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Cuneiform Fakes: A Long History from Antiquity to the Present Day

Abstract: During the three millennia in which cuneiform script was used, scribes copied texts for educational purposes or to preserve existing knowledge. They also created new texts, even reproducing older scripts in some cases. Some of the antique fakes that were produced in the process, such as the cruciform monument to Maništušu, are well known to Assyriologists, but the authenticity of other texts is still being debated, one example being the royal letters of the kings of Ur. In legal texts and royal inscriptions, certain clauses prevented the possible appearance of a false document. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, archaeological excavations in the Near East brought hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets to light and caused people's interest in Mesopotamian antiquities to grow. This led to the production of modern fakes, too, for obvious economic reasons, and many of these were bought by private collectors and museums around the world. This article deals with a great variety of such cases, including copies, replicas, imitations, transformations and fakes, in a bid to understand the context in which they were made, what motivated their originators and, when possible, how they were treated by scholars and collectors.

During the three millennia in which cuneiform script was employed (from the late fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE), scribes produced a great variety of texts, mainly on clay, but also on other materials such as stone, metal or wooden board covered with wax. To date, more than a million cuneiform texts have been discovered in a large area of the Near East ranging from Anatolia to Iran and from northern Iraq to Egypt and Bahrain. Cuneiform script, which was created with a stylus pressed down on fresh clay, consists of combinations of wedges forming as many signs as necessary. The system is ingenious and very easy to reproduce, but the scribes had to memorise a large number of different signs. Most of the collections around the world include some fake pieces of writing,[1] either antique

1 The word 'fake' is used in a generic sense here, referring to a written artefact that appears to be something it is not.

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or modern. While Assyriologists generally have no problem identifying modern fakes, they have more difficulty when it comes to antique fakes.

Besides writing original texts, Mesopotamian scribes also copied literary compositions, scientific and official texts for centuries for educational purposes or to preserve the knowledge these contained. These copies may have been written several centuries after the original text. The scribes also created new compositions using old scripts in some cases. Although some of these texts can be defined as apocryphal today, such as the text on the Maništušu cruciform monument composed with the deliberate aim of deceiving the reader, rewriting the past as the author of the composition intended, others should simply be regarded as writing exercises for which historians would not have the manual. Their authenticity is still being debated, as for instance some of the letters of the kings of Ur. Fake documents may also have been created and used in legal contexts. Certain clauses prevented the possible appearance of a false document, and matters dealt with in court sometimes involved fake wills. These fakes were obviously created with economic motives in mind. Whenever such ancient documents are discovered these days, it is difficult for scholars to identify them clearly as fakes, for reasons that shall be discussed later.

By creating royal inscriptions, Mesopotamian rulers partly intended to leave their name to posterity. Consequently, these texts often end with maledictions directed at anyone who might want to alter or erase them. This has not discouraged various victorious rulers from deleting parts of older inscriptions and adding a few lines of their own to them, however. When they 'signed' inscribed items of booty, they did not create a fake, but they did destroy the integrity of an older text. The historian has to deal with ancient inscriptions bearing texts from different periods. If it does not respect the original building plans, the restoration of ancient monuments may cause the same problems of interpretation for future archaeologists and historians.

The first archaeological excavations conducted in the Near East in the nineteenth and early twentieth century brought hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets to light and subsequently caused scholars' interest in Mesopotamian antiquities to grow. The increasing popularity of cultural heritages gave birth to the production of 'modern fakes', some of which were actually cast from originals. This was also the case for non-inscribed artefacts such as terracotta reliefs, statues and seals. Several private collectors and museums around the world bought these cuneiform tablets in the belief they were authentic objects. The production of forgeries that were then sold on the antique market occurred for obvious economic reasons. However, the making of fakes may be due to other motives.

This article is dedicated to cuneiform fakes and aims to help the reader understand the context in which they were made, the motives their originators had and, when possible, their treatment by scholars and collectors. It deals with a great variety of cases in which the originator's intention is not always clear – did the person want to make a copy, a replica, an imitation, a fake or a forgery? It starts with some ancient examples, discussing their identification as possible fakes and the reasons for their production. The second part deals with modern examples, from production techniques to the methods used to detect them. Modern fakes appeared on the antique market at an early stage; we will follow the history of their production from the nineteenth century up to today and try to understand how museums and scholars have dealt with them. The chapter will end with some written artefacts that may be referred to as 'useful fakes', namely those made by scholars as an experiment.

1 Ancient fakes

Mark Jones, one of the world specialists on fakes, has pointed out that the question 'what is a fake?' is not easy to answer.[2] How can fakes be distinguished from copies, imitations or replicas? This is a problem of terminology and applies not only to modern times where making fakes may be seen as a lucrative activity, but to Antiquity as well, when copying could interfere with the creation of fakes. For cuneiform scribes trained in the practice of copying, only one step was necessary in order to add new elements to their copies, compose entire forged texts reproducing archaic signs and thus manipulating history, or simply create legal forgeries.[3] The following examples present a variety of situations in which scribes produced fakes or altered ancient inscriptions, and they also illustrate the reasons why the fakes were made.

1.1 The status of copies

Copying texts was an essential task for Mesopotamian scribes and apprentices for many different reasons. Apprentices had to copy long lists of signs and words, metrological and numerical tables, proverbs, contractual phrases, and religious

2 Jones 1990, 29–30.

3 The word 'forgery' includes a legal dimension which deals with the intention to deceive people.

and literary texts for educational purposes as copying them was the best way to memorise signs, practice writing and learn Sumerian and mathematics.[4] Scribes also reproduced important texts such as pieces of literary and mythological writing or royal inscriptions for the sake of preserving them in libraries.[5]

Administrators produced annual accounts texts, compiling the data they wrote down on daily and monthly accounts contained in huge tablets.[6] Scribes working for private people or individual writers sometimes had to prepare duplicates of contracts so that each party could have its own copy, or make duplicates of letters if the sender wanted to have a copy or the message was addressed to several people.[7]

Thus, copying texts was considered a normal and very ordinary activity; it was part of scribal education, and later on, it was part of a scribe's daily work, too, regardless of whether he was employed by the palace or the temple or worked as a public scribe. In addition to this, copying was the predominant way of learning and memorising information as well, partly to maintain traditional skills and partly to perpetuate the past, showing admiration of its achievements. In some cases, colophons usually written at the end of a text specify its status as a copy, but many copies did not contain a colophon at all.

To historians nowadays, copies of this kind sometimes represent the only evidence of the existence of older texts that have long since disappeared. For example, eighteenth-century scribes copied official inscriptions left by kings of the twenty-fourth century BCE on clay tablets, the originals of which have now been lost. These copies may cause some confusion when it comes to dating a literary composition or a historical account of an event, however. In a few cases, such copies may be confused with ancient historical fakes, as is the case with some royal letters of the kings of Ur III, to which we shall now turn.

