

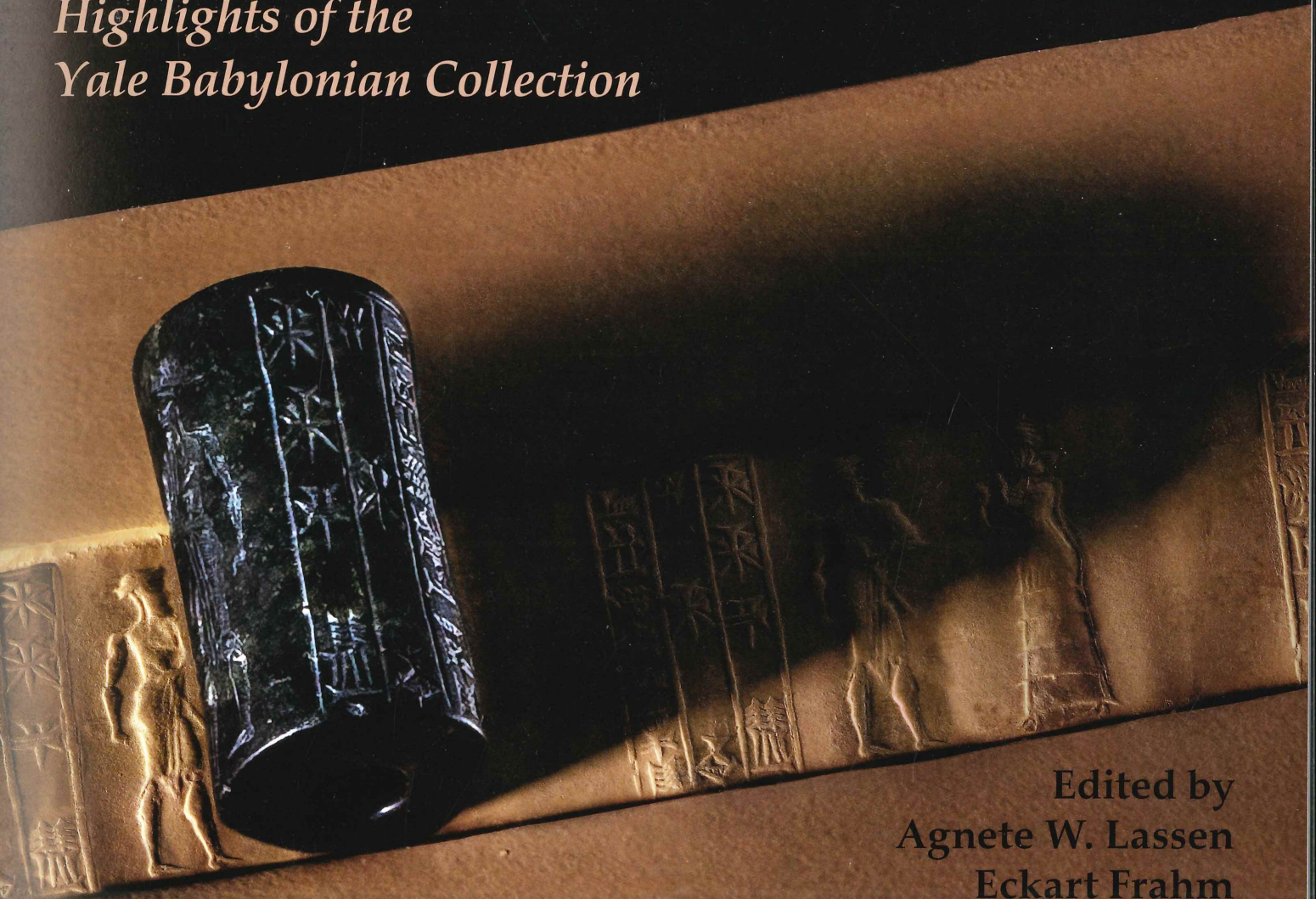
ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA SPEAKS

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ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA SPEAKS

