

2 | Reading the libraries of Assyria and Babylonia

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Many ancient collections of scholarly writings on cuneiform tablets have been excavated from palaces, temples and private houses of second- and first-millennium Mesopotamia.¹ Assyriologists usually refer to these collections as ‘libraries’, but there has been little debate about how this label shapes our assumptions about their functions and meanings in Assyrian and Babylonian society. The classic model of a cuneiform library is Assurbanipal’s library in the seventh-century BC Assyrian capital, Nineveh: a royal collection forged through inheritance, coercion and creative innovation in order to support royal decision-making. But that model can be tested against data from other excavated assemblages of scholarly writings from family dwellings and institutional buildings, before and after the end of indigenous rule in the sixth century BC. Both textual and architectural evidence can be used to explore questions of library formation, use and sponsorship within cuneiform culture of the first millennium BC.

Cuneiform literacies

In the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, writing has been used in urban contexts since the late fourth millennium BC.² Clay tablets and other

¹ This chapter grows out of two research projects which I co-direct. *The Geography of Knowledge in Assyria and Babylonia, 700–200 BC: A Diachronic Comparison of Four Scholarly Libraries* (<http://oracc.org/cams/gkab>), funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and co-directed by Steve Tinney, edits and studies the tablets from Ezida, Huzirina, Reš discussed here and a family house from late Achaemenid-early Hellenistic Uruk. The manuscripts are published online in transliteration, English translation and glossaries as part of *The Corpus of Ancient Mesopotamian Scholarship* (<http://oracc.org/cams/gkab>). *Knowledge and Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (<http://oracc.org/saao/knpp>), funded by the UK Higher Education Academy and co-directed by Karen Radner, presents and discusses the Neo-Assyrian court scholars’ correspondence with the king in seventh-century Nineveh; the letters, queries and reports themselves form part of *The State Archives of Assyria Online* (<http://oracc.org/saao>). I am very grateful to both Karen and Steve as well as to other project members past and present – Marie Besnier, Philippe Clancier, Graham Cunningham, Ruth Horry, Phil Jones, Fran Reynolds, Kathryn Stevens and Greta Van Buylaere – as well as various friends, students and collaborators too numerous to mention.

² For a wide-ranging introduction to cuneiform culture, see Radner and Robson 2011.

inscribed artefacts survive in vast quantities, often in good archaeological context. As they were manufactured to fit the size of the text they would carry, tablets range in size from a USB stick or smaller to a laptop computer but are typically the size of a mobile phone or a little larger. The wedge-shaped cuneiform script, with a repertoire of 600 or more graphemes, was as visually and structurally complex as modern Chinese or Japanese and thus primarily the preserve of professional scribes and the urban elite. The first language to be recorded in cuneiform was Sumerian, a linguistic isolate that probably died out as a vernacular some time around 2000 BC but which continued to thrive in learned and liturgical contexts for a further two millennia. From at least the mid-third millennium, cuneiform was also used to write the Semitic language Akkadian – from the same linguistic family as Arabic and Hebrew – often in close association with Sumerian. Nowadays we divide Akkadian into two main dialects written (and spoken) in different parts of the region: Assyrian, in the area centred on Nineveh around modern-day Mosul in northern Iraq; and Babylonian, including the literary and scholarly Standard Babylonian, south of modern-day Baghdad.

From the eighth century BC Aramaic, another Semitic language, migrated eastwards from the Mediterranean coast. It increasingly supplanted Akkadian as the regional vernacular, not least because it offered much easier access to literacy through its grapheme set of just 22 letters. Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of the Judaeans to Babylon in 587 BC also brought Hebrew into the mix, shortly followed by (Indo-European) Old Persian through Cyrus the Great's conquest of Babylonia in 539 BC – an event that marks the end of indigenous rule in Mesopotamia. Greek came with Alexander the Great in 330 BC, if not before. None of these alphabetic incomers instantly supplanted cuneiform culture, which clung on, in increasingly restricted contexts, until the first century AD. However, the relatively perishable writing media of the alphabetic scripts – papyrus, leather, waxed wooden writing boards – means that cuneiform clay tablets overwhelmingly dominate the archaeological and textual record. We must constantly remind ourselves that in the first millennium BC cuneiform culture was a minority culture in Assyria and Babylonia, in close and often subservient interaction with other literacies.

The overwhelming majority of surviving cuneiform tablets document the upkeep of large institutions and wealthy families: their income, expenditure and legal rights. However, a significant minority comprise the byproducts of becoming literate, numerate and learned: from elementary writing exercises and calculations to excerpts from the great works of Sumerian and Akkadian

literature and scholarship. Scribal and scholarly training depended heavily on memorisation, so that writing was often simply a means of learning by heart and written exercises essentially ephemeral byproducts of that process. Gradually the emphasis shifted, however, from the transmission of knowledge through memory and recitation (with concomitant textual flexibility) towards an increasing dependence on copying out manuscripts (and careful recording of sources) in the first millennium BC. A parallel tradition of editorial work, commentary-writing and recording the oral traditions around texts also developed at the same time. So far as we know, all of those engaged in such literary and scholarly activities made their livelihoods from this knowledge, whether through royal patronage, priestly employment, or solicitation of private clients for performance of ritual. As far as we can tell, there was no wealthy, leisured class for whom intellectual activities were optional, if challenging, pastimes.³

Dozens of collections of literary and scholarly tablets have been excavated, from family homes, temples and palaces, but they have rarely been studied holistically.⁴ Rather, while archaeologists have published their architecture in excavation reports, Assyriologists have mined them for manuscripts of individual compositions. The resulting publications are usually standard editions that draw on manuscripts from a multiplicity of archaeological findspots regardless of date, place or context and which emphasise homogeneity at the expense of variation. Perhaps for that very reason, there is an assumption that all cuneiform libraries were essentially similar: they contained the same sorts of texts on carefully copied manuscripts whose contents changed little over the centuries.⁵ However, as well as the apparently standard works (many of which are rather less than standardised on closer inspection of their manuscript sources), from mythology to omens to ritual, first-millennium BC cuneiform libraries typically also held commentaries on those works,⁶ whether freshly composed or themselves copies of traditional material, as well as new compositions which build on the intellectual tradition.

