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SUMERIAN AND SEMITIC WRITING IN MOST ANCIENT SYRO-MESOPOTAMIA

Jerrold S. COOPER — Baltimore

Introduction

The discovery of mid-third millennium tablets at Tell Beydar was a stunning confirmation of what had been an unavoidable assumption: Ebla, "la grande surprise de l'histoire du Proche-Orient ancien," as Dietz Edzard has aptly labelled it (EDZARD, 1994), was just the tip of the iceberg (to borrow another phrase from Edzard). Syro-Mesopotamia is chock-full of mid-third millennium archives from Ebla all the way to Nineveh; that, despite the intensive archaeological investigations of the last two decades, only one other has been found, is testimony to the role played by sheer luck in archeological fieldwork.

Perhaps Edzard was not quite correct in calling Ebla "the great surprise of ancient Near Eastern history," for there has been another great surprise of equal importance in the last twenty years, a surprise that was not the result of a sudden discovery, but rather emerged from the reinterpretation of old data in the light of new, and the construction of sophisticated hypotheses by a number of archaeologists, many of whom are also "new". This other great surprise has become known as the "Uruk Expansion" (see, e.g., ALGAZE, 1993), a moment in the late Uruk period when — dare I say — Sumerians fanned out across Syro-Mesopotamia and Susiana, and Sumerian influence was felt as far east as Tepe Sialk, and as far west as Egypt, albeit in a more attenuated if nonetheless significant fashion (MOOREY, 1987; Pittman, 1996).

If I hesitate to call the inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia Sumerians, it is because I am all too aware that some very knowledgeable colleagues find few indications of the Sumerian language in the archaic tablets from Uruk and Jemdet Nasr; especially distressing is the dearth of recognizable Sumerian personal names. Yet I believe there is very good evidence that the language of the inventors of cuneiform writing was Sumerian (e.g. KRISPIN, 1993; STEINKELLER, 1995, 695; pace MICHALOWSKI, 1987,

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1 I would like to thank my colleague, Glenn Schwartz, for his help in clarifying both my manuscript and my thinking.
and see no reason to separate these people from the inhabitants of southern Babylonia of the immediately preceding centuries who were the perpetrators of the Uruk Expansion.

I hesitate to use the label Sumerian, too, because we live in a confused age, a time when on the one hand we are urged to celebrate cultural diversity, but on the other hand it is only with the utmost delicacy that we can discuss ethno-linguistic difference in antiquity. You will search in vain for even a mention of Sumerians or Semites in a recent monograph on the Uruk Expansion; one colleague now refers to Sumerian culture as "metaphor," and it has even been suggested that Sumerian was a pidgin used as a means of communication by the mélange of ethno-linguistic groups living in Babylonia in the early third millennium (HÖVROP, 1992). The once hotly debated question of Sumerian origins has all but disappeared from discussions of Mesopotamian prehistory. Halévy must be smiling in his grave!

But there are exceptions to this reluctance to speak of ethnicity, and they are not all salutory. A 1993 volume on Akkad (LIVERANI, 1993) contains some contributions in which Sumerians are characterized as democratic, law-abiding, and phlegmatic, whereas Semites are hot-blooded, authoritarian, aristocratic and tribal. Despite disclaimers by the authors to the effect that they are not speaking of innate differences, but rather of cultural differences, these stereotypes are very much in the line of what one could have read in history books at the beginning of the century. More importantly, almost none of these purported cultural differences holds up when the evidence given for them is carefully examined, suggesting that

2 Despite the technical anachronism, I will use "Babylonia" for southern Mesopotamia throughout.

3 A full discussion of the cultural differences set forth by STEINKELLER, 1993 and WESTENHOLZ, 1993, must be undertaken elsewhere. An example from each will suffice for my purposes here. STEINKELLER, 1993, 120 characterizes southern (= Sumerian) kingship as "weak" and of "a distinct theocratic character," and northern (= Semitic) as "strong, authoritarian and predominantly secular." The Sumerian city-state was "the private property of an extended divine family" ruled "by an official called ensik, whose office combined both secular and religious duties." This system "made any form of territorial expansion... exceedingly difficult; any notion of unification was theoretically unthinkable" (116f.). But in fact, the only rulers who call themselves ensi in the south in ED II B are the rulers of Lagash. The rulers of Umma, Ur and Uruk call themselves lugal, and both territorial expansion and unification were easily accomplished by appeal to the gods: either the land you wanted really belonged to your own city's god (as in the Lagash-Umma dispute), or the gods had joined your city-state to another (as in Ur's absorption of Ur under Lagalkigigududu). Whereas Steinkeller is certainly correct to see the title King of Kish as originating in a hegemonic northern state in ED II A and earlier, he is wrong to deny that southern kings who took that title (Meskalamdug and Mesanepada of the authors, consciously or not, have discovered the differences they were prepared to find.

