Neo-Sumerian letter-orders from Umma in the Iraq Museum

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Abstract: The following article is devoted to five Ur III letter-orders belonging to the collection of the Iraq Museum. Letter-orders are not found in great abundance in the Iraq museum and these texts were not discovered in scientific excavations, but were confiscated by authorities or handed over to the Iraq Museum by Iraqi citizens. The texts can be dated to the Ur III dynasty (*ca.* 2114-2004 BC) by their palaeography and prosopography, and one text includes a date formula on its reverse that refers to the second year of the reign of Ibbi-Suen. Additionally, the prosopography of the texts suggests that the origin of most of the tablets was the city of Umma. These texts contribute to the corpus of letter-orders from the Ur III period and the administrative affairs of its officials.

Keywords: Neo-Sumerian, letter-orders, Ur III, Sumerian, Umma.

INTRODUCTION

Sumerian letter-orders have drawn a lot of attention since the major publication by E. SOLLBERGER in 1966 (TCS I), and the many additional examples that have been subsequently published[1]. Letter-orders are typically short, terse documents that normally request the delivery of goods to an individual, or that some particular action take place. These documents are easily identified by their opening address, u_3-na-a-dug_4 "speak to (PN)". Occasionally, some documents that clearly fulfill this function, however, do not use a salutation at all, but instead use only a precative verbal prefix, which indicates that the recipient was to carry out a specific deed. Some have even argued that letter-orders should be considered separate from institutional documents, as these requests sometimes blur the lines between public and private affairs of members of the Ur III state (ALLRED 2007, 2).

The following letter-orders follow the standard formula seen most often in Neo-Sumerian letter-orders, and are concerned with administrative requests for grain, livestock, beer, seed, and in one case the cost of a boat hire. Unfortunately, few of the letter-orders

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1 Other examples include letter-orders published by MICHALOWSKI (1976; 1993), OWEN (1972), VAN DE MIEROOP (1984), and MOLINA (1999-2000) to name a few. In addition, there are 785 letter-orders available on the Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts (BDTNS, available at <http://bdtns.filol.csic.es/index.php?p=home>).
We would like to express our gratitude to the general director of Iraqi museums Mr. Qais Huseen Rashed for permission to study these texts and a special thanks to Prof. Dr. Basima Jaleel Abid and Ass. Prof. Dr. Saja M. Abdul-lateef for their kind help in the preparation of this work. We would also like to thank the chief of cuneiforms department in the Iraqi museum Mss. Elham Shaker Jwad and all members of the cuneiform studies department. It is a pleasure to also acknowledge Prof. Dr. Manual Molina at the Center of Humanities and Social Studies (CSIC) Madrid for suggesting the publication of these texts in the first place. Finally, we thank the reviewers of this article for their valuable comments which have undoubtedly improved the quality of this publication. The hand copies and photographs of the tablets shown in the appendix were produced by Ass. Prof. Dr. Abathor Saadoon. Abbreviations follow the standard list of abbreviations used by the CDLI at <http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=abbreviations_for_assyriology>.

give patronymics or titles to any of the individuals named therein, so identifying them with known individuals with certainty is problematic. Still, with the help of the online Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts (BDTNS), which presently contains over 95,000 Ur III tablets, probable origins for unprovenanced tablets can be guessed at based on the statistical co-occurrences of personal names and other qualitative information. To be sure, that does not definitively prove the location of a tablet's origin, but these statistics allow one to make an educated guess. With that in mind, most of the tablets look to have originated from the region of Umma, with the exception of Tablet 5 which lacks sufficient data to suggest a probable origin.

TABLET 1

Museum no.: IM 204417
Measurements (cm): 3.4 x 3.3 x 1.6
Content: Letter-order for grain rations.

Obv.

1. [...]-amar	Speak to ... :
2. [u_3-na]-a-du_{11}	
3. 0.0.5.2 $sila_3$ še-ba	he should give 5 ban and 2 silas in grain
4. ur-^{d}ba-bu_{11}	rations to Ur-Babu
5. a-da-lal_3	and A-da-lal.
6. he_2-na-$šum_2$-mu	
Rev.	
7. ⌜iti⌝ min-$eš_3$	Month 7, Year the priest of Inanna was
8. mu en ^{d}inanna $maš_2$-e in-pa_3	chosen by extispicy (IS-02).

