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CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES AND LATE MESOPOTAMIAN ARCHIVES AS FOUND IN THE FRAGMENTS OF THE "GRAECO-BABYLONIACA"

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This article focuses on the social reality behind the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca, a small sample of less than two dozen fragments of clay tablets, mainly inscribed with cuneiform signs on the obverse, with alphabetic Greek signs on the reverse. As possibly one of the last signs of life of the time-honored cuneiform script, in a Janus-faced manner they hint at the long tradition of Babylonian scholarship and learning on the one hand, and at its disappearance via script-obsolescence on the other. Notwithstanding the fact that there are only a few tablets, the aim of this article is to trace the social group behind the textual remains of the Graeco-Babylonian tablets and tablet fragments.

The Graeco-Babyloniaca comprise a sample of 17 cuneiform tablets, mostly heavily damaged, inscribed with texts composed in Sumerian and/or Akkadian language but transliterated into Greek script (see Table 1 at the end of the article).[1] In the main, they bear a cuneiform inscription on the obverse and a transliteration into Greek on the reverse. At least two tablets are demonstrably inscribed with a Greek transliteration of a Babylonian text only.[2] More questions remain open than answered; nevertheless, some hints at the social—and individual—identities of the authors are hidden in the tablet fragments from the final phase of cuneiform writing.

ARCHIVAL CONTEXT, SOCIOCULTURAL MEANING, AND GENRES

The archival context of the texts is unclear. At least the tablets in the British Museum can be ascribed to certain circumstances of acquisition; therefore, they allow an attribution to Babylon, and more exactly to the library of Esaĝil as the alleged findspot (Clancier 2009: 248 and *passim)*. Luckily, we are

1 The present editorial situation and the backbone of our epigraphical and philological understanding were established by Sollberger 1962; Geller 1983; Geller 1997; Maul 1991; Westenholz 2007. The numbering of the tablets in Geller's edition (1997) has still been a point of reference in subsequent publications. For insights from the perspective of Semitistics, see Knudsen 1989–1990; 1990; 1995. Text No. 18 turned out to be written in Aramaic transcribed into Greek letters (Krebernik 2002), and therefore it is no longer part of the Graeco-Babyloniaca *in sensu stricto*. An essential overview and a reevaluation is found in Oelsner 2013, and new insights are advanced in Stevens 2019. The present author owes thanks to the organizers of the conference, Saana Svärd and Sebastian Fink, and to the reviewers who enriched this paper with their insights and fruitful remarks.

2 That is, texts No. 14 (BM 38461), No. 15 (Schileico 1928–1929: 11–13, original lost; and No. 17 (Ash. Mus. 1937.993).

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better informed about the *Sitz im Leben* of the tablets than about their find spots. The texts of those tablets represent a more or less homogenous picture of a certain level of cuneiform curriculum. The contents of the extant tablet fragments clearly demonstrate that almost all of the texts are situated in the milieu of cuneiform learning, ranging from a slightly advanced to advanced level of education (Gesche 2001: 184–185; Oelsner 2013: 148–149). The genres represented in the sample are lexical lists, scholarly texts like a fragment of the Šamaš-hymn, or a piece of the series TIN.TIR on the *hagios topos* of Babylon; furthermore, one finds fragments of apotropaic rituals and fragments which most probably contain literary colophons (No. 14 [BM 38461], No. 15 [Schileico 1928–1929: 11–13, original lost]). They mirror a familiarity with and an esteem for the time-honored cuneiform tradition and the scholarly self-image connected to it. The last-mentioned fragments of texts even offer a superficial glimpse into the prosopography of the authors (Clancier 2009: 252).

LINGUISTIC AND SOCIO-LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES

Until the late third and second centuries BCE, the Babylonian language was represented in essential linguistic domains.[3] Its use and presence were gradually declining and, subsequently, it eked out an insular existence within a single specific social group (i.e., the personnel of the Babylonian temple, the priests). Thus, the Graeco-Babyloniaca emerged from a multilingual and literal milieu in which Sumero-Akkadian texts were still being handed down and performed within the social framework of the late Babylonian temple. As such, this institution served as a linguistic enclave, which was able to decelerate the final language shift.[4]

