

# The Cosmological Hoe

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## Part I: The Problem and the Method

### 1. *The Problem: Two Definitions—Two Worlds*

hoe, n.<sup>2</sup> 1. An agricultural and gardening tool, consisting of a thin iron blade fixed transversely at the end of a long handle; used for breaking up or loosening the surface of the ground, hoeing up weeds, covering plants with soil, and the like.

*Oxford English Dictionary Online*<sup>1</sup>

The hoe—the sound of the word is sweet...the hoe makes everything prosper, the hoe makes everything flourish. The hoe is good barley...the hoe is brick moulds, the hoe has made people exist. It is the hoe that is the strength of young manhood. The hoe and the basket are the tools for building cities. It builds the right kind of house, it cultivates the right kind of fields. It is you, hoe, that extend the good agricultural land! The hoe subdues for its owner any agricultural lands that have been recalcitrant against their owner, any agricultural lands that have not submitted to their owner. It chops the heads off the vile esparto grasses, yanks them out at their roots, and tears at their stalks. The hoe also subdues...weeds. The hoe, the implement whose destiny was fixed by father Enlil—the renowned hoe! Nisaba be praised!

Excerpt from *The Song of the Hoe*,  
*The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ECTSL)<sup>2</sup>

Professional farmers and hobby gardeners alike know how useful the hoe is. Yet one would hardly imagine anyone in the modern world composing a song of praise in appreciation of this simple tool, as did an ancient Sumerian writer some four to five millennia ago. Perhaps all of our modern conveniences and high-tech devices have rendered the simple things of life less noticeable and less worthy of our conscious gratitude. The difference between the functional definition of the hoe in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its laudatory address in an ancient Sumerian document (only a small part of which is quoted above) may thereby find a simple and adequate explanation. The ancients recognized how indispensable even simple garden tools were and found it appropriate to express—in cuneiform writing on clay tablets that have been preserved to the present day—a recognition of their dependency on them. As the *Rulers of Lagaš* (see l. 1–16) records—it is these things, “the pickaxe [hoe], the spade, the earth basket and the plough, which mean life for the Land” in ancient Sumer.

The beginning of the *Song of the Hoe* leads us to a different conclusion, however, for the hoe is not merely a gardening tool for the ancient field worker, it is the creative instrument of Enlil, supreme god of a Mesopotamian pantheon, with which he separated heaven from earth, set the world in order with axis in place, and caused light to come forth so that human seed could be generated:

Not only did the lord make the world appear in its correct form—the lord who never changes the destinies which he determines: Enlil, who will make the human seed of the Land come [forth]—and not only did he hasten to separate heaven from earth, and hasten to separate earth from heaven, but, in order to make it possible for humans to grow... he first [suspended/raised] the axis

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2004 [cited 3-4-2005]); available from <http://dictionary.oed.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/entrance.dtl>.

<sup>2</sup> All English translations of Sumerian texts in this paper are from the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, 2004 [cited 3-4-2005]); available from <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>.

of the world at Dur-an-ki. He did this with the help of the hoe—and so daylight broke forth...  
Then Enlil praised his hoe.<sup>3</sup>

The common field worker's hoe was made of simple materials (such as poplar or tamarisk, "wood of the poor man's hand" if we can believe Plough in the *Debate Between the Hoe and the Plough* and was sometimes provided with either copper or wooden blades, if we can believe Copper in the *Debate Between Copper and Silver*). However, Enlil's hoe was no common hoe; his was lavish, fit for a god:

wrought in gold, its top inlaid with lapis lazuli, his hoe whose blade was tied on with a cord, which was adorned with silver and gold, his hoe, the edge of whose point (?) was a plough of lapis lazuli, whose blade was like a battering ram, born for a great person (?). The lord evaluated the hoe, determined its future destiny and placed a holy crown on its head.

With this marvelous hoe in hand, great things were accomplished: "he had it place the first model of mankind in the brick mould"; "the temple of Enlil was founded by the hoe. By day it was building it, by night it caused the temple to grow"; "the shrine E-ana was cleaned up by means of the hoe." Other gods besides Enlil find the hoe beneficial as well. The hero Ninurta "measured up the hoe" and "passes his time in its tracks"; it is a sacred tool to Gibil, who "made his hoe raise its head towards the heavens—he caused the hoe, sacred indeed, to be refined with fire." The hoe not only created the first humans, it also buries them when they die: "As for the grave: the hoe buries people." But that is not the final connection between humans and the hoe, for "dead people are also brought up from the ground by the hoe" whatever that may mean.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Questions

The *Song of the Hoe* immediately presents the modern reader with questions. Why or how does the hoe find entry into Sumerian cosmology? With what cosmological beings or forces is it associated? Do other implements also play cosmological roles? If not, why is the hoe singled out? If so, how is the role of the hoe similar to or different from those other implements? Do the Sumerian texts themselves provide answers to these questions *for us* (i.e. to what extent do possible Sumerian "answers" make sense to us)? Do typologies and theories of religion constructed in recent times provide a hypothetical framework or comparative strategy to help us better understand a world in which the hoe receives such an exalted status? It is not possible in this paper to arrive at comprehensive and fully satisfying answers to all these questions. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to provide at least partial answers and seek to lay out a methodological strategy for continuing the task at a later time.

