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Sacred Texts and the First Myth about the Creation of Writing

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Abstract

No myth about the origin of writing is known so far for Mesopotamia (only a legend). By applying the new Hylistic methodology for research into mythology, the first known myth of the creation of writing can be reconstructed. The myth we call NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE SACRED SONG OF ENLIL narrates the creation of writing, which serves to immortalise the divine song at the very moment when the supreme god is creating it orally.

Results of this investigation bear important implications for two phenomena, concerning sacred texts and the origin of writing. (1) From an emic perspective, texts created by the gods turn out to be sacred, even numinous, in their conception. Further analysis of the subscript "Nissaba praise!" or of the subscript ka enim-ma, the latter properly understood as "wording of the *divine* words," demonstrates that many Sumerian and Akkadian texts were indeed regarded as sacred texts. Ancient Mesopotamia thus proves to be a culture based on sacred texts. (2) The myth NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE SACRED SONG OF ENLIL sheds new light on the origins of writing as perceived from the culture of the inventors of writing: the decisive function of the creation of writing was seen not in overcoming *economic* challenges, but in coping with *ritual needs*. Re-examining the historical evidence from this perspective opens up new possibilities for a cultural history of the origins of writing.

Keywords

sacred text – myth of the creation of writing – Mesopotamian myths – origin of writing – Nissaba – "Praise to Nissaba!" – subscript ka enim-ma – ritual – revelation – Hylistic – stratification – authorship – translation – genre – oral tradition – praise – *Keš Hymn – Nanše A – Lugalbanda Epic – Erra Epic*

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1 The Myth of the Creation of Writing and the Oldest Sacred Text (*Keš Hymn*)[1]

Mesopotamia is usually not counted among the cultures with sacred texts.[2] Exceptions to this are some of the ritual texts from the 1st millennium, which in antiquity were labelled as the words of the gods as well as the interpretation of amulets as sacred texts.[3] But what is the situation in the preceding centuries? How was the creation of such sacred texts imagined by the Mesopotamians themselves? The analyses of 3rd- and 2nd-millennium Sumerian texts presented below reveal for the first time traces of mythical traditions about the origin and transmission of sacred texts. Analyses on a new methodological basis

1 The *Mythological Research Group 2064 STRATA*, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), has made this contribution possible: It forms the first part of a larger *Myth and Ritual Project*, based on word field studies, new translations of textual sources, Hylistic reconstructions of myths, and systematic studies of rituals in Mesopotamia. A first version of this paper was presented under the title "Heilige Texte im antiken Mesopotamien – neue Entdeckungen zu frühesten religiösen Schriftquellen der Menschheit" in the context of the Göttingen lecture series "Verstehst du auch, was du liest? Debatten über Heilige Texte in Orient and Okzident" presented on October 23, 2018 and can be viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79g_bEITSog. I am particularly grateful to the members of the research group whose stimulating interest, questions and comments helped to shape this paper: Balbina Bäbler, Jennifer Brand, Gösta Gabriel, Brit Kärger, and especially Josephine Fechner, Felix Müller, and Christian Zgoll.

2 See the statement of the New Testament and history-of-religions scholar Frenschkowski 2007: 96, who states that one finds only rudiments of what can be called sacred writings in the religions of the ancient Near East: "tatsächlich besitzen die Religionen des Alten Orients nur Ansätze zu dem, was man heilige Schriften nennen kann." Frenschkowski sees such beginnings in certain texts that were passed on in a fixed form. For Frenschkowski, the criterion for calling a text sacred is its canonisation. Or see for instance Bottéro 2001, who points to "the sacred nature" (ibid.: 21) of Mesopotamian objects such as temples, offices etc., but makes no mention of texts. While Tsouparopoulou 2016: 257–63 rightly cautions that the focus must not be on an unreflective etic but on the emic perspective on sacredness, the underlying assumption that only cultic veneration reveals sacredness falls short, however, as this study will show.

3 See Maul 2013 and Schwemer 2014, who evaluate the indication that a text is of divine origin as an indicator for the sacredness of texts (see Lenzi 2010). Maiwald 2021: 21–2 shows that texts such as *Sulgi E* were regarded as having been created by the gods and were therefore understood to be sacred (based on prior access to this paper, see loc. cit. n. 9). Only loosely related to sacred texts are recent contributions on the sacrality of "(written) signs of heaven and earth" as expressed, for example, in Mesopotamian divination or astronomy; see e.g. Pearce 2004: 628–9, Rochberg 2004; Selz 2014. For a sacred text found on amulets, see §5.

allow the recovery of the oldest known sacred texts of mankind.[4] Furthermore, they lead to the discovery of the oldest myth about the invention of writing.

The article is structured as follows:

1 The Myth of the Creation of Writing and the Oldest Sacred Text (*Keš Hymn*)
  1.1 At the Beginning
  1.2 The Creation Myth Enlil activates the temple of Keš
  1.3 The Cryptic End of the Text
  1.4 Power Struggles. The Myth Nintu activates her temple
  1.5 Stratified Myths
  1.6 The First Myth of the Creation of Writing
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7 Bibliography

4 One can assume that there were similarly ancient sacred texts in ancient Egypt as well; contemporary Egyptology, however, is cautious in this regard. If one asks further about the oldest *religious* texts from ancient Egypt, the Pyramid Texts, which were inscribed in the 24th century BC, are often mentioned, see Gestermann 2006: 1.

1.1 *At the Beginning*

One of the oldest religious texts of ancient Mesopotamia is the *Song of Praise to Nintu and her Temple at Keš*, often abbreviated as the *Keš Hymn*.[5] Its main protagonist, Nintu, is a mother goddess, or goddess of birth and city deity of Keš. This city is located about 40 km east of Nippur.[6] The centre of Keš is Nintu's temple; the city of Keš and the associated city-state are understood in antiquity as the land belonging to Nintu's temple.[7] The praise song to the sanctuary of Keš exists in many different copies that fall into two groups; one dates to the 26th century BC, the other to the 18th/17th centuries BC.

Formally, the song of praise has 131 lines and is divided into stanzas, or "houses," according to their Sumerian designation. But these stanzas or "houses" perhaps also correspond to houses of the sanctuary, which the song of praise concerns. It is therefore possible that it was sung in the context of an (annual)[8] pilgrimage.[9] Each stanza closes with a refrain.

The beginning of the praise song does not consist of hymnic invocations. Rather, the beginning tells a story, which could be described as a frame story for the praise song; but that would be inadequate in view of the outstanding event with which we are dealing. In this initial story there are three important protagonists, namely three deities. In addition to the city goddess Nintu, Enlil, the god over the entire land of Sumer, appears, and Nissaba, the goddess of writing, enters the scene as well. The song of praise begins with this story:

5 This is one of the earliest surviving Sumerian praise songs. Gragg 1969 edited this song for the first time; the edition was based on 36 tablets from the 18/17th century BC. Biggs 1971 published three further textual witnesses that date from the 26th century BC. The most recent edition and insightful study is Wilcke 2006 (with further literature), in which 90 textual witnesses are identified. A new edition by Kärger is in preparation.

6 On the identification of Keš with Tulul al-Baqarat, see recently Lippolis and Viano 2016; Steinkeller 2022: 4.

7 For more information see this very section.

8 Annual celebrations of a temple consecration are well attested, see e.g. the *Song to the God Bazi* (edition George 2009: 1–15 as text no. 1 with Tf. 1–4, latest translation A. Zgoll 2019) or the *Praise Song to Našše* (*Nanše A*) (edition Heimpel 1981), which was performed for the New Year festival of the Našše temple of Niĝin.

9 Following the reconstruction by Wilcke 2006, esp. 220.

[1] nam_2 nun-e nam_2 nun-e e_2-ta nam-ta-ab-e_3	[1] The sovereign,[10] the well-known prince! The sovereign, the well-known prince! Something led him out of the temple and that had consequences![11]
[2] ^{d}En-lil_2 nam_2 nun-e e_2-ta nam-ta-ab-e_3	[2] The god Enlil, the sovereign, the well-known prince! Something led him out of the temple and that had consequences!
[3] nam_2 nun-e nam-lugal-la e_2-ta nam-ta-ab-e_3	[3] The sovereign, the well-known prince! For the sake of kingship, something led him out of the temple, and that had consequences:
[4] ^{d}En-lil_2-le kur-kur-ra igi mi-ni-ib-il_2-il_2-i	[4] Enlil began to turn his gaze to the mountains:
[5] ^{d}En-lil_2-ra kur ni_2-ba mu-na-il_2-il_2-i	[5] For him, Enlil, the mountains began to rise there in their terrible aura.
[6] an-ub-da $limmu_2$ ^{d}En-lil_2-ra $kiri_6$-gen_7 mu-na-si_{12}.g	[6] All four regions of the world were made verdant for Enlil like a garden.
[7] $Keš_3^{ki}$ saĝ men mu-na-ni-ib-ĝal_2	[7] The city of Keš crowned itself for him with a men-turban.
[8] $Keš_3^{ki}$ kur-kur-ra saĝ il_2-bi-im	[8] Keš was now the one who raised her head above all mountains.

Keš Hymn 1–8, transliteration plus literal translation; for a freer translation, see below.[12]

10 The interpretation of the beginning of the text is not easy. Wang 2011: 95 n. 269 refers for nam_2 to the Old Babylonian equation nam_2 = nam = *rubû* in OB Nippur Aa 68:1 (Proto-Aa A iii 8, MSL 14: 91). Similarly, Brit Kärger, who also inspired me to extend the search for the ergative of the non-personal class further. Alternatively, like nam_1 (on the tablet from Tell Abū Ṣalābīḫ), nam_2 (OB tablets) can be understood as an element that forms abstracta and collectives, see Steinkeller 2017, 96–100 (for nam_2-šita$_2$). In this sense, Wilcke 2006, for example, interprets nam-nun as "princeliness" ("Fürstlichkeit") and interprets this as a title for Nintu. The abstract title would then – constructed as non-personal class – form the agent (ergative) in this sentence, but one referring to the goddess (see Maiwald 2021: 236). The decision for one of the different grammatically possible interpretations remains challenging. The basis of the present translation is the content parallel to the beginning of the *Gudea Cylinders*, since there, too, the city plays an essential role, insofar as the city sets the events in motion. The result of the city's action is similar to that in the *Keš Hymn*: it leads to Enlil's actions in favour of the city and the city god, namely the construction of the temple.

11 The prefix {na} has a syntactic function: forms with this prefix have effects which are reported afterwards. I have called this function "effective." See Edzard 2003: 120; Wilcke 2010: 59; Zgoll and Kärger 2018 chapter 12.2.2, A. Zgoll 2020: 88 n. 18, based on my unpublished presentation at the Sumerian Grammar Discussion Group in Oxford 1993.

12 My translation has had the benefit of the translation in Wilcke 2006 and of exchanges with Brit Kärger, who is at work on a new edition of the text.

A first challenge in the comprehension of this text involves the understanding of who is actually designated by the first words of this song and who is acting at the beginning. In other words, who or what makes Enlil come out of which temple? It is obvious, if a god comes out of a temple and this temple is not specified further, then that the temple must be his own. Therefore, Enlil must here be understood as coming from his own temple. This temple of Enlil is located in Nippur. It remains unclear, however, who is responsible for Enlil coming out of his temple. The verb form indicates that the cause for this comes from something that is not understood as a person in Sumerian, though this matter is revisited below.

The fact that one does not immediately know who is meant is typical of the style of Sumerian literary texts. In the beginning, one senses something like a hidden secret. Tension arises. The second line then specifies that it is Enlil, the state god over all of Sumer, who is being led out of a temple. This is formally repetitive, so it has something typically hymnal about it. Certainly, we are missing a dimension here that originally made the fascination of this repetitive-variant opening even more gripping, namely, the musical arrangement. It is, after all, the beginning of a praise song.[13]

Even though the section is formally designed in a hymn-like praising manner, this does not say anything about the narrative material processed here. In terms of content, a narrative is presented here. This narration continues in this way: Enlil directs his gaze at the mountains. Under this gaze, the mountains rise, i.e., they arise in this moment, donned with their terrible aura which distinguishes them as sacred places. All four regions of the world (that is, the whole world) appear green for Enlil as if it were a garden. Such a sequence of actions reveals that it is itself a part of a creation myth.[14]

It is still unclear on whose initiative Enlil comes out of his temple. But now an essential protagonist is added: the city of Keš. The city of Keš crowns itself with a crown (literally, with a turban called men in Sumerian). The crown of a city is to be understood as the temple of the city deity.[15] Crowned by this temple, Keš now towers over all mountains and mountain countries. That city thus belongs to these "mountains," not unlike someone who stands out above others who are quite similar (a *primus inter pares*). With this statement, it is possible to find the solution to the initially unclear protagonist of the

13 See also *Keš Hymn* 114–15 (with Wang 2011: 96) and §1.3 below.

14 We will look at this in more detail. Wilcke 2006: 203 also points out that the events take place at the beginning of the world.

15 On the temple as "crown" (men) of a city see also *Eridu Temple Hymn* 12–3 (edition Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969).

non-person class (the important "something" of lines 1–3) in this narrative: It is the city of Keš. This city plays an important role in this song. One may wonder why in a primordial event a city plays such a decisive role. For this, one must know that city and temple in Mesopotamia belong together like two sides of a single coin, since city and temple form the possession of the respective city deity, whereby the temple serves as a house and the city or city state functions as its grounds.[16] The temple and city of Keš are a major theme of the song, with Keš being important from the very beginning of the text.

