THEORY AND PRACTICE OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

STUDIES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND BEYOND

PAPERS READ AT A SYMPOSIUM IN LEIDEN, 17-19 DECEMBER 2008

edited by

W.S. van Egmond and W.H. van Soldt

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The Near East in the second millennium BC
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DOMESTICIZING BABYLONIAN SCRIBAL CULTURE IN ASSYRIA:
TRANSFORMATION BY PRESERVATION

Niek Veldhuis

Traditional cuneiform texts associated with the Middle Assyrian royal court and dated in the early 12th century BCE, emphasize the true Babylonian origin of their contents. In the absence of an Assyrian literary heritage proper, Assyrian scribes adopted Babylonian scholarship and made it their own. This strategy was so successful that even today the study of the Babylonian written heritage is called Assyriology. Ninurta-uballissu, the royal scribe, went even further in trying to anchor the written tradition in geography by linking it to the ancient Babylonian city of Nippur, home to the god Enlil and his son Ninurta. Ninurta-uballissu exploited the identification of the gods Assur and Enlil in order to appropriate Nippur traditions as being essentially Assyrian. In adopting and scrupulously preserving the Babylonian heritage, the Assyrian scholars standardized and essentially froze its contents, introducing a modality of writing that was fundamentally different from what had been used before. By preserving the Babylonian heritage, they changed it into something else.

1. INTRODUCTION: LEXICAL TEXTS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

The present discussion of the Middle Assyrian lexical material is meant as an example of how we may use simple lists of cuneiform words and signs for studying the cultural and intellectual policies of the time. A brief extract from such a list reads as follows: 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Cuneiform</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ĝišapin</td>
<td>ėpi[nnu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ĝišapin-zu</td>
<td>mušēli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>ĝišapin-zu-zu</td>
<td>mušēli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>ĝišapin-zu</td>
<td>τaîme[du]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>ĝišapin-zu-zu</td>
<td>τaîme[du]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>ĝišapin-šu</td>
<td>gadibbu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>ĝišapin šu-du$_7$</td>
<td>šuklulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>ĝišapin nu-šu-du$_7$</td>
<td>la šuklu[lu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>ĝišapin zu-uzu</td>
<td>lummudu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>ĝišapin nu-zu-uzu</td>
<td>la lumm[udu]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ĝišapin si-sa$_2$</td>
<td>ešeru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>ĝišapin nu-si-sa$_2$</td>
<td>la iš[e]ru</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Veldhuis@berkeley.edu. Department of Near Eastern Studies, UC Berkeley.
1 VAT 9513 edited by Landsberger 1958: 110-111. DCCLT: P370339 (see note 5).
This is a section from the list of wooden objects with Sumerian words in the left column and Akkadian translations in the right column. The list has a thematic organization – other thematic compilations include lists of reeds and reed objects, clay and pottery, metals and metal objects, animals, meat cuts, and so on. Other types of word lists are organized by the first sign (comparable to alphabetic organization) or by the Akkadian translation (collecting Akkadian homonyms or near-homonyms with their Sumerian equivalents). In addition to word lists there are several types of sign lists, which document and explain the workings of the cuneiform writing system.² Lexical texts, word lists and sign lists support the knowledge of Sumerian, a heritage language used for literary and religious purposes, as well as the knowledge of the cuneiform writing system. Lexical texts also became part of the cultural heritage themselves and were transmitted for their own sake.

The lexical material has a long history, before and after the Middle Assyrian period. Leo Oppenheim described traditional Mesopotamian texts as a “stream of tradition”,³ a powerful metaphor that evokes a river irresistibly making its way through the landscape of time. The metaphor emphasizes continuity over long periods of time and in the case of the lexical tradition, this continuity is indeed almost beyond imagination. Several of the word lists and sign lists that will be discussed in this contribution were first introduced in the 19th century BCE and were transmitted over almost two millennia. They changed and developed considerably – but still one can easily recognize a Late Babylonian copy of the list of wooden objects as being part of the same tradition as its Old Babylonian predecessors.

Oppenheim’s metaphor of the “stream of tradition” leaves less room for the idea that scholars and scribes chose to adopt the tradition on their own terms and use it for their own purposes. It views the tradition as something more or less independent and with a power of its own. It does not encourage an inspection of the context in which this tradition was used by actual people. The “stream of tradition” concept has invited modes of publication that all but conceal the characteristics of the individual sources. Composite transliterations have been a useful and efficient means to make lexical material available for semantic research. In order to understand the cultural and cultural-political role of these texts, however, we need the particulars of the time in which they were copied, the specific characteristics of tablet type, palaeography, colophon, and find spot – all those meta-textual data that may tell us something about the actual use and purpose behind the writing of this particular tablet.

