

## ✦ SCRIBAL IDENTITIES, RENAISSANCES, AND DEAD LANGUAGES: FROM BARBER SUMERIAN TO KITCHEN LATIN

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This article is an investigation of the role of the knowledge of dead languages, namely Latin and Sumerian, for scribal or scholarly identities. While at first glance there is no obvious reason why a “dead language” should be part of the curriculum of people who were about to become the foremost administrators of their time, knowledge of one or more dead languages seems to be a pillar of scholarly self-consciousness in many periods. The three groups under study are Mesopotamian scribes in general, especially those of the Old Babylonian schools; the *galas/kalûs*, professional lamentation singers that became scribes over the course of time; and Renaissance scholars, for whom a perfect grasp of Latin was of utmost importance. Those who did not meet the expectations of their colleagues were accused of speaking “Barber Sumerian” or “Kitchen Latin” and thereby excluded from the exclusive scholarly circles—or, as the Sumerian school texts put it, from becoming a true member of humanity.

### INTRODUCTION

We can assume that human beings from any period took pride in their skills, and especially so if the field they mastered was restricted to a small group.<sup>1</sup> In terms of personal identity and self-confidence, a rare skill is more useful than a common skill, as it makes a person stand out from a larger group, and different skills were seen as important by different professional groups.<sup>2</sup> While different practical skills received various levels of esteem over time, mastering a dead and complicated language seems to have held a perennial attraction for scholars who took pride in these skills and devoted their time to the study of a field with no direct material reward. Although these skills were impractical, they opened doors to the learned society, as mastering them was seen as essential for a decent human being.

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1 See Sloterdijk 2009 for a reappraisal of studying and exercises to reach excellence in some subject from a philosophical point of view. The idea of the importance of mastering a subject (which one not being so important) in order to master life is widely found in Japanese philosophy; see, e.g., Mogi 2018.

2 “In order to serve *scribal* self-esteem, mathematics had to be supra-utilitarian (or utilitarian but particularly difficult). A dentist may be personally proud of being good at chess; but *qua* dentist he can only be proud of skills which are, or at least seem to be, relevant to dentistry or odontology” (Hóyrup 2018: 216).



Amartya Sen (2006) has prominently stressed the fact that every human being has multiple identities, largely depending on context and choice, and that in different historical and social scenarios different aspects of a human's identity (nationality, religion, social status, race, education, wealth, and so forth) can become exclusive identities. The professional identities of scribes studied here comprise one of those multiple identities that can become important in different contexts. An interesting fact, however, is that the humanistic approach to identity propagated by Sen was deeply rooted in the self-consciousness of these scribes, who aimed to become true members of humanity by studying ancient languages. This means that, at least theoretically, everyone who was willing to learn and master Sumerian or Latin could become a scribe and thereby a true member of humanity.

Jens Hóyrup (2018: 216) identifies two subjects that had the potential to boost scribal self-consciousness in Mesopotamia in the third millennium: supra-utilitarian mathematics and the creation of literary texts and *de luxe* copies made “in memory of good old school days.” After Sumerian had become an extinct language, knowledge of it became the third pillar of scribal self-consciousness (Hóyrup 2018: 218). The importance of the knowledge of a “dead language” lies at the heart of this article. As Italian Renaissance humanism is a well-documented and well-studied field, we decided to approach scribal identities by means of a comparative study, taking into account the Italian Renaissance, the Old Babylonian school, and finally the *kâlus*, the last heirs of the cuneiform tradition in Mesopotamia.

Arnold Toynbee (1954: 4) famously saw the Italian Renaissance as one instance of a recurrent phenomenon characterized by the “evocation of a dead culture by the living representative of a civilization that is still a going concern.” Sumerian, Carolingian, Indian, Arabian, Chinese, and many other renaissances have been discussed in literature, and all of these movements are connected to the study of and intellectual engagement with texts—and thereby languages—of ancient times (Goody 2010). The proponents of such renaissances developed a special set of values, which is often designated as Humanism. While Humanism is a complicated phenomenon, one common aspect of the Humanists is surely their commitment to the study of a (dead) language and a certain corpus of texts. Hóyrup (1994: 74), who coined the idea of a Babylonian Humanism, described this humanistic attitude as follows:

Bien que le milieu physique et culturelle diffère d'un humanisme à l'autre, la tâche de l'école humaniste demeure donc essentiellement la même: Transmettre les connaissances jugées utiles (dont la liste n'est ni close ni tout à fait stable), et inculquer (dans la mesure du possible) une attitude ne tolérant qu'une indépendance restreinte: celle des chiens fidèles dont parle justement Michel Olsen.

Although Hóyrup highlights the limitations of all the Humanisms, the ideology they developed focuses on the personal development of human beings, endowing their students with a solid basis for their professional identity. All Humanistic ideologies stressed the importance of learning; the Humanism of the Renaissance even included educational reform. Through the studies considered important at that time, a human being was believed to be able to develop their full abilities and become a true member of humanity; this was the case no matter if we consult the Old Babylonian school texts (Volk 2000) or Renaissance philosophers like Pico della Mirandola (1463–1493) (Baumgarten & Buck 1990: 9).

One important aspect that should be mentioned right away, however, is the impracticality of Sumerian for Akkadian-speaking scribes. Already Friedrich Kraus (1973: 28) highlighted the fact that the conservation of the Sumerian traditions until the very end of cuneiform is one of

the greatest enigmas of Mesopotamian culture. We seek to shed light on this enigma by here comparing the use of Sumerian in post-Sumerian times with the use of Latin in the Renaissance.

We do not want to overlook or downplay the many differences between the study of ancient texts in the Italian Renaissance and in the Mesopotamian schools; rather, we aim to highlight the importance of being an expert in a dead language for the self-understanding of the scholars and scribes who engaged in this enterprise. Moreover, this specific endeavor highlights the differences between the sources from Mesopotamia and Renaissance Italy. While most of the texts that inform us about the ideals of the Renaissance scholars are written within the Western tradition of theoretical reflection and philosophical discussion, the evidence from Mesopotamia is quite different. Instead of highly abstract, theoretical considerations, the texts present examples in proverbs and dialogues and often leave it up to the reader to grasp the moral of the story. Furthermore, while long articles or even monographs have been devoted to the study of the concept of Humanism found in the work of different Latin Renaissance authors, we cannot even ascertain authors for most Sumerian literary works, and so we have to instead base our analysis on a single text or group of texts.

This study originated with the question of how to study the identity of a group of scribes, the *kalûs* (as they were called in Akkadian), who studied and copied ancient Emesal lamentations until the knowledge of cuneiform writing slowly faded away around the turn of the era. As the texts they wrote and copied yield little information regarding scribal self-understanding, it soon became clear that additional evidence was needed. In order to catch a glimpse of the ideas of these late scribes, who devoted themselves to the study and transmission of Sumerian literature in a Hellenistic world, proverbs and school texts from older periods needed to be taken into account. Even if these texts originated in a much older period and not all of them are documented in the late first millennium, the fact that Sumerian was still taught, and Sumerian texts were still copied informs us that at least a part of this ideology was still operative.

As we have no hard evidence regarding the interaction of the *kalûs* with the Hellenistic world and all our considerations would be based on speculation, this aspect will not be touched upon here. We have decided to focus instead on the Humanistic ideals of mastering a dead language, which seem to belong to the repertoire of scribal and scholarly self-understanding of many times and cultures (Hóystrup 1994; Goody 2010). To this end, we will give a short description of the history of Latin and Sumerian and then go into a discussion of some exemplary texts from the learned milieu that highlight the value of learning for the development of a true human being, or, in contrast, make fun of uneducated people who pretend to have the highly valued knowledge but turn out to speak Sumerian like a barber or Latin like a cook.