It is not immediately obvious whether ‘library’ is necessarily the right word for all such archaeological assemblages of scholarly tablets. Modern definitions of libraries, deriving ultimately from ancient Greek ideas, typically entail statements such as, ‘A place set apart to contain books

³ This aspect of ancient Mesopotamian society, so striking to Classicists, goes largely unremarked in Assyriological circles.

⁴ du Toit 1998 already makes this point.

⁵ The classic formulation of this stance is Oppenheim 1960; slightly revised as 1977 [1964]: 13–23.

⁶ For a major new study of commentaries in cuneiform scholarship, see Frahm 2011b.

for reading, study, or reference'.⁷ However, Assyriologists tend to define libraries not in terms of their ancient functions but in relation to their disposition when excavated. That is, archaeological assemblages of scholarly, literary tablets are typically labelled as 'libraries', in opposition to assemblages of legal, epistolary and administrative records, known as archives (even if excavation often produces admixtures of the two in the same findspots).⁸

In order to reconcile the Assyriological definition of the cuneiform 'library' with the more usual ones, we must confront two serious questions: first, whether cuneiform tablets can ever be considered as books, and if so under what circumstances; and second, what the functions of such collections of tablets were. I have argued for a positive response to the first question elsewhere;⁹ this chapter is an attempt at a partial answer to the second. There was certainly a native concept of library, albeit more restricted than in other ancient cultures: sporadically attested from the seventh to the second centuries BC, the word *gerkinakku* describes a room – usually in a temple – in which scholarly tablets were deposited, and the contents of that collection.¹⁰ For present purposes this is what we shall take 'library' to mean.

What did cuneiform libraries contain? Who created, supported and used them? Where were they housed? How were they formed, maintained and abandoned? And why did they exist at all? I shall not attempt to give exhaustive answers, but aim to provide some fruitful ways forward by comparing four scholarly tablet collections from the first millennium BC, at least three of which were themselves described as *gerginakku* in antiquity.

Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh

The one cuneiform library that is well known outside the tiny world of Assyriology is Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh. From their heartland on the northern Tigris, the Assyrians had ruled much of the Middle East since the early first millennium BC. By the time Assurbanipal (669–c. 630) came to power, the capital city, Nineveh, hosted a splendid array of palaces and

⁷ OED online (2010) sv. 'library'; cf. Canfora 1989: 77–8.

⁸ For instance, in the standard reference work on ancient Near Eastern libraries and archives, Pedersén 1998: 2–3.

⁹ In Robson 2007a I make the case that scholarly tablets of the first millennium BC can in some senses be seen as books because (amongst other reasons) their contents were transmitted as much by copying as by memory.

¹⁰ CAD G: 86–7.

temples, funded and furnished through plunder and tribute. The citadel of Nineveh, also known by the Ottoman Turkish name Kuyunjik, was amongst the first Assyrian cities to be rediscovered in the nineteenth century. It was dug by Austen Henry Layard and others in 1847–55, well before the advent of recorded, stratigraphic archaeology, yielding around 30,000 tablets and fragments. This first large discovery of cuneiform texts made its way to the British Museum, where it is still housed today. A combination of excavators' notes and textual evidence from the tablets themselves suggests that there may have been four royal libraries on the royal citadel, as well as a substantial archive: in the Southwest Palace, built for King Sennacherib (704–681) in the early seventh century; in the North Palace, constructed for his grandson Assurbanipal; and in the nearby temples of Nabû, god of wisdom, and the great goddess Ištar, both now largely destroyed.¹¹ All but the last contained tablets bearing colophons showing that they were written or collected on Assurbanipal's behalf.¹²

The meagre archaeological data is further complicated by the fact that the whole citadel was looted and burned during the Babylonian and Median sack of Nineveh in 612 BC. Nevertheless, museological evidence puts the total number of surviving library tablets (that is, excluding archival records) in seventh-century Nineveh at at least 20,000 plus several thousand further waxed writing boards. They were acquired through a number of means. The large majority were the result of indigenous copying and recall, editing and composing, and inheritance.¹³ But about 3,500 – over 17 per cent – arrived in Nineveh through forced acquisition in Babylonia (then a rebellious province of the Assyrian empire) or by the capture of Babylonian scholars themselves, who were put to writing out tablets in fetters.¹⁴ They

¹¹ Reade 1986. Reade 1998–2011 gives an excellent survey of the likely findspots of tablets in the British Museum's Kuyunjik collection.

¹² In Assyriological parlance, colophons are inscriptions added to a tablet after the main text has been finished, containing information about the circumstances of production. This ancient metadata may include any or all of: the name of the work, a description of the exemplar from which it was copied, the name and ancestry of the copyist/and or owner of the tablet, the location and date, and sometimes injunctions against loss or theft. Hunger 1968 is the standard reference work on cuneiform colophons, now much in need of revision though still immensely valuable. Hunger 1968 nos. 317–39 are his editions of the Assurbanipal colophons.

¹³ The letters SAA 10: 177, 240 and 255, from various court scholars to King Esarhaddon, all report on – or complain about – the complexities of collecting, collating and editing old tablets.

