

# ADVERTISING SECRECY, CREATING POWER IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA: HOW SCHOLARS USED SECRECY IN SCRIBAL EDUCATION TO BOLSTER AND PERPETUATE THEIR SOCIAL PRESTIGE AND POWER\*

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**Abstract: Advertising Secrecy, Creating Power in Ancient Mesopotamia: How Scholars Used Secrecy in Scribal Education to Bolster and Perpetuate Their Social Prestige and Power**

This study investigates how ancient scholars from mid-first millennium Babylonia and Assyria advertised their possession of secret knowledge to scribal students in order to bolster and perpetuate scholarly social prestige and power in society. After a brief theoretical orientation to issues surrounding the study of secrecy and a sketch of the two-tier scribal educational model developed by Petra Gesche, the study presents evidence for advertising scholarly secrets from the circumstances surrounding the storage and handling of tablets bearing the *Geheimwissen* colophon and from two literary texts copied by first-tier scribes, “In Praise of the Scribal Art” and “The Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic.”

**Keywords:** Scholars – Scribes – Secrecy – Social Power

**Resumen: Publicitando secretos y creando poder en la antigua Mesopotamia: de qué modo los eruditos hicieron uso de los secretos en la educación de los escribas para reforzar y perpetuar su prestigio social y poder**

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Este estudio investiga de qué modo los antiguos estudiosos de mitad del primer milenio en Babilonia y Asiria publicitaban su posesión de conocimientos secretos a los estudiantes escribas, para reforzar y perpetuar el prestigio social erudito y el poder en la sociedad. Luego de una breve orientación teórica sobre temas relativos al estudio de los secretos, y de un esbozo sobre el modelo de educación en dos niveles desarrollado por Petra Gesche, este estudio presenta evidencia relativa a la promoción de secretos eruditos a partir de las circunstancias que rodean el almacenamiento y la manipulación de tablillas que comparten el colofón *Geheimwissen*, así como de dos textos literarios copiados por escribas del primer nivel, “Elogio del arte de los escribas” y “La épica babilónica estándar de Gilgamesh.”

**Palabras clave:** Eruditos – Escribas – Secreto – Poder social

In a previous study,<sup>1</sup> I argued that elite Mesopotamian scribal-scholars claimed to be the exclusive bearers of secret knowledge from the gods by attaching secrecy to the major scholarly corpora—exorcism, extispicy, lamentation, medicine, and celestial divination—and by guarding these secret texts from outsiders via three major means: restricting the number of people who could access the tablets, communicating admonitions and divine invocations to warn those who did access the tablets, and attaching secrecy labels and *Geheimwissen* colophons to tablets to inform users of the restricted nature of the tablets’ contents. The evidence for these ideas came mainly from the secret, scholarly tablets themselves. To further their claims, the ancient scholars also fashioned themselves as the scribal heirs of the antediluvian sages, who were closely allied to Ea, the patron deity of the scholars and the god of secrecy.<sup>2</sup> This professional genealogy provided the scholars with a mythological channel to receive their secret textual corpora from Ea via the sages of antediluvian times through normal scribal channels, i.e., as written copies. Going a step farther, the scholarly claim to secrecy was extended to the entire scribal craft so that Nabu became a god of secrets and anyone who studied scribal products studied secrets *in the company of scholars*.<sup>3</sup> The scholars’ claiming to be the exclusive bearers of secret knowledge, the scribal successors of ancient sages, and the gate-keepers of a secret craft would have sup-

<sup>1</sup> See Lenzi 2008: 67–219.

<sup>2</sup> See likewise, e.g., Parpola 1993: XVIII; Rochberg 2004: 210–219; and van der Toorn 2007: 207–211.

<sup>3</sup> See Lenzi 2008: 140–146 for a review of the evidence and an assessment of the ideological importance of and limitations on this claim.

ported and perpetuated their position at court and in society as ritual experts and counselors to the king—a role that is well-known from king lists, letters, and other official texts,<sup>4</sup> especially those in the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>5</sup> These scribal claims, I argued, are probably best understood as a concomitant development of the editorial work on various series that took place during the second half of the second millennium, since the *Geheimwissen* colophons first appeared at that time.<sup>6</sup> The claims persisted long after the end of indigenous Mesopotamian kingship.<sup>7</sup>

While it is clear therefore that the secret scholarly corpora existed and were indeed guarded against outsiders, it is not clear precisely *how* the scholars transformed this intellectual possession into social prestige and power. The present study begins this exploration in a very circumscribed manner. Focusing on texts and circumstances connected to scribal education,<sup>8</sup> I argue that ancient Babylonian and Assyrian scholars (*ummânū*) advertised their possession of secret knowledge to scribal students as a means—one among others—to bolster and perpetuate scholarly social prestige and power in society.

#### THE THEORETICAL ORIENTATION AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE SCOPE OF AND DATA FOR THIS STUDY

Before looking into the Mesopotamian textual data, a look at some preliminary considerations are in order. First, I offer a brief theoretical orientation to a few relevant issues surrounding the study of secret knowledge, including what I mean by social prestige and power. And second, I consider the warrants, limitations, and chronological scope of the textual data used in this study for historical reconstruction.

<sup>4</sup> See Lenzi 2008: 70–77.

<sup>5</sup> This is not entirely lacking in Neo-Babylonian sources, though. For a summary of scholars at the Neo-Assyrian court, see Vogelzang 1995: 17–28. For a brief summary of Neo-Babylonian scholar-king relations, see Rochberg 2004: 224–225.

<sup>6</sup> See Lenzi 2008: 120–121, 147–149, 205–206, 214–215.

<sup>7</sup> The persistence of the claims is evidenced by Hellenistic cuneiform tablets bearing the *Geheimwissen* colophon and a king list attesting the *apkallu-ummânu* genealogical connection, though the interpretation of the purpose for such claims changes. As cuneiform became confined to the precincts of temples (e.g., in Uruk and Babylon), the role of cuneiform scribal-scholars in society changed (as did the purpose of their claims to secrecy). See generally Clancier 2011: 752–773. On the *apkallu-ummânu* genealogical connection in the Hellenistic period and the modification to the scholar's exclusive claims (i.e., the role of secrecy in their group identity) in light of their Hellenistic situation, see Lenzi 2008a: 137–169.

<sup>8</sup> For a brief defense of this limited scope, see below.

*Theoretical Orientation to Secret Knowledge:* For the present purposes, secrecy may be defined broadly as the deliberate practice of withholding information. Scholars who study secrecy have long recognized this practice to be an important tool for creating power within a social formation.<sup>9</sup> The one exercising secrecy, that is, the possessor of a secret, can be nearly any individual in or fraction of a social formation: for example, a government agency, a corporate board, an institution's leader, members of an organization, or a spouse. Whatever the possessor's identity, their intentional withholding of information gives them a situational advantage—a kind of power. As Stanton Tefft writes, secrecy is “one of the social resources available to individuals that they can employ in manipulating or reacting to their environment. For secret knowledge always gives its possessors some degree of power over others.”<sup>10</sup>

If secrets, by definition, are restricted to their possessors and are not to be divulged to others, how does one go about studying secrecy within a particular social formation?<sup>11</sup> Recent studies of secret knowledge distinguish between the *content* of secret knowledge, which is often unavailable to the investigator, and the *discursive forms* of secret knowledge, “that is,” as Hugh Urban notes, “the *strategies and tactics*...—through which secrets are concealed and revealed, to whom, in what contexts and through what relations of power they are exchanged.”<sup>12</sup> It may help to think of this distinction in more familiar terms. We may not know what secrets the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency has with regard to a particular issue but we generally know that they maintain these secrets via organizational hierarchy, security clearances, marking documents “classified,” lie detector tests, threats of prosecution, or worse.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The seminal work of Simmel (1906: 441–498) is still cited by scholars dealing with secrecy as a social phenomenon.

<sup>10</sup> Tefft 1980: 319–346, here 321. Although Tefft writes about individuals, the same could be said of groups.

<sup>11</sup> The following two paragraphs draw on material presented in an excursus in Lenzi 2008: 19–21.

