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# Restoring Voice to the Mute Clay: Sumer and the Magoffin Collection Cuneiform Tablets

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May, 2016

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Benjamin Robertson entitled “Restoring Voice to Mute Clay: Sumer and the Magoffin Collection Cuneiform Tablets.” We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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RESTORING VOICE TO MUTE CLAY: SUMER AND THE MAGOFFIN  
COLLECTION CUNEIFORM TABLETS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Arts & Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Arts

In History

Winthrop University

May, 2016

By

Benjamin Robertson

## ABSTRACT

This thesis contains a history of Sumer from the earliest known periods through the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur, a detailed investigation into the lives and careers of Sumerian scribes, a history of modern Mesopotamian archaeology, and the results of eighteen months' research into the cuneiform tablet component of the Magoffin Collection at the Columbia Museum of Art. It finds that the latter documents are Sumerian in origin, with most published during the late twenty-first and early twentieth centuries BCE, based on assessments from cuneiform specialists at institutions across the United States. It includes the first full translation of a Magoffin tablet since their donation to the Columbia Museum, prepared by Dr. Robert Englund of UCLA.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This document is the product of roughly eighteen months' academic effort. Its chapters contain a history of ancient Sumerian civilization, further histories of the Sumerian scribal class and early Mesopotamian archaeology, a biography of a major American archaeologist, and a report of original research and translation published for the first time within its pages. It is by several measures the sum of both the author's efforts in the Graduate History Program of Winthrop University and the culmination of the intellectual impulses that led to his joining the program in the first place. It is intended to be a useful document, beyond its role as the capstone of a master's degree from the Winthrop history program. If the reader seeks an account of ancient Mesopotamian history, a study of that civilization's class of professional scribes, a comparable study of the archaeology and translation efforts that restored understanding of Mesopotamian history to modern researchers, or a detailed investigation of the life and legacy of American twentieth century archaeologist Ralph Van Deman Magoffin, all of these can be found within the leaves of this volume.

The following text begins at the very earliest instances of what may be termed human civilization. It explores the genesis of the first permanent settlements in the land called Mesopotamia by the ancient Greeks, and Iraq by modern maps. Our journey strides through the first divisions of class within early settled humanity with the rise of the first priests, those men and women held to speak for the distant gods who imposed regulations on formerly anarchic land and water use, and redistributed their societies' surplus wealth from storehouses that were temples, and temples that were storehouses.

Formerly tranquil hunting and gathering communities were welded into compact, largely self-sufficient, fortified city states by the pressures of external conflicts and the initiatives of a newly emerged class, the first kings. These took the form of hereditary military dictatorships that filled the need for social and military coordination early of early cities ripe with foodstuffs to pillage, beset by nomadic and semi-nomadic neighboring societies, and constantly squabbling with other city-states for scarce water and foraging resources.

The text's narrative proceeds through the adolescence and maturity of ancient Mesopotamian urban society. The cities of Mesopotamia's southern alluvial plain, Sumer, developed a shared culture and polytheistic religion, with its ceremonial heart at ancient Nippur and its political center of gravity drifting from one dominant city-state to the next. Sumerian civilization was united by the very force that led to its cultural dissolution: history's first empire, the kingdom of Akkad founded by Sargon the Great. Sargon's embrace of Sumerian cultural forms and the unique Sumerian writing system, now known as cuneiform, spread both across the greater ancient Near East, but Sargon and his successors ruled through their native tongue, now known as Akkadian. Sumerian scribes in Akkadian employ learned to express the conquerors' language through the wedge-shaped signs of their script. Generations of government-sponsored preponderance slowly but surely replaced Sumerian with Akkadian in Sumer as the dominant language. The fall of Sargon's dynasty gave way to a rough century's interregnum, until a new dynasty arose on the Sumerian plain to unite the city-states again.

This was the Third Dynasty of Ur, so called as it was the third dynasty to hold acknowledged hegemony in Sumer from a royal seat at the city Ur. Some scholars call

this dynasty, also known as Ur III, the 'Sumerian Renaissance,' as it represented the last culturally Sumerian hegemonic power in Mesopotamia. Under the rulers of Ur III Sumerian regained its place as the language of government, if not of daily life, for most of the dynasty's subjects. Like the Akkadians before them the kings of Ur III united a Mesopotamian state that was among the most advanced and sophisticated societies on earth at its time, supported by a complex system of centrally levied taxes in kind that allowed its rulers to shift human and material resources along a comprehensive canal network to wherever they were most needed. When the dynasty finally fell under its last king, Ibbi-Sin, under the combined pressure of pastoralist nomads and aggressive settled states, internal revolt and crippling material shortages, no culturally Sumerian power ever fully filled the void left by Ur III. The next dynasty to hold even partial hegemony in Mesopotamia, the Isin dynasty founded by Ur III separatist governor Ishbi-Erra, succeeded in dutifully preserving the documents and traditions of the kings of Ur, and this project owes a tremendous debt to the scribes of that era.

The second chapter narrows its scope to a single population within ancient Sumerian society: the Sumerian scribes as a class and a profession. It follows their rise with the earliest instances of Mesopotamian writing, through the flourishing of Sumerian letters before the conquests of Sargon, to focus intently on the scribal profession as it existed in the last five centuries of the third millennium BCE. The chapter explores the professional lives of scribes, from their training at temple- and palace-affiliated scribal schools, through their working lives as teachers, accountants, scholars, litterateurs, mathematicians, and the further bewildering array of vocations a Sumerian scribe might exercise. The chapter delves into what the scribes thought of themselves and the



institutions that produced them through reference to surviving works on those subjects prepared by Sumerian scribes themselves. It also examines, to the extent still possible in Mesopotamia's archaeological context, the veritable tools of the scribal trade: the clay, the stylus, and other tools hinted at in scribal documents but lost to ages of neglect and decay. Throughout, the chapter acknowledges the debt all researchers into ancient Mesopotamian history owe the scribes, whose voices and thoughts recorded in fired clay are our windows from the present into the lost reaches of an ancient, nearly forgotten past.

In the third chapter we examine how that past was unearthed, long centuries after Mesopotamian cuneiform languages, both Sumerian and Akkadian, died out as languages of religion and scholarship, supplanted by new tongues and new systems of recording information. The epic of rediscovery begins in the hills of western Persia, along the trade routes of the medieval Silk Road, when solitary travelers marveled at the ruins and curious inscriptions left to future generations by the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the last major political and cultural force to make active use of cuneiform writing. Idle wonder turned to the first efforts at studious examination in the modern eighteenth century, with the earliest explorations of ancient Persepolis. Though that city burned in the wake of Alexander the Great's march eastward, the inscriptions found on its surviving stone monuments and upon articles recovered from its ruins furnished European academics with their first direct experiences of cuneiform writing. Over the following century successive scholars added their observations and efforts at translation to the work, each one sifting a little more dust off the Mesopotamian past, until the Akkadian language was deciphered by the middle decades of the nineteenth century and Sumerian was deciphered

in its last years. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw ancient cities of Mesopotamia unearthed one after the other, at first with the disinterested permission of the Ottoman imperial government, later with the express support of the conquering Entente powers who added the modern Middle East to their overseas colonial empires after the First World War. These efforts restored whole swathes of Sumerian history to modern scholarship, and transmitted the physical relics of ancient Mesopotamia to institutions scattered across Europe and the Americas. The chapter also examines the motivations and approaches of the early Mesopotamian archaeologists, whose interest in treasure and flashy architectural finds over less exciting but deeply informative cuneiform textual finds, combined with their relative indifference to modern standards of site preservation and artifact handling, left much debris and confusion for future scholarship to sift through.

The final chapter of this text seeks to accomplish a little of that sifting. It focuses on a single trove of Mesopotamian cuneiform artifacts, the set of tablets held by the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina. These documents, many of them containing as little as eight lines of cuneiform text front and back, were donated by the son of American archaeologist and Latin scholar Ralph Van Deman Magoffin in 1964, over two decades after Magoffin's death. They arrived untranslated and undifferentiated, labeled as 'Akkadian' documents of 'Mesopotamian' manufacture, as a single line item amidst a body of ancient and classical Mediterranean artifacts offered to the museum by Dr. Magoffin's son, Ralph Manning Magoffin, and named by museum staff the Magoffin Collection. They remained in this state of relative obscurity, untranslated and unexamined, over the course of five decades before my own first encounter with them in

early 2013. The discovery that these tablets' public display lacked an accompanying translation for the simple reason that they had never before been translated was one of the key motivations behind my application to the Graduate History Program. The chapter documents my efforts to gain a better understanding of where the tablets came from, how they arrived in America, and what they actually say, through practical research and collaboration with American cuneiform specialists at institutions scattered throughout the United States. I am proud to report that this chapter contains the first publication of modern translations from the Magoffin Collection.

This work is fundamentally the product of collaboration. The raw materials of its original research were all furnished by the warmly helpful staff of South Carolina museums, while the effort of identifying the tablets' origins and translating their text belongs to several American academics. Each of these contributors received their due recognition in the fourth chapter, but I would like to use this space to acknowledge and thank a few particular individuals. My first thanks goes to Dr. W.R. "Buzz" Brookman of North Central University, Minnesota, who originally worked with the Magoffin Collection tablets in the middle 1980s, who was the first academic I made contact with as part of my research, and who first established the origins of the Magoffin Collection tablets as Sumerian, rather than Akkadian. I also wish to thank Dr. Robert Englund of UCLA, chief American investigator for the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, whose organization now hosts the digital photographs I made of the Magoffin tablets for the free perusal of the world's cuneiform scholars and interested public, and who prepared the very first complete translation of a Magoffin Collection tablet in late February, 2016. Finally, and most especially, I would like to thank assistant curator Noelle Rice of the

Columbia Museum of Art. It was she whom I first made contact with, long before joining the Winthrop history program, with questions about the Magoffin tablets. It was she who allowed me unfettered access to both the museum's documentation regarding the Magoffin Collection and the precious physical tablets themselves. Without her help and support in the crucial evidentiary phase of investigation this project could never have reached its successful conclusion, and for this she has my undying thanks.

## CHAPTER II: SUMER

For all that its languages lay lost to comprehension for well over a thousand years, ancient Mesopotamia was one of the cradles of urban, agriculturally sustained human civilization. The literate Sumerian culture that produced the tablets of the Magoffin Collection in the Third Dynasty of Ur in the twenty-first century BCE arose from roots planted in the shadow of the last Ice Age. It inherited a tradition of settled agricultural life already thousands of years old when the first instances of early Mesopotamian writing appear in the debris of the previous era's fourth millennium. That this ancient culture could fade from the collective human memory during the comparatively brief span of the common era should serve as a compelling warning against assuming the permanence of modern, industrialized civilization. Inhabitants of the twenty-first century's hegemonic, industrialized mode of life may feel some sympathy for Sumerians who lived under the Third Dynasty of Ur. Both experienced a world shaped by the ruin of recently deceased empires. The vast majority of those in either civilization worked means of production owned by others in exchange for a wage. Moderns may note a peculiar familiarity in the rising instability of government and insecurity experienced by Sumerians of the later Ur III period. There is some irony, or at least great tragedy, in the knowledge that the early twenty-first century's endemic violence and anarchy in modern Iraq would be perfectly recognizable to the Sumerians of late Ur III, who witnessed the inroads of aggressive new parties and violent disorder into the same region as their central governing authority collapsed. This chapter examines the cultural context which saw the creation of the Magoffin Collection's tablets. It describes the origins of Sumerian

civilization, the flowering of that culture and its conquest by Sargon of Akkad, then the rise and flourishing of the Third Dynasty of Ur. It concludes with that dynasty's ultimate collapse, which marked the end of the last Sumerian dynasty to hold full hegemony in Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest communities of Mesopotamia gathered edible plants and hunted small game for their sustenance. Surviving archaeological evidence from Near Eastern Stone Age sites reveal permanent settlements of simple homes and granaries over nine millennia old, such as Abu Hureyra in modern eastern Syria. The earliest such sites are remarkable for their longevity and the apparently peaceful lives carried on within their borders. The same Abu Hureyra saw continuous habitation from the tenth millennium to the fourth, yet no stratigraphic layer of its excavation shows forensic evidence of mass violence—burned or otherwise destroyed artifacts, corpses damaged by blows or still embedded with weaponry—found in the archaeological remains of later Mesopotamian settlements.<sup>2</sup>

The Stone Age inhabitants of Sumer migrated onto a geologically young landscape. The alluvial plains of southern Mesopotamia formed from the buildup of silts washed down the currents of the Tigris and Euphrates. The resultant environment was extremely flat and lay close to sea-level. The great rivers could change their courses easily in that landscape, overrunning their banks to carve new green paths through the pan-flat alluvial sediments of southern Mesopotamia on their way towards the sea. At their southern ends the Tigris and Euphrates emptied into littoral marshlands before their

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this chapter, unless specifically stated otherwise assume all provided dates are from before the Common Era.

<sup>2</sup>Keith F. Otterbein, "Early Warfare in the Near East," *Neo-Lithics* 1-10 (2010): 57.

waters finally met the Persian Gulf.<sup>3</sup>

The first permanent settlements of Sumer arose millennia after the first such communities of northern Mesopotamian. The earliest evidence of this mode of life in ancient Sumer dates to the sixth millennium BCE when the hunters, fishers, and gatherers near the site of the ancient Sumerian city Ur adopted a fixed habitation. The earliest available artifacts from Stone Age settlements in Sumer show tools of the hunt in close proximity to early agricultural implements, but the ubiquity of hunting tools declined the longer a settlement remained in place.<sup>4</sup>

The hunting and gathering lifestyle of Sumer's first settled inhabitants gave way to concerted agriculture only gradually. The early Sumerians chiefly gathered wild cereals, and hunted wild sheep and goats for their meat. Over long acquaintance and exploitation they came to exercise more and more control over their food supply. They deliberately planted the seeds of the most easily harvested wheat plants. They gradually assumed responsibility for every aspect of their main prey animals' lives, until they reared and herded the animals they once hunted. The first recognizable farms of the Mesopotamian region arose in the north, where enough rain fell to support nonirrigated agriculture. As early as the eighth millennium farming activity moved into areas of insufficient rainfall where the inhabitants harnessed the rivers' waters for irrigation. They built canal-fed cisterns to store each spring's flood waters for release during the driest months. The same practices of irrigated agriculture spread into Sumer's first permanent settlements.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>J.N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 23.

<sup>5</sup>The following account of early Mesopotamian civilization, from prehistoric times through the fall of the Akkadian Empire, is a synthesis of three secondary sources. Marc Van De Mieroop's *History of the Ancient Near East* and Harriet Crawford's *Sumer and the Sumerians*, and Samuel Kramer's *The Sumerians*. The first two are utilized for the broad strokes of Mesopotamian civilization, especially the

Though urban life depended upon agriculture, the first Sumerian cities required an additional stimulus. They cohered from less discrete settled communities herded together by necessities of self-defense. The settled hunter-gatherer societies from which early Sumer developed left little evidence of organized warfare. The principal point of reference for each of their protoagricultural communities was its temple complex, a feature present in even the most ancient Mesopotamian settlement sites. The priests who interpreted the gods' will acted as society's first arbiters and overseers. Their temples became storehouses for their communities' surplus wealth, while they became the arbiters of that wealth's redistribution. The surpluses of agriculture drew acquisitive attention, and stimulated the first Sumerian warfare for which evidence survives. The preurban settlements fortified themselves in response to both aggression from beyond their region and competition within it. Nomadic and seminomadic societies maneuvered along the periphery of Mesopotamia throughout the region's history, often migrating through the borders of settled lands, sometimes invading en masse. Agricultural surpluses made fixed settlements tempting targets for passing nomads. The very practices that produced this surplus placed unprecedented strains on the Sumerians' available land and resources. When settled communities failed to resolve these urgent territorial issues peacefully they resorted to force of arms. The threat of predation by their neighbors forced communities to abandon their outlying territories and concentrate around defensible cores: their temple complexes, already situated at the geographic heart of each settlement, with high walls, granaries, and established administrative functions.

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characteristics of pre-literate archaeological periods and economic information; the last, Kramer's *Sumerians*, for its narrative and biographical accounts of particular individuals. The citation at the end of each paragraph denotes its foremost source, but the above three texts undergird the account as a whole.



