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# Spectral Etiologies in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*.

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## Abstract

This article examines the invention of writing as represented in the Sumerian epic "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." I argue that a close analysis of the techniques of literary figuration in this episode reveals a kind of circular "spectrality" or "hauntedness" in the poem: the invention of writing seems to be described as if writing had already been invented. This has consequences for both how we understand the poem, as well as more limited consequences concerning the modes of realism and the construction of similes in Sumerian poetry. After analyzing the relevant key passages, I expand my analysis by observing that the poem is more broadly haunted by predetermined, spectral outcomes. For instance, Uruk is already seen to have achieved the acme of its greatness before it is made glorious by Enmerkar; the export of writing as a technology precedes the inventions of exports. In moving toward a conclusion, I connect all these spectral etiologies to the broader problem of historical "progress models" that Sumerian literary works employ to rewrite history to suit specific, presentist political contexts and to propose determined futures for civilization. We will see that the specific contribution of "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" to this broader discourse is that it embeds the invention of writing within these progress models, which were previously more centered on the perceived shifts from nomadism to agriculturalism and finally to city life.

***Keywords:*** Invention of Writing, Mesopotamian Literature, Sumerian Poetry, Progress Models

# Spectral Etiologies in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*.

The Sumerian epic composition known as "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" has long been recognized as one of the most aesthetically and ideologically nuanced works of Mesopotamian literature.[1] The roughly 650-line poem, which dates back to the late third millennium BCE, narrates a rivalry between Enmerkar as the ruler of the Sumerian settlement of Unug-Kulab (later Uruk) and the unnamed king of the mythical and fabulously resource-rich region of Aratta. At its heart is a contest of wits, a verbal game of one-upmanship through which Enmerkar hopes to secure the materials to decorate his city and the whole of Sumer with goods that do not yet exist in Sumer. The exchanges between the rulers are mediated indirectly by the goddess Inana, who recommends to Enmerkar that he petition the king of Aratta for precious and rare materials. But they are then more directly mediated by a messenger who goes between kings, conveying the growingly complex sequences of riddles and solutions that make up each ruler's messages to the other. One way to read the text is to see in it a common folktale motif of the seemingly impossible riddles that, of course, are always ingeniously resolved by the witty protagonist. Another is to emphasize how the exchanges between kings allow the poem to expound, both overtly and between the lines, on questions of overlordship between cities, the importance of trade, and the arrival of new technologies and forms of manufacture due to the arrival of new metals (Vanstiphout, 2003, pp. 53-54). The loosely epistolary or episodic structure of the epic also allows it to include, carefully integrated within its segments, other genres, such as that of etiology, often in turn encoded within other genres still. For instance, the proem offers one panoramic view of prehistory before trade, before the working of new metals, and—implicitly—before the invention of writing which will facilitate them. But another vision of a transition out of

1 References to the Sumerian text and translations, with minor alterations for clarity, follow Vanstiphout (2003, pp. 56-96). For examples of the praise the poem has received as a literary and ideological document, one can turn to Vanstiphout's introduction to the text in the same volume (pp. 49-55), or to Zaccagnini (1993, p. 34).

prehistory can be inferred also from the much-studied "spell of Nudimmud," an incantation contained within one of the exchanges between kings, offered up as a kind of prophetic riddle, and which culminates not in the invention of writing but in the unification of human languages permitting complete intelligibility across Sumer (Mittermayer, 2009; Kramer, 1968; Vanstiphout, 1994). Any treatment of the text's interesting ideological coordinates must accordingly be undertaken through a lens carefully attuned to its structures of literary signification.

In this article, I follow previous scholars in approaching the poem as an important etiological document. However, in exploring how the narrative drives the reader's imagination from the establishment of trade, communication, writing, to a vision of a more connected and politically unified Sumer, I will argue that it manipulates the chronology of its own ideologies through a kind of "spectrality." By this I mean that the poem offers an aberrant history of civilization in which the technologies resulting from key moments of invention must somehow precede the moment of invention for the poem's narrative to make sense—or, in other terms, the poem's inventions of writing and trade haunt the epic's narrative, since they "always already" must have happened to ensure the internal cohesion of the narrative. In borrowing the notion of spectrality from the hauntological paradigm first introduced in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994), I want to emphasize the peculiarity of certain narratives of cultural origin that depend, ultimately, on an always-already defined set of linguistic and cultural conditions for the moments of original invention to be inserted intelligibly into the smooth flow of history. This mirage of historical continuity transforms moments of radical and in some ways erratic historical rupture into neat episodes within a clearly teleological cultural history—such that, for instance, the invention of writing for primarily local bureaucratic purposes that was then extended into forms of more and more sophisticated connectivity between polities comes to be refigured as an invention that directly emerged from and in some ways merely addressed that latter tension. What is lost in this transition are the surprises inherent in the moment of invention and their open-ended possibilities for shaping any number of possible worlds. Instead, the haunted representation of the

