PROBLEMS OF CANONICITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA

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SUMERIAN LITERATURE AND SUMERIAN IDENTITY

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There is evidence of a regional identity in early Babylonia, but it does not seem to be of the Sumerian ethno-linguistic sort. Sumerian identity as such appears only as an artifact of the scribal literary curriculum once the Sumerian language had to be acquired through education rather than as a mother tongue. By the late second millennium, it appears there was no notion that a separate Sumerian ethno-linguistic population had ever existed.

My title puts Sumerian literature before Sumerian identity, and in so doing anticipates my conclusion, which will be that there was little or no Sumerian identity as such – in the sense of “We are all Sumerians!” – outside of Sumerian literature and the scribal milieu that composed and transmitted it. By “Sumerian literature,” I mean the corpus of compositions in Sumerian known from manuscripts that date primarily to the first half of the 18th century BC. With a few notable exceptions, the compositions themselves originated in the preceding three centuries, that is, in what Assyriologists call the Ur III and Isin-Larsa (or Early Old Babylonian) periods. I purposely eschew the too fraught and contested term “canon,” preferring the very neutral “corpus” instead, while recognizing that because nearly all of our manuscripts were produced by students, the term “curriculum” is apt as well.¹ The geographic designation “Babylonia” is used here for the region to the south of present day Baghdad, the territory the ancients would have called “Sumer and Akkad.” I will argue that there is indeed evidence for a 3rd millennium pan-Babylonian regional identity, but little or no evidence that it was bound to a Sumerian mother-tongue community.

Identity in 3rd millennium Babylonia was city-based, but there is evidence for an identity that transcended local particularism, beginning with the writing system that within a few centuries of its invention at Uruk in the late 4th millennium BC, spread throughout Babylonia.²

¹ For a history and overview of Sumerian literature, see, e.g., Rubio, ‘Sumerian Literature,’ 2009.
² The basic discussion is in Englund, ‘Texts from the Late Uruk Period,’ 1998. See Monaco, The Cornell University Archaic Tablets. 2007, for the publication of over 200
Sealings found on tablets at Jemdet Nasr in the north from around 3000 BC contain the names of a group of cities, that match the initial entries in the archaic Cities list, one of a number of lexical texts—word lists—used to transmit the standardized proto-cuneiform signs almost from their inception. Whether the group of cities on the sealings and in the list constituted a polity ruled by one of them, or a looser confederation, is uncertain, but that they simply represent independent trading partners seems the least likely possibility.

Several centuries later, around 28-2700 BC, sealings from Ur contain groups of two to seven names of cities, again suggesting some translocal sense of identity. A regional identity comes more clearly into focus around 2600 BC, with the first large corpora of relatively intelligible texts from Fara and Abu Salabikh. For the first time, the lexical list repertoire includes lists of deities, in which the gods associated with numerous local traditions from various Babylonian centers are gathered. Also for the first time, literary texts appear in addition to administrative and lexical texts. Among these is a compilation of short hymns praising over seventy deities from diverse local centers, again suggesting a pan-Babylonian identity. And, in their initial sections, at least, both the god lists and the hymn compilation suggest a commonly accepted divine hierarchy, headed by Enlil of Nippur, who would remain the chief of the Babylonian pantheon for another 1000 years or more.

This period around the middle of the third millennium is also when we find the earliest references to Sumer. But first, some basic explanation of the native terms for Sumer and Sumerian is in order. Our “Sumer” and “Sumerian” derive from the Akkadian māt šumeri(m) “land of Sumer” and šumeru(m) “Sumerian,” in which the element šumeru is the same for the land and the language. But in Sumerian itself, the geographic designation is ki-en-gi(r), always written with the sign GI, but the language is eme-gi(r), usually written with the sign ŠE for gi(r) (eme is the word for tongue or language). The element gi(r)

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5 Our “Sumer” and “Sumerian” derive from the Akkadian māt šumeri(m) “land of Sumer” and šumeru(m) “Sumerian,” in which the element šumeru is the same for the land and the language. But in Sumerian itself, the geographic designation is ki-en-gi(r), always written with the sign GI, but the language is eme-gi(r), usually written with the sign ŠE for gi(r) (eme is the word for tongue or language). The element gi(r) means “noble” or, with Steinkeller “native,” so eme-gi(r) means “noble language” or “native language,” but ki-en-gi(r) is not as easily analyzed. That the final gi(r) is the same word as gi(r) is clear, because in Shulgi Hymn C, eme-gi(r), the Sumerian language, is written with the sign GI rather than GI. The initial element in the geographic name, ki, means “place,” but the en creates difficulties. The initial g of gi(r) is not the velarized /g/ so the en cannot be dismissed as phonetic, yielding *ki-gir “noble” or “native place,” as Steinkeller has suggested. And a literal etymology for ki-en-gi(r), “place, noble/native lord” is very unsatisfying.