## 3. The Strategy

The strategic approach employed in this paper involves three successive stages. The first task is to *emically* unpack, as far as possible, what a hoe is and what a hoe means to the *Sumerians themselves*, based upon *their own* texts, realizing that the process of translating these texts from the isolated, dead and difficult Sumerian language into modern English necessarily imposes a certain "outside" influence on them. The second step, which naturally emerges from the first, is to identify a *nexus* for the hoe, i.e., to observe with what or with whom the hoe is directly or indirectly connected, and what the significance of those connections is. Third, various theoretical considerations are brought to bear on the findings,

<sup>3</sup> For a connection between human origin and plant-growth (for which the hoe is also employed), see Wilfred G. Lambert, "Technical Terminology for Creation in the Ancient Near East," in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale Prague, July 1-5, 1996*, ed. Jiri Prosecky (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute, 1998), 193. "...in the myth of the Pickaxe the human race was created at the spot called uzu-è in some copies, but uzu-mú-a in other: (the spot where) 'flesh sprouted' or 'flesh grew'."

<sup>4</sup> A possible allusion "to Enkidu's ghost being put in contact with Gilgamesh" is noted by the editor/translator of the ETCSL version. Exploring this connection will need to wait for an expanded version of this paper.

resulting in a tentative general theory that attempts to answer the fundamental question: Why does the hoe have cosmological significance in Sumerian texts?

## **Part II: Employing the Strategy**

### ***1. The Hoe in Sumerian Texts***

The Sumerian word hoe (<sup>giš</sup>al) is found in at least 23 of more than 400 Sumerian literary works accessible online at The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature web site.<sup>5</sup> Only a brief summary of the contexts in which the hoe occurs can be provided in this paper.

#### ***a. The Hoe's Cosmological Role***

As in the *Song of the Hoe*, the hoe plays a markedly cosmological role as a tool of creation also in A *Hymn to Nibru and Išme-Dagan (Išme-Dagan W)* (Segment A). The city Nibru [Nippur] is praised as a city “whose terrifying splendour extends over heaven and earth.” Of all brick buildings, its brickwork is the most excellent, as is its name and soil. Nibru is “the mooring post of all people” with its head reaching to the heavens. It was built “as life-giving food for the Anuna gods” and it was “beautified for their eating and drinking.” How was it made? The last lines of the extant hymn tell us:

Enlil and Ninlil looked at the heavens, while on earth they set bounds (?); and then, once their intention became clear in the great heavens and on the broad earth, the Anuna gods of heaven and earth set to work. The mattock (=hoe) and the earth-basket, tools for founding cities...

Similar imagery is found in *Enki and the World Order* where Enki “the great prince fixed a string to the hoe, and organised brick moulds.” Then:

He tied down the strings and coordinated them with the foundations, and with the power of the assembly he planned a house and performed the purification rituals. The great prince put down the foundations, and laid the bricks. Enki placed in charge of all this him whose foundations once laid do not sag, whose good houses once built do not collapse (?), whose vaults reach up into the heart of the heavens like a rainbow—Mušdama, Enlil’s master builder.

In the *Song of the Hoe*, which primarily extols the hoe’s usefulness as a tool for humans (see next section), there is also this cosmological passage:

After the heavens had been turned upside down, after bitter lament had been imposed on Sumer, after, as houses were overwhelmed by the rivers and Enlil frowned in anger upon the land, Enlil had flooded the harvest, after Enlil had acted mightily thus, Enlil did not abandon us—the single-toothed Hoe was struck against the dry earth.

#### ***b. The Hoe's Utility as a Tool***

In many texts the general utility of the hoe is highlighted. Its common farming tasks are mentioned in the *Farmer's Instructions* and the *Song of the Ploughing Oxen* as erasing oxen tracks and digging edges of a field. Especially informative is the *Debate Between the Hoe and the Plough* where we learn the following: The hoe dams up water that has overflowed; it fills baskets with earth; spreads out clay to make bricks; lays foundations for houses, puts roofs on houses, and builds the houses themselves, where people can either cool or warm themselves; it builds temples and palaces; strengthens an old wall’s base; straightens the town square; builds embankments; digs ditches; removes weeds; makes kilns; plants gardens; makes apple trees grow; brings forth fruits that “adorn the temples of the great gods” and

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix for the list of works containing the word “hoe.” A few small or fragmentary texts have not been included in the list.

“enable the gardener to support his wife and children.” In summary, Hoe says of himself, “I am the Hoe and I live in the city. No one is more honoured than I am.” Finally, Nisaba herself is the hoe’s inspector and overseer. The significance of this will be made clear below.

It is significant that the first item of superiority over the Plough mentioned by the Hoe involves flood control: “When water overflows you [Plough] cannot dam it up.” In the *Song of the Hoe* we read: “It is you, hoe, that extend the good agricultural land!” The area of ancient Sumer is subject to counterproductive natural phenomena that can be alleviated through canalization and irrigation. Harriet Crawford describes the situation:

The whole of the alluvial plain lies outside the area of rain-fed agriculture: rainfall is as low as 150 mm per annum. Rain is confined to the winter months and summer heat is intense; to add to the problems experienced by the first farmers, the rivers flood in the spring at the height of the growing season, washing away the young plants unless measures are taken to hold back the blood waters. If this disaster is averted, then water must be led into the fields at appropriate intervals to allow the crops to ripen, otherwise they will shrivel and die. If these problems can be overcome, a wide range of cereals, fruits, vegetables and fodder plants can be successfully grown.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the hoe is a humble tool. According to Plough, it digs and weeds miserably with its head in the mud.<sup>7</sup> But in spite of Plough’s own utility and Hoe’s humble working position, Hoe “triumphed over the Plough” and won the debate, to the praise of Nisaba. Key advantages of the hoe are: (1) The hoe is small, light, and easy to use; the plough is big, bulky, and often needs repair—“carpenters have to be hired again for you...a whole workshop of artisans surrounds you”; (2) the hoe is a year-round tool whereas the plough is used only during harvest season—“My time of duty is twelve months, but your effective time is four months and your time of absence is eight months—you are gone for twice as long as you are present.”

