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Object, Images, and Text: Remarks on Two “Intercultural Style” Vessels from Nippur

A special class of carved vessels, which are characterized by distinctive low-relief decoration of the entire surface with motifs of various kind (abstract, architectural, vegetal) or with naturalistic scenes involving wild animals and human or hybrid—part human, part animal—figures,¹ is attested in a vast area of the ancient Near and Middle East that stretches from Mesopotamia and the region of the Gulf to India and Uzbekistan. These artifacts, mostly made of chlorite or steatite, are generally referred to either as “intercultural style” vessels, because of their wide distribution,² or as *série ancienne*, in opposition to another, later group of carved chlorite vessels called *série récente*.³

The publication of an astonishing corpus of such vessels and other objects of the same style from the area of Jiroft, in southeastern Iran,⁴ has raised great interest and generated considerable debate among scholars in the last ten years. Some now prefer to label them as “Jiroft style” rather than “intercultural style”.⁵ In this study the latter, traditional designation is retained for the sake of convenience. We know that “intercultural style” artifacts were primarily made in southeastern Iran, in what was then called the land of Marḥaši in Sumerian and Baraḥšum (or Paraḥšum) in Akkadian,⁶

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1 See Kohl 1975, 138–228; Lamberg-Karlovsky 1988; Perrot/Madjidzadeh 2005; iid. 2006; Perrot 2008.

2 We owe the designation “intercultural style” for this class of objects to Philip Kohl: “Over the past forty years a corpus of elaborately carved soft stone artefacts has gradually been recognized as a unique body of material for documenting long-distance trade throughout Southwest Asia. No other class of artefacts are as widely distributed in the mid-third millennium. This corpus will be referred to as the Intercultural Style, a term which emphasizes its distribution and apparent significance for the numerous cultures of highland Iran, the Persian Gulf, and the lowland urban centers of Mesopotamia and Khuzestan” (Kohl 1975, 1). According to Lamberg-Karlovsky (1993, 285), however, “this object type represented a shared ideological and ritual significance to peoples of different cultures [...] united by the specific belief system that the vessels symbolize. [...] This alone justifies the use of the term “intercultural style””. Other scholars consider this style to be the product of the phenomenon of cultural interpenetration, and the designation “intercultural” as an apt label for a style that seems to blend elements of diverse cultural origin (see, e.g., J. Aruz in Aruz/Wallenfels 2003, 325).

3 See de Miroschedji 1973. Cf. also Moorey 1999, 46–49.

4 Madjidzadeh 2003.

5 See, e.g., Perrot/Madjidzadeh 2005.

6 See Steinkeller 1982; Amiet 1986, 132–139; Potts 2004, 6–9; id. 2005, 67f.; Steinkeller 2012; id. 2014.

although there may also be some evidence for the manufacture and/or reworking of objects of this sort in the island of Tarut,⁷ in the Gulf region.⁸ Their chronology extends for a period of roughly six to seven centuries, that is, from the Early Dynastic II period to Akkadian or Ur III times, in terms of Mesopotamian chronology.⁹

According to Philip Kohl, who first studied these objects systematically, the “intercultural style” vessels attest to long-distance trade in finished commodities.¹⁰ In Kohl’s view, these vessels were manufactured in several production centers in south-eastern Iran in order to satisfy and exploit the Mesopotamian demand for elite goods. This interpretation was challenged by Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky, who considered the “intercultural style” vessels to be “artifacts of ritual significance”.¹¹ Lamberg-Karlovsky remarked that some of the iconographic elements, such as the hut-pot and the snake, “appear to symbolize death”, while the provenance of numerous examples of these kinds of vessels from tombs “further suggest[s] their association with the ritual of death and burial”.¹² The wide distribution of these objects was interpreted by Lamberg-Karlovsky as the reflex of a shared ideology of death, and of common burial rites, by people of different cultures.¹³ On the other hand, Pascal Butterlin most recently pointed out that “alors que ces vases ont été découverts en milieu funéraire dans le sud de l’Iran, notamment aux alentours de Jiroft ou sur l’île de Tarut, ils apparaissent en Mésopotamie dans le mobilier des grandes sanctuaires”,¹⁴ while Holly Pittman maintained that “these highly symbolic objects were made solely for local consumption” and that “this artifact was culturally salient only in the Halil River valley”.¹⁵ In addition, Pittman observed that “only closed vessels are documented among exported examples [...] which may suggest that they were exported for their contents”.¹⁶

