

A Hurrian Administrative Tablet from Third Millennium Urkesh

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1. Introduction¹

The aim of the present article is to provide the full edition of a small cuneiform tablet excavated in 1997 in Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh. The text was partly published in the National Geographic issue of October 1999, where the photo of the reverse appeared together with other artifacts excavated there.

The document is labeled A7.341² and is presently housed in the Museum of Deir ez-Zor, Syria, where I had the chance to collate it in September 2009. The tablet is rather well preserved, with minor breaks on the bottom right corner of the obverse and bottom left corner of the reverse. Due to these gaps, and to the partial lack of parallels, the proper interpre-

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Profs. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati, co-directors of the Mozan/Urkesh Archaeological Project, who entrusted me with the full edition of the tablet. A warm thanks goes also to Profs. S. De Martino, M. Giorgieri, and G. Wilhelm, who shared with me their knowledge on the Hurrian language, and offered important suggestions on the possible interpretation of the personal names attested in the document. I am also grateful to Prof. W. Sallaberger for his suggestions on historical and chronological issues of the upper Khabur area. Finally I would like to thank Prof. Lucio Milano for the final improvements and his constant support.

² The tablet was found in unit A7, locus 21, feature 225, a relatively clean soil accumulation next to a brick fall (feature 199), in an area with various manufacturing activities dated to the end of the third millennium. Stratigraphically, it is thus out of context, which can easily be explained given the high incidence of pits in this area, and the hardness of the object (it is baked), which would have made it easy for it to be transported upward from the lower strata. The findspot is directly above the northern portion of the service courtyard of the Tupkish Palace, which dates to the same time period as the one that Maiocchi's typological study attributes to the tablet. It is thus likely that the Palace should be its place of origin. This is significant especially in one respect. If a complete administrative tablet such as this one was still present in the Palace after its abandonment, it is plausible that it may not have been an isolated case, but rather that there may still have been some remnants of an administrative archive. This might have been housed to the north of the service courtyard, precisely below the A7 area where the tablet was found. [M. Kelly-Buccellati and G. Buccellati]

tation of the text remains difficult. Despite these uncertainties, the document seems to be related to field management.

What makes this tablet a *unicum* among the available material from Third Millennium Mesopotamia is the use of Hurrian morphemes. In other words, the document was read in Hurrian. This fact is of the utmost importance, for it provides the earliest evidence by far of the use of Hurrian in an administrative context, and the full adaptation of cuneiform to that language already in the third millennium B.C. This has obvious historical implications in terms of our understanding of Hurrian ethnic identity, and Hurrian presence in the region of Urkesh.

2. Dating of the text

The tablet is datable on the basis of external and internal criteria. The former category includes palaeography, shape of the stylus, and to a lesser extent physical characteristics of the tablet. The second is related to the analysis of its stratigraphical context. As we shall see, both investigation techniques lead to the conclusion that the document was written during the Old Akkadian period, most probably during the reign of Naram-Sin.

2.1 Palaeography

A detailed study of Sargonic hand writing is necessary in order to assign a document to a specific sub-period of the Akkadian dynasty (Early, Middle, Classical, or Late Sargonic period).³ Nevertheless, Old Akkadian palaeography is far from being firmly established. Most of the available data come from the centers of southern and northern Babylonia (especially Girsu and Adab in the south, Tutub, Eshnunna, and Gasur in the

³ The following abbreviations are used in the present article: ED = Early Dynastic, ES = Early Sargonic, MS = Middle Sargonic, CS = Classical Sargonic, LS = Late Sargonic. This periodization was first introduced in TBI 1, 72, where the late texts are actually included among the Classical Sargonic ones. Early Sargonic (ES) roughly spans from Sargon to Rimuš – accepting the succession order of the Ur III version of the Sumerian King List, see Steinkeller (2003) –, Middle Sargonic (MS) from Maništusu to the first half of Naram-Sin, Classical Sargonic (CS) from the second half of Naram-Sin to the end of Šar-kali-šarri, Late Sargonic (LS) from the so-called “anarchy” period to the end of Šu-Durul. It must be stressed that this subdivision of the Sargonic period is rather conventional, and should be properly motivated, especially as far as the definition of the Middle Sargonic period is concerned – a task which is beyond the scope of the present article.

