

LES NEIGES D'ANTAN:
“EARLY RULERS” AND THE VANITY THEME IN
MESOPOTAMIAN WISDOM LITERATURE AND BEYOND

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Abstract: *Les neiges d'antan*: “Early Rulers” and the Vanity Theme in Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature and Beyond

This article will examine the occurrence of the “Vanity Theme” in Mesopotamian wisdom literature and elsewhere. However, the main interest of this investigation lies in the list of rulers or illustrious men of old which is manifest in a variety of wisdom “Vanity Theme” compositions. We will argue that it will not suffice to speak about the “Vanity Theme” in various literatures of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. We should try to identify a particular literary expression that is associated with this type of composition. We contend that this expression is the list or naming of “Early Rulers” that comes to serve as an *exemplum* to the basic assertion of the “Vanity Theme.”

Keywords: Wisdom Literature – Vanity – Mesopotamia – Ancient Near East

Resumen: *Les neiges d'antan*: “Gobernantes antiguos” y el tema de la vanidad en la literatura sapiencial de Mesopotamia y más allá

Este artículo examinará la aparición del “tema de la vanidad” en la literatura sapiencial de Mesopotamia y más allá. Sin embargo, el interés principal de esta investigación radica en la lista de gobernantes u hombres ilustres de antaño que se manifiesta en una variedad de composiciones sapienciales con el “tema de la vanidad”. Argüiremos que no es suficiente con hablar sobre el “tema de la vanidad” en las diversas literaturas del antiguo Cercano Oriente y el Mediterráneo. Deberíamos tratar de identificar una expresión literaria particular que esté asociada con este tipo de composición. Sostenemos que esta expresión es la lista o denominación de los

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“gobernantes antiguos” que viene a servir como un ejemplo de la afirmación básica del “tema de la vanidad”.

Palabras clave: Literatura sapiensal – Vanidad – Mesopotamia – Antiguo Cercano Oriente

“EARLY RULERS” AND THE VANITY THEME: MAIN CONCERNS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper begins by introducing two pieces of literature very far removed from one another. The first is a Babylonian wisdom composition, usually named by modern scholars as the *Ballad (of Early Rulers)*, and the second, parts of François Villon’s poems *Ballade des dames du temps jadis* and *Ballade des seigneurs du temps jadis*.¹

The Babylonian wisdom composition opens with the statement that the fates of mankind are predetermined by the god Ea.² It then goes on to tell us that life is short and even the great heroes of the past perished.

*The fates are determined by Ea,
The lots are drawn according to the will of the god.
Since day of yore there are only these things,*

¹ This paper intends to offer an argument regarding the use and spread of the “Early Rulers” motif and the vanity theme in a variety of wisdom compositions. Obviously, the effectiveness of the argument must be limited by the range of supporting evidence which does not pretend to be exhaustive. Only select illustrative examples are brought here. A full-blown presentation is beyond the scope of this short article and necessarily beyond the abilities of the author: it would furnish a book-length study, comprising of studies of many specialists of various fields. An early version of the paper was read at the Tel-Aviv University Symposium, “Transmission, Translation, and Reception—Three Thousand Years of Textual Production and Dissemination in the Ancient Near East,” June 17–19, 2014; and at “Literary Change in Mesopotamia and Beyond” (*Second Workshop of the Melammu Project*), University of Innsbruck, October 13–14, 2016. My thanks go to the following colleagues for their advice, comments and discussions: Noga Ayali-Darshan, Sebastian Fink, Uri Gabbay, Amir Gilan, Madi Kablan, Christopher Metcalf, Noam Mizrahi, Andrea Rothstein, Nili Samet, Beata Sheyhatovitch, Maurizio Viano, Nathan Wasserman and Martin Worthington.

² Cohen 2013: 132–142; The Emar version is brought here, supplemented from other sources where broken.

*Has it never been heard before from the mouth of
 our predecessors?
 Those (came) after those, and others (came) after
 others,
 Above—the house where they lived, in the nether-
 world—the house where they stayed for Eternity.
 Like the heaven is distant, no one at all can reach
 (them),
 Like the depths of the netherworld, nobody can
 know (them),
 All life is but the wink of an eye,
 Life of mankind cannot last forever,
 Where is Alulu who reigned for 36,000 years?
 Where is Entena who went up to heaven?
 Where is Gilgameš who sought (eternal) life like
 (that of) [Zius]udra?
 Where is Hu[wawa who...]?
 Where is Enkidu who [proclaimed] (his) strength
 throughout the land?
 Where is Bazi? Where is Zizi?
 Where are the great kings of which (the like) from
 then to now
 Are not (anymore) engendered, are not bo[rn]?
 Life without light—how can it be better than death?
 Young man let me truly [instruct you] about your
 god (i.e., his eternal nature).
 Repel, drive away sorrow, scorn silence!
 In exchange for this single [day of h]appiness, let
 pass a time [of silence] lasting 36,000 [(years)].
 May [Siraš] (the beer-goddess) rejoice over you as
 if over (her) son!
 This is the fate of humanity.*