4 I will confess, then, my belief in the existence of the Sumerians, a Sumerian-speaking population in early third millennium Babylonia, as well as in the Semites, who emerge clearly in the middle of the third millennium as a population at home in Babylonia as well as throughout Syro-Mesopotamia. There must have been cultural differences between Sumerians and Semites, too, though probably not of those which have been postulated. And the differences between the two groups were not necessarily more important historically than the differences within each group.

Ur, Lagalkigigududu of Ur and Ur; Eannatum of Lagash) did so because they had temporary hegemony over the north. By asserting that the title simply "described a particular form of kingship, namely, an autocratic and hegemonistic type that... the southerners associated with the Kishite kingdom" (120), he too blithely minimizes the claim to have defeated Kish and Akkad made by Eannatum (118 n. 20), the only one of the southern Kings of Kish to leave lengthy inscriptions that could help us understand what the title meant in the south. Steinkeller's presumption also leaves us wondering why Lagalzagesi, who exercised an autocratic hegemony over the entire south, but probably did not rule at all in the north, did not take the title King of Kish. If we accept, rather, that the title King of Kish was a claim to hegemony over (parts of) the south, then it becomes clear why Eannatum, who claimed to have defeated Kish and Akkad, called himself King of Kish, while Lagalzagesi, whose realm was confined to Sumer, did not. And just as Steinkeller exaggerates the disunity of the south, his vision of northern unity under Kish is too grandiose, that he refers to Mari (!) as a "secondary power-center."

WESTENHOLZ, 1993, who draws far-reaching conclusions about the mentality of Sumerians ("a people of law and order; everything... had its rightful place, duty and purpose") and Akkadians ("well-developed sense of drama... strong temperamental outbursts... a matter of course") from a few Old Akkadian letters, contrasts Sumerian and Akkadian kingship as follows (164): "Sargon and especially Naram-Sin were considered to be more than ordinary mortals by many of their fellow Akkadians. Hero-worship is probably the best description of their attitude. Hardly anything of that sort is known among the Sumerians." Yet long before Sargon, Eannatum of Lagash is described as a nine-foot-tall giant, shaved, born and sacked by gods! And considering the serpents, scorpions, lions and raging tempests that populate early Sumerian incantations, what are we to make of Westenholz's claim that "Sumerian incantations tend to be lyrical orations to natural phenomena, while the Akkadian ones... are filled with fire and brimstone" (163)?

While I concur with Nesson, 1993, 97, that the question of Sumerio-Akkadian cultural difference "needs to be reopened," I think that Kraus's conclusion, doubted by Nissen (n. 16), that political conflict in Babylonia was not along ethnic lines, a conclusion born out by my own studies and those of others (cf. COOPER, 1983b, 9ff. and 30ff.), remains correct, and is not simply a product of "the idealistic mood of the 50s and 60s." While ethnic differences surely had some "impact on the political and social situation," all available evidence suggests that the major cleavages in third millennium Babylonia were not along ethno-linguistic lines.

5 Note in this regard A. Westenholz's examination of Parsumagian Semitic personal names (in AKH, Ebalite Personal Names), where he shows that Semitic theophoric names in Babylonia are overwhelmingly formed with Limm and Ishtar, whereas contemporary
Early Semitic Writing

Returning now to the Uruk Expansion and the presence of Sumerians in Syro-Mesopotamia, it is ironic indeed that the influx of goods from the periphery into Babylonia during this Expansion must have made an important contribution to the increasingly complex social and political structure that led to the invention of writing, but that the Expansion itself seems to have collapsed just prior to writing’s emergence. I fully subscribe to Steinkeller’s hypothesis that this retrenchment is somehow connected with a Semitic presence in Syro-Mesopotamia that included northern Babylonia by sometime in the early third millennium. But right at the beginning of the third millennium, northern Babylonia was within the area of Sumerian retrenchment; the archaic cuneiform tablets that are noticeably missing in Syro-Mesopotamia appear in quantity at Jemdet Nasr near Kish. Sometime during ED I Kish became the regional center of northern Babylonia, and the hegemony of Kish at times encompassed much of southern Babylonia as well. The earliest attested king of Kish, Mebaragesi, has a name that suggests that Sumerian, or at least Sumerian tradition, was alive and well at Kish, but Semitization there must have already been underway.

