

# Wisdom Between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond

edited by  
Francesco Sironi and Maurizio Viano



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edited by Francesco Sironi and Maurizio Viano

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## **Wisdom Between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

The volume contains the proceedings of the workshop *Wisdom Between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond* held at the University of Turin on 26-27 October 2022. The volume collects papers by Assyriologists, Classicists and Biblical scholars around the topic of wisdom. The authors investigate wisdom from various angles, from speculative thought to literature, from science to dance to proverbs.

**Keywords** Wisdom. Assyriology. Near Eastern languages and cultures. Classical studies. Biblical studies.





## Wisdom Between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond

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**Wisdom Between East and West:  
Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond**

edited by Francesco Sironi and Maurizio Viano

## Introduction

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The papers collected in this volume originate from the workshop *Wisdom between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond*, organized at the University of Turin on 26-27 October 2022. That event came as the conclusion of Maurizio Viano's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship BRISDOM, *Bridging East and West, Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Greek Traditions* (Grant Agreement No. 795154), a research project that had started in January 2019. The workshop was jointly organized by an Assyriologist, Maurizio Viano, and a Classicist, Francesco Sironi, who has worked on these themes as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Turin (2021).

The workshop aimed at investigating wisdom and wisdom literature in Mesopotamia, Greece and neighboring areas in a comparative perspective. Wisdom stands at the dawn of literature in both the East and the West. The Sumerian wisdom composition *The Instructions of Šuruppak*, preserved in copies dated to the mid-third millennium BCE, is one of the oldest Mesopotamian literary texts. Wisdom is also found in the earliest stages of Greek literature, like in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Wisdom is a broad category that may include sayings, proverbs, fables, books of instructions, disputations, dialogues, and technical writings such as medical or astronomical texts. Wisdom reflects on some of the most fundamental questions of mankind, such as the meaning of life, mortality, and the relation to the divine and is also deep-rooted in folk culture like no other genre. Furthermore,

wisdom motifs are also conveyed in text-types that are not usually regarded as wisdom literature, such as epics, hymns, prayers, and myths. Such a complex kind of literature had an enormous circulation in both the East and the West. In Mesopotamia, wisdom texts were studied in scribal schools as part of the curriculum and were connected to royal ideology: kings, for instance, were often portrayed as endowed with wisdom, which was essential to their office. In Greece, Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Aesop's fables are shining examples of the widespread circulation of wisdom literature. The broad circulation of wisdom texts clearly fostered the transmission of motifs in the ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The papers presented in this volume are organized in sections and touch several themes and features of wisdom, providing a comprehensive insight in this complex matter. The first section investigates the concept of wisdom and its epistemological implications. Moving from the two major strands of Mesopotamian wisdom tradition (a popular tradition and a school tradition), Giorgio Buccellati explores the contrast between idealization and realism in this twofold epistemic perspective. In her essay, Francesca Rochberg offers a critique of Hellenocentric views on the history of science by investigating the cuneiform scribal-scholarly knowledge termed *tuṣarrūtu*. Maurizio Viano and Francesco Sironi then present a comparative study of the concepts of truth and falsehood in Mesopotamian and Greek thought.

The second section of the volume is dedicated to actors of wisdom, namely sages and practitioners. Massimiliano Ornaghi investigates the overlaps of the features of wise men and poets in ancient Greece, paying particular attention to the perspective of the audience. Stéphanie Anthonioz explores the association of scribal wisdom and royal power in the ancient Near East, with a focus on Seleucid Uruk and Jerusalem. Figures of female advisors between East and West are the subject of Jacob Kuciak and Sebastian Fink's paper, which also points out differences between such figures in Greece and Mesopotamia. Nicola Reggiani presents the most important features of Greek medicine in an attempt to outline a framework of interactions and cross-connections with Egyptian medicine. Stefano de Martino offers an overview of Hittite dancing, focusing on the genre of narrative dances.

The third and last section of this book deals with wisdom and literature in its various forms, from epics to proverbs. Yoram Cohen discusses the limits of transmission of Babylonian literature to other non-cuneiform literatures. Simonetta Ponchia analyses dialogical structures in Mesopotamian epic literature between II and I millennium BCE. In his contribution, Niek Veldhuis argues that the wisdom embodied in Sumerian proverbs is that of the Old Babylonian scribal school where they were copied. Andrea Ercolani provides an overview of proverbs in Greek culture and wisdom traditions. On the

Mesopotamian side, proverbs and *gnōmai* in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are the subject of Bernardo Ballestreros' essay. Jana Matuszak investigates law, morality and subversion in Sumerian culture by analysing the legal framework and transmission history of two Sumerian prose miniatures from the Old Babylonian period.

As the reader can see, this volume benefits from various contribution by foremost specialists and offers an interdisciplinary perspective on wisdom in the Ancient Near East and the Greek world. We hope it can provide an overview on the current status of research and foster further investigations towards a better understanding of the ancient world and the interactions within it.



# **Wisdom Between East and West: Mesopotamia, Greece and Beyond**





## **Section 1**

### Wisdom and Knowledge



# An Epistemological Perspective on the Mesopotamian Wisdom Tradition

Giorgio Buccellati

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**Abstract** There are two major strands in the Mesopotamian wisdom tradition. A popular one (proverbs and folk stories) reflects what we may call a zero degree reflection on the human condition, whereas a scribal tradition hails from a more detached intellectual effort at defining this human condition especially in its moments of greater fragility. Both may be seen as a form of knowledge: reaching for a realistic assessment of what we know about ourselves. As such, it has an epistemic dimension, one that we can appreciate all the more if we compare it with myths on the one hand, which may be seen epistemologically as an idealization of nature, and epics on the other, which may be seen as an idealization of the human past. The paper develops in some detail this contrast between idealization and realism, with reference to specific texts that illuminate this shared, if differently oriented, epistemic effort.

**Keywords** Wisdom. Mesopotamia. Epistemology. Myth. Epics.

**Summary** 1 The Two Wisdom Traditions. – 1.1 Folk and School Traditions. – 1.2 The Epistemic Dimension. – 2 Idealization. – 2.1 An Alternative Epistemic Model. – 2.2 Myths and Epics. – 2.3 Imaging the Ideal. – 3 Counter-Idealization. – 3.1 Realism. – 3.2 The Folk Tradition. – 3.3 The Scribal Tradition. – 4 The Poetics of Proverbs. – 4.1 From Realism to Idealization. – 4.2 A Binary Structure. – 4.3 At the Origin of Syro-Mesopotamian Metrics. – 4.4 A Sample Thematic Construct. – 5 A Double Epistemic Turn. – 5.1 Tensionality: Metrics as an Epistemic System. – 5.2 The Structuring of Expression. – 5.3 The Rethinking of Tradition.

## 1 The Two Wisdom Traditions

### 1.1 Folk and School Traditions

There are two major types of ancient Syro-Mesopotamian texts that are accepted as belonging to what is generally labeled as ‘wisdom’: one that is popular and finds its expression in what we call proverbs and folk stories, and the other that is more intellectual and finds its expression in literary texts.

These two strands are quite disparate in form and content: proverbs and folk stories are short and center around a simple theme, deriving from everyday experience, while the literary texts are more complex in structure and broach topics dealing with psychological issues.

And yet both strands have much in common, which justifies their having been regularly subsumed under the category of wisdom. What they share is a special attention to the human condition, in ways that distinguish both from other texts.

### 1.2 The Epistemic Dimension

What unifies, then, the two traditions is the epistemic dimension. They both aim to articulate and communicate a certain type of knowledge, the knowledge of the world as experienced in real life, whether on a daily basis or through the lens of culture. It is a highly realistic knowledge, which eschews any real effort at idealization.

What distinguishes the two traditions from an epistemic point of view is the role of culture.

The folk tradition is direct and presupposes no special cultural baggage. Knowledge is intuitive and is expressed very succinctly, with terms that are never ‘technical’ but rather draw on the immediate confrontation with reality. What emerges as going beyond common speech is the sharp juxtaposition of words, which tend to put off balance the listener. And it is precisely and only a listener that the folk tradition has in mind.

The epistemic dimension of the scribal tradition, on the other hand, reflects a sophisticated view of reality, one that presupposes a pre-organized (precisely, ‘cultured’) vision, where reality is already filtered through the lens of pre-assigned categories. The person to whom the message is addressed is, in this case, primarily a reader – one wonders, in fact, whether wisdom texts were ever read aloud or recited to an audience that was unaware of the intricacies of scribal culture.

In what follows, I can only give a bird’s eye view of this subject, based on an extensive research I am currently conducting on a

structural analysis of Mesopotamian literature, within the framework of a major Balzan Foundation research project.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Idealization

### 2.1 An Alternative Epistemic Model

We can best appreciate the epistemic dimension of the wisdom tradition if we compare it to another model that also developed at a very early time, one that idealizes the world and projects it in a light that somehow transfigures it – the model of myths and epics.

In this idealized view of reality, images play a major role: they are (precisely) ‘imagined’, i.e. they are not a description of reality as it is seen, but they are presented as a visual image that can immediately be perceived as such: the sun as an image of justice or the depth of the water table as an image of wisdom.

We deal with myths or epics depending on whether one looks at the world of nature or the world of humans.

### 2.2 Myths and Epics

I will only give a panoramic view of some well-known myths and epics, only evoking what I see as the central theme of each of these texts, without any consideration for chronology.

As for myths, we may see, with regard to the world of nature,

- the myth of *Dilmun* and that of *Enlil and Ninlil* as dealing with the shapes of the elemental forms of nature, water in the first case, and wind between heaven and earth in the second;
- the *Enūma elīš* as dealing with the nature of the world and the gods;
- the myth of *Anzu* as dealing with the nature of destiny;<sup>2</sup>
- *Nergal and Ereshkigal* as dealing with the relationship between our world and the netherworld.

With regard to the human world we may consider:

- *Namma and Ninmah* as dealing with the shape of humans;
- the *Eridu genesis* as dealing with the arrival of civilization;
- *Atram-hasīs* as dealing with the dynamics of organization;
- *Adapa* as dealing with the very nature of religion;
- *Etana* as dealing the expansion and the transmission of power;

---

<sup>1</sup> Buccellati forthcoming b.

<sup>2</sup> Buccellati 2023.

- *Martu* as dealing with the nature of ethnic relationships;
- *Inanna and Dumuzi* as dealing with the question of feminine eros.

Epics serve in a similar way to present an idealized vision of history, as we see

- in *Lugalbanda* as dealing with the nature of kingship;
- in the *First Gilgamesh* as dealing with the nature of civilization;
- in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* as dealing with the dynamics of political expansion;
- in *Bilgames and Agga* as dealing with the civilized use of armed conflict;
- in *Bilgames and Huwawa* as dealing with the appropriation of distant resources.

The central point I am making is that each of these texts seeks to present a conceptual vision of various aspects of life, giving expression to this vision with narratives that articulate and communicate knowledge. It is in this respect that myths and epics serve as real epistemic systems, conveying a given understanding of reality.

Myths and epics are idealized views of reality but they do not aim to construct an argument which is to be analyzed and discussed. They represent an intuition and a vision, presented as such. But in each case, this vision has a powerful effect in shaping the view that humans could share about these basic elements of the real world around them.

### 2.3 Imaging the Ideal

This representational aspect of myths and epics is also apparent in the fact that, in contrast with wisdom texts, they lend themselves readily to being the object of various types of figurative renderings. We have representations not only of divine or heroic figures in a static pose, but also of events presented in a dynamic way that depicts events otherwise narrated in myths and epics. They are epistemic in the sense that they convey what is presented as ‘known’, i.e. as the idealized conception of elements of nature or actors in the human scene, as perceived in their identity and in their activities.

I will give here only two examples, taken from our excavations at Urkesh. The first [fig. 1] is the impression of a seal that refers to the myth of Kumarbi, of whom a Hurrian text says that he resides in Urkesh but walks in the mountains.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1997, 93.



**Figure 1** Seal impression from Urkesh (AKc21) showing a deity, presumably Kumarbi, walking on the mountains



**Figure 2**  
Upper right portion  
of a stone plaque from Urkesh (A7.36)  
interpreted as showing Gilgamesh  
and Enkidu

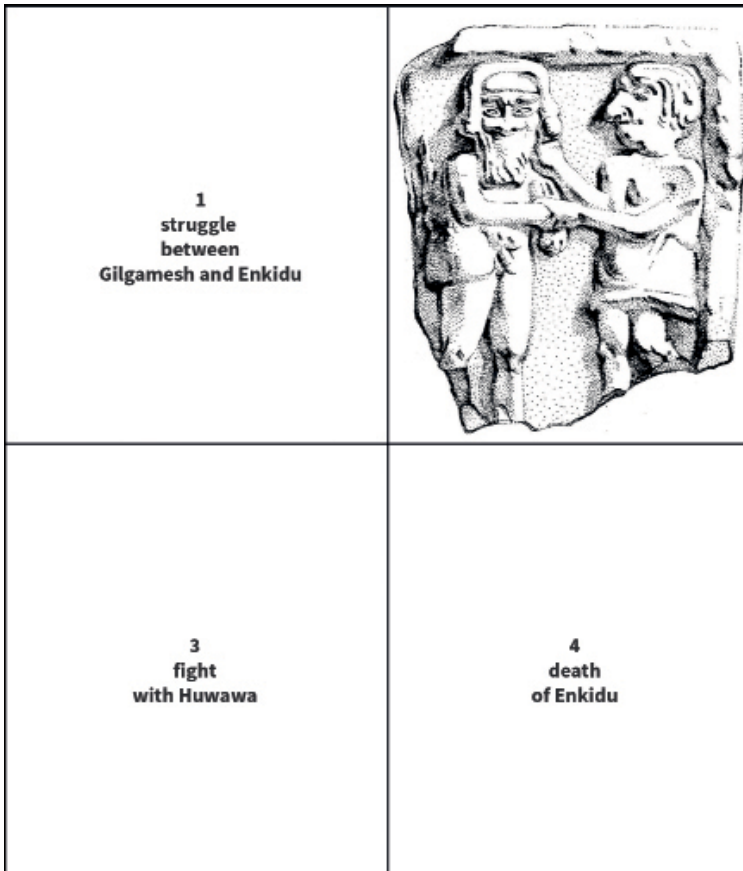


Figure 3 Reconstruction of the whole plaque of which A7.36 would have been a part

The second [fig. 2] is a stone stela representing Gilgamesh and Enkidu as they embrace, presumably part of a larger composition [fig. 3] that included three other episodes from the same epic text.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kelly-Buccellati 2006.



### 3 Counter-Idealization

#### 3.1 Realism

The epistemic dimension of myths and epics is defined by this twinning of textual and figurative aspects in rendering an idealized world. A certain ideal view of nature and history is articulated and communicated in an ideal form, so that water and wind, for instance, are not described in terms of their physical attributes, but rather in terms of an alternative, imagined identity.

The epistemic dimension of the wisdom tradition, by way of contrast, does not make a transfer of the referent (the wind in the myth or a hero in the epic text) onto a different plane, but rather focuses on any given particular aspect of reality in and of itself. The referent is known, i.e. seen and presented as it is, not through a fantastic transposition onto an ideal world.

This happens in two different ways. (1) The folk tradition may be described as a zero degree reflection on the human condition: the style is very direct and incisive, often humorous; it does not argue or belabor a point; it is often elusive to the point of being obscure, with the strong effect of a puzzle to be resolved. It is also earlier in date: it is attested in the earliest texts and sinks its roots into the pre-urban and pre-scribal, past.

(2) The (later) scribal tradition brings to a higher level this reflection on the human condition, developing arguments at length and delving into the psychological dimension. It has a rather rarefied public in mind, in some cases it seems to be exclusively addressed to the scribes, as an intellectual exercise that requires a cultured view of reality.

#### 3.2 The Folk Tradition

We may look at a few proverbs that show the way in which a simple reflection about themes that are central to everyday life can take shape.

1. The indiscriminate and contradictory nature of fate as it is inevitably encountered in everyday occasions:<sup>5</sup>

I am in front of fate:  
(now) it speaks like a just man, (now) it speaks like an evil man

You went – so what? You were sitting down – so what?

---

<sup>5</sup> Alster 1997, 3, l. 176.

You stood up – so what? You came back – so what?<sup>6</sup>

The original Akkadian is so lapidary that it is worth quoting:

*Tallik – mīnu? Tūšib – mīnu?*  
*Tazziz – mīnu? Tatūram – mīnu?*

2. The inexorable inefficiency of the ‘Palace’ – i.e. the bureaucracy, a theme that is among the most popular (and sounds so modern...):

In the Palace the ignorant are a multitude<sup>7</sup>

The one who does not create a problem, he is welcome!  
The one who is strong, leaves,  
The one who speaks well, enters the Palace.<sup>8</sup>

3. The power of the obvious comes across clearly in proverbs that describe, often humorously, very human, and even scurrilous, situations:

A dressmaker wears a dress unsuited for sitting down!<sup>9</sup>

Has she become pregnant without having sex?  
Has she gotten fat without eating?<sup>10</sup>

Something unheard of since immemorial time:  
a young woman farted while laying with her husband!<sup>11</sup>

4. There is no idealization here, no metaphors or descriptive flourishes. It is realism at its most naked and genuine. Even when there is a hint of a metaphor, it is very earthy:

An elephant was speaking to himself: “Among the wild animals there is no one like me!”  
But a little bird answered: “In my measure, I, too, am like you!”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lambert 1960, 278, ll. 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Alster 1997, 9 sec. A 9.

<sup>8</sup> Alster 1997, 18, l. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Alster 1997, 3, l. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Lambert 1960, 241, ll. 40-2.

<sup>11</sup> Lambert 1960, 260, ll. 5-10.

<sup>12</sup> Alster 1997, 5, l. 1.

To which we can add a little note about later scribal intervention. The Akkadian translation lets the animals speak, more crassly, as follows:

“No one can shit like me”  
“In my measure, I, too, can shit like you!”

using, as a neologism and hapax legomenon, a verbal form (*zū, zeāku*) derived from the primary noun *zu*.

### 3.3 The Scribal Tradition

This amusing philological footnote sheds an interesting light on the mindset of the scribes. There must have been among them some pure philologists, but others could also show a humor that reveals a live confrontation with a text. And with a great flare for realism. Let us now look at this particular shade of realism.

One may at first suggest that the second wisdom, that of the scribes, also engages in a form of idealization, namely, the idealization of human experience. In a sense this is true, but in a sense that is very different from that of myth and epic. In myths and epics, the idealization process means putting on a pedestal the object being idealized, with declamation to a public, often with musical accompaniment, and, as we have seen, with representational images. None of this happens with the wisdom texts: the author/*agens* speaks to himself and remains at the center of the expressive effort.

There is, of course, ‘expression’, i.e. an ‘externalization of a discovered interiority’. But it remains private, in such a way that some texts, like the *Theodicy*, could only be read to be fully appreciated (witness the acrosticon resulting from the first cuneiform sign of each stanza, not the first syllable), and thus would have remained accessible to only a limited scribal audience. If there is an expected audience, it is a friendly interlocutor, whom one expects to listen and to answer, which is not the case with myths and epics. The only ‘staging’ with wisdom texts is in fact that of the dialog, where the centrality of the ‘I’ is matched by the parallel centrality of a ‘Thou’ who has something to say in turn.

This projection of the ‘I’ entails a dimension of ‘vulnerability’: it is always in the shape of a confession. It is true that the re-writing of the first epic of Gilgamesh in a wisdom key<sup>13</sup> describes this sense of weakness and loneliness ‘from without’: but the author is very much the *agens*, as he projects his personal ‘I’ onto Gilgamesh, making him a mirror image of himself.

<sup>13</sup> Buccellati 1972a.

And what emerges is a sense of ‘complicity’: we, the readers, or better: I, the reader, am called to be the interlocutor, the sole listener of the confession. And that is what gives these texts such a universal tone and sense of modernity.

## 4 The Poetics of Proverbs

### 4.1 From Realism to Idealization

By placing idealization in the first place and then speaking of the wisdom tradition as being a form of counter-idealization I meant to help focusing on the epistemic dimension of wisdom by contrasting it to that of myths and epics.

In chronological terms, however, the situation is in fact reversed. By virtue of their very simplicity, proverbs sink their roots in an ancient past, and the early attention paid them by the scribes may be seen as indicative of respect for this antiquity, in addition possibly to the everyday nature of the language which may have been appropriate for instruction.

I will now deal with the proverbs in some more detail, with the aim of showing how the particular formal property of proverbs may be seen, in its form, as a very distinctive articulation of knowledge that had a great impact on Sumerian and later literary traditions.

### 4.2 A Binary Structure

It is valid to speak of a ‘poetics’ of the proverbs. In spite of their great brevity, each of them is a full text, with a complete structural wholeness of its own.<sup>14</sup> A key aspect of this brevity is that of ‘compactness’: they are built on a binary system that entails a protasis and an apodosis, with a strong tensionality between the two, a tensionality that becomes especially evident if one emphasizes the caesura.<sup>15</sup>

let the day go by – we’ll still build the house.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This is a major issue with which I am dealing in detail in Buccellati forthcoming b. A relevant concept is the one that considers the cognitive aspect, as outlined among others by Tsur 1977; 1992; Burns Cooper 1998; Andrews 2016. My approach builds on the notions of syntactic isotonomism and counterpatterning as outlined in Buccellati 1990, section 3.

<sup>15</sup> Alster 1991-92, 113-14.

A whole series of parallel considerations are here implicitly included, but they could not be made explicit without reducing the expressive power of the text: “today I don’t have to get to work, I can let time pass, and it will be more than enough if I tomorrow, with more comfort, will start the work of building the house...”. The text includes implicitly these considerations and more, but it is the epigrammatic structure that gives the expression all its strength: there is no place for anything else precisely because the structure is complete.

This structure is made even more effective by the arrangement of the elements (noun-verb -noun/verb), which the original Sumerian makes particularly marked:

*u<sub>4</sub> hé-zal - é ga-dú*

It is a lapidary style, that emphasizes the binary relationship among component parts. Therein lies the element of tensionality I mentioned, which emerges also at the next level, the one we have when two proverbs are linked together:

destruction done,      destruction to come,

which tells us that there is no end in sight, but - it continues:<sup>16</sup>

destruction avoided,      slavery to come,

i.e. even if one avoids the destruction of the city, it only means that one can still be taken into slavery.

### 4.3 At the Origin of Syro-Mesopotamian Metrics

I see here the genesis of the Mesopotamian metrical system. As recorded, these proverbs date to the middle of the third millennium, but they certainly go back to much earlier, very likely to prehistoric times. And they prefigure neatly the structure of Sumerian and then of Akkadian versification. The binary system, where there is a close correlation between one semicolon and the next in a verse, or two verses in a distich, is all here, and so is the syntactic dimension of the correlation, which I have called a syntactic isotonic structure.<sup>17</sup>

Let us look for example at the beginning of the *Enūma eliš*:

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<sup>16</sup> Alster 1997, text 2, l. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Buccellati 1990.

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<i>Enūma eliš</i>	<i>lā nabū šamāmu</i>
<i>šapliš ammatum</i>	<i>šuma lā zakrat...</i>
When on high	the heavens were unnamed
down below the earth	was uncalled by name...

What is known as parallelism echoes fully the binary system of the proverbs, and dominates the entire prosodic system of Mesopotamian poetry.

What is remarkable about the earliest Sumerian proverbs is that they are likely to record the original voice and not only the idea. This original voice may well go back to protohistoric, and even earlier, times, since proverbs are well known for maintaining a live presence in illiterate as well as literate cultures over long periods of time. If so, we would have an important witness of the earliest form not only of Sumerian as a language, but also the earliest evidence for poetic form. Myths, too, may well sink their roots in this earliest past, but not necessarily in terms of the voice with which they came to be written, while epics are clearly later as they are tied to heroic figures of the historical periods.

#### 4.4 A Sample Thematic Construct

The clustering of proverbs as we have seen with the ‘destruction’ theme yields what I call a thematic construct, i.e. a short collection of proverbs that are centered around the same theme. Some of these contain several proverbs, and in some cases there develops a real narrative. I have interpreted the *Dialog of Pessimism* as being a very elaborate, late example of this trend.<sup>18</sup> But we have other examples in the proverb collections, and I will so interpret here one that, to my knowledge, has gone unrecognized.<sup>19</sup> It is a little jewel, another example of the hidden creative bent of scribes. This thematic construct blends together a number of proverbs creating a wonderful little dialog that deals with the courtship theme, in the form of a dialog between a woman and a man (here I give the woman’s voice in italics). She starts very directly:

*I have a fiery eye,            my figure is like an angel’s,            my thighs are a delight:  
who wants to be my seductive spouse?*

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<sup>18</sup> Buccellati 1972b.

<sup>19</sup> Lambert 1960, 227 II 7-34.



- 
- |     |   |  |
|-----|---|--|
| I   | <i>I have a fiery eye, my figure is like an angel's, my thighs are a delight:<br/>who wants to be my seductive spouse?</i>                    |  |
|     | My heart is wisdom, my loins are full of energy,<br>my liver can dominate, my lips express sweetness:<br>who wants to be my preferred spouse? |  |
| II  | <i>Who is poor? Who is rich?<br/>Of the one you love</i>  | <i>For whom must I reserve my vagina?<br/>you must bear the yoke!</i>                                      |
| III | <i>If you make an effort,<br/>If you don't,<br/>Let me lie with you!</i>  | <i>your god is yours,<br/>your god is not yours,<br/>Let the god eat his ration!</i>                       |
| IV  | <i>Prepare yourself!<br/>Unsheathe your sword!<br/>And you lay down,</i>  | <i>Your god is your help!<br/>Your god id your help!<br/>that I may get down to business<br/>over you!</i> |

## 5 A Double Epistemic Turn

### 5.1 Tensionality: Metrics as an Epistemic System

The element of tensionality which characterizes the structure of the proverbs, each in itself and then through the higher level composition in the form of stanzas, may be seen as an indicator of the epistemic dimension of the proverbs. If by 'epistemics' we understand the articulation and presentation of knowledge, then the tight linkage between the constitutive elements of a text may in turn be seen as defining the correlation between seemingly unrelated elements of reality.

The metrical structure provides the formal underlying framework that regulates the dynamics of this correlation. It is more than a simple arrangement of words on the surface, designed for aesthetic purposes, a merely verbal adornment. Rather, the metrical format provides a powerful tool in structuring the thought that is being conveyed.

This isotonic 'metrical' structure is based on the formal binary relationship among constitutive elements. In "destruction done / destruction to come", syntax and semantics create a strong bond among the two components, and give new power to the logical construct, to the knowledge of the connection between a disaster that has happened and one that is still to come.



## 5.2 The Structuring of Expression

This powerful structuring of thought through a highly channeled expressive format constitutes a major epistemic turn. It can be seen in fact, I have suggested, as being at the origin of the Syro-Mesopotamian metrical system, and in turn this helps us in seeing a deeper value of this system - precisely, an 'epistemic' value.

Poetry articulates and conveys knowledge, and it does so within the strictures of a format that is not compulsory (the way morphology and syntax are), but is freely crafted and chosen by the poet. The strictures of the metrical system make the message not only more pleasant and memorable, but also more incisive and convincing. It is no minor feat if indeed we have here the beginning of poetry as metrically channeled discourse. And that such a feat may be brought back to a folk tradition, to the 'first' wisdom, is very significant: it shows that the roots of this early epistemic effort sink deep into human nature and that 'poetry' is innate.

## 5.3 The Rethinking of Tradition

The scribal structuring of proverbs into cogent thematic constructs, of which the little *Courtship* 'poem' or the *Dialog of Pessimism*, as I have interpreted them, are a prime example, leads to a second major 'triumph' of Mesopotamian wisdom, namely the reconfiguring of received texts into new wholes that acquire a very different tonality from the original one. The linking together of distinct proverbs to form a narrative is indicative of this second epistemic turn, this one attributable to the scribes of the later generations, the intellectuals of the second wisdom.

It was a turn that took many shapes, all indicative of a profound confrontation not only with the substantive issues that face humans and call for reflection, but also with the earlier literary 'canon'. This was an essential part of the school, and, clearly, it was not seen as just a repository of dead wood; rather it was confronted as a living reservoir of experience which had to be re-absorbed and metabolized into a wholly new construct - a major epistemic turn indeed.

It is the case with epics - as we see with the *Second Gilgamesh*, which re-writes the glorious idealization of heroic deeds into a heartfelt reflection on the perennial human effort to go beyond all limits.

It is the case with myths - as we see with *Erra*, which presents us with a sustained reflection on the very nature of evil, here hypostatized as a deified entity.

It is the case with hymns - as with *Ludlul*, which introduces the very existential motif of an anxious search for what the absolute may be when our ordinary means of control all seem to fail.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On all three cases see Buccellati forthcoming b.

This re-thinking of what we would call the ‘canon’ is not only literature at its best. It is also, in keeping with the line of inquiry we have followed here, a prime example of the epistemic dimension of wisdom: it reshapes knowledge according to different parameters, different concerns, different sensitivities.

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# **Astronomy, *Tupšarrūtu*, and Knowledge in the Cuneiform World**

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**Abstract** This paper aims to critique a historiography of science that sees Greek science as exemplary. It discusses the entry of Babylonian astronomy into the history of science and defines the cuneiform scribal-scholarly knowledge termed *tupšarrūtu* as a basis for understanding the scope and character of cuneiform science without comparison to Greek or later sciences.

**Keywords** Astronomy. Cuneiform world. Episteme. Nēmequ. Science. Scientia. *Tupšarrūtu*.

As compared with the classical Greek world, the cuneiform world at the time of its discovery in the middle of the nineteenth century by British and European archaeologists offered new and hitherto unexplored historical territory. Even though well-educated colonial agents of foreign governments may have been versed in the Bible and *The Histories* of Herodotus and very likely were able to read Greek, Latin, and possibly Hebrew, as a matter of firsthand documentation, the discovery of cuneiform tablets in sites around Iraq and its surrounding areas would eventually offer new possibilities for assessing the biblical and classical narratives. Because the lands of the ancient Middle East (Sumer, Akkad, Babylonia, Assyria, Elam, Persia, the kingdom of the Hittites, to limit the list to cuneiform cultures) were previously known to Europeans only through the lens of biblical and classical writers, the mid-nineteenth-century decipherment of the cuneiform

script opened a door to native traditions without the filter of the Bible or the Greek historians.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, something unforeseen and unexpected came to light among the cuneiform tablets from Babylonia, namely ephemerides of the moon and the five naked-eye classical planets, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury, that were not derivative of other ancient forms of astronomy known.<sup>1</sup> The realization of what these tables of cuneiform numbers represented was the result of the collaboration between an Assyriologist, J.N. Strassmaier, and a Jesuit mathematician and astronomer, Josef Epping. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Jesuit F.X. Kugler in *Die Babylonische Mondrechnung* (1900) had penetrated the Babylonian lunar theory, exploding any presupposition, widespread at that time, about the inability of so-called Oriental cultures to produce science.

The study of cuneiform astronomical texts began in the 1880s, when Epping and Strassmaier first revealed that the numerical table texts written on cuneiform tablets were lunar and planetary ephemerides [fig. 1].<sup>2</sup> This revelation had a certain gravitas, because the tables analyzed by these pioneer scholars of Babylonian astronomy could be recognized as the oldest mathematical astronomy, the oldest exact science. As Otto Neugebauer pointed out:

Epping fully realized the significance of his discoveries. The two columns from a lunar ephemeris which he had deciphered, he said, “give us more information about Babylonian science than all the notices from classical antiquity combined” – a fact which cannot be emphasized too often. And he [Epping] foresaw clearly that the new material would become of great importance for ancient chronology, for Assyriology in general, and even for modern astronomy.<sup>3</sup>

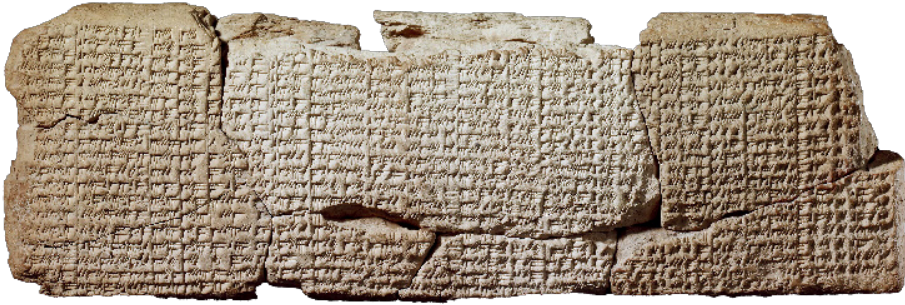
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Portions of this essay have appeared in Rochberg 2017; 2018; 2024.

<sup>1</sup> Swerdlow 1993, 309-11.

<sup>2</sup> Epping, Strassmaier 1889.

<sup>3</sup> Neugebauer 1975, 349 fn. 6.



**Figure 1** Babylonian lunar ephemeris. Neugebauer [1955] 1983, no. 122 (BM 34580). I thank the Trustees of the British Museum for providing the image

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During the very period of the recovery and decipherment of the cuneiform astronomical texts, another scholarly movement was under way that would directly relate to the eventual incorporation of the new field of Babylonian astronomy and astrology into a deeper understanding of the astral sciences of the entire ancient Mediterranean and Middle East. A contemporary of Epping, Strassmaier, and Kugler, the Belgian classical philologist and historian Franz Cumont together with classical philologists Franz Boll and Wilhelm Kroll were engaged in what would ultimately be the 12-volume *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* (CCAG).<sup>4</sup>

The collection of the Greek astrological texts would open new possibilities for the study of how astronomy and astrology were interdependent and how the astral sciences functioned within the lands of the Hellenistic *oikoumene*, including, of course, the cultural-geographical area of the ancient Middle East (and beyond). In 1911, for example, in the *Sitzungsberichte* of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences, Boll, together with Semitist and Orientalist Carl Bezold,<sup>5</sup> set out extensive parallels between the then newly available cuneiform celestial omen texts and certain Greek works from the *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum* as well as, for example, the sixth-century CE John the Lydian, or ‘Lydus’, work on divination titled *De Ostentis* (On Signs). This material was proof of an extensive transmission of Babylonian astronomical knowledge, a phenomenon that would occupy many historians of Babylonian astronomy throughout the twentieth century, such as Otto Neugebauer and David Pingree.

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<sup>4</sup> See Boll, Cumont, Kroll 1898-1953.

<sup>5</sup> Bezold, Boll 1911.

Roughly half a century after the foundation was laid by the Jesuits for the field of Babylonian astronomy, Neugebauer brought out a critical edition of the entire corpus of cuneiform lunar and planetary tables and procedure texts from Babylon and Uruk of the fifth to the first centuries BCE.<sup>6</sup> This work, *Astronomical Cuneiform Texts* (ACT), is still a cornerstone for the field. In that three-volume work, two basic calculation methods, coined by Neugebauer as Systems A and B, were elucidated, and ACT superseded the early work of Epping, Strassmaier, and Kugler.

The recovered astronomical cuneiform texts would ultimately change the face of the history of astronomy and, by extension, the history of science itself. Neugebauer's three-volume *A History of Ancient Mathematical Astronomy* (1975) placed Babylonian astronomy firmly in line with the tradition of Ptolemy's *Almagest* and all later Western astronomy up to Copernicus. Neugebauer credited to F.X. Kugler<sup>7</sup> the discernment of Ptolemy's debt to the Babylonians underlying the Hipparchan lunar parameters used in the *Almagest*,<sup>8</sup> specifically from the lunar System B. The recovery of the bones of Babylonian astronomy made it possible to trace survivals of its parameters and methods not only in Greek but also in Indian and medieval European astronomy.

After Neugebauer, the direct link from Babylon to the West through the transmission of astronomical knowledge<sup>9</sup> to Greece and the Greco-Roman world would come to occupy a central place in assessing the relation of Babylonian knowledge to later science. The impact of the initial decipherment and later explication of cuneiform astronomical texts on the historiography of science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, therefore, had explosive potential because the most entrenched idea about the history of science of that entire era was the idea that science originated with the Greeks. This potential was a long time in coming, as various arguments were put forward to explain and justify the claim to the Greek invention<sup>10</sup> even after Babylonian astronomy was a known quantity, at least to specialists.

One example, from 1954, the year before the appearance of Neugebauer's ACT, is found in Erwin Schrödinger's book *Nature and the Greeks*. In the chapter titled "Return to Antiquity" he quoted Theodor

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6 Neugebauer [1955] 1983.

7 Neugebauer 1975, 305-6.

8 Ptol. *Alm.* 6.2.

9 By 'astronomical knowledge', I refer to all forms of knowledge of the heavens and heavenly phenomena in antiquity, including technical astronomy, astrology, and all related interests in the phenomena.

10 Critiqued in Rochberg 2004, 14-43.

Gomperz, a somewhat older contemporary of Kugler, from his work *Griechische Denker*, first published in 1893 and in its third edition in 1911, still relevant for Schrödinger and his audience in the mid-1950s:

Nearly our entire intellectual education originates from the Greeks. A thorough knowledge of these origins is the indispensable prerequisite for freeing ourselves from their overwhelming influence. [...] Not only has their [Plato's and Aristotle's] influence been passed on by those who took over from them in ancient and in modern times; our entire thinking, the logical categories in which it moves, the linguistic patterns it uses (being therefore dominated by them) – all this is in no small degree an artefact and is, in the main, the product of the great thinkers of antiquity.<sup>11</sup>

The salient point about the Greek invention of science was that it inaugurated a particular kind of thinking – “our entire thinking”, as Schrödinger said, implying all forms of rational thought. This quality of mind was, we would have to deduce from his statement, independent of the entirety of cognitive history before Greek philosophy. The fact that Babylonian astronomical ideas and parameters enabled the development of Greek mathematical astronomy, a historical fact known by 1911 when Gomperz wrote and well known by the mid-twentieth century, was still not seen as in any way part of the history of ‘thought’.

Today the rhetoric of a Greek monopoly on rationalist scientific thought in antiquity has an essentialist, crude, and artificial ring to it. This began to change when Neugebauer and his Brown University colleagues’ attention to sources outside of the Greek corpus, which opened the way to understanding the complexities of the culture, or the cultures, of astronomical science in the Hellenistic world. The study of the non-Greek sources for the astronomical sciences – within which I include observational, predictive, and mathematical astronomy, genethliological astrology, and celestial divination – in Babylonian, Egyptian, Judean, and Indian texts showed that traditions co-existed and were transmitted, received, adopted, and reformulated. In other words, the ‘Greek way’ of thinking about science was itself, in no small measure, formed by contact and exchange with cuneiform and other cultures with which Greek intellectuals came in contact through the political and cultural world established after Alexander’s conquests.

Even though early twentieth-century historiographies of science were fraught with prejudice against ‘Orientals’ and ‘primitives’ (i.e. non-Greek ancient peoples), the original cuneiform astronomical

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<sup>11</sup> Gomperz 1991, in Schrödinger 1996, 19-20.

texts made it clear that Greek astronomy did not spring as Athena full grown from the head of Zeus but itself had a sizable debt to Babylon. The claims about Chaldean astronomy found in Greco-Roman sources such as Geminus, Ptolemy, Pliny, Diodorus, and others could finally be assessed against cuneiform texts, and a basis for comparison was thus established. Once one took account of the units (sexagesimal numbers, the 360-degree circle, the cubit, and the finger), observations (e.g. lunar eclipse observations given in Ptolemy's *Almagest*),<sup>12</sup> and parameters and period relations (e.g. the length of the mean synodic lunar month as 29;31,50,8,20 days in the lunar System B, the 19-year lunisolar cycle also known as the Metonic cycle, the Saros cycle to predict eclipses) adopted from Babylonia by Greek, Greco-Egyptian, and Greco-Roman astronomers and astrologers, it became clear how extensive the Babylonian contribution to Hellenistic astronomical science, in fact, was.

Where Babylon had influenced Greece, a greater relevance or legitimacy could be attributed to the Babylonian tradition by virtue of its making the advances of Greek science possible. This was part of a piece with other aspects of cuneiform culture, its urbanism, law codes, and well-developed military capacities, which were viewed as continuous with and contributing to the construct of 'Western Civilization'. Thus the Fertile Crescent came to represent the 'Cradle of Civilization', where civilization is synonymous with that of the West. Speaking from a broad historiographical standpoint rather than specifically about science, Marc van de Mieroop observed that "the predilection to see the Ancient Near East primarily as a precursor of the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman legacy tacitly presents the European cultural development as the superior one in the world and measures the relevance of other traditions only in relationship to it".<sup>13</sup> Similarly, insofar as Babylonian science anticipated Greek developments, it took its place in the history of science.

The importance of Babylonian astronomical sciences to the Greeks, Romans, Judeans, and Indians spearheaded a major effort to trace the transmission of Babylonian knowledge to these other cultures. The work to trace Babylonian number notation style, parameters, methods, and schemata to other cultures began in 1911,<sup>14</sup> was expanded and deepened by David Pingree,<sup>15</sup> and continues to this day.<sup>16</sup> Not only is Van de Mieroop's observation, therefore, a critique of historiographical teleology because it can result in assessing earlier tradition

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<sup>12</sup> Ptol. *Alm.* 5.14, 4.6.

<sup>13</sup> Van de Mieroop 1997, 288.

<sup>14</sup> Bezold, Boll 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Pingree 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Misiewicz 2018; Brown et al. 2018.



as less developed and less sophisticated and therefore lesser in all respects than what comes later; it is also an invitation to take the cuneiform sources on their own terms. Although science was not part of Van de Mieroop's remit, the question about teleological historiography is particularly fraught for historians of science.

Arguably the most important of the elements at the intersection of Assyriology with the history of science, is that of our developing study of the cuneiform scientific culture itself. Taken as a totality, the sciences of the cuneiform world of circa 2000 BCE to circa 100 CE, including divination, astronomy, astrology, magic, and medicine, have an enormous significance for the historiography of science. Their significance is due to the unique combination of the kinship of certain aspects of the tradition with conventional ways of identifying science as well as presenting a radical otherness in other respects. The sciences in question comprise the knowledge corpora and associated practices of *ṭupšarrūtu*, the term for the component scribal scholarly disciplines that organized knowledge of the phenomenal world and the practices that depended upon that organization.

Morphologically an abstract noun from the professional designation 'scribe' (DUB.SAR = *ṭupšarru*), *ṭupšarrūtu* is defined (CAD, s.v. meaning 2) as 'scribal learning, scholarship'. The forms of scribal scholarship encompassed by the term *ṭupšarrūtu* produced a distinct textual and intellectual culture. Moreover, in *ṭupšarrūtu* we see the marks not only of a textual and intellectual culture but also of a scientific culture.<sup>17</sup>

From the second millennium BCE, the cuneiform scholar-scribes, the *eruditi*, produced and stewarded a diverse learned textual culture. The textual compendia of omens, lexical lists, lamentations, and incantations that these scribes composed, copied, and preserved over many generations comprised a system of knowledge held in high regard in terms of the authority conveyed upon that scholarly enterprise because of its close connection to the divine and to divinities. This relationship forged an identity for scribes who constituted a literate elite, an intelligentsia (without political influence after the seventh century BCE). As a unifying notion, access to the wisdom (*nēmequ*) of various gods (Nabû, Nisaba, Ea, Asalluhi/Markuk, Šamaš, Adad), and thus to texts considered to contain divine secrets, was a critical component of the identity of that elite. This idea can be traced back to the second millennium BCE<sup>18</sup> but continues throughout the cuneiform tradition despite the change in political and administrative contexts for the members of this intelligentsia.

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<sup>17</sup> The relationship between *ṭupšarrūtu* as cuneiform knowledge and our term 'science' is also discussed in Rochberg 2016, 9-10, 34-5, 61-102 and in Robson 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Lenzi 2008, 27-45.

The textual evidence for *ṭupšarrūtu* is available from the Neo-Assyrian period (seventh century BCE) and the Late Babylonian or Neo-Babylonian to Seleucid periods (fifth-second centuries BCE).<sup>19</sup> Considerable changes in the institutional context of the highly specialized scribes with knowledge of astronomy, divination, and medicine occurred during the gap between these periods. During the seventh century, the scribes who produced and used the texts that *ṭupšarrūtu* comprised were court appointees and advisors to the Assyrian monarch in Nineveh.

Following the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 609 BCE, the scholarly scribal culture in the period from the sixth century onward moved south into the major cities of Babylonia, mainly Babylon and Uruk, and into the temples of Marduk/Bēl (Esagil) and Anu (Rēš). Textual sources for astronomy and genethliological, or zodiacal astrology are more numerous from the fifth century onward, although the royal correspondence between the Assyrian monarch and his scholars<sup>20</sup> sheds a kind of light sorely missing from the Late Babylonian period. In the new context of the temples, the fields of knowledge known before as the cornerstones of *ṭupšarrūtu*, namely, astronomy, celestial omens, extispicy, and medical texts, saw profound innovation and change as well. The most revolutionary of these changes was in mathematical astronomy, but significant change is also evident in celestial divination, both natal omens and horoscopy, and in the combination of the new astrology with physiognomy, medicine, and even extispicy.<sup>21</sup>

In the colophons to scholarly texts stored in Assurbanipal's palace during the seventh century BCE, the tablets comprising the various fields of *ṭupšarrūtu* were described as *nisiq ṭupšarrūti* 'the highest level of scribal scholarship', *nēmeq Nabû* 'the wisdom/skill of Nabû, patron deity of writing', and *tikip sattakki* 'the cuneiform signs'. Learning fell under the patronage of the gods, expressed as *nēmeq Nabû* 'wisdom/skill of Nabû' and *nēmeq Ea* 'wisdom/skill of Ea', which is said of a scholarly tablet, and the scribe who wrote it was expressed as "one who understood the entirety (*kullatu*) of *ṭupšarrūtu*".<sup>22</sup> Divine patronage of learning is seen in every corner of the texts that *ṭupšarrūtu* comprised.

This divine patronage was frequently identified with the patron of writing, the god Nabû, and his goddess Tašmētu.<sup>23</sup> Also the god Ea, as patron of wisdom and knowledge of incantations and magic and resident of Apsû, the subterranean watery region where knowledge

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<sup>19</sup> Robson 2019, 52-3.

<sup>20</sup> Hunger 1992; Parpola 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Rochberg 2016, 150-5.

<sup>22</sup> Hunger 1968, no. 330:5, 331:6; both Assurbanipal palace colophons.

<sup>23</sup> Robson 2019, 53-85.

of magic and incantations originated, was a central figure in scribal accounts of their debt to the gods. Rituals for the diviner who inspected the exta (*bārū*) appealed directly to the divine patrons of divination, Šamaš and Adad, who communicated their decisions by writing on the liver.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of divine wisdom is also attested in Late Babylonian astronomical ephemerides, where the contents of the tablet are described in colophons,<sup>25</sup> much as in the Neo-Assyrian colophons, as *nēmeq anūti* ('the wisdom of Anu-ship'). As *anūtu* is the abstract form of the divine name Anu, the divine head of the pantheon and god of the heavens, *nēmeq anūti* is the highest order of wisdom and knowledge/skill. *Nēmeq anūti* was also held to be a secret of the great gods, and the possession of the *ummānu*, the absolute scribal masters of *ṭupšarrūtu*. On the upper edge of ephemerides from Late Babylonian Uruk, the sky god and his goddess, Anu and Antu, were invoked, Bēl and Bēltija in the texts from Babylon,<sup>26</sup> with the formula *ina amat Anu/Bēl u Antu/Bēltija lišlim*: 'By the command of Anu/Bēl and Bēl/Bēltija, may it go well/remain intact'.

In the main, *ṭupšarrūtu* consisted of a wide variety of multi-tablet omen compendia. The omens compiled in these formalized text series (e.g. the series *Enūma Anu Enlil* comprised 70 tablets) were based on the observation not only of the details of human experience but also of terrestrial and celestial phenomena. Intrusions of one into the other may be found for all seven of the major compilations:<sup>27</sup>

- *Enūma Anu Enlil* ('When Anu and Enlil', the celestial omen series);
- *Šumma ālu* ('If a City', the terrestrial omen series);
- *Sakikkū* (omens devoted to symptoms of an illness, both prognostic and diagnostic);
- *Alamdimmū* ('If the Form', the series for physiognomy and morphoscopy, with its poorly attested subseries *Nigdimdimmū* 'If the Appearance' and *Kataduggū* 'If the Utterance');<sup>28</sup>
- *Šumma izbu* ('If an Anomalous Birth', the series for omens from malformed fetuses and other irregularities of births);
- *Ziqīqu* (the series for dream omens);

<sup>24</sup> Starr 1983.

<sup>25</sup> Hunger 1968, no. 98; also in Neugebauer [1955] 1983, 18 as Colophon U.

<sup>26</sup> Also in a horoscope text, Rochberg 1998, Text 14.

<sup>27</sup> As outlined in Rochberg 2004, 54.

<sup>28</sup> An important discussion of the relations and connections among the series *Sakikkū*, *Alamdimmū*, *Nigdimdimmū*, *Kataduggū*, *Šumma sinništu* ('If a Woman'), *Šumma lip-tu* ('If a Spot [on the Body]'), and even *Šumma ālu* is Schmidtchen 2018.

- *Iqqur îpuš* ('He Demolished, He Built', the series for the propitiousness of dates for undertaking various activities or for someone born on certain dates).

These series comprised omens from so-called unprovoked signs, things that happen independently of the diviner's actions to 'provoke' them. The omens resulting from the diviner's provocations were the result of actions that appealed to the gods Šamaš and Adad, providing them with a medium of communication, such as the sacrificed sheep, dropping oil into water, releasing smoke from a censer, or sprinkling flour. Of the provoked omens, extispicy (inspection of the entrails) had an extensive series for omens from the inspection of various entrails, such as the liver, gall bladder, intestines, and lung. The provoked omens came under the heading *barûtu*, meaning 'inspection by extispicy'. Accordingly, the *bârû* ('diviner', literally 'the one who makes an inspection') was the diviner specializing in provoked omens from the exta, oil, and smoke.

Apart from the vast collection and systematization of omens and their different series, *ṭupšarrûtu* also encompassed the sciences of astronomy and medicine. What we call astronomy consisted of a number of well-defined genres of such texts devoted to astronomical observation, schematization, and prediction,<sup>29</sup> including horoscopes.<sup>30</sup> What we call medicine consisted of a number of interrelated and interdependent forms of the science of healing, namely, *āšîpûtu* (knowledge and practice of conjuration against evil, and incantation and prayer literature) and *asûtu* (medical practice and knowledge of medicines).<sup>31</sup>

The *āšîpu* was a specialist in techniques of appealing to the gods to heal the sick, such as incantations and rituals for ridding the patient of whatever consequences he would suffer from bad omens (*namburbû*), especially those responsible for illness. This specialist did not simply come in after diagnosis to heal through ritual and incantation but was a master of the medical diagnostic omen series *Sakikkû* and the physiognomic series *Alamdimmû*. Together these omen compendia combined knowledge of symptoms, diagnostics, prognoses of illness (recovery or death) in the case of certain symptoms, and all the anatomical regularities and irregularities of the human body.

The *āšîpu*'s colleague, the *asû*, specialized in the practice of administering medicine in the form of drugs, the many preparations made from a wealth of materia medica, as well as the use of bandages. The texts of *asûtu* were cataloged in the so-called Assur Medical

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<sup>29</sup> A survey of which can be found in Hunger, Pingree 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Rochberg 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Geller 2010; Schwemer 2019, 39-41.

Catalogue.<sup>32</sup> As Geller and Steinert have shown,<sup>33</sup> there was considerable overlap between the two kinds of medical practice, while nonetheless being internally classified under two rubrics (*āšipūtu* and *asūtu*). Thus the separation of the two into medicine (*asūtu*) and magic (*āšipūtu*) as though these distinctions parallel our own separation of medicine from ‘alternative medicine’ makes for a false dichotomy and a misclassification of the evidence.

If we focus on the textual culture of the Assyrian scribes in the period ending with the fall of the Assyrian Empire, the evidence from Nineveh and elsewhere in the Empire, such as from Assur (Qal’at Sharqāt), Kalhu (Nimrud), and Huzirina (Sultantepe),<sup>34</sup> differs from that which comes to light in Babylonia of the second half of the first millennium, principally from Babylon and Uruk. Assyrian scribes derived their textual culture from Babylonia. Colophons on Assyrian scholarly texts tell us that a tablet was copied from a Babylonian original with the phrase *gabarî Bābili kīma labīrišu šaṭir* ‘copy from Babylon, written according to its original’.

We can only imagine the wealth of scholarly material from southern Babylonia unrecovered as of today. Assyrian scholars focused their interest in astronomical phenomena on the omen series *Enūma Anu Enlil* and its supporting compendium, MUL.APIN. Mathematical astronomy, lunar and planetary ephemerides, and diaries were the product of the later period in the Babylonian cities of Babylon and Uruk. With respect to both the Assyrian and later Babylonian scribal communities, the integrated nature of the texts comprising *ṭupšarrūtu* is a notable feature of the scientific repertoire. For the Assyrian period, *ṭupšarrūtu* included omen texts, incantations, medical prescriptions, ritual instructions, and astronomy alike. A rare glimpse into the textual domain of *āšipūtu* is found in a text listing the text series and subjects to be mastered by the *āšipu*, a priest whose duties included the conjuration of demons for the purpose of healing the sick and also diagnoses of illness.

The text in question (KAR 44)<sup>35</sup> opens with “The incipits [i.e. titles] of exorcism compositions, established for study and reading [lit. ‘viewing’], named in their entirety”.<sup>36</sup> It names the rituals and prayers to be known by the specialist in *āšipūtu* followed by a number of omen texts belonging to this scribe’s repertoire, namely, *Sakikkû*, *Alamdimmû*, *Nigdimdimmû*, and *Kataduggû*. Further incantations, purification rituals, prayers, and spells are also listed, as well as

<sup>32</sup> Steinert 2018, 11, 13-14, 172-84; Panayotov 2018, 89-120.

<sup>33</sup> Geller 2010, 9; Steinert 2018, 187-92.

<sup>34</sup> Robson 2013 discusses the various locations of ‘libraries’ throughout the Assyrian Empire.

<sup>35</sup> Geller 2018, 292-312.

<sup>36</sup> Geller 2018, 297.

predictions from stars, birds, oxen, and flocks, oracles (based) on stones (or) flour, on incense, (and) on a god, in their totality, 'explanatory stone lists', 'explanatory plant lists', the 'tablet of stones', the 'tablet of drugs', 'strings' and 'pendants'.<sup>37</sup>

This summation of celestial and terrestrial omens together with the knowledge of the healing plants and amuletic stones all belong to *ṭupšarrūtu*.

In another clear indication of the range of subjects included under the rubric *ṭupšarrūtu*, King Assurbanipal, monarch of Assyria at the height of its imperial period, boasted of his extensive learning in an inscription, as follows:

Marduk, the sage of the gods, gave me wide understanding and broad perceptions as a gift. Nabû, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition of all his wisdom as a present. Ninurta and Nergal gave me physical fitness, manhood and unparalleled strength. I learnt the lore of the wise sage Adapa, the hidden secret, *the whole of the scribal craft (kullat ṭupšarrūtu)*. I can discern celestial and terrestrial portents and deliberate in the assembly of the experts. I am able to discuss the series "If the liver is a mirror image of the sky" with capable scholars. I can solve convoluted reciprocals and calculations that do not come out evenly. I have read cunningly written text in Sumerian, dark Akkadian, the interpretation of which is difficult.<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis added)

This totality of the sciences of *ṭupšarrūtu* is important to take into account in any history of the cuneiform scientific culture and how it differed from what emerged in later periods in the scientific cultures of the West.

The sciences of *ṭupšarrūtu* expose the questionable nature of a historiography of science that reduces the aims and characteristics of science to those that stem from a modern sensibility about science, mainly one aimed at discovering and then representing the physical workings of nature. If science is to be defined only with reference to such modern ideas, then the knowledge systems and practices of antiquity and the Middle Ages into the Renaissance pose problems of classification and identity, or they are deemed simply to be wrong, superseded stages on the way to the sciences of today. Some of the premodern sciences, such as Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomy, medieval natural magic, alchemy (as well as metaphysics), and Renaissance astrology have already played a role in a reappraisal of

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<sup>37</sup> Geller 2018, 299-300.

<sup>38</sup> K 2694 + 3050, from Livingstone 2007, 100, ll. 10-18.

the scientific revolution.<sup>39</sup> The more remote and distant sciences of *ṭupšarrūtu* present another and somewhat different opportunity for a reassessment of the meaning of science in historical contexts.

Whether *ṭupšarrūtu* stands as a term for the sciences or for a scientific culture depends on how we define science and what sources, methods, and goals we decide belong to science. The evidence of *ṭupšarrūtu* indicates that certain bodies of knowledge, as well as their associated practices, were component parts of a discrete but multifaceted textual and intellectual and scientific culture.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, *ṭupšarrūtu* is distinct from episteme or *scientia*. The fact that *ṭupšarrūtu* incorporated fields of learning concerning observed, ordered, and systematized phenomena under one encompassing heading, similar to the way modern science serves as a general category for the disciplines of physics, biology, astronomy, chemistry, and so on, is one way of looking at a functional similarity. Methodological similarities are also key, such as use of empirical and predictive methods across the board and the overall systematic character of the whole.

Both similarities and dissimilarities to later sciences are found in the subjects encompassed by *ṭupšarrūtu*. Similar are astronomy and to a degree medicine, but divination, which looms large in the cuneiform corpus, is at complete odds with the fields fixed by modern science, to say the very least. The centuries up to the Early Modern period saw parallels in knowledge and practice that make for a consistent picture with the fields of *ṭupšarrūtu*, including such sciences as magic and astrology and theories of causality not always based on physical or mechanical processes such as, in particular, Hume's constant conjunctions or connections made by analogies, or correlation, rather than physical causality.<sup>41</sup> There are methodological resemblances (empirical, rational, predictive) that serve to unify the sciences, but to make the term science work in the cuneiform world, we cannot reduce the ancient evidence only to these unifying similarities, leaving some of the central characteristics of *ṭupšarrūtu* on the margins.

The cuneiform world has much to offer to the history of science by way of a different perspective, particularly in the clear value placed

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**39** Lindberg, Westman 1990.

**40** The unity of *ṭupšarrūtu* is also suggested by the relationship its series had to secret knowledge, which is discussed in Rochberg 2004, 214-17 and Lenzi 2008, 143. Lenzi says, "Late second and early first millennium sources on secrecy and scribalism use a word familiar to this study to describe the scribal craft: *niširtu*. The excursus to chapter one of this study noted the semantic proximity of *niširtu* and *pirištu* based on a synonym list (Aa = nâqu II/4 52-3). Interestingly, the very next word in this list is *ṭupšarrūtu*, 'the scribal craft'. This list, it seems, sets the three terms into a close semantic relationship. If there is evidence for attaching secrecy to the scribal craft in general, this text, originating in the twelfth century, is the first glimpse of it".

**41** Rochberg 2011, 279-80.

on observable signs for prognostication of human events. Some of the signs on which the scribes focused their observational and interpretive techniques were what we would classify as natural phenomena, in particular many of the celestial phenomena. However, the questions for which the observational and interpretive techniques were developed were not those of the later natural sciences.

The observation of regularities and irregularities, and the way deviations from a norm or an ideal were made amenable to schemata, models, calculation, and prediction, did not proceed from a conception of nature as a heuristic or explanatory framework. And because the overriding objective of knowledge was ominous signs of all kinds (astronomical, medical, physiognomic, behavioral, etc.), what was heuristic and explanatory were the meanings and relationships between words and the world conceived primarily through the associative and analogical reasoning employed in the science of interpretation.

Furthermore, an understanding of cuneiform science cannot be based on or defined by a supposed relationship of the gods to nature. The misbegotten nature of the presumption of a divide between the gods and nature extends well beyond cuneiform science even into the Greek and Greco-Roman realms, which may come as a surprise to those who may still regard Anaximander (and other early Greek philosophers) as purely naturalist in his thinking. To quote Daryn Lehoux, “Although many histories of science and of philosophy try to downplay the fact, *the gods never really go away in ancient science* (nor does mythology, for that matter...)” (emphasis added).<sup>42</sup> This suggests that nature did not drive out and replace the gods for purposes of scientific thought and scientific explanation, but as Lehoux pointed out, even in contexts where nature frames scientific inquiry, the gods continue ‘to interact’ with nature well into the Roman imperial period.<sup>43</sup>

In reference to the cuneiform world, however, the relationship of the gods to nature is not the question but rather how we as historians can reimagine a framework for phenomena that does not involve all-encompassing nature. The relationship between what we, in direct descent from Greek thought, think of as natural phenomena and how cuneiform scribes understood the phenomena of their interest is the crux of this difference. How the objects of the scribes’ inquiry were understood, then, is a question of central importance for both historical epistemologies and ontologies. The kind of knowledge science produces and the relation it has to its world underscore the integrated nature of epistemologies and the ontologies supporting them, regardless of cultural or historical context.

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<sup>42</sup> Lehoux 2019, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Lehoux 2019, 22-6.



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# Truth and Falsehood in Mesopotamia and Greece: Similarities and Differences

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**Abstract** This article explores the meaning and boundaries of the conception of truth in Mesopotamia and Greece. The two cultures show similarities and differences, but Mesopotamian scholarship never developed a concept of truth as conformity to ‘what is’. On the contrary, Greek philosophy separated truth and falsehood in epistemological and ontological terms.

**Keywords** Truth. Falsehood. Mesopotamian literature. Greek literature. Philosophy.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Mesopotamian *kittu*. – 3 Ἀλήθεια in Archaic Greece. – 4 Knowledge in Mesopotamia. – 5 Mesopotamia and Heraclitus. – 6 The Development of ἀλήθεια towards an Epistemological and Ontological Concept of Truth. – 7 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary offers several definitions of ‘truth’. Among these we find definitions such as the following: “Something that conforms with fact or reality”; “Conformity with fact; agreement with reality; accuracy or correctness in a statement, thought”. Consequently, the OED defines ‘falsehood’ as follows: “That which, or something that, is contrary to fact or truth” and “Want of conformity to

fact or truth”.<sup>1</sup> An intimate opposition between true and false with reference to reality clearly emerges from such definitions as well as an implicit principle of noncontradiction, which prevents a certain thing from being true and false at the same time. Also, these definitions seem to presuppose a conception of truth as a relation between thought or saying and reality: in other words, an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, to use the words of Thomas Aquinas, who derives this idea directly from Aristotelian thought. On this Aristotelian line we nowadays tend to conceive truth in a twofold way, both as a relation between thought and reality and as noncontradiction. However, the history of ancient Greek thought witnesses different conceptions of truth, sometimes similar to those found in Mesopotamia. In this paper we will try to analyze and compare the ideas of ‘truth’ attested in Mesopotamia and Greece in order to outline similarities and differences. Let us begin with Mesopotamian sources.

## 2 Mesopotamian *kittu*

In Babylonian cuneiform texts the word which is usually translated with truth is the Akkadian term *kittu*.<sup>2</sup> This meaning is commonly accepted by scholars besides dictionary entries.<sup>3</sup> But does *kittu* really mean truth? *Kittu* is a substantivized verbal adjective from the verb *kânu* which means ‘to be firm, to be correct’.<sup>4</sup> The Sumerian equivalents of *kittu* are *niĝ<sub>2</sub>-gi-na* and *niĝ<sub>2</sub>-zi* which are abstracts from *gi.n* ‘to be firm’ and *zi.d* ‘to be right’.<sup>5</sup> Already von Soden argued that in Babylonian and Biblical sources there is no concept of ‘historical’ truth as correspondence to reality; the concept of truth is associated with immutability and rectitude.<sup>6</sup>

The term *kittu* is usually found in legal and juridical contexts with the meaning of ‘justice, fairness, correct procedure’. Indeed *kittu*

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Paragraphs 2, 4, and 5 of this paper were written by Maurizio Viano. Paragraphs 3 and 6 were written by Francesco Sironi. Paragraphs 1 and 7 were written by both Authors.

1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “truth, n. & adv.”, July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6193356826>.

2 CAD K: 468.

3 See van de Mieroop 2015, 174-5; see also Glassner 2012, 41-2.

4 CAD K: 159 ff.

5 See Attinger 2021, 790, 800; Cohen 2023, 442, 1539-40; ePSD2, <http://oracc.org/epsd2/o0035723>, <http://oracc.org/epsd2/o0036144>. Lämmerhirt (2010) dedicated a monographic study to the words for ‘truth’ in Sumerian and Akkadian sources listing many attestations.

6 von Soden 1967-68, see also Lämmerhirt 2010, 10-16.

often appears alongside the term *mīšaru* which means ‘justice’.<sup>7</sup> The two terms represent two complementary rather than parallel concepts and can be translated with ‘law’ and ‘justice’.<sup>8</sup> Most famously the two terms are found at the end of the *Code of Hammurabi*:

Obv. V (20) *ki-it-tam* (21) *u<sub>3</sub> mi-ša-ra-am* (22) *i-na KA ma-tim* (23) *aš-ku-un*

I promised *kittu* and justice on the land!

In letters and legal documents *kittu* appears as a qualifier of a preceding substantive with the meaning ‘correct’:<sup>9</sup>

**TC 3 102**

(7) *ma-aš<sub>2</sub>-ka-al-tam<sub>2</sub>* (8) *ša ki-tim*

Correct payment.

**AbB 1 46**

(25) 3.0.4 ŠE GUR *i-na GIŠ.BÁN ki-it-tim pa-aq-da<sup>2</sup>-ku<sup>2</sup>*  
(26) 3.0.4 GUR ŠE-*a-am i-di-iš-šum*

I am provided with 3 gur and 4 *sûtu* in the correct seah-measure, therefore give him 3 gur and 4 *sûtu* of barley.

**AbB 14 191**

(23) *uš<sup>2</sup>-ta-bi-la-kum šu-quz-ul* (24) *‘i-na’ a-ba-an ki-ti-im*

I have now sent you (soft wool); weigh it out using a reliable weighing stone.

Inscriptions from various periods mention *kittu* in opposition to *šaliptu*, ‘dishonesty’, *gullultu* which means ‘crime, sin’, and *lemuttu*, ‘evil’. The following examples are taken from a royal inscription of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) and two Kassite inscriptions of the king Melišipak (early twelfth century BCE).

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<sup>7</sup> CAD M: 116 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Maul 1998, 66-7.

<sup>9</sup> TC 3 102 is an Old Assyrian letter; AbB 1 46 and AbB 14 191 are two Old Babylonian letters.

**Esarhaddon 1 (RINAP 4.1)<sup>10</sup>**

IV (25) *a-na-ku* <sup>m</sup>Aš-šur-PAP-AŠ LUGAL KUR Aš-šur<sup>ki</sup> LUGAL *kib-rat*  
LIMMU<sub>2</sub>-*ti*

IV (26) *ša<sub>2</sub> kit-tu i-ram-mu-ma ša-lip-tu<sub>2</sub> ik-kib-šu<sub>2</sub>*

I, Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, king of the four quarters, who loves rectitude and abhors treachery.

**Kudurru of Melišiku (MDP 2 99)<sup>11</sup>**

IV (52) *šum-ma* LU<sub>2</sub> *šu-u<sub>2</sub>* (53) *ki-it-ta ir-tam-ma* (54) *gu-ul-lu-ul-ta iz-ze-er*  
V (20) *šum-ma* LU<sub>2</sub> *šu-u<sub>2</sub> ki-it-ta iz-ze-er-ma* (21) *gu-ul-lu-ul-ta ir-tam*

If this man loves rectitude and hates crime.

If this man hates rectitude and loves crime.

**Kudurru of Melišiku (MDP 10 87)<sup>12</sup>**

III (9) *u<sub>3</sub> šum-ma* LU<sub>2</sub> *šu-u<sub>2</sub>* (10) *ki-it-tam is-si<sub>2</sub>-ir* (11) NI<sub>2</sub>.SI.SA<sub>2</sub> *la iḫ-ta-ši-*  
*iḫ-ma* (12) ḪUL-<sup>t</sup>*ti* *ir-ta-am*

And if this man hates rectitude and does not want rectitude and loves evil.

In these cases the contrast with words describing criminal attitudes makes clear that *kittu* means ‘justice’ or ‘rectitude’.

Even when the most appropriate translation appears to be ‘truth’, the semantic sphere of *kittu* relates to speech and indicates something ‘undeceiving’. In letters *kittu* refers to reports of facts with a practical meaning of correctness and trustability.

**EA 107<sup>13</sup>**

(8) *a-mur* <sup>t</sup>*a*<sup>1</sup>-*na-ku* (9) ARAD *ki-ti šar<sub>3</sub>-ri* <sup>d</sup>UTU (10) *u<sub>3</sub> pu-ia a-wa-te<sup>meš</sup> aq-*  
*bu* (11) *a-na šar<sub>3</sub>-ri ki-ta-ma*

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**10** Leichty 2011, 9-26.

**11** Paulus 2014, 369-83.

**12** Paulus 2014, 390-401.

**13** Rainey 2015, 580-1; EA 107 is a letter from El-Amarna between the king of Byblos and the Pharaoh.

Look, I am a loyal servant of the king, the sun god, and as for my mouth I always speak sincere words to the king.

**ABL 586<sup>14</sup>**

obv. (7) [ša] LUGAL EN iš-pur-an-ni (8) ma-a ina ket-ti-ka (9) šup-ra ke-e-tu (10) TA LUGAL EN-ia (11) a-da-bu-u

[As to what] the king, my lord, wrote to me: "Write me truthfully" - I am speaking the truth to the king, my lord.

What *kittu* means is clarified by one of the most iconic wisdom compositions from ancient Mesopotamia, the *Babylonian Theodicy*

(78) ki-na ra-aš<sub>2</sub> uz-ni ša<sub>2</sub> tuš-ta-ad-di-nu la mur-qa  
(79) ki-it-ta ta-at-ta-du-ma u<sub>2</sub>-šur-ti DINGIR ta-na-šu

Righteous one, one who possesses wisdom, what you have pondered is not rational.  
Have you forsaken what is right? Do you despise the order of deity?<sup>15</sup>

These lines make clear that what is right is what has been fixed by the gods, their plans.

The negation of *kittu*, namely *la kittu*, means 'deceiving, unjust, unfair' as in the following Old Babylonian letter:

**AbB 9 236**

(5) a-na mi-ni-im (6) la ki-ti ta-aš-ku-n[a] (7) u<sub>3</sub> i-di wa-ar-di-ia<sup>1</sup> (8) tu-ša-di-na

Why did you act unfairly and why did you collect the wages of my servants?

The legal aspect of *kittu* and *la kittu* is even more explicit in one of Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions where *la kittu* is listed among criminal actions.

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<sup>14</sup> Parpola 1993, 241-3 (= SAA 10 302); ABL 586 is a letter from an Assyrian scholar to the king.

<sup>15</sup> Oshima 2014, 154-5.

**Esarhaddon 33 (RINAP 4.33)<sup>16</sup>**

obv. I (8) *ki-a-am iš-pur-am-ma um-ma LUGAL ša<sub>2</sub> an-zil-li la kit-tu<sub>3</sub> ḥa-ba-lu ša<sub>2</sub>-ga-šu<sub>2</sub> ʾik-kibʾ-[š<sub>u</sub><sub>2</sub>]*

Thus he wrote to me, (saying): “O, king, to whom abomination, injustice, plundering, (and) murdering are taboo”.

As with *kittu* also *la kittu* when associated with declarative verbs relates to the realm of fairness/unfairness; something *la kittu* is deceiving as is clear from another Old Babylonian letter:

**AbB 11 85**

(5) *ki-ma ki-it-tim* (6) *ša* <sup>d</sup>UTU *u<sub>3</sub>* <sup>d</sup>AMAR.UTU (7) *ra-i-mi-ka* (8) *iš-ru-ku-ni-ik-kum* (9) GIŠ.BAN<sub>2</sub> 3 <sup>d</sup>UTU *šu-a-ti* (10) ʾitʾ-ti GIŠ.BAN<sub>2</sub> 3 <sup>d</sup>UTU *ša ŠE-am* (11) *im-du-du ša ma-aḥ-ri-ka* (12) *li-iš-pu-ku-ma*

According to the sense of justice that Šamaš and Marduk, who loves you, bestowed upon you: let them pile up the three-seah measure of Šamaš with the three-seah measure of Šamaš of the barley they have measured.

