

## In search of the *é.dub.ba.a*: the ancient Mesopotamian school in literature and reality\*

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Many Sumerian literary compositions survive that describe life in ancient schools, known in Sumerian as *é.dub.ba.a*.<sup>1</sup> This Edubba-literature, as it is often called, is a typical genre of the traditional literature copied out in the Old Babylonian period, when young boys learning to be scribes had to master a complicated and progressively difficult corpus of sign-lists, lexical texts and literary compositions. Their school-work survived to be excavated, particularly at Nippur and Ur but also at Isin, Uruk and other sites. The tablets left behind by these young Babylonian apprentices are the principal source that modern scholars in Philadelphia and elsewhere have used over the past sixty years to reconstruct the canonical corpus of Sumerian literary texts, the first important body of literature anywhere in the world.

Texts such as ‘Schooldays’ (Kramer 1949) and ‘Edubba D’ (Civil 1985) provide witty insights into the life and times of learner scribes. So in Schooldays we encounter the memorable passage that tells of the boy who can do no right. Everything he does attracts punishment by one or other of the school staff. Falling foul of every regulation, he laments,

lú ká.na.ke<sub>4</sub> a.na.še.àm gá.da nu.me.a íb.ta.è e.še in.túd.dè.en  
lú duglaḥtan.na.ke<sub>4</sub> a.na.še.àm gá.da nu.me.a x šu ba.e.ti e.še in.túd.dè.en  
lú eme.gi<sub>7</sub>.ra.ke<sub>4</sub> eme.uri bí.in.dug<sub>4</sub> e.še in.túd.dè.en  
um.mi.a.mu šu.zu nu.sa<sub>6</sub>.sa<sub>6</sub> e.še in.túd.dè.en

Schooldays 38–41<sup>2</sup>

The door monitor (said), ‘Why did you go out without my say-so?’ He beat me.  
The jug monitor, ‘Why did you take [water *or* beer] without my say-so?’ He beat me.  
The Sumerian monitor, ‘You spoke in Akkadian!’ He beat me.  
My teacher, ‘Your handwriting is not at all good!’ He beat me.

This passage serves incidentally to remind us that until quite late scribal education in Mesopotamia was conducted in Sumerian, not in Akkadian. In the *é.dub.ba.a* a Sumerian monitor was even on hand to make sure that pupils spoke only the old language of literary expression. The Edubba dialogues add the further information that a successful student considered himself a ‘Sumerian’; other texts reveal that many later Babylonian scholars formally registered this new identity by adopting Sumerian versions

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<sup>1</sup> On the expression, its history and problematical etymology, see most recently Volk 2000: 2–5.

<sup>2</sup> The composition is now better understood than it was in Kramer’s day. For the passage quoted see Volk 1996: 199–200 and fn. 131, Sjöberg 1993: 1, and cf. Civil 1992: 304.

of their names.<sup>3</sup> Even in the Parthian period scribal families originally from Nippur were still adopting the pretence of Sumerian descent (Oelsner 1982, George 1991: 162).

By the Old Babylonian period, if not earlier, Sumerian had long died out among the people as a spoken language, but it was still much in use as a written language. Mesopotamian culture was famously conservative and since Sumerian had been the language of the first writing, more than a thousand years before, it remained the principal language of writing in the early second millennium. A much greater volume of documentation was written in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, but Sumerian retained a particular prestige. Its primacy as the language of learning was enshrined in the curriculum that had to be mastered by the student scribe. In order to learn how to use the cuneiform script, even to write Akkadian, the student traditionally had to learn Sumerian, for, as the proverb said, *dub.sar eme.gir<sub>15</sub> nu.mu.un.zu.a a.na.àm dub.sar e.ne* ‘A scribe who knows no Sumerian, what sort of scribe is he?’ (Proverb Collection 2 no. 47, ed. Alster 1997: 54). To prove he had mastered the art of writing and the traditions that went with it, the would-be scribe copied out, on dictation and from memory, texts in Sumerian. The most advanced Sumerian texts that he had to master were a prescribed corpus of traditional Sumerian literary compositions.<sup>4</sup>

Then as now even the best students, it seems, had to be reminded that they were only novices. So, in Edubba D a boy nearing the completion of his studies in the *é.dub.ba.a* proudly announces how good he is at his work. Like any other youngster, he thinks he knows it all:

nam.dub.sar.mu mu.ub.zu.zu  
 níg.na.me nu.mu.ši.ib.sìr.re.en  
 um.mi.a.mu gu.sum diš.àm mu.un.pàd.de  
 géstug.mu.ta diš min bí.ib.daḥ.e.en  
 ki.ulutin.mu.uš a.ba.da.tuš.ù.nam  
 eme.gir<sub>15</sub> nam.dub.sar šà.dub.ba šid níg.kas<sub>7</sub> mu.da.ab.sá.sá.e.en  
 eme.gir<sub>15</sub>.ta inim mu.da.ab.bal.e.en  
 ḫé.eb.da.gál eme.gir<sub>15</sub> i.ri.dul.la.aš

