

# Enheduana and the Invention of Authorship

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**Abstract:** The first known author, Enheduana, gained a central place in the literary culture of ancient Iraq long after the death of Sumerian, the language in which her poems were written. The essay argues that her authorship served to depict the Sumerian literary heritage as a tangible object that could be acquired by people who did not speak Sumerian as their native language, since Enheduana's poems condensed a cacophony of independent traditions into a single entity. The process primarily took place in the city of Nippur in the troubled decades after 1740 BC, as the ancient scholars desperately needed to assert their importance. They did so by claiming special access to Sumerian literature, and authorship served as an ideal vehicle to represent that literature and that access. In short, Enheduana became a body and a bridge for Sumerian literature, condensing it into a single object and allowing it to move into a new cultural context.

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## Introduction

Literature begins in complete anonymity. The oldest known literary texts are entirely anonymous. For more than a millennium after the invention of writing, c. 3500 BC, literature would be composed, copied, and circulated without authorial attributions. This changed at the beginning of the second millennium BC, when the scholars of ancient Iraq made an author, the high priestess Enheduana, central to their literary corpus, attributing to her a series of hymns and autobiographical poems. For the first time in world history, it became possible to link a work of poetry to a named individual, and authorship was born.

Though modern scholars debate whether the historical Enheduana composed the poems attributed to her by the ancient scribes, the attribution is significant in itself. Whether or not it is historically accurate, it represents the earliest known

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instance of the very notion that literary works can be credited to a specific person. But why did this innovation take place, and why did it take place at that point in time?

In a nutshell, authorship gained in importance when the Sumerian language died out. The historical Enheduana lived in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century BC, but the preserved manuscripts of her poems were copied out much later, in the Old Babylonian period (19<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century BC). By then, Sumerian had ceased to be spoken as a living language, though it continued to be used as a language of literature, scholarship, and religious worship. In this essay, I argue that authorship was invented to represent a largely invented “Sumerian tradition” as a single, coherent, and tangible object that could be appropriated by Old Babylonian scribes. The idea of “the author” condensed what was in fact a complex, abstract literary heritage into a single figure.

The condensation of Sumerian was particularly significant in the context where Enheduana’s poems were most intensively studied: the city of Nippur in the decades after 1740 BC. For much of its history, Nippur was the religious centre of ancient Iraq, home to the temples of the most important deities in the Sumerian and Babylonian pantheon and the *axis mundi* of ancient cosmography. But in 1740 BC, Nippur was struck by political crises and social disruption. The city’s scholars desperately needed to assert their importance, and so invoked the memory of a venerable Sumerian culture to which they held special access. In this essay, I argue that Enheduana served as the embodiment of that culture and that access.

I analyse two texts attributed to Enheduana: the *Temple Hymns*, a collection of hymns addressed to the temples of various Sumerian cities, and the *Exaltation of Inana*, a prayer to the goddess Inana that includes an account of how Enheduana was cast into exile. I suggest that the *Temple Hymns* gathered the local traditions of Sumerian city states into a single text, turning a mishmash of local traditions into a composite but still coherent cultural identity. The figure of the author served to guarantee the underlying unity of the text, and with it, the unity of the culture depicted in that text. Meanwhile, the *Exaltation* fostered the ideal that Akkadian-speaking scholars could achieve perfect eloquence in Sumerian and employ that eloquence to address the gods. The figure of Enheduana thus transformed Sumerian from a heterogeneous congeries of traditions into a singular entity that others could appropriate and use.

In making this claim, I draw on the work of Alexander Beecroft (*Authorship*). Beecroft has explored the role of authorship in early Greece and China, arguing that authors became important in the transition from what he terms “epichoric” to “panchoric” forms of literary circulation—meaning the assimilation of local literary traditions into a new cultural whole. In Greece, the literature of each *polis* was gradually integrated into a Pan-Hellenic community, but the poems thereby lost some of the contextual information that had made them meaningful to their original

epichoric community, including a tradition of oral delivery and references to local places and cults. The figure of the author made up for that loss, supplying the texts with an interpretative context as they moved into new territory, by grounding them in a historical and geographical setting and accounting for the circumstances of their composition (Beecroft *Authorship*, ch. 3 and 4). Authors thus served as a pre-packaged frame of understanding within which their texts could be made meaningful. Here I argue that a similar process explains the importance attached to Enheduana by Old Babylonian scholars. When the previously independent Sumerian traditions were collective into a new entity, the figure of Enheduana bridged the gap between the local literary traditions and their new, non-Sumerian readers. In short, authorship in the ancient world allowed literature to move beyond its place of origin.

### **The roots of authorship**

During the third and early second millennium BC, the region we now call Iraq was divided into a multitude of city states, each with its own religious worship, administrative system, and local identity: Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Eridu, Kesh, Lagash, Isin, and so on. The cities were embroiled in a network of conflicts and alliances, but they remained largely independent of each other until the 23rd century BC, when king Sargon of Akkad brought them under a single rule, creating the short-lived Old Akkadian empire—the first empire of world history (Foster *Agade*).

