Early Babylonian tablets in the British Museum's Kuyunjik Collection 1: A fragment of an administrative document from Ur III Girsu?

Zsombor J. Földi*

* – Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. Email: zsombor.foldi@gmail.com

Abstract: The present paper deals with cuneiform tablets in the British Museum's Kuyunjik Collection that were in all likelihood found in Babylonia, not in Nineveh. Following a brief and preliminary overview of the corresponding material, a fragment from this group is published for the first time. It is suggested that it may belong to an administrative record from Ur III Girsu.

Keywords: British Museum, Kuyunjik Collection, collection history, Ur III period, Girsu

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Introduction

Besides what is commonly referred to as the 'Library of Ashurbanipal', the British Museum's Kuyunjik Collection¹ houses dozens of clay tablets and fragments that probably come from places other than Nineveh.² Tablets from the simultaneous excavations of various sites in the 19th century occasionally got confused before their shipment. Consequently, artefacts were sometimes mistakenly registered as belonging to the museum's Kuyunjik, Babylon, or Sippar Collections.³ This is best demonstrated by physical joins between tablets in the aforementioned three collections.⁴

The tablets in the Kuyunjik Collection for which this possibility can be reasonably considered are either later than the 7th century BC, significantly earlier, and/or written in non-Assyrian script.⁵ The situation is quite obvious for royal inscriptions of Neo-Babylonian kings and Late Babylonian documents, as these were written after the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. It is more complicated,

¹ On the British excavations at Nineveh and for an overview of the collection see now [Turner 2020](#) and [George 2020](#) (both with earlier literature).

² By this, the discovery (and occasionally the acquisition) of tablets is meant. It does not apply to tablets that were written elsewhere but brought to Nineveh at the order of Ashurbanipal or one of his predecessors. On Ashurbanipal's tablet collecting practice see [Fincke 2003–2004](#) and [Frame – George 2005](#) (both with earlier literature).

³ 'The Kuyunjik Collection seems to have become a dumping ground for tablets which the Museum staff were unable to allocate to another registered collection' ([Leichty et al. 2019](#), 39). Compare also Walker's (*apud* [Lambert 1992](#), 73–80) list of Neo-Assyrian tablets in the British Museum's Babylonian collections.

⁴ See, e.g., [Heeßel 2005](#), 19; more recently [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 706–707 as well as [Hätinen 2019](#).

⁵ Numerous Nineveh tablets were written in Babylonian script (discussed in detail by [Fincke 2003–2004](#)), but it is often impossible to tell whether they were written in Nineveh or brought there from Babylonia. For the Neo-Elamite texts in the Kuyunjik Collection, [Vallat \(1988\)](#) suggested that they were discovered by W. K. Loftus in Malamir; it is more likely though that they were indeed unearthed in Nineveh ([Reade 1992](#) and [2000](#); see also [Potts 2016](#), 295 with further literature).

though, for earlier tablets: Some of them might be, at least theoretically, late – and sometimes even archaising – copies of ancient texts. A few examples show that copies of early Assyrian⁶ and Babylonian⁷ rulers' inscriptions were sometimes preserved in the Nineveh libraries. Tablets of Middle Assyrian date and originally written in Aššur, most of which were probably present at the genesis of the library, are not uncommon either.⁸

Excluding Middle Assyrian manuscripts and the inscriptions of early rulers, there remain some thirty tablets that are considerably earlier than Neo-Assyrian, mostly dating to the Old Babylonian period (2003–1595 BC).⁹ Although there is a theoretical possibility that these were found in Nineveh,¹⁰ internal evidence makes it more likely that they come from Babylonian sites, excavated more or less at the same time as Nineveh.

Based on their contents, some of the aforementioned tablets can be securely assigned to Kutalla¹¹ or Uruk,¹² pointing to the excavations of W. K. Loftus at those sites as their most likely source. At least four such tablets – but probably more – likely originated in Ur and were unearthed there by J. G. (or J. E.) Taylor.¹³ At least one tablet shows Late Old Babylonian features and thus presumably originated from northern Babylonia.¹⁴

The contents of some of these inscriptions have already been recognized and their text has been edited.¹⁵ The present paper deals with K.14917 which may be the earliest piece within this category and aims to be the first instalment of a series of corresponding notes and articles.¹⁶

⁶ See [Grayson 1987](#), 343–344; [1991](#), 411–414; [1996](#), 257. In several of these instances, Grayson speculates whether individual manuscripts of royal inscriptions in the Kuyunjik Collection were actually found in Aššur (e.g., [Grayson 1987](#), 139, 248, 268; [1991](#), 40) or Kalḫu (e.g., [Grayson 1991](#), 297–298, 327–328, 360). In the case of Ashurnasirpal II 47 (A.O.101.47) it is fairly probable that the two Nineveh manuscripts are indeed late copies of an inscription originally written on a statue of Ashurnasirpal II (see [Grayson 1991](#), 316–317).