¹⁴ The inventories SAA 7: 49–56 enumerate the scholarly contents of a large number of confiscated tablets and writing boards entering the libraries of Nineveh in 648 BC, most or all of which were formerly owned by named individuals, mostly Babylonians. SAA 11: 156 lists the enforced copying labour of nearly thirty scribes, at least some of whom are also Babylonian. See Parpola 1983 for a detailed account.

can be identified today by their use of Babylonian sign-forms and spelling habits.¹⁵

The vast quantity, and often fragmentary state, of the Nineveh tablets means there is still no comprehensive overview of the libraries' contents.¹⁶ Meanwhile, two overlapping subsets of the corpus have been categorised by genre. Nearly three-fifths of the identified works on tablets written in Babylonian script concern divination, especially celestial omens.¹⁷ Hymns, incantations and rituals comprise a further third of the Babylonian tablets from Nineveh, while the majority of the remaining tenth are medical recipes. Genres such as word lists, mathematics, myths and epics represent a tiny fraction of the whole. Similarly about 800 learned commentaries survive from the Assyrian royal library, of which nearly a half concern extispicy (divination from the entrails of sacrificed animals), just under a third deal with celestial omens and about a seventh treat word lists.¹⁸ Even if neither the Babylonian texts nor the commentaries are fully representative samples of the collection as a whole, together they suggest that pre-horoscopic astrology, sacrificial divination and the performance of ritual dominated the libraries' holdings.

Although there had been an Assyrian royal tradition of tablet collecting since the late second millennium BC, in which most kings participated, there are good reasons to associate the libraries of Nineveh particularly closely with Assurbanipal. Most members of the Assyrian royal family had some training in cuneiform writing, but Assurbanipal himself was especially literate and cultured.¹⁹ As a boy he had trained for the priesthood as he was not (yet) a direct heir to the throne.²⁰ But his father Esarhaddon was unexpectedly nominated crown prince in 694 BC, ahead of his older brother, and became king in 681.²¹ He in turn named Assurbanipal as his heir after the untimely death of one of the latter's older brothers in 672.²² Esarhaddon then appointed his chief scribe and astrologer, Balasî, to act as Assurbanipal's tutor.²³ It has even been suggested that some of the hundreds of tablets written in Assurbanipal's name were actually inscribed by him in the final stages of his training and, in the traditional manner, deposited

¹⁵ See Fincke 2004.

¹⁶ The British Museum's ongoing Ashurbanipal Library Project, with the aid of funding from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, has begun a systematic online catalogue and image database of the Kuyunjik Collection, with the long-term aim of providing as much documentation as possible (www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/ashurbanipal_library_phase_1.aspx).

¹⁷ Fincke 2004. ¹⁸ Frahm 2004. ¹⁹ Zamazálova 2011; Frahm 2011a.

²⁰ Villard 1997. ²¹ Porter and Radner 1998: 146. ²² Weissert and Radner 1998.

²³ In the letter SAA 10: 39, written in the summer of 671 BC, Balasî thanks Esarhaddon for the appointment.

ina gerginakki bīt Nabu ša qereb Ninua ‘in the *gerginakku* of Nabû’s temple which is in the middle of Nineveh’ as offerings to the god of wisdom.²⁴ In his official inscriptions he made much of this divinely bestowed wisdom, most famously and lengthily in a passage from the inscription now known as L4 (lines 10–18):

Marduk, the sage of the gods, gave me wide understanding and broad perceptions as a gift.

Nabû, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition of all his wisdom as a present.

Ninurta and Nergal gave me physical fitness, manhood and unparalleled strength. I learnt the lore of the wise sage Adapa, the hidden secret, the whole of the scribal craft.

I can discern celestial and terrestrial portents and deliberate in the assembly of the experts.

I am able to discuss the series ‘If the liver is a mirror image of the sky’ with capable scholars.

I can solve convoluted reciprocals and calculations that do not come out evenly.

I have read cunningly written text in Sumerian, dark Akkadian, the interpretation of which is difficult.

I have examined stone inscriptions from before the flood, which are sealed, stopped up, mixed up.²⁵

The ‘capable scholars’ referred to here constituted the entourage of experts, supported by a patronage system of land grants and royal gifts, who served the Assyrian court and aided the king in his decision-making.²⁶ An undated roster from Assurbanipal’s reign shows that there could be up to forty in attendance at any one time, including Syro-Anatolian augurs and Egyptian scribes and dream interpreters.²⁷ Some 1,350 extant scholarly letters, divinatory queries and astrological reports to Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal provide extraordinarily rich insights into the workings of Assyrian court scholarship.²⁸ Assyrian and Babylonian diviners, exorcists, astrologers, physicians and lamenters all cited scholarly writings in their

²⁴ Livingstone 2007: 113; Hunger 1968: nos. 327–8, 338–9.

²⁵ Translated by Livingstone 2007: 100.

²⁶ On patronage, see Westbrook 2005; on Assyrian royal decision-making, see Radner 2011.

²⁷ The roster is SAA 7: 1; see Radner 2009 on foreign scholars at the Assyrian court.

²⁸ The scholarly correspondence is published in SAA 4; 8; 10; see <http://oracc.org/saao/knpp> (note 1) for a wide-ranging introduction to the politics of scholarship at the Neo-Assyrian court.

correspondence with the king, albeit some with more regularity than others.²⁹ We do not know whether they all had access to the royal library, were citing from their personal collections, or were quoting from memory. But an astrologer named Akkullanu seems to have managed some literary production in the royal library, overseeing several other scholars from various disciplines and reporting regularly to Assurbanipal on editorial matters.³⁰

Nineveh, then, provides the standard image of the Mesopotamian ‘library’ found in many popular accounts of library history: an enormous royal collection, acquired by fair means or foul, whose primary function was to provide large datasets of omens to aid royal decision-making and rituals to ensure continued divine support for the crown. But how generalisable is this picture? Over forty assemblages of scholarly tablets from first-millennium Assyria and Babylonia have been excavated to date.³¹ We shall compare Nineveh with three of them.

