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TIN.TIR = BABYLON, THE QUESTION OF CANONIZATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING¹

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Andrew George's *Babylonian Topographical Texts* is basically an edition of the series known as Tintir. In addition, the author has included a large number of other texts, all of them somehow related to topography, in order to elucidate the contents of this difficult composition. In a number of reviews,² the author has been praised deservedly for the meticulous edition, for the copious but nonetheless legible commentary, and for the inclusion of hand copies of all the tablets edited in this volume. The present reviewer does not hesitate in joining in this praise. There can be no doubt that this volume will remain the basis of any discussion of Tintir and related texts for many years to come.

The author's approach to the texts is first of all to mine them for topographical information. In a most interesting introduction to Chapter 1 the author presents a new reconstruction of the layout of Babylon with its main quarters, temples, streets, and gates. For this reconstruction, the

information in Tintir is successfully related to information from other texts, many of which are included in the book, as well as with archaeological information. The author acknowledges that the text's original intent had little to do with topography. According to George, the text was intended to glorify the city of Babylon and its temples, and belongs to the same genre as the ancient Sumerian temple hymns (pp. 2–4). This assertion has caused some discussion in the reviews. That Tintir is not in the first place a treatise on topography, as we understand it, is not controversial. But then, what is it? This review article does not pretend to attempt an answer to this question. Instead, it discusses the composition's format, its status as a "canonical" text, and its place in a general scheme of Mesopotamian scholarly literature.

Did Tintir III Exist?

The text of Tintir is standardized. No "score" edition of the extant tablets is provided, but the variants are meticulously collected in footnotes. In most cases these variants are of orthographic nature and do not affect the contents. Occasionally two lines are inverted, but variants of a more substantial kind are rare. The earliest datable tablets are from seventh century Assyria. The last known tablets are late Babylonian. One of these is dated 61 BC, and a tablet bearing transcriptions in Greek may even be considerably later (Geller 1997, 82–83). All evidence suggests that

1. Review article of A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, OLA 40. Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992. Pp. xvii + 504 + 58 plates. My thanks are due to H. L. J. Vanstiphout who read a version of this paper and added a number of critical and helpful remarks.

2. I am aware of the following reviews: D. Charpin, *RA* 88 (1994) 95; J. A. Black, *BSOAS* 58 (1995) 542–43; H. Hunger, *WZKM* 85 (1995) 284–85; A. Livingstone, *BiOr* 52 (1995) 449–51; C. Wunsch, *AuOr* 13 (1995) 271–73; M. J. Geller, *AfO* 42/43 (1995/96) 248–50; R. D. Biggs, *JNES* 55 (1996) 61–63; B. Groneberg, *OLZ* 91 (1996) 415–17; B. Pongratz-Leisten, *WdO* 27 (1996) 173–76.

so that what is included in the second half of tablet IV in one source is numbered V in another.⁴ Similar confusion exists for the tablet numbers of the divinatory series *Enūma Anu Enlil* (Koch-Westenholz 1995, 79–82) and *Šumma Ālu*.

Tintir IV, which contains names of temples in the city of Babylon, is subject to another kind of variation. In its standard format the ceremonial name (column i) of each temple is linked to the name of the deity to whom it belonged (column ii). For this list of temple names, commentaries exist in which the Sumerian ceremonial name is explained in Akkadian. In at least one case this commentary is appended as a third column to the text of Tintir IV (source e).⁵ Such variance in textual format is known for lexical and divinatory texts as well. *Diri*, the list of compound signs, is attested with, as well as without, a separate column for sign names. The sign list S^b is found in a variety of formats. The one-column format is simply a list of signs. The fullest format has i: gloss; ii: sign; iii: sign name; iv: Akkadian translation. The *Šumma Ālu* tablet on processions has a variant text from Uruk in which every omen is provided with a second apodosis of meteorological content.⁶

The variation in format and tablet sequence in Tintir are a challenge to the ingenuity of an editor, and one must say that by proper footnoting and cross-referencing the author has succeeded in presenting the material in a concise and reliable manner.⁷ The uncertainties about the existence or non-existence of Tablet III, and the different arrangements found in the extant sources, confirm once again that tablet numbering and line numbering are primarily ancillary

devices for producing a modern standard text edition. The matter is of little practical consequence for the textual reconstruction of Tintir. However, these questions are imminently relevant for our evaluation of the text as a canonical composition.