The description of the events is arranged in an extremely abbreviated style, complicating considerably the text's understanding. The problem can be partially remedied by an edition that, in addition to the basic literal translation (for which see above), elaborates a second, freely paraphrased translation in which the essential information which was clear to the original contemporaries of the text is incorporated and which, at the same time, aims for the most accurate possible wording in the target language. In other words, it is an appealing translation. In the case at hand, this free translation, combined with a free transcription that treats Sumerian as a language (not just a sequence of cuneiform signs)[17] reads as follows:

[1] nam nune nam nune eta namtabe	[1] The sovereign, the famous prince! The sovereign, the famous prince! It, namely the city of Keš, led him out of his temple in Nippur on behalf of Nintu!
[2] Enlil nam nune eta namtabe	[2] The god Enlil, the sovereign, the famous prince! Keš led him out of his temple!
[3] nam nune namlugala eta namtabe	[3] The sovereign, the famous prince! For the kingship, Keš led him out of its temple – and this had weighty consequences:
[4] Enlile kurkura igi minibilili	[4] Enlil turned his gaze to the mountains,

16 See A. Zgoll 2012: 32–3. Felix Müller refers me to further evidence for the unity of temple and city; in the *Ritual Text for a Temple Construction* (also called *Marduk, Creator of the World*) it is reported that at the beginning of the world no temple and no city existed. Later, the temple of the city god of Babylon (E-saĝ-il) and thereby at the same time its city Babylon are created (latest edition Ambos 2004: 200–8, see also the translation by Foster 2005: 487–9, both with further literature).

17 The presentation of a poetic text in two versions, one with a transliteration of the cuneiform signs plus a literal translation, the other with a transcription of the Sumerian words plus a free, paraphrasing translation, was introduced in the edition of En-ḫedu-ana's *Praise Song to Innana* in A. Zgoll 1997.

[5] Enlilra kur niba munailili	[5] and there the mountains were about to rise for him, Enlil, dressed with their terrible aura.
[6] anubda limmu Enlilra kirigen munasi	[6] All four regions of the world became verdant for Enlil as if they were a garden.
[7] Keš saĝ men munanibĝal	[7] The city of Keš crowned itself with a crown for Enlil.
[8] Keš kurkura saĝ ilbim	[8] Keš was now the head that towered over all the mountains.

Keš Hymn 1–8, transcription plus free translation according to the sense. For a literal translation see above.

After this insight into the origin of the world, a section follows that will become important for the topic of the origin of writing and for the search for sacred texts:

[9] ^{d}En-lil$_2$-le Keš$_3^{ki}$-a za$_3$-mim am$_3$-ma-ab-be$_2$	[9] While Enlil was now singing the praise song to Keš,[18]
[10] ^{d}Nissaba nu-KA dili-bi-im	[10] Nissaba was the only one who knew how to write,
[11] enim-bi-da sa-gin$_7$ im-da-an-sur	[11] because she had mastered the art of weaving the song of praise from these words like a net.[19]
[12] dub-ba-am$_3$ al-ĝa$_2$-ĝa$_2$ šu-še$_3$ al-ĝa$_2$-ĝa$_2$	[12] There was a tablet. While she was taking it, while she took this tablet in her hand, …

Keš Hymn 9–12, transliteration plus free translation[20]

What happens here can be summarised as follows: The state god Enlil begins to sing. He sings the song of praise to Keš. He is not alone with Nintu, the ruler of Keš, but in addition Nissaba is present, the goddess of the grain and the art of writing. Nissaba in this context is the one able to write (we will come back to this topic later in §1.4). Therefore, she masters the art of tying the song of praise that Enlil sings, as one ties a net, by taking a writing tablet in her hand

18 For the rendering of the {a} prefix, see Wilcke 2010: 56–8; Zgoll and Kärger 2018, chapter 12.2.2.

19 I owe the translation "like a net" to Brit Kärger.

20 See §2.1.4 for a more literal translation; for clarification of the word nu-KA dili see Wilcke 2006: 206–7.

and writing down on it this song of Enlil. The following lines are therefore to be understood as a quotation of the actual praise song to Nintu and Keš.

The *Song of Praise to Nintu and her Temple at Keš*, thus consists of three parts:

1 The god Enlil sings a praise song to Keš (1–9).
2 The goddess Nissaba writes down the song of Enlil (10–2).
3 Content of Enlil's song of praise to Keš (13–129).

Another part will come to light later (§1.3).

1.2 *The Creation Myth* Enlil activates the temple of Keš[21]

We are here on the trail of a myth that takes us into the beginnings of the world. From our reconstruction we can deduce that only a single temple at the beginning of the world is here imagined. This temple belongs to the state god Enlil. This temple will be Enlil's temple in Nippur. The city of Keš appears as another protagonist, and it causes Enlil to come out of his temple. Upon a closer look it is surprising that a city is able to cause the powerful state god to come out of his temple. Since Keš belongs to the goddess of its city, Nintu, the actions of Keš can only be understood as an act on behalf of, and as a representative of, the goddess of the city of Keš.[22] In other words, it is ultimately Nintu herself who causes Enlil to come out of his temple (§1.3 will show why this fact is so discreetly stated). Enlil comes out and looks at the mountains. Now something amazing happens: the mountains rise. They come into being and the land becomes green. The statement proves to be polysemous. On the one hand, it can be understood literally: the mountains rise, the land becomes green. It may be imagined that mountains here refer to those bordering Mesopotamia, especially the Zagros in the east. However, one wonders whether this interpretation already captures the entire meaning of the statement. Should the creation myth here refer almost exclusively to the peripheral areas of the country, which actually do not belong to Sumer? And how would the city of Keš then fit in this overall picture? Besides this literal reading there is another meaning, according to which the mountains and the world's greening are to be understood as metaphors. Accordingly, mountains here may refer to Mesopotamia's temples, which are regarded as temple mountains.[23] That these mountains rise and become

21 For the term "activation" see Maiwald 2021: 201–3 and *passim*, with further literature.

22 The city at the beginning of the *Gudea Cylinders* has a corresponding significance as a protagonist. There it is Lagas that sets events in motion according to the wishes of its god Nin-ĝirsu. Both texts, the *Gudea Cylinders* and the *Keš Hymn*, are about the creation and consecration of a temple for the respective city deity, and in both cases the supra-regional state god, Enlil, is introduced at the beginning as an important co-initiator of the events.

23 See A. Zgoll 1997: 93–4; 2000: 88. See correspondingly for Keš also Wilcke 2006: 213. In the *Keš Hymn*, various statements make explicit this idea of the temple as a mountain, e.g., line 52, in which the temple rises to heaven as a mountain.

green means that the temples arise and flourish, and, with them, their respective cities.[24] In this respect it is important that these mountains are said to radiate a terrible aura. This statement can be understood succinctly if we recall standard Mesopotamian ritual lore in which mountains with aura are cities with their temples, which have been given their functions by powerful rituals. In this initial world a single "mountain" stands out above all others, namely, the city of Keš.[25]

Myths are not to be confused with texts, but are narrative materials concretised in texts and other media.[26] Such narrative materials are not directly tangible but rather must be reconstructed on the basis of their media concretisations. This is accomplished by Hylistics,[27] a methodology developed in the context of Göttingen myth research groups that operates on the basis of the smallest action-bearing units, the hylemes.[28] By way of the Hylistic methodology of myth research, the myth processed in this text can be reconstructed with maximum precision. The first step strives to offer the most accurate translation possible, and then elaborates the hylemes in it. In order to develop a Hylistic reconstruction, the researcher must transparently break down the content of a text (or other media concretion). For this purpose metaphorically stylised statements are transferred into their intended meaning, while implicit statements are supplemented (and noted as such).

If we relate the various pieces of information at the beginning of the text of the *Keš Hymn* to each other, it becomes clear that the narrative behind the text is much more complex than is first apparent. What follows from the fact that Enlil focuses his gaze on the temples and their cities? In connection to the other described significant events at the beginning of the world no purely coincidental observation, without further function, can be given here. That Enlil's gaze must serve one or more functions also follows from the fact that this occurs as a result of the previously mentioned action steps. Nintu apparently

24 On the city at the beginning of the world's formation, see A. Zgoll 2012: 28–35.

25 Left out of this scenario is Enlil's own city, which apparently already existed. The stratigraphic analysis of the narrative material shows two layers here: an older, "self-sufficient" Keš version of the Song of Praise and a Nippur version overlaying the older stratum. This Nippur version incorporates Enlil into an older Nintu myth. In this way, Enlil is proclaimed as a deity even more powerful than Nintu (§1.3). On such layers in mythical narrative materials see in general C. Zgoll 2019: 303–15 and exemplarily A. Zgoll 2020: 98–127. A related phenomenon on the textual level has been elaborated by Milstein 2016: the phenomenon of modification of older texts by preceding younger textual layers ("revision through introduction").

26 C. Zgoll, 2019: 562–3 (German); 2020: 75–6 (English).

27 See e.g. C. Zgoll 2019; A. Zgoll and C. Zgoll 2020; Gabriel et al. 2021; A. Zgoll, Cuperly, and Cöster-Gilbert 2023.

28 For the latest discussion of the character and determination of hylemes, with further reading, see C. Zgoll 2021: 22–5.

induces Keš to lead Enlil out of his temple in Nippur so that he may fix his gaze on the temples and their cities. Enlil's gaze must therefore be meaningful. It is obvious that the events that occur directly afterwards are meant as a result of Enlil's gaze. The following hylemes therefore do not occur "coincidentally" at the same time as Enlil's gaze. Coincidences do not exist in myths, which are, after all, characterised precisely by their transcending approach to reality.[29] Rather, the rising and towering of the temples and their radiation of terrible aura must be the intended effect of Enlil's look, just as the prospering of the world and the crowning of Keš by a temple. Precisely, then, it must be said that Enlil brings about all this by his gaze. With the benefit of this clarification, the beginning of the *Keš Hymn* can now be analysed as follows:

TABLE 1 Preliminary sequence of hylemes in *Keš hymn* 1–8, in the order of the text

Translation of the Text	**Hylemes**
1 The sovereign, the well-known prince! The sovereign, the well-known prince! It (namely the city of Keš) led him (on behalf of Nintu) out of his temple (in Nippur)! 2 The god Enlil, the sovereign, the famous prince! (Keš) led him out of his temple! 3 The sovereign, the well-known prince! For the kingship (Keš) led him out of its temple – and that had weighty consequences:	– Enlil is sovereign. (1–3) – Enlil is the well-known prince. (1–3) – Enlil is in his temple [in Nippur]. (1–3) – [Nintu induces] the city of Keš to bring Enlil out of his temple [in Nippur] for the sake of kingship. (1–3) – // Enlil comes out from his temple in Nippur (1–3). – This has consequences: (1–3)

29 For the Hylistic frame theory on myths, developed in several Göttingen research groups, see C. Zgoll 2019: 395–404 (German, detailed); 2020: 61–5, condensed in the definition of myth, 75–6: "A myth can be defined as an Erzählstoff [= narrative material] which is polymorphic through its variants and – depending on the variant – polystratic; an Erzählstoff in which transcending interpretations of what can be experienced are combined into a hyleme sequence with an implicit claim to relevance for the interpretation and mastering of the human condition."

TABLE 1 Preliminary sequence of hylemes in *Keš hymn* 1–8, in the order of the text (*cont.*)

Translation of the Text	**Hylemes**
4 Enlil directed his gaze to the mountains (= temples/cities). 5 and there the mountains (= temples/cities) were about to rise for him, Enlil, dressed with their terrible aura.	***Literal reading: mountains*** – Enlil directs his gaze toward the mountains. (4) – The mountains rise for Enlil. (4–5) *In myth, however, this does not happen by itself; here, gods are agents:* – = Enlil makes the mountains rise through his gaze. (4–5) – [Enlil causes by his gaze,] that the mountains carry a terrible aura. (4–5) ***Metaphorical-transferred reading: temples / cities*** – Enlil directs his gaze to the temples / cities. (4) – Enlil causes the temples/cities to rise for him by his gaze. (4–5) – Enlil causes the temples/cities to radiate a terrible aura by his gaze. (4–5)
6 All four regions of the world (= the whole world) became verdant (= prospered) for Enlil, as if they were a garden.	***Literal reading: mountains*** – Enlil makes the world green [through his gaze]. (4+6) – [The whole world is green as a garden to Enlil. (6)] ***Metaphorical-transferred reading: temples / cities*** – Enlil makes [through his gaze] the world, [that is, all the temples / cities] flourish. – [All temples / cities are flourishing].
7 The city of Keš crowned itself for Enlil. 8 Keš was now the head that towered over all the mountains.	***From here on, the focus of the text lies on Keš and only the urban level of meaning is continued***: – Keš crowns itself for Enlil with a crown. (7) *In myth, however, this does not happen by itself; here, gods are agents:* – = Enlil lets the city of Keš become the most glorious and supreme of all cities by its temple. (4+7) – Keš is now the head that towers over all the temples/cities. (8) – = Keš is now more powerful than all other temples/cities. (8)

The entire text thus focuses on the urban level of interpretation. The myth of the origin of the mountains is not continued. It is only touched upon. A manifestation of mythic narrative material that is only incompletely evoked can be called a myth fragment. Of the myth fragment present here, there are at least enough hylemes visible to be able to assign them to a specific myth. This myth can be determined as ENLIL CREATES THE WORLD WITH ITS MOUNTAINS. The fragment of this myth presented in the *Keš Hymn* consists of the following hylemes:

> ***The Myth*** **ENLIL CREATES THE WORLD WITH ITS MOUNTAINS**
> Enlil directs his gaze toward the mountains. (4)
> Enlil makes the mountains rise through his gaze. (4–5)
> [Enlil causes by his gaze,] that the mountains carry a terrible aura. (4–5)
> Enlil makes the world green [through his gaze]. (4+6)
> [The whole world is green like a garden to Enlil]. (6)

This myth shimmers in the background of the other myths like a kind of "companion myth." But other myths about the temples and cities are the focus of the song of praise. For the reconstruction of these, more information in the following line is available. The line speaks about Enlil, who sings a song of praise to Keš. This praise song – as is appreciable from broader research on rituals, is anything but a purely formal ceremonial act in which grandiose speeches are made about something that is already concluded.[30] The singing of a divine praise song constitutes a form of transformation: through it power is transferred and a new state is created, a being with new abilities.[31] In other words, if the god does not sing this song and if no other functionally corresponding divine action takes place, then the temple of Keš cannot enter into its powerful mode of being, it cannot function, and thereby the whole city is unable to flourish. The praise song, thus, bears an extremely important function for the goddess Nintu and for her city.

