“I have forgotten my burden of former days!” Forgetting the Sumerians in Ancient Iraq

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The honor and occasion of an American Oriental Society presidential address cannot but evoke memories. The annual AOS meeting is, after all, the site of many of our earliest scholarly memories, and more recent ones as well. The memory of my immediate predecessor’s address, a very hard act to follow indeed, remains vivid. Sid Griffiths gave a lucid account of a controversial topic with appeal to a broad audience. His delivery was beautifully attuned to the occasion, and his talk was perfectly timed. At the very first AOS presidential address I attended, the speaker was a bit tipsy, and, ten minutes into his talk, he looked at his watch and said, “Oh, I’ve gone on too long!” and sat down. I also remember a quite different presidential address in which, after an hour had passed, the speaker declared, “I know I’ve been talking for a long time, but since this is the first and only time most of you will hear anything about my field, I’ll continue on until you’ve heard all I think you ought to know!”

It is but a small move from individual memory to cultural memory, a move I would like to make with a slight twist. As my title announces, the subject of this communication will not be how the ancient Mesopotamians remembered their past, but rather how they managed to forget, or seemed to forget, an important component of their early history.[1] The quotation from a Sumerian proverb in my title is taken from the mouth of an ass, who, having thrown off his load, immediately proclaimed: “I have forgotten my burden of former days!”[2] Its relevance to my subject will be discussed toward the end of what follows.

The era of world empires culminating in the Roman Empire began in the early first millennium B.C. with a renascent Assyria. (I know, a very occidental conceptualization in an address to the American Oriental Society!) At its greatest extent in the seventh century B.C., Assyria stretched from Iran to Egypt. The last great king of Assyria was Ashurbanipal, whose forty-year reign marked both the climax of Assyrian power and the beginning of the rapid decline that led to the fall of Nineveh a mere fifteen years after his death, in 612 B.C.[3]

The mid-nineteenth century A.D. recovery of the magnificent bas-reliefs from the palaces at Nineveh and their installation in the British Museum[4] were accompanied by the transfer of the Assyrian royal libraries to that same institution, and the careful study of those tablets from Nineveh was foundational for the field of Assyriology.[5] A large percentage of the tablets were originally acquired by order of king Ashurbanipal, who prided himself on his scholarly abilities. In one inscription he boasted that he was able to “read complicated texts,

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[1] My interest in Mesopotamian cultural memory was stimulated by participation in the Berkeley Memory and Identity Working Group (www.berkeleymemoryid.com) in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

[2] Alster 1997: no. 5.39.

[3] For the Assyrian empire, see the relevant chapters in Liverani 1988, Kuhrt 1995, and Van De Mieroop 2007, as well as the monograph by Fales (2001).

[4] Larsen 1996, Bohrer 2003.

[5] For the libraries at Nineveh, see Pedersén 1998, chap. 3.1.4.

whose Sumerian is obscure and whose Akkadian is hard to figure out."[6] Ashurbanipal read Sumerian! Sumerian texts first appeared around 3300 B.C., about as distant from Ashurbanipal as we are from him. The language itself had not been spoken for at least a thousand years when Ashurbanipal began to study it. This was clearly a civilization that did not easily forget the burdens of former days!

The earliest cuneiform was a Babylonian[7] phenomenon, that is, proto-cuneiform texts have been found in the far south, the area we call Sumer, as well as in areas to the north that we sometimes call Akkad. Although Sumerian was in contact early on with Semitic dialects ancestral to the language of later Babylonia and Assyria that we call Akkadian,[8] we assume that for a good part of the third millennium, Sumerian language use was dominant in the south—Sumer—whereas Semitic became increasingly widespread in northern Babylonia—Akkad. With a few possible exceptions Sumerian literary texts appear only around 2600–2500 B.C., and letters even later. Our earliest published royal commemorative texts of any length date to around 2500.[9]