Some vessels of the “intercultural style” that were found in Mesopotamian sites bear cuneiform inscriptions in the Sumerian or Akkadian language. These inscribed pieces are few in number; no more than nine or ten examples are presently known.¹⁷ Of course, these kinds of vessels do not readily accommodate inscriptions, as their outer surfaces are customarily covered with decorations, leaving no space for inscriptions. When inscriptions do appear, they are usually engraved on the inside of

7 See Zarins 1987 (especially p. 67). Cf. Kohl 2001, 220f.; Cleuziou 2003.

8 Cf. Marchesi 2011, 195 with n. 34.

9 See Potts 1994, 255–262; Moorey 1999, 48–49; Kohl 2001, 221–228.

10 Kohl 1975; 1978; 1979; 2001.

11 Lamberg-Karlovsky 1988, 53.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. See also Lamberg-Karlovsky 1993, 285–287.

14 Butterlin 2014, 183.

15 Pittman 2013, 309.

16 Ibid.

17 See Marchesi forthcoming.

vessels, where they cannot be seen except by peering inside. In two noteworthy cases, however, inscriptions do appear on the outer surface of the vessels.

One of these two objects, which is now housed in the Iraq Museum at Baghdad (IM 66071),¹⁸ comes from a well-defined archaeological context: level VIIB of the Innanak (= “Inanna”) Temple at Nippur,¹⁹ which dates to the Early Dynastic IIIa period.²⁰ The decoration on this vessel depicts a contest scene involving a spotted feline—either a leopard or a cheetah²¹—and a coiled snake, one of the favorite motifs of the “inter-cultural style.”²² A two-line inscription is engraved in the empty triangular space between the tail of the feline and the coils of the snake (fig. 1).²³



Fig. 1: IM 66071 (adapted from a drawing by Sylvia Winkelmann).

¹⁸ *La terra tra i due fiumi* 1985, 306, no. 55.

¹⁹ Hansen 1975, 184 *ad* 76a. For the reading of the goddess’ name as Innanak, instead of conventional Inanna, see Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 239 with n. 18.

²⁰ See Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 34–36.

²¹ Cf. Potts 2002, 347–352; Perrot/Madjidzadeh 2005, 137 with n. 12.

²² See Perrot/Madjidzadeh 2005, 139, fig. 8.

²³ For photographs, see Kohl 1975, 156, pl. XXXIXb; *id.* 1979, 64, fig. 5; *id.* 2001, 226, fig. 9.13. See also Goetze 1970–1971, 50, 7N–120 (copy of the inscription).

Donald Hansen and George Dales, who first published the piece in 1962, read this inscription as “Inanna and the serpent”, which they interpreted as a sort of explanatory gloss on the image, according to which the feline represents the goddess Innanak in the form of an animal.²⁴ Hansen later argued for the same interpretation, this time more cautiously:

Zwei Keilschriftzeichen [sic!], eingeritzt auf der Rückseite, zwischen den Schwänzen der Tiere, könnten als “Inanna und die Schlange” gelesen werden und damit die Kampfszene erklären.²⁵

The idea that the inscription directly relates to the imagery on the vessel found much favor among scholars. Hansen’s interpretation has been reiterated again and again in the secondary literature,²⁶ most recently by Sylvia Winkelmann, who, while commenting on certain alleged theriomorphic representations of an Iranian goddess in the Iranian art of the third millennium BC, writes:

Und eines dieser iranischen “intercultural style”-Gefäße mit der Darstellung des Kampfes zwischen Leopard und Schlange [...] nennt uns den Namen, mit dem die Sumerer diese Iranische Göttin vergleichen: es ist beschriftet mit: “Inanna und die Schlange”.²⁷

