SUMERIAN LITERATURE
Niek Veldhuis

Introduction

The Old Babylonian corpus of Sumerian literary texts includes a wide variety of types. We may make a rough division into three groups. First, narrative texts relating the adventures of gods and/or men. A distinction between ‘mythical’ texts about gods and ‘epic’ texts about heroes seems to be of little relevance. The heroic tales concentrate on the early kings of Ur: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh. Other compositions relate the adventures of gods and goddesses such as Inanna (goddess of love and war), Easi (a cunning god) and Ninurta (a warrior god). Second, hymnic texts singing the praises of a god, a king or a temple. The third group – traditionally called ‘wisdom texts’ – I propose to label ‘paradigmatic texts’. Admittedly, this group is a kind of mixed bag in which texts of very different foci and contents are put together. One important group is the disputationes. There are two sub-groups: disputationes between animals, objects, or seasons (bird and fish; eye and grain, winter and summer, hoe and plough) and dialogues between people. Both groups are full of rhetorical tricks and verbal abuse. Related to these is the so-called Eduba (or school) literature. These compositions describe life at school in a satirical way. I am inclined – with some reservation – to rate among the paradigmatic texts the proverbs, and collections of instructions (šuruppak’s instructions to his son, and the Farmer’s Almanac). The texts grouped under the label ‘paradigmatic’ are characterised by the display of knowledge, verbal ingenuity, and – in most examples – a penchant for competition.

The three main groups may then be summarised as follows:

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106 Entries 15, 16 and 17 are certainly in Akkadian.
Not every single Sumerian composition may be categorized by this three-fold distinction, but I believe that it accounts for the main groups. There are, to be sure, examples of verbal ingenuity in the narrative group — where it plays a role in the adventurous plot — but this is the kind of cross-connection that one should expect. The same god may be the addressee in a hymnic text, or the protagonist in a narrative text. In the narrative text he or she may have a positive, negative, or ambiguous character. In the hymnic texts, however, there is only praise.

In this contribution I want to discuss four ways to approach and analyse this corpus. These four approaches are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, I would argue that every next approach presupposes the preceding one.

Literary History

Various authors have discussed the history of Sumerian literature, in particular W. W. Hallo and J. Kecher. The importance of a chronological ordering of the material can hardly be overestimated. No survey of Sumerian literature can ignore the historical dimension. Yet I want to signal a few problems that have sometimes been glossed over too easily.

Clay tablets generally may be dated by paleography, by archaeological context, by a date formula in the text itself, or by some combination of these three. Literary tablets rarely contain a date formula. Paleography is as yet still such a neglected and rather problematic aspect of Sumerology, so that the dating of a tablet without the benefit of an established archaeological stratigraphy may have a margin of uncertainty of a century or more. However, for the purposes of literary history this is rarely a problem. Much more problematic than the dating of an individual manuscript is the establishment of the point of origin of a composition — in other words, when did composition X come into being? Cuneiform compositions may have a very long period of transmission. *The Instructions of Sin-Euppad*, a collection of proverbs and good advice, is known from third, second, and first millennium copies. Although there are many differences between these versions, they represent a composition that remained recognizably the same. Other compositions that are attested in different periods changed considerably. A wide variety of compositions are thought to originate in the Ur III period, between 2100 and 2000 BCE. There is good, but not absolute, evidence that a large number of royal hymns, the legendary tales about Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, and the composition now called *Curse of Agade* were composed in this period. Yet literary tablets from the Ur III period are very rare. The literary production of the Ur III period must therefore be reconstructed from Old Babylonian copies which were written down some three centuries later. The few pieces of Ur III literature that are known show this to be a hazardous undertaking. Some compositions were faithfully transmitted, but in other cases the Ur III version differs considerably from the Old Babylonian one. Some Ur III literary texts are not known at all in Old Babylonian copies. In most cases we have no material for comparison. Even in those cases where we know for sure that a composition existed in Ur III times, there is no way we can be certain about its actual wording.

