CHAPTER 1

The Origins of Writing in Mesopotamia

> In the very first year there appeared from the Red Sea (the Persian Gulf) in an area bordering on Babylonia, a frightening monster, named Oannes . . . Berossos says that this monster spent its days with men, never eating anything, but teaching men the skills necessary for writing and for doing mathematics and for all sorts of knowledge . . .
>
> –*Eusebius on Berossos's History*[1]

> Because the messenger's mouth was too heavy, and he could not repeat it, the lord of Kulab patted some clay and put the words on it as on a tablet. Before that day, there had been no putting words on clay . . .
>
> –*Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*[2]

It was once thought that writing developed in Mesopotamia – the "land between two rivers" – and spread to other cultures through trade, imperialism, and other forms of cultural contact. More recent studies have shown that four distinct cultures within Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica invented writing independently.[3] Most of these cultures had accounting devices for thousands of years before a system of writing arose. The difference between an accounting system and writing is that writing represents speech through marks on a surface while an accounting system represents ideas or quantities only and is not directly connected with speech. In other words, through writing a reader can recover the utterance of a writer without the intervention, or even the presence, of the utterer.[4]

1 Gerald P. Verbrugghe and John M. Wickersham, *Berossus and Manetho: Native Traditions in Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996), 44.
2 Herman Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta* (SBLWAW 20; Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 85.
3 The best treatment of this subject is the compilation of essays in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (ed. Christopher Woods; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2010) which can be downloaded free of charge at http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/catalog/oimp/oimp32.html.
4 Peter T. Daniels, "The Study of Writing Systems," in *The World's Writing Systems* (ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

The movement from accounting systems to written language appeared virtually simultaneously in Mesopotamia and Egypt around 3300 to 3200 BCE. A couple of millennia later an oracle-bone inscription from the late thirteenth century BCE marks the first known example of grammatically connected symbols in China. Finally, writing is thought to have developed within Maya society somewhere between 1200 and 600 BCE; however, the earliest known examples appear within palace murals from 300–200 BCE at San Bartolo, Guatemala.[5]

Even though Mesopotamia has been displaced as the sole originator of writing it remains unique, for the time being at least, as the only culture of early antiquity for which there are examples of literature written by women. In fact, a priestess from Ur is often identified as "the first real author, in the modern sense of that word, known to world history."[6] Furthermore, the patron deity of all Mesopotamian scribes was the goddess Nisaba. This is not to say that female scribes were ubiquitous. On the contrary, like many other aspects of ancient society scribal culture was predominantly male. In spite of this, within an environment in which hardly anyone – male and female alike – was able to read and write, more than a few women learned this skill and produced a sizable number of documents.

Undoubtedly, literate women populated ancient cultures besides Mesopotamia. Several Egyptian tombs contain artistic representations of women who appear to read or write and some scholars have suggested that short notes sent by Egyptian females to their friends may have been written by the women themselves; however, this remains a matter of speculation.[7] Even though most regard it as unlikely, a few scholars posit that women may have composed anonymous works or written under male pen names in Hittite and Israelite societies.[8] Even though there are indicators and possibilities for female literacy throughout the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia remains the only culture of early antiquity for which female

5 William A. Saturno, David Stuart, and Boris Beltrán, "Early Maya Writing at San Bartolo, Guatemala," *Science* 311/5765 (3 March 2006): 1281–1283.

6 Aage Westenholz, "The Old Akkadian Period: History and Culture" in *Mesopotamien: Akkade-Zeit und Ur III-Zeit* (ed. Walther Sallaberger and Aage Westenholz; Oribs Biblicus and Orientalis 160/3; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1999), 76.

7 Rivkah Harris, "The Female 'Sage' in Mesopotamian Literature," in *The Sage in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 15 and David P. Silverman, *Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 81, respectively.