Ezida, another Assyrian royal library

Assurbanipal’s library is not the only Assyrian royal tablet collection to have been discovered. Ancient Kalhu (modern Nimrud), some 30 kilometres south of Nineveh on the Tigris, had served as the Assyrian capital in the ninth to eighth centuries and remained a royal city until its destruction in 614 BC. In 1949–63 a team led by Max Mallowan for the British School of Archaeology in Iraq ran a substantial excavation on its citadel.³² In 1955–7, a few hundred metres south of the palace, they unearthed a temple dedicated to Nabû, the god of wisdom, and his divine consort Tašmetu, which, like its counterpart in Nineveh, went by the Sumerian name Ezida (Sumerian ‘True/loyal House’). In a small room opposite the main shrine was a deposit of some 250 fragmentary scholarly tablets, the remains of an originally much more substantial *gerkinakku*.³³

²⁹ See Villard 1998 on literary quotations in scholarly letters; Robson 2011a and Veldhuis 2010 on quotations from omen collections.

³⁰ Akkullanu’s letters on royal library matters are published as SAA 10: 101–3.

³¹ Pedersén 1998: 275–80.

³² The final excavation report is Mallowan 1966; Oates and Oates 2001 give a very useful and detailed account of the ancient city; Curtis *et al.* 2008 present the results of recent research.

³³ The primary publication of the Ezida tablets – comprising a catalogue and scale drawings of each – is Wiseman and Black 1996; Black 2008 gives an accessible overview of the corpus; an online edition is in progress at <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?ezida>.

Although these meagre remnants comprise an assemblage that is literally a hundredth of the size of Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh, their make-up is remarkably similar. The genres best represented in Ezida are hymns, incantations and rituals (some 40%) and omens (27%), followed by word lists (15%) and medical recipes (7%). These are exactly those genres best attested in the commentaries and Babylonian-script tablets of Kuyunjik.

Further, although only about thirty tablets (about 12%) preserve any trace of a colophon, almost all of them give vital information about the men who worked there. An *āšipu* ('exorcist') named Banunu repeatedly exhorts readers, *gerginakka lā taparrar ikkil Ea šar Apsu* 'Do not disperse the library! Taboo of the god Ea, king of the Apsu!'³⁴ Banunu is also attested in Nineveh, as one of the overseers of the captive Babylonian scholars described above.³⁵ Most of the remaining colophons name scribes and scholars from just two well-connected families, which traced their ancestry to Assyrian court scholars of the early first millennium BC.³⁶ While the descendants of the *āšip šarri* ('royal exorcist') Issaran-šumu-ukin dominated the library in the ninth and eighth centuries, by the 720s they had been replaced by the family of Gabbu-ilani-ereš, who had been King Assurnāširpal's chief scholar. His seventh-century descendants are well known from the library tablets and royal correspondence of Nineveh. They include Nabû-zuqup-kena, the most prominent royal scholar in the days of kings Sargon II (721–705) and Sennacherib (704–670), and his sons Adad-šumu-ušur and Nabû-zeu-lešir, King Esarhaddon's chief exorcist and chief scribe respectively. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Ezida was a royal library very similar in function and personnel to, if much smaller than, Assurbanipal's library in Nineveh.

Interestingly, Nabû-zuqup-kena's many scholarly tablets were all apparently discovered in Nineveh. Yet fully two-thirds of his colophons explicitly state that the tablet was written at Kalhu,³⁷ thereby highlighting the vexed question of mobility of tablets, scholars and indeed whole libraries (although it is possible that there was nineteenth-century confusion or carelessness over findspots). For there is good evidence that the whole institution of Ezida moved, or perhaps bifurcated, not once but twice in the course of Neo-Assyrian history as the royal court moved from Kalhu to Sargon's short-lived capital Dur-Šarruken and thence to Nineveh under Sennacherib.³⁸ The building itself was replicated, with minor alterations,

³⁴ Wiseman and Black 1996: nos. 116, 188; see <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?gerginakku>. Ea was the crafty god of the fresh spring waters under the earth (the Apsu, from which the English word 'abyss' descends via Greek).

³⁵ See note 14. ³⁶ The details are presented in Robson forthcoming.

³⁷ Hunger 1968: nos. 293–4, 297, 305; Baker and Pearce 2001.

³⁸ Robson and Stevens forthcoming.

on each move, and its staff and tablet holdings transported and/or duplicated. Assyrian temples of the god Nabû all have essentially the same layout, with double shrines (one each for Nabû and Tašmetu) and adjacent throne rooms – not only in the royal cities of Kalhu, Assur and Dur-Šarruken but also in western provincial towns such as Guzana and Hadatu.³⁹ It is thus highly likely that the now-vanished Ezida of Nineveh, to which the young Assurbanipal offered his tablets, also followed this pattern.

Although the half-built city of Dur-Šarruken was definitively abandoned on Sargon's unpropitious death in battle, Kalhu was never entirely eclipsed by Nineveh. It remained an important royal centre and its Ezida continued to acquire new holdings, as demonstrated by the colophons of Esarhaddon-era royal scholars mentioned above. It also continued to attract pious donations of personnel and land right through the seventh century BC.⁴⁰

The close relationship between Neo-Assyrian kingship, deity and scholarship is elegantly realised in the architecture of the Kalhu Ezida. The temple, which is – as already mentioned – on the royal citadel just a short walk from the principal palace, is entered via a monumental gateway that features colossal beneficent spirits in typical Assyrian style. But whereas most temples and palaces famously feature monumental winged bulls, Ezida's entrance is flanked by giant fish-men, originally covered in gold leaf,⁴¹ who represented the primordial sages who brought wisdom and civilisation to humankind in deep antiquity. Off the temple's first courtyard, which was surrounded by primarily utilitarian offices, are two further courts. A large courtyard to the south gave access to the twin shrines of Nabû and Tašmetu, whose larger-than-life statues could gaze directly on the scholars at work in and around the tablet store immediately opposite. And to the west, a smaller courtyard led on to a small-scale throne room and miniature versions of the twin shrines, so that the king could visit with appropriate ritual and protocol. Contemporary records and letters show that this area of the temple was known as the '*akītu* suite', which was set aside for an annual 'sacred marriage' ritual between Nabû and Tašmetu, lasting several days and presided over by the king or the mayor of Kalhu on his behalf.⁴² This was not identical to the well-known Babylonian new-year *akītu*, in which Nabû also played a central role,⁴³ but served a similar function in renewing kingship and fertility as spring reached its peak.