Comments

4-5: The most recent contribution on the reading of the god name which is typically transliterated as ^{d}Ba-U_2, has argued that U_2 should probably be read bu_{11} (see SCHRAKAMP 2019 and KEETMAN 2018). The personal names Ur-Babu and A-da-lal are well attested in Ur III texts, occurring at many cities throughout Sumer, such as at Girsu, Umma, Garšana, and Iri-sagrig. Yet, because of the BDTNS we can narrow that search to see where these two names co-occur in the same text. In addition, that search can be further specified because a year name is also given in this letter-order. The results show that Ur-Babu and A-da-lal are both present in the same text in the second year of Ibbi-Suen in only two texts, both of which derive from Umma (see Nisaba 27, 3 and 35). Thus, Umma seems a likely point of origin for this tablet.

7-8: The month name min-$eš_3$ is attested as the seventh month at Umma[2]. The year formula corresponds to the second year of the reign of Ibbi-Suen.

[2] For Ur III months see the resource available on the CDLI at <https://cdli.ucla.edu/tools/ur3months/month.html>.

TABLET 2

Museum no.: IM 206331
Measurements (cm): 4.5 x 4 x 1.5
Content: Letter-order for boat hire.

Obv.

1. ur-^{d}šul-pa-e$_3$	Speak to Ur-Šulpae:
2. u$_3$-na-a-du$_{11}$	
3. 0.1.0 še a$_2$ ⌜ma$_2$ hun⌝-ga$_2$	he should give to him 1 bariga of grain for
4. he$_2$-na-šum$_2$-mu	boat hire.

Rev.

5. ⌜iti⌝ e$_2$-e$_2$-<iti-6>	Month 8

Seal Impression

1. eš$_4$-dar-a-ša-at
2. dumu šeš-kal-la

Comments

1-2: There is one other letter-order that is addressed to a certain Ur-Šul-pa-e, CUSAS 3, 1499, but that text unprovenanced.

4: še a$_2$ ma$_2$ hun-ga$_2$ "grain as rent for a hired boat" is attested in many administrative documents from the Ur III period, but only twice is it found in letter-orders: ITT 2, 2751 and JCS 28, 166 no. 1. Compared to the various amounts paid for boat hire in other administrative documents, 1 bariga is not out of the ordinary; the same amount is found in: BPOA 1, 442; BPOA 6, 940; Nisaba 26, 6; RIAA 187; and SAT 3, 2136. The rental of boats, the rate of hire for different sizes of boats, and associated taxes, is also a matter found in the Law Collection of Ur-Namma (for which see CIVIL 2011, 250 and subsequent commentary; also see WILCKE 2014, 560-561 for additional commentary on the laws).

5: iti-e$_2$-e$_2$ is likely a shortened form of the month e$_2$-iti-6, which is only attested at Umma and the region around it. This suggests that Umma is the most likely point of origin for the letter-order.

Seal: The name of this individual, Ištar-aššat son of Šeš-kal-la, is not attested in another Ur III document and thus makes the document unique. The seal portrays at least two figures with the cases of writing in between. On the left, the god (or goddess) faces away from the writing, but wears the multi-horned crown of divinity. On the right is one clear figure, a woman with both hands raised before her with a particular hair style or headdress, but the style of dress is not clear. Barely visible, is the figure of a person behind whom she stands. It appears to be a presentation scene, a common motif found on Ur III seals (see COLLON 1982, 130-135). Letter-orders are regularly sealed by the sender of the document, and the seals were an important component of the letter (STEINKELLER 1977, 44).

TABLET 3

Museum no.: IM 206387
Measurements (cm): 4.9 x 3.6 x 2
Content: Letter-order for grain.

Obv.