origin story comes across as always already having had only one and only one possible telos. Accordingly, the haunted emergence of writing conveys a clear political message about the assumed importance of one historical consequence over any number of unspoken or outright erased alternatives. In developing this angle on the poem, I will more concretely locate "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" within the broader context of Sumerian narratives that have elsewhere been identified as belonging to the genre of "progress models" of civilization, offering very specific and formulaic visions of the transition from a pre-urban prehistoric moment to the rise of Uruk and the establishment of a glorious Sumer.[2] While "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" will be shown to fit this pattern, we will also see that its unique spectrality makes it a particularly compelling type of progress model narrative—revealing a further aspect of its literary brilliance as a document that forges new historical horizons.

I am by no means the first to note the importance of the etiology of writing in the epic, although I am approaching it from this new perspective.[3] A large number of writers have already commented on the story of the invention of writing in the poem, grappling with the exciting difficulty that the episode is essentially unique in the Sumerian corpus and must therefore be treated with great care. After reviewing the key passages related to the moment of writing's invention and reviewing the state of the field, I will then move on to develop my own thesis of spectrality in the epic by focusing on two striking narrative components of the poem. First, I will show that, in the poem, writing in several ways precedes the invention of writing. This apparent paradox, we will see, can be in part resolved by a narratological analysis of the text and, without con-

2 The notion of a "progress model" as a teleological model that forecloses surprises is developed from Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021). Before writing this article, I submitted to a separate venue an article theorizing the idea of progress models as part of ancient literature and exploring several such models in Sumerian literary texts that precede "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." That article, "Cities Writ in Water: Urbanization, Flood, and Power in Sumerian Poetry," should appear in print by the end of 2025.

3 A properly comprehensive review of the multiple etiological threads in the poem's key passages can be found in the most recent critical edition and commentary to the text (Mittermayer 2009, pp. 57-66). Although my approach differs in how I locate the etiological force of the poem in the rehashing of existing "progress model" narratives, I will return to Mittermayer's contributions below where they intersect with my reading, since hers is complementary to my own in many ways.

tradiction, it can also be allowed to stand as a paradox that serves to naturalize a specific ideological perspective on the importance of the Sumerian language as a political instrument of regional control, showing us the necessity of spectral presupposition at the heart of the poem's ideological rather than narrative structure. Second, we will see that on this new understanding of the poem's etiological force, it appears to self-consciously situate itself as a unique and new version of the Sumerian "progress model" myths. While, as mentioned above, it follows other progress models in the ideological rewriting of prehistory into a clear sequence of supposed events leading into the historical period, moving from pre-urbanity to the urban state via the invention of agriculture, it enmeshes the invention of writing with the rise of agriculture in a subtle manner so as to further entrench its spectral historical teleology from which there can never have been an imaginable deviation. In this capacity, it is also one of the first examples of the progress model genre in the world (if not the oldest text in the world) to incorporate the invention of writing in the mythic panorama of human progress—at the same time as it refuses to in effect represent humanity as ever having occupied any kind of pre-literate past that did not always already have within it the germ of literacy and, consequently, of the social order that the hegemony of the Sumerian language would later achieve.

Like previous scholars, I will begin here with the key passage in which writing is invented by Enmerkar as a way to aid his messenger in the delivery of messages to the king of Aratta. In this episode, the messenger becomes quite literally tongue-twisted after several trips conveying messages *verbatim* between the rulers. Thus, writing is invented as an external instrument that can resolve his somatic impasse, extending his capabilities in a more-than-human direction. The expedient of writing on clay tablets then comes into view subtly and in a way that is clearly embedded in the text's narrative order, at the same time as writing is clearly figured as a tool that extends existing capabilities or raises them to a new level. Indeed, we see that as the messenger fails to repeat back to Enmerkar the speech he has just heard —a technique already used repeatedly in earlier parts of the poem to verify the proper encoding of the message in the messenger's memory— Enmerkar deftly resolves the

issue by developing this externalized technology of memory.