³⁹ Turner 1968.

⁴⁰ The legal records SAA 12: 95–8 record private votive donations of personnel and land to the Ezida temple in Kalhu, the latest dated to 621 BC.

⁴¹ Oates and Oates 2001: 111. ⁴² See Postgate 1974; Oates and Oates 2001: 119–23.

⁴³ On the Babylonian *akītu* festival, see Bidmead 2002.

In sum, we should probably understand the temples of Nabû in Kalhu and Nineveh as branches of the same institutional network, providing divinely legitimated advice to the Neo-Assyrian throne. It just so happens that the fabric of the Kalhu Ezida has survived much more intact than its Nineveh counterpart, even if its tablets have not fared as well as the famous (but somewhat misnamed) Assurbanipal's library.

Huzirina, a school collection in provincial Assyria

We turn now to a third archaeological assemblage of scholarly tablets from seventh-century Assyria, far from the pomp and intrigue of the royal court. Huzirina (modern Sultantepe) was a small town some 400 kilometres west of Nineveh and about 20 kilometres north of Harran. A long-lived merchant city, provincial capital and cult centre of the moon god Sin, Harran (Akkadian 'Road' or 'Journey') was located at the crossroads of two vital overland trade routes: east–west from the Assyrian heartland to Aleppo and the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean; and north–south down the Balikh river from Anatolia to the Euphrates and Babylonia.⁴⁴ After the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, it briefly became the Assyrian capital as the empire regrouped and tried to fight back against the invading Medes and Babylonians. So Huzirina was not completely cut off from the intellectual currents of the empire, but neither was it at the centre of its scholarly activity.

The site of Sultantepe was investigated briefly in 1951–2 by an Anglo-Turkish team led by Seton Lloyd and Nuri Gökçe for the British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara.⁴⁵ Owing to some 7 metres of post-Assyrian strata above the seventh-century levels, the excavation was limited to a series of trenches around the edges of the high central acropolis. It turned out that an artificial brick platform had been made after levelling the old summit, in order to construct a monumental public building on it – almost certainly a temple, perhaps to the moon god of Harran or to the goddess Ištar – and associated smaller structures. Amongst them was a courtyard house with a small domestic altar made of rubble and plaster built against its outer wall, close to the front entrance. On top of the altar, the excavators found a pile of nearly 400 scholarly tablets,⁴⁶ surrounded and protected by

⁴⁴ Lloyd and Brice 1951: 80–1.

⁴⁵ Preliminary reports are Lloyd and Gökçe 1953; Lloyd 1954. No final excavation report was ever written.

⁴⁶ The tablets were catalogued and published as scale drawings by Gurney and Finkelstein 1957; Gurney and Hulin 1964; an online edition is in progress at <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?huzirina>.

a semi-circle of empty storage jars and covered with a heap of stone and pottery vessels.⁴⁷ The whole of the surrounding area was covered in smashed household goods and even a decapitated skull, leading the archaeologists to posit that the tablets had been hurriedly secreted over the shrine for protection as the Babylonians and Medes threatened Harran and its environs in 610 BC.

The composition of the cached tablet collection differs markedly in some respects from that of the contemporary Assyrian royal libraries. As in the Ezida temple, hymns, incantations and rituals dominate (45% of the corpus), but omens comprise just 7% of the extant tablets. Medical recipes (11%) and word lists (7%) survive in somewhat similar proportions to Kalhu, but the most noticeable difference is the relatively large percentage of literary works (15%). Over fifty manuscripts of many of the great Akkadian classics – including *The Epic of Creation*, *Gilgamesh*, *Anzu*, *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and *The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* – were found here, compared to just a handful in Kalhu. However, where the tablets from the royal cities are generally, as one might expect, elegantly executed in a clear hand and good orthography, the Huzirina tablets tend to poor spelling and sometimes incomprehensible script.⁴⁸

The scribes attested in the Huzirina colophons are particularly revealing of the collection's function.⁴⁹ Best attested are members of the Nur-Šamaš family, who – it is reasonable to assume – probably lived in the immediately adjacent house. The paterfamilias was one Qurdi-Nergal, priest of the gods Zababa and Baba of Erbil, Harran and Huzirina, who is named as a *šamallû šeḫru* 'junior apprentice scribe' in a tablet dating to 701 BC. His son Mušallim-Baba appears in colophons, as well as one Ninurta-[...], perhaps Qurdi-Nergal's great-grandson, in 619 BC.⁵⁰ We know nothing about how Qurdi-Nergal and his family made their living, although two fragmentary royal land grants from seventh-century Huzirina exempt cultic personnel from certain taxes and provide the temple(s) with regular offerings.⁵¹

Several unrelated men also wrote tablets *ana tāmarti Qurdi-Nergal* 'for Qurdi-Nergal's viewing', including one Nabu-ah-iddin and his pupil Nabu-rehtu-ušur. Using identical wording to the *āšipu* Banunu in Kalhu, the latter warns against the dispersal of the *gerginakku* as a taboo of the god Ea, in the colophon to a literary work copied in 701 BC.⁵² A further fifteen

⁴⁷ Lloyd and Gökçe 1953: 37. ⁴⁸ Gurney 1952: 26.

⁴⁹ The colophons were first edited by Hunger 1968: nos. 351–408; for a more thorough discussion, see Robson forthcoming.

⁵⁰ See Gurney 1997 for a family tree. ⁵¹ They are SAA 12: 24; 48.

⁵² <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?P338355>.