Aramaic and Greek were living languages; while the former almost certainly must have been spoken by the authors of the tablets (Clancier 2011: 767–769), the latter served as a language of administration (Oelsner 2002a: 186; Westenholz 2007: 293), and *notabiles* from the Babylonian society bore Greek names in addition to their native ones (Boiy 2004: 289–293; 2005; Monerie 2014; 2015). With its phonetic character, the Greek alphabet seemed to be suitable to represent the correct pronunciation of the scholarly texts. The Akkadian language, being represented in the extant texts, shows the characteristics of Late Babylonian (Hackl 2021a; Streck 2014).[5] Aramaic influence due to Akkadian-Aramaic language contact (Streck 2011) is possible, and even expected (Knudsen 1995), but due to the frozen character of the genres found on the preserved tablets, and the lack of colloquial situations and everyday speech, the Aramaic is almost not recognizable.

The writers of our Graeco-Babylonian tablets must have been indigene Babylonians, and we have to abandon the idea that it was Greeks who could have used these transliterations in order to learn Akkadian and Sumerian (Sollberger 1962: 63; Scholz 2008). The opposite was claimed by Schileico in the late 1920s, and the leading opinion today follows his perspective: obviously it was Babylonian scholars, belonging to families of priests,[6] and bearing Babylonian names

3 Akkadian as a dead or extinct language, see Hackl 2021b; for the characteristics and peculiarities of Late Babylonian in general, see Hackl 2021a; for Late Babylonian represented in the Akkadian-Greek transliterations on the tablet fragments, see Lang 2021.

4 "Vielmehr ist von einer stetig kleiner werdenden babylonischen Sprachgemeinschaft (bzw. Gemeinschaften in Form von Sprachinseln) im städtischen Milieu auszugehen, deren Sprecher den wachsenden kulturellen Druck der Kontaktgesellschaft aufgrund von Spracheinstellungen teilweise ausgleichen und so den endgültigen Sprachwechsel bis in die letzten Jahrhunderte des ersten Jahrtausends v.Chr. verzögern konnten" (Hackl 2018: 234).

5 On the peculiarities of Akkadian as represented in transliterations on the Graeco-Babylonian tablets, see Lang 2021.

6 On the social environment and historical context of the Babylonian priesthood, see Geller 1997: 81; Clancier 2011; Clancier & Monerie 2014; Kessler 2014; Krul 2018: 9–78.

(Geller 1997: 81, see also note 10 below) as the last persons preserving the ancient Babylonian culture, who used the Greek alphabet (Schileico 1928–1929: 11). It was surmised that, whereas the exact sites of discovery were unknown, the respective texts must have been found together with astronomical and literary cuneiform texts written by Babylonians (Oelsner 1972: 358; Westenholz 2007: 274; Clancier 2009: 248 and *passim*).

DATING

An exact dating is impossible, as there are no known archival contexts or date indications in the colophons on the tablets. However, besides crucial epigraphical findings, our sample regarding a possible dating horizon fits the general situation of the very late period of cuneiform scholarship in Mesopotamia: our latest dated texts[7] are astronomical[8] and cultic compositions, like Emesal laments; the most recent manuscript stems from the Arsacid period, the 80s of the first century BCE (Löhnert 2009: 19; Gabbay 2014: 249).

Finally, it is an astronomical text that brings up the rear with its dating to 75 CE (Sachs 1976). Attempts to place the tablets by means of epigraphical dating have hitherto led to a time range around the beginning of the common era (Geller 1997 *passim*; Westenholz 2007: 274). This means that our documents must have been written in the Parthian period (141 BCE to 224 CE). The most recent dating attempt situates the tablets in the early part of the suggested range (i.e., the late second or early first century BCE) (Stevens 2019: 141). A systematic evaluation of the epigraphy is still a desiderate but it has its limits.

THE QUEST FOR "IDENTITY" AS MIRRORED IN THE SMALL SAMPLE OF GRAECO-BABYLONIAN TABLETS

The identity of an individual within a group and the group's self-definition are *inter alia* linked to the use of a common language or sociolect and the claim for a connecting and identity-founding tradition. The latter can be traced in the scholarly literary and genealogical constructions (Lenzi 2008; Beaulieu 2000) of this particular period, which asserted the claim of antiquity and meaningfulness. In contrast to Egypt with its rather long tradition of scholarly coexistence with Graeco-Egyptian digraphy,[9] the Graeco-Babylonian sources reflect the milieu of cuneiform learning and its long-lasting and time-honored tradition. On the other hand, in a Janus-faced manner, they reveal the fact of script obsolescence (Houston, Baines & Cooper 2003; on this period, Brown 2008).