At the time, the region was bilingual. The south mainly spoke Sumerian and the north mainly Akkadian, but the two languages intermingled throughout the area and were written with the same script, cuneiform. King Sargon presumably spoke Akkadian as his mother tongue but he installed his daughter, Enheduana, as high priestess of the god Nanna in the southern, Sumerian-speaking city of Ur. The few texts mentioning Enheduana that verifiably date to the Old Akkadian period are all in Sumerian, and her name is a Sumerian phrase that literally means “High priestess worthy of heaven” (or perhaps “The high priestess, the heavenly ornament”).

After generations of political instability and constant revolts, the Old Akkadian empire collapsed around year 2150 BC. At approximately the same time, Sumerian began to die out as a spoken language. The state that rose to take the place of the Old Akkadian empire, the Third Dynasty of Ur, implemented Sumerian as the language of administration and courtly life, but even then, it may already have been an artificial written language (for the question of when exactly Sumerian died out, see Woods, Rubio “Shulgi”, and Michalowski “Lives”). By at least the turn of the millennium, Sumerian had died out as a spoken idiom, becoming instead a learned language of scholarship and ritual, not unlike Latin in the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, the Akkadian language had split into a Babylonian dialect spoken in the south and an Assyrian dialect spoken in the north.

In the first centuries of the second millennium, a profound cultural shift took place, whereby Babylonian culture emerged as the heir of the Sumerian tradition. Much of what we know about the literary culture of the time comes from the Babylonian schools, known as *edubba'a* (literally “house of tablets”, or “house where tablets are distributed”). The schools taught the future priests and civil servants of Babylonia cuneiform writing, mathematics, and Sumerian grammar. The students copied their texts on clay tablets that have been preserved by the thousands, allowing us to reconstruct the curriculum in detail (Tinney, Veldhuis *Elementary*, Robson “Tablet House”).

Old Babylonian education consisted of two phases, elementary and advanced (see the overview in Robson “Tablet House” 47). During the elementary phase, students learned the cuneiform script, the Sumerian language, mathematics, and a comprehensive technical vocabulary. In the advanced phase, they turned to Sumerian literature, and especially two groups of texts: the Tetrad, a set of four hymns to kings and to the goddess of writing (Tinney), and the Decad, ten compositions of varying nature, including hymns, myths, and epic poetry (Delnero “Catalogues”).

Beside their curriculum, we know relatively little about Old Babylonian schools. We do not know who the teachers and the students were, or what kind of pedagogical practices accompanied the copying of texts. While there are some literary compositions that describe school life (Volk), they are quite unreliable as sources of historical evidence (Robson “Tablet House” 39, Civil 229). Further, as I return to below, our knowledge of Old Babylonian schools is heavily skewed towards one specific context, the city of Nippur during the reign of king Samsu-iluna (c. 1750–1712 BC).

A particularly important source of information about Old Babylonian schools is “House F” in Nippur, where archaeologists recovered no less than 1,425 cuneiform tablets of which 98% were school texts (Robson “Tablet House”). House F is a small glimpse of what an Old Babylonian school could look like, though it is difficult to tell how representative it would have been. It is an unimpressive domestic dwelling, c. 45 m<sup>2</sup> in size, with three small rooms and two courtyards. Had it not been for the thousands of texts recovered there, it would have been virtually indistinguishable from an ordinary Old Babylonian home.

It is in the Old Babylonian schools that authorship makes its first appearance in the historical record, as Enheduana’s works gained a central place in their curriculum. For the first time in preserved literary history, poems were treated as the output of an identifiable individual. The *Exaltation* became part of the Decad, and it is among the best attested works of Sumerian literature. A number of other poems were also attributed to Enheduana, including the *Temple Hymns* discussed

below, another hymn to Inana, and two hymns to the moon god Nanna (for the latter, see J.G. Westenholz).

Sumerologists disagree about whether the historical Enheduana was indeed the author of these works (see e.g. Michalowski “Sailing” 184 *versus* Foster *Agade* 207). The earliest known manuscript of her poems dates to centuries after the Old Akkadian period, and while this may be just an accident of preservation, it is also possible that the texts were composed in Enheduana’s name long after her death. However, the question is not really relevant for the purposes of this essay. What interests me is not whether the historical person Enheduana was the “true” author of the poems, but why her purported authorship became so important to Old Babylonian scholars. Her poems may well have circulated orally for centuries, and indeed, two manuscript of the *Temple Hymns* date to preceding periods, the Third Dynasty of Ur (22nd–21st century BC) and the early Isin period (20th century BC). But it was in the *edubba’a* that, it seems, the poems first came to be widely read and carefully studied. As such, it was in the Old Babylonian schools that Enheduana’s authorship—and therefore authorship as such—first became a significant aspect of literary culture. Even if the poems were composed during the Old Akkadian period, they would have acquired new meanings and connotations when they were included in the Old Babylonian curriculum.

The question is then why authorship became so significant at just that time. Here I argue that it was due to the curious afterlife of Sumerian culture, combined with a political crisis that made this culture particularly salient. This argument does not invalidate the very real possibility that Enheduana was the author of the works attributed to her. Rather, I explore why her authorship seems to have become far more significant in the Old Babylonian period than it had previously been, and what it might have meant to the students who copied the poems in that historical context.