1.2 From educational copies to new compositions: the case of the royal letters

Akkadian scribes of the second and first millennia BCE both copied and composed fictional royal letters purportedly written by ancient kings. The royal correspondence of the Sumerian kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (twenty-first century BCE)

4 Veldhuis 1997, Proust 2007.
5 Clancier 2009.
6 Molina 2016.
7 Michel 2018.

presumably includes copies of original letters and compositions created by Old Babylonian scribes of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries.[8] The corpus consists of 24 letters, half of them addressed to King Šulgi, which have been reconstructed from 115 tablets produced by Babylonian scribes as part of school exercises. Modern scholars disagree on the status of these tablets; some of them think that the corpus should be considered apocryphal and that it is an Old Babylonian creation,[9] while Piotr Michalowski, who published the whole corpus masterfully, proposed that authentic elements were incorporated in some of these letters. It is very difficult to distinguish the different levels of redaction which transformed them into school texts. Michalowski identified seven letters that are clearly new compositions, but left the possibility open that they may have been created as replies to real letters. Eight of the remaining letters could derive from authentic letters.[10] On the basis of their contexts, these letters can be interpreted as school, literary or narrative texts. Those historical texts that Assyriologists might consider as ancient fakes were certainly genuine in their composers' eyes.[11]

Fictitious royal letters that are not part of this peculiar corpus also existed, and several of them have been attributed to important kings of the third and second millennium BCE, such as Sargon of Akkad, Samsu-iluna of Babylon, and Kurigalzu, a Kassite king of Babylon.[12] One of the most famous of these letters was purportedly written by Gilgameš, a hero familiar from his epic who is supposed to have ruled the city of Uruk during the twenty-seventh century BCE. Three copies of this letter dating to the seventh century BCE were found in an Assyrian library at Sultantepe,[13] while another copy comes from the late Babylonian temple of the Sun god Šamaš at Sippar south of Mesopotamia. In this letter, Gilgameš makes enormous demands of tribute to an unknown king threatening his country with devastating military action:[14]

> As soon as you see this letter, make ready and go to the land of Eriš, take with you a caravan of [...] white horses with black stripes, 70 thousand black horses with white stripes, 100 thousand mares whose bodies have markings like wild tree roots, 40 thousand continually gambolling miniature calves, 50 thousand teams of dappled mules, 50 thousand fine

8 Michalowski 2011.
9 Huber 2001.
10 Michalowski 2011, 219–220.
11 Lowenthal 1990 for other examples.
12 Westenholz 1997, 141–142.
13 Gurney 1957.
14 George 2003, 117–119.

> calves with well-turned hooves and horns intact [...] and then come yourself. I want to fasten one nugget of red gold, it should weigh 30 minas, to the chest of my friend Enkidu [...] 90 thousand talents (2,700 tons) of iron: pure, excellent, choice, select, scrutinized, precious, first-rate, beaten, flawless, so the smith can make stags.

In an obvious allusion to the epic, Gilgameš needs gold to make a statue of his friend Enkidu. This fictional composition is part of the traditional scholarly literature of Babylonia, but such a Babylonian kingship model was also copied by Assyrian scribal apprentices who included into the text Neo-Assyrian royal features. As a result, according to Jennifer Finn, the text, written as a parody of the Assyrian royal style, tries to undermine kingship ideology. Scholars in important cultural centres outside the capital were actively engaged in such counter-discursive dialogues about the king and kingship.[15] If the correspondence of the kings of Ur is made up of narrative texts that include real historical events, then the Gilgameš letter appears to be a fabrication by first-millennium scholars who wanted to parody their kings; it may have been motivated by political resistance or opposition to their power, for example. Other forms of such political parodies are represented by the many narrations linked to Sargon, who ruled the first centralised state, Akkad, during the twenty-fourth century BCE.[16] The *Old Assyrian Sargon Legend*, for example, presents the royal hero in various absurd situations.[17]

1.3 The apocryphal cruciform monument to Maništušu

Official cuneiform texts also include examples of manipulation and falsification of history. One of the most famous inscribed artefacts is the cruciform stone monument to Maništušu made of black basalt stone and now preserved in the British Museum.[18] This has the shape of a plain cross, and all twelve sides of the monument are covered with an inscription, which spans a total of 346 lines engraved in an archaic type of cuneiform writing (Fig. 1). The monument is one of the rare antique forgeries for which the archaeological context of discovery is known: it was found in 1881 during excavations conducted by the British Museum at the site of the ancient city of Sippar and was in the temple of the Sun god Šamaš in a Neo-Babylonian context (sixth century BCE) together with two other inscriptions

15 Finn 2017, 138–141.
16 Westenholz 1997.
17 Günbattı 1997; Foster 2005, 71–75.
18 Gelb 1949; Sollberger 1968; Powell 1991; Al-Rawi/George 1994.

by King Nabonidus.[19] The inscription purports to be from the time of the Akkadian king Maništušu, however, whose reign dates to the twenty-third century BCE.

Fig. 1: Cruciform stone monument; 346 lines of archaic writing are inscribed altogether: statements of grants and privileges bestowed on the Šamaš Temple by the Akkadian king Maništušu (2269 BCE–2255 BCE). London, British Museum (acquired in 1881); ©Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

19 Woods 2004, 34; Finkel/Fletcher 2016, 218.

The text concerns the renovation of the Šamaš temple and the very substantial increases in revenue that the temple received from the crown; it contains an inventory of the grants and privileges bestowed on the Šamaš temple by the Akkadian king. The authenticity of this monument was revoked on the basis of several philological and historical anachronisms; the measures of capacity, the names of some of the months, and elements of titles mentioned in the text are only known from the end of the third millennium. Other things only appeared at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, such as the *ilkum* corvée or the *nadītum* priestess of Šamaš at Sippar. The scribe made an effort to compose an archaic text, but made the mistake of mixing elements from various periods. The cruciform shape of the monument is unique for ancient Mesopotamia where texts written on stone or clay came in a great variety of shapes and sizes. We do not know what inspired it. One suggestion is that it could have been carved in one of the many *kudurru* stelae that were kept in the Šamaš temple.[20]

The stone was first thought to be a *fraus pia* ('pious fraud') dating from the Old Babylonian period and made in order to establish the antiquity of certain privileges and revenues of the Šamaš temple at Sippar.[21] But the inscription on the monument actually date to the Neo-Babylonian period, i.e. the sixth century BCE. It is known from several copies found in Sippar, including one from the library, and the colophon of this particular copy refers to originals from Babylon and Borsippa (both northern centres).[22] At some point, the text was added to the traditional corpus of compositions copied by scholars. Al-Rawi and George suggested that the copy from Babylon could have been that of an authentic historical inscription supplying the forgers with the historical background they needed and that later on, several copies of this antique forgery were made that reflected the organisation of the text in columns. The Maništušu monument, which was found together with inscribed barrel-shaped cylinders of King Nabonidus, was probably made by the priests of the Šamaš temple of Sippar for their own purposes, establishing the great antiquity of privileges and revenues of the temple and reinforcing the temple's claim to them.[23]

This reconstruction is suggested by another tablet from the Šamaš temple library at Sippar which is also a fake. It is a literary letter purporting to be from King Samsu-iluna, who ruled Babylonia during the eighteenth century BCE, and which is a copy of an exercise tablet from Ur. The letter is addressed to a royal

20 Finkel/Fletcher 2016, 242–245.
21 Sollberger 1968.
22 Breniquet 2018, 34
23 Al-Rawi/George 1994.

prince and includes a draft of a text dealing with Babylonian cult centres, which is intended for a monumental inscription, presumably the model used later for the cruciform monument.[24]

The Maništušu inscription is apocryphal; it constitutes the *a posteriori* side of a story and rewrites the past according to present intentions. It represents a tentative manipulation of history, supplying evidence of historical precedent for propaganda and economic purposes. Such historical forgeries were created for ideological, religious and economic reasons, but they ultimately appear as historical texts themselves, historicised by archaeology and history.

