Not Only History

Proceedings of the Conference in Honor of
Mario Liverani Held in Sapienza–Università di Roma,
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, 20–21 April 2009

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Winona Lake, Indiana
Eisenbrauns
2016

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Was Uruk the First *Sumerian* City?

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Did we really need Mario Liverani to announce yet another Sumerian first—the first city—a half century after Samuel Noah Kramer dished up 25 Sumerian firsts (Liverani 1998; 2006; Kramer 1956)? Now, I knew Kramer, and I can attest that Liverani is no Kramer but, more to the point, Kramer was no Liverani. Kramer was a genius at piecing together Sumerian literary compositions and at almost single-handedly making a broader public aware of the Sumerians' existence and achievements. But he was always quick to admit that his study of the tablets was superficial and, he used to say, it was Falkenstein and Falkenstein's students as well as Jacobsen and Civil who, in Kramer's wake, developed a more profound understanding of the material. Liverani, too, is profound but, to a reader accustomed to conventional philological brilliance, Liverani is brilliant in unconventional and sometimes astonishing ways. When I read some remarkable new insight in a work by Liverani, I do not say what I often say when reading other colleagues' work: "Why didn't I think of that?" Rather, I quietly admit that I never would have thought of it.

Liverani's *Uruk: The First City* sets itself a twofold task. First, to account for the initial emergence of urbanism and the early state in Babylonia (what specific factor led to this happening for the first time in that particular place?), and second, to describe the infrastructural elements and the political and economic processes of that first urban polity, to tell us how Uruk worked. It is difficult to account for beginnings. How can we extract a single element from a synergistic process and claim that it is the one that set the whole process in motion, without which the end result would never have been achieved? For Liverani, the sine qua non was the long field, the exploitation of which required centralized management (Liverani 1998: 19–43; 2006: chap. 2). This almost neo-Wittfogelian analysis ties the origin of the centralized state to the irrigation regime, as does a more recent monograph by Guillermo Algaze (2008). Algaze, seemingly unaware of Liverani's book, sees the crucial element as the particular hydrography of Babylonia, a fluvial system that "encouraged linearly arranged agglomerations based on boat and barge transport" and enabled the "irrigation agriculture [that] provided the practical means to support such enlarged populations" (2008: 145). According to Algaze, Wittfogel "was right but for the wrong reasons" (Algaze 2008: 147).

Liverani's second task, describing how archaic Uruk worked, is accomplished to a large extent by extrapolation from later sources, especially from late Early Dynastic Girsu and various Ur III archives. Little use is made of the thousands

of texts from archaic Uruk itself, but this is understandable, given the difficulties that they present. Although Liverani never explicitly discusses the ethnolinguistic situation of Babylonia toward the end of the fourth millennium, he mentions "an extraordinary continuity between the archaic and later Sumerian texts" (Liverani 2006: 13) implying that the archaic texts are Sumerian and the products of a bureaucracy and society whose workings can be interpreted through better-understood Sumerian archival texts from later periods (cf. Liverani and Heimpel 1995). Algaze is more explicit. His first chapter is entitled "The Sumerian Takeoff," and in his first footnote he states that he uses "Sumerian . . . in a cultural rather than a linguistic sense. It presupposes an unbroken line of continuity between the creators of the early cities . . . in the Mesopotamian alluvium . . . and the people that inhabited those cities later on in the third millennium, who wrote in the Sumerian language—irrespective of what their ethnic affiliation may have been" (Algaze 2008: 177). Elsewhere, Liverani also has recognized ethnolinguistic mixture in archaic Babylonia "sin dall'inizio della documentazione scritta" (Liverani 1988: 168).

But however mixed archaic Uruk may have been, the archaic protocuneiform writing system is almost certainly the creation of those who organized and commandeered the resources and labor of the city, those in whose language decisions were made and orders given, and it was their language that should be the language of the archaic texts. This is where the arguments from continuity are most powerful: archaic protocuneiform is undeniably the ancestor of the Sumerian cuneiform we know well from the third millennium onward, and there is absolutely no positive evidence that would lead us to assume that the language of the archaic texts is anything other than an earlier form of Sumerian. Yet the question—was Uruk a *Sumerian* city?—cannot be answered so simply. If, by "Sumerian," we mean dominated by speakers of an earlier form of Sumerian, then we should be able to find some recognizable Sumerian names in the archaic administrative tablets, but we cannot. And because the archaic texts represent only a limited spectrum of linguistic forms—perfectly adequate for encoding the administrative transactions they record—eschewing the grammatical affixes that identify cuneiform texts from the early third millennium on as Sumerian in language, it cannot be demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that the archaic texts are indeed the product of speakers of Sumerian. The broad scholarly consensus is, however, that the archaic texts do represent the Sumerian language (Cooper 2012).