### **The invention of Sumerian**

It is deceptively easy to think of the people who lived in Sumer and spoke Sumerian as “the Sumerians”. Likewise, it is tempting to speak of a single “Sumerian culture”, implying that it comprised a coherent world view and a single corpus of literary works. But things are not so straightforward. “Sumerian”, as an identity and not just a place, was created *ex post facto* (Rubio “Invention”). In the third millennium BC, there had been a notion of “Sumer” as a geographical region, and of “Sumerian” as a language that was spoken in that region, but there had been no concept of Sumerian as something one could be or of Sumerian culture as a bounded whole distinct from its neighbours. Sumer was a place and a language, not a people or a culture. Only a single text from the entire third millennium BC employs the term “Sumerian” to refer to a group of people (Rubio “Invention” 235). Otherwise, people saw

themselves as citizens of Ur, Nippur, Uruk, Lagash, Isin, Kish, or the like, but never referred to themselves as “Sumerian”.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the city as a building block of cultural identity during this period. Each city preserved its own customs, literary traditions, and state practices. Of course, the cities interacted with each other, but the texts often display a clearer awareness of mutual differences than of any overarching likeness. The Sumerian-speaking cities did share a common pantheon, but each god remained closely tied to a specific city: the king of the gods Enlil was tied to Nippur, the moon god Nanna to Ur, the wise god Enki to Eridu, the goddess Inana to Uruk, and so on. Further, the “Sumerian-speaking people” were not really a delimitable group either, since the region was effectively bilingual. In any given city people spoke Sumerian, Akkadian, or both. Finally, when empires brought the cities under a single rule, as with Sargon’s Old Akkadian dynasty, their territory was never limited to “Sumer” but included also other regions. In sum, during the third millennium, it is practically impossible to establish “Sumerian culture” as a clearly delimited, coherent entity.

However, during the Old Babylonian period, after the Sumerian language had ceased to be spoken, the *edubba’a* began to cultivate a sense of distinctive “Sumerianness” that the would-be scribes were made to study and revere. As shown by Niek Veldhuis (*Nanše* 75–76), the Old Babylonian curriculum promoted the illusion that southern Iraq had always been a unified state and not a set of independent cities. For example, the *Sumerian King List* arranges the chronology of the third millennium as if there had been, not multiple dynasties unfolding in parallel in each city, but a succession of kings ruling all of Sumer with power passing from one city to the next: first Eridu, then Kish, then Ur, and so on. (Michalowski “History”). Further, the very sequence of the curriculum promoted the notion of Sumer as a unified entity. Texts from Ur, Uruk, Nippur, and Lagash were studied in sequence, juxtaposed to give the impression that they belonged to the same tradition.

The Old Babylonian schools thus moulded the Sumerian literary heritage into a distinct cultural identity. As noted by Jerrold Cooper (1), “Sumerian identity as such appears only as an artefact of the scribal literary curriculum once the Sumerian language had to be acquired through education rather than as a mother tongue.” In other words, the death of the Sumerian language led to the birth of Sumerian culture. Sumerian-in-the-singular came about as a retrojection, a post-mortem reinvention of what had actually been a patchwork of local traditions. No one was ever born Sumerian, “[r]ather, to be Sumerian was to be learned. Sumerian is an identity that arose only once the Sumerian language had to be acquired in school” (Cooper 11, emphasis in the original).



To speak Sumerian, read Sumerian literature, and know Sumerian history were turned into the markers of an elite group of scholars serving as priests and court officials. The invented Sumerianness became a source of cultural capital that was produced within the institution of the *edubba'a*, a vehicle for the literate class to position themselves as a unified group commanding special access to the past (Veldhuis *Nanše* 46, Richardson, Steinkeller). Those who had successfully passed through the curriculum became “privy to a unique knowledge of the past, linguistic, historical, and poetic, that marked them as privileged individuals who shared knowledge as a bond of unity” (Michalowski “Literacy” 52).

So far I have spoken of the “Old Babylonian curriculum” as if it were a single thing with a single function. However, one must add an important reservation to this picture. We know the Old Babylonian curriculum mainly from one city, Nippur. Archaeological excavations have yielded far more school texts in Nippur than from anywhere else—almost nine tenths of the entire corpus—which obviously skews our image of Old Babylonian education as a whole (Robson “Tablet House” 52, Delnero “Inana” 142–46). To the extent that the preserved material allows us to compare different cities, a number of local differences emerge both in the structure of the curriculum and in its pedagogical goals (Delnero “Invention”).

Based on current evidence, it is reasonable to assume that there was never one general Old Babylonian curriculum, but a number of local traditions—related and at least somewhat similar, but not identical. The argument presented by Rubio, Veldhuis, and Cooper, that Old Babylonian schools constructed an ideal of a single Sumerian heritage, may still apply, but only in the limited context of Nippur. The curriculum did portray the Sumerian cities as part of a single culture, but this was a fiction that was embedded in one city and that was primarily meaningful there. Even as the Nippurian curriculum assembled local traditions into a new “pan-Sumerian” whole, it also sought to make Nippur the centre of that whole. This local context is key to the reception of Enheduana’s works, since the overwhelming majority of their manuscripts come from Nippur: 62 of 77 for the *Exaltation* and 37 of 44 for the *Temple Hymns* (excluding tablets of unknown provenience). Though Enheduana came from Akkad and lived in Ur, it was in Nippur that her works found fame.

