

IN THE LANDS OF SUMER
AND AKKAD

NEW STUDIES

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Updating Primeval Wisdom

The *Instructions of Šuruppak* in Its Early Dynastic and Old Babylonian Contexts

Walther Sallaberger

1. INTRODUCTION

Mesopotamian wisdom literature extensively discusses, in instructions and in proverbs, the complex topic of proper individual conduct. Prototypically, the father instructs his son, and timeless proverbs characterize situations and often reflect what is considered right or wrong. Wisdom literature handles the area of correct behavior not regulated either by the categories of legally prosecutable offences or misdeeds or by the rules of purity and religion. Given the long tradition of Mesopotamian wisdom texts, the seeming timelessness of the advice and proverbs, and the standard topics treated in them, it is hard to gain a direct understanding of their respective historical situations. Yet, considering the enormous developments in social conditions from the Early Bronze Age (the third millennium BCE)

* This article is dedicated to Jacob, the wise, with appreciation for his lasting contributions to the study of Sumerian literature and culture, and with gratitude for the kind invitation to participate in his birthday celebration in Jerusalem in June 2014. Some of the ideas discussed herein were first developed in a seminar on ‘Weisheit im Alten Orient: Ägypten, Mesopotamien, Israel’, held with my colleagues Friedhelm Hartenstein and Friedhelm Hoffmann in Munich in the summer semester of 2012; the historical and social contextualization of the Early Dynastic version was presented at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Paris, during a seminar on ‘Life and Work in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia’ held in March–April 2013; and a preliminary version of this essay was read at the conference on ‘Transmission, Translation, and Reception – Three Thousand Years of Textual Production and Dissemination in the Ancient Near East’ organized by Yoram Cohen and Amir Gilan in Tel Aviv in June 2014. The discussions at these three events were very helpful in developing the methodological approach used here. I am very grateful to Emrys Bell-Schlatter, member of the Graduate School Distant Worlds at LMU München, who corrected the English of this essay with care and competence.

on, literary texts can be read against their contemporary backgrounds, and this may allow adaptations of traditions to become historically meaningful.

Probably no other Sumerian literary composition shows a longer and more diverse history of textual transmission than the *Instructions of Šuruppak*. The oldest version (=AbSt) was found in the excavations at Abū Ṣalābīḥ and dates to the Fara period (ED IIIa, ca. twenty-sixth century BCE). The more fragmentary version from Adab (=Adab) dates to the pre-Sargonic period (ca. twenty-fourth century BCE). The 290-line Old Babylonian (OB) version, or what Bendt Alster has called the Standard Sumerian text (=SS), was part of the literary lore of the Old Babylonian period (nineteenth–eighteenth centuries BCE); manuscripts have been found in Nippur, Ur, Kish, Susa and other Mesopotamian sites. This and the other versions have now largely been reconstructed, thanks especially to Alster's tireless efforts and the decades of work he devoted to this text, though the task also relied considerably on the contributions of other Sumerologists, especially Miguel Civil and Claus Wilcke. With Alster's edition in his *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (2005) in hand, it is now possible to address some general questions regarding the tradition of the *Instructions* and the respective contemporary settings of its versions.¹

The known textual tradition begins with the Early Dynastic (ED) version, for which reason its form and contents constitute the starting point of this discussion. This is a reversal of the order of the work's decipherment and philological recovery. It was first read and interpreted only with the help of the standard Old Babylonian version, and in passages for which later parallels are unavailable, the archaic orthography of the Early Dynastic version has eluded nearly every effort at interpretation.

In the following pages, I shall discuss two topics relating to the textual history of the *Instructions*. Firstly, after briefly analyzing the form and contents of the Early Dynastic text, I shall investigate its protagonist's contemporary setting. Secondly, I shall discuss the transformation of the text in the Old Babylonian composition, concentrating on formal changes and the addition of new topics. In this way, I hope to improve our understanding of the textual tradition's setting within the intellectual and the social history of Early Mesopotamia.

1 The line numbers in the *Instructions of Šuruppak* follow the edition of Alster, *Wisdom*, pp. 31–220; the translations are based on Alster's transliterations and translations but have been revised to reflect my own understanding of the text.

2. THE EARLY DYNASTIC TEXT FROM ABŪ ŠALĀBĪḤ AND ITS SOCIAL SETTING

2.1. FORM AND PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

The first step towards an understanding of the text lies in identifying its basic structure. The tablet from Abū ŠalābīḤ (AbSt), with its 9 + 7 columns, contains around 171 lines of text; of these, around one third – 56 lines – are largely or completely lost, while 16 lines lack parallels in the OB version and are thus difficult to understand. A prologue provides the key to understanding the admonitions, advice and proverbs that make up the bulk of the composition.

