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Book Author(s): Eleanor Robson

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Introduction

This is a book about how knowledge travels, in minds and bodies, writings and performances. It explores the forms knowledge takes, the meanings it accrues and how they are shaped by the peoples and places that use it. This is also a book about the relationships between political power, family ties and literate scholarship in the ancient Middle East of the first millennium BC (see Tables 3a and 5a for chronological overviews). Its particular focus is on two regions where cuneiform script was the predominant writing medium: Assyria in the north of modern-day Syria and Iraq; and Babylonia to the south of modern-day Baghdad (Fig. 1.1). And third, this is a book about Assyriological and historical method, both now and over the past two centuries. It asks how the field has shaped and been shaped by the academic concerns and fashions of the day. But perhaps above all this book is an experiment in writing about ‘Mesopotamian science’, as it has often been known. By focusing on the geographical and the social I hope to shed new light on the historical and intellectual too. Although I have included a lot of technical detail and evidential data, I have tried to make the book accessible to those without a specialist training in cuneiform studies. In particular, the following introduction aims to set the scene and explain my rationale, while maps, online glossaries and other resources will, I hope, give some further support to non-expert readers.¹

Mesopotamian science, cuneiform scholarship

How can one write a history of Mesopotamian science? There are so many definitional and methodological problems involved that sometimes it seems foolhardy even to try. As I and others have argued before, Mesopotamia – a Greek-derived word meaning ‘land between the rivers’ – is all too

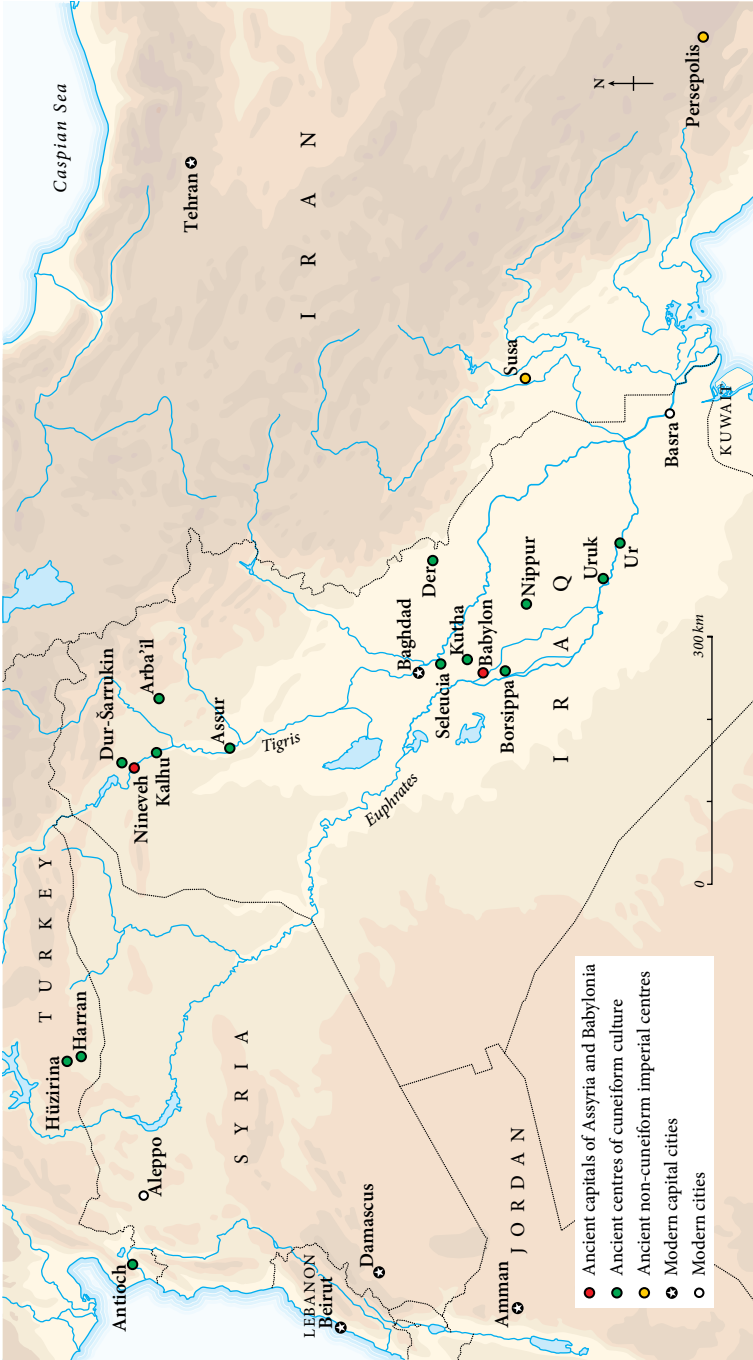


Figure 1.1 Map of the key places mentioned in this book. Source: Martin Brown.