Many of the compositions that we know from Old Babylonian sources already had an impressive history of transmission. Yet we know very little about this history — in many cases nothing at all. The debate about the date of composition of individual literary texts has occasionally acquired dogmatic traits, centring upon different interpretations of intangible or insubstantial evidence. In summary: we may date tablets, but only rarely may we date compositions. Literary compositions existed in a more or less fluid state. And this is true to different degrees for different compositions. This mode of existence and transmission undermines the very idea of a date of composition. Furthermore, since we rely on archaeological finds, we do not know what is missing. There are many indications that the periods before and after the Old Babylonian period were rich and creative, pivotal periods in the history of cuneiform literature. Literary texts from both periods (Ur III and Kassite), however, are rare. The bits and pieces that we do have confirm the idea that a lot was going on there. But we do not have the first-hand evidence, perhaps because we simply have never dug at the right place.

The possibility, therefore, to reconstruct a literary history according to date of composition is very limited. The availability of datable sources may seem to make the whole project somewhat artificial. We may study the actual physical clay tablets on which the ancients wrote their literature — what is the reason to go back in time even further, to leave the sources for what they are and to indulge in speculation about earlier versions which we do not have? I believe that the main reason for this lies in the history of the discipline. The methodology of studying ancient texts was developed for biblical and classical studies. There the dating of the composition is obviously more to the point than the dating of the manuscript. The gap

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1 Hallo, "Toward a History"; Kecher, "Sumerische Literatur".

2 This is true in particular for a number of texts that claim to have been authored by Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon and high priest of Su-er (the moon god). She lived around the middle of the third millennium. The authenticity of this claim for the composition *Nisaba* was vigorously defended most recently by Ziegler (Die Reichsfrau), even though none of the actual tablets antedates 1800 BCE.
between these two dates is a major element in the methodological make-up of these disciplines. The type of evidence that Assyriologists work with, however, is very different and requires another methodology. I believe that one of the main tasks for Assyriology is to continue to develop a methodology that is suitable for cuneiform tablets and their specific modes of textuality.

Several of the characteristics of the transmission of literary texts discussed above are equally true for other traditional text types, such as religious or scholarly texts. But since this collection of studies is about cultural repertoires, we are primarily interested here in the literary texts. But first we should address the thorny matter of a definition of ‘literary’ in the context of ancient Mesopotamian material. Is there a way to distinguish between literary and other texts?

Poetics, or what is literary?

In the practice of numerology the question ‘what is it that makes a literary text literary’ has not been appreciated as a particularly pressing matter. However, in trying to understand Sumerian literature as a corpus we cannot fully escape thinking about the nature or essence of this corpus. Is the literary a category that was somehow recognised by Babylonian people? Cuneiform texts very rarely reflect upon the culture by which they were created. There is hardly any metadiscourse. To put it more precisely: writing was not used for meta-discourse. It is no surprise, therefore, that we have no native poetics. The only thing we have consists of a couple of catalogues of literary compositions. These catalogues are of different kinds and have different functions. A discussion of them is found elsewhere in this book, so I will confine myself here to a brief discussion of three concepts that are important for delineating the literary field: religion, knowledge, and fiction. The first two may be understood as attempts to outline the borders of what may count as literary against other elements of what has been called The Streams of Tradition. The concept ‘fiction’ may then perhaps be used as a positive indicator of what literature is.