<sup>12</sup> Urban 1997: 1–38, here 3. See also Bellman 1984; Lindstrom 1990; Johnson 2002, Urban 1998; 2001; and Campany 2006. As Simmel noted in his classic article: “[s]ecrecy is a universal sociological form, which, as such, has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents” (1906: 463). For a study that looks at *both* the content and the strategies of secret knowledge in Shi'ite Islam, see Dakake 2006.

<sup>13</sup> The analogy was chosen advisedly. Some scholars have argued that Mesopotamian scholarly secrets were more like trade or guild secrets (e.g., Rochberg 2004: 217). From an outsider's point of view, there is much to be said for this idea. But from an insider's view, that is, from the Mesopotamian scholars' own view as it is implied in their texts, this analogy does not do justice to the cosmological and mythological significance of the scholarly corpora deemed secret (see Rochberg 1999: 419–423 for this insider vs. outsider perspective). Just as the CIA's secrets are

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "capital" appears frequently in studies of secrecy to explain how secrecy is transformed into power and prestige. I adopt it here as well. Capital, as Bourdieu himself states, refers to "goods, material and symbolic, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation."<sup>14</sup> Capital may be economic, cultural, social, or symbolic. It relates to what you know, whom you know, and the positive perception among peers that these create for their possessor (i.e., prestige and honor but also social power).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, capital is a dynamic force. It is self-replicating and self-reinforcing so that the more one has the more potent it becomes to build power and prestige. For example, a socially well-connected individual is, as Bourdieu notes, "sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known."<sup>16</sup> The same applies to the cultural and symbolic capital of secret knowledge. A certain body of knowledge is important and kept secret, and because of its secret status it is viewed as all the more important; a privileged person is entrusted with secret knowledge, and due to their possession of it they are perceived by others as all the more privileged.<sup>17</sup> Filling out the notion of "capital" with regard to secret knowledge, Urban notes the following:

*[T]wo processes are at work that serve to transform secret knowledge into a kind of capital. First, the strict guarding of information transforms knowledge into a scarce resource, a good that is "rare and worthy of being sought after." . . . Second, once it has been converted into this kind of valuable commodity, secret knowledge can serve as a source of 'symbolic capital' in Bourdieu's sense, as a form of status and power accumulated by social actors and recognized as "legitimate" in a given social field.*<sup>18</sup>

rooted ultimately in a concern for national security and the perpetuation of national interests, so too are the Mesopotamian scholarly secrets rooted ultimately in a concern for cosmological and theological harmony—even if these secrets also serve the scholars' social benefit.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu 1977: 178, cited by Urban 1998: 219.

<sup>15</sup> See Bourdieu 1986: 241–258 for a discussion of the various kinds of capital. Urban 1998: 219–221 presents a useful summary.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu 1986: 250.

<sup>17</sup> For more on symbolic capital and the related idea of symbolic power, see Bourdieu 1990: 112–121 and 1991: 163–170, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Urban 1998: 220, 221.

In a more recent study, Urban combines the idea of symbolic capital with Simmel's earlier idea of secrecy as adornment to capture another aspect of secrecy's impact on social relations. He writes,

*secrecy or the controlled circulation of valued information serves to transform knowledge into something rare, a scarce resource. Like precious jewelry...or expensive clothing..., it is a covering, something which conceals or obscures aspects of the physical person; but it is also an ornament, something which accentuates the person, and so serves as a mark of distinction and prestige.*<sup>19</sup>

Distinction, prestige, and power can only be acquired, however, if the broader society knows something about a group's secret knowledge, if only that the group claims to possess it. In other words, for secret knowledge to become symbolic capital for its possessors it must be advertised: while largely concealing its actual content, the existence of the secret knowledge must be revealed through various discursive means.<sup>20</sup> As Paul Christopher Johnson states, "[a]n uncirculated secret, after all, is merely an individual's idle thought. Unable to attract a following, it fails to register, socially or culturally speaking. A secret's power resides precisely in the delicate dialectic between containment and circulation."<sup>21</sup> Of course, there are some secrets that are never circulated to protect a person from sanctions were the secret learned by others<sup>22</sup> or to create group coherence with no interest in outsiders other than keeping them out.<sup>23</sup> In such cases, extramural social prestige may not be a desired function of secrecy. But where social prestige and power (what Bourdieu calls cultural and symbolic capital) are desired, advertisement is necessary. Johnson calls the discursive advertisement of secret knowledge "secretism," about which he writes

<sup>19</sup> Urban 2001: 5–6. Along the same lines, Johnson states, "[s]ecrets are to religion what lingerie is to the body; they enhance what is imagined to be present" (2002: 4).

<sup>20</sup> For this aspect of secret discourse see Urban 1998: 212 and especially Campamy 2006. See also the distinction between relative and absolute secrecy as developed by Johnston in a discussion of mystery religions. As she says, absolute secrecy in the religious sphere is rare (Johnston 2004: 108–109).

<sup>21</sup> Johnson 2002: 132.

<sup>22</sup> e.g., an intelligence agent's betrayal or a spouse's adultery.

<sup>23</sup> This could be the function of a secret handshake, for example, in some socially-oriented fraternities. For the group coherence view of secrecy in ancient Mesopotamian scribalism, which is not the main focus of this paper, see below.

*Secretism I define not as merely reputation, but **the active milling, polishing, and promotion of the reputation of secrets.** Secretism is freely and generously shared. Secretism does not diminish a sign's prestige by revealing it, but rather increases it through the promiscuous circulation of its reputation; it is the long shadow that hints of a great massif behind. It is through secretism, the circulation of a secret's inaccessibility, the words and actions that throw that absence into relief, that a secret's power grows, quite independently of whether or not it exists.<sup>24</sup>*

It is this issue of secretism, the advertisement of possessing secret knowledge via specific discursive means, that concerns us in the present study. How did the ancient scholars' exclusive possession of secret knowledge become known to first millennium scribal students so as to contribute to the scholars' social prestige and power?

Individuals in Mesopotamian society who were born into certain families, who were unusually attractive, who possessed desirable skills or iconic objects, who had acquired political office, who had access to those in political office, who had amassed a large economic surplus, who had unusually effective military prowess, who had special access to non-obvious beings, or who obtained and curated valued knowledge all enjoyed various levels of social prestige and power, as Bourdieu defines them. Scribal scholars, the social actors in the focus of this study, thus could have enjoyed prestige and power for a variety of reasons. For example, they were often born into influential families;<sup>25</sup> they were literate; they curated important religious texts; and they had access to important political and religious figures, at least until the loss of indigenous kingship in the Persian period. The focus of this study is the Babylonian and Assyrian scholars' exclusive possession of secret knowledge, textualized in their various learned corpora, and *how* or *by what mechanism* possessing this secret knowledge contributed to their social prestige and power. My answer is that at least one of the ways that this happened was through the advertisement of their exclusive intellectual possession to their students, whose livelihood would take them out into society, out beyond the social sphere of the elite scribal-scholars and those they served.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson 2002: 3.

<sup>25</sup> Scribes generally came from the ranks of well-connected families, see Pearce 1995: 2265–2278, here 2265 for the point generally and Beaulieu 2000: 1–16 for a detailed, representative case study from Neo-Babylonian and Hellenistic Uruk.

*The Warrants, Limitations, and Chronological Scope of the Textual Data:* Ancient intentions are largely inaccessible. We cannot and need not assume that wielders of secret knowledge self-consciously realized the necessity of advertising secret knowledge for their own social advancement to have engaged in such activity or for us to recognize their activity as such. Although we may be able to demonstrate that some ancient scholars were deliberate or even politically shrewd in their tactics of both guarding and advertising their possession of secret knowledge for their advantage, it is likely that many individuals would have never reflected self-consciously about such matters. They would have simply acted the way they were expected to act and reaped the benefits of their intellectual possession and social position—just as many contemporary scholars do. Furthermore, we cannot know how each individual scribal student responded to the scholars' advertisement. No doubt some would have been oblivious to it. Others might have received it more readily. Still others may have been more cynical or incredulous about it. It is useless to speculate about ancient psychological states. We only have texts, the honored product of the scribal craft. The focus in this study therefore will be on what is plausibly warranted from the contextual interpretation of texts available to us.