1.4 Alteration of ancient texts and monuments

The cruciform monument to Maništušu ends with common maledictions to anyone who might have wanted to alter the inscription: 'He who damages this text, let Enki fill up his canals with slime. Let Ninhursaga stop childbirth in his land! Let him plant and let Adad smite it and gather all his descendants!' As kings wanted to leave their name to posterity, especially when it was linked to palaces and temples they had built, many of the royal inscriptions found in Near Eastern sites include maledictions of this kind, following benedictions to any future king who would restore their masterpiece. Tukultī-Ninurta I, ruler of Assyria during the thirteenth century BCE, for example, celebrated his victorious military campaigns and the building of his new palace in one of his stone inscriptions. The text ends as follows:[25]

> In the future may a later prince, when that palace becomes old and dilapidated, restore it. May he anoint with oil my monumental inscription, make sacrifices, (and) return (it) to its place. (Then) the gods Aššur and Adad will listen to his prayers. He who erases my inscribed name and writes his (own) name; (who) discards my monumental inscription and puts (it) in another place where there is no visibility; who conceives of and does anything injurious; or (who) prevents the gods who dwell in the city Aššur from entering my palace during the festivals (and) summons (them) to another palace; (who) abandons that palace and neglects it: May the gods Aššur and Adad, the gods of heaven (and) the underworld, extinguish his sovereignty; may they destroy his name (and) his seed from the land; may a king who is his enemy take away his throne (and) under his very eyes rule his land. May the goddess Ištar, my mistress who designated my turn for sovereignty, bring about the defeat

24 Al-Rawi/George 1994.

25 Grayson 1987; RIMA 1 A.0.78.5.

> of his land; may he not stand firm before his enemies; may she hand him over to his enemies.

By including this set of blessings for those who would respect and restore the inscription in the future and adding curses for those who would alter it, the king sought above all to make his name and achievements known to his distant successors. The aim of such maledictions was also to prevent any alteration or transformation of the stone inscription and consequently any alteration of the historical facts – to prevent a further king from claiming to have achieved what his predecessor had done, for example, and thus abuse the truth for his own ends.

Such curses did not prevent the Elamites from altering Akkadian and Babylonian monuments, however. During the twelfth century BCE, the Elamite king Šutruk-Nahhunte brought back a huge amount of loot from his victorious campaign in Babylonia, including the *Hammurabi Code*. He kept all the trophies in his capital, Susa, in present-day Iran, which was excavated by French archaeologists in 1900. A scribe from Sippar who copied the prologue of the Code in the sixth-century BCE said in the colophon of his tablet that he had made his copy directly from the stele which was still on display at Susa.[26] Another trophy was the *Stele of Naram-Sîn*, a king of Akkad during the twenty-third century, which tells of the king's victory over the Lullubi people from the Central Zagros mountains. The stele, which is now on display at the Louvre Museum,[27] shows the king leading his army over the steep slopes of the enemy's territory – a symbol of a king ascending to be equal to the gods. It was carved in pink limestone. In the primitive cuneiform inscription glorifying Naram-Sîn, the Elamite king ordered a text to be carved dedicated to his own glory, in which it was indicated that he had taken the stele with him after looting the city of Sippar. The Elamite king also erased seven columns of the *Hammurabi Code* stele with the same intent, but did not have anything new inscribed on it. In doing so, he did not create a fake with the intention of deceiving people, but misappropriated a trophy and then 'signed' his booty, leaving his own mark on it.

In a sense, Saddam Hussein did something very similar when he had his own name inscribed on a brick that was then inserted in the reconstructed walls of the processional street in Babylon, reading: 'Restoration of the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar during the reign of the glorious Saddam Hussein' (Fig. 2b). In this political act, he imitated the content of the stamped bricks left by

26 Fadhil 1998.

27 <https://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/la-stele-du-roi-naram-sin> (accessed on 10 September 2019).

Nebuchadnezzar with his name in the walls which he ordered the construction (Fig. 2a). As the Elamite king, he was searching for personal glorification by raising himself to the level of an illustrious predecessor. The 'restoration work' that Saddam Hussein ordered to be done was nothing other than a (re)construction of the past.

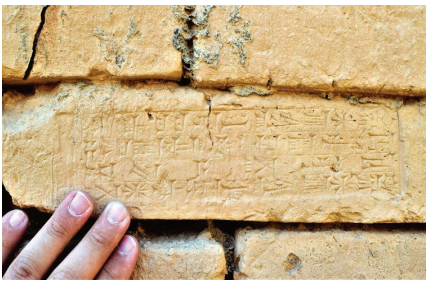

Fig. 2a: Stamped mud-brick bearing the name of Nebuchadnezzar; © Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP (Glasg) / CC BY-SA, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stamped_mudbrick_with_a_cuneiform_text,_procession_street,_Babylon,_Iraq.jpg>.

Fig. 2b: Stamped brick on a processional street wall in Babylon bearing the name of Saddam Hussein; © Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP (Glasg) / CC BY-SA, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stamped_brick_at_the_ancient_city_of_Babylon_bearing_the_name_of_Saddam_Hussein.jpg>.

1.5 Neo-Babylonian kings' interest in archaeology and history

It is no surprise that many historical fakes such as Maništušu's cruciform monument date to the Neo-Babylonian period, a time when kings developed a special interest in the past, even making archaeological investigations, for example, and their scribes looked for the origin of cuneiform signs, deciphering ancient texts and producing antique forgeries.[28] King Nabonidus (556–539 BCE), for instance, who wished to reactivate the religious tradition of the middle of the third millennium BCE began restoration work in the cloister of the priestesses of the Moon God at Ur and found ancient inscriptions about Enanedu, daughter of the king of Larsa and a priestess in the second half of the nineteenth century BCE.[29] Asking his scribes to decipher these 1,500-year-old texts, the king then decided to follow

28 Glassner 1993, 31; Schnapp 1993; Michel 2011; Charpin 2018.
29 Charpin 1986, 192–206; Frayne 1990, 225–226, 257, 299–301.

the religious acts of his distant predecessor and consecrated his own daughter as the Moon God.[30] Confirming the great antiquity of some historical facts and citing them as an example, he thus legitimised his actions.

This interest in archaeology and history came with a passion for antiquities. Some kings set up museums containing a large number of ancient inscriptions and their scribes copied these ancient texts to ensure their transmission from generation to generation. A Neo-Babylonian scholar thus recorded the imprint of a lapidary inscription of Šar-kali-šarrī, king of Akkad at the end of the twenty-third century BCE, and another copied an inscription by the same king, applying himself to reproducing the archaic signs from that time; he probably copied the ancient text as it stood, just adding a colophon revealing that the original was a stone foundation tablet.[31]

Historical fakes such as 'royal' letters and inscriptions also flourished among the copies of genuine antique texts. Another text genre that could be defined as 'fake' even though its content may be close to reality is what we refer to as fictional autobiography or pseudo-autobiography – a biography allegedly written by the person whose life is being recounted.[32] The text is composed in the first person, but it is actually written by another individual who adds real or fictitious anecdotes to it. The most well-known fictional autobiography is inscribed on a stela and spans approximately 150 lines. It starts as follows: 'I am Adad-guppi, mother of Nabonidus'.