8 On the unlikelihood of females using male pen names in Anatolia see Jared L. Miller, *Studies in the Origins, Development and Interpretation of the Kizzuwatna Rituals* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 479 n804. A handful of scholars have proposed female authorship of various biblical books: see Part II *of A Feminist Companion to Song of Songs* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 58–99.

scribes are well documented and from which texts attributed to female authors survive to this day.[9]

1.1 Mythological Origins of Writing in Mesopotamia

Writing is one of the most significant inventions in human history. It enabled people to do things that were previously almost unimaginable. Kings could give direct orders to far flung generals and scribes could continue to teach students even after their death. A quick stroke of the stylus magically broke through the seemingly impenetrable boundaries of time and space. No longer did officials have to depend upon the memories and fidelity of messengers to properly relay instructions, they could send their own words wrapped in tamper-resistant envelopes. Scribes could compose literature that was read and recopied for centuries. Given its significance it is no wonder that fantastical stories shrouded the origin of writing in myth. Perhaps the most interesting was told by a third-century BCE Babylonian priest, Berossos.

In a history of Babylonia Berossos describes a primordial world populated with monsters – human-like figures, some with wings, some with two faces and sets of sexual organs, others that sprouted tails or walked with goats' legs. At this time animals with interchanged features, such as horses with dogs' heads and the like, roamed the earth. The chief deity, Bel, cut the goddess of the sea in half and from her body parts made the heavens and the earth. Bel then cut through the darkness and separated night from day. The monsters were unable to survive the strength of the light and perished. Bel repopulated the earth by creating humans from a mixture of dirt and the blood which flowed out of another god's severed head. On the first day of this new earth Oannes, a half-fish half-humanoid monster that survived the previous events, crawled out of the Persian Gulf and taught humans how to build temples and cities, to make laws, to gather food, and to write. The story Berossos told pictured writing as something that existed before the present order of the world, a gift given to humanity by a being that bridged the divine and human realms.[10]

On the other hand, the early second-millennium Sumerian story, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, located the invention of writing in the ingenuity of a king. According to the legend the king of Uruk, Enmerkar, sent a messenger to the king of Aratta to procure gold, silver, and lapis-lazuli.

9 The women of Greece and Rome produced many texts, starting with Sappho (born ca. 630 BCE); I.M. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). However, virtually every composition within this anthology precedes Sappho and Enheduanna does so by a full millennium and half.

10 Verbrugghe and Wickersham, *Berossus and Manetho*, 44 and Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 132–134.

Before the king of Aratta would trade with Enmerkar he posed a series of riddles. A messenger had to shuttle in between the two kings, conveying the riddle one way and then on the return, the answer. The riddles became increasingly complicated until the messenger was unable to adequately remember them. In response, Enmerkar scooped clay out of the ground, fashioned it into a tablet, and for the first time wrote down the spoken word.[11]

1.2 The Invention of Writing in Mesopotamia

As entertaining as these accounts are, neither reflects the picture that the earliest tablets themselves present. However, the Enmerkar story does contain an element that reflects a degree of reality – the earliest known examples of writing stem from the city of Uruk. Uruk, modern Warka, is located along a now dry tributary of the Euphrates in southern Iraq (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). In the late fourth millennium it was the largest city in Mesopotamia if not the world. The population of Uruk increased from about 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants between 3,500 and 3,100 BCE and the leaders of the city-state managed this growth with a vast and hierarchical bureaucracy.[12] Writing arose in order to provide a more robust level of accounting and accountability in this increasingly complicated sociopolitical structure.[13] The earliest tablets from Uruk contain numerical entries that document complex transactions involving a variety of goods. To put it differently, the world's first writing was invented in order to facilitate bookkeeping.

The system of writing employed at Uruk combined numerical features already employed with counting tokens and pictorial representations. For several thousand years Mesopotamians had used small lumps of clay engraved with symbols to aid in counting. For instance, a small ball might have a sign indicating a sheep. These tokens could be counted and totaled, functioning like an abacus of sorts, or they could be traded and redeemed at a future time. Scribes invented a writing *system* when they combined numerical symbols used on these tokens with stylized pictures indicating commodities

11 Concomitantly, this story represents writing as "an oral discourse fixed on a support" while modern theories tend to focus upon the pictorial representation of early writing that subsequently gained phonetic values, Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon* (trans. Jane Marie Todd; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2 and 255 n2.

12 Christopher Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (ed. Christopher Woods; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2010), 34.

13 Writing arose independently in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China also as a response to organizational complexity. Writing apparently developed for different reasons within Maya culture; see Jerrold S. Cooper, "Babylonian Beginnings: The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System in Comparative Perspective," in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process* (ed. Stephen D. Houston; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71–99.