In Assyriology we are fortunate enough that we can actually ask such questions – that we have the material remains of a tradition through its historical manifestations. We have the opportunity to study how traditional material was used, where it was used and by whom, by reading such texts against the background of their archaeological and historical context. The present generation of scholars, therefore, faces a challenge that is different from the one that led to the creation of the monumental series MSL, or Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon.⁴ One may regard MSL as an exponent of the Stream of Tradition approach, as well as a pioneering effort to make the lexical tradition available in a concise format in particular for purposes of Sumerian lexicography

² A succinct overview of the various kinds of cuneiform lexical lists and their history is Civil 1995.
⁴ Originally known as Materialien zum sumerischen Lexikon, the series started in 1937 and presently consists of nineteen volumes with transliterations of cuneiform lexical texts.
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(as the series title indicates). We now face the challenge of making the cuneiform lexical tradition relevant for cultural history, for questions of textuality, identity and memory, and cultural heritage. With the advent of online publication the financial and practical limitations for publishing images and transliterations of individual lexical tablets are gone. The explicit goal of the Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (DCCLT) is to provide access to images, transliterations, and translations of individual lexical tablets as well as composite texts, in order to make this corpus available for cultural-historical research.

In order to illustrate this approach, the present contribution will discuss several aspects of the corpus of Middle Assyrian lexical texts from the city of Assur. These texts are now available in an exemplary fashion through the efforts of Brigitte Groneberg and Frauke Weiershäuser in the Digitale Keilschrift Bibliothek, where one finds images (photographs as well as copies) and transliterations of all previously published lexical texts from Assur kept in the museum in Berlin.

2. MIDDLE ASSYRIAN LEXICAL TEXTS

The corpus of Middle Assyrian lexical texts is more inclusive than any other late second millennium lexical corpus. The late second millennium saw the spread of cuneiform over the entire known world – and with it came the spread of the lexical tradition. A variety of cuneiform lexical texts have been found in the Babylonian heartland (Nippur, Babylon), in Northern Syria (primarily Ugarit and Emar), in Anatolia (Ḫattuša), in Egypt (Amarna), in Bahrain and in south-west Iran (Kabnak).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assur</th>
<th>Other sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thematic:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects (Ura)</td>
<td>everywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professions (Lu₂)</td>
<td>everywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business expressions (Ki-ulutinbiše)</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God lists</td>
<td>everywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acrographic:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kagal</td>
<td>Babylonia, Emar, Ugarit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 http://cdl.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt. Editions of texts quoted in this contribution by a P-number (for instance P370339) may be found through DCCLT (enter P number in the Cat search box and push the Search button).

6 http://keil.uni-goettingen.de. All lexical tablets with VAT numbers mentioned in the following have been consulted in photographs available at this project web site, which also provides further bibliographic details. Frauke Weiershäuser (Heidelberg) is presently working on a book publication of the remaining lexical texts from Berlin.

7 For the sites and the textual finds see Pedersén 1998. For the Bahrain texts see Eidem 1997 and André-Salvini 1999.

8 For simplicity’s sake this list does not include the sign lists. The general picture, however, is the same: the Assur corpus includes common sign lists, attested everywhere, as well as rare compilations such as Ea and Aa. On these rare sign lists, see below sections 3 and 4.

9 Organized by the first sign of the Sumerian entry.
N. VELDHUIS

Izi

Other:
Nabnitu
Erimuš
Emesal Vocabulary
Grammatical Lists

Ḫattuša, Kabnak

Babylonia
Babylonia, Ugarit, Ḫattuša
Babylonia, Ugarit, Ḫattuša

What is significant about this list is not so much the individual items, but rather the width of the coverage in the Assur corpus. Scribes at Assur attempted to collect not just the ordinary run-of-the-mill lexical material, but also the less common, more specialized scholarly texts.¹⁰

The Assyrian kingdom was a relatively recent arrival on the international scene. During the 14th century political and military power was divided between the kingdoms of Egypt, Ḫatti (Anatolia), Mitanni (Northern Mesopotamia), and Babylonia. The Great Kings of these four empires exchanged presents, wives, and diplomatic letters. The diplomatic language of the time was Akkadian, and this is one reason for the spread of cuneiform over the entire known world of the time. After the king of Ḫatti defeated Mitanni, a power vacuum was created in Northern Mesopotamia and Assur emerged as a new powerful state. It is against this political background that the corpus of Assur texts should be read.