Religion

The problem of religion is a thorny one indeed. What, if anything, is a religious text? May we regard religious texts as a sub-category of the literary, or should we keep them apart as two distinct entities? For a long time the approach to Mesopotamian religion has been to collect all and sundry references to gods, superhuman beings, priests and cult, afterworld, creation, and so on, and extract from this a set of beliefs, or a history of beliefs. The status of ‘beliefs’ distilled in this manner out of a mass of data assembled without much regard for structure and format is obviously highly questionable. As D. Feeley has pointed out, there are many discourses in which religious ideas may figure, and they are likely to diverge from one another. Religious ideas and concepts are contextualised and a single individual may express very different beliefs in different contexts. It should be noted that in Southern Babylonia – from times immemorial the centre of Sumerian learning and literature – the religious routine did not rely on written texts. There is no written creed, and the narratives about gods and songs of praise for divinities cannot substitute for that. A cursory overview of the evidence shows that myths and songs concerning an individual god do not necessarily add up to a consistent picture of the beliefs that people (which people?) held about this divinity. The Goddess Nanl, for instance, appears in widely different configurations. She is the local goddess of Nippur, a town within the province of Lagash, and as such appears frequently in royal inscriptions of the Lagash dynasty at the end of the twenty-second century. In one inscription from this period Nanl appears as an interpreter of dreams. Nippur is on the edge of the Southern marshes, the habitat of numerous birds and fish. Nanl is associated both with marshes and sea, and with birds and fish. In the latter role we find her in two hymns and in the composition Nanl and the Birds, all from the Old Babylonian period. In another Old Babylonian hymn to Nanl, however, no references to birds, fish, or water are to be found. Instead social justice seems to be her domain. There can be little doubt that all these aspects are ‘real’ and ‘authentic’. They do not, however, add up to one monolithic portrait of Nanl.

It seems to make little sense to salvage theology by making a distinction between Nanl as a ‘literary’ figure (not to be taken too seriously for religion) and Nanl in religious texts. First, there is no obvious criterion for making such a distinction. Moreover, one may argue with Feeley that

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3 Black, Reading Sumerian Poetry, p. 5.

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4 Feeley, Literature and Religion.

5 See Michalowski, "Sumerian Literature". We do have a large number of texts produced by the religious routine. These are administrative texts, recording expenses for offerings. Perhaps these should count as religious texts strictly speaking.

6 A preliminary question also seems to be whether the existence of a written creed is necessary for being able to use the term ‘religion’ anyhow. It is very well possible that this attitude, which seems to underlie Oppenheim’s despair of being able to say anything useful about Mesopotamian religion (Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, p. 171) is simply another instance of myopia brought about by religion which relies on Holy Scripture.

7 See Feeley, Literature and religion.
the literary is simply another discourse on religion, not necessarily a less valid one. On these grounds it seems to be impossible to draw a line between religious and literary compositions. We may, however, distinguish between cuneiform texts and poetic texts. As mentioned above, cuneiform texts are rare in the South. They are much more frequent, however, in Northern Babylonian centres. Sumerian never had much of a tradition in the North, and the priests in these areas may well have felt the need to support their memories by written texts. These cuneiform texts are composed in eme-sal, a special variety of Sumerian. The main characteristic of eme-sal is that certain phonemes are replaced by others. For instance Sumerian דרום becomes דומ in eme-sal. Since there are no observable differences in grammar or syntax, the term ‘dialect’ seems to be inappropriate. The use of eme-sal is not restricted to cuneiform texts. Women and female deities in proverbs and literary texts also use it for direct speech. The cuneiform eme-sal texts may be eliminated from the corpus of Sumerian literary texts. But there are no clear and strict boundaries. First, a group of texts now called City Laments seems to be loosely related to the cuneiform literature in structure and content and in the frequent use of eme-sal. The City Laments do not easily fall into one of the three broad textual groups outlined above. They were probably composed for cuneiform occasions; in particular for an event related to the rebuilding of destroyed cities at the beginning of the second millennium. The copies we have, however, derive from the cuneiform school. The texts were used as exercises, albeit in later phases of education. Similarly, many of the royal and divine hymns known from Old Babylonian copies may have had a background in some cult. However, they were copied and transmitted outside of this cult, in the setting of the school. These compositions moved from the cuneiform to the literary. The partition between the categories is far from being watertight.

Knowledge

The second concept is knowledge. Can we make a distinction between texts concerning knowledge (or scholarly texts) and literary texts? Here again there is no straight answer. As M.E.F. Bloch has argued, most knowledge and the most important knowledge are implicit, not verbal, and not language-like. In the Mesopotamian situation we may add that most of the knowledge that was represented in language was probably never written down. Divinatory knowledge, for instance, is of a technical nature, but only

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8 There is a large corpus of literature on this group. See most recently Tinney, ‘On the Curricular Setting’, For the present discussion chapter 4 is particularly relevant.
9 Bloch, How We Think They Think.

