Piotr Michalowski, *The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: An Epistolary History of an Ancient Mesopotamian Kingdom* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 15), Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011, xxvi + 530 pp.

This is not the first time Michalowski has dealt with the letters to and from the kings of the Ur III monarchy: he edited them as his PhD dissertation in 1976. He has returned to them recently and the result is a new, extended and much changed version of the correspondence.

The book is divided into two parts: (1) The Royal Correspondence of the Ur III Kings in Literary and Historical Perspective and (2) The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: Text Editions.

The first part consists of eight chapters (followed by four appendices) constituting historical and literary analyses of the letters and their background.

The first chapter ('Introduction') presents a general sketch of political history of the Ur III state; it also introduces the main thesis of the publication, namely that, in principle, the correspondence should not be used to reconstruct the history of the Ur III monarchy.

Michalowski begins the second chapter ('Sumerian Literary Letters') by comparing Sumerian literary letters (the majority of which originated in the Old Babylonian period) with simple letter-orders, which dominate in the records from the Ur III period. He emphasizes that the 'literariness' of the former is too often narrowly understood: that those letters only belonged to school *curriculum* and possessed a characteristic *ductus*. Michalowski maintains that the Royal Correspondence of Ur is 'literary' in the full sense and should not be treated on equal terms with the sources contemporary with the described events for reconstructing their course; it is better to use the correspondence to study the next generations'

perception of the Ur III kings. This chapter also concerns the provenience and date of composition of Sumerian literary letters and their formal structure.

The third chapter ('The Royal Letters in Their Literary Setting') argues that the corpus is a creation of modern scholars, who created it from a number of letters transmitted in antiquity individually or in sets of a few exemplars. Michalowski in his examination adduces the archaeological context of every exemplar whenever possible. He also analyses the letters with respect to their place in the school *curriculum*; he isolates a 'Hypothetical CKU Core', a group of letters that were copied by students most often (ten of the twenty-four letters treat Šulgi's interventions in disputes between his officials, the building of the wall *Muriq Tidnim* and the struggle between Ibbi-Sin's followers and those of Išbi-Erra) and based on these he defines – alongside hymns praising Šulgi – the limits of the tradition of the Ur III monarchy among the Old Babylonian scribes.

In the fourth chapter ('The Royal Letters in Their Historical Setting 1. The Affairs of King Šulgi [Letters 1–12, 15–18]'), Michalowski examines the letters' historical content. He compares pieces of information about the important persons of the Ur III Period included in the Correspondence with those from contemporary sources. He views those regarding 'The Apilaša Affair' (1–3) as the most historically valuable letters from that group. The presentation of two antagonists there, the mighty general Apilaša and the sukkal-mah Aradmu (Arad-Nanna), although not verifiable, does not contradict data we have from contemporary sources. The story of 'The Apilaša Affair' is, according to Michalowski, an interesting example of the perception of king Šulgi, impelled to intervene because of tensions between his subordinates, as a canny ruler, yet also acknowledging the limitations of his power – in contrast to the well-known image of an almighty sovereign and a god of the Land. Although there is a possibility that some authentic writings from the Ur III Period could have been used in these letters, this is not the case with the remaining ones discussed in this chapter. In Michalowski's view they are the product of Old Babylonian scribes' imagination (with the exception of the correspondence between Šulgi and Amar-Suena, about which Michalowski is not sure what to think).

The fifth chapter ('The Amorites in Ur III Times') is an extensive *excursus*, the purpose of which is to prepare the reader for the argumentation of the next two chapters. Indeed, the originality in addressing the issue, together with its highly polemical character, makes this chapter notable by itself, thus I devote larger space to it in this review. Michalowski challenges the attitude of many Assyriologists towards the question of Amorites' genesis. He rejects the common practice of treating various occurrences of the term 'Amurru/MAR.TU', spread over the whole of Mesopotamia and its environs for a thousand years, as invariable *continuum*. He emphasizes also that many publications of his colleagues have insufficiently

awareness of the newest theoretical works concerning nomadism, ethnogenesis and linguistic change. Michalowski mentions six hypotheses, which 'crop up over and over' but 'not a single one of them can be substantiated on the basis of currently available information', moreover, 'these propositions are simply false' (pp. 87–88).

First he addresses the conception that the Amorites encountered by Mesopotamians were nomads. Its critique can be summarised as follows: it highlights the inaccuracy of nomenclature concerning nomadism, pastoralism or tribalism and ambiguousness of meaning of available sources which are used to support this hypothesis.

