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The Interplay of Material, Text, and Iconography in Some of the Oldest “Legal” Documents

Among the earliest written documentation from third millennium BC Mesopotamia, recorded shortly after the overwhelmingly administrative documentation (c. 85%) from the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (3300–3000 BC),¹ we find an equally intriguing and intricate group of script-bearing objects, usually referred to in the scholarly literature as ‘ancient kudurrus’. These objects seem to be well suited for the purpose of investigating the interplay of material, text, and associated iconography, an approach only rarely intensively pursued among Assyriologists.²

The appearance of a seminal volume dealing extensively with this special group of records has contributed a great deal to reviving the issue of the relation of these early land-sale documents to the later kudurrus, i.e. boundary stones, from second millennium BC Babylonia.³ This unique group of texts (see ELTS nos. 1–12 and 18) on the one hand consists of several stone tablets (ELTS nos. 1–7) with a convex obverse and reverse, a peculiar shape not found in any other group of texts from any other period or area,⁴ and two further stone objects formed like animals, i.e. a recumbent sheep (ELTS no. 8) and a lion-headed bird (ELTS no. 9). On the other hand, there are three quite exceptional stone artefacts with associated iconography (ELTS nos. 10+11, 12, 18), on which I will focus *in extenso* below. Formally, the rather tablet-like stone objects, i.e. ELTS 1–7, generally display vertically arranged columns with

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1 Note that about 15% of the Uruk IV–III tablets are of the lexical genre; whereas Uruk IV tablets exclusively derive from the site Uruk, those of the Jemdet Nasr period (= Uruk III) come from a number of different Mesopotamian sites, including Jemdet Nasr, Kish, Larsa, Tall Uqair and Tell Asmar.

2 See especially Selz 2003, 2004a and 2004b.

3 Gelb/Steinkeller/Whiting 1991, esp. 21–24, henceforth abbreviated as ELTS; Paulus 2014.

4 But note the extreme variation found in ELTS 4, showing an approximately spherical or cubical shape by its nearly identical thickness, length, and width.

writing running consecutively from top to the bottom—partly continuing on the edges (e.g. ‘Philadelphia Tablet’ [= ELTS 3]) and partly with additional sub-columns (e.g. ‘Hoffman Tablet’ [= ELTS 1])—, to be read from left to right.⁵

This whole group of inscribed objects is usually considered the earliest recorded exchange of property, characteristically mentioning

- a certain plot of land followed by specific measurements,
- a concrete location,
- the specific sign group DUG(KAŠ/TIN)+SĪLA,⁶ but strikingly lacking in the stone artefacts under consideration (ELTS nos. 10+11, 12, 18), and
- the names of individuals, possibly the names of the buyer and the seller(s).⁷

This particular class of artefacts showed up from the very beginning of the third millennium BC and can be dated approximately to the Early Dynastic I period (2900–2750 BC) based mainly on palaeographic grounds though, as will be discussed hereinafter, with gradual differences.

Within this group of records there are three quite exceptional artefacts (cf. Table 1) carved on stone.⁸

5 An exception is the ‘Walters Tablet’ (ELTS 2), which features only one separate cell at the bottom right corner possibly referring to the temple household of the deity ^dNUN.SAR (= ^dnin-SAR?). But this might also be merely due to the inscriptions’ brevity. Unlike these stone tablets and the archaic texts from Uruk (c. 2800 BC) the famous Uruk Vase, an elaborately carved but un-inscribed stone ritual vessel with a rich iconographic repertoire, for example, is certainly to be read from bottom to top, that is to say, starts with the water at the bottom till the food products presented as offerings in the upper register. For similarly arranged artefacts, among them the ‘Royal Standard’ from Ur, see Winter 1991, 63. However, I would contradict her assessment of the Stela of the Vultures, which should be read from top to bottom, not bottom to top, as she asserts. For the converse reading direction with regard to inscribed dedicative artefacts see also the remarks in Balke (2015). Furthermore, the assumed impulse to registers on monuments by the arrangement of writing on (archaic) clay tablets, as it is advanced in Schmandt-Besserat 2004, 36–43, 54ff. seems to be quite unlikely in view of the numerous archaic multi-column tablets with equally horizontal and vertical parting rules (cf. Englund 1998, 56–64).

6 For this characteristic sign group see Glassner 1995, 17–20 who convincingly argues that “DUG+SĪLA dirait le statut juridique que ces terres acquièrent dès lors qu’elles sont devenues les biens d’un temple” (Glassner 1995, 18); according to Wilcke 2007, 80 s.v. 8.1.2, this phrase corresponds with later presargonic GEŠTIN.SĪLA (FAOS 5 Ukg. 6 v 2’–3’) and KAŠ.SĪLA (FAOS 5 Ukg. 10 I 6), respectively, as a possible reference to a kind of drinking party or banquet; see also the remarks in Balke (2015).

7 See Gelb/Steinkeller/Whiting 1991, 27–29. Yet the conventional classification of the latter group as ‘legal documents’ in opposition to the seemingly administrative texts ELTS 1–7, is far from certain in spite of the obvious structural differences and the associated iconography.

8 The fact, that all these ‘ancient kudurrus’ are made of durable (dark) stone instead of inexpensive clay certainly indicates that these inscribed objects were considered quite significant and that they were obviously intended to be permanent and indestructible records. Thus, it is only natural that stone was primarily used as material for the majority of commemorative inscriptions throughout the Early Dynastic periods, e.g. for mace-heads, plaques, slabs, tablets or vessels. Besides, ‘common’ stones (in contrast to ‘semi-precious’ stones) were usually employed for three basic fields of handi-

1. the so-called Blau Monuments (ELTS 10+11), named after the German trader and physician Dr A. Blau, who lived in Samawa, near Uruk: two stone objects of dark-greenish phyllite or schist, including a semi-oval plaque and a tapering pillar, both usually interpreted as a pottery scraper and a chisel respectively,⁹
2. the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ (ELTS 18): a limestone object found in Tell K at Telloh in a secondary layer that might have well contained the remains of a temple of Ninġirsu, and
3. the so-called Ušumgal Stela (ELTS 12) made of light to dark-brown alabaster gypsum.

The provenance of the first and the latter are rather uncertain even though Tell ‘Uqair—due to the mention of the sign-group UR₂.HA.RAD, an archaic writing of the toponym Urum (Tell ‘Uqair)—for the Blau-Monuments¹⁰ and Umma for the Ušumgal Stela in view of the mention of Šara, Umma’s patron deity, conceivably appearing in a personal name, have been occasionally proposed. Nonetheless, the sign in question is neither ŠÁRA (LAGAB×SIG₇ = LAK 782), a sign definitely not attested before the Fāra period,¹¹ nor a typical BĀRA (LAK 153 = UET 2, pl. 8 SL no. 88).¹² Since the question of the signs’ correct identification is of considerable interest, I will briefly discuss it.