Revering his mother and presumably fascinated by her long life, Nabonidus, in a very personal process, ordered this pseudo-autobiography of Adad-guppi's life (c. 648–544) to be written. The text is completed by an account of her death at the venerable age of 104 and a description of the burial ceremony, written in the third person. It ends with exhortations to worship the gods.[33]

1.6 Producing forgeries for economic reasons

As for Maništušu's cruciform monument, the production of forgeries may have been motivated by the wish to change the truth: it resulted in the concretisation of a lie with the aim of deceiving the reader. The deliberate construction of a forgery of this kind was often driven by economic factors. In the case of Maništušu's

30 Beaulieu 1989, 127–131.
31 Frayne 1993, 191–194; Beaulieu 2013.
32 Longman III 1991.
33 Longman III 1991, 97–102.

monument, the Babylonian priests of the Šamaš temple at Sippar wanted to secure important economic privileges. There are many attestations of suspected forgeries in the cuneiform sources, which means that these are likely to have existed, as shown by the following examples dating to the first centuries of the second millennium BCE.

During the nineteenth century BCE, Assyrian merchants established long-distance exchanges with Central Anatolia and settled there. The archives found at Kültepe – the ancient city of Kaneš – include many legal texts with judicial records and testimonies by witnesses, suggesting that it was extremely important to establish facts and provide proof of them because of the complexity of trade between Aššur and Anatolia.[34] Written documents were important to prevent false testimonies. They were only useful if they could be proven to be genuine. Legal texts were written down to establish a person's right to something or their legal situation. Various types of contracts were kept by these Assyrian merchants, such as loan and purchase agreements, but there were also witnessed depositions with sworn testimonies, records of private arbitrations, verdicts and suchlike. These documents were entrusted to the person who could be prejudiced (the creditor, buyer, etc.) in order to protect them. In case of dispute, such legal texts were used as proof of the truth of a claim.

To prevent forgery, the legal clay tablet was enclosed in a clay envelope called a *harāmum*. This itself was a legal act. The contract was actually written again or summarised on the envelope before this was done, and parties and witnesses had to roll their personal cylinder seal on each side of the envelope, thus giving its legal value to the document.[35] Once the envelope was broken, the document was no longer valid. A loan contract, for example, was sealed by the debtor and kept by the creditor. When the debt was paid, the creditor gave the document back to the debtor. The latter could cancel it by breaking the envelope containing the imprints of the seals and could then keep it in his archives as a personal record. If the loan contract could not be returned to the debtor upon payment of the debt, the creditor would then seal a receipt and give it to the debtor instead. A receipt of this kind could include the following clause: 'any tablet with the seal/concerning PN's debt that may turn up is false (*sar*)', as in the following example:[36]

34 Hertel 2013, 138–143.

35 Michel 2020.

36 Michel 1995, 24–25, text TC 3, 264a: 2–10, 12–18, cited from n. 43.

> Aššur-nīšu (declared) the following to Šu-Bēlum: 'With regard to your money, with regard to the money I owe you, you have now been satisfied. Give me my loan tablets so I can destroy them!' Šu-Bēlum replied as follows: 'Your tablet has already been destroyed! [...] any tablet that would turn up in my house about Aššur-nīšu's debt as to how interest would accrue to him is false.'

Such declarations naturally suggest that fakes were regularly used by merchants to make more money. With a similar logic, purchased contracts were normally given to the buyer so that he could prove his acquisition and its payment; a document of this type was regarded as proof of ownership, in other words. In a number of houses excavated in South Mesopotamia and Iran, Old Babylonian archives (from the first centuries of the second millennium BCE) were found that contained several purchase contracts relating to the respective buildings: all the tablets from the previous successive transactions had been passed on to the last owner of the house. An Old Babylonian judicial text from Susa concerns a dispute about the status of one such purchase contract: a house was sold by a man, but his son and grandchildren took legal action against the son of the buyer, claiming that the house was not sold and that the document he had presented was fake. The son of the buyer had to swear before the goddess Ištar to confirm the validity of his deed.[37]

The production of forgeries could also concern family law. This is suggested by a trial linked to an inheritance which took place in the late nineteenth or early eighteenth century BCE in the city of Sippar: a priestess received all the property that had belonged to the deceased priestess who had adopted her. Two men, presumably members of her family, accused her of having written a fake will, claiming the following: 'Amat-Šamaš absolutely did not give you a house and she did not write a tablet for you. When she died, you wrote the tablet (yourself)'. They thus suggested that she was able to write a legal document and had made a fake will in order to inherit her adoptive mother's property. However, witnesses confirmed that Amat-Šamaš had, indeed, given the house to the priestess while she was still alive and that she had written the will herself as well; she was a literate woman.[38]

All these suspicions about the existence of fake tablets most likely reflect reality and suggest that the practice of making forgeries for economic gain was common practice. The protection of a legal document by a clay envelope bearing the imprint of the seals of the parties and witnesses ensured that the document was authentic.

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37 Scheil 1933, no. 393.

38 Pinches 1896, pl. 47; Lion 2018.

2 Modern fakes

The production of antique fakes stopped very naturally with the disappearance of cuneiform at the beginning of our era. Fake objects and fake translations reappeared with the rediscovery of the ancient script, even before its decipherment. Once the first official excavations began in Iraq in the mid-nineteenth century CE and the cuneiform writing that was found was deciphered, collectors started to take an increasing interest in Mesopotamian antiquities, resulting in a large number of fakes in order to meet the demand for such items. The techniques employed in order to produce fakes improved, and more and more fakes began to be bought – by private collectors and public museums alike.

As in Antiquity, there are other motives for making fakes than the purely economic ones that drove antique sellers: they may be intended for scientific experiments, for didactic purposes, to honour a colleague, to promote a discipline or even to express a political opinion, for instance. These various reasons for making fakes will now be examined more closely, starting with the most obvious one: the economic aspect.

2.1 Before the decipherment of cuneiform: the first 'imaginative translations' and fakes

The last cuneiform clay tablets to be discovered are written in Akkadian and cuneiform script and date to the first century CE. Cuneiform disappeared after this date and the history of Mesopotamia slowly sank into oblivion. It took more than a millennium to rediscover its history.[39] The first expedition to visit Mesopotamia and Iran was Danish and dates back to the early 1760s. The members of the expedition included Carsten Niebuhr, a mathematician and biologist who copied some of the cuneiform inscriptions engraved on monuments at Persepolis in Iran.[40]

In 1786, the Michaux Stone (or stele) was one of the very first inscribed monuments brought back to Europe. It is now kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Fig. 3).[41]

39 Faivre 2009.
40 Larsen 1996: 7.
41 Lion/Michel 2016: 17.

Fig. 3: The Michaux Stone (*kudurru*), a genuine object which inspired imaginative translations; © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles / Public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caillou_Michaux_CdM.jpg>.

The inscription on it interested and intrigued scholars who tried to decipher it. Anton August Heinrich Lichtenstein deserves a medal for the most eccentric translation: wishing to be recognised as the decipherer of cuneiform scripts, his translation is an obvious act of mystification. His arguments and translation are detailed and commented on by S. de Sacy in a letter published in 1802.[42] Lichtenstein imagined that the cuneiform characters were an early variant of Kufic, an old calligraphic form of Arabic script, and that it was written in Chaldean or Aramaic. He supposed that there was an old Kufic letter hidden in each combination of wedges, and thus he had to take away several useless wedges to find the letter he was looking for; the other wedges were added arbitrarily without following any rule. As a result, his translation is a matter of pure fantasy. He thought that the inscription described a rite during which mourning women were going to the temple to be comforted by priests. Here is an extract of what Lichtenstein translated after specifying his approach: 'I will give a faithful, albeit rather free, translation of this monument, which I have deciphered in its entirety':[43]

> The priest of the temple of the god of death addresses women dressed in mourning clothes, and gathering on the day of the commemoration of all the weapons, near the tombs of their deceased relatives, to engage in the manifestation of their pain [...] 'You must not forget that weakness is the lot of women. Too often, you are blind to your own faults. We solemnly recommend you morals taught by our belief, so that our orders are obeyed. Your happiness is guaranteed, we are your guarantors, provided that you bring the fruit of your hope to maturity when we impose the serious obligation on you.'