The main theme of the composition exposes the futility of life on the one hand and on the other calls upon its celebration, because after death comes only silence. It questions man's ability to comprehend the ways of gods. Since fate is undeterminable and death immi-

nent, the only escape is to reject sorrow and grief, and to enjoy life (by drinking). In order to bolster this view, the composition supplies an *exemplum*. It gives us a list of former great rulers of legendary achievements in order to argue that, despite their achievements, these failed to achieve immortality, hence, how can you, O Reader?

The list of illustrious rulers in the *Ballad* rests heavily on Mesopotamian historiographical and literary traditions.³ In particular, as its source material it draws upon two major Mesopotamian compositions—the *Sumerian King List* and the *Epic of Gilgameš*. The list arranges its figures according to chronological as well as literary considerations. Let us demonstrate this claim: Alulu can be identified with Alulim of the city of Eridu, the first king of the *Sumerian King List*, after kingship was lowered from heaven. Following Alulu comes Entena, or better known as Etana, the post-diluvium king of Kiš, the first city to which kingship was restored after the flood. The *Sumerian King List* informs us that after Kiš, kingship passed to Uruk, hence in the *Ballad*, it is Gilgameš king of Uruk who follows Etana. All three kings held a place of importance in Mesopotamian traditions: Alulu was a magic force, and Gilgameš and Etana, who tried, each in his own way, to overcome death, were venerated figures of the netherworld.

Once Gilgameš is mentioned in the *Ballad*, characters from his life story show up: Ziusudra (aka Atrahasis or Utnapištim), the only person to gain immortality, Huwawa and Enkidu. Bazi and Zizi, known as the kings of Mari from the *Sumerian King List*, are the last to appear. They are representatives of the western regions to where Gilgameš travelled with Enkidu to make a name for himself.

To conclude, the list in the *Ballad* serves as an *exemplum* for the vanity theme: it demonstrates that even famous figures have not survived.⁴

³ See in detail Cohen 2012, following Wilcke 1988.

⁴ An echo of the theme is found in Enkidu's description of the Netherworld (The Standard Babylonian Epic, Tablet 7, ll. 185–202; George 2003: 644–645); he describes the discarded crowns of former kings at the entrance to the Netherworld. Among the citizens of the Netherworld, Enkidu recognizes Etana, “who went up to heaven” (like the *Ballad* expresses it), but nonetheless is dead. Following George 2003: 482–483.

The exact date of the composition of the *Ballad* is not known, but it is preserved in an Old Babylonian Sumerian version. Akkadian versions of the piece are known from a later period. Manuscripts of the *Ballad* have been found at Late Bronze Age Emar and Ugarit. Although they were found outside of Babylonia, there is little doubt that they represent the Middle Babylonian version of the wisdom composition. The composition is also represented by a small fragment recovered from the Library of Assurbanipal hence it survived to, and was probably known, in the first millennium.⁵

When Daniel Arnaud first published the Emar manuscript of the composition, he called it *La Ballade des héros du temps jadis* (from which its English title—the *Ballad*).⁶ Obviously, he was thinking of François Villon’s poems *Ballade des dames du temps jadis* and *Ballade des seigneurs du temps jadis*.⁷ There is no doubt that Arnaud’s nod to Villon’s poems is indeed warranted. Here are some parts from Villon’s *temps jadis* poems.

*Où est la très sage Héloïs,
Pour qui fut châtré et puis moine Pierre Esbaillart
à Saint-Denis?
Pour son amour eut cette essoine...
Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?...*

*Qui plus, ou est le tiers Calixte,
Dernier décédé de ce nom,
Qui quatre ans tint le papaliste?
Alphonce le roy d’Aragon,
Le gracieux duc de Bourbon,
Et Artus le duc de Bretagne,*

⁵ For the literary history and transmission of the piece, see Cohen 2012 and Viano 2016.

⁶ Arnaud 1982: 51 (in translation only); Arnaud 1985–1987, no. 763.