First, it must be pointed out, that LAK 782 (LAGAB×SIG₇ = Šára) has—in contrast to BĀRA—no palaeographic precursor in the corpus of the archaic texts from Ur (c. 2800 BC), and is not detectable as the standard writing for the deity ^dŠára before the Fāra period. BĀRA on the other hand can be traced back as an onomastic element to the earliest third millennium written documentation, e.g. in the personal names ama-bāra-abzu “Mother-dais-of the Apsu”,¹³ men-bāra-abzu “Diadem-dais-of-the-Apsu”,¹⁴ me?-bāra-abzu “divine essence(?)-(is)-dais-of-the-abzu”¹⁵ and igi-zi-bāra-ge “Trusty-eye-upon²-the-dais”.¹⁶ Considering this evidence with lexical phrases widely known from the Old Sumerian onomasticon, especially in names borne by female individuals, an assumed personal name like Bāra-AN-igi-zi-abzu

work: sculpture, stone-vessel manufacture, and tool/weapon production.

9 Cf. Braun-Holzinger 2007, 16–17.

10 Cf. Reade 2000, 81 for details on the acquisition of the two pieces by the British Museum in 1899.

11 However, see the entry ^dŠára e ng ar in the sale document CUSAS 17 no. 104 (MS 2482) vi 6’ (p. 216), where according to the column’s internal textual structure a divine name should be expected. Nonetheless this sign-form itself, though certainly no BĀRA, has only less in common with those forms attested in the adscriptions of the Ušumgal stela.

12 In later Old Babylonian Sumerian literary texts both signs could be used to write the theonym Šára, e.g. BĀRA (= Šara₁; mss. A,Z,KK,Y) vs. LAGAB×SIG₇ (= Šára; mss. B, GG) in the composition *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (cf. W. H. Ph. Römer 2004, 14).

13 See CUSAS 17, 106 ii 7 and BIN 8, 65 i 2.

14 See FAOS 5 Urn. 50 c)1.

15 See FAOS 5/2 AnFara 4 l 3.

16 See ELTS 22 viii 22’.

instead of ^dŠá-ra-igi-zi-abzu seems to conform fittingly to the onomastic patterns known from third millennium sources. Moreover, taking into account the range of variants attested for BÁRA (cf. UET 2, pl. 8 SL no. 88), sometimes omitting partially the horizontal and vertical wedges all around the sign frame or showing a nearly blank frame apart from the two crossed wedges, the sign in question might well be identified with BÁRA.

Furthermore, this palaeographic inconsistency, though on a lesser scale, can also be observed within one and the same document, e.g. the instances for BÁRA in ELTS 15 i 25, ii 24 and no. 18 v 1 by omitting the three vertical and horizontal wedges (cf. ELTS 15) or moving the crossed wedges from its central position towards the lower right-hand corner.¹⁷ But it is crucial that the attributed phrase pa₄-ses bára-AN “(Ušumgal), senior priest of Bara’AN” does not produce any plausible meaning. On the other hand, a reading of the two last signs as ^dŠá-ra would result in a quite reasonable translation, i.e. “senior priest of (the god) Šá-ra”, even though, as far as I know, this would represent the earliest known attestation of the divine name. But since the arrangement of signs obviously does not follow the ‘correct’ reading and pronunciation of personal names in a consistent manner,¹⁸ e.g. the PN A-kalam-šè written as KALAM[?].ŠÈ.A, the reading and interpretation of the onomastic evidence is still fraught with considerable uncertainty,¹⁹ particularly in view of the stela’s poor state of preservation. All things considered, the issue of the sign’s correct identification cannot be finally clarified here, and the preference for /^dŠá-ra/ is primarily accounted for by the given context and not on palaeographic grounds.

Coming back to the three stone objects; these artefacts generally have in common (cf. Table 1), that, in addition to the inscribed text, associated iconographic elements and scenes engraved on them appear, apparently mirroring and illustrating the recorded transaction, e.g. the transfer of property. However, the individuals mentioned by name cannot be securely linked with a function as a seller or buyer in each and every case even though the structural parallels to later sale documents strongly lead one to assume a similar internal structure.

Hereunder, I will mainly focus on the ‘Blau Monuments’ and the Ušumgal Stela, and—on a lesser scale—the ‘Figure aux Plumes’.²⁰ In spite of the aforementioned

¹⁷ However, it always remains a problem comparing the obviously more conservative examples of monumental palaeography on stone artefacts with those on clay, which was used for instance for the archaic texts from Ur.

¹⁸ For the aspect of free and random sign order in Old Sumerian personal name see the contribution of C. Lecompte in this volume.

¹⁹ Accordingly, the given sign cluster might well be read (and understood) as *diĝir-igi-zi-bá-ra-abzu “God-trusty-eye-upon’-the-dais-of-the-abzu” though, to the best of my knowledge, such an Old Sumerian name pattern is not attested.

²⁰ A detailed treatment of the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ from Ĝirsu (Tello) interpreted by Wilcke 1995 as a kind of literary text, i.e. a hymn to the god Ninĝirsu, is beyond the scope of this paper, and has thus

Table 1: Scheme of significant features of the artefacts under consideration.

| Artefact | Provenance | Material | Personal Names | Context | Shape |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| ‘Blau Monuments’ BM 86260 + 86261 (fig. 1) | Tall ‘Uqair (Urum → H̄A:RAD:ÚR/ or Uruk | dark green-stone facies, slaty schist or phyllite | KA-kiš ₁₇ -gal Ḥašḥur-lâl | transfer of property | semi-oval plaque (BA→ZATU 40) tapering pillar/ obelisk KU/ DAB ₅ → ZATU 300) |
| Ušumgal Stela MMA 58.29 (fig. 2) | Umma ² → PN ^d Šára ² /Bára-AN-igizi-abzu; | light/dark-brown Alabaster gypsum | Ušumgal; A-kalam ² - šè; Bára-anigizi-abzu; Me-é-nunsi; Ak; Urgú-edín-na; Bur-si; | Transfer of real estate (or marital) property); Donation of an estate; Colophon: En-ḥé-ḡál DÍM ^a | Milestone like, four-sided block of stone, flat front and base, rounded back, hemispherical top |
| ‘Figure aux Plumes’ AO 221 | Tellō (Tell K → temple of Ninḡirsu) | Limestone | ----- | Hymnal, literary text(?): ^d nin-ḡír-su zà-mì | flattened bas-relief ^b |

Notes: a The subscription or colophon written on its base represents one of the quite rare examples of mentioning an inscriptions’ (and object’s) author, i.e. the craftsman (or scribe) who manufactured the artefact, cf. En-ḥé-ḡál DÍM [X]-SAR-RA? “Enḥeḡal, manufacturer of . . .”. Yet, both the sign form of GAN = /ḥé/ (cf. UET 2, pl. 5 SL nos. 47+48) rather looks like an unsubtle variant of GAN in UET 2, 325:1 (sealing), and the assumed RA-sign (cf. UET 2, pl. 22 SL no. 273 = UDU+SI), that resembles an unsubtle LA (cf. UET 2, pl. 22 SL no. 285), have only less in common with the expected archaic ‘standard’ sign form. For another identification of the object’s manufacturer or scribe by signature, respectively, see Steinkeller 2013, 141 (Amar-ŠID, dub-sar) and Loding 1981, 7 with examples for explicitly mentioned lapidaries from the Sargonic and Ur III period. **b** The artefact is often described as a plaque though it lacks the perforated centre of the wall plaques of later Early Dynastic periods.