The situation in northern Babylonia becomes more clear in ED IIIa, beginning ca. 2600 BC, when texts become plentiful with the Fara tablets and the slightly later tablets from Abu Salabikh. There are Semitic names attested at Fara, in the northern part of Babylonia, but even more, it seems, at Abu Salabikh in the southern part of northern Babylonia, the site which has yielded the earliest tablets written in Semitic. If Sumerian names, as well as Semitic names at Ebla, are formed with many different divine names. See also Di Vizio, 1993.

In Sumer, Lagash seems isolated from the rest of Sumer by its royal titulary (see the preceding note) and probably its political organization (cf. Cooper, 1983, 9). Lagash was conspicuously omitted from the Sumerian King List, and when Gilgamesh asks Enkidu about how various population groups fare in the Netherworld, those groups are 1) people from Girsu (the main city of the state of Lagash), 2) Amorites, and 3) Sumerians and Akkadians. (UET 6 58 c.)

Steinkeller, 1993, 115. Note the important discussion there on pp. 112f., with notes 8 and 9, of Subur, Sumer, and gi-gi in ur-gi, duanu-gi, eume-gi, and ki-en-gi. The understanding of gi-gi as “native, local” rather than “princely, noble” is brilliant, but doesn’t solve the problem of ki-en-gi, since the initial ig of gi-gi is not Ig. His suggestion that the semitic designation Sumer for southern Babylonia grew out of the initial encounter between Semites and Sumerians in northern Mesopotamia, which the Sumerians called Subur, leading to the former calling the latter Subur > Sumer, a name that the Semites then applied to the southern Babylonian homeland of the Sumerians as well, is seductive, but perhaps too clever. In any case, as Steinkeller notes, Subur and Sumer are quite distinct in the earliest reference to the latter in ARET 5 7 xii 1 (also ix 5; cf. Kressmann, 1992, 89f.; Subur ab su-ur-rām ab tilman). We had more texts from the area of Kish itself at this time, Semitic names would certainly be preponderant. At the beginning of this period, Mesalim, king of Kish, for a time ruled over an area that included Adab, Umma and Lagash, and the Fara texts have been plausibly interpreted as indicating the existence of a league of Sumerian cities, perhaps more than just a league, united against a common threat but on good terms with Kish. Pomponio and Viscicato suggest that this threat was Ur — not a member of the league — during the period of the kings of the royal tombs (Pomponio, Viscicato, 1994, 19f.; Viscicato, 1995, 144-146). The success of Ur, signalled by Mekalamud and Mesanepepa using the title King of Kish, would have both destroyed the unity of the Sumerian league and ended whatever authority Kish exercised in the south, ushering in the period of southern disunity that we know so well from ED IIIb sources.

For the date of Mesalim, see Peraza et al., 1992, 105f.

For Mesalim’s inscriptions, see Cooper, 1986, Kii 3. There is no basis to claim that Mesalim was merely a respected third party called in to arbitrate between Lagash and Umma. Mesalim’s role should be compared to the role of Utnepal, the hegemonic king of Uruk, in fixing the boundary between Lagash and Ur 500 years later (Frayne, 1993, 2.13.6.1-3). On his mace-head dedicated at Girsu, Mesalim calls himself the “temple builder of Ningirsu,” hardly an epithet that would be used by anyone who did not have some degree control Lagash politically. It is tempting to see the use by independent rulers of Lagash of the title ensi, which outside of Lagash in ED IIIb and under the Sargonic and Ur III rulers means “governor, subordinate local ruler” (cf. Cooper, 1983a, 9 n. 9), as a reflex of the hegemony of Kish, and interpret the title ensi-GAR of the ED IIIa rulers of Adab and Saruppak as similarly reflecting the hegemony of Kish or its memory. Likewise, the use of lalakku < ensi as a royal title at Assur and Eshnuna in the early second millennium is a reflex of Ur III hegemony. Cf. the similar use of sakkanuzakku, “military governor” in the Old Akkadian and Ur III periods, as the title of independent rulers, especially at Mari and Der.

With Nissen, 1993, and elsewhere, I see no reason to think that the disunity of Sumer in ED III, in itself not as extreme as it is sometimes portrayed (see Cooper, 1983a, 8f.), characterized ED as a whole. The argument of Steinkeller, 1993, that Sumerian land tenure and management patterns are incompatible with centralized rule does not follow. Why should temple control of land inhibit strong secular authority, when the temples themselves, according to all our evidence, were under the control of secular rulers? And certainly the southern pattern of rulers, high officials and their families buying up privately held land, a pattern that Steinkeller stresses, is not so different from the northern pattern of large landholding by royal families and local aristocracy.