If the Uruk elite were Sumerian speakers, did they think of themselves and their city as Sumerian? My guess is that identity at the end of the fourth millennium was local, but there was a broader regional identity evidenced by the rapid spread of protocuneiform throughout Babylonia, by the Jemdet Nasr city sealings, and by the archaic lexical list "Cities" (Cooper 2012; 2016). But Babylonia as a whole by the late fourth millennium was probably even more multi-ethnolinguistic than we might imagine Uruk to be, so it is difficult to imagine that any regional Babylonian identity would have been or should be called "Sumerian." In fact, the Sumerian

word for 'Sumer' does not appear at all before the middle of the third millennium, and the word for the Sumerian language is first found only a few centuries later. A single small Old Akkadian tablet has just two entries: lú a uri-me 'men of Akkadian seed' and eme-gi$_7$ 'Sumerian (language),' each preceded by a number (MAD 4 161). Apparently, in this unique instance, groups of people are being distinguished by their ethnolinguistic affiliation, and the Sumerian language is named in writing, nearly a thousand years after writing emerged as an administrative technology in the first city, Uruk.

This ethnolinguistic sense of "Sumerian" appears again only in the last century of the third millennium, in the hymns of Shulgi, the second and greatest ruler of the so-called Third Dynasty of Ur. But Shulgi, whose native language was Akkadian (Rubio 2006; pace Sallaberger 2011), boasted of being Sumerian as a way of asserting how educated he was, and education meant having mastered the Sumerian school curriculum, just as it did in the Old Babylonian Period, in the first centuries of the second millennium (Cooper 2016). The same usage appears a millennium later in an inscription of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668–627), who bragged that he could "read complicated texts, whose Sumerian is obscure and whose Akkadian is hard to figure out." But by Assurbanipal's time, and, indeed, quite a bit earlier, any sense that Sumerian had been the language of a separate people, different from those who used Akkadian, had been lost entirely (Cooper 2010; George 2009: 110–11).

Except for that single Old Akkadian tablet mentioned above, "Sumerian" as an ethnic designation may be in large part an artifact of modern scholarship, not only in the sense that it is an etic designation without a corresponding category in ancient Mesopotamia but, if we accept, as we must, Mario Liverani's contention that Babylonia was ethnolinguistically mixed "sin dall'inizio," it probably has little or no historical validity whatsoever. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to go as far as R. Matthews, who has suggested

> that the polyglot nature of life in . . . Uruk around the last quarter of the fourth mil-
> lennium BC, with slaves and traders being brought in from the furthest reaches of
> a far-flung world system, may in fact have stimulated the invention and develop-
> ment of a system of administrative communication which was specifically designed
> to transcend the idiosyncracies of any single language, and thus be comprehensible
> and user-friendly to all participants within specific social and economic contexts of a
> multi-ethnic society. (Matthews 1999: 550–51)

Other "primary scripts"—Chinese, Egyptian, Mayan—"display under-grammatical-ization and phonic opacity in their earliest examples," but such features do not mean that a script "exists apart from a linguistic setting" (Houston 2004: 12; cf. Damerow 2006).

What, then, is the answer to the question posed at the outset: was late-fourth-millennium Uruk a *Sumerian* city? Mario Liverani has warned us that answers to research questions "should not be ideological or theoretical, but must be based

on the available documentary data" (Liverani 2006: 69). Archaeological evidence gives us no reason to imagine an ethnolinguistic rupture at the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, and the continuity evidenced by the texts strongly supports ethnolinguistic continuity. But decisive evidence remains elusive, and the inability to detect recognizable Sumerian personal names in the archaic texts is discouraging. Nevertheless, on balance, the answer is yes, probably, the writers of the archaic texts spoke a language ancestral to the Sumerian we know, and the lexemes in this early Sumerian are what protocuneiform represents. However, it is doubtful that these early Sumerian speakers, or even later ones, had a notion of Sumerian-ness—Sumeritude?—that we would recognize as such.

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