Dialogue of Four Pristine Writing Systems

世界四種遠古文字的對話

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How Writing Came to Replace Spoken Language

3000–2600 BCE

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In this paper, I analyze how the first writing system, the Mesopotamian cuneiform script, came to emulate spoken language. In particular, I will focus on the role of personal names in the transition from logographic to phonetic writing, or from accounting to historical texts. I start my inquiry with the personal names recorded on the economic clay tablets of the city of Uruk, about 3000 BCE. I then turn to the personal names inscribed on precious gold and lapis lazuli artifacts from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, *ca.* 2900–2700 BCE. Finally, I discuss the alabaster statues from Mari or Nippur, *ca.* 2750–2600 BCE, which bore a prayer in the name of an individual. I will show that, in each of these instances, the personal names were instrumental in bringing writing closer to the spoken language, first by emulating the sound of speech, and, finally, by adopting its syntax.[1]

Personal Names in Economic Texts

I start my investigation about at 3100 BCE, when the function of writing was still exclusively administrative. Typical entries such as "6 jars of oil" or "3 bushels and 3 pecks of grains" recorded the goods entering and leaving a warehouse[2]. These early economic texts used only two types of signs: logograms to indicate the nature of the listed goods, and numerals to show the number of units involved. Articles, adjectives, or verbs were not included because the entries were mere lists, never intended to mimic spoken language.

A change of great consequence took place around 3000 BCE when accountants from the city of Uruk, in Mesopotamia, began to record, on tablets, the personal names of the individuals who delivered or received the listed goods (see figure 1).[3] In order to transcribe the individuals' names,

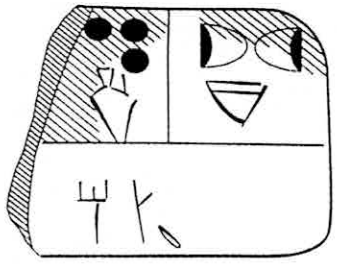

FIGURE 1: *Economic tablet from Uruk featuring two entries and a personal name.* TOP RIGHT: *half of a bread;* TOP LEFT: *30 jars of beer;* BOTTOM: *personal name. After Hans J. Nissen, Peter Damerow and Robert K. Englund, Archaic Bookkeeping (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 31, text b.*

signs were created that indicated sounds.[4] These phonograms consisted of small pictures, easy to draw, that represented the sound of the word corresponding to the item itself. When a name required several syllables, the corresponding phonograms were assembled like a rebus. For instance, the name Lucas could have been written with two phonograms: the sketch of a man and that of a mouth, which in turn sounded "lu" and "ka" in the Sumerian language. These phonetic signs were the first step towards replicating the sound of speech in writing.

The Significance of Personal Names in the Ancient Near East

Before discussing the texts from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, it is important to understand the significance of personal names in the ancient Near East. The cuneiform literature makes it clear that, from Sumer to Babylon, names were held to have awesome powers. In particular, people believed that things came into existence by naming them. As Jean Bottéro put it, "'*recevoir un nom' et exister, c'était tout un*" [To have a name and to exist were one and the same].[5] Conversely, something without a name did not exist.[6] For instance, the Mesopotamians described the world before the creation as follows: "when above, the heavens were not named, below, the earth was not given a name." Also, "[w]hen none of the gods had been created, [they were] not called by name [and] destinies not [yet] decreed."[7]

The Mesopotamians further held that personal names were the essence of an individual.[8] Like a horoscope, a name controlled the fate of a person; like a genetic code, it programmed people to play a given role in the divine plans. Change of status prompted additional names: for example, the kings of Lagash, Eannatum and Enannatum boasted about the "good name" that the god Enlil or the goddess Inanna had bestowed upon them at their accession.[9] The same was true for deities. For example, Inanna, the goddess of love, received a new name, Ishara, after giving birth.[10] Extraordinary personalities warranted several names to fulfill their remarkable destinies.[11] Marduk, the mightiest god in the Babylonian pantheon, had no less than fifty names to express, or rather define, his greatness.[12]

