

# Who were the Authors before Homer in Mesopotamia?

*Jean-Jacques Glassner*

Mesopotamian works are usually anonymous; at best the names of some copyists are known. Some significant exceptions, such as Saggil-kênam-ubbib, the author of *Théodicée babylonienne*<sup>1</sup>, Kabti-ilî-Marduk, author of the 'myth of Erra'<sup>2</sup>, and Shamash-muballit, the son of Warad-Sîn<sup>3</sup>, who may have been the author of a hymn to the goddess Inanna, do not make up for this lacuna.

We do, of course, possess a list of authors' names from antiquity, but the document is hardly acceptable as such, quoting as it does a jumble of names of divinities, legendary creatures and historical people, such as the names of the god Enki/Ea, Adapa, the god of wisdom, Oannes, as described by Berosus, Enmerkar, the legendary king of Uruk and inventor of writing, and also that of Sîn-leqe-unninnî, who is described as the author of the epic of Gilgamesh<sup>4</sup> and who is said to have lived at the time of Gilgamesh himself, Lu-Nanna, the author, also presumed, of the legend of Etana<sup>5</sup>, who is said, again according to the same source, to have lived in Ur at the time of King Shulgi (2094–2047).

Amongst all these names, only that of Saggil-kênam-ubbib is known to be that of an author. He composed a work in the form of an acrostic with twenty-six stanzas; the lines of each stanza start with the same syllable, which varies from stanza to stanza. All together, these syllables combine to form the sentence: *a-na-ku Sa-ag-gi-il-ki-[na-am]-ub-bi-ib ma-ash-ma-shu ka-ri-bu sha i-li u shar-ri*, 'I am Saggil-kênam-ubbib, the exorcist, who gives thanks to the gods and to the king'.<sup>6</sup> Since the author himself has converted his name into syllables in the poem, there can be no doubt about his identity.

We do have a second acrostic poem written by a famous Assyrian, King Ashurbanipal (669–c.630) himself.<sup>7</sup> This poem is a prayer to the god Marduk and to his associated divinity, Zarpanit; taking the initial words of the lines we get *a-na-ku Ash-shur-ba-ni-ap-li sha il-su-ka bu-ul-li-ta-ni-ma ma-ru-du-uk da-li-li-ka lu-ud-lul*, 'It is I, Ashurbanipal, who calls out to you: keep me alive, oh Marduk, and I will invoke you in my prayers!'

But this poem does not attain the perfection of the preceding work. Only the first line of each stanza contains the required initial syllable; in addition, of the thirty stanzas of the work, twenty-three are made up of two lines, whilst the other seven, unevenly distributed throughout the poem, are made up of three.

But who was Ashurbanipal? He was the third son of Esarhaddon, and received an education which destined him for literary work and the priesthood: the eldest son was destined to inherit the throne of Assyria, whilst the second son, Shamash-shum-ukin, educated in the Babylonian fashion, was destined to be the king of Babylon. After the premature death of the eldest son, and with the second son considered to be too Babylonian

in his education, Ashurbanipal was named crown prince of Assyria who would ascend the throne on the death of his father. He was then a man of letters, a fact which he did not hide:

I am Ashurbanipal – he said – the great king, the powerful king, the king of all the (inhabited) lands, the king of the country of Assyria, the king of the four shores of the earth, the king of kings, ( . . . ) I am the one to whom the gods Shamash and Adad have given the knowledge of divination, the message which cannot be changed, I am the one to whom Marduk, the wisest of the gods, granted vast understanding and great intelligence, I am the one on whom Nabû, the scribe of all the universe, bestowed as a gift the knowledge of his wisdom ( . . . ). I have learnt the message of the wise Adapa, the hidden treasure of all the knowledge of the scribes; I have experience of the omens of the skies and of the earth, I am able to discuss the omen texts ‘if the liver is the reflection of the sky’ with the expert lecanomancers; I can solve reciprocals and difficult multiplications which have no given solutions; I am used to reading a scholarly tablet in which the Sumerian is obscure and the Akkadian difficult to construe correctly; I know how to work out the secret sense of any inscription on a stone from before the Flood ( . . . ).

In his palaces in Nineveh he amassed a huge library, which was discovered in the nineteenth century and the remains of which are preserved in the British Museum. The contents have been estimated at about 5,000 works. The library was destroyed in 612 BCE, when the town was sacked by the Median and Babylonian alliance. In spite of the amount lost, it is one of the most important sources for our knowledge of Mesopotamian culture and literature.