Nearly all of this early writing in Babylonia is in Sumerian, but this is probably because nearly all of the tablets recovered from the first two-thirds of the third millennium are from the south. Nevertheless, a few early texts in Semitic, both administrative and literary, were found at Abu Salabikh, north of Nippur, and this find is symptomatic of the mid-third millennium spread of cuneiform writing to Semitic-language areas to the northwest through the Euphrates and Habur valleys, as far as Ebla, about halfway between the great bend of the Euphrates and the Mediterranean coast. Around 2350 B.C. Sargon of Akkad brought all of Babylonia under his control, and documents in the Semitic Akkadian language became commonplace there. But Sumerian didn't gradually disappear, as we might expect it to have done, in light of the fact that it was dead as a spoken language within three or four centuries after Sargon.[10] Rather, Sumerian continued to be written for local government purposes in southern Babylonia, and the next dynasty to rule all of Babylonia, the so-called Third Dynasty of Ur, which flourished in the twenty-first century B.C., mandated the use of Sumerian for administrative and legal purposes throughout the realm.

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 dubbed a "Sumerian Renaissance," and the accepted scholarly name was the Neo-Sumerian Period.[11] This despite the fact that two of the five kings of the dynasty bore Akkadian names, as did numerous other members of the royal family. Recently, Gonzalo Rubio has convincingly argued that Shulgi, the most powerful and long-ruling of the dynasty's kings, was a native Akkadian speaker.[12] And it is with Shulgi that I finally reach the topic of this address: "forgetting."

Shulgi,[13] like Ashurbanipal fourteen centuries later, was proud of the breadth of his scholarship, and in a hymn of self-praise that dwells extensively on his accomplishments he sets

[6] *aštassi kammu naklu ša šumeru ṣullulu akkadû ana šutēšuri ašṭu*. See Livingstone 2007: 100–102.

[7] "Babylonia" is used here for the region south of the point where the Tigris and Euphrates are closest to one another, so, from present-day Baghdad south.

[8] For early Sumerian-Semitic contact, see Civil 2007. For Akkadian, see, e.g., George 2007.

[9] For documentation of the overview presented in this paragraph and the next, see Bauer et al. 1998, Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999, and in brief Cooper 2004, Michalowski 2006: 171–73.

[10] For the controversy surrounding the death of vernacular Sumerian—dead by the end of the third millennium or only by the early second?—see Michalowski 2006 and Woods 2006, with bibliography.

[11] For the history and textual legacy of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III), see Sallaberger in Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999. For "Sumerian Renaissance" as a misnomer, see Becker 1985.

[12] Rubio 2006 (pace Keetman 2010), and cf. Vacín 2009.

[13] For Shulgi, see Klein 1995, Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999: 141–63.

forth an interesting literary agenda.[14] First, he claims to be versed in ancient knowledge, and asserts that he has never declared songs—that is, what we call Sumerian literary texts, especially royal panegyric—from earlier times to be false. Throughout Mesopotamian history rulers were very concerned about establishing the veracity of their inscriptions and praise songs; falsehood was anathema.[15] Secondly, Shulgi reports that he has conserved those earlier compositions and integrated them into the repertoire of his own musicians, to great enthusiasm. That is, he has insured that praise of earlier rulers would not be forgotten.[16]

Then there is a lovely little segue—"Whatever is acquired, can also be lost. What mortal has ever reached heaven?"[17]—and Shulgi comes to the point: future kings should have Shulgi's songs, hymns, and prayers performed, admire Shulgi's abilities and accomplishments, praise Shulgi, and invoke his name. Writing, inscriptions, and literary texts were a Mesopotamian king's ticket to immortality, since actual immortality, as Gilgamesh learned, was not attainable, but eternal fame was—as long as a king's inscriptions were not erased nor his songs forgotten.[18]

But there is also advantage for those who remember. In remembering Shulgi's songs and reflecting on his rule, they will learn useful lessons, and perhaps this is the reason for the insistence of Shulgi and other kings that a text's words "are in no way false, but true indeed!"[19] For, Shulgi asked, "What could be the purpose of writing something false, lacking in truth?"[20] Just as he accepted the validity of earlier writings, implying that he learned from them, so future rulers should understand that his compositions are true sources of wisdom, to be "neither forsaken . . . nor discarded."[21] Ironically, seventeen or eighteen hundred years later, Shulgi would be accused of composing untruthful texts and leaving them to posterity,[22] and a copy of just such an untrue inscription, falsely attributed to Shulgi by its ancient author, has actually been found.[23]

