Libraries & Scribes in Mesopotamia

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Abstract

The Library For the People of Mesopotamia Means That Place Designated for Preserving a Group of clay Tablets , which Include the same Literary, Religious, Historical, Scientific Texts and other Sciences in all Fields and Details of their Daily life, Organized in the Building of the Temple, Palace or Residence, as the Collection of these Tablets can be That Priests, Scribes, Students, or some Individuals who were on the side of Knowledge Benefit from it and The Writer Appeared in Mesopotamian Society Since an Early Period, dating back to the Borders of 3000 BC. Among the class of Priests at the Beginning was an Urgent and Necessary need to meet the Economic Requirements of that Society , The Economic, Administrative, Property, and Religious Requirements of the Community were written down, as there were Schools to Train and Teach Young People Writing at the Time.

Libraries

The Archives in which Tablets were Stored and Found have Been Referred to Many Times Already. Excavations on Almost any Town or City site in Southern Iraq will Turn up at least few Tablets, and if one digs in a Town of the Old Babylonian Period it seems that one can find Tew Tablets in Almost Every House. Small Private Libraries Existed at all Periods recent Belgian Excavations at Tell ed-Der revealed a Library of some 3,000 Tablets in the House of a Priest, datable to c. 1635 BC, and the Agents of Ashurbanipal Reported to him on the contents of Several Private Libraries which they were

Sending to him from Babylonia. But it is the large state or temple archives that yield the most useful information about the Nature of the Contemporary Economy and Administration, and in most Periods, with the Exception of the Old Babylonian, it is the Formal libraries from Palace and Temple that Preserved the mass of Literary Texts.

The Accidents of Destruction and Recovery have somewhat Distorted our Picture of the History and Development of Mesopotamia. Some periods are extremely well known. The fall of the Ur Ill empire as a consequence of an Elamite raid in 2004 BC resulted in the accidental burial of huge archives in the ruins of Umma, Parrish Dagan and Girsu; only a fraction of the tablets from these sites have been published so far. Similarly, the Breaking of Babylon's domination of the south by the kings of the new Sealand Dynasty in the time of Sauna (1726 BC) and the Collapse of the First Dynasty of Babylon itself with the Hittite raid on Babylon in 1595 BC left large libraries for the archeologist at Larsa and Sippar. Most famous of all it the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, priceless source for the reconstruction of Babylonian and Assyrian literature, which comes to us courtesy of the Babylonians and Medes who sacked Nineveh in 612 BC, On the other and many historical Developments are still quite obscure because for long periods we have no significant Archives.

We have the impression, for instance, that there was a low level of economic activity in Babylonia for a century or two after the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon and again after the end of the Kassite Dynasty, but does the absence of tablets really imply this, or does it only mean that the country war at peace and no one's library was being burnt down.

The Great Archives from Mari and Ebla have given us a good idea of the nature of a Mesopotamian library, because (for once) they were properly excavated by competent archaeologists who kept a record of what was found in each room and even how the tablets lay on the floor. At Ebla one can see how the library was scattered across the floor as the wooden Shelves on Which it was Stored collapsed , The Ancient librarians, Like their Modern Successors, needed Systems to Record where to find their tablets. In the case of many large tablets from the Ur III period one can see brief notes written on one edge of the tablet, much like the title on the spine of a modern book, written so that the librarian looking along a Shelf Full of Tablets could pick out the one he needed. Mostly this applies to economic Texts, but Marginal notes are Found also, for instance, on tablets containing Multiplication tables. Where a library could not afford the expense of Wooden Shelves Tablets were Normally Stored in jars or Baskets, which had an Explanatory day tag tied on. Such tags have been found for Baskets of Sumerian Literary Texts, and Matching up the Titles recorded on the tags with the titles of known compositions shows us how much is still Unknown.

The idea of Storing tablets in Boxes is Reflected in literature too: an Old Babylonian epic Concerning Naram-Sin begins, Open the tablet-Box and Read the Stele. The Scribe Wishes to Create the Illusion that be is telling a story which has been preserved from distant days and lost in some Forgotten corner or Buried in a Box in the Foundations of a Building.