Steinkeller’s insistence that early Sumer was bereft of political superstructure leads him to the strange conclusion that the Uruk Expansion was something like the Old Assyrian trading colonies. But the wealth of Assyria as a city depended on trade, whereas Babylonia was the breadbasket of the Near East. The analogy is not at all apt. He supports his reconstruction by appealing to the Jemdet Nasr city sealing and the city sealings from later Ur (cf. Mathews, 1993), but these could as well be used as evidence for a political entity like the “union of free (Sumerian) cities” postulated for ED IIIa by Pomponio and Viscicato, 1994, 14; cf. Viscicato, 1995. But even Pomponio and Viscicato, in the phrase “union
It is in northern Babylonia in ED IIIa, where Sumerian bureaucratic practice had been in place since the beginning of the millennium, that Semitic writing began. As Steinkeller has put it, "the development which occurred within greater Mesopotamia during the third millennium would, to a large extent, be the result of an interaction between two distinct traditions: the southern, or Sumerian tradition, and the northern, or Syrian tradition, with northern Babylonia being the locus of their direct contact" (Steinkeller, 1993, 127). However, the beginnings of Semitic writing in the area of Kish cannot be observed directly, but must be reconstructed based on evidence to the south, at Fara and Abu Salabikh, and from Syro-Mesopotamia to the northwest.

The mixture of Sumerograms and phonetic writing used at Ebla is familiar to cuneiformists, but the specific ways in which Sumerograms — and, as it turned out, Semitograms — and syllabograms were juxtaposed to write texts was very different from the system for writing Old Akkadian that was perfected in Sargonide Babylonia and employed with little essential change for the next two millennia. To be sure, some of the peculiarities of the orthography used at Ebla had left traces in Old Akkadian, especially in the royal inscriptions. As Gelb put it so presciently long before the discoveries at Ebla, "Only those Sumerian logograms are used in Old Akkadian which represent nouns... The use of Sumerograms to express verbs, contrary to the standard procedure... may reflect the existence of two different systems of cuneiform writing" (Gelb, 1961 20f.; cf. Krebernik, 1985, 59). To continue with the example of using Sumerograms to write verbs, whereas cuneiformists could be very tolerant towards the logographic writing of nouns in letters, the fierce avoidance of phonetically written verbs in the emna-texts ("letters") at Ebla seems perverse when considered in terms of the later system with which we are so familiar. The great irony is that verbs were the very first Semitic elements ever written phonetically; surely Semitic personal names, with their finite verbal predicates, found their way into Sumerian documents long before anyone thought of writing actual texts in Semitic.

The system for writing Semitic used at Ebla prefers phonetic writing for proper names and for linguistic elements other than nouns and verbs. Numerous exceptions in texts and the bilingual vocabularies attest that of free (?) Sumerian cities" (just slightly stronger than Jacobson's earlier Kengir League), reveal the scholarly discomfort with the notion of an early unified Sumerian state, a discomfort which derives from the relative disunity apparent in ED IIIb. The evidence of the city sealings and the Fara hexapolis could well be signs of such a Sumerian state, if such a state existed.

the scribes there could very well write nouns and verbs phonetically, but the system in place neither required nor encouraged it. This heavily logographic orthography certainly represents the earliest conventions for writing Semitic that were developed in northern Babylonia. But whereas Sumerograms were to remain a feature of subsequent Akkadian orthography, other features of early Semitic writing, such as Semitograms, the duplication and triplication of Sumerograms to indicate plurality, the use of Semitic verbal prefixes to indicate that a logogram should be interpreted as a finite Semitic verb, rebus writings like NIG.SIG for nēṣīku "prince," and the use of Sumerian suffixes to indicate Akkadian case endings (Krebernik, 1992, 65f., 70f.), do not become part of the system as we know it from the Old Akkadian period on. We are witness here to a period of experimentation that is typical of the early phase of many writing systems.

If it seems odd to us that the Semites of Syro-Mesopotamia did not write phonetically with greater frequency when the potential to do so existed, we have to remember two things. First, the writing system which they were adapting for their own use, Sumerian of ED IIIa, was heavily logographic. There are few phonetic elements in the administrative documents from Fara and Abu Salabikh, and the so-called "nuclear" writing in the Sumerian literary texts from those sites (cf. Krecher, 1992) indicates grammatical affixes without fully expressing them. There were no models that would have suggested that Semitic writing should be fully syllabic.