The reality was much more prosaic: the text concerns a dowry consisting of land offered by a father to his daughter, and it dates to the eleventh century BCE. Interestingly, Lichtenstein anticipated the disbelief of his contemporaries regarding his discovery:[44]

> I expect that more than one Orientalist scholar will revoke my discovery, or perhaps seek to demonstrate its falsity, precisely because it would seem to reproach them a little harshly for not having noticed this striking resemblance, and which is obvious between the main features that form the letters of the wedge-shaped writing and the elements of the Kufic or Estrangelo [Syriac] alphabet, and for having ignored this similarity because of their prejudices (my translation).

42 de Sacy 1802.

43 Lichtenstein 1802 and 1803, 111–116 (Latin); French translation by De Sacy 1802.

44 Lichtenstein 1803, 111–134 (Latin), reported by De Sacy 1802.

De Sacy could easily demonstrate the flaws in the reasoning of this false decoder. While regretting that Lichtenstein only provided a translation of the text and no transliteration, he noted the following weaknesses in his argumentation:[45]

- Lichtenstein read the cuneiform text from right to left. However, it must be read from left to right.
- He deleted parts of the wedges forming each sign, doing so arbitrarily and without any explanation.
- He started the decipherment with the more complex cuneiform version of trilingual inscriptions, even though Carsten Niebuhr had already suggested that only the simplest one might be an alphabet.
- The translation he provided is quite far from the Oriental genre. Moreover, he did not discuss the mythological symbols and iconography of the stele.

The following part of de Sacy's letter concerns the work presented by Georg Friedrich Grotefend, a young German Latinist who claimed to understand fifteen of the forty cuneiform signs of the Old Persian cuneiform inscription. Although he had some reservations about details in his demonstration, de Sacy was generally convinced by it; indeed, Grotefend actually laid the foundation for deciphering the Old Persian alphabetic cuneiform script.[46]

It may not be pure coincidence that the very first modern cuneiform fakes that are attested date more or less to the same period, illustrating the growing interest in this mysterious writing among scholars. The fakes belonged to Claudius James Rich (1786–1821), a pioneer archaeologist and collector of Mesopotamian antiquities, and British Consul in Baghdad between 1808 and 1820.[47] He built up his collection before anyone was able to read cuneiform. It included cuneiform tablets and a moulded cylinder belonging to Nebuchadnezzar II, presumably made in Iraq with local clay. Perhaps he already realised that some of his written artefacts were forgeries because when his secretary, Carl Bellino, prepared some beautiful drawings of the items in the collection, the fakes were not included in the publication.[48] Some of the cuneiform tablets were simply the result of real tablets being pressed onto fresh clay, which explains why the signs do not appear in a negative form as one would expect, but as a positive imprint (Fig. 4). The collection was acquired by the British Museum and is still on display there today. The creation of cuneiform fakes is probably

45 De Sacy 1802.

46 Joannès/Tolini 2009.

47 Jones 1990, 165, no. 169; Larsen 1996, 19–22.

48 Barnett 1974; Walker 1987: 59–60; Finkel 1996: 196, n. 13.

linked to scholars' growing interest in this mysterious writing in the general context of a new fascination about antiquities serving as witnesses of the past.

Fig. 4: A fake tablet in a positive imprint, part of the collection of Claudius Rich, British Museum. Jones 1990, no. 169b.

2.2 After the decipherment of cuneiform: new techniques to produce fakes in large quantities

During the nineteenth century, the production of fakes exploded as collecting relics of the past became a general interest.[49] This collecting mania encouraged the forgers to meet the demand for cuneiform artefacts by producing even more

49 Jones 1990, 161–162.

forgeries. Large quantities of cuneiform tablets were shipped to Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, genuine and forged ones being mixed together.[50]

This increasing interest in antiquities was concomitant to the decipherment of cuneiform. Indeed, Akkadian cuneiform was declared deciphered on 27 May 1857. The Royal Asiatic Society arranged a test involving four scholars who claimed they understood the script and language. One of these was Jules Oppert, a Jewish scholar born in Hamburg who left Germany for France in order to get an academic position there.[51] In his correspondence, which is now preserved in the library of the French Academy, there is an answer he sent to his colleague at the Academy, George Maspero, a well-known Egyptologist, including his report regarding a cuneiform text found in Egypt. In his letter to Maspero dated 8 January 1888, Oppert wrote the following:[52]

> My suspicions had arisen above all because of the resemblance of the tablet you sent with the famous so-called Cappadocian tablets, all of which come from Caesarea and which I believe are all forgeries; at least [I have] up to now. There are fake antiques workshops all over the Orient, which have to be paid a higher price because they are charging the labour force for it. The characters are a mixture of Assyrian and Babylonian styles [...]. I am inclined to think they are authentic (for now).

The 'Cappadocian tablets' mentioned by Oppert come from Kaneš, the ancient site at Kültepe; they belonged to merchants and date to the beginning of the second millennium BCE (see section 1.6). These tablets are written in the Old Assyrian dialect, but they originated from Central Anatolia. This discovery far from the city of Aššur led Oppert to be sceptical about their authenticity, just like the tablets found in Egypt. The tablet sent by Maspero came from El-Amarna (ancient Akethaton) in Egypt and was also confirmed as being genuine. It dates to the middle of the second millennium BCE as the pharaoh had to use cuneiform and

50 Walker 1987.

51 Lion/Michel 2009.

52 Letter no. 164: 'Mes soupçons s'étaient surtout éveillés par la ressemblance de la tablette envoyée par vous avec les fameuses tablettes dites cappadociennes qui proviennent toutes de Césarée et que je crois toutes fabriquées ; du moins jusqu'à présent. Il existe dans tout l'Orient des ateliers de fausses antiquités qu'il faut payer plus cher, parce qu'ils en font payer la main-d'œuvre. Les caractères sont un mélange de styles assyrien et babylonien [...] J'incline (à présent) vers l'authenticité'. I wish to thank Mireille Pastoureau, the former director of the library, who allowed me to work on Jules Oppert's correspondence together with my colleague Brigitte Lion. This letter has already been cited before in Kulakoğlu/Michel 2015.

Akkadian in order to correspond with all the kings of the Near East since they were the diplomatic language and script of the time.

Fig. 5a: A fake handwritten tablet with diagonal lines; the Monserrat Museum (Márquez Rowe 2006, no. 2); © Photo CDLI, P432801, <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P432801.jpg>.

