

Walking Backwards into the Future

The Conception of Time in the Ancient Near East

Stefan M. Maul

If we regard the Akkadian (i.e., Assyrian–Babylonian)¹ terms that designate “past” and “future” as more than simple equivalents to the corresponding English terms, we make an astounding discovery. An examination of temporal terms such as “earlier” (Akkadian: *pāna*, *pān*; *pānānu(m)*; *pāni*; *pānû(m)*) or “former times, past” (Akkadian: *pānātu*; *pānītu(m)*, *pānū*) shows that these are all related to the Akkadian *pānum*, or “front,” plural *pānū*, or “face.” The Sumerian² equivalents to the Akkadian terms for the past are formed with the word *igi*, which means “eye,” “face” and also “front.” In the Akkadian and Sumerian terms for the past, the underlying word “front” is used in the sense of “something that lies before/faces the observer.” It is a similar case with terms that denote the future. The Akkadian (*w*)*arka*, (*w*)*arkānu(m)*, (*w*)*arki* in the sense of “later, afterward,” (*w*)*arkû(m)* in the sense of “future (adj.),” and (*w*)*arkītu(m)* in the sense of “something later, later days, future” are all related to the word (*w*)*arkatu(m)*, meaning “reverse (side), behind.” The equivalent Sumerian terms (*eger*; *murgu*; *bar*) also originally mean “behind” and “reverse (side).” Although here we cannot enter upon a closer examination of Mesopotamian terminology which is so important for the understanding of the culture of the Ancient Near East, it is nevertheless clear that for a Babylonian the past lay before him—it was something he “faced”; whereas that which was coming, the future (*warkītum*), was something he regarded as behind him, as at his “back.” In the mental world of our own modern society the exact opposite is, of course, the case. When we look “into the future,” we firmly believe that our gaze is fixed straight ahead. Nothing can shake our conviction that the past is at our back, that it lies behind us. While we advance along a timeline that has us “facing the future,” the Mesopotamians advanced along the same time-line but with their eyes fixed on the past. They moved, as it were, back-to-front—backing into the future. Without

belaboring the image, it would indeed suggest that Mesopotamian culture was focused on the past, and, ultimately, the starting point of all existence.

The concern of Mesopotamian culture with the past was, shall we say, omnipresent. In the remains of Assyrian and Babylonian culture in the first millennium A.D., one can easily recognize the extreme normative power of tradition, which permeated every aspect of life.

Languages of the Ancient Near East

The numerous inscriptions of the Mesopotamian rulers of the first millennium B.C.—which were left behind for posterity in the foundations of temples and palaces or made visible on reliefs and stelae—were composed in an artificial language that stood aloof from the demotic and took its cues from an ancient form of Akkadian. This language was regarded as a classic language and was spoken at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. and even then was full of archaisms. Other texts as well (religious and scholarly, epic and mythological) used this elevated form of language, which we may call “Standard Babylonian.” With its archaic sound it conjured up not only the venerable reign of Hammurabi, the ruler who united all of Mesopotamia and parts of Syria into a powerful empire in the eighteenth century B.C., but this Standard Babylonian also evoked that linguistic form of Akkadian which in the early second millennium B.C. was the first Semitic language to be widely written down (which was then passed down to the end of cuneiform culture). Two thousand years after it had ceased to exist as a spoken language, Sumerian, the oldest known language of Mesopotamia, was still regarded as a sacred tongue used to address the gods. Sumerian songs, hymns and prayers that had their origin in the third millennium B.C. were always being copied down and accompanied by Akkadian translations. Together with later re-creations from the first and second millennia B.C., these songs, hymns and prayers still played an important role in the Babylonian cult of gods in the final centuries of the first millennium B.C.

Moreover, and very similar to Latin in our own culture, Sumerian survived as a scholarly language. Just as the Renaissance humanists latinized their names, Babylonian and Assyrian scholars translated their Semitic names into Sumerian. Along with countless lexical lists

and grammatical paradigms, these scholars transmitted myths, proverbs, wise sayings, fables, omens, incantations and texts of exorcism in this ancient language. It was above all in those large cities which had been the centers of the early Sumerian culture that Assyrian and Babylonian kings of the first millennium B.C., following the old traditions, had their building and dedicatory inscriptions composed in Sumerian.

