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Historical Perception in the Sargonic Literary Tradition

The Implications of Copied Texts

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Abstract:

My research in Ancient Near Eastern Studies centres on Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2340-2284 B.C.) and his grandson Narām-Sîn (ca. 2260-2223 B.C.), two of the greatest of Mesopotamian monarchs, and their legacy, which flourished until the end of Mesopotamian civilization. It focuses, in particular, on the role of historical perception in ancient times, and the evolution and mutation of historical topoi. Investigating how later peoples in Babylonia and Assyria perceived these kings can tell us about how they perceived themselves, their past and their cultural inheritance. Among the sources of the Sargonic literary corpus that are informative about ancient historical perceptions are legends, chronicles, omens, personal and royal letters, votive inscriptions, rituals, incantations and late copies of genuine Sargonic royal inscriptions. This paper will explore some of the significances of the late copies, and what they suggest about the copyists' views of history.

My current doctoral research focuses on a group of Mesopotamian kings from the second half of the third millennium B.C., who are usually referred to as the 'Sargonic Dynasty' or the 'Old Akkadian Dynasty'. Its founder, Sargon of Akkad, as well as his grandson, Narām-Sîn, became two of the principle protagonists in Mesopotamian literary traditions for almost two thousand years after the fall of their dynasty. Exemplars of texts referring to these kings have not only been found in Mesopotamia, but as far away as Kanesh¹ and Hattuša² in Turkey (see figure 1), Mari in Syria,³ Susa⁴ in Iran (see figure 2), and even el-Amarna⁵ in Egypt. In fact, texts alluding to the Sargonic kings have been found in five different ancient languages: Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite,⁶ Hurrian⁷ and Elamite.⁸ It should also be noted that these are only the editions that have survived. Many more have probably eluded excavation, or were in fact transmitted orally and never written down in the first place.⁹

¹ An unusual Old Assyrian text from Kanesh, which was dealt with in this author's 2005 MPhil dissertation (unpublished), is written in a pseudo-biographical style. For a photograph and copy of the tablet see Günbattu 1997, 152-155. See Van de Mieroop 2000, 146-159 for an English translation, and Hecker 2001, 58-60 for a translation in German. For studies of the text see Dercksen 2001, as well as Foster 2002, 79-80, who treats the text as a parody.

² For the latest treatment of an Akkadian Sargonic text from Hattuša see Westenholz 1997, 280-293.

³ See Birot 1980, 139-150, for a translation, copy and study of the Akkadian text Mari 12803, which mentions funerary offerings made to the 'divine statues' of Sargon and Narām-Sîn.

⁴ According to Cooper 1983, 67-71, a manuscript of the Sumerian legend *The Curse of Agade*, museum number Sb 12364 + 14154, comes from Susa. See also Hinz 1967, 66-69, for a treaty between Narām-Sîn and an unknown Elamite ruler.

⁵ The el-Amarna exemplar of the *King of Battle* legend appears to have been written in a western peripheral dialect of Akkadian: see Westenholz 1997, 102-133.

⁶ For a Hittite version of the Sargon legend *King of Battle* see Güterbock 1969, 14-26. Reference to Sargon is also made in the bilingual annals of Hattusili I: see Güterbock 1964, 1-6.

⁷ For a Hurrian ritual which mentions Sargon see Beckman 1983, 101-103, de Martino 1993, 121-134 and Wilhelm 2003, 393-395.

⁸ Hinz 1967, 66-69.

⁹ For a study of oral traditions in Akkadian literature with emphasis on the Sargonic legends see Westenholz 1992, 123-154.

