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ORIENT & MÉDITERRANÉE

35

REPRÉSENTATIONS ET PERSONNIFICATION
DE LA SAGESSE DANS L'ANTIQUITÉ ET AU-DELÀ

édité par

STÉPHANIE ANTHONIOZ et CÉCILE DOGNIEZ



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SOMMAIRE

Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ <i>Introduction générale</i>	7
Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ, Catherine VIALLE, Françoise VINEL <i>La personnification : essai de définition</i>	31
Maurizio VIANO <i>Representations of Wisdom in Mesopotamian Cuneiform Sources</i>	43
Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ, Nicolas TENAILLON <i>Les représentations de la sagesse dans les sources grecques</i>	59
Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ <i>De la personnification de la sagesse en Pr 1-9 et 31 : contexte, définition et fonction</i>	79
Cécile DOGNIEZ <i>La personnification de la sagesse dans la LXX des Proverbes</i>	107
Bertrand PINÇON <i>« Moi, Qohélet, fils de David » : les représentations de la sagesse dans le livre de Qohélet</i>	127
Dominique MANGIN <i>La sagesse dans le chapitre 28 du texte grec court du livre de Job</i>	141
Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ <i>Job 28, accessible ou inaccessible sagesse ?</i>	173
Elena DI PEDE <i>Représentations de la sagesse dans le livre de Baruch</i>	195
Eibert TIGCHELAAR <i>Wisdom in the Dead Sea Scrolls: She's No Lady</i>	207
Jean-Sébastien REY <i>Repenser le genre de « Dame Sagesse » et révéler des mystères en Si 4,11-19</i>	221
Françoise VINEL <i>Dame Sagesse : les témoignages sur la sagesse dans la version grecque du Siracide</i>	237

Jérôme MOREAU <i>Personnification et effacement : le paradoxe du livre de la Sagesse</i>	259
Pierluigi PIOVANELLI « <i>La Sagesse est rentrée chez elle</i> » (1 Hénoch 42) et, maintenant, où faut-il aller la chercher ?	273
Juliette DROSS <i>Sapientia, virtus, philosophia : quelques remarques sur les représentations de la sagesse dans l'œuvre philosophique de Sénèque (enjeux, héritage et postérité)</i>	281
Jérôme MOREAU <i>La sagesse dans l'œuvre de Philon d'Alexandrie : une personnification au prisme de l'intellect</i>	305
José COSTA <i>Y a-t-il un effacement de la sagesse et du logos dans la littérature rabbinique ancienne ?</i>	319
Jean-Daniel DUBOIS <i>La sagesse chez les gnostiques anciens</i>	349
Françoise VINEL <i>La sagesse « de l'extérieur » chez les Pères</i>	363
Samir ARBACHE <i>L'écriture et la sagesse dans le Coran</i>	377
Catherine JOLIVET-LÉVY <i>Contribution à l'étude de l'iconographie de la Sagesse biblique à Byzance</i>	389
Sylvie BETHMONT <i>La part des images dans les lectures médiévales occidentales de la sagesse personnifiée</i>	421



Representations of Wisdom in Mesopotamian Cuneiform Sources

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As already stated in the title, *Représentations et personnification de la sagesse dans l'Antiquité*, one of the main themes of this volume is the personification of wisdom. Nonetheless, unlike the Bible where wisdom assumes feminine attributes, wisdom was not personified in Mesopotamian cuneiform sources. The present contribution focuses therefore on symbols, images, deities, portraits associated to wisdom from often very different sources. Indeed, Mesopotamian wisdom was not confined to the realm of traditional knowledge transmitted with a moral intent.¹ Wisdom compositions were studied in scribal schools as part of the curriculum in greater Mesopotamia as well as in the periphery.²

1. WISDOM'S DIVINE MEDIATORS

Despite the fact that wisdom was not personified in Mesopotamian cuneiform sources, wisdom was the domain of the god Ea.³ References to Ea as the lord of wisdom are ubiquitous.⁴ The wisdom composition *Šimâ milka* also known as the *Instructions of Šūpê-amêli* offers a fine example of a sage delivering wisdom received from Ea. This text contains the admonitions spoken by a father, whose epithet (or name)⁵ is *Šūpê-amêli*, literally “most famous of men,” to his unnamed son. The composition ends with the son's reply that rejects the father's instructions in a nihilistic tone. The prologue explicitly states that *Šūpê-amêli* received his wisdom from Ea.