Edubba D 32–8, ed. Civil, *Mélanges Birot*, p. 70

I really know my scribal knowledge,  
 I don't get stuck at anything!  
 My teacher shows me a certain sign,  
 I add one or two more from memory!  
 Now I've been here for the stipulated time  
 I can cope with Sumerian, scribal work, archiving, accounting, calculation!  
 I can even hold a conversation in Sumerian!

The boy's interlocutor is some one senior to him who has heard this kind of boasting before. He is quick to put the young upstart down. 'If that is so', he responds drily, 'Sumerian must be keeping its secrets from you . . .'

<sup>3</sup> See Landsberger 1958: 96. On Sumerian versions of scholars' names see further Lambert 1957: 6–7, George 1993: 63–4.

<sup>4</sup> On the scribal curriculum of the Edubba see Sjöberg 1976, Tinney 1998, 1999 and further literature there cited.

Schooldays, Edubba D and other examples of Edubba-literature, some of them later provided with Akkadian translations, thus allow us a glimpse of the institutions in which boys learned to write (see further Falkenstein 1953, Gadd 1956). They have suggested to modern scholars that the *é.dub.ba.a*, with its elaborate hierarchy of staff, large student body and sophisticated and varied curriculum, was a ‘secular university’ (Landsberger 1958). The fact that this literature survives on Old Babylonian tablets has led to a dating of this *é.dub.ba.a* to the same period. Thus, according to one important and influential study, the ‘institution of learning, the eduba, is also specifically Old Babylonian, and as an institution of education, the eduba seems to die out at the end of the Old Babylonian period’ (Sjöberg 1976: 159–60, Landsberger 1958: 97). This theory argues that scribal education fell into the hands of private individuals only in the ‘post-Old Babylonian period’.

It has been apparent for some time that the archaeological record of the Old Babylonian period shows a different picture. The buildings where modern archaeologists excavated the tablets left by those schoolboys of Nippur and Ur were, those that have been recorded, very modest affairs. Nearly all were private dwelling-houses and none was large enough to accommodate the kind of complex and large-scale academic institution described in the Edubba-literature.

Three well-known case-studies show this. The first is House F in Area TA at Nippur, uncovered by Carl Haines and Donald McCown in the 1951–2 season of excavations. This dwelling-house has been the subject of detailed study by Elizabeth Stone (Stone 1987: 56–9, also Charpin 1990: 4–7).<sup>5</sup> In levels dating to the reign of Samsuiluna in the late eighteenth century BC, the excavators recovered from Room 205 some fourteen hundred cuneiform tablets and fragments. Most of these were apparently old tablets that had been put to secondary use as fill but a few may have been stored in accessible locations.<sup>6</sup> The texts inscribed on them were mostly literary compositions and school exercises, in other words the typical output of learner scribes of the early second millennium BC. The presence of unused tablet clay in the kitchen, Room 191, makes it probable that the scribal apprentices who produced the tablets wrote them on the premises. Room 205, where most of the tablets were found, was the largest chamber of House F but measured only about 3 ´ 5 m. It was not, therefore, a space large enough to accommodate a large body of pupils, a teacher and ancillary staff.

My second and third case-studies are similar houses at Ur, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the course of his many seasons at Ur (1922–34). Two Old Babylonian dwelling-houses of early eighteenth-century date, No. 7 Quiet Street and No. 1 Broad Street, are remarkable for the quantity of cuneiform tablets found in them. In the former Woolley found more than forty tablets that are typical products of Old Babylonian

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<sup>5</sup> A new study of this house and its tablets is being made by Eleanor Robson.

<sup>6</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen reports that the tablets were found ‘helter-skelter under the floor . . . as fill’ (Jacobsen 1953: 126). Stone notes that a mud bench in Room 205 was constructed out of ‘the most readily available raw material, old tablets. The walls of this room had bags or shelves on them to hold the [current] tablets’ (Stone 1987: 57). Charpin observes that most of the tablets found in House F were packing for a new floor (Charpin 1990: 7).

learner scribes. In the latter about four hundred similar tablets came to light, most in secondary contexts as fill. Both houses were described by Woolley as ‘schools’. He went so far as to style the man he supposed was the occupant of No. 1 Broad Street, a certain Igmil-Sîn, as the ‘headmaster of a boys’ school’ (Woolley 1963: 185), a description that, coming from such a source, might conjure up in the impressionable mind a vision of an English public school complete with junior masters, tuck shops and rugby football pitches.