## LATIN

### *The History of Latin*

Latin is an Indo-European language first documented in Latium, the region where the city of Rome was later founded. The speakers of this language came to Italy at some point between the sixth and the second millennium BCE, although the precise date cannot be determined due to a lack of clear evidence (Ostler 2008: 22). Until the conquest of the Italian peninsula by the Romans, many different languages such as Faliscan, Oscan, or Umbrian were spoken in this area. Although these languages were also Indo-European and therefore related to Latin, the Romans were not able to communicate with their neighbors; Livy reports that the Roman

commander Volumnius in the third Samnite War (298–290 BCE) had sent scouts to the enemy's army who understood Oscan (Livy X 20, 8). In a couple of centuries, Latin replaced several other languages due to the Romans' conquests. The spread of Latin started in Italy, where in the late first century BCE all other languages (except Greek in the south) were dispelled. From 100 BCE to 400 CE, the number of languages known to be spoken in the Roman Empire declined from sixty to twelve (Ostler 2008: 14).

The first known written testimony for Latin is the so-called *Praeneste Fibula*, a golden brooch which was produced around 600 BCE (Degrassi 1957–1963: I, No. 1). Somewhat younger are the *Duenos* inscription, found on a vase, and the *Lapis niger* on the *Forum Romanum* (Degrassi 1957–1963: I, Nos. 2 and 3). In the following centuries, several inscriptions and other non-literary texts are known or (partly) preserved. The beginning of Roman literature can be dated quite precisely: in 240 BCE, a tragedy and a comedy translated by Livius Andronicus from Greek into Latin were performed in Rome (Suerbaum 2002: 93–104; Livingston 2004). The first completely preserved works of Latin literature are comedies of Plautus and Terentius in the third and second centuries BCE (Stroh 2007: 35).

When the Romans brought under control huge parts of the Mediterranean world from the third century BCE onwards, Latin was spread outside of Italy. This Romanization was largely driven by Roman soldiers, merchants, and settlers. Although the Romans more or less tolerated other languages, the foreign elites were eager to learn Latin in order to interact with the new rulers and pursue careers in the capital of the empire. Knowing Latin also became a condition for citizenship. Some parts of the empire were more affected than others by the spread of the Latin language. For example, in the Hellenistic East, Greek did not disappear as a *lingua franca*. On the contrary, the Iberian Peninsula was Romanized by the first century CE; one century later, North Africa and Gaul were also included among the Latin-speaking regions (Fuhrmann 2015: 24–25). The fact that many of the most famous authors did not come from Rome<sup>3</sup> or even from Italy<sup>4</sup> shows how familiar the inhabitants of provinces were with Latin.

In Late Antiquity, the rise of Christianity fostered the spread of Latin. In the second century CE, especially in North Africa, many Christian texts were translated into Latin. Tertullian can be seen as the father of the Christian Latin literature, followed by other famous authors such as Lactantius, Jerome, and Augustine (Stroh 2007: 122–123). Due to the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west and political upheavals beginning in the fourth century, as well as the decline of grammar teaching in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, people's Latin skills deteriorated in the Early Middle Ages and the Romance languages arose out of vulgar Latin (Ostler 2008: 159; Stroh 2007: 139).

### ***The Renaissances of Latin***

In the ninth century AD, Charlemagne initiated the first so-called Latin Renaissance. He gathered scholars at his court and, although he himself was not able to write properly,<sup>5</sup> induced a flour-

3 For instance, Virgil came from Mantua, Livy from Padua, Horace from Apulia, and Catullus from Verona.

4 For example, Quintilian, Seneca, and Seneca's nephew Lucan were from Spain, and Suetonius from Africa.

5 Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, 25: "Temptabat et scribere tabulasque et codicillos ad hoc in lecto sub cervicalibus circumferre solebat, ut, cum vacuum tempus esset, manum litteris effigiendis aduinceret, sed parum successit labor praeposterus ac sero inchoatus." ("He also tried to write and he used to have tablets and booklets available under his pillow, so that he could train his hand in writing letters whenever there was time, but because he had started late, he achieved little success.")

ishing body of Latin literature. As part of these changes, he also initiated an educational reform. Charlemagne's efforts not only stabilized antique standards of language but also resulted in the recovery of spoken and written Latin (Leonhardt 2009: 166). From the ninth century onwards, more manuscripts of Classical texts were preserved, and literary products were oriented toward Classical Latin (Leonhardt 2009: 160).

Especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the number of people who understood Latin increased. A significant percentage of the preserved manuscripts date to this time, which is why some scholars speak of the "Renaissance of the twelfth century" (Haskins 1957). The different varieties of Latin that were spoken in the Middle Ages are usually summarized under the label of Medieval Latin (on Medieval Latin prose, see Reinhardt, Lapidge & Adams 2005: 26–36).

In the fourteenth century in Italy,<sup>6</sup> Latin and Antiquity in general gained in importance. Characterized by a recourse to Antiquity in many respects, this epoch is usually called the "Renaissance," whereas "Humanism" describes the linguistic, philological, and literary aspects of this time (Korenjak 2016: 33). Although the term "Humanism" is not documented before 1808, "Humanista" designated scholars who taught grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy (Nauert 2006: 8). Those Humanists were largely middle- and upper-class members, and their scholarly debates were certainly pursued by the elites (Nauert 2006: 68). Of course, not every person in Humanistic Italy (or Europe) understood Latin. It was used especially by the male part of the educated class (such as adult clerics and nobles). Lower-class people encountered Latin in church, but that is probably all.

Still, there were always exceptions, such as clerics with only rudimentary Latin skills or a shoemaker with excellent proficiency in the language. Latin in Early Modern Times was based mainly on two institutional entities: the Church and academic/educational facilities such as schools and universities. Furthermore, it was used as a *lingua franca* in diplomacy and when traveling (Burke 1989). To sum up, we can assume that Humanistic scholars were mainly members of the upper-class who had received a deep Classical education.

One important aspect of Humanistic education was the union of eloquence and virtue;<sup>7</sup> as Petrarch states, great authors were also moral persons, such as, for example, Cicero or Virgil (Seigel 1965). Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457) also mentions the relationship between high culture and good language (Garin 1952: 596). Due to the interest in Antiquity, Classical texts were studied intensely, and several texts were rediscovered.

When dealing with Classical texts, one main difference with Medieval scholars was the approach that Humanists chose. In the Middle Ages, the context of texts was often ignored, and individual statements called *sententiae* were collected, whereas Humanistic scholars criticized the dissolution from the textual as well as the historical-biographical context and included this information in their interpretations of texts. Several Renaissance authors express the opinion that the Middle Ages were a "Dark Age"—at least in regard to Latin language and culture.<sup>8</sup> For example, when looking for Classical books together with Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459),

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6 According to Nauert, the Renaissance began in Italy because of its political and social framework. In contrast to monarchies like England or France, Italy comprised many independent republics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This political landscape created an elite consisting largely of merchants, lawyers, and notaries, whose success depended on their education, and especially on their rhetorical skills. See Nauert 2006: 4–6.

7 This view was already present in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, the most complete treatise on education preserved from Antiquity.

8 That is, Petrarch, Guarino Veronese, Coluccio Salutati, Cincius Romanus, Leonardo Bruni, etc. See Pade 2014: 8–10.

Cincius Romanus (1380/90–1445) lamented the loss of texts in the “dark times” (*tenebrae*) (Pade 2014: 9). Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457) was the first to openly and rigorously criticize Medieval grammars—and language in general—in his *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*.

### ***Lorenzo Valla and the Value of Latin***

Valla was born in Rome, later moved to Pavia, and from 1435 onwards was employed at the court of Alfonso of Aragon in Naples, where he composed several treatises. In 1447, he returned to Rome and became an apostolic scribe and then a papal secretary. Also, during his employment in Rome, he wrote typical Humanistic works such as translations and invectives (e.g., against Poggio Bracciolini) in a polemical, sometimes even aggressive style (Nauta 2014: 1191–1192).

Amongst other works, he composed the *Elegantiarum linguae Latinae Libri VI*, a handbook on the use of idiomatic Latin (Pade 2014: 1193). The author expressed the view that language—or, more precisely, Latin—is mainly learned by observing how other people use it. Therefore, the rules of grammar are determined by practice, convention, and custom (*consuetudo*). The authorities that should be observed are the Classical authors between Cicero and Quintilian. Valla speaks of a decline in the knowledge of Latin after the first century CE (Nauta 2014: 1191–1192). For example, in the *praefatio* to the second book, he expresses the opinion that all authors after Donatus, Servius, and Priscianus were babbling (*balbutire*), the first being Isidor of Seville, the most arrogant of the uneducated (*indoctorum arrogantissimus*) (Garin 1952: 602).