1. Note that the first sentence in Lambert's masterpiece *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Lambert 1960), “Wisdom is strictly a misnomer as applied to Babylonian literature” underlines the complexity and variety of Mesopotamian wisdom. Although, Lambert's statement is not fully correct, there is no unambiguous definition of wisdom in ancient Mesopotamia. The association of specific texts to wisdom literature is made rather arbitrarily by scholars and represents a modern categorization.
2. Cohen 2013, Viano 2016.
3. Lenzi 2008, pp. 104-106.
4. Ebeling 1938, pp. 376; Galter 1983, pp. 35, 95-103; see also Espak 2015, *passim*.
5. Cf. Cohen 2013, pp. 116-117.

*Listen to the wisdom of Šūpê-amēli,
Whose ear Enlilbanda opened,
(Listen to) the profound wisdom (of) Šūpê-amēli
To whom wisdom (lit. ear) Enlilbanda granted.*

[Šimâ milka, 1-4]⁶

In an intellectual play, Enlil-banda is here used as a namesake of Ea. Banda is a Sumerian word for wisdom equated to the Akkadian *tašimtu* and thus the name means the Enlil of wisdom, in other words Ea.⁷

Another deity associated with wisdom is the goddess Nisaba.⁸ In the Old Babylonian composition *The Scholars from Uruk*,⁹ Nisaba as lady of wisdom¹⁰ appears alongside Ea. The composition is a monologue¹¹ in which a learned scribe blames on his son for his incompetence in the scribal art. A passage describes Ea and then Nisaba bestowing wisdom to Uruk:

44. mu-un-dim₂ ma-am₃ ġeštug₂ iri-ga₂-a-še₃ mu-un-de₃
ú-ši-im-ma a-an-ni-a-am-ma uz-nam a-na a-li-ia iš-ru-uk
45. ša₃ ma-da-ga₂-a ku₃-zu gi₁₆ mu-un-ġal₂
i-na li-ib-bi¹ ma¹-ti-a né-me-qa¹-am da-ri-a-am ú-ša-ab-ši
46. ud-bi-ta-am abgal [m]u-da-an-e₁₁ gašam ga₂-ša ka-bi ba-e-KID₂
iš-tu a-nu-mi-i-šu-ma ap-kál-lum i-li-a-am-ma ħa-as-sum pi-šu ip-te
47. nam-dub¹ sar¹-ra e₂-kur ri-en-še₃ a-<x>gid₂
ṭup-šar-ru¹ tum¹ [a-n]a [É.KU]R¹ a-li¹-ia iš-lu¹-ni
48. en¹ ne₂ mah⁷¹ ša₃ lu₂-mu-ta bi₂¹-[in]¹ tu¹-ud
šū-me¹ ra¹-am ma-dam i-na li-ib-bi um-ma-na-ti-ia ú-wa-li-id
49. egi₂-zi⁴ Nissaba₂ daḥ-daḥ-e mu-ra-an-tuku
ru-ba-tum ni-is-sà-a-ba wa-šf-ib-tam ú-ba-ši-a-am

*He (Ea) determined this destiny and bestowed wisdom to my city,
In the midst of my land, he established eternal wisdom,
Thereupon, the sage came up and the wise one opened his mouth,
He brought as booty the scribal art to the temple of my city,
In the hearts of my men he brought about the birth of much Sumerian.
The lady Nisaba brought into being (everything) additional.*

Nisaba's association with wisdom is related to the scribal art which was the goddess's domain. This is specifically referred to in another passage of the same composition:

*Nisaba is a scribe, Nisaba is wise
Nisaba it is who is the mistress of wisdom, Nisaba the mistress of intelligence*

[Scholars from Uruk, 23-24]

6. Cohen 2013, pp. 84-85.
7. Cohen 2013, pp. 117-118.
8. See Michalowski 1998-2001.
9. Transliteration and translation follow George 2009, pp. 78-112.
10. For the epithets of Nisaba, see Tallqvist 1938, pp. 429-430.
11. For a discussion of the genre of the text see George 2009, pp. 111-112.

The Sumerian hymn *Nisaba A* offers a similar description of the goddess of the scribal art:

*Engendered in wisdom by the Great Mountain (Enlil)!
Good woman, chief scribe of An, record-keeper of Enlil,
wise sage of the gods!*

[*Nisaba A*, 11-13]¹²

The composition *The Scholars from Uruk* ends with an image of a veiled bride that should be likely identified with Nisaba despite the fragmentary nature of the text:

62. ⁴[*Nissab*]a² ka-al-la-lum ku-ut-tu-um-t[um ú-ti²-i]b
Nisaba(?) the veiled bride [made] good(?)