The convergence of *kittu* and justice is clearly stated in royal inscription of Lipit-Ištar, a king of first dynasty of Isin (1936-26 BCE):

**RIME 4 1.5.3<sup>17</sup>**

(30) *i-nu-mi* (31) *ki-i-ta-am* (32) *i-na ma-at* (33) *Su-me-ri-im* (34) *u<sub>3</sub> A-ka<sub>3</sub>-di<sub>3</sub>-im* (35) *as-ku-nu-ni*

When I established justice in the land of Sumer and Akkad.

The connection of *kittu* with correctness is also clear in the context of divination. In the Old Babylonian *ikribu* prayers recited in preparation of the extispicy *kittu* indicates the correct verdict that the diviner asks Šamaš and Adad, the gods of divination, to place in the lamb he is sacrificing:<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Leichty 2011, 79-86.

<sup>17</sup> Frayne 1990, 49-51.

<sup>18</sup> On the *ikribu* prayers and more generally on the diviner's ritual see Starr 1983; see also Cohen 2020, 31-46.



AO 7031 = RA 38 86<sup>19</sup>

rev. (23') *i-na pu-ḫa-ad a-ka-ra-bu ki-ta-am šu-[uk-na]*

Place a correct verdict in the lamb I am offering.

AO 7032 = RA 38 87<sup>20</sup>

obv. (9) *i-na te-er-ti-i-šu i-na pu-[ḫa-a]d a-ka-ra-bu ki-ta-am šu-uk-nam*

In its extispicy, in the lamb I am offering, place a correct verdict.

YBC 5023<sup>21</sup>

obv. (12) *i-na ik-ri-ib a-ka-ra-bu i-na te-er-ti e-pu-šu*  
(13) *ki-it-tam šu-uk-nam*

In the ritual I perform, in the extispicy I perform, put a correct verdict!

That in these cases *kittu* refers to the correctness of divine judgment is ensured by the legal metaphor used in extispicy rituals that were understood as court cases in which the client was considered the defendant and the gods acted as judges.<sup>22</sup> The gods were asked to render justice as mentioned in another Old Babylonian *ikribu* prayer which uses an expression similar to that found in the *Code of Hammurabi*:

HSM 7494<sup>23</sup>

(18) *li-iš-bu-ma da-a-a-nu i-lu-u<sub>2</sub> ra-bu-tim wa-ši-bu GIŠ.GU.ZA-a-at ḫu-ra-ši a-ki-lu pa-aš-šu-ur uq-ni-im ma-ḫa-ar-ka*  
(19) *i-na ki-it-tim u<sub>3</sub> mi-ša-ri-im li-di-nu di-na-am u<sub>4</sub>-ma-am di-in an-na-an-na ma-ri an-na-an-na di-na-a-ma*

Let the judges, the great gods, who sit on golden thrones, who eat at a table of lapis lazuli, sit before you.  
Let them judge the case in righteousness and justice. Judge today the case of so-and-so, son of so-and-so.

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**19** Nougayrol 1941; Starr 1983, 123-6.

**20** Starr 1983, 122-3.

**21** Goetze 1968, 25.

**22** Cohen 2020, 35-9.

**23** Starr 1983, 31, 38.

*Kittu* is also attested as a deified entity as daughter of Šamaš, the god of justice.<sup>24</sup> *Kittu* as a deity appears in incantations and prayers addressed to Šamaš, as well as in documents of legal nature where she acts as witness together with Šamaš. In Sumerian and bilingual texts as well as in divine lists the goddess' name is found as Niĝ<sub>2</sub>-gi-na, which as said before means 'what is established, fixed', and as Niĝ<sub>2</sub>-zi-da which means 'what is right'. Although this deity is usually understood as a personification of the concept of truth, a more nuanced reading would be righteousness as suggested by the Sumerian names especially because these were probably secondary translations. At any rate the interpretation of *Kittu* as the goddess of Truth can be retained with the caveat that she is not identified with an abstract idea of truth, but with truth meant as correctness and righteousness rendered in verdicts. The realm of this deity is justice as also strengthened by her pairing with her brother *Mišarum*, who is the deification of justice.

In none of the examples discussed so far, *kittu* refers to an abstract or epistemological concept that can be compared to the concept of 'truth' as conformity to reality.

In addition to *la kittu*, the opposite of *kittu* is identified by the term *sartu* that is translated with 'lie, falsehood, treachery',<sup>25</sup> and is often coupled with *kittu* as in the following passage from the seventh tablet of the *Enūma eliš*:

- (35) <sup>a</sup>Ša<sub>3</sub>-zu mu-de-e lib<sub>3</sub>-bi ilāni ša<sub>2</sub> i-bar-ru-u kar-šu<sub>2</sub>  
(36) e-piš lem-ne<sub>2</sub>-e-ti la u<sub>2</sub>-še-šu-u<sub>2</sub> it-ti-šu<sub>2</sub>  
(37) mu-kin puḥri ša<sub>2</sub> ilāni mu-ṭib lib<sub>3</sub>-bi-šu-un  
(38) mu-kan-niš la ma-gi-ri ṣ[u-lu-u]l-šu-un ra-a-šu  
(39) mu-še-šir kit-ti na-si-[h] it-gu-ru da-ba-ba  
(40) ša<sub>2</sub> sa-ar-ti u k[i-it]-tum um-tas-sa-a aš-ru-uš-šu

Šazu, who knew the heart of the gods, who saw the reins,  
Who did not let an evil-doer escape from him,  
Who established the assembly of the gods, who rejoiced their hearts,  
Who subjugated the disobedient, he is the gods' encompassing protection.  
He made *truth* to prosper, he uprooted perverse speech,  
He separated *falsehood* from *truth*.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Lambert's translation of *kittu* with truth, the god's actions against evil-doers, disobedients and perverse people, show that this passage refers to correct and deceiving behaviors. This passage, including line 40 that opposes *sartu* and *kittu*, does not refer to epistemological concepts of truth and falsehood. This interpretation is

<sup>24</sup> Klein 1998-2001.

<sup>25</sup> CAD S: 186.

<sup>26</sup> Lambert 2013, 126-7.

further strengthened by the nature of the god Šazu who was the deified representation of river ordeal.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the legal and judicial context stands out once again.

That *sartu* was understood as the opposite of *kittu* in legal and juridical contexts is supported by lexical lists. In Old Babylonian bilingual Nigga,<sup>28</sup> the negative terms *nakāru* and *sartu* appear just before *kittu* and the words *kīnum* and *mīšarum*.

52.	[niĝ <sub>2</sub> -kur <sub>2</sub> ] di	<i>na-ka-ru-[um]</i>	to be hostile
53.	[niĝ <sub>2</sub> ]- <sup>1</sup> [lu <sup>1</sup> -la	<i>sa<sub>3</sub>-a-<sup>1</sup>ar<sup>1</sup>-[tum]</i>	falsehood
54.	[niĝ <sub>2</sub> ]- <sup>1</sup> gi <sup>1</sup> -na	<i>ki-i-it-[tum]</i>	truth
55.	[niĝ <sub>2</sub> ]-zi	<i>ki-i-nu-[um]</i>	righteousness
56.	[niĝ <sub>2</sub> -si]-sa <sub>2</sub>	<i>mi-ša-ru-<sup>1</sup>um<sup>1</sup></i>	justice <sup>29</sup>

We can therefore conclude that in all instances we have discussed so far, which are not exhaustive but highly significant, the term *kittu* and its opposites *sartu* and *la kittu* never identify epistemological concepts of truth and falsehood. If we want to retain the translation ‘truth’ we must be aware that *kittu* refers to what is fixed, and to correct, reliable and trustworthy declarations. This very meaning of *kittu* finds similarities in the concept of ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*) in archaic Greece. Both concepts seem to have no epistemological value. On the contrary, they appear to be tied to social interactions and communication.

### 3 Ἀλήθεια in Archaic Greece

In archaic Greece the ideas of and the words for ‘truth’ present us with a complex scenery, as we will see. The main Greek word for truth is ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*), but a simple translation with ‘truth’ would fail to express the significance of the original. Ἀλήθεια and its derivatives, at least in the first stages of Greek cultural history, have a quite different meaning, only partially overlapping with the dictionary entries recalled at the beginning of this paper. We will try to briefly recall what scholars have pointed out with regard to ἀλήθεια, without any pretense of exhaustivity – that would require an entire book – but in the hope of highlighting some fundamental aspects. Let us begin our journey towards ἀλήθεια.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Lambert 2013, 484.

<sup>28</sup> Nigga is an acrographic list known in unilingual (i.e. Sumerian only) and bilingual (i.e. Sumerian and Akkadian) from the Old Babylonian period, see MSL 13, 91-2.

<sup>29</sup> MSL 13, 116.

<sup>30</sup> A good summary of the scholarly debate about ἀλήθεια in the archaic age is provided by Riu 2004, 64-8.

As Detienne and many others after him rightly observed in analyzing the archaic occurrences of the word, ἀλήθεια is originally what is authoritatively expressed by a ‘master of truth’ deriving his authority from divine forces.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in an aural context such as that of archaic Greek culture often implying a specific occasion for every performance of a text, ἀλήθεια was not conceived as a mere conformity between something (thought or saying) and reality nor as reality itself. It was a conception intertwined with social functions such as authority, justice, poetic inspiration, praise, blame, persuasion and memory. In other words, ἀλήθεια was a concept working within the context of public speech. In this context the idea of ἀλήθεια does not match the definition of ‘conforming to fact or reality’.

This is also clarified by the etymology of ἀλήθεια. There are two main schools on the matter:

1. Heidegger’s ‘objective’ etymology: privative ἀ + ληθ (from λανθάνω) ‘that which is not concealed’ (the unconcealing nature of a thing lies in the thing itself);<sup>32</sup>
2. Snell’s ‘subjective’ etymology: privative ἀ + λήθη ‘that which does not undergo oblivion’ (the ‘unforgetfulness’ of something lies in the remembering subject).<sup>33</sup>

As one can see, these etymologies, too, show that Greek ἀλήθεια is not primarily what conforms with reality. A few examples, already pointed out by scholars, can help with making this clearer. Let’s read Hesiod’s description of Nereus, the ‘old man of the sea’:<sup>34</sup>

Νηρέα δ’ ἀψευδέα καὶ ἀληθέα γείνατο Πόντος  
πρεσβύτατον παίδων· αὐτὰρ καλέουσι γέροντα,  
οὐνεκα νημερτῆς τε καὶ ἥπιος, οὐδὲ θεμίστων  
λήθεται, ἀλλὰ δίκαια καὶ ἥπια δήνεα οἶδεν·

Pontus begot Nereus, unerring and truthful, the oldest of his sons; they call him the Old Man, because he is infallible and gentle, and does not forget established customs but contrives just and gentle plans.<sup>35</sup>

It has been rightly pointed out that ἀψευδέα ‘unerring’ and ἀληθέα ‘truthful’ are not synonyms in this context. The description is based

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<sup>31</sup> See Detienne 1967.

<sup>32</sup> See Heidegger 1927, 220-3. This etymology was actually already in Classen 1851, 197.

<sup>33</sup> See Snell 1975. Cole 1983 attempts to reassess Snell’s interpretation without undermining its core by placing ἀλήθεια within the frame of communication processes. It might be useful to point out that both λανθάνω and λήθη share the same root and their semantic fields are not completely segregated from each other.

<sup>34</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 233-6.

<sup>35</sup> Transl. G.W. Most.

on two positive poles: accuracy (expressed by the adjective νημερτής) which prevents from saying things erroneously – that is why Nereus is ἀψευδής ‘unerring’ – on the one hand and the memory which gives the authority to say ἀληθέα on the other. This means that Nereus says ἀληθέα because he does not forget (λήθεται) the θέμιστα (‘established customs’), which implies that Nereus is ἀληθής not only because he says true things but also and especially because he does not let them fall into oblivion.<sup>36</sup>

Another clear example is Pindar:<sup>37</sup>

Τὸν Ὀλυμπιονίκαν ἀνάγνωτέ μοι  
 Ἀρχεστράτου παῖδα, πόθι φρενός  
 ἔμας γέγραπται· γλυκὺ γὰρ αὐτῷ μέλος ὀφείλων  
 ἐπιλέλαθ'· ὦ Μοῖσ', ἀλλὰ σὺ καὶ θυγάτηρ  
 Ἀλάθεια Διός, ὀρθῶν χερί  
 ἐρύκετον ψευδέων  
 ἐνιπὰν ἀλιτόξενον.  
 ἔκαθεν γὰρ ἐπελθὼν ὁ μέλλων χρόνος  
 ἔμὸν καταίσχυνε βαθὺ χρέος.  
 ὅμως δὲ λῦσαι δυνατὸς ὀξεῖαν ἐπιμομφὰν  
 τόκος τῶνατων·

Read me the name of the Olympic victor,  
 the son of Arcestratus, where it is written  
 in my mind, for I owe him a sweet song  
 and have forgotten. O Muse, but you and Zeus' daughter,  
 Truth, with a correcting hand  
 ward off from me the charge of harming a guest friend  
 with broken promises.  
 For what was then the future has approached from afar  
 and shamed my deep indebtedness.  
 Nevertheless, interest on a debt can absolve one from  
 a bitter reproach.<sup>38</sup>

Ἀλήθεια here is deeply connected with the Muses in that they can prevent oblivion and blame, opposed to memory and praise. Many other passages could be brought forth to underline these aspects of ἀλήθεια, which appears to be at the center of an intertwining of meanings resulting in a mismatch with the idea of ‘truth’ as conformity to reality.

In archaic Greece the communicative and social nature of ἀλήθεια, as well as its dependence on memory and authority, implies variability and also deception. This emerges clearly in the famous words of the Muses in Hesiod's poetic investiture:<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See Riu 2019, 249.

<sup>37</sup> Pind. *Ol.* 10.1-9.

<sup>38</sup> Transl. W.H. Race.

<sup>39</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 27-8.

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,  
ἴδμεν δ' εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.

We can say a lot of false things similar to genuine ones,  
and, when we want, we can also celebrate true things.

This passage gives us the opportunity to address an important topic. Ἔτυμα and ἀληθέα are not synonyms in this passage. Apparently, in archaic Greece the only words referring to some sort of compliance with reality or fact - what we call factual truth or genuineness - seem to be ἔτυμος (and its derivative ἐτήτυμος) and ἔτεός, most notably all adjectives.<sup>40</sup> The ἀληθέα celebrated by the Muses are not subject to oblivion and are therefore unchangeable - they would otherwise be somehow forgotten - whereas the ἔτυμα, on the contrary, can undergo silence and be replaced by lies.<sup>41</sup> This might also explain why Stesichorus, in his famous *Palinode*, retracts his former poem about Helen by stating that it was not ἔτυμος:<sup>42</sup>

Οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὔτος  
οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις  
οὐδ' ἴκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας.

This story is not genuine,  
you did not go on well-benched ships  
and you did not arrive to the citadel of Troy.

**40** See Krischer 1965; Riu 2019, 246: "C'est surtout ἀλήθεια et ses dérivés et ἔτυμον avec ses variantes (ἐτήτυμον, ἔτεός) qui posent problème. Selon le contexte, en effet, on peut choisir de les comprendre comme, respectivement, 'vrai' et 'réel', ou bien 'inoubliable' (ou 'qui n'est pas à oublier', ou 'à passer sous silence', ou 'à laisser inaperçu') pour l'un; et 'factuellement vrai' pour l'autre. Globalement, je dirais qu'il y a un consensus assez général pour considérer que ἔτεός et ἐτήτυμος font référence à la réalité, aux faits, tandis que ἀληθής est un fait de langue, de parole: c'est quelque chose qui est dit". Sometimes the feminine form of the adjective ἔτεός (ἔτεή) is used as a noun adjective, much attested in Democritus, but it consistently appears to mean 'reality' rather than 'truth' and is almost exclusively used adverbially: ἐτεῆ 'in reality'. The abstract noun ἐτητυμία is not attested in the archaic and classical ages, since its first occurrence is in Callimachus (*Aet.* 75-6).

**41** See Riu 2019, 248: "on croit habituellement que ἔτυμος signifie ce qui est 'vrai' en entendant par là ce qui est 'réel', tandis que ἀληθής signifierait simplement 'vrai', conduisant certains commentateurs à ne plus les distinguer l'un de l'autre: 'nous savon dire beaucoup des mensonges semblables à des réalités, mais nous savons, quand nous voulons, faire entendre des vérités', où 'vérités' n'est en fait qu'une variatio par rapport à 'réalités'. Pourtant, ici du moins, ἔτυμα et ἀληθέα ne sont certainement pas des synonymes, même s'ils ont, tous les deux, affaire à la vérité. Il y a au moins un aspect sous lequel les deux mots sont différents: les ἔτυμα peuvent être oubliés ou passés sous silence, remplacés par des mensonges, mais pas les ἀληθέα, comme leur nom même l'indique".

**42** Fr. 91a Davies-Finglass.

Most notably, Stesichorus does not use the adjective ἀληθής, perhaps because he is retracting the story of Helen, but not questioning his own poetic authority – it may be added that the very fact that he mentions his former poem somehow saves it from oblivion (λήθη). Be it as it may, there seems to be no noun to refer uniquely to any sort of conformity with reality or fact in archaic Greece until its last phases. Until then, truth does not seem to be an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Still, at a certain stage of Greek cultural history, things will start to change. Before discussing these developments, however, let us look at the Mesopotamian conception of knowledge. This will help us in outlining some crucial differences between Mesopotamia and Greece.

#### 4 Knowledge in Mesopotamia

Akkadian and Sumerian as well as the whole Mesopotamian scholarly tradition seem to lack a mutually exclusive opposition between true and false. This absence is associated with the nature of knowledge in Mesopotamia which is fundamentally cumulative. As for cumulative we maintain that the addition of new elements does not cause the exclusion of the former and does not lead to contradiction. For Babylonians knowledge is singling out meanings, reaching a more detailed level of precision; for them it was the exact opposite: expanding the meaning of words and adding new meanings. The cumulative nature of Mesopotamian knowledge rests on the concept that words have deep and hidden meanings that must be found; by principles of analogical associations the meaning of a word can be expanded to find new meanings that can be completely unrelated to the original one.<sup>43</sup> As aptly argued by Cavigneaux the Babylonian scholars had no theory according to which each translation corresponded to a phonetic or written contrast.<sup>44</sup> The cumulative nature of knowledge can be found in many aspects of cuneiform scholarship, especially in lexical lists.<sup>45</sup> In particular, first millennium lexical lists tend to increase the number

<sup>43</sup> Maul 1999, 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Cavigneaux 1976, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Van de Mierop 2015, 71-2 see also 82-3. Lexical lists are among the earliest cuneiform texts; the earliest forms were simply lists of Sumerian words but later developed in complex structures with multilingual entries similar to vocabularies; the typical form consists of a Sumerian sign, its reading and one or more Akkadian translations. Lexical lists were at the core of the scribal curriculum and were used for three millennia in school to learn cuneiform writing. Lexical lists may concern different subjects (e.g. professions, realia, naturalia, body parts) and were arranged according to different principles, mainly thematic or acrographic; for an introduction to lexical lists see Cavigneaux 1980-83.

of Akkadian translations for a single Sumerian sign.<sup>46</sup> The Akkadian translations only partially correspond to the Sumerian sign and draw on various principles of association to expand and create new meanings.<sup>47</sup> Quite interestingly, these new meanings may include antonyms. One of the most extreme cases is that of the sign *bar* in the lexical list Aa, which receives probably nearly two hundred Akkadian translations.<sup>48</sup>

The same lexical list provides other examples of the accumulation of meanings:<sup>49</sup>

SILA <sub>3</sub>	<i>qû</i>	<i>qû</i> (a capacity measure)
	<i>sulû</i>	street
	<i>sûqu</i>	street
	<i>hupû</i>	one-half (of a <i>qû</i> )
	<i>hepû</i>	to split
	<i>mindatu</i>	measure
	<i>mîšertu</i>	standard <i>qû</i> -measure
	<i>silîtu</i>	afterbirth
	<i>îpu</i>	membrane, afterbirth

The basic meaning of the sign SILA<sub>3</sub> is a unit of measurement. The Akkadian words *qû*, *mindatu*, *mîšertu* are traditionally associated with the sign SILA<sub>3</sub><sup>50</sup> and are all related to measures. The Akkadian correspondences are expanded to a close semantic field, that of dividing into units, with *hupû*, 'one-half' and *hepû*, 'to split'. The translations *sulû* and *sûqu*, which mean 'street', are clear examples of cumulative knowledge: the Sumerian word *silā*<sub>3</sub> is expanded to include the meaning of its homophone sign *silā* which means 'street'. The most common Sumerian word for womb, membrane and afterbirth is *arĥuš* (occasionally with reading *uš*<sub>3</sub>); there is however a quite rare word (a)-*silā*<sub>3</sub>-*ġar*-(ra)<sup>51</sup> which has this very meaning and it is written with the sign SILA<sub>3</sub>. In our lexical list this meaning is attributed to the sign SILA<sub>3</sub> only, and therefore translated with *silîtu* and *îpu*.

Another example from the same lexical list is the sign MUL that has the basic meaning 'star'.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Texts tended to grow by imitating former models rather than replacing older traditions, see Van de Mieroop 2015, 192-3.

<sup>47</sup> Cavigneaux 1976, 107.

<sup>48</sup> MSL 14, 163.

<sup>49</sup> Aa I/6 20-8. MSL 14, 225-6.

<sup>50</sup> They are already attested in Proto Aa.

<sup>51</sup> See <http://oracc.org/epsd2/o0024513>; Attinger 2021, 117; Cohen 2023, 112.

<sup>52</sup> Aa II/6 25-44. MSL 14, 291-2.



MUL	<i>kakkabu</i>	star
	<i>zappu</i>	Pleiades
	<i>šitru</i>	writing
	<i>šitirtu</i>	writing, document
	<i>nabātu</i>	to shine
	<i>napāḥu</i>	to light up
	<i>namāru</i>	to be bright
	<i>banû</i>	well-formed, perfect
	<i>kunnû</i>	to honor, honored
	<i>zu'unu</i>	decorated
	<i>papallu</i>	offspring
	<i>bibbu</i>	planet
	<i>mulmullu</i>	arrow
	<i>amartu</i>	dividing wall
	<i>bī'u</i>	drainage opening (in a wall)
	<i>šēpu</i>	foot
	<i>šēnu</i>	shoes
	<i>banû</i>	well-formed, perfect
	<i>banû ša šitirtu</i>	well-formed, perfect (said of) writing
	<i>awīlu</i> EME.SAL	man

Some Akkadian correspondences such as *nabātu*, *napāḥu* and *namāru*, are related to the basic meaning or are connected to a typical feature of stars, that of being bright. The basic meaning star, Akkadian *kakkabu* attracts *zappu*, 'Pleiades' and *bibbu* 'planet', that are not exactly synonyms. The Akkadian *šitru* and *šitirtu* 'writing' are traditionally related to the role of heavenly bodies as divine writing, *šitir šamê*.<sup>53</sup> The term *banû* means 'to be well-formed, perfect' and is usually associated with gods. We can surmise that *banû* is associated with MUL for the natural connection between stars and gods. This term attracts *kunnû* 'to honor or honored', that is also used for gods and in other parts of the same lexical list appears with *bunnû*, which is a derivative of *banû* and means 'to adorn'.<sup>54</sup> The word for 'shoes', Akkadian *šēnu*, is totally unrelated to a star but in Sumerian it is indeed written with the sign MUL but with reading *subub<sub>2</sub>*. This list conflates two different readings of the same sign in one single entry. Most likely the word *šēpu* 'foot' is attracted by *šēnu*:

MUL	(suḥub <sub>2</sub> )	=	<i>šēnu</i>	>>	<i>šēpu</i>
	shoes		shoes		foot

<sup>53</sup> For an introduction to celestial divination see Rochberg 2004 and Van de Mieroop 2015, 87-94 with previous bibliography.

<sup>54</sup> See CAD K: 540.

The translation *awīlu*, ‘man’, is totally unrelated to the meaning of the sign MUL but the Emesal<sup>55</sup> word for ‘man’, *mulu*, is phonetically close to the reading *mul*.

Lexical lists even provide antonymic translations. In the list IZI the two opposite directions of movement, coming close and moving away, are associated with the same Sumerian verbal root that originally had only the meaning of ‘to be near, to approach’.<sup>56</sup>

95.	[TE]	<i>ne<sub>2</sub>-su-<sup>1</sup>u<sub>2</sub></i>	to be distant
96.	[TE]	<i>du-up-pu-rum</i>	to move away
97.	TE	<i>sa-na-qu</i>	to approach
98.	TE	<i>ṭe-ḥu-um</i>	to approach

Behind the antonymic translation there is possibly a graphic principle: the sign KAR which means ‘to leave’ is a compound sign written TE.A.<sup>57</sup> Therefore a synecdochic (or abbreviated)<sup>58</sup> equation TE.A: TE results in an antonymic association, although neither *nesû* nor *dup-puru* are known to translate KAR.<sup>59</sup>

In the Old Babylonian IZI the sign *til*, which means ‘to complete, to be completed’ is glossed with *laqātu*, ‘to gather’; this equation derives from the reading of *til* as the same sign as *bad*, meaning ‘to be distant’ which has a semantic contrast to *laqātu*.<sup>60</sup>

Two other examples may be quoted. The first is from a manuscript from Ugarit of the lexical list Sa (Ugaritica V 133 = RS 23.493A)<sup>61</sup> in which the sign BAD is translated both with *mūtu* ‘death’ – the regular translation – and with *balātu* ‘to live’.

r 8’	DIŠ	BAD	<i>ba-<sup>1</sup>la<sup>1</sup>-[ṭu]</i>	to live
r 9’	DIŠ	BAD	<i>‘ga-ma<sup>1</sup>-[ru]</i>	to complete
r 10’	DIŠ	BAD	<i>la-<sup>1</sup>x<sup>1</sup> [...]</i>	
r 11’	[DIŠ]	BAD	<i>mu-<sup>1</sup>tum<sup>1</sup></i>	death

<sup>55</sup> Emesal is a sociolect variant of Sumerian which was spoken by women in literary texts and used in rituals, see Garcia-Ventura 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Cavigneaux 1976, 109-10; MSL 13, 187; the same entries are found in Aa VIII/1, MSL 14, 494. The verb *te/teḡ<sub>3</sub>* is translated with *nesû* and *duppuru* also in CUSAS 12, 7.1 A 4: 32-3 (MS 4135), *te-ba* = *i-si<sub>2</sub>* (be distant!) // *te-ba* = *du-up-pi-ir* (move away!).

<sup>57</sup> Veldhuis 2018, 190.

<sup>58</sup> For abbreviated Sumerian signs in lexical list see Crisostomo 2019, 156-7.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. CAD D s.v. “duppuru”, lexical section, and CAD N/2 s.v. “nesû”, lexical section.

<sup>60</sup> Crisostomo 2019, 163.

<sup>61</sup> Nougayrol 1968, 236-7.

This equation is based on a series of analogical reasonings: the sign BAD with reading  $u\check{s}_2$  means ‘to die, death’ in Akkadian *mātu*, *mūtu*, and with reading *til* means ‘to (be) complete(d)’, Akkadian *gamāru*. By playing with the reading *til* which is homophonic to the reading  $til_3$  of the sign TI which means ‘to live’ the list gives an antonymic translation *balātu* ‘to live’.

The second example is taken from an Old Babylonian bilingual lexical list in which the sign SIG<sub>7</sub> meaning ‘good’, Akkadian *banûm*, *damqum*, is also translated with its opposite, *la banûm* ‘not good’.

ri 14	se <sub>2</sub> -e	SIG <sub>7</sub>	<i>ba-nu-<sup>r</sup>u<sub>2</sub><sup>r1</sup>-[um]</i>	good
ri 15		SIG <sub>7</sub>	<i>da-<sup>r</sup>am<sup>1</sup>-[qum]</i>	good
ri 16			<i>wa-<sup>r</sup>ar<sup>1</sup>-qu<sub>2</sub>-<sup>r</sup>um<sup>1</sup></i>	green
ri 17		SIG <sub>7</sub>	<i>ra-at<sup>-</sup>bu-<sup>r</sup>um<sup>1</sup></i>	fresh
ri 18		SIG <sub>7</sub>	<i>la ba-nu-um</i>	not good <sup>62</sup>

The foregoing examples showed that knowledge in Mesopotamia developed through the accumulation of elements rather than through their selection. As [the author] already argued, the cumulative knowledge typical of Mesopotamian scholarship finds similarities in Heraclitus’ philosophy.

## 5 Mesopotamia and Heraclitus

In Mesopotamia the highest form of knowledge was finding the hidden meaning of signs and words which was arrived at through analogical reasoning.<sup>63</sup> In Babylonian hermeneutics knowledge unfolds through the search of underlying and hidden connections. A passage of the Examenstext A<sup>64</sup> possibly specifically refers to this process as the way to reach hidden meanings:

*eme-gi<sup>7</sup> a-na i<sub>3</sub>-zu niĝ<sub>2</sub>-dul<sub>3</sub>-bi ur<sup>5</sup>-ra bur-ra i-zu-u  
ina ŝu-me-ri ma-la ta-ĥu-zu ka-tim-ta-ŝu<sub>2</sub> ki-a-am ŝe-ṭ[a-a t]i-de-e*

(The teacher to the student): “Do you know how ‘to spread out’ in the same way, the secrets of Sumerian you have learned?”

<sup>62</sup> Klein, Sefati 2020, 93.

<sup>63</sup> Bottéro 1977, 19-27; Cavigneaux 1987, 245, 247-52; Seminara 2001, 422-4, 430-51.

<sup>64</sup> The Examentext A is a Sumero-Akkadian dialogue about school from the first millennium, Sjöberg 1975.

It is likely that ‘to spread out’ refers to the required ability of the student to expand knowledge by finding hidden meanings.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, in Heraclitus the *logos* had hidden meanings as stated in the fragment D 50 (B 54)<sup>66</sup> which points to the unseen connection of opposites.<sup>67</sup>

Ἄρμονιή ἀφανῆς φανερῆς κρείσσων.

An unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent.

Understanding the *logos* was reserved to wise people; those unable to understand the *logos* were ἀξύνετοι (D 1 = B 1), ‘uncomprehending’ namely unable to put things together and find connections between things.<sup>68</sup> In Heraclitus word-plays and analogical reasoning or to use Charles Kahn’s terminology ‘linguistic density’<sup>69</sup> were heuristic tools to find the hidden meanings of words. Knowledge for Heraclitus derives from finding the hidden and underlying connections as clear from fragment D 47 (B 10).

Συνάψεις ὅλα καὶ οὐχ ὅλα, συμφερόμενον καὶ διαφερόμενον, συνᾶδον διᾶδον, καὶ ἐκ πάντων ἓν καὶ ἐξ ἑνὸς πάντα.

Conjoinings: wholes and not wholes, converging and diverging, harmonious dissonant; and out of all things one, and out of one all things.

Another similarity is that knowledge is produced by the conflation of elements rather than by singling out elements. Heraclitus was working with lists of opposites as we can see in the fragment D 48 (B 67) where god is defined:

ὁ θεὸς ἡμέρη εὐφρόνη, χειμῶν θέρος, πόλεμος εἰρήνη, κόρος λιμός.

God: day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger.

We may recall here Jonathan Barnes’ words:

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<sup>65</sup> Frahm 2011, 75-6.

<sup>66</sup> We refer to the fragments of the early Greek philosophers according to the numbering of the edition of Laks and Most (D); in parentheses we recall the numbering of Diels and Kranz’s edition (B). Translations of Heraclitus’ fragments follow Laks and Most 2016a.

<sup>67</sup> See also Kahn 1979, 202-4.

<sup>68</sup> Nussbaum 1972, 11; Gianvittorio 2010, 237-9.

<sup>69</sup> Kahn 1979, 89-95.

[Heraclitus] was working with a fairly loose, intuitive notion of what ‘opposites’ were; he would, I imagine, have presented a list, not a definition, if asked to explain himself: wet, dry; up, down; straight, crooked; sweet, sour; hot, cold; male, female; and so on. The list would no doubt be long, and its items would, to our eyes, be logically diverse: some pairs seem logical contraries; some express physically incompatible properties; some are elliptically expressed relations between which no true incompatibility exists in the form of a list.<sup>70</sup>

The similarity of the concept of knowledge in Mesopotamian scholarship and Heraclitus’ philosophy is underpinned by a further point of contact, which is given by similar ideas of harmony. In Heraclitus harmony ensues from the tension of opposites as stated in one of his most famous fragments (D 49 = B 51):

οὐ ξυνιαῖσιν ὄκως διαφερόμενον ἐωυτῷ ὁμολογέει·  
παλίντροπος ἀρμονίη ὄκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης.

They do not comprehend how, diverging, it accords with itself: a backward-turning fitting together (ἀρμονίη) as of a bow and a lyre.

The ἀρμονίη is given by the tension between the string stretched in the direction opposite to the armed-body of a bow or lyre. The connection or ἀρμονίη reconciles the conflict in the unity of the single parts where the opposites are identified in one single whole.<sup>71</sup> The above quoted fragment D 47 expresses this very concept in a more abstract way.

The idea of harmony is self-evident in Babylonian scholarship: for instance the long lists of Akkadian translations we have discussed above are reconciled in one single Sumerian sign. As recognized by many scholars the Babylonian world view was built upon binary oppositions<sup>72</sup> of complementary parts. A harmonic relation of counterparts is expressed by the principle of correspondence between Sumerian and Akkadian: although they were two separate languages, for Babylonians what was expressed in one language corresponded in the other.<sup>73</sup> This principle clearly stands out in the expression used for the two languages: *lišān mithurti*, literally ‘languages of the meeting each other’. In Sumerian this expression corresponds to *eme ḥa-mun* which appears in Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta (l. 142) referring to Sumerian and Akkadian.<sup>74</sup>


<sup>70</sup> Barnes 1979, 80.

<sup>71</sup> Kahn 1979, 195-200, in particular, “[t]he concept of *harmonīē* as a unity composed of conflicting parts is thus the model for an understanding of the world ordering as a unified whole” (200); see also Kahn 1979, 150-1.

<sup>72</sup> Van de Mierop 2015, 124; Rochberg 2019, 263-6.

<sup>73</sup> For the principle of correspondence see Seminara 2001, 460-6.

<sup>74</sup> Vanstiphout 2003, 64-5.

Babylonian scholarship was pervaded by the attempt to find correspondences in the whole world: in lexical lists between Sumerian and Akkadian words; in divine lists between Sumerian and Akkadian gods; in divination between macrocosm and microcosm; in the debate poems between entities such as Summer and Winter or Sheep and Grain;<sup>75</sup> in cosmology with the unity and opposition of the pair Heaven and Earth and even in historiography between Assyrian and Babylonian kings.<sup>76</sup> Correspondences can also be found between deities and phenomena, between parts of the liver and deities or months and zodiac signs.<sup>77</sup> The words *mithurtu* and *ḥa-mun* indicate symmetry/counterpart and mean something like 'harmony (of opposites)'. As argued by Rochberg<sup>78</sup> the concept of the harmony of opposites is also expressed graphically because *ḥa-mun* has a rare writing NAGA.NAGA where the second NAGA is written upside down .<sup>79</sup>

We can conclude that although the object of knowledge was different in Mesopotamia and Heraclitus, the cuneiform system and the *logos* respectively, the epistemological approach was similar.<sup>80</sup> Both Mesopotamia and archaic Greece seem to lack a purely epistemological and ontological concept of truth implying the principle of non-contradiction. In Mesopotamian scholarship and Heraclitus' philosophy knowledge does not unfold through selection and rejection of propositions but through the harmonic unity of elements that can be opposite and yet do not exclude each other.

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<sup>75</sup> Note that debate poems may end with a reconciliation between the contenders, Vanstiphout 1990, 284-6.

<sup>76</sup> See Seminara 2001, 463.

<sup>77</sup> See Rochberg 2019, 266.

<sup>78</sup> Rochberg 2019, 266.

<sup>79</sup> CUSAS 12, 1.1.2: 231, *ḥa-mun* NAGA.NAGA-inv. 'mi'-it-*ḥa-ar-tum*. Note that the sign NAGA is used to write the name of Nisaba the goddess of writing; thus one may speculate that harmony is also expressed theologically.

<sup>80</sup> Viano 2021, 240.

## 6 The Development of Ἀλήθεια Towards an Epistemological and Ontological Concept of Truth

So far, we have detected contact points between the Mesopotamian idea of *kittu* and the archaic Greek conception of ἀλήθεια as well as the absence of a clear principle of noncontradiction in both contexts. Let us now see how the idea of ἀλήθεια began to change at the end of the archaic age.

In his seminal essay Detienne identified two main development lines for this period: a philosophical one and a rhetorical one. The philosophical line moved towards a rationalization of ἀλήθεια in terms of what uncontradictorily corresponds with reality and also the criterion itself to establish this correspondence. The rhetorical line, on the contrary, focused on the communicative aspects of ἀλήθεια and persuasion techniques, implying relativism and the idea that truth is what is perceived as such without necessarily adhering to reality or fact.

The archaic author who most of all presents us with an emerging distinction of these two intellectual paths is Parmenides, who also builds the foundation of the philosophical line. Parmenides is a philosopher, but expresses his thought in verse and presents himself as an inspired ‘master of truth’ in his poem,<sup>81</sup> where he is instructed by a goddess about the way of truth (ἀλήθεια):<sup>82</sup>

χρεὼ δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι  
 ἡμὲν Ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος ἀτρεμῆς ἦτορ  
 ἡδὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθῆς.  
 ἀλλ’ ἔμπης καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσῃαι, ὡς τὰ δοκοῦντα  
 χρῆν δοκίμως εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περῶντα.

It is necessary that you learn everything,  
 Both the unshakeable heart of well-convincing truth  
 And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true belief.  
 But nonetheless you will learn this too: how opinions  
 Would have to be acceptable, forever penetrating all things (?)

This truth is for the first time both an ontological and epistemological one and is deeply rooted in the relation between the thinking subject and reality:<sup>83</sup>

εἰ δ’ ἄγ’ ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας,  
 αἴπερ ὁδοὶ μούναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι·

<sup>81</sup> See Pòrtulas 2019.

<sup>82</sup> D 4, 28-32 = B 1, 28-32. Text and translation of Parmenides’ fragments are those provided by Laks-Most 2016b.

<sup>83</sup> D 6 = B 2-3.

ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι,  
 πειθοῦς ἔστι κέλευθος (ἀληθείη γὰρ ὀπηδεῖ),  
 ἡ δ' ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς χρεῶν ἔστι μὴ εἶναι,  
 τὴν δὴ τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἀταρπόν·  
 οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδον (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν)  
 οὔτε φράσαις. τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι.

5

Well then, as for me, I shall say – and as for you, have a care for this dis-  
 course when you have heard it –

What are the only roads of investigation for thought [*noēsai*]:

The one, that ‘is’, and that it is not possible that ‘is not’,

Is the path of conviction, for it accompanies truth;

The other, that ‘is not’, and that it is necessary that ‘is not’ –

I show you that it is a path that cannot be inquired into at all.

For you could not know that which is not (for this is impracticable)

Nor could you show it. For it is the same, to think [*noein*] and also to be.

The ontological and epistemological nature of Parmenidean truth im-  
 plies the idea of truth as a complete, understandable, and communi-  
 cable correspondence with reality, i.e. with ‘being’.<sup>84</sup>

ἡ δὲ κρίσις περὶ τούτων ἐν τῷ δ' ἔστιν·  
 ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν· κέκριται δ' οὖν, ὥσπερ ἀνάγκη,  
 τὴν μὲν ἔαν ἀνόητον ἀνώνυμον (οὐ γὰρ ἀληθὴς  
 ἔστιν ὁδός), τὴν δ' ὥστε πέλειν καὶ ἐτήτυμον εἶναι.<sup>85</sup>

The decision [*krisis*] on these matters depends upon this:

‘Is’ or ‘is not’? Well, it has been decided, as is necessary,

To abandon the one [*scil. road*] as unthinkable, unnameable (for it is not

The true road), and [*scil. deciding*] thereby that the other, by consequence,  
 exists and is real.

We can see how ἀληθής and ἐτήτυμον (see section 3) are here con-  
 flated together. The only ἀληθής road is the one implying genuine ex-  
 istence (τὴν δ' ὥστε πέλειν καὶ ἐτήτυμον εἶναι). Ἀλήθεια is something  
 that exists and that exists genuinely. In other words it is ‘being that  
 completely corresponds with reality’ or better ‘being that coincides  
 with reality’<sup>86</sup> or even better and most simply ‘being’.

<sup>84</sup> D 8, 20-3 = B 8, 15-18.

<sup>85</sup> Author’s emphasis.

<sup>86</sup> McKirahan 2009 always translates ἀλήθεια with ‘reality’: “P. uses the word ἀλήθεια [‘reality’] thrice in the extant fragments [...]; in each case the context shows that it denotes not truth as an attribute of thought or language but objective reality, as often in Plato” (282). We must recall, however, that Parmenides holds thought and being to be the same thing; see above fr. D 6, 8 (B 3) τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι.



Truth is ‘being’ an – which is relevant for the purposes of our paper – does not allow contradiction:<sup>87</sup>

χρή τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ’ ἔδον ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι·  
μηδὲν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν· τὰ γ’ ἐγὼ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα.  
πρώτης γάρ σ’ ἀφ’ ὁδοῦ ταύτης διζήσιος <εἴργω>,  
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτ’ ἀπὸ τῆς, ἣν δὴ βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδὲν  
πλάττονται, δίκρανοι· ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν  
στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλαγκτὸν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται  
κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φύλα,  
οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται  
κοῦ ταῦτόν, πάντων δὲ παλίντροπὸς ἔστι κέλευθος.

5

It is necessary to say and to think that this is being; for it is possible that it is, While nothing is not: that is exactly what I bid you to meditate. For such is the first road of investigation from which <I keep> you <away>, But then also from this one, which mortals who know nothing Invent (*plattontai*), two-headed [*scil.* creatures]! For the helplessness in their Breast directs their wandering (*plankton*) thought; and they are borne along, Deaf and likewise blind, stupefied, tribes undecided [or: without judgment], Who suppose that ‘this is and is not’ [or: that to be and not to be] is the same And not the same, and that of all things [or: for all] the path is backward-turning.

The Parmenidean being dissolves all oppositions and contradictions in itself. There are no opposites as such, inasmuch only ‘what is’ is while ‘what is not’ is not.<sup>88</sup> The principle of noncontradiction emerges for the first time in the extant fragments of Parmenides and is at the core of his ontology.<sup>89</sup>

As we recalled above, Detienne identified another development line of the meaning of ἀλήθεια, namely the rhetorical-sophistic one. It is not surprising that the most extreme representative of this development line overtly challenges Parmenides. Gorgias of Leontini tried to disprove Parmenides in his *On Nature or On Non Existence*, where he demonstrates that:

1. Nothing exists.
2. Even if something exists, it is not knowable.
3. Even if it is knowable, knowledge about it is incommunicable.
4. Even if it is communicable, it cannot be understood.

<sup>87</sup> D 7 = B 6.

<sup>88</sup> Parmenides fr. D 7 (B 6) has often been read as a critique of Heraclitus. I do not think it is necessary to read any reference to Heraclitus in this fragment, but it is nonetheless clear that Heraclitus’ thought is incompatible with that of Parmenides as expressed here.

<sup>89</sup> For a brief history of the principle of noncontradiction in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle, see Thom 1999.

This appears to be more than a mere rhetorical exercise. This work has often – and we think rightly – been read as the first philosophical manifesto of nihilism. In this view, there is no place for truth meant as the uncontradictory correspondence with reality, let alone for Parmenidean ‘being’. The road is open to Sophistic, which has now its philosophical legitimization: there are no true or false discourses, only more or less persuasive ones.<sup>90</sup> This implies a substantial lack of the principle of noncontradiction, which provides a contact point with Heraclitus. It is not surprising therefore that Parmenides is the object of such a philosophical challenge on Gorgia’s part.

In his intellectual struggle against the Sophists, Plato will definitely place himself on the ‘philosophical’ development line – and it may be clear at this point that by ‘philosophical’ we now mean ‘uncontradictory’ or ‘not allowing contradiction’. In Plato’s thought ἀλήθεια will be conceived both at a logical and ontological level, as we will see. Plato knew his rivals well and was well aware of the bond between truth and performance and that at his time ἀλήθεια was still entangled with the ideas of authority and persuasion as well as with the related social functions. In the second book of his *Republic* (376b) he offers a clear example of this. In this book the debate is about education. In discussing what sort of tales and myths children should be taught, a distinction is proposed between true and false ones (377a). Only true ones are allowed in the Platonic city. Needless to say, in Plato’s view truth and good are inseparable and true tales and myths are, for instance, those which represent divinity in a noble light, whereas false ones depict the gods in an unflattering way (we must not forget that Plato’s discourse here is about education). In this discussion truth is still bound to its occasion and to authority (i.e. that of teachers and the State), but the poles are now inverted: a thing is taught because it is true; a thing is not true only because it is expressed authoritatively. In other words, there is one and only truth and that is what should be taught authoritatively. On this basis, there is almost no place for creativity and that is why Plato ends with banishing almost all kinds of poetry from his ideal city.<sup>91</sup> For Plato there is only one truth. But what is this truth? We find a definition in the *Sophist*, a dialogue whose characters are Theaetetus and, most notably, the “stranger from Elea”. At a certain point, the stranger presents Theaetetus with two different statements – a) Theaetetus sits; b) Theaetetus flies – and then discusses them with him (263b)

<sup>90</sup> Other sophists explicitly engaged with the conception of truth. We may recall Protagora’s *Truth* and Antiphon’s treatise of the same name. Truth is conceived in relativistic terms by the first, as plural and ambivalent by the latter (see Gagarin 1991).

<sup>91</sup> Aristotle, though conceiving truth in terms similar to Plato’s, will separate poetry and philosophy more neatly, applying the criterion of truth only to the latter. See Riu 2004, 76-82.

{ΞΕ.} Τούτων δὴ ποῖόν τινα ἐκάτερον φατέον εἶναι;  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Τὸν μὲν ψευδῆ που, τὸν δὲ ἀληθῆ.  
 {ΞΕ.} Λέγει δὲ αὐτῶν ὁ μὲν ἀληθῆς τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν περὶ σοῦ.  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Τί μὴν;  
 {ΞΕ.} Ὁ δὲ δὴ ψευδῆς ἕτερα τῶν ὄντων.  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Ναί.  
 {ΞΕ.} Τὰ μὴ ὄντ' ἄρα ὡς ὄντα λέγει.  
 {ΘΕΑΙ.} Σχεδόν.

STR. Now what quality shall be ascribed to each of these sentences?

THEAET. One is false, I suppose, the other true.

STR. The true one states facts as they are about you.

THEAET. Certainly.

STR. And the false one states things that are other than the facts.

THEAET. Yes.

STR. In other words, it speaks of things that are not as if they were.

THEAET. Yes, that is pretty much what it does.<sup>92</sup>

Truth is here conceived as some kind of relation between thought or saying and reality.<sup>93</sup> Such an unambiguous relation seems to exclude contradiction. It is not surprising, therefore, that Plato formulates elsewhere – again in the *Republic* – his own definition of the principle of noncontradiction much more explicitly than Parmenides:<sup>94</sup>

Δῆλον ὅτι ταῦτὸν τἀναντία ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν κατὰ ταῦτόν γε καὶ πρὸς ταῦτόν οὐκ ἐθέλησει ἄμα.

It is clear that the same faculty cannot do opposite things nor experience them in the same respect and in relation to the same part all at the same time.<sup>95</sup>

As we can see, Plato conceives truth both at an ontological and at a logical level, as it was in Parmenides.<sup>96</sup> There is an intellectual route starting from Parmenides on which we find Plato and others after him: on this line ἀλήθεια gradually gains a strictly epistemological and ontological meaning. In this regard, we cannot omit Aristotle, whose formulations of the principle of noncontradiction are equally canonical.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Transl. H.N. Fowler.

<sup>93</sup> The nature of this relation is a much debated issue. The traditional view is that Plato conceives this relation as correspondence; see Cornford 1935, 309-11. This view has its critics; see Hestir 2003 with further bibliography. For a brief history of the 'correspondence theory of truth' see Long 2011, 21-48; Marian 2022. On truth and falsehood in Plato's *Sophist*, see Crivelli 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Pl. *Resp.* 4.436b.

<sup>95</sup> Transl. C. Hemlin-Jones, W. Preddy.

<sup>96</sup> On this twofold nature of Platonic truth, see Centrone 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Arist. *Metaph.* 4.1005b.19-20.

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ ἅμα ὑπάρχειν τε καὶ μὴ ὑπάρχειν ἀδύνατον τῷ αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ αὐτό (καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα προσδιορισαίμεθ' ἄν, ἔστω προσδιορισμένα πρὸς τὰς λογικὰς δυσχερείας).

“It is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation”; and we must add any further qualifications that may be necessary to meet logical objections.<sup>98</sup>

Closing the loop, let us now see how Aristotle offers a clear definition of true and false in terms matching those which opened this paper:<sup>99</sup>

τὸ μὲν γὰρ λέγειν τὸ ὄν μὴ εἶναι ἢ τὸ μὴ ὄν εἶναι ψεῦδος, τὸ δὲ τὸ ὄν εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν μὴ εἶναι ἀληθές.

To say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false,  
whereas to say that what is is, and that what is not is not, is true.

We may hear formal echoes of Parmenides here, which after all is not surprising. Truth has completely become an *adaequatio rei et intellectus* which does not allow contradiction.

## 7 Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that in Mesopotamian scholarship there is no evidence for a clear concept of truth as conformity to ‘what is’ as opposed to falsehood as a lack of such a conformity. Similarly, we have seen that in archaic Greece ἀλήθεια does not uniquely refer to a conformity to ‘what is’. The absence of the principle of noncontradiction in Mesopotamia and archaic Greece leads to striking similarities in the way knowledge is produced in Mesopotamian scholarship and in Heraclitus’ philosophy. In both cases knowledge derives from the harmonic conflation or unity of opposite elements. While Mesopotamian scholarship never developed the principle of noncontradiction or the ontological concept of truth, with Parmenides Greek philosophy did so. Parmenides’ separation between truth and falsehood, being and not-being, will be developed by Plato and Aristotle in strictly epistemological and ontological terms.

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<sup>98</sup> Translations from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* are by H. Tredennick.

<sup>99</sup> Arist. *Metaph.* 4.1011b.26-7.

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## **Section 2**

### Sages and Practitioners



# Wise Man and Poet in Ancient Greece: Features and Overlaps

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**Abstract** In ancient Greece, the notion of wisdom was expressed by the word σοφία, which implied different nuances of meaning and was used to identify the activities of very different categories of people: among them, even the poet was often recognised (or at least defined) as σοφός, as a ‘wise’ man, or a ‘sage’. This paper aims to analyse the reasons for this identification, especially from the perspective of the audience: what were the features of a poet – who introduced himself as a poet – that could lead his audience to assume that he was a σοφός? The answer probably has more to do with the forms of expression of a traditional ancient Greek poet than with the content of his poetry.

**Keywords** Ancient Greece. Sophia. Poetry. Tradition. Performance. Audience.

**Summary** 1 Open Questions on Sages and Poets. – 2 The Sage: Some Features. – 3 The Poet as a ‘Sophós’. – 4 Final Remarks.

## 1 Open Questions on Sages and Poets

The aim of this research is to focus on the perception of two very common figures of the ancient Greek culture – we may say two social players –, such as the wise man (the sage) and the poet. More specifically, we would like to consider their connotations, the features of these two figures that made them recognisable apart from the content they communicated, or conveyed. In other words, we are asking ourselves: what were the formal/standard elements that predisposed an audience to recognise a person as a wise man or a poet? What qualities – or skills – did a person need to have in order to be considered as such, in both cases? What kind of information (messages)

did this person have to communicate, regardless of the audience's possibility (or ability) to verify the origin and validity of the data he communicated? And finally: with due approximation, could the qualification 'sage' or 'poet' function as a professional label, i.e. could a person be recognised as a sage by profession or a poet by profession, or were these qualifications ancillary to other social identifications?

In order to provide some answers to the previous questions, we will focus on the Archaic and Classical periods, but we will need to look at later sources that preserve information about people of the period under investigation. In the following pages we will also consider literary evidence quite varied in type and chronology, concerning examples of teachings or sayings attributed to sages and poets, but we will always try to deduce details of the perception of these figures from these sources as well. And we will also have to make inevitable generalizations from a variety of cases, which may include exceptions and 'deviations' from the average.<sup>1</sup>

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**1** The average we are trying to enucleate. We are talking about 'the' wise man and 'the' poet in order to discuss some very general elements connotating these two figures, and so we consciously and temporarily gloss over the established multiplicity of 'realizations' (social and historical manifestations) of both figures: "a general category of 'the poet' does little justice to the broad spectrum of poetic activities, types of poetry and types of poet. [...] Many of even the most regarded in the canon are highly idiosyncratic figures, highly critical or (so far as we can tell) even rather innovative figures" (Thomas 1995, 119).

## 2 The Sage: Some Features

The first of the two figures that we want to take into account is that of the wise man, also because it is more complex to specify his ‘expressions’, that is to say the habits, the customs, the behaviours that were usually adopted to identify or qualify someone as a wise man.<sup>2</sup> Wisdom, however, had a quite distinct lexical definition: in ancient Greece the main word used to qualify someone as ‘wise’ was σοφός (adjective), and so the word to express the ‘wisdom’ was σοφία (noun).<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1

There are only weak hypotheses about the etymology of this word, so that Chantraine can close the entry of σοφός with a concise “pas d’étymologie”.<sup>4</sup> But the use of the word σοφός in epic and lyric poetry helps us to define the idea implied in this semantic sphere, probably at its origins: σοφός is ‘(someone) who knows (something)’, especially ‘(someone) who is aware of an art’ or ‘of a profession’; he is ‘expert’, ‘skilled’ in some crafts, sometimes also ‘learned’. And the range of crafts that can be involved in this concept of σοφία is very wide, including for example sailing, governing, legislating, but also making a sacrifice in a proper way: we have exhaustive examples of this meaning, spread from Homer to Plato.<sup>5</sup>

#### Il. 15.408-15

οὐδέ ποτε Τρῶες Δαναῶν ἐδύναντο φάλαγγας  
 ῥηξάμενοι κλισίῃσι μιγήμεναι ἠδὲ νέεσσιν.  
 ἀλλ’ ὥς τε στάθμη δόρυ νήϊον ἐξιθύνει 410  
 τέκτονος ἐν παλάμῃσι δαήμονος, ὅς ῥά τε πάσης  
 εὐεῖδιθ’ σοφίης ὑποθημοσύνησιν Ἀθήνης,

**2** In comparison with this, the case of the poet will be easier to analyse, because a poet – among other skills we will discuss – was firstly defined by the ‘tool’ he used, that is poetry, non-colloquial (marked) language, often with music: see § 3.1.

**3** On the history of the word meaning, in general, see Snell 1924, 1-20; Malingrey 1961, 32-8 (and 46-9); Gladigow 1965, with Bollack 1968. The most ancient occurrences of the derivative σοφιστής seem to converge on the meaning of ‘poet’, rather than ‘wise’: see § 3.2. The family of σώφρων/σωφρόσυνη, instead, is more related to the sphere of behavior, meaning ‘presence of mind’ (even ‘mental health’), ‘foresight’, even ‘self-control’: cf. e.g. Il. 21.462-3 (with Erbse 1986, 185 ff.); Hipponax, fr. 65 Degani (= 63 West<sup>2</sup>), with the note ad loc. in Degani 2007, 113 (for the definition of Myson as σωφρονέστατος).

**4** Chantraine 1980, tome IV-1 (1977), 1031. A new hypothesis (about the Semitic origin of the word-root) was recently proposed in Giordano 2013.

**5** See also Gladigow 1965, 9-15.

ὧς μὲν τῶν ἐπὶ ἴσα μάχῃ τέτατο πτόλεμός τε·  
ἄλλοι δ' ἄμφ' ἄλλησι μάχην ἐμάχοντο νέεσσιν,  
Ἐκτωρ δ' ἄντ' Αἴαντος εἴεσατο κυδαλίμοιο.

415

... nor ever could the Trojans break the battalions of the Danaans and make way into the midst of the huts and the ships. (410) But as the carpenter's line maketh straight a ship's timber in the hands of a cunning workman, that is well skilled in all manner of craft by the promptings of Athene, so evenly was strained their war and battle. So fought they on, divers of them about divers ships, (415) but Hector made straight for glorious Aias. (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1924 [P])<sup>6</sup>

Cf. Bacchyl. *Dith.* fr. 6 Irigoien (= \*\*26 Maehler), 5-6: Εὐπαλά[μοι] υἱε[ῖ] | τεκτόν[ω]ν σοφῶ[τάτω], “to Eupalamus’ son Daedalus, most skilled of carpenters” (transl. D.A. Campbell, 1992).

Hes. *Op.* 646-9<sup>7</sup>

Εὐτ' ἂν ἐπ' ἐμπορίην τρέψας ἀεσίφρονα θυμὸν  
βούληαι [δὲ] χρέα τε προφυγεῖν καὶ λιμὸν ἀτερπέα,  
δείξω δὴ τοι μέτρα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης,  
οὔτε τι ναυτιλίας σεσοφισμένους οὔτε τι νηῶν.<sup>8</sup>

If ever you turn your misguided heart to trading and wish to escape from debt and joyless hunger, I will show you the measures of the loud-roaring sea, though I have no skill in sea-faring nor in ships. (Transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, 1914 [P])

Archil. fr. 211 West<sup>2</sup> / Hom. fr. 22 Allen (*versus heroici*), quoted by Ammonius in Porph. *Isagog. prooem.* 4 (ed. A. Busse, 9, *Comm. in Arist. Gr.* 4.3)

Ὁ μέντοι Πυθαγόρας φησὶ “φιλοσοφία ἐστὶ φιλία σοφίας” πρῶτος τῶν παρὰ τοῖς παλαιότεροις ἐπιστὰς ἀμαρτήματι. ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι σοφὸν ὠνόμαζον τὸν ἠντιναοῦν μετιόντα τέχνην, ὧν εἷς ἦν καὶ Ἀρχίλοχος λέγων  
τρίασαν ἐσθλὴν καὶ κυβερνήτης σοφός, [Archil. fr. 211 West<sup>2</sup>]  
καὶ ὁ ποιητῆς  
ἐπεὶ σοφὸς ἦραρε τέκτων [Hom. fr. 22 Allen]  
καὶ...

<sup>6</sup> When the indication of the translator is closed by “[P]”, this means that the translation comes from the collections of *Perseus Digital Library*, Tufts University.

<sup>7</sup> See also § 3.5 (and fn. 41).

<sup>8</sup> See Ercolani 2010, 375 (note *ad loc.*).

Pythagoras, however, says that “philosophy is the love of wisdom”, and he was the first to notice the error of the ancients. For since they called ‘wise’ whoever practised any kind of art – one of these was Archilochus, who said: “Noble the three-pronged spear, and a wise pilot”, and the poet: “Since wise carpenter fitted it”, and ... (Transl. M. Chase, 2020)

Cf. Bacchyl. *Ep.* 12.1 ss. Maehler (= Irigoin): ὡσεὶ κυβερνήτας σοφός, ὑμνοάνασσι εὐθύνη Κλειοῖ | νῦν φρένας ἀμετέρας, | εἰ δὴ ποτε καὶ πάρος, “Like a skilled helmsman, Clio, queen of song, steer my thoughts straight now, if ever before” (transl. D.A. Campbell, 1992);<sup>9</sup> Aesch. *Supp.* 769-70: φιλεῖ | ὦδ' ἵνα τίκτειν νῦξ κυβερνήτη σοφῶι, “In a cautious pilot night is likely to beget anxiety” (transl. H. Weir Smyth, 1926 [P]).

#### Alcm. fr. 2 (i) Page (PMG 2)

Κάστωρ τε πώλων ὠκέων δματῆρες ἵππόται σοφοί  
καὶ Πωλυδεύκης κυδρός

Castor – tamers of swift steeds, skilled horsemen – and glorious Polydeuces. (Transl. D.A. Campbell, 1988)

Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 5.114-15: ἔν τε Μοῖσαισι ποτανὸς ἀπὸ ματρὸς φίλας, | πέφανταί θ' ἄρματιλάτας σοφός, “Among the Muses, he has had wings since he was a child in his dear mother’s lap, and he has proved himself a skilful charioteer” (transl. D. Arnsion Svarlien, 1990 [P]).

#### Pl. *Phdr.* 266c

Σω. [...] τὰ δὲ νῦν παρὰ σοῦ τε καὶ Λυσίου μαθόντας εἰπέ τί χρὴ καλεῖν· ἢ τοῦτο ἐκεῖνό ἐστιν ἢ λόγων τέχνη, ἢ Θρασύμαχος τε καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι χρώμενοι σοφοὶ μὲν αὐτοὶ λέγειν γεγόνασιν, ἄλλους τε ποιοῦσιν, οἱ ἂν δωροφορεῖν αὐτοῖς ὡς βασιλεῦσιν ἐθέλωσιν;

Socrates. [...] “But tell me now what name to give to those who are taught by you and Lysias, or is this that art of speech by means of which Thrasymachus and the rest have become able speakers themselves, and make others so, if they are willing to pay them royal tribute?”. (Transl. H.N. Fowler, 1925 [P])

<sup>9</sup> Further occurrences are in Bacchyl. *Ep.* 10.39-42 Maehler (= Irigoin), and *Ep.* 13.162-5 M. (= I), with a more generic meaning.

## 2.2

Even assuming that these were the roots of the σοφός/σοφία meaning, we can also observe that it soon shifted to the meaning of ‘clever’, and then ‘wise’ in a general sense, and often without implying a process of education, or apprenticeship: there are examples of this employ of the terms already in late-archaic authors.<sup>10</sup>

(?) Anac. fr. 72.1-2 Page (PMG 417)

πῶλε Θρηκίη, τί δή με  
λοξὸν ὄμμασι βλέπουσα  
νηλέως φεύγεις, δοκείς δέ  
μ’ οὐδὲν εἰδέναι σοφόν;

Thracian filly, why do you look at me from the corner of your eye and flee stubbornly from me, supposing that I have no skill? (Transl. D.A. Campbell, 1988)

Pind. *Oi.* 2.82-8

πολλά μοι ὑπ’ ἀγκῶ-  
νος ὠκέα βέλη 83  
ἔνδον ἐντὶ φαρέτρας  
φωνάεντα συνετοῖσιν· ἔς  
δὲ τὸ πᾶν ἔρμανέων 85  
χατίζει. σοφὸς ὁ πολ-  
λὰ εἰδῶς φυᾶ·  
μαθόντες δὲ λάβροι  
παγγλωσσίᾳ κόρακες  
ὧς ἄκραντα γαρυέτων  
Διὸς πρὸς ὄρνηχα θεῖον.<sup>11</sup> 88

I have many swift arrows in the quiver under my arm, (85) arrows that speak to the initiated. But the masses need interpreters. The

**10** See also Colli 1977, 9 (“Si tenta qui [...] di documentare [...] quella che di solito viene chiamata - con riduttiva designazione cronologica - “la filosofia presocratica”, ma che mi sembra più pertinente denominare “la sapienza greca”. Coloro infatti le cui parole vengono qui raccolte erano chiamati “sapianti” dai loro contemporanei, e ancora Platone li indica con tale nome. In quell’epoca “sapienza” significava anche abilità tecnica, oppure saggezza della vita, prudenza politica: ma sapiente - che non fosse tale in qualcosa e in qualcosa no, ma sapiente in assoluto - era uno che possedeva l’ecceellenza del conoscere”, from the edition criteria); Ercolani 2013, 251-3; also Griffith 1990, 188-9. On the difficult interpretation of the significance of σοφία in Xenophanes’ fr. 2 West<sup>2</sup>, see below § 3.1, note 28.

**11** See Lanata [1963] 2020, 82 ff. (fn. ad loc.), and also below § 3.7, note 51.



man who knows a great deal by nature is truly skilful, while those who have only learned chatter with raucous and indiscriminate tongues in vain like crows against the divine bird of Zeus. (Transl. D. Arnson Svarlien, 1990 [P])

Aesch. *Prom.* 1035-8

Χο. ἡμῖν μὲν Ἑρμῆς οὐκ ἄκαιρα φαίνεται  
λέγειν, ἄνωγε γάρ σε τὴν αὐθαδίαν  
μεθέντ' ἐρευνᾶν τὴν σοφὴν εὐβουλίαν.  
πιθοῦ, σοφῶι γὰρ αἰσχρὸν ἐξαμαρτάνειν. 1035

Chorus. "To us, at least, Hermes seems not to speak untimely; for he bids you to lay aside your stubbornness and seek the good counsel of wisdom. Be advised! It is shameful for the wise to persist in error". (Transl. H. Weir Smyth, 1926 [P])

Cf. Aesch. fr. 390 Radt *inc. fab.* (= Stob. *Flor.* 3.194.12 Hense): ὁ χρήσιμ' εἰδῶς, οὐχ ὁ πολλ' εἰδῶς σοφός, "He is wise who knows the things that are useful, and not he who knows many things".

Hdt. 2.49.1-2

ἤδη ὧν δοκέει μοι Μελάμπους ὁ Ἄμυθέωνος τῆς θυσίης ταύτης οὐκ εἶναι ἀδαῖς ἀλλ' ἔμπειρος. [...]. (2) ἐγὼ μὲν νῦν φημι Μελάμποδα γενόμενον ἄνδρα σοφὸν μαντικὴν τε ἑωυτῷ συστήσαι καὶ πυθόμενον ἀπ' Αἰγύπτου ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἐσηγήσασθαι Ἑλλησι καὶ τὰ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον, ὀλίγα αὐτῶν παραλλάξαντα·

Now then, it seems to me that Melampus son of Amytheon was not ignorant of but was familiar with this sacrifice. [...]. (2) I say, then, that Melampus acquired the prophetic art, being a discerning man, and that, besides many other things which he learned from Egypt, he also taught the Greeks things concerning Dionysus, altering few of them. (Transl. A.D. Godley, 1920 [P])

These preliminary remarks on the original meaning of σοφός provide us with an important framework for setting out (and understanding) some of the characteristics of the ancient Greek wise men that emerge from our literary evidence, and therefore to sketch a sort of phenomenology of them.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For a broader view of the performances of the sages (and a definition of 'performance'), see Martin 1993, 115 ff.: the idea of an agonistic inspiration of the sages' actions (120) can be seen as complementary to the sketch of the sages' deeds we are

## 2.3

For this purpose, probably the best research field is offered by the lives of the so-called ‘seven sages’: that group of men (more than seven, depending on the different traditions)<sup>13</sup> lived approximately during the archaic or late-archaic epoch, who have been recognised as ‘wise’ since the fifth century BCE at least (when we find the first evidence of their lives and deeds).<sup>14</sup> Most of the documentation about these men, however, comes from much later sources – such as the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* of Diogenes Laertius (second-third century CE) – and therefore suffers from an ‘a posteriori’ conception of wisdom: the σοφία is interpreted after the development of the φιλοσοφία, after Plato and Aristotle; and wisdom is understood as the pursuit of a process of education and spiritual evolution.<sup>15</sup> But, as a

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making in these pages. More generally, see also the concise but updated framework of Martin 2017. A further complementary perspective on the issue is offered by Calame 2019: see esp. 56-60, on the ‘statut-auteur’ of σοφός.

**13** Cf. Martin 1993, 109.

**14** Cf. e.g. Hdt. 1.59, and 7.235.2 (on Chilon), or 1.29 ff. (on Solon); and, in general, see Snell [1971] 2005 for a rich collection of references; on Epimenides and Pherecydes, see also Colli 1978, vol. 2. For the number of the ‘sages’, cf. Pl. *Prt.* 343a (among people who φιλοσοφεῖν, he mentions Thales of Miletus, Pittacus of Mytilenes, Bias of Prienes, Solon of Athens, Cleobulus of Lindus, Mison of Chenes, and Chilon of Sparta); Plut. *De E apud Delphos* 385de, and *Conv. sept. sap.* 1 ff. (146b ff.); Diog. Laert. 1.13 (in the proemium, he mentions – as called ‘σοφοί’ in the antiquity – Thales, Solon, Periander of Corinth [instead of Mison in the first list of Plato], Cleobulus, Chilon, Bias, Pittacus, then adds Anacharsis the Scythe, Mison, Pherecydes of Syros, Epimenides of Crete, and – explaining the isolation of this tradition – even Pisistratus of Athens. It is more difficult to judge the mention of Bias in Hipponax, fr. 12 Degani (= 123 West<sup>2</sup>), because of the lack of the context (see also Degani 2007, 84, comm. ad fr. 12). On the contrary, the mentions of Pittacus made by Alcaeus in several fragments only attest the political actions of Pittacus – badly judged by the poet –, but not his reputation as a sage: see e.g. Andrisano 1994, 70-1. In any case, we do not know when the idea of a group of sages was born, and/or who its creator was: see Fehling 1985, 9-19 (for the platonic genetic theory of the group); Martin 1993, 112-13 (and 125 fn. 16); Busine 2002, 9 ff. (esp. 28-35: see also note 16 below); Engels 2010; Leão 2010. If we follow the account of Diog. Laert. 1.22 (quoting Demetrius of Phalerus), Thales was the first to be called ‘σοφός’, in the years immediately following the archonship of Solon (another ‘wise man’): a new interpretation of this tradition has recently been provided by Leão 2022. See also the next note.