Nonetheless, the poor quality of the work does not allow the king to be ranked as a Mesopotamian author. It is rather more reminiscent of an exercise by an apprentice scribe who is not convinced of his vocation.

Very much earlier, in the twenty-third century, there is another author who is perhaps known to us through some of her writings; she is Enheduanna, a historical person, a royal princess, the daughter of King Sargon of Akkade (2285–c.2229) and high priestess of Nanna, the god of the city of Ur. We know of two hymns by her to the goddess Inanna in which she talks of herself in the first person.<sup>8</sup> Other works are also attributed to her, such as a collection of temple hymns even though, in the colophon of one of the editions, her name is associated with the function of *lú.dub.KA.kêsh.da*, or *kâsir tuppi*, ‘the compiler’ and not ‘the author’.<sup>9</sup> A fragment of a prayer has also survived in which her name appears one last time.<sup>10</sup> However, in all the texts mentioned, the name *enheduanna* may only be, as has been seen elsewhere, a generic term indicating any high priestess of the god of the city of Ur;<sup>11</sup> the form of address *lugal.gu*, ‘my lord’ or ‘my king’, which appears in the colophon of the temple hymn collection, is perhaps a reference to the father of the princess, King Sargon, but nobody can be certain of this.<sup>12</sup>

Kabti-ilî-Marduk is called *kâsir kammishu*, ‘the compiler of his work’, an expression in which the pronoun suffix *-shu* refers to the god Ishum, the same god of whom it was said that in the course of a dream ‘he revealed’ the story to Kabti-ilî-Marduk, who then ‘told’ it in the morning, without either adding or leaving anything out;<sup>13</sup> similarly, the list of authors mentioned above uses the same terms as the myth which deals with Kabti-ilî-Marduk, the son of Dabibi, to relate that ‘(the god) revealed (the story) to him and that he himself told (it)’.

Were the gods then, as the Mesopotamians claimed, the real authors of the works which men just reproduced? Let us not be deceived. All knowledge, in Mesopotamia, was the product of a revelation, which usually took the form of a dream. To the idea of revelation the Mesopotamians also added the idea of a quest,<sup>14</sup> such as the journey of Gilgamesh which led

him 'down a very long road by which the sun came out', or the brief descent into Hell of an Assyrian prince. What is more, one source indicated that one story was dictated by a horse!

In Ur, during the eighteenth century BCE, a purificatory priest called Ku-Ningal owned a private library. His house was also a place of teaching. Some of the works found there were completely unknown elsewhere; these included several royal hymns some of which were composed on the occasion of the visit of King Rîm-Sîn of Larsa to that town and its sanctuary, which were written in bad Sumerian, two copies of a hymn to Haya, a god connected with writing and purification, containing an intercession for the aforementioned Rîm-Sîn, an incantation in the form of a hymn, a hymn to the god Asalluhe, a copy of a royal inscription, also by Rîm-Sîn, commemorating the digging of a canal, and finally a copy of an inscription of Enanedu, a priestess of the god Nanna. All these works are definitely those of the master of the house whose sovereign was none other than Rîm-Sîn, and who had business connections with Enanedu. We are presumably in the presence here of an author and his school, or a small but very productive circle of men of letters, whose Sumerian is very eccentric and distinctive.

Although it is anonymous, Mesopotamian literature is thus not totally without authors. For example, in the light of the Sumerian poems which narrate the exploits of a legendary person by the name of Lugalbanda, it can no longer be denied that their author, though he was anonymous, was a very high class poet; his style contrasts strongly with that of the Sumerian accounts of Gilgamesh, which appear to be just popular literature embellished with sayings.

One should therefore wonder about the identity of the man who, in view of his expertise, was destined to use a particular kind of language and who, at the same time, gained his uniqueness and prestige from that language. Access to writing implies that he had gone to school, where he had learnt how to deal with a written language which differed from the spoken language, and that he was a member of the social group made up of scribes.

