
Johns Hopkins University Press has published what for all appearances is a well-bound English translation of J.-J. Glassner’s Ecrite à Sumer: l’invention du cuneiforme (Paris: Seuil, 2000). Quite competent translators were found for the task, and dutiful words of praise included on the book’s well-designed jacket (W. Rosenberger).

A few technical remarks can preface a statement about the book’s intellectual merits. First, a book so heavily dedicated to the graphic development of an ancient writing system does not serve the interests of its readers with the quality of illustrations offered here, low in terms of both technical and conceptual design. Second, the use of end- instead of footnotes should be banned from academic, or academically inclined books; must the reader constantly harvest some number of notes lost somewhere at the back of a book—in some cases now at the end of individual chapters—before returning to the text? The translation itself, and the editing of this book seem to have been very professional, with but few causes for complaint.

The content of the book is, from most vantage points, a severe disappointment. Take for instance the author’s philological analysis of the earliest stages of writing in Babylonia. A cardinal rule of proto-cuneiform sign analysis must be the contextual description of signs, the linguistic interpretation of any of which is being considered. If, for instance, the decipherer will claim that the sign GA₂+AN is to be read in Sumerian /amal/ (“mother”), with an inscribed phonetic indicator amₐ, then he should provide the reader with at least two instances in the proto-cuneiform text corpus that could plausibly be interpreted to represent “mother.” In fact, no single example of multivalence proposed in this book is with even a passing remark supported by contextual evidence from the proto-cuneiform corpus itself.

While criticizing others who, unable to cite evidence from pertinent texts, have resorted to use of graphic sign similarities to claim relationships of various colors among them, the author employs the same discredited techniques throughout the book. At one point, he proffers a bizarre illustration of the conceptual unity of TUR and LAGAR, and of GAL and DUGUD (pp. 152–53) to make the case that DU and TUR are “examples of two polysemic signs that do not have easily recognizable concrete primary meanings,” followed by a misguided description of the sign E₂, improbably “a loom seen from above,” but decidedly not, with the author’s resuscitation of a long disapproved canard, “lil₃” or “kid” (p. 153 with 7.32). The similarity game played in the same vein (p. 164) is not far removed from K. Jaritz’ famous Schriftarchäologie (1967), albeit with an overrefined charm.

We have seen above all in a series of reviews to recent publications of the H. Nissen-directed Berlin project Archaic Texts from Uruk (particularly ATU 2 and 3) lists of presumed Sumerian polyphonic and polysemic signs in proto-cuneiform, and these are repeated here with all due diligence. There is only one interesting and unreferenced piece of evidence of this phenomenon in the present book, that of the use of the sign sequence NUN:ME (“ABGAL”) in a string of lexical entries otherwise qualified by
the sign GAL. But even here the author did not draw the compelling conclusion reached by a Sumerologist who has taken the question of Sumerian origins very seriously, M. Krebernik of the University of Jena, namely that it is suggestive of a Sumerian reading /gal/ of the sign GAL (see Streck and Weninger 2002: 1–2, n. 1). Instead, Glassner writes (p. 164): “abgal can effectively be separated into two single syllables, ab and gal, and it is in its proper place in that context even if it is written with the signs NUN and ME, which have no connection to its pronunciation.” The review (pp. 144–60) of presumed phonetic glosses and rebus writings, in particular the wearisome argument concerning enlil-ti (p. 160 with 249–50, n. 53) that will just not sink in, seem examples of near willful ignorance. I will not return here to the author’s identification (p. 161) of a series of Akkadian words in proto-cuneiform texts except to state that when these gates are opened, all forms of decipherment slither in.

One might at the same time assume that other functions of cuneiform signs are, in such an analysis, understood and applied correctly to archaic cuneiform. Though common elsewhere, it would be interesting to locate the use of so-called determinatives in the earliest texts. However, when the author categorically states (pp. 97–102, 147) that the numerical signs N₁ in lexical lists are semantic indicators, he has left the reader to discover for himself that these glosses were in many, and probably all instances combined in sexagesimal totals on the reverse surfaces of these texts (ATU 3: 36). Such numerical notations do not well comport with the interpretation of these signs offered here, nor does the author offer any compelling evidence in support of the use of this function of signs in the proto-cuneiform texts altogether, as often as he may cite this use (pp. 147, 194, etc.).