⁷ It is assumed that Villon was following the well-known *ubi sunt* theme (‘Where are they [who were in the world before us]?’), ubiquitous in European literature; see below, note 42. Like in the *Ballad*, the *ubi sunt* long-dead rulers are mentioned only to emphasize the transient nature of life, reminding the reader to celebrate life; see Rubio 2009. It is this shared theme with European literature that prompted Wilcke (1988) to compare the sentiments expressed by the *Ballad* with the drinking songs of Europe, such as the famous student song *Gaudeamus Igitur*. The translation of Villon’s is mine.

*Et Charles septiesme le bon?
Mais ou est le preux Charlemagne?...*

[Where is the very wise Eloise?
For whom Pierre Abelard of Saint Denis was cas-
trated and made a monk,
Who suffered for his love...
Where are the snows of Yesteryear?]

[Where is Calixtus III,
The last one dead of this name,
Who held the papacy for four years?
Alfonso, King of Aragon,
The Gracious Duke of Bourbon,
And Artus, the Duke of Bretagne,
And Charles VII, the Good,
But where is the Precious Charlemagne?]

Villon in his poems provides a list of illustrious men and women, such as Alfonso V, Charlemagne and Eloise, who are gone and dead, some legendary and some near-contemporary, in order to demonstrate that all is vanity, as expressed by the refrain, “*Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?*”⁸

Generally speaking, it can be said that both works, in spite of their great distance in time and space from each other, share what can be called the vanity theme, sometimes also named as the *carpe diem* motif. This theme can be broadly described as expressing the view that nothing is of value because life is short but death eternal. Although not always explicitly expressed, the implication is that because life is short, one should better enjoy it before it ends.⁹

⁸ Pierre Abelard: 1079–1142; Pope Calixtus III: 1378–1458; Alfonso (V): 1396–1458; The Gracious Duke of Bourbon (Jean de France, Duke of Berry): 1340–1416; Artus (de Richemont, Duke of Brittany): 1393–1458; Charles VII: 1403–1461; Charlemagne: 742–814. All dates AD of course.

⁹ See Cohen 2013: 15, on the basis of Alster 2005, who was the first to treat this theme in Mesopotamian literature in detail.

This article will examine the occurrence of this theme in Mesopotamian wisdom literature and elsewhere. However, the main interest of our investigation lies in the list of rulers or illustrious men of old manifest in a variety of *carpe diem* compositions. We will argue that it will not suffice to speak about the vanity theme in various literatures of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. One should try to identify a particular literary expression that is associated with this type of composition. We contend that this expression is the list or naming of “Early Rulers” that comes to serve as an *exemplum* to the basic assertion of the vanity theme. Naturally, the aim of the article is not to demonstrate a direct thread of transmission from Babylonia to Villon. It wishes to call to attention that the manifestation of early rulers or illustrious men in compositions which can be seen to deal with the vanity theme may be indebted to a wide-spread topos in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, whose origin was possibly Babylonia.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE VANITY THEME IN MESOPOTAMIAN WISDOM LITERATURE

The earliest attestation of the vanity theme to stand at the core of an independent Mesopotamian wisdom composition is found in a series of Sumerian compositions dated to the Old Babylonian period.¹⁰ They are called collectively as *níg-nam nu-kal* and include the following sentences:¹¹ “Nothing is of worth, but life itself is sweet. When is a man not rich? When is he rich?”

These short compositions encapsulate the nihilistic sense found in later works, namely, that comprehension of the gods’ ways is impossible, and that material wealth is fleeting.

¹⁰ For a detailed history and development of the vanity theme in Mesopotamian wisdom literature, see Cohen 2015. See also Samet 2015.

¹¹ Alster 2005: 265–287; Consider also Samet 2015: 7: “When a man does not have wealth—[he] has [wealth]!”

Another work to feature the vanity theme is the Old Babylonian composition *Enlil and Namzitarra*.¹² In this short wisdom tale, the protagonist Namzitarra rejects a reward from the god Enlil for his good deeds, saying to the god:

“To where will I take your silver, your lapis lazuli gems, your sheep? The days of mankind are approaching, day after day—so it (life) will diminish, month after month—so it will diminish, year after year—so it will diminish, [...]—so it will diminish, 120 years¹³—so will be the limit of mankind’s life...from that day till now as long as mankind lived!”

This work articulates the nihilistic notion, which will be found in later works, such as *The Babylonian Theodicy* and *The Dialogue of Pessimism*, that gains such as wealth, happiness, or even children rewarded by the god(s) for pious behavior are to be rejected because they are futile.¹⁴ Death is fast approaching.