> [Enmerkar's] speech was very grand, its meaning very deep;
> The messenger's mouth was too heavy; he could not repeat it.
> Because the messenger's mouth was too heavy, and he could not repeat it,
> The lord of Kulab patted some clay and put the words on it as on a tablet.
> Before that day, there had been no putting words on clay;
> But now, when the sun rose on that day—so it was:
> The lord of Kulab had put words as on a tablet—so it was!
>
> (500-506)

The messenger then travels to Aratta and performs the speech, seemingly reciting from memory rather than reading ("He spoke out what was in his heart" (513)). However, the written medium of the text comes into view within the speech itself as part of the recorded instructions, since the messenger first claims to be reciting the king's words (518) and then includes the following in his recitation:

> "Enmerkar, son of the Sun, gave me this tablet.
> "O lord of Aratta, when you have read this tablet, learned the gist of the message […].
>
> (524-525)

Thus, the mechanism of encoding the text on clay is thematized by the speech recited from the tablet to the king of Aratta, although it initially seemed that the written text was merely a crutch, should the usual mode of recitation from memory have faltered. The importance of recognizing how the poem figures the recitation as ambiguously oral and written is twofold. On the one hand, it may reveal some interesting coordinates surrounding the nature of how this new technology might have been conceived to operate, for the first time, in a practical dimension—indeed, numerous later historical sources confirm that it was accepted practice in accepting ambassadors first listen to a spoken recitation and then to confirm its content by reading the written version (Oller 1995).

But on the other hand, it consciously or unconsciously results in a striking effect. To all intents and purposes, the first text, in this fictionalization, is a metapoetic text, a written text that is coded so as to be internally "aware" of its own concrete, written form—but I will return to this later.

In whatever manner we may want to understand the relation of the speech (as recitation) to the tablet (as script or crutch), at the end of the speech the king of Aratta explicitly seizes the tablet from the messenger.

> The lord of Aratta took from the messenger
> The tablet (and held it) next to a brazier.
> The lord of Aratta inspected the tablet.
> The spoken words were mere wedges—his brow darkened.
> The lord of Aratta kept looking at the tablet (in the light of)
> the brazier.
>
> (536-540)

The consternation of the lord of Aratta has been the source of great deliberation, since it is ambiguous as to whether it stems from the impact of the message or from an inability to understand the tablet; further, whether he understands it or not, there may be an added element, an envious recognition of Enmerkar's intelligence as the inventor of writing, thus also recognizing and emphasizing its epoch-shifting consequences (Komoróczy, 1975; Glassner, 2003; Vanstiphout, 1989). More recently, scholars have also underlined that the invention of writing *on tablets* in the poem need not be taken as the *first* invention of writing, particularly given the poem's dating to the Ur III period (end of third millennium BCE), approximately a millennium after the earliest evidence of proto-cuneiform writing from Uruk, including writing on other surfaces such as storage vessels and sherds (Yushu, 2004). In a complementary but perhaps more persuasive fashion, Mittermayer in effect addressed this issue by noting that one could plausibly read the writing on tablets in line 503 as the impression of "seals," leading to a similar conclusion, and that the reading of the cuneiform signs on which the translation "mere wedges" is based may itself be rooted in a misunderstanding of

the extant tablets—she reads, for instance, that the king of Aratta is angered because he sees on the tablet Enmerkar's *wütende Willensäusserung* "angry expression of his will," and would thus be recoiling at his adversaries tone (2009, pp. 63-66, 300-301). Nonetheless, he would still be extrapolating that tone through an implied act of reading. Thus, even on a purely historicizing plane, the question of whether or not the king of Aratta could or could not read is evidently more complex than it may first appear, since there are several ways to interpret the fact that he recoils from the "mere wedges" or the tone of the message (540) at the same time as he is seemingly assumed to be perfectly capable "reader" in the messenger's recitation of Enmerkar's written words (525).

It is not my intent to resolve this issue with finality, since it is evident that there is more at play here than the real history of writing—whether or not the authors of this poem properly understood it. But the very tension in the text can be allowed to stand as further evidence for the importance of a moment at which the technology of writing shatters the procedural structure of communication between two rulers. The passage has teleological thrust to it, since it offers a first picture of a new world in which writing has embedded itself in the structure of sovereign decision making as a kind of epochal cut from which there is no going back. The king of Aratta's affective response seems to in effect acknowledge precisely this fact that a new order has arrived. This lends the invention of writing a kind of episodic status in the broader historical fiction that the poem sketches out as part of what we will later see is its riffing on societal progress models.

