FRONTISPIECE. A fish-cloaked *apkallu*-sage, the embodiment of cuneiform scholarship, created by artist Tessa Rickards based on original monuments from ancient Kalhu and Til-Barsip.
THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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and
ELEANOR ROBSON

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Niek Veldhuis (PhD Groningen 1997) is Associate Professor of Assyriology at the University of California at Berkeley and Director of the Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (http://oracc.org/dcclt). His main research interests focus on the history of education in Mesopotamia in its relationship with intellectual history and the uses of writing. He is currently working on a history of the lexical tradition from the late fourth millennium BC to the demise of cuneiform around the beginning of the common era.

Eva Von Dassow teaches the history and languages of the ancient Near East at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of *State and Society in the Late Bronze Age: Alalakh under the Mittani Empire* (2008), co-author of *Cuneiform Texts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 3 (2000), and editor of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day* (1994; 2nd rev. edn 1998). Her recent research examines the conceptualization of citizenship and the constitution of publics in ancient Near Eastern polities, written records as artefacts of cultural practice and temporal process, and the nature of writing as an interface between reader and reality. Among her current projects is a study of the Hurrian *Song of Liberation*, exploring the political dimensions both of the poem’s composition and of its later textualization in a bilingual Hurro-Hittite edition.
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Mark Weeden concentrates his research on the written cultures of northern Syria and Anatolia. He is a British Academy post-doctoral research fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, with a research project on the Akkadian of Alalakh. His PhD thesis was completed at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, a revised version of which will be published under the title *Hittite Logograms and Hittite Scholarship* in 2011. He is jointly responsible (with D. Yoshida) for the publication of hieroglyphic-inscribed artefacts from the Japanese excavations at Kaman-Kalehöyük, Yassihöyük, and Büklükale, as well as being an epigrapher for the Turkish excavation at Ova Ören, all in central Anatolia.

F. A. M. Wiggermann (PhD Free University of Amsterdam 1986) is retired, but as epigrapher is still involved in the Dutch excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria. His present interests include the administration of the Assyrian state in the Late Bronze Age, religious iconography, and first-millennium library texts, subjects on which he has been publishing all his life.

Silvie Zamazalová studied ancient history and Egyptology at University College London, where she is now pursuing her PhD, researching geographical concepts in the Neo-Assyrian empire at the end of the 8th century BC.

Nele Ziegler has been a researcher at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (UMR 7192, Paris, from 1999) and a member of the team of epigraphers working on the palace archives of Mari. Her editorial work on these texts is part of her wider interest in the history of the Old Babylonian period. The author of books on Mari’s female palace inhabitants (*La population féminine des palais d’après les archives royales de Mari*, 1999) and on the musicians of Mari (*Les musiciens et la musique d’après les archives de Mari*, 2007), she collaborated with Dominique Charpin on a study of the political history and chronology emerging from the Mari sources (*Mari et le Proche-Orient à l’époque amorrite: essai d’histoire politique*, 2003). Her current research focuses on the archives from the time of Samsi-Addu and on the historical geography of northern Mesopotamia (with Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, she has recently published an edited volume, *Entre les fleuves: Untersuchungen zur historischen Geographie Obermesopotamiens im 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, 2009). She teaches at the École du Louvre and at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, both in Paris.
Acknowledgements

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Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson
A NOTE ON TYPOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS

Readers of this book do not need to know the languages or scripts of the ancient Near East; although contributors sometimes use ancient words or texts, they always provide English translations. The languages written in cuneiform script may be rendered alphabetically in two different ways: transliteration, which is an alphabetic representation of cuneiform signs; and transcription or normalization (these words are synonymous), which is an alphabetic representation of the language that does not give any information about the signs used to write the original text.

In alphabetic normalization in this book, we write both Sumerian and Akkadian words just like any foreign language: in italics with no hyphens or full stops or superscripts (e.g. Akkadian ṯu-pšarru ‘scribe’ and Sumerian sanga-priest).

In transliterations of Akkadian, the syllabic signs are presented in lower-case italics and separated by hyphens (e.g. ṯu-up-šar-ru), while logograms (signs representing whole words) are written in small upper-case letters and separated by full stops (e.g. DUB.SAR, a logographic writing of ṯu-pšarru). For transliterations of Sumerian, this book uses lower-case bold face, separating signs with hyphens (e.g. ∑UB-SAR ‘scribe’). For both languages, determinatives are written in superscript lower-case, with no connecting punctuation (e.g. ∑UB-ŠAR and ∑UB-SAR). Sign names are transliterated in capital letters, and signs within signs joined with × (e.g. ∑UB-SAR = KA×LI = Šiptu ‘incantation’, where KA×LI means ‘the sign KA with the sign LI written inside it’).

In transliteration, normalization, and translations, square brackets enclose restorations of missing text, while uncertain translations are marked with question marks or set in italics.