One can imagine many social situations in which scholars could "advertise" their secret knowledge by performing their craft: the *āšipu* doing a ritual near the river or on a roof or in a sick man's bedroom, the *kalû* beating his drum and chanting in the temple, the *bārû* doing an extispicy, or the *tušsar enūma Anu Enlil* gazing at the stars in the middle of the night. These activities may have advertised the craft and even added to the scholar's mystique, but it is unclear to what degree this actually advertised the *secrecy* of their secret knowledge. For the present purposes therefore this discussion will be limited to education-related textual evidence that explicitly mentions secrecy.

The scribes may also have advertised their possession of secret knowledge by word of mouth to their students. And/or, as I suggest below, they may have hoped that their students would advertise it for them by telling others outside the scribal craft. These are reasonable ideas—inferences based on social contexts and human interaction. But they assume and build on something that must first be established with evidence. Thus, we must look to the texts available to us.

One can also imagine many audiences to which the scholars could advertise their exclusive possession (e.g., other scholars, the king, foreigners, etc.). Limiting the present treatment to the educational sphere serves a deliberate methodological purpose. My interest is to understand how scholars could have gained social capital, that is, potentially advanced their prestige and

power, to a broader base of their own society, that is, members of the community beyond their own professional ranks and beyond their employers in the temples and courts where they served. The religious and political position of Assyrian and Babylonian scholars, including the role of secrecy in such, is well-known and treated extensively elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> What can we say about the perception the scholars tried to create about themselves among non-elites? Our inability to identify the audience of many texts with confidence diminishes the usefulness of various genres. This is not at all the case for the material used in an educational context. These texts were clearly directed at students. Thus, if we find material used in the scribal curriculum that also advertises scholarly secret knowledge, then we know the audience, and this audience, as I will mention below, provided a potential means to disseminate the scholarly elites' claims to a broader base of society.

The evidence mustered here comes from several sites in post-Kassite Babylonia and Assyria *prior* to the Hellenistic period, a time when cuneiform was limited to the temples and the need for work-a-day scribes among the general populace was nil.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the data is from various mid-first millennium tablet collections. As is often the case in our field, we do not have as much data as we would like about the topic under discussion. The following brief presentation draws on eclectic evidence that does not allow the nuance that we might wish for. The social reality would no doubt have been more complicated and would have differed somewhat from one place in the mid-first millennium to another. Thus, the purpose of this study is to suggest a plausible social perspective on scribalism that future research can refine as new evidence comes to light.

## ADVERTISING SECRECY

To understand how scholars advertised their possession of secret knowledge to their students one needs to understand the scribal educational context. For this, I draw on Petra Gesche's study of the scribal curriculum in first millen-

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Lenzi 2008, the references in note 5 above, and Pongratz-Leisten 1999, who treats the issue of scholarly secrecy on pp. 301–320. For a Neo-Assyrian report that reminds the king that celestial divination is not a matter to discuss in public, essentially advertising (i.e., reminding) the king, in my opinion, that the celestial diviners possessed secret knowledge, see Lenzi 2008: 102–103, which treats SAA 8 338: 7–rev. 4 and 342: 7–rev. 2 (for which, see Hunger 1992).

<sup>27</sup> See note 7 above.

nium Babylonia.<sup>28</sup> Although concerned only with first millennium Babylonia, Gesche also summarizes the Assyrian material, mostly from Aššur, and suggests that the system she reconstructs for Babylonia was probably also utilized in Assyria.<sup>29</sup>

According to Gesche, scribal education followed a two-tier system. The first level of the curriculum trained students for institutional administration; the second prepared students for scholarly pursuits, especially *āšipūtu*.<sup>30</sup> The first level of the curriculum started with students copying signs and lexical lists to teach the basics of the cuneiform script. The curriculum then advanced to the copying of selected literary texts, many of which had a strong royal viewpoint to inculcate the proper ideological values in future administrators.<sup>31</sup> This first level of the curriculum also taught practical knowledge such as the proper forms of contracts, mathematics, land surveying, and other skills necessary for administrative activities. For most students, the completion of this first level was the end of their scribal training. Only a small fraction of the students—perhaps as few as 10% according to one estimate<sup>32</sup>—would have continued with their studies to the second level, where they studied classic literary works (such as *Enūma eliš* and *Ludlul bēl nēmeqī*) and texts associated with *āšipūtu*.<sup>33</sup> Although there is no explicit connection to secret knowledge, this two-tier system of scribal education would have implicitly advertised to all beginning students the existence of an elite, insider-group within the general scribal ranks. With this background in place, I turn now to a standardized colophon and two compositions that give us a peek into the discursive means scholars used to advertise their possession of secret knowledge to first level students.

*Geheimwissen Colophons*: One discursive means to advertise the scholars' possession of secret knowledge to first-level students may be found in the *Geheimwissen* colophons and secrecy labels, which in essence warned non-scholars from reading secret texts. A representative example occurs on an explanatory compendium (KAR 307, rev. 26–27).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Gesche 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Gesche 2000: 23–24.

<sup>30</sup> See Gesche 2000: 61–171 and 172–198 for the respective levels. The two levels are summarized graphically on p. 210. Additional training necessary for the scribe's final position (*Fachausbildung*) would take place, essentially, on the job (213–218).

<sup>31</sup> Gesche 2000: 211.

<sup>32</sup> Pearce 1995: 2274–2275.

<sup>33</sup> See Gesche 2000: 172–173 for a summary of the second level curriculum.

<sup>34</sup> See Hunger 1968, #206 (type B) and Livingstone 1989: 102.

26. AD.ĤAL DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ ZU-u ZU-a li-kal-lim NU ZU-u a-  
a IGI.LAL

27. [NÍG].GIG DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ . . .

SECRET OF THE GREAT GODS. An expert may show an(other) expert. A non-expert may not see (it). A restriction of the great gods . . .

The secrecy label appears in small capital letters in the translation above; the part I am calling a *Geheimwissen* colophon is underlined.<sup>35</sup> The existence of these labels and colophons implies that some literate individuals, whether students or non-scholarly scribes, were assumed to be potential readers of these proscribed texts.<sup>36</sup> The fact that these labels and colophons typically occur with the rubric of the text (generally located at the end of a tablet, though sometimes the labels occur at the beginning) indicates how they were intended to communicate. When someone picked up a tablet containing one of these warnings and checked its colophon or rubric to identify the tablet's content, the secrecy label or *Geheimwissen* colophon would have immediately communicated the fact that the person was holding a restricted text. There is evidence that scholarly (i.e., restricted texts) and mundane (i.e., non-restricted) texts were kept together in a number of private tablet collections.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore plausible to suggest that there would have been circumstances in which a scribal student came across a tablet bearing a *Geheimwissen* colophon or secrecy label. (We cannot document particular instances of this happening, unfortunately. But the scenario is quite plausible from what we know about tablet storage. Moreover, the situation described in SAA 16 65 is suggestive.

<sup>35</sup> For a full discussion and catalog of secrecy labels and *Geheimwissen* colophons, see Lenzi 2008: 160–219. The colophons and labels are first attested in the late second millennium and continue to appear into the Hellenistic and Parthian periods.

<sup>36</sup> See Lenzi 2008: 149–160. Since we do have hints that these proscriptions were actually enforced—that secret knowledge was indeed guarded, the *Geheimwissen* colophons were not simply directed internally to other scribal scholars. There is no doubt that other scribal scholars would have read and regarded these colophons. But my treatment in Lenzi 2008: 154–156 of SAA 16 65, a letter that protests the teaching of extispicy and celestial divination to a man's son by a Babylonian slave, suggests that scholars were not the only intended readers of *Geheimwissen* colophons. This letter uses the very same verbs (*kullumu* and *amāru*) that are used in the *Geheimwissen* colophons to describe the illicit educational activity of this man's son. This suggests “that our anonymous informant has implied in his very word choice the violation of a known prohibition related to restricted knowledge” (Lenzi 2008: 156).

<sup>37</sup> This point is abundantly clear from a perusal of various tablet finds. See, e.g., the generalization by Stolper (1999: 595), quoted by Rochberg 2004: 218. As further examples, scholarly and mundane tablets were found together in several private houses in both Babylon and Ashur (see, e.g., Pedersén 1998: 190–191 [Babylon 19 and 20], 134 [Assur 18], and 136 [Assur 21]).