Another etymology for ki-en-gi(r) suggests itself, but creates its own difficulties. Most of what had been thought to be Early Dynastic occurrences of the word, at Fara and later Early Dynastic Girsu, have been convincingly shown to refer not to ki-en-gi “Sumer,” but to the town Enegi(r), the seat of the netherworld deity Ninazu. The importance of Enegi(r) and the god Ninazu in the early third millennium is suggested by the fact that in the collection of zāme hymns from Abu Salabikh, the hymn to Ninazu of Enegi(r) is longer than any other save the introductory hymn to Enlil. Might ki-en-gi(r) originally have meant something like “region of Enegi(r),” referring to a special importance of the netherworld and its deity?

There is yet another possible etymology, however, perhaps too simple. Could ki-en-gi(r) simply derive from *ki eme-gi(r), “Sumerian language place?” This would raise the question of how it is related to the Early Dynastic writings of Enegi(r), but note that the latter is written quite differently in subsequent periods, suggesting the absence of a real semantic relationship between the name of the city and ki-en-gi “Sumer.”

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9 Rubio, ‘Šulgi and the Death of Sumerian,’ 2006, 167. A variety of sheep in Ur III documents is called udu eme-gi(r), with GI. “Sumerian sheep,” whatever that may mean. cf. Wilcke, ‘Zum Königstum,’ 1974, 226. The same gi(r) “noble, native” occurs as the second element of King Shulgi’s name, again written with GI.
10 Reallexikon der Assyrilogie, s.v. Ninazu.
11 Biggs, Inscriptions from Tell Abi Salabikh, 1974, p. 50:128-139; see Reallexikon der Assyriologie, s.v. Ninazu.
12 An early importance of the netherworld might help explain the human sacrifice and elaborate burials found at ED Ur.
13 Less likely is that the language was named after Enegi(r), and the writing eme-gi(r) was a folk etymologizing writing, and that the Ur III and OB writings of the town name were devised to avoid confusion with ki-en-gi and eme-gi.
Early Dynastic (ca. 2900-2350) sources for ki-en-gi(r) used in the regional sense (i.e., not for the city Enegi(r)) are meager. A copy of the Kesh Temple Hymn from Abu Salabikh (ca. 2500) is the earliest occurrence. Lines 29f. of the later Old Babylonian version of the hymn read “Temple, in whose interior is the heart of the homeland (Sum. kalam), / at whose rear” is the life of ki-en-gi.” On the Abu Salabikh manuscript, these lines are broken, but the EN of ki-en-gi is preserved, suggesting that the Early Dynastic version was close to the later, better preserved version. The same parallelism of ki-en-gi “Sumer” with Ensakusana of Uruk (ca. 2375), whose conquests reached all the way north to Kish and Akshak; he titled himself “lord of ki-en-gi and king of the homeland.” An almost contemporary king of Umma, whose hegemony is not known to have been very extensive, called himself “fierce head of ki-en-gi,” and about a century earlier, Eanatum of Lagash mentions ki-en-gi in a broken passage cataloging his victories. At the very end of the Early Dynastic period, Lugaltzagesi claims that “all the suzerains of ki-en-gi and rulers of foreign lands” paid homage to him at Uruk. Significantly, he doesn’t title himself king of ki-en-gi, but rather “king of Uruk, king of the homeland,” and his hegemony probably extended no further north than Nippur. These few uses of ki-en-gi suggest that it could designate a small region of southern Babylonia, all of southern Babylonia, or even all of Babylonia.