One device Occasionally used, Especially in the Old Babylonian Period, to ease the burden of Storing and Manipulating Many Large Tablets was to Compile Summaries of Several Contracts on a Single Tablet , The same thing could apply to library texts. A recent German Excavation at Isin has produced a fragment of a finely inscribed tablet with five different poetic compositions,

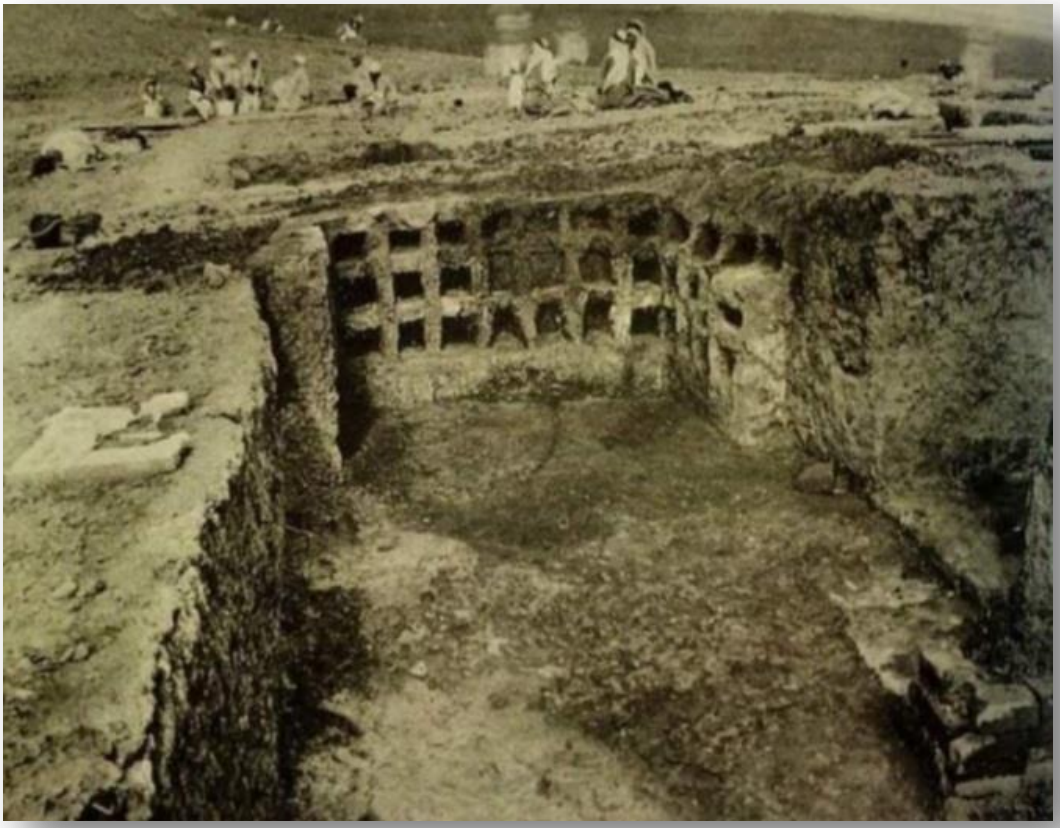
running to about 7,070 times in total,

A simple System of Keeping track of Literary Tablets was to add to the Colophon a Statement of the title of the Series to which the Tablet Belonged and the Number of the Tablet Within that Series. So the famous Epic of Gilgamesh in its latest version consisted of twelve tablets; the story of the Flood was sold on the eleventh tablet. The colophon reads, "He who saw everything, eleventh tablet. He who saw everything is the first line of the epic and Therefore its rule. To ensure that the scribe found correctly the next tablet of the Series its First line might also be added to the Colophon of the Preceding Tablet.

The Literary Libraries Largely Consisted of Standard Texts copied and recopied from one generation to the next. Occasional new texts were added from time to time, but they were few by comparison with the great mass of traditional Material. Much of this was not what we today would regard as literate, even if Assyriologists Continue to call such. The largest Group of texts Consists of omens, collections of observations made over hundreds of years concerned with the stars, the appearance of the liver of a sacrificial sheep, the movements of

birds, etc. Other categories of texts were the Lexical lists, Incantations, prayers, and the well-known epic literature. The late Leo Oppenheim, in a summary of traditional Mesopotamian Literature, Calculated that the whole of the Standard Corpus as Represented in a Library Like Ashurbanipal's could have run to as many as Een Hundred Different Tablets of Between Eighty and Two Hundred lines each ; for many Texts Ashurbanipal had Several Copies.