*Highlights of the
Yale Babylonian Collection*



Edited by
Agnete W. Lassen
Eckart Frahm
Klaus Wagensonner

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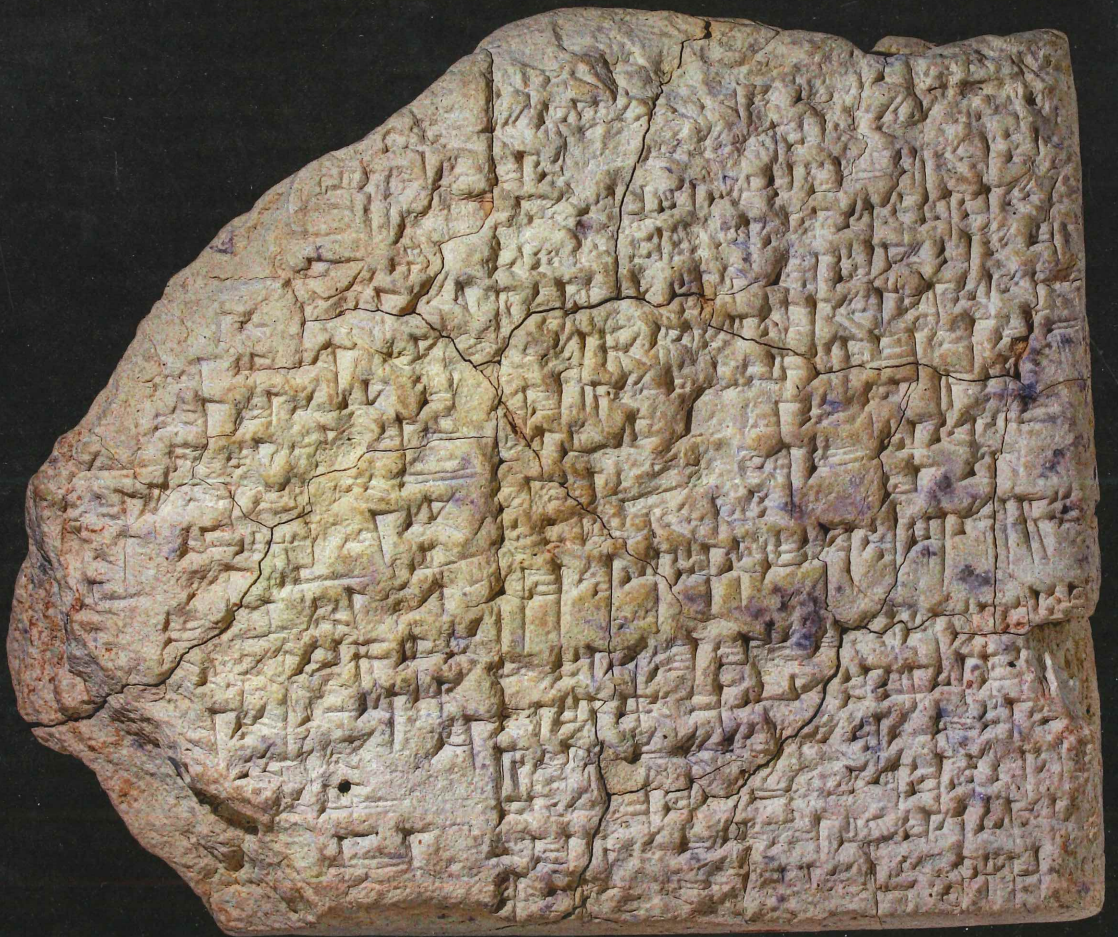
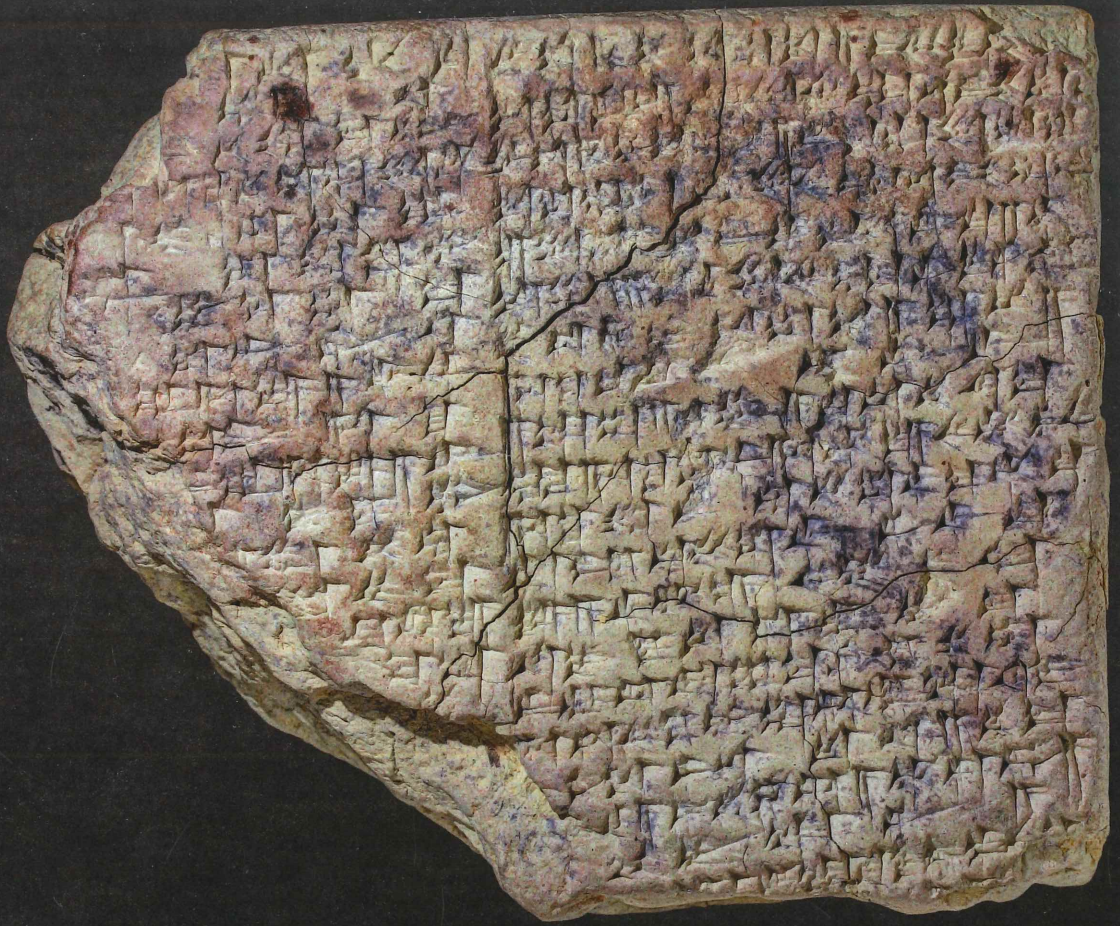
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Mesopotamian Ideas of the Past

