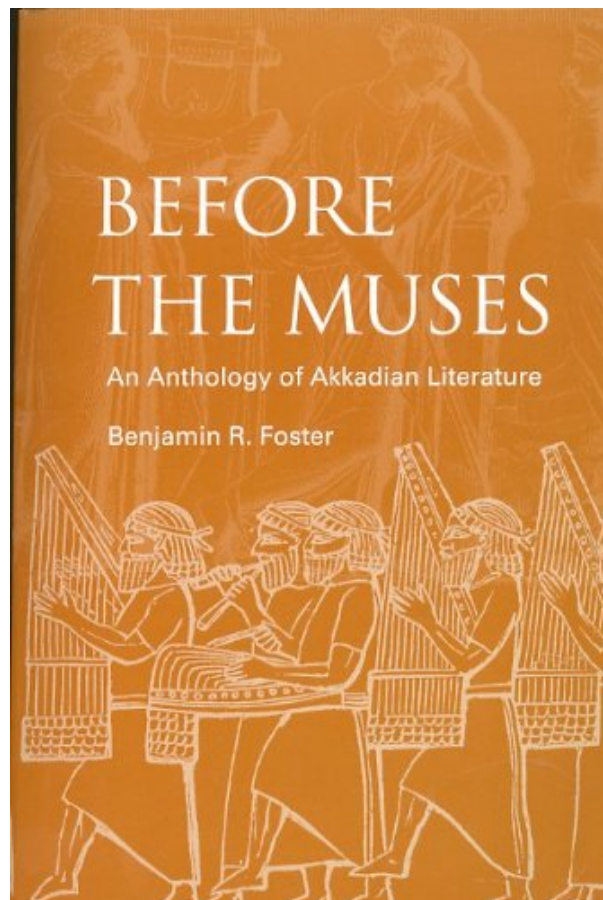
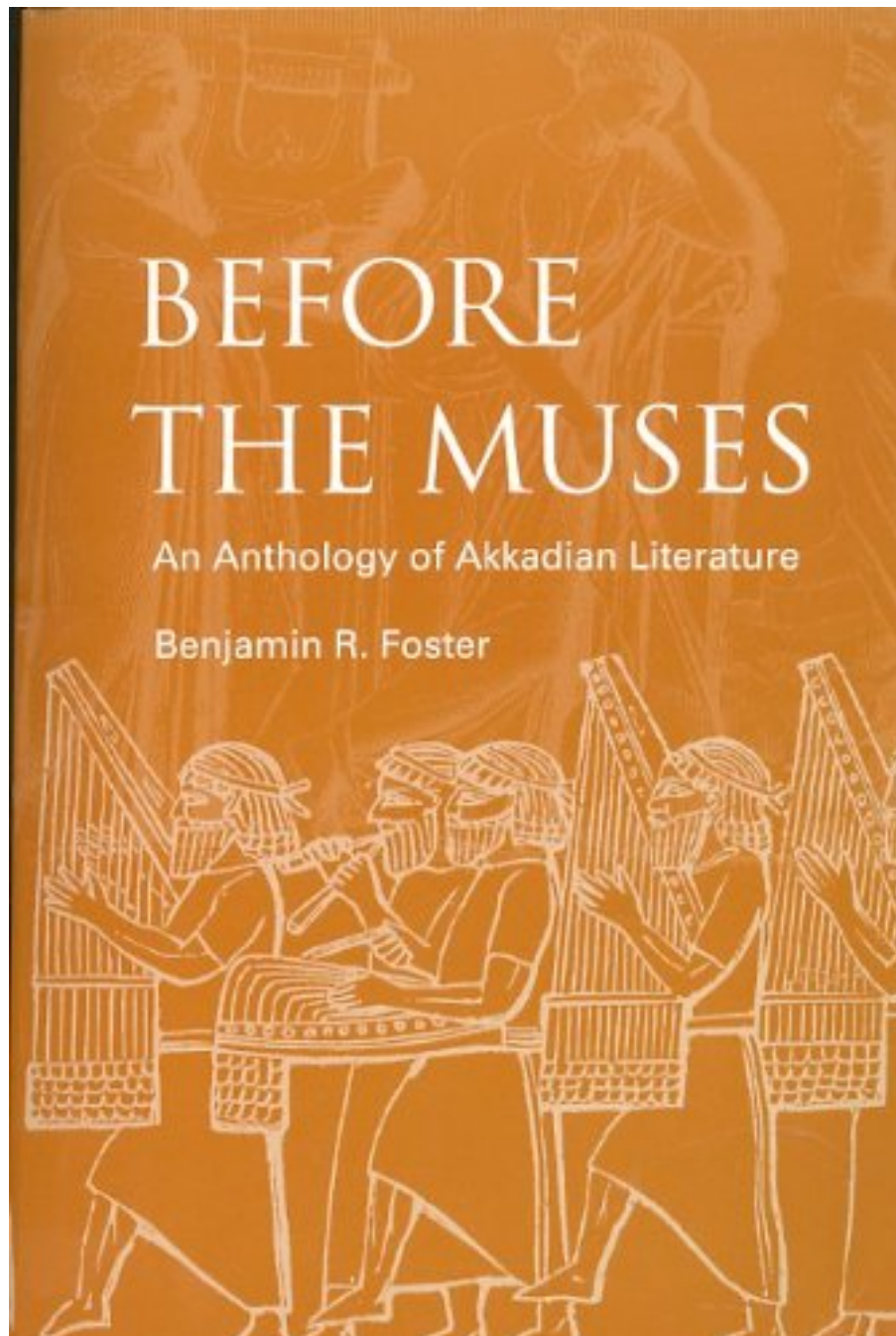


