An Ur-III Business Document From Kharayeb

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The cuneiform tablet published below forms part of what was a large archive of business documents from Drehim, a town near Nippur in Southern Mesopotamia. It is dated to approximately 2033 BC and deals with the registration of accounts of livestock.

From 3000 BC, when writing was 'invented' in Southern Mesopotamia, business documents represent a basic part of the cultural legacy of the Ancient Near East. In terms of quantity, these documents represent the largest category of texts written in cuneiform, although the documents themselves vary in time and place over the 3000 years when cuneiform script was used throughout all of the Ancient Near East. From the time when writing began, business documents give us a general insight into economic and social conditions; but they also show societies against the background of highly complex organizations.

Business documents are basically different from literary texts. In the case of the latter, a single clay tablet may give us all or at least parts of a complete story, and thus a single text can illuminate important aspects of the cultural history of the Ancient Near East. But in the case of business documents a single text is not sufficient for the illumination of economic life. Compare a single business document to a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. One piece is not sufficient for understanding what it means, because it lacks the context that only insertion into the totality can give. A single business document can be understood only if it is placed into its stratigraphic level. Thus the isolated data of a single text show their meaning because they are placed into the proper context.

All of this is true about the text published here below. If it was the only example of its kind, we could do no more than give a transliteration and translation. But the text can be placed into the context of an archive; in addition, a study of its paleography and prosopography reveals the time, circumstances, and personages of the text by placing them into the context of an environment that is already known.

The cuneiform business document that we are treating belongs to the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities Collection. It is labelled No. 25456 in the collection and is reported to come from Kharayeb near Sidon. The text forms part of what was a large archive of business documents...
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from Drehim', a town near Nippur in Southern Mesopotamia, during the Ur III-period.

Drehim was above all the center for the registration of accounts of livestock trade during the Ur-III period, specifically, from the 27th year of king Sulgi through the 2nd year of king Ibbisin (Sigrist 1992: 15). It became increasingly important during the building activities that took place during Sulgi’s 38th year of rule (Sigrist 1992: 18). Proof of Drehim’s efficiency may be seen from the fact that its administrative bureaucracy could handle the processing of 60,000 animals each year (Calvot 1969: 101-114, Sallaberger 1999: 261).

Our tablet is rather well-preserved and gives us all the information necessary for placing it within its historical context. The end of the tablet contains the date formula “Year that follows (the year called) Susan, king of Ur, built the wall, Keeping away the nomads against the Amorites”. This fact permits us to date the text not only to the Ur-III period, but precisely to the 5th year of king Susin of Ur, approximately 2033 BC. This was a time, when the conflict with the Amorites was becoming more serious, and so the king was obliged to build a wall against the massive inroads of these nomads in the north-west. This event was so important that it gave its name for a year and is also mentioned in literary letters. But the text can be dated with exact precision since it gives both day and month, Rev. 9 gives the number of the day, and rev. 13 gives the month, typical for the Drehim calendar. Thus the text can be dated to the 4th day of 4th month of the 5th year of king Susan’s reign.

The main text reports the delivery of livestock for the king. Seven lambs and one goat are summarized on the left edge as “8 sheep”. The individuals who place their livestock at the king’s disposition are all known from other contemporary [Drehim] sources. Some are even mentioned together in texts from the 5th year of Susan reign.

Two further elements in the text deserve to be mentioned, since they are of additional importance for the dating. Intaea, the animal fattener and well-known functionary at Drehim, served as delivering official in the Drehim administration from the time of the 3rd year of Amarsu’en’s reign (1 ix AS 3). Although Intaea’s career during the 8th and 9th years of Amarsu’en is still somewhat obscure, we do know that he later was not only a receiving official, but seems to have been in charge of the whole administrative organisation at Drehim (Maeda 1989:79-80). Intaea rose to this position during the reorganization of the Drehim administrative system, (Sigrist 1992: 293ff., 299-301; Sallaberger 1999: 270-271) that took place with the accession of the new king. Moreover, Nannamaba the scribe is described as controlling official of the whole transaction. It is characteristic of Intaea’s bureaucratic procedure that scribes such as Nannamaba had to serve the additional function of ‘controlling’.