Formerly free farmers, obliged to abandon their land in favor of the shelter of city walls, made their living toiling in fields adjacent to the defenses and owned by the temples. In this way one of the earliest instances of truly urban human life presents us with a wage-laboring proletariat toiling at the very dawn of written history.<sup>6</sup>

The newly fortified settlements of Sumer shared a common structure. Laborers formed the lowest and broadest layer of society. Those who toiled in agricultural work and construction projects for a wage stood slightly above slaves made captive by debt or military conquest. Above these were the cities' craftspeople, trading the work of their hands for the means of living. Above even these, at the top of the hierarchy in the earliest days of urban Sumer, the priesthoods directed labor on temple-owned lands and ultimately controlled the redistribution of its produce. The first cities' security concerns introduced a new figure into the social scheme, the military strongmen who led Sumer's first armies. The Sumerians used three terms for these figures, and the original distinctions between them are the subject of much modern Sumeriological debate. *Lugal* reads literally as "big man," *en* translates variously as "lord" or "priest," while *ensi* specifically refers to the ruler of an individual city. Though the three terms seem to be used interchangeably in early periods, with time *lugal* came to signify the overlord of multiple cities while *en* and *ensi* became the titles of local rulers subordinated to a *lugal*. These early warrior chieftains originated hereditary royal dynasties with claims to authority reinforced by religious practice. Their positions were divinely appointed, according to later tradition, in the time when the gods surrendered day-to-day rule of the Earth to mortals. Sumerian kingship was thus always at least partly sacral in character,

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<sup>6</sup>Ruby Rohrlich, "State Formation in Sumer and the Subjugation of Women," *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980):80-81.

and expanding or renovating temple premises was one of many ways kings displayed and reinforced their power.<sup>7</sup>

Royal power broke the early near-monopoly of the temples on control of land by establishing their own territorial holdings, worked by laborers who took their wages from the king rather than the priests. The kings' military purposes and their efforts to develop economic and administrative bases separate from the temples stimulated the creation of new classes of nonlaborer city dwellers, soldiers, and bureaucrats. The kings operated from new fortified structures within the cities, distinct palaces with their own storehouses and armories. Though they arose prior to the first true Sumerian writing, we can estimate their advent at each rediscovered Sumerian city through the footprints of their distinctive architectural expansions to their cities. With the addition of the kings and their associates to the urban fabric in the period just before the earliest written records we find the classic pattern of Sumerian city life more or less assembled.<sup>8</sup>

This structure, with its broad base of proletarian labor sustaining artisans, bureaucrats, priests, and kings, became the common mold for the thirty or so walled polities of the alluvial plain. The inhabitants of these cities were aware of the similarities they shared beyond their common language. Though it would be anachronistic to speak of a Sumerian nationalism, there does survive in their writings the concept of *kalam*, 'the land,' as a term encompassing the whole urban civilization of southern Mesopotamia. Though the languages used by its living exemplars changed with the ebb and flow of mortal politics, this essential configuration of southern Mesopotamian urban life survived

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<sup>7</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 28.

<sup>8</sup>Rohrlich, "State Formation in Mesopotamia and the Subjugation of Women," 82.

into the common era.<sup>9</sup>

The era of consolidating agriculture and the rise of the first city walls is known in modern scholarship as the Uruk Period, named for the Sumerian city whose strata offered the first insights into the era for modern scholars. The Uruk Period embraces the first nine centuries of the fourth millennium BCE. In addition to the revolutionary new social structures that arose in Sumer's cities during the era, the Uruk period saw the beginnings of bronze-making and writing. Writing arose as a direct consequence of agriculture, and its earliest uses were economic. The immediate predecessors of true writing in Sumer were accounting systems. One was the practice of stamping illustrated seals into wet clay affixed to other objects to denote their ownership. The other involved sets of tokens held in spherical clay envelopes, called bullae. The tokens held within bullae designated a given amount—of bushels of grain, heads of livestock, whatever was being accounted—while the envelope itself was a form of insurance, guaranteeing the veracity of the tokens within so long as their container arrived in its intended recipient's hand inviolate.<sup>10</sup>

Bullae of later construction show inscriptions and impressions on their exterior surfaces, a development that allowed users to 'read' the envelopes without destroying them to view their contents. Excavations of the Uruk Period reveal the contemporary arrival of several competing forms of numerical notation inscribed on clay tablets. The earliest such tablets lack nonnumerical data to tell modern readers just what they accounted for, but later instances of the same sort of document show the development of a body of some nine hundred signs to represent objects and ideas—cows, water, the concept of a 'receipt.' Though these signs were originally simply drawn into wet clay, the

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<sup>9</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 33.

<sup>10</sup>Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 28.

earliest Sumerian writers eventually developed a standard scribal tool: a reed stylus culminating in a T-shaped wedge, used to make linked impressions in wet clay to create particular signs. It is from these writing tools that we draw the modern English term for ancient Mesopotamian writing, cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneiformis* which translates as “triangle shape,” or in this context “triangle writing.” A whole professional class of scribes arose to furnish temple priesthods and royal governments with written records fixed in timeless fired clay.<sup>11</sup> The next chapter examines the Sumerian scribes and the body of literature they produced in greater detail.

Until this point in the story the account of Sumer's genesis relies entirely on archaeological remains. Before the Uruk Period any discussion of Sumer is necessarily prehistoric, as there was no one writing anything down. The advent of truly literate Sumerian culture changes all this as, from the later centuries of the fourth millennium onward, surviving documents transmit the words of the Sumerians themselves to modern readers across barely comprehensible gulfs of time. The overwhelming majority of surviving early texts are economic in nature, as is probably not surprising given the accounting roots of Sumerian writing, but wherever writing took hold it eventually produced genres other than the receipt slip. Temple patronage ensured that some of these new kinds of texts were liturgical, recordings of hymns and prayers as well as accounts of the gods and their deeds. The patronage of each Sumerian city's royal ruler ensured the creation of written history: in the Sumerian sense, accounts of the reigns of kings, often inscribed on their own commissioned monuments.

By the last century of the fourth millennium Sumer was both a region and a more

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 29.

or less cohesive culture. With the advent of written history we can, for the first time, explore its development in detail, down to individual names and particular calendar dates. The two centuries following the Uruk Period are known as the Jemdet Nasr Period, named for the site where its distinctive pottery was first rediscovered. It represents a weak point in the historiography of Sumer, as archaeologists have yet to excavate former urban sites with legibly stratified layers from this period. Its chief defining characteristics are a style of pictographically embellished and not entirely intelligible stamped tablets found only within Jemdet Nasr's double-century span.<sup>12</sup>

The next era in Sumerian history is, luckily, far better documented. The Early Dynastic Period, as it is now known, spanned the middle centuries of the third millennium from approximately 2900 to 2350. In this era the thirty-odd core city-states of Sumer were independent entities, cooperating or jostling with each other in pursuit of limited resources. The Early Dynastic Period takes its name from the many royal dynasties of the era's independent city-states. Though Sumer was far from integrating into a single cohesive state in this era, the competition between independent city-states did sometimes produce local hegemonies. The term for this preeminence was *nam-lugal*, 'kingship,' a title usually reserved for the home city of a particular king rather than the kings themselves. *Nam-lugal* was held to pass from one city to the next, typically when the king of a rising power overthrew the incumbent hegemony. Later literary practice rendered such transitions as an orderly succession stretching back into deified antiquity, when the gods first handed over temporal rule of the world to mortals. What we can deduce of the facts of the period from archeology and contemporary documents presents

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<sup>12</sup>Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18-19.

a rather less orderly picture, with rival hegemonic city-states holding effective 'kingship' simultaneously during the Early Dynastic Period and never for long.<sup>13</sup>

The most significant new development of the Early Dynastic Period is the ultimate outcome of the era's intercity struggles: the creation of the concept and practice of two-tiered regional governments. It is in the Early Dynastic that the titles *en* and *ensi* gain their subordinate quality in relation to *lugal*. The combination of written records and delegation of local authority allowed successful kings to wage war for even higher stakes than slave-taking, plunder and property damage. They could administer territories beyond the shadow of their own city's walls through written orders and reports, while the traditional accounting function of Sumerian writing permitted more efficient long-term exploitation of conquered territory through accurate record-keeping of extracted taxes and tribute.

Despite the kings' new capacities for profitable warfare the Early Dynastic period was characterized by greater economic and cultural interdependence between city-states. Cities near the region's borders imported luxury goods found outside Sumer's bounds. Each city-state exported the staple goods that conditions best suited it to produce. We have proof of prolific intercity trade in the seals affixed to the containers for these trade goods in the Early Dynastic period, stamped with pictographic emblems for their cities of origin. Early Dynastic Sumer had a ceremonial heart in the city of Nippur, home to the temple of the chief Sumerian god Enlil. Nippur's ritual significance was such that control of the city was among the chief criteria for *nam-lugal*. The religious focus of each city-state on a particular god of the Sumerian pantheon bound them together. In order to

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<sup>13</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 28.

sanctify a peace treaty between the cities of Lagash and Umma, for instance, the attendees dispatched anointed doves to the god Enlil at Nippur, Ninhursag at Kesh (or Kish), Enki at Eridu, Nanna at Ur and Utu at Larsa. The city-states of Sumer were thus both linked practically by their economies and conscious of that connection through their religious practices in the Early Dynastic Period.<sup>14</sup>

The last decades of the Early Dynastic period saw the rise of a new Sumerian hegemon, Lugalzagesi of Uruk, who climbed from the *ensi* of the city Umma to lordship over most of the alluvial plain. His city lost the *nam-lugal* within his lifetime; to a new city, Agade, and its king, Sargon. No known reliable sources on Sargon's exact origins survive into the modern era. His home language was Semitic rather than Sumerian, and he served the king of the northern Sumerian city Kish, Ur-Zababa, in the trusted and prestigious position of cupbearer. He left the court of Kish to found a new city, Agade—its Anglophone name, Akkad, stems from a lone reference in the Old Testament—with himself as ruler. With his new city as a base Sargon embarked on a military career that forged the world's first empire. His first target was Sumer, the heartland of Mesopotamian civilization in his era.<sup>15</sup>

Sargon may have had cause to hate Lugalzagesi, Sumer's overlord. The latter's rise to power included the conquest of Kish, and surviving records indicate that Ur-Zababa no longer ruled that city, not even as the *lugal's* vassal *ensi*, when the states of Sargon and Lugalzagesi came to blows. According to sources from Sargon's reign he struck first at Uruk, the Sumerian overlord's capital, and stormed it in a rapid and destructive siege. The Sumerians fled the debacle with their king in their midst to

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<sup>14</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 32-34.

<sup>15</sup>Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, 33.

regroup with reinforcements from Lugalzagesi's wider realm. The Akkadian sources say fifty *ensi* came to their *lugal's* aid, but no means survive to verify that number. Sargon's forces defeated Lugalzagesi in battle upon the plain and took the king hostage. Despite the hegemon's defeat, his *ensi* continued their resistance to Sargon. His campaigns in Sumer continued, southwest to Ur and southeast past Lagash to the Persian Gulf. Another western sweep committed Sargon to the sack of Umma, Lugalzagesi's original stronghold, and the last major hold-out against the northerner's conquest of Sumer. With the heartland under his thumb Sargon's efforts poured north up the rivers and west towards the Mediterranean. By the end of Sargon's life the realm of Agade was greater than any previous *nam-lugal*.<sup>16</sup>

The extension of Sargon's sovereignty so far beyond Sumer's traditional bounds, on a permanent basis reinforced by military garrisons, was a novel development in Mesopotamian history. The rulers and bureaucrats of Agade's new empire were forced to evolve novel administrative solutions for unprecedented conditions if they were to maintain this eminent position. Inscriptions sponsored by Sargon refer to the king taking his meal with "5,400 men" each day, which may be a reference to the world's first standing army. He certainly installed permanent military garrisons in his most restless territories. His administration tightened the strictures of subordination between *lugal* and *ensi*, rendering the latter more a provincial governor for the central authority than a vassal ruler. Further efforts to centralize authority within the new empire included the introduction of a new tax system that skimmed the produce of each administrative district into royal storehouses, whether the central repository at Agade or local warehouses used

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<sup>16</sup>Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 59-60.



to support their region's imperial troops and bureaucrats. Sargon and his successors introduced standardized weights and measures to the empire and conducted their administration in a single language—the Semitic tongue of Sargon's birth, its original name now lost. The Sumerian scribes obliged to learn it called it the language of Agade, Akkadian in modern usage.<sup>17</sup>

This last detail, the adoption of the Akkadian language as the official tongue of Sargon's empire, had far-reaching consequences the kings of his dynasty could only have guessed at. The Sumerian language has no known linguistic relatives, living or dead. Akkadian derived from an entirely different language family, but lacked its own script. Sargon's government adopted the Sumerian cuneiform script as its own. Sumerian cuneiform signs took on entirely new phonetic pronunciations, despite retaining the same physical structure in either language. It is from this period that our modern term for ancient southern Mesopotamia, Sumer, emerged. The word is an Anglicization of the Akkadian phonetic pronunciation of the Sumerian sign for their own land. The Sumerian KIR-EN-GI sign became the Akkadian SHI-ME-RU, or *shimeru*, or simply Sumer in modern usage.

Sargon and his dynasty survived for roughly eighteen decades, though the last few heirs of his line ruled rump states in a collapsed empire. Their reign proved a long enough period of linguistic domination to permanently damage the Sumerian language's position and viability within Sumer itself. Whole generations grew up within Agade's orbit knowing Akkadian as the language of business, government and daily life, with Sumerian relegated to the tongue of backwards rural folk or religious observance.

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<sup>17</sup>Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 60-61.

Ironically one of the most important Sumerian-language texts that descended intact to modern readers was written by an Akkadian princess in this period. After the conquest of Sumer Sargon sent one of his daughters to Ur, where she took the seat of high priestess and ceremonial spouse to the city's patron deity, the moon god Nanna. To prepare her for the position she was given a Sumerian name, Enheduanna, by which we know her today. She authored one of the most complete surviving renditions of the Gilgamesh Epic, along with numerous hymns and other works, all in impeccable Sumerian script. Yet Enheduanna's contributions to Sumerian literature serve to underline how her native language was already reducing Sumerian from a common spoken tongue to one reserved for religion and scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

Of the Akkadian kings who followed Sargon, only Naram-Sin was reckoned truly great. He was Sargon's grandson. The 'Sin' in his name signified the Akkadian version of the moon god of Ur, Nanna. Naram-Sin launched military expeditions that expanded the empire of Agade to its maximum extent. The stelae that commemorate his victories stood as far afield as the Zagros and Taurus mountains. He revived a title once taken by Lugalzagesi, "lord of the four quarters," i.e. of the quarters of the Earth, but his true innovation in self-aggrandizement was his ritual ascension to godhood as the tutelary deity of Agade towards the end of his reign. The posthumous deification of former kings was well established in Naram-Sin's time, but he was the first known Sumerian ruler to assume such honors while still alive. The tradition he inaugurated persisted for millennia to come.<sup>19</sup>

The god-king Naram-Sin spent the final years of his reign presiding over the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>19</sup>Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, 34.

collapse of his empire. A confederation of nomadic tribes, known to contemporary sources as the Gutians, invaded out of the east. According to surviving sources on this tumultuous time the nomads roamed freely through Akkadian territory after defeating Naram-Sin's field forces. They were apparently content to leave the Akkadian king and his remaining troops bottled up in the capital for years at a time while they marauded at will through the provinces, checked only by resourceful local governors. Agade did not fall completely in Naram-Sin's lifetime, but his few successors ruled only Agade's environs amid the empire's ruin. The Gutians exercised de facto hegemony in Sumer and beyond for more than fifty years following the end of Akkadian hegemony. Though a nonliterate society they conducted business with the aid of Sumerian scribes writing in Akkadian. They favored the *ensi* rulers of Lagash, who served as their primary servants among the subordinated city-states. The overthrow of Gutian hegemony in Sumer marked the rise of the last great Sumerian dynasty, the source of the Magoffin Collection's cuneiform tablets: the Third Dynasty of Ur.<sup>20</sup>

The dynasty's origins lie not at Ur, but at ancient Uruk. In the final years of Gutian hegemony the independent *ensi* of Uruk, Utu-Hegal, orchestrated a league of Sumerian cities to expel the nomadic invaders from Sumer forever. Very little documentary evidence survives from the life of Utu-Hegal, and we know only the vaguest sketches of his biography and activities. Under his leadership the Sumerian effort spearheaded by Uruk destroyed the Gutian power, and pursued its remnants beyond the traditional bounds of Sumer. Campaigns along the Tigris brought Utu-Hegal's Uruk into conflict with the powerful Iranian state Awan, lead by the the king Kutik-Inshushinak

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<sup>20</sup>Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 64, 66.

who made his capital at Susa east of the Tigris. By the end of Utu-Hegal's reign Susa belonged to Uruk and the former *ensi* claimed the title “King of Sumer and Akkad.” How, precisely, his reign ended is open to question. We know he was succeeded by a male relative, Ur-Nammu, who may have been his son or brother, and originally ruled the city Ur on Utu-Hegal's behalf. The available sources offer conflicting versions of the succession, leaving uncertain whether Ur-Nammu overthrew his successor or took the throne peacefully. Soon after Utu-Hegal's death the capital of the realm he built upon the wreckage of Agade's empire shifted permanently to Ur, and Ur-Namma inaugurated a new dynasty there. The name by which we know it, the Third Dynasty of Ur, signifies it as the third dynasty to bring the *nam-lugal* to that city since the Early Dynastic Period.<sup>21</sup>

When Ur-Nammu came to power Sargon was already dead and gone nearly one hundred and fifty years, as distant from contemporaries of the new king of Ur as Napoleon III is from the world of the early twenty-first century CE. He assumed the kingship in a Sumer whose only central authority in living memory was the disinterested and contested power of the Gutians. Though Utu-Hegal's efforts largely expelled the Gutians from Sumer they were one of many enemies Ur-Nammu's armies faced during his seventeen years of rule. Ur-Nammu's task as ruler was to consolidate the power of Ur over Sumer. His military conquests were local, chiefly cities neighboring Ur's core territory like Gutian-allied Lagash. Ur-Nammu died as he reigned, in battle in the seventeenth year of his rule, and his son Shulgi succeeded him.<sup>22</sup>

Shulgi ruled longer than any other Ur III king, and left an indelible mark on his region for centuries to come. He ruled for forty-eight years, long enough for a whole

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<sup>21</sup>Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 71.