north). Regional handwriting and local conventions must therefore be taken into account when comparing material from such different areas.⁴ Tablets from the Khabur region mostly belong to the Early Dynastic period, thus are not directly comparable. They come from sites such as Tell Brak and Tell Beydar, and are relatively few in numbers. Interestingly enough, these documents seem closely related to the palaeographic tradition of southern Babylonia.⁵ When available, Sargonic tablets from this region are few in numbers, and usually very fragmentary, as for instance in Tell Brak, whose epigraphical corpus has been recently re-edited by Eidem/Finkel/Bonechi (2001).

Two other Old Akkadian tablets (M2 1 and M2 2, published by Milano 1991), were found in Urkesh, in a building located in the Area F of the High Mound. The proper chronological relation between these large fragmentary lists of workers, which are apparently written in Akkadian, and A7.341 is difficult to establish, both on stratigraphical and palaeographical grounds. The signs on the Akkadian tablets seems slightly more cursive compared to those of the one published here, but this fact may merely depend on the different scribal hand. The comparable repertoire of cuneiform sign is very limited, showing little significant variations. The script of M2 2, which is better preserved than M2 1, seems somehow more archaic than the one of A7.341. In particular, the sign IN, occurring in rev. IV 7, 11, V 7, includes a horizontal wedge in the ŠE part (IN = ŠE.NI), representing so-to-say the plant stalk. This feature is standard in ES text, is still found in some MS text, but completely disappears from the CS period on. Unfortunately the sign IN doesn't occur in A7.341, the only evidence for a "ŠE" being included in the TU of rev. 1, but this sign is consistently written without horizontals in the "ŠE" part, even in ES tablets. In any case, the vertical wedge of the ŠU sign in M2 2, pointing downwards, makes clear that the tablet is later than ES. The overall impression is that this document might be early MS, that is slightly earlier of A7.341. As we shall see, this fact may bear some historical implications. It must be stressed here that until a comprehensive study of Old Akkadian handwriting will be available, palaeographical data may be regarded as only a clue that needs further support to properly place a text within a chronological frame. Hence, the following considerations concerning the dating of A7.341 are meant to serve as a working hypothesis. Such information – provisional and incomplete as it may be – could nevertheless constitute a preliminary sketch for future research, which hopefully may properly justify the palaeographical dating.

⁴ As already noted by Biggs (1973), and more recently by Sallaberger (1998, 24–33).

⁵ As noted by Ismail e.a. (1996, 31).

2.1.1 Stylus

The stylus used to impress the signs has a triangular section with a bottom angle (i.e. the angle formed by the two edges used to impress the signs) of about 90°. This fact speaks for a Classical Sargonic dating, as opposed to the typical section of an Early-Dynastic/Early Sargonic stylus, having a bottom angle of about 70°, an example of which is provided by the Lu E tablet published by Buccellati (2003). The difference is usually hard to appreciate looking at hand copies of the tablets, but clearly emerges when collating the texts, and to some extent also from the photos. Despite some irregularities, which are inevitable especially for the ES(MS transition), the shape of the stylus seems to be very consistent within each period. The transmission of the scribal art included instructions not only for the fashioning of the writing tool, but also for the shaping of the clay to form the tablet, for which see § 2.2.

2.1.2 Sign Alignment

The signs are rather well made, evenly aligned to left and right, and rather well proportioned. As we shall see, they belong to the Middle/Classical Sargonic repertoire.⁶ This is considered to be the most beautiful cuneiform script of all periods.⁷ Nevertheless, one has the feeling that they lack the harmony and elegance typical of the Classical Sargonic tablets from southern Mesopotamia. Of course, this fact may be purely incidental, either because this particular tablet was made by a relatively inexperienced scribe, or because the document itself was written in a rather informal style, somewhere in between the “Duktus I” and “Duktus IIa” of the Tutub tablets, according to the classification offered by Sommerfeld (1999, 7–17).

