

# manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures

ISSN 1867-9617



## Publishing Information

### Originators: Transformation and Collaboration in the Production of Original Written Artefacts

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Every volume of *manuscript cultures* has been subjected to a double-blind peer review process and is openly accessible at no cost on the CSMC website <<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/mc.html>>. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for its generous support of the Cluster of Excellence EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts', which has made the printing of this journal volume possible.

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William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas, *Human Writes*, Performance view, 2010, Radialsystem, Berlin. Photography by Dominik Mentzos.



[www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de](http://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de)

Funded by



Deutsche  
Forschungsgemeinschaft  
German Research Foundation

ISSN (Print) 1867-9617

ISSN (Online) 2749-1021

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Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)

Universität Hamburg

Warburgstr. 26

20354 Hamburg

Germany

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## Article

# Divine Authorship in the Mesopotamian Literary Tradition

Szilvia Sövegjártó | Hamburg

## 1. Introduction

In the Mesopotamian literary culture, the identity of the author often remained unknown; similarly, the names of the scribes who copied manuscripts – the creators of the written artefact – were rarely recorded. Thus, anonymity was a distinctive feature of this culture. Over the years – sometimes many years – texts were copied several times with or without textual changes.

The sporadic acknowledgement of authorship in Mesopotamian manuscripts raises several possibilities, one of which is that authorship – often implicitly but occasionally explicitly – was attributed to deities. In other cases, the human contributors were recorded as textual mediators in place of the original creators. The rare instances in which Mesopotamian gods were depicted as authors – together with further phenomena found in this context – offer insights into both the role of the divine sphere in the creation of the originals, and the way in which works produced by deities or resulting from divine inspiration were conceptualized.

In this paper, I shall examine a unique kind of originator, an originator that holds a distinct place in Mesopotamia's cultural history. My aim is to delineate the relationship between Mesopotamian deities and authorship, exploring both the roles of the deities as authors as well as their contributions to the production of written artefacts. The dual role of deities as both author and scribe is exceptional. Specific texts, various written artefacts and material objects highlight this captivating characteristic of Mesopotamia's writing history. Drawing on various literary works in Sumerian and Akkadian, as well as on the realm of magical and therapeutic practices, I shall demonstrate how the image of divine originators was culturally constructed and symbolically strengthened.

## 2. Writing and the gods

The connection between the divine sphere and cuneiform writing is most evident in the existence of deities who served as patrons of the writing and scribal profession. The earliest deity who had this role was the Sumerian goddess Nisaba,<sup>1</sup> known from the Early Dynastic period onward. Nisaba, originally an agricultural deity associated with grain, acquired her role as the patron of writing through the close connection between this new tool and early Mesopotamian administration. In the Akkadian pantheon, the same role was fulfilled by Nabû,<sup>2</sup> the god of wisdom and writing, whose significance grew during the Old Babylonian period.

The patronage of the scribal art is represented symbolically in the attributes of both deities. While no definitive iconography of Nisaba has been identified, Sumerian literary works, particularly those originating in educational contexts, commonly conclude with the doxology 'Praise be to Nisaba!' ('nisaba za<sub>3</sub>-mi<sup>2</sup>)<sup>3</sup> or include a colophon dedicating the tablet to the goddess.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in a number of Sumerian literary compositions her lapis lazuli tablet is likened to the sky and the cuneiform signs to the stars.<sup>5</sup> Though lapis lazuli tablets are attested in Mesopotamia, they are exceptional and restricted to votive contexts; thus, besides being a powerful metaphor referring to a fictive artefact, the tablet of Nisaba is also linked to a very precious writing material.

<sup>1</sup> On this goddess, see Michalowski 1998–2001, Braun-Holzinger 1998–2001, and Michalowski 2002.

<sup>2</sup> On this deity, see Millard 1999, Pomponio 1998–2001, and Seidl 1998–2001.

<sup>3</sup> This practice is attested from the Early Dynastic period through to the Old Babylonian period. On the doxologies in the earliest literary corpus, see Zand 2020.

<sup>4</sup> On dedicatory colophons, including those dedicated to Nisaba and Nabû, see Sövegjártó 2023.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the initial line of the divine hymn *Nisaba A* [ETCSL 4.16.1]: nin mul-an-gin, gun<sub>3</sub>-a dub za-gin<sub>3</sub> šu du<sub>8</sub> 'Lady coloured like the stars of heaven, holding a lapis-lazuli tablet!' The transcription and the translation follow the edition of the ETCSL.



This written artefact was apparently a well-known attribute of the goddess Nisaba, who was frequently referred to as the tablet of shining heavenly stars. Cuneiform signs were closely associated with heavenly stars and the inscribed tablet of the goddess corresponded to the starlit sky. This imagery was intensified by both the star-like features of cuneiform signs and the blue colour of this rare and precious stone. Thus, this divine attribute was not simply a theoretical concept, rather, in its form as lapis lazuli, it was an artefact belonging in the inventory of Nisaba's household.