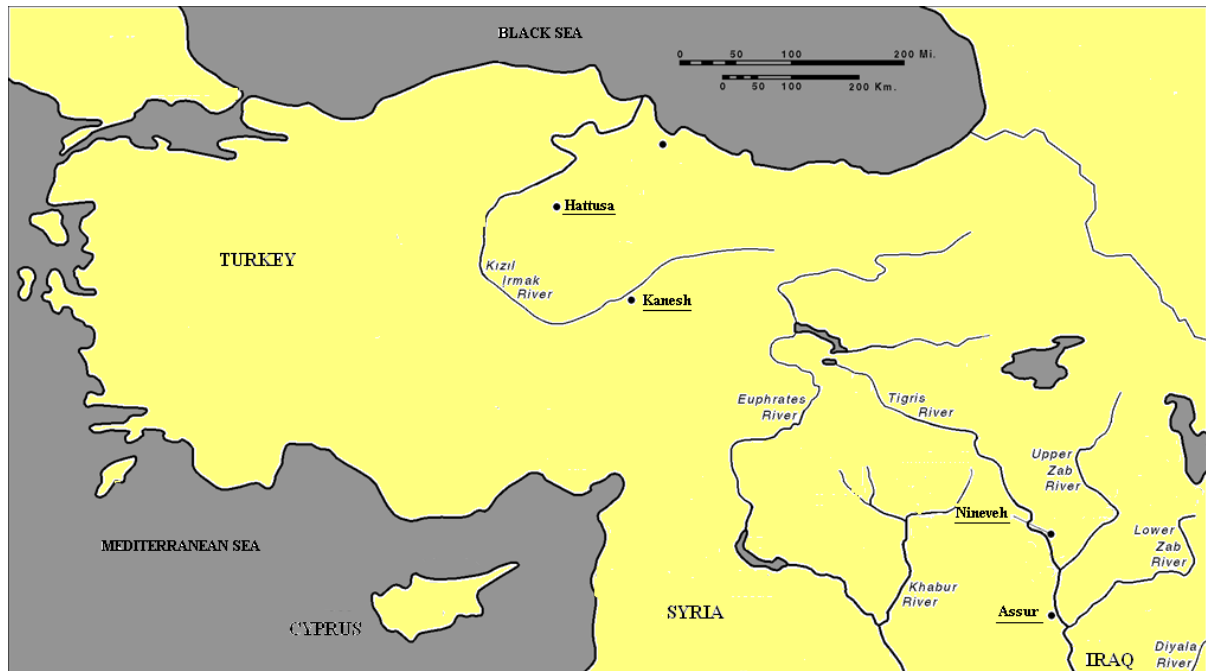


Figure 1. Provenance of the major texts of the Sargonic corpus in northern Iraq and Turkey.