**15** Cf. e.g. the proemium of Diogenes again, immediately before and after the passage already quoted in the previous note: φιλοσοφίαν δὲ πρῶτος ὠνόμασε Πυθαγόρας καὶ ἑαυτὸν φιλόσοφον, ἐν Σικυῶνι διαλεγόμενος Λέοντι τῷ Σικυωνίων τυράννῳ – ἢ Φλιασίων, καθὰ φησιν Ἡρακλείδης ὁ Ποντικός ἐν τῇ Περί τῆς ἄπνου – μηδένα γὰρ εἶναι σοφὸν {ἄνθρωπον} ἀλλ’ ἡ θεόν. θάττον δὲ ἐκαλεῖτο σοφία, καὶ σοφὸς ὁ ταύτην ἐπαγγελλόμενος, ὅς εἰς ἄν κατ’ ἀκρότητα ψυχῆς ἀηκριβωμένος, φιλόσοφος δὲ ὁ σοφίαν ἀσπαζόμενος (Diog. Laert. 1.12); φιλοσοφίας δὲ δύο γεγόνασιν ἀρχαί, ἣ τε ἀπὸ Ἀναξिमάνδρου καὶ ἡ ἀπὸ Πυθαγόρου· τοῦ μὲν Θαλοῦ διακηκότος, Πυθαγόρου δὲ Φερεκίδης καθηγήσατο. καὶ ἐκαλεῖτο ἡ μὲν Ἰωνική, ὅτι Θαλῆς Ἰωνῶν, Μιλήσιος γὰρ, καθηγήσατο Ἀναξिमάνδρου· ἡ δὲ Ἰταλικὴ ἀπὸ Πυθαγόρου, ὅτι τὰ πλεῖστα κατὰ τὴν Ἰταλίαν ἐφιλοσόφησε (Diog. Laert. 1.13); “But the first to use the term, and to call himself a philosopher or lover of wisdom, was Pythagoras; for, said he, no man is wise, but God alone. Heraclides of Pontus,

result of this concept of the history of philosophy, the ancient wise men (namely the ‘seven sages’) have also been interpreted as an initial and magmatic manifestation of wisdom, before (a certain) σοφία ‘became’ the scope of the φιλοσοφία: this happened from a very early stage on our philosophical tradition, and for these reasons their figures have often been included in the *corpora* of philosophers, such as that of Diogenes. Moreover, from a documentary point of view, the anecdotes about the seven sages collected by Diogenes should have been based on ancient traditions about their lives and deeds, so that we can refer to this work – among others – to study the features of the ancient σοφοί.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.4

As a starting point of our approximate identikit of the wise man, we can mention a first, general feature: the σοφός usually manifests himself in being able to say and do uncommon things; and this attitude can have very different expressions, more impressive (if not supernatural) or more funny. For instance, a σοφός can sleep for very long periods of time, expanding the duration of a normal life; or, even without sleeping solutions, he can live for a span of years considerably longer than the human average: the life of Epimenides is exemplary in this sense.<sup>17</sup> But a wise man, more often and less supernaturally, can simply have habits that deviate from the norms: habits

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in his *De mortua*, makes him say this at Sicyon in conversation with Leon, who was the prince of that city or of Phlius. All too quickly the study was called wisdom and its professor a sage, to denote his attainment of mental perfection; while the student who took it up was a philosopher or lover of wisdom. [...] But philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, has had a twofold origin; it started with Anaximander on the one hand, with Pythagoras on the other. The former was a pupil of Thales, Pythagoras was taught by Pherecydes. The one school was called Ionian, because Thales, a Milesian and therefore an Ionian, instructed Anaximander; the other school was called Italian from Pythagoras, who worked for the most part in Italy” (transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P]). For an overview of the ancient and ‘new’ meanings of σοφία and σοφός, after the birth of the philosophy (φιλο-σοφία), cf. Arist. *Metaph.* 1.1-2 (esp. 981b 10-20; 982a 4 ff.), with Gigon [1959] 1983, 43-9; Palumbo 1987; and see § 2.9. Cf. also Diog. Laert. 3.9-19, on Plato and Epicharmus, with quotation of fragments such as Epicharm. 278 Kassel-Austin. Less useful is Lyle Johnstone 2009, for instance 36-85 (cf. also Ruth Scodel on *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2010.08.59, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010.08.59/>).

**16** Most probably, the sanctuary of Delphi played an important role during Late Archaism in promoting the figures of the seven sages and, above all, the connection of their action with the sanctuary itself: cf. Busine 2002, 28-9, by late. For the moment, however, we will exclude from our analysis the question of the origin of their wisdom, and – in particular – the theme of the divine inspiration of their customs, expressions, sentences, etc., since this concerns the ‘quality’ of the contents transmitted by the messages of the sages, and not the primary perception of their figures (see § 3.3, fn. 35).

**17** Cf. Diog. Laert. 1.109-10.

and actions sometimes wired, such as Thales' astronomical extravagances, or Periander's obsession with the secret of his own tomb.

**Diog. Laert. 1.34 (Thales)**

λέγεται δ' ἀγόμενος ὑπὸ γράδος ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας, ἵνα τὰ ἄστρα κατανοήσῃ, εἰς βόθρον ἐμπεσεῖν καὶ αὐτῷ ἀνοιμῶξαντι φάναί τὴν γραῦν· “σὺ γάρ, ὦ Θαλῆ, τὰ ἐν ποσὶν οὐ δυνάμενος ἰδεῖν τὰ ἐπὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οἶεὶ γνῶσσεσθαι;”.

It is said that once, when he was taken out of doors by an old woman in order that he might observe the stars, he fell into a ditch, and his cry for help drew from the old woman the retort, “How can you expect to know all about the heavens, Thales, when you cannot even see what is just before your feet?”. (Transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P])

**Diog. Laert. 1.96 (Periander)**

λέγουσι δέ τινες ὡς θελήσας αὐτοῦ τὸν τάφον μὴ γνωσθῆναι, τοιοῦτόν τι ἐμηχανήσατο. δυσὶν ἐκέλευσε νεανίσκοις, δεῖξας τινὰ ὁδόν, ἐξελθεῖν νύκτωρ καὶ τὸν ἀπαντήσαντα ἀνελεῖν καὶ θάψαι· ἔπειτα βαδίζειν ἄλλους τε κατὰ τούτων τέτταρας, καὶ ἀνελόντας θάψαι· πάλιν τε κατὰ τούτων πλείονας. καὶ οὕτως αὐτὸς τοῖς πρώτοις ἐντυχὼν ἀνῆρέθη.

There is a story that he did not wish the place where he was buried to be known, and to that end contrived the following device. He ordered two young men to go out at night by a certain road which he pointed out to them; they were to kill the man they met and bury him. He afterwards ordered four more to go in pursuit of the two, kill them and bury them; again, he dispatched a larger number in pursuit of the four. Having taken these measures, he himself encountered the first pair and was slain. (Transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P])

## 2.5

A wise man is also able to provide his community with fair laws, or to renew the existing laws: by playing this role, a σοφός exploits his overall view of the human nature and, more specifically, his clear knowledge of the power-relations that exist in a particular social group (or polis), and that he can translate in a political vision. Furthermore, and in parallel with this competence, a wise man often shows that he knows how to act in case of dangerous problems that

involve all the community, like a plague: again Epimenides already mentioned (see § 2.4), for instance, understands the way to purify the community.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.6

This wider view of the humans and the human life often depends on the wise man's attitude to travelling, to experiencing different realities, different societies: travelling is the reason for the wise man's greater knowledge of customs, but it also becomes the occasion (for the wise man) to share his knowledge with everyone he meets. The best personification of these skills (in addition to the previous ones, explained in § 2.5) is Solon, the Athenian lawmaker and traveller, but also the key-figure of the famous episode of his meeting with the Lydian king Croesus.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.7

Sometimes σοφία can be expressed through prophecies, predictions, or riddles, because – like an oracle – the wise man tells the truth in a way that cannot be linear: his messages require an effort to be understood by common people. And, as is often the case with these forms of communication, the message of the sage can take on a poetic form.<sup>20</sup>

Paradigmatic are the anecdote of the suggestion of Pittacus about marriage (that also inspired an epigramme of Callimachus: cf. Diog. Laert. 1.79-81, with the quotation of Callim. ep. 1 Pfeiffer), as well as the riddles of Cleobulus, or the predictions of Pherecydes.

### Diog. Laert. 1.89-91 (Cleobulus: riddles)

(89) Κλεόβουλος Εὐαγόρου Λίνδιος, ὡς δὲ Δοῦρις, Κάρ. [...] οὗτος ἐποίησεν ᾄσματα καὶ γρίφους εἰς ἔπη τρισχίλια. [...] Φέρεται δ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς Παμφίλης Ὑπομνήμασι καὶ αἰνίγμα τοῖον·

(91) εἷς ὁ πατήρ, παῖδες δυοκαίδεκα. τῶν δὲ ἑκάστω

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<sup>18</sup> This is also an aspect of the involvement of sages in religious activities: see Martin 1993, 121-2.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hdt. 1.32-3.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin 1993, 117-18 (“Like the oral art of epic verse making, proverbs are thus completely traditional and yet always innovated. They are embedded in situations in which the social use of artful speech and metaphor becomes a powerful tool for influencing events”), together with Russo 1997. It is also possible that at some point the form of the aphorism became the very communicative mark of the wise: see Havelock [1963] 1973, 235-6.

παῖδες δις τριάκοντα διάνδιχα εἶδος ἔχουσαι·  
αἱ μὲν λευκαὶ ἔασιν ἰδεῖν, αἱ δ' αὖτε μέλαιναι·  
ἀθάνατοι δέ τ' εὐῶσαι, ἀποφθινύθουσιν ἅπασαι.  
ἐστι δὲ ὁ ἑνιαυτός.

(89) Cleobulus, the son of Euagoras, was born at Lindus, but according to Duris he was a Carian. [...] He was the author of songs and riddles, making some 3000 lines in all. [...] The following riddle of Cleobulus is preserved in Pamphila's collection: (91) "One sire there is, he has twelve sons, and each of these / has twice thirty daughters different in feature; / some of the daughters are white, the others again are black; / they are immortal, and yet they all die". And the answer is, "The year". (Transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P])

#### Diog. Laert. 1.116 (Pherecydes: predictions)

Φερεκύδης Βάβυος Σύριος, καθά φησιν Ἀλέξανδρος ἐν Διαδοχαῖς, Πιττακοῦ διακῆκοεν. τοῦτόν φησι Θεόπομπος πρῶτον περὶ φύσεως καὶ <γενέσεως> θεῶν Ἑλλησι γράψαι. πολλὰ δὲ καὶ θαυμάσια λέγεται περὶ αὐτοῦ. καὶ γὰρ παρὰ τὸν αἰγιαλὸν τῆς Σάμου περιπατοῦντα καὶ ναῦν οὐριοδρομοῦσαν ἰδόντα εἰπεῖν ὡς {οὐ} μετ' οὐ πολὺ καταδύσεται· καὶ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ καταδύναι. καὶ ἀνιμηθέντος ἐκ φρέατος ὕδατος πiónτα προειπεῖν ὡς εἰς τρίτην ἡμέραν ἔσοιτο σεισμός, καὶ γενέσθαι. ἀνιόντα τε εἰς Ὀλυμπίαν ἐν Μεσσήνῃ τῷ Ξένῳ Περιλάῳ συμβουλευσαὶ ἐξοικῆσαι μετὰ τῶν οἰκείων· καὶ τὸν μὴ πεισθῆναι, Μεσσήνη δὲ ἐάλω.

(116) Pherecydes, the son of Babys, and a native of Syros according to Alexander in his *Successions of Philosophers*, was a pupil of Pittacus. Theopompus tells us that he was the first who wrote in Greek on nature and the gods. Many wonderful stories are told about him. He was walking along the beach in Samos and saw a ship running before the wind; he exclaimed that in no long time she would go down, and, even as he watched her, down she went. And as he was drinking water which had been drawn up from a well he predicted that on the third day there would be an earthquake; which came to pass. And on his way from Olympia he advised Perilaus, his host in Messene, to move thence with all belonging to him; but Perilaus could not be persuaded, and Messene was afterwards taken. (Transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P])

## 2.8

All these examples presuppose a more general feature of the figure of the ancient σοφός, that is very peculiar: the σοφός of the archaic and late-archaic Greek culture is someone who is involved in the culture of the polis, someone who is part of a polis, who is recognised by the people of the polis, and who acts in the polis (or even in different poleis), often trying to improve the quality of life of his community (or different polis communities).<sup>21</sup>

The knowledge of the σοφός is based on a broad view of the world, but does not contradict the foundations of the traditional culture: the tool of the wise man's action is not the revolution, but a re-direction (or re-functionalization) of what already exists. Not even the creators of new schools of thought, such as Thales or Pythagoras, were actually 'real world disrupters', because their theories were based on a traditional perception - and acceptance - of reality and the world.<sup>22</sup> And, even in the case of sages-travellers (Solon comes to mind first, with Epimenides again, or Pythagoras), the increase in knowledge resulting from visits to distant places and peoples does not lead to the transfer of 'novelties' to Greece: the sage only shares with the Greeks those things - information, reform proposals, advice, etc. - that are compatible with Greek culture. In this sense the σοφός is also a traditional figure, someone who is perfectly integrated into the traditional culture of the archaic Greek society.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.9

This statement can be confirmed by a symmetrical observation, concerning some anecdotes about the early philosophers, Heraclitus in particular. The philosophical aspects of the relations between these 'new intellectuals' and the sages are multifaceted and have been the subject of extensive discussion among scholars, which we can only mention here, recalling some points of the debate: the modern philosopher usually has a destructive attitude towards the knowledge and beliefs of the common people; he can understand the reality in a deeper way than the traditional men (and wise men); his ideas are new, exclusive, and not for everyone. For these reasons, he is often presented as an anti-traditional character, and the champions of the

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<sup>21</sup> See also Martin 1993, 115.

<sup>22</sup> See again Palumbo 1987.

<sup>23</sup> This is also illustrated by the fate of Anacharsis, a Scythian who, according to tradition, was treacherously murdered by his brother during a hunt, perhaps because he promoted Greek customs in his homeland: cf. Diog. Laert. 1.102.

traditional culture - including sages, and also poets (see § 3.3) - became the target of his blame; but even the traditional vocabulary of wisdom is seemingly subjected to a shift in its meaning, or at least in its references.<sup>24</sup> Some fragments from Heraclitus seem very significant to explain this process.

### Obscure Messages and Contempt of the Masses

#### Heraclit. 22 A 1, 6 Diels-Kranz (= Diog. Laert. 9.1.6)

ἀνέθηκε δ' αὐτὸ [= τὸ βιβλίον περὶ φύσεως] εἰς τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερόν, ὡς μὲν τινες, ἐπιτηδεύσας ἀσαφέστερον γράψαι, ὅπως οἱ δυνάμενοι <μόνοι> προσίοιεν αὐτῷ καὶ μὴ ἐκ τοῦ δημῶδους εὐκαταφρόνητον ἦ.

This book he deposited in the temple of Artemis and, according to some, he deliberately made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt. (Transl. R.D. Hicks, 1972 (1925<sup>1</sup>) [P])

#### Heraclit. 22 B 1 Diels-Kranz (= Sext. Emp. Math. 7.132)

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδε ἐόντος ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι, καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι, καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροισιν εἰκόασι, πειρώμενοι ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῖμαι, κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει. τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν, ὅκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὐδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται.<sup>25</sup>

Although this account holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard. Although all things come to pass in accordance with this account, men are like the untried when they try such words and works as I set forth, distinguishing each according to its nature and telling how it is. But other men are oblivious of what they do awake, just as they are forgetful of what they do asleep. (Transl. Ch.H. Kahn, 1979)

<sup>24</sup> In general, by starting from what we can understand from our fragments, the debate about the vocabulary of Heraclitus (and his use and meaning of σοφία/σοφός, for instance) has been intense and should be considered partly still open, at least for specific fragments: cf. Gladigow 1965, 75 ff.; Leshner 1983.

<sup>25</sup> See Marcovich 1967, 8-11; Diano, Serra 1980, 89-109.



Heraclit. 22 B 34 Diels-Kranz (= Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.115.3)

ἄξύνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν εἰκόασι· φάτις αὐτοῖσιν μαρτυρεῖ παρεόντας ἀπεῖναι.

Uncomprehending, <even> when they have heard <the truth about things?>, they are like deaf people. The saying ‘absent while present’ fits them well [lit. “bears witness to them”]. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Against Traditional Wise ‘Characters’

Heraclit. 22 B 40 Diels-Kranz (= Diog. Laert. 9.1.1 [= Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K.]; cf. Ath. 13.601b)

πολυμαθίη νόον ἔχειν οὐ διδάσκει· Ἡσίοδον γὰρ ἂν ἐδίδαξε καὶ Πυθαγόρην αὐτίς τε Ξενοφάνεά τε καὶ Ἑκαταῖον.<sup>26</sup>

A lot of learning does not teach <a person the possession of> understanding; <could it do so,> it would as so taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or for that matter (?) Xenophanes and Hecataeus. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 129 (*dub.*) Diels-Kranz (= Diog. Laert. 8.6 = Pythagoras, 14 A 19 Diels-Kranz [*amplior*])

Πυθαγόρης Μνησάρχου ἱστορίην ἤσκησεν ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πάντων καὶ ἐκλεξάμενος ταύτας τὰς συγγραφὰς ἐποίησατο ἑαυτοῦ σοφίην, πολυμαθίην, κακοτεχνίην.

Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchus, trained himself to the highest degree of all mankind in <the art of> investigation, and having selected these writings constructed a wisdom of his own – a lot of learning, a disreputable <piece of> craftsmanship. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Cf. also Heraclit. 22 B 83 Diels-Kranz (= Pl. *Hp. mai.* 289b): ἀνθρώπων ὁ σοφώτατος πρὸς θεὸν πίθηκος φανεῖται καὶ σοφίη καὶ κάλλει καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσιν “In the matter of wisdom, beauty, and every other thing, in contrast with God the wisest of mankind will appear an ape” (transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> See Marcovich 1967, 64-6; Diano, Serra 1980, 172. For the poets, as traditional ‘characters’, also cf. Heraclit. 22 B 42, 56, 57, 107 Diels-Kranz (passages discussed further, see § 3.3). For the inclusion of Pythagoras, whom the sources also record as the first to take the name φιλόσοφος for himself, see previous note 15 (Diog. Laert. 1.12).

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New Meaning and Pertinence of σοφός/σοφία

Heraclit. 22 B 32 Diels-Kranz (= Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.115.1)

ἐν τὸ σοφὸν μῶνον λέγεσθαι οὐκ ἐθέλει καὶ ἐθέλει Ζηνὸς ὄνομα.<sup>27</sup>

One thing, the only wise thing, is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 35 Diels-Kranz (= Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.140.6)

χρὴ γὰρ εὔ μάλα πολλῶν ἱστορας φιλοσόφους ἄνδρας εἶναι καθ' Ἡράκλειτον.

[For, according to Heraclitus, men who are] lovers of wisdom ought very much to be enquirers into many things. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 41 Diels-Kranz (= Diog. Laert. 9.1.1 [= Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K.; cf. 22 B 40 D.-K.]

εἶναι γὰρ ἐν τὸ σοφόν, ἐπίστασθαι γνώμην, τότε ἐκυβέρνησετ πάντα διὰ πάντων.

[He says that] the wise <thing> is a single <thing> (or, *differently punctuated*: one thing, the wise thing, <is>) – knowing the plan †which steers† all things through all things. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 50 Diels-Kranz (= Hippol. *Haer.* 9.9)

Ἡράκλειτος μὲν οὖν φησιν εἶναι τὸ πᾶν διαιρετὸν ἀδιαιρετον, γενητὸν ἀγενητον, θνητὸν ἀθάνατον, λόγον αἰῶνα, πατέρα υἱόν, θεὸν δίκαιον· “οὐκ ἐμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφὸν ἐστὶν ἐν πάντα εἶναι” ὁ Ἡράκλειτος φησι.

Heraclitus affirms that the All is Divisible/Indivisible, Born/Unborn, Mortal/Immortal, Word/Eternity, Father/Son, God/Righteous One. He says: “Listening not to me but to the Word [λόγου], it is wise to agree [ὁμολογεῖν] that all is one”. (Transl. M.D. Litwa, 2016)

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<sup>27</sup> For the debate about the interpretation of this fragment, also see Marcovich 1967, 445-6; Diano, Serra 1980, 162-5.

Heraclit. 22 B 108 Diels-Kranz (= Stob. Flor. 1.174 Hense)

Ἡρακλείτου. ὀκόσων λόγους ἤκουσα, οὐδεὶς ἀφικνεῖται ἐς τοῦτο, ὥστε γινώσκειν ὅτι σοφὸν ἐστὶ πάντων κεχωρισμένον.

Of all those whose accounts I have listened to, none gets to the point of recognising that which is wise, set apart from all. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 116 Diels-Kranz (= Stob. Flor. V 6 Hense)

ἀνθρώποισι πᾶσι μέτεστι γινώσκειν ἑωυτοῦς καὶ σωφρονεῖν.

All people have a claim to self-knowledge (*literally*, self-ascertainment) and sound thinking. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

The attitude that emerges in Heraclitus' fragments probably should be read as the birth of a self awareness different from that of past or contemporary wise men: the new intellectual (like Heraclitus) is less σοφός and more φιλόσοφος, and aims to trace a distance between himself and common people, or common views of σοφία.

On the other hand, in a poet who was also a pillar of traditional culture - I mean Pindar - we can recognise a kind of mirrored response to these assessments: Pindar probably blamed the new philosophers for their futile research, for their strength in constructing a new knowledge that was perceived as unconventional, and not traditional at all.

Pind. fr. 209 Maehler (= Stob. Ecl. 2.1.21)

Πινδάρου· τοὺς φυσιολογοῦντας ἔφη Πίνδαρος “ἀτελῆ σοφίας καρπὸν δρέπειν”.

Natural philosophers were said by Pindar “to cull the unripe fruit of wisdom”. (Transl. W.H. Race, 1997)

### 3 The Poet as a ‘Sophós’

This mention of Pindar also leads us, finally, to include the figure of the poet in our discussion, with some variations on what we have done for the wise man: indeed, against the multiplicity of terms used to identify the poet (also depending on the type of poem composed or performed by each of them), we can assume that the recognition of a poet took place first and foremost on the basis of one of his essential features, namely the use of a language – a communication *medium* – distinct from the common language.

#### 3.1

It is precisely because of this fundamental competence – an expression of σοφία – that a poet could also be considered a σοφός (‘[someone] who is aware of an art’, as at the origin): several passages from archaic and late archaic poets (Pindar *in primis*) seem to confirm this view.<sup>28</sup>

Thgn. 1.19-21 West<sup>2</sup>

Κύρνε, σοφιζομένωι μὲν ἐμοὶ σφρηγῖς ἐπικείσθω  
τοῖσδ’ ἔπεισιν, λήσει δ’ οὔποτε κλεπτόμενα, 20  
οὔδέ τις ἀλλάξει κάκιον τοῦσθλοῦ παρεόντος.<sup>29</sup>

Kyrnos, let a seal [sphrēgis] be placed by me, as I practice my poetic skill [sophiē], / upon these utterances [epos plural]; that way they [i.e. the utterances] will never be stolen without detection, / and no one will substitute something inferior for the genuine thing that is there. (Transl. G. Nagy, 1985)

<sup>28</sup> Some occurrences will also be discussed below in § 3.7. It is more difficult to define the significance of the term σοφία in Sappho, fr. 56 Neri (= Voigt: see Neri 2021, 660), and in Xenophanes, fr. 2 West<sup>2</sup>. On this last fragment, see Untersteiner [1956] 2008, 113-14 (note to vv. 11-12, where, after a rich recap of the debate about these lines, the scholar concluded: “io vedo in σοφίη espressa l’idea di abilità conoscitiva, di perfezione nel conoscere”); Gladigow 1965, 32-8; and even concisely Cavalli 1992, 176 note 9 (note to the same lines: “Probabilmente il significato arcaico di *sophia* come ‘abilità in una determinata arte’ qui si è già ampliato nel concetto più vasto di ‘sapienza che deriva dalla propria abilità’, e quindi allude alla natura educativa e utile alla città della poesia filosofica di Senofane”). On Xenophanes, more generally, cf. also Palumbo 1987, 44-52; Gentili 2006, 239-40.

<sup>29</sup> On this passage see the remarks of Nagy (28-9), Ford (82-4), and Cobb-Stevens (166-7) in Figueira, Nagy 1985.

Thgn. 1.993-6 West<sup>2</sup>

εἰ θεΐης, Ἀκάδημε, ἐφήμερον ὕμνον αἰεΐδειν,  
ἄθλον δ' ἐν μέσσωι παῖς καλὸν ἄνθος ἔχων  
σοί τ' εἴη καὶ ἐμοὶ σοφίης πέρι δηρισάντοιν, 995  
γνοίης χ' ὅσσον ὄνων κρέσσονες ἡμίονοι.

If you were to set a prize, Academus, for the singing of a lovely song, and if a boy with the fair bloom of youth were the prize for you and me as we compete in artistry, you would know how superior mules are to asses. (Transl. D.E. Gerber, 1999)

Pind. Ol. 1.8-11

ὄθεν ὁ πολύφατος ὕμνος ἀμφιβάλλεται  
σοφῶν μητίεσσι, κελαδεῖν  
Κρόνου παῖδ' ἐς ἀφνεὰν ἰκομένους 10  
μάκαιραν Ἱέρωνος ἐστίαν

From there glorious song enfolds the wisdom of poets, so that they loudly sing (10) the son of Cronus, when they arrive at the rich and blessed hearth of Hieron. (Transl. D. Arnson Svarlien, 1990 [P])

Pind. Pyth. 3.113

Νέστορα καὶ Λύκιον Σαρπηδόν', ἀνθρώπων φάτις,  
ἐξ ἐπέων κελαδενῶν, τέκτονες οἷα σοφοί  
ἄρμοσαν, γινώσκομεν· ἅ δ' ἀρετὰ κλειναῖς ἀοιδαῖς  
χρονία τελέθει· παύροις δὲ πράξασθ' εὐμαρές. 115

We know of Nestor and Lycian Sarpedon, whom men speak of, from melodious words which skilled craftsmen join together. Through renowned songs excellence (115) gains a long life. But few find that easy to accomplish. (Transl. D. Arnson Svarlien, 1990 [P])

Cf. Pind. *Isthm.* 9.7-8; *Pae.* 6 (= fr. 52f Maehler) 51-3.

Bacchyl. (*hyporchemata*) fr. 14 Maehler (= 1 Irigoin).

Λυδία μὲν γὰρ λίθος  
μανύει χρυσόν, ἀν-  
δρῶν δ' ἀρετὰν σοφία τε  
παγκρατῆς τ' ἔλέγχει  
ἀλάθεια ... 5

For as the Lydian stone indicates gold, so men's excellence is proved by the poet's skill and all-powerful truth. (Transl. D.A. Campbell, 1992)

A.P. 13.28.1-6 ([Βακχυλίδου ἢ Σιμωνίδου]; Antigenes, fifth century BCE)<sup>30</sup>

Πολλάκι δὴ φυλῆς Ἀκαμαντίδος ἐν χοροῖσιν ὦραι  
ἀνωλόλυξαν κισσοφόροις ἐπὶ διθυράμβοις  
αἱ Διονυσιάδες, μίτραισι δὲ καὶ ῥόδων ἀώτοις  
σοφῶν ἀοιδῶν ἐσκίασαν λιπαρὰν ἔθειραν,  
οἱ τόνδε τρίποδά σφισι μάρτυρα Βακχίων ἀέθλων  
ἔθηκαν· ...

Often in truth, in the choruses of the tribe Acamantis, did the Hours, the companions of Dionysus, shout in triumph at the ivy-crowned dithyrambs, and overshadow the bright locks of skilled poets with fillets and rose blossoms. The chorus now hath set up this tripod as a witness of their Bacchic contest. (Transl. W.R. Paton, 1918)

Eur. *IT* 1234-8

Χο. εὐπαις ὁ Λατοῦς γόνος,  
ὄν ποτε Δηλιάσιν καρποφόροις γυάλοις  
ἔτικτε, χρυσοκόμαν  
ἐν κιθάραι σοφόν, ὅστ' ἐπὶ τόξων  
εὐστοχίαι γάννυται

Chorus "Lovely is the son of Leto, (1235) whom she, the Delian, once bore in the fruitful valleys, golden-haired, skilled at the lyre; and also the one who glories in her well-aimed arrows". (Transl. R. Potter, 1938 [P])

Cf. *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* 6

κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον Γανύκτωρ ἐπιτάφιον τοῦ πατρὸς Ἀμφιδάμαντος βασιλέως Εὐβοίας ἐπιτελῶν πάντας τοὺς ἐπισήμους ἄνδρας οὐ μόνον ῥώμῃ καὶ τάχει, ἀλλὰ καὶ σοφίᾳ ἐπὶ τὸν ἀγῶνα μεγάλας δωρεαῖς τιμῶν συνεκάλεσεν. καὶ οὕτοι [*scil.* Homer and Hesiod] οὖν ἐκ τύχης, ὡς φασί, συμβαλόντες ἀλλήλοις ἤλθον εἰς τὴν Χαλκίδα.

Now about the same time Ganymctor was celebrating the funeral rites of his father Amphidamas, king of Euboea, and invited to the gathering not only all those who were famous for bodily strength and fleetness of foot, but also those who excelled in wit, promising them great rewards. And so, as the story goes, the two went to Chalcis and met by chance. (Transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, 1914 [P])

30 Cf. Page 1981, 12.

3.1.1

More challenging is the case of an Hesiodic fragment quoted by Clemens of Alexandria, together with a fragment of the Homeric *Margite* (which is of clearer interpretation):

Hom. *Marg.* fr. 3 Gostoli (= 2 West?) / Hes. fr. 306 Merkelbach-West, quoted by Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.25.1-2

Ὅμηρος δὲ καὶ τέκτονα σοφὸν καλεῖ [cf. *Il.* 15.411-12, see § 2.1] καὶ περὶ τοῦ Μαργίτου, εἰ δὴ αὐτοῦ, ὡδὲ πῶς γράφει·  
τὸν δ' οὔτ' ἄρ σκαπτῆρα θεοὶ θέσαν οὔτ' ἄροτῆρα,  
οὔτ' ἄλλως τι σοφόν, πάσης δ' ἡμάρτανε τέχνης. [Hom. *Marg.* fr. 3 Gostoli]

Ἡσίοδος γὰρ τὸν κιθαριστὴν Λίνον “παντοίας σοφίας δεδαηκότα” [Hes. fr. 306 M.-W.] εἰπὼν καὶ ναύτην οὐκ ὀκνεῖ λέγειν σοφόν, “οὔτε τι ναυτιλίας σεσοφισμένον” γράφων [cf. Hes. *Op.*].

Homer even calls an artisan wise, and writes something as follows about Margites (if the poem is Homer's): “The gods did not make him a digger or ploughman, / or wise in any other field; he missed out on every skill”. Hesiod said that Linus the lutenist was “expert in every form of wisdom”, and does not hesitate to call a sailor wise, writing, “not endowed with wisdom in navigation”. (Transl. J. Ferguson, 1991)

If the debate focuses on the equivalence ‘σοφία = practical/professional competence’ (as Clemens seems to attest), we should assume that Linus was mentioned by Hesiod as having ‘the knowledge (δεδαηκότα)<sup>31</sup> of all practical/professional fields (παντοίας σοφίας)’: so a (good) poet like Linus – in the Hesiodic vision – also demonstrated his σοφία (poetic competence) by being able to sing about any human profession (that is various σοφίαί, other than his).

31 For the use of this verb, see also § 3.7.

### 3.2

Besides σοφός, the derivative σοφιστής also seems to have specialised in the meaning of ‘poet’ (rarely even ‘wise’),<sup>32</sup> although its number of occurrences is much more limited and sometimes controversial, if not pejorative (at least in sources from fifth century BCE Athens).

σοφιστής = ‘Poet’

Pind. *Isthm.* 5.28-9

μελέταν δὲ σοφισταῖς  
Διὸς ἕκατι πρόσβαλον σεβιζόμενοι·

[Heroes] who are honoured by the grace of Zeus provide a theme for skilled poets. (Transl. D. Arnson Svarlien, 1990 [P])

Cratinus, *Archilochoi* fr. 2 Kassel-Austin (PCG) / Iophon, *Aulodoi (satyroi)* fr. 1 Snell-Kannicht (TrGF), quoted by Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.24.1-3 (a passage immediately preceding the one quoted in § 3.1.1)

ὅθεν οἱ Ἕλληνες καὶ αὐτοὶ τοὺς περὶ ὀτιοῦν πολυπράγμονας σοφούς  
ἅμα καὶ σοφιστὰς παρωνύμως κεκλήκασιν. Κρατίνος γοῦν ἐν τοῖς  
Ἀρχιλόχοις ποιητὰς καταλέξας ἔφη·  
οἷον σοφιστῶν σμήνος ἀνεδιφήσατε. [Cratinus, fr. 2 K.-A.]  
Ἰοφῶν τε ὁμοίως <ὡς> ὁ κωμικὸς ἐν Αὐλφδοῖς σατύροις ἐπι  
ῥαψωδῶν καὶ ἄλλων τινῶν λέγει·  
καὶ γὰρ εἰσελήλυθεν  
πολλῶν σοφιστῶν ὄχλος ἐξηρτυμένος. [Iophon, fr. 1 S.-K.]

As a result, the Greeks themselves have called those who spend too much time on a single object sages or sophists indifferently, the words being related. Anyway, Cratinus in the *Archilochuses* ends a catalogue of poets with: “What a swarm of sophists you have been groping after”. Similarly Iophon, like the comic dramatist in *The Satyr-Flutists*, says of rhapsodes and others: “Yes, there arrived / a great mob of sophists all at the ready”. (Transl. J. Ferguson, 1991)

The meaning of ‘poet/musician’ is probably also implied by the use of the term σοφιστής in Aeschylus’ fr. 314 Radt (from Athen. 14.32

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Diog. Laert. 1.12 (proemium): οἱ δὲ σοφοὶ καὶ σοφισταὶ ἐκαλοῦντο· καὶ οὐ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ σοφισταὶ, καθὰ καὶ Κρατίνος ἐν Ἀρχιλόχοις τοὺς περὶ Ὅμηρον καὶ Ἡσίοδον ἐπαινῶν οὕτως καλεῖ.



[632c]), but this poses problems of textual reconstruction and interpretation; whereas the meanings of the term in *Prometheus bound*, vv. 62 and 944, are already more generalising and vague (influenced by the increasing 'sophistic' philosophical trend).<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3

However, the identification 'poet = σοφός' should have been endorsed for many other reasons, that we now can attempt to sketch after our observations about the sages.<sup>34</sup>

In general, a poet often had an extensive knowledge of facts, persons, actions, etc., simply because of his experience of people, poleis, sometimes even different countries (in the case of travelling-poets: see also § 3.5). More specifically, the knowledge of a poet could include: information useful for the common/practical life (that is the present); events of the past, actions of people lived in a different time and in a different space, deeds of people qualified as different from the normal (heroes), and so subjects we can consider 'myth' (even though for ancient Greeks myths were parts of their past); predictions about something still not happened, suggestions about the future, predictions also in an enigmatic form.<sup>35</sup> In sum, the poet was able to communicate content that could be interpreted as signs of wisdom, and this impression could also have been reinforced because his content was traditional, because it was part of a traditional cultural heritage that the poet was contributing to preserve.<sup>36</sup>

In a traditional oral culture, more specifically, the repetition of a traditional message is also authoritative, because it is both the repetition of something already known (and approved), and the reassertion of something that should be done (repeated) in an already defined way (so it is prescriptive): repeating (re-performing) such content is authoritative, but it also gives authority to the repeater (performer),

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**33** Cf. Euripides, fr. 905 Kannicht (μισῶ σοφιστήν, ὅστις οὐχ αὐτῷ σοφός); and see also Marzullo [1993] 2023, 478 ff.

**34** By 'poet' in these pages I continue to mean any person who, though not necessarily a poet by profession, practised poetry with some frequency, not exceptionally or episodically (as might happen to anyone attending occasions such as symposia). More inclusive, however, is the reading of Martin (1993, 113-15), who, for example, recognises poetry as a feature of the seven sages: see also § 2.7.

**35** As I have already said with regard to the aim of the present research (see above § 2.3, fn. 16), I have deliberately excluded the subject of the divine origin of the content transmitted by a poet inspired by a god, also because these elements were part of the assertions that poets could certainly make, but that the audience could not 'verify' in the immediate term.

**36** On 'wisdom poetry' in ancient Greece, see e.g. Ercolani 2012; 2015; 2016.

that is to the poet.<sup>37</sup> And this was one of the main reasons why several traditional poets have also been included in the target of the Heraclitean blame, like the wise men, as we saw before (§ 2.9).<sup>38</sup>

Heraclit. 22 B 42 Diels-Kranz (= Diog. Laert. 9.1.1 [= Heraclit. 22 A 1 D.-K.])

τόν τε Ὅμηρον ἔφασκεν ἄξιον ἐκ τῶν ἀγώνων ἐκβάλλεσθαι καὶ ῥαπίζεσθαι καὶ Ἀρχίλοχον ὁμοίως.

[He used to affirm that] Homer ought by rights to be ejected from the lists and thrashed, and similarly Archilochus. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 56 Diels-Kranz (= Hippol. Refut. 9.9)

ἐξηπάτηνται, φησίν, οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν φανερῶν παραπλησίως Ὅμηρῳ, ὃς ἐγένετο τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφώτερος πάντων. ἐκεῖνόν τε γὰρ παῖδες φθειῖρας κατακτείνοντες ἐξηπάτησαν εἰπόντες· ὅσα εἶδομεν καὶ ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα ἀπολείπομεν, ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἶδομεν οὔτ' ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα φέρομεν.<sup>39</sup>

People are deceived, [he says,] in the recognition of things that are obvious in much the same way Homer, who was wiser than all the Greeks, was deceived. For he was deceived by the words spoken to him by some boys killing lice: "What we saw and caught we leave behind, while what we did not see or catch we take <away with us>". (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

Heraclit. 22 B 57 Diels-Kranz (= Hippolit. Refut. 9.10)

διδάσκαλος δὲ πλείστων Ἡσίοδος· τοῦτον ἐπίστανται πλείστα εἰδέναί, ὅστις ἡμέρην καὶ εὐφρόνην οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν· ἔστι γὰρ ἓν.

For very many people Hesiod is <their> teacher. They are certain he knew a great number of things - he who continually failed to recognise <even> day and night <for what they are>! For they are one. (Transl. T.M. Robinson, 1987)

<sup>37</sup> This could also be the key to understand some particular poet-character, apparently endowed with political functions, such as the poet that Agamemnon left at home, to guard (?) his family and his court: cf. *Od.* 3.267-72, with Scully 1981.

<sup>38</sup> On the following fragments, see Babut 1976; Diano, Serra 1980, 172-6 (comm. to frs. 83-4, 86-7); Palumbo 1987, 36 ff. (especially 37 fn. 11).

<sup>39</sup> See also Colli 1980, 3:174-80 (fnn. 9-11).

Heraclit. 22 B 106 Diels-Kranz (= Plut. *Cam.* 19.1)

περὶ δ' ἡμερῶν ἀποφράδων εἴτε χρὴ τίθεσθαι τινὰς εἴτε ὀρθῶς Ἡράκλειτος ἐπέπληξεν Ἡσιόδῳ τὰς μὲν ἀγαθὰς ποιουμένῳ, τὰς δὲ φαύλας [cf. *Op.* 765 ff.], ὡς ἀγνοοῦντι φύσιν ἡμέρας ἀπάσης μίαν οὔσαν, ἐτέρωθι διηπόρηται.

Now concerning 'dies nefasti', or unlucky days, whether we must regard some as such, or whether Heracleitus was right in rebuking Hesiod for calling some days good and some bad, in his ignorance that the nature of every day is one and the same, - this question has been fully discussed elsewhere. (Transl. B. Perrin, 1914 [P])

### 3.4

The occasions for this transfer of knowledge (or repetition of content already known) from the poet to his audience should usually have been public: it is obvious to think, first, of the rhapsodic and choral poets involved in contests or ritual performances. But, sometimes, also private or semi-private occasions - like symposia - could host 'wisdom moments', as we can infer from lines of Theognis, or Solon, or also Mimnermus. And even the descriptions of personal life moments or adventures was always associated to the communication of some traditional rules, or values.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.5

These preliminary observations about the poets, however, have also concerned some of the content of their poems, but - to return to the declared focus of our research (see § 1) - we should also ask ourselves what feature(s) of a poet might make a poet recognisable independently of his poetic content. This feature of recognition should have been extremely important, also because a rather stable element in the characterization of many poets was their mobility, as in the case of the 'generic' wise men (non-poets) we mentioned at the beginning (see § 2.6). Many ancient poets are known to have travelled, for personal (often political-military) reasons, or in order to perform their poems for a specific audience: these events also produced the increasing of their knowledge, the acquisition of a broader view of the reality (hence their 'wisdom'). The lives of Homer, for instance, give us the

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g. Alcaeus, frs. 38 and 347 Voigt; Archilochus, frs. 13 (elegy) and 128 (trochaic tetrameters).

picture of a poet always moving among the poleis of the coasts of the Aegean sea: this image of Homer is surely a multi-layered product, the result of variations and insertions made by many generations of post-classic readers, but should be based on elements of ancient origin, coherent with the habits of an archaic epic poet. And even the *bios* of Hesiod implied an openness to travel abroad – for a poet traditionally thought as very steady, reluctant to move<sup>41</sup> – in case of important events that were a sort of call for professional poets (such as the funeral celebration for the death of a local ruler).

Finally, therefore, we might ask an essential question: when a poet arrived to a new place, where his name was not yet known, what features could facilitate his recognition as a good/reliable poet? Why (or on what grounds) should (or at least could) an audience be well disposed to listen to a poet, assuming that he would report true and useful things, rather than inventions and false things?<sup>42</sup>

### 3.6

The answer probably lies in the poet's main tool, which we have already mentioned several times, i.e. poetry: this is the means by which the poet was able to manifest his knowledge and skills, but also the competence that entitled the poet to be called σοφός, i.e. aware of the art of composing poems. More specifically, this poetic competence was the ability to express information (ideas, myths, values, etc.) by using a marked communication, a language organised by metres, created with a peculiar vocabulary, made up of peculiar syntactic structures (formulae, etc.), often associated with a specific music: in short, a language formalised in a traditional way, easy to recognise by people who shared the same culture. If σοφία was the knowledge of something, especially an art, or a profession, then the poet could reveal his skill by using his art, that is the poetic language, in the occasions of performing poetry: this single action was the expression of his being σοφός, even before the communication of any content that could be considered 'wise'.

The control of this poetic skill (σοφία), by the poet, was also the parameter for judging the quality of a poet, by the audience: every audience (the public of every Greek polis) probably had the competence to recognise the features of valuable – that is traditional – poetry,

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<sup>41</sup> And so hostile to trades: cf. *Op.* 232-7, 646 ss. (quoted in § 2.1), with the evidence from the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* (see above § 3.1). See also Mureddu 2021, XLIII-XLV. On these implications of σοφία, see also Giordano 2013, 35 ff.

<sup>42</sup> On the matter of the truth, and reliability, of the messages conveyed by the poet, see e.g. Aloni 2013; Riu 2019.

because this competence was acquired (by every man in the audience) by attending time after time the same occasions of producing and listening to poetry (festivals, rituals, symposia, etc.). Thus, every audience should have been able to distinguish between average-poets, not outstanding, and very good poets, true owners of full 'verification competence': probably the only ones deserving the name of σοφοί.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.7

This mechanism of recognition probably was consciously or unconsciously present to the same poets, but in any case it seems to be preserved – or mirrored – in many paradigmatic depictions of the art and skills of the poet, or self-depictions of the poet in action, above all in those declarations of poetics in which the content of the poem is distinguished from poetic skills, i.e. from the ability to create poetic language (made up of metres, formulae, sometimes music, etc.): usually in these passages the content that a poet conveys may be exceptional, super-human (cf. the beginning of the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*), and in this case it almost always comes from the gods; otherwise the content can be very subjective, depending on personal life experiences, as for iambic and elegiac poetry; in both these cases, nevertheless, the ability to put these contents into verse – the poet's σοφία – is a skill separately emphasised, as a distinct element that marks the quality of communication.<sup>44</sup>

Often this remark – that of possessing a σοφία – is expressed with lexical occurrences that might suggest a certain normativity, or at least a standardization: knowledge of the technique is usually indicated by the verb ἐπίσταμαι (which could be applied to various fields, not only the poetic)<sup>45</sup> and related words; but sometimes we also find expressions alluding to the learning of the poetic technique (now successfully acquired), and thus characterised by the use of the verb διδάσκω and its derivatives.

<sup>43</sup> See Havelock [1963] 1973, 129-30.

<sup>44</sup> See also Snell [1946] 1963, 190 ff. ("Cap. VIII. Sapere umano e divino"); Palumbo 1987, 39 ff.

<sup>45</sup> For the technical/practical scope of this verb, see e.g. *Il.* 13.221-3: τὸν δ' αὖτ' Ἴδομενεὺς Κρητῶν ἀγὸς ἀντίον ἠΐδα· | ὧ Θόαν οὐ τις ἀνὴρ νῦν γ' αἴτιος, ὅσσοις ἔγωγε | γινώσκω· πάντες γὰρ ἐπιστάμεθα πτολεμίζειν ("And to him Idomeneus, leader of the Cretans, made answer: 'O Thoas, there is no man now at fault, so far as I wot thereof; for we are all skilled in war'"; transl. A.T. Murray, 1924 [P]). See also Snell 1924, 81-96; Chantraine 1970, 360.

Super-Human Content

Il. 2.484-93

Ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι·  
ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαὶ ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα, 485  
ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν·  
οἳ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν·  
πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,  
οὐδ' εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἶεν,  
φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δὲ μοι ἦτορ ἐνείη, 490  
εἰ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο  
θυγατέρες μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον·  
ἀρχοὺς αὖ νηῶν ἐρέω νῆάς τε προπάσας.

Tell me now, ye Muses that have dwellings on Olympus - (485) for ye are goddesses and are at hand and know all things, whereas we hear but a rumour and know not anything - who were the captains of the Danaans and their lords. But the common folk I could not tell nor name, nay, not though ten tongues were mine and ten mouths (490) and a voice unwearying, and though the heart within me were of bronze, did not the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus that beareth the aegis, call to my mind all them that came beneath Ilios. Now will I tell the captains of the ships and the ships in their order. (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1924 [P])

ἐπίσταμαι (= To Know How to Make Poetry)

Od. 11.362-9

τὸν δ' αὖτ' Ἀλκίνοος ἀπαμείβετο φώνησέν τε·  
“ὦ Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὸ μὲν οὐ τί σ' εἴσκομεν εἰσορόωντες  
ἠπεροπιῆά τ' ἔμεν καὶ ἐπὶ κλοπον, οἷά τε πολλοὺς 365  
βόσκει γαῖα μέλαινα πολυσπερέας ἀνθρώπους  
ψεύδεά τ' ἀρτύνοντας, ὅθεν κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο·  
σοὶ δ' ἔπι μὲν μορφή ἐπέων, ἐνὶ δὲ φρένες ἐσθλαί,  
μῦθον δ' ὥς ὅτ' ἀοιδὸς ἐπίσταμένως κατέλεξας,  
πάντων Ἀργείων σέο τ' αὐτοῦ κήδεα λυγρά”.

Then again Alcinoos made answer and said: “Odysseus, in no wise as we look on thee do we deem this of thee, that thou art a cheat and a dissembler, such as are many (365) whom the dark earth breeds scattered far and wide, men that fashion lies out of what no man can even see. But upon thee is grace of words, and within thee is a heart of wisdom, and thy tale thou hast told with skill,

as doth a minstrel, even the grievous woes of all the Argives and of thine own self". (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1919 [P])

**Od. 21.404-9**

ὥς ἄρ' ἔφαν μνηστήρες· ἀτὰρ πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς,  
αὐτίκ' ἐπεὶ μέγα τόξον ἐβάστασε καὶ ἶδε πάντη, 405  
ὥς ὄτ' ἀνὴρ φόρμιγγος ἐπιστάμενος καὶ ἀοιδῆς  
ῥῆϊδίως ἐτάνυσσε νέφ' περὶ κόλλοπι χορδὴν,  
ἄσπας ἀμφοτέρωθεν εὐστρεφὲς ἔντερον οἴος,  
ὥς ἄρ' ἄτερ σπουδῆς τάνυσεν μέγα τόξον Ὀδυσσεύς.

So spoke the wooers, but Odysseus of many wiles, (405) as soon as he had lifted the great bow and scanned it on every side - even as when a man well-skilled in the lyre and in song easily stretches the string about a new peg, making fast at either end the twisted sheep-gut - so without effort did Odysseus string the great bow. (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1919 [P])

**Thgn. 1.769-72 West<sup>2</sup>**

χρὴ Μουσῶν θεράποντα καὶ ἄγγελον, εἴ τι περισσόν  
εἰδείη, σοφίης μὴ φθονερὸν τελέθειν, 770  
ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν μῶσθαι, τὰ δὲ δεικνύεν, ἄλλα δὲ ποιεῖν·  
τί σφιν χρήσεται μούνος ἐπιστάμενος;<sup>46</sup>

A servant and messenger of the Muses, even if he knows exceeding much, should not be grudging of his lore, but seek out this, illumine that, invent the other; what use can he make of this if none know it but he? (Transl. J.M. Edmonds, 1931 [P])

Διδάσκω (= To Teach/Learn How to Make Poetry)

**Od. 22.340-8 (Phemius)**

ἦ τοι ὁ φόρμιγγα γλαφυρὴν κατέθηκε χαμᾶζε 340  
μεσσηγὺς κρητῆρος ἰδὲ θρόνου ἀργυροήλου,  
αὐτὸς δ' αὐτ' Ὀδυσῆα προσαΐξας λάβε γούνων  
καὶ μιν λισσόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα·  
"γουνούμαί σ', Ὀδυσσεῦ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καὶ μ' ἐλέησον.  
αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν ἀοιδὸν 345  
πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀεῖδω.

<sup>46</sup> See the remarks of Ford (92-3) in Figueira, Nagy 1985.

αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας skill / contents  
 παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν· ἔοικα δέ τοι παραείδειν  
 ὧς τε θεῶ· τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομήσαι".<sup>47</sup>

(340) So he laid the hollow lyre on the ground between the mixing-bowl and the silver-studded chair, and himself rushed forward and clasped Odysseus by the knees, and made entreaty to him, and spoke winged words: "By thy knees I beseech thee, Odysseus, and do thou respect me and have pity; (345) on thine own self shall sorrow come hereafter, if thou slayest the minstrel, even me, who sing to gods and men. Self-taught am I, and the god has planted in my heart all manner of lays, and worthy am I to sing to thee as to a god; wherefore be not eager to cut my throat". (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1919 [P])

Sol. fr. 13 West<sup>2</sup> (= 1 Gentili-Prato<sup>2</sup>), (33-6,) 51-2

θνητοὶ δ' ὧδε νοέομεν ὁμῶς ἀγαθὸς τε κακὸς τε,  
 εὖ ρεῖν ἦν αὐτὸς δόξαν ἕκαστος ἔχει,  
 πρὶν τι παθεῖν· τότε δ' αὐτίς ὀδύρεται· ἄχρι δὲ τούτου 35  
 χάσκοιτες κούφαις ἐλπίσι τερπόμεθα. [...]  
 ἄλλος Ὀλυμπιάδων Μουσέων πάρα δῶρα διδαχθεῖς, (51)  
 ἰμερτῆς σοφίης μέτρον ἐπιστάμενος.<sup>48</sup>

We mortal men, alike good and bad, are minded thus: – each of us keepeth the opinion he hath ever had till he suffers ill, and then forthwith he grieveth; albeit ere that, we rejoice open-mouthed in vain expectations. [...] (51) another through his learning in the gifts of the Olympian Muses, cunning in the measure of lovely art. (Transl. J.M. Edmonds, 1931)

A kind of anthology of this kind of expression is also preserved in the last part of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, vv. 475-9, 482-6, 507-12:

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ οὖν τοι θυμὸς ἐπιθύει κιθαρίζειν, 475  
 μέλπεο καὶ κιθάριζε καὶ ἀγλαίας ἀλέγυνε  
 δέγμενος ἔξ ἐμέθεν· σὺ δέ μοι φίλε κῦδος ὄπαζε.  
 εὐμόλπει μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχων λιγύφωννον ἐταίρην  
 καλὰ καὶ εὖ κατὰ κόσμον ἐπιστάμενος ἀγορεύειν.

(475) But since, as it seems, your heart is so strongly set on playing the lyre, chant, and play upon it, and give yourself to merriment,

<sup>47</sup> For the meaning of αὐτοδίδακτος, see Russo 2004, 191-2 (fn. vv. 347-8).

<sup>48</sup> See also Gladigow 1965, 16-20; Noussia-Fantuzzi 2010, 183-5.



taking this as a gift from me, and do you, my friend, bestow glory on me. Sing well with this clear-voiced companion in your hands; for you are skilled in good, well-ordered utterance.

[...]

ὅς τις ἂν αὐτὴν  
τέχνη καὶ σοφίη δεδαημένος ἔξερεεῖνη  
φθεγγόμενη παντοῖα νόφ' ἡριέντα διδάσκει  
ῥεῖα συνηθείησιν ἄθυρομένη μαλακῆσιν, 485  
ἐργασίην φεύγουσα δυήπαθον· ...

Whoso with wit and wisdom enquires of it cunningly, him it teaches (485) through its sound all manner of things that delight the mind, being easily played with gentle familiarities, for it abhors toilsome drudgery.

[...]

καὶ τὰ μὲν Ἑρμῆς  
Λητοῖδην ἐφίλησε διαμπερὲς ὡς ἔτι καὶ νῦν,  
σήματ' ἐπεὶ κίθαριν μὲν Ἑκηβόλω ἐγγυάλιξεν  
ἡμερτήν, δεδαῶς ὁ δ' ἐπωλένιον κιθάριζεν· 510  
αὐτὸς δ' αὐθ' ἑτέρης σοφίης ἐκμάσσατο τέχνην·  
συρίγγων ἐνοπήν ποιήσατο τηλόθ' ἀκουστήν.<sup>49</sup>

And Hermes loved the son of Leto continually, even as he does now, when he had given the lyre as token to the Far-shooter, (510) who played it skilfully, holding it upon his arm. But for himself Hermes found out another cunning art and made himself the pipes whose sound is heard afar. (Transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, 1914 [P])

But, in line with this distinction – or awareness of the distinction – between content and technique (σοφία), it is also worth reading an interesting fragment of Bacchylides, unfortunately out of context, transmitted by Clement Alexandrinus:

Bacchyl. *Paeans*, fr. 2 Irigoin (cf. 5 Maehler), quoted by Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.68.5

“ἕτερος ἔξ ἑτέρου σοφός / τό τε πάλα τό τε νῦν”, φησὶ Βακχυλίδης ἐν τοῖς Παιᾶσιν· “[οὐδὲ γὰρ ῥᾶστων] ἀρρήτων ἐπέων πύλας / ἔξευρεῖν”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See Bollack 1968, 551: “Les deux exemples de l’*Hymne à Hermès* (483 et 511) sont instructifs par la juxtaposition de τέχνη et de σοφία, le premier terme s’appliquant à l’adresse éblouissante, quasi magique, alors que le second désigne plutôt un ordre exprimable du savoir, en l’occurrence un genre musical et son harmonie propre”.

<sup>50</sup> Square brackets of Irigoin: the translation presupposes that the words οὐδὲ γὰρ ῥᾶστων are of Clemens, and not part of the quotation from Bacchylides (as in edition of Maehler).

“One gets his skill from another, now as in days of old”, says Bacchylides in his *Paean*s; for it is no easy matter “to discover the gates of verse unspoken before”. (Transl. D.A. Campbell, 1992)

In fact, the transfer of skills from one poet to another (ἕτερος ἐξ ἑτέρου σοφός) seems to allude to the process of learning by apprenticeship that must have been at the basis of every poet’s training, from time immemorial (τό τε πάλαι τό τε νῦν): a process that – on this point, however, the state of preservation of the fragment suggests to be even more cautious – was inseparable from the transmission of some traditional content (not necessarily new, cf. ἀρρήτων ἐπέων πύλας ἐξευρεῖν), in order to substantiate the songs and, at the same time, to allow the training and acquisition of the skill of poetic creation.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.8

The permeability of the two spheres was, moreover, inescapable and natural, not least because – besides poetic content – even poetic skill (σοφία) could be represented, in the sense we have tried to outline, as a divine gift, a privilege received from the divinity, which allowed a man to excel in the creation of poetry.

(Skill/Content)

*Od.* 8.487-98

“Δημόδοκ’, ἔξοχα δὴ σε βροτῶν αἰνίζομ’ ἀπάντων·  
ἢ σέ γε Μοῦσ’ ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς πάϊς, ἢ σέ γ’ Ἀπόλλων·  
λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀχαιῶν οἶτον αἰεΐεις,  
ὅσσοι ἔρξαν τ’ ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὅσοι ἐμόγησαν Ἀχαιοί,  
ὥς τέ που ἢ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας.  
ἀλλ’ ἄγε δὴ μετάβηθι καὶ ἵππου κόσμον ἄεισον  
δουρατέου, τὸν Ἐπειὸς ἐποίησεν σὺν Ἀθήνῃ,  
ὄν ποτ’ ἐς ἀκρόπολιν δόλον ἤγαγε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς  
ἀνδρῶν ἐμπλήσας οἳ ῥ’ Ἴλιον ἐξαλάπαξαν.  
αἶ κεν δὴ μοι ταῦτα κατὰ μοῖραν καταλέξῃς,  
αὐτίκ’ ἐγὼ πᾶσιν μυθήσομαι ἀνθρώποισιν,  
ὥς ἄρα τοι πρόφρων θεὸς ὦπασε θέσπιν ἀοιδίην”.

<sup>51</sup> See also Fearn 2007, 2-20 (briefly, Giuseppetti 2015, 294 ff., fn. 20); Giordano 2013, 40. On the possibility of recognising an ‘answer’ to Pind. *Ol.* 2.86 ff. (quoted above in § 2.2) in this fragment of Bacchylides, see also Gentili 2006, 91-1; Catenacci in Gentili 2013, 50-3, 410 (fnn. 86-8).

“Demodocus, verily above all mortal men do I praise thee, whether it was the Muse, the daughter of Zeus, that taught thee, or Apollo; for well and truly dost thou sing of the fate of the Achaeans, (490) all that they wrought and suffered, and all the toils they endured, as though haply thou hadst thyself been present, or hadst heard the tale from another. But come now, change thy theme, and sing of the building of the horse of wood, which Epeius made with Athena's help, the horse which once Odysseus led up into the citadel as a thing of guile, (495) when he had filled it with the men who sacked Ilios. If thou dost indeed tell me this tale aright, I will declare to all mankind that the god has of a ready heart granted thee the gift of divine song”. (Transl. A.T. Murray, 1919 [P])

Hes. *Theog.* 22-34

αἵ [scil. the Muses] νύ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδίδαξαν ἀοιδίην,  
 ἄρνας ποιμαίνονθ' Ἑλικῶνος ὑπο ζαθέοιο.  
 τόνδε δέ με πρῶτιστα θεαὶ πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπον,  
 Μοῦσαι Ὀλυμπίαδες, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο· 25  
 “ποιμένες ἄγραυλοι, κάκ' ἐλέγχεα, γαστέρες οἶον,  
 ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,  
 ἴδμεν δ' εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.”  
 ὡς ἔφασαν κοῦραι μέγαλον Διὸς ἀρτιέπειαι,  
 καί μοι σκῆπτρον ἔδον δάφνης ἐριθιλέος ὄζον 30  
 δρέψασαι, θηητόν· ἐνέπνευσαν δέ μοι αὐδὴν  
 θέσπιν, ἵνα κλείοιμι τὰ τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα,  
 καί μ' ἐκέλονθ' ὑμεῖν μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἐόντων,  
 σφᾶς δ' αὐτὰς πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν αἰεῖδεν.

And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me - (25) the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things”. So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave (30) me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvellous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last. (Transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, 1914 [P])

Hes. Op. 654-62

ἔνθα δ' ἐγὼν ἐπ' ἄεθλα δαΐφρονος Ἀμφιδάμαντος  
Χαλκίδα [τ'] εἰσεπέρησα· τὰ δὲ προπεφραδμένα πολλὰ 655  
ἄεθλ' ἔθεσαν παῖδες μεγαλήτορες· ἔνθα μέ φημι  
ἕμνῳ νικήσαντα φέρειν τρίποδ' ὠτώεντα.  
τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ Μούσησ' Ἑλικωνιάδεσσ' ἀνέθηκα  
ἔνθα με τὸ πρῶτον λιγυρῆς ἐπέβησαν αἰοιδῆς.  
τόσσον τοι νηῶν γε πεπεύρημαι πολυγόμεφων· 660  
ἀλλὰ καὶ ὧς ἐρέω Ζηγνὸς νόον αἰγιόχοιο·  
Μοῦσαι γάρ μ' ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ἕμνον αἰεΐειν.

Then I crossed over to Chalcis, to the games of wise Amphidamas where the sons of the great-hearted hero proclaimed and appointed prizes. And there I boast that I gained the victory with a song and carried off a handled tripod which I dedicated to the Muses of Helicon, in the place where they first set me in the way of clear song. (660) Such is all my experience of many-pegged ships; nevertheless I will tell you the will of Zeus who holds the aegis; for the Muses have taught me to sing in marvellous song. (Transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, 1914 [P])

Archil. fr. 1 West<sup>2</sup>

εἰμὶ δ' ἐγὼ θεράπων μὲν Ἐνυαλίοιο ἄνακτος  
καὶ Μουσέων ἐρατὸν δῶρον ἐπιστάμενος.<sup>52</sup>

I am the servant of lord Enyalios / and an expert in the lovely gift of the Muses. (Transl. L. Swift, 2019)

Ibyc. fr. 1(a) Page (282 PMG), 23-6

καὶ τὰ μὲ[ν ἄν] Μοῖσαι σεσοφ[ισμ]ένοι  
εὖ Ἑλικωνίδ[ε]ς ἐμβραΐεν λογι·  
θνατὸς δ' οὐ κ[ε]ἴν ἄνηρ 25  
διερὸ[ς] τὰ ἕκαστα εἴποι  
ναῶν ὧ[ς] Μεν[ε]λάος ...

on these themes the skilled Muses of Helicon might embark in story, but no mortal man (untaught?) could tell each detail... (Transl. D.A. Campbell, 1991)

<sup>52</sup> See Lanata [1963] 2020 on this fragment: "Il poeta possiede una ἐπιστήμη, una perizia tecnica sua propria che è la misura della sua libertà di fronte alla Musa" (35).

Thus the Muses did not teach Hesiod a song, but taught him how to sing in general (μὲν ἐδίδαξαν... ἀείδειν σοφία, *Op.* 662), and also inspired him with imperishable content (ἀθέσφατον ὕμνον, *Op.* 662); Archilocus, on the other hand, asserted first and foremost his primary human dimension (as a warrior, not as a poet, cf. v. 1), which clearly justified much of his poetry (i.e. content), but at the same time claimed a consolidated experience also as a creator of poetry (ἐπιστάμενος, cf. v. 2), of that art which goes back to the Muses and which – perhaps – Archilochus himself had imagined to acquire by divine gift (if we think of the biographical tradition documented by the epigraph of Mnesiepes).<sup>53</sup> In Ibycus, finally, there is a kind of retro-projection: the very creators of poetry – the Muses – are described in the same way as a poet who has mastered the poetic technique;<sup>54</sup> the Muses are thus qualified by an attribute denoting their σοφία, precisely because they are the very paradigm of poetic skill, the model of perfect mastery of poetic σοφία (to which every poet should aspire).<sup>55</sup>

#### 4 Final Remarks

Taking into account both the poetic declarations and descriptions of poets (and poetic ‘investitures’) that we have considered, and the features of the wise men that we have tried to identify, we could perhaps suggest that (1) ἐπίσταμαι (and related words) identified the process of learning a craft/art, considered from an ‘internal’ point of view, i.e. that of the person learning the craft (in the same way as διδάσκω, and related words, which focused on the learning process);<sup>56</sup> and that instead (2) σοφός (and related words) was applied to the person who had reached the end of this process and was finally able to master his craft, but above all who was perceived as such by an audience.

In the case of poetry, the ability to communicate in a marked form (different from the everyday form of speech), according to expressive codes fixed by tradition (= poetic σοφία), could lead an audience to recognise a σοφός in a poet (i.e. a poet as σοφός), even regardless of the content – mostly unverifiable, moreover – that he would express. Therefore, σοφός may have been an ‘external’ marker, an indicator of the poet’s perception by his audience: an epithet applied to a man

<sup>53</sup> See Ornaghi 2009, 38-42; and also Aloni 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Hes. Op.* 649, quoted in § 2.1.

<sup>55</sup> See also Wilkinson 2013, 71-5. Different echoes have been recognised in this passage by Hardie 2013, 10-14. As a term of comparison, see also Edmunds in Figueira, Nagy 1985, 100-1 (and the conclusions of pages 109-11), on the mentions of the Muses in Theognides (and in the only surviving fragment [fr. 1 West<sup>2</sup>] of ‘Pigres’ of Halicarnassus). On the divine origin of poetic skills, compare now also Stewart 2016, 207-9.

<sup>56</sup> See also Bollack 1968, 551.

who, at the top of his training, was finally perceived as superior by the environment in which he was acting, thanks to his established skill;<sup>57</sup> whereas, to be ἐπιστάμενος was perhaps the internal aspect – the poet's own awareness or consciousness – of a state that was externally perceived by others as possession of σοφία. This remark should be seen as complementary to some – even recent – observations on the authority of poetic language:<sup>58</sup> here, in addition, we suggest that the perception of the authoritativeness of the message was in the form, rather than in the content itself; that is, the recognisability of the 'sapiential' (wise) character came, even before the content, through the authoritative form (appropriately poetic) that the message could take.

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<sup>57</sup> To the parameters and audience-skills required to make this kind of recognition I would like to come back in further research (but for now compare the incisive assessment made by Griffith 1990, esp. 189-92).

<sup>58</sup> Such as those of Ercolani 2013: "In un contesto di oralità, la parola che vuol essere autorevole deve essere formalizzata. Il massimo livello di formalizzazione si realizza nella parola poetica, dove all'elaborazione linguistica si affianca la strutturazione metrico-ritmica: il risultato è un verso in cui sono elaborati vari tipi di messaggi ritenuti rilevanti, cioè da diffondere e tramandare, siano essi nozioni tecniche, norme comportamentali o procedurali, valori etici" (252).

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# King, Sage, Scribe, and Priest: Seleucid Uruk and Jerusalem in Perspective

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**Abstract** The scribal role is fundamental in Antiquity and is often associated with royal power, to the point that one may speak of a mythology of the ‘wise king’. One may think of Kings David and Solomon in the Hebrew Bible or the tradition begun with Šulgi in Mesopotamia. This mythology, which articulates both concepts of kingship and wisdom, seems to gain credence not so much at the peak of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires or at the time of David and Solomon reigns, but at a very late moment in the history of these cultures, when they lacked political independence, especially during the Hellenistic period.

**Keywords** Scribalism. Wisdom. Kingship. Hellenistic Jerusalem. Hellenistic Uruk.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Kings, Sages, Scribes, and Priests in Mesopotamia. – 1.1 A General View over Time. – 2.1 A Particular Witness in the Seleucid Rule: The Uruk List of Kings and Sages. – 3 Hebrew Bible and (Divine) Mediation. – 3.1 The Problem with Kingship in the Hebrew Bible. – 3.2 Royal and Priestly Prophecy: The Case of Ben Sira in Hellenistic Times. – 4 David and Solomon: Kings Mythologized as Authors. – 4.1 David and the Lyre. – 4.2 Solomon: Great King of the East or Greek Philosopher?

## 1 Introduction

Scribes and scribalism have recently been the object of renewed studies.<sup>1</sup> The scribal role in the transmission of traditions and cultural heritages is fundamental in Antiquity. It is often associated

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<sup>1</sup> Moore 2021; Zhakevich 2020; Schniedewind 2019; Bloch 2018; Cooley 2018; Grabbe 2014; Davies, Römer 2013; Perdue 2008; van der Toorn 2007; Perdue, Gammie 1990.

with royal power, to the point that one may speak of a mythology of the 'wise king', in the sense that the latter is not only a king of justice or a good shepherd but also a cultured, literate king, at times even 'one who writes'. One thinks in the Hebrew Bible of kings David and Solomon, but also, in Mesopotamia, of the tradition initiated by Šulgi (2094-2047 BCE) and later perfected under Aššurbanipal (668-630 BCE). This mythology, which articulates both concepts of kingship and wisdom, the latter embracing politic, divinatory, and scribal techniques, seems to gain credence not so much at the peak of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires or at the time of the reigns of David and Solomon, but at a very late development in the history of these cultures –<sup>2</sup> indeed, when these cultures lacked political independence, especially during the Hellenistic period.

The Hellenistic period may be characterized as a new oikumene, when political, cultural, and linguistic structures were Hellenized throughout the ancient Near East.<sup>3</sup> Alexander the Great's generals competed for the inheritance of his empire and finally, after several wars, three kingdoms emerged in 301: the most modest was Macedonia; it was conquered in 168 BCE by Rome, which would impose itself more and more in the eastern Mediterranean. The largest part of the empire, from Anatolia to Mesopotamia, went to Seleucos I, founder of the Seleucid dynasty. The whole of Cyrenaica, Egypt, and Syria Palestine became the kingdom of Ptolemy I Lagos, founder of the Lagid dynasty. After several wars, Palestine fell permanently into the Seleucid orbit around 200 BCE, conquered by Antiochos III. While the Lagid kingdom experienced stability for most of the third century and dominated the eastern Mediterranean basin, the Seleucids were plagued by many difficulties combined. Wars were fueled against the Lagids, including the "Syrian wars" (during the years 275-271, 260-253, 246-241, 219-217, 202-200, and 170-168). Their territory, being immense, slowly fragmented and dissolved. From this period different sources and archives have been excavated and studied. Well known is the history of Seleucid Uruk, in addition to that of Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Though these cities lay far away from each other, the way local elites responded to the political, cultural, and linguistic changes, when placed in perspective, show very interesting and connected evolutions. Our attention will be focused on this mythology of the wise king in the Hellenistic period, and two main sources will be of

<sup>2</sup> This idea regarding the reception of the figure of king Nabonidus was thoroughly developed by Beaulieu 2007, 137-66.

<sup>3</sup> Martinez-Sève 2017, 36-46; 2011, 89-106.

<sup>4</sup> Ambos 2020; Honigman et al. 2021; Stevens 2016, 74; Clancier, Monerie 2014, 181-237; Clancier 2011; 2007, 21-74; Robson 2007, 440-61; Linssen 2004; Pearce, Doty 2000, 331-41.

interest: the Uruk List of Kings and Sages, and the Solomonic Wisdom collection in the Bible. It is not argued here that these sites or documents influenced each other; rather it is proposed that the Hellenistic oikumene brought along local elites' responses that can be fruitfully compared, particularly concerning ancestral culture, understood in terms of divine kingship and wisdom.

## 2 Kings, Sages, Scribes, and Priests in Mesopotamia

### 1.1 A General View over Time

As Mattila recalled, the wisdom of kings is of divine origin, and royal mythology developed in the light of the figures of Adapa or *apkallū*.<sup>5</sup> Among different examples cited,<sup>6</sup> the propaganda around the royal figure of Aššurbanipal is famous:

Palace of Aššurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria, whom Nabû and Tašmetu endowed with great wisdom, and who with a sharp eye acquired the gems of literature. While none of the kings who preceded me had learned that craft, with the wisdom of Nabû I wrote on tablets all extant cuneiform writings, checked, and collated them, and established them in my palace for my reference and reading.<sup>7</sup>

The example of Aššurbanipal may look exceptional. However, royal power and wisdom were closely related, and power was even justified by wisdom. It can be said that there was an "agreement" between power, in the person of the king, and knowledge of the world, held by the scribal, priestly, and divinatory elites: the king, informed by his close elite, acted in accordance with the will of the gods – that is, the 'divine will was dictated to the king by his elite'. The wisdom of the king thus responded to the order of the cosmos, a divinely revealed

<sup>5</sup> Mattila 2019, 67-8. See already Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 293-307. On divine sages, see Fechner 2022.

<sup>6</sup> King Hammurapi refers in his law code to "wisdom (*igigallim*) that Ea decreed for me" (Codex Hammurapi 47.26-7). The wisdom granted by the gods is a recurrent theme also in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions (e.g. Tiglath-pileser III. RINAP 1, Tiglath-pileser III 47 r.17'). In a letter praising Aššurbanipal's rhetoric, the king's speech is equaled to that of the *apkallu* (SAA 10 30, r.3-9; the sender's name is missing but the letter was most probably sent by the chief scribe). In his letter to Aššurbanipal, the chief haruspex Marduk-šumu-usur calls the king a sage and an offspring of Adapa and goes in his praise as far as to say that the king has surpassed the wisdom of the *apsû* (SAA 10 174). Mattila 2019, 67-8.

