

***“The Tablets I Spoke about Are Good to Preserve until Far-off Days”*: An Overview on the Creation and Evolution of Canons in Babylonia and Assyria from the Middle Babylonian Period until the End of Cuneiform Sources**

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Ninurta-aḥa-iddina, a scholar at the Neo-Assyrian court in the 7th century BCE, wrote the following in a letter to king Assurbanipal (668–630/627 BCE):

Let me read the tablets in the presence of the king, my lord, and let me put down on them whatever is acceptable to the king; whatever is not acceptable to the king, I shall remove from them. The tablets I spoke about are good to preserve until far-off days.¹

This passage offers a clear testimony of the royal interventions in the selection of compositions which were included into the library of Nineveh at the time, as well as the participation of the court scholars in this process. The perusal of literary and scientific compositions from Mesopotamia today offers the modern scholar numerous insights into what was read and utilised in ancient scholarly circles, and what was deemed “good to preserve until far-off days”. Since these compositions are mostly the result of sustained efforts over time to conserve one or more oral traditions on clay tablets, it is impossible to know exactly their date of creation. The term “canonisation” in Assyriology refers to this phenomenon with an emphasis on the standardisation of literary and scientific texts over time.²

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- 1 Translation: S. Parpola, revisited by M. Young, letter: SAA 10, no. 373, r. 4–11 and r.e.12–13. The verb “*maḥāru*” with “*pan(ū)*” means “to become acceptable, agreeable”, cf. CAD, M/1, 64 (b) 2’. One of the first meanings of “*maḥāru*” is to accept/receive something.
 - 2 The debate about the use of this word for the cuneiform sources is still ongoing. W. von Soden was one of the first to introduce this term in Assyriology, see von Soden 1953, 23. For more critical opinions about the use of the word “canonisation”, see Rochberg 1984 (especially against the use of the Biblical model to the Cuneiform sources), Lieberman 1990, and Veldhuis 1998, 79f. F. Rochberg-Halton (2016) actualised her position about her conception of Cuneiform

As evident from the quotation above, royal power could play a role in the selection of canonical texts. The purpose of this article is to investigate the link between political power and the formation of a written culture, and the involvement of political forces in the preservation of various Mesopotamian canons from the Middle Babylonian period until the end of the first millennium. I do not aim to discuss the terminology that describes the phenomenon of standardisation. As the term of “canonisation” itself remains debated, for the sake of clarity I will follow the definition proposed by E. Frahm:

Canonical texts have a binding character, they cannot be changed, and nothing can be added to or subtracted from them. Does this definition apply to first millennium cuneiform texts? If we accept that definitions deal with “ideal types”, and that the concrete objects they are derived from and refer to frequently show certain idiosyncrasies, our answer to this question, it seems, can be affirmative.³

The term “canonisation” does not imply that the texts from Mesopotamia and their contents were sacred like the books of the Bible.⁴ The content of tablets dating from the second millennium was much less fixed as in the first millennium BCE.⁵ This view is also linked to the sources available: far fewer tablets from the late second millennium are known. According to Frahm’s definition, the expression “canonical texts” serves to describe the content of first-millennium compositions that appears to be standardised. In other words, several manuscripts from different archaeological contexts contain more or less the same text in the first millennium. There were, however, at the same time, different degrees of standardisation that must be kept in mind, so in some compositions the form and content were more fixed than in others.⁶

Canonicity. Mention should also be made of W. Lambert’s seminal study (1957) on the notion of authorship in Cuneiform sources. According to W. Hallo (1991), four Mesopotamian canons can be observed: an Old Sumerian canon, a Neo-Sumerian canon, an Old Babylonian canon and one appearing during the second half of the second Millennium. In the present article, I follow Ph. Clancier’s idea about the standardisation of knowledge which “ressemble à un bilan de l’existant conduisant à sa mise en forme”, Clancier 2009a, 291.

3 E. Frahm applies to Mesopotamia the definition of canon proposed by J. Assmann: “a text corpus that represents an immobilized form of the stream of tradition”; see Frahm 2011, 318.

4 See the article of H. Gonzalez in the present volume concerning the canonisation of the Hebrew Bible.

5 Al-Rawi/George 2006, 50–51.

6 For example, the series *Maqlû*, a magical ritual against witchcraft, *Bārûtu* the series of hepatoscopy, the Epic of *Gilgameš* and the Epic of *Anzu* show a high degree of stability in their content in comparison with the hemerological treatises.

Nevertheless, the second-millennium manuscripts, as well as the tablets from the first millennium suggest that an important work of standardising knowledge appeared in the middle of the second millennium in the Ancient Near East.⁷ Furthermore, the available written evidence underlines the participation of the contemporaneous rulers in this process of standardisation in both the second and first millennia.

Much work remains to be done with regards to the standardisation of literary and scholarly compositions during the Old Babylonian Period.⁸ Here, I will limit myself to the aims of the workshop organised in Leiden and Nanterre, which were to adopt a diachronic approach to the evolution of canons in several regions during the first millennium BCE – a period when large empires brought different geographical areas together.

After an introduction to the appearance of canons in the Middle-Babylonian period, I will present how Neo-Assyrian scholars carried out the massive task of organising and preserving canonical compositions in royal and temple libraries during the 8th and 7th century BCE, an ambitious enterprise with the goal of collecting all the knowledge of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom. The paper will conclude with an analysis of the evolution of Babylonian knowledge during a period when political power was no longer in the hands of a native dynasty, namely under the Achaemenid, Hellenistic and Parthian eras. As this topic spans more than 1200 years of history, I am unable to cover every aspect, but I hope to give an overview of the main issues that the cuneiform sources reveal.

1 The Canonisation of Knowledge during the End of the Second Millennium BCE

The literary and administrative sources unfortunately become scarce after the fall of the first dynasty of Babylon (18th century BCE), moreover, a lot of material remains still unpublished. When one compares the manuscripts from this period, compositions on the same literary topics appear very different. The

7 In the field of Assyriology, the secondary literature often refers to the earlier stage of a text which was standardised during the first millennium, as a 'Forerunner'. The term is much discussed and in this article I have decided to use W. Farber's 'earlier versions' instead; see Farber 2014, 9. On the use of earlier versions to form the series of the first millennium, see for example, Koch-Westenholz 2000, 19, Heeßel 2001–2002, George 2003, 3–70, and Zomer 2018, 175–243.

8 For an introduction to the question of Old Babylonian canons see Veldhuis 2003, 11–18 and Delnero 2016.

royal inscriptions of Samsu-iluna (1749–1738), the successor of Hammurabi, show that he loses the old country of Sumer as his reign progresses.⁹ The cities of southern Babylonia were partially abandoned after the eleventh year of his reign (c.1736 BCE)¹⁰ and there is no information about the fate of the library collections of the scholars from Uruk, Ur, Larsa or Nippur (Fig. 3.1).¹¹ Thus, the secondary literature tend to suggest that scholars migrated themselves in the North and went on to write down compositions which they had known by heart. The few manuscripts published show that an outpouring of literary creativity in Akkadian also appeared at that time. E. Frahm compared this moment of standardising literature with the creation of the first books of the Bible during the exile.¹² He proposed that the scholars near the end of the Late Old Babylonian period may have written down what they knew in order to protect and preserve it. Nevertheless, many of the literary texts from this time (1749–1595 BCE) were found during illicit excavations, so a certain estimation of the state of literary production and knowledge during this period is impossible.¹³ At any rate, it is sure that something must have happened that had far-reaching consequences for the writing of literary and scholarly works during Late Old Babylonian period. Indeed, the manuscripts from the Middle-Babylonian period testify that new editions of masterworks were composed along the “canonical lines”.¹⁴

Whereas the scholars of the first millennium do not preserve the evidence for canonisation which would have taken place under the last kings of the first dynasty of Babylon, they celebrated their successors. Indeed, after a period of turmoil that ended the first dynasty of Babylon, the arrival of the Kassite dynasty marked a turning point in the history of Mesopotamian literature in the second millennium. With the Kassite kings began a period of political and economic stability, which allowed important editorial work to take place. As N. Heeßel calls this age the ‘Blüte der Gelehrsamkeit’ – the flourishing of scholarship.¹⁵

9 Pientka 1998, 6–21, Charpin 2004, 335–364, Volk 2011, Beaulieu 2018, 97–121.

10 Charpin 2004, 361–362, Beaulieu 2018, 103–104.

11 A map of the region is available in Fig. 3.1. D. Charpin proposes that the migrated scholars took elements of their library with them. However, no well-localized discovery makes it possible to date these manuscripts precisely, see Charpin 2004, 345–46 and fn. 1800.

12 Frahm 2011, 322–323, fn. 1540.

13 Charpin 2004, 345–346.

14 Foster 2005, 209.

15 Heeßel 2011, 175; W. von Soden 1953, 22 was the first to note the importance of this period for the standardisation of literary and scholarly works. He also used the word “canonisation” considering the Kassite period the most creative period in the history of Babylonian



FIGURE 3.1 Map of the Ancient Near East

1.1 *The Development of Culture during the Kassite Dynasty*¹⁶

The Kassite dynasty from the Zagros Mountains came into power in North Babylonia after the Hittite raid against Babylon in 1595 BCE.¹⁷ These kings adopted the political, linguistic and cultural traditions of Babylonia.¹⁸ This policy may be explained by the desire to lend the new dynasty legitimacy by connecting it to the old traditions of Mesopotamia. The Kassite dynasty presented itself as the legitimate successor of the great Mesopotamian kings, and emphasizing in their inscriptions their piety, which enabled them to claim the support of the Babylonian gods.¹⁹ The long period of stability they brought

literature. To refer to Akkadian literature between 1500–1000 BCE, B. Foster 2005, 205, used the expression “mature period”.

16 Culture is here to be understood as art, music, literature, and all written knowledge thought of as a group.

17 The Hittite raid is mentioned succinctly in Chronicle 20B; see Grayson 1975. The fall of the First Sealand dynasty allowed the Kassites to unite Babylonia under their authority at the beginning of the 15th century; see Boivin 2018, especially 121–125.