This same Shulgi, however, so insistent on his conservation of ancient texts, so eager never to be forgotten, has been accused of deliberately perpetrating an enormous act of forgetting. To understand why, we have to rehearse a short history of Sumerian literature.[24] The first large corpus of Sumerian literature dates to around 2500; after that, very little has been recovered beyond royal inscriptions until about 1800, two centuries after Shulgi. Hardly any of the earlier compositions survive in the later corpus, and many of the new compositions, such as the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle,[25] the tales of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda,[26] and the praise songs to Shulgi[27] and other rulers of his dynasty, have long been thought to go back to originals written under the Third Dynasty of Ur. Piotr Michalowski (2003, 2008) believes that a "radical cleaning of . . . [the] literary stables" was instigated by Shulgi, to replace the old literary corpus with compositions "in honor of the contemporary ruling house" or more congenial to the ideology of kingship that Shulgi fostered.[28]

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[14] Shulgi B 272ff. Unfortunately there are no modern editions of either Shulgi B or Shulgi E. See, at present, the composite texts and translations in the Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literary Texts (http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk).

[15] Pongratz-Leisten 2002, and on truth and falsehood in great detail, Lämmerhirt 2010. See now also Liverani 2010.

[16] Shulgi is clearly talking about the compositions of earlier rulers, since he begins the passage by saying that he "never had malevolent thoughts about a single ancient king, whether Akkadian, Sumerian, or an iniquitous Gutian."

[17] Ironically, Shulgi, who was deified in his lifetime, actually did reach heaven (Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999: 162 with n. 138).

[18] Radner 2005: 90–110.

[19] Shulgi E 44–46 also insists on the veracity of Shulgi's songs, as does Shulgi's epigone, Ishmedagan of Isin (ca. 1955–1937 B.C.). The topos goes back several centuries to the kings of Akkad; see Pongratz-Leisten 2002, Lämmerhirt 2010: 148–49, Liverani 2010.

[20] See Lämmerhirt 2010: 280–82. The passage concluding with this statement is somewhat misunderstood by Liverani 2010: 233.

[21] The so-called Cuthean Legend (Westenholz 1997, chap. 10) imagines king Naramsin of Akkad complaining that the ancient Sumerian ruler, Enmerkar, left him no inscription for guidance (see Radner 2005: 158–59).

[22] Glassner 2004: Chronicle 48 (Uruk Chronicle); see Cavigneaux 2005.

[23] UET 6/3 919; see Frahm 2006.

[24] Rubio 2009.

Unfortunately, as Michalowski (2008: 38) himself puts it, "contemporary evidence is still sparse." The soon-to-be-published corpus of literary texts dating to the Third Dynasty of Ur[29] is small, a mixed bag of compositions including one probably from the earlier corpus of ca. 2500 B.C., several known from the later corpus of ca. 1800 B.C., but also a number of compositions not known from either the earlier or the later corpus. It is also not easy to see why the earlier Sumerian literary texts would not be congenial to Shulgi's ideology of kingship—in any case, we hardly understand those earlier texts—nor does much of the later corpus seem suitable to fostering Shulgi's alleged agenda.[30] Thus, we cannot yet judge Shulgi guilty, but, again following Michalowski, he is almost certainly guilty of another, related crime of forgetting, which cast numerous rulers and dynasties into oblivion.

The Sumerian King List is the name given to a composition that chronicles rulers of Babylonia beginning with the receding of the Deluge, or in some versions beginning in antediluvian times.[31] It portrays legitimate kingship as the prerogative of only one city at a time, alternating between the south—usually Uruk or Ur—and the north—usually Kish, and, the last time, the city Akkade. Ever since Piotr Steinkeller (2003) published a manuscript of the King List written in the time of Shulgi, it has been clear that the King List was originally a product of Shulgi's reign,[32] enshrining the idea of a single state controlling all of Babylonia as the norm from time immemorial, a notion that was patently false. Rather, the King List is an obvious attempt to legitimize the Third Dynasty of Ur's control over all Babylonia as the culmination of an inexorable process beginning with the resumption of social life after the great Deluge.