Names further played an important role in the Mesopotamian concept of death and in the cult of the dead. It was held that in order to achieve peace in the afterlife, a deceased's name had to be uttered at regular intervals.[13] There was a special ritual for invoking the names of ancestors (Akkadian: *shuma zakaru*), which was to be executed by an appointed kin (*zakir shumi*)—"the one who invokes by name."[14] The ceremony generally took place on the darkest night of the month, when there was no moon. Should the name fail to be uttered, the ghost would wander the earth and haunt the living.[15] The ultimate threat of oblivion amounted to instant and total annihilation.[16] It is understandable, therefore, that the fear of having no one utter one's name was of great concern to everyone. The Sumerian king Shulgi expressed it well in his prayer: "[t]hat my name be established for distant days, that it never fall into oblivion." Other texts, as late as Babylon, continue to echo the same theme:

> Princes, princesses,
> all humanity from east to west,
> Who have no one to care for them or call their names,
> come, eat this, drink this,
> And bless Ammi-Shaduqa, son of Ammiditana,
> King of Babylon.[17]

Finally, the worst curses carved on monuments used the erasing of the name as the ultimate threat: "Whoever you are who may remove this image and grave from its place, may Sahar and Shamash and Nikkal and Nusk remove your name and your place from life. . . . ."[18]

The importance of personal names in the ancient Near East was to succeed in severing writing from its four-thousand-year roots in accounting.[19]

The cuneiform script was about to become an independent communication system.

Personal Names on Funerary Offerings

Single personal names inscribed on artifacts, considered to be among the art masterpieces of all times, were buried in the wealthiest tombs of the Royal Cemetery of the city of Ur in Mesopotamia.[20] Among them, three gold vessels bearing the name "Meskalamdug," (see figure 2) were part of

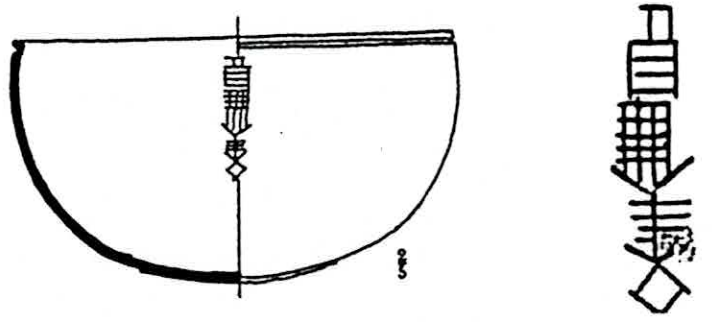

FIGURE 2: *Meskalamdug's gold bowl and inscription, Royal Cemetery of Ur, Iraq. After Eric Burrows, "Inscribed Materials," in C.L. Woolley, Ur Excavations, vol. 2, The Royal Cemetery (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), plate 191 (U 11751).*

the private grave of a male (PG 755) outfitted with sumptuous funerary gifts, among which are metal vessels, weapons, and tools; a profusion of lapis lazuli and gold beads; as well as heaps of gold bracelets; spiral rings; and both large and small lunate earrings.[21] The three inscribed vessels were found in close proximity to the skeleton and, touchingly, one of the bowls was still in the skeleton's hands[22] (see figure 3).

A cylinder seal among the inscribed Ur artifacts bore a personal name followed by a title (see figure 4). The inscription "Puabi, Queen," is believed to disclose the name and title of the occupant of the female royal tomb (RT 800) where the artifact was recovered.[23] The burial chamber was filled with splendid funerary gifts, among which were gold tumblers and a mass of jewelry in the form of wreaths, gold ribbons, earrings, pins, amulets, and strings of beads of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, agate, and chalcedony.[24] The seal bore an elaborate carved composition representing a