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10 One may contest the characterisation of Greek science by Lloyd, Magic, Reason, and Experience, p. 234, in (1) the interest in fundamental issues and second-order questions; (2) the challenging of basic assumptions, even to the point of generalised scepticism; (3) an argumentative, competitive, even combative quality, reflected not only in the rejection of rivals’ views, but also in over-sanguine self-justifications; and (4) pluralism. None of this is found in cuneiform scholarly texts. See also Veldhuis, ‘TEL TIR’, pp. 83-84.
11 An edition of this composition by the author is forthcoming.
names. This shows that the text was conceived of—or at least used—as a means to teach these names. In this it is functionally similar to the list of Sumerian bird names, one chapter from a long thematic word list of which we have many copies on exercise tablets from the scribal school. However this may be, the format of the list and the format of the literary text contrast sufficiently to warrant separate categorisation, even though we must admit that the two had comparable aims.

The separate format of knowledge texts guarantees that these are much more easily distinguished from the literary ‘religious’ or cultic texts. On the level of contents and aims, however, considerable interference between the realms of literature and knowledge is possible.

Fiction

Finally, we may discuss the concept fiction as a potential positive characteristic of Sumerian literature. A. Loprieno has defined Egyptian literature with the concepts of fictionality, intertextuality, and reception. Fictionality, according to Loprieno, ‘is the textual category whereby an implicit mutual understanding is established between author and reader to the effect that the world represented in the text need not coincide with actual reality and that no sanctions apply in the case of a discrepancy’. Loprieno uses the concept of fiction in particular to distinguish between literature and theology.12

The Disputation between Bird and Fish is meaningful only if we accept a fictional world in which animals can speak. Still, I would argue that this is fiction in a rather weak sense. The animals and objects in the disputations are personified representatives of a class. They are not individuals. The hoo, in the disputations with the plough, argues that he, the simple hoo, is much more versatile and may be used for a large variety of jobs, whereas the plough is complex, needs a lot of men and beasts to be of any use, and breaks easily. One could argue that this is not fiction, but the actual reality of this society—or at least its farmers. It is only the faculty of speech that separates the paradigmatic hoo of the disputations from an actual hoo in reality. Or, one step further, one could argue that this is a thinly veiled poem about human qualities, having no fictional aspect whatsoever.

What about the narrative texts, the adventures of heroes like Gilgamesh, or the dramatic divine love story of Dur-uzu and Inana? Margalit Finkelberg has argued that literary fiction is an invention of the Greeks of the classical period.13 This invention constituted a revolution in poetics. Archaic poetry, represented by Hesiod, was evaluated as divinely inspired truth. This concept of poetry and truth is later on rivalled by new prose genres, which develop after the spreading of writing. Inspiration is kept as a literary topos, but the corollary, that poetry has an exclusive claim on truth, is abandoned. For Aristotle the truth-value of a literary work is entirely irrelevant. The poet has become an artist, and he is supposed to make good verses, not to tell the truth. Poetry, in particular fiction, becomes an autonomous phenomenon that is gradually separated from ‘non-fiction’ such as medicine and philosophy. Part of Finkelberg’s argument is related to the concepts of responsibility and knowledge. The heroic poet is not responsible for his verses. The muses inspire him, and tell him about events he did not know. For the classical poet, however, traditional stories are not knowledge that he is supposed to transmit, but rather the raw material from which he creates something new. He is an artist, and being inspired does not free him from the responsibility for what he has made. He will be judged not for the truthful-seen of his creation, but for its aesthetic value.

The relevance of Finkelberg’s argument for my topic is twofold. First, her study shows how the concept ‘fiction’ has its own history. We cannot apply such concepts uncritically to cuneiform material. Second, her description of the archaic situation provides a possible parallel that may elucidate the Sumerian material.

The pivot of Loprieno’s definition of fiction is a silent understanding between author and audience. For traditional material such as the Gilgamesh narratives the concept of an author is problematic to begin with. More to the point, the question is whether such stories were received as knowledge about the past, as entertaining stories, or something in between. These are difficult questions, and their answers may never be fully recoverable. They are crucial, however, if we want to define a corpus that can be described as ‘literary’, being somehow distinct from other written texts.