The Question of Canonization

Much research on literary and scholarly cuneiform texts has been directed at 1) reconstructing standard texts employing extant fragments from various places and periods; and 2) establishing the period in which any given text was composed. There is another question, however, and one that is at least as important: why was the text transmitted, and what status was attributed to it? The search for an “origin” will naturally start from a standardised text, trying to work backwards to the most ancient, original, or pristine version. The reception question focuses on the individual manuscripts, on their distribution in time and place, and on the context (textual or otherwise) in which they were used.

We may invoke here the concept of the “canon.” The terms “canon” and “canonization” no doubt entered Assyriology from Biblical studies.⁸ The process of standardization of the Hebrew Bible is an often told story. The important difference with Mesopotamian canonization is that the Biblical books were considered holy, containing authoritative, divinely given information on correct moral and religious behavior (Bruns 1984). Scholars have often stressed in recent years that the theological idea of canon is hardly comparable to what happens in Mesopotamia. In literary studies, “canon” has been used to denote the corpus of compositions (literary or otherwise) that is regarded in one period as the corpus of great works, that is all the compositions that a man of letters is supposed to have read, and to which he can relate in a meaningful way. The canon includes those

4. See the introduction to Nabnitu in *MSL* 16, in particular p. 19.

5. This column iii is edited in Chapter 2 as text 4 (pp. 78–79). See also p. 12 n. 48 for source x.

6. W 23553; published by A. Cavigneaux (1979, 118). All duplicates of this tablet of *Šumma Ālu* are edited by Pongratz-Leisten (1994, 257–65).

7. I would have preferred to have the additional third column of Tablet IV included in the edition of Tintir, rather than in a separate chapter. But that is a matter of choice.

8. For a comparison between the Biblical and the Mesopotamian canons, including a discussion of word “canon,” its history, and its use in Assyriology see Hallo (1991).

works that, for one reason or another, are attributed with moral, literary or scientific value. It excludes those works that are perceived as merely trivial.⁹ Canon is a phenomenon of reception as well as production, since new texts may be composed in conscious relation to canonical ones. In this use of the term canon, inclusion and exclusion are matters of degree or perspective, rather than an absolute characteristic of a text. We may distinguish between core and periphery, between canons of different social groups, or we may perceive changes over time in the position that a certain composition has within the canon. In this perception, the character of a canon is not solely defined by the corpus that is included, but at least as much by what is excluded and by the relations maintained between the canonical and the trivial. This use of the word canon may be more fruitful for an investigation of the evidence in first millennium Mesopotamia.

Canonicity is a social characteristic of a composition. It is an aspect of the way this composition was perceived in antiquity. Canonicity as such is an abstract phenomenon, which, like virtually all social phenomena, eludes direct observation. We need to identify tangible indications of canonicity in our texts. Technically speaking such indications are elements of its operationalization. An operationalization (or operational definition) defines an abstract concept in terms of its observable consequences in the research data.¹⁰ In Assyriological literature canonicity has almost exclusively been defined in text-critical terms, taking standardization as a near-synonym of canonization. It will be argued here that standardization is one among several aspects of the operationalization of the concept. Some of these aspects will be discussed here in their relation to Tintir.

1. Standardization is the most widely recognised indication for canonization in modern Assyriological literature. We have seen above the

peculiar kind of standardization of Tintir, where the sources agree in detail, but not in the general structure of the composition. Comparing Tintir with other compositions, it appears that standardization is not a unified phenomenon. There are degrees of standardization, though it is not always easy to compare texts in this respect. The list of trees in *ur₅-ra 3* has many more variants (additions, omissions, or inversions) than the list of reed objects in *ur₅-ra 8*. The Gilgameš Epic in its first millennium recension remained stable over a long period of time (Tigay 1982, chapter 6). The ancient scholars were aware of the importance of standardization. This appears from Esagil-kin-apli's proud description of his editorial work on the physiognomic and medical omen series (Finkel 1988, 149):

Concerning that which from old time had not received an [authorised] edition, and according to "twisted threads" for which no duplicates were available, in the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, King of Babylon, to work it anew . . . , Esagil-kin-apli, son of Asalluhi-mansum, the Sage of King Hammurapi, (...) deliberated with himself, and produced the authorised editions for SAGIG, from head to foot, and established them for knowledge.