⁷ See [Frame 1995](#), 340 and especially [Bartelmus 2016](#), 489–532 F.3 with a bilingual inscription of Burna-Buriaš II, known exclusively from Nineveh tablets. In some instances, an Ashurbanipal colophon confirms that we are actually dealing with a Nineveh copy of the original inscription; see, e.g., Nebuchadnezzar I 5 and 8–9 in Frame's (1995) edition. A new edition of the latter two by T. Mitto (pers. comm.) is under preparation. K.7855, the only Old Babylonian royal inscription with a K number (see [Frayne 1990](#), 834) was probably found by Loftus at Uruk; see [Walker 1970](#), 88; [Frayne 1990](#), 462.

⁸ See, e.g., [Weidner 1952–1953](#), 204 and 208 no. 41; [Lambert 1965](#); [Reade 1986](#), 217–218; [George 1988](#); [Geller 1990](#), 211–212; [Heeßel 2012](#), 174–182 no. 51 (refs. courtesy E. Jiménez).

⁹ These are conveniently listed at [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 10. Previously, a handful of such tablets was referred to by Fincke *apud* [Reade 2005](#), 369. Note that the DT, Sm, Rm and Rm-II collections, while containing mostly Neo-Assyrian material from Nineveh, also include a number of Late Babylonian tablets (see now [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 48–52 and 194–202).

¹⁰ Note that a handful of fragments with Old Babylonian script were discovered by R. Campbell Thompson in the temple of Ištar in Nineveh; see [Dalley 2001](#).

¹¹ K.1377, identified by means of prosopography as a file from the archive of Šilli-Ištar of Kutalla; see [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 39 with literature.

¹² The contents of K.4709 (see n. 15) and K.7855 (see n. 7) make Uruk very likely as their place of discovery; see [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 41.

¹³ In the case of K.8765 and K.13942, museographic evidence points in this direction; see [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 42–43. K.14844 was joined by J. Politi to a tablet already associated with the city of Ur(!), see most recently [Charpin 2020](#), 34. K.8860 (to be published in a next instalment of the present series) is a contract from Ur, as prosopography reveals. On Taylor's excavation at Ur and his findings see now [Charpin 2020](#).

¹⁴ K.9569; see [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 42.

¹⁵ See [Leichty et al. 2019](#), 39–43 with the literature referred to there; for K.4709 see [Michalowski – Beckman 2012](#). K.13942 was published by Alster (1987, 201; copy by M. J. Geller), see also [Alster 2005](#), 52.

¹⁶ The forthcoming publication of the two of them has been announced recently: K.8765 (59-10-14, 107) falls into a group that D. Charpin (2020, 26–27 §2.2 with 28 n. 78) aims to examine. K.4755+ contains 'Iš-bi-Er-ra E' and will be included into P. Michalowski's forthcoming edition of that composition (see [Metcalf 2019](#), 67 with previous literature).

FIG. 1. Autograph of K.14917 (Zs. J. Földi).

A small fragment from Ur III Girsu?

K.14917 (Fig. 1) measures 2.6×1.5×1.2 cm and represents the lower right corner of a tablet. It was described by L. W. King in the following words:

‘Bottom right-hand corner, 1/2 in. by 1 in.; 2 + lines. Part of a copy of a text, written in archaic characters, probably from a votive inscription.’¹⁷

King’s assumption that the fragment contained a votive inscription was based on palaeographic reasons: considering the sign forms, archaic from a Neo-Assyrian point of view, it might have been a copy of a royal or dedicatory inscription.¹⁸ Such copies are indeed known from the Kuyunjik Collection (see above), but the sign forms they use are often pseudo-archaic rather than archaic.