The Sumerian Gilgamesh narratives are no doubt based upon traditional material. Unlike the paradigmatic stories, these narratives have protagonists with names, and it is evident that these names and the roles that they played were known. Is there an element of ‘truth’ in the poems as we have them? Or are the traditional tales simply raw materials for a poet to produce his compositions? Or have the stories been used to produce a politically correct—or perhaps even propagandistic—version? Gilgamesh and his dynasty played a major role in the propaganda of the Ur III dynasty. This dynasty that had its residence in the city of Ur probably came from Uruk, and claimed Gilgamesh and his family as their ancestors. In this role we find Gilgamesh in some of the royal hymns of the time. It should be noted that such a moral

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13 See Finkelberg, The Birth. Incidentally, this reflects an odd reversal of fate for the ancient Greeks after having lost in recent times their unicity as the inventors of science.
function of these stories could only be exerted if the texts have some kind of authority, if they cannot easily be questioned or dismissed. In other words, the propagandistic or political role of these narratives may bolster our suspicion that this is not fiction. Whatever liberties the written versions may take compared to the traditional stories, it is very unlikely that they 'lie'. The narratives, therefore, contain some kind of knowledge.

Names of legendary protagonists not only define the limits of what we may call 'fiction'; they also establish a peculiar kind of intertextuality. We may thus move beyond trying to define the literary to an analysis of aspects of the structure of the literary field in Sumerian.

Intertextuality

A literary corpus may be defined by the intertextual links between its parts. A significant intertextual aspect of Sumerian literature is the personal name. Personal names in great majority refer to existing beings: kings, legendary kings, or gods. Only a few we do not encounter names of other people. Some of the dispositions are between named protagonists, but this is quite exceptional and its significance is as yet unclear. Most names are well-known to us and must have been well-known to an ancient audience. The five known Gilgamesh narratives are united around the themes of friendship, death, and fame. From this thematic perspective, we may argue that some narratives are more central than others. The composition Gilgamesh and Huwawa includes all three themes. Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to the cedar forest together in order to confront the monster Huwawa. The explicit motivation for this endeavour is that man is mortal. In Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld Enkidu volunteers to descend into the underworld to fetch the ball and stick that Gilgamesh had lost. Not heeding Gilgamesh's warnings, Enkidu is caught by the underworld. Gilgamesh mourns the death of his friend. The sun god agrees to take Enkidu's spirit out of the underworld at dawn, so that Gilgamesh may interview his friend about the underworld. This appears to be a gloomy and unattractive place. In a version of this text from Mari (Northern Babylonia) Gilgamesh and Huwawa is treated as a sequel to Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld. In narrative terms this is odd: in the one text Enkidu dies and returns only as a spirit. In the next he is alive and kicking. From a thematic point of view, however, this makes sense. The expectation of death, and the absence of any perspective beyond — the-

14 To avoid misunderstanding: it is not Holy Writ either.
15 The Marian text is still unpublished, but was used by George in his translation of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld (The Epic of Gilgamesh). See also Caviglione and Al-Rawi, 'New Sumerian Texts', pp. 93-94.