Further, our knowledge of the Old Babylonian curriculum is limited not only to Nippur, but to a specific time frame. Though the tablets are difficult to date precisely, the archaeological context suggests that most of the recovered school texts were written between 1740 and 1722 BC (Brisch 38, Robson “Tablet House” 327). This may be more than a coincidence dictated by the vagaries of archaeological excavation: there is reason to believe that those decades did see a rise in the importance of scribal education.

The years following 1740 BC were a time of deep crisis for Nippur. The city joined a rebellion against the Babylon-based rule of king Samsu-iluna that was mercilessly put down. Nippur was left in tatters. Its civil life was disrupted, its economy waned, and much of the population migrated north. Samsu-iluna's power also deteriorated, as the state began to lose control over its southern cities. The overwhelming trove of school texts recovered at Nippur were thus produced in the immediate aftermath of a profound social crisis: As Nicole Brisch (39) puts it, "this is the historical background for the Sumerian literary texts as preserved. The Nippur texts offer us a glimpse into a school curriculum *after* the rebellion" (emphasis in the original).

The portrayal of "Sumer" as a singular, significant heritage must have born a special urgency at the time. In the face of Nippur's dwindling status and deteriorating civil life, the city needed to assert its importance more than ever. Its claim to fame lay in being a centre of religious worship, literary erudition, and Sumerian heritage, so it is hardly surprising that the schools of the city should highlight the importance of just those things. Further, the curriculum's implicit message of cultural unity must have been particularly conspicuous in a time where actual political unity was unravelling. As Brisch notes (40), the school texts may have been officially designed to offer ideological support for the idea of a unified Mesopotamia, an idea that the kings of Babylon tried to revive (with little success). Read unofficially they could at the same time subtly underline the fact that the kings at Babylon could not live up to the successes of the past. Indeed, the focus on the invented unity of the past would have been especially clear in the case of Enheduana, as her father Sargon was the most famous political unifier in the history of cuneiform cultures.

In the following sections, I argue that the creation of "Sumerian-in-the-singular" was the reason why Enheduana's authorship became important in Old Babylonian schools. The notion of a Sumerian culture that could be accessed through education bolstered the Nippurian scholars' sense of professional identity and prestige, at a point in time when that prestige was more direly needed than ever. Enheduana was perfectly suited to represent that notion, embodying as she did the ideals of literary erudition, a coherent Sumerian identity, and a unified system of worship.

In short, Enheduana came to serve as a *body* and a *bridge* for Sumerian identity. First, she personified the Sumerian literary tradition, condensing a broader mixture of traditions into a single figure and so guaranteeing its coherence, as I show through a reading of the *Temple Hymns*. Second, she provided a working model for how that tradition could be acquired by Akkadian-speaking scribes, as I show through a reading of the *Exaltation*.



### Embodiment and anthology

The *Temple Hymns* comprise a total of forty-two hymns invoking the main temples of a number of Sumerian cities (a new edition of the text is being prepared by Monica Phillips). They are relatively short, between 8 and 23 lines each. According to the first editors of the text, Åke Sjöberg and Eugen Bergmann (3), the hymns “follow a definite pattern: address to the temple with hymnical epithets, followed by an address to the deity in similar style and a refrain”. Indeed, what matters here is not the content of the individual hymns but the form of the overall collection—or rather, the very fact that it is a collection, juxtaposing and standardizing hymns related to a number of local cults.

A postscript to the collection states that: “The composer (lit. ‘weaver’) of the tablet is Enheduana. / My lord, something has been created that no one had created before!”<sup>2</sup> Given what we know about the literary history of the *Temple Hymns*, the metaphor of weaving seems apt. The composer of the text did not create it *ex nihilo* but drew on an existing tradition of praise poems addressed to temples, collecting and reshaping them to form a single text with a uniform format, like the threads of a textile being arranged into a new weave. It is thus the composition as a whole, rather than its individual parts, that “no one had created before” (see Helle “What Is an Author” 124).

If the *Temple Hymns* were composed by the historical Enheduana, they would have served a patent ideological purpose, as the literary equivalent of Sargon’s subjugation of the Sumerian city states under one empire. The cities included in the *Temple Hymns* are brought together and made to follow a consistent pattern, in a kind of hymnic imperialism. But even if the *Temple Hymns* are indeed Old Akkadian in origin, the collection would have gained a somewhat different function as it entered the Old Babylonian curriculum.

Even though the curriculum fostered the idea of “Sumer” as a unified entity, that process of unification did not mean that all local traditions were merely conflated into one. Local differences were preserved and juxtaposed to create a sense of togetherness. The Sumerian identity constructed in the Old Babylonian period was a mosaic, not a melting pot. The structure of the curriculum thus carried the indirect voice that speaks through the corpus in its entirety: the history of Uruk is our history, the history of Lagaš is our history, too, and so are the histories of Ur, Isin, and Nippur. There is one Sumerian language, one Sumerian history, one Sumerian heritage (Veldhuis *Nanše* 75–76).