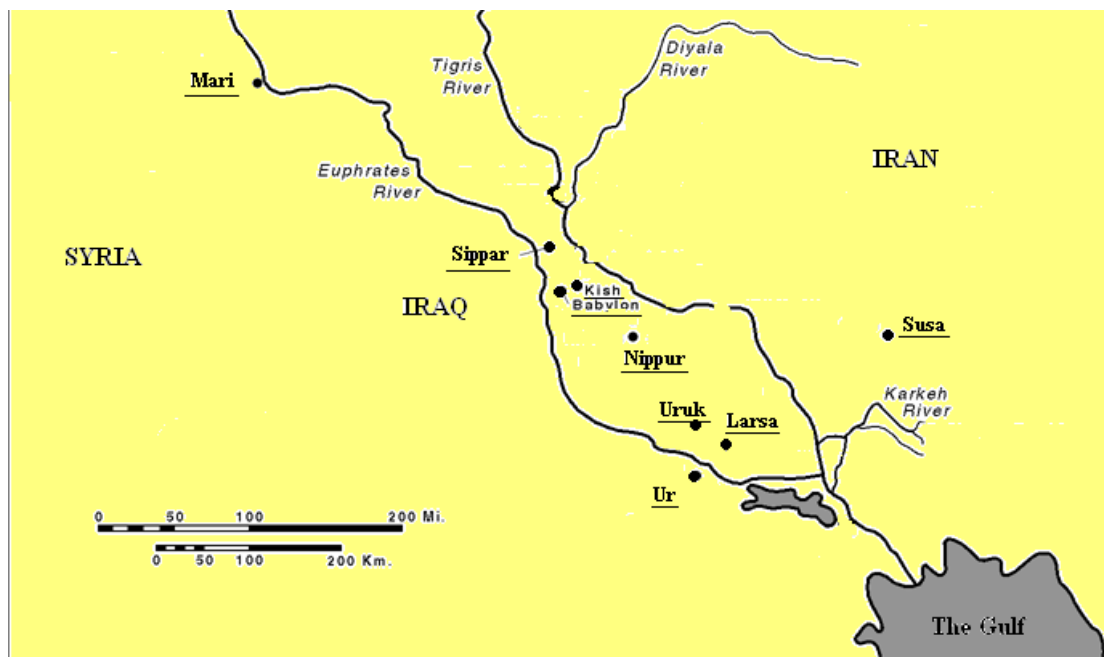


Figure 2. Provenance of the major texts of the Sargonic corpus in Syria, southern Iraq and Iran.

The area of my research with which this paper is concerned is that of copyists and copied texts, and the implications they have on our understanding of how ancient historiographers perceived their own history. The practice of copying older textual material was widespread in the ancient Near East, particularly in the second millennium during the Old Babylonian period. At this time, a great scholarly interest in the art of writing, as well as archaic writing forms, seems to have been prevalent in the scribal schools of Mesopotamia. Commonly found in the cuneiform textual archives are examples of collections that have been compiled with older, individual texts from similar genres. For example, we find collections of ancient royal letters from the third millennium being copied and compiled during the second millennium. Other examples include chronologies being compiled from ancient year names, eponyms and lists of rulers known as ‘King Lists’, or didactic texts being formed from what were already ancient omens.¹⁰ Probably the most commonly copied genre was that of royal inscription. In fact, it is to the eager copyists of the Old Babylonian period that we owe much of our knowledge about the history of the Sargonic dynasty, since many of the original third millennium inscriptions have disappeared from the archaeological record (see figure 3).¹¹

Chronology	Sargonic texts
<i>ca. 2340-2198</i>	Sargonic royal inscriptions
<i>ca. 2000-1595</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Old Babylonian copies of Sargonic royal inscriptions 2. Fake autobiographies 3. Fake letters 4. Legends
<i>ca. 934-610</i>	<p>Scholarly texts regarding the Sargonic dynasty:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A geographical treatise 2. Chronographic texts 3. Historical omens
<i>ca. 610-539</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Neo-Babylonian copies of Sargonic inscriptions (<i>e.g.</i> BM 38302 and BM 78290) 2. Fake autobiographies (<i>e.g.</i> BM 90122, Si₃ + Ni 1288, and IM 124625) 3. Legends

Figure 3. The Sargonic literary tradition through the years.

¹⁰ A more comprehensive review of the different types of copies and a bibliography can be found in Glassner 2004, 15-20.

¹¹ For the royal inscriptions of the Sargonic dynasty, originals and copies, see Frayne 1993.

The prolific practice of copying old and ancient texts continued to flourish into the first millennium. A good example of a first millennium copy is tablet BM 38302, now housed in the British Museum. This is a Neo-Babylonian copy of a genuine Sargonic royal inscription, and purports to record an inscription of King Šar-kali-šarrī, the last king of the Sargonic dynasty.¹² It is one of those rare copies which can be compared with similar texts from the third millennium B.C.,¹³ and therefore allows us to determine how faithfully the copyist has followed an original. In this case, it appears at first glance at least, that he copied an original text exactly, with the slight addition of a colophon stating that his source was a stone foundation tablet.¹⁴ However, there is some room for speculation as to whether the scribe who copied this inscription did so entirely correctly, because all of the deeds described in the copy are in fact known to have been accomplished by Šar-kali-šarrī's father, Narām-Sîn.¹⁵ Like Šar-kali-šarrī, Narām-Sîn is recorded as having built the temple of Aštar, quashed a rebellion and smote the mountain areas from the 'Lower Sea to the Upper Sea', as well as reached the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹⁶

This has understandably led scholars to wonder whether some mistake has been made in the first millennium copy.¹⁷ Douglas Frayne, for example, posed the question whether it is '...possible that the Neo-Babylonian copyist had a broken original text of Narām-Sîn at his disposal with the royal name missing and he mistakenly restored the name of Šar-kali-šarrī in the lacuna?'¹⁸ If this is the case, it would have some interesting implications on how we today can interpret the copyist's view of history. We must question why the copyist evoked Šar-kali-šarrī's name as the author of this inscription. The most probable explanation is that by this late period, about eighteen hundred years later, the historical facts about the Sargonic dynasty had suffered some inevitable distortion. After all, the late Neo-Babylonian historiographers would have been relying on much of the same patchy evidence as we do today, some of which would have been copies themselves. If copyists took it upon themselves to restore broken copies of texts which may have already been restored to some extent, it is easy to see how the historical traditions could evolve and result in a tenuous understanding of Sargonic chronology, as well as an unsystematic grasp of what each king had achieved, and when. As further support for this theory, I will mention three other instances where confusion between the tradition of Sargon and the tradition of Narām-Sîn has occurred in the literary corpus: firstly, in a text known as the *Sumerian Kinglist*, both Sargon and Narām-Sîn are credited with a lengthy reign of 56 years each, when it is clear that the total number of years

¹² Sollberger 1982, 345-348; Frayne 1984, 23-27; and Frayne 1993, 192-194.

¹³ See Frayne 1984, 23 for a list of tablet numbers and publication details of the Old Akkadian exemplars.

¹⁴ Frayne 1984, 24: 'According to a narua of mar .ša stone.' See also Frayne 1984, 25 for an argument for reading 'foundation tablet' instead of 'stele'.

¹⁵ Displaying the strongest similarities to BM 38302 are two Narām-Sîn inscriptions: Frayne 1993, 137-140. Compare, for example: BM 38302 "Šar-kali-šarrī, the mighty, king of Akkad, builder of the ... of the temple of the goddess Inanna in Zabala. When the four quarters together had been subdued, then, from beyond the Lower Sea even unto the Upper Sea, he smote for Enlil the peoples and the mountains in their totality, and he turned their cities into heaps of rubble. Before Enlil, Šar-kali-šarrī, the mighty, in punishing the evil (enemies) of Enlil in fierce battles, shows no mercy to anyone" (after Sollberger 1982, 347: 1-44) with the Old Akkadian diorite foundation tablet "Narām-Sîn, the mighty, king of Akkad, builder of the ... of the temple of the goddess Inanna in Zabala. When the four quarters together revolted against him, from beyond the Lower Sea as far as the Upper Sea he smote the people and all the Mountain Lands for the god Enlil, and brought their kings in fetters before the god Enlil" (after Frayne 1993, 138: 1-43).

¹⁶ For the reaching of the river sources see Frayne 1993, 140.

¹⁷ As first noted by Sollberger 1982, 345-346.

¹⁸ Frayne 1984, 25.

for the dynasty can support only one reign of this length;¹⁹ secondly, in a fake royal inscription often dubbed the *Sargon Parody*,²⁰ Sargon is described as having shaved the heads of his enemies, a literary *topos* which was originally associated only with Narām-Sîn's treatment of his adversaries;²¹ and thirdly, also in the *Sargon Parody*, Sargon's name is written with the cuneiform sign that denotes a deity, but in the genuine royal inscriptions it was, in fact, Narām-Sîn who had his name written as though he were a god.²²

Returning to BM 38302, it is clear that the first millennium copyist had a very deliberate concern with the past. His copy is exact, and even if he has restored it incorrectly it seems as if he has done so only mistakenly. There is no evidence that he has tried to manipulate the text to suit any purpose of his own. Therefore we may conclude that the copyist saw an intrinsic value in preserving the past. His aim was to create a record of Babylonian history so that it would not be forgotten in future generations, considering that the time about which he was concerned was nearly two millennia old. It would be incredible to think that the great antiquity of the Sargonic period of history did not impress ancient scribes and scholars, particularly when it was perceived as *their* history, the history of their land and their culture.