Moreover, by urging the Romans to free their city from the Gauls (referring to the conquest of Rome in the fourth century CE), he metaphorically aims for the “liberation” of Latinity from Medieval decay and shows the importance of linguistic aspects for the humanists (Pade 2014: 14). The *Elegantiarum linguae Latinae* is also famous for its *praefatio* to the first book, where Valla writes about the greatest merits (in his opinion) of the Romans, namely, the propagation of the Latin language:

Cum saepe mecum nostrorum maiorum res gestas aliorumque vel regum vel populorum considero, videntur mihi non modo ditionis nostri homines, verum etiam linguae propagatione ceteris omnibus antecelluisse. Nam Persas quidem, Medos, Assyrios, Graecos aliosque permultos longe lateque rerum potitos esse; quosdam etiam, ut aliquanto inferius quam Romanorum fuit, ita multo diuturnius imperium tenuisse constat; nullos tamen ita linguam suam ampliasset ut nostri fecerunt [...]. opus nimirum multo praeclarior multoque speciosius quam ipsum imperium propagasse. (Garin 1952: 594)

Whenever I reflect on the deeds of our ancestors and other kings or peoples, our people seem to me to surpass all others not only because of their power, but especially because of the spread of language. For the Persians, the Medes, the Assyrians, the Greeks, and many others, subdued wide territory; some, moreover, established a much more long-lived empire, though it was not as great as that of the Romans; but none spread their language as our ancestors have done [...] a work that is much more famous and magnificent than to increase the empire.

Valla compares the Romans’ deeds with those of peoples who created even longer-lasting empires. However, the spread of the Latin language was more durable than the maintaining of an extensive empire and is therefore valued even more highly. Moreover, Valla takes the view that disseminating the Latin language even had a divine significance:

Qui enim imperium augent, magno illi quidem honore affici solent atque imperatores nominantur; qui autem beneficia aliqua in homines contulerunt, ii non humana, sed divina potius laude celebrantur, quippe cum non suae tantum urbis amplitudini ac gloriae consulant, sed publicae quoque hominum utilitati ac saluti. [...] An vero Ceres quod frumenti, Liber quod vini, Minerva quod oleae inventrix putatur, multique alii ob aliquam huiusmodi beneficentiam in deos repositi sunt, linguam

latinam nationibus distribuisse minus erit, optimam frugem et vere divinam, nec corporis sed animi cibum? Haec enim gentes illas, populosque omnes omnibus artibus quae liberales vocantur instituit; haec optimas leges edocuit; haec viam eisdem ad omnem sapientiam munivit; haec denique praestitit ne barbari amplius dici possent. (Garin 1952: 594)

For those who increase the empire are usually adorned with great honor and called emperors; but those who do any good to the people are celebrated not with human but with divine praise, because they have provided not only for the expansion and honor of their city, but for the benefit and welfare of the public and the people. [...] But if Ceres is considered the inventor of grain, Liber of wine, Minerva of the olive, and many others are counted among the gods because of some kind of beneficence, is it less worthy to spread the Latin language among the peoples, the best and divine fruit, the food not of the body but of the spirit? For it has endowed all peoples and all countries with all the arts called the liberal ones; it has taught them the best laws; it has built them the road to all wisdom; it has finally made sure that they can no longer be called barbarians.

Valla expresses the view that Latin (grammar) was the foundation of all kinds of cultural arts. Also, Isidor of Seville defined grammar as the art of correct speech and the foundation of the liberal arts (*Etymologiae* 1). This was a popular view in the Middle Ages. Therefore, grammar was the basis for education and of high importance for the welfare of the people. Furthermore, according to Valla, the Latin language distinguishes “people” from “barbarians.”<sup>9</sup> This statement implies that every true human being has to learn Latin, namely, the Latin that was used in the first century BCE and the first century CE. This fits the general attitude of Renaissance scholars that humans have immense potential but that this potential can only be fully achieved through devoted studies and hard work.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola expressed the same opinion in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (published in 1496 by his nephew Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola). He explains that humans are destined to be extremely mighty, even celestial,<sup>10</sup> but only if they are virtuous and hard-working. Humans who are unable to control their instincts are lower beings, just like animals or plants:

Si quem enim videris deditum ventri, humi serpentem hominem, frutex est, non homo, quem vides; si quem in fantasia quasi Calypsus vanis praestigiis caecutientem et subscalpenti delinitum illecebra sensibus mancipatum, brutum est, non homo, quem vides. Si recta philosophum ratione omnia discernentem, hunc venereris; caeleste est animal, non terrenum. (Baumgarten & Buck 1990: 9)

Because when you see a person crawling on the ground devoted to his belly, you see a shrub, not a person. If one who is blindly entangled in the trifling juggleries of fantasy, such as those of Calypso, is beguiled by seductive allurement and has fallen prey to his senses, you see an animal, not a man. When [you see] a philosopher who ponders everything in right consideration, you can worship him: he is a heavenly being, not a terrestrial one.

Furthermore, the Humanists took over the term *studia humanitatis*, which first appears in Cicero’s *Pro Archia poeta* 2–4, where he speaks about *studia humanitatis ac litterarum* (“the humanities and letters”). *Pro Archia poeta* 2–4 remains the only known mention of the term until the rediscovery of Cicero’s *Pro Murena* by Poggio Bracciolini in 1415, where Cicero also mentions the *studia humanitatis* (Cic. Mur. 61). Cicero’s use of this term implies “the whole

9 Since Antiquity, it was customary to think that Latin and Greek were rational languages and that grammars could only be written about those. In the Middle Ages, Hebrew was also regarded as a rational language, and all these three were regarded as sacred. Grammars of the vernacular languages began to be written in the Late Middle Ages.

10 This is a Platonic idea, since Pico was a Platonist.

range of subjects which boys must study in order to develop their full potential as human beings” (Nauert 2006: 12).

In the Middle Ages, the term ‘liberal arts’ was used, and it was an important program of learning. Its contents were fixed in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages to seven arts, namely, grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (*trivium*) and geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and the theory of music (*quadrivium*). The orientation of the liberal arts is Platonic, which becomes clear when Pico della Mirandola mentions the word “celestial”; it used to be customary to think that the liberal arts provided the steps by which man rises through education toward perfection and divinity. The Humanists added history and moral philosophy to the liberal arts and also called them *bonae artes* (on the concept of *studia humanitatis*, its relation to the liberal arts, and the Platonic influence, see Luhtala 2020).

According to Kohl, the concept of *studia humanitatis* changed during the Renaissance. It was first used by Coluccio Salutati in 1369 in a letter of consolation written to Ugolino Orsini upon the death of his father. Salutati praised the older man for his education and lifestyle and in this context mentioned his *studia humanitatis* (Kohl 1992: 188). In the following years, Salutati often used the term in letters of consolation in order to praise the deceased’s qualities (Kohl 1992: 189). Put very simply and without considering changes of meaning, the concept embraces a person’s educational and scholarly (probably also cultural) attainments. Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444) defines the idea as follows: “propterea humanitatis studia nuncupantur, quod hominem perficiant, atque exornent” (Buck 1959: 175) (“They are called *studia humanitatis* because they improve and adorn a human.”) Furthermore, they contain both *litterarum peritia* (which can be the trivium, or grammar and rhetoric) and *rerum scientia* (probably the quadrivium, that is, natural philosophy).<sup>11</sup> In practice, the way to *studia humanitatis* was to carefully study Greek and Roman Classics (Pade 2014: 15).

The importance of the *studia humanitatis* shows that mastering written as well as spoken Latin was essential for any person educated in the Humanities. Latin was seen as the basis for every education. Interestingly, it was not until the fourteenth century that people realised that Latin had once been a native language. Dante, for instance, in his *De vulgari eloquentia* (written in 1302–1305) uses the terms *Latinus* and *Ytalus* synonymously. However, he distinguishes between a vernacular language and a language the Romans called *gramatica*.

