

# THE RESTORATION OF SUMERIAN LITERATURE

An Example of Turkish - American Cultural Cooperation

*Samuel N. Kramer*

Associate Curator in the Babylonian Section  
University Museum, University of Pennsylvania

One of the most significant achievements of Near East archaeology in the course of the past hundred years consists of the uncovering of the Sumerians and their civilization. Certainly it was one of the least expected. For what the archaeologists who first began excavating in Mesopotamia were looking for, was not the Sumerians, but the Assyrians and Babylonians. For these peoples and their civilizations they had at their disposal considerable Biblical, classical, and post-classical sources which spurred their search and intensified their efforts. But of Sumer and the Sumerians they had not an inkling. There was no recognizable trace either of the land or of its people in the entire literature available to the western scholar; the very name «Sumer» had been erased from the mind and memory of man for over two thousand years. Yet today, the Sumerians are one of the best known peoples of the ancient Near East. We know what they looked like from their own statues and styles. We have a fairly representative cross-section of their *material* culture; scattered throughout the museums we find their columns and bricks, their tools and weapons, pots and vases, harps and lyres, jewels and ornaments. Moreover, Sumerian clay tablets by the tens of thousands, inscribed with their business, legal, and administrative documents, crowd the tablet collections of several of our museums; their contents help to reveal the ethnic layers, the social structure, and administrative organization of these ancient Sumerians. Indeed - and this is where archaeology, because of its very nature, is usually least productive - we can even penetrate to a certain extent into their hearts and souls. For we actually have a large number of Sumerian clay documents on which are inscribed the Sumerian literary creations which reveal their religious, moral, and philosophical concepts. And all this is due to the fact that the Sumerians were one of the very few peoples who not only probably invented a system of writing, but who also developed it into a vital and effective instrument of communication.

It was probably early in the third millennium B. C., almost five thousand years ago, that the Sumerians, as a result of their economic and administrative needs, came upon the idea of writing on clay. Their first at-

tempts were crude and pictographic, and could be used only for the simplest administrative notations. But in the course of the centuries that followed, the Sumerian scribes and teachers gradually so modified and moulded their system of writing, that it lost completely its pictographic character and became a highly conventionalized and purely phonetic script. So that in the course of the second half of the third millennium B. C., the Sumerian writing technique had become sufficiently plastic and flexible to express without difficulty the most complicated of their historical and literary compositions. And there is little doubt that sometime before the end of the *third* millennium B. C., the Sumerian men of letters actually wrote down on clay tablets, prisms, and cylinders, many of their literary creations which until then were current in oral form only.

However, for one reason or another, only few literary documents from this earlier period have as yet been excavated, although this same period has yielded tens of thousands of economic and administrative tablets, and hundreds of votive inscriptions. It is not until we come to the first half of the second millennium B. C. that we find in a number of museums, but particularly in the Museum of the Ancient Orient in Istanbul and in the University Museum in Philadelphia, a group of several thousand tablets and fragments inscribed with the Sumerian literary compositions. The documents range in size from large twelve-column tablets inscribed with hundreds of compactly written lines of text, to tiny fragments containing no more than a few broken lines. As for the compositions inscribed on these tablets and fragments, they run into the hundreds and vary in length from hymns of less than fifty lines to myths of close to a thousand lines. And from the point of view of form as well as content, they display a variety of type and genre, which considering their age, is both startling and revealing. Here in Sumer, a good millennium before the Hebrews wrote down their Bible and the Greeks their Iliad and Odyssey, we find a rich and mature literature, be it noted, in the restricted sense of belles lettres, consisting of myths and epic tales, hymns and lamentations, as well as a many-sided group of wisdom compositions including proverbs, fables, and sundry didactic types. The recovery of this ancient and long forgotten literature will no doubt turn out to be a major contribution of our century to the humanities.

Now in the matter of the restoration of this Sumerian literature, the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient and the Philadelphia University Museum play preeminent, coordinate, and closely related roles. For between them they possess the major part of the relevant source material consisting of close to three thousand literary tablets and fragments dating from the first half of the second millennium B. C.; all of these were excavated by the University of Pennsylvania at Nippur some fifty years ago. The Nippur literary collections in these two museums, therefore, actually form a single, indivisible unit, and can be most effectively utilized if treated accordingly. This was why I travelled to Istanbul in 1937 when, with the generous

permission of the Turkish Ministry of Education, and with the full cooperation of its Department of Antiquities, I copied one hundred sixty seven tablets and fragments; these have been published in a volume whose introduction is written in Turkish as well as English. In the course of my present stay in Istanbul I have copied another hundred and twelve of these Sumerian literary pieces, and I hope to publish them in a similar fashion. Thus, to no little extent as a result of Turkish-American cooperation on the cultural level, the restoration of the ancient Sumerian literature is gradually becoming a reality.

As a concrete example of the effectiveness of this cooperative effort, let me cite a twelve-column tablet, one of the largest literary tablets in existence, whose *text* it was my privilege to copy in the course of recent weeks. The tablet is practically square in shape, measuring twenty-two centimeters by twenty-two. It is therefore smaller in area than an ordinary sheet of typewriting paper. But on this relatively limited area the scribe has succeeded in inscribing close to six hundred and fifty lines of a Sumerian epic poem which I have entitled «Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.» As can be seen from the photographs, it is unusually well preserved; moreover the contents of some of the lacunae can be restored from other tablets and fragments in the Museum of the Ancient Orient and in the University Museum. All in all this tablet enables us to reconstruct six hundred and thirty-nine lines of the poem, and of these, *close to five hundred are in perfect condition.* Since before the copying of this tablet, only some two hundred well-preserved lines could be restored, its importance for the recovery of the text of the poem is self evident.

Needless to say, in spite of the relatively excellent condition of the text, the translation and interpretation of our poem «Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta» will prove no easy matter. It contains an unusual number of Sumerian words and phrases whose meanings are quite uncertain. Moreover the very last part of the text is poorly preserved; it will be difficult to get at its meaning. Upon my return to the United States, I shall begin at once to prepare the scientific edition of the poem, consisting of a translation, transliteration, commentary, and including copies of all the unpublished «Enmerkar» material in the Museum of the Ancient Orient and in the University Museum. But it may be taken for granted that the last word on this poem will not be said for many a decade.

Although all the tablets on which our poem is inscribed, date from the first half of the second millennium B. C. - they are therefore almost four thousand years old - the incident which it commemorates dates back to the first half of the third millennium B. C., not long after the Sumerians had first come into Mesopotamia as conquerors and settlers. Its main character is Enmerkar the king of Erech, a very well known ancient city in southern Mesopotamia, who lived even before the time of the most famous of all Sumerian heroes Gilgamesh. In addition to Enmerkar the important

characters of our poem are an unnamed lord of Aratta, a city far to the east of Mesopotamia, in Persia or perhaps even in western India; Enmerkar's herald and «ambassador» who again and again makes the dangerous journey between Erech and Aratta, in the «diplomatic» service of his master; and the goddess Inanna, the Sumerian counterpart of the Semitic Ishtar, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus. As for the event which constitutes the theme of our poem, it may not inaptly be described as a political incident whose details have a somewhat familiar ring in our own day of «power politics». Enmerkar, the king of Erech, has set his heart on making vassals of the people and ruler of the city of Aratta. To achieve this end he first makes sure that he has the support of the great goddess Inanna. He then unloosens what in modern parlance might perhaps be well described as a «war of nerves» against the lord of Aratta and its inhabitants. He first sends an «ambassador» to the lord of Aratta with an outright demand that he and his people become his vassals. Naturally enough, the lord of Aratta refuses. Enmerkar then directs a constant barrage of threats through his «ambassador» who keeps travelling back and forth between Erech and Aratta, until he finally succeeds in breaking the morale, first of the people of Aratta, and then of its ruler. And so Aratta and its lord succumb and become subjects of Enmerkar.

Let me now analyze the contents of the poem in greater detail; the reader is asked to bear in mind, however, that this outline is preliminary and tentative in character. The poem begins with a preamble whose text is damaged; it seems to sing of the glory of Erech and Kulaba, probably a district within Erech, and of their superiority over Aratta, a city far to the east of Mesopotamia, since it is separated from Erech by seven mountains. The real action of the poem then begins with the phrase «once upon a time». Once upon a time Enmerkar, son of the sun god Utu, uttered a plea before his sister, the goddess Inanna, that the people of Aratta should bring down «the stones of the mountains» and build for him shrines for the gods, and particularly the Abzu-shrine in Eridu. Inanna heeds his plea; she advises him to seek out an appropriate herald to act as his ambassador and carry his demands to the far-distant Aratta, and promised him that Aratta will submit to Erech and that its people will build for him the shrines he desires. Enmerkar selects his herald and sends him to Aratta with a message ordering its lord to bring gold and silver and build for him a temple to Enki; otherwise he will destroy his city in spite of its impregnable location high in the mountains. To further impress the lord of Aratta, Enmerkar instructs his herald to repeat to him the «spell of Enki,» which described how the god Enki in some way (the relevant passage is largely destroyed) put an end to the god Enlil's universal sway over the earth and its inhabitants.

The herald, after a journey which involves the crossing of seven mountains, arrives in Aratta and duly repeats his master's words to its lord. The latter, however, refuses to yield to Enmerkar, since he claims to be

the protege of the goddess Inanna. Whereupon the herald informs him that it is this very goddess who had promised Enmerkar that the lord of Aratta would become his vassal. His spirit shaken, the lord of Aratta nevertheless informs the herald that he will submit only if Enmerkar first sends him large quantities of grain and heaps them up on the «kisallu» of Aratta. The herald returns to Erech and transmits the message to Enmerkar. After taking counsel with Nidaba, the goddess of wisdom, Enmerkar loads up his beasts of burden with grain and sends them forth to Aratta. At the same time the accompanying herald is to deliver a message to the lord of Aratta, eulogizing Enmerkar's scepter and insisting that the lord of Aratta bring him precious stones. The herald arrives with his cargo of grain which he heaps up on the «kisallu» of Aratta, and as a result, its people seem ready to give Enmerkar the precious stones he desires. But when the herald repeats his master's message to the lord of Aratta, the latter seems to reply contemptuously that Enmerkar should first bring him all kinds of wood, precious metals, and precious stones.

Upon the herald's return, Enmerkar seems to consult the omens, and a considerable time elapses before he again sends forth his messenger to Aratta. This time, however, he gives him no message to transmit, but actually places the scepter in his hand. The sight of the scepter seems to arouse terror in the heart of the lord of Aratta; he turns to his «shatam-mu» and speaks bitterly of his own plight and that of his city, and seems ready to send the precious stones to Enmerkar. Nevertheless he once again issues a challenge to Enmerkar, a challenge expressed in riddle-like terms whose import is obscure for the present. Upon the herald's arrival with the new challenge, Enmerkar bids him return with a threefold message. The first part seems designed to answer the cryptic words of the lord of Aratta with very similar riddle-like phrases; the second part consists of a demand that the lord of Aratta heap up gold, silver, and precious stones for the goddess Inanna of Erech; in the third part he is again warned not to put his trust in the impregnable location of his city. The herald departs and delivers the message to the lord of Aratta. From here on the context is difficult to follow. There is a long address of the lord of Aratta to the herald which mentions a flood and the sprinkling of the «water of life by Inanna; there follows a statement that the people of Aratta at last do heap up gold, silver, and lapis lazuli on the «kisallu» of Erech; the concluding part of the extant text of our poem consists of a speech introduced by the now well known couplet: «Come, my king, advice I offer thee, take my advice; a word I speak to thee, give ear to it.»

In conclusion I can perhaps do no better than give a translation of the «spell of Enki», one of the most significant passages in our poem. It describes the blissful and unrivalled state of man in an era of universal peace, before man had learned to know fear, and reads as follows:

## H

in those days there was no snake, there was no scorpion, there was  
no hyena,

There was no lion, there was no wild dog (?), no wolf,

There was no fear, no terror,

Man had no rival.

in those days the land Shubur and Hamazi (East),

Harmony-tongued (?) Sumer (South), the great land of the decrees  
of priestship,

Uri (North), the land having all that is needful (?),

The land Martu (West) resting in security,

The whole universe, the people in unison (?),

To Enlil in one tongue gave praise.