If in fact the hoe is better, one cannot infer that the plough is therefore insignificant, for twice in the *Rulers of Lagaš* we are reminded that these four important items, the hoe, the spade, the earth basket, and the plough “mean life for the Land.” Yet, in the same text we learn that in an earlier time “there was no writing, canals were not dug, earth baskets were not carried.” But afterwards a “good shepherd rose over the land” who provided these things (the text breaks up here). Note the items and the sequence: (1) writing, (2) canals, for which presumably both the hoe and the spade were used (the first two items of the four mentioned above), (3) earth basket (item number three); but no plough here. It can only be used after the hoe and the spade create the canalization system that allows for crop production. The connection between writing and the work of the hoe is explored below.

Perhaps a little friendly rivalry like that portrayed in the Debate serves to promote increased productivity, as in *Išme-Dagan and Enlil’s Chariot (Išme-Dagan I)* where Enlil instructs Išme-Dagan, “let the hoe and the plough, the implements of field workers, rival each other before you” so that along with Ninurta’s holy plough and Enlil’s good seed, “the silos and granaries of Enlil will be piled up high.” In such a prosperous time king Išme-Dagan, the wise and accomplished shepherd, can also hope for the fulfillment of his greatest wish: “Give him Inana your beloved eldest daughter as a spouse. May they embrace each other forever! May the days of delight and sweetness last long in her holy embrace full of life!”

Complementary differences between the hoe and the plough are evidenced not only by their respective functions, but also by the names of their individual parts.<sup>8</sup> The hoe is made up of an “eye” (likely a grip for the hand on the upper end of the handle), a “socket” in which the handle is placed, a

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Similar language is found in “The Heron and the Turtle” where the turtle is said to be troublesome and “an oven brick” who “like a hoe spends his time in the mud.”

<sup>8</sup> Part names are from Armas Salonen, *Agricultura Mesopotamica nach sumerisch-akkadischen Quellen: Eine lexikalische und kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Kirjapaino Oy Helsinki, 1968), 101. I have translated the German part names into English.

“head” (a single blade) or “teeth” (when the hoe has prongs instead of a single blade). Among the parts of the plough are: “mother,” “father,” “vulva,” “penis,” and others. Perhaps the hoe is “smarter” than the plough, but if the contest were about sexual potency, the plough would have easily “triumphed over the hoe!”<sup>9</sup> The presence of complementarity along with differentiation is discussed below in the theoretical section on “Literary Analysis.”

### *c. The Hoe as a Weapon*

The *Lament for Sumer and Urim* begins with the announcement of an oncoming storm that will “overturn the appointed times” and “obliterate the divine plans.” An, Enlil, Enki, and Ninhursaga have decided to “overturn the divine powers of Sumer...to destroy the city...to change the location of kingship.” The same fate awaits Urim, whose “food offerings” will be changed. As a consequence “on the two parallel banks of the Tigris and of the Euphrates bad weeds should grow.” All plant, animal, and human life will suffer. The storm came, and it was devastating. The people “breathed only with difficulty.” It was a “dark time roasted by hailstones and flame,” with the rumbling of heaven and the trembling of earth. People fled in confusion. Houses and orchards were destroyed. The Euphrates was full of corpses and the roads full of bandits. The “storm” that came upon Urim was caused by Enlil, who “sent down the Elamites, the enemy, from the mountains.” The destruction is twice summarized by the phrase “the city was raked by a hoe.” Similar language is used in the *Lament for Unug*—“they hewed the city with hoes.”

In the *Exploits of Ninurta* the following charge is given to Ninurta, son of Enlil:

Ninurta, after gathering the enemy in a battle-net, after erecting a great reed-altar, Lord, heavenly serpent, purify your pickaxe [=hoe] and your mace! Ninurta, I will enumerate the names of the warriors you have already slain: the Kuli-ana, the Dragon, Gypsum, the Strong Šopper, the hero Six-headed Wild Ram, the Magilum Boat, Lord Saman-ana, the Bison Bull, the Palm-tree King, the Anzud bird, the Seven-headed Snake—Ninurta, you slew them in the Mountains.

In a very broken section of the *Debate Between Winter and Summer* we find the expression “destructive hoe.” One should note that the texts involving the destructive hoe use the term metaphorically—the hoe stands for an invading army, wielding more than simple hoes. Further, the enemy is sent by Enlil. The destructive hoe thus also takes on a certain cosmological character.

## *2. The Hoe and Nisaba: A Shared Nexus*

### *a. The Hoe and Its Nexus*

The hoe finds a natural connection with activities associating it with the **ground**. More specifically these activities may be classified as belonging to (1) **agriculture**, where it finds use in both fields and orchards, (2) **irrigation and flood control**, by means of ditches, and (3) **building construction**, by preparing the raw material—chopping weeds, mixing them with mud, clay, and water—and placing the mixture into brick moulds.<sup>10</sup> The resulting bricks are used to build houses, temples, palaces, walls, and to carry out repairs on the same.