Today the discovery of a new Library of Library texts Generates Great Excitement among Assyriologists, but such Material as not Really typical of the Production of the Mesopotamian Scribes. Most of them, after all their Technical Training, Spent their Lives Occasionally Taking a Writing list of Deliveries of Sheep or Issues of Barley Rations and Letter by Dictation. The more Successful Scribes would End up as Senior Administrators in the state Bureaucracy, but most of their Colleagues would have been Happy Simply with their Status as Educated men and the Knowledge that their training Guaranteed them Employment.

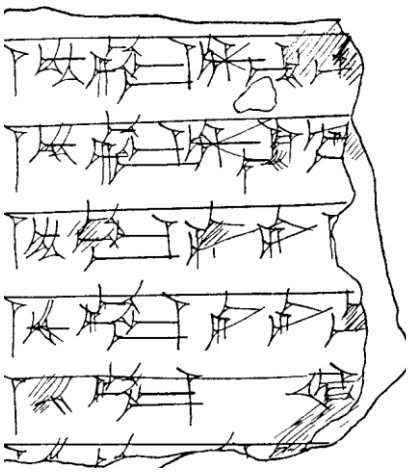


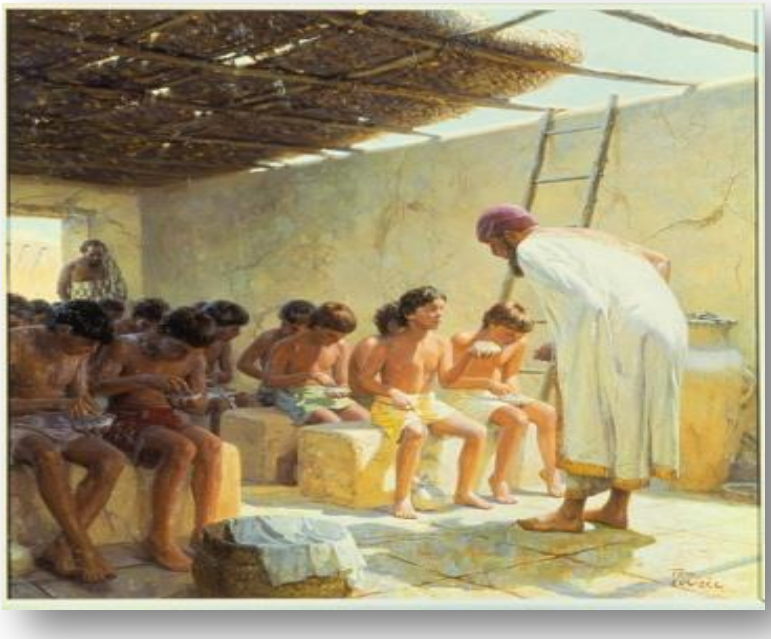
Scribal Training

Literacy was not widespread in Mesopotamia. The Scribes, like any craftsmen, had to undergo training, and having completed their training and become entitled to call themselves dubsar, 'scribe, they were members of a privileged élite who might look with contempt on their fellow citizens. Writing 'Ibni Marduk dubsar' was the equivalent of writing George Smith, B.A. The scribal profession was under the patronage of the Sumerian goddess Nisaba. Occasionally a scribe would end a long literary text with the Comment ^{d}Nisaba zami, "Oh Nisaba, praise. In later times her place was taken by the god Nabu of Borsippa. Whereas other gods were symbolised by Animals or stars, his symbol was the stylus(.)[1]

Our Picture of life in Babylonian Schools is based on a group of Sumerian literary compositions of the Old Babylonian period. A few of them became part of the standard literary tradition and were still being copied for the library of Ashurbanipal. Schooling began at an early age in the é-dubba, the 'tablet-house. The Headmaster was called ummia (or ummanu in Akkadian).[(2)]

He might be Assisted by an adda é-dubba, father of the tablet house, and an ugula, 'clerk. Much of the initial Instruction and Discipline Seems to have been in the Hands of a Student's 'Big Brother', an elder Student who is pictured as fluctuating between being a friend and a bolly. Each of these had to be Haltered or bribed with gifts from time to time to avoid a beating.