Mary Frazer

The anthropologist Jan Vansina observed that when members of certain oral societies in central Africa were asked about the past, they spoke either about the most remote point in time or the most recent: they had no knowledge of the intervening period, a time he famously termed the “floating gap” (Vansina 1985, 168–169). Similar gaps are also observable in ancient societies where writing as a common mode of communication was introduced comparatively late. Thus, the classical Athenians “knew little about their history before 650 BC (or even 550 BC), and what they thought they knew was a jumble of fact and fiction, some miscellaneous facts and much fiction about the essentials and most of the details” (Finley 1965, 288).

The ancient Mesopotamians represent in some respects an interesting counterexample. Because of the remarkable longevity of the cuneiform writing system, its relatively widespread use, and the durability of the favored writing medium, clay, they had many written sources available. A scholar from near the end of Mesopotamian civilization could, for instance, draw on official inscriptions left behind by two thousand years’ worth of kings. Yet ancient Mesopotamian ideas about the past are likewise riddled with “floating gaps” and periods of particular emphasis that often do not reflect the ebbs and flows in the ancient records. In other words, some richly documented periods left little imprint on later Mesopotamians, whereas certain particularly poorly documented periods feature prominently. Indeed, a period for which no historical record could possibly be available, the mythical beginnings, was of fundamental importance for Mesopotamian ideas of the past.

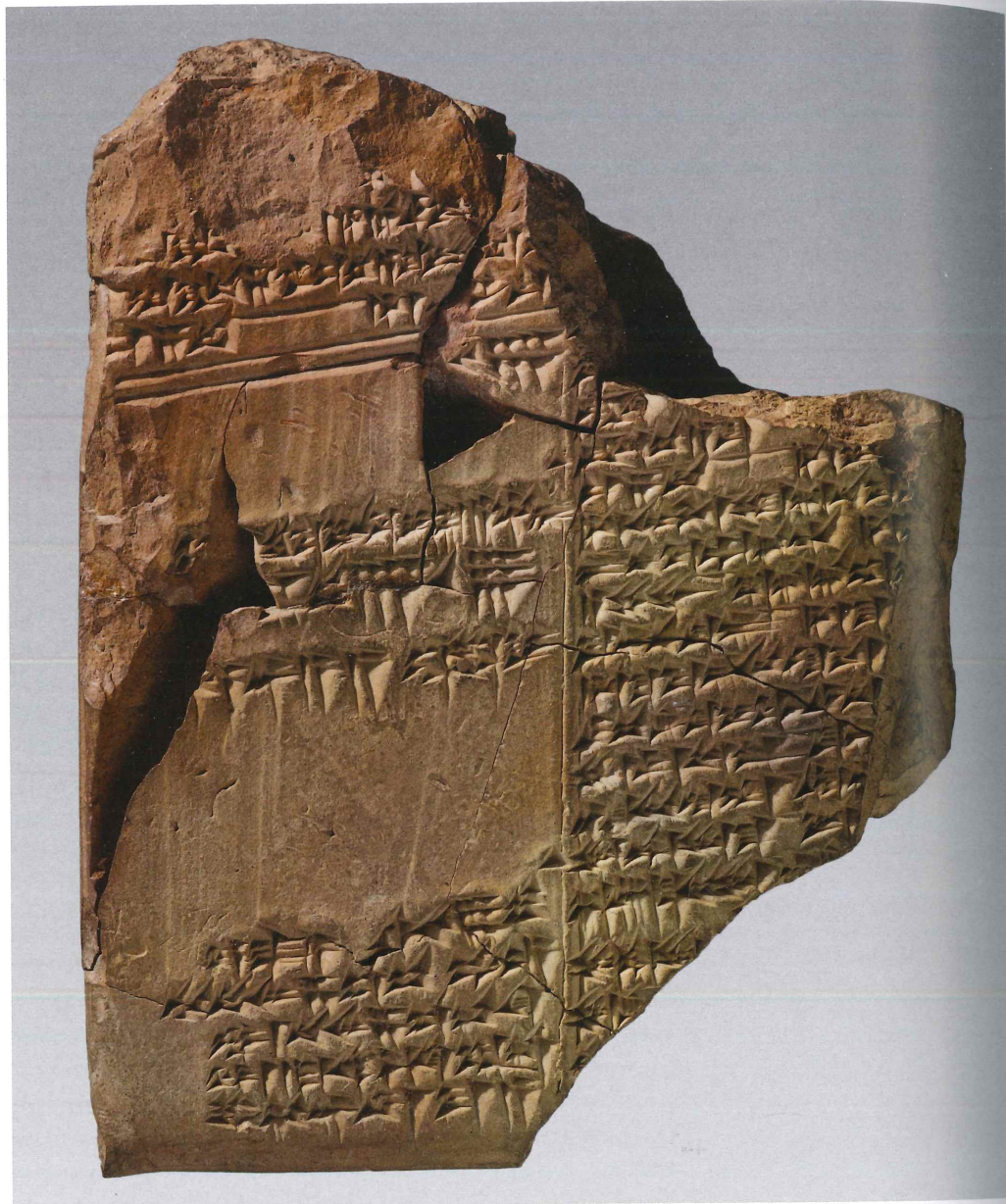
Tales from Distant Days: The Idea of the Most Remote Past