It must now be clarified how this statement is to be inserted chronologically into the sequence of events, i.e., into the hyleme sequence. In the pure text reading one is easily led by the textual arrangement. This would mean that the following larger sections (represented in the form of hyperhylemes) would follow each other (for a correct representation see below):

30 See footnote 1.

31 A. Zgoll 2012: 51–3; Maiwald 2021: 136–7. Further results are expected from the research project and in the context of the *STRATA Research Group* (see footnote 1).

***Hyperhylemes: Nintu, Enlil, and Keš* (*first analysis, improved below*)**
Nintu induces Enlil to turn his gaze to Keš.
Enlil's look causes Keš to rise (etc.)
Enlil sings his praise song to Keš.

Enlil's praise song seems to hang in the air: one does not know how it comes about and what, if any, are its consequences. But what was true in the case of Enlil's gaze holds here as well: if such a song coming from the highest god were truly of no consequence, it would not be reported in a myth about origin and development. Enlil's song of praise must, therefore, have substantial consequences. Yet these are not recognisable at first sight. With the appropriate methodology, however, it becomes clear that problems in understanding these issues arise from the differences between the text and the narrative material. While the sequence of events can be arranged arbitrarily on the text level, the Hylistic reconstruction yields the narrative material in its chronological order (note that this narrative material is different from story and plot!).[32]

The problem with Enlil's seemingly superfluous song arises from the arrangement of events in the text, and these need not follow the chronological order of events. (One cannot speak two things at the same time, even though different actions can very well happen simultaneously; and poetic language can change the order for rhetorical or aesthetic reasons.) Therefore, in order to reconstruct the myth, it is necessary to think about how this chronology can be restored. These considerations lead to the following insight into the course of events:

1 It remains unclear why Keš is to be regarded higher than all other temples/cities.
2 The praise song of Enlil must have consequences.
3 The content of the song of praise, presented in the following text (13–129), has to be added to the analysis; this song refers specifically to Keš and its temple.
4 Two different effects of Enlil's actions can therefore be distinguished. While his gaze has effects on the world in general (the uplifting of cities, their aura, their flourishing), Enlil's praise song is aimed exclusively at Keš.
5 Taken together, (1) to (4) lead to the conclusion that Enlil's song is the reason that Keš gets more powerful than all other temples/cities.

The outcome of these considerations, namely the implicit hylemes and implicit hyleme components resulting from this evaluation, have to be included in the reconstruction of the myth. In chronological order, this appears in the following excerpt from the myth that we can call ENLIL ACTIVATES THE TEMPLE OF

32 C. Zgoll 2021: 13–6.

Nintu in Keš through his song of praise (for an overview of the entire myth see §1.3):

> ***Excerpt of the Myth*** **Enlil activates the temple of Nintu in Keš through his song of praise**[33]
> [Nintu induces] the city of Keš to bring Enlil from his temple in Nippur for the sake of kingship. (1–3)
> // Enlil comes out of his temple in Nippur. (1–3)
> This has consequences: (1–3)
> [Thereby Nintu] induces Enlil to turn his gaze to the (mountains =) temples/cities and sings his praise song to Keš. (4+9)
> Enlil looks at the temples/cities. (4)
> [Enlil causes with his look] that the temples/cities rise for him. (4+5)
> [Enlil causes with his look] that the temples(-cities) radiate a terrible aura. (4+5)
> [Enlil causes with his look] that the whole world (i.e., the totality of the temples/cities) flourishes for Enlil like a garden. (4+6)
> Enlil sings a praise song to Keš. (9)
> [Enlil's praise activates] the temple in Keš.
> // [Enlil's praise enables] the temple in Keš to function as it should, i.e., makes it able to use its powers.] (8+9)
> // [Enlil's song of praise causes] Keš to become more powerful than all other temples / cities because of its temple. (8+9)
> // Enlil lets the city of Keš become the most glorious and supreme of all cities because of its temple. (4+7)
> Keš is now the most supreme and powerful city. (8)

As will be shown below, more information can be gained about this myth.

1.3 *The Cryptic End of the Text*

How does the end of the text relate to the end of the myth? The penultimate stanza shows Nintu, the mistress of the temple and the city, sitting and drinking wine and beer (120–1). This suggests a lavish feast. But Nintu cannot possibly be celebrating alone, in the presence of only her priests. From other myths about temple construction and temple activation, the necessary cultural knowledge can be gained to understand that such an assumption would be mistaken. Where gods build temples and put them to their function by activating rituals, a feast follows at the end, in which the gods celebrate together.

33 For an overview of the whole myth, see below.

On the mythic level this is best seen in Lagas (traditionally Lagaš)[34], where the city god invites the highest gods of the land to his new temple to feast with them (*Gudea Cylinders*).[35] We find an analogous sequence of events in the case of Marduk at Babylon: after having defeated the enemies and having built his temple, the other gods feast with him in his new temple.[36] The ritual enactment of this myth is celebrated at the New Year Festival at Babylon, known in sources from the first Millennium: gods manifested in their statues travel to Babylon to celebrate the festival with Marduk.[37] A modified form is shown in the tradition concerning Enki's temple activation in the praise song with the modern title *Enki's Journey to Nippur*, which, more appropriately, should be designated *The Consecration of Enki's Temple*.[38] As with Nin-ĝirsu in Lagas, one would expect the feast to take place in Enki's new temple, Eridu, though instead the feast takes place in Nippur. As in many other mythical traditions, we find here a layer aiming to profile the god Enlil as the highest god. The Enki-myth is thus adapted to the primacy of Enlil. Important for our reconstruction of the narrative materials in the *Keš Hymn* is the fact that in *The Consecration of Enki's Temple* the activation of the temple also ends with a feast of the gods. In the *Keš Hymn*, the mention of Nintu's feast analogously points to such a festival: this feast is a feast of the gods as well.

However, the seventh stanza also speaks of priests. How are these priests to be understood when it comes to a feast of gods? To answer this question, we need to examine Mesopotamian ideas about how rituals work. In doing so, it becomes clear: Mythical and ritual representation are here intertwined[39]: during the ritual, certain priests embody deities. This is made explicit in the song: "The high priests of the temple are the Anuna gods" (105). The reference to these priests as a manifestation of the Anuna gods (just as the ritual expert is during the ritual the "statue" of a god, i.e. the god's real embodiment, see §4.3) is one of the indicators that this song is rooted in the cultic sphere, i.e. that it

34 The reading of "Lagas" instead of the traditional "Lagaš" follows Attinger *apud* Mittermayer 2006: 13 no. 28.

35 See the editions in Edzard 1993: 68–101 and Römer 2010, as well as the translation in Heimpel 2015: 119–65.

36 This myth is known in the epic version of *Enūma eliš* (edition Kämmerer and Metzler 2012; Lambert 2013; for the first comprehensive study of the text and its meaning see Gabriel 2014).

37 See the New Year's festival in 1st millennium Babylon, for which various ritual instructions are available. The most recent comprehensive account can be found in A. Zgoll 2006a, with further literature; see also Pongratz-Leisten (forthcoming), 98–120.

38 Al-Fouadi 1969 edited this composition for the first time in his unpublished dissertation. A score is offered by Delnero 2006: 2239–90, a more recent edition with further references by Ceccarelli 2012.

39 Further contributions to this complex of topics are in preparation, see footnote 1.

does not only *narrate* about a feast of Nintu but that on this occasion the priests *are* the embodiment of the gods and the priestly actions *are* the embodiment of divine actions. One believed that the divine actions recounted in the myth of transforming the house into a powerful temple[40] occur during the ritual. This intertwining of myth and ritual defines the feast: The feast is experienced as a confirmation that the divine actions of primeval times, of which the myth tells, will take place in the "here and now" of the ritual.

The end of the myth can thus be extended by further hylemes (for a further specification see below).

> ***The End of the Myth* (*first analysis, improved below*)**
> Nintu celebrates that her temple is now activated and thus functional with a feast.
> The Anuna gods, who are part of Nintu's household community, celebrate with Nintu.

But where are the highest deities, including Enlil, Enki, and others at this festival? In other city-states, the newly installed temple is celebrated not just by the family and court of the city deity. These may be named in advance (so in the *Gudea Cylinders*, where the court deities enter the temple with Nin-ĝirsu), but the feast proper is celebrated by the city deity with other city deities. A deviation from this practice would be especially strange in the case of the *Keš Hymn*. After all, Enlil should not be absent from the feast, since he sang the praise song for Nintu. It would not be surprising if the myth remained fragmentary in this point, as is often the case. However, remains of the continuation of the older myth version (and of its concretion in the cyclically repeated ritual) are still detectable, and these may be traced through a new analysis of the end of the text.

A new challenge arises here. The four lines of the concluding stanza (before the refrain) and thus the end of the text have so far remained incomprehensible.[41] This is problematic insofar as these lines are particularly important, which can be seen in their positioning at the end of the text as well as in the manifold repetitions in them. That the lines resist understanding is due to the ambiguity of the Sumerian language, to the terse brevity of the formulations, and to the fact

40 Only after such a transformation ritual the temple is powerful and ready to serve the goddess Nintu.

41 Cf. e.g. ETCSL 4.80.2. "Draw near, man, to the city, to the city -- but do not draw near!"; Wilcke 2006: 228 "Zur Stadt, zur Stadt! Sollte jemand, der (in Keš) angekommen ist, (noch) nicht wirklich herangekommen sein?"; Maiwald 2021: 231–32 (based on a personal communication of A. Zgoll) "Zur Stadt! Wer in die Nähe zur Stadt gekommen ist, der ist nahe herangekommen (und das wird Folgen haben)!"

that positive and negative statements are combined here so that they appear nonsensical. In the jungle of these possibilities, the myth reconstruction we have done can now provide firm ground for dealing with these difficulties. According to this reconstruction, gods from outside Keš are expected to come to celebrate with Nintu. If we take this hypothesis seriously in view of the ambiguous text, then the difficult lines can be understood: they describe an invitation to the gods! "To the city, to the city" the gods shall come, "to the temple of Keš" they shall come, "to the hero of Keš, Ašgi (Nintu's son)," and to the "mistress of Keš, Nintu" they shall come!

Now the problem remains how the combination of positive and negative statements about approaching or not approaching could be understood. The verbal forms are strong prohibitions, or firm, negated assurances about the future. They refer to ordinary people (l u 2), who do not belong to the group of priests working at the temple. These ordinary people must not and will not approach the celebrating deities under any circumstances (na-te). Even the closer definition of such people by participial forms fits the context sketched here: "A person who has approached will by no means approach" must refer to humans who have approached the city or the temple but who will by no means approach the banquet of the deities taking place inside the temple. Thus, the statement is to be translated as: "Even if anyone (a human) had approached (the city), he will definitely not approach (the banquet of the gods in the cella)!" The new translation of the concluding stanza therefore reads:

126 iri^{ki}-še$_3$ iri^{ki}-še$_3$	126 "To the city, to the city (you gods)!
lu$_2$ te-a na-te	Even if anyone (a human) had approached (the city), he will definitely not approach (the banquet of the gods in the cella)![42]
127 e$_2$ keš iri-še$_3$	127 To the temple, to Keš, to the city (you gods)!
lu$_2$ te-a na-te	Even if anyone had approached (the city), he will definitely not approach (the banquet of the gods in the cella)!
128 ur-saĝ-bi $^{d.aš}$aš$_7$-gi$_4$-še$_3$	128 To its (Keš's) hero Ašgi (you gods)!
lu$_2$ te-a na-te	Even if anyone had approached (the city), he will definitely not approach (the banquet of the gods in the cella)!

42 The older version of the 3rd millennium has a similar version: iri-še$_3$ i[ri]-⌜še$_3$⌝ lu$_2$ ti-a nu-ti, "To the city, to the city (you gods)! Even if anyone (a human) had approached (the city), he has not approached (the banquet of the gods in the cella)!"

[129] nin-bi [d]nin-tur$_5$-še$_3$[43]	[129] To its (Keš's) mistress, Nintu (you gods)!
lu$_2$ te-a na-te	Even if anyone had approached (the city), he will definitely not approach (the banquet of the gods in the cella)!

Keš Hymn 126–129

The conclusion of the text is complex because it intertwines two statements. It is an invitation to Enlil and other high gods to come to Keš from their cities for the festival. At the same time this invitation is combined with the assurance that no unauthorised person will disturb the festival of the gods. The interweaving of these statements over four lines has the effect that both – the coming of the gods and the staying away of the people – seem to be connected like prerequisite and consequence. The fact that the ordinary people are kept away and cannot disturb the festival under any circumstances shows that everything is ready for the coming of the gods.

Let us recall again that all this is an event which takes place within the myth in the beginnings of the world. In this context, such statements mean first-time determinations. The gods are to come to Nintu's temple for the first time. Humans must not disturb this divine gathering under any circumstances.