The main difference between those two languages is that the vernacular language is “natural” (I 1, 4: *naturalis*), as children learn it when they first start to recognize sounds (I 1, 2–3: “[...] eam, qua infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipient”), whereas *gramatica* is “artificial” (I 1, 4: *artificialis*), since it cannot be mastered by everyone because it takes time and diligence to learn (I 1, 2–3: “ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa”). Moreover, Dante expresses the opinion that language is a human peculiarity.<sup>12</sup> The idea that an

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11 “Haec enim duo sese invicem iuvant mutuoque deservunt. Nam et litterae sine rerum scientia steriles sunt et inanes, et scientia rerum quamvis ingens, si splendore careat litterarum, abdita quaedam obscura videtur” (Buck 1959: 275–276). (“Those two support each other and serve each other. Because letters are unfruitful and pointless without knowledge, and the general knowledge seems, even if it is immense, hidden and bleak without the splendor of language.”)

12 I 2, 1: “Nam eorum que sunt omnium soli homini datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit. Non angelis, non inferioribus animalibus necessarium fuit loqui, sed nequicquam datum fuisset eis.” (“Because of all living beings, only humans are able to speak, because it is necessary only for them. Angels and humble animals don’t need to speak; therefore, the ability to speak would be useless for them.”)



appropriate use of language is essential for a human being implies that “to use language badly (inaccurately, inelegantly, immorally) was to surrender some vital parts of one’s humanity,” as Botterill (1996: xix) puts it.

The belief that a person without adequate Latin skills was not a “real human being” appears in several invectives or other kinds of polemical texts between scholars, whose critics often aim at the opponent’s poor Latin skills. One example is Lorenzo Valla’s *Apologus* against his intellectual archenemy Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459).<sup>13</sup> This text provides the first known evidence for the term *latinitas culinaria* (“kitchen Latin,” in English also “dog Latin”; on *Küchenlatein*, see Lehmann 1928; Burke 1989). The dialogue’s protagonist Laurentius (Lorenzo Valla) disputes with Poggius (Poggio Bracciolini) about different topics. Laurentius asks Guarinus (Guarino Veronese) to function as a referee, as his *humanitas* and *eruditio* qualify him for this role.<sup>14</sup> Through the whole text, Poggius is described as stupid and ridiculous.

When Laurentius chooses Guarinus to judge their discussion as if they were in court (*forum*), Poggius ineptly remarks that he loves the *forum* because of the different types of food sold there. Guarinus explains that they are talking about court, not the marketplace.<sup>15</sup> After some debates where Poggius’ intellectual inferiority is clearly demonstrated, Laurentius suggests that Guarinus should evaluate Poggius’ letters. Laurentius accuses Poggius of “bad language” (*male loquentem*); Guarinus should judge whether Poggius is guilty and, if not, blame Laurentius for having made a false accusation (*calumniantem*) (Valla 1521: 160). Guarinus starts to read out parts of Poggius’ texts and makes a joke of them.

He remarks several times that his cook and his stable lad speak like Poggius: “Coquum, stabulariumque meos saepe sic audio loquentes.” (“I often hear my cook and my stable boy talk like this.”). “*Cum de proximo instet coronatio regis. De proximo*,<sup>16</sup> coqui mei iste ac stabularii sermo est.” (“*As next is the coronation of the king. As next*, that is the speech of my cook and my stable boy.”). “Coqus meus Parmeno, et stabularius Dromo, sic mecum loquuntur, nec dedocere eos possum, quin auribus meis inculcent quantotius, existimantes sic se loqui pereleganter [...]”

13 On the enmity of Poggio Bracciolini and the younger Lorenzo Valla, see, for example, Tavoni 1984: 117–169. Tavoni (1984: 118) describes the reasons for the hostility as follows: “Lo scontro implicava, sul piano filologico, l’opposizione tra un fervore entusiastico e operosissimo della vecchia generazione, di cui Poggio era e si sentiva campione, grazie al quale si erano conseguiti nel giro di pochi decenni ritrovamenti di codici eccezionali per importanza e quantità; e dall’altra parte una capacità nuova di critica dei testi, di cui il Valla si faceva banditore chiamando esplicitamente i giovani a cooperare al rinnovamento, con un gesto che non poteva apparire a uomini come Poggio altro che un’insolente pretesa di espropriazione di quel patrimonio di classici, la cui riscoperta essi sentivano come un loro merito, e che il Valla reclamava di essere il primo, in sostanza, a interpretare correttamente.”

14 Valla 1521: 159: “Guarine quaeso te pro tua singulari et humanitate et eruditione, te huic facto Iudicem praebeas, tui enim artificii est, de lingua latina [latina] agimus, in qua tradenda tu principatum obtines.” (“Guarinus, I ask you because of your unique *humanitas* and education to make yourself available as a judge in this case, for it is your art. We talk about the Latin language, in the treatment of which you take the lead.”)

15 Valla 1521: 159: “P: Quid ego forum declinem, quod semper amavi et colui? Quippe in quo sunt res ad delectandum gulam pertinentes, emereque solemus non dico lactucas, caules, allia, sed perdiceas, fasianos, anseres, anates, gallinas, columbos, turdos, ficedulas, itemque orates, murenas, congros, mulos, praeterea pastillos, copullos, salsamenta et ante omnia duodetriginta genera vini egregii, quae enumerabo, si vultis. G: Ista fora tibi relinquimus colenda Poggi. Ego de illo foro loquor, unde dicuntur causae forenses.” (“Poggius: Why should I avoid the *forum* that I always loved and visited? There are things which can delight your palate, I don’t buy salad, cabbage and garlic, but partridges, pheasants, geese, ducks, chickens, pigeons, fieldfares, fig-peckers, also salmon trout, morays, conger eels, mules, lozenges, meat pies, salted fish, and above all 28 types of excellent wine which I can enumerate if you want. Guarinus: We will leave those *fora* to you, Poggius. I am talking about the *forum* after which the court cases are named.”)

16 The passages in italics are citations from Poggius’ letters.

(“My cook and my stable boy talk to me like this, and I don’t succeed in lecturing them because they hammer it into my ears like this, they think they speak extremely elegantly [...]”) (Valla 1521: 160–161). They continue to make fun of Poggius by citing parts of his texts which they consider bad Latin. After mentioning another bad quote, Guarinus calls the cook Parmeno:

Guarinus: [...] Parmeno ades huc, dicitur hoc grammaticae, *devenerunt in manibus fratris?*

Parmeno: Mi domine, quis hoc dixit?

Guarinus: Nempe hic Poggius.

Parmeno: Iste Poggius peius me loquitur, qui coquinariam factito, quaeso mi domine pro me coquum Poggium facito, namque ad hanc rem videtur mihi sane idoneus, ut vultus promittit, aut certe cellarium. (Valla 1521: 161)

Guarinus: [...] Parmeno, come. Can you say that in the grammatica, *they came into the brother’s hands?*

Parmeno: Sir, who says that?

Guarinus: Poggius.

Parmeno: This Poggius speaks even worse than I do, who am a cook. Please, sir, make him a cook instead of me, for he seems to me to be very suitable for that, as his face shows, or even as a cellar master.

After an explanation on the use of subjunctive and indicative, Parmeno criticizes Poggius’ use of language again and calls the stable boy Dromo:

Guarinus: [...] *Vestes illas attritas, quae penes te sunt, cupio ut vendantur.*

Parmeno: Licet ne domine?

Guarinus: Minime, tace si sapis.

Parmeno: Ego sapio, sed hic sermo mihi non sapit, fatuus enim est, et insulsus.

Guarinus: Abi hinc, abi inquam.

Parmeno: Non abeo. Dromo, Herus te vocat.

Dromo: Quid vis Here?

Guarinus: Hic tuus est Herus, is iubeat quid velit, qui mihi nihil obtemperat.

Parmeno: Sublimen intro hunc rape, quantum potes in stabulum tuum.

Dromo: Quem?

Parmeno: Poggium hunc.

Dromo: Quamobrem?

Parmeno: Ut in stabulo tibi serviat, et mihi quandoque in culina.

Dromo: Quid fecit?

Parmeno: Latinitatem Grammaticamque, tanquam ollas frangit, quem nisi prohibeamus, actum est de lingua latina. Et postea Italici nos transalpinos barbaros vocant, cum nemo Italicorum, praeter hunc nostrum Herum, Grammaticus sit.

Dromo: Quid iste dixit?