To a modern historian, the List intentionally forgets the real history of competing contemporary city and regional states that characterized much of third-millennium Babylonian history, and certainly that was its intention, though it is questionable how much of that history was known when the King List was composed. The King List is completely unreliable for the periods prior to Sargon of Akkade; in addition to the reigns of hundreds or thousands of years ascribed to some kings and the round-number reigns ascribed to others, few of the kings listed are known from their own inscriptions, and many kings we *do* know have not found their way into the List. Here, I believe the problem is less intentional forgetting than a simple lack of reliable historical sources.[33]

However, there *is* one very intentional omission in the King List, as Michalowski recently pointed out. The regional state of Lagash, which at times controlled a good chunk of Babylonia and then constituted the richest province in Shulgi's realm, is completely ignored.[34] Since Ur's domination of Lagash, culminating generations of competition between Lagash and Ur, played an important if still poorly understood role in the emergence of the Third Dynasty of Ur,[35] this omission of Lagash from the list of states that dominated Babylonia is certainly politically motivated forgetting.[36] Lagash's neighbor to the north, Umma, also an important province that had at times been an independent regional state, is likewise entirely omitted from the Sumerian King List. Ur and Uruk, with which Ur had been linked politically since before the time of Sargon, are the only southern cities the King List admits as worthy of sovereignty.[37]

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[25] English translations and bibliography in George 1999, and by G. Frayne in Foster 2001.

[26] Vanstiphout 2003.

[27] Klein 1981.

[28] Michalowski 2003: 110, 2008: 38.

[29] Rubio n.d.

[30] The epics of the early kings of Uruk, for example, seem totally bereft of useful lessons or models of kingship.

[31] Glassner 2004: Chronicle 1 (Chronicle of the Single Monarchy). Add Friberg 2007, chap. 9; Frayne 2008: 5f.; Klein 2008; Marchesi 2010.

[32] E.g., Michalowski 2008: 38. For other opinions, cf., e.g., Steinkeller 2003, Glassner 2005, Marchesi 2010.

[33] Cooper 2002: 243–45, Marchesi 2010.

But it was not only Sumerian rulers whom the ancients chose to forget. The Sumerians as an ethno-linguistic group, people in southern Babylonia who spoke the Sumerian language for most or all of the third millennium B.C., had been pretty much forgotten by the ancient Mesopotamians as early as ca. 1700 B.C.[38] Sumerian was already a dead language or nearly so when the Third Dynasty of Ur came to an end.[39] Yet Sumerian literature continued to be transmitted almost to the beginning of our own era, two thousand years later.[40] It is described by the ancient scribes as old, prestigious, difficult, and demanding, but not as alien or belonging at one time to a people different from that of the Semitic-speaking scribes.[41] The well-known absence of any written meta-discourse in ancient Mesopotamia may partly account for this.[42] It would be unimaginable for a scribe to wonder, in writing, why this language he spent so many years mastering is so odd, so different from his own language, and what historical factors might explain the difference and the persistence of the Sumerian language.

Yet also, could it be that the Sumerians in some sense are an invention of modern Assyriologists, too quick to use language difference to essentialize and classify population groups? Take the so-called Sumerian King List, for example. Most manuscripts, including the manuscript from the time of Shulgi, begin with the first dynasty of the northern Babylonian city Kish, nearly half of whose kings have Semitic names. Why, then, has it been called the *Sumerian* King List for the last seventy years?[43] Because it begins with dynasties of an imagined most ancient past, and the established Assyriological paradigm parses "most ancient" as "Sumerian." Yet the whole point of the King List is to assert that from ancient times there was a united Babylonia, Sumerian speakers *and* Semitic speakers, under the rule of a single monarch at any one time. And in fact it is much closer to historical reality as we know it to think of third-millennium B.C. Babylonia as a region where Sumerian and Semitic speakers together forged a remarkably unified culture.[44]

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[34] Lagash with its capital Girsu is by far the best documented late Early Dynastic Mesopotamian state; see Cooper 1983, Selz 1995, Huh 2008.