Although Ur-III business documents are rather abundant (to date about 10,000 have been published from Drehim), the documentation for the reign of king Susan is still rather scanty. Therefore our tablet from Kharayeb is a welcome addition to our knowledge of the Ur-III bureaucracy at Drehim.

The text (Figs 1 and 2) is very carefully written and reads as follows:
Obverse:
1 1 sila₄ a-ab-ba-ĝu₁₀
2 1 sila₄ lugal-á-zi-da šabra
3 1 sila₄ da-da énsi
4 1 sila₄ ku-ru-ub-ma-ma
5 1 sila₄ SUH-UŠ-ki-in
6 1 sila₄ "EN.ZU-KASKAL,KUR
7 '1 maš̄ i-di-\:"EN.ZU

Reverse
8 1 sila₄ | ... | \:"x₁
9 u₄ \:"kam
10 mu-ku,(DU) lugal
11 in-ta-e-a i-dab₅
12 ğiri 'nanna-ma-ba dub-sar.
13 iti u₅-bi gu₇
14 mu ū-sa 4u-'EN.ZU
15 lugal ūr'-ma-ke₄
16 bâd mas-[du] mu-ri-isq
lower edge
17 'ti-id'-n[l]-is mu-řu
left edge: 8 udu

1 lamb from A'abbaçu,
1 lamb from Lugalazida the stewart,
1 lamb from Dada, the Governor,
1 lamb from Kurubmama.
1 lamb from Išdumkin,
1 lamb from Šinillat,
1 goat from Iddinsin,
1 lamb from...
(on) the 4 fourth day
(as) a delivery for the king
Intaea received.
'Controller': Nannama ба the scribe.
Month: 'Eating (of) the Ubi (- bird)'
Year following (the year) Šu-sin
King of Ur
built the Amorite wall ""Keeping away
the Nomads"".
(Summary:) eight sheep.
Commentary:

Revised.

8: At the present time it is impossible to restore this line with even reasonable certainty.

9: The term mu-ku, (DU) lugal 'delivery for the king' in this position is characteristic of business documents from Drēhim since Šusin's 3rd regnal year". The expression therefore is of additional importance for dating the text.

Notes

1- I wish to thank Prof. Hélène Sader, Beirut, who first called this cuneiform tablet to my attention. She also gave me excellent photographs of the tablet, some of which are published in this edition.

2- For the relationship of Durāhim / Drēhim and the ancient place name Puźniš - Dagan see M. Sigrist, Drehem, Bethesda, MD, 1992, 14-18.

3- For these lines see below rev. 14-16; i.e. 17 of the text.

4- See P. Michalowski, The Royal Correspondence of Ur, Diss. Yale, 1976, 46; for editions of the two letters exchanged between king Šusin and Šarrumbani, who was entrusted with the building of the wall, see pp. 224-233; 234-242.

5- For the meaning and the different orthographies of the monthname u₂-bi ḫur₂, found in rev. 13 of our text, see M. Cohen, The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East, Bethesda, MD, 1993, 147-148. It should be pointed out, that of the Calendar used at Drehim depended on that of the capital, Ur. Furthermore, due to a calendar reform during Šusin's third year, the month u₂-bi ḫur₂ was considered the 4th month, rather than the 3rd, as it had been in previous years (see M. Cohen, Calendars, 133-135).


7- Note, as one of the procedural innovations of this time, the habit of systematically sealing tablets sent to the various bureaus at Drehim (see M. Sigrist, Drehem, 293).


9- Line by line transliteration/translation of the cuneiform text.

Bibliography


مستند تجاري من موقع الخراب
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الأجرة المسمارية موضوع المقال هذا هي واحدة من الأجرات التي كانت تشكل المحفوظات التجارية لـ«دريهم»، قرب نيبور في المنطقة الجنوبية لبلاد ما بين النهرين. وهي تعود لحوالي 2033 ق.م. والتذويين المسماري يتعلق بتسجيل حساب يختص بالمسامية.

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