AbSt 1–5, Prologue

- 1 The one of understanding, knowing the words, living in the land,
- 2 [Uncle] Šuruppakian, the one of understanding, knowing the words,
living in the land,
- 3 the Šuruppakian enlightened (his) son:
- 4 ‘My son, I will give you enlightenment!
- 5 Attention should be directed towards it!’

The speaker is called ‘Šuruppak’ after the name of his city; the form, a common one used in the Fara period to designate a person as belonging to that city, literally means ‘a person from Šuruppak’ or ‘the Šuruppakian’. In paraphrasing the text, however, including both the Abū ŠalābīḤ and the Adab versions, I shall refer to the speaker simply as ‘Šuruppak’.

Lines 3, 3–4 and 3–5 in the prologue recur as refrains within the text, which concludes with a kind of subscript.

Refrains in AbSt

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1–5 | Prologue (see above) |
| 16 = 3 | ‘The Šuruppakian enlightened (his) son:’ |
| 26–28 = 3–5 | ‘The Šuruppakian enlightened (his) son: “My son, ...”’ |
| 46 = 3 | ‘The Šuruppakian enlightened (his) son:’ |
| <i>Missing lines: 60–65, 69–71, 74–85, 94–100 etc.</i> | |
| 146–148 = 3–4 | ‘The Šuruppakian enlightened (his) son: “My son, ...”’ |
| 170–171 = 3’ | ‘(How) Uncle Šuruppakian (has) enlightened (his) son’. |

Apart from the explicit structure bestowed by the refrains, a formal pattern is discernible in the verbal forms used in the main proposition: (a) prohibitives, i.e., negative imperatives ('Don't ...!'); and (b) indicatives in declarative sentences. This is more than a mere grammatical observation: The forms of communication used in a dialogue are essential from a pragmatic point of view. Here, they signify the distinction between direct prohibitions addressed to the son in the second person and indirect proverbial sayings.

Structure of AbSt: Prohibitions and proverbs

Prologue (1–5)

Section 1 (6–15): Prohibitions

Refrain (16)

Section 2 (17–25): Prohibitions, with one saying sometimes occupying two verses

Refrain (26–28)

Section 3 (29–45): Prohibitions, often with the consequence stated in a second line

Refrain (46)

Section 4 (47–58): Prohibitions (also 55?)

Section 5 (72, 93, 102, 104–105) fragmentary

Section 6 (108–145): Proverbs, often with complementary subjects; 2nd person appears once (135); precatives (134–135)

Refrain (46–48)

Section 7 (149–169): Proverbs (largely fragmentary)

Refrain and conclusion (170–171)

The instructions to Šuruppak's son are thus mostly interdictions: Their advice refers not to how he should act in life, but rather to what he should avoid. The explanations of these interdictions become longer in Sections 2 and 3, and only in the last third, Sections 6 and 7, does the text switch over to the wisdom of proverbs. It is in these last sections, in ll. 134–135, that the only precatives in AbSt are found, as proposals for decorous conduct,² and it is here that we find the only second-person reference in the text (the

2 Similarly Alster, in *Studies*, p. 57, remarks upon the insertion of statements following the negative imperatives in the first part, which I interpret here as explanations or consequences of the preceding prohibitions.

possessive pronoun -zu₅, ‘your’). Šuruppak does not otherwise address his son directly in the proverb section.

2.2. NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES AS RHETORICAL STRATEGY

The principal topics dealt with in the text are introduced in the first two sections (ll. 6–15 and 17–25): possessions, women, communication and legal obligations. Similar topics are taken up later in the text, and similar themes are frequently grouped together.³

Šuruppak cautions his son against the dangers of life, usually offering explanations as arguments for his warnings. Two sayings at the beginning of the text demonstrate this structure:

AbSt 9–10

- 9 Don’t buy a prostitute! She is a mouth with a sharp tooth.
- 10 Don’t place a well in your field! People will damage it for you (i.e., to your disadvantage).

As these examples illustrate, Šuruppak supports his admonitions by pointing to the *negative* consequences of the prohibited action. *Positive* consequences are rare and restricted to the proverb sections; these, however, are badly preserved, and thus additional, similar types of sentences could lie hidden in the broken parts of the text. Clear examples of such positive assertions include:

AbSt 121–123, 131 and 134–136

- 121 To have something (means) to be well esteemed.
- 123 To have a wife is perfect!
- 131 A loving heart is something that builds houses.
- 134–136 Before the strong one the neck should be bent, your words should depend (lit. ‘hang’) on the powerful, then you will [stand up against] the evil ones.