Writing

The royal inscriptions of the first millennium B.C. were not infrequently written down using very antiquated cuneiform signforms, which had gone out of quotidian use fifteen hundred years before and which could certainly not be deciphered by the less educated. The use of ancient characters, however, was not a phenomenon limited to the first millennium B.C. Hammurabi of Babylon (eighteenth century B.C.), whose era would later come to be characterized as "classic," had the text of his famous Susa law-stele inscribed in a writing gesture representative of a cuneiform whose developmental stage in a paleographic sense was then six hundred years old. In the sixth century B.C., on the magnificent edifices he constructed in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II followed Hammurabi's example by employing those cuneiform signforms which were typical for inscriptions composed in the Old-Akkadian period, twenty-fourth century B.C. The inscriptions of the late Babylonian kings not only were often copies of the old language of the Hammurabi era, but also regularly used the obsolete orthographic conventions.

The learned scribes of the first and second millennia B.C. compiled paleographic lists of characters—like modern Assyriologists. They studied old texts and fashioned clay-tablet facsimiles based on them, that were such faithful replicas that even Assyriologists are sometimes fooled as to their actual age. Thus the learned Neo-Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.) could boast that he was able to decipher inscriptions "from before the Flood."

Material Remains

But the interest of Mesopotamia in a past regarded as "classic" was manifest not only in the implementation of an ancient language and script. It can also be shown that in the material culture of Mesopo-

tamia there were constant borrowings from periods that reached far back in time. One impressive example should suffice. As a modern scholar, one is astounded at how frequently one encounters in the royal inscriptions of Neo-Babylonian kings (sixth century B.C.) accounts of massive archeological excavations, undertaken at the behest of the ruler, in the millennia-old temple grounds so as to uncover the remnants of ancient and sometimes long-forgotten cultural venues.³ In their search for old building foundations, the Babylonians—similar to modern-day archeologists—happened upon inscriptions, clay tablets and other artifacts. Specially commissioned scholars studied the old and hard-to-decipher texts, which were carefully preserved, copied and exhibited. One of the labels for just such an exhibit has survived to this day:

Here are copies of the writing found on bricks discovered in the ruins of Ur, the work of Amar-Su'en, King of Ur, uncovered by the governor of Ur in searching for the ground plan [of the temple]. I copied them so as to amaze onlookers.

The head of a statue of the Old-Akkadian King Sargon of Akkade (ca. 2350 B.C.)—whose legendary conquests were still renowned in the Neo-Babylonian period—, damaged in an excavation, was restored and placed on display by King Nabonidus (556–539 B.C.).⁴ He thereby situated himself as a direct recipient of his predecessor's glory, who, as Nabonidus believed, had reigned 2300 years before him. In an inscription, Nabonidus declares:

The foundation stones of the Temple E'ulmash in the city of Akkade from the period of Sargon, the King of Babylon, my predecessor, who reigned 2300 years before me, went unseen by anyone until the reign of Nabonidus. Kurigalzu, a Babylonian king⁵ who preceded me, had sought them, but did not find the foundation stones of E'ulmash. Nebuchadnezzar,⁶ my royal predecessor, dispatched work brigades in large numbers to search out those foundation stones of E'ulmash, he took great pains, dug deep, repeated his efforts, but the foundation stones of E'ulmash he did not find. I, on the other hand, Nabonidus, the King of Babylon, during my lawful reign, fearing Ishtar of Akkade, beheld a face in a dream. Shamash and Adad assured me that I would find the foundation stones of E'ulmash, a favorable sign for the stability of my kingdom. My men I sent in large numbers to search for those foundation stones. For three

years I dug through shafts sunk by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. Right and left, forward and back I sought but found nothing. Thus did they then speak to me: "For the foundation stones we have searched, but we have not found them."

It was only in a later attempt, after the temple foundations of a comparatively recent building phase from the fourteenth century B.C. had been uncovered, that remnants of Sargon's edifice (constructed about 2350 B.C.) were found and Nabonidus could lay the new foundation stones atop the older ones with "not a finger's breadth of deviation."

The goal of such excavations was to identify the oldest foundation of a temple. The remnants of more recent overlays were carted away until it was believed that one had found the earliest form of the god's house, based on its foundations. But the interest of Babylonian (and Assyrian) kings in the temple architecture of their "antiquity" was not primarily of an antiquarian nature. Rather, the building plans were required to nullify the changes that had accreted over time and restore the temple to its unadulterated form and to deviate "not a finger's breadth"⁷ from the original plans. Characteristically the Akkadian (and also the Sumerian) expression⁸ found in the dictionaries for "restore" is literally "to lead something back to its planned/pre-determined place." Clearly at work here is the Mesopotamian notion of each thing in the world being allocated its own fixed, unshakeable and eternal place. This divinely willed but historically altered place was to be restored with the reconstruction of the old temple. Myths that have grown up around Babylonian temples recount how these were not built by human hands but were erected by the gods themselves as part of the work of creation at the beginning of time.⁹ Restoration of the temple according to the undistorted divine plan was intended by the Babylonian kings to transport both the state and its subjects back to their original, pristine, hallowed beginnings.