The veil symbolizes the secret knowledge of wisdom and here the scribal art in particular.¹³ Similarly, the ale-wife Siduri in the standard Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic* is veiled because she functions as goddess of wisdom.¹⁴

2. WISDOM'S SCRIBAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL MEDIATIONS

The description of scribal knowledge as a secret lore provides the cue for discussing wisdom's domains. According to first millennium sources wisdom included five areas of expertise, or craft, namely *āšipūtu*, "exorcism," *bārūtu*, "divination," *kalūtu*, "lamentation," *ṭupšarrūtu*, "scribal art and astrology," *asūtu* "medical practices." This knowledge was collectively referred to as *ummânūtu*, namely scholarship. The association of divination to wisdom can be traced back much earlier than first millennium. Šulgi, the model of wise king, defined himself as a diviner¹⁵ although in his hymns the protecting deity of divination is Nintu, a role later assigned to Ea.¹⁶ Although it is generally acknowledged that the expansion of wisdom to exorcism results from a change of the intellectual context of wisdom occurred in the late second and the first millennium,¹⁷ it should be reminded that Enki was the god of magic and plays the key role in Sumerian incantations.¹⁸ A clear distinction developed between a mythical and divine sage, the *apkallu*, and the terrestrial, human sage the *ummānu*, that had a broad semantic range denoting a practical, technical scholar and craftsman.¹⁹ The aforementioned composition *The Scholars from Uruk* is one of the oldest accounts of what Lenzi called "mythology of scribal succession"²⁰ consisting in the revelation and transmission of divine wisdom by Ea through the antediluvian sages, the *apkallū*. In later traditions seven mythological *apkallū* who lived before

12. ETCSL 4.16.1.

13. George 2009, pp. 80, 103-104.

14. George 2003, pp. 148-149.

15. Šulgi B, 130-150, Šulgi C, 95-101, see Castellino 1972, pp. 15-16, 42-47, 150-151, 245-246, 254-257.

16. For the association of Ea with the origin of divination see Lenzi 2008, pp. 82-84.

17. Beaulieu 2007, see also Lenzi 2008, p. 70.

18. See Falkenstein 1939.

19. Hurowitz 2008, pp. 66-67; Lenzi 2008, pp. 68-102; Fechner 2016-2018.

20. Lenzi 2008, p. 107.

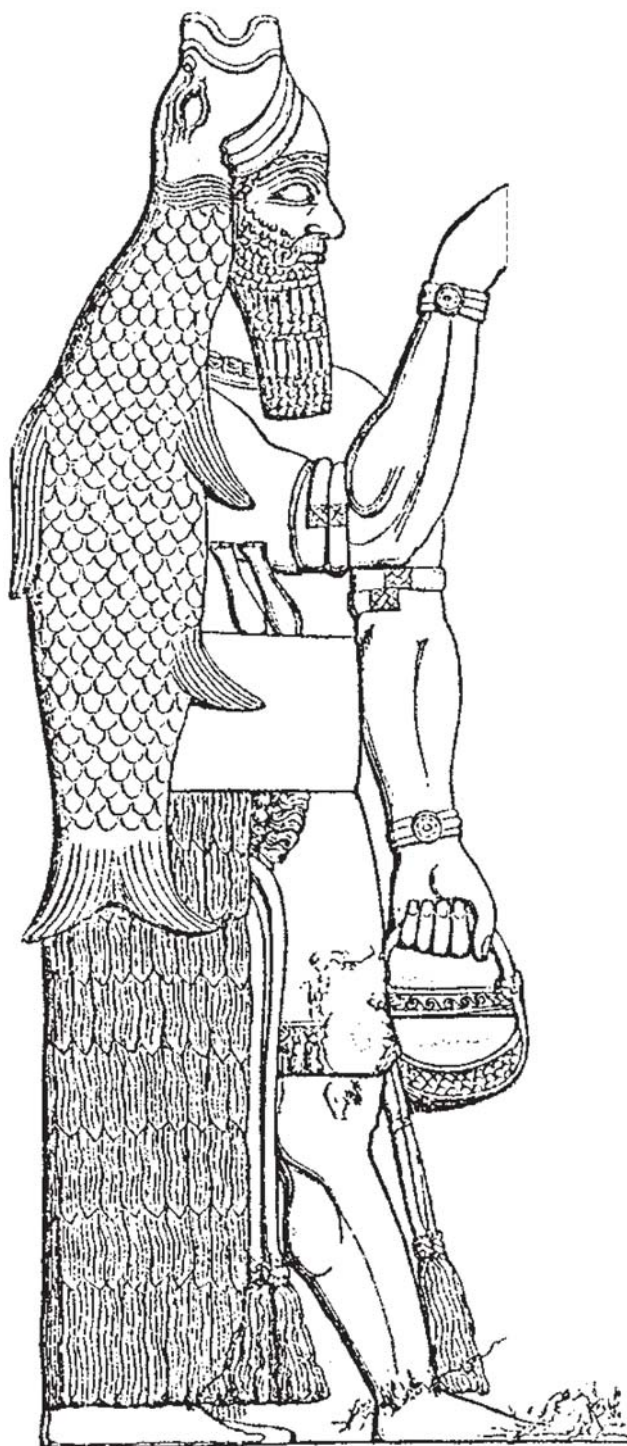


Figure 1 - Apkallu from Dalley 2011, fig. 55.