Another view, which points to the west as the place from which Amorites infiltrated Mesopotamia (I suppose that Michalowski is thinking about southern Mesopotamia, since his argumentation concentrates only on the Ur III state), is refuted as vain reasoning unsupported by the evidence, based only on a strong collocation of 'Amurru' with 'the west' from later times and on the first appearance of the MAR.TU logogram (in Ebla, *ca*. 2400[1]). However, there is some indirect indication that MAR.TU meant 'the west' (or more properly 'the northwest') already in Ur III times and possibly much earlier. I refer to the similarity (likely a case of cognates) between the Sumerian words Amurru (see below) and 'amaru' – 'flood'. 'Amaru' could be used not only as a term for great masses of water but also as a designation of something very violent and catastrophic. I recall here the concept that the famous Flood described in Sumerian literature originated as a rendering of the first intrusion(s) of Semitic people into Mesopotamia in the beginning of the third millennium[2].

Michalowski offers an *excursus* inside the *excursus* called 'War and Foreign Relations during the First Half of the Ur III Period – An Overview', where he relates the foreign policy of Ur-Namma and Šulgi, especially dealing with the latter's expansionist program in the east and identifying two of its reasons: the desire of resource-poor Mesopotamia to seek out resources, and the 'memory' of the end of the Akkadian State, which fell under the strikes of Gutium from beyond the Zagros Mountains. Thanks to the year names we can identify roughly the areas affected by Sumerian military expeditions – Michalowski exploits this and localises Amorite lands known to the Ur III State, based on the Drehem texts listing provisions of 'nam-ra-ak kur MAR.TU', 'the booty of the Amorite highlands/borderland'. This area is situated by the author in the vicinity of the Diyala Valley and Jebel Hamrin and on the southeast of these, along the Khorasan Way,

[1] All dates refer to Before Christ Era and use the Middle Chronology.
[2] W. Hallo, *Limits of Scepticism*, *JAOS* 110 (1990), 196–197.

but he also indicates that because 'kur MAR.TU' lacks the postdeterminative 'KI', that designation is a rather loose description of the Amorites' dwelling place rather than distinct geographical name with strict borders.

'Did Some Amorites Undergo a Process of Sedentarization that Can Be Traced in Texts?' is the title of the next section, in which Michalowski criticises the statement that nomadic Amorites, after encountering southern Mesopotamian civilisation, almost automatically went through the sedentarisation process. He repeats the arguments from the first section, while the value of this section is in the observation that 'MAR.TU/MAR.DU_3' was a logogram also in Sumerian, read as 'Amurrum'. He concludes that virtually all Amorites from the contemporary economic sources who are not POWs or 'ambassadors' are members of elite guards, therefore the term 'Amurrum' could refer not only to an ethnos but also to a profession.

The fourth hypothesis, which states that there was a massive infiltration of Amorites into the Ur III State, Michalowski rebuts on the grounds that existing material does not allow such a pronouncement: out of the 75,000 economical Ur III tablets published till now only 600–700 people designated as Amorites can be found (although I think that refuting this hypothesis is right, counting it among those 'simply false' is an exaggeration – we have little documentation from the majority of Mesopotamian archaeological sites dated to that period – there is a lot yet to be found).

Michalowski denies the fifth idea – that Amorites played a significant role in the fall of Ur III State – because it is based on literary sources from the Old Babylonian period. He analyses the occurrence of the names 'Tidnum' and 'Ia'madium', two known Amorite tribes from the end of the third millennium. He concludes that they were marginal to the interests of the southern Mesopotamian kingdom; he explains the only thing suggesting something quite different – the name of the mighty fortifications 'bad Amurrum *Muriq Tidnim*', 'the (Anti-)Amorite Wall "Holding Tidnum at a Distance"' – in the sixth chapter.

Michalowski also rebuts the statement that Amorites took over the power in Babylonia-to-be in the aftermath of the fall of the Ur III State. He refutes treating Išbi-Erra as an Amorite as a matter of fact: there are no indications of this; scholars incorrectly assign such ethnicity to this ruler because of his name (however it can be understood also on the grounds of Akkadian: 'Erra became sated') and a mention in the Royal Correspondence of Ur that he came from Mari (but according to Michalowski there is no evidence of the presence of Amorites there in the third millennium). Amorite dynasties appear in the southern Mesopotamia more than a hundred years after the fall of the Ur kings (with the possible exception of Naplanum taking over Larsa).

Indeed, Michalowski's opinion on the Amorites of the Ur III Period differs substantially from the scholarly mainstream. But, as for me, he is very convincing – I appreciate his accentuation that many theories do not take into account lacunas in our state of knowledge. I only hesitate to accept some of his more categorical remarks about them.