<sup>7</sup> Hunger 1968, 319.

order, clearly stated by the divinatory arts and techniques.<sup>8</sup> The royal ideal could thus be summarized as perfect obedience to the revealed divine word. The wise king was good, as opposed to the “bad king”, the one who did not listen to the will of the gods.<sup>9</sup> Many texts emphasize this royal ideal, whether literary or chronographic, and even criticize the royal memory when the cosmic agreement is thought to have been undermined. We may think, in the latter case, of Narâm-Sîn, Nabonidus (and the Deuteronomist ideology in the Hebrew Bible). Often judgment is based on cultic agreement.<sup>10</sup> The king’s wisdom is therefore an integral part of the mediating conception of kingship and requires a very elaborate organization and cohesion of skills:

The central and pervasive role of divination as underpinning the world view, religion, and politics, generated a diversified class of intellectuals responsible for explaining and controlling the nature of things and protecting the king from portentous omens. These are the agents behind the complex grid of cultural strategies and key metaphors which shape the image of the king; they organized and set the guidelines norms, and rules for correct royal behavior as the king as agent of the gods was responsible for maintaining the social order and thus contributing to securing the cosmic order.<sup>11</sup>

This royal elite has been the subject of extensive studies. As demonstrated by Lenzi, kings and wise scholars were closely associated with the “secret” of divine revelation. These were known as *apkallū* (antediluvian sages) and *ummânū* (elite or royal experts), of which the Uruk List of Kings and Sages dated to the Seleucid period is a famous witness.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “The Mesopotamia worldview did not separate the natural world from the normative framework. Natural phenomena were indicative of divine decisions made in relation to human life and to be decoded by divinatory experts, as revealed by the scholars’ references to the celestial phenomena as ‘heavenly writing’ (*šītir šamê*) or ‘writing of the firmament’ (*šītir burūmê*) and categorisation of the liver as ‘tablet of the gods’ (*tuppi ša ili*). To be able to read the divine will written in the intestines of an animal or in the constellations was the prerogative of these scholars and - in the royal ideological discourse - of the king. Nature was conceived as a carrier of divine writing establishing the cosmic truth (*kittu*), the decoding of which put the diviners at center stage” (Pongratz-Leisten 2014, 527; cf. 2013; 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Pongratz-Leisten 2014, 534.

<sup>10</sup> Pongratz-Leisten 2014, 538. Concerning Nabonidus, see Beaulieu 2007, 159-63. The matter is there more complex, as it is about legitimizing religious authority rather than dogma.

<sup>11</sup> Pongratz-Leisten 2014, 543-4.

<sup>12</sup> Allusions to the seven sages are known in the myth of Erra (1.162), in the incantations of the series *Maqlū* (“7 sages from Eridu”, *Maqlū* 2.124.36; 5.110.37; 7.49.38; 6-2),

## 2.1 A Particular Witness in the Seleucid Rule: The Uruk List of Kings and Sages

The so-called Uruk List of Kings and Sages is preserved in a single-column tablet unearthed, among other ritual texts from lamentation priests, in Uruk's Bit Reš temple. It is dated to the year 147, during the reign of Antiochos IV (175-164 BCE), a few years before the Seleucids would lose the eastern part of their empire when the Parthian empire, under Mithridates, would conquer Mesopotamia in 141 BCE.

The tablet witnesses to the ancestral mythology of the wise king. As analyzed by Helle, the Uruk List of Kings and Sages is composed of four sections separated by horizontal rulings, each section corresponding to a major epoch of history: the mythical time before the Flood when the sages were semi-divine creatures; the historical time, after the Flood, when the sages were fully human. This second section makes clear a transition from the original cult of the sky-god Anu to that of the goddess Ištar.<sup>13</sup> The scholars listed along with the kings are all known from other sources as 'authors' of famous cuneiform texts. Finally the colophon points to Anu-belšunu claiming descent from Šîn-lēqi-unnenni, the author of the *Epic of Gilgameš* and the first scholar listed in the second section. The structure of the List implies cuneiform scholars were the proper successors to the semi-divine sages that had founded Mesopotamian culture. But why chose precisely those scholars known as 'authors'? This is what Helle wants to understand, more precisely the mechanism by which cultural history is 'reduced' to a list of names. Undoubtedly for the author, names are here indicative of a canon - that is, they evoke more than appears: they evoke their works as "authors".<sup>14</sup> The Uruk List of Kings and Sages thus provides a synoptic overview of the entire culture: "With its brevity, metonymy, and symmetry, the text sketched out a miniature version of a far broader tradition".<sup>15</sup> This is understood consequently as a major change due to the Hellenistic context:

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and in *Gilgameš* ("7 advisors" founders of Uruk, 1.i.19, 11.305), as well as in some fragments of the library of Aššurbanipal (AMT 105.1 / K.4023.21-5). See Lenzi 2008a; Borgner 1974; van Dijk 1962, 44; Reiner 1961.

**13** Helle 2018, 222; Ambos 2020.

**14** "The list of kings and sages includes a selection of the most famous authors of Babylonian literature. This is, in fact, surprising: given the otherwise predominant anonymity of Babylonian literature, any interest in the authorship of literary texts - let alone the placement of authors alongside mighty kings and mythical sages - represented a fundamental break with the tradition of the time" (Helle 2018, 220). See also Helle 2019; Foster 1991; Lambert 1962; 1957.

**15** Helle 2018, 230.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the canonization of Babylonian culture was an effect of Greek influence as such, or a product of Hellenistic cross-pollination. I view it as a specifically Babylonian development, but one that took place as a reaction to cultural contact and subsequent changes in the scholars' social standing. It was a counter-current brought about by new hegemonies and threats of the Hellenistic period, which forced these scholars to stake out a claim for cultural superiority in order to preserve their status. In order to do so, they had to define, delimit, and exalt the scholarly tradition they wanted to protect, and on which their social standing relied. In short, they had to produce a canon.<sup>16</sup>

Though it may be difficult to understand the Uruk List of Kings and Sages in a political perspective, it remains a fact nonetheless that whereas the List opens with Oannes and closes with king Antiochus IV, within the colophon the order king/sage is reversed: it is no longer the king who comes first but the scholar/author - Anu-belšunu along with his genealogy - and only second to him comes the Hellenistic king.

This genealogy has been referred to and analyzed by Lenzi as the "mythology of the scribal succession".<sup>17</sup> It could also be called the 'mythology of the wise king', as it matches so perfectly this conception of divine mediation through kings and sages - the cosmic agreement we have analyzed. While there can be no doubt about the ancient anchoring of such a mythology, Lenzi wonders about the late character of the List: why is this ideology of kings and sages, *ummânû* and *apkallû*, best known in the Seleucid period?<sup>18</sup> The careful examination of the way in which the elite formulated their genealogy reveals a cultic and political aspect of their ambitions. Thus, Nungalpirigal, the first postdiluvian *apkallu*, makes a bronze lyre to be placed in front of the deity Anu, clearly pointing to the renewal of Anu's cult in Uruk. By placing this act of devotion in first place, after the Flood, the List intends to give the cult of Anu a renewed primacy. Moreover, according to the author, the List seems to provide an etiology of the relationship between Nungalpirigal, the temple of Eana, and the temple of Anu, thus preventing any criticism regarding the idea that the house of Anu could replace that of Eana.<sup>19</sup> What is really the point of this 'mythology' if not to accredit scholars with ancestral, divine, and royal authority and in particular Anu-belšunu, who copied and signed the document? Therefore, the lamentation priest of the Seleucid era is endowed with a venerable history

<sup>16</sup> Helle 2018, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Lenzi 2008a; 2008b, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Lenzi 2008a, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Lenzi 2008a, 161.



that justifies his authority. He participates, moreover, in this mythology of the wise king, as he becomes the recipient and mediator of revealed treasures. This shows indeed how political the Uruk List of Kings and Sages was: in associating wisdom and skills with royal power in a myth of origin, in the end it endowed Anu-belšunu with royal and divine authority. We might say that at this point the myth of the 'wise king' becomes the myth of the 'royal sage' – that is, the sage, here the scribe and lamentation priest, sharing divine mediation and even taking authority over the Seleucid king, though at the same time showing him due respect.

### 3 Hebrew Bible and (Divine) Mediation

#### 3.1 The Problem with Kingship in the Hebrew Bible

Many texts from the Hebrew Bible are marked by a criticism of royal power, which is but the result of the loss of the monarchy in ancient Israel and Judah. We often know this phenomenon by the so-called Deuteronomistic ideology running from the book of Deuteronomy to the end of the books of Kings.<sup>20</sup> This theology accounts for an evolution in the idea of kingship, evolution that the Exile accelerated as monarchy was brought to a final term, at least in political terms, apart from the Hasmonean kingship (104-63 BCE). If criticism also exists in Mesopotamian texts, it is more extensive in the library represented by the Hebrew Bible, which texts were gradually edited after the Exile, even if we can identify among them older collections (narrative, legal, prophetic, or sapiential) that fully correspond to the ideal kingship in the ancient Near East. Many biblical texts are thus also anchored in the royal, mediating, and cosmic mythology, which we know in Mesopotamia. The scribes are present in the royal entourage with their more or less definite functions.<sup>21</sup> As for the Deuteronomistic ideology, many texts suggest that the divine royal mediation was questioned and thus had to be renewed or, more precisely, transferred, as the royal figure in particular was no longer pivotal: wisdom

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<sup>20</sup> Knoppers 2021; Dozeman et al. 2011.

<sup>21</sup> The scribe *sofer* is an administrator or secretary; he is counted alongside the treasurer (lit. weigher in Isa. 33:18), the inspector (lit. the one who counts in Isa. 33:18), the archivist or chronicler (2 Kings 18:18,37; 19:2), the attendant or head of the king's household (2 Kings 18:18,37), the priest (2 Kings 19:2), and the prophet (2 Kings 19:2). He is an important royal official, closely involved in political affairs (2 Kings 22:3,8-12 cf. 2 Chron. 34:15; Est. 3:12; 8:9). He may also be a military officer (2 Kings 25:19, cf. Jer. 52:25; 2 Chron. 26:11). Though different names and functions are known, the political organization of the kingdoms of the North and the South and the hierarchy within the monarchical organization are not known.

had to be found elsewhere! One example is certainly the figure of Moses: though never called a king, he is nonetheless endowed with the skill of writing down the Law and mediating it to the people. There is no doubt that the writing of the Law is part of an ancient paradigm of royal authority.<sup>22</sup> It thus participates in this royal mythology that has been developed above except that there is no longer a king but someone who is defined as a prophet.<sup>23</sup> The writing motif has at least two functions: to establish the fame of Moses, which merges with the glory of God, since the act of writing belongs to both of them;<sup>24</sup> and to establish the status of revelation – words can no longer change, and writing certifies it – even though, ironically, at least two legislative codes correct each other, with differences often highlighted. After Moses, other prophets would gain the authority of divine mediation. *Neviim*, after the Law/Torah, indeed became the second part of the official Hebrew library or Hebrew canon. Though we could demonstrate how prophets share in the mythology of the wise king, let us bear in mind our temporal and Hellenistic framework and provide an example of royal and priestly prophecy in Jerusalem during the Seleucid period, before delving into the Davidic and Solomonic paradigm.

### 3.2 Royal and Priestly Prophecy: The Case of Ben Sira in Hellenistic Times

Let us briefly recall the political situation in Jerusalem during the Seleucid period. The Jewish community of Judea was subject to the Ptolemies from 305 BCE and throughout the third century, then passed into the hands of the Seleucids after 198 BCE. Judea became increasingly important at an international scale between the fourth and the first centuries BCE owing to its strategic position. During the second century, a religious and popular opposition developed, led by the Maccabees (169-152). The war of the Maccabees against the Seleucids called into question the Greek way of life, spread by the political power and adopted by many. The Hasmonean state (from the real name of the family) became a priestly monarchy in 104, thus closely associated

<sup>22</sup> Anthonioz 2015a; 2015b.

<sup>23</sup> On the literary level, Moses' mediation includes all the legal codes of the Torah/Pentateuch that are either inserted into the revelation of Sinai (Ex. 19-Num. 10) or presented as a recapitulation of it (Deut. 12:26). See Römer 2012, 88.

<sup>24</sup> According to the Torah/Pentateuch, the word of God is divinely and orally revealed (Ex. 19). It is therefore first heard, "voice", before being put down in writing, whether by the hand of Moses (Ex. 24:4; 34:28) or by the hand of God himself (Ex. 24:12; 31:18; 34:1; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10) – with a confusion that underlines all the more Mosaic authority. In this prophetic revelation, Moses is the recipient or, better, the mediator. See Anthonioz 2019.

with the temple, but paradoxically continued to be Hellenized. It is in this situation that the Bible as library continued to develop.

The book of *Sira* is often said to be the first to have been placed under the authority of its 'author', thus testifying to Greek influence.<sup>25</sup> The prologue written by Ben Sira's grandson attributes the text to a sage of the Law, the Prophets, and other ancient books, named Jesus (Yeshua). The grandson indicates that in the 38th year of the reign of Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II (co-regent in 170-164, then regent in 145-117), he went to Egypt to study (132 BCE). It can be concluded that Ben Sira wrote his book earlier between 200 and 174 (at least before the pogrom at the initiative of Antiochos IV Epiphanes). Coming from the aristocracy and the elite,<sup>26</sup> Ben Sira may have traveled and learned from his travels.<sup>27</sup> His profile is rather Sadducean: he avoids any reference to oral tradition, to the resurrection of the dead, or to the apocalyptic theme. Wisdom and Torah are practically equivalent, and the temple of Jerusalem is central.<sup>28</sup> Wisdom comes out of the temple and is the source of teaching. Moses is not only the mediator of the Law; he is also the patron of the sages.<sup>29</sup> This description of Moses only gives more honor and importance to the office and function of the sage who interprets the Law. According to Murphy:

Ben Sira invited his readers who needed instruction to come to his school or teaching (bet midrash Sir 51:23) and singled out the profession of the scribe (*sopher*) as excelling all others (38:24-39:11: the scribe's profession increases wisdom). By this time, ca 180 BCE, the activity of the sage was concentrated particularly on the study of the Law. (Sir 39:1)<sup>30</sup>

Sira 51:23-5 indicates that Ben Sira taught in a school. His support for the institution of the temple and the priestly hierarchy shows that his teaching is related to them. He could therefore have worked under the Zadokite auspices. Should we consider a Torah school belonging to the temple in Jerusalem, or a synagogue? Sira 45:17.26 actually makes clear the connection between priesthood and teaching.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, Ben Sira appears as one of the first known scribes to interpret Scripture. Interestingly, he defines the sage and understands his own role as Deuteronomistic: fearful, loving, serving Yhwh and keeping

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<sup>25</sup> Beentjes 2008; Corley 2008; Wright 2008; Goshen-Gottstein 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Sira 23:14; 39:4.

<sup>27</sup> Sira 34:11.

<sup>28</sup> Zsengellér 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Sira 44:23-45:6.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy 1990, 3.

<sup>31</sup> See Sira 39:1-5. Boccaccini 2008; Doran 2002.

his commandments.<sup>32</sup> Whatever his teaching position, Ben Sira is a prophetic and priestly scribe and, as such, he shares in the ‘mythology of the wise king’ as he teaches the Law and the Prophets. The Praise of the Ancestors (44:1-50:24) is worth mentioning. As a self-contained unit of its own, it forms the last supplement for the book’s final edition. As the title indicates, it is a praise or encomium to the glory of heroes for their virtuous life. This long section indeed covers the Hebrew Bible with a canonical view, referring to and distinguishing between Torah and *Neviim*/Prophets. Unsurprisingly, priestly covenant is primordial, and the divine word prophetically revealed.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence, the royal transmission of wisdom has become priestly. Would the sage have become a prophet? Indeed, in Sira 39:6-8 and 24:30-4, the sage is divinely inspired at a time when prophets are discredited.<sup>34</sup> However, and for our purpose, Ben Sira is no king – rather, a priest and prophet: his authority is clearly understood as prophetic.<sup>35</sup> It is in this same period of time, however, that old royal figures seem to gain momentum, in the task of transmitting very ancient lore. This is the case in particular with David and Solomon.

#### 4 David and Solomon: Kings Mythologized as Authors

In the wake of the prophetic literature known as *Neviim*, particularly interesting for our purpose are the book of Psalms under the authority of David and the sapiential texts under the authority of Solomon, premises of collections that would later become part of the Hebrew library or canon: the *Ketuvim*. Let us look more closely at this process of literary collection.

##### 4.1 David and the Lyre

David is famous in the Hebrew Bible for playing the lyre and appeasing king Saul when the latter was seized by an evil spirit.<sup>36</sup> Contrarily to the lyre in the Uruk List of Kings and Sages, no obvious connection can be made between these narrative episodes and the cult: it is about smoothing the troubled spirit of king Saul. However, associated with these musical episodes, David as king becomes famous as a Psalmic authority. Already in the book of Samuel, one can read:

<sup>32</sup> Deut 6:1-2; 10:12-13; 30:16. Gammie 1990. See also Himmelfarb 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Goshen-Gottstein 2002. See also Beentjes 2008; Corley 2008; Wright 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Stone 1987.

<sup>35</sup> Sira 24:33.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Sam. 16:23.

And these are David's last words: Oracle of David, the son of Jesse and oracle of man (who has been) high placed, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweetest of the psalm(ist)s of Israel.<sup>37</sup>

Recent study of this Psalmic corpus demonstrates how Davidic authority, though anchored in the past, developed and strengthened over time, especially with the Greek translation of the Septuagint.<sup>38</sup> Not only does the composition of the Hebrew Psalter show the importance of the Davidic collections,<sup>39</sup> but the Greek Psalter reinforces the Davidic attribution to single psalms.<sup>40</sup> In the same way, the prestige of the Davidic figure is reflected in different manuscripts from the Judean desert. The Halachic Letter (4Q397; 4Q398) testifies, without naming the Psalms, to the importance of the figure of David: "We have written to you that you may discern (the meaning) of the book of Moses [and the] books of the prophets and Davi[d...]"<sup>41</sup> In the same way, the prestige of the Davidic figure is reflected in the often cited Psalmic composition, 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (11Q5). This composition incorporates among various literary texts a praise of David, sage and author of many psalms. David accordingly composed 4050 psalms and songs 'prophetically', yet he is never called a 'prophet'. David is here the perfect 'wise king', in the sense that he is both king and scholar, scribe and author. The Davidic authority is invoked again in 2 Macc. 2:13 and confirms the point that the king's authority was invoked to legitimize literary collections:

In these writings and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, it was said, in addition to these same facts, that Nehemiah, founding a library, gathered there the books concerning kings and prophets, those of David and letters of kings about offerings.

It is remarkable that obviously after the Law/Torah and the Prophets/*Neviim*, it is a collection under royal authority that opens that which will later be called Writings/*Ketuvim*. And this royal figure is himself wise. Studying the Davidic material, one may only point out the shared royal mythology. The reasons for the creation of the Davidic corpus seem to be clearly related to the mythology of the wise king. Let us now look at the Solomonic corpus to gain more insight.

<sup>37</sup> זמרת ישראל 2 Sam. 23:1.

<sup>38</sup> Willgren Davage 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Ps. 3-41; 51-72; 86; 101; 103; 138-44.

<sup>40</sup> 33; 43; 71; 91-9; 104 and 137.

<sup>41</sup> Berthelot 2013; Puech 2012; Berthelot 2006.

## 4.2 Solomon: Great King of the East or Greek Philosopher?

Indeed, this conception of the wise king developed further with the son of David, Solomon, the builder of the Jerusalem temple. In the biblical tradition that makes him a wise king, Solomon is iconic. Though at times also criticized,<sup>42</sup> he equals or even surpasses the wisdom of the greatest:

<sup>29</sup>God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, <sup>30</sup>so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East, and all the wisdom of Egypt. <sup>31</sup>He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. <sup>32</sup>He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. <sup>33</sup>He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. <sup>34</sup>People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.<sup>43</sup>

In this Hebrew biblical tradition, Solomon is also the authority under whom different works and collections are placed: the book of Proverbs, Qoheleth, and the Song of Songs,<sup>44</sup> to which may be added in the Greek biblical tradition the Book of Wisdom or *Sophia Salomonis*, Psalms, and Odes. Solomonic authority therefore goes beyond the scope of the third part of the Hebrew Bible or *Ketuvim* and opens to the Greek transmission and development of the Bible. Obviously, at the start of this development is a collection under royal authority.<sup>45</sup> This collection was born with the royal figure of David and unfolded through the figure of Solomon.

It is necessary to insist on this point of emergence of a Solomonic literature, at the crossroads of the book of Psalms, a Wisdom collection, and that of the Writings/*Ketuvim*. Why choose this royal authority in the process of authorizing books? What does it mean to place a collection under royal authority when monarchy is no more? To this question I have proposed elsewhere to consider the possible

<sup>42</sup> de Pury 2009, 32-3.

<sup>43</sup> NRS 1 Kings 4:29-34 / TM 1 Kings 5:9-13.

<sup>44</sup> The Song opens with the title "The most beautiful song of Solomon or Song of Songs"; Qoheleth with "Words of (the) Qoheleth, son of David, king in Jerusalem"; and the book of Proverbs with "Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1:1).

<sup>45</sup> There is clearly an editorial project of great coherence: the mediation after the Torah of Moses and after the Prophetic Library/*Neviim* continues through kings David and Solomon, royal figures having become mythical and thus a guarantee of divine authority.

Greek and philosophical influence.<sup>46</sup> If the ancient Near East anchorage of this royal mythology is not in doubt, the late development of the Solomon collection during the Hellenistic period and most probably during the Seleucid rule also deserves attention. The fact that out of five Wisdom books (Prov; Job; Qoh; Sir; Wis) two were transmitted in Greek speaks for itself. Would this Greek influence be at work in the very elaboration of a Solomonic ‘canon’ and more specifically a sapiential one? This notion can be defended, as the Solomon figure corresponds – at least according to one biblical tradition – to Plato’s ideal of the wise king. In the *Republic*, the ideal king is a “lover of wisdom” – that is, precisely a philosopher.<sup>47</sup> This concept of the philosopher-king could be the source of the astonishing biblical development that places the royal figure of Solomon at the head of a collection. The royal mediating figure then becomes an authoritative figure for the present: if Solomon is no more, he has nevertheless ‘left’ a set of writings that do not legislate but invite reflection on the community, its modes of governance, the freedom of citizens. This may or may not be related to the episode of the Hasmonean monarchy, which settled in the second half of the second century BCE. If it is related, it is indeed critical and polemical – and one should add self-critical, as Hasmonean kingship was Hellenized.<sup>48</sup> The authority that asserts itself is not only a mythical mediating authority, rooted in a venerable past, but truly a civic authority and undoubtedly polemical in view of the political facts – in the sense that an art of living is taught in and for the city in accordance with ancestral, not to say mythological, traditions. There is therefore no doubt that this literature is developing within the framework of a society that has opened to Greek culture and its philosophical heritage.

But another possibility, not exclusive of the preceding one, may be interesting to understand the choice and development of the figure of king Solomon in the late Hellenistic time of the composition of the Bible. As the Uruk List of Kings and Sages has shown, it is possible that amid political changes, a royal collection endowed scribes and priests with the authority of divine and royal mediation in the milieu of the Jerusalem temple. However, contrary to the Uruk List of Kings and Sages, scribes responsible for this Solomonic sapiential collection are not known by name. They did not sign their manuscripts, but by this very collection did they not gain prestige and power?

The authority of the royal figures, David and Solomon, is thus a particularly interesting case of the ancient royal mythology that

<sup>46</sup> Anthonioz 2020, 7-19.

<sup>47</sup> Pl. *Resp.* 5.473c. Baccou 1966, 229.

<sup>48</sup> Criticism of the Hasmonean kings is evident in a number of writings, including the Odes of Solomon.

places the figure of the king at the heart of a mediation of divine origin, so that the writings placed under such authority have the same divine origin. If this mythology is very old, it is quite original and strengthened in the Hellenistic period, it seems, as a process of authorization. But is it only a royal mythology? Is it not necessary, as in Seleucid Uruk, to detect in this royal strategy the affirmation of a scribal power that is endowed with a royal mediation and is thus anchored in past divine revelation? The analysis conducted here points to the interrelated scribal and priestly milieu that gained authority in the Seleucid period. Whether they left their names or not on their works, one means to gain such authority was by endowing their own endeavor and works with the ancient mythology of the wise king, mediator of all divine revelation.

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# Female Advisors Between East and West

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**Abstract** This article discusses the role of female advisors in Mesopotamian and Greek texts. Case studies are devoted to the advisors of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, and the female advisors in Herodotus, namely the daughters of Polycrates and Periander and Gorgo. While female advisors played an important role in Greece and Mesopotamia, the comparison revealed that, while in Mesopotamian texts the female advisors are mainly mother figures – whether human or divine –, daughters play an important role in Herodotus.

**Keywords** Female advisors. Herodotus. Ashurbanipal. Polycrates. Gorgo. Periander.

**Summary** 1 Why Do Rulers Need Advisors?. – 2 Advisors of the Assyrian King. – 2.1 Female Advisors: Mothers, Wise Women, Goddesses. – 2.2 Ashurbanipal and Ishtar. – 3 Preliminary Conclusions. – 4 The Advisor in Ancient Greek Literature. – 4.1 Wise Advisors in Herodotus. –5 Female Advisors in Greek Literature. – 5.1 The Daughter of Polycrates. – 5.2 Gorgo. –5.3 The Daughter of Periander. –6 Conclusion.

## 1 Why Do Rulers Need Advisors?

How do rulers make decisions? This is a question that always seems to have occupied the minds of the rulers themselves as well as those of their subjects. To take important decisions can be already hard if they only affect one's private life, but decisions of rulers affect the whole state and a wrong decision might not only lead to the death or the ruler

but in the worst case also of thousands of his subjects. Therefore, it comes to no surprise that the decision-making process of rulers was embedded in a well-developed system of analysis and critique. In the earliest texts from Mesopotamia rulers claim to follow the advice of gods. As gods usually do not converse directly with rulers, mediation was needed to explore the divine will. The divine will was considered to be revealed through dreams, through prophecy and through all kinds of divination. The gods were continuously sending messages to be understood by those who knew to read them and the king was obliged to carefully study those messages. In the Cuthean Legend, a literary text, the king rebels against this obligation:

I summoned the diviners and instructed (them). I designated seven lambs, one lamb for each of the seven. I set up pure reed altars. I queried the great gods: Ištar, Ilaba, Zababa, Annunitum, Šullat, Haniš, and Šamaš, the hero. The 'latch-hook' of the great gods did not give me permission for my going and my demonical onrush. Thus I said to my heart (i.e. to myself), these were my words: "What lion (ever) performed extispicy? What wolf (ever) consulted a dream-interpreter? I will go like a brigand according to my own inclination. And I will cast aside that (oracle) of the god(s); I will be in control of myself".<sup>1</sup>

This self-empowerment was not the best idea and the king Naram-Sin, who became the prototype of a bad ruler, lost his troops in a war for which he had no divine permission. His reluctance to listen to the advice of the gods was his central mistake. The Cuthean Legend was written down and copied by scribes, who themselves were often masters of all kinds of divination and the interpretation of the divine signs, in order to warn the kings of such a behavior. Divination was not an easy art, as the messages of the gods were sometimes tricky and could be misinterpreted. Therefore, a class of divination experts arose, which was consulted by the rulers. While openly criticising a powerful ruler is a rather dangerous task, these experts could guide the decisions of the king by referring to the ultimate authority: the gods.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Cuthean Legend, 72-83. Westenholz 1997, 316-17.

<sup>2</sup> Fink 2020a; 2020b.

## 2 Advisors of the Assyrian King

According to the Assyrian conception of kingship the ruler is the foremost servant of the god Assur, who is the real king. The king has to explore the divine will with the help of his experts and his experts seemingly also took hard facts into account when they interpreted the divine signs.<sup>3</sup> The Assyrian king was well aware that his experts could manipulate him and therefore he seems to have relied on different teams of experts in order to compare their results. We are well-informed about the discussions of the king with his experts for the late period of Neo-Assyrian times, because many letters of scholars to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal are preserved and were masterfully edited by Simo Parpola.<sup>4</sup> Besides these well-trained experts, the foremost scholars of their time, well-versed in all the texts of the immense cuneiform literature on divination, the king also relied on the advice of other people.

We can be quite sure that he relied on the advice of all kinds of experts for technology or military matters, but there is not much evidence for this, as most of these discussions might have taken place at the royal court or in the field and there seemingly was no necessity to document them in cuneiform. The best documented advisor of the king is their mother, or in some cases, even their grandmother. An old wise woman seems to be the appropriate person to give advice to a king. These wise women will be discussed below.

### 2.1 Female Advisors: Mothers, Wise Women, Goddesses

Mesopotamian kings have a special relationship with the gods, which is sometimes expressed through genealogical relations, or by the claim that a goddess served as a wet-nurse of the king.<sup>5</sup> Therefore the goddesses often take the role as a guide and advisor for the king. We can find many examples in the cuneiform evidence, where a wise woman, no matter if human or divine, gives advice to kings. The specific aspects of male and female wisdom in the ancient world were recently treated in a collected volume, to which the interested reader is referred.<sup>6</sup> In the Sumerian tradition we can find wise women in the role of advisors, dream interpreters, and scribes.<sup>7</sup> In her contribution

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<sup>3</sup> See Lanfranchi 1989 for the discussion of such a case.

<sup>4</sup> Parpola 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See Fink, Sazonov 2019 for a discussion of some examples of kings with special genealogies.

<sup>6</sup> Anthonioz, Fink 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Selz 2019.

to the aforementioned volume on the female sages in Akkadian literature Saana Svård discusses one example from literature, namely mother Ninsun from the Gilgamesh-epic and, maybe somewhat closer to historical reality, Adad-guppi, the famous mother of the last Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus. In the epic Ninsun often acts as the advisor of her son, she guides him through analysing his dreams and tries to help him to overcome challenging situations.<sup>8</sup> Adad-guppi also seems to have been such a supportive mother and she might have played a decisive role in bringing her son to the Neo-Babylonian throne. Svård hints at the close resemblances between these two characters and suggests that both are manifestations of a prototype, an ideal of a royal mother.<sup>9</sup> In the late phase of the Neo-Assyrian empire Naqi'a played an important role. During the reign of three different kings she influenced Assyrian politics, through her influence on the king, but as well as an independent actor, as she concluded vassal treaties, where she makes people swear loyalty to Ashurbanipal. She left her imprint on Assyrian politics first as the wife of Sennacherib, then as mother of Esarhaddon and finally as grandmother of Ashurbanipal.<sup>10</sup> As all human beings, also kings have a special relationship to their mother and therefore it comes to no surprise that kings rely on the advice of their closest and most trustworthy relatives. However, as mentioned above, several kings, among them Ashurbanipal, claimed to have a special relationship with certain goddesses - in the case of Ashurbanipal this is Ishtar, who, according to his inscriptions, developed maternal feelings for the king and protected her child from the evils of this world.

## 2.2 Ashurbanipal and Ishtar

Ashurbanipal, who reigned over the Assyrian empire from 668 to approximately 631 - we are not well informed about the end of his reign - claims that his reign was a time of abundance and prosperity for his subjects:

(i 27) The god Adad released his rains (and) the god Ea opened up his springs. Grain was five cubits high in its furrow (and) ear(s) of corn were five-sixths of a cubits long. Successful harvest(s) and an abundance of grain enabled pasture land to continually flourish, fruit orchards to be very lush with fruit, (and) cattle to successfully give birth to (their) young. During my reign, there was plenitude

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<sup>8</sup> See Svård 2019, 54-6.

<sup>9</sup> Svård 2019, 56-8.

<sup>10</sup> On Naqi'a see Melville 1999.



(and) abundance; during my years, bountiful produce was accumulated. (i 35) Throughout my entire land, (on account of) abundant trade, for one [sh]lekel of silver one could purchase ten donkey-loads of grain, one homer of wine, two seahs of oil, (and) one talent of wool. Year after year, I shepherded [the subjects of the god Enlil] in prosperity and with justice.<sup>11</sup>

This abundance was a visible proof of the divine favor and Assyria prospered while Assurs enemies were thrown into despair. However, evil never rests and the Assyrian order was endangered by powerful enemies. Without divine approval the Elamite king Teumman decided to attack Assyria. Ashurbanipal who was residing at Arbela to participate in a festival of the goddess Ištar, hears the news about the approaching Elamite army and falls into despair:

(v 16) During the month Abu (V) – the month of the heliacal rising of the Bow Star, the festival of the honored queen, the daughter of the god Enlil (the goddess Ištar) – to revere her great divinity, I resided in the city Arbela, the city that her heart loves, (v 20) (when) they reported to me news concerning an Elamite attack, which he (Teumman) had started against me without divine approval, saying: “Teumman, whose judgement the goddess Ištar had clouded (lit. “altered”), spoke as follows, saying: ‘I will not stop until I go (and) do battle with him’”. (v 24b) On account of these insolent words that Teumman had spoken, I made an appeal to the sublime goddess Ištar. I stood before her, knelt down at her feet, (and) made an appeal to her divinity, while my tears were flowing.<sup>12</sup>

Quite contrary to the usual image of the Neo-Assyrian king as a heroic warrior, Ashurbanipal takes the role of a child that asks his mother for help in a dangerous situation. Ashurbanipal’s prayer for help works out well and Ishtar decides to take her role as a protective mother:

(v 45b) The goddess Ištar heard my sorrowful plight and said to me “Fear not!”. She gave me confidence, (saying): “Because of your entreaties, which you directed towards me, (and because) your eyes were filled with tear(s), I had mercy (on you)”. (v 48b) During the course of the night that I had appealed to her, a dream interpreter lay down and saw a dream. He woke up and (then) reported to me the night vision that the goddess Ištar had shown him, saying: (v 51b) “The goddess Ištar who resides in the city Arbela entered

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<sup>11</sup> Ashurbanipal 003 / Prism B, i 27-38.

<sup>12</sup> Ashurbanipal 003 / Prism B, v 16-v 28.

and she had quivers hanging on the right and left. She was holding a bow at her side (and) she was unsheathing a sharp sword that (was ready) to do battle. You (Ashurbanipal) stood before her (v 55) (and) she was speaking to you like (your own) birth-mother. The goddess Ištar, the sublime one of the gods, called out to you, instructing you, saying: 'You are looking forward to waging war (and) I myself am about to set out towards my destination (the battlefield)'. You (then) said to her, saying: (v 60) 'Let me go with you, wherever you go, O Lady of Ladies!'. She replied to you, saying: 'You will stay in the place where you are (currently) residing. Eat food, drink wine, make music, (and) revere my divinity. In the meantime, I will go (and) accomplish this task, (thus) I will let (you) achieve (v 65) your heart's desire. Your face will not become pale, your feet will not tremble, you will not wipe off your sweat in the thick of battle'. She took you into her sweet embrace and protected your entire body. Fire flared up in front of her. She went off furiously outside. She directed her attention towards Teumman, the king of the land Elam with whom she was angr[y]".<sup>13</sup>

The text explicitly states that Ishtar took on the role of a mother, she wanted to protect her child and therefore she decided to go to battle against his enemies, while her child Ashurbanipal should eat food, drink wine, and make music. Seemingly Ashurbanipal was happy with this advice and stayed at home while the enemy's army was defeated by the goddess - in reality rather by a competent general of the Assyrian army. Obviously these ideas of Ashurbanipal do not necessarily have much to do with reality, but they demonstrate that this king presented himself as a crying child, asking his mother for help - for the best of his empire and his subjects, one could add. Besides being strong warriors, we could conclude, Assyrian kings should also have the competence to ask for help when help is needed and accept advice and help.

### 3 Preliminary Conclusions

In the Mesopotamian sources discussed above the main female advisor is the mother. This seems quite a natural approach, as mothers usually take the obligations to raise children and to teach them how to navigate in this world. The role of an advisor seems to be inherent in the role of a mother and the Mesopotamian texts discussed above shed light on the important role that royal mothers played in the life of their sons. However, the maternal role is not the only one

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<sup>13</sup> Ashurbanipal 003 / Prism B, v 45-v 72.

that is taken by female advisors in Mesopotamian sources. In the Gilgamesh epic, also the tavern-keeper and the prostitute – maybe both can be seen as different aspects of Ishtar – give important advice to the main characters.

## 4 The Advisor in Ancient Greek Literature

In ancient Greek literature, the motif of the advisor has occupied a prominent place virtually from its very beginnings. We need only look at Homer's epics: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the first one, it is worth noting the figure of Polydamas, who gives advice to Hector. However, his advice to Hector not to fight Achilles and to retreat to the city<sup>14</sup> goes unheeded, which is fraught with consequences as Hector dies at Achilles' hand. In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, appears the figure of Mentor – a son of Alkimos from Ithaca, whose name has become synonymous with an advisor who offers advice to young people and who plays the role of Telemachus' advisor. Mentor after Odysseus' departure at Troy held custody of his estate in Ithaca (Μέντωρ, ὅς ῥ' Ὀδυσῆος ἀμύμονος ἦεν ἑταῖρος, | καὶ οἱ ἰὼν ἐν νηυσὶν ἐπέτρεπεν οἶκον ἅπαντα) ("Mentor, who was a comrade of noble Odysseus. To him, on departing with his ships, Odysseus had given all his house in charge"; transl. by A.T. Murray).<sup>15</sup> During the proceedings of the assembly in Ithaca, Mentor often opposes the actions of suitors. Among other things, he speaks out against the fact that the suitors are feasting at the expense of the absent Odysseus, who they believe is already dead.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, on the other hand, the goddess Athena herself appears under the figure of Mentor, who advises the son of Odysseus. Athena, in the form of Mentor, for example, accompanies Telemachus on his journey to Pylos, where, at the court of king Nestor, he tries to get some news about his father.

### 4.1 Wise Advisors in Herodotus

The motif of the counsellor is an extremely important element of the narrative also in Herodotus. In his *Histories*, it is often associated with Herodotus' historiosophy (i.e. his belief in the envy of the gods – φθόνος θεῶν (is envy of the gods)– and the instability of human fortune), nor is it a new issue in the subject literature. As early as the 1930s, works were being written that are still cited today, such as Heinrich Bischoff's

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hom. *Il.* 18.249-313.

<sup>15</sup> Hom. *Od.* 2.225-6.

<sup>16</sup> Hom. *Od.* 2.229 ff.

doctoral thesis (*Der Warner bei Herodot*)<sup>17</sup> or Richard Lattimore's article (*The Wise Adviser in Herodotus*).<sup>18</sup> The very title of the first publication indicates what aspect of the advisors' activities Bischoff paid particular attention to – warning of the various dangers that lurk for those who do not listen to the voice of the advisors (in his analysis, Bischoff focused on oriental rulers, e.g. Croesus, Darius, Xerxes, as well as the tyrant of Samos Polycrates). Richard Lattimore, on the other hand, in his article, singles out advice of a practical nature in addition to the warning function that advisors performed. In recent years, interest in this issue has not waned, as evidenced by works examining particular aspects of λόγοι in which the figure of the counsellor appears. Worth noting in this context is a very useful article by Iwona Wieżel of the Catholic University of Lublin (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski), which unfortunately has not been published in any of the congressional languages, making its reach limited.<sup>19</sup> She analyzes the construction of the various λόγοι in which the wise advisor appears. Wieżel points out that in the stories about wise advisors we are dealing with a compositional pattern, according to which first there is a description of the ruler's success, followed by a situation requiring advice or warning. This is followed by the introduction of the wise advisor giving the advice. The compositional framework closes with the outcome of the advice or warning, which is often synonymous with the ruler's failure. In my dissertation, published in November 2022, I also took up the theme of advisors in Herodotus' *Histories*, analysing the topos of the wise advisor through the lens of ethnicity.<sup>20</sup>

## 5 Female Advisors in Greek Literature

In my part of this text, I would like to deal with female advisors, who are far fewer in Herodotus than men. However, this does not mean that they do not play an important role in Herodotus' narrative. This seems relevant since, despite the intensive interest in women's issues, the problem of female advisors in the *Histories* seems insufficiently researched or even overlooked. As an example, Wolfgang Will in his book *Herodot und Thukydides – die Geburt der Geschichte* writes the following in the opening paragraph of the section on advisors:

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<sup>17</sup> Bischoff 1932.

<sup>18</sup> Lattimore 1939.

<sup>19</sup> Wieżel (Domańska) 2006-07.

<sup>20</sup> Kuciak 2022, 127-9. The analysis focused on Amasis and the advice he gave to the tyrant of Samos, Polycrates. The aforementioned Pharaoh is the only non-Greek to give advice to a Greek in Herodotus, while non-Greeks give advice to other non-Greeks 21 times, a Greek to another Greek 23 times, and a Greek to a non-Greek 14 times.

Für die Ankündigung kommender schicksalhafter Ereignisse hat sich Herodot neben den Träumen und dem Orakelspruch noch ein drittes Medium geschaffen, das in Ansätzen bereits Homer nutzt, bei dem Ratgeber in Person weiser alter Männer immer die Funktion haben zu warnen.<sup>21</sup>

Based on this quotation, the reader might get the wrong impression that the advisors in Herodotus are only men. In fact, the case is much more diverse. In the following part the figures to be analyzed will be Greek female advisor: Gorgo, daughter of the Spartan king Cleomenes, and the unnamed daughter of Periander and daughter of Polycrates, although female advisors are also non-Greeks, Atossa, and the wife of the Pharaoh Sesotris. Artemisia, ruler of Halicarnassus, on the other hand, holds a special place. For it seems that she does not fit into an ethnic framework and should be considered as a figure between east and west, between the Greek world and the Orient.<sup>22</sup>

Polycrates' daughter Gorgo and Periander's daughter are examples of female advisors among the Greeks. As we will see below, unlike the non-Greeks, among the Hellenes it is the daughters who fulfil an advisory function. Their advice, however, varies in nature, and so does the reaction of their fathers to whom the advice is given.

## 5.1 The Daughter of Polycrates

Let us begin with the daughter of the Polycrates, for she is a relevant element of the first two Samian λόγοι and helps to understand the role that this Samian tyrant played in the *Histories*. It is important to emphasize that in the first two Samian λόγοι, the advisors (whether men or women) play a prominent role. This is mainly about Pharaoh Amasis, who, as a friend, warns Polycrates of his good fortune – εὐτυχέων μεγάλως.<sup>23</sup> Amasis therefore sends a letter in which he expresses his worry regarding the fortunes enjoyed by Polycrates, for he knows that the deity is jealous – τὸ θεῖον ἐπισταμένῳ ὡς ἔστι φθονερόν. Thus pharaoh advises Polycrates to select from his treasury an item whose loss would make him unhappy, and then get rid of it, so that it would never fall into human hands. In chapter 3.41 Herodotus describes the reaction of Polycrates, who concluded that his friend's advice was right. So he chose from his treasury a ring with an emerald – made by the local artist Theodoros. He then set sail with this ring on the high seas and threw it into the water in front of

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<sup>21</sup> Will 2015, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. Munson 1988, 92-3.

<sup>23</sup> Hdt. 3.40.

everyone. On his return to the island indeed, according to Herodotus, Polycrates felt miserable. Five or six days after throwing the ring away, a Samian fisherman caught a beautiful and large fish, which seemed to him worthy of the tyrannical court. He therefore presented his catch to Polycrates, and the latter, pleased with the gift, invited the fisherman to a feast. Meanwhile, the servants who were engaged in preparing the fish for the feast, noticed while cutting up the discarded signet ring and, overjoyed, brought it to the tyrant. And the tyrant, seeing the whole incident as a divine act, reported it to Amasis. Pharaoh replied that since Polycrates was lucky in everything, an unhappy end awaited him soon. So he renounced Polycrates' friendship: for he did not want to feel sorry for a friend who is soon going to meet an unhappy end. Very interesting here is the reaction of Polycrates. The tyrant was concerned and did not disregard the advice given to him by his friend, realising that a jealous deity could lead him to his downfall. Faced with the incidents described, Amasis broke off the friendship relationship with Polycrates (διαλύεσθαι τὴν ξεινίην), for he did not want to see his *xenos* miserable. The figure of the female advisor does not appear until the second Samian λόγος. Here is Polycrates, deceived by the satrap Oroetes, who has promised him great treasures enabling him to rule the whole of Greece (εἵνεκέν τε χρημάτων ἄρξεις ἀπάσης τῆς Ἑλλάδος),<sup>24</sup> about to go to see him in Magnesia. However, everyone around him is aware of the risks involved in this expedition. Herodotus states:

ὁ δὲ πολλὰ μὲν τῶν μαντίων ἀπαγορευόντων πολλὰ δὲ τῶν φίλων ἐστέλλετο αὐτόσε, πρὸς δὲ καὶ ἰδοῦσης τῆς θυγατρὸς ὄψιν ἐνυπνίου τοιήνδε: ἐδόκεε οἱ τὸν πατέρα ἐν τῷ ἡέρι μετέωρον ἐόντα λουῖσθαι μὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ Διός, χρίεσθαι δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἡλίου. ταύτην ἰδοῦσα τὴν ὄψιν παντοίῃ ἐγένετο μὴ ἀποδημῆσαι τὸν Πολυκράτεα παρὰ τὸν Ὀροίτεια, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἰόντος αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὴν πεντηκόντερον ἐπερημίζετο. ὁ δὲ οἱ ἠπέιλησε, ἦν σῶς ἀπονοστήσει, πολλόν μιν χρόνον παρθενεύεσθαι. ἡ δὲ ἠρήσατο ἐπιτελέα ταῦτα γενέσθαι: βούλεσθαι γὰρ παρθενεύεσθαι πλέω χρόνον ἢ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐστερηῆσθαι.

Polycrates then prepared to visit Oroetes, despite the strong dissuasion of his diviners and friends, and a vision seen by his daughter in a dream; she dreamt that she saw her father in the air overhead being washed by Zeus and anointed by Helios; after this vision she used all means to persuade him not to go on this journey to Oroetes; even as he went to his fifty-oared ship she prophesied evil for him. When Polycrates threatened her that if he came back safe, she would long remain unmarried, she answered with a

24 Hdt. 3.122.

prayer that his threat might be fulfilled: for she would rather, she said, long remain unmarried than lose her father.<sup>25</sup>

In the passage quoted above, the relevant point in the narrative becomes Polycrates' daughter, unknown by name,<sup>26</sup> who, on the basis of a prophetic and ominous dream, tries to dissuade his plans at all costs. What is noteworthy here is both the behavior of the daughter and the reaction of Polycrates. The tyrant's daughter appears clearly here as a tragic warner and conveys a warning that is clearly a sign from the deity. Also the manner is not irrelevant, as prophetic dreams play a very relevant role in Herodotus' narrative. As J. Miklason states, the *Histories* of Herodotus are filled with all sorts of oracles, prophecies or dreams, and thus constitute the most comprehensive and best single source from the classical period relating to the aforementioned topic.<sup>27</sup> Tyrant, in contrast to the earlier part of the story and the advice Amasis gave him, refuses to listen to anyone and rejects all prophetic signs. He also ignores his daughter's prophetic dream, as he does not know how to interpret it correctly, which will prove fatal for him. In this respect, Polycrates is similar to Croesus,<sup>28</sup> who could not interpret the oracle that said that if he set out against the Persians a great state would fall.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in chapter 3.122 we see an enormous dissonance. On the one hand, we have Polycrates, who ignores all signs from the deity communicated to him by his own daughter and, as it were, seals his imminent and inevitable downfall and death. On the other hand, there is the daughter, correctly sensing the ominous meaning of the dream, thus distinguished by her wisdom and ability to interpret the divine signs, who is prepared to pay a high price to protect her father. The latter, however, is completely blinded and, in accordance with the prophecy, is put to death by Oroetes.<sup>30</sup>

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**25** Transl. by A.D. Godley.

**26** In Herodotus, and also in Lukian (*Salt*. 54), the name of the tyrant's daughter is not mentioned, although on the basis of papyrus fragments on which a Hellenistic romance is preserved, the name is reconstructed as Παρθενόπιη; cf. e.g. Georgiou 2002, 90 fn. 90; Asheri, Lloyd, Corcella 2007, 509.

**27** Miklason 2002, 194-5. Jutta Kirschberg, who devoted her still-cited doctoral thesis precisely to the functions oracles fulfil in Herodotus' work, divided them into five categories: 1) the cathartic function (*die katharthische Funktion*), 2) the advisory and transmitting function (*die ratende und vermittelnde Funktion*), 3) the colonial-political function (*die kolonialpolitische Funktion*), 4) the cultic function (*die kultische Funktion*), and 5) the charismatic function (*die charismatische Funktion*). From the point of view of the present considerations, the advisory and transmitting function will be the most relevant, which appears "in difficult political circumstances" (*in schwierigen politischen Situationen*); Kirchberg 1964, 117-18.

**28** Harrison 2000, 45.

**29** Hdt. 1.53.

**30** Transl. by A.D. Godley. Hdt. 3.125.

## 5.2 Gorgo

Let us now look at two further examples of female advisors in the Greek world, namely Gorgo and the daughter of the tyrant of Corinth, Periander. The figure of Gorgo,<sup>31</sup> in the context of giving advice, appears twice in Herodotus.<sup>32</sup> The first time is in book five, where the actions of Aristagoras (who was in power in Miletus) are described in order to enlist support in a revolt (the Ionian Revolt) against the Persians.<sup>33</sup> Seeking the support of other Greeks, Aristagoras first arrives in Sparta, to king Cleomenes. He evidently deceives the Spartan king by promising him that the Lacedemonians could easily rule all of Asia (τῆς Ἀσίας πάσης ἄρχειν εὐπετέως) if only they supported the rebels.<sup>34</sup> Aristagoras also resorts to flattery by calling the Spartans the first among the Greeks (πρόεστατε τῆς Ἑλλάδος). The Milesian was so convincing (Herodotus mentions that Aristagoras was a cunning man) that Cleomenes needed three days to think about it. When the king refused the visitor's help, Aristagoras did not break down and began to offer more and more until the offer reached fifty talents. Then Gorgo spoke: 'πάτερ, διαφθερέει σε ὁ ξείνος, ἢν μὴ ἀποστὰς ἴης' ("Father, the stranger will corrupt you, unless you leave him and go away").<sup>35</sup> Cleomenes heeded his daughter's advice and left for another room, while Aristagoras left Sparta having achieved nothing. In the logos above, the advice given by the daughter to her father already appears in a different light than it was in the case of Polycrates. It is important to reflect on the nature of the advice given by Gorgo – certainly, one should agree with those who argue that this story is intended to highlight the incorruptibility of king Cleomenes,<sup>36</sup> which *nota bene* Herodotus mentions earlier in the third book, when Maiandrios escaping from Samos tried to bribe Cleomenes.<sup>37</sup> However, it is worth noting the lexical layer of the advice given by Gorgo, above all the verb, which is understood as 'to bribe' – διαφθείρειν. In the sentence above διαφθείρειν can be translated in this way, although I personally would have expected an addendum in the form of phrases such as ἀργυρίῳ or χρήμασι. Above all, however, διαφθείρειν means to destroy completely (also to kill) and in this sense it also appears in

**31** *Generalia* on Gorgo cf. Branscome 2021.

**32** Cf. Georgiou 2002, 87-90.

**33** Hdt. 5.36-8; more on Herodotus and the Ionian Revolt cf. e.g. Blamire 1959; Evans 1963; Manville 1977; Forrest 1979; Kuciak 2012.

**34** Hdt. 5.49.

**35** Hdt. 5.51.

**36** Georgiou 2002, 88; Branscome 2021.

**37** Hdt. 3.148.



Herodotus.<sup>38</sup> If this is how we understand the aforementioned verb, then the phrase διαφθερέει σε should be understood as: he will destroy you completely. At that point, the advice given by Gorgo would be more far-reaching, no longer likely to be of a merely practical nature, but could be taken as a tragic warning. Sparta's involvement in the uprising in Ionia could have had far-reaching consequences for it and for Cleomenes himself. Perhaps, then, this advice should be viewed in a similar way to the warning expressed by Polycrates' daughter and seen as a life-saving warning. It is also symptomatic that Cleomenes, unlike Polycrates, listened to his daughter's advice. This is the second time Gorgo, already as Leonidas' wife, appears at the very end of book seven.<sup>39</sup> In this case, her advice is clearly of a practical nature. For it concerns the hidden information that Demaratos sent to Sparta. Demaratos, knowing the intentions of Xerxes, who intended to make an armed expedition against the Greeks, sends a message which is hidden on a tablet beneath the surface of the wax, so as to protect the messenger from danger.<sup>40</sup> When the messenger arrived, Gorgo instructed the Lacedemonians to get rid of the wax and then they would see a message on the tablet. This is what they did. Although this advice is of a practical nature, its importance should not be underestimated as it relates to the events at the centre of Herodotus' attention in Books 8 and 9. It also reveals Gorgo's wisdom, as well as her commitment to Sparta.<sup>41</sup>

### 5.3 The Daughter of Periander

The final figure among the Greek female advisors in this article is the daughter of the tyrant of Corinth, Periander. She occurs here in the context of the animosity between Periander and one of his two sons, Lycophron.<sup>42</sup> The aforementioned hostility stemmed from the fact that Lycophron learned that Periander had killed his mother Melissa.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, he was exiled from Corinth. However, as Periander grew older, he realized that he no longer had as much strength to rule Corinth. So he longed to recall Lycophron from exile and sent

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**38** According to Powell's dictionary, the verb appears 86 times in the *Histories*. It is worth noting that Powell also understands διαφθείρειν in the story from Gorgo as to corrupt; cf. Powell 2013, s.v. "διαφθείρω".

**39** Hdt. 7.239.

**40** The manner in which the message is concealed is similar in the story of Histiaios, who encouraged Aristagoras to spark an uprising in Ionia.

**41** Georgiou 2002, 89.

**42** Hdt. 3.50-3.

**43** Hdt. 5.92.

his daughter to Kerkyra to convince him to do so. Arriving at the site, she said to her brother:

ὦ παῖ, βούλειαι τήν τε τυραννίδα ἐς ἄλλους πεσεῖν καί τὸν οἶκον τοῦ πατρὸς διαφορηθέντα μᾶλλον ἢ αὐτός σφρα ἀπελθῶν ἔχειν; ἄπιθι ἐς τὰ οἰκία, παῦσαι σεωυτὸν ζημιῶν. φιλοτιμίη κτήμα σκαιόν. μὴ τῷ κακῷ τὸ κακὸν ἰῶ. πολλοὶ τῶν δικαίων τὰ ἐπιεικέστερα προτιθεῖσι, πολλοὶ δὲ ἤδη τὰ μητρῷα διζήμενοι τὰ πατρῷα ἀπέβαλον. τυραννὶς χρῆμα σφαλερόν, πολλοὶ δὲ αὐτῆς ἐρασταί εἰσι, ὁ δὲ γέρον τε ἤδη καὶ παρηβηκός: μὴ δῶς τὰ σεωυτοῦ ἀγαθὰ ἄλλοισι.<sup>44</sup>

Child, would you want the power to fall to others, and our father's house destroyed, rather than to return and have it yourself? Come home and stop punishing yourself. Pride is an unhappy possession. Do not cure evil by evil. Many place the more becoming thing before the just; and many pursuing their mother's business have lost their father's. Power is a slippery thing; many want it, and our father is now old and past his prime; do not lose what is yours to others.<sup>45</sup>

The advice the sister gave to her brother Lycophron should be qualified as practical advice, which, however, as in the case of Gorgo, is linked to political issues and concerns the succession of power in Corinth. However, reading the quoted words filled with wisdom, it is hard to resist the impression that it is not the daughter, but Periander himself who is speaking. This is all the more likely because Periander himself appears in Herodotus' Histories as a wise advisor. This is all the more likely because Periander was counted by the Greeks among the group of so-called seven sages. So in this case, Periander's daughter can be understood as an intermediary between father and son Lycophron. It is noteworthy that the advice given to Lycophron contributed to his death, as he was killed by the inhabitants of Korkyra, which he was about to leave on his way to Corinth. In his place, in turn, Periander was to arrive.

Thus we see that among Greek female advisors, these functions are performed by the daughters, either of tyrants or kings. In all three cases, advice was given out of concern for their loved ones, and sometimes in the context of state affairs. Also very relevant is the reaction of the person to whom the advice was given - he could accept it, or ignore it. The example of Gorgo shows that if we are dealing with a wise ruler, advice is accepted and protects from danger or even death (vide the understanding of the verb διαφθείρω). In the

<sup>44</sup> Hdt. 3.53.3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Transl. by A.D. Godley.

case of the daughters of tyrants, on the other hand, we see that the advice they give does not have the desired effect. While Lycophron accedes to the advice given to him by his sister, Polycrates completely disregards the very clear signs given to him by his daughter, which leads to his death.

## 6 Conclusion

In Mesopotamian as well as in Greek sources female advisors play an important role. An interesting difference is that in the Mesopotamian sources discussed above, the mother is the most important female advisor, while in Herodotus daughters are the most important advisors. As far as we can see, daughters play no role as advisors in the Mesopotamian literary evidence. In the case of Herodotus, the person to whom the advice is given is extremely important – if it is a wise ruler, such as Cleomenes, he can make use of it. If not – like Polycrates, who is blinded by the false promise of wealth, the advice falls on deaf ears.

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# The Rational Roots of Medical Science Between Greece and Egypt

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**Abstract** The chapter focuses on the most relevant features of Greek medicine in its historical development, highlighting the main factors of 'rationality' and 'irrationality' by means of a comparison with Egyptian medicine, in the attempt to outline a framework of interactions and cross-connections.

**Keywords** Egyptian medicine. Greek medicine. Magical medicine. Rational medicine. Religious medicine.

**Summary** 1 The Concept of Rational Medicine. – 2 Contacts Between Greek and Egyptian Medicine. – 3 Conclusions.

## 1 The Concept of Rational Medicine

In this chapter, we will explore and establish a connection between two primary inquiries: firstly, the concept of 'rational medicine', believed to have originated in ancient Greece, and secondly, the existence of contacts, interactions, and influences between Greek and Egyptian medicine.

Regarding the first point, a very recent definition of 'rational medicine' emphasizes its objective of

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serving the best overall interests of the patient through an all-inclusive approach to medicine that is thoroughly based on the latest science and most advanced technology in all relevant areas.<sup>1</sup>

Roughly a century and a half earlier, 'the Rational method' in medicine was described as follows:

this recognizes nature as the great agent in the cure of diseases, and employs art as an auxiliary, to be resorted to when useful or necessary, and avoided when prejudicial.<sup>2</sup>

A more ancient perspective, as expressed by the Roman physician Aulus Cornelius Celsus, who practiced during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, stated that

those who practice the rational medicine assume the following things as necessary: the knowledge of the hidden and originating causes of the diseases; then of the manifest ones; then also of the natural actions; and finally of the internal organs.<sup>3</sup>

All three of these statements underscore the role of pragmatic reasoning in dealing with the patients. This approach entails scientifically observing actual symptoms and applying (or not) appropriate material remedies based on scientific knowledge of human health matters. As is known, 'Hippocrates'<sup>4</sup> is generally credited with rejecting divine/irrational/philosophical notions of medicine<sup>5</sup> and, instead, using empirical observation of the body as the foundation of medical knowledge. Rather than relying on prayers, magical spells, sacrifices to the gods, or universal theoretical assumptions, 'Hippocrates' focused on actual diagnoses, dietary adjustments, beneficial drugs, and maintaining bodily balance.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Kondo 2017, 1.

2 Bigelow 1858, 30; see Cotting 1858.

3 *Med.* 1.13.

4 It is not worth addressing here the well-known and widely-debated Hippocratic question, regarding the authorship of the medical treatises comprised in the so-called Hippocratic corpus and the very existence of Hippocrates himself. With 'Hippocrates' I refer to the Hippocratic authors of the corpus. For a general overview on Hippocratic medicine see Jouanna 2001; Nutton 2004, 53-102; Longrigg 1993, esp. 72-97.

5 On pre-Hippocratic medicine, see Nutton 2004, 37-52; Longrigg 2020, 11-71.

6 See Jouanna 2012, 97-106. On the progression from irrational/pre-rational medicine to rational medicine in archaic Greece see Longrigg 1993; also Nutton 2004, 37-40.

## 2      **Contacts Between Greek and Egyptian Medicine**

Regarding the second point, there had certainly been early contacts between Greek and Egyptian civilizations, and the Greeks (and later the Romans) have consistently acknowledged the Egyptians' primacy in the field of medicine. This recognition can be traced back as early as the Homeric epic poems,<sup>7</sup> and has been further emphasized, among others, by prominent authors like Herodotus,<sup>8</sup> Diodorus of Sicily,<sup>9</sup> and the anonymous author of an *Introduction to medicine* later attributed to Galen.<sup>10</sup> Numerous scholars have sought to highlight the similarities and mutual influences between these two medical traditions, while others have chosen to maintain some distance when making comparisons.<sup>11</sup> From our present point of view, it is worth noting the conclusion drawn by the renowned historian of ancient medicine, Jacques Jouanna, who addresses such comparisons from the perspective of rationality:

In our desire to emphasise connections, we risk forgetting the fundamental point that the rational medicine of the Hippocratic Corpus sharply contrasts with the magico-religious medicine of the Egyptians.<sup>12</sup>

Egyptian culture indeed embodies a profound intertwining of medicine and religion, with medical practices seamlessly integrated into their religious framework of cosmic order and harmony.<sup>13</sup> Sickness was perceived as a disruption in this balance, compelling them to seek remedies to fix it. Consequently, proper physicians - those trained in medical knowledge - collaborated closely with healing priests, particularly those associated with the healing goddesses Sekhmet and Serqet. Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to assert that all Egyptian medicine relied solely on magical treatments and religious beliefs: pharmacology, surgery, dietary treatments were customarily applied without any connection with magic or supernatural

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**7** "Egypt, where the fertile earth produces many different drugs (φάρμακα), many good mixtures and many harmful, and where each doctor is the wisest of men" (*Od.* 6.227-32).

**8** Egyptians as the healthiest people worldwide (2.77); "each place is full of doctors" (2.84); Egyptian doctors "were considered the first in medical art" (3.129).

**9** Isis as discoverer of medical and magical drugs (1.25.2-7).

**10** Primacy of Egyptian pharmacology, internal surgery, ophthalmology, internal hygiene (*Introd.* 1.1-3).

**11** See Jouanna 2012, 3-20.

**12** Jouanna 2012, 7.

**13** See Westendorf 1992, 19-39; Bardinet 1995, 39-59; Halioua 2005, 23-30.

powers.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the notion that post-Hippocratic Greek medicine entirely severed ties with religion is also flawed.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the belief in the power of the major healing god Asclepius persisted long after the time of ‘Hippocrates’. Hippocrates himself was believed to have drawn upon the medical knowledge recorded in the temple of Asclepius at Kos,<sup>16</sup> and the famous Hippocratic oath commences with an invocation to Apollo, Asclepius, and other healing deities.<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, it has been demonstrated how ancient Greek medicine originated within temple environments.<sup>18</sup> People continued the practice of visiting the sanctuaries of Asclepius (the *Asklepieia*) and other healing gods, seeking divine intervention for their ailments, as witnessed by many inscriptions and literary descriptions.<sup>19</sup> In these temples, religion functioned alongside rational medicine, with healing priests administering concrete – ‘rational’, in our perspective – healthcare interventions, skillfully cloaked as divine prescriptions from the gods.<sup>20</sup> This tradition seems to have existed in ancient Egypt too, and continued even in Hellenistic and Roman times.<sup>21</sup> A remarkable example is found in the temple of the crocodile god Soknebtunis at Tebtunis in the ancient Arsinoites (Fayum oasis), where the local priests owned a rich library containing the most updated Greek ‘rational’ medical treatises and handbooks.<sup>22</sup> Even Galen displays a somewhat ambiguous inclination towards religious beliefs, as evidenced by his belief in the efficacy of dreams and acceptance of divination.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the Egyptian religious perspective of illness as a challenge to the cosmic order bears intriguing resemblances to the Greek theory of bodily humors. According to the latter, the human body

**14** See Westendorf 1992; Bardinet 1995; Halioua 2005.

**15** See Nutton 2004, 103-14.

**16** See von Staden 1999, 149-57.

**17** On the ambivalent relationship between Hippocrates and Hippocratic writers and religious medicine see Jouanna 2012, 107-18.

**18** See Perilli 2005; 2006.

**19** See Steger 2020 with earlier bibliography. In general, on the ancient healing cults, see Rigato 2013.

**20** “[B]oth the Hippocratic Corpus and the rise of Asclepius cult are part of the same phenomenon, the defining of orthodoxy over against a magical alternative. In religion magic was credited with the potential to disturb the proper relationship between gods and men. It operated outside the formal religious channels for communicating with the divine; and it thereby posed a threat to civic order. The rise of Asclepius cult was one way in which the divine power to heal could be channelled for the benefit of both city and individual patient” (Nutton 2004, 114).

**21** See Reggiani forthcoming a.

**22** See Reggiani 2023a.

**23** See Kudlien 1981; Van Nuffelen 2014.



was traversed by four fundamental fluids: blood coming from the heart, phlegm from the brain, yellow bile from the liver, and black bile from the spleen. The harmonious proportion among these humors ensured good health, while any disruption in this equilibrium led to illness.<sup>24</sup> Medical interventions, whether dietary, pharmacological, surgical, or of other types, were therefore aimed at restoring the original balance. This is clearly a philosophical approach, which can be traced back to the rational musings of the Ionian physiologists (the philosophers of nature),<sup>25</sup> but the core idea is the belief in the correlation between human harmony and the universal harmony, the cosmic balance.<sup>26</sup>

The Greek philosophical theory of the bodily humors produced a holistic approach to medicine: since any disease was caused by an internal imbalance of the liquids, the doctors could treat everything by intervening on the re-establishment of the original balance. There was no medical specialization in Greek medicine, except for surgery,<sup>27</sup> which was distinguished from medicine, as the Hippocratic oath itself shows.<sup>28</sup> Both the philosophy of the humors and the holistic approach mark big differences from Egyptian medicine. Egyptians seem to have had a more mechanical approach towards the origin of illness: according to the extant texts, they believed in some external 'evil spirits' or 'pathogenic agents' called *ukhedu* and *setet*, which caused the diseases by insinuating themselves inside the human body and contaminating its liquid humors (*aaa* 'blood') and their conducting vessels (*met*) stemming from the heart (*haty, ib*).<sup>29</sup> Within an unavoidable religious framework, this looks like more mechanistic an approach than the Greek one: illness is basically caused by external agents and not by an internal imbalance. From a practical viewpoint, Egyptian medicine was characterized by a specialism, recognized by the Greek authors and mirrored in the extant texts: there existed specialized physicians for the eyes, for the teeth, for the head, and so on.<sup>30</sup>

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**24** See Nutton 2004, 77-86; Jouanna 2012, 335-59.

**25** See Longrigg 1993, 26 ff.

**26** On the early Greeks ideas of proportion and relationship between human and cosmic balance, see Reggiani 2015.

**27** Gynaecology held a somehow special place, as it was typically performed by generic male doctors, but there also existed categories of female healers credited with specialized experience and skills in treating women's diseases (see e.g. Flemming 2000; Dasen 2016; Reggiani forthcoming b).

**28** οὐ τεμέω δὲ οὐδὲ μὴν λιθιῶντας, ἐκχωρήσω δὲ ἐργάτησιν ἀνδράσι πρῆξιός τῆσδε (I will not cut, even those suffering from stones, but I will leave this to those who are trained in this craft).

**29** See Bardinet 1995, 60-138.

**30** See Halioua 2005, 31-5; Reggiani 2021, 154-5.

The philosophical attitude of Greek medicine produced another important consequence: the development of medical schools, which, just as the philosophical schools, carried on specific approaches to healing. From the earliest Cnidian and Coan schools – more properly, local traditions of common approaches –, the latter flowed into in the Hippocratic school, ancient Greek medicine proceeded up to the full development of the ‘rational’ medicine in the Hellenistic world: the Alexandrian anatomists, whose discoveries of the internal body subverted many phantastic theories of Hippocratic medicine;<sup>31</sup> the Empirical sect, which stressed the fundamental importance of direct personal experience against general and abstract theories, as opposed to the so-called Dogmatists;<sup>32</sup> the Methodists, based on precise therapeutical methods and on the definition of general states of disease;<sup>33</sup> later, in the early Imperial age, the Pneumatists, which attributed health and illness to the different functioning of a vital spirit (*pneuma*).<sup>34</sup> A parallel trend – philosophical as well, in a sense – was the preponderance given to famous individual physicians, authors of comprehensive treatises or of famous medicaments named after them – a sort of ‘heroic medicine’, in a sense, in which the faith in the healing gods was replaced by the trust in the most excellent doctors.<sup>35</sup> Both aspects – school grouping and individualism – are completely missing from Egyptian medicine: perhaps with the only exceptions of divine Imhotep and Amenhotep son of Hapu, no Egyptian physician is recorded by name, no great personality emerged, because the important was not the single contribution to the healing progress, but the general medical attitude as a way of contrasting the bodily disorders. If a name was to be associated to a medicine, it was that of the Pharaoh who successfully used it; if a brand of efficacy and authenticity was to be developed, it consisted in the story of the finding of the recipe in a sacred place.<sup>36</sup>

A certain influence of spiritual nature on Greek medicine can be seen in the case of internal anatomy. The Greeks were impeded to reach a precise knowledge of the inner parts of the human body by a long-standing cultural horror for the impurity of the dead body, which prevented them to directly explore the inner organs. For a long time, internal anatomy was deduced from the shape of the external parts and from the anatomy of the animals. This was not completely different from Egyptian medicine, since for the Egyptians the human body

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**31** See von Staden 1989; Nutton 2004, 128-39.

**32** See Nutton 2004, 147-50 (Empiricists) and 194 (Dogmatists).

**33** See Nutton 2004, 187-201.

**34** See Nutton 2004, 202 ff.

**35** See Reggiani 2020.

**36** See Reggiani, Urzì, Bovo 2023.

was sacred and was to be preserved uncorrupted even after death. However, the long-standing ritual tradition of embalming and mummification – which included direct interventions on the bowels – favored a closer contact with the dead body and its inner parts. Not by chance the development of the anatomical school led by Erophilus and Erasistratus, who authored many revolutionary discoveries, took place in Hellenistic Alexandria, when Greek medicine came into contact with the Egyptian traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Another medical sector which was patently characterized by the influence of Egyptian medicine on its Greek counterpart was pharmacology. Egyptian ingredients and remedies were known well before Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332-331 BCE, which of course gave rise to deeper interconnections between the two traditions. It is not surprising, therefore, that several medicaments recorded by the Greek medical authors are labeled or recorded as 'Egyptian', as either a memory of their true origin or a simple trademark. Just to mention the most attested in our sources: the 'Egyptian oil' (castor oil) and the 'Egyptian white oil' (lily oil) in Hippocrates; the 'Mendesian unguent' in Galen; the *achariston* 'unmerciful' eye-salve; the plaster called 'Isis'.<sup>38</sup>

A last point that I would like to mention is prognosis, i.e. the foreknowledge of the development of a disease based on the observation of its external signs (what today we call symptoms). Prognostic medicine is in fact a common ground for both Greek and Egyptian medicine.<sup>39</sup> The predictive scheme that we find, e.g. in the Edwin Smith medical papyrus (observation of the signs – therapy [or not] – success [or not])<sup>40</sup> is the very same that we find in the Hippocratic corpus, but with a basic difference: in the Egyptian medicine, prognosis

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**37** See Reggiani 2021, 165-71.