<sup>22</sup>Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 68.

generation to rise and fall within his reign, far longer than any other ruler of his dynasty. Unfortunately for modern research, few documents survive from the early years of Shulgi's rule. What little remains indicates that early on the king of Ur devoted his kingdom's energies to restoring the highways and canals left decrepit by decades of public anarchy. A hymn composed in the king's honor in the sixth year of Shulgi's reign recorded his commissioning new rest houses along the roads to shelter travelers, staffed by reliable royal employees.<sup>23</sup>

Hymns written in praise of Shulgi survive through copies created and preserved by the scribes of later Sumerian dynasties. Centuries after the king's death his hymns were used to teach new generations of scribes the traditional formulas of royal praise literature. They were originally composed during Shulgi's own lifetime by scribes in royal employ. The hymns themselves document how Shulgi founded scribal academies at Ur and Nippur specifically to reproduce literature about himself. They clearly state the king's objectives in creating and spreading these hymns. According to his own scribes Shulgi desired to spread his image as a perfect, deified ruler. His hymns were performed in the empire's temples and utilized in palace ceremonies. In this way Shulgi obliged both the most educated and most powerful subjects of his realm, the priests and palace officials, to acknowledge king's divine excellence and supremacy as a part of their daily lives.<sup>24</sup>

Shulgi's foreign policy was aggressive, expansionist, and more successful than

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<sup>23</sup>Douglas Frayne, "Šulgi, the Runner," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983):743-744.

<sup>24</sup>Ludek Vacin, "Šulgi Meets Stalin: Comparative Propaganda as a Tool of Mining the Šulgi Hymns for Historical Data," in *From the Twenty-First Century B.C. To the Twenty-First Century A.D.: Proceedings of the International Conference on Neo-Sumerian Studies Held in Madrid, 22-24 July 2010*, ed. Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 233-235.

any previous Sumerian *lugal*. With the Sumerian heartland already well in hand thanks to Ur-Nammu's efforts Shulgi was free to expand the kingdom's frontier as far north as modern Iraqi Erbil and east into the frontiers of modern Iran. His efforts proved so successful that he felt worthy to revive Naram-Sin's old title, "king of the four quarters," for his own use. Ur III never equaled Sargon's empire in extent, but it far exceeded the traditional bounds of Sumerian sovereignty. Only the long dead Lugalzagesi's pre-Sargonic *nam-lugal* approached the international reach of Shulgi's Ur. Unlike that lost *lugal* of Uruk, or indeed the deified Naram-Sin, Shulgi's dynasty held on to its full power for decades after his death. His queen Abisimti, a northern Semite and an active ruler in her own right, outlived even her long-reigning husband to preside as the dynasty's dowager queen through the reigns of his next three successors.<sup>25</sup>

The conquests of Ur-Nammu and Shulgi placed tremendous logistical strains on their kingdom. The greatest tool of Ur III's rulers in combating the tyranny of time and distance was the written word, and they used it to tremendous effect. The kingdom operated through two parallel bureaucracies: civilian authorities headed on a regional basis by *ensi* provincial governors, and military authorities headed by appointed generals—the Sumerian term was *shagina*. Civil and military officers wielded authority in overlapping districts. The civil governors hailed from old, prestigious noble families of their cities, while the *shagina* were selected from among the royal government's career military officers and trusted servants. The kings invested their generals with command of lands far from their roots. The rulers of Ur III courted the old families of the Sumerian heartland to maintain their *ensi* governors' loyalty, but in times of crisis they could rely on

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<sup>25</sup>Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 68-69.

*shagina* with no particular ties to the territories they helped administer to blunt the ambitions of independence-minded governors.<sup>26</sup>

Surviving records show that the kings of Ur III were willing to break with the traditional elite families of their subject cities when their needs warranted. Detailed records of the provincial governorships survive for roughly forty years of the dynasty's century of rule, from the thirtieth year of Shulgi's reign through the last several years of Ibbi-Sin, the dynasty's last ruler. These records show that the cities of Sumer followed no uniform system of hereditary succession. Though some cities followed a patrilineal system, evidence survives of multiple cases of fratrilineal succession such as the *ensi* of Umma, which passed one brother to another in the eighth year of Amar-Sin, Shulgi's successor. Further evidence shows that the kings of Ur were willing to break with the hereditary principle entirely in appointing their provincial *ensi*. According to the surviving record Amar-Sin was particularly ready to break the power of old elite families and appoint *ensi* without links to traditional ruling households.<sup>27</sup>

We know details of King Shulgi's correspondence with his agents in the provinces because copies of seventeen of those letters, from both sides of the conversation, survive to this day along with seven similar letters sent to or by Shulgi's successors. The largest such body of letters is the correspondence between Shulgi and his vizier Aradmu, which include their correspondence when the latter was sent north to Subar in Assyria to collect taxes and quell an incipient revolt on the frontier. Aside from the valuable insights

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<sup>26</sup>Van De Mieroop, *History of the Ancient Near East*, 73.

<sup>27</sup>Lance Allred, "The Tenure of Provincial Governors: Some Observations," in *From the Twenty-First Century B.C. To the Twenty-First Century A.D.: Proceedings of the International Conference on Neo-Sumerian Studies Held in Madrid, 22-24 July 2010*, ed. Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 115-117.

offered by these texts into the intricacies of Ur III administration, they reveal something of the personal relationship between the king and his subordinates. Though Aradmu in particular addresses his overlord with great respect, no great litany of royal and divine honorifics precedes the text of letters addressed to Shulgi. The king and his vizier use the same formula of address for each other at the start of their letters. Taking “Shulgi to Aradmu 3” and its reply as examples, the king opens with the line “Speak to Aradmu, saying (the words) of Shulgi, your king:” Aradmu's response opens with the same line in mirror, “Speak to my king, saying (the words) of Aradmu your servant:”<sup>28</sup>

Shulgi's letters also show that his dynasty restored the Sumerian language as a tongue of administration. Shulgi respected and emulated Sargon's Semitic Akkadian dynasty, and several of his heirs had Semitic names, but in his inscriptions he boasted of his fluency with the Sumerian language and his command of its literature. Though Shulgi's literary preferences did not restore the Sumerian tongue to common use even in the Sumerian heartland, the requirements of conducting government business in the language spread fluency in its written form to scribes and administrators throughout the dynasty's territory. In the Third Dynasty of Ur the old language returned to a final prominence as the language of government documents, and retained the importance it held through the Akkadian and Gutian periods as the language of traditional Sumerian religious observance. Its script continued to serve both Akkadian and Sumerian, but its time as the living, common language of Sumer ended decades before Shulgi's birth.<sup>29</sup>

The royal government funded itself through a kingdom-wide system of taxation in

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<sup>28</sup>Piotr Michalowski, *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: An Epistolary History of an Ancient Mesopotamian Kingdom*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 326, 330.

<sup>29</sup>Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 69.



kind. The *bala*, essentially “exchange,” followed previous Mesopotamian practice in extracting a share of whatever each province produced best for storage in and redistribution from royal warehouses. Some of the resources extracted by the *bala* tax collectors went to supply the needs of local royal personnel, but the majority was assembled in central locations from which they could be dispersed across the kingdom. Every province contributed a share, and every provincial governor had the right to request disbursements from the royal stores. The required contribution of each district was figured beforehand by royal assessors based on each territory's production capacities. They measured working agricultural land of great grain-producers like ancient Girsu and issued *bala* quotas based on that total. Once the year's contribution was gathered in royal clerks tallied it against the assessors' projections, and any surplus or deficit was factored into the next year's requirements. The *bala* paid such clerks and assessors, the royal army, and anyone else who drew a wage for performing services on behalf of the royal administration. The fund provided the provisions of laborers drafted by the government to work on such public works projects as the highway repairs of Shulgi's early reign, as well as such labor-intensive projects as canal dredging or the construction of fortifications. Conscripted labor was itself a part of the *bala*, one more provincial resource carefully noted by the royal assessors and called up when the administrative need arose.<sup>30</sup>

The conscript labor element of the *bala* had roots in the earliest periods of Sumerian urban life. Every free inhabitant of Ur III, by far the majority of the population, was termed an *eren*, “royal dependent,” or *dumu-gir*, roughly “citizen.” Even

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<sup>30</sup>Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 73-74.

the provincial *ensi* were regarded as part of the *eren* class. The royal government offered full social and economic rights to the *eren* in exchange for their *bala* obligations. The surviving sources give varying accounts of just how much labor per year the kings of Ur III required of their free subjects. Some record obligations of six months' labor for a single individual, others record obligations of one hundred days. Steinkeller differentiates two grades of projects that utilized *bala* labor, local efforts initiated by provincial *ensi* and national projects ordained by the royal government. Conscript laborers worked on a myriad of projects for public use. They dredged canals, built roads, raised temples and brought in the harvest. *Bala* obligations including military service, and the same conscription systems that gathered and dispersed infrastructural laborers furnished the levies of the royal army. The largest royal projects gathered laborers and resources from every province of the kingdom. According to records from such kingdom-wide effort undertaken at the city Larsa *bala* laborers on royal projects received a significantly higher wage than was common for comparable work under other circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

Though systems like the *bala* had old precedents in Sumerian government, the rulers of Ur III developed their taxation system into a truly novel institution. They expanded the concept of royal storehouses into industrial complexes and administrative centers, called *mar-sa* in Sumerian. This term, and these structures, do not recur in later Mesopotamian governments. Translated literally, the word is a compound of two Sumerian verbs: *mar*, "to lock up," and *sa*, "to compensate." The earliest mention of the

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<sup>31</sup>Piotr Steinkeller, "Corvée Labor in Ur III Times" in *From the Twenty-First Century B.C. To the Twenty-First Century A.D.: Proceedings of the International Conference on Neo-Sumerian Studies Held in Madrid, 22-24 July 2010*, ed. Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 347-351.

*mar-sa* comes from an administrative text dated to the twenty-fifth year of Shulgi's reign, which notes eight facilities in as many urban areas. A contemporary document from Ur notes a ninth *mar-sa* at holy Nippur. In addition to storing and disbursing requisitioned or awarded resources gathered up by the *bala* the *mar-sa* also served as shipyards, using the storehouses' own stockpiles to pay shipwrights as well as supply them with the materials necessary to build river-capable craft. These boats were then used by the provincial governments to ship *bala* supplies along the canal networks to wherever they happened to be needed.<sup>32</sup>

The several complex systems of Ur III government produced truly enormous volumes of paperwork—or in the Sumerian context, claywork. As we will examine in greater detail in the next chapter, though the Sumerians wrought their monuments in stone, they recorded the business of daily life in fired clay. The cities administered by Ur III's officials generated tens of thousands of clay tablet documents, the vast majority of them simply receipts for disbursements from the *bala* stockpiles. As of this writing the cuneiform tablets of the Magoffin Collection all appear to be the very same sort of receipts. All hail from either the reign of Shulgi or that of his immediate successor, Amar-Sin, who ruled for nine brief but richly documented years. Though they lack the emotive and personal character of the royal correspondences, these tiny and fascinating documents offer windows into mundane daily life in Ur III. One such non-Magoffin tablet obtained in the early twentieth century CE by Pennsylvania's Haverford College

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<sup>32</sup>Sergio Alivernini, "Some Considerations on the Management of an Administrative Structure in Ur III Mesopotamia: The Case of *mar-sa*\*, " in *From the Twenty-First Century B.C. To the Twenty-First Century A.D.: Proceedings of the International Conference on Neo-Sumerian Studies Held in Madrid, 22-24 July 2010*, ed. Steven J. Garfinkle and Manuel Molina (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 105-110.

records the establishment of a park. It gives the area of donated land (seven hundred *shars*, or approximately twenty-five square kilometers), the name of the gardener tasked with tending the park (Babizimu), the name of the citizen who donated the land (Lugalsiggid, son of Ur-Lama the Patesi), the land's location (Girsu), and the name of a witness to the donation (Lugalmagurussukkal). The document, comprised of only twelve lines of text front and back, concludes with the year and month of its inscription.<sup>33</sup>

This is just a single example, but it is representative of the larger body of Ur III administrative texts. Their fired clay weathered the intervening four millennia better than even their creators might have hoped. Where they survive they furnish modern readers with truly priceless opportunities to read of Sumerian life far removed from the fortresses and palaces of the kings.