The French Excavations at Mari Revealed in the Palace of King Zimri-Lim a room with rows of clay benches. This has often been taken as a model of

what a Babylonian school would have looked like. Unfortunately no school Tablets were found in it so its use cannot be proved. It seems just as likely that students were taught outside in the courtyard, which was the courtyard of life in any Babylonian house. Almost all the private houses of this Period Excavated at Ur and Isen have a few school tears of one kind or another, suggesting that in wealthy families all the boys were sent to school. At Nippur one part of the town was so full of Literary Tablets that it has Become Known to Archaeologists as Tablet Hill; it may have been a Special scribal Quarter(3).

The First thing the Schoolboy had to Learn was how to make a Tablet and handle a stylus. First steps in writing were made on any piece of clay, learning to impress a simple cuneiform wedge, known in Sumerian as age, Babylonian miḫiştu (4).

The Schoolboy Practised the Horizontal, Vertical and Sloping Wedges Over and over again. Then he started on the basic sig-list, but this had to be learnt not only as a series of individual signs But also with the different syllables that they could represent. Thus, the sign A stood for (á ya) duru, e and a. He had to learn that A was the basic name of the sign. (He could Hot write A in capitals, but we do so sometimes to remind ourselves which sign we are dealing with.) Then be would go on to learn what were the many Babylonan equivalents of all these different signs and their alternative values. For instance, one type of sign-list reads di-i DI di-nu-um (i.e, the sign DI if read as di is the Sumerian equivalent, of dinum, lawsuit si-li-im DI ša-la-mu-um (the sign DI if read as silim is the equivalent of šalāmum, 'to be at peace"). After learning the basic signs, the pupil had to go on to all the thousands of different Sumerian words that were expressed by more than one sign. Here we can see the continuity of scribal tradition, as the signs being learnt by the very earliest scribes at Uruk were learnt in the same order hundreds of years later by scribes at Abu Salabikh and Uruk, and the Old Babylonian sign-lists were still found in Ashurbanipal's Library.

Learning to string signs together to write words seems to have been practiced by writing names. That at least is the interpretation of the many small tablets inscribed in a clumsy hand with three or four Sumerian names. Babylonian scribes with few exceptions are remarkably consistent in their application of the cuneiform script to the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. The consonant at the beginning of a syllable is hardly ever linked with a vowel from a preceding syllable; thus the word 'to', Akkadian ana, is consistently written a-na, not an-a. That is a simple enough example, but the principle extends throughout the phonetic representation of the Language, and must have been Taught in the Schools.(5)

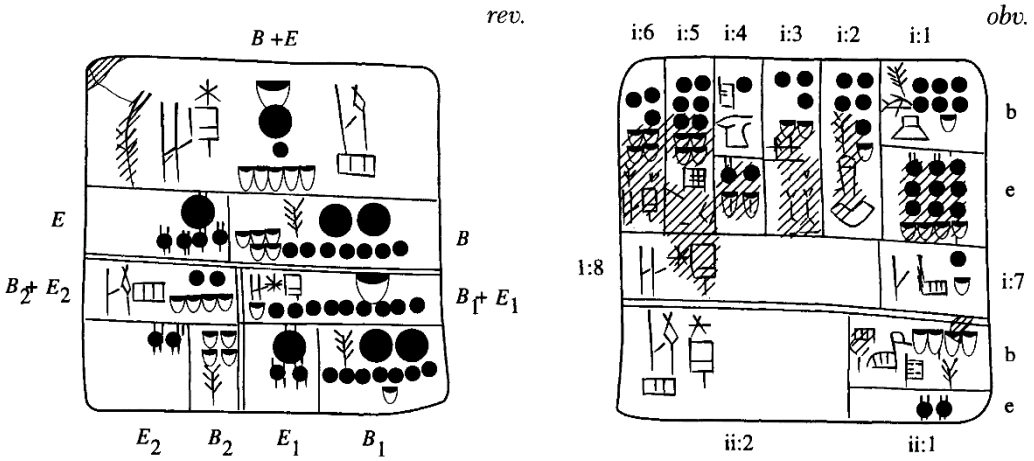
At this point the schoolboy was ready to go on to the next stage, which is marked by writing on a different kind of tablet, the round, bun-shaped tablet. On these the teacher would typically write out three lines on one side of the tablet, such as the names of gods, a list of technical terms, a short fragment of literature or a proverb; the schoolboy had to study these carefully, and then turn the tablet over and try to reproduce what the teacher had written. It is usually quite easy to see which side was written by the teacher and which by the Schoolboy , Finally, the Pupil reached the stage of learning and writing Sumerian literature. Much of Sumerian Literature as known in the Old Babylonian period is preserved for us only in school copies. It seems that the boys were copying from dictation, as again and again we Find that Different Copies of a text Write the Words out slightly Differently. That some-times makes it difficult for us to reconstruct the original form of the text. The Literature curriculum was very large and mostly Traditional, but even in the Old Babylonian period new Compositions were Being added, Mostly hymns to the gods on behalf of the king [6]