The fragment preserves the end of two lines with three signs and the remains of two more; these are $x \text{ } \text{š}u \text{ } \text{gi}_4$ and $x \text{ } \text{AN}$, respectively. The sequence $\text{š}u \text{ } \text{gi}_4$ points to a text in Sumerian, but it is scarcely attested in the known corpus of royal and votive inscriptions. One exception is an inscription of Gungunum, king of Larsa (1932–1906 BC), where the ruler refers to himself as $\text{š}u\text{-}gi_4\text{-}gi_4 \text{ } \text{é-bábbar-ra}$ ‘the one who avenges the Ebabbar’,¹⁹ but even this would not fit the signs’ placement within the line. Otherwise, although there are different options for restoration, the word $\text{š}u\text{-}gi_4$ ‘old’ is by far the most likely reading as shown by attestations in other genres. The AN sign, given its numerous different readings depending on the context, does not provide a comparable clue.

¹⁷ King 1914, 141 no. 1462.

¹⁸ The absence of K.14917 at Leichty et al. 2019, 39–43 may imply that the editors of that volume shared King’s view.

¹⁹ Until recently, a cone in the Schøyen Collection (CUSAS 17, 44; ed. George 2011, 96–97) was the only known manuscript of this text. On the 2nd of June 2020, another exemplar was sold at TimeLine Auctions Ltd. in London for £1,900 (recorded in CDLI under P519796). According to the description in the auction catalogue (TimeLine Auctions 2020, 103 no. 243), it was accompanied by W. G. Lambert’s and M. Ceccarelli’s notes. Note thus the appearance of two manuscripts of a previously unknown inscription in a relatively short period; for its implications compare Földi 2017, 15 (with earlier literature).

From the palaeographic point of view, the sign forms point to the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC, unless one assumes a scribe either exceptionally talented in using archaising sign forms or copying an inscription written on stone. That both šu and GI_4 were written with a row of five horizontal wedges is common in Ur III and early Old Babylonian documents but less typical in later tablets. Therefore, the sign forms make it less likely that the fragment belonged, e.g., to an Old Babylonian copy of a literary composition.

A further clue might be provided by the date of acquisition. Unfortunately, in the published record there is nothing to show when K.14917 was acquired or when it arrived at the British Museum.²⁰ C. Bezold's catalogue of the Kuyunjik Collection contains the K tablets up to K.14230²¹ and it is difficult to ascertain when the remaining fragments reached London.²² The first – and probably only – mention of K.14917 in Assyriological literature is the above description in King's catalogue in 1914. Nevertheless, there is evidence that K.14917 was registered as such in 1900 at the latest: tablets with slightly higher K numbers were included in R. Campbell Thompson's volume on lexical lists, published that year.²³ Their arrangement on plates 42–44 may imply that they were registered and autographed not long before the volume was published, but this does not reveal the date of acquisition that may be considerably earlier.

As for the possibility that the fragment belonged to an Ur III tablet, this fact virtually excludes the vast amounts of Ur III records from Puzriš-Dagān and Umma, discovered in 1908/9–1911 and makes Girsu a likely place of origin.²⁴ What was probably the archive of the Ur III governors of Girsu was found by E. de Sarzec in 1894, but an analysis of the Girsu documents acquired from the antiquities market makes it likely that clandestine diggers plundered the site already before the official excavation.²⁵

Considering the different genres of Ur III and Early Old Babylonian tablets at the British Museum in the last decade of the 19th century, the administrative records from Ur III Girsu are by far the most numerous among them. The question is whether there is a text group in this category with a phraseology that could fit the preserved signs on K.14917. Besides this, also the arrangement of this information within the lines needs to be considered.

There is at least one group that fits both criteria: the so-called plough animal inspection records, also known as $\text{gu}_4\text{-apin}$ gub-ba texts in Assyriological literature. These record the status of draught animals and were subject to a thorough analysis by W. Heimpel. Based on their contents

²⁰ The registration of most Kuyunjik tablets took place long after their arrival at the British Museum, this is why many were already published before actually having a museum number; see Bezold 1888, 745–746 and Haupt 1890, 96–97 with 148–152 (refs. courtesy E. Jiménez). The identification of such fragments is still unfinished: for the recent identification of a long-lost fragment of Gilgameš see Jiménez 2020, 245–246.

²¹ Bezold 1893.

²² In King's (1914, xv) words: 'The numbers which follow them are assigned to small fragments of texts which were obtained during the earlier expeditions, but were considered at the time of their acquisition to be of too small an importance to justify their incorporation in the numbered collection of tablets. Hence, at the time the Catalogue was compiled, they remained unnumbered and were not included with the rest.'

²³ Campbell Thompson 1900.