18 Beaulieu 2018, 122–153 for an overview on the history of the dynasty.

19 For the royal inscriptions and the political history from this period see Bartelmus and Sternitzke 2017.

about proved their strategy a success. Sources attest that the rulers of this dynasty carried out a policy of major building works, benefiting from the good political and economic situation.²⁰ Babylonia was at that time recognized as a powerful state in the Near East and maintained diplomatic contacts with Mitanni, Assyria, Anatolia, Egypt and Iran. The great powers of the region also used Middle Babylonian Akkadian in their diplomatic correspondence. It comes as no surprise, then, that the knowledge of Sumerian and Akkadian literature was exported throughout the Near East to train foreign chanceries.²¹ In fact, most scholarly and literary tablets known from this period come from the ‘west’, including Emar in the great bend of the Euphrates, Ugarit on the Syrian coast, Megiddo in Palestine, Hattuša in Anatolia, and more rarely, the Egyptian city of El-Amarna. The evidence shows this cultural transmission outside the ‘Mesopotamian heartland’, i.e. Assyria and Babylonia. In addition to the growing importance of Standard Babylonian Akkadian, Sumerian was still learnt and used by the Kassites in their building inscriptions. In the middle of the second millennium it had already been a dead language, but at the same time, it became the language of cult and scholarship since the beginning of the second millennium BCE. Sources hint at that schools of translation were active in rendering Sumerian literature into Akkadian and creating impressively bilingual versions during the Kassite period.²² For example, the *Ballad of former heroes* was part of this translation efforts. The Sumerian version of this song had been first copied in a school context, and subsequently it was adapted and found new popularity in Akkadian during the Middle-Babylonian period.²³

Furthermore, the Epic of Gilgamesh which bears as its title the first line, *ša nagba īmuru*, “The one who saw the Deep”, appeared in its Standard Babylonian form during this period. It considerably expanded on the Old Babylonian version and was also transmitted to the West.²⁴ The manuscripts of the Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian periods bear many similarities with the manuscripts of the first millennium, while at the same time also showing considerable variation.²⁵ A Neo-Assyrian catalogue ascribed *Sîn-leqi-unninni* as the

20 For example, Kurigalzu I created a new capital: Dur-Kurigalzu, the “fortress of Kurigalzu”, during the end of the 15th and early 14th centuries BCE.

21 This dialect inherited from the Hymnic Old Babylonian Epic dialect while Middle Babylonian new features enriched it.

22 Maul 1999, 5–6 and Lafont et al. 2017, 524.

23 The manuscripts come from everywhere in Mesopotamia from Assyria to Syria. After an enumeration of the heroes of the past, it recommends enjoying beer and the present day time. See Foster 2005, 894–85.

24 George 2003, 24–27.

25 Ibid.

composition's author.²⁶ He most likely lived at the end of the Kassite period, as did many ancestors of the first millennium's Babylonian scholars, who have names typical for the Kassite period.²⁷ Nothing concrete is known about this author from the Middle-Babylonian period, even though an influential family of lamentation priests in the city of Uruk claimed him as their ancestor down to the Hellenistic period.²⁸

The memory of the Kassite kings was well preserved in the first millennium. They often feature in the role of authority figures and some evidence suggests that this is the result of their involvement in the flourishing of Babylonian written culture. Thus, the calendrical divination literature provides an interesting example of how Kassite kings may have been the patrons of the scholars composing new editorial works. A tablet from the ancient Assyrian capital of Assur (KAR 177) also contains hints that editorial work on texts of this genre was carried out during the reign of the Babylonian king Nazi-maruttaš (1307–1282 BCE). This hemerological compilation has on the obverse an earlier version of the menology series *Iqqur ipuš*, which is followed by a list of auspicious days in each month. This part of tablet ended in a type of colophon known as the "Nazi-maruttaš's rubric":

Auspicious days (according to) the wording of seven tablets, copies from Sippar, Nippur, Babylon, Larsa, Ur, Uruk, and Eridu. The *ummânu*-scholars copied/excerpted (them), selected (the appropriate materials), and gave (them) to Nazi-maruttaš, king of the world.²⁹

This rubric mentions the oldest Mesopotamian cities where the originals came from and chooses the number seven for its symbolic value. The quotation shows clearly that these cities regained their place in the Babylonian intellectual life under the Kassite dynasty. The role of the *ummânu*, the scholars, is emphasized, but the text only names them collectively. Indeed, according to the Sumero-Akkadian tradition, scholars are in charge of transmitting and interpreting knowledge from one generation to another from the time this divine knowledge was revealed to the mythological seven sages (*apkallū*).³⁰ The *ummânu* are the successors of these famous sages and mentioning them

26 See Lambert 1962, 66–67 and 77.

27 Lambert 1957, 2–7.

28 Beaulieu 2000.

29 Translation: Frahm 2011, 322–323. Tukulti-Ninurta I probably brought the tablet in Assur among other tablets that he took as booty from Babylonia. For a new duplicate from Assur, see Heeßel 2011, 172, as well as Jiménez 2016.

30 Reiner 1961.

collectively was enough to give authority to the new serialised work. This text is the oldest proof of a text composed under royal patronage in the 14th or 13th century BCE.³¹ It has long been used in Assyriological literature as a proof of the appearance of the first canonised series under the Kassite kings.³² Nevertheless, as E. Jiménez demonstrates, in his historical study of the genre, this tablet is merely one example of an ephemeral compilation.³³ This combination of *Iqqur īpuš* and *Auspicious days* is only known from two tablets from Assur. According to Jiménez, an important element is missing that would unequivocally affirm its canonicity: the fact of its transmission on several tablets in several regions with identical content.³⁴ The tablet does not bear witness to the beginnings of a canonized series, which would have succeeded in imposing itself in Assyria and Babylonia after being composed under Nazi-maruttaš. It was thus appreciated for its demonstration of compilation activity during his reign, and for its antiquity. The owner of KAR 177 was Aššur-šuma-iškun, chief of the singers (*nargallu*). This Assyrian scholar rediscovered and conserved the tablet during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, presumably because its antiquity interested him.³⁵

The memory of Nazi-maruttaš was also still celebrated in the Late Babylonian period. Nazi-maruttaš continued to be a personal name still in use in Uruk until the Hellenistic period.³⁶ M. Frazer proposed to link the popularity of the king to his patronage of one of the most widespread Mesopotamian literary compositions: *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*.³⁷ Šubši-mešre-šakkan, its author, seems to have been a high official in the court of this Kassite king.³⁸

As the example of the names of Sîn-leqi-unninni and Nazimaruttaš demonstrate, scholars or kings from the Kassite period left their mark on the scholarly elites of the first millennium. References to the past were clearly used as a tool to legitimise their position and privileges in the temple hierarchy. The texts

31 Jiménez 2016, 198–199.

32 Von Soden 1953, 22.

33 Jiménez 2016, 199.

34 Jiménez 2016, 198 and fn. 4.

35 Jiménez 2016, 199, n. 6. R. Pruzsinszky may study the library of the Assyrian singers in a forthcoming monography.

36 Frazer 2013, 204 and fn. 103. As M. Frazer underlined, the name Nazi-maruttaš is not attested before this sovereign, yet it is quite certain that he was the one to influence the onomastic of the first millennium. The same phenomenon appears for the Kassite king Kurigalzu of the 15th and early 14th centuries BCE. In the Neo-Babylonian texts *Nbk.* 283 and 345 the father of Silim-Ištar, bears the name of Kurigalzu.

37 See Foster 2005, 306–323 and Frazer 2013, 205–206.

38 *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* bears the title from its first line *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* in Akkadian, “I will praise the lord of wisdom!” Annus/Lenzi 2010 and Oshima 2015.

concerning the royal patronage of literature and knowledge during the Kassite dynasty suggests that one prominent role of the palace was to encourage canonisation. The Kassite kings wished not only to gain legitimacy using the code of native Babylonian dynasty, but also to make their own name remembered by contributing the transmission of Sumerian-Akkadian culture. An interesting historical parallel with J.-F. Billeter's analysis of the policy of instrumentalizing culture under the Han dynasty in China at the end of the 3rd century BCE emerges here.³⁹ In the manner of the Han dynasty, the Kassites reshaped Babylonian culture:

To make people forget the violence and the arbitrary from which the empire was born, and by which it was supported, it had to appear in compliance with the natural order of things. Everything was redefined following the idea that imperial order complied with the laws of universe since its origins and for all times.⁴⁰

One can imagine that the Kassites used and reshaped the Babylonian culture to pretend that “the arbitrary from which their empire was born” came to be “the natural order of things”. It is then possible that the vitality with which the literary tradition spread in the west can be attributed to the cultural aura of the Kassite dynasty. This is still very hypothetical, but the geographical spread of the sources raises questions, as it does not seem to be linked to a territorial extension of the Kassite kings.

1.2 *The Development of Culture during the Second Dynasty of Isin*

Around 1155 BCE the rising Assyrian kingdom and the Elamites put an end to the Kassite dynasty and a new native dynasty arrived in Babylon: the second dynasty of Isin (c.1153–1022).⁴¹ The sources for this period are disappointingly few in number, with a lot of information coming from literary texts known from later copies.⁴² Written evidence confirms a cultural and institutional continuity between the Kassite rule and the kings of the second dynasty of Isin. Under the second dynasty of Isin, Assyria and Babylonia both had to deal with the arrival of the Arameans and the Suteans as well as with difficult climatic changes.⁴³ It is undoubtedly the turmoil caused by frequent Aramean and

39 See in this volume, the introduction of M.J. Versluys.

40 Billeter 2014, 16–19.

41 Based on Beaulieu 2018, 154–155.

42 The King List A and C are rare contemporary sources on the period, but they are very laconic; see Brinkman 1967, 37–67, 83, and fn. 429, and Grayson 1980–1983, 90–97.

43 Michalowski 2005, 161–162.

Sutean attacks on the Babylonian temples that caused the absence of administrative sources, on the one hand, and the continued efforts to create canonical series, on the other.⁴⁴ This moment of Mesopotamian history exemplifies the liminal period described by J. Assmann: “The construction of canons occurs during times of increased cultural polarisation and broken traditions, when one must decide what order to follow.”⁴⁵

Two figures from the Second dynasty of Isin seem especially important for the history of Akkadian literature. Firstly, the sources of the first millennium commemorated the figure of Nebuchadnezzar I (1121–1100 BCE).⁴⁶ His inscriptions were copied and well used especially by the Neo-Assyrian scribes.⁴⁷ The inscriptions and historical-literary compositions about this sovereign depict his victory against his Elamite enemy and the triumphal return of the statue of the god Marduk to Babylon after it had been robbed from the Esagil temple in Babylon by the Elamites.⁴⁸ This figure had a great impact on Babylonian textual traditions.⁴⁹

The elevation of Marduk in the pantheon had already begun under the reign of Hammurabi and his descendants,⁵⁰ and it continued under the Kassite dynasty, although Enlil was still viewed as the ruler of the gods.⁵¹ However, the religious situation changed under the second dynasty of Isin. It is already obvious in the names of the monarchs of this dynasty, which mainly used Marduk as the theophoric element. The written evidence from the time of Nebuchadnezzar I suggests that Marduk was established at the head of the pantheon after the royal campaign against Elam. W.G. Lambert’s contributions served to popularise this thesis together with his opinion that Nebuchadnezzar I’s reign was “a turning point in the history of ancient Mesopotamian religion”.⁵² According to Lambert, Nebuchadnezzar I commissioned the writing of the *Enūma eliš*, the Babylonian Epic of Creation, to

44 The inscriptions of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (c. 1114–1076) describe the problems caused by the arrival of Arameans and Suteans in Mesopotamia; see Brinkman 1968. Chronicle 15 also seems to link the demise of the king Marduk-nadin-aḫḫe with the turmoil caused by Arameans; see Grayson 1975.

45 Assmann 1992, 125.

46 Based on Beaulieu 2018, 159.

47 About Nebuchadnezzar I in historical memory see Nielsen 2018, 163–188.

48 According to P.-A. Beaulieu 2018, 159, Kuter-naḫḫunte plundered the Esagil temple in the 13th century BCE, bringing to Susa the statue of Marduk.