In its connection with agriculture, the hoe is instrumental in increasing food production, which brings it indirectly into association with the concept of (4) **fertility**. Good seed, the hoe, and the plough

<sup>9</sup> One notes the use of the verb “plough” in ritual sexual contexts, such as “A *balbale* (?) to Inana and Dumuzid (Dumuzid-Inana P)” where Inanna asks, “...my own genitals, the maiden’s, a well-watered opened-up mound—who will be their ploughman?” to which Dumuzi replies: “Lady, the king shall plough them for you; Dumuzid the king shall plough them for you” whereupon Inanna rejoices: “Plough in my genitals, man of my heart!”

<sup>10</sup> Note the description of the process in Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, 66. “These mudbricks are most conveniently made by digging earth from close to the banks of a canal and puddling it with water drawn from the canal, through a small breach in the banks. Chopped straw is usually added to improve the consistency and then the mixture is shaped, usually by means of a wooden frame, in the shape of a rectangle and left to dry in the sun.”

combine forces to produce food, which in turn provides a basis for human (5) **sexuality** and fertility. Išme-Dagan sees full silos as a sign of good times, which are also to be experienced in a long-lasting embrace with Inanna. In *Enki and the World Order*, a long text of 472 lines, sexual intercourse and brick-making are placed next to each other (lines 326–335, 336–348). After describing himself as a god of fertility (“I am the good semen”) providing abundance and prosperity for all, Enki heaps up piles of barley and puts them in charge of her “who causes sexual intercourse... Ezina, the good bread of the whole world.” He then prepares the hoe and brick moulds for a great house (the text is found above on pg. 5).<sup>11</sup> Earlier in the text sexual intercourse is mentioned along with inundations of the sea (lines 299–308), which the hoe is designed to control. Bricks and human birth are also connected:

Aruru, Enlil’s sister, Nintud, the lady of giving birth, is to get the holy birth-bricks as her prerogative. She is to carry off the lancet for umbilical cords, the special sand and leeks... She is to be the midwife of the land! The birthing of kings and lords is to be in her hands.<sup>12</sup>

Although the connection may not be as obvious, the hoe is indirectly related to (6) **writing**. In the *Rulers of Lagaš* three things are said to be absent: writing, canals, earth baskets. These may simply be three separate items viewed as important for society. The latter two are, however, explicitly associated with the hoe in our texts, and one could easily deduce that the same hoe that mixes clay for bricks might also be used for mixing clay for writing tablets. One also notes that in the *Song of the Hoe* Nisaba plays a prominent role. Near the beginning of the song (lines 28–34) we read, “Now Enki praised Enlil’s hoe, and the maiden Nisaba was made responsible for keeping records of the decisions.” The song ends with “Nisaba be praised!” In Sumerian texts Nisaba is primarily the goddess of writing. In *Enki and the World Order* she is “to demarcate boundaries and mark borders. She is to be the scribe of the Land.” In *A Praise Poem of Iddin-Dagan (Iddin-Dagan B)* her role is made clear:

May your exceeding wisdom, given by the tablets of Nisaba, never cease on the clay in the tablet house. In this tablet house, like a shrine fashioning everything, may it never come to an end. May Nisaba, the shining ..... lady, give wisdom to the junior scribe who puts his hand to the clay and writes this on it. May she show generosity. In the place of writing may she come forth like the sun for him.

In *A Praise Poem of Šulgi (Šulgi B)* Šulgi appears quite proud of his literary abilities, which he attributes to Nisaba:

I am a king, offspring begotten by a king and borne by a queen. I, Šulgi the noble, have been blessed with a favourable destiny right from the womb. When I was small, I was at the academy, where I learned the scribal art from the tablets of Sumer and Akkad. None of the nobles could write on clay as I could. There where people regularly went for tutelage in the scribal art, I qualified fully in subtraction, addition, reckoning and accounting. The fair Nanibgal, Nisaba, provided me amply with knowledge and comprehension. I am an experienced scribe who does not neglect a thing.

May my hymns be in everyone’s mouth; let the songs about me not pass from memory. So that the fame of my praises, the words which Enki composed about me, and which Ĝeštin-ana joyously speaks from the heart and broadcasts far and wide, shall never be forgotten, I have had them written down line by line in the House of the Wisdom of Nisaba in holy heavenly writing, as great

<sup>11</sup> One should note that the word “hoe” is preceded by the Sumerian determinative for “tree, wood,” ĝiš (ñiš in John A. Halloran, *The Sumerian Lexicon, Version 3.0* (2004 [cited 3-9-2005]); available from <http://www.sumerian.org/sumerlex.htm>.) The Sumerian word for “penis” is ĝiš (Halloran: ñiš<sub>2,3</sub>).

<sup>12</sup> *Enki and the World Order*, lines 395–402. For a discussion of how this Sumerian text relates to the Akkadian Atrahasis Epic in which bricks and clay are formed into human beings, see Anne Kilmer, “The Brick of Birth,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 46 (1987).

works of scholarship. No one shall ever let any of it pass from memory ..... It shall not be forgotten, since indestructible heavenly writing has a lasting renown. The scribe should bring it to the singer, and can let him look at it, and with the wisdom and intelligence of Nisaba, let him read it to him as if from a lapis-lazuli tablet. Let my songs sparkle like silver in the lode! Let them be performed in all the cult-places, and let no one neglect them in the Shrine of the New Moon. In the music-rooms of Enlil and Ninlil and at the morning and evening meals of Nanna, let the sweet praise of me, Šulgi, be never-ending.