The reconstruction of the narrative material can be deduced from the end of the text even more. Of course, one must assume that the gods will accept this so insistently presented invitation. In the myth, this action is to be completed accordingly. Also on the ritual level the addition is to be made. The gods from other cities will arrive on this solemn invitation in Keš at the temple, e.g., in the form of their statues. Thus, the time when the song will be performed can be determined: it serves the solemn reception of the gods during the annual festival of the temple consecration.[44]

The reconstruction of the entire myth, as presented in the *Keš Hymn*, based on all hylemes and adjusted in terms of material chronology, thus reads as follows:

> ***The whole Myth*** **Enlil activates the temple of Nintu in Keš through his song of praise** ***in the Version of the Keš Hymn***
> *Certain statements apply before, during, and after the myth* (= *durative-constant hylemes*):
> Enlil is sovereign. (1–3)
> Enlil is the well-known prince. (1–3)

43 For the reading Nin-tur$_5$ see Attinger 2021: 1070, n. 3390 with further literature.

44 See also Maiwald 2021: 251–6 for an in-depth study of the ritual timing of the *Keš Hymn*.

Other statements apply only at the beginning of the myth (= *durative-initial hylemes*):
Enlil is in his temple (in Nippur). (1–3)

The now listed single-event hylemes denote the events that follow each other in time:
[Nintu induces] the city of Keš to bring Enlil out from his temple in Nippur for the sake of kingship. (1–3)
// Enlil comes out of his temple in Nippur. (1–3)
This has consequences: (1–3)
[Thereby Nintu] induces Enlil to turn his gaze to the (mountains =) temples/cities and sings his praise song to Keš. (4+9)
Enlil looks at the temples/cities. (4)
[Enlil causes with his look] that the temples/cities rise for him. (4+5)
[Enlil causes with his look] that the temples/cities radiate a terrible aura. (4+5)
[Enlil causes with his look] that the whole world (i.e. the totality of the temples/cities) flourishes for Enlil like a garden. (4+6)
Enlil sings a praise song to Keš. (9)
[Enlil's praise activates] the temple in Keš.
// [Enlil's praise enables the temple in Keš to function as it should, i.e. makes it able to use its powers.] (8+9)
// [Enlil's song of praise causes] Keš to become more powerful than all other temples/cities because of its temple. (8+9)
// Enlil lets the city of Keš become the most glorious and supreme of all cities because of its temple. (4+7)
Keš is now the most supreme and powerful city. (8)
NN [= Nintu][45] invites [gods of other cities like Enlil] to come to Keš to the temple.
NN [= Nintu] invites [gods of other cities like Enlil] to celebrate with her.
NN [= Nintu] ensures that (ordinary) people do not have access to the festival of the gods.
[The gods of other cities like Enlil come to Keš to the temple of Nintu].
Nintu celebrates with the son Ašgi, with the Anuna gods (her household community) and with others, [namely the gods of other cities] at a feast that her temple is now activated and thus functions properly.

45 The one inviting can ultimately only be Nintu as the mistress of her temple. Of course, the execution of Nintu's invitation can be the responsibility of a subordinate deity (or, on the ritual level, of a member of the priesthood).

This has important lasting results (= *durative-resultative hylemes*):
[Nintu's temple in Keš is activated, i.e. functions properly].
[Nintu possesses the most powerful temple among all other temples] (8).
[Nintu and her city of Keš are powerful because Nintu's temple in Keš does something important for the kingship]. (1–3+8)

1.4 *Power Struggles. The Myth* Nintu activates her temple

This overview of the myth Enlil activates the temple of Nintu in Keš through his song of praise sheds light on something striking, even surprising. If Nintu has such a great power that the most powerful temple far and wide belongs to her, why does she need another god to activate this temple? We will tackle with this problem in this section.

At the end of the text we find a subscript containing a final praise. This concluding praise at the end of the song is not addressed to Keš (contrary to what the modern title *Keš Hymn* may suggest); nor is it addressed to Enlil. Surprisingly, the praise is addressed to Nintu, the mistress of Keš, and Ašgi, her son.[46] Ašgi is praised because he has built the temple. Nintu is praised because she has done something that is usually understood as an expression of flattery, or typical female expression. The Sumerian phrase is mim du_{11}.g. But whom should Nintu have flattered? Nothing of this is told in the text. And why should her flattery be given as a reason for praise, parallel to the building of the temple? This would mean that her flattery would be given the same rank as the construction of the temple! The sense of mim du_{11}.g is crucial to the understanding of what is at issue. The phrase occurs frequently in Sumerian religious and literary[47] texts. Word field analyses show that the expression does not refer to flattery but rather denotes powerful speech acts in the form of ritual singing. Such ritual singing activates and transforms the entity to which it is addressed, with the result that this entity is endowed with the powers evoked in the song.[48] In the present case, Nintu's action (mim du_{11}.g) means that she has evoked the powers of her temple in a song, thereby activating the temple and endowing it with its powerful way of being. The subscript of the *Keš Hymn* can thus be understood as:

46 The problem has been pointed out by Wilcke 2006: 204. The present paper's solution is consistent with many other myths. Indeed, it is a common phenomenon in many Sumerian texts and myths that Enlil is "inscribed" into older narrative materials; this has something to do with the fact that Enlil became supra-regional in the 3rd millennium, and that many of the surviving tablets come from Nippur, the cult centre of Enlil.

47 For the classification of texts see §6.2 "Genre and the threefold profile of texts."

48 These word field analyses are beyond the scope of this paper; they will be elaborated in subsequent publications from the research area *Myth and Ritual* (see footnote 1).

[130] $Keš_3^{ki}$ ĥu$_2$-a $^{d.aš}aš_7$-gi$_4$ za$_3$-mim	[130] To him who built Keš, to the god Ašgi praise!
[131] $Keš_3^{ki}$ mim du$_{11}$-ga ama ^{d}nin-tur$_5$ za$_3$-mim	[131] To the one who sang about Keš in an evoking-activating way (and thereby enabled it to be powerful), to Mother Nintu praise!

Keš Hymn l. 130–31

Like all other statements that belong to the narrative material, these are also to be considered in the reconstruction of our myth. Hyleme analysis of these two lines shows the following, chronologically ordered sequence of events:

***An Older Mythical Version:* NINTU ACTIVATES HER TEMPLE**
Ašgi builds Keš (= city/temple).
Nintu evokes Keš (= city/temple) in her song.[49]
= Thus Nintu activates Keš (= city/temple).
= [Thus Nintu makes Keš (= city/temple) prosper].
NN praises Ašgi.
NN praises Nintu.

If one places these hylemes beside the myth sequence from the myth ENLIL ACTIVATES THE TEMPLE OF NINTU IN KEŠ BY HIS PRAISE SONG reconstructed above, then a problem emerges: if Nintu activates the temple or the city, why does it still need Enlil to be active with exactly the same goal? This sounds as unlikely as the idea that activation by only one of the two gods would be incomplete. Quite obviously, both statements do not fit together. The problem is not isolated. There are other statements that do not fit together properly or are formulated in a conspicuously strange way. Briefly summarised, the following inconsistencies, discrepancies and other conspicuous features emerge when comparing the narrative first part with the closing praise of the *Keš Hymn*:

Inconsistencies, Discrepancies, etc. in the Keš Hymn
1 At the beginning Enlil sings his song of praise, at the end Nintu sings her song. Both songs serve the purpose of activating the temple of Keš. Why is there not only one activation by one god? Why do the two statements stand unconnected to each other? Why are the statements separated by the entire text?

49 For the interchangeability of the city of Keš and the temple of Keš in this context, see §1.1 above.

2 Why does Enlil activate the temple of Nintu? Why doesn't Nintu activate her own temple?
3 Why does Enlil's temple (surely meant: in Nippur) already exist at a time when quite obviously no other temples ("mountains") exist at all?
4 Why does Enlil raise Keš above all other cities? Is Keš also supposed to be higher than his own city Nippur? How can such a goal correspond to the intentions attributed to the god Enlil?

Such inconsistencies, discrepancies and similar peculiarities are typical for myths. These phenomena can be evaluated by means of the methodological tool of stratification analysis.[50] Accordingly, the stronger the evidence, the more likely this indicates that we are dealing with a typical myth with evolved layers. In the present case, the fault lines indicate that not only *one* version of the myth of the activation of the temple of Keš has been handed down, but that at least *two* different traditions are linked in the *Keš Hymn*. According to one version, Enlil is the protagonist who sings his song as part of an activation ritual for Keš. According to the other version, it is not Enlil but rather the city's own deity who sings to activate her temple. The version with Enlil is narratively broader, while the version with Nintu becomes recognisable as only a small myth fragment behind the text's end. But even this myth fragment gives a view of the rest of a myth, which is to be determined as NINTU ACTIVATES HER TEMPLE BY HER PRAISE SONG.

Continuing the stratification-analytical procedure, it is now necessary to clarify how the relationship between the two versions is to be evaluated. In the one case, a city goddess equips her own temple with the necessary functions through her praise song. In the other, a superior state god appears to accomplish this task. Many problems appear in the version with Enlil (see above). This version, with its external activation, proves to be far more complex than the version with the activation by the city deity. The Nintu version without Enlil is very simple and easy to understand. Here Nintu acts together with her son Ašgi. And from this perspective, Keš is, of course, the most significant among all the cities. This Nintu version without Enlil, therefore, preserves an older version of the MYTH OF THE ACTIVATION OF THE TEMPLE OF KEŠ.

50 On the theory and methodology of myth stratification, see C. Zgoll 2019: 270–519 (German, comprehensive) and 2020: 52–76 (English, abbreviated). Results that have emerged from the application of this method can be found in the publications of the *STRATA Research Group* and the *Collegium Mythologicum Göttingen* in the Mythological Studies series; see e.g., A. Zgoll 2020.

This older version is limited to the perspective of the city of Keš. From this local perspective, Keš is the most important place in the world.

Only by the subordination of traditions of originally independent cities under Enlil of Nippur does a more complex myth evolve, combining the older Nintu version with the later Enlil version. The development must have taken place when Enlil and Nippur were promoted to supraregional rank, i.e., in the course of the first half of the 3rd millennium BC.[51] The Nintu version must be older.

Even in this composite myth, which integrates Keš into a larger picture of various city-states over which the god Enlil presides from his city Nippur, the importance of Keš is still preserved. But at the same time this status is kept in check by the statement that Keš could only achieve its high rank through Enlil's favor. In the end, a kind of balance is reached: Nintu's temple is still of the highest rank, but the most powerful of the gods is clearly Enlil. And since the temple's rank is only reached through Enlil, his position is elevated over that of Nintu.[52]

Even in this later Nippur version, in which the activation of the temple is no longer solely attributed to the owner of the temple Nintu but rather to the superior state god Enlil, Nintu is still involved in the events. Her city of Keš, and thus indirectly she herself, are credited with persuading Enlil to activate her temple through his praise song in the first place. This event marks the beginning of the text; and it is emphasised by a threefold repetition: Keš – in other words: Nintu – is (still) the decisive force that provides the impetus for her temple to be installed in its essential functions. And yet Nintu is relegated here as a protagonist, so that even her name no longer appears in the initial lines of the text. Only indirectly, through her city of Keš, is she still present.

Whoever transfers power to the temple through the ritual song has the supreme power and thus stands in the preeminent position. A struggle for interpretive power, whether between Nintu and Enlil or between the temples and priesthoods of both deities and their cities is recognisable here, behind

51 Wang 2011: 217–46 and passim.

52 The Nippur version also includes a focus on kingship, which indeed appears as the goal of Enlil's actions: Enlil allows himself to be led out of his own temple "for the sake of kingship" (for the connection of Enlil with kingship in early Sumerian literature see also Wang 2011: 94–7, 228–30, 236–8, and 245f). The temple in Keš, as the praise song shows, is responsible for much more than just kingship in general: royal consecration rituals, which are of obvious supraregional significance, take place in the Keš temple. See Maiwald 2021: 226–56.

the scene, as it were.[53] Although the later Nippur version appearing in the preserved texts ascribes the decisive power primarily to Enlil, it is nevertheless intent on a certain balance: Nintu likewise comes to an important role that cannot (and should not) be concealed. Therefore, a myth fragment that refers to the older version of the myth of the temple's activation is preserved at the end of the text, in the subscript praising Nintu. Moreover, the beginning of the text shows indirectly that Enlil's powerful action is at Nintu's initiative. The powers of the two gods thus appear in a balance in the praise song's creation.[54] The comparison of the two versions and the finely elaborated design of the later Nippur version make it clear that the creation of such a praise song is no trivial matter, but rather something that engaged the authors considerably. As shall be seen, this is due to the fact that such texts are perceived as sacred texts, with great significance.

1.5 *Stratified Myths*

The phenomenon that myths and their textual manifestations so often contain tensions and inconsistencies gains a significant explanation by these results. Myths are alive in a culture as long as their outcome corresponds to actual realities of life. The telling of myths is a way of coping with these realities, both cognitively and affectively.[55] For this reason those myths that are handed down over centuries must be adapted again and again to the prevailing circumstances and convictions. Tensions arise necessarily in those cultures that understand mythical narrative materials (as incorporated into the *Keš Hymn*) as creations and revelations of deities. On the one hand, one is obliged to keep the divine word and divine revelation unchanged and intact, and, on the other, one meets the necessity to adapt the mythical traditions to contemporary convictions, especially with regard to the hierarchies among the gods and the demands of the deities. Quite often the solution for such tensions between traditions of different ages and actualities (and correspondingly between traditions from different places) was to combine the one with the other. They told a myth in a version adapted to current beliefs, but still retained at least parts of the old traditional versions. This way of solving problems had a great advantage: one could assume that this would increase the chance of not offending less prominent but still powerful deities.

53 On myths as ideological battlefields on which interpretive power conflicts are played out, see in detail C. Zgoll 2019: 428–500.

54 In the song of Enlil, which is part of the myth, there is an even more harmonious solution: the god of heaven, An, founds the temple, Enlil activates the temple through his song of praise, while Nintu gives the temple a good fate by an omen (lines 38–9).

55 C. Zgoll 2019: 371–94, 418–28.

In this way, layers (strata) were created as in the *Keš Hymn*, whose original version is handed down in the last two lines of the text (§1.4); in this version, the son of the city goddess builds the temple and the city goddess herself activates her temple through her praise song, thereby enabling it to perform the powerful tasks mentioned in the song. The rest of the song, however, describes these events as brought about by Enlil and his song of praise to the temple of Nintu (§1.2). Here a new layer was built over the original one. In the meantime, this supraregional state god has become so important that he is given priority over other gods and their deeds, presumably originally only in Enlil's cult centre of Nippur. That myths and other traditions are adapted to the prevailing circumstances is to be expected as long as such narrative materials play a vital role in the life of the people, e.g. in their rituals. The peculiarity lies in the fact that the older layers are often not thrown overboard. Another reason for this is that these myths are not attributed to one's own inventiveness but are believed to have been revealed by the gods (see §1.6–1.7, §3–5, and §6.3).

1.6 *The First Myth of the Creation of Writing*

In the following, we will deal with another protagonist who appears in the narrative material of the *Keš Hymn*, namely Nissaba. Here, too, there is a peculiar detail in the wording: the description of what Nissaba does is not directly understandable. In order to understand what is happening here, one must know something about the typical style of ancient Near Eastern and especially Sumerian texts. These texts usually describe only the major lines, extremely concisely. These contain nothing that is superfluous, only the essentials appear. Enlil sings the song of praise: one statement, one line. However, the description of what Nissaba does is different:

> Nissaba was the only one who knew how to write,
> because she mastered the art of tying up the praise song like a net.
> There was a writing tablet.
> While she took this,
> while she took this tablet in her hand …
>
> *Keš Hymn* 10–12, see §1.1; for a more accurate translation see below

Thus, unlike Enlil, whose action (namely, singing) is described in *one* line, the statement that Nissaba writes down the song is carried out in *three* lines which contain *five* statements. Within these five statements there is also an ornamental repetition ("while she took this, while she took this tablet"). This statement is thus intensely repetitive, and hymn-like in design, like the beginning of the text, which was intended to highlight Enlil's role (§1.2).

Another observation accords with this reading: the analysis of the sentence structure shows that the statement about Enlil's singing is referred to as a background action. Enlil's singing is morphologically subordinated (za_3-mim am_3-ma-ab-be_2). Grammatically, it is possible to detect the target phrase of the passage (a phrase without subordinating prefix). This occurs in the sentence, "Nissaba was the only one who knew how to write." And a further target phrase follows: "There was a writing tablet." The length of the section about Nissaba, the repetition of the phrase about writing, and its formulation as a target phrase all indicate that something of paramount importance is at stake here. The particular design raises the question: Why is this statement about Nissaba's writing so important?

If we recall the context of this writing, we find that it is taking place at the creation of the world: the mountains come into being, the temples come into being. At this early point in time when mountains, temples, and cities are created, when Enlil creates his song for Keš, there is only one answer to the question why the narration of Nissaba's writing is so strongly highlighted: This must be *the first time* when someone writes! This is the exact meaning of the phrase "Nissaba was the only one who knew how to write": The weight of writing, which is expressed in the formal arrangement of the text, only makes sense if Nissaba's writing is to be understood as the first instance of writing. The art of writing is highlighted since it is understood as something that has never existed before. In many myths a kind of creation is described. It is typical of myth that something that happens for the first time need not be explicitly marked as such – people knew it anyway.[56] To the experts who sung the praise song and to those who wrote it down, the myth was of course well known – why should one therefore lose words around self-evident things? Building on these findings, that is, in a combined approach of word research, grammar research, and contextual, culture-based semantic research, we can now translate the original Sumerian text more precisely:

> While Enlil was now singing the praise song to Keš,
> there was Nissaba: she was the first to master the art of writing!
> Through her art, she was able to tie the praise song tightly like a net.
> So the first writing tablet came into being:
> While she was taking it,
> while Nissaba took the tablet in hand …
>
> *Keš Hymn* 9–12, see §1.1. The following is the content of Enlil's praise song

56 Firsts are often not marked as firsts in myths, see C. Zgoll 2019: 392, 471; A. Zgoll 2020: 141; A. Zgoll and C. Zgoll 2021: 580–1.

Here, too, it turns out that the text arranges the narrative material in a special, complex way by positioning results prior to the actions from which they follow. The hyleme analysis reconstructs the myth in its chronological order:

> ***The Myth*** **Nissaba Creates Writing for the Sacred Song of Enlil**
> *In the beginning there is a state of non-existence* (*durative-initial hyleme*):
> No one can write. (→10)
>
> *Then several single-event hylemes take place*:
> Enlil sings the praise song to Keš. (9)
> [Nissaba creates writing in order to write down the praise song of Enlil]. (→11)
> [Nissaba creates for her writing] the first writing tablet. (12)
> Nissaba takes the [first] writing tablet in her hand. (12)
> Nissaba is able to tie up the song of praise from Enlil's words like a net. (11)
> Nissaba writes down the praise song of Enlil while he sings. (10+12)
> *The text that follows is understood from the emic perspective as this very praise song of Enlil, which has been fixed through Nissaba's writing.*
>
> *The result is permanent* (= *durative-resultative hylemes*):
> Nissaba is the first scribe. (10)
> Now there is the art of writing and writing tablets. (→11–12)
> Now there is the praise song of Enlil to Keš secured in written form created by Nissaba. (→11–12)

The myth reconstructed from both parts (1–9 and 9–13) can thus be summarised as follows: at the time when the first mountains (i.e., temples and their cities) come into being (§1.2), Nissaba creates writing and the first writing tablet to write down the praise song on the temple of Keš. The figurative phrase that the song is tightly woven or tied like the knots of a net, corresponds to the image behind the English and German word "text," which goes back to Latin *textus*, "(woven, tied) fabric," from *texere* "to plait, weave"; the metaphor is much older going back to Sumerian (zu_2 $keše_2$-d/r)[57] and Akkadian (*kaṣāru*),[58] both meaning "to tie, to knot." The cultural background of the image in the *Keš Hymn* could be the early clay tablets, which were covered by a net of boxes,

57 Best known from the end of the *Temple Hymns* of En-ḫedu-ana.
58 For the use of this word in a *Praise Song to Erra*, the so-called *Erra Epic*, see §5.

the precursors of the later lines.[59] The words were then placed in these boxes in the form of the characters, apparently paying particular attention to their visually aesthetic distribution.[60]

Here, for the first time, a myth about the invention of writing from the very culture that invented writing is revealed. The invention of writing is attributed a high importance here. One tablet notes appropriately also a final praise on the goddess of writing, Nissaba.[61] We already know a Sumerian narrative about the origin of writing, but this narrative, however, is a historicising *legend*.[62] Up until now no *myth* about the origin of writing was known.[63] Now, however, a first such myth appears in the *Keš Hymn*, in the version of the 18th/17th centuries (and probably also the 26th century version, from the time when the first literary-ritual[64] texts were written down,[65] was understood in the same way)[66]. This is the myth NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE SACRED SONG OF ENLIL. The implications of this are far-reaching, and it is not yet possible to consider them in full. But already here it can be stated that according to this myth, writing arises during the unfolding of the world, and it arises as a creative achievement of the goddess Nissaba. Thus, in the original perspective of the Sumerians who composed this myth, the origin of writing does not take place in the service of economy and administration (that would

59 I owe this insight to Christian Zgoll.

60 Michalowski 2003, 452.

61 Tablet Z, see Wilcke 2006: 204.

62 This legend is about a primeval ruler of Uruk, see *En-merkara and the Lord of Arata* (ed. Mittermayer 2009).

63 Defining what is meant by "myth" presents real challenges for research. In the last years, the *Collegium Mythologicum Göttingen* and the *Myth Research Group STRATA* have put much effort into this basic research. The outcome is the frame theory for mythological research that is presented in the *Tractatus Mythologicus* of C. Zgoll 2019 (for the definition see especially loc. cit. 557–63). The condensed English version of the definition is found in C. Zgoll 2020: 75–6 (see note 29).

64 See §6.2 on the threefold profile of texts: the form of this text is literary, the content is mythical, and the function is ritual.

65 See Wilcke 2006: 206.

66 It is not possible to speak definitively on this matter on the basis of the *Keš Hymn*, since the latter is written in an abbreviated manner at the point in question. The idea of Nissaba as the creator of writing is supported by the fact that the younger version of the *Keš Hymn* is a faithful reflection of the older one; see on which Biggs 1971: 196: "The Old Babylonian version is thus not a creation of Old Babylonian scribes using older material, but is a faithful reflection of a text that had already been fixed in the Sumerian literary tradition for centuries." Moreover, the concept of Nissaba as creator of writing is also indicated by the results on textual subscripts with the statement "Nissaba praise!" (§2), which are frequently attested in tablets dating to the 26th century; see §2 below.

be a modern historical view),[67] nor also in the service of royal claim to power against foreign countries,[68] but rather in the service of the gods. The goddess writes down what the god sings specifically for the purpose of perpetuating the song of praise to Keš. The song of the highest god is important because it forms the central part of an effective ritual activating the temple.[69] The creation of the text and the creation of writing occur in order to make a praise song created by gods durable so it can be secured for its use in an important ritual.

1.7 *The Creation of the First Sacred Text*

The transcription of Enlil's song in the *Keš Hymn* is singled out by the myth NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE PRAISE SONG OF ENLIL as something unique. This can only be understood if what is being inscribed is truly outstanding. Enlil's song and, with it, the *Keš Hymn* itself must have been perceived as particularly precious. As we have seen, and as the following sections will make clearer, this hits the mark. From an emic perspective, such a song possesses power that changes reality; in the case of the *Keš Hymn* insofar as it is only the singing of the song that turns a particular building into a functional temple of Nintu, which can itself exercise power.

The text, transmitted orally and in writing, originates from the gods and thus stands in special proximity to them. Entities that belong to the sphere of the gods in such a way are marked in different religions by special terms that express *sacredness*. In Mesopotamia, several designations are found for it. The corresponding terms originate mostly from the word field of light phenomena and are associated with rays, shine, or aura.[70] One such term is "radiant song" (ser_3 ku_3.g),[71] which is functionally a counterpart to what we call "sacred text"

67 See, for example, Nissen, Damerow, and Englund 1993; Englund 2011; Veldhuis 2011; Overmann 2016; Halton and Svärd 2017: 3–15.

68 For the interpretation of the origin of writing in the legend of *En-merkara and the Lord of Arata* see Vanstiphout 1989, Glassner 2000: 21–44, Selz 2000: 172–174, Mittermayer 2009: 65, Veldhuis 2011: 86, and Halton and Svärd 2017: 5–6; Winitzer 2022–23: 1080–1 has found that the origin of writing in this legend is contextualised as reflecting diplomatic practice.

69 This essential point will be the focus of further contributions to the *Myth and Ritual Project* (see footnote 1).

70 See Pongratz-Leisten 2009 with former literature; on radiant purity as a divine characteristic see *loc. cit.* 417–26.

71 Worthington 2019 has found that there are two different variants of this term: one with the terms ser_3 and ku_3.g separated from one another and another with univerbated ser_3-ku_3.g (in his transliteration /serku/). Through close textual analysis he makes clear that ser_3 ku_3.g often has a meaning of "hymn," while the other, ser_3-ku_3.g, the equivalent of Akkadian *serkugû*, often means something like "incantation." These may sound like very different things to us. The results of the present study provide the key to understanding why the two uses stem from one expression: From an emic perspective, both belong together because both refer to texts used in rituals (for the function of praise songs or

(§3). A radiant song has an aura like those that emanate from gods themselves; that is, such a song itself bears sacred character and belongs to the gods. It is quite possible that people in Mesopotamia referred to the *Praise Song to Nintu and Her Temple at Keš* as such a "radiant song." Be that as it may, in this song a different procedure is adopted, one which shows that the song was considered a sacred text. It is the myth that frames the song of praise and tells of the text's creation and preservation by the gods that marks it as sacred. A mythical text of this kind is immediately understood to be sacred, and in a more powerful way than the simple designation of "sacred" is able to convey. The gods thus create the song in two ways: in the first place by its singing and in the second by the invention of writing, by which it will be recorded forever. The myth thus makes it clear that the *Keš Hymn* is a sacred text from the perspective of the Sumerians themselves. It may also be said here that according to Mesopotamian perception this sacred text was not merely created by gods; it was also intended for the sake of gods.[72]

Our myth about the creation of writing is therefore simultaneously also a myth about the first sacred text. The impression by Nissaba of the song on the first clay tablet implies that it (and the original text it records) was the one from which all further tablets were copied. The preserved tablets written by scribes in the 18th and 17th centuries were thus understood to be copies of the original text written by the goddess of writing who had created the tablet at the beginning of the world. Concerning the *Keš Hymn* it may thus be stated that from the ancient perspective this song of praise was a text that was bequeathed orally by the gods and then fixed in writing. In its fixed written form this song of Enlil could now be passed on. The written text was thus a means of transmitting divine revelation. According to this thinking the praise song was even regarded as a "divine text," i.e., as a text that was a repository for

"hymns" in rituals see A. Zgoll 2012: 27–8, the present paper and forthcoming publications of the *Myth and Ritual Project*, see footnote 1). These sacred texts were created by deities of high rank, such as Enlil, Enki, or Erra. Singing sacred songs is therefore a major priestly duty (see Worthington 2019: 281). In a number of cases, it is not possible to be sure which of the two sub-categories is meant. For example, Enki, the god of rituals (Zgoll 2017), can bestow sacred songs and sacred spells. Since the interest of the present study is in sacred texts, I will refer here to the basic meaning of ser_3 ku_3.g as "radiant song," which means "song with divine quality" or, closer to our terminology, "sacred song."

72 The fact that, at the narrative level, it is precisely the writing down of the song that is held centrally demonstrates that the writing down of such sacred texts presented a unique concern for those who dealt with these compositions. As will become apparent in the *Myth and Ritual Project* (see footnote 1), the writing down of sacred texts is anything but unproblematic. The oral transmission of sacred texts must have been practiced long before that.

effective divine power. In today's terminology, the term "sacred text" offers the closest correspondence to this.

2 The Subscript "Nissaba Praise!" as a Marker of a Sacred Text

Typically, research outcomes lead to further questions. One such example in the present instance is the search for other sacred texts. Mesopotamia has a history of some 3,000 years, characterised by a variety of cultural practices. For the earlier periods, for instance, recent research has improved considerably our understanding of the particularities of the Sumerian city-states, each with its own main deity and central temple. It is obvious that there must have been other sacred texts in Mesopotamia during the long period after the city of Keš perished, so that the goddess of Keš became comparatively insignificant, at least in the state cult.

An important result of the analysis of the *Song of Praise to Nintu and Her Temple at Keš* for the search of sacred texts in ancient Mesopotamia is a further appreciation of the decisive role attributed to the goddess Nissaba in the creation of the sacred text (§1.6). After all, by her creation of writing it is she who fixes this first sacred text in such a way that enables its transmission. The question naturally arises whether Nissaba, as goddess of writing, was also credited with securing other, comparable songs through transcription. Indeed, it is noticeable that there are quite a few other Sumerian praise songs, which are provided at the end with a praise on Nissaba. There one finds repeatedly the enigmatic label: Nissaba za_3-mim, "Nissaba praise!" These songs might be praise songs *to* Nissaba herself. However, many of these make it clear that their content is to be understood as a praise to another deity, as in the case of the *Praise Song to Nintu and Keš*. But even in these cases, when *other* gods and their deeds are praised *within* praise songs, i.e., through them, the aforementioned praise of Nissaba often appears in the subscript of praise songs, sometimes with an additional subscript praising the particular deity to whom the song is addressed. Traditionally, the subscript noting Nissaba is understood as an homage by scribes to the scribe goddess. Yet a reconsideration of this supposition on the basis of this paper's results proves revealing. And so it may be asked: Why is Nissaba praised on these occasions, when the actual praise song praises a completely different deity?