Woolley would not have intended such an understanding but he was jumping to unwarranted conclusions, nonetheless. The two houses of Ur and the finds made in them have been exhaustively studied by Dominique Charpin (Charpin 1986: 419–86). He has shown that, as with House F in Area TA at Nippur, we are dealing with private dwelling-houses that belonged to men of the literate, priestly class. Charpin’s conclusions are that No. 7 Quiet Street was certainly a venue of scribal education, though a modest one; however, it is unsafe to assume that No. 1 Broad Street was, for the tablets that were built into the fabric of its floors may have come from elsewhere.

The dwellings House F, No. 7 Quiet Street and others like them that functioned as places of schooling elsewhere, for example at Isin (Wilcke 1987: 83), Tell ed-Dēr (Gasche 1989: 19–20, 40–1) and Tell Harmal,<sup>7</sup> clearly show that already in the Old Babylonian period much scribal training was a small-scale occupation run by private individuals and not by the state. This view is now generally accepted. The owners of such houses were learned scholars who taught apprentice scribes to write, instructing them in their own homes in the ways of cuneiform and the literature of tradition. They may have taught only two or three boys at a time, their own sons and other young relatives and maybe also the sons of colleagues. Most of the tablets the boys produced were recycled (Civil 1979: 7) but others were kept and slowly accumulated until they were found new uses as building materials. It is no doubt to places like these that the few Old Babylonian letters that refer to schools allude.<sup>8</sup> This kind of education, small-scale and from one generation to the next, was traditional in other crafts and is much the same set-up as we find in the third and first millennia, when scribal training was also conducted by learned men (*u m . m i . a // ummânu*) teaching small groups of boys in their own houses.<sup>9</sup>

The houses of the Old Babylonian scholar-teachers were sizeable residences in good neighbourhoods, but they cannot be imagined as institutional buildings housing large-scale educational establishments. In fact, no such buildings have yet been found in any Old Babylonian city. Indeed, the whole idea of a school building as a distinctive structure has been called into question recently (e.g. Wilcke 1987: 83; Volk 2000: 7–8). It is now agreed that much teaching, reading and writing was necessarily done outside in the

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<sup>7</sup> See the definitive report on the excavations at Tell Harmal now being prepared by Peter Miglus and Laith Hussein.

<sup>8</sup> The Akkadian is *bīt tuppim*, ‘tablet house’; for the relevant passages see Sjöberg 1976: 160–1, Volk 2000: 8 with fn. 41.

<sup>9</sup> See briefly Waetzoldt 1989: 39. The Late Babylonian copies of traditional literary compositions excavated in an area of private dwelling-houses at Uruk in 1970–1 present a picture similar to that obtained in Old Babylonian Nippur and Ur. The many commentaries found among them reveal a picture of oral instruction in cuneiform lore by the *ummânu*.

courtyard rather than indoors; this can be inferred not only from the need for bright light that most Assyriologists recognize from their own experience with tablets but also from telling passages of the E-dubba literature (Volk 2000: 7 and fn. 35–6). Writing of the later Old Babylonian period Michel Tanret comments, ‘l’idée d’un espace architectural réservé uniquement à l’enseignement, d’une salle de classe, nous paraît donc, pour cette période, un anachronisme’ (Tanret 1982: 49).

Now that Old Babylonian schools are revealed to have been very modest affairs located in private houses, there arises a discrepancy between the archaeological evidence and the literary documentation that led to Landsberger’s characterization of the *é.dub.ba.a* as a ‘secular university’. Briefly stated, the problem is that the schools reported in the Edubba literature were obviously institutions of a kind very different from the schools in which the remains of this literature were found.