See note 36.) In such a situation, the colophon would have served as a discursive means both to warn the student against reading the text and to advertise the existence and possession (by the tablet owner) of secret knowledge. Of course, concealing the secret knowledge (inscribed on the tablet) would have depended upon the reader's decision to heed or to disregard the warning.<sup>38</sup> Still, this potential for advertising secret knowledge might have been one of the discursive means by which scholars turned their possession of secret knowledge into social prestige and power.

*"In Praise of the Scribal Art"*: As is well known, scribal education throughout the ages often included the copying of various thematically-appropriate texts that describe both the schoolhouse and the scribal craft itself. One such bilingual example, previously labeled Examenstext D but more appropriately called "In Praise of the Scribal Art,"<sup>39</sup> mentions how scribalism could reveal secrets. One of the exemplars of this text, CBS 2266 + CBS 2301 + CBS 8803 + CBS 8803a + N 921 + CBS 11300 (see CDLI no. P259300 for a photo), is a Neo-Babylonian exercise tablet from Nippur that resembles Gesche's scribal exercise tablet type Ib.<sup>40</sup> The tablet's obverse contains an excerpt of the lexical list *ur<sub>5</sub>-ra* = *hubullu* (II 306–376, written nearly twice sequentially);<sup>41</sup> its reverse includes, among other things, the first several lines of the composition under discussion, beginning in its col. iv'. Although this manuscript does not preserve the lines in the composition concerning secrecy (cited below), the tablet's contents and format do suggest that "In Praise of the Scribal Art" was used in the first level of scribal education in the first millennium.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it provides admissible evidence for the purposes of the present study.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Of course, if they disobeyed the colophon's admonition, beginning scribal students would have had a very difficult time reading the tablets due to the pervasive use of logograms in many of the scholarly texts. It is unlikely therefore that a first-level student could have learned much secret knowledge apart from a private tutor who disregarded the two-tiered system (as in SAA 16 65).

<sup>39</sup> See Sjöberg 1972: 126–131 for the most recent edition. The text was known to Sjöberg in four MSS and two others that preserved the catchline (see p. 126). All four MSS witnesses are bilingual. MSS A and B are from Ashurbanipal's library. MS C is from Kish. And our MS D is from Nippur. For an interesting literary reading of this poem, see Hurowitz 2000: 49–56.

<sup>40</sup> For Gesche's type Ib exercise tablet, see Gesche 2000: 45–46.

<sup>41</sup> See Landsberger 1957: 47, 56–80.

<sup>42</sup> The content of the poem confirms this with its listing of administrative tasks and mention of the palace in its concluding lines (15–17). See Sjöberg 1972: 127. The fact that only one school tablet attests this text should not be considered an evidentiary problem. A perusal through Gesche's text index (2000: 806–820) will confirm that relatively few preserved school tablets contain literary excerpts.

<sup>43</sup> The present treatment of this text draws on my earlier work (see Lenzi 2008: 143–144), which used the text for a slightly different purpose.

The text begins in a prospective manner, setting the tone for the entire composition:

1. nam-dub-sar-ra ama-gù-dé-ke<sub>4</sub>-e-ne a-a-um-me-a-ke<sub>4</sub>-eš  
*tup-šar-ru-tu<sub>4</sub> um-mu la-i-ṭa-at a-bi um-ma-ni*

The scribal art is the mother (*ummu*) of the eloquent, the father of the scholar (*ummâni*).<sup>44</sup>

The final word in Akkadian, *ummâni*, is the same word used for both “school master” and “scholar.” From the very beginning of the text, therefore, the student is offered a glimpse of the expertise to which he might aspire, becoming a master, a scholar.<sup>45</sup> This forward looking tendency, that is, the presentation of the level toward which a young student may aspire, is carried through the remainder of the text. This holds true for lines 7–8, where we find an explicit connection between the scribal craft and secrecy. The lines read:

7. nam-dub-sar-ra é-a ni-tuku ki-ùri-<sup>d</sup>am-ma-an-ki-k[e]<sub>4</sub>  
*tup-šar-ru-tu É bu-ni ni-šir-ti <sup>d</sup>am-ma-an-ki-[ma]*  
 8. [igi]-DU um-ma-ra-ak-en ki-uri na-an-da-ab-lá-e[n]  
*ta-da-al-lip-šim-ma ni-šir-ta-šá ú-kal-lam-[ka]*

The scribal art is a house of goodness, the *niširtu* (the treasure/secret)<sup>46</sup> of Ammanki.

<sup>44</sup> Note the phonological homology between *ummu* and *ummâni*. The translation follows Foster 2005: 1023.

<sup>45</sup> If there is any doubt about the prominence of the *ummânu*'s profession in first millennium Babylonian scribal educational subculture, one need only look to *ummiā* = *ummânu*, a Neo- and Late Babylonian non-canonical recension of the *lú* lexical list discussed by Gesche (2000: 127–135). Unlike other recensions of this list of occupations and officials, this recension's first entry is *um-me-a* = *ummânu*. The second entry, although attested in only five of the thirty-seven manuscripts used in Gesche's study (twenty-one tablets are broken in line 2), is *šaman-lá* = *šamallû*, which here must mean “scribal student” (see pp. 128, 130–131 for manuscript evidence, and 132; the tablets attesting *šamallû* as the second entry are from Kish and the *Nabû ša harê* temple in Babylon). The following lines of this first section deal with Sumerian terms for Akkadian *amēlu*, “man” (lines 3–14), and *amēlûtu*, “humanity” (15). The foregrounding of *ummânu* and *šamallû* in this first section implies their prominence among men (*amēlû*), if only to the scholars and their students copying the list.

<sup>46</sup> The association of Enki/Ea with *niširtu* in line 7 and the use of *kullumu*, “to uncover, reveal,” with *niširtu* in line 8 (*kullumu* is also used in *Geheimwissen* colophons, treated above) suggest the primary meaning of *niširtu* in this context is “secret.” Hurowitz (2000: 56, n.27), however, has suggested the word creates a kind of janus-parallelism in line 7: the “treasure” meaning is appropriate with what comes before (“house”) and the “secret” meaning with what comes afterward (“Ammanki”).

Should you work ceaselessly with it, it will reveal its secret  
(*niširtu*) to you.<sup>47</sup>

The primary purpose of these lines is to underscore the difficulty and reward of becoming a scribe. The text makes clear, however, that part of the scribal craft's reward is the acquisition of something secret. Enki/Ea's appearance, mentioned here under the Emesal Sumerian name Ammanki, is noteworthy in this regard. We know that Nabu is the deity usually associated with scribalism in the first millennium.<sup>48</sup> But the invocation of Ea in this context dealing with scribalism and secrecy makes good literary and social contextual sense. The opening line of the text praises the scribal craft as "the father of scholars"; Ea was the patron of the various scholars and, ultimately, the source of their secret scholarly corpora.<sup>49</sup> Lines 7–8 in context promise the tireless scribal student a very great reward for his indefatigable study: Ea's treasure–secret (*niširtu*). By promising the novice (that is, a first-level scribal student) this treasure–secret, the text conveys the message that there are already those who have acquired its possession, namely, the *ummânū*, known servants of Ea, mentioned in line 1. But what is this secret, precisely? On the one hand, the secret is simply the scribal craft as line 7 indicates. This is the most obvious identification. But note that the scribal craft is itself the agent of revealing secrets in line 8, which suggests, on the other hand, that the craft offers more to the advanced student than literacy. Literacy, to build on the house metaphor introduced in line 7, is the door to the riches the scribal craft can reveal.

This reading demonstrates secretism in practice: the student becomes aware of the existence of secrets within the scribal profession and is even promised to gain possession of this valued knowledge if he works hard enough (thus showing how secretism could promote a sense of group coherence for those who possessed it). Yet the young scribal student does not actually learn spe-

<sup>47</sup> The translation is my own. Compare CAD N/2, 276, which translates the lines: "the scribe's craft is a good thing, the secret lore of Enki, if you work ceaselessly with it, it will reveal its secrets to you." Sjöberg (1972: 127), Foster (2005: 1023), and Hurowitz (2000: 56) all translate *tadallipšim-ma*, the initial verb of line 8, as an imperative, "work ceaselessly." Although the poem uses the imperative/prohibitive at times (see, e.g., lines 4–6), the conditional translation of the durative verb in line 8 has the advantage of creating an antithetical parallelism with the statement in line 9: *g[ù]-dé nam-mu-un-na-ab-šub-bé-en ság-zu di-[di-e-dè] / aš-ka ta-nam-di-šim-ma ma-sik-ta-ka iq-qab-b[i]*, "Should you neglect it, you will get a bad reputation" (lit. "your bad reputation will be spoken"). Thus, line 8 shows the positive outcome when the student works hard; line 9 shows the negative outcome when the student neglects his studies.