1. lugal-nig$_2$-⌜lagar-e⌝	Speak to Lugal-nig-lagar-e:
2. u$_3$-na-a-du$_{11}$	
3. 2.0.0 še gur	20 gur grain …
4. […]	
Rev.	
5. ha!-mu-ne-šum$_2$-mu	he should give to them. They should re-
6. še ki-ba he$_2$-na-a-ga$_2$-ga$_2$-ne	place the grain for him

Comments

1: On the tablet the person to whom the letter-order is addressed is damaged, but is most likely to be restored as Lugal-nig$_2$-lagar-e, which is common enough among Ur III personal names, especially in texts from Umma[3]. Furthermore, an agent of Lugal-nig$_2$-lagar-e is attested in CUSAS 3, 1499, another letter-order which is addressed to a certain Ur-šul-pa-e$_3$, much like text 2 above. While CUSAS 3, 1499 is unprovenanced, there may be a connection between these three texts, and many of the characteristics indicate that they most likely originate from the region of Umma.

6: A similar expression še ki-ba ga$_2$-ga$_2$-dam "grain is to be set/established in that place" is attested at Girsu (MVN 12, 165; UDT 15), and at Nippur (BBVO 11, 299 6N-T840).

TABLET 4

Museum no.: IM 212471
Measurements (cm): 3.6 x 3.4 x 1.8
Content: Letter-order for vegetable seed.

Obv.

1. ^{geš}dur$_2$-gar	Speak to Dur-gar:
2. u$_3$-na-a-du$_{11}$	
3. 0.0.3 numun šum-sikil	
4. 2 ad-kid	3 ban of onion seed,
5. […]	(which) the 2 basket weavers …
6. da-da	
Rev.	He should give it to Dada.
7. he$_2$-na-ab-šum-mu	
8. a-ba šeš-gu$_{10}$-⌜gen$_7$⌝	Who is like my brother?

[3] The BDTNS shows that the name appears 808 times in texts from Umma, out of the 819 texts in which the name is attested (accessed May 2020).

Comments

1-2: An individual called $^{giš}dur_2$-gar-ni is attested in three other letter-orders, two of which originate from Umma (AAICAB 1/4, Bod. S 435 and AOAT 271, 241 No. 2) and one of unknown provenance (BPOA 6, 47). While the name in this letter-order is missing the NI sign, the personal name is attested twice in contexts where it is clearly a personal name without the NI sign (AAICAB 1/3, Bod. S 138; AnOR 1, 278).

8: The expression a-ba šeš-gu_{10}-gin_7 "who is like my brother?" is attested in other Sumerian letter-orders following an instruction, notably at Umma (YOS 4, 114; TCS 1, 132;), at Nippur (TCS 1, 139), and at Garšana (CUSAS 3, 1526). This is also an attested personal name, but in the context of this letter-order that seems unlikely.

Tablet 5

Museum no.: IM 226071
Measurements (cm): 5 x 4.5 x 2.1
Content: Letter-order for sheep and beer.

Obv.	
ur-mes	Speak to Ur-mes:
u_3-na-a-du_{11}	
2 udu mah_2	2 mature sheep
1.0.0.0 $bappir_x$(KAŠ.NINDA)-gur	and 1 gur of beer bread
dam ug_3-il_2-ra	he should give to the wife of the UN-il laborer
Rev.	
he_2-na-ab-šum-mu	

Comments

1: Ur-mes is an extremely common name in the third millennium. An Ur-mes is the addressee in several other letter-orders from cities in Sumer, including: Puzriš-dagan (TCS 1, 238; OrAnt 7, 169 No. 2;), Umma (TCS 1, 242), and Girsu (TCS 1, 240 and 241; AuOR 17-18, 221-223 nos. 18 and 21), and Iri-sagrig (Nisaba 15/2, 1042 and 1049) as governor of the city (see Owen 2015, 48-57). Given the diverse number of attestations of this personal name and the lack of context, it is difficult to place him more precisely.

5: People designated as UN-il_2 in Ur III records were a class of menial labourer who were employed by the state and provided with rations throughout the year (Steinkeller 2003, 44-45).

Conclusion

The letter-orders presented here are concerned with the everyday activities of officials of the Ur III state. For the most part there is evidence to either demonstrate or at least suggest that these tablets originate from Umma in Sumer. While these letter-orders do not seem to be particularly exciting, concerned largely with the distribution of goods, they should be

considered as an integral part of the larger whole. These letter-orders are short and simple requests that seem to be more closely connected to the personal affairs of individuals, rather than the administration of the state on a grand scale. Thus, when considering the place of letter-orders within an archive, as a piece of the administrative activity of a place, the letter--orders reinforce the idea that the borders between personal and public spheres of Ur III officials were nuanced and complex (ALLRED 2007, 2).

