

Local identities and the Old Babylonian literary curriculum

(Abstract)

A pivotal theoretical consideration of the present paper is that collective memory does not aim to preserve the past but to socially construct it through archives and school curricula, monuments and other public displays, commemorative acts and rituals. According to Halbwachs, the imagery of collective memory focuses on people and events as well as on their spatial reference points which he calls „places of memory“. Monuments and public displays, therefore, are landmarks on commemorative landscapes. Whereas natural landscapes exist in general categories, monuments focus attention on specific places and events and are important means for constructing symbolic landscapes.

Royal monuments in Mesopotamia mostly unite the two main reference points of collective memory, namely people and events, thematizing both in their inscriptions as well as in their iconography. Royal monuments were spatial and temporal landmarks at once. They established a material and visual connection to the past. They were loaded with memory. They were linked to historical figures. They had a didactic function. However, their role in the formation of local identities through their presence was not much acknowledged in previous research.

In contrast, the Sumerian literary curriculum as known to us from the Old Babylonian period is widely acknowledged as a powerful medium for creating an identity for the elite. It was also recognized, however, that this curriculum was quite variable from city to city as well as from school to school and therefore, it is problematic to describe it as an established literary canon.

The present paper aims to prove that this variability should be accredited to differences in local identities. Case studies on the material from Nippur and Ur will demonstrate the correspondence between the commemorative landscapes defined by royal monuments as well as the scope of Sumerian literature, with a special focus on royal hymns.

Finally, I will propose that the Sumerian tradition and the Sumerian language was a focal point of local identities in southern Mesopotamia up to the 18th century BCE. Therefore, these identities proved useful for Rim-Sin II for unifying the local elites against the first dynasty of Babylon. The northern rulers aimed to forge a regional state in the South instead of the previous sociopolitical order based on city-states. The setting of the southern Sumerian tradition in opposition to the North would also explain why it vanished into oblivion after the rebellion ceased to succeed. Sumerian tradition from the Middle Babylonian period on is mostly based on the Old Babylonian material related to Babylon and not to the once clearly more significant southern centers.

Keywords: collective memory; Sumerian literature; royal monuments; Nippur; Ur