Secondly, all scripts, including Sumerian, have phonetic elements from the very beginning, and all reach a stage where pure phonetic writing would be theoretically possible. Yet no logo-phonetic\(^{10}\) writing system has ever evolved into a purely phonetic system. The force of tradition, no doubt, has something to do with it, but there are practical advantages to logographic writing that our alphabeticocentric culture doesn't understand or appreciate. The early eighth century A.D. Japanese scribe Yosumaro, commissioned to transcribe oral Japanese mythological and historical traditions, put it this way: "If written entirely in characters used for their meanings" — that is, logograms — "the words do not correspond to the sense;" — that is, without grammatical affixes and phonetic indicators, it is difficult to render Japanese in Chinese logograms — "if written completely in characters used for their sound value, the text becomes much longer. For this reason, in some cases passages have been written by

\(^{10}\) Avoiding Gelb's "logo-syllabic" (Grébè, 1963) so as to include Egyptian, which I would not classify (as Gelb did) as syllabic.
means of characters employed sometimes for their sound value and sometimes for their meaning, while in other cases the meanings only have been employed" (Seeley, 1991, 43f.). We might add that brevity is not the only virtue of logograms. They can be less ambiguous than syllabic writing, and they make texts much easier to scan (Cooper, 1996, 52f.). Miguel Civil has already brought to bear on early Semitic writing the example of the adaptation of Chinese to write Japanese (Civil, 1984, 75f.), because, as he noted, it is one of the few examples of a logographic writing system adapted to write another language (perhaps, too, he was thinking of the Sumerian t²š interchange!). The result, as we have seen, was much like the result in Akkadian: a mixed logo-syllabic system. The classical Japanese writing system in use today combines Chinese logograms, which can indicate either Chinese loan words in Japanese or Japanese words, and two phonetic syllabaries used to write grammatical affixes and particles, glosse difficult logograms, and write foreign words. The earliest writing in Japan, however, was in the Chinese language, which, as Civil pointed out, could be read as Chinese or read in Japanese. Due to the considerable differences between Chinese and Japanese grammar, reading in Japanese involved rearranging the order of the characters and adding grammatical particles. Soon, some texts were written with the characters already in Japanese syntactic order, and with some phonetic representation of Japanese elements. By the eighth century, whole poems were written in phonetically rendered Japanese, and by the tenth century extended sequences of Japanese prose could be written phonetically. But then, during the Heian period, the number of Chinese loanwords in Japanese increased. These loanwords could be better expressed with Chinese characters, and during this same period there was an increase in the knowledge of Chinese among the literate public. For these reasons, the amount of phoneticism in Japanese writing actually decreased. The same trend repeated itself in the Edo period, and hence the mixed logo-syllabic Japanese writing system of today (Seeley, 1991). Similar fluctuations can be charted for Akkadian orthography, with the percentage of logographic orthography varying chronologically, regionally and by text type; the highest rate of logography occurs in late scientific texts (cf. Civil, 1973, 46).

The academic manuals and literary texts found at Ebla point back to the northern Babylonian origin of the writing system. Michalowski has suggested that even the unilingual and bilingual lexical lists that have no Babylonian duplicates are not local originals (Michalowski, 1987, 169), but the real question is rather: Even if the bilingual lexical lists are the

creation of the scribes of Ebla, as Archi persuasively argues (Archi, 1992), what is the target language into which the Sumerian was translated? It ought to be the Semitic language that they learned to write, which should be, for want of a better term, written north Babylonian Semitic. It may well be that Michalowski’s diglossia model is correct for the mid-third millennium: a written Babylonian-based Semitic “high language” with local variations was used and understood throughout Syro-Mesopotamia, and local spoken Semitic dialects arrayed along a linguistic continuum stretching from Babylonia across upper Mesopotamia to Ebla, varying from the written “high language” to greater or lesser degrees. What is important is that because Semitic writing was done with a writing system conceived in Babylonia, the Semitic language of Babylonia became the standard for Semitic writing, and this standard endured for a more than a thousand years, long after the Semitic languages of much of Syro-Mesopotamia had diverged markedly from the Semitic Akkadian language of Babylonia (see Michalowski, 1987, 174). Connected texts in those other Semitic languages were never written in syllabic cuneiform\textsuperscript{11}, even though it would have been simple to do so.