The heavenly imagery related to the lapis lazuli tablet is a specific characteristic of the Old Babylonian literary corpus dating back to the nineteenth to eighteenth centuries BCE. Nisaba herself was referred to in this corpus as a 'heavenly star', expressing her close association with the stars and sky. These compositions, mainly divine and royal hymns, also make it clear that this heavenly writing has two distinct features: it is written or inspired by the gods, particularly by Nisaba, and it is meant to preserve divine statements for eternity.

However, the symbolism of the lapis lazuli tablet was part of a further system of metaphors in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. As an attribute of Nisaba, this artefact is documented in a hymn to the goddess, proclaiming that she 'took counsel with the wet lapis lazuli tablet'.<sup>6</sup> In this early piece of literature – written in the Ur III period, i.e. the late third millennium BCE – the 'wet' lapis lazuli tablet clearly correlates with water. From a Mesopotamian point of view, this is a metaphor referring to the cosmic underground waters, the Abzu, the dwelling place of the god Enki, the god of wisdom. This representation of the lapis lazuli tablet was transferred from Sumerian to Akkadian literature with some important modifications.<sup>7</sup> Apart from its association with the gods, the lapis lazuli tablet was also described as a repository of wisdom and associated with sages; furthermore, the power of the tablet derived not only from the gods, but from the precious material from which it was made.

<sup>6</sup> A hymn to Nisaba, NBC 11107, obv. 9: *dub za-gin<sub>3</sub> duru<sub>3</sub>-da šag<sub>4</sub> am-da-kuš<sub>2</sub>-i<sub>3</sub>*.

<sup>7</sup> See the bilingual ritual text, CBS 11341 rev. iii 41–45 / iv 73–77 (second millennium BCE): *dub abgal ġar-ra , pu<sub>2</sub> sud-ra<sub>2</sub> nam-gu<sub>2</sub>-be<sub>2</sub> nu-til-la , lagab<sup>na4</sup> za-gin<sub>3</sub> kal-la , niġ<sub>2</sub>-tam-ma gurun<sub>2</sub>-ak u<sub>3</sub>-tud-da saġar kur-ra , i-si-iš ba-e-la<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub>-e-'da' / tu-u[p-pi ...] , šu-ut-ta-tu[m ...] , ši-bi-ir-ti uq-ni-[im ...] , ta-bu ša-ar-'pu<sup>2</sup>-um li-du-um 'e'-[...] , ša ši-iġ-tam ma-lu-[u<sub>2</sub>] 'Tablet composed by the sage, an unfathomable well, whose shaft is never-ending, a block of precious lapis-lazuli, a cleansed item (Akk.: of good quality), inspected (Akk.: refined), a product of mountain ore, on which tears will drape.'*

Nabû's distinctive attribute was the stylus, depicted as a single wedge, either vertical or horizontal, sometimes resting on a clay tablet or platform. Thus, the shape of the stylus became closely associated with cuneiform writing. In the first millennium BCE, Nabû played a significant role in the New Year festival, recording the fate of the land on the Tablet of Destinies (a mythical artefact belonging to the divine sphere), as described in the creation myth *Enūma eliš*. As the patron of scribes, he was also invoked in numerous colophons.

Other deities were also believed to communicate with the human sphere through writing although this is not as explicit as in the cases of Nisaba and Nabû. The gods were considered to be the authors of the messages conveyed through various divinatory practices, and divination held a crucial place in Mesopotamian culture. Diviners would interpret signs and omens believed to be sent by the gods, providing insight into future events, and guidance. Indeed, reports of signs in the shape of cuneiform script appearing on the human body are found in omen series. Although such reports require interpretation,<sup>8</sup> nevertheless, they illustrate the fact that deities often chose quite specific and singular materials to convey written messages, including the human body.

Additionally, any composition recorded with cuneiform script could contain hidden meanings that scholars were tasked with unveiling. These secondary meanings were conveyed through multiple readings of individual signs, often documented in commentaries.<sup>9</sup> However, when deities interacted with the human sphere through these hidden messages, their identities remained obscure, with only the message and its consequences holding any significance.

Finally, written artefacts relating to the divine sphere can only exist within this sphere, as is apparent in the following example focusing on the conceptualisation of the Tablet of Destinies.<sup>10</sup> The possession of this fictive artefact guaranteed a supreme position among the gods, and rulership over the universe. However, information on the author is not known, nor is there any information on the possible producer of the object itself. Although the content of the tablet remains unknown, the name of the artefact is suggestive: it contained

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see Frahm 2010.

<sup>9</sup> On Babylonian and Assyrian commentaries, see Frahm 2011. Several text editions were made accessible on the online portal of the Cuneiform Commentaries Project of Eckart Frahm, Enrique Jiménez, Mary Frazer, and Klaus Wagonsonner; see Frahm et al. 2013–2023.