The mythical past is the setting of the epic *When the Gods Were Man*, better known as *Atrahasis* (Foster 2005, 227–280), which narrates the origins and early history of humankind (Figure 14.2). According to the epic, the Flood marks the turning point in humans’ relationship with the gods. It is only in the Flood’s aftermath that the gods realize that they depend on humanity for regular provision of food and drink.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* also portrays the Flood as a watershed moment in human history by making the Mesopotamian Noah, Uta-napishti, the last member of humankind to achieve immortality. Both epics show that, although the Deluge is a

14.1 A manuscript of the so-called *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, Old Babylonian period (YPM BC 001362, MLC 1364, obverse and reverse).

14.2 The second tablet of the epic *When the Gods Were Man*, written by the junior scribe Ipiq-Aya in the eleventh year of Ammisaduqa of Babylon (reigned 1646–1626 BC) (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; MLC 1889, reverse).

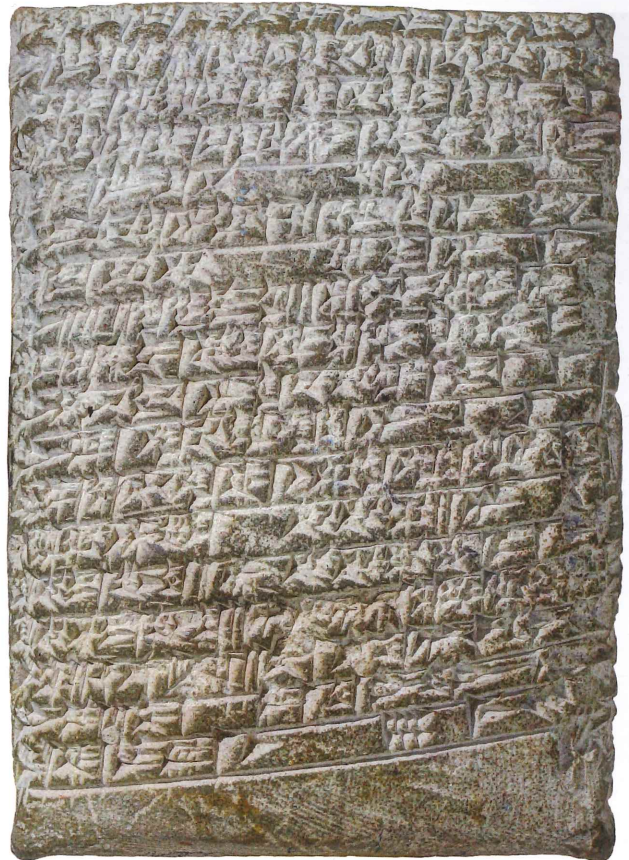
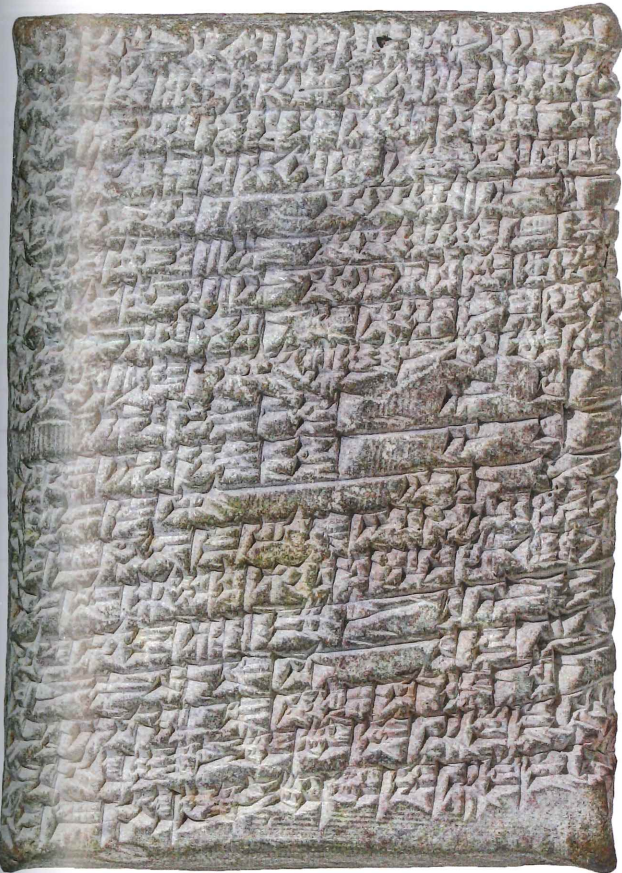