A simple typology of negative consequences illustrates the principles of argumentation used in this Early Dynastic composition.

3 For an outline of the topics treated in the text see Alster, *Studies*, pp. 63–64.

(1) *Deed bears consequences*

theft > imprisonment (becoming like a *geme₂*, a ‘female slave’)
(AbSt 18 = SS 30)

drunken judgment > fatal consequences of words (AbSt 53–55 = SS
126–127, 37)

evil > its destructive effects (AbSt 128–130 = SS 197, 200–201)

(2) *Negative outcome of deed is possible*

beaten farmer > he will destroy the watercourses (AbSt 47 = SS 153)

usufruct of stolen goods > sale of oxen (AbSt 34–36 = SS 39–41)

domestics bought > like bad herbs (AbSt 48 = SS 155)

laziness > decline of house (AbSt 56–58 = SS 175–177)

(3) *Uncontrollable social consequences*

lies > ‘trap’ (AbSt 37–38 = SS 42–43)

buy prostitute > ‘sharp’ mouth (AbSt 9 = SS 154)

‘laugh’ with girl > slander (AbSt 22 = SS 33)

sex with servant girl > ‘she will ruin you’ (AbSt 44 = SS 49)

As these examples indicate, Šuruppak points primarily to the possible negative consequences of deeds that transgress the social norms. The main thrust of Šuruppak’s argumentation is that social conduct is to be guided by the danger of malicious gossip. This conclusion is all the more important when one considers what Šuruppak does not say: There is no mention of ‘honor’ or ‘shame’ or of personal feelings of guilt, and no reference to punishment by higher authorities, either human or divine.

2.3. TOPICS TREATED IN THE ABŪ ŠALĀBĪḤ VERSION OF THE *INSTRUCTIONS*

Wisdom literature generally deals with actions in social life that cannot be sanctioned by law. In keeping with this, Šuruppak only rarely speaks of legally punishable crimes, such as theft (*zuḥ*, AbSt 17–18 = SS 28), homicide and violence (*gaz*, AbSt 18 = SS 30), or breaking into a house

(e₂ bur₃, AbSt 19 = SS 29).⁴ He is more concerned with his son's proper conduct within the social context of his peers. The son should keep promises (?) (AbSt 110–111 = SS 97–98), speak modestly (AbSt 144 = SS 235) and without boasting (AbSt 23 = SS 37), neither lie (AbSt 25 = SS 36; AbSt 37 = SS 42) nor insult anybody (AbSt 72 = SS 134), and avoid quarrels (AbSt 24 = SS 35). The warning not to assume legal obligations as a witness (AbSt 11 = SS 21) or guarantor (AbSt 12 = SS 19) is given in the same spirit.

Interestingly, religion, cult and gods do not play any role; they are not hinted at even indirectly. As discussed in section 2.2 above, the negative consequences of misbehavior may be disrespect, slander or losses, but never the reaction of a deity or a human authority. Community standards serve as guidelines, and disregarding them risks negative consequences, but no reference to a divine order (or to the state) is ever considered.

2.4. A PROFILE OF ŠURUPPAK ACCORDING TO THE ABŪ ṢALĀBĪḤ VERSION

Šuruppak's advice offers a glimpse into the protagonist's social and economic setting. He tells his son that to have a wife is perfect (AbSt 123), and so we see him as a person with children (AbSt 93) and a family life, warning strongly against contact with other women (AbSt 22; prostitute, AbSt 9). He speaks of slaves (AbSt 44 = SS 49; AbSt 48 = SS 155) and of constructing a house (AbSt 8 = SS 18). He also considers where to make a field (AbSt 6) and where to dig a well in it (AbSt 10). Concerning animals, Šuruppak discusses the rent and purchase of donkeys and oxen (AbSt 36 = SS 41; AbSt 30 = SS 214) as well as the choice of a grazing place for sheep (AbSt 39 = SS 44), and he asserts that one's work should not let him be idle (AbSt 56–58). Not surprisingly, he thinks that it is good to have possessions (AbSt 120–122 = SS 184) and that it is better to be rich than poor. Šuruppak is aware of his status in society; he obeys authority (AbSt 133 = SS 204) and bows to the 'strong one' who protects against evil (AbSt 134–135 = SS 205–206). He also instructs his son not to beat the subordinate son of the plowman (AbSt 47 = SS 153). He likens the palace, distant and awe-inspiring, to a river and a goring ox (AbSt 109 = SS 94).

4 Cf. Selz, in 'Streit herrscht', pp. 174–178, who highlights the legal aspects of the ED text.

Šuruppak is well settled in his environment; he warns against nocturnal travel (AbSt 42 = SS 47) and more generally of travel to unknown foreign regions (AbSt 158 = SS 276).