2. Tintir was copied during a period of at least half a millennium. It has been found in both Babylonia and Assyria. A canonical text typically creates its own conditions for secure transmission and wide distribution. For a long time familiarity with Homer was one of the defining characteristics of a man of learning. The value of Homer, therefore, quite apart from its 'intrinsic' value, was partly located in the desirability to belong to this class. The social value of a canonical text will considerably enhance its survival chances.¹¹ Tintir is distinctly Babylonian. This background did not prevent its ascent to canonical status in both Babylonia and Assyria. Comparable texts with an Assyrian background, most importantly the Topography of Aššur (or *Götteraddressbuch*),¹² are not found in Babylonia. This latter composi-

9. See Herrnstein Smith (1984), and other articles in the same volume.

10. For the concept "operationalization" see De Groot (1969, 29–30 and *passim*).

11. See Herrnstein Smith (1984, esp. 27–35).

12. In the book under review the text is edited as no. 20, excluding the initial section with the Divine Directory.

tion, we may conclude, has at the most a limited, provincial canonical character.

3. Several copies of Tintir are provided with a colophon (edited on pp. 71–72). Colophons may inform the reader about the origin of the tablet and may include indications of the reliability of the copy. A further important element is the tablet number. Compositions that are arranged in series and sub-series are indicated by the name of the series plus a number. An example, which contains many of these elements, is found in source z:

The five tablets of Tintir = Babylon; complete.
Written and collated according to an old tablet
from Babylon.
Tablet of Nabukinaplim son of Ile²i Marduk.

Editorial and paratextual remarks such as may be found in colophons indicate canonicity, because they demonstrate the importance of secure transmission of the composition. A similar phenomenon is the editorial remark *hepi* (“broken”). A copyist working from a broken original would use *hepi* to indicate in his copy the place where the text became illegible for him.

4. Most texts in Chapter 2 (“Babylon: Related Texts and Fragments”) are conspicuously similar to Tintir, and may have been patterned on its example. They are found in only one or two copies and therefore hardly canonical themselves. Canonical texts, by their position as valued parts of the cultural tradition, are involved in the creation of new texts, either as the model to follow or as the model to avoid. They thus score high on intertextuality. An important case is the relation between Tintir and the Topography of Aššur. The Topography of Aššur may be regarded as an Assyrian adaptation of a Babylonian text type. For a proper evaluation of the place of the Topography of Aššur we need Tintir as the model on which it is formed (though not necessarily slavishly). A related phenomenon in the corpus of omen texts is the *ahû* tablet: an additional omen or tablet with similar material, which found no place in the series as such. It is used in opposition to *iškaru* (“series”: canonical series) and to *ša pī ummâni* (oral teaching). The term *ahû* is best-known for omen series, though it is also used for liturgical

texts.¹³ There is no indication that *ahû* had any depreciating connotations. A very different example is the *Aluzinnû* text in which several canonical genres are parodied (Foster 1974; Römer 1975–78; CTN IV, 204–6; and VS 24, 118). In this case the intertextual relation is a negative one. Parody, however, may only be effective if the object parodied is non-trivial.

5. Two other indications of canonicity may be discussed here briefly, since they are not directly relevant for Tintir. Firstly, the attribution of authors in “The Catalogue of Texts and Authors” (Lambert 1962), and in the catalogue of prognostic and physiognomic omens (Finkel 1988), whether or not reflecting actual historical reality, no doubt contributes to the authority of the texts in question,¹⁴ and may therefore be included in an operational definition of canonicity. Secondly, quotation, preferably with explicit reference, may signal the importance a text had for the person quoting (and presumably for his audience). The first few lines of Tintir I are identical with entries in Diri (see George’s commentary to I 1–3), but since Diri is considerably older it is more likely that Diri is quoted in Tintir than vice versa.

An operational definition of canonicity may include other aspects; the list is not meant to be exhaustive. The evidence may suggest that there are several types of canonicity among cuneiform texts, probably related to different areas of knowledge in which they were valued. Provisionally we may distinguish between three types. First, some literary texts, such as Gilgameš, are standardised and transmitted over a long period of time in a large geographical area. Non-canonical literary texts are separate compositions. Such compositions may be composed in Assyrian, rather than in the standard literary language. Occasionally non-canonical texts relate themselves to the

13. See Civil (1979, 168–69). According to him, Ea I source C is an example of a lexical *ahû* tablet (p. 169). This, however, must be regarded as a modern extension of the term, since the tablet is not indicated as *ahû* in its colophon. The term *ahû* is discussed at length in Koch-Westenholz (1995, 88–93).