mythical event, it nonetheless appears as a central episode in Mesopotamian ideas about the past. Like many other civilizations, the Mesopotamians lacked a clear division between what we would call history and myth.

Even in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, dividing myth from history is not an easy task (Figure 14.3). Did a man named Gilgamesh, for example, ever rule the city of Uruk? One view maintains that kings such as he probably existed: otherwise it is difficult to explain their importance in later texts. A different view emphasizes the absence of inscriptions in the names of these early kings and points out that all the stories about them can be traced back to a single literary work probably composed during the early

Ur III period (about 2112–2047 BC), the so-called *Sumerian King List* (Steinkeller 2017a, 43 and 181).

That list purports to catalogue Mesopotamian rulers in descending chronological order. By placing contemporaneous rulers centuries apart from each other, it propounds the fiction that only one king could reign at any one time. The boundary between myth and history is particularly blurry in this text. Mythical kings such as Gishur of Kish, who allegedly reigned for 1,200 years, appear in the postdiluvian period (that is, after the Flood) as the predecessors of historical kings such as Sargon of Agade (about 2334–2279 BC). The text is divided into an antediluvian (before the Flood) and a postdiluvian period: the first begins



14.3 Old Babylonian tablet containing an extract of the Sumerian literary text about Gilgamesh's encounter with the monster Humbaba (YPM BC 023856, YBC 9857, obverse and reverse).

"when kingship came down from heaven" and the latter culminates with the monarch who commissioned each of its versions. In this way, kings sought legitimacy by tracing their reigns back to the most remote past.

The antediluvian period was not only a source of legitimacy: from the late second millennium BC on, it also enjoyed a ready association with wisdom. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, speaks of the "message" (*tēmu*) its main character brings back "from the antediluvian age":

He saw the secret and uncovered the hidden,
He brought back a message from the antediluvian age.
He came a distant road and was weary but granted rest,
[He] set down on a stele all (his) labors.

Epic of Gilgamesh, Standard Babylonian version,
Tablet I, lines 7–10 (translation in George 2003, 539)

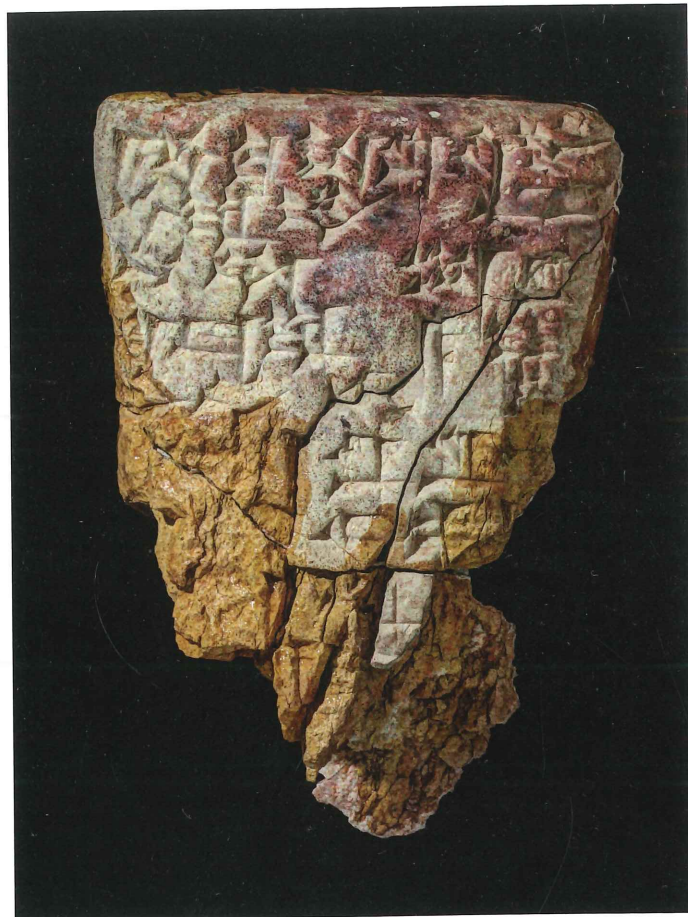
Knowledge from before the Flood is also depicted as wisdom in an inscription of Assurbanipal (reigned

