

**Preliminary recommendation regarding  
Sophus Helle's PhD dissertation:  
*The First Authors. Narratives of Authorship in Ancient Iraq***

The Graduate School, Arts, Aarhus University has appointed an assessment committee consisting of:

- Professor Lis Møller, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University (chair)
- Associate professor Paul Delnero, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Johns Hopkins University
- Associate professor Jon Helt Haarder, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Southern Denmark

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The main supervisor Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University has taken part in the work of the committee without the right to vote.

The dissertation is written in English in the form of a collection of articles of 291 pages including footnotes, bibliography, and illustrations, plus a concluding report (14 pages), plus an English and Danish summary (4 pages), plus appendices (112 pages), a total of 421 pages.

### Summary

The overall objective of Helle's dissertation is to examine the earliest known attestations of literary authorship, namely those from the cuneiform cultures of ancient Iraq, by combining methods and insights from two disciplines that are rarely brought into contact: Assyriology and Comparative Literature. The dissertation intends to answer two interrelated sets of questions: 1) How are authors and authorship depicted in cuneiform literature and how may one study authorship in ancient and/or non-Western cultures? 2) Why did authors and authorship become important in otherwise anonymous cultures? Which historical circumstances led to the emergence of the author? The two sets of questions account for the division of the dissertation into two parts, one methodological ("Studying ancient authorship") and one historical ("The invention of authors").

Part One introduces a key concept in Helle's dissertation: "narratives of authorship", that is, narratives attributing specific texts to named individuals. Arguing that authorship in the ancient world should be studied as cultural narratives rather than as an empirical reality, Helle demonstrates that narratives of authorship are "a crucial and often overlooked source of information of how literary texts were perceived, categorized, and evaluated" (67). Looking into two sets of tropes of authorship, weavers and dreamers (chapter 5) and gods and kings (chapter 7), Helle establishes that cuneiform narratives of authorship present the author as a mediator.

Part Two examines three periods during which authorship became especially important: the Old Babylonian period (chapter 9), the Neo-Assyrian period (chapter 10), and the Seleucid period (chapter 11). Helle's main argument is that authorship rose to prominence in an otherwise anonymous culture during times of cultural crises. Each of the three periods witnessed a demographic, linguistic, and political upheaval that threatened the authority of cuneiform scholarship. Tradition had to be protected, and to do so, it had to be condensed into the figure of the author. The story of how authorship came into being, Helle concludes, is "a story of how power is created and maintained by institutions that invest certain individuals [the authors] with cultural capital" (179).

The dissertation draws on a wide range of cuneiform texts. However, two primary texts are dealt with in particular detail: *The Exaltation of Inana*, attributed to Enheduana, and *The Catalogue of Texts and Authors*. In addition, Helle evokes parallels from non-Western as well as Western literatures, from antiquity and onwards.

### Assessment

The greatest strength of Sophus Helle's dissertation is that it overturns decades of approaching the question of authorship in Mesopotamia, by showing, quite persuasively, that trying to prove or disprove that a purported author of a text was really the author is not only beside the point and methodologically flawed, but fails to consider how claims to authorship are historically and culturally significant. In cuneiform cultures, authorship was attributed to texts that were verifiably much older than the alleged author. In a positivist approach, such authorial anachronism would make the question of authorship meaningless. However, following Barbara Graziosi and Alexander Beecroft, Helle argues that stories where texts are attributed to people who cannot have written them do in fact have a lot to say, "not about the authors in question, but about the people who composed and circulated them" (47). Authorship is seen by Helle as "an origin story that accounts for the existence of a text" (59), and "author" thus "signifies both a single figure and a sequence of events, meaning that the authors condense the process of literary production into one body" (100).

Instigating a conversation between Michel Foucault's and Roland Barthes's seminal essays on the author on the one hand and cuneiform sources on the other, Helle sheds new light on both. Standing on the shoulders of Foucault's and Barthes' essays

on the author, he moves back some 4000 years to discuss texts that attribute their own creation to a specific person, an unusual operation in an otherwise anonymous textual landscape. And vice versa. Fresh readings of what the ancient texts have to say about textual production, enable him to find a way out of the stalemate between romanticism, where the author is seen as omnipotent, and poststructuralism where the author is a mere mouthpiece of anonymous structures: language, tradition, ideology. Helle opts for a conception of partial agency, the cuneiform author is a mediator, a weaver of threads or the medium of divine inspiration. Furthermore, being part of a collective process, she is considered not only a weaver, but also woven herself by others. The pronoun here is important, since Helle firmly places the high-priestess Enheduana as the first known author in literary history.