A less ostentation self-praise is found in *A Praise Poem of Lipit-Eštar (Lipit-Eštar A)*:

I am a proficient scribe of Nisaba. I am a young man whose word Utu confirms. I am the perfection of kingship. I am Lipit-Eštar, Enlil's son.

### *b. Nisaba's Nexus*

Nisaba's name occurs ca. 100 times in the ECTSL. Focusing on the seven ECTSL texts at the end of which she receives explicit praise, we note that the content of those texts reflects a nexus of writing, sexuality, destruction, temple construction—themes connected also with the hoe. I have just noted the connection between the scribe Nisaba and the hoe in the *Song of the Hoe*. Two other texts ending with praises to Nisaba also highlight her as goddess of writing. The *Rulers of Lagaš* ends with, "Written in the school. Nisaba be praised!" In *A Praise Poem of Šulgi (Šulgi A)* Šulgi describes himself thus: "I am a knowledgeable scribe of Nisaba; I have perfected my wisdom just as my heroism..." and near the end of the text seems to pick up the theme of writing again, but the tablet breaks off, "By the life of my father holy Lugalbanda, and Nanna the king of heaven and earth, I swear that the words written on my tablet are..." *A Praise Poem of Šulgi (Šulgi X)* combines Šulgi's sexual and military prowess. The text begins with a lengthy description of the former, in which Inanna herself speaks thus:

When I have bathed for the king, for the lord, when I have bathed for the shepherd Dumuzid, when I have adorned my flanks (?) with ointment (?), when I have anointed my mouth with balsamic oil (?), when I have painted my eyes with kohl, when he has ..... my hips with his fair hands, when the lord who lies down beside holy Inana, the shepherd Dumuzid, has ..... on his lap, when he has relaxed (?) ..... in my pure (?) arms, when he has intercourse (?) with me ..... like choice beer, when he ruffles my pubic hair for me, when he plays with the hair of my head, when he lays his hands on my holy genitals, when he lies down in the ..... of my sweet womb, [2 lines unclear] when he treats me tenderly on the bed, then I will too treat my lord tenderly. I will decree a good fate for him! I will treat Šulgi, the good shepherd, tenderly! I will decree a good fate for him! I will treat him tenderly in his .....

In *Inanna and Ebih* Inanna is a great warrior goddess who destroys rebel lands. Finally, Nisaba is praised at the end the *Temple Hymns* which lists, describes, and praises numerous temples.

We can thus understand the connection between Nisaba and the hoe by the observation that they share a nexus.

[There may be a third nexus of interest. A. Salonen notes that *allu* ("hoe") is also a symbol of the god Ninurta. In Babylonian texts the hoe is thought to be associated with Marduk; one text links the two: "Ninurta is Marduk of the hoe."<sup>13</sup> In the *Song of the Hoe* the hero Ninurta is said to have "measured up the hoe" and is told to purify his hoe in the *Exploits of Ninurta*. In *Išme-Dagan and Enlil's Chariot (Išme-Dagan I)*, however, Ninurta is also associated with the "holy plough," and in other texts with many other items and attributes (his name occurs at least 429 times in the ECTSL). A complete analysis of Ninurta's nexus, which would surely be instructive, would, due to the magnitude of task, extend beyond the scope of this paper.]

<sup>13</sup> Salonen, *Agricultura Mesopotamica*, 140.

### 3. Theoretical Considerations

How is the information gathered so far to be evaluated? What have we learned about the hoe and its meaning in Sumerian society? Can we now construct a clear theoretical model to explain its cosmological significance? Four methodologies are now applied; we ask of each to what extent it contributes to a better understanding of our topic.

#### a. Typology

Theories of religion employ systems of classification in an attempt to compare and contrast one religion with another, or to provide a frame of reference for understanding a particular religion. As a starting point, Kees Bolle suggests:

Cosmic worldviews may be examined from two distinct perspectives: in terms of geographical location or in terms of culturally evolved themes.<sup>14</sup>

The *Song of the Hoe* involves both components. The hoe is the instrument used by Enlil to establish a *geographical center*. In one of his first creative acts Enlil uses the hoe to set “the axis of the world at Dur-an-ki” which is described as being “in the middle of the four quarters of the earth” in *Enlil in the E-kur (Enlil A)*. Dur-an-ki is most often associated with Nippur, but in some texts it is connected with other cities.<sup>15</sup> As an extension of geography Bolle notes that humanity is also “a central theme in all traditional cosmologies.”<sup>16</sup> With the hoe Enlil placed “the first model of mankind in the brick mould” and with the hoe he provides a stable existence for mankind. The cultural theme here is simply the hoe itself. Due in part to specific geomorphological processes that affect the area of Sumer, the hoe became a highly valued multi-functional tool. However, merely noting that the hoe has both cosmological and cultural associations in the texts in which it occurs does not provide the reason for that connection.

Charles Long has identified five categories for cosmogonic myths: “(1) creation from nothing; (2) from chaos; (3) from a cosmic egg; (4) from world parents; (5) through a process of emergence.”<sup>17</sup> Creation via an agricultural tool finds no place in his typology, so applying this scheme will not move us forward.