<sup>10</sup> On this written artefact and its conceptualisation, see Lämmerhirt, and Zgoll 2009.



Fig. 1: London, British Museum, BM 89810, unknown provenance, Neo-Assyrian period, cylinder seal and its modern impression. On the left are the symbols of the gods Nabû and Marduk – the stylus and the spade – standing on altars beneath a winged sun-disc, symbol of the sun god.

the destinies specified by the gods. The disclosure of the destinies could occur in the divine sphere through reading out the tablet's content; in the human sphere, the gods might mediate destiny in the course of divination. No illustration of this fictive artefact is known at present, thus its materiality is known only in a few literary descriptions: the Sumerian composition *Ninurta and the Turtle*, the Akkadian *Anzu Myth* and the Babylonian creation myth *Enūma eliš*.<sup>11</sup> However, in these descriptions of the Tablet of Destinies, it was seen primarily as a prototypical legal document (a clay tablet written with cuneiform script and impressed with cylinder seals); it was not a text which made any allusion to omen compendia or divinatory texts. Its rather plain materiality – a clay tablet – is surprising for an artefact which belongs in the divine sphere.

According to Sumerian and Akkadian literature, the owner of the tablet is described as 'holding the tablet in his hand' or 'clutching the tablet to his breast', i.e. wearing the tablet as an amulet. In both cases, physical ownership is emphasized. Interestingly, whenever the Tablet of Destinies was reported to have changed hands, it was said to have happened through theft or violence. According to both a

Sumerian narrative and the *Anzu Myth*, the Anzu-bird stole the tablets from Enki. The *Enūma eliš* tells us that the tablet changed possession several times: Tiamat hands it over to Kingu, who will be overpowered by Marduk and thus loses the tablet. Thereafter, Marduk hands it over to Anu, the god to whom it is supposed to belong.

The praxeological aspects of this artefact also enhance its material features as they are closely related to the praxeology of legal documents. It is well known that the physical ownership of legal documents was also of importance in Mesopotamia: whenever a loan was repaid, the debtor took ownership of the corresponding document from the creditor. Again, whoever bought a piece of land, also took possession of all previous sale documents concerning the land. This procedure aimed to eliminate the possibility of another person claiming ownership of the same land. To sum up, the mere physical existence of a document indicating possession was not enough to satisfy legal requirements; the transfer of a piece of land involved the handover of all previous legal documents to the new owner.

Thus, the conceptualisation of the Tablet of Destinies was based on real models found in the human world. Apparently, the divine origin of an artefact would manifest itself in an exceptional material form only when the artefact was also accessible to, or transferred to, the human world.

<sup>11</sup> The exact references are, for *Ninurta and the Turtle*, [ETCSL 1.6.3], II. B 2–4; for the *Anzu Myth* III: 91–95; for the *Enūma eliš*, EnEl I 157–160, IV 119–122, and V 69–70.

### 3. Deities as authors represented in lists of originators

The above statement suggests that divine authorship typically remained obscure in ancient Mesopotamia. However, there is a notable exception, namely the renowned *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*,<sup>12</sup> a composition which sought to identify the authors of specific texts and groups of texts, mainly of a scholarly or literary nature. The *Catalogue* emerged during the first millennium BCE and was preserved in at least three manuscripts found in the Nineveh libraries.<sup>13</sup> It was copied in later times and an alternative version from the Hellenistic or Arsacid Era is also known.<sup>14</sup>

While the *Catalogue* primarily addresses human authorship, it initially lists nine (groups of) compositions, seven with scholarly and two with literary content (ll. 1–3), attributing them to an important deity, Enki/Ea. Enki/Ea was the god associated with wisdom, magic, and incantations (l.4). This section of the *Catalogue* is as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- 1 [‘The Exorcists’] Lore’; ‘The Lamentation-priests’ Lore’; ‘When Anu and Enlil’ (Celestial Divination);
- 2 [‘(If) a] Form’ (Physiognomic Divination); ‘Who has not Completed the Months’ (Teratological Divination); ‘Diseased Sinews’ (Healing Arts);
- 3 [‘(If) the Utterance [of the Mouth]’ (Cledonancy); ‘The King, the Storm, whose Aura is Heroic’ (Lugale); ‘Fashioned like An’ (Angim);
- 4 [These] are by E[a].

Although the *Catalogue* mentions no other deities, it attributes compositions to human authors employing two distinct formulas. In one formula, the intention is transparent, i.e. to assert authorship; this is conveyed in the phrase ‘by the mouth of DN/PN’ (*ša pi-i DN/PN*).<sup>16</sup> However, another formula uses a different scenario: ‘This is what was revealed to PN, and what he proclaimed’ (*u<sub>2</sub>-šab-ri-šu-ma id-bu-bu*).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Concerning the most recent textual reconstruction of this composition, see Mitto 2022 with further literature in n. 15.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of manuscripts, see Mitto 2022, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Mitto refers to these late manuscripts as part of the eBL fragmentarium and edits them in his article, see Mitto 2022, 109, 131–134, and 136 for a copy.