<sup>48</sup> See also Hurowitz's similar comment (2000: 53–54), though he interprets this fact in terms of the poem's possible subversion of "the regular goddess of scribes, Nisaba (...) or of Nabū (...) replacing them by Enki" (p. 54).

<sup>49</sup> Lenzi 2008: 104–106.

cific secret content. As described in the first section of this study, this is precisely how those with secret knowledge transform their possession into social prestige and power. Secret knowledge is both revealed (its existence) and concealed (its content). Given this, we might say that secret knowledge in this text is symbolic; it stands for the potential prestige and power accessible to those who join the scholars' ranks.

*The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh:* As stated above, Gesche argues that the scribal curriculum in first millennium Babylonia included the copying of certain literary texts, many of which exhibit a strong connection to issues of kingship. The SB Epic of Gilgamesh is among such texts and is therefore our second composition that opens a view onto the discursive means scholars used to advertise their possession of secret knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

Before engaging this text, I wish to emphasize that the reading offered below explores one motif, secrecy, in the Epic. It is one perspective on the Epic, which is a complex and sophisticated literary text. My interpretation is not exclusive to other readings. Moreover, as with any text, interpretations must be based on warrants in the text as understood within a cultural context, which for the present reading is scribal education and first millennium Mesopotamian scholarship.

To make the argument easier to follow, I anticipate the main conclusion of my reading here: the secret knowledge presented in the Epic is symbolic, just as it was ultimately in the previous text. The secret knowledge in the Epic reveals the existence of secret knowledge and its possessors but ultimately conceals (while also hinting at) its genuine content.

<sup>50</sup> Gesche 2000: 150, 172. For a discussion of SB Gilgamesh in scribal education, see George 2003: 35–39. Early in the discussion George states that “[o]ral versions of the legends of Gilgameš, Sargon and Narām-Sîn were probably well known to Babylonian children, and their early exposure to written texts about these fabled heroes of remotest antiquity in the first level of schooling sought to take advantage of this familiarity” (36). George’s MS y (= VAT 19286) is the only direct evidence so far that SB Gilgamesh was copied by first-level Babylonian scribal students in the first millennium (see p. 399 and Gesche 2000: 790). The late Babylonian tablet contains a syllabary on the obverse (see van Dijk 1987: plate 96 for a copy of the obverse) and SB Gilgamesh III 84–93 on the reverse (see George 2003: 578 and plate 68 for the copy). George’s MB MSS Nippur<sub>1-4</sub>, however, provide some earlier curricular evidence for the copying of the Gilgamesh Epic (see pp. 24, 287–294) as do several OB tablets (see pp. 17–18, 22, 216, 241, 260). George speculates that many tablets bearing the Epic were written by advanced scribal students, “sitting their final examinations, as it were” (p. 38), who had “mastered the art of writing and the immense body of learning that went with it” (p. 37). Even if this were the case, it does not negate the evidence cited above for the Epic being copied at the first level of scribal training. As George himself imagines, the Epic would have been “a good story and thus useful, in small quantities, for absolute beginners” (p. 39).

Unlike the OB recension, the SB recension of the Epic of Gilgamesh contains a new prologue, I 1–28.<sup>51</sup> Lines 6–8 of this new prologue proclaim Gilgamesh’s comprehensive wisdom and announce that he brought back secret knowledge from before the flood.

[*nap-ḥ*]ar *né-me-qi ša ka-la-mi* <sup>†</sup>*i*<sup>1</sup>-[*ḥu-uz*’]  
 [*ni*]-*šir-ta i-mur-ma ka-tim-ti ip-<sup>†</sup>tu*<sup>1</sup>  
 [*u*]b-la *ṭè-e-ma ša la-am a-bu-b*[*i*]

He learned absolutely everything pertaining to wisdom.  
 He saw what was secret, opened what was hidden,  
 He brought back a message from before the flood.<sup>52</sup>

George convincingly argues that the secret of line 7 refers to antediluvian knowledge generally (line 8) and not just to the story of the flood. Though the two are related, they are not identical.<sup>53</sup>

Attributing extraordinary wisdom to an ancient Mesopotamian king is commonplace. But this passage goes beyond that. Its reference to what was secret, hidden, and antediluvian refers, as the reader will learn in Tablet XI, to the two occasions when Uta-napishti, the flood hero and, significantly, a protégé of Ea (XI 42), reveals, literally “opens” (*petû*, compare I 7), information to Gilgamesh that presumably only a survivor of the flood would know. Uta-napishti prefaces his revelations there with these formulaic words:

*lu-up-te-ka* <sup>d</sup>GIŠ-*gím-maš a-mat ni-šir-ti*  
*ù pi-riš-ti šá* DINGIR.MEŠ *ka-a-šá lu-uq-bi-ka*<sup>54</sup>

Let me open to you,<sup>55</sup> O Gilgamesh, a secret matter,  
 Let me speak to you a secret of the gods.

Uta-Napishti’s first revelation is the flood story itself, disclosed in XI 11–208. His second, revealed in XI 283–286, concerns the location of a rejuvenating plant, which is eventually lost by Gilgamesh and is therefore of no further use to humans.<sup>56</sup> Having the flood hero introduce the flood story and the rejuve-

<sup>51</sup> See George 2003: 29, 32, inter alia and Tigay 1977: 48, 104–105, and 142–143.

<sup>52</sup> See George 2003: 538 for the text. The translation is my own.

<sup>53</sup> See George 2003: 445–446 and likewise Tigay 1977: 143, n.8.

<sup>54</sup> This is the text of XI 9–10. The text of XI 281–282 varies only slightly. Its restoration is obviously based on the earlier parallel passage. The lines read: *lu-ú-up-te* <sup>d</sup>GIŠ-*gím-maš a-mat ni-šir-ti / u* AD.ḤĀL *šá* DINGIR.MEŠ *ka-a-šá lu-u*[*q-bi-<sup>†</sup>ka*]<sup>1</sup>. See George 2003: 702, 720.

<sup>55</sup> The pronominal suffix *-ka*, rendered here as “to you,” is absent from the verb *lupte* in XI 281. See the previous footnote.

<sup>56</sup> For thoughts about the identification of this plant, see the discussion in George 2003: 524.

nating plant as secrets informs un-initiated individuals (such as first-level scribal students)—if only in a general way—that secret knowledge consists of antediluvian knowledge and medicinal plants.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, unbeknownst to non-scholarly readers, this information is accurate since antediluvian knowledge and healing properties of plants are in fact connected to the contents of scholarly secret knowledge and to the god Ea, patron of wisdom, secrecy, and scholarship.<sup>58</sup> Yet as Karel van der Toorn has recognized, neither of Uta-napishti's conveyances of information is genuinely part of the secret corpora of the scholars. Thus, Uta-napishti's (pseudo-)revelations to Gilgamesh (and

<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting that the ummia = *ummānu* lexical list (see note 45 above) contains a section dealing with the various Sumerian equivalents for the Akkadian term *āšipu*, “exorcist,” the office to which the second level of scribal education prepared students. One of the Sumerian terms for *āšipu* is <sup>lu</sup>AD.ĤAL, which is usually a logographic writing for *bārû*, “diviner.” AD.ĤAL is, of course, also a common logographic spelling of the word *pirištu*, “secret,” as is the case in Gilgamesh XI 282 (see CAD P, 398). Aside from the fact that the exorcist apparently took over the title of the *bārû* in this lexical list (whose work in divinatory matters was considered a secret of the gods [see Lenzi 2008: 55–58] and was becoming more and more the domain of the exorcist [see Geller 2010: 48 and 182, n.52]), we may suggest further that the co-opting of this title also served to associate the exorcist with secrets, and it does so in a text that many aspiring scribes would have copied repeatedly. This lexical equation suggests that young Babylonian scribal students would have been warranted to connect the phrase “secret of the gods” (*pirišti ša ilī*) in XI 10 and 282 with exorcism. See Gesche 2000: 130–131 for the text of the lexical list. The textual evidence for this point, however, is slight and equivocal. Only two manuscripts preserve the equation, one from Sippar and one from Ur. But, many of the witnesses are broken in these lines. Thus, it is likely that others contained the same lexical equivalency. In contrast to this, a few manuscripts from Kish and the *Nabû ša ĥarê* temple in Babylon do not attest *āšipu* here at all; rather, they give the more common equivalent, *barû*. See Gesche 2000: 128. As stated in the introduction to this study, times and places will have varied with regard to how secrecy may have been advertised and the precise textual evidence for such advertisement. We needn't demand uniformity. Besides, this point about the lexical list is not determinative for the “textual secret knowledge” reading of the Epic that I am developing above.