Having rehearsed the importance of this passage and the reason for which it has attracted so much scholarly attention, it is all the more striking that in several other important senses this episode does not, in fact, represent the earliest mention of writing in the poem. Writing, as a seemingly already developed technology, is prefigured as a wondrous technology and as an efficacious medium of transmission at several points in the text that far precede the moment at which the messenger's mouth fails him, leading to the putative invention of writing.

The first of such instances occurs in the context of a lengthy description of the goddess Nisaba/Nanigbal, who helps Enmerkar resolve the second challenge posed by the Lord of Aratta. As part of that challenge, Enmerkar must ingeniously overcome a logistical challenge in the transport of grain. While this challenge does not explicitly relate to the invention of writing, it does in other ways demonstrate a possible desideratum for systems akin to the administrative deployment of writing. The intervention of Nisaba, as a goddess of grain, to help resolve a challenge based on the transportation of grain, is relatively straightforward. However, Nisaba is also a goddess of writing—often much praised by scribes in other compositions. In several way, the poem seems to hinge on the lability of this figure to develop a series of broader points about the invention of writing.

In brief, Nisaba was first an agricultural deity, and then became associated with writing due to the conceptual recognition of the relation of writing as record-keeping, measurement, land assessment and surveying, etc., i.e., through things that relate writing to agricultural practices. This aspect of her patronage was then generalized into her role as a patroness of writing and knowledge more broadly (Asher-Greve and Westenholz, 2013, pp. 19, 43, *et passim*; Michalowski, 1998). However, when she is first described in the epic, she is already characterized by a sophisticated epithet that literally embodies her standing as a goddess of writing—she is called "the shining tablet of clay, the sharpened reed of the assembly" (317). The meaning of **i-gi$_8$**, here translated as "shining," is speculative.[4] However, I have kept Vanstiphout's translation here merely on the grounds that it highlights how **igi** might here be used to qualify the tablet in terms of its conceptual importance or even aura, just as the emphasis on the sharpness of the reed more broadly qualifies not just the reed but also the acumen of the assembly. Thus, through this extended epithet construction, the key instruments of writing on tablets are prefigured in the poem as an embodiment of the goddess. Long

4 A rehearsal of the difficulties and previous attempts to resolve them can be found in Mittermayer's commentary (2009, pp. 263-264). She recognizes the basically epithet-like nature of the phrase, underscoring it acts as a compounding metaphor. The term **igi**, the basic meanings of which can include "eye," "face, front," might then interpreted as highlighting (the materiality of?) the surface of the tablet. As she puts it, the verse's specific literal meaning remains difficult to explain in detail, although the key components of the comparison ("tablet" and "reed") are crystal clear.

before writing is invented by Enmerkar several hundred verses later in the poem, the instruments (and the goddess) are explicitly understood to play an important role in the political organization of the assembly as a metonym for palace administration and broader political action.

The second example of this kind of prefiguration is simpler. It occurs as part of the lord of Aratta issuing the third counterchallenge to Enmerkar: "the lord of Aratta then entrusted to the messenger / A message, important like a tablet" (454-455). This simile clearly presupposes that writing is one instrument through which to secure the integrity of sensitive information. The achronological deployment of the simile is all the more striking to readers who are sensitive to the fact that this legend will later culminate with the invention of writing.

What then might we make of this kind of spectral, always-already-ness of writing? We could build on the historical approach to the text promoted by Yushu, as discussed above, and resolve the question from beyond the text, pointing to the manner in which earlier forms of writing may have informed both the composition of this text and its text-internal conceptual universe. However, such an approach may very well be taken to overemphasize the dimensions of historical realism in Sumerian literature, if not to outright import a kind of realism from modern notions of literariness into the Sumerian tradition, by assuming that one objective of literary activity is to faithfully record historical changes. Further, the two types of writing in the prefigurations described above are explicitly related to writing on tablets. This makes it even more difficult to see in the poem a distinction between different kinds of writing. But I think it is correct to note, building on Yushu's work in a new direction, that questions of perceived realism may be at stake here, since the sequence of events in a poem can relate complexly to the sequence of events in a story, let alone with respect to real of idealized references to historical developments.