[35] Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999: 132–34.

[36] Lagash had its own local historical traditions, as evidenced by a text known from a single manuscript that begins with a long description of the reconstitution of civilized life after the Deluge and ends with a long list of rulers (*ensi*s) of Lagash, beginning in Early Dynastic times and ending with the last great ruler of Lagash, Gudea, who was contemporary with the very beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Glassner 2004: Chronicle 6). Although it is clearly a response of sorts to the King List, there is no reason to regard it as a parody, as most have done since the *editio princeps* (e.g., Glassner 2004: 74–75). That the list of rulers is defective when we can compare it to what we know from contemporary inscriptions is due not to some deliberate comic impulse, but to the defective historical traditions available to the author (Cooper 2002: 245).

[37] The Old Babylonian manuscripts of the King List include a king of Adab in central Babylonia; see Frayne 2008: 18 and 31. The Ur III manuscript inserts an Adab dynasty before Utuḫegal of Uruk, the immediate predecessor of the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Steinkeller 2003: 284 attributes this to a local Adab version of the King List which would have influenced the Ur III manuscript. Yet it is difficult to imagine that anyone from Adab would have claimed for Adab, as does the Ur III manuscript, the notorious Tirigan, otherwise known to be the last of the hated Guti rulers. Rather, the Adab insertion should be attributed to the poor sources available to the compiler of the list.

[38] See now George 2009: 110–11. For the question of Sumerian identity, see my forthcoming "Sumer, Sumerer" in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* and my "Sumerian Literature and Sumerian Identity" in the forthcoming proceedings of the conference "Problems of Canonicity and Identity Formation in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia," held at the University of Copenhagen's Center for Canon and Identity Formation in May 2010.

[39] See n. 10 above.

[40] Rubio 2009: 43–46, Frahm 2010. There are even tablets with Sumerian transliterated into Greek letters (Geller 1997, and for dating and bibliography Clancier 2009: 252–53).

[41] I can't agree with Joannès 2000, who contends that late first-millennium B.C. scholars at Uruk were identifying with particularly Sumerian forebears.

[42] Machinist 1986.

This was how the ancients thought of it as well. The so-called Sumerian King List was continued, probably beginning around the middle of the second millennium, and was eventually extended into the first millennium, listing dozens of rulers who had nothing whatsoever to do with Sumer or Sumerian.[45] In fact, no Mesopotamian historiographic text ever distinguishes early kings whom we might rightly call Sumerian from contemporary or later rulers who spoke other languages. It was not that the Sumerians had been forgotten; rather, they most probably never existed—or hardly so—as a conceptually distinct ethno-linguistic population in Babylonia.

If the Sumerians themselves were not—could not be—actually forgotten, the cuneiform writing system "they" invented, "their" language, and the Akkadian language that used that same writing system were indeed forgotten. Both Sumerian and Akkadian continued to be written into the first and probably second centuries of our era, even if, from the last few centuries B.C., by an ever-shrinking number of members of Babylonian temple communities.[46] Sumerian, as we have seen, was a dead language beginning, at the latest, in the early second millennium, and most scholars would agree that Aramaic had replaced Akkadian as the spoken language in Babylonia by 500 B.C., if not earlier.[47] While it is not unusual for a traditional language to continue in use for religious, legal, and literary purposes long after a mother-tongue community ceases to exist, the persistence of Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform, with its bulky, if inexpensive, medium of clay tablets, and lengthy period of scholarly education and apprenticeship, is curious. Cuneiform scribes in Hellenistic Babylonia were familiar with and probably proficient in Aramaic and Greek alphabetic writing on papyrus and parchment, yet they continued to write contracts and copy out traditional religious and literary texts—and even compose new ones—in long-dead languages using an ancient writing system consisting of many hundreds of complex signs impressed on damp clay tablets.[48]