In *Ancient Mesopotamia* Susan Pollock provides an anthropological approach to assess the connection of cosmology with agriculture.<sup>18</sup> She associates Dumuzi’s fate in the stories of Inanna and Dumuzi, as many others do, with a “close connection to the seasonal agricultural cycle in Mesopotamia.”<sup>19</sup> She notes further:

Religion was inseparable not only from nature but also from politics. Kings claimed to rule by divine sanction, but they were also in the service of the gods. Rulers were expected to (re)build temples of the gods, often enlarging or otherwise elaborating them in the process. In a related kind of move, Sargon attempted to consolidate his military and political victories over the city-states of southern Mesopotamia by appointing his daughter Enheduanna high priestess of the moon god at Ur.<sup>20</sup>

Pollock is sensitive to attempts to over-historicize Mesopotamian religion. However, on the basis of textual and iconographic evidence she understands that “Mesopotamian cosmology was based upon a

<sup>14</sup> Kees W. Bolle, ed., *Cosmology: An Overview*, vol. 4, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 101.

<sup>15</sup> On its cosmological role, see also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Inc., 1959, 1987), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Bolle, ed., *Cosmology: An Overview*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Charles H. Long, ed., *Cosmogony*, vol. 4, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 94.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden that Never Was* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 188.

<sup>20</sup> Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 188.



conceptual identification of the social with the natural world.”<sup>21</sup> What we have here is a rather complex intertwining of agricultural, social, religious, and political phenomena which, together with specific occupational roles important especially in southern Mesopotamia, may form the *Sitz im Leben* for the emergence of such a thing as a cosmological hoe (though it does not yet provide the *explanation* for it). If we do not worry too much about finding a tidy typological category for such a complex nexus, we may not be so inclined to oversimplify ancient Sumerian cosmological notions by constraining them to a pre-constructed *etic* category.

### ***b. Sacred/Profane—Here/There***

A number of theories of religion focus on aspects of sacred space, spatial or temporal. However, a cosmological hoe does not fall nicely into these classifications either. While, as we have seen, the hoe is employed to create a cosmological “center,” and the instrument itself is said to be “sacred indeed” in the *Song of the Hoe*, it is neither deified nor made an object of the cult. While it is true in a sense that, in Eliade’s words, the hoe “becomes *something else*, yet it continues to be *itself*,” for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu,<sup>22</sup> its “sacredness” is not primarily spatial or temporal, but rather *textual*, an idea pursued in the next two sections. With no recorded religious ritual involving the hoe, it is difficult to assign its cosmological role to one of J. Z. Smith’s tripartite topographical categories. Does it belong to the “here” of domestic religion, the “there” of public religion, or the “anywhere” of an “interstitial space between these other two loci?” Perhaps it belongs to the last category if we think of his extension to “activities we label ‘magic’”(see “Scribal Activity” below).<sup>23</sup> But if that’s the case, the magic resides in the written and oral *text*, which becomes its own sacred “space.” In the words of Šulgi (Šulgi B), the text on clay is “holy/indestructible heavenly writing.” Narrowing our focus then to the *text*, our last two methodological approaches involve two aspects of its production: (1) Physical materials and processes (scribal activity), and (2) the end product in terms of its literary form and function.

### ***c. Scribal Activity***

Scott Noegel has drawn close attention to the connections between cosmological notions and various aspects of scribal activity in the ancient Near East.<sup>24</sup> Writing and pronouncing the name of a person or object connects that person or object with creative and cosmological processes and powers. Such power can be heightened when the name is embedded in various literary and acoustic devices such as parallelism or paronomasia. The creative power of the hoe is thereby maximized in the *Song of the Hoe*, for the word “hoe” is *written* some 45 times, more than a third of all occurrences of the word in ca. 23 texts the ETCSL in which the word is found. Noegel also draws attention to the *medium* in which Mesopotamian texts were written—clay, the material used in creating humans and buildings. Thus, “when a scribe impressed a stylus into moist clay, he was, in a sense, participating in creation.”<sup>25</sup> In the *Song*, the hoe is created and re-created by the scribe over and over. Furthermore, every time the scribe presses the stylus into the clay to form the cuneiform wedges for the word *al* (Sumerian, “hoe”), he appears to emulate on a reduced scale the hoe-worker who also leaves marks in the clay as he mixes it and prepares it for the brick mould, and who thereby also participates in the creation of everything for which the resulting bricks will be put to use.

<sup>21</sup> Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Here, There, and Anywhere,” in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique Worlds*, ed. Scott Noegel, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>24</sup> See especially, Scott Noegel, “New Observations on Scribal Activity in the Ancient Near East,” in *Voice, Text and Hypertext at the Millennium: Emerging Practices in Textual Studies*, ed. Raimonda Modiano, Leroy F. Searle, and Peter Shillinsburg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Noegel, “New Observations on Scribal Activity,” 137.

In keeping with the general (but not exclusive) rule of texts in antiquity, the *Song of the Hoe* was meant to be *sung* or *read aloud*, which we may also consider here from a purely physical point of view in terms of sound production.<sup>26</sup> Alongside the constant repetition of the word *al*, many other words of the Song contain the syllable *al* or a close phonetic neighbor *ar*, providing heightened alliteration—and cosmic impact on the hearers. Walter Ong has emphasized the cosmological impact of sound in oral cultures. Since a number of people who might have heard the *Song of the Hoe* might not have been able to read the text, considering them in the light of Ong’s treatment of “oral culture” is not inappropriate:

In a primary oral culture... the way in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life. The centering action of sound... affects man’s sense of the cosmos. For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its center.<sup>27</sup>

These *al/ar* sounds are noted to be primarily connected with nouns and verbs. The hoe’s power lies in a dynamic link between its *being* and its *doing*. On multiple levels, then, including its physical production in the clay, its oral recitation, and its semantic functions, the hoe in its Song is imbued with cosmological significance.