It is worth noting that the upper part of each sign touches the line division. This feature is commonly found on CS tablets, but not on A1.72, a well stratified school tablet from Urkesh datable to early Naram-Sin or even slightly earlier.⁸

⁶ For a repertoire of cuneiform signs from Classical Sargonic Mesopotamia see Maiocchi (2009, 251–305).

⁷ As already stated by Gelb (1961, 13): “from the aesthetic point of view, the Sargonic writing is probably the most beautiful of all the known types of cuneiform writing”.

⁸ Buccellati (2003, 47).

2.1.3 Noteworthy signs

The epigraphical repertoire provided by A7.341 is very limited. Still a bunch of signs show significant palaeographical variations.

The šU sign appears two times in our text, in obv. 3 and rev. 4 respectively. In the first place, on the bottom edge, the horizontal wedges are a bit eroded, but they seem to be parallel to each other. On the contrary, the variant on rev. 4 has the bottom wedge (the so-called “thumb”) slightly oblique, pointing upward. This is rather significant, since both versions are in opposition with the šU of MS texts, which is usually written with the bottom wedge pointing downward. In addition, the vertical wedge in ED/ES script is upside-down as compared to later variants.⁹

The MA sign has the final vertical wedge starting at the same height of the initial wedge, as opposed to the ES/MS version, where it occurs closer to the bottom horizontal wedge (the same applies to similar signs, as for instance UR). In addition, the second wedge from the left is usually rendered as a vertical wedge in MS/CS script, as opposed to the oblique wedge used by ES scribes.

The RA sign in ES/MS tablets appears as an elegant UDU+SI, both signs being well proportioned. On the contrary, MS/CS texts usually show an elongated RA, especially as far as the UDU part is concerned, the overall shape being closer to šID.

The RU sign appears here somewhat less cursive than the RU found in the obv. 3 of the above mention Lu E school exercise, datable to the ES period or slightly later. In addition, the upper horizontal wedge, which is missing in the school tablet, may be here obliterated by the line division. In this case, one may compare the variant attested in Tell Beydar (Salla-berger 1996, no. 68).

⁹ These considerations hold true also for signs composed with šU, as for instance DA, which unfortunately occurs in partly broken context in our text (see rev. 5).

Sign Name	Provenance	ES-MS	MS-CS
MA	Adab	 (ES)	a)  b)  (mostly MS) (mostly CS)
	Urkesh		
RA	Adab	a)  b) 	a)  b) 
	Urkesh		
RU	Adab		
	Urkesh	a)  b) 	
šU	Adab	a)  (ES) b)  (MS)	
	Urkesh		a)  b) 

Tab. 1: Comparison of selected signs of A7.341 with Sargonic variants from Urkesh (for ES-MS based on ED Lu E, Buccellati 2003; for MS-CS based on Milano 1991 and Adab (based on Maiocchi 2009).

2.2 Physical characteristics

Compared to the uniformity of the stylus, tablet shapes show a larger degree of variation, depending on the size of the writing medium to be produced. For instance, very small Sargonic tablets tend to be rather round regardless of their dating. The document measures $25 \times 27 \times 11$ mm, and shows an average reddish brown color, slightly lighter than the one of A10.377 – also datable to the Sargonic Period – published in Buccellati 2005. As customary with cuneiform tablets, it has a flat obverse and a convex reverse, as the result of squashing the clay in between the two hands. What is relevant for the dating is the shape of the corners and the edges. Despite some breaks, the former seem rather sharply made, but still rather round, and the latter are almost straight, as opposed to the oval or round shape of Early Dynastic/Early Sargonic tablets, see for in-

stance the above-mentioned school tablet published in Buccellati 2003. These peculiarities reflect different techniques in the production of the clay media: ED/ES tablets were probably made by squashing a ball of clay, while later tablets were made by squashing a cylinder of clay. Classical Sargonic tablets from southern Mesopotamia usually show straighter corners, closer to 90° than those of A7.314, but more epigraphical material from Third Millennium Upper Mesopotamia is needed for proper comparison.