The various local manifestations of Syro-Mesopotamian Semitic cuneiform writing persisted at Ebla and Mari, and surely elsewhere\textsuperscript{12}, as the Shakkanaqku inscriptions and documents from Mari and the Ibbit-Lim inscription from Ebla demonstrate (Geiß, 1992), through the Middle Bronze and on into Late Bronze. Because the language of Babylon was the standard, the local dialects of written Akkadian were periodically reformed to conform, more or less, to that standard. The only documented example we have of such a reform is at Mari, where in one stroke the old Shakkanaqku conventions of writing were replaced by those current in contemporary Babylonia (Durand, 1985, 160ff.; 1992, 121ff.). As Michalowski has pointed out, it should make us feel very insecure, indeed, about our ability to reconstruct spoken language from the written norm, if the same can be called Iggid-Lim on Monday, but Yagidd-Lim on Tuesday (Michalowski, 1987, 124ff.).

No doubt not all readjustments of local systems were as sudden or drastic. We might imagine Babylonian scribes making the rounds like itinerant artisans, or sent as part of a Babylonian delegation to a Syro-Mesopotamian

\textsuperscript{11} With the exception of the Aššur inscription from Uruk (Dilmun, 1988), Durand, 1992, 125, implies that there is an unpublished Mari text in Amorite ("une petite tablette [M. 9777] en langue clairement sémitique, quoique non akkadienne").

\textsuperscript{12} Durand, 1992, 126, suggests that Old Assyrian be seen as just one more local Syro-Mesopotamian Akkadian dialect.
court. There will always have been a time lag. As W. Moran writes about the Late Bronze situation,

But if the cuneiform culture of the provinces was to some extent up-to-date, it was not infrequently, as is usually the way with provinces, also behind the times. This is true of the writing: a logogram that had been replaced by another logogram centuries before in the scribal schools of Babylonia survives in the provincial culture; an exercise once part of the scribal training but long abandoned in Babylonia is still part of the provincial curriculum; old orthographies are retained, sometimes mixed together with the modern ones; and so on. In the language, too, one finds a similar quaint and archaic quality. The provincial scribes... may use old common or dialectal forms that had otherwise disappeared centuries before

This time lag helps us to understand why the tablets from Ebla, which almost everyone now dates to the end of ED IIIb, that is, late Presargonian, remind us so much of the earlier Babylonian tablets of ED IIIa from Farā and Abu Salabikh.

Sumerian Writing and Semitic Writing

Most ancient writing systems have left very unrepresentative remains of the range of uses to which writing was put. We must study Shang China through its oracle bones and bronzes, but have none of the documents on more fragile materials like textiles and wood that must have comprised the bulk of Shang documentation. Only a handful of the thousands of Maya bark-paper codices survived the book burning of Spanish missionaries and the ravages of the tropical climate. And I am persuaded that Mycenaean Greek literature was written on perishable papyrus or leather; those Linear B administrative tablets are simply too ugly and clumsy to have been the medium for which the script was designed. But early cuneiform writing surfaces — clay, and for special occasions,

13 For a Babylonian scribe at (? Ebla, see PETRUSATO, 1981, 269; for scribes from Ebla possibly going to school at Mari, see ARCHI, 1992, 20. A Babylonian scribe was resident at Ugarit (VAN SLOOFF, 1991, 521), and a Babylonian scribe and Babylonian tablets could be found at Hattusa (BECKMAN, 1983, 103f). See BECKMAN, 1983, too, for the complex mixture of direct and mediated transmission of Babylonian scribal tradition to the Hittites.

14 MORAN, 1992, XXIII, WILCKE, 1992, describes two distinct scribal traditions in use at Emar, which differed in tablet format, sealing practices, paleography, phraseology and orthography. The "Syrian" tradition is more archaic, whereas the "Syro-Hittite" tradition has more features in common with contemporary MB usage. Significantly, the school tablets conform to the latter tradition. Because a scribe writing in the Syrian tradition may have a son writing in the Syro-Hittite tradition, but a scribe writing in the Syro-Hittite tradition will never have a son who reverts to the Syrian tradition, scribal practice at Emar was clearly in a period of transition from the Syrian to the Syro-Hittite practice.

15 A real surprise appeared after this paper was written and delivered: WILCKE, 1995, makes a plausible case that one of the early stone land-sale documents, the "Figure aux plumes", is an early dedicatory inscription with a marked poetic character. As long as this remains a solitary example, I would continue to hold by the characterization of pre-ED III writing in Babylonia as almost exclusively administrative. Note, too, ENGELUND and NISSEN, 1993, 26-29, where an interesting but not convincing argument is made that one of the Uruk III archaic lexical compositions is actually "the first example of written literature".

stone — are virtually indestructible, so we can be fairly certain that we know what kinds of texts were written in Sumerian (barring any more grand surprises). For the first five hundred years that writing was used in Babylonia, we have only administrative and legal documents, and the lexical lists that were compiled to teach the writing system. Literature appears only in ED IIIa, and the first extant Sumerian letters date to ED IIIb.