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<sup>2</sup> lu<sub>2</sub> dub zu<sub>2</sub> keše<sub>2</sub>-da en-ĥe<sub>2</sub>-du<sub>7</sub>-an-na / lugal-ġu<sub>10</sub> niġ<sub>2</sub> u<sub>3</sub>-tu na-me lu<sub>2</sub> nam-mu-un-u<sub>3</sub>-tu, l. 543–44.

According to Veldhuis, the syncretism did not take place within any one text, rather it was the juxtaposition of texts within the curriculum as a whole that created the sense of unity.<sup>3</sup> In the *Temple Hymns*, however, this implicit, corpus-wide process becomes much more concrete. Hymns from Eridu are placed directly next to hymns from Nippur, Kesh, Ur, and so on, all within the same text. The *Temple Hymns* is thus the fullest realization of the structure of Old Babylonian education more generally: the “indirect voice” that speaks through the corpus found its mouth in Enheduana.

As such, the hymns also make evident a contradiction at the heart of that structure, namely a tension between sameness and difference. “Paradoxically,” writes Veldhuis (*Nanše* 77), “the national character of Sumerian literature is created by the local background of many individual compositions.” The creation of a single heritage relied on a multitude of traditions that could be juxtaposed to form a new whole only insofar as they remained recognizably distinct. Even in its fullest Old Babylonian syncretism, Sumerian culture remained a composite construct. The format of the anthology was an ideal vehicle to reconcile that tension. It afforded the possibility of collecting without merging, of positing an overarching unity between cities without destroying their idiosyncrasy. In other words, the *Temple Hymns* do not “represent” or “depict” Sumerian identity, rather the structure of the collection is the structure of Sumerian identity at its clearest: Sumer came into being as an anthology.

It is therefore interesting to consider the relation between the format of the anthology and the accompanying postscript identifying Enheduana as its author. The local traditions required a sense of coherence if they were to be united despite their differences, and that coherence was provided by the author. The notion of authorship, especially the idea that different poems could be attributed to the same person, guaranteed the unity of what was fundamentally a composite text. In turn, the unity of that text made manifest the unity of what was fundamentally a composite culture. Just as the various hymns could be subsumed under one author, so could the various cities be subsumed under a single Sumerian identity. Enheduana thus embodied Sumerian in the sense that her singularity as a person, combined with her prolificacy as an author, reconciled the tension between the composite and the unified character of Sumerian culture. Authorship rose to prominence as a single voice that could sing of many cities.

But as noted above the construction of Sumerian took place in a specific local context, Nippur. The city was never the site of any major political power, nor was it vital as a hub of commerce or industry. Rather, it was important as a religious centre,

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<sup>3</sup> The coming into being of Sumerian literature is thus comparable to the processes that took place in ancient Greece and China, which Beecroft describes as “the collecting of disparate textual units scattered over the panchoric territory” (“Comparing” 74).

the city of Enlil, king of the gods, and as the home of many important temples. This focus is reflected in the *Temple Hymns*. It is noteworthy that the cultural unity being constructed here is a specifically religious one. It consists of hymns and temples, not of kings and dynasties as in the *Sumerian King List*. That religious unity would have been particularly appropriate for a city that saw itself as primarily a religious capital.

Further, the very structure of the *Temple Hymns* reflects a Nippur-centric cosmology. The first hymn goes to E-Engura, Enki's temple in Eridu, perhaps to acknowledge Eridu's status as the primordial city where culture was said to have originated. But the following four hymns all go to temples in Nippur: the temple of Enlil, of his wife Ninlil, of his servant Nuska, and of his son Ninurta. By contrast, all other cities in the *Temple Hymn* receive just one hymn each,<sup>4</sup> so it is no surprise to find that 37 of its 44 manuscripts come from Nippur (the last seven come from Ur and a further six are of unknown provenience). If the *Temple Hymns* were also studied in other cities, the hymns may have been arranged differently there, but we do not have the sources to show it. With the evidence presently at our disposal, we can only assume that the *Temple Hymns* gathered a set of local traditions into a new whole, but also made Nippur the centre of that whole. The creation of a collective identity was shaped by the context in which it took place.

This, then, is one reason why Enheduana's authorship became important during the Old Babylonian period. The figure of the author rose to prominence as the unity of Sumerian culture became politically vital. In the one historical context in which we know that the *Temple Hymns* were studied extensively—Nippur after the failed rebellion—the hymns would have been an ideal source of social prestige for the embattled scholars: they represented the structure of Sumerian culture and reshaped it to fit contemporary needs. In need of support for their declining city, Nippurian scholars could see themselves as citizens of the core of an ancient world order, an order that was both composite, coherent, and religious in nature, and whose unity was guaranteed by the figure of Enheduana.

### **Eloquence and appropriation**

The memory of Enheduana not only allowed for the creation of a Sumerian heritage, it also promoted the idea that this heritage could be appropriated by others. This becomes clear in the *Exaltation of Inana*, a hymn to Inana to whom the narrator Enheduana appeals for help (Zgoll). It contains a (pseudo-?) autobiographical section describing Enheduana's plight: She has been cast into exile by a usurper and the deity she served, the moon god Nanna, refuses to answer her prayers. To remedy her situation, Enheduana must convince Inana to intervene in his stead and rule in her favour.