See Veldhuis and Weeden in this volume, and Robson (2009, listed in the references to the Introduction) for more on Assyriologists’ typographical conventions for representing cuneiform script.
The term ‘cuneiform culture’ is not simply a synonym for the ancient Near East but the conceptual framework that provides cohesion to this volume. It is impossible to do justice to all of ancient Near Eastern culture chronologically, geographically, and linguistically, even in a book of this size. Instead, we examine it through the lens of cuneiform writing—the writing technology that is not only fundamental to a modern academic understanding of the region but which also bound the ancient inhabitants into a shared set of ways of understanding and managing their world. The title of this book, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, therefore reflects its emphasis on cuneiform literacy and the literate segments of society, or ‘textual communities’, following Brian Stock’s definition of the latter as ‘microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script’ (Stock 1990: 23).

The cuneiform writing system of the ancient Middle East was deeply influential in world culture. For over three millennia, until about two thousand years ago, it was the vehicle of communication from (at its greatest extent) Iran to the Mediterranean, Anatolia to Egypt (Figure 0.1). A complex script, written mostly on clay tablets by professional scribes, it was used to record actions, thoughts, and desires that fundamentally shaped the modern world, socially, politically, and intellectually. Unlike other ancient media, such as papyri, writing-boards, or leather rolls, cuneiform tablets survive in their hundreds of thousands, often excavated from the buildings in which they were created, used, or disposed of. Primary evidence of cuneiform culture thus comes from a wide variety of physical and social contexts in abundant quantities, which enables the close study of very particular times and places.

But although cuneiform is witness to one of the world’s oldest literate cultures, the academic discipline devoted to it, Assyriology, is still a relatively new and underdeveloped field at just over 150 years old. Cuneiform writing shaped the economies and societies which used it, just as its limitations and possibilities were inseparable from intellectual thought about the world. But modern cuneiformists have traditionally studied either socio-economic history or intellectual and cultural history, which themselves have been balkanized into modern categories such as ‘literature’, ‘religion’, ‘magic’, and ‘science’. Political history is a third strand which has hitherto rarely been integrated with
the study of the other two, except as an ordering and dividing principle. This division of labour has created two distinct images of the ancient Near East. Socio-economic studies produce a strangely familiar world of high finance, bureaucracy, and international law and diplomacy, while intellectual and cultural studies recreate an ancient Near East that is exotic, alien, full of sorcerers, demonic forces, and auspicious signs. Rarely are these parallel worlds superimposed on each other.

The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture draws together these hitherto disparate topics and methodologies to project a new image of the literate ancient Near East. It seeks to restore context and coherence to the study of cuneiform culture by approaching it holistically: through the social, the political, and the intellectual, by means of textual sources whose materiality is fully acknowledged. Mesopotamia’s clay tablets and stone inscriptions are not just ‘texts’ but also material artefacts that offer much additional information about their creators, readers, users, and owners. Whenever appropriate and possible, the contributors to The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture explore, define, and to some extent look beyond the boundaries of the written word. We hope that the book goes some way towards nuancing the depiction of the ancient Near East in both learned and popular literature.
To this end, we have commissioned chapters from a mix of scholars from across the discipline and around the Assyriological world, female and male, old hands alongside those just beginning their careers. The contributors’ remit was to transcend the political, geographical, chronological, and linguistic boundaries that have been constructed by modern research over the past century or more, and to cut across conventional temporal and spatial categories. They have each risen wonderfully and good-naturedly.

### Table 0.1 Timeline of Cuneiform Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Political history and periodization</th>
<th>Key people and places</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Later fourth millennium</strong></td>
<td>Urbanization and literacy:</td>
<td>the city of Uruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uruk period, c. 3200–3000 (Uruk IV, Uruk III)</td>
<td>the site of Jemdet Nasr</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Early third millennium</strong></td>
<td>City-states:</td>
<td>Sumerian city of Šuruppak (Fara)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early Dynastic period, c. 3000–2350</td>
<td>Syrian city of Ebla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Later third millennium</strong></td>
<td>First territorial empires:</td>
<td>king Sargon of Akkad and his daughter Enheduana, c. 2300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Akkadian or Sargonic dynasty, c. 2350–2200;</td>
<td>Gudea, city ruler of Lagaš, c. 2150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III), c. 2100–2000</td>
<td>king Šulgi of Ur and his successors, c. 2100–2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early second millennium</strong></td>
<td>Short-lived kingdoms of the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000–1600):</td>
<td>king Zimri-Lim of Mari and his courtly entourage, c. 1760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isin, Larsa, Mari, Ešnunna, and Babylon</td>
<td>king Hammurabi of Babylon, c. 1750</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the scribes and students of Nippur, c. 1740 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ipiq-Aya the scribe of Sippar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ur-Utu the chief lamentor of Sippar</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Later second millennium</strong></td>
<td>Age of international diplomacy:</td>
<td>Hittite city of Hattusa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kassite or Middle Babylonian period;</td>
<td>Egyptian city of Amarna</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Assyrian empire;</td>
<td>Syrian city of Ugarit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amarna period, c. 1400</td>
<td>the Zu-Ba’la family of diviners in Emar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early first millennium</strong></td>
<td>Age of empires:</td>
<td>kings Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal of Assyria and their advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neo-Assyrian empire, c. 900–612</td>
<td>king Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon and his temple personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neo-Babylonian empire, c. 620–540</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Later first millennium</strong></td>
<td>End of native rule:</td>
<td>king Alexander the Great, c. 330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persian or Achaemenid period, c. 540–330</td>
<td>Berossos, historian of Babylon, c. 300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seleucid or Hellenistic period, c. 330–125</td>
<td>the priests and scholars of Uruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parthian or Arsacid period, c. 25 BC–AD 225</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
to the challenges we set, and we are immensely grateful to all of them. They have drawn on the best scholarship of recent decades and integrated a multiplicity of fruitful approaches, highlighting open problems and helping to set agendas for subsequent research.