common features (see Table 1) all three objects reveal themselves to being quite unique. Their main characteristics and a specific structural chart of the involved individuals (and figures) of the Ušumgal Stela are drawn together in Table 1 and Table 2. Another curious script-bearing stone artefact, housed in the F. Bodmer Collection (Cologne) must certainly be classed with this group of Early Dynastic *kudurrus* as well, especially in view of the occurrence of the typical sign complex DUG+SĪLA (col. i 4).²¹ However, in contrast to the roughly tablet-like records ELTS 1–7, the object’s

not been taken into closer consideration due to its obviously different structure. Yet, the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ provides us with the portrayal of the so-called priest-king, a bearded figure with a net skirt, closely resembling in his gesture the main figure on the larger Blau plaque (ELTS 10).

21 As regarding its palaeography, especially the sign forms of DU₆, IB or PA, the object FMB 27 dis-



Fig. 1: Blau Monuments: (left) 'tapering pillar'; (right) 'semi-oval plaque' (c. 2900 BC) © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 2: Ušumgal Stela (c. 2750 BC) © Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

plays several common features with the tablet-like objects, i.e. ELTS 1–7, but also with the palaeography of the 'Blau Monuments' such as the IB-sign on the tapering pillar (ELTS 11 l. 4).

inscription runs all around it like a cone or a cylinder seal together with an additional personal name appearing on the surface of the artefact's tapering upper part.²²

By referring to the significant defining properties as *material*, *iconography* and *text* (cf. Table 1),²³ featuring the objects' universal components, I will attempt to improve our understanding of this group of stone artefacts, which are still not fully understood and sometimes only poorly preserved. Besides that I will particularly take into account those sign sequences that can be confidently linked with attested known name patterns from Old Sumerian textual sources, to obtain deeper insight into their general structure while at the same time enabling a more precise internal dating.

Based primarily on onomastic research, for example, one might argue for a slightly later date of both the Ušumgal Stela and the 'Figure aux Plumes' though the latter apparently does not contain any personal name. This notable feature of the latter strongly contrasts with the evidence from the two other stone artefacts. For example, the personal names Hašḫur-làl "Apple-syrup" (Rev. ii 15), borne by a male individual, and KA-kiš₁₇-gal "Mouth-is-a-big-Acacia"²⁴ (Obv. ii 6), borne by a female individual, occur in the inscription of the "Blau plaque" (ELTS 10),²⁵ and though these names are not exactly attested in the given form, names with the pattern kiš₁₇-gal "big acacia" and the lexeme làl "honey, syrup" are widely known from the phrasal repertoire of the Old Sumerian onomasticon, but are predominantly linked with different head nouns.²⁶ But in contrast to the Ušumgal Stela, where the depicted figures are directly accompanied by the corresponding adscription (name, title, filiation), both names either directly precede its referential portrayal (cf. KA-kiš₁₇-gal) or occur distantly posterior to the assumed referential figure (cf. Hašḫur-làl).²⁷

1 Material and Shape

While the material aspects of Early Dynastic sculpture have occasionally been addressed in scholarship,²⁸ the specific aspect of material and shape of these earliest

²² This peculiar piece is dealt with in detail in Balke (in press).

²³ This tripartite division has been inspired by Gibson's three-part categorization of the inhabited environment: medium : substances : surfaces; cf. Gibson 1979, 16.

²⁴ The name pattern /kiš₁₇-gal/ "big Acacia", alternately read ⁽⁶³⁵⁾UL₄-gal, in all likelihood denotes a thorny plant used as a metaphor for protection.

²⁵ A third personal name which is inscribed on its reverse (line 16) below the section dividing the plaque into two columns and separate entries eludes me and might tentatively be read AN-ĜĪR-il-ZA.

²⁶ Cf. A-kiš₁₇-gal "Father-is-a-big-Acacia" or A-làl "Father-is-like?-honey" both occurring in the corpus of the archaic texts from Ur; see Burrows 1935, 27 s.v. no. 14 ("a-gír-gal") and no. 22 ("a-làl").

²⁷ For the archaic form of the sign HAŠHUR see Szarzyńska 1994, 1 s.v. "tag" no. 1 (Uruk IV period).

²⁸ See most recently Evans 2012, 124–130, pointing out that surviving royal sculpture is carved mainly from hard dark stones (e.g. diorite), whereas statues dedicated by private individuals are generally

stone artefacts has not been taken into closer consideration, not to mention its interplay with the associated iconography or the inscribed text.

Admittedly, exact and systematic petrographic assays of the generally employed metamorphic rocks have been conducted only in very few cases, e.g. for the ‘Blau Monuments’ (cf. Reade 2000), what inevitably resulted in quite vague descriptions in the pertinent works such as “dark stone, blackish stone” etc. without giving any further specification.²⁹ By starting with a seemingly trivial remark on the objects’ material and shape, it must be pointed out that though largely unexplored geologically, southern Mesopotamia itself was not entirely devoid of stone, and, for example, gypsum, precisely gypsum alabaster,³⁰ or limestone, both soft, light-coloured stones, were available in Southern Mesopotamia, specifically on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. On the other hand, schist or its variety phyllite, but also greenish serpentine, had to be chiefly exported via trading routes from areas outside central Mesopotamia³¹ such as Egypt, Central Iran or the Persian Gulf.

Therefore it is not surprising that schist (and its varieties), even though relatively soft especially when compared to diorite or olivine gabbro, was only rarely used for manufacturing of stone artefacts in Mesopotamia during the third millennium BC. On the other hand, limestone and gypsum alabaster being used for the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ and the Ušumgal Stela respectively, have demonstrably been available to the Mesopotamians on the banks of Euphrates and Tigris. However, such an observable orientation to light-coloured stones in contrast to the dark(er) stone varieties used for the earliest group of ‘ancient *kudurrus*’³² does not seem to indicate a lower value,

made of soft, light-coloured stones of lower value. Accordingly, one might assume that these artefacts were largely intended to be kept in a temple building and not subjected to the weather.

29 However, improperly identified stone artefacts are by no means restricted to Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, but are known, for example, from Pre-dynastic Egypt as well, e.g. the significant ‘Palette of Narmer’ (c. 3100 BC), a shield-shaped, ceremonial palette found in the temple of Horus at Hierakonpolis, which is indeed carved from gray-green siltstone but is often described as made of schist or slate.