The wisdom composition *Šimâ Milka*, whose manuscripts are almost exclusively known from sites west of the Euphrates (Hattuša, Ugarit and Emar), contains a set of instructions delivered from father to son. After hearing the father’s instructions, the son rejects them as useless, telling him as follows:¹⁵

*“My father, you built a house,
You elevated high the door; sixty cubits is the width
of your (house).
But what have you achieved?
Just as much as [your] house’s loft is full so too its*

¹² Cohen 2013: 151–163; 2010, and Cooper 2011.

¹³ For the theme of man’s allotted time as 120 years, appearing also in Genesis 6, see Klein 1990.

¹⁴ Compare the words of the Sufferer in *The Babylonian Theodicy*, ll. 133–143 (Lambert 1960: 78–79; Oshima 2014: 156–157), as he rejects all wealth and *in extremis* behaves amorally.

¹⁵ Cohen 2013: 81–128.

storage room is full of grain.

(But) upon the day of your death (only) nine bread portions of offerings will be counted and placed at your head.

From your capital (var. (your) household) (consisting of) a thousand sheep, (only) a goat, a fine garment—that will be your own [sha]re.

From the money which you acquired either bribes or taxes (will be left); (var.: (so what will become of) your¹ money? It will be lost!').

Few are the days in which we eat (our) bread, but many will be the days in which our teeth will be idle,

Few are the days in which we look at the Sun, but many will be the days in which we will sit in the shadows.

The Netherworld is teeming, but its inhabitants lie sleeping.

Ereškigal is our mother and we her children.

*At the gate of the netherworld, blinds are placed,
So that the living will not be able to see the dead.”*

In *Šimâ Milka*, as in *Enlil and Namzitarra*, the futility of material things and wealth is stressed because they serve none in the Netherworld.

All these works share the vanity theme with the Babylonian *Ballad*. Nonetheless, the *Ballad* is different because of its list of “Early Rulers.” Let us explore now some compositions outside of Mesopotamia whose topic is the vanity theme and in which a list of early illustrious men is manifest.

THE SONG FROM THE TOMB OF KING ANTEF

The following piece is an Egyptian composition known as *The Song from the Tomb of King Antef*.¹⁶ Generically speaking, it belongs to compositions called *Harper Songs*. The piece is known from New Kingdom copies. Although it was thought to have been composed in the Middle Kingdom, because there were some kings by the name Antef who reigned during the 11th dynasty (21st–20th centuries), and the 17th dynasty (16th century),¹⁷ this view has been contested. It was argued that the piece was written in the Amarna period or the Ramesside period.¹⁸

He is happy, this good prince!
Good is the fate.
Good is the injury.
A generation passes,
Another stays,
Since the time of the ancestors.
The gods who were before rest in their tombs,
Blessed nobles too are buried in their tombs.
(Yet) those who built tombs,
Their (burial) places are gone,
Look what has become of them?
I have heard the words of Imhotep and Hardedef,
Whose sayings are recited whole.
Look at their (burial) places.
Their walls have crumbled,
Their (burial) places are gone,
As though they had never been!...

¹⁶ The comparison between the *The Song from the Tomb of King Antef* and the Babylonian *Ballad* was suggested to me by N. Ayali-Darshan.

¹⁷ See Lichtheim 1974–1980, vol. 1: 194–197 and vol. 2: 115. Also, Lichtheim 1945.

¹⁸ Fox 1977: 400–401; Goedicke 1977; Parkinson 2002: 31. The translation follows Lichtheim 1974–1980 vol. 1: 194–197 and Fox 1977.

*Hence rejoice in your heart!
Forgetfulness profits you,
Follow your heart as long as you live!
Put myrrh on your head,
Dress in fine linen,
Anoint yourself with oils fit for a god.
Heap up your joys,
Let your heart not sink!
Follow your heart and your happiness,
Do your things on earth as your heart commands!
When there comes to you that day of mourning,
The Weary-hearted (Osiris) hears not their mourning,
Wailing saves no man from the pit!*

*Make holiday,
Do not weary of it!
Lo, none is allowed to take his goods with him,
Lo, none who departs comes back again!*

The vanity theme is voiced again and with very similar expressions as those met in the *Ballad*. Although death is not negated as in the Babylonian piece, a sense of nihilism creeps in this Egyptian composition as the celebration of life is called upon. Life is appreciated, when we learn that none come back from the grave. But the poem goes further by reflecting on the fact that the places of the dead do not last for eternity. The idea that the resting place of the dead does not remain is distinctly non-Egyptian in its outlook.¹⁹ As Lichtheim says, although *The Song of Antef* shares some traits with the pessimistic literature of Middle Egyptian period, "its attitude is unique and its advice runs counter to the letter and spirit of that literature."²⁰ Indeed, it has been suggested that the nihilistic tone in the poem was unique to Egyptian wisdom literature and later toned down in other similar Harper Song compositions.²¹ This may imply that the vanity theme present in this

¹⁹ Fox 1977: 414–416.