Another good example of the complexity of copied texts can be found in *The Cruciform Monument of Maništūšu*,²³ which is known from four manuscript sources differing to varying degrees (see figure 3 for a chronological overview):

1. BM 78290 (known as BM), a seemingly genuine copy of an authentic third millennium Sargonic royal inscription of Maništūšu, royal predecessor of Narām-Sîn;
2. BM 91022 (known as CM), a stone inscription from which the text takes its name, of probable Neo-Babylonian date, with many anachronisms, and purporting to be a Maništūšu royal inscription;
3. Si₃ + Ni 1288 (known as Si), a “duplicate of CM”²⁴ of Neo-Babylonian date, but without anachronisms; and
4. IM 124625 (which I shall refer to hereafter as IM), a Neo-Babylonian copy of CM.

Unlike BM 38302, *The Cruciform Monument of Maništūšu* is not a genuine like-for-like copy of a Sargonic royal inscription. As early as 1937, doubts were expressed about its authenticity, and it is now certain that CM (and its ‘copy’ IM) is, in fact, a forgery. As well as its many epigraphical, philological and material anachronisms, Sollberger has noted its many “mistakes which are not anachronisms but merely the result of the scribe's overreaching himself in his efforts to compose an ‘archaic’ text”.²⁵ To deliberately archaize a text is, of course, one of the clearest indications of an author's intentions. His concern is not, as was the case with BM 38302, to create a reliable historical record. His attitude to ‘history’ is not a

¹⁹ Jacobsen 1939; “...since Jacobsen has shown that the two figures of 56 years cannot be accommodated by the dynastic totals for the Akkadian dynasty, there must have been a confusion in the tradition here” (Frayne 1993, 84).

²⁰ See note 1.

²¹ Frayne 1993, 105.

²² That is, of course, unless the *Sargon Parody* reflects in some way the use of the divine determinative used by another king named Sargon (usually referred to as Sargon I in order to distinguish him from the Neo-Assyrian ruler Sargon II) who reigned during the Old Assyrian period. Almost nothing is known about Sargon I. For his royal inscriptions see Grayson 1987.

²³ For a comprehensive study, photograph, translation and bibliography on previous studies of *The Cruciform Monument* see Sollberger 1968, 50-70. The most recently discovered manuscript was published by Al-Rawi and George 1994, 139-148.

²⁴ Sollberger 1968, 52.

²⁵ Sollberger 1968, 51.

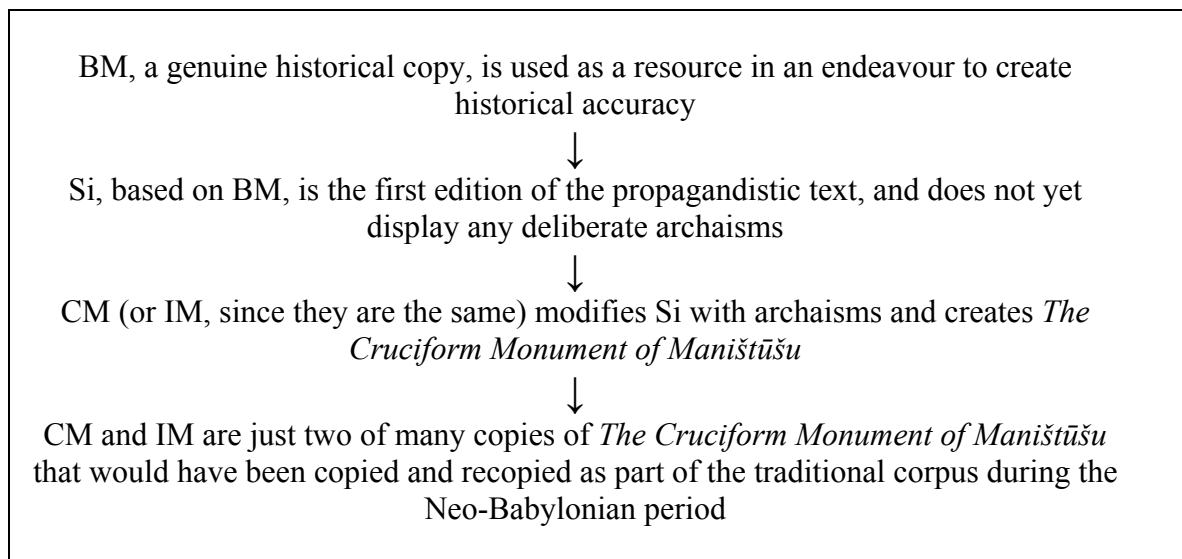
purist attempt at documentation, but one with agenda. To archaize an inscription is an attempt to improve its trustworthiness, which, *ipso facto*, brings into question its authenticity. It is now well accepted that the text was:

“a *fraus pia* perpetrated sometime in the Old-Babylonian period²⁶ to establish the great antiquity of some privileges and revenues of the E-babbar at Sippar, thereby strengthening the temple’s claims to them.”²⁷

The Cruciform Monument of Maništūšu, despite its telltale anachronisms, is in fact a surprisingly convincing and resourceful forgery due to the fact that it appears to have been based on genuine historical material: text BM.²⁸ Sollberger, due to the fact that Si contains none of the mistakes and anachronisms exhibited by CM and IM, was even able to identify the order in which *The Cruciform Monument of Maništūšu* came into existence:

“Si is a word-for-word duplicate of CM, but is it a mere copy of it? ...Si shows none of the archaisms or pseudo-archaisms of CM: it is written in ‘correct’ Neo-Babylonian. ...Si, far from being a copy of CM, is the original text composed by officials of the E-babbar for a scribe to turn into the ‘antique document’ they needed to reinforce their claims.”²⁹

Thus, the evolution of the text was as follows:



²⁶ For evidence that the fraud was already committed this early see Sollberger’s list of ‘material anachronisms’, 1968, 50-51.

²⁷ Sollberger 1968, 50, discussing this now accepted interpretation first concluded by Gelb 1949, 346-348.

²⁸ Sollberger writes, “...it is probably because of the availability of a Man-ištūšu text that the dotation was attributed to that king rather than to his much more famous successor, Narām-Suen” (Sollberger 1968, 52).

²⁹ Sollberger 1968, 52.

We are therefore very fortunate, since it is rare in the Sargonic literary corpus that the intentions of the forger can be so easily discerned. Studies of other pseudo-biographical or pseudo-autobiographical texts, such as the *Sargon Parody* and the *Sargon Birth Legend*, are yet to reach a consensus about their authors' intentions and perceptions of history.³⁰

To conclude, only by comparing copies of texts to their originals in this way can we begin to discern what were the attitudes of their authors towards the writing of history. We can begin to see how the Babylonians and Assyrians conceptualised their past, as well as what they considered to be a legitimate way in which to manifest it in writing. It is evident that for some authors, such as the author of BM 38302, the process of writing history was based on nothing more than the will to preserve ancient manuscripts. For others, such as the author of BM 91022, the writing of history was a process linked to other important factors such as intellectual, political or religious motivations. There are still countless unpublished cuneiform tablets around the world that are copies of older inscriptions. In the British Museum alone there are numerous that are in need of collating, ranging from copies of omens, astrological texts, economic texts, medical texts, literary texts, ritual texts, and of course, historical inscriptions. I am currently photographing and collating for my thesis many of these copies. Some of them are not as exact copies as the Neo-Babylonian copies discussed here, and in time I will study the palaeography and philology of these texts in order to try to determine whether a deliberately archaic script has been utilised in order to make them appear as though they were genuine or, at least, very antique inscriptions.

³⁰ It has been argued, for example, that the *Sargon Parody* was intended as a parody of the Sargonic literary tradition: see Foster 2002, 79-80. Whilst I am wholly in agreement with this interpretation, and have argued in its favour in my MPhil dissertation (unpublished), it is not universally accepted (see, for example, Hecker 2001, 58-60). The 'purpose' of *The Sargon Birth Legend* has received much study in Lewis, 1980.

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