49 See Reynolds 2019, especially 80–92.

50 See Sommerfeld 1982.

51 Some seals with their inscriptions show that the cult of Marduk was important in the Kassite period. See Kämmerer 2012, 19.

52 It is in fact the title of his famous article published in 1964; see Lambert 1964 and Lambert 2013, 271–274.

justify this theological change.⁵³ The epic subsequently legitimized the political pre-eminence which Babylon had assumed in the land of Sumer and Akkad at the expense of Nippur, the ancient religious capital, which had become largely deserted in this period.⁵⁴ Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar was the first to give himself the title of “scion of Babylon” (*zēr Babilī*) in his inscriptions. For the first time in the history of the Ancient Near East, a literary composition attributed the creation and organisation of the entire universe to one single deity. The Epic of Creation came to circulate widely in Mesopotamia in its standard Babylonian form, and it served to justify Marduk’s new position as the king of the gods.⁵⁵ Unlike in the case of Gilgamesh, no earlier version of this composition is known. All known manuscripts of the *Enūma eliš* date back to the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian or Late Babylonian periods. No copies from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I have yet been found. The oldest manuscript can be dated to the 9th century BCE.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the standard Babylonian version of the epic was recited in the new year’s ritual and in a ritual during the month *kislīmu* throughout the first millennium BCE.⁵⁷ Its later inclusion in the royal cult underlines its importance. The festival of the new year was then used to ritually confirm the Babylonian king in his office. The Epic also had an impact on the Neo-Assyrian kings: Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) commissioned an Assyrian version to be written, in which Assur, the Assyrian chief of the

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- 53 Furthermore, another piece of evidence underlined the importance of the royal patronage of Nebuchadnezzar for the intervention in the production of knowledge: two chemical recipes for making artificial gemstones contained a colophon that specified that the tablet is “a copy of an original from Babylon (property of) the palace of Nebuchadnezzar I, king of Babylon” (K. 713). The tablet dates from the Middle-Babylonian Period; see for its edition Oppenheim 1966.
- 54 It has to be noted that among the authors who created the canonised series listed in the catalogue of authors and texts, seven out of ten seem to come from Babylon; see Lambert 1957.
- 55 184 manuscripts of the epic are known, which clearly present its success. The title ‘king of the gods’ for Marduk was already detectable in the Kassite onomastic. It also appeared in Šitti-Marduk’s *kudurru*, contemporary with Nebuchadnezzar I, and in the bilingual epic of Nebuchadnezzar. *Enūma eliš* is the earliest literary text which ascribed the kingship over god to Marduk, which might indicate that it was composed during the reign of this ruler.
- 56 The oldest copy (VAT 10346) comes from Assur, but unfortunately, there is no information about its archaeological context or the findspot. For S.M. Maul, palaeographic features suggest that it is to be dated to the end of the second millennium or the beginning of the first millennium BCE. A dating of the manuscript between 1000–800 BCE is usually accepted in the secondary literature; see George 2005, 87, fn. 15 and Oelsner 2009, 464. The manuscript serves as a *terminus ante quem*.
- 57 The singers (*nāru*) sang the *Enūma eliš* the fourth day of the new year’s ritual and the fourth day of a ritual during the month *kislīmu* in Babylon, see Çağırğan/Lambert 1991–1993.

pantheon, leads the creation instead of Marduk.⁵⁸ The ideology of the absolute power of Marduk, formulated in the Epic, and which reflected the imperial ambitions of Neo-Assyrian kings, must have aroused their interest.

Evidence for the importance of the memory of Nebuchadnezzar I in the first millennium Mesopotamia appears also on a tablet from the Babylonian city Uruk, which lists sages and scholars, each of them accompanied by the king whom they served (Table 3.1). The list is dated to 165 BCE, and it was composed by Anu-belšunu, a member of the Babylonian scholarly elite, a lamentation priest.⁵⁹ The list mentions Esagil-kinam-ubbib as the court scholar (*ummānu šarri*) of the king Nebuchadnezzar I.⁶⁰ Moreover, Anu-belšunu stated that Esagil-kinam-ubbib was also the scholar of Adad-apla-iddina (1064–1043), who reigned 36 years after Nebuchadnezzar I. Esagil-kinam-ubbib is known as the author of the *Babylonian Theodicy*.⁶¹ The first signs of the various stanzas of this composition spell his name in an acrostic, a further evidence for the outpouring of learned literary and poetic creativity during the second dynasty of Isin.⁶² The Esagil-kinam-ubbib was then succeeded by Esagil-kin-apli in the role of the court scholar during the reign of Adad-apla-iddina.⁶³ Under Adad-apla-iddina an important phase of the fixation of knowledge was also completed, as it is embodied by the figure of Esagil-kinam-ubbib and Esagil-kin-apli.⁶⁴ The latter is well known from different manuscripts, which mention him as the author of several medical compendia. Two of the best known are the medical-diagnostic series *Sakikkû* and the physiognomic series *Alamdimmû*.⁶⁵ A catalogue of *Sakikkû*'s forty tablets⁶⁶ known from Kalhu and Babylon⁶⁷ lists all the works that were believed to have been compiled by Esagil-kin-apli, and even offers an apologetic bibliographical note about him:

58 Frahm 2010, 8–10 and Kämmerer 2012, 26–33.

59 Van Dijk 1962, 44–52, Finkel 1988, 144 and fn. 3, and Heeßel 2010, 162–164.

60 *BaM Beih.* 2 89: l. 17–18.

61 The *Babylonian Theodicy* is a dialogue between a sufferer and his friend about god's justice. In a "catalogue of Texts and Authors" from Nineveh, Esagil-kinam-ubbib is claimed to have written the Theodicy under Adad-apla-iddina; see W.G. Lambert 1962, 66–67.

62 Lambert 1960, 63–91.

63 *BaM Beih.* 2 89: l. 16.

64 His inscriptions confirm his numerous renovation works of buildings damaged by Sutean and Aramean invasions. See Radner 2006–2008 for discussion.

65 *Sakikkû* combines medical symptoms with the corresponding diseases and predicts the patient's chances of recovery. The first two tablets were called "When the incantation priest goes to the house of the patient" (*Enūma āšīpu ana bīt marši illaku*) and they cite the omens that the exorcist observes on the way to the patient's home.

66 The choice of the forty as the final number of tablets for *Sakikkû* is certainly not a coincidence, but was intended to symbolically refer to the god of wisdom Ea; see Heeßel 2000, 106, fn. 40.

67 Finkel 1988, 143–159, und Heeßel 2000, 104–110.

Concerning that which from old time had not received an (authoritative) new edition and was like disordered threads, having no duplicates – in the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, king of Babylon, to [work it] anew, Esagil-kin-apli, son of Asalluḫi-mansum, the sage of king Hammurapi, the *ummānu*-scholar of Sîn, Lisi and Nanaya, a prominent citizen of Borsippa, the *zabardabbû* of Ezida, the *pašīšu* of Nabû who holds the gods' tablet of Fate, and can reconcile conflicting things, the *išippu* and *ramku* priest of Ninzilzil, lady of loving trust, sister of his love one, the *ummānu*-scholar of Sumer and Akkad, through the incisive intelligence that the gods Ea and Asalluḫi had bestowed on him, deliberated with himself, produced an (authoritative) new edition of *Sakikkû* (arranged) from head to foot, and firmly established it for learning.⁶⁸

This passage is a unique evidence for the creation and compilation of a new series by a Babylonian scholar. From the passage quoted, Esagil-kin-apli appears to have been a scholar whose memory was especially important in Babylonia during the first millennium. His name was also preserved in the handbook of the incantation priests, which lists all the compositions that an *āšipu* had to master.⁶⁹ The dependence on the lore whose authorship was traditionally ascribed Esagil-kin-apli was, however, not celebrated ubiquitous in Assyria and Babylonia. His authority was well established in Babylonia, and all the Babylonian manuscripts of *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmû* so far discovered follow his edition, but this is not the case everywhere in Assyria.⁷⁰

68 Translation: Frahm 2011, 326. See Finkel 1988, 148–50, Heeßel 2000, 104. The term used to describe the editorial enterprise is *sur-gibil*, in Sumerian ‘the new text’. It comes from the Sumerian verb ‘to spin’. This word stands in close semantic proximity to the Latin word *textus*. See Stol 2007, 241–42.

69 This text is known from seven manuscripts found in Assur, Nineveh and in Babylonia: Sippar, Babylon, and Uruk, see Geller 2000, Jean 2006, 62–82, Clancier 2009b. The manuscript from Assur simply gives the name of Esagil-kin-apli without specifying his titles and ancestors as the Babylonian tablets did; see Heeßel 2010, 160–161. The Assur text comes from the library of Kişir-Assur, see Maul 2010.

70 N. Heeßel 2010, 154–159, published a fragmentary tablet from Assur which adds information about how the Assyrian scholars saw Esagil-kin-apli. Certain scribes from Assur rejected his editorial work. They preferred the use of an earlier version of the physiognomic series *Alamdimmû*. The tablet edited by Heeßel is a rare glimpse into the scholarly discussions that surely must have taken place in the learned milieu of Mesopotamia. The text of the tablet makes it clear that the version copied by the scribe of Assur is not the one that Esagil-kin-apli replaced (*šá é-sag-gil-gin-a nu du₈.meš-šú*). According to N. Heeßel 2010, 157–158, the fact that this scholar had to explicitly claim the validity of an old version shows that the new version of Esagil-kin-apli had meanwhile become the standard or at least widely accepted. Furthermore, it has to be emphasised that not a single manuscript of *Sakikkû* has been found in Assur, see Heeßel 2010, 158–59, although

Although N. Heeßel has demonstrated that the *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmu* manuscripts from Nineveh of the first millennium contained the version established by Esagil-kin-apli, they did not mention his name at all, and a catalogue of texts and authors from Nineveh states that *Sakikkû* and *Alamdimmû* were created by the god Ea.⁷¹ It seems that the Assyrian scholars were reluctant to place a Babylonian scholar from Borsippa in the foreground.

E. Frahm emphasises the idea that the “collecting, reorganizing and safeguarding the written knowledge available” under the Second dynasty of Isin may have been spurred on by the plundering of the Babylonian sanctuaries by Aramaeans and Suteans.⁷² This period of upheaval seems to be reflected in the Late composition known as the Epic of Erra. It presents Erra, the god of destruction and violence, bringing ruin and devastation to the world after convincing Marduk to leave his throne and repair his cult image in the netherworld.⁷³ Scholars may have feared the loss of cultural memory and opted to insert in newly compiled works the oral tradition or different versions of one composition which were at the moment in question in “disordered threads” to adopt the words of Esagil-kin-apli.

1.3 *First Millennium Celebration of the Past*

Many facts point towards the importance of the end of the second millennium for the formation of Babylonian and Assyrian written cultures. Numerous documents from this period are preserved in first-millennium copies. The Assyrian and Babylonian scholars maintained a real and remarkable awareness of the history of Sumero-Akkadian literature, as well as the history of Sumero-Akkadian kingship.

The literary and scholarly compositions were passed on thanks to the task of copying, which not only allowed the contents of the compositions to survive, but also ensured the transmission of knowledge and a specific *Weltanschauung* to the scribes, who were often apprentices. The kings of the

numerous tablets belonging to the series come from the other Neo-Assyrian cities of Hurizina, Nineveh and Kalhu.