²⁰ Lichtheim 1945: 207.

²¹ Lichtheim 1945: 197–201; Fox 1977.

composition was not originally Egyptian but rather imported from elsewhere, perhaps intermediated when the political and economic ties Egypt had with Syria and the Levant in the second millennium BCE were flourishing.²²

Beyond the shared vanity theme of the *Song from the Tomb of King Antef* and the *Ballad* stands out a similar literary device—the mention of historical or legendary figures from the past to serve as *exempla*. The use of two quasi-historical venerated figures of the Egyptian past—Imhotep and Hardedef—can be obviously compared with the mention of figures of old in the *Ballad*. The choice of the Egyptian figures was not incidental: Imhotep was the architect and advisor to King Djoser (*ca.* 2600), who achieved a status of a god in later times. And Prince Hardedef, son of Cheops (*ca.* 2500), was considered a sage and received a personal cult. Nonetheless, in spite of their fame, their burial places were destroyed.²³ The mention of these two figures is found again in a later Egyptian composition, clearly responding to *The Song of Antef*. *The Immortality of Writers* adopts the nihilistic attitude met here. But on the other hand it introduces the idea that while materiality does not last, books are eternal.²⁴

*Be a scribe, take it to heart,
That your name become as theirs.
Better is a book than a graven stele...
Man decays, his corpse is dust,
All his kin have perished;
But a book makes him remembered...*

²² Ayali-Darshan 2017: 204–205, noticing the similarity between the *Song of Antef*, the *Ballad* and Siduri's Speech in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Old Babylonian Version iii, ll. 1–14; George 2003: 278–279). See also Uehlinger 1997: 194, who compared the *Ballad* with the Egyptian Harper Songs; and Lichtheim 1945, with previous literature, some from the 19th century (CE), which already had recognized the *carpe diem* theme in the *Song of Antef* (notably Müller 1899; Becker 1916: 105), although obviously not to Babylonian wisdom literature, hardly known at that time.

²³ Fox 1977: 414.

²⁴ Following Lichtheim 1974–1980, vol. 2: 175–178 (*i.e.*, the Ramesside Chester Beatty IV Papyrus).

*Is there one here like Hardedef?
Is there another like Imhotep?...*

Long dead heroes, to conclude, have survived in memory because of their books. Thus, the “Early Rulers” motif is turned on its head—there is an escape of oblivion, even if one is dead for eternity.

“EARLY RULERS” AND THE VANITY THEME IN *PAPYRUS OXYRHYNCHUS* 1795

As has long been pointed out by Martin West and others, the immortality of gods vis-à-vis the suffering and death of mortals was a theme played out in both Mesopotamian literature and Greek literature.²⁵ Hence, finding expressions of the vanity theme in Greek literature is not surprising. For example, this wisdom theme is reflected in *Iliad* 24, 527–548, where the poet speaks through the voice of Achilles of Peleus and then Priam, who, although blessed by Zeus, suffer like all mortals. Johannes Haubold justly compared these lines in the *Iliad* to Utnapišti’s speech in *The Epic of Gilgameš*, Tablet 10, where similar sentiments are expressed.²⁶ One can of course think of the underworld scene of the *Odyssey* 11 (long associated with Enkidu’s description of the Netherworld in the *Epic of Gilgameš*) as a discourse on a vanity-like theme.²⁷ Other examples can be brought from early Greek lyric poetry.²⁸

Another and perhaps sharper expression of the vanity theme and of more interest to the present study because it employs a list of

²⁵ West (1969) already explored the relations of Greek and ancient Near Eastern sources dealing with the theme we are interested in; and he was bold enough to suggest a literary connection between Horace’s *Exegi monumentum* (Odes III 30) and Gilgameš’s desire to make a lasting name for himself. The comparison in fact gathers strength, when Horace’s poem is thought to engage with the vanity theme, present also in the *Epic of Gilgameš*; e.g., in Siduri’s speech (Old Babylonian Version iii, ll. 1–14; George 2003: 278–279) and Utnapišti’s speech (Standard Babylonian Version, Tablet 10, ll. 301–322; George 2003: 505–507; 696–699).