Two kings of Ur III followed Shulgi's heir, Amar-Sin. Shulgi died in the year 2047 BCE, and Amar-Sin in 2038. Shu-Sin ruled from 2037 to 2029, his successor Ibbi-Sin from 2028 to 2004. Ibbi-Sin was the last—the last *lugal* of Ur III, doomed to preside over the demise of the last great Sumerian-speaking Mesopotamian dynasty. Administrative texts from the last years of his reign are rare, given the spiral of anarchy that gripped his domain by then, but those from early years indicate that he proved unable to force the compliance of royal subjects when frontier *ensi* refused to pay their allotted taxes. By the ninth year of his reign the *bala* system that underlay the whole apparatus of Ur III administration disappears from the available records. Ibbi-Sin's letters from the surviving Ur III royal correspondence show even ostensibly loyal provincial governors

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<sup>33</sup>George Aaron Barton, trans., *Haverford Library Collection of Cuneiform Tablets or Documents from the Temple Archives of Telloh* (Philadelphia; London: The John C. Winston Company; Headley Brothers, 1918), 10.

exerting more and more independent authority. As with the dying days of the Akkadian empire nomadic groups took advantage of the failing central authority to move at will through the realm, though in the late twenty-first century BCE the principal nomad invaders were the Amorites out of the northwest. The deathblow to Ibbi-Sin's regime was dealt by a settled society, not migrating nomads. With the king at Ur barely able to keep the invaders away from the gates of the capital the Iranian kingdom of Elam assailed the eastern frontier. They took Susa from the Sumerians and used it as a base for raids into heart of the alluvial plain. In the last years of Ibbi-Sin's reign they laid siege to Ur itself, stormed it, and took Ibbi-Sin off to Susa as a captive. The Elamites occupied Ur for seven years until they were driven from Sumer by the forces of Ishbi-Erra, the former *ensi* of Isin who established himself as an independent ruler during the collapse of Ur III.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence of Ishbi-Erra's drive towards independent rule survives in the royal correspondence. A pair of letters, one from Ishbi-Erra to his king and the other from Ibbi-Sin to his governor, illustrate the desperate straits of the last king of Ur. Ishbi-Erra reported on Amorite nomads moving at will through the frontier, plundering *bala* warehouses and seizing fortresses. He complains that he lacks the forces to drive them off or even link his territory by land with the capital. The *ensi* of Isin acknowledges that his ruler lacks the supplies at Ur for a lengthy siege and offered to resupply him with Isin's copious grain. If the king would only send a flotilla over the canals, guarded by armed vessels and loaded with weapons with which Ishbi-Erra could expand his military, the *ensi* would send them back with enough grain to supply Ur for fifteen years. The

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<sup>34</sup>Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 78.

final pair of letters from the Royal Correspondence are an exchange between Ibbi-Sin and the *ensi* of Kazallu, Puzur-Numushda. The governor reported on an envoy he received from Ishbi-Erra who proclaimed that his master was promised the rule of Sumer by the god Enlil himself. Puzur-Numushda complained that Ishbi-Erra had rebuilt the fortifications of Isin and invested holy Nippur with his troops. The *ensi* of Isin wooed other local governors to his service and led his army throughout the frontier, fighting invading peoples and bringing more and more of Sumer under his control. Puzur-Numushda concluded his letter with the warning that his province was Ishbi-Erra's next target, and a plea to his king for aid. In his reply Ibbi-Sin attributed the kingdom's woes to the will of Enlil and complained that Puzur-Numushda and Girbubu, *ensi* of Girkal, had not combined their forces to bring Ishbi-Erra's treason to an end. He offered no reinforcements of his own, but claimed that Enlil had roused the Amorite nomads to repulse the easterner Elamites and overthrow Ishbi-Erra on the king's behalf. Given the ultimate fates of both Ibbi-Sin and his capital, it seems clear that the last king of Ur clung to some comforting illusions in the twilight of his rule.<sup>35</sup>

It is largely thanks to the scribes of Ishbi-Erra's Isin Dynasty that key Ur III documents like the royal correspondence survive. Though the *nam-lugal* of Isin was a shadow of Ur's former position, its scribes preserved Sumerian-language texts from the deceased dynasty. The Isin Dynasty's history-minded practices included the commissioning of one of the most important surviving Sumerian texts of all, the Sumerian King List. This document, compiled chiefly to justify Ishbi-Erra's claims of rightful succession to Ibbi-Sin, charts the succession of *nam-lugal* from city to city, king

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<sup>35</sup>Michalowski, *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur*, 440-441, 464.

to king, from the kings of Isin all the way back to the mythological past when the great god Enlil handed over kingship to mortals. It is from the King List's nomenclature that we draw the name "Third Dynasty of Ur." Next we examine the scribal tradition that produced the King List, the Magoffin Collection tablets, the royal correspondence of Ur III, and every other Sumerian document mentioned in this chapter.

### CHAPTER III: SCRIBES

The previous chapter explored Sumerian history from before its earliest recorded periods through the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur in the the early second millenium. This chapter examines the practitioners of a Sumerian profession that was essential to daily urban life, that of the scribes. Those ancient writers created the primary texts of Sumerian historiography: the hymns, the letters, and the tens of thousands of account tablets that underpin modern comprehension of life in ancient Sumer. This chapter will show how new scribes came to the profession around the Ur III period and what they created during their working lives. It also seeks to underline the importance of their creations in modern understanding of their profoundly ancient society.<sup>36</sup>

The term 'scribe' does little to capture the full breadth and variety of that profession as the Sumerians practiced it. Strictly speaking, a scribe was someone who wrote for a living. In ancient Sumer, where the principal means of mechanically transmitting information was to inscribe signs from a complex phonetic and ideographic language system onto wet clay, the carefully cultivated skills of a trained scribe could be applied to almost any sort of human endeavor. Scribes could be accountants for a variety of clients whether they recorded temple offerings, private business expenditures, or grants of *bala* grain in return for service to the royal state. Their abilities made them essential to large building projects, where their talents could keep track of supplies and ensure all involved recieved appropriate compensation for their work. They served both temples and royal courts by recording or composing praise hymns for gods, rulers, and deified

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<sup>36</sup>Regarding Dates: Unless specifically stated otherwise, all dates in this chapter refer to years from BCE.



rulers, as well as acting as secretaries for the powerful. Some found lifelong careers in training future generations of scribes at permanent schools dedicated to that purpose. The scribal profession, in sum, encompassed business and government, religion and literature, and even some intellectual efforts modern readers might call science. Scholars of this later era owe them a great deal, not merely for the documents they left behind, but for the mode of life dedicated to letters and the mind that they pioneered over four thousand years ago.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the Sumerian scribes as human beings. It explores their backgrounds, their training, and the tools of their life's work. The second part extends our inquiry into the documents that make up the vast majority of surviving Sumerian texts, the small bureaucratic and economic texts scribes produced in vast numbers for state, temple, and private clients. The fifth and final part explores what might be called the higher callings of the scribal profession such as lyric and prose literature.

No records can precisely date the earliest use of the written word in human history. All human affairs previous to the advent of written records are necessarily prehistory, elucidated for modern consideration only by the testimonies of archeology and forensic anthropology. Both those investigatory approaches provide invaluable insights into defunct societies and lost peoples, but the information they gather lacks a crucial element. Deciphering the bones and artifacts of pre- or non-literate extinct cultures is necessarily a circumstantial effort. The people originally involved lack any lingering voice to tell modern observers what they are looking at. Those ancients can never explain in their own words the mysteries they left behind. Modern eyes cannot help but

look at these mute remains through the lens of their own time and place, and so make unavoidable errors of interpretation that only great care and self-awareness can correct.

The surviving literary corpus of Sumer allows students of its antiquities to directly experience some of the ideas and feelings of that distant era, beyond the evidence provided by other physical remains. Those words survived the gulf of centuries to be reread in a distant time because they were written down by professionals of a lost age, carved into wet clay that preserved each carefully constructed cuneiform sign for posterity. The men and women who left these priceless relics for the future were called *dubsar* in their own Sumerian language, which they knew by the name *emegir*, "the language of Sumer." Since the Sumerian language's rediscovery and translation in the Victorian era, English-language scholarship has rendered the term for Sumerian professional writers as "scribe."<sup>37</sup>

The previous chapter described how the cuneiform writing system began as a numerical and labeling system, first documented in the archeological strata of the Sumerian city of Uruk. The earliest surviving evidence of efforts to collect and systematize early Sumerian cuneiform dates back to the fourth millennium. Excavators found a new sort of document buried with long-abandoned Uruk in the Eanna temple complex, examples from five thousand years previous of a sort of document that persists as long as scribes continued to write in cuneiform: the lexical list. These were, as their modern name suggests, lists of words copied down by scribes. They were teaching tools used by scribes to learn new signs and to practice the careful strokes necessary to reproduce them. A separate find in the remains of the Sumerian city Shuruppak, home

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<sup>37</sup>My reference for Sumerian nomenclature throughout this work is the "The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary," last modified June 26, 2006, <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd1/index.html>.

city of the mythical Utnapishtin whom Gilgamesh sought in his quest for eternal life, yielded an array of just such teaching texts from approximately 2500 BCE. Each of these teaching lists grouped its signs by themes that included the names of gods, of plants, of tools, and further categories. Aside from affording their obvious uses to the original Sumerian scribes, lists like these remain excellent resources for establishing the Sumerian language's full glossary, and for assessing the level of standardization within the language in a given period.<sup>38</sup>

The survival of contemporary scribal teaching tools implies the existence of both teachers and students. Few resources on how exactly that teaching took place survive from before the twenty-sixth century, but Sumerian writers of the following centuries left behind both written tools of their professional practices and literary accounts of their own educations. Through these we learn that at least from the later Early Dynastic Period through the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur scribes learned their exacting skills in distinct schools. The *edubba*, literally "tablet house," originated as a trade school for learning to write in cuneiform, yet as Sumerian civilization deepened in complexity its schools were obliged to broaden the curriculum necessary to express newly emerged ideas. In the era of Ur III, when the newly ascendant Akkadian language was already well on its way to extinguishing Sumerian as a living tongue in southern Mesopotamia, the *edubba* were repositories of information on topics from public administration to biology to astronomy, and held examples of Sumerian writing that ranged from medical treatises to comic verse.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 229.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 230-231.

Though few *edubba* have yet been positively identified in the architectural footprints of excavated Sumerian cities, the scribes who graduated from them were not shy about writing about their school experiences. There exists a whole genre of surviving texts regarding the lives led in Sumerian *edubba*.<sup>40</sup> Some appear frankly autobiographical, while others exhibit a more satirical and poetic bent. The institutions they describe are usually affiliated with the palace or temple of their home cities, and the surviving sources leave the question of whether or to what degree scribal education penetrated rural Sumer unanswered. Recurring themes and figures of these often rosily tinted recollections are the years of monotonous and repetitive memorization required of scribes in training, of supercilious upperclassmen and severely authoritarian teachers. There also shines through in even the most rueful and humorous accounts of life in the *edubba* an intense pride in the scribes' own training and lifestyle commensurate with the status and prestige these specialists enjoyed throughout Sumerian history.<sup>41</sup>

Among the surviving texts associated with the *edubba* are some of the schools' own administrative documents. These show that the Sumerian scribal schools collected tuition from their students' families, which was then used to pay their teaching staff. In order to better understand just who became a scribe the modern cuneiformist Nikolaus Schneider undertook a survey of the roughly five hundred scribes who name themselves on their surviving work in recovered Sumerian documents from around the juncture of the third and second millennia. He found that many of these scribes further identified

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<sup>40</sup>For several rich examples of the genre I recommend the series of four *edubba*-related essays reproduced and commented upon by Samuel Noah Kramer in the 1963 edition of his *The Sumerians*, starting on page 237.

<sup>41</sup>J.N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

themselves by naming their fathers and their fathers' professions. Through this ingenious inquiry Schneider established that the vast majority of scribes identified in his study descended from the higher strata of Sumerian society. Their fathers tended to be civic governors, military officers, priests, state bureaucrats, ship captains, and other positions of eminence. Many were *edubba* graduates themselves who continued to work as instructors in the schools or in one of the many managerial or accountant positions scribes found careers in after graduation. Though one of the most eminent Sumerian-language writers in modern scholarship was the Akkadian princess Enheduana, a daughter of Sargon who composed the version of the Gilgamesh epic preserved at the library of Assyrian Nineveh, only a single woman identifies herself as a scribe among the writers studied by Schneider. His findings indicate that though the scribal profession was not necessarily or exclusively male, it seems to have been heavily male-dominated.<sup>42</sup>

Writings about the Sumerian *edubba* preserve some of the titles and hierarchy of the schools' staff and pupils. Each school had a head entitled *ummi*, which translates as "expert" or "master craftsman." Beneath the school's chief scribe were instructors known as *namsheshgal*, literally "big brother," while the students were "school-sons" and the *ummi* "school-father." There was even a distinct term for *edubba* alumni that translates to English as "school-son of days past." Beyond the generic instructors surviving texts also refer to specialists in particular fields, such as "the man in charge of drawing," and "the man in charge of Sumerian." If *edubba* faculties were further delineated into ranks or levels of attainment the surviving sources do not make mention of it.<sup>43</sup>

The principal medium of the Sumerian scribe was clay. Their principle tool in

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<sup>42</sup>Kramer, *Sumerians*, 231.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

shaping that clay was a stylus. There were other tools named in lexical lists on the topic, including a 'loom' that may have been a string-based counting tool reminiscent of the abacus, but few examples of this wider paraphernalia survive for modern study. There are certainly tablets engraved with mathematical information that seem to have been put to an abacus-like purpose as counting aids. The physical necessities of inscribing signs on the clay's surface required that it be wet and of an appropriate consistency, but no details survive of how the scribes stored their writing material or prepared it for use. The large tablets necessary for recording any great length of information, the equivalent of even a few paper pages, could be both physically cumbersome and grow more difficult to write on as the clay dried. Though in later periods this issue was somewhat mitigated by the introduction of wood-backed erasable wax tablets, there is no evidence that such tools were introduced before the fall of the last king of Ur III. The wax approach had a significant drawback of its own, as such documents were far less durable than clay equivalents that could be baked into hardened, waterproof forms. One of the reasons so very many administrative documents survive from between 2500 and the fall of Ur III is that every single document, even those intended as one-off messages or scribal practice texts, was written in clay. A Sumerian stylus of the late third millennium was cut from a river reed, with a flattened triangular tip and sharp-edged sides. Scribes of the Ur III period revered Nisaba, a goddess of cereals whose remit included river reeds, as their patron goddess.<sup>44</sup>

In the final years of the modern nineteenth century the French archeologist Ernest de Sarzec headed an archeological expedition to Tell Tello in Ottoman Iraq, site of the

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<sup>44</sup>Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 52, 58-59, 63.

Sumerian grain-producing city Girsu. His team's efforts to unearth the bones of that lost polity rediscovered the city temple archives, arranged in long rooms and still intact after thousands of years. A comparable find at the Sumerian city Ebla discovered its palace archives, their contents still lying where they fell when the wooden shelves they were arranged upon burned in the city's fall. One of the grim ironies of Sumerian historiography is that the very violence which attends the fall of kingdoms and empires, the very same sort of violence that often destroys the records of paper-reliant societies, only baked the output of Sumerian scribes into a more durable form.<sup>45</sup>

Archival finds like those at Girsu and Ebla helped to tremendously expand the modern world's accumulated knowledge of Sumerian society and government. The overwhelming majority of the documents thus found were economic or bureaucratic in origin, often receipts for *bala* disbursements or legal records. Every one of these archival documents was prepared by a trained *edubba* graduate employed by the temple or royal government for just that purpose. The minutiae of Sumerian daily life remains preserved in these mundane, brief, but fascinating documents. In modern 1901 Haverford College, an institution still active in Pennsylvania at the time of this writing, acquired four hundred texts retrieved from the Girsu archive. The translations of those documents, published by the college in installments following their procurement, reveal a complex and sophisticated society dealing with issues readily familiar to readers from the modern world.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the ubiquity of clay as a physical material in the Sumerian milieu, the

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>46</sup>George Aaron Barton, ed., *Haverford Library Collection of Cuneiform Tablets or Documents from the Temple Archives of Telloh* (Philadelphia; London: The John C. Winston Company and Headley Brothers, 1918), 5.

practical issues of using it as a writing material mentioned above inclined cuneiform scribes towards succinctness and brevity. The account and receipt tablets recovered from Girsu are quite small as objects, and express the information they contain with an immediacy that historians acquainted with their modern equivalent in government documents may come to envy. The following serves as an instructive example: tablet number 334 in the Haverford collection entitled "Payment for a Loan." The physical dimensions of the tablet are roughly 3.5cm x 3.175cm x 1.6cm.<sup>47</sup>

*Obv.*        1. 5 Shekels of silver  
              2. minus the interest  
              3. from Ur-Galgirgalninan  
              4. Egalla has brought in  
*Rev.*        1. Witness: Ur-Lama  
              2. Month Ab  
              3. the year the divine Bur-Sin became king.<sup>48</sup>

The final two lines of "Payment for a Loan" are a sort of standardized timestamp used by scribes to date their work. Ab, also rendered Abu, was the fifth month in the twelve month Sumerian calendar, and corresponds with the month Av in the Hebrew calendar. "[T]he year the divine Bur-Sin became king" refers to the coronation of Bur-Sin, also rendered Bur-Suen, the seventh king of the Isin dynasty. This is a year name, and it was the manner by which scribes referred to particular years in lieu of the numerical designation popular in modern times. The precise wording of year names could vary from city to city and scribe to scribe within a given Sumerian political entity, and usually refer to the deeds of rulers or events of great regional significance, such as the destruction of a city by siege or the elevation of a new high priest to an eminent deity.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 13, 26.

<sup>48</sup>The words 'Obv.' and 'Rev.' are short for 'obverse' and 'reverse,' while the number preceding each line of text is a designation made by the translators that does not appear in the cuneiform.