šamallû (*sehrûtu*) ‘(junior) apprentice scribes’ are named in the Huzirina cache. Particularly noteworthy are Šum-tabni-ušur, son of a royal doctor; Nabu-ibni, son of an Assyrian scribe; Mutaqqin-Aššur, son of a scribe of the city of Assur; Nabu-šumu-iškun, son of the *turtānu*’s senior scribe; and Bel-le’i- . . . , son of the *turtānu*’s scribe. The *turtānu* was the most senior of Assyria’s military officials who, not coincidentally, also governed the province immediately to the north of Harran.⁵³ Conspicuously, none of these young men hailed from the royal cities of Kalhu, Dur-Šarruken or Nineveh.

In this light, it is tempting to posit the Huzirina tablet collection as the remains of a scribal school, run by Qurdi-Nergal and his descendants, for the sons of provincial officials and the like. The tablets were produced, as was traditional, by copying or dictation, by youths in their late teens or early twenties in the final stages of training, for their older teachers.⁵⁴ The quality of the manuscripts, the rather backwater location and the social status of the apprentices collectively suggest that this was not an establishment of the highest educational standing – they would have been in the royal cities of the heartland – but certainly had aspirations and pretensions to cultural roundedness. As its students were not preparing to access the inner circle of the royal court, they had no great need for omens. But as they were probably destined for positions in the middle ranks of imperial governance, they were given a thorough grounding in the classics of their culture as well as in standard works of healing, prayer and penitence.

Reš, a city temple in Hellenistic Uruk

The Huzirina-Kalhu comparison shows that the composition and function of cuneiform libraries depended on socio-political circumstances: in the seventh century BC the collections of royal institutions differed quite dramatically from those in private priestly households. We shall now consider a fourth and final assemblage of scholarly tablets, from a city in second-century BC Babylonia, to test the impact of Persian and Seleucid rule on native intellectual culture.

The city of Uruk was ancient, august and enormous, even by Mesopotamian standards. It was here, in the late fourth millennium BC, that the world’s first writing had been developed for managing temple assets.⁵⁵

⁵³ Radner 2006: 59.

⁵⁴ See Robson 2008: 227–60 and Maul 2010 for such patterns of apprenticeship in later Babylonia and Neo-Assyrian Assur respectively.

⁵⁵ An authoritative and engaging introductory account is Nissen, Damerow and Englund 1993.

By the early third millennium it had grown to 5.5 square kilometres – about twice the size of Athens at its greatest extent and half the size of imperial Rome three millennia later.⁵⁶ By the late third millennium it had become known as the home of the legendary king Gilgamesh, a reputation which it retained even in the Seleucid period.⁵⁷ Uruk was still a thriving urban centre in the late first millennium BC and, along with Babylon itself, one of the last bastions of cuneiform culture in the face of increasing Hellenisation.

The Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft conducted several long series of excavations at Uruk over much of the twentieth century. Their primary focus was the enormous temple complex at the centre of the city which in the Seleucid period comprised two ziggurats and three gigantic temples: Reš, dedicated to the sky-god Anu-Zeus, and Eanna and Irigal (or Ešgal), both dedicated to Ištar-Venus.⁵⁸ In the winter of 1959–60 the team uncovered some 140 tablets and fragments in a small paved room adjacent to the southeastern gate of Reš, off one of its dozen courtyards.⁵⁹ This area of the temple had already been excavated once in 1912–13 and had also been thoroughly covered in looting pits, so that it is impossible to determine its exact function.

It is highly likely that at least 170 illicitly excavated tablets from Seleucid Uruk, which entered European and north American collections in the first decades of the twentieth century, also come from this findspot,⁶⁰ not least because many of the names and dates tally with those on the formally recovered tablets. However, no direct joins between the two groups of tablets have yet been made. In what follows we thus distinguish between ‘Reš’ tablets, formally excavated in the temple, and ‘Uruk’ tablets, which on internal evidence are highly likely to have been looted from the same locus.

The Reš tablets date from SE (Seleucid Era) 15–150 (297–162 BC), although the temple itself was not completed until 251 BC.⁶¹ Some tablets must, then, have been moved here from other places, including perhaps the Eanna temple. For amongst the illicitly excavated tablets is one with a colophon that ends, *ummānu ša šuma lā ušannū u ina gerginakki išakkanu Ištar hadiṣ lippalissu ša ultu Eanna ušeṣṣū aggiš Ištar lišteddiš* ‘The scholar

⁵⁶ Nissen 1988: 71–2.

⁵⁷ On the role of Uruk in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, see George 2003: 91–137.

⁵⁸ For their architectural history, see Downey 1988: 17–35; Kose 1998: 93–242, 257–76.

⁵⁹ The tablets were catalogued and published as scale drawings by van Dijk and Mayer 1980 and were discussed most recently by Clancier 2009: 86–90, 99–101, 406–9; an online edition is in progress at <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?resh>.

⁶⁰ van Dijk and Mayer 1980: 13; for a list and an online edition in progress, see <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?illicitly>.

⁶¹ Downey 2003: 188. The Seleucid Era (SE) was deemed to have begun on New Year’s Day (signalled by the first new moon after the spring equinox) in 311 BC, Seleucus I Nicator’s first regnal year in Babylonia.

who does not change a line and deposits (it) in the library: may the goddess Ištar look joyfully on him! He who removes it from the Eanna temple: may Ištar keep pursuing him angrily!⁶²

About sixty of the Reš tablets are unidentifiable fragments and another thirty are legal and administrative records. Of the remaining fifty manuscripts, twenty-three (46%) are hymns, incantations and rituals and eighteen (36%) are omens. So far, so much like earlier libraries. But if we factor in the extra 170 Uruk scholarly tablets that are likely to have come from the same findspot, we find a very different picture: 115 (51%) of the new total contain mathematical astronomy – a genre invented since the fall of native rule – fifty-one (23%) contain hymns, incantations and rituals, and thirty-seven (16%) bear omens.