²⁶ Haubold 2013: 46–49; George 2003: 505–507; 696–699, ll. 301–322).

²⁷ As Ch. Metcalf suggests to me. See the Standard Babylonian Version Tablet 7, ll. 165–215; George 2003: 642–647, and above, n. 4.

²⁸ Consider Simonides, Fr. 1 (Gerber 1999: 298–301); and Simonides, Fr. 520–522 (Campbell 1991: 416–419); Miller 1996: 22–23; 112–113.

“Early Rulers” is *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 1795. *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 1795 is a 2nd century AD fragment of a *scolion*, or drinking song, which was probably meant to be sung on the occasion of a symposium.²⁹ The song is arranged in alphabetically headed stanzas, originally from Alpha to Omega, but now only preserved from the letter Theta (partly) to Xi; the rest is lost. Hence seven stanzas remain. Of particular interest is the last, but in order that the theme of the song be appreciated, the last four stanzas are brought here.

*(Lamda) The Lydian pipe and play of the Lydian lyre,
And the Phrygian reed and ox hide kettledrums toil for me,
In life these (songs) I love to sing. And when I die,
Place a flute above my head and at my feet a lyre.
Play me the flute...*

*(Mu) Who ever found the measure of wealth, the measure of
poverty?
Who, I repeat, found out the measure of gold among men?
Now, he that has money wants more money,
And rich as he is, the wretched is tormented like the poor man.
Play me the flute...*

*(Nu) Whenever you see a body dead, or pass by silent tombs,
The common fate of mankind stares you in the face. The dead
man expected just the same.
Time is a loan; he who lent you life is cruel,
If he asks you for it, to your sorrow you will repay.
Play me the flute...*

²⁹ For an edition and commentary, see Hopkinson 1988: 80–81; 271–274. The translation here with some minor changes is based on Page 1950: 508–513. The poem was partly quoted by West (1969: 131), but no connection was made to the *Ballad*, because it was still insufficiently known. The *Ballad* was mentioned by West (1997: 83), but the tie to the *scolion* was not suggested.

(Xi) *A king was Xerxes, the one who claimed to share everything
with god.
Yet he crossed back the Lemnian water with a single oar.
Blessed/wealthy was Midas, thrice-blessed/wealthy was
Kinyras,
But what man went to Hades with more than an obol?
Play me the flute...*

The themes of this poem are well apparent: the finality of death, the shortness of life, and the transient nature of material wealth. And yet, the *scolion* stands out by listing three rulers, near-contemporary (like Villon's heroes), semi-legendary and legendary. As in the Babylonian *Ballad* with its own list of dead rulers, the claim of the poem is obviously the same: these rulers, powerful and rich as they were, eventually died, their fate not different than the everyman.

Who are the rulers mentioned in the drinking song? Xerxes is the Persian king of world dominion, who however retreats back with one maimed ship after the failure at Hellespont.³⁰ His epithet, “the one who claimed to share everything with god,” reflects the Greek attitude of the vain oriental despot.³¹ Midas the Phrygian king was blessed or (here more likely) proverbially wealthy (*olbios*), but, as we all know, he was cursed by his touch of gold. Kinyras was king of Cyprus, although some ancient sources say he arrived to the island from Syria. He was considered of fabulous wealth. He was also thought of as the first musician, an inventor-king. He fathered Adonis by an incestuous relation with his own daughter, Myrrha, and committed suicide once learning of his illicit deed.³²

It would be foolish to seek an equivalent for each of the kings of the Greek poem in the list of the Babylonian *Ballad*. Xerxes, Midas and Kinyras are all non-Greek Orientals, but their origin is not an indi-

³⁰ For the Greek topos of Xerxes' hubristic act of controlling the sea, Haubold 2013: 110–111; Hopkinson 1988: 273–274.

³¹ One wonders if an ancient Near Eastern topos was not evoked here. Xerxes' epithet, “the one who claimed to share everything with god,” reminds one of Ziusudra (aka Atrahasis/Utnapišti), who achieved immortality, like the gods.