2.5. ŠURUPPAK AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF EARLY DYNASTIC SOCIETY

A profile of Šuruppak emerges from the Abū Šalābīḥ text: We see him as an honest, slightly skeptical, conservative and obedient citizen, striving for moderate wealth, for whom good social relations in his city are of utmost importance. This profile clearly represents an ideal of the era in which the text was written, so that we can now examine how it fits into its social context, the Early Dynastic period. Sources from little over a century after the Abū Šalābīḥ text was written allow for an approximate reconstruction of Early Bronze Age society. The archive of the Lady of Lagaš from Girsu (twenty-fourth century BCE) may be taken as a representative example. It indicates that in Sumer a large part of the population, at least, was grouped in communal organizations; of these, the Lady's organization, called the 'Female Quarter' or, after Urukagina's reform, the 'House of Bau', was one of the most prominent in the city of Girsu, capital of the city-state of Lagaš.⁵ The 500–600 persons listed as belonging to the Lady's organization and receiving allotments were divided into two groups: those with subsistence land (189 to 267 persons) and those who lived solely on monthly grain allotments (266 to 436 persons). The first group contained only men, whose professions involved food production or crafts: herdsmen, boatmen, barbers, doorkeepers, foresters, gardeners, overseers of storehouses, etc. The second group consisted of carriers and textile workers – mainly women – as well as gardeners and members of other professions.

Where in this world is one to situate Uncle Šuruppak? According to the text of the *Instructions*, he ranked below the palace royalty and the highest authorities, excluding the possibility that he was a member of the family of the city's ruler or of the city-state's highest-ranking priests, generals or managers, because individuals belonging to the top stratum appear

5 Recent descriptions of the Lady's organization of Girsu are offered by Selz, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 49–96; Bauer, 'Der vorsargonische Abschnitt'; Prentice, *Exchange*; and Schrakamp, 'Krieger und Bauern'. See also Sallaberger and Pruß, 'Home and Work'.

together in the Girsu archive as celebrated guests at the main festivals.⁶ We must assume, however, that Šuruppak did enjoy a certain social standing, since he owned slaves and had plowmen at his disposal. This, along with his description as caring for a field and farm animals, clearly situates him in the first group in the Lady's organization. The first profession listed among the members of the 'Female Quarter', indicating its high rank, was called *RU lugal*,⁷ and it contained by far the greatest number of members. The *RU lugal* were engaged in agricultural work and performed duties for the community but also served in the army in times of war. According to the *Reforms of Urukagina*, the *RU lugal* is protected against the *lu₂ gu-la*, the 'big man', a member of the highest social stratum. Further characterizations appearing in the *Reforms* read like a portrait of Šuruppak in the *Abū Šalābīḫ* version: 'The *RU lugal* built his well at the head end of his field and took the "blind one" into his service',⁸ to whom he has either to pay rent or to give water.⁹ In the *Instructions*, Šuruppak warns his son not to dig a well in the field (AbSt 10) and to treat his plowman well (AbSt 47). The *Reforms* further mandate that the *RU lugal* cannot be forced to sell his house¹⁰ or his donkey.¹¹ As we have seen, Šuruppak owns a house and buys donkeys.

The *RU lugal*, the 'farmers and soldiers' or 'freemen', can reasonably be identified as the backbone of Mesopotamian society. I would therefore suggest that the prototypical Šuruppak would have been a member of the *RU lugal* in pre-Sargonic Girsu, a group that comprised about one half of those possessing subsistence land,¹² or about 20% of the persons belonging to the 'Female Quarter'. The *Instructions of Šuruppak* presumably were considered valid also for other members of the organization,

6 See the list of recipients of 'holy milk, holy malt' in DP 133, as given by Selz, *Untersuchungen*, p. 75; the recipients of grain, vegetables and fruit, such as those mentioned in DP 134 (including the family of the city's ruler and the notables of the city-state); or the contributors to the festival (*maš-da-ri-a*).

7 Schrakamp, 'Krieger und Bauern', and the literature cited there. A correct translation of the designation *RU lugal* is still out of reach.

8 Ukg. 4 vii 17–19 / 5 vi 37 – vii 2; see Frayne, *Presargonic Period*, p. 261.

9 Ukg. 6 ii 2'–7'; see *ibid.*, pp. 272–273.

10 Ukg. 4 xi 32 – xii 11 / 5 xi 1–19; see *ibid.*, p. 264.

11 Ukg. 4 xi 20–31 / 5 x 20–32; Ukg. 6 ii 8'–9'; see *ibid.*, pp. 264 and 273.

12 Prentice, *Exchange*, p. 71.

for whom the large and highest-ranking group of the *RU lugal* very likely served as role models.

