On the Curriculum of the Neo-Babylonian School

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Petra D. Gesche's book, *Schulunterricht in Babylonien im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, a slightly reworked version of her dissertation, is a stunning achievement. The author evaluates about 2,500 often badly written exercise texts (most of them kept in the British Museum) for the information they yield about Neo- and Late Babylonian scribal education. The novelty of this study becomes apparent in comparison with the publication of similar texts in *Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon (MSL)*, a series that aims at reconstructing lexical compositions and utilizes for this purpose the evidence from various kinds of cuneiform tablets, including school texts and library copies from both Assyria and Babylonia. Since Neo-Babylonian exercise tablets often contain extracts from various (sub)literary and lexical compositions, the edition of a single school tablet may be dispersed over two, three, or even four volumes of *MSL*. Gesche's focus is on the individual tablet, or rather on the corpus of Neo- and Late Babylonian school tablets and how they bear witness to education in first-millennium Babylonia.

The structure of the book is straightforward and lucid. After chapters A and B (abbreviations and bibliography, respectively), the book opens with the introduction (chapter C), which contains research history, definitions, and a history of education in ancient Mesopotamia (C.III). The author provides the reader with an overview of the school tablets of all periods of cuneiform from the earliest archaic lexical lists onwards and for each group gives a succinct analysis of the evidence these tablets provide for our understanding of contemporary education.

Chapters D and E contain a reconstruction of the curriculum of the Neo- and Late Babylonian scribal schools, based on the analysis of tablet typology, contents of the exercises, and colophons. The author is able to make a clear distinction into two phases of schooling, based on the physical characteristics of the exercise tablets. The drills in type 1 (big, multicolumn tablets) are consistently more elementary and less varied than those in type 2 (smaller one- or two-column tablets). Type 1 tablets contain excerpts from Syllabary S^a, Vocabulary S^b, the Weidner god list and u r_5-r a = *ḫubullum* tablets 1–3, sometimes complemented by exercises in proper use of the stylus (numerous repetitions of DIŠ.BAD) and a variety of non-standardized exercises such as proper names or letter formulas. This type may include a colophon. Type 2 exercises often include excerpts from one or two literary or sub-literary texts (Akkadian or bilingual) plus several excerpts from lexical series, in many cases from u r_5-r a = *ḫubullum*. Type 2 tablets are usually dated to month and day. The author distinguishes a number of sub-types of both type 1 and type 2 based on a careful coordination of contents and physical features.

Chapter E.III–IV contains descriptions of all compositions encountered in the corpus, preceded by a discussion of the concepts "canonical" and "non-canonical." The author concedes that "canonical" simply means "standardized," or "standardized and serialized" (p. 62). Given the rather muddied history of the concept in Assyriological research, I would have preferred

the term "standardized," since it lacks the laden overtones and is more to the point. Since, however, the author explains in such detail what the concept is supposed to mean in her text this does not affect in any way the substance of the argument. The brief description of all the compositions and exercises attested in the school corpus gives a crystal-clear overview of what the Neo-Babylonian curriculum contained.

Chapter F, the main portion of the book, contains copies and editions of a generous selection of the tablets discussed in the previous chapters with translation of the (sub)literary excerpts and commentary. The author has tried to identify every extract in all the tablets published. Considering the fragmentary state of many of these pieces and the very cursive handwriting, this is a major accomplishment.

Chapter G, finally, contains a catalogue of sources, including not only the tablets published in this book, but also all other school tablets—published and unpublished—identified by the author and included in her argument.

Gesche's discussion of Neo-Babylonian scribal education represents an approach to texts and tablets focused on use rather than on origin. Whatever the origin or original function of *enūma eliš*—a question we may not be able to answer with much certainty—we do know that it was used in phase 2 of Neo-Babylonian scribal education as a text book from which brief excerpts were copied. As a school text *enūma eliš* is found in conjunction with the *aluzinnu* text[1] and with incantations and lexical texts. An analysis based on content only would probably not place these compositions in one category. The empirical fact is that they appear side by side in the notebooks of schoolboys, and no analysis of their meaning can afford to ignore that fact. Gesche's book contains much that is new and exciting and much that invites rethinking of what had once seemed to be obvious.