Helle has successfully facilitated an inspiring and impressive dialogue between modern essays on authorship and a large, ancient and difficult corpus of cuneiform texts. Such an ambitious operation must necessarily downscale or bypass a number of relevant materials and angles. Fifty years of reception history of Barthes and Foucault is represented with a small number of texts and there is no mention of the history of biography. This latter omission is surprising since the dissertation is based on the idea that authorship is, in a sense, biography. Authorship is understood as “the stories that are told about authors” or “narratives of authorship”. This narrative understanding of authorship is a compelling one. However, Helle does not quite show how these narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an ending (his definition of narrative), nor does he clarify how he sees the relationship between “narratives of authorship” and “tropes” of authorship. Furthermore, there seems at times to be a conceptual conflation of “claim to” and “attribution of” authorship.

Helle’s philology (particularly when he is translating and interpreting Sumerian texts) would occasionally benefit from a little more nuance. More concretely, he not infrequently puts forward one translation of a text and presents it in such a way as if it is completely certain or the only possible translation. Often there are significant grammatical and lexical difficulties that are overlooked or glossed over, concealing the limitations of what we can say about the passages in question with certainty from the readers of his work who are not experts in Sumerian. The key passage from *The Exaltation of Inana* – cited in Chapter 7 to bring out the sexual connotations and to argue that the use of a series of ambiguous pronouns makes Enheduanna seemingly indistinguishable from Inana – is fraught with difficulties and uncertainties. Helle’s translation is not only one of many possibilities, but also not one of the most compelling from a grammatical and philological perspective.

Furthermore, the argument Helle makes in the second part of the work, about claims of authorship, arising during times of cultural crisis, rests on assumptions for each of the three historical periods in his analysis (the Old Babylonian Period, the Neo Assyrian Period, and the Seleucid Period) that could be viewed as too monocausal and reductionistic. The argument that Mesopotamian scribes bolstered their elite identity through their knowledge and mastery of a dead language and literature, by investing

— this language/literature with an importance that it was in serious danger of losing, has become very prevalent in the field over the past few decades, and is, in itself, uncontroversial and unproblematic. However, it seems unlikely that this was the sole purpose literature served in any of the three periods, and other functions that existed alongside elite identity formation, such as being directly or indirectly connected with cultic and ritual traditions accessible and known to more than just a small group of literate scribes is equally conceivable. Furthermore, while a case could be made that Sumerian literature was in danger of dying out in the Old Babylonian Period when Akkadian had become the main spoken language in Mesopotamia, applying the same type of claim again to the other two periods is less convincing. For example, even though Aramaic was gradually becoming more widespread as a ‘spoken’ language in the Neo Assyrian Period, there exists no body of Mesopotamian Aramaic texts of any type during this period that suggest Akkadian was in a state of crisis the way Sumerian might have been in the Old Babylonian Period.

— Lastly, though mainly concerned with the author in cuneiform texts, Helle has interspersed his dissertation with numerous parallels to texts from the Western as well as the non-Western literary tradition in a time span from Antiquity to modernism, thus widening the scope of his thesis. These parallels are suggestive and thought provoking. However, in the present form, they are at times too freely dispersed to constitute a consistently grounded argument. One hopes that Helle, in his future research, will develop this point.

— On the invention of authorship in times of crisis, Helle writes that, “preserving an outdated tradition often involves simplifying, reducing and reifying it, condensing its complexity into something singular and tangible and exaggerating some of its features while eliminating others” (182). Helle, too, does in some instances simplify and condense the complexity of his material. However, the single-mindedness of his argument is also what makes his work so compelling. The dissertation is carefully organized. It has two sets of clear and pertinent research questions: How were authors depicted? Why did authors become important? These research questions structure the argument and divide the dissertation into two well-defined parts. The argument is cumulative and consistent. Though labeled an article-based dissertation, Sophus Helle’s *The First Authors* successfully combines the article-based and the monograph dissertation. Of the dissertation’s eleven chapters (excluding the conclusion), five are academic articles, three of which have been published in high-ranking peer reviewed journals while one is in press and one in review. Interspersed between these articles are chapters that string the argument together and fill in its lacunae. Unlike many article-based dissertations, Helle’s thesis does indeed present a coherent claim. He has successfully straddled the divide between literary theory and Assyriology, and in so doing he has enriched both fields. While offering valuable and original insights into the study of authorship in Mesopotamia, this truly interdisciplinary study is widely accessible to scholars outside the field of Assyriology and ought to be read attentively by literary historians as well. Helle’s dissertation is extremely well written, lucid and

intelligent, and his obvious enthusiasm for cuneiform text is nothing short of infectious.

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Based on the committee's assessment of the dissertation, a unanimous committee recommends that Sophus Helle should carry out a public defence. This defence is to be held on June 19, 2020.

On behalf of the committee and following due authorisation

Date: April 27, 2020

Lis Møller  
chair