2.3 Copy, transliteration, translation, commentary

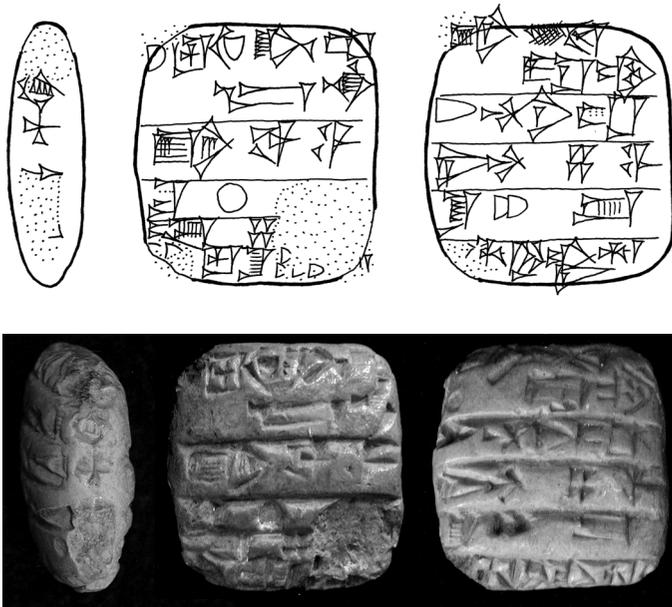


Fig. 1: A7.341

Transliteration	Transliteration
obv.	
1. 1 UDU 1/3 ^{sa} URUDU MA.NA	1 sheep and 1/3 mina of copper:
2. <i>ga-ba-wa</i>	to Kaba
3. <i>šu</i> 1.0.0 [GANA ₂]	for (cultivating) 1 bur (= 18 iku of land):
4. <i>ze₂[?]-za-[x]</i>	Ziza[...] (is the supervisor?);
5. [2]+'2' UDU <i>šu</i> 0.0.'4'+[2 GAN]A ₂	'4' sheep for '6' iku (of land):

rev.

- | | | |
|------|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>BI-tu-ra-am</i> | Bituram (is the supervisor); |
| 2. | 60 GIRI ₂ URUDU ¹ | 60 daggers of copper: |
| 3. | <i>gu-za-wa</i> | to Kuz(z)a |
| 4. | <i>šū 0.0.2 GANA₂</i> | for (cultivating) 2 iku (of land): |
| 5. | <i>ṛa²¹-[d]a-ru-gu₄-hu-ni</i> | PN (is the supervisor). |
| 1.e. | <i>ṛx¹-maš^{ki}</i> | G[N]. |

General commentary

The document records the taxation of three parcels of land located in a city mentioned on the left edge, probably a rural settlement in the vicinity of Urkesh. The placing of the toponym on the edge of the tablet may be due to the way the tablets were filed, in order quickly find it among others. This fact may imply the existence of an archive (still to be found) where other similar documents were stored side by side, having the label GN on the visible edge.

Comparable documents concerning field management come from third millennium Babylonia. A survey on the available material is provided by Steinkeller 1981. Pre-Ur III documents make use of three different terms as part of the standard rental fee: *še-bi*, lit. “its (= of the field) barley”, referring to the landlord’s share on the produce; *udu-bi*, lit. “its sheep”, denoting the irrigation tax; and *maš₂-bi*, lit. “its goat”, denoting a tax on goats and sheep born to the tenant during the rental period, to be paid in silver. In the present text, only the second one appears, together with a small amount of copper, but the fact that in the upper Khabur region – contrary to southern Babylonia – irrigation is not necessary to cultivate the fields, may suggest that the *udu* tax mentioned in obv. 1 and 5 may refer to the new-born animal, rather than to irrigation costs. In addition, it seems that the total amount paid by the tenant is not proportional to the size of the rented land. In any case, the daggers mentioned in rev. 2 are rather unexpected (at least from a Mesopotamian point of view), the standard means of payment being silver or copper. These peculiarities, not found elsewhere, make the interpretation of the text difficult

