



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

## **Confusion of tongues – A new digital tool for studying Babylon’s multi-ethnic society**

### **Applicants**

<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Discipline</b>
Prof. dr. Caroline Waerzeggers	Leiden University, Institute of Area Studies
Dr. Alwin Kloekhorst	Leiden University, Centre of Linguistics
Dr. Margaretha Folmer	Leiden University, Institute of Area Studies
Dr. Melanie Gross	Leiden University, Institute of Area Studies

### **Project description**

The story in Genesis about the confusion of tongues offers a famous literary reflection on Babylon’s multilingual society. It is less well-known that a large historical dataset survives that enables us to study the languages that were spoken in Babylon at the time when the Judeans experienced this multi-ethnic society. This dataset derives from cuneiform tablets written in the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Albeit recorded in Babylonian (and therefore in essence monolingual), these texts contain the names of thousands of individuals, many linguistically non-Babylonian. While not every person with a non-Babylonian name will have spoken the language represented by his or her name, there is a significant correlation between the linguistic affiliation of a name and the ethnic origins of its bearer. Persian names, e.g., were almost entirely restricted to persons of Persian descent; people bearing Carian names were mercenaries originating from south-western Anatolia; etc.

The rich onomastic data from this corpus is sparsely studied so far. The data is difficult to access because of the fragmented nature of text edition in the field of Assyriology. Moreover, researchers require advanced knowledge of a variety of languages (Anatolian, Persian, Egyptian, West-Semitic, Babylonian, Greek...) in order to interpret the multilingual onomastic material correctly.

This project proposes to bring two trainees together under the supervision of linguists and Assyriologists at Leiden’s Faculty of the Humanities, to tackle these obstacles in a sustainable way. Our aim is two-fold:

- First, our trainees will make the multilingual onomastic data from Babylonia publicly available by developing a digital research tool integrated in the open access database “prosobab” (<https://prosobab.leidenuniv.nl/>).
- Second, they will analyse the distribution of non-Babylonian names in the corpus and study the modalities of Babylonia’s multi-ethnic society. This will result in a poster presentation at the

Assyriological conference “Cultural contacts in the Ancient Near East” in Mainz and Frankfurt in mid-2020.

### **Research Trainee Profile**

In view of the linguistic complexity of the onomastic materials, we will be looking for students with advanced knowledge of, preferably, more than one ancient language or language family. The most important languages to be considered are: Babylonian, Anatolian languages (such as Carian and Lycian), West Semitic languages (such as Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic), Egyptian, Persian, and Elamite. Leiden University boasts several programs where students are trained in these languages to a high level of specialization: BA or (Res)MA Linguistics, BA Ancient Near Eastern Studies, (Res)MA Classics and Ancient Civilizations, (Res)MA Middle Eastern Studies. The applicants are all affiliated to one or more of these programs.

The traineeships are intended for students who are curious about the socio-linguistic history of the ancient Near East and who want to make a sustainable contribution to the development of a digital research tool in order to advance this field of study.

### **Collaboration**

The project will establish a new collaboration between two areas of expertise at Leiden University’s Faculty of the Humanities: linguistics and Assyriology.

- Caroline Waerzeggers and Melanie Gross (LIAS) are directors of the open access database “Prosobab: Prosopography of Babylonia 620-300 BCE” (part of the ERC-funded project Persia & Babylonia). The focus of this database is on prosopography, hence, on the biographies of individuals. As the database deals with *named* individuals, it also contains a wealth of onomastic materials but this component is not developed because it goes over and beyond the socio-historical interests of the ERC project Persia & Babylonia. The size and complexity of the onomastic materials require dedicated attention of specialists from linguistics.
- Alwin Kloekhorst is an expert in Indo-European historical linguistics at LUCL. In a recent monograph he used a large corpus of onomastic materials contained in Old Assyrian cuneiform texts to study the oldest strata of Anatolian Indo-European. The methodology developed in this monograph will be adapted for the “Confusion of Tongues” project. Moreover, a substantial share of non-Babylonian names recorded in our corpus derives from Anatolian languages.
- Margaretha Folmer is an expert in Semitic linguistics at LIAS. Her expertise in the Aramaic language will be essential to the “Confusion of Tongues” project, as the majority of non-Babylonian names derive from the West Semitic sphere.

The day-to-day supervision of the research trainees will be executed by Melanie Gross who is acting director of the prosobab database.

### **Deliverables**

In a first phase of the project, we will technically expand the relational database “prosobab” in order to provide the public user with a sophisticated instrument to look into personal names of the Late Babylonian material. This expansion will consist of adding two fields to the name-tables, enabling the linguistic determination of the name as well as free field for typing in the translation of the name (given the challenges involved in determining the linguistic affiliation of names rendered in non-alphabetic scripts, a translation may not always be feasible). The connection to prosobab will make sure that the information is integrated with all other information that is already collected for each individual (e.g. gender, title, activity etc.). This will enable the user to make complex searches of socio-historical information, e.g. calling up all bearers of a Hebrew name who possessed real estate in Babylon, or, all names containing the element “brother” in any language, etc.

In the second phase of the project, the trainees will analyse the distribution of non-Babylonian names in the corpus and study the modalities of Babylonia’s multi-ethnic society as revealed by these distribution patterns. The results will be presented in an academic poster at the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (RAI) in

Mainz and Frankfurt on the theme of “Cultural Contact – Cultures of Contact”. They will also develop a video tutorial, to be posted on youtube. The video will assist users of prosobab when exploring the onomastic materials. (For an example of one of these tutorials, see [https://youtu.be/Xwm\\_sYKyB7I](https://youtu.be/Xwm_sYKyB7I))

### **Planning**

1. Week 1: (1) Joint session with supervisors: introduction to “prosobab” and discussion of work plan  
(2) Technical development of the database (c. 5–6 hours of programming; c. 500,00 incl.): create name fields and produce an interconnected name list – linked to the respective individuals.
2. Week 2-8 Identify and tag Babylonian names
3. Week 9-16 Identify the linguistic affiliation of non-Babylonian names and tag accordingly
4. Week 17-20 Analyse the distribution of non-Babylonian names according to linguistic origin
5. Week 21-22 Design poster for RAI in Mainz
7. Week 23-26 Develop video tutorial
8. Week 27-28 Publish video tutorial and announce new component of prosobab

### **Finances**

We will require c. 500 euros to develop the database in order to link the name materials to attested individuals.

### **Student Application**

Students who are interested in a traineeship are invited to send their CV and a letter explaining their motivation for this project, to [c.waerzeggers@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:c.waerzeggers@hum.leidenuniv.nl).