#### *d. Literary Analysis*

Much of the information we derived about the agricultural utility of hoe was taken “at face value” from the *Debate Between the Hoe and the Plough*. Is that legitimate, or was there a “debate genre” in Sumerian literature that was not intended for us to so descriptively? Now there does exist a “debate poem” or “disputation” literary form, not only in Sumerian (which is the earliest attestation of this form), but in many other literatures as well. In 1989 an international symposium on the subject of the Literary Debate in Semitic and Related Literatures was held in Groningen, The Netherlands, to investigate this genre. In the Introduction to the published symposium volume, the editors ask the following questions about the Literary Debate:

By whom and for whom were they composed; and most importantly: why were they composed? As an intellectual game? As a didactic exercise in rhetorics? As part of a liturgy? As a kind of popularization or vulgarization of wisdom, knowledge, theological principles, ideology...?<sup>28</sup>

The extent to which the editors feel that the contributed articles provide solid answers to these questions is found in these statements:

It can be easily seen from the following essays that a single answer is difficult if not impossible to give...<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion the editors would propose that a complete answer to the question of origins of the [sic!] genre in the diverse literary cultures cannot as yet be given.<sup>30</sup>

We are left with a sense of uncertainty. Two articles dealing specifically with the Sumerian materials do provide helpful insight for our topic.

<sup>26</sup> See “A Praise Poem of Šulgi (Šulgi B)” on pg. 8, especially “The scribe should bring it to the singer... Let them be performed in all the cult-places.”

<sup>27</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982, 2002), 72.

<sup>28</sup> G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 42 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Reinink and Vanstiphout, eds., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*, 3. The sentence follows immediately upon the previous quote.

<sup>30</sup> Reinink and Vanstiphout, eds., *Dispute Poems and Dialogues*, 6.

Herman Vanstiphout notes that “the debate poem in Early Mesopotamia is restricted to a *pair* of contenders.”<sup>31</sup> Examples cited are: *Hoe vs. Plough*, *Summer vs. Winter*, *Tree vs. Reed*, *Ewe vs. Wheat*, *Heron vs. Turtle*, *Bird vs. Fish*, *Herdsmen vs. Farmer*<sup>32</sup>, *Upper vs. Lower Millstone*, *Copper vs. Silver*. Vanstiphout makes several observations about these poems: (1) The pairs deal with nature, especially agriculture, (2) they are complementary pairs, in spite of which one of the parties always “wins” the debate, (3) they entail common knowledge from daily life, and in this sense can be taken seriously, (4) they display high literary competence with sophisticated structural and semantic features, (5) they are also frivolous, or at least playful, compositions, and, (6) interestingly, they typically have cosmological introductions, some of which can comprise up to a third of the composition.<sup>33</sup> A key observation for our use of the *Song of the Hoe* is that the content of these debates is generally taken from real experiences of daily life.

Karel van der Toorn differentiates her theme, literary dialog in which the problem of theodicy is debated, from the disputation genre discussed by Vanstiphout. While she argues that these “non-instructional” and “highly literary” works were probably designed for internal use among scholars in an academic environment and would not have had a wide reach among the general populace, she does admit the likelihood “that the dialogues reached a broader circle than just that of the professional literates.”<sup>34</sup> If so, one could easily imagine that the far less theoretical and much more practically-oriented nature and agricultural debate poems would have been known (orally) among the general populace.

### *A Preliminary Theory*

The multifaceted usefulness of the hoe in areas of constant attention and interest in the daily life of ancient Sumer, particularly made clear in the *Song of the Hoe* and the *Debate Between the Hoe and the Plough*, may provide the foundation for understanding its cosmological implications. The summarizing statements—“the hoe makes everything prosper, the hoe makes everything flourish”—are the reasons, from the Sumerian writer’s viewpoint, for the hoe’s praiseworthiness. The one who controls the hoe, i.e. the ruler who controls those who wield the hoe, controls civilization’s valued commodities: food, houses, temples, and, through its employment in flood control, can minimize the effects of nature’s potentially destructive irregularities.

This control must be maintained for the benefit of all the members of the community. The one who controls must have both divine legitimization from above, and continual support of those over whom he wishes to exercise his control. Perhaps by praising the simple tool of an extremely important group of laborers, and imbuing it with cosmological significance, those wielders of the hoe are themselves brought into a grand cosmological drama. As they go about their daily work, they are reminded by the songs of the scribes that they wield the instrument of Enlil himself, the very tool to which humankind ultimately owes its own creation—for it has “made people exist.” In their labors these workers themselves

<sup>31</sup> Herman L. J. Vanstiphout, “Lore, Learning and Levity in the Sumerian Disputations: A Matter of Form, or Substance?” in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, ed. G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 42 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1991), 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> A very old rivalry indeed that forms the theme of the 1943 Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* Recall especially the song that begins with these words, “The farmer and the cowman should be friends...one man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow, but that’s no reason why they can’t be friends”! The rest of the song, in harmony with the theme of the musical, promotes “complementary” thinking, “Territory folks should stick together, territory folks should all be pals. Cowboys dance with the farmer’s daughters, farmers dance with the rancher’s gals.”

<sup>33</sup> An exception is the *Song of the Hoe*, where the cosmological section, quoted above on pg. 4, occurs near the end of the poem.