A slightly different interpretation was offered by Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, who argues that this inscription is not a caption but rather a dedication: “To Inanna and the Serpent”.²⁸ Draffkorn Kilmer apparently supposes that a sort of mythological serpent or a snake god (“the Serpent”) was worshipped together with the goddess. No such serpent or deity ever existed, however. Nor can either of these translations be upheld. The correct interpretation of this inscription was already provided by Albrecht Goetze, in his comprehensive study of the Early Dynastic inscriptions from Nippur in 1970–71.²⁹ Goetze correctly observed that what Hansen and Dales interpreted as MUŠ, i.e., as the Sumerian logogram for “snake”, is not MUŠ at all,³⁰ but rather two signs: PAP and NUN. Goetze read PAP.NUN as “Pa₄.n un” and interpreted the inscription as a dedication to the goddess Innanak by someone of this name, though noting that he was aware of no other attestation of such a personal name.

²⁴ Hansen/Dale 1962, 79.

²⁵ Hansen 1975, 185 *ad* 76a.

²⁶ See Brown 1973, 44; Kohl 1978, 469; Williams-Forte 1980–1983, 603; E. Valtz in *La terra tra i due fiumi* 1985, 364; Roaf 1990, 81; Collins 1994, 114; Lewis 1996, 45; Kohl 2001, 226, caption to fig. 9.13; Pittman 2002, 211; etc.

²⁷ Winkelmann 2003, 613.

²⁸ Draffkorn Kilmer 2000, 53f.

²⁹ Goetze 1970–1971, 42, 7N–120.

³⁰ For the form of the sign MUŠ in this period, see *LAK* 235.

The question was then reopened by Horst Steible: according to him, “pa₄-nun” might represent a personal name, a place name, or an epithet of Innanak.³¹

While no such toponym is known, the hypothesis that PAP.NUN represents a divine epithet may find some support in the occurrence of this sign sequence in the divine name spellings ⁴PAP-nun-na³² and ⁴pa₄/pa₅-nun-(na-)an/na-ki.³³ However, these theonyms are only attested much later (Old Babylonian period and later). The entry UD.PAP.NUN in a Fara-period word-list written in the orthographic style called UD.GAL.NUN³⁴ is probably not relevant either: UD.PAP.NUN is almost certainly to be interpreted as pab-kur(UD)-gal(NUN), i.e., as an UD.GAL.NUN writing of the personal name Pab-kurgal,³⁵ “The Leader Is a Great Mountain”.³⁶ Finally, there remains to be considered a number of attestations of PAP.NUN in the archaic texts from the Uruk III (or Jemdet Nasr) period. Here PAP and NUN seem to occur in the writings of personal names; note the following passages:

- a. IM 74217 i 2 (cdli.ucla.edu/P004132): pab-nun-mud³⁷ saĝĝa ib-kug, “Pab-nune-inmud,³⁸ the temple administrator of the Ibkuĝ”.
- b. MS 3003 ii 1 (cdli.ucla.edu/P006257): 1N₁₄ 2N₁ še pab-nun-mud (amount of barley for Pab-nune-inmud).
- c. *ACTPC* 37 i 2a: 1N₃₄ 3N₁₄ pab-nun-mud (amount of barley for Pab-nune-inmud).
- d. Nissen *et al.* 1990, 18, no. 4.12 ii 4: 2N₄₀ 1N₂₄ pab-nun-túm³⁹ é ⁴innanak_x(MÛŠ) (amount of malt for “Pab-nunra-altum,⁴⁰ (man/official) of the temple of Innanak”).
- e. *ACTPC* 123 i 1-2: 1N₁₄ 2N₁ še / pab-nun-túm (amount of barley for Pab-nunra-altum).

³¹ Steible 1982, 239, AnNip. 23.

³² See Pomponio 2000, 888–890; Krebernik 2004; Richter 2004, 347f.

³³ See Tallqvist 1938, 436 s.v. “Pap-nun-an-ki”; Cohen 1988, 772; Richter 2004, 104, 106.