**38** See Reggiani 2023b.

**39** And not only: prognostic medicine did in fact begin in second-first-millennium BCE Mesopotamia, see Wee 2019.

**40** See e.g. pEdwinSmith, col. i, r. 18-col. ii, r. 2: "If you proceed to the examination of a man who suffers at the head from an open wound that reaches the bone, while the skull is pierced, you shall explore the wound and state that he is not able to look at his own shoulders and chest any more, and he suffers from stiffness at the neck. You shall say to this man: [...] it is an ailment that I can treat. After having stitched up it, you shall put some fresh meat on the wound on the first day. You shall not bandage it. It will stay like that until the pain is over. Then you shall treat it with fat, honey, vegetal tampons, every day until it recovers"; col. ii, rr. 11-17: "If you proceed to the examination of a man who suffers at the head from an open wound that reaches the bone, while the skull is smashed, you shall explore the wound and state that such a break in the skull is deep, sinking under your fingers, and that the swelling above the break is jutting, while the man bleeds from the nostrils and from the ears, and suffers from stiffness at the neck, thus not being able to look at his own shoulders and chest. You shall say to this man: [...] it is an ailment that I cannot treat. You shall not bandage it. It will stay like that until the pain is over". Text in Bardinet 1995.

was just a technical means to predict the development of a disease in order to apply the correct therapy; in the Hippocratic medicine, there is still a strong individualistic (heroic, in the abovementioned meaning) purpose.<sup>41</sup>

I think it is excellent for a physician to practice prediction. Because if he knows and foretells the present, the past and the future, alongside his patients, and fills the gaps in the report given by the patient, he will be considered the most suitable to understand the cases, so men will gladly rely on him to be cured. Furthermore, he will carry out the treatment better if he foreknows what will happen next, from the present symptoms. Now, getting all patients back to health is impossible. In fact, succeeding in that would have been even better than predicting the future. But as a matter of fact men die, some due to the severity of the disease before calling the doctor, others immediately after calling him and before he can fight the disease with his art. It is therefore necessary to learn the natures of such diseases, how much they exceed the strength of human bodies, and to learn the prognosis. Because in doing so you will rightfully earn respect and be a skilled doctor. Because the longer you plan to deal with any emergency, the greater your power will be to save those who have a chance of recovery, while you will be un reproachable if you know and declare in advance those who will die and those who will get better.<sup>42</sup>

### 3 Conclusions

To conclude, ancient Greece and ancient Egypt were certainly two separate cultures, with peculiar aspects and different approaches to the world. In the medical sphere, where the purpose was however the same - to heal ill people - we can notice similarities and differences, according to the single cases, and even influences, though more from the Egyptian to the Greek side than the other way around. Above all, it is impossible to trace a clear limit between rational and irrational, or non-rational: distinctions must be made case by case, and we may observe that after all Greek medicine might have not been so much rational as generally intended, and Egyptian medicine not too much invalidated by its religious framework. Greek medicine might appear as a science in continuous evolution and progress, while Egyptian medicine might look like a stable technical application of a general universal establishment, but perhaps it is just a matter of chronology:

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<sup>41</sup> See Reggiani forthcoming c.

<sup>42</sup> Hippoc. *Progn.* 1.

“You Greeks are always youngsters”, the old Egyptian priest uttered in Plato’s *Timaeus* (22b), claiming the antiquity of Egyptian science. A comparison between both traditions, therefore, is also a possible key to the reflection about learning from our past for a better future.

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# Dance in Hittite Culture: Choreography and Setting

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**Abstract** Dance played a significant role in the performance of Hittite cult festivals. Evidence on dance comes from the cuneiform tablets discovered in Anatolia, but also from images depicted on some cult-vases. After having very briefly presented the main characters of Hittite dancing, we will deal with the so-called narrative dances, and with a dance that accompanies the movements of an acrobat who leaps on a bull. Narrative dances, which mostly occur in Old Hittite texts, stage mimetic representations of hunting scenes. The bull-leaping performance is documented from the frieze on a decorated vase and possibly from two Hittite tablets. In both cases, the performed actions, which are manifestations of the oldest intangible heritage of Anatolia and the Mediterranean regions, likely symbolize the superiority of humans over the wild animals.

**Keywords** Bull-leaping. Cult festivals. Dance. Hittites. Narrative dances.

**Summary** 1 Introductory Remarks. – 2 Narrative Dances. – 3 Dance and Bull-Leaping.

## 1 Introductory Remarks

The greatest part of the cuneiform tablets, which have been discovered in the capital of the Hittite kingdom, Ḫattuša, as well in other Anatolian sites, belong to the *genre* of the ‘festival texts’. These tablets contain information on the main aspects of the performance of the religious festivals, such as the participants in the ceremony, the time and place, the offerings, etc.<sup>1</sup> Some of these documents are

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<sup>1</sup> See Klinger 2022, 135-8.

very detailed and mention other more specific elements,<sup>2</sup> such as the presence of singers and dancers, the played musical instruments, the songs, and the performed dances.

Thus, our knowledge of the Hittite dance mostly depends on the cult texts, and we have very little information concerning dance performances in other contexts; nevertheless, the available documents support the assumption that dance also played a role in daily life of the Hittites, for example on the occasion of banquets and court feasts.<sup>3</sup>

Hittite terminology for dancing is varied; the verb *tar(k)u-* generically means ‘to dance’,<sup>4</sup> but other verbs more specifically define different kinds of dancing, such as *nai-* ‘to turn’, *wahnu-* ‘to turn around’, and *weh-* ‘to turn’.

In addition to textual sources, visual representations of dance, though rare, give further information, and the best example comes from the images on the İnandik vase, which depicts various moments during a religious ceremony. The four friezes that decorate this vase represent the official rites performed in and out the temple, as well as the joy of the people who celebrate the festival.<sup>5</sup>

Dances could be executed with or without musical accompaniment, but usually the sound of percussion instruments, such as tambourines and cymbals, accompanied the dancers. As far as the steps executed by the performers, some texts simply say that dancers enter the stage and dance, but other documents provide more details. Particularly interesting is the tablet KUB 4.1, which collects three texts on various subjects and preserves in the fourth column a description of a series of steps and dances. This tablet is likely a scholarly text,<sup>6</sup> and the part that refers to dancing does not give any information on the ritual context in which the listed dances were performed. Some of them, which are labeled according to the towns where they were usually performed, are clearly folk dances.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we assume that delegations from Anatolian towns likely took part in the state ceremonies and performed dances belonging to their cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup>

The most common ‘Anatolian dances’ seem to consist of two series of movements, namely, steps completed in place (*pedi*), and others

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the different grade of detail of cult festival texts and their functional differentiation see Schwemer 2016; Christiansen 2016; Klinger 2022, 135-8.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the dance performed by the goddess Allani at the banquet held in honor of God Teššob in the literary composition known as *Song of Release*, see de Martino 2019, 149.

<sup>4</sup> See Kloekhorst 2008, 842-5.

<sup>5</sup> See Özgüç 1988; de Martino 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Waal 2015, 301.

<sup>7</sup> de Martino 1989, 36-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Rutherford 2005.



that presuppose a leap from the original position to a distant point (*tuwaz*). We argue that a group of dancers, likely arranged in rows, first danced in place, and then caught up with the row in front.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Narrative Dances

Some cult festival texts also report the performance of narrative dances that mostly dramatize hunting scenes. In these cases, the performers wear animal masks and play the role of animals. Dance narrativity and the representation of ancient mythical narratives are also documented in Greek tradition.<sup>10</sup>

As was already said, cult festival texts vary in the degree of detail they supply; some of them very accurately outline each action and rite performed during the celebration of the festival, while other tablets are less detailed. In the case of mimetic representations, sometimes texts only mention that performers come onto the stage at a particular moment during the celebration. Only in a very few cases do texts report who the performers are and what they do. This limits our possibility of understanding how the dramatic representation was realized; nevertheless, we will consider here some of the most detailed descriptions of animal dance.

Animals played a significant role in the daily life of the ancient Anatolian peoples, not only in the pastoral and agricultural context, but also in religion.<sup>11</sup> Even the Hittite gods were seen in a theriomorphic way: the bull represented the Storm-god, and the stag was the sacred animal of God Kuruntiya. The latter, who was of Luwian origin and tradition, was the protector of the countryside, where stags lived. In addition, bears, and great felines, who inhabited the rural landscape and the mountain forests, are mentioned in Hittite texts.<sup>12</sup>

The dramatic representations of hunting scenes in dance occur in the cult festivals that belong to the oldest Anatolian religious tradition. They presumably derive from local cults that were celebrated by the village communities. Some of them had been absorbed into the official state religion, mostly in the KI.LAM festival<sup>13</sup> and in the cults related to the Hattian deities, while others, particularly those documented in the so-called 'Cult Inventories', were practiced only at the local level.<sup>14</sup> The scenes of hunting inserted in the celebration

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<sup>9</sup> See de Martino 1995, 2665.

<sup>10</sup> See Gianvittorio-Ungar, Schlapbach 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See Archi 2023.

<sup>12</sup> See Erskine 2021.

<sup>13</sup> On this festival see Burgin 2019.

<sup>14</sup> See Cammarosano 2018; 2021.

of festivals are the best examples of human-animal interactions and of the survival of the most ancient religious practices.

Let's move on to examine tablet KBo 17.43, which belongs to the group of the oldest preserved Hittite texts,<sup>15</sup> and documents a very interesting description of a mimetic dance. A passage in this text describes the performance of a festival that has generally been identified with the Hittian *purulli*-festival and more specifically with the ceremonies in honor of the goddess Tetešḫapi.<sup>16</sup> Steitler, however, has recently attributed this tablet to the KI.LAM, which is another Hittite cult festival of ancient tradition.<sup>17</sup>

The performance is introduced by the priest of the city of Tawiniya, located not far from the Hittite capital Ḫattuša,<sup>18</sup> which played a significant role in the religious tradition of the Hittites.<sup>19</sup> The priest of Tawiniya takes a silver vessel and approaches a singer<sup>20</sup> who libates from this vessel. Then, the singer gets up and 'dances' (*tarukzi*) while crouching (*ganenantaš*). He sprinkles something from a leather flask (*šarazzi*).<sup>21</sup> A 'hunter' (LÚ<sup>meneya</sup>-) comes on stage and walks behind him. He draws an arrow and aims it at one side and the other, but he does not release it. Several times he cries "i, i". He (= the singer) initially moves forwards toward the king, but he turns back and strikes the 'hunter' with the leather container; then he goes forwards again and strikes the 'performers' (LÚ<sup>MES</sup> ALAN.ZU<sub>9</sub>). Then a man wearing a bear mask (LÚ<sup>hartagga</sup>-)<sup>22</sup> wipes the feet of the performers with a piece of textile<sup>23</sup> and dances.<sup>24</sup>

Among the performers of this scene, we do not find a professional dancer, but a singer. This is not an exceptional case; in fact, in Hittite ceremonies dances are executed not only by professional dancers (LÚ<sup>MES</sup>ḪUB.BI), but also by cult officials who apparently did not have any training.<sup>25</sup>

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15 See Neu 1980, 103-6.

16 See Pecchioli Daddi 1988; Haas 1994, 734-5.

17 See Steitler, Hethitologie Portal Mainz, Konkordanz, KBo 17.43: [www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de](http://www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de).

18 See Kryszewski 2016, 111-41.

19 See de Martino 2006.

20 The semi-logographic writing LÚ<sup>NAR</sup>-šiya- likely corresponds to the Hittite word LÚ<sup>tarašiya</sup>- and refers to a performer of music and songs, see CHD Š.2 (1980), 249-50.

21 See CHD Š.2 (2005), 249-50.

22 This word can be restored thanks to the duplicates, see CHD Š.3 (1980), 437.

23 The word *šerḫa*- likely refers to a piece of textile, see Kloekhorst 2008, 745-6; CHD Š.3 (1980), 437.

24 KBo 17.43 obv. i 8'-14', see Neu 1980, 104-5; de Martino 1989, 69-71; Mouton 2021, 86.

25 See de Martino 1989, 8-10; 1995, 2666.

The Hittite term <sup>LÜ</sup>*meneya*- occurs in festival rituals belonging to the oldest traditions and in passages that describe the performance of scenes of bear and leopard hunting, in which the *meneya*-actor hunts with a bow. This is not the word for ‘hunter’ that usually occurs in the Hittite texts; the meaning of ‘hunter’ for the term <sup>LÜ</sup>*meneya*- was only inferred from the contexts of the cult texts where it is documented. As far as the etymology of this word, it was assumed a derivation from *meni*- ‘face’; thus, the epithet ‘face-man’ could allude to a mask that this personage wore.<sup>26</sup>

The logogram <sup>LÜ</sup>ALAN.ZU<sub>9</sub> refers to cult attendants who often take part in the Hittite festivals. They do not play a specific role but can sing and dance.<sup>27</sup> Lastly the <sup>LÜ</sup>*hartagga*-performer plays the role of a bear, and we assume that he wore a mask. Animal masks are documented in other Hittite cult festivals, although we cannot say what they looked like.<sup>28</sup>

The text specifies that the singer dances in a crouch and sprinkles a liquid from a leather flask, but it does not name the substance that is sprinkled; given the content, we assume that it served as bait for attracting the prey. The singer and the ‘hunter’ here play the role of a hunting team in which the former, crouching, puts bait on the ground, and the latter shoots the arrow. Since they are hunting a bear, the bait may have been some honey. The singer’s cry of “i!!!” may have been intended to attract the bear. The ‘hunter’ mimes an archer who is ready to shoot the arrow every time the prey is in range. Thus, the first part of the storyline is purely descriptive and realistically mimes a hunting trip.

The arrival of the dancer with the bear mask signals the passage to a different dramatic register; suddenly the bear-man becomes human and wipes the feet of the ‘performers’ with a piece of textile; lastly, he dances. We assume that this last part of the scene, in which the bear-man submits himself to the ‘performers’, metaphorically expresses the supremacy of the urban and civilized world over the inhabitants of the wild countryside, where ancient hunters risked their life. As Collins argued, this scene may be interpreted as a “ritualized removal of forces of destruction from a vulnerable village”.<sup>29</sup>

As was said, the mimetic representation ends with the dance of the bear-man, but unfortunately there is no description of it. We can only assume that the dancer imitated the movements of a real bear. Hittite documents do not preserve any information on bears that were trained to dance, as was the custom in Turkey until recent years, but

<sup>26</sup> See Tischler 1990, 198; Puhvel 2004, 147-8; differently see Kloekhorst 2008, 576-7.

<sup>27</sup> See Weeden 2011, 142-4.

<sup>28</sup> See Ünal 2016, 396.

<sup>29</sup> Collins 2002, 329.

we cannot exclude that the bear-man imitated a real dancing bear.

The dancing *meneya*-hunter, together with an animal-man, is featured in other Hittite festivals, as documented for example from KUB 25.51 i 2'-11'.<sup>30</sup> In this tablet<sup>31</sup> a performer who wears a leopard mask is followed by a 'hunter' who holds the 'bow of the deity'. When these two figures stand before the deity, the cupbearer offers them a drink. They drink and then dance. Unfortunately, there is no description of the dance they perform.

Another mimed representation of a hunt occurs in the fragmentary tablet KBo 7.37 (and in the duplicate tablet KUB 58.14), which describes the performance of a cult festival, possibly related to the cults of the city of Zippalanda, one of the main sanctuaries of the Storm-god.<sup>32</sup> Performers masked as wolves and bears take part in the festival. This time the hunter is an archer-woman (MUNUS <sup>GI</sup>SPAN) who shoots an arrow at the bear-man but misses him. Then she shoots a second time and hits the bear-man, who cries "*awaiya, awaiya!*". This clearly is a cry of pain,<sup>33</sup> and this passage shows "the hybrid character" of the animal-masked performers; they behave as animals, but they are indeed humans and, in this case, cry out like a human, as Mouton argued.<sup>34</sup>

The presence of a woman who plays the role of an archer is particularly interesting, because hunting traditionally was a male activity. An archer-woman occurs in other Hittite cult festivals, but only text KBo 7.37 presents her in the act of shooting an arrow. We assume that the episode mocked the poor bear-man, whom even a woman could take as prey and who cried desperately when wounded.

### 3 Dance and Bull-Leaping

As was already said, Hittite dance is not only documented in written evidence, for the images depicted on some vases decorated in relief add pieces of information. The most significant visual representation of the human-animal interaction in dancing appears on the vase discovered in 1997 at the site of Hüseyindede, which lies in northern Anatolia in the province of Sungurlu.

The vase, 52 cm high, comes from the country residence of a member of the Hittite élite,<sup>35</sup> and dates to the Old Hittite Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> This

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<sup>30</sup> See de Martino 1989, 68-9.

<sup>31</sup> KUB 25.51 joins KBo 37.51, KUB 11.32, KUB 20.17, and IBoT 3.68.

<sup>32</sup> See de Martino 2001; Mouton 2021, 86.

<sup>33</sup> As argued by Klinger 1996, 228 no. 401.

<sup>34</sup> Mouton 2021, 86.

<sup>35</sup> See Mielke 2017, 125-6.

<sup>36</sup> See Sipahi 2000; 2001.

vase, unlike the İnandik vase, shows only one decorated frieze. The figures are in relief and colored in brown, black, red, and grey.

The frieze depicts fourteen figures in a single row. The first figures on the left edge are two women represented frontally who dance hand in hand.<sup>37</sup> A dance of this kind is also documented in the already mentioned text KUB 20.38 obv. 10'-17' where six women dance in a row, holding hands. The figures to the right of the two dancers play cymbals and a stringed instrument like a *saz*. The following figures represent two men, who dance in a crouching position facing each other and play cymbals.

The series of dancers and musicians leads up to the central image in the scene: a man prepares to attach a halter to a bull. Three personages are represented close to the bull: one of them balances on the bull's back, another one is performing a somersault, and the third one is preparing to jump. We agree with Decker<sup>38</sup> that these three figures represent three stages of a single jump executed by an acrobat leaping on the bull. The three figures are identical in their dress and features, which supports Decker's assumption. The acrobat's leap onto the bull is neatly framed by two musicians, a cymbal player, on the left, and a *saz* player, on the right, who admire the ability of the acrobat and accompany his movements with music.

The publication of the Hüseyndede vase had a strong impact on researchers of Mediterranean civilizations, since bull leaping and acrobatic performances on the back of a bull are very well documented in the Aegean world, in Egypt and Syria.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, this practice is not clearly documented in the Hittite textual evidence. Nevertheless, there are three texts, admittedly fragmentary, that seem to allude to such a performance.

Firstly, we mention text KUB 25.37+ that belongs to the corpus of cult festivals of Luwian tradition.<sup>40</sup> A delegation from the town of Lallupiya takes part in the celebration of the rites described in this text. We are unable to locate this town precisely, but it presumably was in central Anatolia around the Sakarya river.<sup>41</sup>

In the first lines of this text (i 4'-10'), the chief of the delegation of Lallupiya calls out in Luwian to the cupbearer, who starts dancing, and the cook also dances in the same way. A man of Lallupiya dances repetitively, turning in place, while another Lallupiya man holds a cloak behind the dancer. This passage seems to refer to two dancers who start out facing each other, but then one of them turns his

<sup>37</sup> See Sipahi 2000, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Decker 2003, 50-1.

<sup>39</sup> See Decker 2003.

<sup>40</sup> See Starke 1985, 342-50.

<sup>41</sup> de Martino 2017, 258.

back to the other, who shakes a cloak. This same dance also occurs in another passage of this text.<sup>42</sup>

A fragmentary passage in the third column in KUB 25.37+ (iii 1) preserves the sentence *w]atkuzi nu ANA GUD.MAḪ* (he [j]umps and towards the bull). As Taracha wrote, the interpretation of this passage as a description of an acrobatic performance over a bull seems to be confirmed by another fragmentary text, Bo 3817, that belongs to the north-Anatolian religious tradition. Here we read as follows:<sup>43</sup> *[n=ašt]a GUD.MAḪ parā [pennianzi]. watkuanzi* ([and th]en [they drive] the bull they jump).<sup>44</sup>

A third Hittite text may also refer to bull leaping. Tablet KBo 19.138 describes the cult ceremonies in honor of the goddess Teteshapi, a deity we have already mentioned; she is of Hattian origin and plays the role of mistress of wild animals.<sup>45</sup> Pecchioli Daddi quoted a passage in this text where a performer (<sup>LÚ</sup>ALAN.ZU<sub>9</sub>) ‘mocks’ (*ḥaḥḥarš*)<sup>46</sup> the Hurrian bull of the god.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, since this text too is fragmentary, we are in the dark as to what the act of mocking the bull entailed. Pecchioli Daddi argued that this passage may refer to leaping onto the bull, though this is not explicitly stated here as it is in KUB 25.37+ and Bo 3817. In our opinion, it could also allude to an action that echoed some lost literary narrative concerning the two Hurrian bulls, Hurri and Sherri, who drove the chariot of the Storm-god.

Thus, as far as the textual evidence is concerned, we concede that we are dealing with very badly damaged tablets, and we cannot exclude that the scene depicted on the Hüseyindede vase does not in fact correspond to any cult practice performed in Hittite Anatolia. The Hüseyindede vase was a luxury product acquired by a wealthy Anatolian person. As is well known, scenes of bull leaping were diffused in the ancient Near East during the second millennium BCE, as the frescos of Tell el-Dab’a and some Syrian seals show,<sup>48</sup> and the artisan who manufactured the vase and realized the frieze may have been inspired by models known to him from sealings and seals. The owner of the vase may have appreciated it for its exotic character.

In short, the two aforementioned Hittite texts, though fragmentary, cannot be ignored, and we are inclined to assume that acrobatic leaps onto the back of a bull were performed in Anatolia. The different cultural backgrounds of the two texts, one referring to the

<sup>42</sup> See ii 10'-18', de Martino 1989, 76-8; Mouton 2016, 128-9.

<sup>43</sup> ii 20'-22'.

<sup>44</sup> Taracha 2004

<sup>45</sup> See Taracha 2009.

<sup>46</sup> See see HW<sup>2</sup> 3, 11:10-11.

<sup>47</sup> Pecchioli Daddi 2010, 124-9.

<sup>48</sup> See Sipahi 2001; Decker 2003.

Luwian tradition of the region of Lallupiya, and the other one to north-Anatolian cults,<sup>49</sup> witness the possible diffusion of this practice in the Hittite kingdom.

We wonder what the meaning of such a performance was; we know that the bull was the sacred animal of the Storm-god, who was imagined and represented as a bull. Bull-shaped vessels have been found in several Anatolian temples. We argue that the scene depicted on the Hüseyindede vase and possibly described in the aforementioned texts does not refer to the bull as the animal dear to the Storm-god, but more broadly to the oxen and bulls that the most ancient inhabitants of Anatolia encountered in the country, hunted, and learnt to herd. As in the case of the narrative representation of a bear hunt, the bull-leaping performance may symbolize the superiority of humans over the animals, as if the wild and ferocious bulls had been brought from their original environment into the urban space controlled by the men.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Lamante 2014, 448.

<sup>50</sup> See Shapland 2013, 199-200.

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## **Section 3**

### Literature and Wisdom Traditions



# **The Limit of Transmission**

## **Babylonian Wisdom Literature and Wisdom in Non-Cuneiform Literatures**

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**Abstract** This essay discusses the limits of transmission of Babylonian literature to other non-cuneiform literatures. It will ask can a limit be set as to what is Babylonian, specifically Babylonian Wisdom Literature, in non-cuneiform sources. Three interconnected issues will be addressed: who speaks words of wisdom? Who is the conveyor of wisdom, that is, who is the chief carrier of knowledge which is considered as wisdom? What words of wisdom are spoken? What wisdom themes are expected to be met upon the transmission route and how are words of wisdom spoken? How can genre instruct us to identify a structure typical of Babylonian wisdom literature which can be traced elsewhere? Examples from major works of Babylonian Wisdom Literature will be cited throughout.

**Keywords** Babylonian Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature of the Eastern Mediterranean basin. The Book of Qohele. The Epic of Gilgameš. The Babylonian Theodicy. Jotham's Fable.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Who Speaks Wisdom? – 3 What Words of Wisdom Are Spoken? – 4 How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken? – 5 Conclusion.

### **1 Introduction**

This essay discusses the limit of transmission of Babylonian literature to other non-cuneiform literatures.<sup>1</sup> It will ask can a limit be set

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**1** For an overview of Babylonian wisdom literature, see Cohen, Wasserman 2021.

as to what is specifically Babylonian Wisdom Literature (as far as it can be identified) in non-cuneiform sources. The term limit intends to place an essential bar above which the question of transmission becomes almost non-tangible, in other words, that there are no limits to be placed, and, hence, anything anywhere can be related, and, explained by transmission. Thus, this essay investigates what is the limit that needs to be defined in order to identify, at least as a hypothesis, transmission, and reception, or the context and function at the receiving end. Three interconnected issues will be addressed:

Who speaks words of wisdom? Who is the conveyor of wisdom, that is, who is the chief carrier of knowledge which is considered as wisdom; what words of wisdom are spoken? What wisdom themes are expected to be met upon the transmission route; and how are words of wisdom spoken? How can genre instruct us to identify a structure typical of Babylonian wisdom literature which can be traced elsewhere.

The aim of this essay is not to arrive at a definite conclusion or to bring proof of a transmission of one example of a specific piece of work to another non-cuneiform work, but to define as precisely as the opportunity allows the limits of what can be called transmission.

## 2 Who Speaks Wisdom?

As is known, traditional wisdom is attributed to figures of authority, such as old man, father, or king. Although seemingly obvious, the question is why? In Babylonia, wisdom is called *ḥasīsu*, literally, the 'ear', which involves a semantic shift to 'intelligence'. A person or deity possessing wisdom achieves the appellation or title *atar ḥasīsa*, 'super wise' or *bēl ḥasīsi* 'endowed with wisdom' (for a god); or he can be called as possessing *ḥasīsa palkâ*, 'wide ears'. Another term, synonymous of *ḥasīsu*, 'ear', 'wisdom', is *uznu/uznâ*, 'ear, ears', which also means 'wisdom'. The expression *rapāš uzni*, 'wide of ear', or possessing *uzna/uznātu rapšātu*, 'wide ears', means 'endowed with wisdom'. The gods can also *uzna ruppūšu* - 'widen one's ear', or 'grant wisdom'.

However, the notion of why 'ear' necessarily is 'wisdom', or 'intelligence' and what has 'wide' or 'broad' to do with wisdom needs further comment, as the semantic shift between the 'ear' and 'wisdom' had not been adequately explained before.<sup>2</sup> I risk providing my own explanation, although it rests on an assumption which cannot be definitely proven.

In the human body, the ear is the only tissue organ which consistently grows even after adulthood (in a prominent way; the nose is

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Westenholz 2014.

another organ). The older one grows the bigger one's ear is. Evidently, big ears or wide ears are traits of old or older people. Hence, it is of no surprise to find *yashish* in Hebrew as 'old man', cognate with Akkadian *hasīsu*. In pre-modern days or preindustrial societies, a person with utterly big ears, that is old, was lucky enough to have survived, outliving his age group. Of course, in ancient societies, such as Mesopotamia, luck had nothing to do with it, rather the fact that the person was loved by the gods who granted him longevity. The reason he was granted longevity was because he was rewarded for his piousness and moral living. Hence, *hasīsa palkâ* and *uzna/uznātu rapšātu* 'wide ears' were taken as a metaphor for the archetypical wise person. And when the gods 'widen one's ears' they grant one old age, experience or wisdom. Of course this is not to deny the cognitive aspect of the ear as an agent of hearing, but to sharpen the imagery behind the otherwise implicit 'wide-eared'.

The wise person's configurations in wisdom literature can take the form of an exceedingly old person, like Atra-ḥasīs, who was granted eternal life, or a father-figure, like Šuruppak, who is necessarily older, hence more wise and experienced, speaking wisdom to his son. The same is seen in additional compositions. The wisdom composition called *šimâ milka*, or *Šūpû-amēlu* (Most Illustrious Man), in which Šūpû-amēlu gives advice to his son; the Old Babylonian composition called *The Scholars of Uruk*, where the father-figure chides his son; similarly in the *Dialogue Between a Father and His Son*; and, most probably, in the *Counsels of Wisdom*, where wisdom is delivered from a father to his son, or a father-like figure to a son-like figure, such as from a senior official to his junior.<sup>3</sup>

In Mesopotamia this traditional position of old man or father can be expanded or replaced by the figure of the king, as the wisest alive. This happened in literature, such as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (cf. *ša naqba imuru*, 'He [i.e. Gilgameš] who saw the 'deep''), and as in *The Instructions of Šuruppak*, whose speaker of wisdom, i.e. Šuruppak, was regarded as king in the Mesopotamian literary tradition, although his instructions are not necessarily related to courtly life and manners.<sup>4</sup> Consider also the *Counsels of Ur-Ninurta*, a composition of instructions that were seemingly issued by king Ur-Ninurta of the first Dynasty of Isin (ca. twentieth-nineteenth centuries BCE).<sup>5</sup> But the attribution of wisdom to royal figures was reflected also in real life, when, for example, King Assurbanipal was equated with Adapa. Additional wise kings were Šulgi and Nabonidus. In the context of courtly life,

<sup>3</sup> Cohen 2013, 81-128; George 2009, 78-112, no. 14; Foster, George 2020; Lambert 1960, 96-107, 311-15, 345-6; Lenzi 2018.

<sup>4</sup> George 2003, 1: 444-5; Alster 2005, 31-220.

<sup>5</sup> Alster 2005, 221-64.

expressed apocryphally, the *Uruk List of Scholars and Kings* (without entering to the question of the time of its composition) wished perhaps to re-establish the position of the wise (and traditional) sage as the indispensable advisor of the royal figure.<sup>6</sup>

Similar configurations in non-cuneiform wisdom literature are evident in the *Book of Proverbs*, where traditional wisdom is conveyed by father and mother to son (“Attend my son to your father’s instruction [בְּיִסֹרֶךָ], and do not reject the teaching [הוֹרָה] of your mother”).<sup>7</sup> But, as in Mesopotamia, wisdom taught by one’s ‘father and mother’ is appropriated by the figure of King Solomon. Thus the book opens: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David king of Israel, to know wisdom and instruction [בְּיִסֹרֶךָ]”.<sup>8</sup> The artificiality of the opening verse is blatant, when a few lines down of the very same opening chapter we hear about parental wisdom.

Traditional wisdom conveyed by an elder figure to his younger kin is seen in the *Story of Ahiqar*. Of course, Ahiqar was no father to Nadin, but his uncle. Such a change was required by the narrative (i.e. the good uncle vs. the wayward nephew). But in the narrative Ahiqar was also placed in a high position of a sage or counselor (of Kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon), as dictated by the Babylonian perception of kings and their scholars.

Father and/or king, scholar or vizier as conveyors of wisdom to their juniors are also commonly used to frame the *sebayit* instructions in the Egyptian wisdom literature: Ptahhotep, an official, to his son, King Cheti to his son Merikare, King Amenhotep I to his son Sesosteris I, and Amenemope the scribe to his son.<sup>9</sup>

But there are also alternatives to father/king/scholar as speakers of wisdom. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* Siduri is an interesting case to consider. Her name means ‘woman’, ‘young girl’ in Hurrian, keying Siduri in the ears of the Mesopotamian audience as a female captive or prisoner of war. This Siduri works as a bar-keeper of a brothel, and she lives at the end of the world. As a liminal figure, on the crossroads of mortal life and the eternal life of the gods, non-representative of traditional Mesopotamian perceptions, she conveys words to wisdom to Gilgamesh. Her wisdom is unconventional. Rather than be a heroic king - like Sargon and Naram-Sin, upon whom the literary figure of Gilgamesh is modeled, she says to Gilgamesh,

“O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?  
The life that you seek you will never find.

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<sup>6</sup> Lenzi 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Prov. 1:8.

<sup>8</sup> Prov. 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Adams 2020.



When the gods created mankind, death they dispensed to  
mankind,  
Life they kept for themselves.  
But you Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
Enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
Dance and play day and night.  
Let your clothes be clean,  
Let your head be washed, may you bathe in water,  
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace.  
For such is the destiny of [mortal men]”.<sup>10</sup>

With Siduri, heroism is reversed. Better to be home than chasing windmills. Thus, her words reminds one of a similar negative or nihilistic wisdom theme, the ‘vanity theme’ or the *carpe diem* theme. Great deeds are useless because even the greatest died, for death was bestowed to all mankind, so best to live life to its fullest.

Siduri’s wisdom, however, is quickly appropriated. Siduri appears as a wisdom figure in the Old Babylonian Gilgameš version. In the Standard Babylonian version, however, it is Utnapišti who now speaks similar themes to Gilgamesh. In the Standard Babylonian version, Siduri steps out of the limelight, and becomes a cut-out character. Utnapišti as sage-king is now the one who advocates wisdom, telling Gilgamesh that the life of mortals is limited, in a vein not unsimilar to Siduri’s.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps there were other Siduri-s, now lost to us.<sup>12</sup> We heard of the wisdom (חָכְמָה) of the mother in the *Book of Proverbs*, but she also has disappeared – Solomon was now the wise king. Other ‘wise women’ may have been erased out of literary history, with a few fleetingly mentioned, such as the ‘wise woman’ of Abel Beit Maacah.<sup>13</sup> Šērū’a-eṭirat, the eldest daughter of Esarhaddon and sister of the ‘twin’brothers, Assurbanipal and Šamaš-šumi-ukin, resurfaces in *Papyrus Amherst* 63, as Sryṭrh or Saritrah, a woman counselor and diplomat.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of her role in history, it is interesting to note that in Aramaic literature, a place is given to the counselor queen. This can be of significance as further consideration is given to speakers of wisdom in non-cuneiform literature.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Epic of Gilgameš*, “Sippar” Tablet (Old Babylonian; George 2003, 276-86).

<sup>11</sup> Tablet 10, ll. 293'-322'; George 2003, 696-9.

<sup>12</sup> Consider the comparison between Siduri and Achilles’ mother, Thetis, by Viano, Sironi 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Camp 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Holm 2020.

Consider Aesop – a complete reversal of the archetypical ancient Near Eastern conveyor of wisdom, although acknowledged as a stranger, coming from Phrygia and as a prisoner of war, of physical defects. What was the intention of such a portrayal? A reversal of the Babylonian or other ancient Near Eastern traditions of the wise king, although adopting ancient Near Eastern literature (to a certain extent) through proverbs and sayings?

A figure which invites more discussion than can be given here is the *aluzinnu*, the ‘jester’ or ‘buffoon’, who transposes and ridicules perceived wisdom and knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Hardly a star of Mesopotamian literature, he appears in one badly preserved composition, where he mocks the entire profession of Babylonian medicine and magic (which came hand in hand), by a display of pseudo-incantations. Was the *aluzinnu* adopted to the Greek world in a similar role as the *alozon*, the ‘boaster’ or ‘clown’?<sup>16</sup> There, regardless of a shared etymology real or false between Akkadian *aluzinnu* and Greek *alozon*, he rose to fame, or at least moved to center stage. And if so, was the *aluzinnu*’s Babylonian ‘wisdom’ the blueprint of the exploits of the *alozon* in Greece, as a man whose wisdom is all pretense? In this context, one is reminded of the ‘wise’ servant in the *Dialogue of Pessimism* (aka *Arad Mitguranni*) or Gimil-Ninurta, the protagonist in the *Poor Man of Nippur*, who despite their low status outwit their superiors.<sup>17</sup> They too, like the *aluzinnu*, can be seen as jester archetypes, finding a later reflection, directly or not cannot be known, with other non-cuneiform literatures of the Mediterranean basin and Mesopotamia.

Reversal of roles can also be recognized in Babylonian disputation literature (which will be discussed below in *How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken?*), where figures of wisdom are ridiculed – to be portrayed by insignificant critters. The *Series of the Spider*, for example, lifts up quotations from the *Babylonian Theodicy*, *Gilgameš*, and other ‘worthy’ works, to be spoken by rodents or insects. The comparison with the Greek *Battle of Frogs and Mice* is inevitable, as is the question of transmission.<sup>18</sup>

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15 A translation of the text is found in Foster 2005, 939-41. There is no modern edition.

16 Griffith, Marks 2011; Veldhuis 2006; Rumor 2017.

17 The *Dialogue of Pessimism* is structured as an exchange between a master and his slave. Whenever the master wishes to embark upon a task (hunting, marrying, conducting business, starting a revolt), the slave supports his intentions with words of instructive wisdom, such as in proverbs and instructions. But when the master reneges on his words, the slave, in order to buttress his master’s desires, brings about negative or pessimistic wisdom, for which see the section below “What Words of Wisdom are Spoken?”; Lambert 1960, 139-49. *The Poor Man of Nippur* is a folktale about a poor man although a trickster, who takes his revenge on a figure of authority; Foster 2005, 931-6; Ottervanger 2016.

18 In the *Series of the Spider* two insignificant animals (insects?) argue in front of the spider over who is more worthy (Jiménez 2017, 291-323). The use of poetic language

To conclude this discussion, when speaking of transmission, it should be asked who in the eyes of the ancients conveys this wisdom. And in the process of transmission, was the conveyor of this wisdom maintained (wise king or ruler, such as Solon) or rather inverted (e.g. Aesop and the *alozon*), in order to create a contrastive or polemic narrative framework, which, nonetheless, is willing to accept Babylonian wisdom traditions? Or perhaps, as Babylonian disputation literature hints, the inversion of accepted roles was already conventional in that ancient literature tradition, paving the path for alternative conveyors of wisdom? And were women as speakers of wisdom conventionally silenced only to resurface in alternative narratives, nowadays almost completely lost?

### 3 What Words of Wisdom Are Spoken?

One of the most common and enduring themes of wisdom literature is the 'vanity theme', which expresses, in a similar way to Siduri's words seen above, the futility of life in face of coming death. It is expressed most pointedly in the Babylonian *Ballad of Early Rulers*, where the poet sings of the many illustrious heroes, who in spite of their heroic deeds, are now dead and gone. He goes on to recommend the listener to have a good glass of beer (in the tavern no doubt), and enjoy life as much as he can. The theme is echoed in many literatures, where it is sometimes identified as the *ubi sunt* motif. As shown in a previous study, although the vanity theme may seem as too diffuse to claim a shared heritage, the list of dead rulers now in the netherworld appended to the 'vanity theme' can be recognized as a distinct literary device. Since it is found in the Babylonian *Ballad* but also throughout various literatures (Greek, Arabic, Egyptian, Syriac), this may bring one to speak of transmission of a motif of Babylonian wisdom literature in non-cuneiform literatures. A few examples are provided:<sup>19</sup>

All life is but the wink of an eye,  
Life of mankind cannot last forever,  
Where is Alulu who reigned for 36,000 years?  
Where is Entena who went up to heaven?

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and quotes from the *Babylonian Theodicy* elevates the level of satire and ridicule. The *Babylonian Theodicy*, quoted in the *Series of the Spider*, is a wisdom dialogue between the sufferer and his friend who contend on the problem of divine retribution; Oshima 2013. It was one of the best-known and much studied works in Babylonia, as it is today.

<sup>19</sup> Discussion and full references in Cohen 2017.

Where is Gilgamesh who sought (eternal) life like (that of) [Zius]  
udra?  
Where is Hu[wawa who...]?  
Where is Enkidu who [proclaimed] (his) strength throughout the  
land?  
Where is Bazi? Where is Zizi?  
Where are the great kings of which (the like) from then to now  
Are not (anymore) engendered, are not bo[rn]?  
Life without light - how can it be better than death?<sup>20</sup>

Where are the princes of the heathen become, and such as ruled  
the beasts upon the earth; They that had their pastime with the  
fowls of the air, and they that hoarded up silver and gold, wherein  
men trust, and made no end of their getting? For they that wrought  
in silver, and were so careful, and whose works are unsearchable,  
They are vanished and gone down to the grave, and others  
are come up in their steads.

The Agarenes that seek wisdom upon earth, the merchants of  
Meran and of Theman, the authors of fables, and searchers out of  
understanding; none of these have known the way of wisdom, or  
remember her paths.<sup>21</sup>

A king was Xerxes, the one who claimed to share everything  
with god.  
Yet he crossed back the Lemnian water with a single oar.  
Blessed was Midas, thrice-blessed was Kinyras,  
But what man went to Hades with more than an obol?<sup>22</sup>

Where is Khosarow? Where is Caesar? Where is who joined money  
with more money, so that it became plenty? I have already seen  
time destroying one group of people after another. No rich man  
stays (forever rich), neither a poor one. Where is who claimed to  
be superior in richness of the world and was proud? I wish I knew  
what would come after what I see.<sup>23</sup>

The next set of examples will demonstrate how another literary device  
of Babylonian wisdom literature is used to propel the idea of the 'vanity  
theme'. It does so by introducing the human life versus animal life  
motif, or, in the view of the nihilist, the lack of difference between human  
life and animal life. Man despite his toil is no better than beast.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Ballad of Early Rulers* (Old Babylonian period, ca. 1700-1500 BCE).

<sup>21</sup> *The Book of Baruch* (ca. 200-100 BCE).

<sup>22</sup> *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 1795 (second century CE).

<sup>23</sup> Abu al-'Atāhiyya 748-828 CE.

In the Babylonian Wisdom composition *šimâ milka*, the wise father (Šūpû-amēlu) advises his son to build a house for himself, amass wealth, raise a family and by doing so be considered a success in the eyes of society of humans and gods. The son replies that all life is of no point, because all die at the end (the ‘vanity theme’). Hence, father’s advices are useless. To argue his point the son says the following:<sup>24</sup>

*anenna summatu dāmimtu iššūru murtappittu*  
*ša alpi danni alê bīssu*  
*[ša dam]dammatu anenna mārūšu*

“Where is the moaning dove – the bird that is always on the move?  
As for the strong ox – where is its household?  
[As for the ma]re mule – where are its children?”

The questions that the son asks go unanswered but their implication is clear. Look at the animals of the wild and the field. They have no permanent houses, they amass no wealth in the granary, they even do not have children. In what way do they fare worse than us? In what way are we better? Both we and they will die.

The theme or motif is also found in the *Babylonian Theodicy*. A dialogue-structure between the so-called Pious Sufferer and his friend brings the two opposing view of wisdom: the Sufferer representing nihilistic wisdom (of the kind the son in *šimâ milka* expresses) and the friend, representing traditional ‘fatherly’ or positive wisdom.

As the Sufferer complains of his cruel fate, his friend, the wise sage, urges him to pray to the gods for salvation. The Sufferer, however, rejects the friend’s advice, turning to the animal versus human metaphor, saying:<sup>25</sup>

*[a]kkānu serrēmu ša iṭpupu šumuḥ šamm[i]*  
*ak-kabtī pakki ilī uzunšu ibši*

*aggu lābu ša itakkalu dumuq šīri*  
*ak-kimilti iltī šuṭuri ubil maṣṣassu*

“The onager, the wild ass, that had its fill of lush wild grasses,  
Did it have a care for the weighty wisdom of the gods?”

The savage lion that fed himself from the choicest meat,  
Did it bring its flour offerings to appease a goddess’s wrath?”

<sup>24</sup> LI. 122’-124’. See above fn. 3.

<sup>25</sup> LI. 48-51. Lambert 1960, 72-5; Oshima 2013, 11, 19; Heinrich, Jiménez, Mitto, forthcoming.

As before, the condition of man is similar, if not worse than those of animals. The animals are neither pious nor hold to traditional values, but regardless live well and survive. Like in *šimâ milka*, traditional wisdom (praying to the gods, being pious etc.), is rejected because it is useless.

The *Sargon Birth Legend* is the next composition to use this device. The *Sargon Birth Legend* is a well-known literary work, categorized under the genre of *narû*-literature, which while criticizing royal power imitates Mesopotamian royal inscriptions, in particular of Sargon and Naram-Sin.<sup>26</sup> The *Sargon Birth Legend* tells how Sargon was born to an *entu*-priestess who placed him in a bitumen-covered casket. The casket was carried down the river, but Sargon was saved by a gardener, and from lowly beginnings he arose to become the world's greatest emperor. The rest of the composition, which is very poorly preserved, suffers from a break with the main story, and therefore its contents have not been properly understood. There is a gap of some fifteen lines in the text, but sense arrives, however, if the human versus the animal motif is considered. Hence, a re-reading of the final lines can provide us the sense of the whole composition.<sup>27</sup>

*u šūru [...]*  
*irtappud laḥru ina šēri ammēni la [...]*  
*u šabītu israt šāri lulima [...]*

*iṣṣūru qadû ša iltassû mušīta*  
*ina šisītišu mīna utter*

*illak šāru ayya bīssu*  
*iltassum serrēmu ayyak[a illak] [var. irtappud serrēmu ibīt ina šēri]*  
*išū' arū ana mannīšu*

*ša parû lāsīmu ayyinni mārūšu*  
*ul iṣēṭ barbaru dāmi [...]*

*nēšu ākil dāmi [...]*

The wild bull [...]

The ewe ran about in the steppe, why does it not...? [...]  
And the gazelle driven by the wind, the stag ... [...]

<sup>26</sup> Lewis 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Ll. 50-62. On the basis of Westenholz 1997, 44-7, supplemented by Jiménez, Mitto forthcoming.

The owl that always hoots at night,  
What does it achieve with its speech?

The wind blows thither – where is its home?  
The onager runs about, where does he [go?]<sup>28</sup> [var.: The onager runs  
about, he spends his nights on the steppe].  
The eagle flies – but to [aid] one of his own?

The swift mule, where are its children?  
Didn't the wolf miss ... the blood ... ?

The lion-eating bloody-flesh.<sup>28</sup>

The passage from the *Sargon Birth Legend*, as badly as it is preserved, consists of the motive already encountered.<sup>29</sup> It can be surmised with all due caution that the glory of Sargon is probably questioned by the vanity theme, expressed by the device of asking what difference is there at the end of the day between man and beast. Sargon achieved so much – but what is it worth? The animals roam about, the wind is homeless, the onager runs about the steppe, with no home. The owl hoots at night, but to what use, because, with everybody asleep, who can hear him? And the eagle flies high in the sky, without tending his family. The swift mule is sterile and therefore has no offspring. And yet they pretty well survive, without conquering the world. What is challenged here is the conventional narrative of world domination. (And consider above the words of Siduri to Gilgameš). The critical outlook on the exploits of the mighty and famous is not foreign to *narû*-literature. The very essence of the genre of *narû* is to question the limits of power.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, it is to be recalled that from a Mesopotamian point of view, the very suggestion that humans and animals are the same challenges one of the basic tenets of Mesopotamian religion, which is that gods and humans stand in one category, as opposed to the category of animals, or in the general sense, the natural world. Gods and humans

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**28** The rest of the text is very poorly preserved.

**29** The point was already partially realized by Westenholz 1997, 36: "Column ii [i.e. the lines considered here] poses many problems, since it contains no narrative but a series of rhetorical questions. These questions are also addressed to an implied audience. The seemingly obvious message to be read out of the text is a commentary on the futility of all human effort. The relationship of this section to the story of Sargon is unfortunately not clear. It could contain his reflections at the end of his life. On the other hand, it may describe a tragic cataclysm at the end of his reign. Though most unlikely, it is also possible that col. ii contains an unrelated composition, traditionally copied on the same tablet as the 'Sargon Autobiography'."

**30** Schaudig 2019.

are the same but for their immortality. In this respect, it is interesting to note that no poem of Babylonian literature ever celebrated an animal, and no song was composed on the beauty of a snowy mountain.

The discussion of the human vs. animal motif leads one to consider a few passages from the *Book of Qohelet*.

The speaker of the *Book of Qohelet*, an unnamed 'son of David', articulates the 'vanity theme' throughout many passages in composition.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this passage<sup>32</sup> is the closest articulation found of the ideas recounted in Babylonian compositions, such as *šimâ milka* or the *Ballad*

What point for man is there who toils and strives in all his heart as he toils under the sun? All his days are constant pain, and anger is his concern also at nighttime, his heart rests not - this is vanity also. Hence there is nothing better for man than to eat and drink, and to enjoy himself, even when in toil. I have learnt this too - because it is dictated by God.

Qohelet then continues in a later pericope<sup>33</sup> to discuss the fate of the just and unjust, for he has seen how justice is meted. It matters not, he says, whether one is just or wicked.<sup>34</sup> Thus, he is critical of positive wisdom, similar in his point of view to the Sufferer in the *Theodicy*.<sup>35</sup> He comes to the conclusion that man's actions are of no relevance to his fate, hence man and beast are alike.<sup>36</sup>

The case of humans and beasts is alike: as one dies so does the other, they draw the same breath. Is man different from beast? No. All is vanity. Everything reaches the same place: everything was dust and to dust it will return. Can anybody know if humans' breath goes up while beast's breath goes down to the netherworld? And I understood - man must enjoy his doings, because that is his lot. Who will bring him to know what will be after he dies?

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**31** On the relationship between the *Book of Qohelet* and ancient Near Eastern literature, long acknowledged, see Samet 2015, the most important discussion in recent years, because it takes into consideration the newly discovered or newly assessed Babylonian 'vanity theme' wisdom compositions. Worthy of mention is Gianto 1998, who was among the first to point out the thematic relationship between Qohelet and the *Ballad* and *šimâ milka* and Keefer 2022, 188, who points out to the thematic similarity between *šimâ milka* and Qohelet. The English translation of the *Book of Qohelet* brought here rests on the *New English Bible*.

**32** Qoh. 2:22-25.

**33** Qoh. 3:16-22.

**34** For the *carpe diem* motif in this passage, see Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2011, 284-7.

**35** Shields 2006, 146-9; Seow 1997, 175-6.

**36** Qoh. 3:19-22.



Qohelet judges mankind and animals to be alike, their fate not different.<sup>37</sup> All die, despite man's deeds, whether good or bad. Nothing promises a blessed afterlife. Who ever said that the spirit of beasts goes to the netherworld while that of man's to heaven?<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting to note how the 'vanity theme', both in the Babylonian wisdom compositions and in the *Book of Qohelet* brings into play the human condition versus the animal condition. For the Mesopotamian authors the animal world is brought to prove the point that although animals do not toil, amass fortunes, or behave piously towards the gods, they go about and live as much as man does. For Qohelet, man's deeds are of no relevance as regards his fate: either good or bad, who can know man's fate. Thus, mankind's case and the beasts' case are the same: all will die. And after death, man will not know what worth were his doings.

To conclude, a notion of negative or nihilistic wisdom which introduces a comparison between human and beast can be recognized. It was identified as a literary motive in Babylonian wisdom compositions which introduce the 'vanity theme'. They include *šimâ milka*, the *Theodicy*, and the *Sargon Birth Legend*. A similar device used to argue that man's fate after death cannot be known was found in the *Book of Qohelet*. Common to the Babylonian compositions and to Qohelet is the argument that the human and animal condition is of no difference. Thus the argument demonstrates the invalidity of the claims of accepted wisdom of the fathers or wise men, encouraging whoever encounters it to question established truisms and platitudes. But there is more to consider. The speaker of Qohelet is a prince, "son of David", a figure of power and authority, a figure who is modeled, so one can assume, on the representation of the royal *persona* in the ancient Near East. And yet, Qohelet acutely observes from a position of power that all is vanity, hence ultimately criticizing his very own. The same outlook by way of the teller is taken in the *Birth Legend of Sargon*: the mighty king's power is criticized as valueless in face of impending death.

#### 4 How Are Words of Wisdom Spoken?

The last issue to be discussed is that of genre – or, how are words of wisdom spoken within a given literary frame. Is genre enough to test the limit of transmission? A recent volume (2020) edited by Enrique Jiménez and Catherine Mittermayer set about to examine

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<sup>37</sup> Longman 1998, 129.

<sup>38</sup> For Qohelet's critique of apocalyptic ideas, perhaps prevalent in the author's days (through Greek-Hellenistic influence?), see Fischer 1998 and Krüger 2004, 93.

critically the genre of disputation literature in the *Near East and Beyond*, with 'beyond' extending to Syriac literature, Arabic, Medieval Spain, Iran and so on. The underlying assumption of the volume was that in some way or the other the genre of disputation literature has had its origins in the Babylonian disputations. Another dimension can be added to the discussion that moves beyond the question of genre. This can be done by looking at a specific discourse in this type of literature.

The main and shared characteristic of disputation literature is that of two 'non-human' *personae* disputing between themselves who the more beneficial is. So much is clear. But in the disputes there is more. The dispute runs along the divide of the human and the divine. The question which is argued is who is more beneficial to gods and humans, with each protagonist emphasizing his or her traits and features in both domains. Two Babylonian compositions can demonstrate just that, the *Date-Palm and the Tamarisk*, and the recently reconstructed composition, the *Date-Palm and the Vine*.<sup>39</sup> In the *Date-Palm and the Tamarisk*, the Tamarisk says:

"I am the exorcist priest, I renew the temple...  
Behold: aren't my surroundings full of resin? Are they not full of incense?  
The priestess collects the 'water' of the tamarisk, and then praise is given and a festival performed".

The date palm responds by saying that its fronds are also used in purification rites, as well as of course as feeding everybody.

"In the offering place, when offering to Sin the prince,  
Without myself being present,  
The king cannot perform libation.  
My purification rites are performed through all corners of the world,  
My fronds are dropped to [the ground] and a festival is celebrated. [...]  
I am considered a replacement for grain for a period of three months [...]  
The orphan, the widow, the pauper [...]  
They eat food which never diminishes. My dates are good"<sup>40</sup>

And in the parallel composition the *Date-Palm and the Vine*, the Palm-tree says,

<sup>39</sup> Cohen 2013, 177-98; Jiménez 2017, 231-87.

<sup>40</sup> *The Date-Palm and the Tamarisk* (Old Babylonian; eighteenth-sixteenth centuries BCE).

“I am [Palm, the ...],  
I am tall in stature [...]   
I am suitable in my crown, like the cyprus itself [...]   
In my luscious fruit humanity exults,  
Lavishly do I supply the table of the gods and provide them with  
perfect oblations.  
Without me the exorcist casts no spells,  
With my produce he carries out every hand-washing ritual.”  
The vine, not to be undone, replies as follows,  
“I am wine, the purifier of everything, the mountain tippel!  
In the cup of Šamaš, at the divine table, I blend the tithe  
[And], as for Šamaš, the bond of the people, the sun of humanity,  
I make his heart expand, I light up his face ...  
It is after my name [i.e. *karānu* ‘wine’] that [humanity] names libation drinks [*kurunnu* ‘libation’]...  
I heal the sick person whom fever afflicts,  
[And] bring back from the Netherworld the sick [and] dying,  
He whose life has faded from his breast,  
And death has covered it [sc. his breast], bearing him towards  
the grave,  
On his deathbed I spare his life!”<sup>41</sup>

Can we trace a similar discourse in non-cuneiform literatures? The tension between human and divine sphere is also found in the Syrian *Dialogue between the Vine and Cedar*, and the Parthian composition named as the *Babylonian Tree*, which features a disputation between the Palm-tree and the goat.<sup>42</sup> In the Syrian *Dialogue between the Vine and Cedar*, the Vine says,

“It is I who give forth wine, which gladdens the heart of humans.  
The one short on wine has no life, [neither do] the rich without  
luxury.  
For kings exult in [my] produce, and sadness is overthrown.  
Rulers delight in my necklaces, and children rejoice in my clusters.  
My leaves give healing, and my tendrils [give] every sweetness [...]   
In the holy cup it is mixed, and it is offered with sacrifices.  
Small and great love me. Who therefore is equal to me?”<sup>43</sup>

In the *Babylonian Tree*, the goat speaks,

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<sup>41</sup> *Date-Palm and the Vine* (date unknown; only first millennium copies).

<sup>42</sup> Butts in Jiménez 2017, 462-73; Brunner 1980, and further discussion, Cohen 2021.

<sup>43</sup> *The Dialogue between the Vine and the Cedar* (Dawid bar Pawlos; eighth-ninth centuries CE).

“For the almighty creator, radiant kind Ohrmazd for the pure religion of the Mazdeans, which kind Ohrmazd taught, one cannot do worship without me, who am the goat. For from me they make milk offerings [...] in the rites of the gods [...] the efficacy is from me.”<sup>44</sup>

The tension of a plant species serving either man or god, as one can call it, is found in the *Fable of Trees*, which Jotham delivers in Judges 9.

“The trees searched for someone to be king over them. They said to the Olive: reign over us! But the Olive replied: Shall I halt my fruits with which gods and folk partake? [...] The trees said to the Vine; go thee - reign over us! But the Vine told them: Shall I stop my wine which delights gods and folk?, and go to be king among the trees?”

The value of the trees in the fable is measured according to the benefit each brings to gods and humans. The *crux interpretum* of Jotham's fable lies in the worth of the thorn, called to rule over the trees, but this question lies outside the scope of our discussion.<sup>45</sup>

To conclude, if the limit of transmission is to be defined, genre by itself may not be sufficient. The deep structure investigated here supplies genre with a meaning: the disputation is not just a literary game of wit and erudition, as many times it has been displayed, but rather a discourse into an existential problem of the believer: what or who is of greater value not only to mankind but also to the divine domain? While in some disputations the winner is proclaimed, in others the question remains deliberately, so it seems, open.

## 5 Conclusion

Three parameters by which the discussion on Babylonian wisdom literature and non-cuneiform literature can be expanded were introduced. They were meant to set the limit of transmission, that is to say, when can one begin to identify transmission. First, emphasis was placed on the changes one can expect in the course of transmission, when speakers of wisdom were changed or adapted. Secondly, a discussion into the strategies developed around a single wisdom theme - the 'vanity theme' - was offered. It was demonstrated how the list of long dead figures or the human versus animal

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<sup>44</sup> *The Babylonian Tree* (Parthian; Middle Persian).

<sup>45</sup> Tatu 2006.

motif provided the metaphor for carrying the 'vanity theme'. Thirdly, the question of genre in the transmission of wisdom literature was raised. The case of disputation literature showed that genre by itself is rather insufficient to provide the foil against which transmission can be argued. The underlying structural element which creates the tension in the disputation must also be taken into account.

It is hoped that the three parameters brought into discussion be considered when talking about transmission, as the quest for the reconstruction of lost literatures, across centuries, languages, religions and cultures continues.

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# **From Dialogue to Debate** Argumentative and Epic Discourse in Mesopotamian Literature Between II and I Millennium BCE

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**Abstract** Dialogical structures in the wisdom debate of the *Babylonian Theodicy* and in the epic of *Erra and Išum* are analysed comparing both the stylistic level and the main moral and theological issues the texts bring to the fore. Rhetorical and dialectical means appear to be deployed as tools for articulating subtle reasoning and arguments. They allow myth to be subjected to renewed reflection and reworking, deeply transforming epic narrative. This scenario suggests the emergence of a new figure of sage and *literatus*, particularly versed in the art of debate.

**Keywords** Babylonian Theodicy. Babylonian literature. Dialectics in Assyro-Babylonian texts. Dialogue and debate. Erra and Išum.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Dialectics and Wisdom. – 3 Dialogue, Dialectics and Narrative. – 4 Further Questions.

## **1 Introduction**

In Mesopotamian myths direct speech and its repetitions are a major narrative technique, used especially for characterising the protagonists and moving the action from one scene to another, and illustrate temporal sequences and the consequences of the first enunciation of wishes, intentions, claims, etc. This gives a dramatic character

to the narrative and can be compared with the style of epic texts of different epochs and provenance that in general largely deploy this instrument.<sup>1</sup> This narrative structure also takes the form of a dialogue, although often a rather schematic and limited one, in which various actors address the same question to the protagonist to obtain the same answer.<sup>2</sup>

Dialogical structure is exploited to its full potential in the disputations genre, where the assertions of the contenders are articulated, their characteristics fully analysed and illustrated vis-à-vis the world in which they usually occupy complementary positions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, instead of moving from one stage of the plot to another, a detailed presentation of values is pursued here through the intensified exchange of propositions. The contenders interrelate at the logical level, picking up on the adversary's arguments to oppose them with a rejoinder and a counter-discourse. Introductory formulae of direct speech, such as the basic formula: *x pâšu īpušma iqabbi/ana y amāta izakkar* 'x made his mouth and spoke/said/saying a word to y', or more redundant variations, are used both in the epic/narrative texts and in disputations, to distinguish the speakers and mark the beginning of their discourses; they can be easily ranged among literary devices, in some occasions also transformed into a parodic version. The Sitz-im-Leben of the study and transmission of disputations was the school curriculum, where they contributed to the training of linguistic competence, argumentative skills and reflection on values, even when styled into parody,<sup>4</sup> or compositions of satirical flavour revealing that wisdom is a controversial matter.<sup>5</sup>

The repertoire that could be referred to in order to find and compose the arguments of discussions was wide and included texts belonging to the scribal curriculum and dealing with didactic and wisdom themes, such as proverbs and *historiolae* of mythical setting.<sup>6</sup>

In the present contribution the analysis is mainly devoted to the formal aspects of discourse and to the deployment of rhetorical means typical of wisdom literature in the creation of a new form of epic narrative.

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1 For a general survey referring to various statistics see Archi 2009.

2 See for instance the Sumerian tale of *Inanna's Descent into the Netherworld*, or sections of *Gilgamesh*.

3 For a recent overview see Jiménez 2017, with previous bibliography.

4 Jiménez 2017, *passim* in chap. 1.4 and 1.5 on parody. Specifically on the parody of *Babylonian Theodicy*, see Jiménez 2018.

5 See Foster, George 2020.

6 Cohen 2018 for a presentation of the compositions we might label as wisdom texts and their use in the scribal curriculum and the efforts to collect them in series. Cooper 2017 for updates to the short tale of Enlil and Namzitara. For a recent general overview of Mesopotamian wisdom literature see Cohen, Wasserman 2018.

## 2 Dialectics and Wisdom

These procedures were the basis for articulating reflection also on moral issues and the major questions of human life, as attested by the *Babylonian Theodicy*, in which the structure of the disputations is adapted to different actors and aims. This text, traditionally attributed to the end of the second millennium BCE, was widely known and commented on during the first millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup>

The reflections of the two scribes<sup>8</sup> or sages that confront each other in this highly sophisticated text draw inspiration and arguments from common experiences and popular wisdom, but also from the traditional patrimony of mythological and devotional literature, in order to discuss a crucial point, the principle known as ‘Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang’, or the principle of divine retribution for human behaviour.<sup>9</sup> This can be viewed against the background of the didactic and wisdom literature that imparts precepts of correct behaviour and religious devotion. J. Haubold has recently examined the poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* from this perspective and proposed that the text is not a simple demonstration of the validity of traditional faith, but rather reveals a deeper religious sensibility and a new awareness: what the sufferer “can do, after conventional wisdom has failed, is to feel Marduk’s hand upon his body – and that in turn gives him access to what unfolds in Marduk’s heart”.<sup>10</sup> And the final restoration of the sufferer to health and prosperity shows: “not just an individual act of mercy but also the order of Marduk’s universe, an order

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**7** A synthesis of the chronological issue is in Oshima 2014, XIV-XVII. The traditional attribution, known from literary catalogues, to the time of Nabuchadnezzar I (1126-1105 BCE) or Adad-apla-iddina (1069-1048 BCE) could be compared with inscriptions of the first king, known from copies from Ashurbanipal’s library (RIMB 2.4.5, 2.4.9, and 2.4.10), that narrate the abandonment of Babylon by Marduk and the return of divine favor thanks to the righteous and pious attitude of the king. Nabuchadnezzar is taken from his situation of suffering and allowed to march victoriously against Elam and recover the statue of the god, whose return to Babylon is a symbol and guarantee of the god’s care for his town.

**8** On the identification of the sage with the scribe in the commentary on the *Theodicy* see Jiménez 2018, 125: “In fact, the equation ‘sage’ means ‘scribe’ is given no fewer than five times in the commentary: BM 66882+ obv 3 and rev 9’ (*mūdū*, ‘sage’), 12’ (*emqu*, ‘wise’), 17’ (*palkū*, ‘wide-open’, referring to the intelligence), and 19’-20’ (*kitmusu*, ‘hearer’). Compare also rev 10: ‘fowler’ (*usandū*) means ‘scribe’”. It can also be observed that the emphasis on the dialogical structure is preserved in the Biblical book of Job.

**9** See Oshima 2018, 189 with bibliography. A detailed discussion of the topic is provided by Cohen 2015. He critically revises some major relevant studies that adopt an ‘evolutionary or progressive’ perspective on the theme – attributing to the *Theodicy* the criticism of tradition – and look for historical circumstances that might have induced change, and more pessimistic and disenchanting views of the relations between gods and men.

**10** Haubold 2019, 217.

which we grasp not despite the limitations of our own embodied existence, but because of them”.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the *Babylonian Theodicy*, the texts and studies cited above sound as warnings against too simplistically considering it as a reaction vis-à-vis the traditional view.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the value of wisdom precepts appears also to be questioned in other texts,<sup>13</sup> and the critique of the principle of divine retribution can already be identified in texts earlier than the Kassite or first millennium BCE periods, nor is the *Theodicy* to be considered fruit of contingent difficulties that show the limits of the principle of divine retribution that was cardinal in wisdom precepts. In any case, it cannot be denied that it is the scribal and wisdom tradition that is further meditated upon and elaborated in this text, although this tradition is not monolithic, but can rather be viewed as a complex horizon of interpretation.

As has often been recognized the *Babylonian Theodicy* with its strophic architecture hinged on the acrostic is also a highly sophisticated piece of literature; we might say that it reached the *acmé* of the scribal art, in which stylistic devices are used to find a new explanation for an old problem. Despite some large textual gaps, it is possible to observe a progression in the use of rhetorical methods and in the attitudes of the discussants, as revealed by some key-sentences.<sup>14</sup>

The sage who takes the part of the sufferer starts with the observation of personal conditions in strophes 1 and 3,<sup>15</sup> considers principles of acknowledged wisdom, echoing proverbial sentences in strophe 5,

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**11** Haubold 2019, 218. As in the case of *Ludlul Bêl Nêmeqi*, Oshima reads this poem as representing not a rebellion against orthodox dogmata but a submission to the ultimate authority and power of divine rule and justice: “the sufferer has finally realized that he has suffered maltreatment from others, not because of any lack of divine justice but because of his own lack of respect for the divine order and his own lack of piety towards the gods” (2014, 142). Thus, both poems employ the figure of the “righteous sufferer” as a theological motif, “not to assert the sufferer’s innocence or to encourage people to reject the gods, but rather precisely to teach people the justice of divine rule, however inscrutable, and to urge them to submit themselves without questioning to the gods’ authority” (76). As didactic texts for the learned, both texts facilitated the contemplation of Marduk’s godhead.

**12** See bibliographical references in footnotes 6 and 9 above.

**13** See the Old Babylonian dialogue between *A Father and his Son*, in Foster, George 2020, 39, l. 8: NUN.ME-*lu-tum!*? *ša-lu-tum* ‘ù’ *mi-ši-tum* (Being a sage is captivity and oblivion). In this light it may be questioned whether the sentence: “It was commanded, they say, from Enlil’s own mouth: ‘Father should love son’. Why was ‘Son should love father’ not commanded among things destined to be?” (41, ll. 59-62) is to be simply interpreted with regard to family relations, or whether it emphasizes that change is a natural process vis-à-vis the image of conservative wisdom.

**14** A detailed formal analysis was proposed in Buccellati 1972.

**15** In strofe 1 he laments being an orphan and without protection and in strophe 3 poverty, enfeeblement, and grief. The other sage answers in strophe 2 that prayers provide divine protection and wealth, and in strophe 4 that after prayers gods show mercy and favor.

and openly replies to the sage's answers, saying that a corresponding reward is bestowed on neither the pious nor the wicked, in strophe 7.<sup>16</sup> The sage has to implicitly admit that experience contradicts the divine retribution principle, since he answers that divine plans cannot be understood, but that ritual correctness must be respected anyway. After a large textual gap, in strophe 13, the sufferer appears to choose another rhetorical tactic and provokes his friend by putting forward the proposal of abandoning his correct behaviour and living like a robber. This declaration might reveal the use of a paradoxical procedure, to induce a change of perspective and solicit further reflection by the other contender: what would you object, if I were to choose the attitude of the rascals?<sup>17</sup>

The following strophes are badly damaged and it is impossible to determine how the argumentation is conducted. It seems that in strophes 17-20 the arguments concern the instability of fortune, and in strophes 20 and 22 the sage again proposes the argument of devotion and faith in a final divine reward: only piety and devotion warrant true stability (strophe 22). He seems to discard the arguments of the sufferer as not cogent enough to undermine the current view that recommends devotion to obtain divine favour and prosperity.

Strophe 23 combines the sufferer's main arguments based on the observation of the lack of coherence and lack of stability in human experience. The sage also returns to a key argument he has already expounded in strophe 8: people cannot understand divine thought and plans.<sup>18</sup> Actually he seems to use fundamentally the same arguments, although varied in their expression, implying that the sufferer's propositions do not invalidate his own positions – although

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**16** In strophe 5 the sufferer remarks that the impious (metaphorically represented by wild animals) are fortunate and rich. To which the sage opposes that in the end they are punished. In strophe 6 the sufferer objects that the pious suffers from poverty and has a low position in society. The sentence *gana luqbika* (come, let me tell you), l. 1 and 47, is also attested in disputations (Jiménez 2017, 89-91), where it is perhaps an allusion to the *Theodicy*. See also Jiménez 2014, 102-3 for a restoration of ll. 46-51 on the basis of a new fragment.

**17** Oshima 2014 understands the passage differently and concludes: "At closer look, one sees that the friend never really acknowledged the sufferer's innocence; on the contrary, he attributes both the sufferer's refusal to accept his sinfulness and his doubts about the divine order to the lies and deceit innate in human nature. And rightly so, the criminal intentions and impious thoughts expressed by the sufferer on multiple occasions in the poem show that he was hardly as righteous as he claimed to be. Thus, it is not the sufferer who wins the argument, but rather the friend who convinces the sufferer of his guilt. This explains why the sufferer, in the end, after acknowledging his sinfulness, begs for divine mercy and leniency. He apparently realizes that, through their compassion, the gods alone can ease his plight and adversity (i.e. divine punishments). And this is precisely what the friend has repeatedly insisted upon".

**18** Strophe 24: "The mind of a god is as remote as the centre of the heavens, comprehending it is very difficult; people cannot understand".

here, perhaps significantly, he omits the exhortation to piety. Thus his view practically coincides with that of the sufferer, although he attributes to humans limited understanding of the apparent incongruities in life experience.

At this conclusion, the sufferer comes back to the original problem, individual suffering, in this case caused first of all by prevarication and injustice in human relations. Having established that divine plans cannot be understood, but that what the sufferer maintains is true, in strophe 26 the sage has to admit that injustice is the fruit of the wicked nature the gods have given to mankind (for whatever reason in their inscrutable plans). As in the case of strophe 13, this might be a concession made to provoke a further step in the reasoning, quite a paradox from the perspective of the sage: let's admit this, and then what would you say? Thus, strophe 26 seems to finally accept the arguments of the sufferer, but actually suggests that this leads to a logical and practical aporia: if the gods have given a deceitful nature to humankind, human discourse is devoid of validity and social relations are condemned to the law of the stronger or wealthier. But the dialogue does not lead to such an aporia, and it is the sufferer who has to accept the point of view of his adversary. Strophe 27 concludes the debate with an invocation:

May the gods who forsook me grant me help,  
May the goddess who d[eserted me] show mercy.  
May the shepherd, my Sun, care for the people like a god.<sup>19</sup>

Two fundamental conclusions are implicitly expressed in the last strophe, as results of the various steps of the dialogue: 1. since divine designs are not understandable, there is no reason to suspend devotion and correct behaviour, although the human world is not a perfect one; 2. since there is no causal link between suffering and sin, the righteous sufferer merits mercy and help, thus again demonstrating that correct behaviour and piety are the right attitude.

And mostly, although experience appears contradictory, there is no contradiction in adhering to traditional principles. Wisdom, far from proposing a 'revolutionary' model - even exploring new dialectical strategies - claims its role in promoting human solidarity and traditional piety.

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**19** Oshima 2013, 26, ll. 295-7: "May (the) gods who forsook me establish help (for me). | May (the) goddess who d[eserted me] have mercy on me. | May the shepherd (i.e. the human king), my Sun, gui[de back] the people to the god". Discussion of the last line in Oshima 2014, 373.