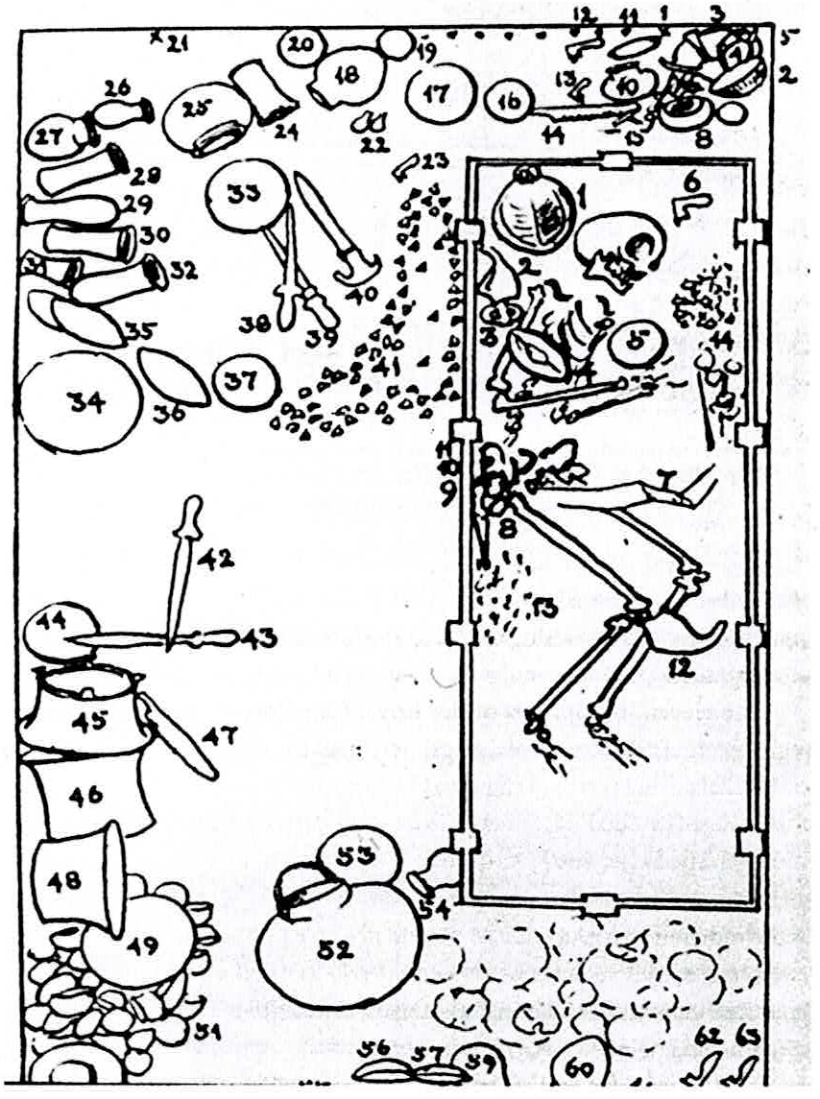

FIGURE 3: *Grave of Meskalamdug showing a gold bowl in the skeleton's hands, Royal Cemetery of Ur, Iraq. After C.L. Woolley, Ur Excavations, vol. 2, The Royal Cemetery (London: Oxford University Press, 1934) p. 157, fig. 35.*

FIGURE 4: *Banquet scene and inscription (2 LEFT COLUMNS IN TOP ROW) carved on Queen Puabi's seal, Royal Cemetery of Ur, Iraq. After Pierre Amiet La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque (Paris: CNRS éditions, 1980), plate 90:1182.*

(funerary?) banquet where males and females, clad in the typical Sumerian *kaunakes,* are shown raising their cups, while faithful servants are busy attending them.

The eleven inscriptions of the Royal Cemetery of Ur are all exceedingly succinct. Six consist of a single personal name:[25]

Meskalamdug (PG 755) (figure 2)
Abarage (RT 800)
Lugalsapeda (RT 800)
Enshagan (RT 1236)
A-Imdugud (RT 1236)
Ezi (RT 779)

Four further texts from Ur include a name and a title:

Ninbanda, Queen[26] (PG 755)
Puabi, Queen (RT 800) (figure 4)
Hekunsag, Priestess of Pabilsag (RT 580)
Meskalamdug, King (RT 1054)

Finally, a royal pair, associating two names and their respective titles, constitutes the longest inscription:

Akalamdug, King of Ur, Ashusikildingir, Wife (RT 1050)