The tablet's listed month and year name dates it to the summer of 1831 BCE. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Isin dynasty was founded by Ishbi-Erra, a provincial governor under the final king of Ur III Ibbi-Sin. The witness named in the first line of this account tablet's reverse side, Ur-Lama, was the *ensi* governor of Girsu under Bur-Sin. His name recurs frequently in the Haverford College cuneiform collection on documents from this period.

Beyond names and dates, themselves fairly illuminating, this simple document comprised of a mere seven lines offers abundant information regarding daily life in the first centuries of the second millennium. The first line shows that silver currency was in use in Girsu under the Isin dynasty. It also shows that payment in currency, rather kind, was a possible means of resolving outstanding debts. In the second line we learn that a recognizable system of finance existed at Girsu during the Isin period: our debtor has paid off the principal of their loan but the interest on that loan remained outstanding in the year of Bur-Sin's coronation.

A second tablet from the Haverford collection sheds some light on what might become of a Sumerian who left their debts unpaid. Tablet no. 340 was composed of eight lines, though the physical tablet was a little smaller than 334. Entitled "Record of Hired Slaves" by its translators, this document records the hiring of six slaves belonging to one Urutunutammi for two months to dig a field for Barugal, son of Urshagga. Though it lacks a month designation its year name also places it at the start of the reign of Bur-Sin under the Isin dynasty. The practice of slavery already had a long and storied history in Mesopotamia. Sumerian slaves entered that state through either military conquest or outstanding debt, though this small tablet does not offer the provenance of

Urutunutammi's bondspeople. Beyond confirming that slavery continued under the Isin dynasty, this document shows that at least one slave owner in Girsu hired out their slaves to do others' manual labor. Unfortunately this document does not list the cost or rate of hiring out six slaves for two months' manual labor.<sup>49</sup>

Though secretarial work is not reckoned among the most prestigious positions in most modern workplaces, those scribes who worked as stenographers and letter-writers could find themselves in service to the most powerful and influential people in their society. The plain fact of scribal prestige, and the accompanying high fees they could charge for their work, ensured that only the mighty could afford to keep full-time scribal secretaries. The previous chapter referenced the Royal Correspondence of the Kings of Ur, a set of surviving epistolary records from Ur III. These letters to and from Ur III monarchs and their servants in the wider kingdom would've been taken down by scribal secretaries. Some Sumerian rulers took great pains to proclaim their literary accomplishments, particularly the venerable Shulgi, but the texts of the Correspondence preserve details that demonstrate the scribes' presence as intermediaries between sender and recipient.

The letter from Abaindasa, a former military officer, to King Shulgi is rather too long to reproduce here in full, but some of its details may serve an instructive purpose. Like every other item from the Royal Correspondence the letter opens with the same formula: "Speak to [the recipient]." This was a literary relic from the time when literacy itself was restricted almost exclusively to scribes, who read the text aloud to its intended recipient. Praise poems to Shulgi remark on the king's literacy, while Abaindasa

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 13.

proclaims his own scribal training in the text of his letter to the king, but the letters of both the soldier and the king use this traditional imperative form to begin their text. Abaindasa's address to the king opens with several flattering, allusive epithets ("To my mountain goat, fair of limb, [e]agle-clawed highland horse, [t]o my date palm growing in a sacred place, laden with glistening dates,"), proceeds with a glowing account of Abaindasa's capacities as a soldier, scribe, sailor and agriculturalist, and concludes with a lament of his current poverty. He begs the king to take pity on him ("I am a widow's son; I have no one to show concern for me."), and offer him a new commission in the royal government, thereby restoring his fortunes.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond their historical interest as the letters of ancient royalty, the documents that make up the Royal Correspondence have an additional virtue where the study of Sumerian scribes is concerned. No original copies of the Correspondence have yet been rediscovered, and such may no longer exist. Modern knowledge of the Correspondence comes from documents dated to more than two centuries after Shulgi's death, from the Isin dynasty of Ishbi-Erra and Bur-Sin. The Isin scribes used the texts of the Royal Correspondence as practice documents in a period when the Akkadian language had fully replaced Sumerian as the tongue of daily Mesopotamian life. Scribes in training rewrote the epistolary tablets to learn the forms of stately Sumerian cuneiform, which survived through their era all the way to the period of Roman rule in Mesopotamia as a sacred and scholarly literary language.<sup>51</sup>

The preceding scribal works were essential to the operation of Sumerian

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<sup>50</sup>Piotr Michalowski, *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: An Epistolary History of an Ancient Mesopotamian Kingdom* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 306.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

civilization and remain essential tools in understanding that lost society, but the scribal art encompassed far more than accounts and dictation. Though far outnumbered by those sorts of document in the surviving sources, a whole spectrum of Sumerian literature survived the abyss of time to be rediscovered along with more mundane documents of Mesopotamia's past. These texts range in their subject matter from famous poetic epics like that of Gilgamesh, mentioned earlier in this chapter, to hymns of praise for gods or kings like Shulgi, to such obscure topics as metaphorical debates between sheep and grain or birds and fish.<sup>52</sup>

Many of the surviving Sumerian hymns were commissioned by royal personages, and say so within their texts. The previous chapter retold the fate of Ibbi-Sin, also rendered Ibbi-Suen, the last king of Ur III who saw the elaborate centralized bureaucracy of his state collapse and its borders implode, who died in captivity in Elam to the east. For much of his reign he directly ruled only the environs of Ur. Among the surviving hymns of Ur III was one commissioned by that ill-fated ruler to the patron god of his city and his own partial namesake, Sin or Suen, god of the moon, father to both the sun Utu and the lady of war and love, Inanna. In it the scribe proclaims the luminous glory of Sin and that god's favor for his chosen mortal instrument, Ibbi-Sin, as well as the many blessings bestowed upon Sin's chosen city, Ur ("It shall have an abundance of butter, fish, birds, births, copper, and gold!"). The hymn is specifically phrased as a song in praise of Sin composed and performed *on behalf* of Ibbi-Sin, and it begs the moon god to continue offerings his blessings to the realm and its ruler.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Even a short example of translated Sumerian literature would be prohibitively long to reproduce in full within this text. For full English renditions of all the literary genres mentioned here I recommend *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford University Press, 2004), edited by Jeremy A. Black.

<sup>53</sup>Jeremy A. Black, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 274.

As we know, Ibbi-Sin had good reason to call for continued divine aid. Despite its achievements in administration, and the place its literary heritage occupied in the training regimen of future regimes' scribes, Ur III was remembered by succeeding generations of Mesopotamians principally for its fall. There is a whole genre of laments, poetic remembrances of the fall of cities and kingdoms. The destruction of Ur III was evocative enough that its demise served as a rich inspiration for these grim poems. One such surviving lament concerns itself directly with Ibbi-Sin's fate. *The Lament for Sumer and Urim* is an extended meditation on the essential fragility of human works and endeavours. The great gods withdraw their protection from the city, its king, and their realm, such that "its people should no longer dwell in their quarters, that they should be given over to live in an inimical place; that Shimashki and Elam, the enemy, should dwell in their place; that its shepherd, in his own palace, should be captured by the enemy, that Ibbi-Suen should be taken to the land of Elam in fetters..."<sup>54</sup>

The disasters the gods decree for Ur in the *Lament* afflict humans, animals, and the land itself which dries and falls infertile. In the poem it is the great god Enlil himself who summons foreign invaders from the mountains of Gutium to beset the kingdom. One by one the gods depart their sacred cities, opening them to disaster and invasion while a storm summoned by Enlil blankets the land in darkness. The poet writes of quays silted up in the desolation that follows, of beer-halls empty for lack of malt for fermenting, of storehouses vacant of life-giving grain, and of grass growing where once were well-traveled paths along the riverbanks. By the poem's end Ur is "the haunted city," and it concludes with the poet's plea that the gods relent and allow the land and its

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 129.

people to recover.<sup>55</sup>

If the preceding survey of the Sumerian scribal profession and its output underscores one point, I hope it is the sheer breadth of activity and experience their lives and work could involve. A *dubsar* of the late third and early second millennium could be an accountant, a poet, a professor, a soldier as in Abaindasa's case, a construction manager, and so many more. Their lives' work concerned itself with every human endeavour that could benefit from written records, which was very nearly every aspect of human life in ancient Mesopotamia. That work, inscribed on Mesopotamian clay, thus hold the potential to inform readers on any of a dazzling array of subjects.

It is true that the relatively few scribes identified in the Sumerian literary corpus were hardly of the people, the mass of laborers and artisans who made up the vast majority of any Sumerian polity. They share their patrician background with most other premodern sources in the historical profession, for the simple reason that the only institutions dedicated to providing scribal training charged tuition that only those already well to do could afford. It is also true that the scribal profession was profoundly male-dominated, shining counterexamples like Enheduana aside. Sumerian literature emerged from the upper echelons of that civilization, and one of the great tragedies of Sumerian historiography is the absence of voices from below.

If the great benefit to historiography of surviving Sumerian texts is their power to introduce modern readers to the thoughts and feelings of that time and place, the reader must always bear in mind that even these remarkable documents represent only a tiny slice of the whole breadth and depth of life in ancient Sumer. No effort of scholarship

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 128-141.

can restore voice to the mute bones of Girsu's agricultural workers, or tell us the full story of Urutunutammi's six hired-out slaves. Yet what the modern world still possesses of Sumer's thoughts and memories is so much more than what can be known of comparably ancient societies, that any student of history must acknowledge the profound debt the living owe to Mesopotamia's extinct cuneiform scribes. It is only because of their lives' work that the history, art, and mythology of Sumer could lie dormant for centuries until nineteenth century scholarship unearthed it from the wreck of ages.

## CHAPTER IV: ARCHAEOLOGY

The language of Sumer died out as a common spoken tongue in southern Mesopotamia during the early centuries of the second millennium BCE. The Akkadian language, introduced to Sumer by the conquests of Sargon and entrenched in the land and culture by Akkadian administration, superseded Sumerian in Sumer. Akkadian remained the principal language of Mesopotamia through the region's conquest by Cyrus, founding king of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. Scribes still wrote with styli on clay tablets when the emperor Trajan added Mesopotamia to the Roman imperium, though by that time their styli were copper rather than reed and even Akkadian was relegated to a language of religion and scholarship rather than everyday use. By the Islamic period cuneiform writing was an extinct discipline, whether within or beyond the bounds of Mesopotamia. This chapter explores the history of modern Mesopotamian archaeology: the process by which successive scholars rediscovered Mesopotamia's classical languages, began unearthing its ancient cities, and started transporting the relics of Mesopotamian antiquity to Europe and America.<sup>56</sup>

The first and perhaps most crucial stage in the rediscovery of Mesopotamia's deep history was the first recovery of a working understanding of the Akkadian and Sumerian languages. After the cuneiform writing system died out as a living tradition its complex system of ideographic and syllabic signs was rendered unintelligible for the next thousand years and more. Like Egyptian hieroglyphics cuneiform writing and all the knowledge it contained lay dormant, inscribed on ancient monuments, the walls of buried

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<sup>56</sup>In a departure from previous sections of this work, dates in this chapter should be understood to refer to Common Era years unless stated otherwise.



palaces, and carefully arranged in the silent libraries of dead cities. The first efforts at cuneiform translation were undertaken in the early nineteenth century, when European scholars first began systematically comparing multilingual inscriptions on single artifacts; that is, artifacts that contained the same inscription rendered multiple times, each time in a separate cuneiform language.

Early excavation of ancient Mesopotamian sites by European expeditions began in the nineteenth century, when cuneiform inscriptions remained silent mysteries. The growth and spread of cuneiform translation efforts stimulated further archaeological expeditions throughout the last decades of Ottoman rule in modern Mesopotamia. Once the smoke and chaos of the First World War subsided such efforts resumed with the lands in question under the de facto control of the British colonial empire. Excavation and the removal of artifacts from Mesopotamian sites allowed cuneiform documents to circulate throughout interested institutions in Europe and the Americas, where many such objects still reside. The same efforts created an unregulated market in Mesopotamian artifacts, whether through digs conducted by professional archaeologists or the less scholarly efforts of private diggers. This chapter will survey the history of Sumerian archaeology from its genesis in the memoirs of late medieval travel writers through the interwar period, from early observation through the proliferation of Mesopotamian findings in public and private collections around the world. This material is essential for fully understanding the next chapter's investigation of the Magoffin Collection cuneiform artifacts, which are products of this era of archaeology.

Mesopotamian archaeological research and excavation lay at the frontiers of the archaeological discipline in 1915 when Dr. Robert William Rogers, of Drew Theological

Seminary in New Jersey, published the sixth edition of his history of the discipline in two weighty volumes. At the time of that publication the first reliable translations of Akkadian cuneiform documents were already decades old, though Sumerian was cracked open just a few years before his writing. As a scholar of the subject in his time and place he was necessarily quite familiar with the state in which knowledge of the ancient Mesopotamian world lay before the nineteenth century. The answer was: almost nothing. It is difficult for twenty-first century investigators of the ancient Mesopotamian topic to conceptualize just how vast the silence was concerning history before the time of Cyrus when cuneiform remained mute wedge-shapes carved on clay and stone. In his words, “[n]o single word had come from the deep stillness of the ruins of Babylon, no voice was heard beneath the mounds of Nineveh.”<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that the wedge-shaped writing of the Mesopotamian ancients was entirely unknown in the early nineteenth century. The first known European account of a site related to Mesopotamian antiquity is the late medieval memoir of a wandering friar, Odoricus or Odoric, who traveled both ways along the Silk Road across Eurasia. In approximately 1320 he passed between the Persian cities Yezd and Huz, and the pace of his journey left little time for sightseeing. Yet he still remarked upon the ruins of Persepolis, an ancient capital of the Achaemenid Persian Empire burned by the occupying army of Alexander the Great roughly sixteen centuries previous to his visit, and the mountainside complex of Persian royal tombs nearby now known as Naksh-e Rostam. Odoric called the site Comum for the nearby town Camara, remarked that it had once been a fine city that “hath done in times past great damage unto the Romanes,” and went

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<sup>57</sup>Robert William Rogers, *A History of Babylonia and Assyria Vol. I* (New York; Cincinnati: The Abingdon Press, 1915), 1-2.

on his way.<sup>58</sup>

Odoric's account became one of the great 'eastward journey' memoirs of late medieval Europe. Despite being published in a time before printing came into European use his memoir proliferated through many lands, and stimulated some curiosity for the antiquity from which his 'Comum' derived. This first postclassical contemporary reference to Persepolis is a pivotal point in Mesopotamian archaeology because it was through originally Persian artifacts that Akkadian and Sumerian were eventually made intelligible. Furthermore, it gave future travelers down the same eastern route something to look for and subsequently comment upon. In the four centuries between Odoric's eastern journey and the eighteenth century further understanding of the Mesopotamian past was incrementally expanded by travelers like Odoric who added their own informal observations to his kernel of historical interest.