the flood were responsible for transmitting the secret knowledge to mankind, or better to scholars. This tradition is known from the apotropaic series *Bīt Mēseri*, *The Uruk List of Kings and Sages* and Berossos' *Babyloniaca*.²¹ The non-human antediluvian *apkallū* were followed by human *apkallū* (*Bīt Mēseri*) or scholars, *ummânū* (*Uruk List*), who as mortal heirs of the divine *apkallū* preserved and transmitted the secret knowledge of the gods. The *apkallū* are associated with the Apsû, the primeval sea, which, as Ea's domain, was regarded as the source of antediluvian wisdom and knowledge.²² According to Foster,²³ the earliest representation of wisdom had no human form (the carp) but when wisdom became a more civilized phenomenon, it assumed human traits which are evident in the anthropomorphism of the *apkallū* in late accounts and art. In the Seleucid list of sages from Uruk the association of the *apkallū* with the primeval sea is made explicit by the name of the seventh *apkallū*, called Utuabzu which means "born in the Abzu". In one of the lists contained in the *Bīt mēseri* ritual, the same sage is called Utuabba, that means "born in the sea."²⁴ Textual sources and iconography represent the *apkallū* as fish-like creatures. The series *Bīt Mēseri* and *The Poem of Erra* describe the *apkallū* as *purādu*-fishes, namely carps:

*They are the seven brilliant purādu-fishes, purādu-fish from the sea,
The seven sages who were created in the river, who ensure the correct execution of the plans of
heaven and earth.*

[*Bīt Mēseri* III, 10-13]²⁵

*Where are the seven apkallū of the Apsû, pure purādu-fishes
who, like Ea, their lord, with sublime wisdom have been endowed?*

[*Erra* I, 162]²⁶

Berossos' account describes the first sage, Oannes, as a monster half man and half fish, exactly as we know it from the iconography (figure 1):²⁷ "It had the whole body of a fish, but underneath and attached to the head of the fish there was another head, human, and joined to the tail of the fish, feet, like those of a man, and it had a human voice".²⁸

The water element as source of wisdom and secret knowledge is explicit in an Old Babylonian lexical list where the secrets of the pure heaven, *hal-an-ku*, is equated with Apsû.²⁹ *Hal-an-ku*, was indeed Enki's council room as stressed in the literary text *Enki and Ninmaḥ*.³⁰

25. ḥal-an-ku, niḡen₂ ša₃ kuš₂-u₃-da-na ḥaš im-mi-ni-i[n-ra]
In Halanku, his room where he takes counsel, he slapped his thigh.

21. Greenfield 1999; Wilcke 1991, pp. 262-269; Lenzi 2008, pp. 106-120; Kvanvig 2011, pp. 107-117.

22. See Horowitz 1998, pp. 307-308, 313-314.

23. Foster 1974, p. 350.

24. Kvanvig 2011, pp. 118-119.

25. Von Weiher 1983, p. 48 (= SpBTU II, 8); translation according to Lenzi 2008, p. 110.

26. Cagni 1977, p. 34.

27. For the iconography of the fish-*apkallū* and the other *apkallū* see Dalley 2011, see also Wiggerman 1992, pp. 65-77.

28. Verbrugghe, Wickersham 1996, p. 42.

29. MSL 14, 142: 18, see Lenzi 2008, p. 104.

30. See Ceccarelli 2014.

The *apkallū*'s main task was the correct execution of the “plans of heaven and earth” (*uṣurāt šamê u erṣeti*). This mission is represented in Mesopotamian art, notably in first millennium Assyrian reliefs, in the iconography of the tree of life or sacred tree. This is a stylized tree consisting in a trunk surrounded by a palmette crown which symbolizes the cosmic order as well as the king as the god's representative on earth.³¹ The execution of the divine plans was represented by the sacred tree flanked by two *apkallū* who purify it by means of a cone and a bucket of holy water (figure 2). Because on earth the role of the *apkallū* was held by the *ummânū*, the scene also represents the activity of the scholars at the Assyrian court whose task was to protect the king “from straying from the path that the gods had decreed.”³² As the *apkallū* ensure the cosmic harmony, the *ummânū* ensure the stability of the empire.