Assur had known cuneiform writing for a long time, but it never created a written heritage to speak of. Apart from a list of kings, which traced the rule over Assur back to the late third millennium, there was nothing to anchor this new superpower in history. Assur thus borrowed a cultural heritage from its close neighbour, Babylonia. This heritage included literary texts, divination texts as well as lexical compilations. Some of these texts were in the ancient Sumerian language, others in an elevated register of Babylonian. By associating themselves with this Babylonian tradition the Assyrian rulers appropriated a heritage of a very considerable chronological depth, rooted in remote antiquity.¹¹

3. THE BABYLONIAN CONNECTION

The lexical corpus at Middle Assyrian Assur demonstrates a serious effort to collect everything available in the Babylonian knowledge tradition. Scribes at Emar, Ugarit, Ḫattuša, and elsewhere copied lexical texts, the traditional teaching tools for learning cuneiform and Akkadian. The Assur scribes, by contrast, collected a comprehensive corpus and put a very explicit emphasis on its Babylonian origin. We may detect this emphasis first, in colophons and second in paleography.

¹⁰ The Middle Assyrian corpus of lexical, literary, and scholarly texts was described as the Library of Tiglath-Pileser by Weidner 1952-1953 and is occasionally still referred to in those terms. The existence of such a library has been challenged on good grounds by Lambert 1976: 85 (with note 2). Freydank 1991: 94-97 has demonstrated that an important number of these tablets are to be dated about half a century before Tiglath-Pileser’s time. While a “library of Tiglath-Pileser” may thus not have existed, the connection that Weidner made between the width and depth of the Middle Assyrian corpus and the literary and cultural ambitions of the Middle Assyrian monarchs is still a valid point.

¹¹ The cultural dependency of Assyria on Babylonia cannot be separated from the problematic political and military relationships between them. See the important discussion by Machinist 1984-1985.
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The colophon on a copy of a thematic list of words says: 12

[Total: 3] 28 lines
[complete; collated; from an original from Akkad.
[by Marduk-balasi-su-eresh
the junior [scribe]
[son of Ninurta-uballisu]
the royal [scribe].

This colophon not only informs us that it was copied from a Babylonian original, but it also draws attention to several measures that have been taken to ensure that the copy is identical to the Babylonian original. The text was collated and the line count allows one to check that nothing was added or omitted. Various aspects of this colophon and its author will be discussed in more detail presently.

Several lexical texts in the Middle Assyrian corpus signal their Babylonian origin by using Babylonian paleography. Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform writing are different in style. Assyrian is squarish and very orderly, with most strokes at right angles. Babylonian writing tends to be more cursive and more chaotic in its appearance. The basic signs are the same, Assyrian and Babylonian signs clearly derive from the same source, but they look different. The great majority of Middle Assyrian lexical texts are written in the Assyrian style – even those that claim to be copies of a Babylonian original. A number of tablets, however, use Babylonian sign forms. This group not only includes lexical material, but also omen compendia and literary texts. 13

One example is VAT 9498, an exemplar from the series Izi, listing Sumerian words that all begin with the same sign. 14 Texts like this may have been imported from Babylonia, they may have been brought by Babylonian scholars working at Assur 15 or they may have been taken as booty. The so-called Tukulti-Ninurta Epic 16 tells us that king Tukulti-Ninurta went after the Kassite Babylonian king Kaštiliaš and defeated his troops. In a fragmentary section the text talks about the looting of Babylonian cities including, significantly, large numbers of scholarly texts such as prayers, divination texts and medical texts. There is the possibility, therefore, that VAT 9498 was indeed written in Babylonia by a Babylonian and brought to the north – by force or otherwise. There is also a good possibility, however, that the text was written in Assyria. The tablet uses ten marks in the left margin to indicate every tenth line. This editorial device is well attested in Middle Assyrian Assur, but does not exist, as far as I know, in contemporary Babylonia.