Invention signals, furthermore, an academic slovenliness that is disquieting in the field of Assyriology. Having read (p. 8) that “a more systematic investigation of the record would have led to only some minor further nuances,” the reviewer is hard pressed to find any system at all in the treatment of proto-cuneiform. The book’s tendentious and almost entirely derivative portrayal of earliest cuneiform is so replete with factual and logical errors that it is, as Dr. Johnson remarked about a work of a decidedly different caliber, once put down, very hard to pick up again. The author evidently has no control of primary sources, and little of secondary. Thus, the restricted treatments of archaic accounts (pp. 92–97 and 184–89) are quite simply without merit. In several cases, this text analysis lapses into the absurd, for instance, the elevation of decorative fingernail impressions on an Uruk tablet into “nine different accounts,” complete with a Phaistos parallel (pp. 191–92).

Those instances that claim the need of correction in either the primary documents, or in the more recent editions of these texts, are all in error and are to be rejected, with one primary text exception noted again and again in earlier secondary literature (pp. 186–88, MSVO I: 2, but disregard Glassner’s n. 24 on p. 253). Further, paleographic arguments seem made without recourse to original tablets. Glassner describes (p. 112) the decision of scribes at the end of the Uruk IV period to break signs into segments, although this was the case throughout Late Uruk (the idea—p. 119—of a pointed stylus in Uruk IV was debunked long ago), and, as one example among many, the author’s misinterpretation of the DU₈ sign (p. 152) disregards the graphic designs of both DU₈ and of LAGAB₈ (the circle, to be strictly distinguished from the rectangle LAGAB₉).

In the case of metrological notations, those who care for detail will not be surprised that measures lifted from recent editions and inserted in Invention stand in direct conflict to the nonsensical absolute values for such notations proposed by the author on p. 93 of this volume (e.g., p. 185, excluding the rendering of 13 square kilometers, for which I find no qualified source). It should also be noted that both in the case of numerical tablets, for instance those from Jebel Aruda that are claimed to exhibit no correspondence of lower to higher units in numerical notations, and in the case of the use of non-numerical signs in Uruk IV/III texts, the author ignores compelling evidence of systematization. The Jebel Aruda texts (p. 44, fig. 2.2c) clearly demonstrate an imposed hierarchization of sets of numerical signs that constitutes the basic rule of all such cuneiform notations, including those few examples found on the exterior of Late Uruk bullae. Summarizing the characteristics of earliest texts (p. 218), the author speaks of a “total disorder in the arrangement of signs,” which, even assuming he intended to restrict himself to ideograms, is without any foundation. Both the strict rules of sign sequence of the lexical lists, and the general rules that govern the position of signs representing qualified objects and proper nouns in administrative documents, leave no doubt that ordering guidelines do apply.

For reasons unclear to the reviewer, Glassner dismisses (p. 40) Uruk stratigraphy developed over seventy-five years of German excavations, in particular the well documented results from the deep
sounding; misconstrues that of Susa (p. 115; see, for instance, Le Brun 1971: 177, and 1978: 64); and so distorts the record of the prehistory of archaic cuneiform that one must wonder whether he has given due consideration to the contributions of D. Schmandt-Besserat and the numerous, measured, critiques of her publications. He does violence to the notion of diagnostic ware change through time by his contention that the simultaneous existence of clay envelopes and numerical tablets is not consonant with a reasoned understanding of early stages of prehistoric and Late Uruk writing—are we to imagine that from one level to the next there was no physical contact of such concrete forms of communication? A short description of Sb 2313 (pp. 92–93; = Amiet 1972: 922) concludes without mentioning the fact that this tablet includes three numerical signs evidently impressed using a token and therefore regularly cited elsewhere as a missing link between similar impressions on bullae and the use of styli on numerical tablets. The author states (p. 115) that the use of bullae continued into Susa Acr. I 17, yet mentions only in passing (p. 117) that room 830 contained but one envelope as a singular example of this continuation, and not at all that the assignment of this room to level 17b is very uncertain. He cites the use of the proto-Elamite script during the fourth, and throughout the third millennium (p. 57), for which there is no evidence.