71 Heeßel 2010, 161–162 et n. 38. For the “Catalogue of Texts and Authors” see Lambert 1962, 64.

72 Frahm 2011, 324. In the later literary tradition, the land of Elam is mainly seen as the most responsible for the looting and destruction affecting the Babylonian cities and their temples, especially with regard to the disappearance of the statue of the god Marduk, see Reynolds 2019, 70–101.

73 Lambert 1962, 76–77, Oppenheim 1977, 267–68 and Frahm 2010, 6–8; 2011, 347–49, Reynolds 2019, 97. See, for the most recent translation of the epic, Foster 2005, 880–911. It is most probable that the epic was composed in the 9th century BCE.

second millennium BCE were commemorated by the creation or the transmission of historical-literary compositions and the copying of their inscriptions.⁷⁴ Mesopotamian temples required regular renovation work due to the fragility of the brick construction. When temples were renovated, they had to be rebuilt on the same foundations that were believed to have been established since time immemorial, and where past kings had piously set up their building inscriptions.⁷⁵ Out of respect for the royal power, temples and palaces kept these testimonies of the bygone days in their treasuries, or what the secondary literature often describes as “museum”.⁷⁶ Copies of these inscriptions, and sometimes even their originals, were studied by apprentice scribes when they were learning how to write in an archaising script,⁷⁷ studying their history,⁷⁸ as well as to training in how to write new royal inscriptions. Mesopotamian kings usually asked the scribes to prepare foundation inscriptions which they would place in the renovated building, together with the older foundation deposits of their predecessors, to testify to the renovation they had undertaken. A monumental “old”-looking script was often employed in the first millennium for foundation inscriptions or building inscriptions inspired by Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian ductus.⁷⁹ The Kassite kings or the Second dynasty of Isin used the past and culture to create a history of themselves, in order to legitimize their power. This knowledge of tradition was then used as a *Herrschaftswissen* to acquire power,⁸⁰ making it appear, as J.-F. Billeter wrote, a part of “the natural order of things”. The best-known example of this use of knowledge for dynastic purposes, is still represented by the Sargonid dynasty in the first millennium BCE.

74 See for example Radner 2005, 244–250 and Paulus 2018.

75 See Schaudig 2003.

76 The secondary literature often uses the word of “museum”, see Goossens 1948, Weisberg 1996 on this topic. It is worth noting, however, that these inscriptions were not always the originals but were in some cases composed by later scholars in order to contribute to the construction of an idealised past (*fraus pia*); see Schaudig 2003. This fascination with the past is already attested earlier in the history of Mesopotamia, although more evidence can be dated to the first millennium because of its chronological posteriority. The evolution of writing in the first millennium BCE makes easier to distinguish an archaising ductus from the contemporary writing normally used by the first millennium scribe.

77 Radner 2005, 249–250, Hallo 2006, Beaulieu 2010, 10.

78 Beaulieu 2010, 10, Hallo 2006, Radner 2005, 249–250.

79 See for example the inscription of Esarhaddon celebrating the rebuilding of Babylon and Esagil (BM 91027, British Museum). Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562) is also well known for his use of an archaising cuneiform ductus for his monumental inscription, see for example the Ištar gate in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.

80 Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

2 The Age of Libraries: The Preservation of Canons under the Sargonid Dynasty of Assyria in the 8th and 7th Century BCE

The archaeological campaigns of the 19th century brought to light thousands of tablets kept in palace and temple libraries as well as in private scribes' collections. The so-called "libraries of Assurbanipal" in Nineveh remain the most famous discovery of this period. It was indeed, the decipherment of the royal archives and libraries that laid the foundations for a discipline newly named Assyriology. Assurbanipal (668–630/27 BCE), succeeded his father around 668 BCE, the inscriptions dating from this period highlight his wide-ranging educational accomplishments in the scribal craft and his personal interest in ancient wisdom.⁸¹ Even though different Assyrian monarchs had started to assemble the text collection in Nineveh over centuries,⁸² he seemed to have been the most ardent among the royal collectors.⁸³

2.1 *The Motif of the Wise King*

Under the Sargonid dynasty (722–609 BCE) and in particular during the reigns of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE), royal inscriptions and the letters of the court scholars often invoked the figure of the wise king: the king is constantly compared to the mythological figure of Adapa, a priest of Ea, and an antediluvian sage of Eridu, the earliest city of Sumer.⁸⁴ Thus, one of the court diviners writes to Assurbanipal:

Assur, in a dream, called the grandfather of the king, my lord, a sage; the king, lord of kings, is an offspring of a sage and Adapa: you have surpassed the wisdom of the Abyss and all scholarship.⁸⁵

81 In fact, he must have been quite young and still an apprentice when he acceded to the throne; see Villard 1997.

82 K. Radner 2015, 111–12 proposed that Aššur-uballiṭ I was the first to let his court scholar, the Babylonian Marduk-nadin-aḥḫe, assemble the first royal literary and scholarly texts collection of Nineveh in the 14th century BCE.

83 Numerous tablets contain the mention "tuppi Aššur-bani-apli" and "ekal Aššur-bani-apli," respectively "tablet of Assurbanipal", "tablet of Assurbanipal's palace". The king was also presented as the copyist of tablets; see Hunger 1968, 97–107 and Lieberman 1990. Assurbanipal's excellent education also resulted from the fact that he was not originally destined to succeed his father, but rather to exercise a high-ranking religious function, see Villard 1997.

84 Parpola 1993, xix, and Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 309–320. On the use of this motif in the inscription of Sennacherib see Frahm 1997, 280.

85 SAA 10, no. 174.

This courtier's flattery reveals the image that Assurbanipal wanted to transmit to posterity. He himself also used the figure of Adapa in inscriptions from the beginning of his reign:

I learned [the c]raft of the sage Adapa, the secret lore of all of the scribal arts. I am able to recognize celestial and terrestrial [om]ens and can discuss (them) in an assembly of scholars. I am capable of arguing with expert diviners about (the series) "If the liver is a mirror image of the heavens". I can resolve complex (mathematical) divisions and multiplications that do not have a(n easy) solution. I have read cunningly written text(s) in obscure Sumerian and Akkadian that are difficult to interpret. I have carefully examined inscriptions on stone from before the flood that are sealed, stopped up, and confused.⁸⁶

The appearance of this literary motif in the royal discourse seems to be an innovation of his dynasty.⁸⁷ In the passage cited above, Assurbanipal boasted about his mastery of secret knowledge, of the prognostic disciplines of astrology and sacrificial divination. He was also able to understand the omens and cited a canonised series on haruspicy. In addition to mathematics, he bragged about being able to read old inscriptions, "stone tablets from before the flood", further underscoring the authority that the most ancient compositions enjoyed in Assyrian and Babylonian scholarship. The exaggeration is clear here, but on the other hand the passage gives a fairly good account of the categories of texts found in the libraries of Nineveh. One letter of a court scholar also shows perfectly how Assurbanipal controlled the choice of series that were to be included in the libraries:

The series should be rev[ised]. Let the king command: two 'long' tablets containing explanations of antiquated words should be removed, and two tablets of the haruspices' corpus should be put (instead).⁸⁸

The importance of divination, especially haruspicy, in the libraries is again evident here. Assurbanipal encouraged supplying the library's collection with

86 K 2694 + K 3050 (CDLI: P394610), I 17–23 = Novotny 2014, no.18 (Assurbanipal L⁴), see also Streck 1916, 255–257. The translation used here follows the one in Novotny 2014, no. 18.

87 Sumerian kings as Shulgi already made use of this figure of the wise king. Assurbanipal may have been influenced by the inscriptions of this king, or the literary-historical compositions about him; see May 2013.

88 SAA 10, no. 177.

truly encyclopaedic knowledge, under which operational knowledge was the most important.

2.2 *Operational Knowledge and Assurbanipal's Reign*

Around 31,000 clay tablets and fragments were discovered in the Nineveh libraries, having survived the fire that engulfed the palaces on Nineveh in 612 BCE.⁸⁹ A very small minority of those texts belonged to literary genres, whereas texts related to divination represent more than the half of the total number of tablets found. One of the functions of the library was to provide the scholarly advisers of the king and the king himself with materials that would support the royal decision-making and secure divine favour for king and state.⁹⁰ Scholarship served primarily to stabilise the kingdom and to guarantee the well-being of the population.⁹¹

According to Assyrian royal ideology, the king was the image of the god Assur on earth.⁹² He was responsible for maintaining the link between the gods and humankind and for organising the society in such a way that the offerings for the gods would always be provided.⁹³ To maintain the peaceful relationship between gods and mankind, the scholars had to interpret signs sent by the divine world: the gods demonstrated their divine pleasure or displeasure with the king's conduct by means of portent, dreams, oracles, or visions. Gathering the entire knowledge of the empire in its libraries in a canonical and therefore not contradictory form offered the court scholars the means to interpret and respond to these signs gathered likewise from the totality of observable earthly and celestial phenomena. On the other hand, assembling the whole of available specialist knowledge presented the king the tools necessary to control his experts. The knowledge collected in the libraries of Nineveh is indeed the reflection of *Herrschaftswissen*, namely a knowledge which allows the king to

89 Literary and scholarly texts could be written on writing boards mostly made of wood so the fire of the city in 612 BCE would have completely destroyed them, see Pedersén 1998, 247–248 and Joannès 2000b, 24. The bulk of the tablets from Nineveh is now housed in the British Museum in London.

90 S. Parpola 1993, 56: “We are dealing with a sophisticated, well organized and comprehensive system of thought that had largely grown out of the necessity to advise and protect the king in his capacity as the god's earthly representative. It could not have developed as it did without this sort of background”. See also Joannès 2000b.

91 This idea was inculcated into apprentice diviner as evident from the following rhetorical question from the so-called Diviner's manual: (l. 47–52) “when you have identified the sign and when they ask you to save the city, the king, and his subjects from enemy, pestilence and famine (predicted) what will you say?” translation A.L. Oppenheim 1974.

92 Parpola 1993, xv–xvii.

93 Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 198–218.

establish his power and to stabilise it, as Pongratz-Leisten defined it.⁹⁴ The reign of Assurbanipal was also one of the longest in the Sargonid dynasty: forty-two years, which indicated maybe the success of his ideological endeavour.

Furthermore, Assurbanipal did not just order the expansion of the libraries' collection, but also presented himself as the editor of a new version of the pharmacological-botanical series *Uruanna*, relying on the biography of Esagil-kin-apli as a model for scholarly self-representation.⁹⁵ Additionally, he personally supervised the composition of several works, for example a Hymn to the god Marduk and a Hymn to the god Šamaš.⁹⁶ To a modern scholar, the idea that the king could be a promoter of new composition, or newly edited works, and the idea that the knowledge was created by gods might seem contradictory. In the Babylonian and Assyrian vision of history, Ea, the god of wisdom, transmitted crafts and scholarship to humankind through the intermediary of the antediluvian sages, and the postdiluvian masters (*ummanû*) after the flood. For Mesopotamian scholars, the prehistoric flood marked a turning point in the history of mankind.⁹⁷ However, the juxtaposition of the Neo-Assyrian king with Adapa shows that the king was himself chosen by the gods, and his alterations of the traditional texts may be understood as a divine choice. Secondly, as B. Pongratz-Leisten suggested, the “perpetual reconceptualization or reinvention of tradition” constituted after all of “variations upon received themes rather than products of originality”.⁹⁸ The use of intertextuality in new compilations and new compositions allowed Assurbanipal to preserve the link to the received canonised knowledge.