Parmeno: *Cupio, ut illas vestes attritas vendantur.*

Dro: Magis ipse attritum caput habet, quam illae vestes fuerint, sed quid iubes Here, huncine attritorem, confractoremque latinarum ollarum in stabulum rapio, ut cum caballo et asino vitam degat? [...] (Valla 1521: 161)

Guarinus: *I wish these worn-out clothes, which are in your possession, to be sold.*

Parmeno: May I, sir?

Guarinus: No, keep quiet if you are smart.

Parmeno: I am smart, but this babble is not; it is stupid and foolish.  
 Guarinus: Go away, I say. Go.  
 Parmeno: I don't go. Dromo! The lord is calling you.  
 Dromo: What do you want, sir?  
 Guarinus: He is your lord, he commands whatever he wants and does not obey me.  
 Parmeno: Take this one with you, if you can, bring him to your stable.  
 Dromo: Who?  
 Parmeno: Poggius here.  
 Dromo: Why?  
 Parmeno: So that he can give you a hand in the stable, and sometimes me in the kitchen.  
 Dromo: What did he do?  
 Parmeno: He smashes the Latin language and the grammar, and even the pots, if we do not stop him; it is about the Latin language. And then the Italians call us transalpine barbarians, although none of the Italians, except our lord, is a grammarian.  
 Dromo: What did he say?  
 Parmeno: *I wish these worn-out clothes to be sold.*  
 Dro: He rather has a worn-out head than clothes, but what do you command, lord, that I should take this wearer and smasher of Latin language and pots to the stable to spend his life with horses and donkeys?  
 [...]

In the following, the interlocutors correct Poggius' texts and compare them with Classical expressions and grammar rules. The reader will notice that Poggius remains silent and does not answer the charges. At the end of the dialogue, the dialogue partners realise that the victim of their accusations had fallen asleep:

Parmeno: Pol dormit et (ut opinor) usque dormivit.  
 Guarinus: Excitare hominem.  
 Parmeno: Evigila Poggi.  
 Dromo: Dormit apertis oculis, surge Poggi surge.  
 Poggius: Quid me percutitis, quid me excitatis?  
 Dromo: Quia apertis oculis dormis, ut lepus.  
 Poggius: Semper sic dormio.  
 Dromo: Itane cum dormis, oculos habes apertos, cum quis tecum loquitur aures habes clausas?  
 Poggius: Quis mecum loquitur?  
 Dromo: Guarinus.  
 Poggius: Ubi is est?  
 Dromo: En tibi Poggi.  
 Guarinus: Immo tu hinc aberas Poggi.  
 Poggius: Aedepol nihil (si quid dixisti) audivi. (Valla 1521: 163)  
 [...]

Parmeno: Pollux, he is asleep and—I believe—has been asleep the whole time.  
 Guarinus: Wake him up.  
 Parmeno: Wake up, Poggius.  
 Dromo: He sleeps with eyes open. Get up, Poggius, get up.  
 Poggius: Why are you shaking me? Why are you waking me?  
 Dromo: Because you sleep with your eyes open, like a rabbit.

Poggius: I always sleep like this.

Dromo: When you sleep like this, with your eyes open, do you also have your ears closed when someone is talking to you?

Poggius: Who was talking to me?

Dromo: Guarinus.

Poggius: Where is he?

Dromo: Here, look, Poggius.

Guarinus: So you were absent, Poggius.

Poggius: Truly, I have heard nothing (if you have said anything).

[...]

Poggius not only does not know how to write or speak Latin properly, but he is also impolite and does not seem to be interested in improving his language skills at all. Altogether, he is portrayed as simple-minded, unteachable, and ignorant of the proper use of Latin grammar. Furthermore, he is greedy (as the misunderstanding of the *forum* shows) and a drunkard, as Parmeno indicates.<sup>17</sup> To sum up, Poggius is the exact opposite of a Humanist who heeds the *studia humanitatis*.

The excerpts from the *Apologus* show that one way to mock an intellectual enemy in the Renaissance was to point out his grammatical mistakes and discrepancies from Classical Latin. Being proficient in Latin was held to show the true value of a person, since virtue and eloquence go together. If we recall Pico della Mirandola's view that humans can achieve celestial spheres as long as they are virtuous, but that they can also be inferior living beings if they are steered by emotions, Poggius' behavior surely falls into the latter category.

In general, disputes about the Latin language were extremely popular in the Renaissance. For example, the relationship between Latin and the vernacular language in Early Modern Times (see Dante above) and in Antiquity (see Valla's *Apologus* II in Tavoni 1984: 260–273) or Cicero as role model for Classical Latin (see Erasmus' ironic treatment of "Cicero-mania" in his dialogue *Ciceronianus* in Payr 1972) have been widely discussed.

## SUMERIAN

### *The History of Sumerian*

Despite various attempts to place Sumerian within different language families, most Sumerologists still see it as an isolate—a language with no known relatives. Therefore, and due to the lack of evidence regarding Sumerian DNA, we still cannot be sure if the Sumerians were indigenous to Southern Mesopotamia or if they originated from somewhere else. Be that as it may, we can follow the history of Sumerian for about 3,000 years; only during the first third of this period was Sumerian still a vernacular. The first Sumerian texts can be identified when cuneiform writing was developed to the point that it could represent language. This took

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17 Valla 1521: 161: Parmeno: "[...] praecipue sapes intelligit [sc. lingua Parmenonis], vini praesertim. Si non credis, vel Poggium interrogato, qui singularis mihi videtur iudex, ac censor vinaliorum." ("Parmeno: [...] [My tongue] has recognized certain tastes, especially that of wine. If you don't believe me ask Poggius, who strikes me as a unique judge and critic of wine.")

Valla 1521: 161: "Parmeno: At hic nimium olet, Dii te perdant Poggi, ut vehementer crapulam exhalasti, eructasti." ("Parmeno: It stinks so much here, may the Gods destroy you, Poggius, as you violently exhale and spit out the smell of alcohol.")

place with the archaic texts from Ur, which date to around 2800 BCE. Earlier texts—cuneiform was invented several hundred years earlier—consisted of logograms (word-signs) and numbers and therefore do not yield much information about the language of their scribes. Until the Fara period (c.2600 BCE), all texts are either administrative or lexical. In the Fara period, the use of cuneiform was expanded to legal documents, incantations, and literary texts (Jagersma 2010: 4–5). Around this time, the first royal inscriptions occur and especially the rulers of Lagaš—although our view might be somewhat biased by the haphazardness of archaeological discovery—left behind inscriptions of impressive literary quality.

The dominance of the Sumerian language in the written records changes somewhat with the rise of the Empire of Akkad around 2350 BCE, which was ruled by an Akkadian-speaking dynasty. Although the first royal inscriptions were still written in Sumerian, Akkadian soon became the dominant language of royal inscriptions and was used for other genres as well. Sumerian was still in use for administrative texts and letters, and several thousand Sumerian texts are known from the period of the Akkadian kings (Jagersma 2010: 5–6). The Akkadian Empire had to face several major rebellions in the Sumerian South, and it finally collapsed around 2200 BCE after an onslaught by the Gutu, a people from the Iranian highlands.

After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, most of Mesopotamia was ruled by the Gutu, and only Lagaš could escape the grasp of the invaders. The inscriptions of Gudea stand out in literary quality as well as in terms of their sheer number. Around 2100 BCE, the Gutu were defeated by Utu-hengal and soon after their defeat the Ur III dynasty was started by King Ur-Namma. From this period, we have numerous royal inscriptions, royal hymns, and tens of thousands of administrative texts in Sumerian. Unfortunately, the published literary texts from this period are still few. The Ur III dynasty ended in a major disaster c.2000 BCE. Droughts and floods destroyed the harvest for several years and a period of intensive warfare rendered agriculture virtually impossible (Fink 2021). All these factors together seem to have resulted in a massive decline of the southern population, which probably already spoke Akkadian to a large extent. Evidence (mainly personal names and the language of everyday texts) suggests that Sumerian as a vernacular did not survive for long after the end of the Ur III state (Sallaberger 2004).

