

PREFACE

Homer and Hesiod found it superfluous and boring to talk of “trees” (δρῦς) and “stones” (πέτρη); to them, there were more important topics to be discussed. They could not foresee that the “later people” (οἱ ἑσσόμενοι), after almost three thousand years, would have great difficulties in finding out exactly what trees and stones the gossip among the Ancients was about. The very word δρῦς — originally “tree”, later on “oak” — is already a matter of learned discussion.

This book will expand on these themes and will deal with various trees and stones mentioned in ancient Near Eastern texts. My investigations all started with the discovery that “the mountain of the god 𒌷𒍪𒀭”, mentioned in the Old Babylonian cuneiform texts, must be Jebel Sinjār, a mountain range in northern Iraq. We learn from those texts that this mountain range was covered with trees called *buṭumtum*. My question was, were they terebinths or pistachio trees? I had to answer this query before I could proceed. The trees turned out to be terebinths, but in the course of this botanical study so many ramifications arose, that some words had to be said about the trees that produced balm and opopanax.

Cuneiform texts of the scholarly tradition also call Jebel Sinjār a “mountain of millstones”. My next task was to find out exactly what materials millstones were made of and if those materials are actually found on the Jebel Sinjār. This investigation eventually showed that the ancient Mesopotamians made a clear distinction between upper and lower millstones, even reflected in their wisdom literature.

During the course of this work, full of unexpected adventures, I felt like a detective solving a mystery. Sometimes I strayed a bit too far from the main line of my investigation; but Dr. Watson was always there to tap me on the shoulder and to remind me of the real objective of my work of detection: the quest for Jebel Sinjār.

In order to make the results of this work digestible to the reader, the evidence is arranged in three parts, one on the terebinth and other trees, one on Jebel Sinjār, and one on millstones and the material from which they were made. There is no doubt that innumerable factual additions can be made to this book. I did not intend to contribute chapters to an exhaustive encyclopaedia of material culture, but I did try to shed some light on certain problems.

This book was written by an Assyriologist who tried, with his little Latin, less Greek, and no botany or geology, to go beyond the limits of his own field. He can only hope that he did not make too many false steps when venturing into the unknown.

Mr. K. van Lerberghe (Leuven, Belgium) was invited to write a chapter for this book. He has enriched it with an interesting and thorough study of a cylinder seal mentioning the words *buṭumtum*, “terebinth”, and *uṣûm*, “ebony(?)” (Chapter III, “An enigmatic cylinder seal mentioning the *uṣûm*-tree ...”). A hand-copy of the cuneiform text on the object discussed by him is published here with the kind permission of Mrs. Prof. Dr. D. Homès-Fredericq, Curator of the Ancient Near Eastern section of the Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis at Brussels.

A number of people have helped me in various ways. Mrs. Dr. B. Groneberg and Dr. K. Butz have made some observations that have opened new vistas to me (p. 86, 22). Prof. Dr. R. Borger, Dr. J.F. Borghouts, Mrs. St. Dalley, Mr. K.D. Jenner, Mr. G.M. Kelder, Mr. G. van der Kooij, Mr. Th.J.H. Krispijn, Dr. K. Maas, Mr. J. de Roos, Prof. Dr. K.R. Veenhof and Mr. C.B.F. Walker have provided me with bibliographical and other information. Mrs. Ruth Marcanti corrected the English of the original manuscript. The advice of Professor Veenhof in the editing of this book has been invaluable. It is a pleasure to thank them all for their help.

I am grateful that I could write this book in peace and good health, surrounded by well-stocked libraries.

Leiden

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