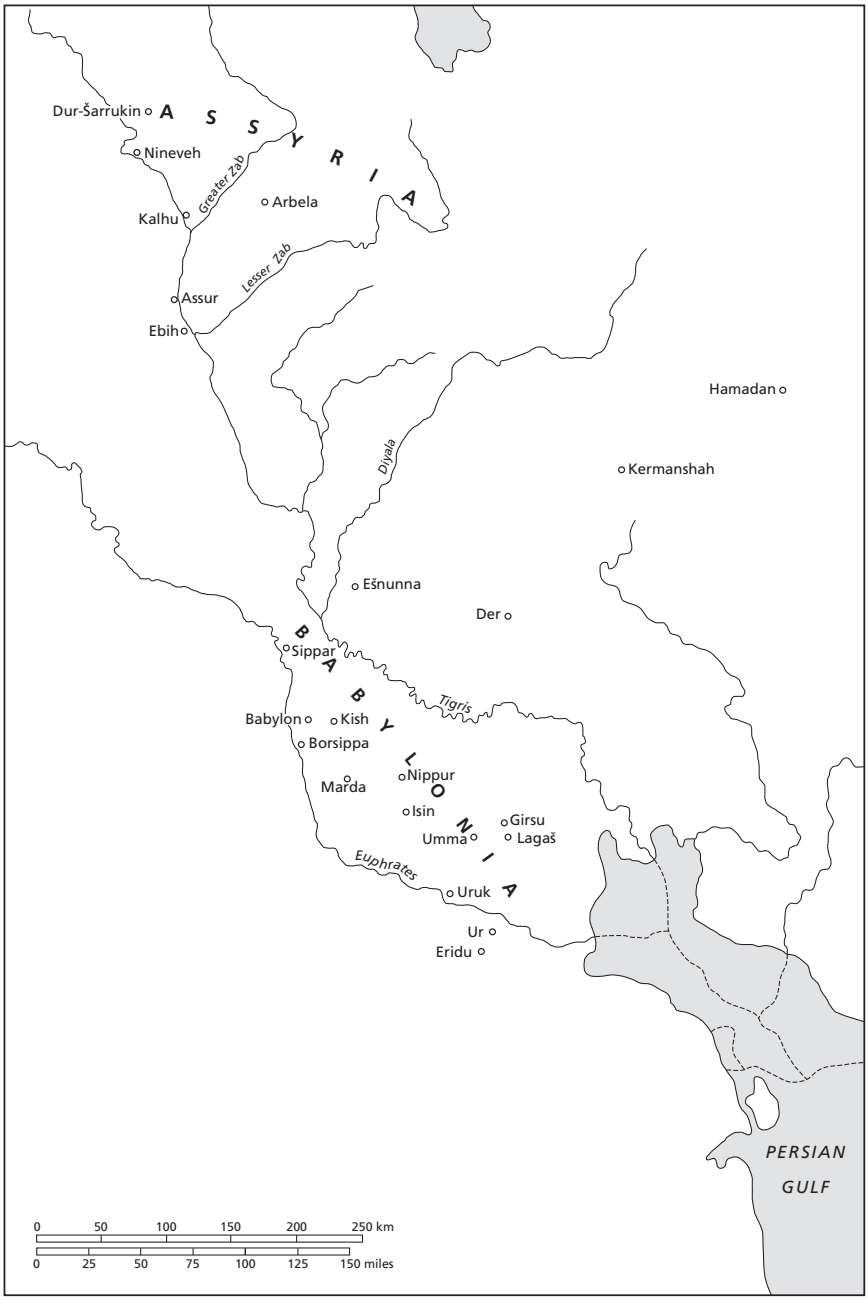
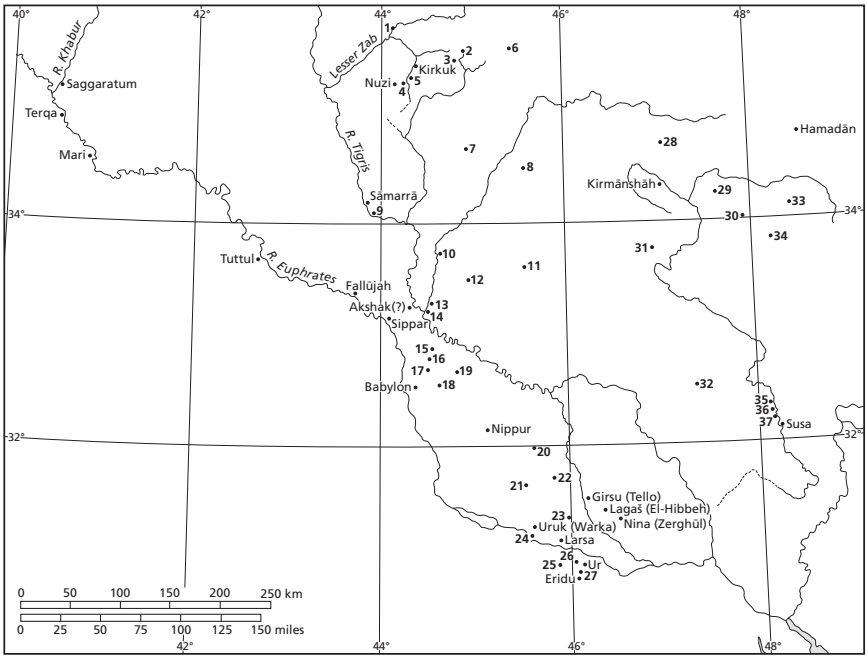