Leaving aside the writing of Aramaic in an alphabetic script, which had a long tradition in Mesopotamia, the phenomenon of digraphy (i.e., the use of two writing systems) in these very late documents in a shrinking world of cuneiform scholarship hints at persons moving between two

7 The latest attestations of cuneiform script in economical texts stem from the Raḫimesu Archive and date to 94/93 BCE (van der Spek 1998; see also more recently Hackl 2016 with mentions of previous literature). For a survey of the last known archives and the terminal attestation of cuneiform documents, see Oelsner 2002b: 9–18.

8 David Brown (2008: 94) explains the phenomenon of script obsolescence as follows: "scholars with good astronomical skills had, during the course of the second and first centuries BC, written in cursive scripts, in the languages of a far larger group of potential consumers, but had thereby undermined cuneiform's last stronghold. The temples learned to do without cuneiform and survived for some centuries longer, either by transliterating Akkadian and Sumerian into a cursive script (probably Greek) on perishable materials, or by translating the texts necessary for the practice of the cult into a living language (probably Aramaic)."

9 See Barns 1978 and most recently Quack 2017 for a full documentation of the polymorphous Graeco-Egyptian documentation.

worlds. On the one hand, they were still in touch with the cuneiform tradition and its institutional and intellectual heritage; on the other, they participated in the daily life of Hellenistic urbanism.

Leaving the quest for a group identity aside, if we were to seek traces of a personal or individual identity within the group, we possibly find them in two fragments of our sample. A character of individuality or personal creativity can somehow be traced in the two tablets inscribed with texts that were recognized as dedicatory colophons (No. 14 and No. 15). Though it cannot be ruled out that these tablets are school exercises, copies that do not give any information about the individual identity of the scribes, they bear traces of personal names,[10] containing formulaic but in some respect individually composed phrases.[11] As such, they clearly form deposition statements and hint at the votive character of these fragments (Pearce 1993: 189) and the dedicative intent of their respective writers.

The general question of this volume is dedicated to the search for identities hidden in and behind the archival findings. In themselves, the Graeco-Babyloniaca do not form an archive, and yet the texts may have been part of the inventory of an archive. A considerable number of them were possibly stored in the archive of the Esaĝil. As small as the number of hitherto-existing Graeco-Babyloniaca texts may be, they shed light on a very distinct part of Babylonian society and can offer information about script obsolescence and language death.

The social group of those who were still able to write cuneiform in this late period had become steadily smaller from the Hellenistic period onwards. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the bearers of the old written culture were no longer finding strong support in the alliance between the temple and palace;[12] as political and economic power shifted to newly founded urban centers, they became more or less obsolete (Brown 2008: 76–77). On the other hand, this group—*ad intra*—became smaller and smaller due to increasingly strict access regulations and purity rules (Still 2019: 191–195; Waerzeggers & Jursa 2008) On this horizon of self-perception of a group identity, there also emerged new literary activity, which has recently been called Late Babylonian priestly literature (Jursa & Debourse 2020; Jursa 2020). The œuvre of Berossos, with its cultural history of Babylonia written in Greek and its claim to demonstrate the importance—and, above all, the venerable age—of Babylonian culture (van der Spek 2008; Lang 2013: 53–55), must have arisen from this context as well. Berossos himself was a descendant of Esaĝil's priesthood.

The Graeco-Babyloniaca do not derive from the third century BCE, but most probably originate from the first, the one or the other possibly from the second cent. BCE. It is therefore the social group of the Babylonian priests who apparently last gained literacy—including the technique to record their contents with other writing materials than clay—around the turn of the century by composing their school texts with the help of the Greek phonetic script. According to Joachim Oelsner, the Graeco-Babyloniaca show the transformation from a mere writing of Akkadian in cuneiform to writing on other media than clay, which means "as a technical means to facilitate the transmission of written texts – including the traditional ones" (Oelsner 2002a: 191). Be that as it may, leaving the path of the traditional curriculum with its stable and inert connection between script and language must have accelerated the language death itself.