Hence, the search of Babylonians and Assyrians for "antiquity" emerges as a striving after the unsullied original order of a "distant yore," to which the gods themselves had imparted form through the act of its creation. Mesopotamian culture was ever focused on the origin of all things.

A look at the mythical texts of Mesopotamia shows very clearly that all the cultural achievements—in architecture, writing, gold-

smithery, carpentry and so forth—were viewed as revelations of Ea, the god of wisdom, who had bestowed them upon humanity at the beginning of time. Even Berossos, a Marduk priest of the third century B.C., whose Greek-language work *Babyloniaka*¹⁰ acquainted the Hellenistic world with the history and culture of ancient Mesopotamia, thought the following myth essential to any understanding of Babylonian culture. According to Berossus, in the first year of the world *immediately* subsequent to the creation of heaven, earth and humans, a fish-shaped creature called Oannes¹¹ rose from the Persian Gulf and taught

humans writing and the manifold techniques of the arts, the building of cities and the construction of temples...whatever availed the domesticity of life in the world, it [i.e., the “animal” Oannes] passed down to humankind; and since that time no one has invented anything more.¹²

Although in their inscriptions the Babylonian and Assyrian kings proudly invoked the names of their predecessors who had ruled the land thousands of years before, they also sought to close the gap in time that existed between themselves and the beginning of all things. Elegant testimony to this desideratum was the annual New Year’s celebration. In this important state ritual the king presented himself hand in hand with the World-God (i.e., with the image of this god which was usually worshiped in the temple) so as to recreate in a ritual performance the primordial struggle of this god with the powers of chaos, the eventual triumph over this adversary by the forces of order, and the ensuing creation of the world. Mesopotamian rulers legitimized themselves not only by tracing their descent from an “eternal seed,”¹³ from a “precious seed from the time before the Flood,”¹⁴ and from “families from the beginning of time,”¹⁵ but, according to a well-known myth from the Neo-Babylonian period, the gods created “the King” immediately after creating humankind in order that he might “lead [them] righteously.”¹⁶ The god-willed task of a king consisted in preserving, defending and renewing the world as had been ordered in the act of creation. Thus reforms in Mesopotamia were fundamentally seen as the restoration of this order, which had flagged over time. The developments witnessed by Mesopotamian society in the course of centuries and millennia—developments that were of enormous importance for human history

—were virtually never described as “progress” but mostly as restoration. The ideal society and state for the Mesopotamians—their utopia, as it were—always had its settled place in a long-ago age and never in the future. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the first millennia B.C. Assyrian kings, through subtle allusions, portrayed their campaigns against the enemies of the empire as the ever recurring primeval battle of the World-God against the forces of chaos, ending with the triumph of world order in the work of creation.

It was not only this mythical period which provided the Babylonians and Assyrians with a paradigm for ordering history. In the cultural memory of Mesopotamia those kings of “distant yore” who had achieved military conquest and expanded their power sphere far beyond the Fertile Crescent were seen as outstanding figures and even “Savior Kings” whose works were the expression of an ideal monarchy it behooved one to emulate. Among these was Sargon of Akkade, who was the first to unite the Mesopotamian city-states into an empire (c. 2350 B.C.). Also personifying the kingly ideal was Hammurabi, who in the eighteenth century B.C. once more united a Mesopotamia that had lapsed into a farrago of petty states. It was chiefly in the first millennium B.C. that the methods were passed down by which these kings succeeded in maintaining harmonious relations with the world order as established by the gods in the act of creation—thus fostering the kings’ memorable successes, along with an extensive epic literature on the “Savior Kings” and the original inscriptions of these rulers (which were always being scrupulously collected). In medical texts, for example, a certain medicine is extolled as having helped Hammurabi.¹⁷ To preserve the health of their monarch, royal scholars of the first millennium B.C. compiled lists of such things as what amulet Sargon of Akkade wore into battle, or what stones were contained in the amulet chain fastened to Hammurabi’s bed.¹⁸ Also conscientiously collated were omens which portended the victories or successes of these kings. Posterity was not concerned with the personality of a “Savior King” but rather with his relationship to the gods, which was revealed in his successes, his proper performance of the rituals and in those cosmic phenomena interpreted as favorable signs. Royal successors of the “Savior Kings” wished to partake of the divine grace bestowed upon their historical models and thus sought to emulate them. For Mesopotamian society the past already contained (pre-formed) all possibilities for the future, and

hence its preoccupation with bygone mythical or historical epochs was simultaneously a preoccupation with the future. No text illustrates this better than a fictitious autobiographical account of the deeds of Sargon of Akkade.¹⁹ This document probably originated in the late eighth century B.C. at the court of the Assyrian King Sargon II, who, upon ascending the throne, likely chose his name so as to invest his reign with the glorious aura of the great Old-Akkadian king:

...I exercised kingship for [5]4 years.