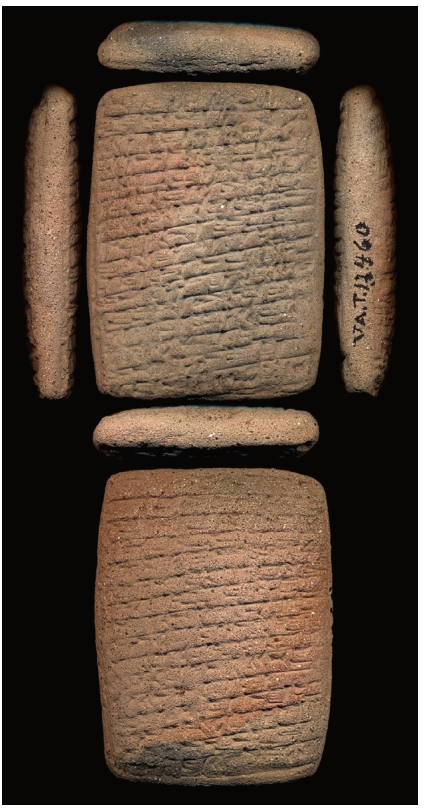

Fig. 5b: A fake Old Assyrian moulded tablet with erased edges; the Vorderasiatische Museum Berlin, VAT 13460 (Michel 2003, 32); © Photo CDLI, P358324, <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P358324.jpg>.

The letter written by Jules Oppert confirms the active manufacture of forged cuneiform tablets in the late nineteenth century CE. In fact, this massive production of cuneiform fakes went on for several decades, at least up to the 1930s. Oppert's answer to Maspero also shows the difficulty that specialists face when they have to produce an expert report on an artefact. The collections of Old Assyrian tablets in museums and private hands in Europe and North America

were built up during this period before the official excavations of the site at Kültepe were begun in 1948. Eighty per cent of the Old Assyrians tablets now in the Louvre were acquired and published at this time.[53]

A set of ten tablets that the Louvre Museum bought off a private collector in 1968 contains a letter with a text found in fifteen other tablets around the world. Even though merchants often made copies of some of their texts, such a high number of duplicates is unusual and intriguing. A closer look at their layout convinced me that there were only two copies that were genuine and all the other tablets were forged. The line breaks are the same as well as the layout of the text on both sides of the tablets.[54] The forged copies were clearly produced using a mould created from an original. It is quite easy to make a mould for each side of a tablet (i.e. the obverse and reverse) and then glue the two halves together while the clay is still fresh. This technique has an advantage over the hand-made production of tablets today in that the object produced has all the characteristics of a real tablet, exactly reproducing the text as it is written on each side of an antique cuneiform tablet (compare Fig. 5a and b). However, the forger usually had some trouble with the edges at the join between the two half-moulds, which were inscribed most of the time in original tablets. Either he left them blank or he wrote wedges on them, albeit randomly and sometimes even upside down (an example can be seen in Fig. 5b). The Old Assyrian tablets that have been unearthed so far are plentiful – there are about 23,000 of them in all – and many more are yet to be found. It must have been easy for forgers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century CE to sell such well-made fakes together with genuine tablets.[55]

The suggested technique used to produce these fakes was confirmed in May 2014 with the discovery of a lead object during a survey of a field near the village of Büyükhırka on the road from Çorum to Yozgat in Turkey (in the region of Bayındır) (see Fig. 6).

53 Michel 2003, 13–19. The Louvre Museum has 720 Old Assyrian tablets and envelopes. A group of ten tablets was bought in 1968 and a group of 137 tablets was given to the museum in 1982 by the Assyriologist Marguerite Rutten.

54 Michel 1987, 9–13.

55 Such fake Old Assyrian tablets are now preserved in a dozen collections around the world, but there is a concentration in the collection preserved in Adana Museum where they amount to roughly a quarter of the twenty-five tablets. Knowing more about the history of the collection could possibly help researchers find out who the forgers were. There is also a group of several Old Assyrian fakes (and other fakes as well) in the Böhl Collection in Leiden; these were acquired from the estate of Felix Ernst Peiser in 1899 (Böhl 1932).

Fig. 6: A lead mould from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century CE (on the right) and its imprint (on the left). Photo courtesy of Ilknur Taş.

The heavy object was a broken lead mould which was clearly used to make one side of an Old Assyrian clay tablet;[56] this half-mould is now kept at Çorum Museum. Physical analyses were made to determine the age of the object. The ensuing report defined it as 'ancient', but did not say exactly how ancient it was. The most likely hypothesis is that the artefact actually dates to the end of the Ottoman Empire, presumably the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The text on this half-mould does not match the one on the tablet which has so many fake duplicates, so several other moulds of original tablets must have been prepared. It is quite unique to have found the tool which was used to produce such fakes more than a century ago.

2.3 Fakes in museums and private collections

The Old Assyrian period was not the only one affected by the widespread production of fakes. Presumably around the same time, tablets from the Neo-Babylonian

56 Taş/İpek 2015.

period (the second half of the first millennium BCE) were produced in large quantities by the same technique, moulding.

In 1970, Erle Leichty from Philadelphia noticed that groups of tablets preserved in the University Museum of Pennsylvania, the Chicago Oriental Institute, the Yale Babylonian Collection and the Metropolitan Museum in New York were actually modern fakes. These tablets, often in fragmentary pieces, had been bought at the shop of a Baghdad dealer called Joseph Shemtob between 1888 and 1910. They were duplicates and were also duplicates of originals preserved at the British Museum.[57] On taking a close look at these fakes, Leichty discovered that the obverse and reverse of some of them were duplicates of two different texts, which were eventually dated to the eras of two different kings: the forger had glued two halves together both corresponding to the reverse faces of tablets, both of which included a date.[58] Moreover, many of the fragments turned from obverse to reverse around a vertical axis, like a modern book, rather than around a horizontal axis, as cuneiform tablets usually do. Just like the Old Assyrian samples, these fakes had been cast in two halves and joined together later, the joint being visible on the edges. The forger(s) made moulds of different tablets that were genuine, casting the obverse and the reverse separately, then pressed them together while the clay was still soft. In some cases, they did not make much of an effort to match the obverse and reverse properly. Fakes of this kind look authentic at first glance precisely because they are casts of originals. It is likely that Joseph Shemtob bought them from the faker(s) sometime before the middle of the 1880s. He also sold hundreds of authentic antiquities to North American collectors and museums. According to Christopher Walker, a former curator at the British Museum in London, many of Shemtob's fakes may have been made by the Ready brothers, who were employed by the British Museum to prepare official copies and thus had access to originals.[59] Since these fakes were produced from very common administrative tablets dating to the Neo-Babylonian period, it was easy to sell them. It is clear that the seller made a good profit by selling them as there was a market for such forged artefacts.

The same production technique was also used for Ur III tablets dating to the twenty-first century BCE, a period represented by hundreds of thousands of administrative texts. Presumably, no less than fifty-seven forged Ur III tablets purportedly from the city of Girsu south of Mesopotamia were produced by a

57 Leichty 1970.

58 See also Spar/von Dassow 2000, comments on text no. 129.

59 Walker 1987, 59–60.

single forger; these are now preserved in the British Museum and the University Museum of Pennsylvania.[60]

It is not surprising that the Ur III, Old Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods inspired counterfeiters the most. Given the abundance of texts from these three eras, it was easy for forgers to find samples to reproduce and then to include groups of fakes in the many lots of tablets from these periods on sale during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century CE. According to Jones, the nineteenth century was a golden age for forgers and dishonest dealers.[61]

The production of fakes of Mesopotamian antiquities was so widespread that it inspired the nineteenth-century Assyriologist Joachim Menant to write a book about the subject.[62] However, all the examples that he mentions were made of stone, a type of production that required completely different techniques to be used. It seems that fake cuneiform artefacts carved in stone were also produced in great quantities by counterfeiters who were very imaginative, and highly skilled as well in some instances, even creating new types of inscribed monuments.[63] Cylinder seals carved in semi-precious stones with miniature scenes and sometimes a short cuneiform inscription were also produced in large quantities, presumably because they were highly valued on the antique market (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: A fake inscribed cylinder seal made of stone; the Walter Art Museum, Baltimore; © Photo CDLI P272884, <https://cdli.ucla.edu/dl/photo/P272884.jpg>.