One clear alternative is to follow the kind of realism imputed to the text by Vanstiphout's structuralist assessment of the text's originality and cohesion (1989, 521). For him, the poem operates much like certain

kinds of modern novels in which narrators intervene on their narratives from a distinct vantage point. Thus, in several line-notes to his translation, Vanstiphout suggests that the earlier mentions of writing in the text are proleptic nods to a key theme that will be explored later in the text (2003, 93-96)—in brief, the passages I have highlighted above as offering a potential paradox can be read as familiar forms of foreshadowing. This would imply a relatively neat narratological solution to the apparent narrative inconsistencies. Namely, if we were to take the narrator's diegetic frame to be one from which he is speaking about the past (the time before and at which writing was written) from a point in the future (in which writing is already an established practice), then there would be no inconsistency at all to the text's prefiguration of writing in passages that precede the invention of writing. To all effects and purposes, there simply would be no prefiguration at all to speak of, but rather a kind of emphasis that does not interfere with the relation of narratorial diegesis, understood as the ordering of events from the story (*fabula*, the events as they happen in a chronological sequence) into a plot (the organization of those events into a narrative sequence that may or may not correspond to the chronological sequence). On this understanding, the instances of foreshadowing might then have felt absolutely natural to readers of the poem who, of course, were already situated in a world like that of the narrator, in which writing is an established practice.

This solution is neat, but it in some ways misses the literary character of its own conclusions that, interpreted otherwise, shed light on some important aspects of Sumerian poetics. Paradoxically, in agreeing with Vanstiphout's suggestion that we have prolepses here, we arrive at something of a narratological impasse. Vanstiphout's analysis is cogent in that it is descriptive: one aspect of this sophisticated narrative appears to be precisely that it carefully uses narrators, internal and external to the narrative, to tell its story. But the analysis falters in one sense, even as a descriptive one: the qualities or characteristics of the specific external narrator in question are left for the most part undescribed, and these can make all the difference. In reviewing the poem overall, we see that the narrator of this epic is not a narrator that we can describe as clinically detached from the narrative and from its characters in the way, for

instance, we might expect in certain forms of scientific or social realism, in which the narrator operates at a tactical remove from the characters as an observer that does not attempt to verbalize internal states of mind. Here, the narrator has privileged access to the inner workings of the characters' minds and, in effect, speaks for them at several instances—at the same time as he can import his own perspectives into the narrative, retrospectively coloring how the characters may or may not have experienced a certain event. Let us consider the implications with respect to the examples above.

In returning to the first example, we should consider whether the description of Nisaba corresponds to the text-internal vision of Enmerkar or whether it corresponds to external objective description of Enmerkar and Nisaba as if glossing an episode or scene from afar. It may be that the narrator is reporting to us that Enmerkar himself, on seeing Nisaba or perceiving her actions, thinks of her as a tablet and a reed. But the narrator could instead be deploying the epithets as part of the poetic exposition of a past event without suggesting that the characterization of Nisaba reflects Enmerkar's way of conceiving of the goddess. In this vein, we could read the epithets even as a kind of aside—as an example of the kind of praise lavished on Nisaba by scribes more broadly, perhaps here as an embedded nod to the goddess of writing on the part of the poem's author. Finally, it could also be that both are true, and what we have here is a kind of viewpoint blending common to ancient narratorial techniques in Mesopotamia and beyond.

In the second example, we could ask the same series of questions. The narrator's explicit simile (signaled by the use of **gin**$_7$) may very well reflect merely the narrator's opinion that the message is "important like a tablet," offering mere foreshadowing. Alternatively, if we take the narrator's voice to be externalizing the thought process of a character (cf. my observations on the poem's "realism," above), it may blend with the view of one or more of the characters, creating the kind of paradox I have been describing as spectrality. One route into this question, I submit, is to think through the conceptual world created by similes and metaphors in the poem itself. Indeed, in the passages in

which writing is invented, already cited in the opening of this article, we read that "the lord of Kulab patted some clay and put the words on it as on a tablet / Before that day, there had been no putting words on clay," (504-505) and that "the lord of Kulab had put words as on a tablet" (506). In the repeated simile "as on a tablet" (**dub-gin$_7$**), the temporality of similes comes to the fore—offering a clear view into the apparent paradox. How could the words be patted onto some clay, "as on a tablet," when it had never been done before? How could the comparison to a tablet be drawn in a world that, putatively, did not know of writing on clay, let alone tablets? We might again be tempted to suggest that the simile offers a gloss on the events of the story from the perspective of the narratorial present (a time after the events of the text in which writing, on tablets rather than patted clay, is an established practice). However, the text itself does not seem to permit this conclusion due to what I previously termed the metapoetic tenor of the poem's internal text. When the messenger is reciting the contents of the message inscribed on the patted clay to the lord of Aratta, the message appears to contain a device of authentication that confirms to the listener that the messenger is reciting from an official document. As we saw, the messenger's recitation includes the words "Enmerkar […] gave me this tablet" (524) and it also invites the lord of Aratta to verify the message by rechecking it against the recitation: "when you have read this tablet, learned the gist of the message…" (525). Thus, the text's text already conceives of itself as a tablet and not merely as patted clay. Thus, the poem's comparative devices are shot through with a kind of asynchrony that cannot be accounted for merely in terms of making an easy decision on the temporal position of the narrator with respect to the narrated events. Part of this poem's artistry, indeed, appears to be a kind of blending of viewpoints as well as of temporalities. This could, in part, be put down to how its episodic structure enables it to integrate different genres within a broader literary "mode," requiring a narratorial persona whose knowledge cuts across diegetic frames and in effect speaks the content of the characters' minds to the reader.[5] Explicit similes then raise the question as to whom the comparison is supposed to make sense: to the reader, to the