### 3 Dialogue, Dialectics and Narrative

These aspects and the same or similar rhetorical methods are implemented in a work of wider design, the epic of *Erra and Išum*. The central problem expressed in the *Theodicy* is summarized in a sentence of the passage that expresses god Erra's destructive purposes – extended to the complete disruption of human, family and social principles: “Troncherò la vita del giusto, che intercede benevolo, il malvagio, che recide le vite, porrò ai primi posti” (tablet III A 7-8, in Cagni's 1969 translation). It appears as one of the means to achieve destruction, which is variously described after it has occurred and an attempt is made to stop it by soothing the god's rage: “O eroe Erra, il giusto tu hai ucciso. | L'ingiusto tu hai ucciso. Chi peccò contro di te hai ucciso. | Chi non peccò contro di te hai ucciso”.<sup>20</sup> Human experience of sorrow and misfortune is here included in the apocalyptic description of the world devastated by the wrath of Erra, the god of war; perspective is shifted from the human to the divine level and debate becomes part of a mythical scene. The narrative of this catastrophic event is connected to a reinterpretation of the nature and origin of the cosmos as known from other texts, and in particular the conceptualisation of the creation that had been defined in *Enuma eliš*. Of its complex relations with the latter text, it is here only cursorily mentioned that a fundamental question is posed: whether the perfect order of the cosmos created by Marduk as described in *Enuma eliš* can be subverted.<sup>21</sup> And therefore whether order can be maintained, re-established, restored or renewed, and at what cost and by what means.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, *Erra and Išum* also illustrates that the apparently irrational divine wrath is regulated by a perfect rational discourse and has the final purpose of guaranteeing human respect for and veneration of the gods.

Partly reversing the model of *Enuma eliš* – where the power of the word is represented as a creative force – and developing its use as a rhetorical instrument,<sup>23</sup> in *Erra and Išum* the negative and positive

<sup>20</sup> The passage includes various categories of people (tablet IV 104-11) and continues with Išum quoting the words of Erra expounding the purposes of destruction that guided his action (IV 112-27).

<sup>21</sup> For the interpretation of the poem as counter-text of *Enuma eliš* see Frahm 2011, 348; see also Haubold 2013, 58-61.

<sup>22</sup> It seems that the poem considers that the creation tale admits that the germ of fighting and destruction is inherent to the cosmos as the energy capable of regeneration and that the fundamental problem it poses is how to keep this energy under control, how to stop it when it has been released, avoid total conflagration and collapse, and re-establish and protect righteousness and piety.

<sup>23</sup> For the last aspect see the recent detailed analysis in Haubold 2017a, who emphasizes the highly rhetorical efficacy of the passage in which Ea calms down the angry Anu (*Enuma eliš* II 49-56), a situation that is parallel to that of Erra in his dialogue with Išum.

potentials of discourse are explored in detail. From a formal perspective, mythology becomes the substance of an ambitious experiment: the text largely employs direct speech, monologues and dialogues, as narrative techniques. It is an expansion of the epic code and has the effect of extensively transforming almost the whole narrative into an enunciation of what one will do and a report on what one has done. In some passages, the narrative also echoes lamentation texts, in a structure that at the very end is comprehensively defined as a chant in praise of Erra (*zamāru* ‘song’ V 49, and *tanittu* ‘(hymn of) praise’, V 39). Hymnic passages as expressions of praise, invocation, and exhortation develop into a persuasive discourse – and, significantly enough, in some points the boundaries between the two forms of speech are blurred.<sup>24</sup> Hymnic insertions have the function of describing the personages by extolling their qualities and at the same time of making the reader/listener part of the plot by voicing praise of the gods, as executor of the *zamāru*, a discourse addressed to the gods.

The first tablet opens with a hymnic introduction that glorifies Išum as a warrior. Erra is represented in his seat, according to the disposition of Marduk in *Enuma eliš*.<sup>25</sup> The process that leads the gods to abandon their position and stance, causing a cosmic disaster, is ignited by and developed through persuasive speeches. These are the means that enable putting plans into action and make orders effective. In the first tablet the orders imparted by Išum to prepare for battle (ll. 7-9)<sup>26</sup> are reversed by those of Erra (ll. 17-18), who is debating with himself but not convinced to take action (l. 16).<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, speech has creative power, as well known from *Enuma eliš* and here illustrated in the following lines that present the other protagonists: the Sibitti. They are described by quoting the words of Anu who decrees the destiny of and gives instructions to each one of them. Their violent nature, however, does not manifest itself immediately in terms of action, but as a persuasive discourse

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**24** See Ponchia 2016 for a general analysis of these sections and details on formulae and structure of dialogues.

**25** Cf. *Erra and Išum* I 5: *Erra qarrād ilāni inušu/inūšu ina šubti* (Erra the hero of the gods tremble/becomes weak in the seat) with *Enuma eliš* VI 143-6 in which Marduk is the one “Who distributed the heavenly stations between Igigi and Anunnaki, Let the gods tremble at his name and quake on their seats (*linušu ina šubti*)” (Lambert 2013, 119).

**26** *itami/itammi ana kakkēšu liptatā imat mūti* (He says/said to his weapons: Smear yourself with mortal venom); *ana Sibitti, nandiqa ana kakkēkun* (To the Sibitti, warriors unrivalled: let your weapon be girded); *iqabbi ana kâša lūšima ina šēri* (He says to you: I’ll go out to the steppe/field).

**27** *iqabbi ana libbišu* (He says to himself: Shall I get up or go to sleep?); *itamma ana kakkēšu ummedā tubqāti* (He says to his weapons: Stay in the corners!); *ana Sibitti ana šubtikunu tūrāma; Ai Sibitti* (Go back to your dwellings!).



addressed to Erra (I 46-91).<sup>28</sup> Various rhetorical devices, such as questions, similes, exhortations, are used to articulate their arguments, and the function of discourse is clearly emphasized: *qurādu Erra niqabbikumma atmûni [li]mruš elika mindēma attā šemāta amātni* (Hero Erra to you we speak: let our discourse become oppressive. [...]) Certainly you should listen to our word) (I 78-80).

Their discourse is effective and provides Erra with the arguments that induce him to action, as is demonstrated by the fact that Erra uses them, when the situation is reversed and Erra replies to Išum who exhorts him to refrain from violence (I 106-23). The repetition of arguments (the heroic and violent nature of Erra, and the risk that men show contempt for and neglect the gods) serves the purpose of increasing their weight and transforming them into compelling instances. Due to the ambiguity at the beginning of the text between Erra and Išum and the image of Erra debating with himself, it cannot be excluded that the whole passage is to be interpreted as a continuation of the protagonist's reflection before taking his final decision.

This consists of inducing Marduk's rage (I 123) and convincing him to leave his seat that guarantees cosmic stability to have his apparel refurbished and restored in order to fully impose his divine authority on humans who are growing disrespectful. Again the power of discourse is emphasized. But Marduk opposes counterarguments, narrating the devastating effects that would result if he were to abandon his position. A series of theological questions are posed by Marduk that demonstrate his role of pillar of the cosmos who guarantees protection from returning to the original chaos (I 170-7). To this preoccupation Erra answers that he will maintain the government of heaven and earth. Violence and destruction are not denied, but the role of Marduk is acknowledged.

After Marduk has been persuaded to temporarily abdicate his role of guarantor of cosmic stability, Erra unleashes violence and perpetrates destruction, as a consequence of his nature that the persuasive force of discourse has moved into action from its previous quiescent status.

Tablet II is particularly difficult because of unfortunate textual gaps, that hinder the interpretation of some crucial points in which discourse appears blocked.<sup>29</sup> Of Erra it is said that *aguḡma ul iqāli ana mamma(?)* (he is angry and pays heed to no-one) (II C 5/iii 33'), rather: *iqāl ana ramānušu ina šipri šāšu | raumma libbušu ul ippala*

<sup>28</sup> They stress the contrast between inactivity and weakness and the manly and valorous attitude of the warrior; it is also their contention that if the god of war does not show his strength men and animals might become disrespectful.

<sup>29</sup> Partial integrations are provided by the copy discovered in Tell Haddad (al-Rawi, Black 1989), the numbering of which is indicated here following that of Cagni's edition.

*qi[bītu] iša'al ana šāšu qibī[ssuma]* (he takes counsel with himself on this matter, but his heart is upset and gives him no answer) (II C 9/iii 37'). The last part of the tablet contains the utterance of Erra's destructive purposes, that are illustrated in the following tablet III. Last sentence and catch-line with tablet III is *ul iqāl ana mamma* (he pays heed to no-one), that icastically concludes the image of the interruption of any dialogue and of the communication with human beings by not accepting their prayers and sacrifices. Erra declares he will enjoin the king of the gods: *ē tamhura suppēšu* (do not accept their prayers) (II C 22-3/iv 10-11).

It is again discourse and the dialogue with Išum, Erra's herald and alter ego, that induces the god of war to relent, pacify and re-establish stability, thus finally complying with his promise to Marduk to preserve cosmic order. This is in fact an argument that Išum uses when he asks why Erra has conceived evil against men and gods (*minsu ana ili u amēli lemutta takpud*, 'Why have you conceived evil against gods and men?', III C 36). Erra justifies his actions affirming that once Marduk had abandoned his seat, the bond between god and man had been undone (III 40-56), thus allowing destruction. Išum retorts not only accusing Erra of disregarding Marduk's word, but also adding a sentence that sounds like a paradox: *ilūtkā tušannima tamtašāl amēliš* (your divine nature you have changed and become like a man) (IV 3). Pursuing destruction means disregarding Marduk's command and therefore can be equated with the disrespect for divine orders and rites that men had been accused of at the beginning of the tale. Both attitudes threaten the bond between gods and men which is the fundament of cosmic order. As in the *Babylonian Theodicy*, divine responsibility in admitting the principle of disorder – and, as one of its manifestations, indiscriminate violence against righteous and wicked alike – is not denied, but devotion is part of and functional to an ordered cosmos. The discourse that in the epic soothes the divine heart is analogous to, and may be considered the model for, the prayers for pacifying the gods, well known from devotional practice. Persuasion in the end succeeds in reconciling the god of destructive violence and transforming him into a protective force; thus discourse, that finally succeeds in stopping violence, fulfils a task in all analogous to Marduk's role as pillar of cosmic stability.<sup>30</sup> Violence is redirected against the forces that menace civilized society and the seats of devotion, where the bond between

**30** George 2013 stresses the value of this conclusion as a pacifist message and upholds that the apotropaic function of the poem is to be read as a message for all times: "The claim has a less tangible implication, but one that resonates more strongly outside Babylonian culture. The greater the audience for poetry that denounces war, the wider will its message spread: the vain but irrepressible hope that less war will be waged".

gods and men is kept (IV 136-43) and divine reason re-establishes order and prosperity (V 25-38).

J. Haubold<sup>31</sup> maintains that in *Enuma eliš* it is the consensus of the gods which is represented and emphasized, both when Marduk is invested with the role of champion of the gods in the fight against Tiamat and as the final result of theomachy and cosmogony. Taking up this perspective we might consider the possibility that the epic of *Erra and Išum* proposes a controversial interpretation of the image of the divine consensus on Marduk's role and demiurgic work, introducing the hypothesis that instability and disruption are possible since the energy of the primordial world is still alive. It therefore imagines a follow-up, in which the consensus is broken and conflict erupts. However, it is not solved by a new theomachy for taking the throne of the supreme power, but by acknowledging the inner reason of order. A possible implication is that the cosmos is ruled by a dynamic, not a static, principle; this is not an immobile god, but the inner reason Marduk represents and that follows dialectical schemes and can overcome critical points.

Trying to combine this view with the *Theodicy*, we might recognize that divine decisions - also manifestations of wrath that target humankind as a whole with devastating effects - do not alter the final stability of the cosmos and do not preclude the re-establishment of the bond between gods and humankind. The text is revealed (*ušabrišu* V 43) to its author directly by the god, to be recited in the sanctuary of the learned as a means to pacify the angry god, save the devotees from destruction, and re-establish stability. The knowledge of the learned, through revelation, is founded on - and, we might add - uses methods that in all mimic the expression of divine reason. The name of the author, Kabi-ilani-Marduk, 'Marduk is the foremost of the gods', expresses faith in the order of the cosmos, guaranteed by the pre-eminence of the god who is the pillar of stability over all forces - that, even through the experience of disruption, is finally acknowledged. And it seals the reference to *Enuma eliš* and its image of the cosmos, condensing in the name of the author the final part of that epic and the fifty names that had been given to Marduk by the other gods to exalt his role.

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31 Haubold 2017b.

## 4 Further Questions

The two literary works examined here share some formal techniques, irrespective of their different overall structure, adhering to the disputation style in the *Babylonian Theodicy* and to mythological narrative in *Erra and Išum*. Both deploy dialogues and the confrontation of contrasting positions with the final aim of finding the solution to a fundamental problem, and to reconcile two opposing views. Another salient feature is the identification of some main basic arguments that are variously treated, illustrated, confuted, supported, and also transformed into narrative throughout the development of the text: instability of fortunes and lack of coherent reward are the main arguments brought forth and discussed in the *Theodicy*; the violent nature of the divine protagonist and human disrespect of the gods are the justifications variously presented in *Erra and Išum*. The development of this shared dialectic procedure suggests a first question: whether they can be placed in the same intellectual and, at least roughly, chronological frame.

The topic of the dialogue and the clue provided by the ‘author’s name, (E)saggil-kinam-ubbib, in the acrostic of the *Babylonian Theodicy* suggest placing the text in the last centuries of the second millennium BCE. The period appears to be recalled as quite prolific in later texts and collections, whose origin is traced back in the editorial activity devoted especially to texts of divination and wisdom. Moreover, in the second half of the second millennium BCE, literary and wisdom texts from the west show the reinterpretation of Mesopotamian lore. Excellent examples of wisdom themes are the prologue of the *Gilgamesh Epic* found in Ugarit,<sup>32</sup> which predates by centuries the classical version from Nineveh and emphasizes the role of the hero of knowledge, or the *Instructions of Šupû amēlu* and the ‘vanity theme’, that is the quite pervasive motif of life’s brevity that appears in various texts as a counter-argument vis-à-vis moral precepts.<sup>33</sup> In Babylonia, Nebuchadnezer I appears to have been particularly keen to interpret the theme of the righteous sufferer, whom he himself personified.<sup>34</sup>

The matter of the *Babylonian Theodicy* can therefore be confidently dated to the period of the II Dynasty of Isin. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that the text we know from first millennium BCE copies is a more recent elaboration explicitly referring to

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<sup>32</sup> George 2007 with previous bibliography.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview see Cohen, Wasserman 2018 with bibliography. On *Šupû amēlu* see most recently Viano 2023 with previous bibliography.

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 7 above.

tradition, but also transforming it according to new developments in the dialectic technique.<sup>35</sup>

First millennium BCE scribes resorted to various techniques that allowed innovative interpretations of traditional concepts and texts, and even to transform literary motifs, such as that of the gods taking counsels and decisions, into a debate or a dialectical confrontation, as well illustrated in the *Erra and Išum* epic. Due to the popularity of these texts, it can be gauged that these hermeneutical strategies were shared and spread in scribal circles. Comparing the final exhortation to honor and repeat the text included both in *Enuma eliš* and *Erra and Išum*, it appears that the latter particularly emphasizes the place of the scribe and the *ummânu*.<sup>36</sup> We wonder therefore if this is a sign of the change from the cultic contextualisation of *Enuma eliš* - which was recited during the major New Year feast of *akītu* - to an audience for which the salvific function of prayer was closely connected to the study and interpretation of mythical and theological works.<sup>37</sup>

A final question is whether the acknowledged role of dialectical techniques fostered the emergence of the author, although under fictitious and evocative names, as the image of a new personality of scribe and wise man, a new *ummânu*, successor to the mythical *ummânus* that are confined in the Apsû - after Marduk's attire have been restored the first time - and bearer of a new form of knowledge, as the conclusion of the *Erra and Išum* epic suggests. This descends from the creative knowledge of the first *ummânus*, but consists of the interpretive techniques that the dialogical form of the debate allows to be illustrated.

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**35** This hypothesis may be supported by the particular use of literary genres, such as the case of disputations mentioned above and that of the *Dialogue of Pessimism* between master and slave. It bears witness to the interest in dialectic methods and their potentially disruptive effects, by showing that positions with a purpose and its opposite appear equally justifiable. That no choice is practicable in logical terms is equivalent to a death sentence, but the slave - whom the master proposes to kill - is able to demonstrate that if this is the only choice, then the master must die too.

**36** See tablet V 49-61 and in particular ll. 55-6 where scribe (*tupšarru*) and sage/scholar (*ummânu*) are mentioned after god, king and cultic singer.

**37** In his comparative analysis of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Enuma eliš*, Haubold (2017b) stresses the importance of interpreting them in the context of their reception and maintains that the Greek poem "takes ancient Mediterranean cosmogony and establishes its connections to heroic epic. *Enūma eliš*, by contrast, adapts the same genres to Babylonian cult and its associated traditions of learning".

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# Sumerian Proverbs as Wisdom Literature

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**Abstract** Sumerian proverbs are lists of sayings of various kinds – more than 25 such collections are currently recognized. In the past these sayings have been categorized as ‘Wisdom Literature’, with the understanding that they represent genuine proverbs that were used in every-day Sumerian and that encode the moral outlook of its speakers. This contribution argues that the wisdom embodied in the proverbs is the wisdom of the Old Babylonian scribal school where they were copied. This wisdom had less to do with moral teachings, and more with a deep knowledge of the Sumerian language, its writing system and its literary heritage.

**Keywords** Sumerian proverbs. Scribal school. Wisdom. Heritage. Analogical reasoning.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Proverbs and Wisdom. – 3 Proverbs and the Scribal School. – 4 Wisdom.

## 1 Introduction

Sumerian proverbs are known primarily from the Old Babylonian period, around 1800 BCE.<sup>1</sup> They are preserved on school tablets, either as collections of such sayings – one after the other – or on smaller round tablets (so-called Type IV tablets, or lentils) with just a single proverb.

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**1** For a brief but informative introduction to Sumerian proverbs and the various ways in which they have been interpreted, see Younger 2023.

I will start this discussion by quoting some random examples – not entirely random; I have chosen some that seem understandable, and I must admit that many proverbs are not.<sup>2</sup>

- 1.103 He who eats mightily – sleep will not come to him.
- 1.104 If one pours oil into a scepter, nobody will know.
- 2.31 A poor man chewing silver.
- 2.55 A barber who knows Sumerian.
- 2.70 Tell a lie; tell the truth – it will be considered a lie.

Sumerian proverbs have routinely been included under the umbrella term ‘wisdom literature’. Van Dijk, in his pioneering *La Sagesse Sumerio-Accadienne*, defined ‘wisdom’ in opposition to science.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge produced by science, according to Van Dijk, is deductive or inductive; in the context of wisdom, knowledge has an existential and an esthetic aspect. He acknowledged that his definition of wisdom was a modern one and did not necessarily reflect an ancient understanding. In the mid-twentieth century when Van Dijk was writing his study, few of the Sumerian proverbs were accessible in scholarly publications. Van Dijk discussed some examples, but he did not try to harmonize the proverbs that he quoted with his definition of wisdom. A few years later, Edmund Gordon reconstructed multiple Sumerian proverb collections and produced a book and several articles on this material. Gordon published a lengthy review article of Van Dijk’s *La Sagesse*, entitled “A New Look at the Wisdom of Sumer and Akkad”.<sup>4</sup> The article includes an overview of all the wisdom texts known at that time, including some 20 proverb collections. Gordon used a very broad definition of wisdom literature: “literary writings [...] whose content is concerned in one way or another with life and nature, and man’s evaluation of them based either upon his direct observation or insight”.<sup>5</sup> Gordon’s reconstruction of Proverb Collections 1 and 2 appeared in his *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*.<sup>6</sup> The importance of proverbs, according to Gordon, is that they give insight into the inner life of the people who use them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, the reference ‘1.103’ (or SP 1.103) means: Sumerian Proverb Collection 1, item 103. The numbering of the Old Babylonian proverb collections was first established by Gordon (1960) and further expanded by Alster (1997). The same numbering system is also employed by *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> section 6.1) and has become the standard in Assyriology.

<sup>3</sup> Van Dijk 1953, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon 1960, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon 1960, 1.

The one scholar who has contributed most to our current knowledge of Sumerian proverbs was Bendt Alster who reconstructed and edited all the collections known by then in his *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer: The World's Earliest Proverb Collections* (1997). Alster added additional material in multiple articles and books that came out between 1997 and his untimely death in 2012.<sup>8</sup>

Alster placed the Sumerian proverbs in the wider area of proverb studies or paremiology. He argued that the collections contained reflections of genuine sayings that derived from spoken everyday Sumerian. One may notice that the idea of proverbs originating in everyday life was already expressed in the title of Gordon's book. Van Dijk, similarly, believed that proverbs had their origin in popular wisdom.

All the authors mentioned above realized that not all the entries in the Proverb Collections may be called proverbs strictly speaking. Gordon differentiated between proverbs, maxims, truisms, and bywords, as well as taunts, compliments, fables, parables, and anecdotes.<sup>9</sup> Alster provided a similar typology, but Jon Taylor essentially declared the attempt to categorize Sumerian proverbs under different headings a failure: the categories are too vague and our understanding of the Sumerian is usually too limited to come to meaningful results.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 Proverbs and Wisdom

The question that remains largely unanswered so far is: how do Sumerian Proverbs relate to 'wisdom'? To discuss that issue, let us first look at one section from Proverb Collection 2: SP 2.2-2.6.

nam-tar- $\eta$ u <sub>10</sub> ga-am <sub>3</sub> -dug <sub>4</sub> in-na-am <sub>3</sub>	I want to speak about my fate: it is an insult. I want to reveal it: it is contemptible.
pa-ga-am <sub>3</sub> -e <sub>3</sub> sulummar <sub>2</sub> -am <sub>3</sub>	
nam-tar- $\eta$ u <sub>10</sub> nin $\eta$ <sub>8</sub> - $\eta$ a <sub>2</sub> ga-na-ab-	I want to speak to her about my fate in my neighborhood.
dug <sub>4</sub> in-na ma- $\eta$ a <sub>2</sub> - $\eta$ a <sub>2</sub>	One will heap insults on me.
a-a igi i-ni-in-bar nam-tar- $\eta$ u <sub>10</sub> ba-dib-ba	I looked at the water: my fate passing by.
ud nam-tar gig-ga-ka ba-tu-ud-de <sub>3</sub> -en	She gave birth to me on a day of bitter fate.
nam-tar- $\eta$ u <sub>10</sub> gu <sub>3</sub> -nam ama- $\eta$ u <sub>10</sub> mu-da-an-kur <sub>2</sub>	My fate is her voice: my mother can alter it.

<sup>8</sup> See also Alster 2005 and 2007; Alster, Oshima 2006; and the overview of recently published proverbs in Alster 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon 1960, 17-19.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor 2005.

The entries are united by the word ‘fate’ (*nam-tar* in Sumerian) and by a rather negative general feeling. It is hard to see any kind of wisdom in these lines, any attempt to reflect on life, death, nature, or anything else. While the hardships of life are referred to, there is no attempt to explain them, or to admonish someone to deal with those hardships in a particular way. It is not clear to me whether, in Gordon’s terminology, these lines would be categorized as maxims, adages, or truisms or anything else.

In discussions of Sumerian proverbs and Sumerian wisdom one cannot get around a composition that is called *The Instructions of Šuruppak*.<sup>11</sup> The earliest copies of this composition go back to the middle of the third millennium; the textual transmission continues well into the first millennium. The text has a proper introduction that places it in remote times when Šuruppak instructed his son Zi-usudra:

My son, let me give you instructions, you should pay attention!  
Do not neglect my instructions!  
Do not transgress the words I speak!  
The instructions of an old man are precious, you should comply with them!

The body of the text involves actual advice about how to live, and how to behave (131-5):

At harvest time, at the most priceless time,  
glean like a slave girl, eat like a princess.  
My son, to glean like a slave girl, to eat like a queen, this is how it should be.

Insults pierce the skin; envy kills.

Such lines may well be classified under ‘Wisdom Literature’ in that they provide life lessons.

The Old Babylonian proverb collections, however, do not have introductions that place them in the mouth of an ancient culture hero or anything like that. They just begin. Proverb collections do include lines that can be understood as life lessons. Line 135 of *The Instructions of Šuruppak* is quoted in Proverb Collection 3.31: “envy kills”.<sup>12</sup>

Other life lessons, exhortations, and ethical concerns may be found throughout the proverb collections. In an article entitled “Moral

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<sup>11</sup> Alster 2005, 31-220.

<sup>12</sup> Several other maxims from *The Instructions of Šuruppak* are quoted in Old Babylonian Sumerian proverb collections. See Younger 2023, 117.

Concepts within the Sumerian-Akkadian Proverbial Literature”, Josephine Fechner collected scores of examples of Sumerian proverbs that may be interpreted as having some moral implication.<sup>13</sup> What such a compilation does not address, though, is the question: what to do with those sayings that do not seem to have any moral implications, do not reflect on life and death in any way and do not provide advice? In other words, while we may well find wise sayings in the proverb collections – how do we account for the unity of these collections? When characterizing Sumerian Proverb Collections as ‘Wisdom Literature’ we run the risk of highlighting those sayings that somehow fit that description and downplaying those that do not seem to have any wisdom implication.

### 3 Proverbs and the Scribal School

Unlike biblical proverbs, we know with some precision how Old Babylonian Sumerian proverbs were used. They were used in scribal education where they were positioned between lexical lists and literary texts. The reconstruction of the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum is a story that has been told many times, and I will therefore only summarize here.<sup>14</sup> The sequence of exercises in the scribal school can be reconstructed by analyzing several hundreds of actual school tablets from the city of Nippur. These school tablets carry an extract from a new exercise on the obverse. This was a model text, with empty space to the right, where the pupil could write his copy of that exercise – erase and copy it again, until he (rarely she) knew it by heart. The reverse was used for an exercise that the pupil already knew by heart – in other words, the reverse exercise was introduced before the obverse exercise. Based on some 500 such tablets a clear picture of the Nippur curriculum emerges:

Sign exercises	Signs
Lists of names	Words (and expressions)
Thematic lists of (Sumerian) words	
Advanced lists	
Proverbs and Model Contracts	Sentences
Literary texts	Compositions

This curriculum was not enforced by any higher authority. There is plenty of evidence for variation, local and chronological, and there

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<sup>13</sup> Fechner 2015.

<sup>14</sup> See Veldhuis 2014, 204-22 with further literature.

is no reason to assume that even a single teacher would necessarily do the same thing all the time. But there is an inner logic to this sequence of exercises that goes from mastering signs, to mastering words and nominal expressions, to brief sentences, to entire compositions. The Advanced Lists introduce more vocabulary, but also provide a place for teaching in a more systematic way about the writing system and its complexities and about the kind of analogical reasoning that played a large part in the scholarship of the time.<sup>15</sup>

The pupils who went through this curriculum presumably spoke Akkadian or some other vernacular such as Amorite. Sumerian was an ancient language to them, linguistically unrelated to their mother tongue, and this curriculum is designed to teach them the Sumerian writing system, Sumerian vocabulary, and finally, a Sumerian heritage as represented by the literary texts that form the capstone of their education.

With this in mind, it is quite easy to see how the proverbs, as relatively short bits of texts, fulfill a function between the lexical texts and the literary heritage. They make the students apply their knowledge of signs, sign values, and Sumerian words that they had worked so hard to learn.

In my review of Alster's edition of the proverb collections I suggested that what these collections introduce in the curriculum is grammar.<sup>16</sup> They introduce Sumerian verbal forms – largely absent from the lexical lists, and they introduce proper syntax and morphology. Proverbs do not go through Sumerian grammar or morphology in any systematic way. We can go back to the brief extract from Proverb Collection 2 discussed above to see how grammar is introduced here. Concentrating on verbal morphology, in this short extract we find /ba/ and /mu/ prefixes – roughly equivalent to passive and active forms. In addition, we find the modal /ga/ prefix (first person cohortative), two different forms of the dative infix (first and third person), and the /da/ infix (comitative; here functioning as an abilitative).

But there are a few other things going on here. In order to demonstrate that I need to explain some technicalities of Sumerian. The reading and translation of SP 2.3 provided above is not the one that is found in recent editions. In the Old Babylonian period the Sumerian word for 'district' is usually written *nigin*<sub>5</sub> which is 𒌶𒀭 (LAL2. LAGAB). The sign that is used in this proverb, however, is 𒌶 (LAL2. SAR), which is commonly used for *usar*, meaning 'female neighbor'. In our proverb, however, reading *usar* and translating neighbor runs

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<sup>15</sup> Crisostomo 2019a; 2019b.

<sup>16</sup> Veldhuis 2000. This position was firmly rejected by Alster, Oshima 2006. I agree that my point lacked nuance; see the overview of the 'paremiological' vs the 'curricular' approach to Sumerian proverbs in Crisostomo 2019b, 143-4.

into trouble, because the form *usar-ḡa<sub>2</sub>* has a clear locative, which is ungrammatical, or at least odd. One does not speak ‘in’ a neighbor, but ‘to’ a neighbor and that is expressed with a dative. The dative is present in the verbal form (the *-na-* infix) but it is not expressed on the noun phrase, where one would expect *usar-ra* (to the neighbor), or *usar-ḡu<sub>10</sub>-ra* (to my neighbor). We have five or six exemplars of this proverb and even though there are variants, all of them have this strange locative. The problem disappears when we read *nijin<sub>8</sub>-ḡa<sub>2</sub>* ‘in my neighborhood’ – and leave the person to whom the speech is directed implicit. Some students were apparently confused by all this – instead of *usar* or *nijin<sub>8</sub>* they wrote *uku<sub>2</sub>* (𒌦𒌶𒌵), which belongs to the same sign family, but means ‘poor’ and does not make sense at all.

Interestingly, the words *nijin* for district and *usar* for neighbor had swapped signs in the early Old Babylonian period, about two hundred years before these tablets were written.<sup>17</sup> A proverb like this one provided a teachable moment, where, as an instructor, you might discuss and explain aspects of the history of these complex and fairly rare signs. There is good evidence that scholarly scribes of the period were interested in the history of their writing system, many arcane writings survived in the tradition of the sign lists even until the first millennium – and that includes the reading *nijin<sub>8</sub>* for LAL.SAR and *usar<sub>3</sub>* for LAL.LAGAB.

One may argue, therefore, that proverb collections not only introduced grammar and morphology, they also provided an opportunity to review and deepen the students’ knowledge of the writing system. One more example may further strengthen this point. The word *sulummar*, ‘contempt’, is a rare word, usually written syllabically *su-lum-mar*. Our proverb uses the writing KI.SAGnutillû. DU – that is the sign KI, followed by an unfinished SAG, followed by DU (𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭𒀭). This is a rare word in a rare spelling.<sup>18</sup> Students had encountered that word in this spelling in the list *Diri*, one of the advanced lists, and now they could practice it – its proper writing and meaning in a full sentence.

Another example connects a proverb to the word lists. There is a rather unlikely bird name in Sumerian – the Bilzazagubalaḡakargirzana bird. We are not quite sure what kind of bird this is – the first half of the name means something like ‘frog with the voice of a drum’. The

<sup>17</sup> Powell 1974.

<sup>18</sup> The Old Babylonian form of the sign is KI.SAGnutillû.DU = *sulummar<sub>2</sub>*, in later orthography the regular SAG sign is used (KI.SAG.DU = *sulummar*). For KI.SAGnutillû. DU = *sulummar<sub>2</sub>*, see Attinger 2021, 948. In Civil 2004, 26 (Old Babylonian Nippur *Diri* section 2:6) the entry [KI].SAG.DU = *ṭu<sub>3</sub>-’pu<sup>1</sup>-ul-lu* (to scorn) should be corrected to [KI].SAGnutillû.DU. The only source for this line is ISAC A30175 = 3N-T168; collated from a photograph generously provided by prof. Susanne Paulus.

bird appears consistently in thematic lists – lists of birds – from the middle of the third millennium all the way to the first millennium. Outside the lexical tradition this bird appears only once, in a proverb collection that is devoted to birds.<sup>19</sup>

Some proverbs may only be understood by translating them into Akkadian. SP 2.70 says: “Clever is the fox, the *šu-lu<sub>2</sub>* bird is noisy”. Cleverness as an attribute of foxes is a well-known theme in Mesopotamian (and other) literature – but what is the *šu-lu<sub>2</sub>* bird doing here? Much later lexical lists clarify that Sumerian *šu-lu<sub>2</sub><sup>mušen</sup>* equals Akkadian *hazû* which is derived from a verb for ‘to hiss’. The students who remembered the proper Akkadian translation and its etymology would find such a proverb much more insightful than those who simply copied it.

Crisostomo uses this same example to show that Sumerian proverbs teach associative principles, both in their ‘vertical’ organization (how they are sequenced) and their ‘horizontal’ aspect – that is, how they are (implicitly) translated.<sup>20</sup> These same associative principles are at play in the advanced lexical lists that immediately precede the proverbs in the curricular arrangement.<sup>21</sup>

Proverbs are closely connected to literary texts – we find direct or indirect quotes in such different texts as *The Instructions of Šuruppag*, *The Curse of Agade*, *Gilgameš and Aga*, *Gilgameš and Huwawa*, and several other compositions.<sup>22</sup> Proverbs, in other words, provide a web of connections between everything that is taught in the scribal curriculum.

## 4 Wisdom

What about wisdom – can we entirely do away with it when thinking about Sumerian proverbs? And what about the contents of the proverbs? Isn't it reductionist to see in them only vehicles for studying morphology, grammar, words, and signs? I believe that is reductionist, indeed, and thus we may need to think again about what wisdom means.

In the last few decades, it has become increasingly clear that the Old Babylonian scribal school transmitted not just a set of practical skills, but a heritage. The curriculum worked towards the collection of Sumerian literary texts, texts about gods and kings of old, compositions with moral implications, but also compositions that simply

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<sup>19</sup> Veldhuis 2000, 392.

<sup>20</sup> Crisostomo 2019b.

<sup>21</sup> See Crisostomo 2019a.

<sup>22</sup> Younger 2023.



seem to make fun. This is the Sumerian heritage that ancient scribal pupils made their own. But this heritage also included a deep knowledge of Sumerian, the Sumerian writing system, and the history of both. Moreover, students were taught to find and discover complex relations between Sumerian and Akkadian words in a process that has been referred to as analogical reasoning.<sup>23</sup> If we define ‘wisdom’ in terms of our notion of dealing with life and death, morality, or the place of human beings in the universe we run the risk of reading that kind of wisdom into the often-opaque meaning of Sumerian Proverbs. If we define ‘wisdom’ in the context of the types of knowledge that we know were valued in Old Babylonian scribal circles we may discover that proverbs contained a lot of wisdom. Being wise, then, implied being a master of a heritage that included such unlikely words as the Bilzazagubalaṅakargirzana bird, the proper writing of *sulummar* (contempt) and similarities and differences between older and more recent writings for ‘neighbor’ and ‘district’, and the Akkadian translation of the Sumerian bird name *šu-lu*<sup>mušen</sup>. Some proverbs may very well have taught a moral lesson – but that did not make the Proverb Collections into wisdom texts. Sumerian Proverb Collections are wisdom texts because they are located in the centre of a network that connected various types of knowledge taught in the scribal schools of the period.

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<sup>23</sup> Crisostomo 2019a.

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# Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions in Archaic Greek Culture

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**Abstract** This contribution aims to: 1. present a quick overview of proverbs and their use in archaic Greek culture; 2. define and review the main Greek wisdom traditions; 3. show, through the analysis of some examples, how proverbs are among the main forms of expression of the sapiential traditions.

**Keywords** Ancient Greek. Proverbs. Wisdom traditions. Epic poetry. Hesiod.

**Summary** 1 The Proverb: General Remarks. – 2 Proverbs in Greek Culture. – 2.1 Terminology: Modern and Ancient. – 2.2 Dissemination in Greek ‘Literary Genres’. – 3 Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions. – 3.1 Wisdom Traditions in Greece: A Brief (and Partial) Survey. – 3.2 Hesiod. – 4 Conclusions.

## 1 The Proverb: General Remarks

Proverbs and sayings are human universals:<sup>1</sup> all societies without exception have developed a proverbial tradition. This prompts the

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I would like to thank the participants in the discussion of this paper in its oral version, presented in Turin on 27 October 2022, at the conference of which this publication is the fruit. I would also like to thank Livio Sbardella for criticising and improving this contribution with his usual acumen and intelligence. Translations from Hesiod are by H.G. Evelyn-White; other translations from the Greek, unless otherwise indicated, are by the Author.

**1** The theory of human universals dates back to Brown 1991; the category of human universals includes “those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no known exception”. Among the universals identified are: poetic lines characterized by repetition and variation; proverbs, sayings - in mutually contradictory forms; rhythm. With particular reference to proverbs see also Mieder 2008, 2: proverbs are “linguistic and cultural ‘monumenta humana’”.

assumption that proverbs represent an information unit of fundamental importance for the transmission of relevant segments of the 'cultural message', i.e. that set of information useful for the survival of the human group and not inscribed in the genetic code. From this point of view, proverbs can indeed be considered an adaptive tool in Darwinian terms.

Proverbs are characterized by a very high degree of 'cognitive economy':<sup>2</sup> a proverb is able to compress and provide "enough information (free of noise) to generate the appropriate 'diagnosis' of a situation and 'remedy' for it".<sup>3</sup> Otherwise said: proverbs express a maximum of information through a minimum of linguistic signs;<sup>4</sup> each proverb represents a single linguistic unit and therefore works very well as a *meme*, a memory unit that reproduces itself and automatically disseminates.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these structural elements explain why the proverb is entrusted with fundamental notions of social/collective relevance and usefulness: rules of behaviour, indications of method, relevant data (in the most diverse fields: work activities, calendar, animals, plants etc.).<sup>6</sup>

The effectiveness of the proverb, both in terms of communicative impact and in terms of dissemination/diffusion capacity, also depends on the level of its formal elaboration. In the traditions I am aware of,<sup>7</sup> proverbs always have a particular structure, significantly different from that of plain language. I present below a quick list of 'proverbial' traits without claiming to be exhaustive, only *exempli gratia*:<sup>8</sup>

- Nominal clause
- *Cola* structure (bi- and tri-members)<sup>9</sup>
- Symmetries and parallelisms<sup>10</sup>

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**2** Although formulated in other contexts, namely within Stinchcombe's 2001 'theory of formality', it describes the effectiveness of the proverb excellently.

**3** Concise definition by Colyvas 2012, 177, tab. 1.

**4** This explains well, in my opinion, why they have found and still find wide diffusion and dissemination.

**5** Because this is precisely its function: Dawkins 1976.

**6** The hypothesis that the proverb, in addition to being a source of knowledge, would also have heuristic and epistemological value is worthy of consideration: Shapin 2001.

**7** The Italian, Latin and Greek ones: some forays in others, such as German and English traditions, confirm the general lines.

**8** On the structure of proverbs in general, Dundes 1975 is still very useful (see also Cirese 1972). Updated discussion of proverbial features in Mac Coinnigh 2014, with an extensive bibliography.

**9** Cf. Sum. and Akk. traditions: see Buccellati in this volume. In what follows, given the theme of the conference whose proceedings are collected here, I will tend to favor comparisons with Near Eastern cultures, and more particularly with Sumerian and Akkadian texts.

**10** This is a universal formal/structural characteristic: whether there are exclusive 'specific' forms of it, such that direct relationships can be established between texts

- Meter and rhythm<sup>11</sup>
- ‘Sound’ organisation of the text (parechesis, homoteleuton, assonances, alliterations etc.)
- Formulaic diction (esp. incipit-formulas)

Precisely because of all these formal and structural characteristics ‘proverbs speak louder than words’.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Proverbs in Greek Culture

### 2.1 Terminology: Modern and Ancient

In order to provide an overview of the proverb in Greek culture, it is useful to first clarify as much as possible the notion of ‘proverb’.

The proverb is now commonly defined by the *terminus technicus* ‘*paroimia*’ and is the field of study of an autonomous discipline: paremiology.<sup>13</sup>

A *paroimia* is a specially meaningful sentence (with specific formal features) that has entered the collective linguistic memory of a human group. The distinction and isolation of the proverb from other expressions of general application therefore depends mainly:

1. on the ‘linguistic sharing’ of the formulation;
2. on the non-‘authorship’ of the text: if a text has a specific and ‘nominal’ (authorial) origin, it is a *sententia*, until it is lost, anonymous and enticed, in the rhetorical code of the *langue*;<sup>14</sup>
3. on the allological nature of the utterance, evoking by analogy another semantic set (a trait particularly evident in animal proverbs).<sup>15</sup>

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and/or traditions, according to a derivationist model, seems to me highly questionable. For an attempt in this direction see, however, Currie in this volume.

**11** See Buccellati in this volume.

**12** So goes the title of a book by Wolfgang Mieder (2008).

**13** For an excellent introduction to this field of study see Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Varga 2015, with extensive bibliography.

**14** I use and accept F. de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* and *parole* (de Saussure 1916).

**15** On the definition of proverbs, the linguistic concept of *paroimia* and, more generally, on problems concerning the definition and classification of proverbial utterances I follow Franceschi 2004 (cf. already Franceschi 1999; see also D’Eugenio 2018, 602-4). Still fundamental is the pioneering work of Taylor, despite his aporetic position that “the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking” (Taylor 1931, 3). For the various definitions of ‘proverb’ see the doxography in Mieder 2008, 10-13, and then Norrick 2015. With a possibilistic attitude Villers 2014 and then Villers 2022 (with bibliography). Lelli (2023, 1-4) quickly returns to the various issues.

The definition of a proverb (and the appropriate criteria for identifying it) adopted here illustrates its basic characteristics and allows us to address the question of the ‘proverb in Greek culture’. Of course, there are other descriptive models that produce other taxonomies and define other oppositions between different types of utterances that we might generically define as sententious, including proverbs in the strict sense. I quote, purely as an example, Barley’s 1974 model, in my opinion more effective than others, which develops a classificatory matrix that can be summarized as follows:

	statement	fixed	metaphorical
proverb	+	+	+
riddle	-	-	+/-
maxim	+	+	-
proverbial phrase	-	+	+

In the Greek culture proverbs in the proper sense are indicated by the term *paroimia* παροιμία.<sup>16</sup> The noun *gnome* γνώμη indicates a formulation like the proverb but allegedly of authorial origin. More precisely, on the level of meaning, should we wish to try to distinguish, *paroimia* expresses a kind of general and generally shared truth, *gnome* a personal (albeit authoritative) opinion.<sup>17</sup>

These purely theoretical distinctions, however, are of no consequence, since both *gnome* and *paroimia* are present in wisdom traditions,<sup>18</sup> and we are not always able to make a sensible distinction between them.

That a distinction existed between *paroimia* and *gnome* can be deduced from the existence of two erudite genres related to such utterances: the gnomologists on the one hand and the paremiography

<sup>16</sup> For the etymology see García Romero 1999.

<sup>17</sup> γνώμη indicates a cognitive faculty and hence takes on the generic meaning of ‘thought, judgement’ or ‘judgement, opinion’ (*LSJ* s.v., II, III): something individual, therefore. On the definition of *gnome* and its detailed use see the discussion in Boeke 2007, 12-27 (with further bibliography). An attempt to define the Greek concept of ‘proverb’ in Kindstrand 1978; further discussion in Russo 1983 and Tzifopoulos 1995. For a useful overview see Tosi 2004b. Issues of terminology and definitions also in Hallik 2007 and now in Lelli 2023 (who alongside proverb adopts, perhaps rightly, the more generic definition of *sententia*).

<sup>18</sup> One should also consider the ἀποφθέγματα (*apophthègmata*) ‘terse pointed sayings’ (cf. *LSJ* s.v. “ἀπόφθεγμα”), in fact indistinguishable from *gnomai*, if not for their avowedly oral origin of ‘spoken word’ (sayings, precisely). In reverse perspective (= point of view of the listener, not of the issuer) on the same level are the *akousmata* ἀκούσματα, literally ‘things heard’, but in the context of the Pythagorean school ‘oral instructions’ (cf. e.g. Iambl. *VP* 18.82; cf. *LSJ* s.v. “ἄκουσμα”). For the lexicon of ‘proverb’ in Greek (and Roman) culture see Bieler 1936.

on the other. The proverb was certainly the subject of reflection by Aristotle<sup>19</sup> and by his school: in the list of works of Theophrastus, one of Aristotle's most prominent pupils, reported by Diogenes Laertius 5.42-50, a treatise Περὶ παροιμιῶν is mentioned. Precisely to the interest of ancient scholars we owe collections of both *gnomai* and *paroimiai* that fixed in written form part of the Greek proverbial traditions, thus ensuring its preservation over time.<sup>20</sup> Particularly relevant is the set of ancient proverbial collections published as *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* (CPG), without which any attempt at investigating the Greek paremiological tradition would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

## 2.2 Dissemination in Greek 'Literary Genres'

Archaic Greek culture (as many others) made use of proverbs *plenis manibus* and embedded them in numerous communicative contexts. The use of proverbs appears pervasive (I can't say if massive, but certainly pervasive), as the following brief review demonstrates:<sup>21</sup>

### Epos

Hes. *Op.* 218

παθῶν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων ||

cf. Hom. *Il.* 17.32 = 20.198

ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων ||

In these cases we are dealing with a final clause of proverbial matrix (as underlined by the paremiac structure of the *colon*, for which see § 3.2.1 below; in the Hesiodic case see also the testimony of Pl. *Symp.* 222b). The Hesiodic passage expresses a widespread idea: 'learning through suffering', summarized in the formulation of Aesch. *Ag.* 177 πάθει μάθος (cf. the It. proverb "danno fa far senno").<sup>22</sup> The Homeric formulation (concluding a larger repeated sequence: ἀλλά σ' ἔγωγ'

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<sup>19</sup> See Ieraci Bio 1978; 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Recent collections of Greek and Roman gnomic/proverbial material, complementing ancient ones, are now offered by Tosi 2017a and Lelli 2021.

<sup>21</sup> With the exception of the epos, I give a single example for each poetic 'genre' in which proverbs are found. The data are far more conspicuous: see the pioneering and still useful collection by Ahrens 1937; for the presence of proverbs in various 'literary genres' (both Greek and Roman) see the contributions collected by Lelli 2009; 2010; 2011; a summary in Lelli 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Comparison material and wider discussion in Ercolani 2010 *ad loc.*

ἀναχωρήσαντα κελεύω | ἐς πληθὺν ἰέναι, μηδ' ἀντίος ἴστασ' ἔμειο πρίν τι κακὸν παθέειν- ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω)<sup>23</sup> seem to express a slightly different sense, comparable to the It. proverb “uomo avvisato mezzo salvato”.<sup>24</sup> The contiguity of the utterances is evident in itself: one is dealing with a proverb ‘declined’ to fit the context. It is difficult, as well as useless, to establish which is the starting model and which the derived outcome (see also *infra* § 3.2.2).

Precisely because of controversial and decidedly unclear interpretation, I point out the case of Hes. *Theog.* 35 ἀλλὰ τί μοι ταῦτα περὶ δρυῶν ἢ περὶ πέτρην (But why all this about oak or stone?) in comparison to Hom. *Il.* 22.126 f. οὐ μὲν πῶς νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης; | τῷ ὀαριζέμεναι (“In no wise may I now from oak-tree or from rock | hold dalliance with him”) and Hom. *Od.* 19.163 οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ δρυὸς ἔσοι παλαιφάτου οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης (“for thou art not sprung from an oak of ancient story, or from a stone”) (both transl. by A.T. Murray). This could be an oath formula, a simple exclamation, but also an expression of proverbial derivation, maybe even derived from a fairytale story. Certainly in the Homeric passages the expression is problematic.<sup>25</sup>

## Lyric Poetry

### a. monodic<sup>26</sup>

Alc. fr. 393 V. (Mantiss. prov. II 46 [CPG 2: 765])

Πάλιν ἢ ὕς παρορίνει

the sow outsteps the boundaries once more

### b. choral<sup>27</sup>

Pind. *Isthm.* 2.11

χρήματα χρήματ' ἀνήρ

man is wealth

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**23** Hom. *Il.* 17.30-2 = 20.196-8.

**24** Vd. Lardinois 1997, 216; Lelli 2023, 6. On proverbs and *gnomai* in the Homeric poems see Lardinois 1997 (with previous bibliography); 2000; 2001; Lelli 2023, 5-6. For the Hesiodic poems see *infra* § 3.2.

**25** See e.g. West 1966, *ad* 35, and Richardson 1993, *ad* 126-8.

**26** For an overview see Lelli 2023, 10-12. The frequency of proverbial expressions in Alceo is significant: in the approximately 600 readable verses we possess, one finds “a proverb every twenty lines” (Lelli 2023, 10).

**27** For Pindar, after Bischoff 1938, see Boeke 2007 (esp. chapters 2 and 3), with bibliography.



## Tragedy<sup>28</sup>

Aesch. Ag. 36

βοῦς ἐπὶ γλώσσηι (cf. Diogen. III 48 [CPG 1: 223] βοῦς ἐπὶ γλώσσης)  
an ox on the tongue

## Comedy<sup>29</sup>

Ar. Pac. 1083

οὔποτε ποιήσεις τὸν καρκίνον ὀρθὰ βαδίζειν (cf. Apostol. XIII 46a [CPG 2: 586])  
you'll never make the crab walk straight

In short: proverbs are to be found in most of (if not all) poetic genres and, of course, in the prosa-genres.

A passage from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*<sup>30</sup> helps to understand the reason for the dissemination of the *gnome* (and thus of proverbs, which from a logical point of view function like *gnomai*) in Greek texts of all kinds and times.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle illustrates the use of the *gnome* as the premise or conclusion of an *enthymeme*, i.e. of an argumentative/demonstrative reasoning (even a very short one): it is precisely this logical function of the *gnome* that makes it employable in the most varied contexts.

Περὶ δὲ γνωμολογίας, ῥηθέντος τί ἐστὶν γνώμη μάλιστ' ἂν γένοιτο φανερόν περὶ ποίων τε καὶ πότε καὶ τίσιν ἀρμόττει χρῆσθαι τῷ γνωμολογεῖν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις. ἔστι δὴ γνώμη ἀπόφανσις, οὐ μέντοι οὔτε περὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστον, οἷον ποιός τις Ἴφικράτης, ἀλλὰ καθόλου, οὔτε περὶ πάντων, οἷον ὅτι τὸ εὐθὺ τῷ καμπύλῳ ἐναντίον, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὅσων αἱ πράξεις εἰσὶ, καὶ <ἄ> αἰρετὰ ἢ φευκτὰ ἐστὶ πρὸς τὸ πράττειν, ὥστ' ἐπεὶ τὸ ἐνθύμημα ὁ περὶ τοιούτων συλλογισμὸς ἐστίν, σχεδὸν τὰ συμπεράσματα τῶν ἐνθυμημάτων καὶ αἱ ἀρχαὶ ἀφαιρεθέντος τοῦ συλλογισμοῦ γνώμαί εἰσιν κτλ.

**28** In tragedy *gnomai* and proverbs play an important role both on the conceptual and on the structural level (= *actio*, turn-taking: Ercolani 2000, 143-77). On the proverb in tragedy see also Martin 2005; for Aeschylus see Grimaldi 2009, for Sophocles see Cuny 2007, for Euripides see Most 2003, each with previous bibliography.

**29** Numerous works have been devoted to proverbs in comedy; for an initial orientation see Lelli 2007; Schirru 2009; Tosi 2017b.

**30** From historiography to oratory etc.: see e.g. Huart 1973 (*gnomai* in Thucydides), Russo 1997 and Shapiro 2000 (*gnomai* in Herodotus; the first one with a very useful concluding appendix).

**31** Arist. *Rh.* 2.21.1-2 (1394a 19 ff.).

[1] In regard to the use of maxims, it will most readily be evident on what subjects, and on what occasions, and by whom it is appropriate that maxims should be employed in speeches, after a maxim has been defined. [2] Now, a maxim (γνώμη) is a statement, not however concerning particulars, as, for instance, what sort of a man Iphicrates was, but generals; it does not even deal with all general things, as for instance that the straight is the opposite of the crooked, but with the objects of human actions, and with what should be chosen or avoided with reference to them. And as the enthymeme is, we may say, the syllogism dealing with such things, maxims are the premises or conclusions of enthymemes without the syllogism etc.<sup>32</sup>

*Gnomai* and proverbs, therefore, stand out as logical-expository modules that are widely and massively used within all kinds of texts or communicative acts, yesterday as today, since they serve to affirm or demonstrate authoritatively the goodness or badness of whatever it is that we are dealing with.

It is good to remember, with Mieder, that

proverbs are a significant rhetorical force in various modes of communication, from friendly chats, powerful political speeches, and religious sermons on to lyrical poetry, best-seller novels, and the influential mass-media.<sup>33</sup>

### 3 Proverbs and Wisdom Traditions

#### 3.1 Wisdom Traditions in Greece: A Brief (and Partial) Survey

Before proceeding to a sampling (partial as it may be) of the wisdom traditions in Greece, it is necessary to give firstly an operational definition of wisdom. The notion of wisdom that I adopt (and which, in my opinion, is the most correct from a historical point of view) is essentially based on the results of von Rad 1970's analysis, whereby what we define as 'wisdom' does not respond to a formal criterion, i.e. it is not a literary genre, but is a content: wisdom is the set of knowledge (including technical knowledge) and conceptions that a society has acquired through experience and transmitted over time.

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<sup>32</sup> Transl. J.H. Freese.

<sup>33</sup> Mieder 2008, 9.

In archaic Greek culture, sapiential contents are entrusted primarily (if not exclusively) to the poetic word,<sup>34</sup> and in particular to the epos, the poetic word par excellence. In the form of epos the most significant Greek sapiential traditions take shape: Hesiod and the *corpus Hesiodicum*, Empedocles, the oracles, the ‘Seven Wisemen’.

To the Seven Wisemen<sup>35</sup> the sources assign a varied production, mostly poetic, where hexameter poetry seems to dominate (not to mention that many of the sayings attributed to them are compatible with metrical patterns): the sources say of many of them that they composed *epe* ἔπη, a quasi-technical term usually denoting dactylic hexameters (6da): Thales ἔγραψε περὶ μετεώρων ἐν ἔπεσι (wrote about astronomical phenomena in verses),<sup>36</sup> Periander is said to have composed *hypothekai* for 2,000 verses (ἔποίησε δὲ καὶ ὑποθήκας εἰς ἔπη δισχίλια ‘he also composed exhortations for 2,000 verses’)<sup>37</sup>; Cleobulus is said to have composed songs and riddles for 3,000 verses (οὗτος ἐποίησεν ἄσματα καὶ γρίφους εἰς ἔπη τρισχίλια ‘he composed songs and riddles for 3,000 verses’);<sup>38</sup> cf. also the information on Anacarsi author of a poem of 800 verses (ἔπη ὀκτακόσια),<sup>39</sup> or Museo<sup>40</sup> or Orpheus, wise men *de iure* and *de facto*.

Significant sapiential traditions (often containing moral teachings) are also expressed in elegiac couplets: I am thinking of Solon (author of *hypothekai* in elegiac form),<sup>41</sup> Chilon,<sup>42</sup> Pittacus (author of 600

**34** For a detailed discussion of the ‘wise man-poet’ relationship in Greek culture see Ornaghi in this volume. The conclusion is that the figure of the poet and the wise man coincide, are one and the same. The poet is the ‘master of truth’: Detienne 1967 (see also Martin 1993).

**35** I follow the list by Diog. Laert. 1.13: σοφοὶ δὲ ἐνομιζόντο οἶδε· Θαλῆς, Σόλων, Περίανδρος, Κλεόβουλος, Χεῖλων, Βίας, Πιττακός (“The men who were commonly regarded as sages were the following: Thales, Solon, Periander, Cleobulus, Chilon, Bias, Pittacus”; transl. R.D. Hicks). The names, however, vary according to the sources, and if we put the various lists together, the Seven Wisemen, in total, turn out to be far more than seven: see, for example, the continuation of Diogenes Laertius himself: τούτοις προσαρθμοῦσιν Ἀνάχαρσιν τὸν Σκύθην, Μύσωνα τὸν Χηνέα, Φερεκύδην τὸν Σύριον, Ἐπιμενίδην τὸν Κρήτη· ἐνιοὶ καὶ Πεισίστρατον τὸν τύραννον. καὶ οἱ <δε> μὲν σοφοί (“To these are added Anacharsis the Scythian, Myson of Chen, Pherecydes of Syros, Epimenides the Cretan; and by some even Pisistratus the tyrant. So much for the sages or wise men”; transl. R.D. Hicks; the last sentence, however, should be translated as follows: ‘these too were wise men’). On the traditions of the Seven Wisemen, preliminary information in Ercolani 2013, 272 f. (see also Di Giglio 2022, with bibliographical updates). In a more comprehensive manner Martin 1993.

**36** Suid. θ 17 Adler.

**37** Diog. Laert. 1.94; cf. Suid. n 1067 Adler.

**38** Diog. Laert. 1.89.

**39** Diog. Laert. 1.101.

**40** See Ercolani 2016.

**41** Suid. σ 776 Adler.

**42** E.g. Diog. Laert. 1.68.

elegiac verses),<sup>43</sup> all included in the list of the Seven Wisemen; and I am thinking above all of Theognis,<sup>44</sup> Phocylides and ps.-Phocylides.

Not always poetic is the tradition of the so-called ‘pre-Socratic’ philosophers, who are nonetheless a constitutive and integrated part of Greek wisdom;<sup>45</sup> the Pythagorean *akousmata* (= oral teachings handed down within the Pythagorean school) are also to be traced back to this tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Some fable traditions with a clear sapiential content are preserved in a prosaic form (e.g. the corpus of Aesop’s fables). But the fable, it should be emphasized, is more than a literary ‘genre’, it is a communicative module proper to sapiential traditions (not only Greek) and is found, just like the proverb, scattered throughout the various ‘genres’ (poetic and otherwise). It should also be noted that the fable is often the framework for proverbs, especially in the *epimythion*.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.2 Hesiod

The Hesiodic corpus in its entirety constitutes one of the clearest examples of Greek wisdom tradition of the archaic period. It is an articulate and complex tradition whose contents encompass virtually all relevant aspects of experience: behavioural and procedural norms, technical notions and practical knowledge, ethical precepts, theodicy, mythical traditions and much more.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from the macroscopic case of *Works and Days* (for which see *infra*), the titles of the poems attributed to Hesiod suffice to show the variety of their contents: *Wedding of Ceyx* (where at least a part of the narrative seems to have been focused on witticisms and riddles at the wedding banquet), *Melampodia* (a poem on the seer Melampus: a sage, like all seers), *Precepts of Chiron*

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<sup>43</sup> Suid. π 1659 Adler.

<sup>44</sup> See Condello 2009.

<sup>45</sup> The entire reflection of the pre-Socratics is sapiential: Colli 1977; many of the pre-Socratics are epic poets: e.g. the already mentioned Empedocles.

<sup>46</sup> *Akousmata* aside (see *supra* fn. 34), on the various ‘Pythagorean’ teachings (παρανέσεις ‘recommendations’, ὑποθήκαι ‘exhortations’, παραγγέλματα ‘precepts’, σύμβολα ‘secret codes’, αινίγματα ‘riddles’) see Lelli 2023, 13.

<sup>47</sup> For more details and bibliography see Ercolani 2010, 40-1, 204-8. For a broadening of perspective see now Oegema, Pater, Stoutjesdijk 2022. For the relationship between fable and proverb see van Thiel 1971; Carnes 1988. A (also non-exhaustive) listing of Greek wisdom traditions and materials in Ercolani 2013.

<sup>48</sup> I have tried repeatedly and with more accomplished arguments to show the validity of the equation ‘Hesiod = sapiential tradition’: Ercolani 2009; 2010, 41-2; 2012; 2016; 2017. See now also Horne 2018 (who focuses on *hypothekai*, which come to constitute entire poems or sections of poems).

(Χείρωνος ὑποθήκαι, *Cheironos hypothekai*: a collection of teachings and precepts of the centaur Chiron, master of many Greek heroes, including Jason, Achilles and Asclepius: see <https://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/KentaurosKheiron.html> for sources and details), *Astronomy*, *Ornithomancy* and others, all with varying degrees of sapiential content.<sup>49</sup>

This multifarious ‘Hesiodic’ wisdom is very often conveyed in the form of proverbs or proverbial expressions, precisely because the proverb is a particularly effective linguistic and conceptual unit for conveying and disseminating information (§ 1 above).

In what follows, I discuss in more detail some of the proverbs in the *corpus Hesiodeum*, especially in *Works and Days*,<sup>50</sup> presenting specific cases illustrative of more general issues.

### 3.2.1 Proverbs/*gnomai* and Metrical Patterns: The Case of *Works and Days*

Epos is a metrically organized poetic discourse, where the text is arranged to form a sequence of long and short syllables according to the prototypical pattern of a verse, the dactylic hexameter (6da).

In the hexameter we identify *cola*, or ‘members’, as smaller textual segments that constitute not only metric, but often also logical and syntactic units.

A particular type of *colon* with specific metrical features is frequently employed in gnomic/proverbial expressions, so much so that it is referred to by ancient scholars as ‘paremiac’, i.e. ‘proverbial’.<sup>51</sup>

˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ – ˘ ||

The use of this ‘proverbial’ *colon* is insistent in *Works and Days*, that is, precisely in that traditional poem whose sapiential content is particularly evident.<sup>52</sup> In the second part of the poem, in the section of vv. 383-828, prescriptions (or the like) are present in a high degree and very often such expressions take the form of the paremiac colon: the

<sup>49</sup> For an introduction to all these poems, see Cingano 2009.

<sup>50</sup> For a more extensive discussion see Ercolani 2009 (where all the proverbial material from *Works and Days* is also collected) with bibliography (fundamental Pellizer 1972 and Fernández Delgado 1978), and then Lelli 2023, 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Heph. 8.6, 26 f. Consbruch.

<sup>52</sup> Ercolani 2012.

percentage of verses with these features is remarkable (60.1%)<sup>53</sup> and clearly underlines the peculiarity of the Hesiodic poetry, which also highlights through a precise rhythmic trend the notions and teachings generally recognized as valid.<sup>54</sup> Of a more overtly proverbial nature with paremic colon are vv. 412, 451, 456, 471, 524, 560, 603, 694, 730.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.2.2 Proverbs as Generative Patterns: Proverbs and Anti-Proverbs<sup>56</sup>

If the proverb fits, use it, and if it doesn't, choose another one or change it.<sup>57</sup>

Hes. fr. 321 M.-W.

ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men.

The phrasing is clearly proverbial: apart from its structure, which clearly shows the features of a proverb (tripartite sentence with nominal structure), it is quoted as such by Hyperides (fr. 57), according to Harpocration and Apostolius:

Harpocrat. ε 130 [133.18 Dindorf]

Ἔργα νέων· τοῦτο καὶ Ὑπερείδης ἐν τῷ κατ' Αὐτοκλέους φησὶν εἶναι. παροιμία τις ἐστίν, ἣν ἀνέγραψεν καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικὸς οὕτως ἔχουσιν “ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων.”

Works by young men: Hyperides also says this in *Against Autocles*. It is a proverb, which also recalls Aristophanes the grammarian in

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**53** See Sbardella 1995. The total number of *gnomai* in the Homeric poems (without taking into account the paremiac structure of the colon, in which case the number is bound to decrease) is 154, according to Lardinois 1997 (other counts offer lower figures: see Lelli 2023, 5): when put in relation to the approximately 30,000 verses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the percentage is insignificant (just over 0.5%).

**54** In *Works and Days* we find a sententious utterance every 8.7 lines: a very high frequency not recorded elsewhere (see Ercolani 2009, 39-40). Precisely on the basis of an examination of the Hesiodic material, Fernández Delgado 1982 reconstructed an autonomous tradition of 'gnomic poetry' variously flowing into or picked up by the epic traditions.

**55** I leave out here the question of the *hemiepes* and their possible combination with paremiacs, for which see Ercolani 2009, 39.

**56** Anti-proverb is a modified proverb (see at length Mieder 2008, ch. 2). A more precise definition of anti-proverb is: “an allusive distortion, parody, misapplication, or unexpected contextualization of a recognized proverb, usually for comic or satiric effect” (Doyle, Mieder, Shapiro 2012, XI).

**57** Mieder 2008, 2.

the following way: “Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men”.

**Apostol. VII 90 (CPG 2: 419)**

Ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, εὐχαὶ δὲ γερόντων. τοῦτο Ὑπερείδης ἐν τῷ κατ’ Αὐτοκλέους. Ἡσιόδου φησὶν εἶναι παροιμίαν, ἣν ἀνέγραψεν καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ὁ γραμματικός.

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, prayers by old men: this [quotes *vel sim.*] Hyperides in *Against Autocles*. He says it is a proverb of Hesiod, which Aristophanes the grammarian also records.

A few centuries later we find the expression in a slightly modified form adapted to a new context:

**Strabo 14.5.14<sup>58</sup>**

οἱ δὲ πρῶτον μὲν κατετοιχογράφησαν αὐτοῦ τοιαῦτα “ἔργα νέων, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, πορδαὶ δὲ γερόντων”. ἐπεὶ δ’ ἐκεῖνος ἐν παιδιᾷς μέρει δεξάμενος ἐκέλευσε παρεπιγράψαι “βρονταὶ δὲ γερόντων” καταφρονήσας τις τοῦ ἐπιεικοῦς εὐλυτον τὸ κοιλίδιον ἔχων προσέρρανε πολὺ τῇ θύρᾳ καὶ τῷ τοίχῳ νύκτωρ παριῶν τὴν οἰκίαν· ὁ δὲ τῆς στάσεως κατηγορῶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ “τὴν νόσον τῆς πόλεως” ἔφη “καὶ τὴν καχεξίαν πολλὰχόθεν σκοπεῖν ἕξῃστι, καὶ διὴ καὶ ἐκ τῶν διαχωρημάτων”.

These [i.e. Boethus and his followers] at first indicted him (i.e. Athenodorus) with the following inscription on the walls: “Work for young men, counsels for the middle-aged, and flatulence for old men” and when he, taking the inscription as a joke, ordered the following words to be inscribed beside it, “thunder for old men”, someone, contemptuous of all decency and afflicted with looseness of the bowels, profusely bespattered the door and wall of Athenodorus’ house as he was passing by it at night. Athenodorus, while bringing accusations in the assembly against the faction, said: “One may see the sickly plight and the disaffection of the city in many ways, and in particular from its excrements.”<sup>59</sup>

Strabo does not seem to be aware of the Hesiodic hypotext, since he mentions neither Hesiod nor his poems. It could be that the ‘Hesiodic’

<sup>58</sup> The context of the anecdote is scarcely relevant to this discussion; however, the episode described takes place in Tarsus, and has to do with problems concerning the city administration after the battle of Philippi (42 BCE).

<sup>59</sup> Transl. H.L. Jones.

model was not 'Hesiodic' at all, i.e. that it was not exclusive to the Hesiodic tradition: it could already have been originally an anonymous proverb circulating autonomously, which was also received by the poetic tradition linked to the name of Hesiod; but it could also be that the verse, 'Hesiodic' at the outset, had progressively become part of the collective linguistic horizon of the *langue*, losing its original 'authorial' imprint and dissolving into an anonymous oral tradition.

Be that as it may, Strabo's quotation reports a modified proverb, an anti-proverb, which implies that the underlying model (it matters little, for this reasoning, whether Hesiodic or not) was a productive one, i.e. a proverb in the proper sense, capable of generating, by re-adaptation, anti-proverbs.

It is worth noting that the anti-proverb reported by Strabo, in turn, was transposed as an autonomous proverb in the collection of Macarius IV 11:<sup>60</sup>

Ἔργα νεῶν, βουλαὶ δὲ μέσων, πορδαὶ δὲ γερόντων: τὸ δὲ λέγειν  
εὐχαὶ γερόντων κρεῖττον καὶ εὐφημότατον

Works by young men, advice by middle-aged men, farts by old men:  
saying 'prayers of old' [is/would be] better and much more graceful

The proverb is quoted in its 'modified' and anonymous version, without indication of its origin; the commentary note refers back to the source model, apparently ignoring its Hesiodic matrix. The proverb/anti-proverb relationship, in Macarius, seems to be completely lost, ignored, confused.

The practice of modifying a proverbial pattern to generate similar proverbs is not unknown to Greek culture, as another Hesiodic passage, *Works and Days* (vv. 23-6), shows quite clearly:

ζῆλοῖ δέ τε γείτονα γείτων  
εἰς ἄφενος σπεύδοντ'· ἀγαθὴ δ' Ἔρις ἦδε βροτοῖσιν.  
καὶ κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει καὶ τέκτωνι τέκτων  
καὶ πτωχὸς πτωχῷ φθονέει καὶ ἀοιδὸς ἀοιδῷ.

and neighbor vies with his neighbor  
as he hurries after wealth. This Strife is wholesome for men.  
And potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman,  
and beggar is jealous of beggar, and minstrel of minstrel

60 CPG 2: 167.



Most likely proverbial in the proper sense is only v. 23, while vv. 25-6 are adaptations of this model:<sup>61</sup> true anti-proverbs that broaden its spectrum of application, extending it from a generic neighbourly contrast to a contrast between socially recognized professional figures ('beggar' included).

### iii. The Inability to Understand: Proverbs in Context Without Rhetorical 'Framework'

The following example is intended to show how difficult, if not impossible, it is to understand a proverb when the linguistic reference context is missing, i.e. we do not know the rhetorical code in which to place it.<sup>62</sup> I quote once again a passage from *Work and Days*, vv. 40-1:

νήπιοι, οὐδὲ ἴσασιν ὅσῳ πλεόν ἥμισυ παντός  
οὐδ' ὅσον ἐν μαλάχῃ τε καὶ ἀσφοδέλῳ μέγ' ὄνειαρ

Fools! They know not how much more the half is than the whole,  
nor what great advantage there is in mallow and asphodel

The verses are proverbial, as the linguistic structure clearly shows

[X is] Y. οὐδέ + vb.<sup>63</sup>

This is a typologically well-documented pattern (*Op.* 187 σχέτλιοι, οὐδὲ θεῶν ὅπιν εἰδότες, 'hard-hearted they, not knowing the fear of the gods'; 456 νήπιος, οὐδὲ τὸ οἶδ'· ἑκατὸν δέ τε δούρατ' ἀμάξης, 'the fool! he does not know that there are a hundred timbers to a wagon'),<sup>64</sup> with a formulaic incipit (for σχέτλιος, οὐδέ see *Hom. Il.* 9.630; *Od.* 21.28; for νήπιος, οὐδέ see *Hom. Il.* 2.38, 5.406; *Od.* 3.146 and cf. *Il.* 21.410). The verses are often quoted and discussed in antiquity: *Gell.* 18.2.13, *Stob.* 3.10.11 etc.<sup>65</sup>

The meaning of both is controversial. It is generally held to be an invitation to measure and moderation, or an exhortation to prefer honest poverty to dishonest wealth.<sup>66</sup> V. 41 seems to go in this very direction, since the reference to mallow and asphodel refers to poor food: it is quite plausible that it represents an invitation to thrift or

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<sup>61</sup> Fernández Delgado 1982, 164-5; see also Ercolani 2010, *ad* 25-6.

<sup>62</sup> See § 2.1 above.

<sup>63</sup> For similar proverbial structures see Ercolani 2009, 32-4.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. also Simon. fr. 8. 10-11 W.

<sup>65</sup> Complete list in Rzach 1902, in *app. test. ad loc.*, 134 f.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. already schol./Procl. *ad* 41.

to be content with what one has.<sup>67</sup> Much more problematic is v. 40,<sup>68</sup> the meaning of which, at first glance, is by no means intuitive, and which seems to fit with difficulty into a context in which material goods are involved.