More is known about the living conditions of the members of communal organizations in the Early Dynastic period thanks to finds from Tell Beydar.¹³ Here, too, the highest-ranked group in the grain allotment lists is the most numerous, comprising 20–25% of the workforce; its members, called *lu₂-neš-DU*, received the highest rations and also worked in agriculture. In Tell Beydar, almost the entire population of the city received monthly allotments of barley from the community's harvest, which was stored in large granaries and managed centrally. Every house had at its disposal grinding stones and ovens for preparing meals at home. Family life took place in the domestic dwellings. This is the context of the family-man *Šuruppak*. There are no traces of professional work taking place at home, however; the workshops and storerooms of Tell Beydar covered a large area of the town, and the agricultural tools and draught animals were allotted to those working the fields. Evidently, the inhabitants of an Early Bronze Age town spent much of their time with peers in the same profession or group. This ties in nicely with the consistent grouping of people according to profession in the preserved administrative lists. In this context, we may understand better why, when offering advice, *Šuruppak* concentrates on correct social behavior in communicating with others; this contributed to an atmosphere of collaboration in the place where people spent most of their waking hours.

The people listed in the early grain allotment lists from Girsu and elsewhere have often been described as dependent workers, even state slaves,¹⁴ whereas *Šuruppak* gives the impression of being a self-determined person with a relatively high degree of independence. Otherwise, his long list of admonitions to his son surely would not have been written. Indeed, it is not difficult to connect these two images to form a more complete picture of social life in the Early Dynastic period. The grain allotment lists evidently indicate nothing more than the allotted amounts of grain, per person or per professional group. Where the individual was concerned, however, work in the fields or the workshop demanded responsibility and clear decisions in order to obtain good results; individual failures in

13 Sallaberger and Pruß, 'Home and Work', on which the following description is based.

14 See the reviews of the literature in Powell, *Labor*, especially Steinkeller, 'Foresters'; also Dahl, 'Babylonian Gang', and Sallaberger and Pruß, 'Home and Work'.

agricultural or handicraft production affected the community as a whole. Furthermore, in a densely built Early Bronze Age city, with its narrow streets and small houses abutting one another,¹⁵ social life necessarily demanded good conduct and the preservation of community standards. It is thus most appropriate that wise Šuruppak's advice to his son concerns proper speech in everyday communication, since social relations are established and preserved by verbal action.

The *Instructions of Šuruppak* are thus an important source for reconstructing the personal perspective of the inhabitants of Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia, whom we otherwise know mainly from administrative documents. They depict the responsibility held by every individual participant in a communal organization, whereas study of the administrative lists alone often produces a distorted caricature of dull workers directed by mighty and omniscient managers, 'elites' or rulers.

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE *INSTRUCTIONS OF ŠURUPPAK* IN THE OLD BABYLONIAN VERSION

3.1. THE SURVIVAL OF THE *INSTRUCTIONS OF ŠURUPPAK* IN THE OLD BABYLONIAN PERIOD

The *Instructions of Šuruppak* is one of the few texts that survived the revision of the literary and lexical corpus at the end of the third millennium. As is well known, the Early Dynastic corpus from Fara, Abū Šalābīḥ and a few other sites, including some lexical texts going back to the Uruk period, had hardly any successors in the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods. Beginning with Gudea and Urnamma, a new corpus of literary texts emerged from ca. 2100 BCE onward. This creative period culminated under Šulgi of Ur and the kings of Isin, especially Išmedagan and Lipiteštar in the late twentieth century BCE. Never ceasing completely, it continued into the Babylon I dynasty. Very few copies of the Early Dynastic lexical lists date

15 In twenty-fourth century Tell Beydar, the average size of a private house was 60m² (including walls), whereas sale contracts point to houses of 40m² to 50m² (probably excluding walls) from the Fara to the Sargonic periods; see Sallaberger and Pruß, 'Home and Work'.

to the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.¹⁶ Apart from the *Instructions of Šuruppak* and some proverbs, the only literary composition that survived this overhaul was the *Kesh Temple Hymn*. However, there are no later parallels of the UD.GAL.NUN literature, the Lugalbanda text or the *Zami Hymns* from Abū Šalābīḥ.