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10 According to text No. 15, l.1, the writer of the dedicative colophon from St. Petersburg clearly bore Babylonian names: … σα βηλ ιφοσ μαρ σα [εα?]βαν (= … ša *Bēl-īpuš mār ša* [*Ea*?]-*bāni* (Geller 1997: 81)).

11 *Inter alia*, see the formula(tion) in text No. 14, l.7: "τουβ λιβει τουβ σειρ"—*ṭûb libbīya ṭûb šīrīya* (reading according to Oelsner 2013: 152); while it indeed has the character of a stock phrase or a set piece ("Versatzstück"), it is individually applied to the writer and his personal *salus animae*. We know this phraseology from other late colophons (Clancier 2009: 154; Cavigneaux 1981: 37–38; Gesche 2001: 153–166).

12 For the interaction between temple and palace in Hellenistic times cp. Clancier & Monerie 2014.

Table 1 Table of the extant tablet fragments according to their contents, epigraphical constitution, "dating," and availability online.

Text	Content	External appearance of the texts	Proposed dating	Availability as digital / online resources (CDLI number, if available)
(1) BM 34797	Ur_5-ra=*hubullu* II, 203–214 (MSL 5,66–67)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved	Around the beginning of the Common Era (?)	P370916 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/archival_view.php?ObjectID=P370916>
(2) BM 35727	Ur_5-ra=*hubullu* II, 228–234 (MSL 5,68)	Cuneiform inscription obv. destroyed and restored, only rev. preserved	1st cent. BCE	
(3) BM 34799	Ur_5-ra=*hubullu* III, x + 284–289 (MSL 5,117)	Obv. only traces of cuneiform signs	1st cent. BCE	
(4) BM 35726	Ur_5-ra=*hubullu* III, 290–295 (MSL 5,117–118)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved	Around the beginning of the Common Era(?)	
(5) BM 35458+	S^a (MSL3,22–23; MSL 2,55)	Obv. destroyed and reconstructed	1st cent. BCE	
(6) BM 48863	S^bA (MSL 3,110)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved. Lines of cuneiform texts and the Greek transliteration do not entirely correspond.	1st cent. CE	
(7) BM 34781 + 35154	S^bA (MSL 3, 96)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved.	Around the beginning of the Common Era(?)	
(8) BM 77229	S^b 1–4 (MSL 3, 96)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved.	1st cent. CE	
(9) BM 33778	Ea IV, 122–123 (MSL 14, 360)	Cuneiform script on obv. is lost, Greek text preserved only.		
(10) HSM 1137	zi-pà incantation	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved.	1st cent. CE (Geller 1983: 114); see also Stevens 2019: 140–141: 1st cent. BCE	P405773 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P405773>
(11) BM 34816	Udug.ḫul.la.meš / *Utukkū lemnūtu* (UH IX 87'–91')	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved.	1st cent. CE (Geller 2008: 44)	P429963 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/archival_view.php?ObjectID=P429963>
(12) BM 33769	Šamaš Hymn (BWL 136, lines 169–172)	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved.	1st cent. BCE	P368607 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P368607>
(13) VAT 412	Unassigned, but seems to be inscribed with excerpts typical of school texts	Cuneiform script on obv. and Greek signs on rev. preserved, but the extant texts do not correspond.	Around the beginning of the Common Era?	
(14) BM 38461	(literary) colophon	Inscribed with Greek letters only (Oelsner 2013: 151)		
(15) AfO 5 (1928–1929: 11–13)	(literary) colophon	Inscribed with Greek letters only (Oelsner 2013: 153)		Original now lost, image and drawing see AfO 5 (1928–1929), Tablet VIII.

Text	Content	External appearance of the texts	Proposed dating	Availability as digital / online resources (CDLI number, if available)
(16) BM 34798	TIN.TIR.KI (George 1992: 37–41)		1st cent. CE (Geller 1997: 82); 2nd cent. BCE (Black & Sherwin-White 1984: 143; Stevens 2019: 139)	P479205 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P479205>
(17) Ash. Mus. 1937.993.	Bilingual incantation (Maul 1991; Knudsen 1995)	No cuneiform sign visible, obviously it was inscribed with Greek letters only (Geller 1997: 84; Oelsner 2013: 159 n. 45).	2nd cent. BCE	P412445 <https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/archival_view.php?ObjectID=P412445>

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