All of Babylonia is what must be meant for the earliest use of the Semitic word for Sumer, found in a Semitic hymn to the agricultural and scribal goddess Nisaba. The hymn itself was found at Ebla, but from its subject matter the composition clearly originated in late Early Dynastic Babylonia. Here, the later Akkadian Sumer appears first in the phrase “Sumer, ruler of the foreign lands” or “Sumer and the rulers of foreign lands” or “Sumer, throne of all the lands,” and then, more significantly and unambiguously in the sequence Subartu-Sumer-Tilmun. Since Subartu is northern Mesopotamia, and Tilmun is the Gulf coast and islands, Sumer must be what’s in between: Babylonia. The name Sum’ar recalls the much later Hebrew bible šim’ar, which also refers to all of Babylonia (Gen. 10: Uruk, Babylon and Akkad are in Shinar).

Previous attempts to derive šumer and the like from ki-en-gi(r) or eme-gi(r) have proven futile, but perhaps, with all due caution, we could look to an original *šu emegir or *šu enegir “(place) of Sumerian language.”

In the Sargonic or Old Akkadian period (2350-2150 BC), Sargon of Akkad’s successor Rimush, around 2300 BC, reports three victories over Sumerum. Uruk is the only city mentioned there, but elsewhere, together with Ur, he mentions Adab, Zabalam, Umma, Ki-AN and Lagash. Rimush claims to have defeated the north Babylonian city Kazallu after returning from Sumer, and the last Akkadian king to rule over a large territory, Sharkalisharri, “went down” to Sumer (ki-gi-ca), presumably from his capital, Akkade, somewhere in the far north of Babylonia. Sumer seems to be southern Babylonia, but where the northern border of Sumer was for the Sargonic kings is unknown. In later sources, Sumer is often used for an unspecified region of southern Babylonia, but also, especially in literary texts, can alternate with “Sumer and Akkad” or “homeland” (Sum. kalam) as a term for all of Babylonia, in contrast to foreign or enemy lands.

The Sargonic period also provides the first apparent use of the term Sumerian as an ethno-linguistic marker. A single small tablet lists a number followed by “men of Akkadian seed” (lu a uri-me) and another number followed by “Sumerian speakers” (eme-gi). Thus, it is a thousand years after our first documents in proto-cuneiform, presumably proto-Sumerian, that the term Sumerian is applied to individuals.

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14 Or, perhaps in view of the development of these lines later in the hymn, a-ga here is not “rear,” but rather a part of the temple, as in the Gudea inscription RIM E3/1.1.7.44-10 (Edzard, *Gudea and His Dynasty*, 1997) lá-ba a-ga eren // ki-dî-ku₃-a-ni // mu-na-ni-du “Within it (the temple), he built him (Ningirsu) an ego of with cedar, his judgement place.”
17 RIM E1.9.3.1 vii 4’-5’ (Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, 2008).
19 For references to ki-ent-gi in the very difficult Early Dynastic mythological UD.GAL.NUN texts, see Zard, *Die UD.GAL.NUN-Texte* (forthcoming).
24 Cooper, ‘Sumer, Sumeri,’ 2012.
though to what end, the tablet does not say. By contrasting “men of Akkadian seed” with another group characterized by the word for the Sumerian language, the tablet implies that members of the former group spoke Akkadian, the language that would replace Sumerian in just a few centuries. But, despite the increased use of Akkadian and the gradual decline of the Sumerian mother-tongue community, Sumerian continued to be written in the south for local government and legal purposes under the Akkadian kings. The next dynasty to rule all of Babylonia, the so-called Third Dynasty of Ur, or Ur III, which flourished between 2100 and 2000, used Sumerian exclusively for administrative and legal purposes in the north as well as the south. The hundred thousand or so recovered Sumerian administrative texts from this dynasty create such an overwhelming sense of Sumerian language use that the period for a long time was erroneously dubbed the “Sumerian Renaissance,” and the accepted scholarly name was the Neo-Sumerian Period, despite the fact that two of the five kings of the dynasty bore Akkadian names, as did numerous other members of the royal family.

Gonzalo Rubio has convincingly argued that Shulgi, the most powerful and long-ruling Ur III king, was a native Akkadian speaker. Shulgi boasted about his ability to speak and even judge cases in five languages: Elamite, Sumerian, Meluhhan (a Dravidian dialect?), Amorite and Hurrian. The absence of Akkadian is telling: it was taken for granted that he spoke his mother-tongue. But the language of prestige, of scholarship, administration and religion, remained Sumerian, and Shulgi would boast that he was from Sumerian “seed” as a way of emphasizing how thoroughly he had mastered the language. Two centuries later, Akkadian speaking scribes would use similar expressions when making a similar claim.