The first real breakthrough in Assyriological study came in 1765. Carsten Niebuhr of Denmark visited the ruins of Persepolis in that year, not as an incidental visit in some other journey but as an end in itself. He was primed with the memoirs of previous European travelers to the site, and equipped with a methodical cast of mind and a surveyor's tools. Over the course of three weeks he completed what was probably the first systematic survey of Persepolis since the Macedonians left it a smoking ruin in their wake nearly two thousand years previously. He created exact facsimiles of every inscription he found with greater attention to detail than any previous post-classical visitor. In his work he identified three separate classes of characters to be found inscribed in the wreck of Persepolis, which he numbered with Roman numerals. He determined

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

that the signs of his Class I were alphabetic in nature, and identified forty-two constituent signs for that class, but in his lifetime he never approached translating the signs he laboriously copied down and presented to European scholarship. His work still furnished the earliest foundation for modern Assyriological study. Every subsequent student of ancient Mesopotamia is thus indebted to his three weeks' effort in rural Iran.<sup>59</sup>

Other travelers of scholarly inclination further embroidered the efforts of previous writers like Niebuhr and Odoric. In 1809 James Justinian Morier, on his way from Tehran to Istanbul on behalf of the British legation in the former city, journeyed with the works of a few such previous eastern travelers in hand. He could only afford to stop at Persepolis for two days, but he added significantly to the quest for cuneiform translation by applying the first scholarly assessment to a site that the nineteenth century Persian locals called “the tomb of the mother of Suleiman,” in reference to the ancient king of Israel, or more precisely the mosque thereof. He copied down a cuneiform inscription taken from three pilasters inside the complex which, when the script upon them was finally translated, was found to read: “I am Cyrus, king of the Achaemenids.” Later scholarly efforts revealed the site Morier visited to be Pasargadae, a city of great fame and wealth in the Achaemenid empire, but in the meantime his copying furnished examples of a few words, such as the proper name Cyrus and the noun “king,” that would prove fundamental in the first translations of Old Persian—the alphabetic Class I of Niebuhr, rendered using cuneiform script.<sup>60</sup>

There is one discovery that may be said to exert a preponderant influence on the future course of Assyriological study, comparable to that of the Rosetta Stone's discovery

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 44-47.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 47-49.

for Egyptology. Through it we are indebted to a second English investigator, Major Henry Rawlinson of the British East India Company. Born in 1810, Rawlinson shipped out to India as a young cadet of the Company. He learned modern Persian there along with multiple local languages or dialects. As an adult officer was part of a mission sent to reorganize the army of the Qajar dynasty then supreme in Persia. Rawlinson had a genuine curiosity for antiquities and foreign languages. Though he was in Persia on professional business, during his own time he carefully copied down such unidentified inscriptions as he encountered, first at Hamadan in 1835 but continuing throughout that decade. He was aware of the scholarly effort in Europe to decipher Old Persian from the very same sort of inscriptions he copied down, and sent his early efforts to Dr. Georg Friedrich Grotefend, then director of the Hanover Lyceum, a well-known decipherer and classical teacher in his time. Both Grotefend and Rawlinson reached the conclusion that Niebuhr's three classes were in fact three separate languages expressed through the same writing system rather than differing writing styles within one language. The work of transcription and deciphering that will ensure the survival of Rawlinson's memory down the ages would have been impossible without this early recognition of the multilingual nature of Achaemenid royal inscriptions.<sup>61</sup>

The crowning discovery of Rawlinson's life lay on the caravan route between Hamadan and Kermanshah, near what was then a small village called Bisutun or Bisitun, which Rawlinson rendered Behistun. There, carved into the face of the final peak of a narrow mountain range that defines the eastern limit of the Kermanshah plain, stood what is now known in English as the Rock of Behistun. The springs at its foot offered a time-

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 80-83.

honored respite for passing caravans. Some five hundred feet up the Rock's sheer face, recessed into its living stone, was a monumental trilingual Achaemenid inscription. The Roman writer Diodorus Siculus knew of this monument, though he attributed it to Semiramis, a legendary pre-Roman queen of Assyria. The Macedonian expedition of Alexander the Great is known to have visited the site as well, on the way from Susa to Ecbatana in the great conquest march following Gaugamela. The site was otherwise forgotten by western writers after the Roman period but remained well-known to the locals, to say nothing of the caravaneers who took their grateful rest by the springs beneath the carvings for centuries before Rawlinson's advent. Crucially though, the Behistun inscriptions remained illegible, undeciphered, and uncopied when Rawlinson first applied himself to the effort of reproducing their carvings in 1835. Rawlinson returned to the Rock of Behistun again and again through the 1830s, copying down the ancient inscriptions on their high perch with the aid of a spyglass and comparing his findings with the latest work of London's Royal Asiatic Society and the continental European scholars with whom he maintained correspondence. Though his official duties took him to Afghanistan in the early 1840s Rawlinson continued his pilgrimages to Behistun until, in 1846, he presented his findings: a nearly complete translation of the Old Persian (Class I) section of the Achaemenid inscription.<sup>62</sup>

Rawlinson was just one investigator into the decipherment of cuneiform, and his 1846 publication was just one more item in a torrent of new finds, insights and artifacts steadily trickling into the nascent field of Assyriology. Small troves of Persian-era stone cuneiform texts were already under serious scrutiny by French scholars. By the 1850s

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 83-89.

Old Persian was a known quantity, the site of Nimrud was under intermittent excavation, and the royal library at Nineveh was rediscovered. Rawlinson's publication of the Behistun inscriptions contributed directly to the Irish Assyriologist Edward Hincks's revelation that the language now known as Akkadian was written both syllabically and ideographically. Over the 1850s, through comparison of multilingual texts containing translatable Old Persian, European scholars finally began to compile lists and establish meanings for the hundreds of cuneiform figures that made up the written Akkadian language. Jules Oppert is the first scholar known to have contributed to this process through use of the old Assyrian-era cuneiform scribes' own lexical lists, retrieved from the Nineveh library, by which he added extensively to the catalog of known Akkadian signs. By the end of the 1850s Assyriology was a recognized field of historical study and translation of the primarily Assyrian cuneiform texts already recovered by European archaeologists was well underway in German, French and British institutions.<sup>63</sup>

For all the progress in the early nineteenth century regarding Assyrian and Old Persian cuneiform, those speculations and investigations had yet scarcely begun to contemplate that another, previous culture actually originated the cuneiform writing system. Hincks first raised the possibility that written Akkadian (then referred to as Babylonian-Assyrian) possessed an antecedent. His argument was that in Semitic languages like Akkadian consonants remain constant while context shifts the pronunciation of vowels, yet in written cuneiform's syllabic signs it is the vowel signifiers that remain unchanging. This, among other discrepancies, convinced Hincks to first publish his theory that the cuneiform system derived from an unknown, non-Semitic

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<sup>63</sup>Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 14-19.

predecessor language in 1850. Rawlinson reached a similar conclusion two years later after study of some bilingual syllabaries excavated at Kuyunjik. On this evidence he proposed that Sumerian, Niebuhr's Class III inscriptions, was an adaptation of native Mesopotamian cuneiform by the *Akkadian* conquerors of Sargon's dynasty. Finally, in 1869, Jules Oppert presented his own conclusions to the French Society of Numismatics and Archaeology. Based on the recurring title "King of Sumer and Akkad," associated with the early Assyrian kings, he determined that Akkad referred to the Semitic-speaking inhabitants of Mesopotamia, while Sumer referred to the non-Semitic population. Through Oppert's correction of Rawlinson's misapprehension, the name 'Sumerian' was at last applied to the ancient language of the people of southern Mesopotamia in a modern context.<sup>64</sup>

The first archaeological expedition to what was later recognized as a distinctly Sumerian site began in 1877. The French archaeologist Ernest de Sarzec opened exploration of Tell Telloh, a collection of ancient mounds .9 miles in diameter at its widest in southern Iraq and the site of the Sumerian grain-producing city Girsu. De Sarzec completed eleven seasons of excavation at Telloh between 1877 and his death in 1901. His operations were absent from the site for months and years at a time, and during those lulls other interested parties sifted the Telloh mounds. De Sarzec's expeditions first uncovered Girsu's Sumerian cuneiform archives, and these secondary parties took full advantage. Between 35,000 and 40,000 Sumerian account tablets filtered into the markets of Ottoman Baghdad in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, while an approximate three thousand and eight hundred were officially unearthed by de

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 19-21.



Sarzec's expeditions. In addition to cuneiform documents de Sarzec's expeditions unearthed diorite statues and other non-literary artifacts that he dutifully shipped back to France.<sup>65</sup>

The second major excavation of a Sumerian site commenced just over a decade after de Sarzec began work at Telloh. The University of Pennsylvania launched the first significant American Assyriological expedition in 1889, and its work proceeded through 1900 in four campaigns of excavation. The American expedition unearthed the ruins of Nippur, the holiest city of ancient Sumer, and retrieved over thirty thousand separate tablets from its remains. Those literary findings dated from the middle centuries of the third millennium BCE to the final centuries of the first millennium BCE, and a majority of them were Sumerian rather than Akkadian. Crucially, the Nippur finds included Sumerian lexical texts essential to compiling a working Sumerian dictionary. The same process of comparing multiple versions of bilingual and trilingual classical Persian inscriptions allowed scholars to compare the Sumerian and Akkadian written languages, and thereby work out the former language sign by sign. The fundamental basis of Sumerian grammar was well established by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and the succeeding decades saw the same flourishing of Sumerian translation that the last decades of the previous century saw in study of Akkadian.<sup>66</sup>

If Niebuhr's survey of Persepolis in 1765 marked the beginning of serious Western academic study of Mesopotamian antiquity, then less than fifteen decades elapsed between that tenuous beginning and the effective translation of all three of his classes of

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<sup>65</sup>Seton Lloyd, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: From the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1978), 148-149.

<sup>66</sup>Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 22-25.

cuneiform inscription. In the early twentieth century Akkadian and Sumerian artifacts resided in public institutions and private collections across Europe and the Americas. The previous chapter made mention of the several hundred tablets obtained by Haverford College by way of de Sarzec's excavation of Girsu, translations of which were first published in 1918. In Dr. George Barton's introduction to the first volume of their collected translations, he sketched the means by which Haverford acquired its cuneiform collection. They were purchased on behalf of Haverford College by T. Wistar Brown, then president of the college, in New York City in 1901. Interestingly, Barton gives no further details regarding the purchase. He remarks that it is impossible to know precisely where the tablets came from, having come from "the markets of the world" rather than directly from their excavator. It was only translation, which identified proper names, year names and other exact signifiers that established the provenance of the Haverford Collection as Telloh, the ancient Girsu. In his introduction Barton does not seem to regard the lack of a direct chain of custody from official excavations at Telloh to the purchase of Haverford's cuneiform artifacts as out of the ordinary. If anything, the discussion of the translation process that follows his explanation for the artifacts' source seems to take that ambiguity of provenance for granted as a common issue in Sumerian translation.<sup>67</sup>

That Barton would allude without a blush or further explanation to working with artifacts that may have been pried from their site by an illicit dig makes more sense once placed in the context of early twentieth century archaeology. Dr. Edward Chiera was an

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<sup>67</sup>George Aaron Barton, ed., *Haverford Library Collection of Cuneiform Tablets or Documents from the Temple Archives of Telloh* (Philadelphia; London: The John C. Winston Company and Headley Brothers, 1918), 5.

Assyriologist at the University of Chicago early in the century until his death in 1933. Towards the end of his life Chiera grew convinced that the young discipline of Assyriology lacked the glamour and public interest of its Egyptian academic equivalent, largely due to differing climatic conditions. Egypt's dry heat and sandy soil preserved ancient material remains with startling efficiency, while the water-retentive clay and loam of Mesopotamia was remarkably capable of devouring all but the most imperishable materials. He especially lamented that Assyriology would never know its equivalent of the Tutankhamun find, with its intact funereal regalia of the boy-pharaoh, as even those few Assyrian and Sumerian royal burials not pillaged in classical times have decayed in the pit-graves favored by ancient Mesopotamian elites until only the gold and jewels of their garments and tools survived. Dr. Chiera wrote a small book on Mesopotamian archaeology for popular consumption to help popularize the discipline. *They Wrote on Clay* is an interesting text on its own merits, but one detail in its first chapter may illuminate the matter of the Haverford Collection.<sup>68</sup>

As part of an extended discussion of how the ancient Mesopotamians raised their cities despite the tremendous dearth of stone in the region, Dr. Chiera described a striking interlude involving fired clay bricks. As Chiera points out, fired bricks usually made up a minority of the bricks used to build ancient Mesopotamian structures. Fired bricks were far harder than bricks that were merely sun-dried, but the relative scarcity of fuel for firing kept fired clay bricks at premium prices. When fired clay was used in mass quantities for construction, it was for high-status structures raised by high status individuals, and such individuals usually had the fired bricks inscribed with a dedication

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<sup>68</sup>Edward Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay*, ed. George C. Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 1-4

to the magnate whose wealth or power impelled the construction. Chiera described a day at the ongoing excavation of Ur, when a visiting British archaeologist selected a fired brick from the excavation's refuse pile. The brick, which dated to the twenty-third century BCE, was one of thousands of similar artifacts already discarded by the excavators. Its inscription was, in Chiera's words, "so common as to be of no scientific interest," and so the guest was freely allowed to take it. Indeed, the brick was rather large at roughly twelve inches by three, and so the British archaeologist determined to take only its inscription back to England. By Chiera's account his unnamed guest worked over the brick with ax for over half an hour before he gave up on separating the stamped face from the rest of the brick.<sup>69</sup>

Chiera's goal in sharing that anecdote was to make a point regarding the great durability of Sumerian fired clay bricks, even over three thousand years since their firing, in his larger explanation of why the ancient Mesopotamian cities had subsided into layered mounds over the ages. For our purposes though, it is the nonchalance with which that British archaeologist was allowed to not merely take home that brick, but to thump away at it with an ax until he gave up the effort. Presuming that Chiera's unnamed British archaeologist took the brick back to England, as was his professed intent, only its (hopefully undamaged) inscription could tell from whence it came, and that could certainly not tell where the brick lay in the finished structure from which it was removed. Chiera's generation of Assyriologists, whose working lives coincided with the full rush of new Sumerian translations, operated under far different standards from those of modern archaeological expeditions. People simply took things home sometimes, and artifacts

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

could show up in an institution's catalogue from potentially specious sources without anyone blinking an eye at their provenance or even having cause to.

Modern standards in site preservation and establishing firm chains of custody from excavation site to holding institution only started to take shape in the years following Edward Chiera's death. Instead, excavators and collectors exercised tremendous latitude in what was taken or sold from Mesopotamian archaeological digs, from the period of the first major removals of Mesopotamian artifacts to European institutions in the middle decades of the nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century. Ottoman officials imposed some limitations on what artifacts could and could not be exported in the later decades of their government's existence, but this measure was premised upon keeping large items within the country while allowing out small ones like cuneiform tablets. The Mesopotamian antiquities market thrived through the decades of decipherment and excavation under a bare minimum of national or international regulation. Archaeologists who held back portions of their finds for sale could earn significant sums in this environment.<sup>70</sup>

The most prominent or infamous of these archaeological entrepreneurs was Edgar James Banks, a contemporary of Dr. Chiera's at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century. Banks led the start of a new Chicago archaeological expedition to the city of Adab in 1904, but was caught attempting to smuggle artifacts out of Ottoman territory in the following year. Banks was banned from further digging by the Ottoman authorities and fired by the University of Chicago over the debacle, but he still managed

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<sup>70</sup>McGuire Gibson, "The Acquisition of Antiquities in Iraq, 19<sup>th</sup> Century to 2003, Legal and Illegal," in *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, eds. Peter G. Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjalay (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2008), 31-32.

to spend the next three decades dealing profitably in Mesopotamian antiquities. Artifacts filtered out of Iraq through Banks to institutions across the United States, and some of these preserve correspondence from Banks warning that his prices were bound to rise as restrictions against his business hardened within the legal code of the Kingdom of Iraq.<sup>71</sup>

The very authorities tasked with cracking down on smuggling and unregulated sale of artifacts were often just as active in profiting off Mesopotamian artifacts as Banks. The Iraq Museum, later the Iraqi National Museum, first opened in 1922 under the directorship of Gertrude Bell as a project of the Iraqi Antiquities Service. Bell's directorship saw the implementation of a new antiquities law similar to the previous Ottoman legislation, with additional clauses giving the Iraq Museum first pick of the objects unearthed at Iraqi archaeological sites. A subsequent director of the museum and Antiquities Service, was caught smuggling artifacts nonetheless, allegedly to American archaeologist Richard Starr, and a black market operating in defiance of extant antiquities laws continued to thrive in Iraq through the 1930s. Iraq's 1936 antiquities law, promulgated in the fourth year of the kingdom's independence, was much more strict than the British Mandate law in that it nationalized all Iraqi archaeological sites and their contents. In the years immediately following independence Iraqi scholars began their first expeditions independent of European or American archaeological teams, and the now Iraqi-run Antiquities Service made a concerted effort to curb illicit digging like that which pilfered so many tablets from the Girsu archives. Centralized control of Iraq's ancient sites only tightened after the 1958 revolution, as subsequent Baathist governments placed a premium on development of Iraq's cultural heritage. The Iraqi

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 32-33.