often used as a catch-all term to refer to a large area over a vast period of time.² Maximally, the term encompasses most of Iraq and Syria, plus parts of Iran and Turkey, from prehistory through the beginnings of writing in the late fourth millennium BC, to the Persian and Macedonian conquests some 3,000 years later. It emphasises long-term, large-scale continuity and similarity – which admittedly has its methodological benefits – while underplaying localism, change and individuality. There is a resultant temptation to over-generalise from single instances and to downplay geographical and chronological difference.³ As one means of avoiding this unwitting homogenisation Karen Radner and I proposed the term ‘cuneiform culture’ to label the object of most Assyriologists’ historical attention. By this we meant the individuals and professional and social groups who cohered around ‘the writing technology that is not only fundamental to a modern academic understanding of the region but which also bound the ancient inhabitants into a shared set of ways of understanding and managing their world’.⁴ Of course one can and should also usefully subdivide that culture geographically, chronologically, linguistically and socially. In what follows I focus on a particular set of cuneiform subcultures: the tiny number of highly educated urban males in first-millennium Assyria and Babylonia who identified with, or aspired to, the highest echelons of intellectual life. As we shall see, it was they who produced the body of writings in the Akkadian and Sumerian languages that are now often labelled as cuneiform ‘literature’ and ‘science’.⁵

These terms too are fraught with danger if applied unthinkingly to the cuneiform world, for they are often misrepresented as entirely separate realms of knowledge and treated very differently in modern academe. Cuneiform ‘literature’ has been accepted easily into the world canon, constituting early examples of poetry, myth and epic. Yet Niek Veldhuis and others have warned us off purely aesthetic or documentary approaches to ‘literature’ written in cuneiform, even when it does have clearly poetic or allegorical qualities.⁶ Instead a more socio-functional analysis can help historians understand what these compositions, whether narrative or hymnic or dialogic, meant to those who memorised, copied and performed them. How did form relate, if at all, to function? By contrast, Francesca Rochberg and I have both shown in different ways how even the Babylonian intellectual endeavours with the closest family resemblances to modern scientific disciplines – namely astronomy and mathematics – struggled to be accepted into the history of science for much of the twentieth century.⁷ Questions of form and function were barely addressed, as historians often tended to ‘domesticate’ ancient writings to more closely represent modern ways of thinking.

In the early 1990s, Rochberg edited a seminal collection of papers on ‘cultures of ancient science’ for the journal *Isis*, encapsulating an important historiographical shift whose ramifications are still being worked through.⁸ In that volume Geoffrey Lloyd in particular laid out a compelling case for abandoning worries about the so-called ‘demarcation question’ – namely how to distinguish ‘science’ from its imitators – and focusing instead on the ancients’ own ways of making sense of the world and the terminology with which they categorised their findings and themselves.⁹ These ideas are usefully summarised by two equally eminent sociologist-historians of more recent periods. In David Bloor’s words, ‘Knowledge for the sociologist is whatever people take to be knowledge’ and, says Steven Shapin, it should be studied by historians ‘as if it was produced by people with bodies, situated in time, space, culture and society, and struggling for credibility and authority’.¹⁰ With those exhortations in mind, in this book I try to eschew anachronistic, value-laden terms such as ‘astrology’, ‘science’, ‘physician’ and even ‘Mesopotamia’. Rather, I try to carve the world of high cuneiform culture at its joints by respecting ancient taxonomies of knowledge.¹¹ Most fundamentally, the whole enterprise I consider here was known in Akkadian as *ṭupšarrūtu*, the abstract form of the noun *ṭupšarru* ‘scribe’. It could mean most mundanely ‘scribal employment’ or ‘the status of being a scribe’ but also ‘scribal learning’.¹² As we shall see, *ṭupšarrūtu* covered a wide range of intellectual enterprises, from (in modern-day terms) mythology to medicine to mathematics, and much that has no contemporary counterpart. Throughout this book, I shall denote the field of literate cuneiform learning simply as ‘scholarship’.