<sup>15</sup> The translation follows the recent edition of Mitto based on the Assyrian version of the *Catalogue*, see Mitto 2022, 112–113. In most cases, the incipit of the respective compositions is quoted here, in accordance with the Mesopotamian tradition where compositions did not have a title but were known by their initial lines.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Mitto 2022, 116, l. c+9.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Mitto 2022, 114, l. b+2.

In the latter context, the human intermediary is included in the list, and the (assumed divine) authorship of the composition remains enigmatic. This practice also draws attention to the Mesopotamian belief that deities communicated directly with chosen individuals, endowing them with divine knowledge and inspiring them to record it in written form.

This distinction within the *Catalogue* demonstrates that there was a threefold understanding of how scholarly and literary compositions were produced in ancient Mesopotamia: they were composed either by deities or by humans or they were authored by deities and conveyed to the human sphere through human intermediaries. When examining the content of these three models, it becomes clear that omen series were directly attributed to the god Ea; this is also true of two Sumerian literary compositions which were known from the Old Babylonian period onwards. Furthermore, although these Sumerian literary or liturgical compositions were written in a language that was no longer used in the first millennium BCE, they were still used in religious contexts, making them accessible to scholars.

Human intermediaries are also mentioned in the *Catalogue* in three Akkadian literary compositions. Oannes-Adapa, more a mythological figure than human, was believed to be the transmitter of two compositions,<sup>18</sup> while the mythical composition *Erra and Išum* was revealed to the scholar Kabti-ilī-Marduk.<sup>19</sup>

An analysis of the wording used in the *Catalogue*, offers insights into how ancient Mesopotamian scholars perceived authorship. Both the term ‘by the mouth of’ and ‘he proclaimed’ denote oral rather than written transmission.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, being the author or mediator of a particular composition appears to be distinct from being the producer of a manuscript. Indeed, in most cases, authorship is associated with oral tradition rather than with the written domain.

Learning a composition by heart and performing it played a vital role in the transmission process. This observation is supported by the fact that clay tablets were not intended to be preserved for ever and the extant tablets were thus viewed as copies rather than originals. Perhaps these circumstances lessened the importance of the tablets and contributed to the emphasis on the oral rather than on the written tradition, particularly in the context of authorship and originality.

<sup>18</sup> Mitto 2022, 113, ll. 5–6.

<sup>19</sup> Mitto 2022, 114, ll. b+1–2.

<sup>20</sup> In the Mesopotamian tradition, gods revealed their will in form of dreams.



Fig. 2: London, British Museum, K.2248, Library of Ashurbanipal, Neo-Assyrian period, one of the manuscripts containing the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*.



The precise ways in which communication between the divine and the human spheres was conceptualized in ancient Mesopotamia remain unknown. As with numerous other ancient cultures, gods were believed to communicate with human intermediaries through dreams. However, the extent to which entire compositions could be thus inspired is shrouded in uncertainty, as is the possibility that alternative conduits existed for inspiring these human mediators.

Our knowledge of the possible connections between the divine realm and the individuals involved in manuscript production remains speculative. Conceivably, the author of a specific composition might also have been the originator of a written artefact. However, traditionally in the Mesopotamian writing culture, the two roles were seen to be distinct. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize the fact that Mesopotamian scholarly culture predominantly leaned towards orality. As such, those responsible for crafting written artefacts – these were the scribes who perpetuated the traditions by transmitting compositions – largely remained anonymous and were not directly associated with the act of composition itself. There are, however, some specific cases in which both author and scribe belonged to the divine sphere.

#### 4. Divine originators in the literary tradition

In the literary tradition of Mesopotamia, one rarely finds specific attributions to the gods in individual compositions; this is also true of Sumerian and Akkadian literary manuscripts, where the originators, human or divine, are seldom named.<sup>21</sup> However, there are a few notable exceptions – literary works that serve as valuable sources for the present topic, as they make explicit reference to divine authorship or divine inspiration in relation to certain compositions.

I would like to present two well-known cases from the Sumerian tradition that illustrate the two types of divine authorship: direct involvement and divine inspiration. These compositions are the *Keš Temple Hymn* and one of the hymns of Šulgi, the famous ruler of the Ur III Dynasty.

In the introduction of the *Keš Temple Hymn*<sup>22</sup>, the goddess Nisaba, the patroness of writing and the scribal profession, is presented as weaving the hymn like a net from the words of Enlil (ll. 8–11):<sup>23</sup>

As Keš lifted its head among all the lands, Enlil spoke in praise of Keš. Nisaba was its accountant (?): with those words she wove it (= the praise) like a net. She carried out the writing on the tablet.

The figurative expression used in this case was the Sumerian verb ‘sa-gen<sub>7</sub> – sur’ (‘to weave/form like a net’).<sup>24</sup> Nisaba’s act of creation, described in metaphorical language, takes place in the divine sphere, while the product, the manuscript of the hymn, also becomes available in the human realm. However, the identity of the divine author and originator is unclear. Is it Nisaba or Enlil? Interestingly, the creation of a temple hymn – like any other act of creation – involves two participants in the divine sphere: Enlil, the author of the oral composition, and Nisaba, who is the scribe and therefore the originator of the written tradition. This clear-cut difference between the actors – the author and the scribe – is a distinctive feature of Mesopotamian literary manuscripts.

The closing passage of the Sumerian hymn of Šulgi *E* (ll. 240–252) also highlights the role of several deities in inspiring royal hymnody, particularly the hymns about the ruler:<sup>25</sup>

May my hymns be in every mouth. May the songs about me never be forgotten. The purpose of my praise is for the words that Enki conveyed about me, and the joyful utterances of Geštinana, which she speaks from her heart and disseminates, to never fade from memory. Therefore, I have meticulously recorded these great repositories of knowledge, line by line, in Nisaba’s House of Wisdom, as if they were gleaming heavenly stars. They shall never be forgotten. They are like everlasting celestial bodies spanning eternal years. The scribe shall present them to the singer, who will peruse them, for

al-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>. The transliteration follows the online edition of the ETCSL, the translation is my own.

<sup>24</sup> Conceptualizing authorship through metaphors is rare in Sumerian literature; nevertheless, it is a well-attested strategy, for example, in medieval Persian prose, see Rubanovich 2009.

<sup>25</sup> en<sub>3</sub>-du-ĝu<sub>10</sub> ka-ga<sub>14</sub> ħe<sub>2</sub>-ĝal<sub>2</sub>, šir<sub>3</sub>-ĝu<sub>10</sub> ĝeštug<sub>2</sub>-ge na-an-dib-be<sub>2</sub>, gu-kur silim-eš<sub>2</sub> dug<sub>4</sub>-ga-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-kam, inim<sup>d</sup>en-ki-ke<sub>4</sub> mu-ši-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-ĝa<sub>2</sub>-a-am<sub>3</sub>, ħul<sub>2</sub>-ħul<sub>2</sub>-e šag<sub>4</sub>-ta dug<sub>4</sub> tal<sub>2</sub>-tal<sub>2</sub>, <sup>d</sup>ĝeštīn-an-na-ka-kam, ud ul-le<sub>2</sub>-a-aš nu-ħa-lam-e-de<sub>3</sub>, e<sub>2</sub>-ĜEŠTUG<sub>2</sub>. <sup>d</sup>NISABA niĝ<sub>2</sub>-umun<sub>2</sub>-a gal-gal mu-bi-še<sub>3</sub> mul-an kug-gin<sub>7</sub> bi<sub>2</sub>-sar, ud me-da na-me ĝeštug<sub>2</sub>-ge niĝ<sub>2</sub> la-ba-ab-dib-be<sub>2</sub> [...]bi, nu-ħa-lam-e mul-an sag<sub>2</sub> nu-di mu da-ri<sub>2</sub> mu-tuku<sub>2</sub>, nar-e dub-sar ħe<sub>2</sub>-en-ši-tum<sub>2</sub> igi ħe<sub>2</sub>-en-ni-in-bar-re, ĝeštug<sub>2</sub> ĝizzal <sup>d</sup>nisaba-ka-kam, dub za-gin<sub>7</sub>-gin<sub>7</sub> gu<sub>3</sub> ħe<sub>2</sub>-na<sup>7</sup>-ta<sup>7</sup>-de<sub>2</sub>-e, en<sub>3</sub>-du-ĝu<sub>10</sub> kug ki-dar-ra-gin<sub>7</sub> pa ħe<sub>2</sub>-em-ta-e<sub>3</sub>-e<sub>3</sub>. The transliteration follows the online edition of the ETCSL; the translation is my own.

<sup>21</sup> In case of Akkadian literary manuscripts, see the list of Foster 1991, 17.

<sup>22</sup> ETCSL 4.80.2

<sup>23</sup> keš<sub>3</sub><sup>ki</sup> kur-kur-ra saĝ il<sub>2</sub>-bi, <sup>d</sup>en-lil<sub>2</sub>-le keš<sub>3</sub><sup>ki</sup> za<sub>3</sub>-mi<sub>2</sub> am<sub>3</sub>-ma-ab-be<sub>2</sub>, <sup>d</sup>nisaba nu-ka-aš-bi-im, inim-bi-ta sa-gin<sub>7</sub> im-da-an-sur, dub-ba sar-sar šu-še<sub>3</sub>

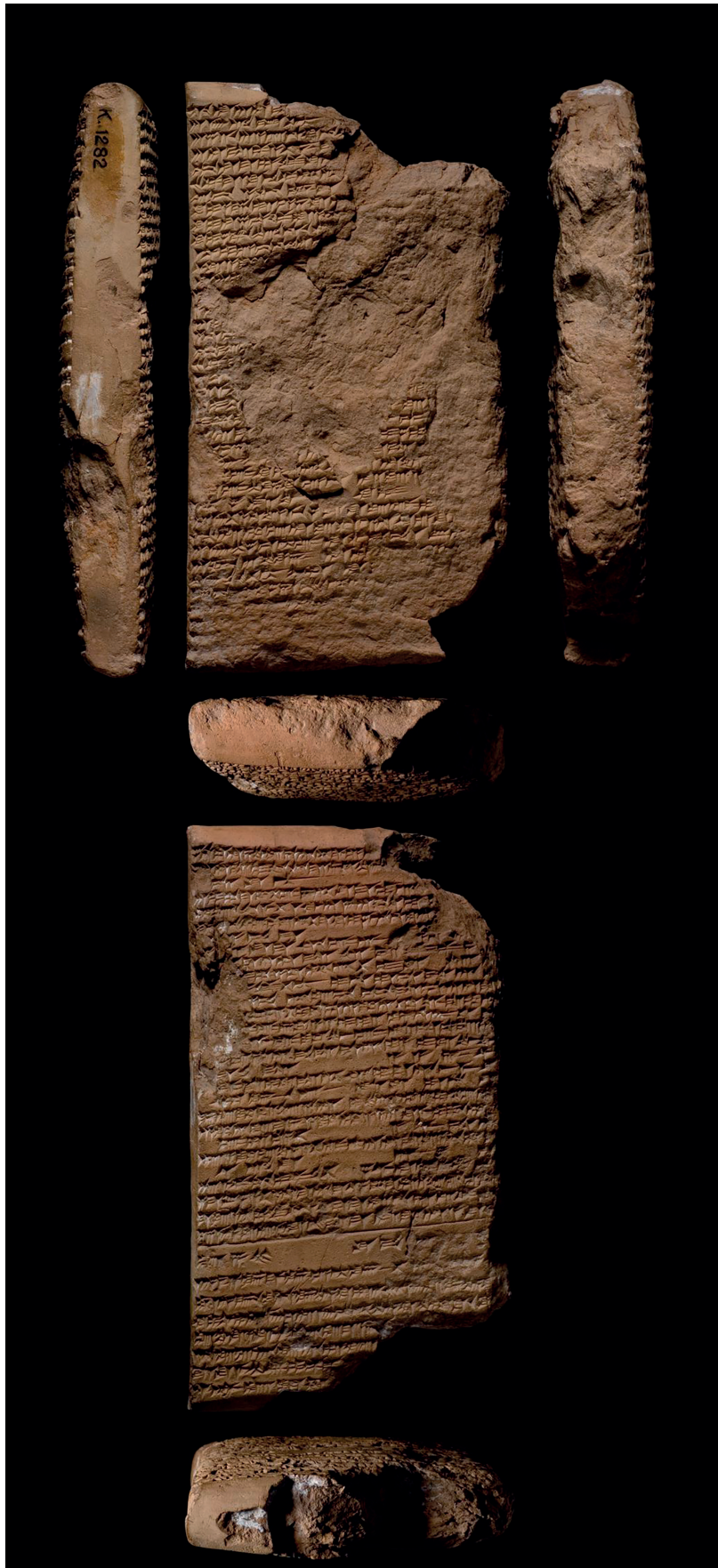


Fig. 3: London, British Museum, K.1282, Library of Ashurbanipal, Neo-Assyrian period, a manuscript of Tablet V of *Erra and Išum* with the colophon mentioning Kabti-ilī-Marduk.

they possess the wisdom and understanding of Nisaba. And he, the singer, shall recite my hymns from them, as if from a lapis-lazuli tablet, illuminating them like silver in the lode.

In this case, Enki appears as the author of the compositions, but several other gods are involved in the chain of transmission. Geštinana seems to be responsible for the oral transmission of Šulgi's songs, while Nisaba, the goddess of writing, ensures the continuity of the written tradition. Moreover, the lapis lazuli tablet of Nisaba also appears in this context, making metaphorical reference to this eternal written artefact, written with heavenly stars, containing the royal hymns, and thus securing their transmission for many generations.

The Akkadian literary tradition also contains comparable narrative or descriptive accounts illustrating the divine inspiration of compositions or of their manuscripts. One example in which this concept is traceable is the myth *Erra and Išum* (Tablet V, ll. 42–47); here, it is not only the name of the human mediator that is given, but also the circumstances of the composition of the myth.<sup>26</sup>

The composer of its text was Kabti-ilī-Marduk of the family Dabibi. He (the god) revealed it in the nighttime, and, just as he (the god) had conveyed it while he (the intermediary) was coming awake, he (the intermediary) omitted nothing at all. Nor one line did he add to it. When Erra heard it, he approved. What (belonged) to Išum his vanguard pleased him, all the gods were praising his sign.

This passage is followed by a statement made by Erra protecting the composition and guaranteeing its performative practice and transmission.

According to this passage, the composition was revealed to the human intermediary during the night, most likely in a dream. Whether he transmitted the composition in writing or orally, is not clear, but an oral performance certainly took place. Similarities between this account and the previously quoted hymn, *Šulgi E*, suggest a continuity across linguistic boundaries, and a strong connection between the Sumerian and Akkadian conceptualisations of divine authorship.

<sup>26</sup> *ka-šir kam-me-šu<sub>2</sub> kab-ti-ilāni<sup>a</sup> marduk mār<sup>a</sup> da-bi-bi, ina šat mu-ši u<sub>2</sub> šab-ri-šu<sub>2</sub> ma ki-i ša<sub>2</sub> ina mu-na-at-ti id-bu-bu a-a-am-ma ul ih-ti, e-da šu-ma u<sub>2</sub> rad-di a-na muh-hi, iš-me-šu-ma<sup>a</sup> er<sub>3</sub>-ra im-da-har pa-ni-šu<sub>2</sub>, ša<sub>2</sub> i-šum a-lik mah-ri-šu<sub>2</sub> i-ṭib elī-šu<sub>2</sub>, ilāni nap-har-šu<sub>2</sub> nu i-na-ad-du it-ti-šu<sub>2</sub>.* The transliteration and translation follow Foster 1991, for the Akkadian text, see Lambert 1962, 122–125, or Foster 1991, 19.

## 5. Divine originators in the magical and therapeutic praxis

Evidently, magic, religion, and medicine were all integral components of the Mesopotamian worldview. Distinguishing between these domains is challenging. Here, I offer the following descriptions: Magic is a divine tool utilized by both the gods and humans to restore or maintain order; religious rituals are symbolic of the involvement of the gods in achieving the desired changes.<sup>27</sup>

Within the realm of magical and therapeutic practices, there seem to be two types of divine authorship: firstly, direct action by the deity as an author and, secondly, action through a human intermediary. These two types are found in many Mesopotamian incantations, i.e. in practices which belong in the realm of theurgy,<sup>28</sup> this is a form of divine magic where ritual practices become effective through the involvement of a deity as well as through the mythological prefiguration of these practices, particularly in their role as creators.

Falkenstein identified four main types of incantation,<sup>29</sup> two of which are relevant to the present topic. The first type involves a priest who legitimizes himself as the representative of a deity, acting as a human intermediary to convey the intentions and words of the god. In such cases, various formulas are found at the end of the incantation confirming the involvement and contribution of the deity. These divine legitimisation formulas clearly state that the incantation contains the words or instructions of a deity. Examples of these closing formulas include ‘Word of Enlil’,<sup>30</sup> ‘(Invocation) of the temple of Enki. Even Asar in his abzu should not be able to dissolve it. It is (in) the name of Nanše’,<sup>31</sup> ‘This is the speech of Ningirimma’,<sup>32</sup> or ‘It is not

<sup>27</sup> Rudik 2011, 7.

<sup>28</sup> See Ceccarelli 2015, 198, with reference to Bottéro 1987–1990, 201–202 § 2.

<sup>29</sup> The typology of Falkenstein 1931 consists of these main types: (1) legitimisation type, (2) prophylactic type, (3) Marduk-Ea-type, as well as (4) dedicatory type. This typology is based on formal and formulaic differences of various incantations. A criticism of his typology can be found in Schramm 2008, 16–17, as well as Rudik 2011, 67–68. Rudnik even proposed a new typology based on the incantations’ content. Nevertheless, the typology of Falkenstein is a useful one when considering divine authorship or mediation, as these aspects usually manifest in the formulaic language used and not in the content of the incantations.

<sup>30</sup> N 1235 + N 6283 ii 5: *inim en-[il]<sub>2</sub>-la<sub>2</sub>-kam*. The text was edited by Alster 1976, 14–18, Cunningham 1997, 54, and Rudik 2011, 438–441.

<sup>31</sup> RBC 2000 ii 6–8: *eš<sub>3</sub> en-ki asar-re abzu-na, nam-mu-da-bur<sub>2</sub>-e, <da> mu nanše al-me-a*. The text was edited by Hallo 1985, 56–64, Veldhuis 2003, 1–4, and more recently by Rudik 2011, 428–433. The present transliteration and translation is based on the edition of Rudik.

<sup>32</sup> ARET V 19 iii 1–2: *UD-du<sub>11</sub>-ga, nin-girim<sub>x</sub>*. The text was edited by Krebernik 1984, 146–149. The same formula occurs in VAT 12597 iii

my incantation. It is the incantation of Ea'.<sup>33</sup> The emphasis of such formulas is unmistakable: the composition is of divine origin, and, when the incantation is a spell, it is imbued with magical efficacy.

The third type in Falkenstein's typology refers to divine dialogues. Such dialogues take place between the god Enki and his son, Asalluhi.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Asalluhi, recognizing the suffering of a human caused by a demon, turns to his father for assistance; in the present example he addresses his father personally; in other examples he sends a messenger.<sup>35</sup> Enki, or the corresponding senior god, always responds with a formula: 'My son! What do you not know? What can I add for you?'<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, the senior deity explains the treatment of the patient in detail, assuming that the junior deity is already aware of it.

In compositions such as the above there are no formulas which explicitly assign the composition to the respective deity; nevertheless, the narrative framework of the composition clearly indicates that it is a god who reveals the treatment the incantation priest should carry out on the patient. Thus, we have a further example of divine authorship or, at least, of divine mediation.

The connection between the divine author and the composition is explicit in these cases. However, since magical-therapeutical compositions were primarily intended for oral performance – and only secondarily for written preservation and transmission – the direct connection between the divine author and the written artefact is not stated.

## 6. Conclusions

In Mesopotamia, the belief in divine authorship found expression in various forms, predominantly in religious and literary compositions. However, applying the terms 'originals' and 'originators' to ancient Mesopotamia is a challenging task. The challenge arises because of the

prevalence of the practice of transmission through copying, a practice which may well have rendered the distinction between 'originals' and 'originators' less clear. However, precisely in the realm of divine originators, intriguing indications surface, pointing to instances of both divine authors and divine scribes (although the two functions remaining distinct). These instances offer a nuanced view of the multifaceted relationship between divine agency and the act of writing in this ancient civilisation.

The ancient Mesopotamians firmly believed that their gods actively shaped and influenced their lives; thus, it is no surprise that divine authorship – the creation and transmission of written works – is an element of such beliefs. Nevertheless, the details of divine authorship may well have varied among different social groups, and the perception of deities as the originators of compositions or written artefacts may have evolved over time and across different regions.

The manifestations of divine authorship in Mesopotamia were diverse. Not only was divine authorship held in great respect, but divine inspiration also played a significant role in the spheres of religion, magic, and therapeutical treatment. Ominous signs, closely associated with the cuneiform script, were also considered as indications of divine intervention in the human realm.

Whenever deities were presented as skilled scribes – conveying divine messages or shaping the written form of compositions – the written product appeared on specific, precious materials. Thus, the written artefacts of the divine sphere were not everyday objects but were the exceptional products of exceptional producers.

Given the scarcity of surviving source material, determining the prevalence of the concept of divine authorship in Mesopotamia poses a challenge. However, it is evident that divine authorship is directly visible in numerous genres, and its indirect influence was even more significant. Not only did deities communicate with the human realm through inspired compositions and ominous signs, but rulers were also believed to act as intermediaries of divine will. Authorship and inspiration were just two of the many ways in which deities could interact with the human sphere and make an impact on the life of human beings. Thus, the influence of the gods in the human sphere far exceeded the realms explored in this paper.

10–11, edited by Krebernik 1984, 20–24, among others. The present transliteration and translation is based on this edition.

<sup>33</sup> It is the typical closing formula of Akkadian incantations, not always referring to the god Ea: *šiptu ul yattun šiptu DN*.

<sup>34</sup> The deities involved change in the course of time. In the earliest periods, likely Enlil and Ningirima were involved in this incantation type, in the Ur III period, the compositions refer to Enki and Asalluhi, from the Old Babylonian period on, Ea and Marduk were featured in the text.

<sup>35</sup> HS 1588 + HS 1596 ii 1–2: *asal-lu<sub>2</sub>-hi a-a-ni en-ki-še<sub>3</sub> / e<sub>2</sub>-a mu-ši-ku<sub>4</sub>, g[u<sub>3</sub>] mu-na-de<sub>2</sub>-e* ('Asalluhi entered his father Enki's house and spoke to him').

<sup>36</sup> HS 1588 + HS 1596 ii 3: *dumu-ĝu<sub>10</sub> <<a> a-na nu-zu / a-na-ra-ab-[ta]h*.



### Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts: Material, Interaction and Transmission in Manuscript Cultures', project no. 390893796. The research was conducted within the scope of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at Universität Hamburg.

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Fig. 1: Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), attr. *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest (Xingrang tie 行穰帖)*; undated, Tang tracing copy, letter fragment mounted as a handscroll, here in rolled-up form with outer title slip; Princeton University Art Museum, Object no. 35203.

ISSN 1867–9617

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