²⁴ See Sallaberger 1999, 201–203 with Firth 2016. On the very few Ur III tablets found by Loftus and Taylor see Verderame 2008, 238; compare now Leichty et al. 2019, 10. Although there are textual references to the city of Nineveh in Ur III documents (see Goodnick Westenholz 2005, 10–11 and Zettler 2006, both with earlier literature), no such record is known to have been found in Nineveh, which makes a Nineveh origin of K.14917 unlikely.

²⁵ Jones 1975, 43; Sallaberger 1999, 201.

and format, Heimpel sorted them into three (A, B and C) groups.²⁶ To judge from K.14917's preserved thickness and form (especially its curvature), it seems likely that it belonged to a small, one-column tablet rather than a large, multi-column one. This circumstance makes a text in group B the most likely as these do not have columns at all, but a group A tablet with two columns per side cannot be excluded either.²⁷

Accordingly, the following provisional restoration of K.14917's partially preserved two lines can be suggested:

- 1'. [(šu-nígin) x dūr² šu-gi₄
 2'. [gub²-ba²-à]m
 '[(total?): n] "old" [male donk]eys(?): [asset]s(?).'

Philological notes: the traces preceding the sign šu make dūr '(young) male donkey, jackass' the most likely reading. 'Old' is a conventional translation of šu-gi₄, but it hardly fits this context, as one- and two-year-old animals could also be qualified as such. Consequently, in Heimpel's words, 'it must designate a quality that is typical but not exclusive of old age'.²⁸ In 2', a comparison with similar documents shows that gub-ba-àm is by far the most frequently attested in this context, whereas lá-i-àm, libir-àm and zi-ga-àm are possible too. The translation 'assets' (lit. 'it is standing') follows Heimpel.²⁹

To sum up, there is a certain degree of probability that K.14917 belongs to an archival document on livestock from Ur III Girsu.³⁰ Only the eventual discovery of the missing part of the tablet can prove this hypothesis, however. Since thousands of Ur III Girsu documents in the British Museum as well as in other collections still await publication, the aforementioned tablet may very well turn up one day.

Should that happen, it will shed more light upon the acquisition history of K.14917. For the time being, it is impossible to tell how exactly it ended up among the Kuyunjik tablets. Given the absence of more Ur III documents in the Kuyunjik Collection, it is rather unlikely that the confusion took place already before the shipment of a corresponding batch of tablets to London.³¹ It is more probable that the fragment was found by clandestine diggers,³² acquired by the British Museum from the antiquities market after 1894 and mistakenly registered as belonging to the Kuyunjik Collection – possibly due to its size, as the latter was easily associated with tiny fragments.³³

²⁶ Heimpel 1995; see more recently Wilcke 2010.

²⁷ On group B texts see Heimpel 1995, 80–82, for a list of documents see Heimpel 1995, 142; the latter was supplemented by Wilcke 2010, 352 with nn. 3–7.

²⁸ Heimpel 2013, 205; 1995, 87–88; compare also Hilgert 2004, 79–80.

²⁹ Heimpel 1995, 86; see also Wilcke 2010, 356 with n. 19.

³⁰ The uncertainty of this solution is best demonstrated by an Old Babylonian contract from Kisurra. The last lines of RA 85, 45 16 read: IGI *ha-mu-šU¹.GI₄* / MU *ma-na-bā-al-ti-e-el¹* / LUGAL 'before Hammu-šibum (the PN following Anbar – Stol 1991, 27; see also Goddeeris 2009, 36); the year: "King Manna-balti-el". As the final element of the king's name could be written with DĠIR as well (e.g., ARM 2, 107, 9), the text, irrespective of its palaeography and other physical features, could account at least for the signs that are fully preserved of K.14917.

³¹ On the other hand, according to J. V. Scheil (1902, 19 with reference to Scheil 1895), the Ur III tablets from Girsu reached Mosul already in 1894 (see also Parrot 1948, 20–21; ref. courtesy L. Verderame). Therefore, it cannot be excluded that more Ur III tablets were mixed up with 'Kuyunjik' material but recognized at the British Museum as such and sorted out accordingly. Given the tiny size of K.14917, it might have escaped attention at that stage.

³² On the Ur III Girsu tablets supposedly found by H. Rassam in de Sarzez's absence, see Verderame 2008.

³³ Compare King 1914, xv.

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ON THE COVER:

Excavations at Grd-i Tle in 2019 –
the northern face of the tell with Trenches I and IV.

Photo: ELTE Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Budapest

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Gábor Kalla, *Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest*

Registered office (*a kiadó székhelye*):

Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Múzeum krt. 4/B., 1088 Budapest, Hungary

Email address:

info@harjournal.com

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