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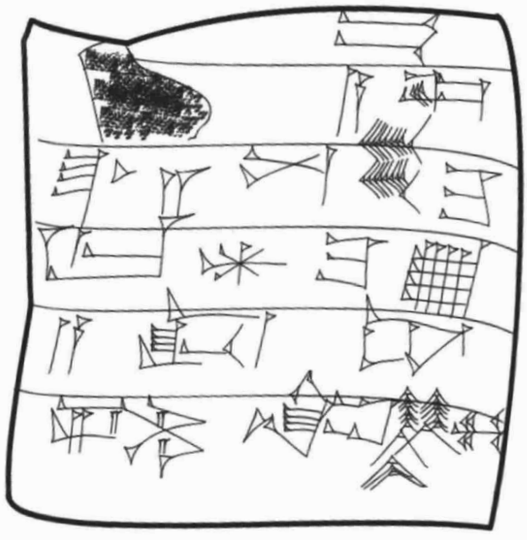
Appendix

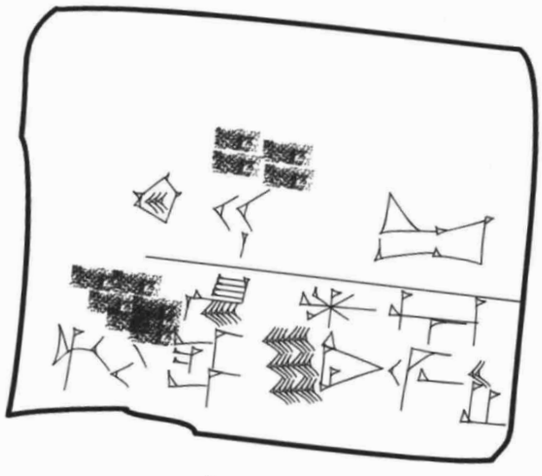
1. Tablet IM 204417

Obverse

Reverse



Obverse



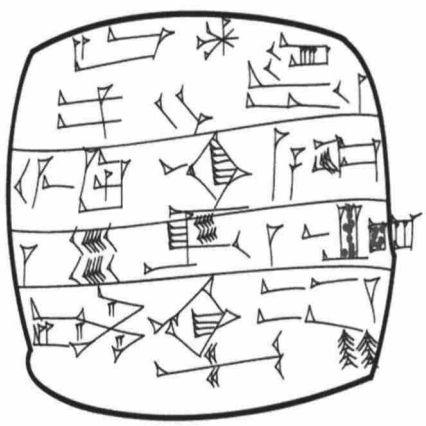
Reverse

2. Tablet IM 206331

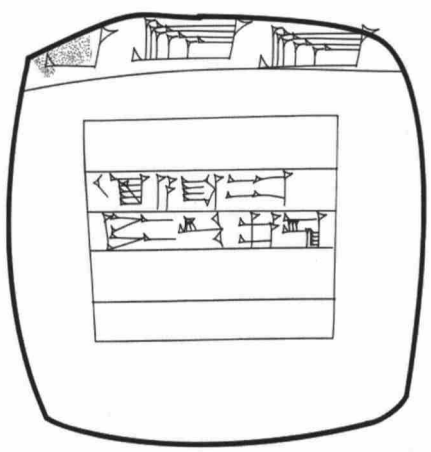
Obverse

Reverse

Seal



Obverse

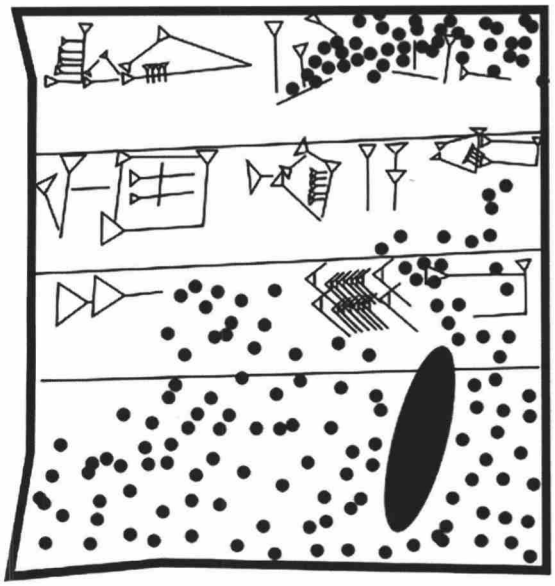