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<sup>4</sup> To celebrate the building of a new temple in Ur, king Shulgi of the Third Dynasty Ur added a hymn to the composition, no. 9, so that there are in fact two hymns addressed to temples in Ur, but with no. 9 explicitly acknowledged as a supplementary addition (dah-ḫu-um, l. 134).

The resolution of the narrative crisis thus depends on the eloquence of its narrator. Armed with nothing but words, Enheduana must persuade Inana to assist her. But Enheduana's power of speech has disappeared: "My once honeyed mouth has now become froth, / my power to please hearts is turned to dust."<sup>5</sup> This is the core dilemma of the *Exaltation*. If Enheduana does not regain her "honeyed mouth", all will be lost. The crisis is eventually resolved through the composition of the poem itself. In a striking climactic scene, Enheduana creates the *Exaltation*, thereby regaining her eloquence and exalting Inana. The following day, a singer repeats the song that Enheduana composed, and a postscript states that Inana accepted her prayer.

The self-referential resolution thus makes eloquence the turning point of the poem. Enheduana's ability to compose the *Exaltation* saves her from the predicament described in the *Exaltation*, meaning that her survival relies on a mastery of literary Sumerian. Amid the narrator's boasts about her "honeyed mouth", it is easy for modern readers to forget that Enheduana was presumably not a native speaker of Sumerian, but the princess of an Akkadian-speaking dynasty. Sargon and his heirs introduced the use of Akkadian as a language of administration and public discourse on par with Sumerian (Foster *Agade* 213–14), and though the historical Enheduana could easily have grown up fluent in Sumerian, the Old Babylonian pupils copying her works would likely have associated her with an Akkadian-speaking empire. We cannot be certain that they would have thought of Enheduana as a non-native speaker of Sumerian, but given her association with Sargon's dynasty, it is also far from impossible.

In turn, that association would have created for them a space of identification. Just like them, Enheduana was an Akkadian speaker who had to master literary Sumerian. As with the *Temple Hymns*, here the medium is the message: the form of the *Exaltation* tells us as much as its content. It is written in a notoriously difficult Sumerian, full of recondite expressions, multiple layers of allusion, and vivid images. The narrator's comparison of her speech with honey is very fitting: Enheduana's poetic style seems somehow viscous—dense, slow, and highly enjoyable, with complex metaphors following each other in heavy succession. Often a single line is so compact that it can be read in more than one way, and translations of the poem differ substantially from one another. The sheer poetic quality of the narrator's diction adds an element of irony to the crisis of eloquence described above. The readers know that the narrator will eventually regain her lost eloquence, because that loss is narrated to us in eloquent verses.

The language of the poem thus demonstrates the degree of mastery that speakers of Akkadian could achieve in Sumerian. As noted, the *Exaltation* was part of the Decad, and it is telling that in this select corpus of Sumerian literature, the

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<sup>5</sup> ka lal<sub>3</sub>-ĝu<sub>10</sub> šu uĥ<sub>3</sub>-a ba-ab-du<sub>11</sub> / niĝ<sub>2</sub> ur<sub>5</sub> sa<sub>6</sub>-sa<sub>6</sub>-ĝu<sub>10</sub> saĥar-ta ba-da-ab-gi<sub>4</sub>, l. 72–73.

most consummately poetic text was written by someone who may not have spoken Sumerian as her mother tongue. But that is precisely the point. The *Exaltation* divorces Sumerian eloquence from native speakers of Sumerian, turning it into an effective instrument that could be acquired and employed by anybody.

Aage Westenholz (“Old Akkadian” 76–77) argues that, while Enheduana’s “works are written in the most exquisite Sumerian”, they also contain an “Akkadian spirit”, making them “a blend of Sumerian and Akkadian tradition”. Though it is a contentious matter to isolate Sumerian and Akkadian elements of a text, as Westenholz does here, his comment reflects a more widely held sense that Enheduana’s poetry was somehow poised between languages. Westenholz attributes this admixture of traditions to the historical Enheduana’s precarious position in the “turbulent times” of the Old Akkadian empire, but whatever its origin, the blend of Sumerian and Akkadian made Enheduana’s poetry an ideal vehicle for a cultural transfer between languages.<sup>6</sup>

Again, it is possible that the *Exaltation* was composed by the historical Enheduana and played a specific ideological function in the Old Akkadian period (Zgoll, Hallo and van Dijk, ch. 1 and 5), but in the Old Babylonian schools, it became a demonstration of the appropriability of Sumerian eloquence. It is important to note that at this time, Sumerian was fully tied to the schools. It was not all Akkadian speakers who could acquire Sumerian eloquence, but specifically school students. As Cooper puts it, the corpus of the *edubba’a* was “a Sumerian curriculum in which Sumerian literature is studied and the ability to write and speak Sumerian is valorized, but it is also clear that the Sumerian language must be learned” (11). Some humorous compositions contain idealized dialogues between school students boasting about their achievements: “Having been in school for the prescribed time, I have achieved (mastery) of Sumerian, of the scribal art, of the meaning of texts, of counting and accounting—I can even speak Sumerian!” (translation from Michalowski “Literacy” 44). Proficiency in Sumerian is expressly linked to the scribal profession and to the *edubba’a*. The student brags of speaking Sumerian fluently, but the very fact that this is something to brag about implies a lack of natural familiarity with the language, a distance that had to be overcome through education.