5 On the complexity of multi-generic compositions in Akkadian and Sumerian literature, see the review of existing work by George (2007).

characters, to the narrator? Given the metapoetic tenor of this section of the text, the answer appears to be to all of them. Thus, the similes fulfill the poem's broader objective of signaling the unique importance of this moment of invention, as well as more broadly allowing the poem to offer a new historical sequencing that serves its broader purposes in glorifying both the Sumerian language and the city of Uruk in the history of civilization that it proposes to its readers.

Indeed, beyond its mechanics, the conclusion that the poem is thus haunted by the existence of writing at the same time that it narrates the invention of writing should not in and of itself be an object of great surprise. But the mechanics of the haunting are particularly impressive and sophisticated. The narrator conceives of the invention of writing as something that, ultimately, seems to be comparable only to writing itself—and, implicitly if not explicitly, inverts the temporality of invention through his use of similes and comparative devices at the moment that the text's text announces itself to be nothing short of a fully-fledged tablet. One consequence of recognizing this is that it leads us to consider how writing is an externalization of a pre-existing set of technologies of memory, such as those of the oral milieu that the poem describes.[6] After all, the text shows us that writing extends and consolidates an existing, structured form of memorization and transmission of messages. We hear, for instance, that the messenger "repeated message word for word" (419) back to the person that had first recited it, showing us how messages were encoded through a practice that allowed for verification—a practice that, were it not of signal importance, would not allow us to recognize the importance of the moment, later in the epic, at which the messenger's mouth fails him, thus prompting the turn to a new (and improved) technology. Indeed, the choice of a specific messenger is not made casually: Enmerkar "chose [among the troops] a messenger, clever of speech and hardy" (106), further emphasizing that we are not to think of the messenger's task as based on unstructured skill. Writing then

6 On the broader theoretical question of how debates about the sharp distinction between orality and writing tend to obscure the technological continuum between practices, see Saussy (2016). Another way to look at this is to follow the recent work of Shawn Ramsey (2020), who sees in the epic the exposition of a discourse related to the importance of rhetoric and eloquence akin to that of the Classical Greek tradition that, in texts like Plato's *Phaedrus*, similarly grapples with the relation of orality to writing.

emerges not just as a new technology, but as a teleological improvement on the previous modes of communication—again consolidating a view of unilinear progress toward the increasing glory of Sumerian and Uruk, in spite of the fact that we know that oral recitation and technologies of memory co-existed for centuries and even millennia after the invention of writing in the region, as, for that matter, they do today.

To underscore the importance of writing's spectral emergence in this epic, I will now contextualize the poem against the backdrop of a broader etiological genre in which it participates by offering several "progress models" that outline a specific, linear conception of how civilization emerged from prehistory into the contemporary moment, characterized as it is by interconnected city states, and which self-evidently serves its broader ideological program as described in the paragraphs just above. There are two key passages in the poem that effectively summarize this view of civilizational progress. The first is the epic's proem, which—much like the invention of writing—narrates a kind of spectral emergence of the city of Uruk. Although the text is slightly fragmented, the basic paradox is quickly evident: Uruk (here, Unug-Kulab) was already a great city *before* the time of the establishment of patterns of trade that, as we see in the poem, will permit Enmerkar to decorate it and ensure its prosperity.