Other tablets more clearly demonstrate that Babylonian paleography was used locally by scribes at Assur. The so-called S Paleographic list from Assur is a Babylonian-Assyrian

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13 The texts are listed in Weidner 1952-1953, 200 and Pedersen 1985, 34. Both include in this list VAT 10102 (Tamarisk and Datepalm; see, most recently, Streek 2004 with previous literature), but the copies by Ebeling (KAR 145) and Lambert (BWL 41-42) show Assyrian writing.
15 For this possibility see Wiggermann 2008.
16 See Foster 1993: 209-229 with literature.
concordance of signs, with relatively archaic Babylonian forms. This tablet has a colophon that mentions the name of the scribe Marduk-kabit-ahhēšu the son of Aššur-ittūšunu. The colophon, interestingly, is entirely written in the archaic Babylonian style of the signs in the list. The same scribe wrote a copy of an incantation series (KAR 24) in regular Assyrian writing. The S' Paleographic list may be associated with the Middle Assyrian royal inscriptions, commonly written in archaizing Babylonian sign forms. Although Marduk-kabit-ahhēšu’s father is a “scribe”, not a “royal scribe” like Ninurta-uballissu (see below), it is possible that he and his father belonged to the small circle of officials who composed and/or copied inscriptions for the king.

In still other cases the use of Babylonian sign forms is clearly entirely scholarly in character, with no relation to any scribal practice. There is a group of Middle Assyrian copies of the sign list Ea, a very extensive list that includes the usual signs with their usual values but also many rare signs and sign uses that are, in fact, entirely restricted to the lexical corpus. Sign lists such as Ea treat the cuneiform writing system as a discipline of knowledge by itself. They do not primarily support the use of the writing system for writing and communicating other genres – they are theoretical treatises in their own right. The sign list Ea is laid out in three columns: the sign to be explained is in the middle column; the first column has a gloss that usually represents a Sumerian word and the third column has an Akkadian translation of that Sumerian word. In Middle Assyrian exemplars of Ea the middle column has Babylonian signs while the explanatory columns to the left and right have Assyrian signs. In Middle Assyrian Assur, therefore, Ea is a sign list that explains the proper use of Babylonian cuneiform signs.

The use of palaeographic data in this discussion has forced me to go into details of a rather technical and perhaps obscure nature. It is important to mention these issues here because many of the texts discussed above were originally published in transliteration only – without mention of the writing style they used, the ten marks in the margin or other aspects that signal their use. In a Stream of Tradition approach the mix of Babylonian and Assyrian signs in the Ea exemplars may be no more than a curiosity. If we assume, however, that scribes and scholars adopted this tradition with a purpose in mind, the writing style becomes part of the message.

The Babylonian written heritage as adopted by Assyrian scribes is thus marked as being, indeed, Babylonian in origin and in character. This is done by emphasizing the Babylonian origin of the text in the colophon, by utilizing the literary Babylonian dialect of the Akkadian language and occasionally by using Babylonian sign forms. The very extensive Babylonian lexical tradition, which had a considerable chronological depth and which, through its use of Sumerian, pointed back to an even more remote antiquity provided an important element of learning and learned heritage that Assyrian scribes and rulers used as objects of prestige and as a heritage to match their claim to power.

17 Meissner 1927; see Gantzert 2006. The Assyrian forms are added in small and very shallow signs.
18 Hunger 1968, no. 52. In contemporary Emar some colophons use the archaic writing style known from S’ Paleographic (see Rutz 2006), but this is not otherwise attested at Middle Assyrian Assur.
19 For a sample of the palaeography of Middle Assyrian royal inscriptions see for instance the stone inscription of Šalmanesar 1 in KAH 13 (edited by Grayson 1987: 180-186).
20 All lexical texts from Middle Assyrian Assur use the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian in the translation column. There is a small group of tablets that occasionally inserts Assyrian dialectal forms.
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4. DOMESTICIZING BABYLONIAN KNOWLEDGE: NIPPUR AND THE ASSYRIAN ENLIL

To the Assyrian scribes who appropriated this knowledge there was a value in the label Babylonian. At the same time, in order to function, this knowledge needed to be domesticized and made into something that ultimately belonged to them themselves, the Assyrians. Assyrian and Babylonian culture and religion have enough similarities and points of contact to make such a project feasible. They share a language, a writing system and at least a number of gods. Old Assyrian incantations, dating to about 1900 BCE, have much in common with contemporary examples from Babylonia, suggesting that there was a cultural continuum and a shared repertoire. In this shared repertoire, however, Babylonia was the cultural superpower with long traditions and with scribes who were confident enough to recreate that tradition continuously.