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- Sales Rank: #484494 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Univ Pr of Maryland
- Published on: 2005-01-30
- Released on: 2005-01-30
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 6.00" w x 2.25" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 1044 pages

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Ian Myles Slater on: Words from the Earth

By Ian M. Slater

A remarkable amount of the literature of ancient Mesopotamia, and some neighboring regions, has come down to us due to the fact that it was written on clay, or occasionally cut into stone, and has survived into modern times literally by the ton. Of course, most of the sheer volume seems to have been things like tax receipts, "account receivable," disbursement orders, contracts, business letters, and scribal exercises; cuneiform ("wedge-shape") writing seems to have been developed for bureaucratic, not literary, reasons. The oldest texts still seem to be those in Sumerian, a language with no known relatives, although there is increasing evidence that the script was being used to write a Semitic language earlier than had been thought.

In "Before the Muses" (1993; third edition, 2005), we have an anthology of literary texts in what has become known as Akkadian, covering the temporal, regional, and literary dialects of an East Semitic language which used to be referred to, awkwardly, as "Assyrian and Babylonian," after the two main geographic divisions. It runs from the "Archaic" phase (say, 2300 B.C.E.) to the Late Period, ending somewhere around 100 B.C.E. I've read enough other translations of some of the contents to feel safe in saying that Foster's English renderings of them are impressive for their literary quality. (His accuracy I pretty much have to take on faith.)

With the exception of "Gilgamesh," which Foster separately translated for Norton (and has several other recent translations in print, notably by Stephanie Dalley, in the Oxford World's Classics' "Myths from Mesopotamia," and by Andrew George, in Penguin Classics' "The Epic of Gilgamesh") the translator has crammed into this collection at least a substantial sample of the most important literary genres of the ancient

Assyrians and Babylonians. It includes mythic narratives, epics of heroes and historical kings, Wisdom texts, humorous stories, royal inscriptions, poetry, letters, and more; the harvest of over a century and a half of work in the field, and in museums and collections. Bit by bit the material has been identified, copied and photographed, the complex script transliterated, and, finally, the words have been rendered into modern languages.

Alas, I have to agree with an earlier reviewer who complained about the binding -- at over a thousand pages, it is an overstuffed paperback which is sure to crack its spine in ordinary use. It is also awkward to handle, both in terms of weight on the hands or wrists, especially for those with joint problems, and in preventing it from breaking in two while being read. Just letting the open book lie flat also tends to stress the binding.

On the other hand, a hardcover edition of "Before the Muses," or one in two volumes, like its first edition, although easier to handle, would be at a higher price; which, although I know is quite reasonable by present standards, as it is, still gives me sticker-shock. (A sign of how long I have been buying books, I suppose.)

For those who can't afford it, or don't want to invest that much in something unfamiliar, the abridged edition of 1995, "From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia," is still available, at a more down-to-earth price. (This could be counted as a second edition plus-or-minus; it contains some material not included in the first edition, as well as corrections incorporated from the official second edition....) Frankly, though, if you are really interested in ancient non-Western literatures, or the background of the Bible, or Middle Eastern History (among other topics), my advice is to go ahead with the full version if you can; otherwise you might wind up buying both. And, in an area of scholarship that is still developing, a later edition of the same translation is usually the better choice. (Is anyone else thinking 'e-book'?)

And, besides being overstuffed with regards to the binding, the full edition is stuffed full of both otherwise readily available material (like a translation of the Babylonian Creation Epic, "Enuma Elish," and the other myths and mythological epics included in Dalley's volume) and masses of hymns, prayers, incantations, and secular literature. Much of it previously was available in English only in technical journals, or not at all. Some of the translations were from early in the twentieth century, and of dubious reliability. (Those who read German or French have had comparable, if less inclusive, volumes available for years; back in the 1980s and early 1990s, I struggled with those, as well as running down English translations in a large University library.)

[It somewhat belatedly occurred to me that I might as well identify the French and German volumes, for those who are curious, and read one or both with more ease than I ever achieved. The French translation is M.-J. Seux. "Hymnes et prières aux dieux de Babylonie et d'assyrie" published in 1978. W. von Soden contributed the second part of "Sumerische und Akkadische Hymnen und Gebete" published in 1953 (Adam Falkenstein having translated the Sumerian texts). There is considerable overlap between these two collections, given that both are made up of the same types of documents. Something over half of von Soden's selections are included by Foster; and, if 20-year-old memories are accurate, about the same is true of Seux's. Note that although von Soden is highly thought of, his work has aged during a continuing expansion of modern knowledge of the ancient language.]

13 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

An absolutely magnificent anthology.

By Boris S

A great translation for both experts and literature lovers like me, Foster provides citations and references on almost every page, for those interested in broadening their knowledge on the subject. My only complaint about specifically this edition of the book is that it's printed paperback, which is horrible, considering its

more than 1000 pages long. I hope to see a hardcover version in the future.

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

a very lovely collection

By A. Vjunas

I am not a specialist of Akkadian studies, and bought this book merely out of interest. This very thick book (over 1000 pages) covers the different periods of the Akkadian history, from Old Akkadian (Archaic period) to the Late period, offering a very wide selection of texts (hymns, letters, incantations, love and mythological poems, legends, etc.). There is also a fairly lengthy introduction with numerous references to other literature, which will surely benefit not only amateur, but also professional students of the field.

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