2.3 *The Question of Serialisation in the First Millennium BCE*

The organisation of omens collections, both terrestrial and celestial, in series is a phenomenon well attested in the first millennium BCE, especially in the libraries of Nineveh. As M. Worthington defined it: “the term series is used to reflect the fact that ancient scholars distributed compositions over numbered sequences of tablets”.⁹⁹ This meaning was expressed by the Akkadian word *iškaru* (sum. éš.gàr). It was at first used to describe various types of

94 Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

95 Frahm 2011, 332, fn. 1588. For an introduction to *Uruanna*, see Kinnier Wilson 2005.

96 Foster 2005, 704–709, 710–711.

97 This idea of a prehistoric flood that invaded Mesopotamia from the south appeared in several text, as for example in the eleventh tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, see George 2003, 700–725 for an edition.

98 Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 37.

99 Worthington 2009–2011, 395.

textual assemblages.¹⁰⁰ In the first millennium the word took on the meaning of “text series”, “canonical series”, because it implied that the text was a classic that scholar had to know.¹⁰¹ A composition could be designated as an *iškaru*, especially in colophons, letters, and catalogues.¹⁰² Furthermore, at the end of each literary or scholarly tablet that formed a part of a series, its scribe gave the catchline of the next tablet, in other words, the incipit of the following tablet-chapter, separating it from the rest of the text with a ruling, which allows the modern scholars to reconstruct the place of the tablets in the series. The colophon, a scribe’s note at the end of a tablet, usually followed the catchline with the mention of the tablet number within the series and with additional information about the scribe, the purpose of his copy, and sometimes the date. One speaks therefore of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh in its first millennium version of twelve tablets, or as already cited, the *Sakikkû* series with its forty tablets, this number bearing in this case a symbolic value: forty was one of the symbols of the god of wisdom Ea.

However, if the text of omen collections, medical series or literary works was generally fixed, the number of tablets they consisted of was not.¹⁰³ What mattered for scribes was the titles of each chapter within the series, but the divisions of the series by tablet number generally differed depending on scribal schools that used different tablet layouts.¹⁰⁴ The tablet with the omens concerning the appearance of the Pleiades in the astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, bears the title “*When the Pleiades reach the constellation of the yock*” (diš mul.mul mul.šudun kur-ud). It represented the forty-seventh tablet of the series in Assur, but in Nineveh it was the fifty-third tablet, and in Babylon the fifty-fourth.¹⁰⁵ While standardisation of compositions dealing with scholarly knowledge is clearly attested, this example shows that the process did

100 See the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, I/J, 244. The term has also the meaning “collection” in the second millennium BCE, see Worthington 2009–2011, 395.

101 The canonical status of the *iškaru* series is evinced by a letter of Marduk-šapik-zeri who, together with a group of twenty able scholars, offers himself for the royal service: “I fully mastered my father’s profession, the discipline of lamentation; I have studied and chanted the series”. SAA 10, no. 160, f. 36–37.

102 About Assyrian and Babylonian catalogues see Steinert 2018.

103 Lieberman 1990, 333–334. As E. Jiménez 2016, 200, remarked about the hemerological genre: “the variability of tablet format and text combinations in short hemerologies contrasts starkly with the relative stability of the text they contain”.

104 Koch-Westenholz 1995, 79–80.

105 Fincke 2001, 28.

not mean a straightforward uniformization of all features of the text and its medium, and that the question of serialisation is more complicated.¹⁰⁶

The letters of the court scholars of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal use also the word *ahû* to describe less authoritative texts, texts that contain extraneous, non-canonical data, as opposed to the compositions designated with the word *iškaru*.¹⁰⁷ A complete and systematic picture of all the nuances of the word *ahû* is, however, difficult to obtain. The word was occasionally applied to excerpted omens¹⁰⁸ and seemed to describe a type of “appendix” or “excursus”,¹⁰⁹ while in other contexts the word seemed to refer to different type of text not included in the main series.¹¹⁰ A complete list of all meanings of this noun requires further study. Nonetheless, all the concepts expressed with the word *ahû* seem to have originated from Babylonia, while Assyrian scholars appropriated them in context of territorial warfare.

2.4 *Culture Transfers from Babylonia to Assyria*

In fact, the tablets from the libraries in Nineveh come partly from Babylonia, they could have found their way into the collections as looted goods, the practice of taking the written knowledge from the enemy having an old tradition in Mesopotamia. The Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233–1197 BCE) was the first Assyrian king to subdue Babylonia. In the epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I, which celebrates his victory over Babylonia around 1235 BCE, the scribe listed everything that the Assyrian army plundered in the Babylonian cities and took to Assur as booty – the passage is sadly only fragmentary:

Scepter [...] war vehicles [...] Treasure [...] Tablet of [...] Scribal lore [...] Exorcistic texts [...] Prayers to appease the gods [...] Divination texts [...] the ominous marks² of heaven and earth, Medical texts, procedure for bandaging [...] The muster lists of his ancestors [...] Records of? [...] slaves², overseers², and soldiers [...] Not one was left in the land of Sumer and Akkad! The rich haul of the Kassite king's treasure [...] He

106 A similar phenomenon is observable in the extremely long series of terrestrial omens *Šumma ālu*, “If a city is set on a height”. Tablet number forty-nine in Assur has for example number forty-five in Kalhu. They both share the same content; see Leichty 1970.

107 E.g. SAA 10, no. 8, r. 8. See Rochberg(-Halton) 1987. For *Enūma Anu Enlil* (celestial omens), or *Šumma izbu* (teratological omens), it is often not easy to identify the text considered as *ahû* without a colophon. Indeed, the extreme similarity of the content make it frequently impossible, when the tablets are badly preserved, to distinct the *ahû* text from the *iškaru*. See also concerning this term Lieberman 1990, Böck 2000, 21–22, and Frahm 2011, 318f.

108 Leichty 1970, 22.

109 Lieberman 1990.

110 Rochberg (-Halton) 1984, 139f.

(Tukulti-Ninurta) filled boats with the yields for Assur and the glory of his power was seen [...].¹¹¹

This poetic epic celebrated the looting of divinatory, religious, magical but also medicinal texts from Babylonia. The confiscation of learned compositions was a way to deprive the enemy, of a powerful tool, allowing the Assyrian king to enhance the capabilities of his own scholars to interpret signs sent by the gods. The author of the Epic emphasised that under Tukulti-Ninurta I: “not one (tablet) was left in the land of Sumer and Akkad (Babylonia)”. From that moment in the 13th century BCE onwards, the Assyrians had access to written tradition from Babylonia, which they used to develop their civil and military policies and form an Assyrian culture based on Babylonian *Weltanschauung*.¹¹²

Some centuries later the king Sargon II (721–705 BCE), founder of the Neo-Assyrian dynasty, also tried to confiscate Babylonian texts after his victory against the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina II around 710 BCE, just like his predecessor, Tukulti-Ninurta I, before him. A fragmentary letter dated to the reign of Sargon II reports that before the arrival of the Assyrians the Babylonian king collected the writing boards stored in the Babylonian temple library and hid them away in a safe place to prevent them from being pillaged by the enemy army.¹¹³

The descendant of Sargon II, Assurbanipal, appears to have emulated his ancestors successfully and enlarged the royal collection of Nineveh thanks to a real “brain drain” that occurred in Babylonia in favour of Assyria. It seems that the best Babylonian scholars, especially diviners, left Babylon and moved to Assyria to set up their schools or serve at the court.¹¹⁴ The encyclopaedic orientation of the knowledge gathered in the libraries of Nineveh underwent further development after the end of the war against Assurbanipal’s older brother, Šamaš-šum-ukin, in 648 BCE. Late Babylonian sources, whose

111 v 31'–vi 14'. Translation B. Foster (2005, 315).

112 The case of the haruspicy is interesting. In the temple of Assur for example, there are many texts or compendia of haruspicy written in a Middle Babylonian script. But, at the end of the second millennium BCE, manuals for the practice of extispicy started appearing in Middle Assyrian script. This shows the adaptation by the Assyrian scribes of a tradition of knowledge that would have come from Babylon; see Heeßel 2012, 11 and Maul 2013, 232–233. Some Middle Babylonian texts from the Assur temple also raise the question of the existence of a literary and scholarly tablets collection patronized by Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076), see on this topic Weidner 1952–1953 and Lambert 1976, 85, fn. 2.

113 SAA 17, no. 201 and Fincke 2004, 55.

114 In some letters, Neo-Assyrian scholars complained that non-literates employ Babylonian masters to give their son a scribe’s education. See the documents SAA 16, no. 65: 3–12 and SAA 8, no. 338.

reliability is somewhat doubtful, claims that Assurbanipal asked the Babylonian sanctuaries to give him their tablets and urged the scholars who remained faithful to the Neo-Assyrian empire to come to Assyria.¹¹⁵ A Late Babylonian copy of an answering letter from the scholars of Borsippa suggests that Assurbanipal asked the sanctuary to “write out all the scribal learning in the property of Nabû and send it to me”.¹¹⁶ The library of Nineveh did indeed house many tablets written in the Babylonian script. Around 17% of those must have originated from this acquisition policy or were copied by the imprisoned Babylonian scribes.¹¹⁷ It is possible that the colophon “Property of the palace of Assurbanipal, the king of the world, the king of Assyria” was in fact written partly on documents originating from private or temple collections that the king’s scholars confiscated or received as gifts for the king’s library.¹¹⁸ Some tablets from Nineveh do in fact bear a colophon that was clearly added later, usually written with red ink. Because clay tablets dried fast and were sometimes burned, the scribes of the Neo-Assyrian royal libraries had to make additional inscriptions with ink, if they wanted to provide the precious artefacts with statement of ownership.¹¹⁹

2.5 *Hermeneutics in Nineveh*

As Assurbanipal’s inscription cited above shows, the king was particularly fond of ancient tablets with difficult content. The preserved sources offer a different picture about the ability of the king to understand everything in the canonical series. Indeed, the content of the libraries confirmed that the corpus of texts

115 We know copies of the correspondence between Assurbanipal and the Babylonian sanctuaries from the end of the first millennium BCE. For example, BM 45642 from Borsippa and BM 28825 from Babylon (British Museum), both dating to the Seleucid period. Both are answers of the sanctuaries to Assurbanipal’s request to send him entire corpora of knowledge on writing-boards. They kept in memory this acquisition policy. These letters were copied in a school context. It is still difficult to know exactly the historical value of these letters. See for the edition: Frame/George 2005. For a study of the catalogue from the Nineveh library listing the tablets which newly entered the royal collection see Parpola 1983.