The writing of cuneiform texts falls off sharply by the early first century B.C., though certain cultic texts and astronomical/astrological texts continue to be attested throughout that century. The very last datable cuneiform tablet was written in 75 A.D.; it and the few other tablets from the first century A.D. are unsophisticated astronomical texts of the type used to construct individual horoscopes. David Brown (2008) has argued convincingly that comprehensive scribal training ended by the middle of the first century B.C., and that cuneiform persisted for another century and a half as a niche medium for astrologers who made their living doing horoscopes for individuals. Evidence from Egypt shows that Babylonian horoscopic methods appear in Greek and Demotic texts in the first century B.C., and this transfer of Babylonian techniques to vernaculars using cursive linear scripts doomed cuneiform to be gradually forgotten during the first century A.D. But if the hand of the last cuneiform tablets is rather homely and there are some orthographic aberrations, there are none of the "scribblings of rememberers," the semi-literate or pseudo-literate "texts" that accompanied the forgetting of the Egyptian or Mayan writing systems.[49]

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[43] There are exceptions: Krecher (1978) and, following him, Glassner (e.g., 2004, 2005) call it "The History/Chronicle of the One/Single Monarchy," because the King List insists that a single "kingship" was passed from one center to another. And Marchesi 2010, despite its title, begins refreshingly, "Of course, there is no such thing as the Sumerian King List."

[44] Briefly and nicely put by Bottéro 1992: 2.

[45] Glassner 2004: Chronicles 3 (Continuators: The Babylonian Royal Chronicle) and 4 (Continuators: The Hellenistic Royal Chronicle).

[46] Houston et al. 2003: 450–56, George 2007: 61–64, Brown 2008.

[47] George 2007: 60–61.

[48] Clancier 2009.

Cultures forget for many reasons. The examples of Mesopotamian forgetting that I have discussed here included the Sumerian King List's deletion of a number of early regional states and creation of the myth of a single dynasty in control of Babylonia at any one time—all to create a history of kingship conforming to the ideology propagated by the ruling house; a forgetting of Sumerian alterity, an alterity which may actually be a figment of Assyriological imagining; and a forgetting of cuneiform itself, when, more than three millennia after its birth, it had finally outlived its usefulness. Ultimately, this last was not just a culture's forgetting, but entailed the forgetting, almost entirely (except for the fragments preserved by biblical and classical texts), of the Sumero-Akkadian culture of Babylonia and Assyria, a culture that would only be recovered in the wake of the heroic decipherments of the nineteenth century A.D.,[50] a recovery that was followed with great interest at the early meetings of the American Oriental Society.

And it is to the Society and its forgetting that I would now like to turn, taking advantage of the freedom a presidential address affords to allow myself a moment of self-indulgence. In 1977 I was chair of the Society's nominating committee, and it was the turn of the Ancient Near East to nominate a vice-president for 1978–79, who would become president in 1979–80. I consulted with some colleagues, and then phoned Edith Porada, the doyenne of ancient Near Eastern art history, and asked her if she would stand for vice-president. She agreed, but asked, "What will they do the next year? You know they will never allow a woman to be president!" I assured her that *we* are *they*, and we/they would be delighted to have her as the Society's first woman president. Four years later, it was the Ancient Near East's turn once more, and, still nominating committee chair, I phoned Erica Reiner, editor of the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. "You're only asking me because I'm a woman!" was her response to my invitation to stand for vice-president. "All right," I replied, "Can you suggest another senior colleague who deserves the honor?" She immediately agreed to serve.

Of course, I was very eager to see women holding what had been an exclusively male office, but it was a no-brainer: both Porada and Reiner were eminently worthy candidates, obvious choices, really. Nevertheless, two decades would pass until another woman, Wadad Kadi, wielded the AOS gavel, and another six years before Stephanie Jamison, my immediate successor, became president in 2009. It's getting better, but the Society ought not forget that four women presidents since 1842 is a "burden of former days" that invites regular and continual redress.

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49. The one possible exception, the Tell Fisna tablet, is discussed by Brown 2008: 96. For late semi-literate Egyptian and Mayan texts, see Houston et al. 2003. See also my reflections on Brown 2008 (Cooper 2008).

50. For the short version, see Bottéro 1992, chap. 4. For greater detail, see, e.g., Larsen 1994.

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