668–631/627 BC), the last great king of the Assyrian empire. Befitting his role as patron of one of the largest libraries of the ancient world, Assurbanipal often portrayed himself as a scholar. In a passage where he recounts his scholarly abilities, he claims antediluvian knowledge by boasting:

I have examined cuneiform signs on stones (dating) from before the Flood, whose (meaning) is sealed, inaccessible, and confusing. (*Assurbanipal*, Inscription L⁴, I 18'; translation in Frahm 2011a, 272–273)

The More Recent Past: One King after Another

Gilgamesh and Assurbanipal share an important characteristic: they are kings. Indeed, kings are at the center of Mesopotamian ideas about both the most remote and the most recent past. To misappropriate a famous "definition" of history, Mesopotamian historiography could be described as "just one damn king after another" (The King's Singers 2012).



14.4 The only known manuscript of an Akkadian literary text beginning "I, Sargon," Old Babylonian period (YPM BC 000646, MLC 641, obverse).

Despite the lack of social diversity in Babylonian representations of the more recent past, there is nothing monotonous about the ways in which earlier kings are depicted. Superficially, it may seem as though depictions fall into two categories—those of "successful" and "unsuccessful" kings (compare Güterbock 1934)—but the depictions are rarely so one-dimensional. It is often challenging to explain the author's motivations behind any given depiction or, in cases of longevity, a composition's continued appeal.

A good example is the portrayal of Sargon of Agade in the *Sumerian Sargon Legend* (Cooper and Heimpel 1983). Sargon, the founder of what has been called the world's first empire, is in Mesopotamian tradition the paragon of a militarily successful ruler (Figure 14.4). The description of his rise to power in the *Sumerian Sargon Legend*, however, includes several elements incongruous with this image, such as his deceitful behavior toward his patron. One plausible explanation for this representation is that because

the Sargonic empire had to be different from the preceding Mesopotamian states, "its appearance ... had to be attributed to unusual and extraneous causes" (Steinkeller 2017a, 189).

Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (reigned about 2254–2218 BC), is also a recurring character in narratives about earlier kings that circulated during the late Old Babylonian period. If the number of manuscripts is a reliable index, the most popular of these narratives was the *Curse of Agade* (Figure 14.5), which depicts Naram-Sin's reign as a failure. As the following passage shows, the gods look askance at Naram-Sin for renovating Enlil's temple without obtaining divine approval, which triggers the invasion of the Gutians from the east:

That storm that drowns out all others,
that besets the entire land,

That rising Flood that nothing can withstand,

Enlil, because his beloved Ekur had been destroyed,

What should he destroy in return for it?

Curse of Agade, lines 149–152
(translation in Foster 2016, 354)

Why this negative depiction of Naram-Sin in later texts? The king's decision to promote himself to the status of a god is a plausible explanation (Steinkeller 2017a, 79–80), yet a full justification of his portrayal in later tradition should take into account a fundamental issue: which documents from his reign were still available in later periods?

Together with the challenge of explaining why earlier kings were depicted in certain ways, modern scholars also have to explain why some kings "made the cut" when others did not. An important factor in this selection process—though by no means the only one (Jonker 1995, 69)—is the existence and accessibility of their building inscriptions, in which they record building and restoration works that they sponsored during their reigns. Because building inscriptions were simultaneously protected by the structures to which they refer and likely to be rediscovered during subsequent renovations, such inscriptions became one of the main points of contact with the past for later Mesopotamians.

The earliest dedicatory inscriptions were probably not composed with an eye on posterity (Radner 2005, 206), but from the reign of Sargon of Agade onward, official inscriptions habitually end with curses directed at future rulers who will remove or deface the inscriptions. A dedicatory inscription from the reign of



14.5 A manuscript of the *Curse of Agade* (YPM BC 018676, YBC 4611, obverse and reverse).

Nebuchadnezzar II (reigned 605–562 BC) in the Yale Babylonian Collection illustrates how later kings deliberately searched for older inscriptions. The inscription describes how his restoration of a temple in the ancient city of Marad included the search for its “ancient foundation document”:

I sought and found its ancient foundation document, I saw the foundation document of King Naram-Sin, an ancient ancestor. I did not alter his written name, (but rather) inserted my written name together with his, and upon the foundation document of King Naram-Sin I laid (the temple’s) foundations. (YPM BC 016755, YBC 2122, column ii 2–8; translation in Clay 1915, 63)

Of course, Nebuchadnezzar II’s workmen may have encountered inscriptions of other kings while searching for the foundation document: official inscriptions are products of decisions about what to include and what to exclude.