His description of the early designations of scribes (pp. 106–10, 204–5) should be dismissed, and replaced with that of Visicato (2000: 4, 16–17). (Note that neither HAR nor SAR are ever attested in proto-cuneiform in an environment amenable to Glassner’s interpretations.) When the author states (p. 239, n. 35) that “the original direction of reading is preserved, here and there, until the fourteenth century,” one wonders which inscriptions he refers to in which it was not so preserved—I believe my files contain three examples. He prims with “the Stagirite” (p. 103) and “syllogigrams” (p. 142); he ascribes (p. 154) to the inventors of cuneiform a relationship to rationality that “is mediated by an infinite number of powers. Their universe is and remains an enchanted world, unlike ours.” He would deny us our little enchantments? More seriously, his statement (pp. 82–83) that “[those who contend that accounting led to writing] believe that when leaving prehistory primitive mankind was ... incapable of conceptual thinking,” seems nothing less than impertinent. Despite the almost baffling lack of primary source control in this book, one might wonder whether it after all harvests a kernel of truth. But if a Saussurian underpinning is defended as a means to understand an historical and conceptual development five millennia removed from immediate experience, and fractured by a record of transmission at best uneven, and if the proposed model is supported by error-laden data, then the model itself and its conceptual framework are discredited. Semioticists need, however, not be alarmed, for this is a book that does not have the distinction of at least getting it wrong, and therefore reflects no more light on earliest cuneiform than on theories of writing development. It need not have been translated or printed, and cannot be recommended for purchase, unless as an example of how a university press office can misstep.

ROBERT K. ENGLUND
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

REFERENCES


In his book about style and form in Old Babylonian Akkadian literary texts Nathan Wasserman tries to establish “a wide perspective of the more prominent features of the Old Babylonian literary system, aiming to arrive at general conclusions regarding its distinctive style and to define what singles it out from prose texts” (p. 1). These features are Hendiadyds, Tamyiz, Damqam-inim, Merismus, Simile, and Rhyming Couplets. These titles show that the author appropriately deals with Akkadian literature in the light of its own character and in the context of comparative Semitic studies.

Using the complete literary corpus of a single period, the author is able to analyze the use of elements of style and form in the entire Akkadian literature of that time. So he gives a broader basis of examples than a study of a single literary genre would offer—bearing in mind that due to the incidental and fragmentary nature of what we have, as the author states the field of “Mesopotamian literature is constantly undergoing a process of redefinition and expansion” (p. 175).

Welcome is the survey of the scholarly discussion given at the beginning of every chapter, and the author’s special attention to the distribution of style according to the different literary genres in his conclusions of each single chapter.

Unavoidable in research of such an extent, some of his examples require discussion. In the first chapter about hendia dys (pp. 5–28) Wasserman distinguishes between nominal and verbal hendia dys. A little confusing, to my mind, is the use of the term hendia dys in the case of verbal expressions using words like redûm, bitrum, kânun, šanûm, tarûm, hiāšûm, gamârum, wasâbûm, magârum and le’ûm, Wasserman’s database for verbal hendia dys (pp. 19–22). Are these examples really the same as nominal hendia dys? Or are these intransitive verbs with a meaning like “do a second time, repeat,” “endure,” etc., not only a mere possibility in Akkadian for the verbal expression of repetition, duration, willingness and so on, without being hendia dys, and is the hendia dys inherent only to our translation? Buccellati’s “coordinative adjunctivation” (p. 17) is preferable in my mind for this kind of construction, since it separates the matter clearly from nominal hendia dys.

It should be stated that Wasserman chose his examples with commendable scientific caution, separating them from circumstantial clauses by excluding equivocal sentences without congruency of tenses (p. 23). Only two examples do not necessarily belong in this chapter (both p. 22): alki in example 15.1.2 seems to me to be rather an interjection, cf. Sumerian a-na or a-m a 1, which has the same meaning. le’ûm is a verb of inner condition and is not part of hendia dys; the example shows a sequence tele’i (prs.) . . . tašdûd (prt.), which is a general-continuative case of the past. Nevertheless, this minor criticism doesn’t affect Wasserman’s conclusions about the generic distribution and the main

1. For this interjection in Sumerian, see M. Thomsen, “The Sumerian Language,” Mesopotamia vol. 10 (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1984), 86.