Antiquities Service reached a peak of power and efficiency in the 1970s with funding from the proceeds of Iraq's oil industry. The organization stationed guards at ancient sites and maintained a presence in every province of the country, effectively strangling the black market in Mesopotamian artifacts. This elaborate and effective system of site preservation collapsed in 1991, after the disastrous defeat of Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. Looters sacked thirteen regional museums in the chaos and uprisings that followed the Iraqi army's downfall, with the loss of some five thousand artifacts. The security of Iraq's ancient sites has only deteriorated in the decades since.<sup>72</sup>

The legacy of modern Mesopotamian decipherment and archaeology, for all its scholarly achievement, is checkered by the greed and indifference of some of those privileged to take part in the recovery of the ancient Mesopotamian past. Every modern student and scholar of Sumer or Babylon owes a tremendous and unquestionable debt to those who first pored over the Pasargadae inscriptions or first labored with the duolingual and trilingual cuneiform texts. Without their efforts we would have no clearer picture of the ancient Near East than those furnished by religion or the incomplete historical traditions of past ages. The meat of all good history is primary sources, and only the epic of decipherment could provide modern readers with the training to read the recovered documents of the Mesopotamian past. Yet there can never be a full and accurate accounting of all the cuneiform documents secreted away to private collections, just as no one can ever know precisely what was lost when archaeologists with more zeal than circumspection destroyed or ignored the less striking surviving artifacts they unearthed in favor of flashy finds like royal ornaments and temple complexes. We owe them, yes, but

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 33-34.

we should mourn the knowledge lost to their methods and strive to repair the damage they did to their own discipline.

This project is my own small effort to repair that damage. The next chapter deals with the life and legacy of another contemporary of Dr. Chiera's, Dr. Ralph Van Deman Magoffin of Johns Hopkins and New York University. Magoffin acquired a significant trove of artifacts from several ancient and classical Mediterranean societies before his death, though he himself was a scholar of classical Italy. Years after his death the professor's only son donated much of this collection to the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina. Those objects remain at the Columbia Museum at the time of this writing, where they are known as the Magoffin Collection. The Collection includes a set of Sumerian cuneiform tablets that were never translated while Dr. Magoffin lived, and did not receive that treatment from the time of their donation in the 1960s through the start of this project. They arrived with no documentation to show a chain of custody from their excavation site to Magoffin himself. The silence of these unread and unintelligible tablets, along with their lack of identifying documents, are small instances of the wounds done to the field of Mesopotamian study by the indifference of early excavators to what are now the common professional standards of archaeology. The next chapter contains my efforts to piece together the past of these artifacts and finally give them the attention from competent cuneiform translators that they deserve.



## CHAPTER V: THE MAGOFFIN COLLECTION

The impetus of this project, which spans eighteen months' writing and research, resulted from a moment of casual curiosity in a regional art museum. In the early spring of 2013, during a stay in Columbia, South Carolina, on unrelated business, I visited the Columbia Museum of Art. At that time I had yet to consider applying to the history program at Winthrop University, but my overriding interest in the classical Mediterranean world long predated my academic efforts in the field. It led me quickly to the museum's Ray Taylor Fair Gallery, host to the facility's displays of ancient and classical art. Though my inclinations first turned towards the gallery's quartet of Roman statue heads and its proudly displayed archaic Greek black-figure pottery, I eventually noticed a small exhibit near the gallery's front entrance. Three clay tablets sat propped up behind enclosing glass, beside a copper stylus presented as an example of the sort of tool used to inscribe them. The exhibit's information card labeled the tablets as products of Assyrian scribes writing in Akkadian during a span of centuries extending from the twelfth through the seventh, BCE. The card attributed the tablets to the Mesopotamian region as a whole rather than a specific city or excavation. All three tablets held intact text on both obverse and reverse sides, though the largest of the three showed significant damage, but their exhibit lacked any displayed translation of the information they held. The tablets' generalized attribution, and the absence of an accompanying translation, fixed themselves in my memory after I examined a set of engraved jade tablets from China's Qing Dynasty, on the same museum visit, that included a full translation of the tablets' text. With my curiosity heightened I took home contact information for the museum's curatorial staff,

resolved to learn more about the Mesopotamian tablets from their keepers.<sup>73</sup>

That spring I first made contact with Noelle Rice, curatorial assistant for the Columbia Museum of Art. I asked her for any information the museum possessed regarding its cuneiform tablets' provenance and content. Her reply surprised me but only deepened my curiosity. The details provided with the tablets' exhibit were the sum total of what the museum's records told regarding the artifacts. The exhibit lacked a translation because none had been prepared since the tablets' original donation. Their attribution remained so broad in both chronological and geographic terms because those were the descriptors with which the artifacts arrived. The cuneiform exhibit in the Ray Taylor Fair Gallery really did contain all the data the museum possessed regarding its tablets' origins. I was surprised and a little dismayed to learn that these documents remained so little understood, but the incident served to further my curiosity regarding the silent tablets. That curiosity was among the driving motivations that led me to apply to the graduate history program at Winthrop University.

I joined the Winthrop program in the autumn of 2014, and received departmental authorization to pursue the mystery of the Columbia tablets by the end of that first semester. My serious research began with the new year in the form of a single-semester independent study. During the spring of 2015 I renewed contact with curatorial assistant Noelle Rice at the museum. At this point I learned that the three cuneiform tablets on

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<sup>73</sup>Much of the material in this chapter owes its existence to collaboration with two museums (the Columbia Museum of Art and the Florence County Museum, both in South Carolina) as well as a number of scholars scattered across the United States. Where this chapter references documents from those museums' archives, I retain copies of those documents in either photocopied or digitized form; the originals remain with their respective institutions. Where the chapter references email correspondences carried out over the course of my research I retain copies of all those communications on my Winthrop University email account. Finally, for the purposes of this chapter, dates refer to the Common Era unless stated otherwise in the text.

display in the Columbia Museum's antiquities gallery were only a small selection from their collection of ancient Mesopotamian documents. Over a dozen more fired clay tablets reposed in storage, as little understood as those usually presented to the public. The Columbia Museum of Art provided me with open access to all documents pertaining to the cuneiform collection as well as physical access to the tablets themselves. Those tablets, both the inspirations and the ultimate subjects of this academic investigation, are known in the museum's records from their initial donation as components of the wider Magoffin Collection.

The preceding chapters' exploration of Mesopotamian history, the lives and works of the Sumerian scribal class, along with late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mesopotamian archaeology, were written to thoroughly ground the reader in the context and significance of the findings regarding the Magoffin Collection relayed in this chapter. The following pages contain detailed information on the background and life's work of the American scholar whose son donated the tablets, Dr. Ralph Van Deman Magoffin. They illustrate, to the extent possible with surviving documents, the means by which artifacts collected over the course of Dr. Magoffin's career filtered out to institutions of learning throughout the United States both before and after his death. They relay the sum of eighteen months' research into the known history of the Magoffin Collection, including new assessments of their era and locations of origin confirmed by multiple contemporary American cuneiform scholars. They conclude with the latest development in Magoffin Collection research, the tablets' addition to the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, a free and open online academic database of cuneiform documents, and predictions of future lines of research into Dr. Magoffin's scattered legacy of Mesopotamian artifacts.

Ralph Van Deman Magoffin was born in 1874 to Thomas and Martha Magoffin in Rice County, Kansas. At age twenty-four he served in the military of the United States as a corporal in the Spanish-American War. He entered academics after the war, and graduated from the University of Michigan in 1902 before earning his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in 1908. Magoffin taught at Johns Hopkins from 1908 through America's entry into the First World War, during which he reentered the armed forces and gained the rank of lieutenant colonel before the conflict's end. After the war he returned to Johns Hopkins, where he continued teaching until 1923. Between 1921 and 1931 Magoffin held the presidency of the Archaeological Institute of America; he became the institute's honorary president in 1931, and retained that position until his death. In the spring of 1923 he was elected to the presidency of St. John's College in Baltimore but rejected the position in favor of chairing the Department of Classics at New York University, a post he held until his retirement in 1939. In 1926 Magoffin served as a delegate at the International Archaeological Congress in what was then British Mandate Palestine. He retired to Columbia, South Carolina, where he died in 1942, survived by his second wife Kate Manning and their son, Ralph Manning Magoffin.<sup>74</sup>

Magoffin's scholarship focused squarely on the Latin language. His early academic efforts include a modern translation of Grotius, while his most enduring legacy is probably his translation of inscriptions at Praeneste, modern Palestrina, Italy. There is no indication in his works or writings to indicate he possessed any training in ancient Mesopotamian languages, though New York University did operate multiple Middle Eastern excavations during his time chairing the Department of Classics. The chain of

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<sup>74</sup>"Dr. Magoffin Dies: Archaeologist, 67," *New York Times*, May 17, 1942.

evidence that might tell precisely how and when Dr. Magoffin acquired the ancient Mesopotamian documents his son later donated to the Columbia Museum of Art unfortunately no longer exists. Ralph Manning acted as his family's informal historian until his death in 1984. One of his surviving daughters, Anne Moffet, confirmed in a telephone conversation conducted March 5, 2015, that any documents from her grandfather collected and preserved by her father's efforts were lost in the years after the latter's death. In the same conversation she described a Mesopotamian artifact in her possession, passed down to her from her grandfather, that resembled a cylinder seal, indicating that some of Dr. Magoffin's collected Mesopotamian artifacts remain with his family.

Though no personal documents survive to establish how Dr. Magoffin came into possession of cuneiform artifacts, some of his surviving published work sheds light on his approach to Mesopotamian archaeology. In 1929 Dr. Magoffin co-wrote with Emily C. Davis *Magic Spades: The Romance of Archaeology*. Like Edward Chiera's *They Wrote on Clay*, discussed in the previous chapter, Magic Spades was intended to popularize the academic discipline of archaeology with the American general public. In Magoffin's own words, Magic Spades was written “with the hope of helping to diminish the once rather widespread notion that Archaeology was the unnecessary and fatuous excavation of the broken remains of a bygone, and therefore superseded, antiquity.” Magoffin devoted one of the twenty-seven chapters of Magic Spades to Middle Eastern archaeology. Throughout that material Magoffin's primary interest seems to lie in how Mesopotamian archaeology could possibly illuminate contemporary understanding of the Bible. He was greatly animated by such such finds as the rediscovery of the ancient Israelite city

Mizpah at Tell en-Nasbeh, and how that discovery rebuked the site traditionally assumed for the city. The pages he devotes specifically to ancient Mesopotamia concentrate on two subjects: recovered burial items of Sumerian royalty and uncovered architectural footprints of Sumerian ziggurats. He describes the surviving grave goods of ancient Mesopotamian royalty at great length, particularly the evidence of funereal human sacrifice found with those remains, while his chief point in discussing the dimensions and origins of Mesopotamian ziggurats is to offer them as the historical basis for the biblical Tower of Babel.<sup>75</sup>

The available evidence indicates that the tablets constituting the Magoffin Cuneiform Collection were never translated while they remained within Dr. Magoffin's possession. Magoffin was fully aware that such translation was possible. The relevant chapter in *Magic Spades* describes several excavation programs active during his time at NYU where such translation was taking place, as well as the succession of scholars and linguists who contributed to the rediscovery of cuneiform languages. Like the ultimate provenance of the tablets themselves, evidence for why he never pursued translation for his personal cuneiform artifacts no longer exists. Magoffin wrote *Magic Spades* with an objective in mind, the popularization of archaeology, and so it is not surprising that he favors striking and sensationalistic finds like royal burials and vast temple complexes over the mundane but fascinating information contained in cuneiform account tablets in that book. Yet if we take this surviving expression of Magoffin's intellectual interests in Mesopotamian archaeology at its word, he seems to have felt little curiosity for the documents produced by the ancient Sumerians, as opposed to other artifacts from their

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<sup>75</sup>R. V.D. Magoffin and Emily C. Davis, *Magic Spades: The Romance of Archaeology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929), vii, 77, 87-92.

society. He may have simply regarded the tablets in his possession as minor curiosities not quite worth the effort of seeking a translation. We simply cannot know for certain.

There is a glaring exception to the dearth of personal documents from the life of Dr. Magoffin. The only surviving instance of his correspondence rediscovered in the course of this project comes from South Carolina's Florence County Museum. These texts, preserved for their relevance to the museum's founding, are one half of an epistolary conversation carried on over the course of years by Dr. Magoffin and his friend Jane Beverly Evans. The letters range from January 1934 through March 1941, interspersed with clippings from local Florence newspapers. They tell the tale of how, over the course of years, Magoffin and Evans gathered support for the founding of a museum within the Florence Public Library stocked with ancient artifacts supplied by Magoffin. In addition to the raw materials necessary to establish a small museum, Magoffin attended several speaking engagements, such as a February 1935 appearance before a Florence Lion's Club meeting, to argue for the salutary social and educational effects a local museum could have on the people and city of Florence. The letters mention a series of extraneous ancient objects from Dr. Magoffin's collection, what he termed "duplicate objects," sent from Magoffin to Evans in order to broaden her collection for the museum.<sup>76</sup>

When Evans finally launched the museum in February 1939 Magoffin was one of two guest speakers at the grand opening. Less than two months after its opening the museum was robbed in what Dr. Magoffin hypothesized was a professional job, based on

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<sup>76</sup>The following brief account of the founding of the Florence County Museum draws upon a digitized transcript of a set of thirty-nine documents preserved in the same file as documentary evidence from the genesis of the institution. I reviewed the originals in September 2015 and received the transcribed version in the same month.

the items stolen. In August 1940 Magoffin took a significant stride towards replenishing the Florence museum's collection when the Master Institute of United Arts, an art museum in New York City for which he was one of five trustees, shut down after its first director fled to India over a vaguely defined matter of "income tax delinquencies." Magoffin and the other trustees chose to liquidate the museum by declaring bankruptcy. Dr. Magoffin sent the objects he contributed to the founding of the Master Institute south to the Florence Museum, where they remain in that institution's care. The current site of the Florence County Museum is a new building constructed in 2012. An exhibit regarding the museum's founding on its first floor features a picture and short biography of Dr. Magoffin, accompanied by a few displayed Mediterranean artifacts including a sizable cuneiform tablet. Like the Mesopotamian items eventually donated to the Columbia Museum of Art by the professor's son, the Florence museum's cuneiform artifacts have yet to be translated as of this writing.

The Florence documents show Magoffin possessed both a considerable collection of Mesopotamian artifacts and a history of contributing them to museums and educational institutions. Further documents preserved in the Magoffin Collection accession file at the Columbia Museum of Art show how his son, Ralph Manning, carried on this family tradition.<sup>77</sup>

The earliest correspondence between the younger Ralph and the Columbia museum dates to March 1960, nearly two decades after the elder Magoffin's death. It is a letter sent to Ralph from John Richard Craft, then director of the museum, thanking him

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<sup>77</sup>The following account of the donation and subsequent scholarly interest in the Magoffin Collection of Mediterranean artifacts held by the Columbia Museum of Art derives from documents preserved in the accession file associated with that collection. I reviewed the originals on several occasions in the spring of 2015 and was allowed to make photocopies by museum staff.



for the donation of an archaic Greek sculpture which Craft describes as the first such artifact to enter the museum's collection. In this first letter Craft affirms that all items from Dr. Magoffin's estate would be designated as "From the Magoffin Collection" by the museum.<sup>78</sup>

A subsequent letter from July 1966, also sent by John Craft to Ralph Manning, described two boxes full of Mediterranean artifacts donated by the latter in July 1964. These lay in storage for two years until museum staff opened and cataloged them in the summer of 1966. Their contents were sufficient to form the basis of an exhibition on the ancient world, "99% composed of this Magoffin Collection" (Craft's emphasis). The objects, which included artifacts from a wide array of ancient Mediterranean eras and cultures, arrived accompanied with an inventory list originally prepared by Dr. Magoffin, but there is no indication of any translations provided for the several cuneiform tablets included with the donation.<sup>79</sup>

The accession file shows intermittent outside interest in the cuneiform component of the Magoffin Collection. The first such episode dates to the summer of 1980. A sequence of correspondence between the Columbia Museum of Art and Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum show that the Magoffin Collection was transported to the latter facility for restoration purposes. The most time-consuming aspect of the restoration project was care of the collection's cuneiform tablets, which exhibited significant surface salt crystallization. Fogg Museum personnel were not requested to make any efforts at

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<sup>78</sup>Letter from John Richard Craft to Ralph Manning Magoffin, 18 March 1960, Magoffin Collection Accession File Document #000083, Columbia Museum of Art.