That the *Keš Hymn* attributes its written form to Nissaba provides a key to understanding other praise songs as well. The myth NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE PRAISE SONG OF ENLIL demonstrates that, through her deeds, Nissaba is to be regarded as praiseworthy. It is obvious that other praise songs explicitly praising Nissaba are to be understood analogously. The reason to

praise Nissaba was obvious for persons familiar with myths such as NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE PRAISE SONG OF ENLIL: Nissaba was praised because it was she who was credited with securing songs sung by the highest deities in a written form. She was seen as responsible in a double sense (§1.6):

1 She had done a fundamental deed by creating writing.
2 She had created the written version for the praise song specifically at hand.

From an emic perspective, both deeds have crucial effects on the human world. It is through Nissaba's written version that such a divine song reaches human beings in the first place. Thus, the small text caption "Nissaba praise" proves in this context to be a trace of a minimal myth fragment, a "myth in a nutshell," which anyone knowing more detailed myth versions (as in the *Song to Nintu and Keš*) will understand. "Nissaba praise," therefore, stands for the following mythic pattern:[73]

> ***The Mythic Pattern*** **NISSABA CREATES WRITING**
> Nissaba creates writing.
> A deity NN sings sacred text X (= the text at hand).
> While deity NN sings, Nissaba creates the transcription of sacred text X on a tablet.

In order that sacred text X can find its way into broader tradition, i.e., in order for it to be written down on an actual clay tablet by an actual scribe, such a myth must obviously continue:

> ***The Mythic Pattern*** **NISSABA INITIATES CERTAIN PEOPLE INTO THE ART OF WRITING AND INTO A PARTICULAR SACRED TEXT**
> Nissaba initiates a certain person into the art of writing.
> This certain person is now expert in the art of writing (the first scribe).
> Nissaba hands over to this first scribe her transcription of sacred text X.
> The first scribe makes a copy of Nissaba's original tablet with sacred text X.
> The first scribe initiates another person into the art of writing.
> This second person is now expert in the art of writing (the second scribe).
> This second scribe makes a copy of the copy of Nissaba's original tablet with sacred text X.
> The second scribe initiates another person into the art of writing.
> ...

73 For mythic patterns see C. Zgoll 2019, 178–9 (German; "Hylemschema," "Stoffschema"); 2020, 47–52 (English; "*Stoff* pattern"); 2021, 47–8.

This interpretation is confirmed by concrete tablets in which invocations to praise the scribe goddess and praising exclamations of her appear more extensively. These are found on early clay tablets that originate from the 26th century.[74] Here Nissaba is praised, *inter alia*, as the "knowing one" (zu_5), which must of course refer to her knowledge of the art of writing that she has created and for which, therefore, she is called the "supreme one" (un_x-un_x). It is even said of her that she cannot be surpassed by anyone, not even a deity.[75] These statements about Nissaba's outstanding rank are singular: in the text corpus of the early dynastic texts such rank-high titles are ascribed to no other deity.[76] Here one may still note how remarkable it must have seemed for those experts allowed to transcribe these texts, to see themselves endowed by the gods with such means of power in the first place; for such praise songs were considered the centrepiece of powerful rituals.[77]

Thus the subscript, "Nissaba Praise," is hardly to be regarded, as had sometimes been assumed, as a mere trivial subscript by scribes who genuflect to their patroness of the art of writing.[78] As primary meaning of the doxology, it is to be noted that the call to praise Nissaba in subscripts assigns the respective text to the sacred scriptures, which are actually property of the gods, but through the goddess Nissaba also become accessible to certain people. We have found here an important criterion for the determination of further sacred texts from the Mesopotamian point of view: texts that are set down in writing by deities such as Nissaba, Nabû or Enki have been taken to be sacred.[79]

74 They can be consulted in the overview of textual subscripts in Zand 2020: 745–8.

75 These subscripts are contemporaneous with the earliest copies of the *Praise Song to Nintu and Keš* from the 26th century. In the hitherto extremely fragmentary tradition of this oldest version of the praise song from this period – only 51 lines have been preserved in fragmentary form so far – no reference to Nissaba is yet discernible. This does not mean that in this version of the 26th century the corresponding myth of the creation of writing by Nissaba was not yet known, but only that it cannot be found on the few fragments that have survived so far. The subscripts full of Nissaba's praise from the 26th century make it obvious that this Nissaba myth was well known at this time.

76 Zand 2020: 745–8.

77 The opposite case can be seen in the various versions of the so-called FLOOD MYTH, where the ritual god Enki has to justify himself before the assembly of gods in the face of harsh criticism for his conveying to humanity secret rituals that give them insight into the decisions of the gods (see A. Zgoll 2017). This will be detailed in the *Myth and Ritual Project* (see footnote 1).

78 New research perspectives open up here, since texts with the praise of Nissaba are to be examined anew in view of their respective meaning and function. The *Myth and Ritual Project* (see footnote 1) will examine these issues in more detail.

79 Whether this should apply to all texts with such a subscript is to be clarified in subsequent research projects.

3 Sacred Texts from the Subterranean Ocean (*Nanše A*)

Another text, a *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše* (traditionally *Nanše A*),[80] can add some depth to the previous findings on sacred texts in ancient Mesopotamia. Here, another myth about sacred texts is told. The protagonists this time are Enki, the ritual god[81] and city god of Eridu, and his daughter Našše, goddess of a separate city-state called Niĝin, not far from Eridu.

In the *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše* there is information about an interesting myth: the ritual god Enki creates sacred songs (ser_3 ku_3.g, literally "radiant songs", §1.7) and oracle decisions (eš-bar) in his own cosmic space, the underground freshwater ocean Abzu. After that, someone brings up these sacred texts from the freshwater ocean. This is remarkable in itself. For in a *Praise Song to Enki* it is said that no one may enter this abzu; it is, after all, the place where Enki works in secret (*The Consecration of Enki's Temple* 45–47).[82] In the *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše*, who takes over this important task is left out. It can only be someone whom Enki allows to enter. In the mythical text *Innana and Enki*, a similar case is reported: here Enki allows Innana to enter the Abzu. Thus, it stands to reason that in the *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše*, too, only a high-ranking deity is granted access. In view of her central role in the song of praise, it must be the goddess Našše herself who brings up these sacred texts from the secret divine space in order to carry them into the temple of her own city.

Further, it is said that certain beings reveal these songs and (the associated) purification rituals. These are beings written with the cuneiform characters SER$_3$.MUŠ$_3$, an otherwise unknown expression,[83] and a group consisting of male Enkum and female Ninkum who perform purification rites (132–3). These persons are priests and priestesses, who are thought to be manifestations of some numinous beings of the same name from the surroundings of Enki.[84] Here, too, it is consequently a matter of sacred texts, i.e., texts composed by deities for the sake of deities, as well as of how to gain access to these essential means of power. The origin of the sacred texts is told in this myth NAŠŠE BRINGS THE SACRED TEXTS OF ENKI TO HER CITY as follows: the ritual god Enki creates the sacred texts and the rituals that go with them. Among these

80 The reading "Nanše" is traditional; the reading "Našše" follows Attinger *apud* Mittermayer 2006: 51 no. 131.

81 For Enki as ritual god, see A. Zgoll 2017.

82 For this text see §1.3.

83 See Attinger 2019: 100 n. 103. The cuneiform signs used to write these beings include a sign which standing for itself may be read as ser_3 "song," and another read as $muš_3$, which can mean "sanctuary," among other things.

84 For the Enkum and Ninkum see now Fechner 2023.

rituals are especially emphasised those through which one can get insight into the oracular decisions of the gods, which are important for the future. The goddess Našše then brings them up from Enki's freshwater ocean Abzu. Certain deities, embodied in priests and priestesses named SER_3.MUŠ_3 and Enkum Ninkum, finally reveal the sacred texts so that selected people can use them in rituals. The next section will provide more insight into this.

4 "Wording of the Words": Divine Words as Sacred Texts

4.1 *Divine Words in the* Praise Song *to Našše* (*Nanše A*)

In the *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše*, there is another important piece of information regarding how one is to deal with these sacred texts. Here falls the reference that these must be repeated *word for word*. One reads that no one may add anything, not even anything that is whispered, to the text's precise "wording of the words" (ka enim-ma).[85] Since the text includes ample abbreviations, rendering it almost incomprehensible, I offer here my translation, with numerous parenthetical notes for its proper understanding (references to the literal expression are in the footnotes):

[131] eš-bar kiĝ$_2$ ser$_3$ ku$_3$.g KA abzu-ta um-ta-e$_3$-a-ra	[131] At the behest of Našše,[86] who brought out the oracular decisions and the radiant (= divine / sacred) songs from the *mouth* of Abzu,[87]
	[135] will no one,
[132] SER_3.MUŠ_3-e ser$_3$ im-ta-zu-zu	[132] while the (numinous beings and their priestly manifestations) SER_3.MUŠ_3 from the Abzu[88] make the songs known,[89]
[133] enkum ninkum šu-luḫ im-da-pad$_3$-de$_3$	[133] while the (primordial gods and their priestly manifestations called) Enkum and Ninkum reveal the purification rituals from the Abzu,[90]

85 For more on the meaning of the expression "wording of words," see §5.3.

86 Literally, "For the person (= Našše) who. …"

87 Literally, "(For =) At the behest of (that person =) Našše who brought forth the oracular rulings and the radiant (= sacred) songs from the *mouth of* Abzu."

88 Literally, "from there (= from the Abzu)."

89 On the meaning of the {i} prefix, see Wilcke 2010: 56–8 and and Zgoll and Kärger 2018, chapter 12.2.2.

90 See the note to the previous line.

134 enim tur-bi du_{11}.g-ga	135 add something to the wording of these
KA×X($še_{25/26}$)[91]-a diri.g ĝar-ra	(divine) words,[92]
135 ka enim-ma-be_2 la-ba-an-taḫ-e	134 (neither) whispered words, nor loudly
	shouted words![93]

Song of Praise to Našše (*Nanše A*) 131–35[94]

This passage shows that it is crucial to observe the exact wording of the words (ka enim-ma) of sacred texts, since these words are the words created by gods, in this case the ritual god, Enki (§3). A text consisting of these words coming from Enki is most powerful; it is a sacred text! Therefore no one will add anything to them, not even the slightest whisper. The indicative formulation, "no one will add," stands here for the strongest form of the prohibition and makes perfectly clear: the sacred texts must be carried out exactly and quite precisely as they are believed to have been handed down from the gods. Only then can they function in the right way.

4.2 *Divine Words in the* Praise Song to Lugalbanda (Lugalbanda Epic)

The meaning "wording of the words" is also shown in a section of the *Praise Song to the Deified Ruler Lugalbanda* (*Lugalbanda-Epic*), in which the power of the sun god Utu is described. Here it is said that the sun god has powerful words and songs that only he knows, but the other high gods do not. These powerful texts, which he himself may sing, write, or dictate to others, are essential for the preservation of the entire cosmos:

413 ur-saĝ ⌜sul $^{d⌝}$Utu enim	413 The warrior, the young man Utu – he
zi.d-da-kam	has powerful[95] words.
414 ser_3.$^?$ zu enim [zu]-a$^?$ $ša_3$.g	414 He is the one who knows the (sacred)
enim-ma zu-a	songs$^?$, the one who has come to know the
	words (necessary for them), the one who
	has come to know the (powerful) inside of
	the words.

91 The copy of the text witness IM 58475 Rs. 18 does not reveal whether the cuneiform sign is KA×BALAG or KA×ŠID. The sign is heavily rubbed off.

92 Literally, "this wording of the words."

93 Literally, "words powerfully set in clamour."

94 See also Attinger 2019, and Worthington 2019: 274–5.

95 On the scope of meaning of zi.d, see Lämmerhirt 2010, especially 74f. The meaning of enim zi.d can be determined more precisely than previously, especially on the basis of texts like the present one. The context of the present passage deals with words of the gods that have power and thus accomplish something. The paper here refers to a larger study of Sumerian and Akkadian terminology of such divine words and rituals (n. 1).

415 an k[i-a ge] KA enim-ma-be$_2$ si um-mi-in-sa$_2$	415 After he (= Utu) has made sure that [the stylus][96] has arranged the wording of the (divine) words suitable for these songs in heaven and e[arth],[97]
416 KA$^?$ enim-m[a s]i-sa$_2$ sul dUtu-kam	416 the ordering of the wording of the (divine) words is under the control of young man Utu,[98]
417 dA-nun-na diĝir gal-gal-e-ne nu-mu-un-zu-uš-a$^?$	417 while the Anuna, the great gods, do not know these words.[99]

Lugalbanda Praise Song / Lugalbanda in the Mountains / Lugalbanda I 413–17[100]

It is hardly possible to emphasise more how important the sacred texts and their ritual words are: these words are, as it is said here, "energetic" or "effective" (zi.d). What is meant is that these words have power to change something – exactly what is expected from powerful rituals. The words belong to songs or other ritual spells. The inside of such songs is powerful. Since the Great Gods (Anuna) do not know these powerful words the power of Utu who knows these words is all the greater! And not only that: Utu puts these words in the right order, so that these words form the powerfully working ritual spells. The order of the ritual words is decisive for heaven and earth (to which also the underworld belongs), i.e., for the whole world.

4.3 *The Subscript ka enim-ma as a Marker of Divine Words*

The term "wording of the words" (ka enim-ma) is preserved as a fixed term on hundreds[101] of tablets from the 2nd and 1st millennia, which contain ritual

96 See the translation by Wilcke 2015: 247. The transliteration is based on the unpublished score (Wilcke 2011), which Claus Wilcke kindly made available to me. The primary basis of the passage is the tablet NiW, CBS 7085 lines 89–90 (= Kramer 1956: fig. 25).