In the sixth chapter ('The Royal Letters in Their Historical Setting 2. Great Walls, Amorites, and Military History: The Puzur-Šulgi and Šarrum-bani Correspondence [Letters 13–14 and 19–20]') Michalowski analyses correspondence between King Šulgi or Šu-Sin and their commanders dealing with the construction of fortifications in the borderland. The main outcome of his study is proving that two lines of fortifications (not single walls!) usually equated by modern scholars ('Bad Mada' and 'Muriq Tidnim') are in fact two different structures, built for different purposes. His set of proofs stems from contemporary sources but also from parts of the Correspondence that he discusses – Michalowski thinks that the Correspondence should not be discarded but used with caution – some authentic information might be contained there. He argues that 'Bad Mada' had to be a kind of 'in depth-defense' (this term is borrowed from historians writing about the strategy of *Imperium Romanum*) – designed to enfeeble and make vulnerable hostile armies that were raiding the kingdom after breaking the first lines of defense. 'Muriq Tidnim', according to Michalowski, had to preserve and control the region of Diyala valley and be a base for royal armies attacking the Iranian plateau – its name was created to mask its real function.

The seventh chapter ('The Royal Letters in Their Historical Setting 3. Ur, Kazallu, and the Final Decades of the Ur III State [Letters 21–24]') presents the author's views on the collapse of the Ur III State and its rendering in the Correspondence. Michalowski tries to find political causes for the fall (the only certain reason we can think of on the basis of existing sources) thus providing a very interesting reconstruction of events: expansion towards the east consolidated enemies of the 'Sumerian' State making them able to defeat their antagonist. Moreover, those enemies, under the banner of Šimaški, began dismantling of the empire by taking Susiana in the third year of the reign of Ibbi-Sin and allowing Ešnunna to declare independence. New polities emerged after that – the most significant was the *casus* of Isin, whose ruler, Išbi-Erra, cut off Ibbi-Sin's access to northern parts of the state. The next years passed and rule of the last king of Ur was ended by the next Šimaškian invasion.

Michalowski indicates that parts of the Correspondence concerning the end of Ur empire, on which scholars base their reconstruction of events, are, probably with the exception of the Išbi-Erra letter to Ibbi-Sin (nr 21 in this edition), Old Babylonian fabrications. They are valueless for describing the fall of the Ur III

State, but valuable to study Mesopotamian perceptions of it. Moreover, as Michalowski assures, they are perfect material for exploring the historical reflexions of Old Babylonian literates and even (together with other letters from the corpus) their insights into the nature of literature and fiction.

The eighth chapter ('Afterword') is a summary of results of Michalowski's work. He states that the value of the Royal Correspondence of Ur for the reconstruction of events described in them is very low, because the majority of the letters are purely fictional; the rest probably had contained authentic material, but was brought under such thorough literary processing that separating the original layer from the later ones is impossible.

The second part of book ('The Correspondence of the Kings of Ur: Text Editions') contains transliterations of composite texts of the letters, each followed by English translation, extensive philological commentary and textual matrix. Michalowski has done enormous work – he collated them from almost all known exemplars, placed in various museums all over the world. Their photographs are situated in the DVD disc attached to the book. The pictures are of good quality; every tablet (or fragment of one) was photographed from a range of positions.

A reconstructed texts in the edition 'is a redactional fiction created for analytical, citation, and translation purposes that does not correspond to any actual version of the composition that existed in antiquity' (p. 237). Some exemplars of a letter are much different from each other and in this case they comprise a dual composite text. The transliteration used is a traditional one (with the addition of *ĝ*) – its task is only to render the signs used in writing the compositions, not to represent their phonological shape of utterances. Michalowski states, that '[...] such projects (aiming at creating a transliteration system suited to render the vocalisation accurately – K.S.) are ultimately futile and misguided because they create the illusion that the cuneiform system used to write Standard Old Babylonian Sumerian accurately represented the language as it was read aloud'; furthermore, '[...] there existed in antiquity a broad range of variation in the perception of Sumerian, subject to local and individual teacher/student idiosyncrasies and received traditions'.

Much improvement has been made in the understanding of many of the words used in the Correspondence in scholarship since the time of the previous edition. The English translation is not a mere formality: it shows how Michalowski understands the text; he interprets some fragments different than many scholars–the passages of text in question are italicised.

The philological commentary of the Correspondence is extensive and skillfully helps in understanding the used Sumerian words.

The really worthy elements of the edition are its textual matrixes: they enable acquaintance with all the discussed exemplars of the letters. Comparing various versions of a letter in regard to their provenience, time of composition and contents would be a very interesting study.

To sum up, the book as a whole is a true treasure in Sumerological circles. It provides an excellent edition of texts and thought-provoking commentary. Many ideas are truly revealing, though some of them undoubtedly controversial.

Kamil Salmanowicz
k.salmanowicz@student.uw.edu.pl

Institute of History
University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28
00-927 Warsaw, Poland