Early in the second millennium the god Assur, the central god of the Assyrian pantheon, was identified with Enlil, the main god of the Sumerian pantheon who resided at Nippur in Babylonia. Assur was called “the Assyrian Enlil”. This identification provided Assur with a wife, Ninlil, and with children, including the warrior god Ninurta. This process took place not only in theological speculation, but also in the physical cult topography of the city of Assur, so that names of temples, chapels, and other cultic installations at Assur were identical with those at Nippur. Assur’s identity as the Assyrian Enlil justifies the existence of prayers and songs to Assur in the Sumerian language – the language that was used in remote antiquity to address Enlil. Sumerian had no tradition in Assyria; there was no Sumerian literary or religious heritage in the north. By assimilating Enlil’s identity, however, the solemn tradition of songs in the very ancient and very learned Sumerian tradition could be used for Assur.

The importance of Nippur and its traditions in establishing a proper Assyrian literary and religious heritage may be further illustrated by considering the corpus of texts written by three brothers who were closely connected with the royal court. Above, I briefly discussed a colophon to a copy of a list of wooden objects, written by Marduk-balassu-ereš the son Ninurta-uballissu, the royal scribe. Marduk-balassu-ereš had two brothers, Bēl-aha-iddina and Sîn-suma-iddina, who signed their names on a number of lexical and literary tablets. Some of these colophons are dated and may be placed in the first half of the twelfth century. The texts are all beautifully executed library exemplars which were clearly highly valued and which were preserved for many centuries in cuneiform libraries.

The sons of Ninurta-uballissu copied the following texts:

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22 Maul 1998.
23 Until recently it was commonly believed that the Southern Babylonian cities, including Nippur, had been abandoned in the late eighteenth century and were only re-established several centuries later. This historical reconstruction has been called in question – it seems more likely now that Nippur was continuously occupied so that a continuous scribal tradition may have flourished there. See, provisionally, Van Lerberghe 2008.
24 These texts and their colophons have been discussed by various authors. See most recently Freydank 1991: 94-97 and Jakob 2003: 256-258.
25 The tablets were found in Neo-Assyrian archaeological contexts, mixed with tablets that date several centuries after the Middle Assyrian period. A few of the Ninurta-uballissu tablets were discovered in the royal libraries at Nineveh. For the details see Pedersén 1985: 31-42.
Sign lists:
- Ea 1 VAT 10172
- Ea 2 Ass 523
- Aa 3/1 VAT 9534
- Diri 2 Ass. 2559
- (Diri 3) VAT 9487

Word lists:
- Ura 3 Ass 3071 + 4463
- Ura 5 VAT 8876
- Kagal 2 MS 3030
- Kagal A VAT 9592
- Kagal B VAT 10383
- Nabnitu 4 VAT 9716
- Ki-ulutinbiše 3 VAT 9552
- Ki-ulutinbiše 6 VAT 8875
- Ki-ulutinbiše 7 Ass 4533p

Literary/religious (bilingual):
- song to Nininsina KAR 15
- song to Nininsina KAR 16
- Lugal-e KAR 14
- Lugal-e BM 122625

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26 Zimolong 1922.

27 Civil 2004: 120. The final line of the colophon is to be reconstructed \([\text{a-šur iš-man}]-ni\) DUMU a-bi-DINGIR; see Jakob 2003: 257.

28 This colophon mentions Bêl-aha-iddina the scribe (LU₂.A.BA) as collator; the copiist is the otherwise unknown Nabû-suma-iddina, son of Badû. The text is dated to the eponym of Sammuha-ašarêd and is therefore later than the other tablets listed here; Civil 2004: 134 and Jakob 2003: 258.

29 Landsberger 1957: 83. This text probably joins VAT 9530 = LTBA I, 6; Landsberger 1957: 85 P. Landsberger, in his edition suggested that the latter fragment belongs to LTBA I, 1 (VAT 9519), but these two pieces are partly duplicated in lines 147-166 of the composite edition.


31 This fragment most probably belongs to the same tablet as VAT 10228 + VAT 11915; see Civil 1971: 234.

32 Landsberger 1937: 90 C.

33 Van Dijk 1983: text i; excavated at Nineveh.
Obviously, this list only includes tablets that have been preserved and that have preserved a useful colophon – the brothers may have copied many more texts. As it is, however, this corpus is quite unusual and significant.