Even royal display inscriptions on stone, which appear in Egypt from the very beginning, are practically non-existent (the two brief inscriptions of Mebaragesi of Kish are the only exception) before Mesalim at the beginning of ED IIIa (cf. LARSEN, 1988). The fact that fourteen stone land sale documents are preserved from the time before Mesalim suggests that if display inscriptions were at all common, we would have them. Mogens Lassen aptly makes the point that archaic Sumerian writing was more akin to Peruvian quipu in its range of uses than to a real writing system (LARSEN, 1988).

Sumerian cuneiform was transformed from a record keeping technology into a mode of linguistic expression in ED IIIa, the very period when cuneiform was being appropriated to write Semitic. Nissen has already suggested that the need to write Semitic names stimulated the expansion of Sumerian writing's incipient syllabic representation, and this expanded potential for phonetic writing in turn made the writing of Sumerian literature possible (NISSEN, 1988, 231f.). Michalowski, too, implies that the writing of Sumerian literature was a result of adapting cuneiform for writing Semitic (MICHALOWSKI, 1990, 60). What is important is that writing Sumerian in the broader sense coincides with the inception of Semitic cuneiform writing, which, to judge from the evidence of Ebla, was applied to a broad range of texts almost from the beginning. Before the discoveries of Sumerian literary texts at Abu Salabikh and Semitic texts at Ebla, we were taught that an originally oral Sumerian literature was first written down in the Old Babylonian period because Semitic Akkadian was replacing or had replaced Sumerian as the spoken language. The new paradigm has it that Sumerian literature was first written down in ED IIIa as a response to the possibilities, and perhaps the challenges, arising from the development of Semitic writing.
If we know that writing began in Babylonia as an improved device for bureaucratic control, the Sumerians themselves had a less prosaic view of the history of cuneiform. They understood it to have been invented by Enmerkar of Uruk for the purpose of writing letters, i.e. sending messages too long to commit to memory. This typical misunderstanding of the origins of writing systems — the belief that writing was devised to reproduce speech — is especially ironic in light of the relatively late appearance of Sumerian letters. The earliest Sumerian letters date to late ED IIIb, and there are only six (Kienast, Volk, 1995, 25-36). In the contemporary Ebla archives there are several score enna-documents, letters, and perhaps Volk is right when he claims that “the letter as a genre is an Akkadian innovation” (apud Westenholz, 1993, 167). There may also be something to Kienast’s suggestion that the historical resumés in the ED IIIb royal inscriptions from Lagash were inspired by texts like the Enna-Dagan “letter” found at Ebla (Kienast, 1980). And finally, we must ask if it is only coincidence that the authors of the two earliest royal inscriptions by far in Babylonia, Mebaragesi and Mesalin, were kings of Kish.

Sumerian, the language, seems never to have had much of a life in Syro-Mesopotamia outside the academy. In his study of the few Sumerian literary texts found at Ebla, Krecher notes that they are reminiscent not of the few contemporary ED IIIb Sumerian literary texts from Babylonia or the more numerous Sumerian royal inscriptions of that period, but rather they resemble the earlier literary texts of ED IIIa from Fara and Abu Salabikh (Krecher, 1992, 287). This is in keeping with the time lag between the Babylonian and provincial curriculums mentioned earlier. Krecher then discusses the reasons why the early Sumerian literary texts are so difficult, and from his excellent characterization of these texts it is clear that, like early Semitic writing, the conventions used to write Sumerian literature in ED IIIa are still experimental, characteristic of the formative phase of a writing tradition. When the tradition stabilizes in ED IIIb, its conventions are practically those that we know well from later periods, just as the conventions for writing Akkadian that emerge in the Sargonic period are almost the same as those for subsequent phases of that language. What comes before, Fara-period Sumerian literature and Ebla Semitic, is weird and difficult.