“Sumerian seed” reappears at the end of the Ur III dynasty, or, rather, in a literary letter purporting to be from the last King of Ur, Ibbisin, in which he demeans his rival, the ultimately successful Ishbi-Erra, as “not being of Sumerian seed.” However, as in that same letter Ishbi-Erra is said to hail from Mari, well outside Babylonia, the insult simply means that he is not Babylonian, and not that he is Semitic as opposed to Sumerian speaking. The Ur III dynasty was the first to use the royal title “king of Sumer and Akkad,” that is, king of all Babylonia. In a hymn probably written under the kings of Ur (although attributed to the daughter of Sargon of Akkade), we find the first demarcation of the border between Sumer and Akkad. Sumer is to the south of the holy city of Nippur, and Akkad is to its north. Neat, but probably just a literary artifact. Another hymn from the same collection calls the town Enegir the Kuha of Sumer, Kutha, in northern Babylonia, being the home of the netherworld god Nergal, as Enegir in the south was the home of the netherworld god Ninazu. There is no sense of a Sumerian identity apart from Akkad, and Akkad almost never appears in Sumerian texts by itself. When Shulgi claimed that as a child he was educated “in the tablets of Sumer and Akkad,” he meant that he learned Sumerian. That same phrase (“tablets of Sumer and Akkad”) appears a few hundred years later in a scribal dialogue, it refers to the elementary school curriculum. The only Sumerian identity we find here is bound up in the mastery of the Sumerian language as a learned, and learned, language. In this sense, we might say that Shulgi, tireless in boasting of his scholarly achievement, was the first Sumerian. He established academies at Ur and Nippur—cities that remained the major centers of learning after the fall of the Ur III state—whose explicit purpose was to transcribe and transmit his hymns of self-praise and his prayers to the gods, in Sumerian all.

Yet Shulgi, who reported being a star pupil in his youth, knew that there was more to scholarship than the study of his own panegyric. He insisted that he had conserved all the earlier Sumerian compositions and


Shulgi B 266-219 (cited Rubio, ‘Sulgi and the Death of Sumerian,’ 2006, p. 169f., with sources in his n. 3). My assumption is that the Shulgi Hymns are products of Shulgi’s reign. Keetman’s argument (‘Enmekar and Susul, ‘2010’ against Rubio is based on a very tendentious reading of Shulgi B. The remarks of Sallaberger, ‘Sumerian Language Use,’ 2011, 361 n. 39 are difficult to comprehend.

integrated them into the repertoire of his own musicians, a claim immediately followed by a recommendation that future rulers do the same with his compositions, admire his accomplishments recounted therein, and bless him. This kind of posthumous celebrity was the only immortality a human might achieve, but it brings benefits to future generations as well: through the recitation of Shulgi's songs and reflection on his reign, later rulers will learn useful lessons for themselves.40

Was Shulgi a hypocrite, protesting too much, when he claimed to have preserved earlier compositions, had them performed, never consigning them to oblivion? P. Michalowski certainly thinks so when he asserts that Shulgi "wiped clean the literary slate of the land, replacing the old Early Dynastic mythological literature with a whole new corpus," 41 effecting a "catastrophic revision of the existing scholarly and educational textual repertoires." 42 According to Michalowski, 43 Shulgi took this drastic step as part of his response to a crisis of legitimacy triggered by the death in battle of his father and predecessor, Urnamma. Using the example of the Sumerian epic tales of Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, the legendary early kings of Uruk, Michalowski argues that the Ur III kings, because of the dynasty's alleged origins at Uruk, considered themselves sons of the divine Lugalbanda and his wife, the goddess Ninsumun, as well as brothers of Gilgamesh, and Shulgi commissioned tales of those legendary kings as a partial replacement for the earlier literary corpus, to enhance the dynasty's legitimacy. The case for the tales' Ur III origin would be supported by the fact that the Enmerkar and Lugalbanda tales, and one of the Gilgamesh tales, involve expeditions eastward into Iran, precisely the region toward which most Ur III military campaigns were directed.