All sign lists (Diri and Ea/Aa) are of the type discussed above, with a mix of Babylonian and Assyrian palaeography. The signs to be explained are in Babylonian writing, the glosses and translations in Assyrian. Diri is a common sign list in the late second millennium, but Ea and its derivative Aa are not. Ea is a scholarly text that was not studied in scribal schools but that belonged to the learned heritage of expert scribes. Appropriately, one of the colophons to an Ea text labels it as “a series of old syllabaries”, thus distinguishing Ea from the syllabaries that were in use in scribal education. More specifically, Ea belongs to the learned heritage of the city of Nippur. In the early second millennium Ea was used as a scribal exercise at Nippur. It was replaced in that function by another sign list (known as S') that was at home in Sippar, in Northern Babylonia, and that would remain the standard teaching tool for almost two millennia. While the sign list Ea was no longer used in education, it developed into an authoritative and encyclopaedic compilation of signs and sign values, originating at Nippur. At least one of the three Ea copies, written by the sons of Ninurta-ubalissu the royal scribe, is copied from a Nippur original, as indicated in the colophon.

Similarly, among the word lists one finds very common compositions such as the thematic word list Ura. The lists Kagal and Nabnitu are less common, but absolutely unique is the appearance of no less than three tablets of Ki-ulutinbiše, the list of contract phrases. The expressions are in Sumerian, with translations in Akkadian. Many of the expressions are well known from administrative tablets from around the eighteenth century and many are typical of Nippur. The style of the compilation may be illustrated by a section that deals with the additional share for the first-born son in the division of an inheritance:

1. sipa-ta elātu additional share
2. sipa-ta šeš gal-la elāti ahī rabī additional share of the eldest brother
3. sipa-ta mu nam-šeš gal-la elāti ahī ri-bi additional share because of first birth
4. sipa-ta-a-ni elātušu his additional share
5. sipa-ta-a-ni-ta ina elātišu from his additional share

34 Cooper 1978: text aA; excavated at Nineveh.
35 See Pedersén 1985: 42; excavated at Nineveh.
36 Probable candidates (colophon broken) are VAT 9533 = KADP 38 (Urn 17); VAT 8755 (Nabnitu 7); VAT 8880 (Nabnitu R); and perhaps VAT 9528 (NBGT III; written in an odd mixture of Babylonian and Assyrian sign forms). These tablets are beautifully written, have double column dividers and indicate every tenth line with a ten mark in the margin.
37 See Civil 1979: 147.
38 This is the opening of Tablet 6 (Landsberger 1937: 75).
6. sipa-ta-a-ni-še₂₃
7. sipa-ta-a-ni šu b₂₂-in-ti
8. sipa-ta-a-ni šu ba-ab-te₂₁-še₂₆

This terminology is primarily known from Old Babylonian Nippur, other cities had no additional share or expressed that in different ways. The term sipa-ta, while not exclusively Nippurian, is most frequently attested in Old Babylonian legal texts from Nippur. Other sections in the text talk about oaths before Ninurta, a Nippur god, or mention localities at Nippur.

A unilingual Sumerian version of Ki-ulutinbiše is known from some twenty-five fragments from eighteenth century Nippur – and then nothing – until the text resurfaces in a much expanded and bilingual format in the copies of the sons of Ninurta-uballissu. Two of these three tablets mention in their colophon that they were copied from originals from Nippur.

The translations of the local Nippur Sumerian contract phraseology certainly had no practical value whatsoever at the court of Assur. Ki-ulutinbiše represented ancient knowledge that had somehow survived the centuries at Nippur and was copied from Nippur originals by scribes at Assur, the city of the Assyrian Enlil.

Going through the list of literary texts we see once more the Nippur connection in the form of several mythological texts in Sumerian that celebrate Ninurta, the son of Enlil. The sons of Ninurta-uballissu the royal scribe augmented their father’s collection with a number of beautifully executed library tablets. The tablets that may now be identified as belonging to this group put much weight on Nippur and its traditions. If the god Assur was the Assyrian Enlil then the city Assur was the Assyrian Nippur and the Sumerian heritage of Nippur and all that belonged to it could be legitimately claimed as Assyrian heritage.

5. Transformation through Preservation

Assyrian scribes introduced a number of editorial practices to safeguard the Babylonian texts that they copied. By doing so, they introduced standardized lexical texts and fundamentally changed the mode of writing of this Babylonian tradition.