> In days of yore, when the destinies were fixed,
> The Great Princes granted Unug-Kulab's Eana
> Head-lifting pride.
> Opulence, carp floods
> And rains that bring forth dappled wheat
> Abounded in Unug-Kulab.
> The land Dilmun did not yet exist,
> When the Eana of Unug-Kulab was already well-founded,
> And the Gipar of Holy Inana
> And Kulab, the Brickwork, glinted like silver in the lode.
> [...] was not yet imported*;* there was no trading;
> [...] was not exported*;* there was no commerce.
> [Gold], silver, copper, tin, blocks of lapis lazuli,

> [The mountain ores,] were not yet brought down from the highlands.
> [...] there was no bathing for the festivals.
>
> (6-20)

The "Great Princes" are to be understood as the early gods that, in fixing the destiny of mankind, elsewhere bring the people of Sumer out of a nomadic, pastoral existence into an era of prosperity based on agriculture (n.b., the "carp floods" are a metaphor for agricultural abundance; Vanstiphout, 2003, p. 93). This epic's proem might then be compared to similar examples of progress model narratives as they can be found in texts like the "Sumerian Flood Story," "Enki and Ninmah," and even to the older stratum of mythology that deliberates between nomadic pastoralism and agricultural urbanism in the debate texts like the "Debate between Grain and Sheep" and the "Debate between Winter and Summer."[7]

But it remains striking that the poem imagines that the opulence was already present *before* the relation to Dilmun, as a regional symbol for foreign trade, was established—and in a time *before* imports and exports, in which there was explicitly "no commerce" and "no trade."[8] This is after all, to put it very briefly, the point that the poem is supposed to argue—that Uruk became great as a result of the establishment of its regional hegemony. Instead, this is a foregone conclusion already in the proem, precisely where the lack of trade and of materials is remarked on explicitly. In contrast, the comparanda listed above tend to describe the early state of mankind before the establishment of one or more great cities as in several senses unstable, deficient, unattractive. Indeed, it is the shift from a brutish existence to a civilized one that normally acts as the argumentative force of the poems as documents that naturalize the

7 For a discussion of these texts, alongside "The Sumerian Flood Story," "Enki and Ninmah," and the "Death of Gilgamesh," see my forthcoming article "Cities Writ in Water: Urbanization, Flood, and Power in Sumerian Poetry."

8 The peculiar myth-historical position of Dilmun (modern Bahrain) in the Sumerian records has received intense scrutiny in and of itself. The island is often figured as both an inaccessibly remote Elysian utopia and also as a concretely important nexus for trade and for extremely large-scale Sumerian funerary cult activity (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1982). Like much in this epic, then, it appears to occupy a spectral historical position as a well-known and frequented place at the same time as it is a mythicized remote land of plenty.

organization of life in and through cities (controlled by specific kinds of rulers)—making up the hallmark sleight of hand at the heart of every progress model myth. But in an effort to emphasize the grandiosity of Uruk, and its exceptionality, the poet has here spectrally imagined an always already prosperous city—in effect removing it from the natural succession of time, and showing up the kind of contradiction ensconced in many ideological maneuvers that seek to naturalize that which is in fact an artificial construct.

It is at this juncture that we can contextualize the much-discussed "Spell of Nudimmud" as a kind of further progress model narrative unto itself. The text is less a discussion of the past than a proleptic threat or even prophecy, seemingly designed to nest the discussion of the golden age within the epistolary exchange, and thus promising to close a teleological circle that was opened in the epic's proem (Mittermayer, 2009, p. 61).

> "One day there will be no snake, no scorpion,
> "There will be no hyena, nor lion,
> "There will be neither (wild) dog nor wolf,
> "And thus there will be neither fear nor trembling,
> "For man will then have no enemy.
> "On that day the lands of Šubur and Hamazi,
> "As well as twin-tongued Sumer—great mound of the power of lordship—
> "Together with Akkad—the mound that has all that is befitting—
> "And even the land Martu, resting in green pastures,
> "Yea, the whole world of well-ruled people,
> "Will be able to speak to Enlil in one language!
> [Enki shall…]
> "Change the tongues in their mouth, as many as he once placed there,
> "And the speech of mankind shall be truly one!""
>
> (136-146, 154-155)

At the same time as the text offers a utopian vision of the future, it implies a not yet perfect past and present in which the people of Sumer, by virtue of their many languages, are not yet unified and consolidated as a people. In this sense, the spell offers an analogy to the progress models of older Sumerian literature, in which the dispersion of peoples across the land is lamented and offered as an expedient reason for the emphasis on urbanization.

Furthermore, as Vanstiphout and Mittermayer carefully noted, this proleptic vision of a linguistically unified Sumer dovetails with the broader ideological work done by the poem's treatment of the invention of writing. In the former's terms, the overall "implication is of course that also in Aratta Sumerian is to be spoken" (Vanstiphout, 1994, p. 149), and that

> the invention of writing—explicitly cuneiform writing—complements the notion of Sumerian as the international language, as was already put in the spell of Nudimmud. […] This subtle cross-reference thus becomes yet another structural element holding the story together
>
> (Vanstiphout, 2003, p. 53).

