PREFACE

This study is a discussion of the Sumerian composition Nanše and the Birds in the various contexts in which it may be read and understood. I started editing the text simply because there was no edition available and because I was interested in the bird names that it contains. It was only much later, while the chapters began to take shape, that I realized that it enabled me to connect three of my main interests in the study of ancient Mesopotamia: religion, literature, and scholarship. My earlier engagements with literary theory, religious studies, and intellectual history were each triggered more or less accidentally by a class that I took, by a text that drew my attention, or by a book that jumped to my eyes from the shelves of a second hand bookshop. I would like to think that on the pages that follow I have merged these disparate interests into a single argument concerning the composition Nanše and the Birds. For me, therefore, this book represents a moment of stocktaking, of looking back at my own work to see how it hangs together.

This book contains my present thoughts on what the concepts religion, literature, and scholarship mean and how they may be applied to ancient Mesopotamia. I have connected these abstract conceptual discussions to the concrete example of Nanše and the Birds and it is my hope that readers will find this combination of concrete and abstract interesting and appealing.

Quite apart from my existing interests, working on this book also created a new one: birds and bird watching. Northern California, our new home, is an area with numerous microclimates, each with its own ecology and its own bird life. On our frequent hiking trips throughout the Bay Area, Marlies and I discovered numerous birds – new to us – and observed their behavior: a diving tern, an osprey carrying a fish, flapping pelicans, a red-tailed hawk circling in the sky. Chapter 9 of the present book is a hike through the wilderness of Sumerian texts, with binoculars and a field guide, in an attempt to identify the flying creatures that inhabit them.

While working on this book I have obliged myself to numerous people who answered my queries, collated texts, send me photographs and scans, read and criticized parts of the manuscript, or provided me with hospitality. Laurie Pearce read a version of the whole book and tried to encourage me to be more explicit and to spell out what, if anything, I wanted to say. This book owes a lot to her ruthless collegiality. Nicole Brisch, Ron Hendel, and Mary-Frances Wogec read and criticized part of the book. Geert de Breucker effectively destroyed an early version of the chapter on literature and forced me (after much protest on my side) to rethink the whole issue. Eleanor Robson not only gave her comments on the chapter on scholarship, but also
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provided me with several of the copies and photographs published here and with numerous collations of a variety of texts. Most importantly, she has been a wonderful friend.

Miguel Civil allowed me to use his electronic version of Diri and sent me photographs of an important Tell Harmal lexical tablet. Markham Geller, Markus Hilgert, Fumi Karahashi, Jeremie Peterson, Laurie Pearce, and Tonia Sharlach all provided collations for one or more texts. Ruud Vlek answered several queries on bird behavior. Mark Avila did part of the tedious work of reference checking. Professors T. Brinkman (Oriental Institute, Chicago), M. Krebernik (Hilprecht collection, Jena), Marcel Sigrist (École Biblique, Jerusalem), Steve Tinney (University Museum, Philadelphia), and the Trustees of the British Museum allowed me to publish texts under their care.

For my work in museums I enjoyed the hospitality of Matt Stolper (Chicago), and Alice Wells (Philadelphia). An invitation from Margalit Finkelberg to join a research group at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University gave me the opportunity to work on a tablet in the École Biblique in Jerusalem. To all of these people I wish to express my sincere thanks.

Over the years the encouragement of Stip (H.L.J. Vanstiphout), and his unfailing support have meant a lot to me. His critical intellectual approach to ancient Babylonian documents has formed my own thinking in many ways and this book owes a lot to his example.

I shared the ups and downs of the last couple of years with my wife, Marlies Rosmark, who went with me to start a new life in California. What that means, exactly, is hard to describe, but in the process we have become a strong team and it is with much affection that I dedicate this book to her.

Berkeley, August 2003