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Sumerian Literature

Greened in the final episode of Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld — constitute the main motivation for the heroic deeds in the cedar forest in Gilgamesh and Huwawa. For a contemporary audience, however, any sequence may have been irrelevant. They knew such stories, and the names of Gilgamesh and Enkidu were sufficient to evoke the complex of their characters and adventures. Gilgamesh and Akki, a novella about a war between Kish and Uruk, may be considered the most peripheral of the Sumerian Gilgamesh stories. It has no heroic content. The war turns into a Uρean victory simply by the irresistible force of Gilgamesh's divine aura. Enkidu plays a role in the narrative, but the relation between him and Gilgamesh is not thematised. Gilgamesh's role as a king and leader of the military is more important here than in the other narratives. Still, this does not invalidate the place of Gilgamesh and Akki as a member of the group of Gilgamesh narratives. The Gilgamesh of tradition is king, hero, and minor (underworld) god all at the same time. Though an individual narrative may emphasise one aspect over another, they are all there, and Gilgamesh is never not a king. The Death of Gilgamesh is not a heroic tale at all. It tells how the council of the gods decides that even Gilgamesh, the great king, has to die. Part of the composition describes the construction of his tomb. From an intertextual point of view this composition is perhaps the most interesting of the group. The gods, in their council, discuss Gilgamesh's accomplishments, including both royal and heroic deeds. One of his royal deeds consists in his care for the gods. Among his heroic traits are his confrontation with Huwawa and his meeting with the survivor of the great flood, Ziusudra. The first is a reference to the tale discussed above. There is no extant Sumerian story, however, in which Ziusudra and Gilgamesh meet.6 The picture of Gilgamesh that is presented here in the divine council is more complete than the one we have from the known Sumerian narratives. The intertextual connections include traditional elements of the Gilgamesh character that never made it to written Sumerian compositions.

The intertextual links established by the name of Gilgamesh are not restricted to the narratives. In a hymn addressed to Súlgi, a king of the Ur III dynasty, Súlgi himself addresses Gilgamesh:

On that day Gilgamesh the lord of Kish (= Uruk) conversed with Súlgi, the righteous shepherd of Sumer at his shining feet (?).

That their praise is sung to eternity

6 The Flood hero and Gilgamesh meet in the first millennium Akkadian Gilgamesh epic. There has been no indication so far that this was the case in the Old Babylonian Akkadian version.
Gilgamesh and Šulgi thus exchange praises. In the sections about Gilgamesh (uttered by Šulgi) we find references to his war against Enmebaraggesi of Kish and to his exploits in the cedar forest and his confrontation with Huwawa. Since the text has not been preserved completely, there may well have been more references to other known Gilgamesh episodes. The war against Kish is thus one of Gilgamesh’s traditionally acknowledged accomplishments, on the same level as his slaying of Huwawa. At the same time this Kish episode provides a number of complex problems. First, in the tale Gilgamesh and Akka, it is Akka the son of Enmebaraggesi who besieges Uruk and is defeated by Gilgamesh. Second, in one version of the so-called Sumerian list of kings Enmebaraggesi is defeated by Dumuzi the fisherman, the predecessor of Gilgamesh. Whether historically Enmebaraggesi or Akka was defeated by Gilgamesh or Dumuzi is not of much interest here – and beyond recovery anyway. In the so-called Tammul inscription Enmebaraggesi and his son Akka both appear, and there they are valued positively for both having supported temples of Enlil and Ninlil, the main gods of Sumer. In this same text Gilgamesh and his son Ur-Lugal are mentioned in exactly the same role as Enmebaraggesi and Akka, and nothing of their eminence is apparent in this composition. The example makes clear that one should not overestimate the unifying tendency of the tradition. In fact, ‘the tradition’ may be an unwarranted overgeneralisation. We have to count with different contexts in which different discourses existed.

Context

How much can of these ancient contexts be recovered? The traditional notion of ‘Sitt im Leben’ has its main focus on the original context for which a text was composed. The concept was developed in biblical studies and therefore fully text-oriented. The idea was that the text itself would clarify its original use. There is, however, little reason to favour the first ori-