60 Pomponio 2012; Firth 2015.
61 Jones 1990, 161.
62 Menant 1888.
63 Márquez Rowe 2006, no. 15.

Although bigger in size, statues copying the work of artists from the second half of the third millennium BCE were also produced by counterfeiters – several statues of Gudea and members of his family were made, for example. Some of these statues were obviously the work of a skilled artist and were carved in a very fine and pretty stone such as translucent green diorite, which was used to produce the Gudea M statue supposedly found at Tello, the ancient Sumerian city of Girsu excavated by a French team from 1877 onwards. It was bought on the market in 1926 and is now kept at the Detroit Museum. This artefact, which has an inscription on its back and on a shoulder, has been the subject of much debate among art historians and philologists. In a recent study, Eva Braun-Holzinger showed that the statue itself may be a fake even if the text is genuine as philologists claim.[64] The counterfeiter mixed up characteristics of statues of Gudea and his son Ur-Ningirsu, then carved an original text copied from another ancient artefact on its back.

2.4 Modern replicas and modern originals

Most of these modern fakes were made with an economic motive: the temptation to earn money. The production of modern replicas and modern originals may be for other purposes, however. Since the decipherment of cuneiform, a few Assyriologists have created replicas of ancient written artefacts or produced new items of their own in ancient script (and some of them still do so; see Fig. 8); their motives were (and are) scientific, sharing knowledge of an ancient culture and enhancing their academic discipline.

From a scientific perspective, the aim of reproducing the scribes' strokes and making wedges in fresh clay is to understand what techniques are linked with producing cuneiform script and to discover differences in texts produced by different scribes in order to identify scribes' hands. This academic research also includes the shaping of clay tablets, the making of envelopes (Fig. 8), the printing of seals and other such related activities.[65]

64 Braun-Holzinger 2018.

65 For an example, see the research carried out in Hamburg in the cluster of excellence entitled 'Understanding Written Artefacts' (project RFA09): <https://www.written-artefacts.uni-hamburg.de/research/field-a/rfa09.html> (accessed on 10 October 2019).

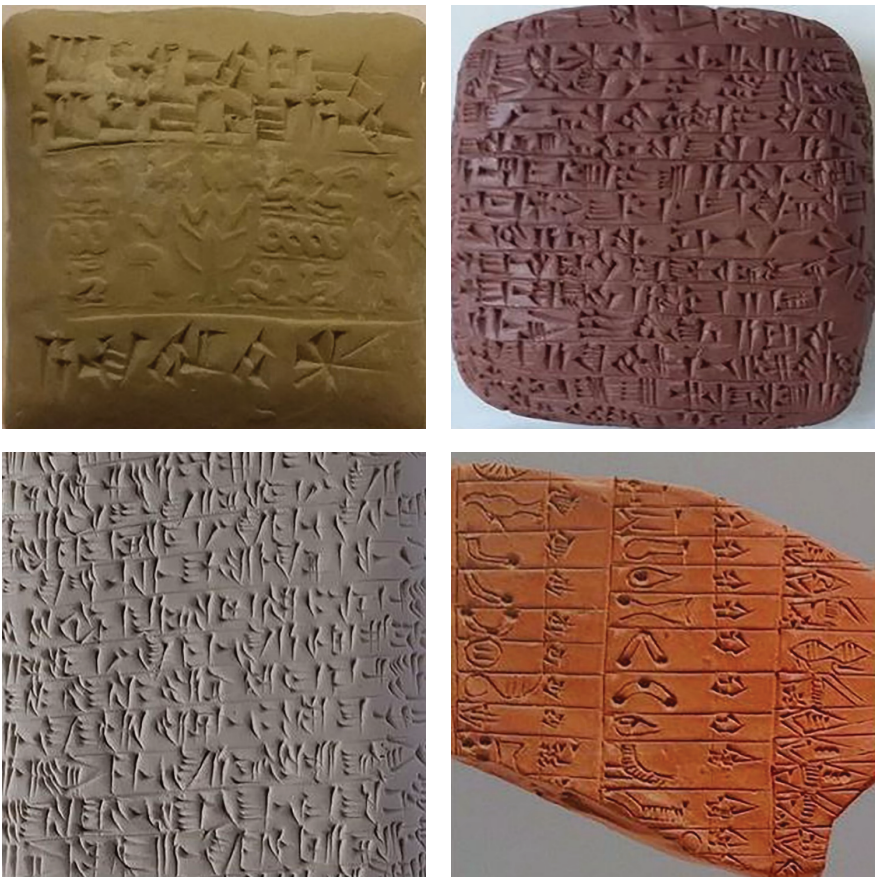

Fig. 8: Four modern replicas. A clay envelope and its tablet enclosed inside (upper left corner), and tablets produced by the author in experiments; © Cécile Michel.

Secondly, organising scribal schools that are open to a wide range of people helps scholars share their knowledge of cultural history and in some cases prevent ignorance from leading to the destruction of the cultural heritage of humanity.[66] Educational activities may also be channelled at the elite and rulers by creating honorary gifts for them containing original or specially written texts. In doing this, Assyriologists also show how much they value their own discipline, which

66 <https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/cuneiform/documentation_e.html> (accessed 5 June 2018).

is only represented by a small number of specialists worldwide, and how they are able to gain the attention of rulers and managers alike.[67]

Modern artefacts of this kind may be referred to as 'modern replicas' and 'modern originals', and they are not produced with the intention of deceiving anyone.

2.5 Publication of a 'modern original' to honour a scholar

Some scholars used to prepare tablets that were modern originals for friends and colleagues, celebrating a special event such as a marriage, birthday, the birth of a child, a scientific event or an anniversary, for example.[68] Some of the clay tablets made by modern Assyriologists may be very accurate, regardless of whether an existing text has been created or a brand new one, but once again, tablets like these are not produced in order to deceive anyone on purpose, even though this might well happen to non-specialists unfamiliar with the field.

The clay cuneiform tablets made by Assyriologists, whatever their motives, usually end in personalities' or colleagues' homes or are used as experimental or educational tools. Once they are recognised as modern artefacts, they usually have no scientific value to posterity, unlike genuine tablets, which are studied, published and commented on by scholars. However, at least one such modern tablet ended up in a book containing the publication of Neo-Babylonian tablets preserved in the Yale Babylonian Collection at New Haven. In volume XXI of the Yale Oriental Series (YOS), published in 2011, the authors discretely inserted a tablet in the category of 'letters' – no. 43, which they described in their catalogue as 'greetings in extremely late Babylonian'.[69] A copy of the text was included among the other copies.

As for the other tablets, the dimensions are provided as well as the names of the sender and addressee, which are also listed in the index of proper names together with another name mentioned in the text. These names sound extremely modern compared to those found in the other tablets. The sender is 'Alberti', a

67 Several state presidents, queens, European officials, local governors, mayors and university presidents have received a cuneiform clay tablet bearing their name, title, the date or a short original text in Akkadian. Ideally, when I do so, I try to enclose a euro cent in the clay so that future archaeologists will be able to date the tablet, a 'modern original'.

68 The organisers of the Third Kültepe International Meeting which took place at Kültepe at the beginning of August 2019 received very well-made tablets with an original Old Assyrian text from a friend and colleague, formerly the curator of a large museum cuneiform collection.

69 Frahm/Jursa 2011, 37.

descendant of 'Kalaya', with a note in brackets saying that it corresponds to Albert Clay. The tablet is, indeed, referred to as the 'Clay tablet', which could also be understood as a pun on the medium of the manuscript.

Albert T. Clay (1866–1925) was one of the most famous American Assyriologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He studied in Philadelphia with H. Hilprecht and received his PhD in Assyriology in 1894 on business texts from Nippur from the Achaemenid period.[70] He was a lecturer in Hebrew and assistant curator of Babylonian and Semitic antiquities before becoming professor of Semitic philology and archaeology in 1909. In 1910 he was offered a professorship in Assyriology at Yale, which was specially created for him, and the following year he became the curator of the new Yale Babylonian Collection. In the years that followed, he bought large groups of tablets, setting up the biggest collection of cuneiform texts in America, and published thirteen volumes with copies of cuneiform, many of these on Babylonian tablets from the first millennium BCE. His excellent knowledge of cuneiform written artefacts and his renowned competence regarding cuneiform copies explain the excellent formal quality of his 'forged' letter, which he gave to a couple of good friends.

The addressees are Harles, a descendant of Turria, and Miryam, a descendant of Rihardis, and thus a couple. In the index, footnotes referring to each other provide the identity of these persons: Charles Cutler Torrey (1863–1956), a biblical scholar and Semitist, chairman of the Yale Department of Semitic and Biblical Languages, Literature and History in the graduate school and curator of the university coin collection, and Marian Edwards Richards, whom he married in 1911.[71] This cuneiform letter was presumably made and given to them on the occasion of their marriage.

By including this modern original tablet in their publication of Neo-Babylonian tablets preserved in the Yale Babylonian Collection, the authors of the volume paid tribute to a great Assyriologist from the early years of the discipline.

2.6 Fakes and politics: the scientific expression of a political opinion

Humour and parody were not the prerogative of Mesopotamian scribes alone, and some mischievous Assyriologists in the US have recently reacted to the election

70 Foster 1999, 17–18.

71 Foster 1999, 756–757.

and political speeches of their president by writing parodies of scientific articles including the publication of imaginary tablets, fruits of their creativity.[72] Two articles have supposedly been published[73] in a surrealist series called 'Occasional Publications of the Museum of the Sealand'. By using the artifice of parody, their authors express their fears about future political decisions concerning their country. Both articles are preceded or followed by the very end or the first few paragraphs of other contributions which are also full of humoristic and absurd mentions and references.

The author of one of these articles has included the edition of two invented prophecies which are purportedly written on an undated and unprovenanced tablet from a private collection, and included its cuneiform copy. In this example, the tablet has not even taken shape; it is suggested by the pseudo-scientific study that is being done. By doing this, the author mystified at least one colleague since his article is cited in a recent book devoted to the prophecies of Antiquity. The author of this book compares these prophecies to existing 'apocalyptic literature'.[74]

3 Conclusion

Cuneiform fakes have a very long history spanning from at least the late third or early second millennium BCE to the present day, albeit with a long interruption from the beginning of our era to the eighteenth century CE, corresponding to the time during which cuneiform script and the history of Mesopotamia had fallen into oblivion. Under the generic word 'fake', this chapter presents a variety of cases that show the difficulty of applying modern terminology to each of them.

The current practice of copying texts as part of scribal education complicates the work that Assyriologists have determining the date of production of literary works. According to Jones, 'copying comes closest to faking (... because of) the skills used in their manufacture'.[75] It then becomes difficult to distinguish between originals, copies, replicas and fakes. The correspondence of the kings of Ur is a mixture of copies of original letters from the late twenty-first century BCE

72 Garfinkle et al. 2016; Richardson 2017.

73 They are also available online at Academia. (This highlights the problem of the scientific status of 'publications' that are deposited on such a private shared website.)

74 The tablet published in Richardson 2017 is mentioned in Nissinen 2018, 112–113, n. 276–277, and in the bibliography on p. 408.

75 Jones 1990, 29–30.

and compositions written by scribes in the first few centuries of the second millennium BCE, these creations sometimes including elements of genuine letters.

Mesopotamian scholars have shown deep interest in the past, even copying ancient texts. Kings from the first millennium BCE dug into the foundations of buildings, asked their scribes to decipher the unearthed ancient inscriptions, and Nabonidus even decided to revive ancient religious traditions. This antiquarianism was reflected in the scholars' study of ancient texts and their mastery of archaic signs; it led them to the creation of forgeries, such as the cruciform monument to Maništušu.[76]

The production of fakes in the ancient Near East was often motivated by economic factors, but could also have a religious or political background as well, such as the creation of texts caricaturing kingship ideology. The main motive is also an economic one today. Hundreds of fake tablets were produced between the end of the nineteenth and the first few decades of the twentieth century CE. The production of such fakes decreased perceptibly during the 1930s as new expert techniques were developed and legal sanctions were taken against fakers. The phenomenon still exists today, however, alongside the making of legitimate modern replicas or 'modern originals' by Assyriologists, but fake items have to 'compete' with thousands of genuine artefacts put on the market by looters taking advantage of the wars that have plagued this area of the world the last forty years. This organised looting of antiquities and their appearance on the market causes some significant problems for Assyriologists, who are thus deprived of part of the scientific information relating to their contexts of discovery. In addition, they face a difficult dilemma: on the one hand, they feel obliged to prevent the information contained in these written artefacts from being lost forever by disappearing into private collections, and on the other, they do not want to promote the market of antiquities by giving added value to an object once it has been certified as genuine and published.[77]

The identification of fakes is not always obvious, even to specialists. According to Christopher Walker, it is difficult to distinguish between a well-made fake cylinder seal and a third-class antique one, for example.[78] There are still debates about some items which became famous as a result and were thus historicised. When a fake is identified as such, its fate varies according to the size of the collection in which it is preserved. Large museums that have a department dedicated to ancient Near Eastern antiquities usually keep the fake cuneiform tablets they

76 Beaulieu 2013.

77 Michel 2019.

78 Walker 1987, 59–60.

have acquired in their storerooms, while other museums that only possess a small collection of written artefacts present their fakes in showcases for educational purposes. If the fakes are real pieces of art, such as inscribed statues, they may also be displayed in museum exhibitions. Some fakes have been the subject of a specific exhibition insofar as these forgeries have become objects that have their share of history.[79] A few Assyriologists study them as historiographical testimonies,[80] and the main database of cuneiform texts – the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative[81] – has decided to include them.

The fakes created during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tell us another story, one of the rediscovery of the ancient Near East within the Orientalism movement. This fascination about the Orient and the past led certain individuals to create some fantastic stories and theories, such as those published by the writer Zecharia Stichin (1920–2010) who took the mythological battles of gods related in the authentic *Babylonian Epic of Creation* to be real astronomic phenomena.[82] Such publications possibly inspired the Iraqi Minister of Transport, Kazem Finjan, in 2016 when he declared that the very first airport was built in Iraq around 5,000 BCE by the Sumerians, who explored space and discovered the planet Pluto.[83]

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79 Lehrer-Jacobson 1989.
80 Marqués Rowe 2006.
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