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., the medical colophon AMT 105/1 (= K.4023), treated in Lenzi (2008: 117 with literature in n.274) and 200, which asserts that the recipes for some salves (*napšalātu*) and attachments (*takšīrānu*) derive from the antediluvian sages (*apkallū*), known from other contexts to have been sent by Ea. The text of the colophon also includes the *Geheimwissen* refrain (though garbled), indicating that its content was secret. The rendering of *takšīrānu* here as “attachments” follows CDA, 395 and the older practice of the CAD (e.g., L, 112, M/1, 161, and N/1, 317) over against CAD T, 87, which gives “string of amulet stones.” *Takšīrānu* could be made with either stones or plants; for the latter, see, e.g., KAR 44, rev. 3. *Napšalātu* were made by mixing crushed plants or stones with oil. For examples of texts that connect Ea to life-giving plants, see Veenker 1981: 202–203. Both the *asū* and *āšipu* used plants medicinally. But the recording and organizing of this knowledge on tablets fell to the *āšipū*. See Böck 2009: 105–128, here 110.

the Epic's audience) are a kind of advertisement of the existence of secret knowledge, which simultaneously conceal the actual content of genuine secret knowledge. One may learn a few vague (and accurate) ideas about secret knowledge from Uta-napishti's (pseudo-)revelations in Tablet XI but nothing genuinely from the secret corpora. Thus, the Epic's secret knowledge here is a literary decoy (a symbolic substitute) for the real secret knowledge, which was so deeply valued that it could not be revealed in the text. This idea of revelation as concealment, I suggest, holds true for all of the language of secrecy in the Epic. It is, as van der Toorn says, "rhetorical" or shaped both to reveal the existence of secret knowledge and simultaneously to conceal or obfuscate its true content.<sup>59</sup> Again, as described in the first section of this study, this is precisely how those who hold secret knowledge transform their possession of valued knowledge into social prestige and power.

Having Gilgamesh bring back secret antediluvian knowledge connects secret knowledge to kingship but, significantly, *not* to scholarship. This kingship connection in the Epic squares very nicely with an old tradition that ties antediluvian knowledge to important kings in Mesopotamian cultural traditions (e.g., Ziusudra, Enmeduranki, etc.).<sup>60</sup> But where are the scholars? The scholars, if our social scientific perspective with regard to secrecy is to apply, need to have some connection to the Epic's so-called secret knowledge to benefit from its advertisement.

There are two ways to find a place—a subordinate place but one nonetheless—for the scholars in Gilgamesh's achievement of bringing back secret antediluvian knowledge. The first comes from a narrative detail; the second, from claims of the Epic's authorship.

Uta-napishti is the survivor of the flood who passes his secrets along to Gilgamesh, who in turn brings them back to civilization. As we have said, Uta-napishti's (pseudo-)revelations already hint at scholarly lore connected to Ea and thus implicitly advertise the nexus of secrecy and scholarship. But there is another hint in the flood story that would connect the scholars with Uta-napishti's secret knowledge. In the middle of the flood story, we learn that Uta-napishti is not the sole survivor of the flood; along with his family, he is accompanied on the boat by others, which XI 86 describes as follows:

<sup>59</sup> van der Toorn 2007a: 21–29, here 24.

<sup>60</sup> See Beaulieu 2007: 3–19, here 6–7.

*bu-ul* EDI<sup>1</sup> [ú]-*ma-am* EDIN <sup>1</sup>DUMU.MEŠ<sup>1</sup> *um-ma-a-ni ka-li-šú-nu ú-še-li*

I made the animals of the steppe, the creatures of the steppe, and the members (lit. sons) of the *ummânū* board (the boat).<sup>61</sup>

Uta-napishti saved *all* of the *ummânū* from the devastation of the flood. It was in this way, we might surmise, that all of the scholars and their learned crafts were preserved.<sup>62</sup> Although the text credits Gilgamesh with the return of antediluvian knowledge in the prologue (I 7–8)—he is after all the focus of the Epic and the king, XI 86 hints at an etiology of secret knowledge in line with but slightly different from an idea evidenced elsewhere in the first millennium, namely, that contemporary scholars (*ummânū*) were the professional descendants of antediluvian forebears and therefore were connected to antediluvian secret knowledge.<sup>63</sup>

One may suggest that the *ummânū* in the context of the flood story would most obviously refer to the craftsmen who worked on Uta-napishti's boat and that this reading of XI 86 is therefore overly subtle. But it must be remembered that young scribal students were deeply immersed in copying lexical texts. Among the texts copied by first-level students in first millennium Babylonian schools was a non-canonical recension of the *lú* lexical list that Gesche has called *ummiā* = *ummānu*. As this title suggests, the very first entry of this version of the lexical text, unlike the so-called "canonical" *lú* list, is *um-me-a* = *ummânū*. This is sometimes then followed by the word for the junior scribe's own position: *šaman-lá* = *šamallū*.<sup>64</sup> Given the prominence of these words for the two major positions in the scribal school, i.e., teacher and pupil, and the prominence of this lexical text in first millennium scribal education, it seems plausible to suggest an intertextual connection between the list and SB Gilgamesh XI 86. A student copying SB Gilgamesh XI 86 would have been warranted, given his curriculum, to identify the *ummânū* on Uta-napishti's boat, even if only secondarily, with scribal scholars—the ancestors

<sup>61</sup> See George 2003: 708 for the text. The translation here follows George.

<sup>62</sup> Likewise Noegel 2007: 78, n.97, who cites others.

<sup>63</sup> The evidence that first millennium Babylonian and Assyrian scholars were the professional descendants of the antediluvian *apkallū*, the servants of Ea, is summarized in Lenzi 2008: 106–120. In this tradition, the forebears are not royal, as is Uta-napishti here in the Epic.

<sup>64</sup> Gesche 2000: 130–131 and note 45 above. The evidence for this equation in the first line of the lexical list is unambiguous. Of the thirty-seven manuscripts used by Gesche, all sixteen manuscripts that preserve a first line attest this equation. All other witnesses are broken in the first line.

of the student's teacher—and thus come to recognize the antediluvian genealogy of scholarship and its connection to secrecy by way of association with Uta-napishti, the teacher of secret knowledge to Gilgamesh.

As for the authorship of the SB redaction of the Epic, a well-known catalog of texts and authors dating from the seventh century BCE identifies Sin-leqi-unninni, a *kalû* or cult-singer, as the scholarly author/editor of the SB Epic.<sup>65</sup> Even if one does not think this tradition is historically accurate, the catalog provides invaluable insight into what the ancient scholars themselves believed about the authorship of the Epic. It can be no accident that the person traditionally credited with editing and/or writing the Gilgamesh story, perhaps the very person we are to believe—from the perspective of the Epic's narrative world—to have inscribed the Epic on a tablet for King Gilgamesh (see I 10, 24–28),<sup>66</sup> was himself an *ummânu*. But he was not just any *ummânu*. According to the late Uruk List of Kings and Sages (second century BCE), which likely contains older traditions, Sin-leqi-unninni was Gilgamesh's *ummânû*.<sup>67</sup> Traditions known to first millennium scribes about the Epic's origins therefore preserve the precise relationship between Gilgamesh and Sin-leqi-unninni that we find depicted in other sources between a king and his scholars: secret knowledge is preserved by scholars in writing for the king.<sup>68</sup>

Another layer to the advertisement/concealment of secret knowledge in the Epic of Gilgamesh presents itself in the SB prologue at I 24–28. As these lines form the prologue's conclusion, they are especially significant to understanding the ideological orientation of the SB redaction of the Epic. They read:

<sup>65</sup> See Lambert 1962: 66 (VI, line 10). For a full discussion of Sin-leqi-unninni's authorship of the epic, see George 2003: 28–33. I think this traditional ascription is reasonable and perhaps historically accurate, though I recognize the possibility with Paul-Alain Beaulieu that “he might have been a purely legendary figure that slowly grew in stature to become a divinely inspired sage in the minds of later generations” (2000: 4).