This nearly complete replacement of the literary and lexical corpus is all the more remarkable in that compositions were generally handed down for centuries. Thus, for example, the Early Dynastic Lu A list of professions that were valid in the Uruk period was copied in basically the same order over half a millennium later, and individual texts continued to be copied even in Old Babylonian times. Similarly, many lexical lists of the early second millennium, most of which probably date to the Isin period, were later expanded, but they were never completely replaced by similar texts. This copying process continued until the end of the cuneiform lexical tradition in the final centuries of the first millennium BCE.

The tradition of the *Instructions of Šuruppak* is remarkable not only from the perspective of the modern Assyriologist; the Old Babylonian authors who worked on the text apparently also sensed its venerable age. The transformation of the prologue confirms this most clearly by setting the advice not in the contemporary world but in an antediluvian past, giving it a cosmic frame.

SS 1–13, introduction. Text appearing in AbSt is in italics.

- 1 In those days, in those distant days,
- 2 in those nights, in those distant nights,
- 3 in those years, in those distant years,
- 4 then, there was *the one of understanding*, the word artist, *knowing the words, living in the land*,
- 5 *Šuruppak, the one of understanding*, the word artist, *knowing the words, living in the land*,
- 6 *Šuruppak enlightened his son.*
- 7 *Šuruppak*, the son of Ubar-Tutu,
- 8 enlightened his son Ziusudra.
- 9 *My son, I will give you enlightenment*, my enlightenment should be accepted (by you)!
- 10 Ziusudra, I will tell you a word, *attention should be directed towards it!*
- 11 Do not relinquish my enlightenment!

¹⁶ Veldhuis, ‘Guardians’.

underlining the value of the ‘gift’ of the wise man’s advice, as already emphasized in the introduction:

SS 284–290

284 This gift of words [is] something that soothes the mind,
 285 after having entered (even) the palace [it] soothe[s] the mind,
 286 the gift of the expression of words¹⁸ [...] stars,
 287 it is the enlightenment given by Šuruppak, the son of Ubar-Tutu,
 288 an enlightenment, given by Šuruppak, the son of Ubar-Tutu:
 289 Praise be to the lady who completed the great tablets,
 290 praise be to the maiden Nisaba!

The *Instructions* thus show the following structure in the Standard Sumerian (SS) version:

Introduction (1–13)
 Section 1: 58 lines (14–72)
 Refrain (73–82A)
 Section 2: 59 lines (83–142)
 Refrain (143–152A)
 Section 3: 130 lines (153–283)
 Conclusion and doxology (284–290)

Largely following its Early Dynastic predecessor,¹⁹ the OB version treats basic social relations and proper speech in Sections 1 and 2, but no topic is dealt with exclusively in just one section.

The Old Babylonian text makes no attempt, by nuancing either the contents or the formulae, to tone down the sometimes jarring contrasts created by the superimposition of the mythical framework upon the older text, with its everyday perspective. Thus, following the cosmic frame offered by the prologue (ll. 1–13), the very first line of Šuruppak’s antediluvian wisdom declares:

SS 14

Don’t buy a braying donkey stallion; he will break your yoke!

18 Reading ka enim-ma.

19 Alster, *Studies*, Chap. 5, ‘The Compositional Principles’, and Chap. 6, ‘Transmission and Recreation’.

One hopes that those who heard, read, learned and wrote this text in the Old Babylonian period also enjoyed the irony of this sudden shift in registers.

3.3. NEW THEMES IN THE OLD BABYLONIAN VERSION

The topics treated in this wisdom text – the quest for personal welfare and good social relations – are timeless. No wonder, then, that the Old Babylonian text largely follows the Early Dynastic model, even if the use of different organizational principles for combining common themes led to some textual reorganization.²⁰ The additions were likely determined by the new cultural and social contexts of the Isin or Old Babylonian period, which demanded an update of the old and venerated wisdom text.²¹

Since the Early Dynastic text is lacunary, new themes introduced into the OB text cannot be identified with absolute certainty. Many lines without earlier parallels take up standard topics, so that most of the textual expansions do not produce greater thematic variety. Thus, further details expand the discussion of correct verbal communication, already a prominent theme in AbSt:

SS 103–108

- 103 The pleasant mouth recites words,
 104 (but) the recalcitrant mouth carries a (legal) document,
 105 the honey-mouth roots out (i.e., harvests) honey-sweet herbs.
 106 (To) the eloquent, his leather bag approached (him),
 107 (but) the haughty one brought (only) an empty bag,
 108 (and) the braggart put empty words in it.

Here proverbs elucidate the topic of correct speech: Friendly talk brings its reward, while the recalcitrant, the haughty and the braggart earn nothing.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–76 (‘The Function of the Additional Sections’).