Indeed, in taking these conclusions on the spell alongside my discussion of the proem together, we might even conclude that there is here a further element of spectral circularity. The invention of writing in principle establishes the possibility of trade and commerce. But it is the export of Sumerian itself that will ultimately create a perfect world in which such trade will be possible. Thus, the export of writing preceded the invention of writing and the establishment of trade—since, as we saw, the lord of Aratta was invited to read the very first written text as if reading tablets was already an established norm. Regardless of the specifics concerning his literacy or lack thereof, it is striking to recognize that the poem posits yet another specter: a cultural export, conceived of as such by the poem, in a time in which exports and imports, trade and commerce, have yet to be codified.[9]

9 For more on the discourses, literary and otherwise, surrounding trade and commerce, see Kramer

Specters aside, then, it is the development of a regional *koine* that is seen to offer the crucial step in the development of civilization—the "introduction of Sumerian and cuneiform as the necessary means of administration, bookkeeping, and, finally, trade, the lack of which stands at the origin of the conflict" between the two rulers in the epic (Vanstiphout, 2003, p. 54). To an extent, the text can be seen as capturing what appears to be an important historical truth:

> the very first cuneiform documents, without doubt written in Sumerian, are what we now call administrative and economic in nature. The scribes who are responsible for this text not only coined a term concordant with "cuneiform" (see line 540). They also hinted at the indubitable fact that writing was invented for economic, not intellectual, reasons
>
> (Vanstiphout, 2003, p. 54).

But by employing the poetics of spectrality described above, the poet or poets of this epic were not necessarily as interested in the specifics of this truth, if they even recognized as it such. After all, those early administrative documents do not quite resemble the tablet that Enmerkar gives to his messenger in the epic. It may be that the origins of cuneiform were for the poets a shadowy past to which they had little direct access. But whether or not they understood the relation of those documents to the imagined tablet of the poem, it is clear that the poem performs a great deal of ideological work in positioning the invention of writing in a straightforward series of conceptual events through which the history of civilization was figured as culminating in the hegemony of Sumerian and Uruk. One clear part of this seems to be how writing appears to supersede orality in a linear fashion—a common ideological mirage across cultures. But there are even clearer elements of sequentialization in how the poem more broadly engages with the kinds of progress model narratives popular earlier in the third millennium, which were themselves engage in a linearization of history for ideological purposes. In sum, it is not merely that we have here a historical memory or reconstruction of the emergence of cuneiform. Rather, we

(1977).

are given a taste of the manner in which the export of Sumerian led to a specific kind of cultural hegemony without which, the poem argues, the success of cities like Uruk cannot be imagined.

The specific contribution of this poem is then to be measured in how it reframes the position which previously was occupied by that other historical mirage commonly discussed today as the "agricultural revolution." While the sweeping success of agriculture in Mesopotamia did not, for a very long time, eliminate the importance of nomadism and other forms of social and economic interaction, it is often conceived to do just that in the predominantly urbanocentric literary texts from this period.[10] "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta" quietly accepts this premise and then, instead, shifts our focus to the myth of the invention of writing and in doing so it insists on the relative merit of that technology and its future centrality to the organization of the state and to the status of Sumerian. Within this context, the metaphorics surrounding the figure Nisaba, a goddess first of agriculture and then of writing, offers a neat cypher into the ideological project of the epic—but we would also do well to recognize that the poem in effect sheds light on how the goddess' domains were reconfigured, and it may even have participated in this broader conceptual transition. After all, the poem was itself likely an important component of the scribal curriculum—only emphasizing that its literariness in relation to Nisaba could have acted as a kind of primer in metapoetics and viewpoint blending, as well as in the art of crafting ideologically driven panoramas of "history." While there may be a realistic memory behind the poem going back to the invention of writing as a way of administering, among other things, agriculture yields, there is also a broader conceptual parallelism being drawn here between the two technological innovations in the perceived history of civilization. In turn, these are then projected into the realm of the divine through a single figure of Nisaba. This makes of the epic a particularly efficacious conceptual argument or device capable of establishing the horizon of thinkable futures through the poems teleological and ideological outlook on what properly constitutes "civilization" in Mesopotamia.

10 On the persistence of nomadism, see Postgate 1992. The urbanocentric works are those already discussed above in reference to the poem's proem, and which are discussed in my own forthcoming article.

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