Not everyone who copied, commented on or created scholarly writings used titles to identify themselves but in first-millennium Assyria and Babylonia there were, broadly speaking, five major specialisms in different areas of learning. Ideally – although the reality was often messier in practice – the *asû* and *āšipu* were two types of healer (often unhelpfully translated into English as ‘physician’ and ‘exorcist’); the *bārû* and *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Ellil* (often ‘diviner’ and ‘astrologer’) read and interpreted provoked and unprovoked omens respectively; and the main role of the *kalû* (‘lamerter’) was to soothe and placate angry gods.¹³ Degrees of expertise could be marked with terms such as *šamallû* ‘apprentice’ or *rab(û)* ‘senior’. The bodies of work associated with the scholarly professions were, like *ṭupšarrūtu*, mostly named for them: *asûtu*, *āšipûtu*, *bārûtu* and *kalûtu*. Conversely, the *ṭupšar Enūma Anu Ellil*, literally ‘scribe of “When the gods Anu, Ellil (and Ea established in council the plans of heaven and earth)”’, was named after the celestial omen series that,

initially at least, was its primary reference work and source of authority. While there have been several useful studies of the individual scholarly professions, they tend to synthesise evidence from a range of periods, places and contexts.¹⁴ Likewise, the realities of the relationships between scholarly genres, professional titles and living human beings were much more complex than this schema allows. Here instead I shall aim to draw out the nuances of difference across time, space and social class in order to track local practices and change, both in the meaning and function of the scholarly professions and in their relationships with the bodies of learning that individuals worked with.

Histories of science, geographies of knowledge

It has been hard to integrate history of science and Assyriology over the years, partly because of the relatively late decipherment of cuneiform and the huge linguistic challenges that it brings. Eurocentric reluctance to decentre classical Greece from origin myths of 'civilisation' fuelled worries about what counted as 'science'. Cuneiformists' challenges to long-established models of the past have gone largely unheard. All of these barriers have already been well documented. But there is also a fundamental structural problem in that the largely anonymous cuneiform record does not lend itself to the dominant modes of writing about more modern periods of science. Hagiographic accounts of brilliant individuals making world-changing discoveries are thankfully no longer mainstream in academic history writing but are still prevalent in more popular books and broadcast media. Assyrian and Babylonian scholars, who have left us very few names and the barest traces of personalities to identify them by, are necessarily excluded from this type of historical discourse. We can say almost nothing about individuals' motivations, interests and abilities. Similarly, the cuneiform record cannot supply the types and density of sources needed to contribute to more recent, sociologically motivated studies of the ways by which scientific controversies are resolved in favour of one theory or technique held to be superior. Instead, as we shall see further in Chapter 2, the Assyriological default has necessarily been to focus on the edition and interpretation of textual genres and compositions. More recently, however, attention has turned to other sorts of evidence: letters, school exercises, institutional documentation, archaeological context. Together they open up the possibility of studying Kuhnian 'normal science': the business-as-usual of everyday scholarly practice.¹⁵

All of that practice was situated in particular places and spaces. Enough evidence survives of those locales and their relationships to make cuneiform scholarship susceptible to what the historical geographer Alan Baker has dubbed 'locational-spatial' analysis.¹⁶ At its most focused, this type of 'Where? And why there?' study is a form of micro-geography: an attempt to reconstruct the textures and rhythms of intellectual life in a single community, in a single place over a restricted period of time. Such approaches are a key feature of this book, especially in Chapters 4 and 5. Macro-geographies, on the other hand – the movements of people and objects, ideas and practices, techniques and knowledge across longer distances and between communities – are addressed mainly in Chapters 3 and 6. There have been a few previous studies of individual instances of long-distance scholarly journeys in the cuneiform world, but by and large intellectuals have been left out of accounts of travel in the ancient Middle East.¹⁷ For instance, in her monograph about travellers on official business for the Neo-Assyrian empire Sabrina Favaro considers only magistrates, governors and officials, messengers, and the king and his army. Yet, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4, Assyrian court scholars were also frequently on the move.¹⁸ As discussed in Chapter 2, over the past decade or so there has been a wave of geographical studies on more recent periods in the history of science. Historians have sought to identify where and under what socio-political conditions knowledge is generated, how that knowledge is replicated and spread, where it is consumed and by whom, and under what circumstances, and in what places, it flourishes or dies.¹⁹ There is a plethora of both archaeological and textual evidence from ancient Iraq and its environs to enable Assyriology to tackle such questions; this book is an attempt to do just that.