³² Franklin 2015; Graf 1999.

cation of the origin of the list in the *scolion*. It is but a reflection of the tastes of a Greek audience. A list of foreign kings and all their wealth and power stands as a reversal or mirror image of Greek ethos. Still, one wonders if the use of “Early Rulers” in the *scolion* stems from an ancient Near Eastern tradition, although not necessarily directly from the Babylonian *Ballad* or the Egyptian *Song of Antef*, that ties between the vanity theme and the deeds of famous but dead men.³³

The literary device of “Early Rulers” in the *scolion* (and perhaps in other similar but now lost works) as an *exemplum* for the vanity of life may have grown in its popularity throughout the Hellenistic world, because it was obviously known to Lucretius. As a devote Epicurean, he uses a list of dead heroes to prove the very same point of the works we met. In *De rerum natura*, III 1024–1052, a list of select characters shows us that even the famous and illustrious die: the virtuous Roman king Ancus died, as did he who tried to cross the Hellespont (Xerxes); and so did the son of the house of Scipio (Africanus). And not only kings and generals died but also inventors and companions of the muses, as Homer and Democritus, and even Epicurus himself, who turned the advice of the poets into a philosophy.³⁴

NOAH, DANIEL AND JOB IN EZEKIEL 14

It has been demonstrated that the literary device of providing a list of “Early Rulers” or illustrious men to serve as an *exemplum* for the vanity theme can be found in the literatures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. The final example in this paper draws upon a source that introduces illustrious men from the past, however, with a different aim than that met in other compositions. It is not a wisdom composition, but it draws upon an ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition, so it will be argued, to prove its point.

³³ For an important discussion regarding the transmission of the ancient Near Eastern vanity theme to the Greek world, perhaps by funerary inscriptions (or at least, by a Greek literary imagination of such inscriptions), see Fink 2014.

In one of the prophecies in the Book of Ezekiel (14: 12–23), which informs how God will destroy the world, a list of dead illustrious people of old is found:³⁵

The word of the Lord came to me: O mortal, if a land were to sin against Me and commit a trespass, and I stretched out My hand against it and broke its staff of bread, and sent famine against it and cut off man and beast from it, even if these three men—Noah, Danel and Job—should be in it, they would be their righteousness save only themselves—declares the Lord God...

Or if I let loose a pestilence against that land, and poured My fury upon it in blood, cutting off from it man and beast, should Noah, Danel, and Job be in it, as I live—declares the Lord God—they would save neither son nor daughter; they would save themselves alone by their righteousness...

What is the role of Noah, Danel, and Job, all non-Jews in this prophecy?³⁶ The prophet mentions the three righteous men in order to

³⁴ Some of the great men are not mentioned by their explicit name, but the allusions are clear enough to guarantee their identification; see Kenney 1971: 232; Kenney 1971, also recognizes the fact that Lucretius may have been under the impression of *P. Oxy.* 1795, because of the mention of Xerxes’ crossing of the Hellespont in both works. Consider also Plutarch, *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, 110 D, (cited by Becker 1916: 101–102): “Where now are all those things magnificent—Great Croesus, lord of Lydia? Xerxes, too, who yoked the sullen neck of Hellespont? Gone all to Hades and Oblivion’s house” (Babbitt 1927: 155).

³⁵ Following NJPS 1999, apart from the rendering of the name of one of the heroes as Danel, rather than Daniel; see below, n. 37.

³⁶ A review of the various modern commentators of Ezekiel does not solve the problem of why these particular figures of international Near Eastern fame were mentioned in this prophecy. See, e.g., Noth 1951: 251; Zimmerli 1979: 314 (who sees Jer. 15:1 as the prototype for Ezekiel’s prophecy, where these are Moses and Samuel who try to no avail to intercede on behalf of Israel); Greenberg 1983: 257–258; Block 1997: 447–450. See also the attempts of Rashi, Kimchi, and Yosef Ibn-Kaspi to explain the presence of the three figures; Cohen 2000: 72–73.

demonstrate the God's retribution is universal in scope.³⁷ However, there is an ironic twist here in the choice of these famous men. God has decided the fates: he will destroy the land and its inhabitants, man and beast (contradicting his own promise after the flood).³⁸ But who will be saved? The common message of the "Early Rulers," as those who cannot escape death is changed here. It is these "Early Rulers"—Noah, Danel, and Job—who will be saved but the current generation lost. By using a rhetorical motif that has its roots in ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition, the idea which we have seen throughout is reversed. Hence the irony which Ezekiel achieves in the prophecy. It is a surprising reversal of the readers' expectations: hearing that "Early Rulers," who for all the readers are concerned are long dead and gone, are now to remain.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed a sapiential theme in a few Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek works. This theme, which was called here the vanity theme, is to be considered not merely as a literary device but rather one that offers an alternative attitude: an attitude of nihilistic or negative wisdom which is critical of the order of things in the world of gods and men. It denounces wealth, fame and power and subtly attacks what is called the retribution principle, where good things come to those who find favour with the gods.³⁹ In order to support its claim, it adopts, as one of its strategies examined here, figures of the historical or leg-

³⁷ Noah was considered as righteous (Gen. 6:9; 7:1), as was Job (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). Danel was wise (Ez. 28:3). The three figures may be taken to represent three geo-historical regions: Noah, as part of the flood tradition, perhaps represented Babylonia (although this is not explicitly acknowledged), Danel represented Phoenicia (Ez. 28:3), and Job, Edom. The identification of Danel with the Ugaritic Danel is generally accepted by modern scholarship; e.g., Day 1980, but see Block 1997: 449; Dressler 1979.