New Ideas: Archaeologists, Kings, and Scholars

As illustrated by the inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II, in the first millennium scholars actively excavated the past. In contrast to the Old Babylonian period, when artifacts from earlier periods were still on display in temples, by the first millennium, to find relics of the past, one often had to dig (Beaulieu 1994; Jonker 1995, 154–155). Inscriptions found in this way were sometimes copied, and in more than one case, Babylonian scribes even took a squeeze (imprint) of an ancient original (see CBS 16106; Figure 3.22).

Frequently, there was more at stake than an academic interest in the past. Some objects from earlier times were used by kings to revive ancient institutions, often because of some political agenda. One famous example of this practice is the revival of the Babylonian ritual of royalty carrying baskets by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (reigned 680–669 BC).

The king does not explicitly relate the revival of this ritual to ancient objects, but it was probably inspired by the rediscovery of basket-carrying figurines from the late third or early second millennium BC (for example, Figure 14.6) that were buried in temple foundations (Porter 1993, 82–87). The perceived positive effect of this revival on Babylonian elites was such that Esarhaddon's sons, Assurbanipal and Shamash-shumu-ukin, also depicted themselves as basket carriers, probably in competing attempts to curry favor with the priesthood of an important Babylonian temple (von Dassow 1999, 230–233).

Another case of such behavior is recorded in detail on a clay cylinder in the Yale Babylonian Collection (Figure 14.7). It represents the only known manuscript of the official account of how and why king Nabonidus (reigned 555–539 BC) appointed his daughter priestess of the moon god, thereby reviving a position that had been defunct for centuries. According to the inscription, the discovery of an “old stele” of Nebuchadnezzar I (reigned 1125–1104 BC) and an ancient cylinder inscription of an earlier priestess, a daughter of Kudur-mabuk (nineteenth century BC), played crucial roles in the revival.

Time treated the various kings who populated the Mesopotamian past very differently. Gilgamesh—the protagonist of multiple literary works composed in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods—continued to be a household name and the protagonist of various literary compositions until the end of cuneiform culture. In contrast, it seems clear that by the middle of the first millennium BC most of the texts composed in Old Babylonian times about other early royal figures had largely been replaced by texts about kings from the second half of the second millennium BC. In the late first millennium (about 400–100 BC), these figures were, in turn, supplemented by historical figures of the Neo-Assyrian, Chaldean, and early Achaemenid periods (about 700–530 BC).

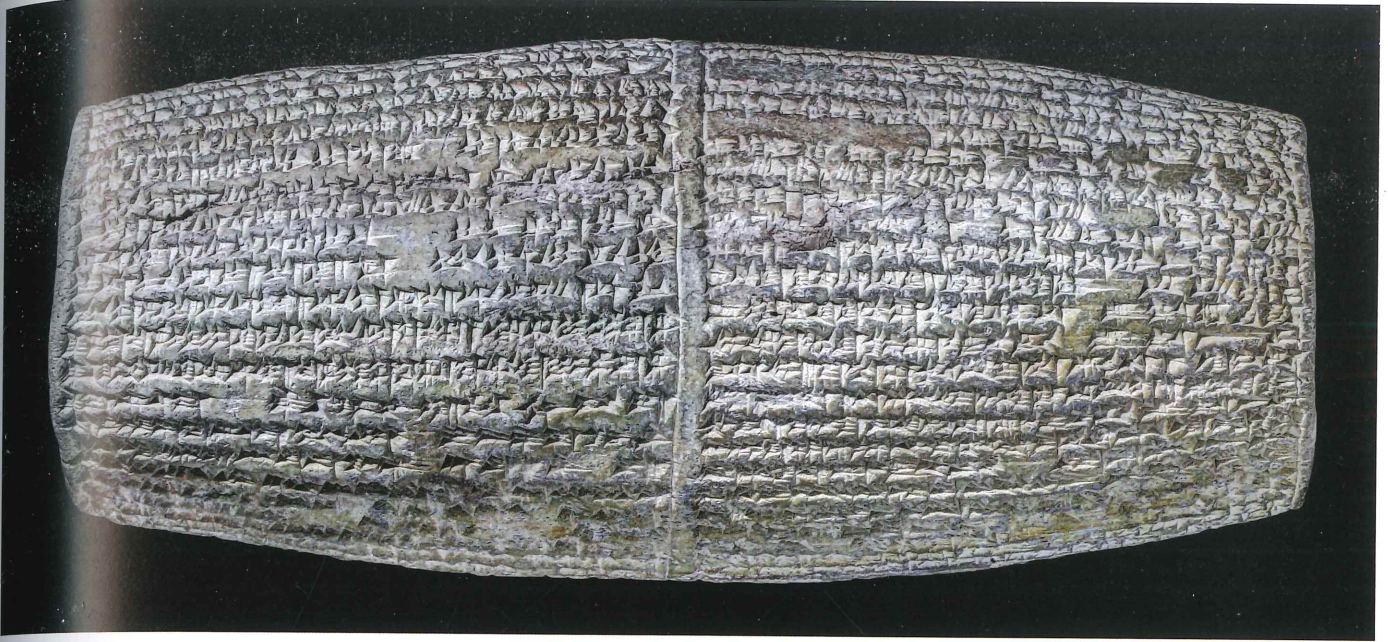
This “new cast of protagonists,” to appropriate a phrase previously applied only to the late first millennium (Waezeggars 2015, 213), is drawn from two sections of society. Royalty still predominates, but the kings in question are not always military heroes. On the one hand, Nebuchadnezzar I, the protagonist of an epic about his royal deeds that circulated widely during the first millennium BC (Foster 2005, 376–380), fits into this category. On the other, the Kassite king Nazi-Maruttash (reigned about 1307–1282 BC) has a rather dubious claim to fame in military terms, as the defeated party in an encounter with the Assyrian king. Instead,