14. The question of authorship in cuneiform literature has recently been studied by Foster (1991) and Michalowski (1996).

canonical corpus by means of parody. The comic effect of the story of Ninurta-pāqidāt's dog bite is located precisely in the subversion of learning, even though the very fact that this text is *written* in itself indicates a learned background (George 1993, 63, 72; Michalowski 1996, 186–87). Second, texts such as the important omen series, are transmitted over no smaller period or area, but are found in several recensions. We would be hard pressed to maintain that Gilgameš is “more canonical” than *Enūma Anu Enlil*, because many indications point to the fact that the latter series belonged to the most valued of the scholarly texts. Non-canonical omen texts follow the pattern of the canonical texts precisely, and, in fact, can hardly be distinguished from canonical texts unless they are specified as *aḫû*. Third, duplicates of medical texts are rarely separated by more than a century. Over longer periods we find duplicate prescriptions or incantations, but they are transmitted in different contexts. The standardization of the medical corpus is too weak to enable us to distinguish between canonical and non-canonical texts.

Babylonian Semiotics

Tintir belongs to the large corpus of scholarly and educational texts that are concerned with meaning, with the production of meaning, and with the theory of meaning. The first tablet contains a list of names of Babylon in much the same style as the names of Marduk that conclude *Enūma Eliš* (Bottéro 1977). Each of the Sumerian names is rendered “Babylon” in the second column, followed by an explanation in Akkadian. The Akkadian explanation may be a straightforward translation of the Sumerian expression, or a more or less fanciful interpretation of the name, using the speculative kind of hermeneutic scholarship well known from certain commentary texts and bilinguals.¹⁵ The mechanics of the relation between the Sumerian and the Akkadian are ex-

plored in George's commentary. In a few cases, in particular in the first few lines, the lines of Tintir are actually quotes from lexical texts. The city of Babylon is positioned by hermeneutic means in a network of theological and cosmological speculation. The tablets II and IV list religiously significant places; the “seats” and temples. The Sumerian ceremonial names of these cultic places are explained in terms of function and divine owner. As mentioned above, there is at least one variant recension of tablet IV in which speculative explanations of the Sumerian were added in a third column. Tablet V is almost entirely in Akkadian. It lists the daises of Marduk, followed by sections for city gates, walls, rivers, and streets. After a summary section the ten main city quarters of the city are delineated. According to George, the lists in II and IV are organised along topographical lines. The hermeneutic technique used in these tablets is not the speculative interpretation of the Sumerian (as in Tablet I), but rather the endless list, which presents Babylon as a place defined by cultic locations. Similarly, the daises, gates, walls, rivers, and streets in V are apparently all listed for their religious value, their ceremonial names. As V:89–90 tells us in bilingual fashion: Babylon is the place of creation of the great gods. In Tintir Babylon is described as well as created. It is created as a mental image, as a cosmic centre defined by a network of religiously significant points.

Tintir I utilises the resources of the lexical corpus to provide interpretations of Sumerian ceremonial names. Whether such interpretations are “correct” translations of the Sumerian is irrelevant. The interpretations demonstrate the hermeneutic power of the lexical tradition. Similarly, the enumeration of seats and temples in II and IV is couched in the same format as compositions such as *ur₅-ra*, and thus position the text in a scholarly context. According to George, the function of Tintir is first of all to praise the city of Babylon and its cultic places. It is, indeed, difficult to avoid such a conclusion when reading the text. Yet, this can only be one of its functions. The text is often used a school exercise. Tintir is first and foremost a scholarly text, using the full potential of the hermeneutic tools available.