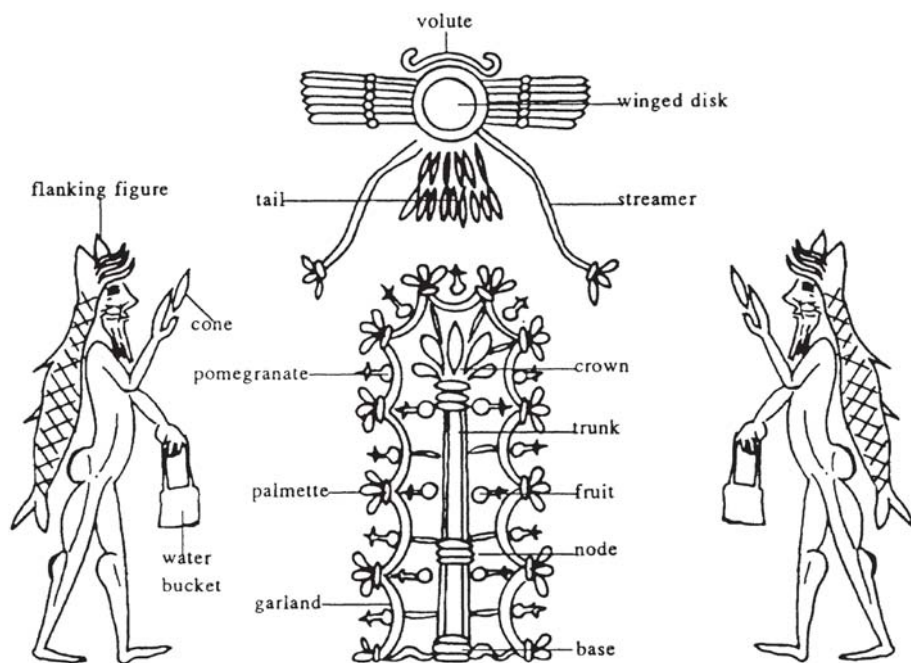


Figure 2 – Structural elements of the Assyrian Tree Motif (from Parpola 1993a, fig. 1).

Adapa, who was alternatively identified with the first *apkallu* (Uan, i.e. Oannes in Berossos)³³ or the seventh one,³⁴ was the foremost figure of a sage. Due to his exceptional wisdom, the name Adapa became a term for wise, sage, through the rhetorical

31. Parpola 1993a, pp. 165-169.

32. Parpola 1993b, pp. XIX-XXIV. Note that Šulgi's mastering of divination in the hymn *Šulgi B* has the same purpose of knowing and consequently respecting the gods' will, see Castellino 1972, pp. 15-16.

33. Lambert 1962, p. 74; van Dijk 1962, pp. 47-48; Sanders 1999, pp. 125-127; Annus 2016, pp. 9-14.

34. See Parpola 1993b, p. XIX; Kvanvig 2011, pp. 117-129.

figure of antonomasia. In the lexical list *Igituḥ* (I 107) the Sumerian term “born in the water” is equated with *adapu* and it is placed between two terms for “wise”, *abgal TAG = enqu, itpēšu, ḥassu, mudû, mār ummâni* and *šu-gal-an-zu = eršu, mudû*.³⁵

The mythological text *Adapa and the South Wind*³⁶ offers several representations of wisdom. When Adapa arrives in heaven he is offered food, water, garment and anointing oil, but he accepted only garment and oil following Ea’s instructions:

*When you stand before Anu,
you will be offered food of death; do not eat!
You will be offered water of death; do not drink!
You will be offered a garment; dress!
You will be offered oil; anoint!*

[Adapa – Fragment B, obv. 29-32]

*He was brought the [fo]od of life;
he did not e[a]t. [H]e was brought the water of life;
he did not dr[ink]. [He was br]ought a garment;
he dressed. [He was b]rought oil;
he anointed.*

[Adapa – Fragment B, rev. 61-65]

Without entering in the complex discussion of the purpose of Ea’s instructions, it is clear that the text presents a structural distinction. Food and water represent life, specifically eternal life, while garment and oil are signs of civilization symbolizing human intelligence and wisdom in contrast with animals and savage life. Adapa received garment and oil as confirmation of his wisdom.³⁷ To a deeper level of analysis, the symbolic image is twofold: we are not only confronted with a representation of wisdom, but also with wisdom representing the very nature of civilization namely human intelligence.

In the Amarna version of the myth (Fragment B) Adapa, after been summoned by An to heaven to be judged, was returned to the earth and was not granted eternal life. Asking Adapa for the reason he broke the wing of the South Wind, Anu defines wisdom as a bad thing:

57. *am-mi-ni* ^{dÉ}-a a-mi-lu-ta la ba-ni-ta ša ša-me-e
58. *ù er-še-e-ti ú-ki-il-li-in-ši li-ib-ba*
59. *ka-ab-ra iš-ku-un-šu*

*Why did Ea expose to a human what is bad in heaven and earth?
(Why did he) establish a ‘fat heart’ (in) him?*

[Adapa – Fragment B, rev. 57-59]

35. See CAD A, p. 102 and Sanders 1999, pp. 123-124; for the lexical list *Igituḥ* see Cavigneaux 1980-1983, p. 634.

36. Transliteration and translation follow Izre’el 2001.

37. Izre’el 2001, pp. 120-125; Kvanving 2011, pp. 126-127.

In Anu's eyes, extensive wisdom, namely the knowledge of what is bad, *lā banīta*, is a divine prerogative and is negative when revealed to humans because it makes them similar to gods.³⁸ Wisdom allows men to control the nature as Adapa did by breaking the wings of the South Wind then subverting the cosmic order. The negative connotation of wisdom can be perhaps found also in the expression "fat heart." Although this expression is unclear because is unique in the Akkadian literature, Izre'el³⁹ has regarded it as a metaphor for wisdom by way of comparison with the negative connotation of wisdom in the preceding line.

A curious representation of wisdom is found in *The Babylonian Theodicy*. The protagonist refers to himself as *lāmi išṣūrī* (l. 160) and *usandū* (l. 202) which mean "bird-catcher, fowler." Oshima⁴⁰ noticed that the *Commentary on Theodicy* to line 202⁴¹ explains *usandū* as being equivalent to *ṭupšarru*, "scribe", commenting however that "because the profession of a 'fowler' is in no way related to that of a 'scribe', this entry should be taken to be an interpretation supplied by the ancient commentator."⁴² However, we can relate the two terms based on lexical material. In the Neo Assyrian recension of *Antagal* (C) the Sumerian *usandu* is translated with the Akkadian *mūdu* "wise" in a section dedicated to wisdom:⁴³

251. gal-an-zu	<i>er-šú</i>		wise
252. mušen ^{u₂-sa-an-du₃}	<i>mu-du-u₂</i>		fowler = wise
253. gašam	<i>ḥa-as-su</i>		craftsman, wise = wise

Most importantly this correspondence is already attested in the Old Babylonian Nippur recension of the lexical list *Diri*, confirming that the association of the fowler with wisdom was not a late development:⁴⁴

Section 7.06	(u ₂ -sa-an-du)	<i>em-qum</i>		fowler = wise
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The Fowler is the main character of popular Sumerian tales preserved as single texts and as part of *Proverb Collections*⁴⁵ and used in the school curriculum both in Mesopotamia and in the periphery during the second millennium.⁴⁶ A tale dedicated to the Fowler is listed in the first millennium catalogue of the series of Sidu, a collection of thirty-five wisdom compositions, named after its supposed compiler⁴⁷ who was one of the nine *ummânū* mentioned after the seven *apkallū* in the *Uruk List of Kings and Sages*.⁴⁸ Interestingly, the same *Commentary on Theodicy* for lines 6 and 201 explains *mūdu*, "wise", with *ṭupšarru*, "scribe."⁴⁹ We can therefore explain

38. Izre'el 2001, pp. 125-130, knowledge operates by dichotomies: the knowledge of what is bad involves the knowledge of what is good.

39. Izre'el 2001, p. 29.

40. Oshima 2014, p. 126.

41. *Commentary* rev. 10, Oshima 2014, p. 454; Jiménez 2017.

42. Oshima 2014, p. 360.

43. MSL 17, p. 201, <http://oracc.org/dcclt/P394161>.

44. MSL 15, p. 30.

45. Alster 2005, pp. 371-372.

46. Viano 2016, pp. 62-63, 313-314.

47. For the series of Sidu see Finkel 1986; Frahm 2010.

48. See Lenzi 2008, p. 108.

49. See Oshima 2014, p. 126.

the popularity of the tales of the Fowler and its use as a school text with the fact that they related to the scribes' life, possibly in an (auto)ironic way, although the reason why scribes / sages identified themselves as fowlers escapes us.