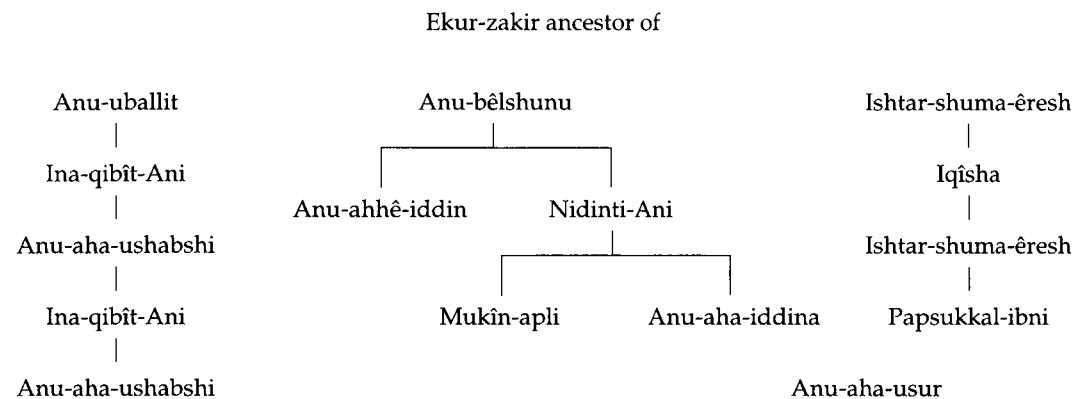
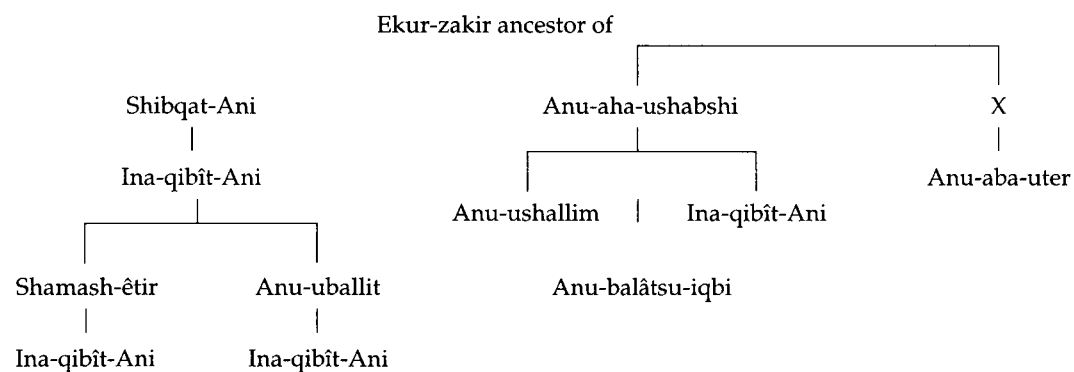
What were schools like? They were usually to be found in the house of a scribe or a literate priest. Little is known about the organization of studies. Students attended every day, with three rest days and three holidays each month. Education itself was carried out in several stages: the student began by learning the syllabary, making clay tablets and using the reed pen. Then came lessons in vocabulary, and later, instruction in grammar and the Sumerian language. After this he was able to copy literary, technical and scientific texts, first of all in the form of extracts (the usual length of school exercises varied between 25 and 35 lines), then later in their entirety. At the same time, and this is an aspect that is often omitted, all these texts were learnt by heart.

So did there exist elites, made up of good pupils from these schools, and based just on their individual qualities and intellectual aptitudes? It is clear that throughout Mesopotamian history generations of scribal families controlled the entire output of literary and scientific works; some of them, in the Hellenistic period, even claimed to trace their ancestry back to a distant ancestor who, if the person involved was historical, has been calculated to have lived during what is known as the Kassite period, in the middle of the second millennium before the present era. These families played a very important role because they were responsible for transmitting the sources from the middle of the second millennium down to the Seleucid era.<sup>15</sup>

Take the family of Ekur-zakir, who was an exorcist priest of the divine couple Anu and Antu, in the town of Uruk, as well as the high priest of the temple *bit resh*, in the