Commentary to individual lines

obv. 1: For the root *kab-* compare for instance the PNs *Kapanne-abi* and *Kapipursa* mentioned by Richter (2006, 153, 156). This root, as well as the root *kuz-* in the PN *Kuz(z)a* (rev. 3), again with unclear etymology, are well attested in the Hurrian anthropology of the II millennium, especially in Mari (Sasson 1974, 378) and Tell Timah (Sasson 1979, 18 ff.; Loretz 1969, 22). On the root *kab-* see also Richter (2005, 36 with n. 41). The ending *-wa* represents */-va/*, the Hurrian dative morpheme, here and in rev. 3. The reading

wi/we, representing the Hurrian genitive morpheme, though not impossible seems less likely because of the parallels with the available Mesopotamian documentation.

obv. 4, rev. 5.: One could also translate these lines as “(land of) PN”. The sign in obv. 4 tentatively transliterated as *ze₂*? actually looks like *TAB+ZU*. The line division between obv. 4 and 5 is mostly obliterated by the breaks and the surviving signs, but still visible in obv. 5 between *udu* and *šu*.

rev. 1.: For a possible Hurrian etymology of *Pitiram(a)* see the PNs in *-am* quoted by Wilhelm (1998, 125). The PN may be related to a root *pi/ed-* + *-or-*, see Marquez Rowe (1996, 283–284); Haas/Wegner (1997, 344 n. 30). On the PNs in *-am* see also Wilhelm (1998–2001, 125; 2008, 184–186).

rev. 2.: The sign *URUDU* shows traces of extra horizontal strokes in the beginning part.

rev. 3.: For the PN *Kuz(z)a*, see Pruzsinsky (2003, 244 with n. 190 and 191). On the alternation of *KU-* and *GU-* in the writing of this PN see also Sasson (1974, 364); on the root *kuz(z)-* see also Girbal (1990, 99). This PN is probably unrelated to *gu₂-sa*, already attested for the Pre-Sargonic period, which is probably Akkadian, see Catagnoti (1998, 49), relating it to *kuša* “robust”.

3. Historical significance of the text

Some considerations of historical nature are in order. As we have seen, the use of the dative morpheme *-va* in obv. 2 and rev. 3 strongly suggests that the tablet was read in Hurrian. This fact is of utmost importance, for it forces us to reconsider the question of Hurrian ethnicity in the third millennium BC, as defined by Buccellati (2010).¹⁰ Obviously, the use of a local language is one of the most telling features (or better “ethnic elements” according to Buccellati’s terminology) to look at, when considering the matter of cultural identity. In a way, the use of Hurrian for accounting purposes, documented by this unique text, is not surprising: Hurrian texts were already known from third millennium Tell Mozan, the most important being the well-known inscription of *Tiš-atal*,¹¹ which is a temple foundation of political nature. Besides this, the seals of the royal family, bearing the local titlature *endan*, could also be viewed as Hurrian, despite the extensive use of sumerograms.¹² Scattered Hurrian personal names and toponyms are obviously attested in many third millennium tablets, mostly read in Akkadian, but this fact seems irrelevant for the present dis-

¹⁰ See also the remarks by Buccellati (2004, 210–211). Ethnicity has been discussed also by Foster (1982, 297–305, with note 4 and previous literature).

¹¹ Parrot/Nougayrol (1948); Wilhelm (1998, 117–143); Salvini (2000, 38–44). For a discussion of its provenance see also Buccellati (1998, 28–29); Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (2009, 58–62).

¹² Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (1996). For the suggestion about the word order implying a Hurrian reading of the seal legends see *ib.*, 68 note 10; Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (1997, 88–89).

cussion.¹³ The uniqueness of the tablet published here lies in the fact that it is an administrative record, lacking those ideological motives deeply rooted in royal propaganda of all periods. The use of the Hurrian dative morpheme in it may be motivated by the need of disambiguation in a context mentioning three interrelated items, namely the quantity of goods (sheep and metal) possibly related to taxation, the individual involved in the account, and parcels of land in connection with this individual.¹⁴ If this holds true, one may look back at the two Sargonic tablets listing workers found in Urkesh, mentioning several Akkadian, Hurrian, and possibly Sumerian personal names as well, and using Akkadian pronominal elements and prepositions (*šu*, *in*, see Milano 1991, 18–21, 23–25, and discussion at § 2.1). The absence of Hurrian morphemes in these documents may be explained by the fact that only two parts are involved – the workers and the relative supervisors, or the place where they are dwelling – without the need of further grammatical elements to clarify the content. In other words, the underlying language of these two texts may also be Hurrian. Hence, they may not be regarded to as a prove of the existence of an Akkadian installation or some sort of administrative building managed by local Akkadians. This consideration strengthens the impression of a culturally flourishing scribal environment, at least as far as the third millennium is concerned. As it is well known, the policy of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin with regard to Urkesh was one of alliance, as opposed to the military occupation in the nearby sites such as Nagar (Tell Brak). The presence of Tar³am-Agade, daughter of Naram-Sin, in Urkesh is in fact almost certainly to be explained on the basis of a dynastic marriage to a local king (*endan*).¹⁵