³⁴ See *SF* 19 i 5 // 18 xii 20. Cf. Krecher 1978, 156f.; Zand 2009, 180–185.

³⁵ The same name occurs in standard writing (pab-kur-gal) in the so-called “Names and Professions List” (see Archi 1981, 182, line 41).

³⁶ For the meaning of pab/pa₄ (something like “first in rank, leader”), see Sjöberg 1967, 214–217; and Krispijn 2004.

³⁷ Cf. the parallel name pab-en-mud (Pomponio 1987, s.v. “pa₄-en-mud”).

³⁸ For mud representing the finite verbal form /inmud/ in personal names from the Uruk III and Early Dynastic I–IIIa periods, note the more accurate writing nun-né-î-mud vs. the archaic spelling nun-mud in two duplicates of a scholarly list of personal names, one dating to the Sargonic period, the other to the Fara period (see Bauer 2014, 13). Pab-nune-inmud (“The Leader—the Prince [i.e., the god Enkîk] Created Him”; cf. n. 37 above) is similar in meaning to names such as Lugal-Nanšê-mundud (luga-l-dna-nše-mu-dú) (cf. Marchesi 2006, 72f. n. 381; Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 107).

³⁹ Cf. lugal-nun-túm (*SF* 29 iv 16; see the copy by M. Krebernik on CDLI—cdli.ucla.edu/P010609). For additional parallel names and for the name-pattern, see Marchesi 2004, 191 n. 216, 193 with nn. 225f.; Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 239.

⁴⁰ The name means: “The Leader Is Worthy of the Prince” (cf. nn. 37 and 39 above).

In addition, the abbreviated name Pab-nune (a probable abbreviation of Pab-nune-inmud) is also attested:

f. W 7227,f (ATU 5, pl. 27) i 3: 1N₃₅ pab-nun.

Although an interpretation of PAP.NUN as an epithet of the goddess Innanak cannot be completely ruled out, this evidence strongly suggests that the inscription on our vessel is rather to be interpreted as: ^dinnanak_x(MÜŠ)⁴¹ / pab-nun, “For Innanak, from Pab-nune”. This type of inscription—offeree + offerer (without any dedicatory formula)—is sufficiently well attested in the inscribed materials from the Early Dynastic IIIa period.⁴² Finally, the fact that no other occurrence of the personal name Pab-nune is presently known from the Early Dynastic texts should come as no surprise. In fact, three-element names having nun (in the ergative case) as the second element are extremely rare in the Early Dynastic onomasticon.⁴³

The second example of an “intercultural style” vessel inscribed on the outside is represented by an unprovenanced piece in the Collections of the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston (MFA 1980.71; Plate I). It is a sort of beaker made of greenish black chlorite, which was acquired in 1980 by the Museum and published in 1987 by W. Kelly Simpson.⁴⁴ This artifact, however, was already known: Pierre Amiet had already published it in 1976, when the vessel was still in the hands of a Swiss dealer.⁴⁵

The piece is incomplete: little more than a half of the original vessel is preserved. According to Amiet, the object was repaired in antiquity.⁴⁶ What remains of the relief shows two personages: an anthropomorphic figure and a bizarre hybrid being whose upper body is human, with a bull’s head protruding from its waist and claws for feet. The human-like figure is standing on an altar or building, which may suggest that the personage in question was a god.⁴⁷ Two animals, a snake and a feline (upside down), fill the space between the two main characters.

The authenticity of this vessel was questioned by Oscar White Muscarella, primarily because the iconography and style are odd and unparalleled.⁴⁸ However, the

⁴¹ Cf. n. 20 above.

⁴² See, for instance, Steible 1982, 238f., AnNip. 22.

⁴³ I only know of mes-nun (Steinkeller 2014, 152, fig. 4, vi 2’; cf. *ibid.*, 136) and [mes]-nun-[ki-á]ĝ (UET 8, 2:1’; cf. Marchesi 2004, 168 n. 97). Both nun and pab became completely obsolete as onomastic elements in the Early Dynastic IIIb period.