3. WISDOM'S PERCEPTION AND ABILITIES

Ancient Mesopotamian wisdom was traditionally associated to the sense of hearing and was transmitted by oral messages. Wisdom is not achieved by inner reflection and introspection but by listening to the words of wisdom conveyed by wise men or gods.⁵⁰ The association of wisdom to the sense of hearing is evident also lexically as the Sumerian term for "ear", *ĝeštug_{2/3}*, is used as a metonymy for wise and wisdom.⁵¹ Wisdom was connected to royal ideology being an essential feature of good kings. Divine selection and designation of kings was followed by endowment of favors, a common topos found already in Pre-Sargonic inscriptions.⁵² The list of divine favors included wisdom which was always endowed by Enki. The formula *ĝeštug₂ šum₂-ma^den-ki-ka-(me-en)* is known from Pre-Sargonic, Ur III, and Isin-Larsa inscriptions and royal hymns.⁵³ The king's great wisdom is represented by the expression *ĝeštug₂ daġal* which literally means "wide ear" (i.e. broad understanding). This attribution is found in Gudea's Statue C (RIME 3/1.1.1.7.StC, ii, 14-17) and F (RIME 3/1.1.1.7.StF, ii, 6-9) and in Ur III and Isin-Larsa royal hymns.⁵⁴

The association of listening, orality and wisdom is exemplified by the prologue of the earliest wisdom composition, *The Instructions of Šuruppak*: the wisdom message is delivered orally by the intelligent and wise father (*ĝeštug₂, zu-a*) to his son.

In those days, in those far remote days,
 In those nights, in those far-away nights,
 In those years, in those far remote years,
 In those days, the intelligent one, the one of elaborate words, the wise one, who lived
 in the country,
 the man of Šuruppak, the intelligent one, the one of elaborate words, the wise one,
 who lived in the country,
 the man of Šuruppak gave instructions to his son,
 the man of Šuruppak, the son of Ubartutu,
 gave instructions to his son Ziusudra:
 "My son, let me give instructions, let my instructions be taken!

50. Wasserman 2016-2018.

51. For this term see Westenholz 2014 with previous bibliography.

52. Fluckiger-Hawker 1999, p. 50.

53. E.g. Eannatum: RIME 1.9.3.1, r v 51-52; RIME 1.9.3.5, ii 6-7. Enmetena: RIME 1.9.5.1, v 24; RIME 1.9.5.15, ii 5. Lugalzagesi: RIME 1.14.20.1, i 17-18. Ur-Bau: RIME 3/1.1.6.5, i 12. *Ur-Ninurta C*, 22 (ETCSL 2.5.6.2). *Šulgi A*, 12 (ETCSL 2.4.2.1); *Sîn-iddinam*: RIME 4.2.9.11.24. *Rim-Sîn*: RIME 4.2.9.15, 41-42; RIME 4.2.14.10, 29; for further references see Westenholz 2014, pp. 288-289. This topos developed in more elaborate sentences in royal hymns from the Ur III and Isin-Larsa periods.

54. See *Ur-Namma B*, 13 (ETCSL 2.4.1.2); *Lipit-ištar A*, 86 (ETCSL 2.5.5.1); *Išme-Dagan A*, 340 (ETCSL 2.5.4.1).

Wind manifesting his control over nature.⁵⁸ This ability reflects his intelligence as clearly stated at the beginning of the composition:

*Let? his [s]peech be ... [..] like the speech of [Anu.]
 He perfected him with great intelligence, to give instruction about the
 ordinance of the earth.
 To him he gave wisdom, he did not give him eternal life.
 In those days, in those years, the sage, a native of Eridu,
 Ea made him (his) follower among people.
 The sage's speech - no one repudiates.*

[Adapa – Fragment A, obv. 2-7]

Despite the fact that wisdom is mostly realized as an auricular perception through listening and speech, a superior, divine wisdom can be found associated with the visual perception. Unlike the above quoted Amarna version, in a Neo Assyrian fragment from Nineveh (Fragment D) Adapa was not returned to the earth but remained in heaven as the chosen of Anu:

*Adapa, from the foundation of heaven to the summit of heaven,
 looked at it all and saw his (Anu's) awesomeness.
 At that time Anu estab[lished] Adapa as watcher.
 He established his freedom from Ea.
 [An]u se[t] a decree to make glorious his lordship forever:
 [..] Adapa, seed of humankind,
 [..] he broke the South Wind's wing triumphantly,
 (and) ascended to heaven,—so be it forever!*

[Adapa – Fragment D, rev. 7-14]

In this variant of the myth, Adapa is elevated to the heaven and installed as watcher by Anu as the ultimate sign of divine wisdom.⁵⁹ Therefore, Adapa acquires the insight into the heavenly domain he did not possess as a “simple” wise man. This faculty is expressed by the verb *amāru*, “to see”, which describes the ability to see the whole heaven and Anu's awesomeness. While the hearing gives insight into the earthly matters and is a common attribute of kings who were portrayed as endowed with broad understanding, the visual perception denotes the experience of deeper wisdom. One may recall here the incipit of the Gilgameš Epic, *ša naqba imuru*, “the one who saw all or the depth”. Indeed, Gilgameš, despite the fact that he did not gain eternal life, unlike Adapa in the Nineveh fragment, saw more than any other human being and experienced Ea's domain and rebirth.⁶⁰

4. THE FOOL

Having explored the imagery of sages and wise men in Mesopotamian literature we may now turn to their opposite, that is the fool. The aforementioned text

58. Izre'el 2001, pp. 130-135.

59. Kvanvig 2011, pp. 124-129; Annus 2016, pp. 81-85.

60. *Gilgameš Epic* XI, 290, George 2003, pp. 722.