<sup>66</sup> I equate the content of the *narû* mentioned in I 10 with the content of the lapis lazuli tablet (*tuppi uqni*) referred to in I 27. See likewise, e.g., George 2003: 446 and Pongratz-Leisten 1999a: 67–90, here 84.

<sup>67</sup> For a study into the purpose of this king list, see Lenzi 2008a; the text and translation appear on pp. 140–143. We know from other evidence that there was an entire clan of Babylonian scribes that claimed Sin-leqi-unninni as their scribal ancestor. They specialized in *kalûtu* and owned many documents that were labeled a secret. See Beaulieu 2000. Evidence for this family begins in the Neo-Babylonian period.

<sup>68</sup> See likewise Greenstein 1998: 197–204, here 201 and Noegel 2007: 77–79. For scholars in service to the king, see Pongratz-Leisten 1999 inter alia, but especially pp. 286–320. The collection of attestations now available in CAD U/W, 111–115 provides a convenient overview of various texts attesting to the scholars' activities.

[a-mur?] <sup>giš</sup>tup-šen-na šá <sup>giš</sup>ERIN  
 [pu-uṭ-ṭe]r? ḥar-gal-li-šu šá ZABAR  
 [pi-te-m]a? KÁ šá ni-ṣir-ti-šú  
 [i-š]i?-ma ṭup-pi <sup>na4</sup>ZA.GÌN šī-tas-si  
 [mim-m]u-ú <sup>d</sup>GIŠ-gím-maš DU.DU-ku ka-lu mar-ša-a-ti<sup>69</sup>

Find the tablet-box of cedar,  
 Release its clasps of bronze.  
 Open the cover of its secret,  
 Lift up the lapis lazuli tablet and read aloud,  
 All of the trials, everything Gilgamesh endured.

These lines allude to the royal practice of depositing inscriptions in the foundations of buildings, here under the walls of Uruk, for future kings to discover, read, and gain wisdom.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the Epic is placed within the conceptual sphere of *narû* literature.<sup>71</sup> Whether the actual audience of the Epic was the king (and his scholars),<sup>72</sup> a first-level scribal student, or someone who may have heard or read the Epic for themselves, the use of this motif in I 24–28 turns the reader/listener into a person worthy of opening the tablet box (literarily speaking). In other words, the reader/listener is in some ways invited to *become* a king like Gilgamesh and through the vicarious reading of the Epic, which is surely the content inscribed on the lapis lazuli tablet, learn—in fact, like Gilgamesh and Uta-Napishti, “open,” *petû*, if the restoration is correct—the Epic’s revelation of so-called secret knowledge Gilgamesh brought back. It is significant to note that this passage characterizes secret knowledge as *textual* knowledge—a scribal product. This shapes readers’ expectations therefore about what Gilgamesh did with the knowledge Uta-Napishti reveals to him in Tablet XI: he wrote it down. Thus, again, the reader learns something accurate about scholarly secret knowledge, namely, its textual character, without learning anything substantive about its content.

But what of these secrets in I 24–28? This apparently magnanimous offer to disclose secret knowledge should not be read too quickly as a genuine offer to open the secrets of ancient Mesopotamian scholarly lore, for already we have seen that a narrative world is being created in which most readers would

<sup>69</sup> See George 2003: 538 for the text. The translation is mine.

<sup>70</sup> Thus, Walker 1981: 194 and George 2003: 446. Compare these lines to the opening lines of the Cuthean Legend, for which see Westenholz 1997: 300, 332.

<sup>71</sup> For an engaging discussion of *narû* literature, see Pongratz-Leisten 1999a.

<sup>72</sup> Pongratz-Leisten (1999a: 67–90, especially 85, 88) has convincingly argued that the primary audience of *narû* literature, which includes the SB Epic of Gilgamesh (see I 10), would have been future kings and their entourage (i.e., the *ummânû*). This, however, does not exclude its educational use.

not actually belong. Moreover, as anyone can see as they read through the rest of the Epic, the wisdom imparted by the Epic—again, the presumed content of the secret tablet in I 26–27—is learned via Gilgamesh’s *experience*. Such is in fact very clearly stated earlier in I 10: Gilgamesh established (*šakin*) an inscription (*narû*) of *all that he went through*, not the divination corpus or exorcism corpus.<sup>73</sup> So the invitation to open the tablet box and read the secret is a literary device that adorns, to recall imagery used earlier, the common sense advice the reader learns from Gilgamesh with the garb of secrecy in order to give the advice a greater sense of importance or authority. In the prologue, the text advertises the existence of antediluvian secret knowledge; and now, in this passage, the text adapts the language of secrecy to describe the life-wisdom Gilgamesh learns and offers it to every reader of the epic. This vulgate of secret knowledge is useful and available to all; it is, we might say, a democratized form of secret knowledge. But this so-called secret knowledge is not to be equated with either the antediluvian secrets, which hint at scholarly secret lore but are actually no secrets at all, mentioned earlier in the prologue (and disclosed in Tablet XI) or the actual secret knowledge that we know from other sources was protected by the scholars (i.e., their various learned corpora). This equivocation on the supposed content of secret knowledge, this rhetorical sleight of hand, both advertises and masks yet again that which only the initiated, the king and his royal scholars, actually possessed.

If the ancient reader accepted this idea of the democratization of secret knowledge and believed they themselves had become privy to it in the reading of the Epic, then one might suggest that this literary effect undermines the very reason for the scholars’ advertisement of the possession of their own, *true* secret knowledge. But this, in fact, is not the case. Literature is not simple, straight-forward, or flat. Rather, it is evocative, dynamic, and ramified. Different meanings are activated for readers with different backgrounds, contexts, and expectations. Some readers may be prepared to learn about Gilgamesh’s exploits and may believe at the conclusion of the prologue that secrets are being opened as the Epic unfolds. This is the intention of the Epic on the surface of it. But by the conclusion of the Epic the story may suggest to some readers, such as first-level scribal students, that something more lies behind the secret knowledge in the Epic than what the tablet box in I 24–28 overtly offers.<sup>74</sup> Tablet XI 196–197 is the first indication of this something

<sup>73</sup> As Peter Machinist, among others, has noted, “the Epic of Gilgamesh becomes a story about itself” (1986: 194).

<sup>74</sup> One might recall the way that line 8 of “In Praise of the Scribal Art” seems to hold out more secret knowledge to the would-be scribe than the mere promise of literacy.

more. Here Ea says:

*a-na-ku ul ap-ta-a pi-riš-ti* DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ  
*at-ra-ḥa-sis šu-na-ta ú-šab-ri-šum-ma pi-riš-ti* DINGIR.MEŠ *iš-me*

I did not disclose (literally, “open” from *petû*) the secret of the great gods,  
 I showed Atra-ḥasis a dream, and thus he heard the secret of the gods.<sup>75</sup>

Disingenuous denials aside, these lines clearly indicate that Ea, against the will of the gods, showed the flood hero (called Atra-ḥasis in this line) a dream that revealed to him the secret counsel of the gods pertaining to the flood. The other indication of something more occurs in XI 287–293.<sup>76</sup> In these lines we learn that Gilgamesh acquires the secret medicinal plant Uta-Napishti revealed to him from the Apsu, Ea’s domain. The significance of both passages is that Ea is the master of secrets, and he reveals secrets to his protégé Uta-Napishti (who bore the *ummânû* safely through the flood) and to Gilgamesh the king who learned everything. A first-level scribal student, who in another text was promised the secrets of Ea, would be warranted to conclude that he too might receive secret knowledge from Ea through his contemporary servants, the scholars. Again, the existence of secret knowledge is revealed but its contents, even though implicitly offered to those who would find favor with Ea, are largely concealed.

According to this interpretation, we may conclude that the advertisement of secret knowledge in the SB Epic of Gilgamesh was another discursive location in which scholars (and the king, in this case) could have parlayed their possession of textual secret knowledge into social prestige and power.