The Ur material is dated to *ca.* 2900–2700 BCE. The richest graves of the

Royal Cemetery of Ur are generally considered the most ancient.[27] Dates in recent years have been pushed back steadily to an earlier period. In 1998 Hallo dated the Ur kings Meskalamdug and Akalamdug to the Early Dynastic II period, 2700–2500 BCE, rather than the traditional Early Dynastic IIIa.[28] Based on comparative studies of pottery remains from other Iraqi sites, such as the Diyala, Gianni Marchesi and Nicolo Marchetti view the Seal Impression Strata (SIS) layers, located above the early Ur tombs, as belonging to the Early Dynastic I period, 2900–2700 BCE.[29] Finally, the University of Pennsylvania Museum web site cites Puabi's title, "*eresh*" (Queen), also to be indicative of a date prior to the first Dynasty of Ur.[30] According to this source, the fact that Puabi is identified without the mention of her husband suggests that she was queen in her own right. If so, she probably reigned prior to the First Dynasty of Ur, whose first ruler is known from the Sumerian King List as Mesannepada. If this is the case, the funerary Ur inscriptions may not only be considered to be the oldest known royal texts of Ur, but also of Sumer. In particular, they antedate the royal inscriptions from Kish,[31] Uruk, Adab, and Lagash by several generations—some two or three centuries.[32] Because they precede these royal texts, as well as the literary texts from Fara dated to the Early Dynastic III period (*ca.* 2400–2300 BCE),[33] the Ur funerary texts have the distinction of representing the very first step in the critical transition from an economic to a literary textual function.

The Ur inscriptions differed from the previous economic texts in form and content. Of course, their most obvious distinction was that they were written on works of art, rather than on mundane tablets. The economic and lexical texts were written on clay—the cheapest possible material. By comparison, the Ur texts were engraved on gold, bronze, and lapis lazuli, the most precious metals and stone in Sumer. Making a tablet simply involved manually molding a lump of clay into a cushion shape. The Ur metal vessels, however, were designed in elegant forms and the seals bore some of the most intricate compositions of the entire Mesopotamian glyptic repertory. They were created by talented craftsmen in the difficult crafts of metalwork and seal carving. To couch their name in writing, Meskalamdug and Puabi exchanged the dull color of clay with, respectively, the warm gleam of gold and the deep blue of lapis lazuli. Especially, gold was perceived as a sacred/divine material,[34] and lapis lazuli was the Mesopotamian symbol of perfection.[35] However, the most significant change was the replacement of fragile, breakable, tablets, with hard, immutable and durable stone and

metal objects, which neither corroded nor tarnished, and which could last forever.

Most important, the function of the Ur texts was no longer one of accounting. Writing had taken a momentous turn: to serve the dead. The fact that the personal names were inscribed on burial furniture of the Royal Cemetery, and that the objects were found in or above tombs[36]—in the case of Meskalamdug in the skeleton's hands—leaves little doubt that the function of the inscriptions was funerary. Furthermore, because all the Ur texts featured a name, and most consisted of merely one name, it appears that inscribing the name of a deceased individual was the main purpose of the funerary inscriptions. The selection of precious materials further implies that the intent of the inscribed objects was to iconize the names of the departed, associating them with the brilliance of metal and the benefic color of semi-precious stones. Finally, the choice of hard and impervious material suggests that the names of the Ur individuals were meant to last forever.

It remains for me to explain the meaning of the personal names on the Ur artifacts. Ignacius Gelb, the eminent Assyriologist, was puzzled by the texts featuring a single personal name found on a variety of beads, boulders, and stone bowls from later historical periods in Mesopotamia.[37] He wrote in 1956 that "it is understandable that some large objects such as statues and stelae, might need special names to set them apart, but why were names also given to such insignificant objects such as . . . bowls, . . .? We are led to the inescapable conclusion that the purpose in naming ex-voto objects is not solely identification."[38] In response to Gelb's question, I propose that the intent of the Ur texts was to supplement or replace the all too fallible *zakir shumi* for the regular utterance of ancestors' names. Meskalamdug, and all the Ur nobles buried with extravagant wealth, believed that, because the phonetic signs reproduced the sounds of their name, writing had the awesome power of a perpetual utterance. This is particularly credible when one realizes that, at the time, reading was always done aloud, therefore the signs always evoked sounds to the reader.[39] Furthermore, it was held that tablets could be listened to "because they had a mouth."[40]

The terse funerary inscriptions featuring personal names on the precious Ur artifacts were the first texts independent of accounting. They brought writing one step closer to spoken language, by being the first entirely phonetic texts.

