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See also → Church

Narû Literature

The term “*Narû* literature” was coined in 1934 by H. G. Güterbock as a generic designation for a group of fictional compositions that imitate the structure of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions (Güterbock: 18–21). The first element of the term is a Sumerian loanword into Akkadian that designates a specific type of text support, namely a stele or a tablet usually made of stone, that was often used to support royal inscriptions (Pongratz-Leisten: 74–80). According to Güterbock, works of *Narû* literature have another main characteristic, namely a conclusion that draws a positive or negative lesson from the events narrated in the text (Güterbock: 19). However, a didactic function for every piece of *Narû* literature has since been questioned (Galter: 76) and is now regarded as a secondary, optional characteristic of texts in the corpus (Haul: 105–15).

Güterbock identified six works as belonging to the category. Four – the “Sargon Birth Legend,” the Old and Standard Babylonian versions of the “Cu-

thean Legend of Naram-Sin,” and the “Great Revolt against Naram-Sin” – are narratives in the first-person voice of either the founder of the Sargonic empire, Sargon of Akkad (r. ca. 2334–2279 BCE), or his grandson, Naram-Sin. The “Sargon Birth Legend,” which begins with Sargon narrating his mother’s abandonment of him as a baby in the Euphrates, his discovery by a gardener, and his rise to kingship and subsequent military exploits, has garnered interest from biblical scholars because of its striking similarities with the Exodus account of the birth of Moses (Lewis: 263–66; Gerhards: 149–264; Gruseke: 49–70, 204–9). The remaining two works assigned to the category by Güterbock are also narrative compositions in the first person, but in the voices of Shulgi king of Ur (r. ca. 2094–2047 BCE) and the god Marduk respectively. The most recent discussion of *narû* literature reckons with eleven or twelve texts, of which one is in the voice of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE), another in the voice of Nebuchadnezzar I (r. 1125–1104 BCE) and the remaining nine or ten are in the voices of Sargon of Akkad or Naram-Sin (Haul: 168).

Two objections have been raised against the term “*Narû* literature.” The first centers on the supposed characteristics of texts assigned to this category. The characteristics sketched by Güterbock and later refined by Lewis (87–88) are incontestably present in only one composition (the Standard Babylonian version of the Cuthean Legend). While this situation may to some extent be due to the texts’ fragmentary state of preservation, it raises the question of whether compositions with different functions have been shoe-horned into a modern category (Galter: 79). More recently, however, the diversity of the texts’ structure and language has been attributed to the variation in the models they imitate, i.e., authentic royal inscriptions (Haul: 169, 173). Haul argues for the validity of retaining *Narû* literature as a generic category by contrasting the texts with other works within the larger category of pseudepigraphic inscriptions (ibid.: 161–68). He points out that a political or economic motivation for simulating the voice of an earlier king is discernible in other pseudepigraphic inscriptions, but that the works of *Narû* literature, imitate royal inscriptions without having an obvious practical motive (ibid.: 133–35).

The second objection to the term concerns the potential for confusion it creates with genuine royal inscriptions inscribed on *narûs*, many of which can reasonably be described as pieces of literature (Grayson: 7, n. 9). Other terms proposed as replacements, such as “pseudo-autobiography” (ibid.: 7) and “fictional Akkadian autobiography” (Longman), have not met with wholesale approval (Westenholz: 16–24) but “fictional inscriptions” and “fictional *narûs*” (Haul: 134) deserve to gain traction since they combine the two defining features of the

texts: fictionality (ibid.: 117–31, 186–87) and the structure of a royal inscription. “Fictional inscription” has the additional merit of not containing the element *narû*, a term that in other contexts denotes the specific support on which texts were inscribed rather than the texts themselves.

English translations of literary texts about the Sargonic kings, including those classified as “fictional *narûs*” or “fictional inscriptions” by Haul, are provided by Westenholz. Longman offers a convenient set of translations of the other Akkadian texts classified as pseudepigraphic inscriptions by Haul (but as *Narû* literature by Güterbock, among others).

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