In Chapter 2, I take Rochberg's classic advice to historicise our predecessors in order to better understand ourselves.²⁰ In this case the question is why cuneiform intellectual culture has so rarely been subject to historical or geographical study in the ways described above. I argue that the current image of universal sameness stems from two ideas created roughly a century apart. First, 'Ashurbanipal's Library' was constructed twice: first as that king's private collection in the seventh-century Assyrian capital Nineveh; and then as the epitome of royally supported cuneiform learning in the British Museum in the late 1860s AD. Second, the power of the American Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim's 1960s phrase 'the stream of tradition' has unintentionally stymied the historicisation of Assyrian and Babylonian intellectual culture despite his own later writings.²¹ I then detail some of the new sources and methodologies that enable us to make a new start, and which underpin the following chapters.

Chapter 3 starts to pick a little further at the supposed first-among-equals status of ‘Ashurbanipal’s Library’ by considering the evidence for Assyrian court scholarship over the centuries before that particular historical moment. It becomes clear that the close relationship between king Ashurbanipal and the god Nabu that permeates the intellectual culture of his reign was the culmination of a long development. I argue that Nabu was taken up by courtly intelligentsia as their patron deity in the early ninth century BC but it was not until the late eighth century BC that he became a central figure in the king’s personal theology. At this point temples to Nabu, as centres of cuneiform scholarship, began to proliferate in Assyrian royal cities as the ruler became increasingly dependent on both the human and the divine support that they offered. Architectural and textual evidence suggests that at one level they can all be thought of as branches of the same institution. This flourishing of court patronage was relatively brief, however, and decline began even before the end of Ashurbanipal’s reign.

Where Chapter 3 considers change over centuries and large-scale institutional upheavals between Assyrian royal cities, Chapter 4 zooms in on two decades or so of the early seventh century BC, during the reigns of Esarhaddon and his son Ashurbanipal. Here I trace the movements of scholarly professionals and their writings around the Assyrian court and consider who had access to these men and their knowledge. Royal scholarship was – perhaps not surprisingly – highly exclusive and exclusionary. I shall show that it served significantly different aims from the tablet collections of communities elsewhere in the Assyrian heartland and periphery. ‘Ashurbanipal’s Library’ thus loses its claim as archetype, both within the history of the Assyrian empire and within its socio-political fabric.

In Chapter 5 I track the changing relationship between scholarship and kingship in Babylonia over the first millennium BC, in parallel with Chapter 3. Not surprisingly, the heyday of cuneiform scholarship in Babylonia was after the demise of Assyria in 612 BC, under the newly independent dynasty of Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar. But the Persian conquest of 539 BC did not kill off the old ways immediately. Rather, it was a series of brutal crackdowns on rebellions amongst the northern Babylonian elites in the late sixth and early fifth centuries that caused the greatest rupture. While the titles *asû* and *bârû* disappear almost completely from the historical record at this point, the scholarly professions of *āšipu*, *kalû* and *tušsar Enūma Anu Ellil* were able to adapt and survive. Meanwhile, the fate of Nabu in Babylonia was closely tied to his identity as son of the dynastic god Marduk. While he remained an important deity after the fall of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, institutional politics meant that temple affiliations took priority in scholars’ personal

devotional declarations. Henceforth, lack of courtly patronage drove the exploitation of two other long-standing means of support in new ways. Through a complex mixed economy of temple-based performance and private practice, scholars continued to provide consultations for individual clients, deploying innovations in both theory and method. A close study of the Uruk temple community's scholarly output shows the various ways in which they reacted to the end of royal support. In Uruk, I argue, a robust sense of long scholarly heritage along with concomitant self-worth mixed with grievance over past royal slights kept cuneiform intellectual culture alive and creative, despite dwindling numbers of practitioners and clients, well into the second century BC.

Chapter 6 again takes a micro-geographical turn, with a study of the places and spaces of scholarly practice before and after the anti-Achaemenid rebellions around 500 BC. I explore scholarship's relationship with the temple, and with private clientele, city by city. Throughout Babylonia, cuneiform learning petered out gradually or disappeared suddenly over the course of the late first millennium, leaving the communities of Uruk and Babylon as the last survivors of cuneiform culture. By this time, it bore little resemblance to its predecessor in the Neo-Assyrian court of half a millennium earlier, in aims, content or social status. The Oppenheimian 'stream of tradition', in other words, turns out to be far more fluid and far less traditional than many of its more dogmatic proponents would allow. However, I also argue that these apparent disappearances are not simply the chance result of what archaeologists happen to have discovered. Rather, they reflect a genuine geographical and social shrinkage of cuneiform scholarly networks, both within and between the cities of Babylonia in the latter half of the first millennium BC.