I mastered and re[igned over] the black-headed people.²⁰

(Through) the rockiest mountains [I] he[wed (a path)] with bronze pickaxes.

I repeatedly climbed the highest mountains [(...)].

I repeatedly crossed all the low mountain ranges.

The lands of the sea I circled three times.

[I] s[ubjugated] Dilmun.²¹

I [climbed] the great wall of Heaven and Earth.²¹

I did remove [its sto]nes [].

Irrespective of which king comes after me,

[May he exercise kingship for 54 years].

May he mas[ter and reign over] the black-headed people.

(Through) the rockiest mountains may he [hew] (a path) with bronze pickaxes.

May he repeatedly climb the highest mountains.

[May he repeatedly cross all the low mountain ranges].

May he circle three times the lands of the sea.

[May he subjugate Dilmun].

May he climb the great wall of Heaven and Earth.

[May he remove its stones].

Notes

- ¹ Akkadian is the oldest known Semitic language, coming down to us in the form of cuneiform documents from the period ca. 2800 B.C. to the first century A.D. Akkadian has two dialects: Babylonian and Assyrian.
- ² Sumerian is an agglutinate tongue unrelated to any other known language family. Sumerian itself is known to us through cuneiform documents ranging from the late fourth millennium B.C. to the first century A.D. As a spoken language it died out in the early second millennium B.C.
- ³ See G. Goossens, "Les recherches historiques à l'époque néo-babylonienne," *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 42 (1948): 49–59; and Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556–539 B.C.* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1989).
- ⁴ See W. G. Lambert, "A New Source for the Reign of Nabonidus," in *Archiv für Orientforschung* vol. 22 (1968–69): 1–8.
- ⁵ Kurigalzu reigned in the fourteenth century B.C.
- ⁶ Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 604–562 B.C.
- ⁷ W. G. Lambert, "A New Source," p. 5, line 24; and also see W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* 1399a.
- ⁸ ki – bi – shè gi₄ (Sumerian) = *ana ashriṣhu turru* (Akkadian).
- ⁹ See, for example, J. J. A. van Dijk, "Inanna raubt den 'grossen Himmel': Ein Mythos," in *Festschrift für Rykle Borger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 24. Mai 1994: tikip santakki mala bashmu* ed. Stefan M. Maul, (Cuneiform Monographs 10: Groningen 1998): 9–38.
- ¹⁰ See Paul Schnabel, *Berosos und die babylonisch-hellenistische Literatur* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1923) (reprint: Hildesheim 1968); and the translation of Stanley Mayer Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berosus: Sources from the Ancient Near East* 1/5 (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1978) 143–81 (= 1–39).
- ¹¹ For Oannes in the cuneiform literature, see W. W. Hallo, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83 (1963): 176, fn. 79; W. G. Lambert, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* vol. 16 (1972): 74; and R. Borger, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 33 (1974): 183–96; as well as A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 269.
- ¹² See Schnabel, *Berosos und die babylonisch-hellenistische Literatur* 253.
- ¹³ See A. L. Oppenheim et al., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago*, vol. Z, 95f. s.v. zēru 4b.
- ¹⁴ See Grant Frame, *Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157–612 B.C.)—The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 25, Nebuchadnezzar I B.2.4.8, line 8: zēru naḡru sha lām abūbi.
- ¹⁵ The Assyrian King Asarhaddon (680–669 B.C.) designated himself and the Assyrian royal dynasty as zēr sharrūti kisitti ṣāti ("Seed of the King-

- dom, Eternal Family Tree”). See Riekele Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien*, *Archiv für Orientforschung*, supplement 9 (Graz 1956): 32, Brs. A, line 17 (here translated as “königlicher Same, Uradliger”).
- ¹⁶ See W. R. Mayer, “Ein Mythos von der Erschaffung des Menschen und des Königs,” *Orientalia Nova Series* 56 (1987): 55–68.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, E. von Weiher, *Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk*, part II (Berlin 1983), 194ff., Text No. 50.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, E. von Weiher, *Uruk: Spätbabylonische Texte aus dem Planquadrat U 18*, part IV (Berlin 1993) 28ff., Text No. 129.
- ¹⁹ See Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 38–49.
- ²⁰ “Black-headed people” is an appellation for the people of Mesopotamia.
- ²¹ Dilmun was the name of the island known today as Bahrain.
- ²² This reading is uncertain. See the commentary of Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* 42f.