The new available data fit well the overall impression of a close contact between the two worlds (Akkadian and Hurrian), but with a limited control of the former element over the latter. This is in good agreement with the recent historical (re-)evaluation of Naram-Sin's inscriptions, pointing to the absence of a great rebellion in the north, and a remarkable political

¹³ For an overview of the available evidence see Richter (2004, 268–309); Milano (1991, 15–17).

¹⁴ I am grateful to W. Sallaberger for this suggestion. He also informs me of the existence of a Tell Brak text possibly parallel to the one published here, namely Tell Brak 52, see Eidem/Finkel/Bonechi (2001, 112–113).

¹⁵ Door sealings with the impression of her seal were found among many others in the royal palace, see Buccellati (2002). Well before Naram-Sin, similar political processes are known from the Ebla archives, mentioning the marriage between a prince (DUMU EN) of Nagar, bearing a Hurrian name, with the local princess Tagriš-damu, see Richter (2004, 277–280), with previous bibliography.

continuity in the whole area.¹⁶ In this regard, one notes here that since the very beginning of the excavations, Urkesh has shown a set of peculiarities, both in the epigraphical evidence and in the material culture (as evidenced especially by the *ābi* and the monumental Temple complex),¹⁷ which strongly suggested that Urkesh belonged to a different cultural horizon when compared to other sites in its vicinity. This invisible boundary,¹⁸ since there is not environmental discontinuity between Tell Mozan and Tell Brak for instance, is motivated by a combination of inter-dependent factors, such as religion and trade, which are intrinsically linked to ethnicity. It is also not surprising that a text related to field management from the upper Khabur region is partly incomprehensible to us, since we mostly rely on evidence from a completely different climatic as well as socio-political environment, namely the Mesopotamian one. Not only different systems were in use, but local practices are to be taken into account, due to the different Hurrian vision of the environment, which no doubt was more strictly linked to the mountains in the north than to the plains in the south. This diversity is obviously motivated by the fact that Urkesh lies in a territory where dry farming is widely possible, as opposed to the massive irrigation structures needed for cultivating the fields of southern Mesopotamia. Despite the fact that very little is known about the relationship between Urkesh and its hinterland,¹⁹ we can now better appreciate the significance of the Hurrian presence at this site, and its fundamental contribution to the development of a third millennium capital city. This process is historically documented within a frame of a well stratified society, including both Hurrian and Akkadian elements, since the very beginning of the available written sources. How this process of cultural contact evolved through time, eventually leading to major historical changes on a larger scale, is a matter for future studies, informed by future discoveries.

¹⁶ See Sallaberger (2007, 425–431). The lack of a gap has obvious repercussion on our periodization of the Sargonic period in upper Mesopotamia, and possibly affects the palaeogeographical analysis as well, adding further element of uncertainties to an already complicated picture.

¹⁷ For an overview of these structures see respectively Kelly-Buccellati (2002); Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (2009, 33–54).

¹⁸ As already stressed in Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (1997, 92–93); Buccellati (1999, 238–239).

¹⁹ For an overview on this topic see Buccellati (1999, 236–242). Contacts between Urkesh and the trans-caucasian region may be inferred from similarities in pottery and metal objects, see Kelly-Buccellati (1990, 120); Buccellati/Kelly-Buccellati (2007, 143–146). For parallels in art in the upper Khabur and northern Mesopotamia area of third and second millennium see Kelly-Buccellati (1996, 265–266).

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