Finally, Chapter 7 briefly pulls together several threads that have been running throughout the book – the social, the geographical, the cuneiform and the scholarly – and considers some fruitful directions for future research. In particular, I highlight the concept developed here of the 'survival bottleneck' for high cuneiform culture, by which it was twice almost extinguished, and that of the 'distributed library', which gave it the flexibility and resilience to endure for so long.²²

Notes

1. At <http://oracc.org/cams/akno>.
2. Bahrani (1998); Robson (2008a: 272–4).
3. This trend can be seen, for instance, in the ubiquity of the phrase 'the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum' in the secondary literature, where what is actually meant is the commonality of

texts and practices used in the Babylonian city of Nippur, and to a greater or lesser extent in neighbouring cities, in the eighteenth century BC (Veldhuis 2016). Van der Toorn (2007: 55–9), for example, mixes evidence from early second-millennium Babylonia, the seventh-century Assyrian court in Nineveh and later periods in his account of ‘Mesopotamian’ scribal education, frequently referring to ‘the curriculum’. Delnero (2010) gives a useful critique of the notion of curriculum in the Old Babylonian period (and implicitly beyond).

4. Radner and Robson (2011: xxvii).
5. Akkadian was a member of the Semitic language family, indirectly related to modern-day Hebrew and Arabic; Sumerian was, so far as we know, a linguistic isolate. Both were written in cuneiform script on clay tablets, waxed wooden writing-boards and other media. At its simplest cuneiform consisted of about 100 syllable signs and twenty word signs (logograms) but intellectuals used a much wider range, at least five times that number (see Chapter 5). For a basic overview of cuneiform script, the languages written in it and the modern conventions for representing them, see Robson and Radner (2009). Radner and Robson (2011) constitutes a useful introduction to the wider issues of cuneiform culture.
6. E.g. Veldhuis (2004: 39–47); Black et al. (2004: xix–xxx).
7. E.g. Rochberg (2004: 14–43; 2016); Robson (2008a: 268–74).
8. Rochberg (1992a). I am grateful to Andrew Gregory for organising the ‘Cultures of Ancient Science’ conference at UCL in the spring of 2013, at which the surviving contributors to the 1992 collection and other speakers reflected on its impact and legacy. Some of my talk on that occasion is scattered through this introduction.
9. Lloyd (1992). A useful introduction to the ‘demarcation question’ in philosophy of science is Hansson (2012).
10. Bloor (1976: 5); Shapin (2010: iii).
11. For a useful introduction to the philosophical concept of natural kinds and ‘carving nature at its joints’ (a phrase coined by Plato) see Bird and Tobin (2012); in relation to cuneiform culture, see now Rochberg (2016: 96–101).
12. CAD T: 162–3.
13. Not surprisingly, these professional designations are often written in arcane orthographies, and it is not always clear how to render them phonetically. In particular, it is likely that the *ašīpu* – written variously with the logograms ¹⁶MU₇.MU₇; ¹⁶KA.PIRIG₍₃₎; ¹⁶MAŠ.MAŠ; ¹⁶KA.INIM.MA; ¹⁶ME(.ME); and ¹⁶ZABAR.DAB₍₃₎ (.BA) – was also sometimes known by the term *mašmaššu* (CAD A/II: 431–5; M/I: 381). However, for simplicity’s sake I shall use the word *ašīpu* throughout.
14. E.g. Scurlock (1999); Jean (2006); Geller (2007) on the *asū* and *ašīpu* and Rochberg (2000); Robson (2019) on the *tušsar Enūma Anu Ellil*. See Robson (2011a) and Gabbay (2014a) respectively on *bārū* and *kalū* in the Neo-Assyrian royal court.
15. Kuhn (1996); see for instance Worthington (2009); Radner (2011b); Robson (2011a).
16. Baker (2003: 62–71); as opposed to ‘environmental’, ‘landscape’ and ‘regional’ approaches in his taxonomy. On space as a ‘practiced place’, produced by human action, see de Certeau (1984: 117–18); and more recently Withers (2009).
17. Good examples are by Wiggermann (2008); Heeßel (2009).
18. Favaro (2007: 5–49).
19. Two very influential early examples of this genre are by Livingstone (2003) and Secord (2004).
20. Rochberg (1992b).
21. E.g. Oppenheim (1975), to which I return in Chapter 7.
22. These two concepts are introduced and discussed at more length in Robson (2018); Robson and Stevens (2019).