21 Selz, in ‘Streit herrscht’, pp. 177–178, looked for new topics in the OB version of the *Instructions of Šuruppak* that might have been caused by social change, and he therefore concentrated on legal matters. My methodological approach differs in that it is based on a complete mapping of the themes treated in the text and concentrates on elements that are clear and substantial additions; it does not touch upon finer alterations, such as those treated by Selz.

Notably, the proverbs in ll. 103, 105 and 106 indirectly offer positive advice rather than negative warnings; as we saw above, positive assertions are very rare in the Early Dynastic text, so that this paragraph can plausibly be identified as an Old Babylonian addition.

Prayer

The topic of correct speech reappears in ll. 134–142, starting with a line from the proverb section in the ED version (SS 134 = AbSt 72), but proceeding with a different continuation:

SS 134–142

- 134 Speaking insults has finally pierced the skin,
 135 envious looking will strike down,
 136 shouting (and) the liar tear up garments,
 137 insults will be presented as advice by evil,
 138 excessive talking is a fire; it is a herb that sickens the stomach.
 139 (But) let me beam with joy because of you, with your name becoming
 brilliant:
 140 Words of devotion are years of abundance,
 141 prayer is cool water; it will cool the heart.
 142 (But) insulting and speaking doltishly demands²² the attention of the
 land.

This segment begins similarly to the ED version, with various proverbial warnings about the destructive potential of insults and lies. However the continuation is remarkable in several ways. Firstly, we again encounter positive statements (ll. 139, 140, 141), such as are seldom to be found in the Abū Ṣalābīḥ version. The cohortative ‘let me...!’, here directed towards a second person (l. 139), is a form of speech not used in the ED *Instructions*. More importantly, the topic of prayer, completely absent from the ED version, appears twice in these lines (ll. 140, 141). That these lines appear at the very end of Section 2, just before the refrain (see 3.2.), is another strong indication that they are an Old Babylonian addition.

22 Literally ‘(is something) for the attention...’, i.e., the land should be on the watch for malicious and stupid language use.

Divine authorities

A comparable development of ideas can be found in the treatment of the ancient theme of obedience to authorities (AbSt 134–136 = SS 205–207, cited above in 2.2). Similar statements to those appearing in AbSt can be found in the OB version, but they are formulated differently:

SS 189–192 (based on Alster’s translation)

- 189 After a man has held onto the neck of a huge bull,
 190 this man will cross a river.
 191 When you have passed (some time) at the side of the ‘big men’ of
 your city,
 192 my son, this may make you ascend.

The positive formulation and the direct address to ‘my son’ indicate that this segment is an Old Babylonian insertion. The reference to the ‘big men of the city’ may also be taken as a sign of the OB background, since fellow citizens were never marked as members of their city in the Abū Ṣalābīḥ text.

Respect for authorities is also expressed at the end of Section 1, before the refrain (see 3.2). Here, too, the context is highly relevant to this segment’s identification as a likely insertion.

SS 69–72 (based on Alster’s translation)

- 69 A warrior is alone; when he is alone, he is (like) many!
 70 Utu (the sun-god) is alone; when he is alone, he is (like) many!
 71 Standing with the ‘hero’, your life will stay with you!
 72 Standing with Utu, your life will stay with you!

The use of precatives and of the second person in ll. 71–72 as formal features, reinforced by the placement of these lines at the end of Section 1 (see 3.2), again marks them as Old Babylonian additions, in contrast to the earlier proverbs, which are phrased as indirect statements. Alster was the first to point out the relevance of the passages at the ends of the various sections in determining the course of transmission, and he rightly stressed the importance of the ‘religious background of the composition, which therefore should not be underrated in spite of the fact that seemingly it plays little

role in the individual sayings of the text'.²³ But this religious perspective was only inserted in the later, Old Babylonian text!

Fear of foreign regions

If the topic of verbal behavior, present in the ED version, is expanded in the OB version to include prayer, and authorities to include divine authority, so, too, is another theme, Šuruppak's fear of travelling in unknown regions, adjusted to the new setting. In the ED text, he warns of the dangers of travel (AbSt 158 = SS 276) and of nocturnal journeys (AbSt 42 = SS 47). In the OB composition, however, this is developed into Babylonian patriotism:²⁴

SS 165–167 (Alster's translation)

- 165 My son, towards the place where the sun rises,
 166 don't travel alone!
 167 Someone whom you don't know will trade you as a slave.

We may note in passing that slaves from mountainous regions are highly esteemed (SS 193), but the mountains are a dangerous place:

SS 178–180 (Alster's translation)

- 178 (The need for) bread makes those who live in the mountains (kur)
 descend;
 179 it brings liars and strangers along;
 180 (the need for) bread makes people descend from the mountains.