<sup>79</sup>Letter from John Richard Craft to Ralph Manning Magoffin, July 18, 1966, Magoffin Collection Accession File Document #000084, Columbia Museum of Art.

translating the tablets, and there is no evidence that they did so.<sup>80</sup>

The next instance of outside interest in the Magoffin Collection's cuneiform artifacts was an inquiry by Dr. W. R. "Buzz" Brookman, then of the University of Minnesota, from the summer of 1986. Dr. Brookman's correspondence explained that he was in the process of writing a book on clay cuneiform texts that still possessed fingerprints from before their firing, and requested that the museum loan him any such artifacts in its possession for his review. The accession file's documentation ends without confirming whether or not Brookman saw the tablets in question.<sup>81</sup>

My own investigation of the Magoffin Collection was the first outside scholarly approach to those objects since Brookman in 1986 for which evidence survives in the accession file. My own initial efforts, beyond reviewing the documents from which the last several pages were drawn, focused on creating facsimiles of the tablets for later review. Before the spring of 2015 the only extant set of photographs of the Magoffin Collection cuneiform tablets was a set of analog slides probably produced during the Fogg Museum restoration. Over the course of three visits to the Columbia museum I prepared high resolution digital photographs of the eighteen tablets from the Magoffin Collection cuneiform documents that retain legible writing on at least one face. As of this writing I have yet to attend an institution that offers instruction in reading cuneiform languages. Unable to translate the tablets myself, I resolved to send my digital facsimiles to someone who could. I first looked into the current status of Dr. Brookman,

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<sup>80</sup>Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, "Record of Treatment," Harvard University, March 3, 1983, in the Magoffin Collection Accession File.

<sup>81</sup>Letter from W.R. Brookman to Columbia Museum, April 22, 1980, Magoffin Collection Accession File Document #000002., Columbia Museum of Art; Letter from Harriette Green to W.R. Brookman, July 2, 1986, Magoffin Collection Accession File Document #000001., Columbia Museum of Art; Letter from W.R. Brookman to Harriette Green, August 5, 1986, Magoffin Collection Accession File Document # 66.49.76, Columbia Museum of Art.

and found him an active faculty member at Minnesota's North Central University. I first made contact with Dr. Brookman in February 2015. He confirmed for me that he did receive the Magoffin cuneiform tablets from the Columbia museum in 1986, but he never found enough tablets with surviving fingerprints to write his book. He was willing to look at some of my Magoffin Collection photographs. I sent him shots of the three most clearly legible tablets in the collection, and though he did not offer to translate them he did have a great deal of information to share. He stated that all three were administrative texts written in Sumerian, not Akkadian, cuneiform. The three tablets he reviewed hailed from the same ancient Mesopotamian city, Girsu (modern Tell Telloh). He also identified year names on two of the three tablets, which established their dates of publication as the forty-fifth year of the reign of Shulgi and the third year of the reign of Amar-Sin, respectively the second and third kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur from the twenty-first and twentieth centuries BCE.

Brookman's assessment was a bombshell. His attribution revised the proposed provenance of the tablets by one language and eight centuries, while narrowing their area of origin to a specific find. I subsequently shared my photographs of the Magoffin cuneiform tablets with the following scholars: Paul Delnero and Glenn Schwartz of Johns Hopkins University; Beate Pongratz-Leisten of New York University; Christopher Woods of the University of Chicago; Holly Pittman and Philip Jones of the University of Pennsylvania; and, finally, Robert Englund of UCLA. Each Assyriologist to whom I showed the photographs echoed Brookman's assessment of Sumerian origins for the tablets. Every Assyriologist I consulted other than Dr. Englund also recommended that I show the tablets to him, as he is both a specialist in Sumerian administrative documents

and one of two primary investigators for the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI), a collaborative project between the cuneiform scholars of UCLA, the University of Oxford, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. The CDLI is an open, free academic platform for distributing images and transcripts of cuneiform texts. Researchers from around the world use it as a platform to publicize newly discovered or rediscovered documents from ancient Mesopotamia, while an active community of specialists translates undeciphered documents added to the database. The CDLI seemed like the best possible avenue to set the Magoffin Collection cuneiform texts before eyes capable of reading them.<sup>82</sup>

I made contact with Dr. Englund, with the blessing of the Columbia Museum of Art, in February 2016. I showed him the tablet photographs through an email, and he judged them sufficient for hosting on the CDLI. On the afternoon of February 27, 2016, my photographs of eighteen ancient Mesopotamian tablets were added to the CDLI's database by Dr. Englund. As of this writing all eighteen tablets thus published are believed to be written in Sumerian. The oldest of them date to during or just before the Third Dynasty of Ur, though a handful likely derive from Ur III's successor regime, the Isin dynasty founded by Ishbi-Erra. Most of the tablets were inscribed at ancient Girsu, though according to Englund at least one, tablet H by their alphabetic designations, was written in the city Umma in the sixth month of the fifth year of the reign of Shu-Sin, Amar-Sin's successor and fourth king of Ur III. Tablet P appears to be identical to a tablet held by the British Museum, but as of this writing it remains unclear which

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<sup>82</sup>“Associates and Staff,” Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://cdli.ucla.edu/?q=associates-staff>.

cuneiform tablet is the copy and which the original.<sup>83</sup>

Dr. Englund went a further step beyond adding the Magoffin Collection photographs to the CDLI and browsing for year names. He selected tablet B, one of the three tablets I initially showed to Dr. Brookman and the only one of those three to lack a full year name, and translated it. As such, it is my great pleasure to present in this paper the first full translation of of a cuneiform tablet from the Magoffin Collection ever produced. This occasion is the first time this tablet has been fully intelligible to anyone alive in at least twenty centuries.

*Obverse*

1. One (gur) wort, fine quality,
2. from Ur-Hendursag,
3. did Erra-bani
4. receive;

*Reverse*

**Blank Space**  
**Seal Impression**

1. Month “Festival-of-Baba”

*Seal 1*

1. Erra-Bani
2. Servant of Ur-Baba<sup>84</sup>

A *gur* was a standard Mesopotamian measurement by the Ur III period, the hypothetical volume a pack donkey could safely carry on its back. Wort is the liquid precursor to beer, absent the fermenting effects of brewer's yeast. The “Festival-of-Baba” signified the eighth month in the Sumerian calendar. I am unfamiliar with the names Ur-Hendursag or Erra-bani, but the presence of a seal impression bearing Erra-Bani's name on the tablet indicates he may have been a scribal bureaucrat. The Ur-Baba whom Erra-

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<sup>83</sup>“Search results: Collection: Columbia Museum of Art,” Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, accessed February 28, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hqxvgfc>.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

Bani served may be the king Ur-Baba or Ur-Bau of the Second Dynasty of Lagash, a regime that prospered in the interregnum between the fall of Sargon's dynasty and the rise of Ur III, but as of this writing that attribution remains uncertain.

As proud as I am to have contributed towards making the above translation possible, significant avenues of further research remain where the Magoffin Collection is concerned. The Florence Museum holds multiple pieces of cuneiform text that I did not photograph, which have yet to be translated or added to any open database. Anne Moffet, Dr. Magoffin's granddaughter, holds at least one cuneiform-inscribed artifact that has not received any known scholarly attention since Dr. Magoffin's death; she and her relatives may possess more. Finally, a newspaper clipping included in the Florence Museum's collection of Magoffin correspondence regarding the museum's founding made mention of a further twenty-two such institutions Magoffin helped found, possibly also with donations from his prodigious collection of Mediterranean artifacts. The article in question offers no names or locations for these other museums; its total of institutions founded by Magoffin may include the ill-fated Master Institute of United Arts from which some of the Florence Museum's current collection came. Given the fate of the Master Institute within Magoffin's own lifetime, or indeed of his original donation to the Florence Museum plundered in a burglary, other items donated by Magoffin may have proliferated across the United States and perhaps the world. Wherever these lost pieces of Magoffin's legacy lie, their associated documents may hold the information all other sources from Magoffin's life and estate have lacked: the truth of precisely where and how he acquired his Mediterranean artifacts in the first place.

The quest for the last loose ends of the Magoffin legacy lies beyond the scope of

this project. This investigation began in the spring of 2015 with the aim of uncovering as much as possible regarding the origins and content of the Magoffin Collection cuneiform tablets at the Columbia Museum of Art. As of this writing, with the tablets added to the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative and the first full translation of one already in existence, I believe that my efforts have measurably expanded common understanding of the ancient Mesopotamian documents held in Columbia. There remain compelling mysteries associated with the collection, such as the possible twin to a tablet in the British Museum and the undocumented pieces of Magoffin's treasures scattered into unknown private and public collections. These could be the subjects of further illuminating research, but they are not among the ambitions of this work. The efforts contained in this thesis pushed the frontier of knowledge regarding the Magoffin Collection some small distance further. It remains for efforts of the future to drive that frontier further still.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The emotion that stimulated the creation of the document you now hold was shock. That shock stemmed from learning that artifacts held in the state of South Carolina's capital art museum could be retained for decades on end without ever receiving the necessary scholarly attention to accurately assess their origins and content. Shock gave way to curiosity as I was allowed to examine the Columbia Museum's tablets and documentation relating to the Magoffin Collection. Curiosity gave way to determination when Dr. Brookman returned the first year names for items from the collection, proving that my project to study these mute cuneiform tablets could measurably expand understanding of the artifacts despite my lack of training in ancient Mesopotamian languages. Determination gave way to a measure of satisfaction as the project drew to a close at last. The project has accomplished what it was always intended to accomplish: to further understanding of the Magoffin Collection cuneiform tablets to the maximum extent my academic and linguistic capacities allowed. Most of the Magoffin tablets now possess accurate dates drawn from the year names inscribed on their clay, with site attributions to match. The first translation of a Magoffin tablet is already freely available through the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, and the whole collection is now laid before the eyes of specialists in Ur III administrative documents from around the world through that medium. The Magoffin Collection's cuneiform tablets are better understood at the time of this writing than at any point in their history since they emerged on the western side of the Atlantic in the keeping of Dr. Ralph Magoffin during the previous century, and I take some pride in the knowledge that this



understanding was only advanced because I followed through on the moment of shock that so thoroughly engraved the Magoffin cuneiform tablets upon my memory.

The tablets are small artifacts, miniscule components of the surviving literary corpus of the lost ancient Mesopotamian world, yet I firmly believe that regaining understanding of these ancient documents has meaning beyond their literal contents. These objects contain the last vestiges of the thoughts and feelings of people who lived in an utterly remote time, yet the documents themselves demonstrate how very little has changed within the human species since the days of Ur and Girsu. There will never be another new Sumerian tablet written by a Sumerian scribe. Every scrap of their society's written output is a piece of those people, the only kind that can truly survive the ages when every other element of that society is long dead. Every single cuneiform-inscribed artifact, from the meanest account tablet to the most flowery hymnal poetry, is unspeakably precious as a vessel for the ghost of the culture that produced it, still capable of whispering to modern students through the medium of silent, speaking clay.

The task of preserving and studying these relics of the Mesopotamian past gained an added urgency over the course of my involvement with the Magoffin Collection. Contemporary politics have rendered the land between the rivers an intermittent war zone for the entirety of my adult life. The first major stroke of disaster for the raw materials of contemporary Assyriology arrived with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. When looting swept Baghdad in the wake of the United States overthrow of the Hussein regime, the ancient artifacts housed in the Iraqi National Museum were early casualties to avarice and desperation. The museum was pillaged, and some fifteen thousand items were stolen from it and resold on the black market. The facility shut down and remained closed until

February 2015. It reopened with only a third of its looted exhibits regained, in an Iraqi nation that was if anything worse off in 2015 than in 2003.<sup>85</sup>

The convulsions that afflict Iraq at the time of this writing, the spring of 2016, have been nearly as brutal to the relics of that land as they have been for the people living there. This medium lacks the space to do justice to the most recent horrors visited on the people of Iraq and Syria, already one of the great human crimes of this century. It does possess a little space to talk about the irreparable damage done to the discipline of Assyriology, deliberately and maliciously, by the political and military force known variously as the Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, etc. This paper will adhere to Daesh. This work refers multiple times to the Assyrian capital Nineveh, source of princess and high priestess Enheduana's composition of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Tablets retrieved from Nineveh's rediscovered library helped lay the foundation for Akkadian decipherment. In January 2015 Daesh destroyed the unearthed walls of Nineveh with explosives and bulldozers. In February of the same year Daesh burned some 100,000 books and manuscripts wrenched from the central library of Mosul, Iraq. Then, in March, they demolished the rediscovered Assyrian city Nimrud, for the mute stone and bricks' crime of blasphemy. Not all was destroyed, of course. Such artifacts as Daesh's commanders deem potentially valuable, they haul away in advance of the bulldozers for sale on the black market.<sup>86</sup>

I cannot call crimes dealt to unfeeling clay and stone worse than what Daesh and other actors have inflicted on the people of Iraq and Syria over the first several years of

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<sup>85</sup>“Looted Iraqi Museum in Baghdad reopens 12 years on,” British Broadcasting Company, February 28, 2015, accessed on March 15, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31672857>.

<sup>86</sup>Mary McCleary, “Cultural cleansing in Mosul and Nineveh,” *NewBostonPost*, January 15, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://newbostonpost.com/2016/01/15/cultural-cleansing-in-mosul-and-nineveh/>.

the twenty-first century. What I can say is that their crimes against human history ripple out to affect the entire species. No one can ever be entirely sure what knowledge of the Mesopotamian past now lies effectively mute in private collections embellished with black market purchases. No one will ever know for sure what knowledge was lost when Nineveh's walls fell, again. We may find out a little though, as the finds of Daesh's demolitions percolate through the international antiquities market. The American arts and crafts retail chain Hobby Lobby entered the news in 2014 when its owners won a contentious Supreme Court case regarding their obligation to pay for female employees' birth control. Those owners, the Green family as a group, are also founders of an institution called the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., originally planned to open in 2017. The museum was intended to display the Green family's collection of artifacts from the ancient and classical Mediterranean, but a few newly purchased acquisitions shipped into the United States from Israel drew the attention of American federal law enforcement. The curious shipment, sent via FedEx, labeled its contents "hand-crafted clay tiles," a literally accurate but disingenuous description for millennia-old cuneiform tablets. The tablets lack documentation to show from what site they were unearthed. At the very least their removal from Iraq and ultimate delivery to the United States violated customs laws regarding the necessary documents for internationally shipped archaeological artifacts. At worst, these may be tablets stripped from a site of antiquity within Daesh territory just prior to its obliteration.<sup>87</sup>

The ongoing destruction of Mesopotamia's archaeological treasures makes study

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<sup>87</sup>Laura Wagner, "Hobby Lobby Owners Under Investigation for Alleged Illegal Import of Artifacts," National Public Radio, October 28 2015, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/10/28/452646460/hobby-lobby-owners-under-investigation-for-alleged-illegal-import-of-artifacts>.

and preservation of such artifacts as remain outside the fields of desolation an even greater responsibility for their keepers. If there will never be a new Sumerian tablet written, then the active destruction of the archaeological sources for those artifacts makes these invaluable relics of past ages even more precious. It is far beyond my meager influence to affect the outcome of Iraq's struggles in any meaningful way, but I believe my experience with the Magoffin Collection shows that every institution and scholar with untranslated cuneiform documents in their possession is capable of advancing modern understanding of the artifacts in their care in at least some small ways. If the reader takes away any one insight from the preceding material, I hope it is that any interested party, even those as lacking in formal training with ancient cuneiform as myself, can expand modern civilization's knowledge of the Mesopotamian past with persistence and practical research.

I hope, of course, that the reader takes away far more than one insight from this text. As I wrote in the introduction of this thesis, it is intended to be a useful document. I hope it serves as a primer for ancient Mesopotamian history, as an instructive introduction to the Mesopotamian scribal profession and the modern decipherment of cuneiform languages, and of course as a guide to the legacy of Dr. Ralph Magoffin and the set of tablets whose mystery prompted all this writing and research in the first place. I hope, in sum, that reader learns as much about the lives and times of ancient Mesopotamia and modern Mesopotamian archaeology as I did while writing about them. If this document provokes some small measure of curiosity in the ancient world, if it stimulates even one further effort by another researcher to better understand the whispering clay of the Mesopotamian scribes, then it will have succeeded beyond my

highest hopes.

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APPENDIX: SELECT PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MAGOFFIN COLLECTION  
CUNEIFORM TABLETS

*Tablet A*

Side A



Side B:



*Tablet B*

Side A:



Side B:



*Tablet C*

Side A:



Side B:

