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Stip (Dr. H. L. J. Vanstiphout)

Approaches to Sumerian Literature

Studies in Honour of Stip
(H. L. J. Vanstiphout)

Edited by

Piotr Michalowski and Niek Veldhuis



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H. L. J. VANSTIPHOUT: AN APPRECIATION

The scholarly work of H. L. J. Vanstiphout, known as Stip to his friends, reads as a persistent, stubborn meditation on one central theme: the importance of Mesopotamian literature as *literature*, that is as verbal art. The importance of this literature is paramount for any assessment of the thoughts, ideas, and ideologies of ancient Mesopotamians, and as a demonstration of their artistic and scholarly know-how. Moreover, Vanstiphout argues, this literature is our earliest, and is therefore of critical importance if we are to understand literature as such. In the nineties of the last century the Mesopotamian Literature Group met three times in Groningen, at the initiative of Vanstiphout and Dr. Marjan Vogelzang. These lively meetings and their proceedings established Groningen as the world center for the study of cuneiform literature.

Vanstiphout's contributions to the field of cuneiform literary studies may be classified under three closely related headings: structure, interdisciplinarity, and popularization. The emphasis on structure indicates a shift in attention from *what* the texts tell us—all too often understood as directly reflecting the ancient reality—to *how* they produce their message. Vanstiphout's studies of the literary disputes are excellent examples of this aspect of his scholarship, demonstrating that these texts exhibit a more or less fixed pattern, from (mythological) introduction, to verbal exchange, to verdict—a pattern that may be used and altered creatively to achieve special effects. Vanstiphout's consistent emphasis on structure further implies a shift in attention away from individual words and phrases towards an understanding of literary works, genres, and indeed the whole corpus of cuneiform literature as integrated, meaningful wholes. His various contributions to the problem of genre and the curricular background of Sumerian literature may be seen in this light.

The concept structure as employed by Vanstiphout has its roots in the Prague Linguistic Circle and in the related French structuralist movements of the last century. The introduction of such ideas, concepts, and research methods from other disciplines, including linguistics, literary theory, and mediaeval studies, is a remarkable constant in his work. An outstanding example is his “Un Carré d'Amour

sumérien,” a discussion of several Sumerian poems about love pursuits of the gods, in which he successfully applied concepts and analyses first introduced by the famous French medievalist E. Le Roy Ladurie. Co-operation with scholars from a variety of disciplines led to a number of meetings that resulted in edited volumes on *Dispute Poems*, *Aspects of Genre*, and *Cultural Repertoires*—all of them (co)-edited by Vanstiphout and inspired by the idea that interaction with non-cuneiformists enriches our knowledge and results in a whole that is more than the mere accumulation of its parts. The pursuit of interdisciplinary studies is never easy, since it requires extensive knowledge in an array of scholarly fields and sometimes invites skepticism, if not worse, from colleagues who are not willing to go beyond traditional notions of philology. But Vanstiphout has always based his literary analysis on solid philological foundations: he has authored or co-authored a number of primary text editions, and has always worked closely with original sources. Indeed, he is a frequent visitor to the Babylonian Section of the University Museum in Philadelphia, where he works on deciphering, identifying, and collating ancient tablets from the school rooms of Nippur.

Vanstiphout's intense interaction with scholars from various disciplines created the necessity and obligation to make the primary evidence available to the non-specialist. Over the last decade he has published four volumes of translations; three in Dutch and one in English, all of them provided with introductions that draw attention to the literary structure and qualities of the texts translated. True popularization eschews simplification, and thus the reader of Vanstiphout's Dutch translation of Sumerian heroic and mythological poems (the first such anthology in the language) is confronted with a long essay that discusses the essentials of the Sumerian writing system and language, the literary system of genres, verse and strophe, and various issues of Sumerian culture and religion. Much the same can be said about his rendition of Gilgamesh, which was greeted with much praise by the Dutch press.

The present book is a collection of studies in Sumerian literature in honor of Stip, who through his work as teacher, scholar, convener, and editor transformed this field beyond recognition.

Piotr Michalowski and Niek Veldhuis

PUBLICATIONS OF H. L. J. VANSTIPHOUT

1. Books

- 1.1 *Proeve van Beschrijvende Linguïstiek met Betrekking tot de Beïnvloeding van een Indo-Europese Taal door een niet-Indo-Europese Taal*, Licentiate thesis. Catholic University of Louvain, 1971.
- 1.2 *Studies in the Literary Traditions about the Destruction of Ur*, Doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of Louvain, 1975.
- 1.3 *The Rebel Lands. An Investigation into the Origins of Early Mesopotamian Mythology*. J. V. Kinnier Wilson, with the assistance of Herman Vanstiphout. Cambridge Oriental Publications 29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- 1.4 *Helden en Goden van Sumer. Een keuze uit de heroïsche en mythologische dichtkunst van het Oude Mesopotamië*, Nijmegen: SUN, 1999.
- 1.5 *Het Epos van Gilgameš*. Nijmegen: SUN, 2001.
- 1.6 *Epics of Sumerian Kings: The Matter of Aratta*. Writings from the Ancient World 20. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- 1.7 *Eduba. Schrijven en Lezen in Sumer*. Nijmegen: SUN, 2004.

2. Edited Volumes

- 2.1 *Scripta Signa Vocis. Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East, Presented to J. H. Hospers by his Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, eds. H. L. J. Vanstiphout, K. Jongeling, F. Leemhuis, and G. J. Reinink. Groningen: Forsten, 1986.
- 2.2 *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East. Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, eds. G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 42. Louvain: Peeters, 1991.
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3. Articles and Reviews

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- 3.2 Political Ideology in Early Sumer. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 1 (1970): 7–38.
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HOW DID THEY LEARN CUNEIFORM?
TRIBUTE/WORD LIST C AS AN ELEMENTARY EXERCISE

Niek Veldhuis

H. Vanstiphout's question "How Did they Learn Sumerian?" (Vanstiphout 1979) has provoked a long series of studies by a variety of scholars improving our understanding of the role of literary and lexical compositions in Old Babylonian education. This contribution will concentrate on a composition first attested in archaic Uruk and variously labeled as *Tribute List*, or *Sumerian Word List C*.¹ I will argue that this is an exercise designed for beginning students in order to tackle the new technique of writing. This analysis, which aims to throw new light on archaic lexical and educational texts, is dedicated to Stip, my teacher and friend, from whom I learned Sumerian.

Introduction: Previous Interpretations

In the late Uruk period, around 3,200 BCE, writing was invented as an administrative tool in order to help managing the increasing complexity of institutional transactions.² The archaic text corpus consists of accounting texts and lists of words (lexical lists) for use in scribal education. Our understanding of the archaic corpus, both the administrative texts and the lexical lists, has made enormous progress through the publications of the Berlin team, in particular Hans Nissen and Bob Englund, in the series *Archaische Texte aus Uruk* and in numerous other contributions. An in-depth analysis of the evidence appeared in Englund 1998.

Within the archaic lexical tradition *Sumerian Word List C* occupies a special place, because it exhibits textual features that are otherwise unattested in this corpus. First, it contains a section with quantitative

¹ Despite my own misgivings (see below), this is the label I will use here.

² Hans Nissen has recently argued that societal complexity is not a sufficient explanation for the introduction and use of writing, and that there are many other ways to store information—instead or alongside of writing (Nissen 2004).

items such as “10 cows” or “1 bull.” Throughout the Mesopotamian written tradition such items are a give-away characteristic of administrative texts, not to be found in lexical tablets. Second, *Sumerian Word List C* has a long section that is repeated line by line, word for word. Repetitions are well known in literary texts, but not in lexical compositions. Finally, the last ten lines of *Sumerian Word List C* are identical with the first ten lines of another archaic composition, usually labeled as “Plant.” In short, on first glance, *Sumerian Word List C* does not qualify as a typical lexical list. The main reason why the composition is usually included in the category of lexical lists is that its transmission history is identical with that of the more typical members of the group: it is found in multiple exemplars in the archaic record and was copied, albeit with slight modifications, all through the third millennium and even into the Old Babylonian period.

The unusual characteristics of *Word List C* have led to a variety of interpretations, reading the text as a tribute list, as a literary piece, or as the earliest example of esoteric knowledge. Before looking in more detail at the text itself I will briefly discuss each of these interpretations.

Sumerian Word List C

This title, introduced by Pettinato in his edition of the text in *MEE* 3, is used in the present contribution as a neutral description that does not anticipate any decision concerning the actual contents of the composition. However, neutrality is hard to achieve and the designation “Word List” seems to be out of place since, as we have seen above, the text lacks all of the main characteristics of the early lexical corpus. *Word List C* is not a lexical list of words on a par with the list of professions (*Lu A*) or the list *Metals*. It should be noted, however, that there are other non-thematic early lexical texts and some of them may share features with *Word List C*: the list *Plants* (which contains many plant names, but also includes sections on time indications and other topics) and the list *Grain*, which lists a variety of foodstuffs but also includes a section on numbers.³

³ On *Plants* and *Grain*, see Englund (1998:95 and 98 with further literature). Both texts are badly represented in the archaic record so that most of our understanding of these compositions derives from third millennium parallels.

Tribute

The title *Tribute* was introduced by the Berlin team (M. Green, H. Nissen, and R. Englund) in their publications on the archaic sign list (Green and Nissen 1987) and on the archaic lexical lists (Englund and Nissen 1993). The title is based primarily on the word gu_2 or gun_2 (tax), which appears at two places in the text in what may be understood as explanatory interpolations, since both lines are absent in the archaic version.

The word gu_2 occurs in the final section of the text in the ED and OB versions in a well-known expression ($\check{s}ag_4 gu_2-bi nam-gi_4$) that has nothing to do with taxes, but means “rising of the flood.”⁴ The other passage where the word gu_2 appears is found only in the Old Babylonian version, where it comes after the long list of animals and commodities (O.B. version lines 32a and 58a):⁵

$\check{s}ag_4 nam-gu_2 \check{s}um_2$

Sumerian $nam-gu_2$ means “oppression,” or “wrongdoing” rather than “tribute.” In third millennium legal context $nam-gu_2-\check{s}e_3 . . . ak$ refers to wrongful appropriation, in particular of inheritance. The expression usually follows a list of commodities and identifies the agent of the sentence as the wrongdoer (with the victim in the dative).⁶ Whether this has anything to do with our line remains uncertain, but the fact that it is found at the end of a list of commodities is suggestive.

The interpretation of the two lines that contain the sign GU_2 as referring to tribute, therefore, has to be rejected in one case (in the expression $\check{s}ag_4 gu_2-bi nam-gi_4$) and lacks sufficient supporting evidence in the other. Moreover, both passages are missing from the Archaic text, so that they may explain to us the way in which ED and OB scribes understood this text—but we cannot be certain that this accurately reflects the original contents and function of the composition.

⁴ See the discussion of line 76 in the ED version below section 3.3 and Englund (1998:99 with n. 222).

⁵ These lines appear in the unpublished fragment Ni 1597 and are quoted in Englund and Nissen (1993:25).

⁶ References in Wilcke (2003:44 n. 107).

Literature

The idea that *Sumerian Word List C* may represent the earliest piece of literature was put forward in detail by Englund (1998:99) and is based first of all on the wholesale repetition of a considerable portion of the text. This, indeed, is an important characteristic of narrative and hymnic texts. In narrative, repetition may be used to relate a dream, followed by the dream come true (e.g. *The Death of Gilgameš*), or to give instructions to a messenger, followed by the messenger actually delivering his message (e.g. *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*).⁷ In certain types of hymns refrains are repeated at more or less regular intervals, as in *Šulgi B*. In the present case the repeated section is a list of animals and commodities, and this is neither a hymnic refrain nor an example of narrative repetition.

Another piece of evidence that has been adduced to support the literary interpretation is the appearance, in some sources, of the sign UD in the first and second line of the archaic version. This may be understood as a temporal indication—"when"—which is very common in introductions to Sumerian literary texts. However, such use of the sign UD is not otherwise known in the archaic record, and later versions of the composition omit this element.

Short of actually understanding the contents of the text, and no one has claimed to have achieved this, it is hard to support the literature theory. The main problem with this hypothesis, however, is that it is completely out of context. Archaic writing was a semiotic system that represented transactions and prognostications rather than language. This system existed alongside of language and borrowed elements (in particular nouns and names) from this language, but did not represent it anymore than old-fashioned DOS commands such as dir /p (directory, one screen at a time) represent English. The syntax of this system is largely provided by tablet layout rather than by linguistic means (Green 1981). The raw material of literature is language—patterned or heightened language. Nothing in the archaic record prepares us for expecting literature—except that we, modern readers, easily associate writing with a story, or at least with connected text. For the time being, therefore, the narrative hypothesis has to be laid aside as improbable.

⁷ Vanstiphout (1992).

Secret Lore

Finally we have to discuss Joan Westenholz's interpretation of our composition as secret lore (Westenholz 1998). This proposal is based, first, on her understanding of the introduction (lines 1–2), which she tentatively translates as “(When) counsel (was) first given, (when) the abrig (. . .) sage brought the secret lore. . . .” Second, Westenholz bases her interpretation on an explanation of the entire archaic lexical corpus as a representation of the divine order. The lexical lists, according to Westenholz, are far too extensive, and contain far too many words to be explained by the needs of scribal education. The great majority of the words in the archaic lexical series in fact never appears in administrative documents. The word lists, according to Westenholz, give a complete inventory of all the words in a given area of reality; ultimately they are theological or cosmological in nature, since they provide every element of reality with its own name. The name of a thing represents its nature, and thus the lexical texts, by providing a complete list of names for everything not only represent the proper order of the world, but also make it possible to affect the world by magical means (Westenholz 1998:453).

Westenholz's hypothesis suffers from the same weakness as the literature theory: the character of the archaic writing system seems ill suited for recording secret lore. The idea that the lists are theological in nature and describe the order of the world goes back at least to Von Soden's famous “Leistung und Grenze sumerischer und babylonischer Wissenschaft,” (Von Soden 1936). Although Oppenheim (1977:248) protested against “such a quasi-mythological concept as *Ordnungswille*” (according to Von Soden a defining element of the Sumerian mentality), von Soden's approach continues to enjoy a broad popularity in Assyriology. I have written about Von Soden's essay elsewhere (Veldhuis 2004:81–2), and I will restrict myself here to the interpretation of the archaic lexical texts—a group of texts that he had hardly access to. A brief analysis of the archaic corpus will demonstrate that a cosmological interpretation is untenable.

*The Archaic Lexical Corpus**Overview*

The archaic lexical corpus (Englund and Nissen 1993) includes thirteen compositions that are attested in multiple copies, most of which still are also attested in the Early Dynastic period and even as late as Old Babylonian.⁸

Title	Number of Exemplars
<i>Lu A</i> (professions)	185
<i>Vessels</i> (and <i>Garments</i>)	91
<i>Tribute</i> (<i>Sumerian Word List C</i>)	56
<i>Metal</i>	55
<i>Cattle</i>	24
<i>Officials</i>	23
<i>Fish</i>	22
<i>Wood</i>	30
<i>Cities</i>	17
<i>Geography</i>	12
<i>Grain</i> (<i>Sumerian Word List D</i>)	9
<i>Birds</i>	6
<i>Plants</i>	5

In addition, there are quite a few archaic tablets and fragments that are of a similar nature but do not belong to a standardized composition and may represent ad-hoc exercises.

The table shows that the distribution is very uneven: *Lu A* (a list of professions) is by far the most frequent; the text that interests us here comes in as a good third. The archaic lexical corpus is sometimes described as a coherent corpus of thematic word lists, but the facts are a little more complicated. The lists *Lu A*, *Metal*, *Fish*, *Wood*, *Cities*, and *Birds* are proper thematic lists that may provide a complete inventory of the semantic field at hand. The *Officials* text includes personal names as well as names of professions, and may be understood

⁸ The numbers and the labels are taken from Englund (1998:88); see also Englund and Nissen (1993:12). The numbers require some adjustment because of the discovery of several additional exemplars, but since these new copies do not change the overall picture, they have been ignored here. Not included in the overview is the list *Pigs*, because the two extant copies do not reflect a standardized text (see Englund 1998:94 with earlier literature).

as a thematic list only in a weak sense (indications of persons). The list *Vessels* and *Garments* includes a section that seems to play with the basic idea of a compound sign—a sign inscribed within another sign—and is therefore organized, in this section at least, by graphemic rather than by semantic criteria (Krispijn 1992). The list *Cattle* has a standard set of twenty-four attributes that qualify four different words for bovines, so that the density of information is much lower here than in most other lists. Several compositions, including *Word List C*, *Grain*, and *Plants*, despite their conventional labels, have hardly any thematic organization at all.

The archaic lists were used as instruments to teach the newly invented accounting system, yet their contents suggest that they are also something else. The most frequent list, the list of professions *Lu A*, contains about 140 entries, very few of which are ever encountered in contemporary accounts. The same holds true for the other lists. The numerous complex signs in *Vessels*, consisting of the sign for container inscribed with the sign for some commodity, are rarely, if ever, attested outside of the lexical corpus. In other words, the lexical corpus contains many words and signs that seem superfluous and cannot be explained by the immediate necessities of education.⁹

The cosmological or theological interpretation of this apparent lack of fit between the lexical and the administrative corpus is untenable because, as one may see in the list above, many essential elements of any cosmology are missing, such as gods, stars, rivers, mountains, and wild animals. At the same time, a list of vessels and garments—including many apparently newly created signs—seems oddly out of place in a theological corpus.

It is necessary, therefore, to find another way of explaining the incongruous relationship between the thematic lists and the administrative texts. To do so, we have to look in more detail at the surviving records.

Nouns, Numbers, and Days

In his overview of the archaic text corpus Bob Englund (1998) identified five administrative “offices:” fisheries; domesticated animals and animal products; labor organization; grain and grain products;

⁹ It should be noted, though, that such incongruence between teaching tools and actual writing practice is a constant throughout the history of cuneiform education.

and fields. Each of these “offices” deals with a specific set of goods and uses characteristic numerical systems. Fishermen not only deliver fish, but also other marsh products, including wild boar and birds. The animals office deals with the accounting of sheep, goats, cows, and pigs, but also with milk and textiles. The grain office is responsible for beer production. A smaller group of administrative texts deals with metal objects (see W 13946,a; W 13946,b; W 13946,d; W 13946,n; and several other texts in the W 13946 group; W 14265).

In addition to such commodities, the archaic accounts include references to persons, times, and places. There is a rough match between the types of words needed in the accounts and those listed in the lexical corpus:

Subject	Lexical Text (Conventional Label)
numbers	“grain” (<i>Word List D</i>)
grain and grain products	“grain” (<i>Word List D</i>)
fish	fish
birds	birds
domestic animals	animals
wood and wood products	wood
dairy products	vessels
containers	vessels
textiles	vessels
metals	metals
persons	<i>Lu A</i> ; officials
place names	cities
time indications	“plant”

The match is not exact. The archaic corpus uses many different kinds of number systems; almost none of those appear in the lexical corpus. Personal names and the names of gods do not appear in the lexical texts, although a small number of personal names may appear in the *Officials* list. There are two exemplars of a *Swine* list, but they are not duplicates of each other, and therefore it appears that there is no standardized lexical composition concerning this subject. Nevertheless, the correspondence is close, even the more so when one considers the negative evidence. Wild animals, stars, and rivers are of little use in this administrative system and they are absent from the lexical texts. These compositions do contain many words and signs that are not otherwise attested, but the categories of words represented match the administrative corpus very well.

The Urge to be Complete

The archaic lexical lists seem to display a drive to be complete, to include every possible item in a certain category—even if it was entirely useless within the administrative system of the time. Rather than postulating a specific Sumerian character trait or mentality, we may explain the appearance of the archaic corpus in more practical terms. Creating a true *system* cannot be done bit by bit—the whole needs to be functional from the start and therefore it must be able to accommodate all possibilities.¹⁰ Writing is an excellent example. An alphabetic system cannot be developed letter by letter; the idea becomes useful only once the whole set of characters is in place. The same holds true for an administrative system. A bookkeeping software package that can perform all but one of the basic bookkeeping functions is entirely useless. Those who designed the archaic bookkeeping system went for even the remotest possibilities. All these officials that never took charge of deliveries were still listed in *Lu A*—because once upon a time they might. The drive to be complete, therefore, has a very practical background in the need to design something entirely new. We may again invoke the parallel with a software package here. Most of us only use a few pages of any software manual—the great majority of the options are obscure and very rarely used. The manual, however, must be complete, and by necessity lists them all.

At the same time, the people who created the archaic lists may well have enjoyed the idea of inventing signs for as many birds or fish as they could think of. In other words, there is an intellectual and speculative background to the archaic lexical lists, although the intellectual effort builds on the needs of an administrative system, not on theology. It has been convincingly argued that *Lu A* represents a full inventory of the administrative hierarchy of Uruk, with the highest official heading the list (most recently Englund 1998:103–6). Apart from an administrative and intellectual relevance *Lu A* may thus also have an ideological background, and this may well account for the extraordinary number of copies found. The lexical texts, therefore, push the limits of this new administrative technique, accommodating for intellectual and ideological contents at least in some marginal way. To realize the full potential of intellectual and ideological uses

¹⁰ That the archaic writing system was created *ab ovo* as a system (rather than being a gradual development from something else) has been argued for some time by Michalowski; see in particular Michalowski (1994).

of writing, however, the cuneiform system needed the ability to represent language—a development that took several centuries to materialize.

Sumerian Word List C

We may now take a closer look at *Word List C* and try to understand how this composition fits in the world of archaic writing. Based on formal criteria, the text may be divided into three sections of unequal length. The first consists of a short and enigmatic introduction of just two lines, which was expanded to four in later versions. The middle section is formed by a long passage which lists quantities of animals, food items, and other commodities; this passage is repeated in its entirety, word for word, and sign for sign. The third section, finally, is another long passage that may contain words and expressions that refer to raw materials and to work on the land. Admittedly, this last section contains many items that are unintelligible, and may therefore include other themes as well.

The Introduction

The introduction may well provide explicit clues to the meaning and function of the composition, but it is frustratingly laconic and opaque. In the archaic version the introduction takes only two lines, and there is some variation among the sources (W15895, bb):

SAG̃ KI_a AD_a
HAL ABRIG AD_a

Several sources add UD in one or in both lines. Some scholars have ventured the hypothesis that UD introduces “when” clauses (see sections 1.3 and 1.4), but we lack the parallels in the archaic corpus to support such an interpretation. The word abrig is known from lists of professions and is used in later Sumerian for a purification priest. The ED version is only slightly better comprehensible:

ad-gi₄
ki-saĝ
ad-hal
abrig

The word ad-gi₄ means “counsel;” ad-hal = “secret,” and ki-saĝ may stand for saĝ-ki = “rites.” Unfortunately, none of our sources places these words in a meaningful sentence, and we have no checks to confirm that these isolated words indeed meant in the archaic period what they meant more than a thousand years later. Joan Westenholz’s translation of these lines (see above 1.4) may be right or not—we simply cannot say.

The List of Commodities

The introduction is followed by a list of animals, fish, herbs, eggs and other commodities, with indications of quantities (lines 3–26, or 5–28 in the post-archaic versions). Where understandable, the entries are directly related to food and food producing animals. Many of the items are relatively well understood, because the words appear in other archaic contexts as well. Here is a brief passage:

18	10 ga _b	10 units of milk
19	10 gara _{2a}	10 units of cream
20	10 ab ₂	10 cows
21	1 gud	1 bull
22	10 u ₈	10 ewes
23	1 utua _b	1 ram

The list of commodities is followed by four lines that may be interpreted as names of professions:

27	kuš ₇ (IŠ _b)	steward
28	nar	singer
29	UB ŠAG _{4a1}	barber?
30	ĝar	?

The interpretation and reading of these lines remains provisional and is based on the comparison with later versions (ED):

29	kuš ₇	steward
30	nar	singer
31	ĝar	?
32	kinda ₂ SAHAR šag ₄	barber,

In at least one of the archaic sources (W 20266,117) the last two lines are inverted, as they are in the ED sources, and at least two archaic sources have line 29 as ŠAG_{4a1} URI, where URI is identical to kind₂ in the ED version. The ED entry may be compared to

ED Lu₂ B (= SF 70) 30: kinda₂ SAHAR ĠAR. In the Old Babylonian version šag₄ (archaic 29/ED 32) is expanded to šag₄ nam-gu₂ šum₂ (32a).¹¹ This line, which may function as a kind of subscript and may contain some indication of how Old Babylonian scribes interpreted the text, is unfortunately unclear (see the discussion above §1.2).

The list of commodities and officials(?) is repeated line by line (31–58). The Old Babylonian version has again the additional line šag₄ nam-gu₂ šum₂ (60a).

The Final Section

The final section consists of some thirty lines; many of these lines seem to refer to plants or other agrarian products, but there are no numbers—except, perhaps, for šar₂ (1 N₄₅) in 59–60:

59 šar₂ ki_a
60 šar₂ ki_a ki_a

Lines 61–66 may contain words for raw materials, including wood, plum (šennur), reed, and rushes(?), followed by the name of a temple or administrative center (e₂ piriġ ug_x(EZEN)-ga “house of the exalted lion;” this interpretation is again based on ED and O.B. versions).¹² In 68–94 (end of text) the later versions suggest that this section deals with work in fields, ditches, etc., as the following passage may show (ED version 74–80; Archaic version 72–76):

ED	Archaic
74 al-tar	72 gi al [. . .]
75 al-tar gana ₂	
76 šag ₄ gu ₂ gi ₄	ø
77 pa ₅	73 A
78 pa ₅ lum _x (ZU&ZU.SAR) ¹³	74 A SAR rĠIŠ?r[. . .]
79 ġiš	75 ġiš
80 ġiš ^{is} apin sur _x (EREN ₂) ¹⁴	76 apin sur _x (EREN ₂)

¹¹ The line appears in Ni 1597 (joins *SLT* 42), quoted in Englund and Nissen (1993:25 with n. 49).

¹² This reading is indicated by the Schøyen text, which reads e₂ piriġ u₉(EZENxAN) confirming the Old Babylonian e₂ piriġ u. Both Fara sources read e₂ piriġ EZEN-ga. For ED ug_x = exalted see Cohen (1976).

¹³ For lum_x(ZU.SAR) see Krebernik (1998:275).

¹⁴ For this reading of EREN₂ see Steinkeller (1990).

The passage includes words about hoeing (ED 74–75), ditches (ED 77–78) and plow teams (ED 80). Line ED 76, which has no parallel in the archaic version, may refer to a time of the year—spring floods—when work on the ditches was to be performed.¹⁵

The final ten lines are duplicated by the first ten lines of the ED version of the *Plants* list (*SF* 58 and parallels, not preserved in archaic duplicates). The connection between *Word List C* and the *Plants* list is perhaps confirmed by the fact that one archaic tablet contained both (W 20266, 44), but other examples of such combinations are known.¹⁶ The penultimate line of the archaic version (93) may be read *sanga₂ sar*.¹⁷ In the Early Dynastic version, which in this section differs in quite some details from the archaic text, this becomes the final line (97). The verb *sar* is used in colophons in texts from Fāra and Abu Salabikh for “to write” (see Biggs 1974:33–35 and Krebernik 1998:325–33) and this may well be how Early Dynastic scribes interpreted this final line (“written by the purification priest”). It is unlikely, however, that this is the actual meaning of the archaic text. First, *sar* is not known in this function in archaic documents. Second, BAD SUG (Archaic 91) and *sar sanga₂* (Archaic 93) are known from the “Figure aux Plumes” in what seems to be a list of field names (see Gelb et al. 1991:67),¹⁸ and this may be a likely interpretation for the final section of our text as well.

An Elementary Exercise

The difference between the thematic archaic lexical lists and *Word List C* is not only found in formal characteristics, such as the use of numbers and the repetition of a passage, but also, and more importantly, in the relevance of this exercise for writing actual administrative records. Where texts such as *Lu A* and *Fish* may be compared to the exhaustive manuals of a software package that document every obscure feature of the program, *Word List C* is more like a quick reference guide, concentrating on frequently used elements of the

¹⁵ For the expression *ša₄ gu₂ gi₄*, “flood,” a common metaphor for abundance, see most recently Steinkeller (2004a:143).

¹⁶ For instance W 11986,a which contains *Lu A* and *Metals*.

¹⁷ The ED versions have *sanga₂ (LAK175) sar*. For LAK 175 = *sanga₂* see Krebernik (1998:283), with earlier literature. For the archaic sign (“ŠAGAN”) and its reading see Steinkeller (1995:708–9).

¹⁸ See also Wilcke (1995).

system such as animals, numbers, foodstuff, and the terminology for work in the fields. It is instructive to look at the numbers in *Word List C*, which appear exclusively in the repeated section, the list of commodities.

3	5 LAGABxNAGA	5 units of salt(?)
4	5 gazi	5 units of mustard
5	5 LAGABxNE.E ₂	5 units of ?
6	5 uz _a	5 ducks
7	5 maš si _{4a}	5 ?
8	10 TU	10 TU animals ¹⁹
9	10 gukkal	10 <i>gukkal</i> sheep
10	1 KAL _a ab ₂	1 milk(?) cow ²⁰
11	1 amar ga _b	1 suckling calf
12	10 SUHUR	10 ?
13	10 KAR _{2a}	10 ?
14	3 KAD _{4b}	3 ?
15	3 ZATU612	3 units of cereal dish ²¹
16	4 an-ġir _{2a}	4 metal knives(?)
17	10 anše da	10 . . . donkeys ²²
18	10 ga _b	10 units of milk
19	10 gara _{2a}	10 units of cream
20	10 ab ₂	10 cows
21	1 gud	1 bull
22	10 u ₈	10 ewes
23	1 utua _b	1 ram
24	10 ud _{5a}	10 goats
25	1 maš ₂	1 billy goat
26	61 mušen nunuz [?] -a ²³	61 eggs?

¹⁹ TU is a domestic animal, not a dove. See *Sumerian Word List D* (MEE 3 172–3), line 61 and 84 where TU appears immediately before gukkal, as is the case here.

²⁰ The interpretation is based on the OB parallel which has ab₂ ga gu₇-eš (see Green and Nissen 1987:228).

²¹ The ED texts read LAK 384, (to be read uz_x?), which indicates some food product, perhaps a dish of cereal products (see Civil 1983 for an extensive discussion of this sign).

²² For the identification of the sign (ZATU 297) as ANŠE (instead of KIŠ) see Steinkeller (2004b:179). The Old Babylonian text has [x¹] da-ri-a.

²³ The sign read nunuz here was read BALA_a in ATU 3. In W 21208, 2 (Plate 51) the sign is a true BALA; in W 20266,66 (Plate 50) it may well be NUNUZ, in other sources the sign is broken (for archaic NUNUZ see Steinkeller (1995:706–7).

While much is uncertain or speculative here, this list will do very well to engrain the correct writing of the basic numbers 1, 10, and 60 and their differences and given the importance of that skill it makes a lot of sense to repeat the whole passage. *Word List C* allowed the student to combine numbers with nouns in what appear to be realistic example entries. Most interesting is the last item in the passage quoted above, which perhaps means “61 eggs.” Later versions of the text have 71 nuz kad₄^{mušen} “71 eggs of the kad₄ bird” (an unidentified bird).²⁴ In cuneiform, the significance of the number 71 is immediately clear: it is the combination of the three most basic number signs in the sexagesimal system: 60 + 10 + 1. The archaic text reads 61, combining only two such signs—one variant exemplar (W 21208, 2), however, sides with the later versions and has the number 71. The number was chosen for its instructional value.