⁴⁴ In Browarski 1987, 84f.

⁴⁵ See Amiet 1976, 6–8, figs. 10–12 (=Amiet 1986, 271, fig. 73a–c). See also Potts 1994, 256f., fig. 45: 2 and Collon 1998, 37f., fig. 5.

⁴⁶ Amiet 1976, 6.

⁴⁷ Cf. representations of seated deities on Mesopotamian cylinder seals or stelae, which often show the deities as sitting on architectural thrones depicting temple façades (see Seidl 2013, 636f., § 2.1).

⁴⁸ Muscarella 2000, 169f.

object under discussion displays some stylistic features that do have parallels,⁴⁹ while the hybrid creature, though unique, recalls certain composite beings that are peculiar to early Iranian art.⁵⁰

An inscription in clear Fara-period writing⁵¹ is engraved in the empty space between the shoulder of the beast and the skirt of the anthropomorphic figure, but as the space is too small, the inscription partially overlaps the images. Since one of the signs is malformed, Amiet speculated that this vessel might have been inscribed in southeastern Iran, “selon les directives d’un Sumérien résidant loin de son pays”.⁵² Muscarella cited the same argument in support of his hypothesis that the piece is a forgery.⁵³ Finally, on the basis of the inscription, Simpson argued for a possible provenance of the Sumerian city of Eridug:

This [inscription] states that the object was “dedicated (to) the ‘high house of Engur’ (for) Engur, (god of) the totality of the Sea-Land.” If “Engur” is an alternative reading for the name of “Enki,” the water god, as it is thought to be, this object may thus have been dedicated to the chief deity of the city of Eridu in southern Mesopotamia, which in the third millennium B.C. was a thriving seaport near the mouth of the Euphrates and the Persian Gulf.⁵⁴

However, the inscription in question tells a different story. It reads: [...] / é-a ma-ĝu₁₀ / a ma¹ (A×AN)⁵⁵ / abzu(ZU+AB)-ki-dùg / a mu-ru, “E-amaĝu,⁵⁶ mother of Abzu-ki-dug, presented it [to ...]”.⁵⁷ What makes this inscription particularly intriguing is the identity of the woman who commissioned it. It should be noted that women in dedicatory inscriptions are always qualified with reference to their fathers (daughter of such-and-such) or their husbands (wife of such-and-such). The fact that a woman is

49 Cf. BM 128887 (Aruz/Wallenfels 2003, 331, fig. 85; Parpola 2011, 316f., figs. 82 and 83), which, according to Muscarella 2000, 170, “may be the present vessel’s model”.

50 See Pittmann 1984, 70; ead. 2002, 229; Winckelmann 2013, 57 and 64, fig. 3.

51 Note especially the shapes of the signs AMA (line 1’; cf. Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 122 n. 220) and A (line 4’; cf. Krebernik 1998, 280).

52 Amiet 1976, 8. According to Amiet, “la graphie insolite du second signe ama pourrait indiquer que son auteur était un provincial”.

53 Muscarella 2000, 169f.

54 Simpson in Browarski 1987, 84.

55 Although a sign A×AN is sporadically attested in Early Dynastic texts (always in unclear contexts; see UET 2, 357 ii’ 4; IAS 278 ii’ 2, iii’ 16), there can hardly be any doubt that A×AN here represents an incomplete AMA (= LAGAB×AN; cf. n. 52 above).

56 The name é-a ma-ĝu₁₀ (“The Temple Is My Mother”) is unique, as far as I know, but the name-patterns x-a ma-ĝu₁₀ and é-x-ĝu₁₀ are well attested (see Di Vito 1993, 55f. sub 29.1a: 1 and Pomponio 1987, s.vv. “é-aša₅-ĝu₁₀”, “é-PAD⁷-ĝu₁₀”, and “é-šita-ĝu₁₀”, respectively). Needless to say, the unique occurrence of this name speaks for the authenticity of the inscription in question, and of the piece on which it is inscribed (contra Muscarella 2000, 169f.): why should the alleged forger have invented a Sumerian name when he could simply utilize one of the many known anthroponyms?