A Separate part of the Curriculum was Devoted to Mathematics, Taught by the (dub Sar nišid) 'scribe of Accounting, the (dub Sar Zaga) 'scribe of Measurement, and the (dub Sar ašaga) 'scribe of the field' [7].

In a Dialogue Between Schoolboys the Senior Boy asks the Junior, "Do you know Multiplication, Reciprocals, Coefficients, Balancing of Accounts, Administrative Accounting, how to make all Kinds of Pay Allotments, Divide Property and Delimit shares of fields??? , That Summaries for us their mathematical Curriculum , Museums have Dozens if not Hundreds of copies of Mathematical Tables Multiplication Tables, tables of reciprocals (for division), of squares and cubes, of square roots and cube roots, and of coefficients. They are the Babylonian equivalent of '60 seconds 1 minute, 60 minutes 1 hour, 24 hours-1 day, 12 inches1 foot, 3 Feet1 yard, 1760 yards 1 mile', etc., but

Extended to a wide variety of other purposes such as house-building and tuning musical Instruments. There are also Compilations of Mathematical Problems and their Solutions Designed to teach the students how to apply their knowledge to more or less practical situations, as well as problems in a geometry and elementary algebra. The compilations have one curious feature: the numerical answer to all questions on the tablet is the same. If the answer to the first question is six, then so is the answer to the second and third question. This has the advantage that if the student arrives at the answer six then both he and the teacher know that he has correctly understood the necessary procedure. The technical terminology of mathematics largely Sumerian even though the Problem texts are Written in Babylonian(8).

One gets the impression that apart from Mathematics the Babylonian Scribal Education Concentrated on Sumerian ، One may Compare this to the nineteenth-century English public-school tradition that a knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages and literatures and of mathematics were all the education that a man needed. In practice, however, the picture is incomplete. We have copies of Akkadian literary texts, and there is evidence for the more practical side of the curriculum. Just as the modern typist is taught the standard layout for a business letter or a contract, so the Babylonian scribes follow regular patterns in writing such texts, and one can often identify the nature of a tablet from a very small fragment on this basis. A small Group of Practice Letters has a Special Terminology that marks them out as School Letters , and there are Similar model contracts. The Lexical series, ana ittïšu, composed in the



Early Old Babylonian Period but Surviving only in a few copies from the Late Assyrian Libraries, is a Collection of Sumerian Legal Phrases with Babylonian Translations, Presumably also Compiled for use in Schools(9).

The Picture Given so far Relates to the Early Second Millennium ac, Since that is the Period for which we have the best Evidence. As is so often the

case, the Surviving texts are quite Unevenly Distributed over time. A small group of copies of Sumerian Literary Text of the Kassite period from Nippur shows that the old traditions still survived at that time. The next group of school texts while retaining the spirit of the old tradition have a quite different format These are texts from Babylonia, and the majority probably come from Babylon itself, dating to the seventh or sixth century BC. They have extracts from more than one composition. Typically they quote two or three consecutive lines from A Sumerian text, giving a translation into Akkadian after each line, then quote from another part of the same text or from quite a different composition in the same manner, Sumerian with Akkadian translation, and end with an extract from a lexical text or the great list of Gods known as 'An Anum. The fundamental change from the early tradition is the provision of translations of the Sumerian texts. The change is mirrored in the contemporary libraries, in which Sumerian texts written for Permanent Record Also have Interlinear Translations(10).