Personal Names on Votive Statues

Votive statues inscribed with a personal name were recovered in the ruins of temples of Near Eastern sites such as Mari, Assur, Nippur, Ubaid, and Khafaje.[41] The figures, carved in alabaster, were some 10–30 cm high. They generally represented a standing man wearing the typical Sumerian *kaunakes*, or sheep skin kilt with superimposed layers of tufts of wool (figure. 5).

FIGURE 5: *Statue of Nani, Mari, Syria. Drawn by Lewis R. (Bill) Wiman. Courtesy Denise Schmandt-Besserat.*

The hands were joined together or held a libation cup.[42] An inscription was chiseled either in the front of the bare torso, or, more often, on the right shoulder.[43] The words *nam-ti* "for the life of X" recurring at the end of some of the texts, make it clear that the statues were offered to the gods to obtain eternal life to an individual.[44]

The named figures are well dated. None are known from the Early Dynastic I period (2900–2750 BCE). The figures from the Inanna Temple of Nippur and the Ninni-Zaza temple of Mari, mark the beginning of the tradition of votive figures in the Early Dynastic II period (2750–2600 BCE). They reached their climax during the Early Dynastic III period (2600–2340 BCE). Their number dwindled during the Akkadian period in the second half of the third Millennium BCE.

As at Ur, some of the texts written on the votive statues consisted of a personal name alone or followed by a title as follows:

SAL-ki- gal (P.N.)[45]

Ginak, Ensi of Edin-e (P.N., title)[46]

Other inscriptions were lengthened to include the name of the temple or a god to whom the piece was dedicated. For instance:

Esar. Lugal-da-Lu, King of Adab (temple, P.N., title)[47]

Finally, statues, like that of a certain Nani from Mari, bore a complete sentence (figure 5).[48] The inscription read:

"Nani, [his] statue [to] Ninni-Zaza dedicated."

The message consisted of:

1. Nani's name, as subject or nominative.
2. "statue" as accusative (direct object).
3. the god's name, "Ninni-Zaza," as dative (indirect object).
4. "dedicated" as the verb.

The inscription on the statue of Nani formulated a full sentence that emulated the syntax of speech.

Nani may have believed that inscribing his name on a stone figure could replace a spoken invocation. But the statues were meant to do far more than Meskalamdug's precious bowl.[49] The statue in the likeness of Nani, placed in front of Ninni-Zaza, was expected to pray perpetually to obtain a blessed afterlife.[50] And to be sure that the plea be heard and understood by the gods, the little figure was inscribed with a full message in common speech.

The transition from logographic lists to texts replicating speech was finally completed on Early Dynastic statues. The names of worshippers,

gods, and temples were written phonetically, and the prayers borrowed the syntax of the spoken language.

Conclusion

Names of individuals served as a catalyst for linking writing to spoken language during a process that lasted some four hundred years. The transition from logographic to phonetic signs mostly took place in small inscriptions on precious artifacts that never attracted the attention of philologists[51] and were ignored by art historians.[52] To start with, *ca.* 3000 BCE, an accounting procedure phonetically transcribed the names of temple clients. Then, it took the fear of oblivion and the quest for immortality to induce the Ur nobility to have their names written on funerary furniture, *ca.* 2900–2700 BCE. Finally, it was the desire of pious men to be identified by name, and listened to by a god, that stimulated writing to reproduce the syntax of language *ca.* 2750–2600 BCE. Once the scribes had managed to model the cuneiform script on the sound and syntax of spoken language, it took them no more than one century to build a syllabary large enough to extol the glorious deeds of King Eanatum on the Stela of the Vultures, *ca.* 2500 BCE.[53] At this point writing was ready to become a universal communication system.

Notes

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