The sections in this study that discuss earlier material (from the third or second millennium) lack some of the methodological rigor and sharp analysis found in the main part of the book. The discussion of Old Babylonian education in chapter C.III is based on older secondary literature: Proto-Ea does not belong to the most elementary phase of Old Babylonian education (p. 18), it is not true that most Old Babylonian Sumerian literary texts represent full editions rather than excerpts (p. 20), and it is also not the case that the hymn Lipit-Eštar B is attested on just one lenticular tablet, as suggested by p. 20. Similarly, the discussions of the history of individual lexical compositions is not always adequate. The author contends that Sᵃ is Old Babylonian in origin (p. 69), a point that was still open to some doubts by Civil (*MSL* 14, 165–66). The existence of Sᵃ in late Old Babylonian Sippar is now confirmed, however, by the publication of the Sippar-Amnanum school texts by Michel Tanret (*MHET* I/2). The development of Sᵃ out of Proto-Ea (p. 68) seems less likely to me. More probably Proto-Ea and Sᵃ represent local versions of the same syllabary tradition. I am not convinced that the oldest manuscripts of the Weidner God list date to Ur III (p. 75). As far as I know, no manuscript is older than the (late?) Old Babylonian period.[2]

A problem that surfaces at several places in the editions of lexical extracts is the quality and status of the editions of lexical compilations in *MSL*. The author has usually based her readings and reconstructions on the *MSL* composites with little awareness of the problems involved. In particular in the earlier volumes, the practice was to blend various Middle

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1. This traditional label is a misnomer; only one out of six sections is about an *aluzinnu*. The composition is a collection of parodies of various learned text types, including god list, royal inscription, heroic narrative, omens, and menology.

2. Weidner, in his edition of the list, dated VAT 6563 to the Ur III period (*AfO* 2 [1924–25]: 2), but the paleography of the piece as copied in *AfO* is consistent with an Old Babylonian date.

Babylonian,[3] Middle Assyrian,[4] Neo-Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian traditions to product one composite, a text which, ironically, became "canonical" to the Assyriological world but never existed in this form in antiquity. At several places the author states that the school text does not follow the canonical text—apparently without realizing that the "canonical" text is to be blamed. This problem is encountered (knowingly or unknowingly) by anyone who uses the editions in the early volumes of *MSL*. One of the important contributions of Gesche's book is that these inadequacies of the "canonical" lexical editions come out so clearly.

One example is BM 66830 + 82911, a type 2 text which preserves a long extract from ur_5-ra = *ḫubullu* 7A on the reverse. The extract, not edited by Gesche, reads as follows:

1′	[ğiš-zu₂-gud-si-dili]	*ši-*[*in-ni* MIN (*a-šu-bu*)]
2′	[ğiš-gu₂-murgu-gu]d-si-dili	*e-ṣe -e*[*n-ṣe-ri* MIN]
3′	[ğiš-peš₁₀]-gud-si-dil	*u₂-ma-aš₂-šu* [MIN]
4′	[ğiš-DU].DU-gud-si-dili	*a-ri-a-at* [MIN]
5′	[ğiš-DU.DU-gu]d-si-dili	*mut-ta-bi-la-at* [MIN]
6′	[ğiš-zu₂-ra-a]ḫ	*kal-ba-na-*[*a-tum*]
7′	[ğiš-zu₂-ra-aḫ]	*me-ek-ku-*[*u*]
8′	[ğiš-ma₂]	MIN
9′	[ğiš- . . .	MIN]
10′	[ğiš-eš₂-l]a₂	MIN
11′	[ğiš-šu]-la₂	MIN
12′	[ğiš-sa]-la₂	MIN
13′	[ğiš-kuš]-la₂	MIN
14′	[ğiš-šu]-il₂-la₂	MIN
15′	[ğiš-da₃]ᵈᵃ-a	MIN
16′	[ğiš-ig]i-ğal₂	MIN
17′	[ğiš-igi-ğ]al₂-bad₃	MIN *du-u₂-*[*ri*]
18′	[ğiš-gan-nu]	*ka-an-*[*nu*]
19′	[ğiš-gan-nu-sağ-du]	MIN *ša₂ i-*[*li*]
20′	[ğiš-maš-ᵍ]ᵃ⁻ᵃⁿ*gan*	MIN *ša₂ bur-ti*
21′	[ğiše]⁻ᵖⁱ⁻ʳᵘDUG	MIN *ša₂ me-*[*e*]
22′	[ğiš-ebir]-kaš	MIN [*ša₂*] *ši-ka-*[*ri*]