15. Examples may be found in Maul (1997).

The scholarly concern with meaning is not restricted to lexical and explanatory texts. We may include in the discussion the omen compendia. Omens have a formal structure similar to lexical entries: $A \Rightarrow B$, where the exact meaning of the symbol \Rightarrow is largely indeterminate. The most common wording of an omen is “if phenomenon A is observed, phenomenon B will occur.” Yet, omens do not primarily predict the future. Omens classify phenomena according to a binary system: positive or negative. The basic schemes behind this classification have been worked out in recent studies for some of the omen collections.¹⁶ The positive or negative aspect of the phenomenon is indicated by the apodosis, which has either a positive (“this man will gain his heart’s desire”) or a negative value (“destruction of the army”). That the apodosis was in most cases valued as + or -, rather than as an actual prediction, is clear from the omen reports, where positive and negative omens are totalled to give an answer to a yes/no question. In many cases the apodosis has an etymological or associative relation with the phenomenon described in the protasis. The apodosis thus justifies the positive or negative value of the omen, by showing that there is an associative relationship between the observed phenomenon and the event described in the protasis. This, once again, involves hermeneutics and speculation, two important aspects that this corpus shares with the lexical tradition. The Nippur Compendium, text 18 in the book under review, supports the general relationship between texts such as Tintir and the omen compendia. This composition includes a variety of data. One section is devoted to the temple-name Ekur. The name is analysed in a number of ways, so as to arrive at some 20 different Akkadian translations (Nippur Compendium §5). The same composition contains speculative entries identifying cardinal points and days of the months with divinities (§11 and 12). Such identifications belong to the sphere of divination, rather than to lexicography. Cardinal points and days of the month are used extensively in *Enūma Anu Enlil*

to differentiate the interpretation of a phenomenon (Koch-Westenholz 1995, esp. 97–98, 108–9). Thus an eclipse of the moon is valued differently according to the quarter of the moon that is darkened, or according to the prevailing wind. In both cases the four cardinal points are used to express the differences. The day of the month is a natural element in the description of a variety of phenomena in the celestial omen series, but is also used in other divinatory texts. Cardinal points and days of the month are, therefore, part and parcel of the system of the production of meaning in divination.

As customary in cuneiform scholarly literature, Tintir does not describe its own method, or the basic assumptions on which it is based. Nor do we find polemics against alternative interpretations. The argumentative or foundational aspect of knowledge is at most at the periphery of what is being put to writing. This scholarly use of literacy differs considerably from the one in classical Athens. G. E. R. Lloyd summarized his lucid characterization of Greek science in four points: 1. the interest in fundamental issues and second-order questions; 2. the challenging of basic assumptions, even to the point of generalised scepticism; 3. “an argumentative, competitive, even combative quality, reflected not only in the rejection of rivals’ views, but also in over-sanguine self-justifications”; and 4. pluralism (Lloyd 1979, 234). The Mesopotamian scholarly tradition may be described as almost point by point the exact opposite. Even though the lists and omen collections may include different, in our eyes sometimes mutually exclusive, explanations of the same data these are peacefully listed side by side. There is no trace of scepticism, of pluralism, no ardent discussions, and no questioning of the fundamental assumptions underlying the scholarly business. Lloyd has argued that the argumentative character of politics and jurisdiction in classical Athens influenced the Greek style of argumentative scholarship. According to Lloyd, the classical Greek scholarly works may be perceived as part of the rhetorical tradition (see, for instance, Lloyd 1979, esp. chapter 4). Scholarly argument and rivalry were surely known in Mesopotamia. We

16. See e.g., Starr (1983, esp. chapter 2).

have evidence for such disputes in the corpus of Neo-Assyrian letters. In a most stimulating contribution Peter Machinist (1987) has argued that the absence of abstract and methodical argumentation in Mesopotamian scholarly texts may not be attributed to the absence of abstract thinking, but is rather a consequence of the moral power of traditional textual formats. Traditionality was valued rather than novelty, and this may be one of the reasons why new ideas were put forward in a most traditional fashion: in lists. The differences between the scholarly traditions of Mesopotamia and Greece may therefore partly be located in a different style of recording knowledge.

The lexical corpus, including Tintir, and the omen compendia show that the Babylonian conception of meaning is dynamic. Things may have more than one meaning. Indeed, polyvalence is a basic aspect of the writing system itself.¹⁷ A deeper understanding appears to imply a larger

collection of meanings, or a further differentiation of meaning. This may explain the fact that a number of the texts that are concerned with meaning were never completely standardized in their format. That Tintir was canonised is beyond question. The individual items were largely fixed, and remain constant over a very large period of time. The format, however, allows for variation, for addition, so that the process of the production of meaning never stops.

Conclusion

The understanding of Tintir as it is developed in these pages is impossible without reference to comparable texts. It is, therefore, with great satisfaction that one finds so many related texts included in the same volume. This reviewer is well aware that he has chosen an approach to Tintir that is very much different from the one that the author had in mind when writing the book. The result of the author's labour is imminently useful for a variety of approaches. That is a formidable achievement for which the author deserves our sincere thanks.

17. The similarity between divination and reading cuneiform (in particular its "pictographic" aspect) has been emphasized by Bottéro (1974, 161–63).

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