The archaic writing system is an administrative tool, and therefore, numbers and number writing are crucial for anyone who needs to learn how to use it. Archaic metrology is very complex, using five basic systems and several derived ones. In spite of their complexity and importance, numbers are not treated to any large extent in the archaic lexical corpus. The *Word Lists C* and *D (Grain)* pay some attention to numbers, but this stands in no relation to the significance of number writing in archaic record keeping. To some extent this may be explained by the very importance and ubiquity of numbers. The metrological systems that seem so complicated to the modern observer presumably were in common use and familiar to everybody—even those outside the circles of scribal specialists. Numbers are not difficult to draw, they are rather straightforward in design, and their proper use was easier to learn through accounting exercises (several of which have been identified) than through lists (see further Englund 1998:106–10).

In contrast to the thematic lists, *Word List C* is an exercise that remains relatively close to the practice of archaic writing. Among the frequently attested lists (*Lu A, Vessels, Word List C, Metal*) it is no doubt the one with the most practical relevance. Far from being literature or secret lore, *Word List C* is an exercise in elementary administrative skills.

²⁴ See Veldhuis (2004:241–2).

The Later History of Word List C

Word List C became part of the main stream of the lexical tradition in the third millennium and was still known in Ur III and Old Babylonian Nippur. Copies of the list have been found in the Mesopotamian heartland (Fara, Abu Salabikh) as well as in Syria (Ebla) in ED times. Interpolations in the text may reflect the attempts of the scribes to make sense of a composition that must have been rather opaque to them.

The single extant Old Babylonian copy is written on a small six-sided prism, identical in size and shape to a contemporary prism that contained *ED Lu A*.²⁵ The two no doubt belong together, and may have been the proud possession of a Nippur scholar. Lexical texts in Nippur first of all served scribal education, witnessed by the thousands of lexical exercise tablets. These two prisms, however, are hardly school texts. They are more likely written by an accomplished scribe who copied these enigmatic texts to appropriate part of an ancient tradition, a chain of knowledge that went back all the way to the invention of writing.

Without changing much in its actual wording *Word List C* came a long way from an elementary exercise in the archaic period to a piece of venerated traditional knowledge in the Old Babylonian period. While this is a remarkable career, it is by no means exceptional. In the history of cuneiform several lists that were originally designed as primers became bearers of venerable or speculative knowledge. A first example is *Syllable Alphabet A*, an elementary exercise which probably goes back to the Ur III period,²⁶ and which consists of basically meaningless syllable combinations. It is one of the very few exercise texts that was rigidly standardized in all Old Babylonian scribal centers. In the Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian period it was provided with speculative translations in Akkadian—apparently inspired by its enigmatic contents (see Farber-Flügge 1999). Second, *S^a*—an elementary sign list used in the Sippar area in the Old Babylonian period (see Tanret 2002)—was used later on to organize a variety

²⁵ For a photograph of both prisms side by side see Veldhuis (2004:92 and pl. 35). Both prisms are broken; the pieces ended up in Philadelphia and Istanbul. The *ED Lu A* piece is CBS 7845 (*SLT* 113) + Ni 1600 + Ni 2528 (see Veldhuis and Hilprecht 2003–2004).

²⁶ A probable Ur III exemplar is *MVN* 6 4 (transliteration only).

of scholarly data, including the mysterious lists that link a sign with a number (Pearce 1996). Again, the erstwhile elementary school books have turned into the speculative tools of a scholar.

Archaic cuneiform was not a tool for writing poetry or narrative. It was an administrative tool with extraordinary flexibility—the potential of which went far beyond the wildest imagination of its inventors.

APPENDIX

Sources

The archaic sources of Sumerian Word List C are all published and edited in Englund and Nissen (1993:112–20).²⁷ The Early Dynastic and later sources known by the time were edited by Pettinato in *MEE* 3 (1981), 155–165. More recent lists of sources appeared in Englund and Nissen (1993:25 note 49) and Krebernik (1998:338, under *SF* 12). A newly identified source is MS 2462 (Schøyen collection); for convenience a full list, excluding the archaic sources, follows:

ED III	Fara	<i>SF</i> 12; <i>TSS</i> 264 + <i>SF</i> 13
	Abu-Salabikh	<i>OIP</i> 99 402?; 459; 465; AbS 2545 (<i>Iraq</i> 52 Pl. XV)
	Ebla	<i>MEE</i> 3 47
	Unknown	Schøyen MS 2462 http://www.nb.no/baser/schoyen/
Pre-Sargonic	Unknown	<i>MVN</i> 3 15
Ur III	Nippur	6 N-T 676 (unpublished)
Old Babylonian	Nippur	<i>SLT</i> 42 + Ni 1597 (unpublished)

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²⁷ See now the Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts, <http://cuneiform.ucla.edu/dc/lt>.

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