The Scholars from Uruk offers vivid imageries of the unwise, foolish son of the learned scribe.⁶¹ The father blames on his son's wrongdoing which is metaphorically described as pilfering.

You stripped clean and plundered the house of my lord, you squandered the property of my lady.
[*The Scholars from Uruk*, 3]

What the son dissipated is wisdom, specifically the scribal art, which is here evoked by referring to Ea, the lord, and Nisaba, the lady. The metaphoric description of the son's wrongdoing turns into insult for the father calls him a piglet:

You slap (lit. kill) my cheeks with a palm of my own hand!
You little pig! You have fed and fed, (now) lay yourself down!
[*The Scholars from Uruk*, 5-6]

Like a piglet you sucked the teats of your own belly!
[*The Scholars from Uruk*, 22]

The father also compares his mastery of the scribal art with his son's slowness in learning:

17. *i-na e-hi-iz ta-al-ma-du a-ah-mu-uṭ-ku ki-ma a-na ia-ši-im nu-hu-um at-ta*
In the knowledge you learned I was faster than you. How you were a dunce compared to me!

The term *nû'um* means "rude, uneducated, stupid" and is found in opposition to *ummânu* in a mythological text known as *The Creation of Mankind*, best preserved on a Middle Assyrian bilingual tablet⁶²:

ummânu ana ummâni nû'u ana nû'i
The wise one to the wise one, the ignorant to the ignorant.
[*The Creation of Mankind*, rev. 19]

In a completely different context, that of the Old Assyrian texts, the term *nû'um* designates the native Anatolians from Kultepe.⁶³ This usage, which plausibly derives from the Mesopotamian bias for foreign people, shows a conception of certain foreigners as uneducated, stupid, barbarian.

Imageries of the wicked are well known in *The Babylonian Theodicy* where the faithless men who do not follow the divine wisdom are metaphorically represented as wild animals⁶⁴:

48. *Has the wild-ass, the onager, which was seated with e[ars of barley]*
49. *paid attention (lit.: has his ear) to the one who guarantees divine wisdom?*
50. *Has the savage lion who always ate the best meat*
51. *(ever) brought maḥṣatu-flour-offering in order to appease fury of godhead?*

61. George 2009, pp. 78-79.

62. The most recent edition is Lambert 2013, pp. 350-359; for the history of the text see Viano 2016, pp. 97-99.

63. CAD N/2, pp. 356-357.

64. See Oshima 2014, pp. 130-131.

The present contribution offered an overview of the representations of wisdom in Sumerian and Akkadian sources from very different periods that intends to be all but exhaustive. Wisdom was traditionally a divine creation, but it could be delivered by both divine and human mediators. Mesopotamian wisdom had a broad spectrum of application which included skills and knowledges that as moderns we do not usually associate with wisdom. Despite the widening of Mesopotamian wisdom to various branches of knowledge is usually regarded as a late development due to the increased role of scribes and technical practitioners occurred during the first millennium consequent to a process of mythmaking and self-legitimation, we observed that wisdom always had a practical connotation whether related to the king's capacities or personal behavior, and some crafts such as magic and divination were already associated to wisdom in early periods.

Although some similarities are traceable in texts from different periods, wisdom was differently conceptualized over time. Consequently, representation as well as the imageries and figures associated to wisdom mutated during the three millennia of Mesopotamian literary and textual production. An example of such cultural development concerns the tradition of the *apkallū*, which is preeminent in the first millennium but is poorly attested in the early second millennium and particularly in Sumerian sources.⁶⁵ Mesopotamian wisdom was transmittable usually through oral messages delivered by gods or wise men. During the first millennium, oral messages remain the privileged means for the transmission of wisdom in literary texts and topoi, but at practical level wisdom became transmitted in a written form within scribal circles as a formalized body of secret knowledge acquiring an esoteric nature.⁶⁶

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65. Note that a search of the term on the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL) returns only seven occurrences.

66. See Lenzi 2008, pp. 135-219.

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