However, most of the Sumerian literary texts that we know today originate from the Old Babylonian period (roughly 2000–1500 BCE). The Akkadian-speaking scribes took pride in the conservation of Sumerian literature, and while letters and administrative documents ceased to be written in Sumerian and Sumerian personal names were quickly replaced by Akkadian ones, Sumerian became the language of the educated. Sumerian was still alive, but only in the scholarly circles in the school, the palace, and the temple. With the end of the Old Babylonian period, marked by the Hittite raid of Babylon, the transmission of several Sumerian literary texts seems to have come to an end. However, the Sumerian lamentations, which were performed on a regular basis in the temple and during rituals, continued to be transmitted until the first century BCE or more.

While the texts from the third millennium are usually written in what we call standard Sumerian, or Emegir, texts from the Old Babylonian period first document a variant of Sumerian which was designated as Emesal (“fine language”) by the ancient scribes; in fact, it is the only known variant. Here we will give a few basic facts about Emesal, because its first translation as “women’s language” lead to far-reaching conclusions about the identity of the *kalûs*, who were seen as effeminate Oriental priests, homosexuals, or hermaphrodites (Gabbay 2008). As we will demonstrate below, this group of priests fell victim to the mockery of the scribes of the Old Babylonian schools, but during the last centuries of the existence of cuneiform they became

the last guardians of the Sumerian tradition through their transmission of the large corpus of lamentations in Emesal.

A few Emesal forms occur in Old Babylonian lexical lists, but only in the first millennium we find those entries marked as Emesal (see Schretter 1990: 17–22 for evidence). Emesal is used in lamentations, in speeches of goddesses in literary texts, in myths, and in royal hymns. It is quite strange that the evidence of this variant of Sumerian comes only after the death of Sumerian as a spoken language, but it seems that Old Babylonian scribes wanted to preserve an oral tradition which was on the brink of extinction. A thorough study of the third-millennium evidence regarding possible instances of Emesal still remains to be written. Emesal is not a language of its own, as it shares most of its features with Emegir, but it has a number of distinct words that mark a text as such, even in the case where the majority of words are written in standard Sumerian.

In many texts, the Emesal forms of a given word can be interchanged with its Emegir forms. The study of Emesal is hampered by the rather complicated way of transmission. We can only see Emesal through the eyes of Akkadian scribes, who seem to have had their own theories about it, which were from time to time heavily influenced by their mother tongue. In the Middle Assyrian period (roughly 1400–1000 BCE) was produced the so-called Emesal list, a collection of all known Emesal words. However, the list also contains many entries which never occur in the preserved texts and seem to have been created on the basis of analogy with other Emesal words (Schretter 1990; Schretter 2018).

### ***Evidence for Scribal Identities***

Niek Veldhuis (2012: 74) distinguishes between different types of cuneiform literacy (functional, technical, and scholarly) and defines the latter as follows:

Scholarly literacy refers primarily to the knowledge of the writing system for its own sake, collecting all possible and impossible readings of each sign and sign combination and studying the history of its use and palaeography. Scholarly literacy exhibits the pride of the scribes in their craft, emphasizing and even increasing the complexity and demonstrating the joy of discovering rare and unusual features of the system.

In the following discussion on scribal identities, we focus on scholarly scribes who distinguished themselves from scribes of lower levels, who only possessed practical skills and were not aware of the highest secrets of cuneiform. Waetzoldt (2009: 251) defines scribes as persons who after their education (either through their father or another teacher, or by attending a school) had the right to use the title *dub-sar*. There are two Sumerian terms that are translated as “scribe” in English. The first documented term is *umbisag*, which originally meant something like “calculator.” Later, the term *dub-sar* “tablet writer” became the usual title for someone working in the administration (Waetzoldt 2009: 251). In many cases, the scribal art was handed down in the family, but scribes came from a variety of different social classes. The social spectrum ranged from slaves to sons of kings and city rulers (Waetzoldt 2009: 255), and therefore it is hard to speak of scribes as a coherent social class. Instead, we may conclude that all these people with their different backgrounds found a common identity in their skills and in their pride of mastering the secrets of cuneiform.

There are three larger groups of texts that allow us insight into scribal learning. These are the lexical lists, the proverbs, and the so-called school texts. The first lexical lists, which occur

simultaneously with the first administrative texts, give evidence for the existence of a class of scribes who carefully studied and copied them. These lists were to some extent supra-utilitarian, as they contain many entries which were obsolete or artificial (Veldhuis 2012: 79), and the school texts testify that the scribes were proud of their skills in mastering the lexical lists and their ability to comment on even the strangest entries therein.

We can get a clearer idea of the self-understanding of the scribes and of their professional identity when we have texts at our disposal that actually discuss scribes and scribal art. The first group we will address here are the proverbs, and after them we will turn to the so-called school texts, a group of writings that describe life in the tablet house (the school). Mesopotamian literature begins with proverb collections, the first of which date to approximately 2600 BCE. The proverbs themselves are hard to date, as a large part of these collections may have been transmitted as oral lore for generations before being written down. Furthermore, the proverb collections were in constant flux, as proverbs could be added or removed. Proverbs inform us about the scribes, as well as about the gala, a lamentation priest. The gala, or Akkadian *kalû*, is documented for three millennia and although his exact duties and role changed over time it seems that he was always involved in the performance of lamentations.

### ***Proverbs and Scribes***

While lexical lists were used to teach signs and Sumerian vocabulary, proverbs were used to introduce the apprentice scribe to Sumerian morphology and syntax. The proverbs were written on small round tablets, or “lentils.” The teacher wrote the proverb on one side of the tablet, and the pupil had to memorize it and then write it on the other side. In most cases the clumsy handwriting of the pupil can easily be distinguished from the masterful hand of the teacher. Sometimes the deformed tablets even allow us to reconstruct the emotions of the scribes, who threw the tablets against the walls or crushed their teeth in the clay of the tablet in anger. As these texts had their setting in the scribal curriculum, it is only natural that the proverbs also deal with the scribes and their education in the school. Some of the proverbs seem to be used to scold lazy students:

- [du]b-sar-me-en mu-ní-za nu-zu / igi-ní-za sig-ga  
 You’re a scribe and you don’t know your own name! Shame on you! (2.37)<sup>18</sup>
- dub-sar hu-ru a-ga-aš-gi<sub>4</sub> é-dub-ba-x  
 A fool of a scribe, the most awkward one in school. (2.40)
- dub-sar šu nu-a nar mili nu-a  
 A scribe without a hand, a singer without a voice. (2.43)
- kindagal eme-gi<sub>7</sub> ba-an-zu-a  
 A barber who knows Sumerian. (2.55)

While Stefan Maul (1997) spoke of “kitchen Sumerian” as analogous to “kitchen Latin,” proverb 2.55 seems to suggest that we should instead speak of “barber Sumerian.”<sup>19</sup> Another

18 The text and translation are taken from Alster 1997.

19 See Kleinerman 2013 for an analysis of the evidence for barbers in Ur III documentation. The evidence demonstrates that some people designated as barbers held functions in the administration, which might hint at an inter-scribal conflict.

set of proverbs highlights the professional qualities of the scribes and stresses the hard training they had to undergo to master cuneiform:

[dub-s]ar-re mu diš-àm hé-en-zu(!) / [šu-n]i hé-sa<sub>6</sub>-sa<sub>6</sub> e-ne-àm dub-sar-ra  
When the scribe knows every entry, when his hand is good, he is indeed a scribe. (2.38)

dub-sar šu ka-ta-sá-a e-ne-àm dub-sar-ra-àm

A scribe whose hand can keep up with the mouth—he is indeed a scribe! (2.40)

Proverb 2.38 refers to the entries of the lexical lists which the good scribe should obviously know by heart. The other aspect is the mastering of the many complex cuneiform signs that a scribe should be able to write “with a good hand.” Proverb 2.40 has given room to much speculation about the speed of cuneiform writing, as it seems to suggest that a good scribe could manage to write down a speech without any lag. These two proverbs stress the hard training of the scribes, who had to study for years to know by heart all of the thousands of entries of the lexical lists and to master cuneiform to a degree where they could write as fast as others spoke. While such technical abilities seem to represent a solid basis on which to distinguish the scribes from other groups, giving them the possibility to establish their professional pride in their knowledge of the lexical lists and their fast hand, knowledge of Sumerian adds another important aspect to their self-understanding, as the following proverbs demonstrate:

dub-sar eme-gi<sub>7</sub> nu-mu-un-zu-a a-na-àm dub-sar e-ne

A scribe who does not know Sumerian, what kind of scribe is he? (2.47)

dub-sar eme-gi<sub>7</sub> nu-mu-un-zu-a inim-bala-e me-da hé-en-tùm

If the scribe does not know Sumerian, how will the translator succeed? (2.49)