This corresponds to the text of ur_5-ra 7a as edited in *MSL* 6, lines 90–96 (93 omitted), 101–6, 128, 131 (variant), 136a, 134, 135. If this were not confusing enough, the *MSL* edition has a lot of additional lines (129a–d; 104a–e, etc.), some of which are included in our text and some not. Line 14′ of the present text, moreover, is new. It seems, therefore, as if this exercise represents a deviating version of ur_5-ra 7A, but this is not the case. All problems disappear once the Middle Babylonian (S_6) and Middle Assyrian (A) sources are separated from the rest.[5] The main Neo-Babylonian sources for this section are sources B, F, and S_{14}, which, where preserved, duplicate our text with minimal variation. Even the previously unknown line ğiš-šu-il₂-la₂ appears in B, erroneously treated as a variant of 104a (ğiš-šu-la₂) in *MSL*. Two unpublished Neo-Babylonian school texts confirm that this is the standard Neo-Babylonian version (CBS 3864; BM 49649[6]).

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3. On the Middle Babylonian Kassite tradition see now Veldhuis 2000.
4. The existence of a separate Middle Assyrian tradition was demonstrated by Horowitz 1988.
5. For this passage and its Kassite sources see also Veldhuis, 2000, 77–78.
6. Courtesy M. Civil.

Another exercise tablet included in Gesche's study contains an extract from u r$_5$-r a 7A that almost immediately follows the section discussed above (BM 37928):

1'	illegible	
2'	ǧ i š-g[a]-a n-n u-t u r-r[a$^?$]	*kan-nu-[du-ru-u$_2$]*
3'	ǧ i š-$^{b[a?-al-bi]}$ḫalbi$_5$	MIN (*kan-nu-[du-ru-u$_2$]*) *ša* [*bur-ti*]
4'	ǧ i š-KU.$^{tu-ru}$KIB	KID-[*tum*]
5'	ǧ i š-KU.$^{da-ri}$KIB	*ki*-[*ib-su*]
6'	ǧ i š-n i ǧ$_2$-g i l i m-m a-^{ǧiš}d a g-s i	*dak*-[*šu-u*]
7'	ǧ i š-d a g-s i-[^{kuš}u m]m u$_3$	*ša$_2$ na*-[*a-a-du*]
8'	ǧ i š-d a g-s i-e$_2$-p a-n a	[. . .]

This corresponds to the lines 130, 142, 143, 144, 145 (variant), 146 of the *MSL* text. Again, the confusion is due to the eclectic text in *MSL*; the Babylonian sources agree among each other with only slight variation.[7]

BM 38864 includes a section near the end of u r$_5$-r a 16. The new piece demonstrates that lines 436, 440, and 442–52 in the edition in *MSL* did not exist. With the help of the Emar version the text of this exercise may be reconstructed as follows:

8'	[n a$_4$-2]-g i n$_2$	*ab-nu š*[*i-ni ši-iq-lu*]
9'	[n a$_4$-1]-g i n$_2$	MIN *ši*-[*iq-lu*]
10'	[n a$_4$-1/2]-g i n$_2$	MIN *zu-u*[*z*] (or *zu-u$_2$-zu*)
11'	[n a$_4$-1/3]-g i n$_2$	MIN *ma-an* [*ṣe-eḫ-ru*]
12'	[n a$_4$-i g i-4-ǧ]a l$_2$-l a	MIN *re-b*[*u-u*]
13'	[n a$_4$-i g i-6-ǧ]a l$_2$-l a	MIN *pa-r*[*a-as ma-an ṣe-eḫ-ru*]
14'	[n a$_4$ . . .]-n a	MIN x [. . .]
15'	[n a$_4$-n i ǧ$_2$-g]i-n[a]	[MIN *kit-ti*]

Perhaps the Sumerian in 14' is to be read ^{d}u t u instead of -n a. In that case the Akkadian may be reconstructed as MIN *š*[*a-am-ši*].

The lexical tradition, in particular u r$_5$-r a = ḫubullu, is in need of a new edition in which the various versions are placed side by side. Ideally, lexical texts should be edited in a flexible electronic fashion, so that one may pay as much attention to the single school tablet (as illustrated brilliantly in the present book) as to the reconstruction of standard lexical compositions.[8]

The school texts published here provide quite a number of interesting additions and corrections to passages in *MSL*. The following remarks—in no way exhaustive—concentrate on u r$_5$-r a extracts.

BM 36282+

Line 10: [ǧ i š-s a-d]u-b u r-r[a] = MIN (u r$_5$-r a 6, 175a). The line ǧ i š-s a-d u-b u r appears in NBC 10915 (Kassite version of u r$_5$-r a 6; unpublished) and is confirmed by the OB entry l u$_2$-s a-d u-b u-u l = *ša še-e-š*[*e-e*] or *ti-bu-u$_2$* (*MSL* 12, 171 l. 435 and 196 l. 15). Note that the position of lines 175a–b is uncertain. Text U (CBS 14095; collated) only preserves the

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7. For this section see also Civil 1987, 15. The Sumerian in line 6' of BM 37928 has ǧ i š-n i ǧ$_2$-g i l i m-m a-^{ǧiš}-d a g-s i where other sources have ǧ i š-d a g-s i. Probably two entries have been telescoped into one. In the lexical tradition, KU.KIB is translated KID-*tu*, *kibsu*, and *parriku* (see *MSL* 6, 96). The third is missing here, but ǧ i š-n i ǧ$_2$-g i l i m-m a is a likely alternative Sumerogram for *parriku*.

8. I hope to make some progress towards such a goal in the near future.

Akkadian column (which has MIN). The extra lines may as well belong immediately after 173 (as in this text).

BM 36331

Obverse section c may be reconstructed from the unpublished revised version of ur_5-ra 7B by Civil,[9] partly published in *RlA* 6, 573 (Leier):

12	[ǧiš-dim₃-ad]dir	*sa-gu-u₂ mar-g[u]-u₂*
13	[ǧiš-dim₃-dim₃]-addir	MIN
14	[ǧiš-KAB-z]a₃-mi₂	*tup-pi sa-am-me-e*
15	[ǧiš-dub-z]a₃-mi₂	MIN
16	[ǧiš-gu-z]a₃-mi₂	*ḫa-an-zu-u₂*
17	[ǧiš-kak]-za₃-mi₂	*ḫa-si-si*
18	[ǧiš-KA]-za₃-mi₂	MIN
19	[ǧiš . . .]-za₃-mi₂	MIN

BM 36384

Rev. 7': PIRIǦ^{ni-mur}TUR. This gloss appears at various places in ur_5-ra; see *SpBTU* 3, 110 i 24: kuš-PIRIǦ^{ni-mi-ir}TUR.

BM 36643 + 37527

Rev. 8–9' are probably to be read:

dug-gur₄-gur₄-saḫar	MIN ṭi-[-i-di]
dug-gur₄-gur₄-im-ma	MIN [MIN]

The fragment BM 37527 was not used by Civil in *MHEM* III (p. 132 S₂₉); the reconstruction of ur_5-ra 10 may need slight revision here (lines 111ff.).