116 Line 9, see Frame/George 2005.

117 Fincke 2003–2004. A list of Babylonian scribes who were prisoners is also known: SAA 11, no. 156.

118 Reade 1986, 220.

119 For example, K 10100 and DT 273 (British Museum). Pictures in Reade 1986, 217. Some colophons from the Assurbanipal library were also incised on tablets. The tablets were certainly donated or confiscated – another possible explanation would be that the scribe wanted to make the colophon look like stone inscription (K 3353+, K 6244 and K 10430 from British Museum).

forming “the stream of tradition”¹²⁰ needed to be reactivated and explicated because the language used in it was getting older and was not always understood. The court scholars employed hermeneutical techniques to explain the standardised series in their correspondence with the king.¹²¹ It is evident from the letters that they did not always agree with each other on the interpretations of the canonical series or of the terrestrial or celestial phenomena they had observed.¹²² The authors of the astronomical reports noting the position of the stars and planets together with the celestial omens his observation forecasts quoted in their reports the astrological canonical series *Enūma Anu Enlil*.¹²³ In their missives, the observed phenomena were recorded first, followed by citations from the omen series. Authors of these missives employed an hermeneutical process through which both the observed phenomenon and the related forecast were interpreted.

Bellow follows an example of how the astronomical reports were organized: it was written by Nabû-aḫḫe-eriba, one of the most knowledgeable experts of Esarhaddon and mentor to Assurbanipal:

[...] [If] the moon is surrounded by a halo, and a planet stands in it: robbers will rage.

(Explanation): – Saturn stands in the halo of the moon.

If Jupiter comes near to the Bull of heaven (a constellation): the treasures of the land will perish; variant: the offspring of large and small cattle will not prosper.

(Explanation): – Jupiter entered the Bull of Heaven; the king my lord should beware of drafts.¹²⁴

120 This expression is generally accepted to designate the corpus of authoritative editions of texts since A.L. Oppenheim 1977, 13, employed it for “what can be loosely termed the corpus of literary texts maintained, controlled, and carefully kept alive by a tradition served by successive generations of learned and well-trained scribes”.

121 Parpola/Reade 1993, 35.

122 See Verderame 2014. In this article L. Verderame described the dispute between several court experts under the reign of Esarhaddon. They disagree about the appearance of Venus and Mercury in the sky.

123 According to J.C. Fincke, more than 98% of quotations in the 600 astronomical reports sent by the Neo-Assyrian experts come from *Enūma Anu Enlil*, see Fincke 2010, 36. For N. Veldhuis the scholars used mostly simplified versions of the *Enūma Anu Enlil* and a commentary canonized: *Šumma Šin ina tāmartišu*, ‘if Šin appeared’; Veldhuis 2010, 85. This interpretation didn’t exclude the authority of the *Enūma Anu Enlil*’s series.

124 Tablet SAA 8, no. 49. Translation: Verderame 2014, 715.

One sees that the scholar firstly introduced the quotations, and subsequently commented upon them. These exegetical methods are also evident in the commentaries, which developed significantly as a genre in the 7th century BCE. Approximately 454 commentaries were found in Nineveh, more than a half of the tablets belonging to this text genre.¹²⁵ The commentaries from Nineveh reflect the encyclopaedic scope of the entire collection: the commentaries are to be associated with numerous genres of primary texts to be commented upon and explicated. As an example, the commentaries to the astrological series *Enūma Anu Enlil* had, according to E. Frahm, two main purposes:

One is to explain difficult words and expressions from the base text with the help of synonyms and paraphrases. The other, more interesting purpose is to re-interpret references to celestial bodies that are described in the series in vague or mythological terms, or are said to move in ways (such as astral constellations approaching each other) that are impossible from an astronomical point of view.¹²⁶

Indeed, astronomy in its Assyrian and Babylonian context cannot be separated from astrology, which constituted the ultimate goal of observations of the sky. Scholars had to ensure that their *frozen* body of texts remained intelligible, and compatible with new knowledge being constantly gained from their celestial observations, as well as secure the use of the texts within their professional sphere.¹²⁷ The tradition of commentaries did not die out after the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian state at the end of the 7th century BCE, and the cuneiform scholarship retreated to Babylonia, where it had begun nearly three millennia earlier, surviving in the temples and private houses of scholars until the Parthian era.

3 The Canonised Text in the Late Babylonian Period

The sources give the impression that scholarly or literary texts were no longer copied in North Mesopotamia after the sack of the Neo-Assyrian cities. Nevertheless, some written pieces of evidence shows that the memory of Assurbanipal and its royal library continued to interest the scholars of the late period. Two Hellenistic copies of letters recorded the correspondence between

125 Jiménez 2013.

126 Frahm 2011, 131.

127 The expression “frozen” body of texts comes from E. Frahm (2011, 333).

Assurbanipal and the North Babylonian temples about the sending of entire corpora of learning from Babylon and Borsippa to Nineveh.¹²⁸ Tablets from Uruk dated to the Hellenistic period also were proofs that the Hellenistic scholars were still copying series edited and serialized in Nineveh.¹²⁹ Moreover, a tablet from the Ekur-zākīr family private library in Uruk comes directly from the Assurbanipal library.¹³⁰ It is possible that it is linked to the activity of an ancestor of the family in Nineveh, but this remains very hypothetical.¹³¹ It is difficult to know the modes and degrees of transmission of knowledge from Assyrian libraries to Babylonian libraries.¹³² Whether for Uruk or Babylon, we know mainly the content of the collections between the end of the Achaemenid period and the Parthian period. We have very few sources that provide information on the state of the collections in the Neo-Babylonian and early Persian periods. This is partly related to the “weeding work” in the libraries. Indeed, the procedure of copying the originals to keep the text in good condition had as a consequence to throw away the ancient manuscripts.¹³³

Kings of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty seemed to have employed court scholars in the same way as their Neo-Assyrian predecessors had done, yet no royal correspondence has been found in the Neo-Babylonian palace of Babylon so far.¹³⁴ How did the Assyrian-Babylonian canons evolve after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire? Does the transition from a genuine monarchy to the region’s integration into large-scale empires change the status of ancient Babylonian canonized texts? These questions remain difficult to answer, but the sources give us some indication of how to analyze the Late Babylonian employ of Sumerian-Akkadian tradition.

3.1 *The Babylonian Scholars and the Textual Transmission during the Second Half of the First Millennium BCE*

Writing evidences from Babylon, Borsippa, Nippur, Sippar, or Uruk coming from private and temple libraries attested that the series visible in Nineveh continued to be transmitted after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Temple

128 Frame/George 2005 and Frahm 2005.

129 See Farber 1987 and Beaulieu 2010.

130 The private library of Iqīšaya, scholar at Uruk, contained one manuscript with a Neo-Assyrian script and with a colophon of the Assurbanipal’s library (SpTU 2, 46), see Farber 1987 and Beaulieu 2010.

131 W. Farber 1987, 35, proposed this hypothesis, also adopted by E. Frahm 2002, 97.

132 Beaulieu 2010, 14–15.

133 Clancier 2009a, 260–261.

134 M. Jursa argues that traces of a royal correspondence are obvious in some administrative texts; see Jursa 2014, 94.

cult personal still used the canonised series in Babylonia to provide the gods and to protect the mortals. The texts from private and temple collections testified that part of the corpus was linked to the religious function of the scholars in the cult of the gods. For example, in Babylon and Uruk, families of lamentation priest (*kalû*) were in the possession of hymns, prayers, literary epic that they recited in the cult of the gods.¹³⁵ The Sumerian dialect Emesal was often the language of these texts, and the lamentation priest seems to be one of the last specialists to be able to understand it.¹³⁶

Divination, magical and medical texts formed the bulk of several private collections of incantation priests (*āšipu*) in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic period.¹³⁷ The sources testify above all of the theoretical corpus that the incantation priest should know in order to be able to practise his profession, a lot of them seem to belong to a study context. The scholarly texts reflect how the incantation priest deals with the spiritual and physical components of a disease. This mission of protection of the population was still taken very seriously in this time.

In addition, the figure of the specialist in celestial phenomena became a key figure in the intellectual world of the time.¹³⁸ The astrologer was literary the scribe of the series of interpretations of astrological omens: *Enūma Anu Enlil* (*ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*). This title is attested from the 7th century to the 1st century BCE, and the appellation highlights that astrology and astronomy are intrinsically combined in the same professional.¹³⁹ It also underlined the prestige that the series of omens of celestial phenomena still had and its authority in the second half of the first millennium BCE. In the sources from Uruk, the incantation priest and the lamentation priest bore often the title of

135 Beaulieu 2000, Maul 2005, and Gabbay 2014.

136 Schretter 1990, Maul 2005, and Gabbay 2014.

137 Nippur: Joannès 1992, Sippar: Finkel 2000, Uruk: Clancier 2009a, in particular 81–85.

138 The role of the astrologer was reinforced under the Sargonid. If the administrative sources of the Esagil in the 4th century BCE (Jursa 2002, 112) and in Sippar in the 7th and 6th centuries, confirmed that the diviner is always employed in the temples, the astrologer reinforce his place and administrative sources from the Esagil showed that he was more paid than the diviner. The very strong growth in the number of astronomical texts in the light of the weak presence of those of the diviners shows that the discipline is gradually being erased by that of the astrologer in the first millennium BCE. See also on this topic Maul 2013, 237–241.

139 In the colophon of the tablet MLC 1866, the scribe introduces himself not with the title of *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Enlil*, but he uses the very elaborated title of *šassukku*, this word designates a specialist in cadastral surveying and land surveying, so it may underline that it was the scribe's knowledge of "celestial geometry" that authorised him to bear the title of "astrologer".

astrologer as a supplement title.¹⁴⁰ In Babylon, the sources show that from the 4th century onward, the Esagil temple endowed the astrologers with monthly allowances¹⁴¹ that they still received in the 2nd century BCE, in addition to land granted by the temple.¹⁴² The astrologer could still have been a royal counselor in the 2nd century BCE, as an administrative text from the Esagil shows us: Itti-Marduk-balaṭu, descendant of Mušeziḫ, leaves the temple to work at the court of the Parthian king Hyspaosines.¹⁴³

However, the position of these scholars seems to have changed with the fall of Nabonidus in 539 BC. After the arrival of Cyrus the Great, Babylonia would no longer belong to an independent kingdom. For the Sumerian-Akkadian scholars this meant that the expression of the Sumerian-Akkadian culture was to pass through the temples. Even if the king's protection rituals are still transmitted and learned by scholars, Persian, Achaemenid and Parthian kings do not seem to have been involved in promoting Sumerian-Akkadian culture. Furthermore, from Darius I (521–486) and Xerxes (486–465) onwards, the disappearance of Babylon's status as capital will have important repercussions.¹⁴⁴ After the conflict between the Babylonian elites and the Achaemenid kings in 484 BCE, the ancient Sumerian South gained autonomy, the Urukians put Anu, the city god, at the head of their pantheon, and distanced themselves from the figure of Marduk, the god of the ancient capital, Babylon.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, the arrival of Alexander the Great was not without consequences for the vitality of a scholarly micro-society which no longer represented the dominant culture in Mesopotamia at the end of the first millennium BCE. The new Hellenistic monarchs saw in these sanctuaries and their assembly, convenient interlocutors, as they were familiar with local political, economic and cultural issues. They naturally became the relay of the Hellenistic power.¹⁴⁶ Kings no longer exercised royal patronage over Sumerian-Akkadian culture since the Achaemenid dynasty, as is also reflected in some literary texts from the 2nd century BCE. Indeed, the so-called "Uruk list of Sages and Kings" (Table 3.1), testified how the Babylonian scholars dealt this new situation

140 Rochberg-(Halton) 2000. The phenomenon of this double title or even double function is not that well attested in Babylon but seems to have been possible. Only one individual from Babylon appears with the title of lamentation priest and astrologer (CT 19 144, Nabû-apla-uṣur).