The answer to this problem lies in understanding that the texts and the material remains report conditions of education in different periods. The Edubba-literature was traditional literature, already old when writing was taught in the houses of eighteenth-century Nippur and Ur. The tradition enshrined in Sumerian literature is that under the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III) there were special academies of learning in exactly these cities, Nippur and Ur. These institutions were very probably an innovation of this dynasty made to satisfy the growing bureaucracy’s demand for scribes that could not be met by the small-scale operations of the private sector (Waetzoldt 1986: 39). One of the hymns in praise of King Šulgi of Ur (twenty-first century) records his special connection with the scribal academies:

sig.šè urím<sup>ki</sup>.ma ki.sikil.la bí.mú  
 é.géštug.<sup>d</sup>nissaba.mul èn.du.gá.ka (*var.* a.kam)  
 nim.šè nibru<sup>ki</sup>.a ki.gal.la bí.gub  
 šùd é.kur.ra ki h́é.ús.sa.mu.uš  
 dub.sar h́é.du šu.ni h́é.eb.dab.bé  
 nar h́é.du gù hu.mu.un.né.re.dé (*var.* hu.mu.ne.re.dé.[(e)])  
 é.dub.ba.a da.rí ur<sub>5</sub> nu.kúr.ru.dam  
 ki.úmum da.rí ur<sub>5</sub> nu.šilig.ge.dam

Šulgi Hymn B 308–15, ed. Castellino, *Two Šulgi Hymns*, pp. 60–3<sup>10</sup>

Downstream, at Ur, in the Pure Place (my song) is sung,  
 the House of Wisdom of Starry Nissaba is (the place) of my song.  
 Upstream, at Nippur, in the Great Place (my song) is established  
 for my benediction in Ekur, the place that I did set on a firm footing.  
 The scribe shall come, his hand shall capture (the song in writing),  
 the minstrel shall come, shall declaim *thereof for them*,<sup>11</sup>  
 For all eternity the Edubba is never to change,  
 for all eternity the Place of Learning is never to cease functioning.

From the hymns of Šulgi that have been so well elucidated by Jacob Klein, especially, we learn that Šulgi was particularly proud of his literacy and cultural accomplishments. He had rosy memories of his boyhood at the *é.dub.ba.a*, where he boasted that he

<sup>10</sup> On ll. 311–15 see Sjöberg 1976: 174; on ll. 311–19 see Klein 1981a: 20; on ll. 313–15 see Ludwig 1990: 42; on ll. 309–14 see Alster 1992: 45–6; on ll. 312–14 see Black 1992: 100.

<sup>11</sup> See Alster 1992: 45.

was the most skilled student in his class.<sup>12</sup> This claim is not unique and may have been an expression of an ideal rather than a reality,<sup>13</sup> but in later life Šulgi was certainly an enthusiastic patron of the arts. If he did not himself found the academies of Sumerian learning at Ur and at Nippur, he clearly adapted them to his purpose, speaking of his ‘libraries’ (g̃r.gin.na) set up for the use of court minstrels (Šulgi Hymn B 318 and 329). The aim was evidently to provide a reliable corpus of Sumerian songs and other texts for future generations. Thus Šulgi envisaged that hymns to his glory and other courtly literature of his day would be preserved for posterity. Evidently he was worried that as the Sumerian language died out the songs, hymns and other compositions written in it would be forgotten and with them his glorious memory. And so they were not forgotten, for his academies established a literary corpus that survived as the core of the scribal curriculum at Nippur, Ur and other cities for three centuries.

When Šulgi speaks of his state-sponsored academies at Nippur and Ur as *é.géštug.dnissaba.mul*, ‘House of Wisdom of Starry Nissaba’, and *ki.úmun*, ‘Place of Learning’, it seems to me he is using the expressions much as one used the ceremonial names of temples. With institutions that could bear such distinctive names he surely had in mind physical structures dedicated to the scribal art. Thus I would maintain that the *é.dub.ba.a* of the Edubba-literature was an architectural as well as an institutional reality. In contrast to the Old Babylonian schools described earlier, we can suppose that these grand imperial schools occupied purpose-built accommodation, whether whole buildings or complexes of rooms.

It is not difficult to imagine that scribal training in the Ur III period came, like so much else, under the control of the state.<sup>14</sup> Documentation reveals that provincial governors had responsibility for the upkeep of learner scribes in local centres.<sup>15</sup> Connections between state and *é.dub.ba.a* were strong.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the courts of the kings of Ur and the succeeding dynasty of Isin were witness to considerable literary creativity in Sumerian. The *é.dub.ba.a* was an important instrument not only for handing down traditional texts but also for producing new royal compositions. Hymns were composed articulating the imperial pretensions of the first six kings of Isin and a few of the later ones, and several of them were included in the basic curriculum of the scribal trainee.<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that the state *é.dub.ba.a* of the Ur III period was maintained in some form by the court of Isin for as much as one and a half centuries after the fall of Ur, an

<sup>12</sup> See Šulgi Hymn B 13–20, re-edited by Volk 1996: 202–3, fn. 148; cf. Klein 1981a: 15.