The last two proverbs only make sense in an environment where Sumerian either has become the language of a minority or ceased to be a vernacular. At this point, we can ask ourselves why the scribes still had to study this language that was completely unrelated to Akkadian, the mother tongue of most of the Old Babylonian scribes. No conclusive answer has been presented so far, as the evidence for the Akkadian scribe’s understanding of the nature and importance of Sumerian is rather meager and leaves much room for speculation. Already during Ur III times, when the administrative records were still written in Sumerian, a good part of the education in the scribal school was supra-utilitarian, or, to put it harshly, useless for the daily work of a scribe.<sup>20</sup> Did they see Sumerian, as we do, as the language of the Sumerians? Did they see it as the language of the gods? Was it a scribal language that was intimately connected with writing? Whatever the scribes thought about Sumerian, it made them continue to include Sumerian in the scribal curriculum until the knowledge about this writing system faded away at some point in the first centuries CE.

When we evaluate all these aspects together, we can be sure that the scribes took pride in their hard training. It seems that the aspect that distinguished them from others who had mastered complicated crafts, like goldsmiths or architects, was that they were experts of a supra-utilitarian subject. Learning the craft of a goldsmith has a clear aim, but why did scribes learn Sumerian? For most of the post-Sumerian scribes, the language was absolutely unnecessary when we only take practical matters into account. As already pointed out above, the

20 “As a rule, once the students left the Edubba, they would have made relatively little use of the vast body of Sumerian literature that they had so dutifully memorized, copied and recopied over the decade or so of schooling that they had endured” (Johnson & Geller 2015: 1).



devotion to a dead language resulted in a “Humanistic” ideology during the Old Babylonian period (roughly 2000–1550 BCE). If someone dedicates so much effort to study something with no clear practical aim, a philosophy of training and devotion will arise in order to justify these efforts with higher values, namely, the development of the human being through hard training. The importance of hard training is also stressed in two proverbs that basically state that a pupil is something like a raw diamond which will only shine after cutting and polishing:

dumu um-mi-a <sup>na4</sup>gug-gim ti-ba un-bùr e-ne dub-sar-ra-àm

The schoolmaster’s pupil (is) like carnelian whose side has been pierced—he is indeed a scribe. (2.45)

ti-ba un-bùr <sup>na4</sup>za-gìn-na-àm

After its side has been pierced, it is (truly) lapis lazuli. (2.46)

### ***The Gala in Proverbs***

As many galas/*kalûs* were scribes in the second and first millennia, one might interpret them as a subgroup of scribes. While this is quite true for the post-Sumerian period, the situation in the third millennium may have been quite different. As already mentioned earlier, there is not much evidence for Emesal in the third millennium, and the not-very-charming description of the gala in the proverbs fosters our suspicion that such a person was not seen as a member of the sophisticated club of the dub-sars but rather a professional singer performing lamentation songs. Jerrold Cooper (2006: 45) has demonstrated that lamentations were very often the realm of female singers, and he suggests that the male gala gradually replaced the female singers, maybe as a result of the general trend to restrict the activities of women to a more private sphere toward the end of the third millennium.

The proverbs mentioning the gala are not always easy to interpret, but it is quite evident that they rank the gala below the scribe and make fun of him as a conceited person, someone who always overestimates his importance and his abilities:

ninda gala-kam lag-ga- ab-gu-ul ki-lá-bi al-tur

This is the bread of a lamentation priest. In bulk it is large, but its weight is small. (2.104)

Another proverb (2.101), which looks like a short fable, describes how a gala who met a lion in the desert boasts in a speech not to be afraid of the brother of a dog, which he used to chase away with potsherds in the town. It is quite probable that this story is actually a scribal joke, based on the similarity between ur (“dog”) and ur.maḥ (“lion”) and that the gala is ridiculed as someone who takes writing, or at least language, as a guide to reality, which in the case described above could be fatal.

We can see quite clearly that the proverbs were not written by the galas themselves; they instead represent a not-so-friendly view of the galas from outside. This is most obvious in the following proverb, which we might even call a joke:

gala-e bid-da-ni ḥa-ba-an-da-zé-er

èm ga-ša-an-an-na ga-ša-an-mu

ba-ra-zi-zi-dè-en-e-še

A lamentation priest who should have wiped his anus said, “I must not remove what belongs to the Queen of Heaven (i.e., Inanna), my lady.” (2.100)<sup>21</sup>

If our interpretation of this text is correct, it presents the gala as someone who is too lazy to wipe his ass and who gives sophisticated explanations with reference to the gods for his avoidance of the most ordinary tasks.

### ***The School Texts***

A group of texts that deal with the scribal school is designated with this label. The texts were written by the scribes and reflect their milieu, their upbringing, and, most important for our topic, their scribal values and self-understanding. They describe school life in a non-Sumerian milieu where it was forbidden to speak Akkadian, and where a fluent conversation in Sumerian seemed to be the ideal for a well-educated scribe (Volk 2000: 13–14). The ideal human being promoted in the school texts is a person highly dedicated to his (in very few cases, her) duties, being punctual, modest, always open to good advice, and free from material worries (Volk 2000: 20–24). The Humanism promoted in this school was achieved if someone became a *lú-u<sub>18</sub>-lu*, a true human being. This aim could only be achieved through hard work, devotion, and continuous training—and, we could add, by adherence to goals not directly related to utilitarian motives; that is, the idea of a supra-utilitarian education was connected to unleashing the potential of a true human being. This type of idea seems to be key to the understanding of the various Humanistic projects of all times (Hóystrup 1994). The lazy students are confronted with the rhetorical question if they want to be members of humanity (*nam-lú-u<sub>18</sub>-lu*) (Volk 2000: 25–26; Steinert 2012: 110–119), and Konrad Volk convincingly demonstrates that the Humanism we find in these texts is the first instance where human beings are educated and formed according to a higher ideal of a true human being.<sup>22</sup>

The school texts themselves are quite hard to interpret, as they often have several layers of meaning. If we look at the dialogue *The Class Reunion*, we find a long list of insults at the surface level. Only the initiated scribe, or the well-versed Sumerologist, is able to understand that the ultimate aim of the two speeches is not to insult each other, but to artfully arrange the insults in an order that contains allusions to certain parts of lexical lists. While Johnson and Geller (2015) interpret the text as a class reunion, Matuszak (2019) is convinced that the disputants are two advanced students at the school.

Another famous text, which was written largely in Akkadian and most probably originates from the Kassite period (1475–1155 BCE), deals with a doctor from Isin who heals someone from Nippur and is instructed by his patient to come to Nippur to be rewarded there. The healed man instructs the doctor to look for an old woman selling vegetables on a corner, who will show him the way to his house. The doctor manages to find this woman, but her answers are in Sumerian and the doctor accuses her of cursing him. The old woman explains what she said and answers his next question, so that the accusation and explanation is repeated three times. After this the old woman calls for the apprentice scribes to chase the stupid doctor out of the city gate.

21 Alster translates this as “a lamentation priest wiped his anus,” not taking into account the precative particle. It is important to insist on the precative, as only with that does the whole story make sense and become a joke about the lazy lamentation priest who always finds an excuse for his idleness.

22 “Erziehung wird somit, das machen die Schulstreitgespräche deutlich, ganz ausdrücklich als ein Prozeß fortschreitender Wandlung und Vervollkommnung begriffen” (Volk 2000: 27).