Whereas few scholars would argue with ascribing an Ur III date to the Sumerian epic tales as we have them, 44 it is difficult to imagine what would have motivated Shulgi to discard almost the entire earlier literary corpus and replace it with these stories of the fabled rulers of Uruk.

39 Shulgi B 270-296.
40 Shulgi B 289-292. See the discussion in Cooper, "I have forgotten my burden of former days!" Forgetting the Sumerians in Ancien Iraq,' 2011.
41 Michalowski, 'Maybe Epic: Sumerian Heroic Poetry,' 2010, p. 21.
42 Michalowski, 'Masters of the Four Corners of the Heavens,' 2010, p. 157.
44 For the history of the compositions and their forerunners, see Michalowski, 'Maybe Epic,' 2010; and Rubio, 'Sumerian Literature,' 2009, for an overview of Sumerian literary history.

Because so few literary texts from the Ur III period have survived, 45 we cannot be sure that most compositions known from the mid-Early Dynastic period (ca. 26-2500 BC) 46 had been discarded by then. But since those early literary texts are so very difficult to understand, I would guess that they passed out of use even earlier, perhaps in the Sargonic period or even by the end of the Early Dynastic. What we can understand of those texts suggests nothing that would arouse Shulgi's ire.

As for the epic tales, it was not only the Ur III dynasty that claimed kinship with the legendary early rulers of Uruk: Pirigme of Lagash, who probably ruled just before Urnamma founded the Third Dynasty of Ur, called himself the son of Lugalbanda's wife Ninsumun, and Gudea of Lagash, the greatest ruler of Lagash, shortly before it was absorbed by Ur, claimed to have grown up with Gilgamesh, and to be the son of Ninsumum.47 The god-kings Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh were invoked by rulers at the end of the third millennium, regardless of dynastic origins. Would Shulgi have bothered to boast about being Gilgamesh's brother if Gilgamesh were not already an epic hero, a fabled king of ancient times? Rather, the rulers of Lagash and Ur were eager to claim kinship with the legendary rulers of Uruk because stories about them were already circulating and popular.

And expeditions to Iran were a staple of Babylonian geopolitics from earliest times, from the mid-fourth millennium "colonization" of Susiana, 48 to Gudea's claim, just before or contemporary with Urnamma's early years at Ur, that he "defeated the cities of Anshan and Elam, and brought their booty" 49 back to Lagash. Trade with the east, on which Babylonians, as Michalowski tells us, "were completely dependent for all their luxury items," 50 was also a perennial factor. There is no reason to see the tales of the legendary kings of Uruk, with their focus on the east, as bearing the imprint of the particular historical situation of Shulgi or of the Ur III realm. 51 Neither Enmerkar, nor

47 Pirigme: RIM E3/1.1.2.1 (Edzard, Gudea and His Dynasty, 1997); Gudea: RIM E3/1.1.7 CyI B xxiii 16-21 (Edzard, Gudea and His Dynasty, 1997; restoration of Gilgamesh not certain).
49 RIM E3/1.1.7 SB vi 64-69 (Edzard, Gudea and His Dynasty, 1997).
50 Michalowski, 'Masters of the Four Corners of the Heavens,' 2010, p. 158.
51 For the problem of the relationship between Sumerian literature and Babylonian history, see Cooper, 'Literature and History,' 2001; and cf. Wicke, 'Politik und Literatur.
Lugalbanda, nor, especially, Gilgamesh, behave in any way reminiscent of the Ur III rulers, nor are they in any way exemplars of what Shulgi tells us an ideal king—himself—should be, but their adventures may well have been fodder for the entertainers at the court of the kings of Ur. Royal and political ideology is to be found, rather, in the very praise hymns that Shulgi, as he tells us in those same hymns, had composed and performed in his honor, and which have a prominent place in the scribal curriculum as we know it from several centuries after Shulgi’s death.