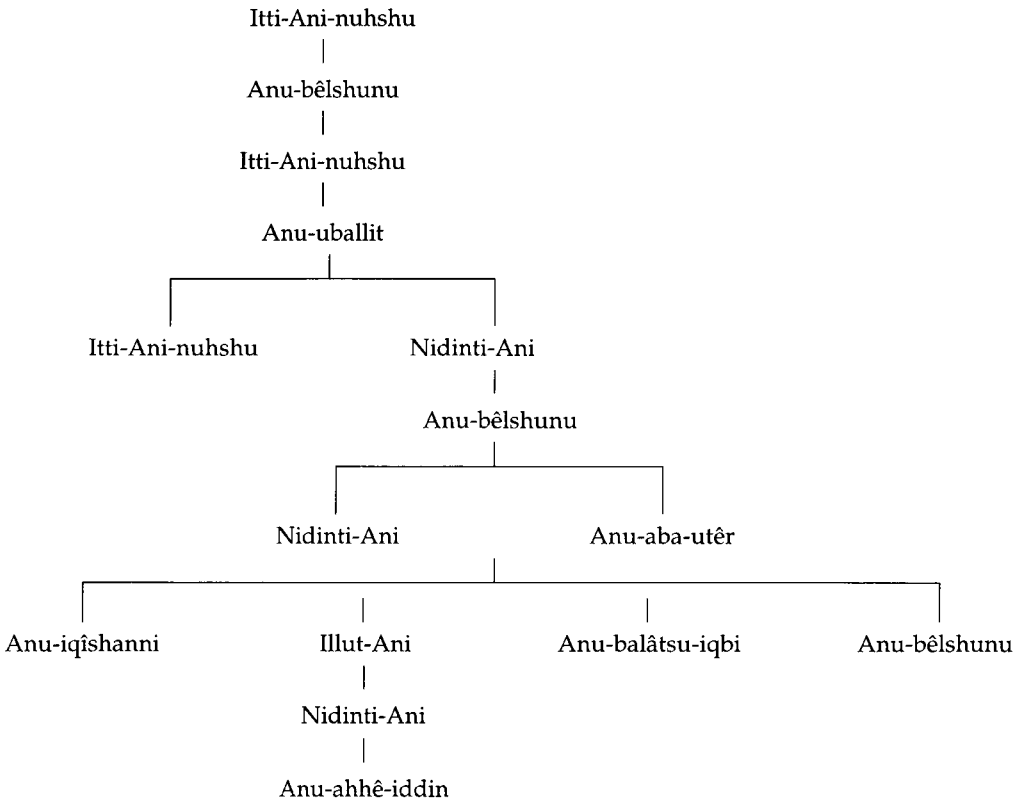
same town, and astrologer, writer and commentator on the important astrology manual called Enum Anu Enlil. Since we do not have any chronological data, we do not know at what precise time he was exercising these talents. He was the ancestor of a man called Kidin-Ani, a contemporary of the kings Seleucus I and Antiochus I (305–260), who brought back from Elam a tablet containing the rituals to be carried out by the priests, exorcists, professional mourners, singers and theologians in the temples of Uruk, a tablet which Nabopolassar (625–605), the king of Babylon, had stolen some time before, and which a certain Shamash-êtir, a member of the same family, and himself the son and grandson of a scribe, had copied during the reign of Antiochus III (222–187).

His eldest son was Anu-aha-ushabshi, who worked as a scribe during the reign of Seleucus II (246–226), and who was himself the father of three children, Anu-ushallim, Ina-qibît-Ani and Anu-balâtsu-iqbi, who were also scribes during the reigns of Antiochus II (261–246) and Seleucus II; a second son, whose name is not known, was in his turn the father of a scribe, Anu-aba-uter, who also worked during the reign of Seleucus II. Other members of the same family occur at intervals until 146BCE. Unfortunately it is impossible to draw up a complete family tree for this family, Ekur-zakir being the ancestor of four other scribes in Uruk, Shibqat-Ani, Anu-uballit, Anu-bêlshunu and Ishtar-shuma-êresh. Nevertheless, the following family tree can be drawn up:



The family tree of the descendants of Sîn-leqe-unninnî, an exorcist and the presumed author of the Epic of Gilgamesh, thought to be the author of a later version of the story, in the middle of the second millennium, extends over eleven generations of scribes, the last generation being active during the reign of Antiochus VII (139–130):

Sîn-leqe-unninnî ancestor of



Moreover, we can see that the vast majority of authors and compilers of the important literary works were exorcists, professional mourners and seers. Thus it appears that there definitely were intellectual elites of which all these people were pillars, elites which were defined by family groups which maintained complicated links with each other and in which none were the sole guardians of exclusive specialized knowledge.