Here, tentatively, I try to imagine hypothetical contexts that would explain the preferability of the half to the whole (I refer to the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* in its latest version known as the 'ATU Index').<sup>69</sup>

1. A fairytale context of the kind described in ATU J1161.8

*Ruler orders doctor to wear his hair and his robe 'not too long and not too short'. Has both his hair and his cloak cut half short and half long. (Italics in original)*

Here clearly half is better than the whole, as this is the only way to save the doctor from the risk of excess.<sup>70</sup>

2. a context in which a loan or similar is requested, according to the model ATU J1552.4:

*Better to donate half of what is asked than lend all. Two farmers ask a priest to lend two measures of grain to each of them. The priest refuses to lend them any but donates one measure to each. Thus he saves two measures.<sup>71</sup> (Italics in original)*

3. a context in which the whole represents or entails an evil, so that half is definitely better: so for example in ATU K551.2:

*Respite from death until prisoner has finished drinking his glass. It is left half finished. (Italics in original)*

If we imagine scenarios such as those mentioned above, then the meaning of the proverb can be better determined, and may well be valid as an exhortation to careful moderation, since any excess, any overshooting of the middle, would only bring harm.

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<sup>67</sup> Detailed discussion of these verses in Ercolani 2010, *ad locc.* (138 f.).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Ov. Fast.* 5.718 *dimidium toto munere maius erit.*

<sup>69</sup> Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (see Uther 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Less likely but not impossible is a context such as ATU J1193.2.1: "*The Court keeps the change.* Man is fined half-ducats. Judge has no change. Defendant strikes judge for the change". Here, the lack of a half (= the change) allows the whole to be maintained.

<sup>71</sup> Or perhaps ATU J2213.6: "*Selling his half of the house.* A man owns half a house. He wants to sell his half so as to get money to buy the other half and thus have a whole house". The undertaking is obviously in vain, so half is certainly better than the whole.

Of course, one can try to identify other contexts in which ‘half is better than the whole’: the ones I have given here serve as hypotheses. My aim is not so much to shed light on the meaning of the Hesiodic passage, but rather to show how, in the absence of the context and rhetorical code of reference, the meaning of the proverb is problematic, if not entirely elusive. It is the implicit linguistic competence, taken for granted in the listener, that bridges the partiality of the utterance and defines its meaning. And this competence of ten remains beyond our reach.

#### 4 Conclusions

A message considered relevant (for whatever reason) by the human group that elaborated it must be preserved and passed on, as it conveys ‘strategic information’ for society and its survival.

In a predominantly oral culture, the primary means of preserving and transmitting these fundamental messages is the word consigned to memory: the data to be transmitted must be converted into words that must be memorized.<sup>72</sup> Memorization can take place more effectively if the formal elaboration of the text succeeds in stimulating the recipient’s attention. In archaic Greek culture the maximum of formal elaboration is the poetic word, with its rhythmic and metrical structure.<sup>73</sup>

The poetic word records what is to be remembered; it is authoritative, i.e. the poetic text conveys socially shared relevant content and it is normative in a broad sense.

With specific reference to the Greek culture of the archaic period, characterized by a dominant oral communication system,<sup>74</sup> we can take the following statements as valid: 1. the poetic word (= metrically organized word) is the primary vehicle of relevant content as an effective means of communication, both because it has faster access to memory, and because – sociologically – it is an authoritative word; 2. proverbs and proverbial expressions fit perfectly into this ‘authoritative-word system’: they confer authority on the poetic word and are themselves authoritative poetic words; 3. the poetic word preserves and transmits socially relevant notions: the wisdom of a society.

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<sup>72</sup> On the importance of memory and the relationship between the poetic word and *memoria rerum* see Giordano-Zecharya 2003; an overview in Ercolani 2006, 65-7.

<sup>73</sup> One wonders, at this point, whether and how much sense it makes to distinguish (as is often done) between epic tradition and ‘proverbial’ or ‘gnomic’ tradition of ‘popular’ matrix. These juxtapositions lose their meaning if we consider epos as an authoritative word, and therefore an expression of all relevant content.

<sup>74</sup> I do not think the statement is any longer open to question: I merely refer here to the works of Havelock 1963; 1981; 1986.

The relationship between proverbs and wisdom traditions in Greek culture should be understood within this quickly sketched general framework.

I will summarize my reasoning in a very concise and point-by-point manner:

1. proverbs represent minimal signifying units entrusted with socially relevant messages;
2. proverbs are easy to memorize and disseminate quickly;
3. proverbs represent a wisdom tradition *per se*, but are also a medium of wisdom, a typical expressive form that could be used in any context of ‘authoritative speech’;
4. proverbs are a primarily oral traditional heritage (as oral are the ‘wisdom’ teachings of every society).<sup>75</sup>

Yesterday as today, today as yesterday, ‘un proverbio al giorno leva il medico di torno’ (a proverb a day keeps the doctor away).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The fact that proverbs are known in written form is, of course, a purely mechanical and accidental fact: we only know those proverbs ‘inserted’ in other texts that have come down to us or those inserted and classified in *corpora* by scholars since antiquity (see e.g. the collection of Stobaeus [on which Piccione 2003] or those of the various paremiographers in *CPG*). See also *supra* § 2.1.

<sup>76</sup> I paraphrase the proverb ‘una mela al giorno leva il medico di torno’ to evoke the title of a work by D. D’Eugenio (2018) “Un proverbio al giorno mette l’allegria intorno”, an anti-proverb cast on the same model. D’Eugenio’s work shows the usefulness of using proverbs in language learning (notably in the glottodidactics of Italian as a second language, L2) and argues that exposure to proverbs promotes problem-solving activities. The fact that some proverbs elicit laughter as a first reaction (D’Eugenio 2018, 600 f.) further demonstrates the proverb’s extraordinary communicative effectiveness.

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# Proverbs and *Gnōmai* in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

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**Abstract** This essay discusses proverbial expressions and wisdom sayings in the *Gilgamesh* tradition. It contends that certain critical strategies developed for ancient Greek poetry can be applied to Babylonian epic, particularly the analysis of poetic *gnōmai* and narrative irony. I begin by isolating the type of expression at issue, building on a flexibility in scholarly definitions of proverbs, *gnōmai* and sayings that goes back to antiquity (§ 2). The core of the paper (§§ 3-5) charts and comments on wisdom sayings in the first-millennium Standard Babylonian (SB) *Gilgamesh* with reference to the earlier poetic tradition. After some concluding remarks (§ 6), I include an indication of potential comparative avenues involving Homeric epic (§ 7).

**Keywords** Gilgamesh. Proverbs. Wisdom. Narrative irony. Homer.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Proverbs and *Gnōmai*. – 2.1 Definitions. – 2.2 Poetry and Proverbs. – 2.3 Sayings and Narrative. – 3 Aspects of Wisdom Poetics in SB *Gilgamesh*. – 4 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Tragedy of Enkidu. – 5 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Wisdom of Uta-napishti. – 6 Conclusion. – 7 Coda: Homeric Vistas.

## 1 Introduction

Scholars are increasingly interested in reading Greek and Babylonian epic side by side, but a comparison of the poetic deployment of proverbial sayings and sentencing has not been pursued, at least to my knowledge.<sup>1</sup> This article centres on the role played by pithy wis-

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dom expressions as part of the narrative and thematic infrastructure of SB *Gilgamesh*. It argues that proverbs and sayings contribute to connecting the Humbaba adventure to Gilgamesh's encounter with Uta-napishti, and to the broader theme of accessible and inaccessible knowledge. Throwing into relief how the characterisation of Enkidu and Gilgamesh changes as the plot unfolds, sayings are one important way in which the poem emphasizes shifting degrees of authority and wisdom.

Graeco-Babylonian epic comparisons often rely on important analogies in plot and theme between the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*, including the pairs Achilles/Patroclus and Gilgamesh/Enkidu, the death of the minor partner and the discourse on life, death and the gods. Such thematic ramifications have prompted the question whether Homer was on some level dependent on the Babylonian poem.<sup>2</sup> "Proverbial wisdom by its very nature transcends boundaries of time and space",<sup>3</sup> and thus crosses cultural and linguistic barriers too.<sup>4</sup> But this paper does not take a cross-cultural reception approach; my focus falls on the *Gilgamesh Epic* as a case-study of the creation, deployment and manipulation of wisdom sayings in mythological narrative poetry.

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**1** For comparisons of early Greek and Near Eastern poetry Burkert 1992; 2003 and West 1997 remain fundamental; papers in Kelly, Metcalf 2021 reflect the current state of the field; also below fn. 2.

**2** Recently Currie 2016, ch. 5; Matjevic 2018; West 2018; Clarke 2019; Ballesteros 2021; Sironi, Viano 2022; Davies 2023. Influence-free comparisons include Haubold 2013, 1-72 and subsequent publications; Ballesteros forthcoming, part II.

**3** Hallo 2010, 611.

**4** On ancient Mesopotamia and the Classical world see Moran 1978; Currie 2021; Lazaridis 2007 on demotic and Greek proverb collections. Theognis and the Book of Proverbs: Brown 1995, 290-309; Legaspi 2018, 165. Wide-ranging comparative view: Wilson 2022.

## 2 Proverbs and *Gnōmai*

This preliminary section addresses three points: first, the sense in which the Greek term *gnōmē* (pl. *gnōmai*) is used in this article; second, intertextuality, including between poetic texts and ancient proverb collections; and finally, how the first two points affect literary interpretation.

### 2.1 Definitions

*Gnōmē* is a semantically complex Greek word whose root is visible in *gignōskō* ‘I know and discover’ (and in English ‘knowledge’). In the sense that interests us, it is usually translated as ‘maxim’, rather than simply ‘opinion’.<sup>5</sup> Distinguishing a *gnōmē* from a proverb is not always straightforward. In the abstract, the difference is that a ‘maxim’ need not be a ‘traditional saying’. The problem is that, if successful, a *gnōmē* frequently becomes a ‘traditional saying’. Proverbs, in turn, notoriously resist definition, and Assyriologists and Hellenists face similar terminological difficulties.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that the boundaries between proverb (roughly Greek *paroimia*) and *gnōmē* were fluid in antiquity too. Relevant ancient Greek concepts were as multifarious and flexible as our own. Discussing the Aristotelian terminology, Lardinois remarks:<sup>7</sup>

It appears that by the time of Aristotle a number of terms existed which described different kinds of generalizing expressions or sayings: *gnōmē* (‘generalizing statement about particular human actions or the gods, often newly coined’), *paroimia* (‘traditional, popular sentence or phrase, sometimes metaphorical’), *upothēkē* (‘instruction, sometimes in the form of a direct command’) and *apophthegma* (‘short generalizing statement or retort, tied to a particular historical figure’).

At the same time, there was considerable scope for overlap – much as in English, where *dictum*, ‘adage’, ‘saying’, ‘proverb’, ‘maxim’, ‘precept’ and so on are all arguably distinct but frequently interchangeable.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See relevant entries in *GEW*, *EDG*; *LSJ* s.v. 3.3, *CGL* s.v. § 6.

<sup>6</sup> Paroemiological work in the anthropological sense first deployed by Taylor 1931, which concentrates on the morphology of proverbs and how they can deepen understanding of the societies that produce and deploy them, has been notably pursued, among Assyriologists, by Alster 1996; 1997; Alster, Oshima 2006; for the Greek world see Lelli, Tosi, Di Donato 2009-11; Lelli 2008; 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Lardinois 1995, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Lardinois 1995, 19 fn. 67.

In ancient Mesopotamia, Akkadian *tēltum* could indicate a “proverb, riddle, a saying, adage”,<sup>9</sup> and Sumerian had several words for this semantic field, as we gather from lexical lists: *i-bi-lu* (utterance, saying), *ár* (also ‘word of praise’, ‘glory’), *enim-tar* (perhaps ‘wide-spread [dispersed] word’ or ‘established word’).<sup>10</sup> Like classicists, students of Mesopotamian proverbs routinely remark on the protean features of their material: in Wasserman’s words, “[i]t is often not easy to distinguish proverbs from sentences of a gnomic character”; Durand remarks that “il est difficile de faire une distinction a priori entre un énoncé authentique et une formulation qui ait un schéma rhétorique de proverbe”.<sup>11</sup>

Because this article seeks above all to elucidate rhetorical effects in poetry and how poets manipulate the wisdom content of sayings, it seems useful to adopt a definition of *gnōmē* based on (but not necessarily coinciding with) that given by Aristotle, who writes:<sup>12</sup>

ἔστι δὴ γνώμη ἀπόφανσις, οὐ μέντοι οὔτε περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστον, οἷον ποῖός τις Ἴφικράτης, ἀλλὰ καθόλου, οὔτε περὶ πάντων, οἷον ὅτι τὸ εὐθὺ τῷ καμπύλῳ ἐναντίον, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὅσων αἱ πράξεις εἰσὶ, καὶ <ᾧ> αἰρετὰ ἢ φευκτά ἐστι πρὸς τὸ πράττειν

Now a *gnōmē* is a statement neither about particulars – such as what kind of man Iphikrates is – but about generalities, nor about what applies to everything, such as that the straight is contrary to the crooked, but about the quality of actions, and <that which> is worth pursuing or avoiding in respect to acting.

We can thus say that, for the purposes of this paper, a *gnōmē* is a pithy statement of general validity meant to induce or discourage from a course of action. What is crucial is the ethical and paraenetic

<sup>9</sup> Wasserman 2011a, 22; cf. *CAD* s.v.; Durand 2006, 18-21, who tentatively compares Arabic *tāla* ‘charmer’.

<sup>10</sup> Wasserman 2011a, 20-1; *CAD* s.v.; Alster 1996, 6-7 fnn. 26-30.

<sup>11</sup> Wasserman 2011a, 21; Durand 2006, 10. Alster 1996, 4 and fn. 3: “One might argue that it is futile to try to decide whether or not the sayings known to us [viz. from the ‘Proverb Collections’] are genuine proverbs. There is some truth in this. [fn. 13:] The argument would be the fact that some ancient so-called proverb collections contain few genuine proverbs, and rather consist of sententious sayings of literary origin”. Cf. Alster 1997, XXXI; Hallo 2010, 618 sets out criteria to identify proverbs in literary texts: (1) incongruity to context; (2) presence of ‘they say’ statements; (3) parallels in proverb collections; (4) recurrence in non-wisdom corpora.

<sup>12</sup> Arist. *Rh.* 1394a21-5, text Ross. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author. On the passage’s context, where Aristotle adduces several poetic examples, see Rapp 2002, 735-40; Gastaldi 2014, 502-8. Grimaldi (1988, 260-1) collects relevant ancient discussions.

aspect.<sup>13</sup> In narrative poetry, as will be seen, the action-content (what is encouraged or not) may emerge from context as much as from the saying *per se*. I emphasize that using the word *gnōmē* does not negate that the saying at issue could also be a ‘folk proverb’, or an ‘instruction’ (*upothēkē*).

## 2.2 Poetry and Proverbs

This fluidity has advantages. It has long enabled Hellenists to concentrate on literary effects and set aside the dilemma whether a *dictum* occurring in a literary text was already a proverb – and recognized as such by audiences – or not (in which case it was meant to be perceived as a venerable saying nonetheless).<sup>14</sup>

That question is especially difficult for archaic Greece because the earliest surviving Greek proverb collections are dated to the Hellenistic age.<sup>15</sup> In archaic times, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and the corpus Theognideum, for instance, attest to early systematisations of wisdom sayings as part of poetic compositions. Coincidence in diction and meaning across texts frequently suggests that the saying was older than any of its occurrences. The point, and its complications, may be illustrated by two brief *dicta* in Homer and Hesiod, the earliest preserved corpora of Greek poetry: “for (only) the fool understands after the deed” (ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων)<sup>16</sup> and “for (only) the fool understands after suffering” (παθὼν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων).<sup>17</sup> What is remarkable is that re-creation (*pathōn* for *rhekththen*) goes hand in hand with traditionality, so that deciding whether this is the ‘same’ proverb (or *gnōmē*) becomes difficult.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the distinction between *gnōmē* and proverb remains a potentially important one. By looking at the poets’ sophisticated creation of sayings and use of proverbs we can, again potentially, shed light on the varying intersections between the two poles of ‘folk’ and ‘high’ culture – though this is probably best conceptualized as a spectrum. That interface was perceived in Greek antiquity: Isocrates

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**13** Contrast the broader definitions by Lardinois 1995, 12 on *gnōmē*: “a generalizing statement about a particular action” and Mieder 2004, 4 on proverbs: “proverbs [are] concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk”.

**14** Lardinois 1995; 1997; 2000; 2001 on Homer; Stenger 2004 on Bacchylides; Boeke 2007 on Pindar; Ellis 2015 on Herodotus; Manousakis 2019 and Van Essen-Fishman 2020 on tragedy.

**15** Rupprecht 1949; Tosi 1994; Lelli 2021; it seems that collections of sayings independent of poetic composition began as early as the fifth century BCE.

**16** Hom. *Il.* 17.32, 20.198.

**17** Hes. *Op.* 218.

**18** Cf. Pl. *Symp.* 222b. Lardinois 1995, 23-6, with ethnographic comparisons.

differentiates between the *gnōmai* that could be excerpted from the works of the wise poets of the past and what would be appealing to the general public.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle's interest in proverbs and folk-wisdom may have been criticized by Isocrates' student Cephisodorus.<sup>20</sup> The fragments of Aristophanes of Byzantium's treatise on proverbs (third-second century BCE) show that the question whether a literary *gnōmē* should count as a proverb was discussed.<sup>21</sup> Although a difference between literary *gnōmai* and folk proverbs was perceived, wisdom sayings taken from poets were nonetheless excerpted to become part of proverb collections.

In Mesopotamia, proverb collections are attested from Early Dynastic times (twenty-sixth century BCE), and they were important in education from early on – earlier, that is, than the time at which a poem such as the SB *Gilgamesh* took shape.<sup>22</sup> However, this does not make the task of distinction any easier, because poets could draw on proverb collections, and proverb collections could include, as in Greece, poetic maxims.<sup>23</sup> I will present a case-study in § 4 (maxim [2]), with sayings in *Gilgamesh* paralleled in several literary sources as well as proverb collections. One can make inferences from probability, but ultimately, we may have no way of ascertaining which way the traffic originally went. What interests me here is that, insofar as the SB *Gilgamesh* is a relatively later source, the parallels illuminate the creative process of literary re-use and artistic adaptation.

Thus, we know that the boundaries between proverbs and pointed literary sayings were crossed in both the Babylonian and the Greek intellectual cultures. This cross-over was conscious and deployed for aesthetic and discursive purposes. Intertextuality opens further – and no less interesting – questions beyond the identification of proverbs and the definition of types of sayings.

### 2.3 Sayings and Narrative

How, then, should we study proverbs and *gnōmai* in the literary context of epic and narrative poetry? It is profitable to look once again at the fluid boundary between proverb and *gnōmē*. In his influential work, Lardinois applied to *gnōmai* the insights of proverb

<sup>19</sup> Isoc. *ad Nic.* 42-9.

<sup>20</sup> Athen. *Deipn.* 2 [56] 60e; the passage is difficult: Curnis 2009, 165-7, with fn. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Tosi 1993; cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1395a18-33.

<sup>22</sup> Sources in Alster 1997; on 'proverbs', literature and education see Hallo 2010; Veldhuis 2000; Alster 1997, XIX-XXIII; 2005, 25-6; Taylor 2005; Alster, Oshima 2006; Veldhuis, *infra*.

<sup>23</sup> Above fn. 11.

anthropology and sociolinguistics.<sup>24</sup> Like proverbs, *gnōmai* occurring in narrative poetry only make sense in a context where characters speak. It is thus important to concentrate on their pragmatics: who addresses whom, for what purpose, and how the saying reverberates against a broader background of previous knowledge. Narratologically, one interesting result of previous research here is that in Homer (unlike in Hesiod) *gnōmai* addressed by the poet to the audience are extremely rare, something which reinforces the objective character of the narration.<sup>25</sup> Much the same applies to SB *Gilgamesh*, where none of the sayings I have charted is uttered by the narrator. For present purposes, this confirms that epic *gnōmai* exist above all in a dynamic context of dialogue and action. I will therefore concentrate on the role of the speaking agents and addressees in the *longue durée* of the story, and on the narrative irony generated by the mismatch between what the characters believe and how things turn out to be (see further below § 3). The proverbs in *Gilgamesh* are best assessed against the narrative background of the entire poem. At the same time, when the sayings can be situated within a textual network extending beyond the SB text, this proves particularly useful to illuminate the poem's cohesive programme.

### 3 Aspects of Wisdom Poetics in SB *Gilgamesh*

In contrast to other genres of Babylonian wisdom literature, narrative poetry attaches wisdom to full-rounded characters, rather than to stereotypical figures.<sup>26</sup> Based on the maxims collected in Table 1, the lion's share of gnomic utterance in SB *Gilgamesh* goes to Enkidu. Besides Gilgamesh himself, who holds a special position since he is the poem's protagonist, all the gnomic speakers are figures of authority and wisdom: the elders who see the heroes off before their expedition; Humbaba, a divine creature and Enlil's protégé; Uta-napishti, the immortal sage and flood hero; and Ea, god of wisdom.<sup>27</sup> Because their gnomic sayings, as I argue, are best understood as a function of the poem's overall narrative development, it is useful to offer some context on the poetics of wisdom and knowledge in the epic.

Starting at least from the OB Sumerian tradition, Gilgamesh is said to have recovered pre-diluvian wisdom, including principally

<sup>24</sup> Lardinois 1995; 1997; 2000; 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Lardinois 1995, 157-61.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, Wasserman 2021, 124-5.

<sup>27</sup> 6× Enkidu (1× to Shamhat, 5× to Gilgamesh); 3× Gilgamesh to Enkidu; 1× elders/officials to Gilgamesh (repeated twice); 2× Humbaba to Gilgamesh; 1× Uta-napishti to Gilgamesh; 1× Ea to Enlil.

knowledge related to cult. This emerges from a central passage in the *Death of Gilgamesh* in which the gods address Gilgamesh in their assembly (DG M 57-61, eighteenth century BCE):<sup>28</sup>

you reached Ziusudra in his abode!

The rites of Sumer, forgotten there since distant days of old,  
the rituals and customs – you brought them down to the land.

The rites of hand-washing and mouth-washing you put in good order,  
[after the] Deluge had drowned the settlements of all lands.

The recovery of knowledge theme frames the SB version in a ring composition, connecting the proem to the king's final encounter with Uta-napishti (Sum. Ziusudra), the immortal flood hero and protégé of the wisdom god Ea. The proem dwells on what Gilgamesh has seen, on the depth of his knowledge (I 1-6); he "saw the secret (*niširta*) and uncovered the hidden | he brought back lore (*ṭēma*) from before the Flood" (I 8); Gilgamesh is said to have written down his profound, manifold sufferings on a stele (I 9-10). The majestic buildings of Uruk, especially its mighty walls, are connected both to the king and to prediluvian wisdom. Audiences are invited to go up on to the walls, admire them and pick up a lapis lazuli tablet to read out "all that Gilgamesh went through, each of his sufferings" (I 28). That tablet lies within a precious tablet-box of cedar, and the "door of its secret" (*bāba ša niširtišu*) must be disclosed for it to be accessed (I 26).<sup>29</sup>

When Gilgamesh finally meets the Flood hero, Uta-napishti introduces his tale of things long past as a "word of secret" (*amāt niširti*), a "mystery of the gods" (*pirišta ša ilī*), and later on he uses the same words to offer Gilgamesh the plant of rejuvenation, which the king, however, will inevitably fail to utilize (XI 10-11 = 281-2). This intra-textual connection revolving around knowledge as a revealed secret (*niširtu*) matches a second long-distance echo involving the mighty walls of Uruk, which Gilgamesh praises upon his return at the end of the poem and whose construction rests, as noted above, on prediluvian knowledge (XI 323-8 ≈ I 18-23). Gilgamesh becomes "wise in everything" at the end of his journey. The knowledge that Uta-napishti imparts and which is contained in the lapis lazuli tablet (I 26) is one of suffering (I 28): Gilgamesh learns that death is unavoidable, as is the chasm between gods and mortals.

<sup>28</sup> Transl. George 2020, 153; text in Cavigneaux, Al-Rawi 2000.

<sup>29</sup> The term 'audience(s)' will occasionally synthesize the cumbersome but more precise 'audiences and/or readers'; cf. Worthington 2019, 105 fn. 298.



This is well-trodden ground for Assyriologists.<sup>30</sup> Much less attention has however been paid to the fact that the theme of knowledge, far from being confined to the quest for immortality and Uta-napish-ti's appearance in Tablets X-XI, is eminently present in the first, heroic half of the epic too, where indeed most gnomic expressions concentrate.<sup>31</sup> As will become clear, shifting degrees of wisdom before Enkidu's death constitute a *fil rouge* which connects the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, between the heroes and their city, and between the pair and their fated travel to the Cedar Forest. What is more, there is scope to argue that the theme of knowledge constitutes a strong tie between the Uta-napishti episode and the Humbaba legend.<sup>32</sup> Proverbs and *gnōmai* offer an excellent vista on this structural connection.

It is thus worth recalling what is at stake in the epic's first half, especially regarding Enkidu. It revolves around Enkidu's integration in Uruk as Gilgamesh's helper and their expedition against Humbaba (Huwawa in the older sources), the guardian of the Cedar Forest appointed by the chief god Enlil. After the heroes kill Humbaba, they clash with the goddess Ishtar, and the first half of the poem concludes with the death of Enkidu, condemned by the gods. Enkidu is a creature of knowledge and wisdom. The ramifications of this theme deserve discussion.

Enkidu, created by the gods as a match for an initially reckless Gilgamesh, becomes his counsellor (*māliku*), effectively appointed as such by the elders – themselves advisers – to stand at the king's side during the expedition. Enkidu comes from the wild, a liminal space granting a specific form of knowledge suited to their adventure outside the civilized space of the city.<sup>33</sup> After being civilized through sex by Shamhat, he is adopted by Ninsun, Gilgamesh's divine mother. With Ninsun, Enkidu shares the ability to interpret divine-sent dreams (esp. SB 4; OB Schøyen<sub>2</sub>, OB Nippur, OB Harmal, MB Boğ<sub>2</sub>). Ninsun "is wise in everything"; she understands Gilgamesh's dreams and predicts Enkidu's friendship and role as protector of Gilgamesh;

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**30** E.g. Moran 1991; George 2003, 445-6; 2012; Lenzi 2008, 106-21 for context on ante-diluvian wisdom and first-millennium religious experts; Maul 2008, 346-50; Salla-berger 2008, 55; Zgoll 2010; Worthington 2019, 264-5 (on XI 197 ≈ XI 10); Machinist 2020, 324-9; also below § 5 on sayings [13]-[14].

**31** But see Foster 1987 on knowledge and love and, more recently, Sonik 2020 on emotion and counsel.

**32** Helle 2020, 198-201, with previous scholarship, on the epic's bi-partition.

**33** VI 26 ≈ IV 107 (OB Harmal<sub>2</sub>, rev. 47 ≈ OB IM 19), V 190-1; cf. also saying [1] and SB II 237-40, III 7 = 221 ≈ 78; OB III 24-5, 106-7, 151-2, 253-4, 275-6. His association with Enki/Ea, ingrained in Enkidu's name, is confirmed by MB Priv<sub>1</sub> (George 2007a). See Zisa 2022, 699-706 on the liminal implications of the Huwawa adventure in OB sources, here (on Enkidu) esp. 706-7 fn. 63.

the fact that Ninsun adopts Enkidu reinforces his authority as counsellor, and constitutes a further mark of wisdom.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, the civilising of Enkidu by Shamhat also entails an increase in knowledge, marking his achievement of human status.<sup>35</sup> But it also entails his “forgetting about the steppe”, that is, precisely the knowledge that underpins his appointment by the elders.<sup>36</sup> Enkidu decisively helps Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, but he should have known better, for that killing inevitably enrages the gods. Enkidu is aware of the risk until the end, but he deludes himself into thinking that Enlil might be propitiated.<sup>37</sup> The wisdom of Enkidu is thus ultimately misdirected or, at best, partial. Crucially for the poem’s narrative economy, the ultimate result of the expedition is utter disaster: the heroes “reduce the forest to a wasteland” (SB V 303), as Enkidu puts it; Enlil’s protégé is killed despite his repeated pleas for mercy; Enkidu is punished and dies; Gilgamesh cannot face death and leaves his city.

The heroes’ excess and punishment may be compared to dramatic trajectories in Greek tragedy and epic connected with *hubris* (roughly: ‘inconsiderate arrogance’).<sup>38</sup> Similarly to Greek poetry, the *Gilgamesh* narratives elicits several questions surrounding the moral explanation of disaster, particularly concerning character knowledge and responsibility. To what extent are characters responsible for the evils that befall them? Could disaster have been avoided? Were the characters in an epistemic position such that they could have taken a different course of action? One way in which poetry develops and engages with these themes is by interlacing layers of knowledge and irony: the narrator (or dramatist), the characters and the audience display different degrees of knowledge compared to each other, which often shift as the narrative proceeds. Some things are true and wise on one level, but they are revealed not to be so in retrospect. The characters’ limited knowledge and delusion is foregrounded,

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**34** Ninsun (*kalāma īde*): SB I 257-8 = 284-5, III 17-18, [117]; Enkidu’s wisdom and knowledge: SB I 200; I 212 = II 32, cf. II 59; I 294-5; OB CUNES obv. 1-3 (George 2018), SB VII 70. Fleming and Milstewa (2010, 32-40) survey the material as part of their argument for a lost proto-Huwawa narrative in Akkadian.

**35** Shamhat’s status as giver of counsel (*milku*) is stressed at OB II 67-8, which is not extant in the equivalent passage at SB I 211-12; Enkidu’s initial lack of knowledge: SB I 106, 231, II 48; OB II 90-1.

**36** OB II 47, again not extant in the equivalent SB I 192-4. Enkidu’s alienation from the wild is nonetheless amply emphasized at SB I 197-202 too; also SB VII 130-1 (MB Nippur 39-40).

**37** SB V 199-202 = 268-71 (the poet emphasizes the contradiction, since it is precisely in these lines that Enkidu gives the decisive advice to kill Humbaba); V 303-4, 312-19.

**38** Van Dijk 1960, 81 (‘hybris’); cf. Zisa 2022, 705 (‘tracotanza’).

thus generating a range of audience reactions, including sympathy, pity and terror.<sup>39</sup>

We will see that the use of *gnōmai* exemplifies the existence of comparable strategies in Babylonian epic. Interrogating the wisdom-value of *gnōmai* in their narrative context and against the background of what the audience knows or will find out to be the truth enhances our understanding of characterisation as well as of plot and thematic development. The *gnōmai* referred to are listed in the table below, which is footnoted by a brief explanation, based on context, of the course of action they encourage or discourage.

**Table 1** Sayings in SB Gilgamesh<sup>40</sup>

No.	Lines	Speakers	Translation
[1]	I 221	Enkidu to Shamhat	[one] born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses
[2]	II 234-5	Gilg. to Enkidu	As for humankind, [its days] are numbered,   all that ever it did is but [wind]
[3]	III 4-5 = 218-19	City-elders/ <i>šakkanakkū</i> to Gilg.	The one who goes in front saves (his) comrade,   one who knew the road protected his friend
[4]	V 49	Gilg. to Enkidu	The one who went first protected his person, let him bring the companion to safety!
[5]	V 75-80	Enkidu to Gilg.	One friend is one alone, but [two are two!]   Though they be weak, two [...]   [though one alone cannot climb] a glacis slope, two [...]   Two triplets [...]   a three-ply rope [is not easily broken]   As for a strong dog, [its] two pups [will overcome it(?)]
[6]	V 116	Humbaba to Gilg.	Let fools, Gilgamesh, take the advice of an idiot fellow

<sup>39</sup> This framework goes back to Aristotle's much-discussed concept of *hamartia* ('error'), *Poet.* 1452b31-1453a17. A comparative application (*Iliad* and Sam 1) is Gerhards 2015. Narrative ('tragic') irony in Homer: especially Rutherford 1982; Redfield 1994; Battezzato 2019; Johnston 2022. In Greek tragedy: e.g. Goldhill 2012; Rutherford 2012, 323-64; Johnston forthcoming. In *Gilgamesh*, as in Greek literature, sympathy is enhanced by the transience of partial divine support: Shamash unwaveringly helps the heroes, but is then ousted by Anu and Enlil; Ballesteros forthcoming, ch. 7.

<sup>40</sup> [1]: therefore, it is best not to defy me/think one can overcome me. [2]: therefore, let us establish our fame with glorious deeds. [3]: therefore, trust Enkidu. [4]: therefore, you go first. [5]: therefore, let us do this together. [6]: therefore, do not heed Enkidu's advice. [7]: therefore, let us finish the deed. [8]: therefore, spare my life. [9]: therefore, do not worry about Humbaba's auras, let us attack him. [10]: therefore, trust my determination to intercede for you. [11]: therefore, do not place hope on your praying to the gods. [12]: therefore, consider how miserable I am. [13]: therefore, do not hope to overcome death. [14]: therefore, practice moderation. This list does not aim to be comprehensive; for instance, one could add SB V 40, a few lines before [4], which displays the same syntactic structure as I 221 [1] and III 5/219 [3]. I do not treat Ishullanu's rhetorical questions to Ishtar at SB VI 72-3, considered to contain proverbial material by Foster 1987, 35; cf. Hallo 2010, 617. George 2003, 838, with a different interpretation.

[7]	V 133-5	Enkidu to Gilg.	Already the copper pours into the mould!   To stoke the furnace for an hour? To <i>blow</i> on the coals for an hour?   To send the Deluge is to crack the whip!
[8]	V 171-2	Humbaba to Gilg.	Never, O Gilgamesh, did a dead man <i>please</i> his lord,   but [ <i>a slave</i> ] alive [ <i>brings profit</i> ] to his lord.
[9]	V 250-1	Enkidu to Gilg.	My friend, [catch a bird],   and where [can its hatchlings go?]
[10]	VII 75-6	Gilg. to Enkidu	To the one who survived grieving was left   the [ <i>deceased</i> ] left sorrow to the one who survived.
[11]	VII 86-7	Enkidu to Gilg.	[What he (viz. Enlil)] uttered, he did not [erase] again   [what] he <i>proclaimed</i> , he did not erase again
[12]	VII 266	Enkidu to Gilg.	My friend, one who [ <i>falls</i> ] in combat [ <i>makes his name</i> ]
[13]	X 316-18	Uta-napishti to Gilg.	The captive and the dead, how alike they are!   They cannot draw a picture of death.   The dead do not greet man in the land.
[14]	XI 187	Ea to Enlil	Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]

#### 4 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Tragedy of Enkidu

In Tablet I, Enkidu plans to defy Gilgamesh, and tells Shamhat [1] (SB I 219-21):<sup>41</sup>

[*ul-tar?*]-*ri-ih ina libbi(šà) uruk(unug)<sup>ki</sup> a-na-ku-mi dan-nu*  
[*x x*]-*um-ma ši-ma!?-tú ú-nak-kar*  
[šá i-n)a 'šēri(edin)<sup>1</sup> i'-al-du [da-a)n i-mu-qí i-šū

[*I will vaunt*] *myself* in Uruk, saying I am the mightiest!  
[*There*] I shall change the way things are ordered:  
[one] born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses.

The proverbial overtone of the saying at I 221 is marked by the ‘gnomic preterit’, which Werner Mayer saw as equivalent to the Greek gnomic aorist.<sup>42</sup> The maxim rings true, for Enkidu will indeed show mighty strength. Yet at the same time, the narrative shows just how wrong he is: Enkidu will not win the challenge of strength with Gilgamesh in Uruk, nor indeed will he change the order of things (accepting George’s reading *šīmatu* at 220).<sup>43</sup> In fact, he ends up accepting Gilgamesh’s kingship in the most solemn way (OB II 239-40). The *dictum* ultimately serves the theme of Enkidu’s fragility and error,

<sup>41</sup> All *Gilgameš* texts and translations after George 2003; 2020 and now George et al. 2022, integrating the new material published hitherto, noting alternative restorations and with updated line-numbering.

<sup>42</sup> Mayer 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Nurullin 2012, 202-4 reads *ši-giš-tú ú-nak-kar* ‘will change the (course of) fighting’, which is equally ironic, since the clash between Enkidu and Gilgamesh will result in a stalemate.

which will culminate in his death. Audiences and readers are immediately alerted to the theme, since in this early dialogue Enkidu misses Shamhat's point about knowledge: she rightly replies that Enkidu is "ignorant of life" (I 233), that Gilgamesh is more powerful and that the king has the epistemic advantage. Gilgamesh counts on the great gods who have "broadened his wisdom" (I 240) and on his divine mother, "wise in everything", who recently elucidated to Gilgamesh the dreams about Enkidu (I 240-98). The wider context of Enkidu's first *gnōmē* can thus be understood to be a deeply ironic one. There is truth-value to the saying, but the intention for which it is deployed (defying Gilgamesh) proves misdirected. Importantly, a wisdom figure (Shamhat) unsuccessfully tries to dissuade the speaker of the saying, with the attempt foreshadowing that speaker's delusion. We will now see that this pattern is deployed, on a large scale, to frame the Humbaba expedition, which in turn proves that Gilgamesh is in no way as wise as Shamhat puts it.

Albeit clearly limited in knowledge, as befits a mortal, the civilized Enkidu soon gains his new status as the counsellor of Gilgamesh that the king had longed for (SB I 295-7). Initially, and at length, Enkidu tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from his plan of setting out against Humbaba, the protégé of Enlil; so do the city elders (SB II 216-29, 274-99). These authoritative and knowledgeable figures are correct, of course, because there seems to be no real need potentially to enrage Enlil save for seeking glory, and the consequences will be disastrous. Yet Gilgamesh emerges as fearless and ambitious, especially thanks to the existential *gnōmē* (more fully preserved in the OB source) which he uses to spurn Enkidu's remarks about the divinely determined danger that awaits whoever defies Humbaba ([2], SB II 232-5):

*am-me-ni ib-ri pi-is-nu-[qiš ta]-qab-bi*  
 ù pi-i-ka ir-ma-am-ma t[u-lam-man l]ib-bi  
 a-me-lut-ti ma-nu-<sup>r</sup>ú<sup>1</sup> [u<sub>4</sub>-mu-šá]  
mim-mu-ú e-te-ep-pu-šu š[ārū(im)<sup>meš?</sup>]-ma 235

Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling?  
 With your feeble talk you have vexed my heart!  
 As for humankind, [its days] are numbered,  
 all that ever it did is but [wind]. 235

Cf. OB III 140-3:

*ma-an-nu ib-ri e-lu-ú ša-<sup>r</sup>ma<sup>1</sup>-[i]* 140  
 i-lu-ma it-ti <sup>d</sup>Šamšim(utu) da-ri-iš <sup>r</sup>uš<sup>1</sup>-[bu]  
 a-wi-lu-tum-ma ma-nu-ú u<sub>4</sub>-mu-ša  
mi-im-ma ša i-te-né-pu-šu ša-ru-ma

Who is there, my friend, that can climb to the sky? 140  
Only the gods have [dwelled] forever in the sunlight.  
As for humankind, its days are numbered,  
whatever it might do, it is but wind.

In these striking metaphors, the unreachable sky exemplifies humankind's fragility; the fluctuating wind, the transience of its achievements. Life's limited span prompts Gilgamesh to seek immortal glory through his deeds. The sky-metaphor is widely attested in various forms in Babylonian literature, beginning in the OB Sumerian forerunner *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (*GH*); in OB proverb collections and the wisdom text *Nothing is of Value* (*nîĝ-nam*), in the OB *Ballad of Early Rulers*, and finally in the *Dialogue of Pessimism* attested in the first millennium. The wind-metaphor is paralleled in *Nothing is of Value*. These passages illuminate the intertextual matrix out of which the pointed literary use in SB *Gilgamesh* emerges. As such, they help us understand that Gilgamesh's existential *gnōmē* in fact undermines the king's plans.<sup>44</sup>

- **GH A 25-33:** I raised my head on the rampart, my gaze fell on a corpse drifting down the river, afloat on the water: I too shall become like that, just so shall I be! (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | (even) the broadest one cannot compass the Netherworld (kur). Since no man can escape life's end, I will enter the mountain and set up my name. Where names are set up, I will set up my name, where names are not yet set up, I will set up gods' names.
- **nîĝ-nam A 5-10 ≈ D 18-22** (vanity of sacrifice): (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | (even) the broadest one cannot compass the Netherworld (kur) | (even) the strongest one cannot [compass] the Earth (ki) | The good life, let it be defiled in joy! | Let the 'race' be spent in joy!
- **nîĝ-nam B 6:** That plan - its outcome was carried away by the wind!
- **SP 17 sec. B2 1-2** (SP = Sumerian Proverb Collections): (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | Even the broadest one cannot lift (himself) to earth (ki).
- **Ballad of Early Rulers SS 11-18:** Where is Gilgamesh, who, like Ziusudra, sought the (eternal) life? | Where is Huwawa, who was caught in submission? | Where is Enkidu, whose strength was not defeated (?) in the country? | Where are those kings,

<sup>44</sup> *GH* A 28-9 (25-33, cf. *GH* B 5-14), ed. Edzard 1990; 1991; 1993; Peterson 2011, 81-2; transl. George 2020 ≈ *Nothing is of value* (*nîĝ-nam nu-kal*) A 5-7, D 19-20, ed. and tr. Alster 2005; SP 17 Sec B2 1-2 ≈ SP 22 vi 38-40, ed. and tr. Alster 1997; *Dialogue of Pessimism* 82-3, ed. and tr. Lambert 1960. Translations slightly modified to emphasize overlapping diction.

the vanguards of former days? | They are no longer engendered, they are no longer born. | Like the remote heavens, has my hand ever reached them? | Like the deep underworld (or: earth) (ki b̄uru-da-gin<sub>7</sub>), no one knows them. | All life is an illusion.

- **Dialogue of Pessimism 75-84:** “Do not perform, sir, do not perform [*viz.* a benefit for your country]. | Go up on to the ancient ruin heaps and walk about; | see the skulls of high and low. | Which is the malefactor, and which is the benefactor?” | “Slave, listen to me”. “Here I am, sir, here I am”. | “What, then, is good?” | “To have my neck and your neck broken | And to be thrown into the river is good. | Who is so tall as to climb to the heavens? | Who is so broad as to compass the underworld [or: earth] (KI)?”.

It is difficult to say whether the poet of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* took the saying from current proverbial wisdom, or whether the non-narrative wisdom texts drew on the Sumerian literary tradition about Gilgamesh.<sup>45</sup> The imagery of sky and earth/netherworld as impossibly vast dimensions for a mortal to encompass also appears to respond to a topos of Sumerian religious poetry, emphasising the gods’ majesty as reflected in their dominion over sky and earth.<sup>46</sup> What seems certain is that a contextual reading shows important differences in the passages about humans collected above. Especially revealing is the fact that the Sumerian epic appears as the outlier here. In *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, unlike in the SB version, the adventure does not end tragically. The heroes kill Huwawa, and Gilgamesh emerges in triumph as the king who established his name for eternity.<sup>47</sup> In all the other sources, on the other hand, the sayings have a markedly pessimistic tone – rather than promoting action, they invite audiences to accept the limits of humankind and recognize the vanity of things. The *Dialogue of Pessimism*, the latest of these sources, uses the saying to interpret the story of Gilgamesh in precisely that manner,

<sup>45</sup> Alster 2005, 294-7; Hallo 2010, 621-2. To Metcalf 2013, 261, “both [*GH* and the *Dialogue of Pessimism*] draw on the same proverbial wisdom”.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. *Gudea Cyl.* A 4.14-15, V 13-17; *Inana B* 123-4, *Inana F* 10-11; Metcalf 2013, 257-60, with further examples.

<sup>47</sup> It is true that at *GH* A 181-91 Enlil is displeased that Huwawa has died. However, although the heroes have offered him Huwawa’s head, the chief god does not take revenge, and instead assigns new roles to Huwawa’s ‘auras’ – showing that the enterprise becomes aetiologically functional. Enkidu’s death in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* is not connected to the Huwawa adventure. Hence I disagree with Alster 2005, 295 who takes the lines in *GH* as “refer[ring] to the futility of Gilgameš’ ambitions”. The negative implications seem only to apply in the later instantiations. The poems about Gilgameš set out to demonstrate that the king did establish his renown; cf. Radner 2005, 90-2; Zgoll 2010; Metcalf 2013, 261; Franke 2023, 19.

and so does, even more explicitly, the earlier *Ballad of Early Rulers*.<sup>48</sup> These intertexts, then, suggest that the deployment of the saying in the Akkadian versions of the epic is ultimately one of pessimism – for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, their triumph will indeed amount to nothing but loss. The Akkadian epic ultimately recasts the older Sumerian forerunner by making the saying resonate with the pessimistic tone that was also current in later eras. The diachrony of the tradition illustrates the point well. *GH* only contains the ‘sky and earth’ theme, *OB Gilg.* significantly adds the ‘vanity’ wind image, the only one retained in the *SB* version, which, notably, utilizes a gnomic preterit (*iteppušu*). But there is more to this sophisticated operation, for narrative irony comes into play. In the specific context of the scene, Gilgamesh does emerge as the bold and heroic king, and he will persuade Enkidu. At the same time, a cultivated audience – and those who knew the whole story – would not have failed to detect the irony: the heroic deed will bring loss, despair and a sense of vanity. In this way, Gilgamesh’s heroic saying ultimately reinforces the broader pattern of misguided confidence which we have encountered in the previous exchange between Enkidu and Shamhat. Like Enkidu, Gilgamesh will meet disaster as he does not listen to the correct advice of a more knowledgeable figure.

The next *gnōmē* [3] is uttered first by the city-elders (*mālikū rabūtu*), then by the *šakkanakkū*-officials. It marks and, by virtue of being repeated, frames the civic appointment of Enkidu as the protector of the king ahead of the expedition (*SB III 2-5 = 216-19*):

[I]a ta-tak-kil <sup>1a</sup>GIŠ<sup>1</sup>-gim-maš a-na 'gi-mir' e-'mu-qí-ka' 2/216

[i]-na-ka liš-ba-a mi-ḫi-iš-ka tu-k[il]

'a'-lik maḫ-ri tappâ(tab.ba) a ú-še-ez-z[eb]

ša tú-du i-du-ú i-bir-šú iṣ-ṣu[r] 5/219

Do not trust, O Gilgamesh, in the fullness of your strength, 2/216  
let your eyes be satisfied, strike a blow to rely on!

He who goes in front saves (his) comrade,  
one who knew the road protected his friend. 5/219

<sup>48</sup> *Dialogue of Pessimism* 76 does, in my view, parody *SB Gilg.* I 18 ≈ 11.323; cf. George 2003, 526; Alster 2005, 295 with fn. 39; Wasserman 2011b, 7-11. Metcalf 2013, 263 persuasively argues that the parody need not imply a humorous effect, but remains sceptical concerning the intertextual nexus (as was Lambert 1960, 140-1). I would insist that verses *SB Gilg.* I 18 (≈ XI 323) and *Dial.* 76 match precisely in diction and meter: to *elī-ma ina muḫḫi dūri ša uruk itallak* responds *elī-ma ina muḫḫi tīlāni labīrūti itallak*. Further, the *SB Gilg.* lines are exceptionally prominent in the epic, since they encircle its trajectory (above fn. 30, below fn. 72), and thus make for an easily recognisable allusive target. Finally, the *Dialogue*'s reference to the wall at 76-7 forms a cluster with the ‘sky and earth/underworld’ theme (*Dial.* 83-4), which is again prominent in the Gilgamesh tradition.



The second couplet has been recognized as proverb-like thanks to the gnomic preterit.<sup>49</sup> The saying (III 4-5, 218-19) highlights the importance of trusting the counsellor and companion, whilst stressing the collaborative aspect of the enterprise: Gilgamesh's blow must be reliable for his companion (*miḥiṣka tukkil*, III 3/217). What bears emphasis is, once again, the narrative-ironic purpose to which the proverb is put. For when the heroes eventually face Humbaba, Gilgamesh, who was so bold, is paralyzed and terrified (SB V 27-30), and the poet has him re-use the saying to convince Enkidu to go first and confront Enlil's creature at [4], SB V 47-50 (IV 245-8 in George 2003):<sup>50</sup>

*mu-u-tú mi-ši-ma 'ba-la-tu' [še-'-i?]*  
*[šá i]na idi(á) pal-lu pit-qu-du a-'me-lu'*  
*[šá ina] 'pāni(igi)' illaku(du)<sup>ku</sup> pa-gar-šú iṣ-ṣur tap-pa-a li-šal-lim*  
*[ana u<sub>4</sub>-me r]u-qu-ti šú-nu šu-ma iš-tak-nu* 50

Forget death and [seek] life!

One who, at one's side, moves forward, is a careful man

The one who went first protected his person, let him bring the  
companion to safety!

It is they who have established a name [for] future [time!]. 50

In the moment of truth, Gilgamesh proves to be rather unworthy of the heroic ideals he had expressed (explicitly evoked at SB V 50, cf. 203-4, 271-2). Notably, in spurning Enkidu's wise advice, Gilgamesh had said – at least in the OB version (III 146-7) – that he would be the one to go first and protect his less courageous companion. But here the king is happy to send Enkidu forward. It is up to Enkidu the counsellor to reply with a series of gnomic statements which reinforce the elders' advice that the pair should instead act in concert ([5], SB V 74-80):

*ib-ri ḏḥum-ba-ba x [...]*  
*ib-ri iš-tén iš-tén-ma š[i-na ši-na-ma]* 75  
*lu-ú ma-ku-ma 2-t[...]*  
*lu-ú muš-ḥal-ši-tum-ma u[l ...] 2 m[u- ...]*  
*[šit-'ta' taš-ka-a-ta x [...]*  
*áš-lu šu-uš-lu-šú [...]*

<sup>49</sup> George 2003, 214-15, 809.

<sup>50</sup> The building-blocks of verse SB V 49 are found at SB III 9-10, 224-5: *ḏen-ki-dù ib-ri li-iṣ-ṣur tap-pa-a li-šal-lim | a-na šēr(edin) ḥi-ra-a-ti pa-gar-šú lib-la* 'let Enkidu protect (his) friend and keep safe (his) comrade! | Let him bring his person back to his wives!', which in turn echo the version of *gnōmē* [3] as found in OB III 255-6: *[a-li]k maḥ-ra tap-pa-a ú-ša-lim | [ša i]na-šu šu-wu-ra 'pa-gār-šu i<sup>1</sup>-š[ú-ur<sup>2</sup>]'* 'He who went in front kept his comrade safe; | The one whose eyes were peeled (lit. gleaming) [protected] himself'.

[1 <i>kalb</i> ](ur.gi,) <i>dan-nu 2 mi-ra-[nu-šú ...]</i>	80
My friend, Humbaba [...]	
One friend is one alone, but [two are two!]	75
Though they be weak, two [...]	
[though one alone cannot climb] a glacis slope, two [ <i>will succeed!</i> ]	
Two triplets [...]	
a three-ply rope [ <i>is not easily broken</i> ]	
As for a strong dog, [its] two pups [ <i>will overcome it</i> ].	80

Particularly interesting is line SB V 79, where the alliteration reinforces the gnomic character. Here we find another strong intertext with the Sumerian version, *GH* A 106-10 (Gilgamesh to Enkidu):<sup>51</sup>

Set to, O Enkidu, two men together will not die: a raft of reed cannot sink, no man can cut a three-ply rope, a flood cannot sweep a man down from a wall, fire in a reed hut cannot be extinguished! You join with me, I will join with you, what can anyone do to us then?

We will return to this dense set of sayings, whose focus on the nexus between collaborative values and fragility is central to the SB poem (below § 5 on [14]). For present purposes, the passage is remarkable because it confirms the programmatic nature of the narrative irony. A strong inversion of roles takes place in the Humbaba adventure as portrayed in the SB version: unlike in the older Sumerian poem, it is Enkidu, and not Gilgamesh, who acts as the courageous one who utters the *gnōmē*. Importantly, the OB Akkadian tradition in OB Schøyen<sub>2</sub>, unlike the late Bronze Age Hittite adaptation, displays a courageous Gilgamesh and a fearsome Enkidu. We can thus recognize here an innovation that may postdate the OB period.<sup>52</sup>

The process of ironic inversion continues. Despite Enkidu's advice, Gilgamesh continues to hesitate. Enkidu reproaches the king with the very words Gilgamesh had used when spurning Enkidu's wise advice against confronting Humbaba (V 130-1 = II 232-3). It is again

<sup>51</sup> Transl. George 2020, 110, cf. Civil 2003, 81-2; Edzard 1991, 202-4. Also compare Eccles. 4:9-12: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken". The parallel has, in fact, enhanced understanding of SB V 79: George 2003, 467 fn. 84 (previous literature); Samet 2015, 279-82, from whom I quote the biblical passage.

<sup>52</sup> OB Schøyen<sub>2</sub> 63-80, CTH 341.III.1 H.6'-12' (Beckman 2019). The action sequence in SB 5 has been considerably clarified after the publication of MS ff: Al-Rawi, George 2014. Note that SB 4.227-50 in George 2003 are now understood as SB V 29-52, with Enkidu as the speaker at V 31 = *olim* IV 229.

the counsellor's task to try to persuade the king with a complex gnomic metaphor ([7], SB V 132-7):<sup>53</sup>

*e-nin-na-ma ib-ri iš-ta-at [(x)]-<sup>1</sup>pi?<sup>1</sup>-[x]  
ina ra-a-ṭu <sup>lu</sup>nappāḫi(simug) e-ra-(a) šá-ba-šá-<sup>1</sup>a<sup>1</sup>  
tu-ú-ru ana 1 bēr(danna)<sup>am</sup> na-pa-ḫu na-pi-iḫ-tu ana 1 bēr(danna)<sup>am</sup>  
šá-<sup>1</sup>lu-ú<sup>1</sup>  
šá-par a-bu-bu iš-tuḫ-ḫu la-pa-tu 135  
[e] <sup>1</sup>ta<sup>1</sup>-as-suḫ šēpī(gīr)<sup>min</sup>-ka e ta-tu-ur ana ár-ki-ka  
[e-nin-na ki-i-ma l]abbi(ur.maḫ) mi-ḫi-iṣ-ka du-un-nin*

Now, my friend, but one is [our task]  
Already the copper pours into the mould!  
To stoke the furnace for an hour? To *blow on* the coals for an hour?  
To send the Deluge is to crack the whip! 135  
[Do not] pull back your foot, do not make a retreat!  
Make your blow mighty, [like that of a] lion!

The metaphors of metalcraft at V 133-4 have been persuasively elucidated by George, who interprets them as suggesting that once a potentially dangerous process has been set in motion, hesitation can only make things worse.<sup>54</sup> I would add that the reference to the Flood (VII 135), by looking forward to the encounter with Uta-napishti and so to the conceptual resolution of the poem, also casts the completion of the enterprise under a dark light. Just as the Flood was brought about recklessly and disastrously, so will the killing of Humbaba prove damaging for the heroes (see further below § 5 on [14]).

Enkidu's ability is also manifest as he gives excellent proverbial advice regarding Humbaba's auras, about which Gilgamesh should not worry, concentrating instead on Humbaba himself ([9] SB V 250-1):<sup>55</sup>

*ib-ri [i-šú-ra-am ba-ar-ma] | e-ša-am [i-la-ku wa-at-mu-šu]*

My friend, [catch a bird], | and where [can its hatchlings go?]

It may be observed that the identification of Humbaba as a parent contributes (ironically) to creating empathy towards Enlil's appointee, much like the description of the "monkey mothers" singing aloud

<sup>53</sup> The passage is paralleled in (and restored thanks to) MB Ug<sub>2</sub> b, where the speaker is seemingly Gilgamesh. George 2007b, 250 deems this "a corruption", but it is possible that the peripheral source reflects an older version where, as in *GH*, OB Schøyen<sub>2</sub> and the Hittite texts, the inversion of roles was not as pronounced as in the SB text.

<sup>54</sup> George 2003, 823-6.

<sup>55</sup> Restored with OB Ishchali 15'; identified as a proverb and compared to Deut. 22:6 by Wasserman 2011b, 12.

for Humbaba alongside their younglings (SB V 24-6) – an important part of the sympathetic depiction of Humbaba’s domain, which will be destroyed and cause Enkidu’s “ecological regret”.<sup>56</sup> After Enkidu is punished with death, Gilgamesh will himself suffer “like a lioness deprived of her cubs” (VIII 61).<sup>57</sup>

The ironic inversion of roles, with Enkidu taking the lead, culminates as the counsellor decrees Humbaba’s death, leading Gilgamesh brutally to stab the divine creature in the neck (V 197-204 = 266-72). At the same time, the fact that, in doing so, Enkidu accomplishes the task he was entrusted with by the city-elders shows that the role-inversion is just one aspect of the narrative irony of Tablet V. Enkidu proves up to the task: without his knowledge and advice (stressed by Humbaba at V 190-1), the enterprise would have failed. The larger and most important irony is, of course, that Enkidu’s persuasive advice to kill Humbaba will ultimately lead to disaster. Humbaba’s insulting address to the two heroes ([6] SB V 116) is instructive:

*lim-tal-ku lil-lu* <sup>a</sup>GIŠ-*gím-maš nu-’-ú a-me-lu mi-na-a tal-l[i-ka] a-di*  
*’maħrī(igi)-ia’*

Let fools, Gilgameš, take the advice of an idiot fellow, why have you come [here] into my presence?

Humbaba’s attempt to undermine Enkidu has the general validity of a *gnōmē*, and utilizes stereotypical figures (the *lillu* ‘fool’, the *nu’u* ‘idiot’) which recur in wisdom texts and in Tablet X.<sup>58</sup> The insult is however misdirected, since Enkidu will be effective and Humbaba will die – indeed, Humbaba’s insult arguably reinforces Enkidu’s determination, and contributes to a crescendo effect between maxims [5] and [7]. Enlil’s appointee, moreover, is also wrong in connecting the expedition to Enkidu’s initiative. Unlike the audience, he does not know that Enkidu had in fact advised against the idea: this mismatch could draw the audience’s attention to the inversion of roles, and to the question of responsibility. For in the long run, Humbaba is right that Enkidu’s advice is ultimately wrong-headed.

The second of Humbaba’s maxims serves, in its immediate context, his plea for mercy, as he proposes to become Gilgamesh’s servant ([8], SB V 171-2, cf. MB Ug<sub>2</sub> b+10):

*[ma-ti-m]a* <sup>a</sup>GIŠ-*gím-maš mi-i-ti ’ul’ x-tar-ri [b]e-lu*  
*[ár-du? bal-ṭ]u ana be-lí-šú [it-tur?]*

<sup>56</sup> So, perceptively, Al-Rawi, George 2014, 74; see Zisa 2022, 703-5.

<sup>57</sup> On this simile and *Il.* 18.316-22 see Davies 2023.

<sup>58</sup> See below on [13], with fn. 62.

Never, O Gilgamesh, did a dead man *please* his lord,  
but [a *slave*] alive [*brings profit*] to his lord.

It seems likely that these lines offer a foreshadowing of Enkidu's death, especially since Humbaba bitterly stresses Enkidu's status as Gilgamesh's hireling (V 261-2).<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the poem's pervasive emphasis on Enkidu's knowledge turns out to be ironic. Specifically, Enkidu's otherness, his superior knowledge and his appointment as counsellor unveil, on the one hand, the weakness of Gilgamesh, and on the other, the vanity of the two heroes' enterprise against the power of Enlil.

We can start to take stock of the discussion so far. The manipulation of proverbs and *gnōmai* by the poet exploits the differing degrees of knowledge of the characters about the ultimate effects of their actions. In the end, Gilgamesh's *dictum* about the vanity of humankind's agency proves correct, though he was crucially wrong in his attempt at making it a function of successful heroism. The principal instrument of this chain of error is Enkidu, sent down by the gods and taken away by them. He is a good counsellor, and an effective companion throughout, thanks to his divinely derived knowledge. But this is not enough to save him.

It is only after understanding that divine retaliation is upon them, in Tablet VII, that the heroes' gnomic statements turn to the acceptance of the absolute power of the gods, and of humankind's fragility. The irony ends, their maxims become truthful. Reacting to the revelation of Enkidu's imminent death, Gilgamesh is correct in predicting, in yet another occurrence of the gnomic preterit, that suffering will stay with him ([10], SB VII 69-72, 75-6):

[*ib-ri* ...] x x x [...] x *šu-pu-u*  
[*šá u*]z<sup>nī</sup>(geštu)<sup>min?</sup> *ṭè-mu ra-šu-ú šá-na-ti-ma* [...] x x [.]  
[*am-m*]i-ni *ib-ri id-bu-ub lib-ba-ka šá-na-ti*<sup>1</sup> [...] 72  
[*šu-ut-tu*<sub>4</sub> *š*]u-qu-rat-ma *pi-rit-tu*<sub>4</sub> *ma-r*<sup>1</sup> *da-at*<sup>1</sup>  
(...)  
*ana bal-l-ṭi i zi-bu na-sa-sa* 75  
[x *mi-t-t*]<sub>4</sub> *ana bal-ṭi ni-is-sa-ta* <sup>1</sup>*i-zib*

[My friend, ...] (...) [...] manifest,  
[who] has *understanding* and sense, [...] *profanities*?  
Why, my friend, did your heart talk *profanities* [...]?  
[the dream] was precious and the apprehension was much, 72  
(...)

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *GH* 175-7, with George 2003, 468-9.

To the one who survived grieving was left!  
the [deceased] left sorrow to the one who survived”.

75

Enkidu too is right that Enlil will not change his mind regarding his fate ([11], SB VII 86-9, again with gnomic preterits):

[šá i]q-bu-u ul i-tur ul i[p-šit]  
[šá] ul!-ŠI-ed-du-u ul i-tur ul ip-šit  
[ib-ri uš-šu<sup>1</sup>-[ra ...]  
[i<sup>1</sup>-[na l]a šimāti(nam)<sup>meš</sup>-ši-na nišū(ùg)<sup>meš</sup> il-[la<sup>1</sup>-ka

[What he (viz. Enlil)] uttered, he did not [erase] again  
[what] he *proclaimed*, he did not erase again  
My friend, [my destiny is] drawn,  
people do go prematurely to their fate.

And it is up to Enkidu, if we accept George’s interpretation of the lacunose text, finally to articulate the vanity of their heroic enterprise. He echoes – and subverts – the terms of Gilgamesh’s heroic discourse, thus unleashing the second part of the epic ([12], SB VII 266-7, Enkidu to Gilgamesh):<sup>60</sup>

ib-ri šá ina tāḥ[āzi(mè) im-qu-tú ...]  
[a<sup>1</sup>-na-ku ina t[āḥāzi(mè)?.....]

My friend, one who [falls] in combat [makes his name]  
But I, [I do not fall] in [combat, and shall not make my name.]

## 5 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Wisdom of Uta-napishti

The contexts of the two last *gnōmai* to be considered here, both heard by Gilgamesh in Uta-napishti’s voice, have been widely seen as conceptual cores of the epic. The first passage comes at the end of Uta-napishti’s sapiential speech in SB X 266-322, and centres on the inevitable, unfathomable and definitive nature of death ([13], X 312-22):

im-ma-ti-ma nāru(id) iš-šá-a mīla(illu) ub-lu  
ku-li-li iq-qé-lep-pa-a ina nāri(id)  
pa-nu-šá i-na-aṭ-ṭa-lu pa-an <sup>d</sup>Šamši(utu)<sup>š</sup>  
[ul<sup>1</sup>-tu ul-la-nu-um-ma ul i-ba-áš-ši mim-ma  
šal-lu ù mi-tu<sub>4</sub> ki-i pī(ka) a-ḥa-meš-ma

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* 229/237 // SB XII 62, and see George 2003, 484.

šá mu-ti ul iṣ-ṣi-ru ṣa-lam-šú  
lullâ(lú.u<sub>18</sub>.lu)<sup>a</sup> mītu(lú.ug<sub>7</sub>) ul ik-ru-ba<sup>ka-ra-bi</sup> ina māti(kur) (thus mss. bf)  
<sup>d</sup>a-nun-na-ki ilū(dingir)<sup>meš</sup> rabûtu(gal)<sup>meš</sup> paḥ-ru  
<sup>d</sup>ma-am-me-tu<sub>4</sub> ba-na-at šim-ti itti(ki)-šú-nu ši-ma-tú i-ši[m-[ma]]<sup>320</sup>  
iṣ-tak-nu mu-ta u ba-la-ṭa  
šá mu-ti ul ud-du-ú ūmī(u<sub>4</sub>)<sup>meš</sup>-šú

At some time the river rose, it brought the flood,  
the mayfly was floating on the river:  
its face was gazing at the face of the Sun,  
then, all at once, nothing was there. 315  
The captive and the dead, how alike they are!  
They cannot draw a picture of death.  
The dead do not greet man in the land.  
The Anunnakī, the great gods, were assembled,  
Mammītu, creatress of destiny, decreed a destiny with them: 320  
death and life they did establish,  
the days of death they did not reveal.

This passage closes the Flood hero's reflections on the transience of humankind's efforts (X 301-18). What comes before is severely fragmentary, but it appears that the train of thought proceeds from a reproachful commiseration for Gilgamesh's present condition (X 267-79), to a description of celestial movements (280-5, perhaps reflecting humankind's alternating circumstances) and a mention of the provisions for the gods, for which Gilgamesh was traditionally famous (286-94, see above § 3).<sup>61</sup>

We must ask whether our *gnōmai* (X 316-18) connect Uta-napishti's discourse to the early part of the epic. Uta-napishti makes no explicit reference to what happened in the poem's first half. Yet his commiseration for Gilgamesh at least makes clear that the king, who is part human and part divine (X 267-9), was not supposed to have fallen so low. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, had made clear that the killing of Humbaba preceded Enkidu's death (X 230). Arguably, the implication is that the inevitability of death and human miseries are not to be countered - as per Gilgamesh's earlier perspective - through excessive, reckless and impious heroic behavior. An important sign of this connection may lie in the enigmatic exordium of Uta-napishti's speech, which concerns a stereotypical figure in Babylonian wisdom discourse, 'the fool' (*lillu*) (X 268-77):

<sup>61</sup> On Uta-napishti's speech see George 2003, 504-8; Haubold 2013, 46-51; Helle 2017; Maul 2020, 36-7, 182-3; Nurullin 2020; Sibbing-Plantholt 2020, 336 fn. 7.





gave resulting in Humbaba’s death – but Uta-napishti’s. The final position of the set of *gnōmai* [13] serves Uta-napishti’s concluding emphasis on human transience. Gilgamesh, to be sure, had not been unaware of that condition. It was precisely the fragility of human life and achievements that prompted him to seek heroic glory ([2]). But his present condition shows the inadequacy of that perspective, whose consequences proved to be excessive, reckless, even impious heroic behavior. Though the fragmentary text precludes certainty, Uta-napishti’s wisdom does not seem to connect human limits to a search for personal glory. Rather, it directs awareness of death’s inevitability towards the careful performance of the ritual duties of kingship (X 286-93), which crucially include accepting sound advice (X 270-7).<sup>63</sup>

Moving on to the paradigmatic story of the Flood in Tablet XI, it is significant that it centres on precisely these two themes – religious awareness of one’s limits, and acceptance of advice. Uta-napishti achieved the perpetuation of human civilisation by behaving piously towards his god Ea, whose difficult advice he was able to accept and execute.<sup>64</sup> While this is not the place to discuss the theology of the Flood story,<sup>65</sup> we must note that the last *gnōmē* [14], spoken among the gods, illustrates how Uta-napishti’s principles inform the divine world too. Ea, the counsellor god, reproaches the ruler Enlil for the disproportionate destruction caused by the Flood, saying that Enlil ‘lacked counsel’ (*lā tamtalik*). The implication is that even the divine ruler (like Gilgamesh) must accept advice, and avoid excessive behavior [14] (SB XI 181-7):

*é-a pa-a-šú īpuš(du)-ma iqabbi(du<sub>11</sub>-ga)  
izakkar(mu)<sup>dr</sup> ana qu-ra-di <sup>en</sup>-[líl]  
at-ta apkal(abgal) ilī(dingir)<sup>meš</sup> qu-ra-du  
ki-i ki-i la tam-ta-lik-ma a-bu-bu taš-k[un]  
be-el ár-ni e-mid ħi-ṭa-a-šú 185  
be-el gíl-la-ti e-mid gíl-lat-[su]  
ru-um-me a-a ib-ba-ti-iq šu-du-ud a-a i[r-mu]*

Ea opened his mouth to speak,  
saying to the hero Enlil:  
“You, the sage of the gods, the hero,  
how could you lack counsel and cause the deluge?  
On him who commits a sin, inflict his crime! 185  
on him who does wrong, inflict [his] wrong-doing!  
Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]

<sup>63</sup> This interpretation builds on George 2003, 504-8.

<sup>64</sup> Ramifications and complications of Ea’s advice: Worthington 2019.

<sup>65</sup> I have tried to do so in Ballesteros forthcoming, ch. 7 § 2.4-5 and ch. 9.

In this way, the *gnōmai* uttered by Uta-napishti crystallize the same wisdom of moderation which underlay the ironic narrative development of the first part of the epic, which centred on Enkidu, his ambiguous position as wise adviser and his ultimate failure and death.

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The text gives another indication of how Uta-napishti's wisdom coheres with the narrative of the Humbaba expedition, helping us perceive the wisdom content of the advice that rulers need. This wisdom content concerns the collaborative values qualifying the king's action as worthy, and emerges from a textual thread revolving around the symbolism of water as a metaphor of transience.

Uta-napishti, as noted, preserves humankind by relying on his god and leading his citizens to build the ark to escape the Flood. That is a remarkable collective and collaborative effort which is given pride of place in his tale (XI 48-75). The ark, in turn, escapes the watery destruction by finding, at long length, an anchoring on Mt Nimush (*ana šadî nimuš itemid eleppu* XI 142). On that mountain, gods and humans will convene for the sacrifice and Uta-napishti will be made immortal. The importance of this mooring, stressed by a fourfold repetition in lines XI 143-6, lies in the fact that it counteracts, resists the destructive power of water. The resonance of water as a symbol of transience and death has been amply developed in the epic, notably in Uta-napishti's famous mayfly metaphor (X 312-15, quoted above, where the Flood is also evoked).<sup>66</sup> Crucially, the motif of anchoring (or proper mooring) returns in Ea's *gnōmē* addressed to Enlil in the divine assembly: "Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]" (XI 187 [14]). The point is that a ruler must exercise restraint in governing a vessel's course in perilous waters - if the rope is pulled too tightly, it may break; if it is kept too loose, the ship will float uncontrollably. It does not seem to have been recognized that the imagery of that *dictum*, already attested in the OB period (cf. *Atr.* OB III vi 24), can be connected to Gilgamesh and Enkidu's confrontation with Humbaba. We have seen that in saying [5] Enkidu calls for a joint effort with the image of the three-ply rope, which in turn goes back to the Sumerian *GH* A. The older version makes the connection with vessels, water and death explicit in a passage partially quoted above, which is now worth reading more fully (*GH* A 106-15):<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Watery destruction in Old Babylonian literary imagery: Chen 2013. Mayfly metaphor: George 2012, 232-41; Helle 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Transl. George 2020; for the text see Edzard 1991, 202-4, cf. Civil 2003, 81-2.

Set to, O Enkidu, two men together will not die: a raft of reed cannot sink, no man can cut (ku<sub>5</sub>) a three-ply rope (eše<sub>2</sub> 3 tab-ba), a flood cannot sweep a man down from a wall, fire in a reed hut cannot be extinguished! You join with me, I will join with you, what can anyone do to us then? After it sank, after it sank, after the boat from Magan sank, a raft of reed was the boat that saved lives, it did not sink! Set to, let us go to him, let us set eyes on him.