Figure 1.1: Babylonia and Assyria



Numerical key

1 Altin Köprü	11 Mandali	21 Shuruppak	31 Tepe Gūrān
2 Jarmo	12 Ešnunna (Tell Asmar)	22 Umma	32 Tepe Mussian
3 Chamchamal	13 Khafājī (Tutub)	23 Badtibira	33 Tepe Giyān
4 Kurdish Şaghīr	14 Ishchali	24 Qal'at Ḥajji Muḥammad	34 Alīshtar
5 Matarrah	15 Tell 'Uqair	25 Reijibeh	35 Tepe Bandibāl
6 Sulaimaniyyah	16 Tell Ibrāhīm (Kutha)	26 Al-'Ubaid	36 Tepe Jaui
7 Kifrī	17 Ras el-'Amiya	27 Mereijeb	37 Tepe Ja'farābād
8 Qaşr-i-Shīrīn	18 Kish	28 Tepe Sarāb	
9 Tell es-Sawwān	19 Jamdat Naşr	29 Harsīn	
10 Ba'qūbā	20 Adab	30 Delfan	

Alphabetical key

Adab	20	Jaui (Tepe Jaui)	38	Tell Asmar (Ešnunna)	12
Alīshtar	34	Khafājī (Tutub)	13	Tell Ibrāhīm (Kutha)	16
Altin Köprü	1	Kifrī	7	Tell es-Sawwān	9
Badtibira	23	Kish	18	Tell 'Uqair	15
Bandibāl (Tepe Bandibāl)	37	Kurdish Şaghīr	4	Tepe Bandibāl	35
Ba'qūbā	10	Kutha (Tell Ibrāhīm)	16	Tepe Giyān	33
Chamchamal	3	Mandali	11	Tepe Gūrān	31
Delfan	30	Matarrah	5	Tepe Ja'farābād	37
Ešnunna (Tell Asmar)	12	Mereijeb	27	Tepe Jaui	36
Ḥajji Muḥammad (Qal'at Ḥajji Muḥammad)	24	Qal'at Ḥajji Muḥammad	24	Tepe Mussian	32
Harsīn	29	Qaşr-i-Shīrīn	8	Tepe Sarāb	28
Ishchali	14	Ras el-'Amiya	17	Tutub (Khafājī)	13
Ja'farābād (Tepe Ja'farābād)	39	Reijibeh	25	Al-'Ubaid	26
Jamdat Naşr	19	Sarāb (Tepe Sarāb)	28	Umma	22
Jarmo	2	Shuruppak	21	'Uqair (Tell 'Uqair)	15
		Sulaimaniyyah	6		