Thus, we cannot judge Shulgi guilty of discarding those earliest Early Dynastic literary texts, written at least in part by people whose mother tongue really was Sumerian, but would have seen no reason to remark on the fact. If my hunch above is correct, those barely intelligible compositions were probably no longer part of the Ur III scribal curriculum, even if that curriculum retained similarly opaque ancient word lists, some going back to the beginnings of writing in the late fourth millennium. Rather than a “brutal clearing out of the literary stable” under Shulgi, we might imagine a gradual revision of the curriculum: old literary compositions discarded probably before Ur III, a rewriting of the tales of the legendary kings of Uruk during Ur III, the Ur III creation of the royal praise song and its propagation by Shulgi, as well as its continuation under the dynasty of Isin (beginning of the 2nd millennium),

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and, under that same Isin dynasty, as Nick Veldhuis has shown, the creation of a structured elementary curriculum, the sign and word lists that formed the basis of Sumerian learning for the ancients, as they do for us.\[57\] There remains much in the corpus of Sumerian literary


The role of the bard at a royal court is depicted in one of the Sumerian Gilgamesh tales, Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven; see the translations in George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 1999, p. 172f; and Foster, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2001, p. 125 (by D. Frayne).


See especially Klein, ‘Slugi and LImedagan,’ 1990, for Ishme-Dagan of Isin modeling his hymns on those of Shulgi.


texts preserved for us on Old Babylonian Ur, Nippur and other sites, and from the compositions set in the school,\[59\] is a Sumerian curriculum in which Sumerian literature is studied and the ability to write and speak Sumerian is valorized, but it is also clear that the Sumerian language must be learned. In one text, a student is scolded for speaking Akkadian,\[59\] and a late Old Babylonian fragment portrays an oral exam in which a student is required to translate from Akkadian to Sumerian and vice-versa.\[60\] Students or scholars brag about their ability to speak Sumerian or their genuine Sumerian origins, but, like Shulgi, their Sumerian identity was acquired.

Thus far, we have seen that there is little or no evidence for a Sumerian identity as such until the time of Shulgi, when Sumerian was being widely replaced by Akkadian as a mother-tongue, and Sumerian was learned in school. The place name Sumer is also sparingly attested until the Third Dynasty of Ur, when the dynasty’s founder Urnamma, and his son, Shulgi, took the title “king of Sumer and Akkad,” a title that would be used off and on by rulers of Babylonia down to and including Cyrus, founder of the Persian empire.\[61\] But no one was ever king of Sumer alone.\[62\] Sumer was not a nation, and Sumerian was no nationality. Rather, to be Sumerian was to be learned. Sumerian is an identity that arose only once the Sumerian language had to be acquired in school. In the process, it seems, the real Sumerians, or, rather, the third millennium BC speakers and writers of Sumerian in southern Babylonia, were largely forgotten.\[63\] The names and traditions of some
early Sumerian kings were preserved, but there is no indication that anyone thought there had at one time been a large population of Sumerian speakers in the land. In the words of Andrew George, "The projection of scholarship’s exclusive control of Sumerian back into the remote, mythical past ignores the historical fact that it was once a vernacular language. ... the Babylonians’ own statements concerning Sumerian nowhere acknowledge that it was anything other than a special language used by the initiated." 64

Niek Veldhuis65 has written about the Sumerian ‘invented tradition,’ the fact that the scribal curriculum we know from ca. 1800 BC, which contains Sumerian compositions centered around deities and rulers of many different Babylonian centers, can be read through the lens of the so-called Sumerian King Lisi, a text promulgated under Shulgi, that asserts, quite fallaciously, that from antediluvian times onward there had been only one legitimate king of Babylonia at a time, and that this one kingship circulated among different cities. Thus, all the compositions in the curriculum with various local centers and interest are part of a common Babylonian history, a constructed “Sumerian heritage, ... embodied in the Sumerian language and writing system itself.”66 Veldhuis convincingly argues that this points to the creation of the syllabus under the dynasty of Isin, which saw itself as the successor to the Third Dynasty of Ur, the legitimate ruler of all of Babylonia, even if its actual territory was considerably smaller. I would only add that the notion of a common identity had been around for a long time, and the creation of the Sumerian heritage and the idea of a single legitimate monarch, had begun at least with Shulgi, even if they were fully expressed only at Isin. By the time of the bulk of our Sumerian manuscripts, Babylonia had long been divided into many competing polities, except for the brief hegemony of Hammurabi and, for a time, his son and successor Samsu-iluna. It is precisely to the reigns of Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna that the vast majority of Sumerian literary tablets can be dated, and so the ideology of Babylonian unity would have been relevant to the writers of our manuscripts, if not really to their immediate predecessors.