That distance is crucial to how Enheduana would have been perceived in the *edubba’a*. She bridged the gap that separated Old Babylonian students from the Sumerian language, not closing it, but advertising the prospect of crossing it. The *Exaltation* could serve two purposes in a pedagogical context. First, it demonstrated

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<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Michalowski (“Where’s Al?”) argues that bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian puns in the *Hymn to the Hoe* (also part of the *Decad*) were “a useful tool for instilling a sense of the living authority of Sumerian by means of the polyglottic simultaneous presence of the vernacular Akkadian embedded in the classical tongue” (199)—that is, reinterpreting Sumerian as a prestigious language radically entangled with Akkadian, and thus available for use to Akkadian-speaking students.

the possibility that non-native speakers might acquire a remarkable degree of eloquence in Sumerian; second, it dramatized the rewards of acquiring it, as the narrator remedies her desperate situation through a mastery of language. The self-referential climax, with the composition of the story resolving the crisis of the story, makes a point that is unmistakably didactic: eloquence saves lives, so study hard.

But eloquence is not just eloquence. It matters that Enheduana displays a command, not of poetic language in general, but of poetic Sumerian. Sumerian was the language employed in religious ceremonies, and though it was possible to address the gods in Akkadian, Sumerian guaranteed direct access to the divine world. Again, this would have been significant in the context of the *edubba'a*, whose students generally pursued one of two career paths: officials at court or priests at the temples. As Rubio (“Invention” 249) notes, “it is no accident that most of these possible *edubbas* or tablet houses were the dwellings of priests and located near temples. Sumerian was a liturgical language throughout Mesopotamian history.” Again, it would have been easy to turn the language of the *Exaltation* into a pedagogical point. Enheduana’s appeal to Inana proved effective not least because it was spoken in the language of gods, making that language worthy of acquisition.

Once more, this would have been a specifically Nippurian ideal. No other city placed as much emphasis on the mastery of Sumerian. Delnero (“Invention” 47) compares school texts found at Ur with those found at Nippur, noting that “the type of elitism that was conferred through scribal training differed between the Nippur and the Ur curricula”. The Nippur curriculum emphasized recondite Sumerian literature and the full complexities of the language, while in Ur, “form seems to have taken precedence over substance” (Delnero “Invention” 45). What mattered in Ur was for tablets to look professional—clean, well-written, well-shaped—while the *minutiae* of *recherché* poetry in a dead language seem to have been less important. Not so in Nippur, where the ideal of Sumerian eloquence was part and parcel of the city’s self-perception.

The *Exaltation* thus displayed the promise of Sumerian eloquence in a historical context where access to that eloquence was highly restricted. Only elite urban children attended the schools, and only in Nippur did those schools focus so intensely on mastering Sumerian poetry. So despite the story taking place in Ur, it is again unsurprising to find that it was mainly studied in Nippur. Eleanor Robson (“Tablet House” 53) charts how many manuscripts of a given Sumerian literary text come from Nippur as compared to how many manuscripts of the text have been preserved in total, and the *Exaltation* emerges as the most “Nippurian” of all texts in the Decad: 86% of the sources come from Nippur. In fact, a full 38% come from House F specifically, which is perhaps unsurprising in light of its archaeological context. The school was located a mere 250 meters away from Nippur’s main temple (Robson “Tablet House” 40), so if the power of appealing to the gods in eloquent Sumerian was ever important anywhere, it was important there.



This is a second aspect of Enheduana's authorship that made it central to the literary culture of the Old Babylonian period. Not only did the figure of Enheduana reduce the Sumerian heritage to a single entity, it also divorced that entity from Sumerian-speaking people. The language and its literature were made an object of appropriation, an instrument to be used rather than an abstract admixture of independent traditions.

### **The cruelty of conservation**

I have argued that the invention of authorship provided a body and a bridge for the survival of Sumerian, meaning that the author became a way of condensing a fading culture into a single object and granting others access to that object. Enheduana thus emerges as a specifically Old Babylonian embodiment of Sumerian culture, and her authorship was crucially tied to the institution that celebrated it. The author represented the ideals of the *edubba'a*: the ideological unity of the Sumerian past and the sense of elite identity that accompanied it.

I have emphasized that Old Babylonian scholars simplified and transformed Sumerian heritage for their own purposes, but this is surely not what they thought they were doing. For them, Sumerian history was intrinsically valuable. The scholars were deeply invested in safe-guarding Sumerian, but any attempt at safe-guarding a culture inevitably transforms it. There is a cruelty to conservation: To establish a culture as worthy of preservation is also to transform, fix, flatten, simplify, instrumentalize, and reify it, thus turning a living tradition into a tangible artefact. The scholars' attempt to preserve the Sumerian heritage led them to reduce its multiplicity, condense its cacophony, and separate it from its original context. But the process of conservation is cruel not least because that cruelty is often necessary. The past gains currency only if it is adapted to the purposes of the present, even if that adaption requires some degree of damage to the past that one wishes to protect. In the Old Babylonian context, preserving Sumerian meant reshaping it into a singular source of cultural capital. If, amid the crisis of 1740 BC, Nippur was to base its continued standing on the value of Sumerian literature, this literature had to be presented as a definite entity that non-Sumerians could access.