<sup>13</sup> Note the similar passage in a hymn of Išme-Dagān of Isin: Ludwig 1990: 166 ff., IŠD V<sub>A</sub> 5–9.

<sup>14</sup> See already Nissen 1993: 108, who considers it ‘conceivable that the sector of scribal education formerly supported by private initiative increasingly came under state influence during the Ur III period’.

<sup>15</sup> At Girsu the governor provided regular rations for twelve scribal apprentices (*dub.sar.tur.tur*): see Waetzoldt 1986: 39, 1989: 39.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kraus 1973: 24–5, who argues for a close relationship between the *é.dub.ba.a* and the courts of the successor states of the early second millennium, speaking of the *é.dub.ba.a* as a ‘Hofkanzlei’.

<sup>17</sup> The group of four literary texts first encountered by Old Babylonian schoolboys, called the ‘Tetrad’ by Tinney 1999: 162–8, contained three hymns to kings of Isin, Iddin-Dagān B, Lipit-Ištar B and Enlil-bāni A.

example of continuity in state practice that is wholly expected. There is even evidence to suggest that the scholars of the academy at Nippur were not much impressed with the rival establishment just down the road (van Dijk 1989: 448–50). Probably we should seek the *é.dub.ba.a* of the Isin period near the royal residences, or even in them. In this connection it should be pointed out that a complex of chambers and courtyards used for scribal training would not necessarily contain distinctive furnishing or equipment of any kind beyond rudimentary bins for new and recycled clay, so that the recognition on the ground of an Ur III period *é.dub.ba.a*  $\S$  or indeed any other large-scale educational institution  $\S$  may not be a simple matter.<sup>18</sup>

Measured in terms of royal hymns and prayers literary creativity in Sumerian at the courts of Larsa and Babylon was starkly reduced,<sup>19</sup> an indication that in the eighteenth century the state secretariats of Babylonia had abandoned many of the traditions of the old *é.dub.ba.a*. In the later Old Babylonian period, three and four centuries after King Šulgi, the royal academies of the kings of Ur and Isin were surely gone altogether. In an era characterized by private enterprise many other imperial institutions of the Third Dynasty of Ur had also disappeared. Though the presence of school tablets in royal residences, for example in the palace of Šin-kāšid at Uruk (Cavigneaux 1982: 21–30), shows that the petty kingdoms of the middle Old Babylonian period continued to have an interest in training a literate bureaucracy, most schooling was probably undertaken in the private sector.

But the Sumerian literary corpus that Šulgi's academies had established survived, for it had become a teaching resource. Sumerian lists and texts were the standard copy books of learner scribes wherever they were taught. In the Old Babylonian period, when scholars and other literate men instructed their sons and a few others in the rooms and courtyards of their own houses, they passed on to them a literature much of which was already three hundred years old. From the texts that report life in the Sumerian *é.dub.ba.a* the boys learned that once, in the golden years of King Šulgi, their predecessors had attended schools vastly different from the modest establishments they knew themselves in the reign of King Samsuiluna.

My point, then, is simple. Any attempt to identify the many private houses where scribes were trained in the Old Babylonian period with the grand institutions called *é.dub.ba.a* in Sumerian literary texts is misconceived. To look for material remains of this *é.dub.ba.a* in Old Babylonian levels is to try to match the realities of two very different eras. The reigns of Šulgi and his successors were the heyday of the *é.dub.ba.a*, and it is educational practice of their era that is reflected in the Edubba

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<sup>18</sup> Note in this regard that the supposed school-room famously excavated in Zimri-Lim's palace at Mari remains a space of uncertain function. The evidence for scribal training therein is not compelling; on this question see most recently Waetzoldt 1986: 39, Tanret 1981: 33–4, Volk 2000: 5–6 and fn. 26.

<sup>19</sup> The relative sizes of the corpora of royal compositions stemming from the courts in question can easily be seen in the catalogue of Neo-Sumerian and Old Babylonian royal hymns published by Klein 1981b: 24 and 226–34; at the time of compilation Ur III scored 39, Isin 55, Larsa 13 and Babylon 15 (including Akkadian and bilingual compositions).

literature.<sup>20</sup> If one wishes to find the remains of the grand imperial school it is in the levels of the Ur III and early Isin periods that one should look.

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<sup>20</sup> In this analysis we must accept the testimony of the Edubba-literature, that the pupils' first language was Akkadian not Sumerian, as further evidence in the debate over the date of the death of Sumerian as a vernacular language, for it will apply to the late third millennium. This detail supports the view that 'Sumerian as a spoken language was in all probability dead or nearly so in Ur III' (Cooper 1973: 241).



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