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64 George, Babylonian Literary Texts in the Schøyen Collection, 2009, p. 110f.
67 In addition to the evidence adduced above, note that the collection of Temple Hymns to various sanctuaries throughout Babylonia (Sjöberg, The Collection of Sumerian Temple Hymns, 1969) was known in Ur III, and some think it is as old as the Sargonic period.

This changed when Samsu-iluna (late 18th century BC) lost control of the south, the old Sumer, and many of the southern cities were abandoned. Ironically, the only time anyone was dubbed “king of Sumer” was at this very moment: in an unpublished but widely circulated inscription of Samsu-iluna, the southern rebel leader Rimsin II is given that very title. Subsequently, Sumerian continued to be learned and taught, but the curriculum of the various late Old Babylonian centers has yet to be established.68 Whereas belles-lettres predominate in the curriculum known from the earlier Old Babylonian period, the later Old Babylonian corpora contain large numbers of Sumerian texts belonging to the repertoires of ritual and cultic specialists, the same kind of Sumerian texts that are dominant much later in the first millennium. It is these specialists, by and large, who maintain the tradition of written Sumerian almost to the beginning of our own era, 2,000 years after native speakers of Sumerian were speaking their last; that is, the scribes of the last Sumerian tablets are as distant from us as they were from the last speakers of Sumerian! On a few tablets written in Babylon in the 2nd or 1st centuries BC, the Sumerian on the obverse is transliterated into Greek on the reverse,69 as a study aid for the poor students, Aramaic speakers all, who were struggling to acquire literacy in Sumerian and Akkadian, in addition to the Aramaic and Greek they already read and wrote. Greek was the transliteration script of choice because, unlike Aramaic, it represented the vowels of the cuneiform as well as the consonants.70

We have no idea what first millennium BC students and scholars thought Sumerian was, other than being, in their own words, complicated, obscure, and very ancient. But if the ethno-linguistic realities of the third millennium BC had been pretty much forgotten before the mid-second millennium, it is unlikely that they were recoverable in the first. The complete absence of a meta-discourse in Mesopotamian civilization71 means that we can never expect our ancient colleagues to ask, in writing, at least, why all those early kings and heroes have names in Sumerian, whereas the later kings names are

70 See the more nuanced discussion of Westenholz, ‘The Graeco-Babylonian Once Again,’ 2007, p. 274-278.
Semitic, or to speculate as to whether Sumerian was ever spoken or not, and if so, by whom, where and when. Even Berossus, 12 writing in Greek, does not mention (in the fragments of his writings that have been preserved) that the ancient Babylonian texts he had studied and used as sources were in two different languages. The Sumerians, the inventors of cuneiform who built the world's first large cities, were forgotten entirely, long before knowledge of their language and their script disappeared from humankind's ken.

I have asserted elsewhere that the Sumerians as a people are in some sense the invention of modern Assyriologists, who are more comfortable with discrete categories than with messy realities. 73 The messy reality, as I have argued above, is that the only detectable assertion of Sumerian identity is based upon and found in the curriculum of the Babylonian school, from Shulgi through Samsu-iluna, roughly (being generous) from 2100-1700 BC. National identity, beginning at the time of the archaic texts at the end of the fourth millennium, when detectable, was a Babylonian identity, geographic but not linguistic. So it was not that the Sumerians were not remembered by later generations; rather, they most probably never existed — or hardly so — as a conceptually distinct ethnic-linguistic population in Babylonia. The only real Sumerians existed in the scribal imaginary of a textual community in the three or four centuries attending and following the extinction of the Sumerian mother-tongue population. 74

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12 For Berossus, see Van der Spek, 'Berossus as a Babylonian Chronicler and Greek Historian,' 2008 with bibliography. The Berossus fragments are now available electronically as part of Brill's New Jacoby (www.brillonline.nl/public/atticus.html).

73 Cooper, 'I have forgotten my burden of former days', 2011.

74 My conclusions here are not far from those in the invaluable monograph of Kraus, Sumerer und Akkader, 1970. 415: 'Die Sumerer und Akkader, auf deren Suche wir ausgezogen waren, haben wir nirgends mit Sicherheit feststellen können, obwohl sie uns doch in ihren Sprachen einen unwiderleglichen Beweis ihrer Existenz hinterlassen haben. Es ist uns auch nicht gelungen, ein brachbares Indiz für die zuverlässige Identifizierung von "Sumeren" und "Akkadern" zu finden.'