57 Cf. already M. Lambert *apud* Amiet 1976, 6.

said to be “mother of such-and-such” is exceptional. There is only one other example of a woman who styles herself as mother of somebody in a dedicatory inscription: Ereš-enimgennâk, mother of Namḥanne (“Nammaḥani”), a Neo-Sumerian ruler of Lagaš.⁵⁸ The question arises: was E-amaġu, by analogy, the mother of a ruler? The fact that Abzu-kidug occurs with neither a title nor a professional designation supports this interpretation: he must have been a very important person whom everyone knew regardless. This Abzu-kidug was probably the self-same ruler of Nippur who is known from two of his wife’s dedicatory inscriptions.⁵⁹ Notably, in one of these inscriptions, Abzu-kidug is mentioned only by name, not by title,⁶⁰ just as in the case of the inscription of E-amaġu on the “Boston” beaker.

The object in question thus appears to have been inscribed at Nippur in the Early Dynastic IIIa period,⁶¹ just like the more famous “Inanna and the serpent” vessel. This hypothesis accords with the fact that these two pieces, unique among all examples of inscribed “intercultural style” vessels, are inscribed on their outer surfaces. In both cases, there is no connection between the images they depict and the inscriptions they bear. In point of fact, the “intercultural style” is not intercultural at all. On the contrary, it is culture-specific: the meanings of the various motifs and iconographies that characterize these objects could only be decoded within the culture that produced them,⁶² that is, the Marḥaši or Jiroft culture. For the inhabitants of Mesopotamia the “intercultural style” vessels were merely exotica with bizarre and meaningless decorations. Their value lay in the fact that they were foreign goods coming from a distant country. It is probably no coincidence that almost all of the inscribed pieces date to the Early Dynastic IIIa period,⁶³ when “intercultural style” vessels were presumably rare in Mesopotamia.⁶⁴ Inscriptions were added for the precise purpose of making them into votive objects, that is, vehicles of devotion and/or of requests to deities.⁶⁵ In other words, the act of engraving an inscription served to consecrate the vessel. In this way, texts supersede images and change the function of objects.

⁵⁸ See Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 158.

⁵⁹ Frayne 2008, 355f., Abzu-kidu 1–2.

⁶⁰ Frayne 2008, 355f., Abzu-kidu 2.

⁶¹ For dating the rule of Abzu-kidug to this period, see Marchesi/Marchetti 2011, 36 with n. 74.

⁶² Cf. Maquet 1993.

⁶³ See Marchesi forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Not one inscribed “intercultural style” vessel can be attributed with certainty to the following Early Dynastic IIIb period. On the other hand, there are many uninscribed “intercultural style” vessels from IIIb (Marchetti 2006).

⁶⁵ The two vessels with inscriptions of King Rīmuš (= “Rimush”) of Akkad (see Collon 1998, 38, fig. 6 and Aruz/Wallenfells 2003, 336, no. 233) represent a different case: they were inscribed because they were spoils of war and thus served to commemorate Rīmuš’s victory over Elam and Marḥaši (cf. Klengel/Klengel 1980, 50f.; Steinkeller 1982, 254–257).

Abbreviations

ACTPC	Monaco in press.
ATU	Archaische Texte aus Uruk; vol. 5 = Englund 1994.
BM	Object siglum of the British Museum.
CDLI	<i>Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative</i> (cdli.ucla.edu).
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology.
IAS	Biggs 1974.
IM	Object siglum of the Iraq Museum.
LAK	Deimel 1922.
MS	Object siglum of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo.
SF	Deimel 1923.
UET	Ur Excavations Texts; vol. 2 = Burrows 1935; vol. 8 = Sollberger 1965.
W	Field siglum of objects excavated at Uruk-Warka.

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Plate I: Beaker; chlorite; dimension: H. 7", W. 5". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston – Egyptian Special Purchase Fund, 1980.71 (Photographs © 2015 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