## CONCLUSION

Although the evidence is admittedly sparse, the above discussion presents three examples for how scholars could have advertised scholarly secret knowledge to first-level scribal students in the mid-first millennium. By these discursive means (and no doubt through others) the scholars transformed their unique possession of secret knowledge into social prestige and power. The implications of this discursive practice, however, probably went well beyond persuading first-level scribal students that the scholars possessed secret

<sup>75</sup> See George 2003: 716 for the text. The translation is mine.

<sup>76</sup> See George 2003: 722 for the text.

knowledge and were therefore very special. As mentioned above, the majority of scribal students finished their training with the completion of the first level. After “graduation,” these non-scholarly scribes would have gone on to work in the palace, the temples, and among ordinary citizens. As these scribes worked among the general populace, one can imagine that they could have disseminated by word of mouth the idea that scholars possessed secret knowledge. In this way the scholar’s social prestige and power might have been bolstered and perpetuated via secretism not only among their students, but also among people more broadly in society. As is true with almost all statements about the general citizenry in ancient Mesopotamia, however, this indirect form of advertising secrecy, although quite reasonable since scribes lived, worked, ate, drank, and slept with people outside the scribal profession, must remain a matter of conjecture.

A secondary result of the advertisement of secret knowledge to scribal students at the first level of their training would have been the creation of in-group cohesion and a sense of privilege among those few students who advanced to the second level of scribal training and on to the full status of scholar. Thus, the discourse of secrecy cut two ways among the scribal students: it informed the non-scholar scribes about the existence of secret knowledge while keeping them out of the esoteric circle that actually possessed the secret knowledge, and it kept the scholar-scribes privy to such secret knowledge in the esoteric circle by virtue of a shared, unique possession.<sup>77</sup> This sociological effect would have been another important contributing factor for preserving and perpetuating the social position, prestige, and power of the select group of scribes we call the *ummânū*.

## ADDENDUM

The editor has permitted me to respond to Kathryn Stevens’s recent article “Secrets in the Library: Protected Knowledge and Professional Identity in Late Babylonian Uruk” (*Iraq* 75 [2013], 211–253), which criticizes a few of my ideas in *Secrecy and the Gods*.

Stevens frames scholarly knowledge in terms of “protected” rather than “secret” knowledge. Her ideas are useful for her “broader historiographical project of delineating and explaining protected knowledge and protective mechanisms in the Mesopotamian intellectual domain” (p. 213). But I fail to

<sup>77</sup> For the general sociological issue of keeping outsiders out and insiders in, see Berger and Luckmann 1967: 87–88.

see how they negate the usefulness of a more focused inquiry into secrecy and secret knowledge for understanding the sociology of ancient Mesopotamian scholarship. Secrecy, I suggest, is a specific and distinctive kind of protection. Our views are not ultimately mutually exclusive. Stevens' criticism of my work centers on my treatment of the *Geheimwissen* colophons.

Stevens claims I de-contextualize the *Geheimwissen* colophons because I treat all of the texts bearing this colophon without regard to their specific time and place in the first millennium. I would suggest that I contextualized the texts *differently than she would have liked*. Informed by social scientific studies that use "secrecy" for understanding human organization and mythmaking (pp. 17–21), I looked at texts containing secrecy-related terms to gather relevant data (pp. 22–23). After an examination of all of these texts, I found that some of them describe the corpora of the five scholarly disciplines of *ummânūtu* (lamenters, exorcists, haruspices, celestial diviners, and physicians) as a revelation of Ea and a secret (ch. 2).<sup>78</sup> I then demonstrated that these texts were in fact guarded (see pp. 149–160). All of this provided a broad social context—a framework (Stevens calls it a "top-down" approach, see her p. 212)—for understanding the means scribes used to guard such texts. Among these means were not only secrecy labels and the *Geheimwissen* colophons (pp. 170–204) but also admonitions and divine invocations (pp. 163–170). With only a handful of exceptions, the tablets bearing a *Geheimwissen* colophon belonged to one of the five scholarly disciplines. The reason for the presence or absence of the colophon on any particular tablet, I suggested, was beyond recovery. Stevens is of another opinion, to which I will return below.

Since Stevens has a broader conceptual agenda than my own work, it is not surprising that she also wants to use other colophons beyond the *Geheimwissen* ones for understanding how scholarly knowledge was, as she prefers to see it, protected. Stevens believes tablets bearing a variation of a colophon that admonishes "one who fears" (*pāliḥ*) a deity or deities not to steal the tablet, cause it to be lost, and/or to return it within a specified time ought also to be considered "protected knowledge."<sup>79</sup> I disqualified these

<sup>78</sup> Stevens complains that previous treatments of secret knowledge treated it as an abstract body of material (see, e.g., her p. 212). But in fact that is what our sources mention: there are Akkadian terms for the scholarly crafts and their exclusive textual corpora (e.g., *kalūtu* and *barūtu*). Of course, what actually populated these corpora would have changed over the centuries—something that I did not discuss in my work. Stevens' work usefully emphasizes this fluidity (see, e.g., her p. 232).

<sup>79</sup> She refers to these variations as *tabālu* formulae.

colophons from my consideration because they do not explicitly mention secrecy; they therefore did not unequivocally seem relevant to what I was studying. I suggested they were concerned with the material safety of the tablet rather than guarding its content from unauthorized eyes (p. 204). I then concluded that these and the *Geheimwissen* colophons, “though broadly related, seem to be more complementary than identical in their purposes” (p. 204).<sup>80</sup> Stevens sees the purpose of the two kinds of colophons as more or less the same since both intend to protect, ultimately, the intellectual content of tablets. But she also seems to recognize their different emphases. She writes, “The *Geheimwissen* formulae can certainly be said to reflect a different emphasis from those which prohibit theft or extended borrowing; the former explicitly restrict access to the content to a group of users with specific intellectual qualifications, while the latter are concerned to ensure that the (unspecified) user,” thus perhaps another scholar or his copyist, “returns the tablet safely to its rightful place without loss or neglect. However, I would argue that in all the formulae the core concern is to protect knowledge, and hence that, *if we wish to investigate not only Mesopotamian scholarly conceptions of secrecy but also the protection of knowledge by Mesopotamian scholars more generally*, then all tablets marked by protective formulae, not just the *Geheimwissen* type, can be classed as protected or restricted on intellectual grounds” (emphasis added). I agree. But I do not see how this broader perspective requires the dissolution of an analytical category, i.e., secrecy, that both the ancient scholars themselves used to characterize their materials and modern social science has shown to be useful in understanding the dynamics of social formation.

Despite the above disagreements, I believe Stevens’ “bottom-up” approach (see her p. 212) represents an advance in understanding the role of the *Geheimwissen* and related colophons on scholarly texts. I suspected in *Secrecy* that various extra-textual circumstances were probably responsible for the attachment of a *Geheimwissen* colophon to some scholarly tablets and not to others (p. 206). Not seeing how to get at evidence that would allow us to retrieve such circumstances, I concluded that looking for a detailed pattern as to why particular texts and not all scholarly tablets were marked with a *Geheimwissen* colophon or other measure was a dead-end (p. 214). Stevens’ ideas for finding such a pattern in tablets from Achaemenid and Hellenistic Uruk may be a way out of this presumed dead-end. After a study of the contents and the owners/copyists of tablets bearing specific “protection”

<sup>80</sup> Stevens seems to ignore this statement in her summary of my views.

colophons, Stevens finds that pedagogical tablets were not usually protected—probably because they were considered ephemeral. She also finds that tablets that were protected had some relevance to the owner’s or copyist’s professional interests whereas the same text owned by another scholar may not have been protected because it was not relevant to their work. Thus, she emphasizes rightly, in my opinion, that what was deemed worthy to mark as secret (or protected, in her broader view) was both circumstantial and fluid. These are very interesting ideas. There is the occasional anomaly that is troublesome to her synthesis. And I have a question about why, if the pedagogical texts were considered ephemeral and therefore not in need of protecting, they ended up in the same tablet cache as other non-pedagogical, protected texts. But her “bottom-up” approach allows us to imagine how various scholars applied their protective measures in diverse circumstances while not bothering to apply them in others. And this is a step forward.

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