Of the Same Late date are the few Surviving Pictures of Scribes, all from the area of Assyria. The wall paintings at Til Barsip (eighth or seventh century BC) show pairs of scribes, one writing on a tablet with a stylus, and the other writing on a leather scroll with a pen, each holding his writing instrument differently. The papyrus was probably used for writing in Aramaic, Similar pairs of scribes can be seen on the reliefs from the palaces of Tiglath-Pileser, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal at Kalḫu(Nimrud) and Nineveh (seventh century BC).

Our knowledge of the scribes is mostly Derived from the Colophons of tablets. The word colophon (taken from Greek and meaning summit) describes the inscription formerly placed at the end of a book, containing the title, the printer's name, date and place of printing, etc.

Nowadays books have title pages instead of colophons, but the term is regularly used by Assyriologists to describe the information which Scribes wrote at the end of tablets. There are three normal constituents to a colophon on a cuneiform tablet, the name of the scribe, the date, and the name of the town in which the tablet was written. Not all tablets have colophons, and some leave out one or another of these elements, but where they do include them all they Generally Follow this Pattern.

Scribes wrote their names on tablets as early as the Fara period (c. 2600 BC). Most of the names have no great significance, but a few are of particular interest. Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon I, and high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur, is one of the few female scribes known from Mesopotamia, and the earliest named author in history, her composition, named after its first line, nin-me-šar-ra, 'Lady of all aspects of life, a celebration of the goddess Inanna. The next royal scribe is Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, over 1,600 years

later. Although on the whole the Literary sexts do not Record their Authorship, a Catalogue Preserved at Nineveh Gives us a list of the Authors of some of the best-known compositions such as Sin-liqi-unninni, editor of the Gilgamesh series, and Lu-Nanna, author of the Etana epic. A few texts are attributed to the (AN(god) Ea) or the mythical sage Adapa. Later Scribes give not only their own Names and the Names of their fathers but also the names of an earlier ancestor, the founder of the Family or Scribal: Dynasty, and many of these Ancestors are Identical with the scribes named in the last of authors.

The Place Names Given in the Colophons are Particularly useful for the Reconstruction of Archives which have been Distributed through the antiquities trade. But Occasionally they can have a Different Significance. Tablets excavated in one town can have another Town's name in the colophon, showing how tablets were carried around the Country for business Purposes. Or an Archaeologist Scribe Copying an Earlier Text may Describe how be found it 'on the rubbish-tip at Nippur.

The Scribes often Describe Themselves Simply as dub Sar , but Sometimes give them Selves other titles such as dub Sar tur, junior Scribe for instance Nur Aya who copied out the Old Babylonian Flood story of Atrahasis), or mašmaššu, "exorcist. In a special class was the 'scribe of Enuma Anu Enlil', meaning the scribe of the astrological series entitled "When the gods Ame and End-in effect a professional astrologer, In a few cases even though no scribe's name is recorded we can see that a tablet was Written by More than one Scribe. A Group of Circular field-survey tablets of the Ur III period give the dimensions of various fields and the amount of barley that each field was expected to yield at harvest time ، On a few tablets the space for the barley yield has been left blank. At first it was suggested that the tablets might only be School texts, but close Examination revealed a different Explanation Wherever the Barley yield was recorded it had been Written in by a Different hand, less Deeply Impressed than the rest of the text, Probably when the clay had Started to dry out. Apparently, the Surveyors were only Responsible for Recording the Dimensions of the fields; the yield was worked our Separately by the Accountants or tax Inspectors(11).

The date on a tablet is the date of Writing: in a very few cases we can see that a Tablet was Written on one day and its Envelope on the next day , The dates Normally take the Sequence Month, day year. The Year can be indicated in several ways. In Sumer and in Babylonia of the Old Babylonian Period the year was named after an Event of some Importance occurring either in that year or in the Preceding year.

The Scribes had to Keep Long lists of Such Names in Order to Remember the Sequence of Documents , The Old Assyrian archives and those from Mari are dated by the Name of the Limmu , a Public Official Appointed for the year.

Again, lists of these officials had to be kept. In Kassite Times the System of Regnal Years began, the first year of Kurigalzu , and so on, and this System Remained Standard in Babylonia until the Fourth Century sc.

The Assyrians Stuck to the Limmu System Finally in 305 BC a new System was Introduced in Which all years were Numbered in Succession From the First Year of the Seleucid Dynasty, Deemed to be (311 BC)

Margins

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