141 Beaulieu 2006b.

142 CT 49 144.

143 BOR 4 132, see van der Spek 1985, 549–551.

144 See also Joannès 2000, 706 and Clancier/Monerie 2014.

145 Krul 2018 and Joannès 2000a.

146 See Clancier/Monerie 2014.

during the end of the Hellenistic period (165 BCE). Anu-belšunu, his author, divided this list into three sections: the first seven lines lists seven antediluvian kings and their sages (*apkallu*), after a paragraph partly broken follows the last section with eight postdiluvian kings and their master scholars (*ummânu*).¹⁴⁷ Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid, and Hellenistic rulers are decidedly absent. E. Robson accurately noted that:

The political intent of Anu-belšunu is clear: Uruk has been supported by kings, served by sages and master-scholars, since the time before the flood but in recent centuries, the bond between royalty and scholarship has been broken and the local, temple-based community of *āšīpus* and *kalûs* is now forced into self-reliance.¹⁴⁸

Royal power seemed to be losing its place as a referent in favour of the dynasties of sages in the mentality of the scholars of the Hellenistic period.¹⁴⁹ They appear to be the cogs of power just as important as the figure of the king. Listing the *apkallu* and *ummânu* parallel to that of the kings, one can trace the sages just like the monarchs back to antediluvian times¹⁵⁰ thus putting them on equal terms.¹⁵¹ Reference to the past justified the privileged social position of the families of scholars in the Hellenistic society and reflected the vision of these families, who considered that their roles were as important as the one of the king.¹⁵²

147 Van Dijk 1962. The list goes from Gilgameš, and Šin-leqi-unninni, the legendary creator of the Standard Babylonian Epic, to Esarhaddon and one Tupšar-ellil-dari, known by the Aramaic name Ahiqar. Apart from Gilgameš, all six extant kings's names are historically attested.

148 Robson 2019, 187.

149 Joannès 2000, 710–711.

150 The antediluvian times marked a turning point in the history of mankind in Mesopotamian history.

151 Joannès 2000, 713.

152 The Uruk prophecy also shows that the Urukean scholars hope that the day will come where a new king will restore Uruk to its former glory, and make it the capital of the world. They hope that the king “will rebuild the temples of Uruk. He will return the gods' temples to their proper condition. He will renew Uruk. He will build Uruk's city gates with lapis lazuli. He will fill the watercourses and meadows with abundance and plenty. After him, a king, his son, will arise inside Tirana (archaising name of Uruk) and rule over the Four quarters. He will exercise rule and kingship inside Tirana. His dynasty will be permanent forever. The kings of Uruk will exercise rule like gods.” (Translation Robson 2019, 192). See also Beaulieu 1993, 49 about the identification of the king from this prophecy.

The scholars of the Late Babylonian period continued to hold the view that the spiritual protection of monarchs was a part of their mission. But the bulk of the scholarly and literary collections hinted that the transmitted knowledge is less and less concentrated on the palace and the king. Astrology, for example horoscopes, astrological medicine, and astrological magic gave more room to individuals.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, as the example of Itti-Marduk-balaṭu suggests, this does not mean that they stopped to be employed by the royal courts. The written evidence gave the impression that Cyrus and his successors did not adopt the Sumerian-Akkadian royal culture and ideology as it used to stand, which did not hinder the exchange of knowledge between the different satrapies of the Persian empire.¹⁵⁴ The few concessions that Persian or Hellenistic kings made to the sanctuaries had only local political significance, as the cylinder of Cyrus and Antiochus suggested.¹⁵⁵

3.2 *From the Observation of Celestial Phenomena to the Prediction of Them*

The second half of the first millennium marks a period of intense intellectual stimulation. The Babylonian Esagil seems to become an important “research centre”, as we would say today.¹⁵⁶ It seems that the preservation of the Babylonian texts also allowed the scholars of the Late Babylonian period to create new compositions anchored in the old ones. The process of copying canonical series authorized several generations of scribe to update and appropriate their content.¹⁵⁷

We do not have much information about the state of temple and palace libraries from the 8th until the end of the 5th century BCE in Babylonia. The library of Esagil in Babylon, as part of the temple of Bel-Marduk, seems to be similar to the library in Nineveh, as an encyclopaedic library.¹⁵⁸ The collections of Esagil were in use from the first half of the 7th century BCE until the beginning of the 2nd century CE at least. But the collection reached its peak between 200 and 100 BCE, according to the dates provided by the astronomical diaries, which were produced for the temple, and others literary tablets found in the

153 There are at date 28 horoscopes known in Babylonia. The oldest comes from Nippur, six from Uruk, the majority comes from Babylon. See on the evolution of astrology in the first millennium Reiner 1995, Rochberg-(Halton) 1998, Geller 2014.

154 See for example Pingree 1992.

155 For the Cyrus cylinder see Schaudig 2001, especially 550–556; see Stevens 2014 for a translation of the Antiochus Cylinder and the bibliography concerning it.

156 Clancier 2009a, 283.

157 Waerzeggers 2015, 110.

158 Clancier 2009a, 278–297.

collection of the temple' scholars. This encyclopaedic collection preserved the Sumerian-Akkadian tradition during its latest age.

The core of the Esagil library clearly shows new compositions were born out *Enūma Anu Enlil* based on regular observations of the sky during several centuries. The writing of astronomical diaries has been documented in the Esagil library of Babylon between 651 BCE and 60 CE.¹⁵⁹ Most of the texts were dated from the Hellenistic period, but the librarian kept at least one ancient astronomical diary dated to 651 BCE. The practice of observing the different aspects of the sky and recording their positions seems to have dated back to the 8th century BCE. Currently 2985 astronomical diaries are kept in the collection of the British Museum in London and come from the ancient collection of the Esagil temple. The production of astronomical diaries seems to be a speciality of Babylon, maybe promoted by the king Nabonassar (747–734 BCE).¹⁶⁰ The astrologer produced the astronomical diaries (*našāru ša ginê*) with almanachs (*mešhi*) and mathematic astronomic texts (*tersētu*) in the second half of the first millennium BCE. Scholars were able to calculate the position of the stars during the Hellenistic period, and mathematical astronomy originated at the same time as astronomical diaries appeared in Babylon. The discipline had been practiced in Uruk from the 4th century BCE onwards, while the city had only provided one astronomical diary to date.¹⁶¹ In Uruk, a comparison of the astronomical texts in the private collection of the descendants of Šangi-Ninurta with those from the Bīt Rēš offers a striking testimony of the evolution of astronomy between the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods.¹⁶² The studious notation of the position of the stars since the Neo-Assyrian period, made such later mathematical studies possible. It is however unclear whether the authors of astronomical diaries, or of mathematical astronomy texts, had planned to compile a new canonical series based on the structure of *Enūma Anu Enlil*.

3.3 *The Development of History*

Furthermore, texts with historical content evolved during this period. The genre of chronicles flourished in Borsippa and Babylon in the Hellenistic and Parthian period. A chronicle contains historical facts that follow a chronological order, but they never form a continuous narrative; lexical lists and the historical part of the astronomical diaries, indeed, inspired their structure. The status

159 Clancier 2009a, Waerzeggers 2015.

160 See for more information Hallo 1988.

161 The astronomical diary from Uruk is dated to 463 BCE.

162 See Steele 2019.

of these new texts in the ancient Near East is questionable. As the astronomical documents, they are never mentioned as a series (*iškaru*). The chronicles are known through unique manuscripts, they were not frequently copied.¹⁶³

While the last chronicle written in Borsippa dated to the reign of Neriglissar (560–556 BCE), the scholars who produced the chronicles in Babylon lived two hundred years after his reign. Their authors in Babylon also seem to have been the authors of the astronomical diaries and, as chroniclers, mainly seemed interested in recent events. The information they remembered could also be found in the event records of the astronomical diaries.¹⁶⁴ Astronomical diaries and Chronicles provide very precise data about the chronology of some events, such as the death of Alexander the Great, the wars between his Diadochi, and the renewal of Babylonian buildings by Hellenistic kings.¹⁶⁵ Only three chronicles from Babylon focus on ancient facts; one of these reports on the reign of the king Nabonidus (556–539 BCE).¹⁶⁶ The scholars employed royal inscriptions, among others, to write this historical-literary composition,¹⁶⁷ in which a fine network of intertextuality can be observed. But it is not the only text from the Esagil library that focuses on the figure of Nabonidus and Cyrus. Other compositions that mention them are the *Dynastic Prophecy*, the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the *Royal Chronicle* or the *Verse account*. These texts were all linked to each other, and they were certainly produced from the same sources. Indeed, it seems that the transition from the reign of Nabonidus to Cyrus the Great (539 BCE) aroused the interest of Babylonian scholars of the late Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods, because it was a crucial moment. It marked the end of the last native Babylonian dynasty. Although these texts reflect the dissatisfaction of the Babylonian clergy with Nabonidus' religious policies, they were studied and copied because they characterize the beginning of a foreign rule on the region. Moreover, these are not the only historical-literary text showing that the scholars of this time are redefining their culture and history in a world

163 We have one exception, the text ABC 1, this chronicle presents the reign of the kings who ruled Babylonia from Nabonassar (747–734 BCE) to Assurbanipal (668–630/27 BCE) and the main geopolitical events of the period. It is known from several copies. The colophon of the Babylon exemplar suggests that it was part of a series. It is still difficult to understand its context of creation.

164 About the link between astronomical diaries and chronicles, see Joannès 2000a.

165 See for their publication Grayson 1975, Glassner 1993 and the website livius.org by van der Spek and Finkel.

166 Waerzeggers 2012, 298–99.

167 CT 51 75 is a copy of a Nabonidus's inscription; CT 46 48 seems to be a literary text about his reign. See Schaudig 2001, 532 and 590–95. It is possible that the scholars from the Esagil have travelled to Harran to consult one of Nabonidus's stela. A copy of it was found in Larsa in a secondary context. Waerzeggers 2015, 113.

ruled by foreign rulers and alien cultures.¹⁶⁸ After this date, royal patronage of the temples and the Sumerian-Akkadian culture became increasingly rare, even though the region was a strategic place in the new Persian and Seleucid empires, its scholars were no longer at the heart of the decision-making bodies for the empire.

C. Waerzeggers offers an interesting interpretation of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. According to her, it should “have spoken to ideas circulating in a Greek cultural background”.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, it may have been a product of Hellenistic Period. In her opinion, the detailed account of the death of Nabonidus’ mother and Cyrus’ wife in the *Nabonidus Chronicle* may have interacted with Herodotus’ account of the death of Cyrus’ wife, Cassandane.¹⁷⁰ However, without sources from the 6th century available, it remains difficult to confirm whether or not it really was a Hellenistic composition. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude that all literature about Nabonidus appeared during the reign of Cyrus and that the Esagil’s manuscripts were merely later copies of it.