97 Literally, "After it [the stylus] has arranged the wording of the (divine) words (KA enim-ma), which are suitable (for this =) for the chants, in heaven and e[arth]."

98 Literally, "the ordering of words is that of the young man Utu."

99 Literally, "the (words) that the Anuna, the great gods, do not (yet) know."

100 For permission to use his score, I sincerely thank Claus Wilcke, whose groundbreaking insights into the Lugalbanda texts (Wilcke 1969, most recently id. 2015) have also enabled the results presented here. The line count follows Wilcke 2015: 247; lines 413–7, which corresponds to lines 424–8 in Vanstiphout 2003 and ETCSL 1.8.2.1. For the latest discussion of the passage see Worthington 2019: 273–4 with further literature.

101 Felix Müller noted in December 2022 that the "Electronic Bablyonian Literature" (eBL) database then contained a total of 414 instances of this designation. Thanks go to Enrique Jiménez for the opportunity to include this information prior to the public launching of eBL.

texts consisting of ritual spells and ritual actions.[102] The term designates the words on these tablets that are to be spoken during the performance of the respective ritual, i.e., the ritual spells. At the same time, it delimits them from the actions, which are to be accomplished in this ritual. These are noted in a separate passage following the ritual spells.

The results of the previous sections make it possible to grasp the specific meaning of this note "wording of words" (ka enim-ma): as has been shown in the evaluation of the *Praise Song to the Goddess Našše* (§4.1) and the *Praise Song to Lugalbanda* (§4.2), "wording of the words" is a concise term for the content of those texts that *originate from a deity* and are to be *transmitted verbatim*. In other words, the term "wording of the words" becomes relevant when it comes to an original Mesopotamian perspective on sacred texts. The result of the combined analyses of myths about sacred texts and close textual reading and new translations is that the term "wording of the words" is abbreviated and, in the cases mentioned, stands for "wording of the words (of the sacred text)" or, closer to the Mesopotamian meaning, "wording of the words (of a deity)", i.e., divine wordings.

From the synopsis of these findings the conclusion arises that the texts provided with the subscript "wording of the words" are also to be understood as sacred texts that reproduce the "wording of the words" of a deity. What this means is startling: all such ritual spells were considered to be sacred texts! In other words, people's lives were thus filled with spells that were attributed to deities. No wonder people attributed power to them and were in anticipation of the impact they would have.

This result is surprising in terms of scope. In terms of content, the outcome does not stand alone, but can be deepened by other statements: Explicit evidence of the idea that rituals literally originate from the gods is found in various ritual spells, when the ritual expert states that the ritual spell does not originate from him, but is rather the property of the gods.[103] For example:

102 A word on terminology, whose significance should not be underestimated, is in order. For reasons of systematics as well as the neutrality of the terms, it is good to avoid the term incantation. Instead, the term *ritual spell* seems more suitable and closer to the emic perspective; the latter, together with *ritual actions*, make up a *ritual* (it is the English counterpart to the Greek term *legomena* and *dromena*). When such a ritual (consisting of ritual spells and ritual actions) is written down, one may speak of a *ritual text*. An abbreviated form of a ritual text may also consist of only its spells or actions.

103 See in detail Lenzi 2010.

šiptu ul yuttun	The ritual spell is not mine:
šipat Ea u Asalluḫi	It is the ritual spell of Ea and Asalluḫi.
šipat Ištar b[*ēl*]*et râmi*	It is the ritual spell of Ištar, the Lady of Love.

From a *Ritual to remedy impotence* (ša_3 zi-ga/ *niš libbi*), LKA 97, 2, 21–22a[104]

Corresponding statements can be found in similar formulations in other rituals, e.g., in a *Ritual Spell for Calming a Crying Infant*:

šiptu ul yattu	The ritual spell is not mine:
šipat Ea u Asalluḫi	It is the ritual spell of Ea and Asalluḫi.
šipat Damu u Gula	It is the ritual spell of Damu and Gula.
šipat Nin-girima bēlet [*šipāti*]	It is the ritual spell of Nin-girima, the mistress [of ritual spells].
šunu iqbûnimma	They themselves (= the mentioned deities) – they told me (the ritual spell)!
anāku ašan[*ni*]	But as for me – I am (only) repeating (the ritual spell).

From a *Ritual text for Calming an Infant*, VAT 8896, KAR 114 Rs. 1–4[105]

Here, on the one hand, it is Ea and Ea's son Asalluḫi, known like Ea as a ritual god, and on the other hand it is the healing gods Damu and Gula and the ritual goddess Nin-girima, known from ancient times (the 3rd millennium), who recite ritual spells themselves and allow the human ritual expert to get to know them.

Other sources for the divine origin of sacred texts may be found elsewhere. Rituals used by the ritual expert (*āšipu*; *mašmaššu*) are attributed to the ritual god Enki/Ea according to a famous text. This is the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*; its four manuscripts known so far date to the first half of the 1st millennium.[106] In this same *Catalogue*, other texts are also attributed to certain people, and in some cases their professions are also mentioned. It is notable that the professions mentioned there (those preserved in the text) belong to the context of the religious experts.[107] Mention is thus made of lament singers (*kalû*), ritual experts (*āšipu* / *mašmaššu*) and diviners (*bārû*). The fact that such powerful texts are transmitted on the one hand by gods and on the other by

104 See Biggs 1967: 38–9.
105 See Farber 1989: 98–101, lines 12–5.
106 Lambert 1962: 63. An updated version with new manuscripts can be found in Mitto 2022.
107 Overview in Lambert 1962: 75.

humans can be understood if one takes into account this very Mesopotamian idea that priestesses, priests, and ritual experts act as embodiment and representative of gods when performing their specific tasks. A perfect testimony of the last point appears in the following text[108]:

šiptum šipat Marduk	The ritual spell is a ritual spell of Marduk,
āšipu ṣalam Marduk	the ritual expert is a statue of Marduk.

From the ritual series *Bīt Mēseri* 2, 226[109]

The ritual expert is a "statue of Marduk," which means that he is a manifestation of the god, not unlike the statue itself, in which the god is imagined present.[110]

Even in such cases, therefore, the origin of the ritual spells is – from an original perspective – divine: for ancient Mesopotamia, sacred texts are not man-made but divine texts.

5 Revelation of a Sacred Text in a Dream (*Erra Epic*)

As can be seen in the aforementioned *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, sacred texts are also attributed to gods and people who embody deities in Mesopotamian tradition. These, too, must be transmitted verbatim, according to the claim. An outstanding example of this is the so-called Akkadian *Erra Epic*, in Mesopotamian perspective more properly titled *Song of Praise to Erra*, god of plague and war.[111] According to the text, this song was disclosed by the god Erra,[112] to a man named Kabti-ilāni-Marduk, during the night, i.e. during a dream. Kabti-ilāni-Marduk faithfully guards this tradition. It is emphasised that he adds nothing and omits nothing. In a free translation, the passage reads as follows:

108 Detailed studies on this topic are also in preparation (see footnote 1).

109 See Meier 1941–1944: 150–1; the latest publication about the series is Schwemer 2022.

110 See Gabbay 2018; 2022. For the underlying conception of man, see A. Zgoll 2012a; 2012b.

111 See the edition of Taylor 2017, for the discussion of the text's title Taylor 2017: 1. The situative context is discussed by Maiwald 2021: 27–9.

112 See Taylor 2017: 56–61.

44a *ina šāt mūši ušabrišumma*	44a At the time of the middle watch of the night he (Erra)[113] revealed it (the song) to him (Kabti-ilāni-Marduk)[114] (in a nocturnal dream)[115] and
44b *kī ša ina munatti idbubu*	44b–as if he had spoken in a dawn dream of divine revelation –
44c *ayyamma ul iḫṭi*	44c he (Kabti-ilāni-Marduk) (neglected =) omitted nothing (from it),
45 *ēda šuma ul uraddi ana muḫḫi*	45 not a single line did he add in addition (to it).

Praise Song to Erra (*Epic of Erra*) 5:44–5[116]

The reason for this unusual translation lies in the specific meaning of the Akkadian word *munattu*, which does not mean "awakening", "waking state" or "morning", as is often assumed. Rather, *munattu* is a *terminus technicus* of Mesopotamian dream specialists, who make a precise distinction between dreams from different periods of the night and the beginning of dawn.[117] In particular, a distinction was made between night dreams and *munattu*, the dream in the early hours of the morning, before sunrise, i.e. the dawn dream.[118] Early morning dreams were considered more important than night dreams,[119] since dawn dreams were thought to be particularly suitable for receiving divine revelations.[120]

Akkadian *munattu* is equivalent to Sumerian ĝiri$_3$ babbar-ra-na, literally "at his radiant foot." This expression is a reference to the sun god Utu. The first glimmer of dawn is perceived as Utu setting foot on the eastern mountains. *munattu* / ĝiri$_3$ babbar-ra-na are special terms used by dream specialists to describe a period at dawn when deities act upon humans. The statement that someone speaks at dawn during the *munattu* dream (*kī ša ina munatti idbubu*)

113 For the identification of the revealing god see convincingly Taylor 2017: 56–61.

114 The name is mentioned in the *Song of praise to Erra* 5:43.

115 Literally, "At the time of the middle watch of the night he made him see it."

116 One manuscript of the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* (NinNA2a obv. 2′) refers to line 44a in an abbreviated manner as ⌜*ú*⌝*-šab-ri-šu-ma id-bu-bu*, see Mitto 2022 (the verbal form *ušabrišumma* is of course an active one).

117 In the city-state of Mari around 1700, for example, it was assumed that a dream from the first night watch was usually to be regarded as false, i.e. irrelevant to the future. – On Mesopotamian dream theory and practice, especially on evaluating of the relevance of dreams, see A. Zgoll 2006: 353–68 (German; comprehensive); 2013: 1195–6 (English); 2014: 300 and 311 (English); 2014a: 117 (German) and 2019a: 31–2 (German).

118 See A. Zgoll 2006: 69, with 66–8.

119 For the physiological background of this assessment, see Zgoll 2006: 68.

120 See Oppenheim 1956: 225; A. Zgoll 2006: 66–8, Taylor 2017: 539.

therefore refers to deities, not to the dreamer himself. The larger context of the Mesopotamian dream practice is only hinted at here because it is taken for granted. Whether a dream is actually from a deity, and what message the deity wishes to convey to the dreamer, can only be clarified in the waking state, based on an examination of the dream by divination specialists. After this examination, dream interpreters must determine the message that a deity has conveyed in such a dream.[121] It is only then, when the relevance has been confirmed and the divine message has been identified, that Kabti-ilāni-Marduk can transmit that divine message as sacred text. A contrast between the dreams of the night and the dreams of the morning, as here in the *Praise Song to Erra*, is well known from tradition: In the song *En-merkara and En-suḫkeše-ana*, En-suḫkeše-ana, the ruler of Arata, says that he converses with Innana during the dawn dream, while the goddess appears to his rival En-merkara only during the (inferior) night dream.[122] Such passages indicate that meeting a deity in a dawn dream is considered to be more important than in a night dream.

The *Praise Song to Erra* also deals with the contrast between the night dream and the dawn dream, but here it is emphasised that Erra's revelation in the night dream is as relevant as if he had spoken in a dawn dream. Therefore, the message perceived through the interpretation of this dream counts just as weighty as if it had been conveyed through a dawn dream. The statement about the dream of the dawn is particularly relevant to the subject of the sacred texts. The comparison with the twilight dream serves precisely to ensure that the message (obtained from the dream through dream interpretation) is to be regarded as a genuine divine revelation. The *Praise Song to Erra* is thus, in its original perception, a song revealed by Erra himself,[123] and, like the *Praise Song to Nintu and Keš*, comes from a high deity (§1). This identifies the *Praise Song to Erra* as a sacred text.[124] Because of its sacred quality, Kabti-ilāni-Marduk has to repeat the message verbatim.

It should be noted that the awkward wording – something happens in a night dream, but has the same meaning as if it had happened in a dawn dream – is striking and calls for explanation. In Mesopotamia, a literary style is popular which is characterised by extreme brevity. The exception to the rule is parallel formulations, the so-called *Parallelismus membrorum*, but that is not what we are dealing with here. We can therefore assume that a fictional

121 See A. Zgoll 2006: 353–462.

122 See A. Zgoll 2006: 66–7 and Wilcke 2012.

123 This has been convincingly argued by Taylor 2017: 56–61.

124 The statement about the dawn dream stands in the middle between the divine action and the human reaction to it: due to the middle position, the statement is related to both the preceding and the following sentence (here the stylistic device of Apokoinu is used).

literary account would simply speak of a dream at dawn, without reference to a night dream. So why the complication? In my opinion, the peculiar wording is a strong indication that what is being described here is not purely fictional, but that there is a historically verifiable core. In such a case it is understandable that one has to state data and facts as precisely as possible, similar to the protocol of a divination.[125]

The so-called *Erra epic* is thus also a sacred text, created by Erra himself, a *Song of Praise to Erra*. The self-designation given to the person responsible for transmitting the text is reminiscent of the *Keš Hymn*: Kabti-ilāni-Marduk refers to himself as the one who "knotted" (*kāṣir kammi*) the text or the tablet containing the text;[126] this "knotting" of the text has a counterpart in the knotting of the praise song from Enlil's words, creating a solid structure like a net (§1.6). The requirement that nothing may be added to a sacred text (and, correspondingly, that nothing may be left out of it) was also well known in the transmission of sacred texts, as shown by the *Praise Song to Našše* (*Nanše A*), where nothing may be added to the "wording of the words (originating from a deity)" in any way, whether spoken softly or aloud (§4.1).