Figure 1.2: Babylonia and Western Persia

such as wheat and cattle in order to produce itemized records of transactions between government offices and individuals. The Uruk tablets are distinguished from earlier accounting lists, and concomitantly mark the transition from numerical notations to a full fledged writing system, since they add titles, names, and transaction types to signs for numbers and commodities. This system was fairly daunting since it used, according to some calculations, over 2,000 individual signs, which were eventually consolidated to around 600.[14]

At first pictographs merely depicted the objects to which they referred. For instance, the outline of a head of a cow depicted a cow. As the writing system developed signs took on other meanings as well. A sign could represent not only a physical object but also a similarly sounding word or idea. A hypothetical example of this concept would be using a picture of an eye to signify the pronoun "I."[15] This innovation led the way for further linguistic development since phonetic values could be used to indicate ideas or syntactical relationships that are unrelated to concrete things. This facilitated the representation of relationships like ownership – the governor's cattle – and non-physical concepts like love. Over time the pictographs became more and more abstract until the objects they originally represented were in many cases practically indiscernible in the shapes of the signs. Eventually, many signs took on phonetic values, or sounds, that were derived from but not identical to the sign's original meaning. These phonetic values could be combined with other sounds to form words whose meanings were different from any of the signs that composed them. At this point the connection between a sign, its sound, and its meaning was very loose if intact at all.

If this system of writing sounds complicated that is because it was. But this is the nature of language; languages are constantly in flux. "Nature is dynamic, and so is language," said nature writer Robert MacFarlane.[16] The meanings of words change and morph and new words are created or borrowed. Ralph Waldo Emerson noted the way that the meanings of words within the English language had strayed from their original connotations. Like what happened with Sumerian and Akkadian, they became more abstract: "Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin."[17]

14 The first figure comes from J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 1994), 54, while the second is from Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," 37.
15 This example is taken from Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," 20.
16 *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), 13.
17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays: Second Series* (ed. Joseph Slater *et al.*; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1844), 13.

It took a substantial investment of time and energy to gain a facility in the cuneiform script, not to mention the language itself. Accordingly, small schools sprung up. Sometimes they were sponsored by the king but at other times they were privately run tutorial apprenticeships in which several students at a time gathered in a small courtyard and learned their new craft. Oftentimes fathers taught their children and possibly took on an extra child or two in the process. Teachers demonstrated the mechanics of forming wet clay into a tablet, how to turn a reed into a stylus, and how to impress the stylus into the clay to form the wedge-like, or cuneiform, shapes that represented objects, words, and sounds.

In this setting repetition was the mother of learning, and students copied the signs over and over again, moistening the tablet and reusing it. Typically, an instructor would make an "exercise" tablet by writing a line of signs which the student would then copy underneath or on the back. Once the students were able to form the signs, they learned their meanings and phonetic values by copying lists which arranged signs according to their topic or category. Finally, students copied examples of the accounting texts that they were likely to encounter as they carried out their duties within the various bureaucratic institutions that ran the city-states. For hundreds of years these three types of texts – scribal exercises, lexical lists, and accounting tablets – were the only genres of writing in existence within Mesopotamia.

In contrast to the stories that Mesopotamians wrote about the origins of writing, the texts from Uruk have nothing to do with letters, historical writings, or religious literature. It took almost seven hundred years for these genres to appear. When such texts were written the priestess Enheduanna was among the first to compose them.

1.3 Mesopotamian Literature and Scribal Schools

Scribes may have started out as bookkeepers and accountants but over time they became advisors to kings and used the skills they learned recording sheep and grains that traded hands to compose triumphal inscriptions that lauded their patrons.[18] Some of the earliest examples are inscriptions on votive objects deposited in temples. Non-cultic historical narratives were also composed and used to legitimate the reign of kings.[19] Scribes linked the kings that paid their salaries with heroes of mythology, and religious figures praised temples through hymnody. Genres of writing grew and developed as scribes invented new forms of writing on their own as well as learning of

18 Jean-Jacques Glassner, *The Invention of Cuneiform: Writing in Sumer* (trans. and ed. Zainab Bahrani and Marc van de Mieroop; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 205.

19 Glassner, *The Invention of Cuneiform*, 212.

new styles from contact with other cultures. Stories became more complicated and new types of literature proliferated. The scribal arts became a lucrative profession.