Parallels clarify that the Sumerian word for ‘rope’ at *GH* A 107 (eše<sub>2</sub>) is specifically a ‘towing rope’ (*Šulgi R* 34, *InEb* 85, cf. *EnlNinl* 42).<sup>68</sup> It seems significant that *batāqu* ‘snap’, the verb used at [14] (SB XI 187) is the standard Akkadian equivalent of the Sumerian verb ku<sub>5</sub> ‘cut’ used at *GH* 107.<sup>69</sup> The traditional (proverbial?) nature of the imagery seems confirmed by a parallel in a curse at *Maqlu* III 133: “let its (ship’s) mooring rope be cut”.<sup>70</sup> Importantly, the strong metaphorical connection between water, death and the Humbaba adventure emerges from two further intra-textual links. First, Gilgamesh’ claim that thanks to the rope “water cannot wash someone away from a wall!” (*GH* A 109) refers back to the vision that prompted his heroic quest in the first place (“I raised my head on the rampart, my gaze fell on a corpse drifting down the river” *GH* A 25-6, quoted above on [2] – walls as safety, water as death). And second, the heroes’ encounter with Humbaba in SB *Gilg.* contains several references to the Flood, the most explicit being at [7], where Enkidu refers to their enterprise as “to send the Deluge” (SB V 135).<sup>71</sup> This complex network of resonances, I suggest, contributes to linking the two parts of the SB epic, insofar as they illustrate the *fil rouge* that connects (a) Gilgamesh’s heroism (straightforward in *GH*, mis-guided in SB *Gilg.*), (b) the theme of transience associated with water and (c) the collaborative values that are central to success, whether it be it mis-directed and impious (as in the tragic Humbaba adventure in SB *Gilg.*) or pious and positive (as in the Flood story).

Finally, it is significant that the narrative pattern according to which failure to follow wise advice leads to error should recur in Tablet XI. Just as Enkidu did not heed Shamhat’s advice (above [1]), and just as Gilgamesh did not listen to Enkidu and the city-elders (above [2], [3], [4]), so too Gilgamesh fails to accept Uta-napishti’s admonition

68 GSF 363 s.v. “éše”.

69 CAD B 165.

70 Quoted by CAD B 165.

71 Gilgamesh’s exhortation to Enkidu to “forget death and [seek] life!” (*mūta miši-ma balāta* [še’i?]) SB V 47 [4]) reminds one of the exordium of Ea’s speech to Uta-napishti, where the Flood is announced (11.25-6: *muššir mešrāmma še’i napšāti* | [m]akkūra zērma napišta *bullit* ‘Abandon riches and seek survival! | Spurn property and save life!’). The nexus is reinforced by MB Emar<sub>1</sub> 5’b-6’a = SB VI 131, cf. XI 35.

about the inevitability of death. Accordingly, the king's attempt to bring home the plant of rejuvenation – following the suggestion of Uta-napishti's wife – does not succeed (SB XI 281-318). The epic concludes with the king admiring Uruk's mighty walls, his own royal work, repeating lines found in the proem (SB I 18-23 ≈ XI 323-8). Scholars have interpreted the walls as a symbol of the correct way for a king to obtain (figurative) immortality, through civic and religious deeds.<sup>72</sup> If so, then Gilgamesh did bring home positive advice concerning collaborative values and the duties of kingship. But the wisdom of Uta-napishti cannot cancel the pain of fragility and mortality, because that pain constitutes the foundation of his wisdom.

## 6 Conclusion

The gnomic poetics of *Gilgamesh* contribute to its wisdom of moderation, one which aligns the poem to the strand of Babylonian literary discourse that scholars classify as 'wisdom literature'.<sup>73</sup> In particular, the emphasis on the limitations of the royal figure is a central aspect the SB poem shares with several compositions of a non-narrative character.<sup>74</sup> It is worth adding that much Babylonian narrative poetry, too, is concerned with the dialectic between the potential failure of rulers and wise, moderating advice. A prominent theme here is the dialectic between the wisdom god Ea and divine rulers and warriors, particularly Enlil, Ninurta and Marduk.<sup>75</sup>

More specifically, and looking at poetic technique, our central conclusion is the recognition of the narrative irony developed through the wisdom sayings, especially before Enkidu's death. At stake is the definition of wisdom in a religious dimension, since the pattern of unheeded advice and error in the poem consistently involves a misjudgement of divine plans. Enkidu was created by the gods to confront Gilgamesh, but not to defeat him. Gilgamesh egregiously disregards the possibility of Enlil's retaliation, and, until the end, does not accept that the gods have placed strict limits on human lifespan. Wisdom is then defined as an acceptance of one's limits as set by the gods, including ignorance of the future and of the moment of death ([13] X 316-22, cf. [11] VII 86-9). This general discourse is enacted dramatically, and its lifeblood runs in the evolving characterisation of the heroes. The characters experience pain and death because of

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<sup>72</sup> E.g. Tigay 1982, 140-9; Maul 2008; George 2012; Clarke 2019, 97-100.

<sup>73</sup> *Gilgamesh* and wisdom literature: George 2007c, also Michalowski 1999; Ballesteros forthcoming, chap. 6 §§ 3-4.

<sup>74</sup> Finn 2017; Fink 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Ballesteros forthcoming, chs 8-11; compare also Ishum and Erra in the *Epic of Erra*.

their mistakes, and audiences are made to partake in that experience. Narrative irony, I have argued, is key to this process, helping us better to understand Enkidu and Gilgamesh, and why the text has struck readers as ‘an epic that undermines itself’,<sup>76</sup> that is to say, one that foregrounds human fragility.

The thread of *gnōmai* casts the king’s error and the tragedy of Enkidu into sombre light. Enkidu is a figure of wisdom, but his wisdom is limited and ambivalent, and leads to suffering and death. His wisdom makes him foresee the problematic nature of the expedition. But once appointed as counsellor, Enkidu complies with his duty and so cannot but become the key agent in Humbaba’s killing. For this, he is punished by the same gods who created him to flank Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, in turn, appears to be placed at a level of knowledge and wisdom far below Enkidu’s. The pain of Enkidu’s death comes for him with all the violence of the unexpected. The depth of the king’s delusion, then, becomes a function of his search for the wisdom of immortality. Yet, what he finds at the end of his quest is the very wisdom of moderation that was implicit in Enkidu’s tragedy, and to which Uta-napishti gives, for the king and the audience, a prototypical, primeval sanction. Placed at the multi-dimensional interface between what the external and internal audiences know, as well as the characters’ limited awareness of the future, the *gnōmai* illuminate, and are illuminated by, the full trajectory of the poem’s narrative arch.

## 7 Coda: Homeric Vistas

Let us quickly return to Hellenic poetry, especially the *Iliad*. Rather than a systematic comparison, I offer an outline of parallels which seem to reflect an international wisdom discourse visible well before Alexander’s conquests.<sup>77</sup> They confirm the legitimacy of the comparative approach and may stimulate future research.

We may begin with the well-intentioned wisdom by a senior figure that is ultimately conducive to disaster. The city-elders’ advice to Enkidu that he should wisely guide Gilgamesh can be compared to old Nestor’s advice to Patroclus at *Iliad* 11.762-803. Nestor suggests that

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<sup>76</sup> Machinist 2020, 333.

<sup>77</sup> On current thinking about the historical relation between Homer and *Gilgamesh* see above § 1. On cross-cultural ‘wisdom discourse’ in the Near East and East Mediterranean see De Martin, Furlan forthcoming. For a recent discussion and a Hellenistic case-study see Cohen 2021; Johnston 2019 compares *Ludlul* and Solon fr. 13 West; on *Ahiqar*, an Aramaic composition with a Babylonian setting and background, attested first in late-fifth century BCE Egypt and ultimately influencing Greek wisdom literature (particularly the *Life of Aesop*) see Konstantakos 2008-13.

Patroclus should enter the fight in Achilles' stead if the latter refuses to return. The senior figures' advice is enacted after both themselves (elders/Nestor) and the counsellor (Enkidu/Patroclus) try to dissuade the protagonist, in vain.<sup>78</sup> Both decisions ultimately lead to the helper's death, which is the key denouement of the plot.

Second, the ironic use of *gnōmai*: we repeatedly saw that sayings may be right or wrong in the circumstances in which they are uttered, but prove to be the opposite in hindsight. In the *Iliad*, one example of this phenomenon concerns Hector, whose error flanks that of Achilles in shaping the plot. At *Il.* 12.243 Hector uses a *gnōmē* which, as we learn from Aristotle (*Rh.* 1395a13), was proverbial:

εἷς οἰωνὸς ἄριστος ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ πάτρης

One bird-omen is best, to fight for one's country

Hector pronounces it to dismiss the counsel of the seer and counsellor Polydamas, who suggests military caution. Hector is right in the immediate circumstances, but his death will come about after he misinterprets Zeus' intentions at *Il.* 18.293-5, disregarding Polydamas' advice. This is pivotal in the plot of the *Iliad*, insofar as Zeus' help to Hector and the Trojans represents the central action-content of the poem. Crucially - and tragically - Hector does not realize that divine favor is bound to be limited for him and his city.<sup>79</sup>

Third, and more broadly, both the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* revolve around the 'wisdom of alternation', as defined by the Hellenist Douglas Cairns.<sup>80</sup> This refers to the idea that no human life is free of suffering. The best one can expect is a mixture of good and bad fortune.<sup>81</sup> One complicating component of this idea are the mistakes that humans make due to limited knowledge or hubris, and, accordingly, how human error should be judged. The gods will inevitably allot a portion of evil to humans, but how far can we prevent our actions from generating 'further' pain?<sup>82</sup> How far are humans able to 'know' what to do? In this perspective, the question of access to (divine) knowledge and authority feeds into the ironic structure of the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*. The fact that Achilles and Gilgamesh are both part-divine and enjoy privileged access to the gods through their immortal mothers (Thetis and

<sup>78</sup> Nestor tries to dissuade Achilles from clashing with Agamemnon at *Il.* 1.277-81; he proposes the vain embassy of Book 9 (*Il.* 9.103, 163-72).

<sup>79</sup> On the 'tragedy of Hector' see above fn. 39.

<sup>80</sup> Cairns 2014, with comparative perspectives, including *Gilgamesh*; now Johnston forthcoming, ch. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Esp. Hom. *Il.* 24.522-51.

<sup>82</sup> Hom. *Od.* 1.32-43.

Ninsun) makes their errors all the more sensational. It also makes their ignorance, which is predicated on their humanity, all the more painful.

We may consider another parallel involving advice by senior figures. Gilgamesh and Achilles are both requested to desist from a reckless course of action. The Homeric passage introduces a piece of counsel by Odysseus, the wisest Greek hero, who correctly suggests that leading a tired army to fight would be injudicious.<sup>83</sup>

ἐγὼ δέ κε σεῖο νοήματί γε προβαλοίμην  
πολλόν, ἐπεὶ πρότερος γενόμεν καὶ πλείονα οἶδα

but in counsel I would surpass you  
by far, for I am the elder-born and understand the more

This invites comparison to the elders' words to Gilgamesh, on not embarking on the Humbaba expedition (SB II 289-90):

[š]e-eh-re-e-ti ᵀGIŠ-gím-maš libba(šà)-ka na-ši-ka  
ᵀu' mim-ma šá ta-ta-mu-ú ul ti-i-de

You are young, Gilgamesh, carried away by enthusiasm,  
and the thing that you talk of you do not understand.

In both cases older age is a mark of wisdom, and in both cases it serves to restrain a young warrior's incautious excess. In wider perspective, what seems interesting is that, in fact, both Gilgamesh and Achilles have - thanks to their immortal mothers - a much closer access to divinely derived knowledge than the older people who counsel them. And yet, this does not prevent error and sorrow from befalling them. This mismatch is critical, inasmuch as it enhances the dramatic impact of the heroes' reversal of fortune - the greater the potential for divinely derived knowledge, the greater the impact of failure to control events.

Ultimately, *gnōmai* and proverbs contribute to the ironic structure of the plots, and to the ambiguous paths of wisdom. Gnostic wisdom is not to be taken at face value; it is not free-standing. In Homer as in the Gilgamesh tradition, it serves sophisticated plots that ultimately advertize humankind's ignorance, but also its efforts.

83 Hom. *Il.* 19.218-19. Cf. esp. *Il.* 9.438-43, 11.786-9.

## Abbreviations

- CAD = Gelb, I. et al. (1956-2011). *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. Chicago.  
CGL = Diggle, J. et al. (2021). *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*. Cambridge.  
EDG = Beekes, R. (2010). *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. With the assistance of L. van Beek. Leiden.  
GEW = Frisk, von H. (1954-72). *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg.  
GSF = Attinger, P. (2021). *Glossaire sumérien-français: principalement des textes littéraires paléobabyloniens*. Wiesbaden.  
LSJ = Liddell, H.S.; Scott, R.; Jones, H.G. (1940). *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th edition. Oxford.

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# Law, Morality, and Subversion in Sumerian Prose Miniatures

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**Abstract** This paper investigates the legal framework and transmission history of two Sumerian prose miniatures from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1600 BCE), which were hitherto considered as folktales and whose relation to wisdom literature remained controversial. It will be argued that their affinity with academic legal discourse and moralising wisdom compositions, as well as their firm embeddedness in scribal milieu, suggests that they are better understood as satirical morality tales bridging literary genres at the intersection of law and morality. Since both stories respond to incidental or conceptual ‘gaps’ in royal law collections, special attention will be devoted to analysing their subversive potential.

**Keywords** Folktale. Law. Morality tale. Parody. Royal legislation. Satire. Scholarly text compilation. Scribal education. Sumerian. Wisdom literature.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: The Challenges and Implications of Classifying Sumerian Wisdom Texts. – 2 Two Sumerian Prose Miniatures at the Intersection of Law and Morality. – 2.1 Three Ox-Drivers from Adab. – 2.2 Old Man and Young Girl. – 2.3 Summary and Discussion. – 3 The Scribal Context. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction: The Challenges and Implications of Classifying Sumerian Wisdom Texts

Bendt Alster’s monumental monograph *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (2005) remains the prime source for Sumerian wisdom literature, containing the most comprehensive collection of relevant texts to date. Recent years, however, have witnessed new editions and interpretations of individual texts and a critical assessment of Alster’s approach towards defining ‘wisdom’ and Sumerian ‘wisdom literature’

more generally.<sup>1</sup> In the present paper, I will pursue an indirect approach to address the question of what wisdom literature can be by focusing on a small group of texts, which Alster included in his corpus but whose classification as wisdom compositions, he felt, required justification.<sup>2</sup> Paradigmatic prose miniatures featuring clichéd human protagonists are presented under two different headings, ‘fables’ and ‘folktales’.<sup>3</sup> Under ‘fables’, Alster presented three “so-called morality tales”:<sup>4</sup> *The Adulterer*, *The Lazy Slave Girl* and *The Fowler and his Wife*,<sup>5</sup> although, as Alster himself admitted, the description of the adulterer reads more like a riddle,<sup>6</sup> the second text is a direct warning addressed to a lazy slave girl cautioning her to work, and in the third story a fowler and his wife discuss their sex life in bird, boat, and swamp metaphors, with no moral lesson apparent.<sup>7</sup> Two longer narratives, *The Three Ox-Drivers from Adab (3ODA)* and *The Old Man and the Young Girl (OMYG)*, are designated as ‘folktales’, although throughout the book, Alster wavered on the classification.<sup>8</sup>

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**1** For new editions of individual texts included in Alster 2005, see the bibliographical notes in Attinger 2021; 2023, 19-57. Additionally: Lämmerhirt 2020; Matuszak 2022; Viano 2022a-d. On ‘critical wisdom’, see recently Viano 2023 with further literature.

**2** Alster 2005, 25, 29 f.

**3** Alster (2005, 342 f.) defines (Sumerian) fables as stories in which “animals act and speak as humans”, but avoids delving deeper into problems concerning their function and definition by focusing his attention on proving that they were not a Greek invention. Significantly for the purview of the present paper, he acknowledges that written versions may have been adapted or invented by scribes, despite their assumed popular origin. Folktales are understood as stories in which a “problem solver” from the lower strata of society provides “proverbial wisdom” and thus “prevails over his superiors because he is cleverer than they” (23). This definition is contradicted elsewhere in the book, cf. the summary below.

**4** Alster 2005, 25.

**5** Alster 2005, 342-72.

**6** Alster 2005, 368.

**7** Alster 2005, 29; cf. also Alster 2008, 56 fn. 33. The point of the little story abounding in word, sound, and sign play seems to be a display of scribal virtuosity. Apart from the ambiguity of Sumerian ‘a’ meaning both ‘water’ and ‘sperm’, as well as the bird, boat, and swamp metaphors already discussed by Alster (1992, 193-5), it appears particularly poignant that the ‘sparrow’ (buru<sub>4</sub> (ŠIR.BUR)<sup>mušen</sup>), which the fowler’s wife accuses her husband of having ‘caught’ and thereby incapacitated with a ‘net’ (l. 6), is spelled with the same sign as the Sumerian word for testicle (šeri(ŠIR)). To me, the ambiguity created by the clever employ of the cuneiform writing system suggests that the story was a scribal invention.

**8** Alster 2005, 373-90. *3ODA* is edited in Alster 2005, 373-83; an eclectic Sumerian text and English translation can also be found on <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.5.6.5#>. It has been assigned the composite number Q000785. For *OMYG*, see now Matuszak 2022; the text can be found on ORACC and CDLI as Q002335. For additional secondary literature, see Attinger 2023, 49, 55.

The idea that *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* is a folktale goes back to Edmund Gordon's seminal article "A New Look at the Wisdom of Sumer and Akkad" and has since been almost unequivocally accepted.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Alster, given his professed interest in folklore,<sup>10</sup> could not quite abandon the thought that Sumerian folktales must have existed, because dropping the label 'folk-tale' would result in the genre – and with it, the world's oldest specimen – no longer being attested.<sup>11</sup> However, following a study by Edward Lipiński, which detailed the legal and parodistic aspects of *Three Ox Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl*,<sup>12</sup> Alster had to concede that the two stories do not actually operate like folktales and instead bear the marks of "innovative" "scribal wit" characteristic of "wisdom circles".<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging that folktales are not normally considered wisdom literature,<sup>14</sup> he even contemplated the label 'anti-folktale'.<sup>15</sup> Because of their satirical elements, he resolved to assign the two tales to his category of 'critical' wisdom versus the 'traditional' or 'conservative' wisdom found in other, mainly instructional, texts.<sup>16</sup> While this assessment of *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl* directly contradicts the chapter title advertising them as folktales, it justifies their inclusion in his oeuvre on Sumerian wisdom literature. Evidently, Alster wanted them to be both.

It is likely that some of the contradictions in Alster's 2005 *magnum opus* are the result of tensions between ideas he had formulated in the 1970s and his response to critique and new approaches developed

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**9** Gordon 1960, 122, 124. Cf. e.g. Lipiński (1986, 137), who switches from "literary transpositions of folk-tales" to simply "folk-tales" and Cavigneaux (1987, 51), who describes 3ODA as an "histoire au parfum folklorique assez rare dans la littérature sumérienne". Only Foster (1974, 72 fn. 8) saw 3ODA – in my view correctly – as "a parody on a legal case, or merely a *story with a scribal legal touch* at the end" (italics added).

**10** Cf. particularly his early books, Alster 1974; 1975.

**11** Cf. his statement in Alster (1975, 94), announcing the discovery of the oldest attestation of an old man marrying a young girl, a common motif attested throughout world literature: "[O]ne single example would be enough to prove that the genre was well known, [since] a single folktale is inconceivable". The preoccupation with identifying the world's oldest specimen of X – understandably – characterized much of pioneering cuneiform scholarship, cf. e.g. Kramer's iconic *From the Tablets of Sumer: 25 Firsts of Man's Recorded History* (1956).

**12** Lipiński 1986. Legal aspects of 3ODA had already been noted by van Dijk (1953, 12) and Foster (1974, 72 fn. 8).

**13** Alster 2005, 29, 377; 2008, 56.

**14** Alster 2005, 23; 2008, 53 fn. 17.

**15** Alster 2005, 377.

**16** Alster 2005, 25 *et passim*; 2008, 56-61. The dichotomy of conservative vs critical wisdom was recently questioned by Viano 2023. The question of how critical 3ODA and OMYG really are will be revisited in § 2.3.

in the intervening decades. But the problem of generic classifications persists. Although the discussion has long been recognized as largely extraneous to the Sumerio-Babylonian tradition, the question of – or quest for – genre continues to shape modern readers’ expectations and interpretations. Alster’s reconstruction of the then fragmentary text *Old Man and Young Girl* is a case in point: to make sense of a story whose beginning and end were missing, but whose extant parts reminded him of a “crucial motif” “well attested in world literature”,<sup>17</sup> he followed the ‘Morphology of the Folk Tale’ developed by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp.<sup>18</sup> What seemed promising turned out to be misleading: the discovery of a manuscript preserving the hitherto missing parts revealed that the plot was quite unlike Alster had imagined: it did not follow Propp’s template, the roles of individual protagonists turned out to be reversed, and the story’s resemblance to other alleged folktales remained superficial at best.<sup>19</sup> Rather, the revised text reconstruction (cf. § 2.2) highlights the story’s parallels with *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, whose legal and parodistic ‘anti-folktale’ aspects had already been established.

I therefore aim to demonstrate that much more compelling results are yielded by reading these texts not through the lens of the folklorist trying to identify universal patterns, motifs, and characters, but by paying close attention to the stories’ embeddedness in specifically Old Babylonian (2000-1600 BCE) academic legal and moralising discourse. In order to avoid premature conclusions, I will use the descriptive terms ‘(short) story’ or ‘prose miniature’, which are also borne out by summary notes on Old Babylonian manuscripts (cf. § 3).

Accordingly, § 2 will outline the two prose miniatures’ pervasive legal framework and discuss how they communicate with law collections and model court cases, as well as instructional and moralising texts popular in Old Babylonian scribal circles. I will argue that both stories present unusual legal problems that are not accounted for in royal law collections, which explains why the king is called upon as supreme judge – but initially turns out to be incapable of solving them. The stories hence contain subversive potential, but this is immediately muted by their moralising finish, making them classic examples of ‘subversion and containment’ strategies.<sup>20</sup> In § 3, I will complement this strand of investigation by studying the stories’ transmission history, paying special attention to scribal practices such as rigorous line count and compilation. The affinity of both texts

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<sup>17</sup> Alster 1975, 94; 2005, 385.

<sup>18</sup> Original publication: Propp 1968.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the more detailed discussion by Matuszak 2022.

<sup>20</sup> The concept was developed by Greenblatt (1988) and has since been used widely in historical and literary studies. I owe the reference to Sophus Helle.



with academic legal discourse as well as moralising wisdom compositions and their firm embeddedness in scribal milieu leads to the conclusion that they are better understood as satirical morality tales at the intersection of law and morality (§ 4).

## 2 Two Sumerian Prose Miniatures at the Intersection of Law and Morality

*Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl* seem to form a pair: they share the general structure, key characters and motifs, and even entire phrases. Both stories feature nameless, paradigmatic representatives of different social groups determined by age, gender, profession, and other status indicators. Both stories are satirical, because they focus on exposing the flaws associated with these types in a humorous, entertaining, and instructive way: as we will see, business partners are uncooperative, old men lecherous, and young girls treacherous. The implicit moral lesson is hence not to behave like these fools, for every one of them will get punished as befits them. But that is not all: the stories derive their particular ingenuity from the fact that within the context of a cautionary tale, they construct a ludicrous legal problem, which cannot be solved by 'the law.' They thus illustrate the limits of legal discourse, and law collections in particular – which bears considerable subversive potential, since according to royal ideology, laws were formulated by the king at the behest of the gods.

To be clear, in the following discussion I do not wish to suggest that Sumerian and Babylonian royal law collections had normative status. Particularly with respect to the most advanced and comprehensive example, the *Laws of Hammurapi*, it has long been demonstrated that it is an immensely complex monument to royal patronage of law, comprising elements of legal systematisation, suggestions for an ideal society, royal propaganda, scholastic literature, and more – but that it was neither used as a day-to-day legal reference work nor necessarily enforced.<sup>21</sup> It also needs to be emphasized that there is no indication that these casuistic compilations were ever intended to be complete, or all-encompassing. For understanding the two fictitious stories discussed in the following, however, it seems useful to emphasize the fact that it was Old Babylonian (apprentice) scribes who – among other things – copied public stela inscriptions containing the promulgations of kings from Ur-Namma (2110-93 BCE) to Hammurapi (1792-50

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. most recently Barmash 2020 with an overview of previous theories (6-11) and a chapter devoted to the relation between the *Laws of Hammurapi* and legal practice (231-50).

BCE) in excerpts or their entirety.<sup>22</sup> This made them the premier preservers and connoisseurs of this textual genre; and ‘royal legislation’ or other kinds of legal discourse treated as ‘a text’ could hence be subjected to commentary, parody, and other scribal practices.<sup>23</sup> The copying of law collections likely also made the scribes susceptible to noticing apparent ‘gaps’, or grey zones of semi-legal human interaction that the casuistic compilations did not cover, either incidentally or conceptually. As I hope to show, *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl* engage in thought experiments informed by contemporaneous legal discourse, and hence indirectly bear witness to scribal endeavours at the intersection of legal thought and literature. While the stories never refer to any legal corpora directly, knowledge of legal discourse as it was at least sometimes studied during scribal education informed their content, and a full appreciation of the stories’ originality was only possible for those who were familiar with Mesopotamian legal lore.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.1 *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*

In the first story, three carters hailing from the city of Adab are on a mission. One man has an ox (or a bull? – the Sumerian word is conveniently ambiguous), the other a cow, and the third man a wagon. What may sound like a perfectly innocuous setup to modern readers not too familiar with the business of driving carts would have probably aroused the first round of laughter among ancient Babylonians.

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**22** Cf. e.g. Roth (1997, 2) and the information about the sources for every law collection up to the *Laws of Hammurapi* in the same volume. New copies of law collections kept being identified and published.

**23** Roth 2000; cf. also Barmash 2020, 271-84 with respect to later periods.

**24** The nature and extent of advanced legal training is debated. While numerous model contracts from the intermediate phase of scribal education survive, the relative paucity of preserved exercise tablets containing model court cases, copies of law collections, and stories like *3ODA* and *OMYG*, suggests that they were not an essential component of the scribal curriculum. However, as recently summarized by Milstein (2021, 37-8, 50), those texts that were seemingly used in legal training often exhibit parallels with laws, although they never directly quote them. The same, I might add, applies to the trial in *Two Women B*; cf. the discussion in Matuszak 2021, 121-33, 138. Despite their circulation in academic contexts, they are hence not completely divorced from contemporaneous legal practice. In this regard, it is not uninformative to compare the analysis of Steinberg (2023), who argues that legal doctrine is not the *point* of the stories collected in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and that Boccaccio’s legal training should not be overestimated as a source of literary inspiration, but that his stories were informed by a legal culture which his readers would have recognized and appreciated. Unlike in fourteenth-century Italy, however, where thanks to Boccaccio vernacular literature was elevated to classical status, the reach of our Sumerian stories would have been restricted to the most educated of scribes, who had learned Sumerian as a dead foreign language as part of their multi-tiered education.

Nobody in their right mind, least of all professional carters, would ever set out on a business trip like this. What is the cow doing here – she is not commonly used as a draught animal? Given the matching pair of male and female bovines, one wonders, has the bull really been castrated? And finally, why is it important to introduce the three fools as citizens of Adab, home of the mother goddess and her entourage?

With these questions raised but not answered, the story continues. And indeed, the suspicion that their mission was doomed right from the start is soon confirmed, for apparently the three colleagues were also inexperienced enough to forget to bring provisions and become plagued with thirst. However, every one of them refuses to go and fetch water, because the owner of the ox/bull fears that in his absence his ox/bull may be devoured by a lion, the owner of the cow worries that if he leaves her, his cow may wander off into the desert, and the owner of the wagon is anxious that his cargo may get stolen. So, foolish as they are, they decide to go together and leave all their prized possessions behind. The minute they are gone, fantastic events happen in rapid succession: the ox/bull apparently impregnates the cow, the cow immediately gives birth to a calf, and the calf eats or otherwise destroys the cargo.<sup>25</sup> Hence our initial concerns were justified: either a castrated draught ox managed to impregnate a cow, making the conception of the incredibly fast-growing calf even more miraculous, or the three carters set out with a pair of animals completely unfit for purpose: a cow and, crazier still, a horny bull, whom one would have a very hard time persuading to pull a cart. While the ambiguity of Sumerian *gud* “ox/bull” (l. 5 *et passim*) is thus fully exploited for storytelling purposes, the unusually fast gestation and growth of the calf is signalled through a conspicuously precise choice of words (l. 14): the embryo (*a-sila<sub>3</sub>-ḡar-ra*) is pressed out (*sur-sur*)

**25** While the summary offered above seems to be confirmed by the rest of the plot, *3ODA* 14 (*gud eše<sub>2</sub><sup>7</sup> ba-a-la<sub>2</sub>-e ab/um<sup>2</sup>-la<sub>2</sub> ab<sub>2</sub> a-sila<sub>3</sub>-ḡar-ra-bi um<sup>2</sup>-sur-sur-ru amar<sup>965</sup>mar-ra KA bi<sub>2</sub>-in-ḡU*, quoted after MS A; P345424), which contains four sentences in one line, is riddled with unusual word choices, a detailed discussion of which (also *vis-à-vis* the metaphors in *OMYG*) transcends the scope of this paper. 1) The impregnation of the cow is apparently expressed by *la<sub>2</sub>* ‘to hang, to bind, to supervise, etc.’, although this is not how (animal) intercourse is normally described. Whatever its connotations, it evidently plays with the preceding *eše<sub>2</sub> la<sub>2</sub>*, which informs us that the ox/bull had been tethered with a rope – not that it could stop him. Moreover, the patient of *la<sub>2</sub>* (the cow) is omitted, perhaps because it initiates the next sentence (where one would expect an ergative). *ab<sub>2</sub>* thus seems to connect the two sentences in a grammatically and syntactically unusual way. 2) *KA ḡU* is equally enigmatic. As recognized by Alster (2005, 381-2), it cannot be *zu<sub>2</sub> gub* ‘to dig in the teeth, to eat’ (thus Foster 1974, 71 and ETCSL) because of *KA tum<sub>3</sub>/tum<sub>4</sub>* in the parallel line 84; he interprets *KA tum<sub>2</sub>* as ‘to bring the mouth (or: teeth, nose) to the wagon’. While the meaning of the phrase *KA de<sub>6</sub>/tum<sub>2</sub>* remains unknown, it seems to result in the loss of the cargo (which, if eating were involved, could have simply been expressed with *gu<sup>7</sup>* ‘to eat, consume, destroy’!). The rest of the unusual terminology is discussed below, but a dedicated study of word choice remains a desideratum.

rather than being born (du<sub>2</sub>-d), and when it starts munching<sup>2</sup> on the wagon's cargo a few moments later, it is already a fully-grown calf (amar). It remains unclear in how far Paniṅara, the city-god of Adab responsible for fetuses and premature babies, who is later credited as the scribe recording the case (cf. § 3), was involved in the miraculous birth. But the prominent note about the carter's origin now finds its explanation in the fact that Adab is the home of the mother goddess and her entourage, who are concerned with all aspects of births, regular or bizarre.

When the three colleagues have quenched their thirst and return to the desert, they face complicated issues of property and liability law. Foremost on their minds is the question: who owns the calf? (l. 15), but implied in the question of rightful ownership is also the question: who assumes responsibility for the calf consuming the cargo (if that interpretation of KA DU proves to be correct)? Although their discussion is not quoted within the text and only alluded to as part of the narrative (l. 3),<sup>26</sup> we can speculate that the owner of the wagon might have wanted to claim the calf as compensation for the loss of his cargo; the owner of the ox/bull might have insisted that the calf is his as a sort of stud fee; and the owner of the cow might have claimed the calf either because babies normally belong to the owner of the female breeding animal – or as compensation for wrongful insemination. Be that as it may, the three colleagues cannot resolve the matter amongst themselves and approach the king. He listens to their story but – unheard of in the world of supremely knowledgeable and wise kings – does not know what to do and asks a court lady for advice: likely a double joke with sexist overtones. As king and divinely appointed supreme judge and lawgiver of his country, he should be the ultimate authority on all legal matters, no matter how difficult.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, if indeed he must solicit legal advice from anyone, one would expect him to consult the consortium of male experts that often features in Sumerian model court cases.<sup>28</sup>

The protracted solution, which involves complex analogies, is badly preserved and difficult to comprehend in its details. Presently, there is a gap of over 40 lines (which is nearly half of the story!), and several of the preserved lines are fragmentary. While the loss is partly mitigated by frequent repetitions, many questions remain, and the

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**26** 3ODA 3: enim ib<sub>2</sub>-ta-an-šar<sub>2</sub>-šar<sub>2</sub>-eš-am<sub>3</sub> “They discussed it heatedly, with many words”.

**27** On the image and self-representation of royal jurisdiction, see e.g. Démare-Lafont 2011, 338-40.

**28** The interaction of king and assembly (*puḫrum*) is recorded in several Sumerian model court cases, most famously in the so-called *Nippur Homicide Trial*, as well as in *Two Women B*; cf. Matuszak (2021, 117) with further literature. On the role of the court lady, see Matuszak 2022, 192, 206 *ad* 18-19.

following interpretation is tentative and provisional at best.<sup>29</sup> But judging from what we can currently glean from the broken passages, it looks like no-one wins and everybody loses. Somehow the ox/bull is linked to its owner's field (cf. the fragmentary lines 65, 67, 72), and the potential threat of it being eaten by a lion (l. 23//66)<sup>30</sup> ultimately leads to the field being flooded' (l. 90).<sup>31</sup> If that interpretation is correct, then there is obvious irony in losing one's livelihood to an abundance of water, given that the carters' initial problem was thirst. The fates of his two colleagues seem to rest on similar premises: The owner of the cow divorces his wife whom he despises (l. 91), presumably because she may wander off just like his cow, which would make her also vulnerable to sexual predators,<sup>32</sup> and the man with the wagon

**29** Importantly, the roles of both court lady and king, as well as the nature of his final judgement, are unclear. Since the king went to consult the court lady in l. 16 and left her abode only in l. 89, a lot seems to have happened there. It is unlikely that the court lady's speech extended over 50 lines (i.e. ll. 32-88); it is hence unclear who speaks in ll. 65-88. Since ll. 90-2 are phrased as a narrative report rather than a verdict (similar to OMYG 46-7), it could well be that ll. 65-88 were uttered by the king. But given the large gap it is uncertain if the plot developed along the same lines as in OMYG. Crucially, the interrogation of the old man and the first (and soon to be revised) verdict occur *after* the king had left the court lady. This may be because only the young girl had appealed to the king, whereas in 3ODA the claimants had approached the king jointly, rendering another interrogation unnecessary. Given the similarities and differences with OMYG it remains unclear if the court lady's advice is as perceptive as it is in OMYG and whether it inspires the king to come up with a suitable solution immediately or if he is forced to change his first verdict, as in OMYG. This uncertainty prevents us from fully appreciating the relationship between the utterances concerning each of the three colleagues in ll. 65-88 and the brief tripartite summary in ll. 90-2.

**30** There may or may not be a double entendre involved, as the lion often symbolizes the king; cf. Watanabe 2002, 42-56 *et passim*.

**31** L. 90: lu<sub>2</sub> a-ša<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni <...><sup>7</sup> a-ša<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni ba-an-ši-ib<sub>2</sub>-si 'The man <who ...><sup>7</sup> his field, his field was *flooded*'. Alster (2005, 380), following suggestions by Cavigneaux (1987, 52) and Foster (1974, 71), emends A to DİŠ and translates "Each(?) man <whose heart had not been satisfied(?)>, his heart was satisfied"; ETCSL offers "each (?) man's heart was dissatisfied". But in his line commentary, Alster (2005, 383) rightly acknowledges that, because of the parallelism of ll. 90-2, this line must refer to the owner of the ox/bull and his field. The translation 'flooded' is admittedly conjectural, as it requires a si 'to fill with water'; cf. l. 7 and parallels. However, l. 90 - despite or because of its elliptical nature - seems to involve multiple puns: a-ša<sub>3</sub>-ga-ni ba-an-ši-ib<sub>2</sub>-si 'his field was *flooded*' might recall a u<sub>3</sub>-um-te-si 'if you (i.e. the owner of ox/bull, cow, or wagon, respectively) could fetch water' in lines 7//9//11, while also playing with a ša<sub>3</sub>-ge si 'to fill the womb with semen', which is what the ox/bull had done to the cow (albeit enigmatically expressed with la<sub>2</sub> in l. 14).

**32** The section is, unfortunately, only fragmentarily preserved, but ab<sub>2</sub>-ba-ni edin-še<sub>3</sub> u<sub>3</sub>-ba-nen-n[...]' 'After his cow had gone off into the desert [...]' (l. 74) and dam-a-ni tillaz<sub>2</sub>-a u<sub>3</sub>-ba-an-AK-[...] *im-suz-qis i-la-ak-ma* 'After his wife had *taken to*(?) the streets' (l. 75) are clearly presented in parallel. While the Sumerian could also be translated as 'had done it in the streets' or 'had been done in the streets', the Akkadian gloss predicts: 'She will walk in the streets and [...]'. For the association of women walking in the streets and promiscuity or prostitution, see Matuszak (forthcoming). This is followed by a reference to the cow pressing out her embryo in l. 76 (ab<sub>2</sub> a-sila<sub>3</sub>-ḡar-ra-bi um-sur-sur-ru [...]), suggesting that her impregnation was a direct consequence of

not only loses his cargo but apparently all of his possessions.<sup>33</sup> None of them seems to get the calf.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the three colleagues end up losing everything they own. On a moral level, this seems fair: they were each willing to give up their most prized possessions rather than to trust and cooperate, so they deserve to lose everything, including the bonus of the miraculously quickly born calf. But there is also a juridical perspective to this. Martha Roth<sup>35</sup> has shown that legal provisions around rented oxen, which combine property and liability law, were particularly popular in scribal education.<sup>36</sup> Ancient readers of this story would therefore know that, “if a lion kills a yoked ox engaged in pulling (a plough or wagon), he (the renter) will not replace (the ox)”<sup>37</sup> – meaning it will be the owner’s loss – or, more explicitly: “If a lion devours a wandering ox, the misfortune falls to its owner”.<sup>38</sup> The same is also recorded in the *Laws of Hammurapi* § 244: “If a man rents an ox or a donkey and a lion kills it in the open country, it is the owner’s loss”.<sup>39</sup> The fate of the owner of the loaded wagon, on the other hand, recalls *Laws of Hammurapi* § 237:

If a man hires a boatman and a boat and loads it with grain, wool, oil, dates, and any other loading, and that boatman is negligent and thereby causes the boat to sink or its cargo to become lost,

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wandering off into the desert. We therefore expect a similar fate befalling the wife, though l. 77 mentioning a hero or warrior (ur-sa<sub>2</sub>) admittedly remains unclear. L. 91 records the fact that ‘the man who hated his wife left (lit.: walked away from) his wife’ (lu<sub>2</sub> dam-a-ni ħulu an-ge<sub>17</sub>-ga-am<sub>3</sub> dam-a-ni-ta ba-an-da-ġen), although the usual technical term for divorce is taka<sub>4</sub>. The word choice (ba + ġen ‘to go away’) echoes the action of the cow (cf. ll. 10, 25, 74).

**33** The Sumerian word here tentatively translated as ‘possessions’ is not clear in this context and hence the interpretation not beyond doubt; cf. already the discussion in Alster 2005, 374, 383. Normally, me means ‘essence; potential; divine power’; cf. also me = *lalū* ‘virility, sexual exuberance’ and me ‘when, where’; cf. Attinger 2023, 932. Note, however, that some of the Akkadian equivalents of me listed in OB Nippur Izi 125-32 “defy analysis” (Crisostomo 2019, 165). The unusual word choice in 30DA deserves a separate study.

**34** If I understand the fragmentarily preserved l. 84 correctly, the court lady points out the risk that if the calf can eat up an entire wagon’s cargo in no time, it will also diminish (tur<sup>7</sup>]-tur<sup>7</sup>) its owner’s household possessions. Therefore, his hope that he might receive the calf in compensation for his loss is indirectly portrayed as unjustified.

**35** Roth 1980.

**36** On Old Babylonian school texts about owner’s liability, see also Spada 2021.

**37** *Laws about Rented Oxen* §7 (cf. Roth 1997, 41). A new fragment was published by Spada 2018.

**38** *Sumerian Laws Exercise Tablet* § 9’ (cf. Roth 1997, 44). Similar legal provisions are also recorded in the *Sumerian Laws Handbook of Forms* vi 16-22 and 32-6 (cf. Roth 1997, 52).

**39** Quoted after Roth 1997. Other laws that might be somewhat relevant to the case are provisions for safekeeping (e.g. *Laws of Hammurapi* §§ 120-6), as well as inheritance law.

the boatman shall replace the boat which he sank and any of its cargo which he lost.

While these regulations possibly ‘justify’ the three carters’ losses (at least within the context of our ludicrous little story), there are no provisions that settle the questions at hand, namely, who owns an accidentally begotten calf born to bovine parents belonging to different owners, and who is liable for damage caused by a calf that does not have a legal owner yet. As Martha Roth astutely points out to me, ownership and liability in an ordinary situation would be clear: animal babies belong to the owner of the female just like a slave woman’s children belong to her master.<sup>40</sup> This would make the calf the property of the owner of the cow, and he would be responsible for the damage caused by it. But in our story, there are complicating factors, which each of the three colleagues tries to use to their advantage: unlike with other randomly conceived animals such as stray puppies, the father of the calf is known, the impregnation of the domestic cow was not planned by the owners of cow and ox/bull, and the calf caused damage to a third person’s property before anyone knew of its existence, let alone its rightful owner.

In other words, we have a problem which is not easily resolved by applying existing legal provisions, and it is this very absence of applicable laws that allows for the entire text to assume the form of a (parodied) lawsuit presided over by the king. The solution, however, is only partly based on an evaluation of property and liability regulations such as the ones quoted above. More weight is given to an implicit assessment of the businessmen’s character flaws, which provide the real reason for why their losses seem justified.<sup>41</sup> By shifting attention away from the legal problem and towards the problematic characters, the apparent ‘gap’ in royal law collections and related texts vanishes from view.

## 2.2 *Old Man and Young Girl*

A concern with personal moral choices can also be observed in the second story, which is only about half as long as *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* but similarly structured. There, an old man is lusting inappropriately after a young girl and makes her a marriage proposal of sorts, without following the customary practice. For reasons we

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g. Westbrook 1998, 220-3.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. already Falkenstein 1952, 118: “Auf alle Fälle ist klar, daß dieser Passus ein Anrecht des Wagenbesitzers auf das Kalb begründen soll. Juristisch gesehen dürfte das aber nicht ohne einige Spitzfindigkeit zu bewerkstelligen gewesen sein”.

cannot guess, the young girl accepts, although she is aware of the impotence of the *senex amans*. As with the ill-fated business trip of the three ox-drivers, readers are thus warned right at the beginning that this marriage will not end well. And indeed, after a while, feigning innocence, the young girl approaches the king and complains about the fruitless marriage. Like in *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, the king is out of his depth and consults a court lady. In her somewhat oracular (and previously misunderstood) answer, she implies that a union between old man and young girl will never miraculously balance out the age difference, so the marriage does seem to be doomed. The king thereupon summons the old man to court and interrogates him about why he cannot perform in bed. The old man replies with an iconic speech, asserting that he was once young and virile but old age has consumed his prowess:

A young man used to be my god, strength my protective deity.  
(But now) my youth has rushed past my thighs like a fleeing donkey.  
My (formerly) 'black mountain' has sprouted '(white) gypsum' [i.e. white hair].  
My 'mother' has sent a 'messenger from the forest' to me; s/he has given me a 'helping hand' [i.e. crutches].  
My 'mongoose' [i.e. penis] which used to 'eat' 'pungent things,' does not (even) stretch (its) 'neck' to the 'jar with clarified butter' (anymore).<sup>42</sup>

This testimony, which corroborates the young girl's charges, inspires the king to come up with the ingenious – or rather, absolutely shocking – idea that the young girl could have sex with her slave and conceive progeny that way. The young girl is delighted, leaves the palace jubilantly, proclaims a general debt remission, which would free debt slaves such as the one intended to become the father of her children, and encourages all young girls to dance around frivolously. The king in horror finally realizes her perverted nature as well as his own mistake in seriously considering her disingenuous plea, marks her as an adulteress of sorts,<sup>43</sup> annuls her marriage with the old man and chases her out into the street, where – it is insinuated – she.

Again, the little story addresses an apparent 'gap' in existing legal provisions, this time in marriage law. Pertinent legal provisions only ever deal with the scenario of an infertile wife, in which case they allow the husband to take a second wife, often a household slave, in order to secure offspring. The second wife would then cease to be his slave. This is illustrated not only by the *Laws of Hammurapi*

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<sup>42</sup> OMYG 33-7.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the discussion of the implications of shaving half her hair in Matuszak 2022, 193.



(§§ 144-9), but also by several Old Babylonian contracts, in which a second wife is either adopted or purchased. They explicitly record: “wife number 2 is a slave to wife number 1 but a wife to the husband”.<sup>44</sup> In our story, everything is turned on its head: it is clearly the husband who is impotent, so the king suggests the wife take a second husband – apparently oblivious to the fact that this would be adultery, a capital offence!<sup>45</sup> Moreover, unlike in the scenario of a man securing an heir thanks to a second wife, a child conceived by wife and slave would result in the legal paternity of the slave, not the wife’s first husband. The proposed solution hence does not solve the problem – in fact, the problem cannot be solved by simple analogous inversion, unless one is ready to accept the total inversion of the patriarchic order. It is therefore almost a stroke of luck that the young girl interprets the ill-advised one-time solution on a global scale – or, one could say, as a legal precedent.<sup>46</sup> Her announcing the release of all debt slaves and licence for promiscuity for all girls forces the king come to his senses just in time to prevent a total upheaval of the social order. Though the king’s change of mind averts a major catastrophe, it constitutes another laughable feat of royal incompetence – particularly in light of *Laws of Hammurapi* § 5, which prohibits judges from reversing their verdict and bans them from ever serving as judge again.<sup>47</sup>

By engaging in a thought experiment – asking ‘what if it were the other way around?’ – the story exposes the bias inherent in the rule that only men are allowed to have more than one sexual partner while married. In so doing, it briefly shakes the very foundation of Old Babylonian society – but it is quick to backtrack, and immediately proceeds to justify the existence of the ‘gap’ and thereby the existing order. The justification is again based on the character flaws of the protagonists. A marriage between a fertile wife and an impotent husband is presented as absurd and unnatural because it is the result of bad decisions made by immoral people: the old man should have never proposed to the young girl, and the young girl should have never accepted the proposal. In other words, the story provides an *argumentum ad absurdum* – a key strategy that has apparently been in the repertoire of jurists for the past 4,000 years. This also explains

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Westbrook 1988, 103-4. See the more detailed discussion in Matuszak 2022, 192 f.

<sup>45</sup> Démare-Lafont 1999, 78: “Le châtement de principe en matière d’adultère est la mort”; cf. 78-91 for other forms of punishment. According to Westbrook (1988, 75), “in practice a lesser punishment may have been the norm”, though he cites as evidence only model court cases from the scribal tradition, whose relation to practiced laws is difficult to determine. Cf. also the discussion in Matuszak 2021, 127-9.

<sup>46</sup> On the precedential value of royal utterances, see Roth 2000, 23-8.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Matuszak 2022, 193.

why the king as divinely appointed lawgiver and guarantor of the social order, despite cutting a rather hapless figure at the beginning and proposing shockingly radical ideas that run counter everything he stands for, ultimately does not suffer significant status loss. The laws he and/or his predecessors proclaimed at behest of the gods remain valid and beyond critique, and thanks to his dissolution of the marriage that was never supposed to be, the divinely ordained social order remains intact. The satire hence criticizes clichéd characters – but never institutions, resulting in an exciting tension between explosive ideas and tame solutions inspired by a cast of socially deviant fools.

### 2.3 Summary and Discussion

In both stories, people of questionable character approach the king with seemingly trifling matters: potency problems, an extra calf. This can be seen as part of the parody, as the king normally only got involved in capital crimes. However, it also serves as a potent illustration of the fact that in both cases the situation at hand is not covered by royal law collections. According to the implicit logic of the stories, the cases hence ‘must’ be resolved by the king. However – and here we are back to the satire – the nameless ruling king in the stories does not know how to handle the unusual situation and turns to a court lady for advice. In other words, the person who embodies the institution of royal justice defers a ‘gap’ in his law collection to someone outside the legal system.

It is not entirely clear how to interpret this: while, at least in the case of the young girl, it is obvious that the king should have never taken her appeal seriously,<sup>48</sup> it is also possible that he realized that these are problems at the intersection of law and morality and hence cannot be settled by applying existing legal provisions alone – a realisation that may have inspired him to consult someone other than male legal experts. Should we recognize the court lady as a moral authority? Or is this a joke after all? At least in *Old Man and Young Girl*, she immediately comprehends the problem at hand and suggests that it cannot be solved – only the king is foolish enough to attempt it. His unprecedented and rather naïve solution relies on a simplistic reversal of gender roles, which is implicitly portrayed as absurd and dangerous. The two instances of gender role reversal in *Old Man and Young Girl* are intricately linked: first a mere court lady is wiser than

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<sup>48</sup> It is unclear if this is an indirect critique of people abusing the tradition of direct appeals to the King (cf. Démare-Lafont 2011, 338-9). We do know, however, that literary petitions to the king were studied as part of scribal education (Keisuke 2009).

the king, then he – apparently ignoring or misunderstanding her advice – suggests a complete reversal of the patriarchic order, which he needs to rescind in order to preserve the functioning of society and his own role in it. In *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, the validity of analogical thinking – arguably a staple of Babylonian scholars already in the early second millennium BCE<sup>49</sup> – is more difficult to gauge due to its fragmentary state of preservation.

While simple people tricking or advising the king may sound like something straight out of a folktale, there are important differences. In both stories, there is no true hero fighting a just cause, and the simple folk do not prevail over the powerful.<sup>50</sup> Rather, all parties are guilty in some capacity, and all get punished accordingly, whether by royal decree or not: the possessive ox-drivers forfeit their belongings, the lewd old man must forsake his pretty young wife, the conniving young girl loses her marital status and home. None of the contestants win the case, but society as a whole benefits from their conviction.

The cast of foolish characters, each of whom deserves to lose, also distinguishes our stories from other texts used in the legal training of scribes, such as model court cases and the final third of *Two Women B*, all of which contrast an innocent plaintiff and a guilty defendant.<sup>51</sup> While *Two Women B* follows the trials of a wrongfully accused heroine fighting her way to justice, the model court cases tend to focus on the defendant, who is rightfully convicted. But even in their focus on the perpetrator, there is always a victorious party present or implied. The didactic benefit in all these texts lies in learning how justice is achieved by following appropriate procedures. They hence elucidate the workings of established law and instil trust in the existing legal system in those who would later be expected to uphold it as part of their professional career. Our stories approach the topic from a different angle, but at least the better-preserved *Old Man and Young Girl* equally ends up proving the validity of marriage law as it stands.

There are also important aspects that differentiate our two prose miniatures from other moralising compositions included in Alster's *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, such as *The Adulterer* and *Lazy Slave Girl* mentioned above in § 1, as well as another text entitled *Slave and*

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<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Crisostomo 2019. The possibility that the difficult Old Babylonian text *Scholars of Uruk* might be a parody of *recherché* bilingual scholarship (George 2009, 112), as well as the existence of several humorous texts about life at the scribal school (e.g. *Schooldays* ed. by Kramer 1949), indicates that (self-)satirising was not an uncommon element in Old Babylonian academic text composition.

<sup>50</sup> This is precisely the reason why Alster (2005, 377) potentially considered *30DA* an “anti-folktale”.

<sup>51</sup> For the trial in *Two Women B*, see Matuszak 2021, 107-38. For literature on model court cases, see Matuszak 2021, 107 fn. 284.

*Scoundrel*,<sup>52</sup> which can perhaps best be described as portraits of immoral characters. They are very straight-forward – so much so that even *Slave and Scoundrel*, which takes the form of a patchwork parody of different legal documents (from court records to inheritance deeds), does not construct a legal problem: the depravity of all protagonists is obvious and their fate is sealed by their own behavior, not by judicial verdict.

Our morality tales, on the other hand, engage in thought experiments outside of the established legal tradition. They ask questions that the law collections from the *Laws of Ur-Namma* up to the *Laws of Hammurapi*, which scribal apprentices in the Old Babylonian period demonstrably studied and copied,<sup>53</sup> could not answer: Who is the rightful owner of a calf that was never meant to be born, and who is liable for damage caused by it? How does a married couple secure progeny if the husband is impotent? These perceived ‘gaps’ in written legal discourse as it was studied and copied by scribes apparently warranted discussion and commentary – risky as that may be. But the subversive potential was immediately contained by connecting the legal problem to immoral and/or foolish characters, thereby invalidating it. As a result, the institution of royal justice, which is first called into question, emerges stronger than before. On the level of the narrative – at least in the better-preserved *Old Man and Young Girl* – this is expressed by the king regaining control and sentencing each as they deserve.

But where there any lingering doubts? When Greenblatt first developed the model of ‘subversion and containment’ and applied it to state-censored Elizabethan drama, he also noted its dialectical nature, pointing out that “what is for the state a mode of subversion contained can be for the theatre a mode of containment subverted”.<sup>54</sup> In how far this applies to our Sumerian stories is difficult to assess, partly because there are no contemporaneous metatexts such as interpretations or commentaries, and partly because the nature and extent of institutional patronage and other forms of official involvement in text production are not easy to gauge in this period. But the fact that neither a fundamental critique of kingship as an institution nor of a historical monarch composed during his reign is known to exist, suggests that there were limits to the written expression of such thoughts.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore the legal problems that lie at the heart of our stories are never solved, but simply undone. *Old Man and Young Girl* does

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<sup>52</sup> For this text, see Roth 1983; Alster 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. above fn. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Greenblatt 1988, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Fink 2020; for the ambiguity of the image of the king in Sumerian proverbs, see Konstantopoulos 2017.

not provide a viable solution to the problem of how an old husband and a young wife can produce children. A marriage between a fertile wife and an impotent husband is presented as so absurd that it should be prevented at all costs, or at best dissolved, because it cannot be remedied within the existing norms that prohibit a married woman from sleeping with someone other than her husband. Something similar can be observed with respect to *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, which seems to presage a satirical take on Solomonic wisdom. Unlike in the Biblical story in 1 Kings 3:16-28, where the king determines the baby's real mother by means of a test, our king apparently decides that because of their moral shortcomings and their professional incompetence none of the three colleagues deserves the extra calf.<sup>56</sup> But the story does not stop there: at the end, all three lose everything - although due to the fragmentary state of preservation it remains unclear in how far this is the result of the court lady's advice and/or the king's decision.

Given the cast of lowly and clichéd characters such as the *senex amans* or the uncooperative business partners, as well as common tropes such as the reversal of fortunes or the court case exposing deeper societal problems than initially anticipated,<sup>57</sup> I would not exclude the possibility that the authors may have drawn inspiration from now-lost popular stories such as folktales when composing their cautionary tales.<sup>58</sup> But even if they did, they have extensively reworked them for their purposes and furnished them with a pervasive legal framework. Despite the preponderance of a moral lesson, which outweighs the legal basis for the protagonists' punishment (whether

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**56** This pairing of professional incompetence and immoral (here: uncooperative, mistrustful, possessive) behavior is also commonly found in Sumerian disputations (cf. Matuszak 2021, 137) and instructional texts such as the *Instructions of Šuruppak* (cf. Alster 2005, 31-226), linking our stories to other genres of wisdom literature.

**57** Cf. e.g. the following motifs registered in Thompson 1955-58: J445.2 (foolish marriage of old man and young girl); J1171.1 ("Solomon's judgement: the divided child"; cf. also J1171.2 "Solomon's judgement: the divided bride. Three suitors dispute over a woman. When it is proposed to divide her, true lover is discovered"), and, more generally, J1130-J1199 (cleverness in the law court); J1230-J1249 (clever dividing); L (reversal of fortune).

**58** For a discussion of the relation of *OMYG* to proverbs and 'folktales' found elsewhere in world literature, see Matuszak 2022, 188-90. As regards *3ODA*, both Foster (1974, 72 fn. 8) and Lipiński (1986, 140) considered SP 2.82 a potential allusion to a similar story: anše lu<sub>2</sub> a-ga-de<sub>3</sub><sup>ki</sup> min-am<sub>3</sub> u<sub>2</sub>-gu ba-an-de<sub>2</sub> | al-ġen u<sub>4</sub> za-ħa-al AK-e ul-tuš šer<sub>7</sub>-da-am<sub>3</sub> 'There were two men from Akkade, who had lost a donkey. One went and disappeared. (The other), after he had been sitting around (waiting), the blame was (put on him)'. Though clearly differing in its details, it alerts us once more to the possibility of stories existing in different versions. One could, for example, easily tell both our narratives without the legal framework and rewrite the end to achieve an entirely different conclusion: perhaps in one retelling someone did get the calf, or the young girl did manage to have sex with a younger man - as she does in the medieval Pear Tree stories; cf. Matuszak 2022, 189-90.

effected by royal verdict or not), the plots of both stories can hence best be savoured if the reader is familiar with the pertinent legal tradition. At least in their present form, they are thus better understood as satirical and moralising narratives commenting on cleverly devised legal ‘problems’, which were written by scribes for scribes.

### 3 The Scribal Context

Let me substantiate the claim that both prose miniatures are better understood as scribal creations by taking a closer look at their transmission history. In *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, the distinctly scribal, scholarly context is literally written into the last line of the story, which records the following: “Paniṅara, their ‘eldest brother’,<sup>59</sup> the scholar, the god of Adab, was its (the court case’s) scribe”<sup>60</sup> On the one hand, the choice of divine patron alludes once more to the miraculously fast birth and growth of the calf: Paniṅara, whose name contains the Sumerian word for foetus or stillbirth (niṅar), was associated with the mother goddess and responsible for foetuses, as well as premature and stillborn babies.<sup>61</sup> His qualifications as scholar (um-mi-a) and scribe (dub-sar), however, root him and the entire composition in an academic milieu. The title ‘scribe’ also establishes a link between the alleged divine court clerk and subsequent generations of scribal apprentices copying the text as part of their training. Qišti-Ea, for example, who copied the text in Late Old Babylonian Sippar (Ammi-ṣaduqa 8/i/11), referred to himself as ‘apprentice scribe’ (dub-sar tur) at the time of writing.<sup>62</sup> As shown by Frans van

<sup>59</sup> Note that Foster (1974, 72) and Alster (2005, 381) translated pa<sub>4</sub>-ses as ‘sage’, which was also adopted by ETCSL. The term, however, means ‘eldest brother’, here in the sense of oldest ‘living’ ancestor, and refers to the fact that Paniṅara is the city-god and hence primordial resident of Adab, the three ox-drivers’ hometown. The Sumerian word for ‘sage’ is abgal; cf. Fechner 2022, 9-40.

<sup>60</sup> Note that court records from the Ur III period list the names of the bailiff (maškim) and the judges (di-kus) at the end, but never mention scribes (dub-sar); cf. Falkenstein 1956. However, in the late Old Babylonian period (post-Samsuiluna), it becomes common practice to list the name of the scribe of a given legal document as the last witness (Harris 1975, 284). The reference to Paniṅara as the ‘scribe’ of the court case may hence corroborate the suggestion that *3ODA* is the product of Old Babylonian scribal circles. Paniṅara’s identity as both city-god and scribe is perhaps indicated by the fact that his name is preceded by determinatives for both men and deities (<sup>l</sup>pa<sub>5</sub>-niṅar<sup>001</sup>-ra).

<sup>61</sup> Krebbernik 2004. On niṅar vel sim., see Attinger 2023, 1040.

<sup>62</sup> The important colophon of MS A (AO 07739 [TCL 16, 80] + AO 08149 [TCL 16, 83] = P345424) was mentioned but not presented or discussed in Alster’s (2005, 373-83) edition. It reads, following the transliteration by Cavigneaux 1987, 52: (rev. 17”-18”): dub til mu šid-bi 95 | šu qiz-iš-ti-e<sub>2</sub>-a dub-sar tur ‘Tablet complete. Its number of lines: 95. Hand of (i.e. written by) Qišti-Ea, the junior scribe’; (upper edge 1-4): iti para<sub>10</sub>-za<sub>3</sub>-ṅar u<sub>4</sub> 11-kam | mu am-mi-ša-du-qa<sub>2</sub> lugal-e | <sup>0065</sup>dur<sub>2</sub>-ṅar ku<sub>3</sub>-si<sub>2</sub><sup>2</sup>-ga-a ki-bad-ra<sub>2</sub>-a-aš

Koppen,<sup>63</sup> he went on to work as a professional scribe and wrote perfectly normal, humourless legal documents for his fellow Sippar citizens. According to his titles, however, Qišti-Ea was proud of his education: three years after he copied our story, he referred to himself as *dub-sar* '(professional) scribe'<sup>64</sup> and yet another two years later, as *dumu e<sub>2</sub>-dub-ba-a*,<sup>65</sup> literally 'son of the scribal school' and hence a testament to his advanced academic education. One would love to know what else he did in this capacity.

In the case of *Old Man and Young Girl*, no colophons mentioning the names of scribes are preserved. But passages of particular literary value and metaphorical density, such as the old man's iconic speech for the defence quoted above in § 2.2, have been excerpted in various so-called 'proverb collections', indicating an ancient appreciation for idiosyncratic and creative use of language.<sup>66</sup> As has been compellingly argued by Yoram Cohen (2018), the so-called 'proverb collections'<sup>67</sup> did not just play a role in scribal training, but also attest to compilation efforts, which served various purposes in the quest for achieving scholarly erudition. This observation deserves further consideration.

Evidence for junior scribes studying our stories exists in the form of lenticular tablets containing single line excerpts as well as a few teacher-student exercises.<sup>68</sup> These tablet types are characteristic of the intermediate phase of scribal education, where students moved from words to entire sentences by studying proverbs and model contracts. In the case of UM 55-21-254 (P231631), the quoted line *OMYG* 3//6 may record a common idiomatic expression that is found in two 'proverb collections'.<sup>69</sup> However, both prose miniatures are also attested on large tablets written by advanced scribes. *Three Ox-Drivers*

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biz-in-gub<sup>2</sup>-ba u<sub>3</sub> alan<sup>1</sup>-a-ni hub<sub>2</sub> šu<sub>2</sub>-šū<sub>2</sub>-e-a | e<sub>2</sub>-nam-til<sub>3</sub>-la-še<sub>3</sub> in-<ne->en-ku<sub>4</sub>-ra 'Month 11, day 4. Year in which Ammi-šaduqa, the king, set up a throne made of gold (fitting) for the throne room and brought a statue of himself as a runner into the Enamtila (temple)'. Cavigneaux further notes that, despite the Late Old Babylonian date, the palaeography alone suggests a Kassite date.

<sup>63</sup> van Koppen 2011, 146.

<sup>64</sup> BM 92506 (CT 8, 3; P365166) rev. 18 (AŠ 11).

<sup>65</sup> CBS 1534 (BE 6/1, 95; P258868) rev. 17' (AŠ 13); probably also in CBS 1524 (BE 6/1, 101; P258858) rev. 17 (AŠ 15), though his title is mostly broken.

<sup>66</sup> Matuszak 2022, 188-90.

<sup>67</sup> On the diverse nature of Sumerian 'proverb collections', see Taylor 2005, 14-18.

<sup>68</sup> *3ODA* line 10//25 is preserved on the Type IV (lenticular exercise) tablet UM 29-16-719 (Peterson 2010, 565 no. 49; P228801) and *OMYG* lines 3//6 and 12, respectively, on Type IV tablets UM 55-21-254 (Alster 1997, 1:305; P231631) and NBC 1278 (BIN 2, 59; P297181). Jeremiah Peterson kindly informed me that the first line of *OMYG* is also attested on Type II (teacher - student exercise) tablets CBS 14233 (PBS 13, 22; P230524) obv. 5' and CBS 6765 (P264225) l. 5'.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. the discussion in Matuszak 2022, 189. On the Old Babylonian 'core curriculum' in Nippur, see Veldhuis 2011, 82-6 and Tinney 2011, 581-4.

from *Adab* is known from two manuscripts that originally contained the entire composition and nothing else.<sup>70</sup> Whenever both manuscripts are preserved, their textual transmission is remarkably similar. Both bear marks on the margins after 10 or 20 lines and the one written by Qišti-Ea, MS A, also details in its colophon that the tablet is complete at 95 lines. The end of MS B, where a colophon might have been placed, is not preserved. For *Old Man and Young Girl*, the line count of the individual manuscripts differs. One (X<sub>1</sub>; P252108) indicates 45 lines, another (B; P283760) added four lines by improvising on a theme, yielding a total of around 50. The other manuscripts are too poorly preserved, but clearly add or omit lines.<sup>71</sup> Being about half as long as *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, *Old Man and Young Girl* is exclusively attested on big compilation tablets collecting miscellaneous prose miniatures. One of them (X<sub>1</sub>) meticulously notes the line count for each story and on the left-hand edge lists their titles, summarising them in Akkadian as 9 *še-eh-ḫe-er-tum* ‘9 short (ones)’. The left-hand edge thus records information comparable to the spine of a book. Similar summaries are also attested on other compilation tablets, suggesting that these texts were grouped together because of their brevity.<sup>72</sup>

Meta data such as 10-line marks, line counts, or ‘tables of contents’ are normally only provided on ‘library copies’, suggesting that professional scribes collected such stories for future reference.<sup>73</sup> The precise recording of line counts safely situates the texts within a written tradition, where such data were relevant. Moreover, the grouping of *Old Man and Young Girl* together with other prose miniatures can be seen as early evidence for compilation of wisdom texts, which later finds its full expression in the *Series of Sidu*. Although available manuscripts all date to the first millennium BCE, its roots extend to the mid-to-late second millennium BCE.<sup>74</sup> Just like the Old Babylonian compilation tablets, it is characterized by rather diverse content, ranging from proverbs to agricultural instructions to texts about the ephemerality of life.<sup>75</sup> In the Old Babylonian compilations, the se-

<sup>70</sup> A: AO 07739 (TCL 16, 80) + AO 08149 (TCL 16, 83); P345424 and B: CBS 01601 (Alster 2005, pl. 48; P258933). Both are of unknown provenience, though A probably stems from Sippar, where Qišti-Ea later worked as a professional scribe (van Koppen 2011, 146). Given the similarity of both MSS, B could originate from the same city.

<sup>71</sup> For details, see Matuszak 2022, 187.

<sup>72</sup> For details, see Matuszak 2022, 185. A similar descriptive label, this time in Sumerian ([...] x TUR-TUR-me-eš ‘they are small ones’), was probably used in the colophon of the compilation tablet BM 80184 (CT 44, 18) containing three compositions, two of which (*Niĝ-nam C* and *Ballade of Early Rulers*) are included in Alster 2005.

<sup>73</sup> On ‘tables of schools and scholars’, see Tinney 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Cohen 2018, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Cohen 2018, 50-3.



quence of individual stories, many of which still await discovery and publication, is not yet fixed. However, there is a certain amount of overlap between individual compilation tablets, and groupings based on various criteria can be discerned.<sup>76</sup>

Cohen has convincingly argued that these compilations of seemingly disparate texts show that they were recognized as a specific, valuable, and important type of literature, which was “cultivated in order to meet curricular, intellectual, and academic purposes” and that these texts were not only studied for moral education but also for achieving scribal erudition.<sup>77</sup> While we currently have no evidence for our stories being used for exegetical and hermeneutic purposes, as Cohen has shown for the later *Series of Sidu*, I would argue that the extensive analogies in *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* linking oxen to fields and cows to wives, the shrewd commentary on extant and non-extant legal provisions in both *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl*, as well as the ubiquitous word, sound, and sign play, can be seen as manifestations of early Babylonian hermeneutics at play, which firmly situates our stories in scribal circles.

#### 4 Conclusion

After reviewing the legal framework and distinctly scribal transmission history of two Sumerian prose miniatures, *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl*, we can conclude that Alster<sup>78</sup> was right in including them in this book on Sumerian wisdom literature – but his classification as folktales is less convincing. As argued in § 2.3, I would not exclude the possibility that the authors were drawing inspiration from popular tales, but any orally circulating Sumerian folktale that may have once existed is forever lost to us. In their present form, the stories are clearly the creation of educated scribes working in an academic context. This is obvious both from text-internal references to scribal scholarship, as in the last line of *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab*, and from distinct features of the manuscripts recording both *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl*, which attest to scribal practices such as counting the lines of the written transmission and compiling relevant texts for future reference.

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<sup>76</sup> Both MSS B and X<sub>1</sub> of *OMYG*, for example, contain hitherto unknown stories about a Burglar and a Builder, which can equally be understood as parodies of court cases; see provisionally Matuszak 2022, 194. For other compilation tablets with short texts, see e.g. Kleinerman 2011, 57-74, and 64-6 specifically for wisdom compositions.

<sup>77</sup> Cohen 2018, 41, 56. On the conception of authors/compilers like Sidu as specifically literate scholars, see also Helle 2019, 357f.

<sup>78</sup> Alster 2005.

Moreover, both stories have been supplied with a strong legal underpinning, which establishes links with other genres of academic legal discourse, such as law collections and model court cases. This results in deceptively burlesque and entertaining stories, whose moral lesson would have been fairly obvious to anyone, but whose juridical depth could only be appreciated by those who were familiar with the legal tradition as it was studied during specialized scribal education. In terms of legal training for aspiring notaries such as Qišti-Ea, these satirical stories may have complemented model court cases, which provided examples of how to successfully adjudicate a complicated case, with examples of how *not* to do things. The presentation of negative examples as a deterrent is a popular pedagogic strategy across Sumerian moralising and didactic texts and connects our prose miniatures with proverbs, instructional texts, disputations, character portraits, and other texts commonly considered 'wisdom literature'.<sup>79</sup>

It is hence not surprising that on compilation tablets, *Old Man and Young Girl* is grouped with other wisdom texts, and not with more overtly legal genres such as model court cases. Rather than elucidating the workings of the law, as the model court cases do, the morality tales focus on exposing stereotypical fools, or embodied vices. The satirical elements of the stories are targeted at criticising paradigmatic characters - but never institutions. Although the king may not initially come across as the all-powerful, all-wise, divinely appointed lawgiver and supreme judge - he *is* at first duped and a little overwhelmed - he regains control and sentences each according to their misdeeds, whether outright criminal or merely immoral. While our prose miniatures thus do contain intriguingly subversive elements, they always judiciously stop short of any fundamental critique of the existing order, rendering Alster's categorisation of these stories as representing 'critical wisdom' doubtful. They may point out apparent incidental or conceptual 'gaps' in the law collections, but immediately defend them as justified, because either the resulting scenario would be too absurd or the characters who would take advantage of them too immoral: potential subversion is thus contained by hyperbole and humor, and any lingering aftertaste of critique is difficult to gauge.

As it stands, the royal vision of an ideal society put forward by the law collections thus remains valid and beyond critique, but measures must be taken to prevent immoral and/or foolish figures from operating in grey zones not considered by the law. For fixing situations in which law is neither available nor enough, the stories propose ethical solutions tailored to the protagonists' misdeeds and character flaws. In both narratives, the solution is ultimately brought about by the king, who - ideally - embodies the concept of justice (ni<sub>2</sub>-si-sa<sub>2</sub> /

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. e.g. Matuszak 2021, 142 f. with further literature.

*mīšarum*), which informs both law and morality as related yet distinct regulators of human behavior.<sup>80</sup> Considering the affinity of *Three Ox-Drivers from Adab* and *Old Man and Young Girl* with both academic legal discourse and moralising wisdom compositions, as well as their firm embeddedness in scribal milieux, I would hence suggest that they are best understood as satirical scribal inventions at the intersection of law and morality.

## Abbreviations

Abbreviations follow the conventions of the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*: [https://rla.badw.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Files/RLA/03\\_Ab- kverz\\_Ende\\_Nov2018.pdf](https://rla.badw.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Files/RLA/03_Ab- kverz_Ende_Nov2018.pdf).

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<sup>80</sup> E.g. Shavell 2002. On (kings and) justice in Mesopotamia, see e.g. Démare-Lafont 2011, 335-40.

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