The shift in interests is explicable once we look at the composers and copyists of the texts. In Seleucid Babylonia (as in Neo-Assyrian Kalhu and elsewhere), families identified themselves with eponymous ancestors.⁶³ The ancestral names attested more than once in the Reš tablets are Ahi'utu, Ekur-zakir and Sin-leqi-unninni.⁶⁴ The Uruk scholarly tablets were written exclusively by men from those same three families, plus that of Hunzû, and even by the same individuals as are found in the Reš corpus.

For instance, amongst the Reš tablets is a prayer to be offered as a bull is sacrificed in order to make the skin of a ritual kettle-drum from its hide. Its colophon, which dates the tablet to 176 BC, reads:

A šu'illakku-prayer of the prize bull of the temple-workshop.

Tablet of Anu-aba-uter, son of Anu-belšunu, descendant of Sin-leqi-unninni. Hand of Anu-balassu-iqbi, son of Nidintu-Anu, son of Anu-belšunu, descendant of Sin-leqi-unninni, Urukean. Uruk, the 21st day of Ululu (month VI), year 1 hundred 36, Seleucus was king.⁶⁵

And a list of ancient royal sages, written eleven years later, ends:

[Tablet] of Anu-belšunu, son of Nidintu-Anu, descendant of Sin-leqi-unninni, lamentation priest of Anu and Antu, Urukean. (Written with) his own hand. Uruk, the 10th day of Ayyaru (month II), year 1 hundred 47, Antiochus was king. He who fears Anu shall not carry it off.⁶⁶

⁶² Hunger 1968: no 106; to appear online as <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?P363709>.

⁶³ See Brinkman 2006 for the origins of this practice.

⁶⁴ Ahi'utu: three times, all in archival records; Ekur-zakir: three times: once in a scholarly colophon and twice in archival records, and Sin-leqi-unninni: five times in scholarly colophons and once in a legal record; see van Dijk and Mayer 1980: 26–9.

⁶⁵ van Dijk and Mayer 1980: no. 6; online edition at <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?P363270>.

⁶⁶ van Dijk and Mayer 1980: no. 89; online edition at <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?P363353>.

Three generations of the Sin-leqi-unninni family – descendants of the fabled editor of *Gilgamesh*⁶⁷ – are attested here: in the first colophon we have the paterfamilias Anu-belšunu the elder and his two sons Nidintu-Anu (named after his grandfather and thus the eldest son)⁶⁸ and Anu-aba-uter. Nidintu-Anu's sons Anu-belšunu the younger and Anu-balassu-iqbi wrote the second and first tablets respectively.

Four of these five men are also attested on legal and scholarly tablets excavated illicitly from Uruk.⁶⁹ Anu-belšunu the elder may have been born in SE 63 (249 BC) if we are to believe a horoscope written in his name.⁷⁰ He was intellectually and economically active from SE 83 at the latest to at least SE 123 (229–189 BC). As a young man he copied scholarly tablets – mostly omens, rituals and mathematical astronomy – for his father Nidintu-Anu and (yet another) Anu-belšunu of the Ahi'utu family and then trained three of his own sons. Nidintu-Anu the younger copied out a lamentation to the god Ellil for Anu-belšunu in SE 108 (204 BC) while Anu-aba-uter wrote a building ritual, some astrological medicine and a great deal of mathematical astronomy for him and for Šamaš-eṭir of the Ekur-zakir family between SE 112 and SE 121 (200–191 BC). Anu-belšunu the younger is not attested outside the Reš corpus but his younger brother Anu-balassu-iqbi was trained by uncle Anu-aba-uter in laments and mathematical astronomy from SE 130 to SE 136 (182–176 BC).

How are we to make sense of the apparently antithetical combination of lamentation and ritual and mathematical astronomy written by these men? All were known by the title of *'kalû* (lamentation priest) of Anu and Antu', the all-important deities whose sanctuaries were at the heart of Reš. The role of the Seleucid *kalû*, just as it had been in Neo-Assyrian times, was to soothe and placate the gods through ritual performance of lamentation in times of disturbance and distress: during repairs to the gods' sanctuaries for instance, or at times of solar and lunar eclipse. A vast and intricate body of *kalûtu* – *kalûs'* laments and rituals – survives from Seleucid Uruk, much of it anonymous but significant numbers from the Sin-leqi-unninni men's hands.⁷¹ As the legal documents from Reš and elsewhere in Uruk show, the *kalûs* and other priests supported themselves through prebends – rights to shares in the temple's offerings income – and through the management of agricultural and urban land. Royal support for the temple was sporadic at best.

⁶⁷ On Sin-leqi-unninni see George 2003: 28–33. ⁶⁸ On such naming practices, see Baker 2002.

⁶⁹ Discussed in more detail by Robson 2008: 240–60.

⁷⁰ Edited by Beaulieu and Rochberg 1996.

⁷¹ Many of the laments are edited by Cohen 1988 and the rituals by Linssen 2004. For tablets by and for the Sin-leqi-unninni family, see <http://oracc.org/cams/gkab?sin-leqi-unninni>.

However, Anu-aba-uter and his mentor Šamaš-eṭir of the Ekur-zakir family – who later became chief priest of Reš – also took the archaic title ‘scribe of *Enūma Anu Ellil*’. In Neo-Assyrian times this term had designated men such as crown prince Assurbanipal’s tutor Balasî, who made qualitative observations of the night sky and interpreted them through omens from the great handbook *Enūma Anu Ellil*. The gradual mathematisation of the night sky had begun in eighth-century Babylon, with systematic observation of lunar eclipses. By the Seleucid period, only lip service was paid to celestial omens, as zodiacal schemas and increasingly sophisticated predictive models took over. This intellectual shift is clearly visible in the Uruk tablets.⁷² In the late third century, Anu-belšunu the elder’s generation still copied *Enūma Anu Ellil* and made short-term predictions based on simple periodicities. By the early second century – in Anu-aba-uter’s generation – we find short-term predictions alongside the mature mathematical astronomy now known by historians as Systems A and B, but no celestial omens. Another twenty years later, Anu-balassu-iqbi and his contemporaries only used Systems A and B.