14.6 Basket-carrying figurine from the reign of Ur-Ningirsu, king of Lagash, about 2100 BC (YPM BC 016871, YBC 2248, front view).

his later fame stems from his association with scholarship, specifically as one of the main characters of the Babylonian *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* (Frazer 2013).

Nazi-Maruttash's posthumous reputation is part of a wider phenomenon—namely, the inclusion of earlier scholars in texts about the past. The so-called *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, which associates works of Babylonian scholarship with individual scholars (see Chapter 12, “Mesopotamian Literature”),



14.7 The En-nigaldi-Nanna cylinder, so called after the Sumerian name given to Nabonidus's daughter on her appointment as priestess of the moon god (YPM BC 016810, YBC 2182).

is a prominent example of this trend. A new idea emerges from these texts: the Mesopotamian past was now populated by kings *and* scholars.

In fact, new compositions connected the world of present scholarship with royal figures of the past. One such text, the so-called *Uruk List of Kings and Scholars*, is represented in the Yale Babylonian Collection by a short extract, probably written as an exercise by a trainee scholar (Figure 14.8). The text links sages and scholars of remote and recent times with the kings under whose reign they supposedly lived:

During the reign of Ayalu, the king, Adapa was sage.

During the reign of Alalgar, the king, Uanduga was sage.

During the reign of Ameluana, the king, Enmeduga was sage.

During the reign of Amegalana, the king, Enmegalama was sage.

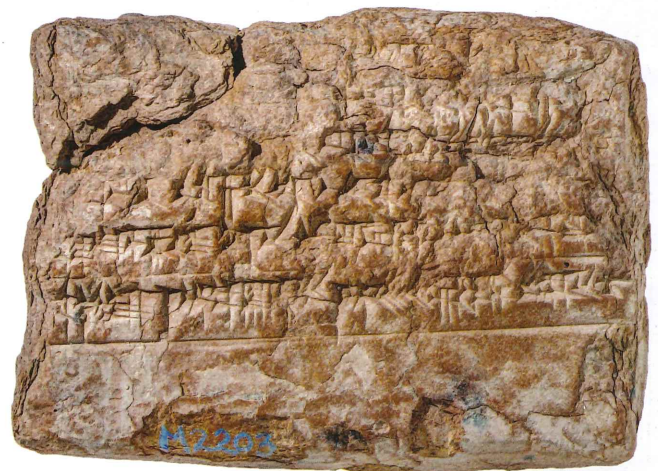
During the reign of Enmeushumgalana, the king, Enmebuluga was sage.

During the reign of Dumuzi, the shepherd, the king, Anenilda was sage.

During the reign of Enmeduranki, the king, Utuabzu was sage.

Uruk List of Kings and Scholars,
lines 1–7 (Lenzi 2008, 142)

case of the *Uruk List of Kings and Scholars* and similar treatises such as the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, first millennium scholars—at least some of whom traced their ancestry back to the scholars mentioned in the text—stood to gain legitimacy. It is possibly no coincidence that the extract of the *Uruk List* ends with Sin-leqi-unninni as scholar in the reign of the famed king Gilgamesh, since one of the important scholarly families of Uruk in the Hellenistic period traced back its ancestry to this scholar. For the first time, members of a nonroyal class were writing themselves into the past.



14.8 A manuscript containing an extract of the *Uruk List of Kings and Scholars* (YPM BC 002150, MLC 2203, obverse).

“For whose benefit?” is always an enlightening question to ask of a text about the past, and in the

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Names Index

Listed are all ancient personal names, divine names, toponyms, and gentilics in this book, along with the names of modern individuals who played a role in the early history of Mesopotamian archaeology or were closely linked to the creation of the Yale Babylonian Collection.

Compiled with assistance from Dana Brattlof, Jonathan Beltz, Thomas Eby, Evelyne Koubková, Eli Tadmor, and Sergio Tang.

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FRONT COVER

A student's mathematical exercise for determining the diagonal of a square. Unfired clay, Old Babylonian period (nineteenth or eighteenth century BCE, YPM BC 021354, YBC 7289), from southern Iraq (Larsa?).

BACK COVER

One of the ten stained and painted glass medallions, created by G. Owen Bonawit and his firm, that adorn the windows of the Yale Babylonian Collection spaces at Yale's Sterling Memorial Library.

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