BM 36726

Rev. 22 should be kuš-ur-šub₅ (either second half of šub₅ is broken or was never written). The reading šub₅ (NUMUN₂) is indicated by *SpBTU* 3, 110 i 19 and BM 76502 (see below).

BM 37928

See above.

BM 38008

Rev. section b is ur_5-ra 5, 15–18 (ǧiš-e₂-gigir, etc.).

BM 54010

Obv. equals ur_5-ra 18, 47–51. Since the other side has ur_5-ra 16 and 17, obverse and reverse of this fragment should be inverted.

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9. Miguel Civil kindly allowed me to use his revised reconstruction of ur_5-ra 7B, 39–135, for which I wish to express my sincere thanks.

BM 54609

Read rev. 8: m u l-l u-l i m = *lu*-[*lim-mu*].

BM 54628

Rev. 8–17′ is u r₅-r a 11, 247–56 (*MSL* 7, 134–35 and *MSL* 9, 200–201).

BM 54847

Rev.: see *SpBTU* 3, 114 obv. iii 13ff.

BM 55060

Obv. section b parallels *SpBTU* 3, 114A rii and *SpBTU* 3, 114 B rii:

[m u l-m a š-t a b]-b a	*tu-'-a*-[*mu*]
[m u l-a l]-l u b	*al-lu-ut*-[*tum*]
[m u l-m u d r a₆-k e š₂-d a]	[*ni*]-*i*-[*ru*]
[m u l-e n-t e-e n-n a-b a r-ḫ u m]	[*ḫa-ba-ṣ*]*i-ra*-[*nu*]

BM 66116

Rev 5–6′:

ǧ i š-u₅-ᵍⁱˢg a n₂-u r ₃	*im*-[*šu*]
ǧ i š-z a-r i-ᵍⁱˢg a n-u r₃	MIN

BM 66830 + 82911

See above.

BM 72143

This text was transliterated in *MSL* 11, 171–72; duplicate *MSL* SS1, 43.

BM 73048

Rev. section b is u r₅-r a 12, 69–73; it parallels *SpBTU* 3, 111ii and BM 78113 (see below):

[ǧ i r₂-u₄]-s a k a r-z a b a r	[MIN (*pa-tar*) *us-ka-ri*]
[b u l u g]-z a b a r	[*pu-lu-uk-ku*]
[b u l u g]-g a l-z a b a r	[*ma-aq-qa-ri*]
[b u l u g-š u]-z a b a r	[*šat-qu-u₂*]
[b u l u g-s]a l-l a-z a b a r	[*maḫ-ra-ṣu*]

BM 73313

Obv. 15–17 (u r₅-r a 14, 180–82):

š a ḫ⁇-s i g₇-s i g₇-a	*ar-qu*
m e g i d d a₂ᵈᵃ	*ša₂-ḫi-tum*
m e g i d d a	MIN

BM 76502

Parallels *SpBTU* 3, 110 and BM 36726 (see above):

22′ ku š-ur-$^{šu-u[b]}$šub$_5$ MIN *min-[di-ni*]
25′ ku š-$^{si-[ig]}$šeg$_9$ MIN [*a-tu-di*]

BM 78113

Obv. section b is probably ur$_5$-ra 7B:

[ǧiš]-e$_2$-za-na   *bi-it pa-as-su*
[ǧiš-^{d}l]ama-za-na   *la-mas-su* MIN
[ǧiš-...]-lum-ma   *bi-i[t]* x x
[ǧiš...]- x x   IGI *zi-[ik]-ri*
[ǧiš-...]-še-bi-da   MIN *sin-niš-tum*

Although much remains unclear here, the passage more or less parallels the Emar version of ur$_5$-ra 7B (Emar 6/4, 80 ll. 568′–72′). Reverse section b parallels *SpBTU* 3, 111ii and BM 73048 (see above).

In sum, *Schulunterricht in Babylonien* is an unusual book of high quality that gives us much to work on and think about. For all this the author deserves our sincere gratitude.

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