Not only did forms of writing change but the languages themselves did too. The cuneiform writing system was originally developed in order to represent the Sumerian language that was spoken in southern Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium. In the third millennium Semitic peoples moved into Sumerian lands and subsequently they adapted the indigenous writing system for use with their language, Akkadian. But Sumerian was not entirely displaced. Although it eventually ceased being a spoken language, scribes continued to learn Sumerian and continued to recopy the traditional literature written in it. Furthermore, for a brief period (ca. 2100–2000) it made a comeback as the language of record for the Ur III empire established by king Šulgi. After Šulgi's empire collapsed Akkadian resumed its place as the lingua franca and Sumerian was again only employed as a written language for the learned. Yet scribes were expected to be competent in both Akkadian and Sumerian so that they could work in the language of politics and commerce, Akkadian, but also perpetuate the cultural texts predominantly written in Sumerian. Bilingual lists were used in schools in order to help apprentice scribes learn both languages but as time wore on the traditional stories of the Sumerians were adapted and merged with the traditions of the Semitic peoples who spoke Akkadian. Eventually Sumerian was no longer used.

One of the reasons why classical compositions, many of which were written in the dead language of Sumerian, survive to this day is because they were recopied for centuries by students who lived in Akkadian-speaking cities. These individuals went into a variety of jobs after they left the scribal schools – everything from land surveying to administration of animal husbandry to advising the king. Much like modern educational systems the scribal curriculum was graduated and contained a core body of knowledge that every student, no matter their future employment, was expected to master. If a student excelled in the introductory stages they could go on to "specialize" in certain areas of knowledge.[20] With knowledge comes power and scribal instructors recognized that, in addition to teaching students the technical skills of reading, schools should also cultivate a professional identity and ethic. A case in point is seen in the curriculum of the e.dub.a(k), literally "the tablet house" or scribal school, located in Nippur, the most important town for the religious life of Mesopotamia:

> The teaching of Sumerian in the Nippur eduba was not guided by the list of skills a future scribe had to master. The lack of attention to Akkadian and the overdose of high-brow Sumerian point in another direction. It seems

20 Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 213–217.

> that handing down the Sumerian language and tradition as completely as possible was considered to be all important. A pupil of the scribal school was introduced to the techniques of writing, but more importantly he was introduced to the heritage of Sumerian writing and Sumerian poetics.[21]

Poems, myths, hymns, proverbs, and laments – many of which were written in Sumerian – were used in the process of teaching students how to write so that they would learn wisdom, ethics, and a sense of their cultural and professional identity. These compositions were copied over and over again and their inclusion in the curriculum is one of the main reasons why they survive to this day.

Letters and prophecies had a far different life. Apart from generic templates that were used to teach students the basic formats of letters and reports, these were generally one-off texts. That is, they were not recopied over the centuries. Rather, they were used once for a specific purpose and possibly stored for a time if they were of particular importance. Occasionally, archaeologists have stumbled upon archives of this sort which were housed within cities that burned to the ground. While the flames consumed the buildings they baked clay tablets and preserved them for thousands of years. Another path of textual preservation was the garbage. Once scribes had practiced a text or a tablet had served its specific purpose, it was often thrown into a garbage heap or used as fill within construction. Many of the texts which modern scholars study were quite literally pulled from the trash.

1.4 Overview of Literary Periods in Mesopotamia

Just as scholars of English divide the history of English literature into periods such as Old English, Middle English, Renaissance, and so on, those who study Mesopotamia divide the literary activity of this area into a number of periods. This division typically involves three criteria: language, region, and time.

Sumerian was the first language that appeared in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Accordingly, it became the equivalent of Latin for this region – learned people trained in this language and Sumerian texts were recopied for hundreds and hundreds of years. Yet, even in the third millennium it was on the wane and in the second it was dead, but had an afterlife in scribal tradition. For a brief period (ca. 2100–2000) a form of Sumerian was used within the administrative structures of the Ur III empire in southern Mesopotamia, but even at this time it was not a living language but a prestige language used for scholarship and religious ritual.[22]

21 Nicolaas Veldhuis, *Elementary Education at Nippur: The Lists of Trees and Wooden Objects* (PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1997), 82–83.
22 Dominique Charpin, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*, 43.