For the *kalûs* of Uruk, then, astronomy was a specialised branch of their discipline. We might imagine that, as faith in the old belief systems declined in the course of the early Hellenistic period, the priesthood needed to maintain a strong worshipper base in order to protect their social standing as well as their economic support system. Much of their allure rested on the impressive public chanting of elaborate lamentations, accompanied by the beating of kettle-drums, to placate the upset gods during solar and lunar eclipses. In this light, we can see the ever-increasing mathematisation of their predictive methods as a means of ensuring the continued accuracy of ritual timings – and as a conspicuous display of intellectual endeavour that was currently beyond Greek competence.⁷³ Sadly, the project failed within a few generations. Anu-balassu-iqbi is the last known astronomer-*kalû* of Uruk, while Reš itself was destroyed by fire in 124 BC, shortly after the Parthian conquest, and never rebuilt.⁷⁴

Conclusions: the four libraries compared

As Yun Lee Too reminds us, ‘the words “ancient library” [may not] always refer to the same thing where different people of antiquity are concerned’.⁷⁵ She worries that ‘the [modern] scholarly emphasis on the

⁷² On the evolution of celestial scholarship in Seleucid Uruk, see Robson 2007b.

⁷³ As argued by Bowen 2002. ⁷⁴ Downey 2003: 189. ⁷⁵ Too 2010: 4.

Alexandrian library that constructs this institution as *the* ancient library suggests that “ancient library” might indeed be a static entity’. A similar privileging of Assurbanipal’s library at Nineveh permeates the perceptions of cuneiform libraries of the ancient Middle East. However, this brief survey has shown how various the contents and functions of such collections actually were.

The scholarly tablets of the Kalhu Ezida not surprisingly provide the closest match to the Nineveh library. In this Assyrian royal temple, active throughout the eighth and seventh centuries BC, royal advisors worked in kin-based groups, supported by direct and institutional patronage from the king. Here, as in Nineveh, the emphasis was on omens, incantations and ritual to provide divinely authorised guidance to the crown. As part of a network of such institutions, the Kalhu Ezida was partially emptied of its tablets as the capital moved, first to the short-lived new city of Dur-Šarruken and later to Nineveh; yet it continued to function and was destroyed only at the end of the empire in c. 614 BC.

The cache of tablets found outside a domestic dwelling at Huzirina, not far from the western Assyrian city of Harran, provides a contemporary contrast. It seems to have belonged to a priestly family, active c. 718–610 BC, who educated the sons of local officials – but conspicuously no young men from royal cities – and perhaps also had income through royal and private endowments to the temple with which they were associated. Here the emphasis was on incantations, (non-royal) ritual, medicine and literature – the last two genres noticeably more prominent than the royal library. The collection was hidden away for safe-keeping as invaders attacked the rump of the Assyrian empire, and never returned for.

Finally, the remains of a much-looted tablet room in Reš, the main city temple of Uruk in Seleucid Babylonia, contained the professional and legal records of a few priestly families, especially over the period c. 220–170 BC. The descendants of Ekur-zakir and Sin-leqi-unninni served as lamentation priests and astronomers of the god Anu, supported by prebendary income and land holdings. Their scholarly writings accumulated, as the tablets of Huzirina had, through young men copying and composing for older mentors. But in Reš the tight focus on astronomy, lamentations and ritual was closely aligned to the *kalûs*’ professional interests, rather as the contents of the Ezida had been. As the men of Reš had no royal patronage, however indirect, they set their own priorities and agendas, responding very differently to the divine world than the Assyrians had. Because they depended ultimately on continued offerings from worshippers, their income and prestige withered with the loss of indigenous culture and finally failed in the mid-second century BC.

This sketch of the libraries of Assyria and Babylonia marks the beginning of a large-scale research endeavour, not its final outcome. I have briefly surveyed just four of the forty or more excavated assemblages of scholarly tablets from the region, and based my analysis of them on corpora that we are still in the process of editing. It is likely that future research will necessitate substantial revisions and improvements to the picture painted here.

However, it is already clear that, in contrast to many libraries of the classical world, cuneiform ‘libraries’ apparently had no public face or function. There were certainly no dedicated library buildings. While tablet collections could be housed in monumentally large urban temples such as Ezida or Reš, which stood literally and metaphorically at the heart of Assyrian and Babylonian cities, it is highly unlikely that any but the scholarly personnel who created and used them had any notion of their existence. There is little or no evidence (yet) of librarians, catalogues or other finding aids,⁷⁶ absences which further hint at very restricted user (and production) communities.

On the other hand, we can already see that, while cuneiform ‘libraries’ had much in common, they were neither static nor universally similar. Collections accrued as much through educational copying and composition by younger men for older mentors as by acquisition or by other means. Their scale, composition and function depended heavily on the particular needs and interests of the institutions and individuals, both patrons and scholars, who used them. Once royal patronage disappeared with the end of indigenous rule, scholarly communities had to rely exclusively on religious and private support. New genres of writing, such as personal horoscopes, astrological medicine and mathematical astronomy, reflect the effort put in to attracting and retaining new clientele.⁷⁷ The model of the cuneiform *gerginakku* was robust and flexible enough to support both tradition and innovation for several hundred years after the loss of political engagement with native intellectual culture.

⁷⁶ The records from Nineveh mentioned above (note 14) should be understood as booty rosters, not acquisition lists; and we should be wary of labelling Akkullanu, Banunu or any of their colleagues as ‘librarians’ (notes 13, 30).

⁷⁷ On personal horoscopes, see Rochberg 1998; on astrological medicine, Heessel 2008; on mathematical astronomy, Steele 2008: 39–66.