The sacredness of the "knotted" *Praise Song to Erra* manifests itself not least in its promised powerful effects. As the text itself states, the one who continues to transmit this sacred text, whether orally or in writing, will experience the blessing of the praised god: if it is a ruler, Erra will give him unchallenged dominion; if it is a singer or scribe, Erra will protect him from harm in plague and war (in case of captivity). Any house in which the tablet with the song is kept shall also be safe from plague (*Song of Praise to Erra* 5:54–59). That people trusted in this promise is attested by four amulets from Nineveh and Assur, which contain excerpts from this *Praise Song to Erra*.[127]

6 Results and Outlook

6.1 *Methodological Basics: The Three Pillars of Translation*

The paper has made clear how basic philological and Hylistic research go hand in hand, both in order to understand texts and myths i.e., to be able to

125 In this case, it is unlikely that the dream is being experienced purely by chance. Rather, Kabti-ilāni-Marduk may have been actively seeking to communicate with the gods through ritual means in the face of bad times; one proven ritual was incubation, which had been known in Mesopotamia for centuries; see Zgoll 2006: 309–51.

126 *Song of praise to Erra / Epic of Erra* 5:43.

127 See the overview in the edition of Taylor 2017: 388–92. These are the textual witnesses: O, Q, S, W.

translate the texts and to reconstruct the narrative materials correctly. The tools of narrative material research (Hylistics) have enabled the reconstruction of various myths, including the first MYTH ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF WRITING. Methodologically, this effort has shown the great difference between a text translation and a myth reconstruction. But the two endeavours are most intricately intertwined. The basic reading or translation of a text does not promise an automatic understanding of its content. At the same time, it becomes clear that one cannot translate texts properly when one does not understand their content properly. The process of translation succeeds only in interaction with such semantic analysis. The reconstruction of narrative material (i.e. content) is thus a necessary methodological tool that must complement the other analyses so that a text may be correctly translated. We may regard of these activities as the three pillars of translation: analyses of grammar, vocabulary, and semantics. For the first time, systematic methodological tools for determining the semantics of narrative texts are available in the form of hyleme analyses.

In order to understand how hyleme analysis (i.e. semantic analysis or content analysis) works, a comparison with grammar analysis is useful. Just as grammar analysis reveals information about hidden morphemes (e.g. of a Sumerian text), which is necessary for the translation of a text, hyleme analysis reveals information about hidden hylemes, which is necessary for the reconstruction of the narrative materials incorporated in a text, i.e. the semantics and content of a narrative text (which in itself is a prerequisite for translating such a text). Hyleme analysis turns out to be the tool for semantic analysis. Just as grammar analysis helps to make texts translatable, such semantic analysis makes the semantics of texts reconstructable (and thus their texts translatable). On this basis, meaningful narrative reconstructions and translations of difficult texts become possible. Decisions are no longer made "from the gut," but on the basis of scientifically discussable principles. As a result, as grammar analysis is necessary for a sound *translation of a text*, so hyleme analysis is necessary for a sound *reconstruction of a myth* (or other narrative materials) and for a sound *translation of its text*.

An example of how precise hyleme analysis can help to find the translation of a difficult text passage is the end of the *Keš Hymn*, made possible in the context of myth reconstruction (§1.3).

6.2 *Genre and the Threefold Profile of Texts*

The study of the *Keš Hymn* has provided important insights into the field of genre studies. Time and again, the question whether a text should be attributed to the genre of literary or religious texts or whether it can even be called a myth has been debated. Such discussions, however, will never result in meaningful

insights since the "labels" (literary, religious, mythic) belong to different categories. For instance, to label a text "myth" is misleading as it is not the *text* itself that is mythic, but its *content*. Sometimes, it belongs to another sort of narrative material altogether, such as legend, fairy tale, historical report, etc. Most often, at least in Mesopotamian texts, several narratives are incorporated into the content of a single text. Thus, for example, in the *Keš hymn* we have identified at least two myths. Whereas the *content* may be mythic, the *form* can be literary (and thus further subdivided by genre, as hymnic literature, prose etc.) or non-literary. Such a mythic, literary text often belongs to yet another category – ritual texts or, in broader terms, religious texts. These categories refer to the *function* of the text.

Therefore, rather than defining a text in terms of only a single genre, it is better to define it in terms of a threefold profile, as the following table shows:

TABLE 2 The threefold profile of texts

Text	Content	Form	Function
Praise Song to Nintu and Keš	mythic	literary	ritual = subgroup of religious
Texts in general	mythic legendary fairy tale historising historical etc.	literary with subgroups as hymnic, prose etc. non literary with subgroups as administrative records, lexical lists, historical letters etc.	religious with subgroups as ritual, commentary etc. legal economic entertaining etc.

Defining a text profile in this threefold manner avoids the confusion of categories: Text cannot be equated with myth, since myth belongs to the group of narrative materials and is therefore about context; literary form does not exclude ritual function. Such an analysis of the textual profile is important for understanding and communicating what kind of text we are dealing with.

6.3 *Mythical Insights Into the Creation of Sacred Texts*

Traces of mythical traditions in Sumerian texts of the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC have for the first time provided substantial insights into how the origin

and transmission of sacred texts were imagined in ancient Mesopotamia. Through methods of narrative research (Hylistics), myths and myth fragments have been reconstructed, showing that it is deities such as Enlil or Nintu (§1), Enki (§3, §4.1), or Utu (§4.2) who are credited with the creation of such sacred texts through singing and speaking. Their powerful songs and spells are used in rituals to achieve the most important goals for Mesopotamia, such as the functioning of temples, and thus the prosperity of the city-state.

The Hylistic reconstruction reveals the first known myth about the creation of a sacred text, which has been handed down in the *Keš Hymn* in versions of the 26th and 18th/17th centuries. It is the myth ENLIL CREATES THE SACRED SONG FOR KEŠ. Enlil's singing activates the temple of Keš, i.e., he puts it to its tasks. It should be noted that the sacred text is created here in oral form (§1.2).

The evaluation of the stratigraphic evidence has also provided insights into other myth versions: for example, the myth of ENLIL'S CREATION OF A SACRED SONG FOR KEŠ proves to be an innovation over an earlier myth about NINTU'S CREATION OF A SACRED SONG FOR KEŠ that attributed the creation of the sacred text for Keš to its city goddess (§1.4–1.5).

6.4 *The First Myth about the Origin of Writing*

This myth about the creation of the sacred text is connected in the version reported in the *Keš Hymn* with another myth: the myth about the origin of writing. This other is the myth NISSABA CREATES WRITING FOR THE SACRED SONG OF ENLIL (§1.6). It is the first myth we know about the origin of writing from the perspective of the inventors of cuneiform writing! The term "invention," however, is somewhat misleading in terms of gaining the most historically accurate possible approximation to the ideas of the Mesopotamians. Divine action here is creative action at the beginning of the world. Therefore, we are dealing here with an act of creation. It is not about "finding" or "inventing", but about creating. The Mesopotamian perspective anchors the creation of writing at the beginning of the world.

6.5 *Oral Creation and Written Preservation of Sacred Texts*

From the *Keš Hymn* and its basis, the myths about the origin of a sacred text and the origin of writing, significant new insights have emerged into the original Mesopotamian perspectives on the formation of sacred texts and of their writing, as well as their evaluation (§1):

1 The emergence of a sacred text is not at the will of man, but owes itself to the creative action of the gods (e.g., Enlil).
2 The creation of a sacred text happens orally, within the framework of the performance of this text (a song or spell). A written version does not yet

exist. The scenario is thus fundamentally different from what is usually imagined by analogy with today's practices (where author equals writer).

3 The creation of writing is temporally subordinated to the oral creation of the sacred text.

4 The creation of writing by Nissaba is hierarchically subordinated to the oral creation of the sacred text by Enlil.

5 The oral creation of sacred texts therefore has the highest priority.

6 Writing is used for the preservation of sacred texts.

7 Analyses of textual design show that the oral creation of sacred texts has the higher rank, but that one formally highlights their preservation through writing as an innovative event.

8 The origin of the sacred texts and the origin of their preservation through writing both lie in divine acts of creation.

6.6 *More Myth Fragments about Nissaba*

These concrete statements based on the myths in the *Keš Hymn* can be regarded as prototypical and can thus be generalised as insights into Mesopotamian conceptions of the world, as has been shown by research into further texts and myths. Thus, the meaning of the subscript about the praise of the scribe goddess Nissaba has been clarified as an allusion to myths about the creation of writing and ritual writings (§1.6). Nissaba is praised for recording the divine words in writing and thus preserving the sacred texts (which, from an emic perspective, start from Nissaba and enter then the chain of tradition).

6.7 *Sacred Texts with Divine Aura*

Deities not only create and store the sacred texts; deities also bring the divine spells and rituals – in oral or written form – from distant cosmic realms to their city and temple, as exemplified in the myth NAŠŠE BRINGS THE SACRED TEXTS OF ENKI TO HER CITY (§3, 4.1). Deities, partly manifested in priestesses, priests or ritual experts, reveal these gods' words. Therefore, these words of the gods have such a great power that in Mesopotamian perspective they are not only considered as "sacred texts," but even as numinous entities with divine radiance (as, e.g., in ser_3 ku_3.g). Therefore, no one is allowed to change the wording of these texts. Research on this major topic is still in its infancy; further studies will follow.[128]

The exact wording in which the myth NAŠŠE BRINGS THE SACRED TEXTS OF ENKI TO HER CITY is handed down in the *Song of Praise to Našše* (*Nanše A*) proves to be a heuristic key to the understanding of the designation of ritual

128 More on this in the project's other publications (see footnote 1).

spells, which is best attested in the 2nd and 1st millennium. This designation (ka enim-ma "wording of the words") thus reveals itself as a marker of words of the gods, i.e., sacred texts (§4.3).

6.8 *Mesopotamia: Religion of Sacred Texts*

The phenomenon of sacred texts proves surprisingly alive in Mesopotamia: it is not a marginal phenomenon, but one of central importance. The discovery of the oldest sacred texts of mankind and the oldest reflections on their origin shows the priority of the oral creation and performance of such ritual songs and spells. The discovery of the first myth about the creation of writing reveals that the descendants of its inventors understood this world-shaking invention in its innovative potential as a product of divine creative power at the beginning of the world.

The results have implications for the classification of Mesopotamian religion in the overall context of religions. Mesopotamian religion is, in original perspective, based heavily on orally and written[129] sacred texts – different from what had been thought until now. In reality, Mesopotamia is the first known religion with sacred texts.[130]

6.9 *News about the Origin of Writing: Writing of the Gods vs. Administrative Tool*

For the scientific reconstruction of which phenomena contributed to the emergence of writing, a more complex scenario is emerging than previously envisioned. According to today's historical reconstruction, writing was invented in Mesopotamia for the purpose of administration in the metropolis of Uruk, which had become too complex due to its sheer size. The newly reconstructed MYTH OF THE INVENTION OF WRITING BY NISSABA (§1.6), which is also alluded to in the subscripts of other texts praising Nissaba (§2), shows that according to ancient Mesopotamian ritual texts the primary and

129 The great importance of writing and written documents for Mesopotamian culture was demonstrated by Winitzer 2021 with regard to divination. As he shows, with the advent of writing the Mesopotamians developed a new understanding of the world, as new forms of interpretation and hypothesis formation became possible. – As far as sacred texts are concerned, it should be added that *oral performance* played a much greater role in ancient Mesopotamia than has been assumed. A model of this practice – which is difficult for us to find – has become visible in the sources dealt with in this paper: it is here the highest-ranking gods, Enlil and Erra, who sing the sacred songs. Writing is created and used (by lower-ranking deities and chosen men) to record such songs so that they will endure (§1 and §5). More on this subject is in preparation as part of the *Myth and Ritual Project* (see footnote 1).

130 See footnote 4.

decisive function of the invention of writing was not seen in overcoming *economic* challenges, but in coping with *ritual tasks*. One imagined that certain gods who were engaged in permanently securing powerful rituals, as well as their important praise songs, invented writing and gave it to humans so that their human protégés could continue to perform the rituals as authentically as possible for the gods – so it was told in myths. The gods were seen as manifest in the priestesses and priests who were responsible for the performance of sacred texts in rituals (§4.3). It was these persons who held key positions in early Mesopotamian society.

These findings have a major impact on the historical understanding of the emergence of writing. The fundamental respect of the Mesopotamians for the correct transmission of the powerful words of the gods in order to perform their rituals correctly is to be seen as an essential impulse for the more differentiated formation of a complex writing system.[131] And even the preliminary stages of writing – it would be almost surprising if the Mesopotamians perceived them as serving only the needs of a complex economy, and not as linked to the needs of the gods. Economic-administrative requirements, serving the aim of providing for the gods in temple households,[132] may have led to the development of cuneiform characters, but only at a rudimentary level. The Mesopotamian ability to invent a comprehensive reproduction of language in writing, i.e. to write concrete and even abstract content with a rich vocabulary and grammatical elements and with a complex syntax, first appears not in the economic-administrative texts of the Uruk period, but in the religious-literary texts of the subsequent centuries.[133]

131 See the important remark by Gabriel 2021a: 71–2 n. 7: "Writing slowly begins to appear in new and especially non-administrative contexts. The phenomenon is reflected in the innovation of textual genres in the 3rd millennium BC, such as votive/dedicatory inscriptions, incantations, hymns, and epics. All these genres are embedded in religious practices, which underscores the importance of religious needs for the post-archaic transformation of the cuneiform writing system and its transformation into a system for the storage and reproduction of oral language." – For a so-called "magical-religious aura" of writing and texts in Mesopotamia see Pongratz-Leisten 2021.

132 Due to the fact that there was no economy for economy's sake, but economy under the supervision of high priests (or priest-kings) in the service of the supreme authority, the city goddess Innana who dwelt and ruled in her temple at Uruk, it is more than likely that even the preliminary stages of writing were developed in response to religious-ritual needs, namely the need to organise the cults of the gods, i.e. to serve the economy and administration *of the temples*.

133 See, e.g., Wilcke 1991: 273–4; Veldhuis 2011; Krebernik 2019: 12; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Schrakamp 2022: 10.

The myth Nissaba creates writing for the sacred song of Enlil can serve as a model that it was precisely the cultic and ritual needs that generated the desire to preserve divine spells and songs that, according to the evidence presented here, played an essential role in the development of a rudimentary script into a full script – a script in the true sense of the word.

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