³⁸ Cf. Gen. 8:21.

³⁹ This is especially seen in *Šimā Milka*, where the son's reply is a rebuke of the father's advice that embodies conservative attitudes. See Cohen 2015 and Fox 1977: 417 and 422.

endary past now dead.⁴⁰ It is of interest to note that in the *scolion*, and verses from Ezekiel the figures of the legendary past were known to each cultural circle but were essentially foreigners. They stood not only as representatives of the past, but of a different and lesser world.

In the background of the discussion throughout, a possible Babylonian origin of this strategy was considered. A Babylonian origin can be argued for two reasons. The first is chronological: the appearance of the list of “Early Rulers” in the *Ballad* is the oldest source we have that employs this strategy.⁴¹

The second reason, and the more crucial, is concerned with the associations of the “Early Rulers” list in the *Ballad* to the *Sumerian King List* and the Mesopotamian epic tradition. By such it transforms what can be thought of as a general theme of wisdom—the vanity theme, as was seen in *Enlil and Namzitarra* or *Šimâ Milka*, and in some passages of *The Epic of Gilgameš*, into a work endowed with a typical Babylonian scholarly interest with the past. We do not claim that such an interest in the past found in works we have seen here was the direct outcome of an intimate knowledge of the *Ballad*. The evidence, however, is suggestive enough to inquire about points of transmission and contact when we come to write a history of the vanity theme in the early literatures of the Mediterranean and the ancient Near East, and even further afield.⁴² It is surely a good starting point for re-evaluating the history and heritage of ancient Near Eastern or Babylonian wisdom literature in a wider perspective.

⁴⁰ Another strategy of the vanity theme is to resort to the world of nature, where the cycle of life goes on regardless of positive or negative values. A prime example is found in *Šimâ Milka*, ll. 122’–132’ (Cohen 2013: 96–99) and *The Babylonian Theodicy*, ll. 48–51 (Lambert 1960: 72–75; Oshima 2014: 152–153).

⁴¹ Considering that the *Song from the Tomb of King Antef* was composed in the Amarna period or perhaps somewhat later, it is not outlandish to suggest that some version of the *Ballad* arrived to one of the scribal centers in Egypt where cuneiform was studied. If the *Ballad* was retrieved from Ugarit and Emar, and if Egypt shared a cuneiform curriculum with other centers of the western reaches of the cuneiform world, such a hypothesis is certainly permissible.

⁴² For the *ubi sunt* motif, see the oft-quoted but antiquated Becker 1916. For the motif in Arabic ascetic poetry (*zuhdiyyāt*), which may have its roots in the early Christian fathers (Cyril of Alexandria and Ephraim the Syrian) and the apocryphal books (notably, Baruch, 3: 16–23); see

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Hamori 1990; Becker 1916: 92–93; 104–105. Some of this poetry is interestingly close to the works we have introduced here, notably the verses of poet Abu al-ʿAtāhiyya (748–828 AD), who says the following: "Why don't we contemplate: Where is Khosarow? Where is Caesar? Where is who joined money with more money, so that it became plenty? I have already seen time destroying one group of people after another. No rich man stays (forever rich), neither a poor one. Where is who claimed to be superior in richness of the world and was proud? I wish I knew what would come after what I see" (the author thanks B. Sheyhatovitch for her help in translating these verses from the Arabic; for a German translation, Reşer 1928: 98; cf. 66–67; 234–235); for Abu al-ʿAtāhiyya, see Kennedy 1998; Schoeler 1990: 286–290. Consider also lines found in *Al-Lāmmiyya* of the poet Ibn al-Wardī (1292–1349 AD); Raux 1905: 2. These poetry lines echo perhaps the earliest attestation of the vanity theme in Arabic literature that includes a list of glorious rulers—the verses of the poet ʿAdi bin-Zayd (ca. 600 AD), who asks, "Where is Khosarow, king of kings and Sabur who came before him;" Kennedy 1997: 89–90.

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