3.4 *Commentaries with a High Degree of Exegesis*

An increased sophistication of Babylonian scholarship is also evidenced by the commentaries written throughout this period. This genre appeared in the first millennium BCE and reflects an attempt to explain the content of standardised texts whose the vocabulary and phenomenal content were becoming older and difficult to understand. The aim of the commentator was not to extrapolate new meaning from the base text but rather to use all his knowledge to give consistency to a base text he had some difficulties to understand.¹⁷¹ Until now around 900 Akkadian cuneiform commentaries are known to have been written between the 8th century and the 1st century BCE.¹⁷² When commenting on them, the scholars often used the polysemy of cuneiform signs to make sense of the base text.¹⁷³ The commentator could have had difficulties to interpret a single word, or may not have understood a more extensive section of the base text.¹⁷⁴ Commentaries do not seem to be the work of one lone scholar interpreting texts but rather the produce of an assembly of scholars or the result of an apprentice work. This new genre of the first millennium BCE is linked to the

168 See Jursa/Debourse 2017.

169 Waerzeggers 2015, 117.

170 Waerzeggers 2015, 117–18.

171 Gabbay 2016, 8–9.

172 Gabbay 2016, 1. The *Cuneiform Commentaries Project* counts 880 commentaries, U. Gabbay adds also to this estimation the cultic commentaries and explanatory texts.

173 Gabbay 2016, 8 and 74–83.

174 Gabbay 2016, 9.

teaching role of the scholars. Indeed some texts are labelled “oral explanations and questions from a master” (*šūt pî maš’altu ša pî ummâni*). U. Gabbay underlines that the terminology of commentaries indicates that they could have been written after a senior scholar had asked questions to a younger scholar during a lesson (*malsûtu*) about his interpretation of a canonical text and after the advanced scholar added his corrections and own explanations. It was then probably the younger scholar who was responsible for composing the commentary tablet based on the content of the lesson, and sometimes on other available commentary tablets.¹⁷⁵ The place taken by commentaries in the collections of the first millennium scholars is important and may be linked to their teaching activities. Roughly 25% of the tablets of the Neo-Assyrian court scholar Nabû-zuqup-kenu, are commentaries, it is approximately the same for the library of the Hellenistic scholar Anu-ikšur from Uruk.¹⁷⁶ The texts of this genre could have been part of the textual transmission but this phenomenon seems to have been rare.¹⁷⁷ As U. Gabbay and E. Jiménez have pointed out around 25% and 37% of the commentary tablets found at Uruk are copies or partial copies of earlier manuscripts.¹⁷⁸ The original text copied could have been a local text or could have come from other cities.¹⁷⁹ It is especially the fame of a scholar that seems to explain that apprentices from other cities attended his lessons and wrote commentaries under his supervision.

The commentators gave explanations often based on lexical lists, it was actually the most important genre employed to explain canonised text. As soon as they started their apprenticeship, scribes learnt to know by heart a huge collection of synonyms, homonyms, and antonyms lists which offered them a practical tool to understand the core of Sumerian and Akkadian texts.¹⁸⁰ In some cases they may also have used quotations from other sources to explain the base text.¹⁸¹ During the first millennium, especially from the Achaemenid period onwards, commentaries attested the growing importance of the astrological core of texts. For example, a text from Nippur, dated to the end of the 5th century BCE, comments on the first two tablets of the medical diagnostic

175 Beaulieu 2007, Frahm 2011, 313–314 and Gabbay 2016, 13–16.

176 Frahm 2011, 314.

177 Gabbay 2016, 59.

178 Gabbay/Jiménez 2019, 59–64.

179 Iqīšaya, the owner of a private library in Uruk at the end of the 4th century BCE, possessed some commentaries which show an Assyrian origin (SpTU 2 46 and SpTU 3 101). Nevertheless, some text indicated that the transmission from Assyria to Uruk have been mediated by the city of Nippur, see Gabbay/Jiménez 2019.

180 Frahm 2011, 88–94.

181 For the both methods see Gabbay 2018, 293–298.

series, *Sakikkû*. The commentator tries to explain in this tablet, and in the part cited below, the link between the situation, a phenomenon described in the protasis (the “if” clause) and the ominous prediction presented in the apodosis (the “then” clause) of the base text.¹⁸² The commentator seeks to answer the question: Why, if the incantation priest sees a deaf man on his way, would it mean that his patient has the disease “Hand of Nergal”? Line 32 reads:

If he sees a deaf man: (the patient is suffering from) the Hand of Nergal – (explanation:) (If a child) is born under the constellation Kaduha (Cygnus), it will be dumb; alternatively, deaf.¹⁸³

The commentator figures out in this quotation that the disease “Nergal’s hand” and the deaf man seen on the road of the incantation priest are associated because in another astrological transmitted tradition the birth of a child under the Cygnus constellation caused his deafness or dumbness.¹⁸⁴ The Cygnus constellation is also associated with the figure of the god Nergal in the corpora mastered by the scholar.¹⁸⁵ The hermeneutical tools at work here are fascinating as they help understand the omens of the canonical series studied and as they allow to update the content of canonised texts.

3.5 Conclusion

The standardised series in the first millennium are generally rooted in the little-known history of manuscripts from the end of the second millennium BC. The scholars of the first millennium kept a very vivid and mystified history of this work of standardisation. They celebrated the intervention of the king in the creation of the corpus of Sumerian-Akkadian written knowledges, and the preserved textual sources highlight in particular the intervention of the monarchs of the Kassite dynasty and of the Second Dynasty of Isin. These kings provided models for the kings and scholars of the first millennium. Nevertheless, to this date, sources from the Middle-Babylonian period remain quite rare and they can only offer hypotheses to this date. Before the Kassite dynasty and the second dynasty of Isin, a first enterprise of standardisation of knowledge seemed to have appeared during the Late Old Babylonian period, and it seems to be linked to a desire to preserve an oral culture in danger of disappearance. The

182 See Frahm 2011, 80–81.

183 Translation: George 1991, 151.

184 The same astrological omen is referred in the horoscope TCL 6 14, see George 1991, 160.

185 The association of the constellation of Cygnus, namely the star ^{mud}ud.ka.duḫ.a, with the god Nergal is visible in the first tablet of the astronomical series *Mul.Apin* (for example see the text CT 33 1, i. 28).

same seems to be true for the canonisation of texts at the end of the second dynasty of Isin. Secondly, the effort to standardise culture also appeared to be the product of a prosperous monarchy which used it to build and support its royal ideology, as is the case of the Kassite dynasty and the Neo-Assyrian rulers. The intellectual policy of these dynasties seems to have been part of the manifestation of their power, but was also its tool for asserting and holding it.

Finally, the cuneiform sources of the end of the first millennium attest that from the moment the Persians came to power, royal patronage of the Sumerian-Akkadian culture came to an end. Their contributions in the Sumerian-Akkadian knowledge, written in cuneiform on clay tablet, were only partial. The Babylonian sanctuaries became the only promoters of this culture, which had as a consequence a reassertion of the social role of the scholar in the sources. Sumerian and Akkadian culture did not disappear in the second half of the first millennium: on the contrary, it flourished. The long study of existing knowledge, and the annotation of celestial observations for astrological purposes, during centuries, provided the framework for the elaboration of innovative knowledge: astronomy, mathematics, history blossomed. Furthermore, the commentaries at the end of the first millennium show that the Sumerian-Akkadian culture was still dynamic and that scholars constantly renewed their approaches of canonised knowledge. Canonization was then very productive in itself.

The last scholars to hold these commentaries, the Egibatila family from Babylon in 103 BCE, mentioned commentaries written on parchment scrolls.¹⁸⁶ This raises the question whether texts from the Sumerian-Akkadian tradition were transmitted on media other than clay tablets. It is possible that a change of medium may have led to the end of cuneiform clay sources. The question of the translation of Akkadian and Sumerian works into Aramaic or Greek remains a very difficult phenomenon to assess.¹⁸⁷ These works would have been written on perishable media and therefore they would not have reached us, be they written in cuneiform or not. The first book of the *Babyloniaca* by Berossus mentions a translation into Greek of the *Enūma eliš*, the epic of creation, but it seems that this was more an adaptation than a translation. Moreover, the Chaldeans's reputation in astronomy in Rome or Greece is underlined by classical sources and demonstrates that in one way or another these traditions had been passed on to the west.¹⁸⁸

186 Frahm 2011, 194 and Jiménez 2014.

187 Geller 1997, Westenholz 2007, and Maul 2009.

188 *Diodorus of Sicily* 11, 2.29–31 and *Geography of Strabo*, 16.1.6.

TABLE 3.1 The Uruk list of sages and scholars^a

-
- 0.1 During the reign of Ayalu, the king, U-anna was sage (*apkallu*).
 During the reign of Alalgar, the king U-an-duga was sage (*apkallu*).
 During the reign of Ameluana, the king, Enmeduga was sage (*apkallu*).
 During the reign of Enmeušungalana, the king, Enmebuluga was sage (*apkallu*).
- 5 During the reign of Dumuzi, the shepherd, the king, An-Enlilda was sage (*apkallu*).
 During the reign of Enmeduranki, the king, Utuabzu was sage (*apkallu*).
- 8–11 After the flood, during the reign of Enmerkar, the king, Nungalpirigal was sage (*apkallu*), whom Ištar brought down from heaven to Eanna. He made the bronze lyre, whose ... (were in) lapis lazuli, according to the technique of Ninagal. The lyre was placed before Anu..., the dwelling of (his) personal god. During the reign of Gilgameš, the king, Šîn-leqi-unninni was scholar (*ummânu*).
 During the reign of Ibbi-Šîn, the king, Kabti-ili-Marduk was scholar (*ummânu*).
 During the reign of Išbi-Erra, the king, Sidu, also known as Enlil-ibni, was scholar (*ummânu*).
- 15 During the reign of Abi-ešuh, the king, Gimil-Gula and Taqiš-Gula were the scholars.
- R. During the reign of [Adad-apla-iddina], the king, Esagil-kin-apli was scholar (*ummânu*).^b
 During the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, the king, Esagil-kin-ubba, was scholar (*ummânu*).
 During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the king, Esagil-kin-ubba was scholar (*ummânu*).
 During the reign of Esarhaddon, the king, Aba-Enlil-dari was scholar (*ummânu*),
- 20 whom the Arameans call Ahiqar.
 [...] Nikarchos.
 Tablet of Anu-belšunu, son of Nidintu-Anu, descendant of Šîn-leqi-unninni, the lamentation priest of Anu and Antu, the Urukean. (Copied) by his own hand. Uruk, the 10th of Ayyar, the 147th year of Antiochos (= 165 BCE), the king.
- 25 The one who reveres Anu will not carry it off.
-

a Object number: W 20030, 7. See for the transliteration in Akkadian van Dijk 1962, 44–52. Translation: A. Lenzi with some modifications.

b For the reconstruction of the name of Adad-apla-iddina see Finkel 1988.

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