The story itself and the colophon of the tablet, where it is said that it was written for the “recitation of the apprentice scribes” (George 1993: 67), clearly indicate that this text belongs to school literature. Erica Reiner (1986) thought that the humor of the texts is based on the old woman speaking Sumerian and the uneducated doctor misinterpreting her Sumerian as an insult (see also Foster 1996: 819–820). While this interpretation would nicely fit the idea that scribes were proud of their humanity, which was constituted by their knowledge of Sumerian, George pointed out that the text plays with cryptographic Sumerian writings of Akkadian. George (1993: 65–66) came up with the idea that the use of logograms in the old lady’s speech should still represent Akkadian, but the unusual writing should hint at her Akkadian being incomprehensible. It is not the aim of this article to decide which interpretation of the text is more appropriate; however, we can conclude that it is a highly learned text which reveals its humor and its secrets only to the initiated scribe, who had to know Sumerian and in some way was able to find amusement at the expense of a poor doctor from Isin.

As far as we know today, the transmission of Sumerian school literature came to an end after the Old Babylonian period. However, the values and moral codices represented in the school texts could also be found in other texts and were still transmitted in scribal circles (Volk 2000: 30). The so-called SBH texts, which mainly date to the second and first centuries BCE, might be one of the last-known representations of the scribal ideology seen at work in the school texts.

### ***Evidence for Scribal Identities in the Last Sumerian Literary Texts (SBH)***

The texts published in SBH (Reisner 1896) are Emesal prayers with Akkadian interlinear translations. The texts were written in the second and first centuries BCE and, as far as we can see today, represent the last evidence of transmission of Sumerian literature; for this reason, they are especially interesting for our discussion of the importance of Sumerian in scribal circles. They belong to a collection that was bought by the Berlin Museum in 1886 and come from Babylon, as confirmed by their colophons (Reisner 1896: XI), meta-textual remarks at the end of a tablet that inform about it and its scribe (Hunger 1968: 1). Other parts of this collection were sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as demonstrated by distant-joins of tablets in Berlin and New York (Maul 2005). The scribes of these tablets identify themselves as *kalûs* in the colophons.

While authorship was very seldomly claimed in Mesopotamia, scribes took pride in being good copyists. Here, they demonstrated their abilities in careful and often beautiful copies of old texts. While it is hard for us to grasp the aesthetic standards of these scribes, and not much effort has been devoted to investigating this question, the colophons imply that the scribes took pride in the result of their painstaking work of carefully copying these texts. They collected copies of older works, compared the tablets, and produced composite texts, often indicating lacunae and variants, also producing commentaries (Frahm 2011). While Akkadian interlinear translations may have initially been a tool for the apprentice scribe to improve his knowledge of Sumerian, these translations became canonical at some point and variants in Akkadian translations were also noted in the copies.

Besides these rather technical aspects, the scribes were masters of exegesis as well, and they documented their exegetical efforts in the interlinear Akkadian translations. At this point we return to the lexical lists, the backbone of scribal education, which were used to find different layers of meaning in the texts. The polyvalent cuneiform signs offer many possibilities of inter-

pretation, even if most of them do not make much sense to us. They became possible through the many different Akkadian equations for one Sumerian sign in the lexical lists; sometimes more than 100 Akkadian equations are given for one sign. We only understand the exegetical methods of the *kalûs* to some extent, as they are mostly based on equations in lexical lists, but sometimes even more esoteric ways of interpretation might be at work, which we are still at a loss to explain.<sup>23</sup>

While we have no insight into that reveal why the *kalûs* tried to explore possible meanings of the Sumerian texts, we can be quite sure that interpretation of the age-old texts they copied was seen as important for mastering the art of the *kalû*. Possibly due to a rather esoteric motivation, the idea that the Sumerian text could be interpreted by sign-by-sign analysis, the *kalûs* established high standards of philology; to this end, it was surely important to note variants in the Sumerian and in the different translations as well. One impressive example of such an exegesis of an Emesal text is found in the Balaĝ abzu pe-el-lá-àm. Here, we find no less than five different Akkadian translations of one Sumerian line:

14. abzu.peš<sub>10</sub>-peš<sub>10</sub>-e te ma gi<sub>4</sub>-gi<sub>4</sub>-gi<sub>4</sub>  
*ap-su-ú kib.ri mi-nam it-ta-nu-ru mi-nam ú-ta-[r.]*  
*mi-nam im-ta-na-ĥar šá ap-su-ú kib-ru-šú mi-nam im-ta-na-ĥar šá ap-su-ú kib-ru-šú mi-nam ut-ta-ab-ba-tu : mi-nam in-na-aq-qá-ru*

Sumerian: Why does the *apsû* constantly turn against me at every shore?

Akkadian: Why does the *apsû* constantly turn against me at every shore? Why does it ...? Why does it confront constantly? Why have the shores of the *apsû* been destroyed? Why are they demolished? (Maul 2005: 20–22)

Besides all these technical and learned aspects, we would assume that the *kalûs* not only preserved and interpreted these texts, but also performed them in some way. They were simultaneously scholars, priests, and singers. This means that a group of priests that were ridiculed in the Sumerian proverbs became the last guardians of Sumerian literature in the Hellenistic and Parthian eras. In this environment, where the use of cuneiform had become reduced to a small group of experts, and with big changes on the way that would finally lead to the oblivion of cuneiform, the scribes of Emesal lamentations took pride in their knowledge of Sumerian and Akkadian (which had already lost or was about to lose its role as a vernacular).

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The history of Sumerian and Latin language and literature did not end with the death of the respective languages. Both languages and literatures survived their death, meaning that they can be designated as *revenants* or *undead* languages. For approximately 2,000 years, Mesopotamian scholars took pride in mastering the ancient language of Sumerian, and their knowledge was based on an unbroken tradition which only ceased at some point in the first centuries AD. While Latin also ceased to be a vernacular around the middle of the first millennium AD, Latin literature was still transmitted, and Latin was studied and spoken. In different renaissances, the study of Latin was encouraged, texts and teaching methods were improved, and Latin texts were collected and copied. These days, Latin is still written and spoken, although in restricted

23 The different exegetical methods of the Mesopotamian scribes are discussed by Frahm (2011: 60–71), and illuminating examples are also given.

contexts; its literature is analyzed and transmitted and there was never a complete break in the tradition. In the case of Sumerian, however, knowledge about the language was completely lost and had to be reestablished by European scholars in the nineteenth century. The knowledge regained about the Mesopotamian texts had, at least for a while, a deep impact on the cultural, religious, and intellectual life of the Western world (see, for example, Seymour 2014).

While Latin and Sumerian were not mother tongues for the longest part of their documented history, mastering them was seen as key to higher education and even as a way to fully develop one's humanity. Without knowledge of the respective language, it was not possible to become a true member of humanity; in the eyes of the scholars, such a person would remain a barbarian for the rest of their life. Obviously, we also have to take into account the context of the texts and their intended public to interpret them correctly. At least in the case of the Sumerian texts, we can clearly see that they were meant for students of the language. They had a clear pedagogical intention; they were aimed to explain to the apprentice scribe why it was necessary to study Sumerian, impractical though that may seem, and convince them that their efforts would finally pay off, as learning the language would give them the chance to become a true human being. The Latin texts discussed above, on the other hand, were part of debates between members of the upper class. Valla's intention when writing the *Apologus* was surely to humiliate his enemy Poggio Bracciolini by accusing him of bad Latin skills.

In contrast to the scholars of the Italian Renaissance who looked forward to a new golden age of Latin and Greek, the scribes of the Emesal lamentations were the last guardians of a Sumerian tradition. They must have been aware that their number was small and that only few families able to keep up the tradition were left. Given that they believed in the ideology of the texts they copied and performed, they must have been convinced that what they did not only served for their personal development but also for the stability of the world; indeed, the aim of their performances of these songs was to calm the wrath of the gods and thereby prevent disaster (Gabbay 2014). While their use of Sumerian was quite different from the use that Renaissance scholars made of Latin, both parties were convinced that studying a dead language contributed to the welfare of humanity. This conviction surely fostered their self-esteem and provided a firm basis for their professional identities.

Group identities are fostered by inner cohesion and a demarcation of outsiders. In our case, the inner cohesion of scribes is given by the common aim of studying an old language, be it Sumerian or Latin, for the sake of pure knowledge. The demarcation, the definition of the border of the community, is not established by birth, but rather by the willingness and ability to learn and master the respective language. The outsiders are interestingly not the ordinary people, but instead the bad students of Sumerian and Latin, such as those who speak Sumerian like a barber or Latin like a cook.

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