30 Geologically, this type of alabaster has to be distinguished from the slightly harder calcite alabaster, also known as onyx-marble that was highly esteemed for making jars, vessels, and various sacred objects. In view of the material’s characteristic translucency and light colourfulness—the purest alabaster is usually a snow-white material—a translucent green variety, as an ED II plaque from Kiš (cf. Steinkeller 2013, 131) has been described, would represent a quite unique variety of alabaster.

31 However, according to the reported findings both at Mari (c. 17th century BC), where an accessible source along the Euphrates has existed, and at Ur, i.e. in the ‘Royal Cemetery’ area (c. 2600 BC), the use of schist (or slate) seems to be far more widespread than the number of surviving pieces might indicate (cf. Moorey 1994, 26–27). Furthermore, the use of several exotic stones during the Uruk IV–III period (c. 3400–3000 BC) might be due to extensive trading contacts with the neighbouring city of Susa, a point of access to supplies from the Zagros Mountains and beyond.

32 Dark(er) stone was persistently used for inscribed stone objects throughout the early Dynastic period, e.g. in the (early) Fara period (c. 2500 BC) for the ‘Chicago Stone’ (ELTS 14) made of black basalt. Moreover, basalt was popular for relief sculpture during the Uruk IV period (c. 3200 BC), e.g. for the well-known ‘lion-hunt’ stela (cf. Börker-Klähn 1982, nos. 1–3). As its probable source one might

i.e. lesser importance of the latter two artefacts, but quite the contrary. At large the group of stones used for inscribed (monumental) sculpture is nearly identical with those used in vessel manufacture throughout the third millennium BC though not all are equally well suited for the manufacture of vessels, e.g. schist.³³ Yet all used stone varieties are also characterized by the crucial suitability for being burnished for the purpose of increasing its lustre and thus the representative status as an artefact.³⁴

As regards the artefacts' special shape, the prominent shape of both 'Blau Monuments' leaps in the eye while the 'Figure aux Plumes' and the Ušumgal Stela in each case feature shapes, which are relatively known from other script-bearing Early Dynastic stone monuments. The latter, for example, is strongly reminiscent of two slightly later stelae of the ruler Urnanše (c. 2500 BC), the first made of (porous) limestone and found at Tello, bearing a dedicative inscription on its reverse,³⁵ the second granite piece found at Ur, bearing a genealogical adscription on its reverse.³⁶ The particular shape of the 'Blau Monuments' has been interpreted hitherto as representing stone tools, i.e. a pottery scraper (= semi-oval plaque) and a chisel (= tapering pillar).³⁷

Taking up an older proposal of M. Krebernik³⁸ who connected the archaic sign form of KU/DAB₅ "to seize (the payment)" with the shape of the tapering pillar (ELTS 11), I will argue for a similar palaeographic relationship of the semi-oval plaque (ELTS 10) that might well be interpreted as being formally derived from the archaic sign form BA "distribution".³⁹ In addition, this observation fits well with the fact that BA (cf. fig. 3) appears in the Uruk III administrative corpus—contrasting with GI "delivery outside the household"—, as a general term for distribution (as rations?). Accordingly, BA seems quite suitable to be used as a kind of template for an object recording a list of

assume Syria, which provided the Neo-Assyrian kings with basalt for sculpture during the first millennium BC.

33 See the commented list of used stones in Moorey 1994, 37–38.

34 Sometimes also volcanic rock such as the hard grey-green trachyte was used for the manufacture of statues, cf. Moorey 1994, 25.

35 This stela seems to commemorate the inauguration of the Ibgal, the temple of the goddess Inana, displaying portrayals of Urnanše, his wife Menbara'abzu and daughter NinUsud, both identified by their names inscribed on their garments.

36 Interesting enough, instead of being cut, the relief is completely made by rubbing-down the stone (cf. Börker-Klähn 1982, no. 16), an obvious indication that the material, i.e. mottled black and white granite, was too hard for the sculptor. Generally, it is equally curious and difficult to understand why such an important ruler as Urnanše has evidently left two stone artefacts of an obviously poor quality; nonetheless this might be due to special circumstances, such as the fact that the latter piece was carried off to Ur and later re-utilized as construction material by the Neo-Babylonian ruler Nebukad-nezzar in the 6th century BC.

37 See Braun-Holzinger 2007, 16–19.

38 Krebernik 1993–1994, 90 s.v. Nr. 10, 11.

39 For a similar proposal see now Boese 2010, 215. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the sign DU₆ "hill" (cf. UET 2, pl. 18 SL no. 219, e.g. ELTS 1 iii 2) also features a similar shape even though slightly wider, but, of course, does not fit together with KU/DAB₅ as its assumed symbolic counterpart.

goods to be transferred from one individual to another. Both shapes then might confidently be related to the archaic sign forms of KU/DAB₅ “to seize (the payment)” (cf. fig. 4),⁴⁰ possibly referring to the plot of land representing the receipt of a payment, and

URUK IV
 40 BA, IGI

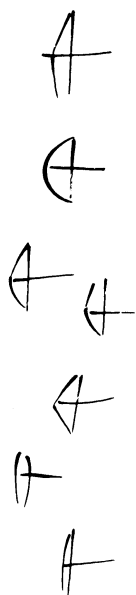


Fig. 3: Archaic Sign-form BA (ZATU 40; Uruk IV).

BA “distribution”, respectively, obviously referring to the list of commodities, i.e. the price and/or additional payments. If we indeed agree on this interpretation connecting these extraordinary stone artefacts, shapes to archaic sign-forms symbolizing a graphic transfer of a cuneiform sign-form to a script-bearing object, it would fundamentally follow—on the background of Lakoff’s ‘experiential realism’⁴¹—the principle of objectification (“Vergegenständlichung”) of mental images, how it also came into effect in the evolutionary process of the archaic cuneiform script, e.g. by means of metaphor or metonymy.⁴²

As regarding the preference for stone as the employed material, one can only surmise that these documents could have been meant to be deposited in a temple or public office, in a similar fashion to later Presargonic (c. 2350 BC) sale transactions. The latter often required at least two complementary records: a clay tablet kept by the buyer in his archive and a clay cone for the purpose of public scrutiny, but occasionally a further composite record of the buyer’s purchases made of stone.⁴³

Finally, the preceding observations on the diversity and relevance of the employed materials, i.e. stone varieties, lead to the unmistakable résumé that stone, e.g. schist, limestone, alabaster gypsum or basalt, was the preferred material—in con-

⁴⁰ Note the extreme spectrum of diverging sign-forms in the corpus of the archaic texts from Ur (cf. UET 2, pl. 31 SL no. 384) ranging from a (more) narrow frame, a broader, leaning variant till variants with a striking tapering lower part (cf. no. 384 var. d) and further intermediate forms with only vestigial reminiscence of the earlier pictographic form.

⁴¹ Cf. Lakoff 1987.

⁴² Equally it would support the theory particularly advanced by J.-J. Glassner (cf. Glassner 2000), that the archaic script of the Uruk IV/III period was intimately linked to the Sumerian language from the very beginning.

⁴³ For the pre-eminent importance of stone artefacts, erected stones (“Grenzsteine”), in the context of legal procedures, if understood in the broadest sense, see Assmann 1993, 239–241, who explicitly underlined the inherent relevance of the distinguishing marks, visibility (“Sichtbarkeit”), perpetuity (“Ewigkeit”), spatiality (“Räumlichkeit”) and stability (“Ortsfestigkeit”) with regard to (erected) stone objects in the cultures of the Ancient Near East.

trast to the inexpensive clay⁴⁴—for monumental script-bearing artefacts in the first half of the third millennium BC.⁴⁵ Although their predominant use for sale-like transactions can surely be linked to inherent properties such as durability (and absolute hardness),⁴⁶ stability or translucency mirroring the inscriptions' assigned permanence, the selection of a specific stone variety, apart from the assumed pragmatic range of utilization, largely depended on the following basic issues: (A) the intended repository of the artefact, e.g. inside a temple building, (B) the object's specific provenance and the local accessibility to metamorphic rocks, and, presumably, (C) the particular textual characteristic and its perception through the anticipated audience.

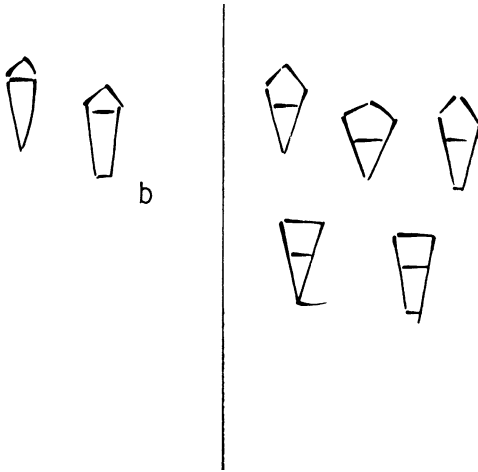


Fig. 4: Archaic Sign-form KU/DAB₅ (ZATU 300; Uruk IV).

44 Clay was the standard medium for nearly all administrative record-keeping and communication. Thus clay tablets usually were not meant to bear (commemorative) royal inscriptions, with the exceptional use as copies or drafts of texts originally carved on monumental stone objects.

45 Needless to say, that from the time of Urnanše onwards (c. 2500 BC) we also find other materials like copper, gold, lapis lazuli, and silver used for several dedicative script-bearing objects (e.g. foundation figurines, plaques, tablets, or vessels).

46 Mineral hardness, characterized by its scratch resistance and measured according to the so-called MOHS scale (1–10), is usually determining for the object's scope for design and the stone's general workability.

2 Iconography

The stylistically and epigraphically unified ‘Blau Monuments’ form one composite artefact probably fashioned at the same time and presumably by the same stonemason (zadim). In favour of a contemporaneous origin of text and associated iconography is the fact that the two figures facing each other on the obverse of the semi-oval plaque, a man who holds a kind of pestle⁴⁷ and a woman (?) with bent arms and quenched fists,⁴⁸ are apparently accurately arranged according to the dividing rules of the entries, deliberately considering the necessary space for both portrayals to attain a compositionally balanced result. In this regard, the Blau Monuments show a more discernible consideration for the associated iconography than, for example, the Ušumgal Stela or ‘Figure aux Plumes’.

Only the semi-oval plaque (ELTS 10) completely contains iconography and text on its obverse and reverse, whereas the tapering pillar (‘obelisk’) bears writing on its obverse but iconographic scenes on its reverse.⁴⁹ On iconographic grounds, the semi-oval plaque shares with the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ the depiction of a bearded man wearing a headband and a skirt of netlike material (indicated by the incised crisscross pattern), generally referred to as the ‘priest-king’ (EN) on account of his appearance in both secular and religious contexts. Although the bearded male figure (‘priest-king’) of the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ standing before three colossal maces, i.e. a temple door, apparently displays minor pictorial differences, e.g. the longer backswept hair and the two feathers,⁵⁰ both stone artefacts obviously seize the well-known pictorial motif of the so-called priest-king, i.e. male EN(-priest) of Inana,⁵¹ originally connected with (slightly) earlier iconographic traditions from the Uruk III period.⁵² Generally, considering the minor variations of the figure’s imagery, e.g. typical net skirt vs. plain skirt⁵³ or the differences in hairstyle, it seems evident that the specific iconography of the ‘priest-king’ should be seen more in terms of the essential imagery of a certain ruler type and less in terms of the specific attire. In addition, the rounded headwear

⁴⁷ This object has been erroneously assigned to the female co-seller(?) in Asher-Greve 2006, 46–47.

⁴⁸ The identification of this figure has been discussed controversially, see, for example, Braun-Holzinger 2007, 17–18 who argues for an identification as a male (figure) against Steinkeller in ELTS p. 41.

⁴⁹ For further details see Gelb et al. 1991, 40–42 and Boese 2010, 214–218.

⁵⁰ For a different interpretation of these “feathers” as wheat stalks (or another symbol of vegetation) see Dolce 1997, 1–3.

⁵¹ For a recent critical appraisal of the persistent interpretation of the EN from the Uruk IV–III text corpus as “priest-king” see Suter 2014, 554–560.

⁵² For further instances of this specific figure see Boese 2010, 216–218 with older literature.

⁵³ Cf. cylinder seals in Boese 2010, 219 Abb. A–H.

Table 2: Scheme of Iconography and Text (FIG = depiction; PN = personal name).^a

| | |
|---|---|
| | [1] |
| | ↓ house plots |
| | NP ₁ é řú |
| | NP ₂ é řú |
| | NP ₃ é řú |
| | FIG |
| | ↓ |
| | PN: Ak (gal-ukkin) |
| FIG | FIG |
| ↓ | ↓ |
| Ušumgal, pa ₄ -ses bára-AN | ^a Šára?(Bára-AN)-igi-zi-abzu, dumu A-kalam-šè ^b |
| [2] | |
| ↓ . measure of area PN (niġir; pa ₄ -ses) | |
| . bulls, sheep, donkeys PN (saġġa) | |
| . measure of area PN ₁ PN ₂ ġiš ab-bala? //PN(?) a-DU | |
| FIG | |
| ↓ | |
| IGI.RU ² .NUN.A.ŠÈ, dumu Me-é-nun-si pa ₄ -ses | |
| [3] | |
| ↓ oath taking | |
| nam-ku ₅ PN ₁ 6 GÁNA GI.LAGAB ² | |
| nam-ku ₅ PN ₂ 3 GÁNA GI.LAGAB ² | |
| FIG | |
| ↓ | |
| X.KU.EN (gal-niġir) | |
| [4] | |
| ↓ grand total (property?) | |
| gú-an 2 (bur'u); 5 (būr) GÁNA | |
| Ušumgal nam-ta-šid/nam-šID ša _x (LAK 384) ² Ušumgal | |
| FIG | |
| ↓ | |
| Ses-na/ki (ugula-ukkin) | |
| [5] | |
| ↓ subscript(?) on the base | |
| En-ġé-ġál díṃ X (=A?) SAR.RA ^{2c} | |

Notes: **a** For a similar chart see Milano 2008, 102. **b** Against Gelb/Steinkeller/Whiting 1991, 46 the father of the woman named ^aŠára / Bára-AN-igi-zi-abzu is not Ušumgal but, according to the given signs, A-kalam (UET 2 pl. 29 SL no. 367)-šè “Father-for-the-land (Sumer)”, cf. the similar Old Sumerian male and female personal names Lugal-a-kalam “The king-is-the-father-of-the-land”, A-kalam-du₁₀ “Father-is-good-[for]-the-land (Sumer)” or shortened A-kalam “Father-[for?]-the-land (Sumer)”, the name of the wife of the Ensi Abzukidug. **c** If sar ‘to write’ is really meant, it would be the earliest attestation of this verbal base otherwise appearing more frequent in the (later) textual corpus from Abu Salabikh (c. 2600 BC); for an elaborate discussion of sar ‘to write’, in opposition to hur ‘to draw’, see most recently Glassner 2000, 106 although one might not follow his given etymology ‘go fast and straight’.

(or circlet) turns out then to be significantly more essential as a possible indicator for rulership than the other attributes.⁵⁴

By looking closely at the depicted iconographic scenes, it can be also perceived that all three stone artefacts apparently contain pictorial indications for accompanying symbolic legal acts widely known from the contemporaneous textual evidence. These associated ritual actions symbolized the transfer and conveyance of (real) property in sale documents throughout the third millennium BC and at the same time made public the whole transaction, for example, by means of a *niĝir* “herald, town crier”.⁵⁵

At least two virtually certain indications for such additional symbolic ceremonies can be gleaned from the depicted pictorial scenes: (A) the *ĝi š . . . ba la* “crossing over/ passing the pestle/wooden stick” ritual action, assuming that the bearded male figure (‘priest-king’) is holding a pestle (or wooden stick) with both hands⁵⁶ on the obverse of the semi-oval plaque (ELTS 10), and (B) the *gag é-gar_g(-ra) . . . dū* “driving the peg into the wall (horizontally)” ceremonial act as a nail (*gag*) is clearly discernible in the left side of a temple’s(?) doorway protruding horizontally from the wall of an architectural structure in front of Ušumgal’s portrayal (cf. ELTS 12: Photograph Side A).⁵⁷ If the visible nail-like object is correctly identified with a peg (*gag*), this would represent crucial evidence for the fact that these objects were indeed displayed in a public place. On the other hand, an interpretation of the first mace being grasped by the bearded male figure (‘priest-king’) with his left hand on the ‘Figure aux Plumes’, as symbolizing a kind of pestle or wooden stick, too, seems less likely, especially with regard to a possible identification of this figure as a deity (*Ninĝirsu*).

⁵⁴ This is supported by the observation that the bald figure depicted on the plaque’s reverse wears no headwear but a long net-skirt who might represent another involved official or an acolyte of the bearded ‘priest-king’.

⁵⁵ Its omission would have vitiated the validity of the recorded proceedings. Generally, it seems to turn out that the further one tries to trace back the evolvement of legal matters to their very beginnings the more an association to symbolic and ritual actions seems to manifest itself. For the role of the *niĝir* ‘herald’ see Steinkeller 1989, 101–102.

⁵⁶ This object is crucially different from both the tools(?) being gripped by the three kneeling servants(?) or the sitting craftsman(?) on the tapering pillar (‘obelisk’). These objects, if indeed representing chisels or mortars, might well be taken as pointing to the general importance of craftsmanship, either generally in the society or, concretely, for manufacturing these two small stone artefacts; see Moorey 1994, 56–57 for similar attempts at an explanation.

⁵⁷ It is interesting to observe that as in the case of the ‘Blau Monuments’, namely the semi-oval plaque, in the case at issue the depicted figure of Ušumgal also faces a female figure of the same size, holding a kind of vessel and wearing a garment draped over her left shoulder, across the doorway of a temple(?), even though, as will be pointed out, this woman cannot be identified as Ušumgal’s daughter but—according to the adscription—as the daughter of a certain Akalamše.

3 Text

Enlarging now upon the crucial issue of the respective textual evidence revealing itself more or less in the artefacts' inscriptions, it becomes immediately evident that all three texts clearly differ from one another both in their content, though on a lesser scale, and complexity despite the aforementioned palaeographic and/or structural similarities. As regards the textual evidence, i.e. the content, I will generally confine myself to conspicuous structural remarks on selected issues, which occasionally might deviate from the interpretation (and transliteration) presented by the authors of ELTS. Considering the 'Blau Monuments', both stone pieces feature diverging portions of inscribed text: the tapering pillar ('obelisk') a five-line inscription on its obverse running subsequently from top to the bottom, the semi-oval plaque a two-column inscription—interrupted by two human portrayals—on its obverse ending at the top of the reverse with an additional adscription on the upper left side, above the naked, beardless figure with the stick-like tool (driller?) sitting on a kind of taboret and the bald figure who wears a net skirt. A noteworthy property of the plaque's inscription is the use of dividing vertical lines within a case, that is to say sub-columns (cf. col. l. 4a–c: 2 *uri* '2 U.-vessels'; 2 *gada* '2 linen (cloths)'; 2 *šakir* (LAK 602) *LĀ ŠĒ*⁵⁸ '2 butter churns'), as it is a known characteristic of multi-column archaic tablets from the proto-literate period (Uruk III).⁵⁹

The relatively brief inscription of the tapering pillar ('obelisk') in all likelihood records the size of the sold(?) real estate (c. 33 ha) together with its concrete site, i.e. the meadow⁶⁰ of the (deity) Nin-UL₄(?)(l. 1), that it was returned (*gi*₄-a; l. 2) to the exterior(?) of Urum (ḪA.ŪR.BAR²; l.2–3), by the buyer BIL_x (SL no. 377 NE.PAP)-alam-UL₄-GI₄?⁶¹, the cultivator of the temple household (*engar èš*; l. 4–5). The semi-oval plaque lists the commodities presumably representing the (additional) payment, among them birds, i.e. black francolins(DAR),⁶² a cauldron—belonging to the woman

⁵⁸ Probably a type of vessel, if comparable to (later) *duššakir-šè-lá*.

⁵⁹ Cf. Englund 1998, 56–60 and n. 5; this specific indication seldom occurs in later documents as well, for example, in ELTS 13, a rectangular limestone tablet probably dated to the Fara period (c. 2500 BC).

⁶⁰ For U₈.SAL 'meadow(?)' (< *ú-sal*) see also the toponym SAL.U₈^{ki} attested in CUSAS 17 (2011) no. 104 (MS 2482) v' 4 and vi'5.

⁶¹ See Krebernik 2002, 14 fn. 39 for convincingly taking the sign sequence /SL no. 37 PAP.NE/ as the graphic precursor of later *ĜIŠ.NE/GIBIL* (= /bil/). However, the sign read as GI₄ by Krebernik, especially, if compared to a clear GI₄ in l. 2, is rather TAK₄ (SL no. 118), what might lead to an equally sound transliteration as TAK₄.ALAM gibil(NE) Pa₄-UL₄-ĜIŠ 'new portrayal(!) of P.

⁶² In his critical appraisal, Sommerfeld 2006, 56 has convincingly argued against an interpretation of BA.DAR 'dagger' as a Semitic loanword (< *patarru*) in Sumerian as postulated in Gelb/Steinkeller/Whiting 1991, 41–43.

K.—, and vessels, linen (clothes), a slave(?), silver, beer and a kid, belonging to the man H.⁶³

But not all entries among the enumerated goods can be explained conclusively, e.g. EN.A and EN.ŠĀ. Both sign groups are only rarely attested in the archaic text corpus, e.g. EN.A in CUSAS 1: 135 (list of cereal products) or EN.ŠĀ in *ibid.* 182:6 (ration list), where an interpretation as ‘something for the EN’, as it is likely in the phrase EN.TÚG ‘garments (for) the EN’, seems hardly plausible, particularly in view of a sequence GĀNA EN.ŠĀ (CUSAS 1, 25:1), where EN.ŠĀ appears to be a personal name or perhaps a toponym. On the other hand, the occurrence of initial numbers seems to exclude an interpretation as a name of an individual. Furthermore, by reading the two signs as EN.ZA ‘(precious) stones for the EN(?)’—the signs A and ZA are not yet strictly separated—it would become even more plausible to identify the first portrayal as a female person and likewise to link the whole content with the transfer of marital property, as it was suggested by Wilcke.⁶⁴ Eventually, it is notable that based on palaeographic and contextual grounds and in view of the compositionally balanced and accurate iconography, there seems no plausible reason to contest the primary character of both writing and associated iconography of this unique pair of stone artefacts.

In contrast to the textual evidence of the ‘Blau Monuments’, the inscription of the Ušumgal stela (cf. Table 2) is far more complex, e.g. the number of mentioned house plots and involved high officials, e.g. senior priests (pa₄-ses),⁶⁵ or the final peculiar mention of the grand total (gú-an), and displays conspicuously phraseological traits of a principally legal record, e.g. the taking of the declaratory oath (nam-ku₂) or the mention of the symbolic passing by a wooden pestle (ġiš ab-bala).⁶⁶ Moreover, the inscription contains (short) finite verbal forms such as ab-bala, an obvious abbreviation of later ġiš-a ab-ta-bala “let someone/something pass the wooden pestle”, a feature that it shares with the text of the ‘Figure aux Plumes’, e.g. ġiš nu-rú “wood is not erected”, but which is not found in the text of the ‘Blau Monuments’ though

⁶³ Interestingly enough, many of these entries could be well interpreted as personal names, even though as truncated variants, e.g. igi-gūn (cf. ELTS 15 ii 11, vi 10, viii 22), en-a(-rá-nú), en-šà(-kúš/ga-na) or ki-kù, which all are attested in the Old Sumerian onomasticon. Notwithstanding, if compared to the sign repertoire of the archaic texts from Ur, the given sign form must be certainly read BA (see UET 2, pl. 18 SL no. 222) instead of IGI (cf. UET 2, pl. 20 SL nos. 240 and 185 [on a sealing]), because both forms are clearly separated from each other and thus represent distinct signs (and lexemes) in this corpus. The IGI-sign (SL no. 240) obviously preserved the similarity to its pictorial origin, i.e. the eye, whereas BA developed into a more trapezoidal frame.

⁶⁴ See Wilcke 2007, 64.

⁶⁵ For this title, literally the ‘older relative of the brother(hood)’ see the detailed treatment in Krispijn 2004.

⁶⁶ That the sign sequence NAM ŠID TA (or LAK 384) should be read /nam-ta-šid/ representing a finite verbal form seems quite unlikely due to the lack of any other known verbal parallel, whereas a genitive phrase like nam-šid za_x(LAK 384) “counted total property of (Ušumgal)” fits in the context more appropriate.

symbolized by its depicted iconography. Generally, the occurrence of finite Sumerian verbal forms usually consisting of a verbal stem with a preceding (dimensional) prefix, sometimes including a dimensional personal prefix, is not attested before the Fara period, for example, in the ‘Baltimore Stone’ (ELTS no. 15) displaying forms like *íb-è* “it was removed”, *ab-a₅* “it was applied (on)” or *an-na-lá* “it was weighed out for him”. This appearance of finite verbal forms is surely indicative for a later dating of both the Ušumgal Stela and the ‘Figure aux Plumes’ in contrast to the older ‘Blau Monuments’.⁶⁷

4 Conclusion

Based on the observations and insights achieved through the structural comparison of these significant stone monuments, first and foremost, it is evident that iconography and writing, i.e. the graphic representation of language, seem to be quite disjunctive categories already in the earliest written documentation; in other words, iconography and writing are clearly separated ‘communicative’ media.⁶⁸ While iconography and textual evidence of the ‘Blau Monuments’ roughly function as complementary referential components, that is to say they essentially display the purpose of the whole transaction, in the case of the Ušumgal Stela both seem to represent inconsistently marked categories. This becomes evident by considering the pictorial hint at the peg (*gag*), i.e. the ceremonial act of driving a nail into a wall, in opposition to the divergent textual indication of the symbolic act of making someone pass by a wooden pestle. Therefore, this relation seems to be entirely different from the case in ancient Egypt⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Generally the corpus of the archaic texts from Ur contains the first examples of infinite verbal forms (cf. verbal base + /a/) and the usage of phonetic complements, e.g. *gíd-a* “surveyed” in UET 2, 104 iv 5 (*gíd^a*).

⁶⁸ However, there are rare examples of co-occurring (glyptic) imagery and cuneiform writing on seals, e.g. an unique seal formerly belonging to the Erlenmeyer collection (cf. Nissen/Damerow/Englund 1990, 45 Abb. 5a1), which probably displays the designation of a certain festival, i.e. ‘festival of the evening/ morning Inana (= Venus)’, underlined by the appearance of the archaic sign-forms AN (‘god’ = ZATU 31), UD (‘day, sun’ = ZATU 566), SIG (‘below, evening’ = ZATU 451), and EZEM (‘festival’ = ZATU 150) together with the reed bundle as the symbol of the goddess Inana. In addition, the only further evidence in the Uruk III period for cuneiform writing on seals comes from a sealing found on several archaic tablets from Jemdet Nasr containing the names of some Mesopotamian cities though in contrast to the written forms the glyptic forms are more pictorial and curvaceous.

⁶⁹ This becomes particularly evident in a specific emblematic mode of representation, where hieroglyphs and further elements acquired human limbs in order to act independently in iconographic scenes; cf. Baines 1985, 43–63.

or Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica,⁷⁰ where imagery and glyphs continuously remained intimately close and even integrally connected.⁷¹

There are indeed further meaningful examples for such an incoherency and inconsistency, between writing and associated iconography. For example, in Eanatum's famous Stela of the Vultures, a stela fragment of Sargon of Akkade (c. 2300 BC)⁷² or the Dadusha Stela (18th century BC),⁷³ the depicted vultures, though definitely part of the artefact's imagery—in the latter both cases certainly a pictorial reminiscence of the Stela of Vultures—are strikingly not explicitly mentioned in the corresponding inscription. However, as has been widely stressed by Winter (1985), the relationship between imagery and writing might well be seen as one of originally independent and concomitant modes that were only linked in their incorporation on the single artefact.

Leaving aside the intricate matter of exactly determining the precise kind of legal procedure (e.g. marriage, inheritance, grant) described in text and iconography, the observable interplay between writing, iconography and chosen material might well permit deeper insights into the object's internal structure and, possibly, its intended perception in the public. Considering the fact, that the authorship of third millennium Sumerian records is, apart from a few exceptions, usually unknown, the explicit mention of the author, the 'scribe' or 'artisan', who chiselled the text of the Ušumgal Stela, deserves special attention. Apparently, this must be understood to mean that this individual, i.e. Enġeġal, was officially responsible for the inscription's correctness.

First of all, three fairly assured statements about this group of stone artefacts can be made:

1. all three served a legal-documentary purpose in the wider sense using a durable material as a means of ensuring their endurance;
2. the contemporaneous origin of iconography and cuneiform writing is virtually certain for all artefacts;⁷⁴

70 Cf. the contributions in Boone/Mignolo 1994.

71 However, imagery and cuneiform writing occasionally coalesced, as can be seen on the metal vessels (bowls, tumblers) from Ur, which display on its rim a band of 'herring-bone design' together with a twofold zig-zag beneath (cf. Selz 2004, 200). These decorative elements, i.e. the zig-zag and the herring-bone, are actually pictorial repetitions of the cuneiforms signs for "water" (a) and barley (še). Note, that the same vessels often feature rosettes on their bases, usually interpreted as an emblem of the goddess Inana (differently cf. Selz 2004, 201), and flowers as figurative elements.

72 Cf. Braun-Holzinger 2007, 88–91 and 101 s.v. AKK 1.

73 Cf. Braun-Holzinger 2007, 152–154 and 168 s.v. AB 12.

74 Needless to say, that there is, of course, Early Dynastic sculpture with secondary writing what becomes evident on palaeographic grounds or through the script's absolute crudeness; see Boese 1996, 27–35 for examples from Mari (c. 2500 BC).

3. the lack of the sign group DUG(KAŠ/TIN)+ŠĪLA in all three texts must be taken as indicative for a different (legal?) categorization compared to the group of tablet-like stone objects ELTS 1–7.

But what do these very specific stone artefacts reveal with regard to their particular ‘social environment’, that is to say, concerning their respective addressee, concrete location and repository or even ‘owner’. Apart from the ‘Figure aux Plumes’, which precise location at the temple of Ningirsu seems barely questionable, we can only make conjectures for the other two objects with regard to the aspects mentioned. While in the case of the Ušumgal Stela the iconographic composition and the use of a stela as the script-bearing medium speak in favour of a cultic donation within a family and thus rather for a public location, e.g. a courtyard, gate or processional way of a sanctuary,⁷⁵ the two-part composite nature of the ‘Blau Monuments’ does not easily reveal further details through its writing and iconography about its actual ‘social environment’, the location and the assumed audience.

Notwithstanding, considering both the fundamental importance of ritual in early Ancient Near Eastern law and the corresponding lack of any textual reference to symbolic ceremonies, it seems worth considering that both stone pieces might well embody this symbolic sphere in themselves by having possibly been deposited with the buyer, i.e. the cultivator of the sanctuary (*engar èš*), and/or the former owners of the real estate. It seems also conceivable that by imitating the forms of semantically referential archaic cuneiform signs, i.e. BA (‘semi-oval plaque’) and KU/DAB₅ (‘tapering pillar’), the ‘Blau Monuments’ might well be directed at an illiterate public viewer or audience, who is supposed to discern the objects’ inherent legal nature already by their alluding shape. Yet their actual location and concrete architectural placement still remain quite opaque. Moreover, if these pieces have been meant for public scrutiny at all, is far from certain even though both artefacts, if placed upright – orientated to the direction of reading – almost at the same height (c. 16 cm), might well represent a deliberately arranged composite ensemble considerably enhancing the owner’s prestige. But likewise, they could represent a kind of valid deed usually kept privately by the buyer and only to be produced as a proof of the transaction’s general legitimacy.⁷⁶ From an evolutionary point of view the unique ‘Blau Monuments’ seem

⁷⁵ It goes without saying that not all stelae (*na-rú-a*, lit. “erected stone”) are *per se* cultic or historical records, as can be seen, for example, in an Old Sumerian administrative text from Lagas (c. 2350 BC) recording the acreage of various vegetables and its specific dimensions, and also mentioning that one furrow of onions borders on a stela (*na-rú-a*). Thus, *na-rú-a*, in this context is certainly to be understood as a boulder and not as a monumental stela in the narrow sense.

⁷⁶ We also can only surmise whether the ‘Blau Monuments’, if kept privately or deposited in the public, were ever read aloud to a possibly illiterate seller or buyer by a scribe or literate craftsman. Likewise the probable degrees of literacy and the scale of passive or active knowledge of writing and reading cannot be conclusively justified in the earliest literate periods of Mesopotamia.

to be at the earliest stage of inscribed monumental art, possibly not yet adequately aligned to its intended purpose, before the evolution of the classic slab-like stela with fixed divisions into friezes in the later Early Dynastic periods. Likewise their uniqueness is certainly due to this stage of development and especially to possible different local traditions.⁷⁷

On the other hand, one can reasonably infer that inscribed artefacts with a definite stand space as stelae could be visibly deposited on walls or in wall niches, while plaques or wall plaques could be affixed to walls or doors by means of a large nail or peg and build into a wall with its back side respectively.⁷⁸ Thus, if one considers the criterion of accessibility and visibility of writing as vital for any literate communication, consequently the complete textual evidence, if on obverse, reverse or any other side of the object, should be clearly recognizable to any assumed audience. Although this group of artefacts, especially the enigmatic 'Blau Monuments' in its unique two-part composite structure, does not convey much factual unambiguous evidence, they definitely embody as artefacts with a primary legal-documentary purpose important mosaic pieces in the evolutionary process of early writing, equally substantiating the fundamental significance of law as a socially important area in the extension of literacy in Ancient Mesopotamia after the Late-Uruk period.

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⁷⁷ By contrast, the stela of Ušumgal (c. 2750 BC) represents the earliest exponent of a milestone-like kind of stela that was, for example, used by Urnanše two centuries later, too.

⁷⁸ See Börker-Klähn 1982, 115 and n. 4.

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