With few exceptions, second millennium Babylonian lexical texts are not rigidly standardized. The exceptions that we know about all belong to very elementary education. Early second millennium lexical texts were controlled by schoolmasters who were very knowledgeable about Sumerian, who knew the Sumerian literary tradition and were confident about their knowledge of the lexicon and the writing system. This confidence is expressed in the constant state of flux in which the early second millennium lexical texts have come to us. Later second millennium examples are primarily known from Ugarit and Emar where knowledge of Sumerian was much more restricted. Both Ugarit and Emar had received cuneiform literacy from their
Mitannian overlords, who, at one point, ruled over the area of what is now South-East Turkey, Northern Syria and Northern Iraq, including, most probably, Assur. With the writing system the Mitannian rulers introduced the tools to teach this writing system, lexical texts, that they had obtained, presumably, from Babylonia. Bits and pieces of this Mitannian lexical tradition are found not only at Emar and Ugarit, but in the whole area that was once part of this empire, demonstrating that more or less the same set of lexical texts was used at Alalakh, and Ekalte42 in the West, as well at Nuzi and Šibaniba43 in the East. One may assume that the great majority of the Sumerian entries in the lexical texts was only vaguely understood in these peripheral scribal circles. There was little room or incentive for an individual scribe or teacher to invent new items or to further develop the text. On the other hand, there is no sign of a rigid standardization of the corpus; they did not use any editorial tools for safeguarding the integrity of the received text.

The Middle Assyrian Assur corpus is different on two accounts. First Assur is close to Šibaniba and Nuzi and was under Mitannian influence – there is all reason to suggest that at some point this same Mitanni lexical corpus was used at Assur. Once Assur rose to power, the Mitanni tradition was no longer good enough. What they needed was a true Babylonian tradition, if possible a Nippur tradition – one that had a long and trustworthy pedigree. Second, this tradition needed to be preserved exactly as it was. The Middle Assyrian Assur texts reveal an approach to textuality that is very different from earlier Babylonian approaches, a difference that in modern scholarly literature is often associated with the difference between “oral” and “written” culture, a terminology that I prefer not to use. The evidence that we have is, of course, written and not oral; lexical texts define, organize, and study the cuneiform writing system. It is hard, therefore, to identify a group of texts that is more “written” in a very essential sense of the term than lexical texts. These texts are about writing, they teach writing, and they preserve the knowledge of writing.

Perhaps this is just a terminological quibble. What is important is the paradox of this cultural appropriation – in all their efforts to preserve the Babylonian heritage, the Assyrian scribes changed this heritage into something essentially different. By adhering exactly to their Babylonian originals they loudly proclaimed that in fact they did not own this heritage, that they were not free to adapt it at will and that they did not have the facility with the Sumerian language to keep the lexical corpus in its free floating state.

The example of the Middle Assyrian scribes was followed, not only in Assyria, but also in Babylonia. Lexical texts and many other traditional compositions received more or less authorized editions that were, from now on standardized – if not always in practice, then at least in theory.

6. CONCLUSION

Lexical texts consist of straightforward lists of words and signs with explanation. They are interesting, first because they help us to decipher cuneiform languages, in particular Sumerian.

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42 Ekalte yielded only a small fragment of the list of professions (Lu₁). The fragment Mayer 2001, no. 81 A; DCCLT: P347326, as far as preserved, follows closely the Ugarit/Emar version of this list.

43 The Šibaniba (Tell Billa) list of animals (edition Landsberger 1960: 97-99; DCCLT: P282737) is virtually identical with the Ugarit/Emar version. Civil 1987 has demonstrated that one of the Nuzi exercises is a syllabic version of Ura 4 (wooden objects) in basically the same wording as the Emar recension.
Second, we may follow, more or less, the history of the transmission of these texts, which, as it seems, was not so much a river or a stream, but rather a complex web of trails, not to be abbreviated in a neat linear stemma. What the present contribution seeks to exemplify is a third approach, a use of lexical texts for understanding the intellectual climate of a period, the struggle for identity, the uses of the past, and the importance of useless knowledge. The first chapter of Jean Bottéro’s Mesopotamia is entitled, in the English translation, “In Defense of a Useless Science”. Useless science, however, is hardly new – the study of useless science in antiquity may strike some as being useless to a high degree. I submit that understanding the social context of this useless science and its practitioners may tell us something important about those people – and perhaps about us.

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DOMESTICIZING BABYLONIAN SCRIBAL CULTURE IN ASSYRIA


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