18 Vanstiphout, ‘How did they learn Sumerian’?
19 Tinney, ‘On the Curricular Setting’.
20 The concept ‘institution’ is used here in the broad sociological sense of the word, as a pattern of social behaviour that follows conventional rules and is provided with moral authority. In this sense modern (Western) literature is an institution that may be described as a social web of authors, publishers, readers, reviewers, bookshops, literary awards, and libraries, all behaving in more or less predictable ways. The conventional character of this institution may be appreciated in a comparison with, for instance, modern Egyptian literature, where the political sphere has much more of a presence.
21 The description of an ancient (or any alien) culture necessarily involves con-temporal negotiating in order to link what is described with a modern frame of reference. The ideal to remove all anachronistic elements from our conceptualisation (some-
with a corpus of literature that does not correspond in all respects to our idea of what literature is, including lexical lists, mathematical tables, letters, and even administrative documents. This problem is a minor one, though. First, we can make a distinction between earlier and later phases of the curriculum. The earlier phase contains most of the text types that strike us as non-literary (mathematical tables, lexical lists, model documents). This will allow the definition of a group of texts that corresponds more closely to our idea of literature. Second, however, we may actually take advantage of this unusual definition of the literary by appreciating links and cross connections between literary and lexical texts which would otherwise not be apparent. The contextual approach does not invalidate the poetic discussion about the concepts 'literary,' 'religious,' 'scholarly,' and 'fiction.' We will have to investigate what (institutional) contexts we may identify for religion and knowledge. The phenomenon of cuneiform tablets entering the literary corpus may then be described as a type of interaction between institutions or rather fields. Finally, intertextuality receives a very specific meaning once we realise that the texts studied by us were all studied in a well defined context: the scribal school. The intertextual is not an aspect of the texts themselves; these texts actually encountered each other in the hands and heads of teachers and pupils.

There are good indications that the assumption that all Sumerian literature derives from exercises in the school has to be abandoned. Quite a few Sumerian texts are known in a single copy only — or in very few copies. Steve Tinney, in a forthcoming article, argues that several such unique pieces may belong together as a 'cubic archive.' The tablets in question are similar in format and paleography. A problem is that we have very little archaeological information on the most important find-spots of literary tablets in Nippur. The excavations happened late in the nineteenth century and very little was recorded about the provenance of the objects found. There is no way to know, therefore, whether Tinney's cubic archive was actually found as a single lot, and if so, what else was related to it. It is probable that in addition to Tinney's cubic archive we may identify other groups of texts that may have had their own characteristic context. This will make a contextual approach more differentiated and therefore even more attractive.

The contextual approach may add a dimension that is hard to come by in most other ancient literatures. Cuneiform tablets are archaeological objects; they ought to be analysed as other archaeological objects. Why do we find this object in this house? What does it tell us about the owner? How does it relate to other objects? What was the (symbolic) significance of this object? Unfortunately, in too many cases the exact find-spot of tablets is unknown. In the decade following the Gulf War a new wave of illegally excavated tablets has reached European and American dealers; including large numbers of literary tablets. Such as this is, it is no excuse for neglecting the physical side of the sources. Tablet format, paleography, and distribution of sources may still hold information that most scholars of ancient literature can only dream of.
CULTURAL REPERTOIRES
Structure, Function and Dynamics

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1999, the local Research School, Rudolf Agricola, and the Groningen members of the national Netherlands Research School for Medieval Studies succeeded in obtaining a grant for an innovative, large-scale, collective research programme entitled Cultural Change: Dynamics and Diagnosis. Supported by the faculties of Arts, Philosophy and Theology and financed by the Board of the University of Groningen, the Cultural Change programme constitutes an excellent opportunity to enhance multidisciplinary approaches to phenomena characteristic of transformation processes in the fields of politics, literature and history, philosophy and theology. In order to enhance programmatic cohesion, three crucial ‘moments’ in European history were selected: 1) Late Antiquity to Early Middle Ages (ca. 200-ca. 600), 2) Late Medieval to Early Modern (ca. 1450-ca. 1650) and the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’ (1789-ca. 1918). In 2000 and 2002 the two abovementioned Research Schools obtained two more grants for Cultural Change. Impact and Integration and Cultural Change. Perception and Representation respectively. Several international conferences and workshops have already been organised; more are planned until the end of 2007.

The present volume, number III in the series Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, offers a selection of papers from the workshop held in September 2000, and organised by Gillis Dorleijn and Herman Vanstiphout. The eleven papers in this volume collectively present a good overview of the way cultural repertoires have been created, used and re-used in the very long period from the Babylonian civilization until to-day.

We thank the Board of the University of Groningen for the financial support given to the Cultural Change programmes. This initiative has had the happy effect of uniting several faculties and two research schools within a coherent research programme which shows the real advantages of stressing multidisciplinary approaches in the field of the humanities.

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Martin Gosman
General Editor