<sup>34</sup> Karel Van Der Toorn, “The Ancient Near Eastern Literary Dialogue as a Vehicle of Critical Reflection,” in *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East: Forms and Types of Literary Debates in Semitic and Related Literatures*, ed. G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 42 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1991), 74.

participate in creative activity, thereby becoming part of a cosmological cycle. When they do their work well, society is well served and preserved: gods and temples receive their gifts, people support their families, sexuality and fertility are promoted, all while the stability of such a world is continually guaranteed *in writing*—“indestructible heavenly writing”—and in the oral reading and recitation of the texts that reflect, or rather co-create, this cosmological nexus. Should, however, these workers become restless and discontented, they may also be reminded through the texts of the scribes that there is a hoe, *not* their own hoes, but a metaphorical-cosmological hoe, that can serve destructive purposes. For when *that* hoe rakes a city, it is the wielders of common hoes who suffer.

In her concluding section, Pollock writes:

Ideological support was essential to create an aura of legitimacy for social, political, and economic changes and the inequalities they established. In Mesopotamia as in many other early civilizations, ideologies were closely tied to concepts of the supernatural...Early concepts of the deities connected them to nature and to human exploitation of nature through farming, herding, and collection of wild plants and animals. The connection between the world of the deities and nature was extended to the human world to represent hierarchical relationships and inequalities among people as legitimate products of the natural world.<sup>35</sup>

So, at any rate, is the preliminary theory. It is in essence about an ancient culture's social management of issues of complementarity and differentiation on various levels in a hierarchical system for collective well-being. We must consider, however, that we still actually *know* far too little about the ideology of control in ancient Sumer. A recent contribution by Gebhard Selz to the study of rulership concepts of Mesopotamia begins cautiously thus:

Die Frage nach der Organisation von Herrschaft, ihren Ursprüngen, Funktionen und ihren Strukturen—mehr oder minder Gegenstand aller geistes- oder kulturwissenschaftlichen Fächer — ist ungeheuer komplex.<sup>36</sup>

The inquiry into the organization of rulership, its origins, functions and its structures—more or less the objective of all fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences—is enormously complex.

Selz points out, for example, that any explication of early rulership concepts must, on the one hand, take Sumerian occupation and official lists into consideration, but that, on the other hand, a number of entries in these lists are difficult to determine with any kind of precision. It would be nice, for example, to find that the “hoe-worker” was given some prominent position in such an occupation list, or an economic or administrative text. It would then be even more informative to find texts that detail the relationship between ruler and various laborers in Sumerian society. Perhaps such texts exist and are merely waiting to be pulled off the shelf through additional research, or are yet to be translated, or are on tablets yet to be dug up—perhaps even by a hoe—in some future archaeological discovery.

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<sup>35</sup> Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 221.

<sup>36</sup> Gebhard J. Selz, “Über Mesopotamische Herrschaftskonzepte,” in *dubsar anta-men, Studien zur Altorientalistik: Festschrift für Willem H. Ph. Römer zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 281. English translation following the quotation is my own.

### Epilogue

A modern parallel connecting writing and gardening occurs in the following excerpt from “Digging” by Seamus Heaney, 1995 Nobel Prize winner<sup>37</sup>

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests: snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down  
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

...

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it.

(1966 from “Death of a Naturalist” )

Between the oldest Sumerian texts and this modern analogy lies a massive and tantalizing comparative undertaking, especially in the texts of the ancient Near East. There is the obvious transmission with modification of these ideas into Akkadian and its later dialects. In Egypt, the hoe is often portrayed in art and iconography; in one scene eight hoes represent the ogdoad. In the Hebrew Bible there is a word root that is used for both plowing and tablet engraving, a sexual metaphor using the verb “plow,” a metaphorical use of the words “rod” and “staff” for an Assyrian invasion, and much more.

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<sup>37</sup> I thank my daughter, Sara Martin (B.A. English, University of Washington), for linking me to this modern parallel as I read aloud to her the first draft of this paper (URL: <http://www.wordbiz.com/digging.html>).

**Appendix: List of Sumerian Texts Using the Word “Hoe”**

- Cursing of Agade  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.1.5#>
- Debate between Hoe and Plough  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.3.1#>
- Debate between Silver and Copper  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.3.6#>
- Debate between Winter and Summer  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.3.3#>
- Enki and the World Order  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.1.1.3#>
- Exploits of Ninurta  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.1.6.2#>
- Farmer’s Instructions  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.6.3#>
- Heron and the Turtle  
 (Sumerian text only: <http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=c.5.9.2>)
- Home of the Fish  
 (Sumerian text only: <http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=c.5.9.1#>)
- Hymn to Nibru and Išme-Dagan (Išme-Dagan W)  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.5.4.23#>
- Išme-Dagan and Enlil’s Chariot (Išme-Dagan I)  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.5.4.09#>
- Lament for Eridug  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.2.6#>
- Lament for Sumer and Urim  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.2.3#>
- Lament for Unug  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.2.5#>
- Lament for Urim  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.2.2#>
- Pabilsaġ’s Journey to Nibru  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.1.7.8#>
- Praise Poem of Šulgi (Šulgi E)  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.05#>
- Proverbs: Collection 2 + 6  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.6.1.02#>
- Rulers of Lagaš  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.1.2#>
- Sargon Legend  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.2.1.4#>
- Šir-gida to Nuska (Nuska A)  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.4.29.1#>
- Song of the Hoe  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.5.4#>
- Song of the Ploughing Oxen  
<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1mac.cgi?text=t.5.5.5#>

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