Reverse

3. Tablet IM 206387

Obverse

Reverse



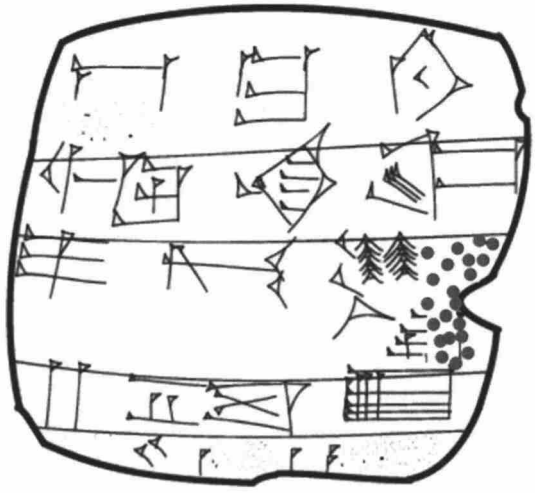
Obverse

Reverse

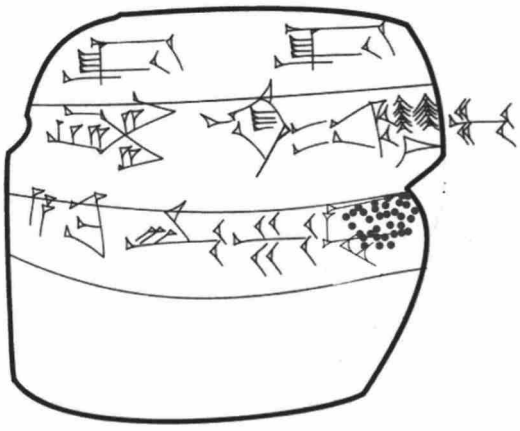
4. Tablet IM 212471

Obverse

Reverse



Obverse

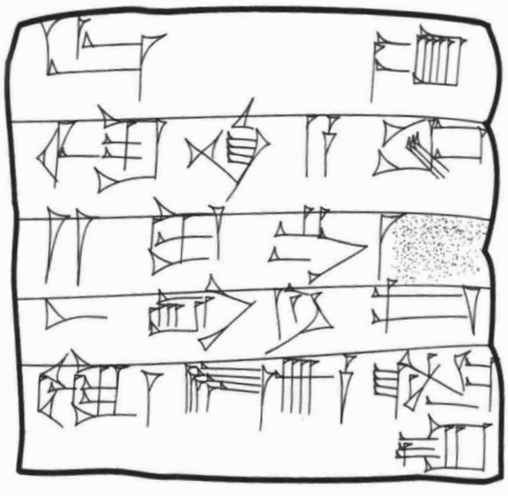


Reverse

5. Tablet IM 226071

Obverse

Reverse



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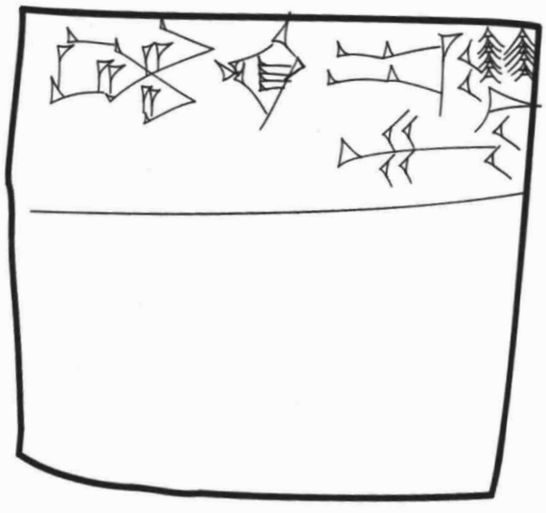

Reverse