Did the palaces and the temples not play the part which is customarily attributed to them in the composition, copying and transmission of literary and erudite works? In reality, there were no watertight, insurmountable barriers, between the intellectual, political and religious spheres at all. For the temple could employ men of letters, as did the

Esagila complex dedicated to Marduk in Babylon, which fixed the pay for the astronomers employed to make daily observations and note them on tablets. Amongst the scribal families some were traditionally remunerated by the kings, such as the family of Arad-Ea in Babylon, whilst others were in the service of the temples. And how could one forget that in 703 a notable man from the provinces, and a member of an important scribal family, led a revolt and ascended the throne of Babylon with the name Marduk-zâkir-shumi (II) (703)! As for Nabû-apla-iddina (887–855), the king of Babylon, and a predecessor of Marduk-zâkir-shumi, he himself was directly associated with considerable editorial work.

The Mesopotamians were aware of that fact. Besides, tradition required that a wise man or a scholar should be assigned to each reign: Uana-Adapa is thought to have been a contemporary of Alulu, the first king before the Flood; the name of Lu-Nanna, already cited, the alleged author of a quantity of learned works and hymns in honour of Shulgi, but severely criticized in a chronicle which described him as blind and indicated that, in concert with his king, he had probably changed the rites to the gods, written false steles and arrogant documents, is associated with the reign of Shulgi; Saggil-kênam-ubbib is presumed to have lived during the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, king of Babylon (1068–1047), and Aba-Enlil-dâri, better known under his Aramaic name Ahikar, during the reign of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (680–669). In between these two, and amongst many others, Kabti-ilî-Marduk is presumed to have lived at the time of Ibbi-Sîn of Ur (2028–2004), which is an obvious mistake because he wrote the myth of Erra in the second half of the ninth century BCE, probably during the reign of Marduk-zâkir-shumi. But what do mistakes and legendary features matter, when tradition requires that literary production is associated with royal power.

Jean-Jacques Glassner

*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique/École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*

Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

## Notes

1. Text translated in R. Labat *et al*, *Les Religions du Proche Orient*, Paris, 1970, p. 320 *et seq.*
2. Text translated in J. Bottero and S.N. Kramer, *Lorsque les dieux faisaient l'homme*, Paris, 1989, p. 680 *et seq.*
3. C.J. Gadd, *Cuneiform Texts (. . .) in the British Museum* 36, London, 1921, pp. 35–38.
4. Amongst the latest editions: J. Bottéro, *L'Épopée de Gilgamesh*, Paris, 1992; R.J. Tournay and A. Shaffer, *L'Épopée de Gilgamesh*, Paris, 1994; A. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, New York, 1999; B.R. Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, New York, 2001.
5. Text edited by J.V. Kinnier Wilson, *The Legend of Etana*, Warminster, 1985.
6. W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford, 1960, p. 63.
7. A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, *State Archives of Assyria* III, Helsinki, 1989, text No.2.
8. A. Zgoll, *Der Rechtsfall der En-hedu-ana im Lied nin-me-shara*, Munster 1997, p. 22, line 81 *et seq.*
9. A.W. Sjöberg and E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns*, Locust Valley-New York, 1969, p. 49: line 543 *et seq.*
10. J. Goodnick Westenholz, 'Enheduanna, En-Priestess, Hen of Nanna, Spouse of Nanna', in H. Behrens *et al.*, (eds.), *Dumu-e-dub-ba-a, Studies in Honor of A.W. Sjöberg*, Philadelphia, 1989, p. 556, line 6'.
11. M. Civil, 'Les limites de l'information textuelle', in M.-T. Barrelet, (ed.), *L'archéologie de l'Iraq du début de l'époque néolithique à 333 avant notre ère*, Paris, 1980, p. 229.

12. One of the temples praised in this way, that of the god Nanna at Gaesh, was not built until a century or two after the reign of Sargon: J. Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry*, London, 1998, p. 43, note 126.
13. L. Cagni, *L'épopée de Erra*, Rome, 1969, p. 126: 41 *et seq.*
14. On this point: J.-J. Glassner, 'La philosophie mésopotamienne', in A. Jacob, (ed.), *Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle, I, L'Univers philosophique*, Paris, 1989, p. 1637 *et seq.*; 'The Use of Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia', in J.M. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, III*, New York-London-Mexico-New Delhi-Singapore-Sydney-Toronto, 1995, 1815 *et seq.*; 'Savoirs secrets et écritures secrètes des scribes mésopotamiens', *Politica Hermetica* 13, 1999, 15–32.
15. H.M. Kümmel, *Familie, Beruf und Amt im spätbabylonischen Uruk*, Berlin, 1979, p. 108 *et seq.*