There is an inevitable nostalgia to such an operation, a sense that something had been lost and that it can only ever be preserved in part. Seth Richardson (178) argues that Old Babylonian scholars "approached Sumerian as a foreign language, but one in which the past itself was part of the foreignness; it was a cultural position stereotyped to connote antiquity first and foremost." That is, the scholars preserved Sumerian for the present moment, grafting a new meaning onto it, but the temporal distance was itself a key part of that meaning. As such, while Enheduana's authorship made the Sumerian heritage appropriable and thus "current" for Old Babylonian students, it also registered the disappearance of that heritage.

Rubio (“Invention” 231) notes that “the creation of a Sumerian literary corpus embodied a discourse grounded in the nostalgia of the power Sumer had once had and lost.” If anyone represented that discourse, it was Enheduana. Her works fully display the might of the Old Akkadian empire that had brought the city states under one rule. But they also illustrate the loss of that power. In the *Exaltation*, the narrator’s predicament is that she has been exiled as the result of a rebellion, one of the many that eventually brought the empire to its knees. Further, as noted above, the ideal of the Sumerian past as a unified state would have been a double-edged sword in an Old Babylonian context. It could legitimize the contemporary Babylonian project of political unification, but it could also expose the shortcomings of that project in comparison with the invented Sumerian past (Brisch 40). Poised midway between imperial might and political collapse, rebellion and reparation, failure and success, the figure of Enheduana fully registers that ambiguity.

Enheduana was thus a nostalgic figure through and through, representing both the zenith of imperial power and its irrevocable loss. This nostalgia is indicative of the function of her authorship more generally. The figure of the author became a way of preserving a dead language and a lost culture, but in that process, the object of preservation was transformed almost beyond recognition. The Sumerian heritage was simplified and reified to become an identity and an instrument.

## Conclusion

One question remains: why Enheduana? Any number of famous figures could have had any number of literary compositions attributed to them. If indeed the Nippurian scholars needed to embody Sumerian literature in one author, why did Enheduana come to play that role? One straightforward possibility is that Enheduana was the actual author of the poems, as Annette Zgoll (179–84) and others have forcefully argued. This would of course make her a particularly ideal candidate for literary fame, but it would not in itself be a sufficient explanation. Even if Enheduana could definitively be proven to have composed the texts, we would still have to explain why her authorship continued to matter five centuries after her death when all other Sumerian acts of authorship were consigned to oblivion. Whether Enheduana’s Old Babylonian fame is best understood as historical memory or as pure invention, we must account for the factors that made her so appealing.

I have already proposed some answers to this question: Enheduana’s straddling of the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, her prominent position in the religious system that had its centre in Nippur, and her double connection with both the Old Akkadian empire and its disintegration. One might add that Enheduana was not overly tied to any one city—she came from Akkad, served in Ur, worshipped an

Urukian goddess, and gave pride of place to Nippur in the *Temple Hymns*—perhaps allowing her to stand in for all Sumerian cities and not for just one tradition.<sup>7</sup>

A final factor that should not be overlooked is Enheduana's gender. Since all other known authors from cuneiform cultures were male, her femininity has struck many scholars as a particularly salient aspect of her authorship (see e.g. Michalowski "Sailing" 184–85 and Lion 94–95). However, in an Old Babylonian context, it may be less remarkable than it is usually taken to be. Robson ("Gendered Literacy") shows that in the Sumerian literature studied in the *edubba'a's*, literacy is generally associated not with men but with goddesses, chief among them Nidaba, the patron deity of scribes. Likewise, Brisch points to a possible "female paradigm" in the poetry about the king Shu-Sin, where royal women play a key ideological role in singing the king's praises. In Sumerian literature, female authorship may thus have been less striking than it would become in later times. This may be a further reason why Enheduana was ideal suited to embody Sumerian literature, serving as a human counterpart to the literacy of goddesses such as Nidaba.

When the curriculum of the cuneiform schools was restructured after the Old Babylonian period, Enheduana's works were left out. Her poetry soon faded from memory, leaving them entirely forgotten until their rediscovery in the 20th century AD. Cuneiform literature thereby reverted to its previous anonymity and would remain anonymous until authorship once again became important during the Neo-Assyrian and then the Seleucid periods (Helle "Role of Authors"; on authorship in Akkadian literature more generally, see Foster "Authorship" and Lambert). Though Enheduana's authorship was in many ways exceptional—a rare flash of poetic attribution in an otherwise anonymous culture; the eloquent speech of a privileged woman in an otherwise patriarchal culture—it should be a site of far greater interest for historians of literature, as it is the earliest known instance of literary authorship.

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<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Beecroft (*Authorship* 72–79) argues that ancient debates about Homer's birthplace served to untie the author from any one *polis*, allowing his epics to function all the more forcefully as Pan-Hellenic charters of cultural cohesion to which no one city had special access.

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