The resulting book is not structured by periods (see Table 0.1) or places (Figures 0.1 and 0.2) but around seven themes: ‘Materiality and literacies’, ‘Individuals and communities’, ‘Experts and novices’, ‘Decisions’, ‘Interpretations’, ‘Making knowledge’, and ‘Shaping tradition’. Each of these sections encompasses a brief introduction and five chapters. While these chapters cover three thousand years of cuneiform culture from the late fourth millennium to the 2nd century BC, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* seeks to be exemplary rather than exhaustive, focusing on methodologies rather than on blanket coverage. Several of the authors have used a deliber-

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1 For reasons of uniformity, all dates in this volume are given in the conventional Middle Chronology, following the regnal dates established by Brinkman (1977).
ately diachronic approach (Foster, Löhner, Lion, Robson, Steele, Taylor, Veldhuis, and Wiggermann) or selected two or more case studies from different periods to make their point (Chambon, Cohen and Kedar, Frahm, and Von Dassow), but two periods of Mesopotamia’s past have very clearly emerged as the focal point of the majority of the contributions. One is the end of the third millennium to the first half of the second millennium BC, the so-called Ur III and Old Babylonian periods. During this time, an age of territorial states, Mesopotamia’s political set-up was shaped by the rivalries and alliances of a mosaic of small kingdoms that periodically coalesced into much larger units, with Ur for seventy years and later Babylon for 175 years as the political centres of states controlling Mesopotamia (Brisch, Brunke, Charpin, Démare-Lafont, Huber Vulliet, van Koppen, Tanret, Tinney, and Ziegler). The second focal point is the Age of Empires’ from the mid-8th to the late 6th century BC (Baker, Böck, Fuchs, Jursa, Koch, Radner, Rochberg, Schwemer, Waerzeggers, and Zamazalová), when the Neo-Assyrian and later the Neo-Babylonian empires dominated the political history of the Middle East. This twin emphasis is due to the exceptionally rich textual remains which document these periods from sites across Mesopotamia, most especially Assur, Babylon, Kalhu, Mari, Nineveh, Nippur, and Sippar. Three chapters deal with the very beginning of cuneiform culture in the southern city of Uruk in the late fourth millennium BC (Englund) on the one hand, and its last guardians, active in this very same city and elsewhere in Babylonia as late as the 2nd century BC (Clancier and De Breucker) on the other. Another chapter looks at ‘cuneiform abroad’, analysing how the Mesopotamian writing system was adapted for use in Anatolia under Hittite rule in the mid-second millennium BC (Weeden).

*The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* aims to demonstrate the importance and relevance of cuneiform culture to world history by integrating the strange with the familiar. With this in mind, we chose the image for the jacket and frontispiece. It shows a composite creature, half man, half fish, known in ancient times as an *apkallu*, ‘sage’. The Akkadian term is a loanword from Sumerian *abgal*, literally ‘big fish’. The cover image, which is also reproduced on the frontispiece, is based on the 9th-century BC Assyrian *apkallu* carved on the stone decoration of Ninurta’s temple in Kalhu, modern Nimrud (Layard 1853: pl. 6). Its creator, Tessa Rickards, brings it to life by using the colour scheme of the wall paintings adorning the 8th-century BC Assyrian palace of Til Barsip (modern Tell Ahmar). A similar fish-creature was depicted in room XXVII of the Til Barsip palace, close to the throne room, but is preserved only in fragments (Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936: pl. LIIIb). The Kalhu *apkallu* was certainly also painted in antiquity, perhaps in a very similar way to the artist’s reconstruction. According to Mesopotamian tradition, these ‘big fish’ are the companions of the god of wisdom, Enki/Ea, who dwells in the depths of the sea. They regularly emerged from the sea in order to teach mankind the cornerstones of civilization, such as agriculture, kingship, justice, and writing, before the Flood ended their coexistence (see van Koppen in this volume). From the third millennium BC to the Hellenistic period (see De Breucker in this volume), the fish-creatures were seen as purveyors of wisdom and learnedness (Reiner 1961; Greenfield 1999). Scholars and priests took
their title and dressed in their image, wearing robes and hats made out of the skin of the enormous river carps that still populate the Euphrates and Tigris today. To us, these fish-creatures are icons of cuneiform culture.

References