Veneration of parents

The last theme to be expanded in the later text is that of family. To be sure, family plays a role in the ED text; the advice to choose a good wife is among its recurring themes, and praise for the elder brother and sister appears in the text from Adab:

23 Alster, *Studies*, pp. 73–74.

24 See *ibid.*, p. 74. Alster's reference to Abs. rev. vi 3 = AbSt 134 as pointing to a 'contrast between barbarians and civilized people' must now be corrected in light of the new understanding of the text as referring to authority.

Adab fr. 8 i 1–2

An older brother is indeed a father; he is indeed a mother!

SS 172–174 (Alster’s translation)

- 172 An older brother is indeed a father; an older sister is indeed a mother!
- 173 You should pay attention to your older brother;
- 174 you should be supportive (?) of an older sister like your mother.

Expansion of an ED statement by way of additional explanations is among the techniques employed by the OB text to emphasize what is considered important.²⁵ The theme of venerating one’s parents, however, seems to be without an earlier parallel, and the reference to the gods strongly suggests that this, too, is a genuine Old Babylonian insertion:

SS 265–270 (Alster’s translation)

- 265 Don’t speak an arrogant word to your mother; there will be hatred caused against you.
- 266 Your mother’s words (and) the words of your god, don’t take them to (your) mouth!
- 267 A mother is (like) Utu, who gives birth (i.e., life) to man(kind);
- 268 a father is (like a personal) god who makes [*a name* (?)] shine.
- 269 A father is like a (personal) god; his words are just;
- 270 you should pay attention to the instructions of a father.

The themes of prayer and divine authorities, both belonging to the broader topic of religion, and those of patriotism and veneration of the family have been identified as Old Babylonian insertions primarily because of their formal qualities. But they also represent the different *Zeitgeist* of the era in which the text, originating in a foreign past, was adapted to its environment, in the Old Babylonian period (or perhaps slightly earlier). The protagonist of the Early Dynastic version was a member of a city-state, belonged to a communal organization (perhaps a temple) and spent most of his life amongst his social peers. In the Old Babylonian period, by contrast, the protagonist can be seen as an individual for whom family life and personal prayer appear to have become important, while the expressed fear of foreign countries recalls the era’s wider geographical horizon and changed

25 Alster, *Studies*, *passim*, esp. pp. 71–74.

historical situation. Proper conduct is still largely perceived as controlled by the community, but the topic of religion has now been introduced as a positive element in the individual's life. I take this as a sign of the individual's broader perspective, which now included the religious and divine order in addition to the urban community. In passing, it may be added that the obligation to observe cultic duties appeared only late in Babylonian wisdom literature, from around 1100 BC onward, half a millennium after the Old Babylonian manuscripts were written.

4. THE LATER HISTORY OF THE *INSTRUCTIONS OF ŠURUPPAK*

In the Old Babylonian period, some extraordinary authors among the scribes educated in Sumerian literature started to write compositions in Akkadian, combining the transmitted literary lore with the style of the time. The *Instructions of Šuruppak* served as a model for an Old Babylonian wisdom text, *Šimâ milka*, which transmits the advice given by a father, Šūpê-amêli, to his son. In the end, however, the antediluvian wisdom is called into question by the younger generation, as the son questions the words of his father by pointing to the brevity of life and the inevitability of death.²⁶

Notwithstanding this change in worldview and the development of dialogues in wisdom literature, the *Instructions of Šuruppak* withstood even the second profound break in the tradition of Sumerian literature at the end of the Old Babylonian period, one in which few compositions outside the cultic and magic genres survived. Our text was even translated into Akkadian, as evidenced by a Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian manuscript, and a small fragment offers the addition of a Hurrian column. This transmission history makes the *Instructions of Šuruppak* unique; it survived two periods in which the corpus was overhauled, and it overcame the linguistic gap between Sumerian and Akkadian and even other languages. That a wisdom text constitutes the exception is no coincidence, I would argue. Not only are many of its sayings applicable to any context, but, more importantly: the text bears no specific cultural markers. It contains no references to local rulers or dynasties; local cults play no role in it at all; and religion appears only in its most basic forms, in references to 'prayer' or the 'sun-god'. This neutral character facilitates transmission

26 Sallaberger, 'Skepsis'; Cohen, *Wisdom*, pp. 14–16, 81–128.

and translation into different cultural contexts. Indeed, the genres of wisdom literature – including instructions and proverbs – and narratives of heroes comprise the literature that spread most freely in the cuneiform world of the Late Bronze Age. Unfortunately, the standard phrasing of proverbs does not allow for easy identification in the receiving literature, such as Hesiod or the Bible, in which, however, wisdom literature takes different forms and features other perspectives.

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