It is possible that the allographic UD.GAL.NUN orthography of so many early Sumerian literary texts can be explained as a product of the scribal exuberance that can characterize the formative period of a writing tradition. Let us return one last time to 8th century A.D. Japan, when the conventions for phonetically writing Japanese were still in flux, and to the Man'yōshū, the same anthology of poems that Miguel Civil referred to in his discussion of bilingualism at Ebla (Civil, 1984). In this anthology, the signs for the phonetic rendering of Japanese are chosen on the basis of elaborate semantic, phonetic and even graphic puns, the very devices which Krecher, in his discussion of early Sumerian literary texts (Krecher, 1992), uses to derive many UD.GAL.NUN values. The results were the same in both Sumerian and Japanese:

the orthographic complexity in which some of the Man'yōshū poets took such delight seems to have been one of the factors which led to the poems in that anthology becoming virtually unintelligible to readers within the space of about two hundred years (seeley, 1991, 53).

The key phrase here is “took such delight.” UD.GAL.NUN is not cryptography at all, but rather a symptom of the perverse pleasure that academics can take in their most arcane and recondite creations.

The Empire Writes Back

In Syro-Mesopotamia the cultural hegemony of Babylonia signified, as we have seen, that writing a Semitic language meant writing a Babylonian-based language, and writing literature meant writing Babylonian

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16 I would take issue with many of the details in Kienast’s argument. Because there is a battle report already in an inscription of the founder of the Lagash dynasty, Urnanshe, and because the history of the Lagash-Umma boundary dispute in Eannatum’s Stela of the Vultures is so at home there (for these texts, see Cooper, 1983a), I would prefer to understand the historical reports as a Babylonian development which may have been initiated by as yet undiscovered northern Babylonian Semitic inscriptions.

17 The only exception might be the occasional Sumerian incantation that may have been used for more than a writing exercise. For the slight use of Sumerian at Mari (incantations, Emesal laments, and a petition), and the difficulty in finding a scribe there who could read it, see Charpin, 1992; Durand, 1992, 124f. and 127.

18 Compare the bewildering variety of columnar formats in Uruk III tablets first discussed by Green, 1981, with the far simpler format that is standard in subsequent periods.

19 Cf. Alster, 1992, 2b. It is illogical for Krecher (1992) to assert that UD.GAL.NUN writing is never consistent (that is, “normal” writing also occurs in UD.GAL.NUN texts) and that sign forms are only occasionally distorted, and then to turn around and argue that UD.GAL.NUN writing is cryptographic. If secrecy were the intent, then the scribes could well have been consistent or nearly so in disguising the content. The fact that, as Krecher himself emphasizes, there is no compositional overlap between UD.GAL.NUN texts and “normal” texts, but the same scribes produced both kinds of texts, suggests that UD.GAL.NUN was a closed corpus that at some (slightly) earlier time had been written down in an experimental/playful orthography, and was so transmitted for a short while, until it was no longer understood and was dropped from the curriculum.
literature or an imitation thereof. Hittites and Hurrians had no scruples whatsoever about using Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform to write their own languages and literatures, but Semitic speakers were so thoroughly under the spell of their ancient association of writing with Babylonia that they just could not do so. Eventually, the empire writes back, but this became possible only after it invented a writing system of its own. The Semitic alphabet abruptly turned away from the syllabic phonetic writing of Babylonian cuneiform, and embraced the principle of consonantal writing that was the basis of writing in Egypt, but in a simplified form and without the cultural baggage of the Egyptian system itself. Only then did people feel free to commit other Semitic languages and literatures to writing.

We would like to know more about these other Semitic literatures, but the choice of an Egyptian-inspired writing system dictated Egyptian media, ink on papyrus, or some other perishable material. At Ugarit, fortunately, the alphabetic principle was married to the durability of clay tablets, and in the alphabetic cuneiform texts of Ugaritic we get a taste of what we are missing. But even at Ugarit, where the same scribes were at home in both alphabetic and logo-syllabic cuneiform (Van Soldt, 1995 184), literature and language were tightly bound to writing systems, as Michalowski has observed: Ugaritic literature is not written in syllabic cuneiform, nor is Babylonian literature written in alphabetic cuneiform (Michalowski, 1987, 175f). 20 The startling simplicity of alphabetic writing (cf. Van Soldt, 1991, 519 f.; 1995, 183) was a blow to the entire cuneiform scribal koiné, and after some centuries of coexistence, cuneiform disappeared as a cultural force in Syro-Mesopotamia, reappearing only as an accoutrement of the political imperialism of Assyria or Babylonia. But despite the astonishing staying power of cuneiform writing in Babylonia proper, it vanishes completely from Syro-Mesopotamia after the middle of the first millennium.

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20 As W. van Soldt has kindly pointed out to me, there is one probable case of Ugaritic text, badly preserved, written in syllabic cuneiform (HUBNERGARD, 1987, 11f), and there are four tablets with what seems to be Akkadian written in syllabic cuneiform (Van Soldt, 1991, 296-301).


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