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Designs on the Fara, Abū-Ṣalābīkh and Ebla Tablets*

A peculiar feature of the archives of the late E. D. III is the beginning of the custom of engraving designs on written tablets; thereafter, this custom became a deep—rooted tradition in the history of cuneiform writing, so that we find it even in the Hittite area ¹. Designs are indeed found on some of the cuneiform tablets from Fara, Abū–Ṣalābīkh and Ebla (respectively circa 2,600 B. C. the first and 2,500 B. C. the other two ²); it is reasonable, though uncorroborated by adequate evidence, to suppose a connection between this innovative feature and yet another — whose appearance is to be dated to the same period — namely, the inclusion of colophons at the end of the texts ³.

Stylus engravings – as distinct from either seal-impressions or single signs of the cuneiform repertoire – are also found on earlier tablets, but their incidence and elaborateness never reached that of the archives here mentioned. It is because of this development – which marks a sharp dividing line with earlier engravings – that we have chosen to assay a systematic analysis of the epigraphic evidence from the tablets of the three sites.

In the following table, the inventory of the designs will be cross-referenced with indications of the content of the texts. Abbreviations are the usual ones; the content is reported following the two catalogues provided by R. Biggs in OIP XCIX p. 35–42 (Fara), and p. 79–97 (Abū-Ṣalābīkh); the Fara designs are reproduced in the study by E. Heinrich, *Fara: Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen der DOG in Fara und Abu Hatab*, 1902/03 (Berlin, 1931) which we shall refer to,

^{*} The present article was originally intended as the present writer's contribution to a research project, headed by Prof. Giorgio Careri on some aspects of the origin of writing. It is published here however, since the present writer is undertaking a further research on the topics of the general theme of that project. The present writer wishes to thank Prof. H. Waetzoldt, Prof. E. A. Braun Holzinger and Prof. G. Pettinato for their kindness in helping him on more than one occasion.

¹Cf. A. Ünal, in K. Emre – B. Hrouda – M. Mellink – N. Özguç ed., *Anatolia and the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honor of Tahsin Özguç*, Ankara (1989) p. 505–513.

²Cf., most recently, G. Pettinato, *I Sumeri*, Milano (1992) p. 191 and 209 ff. on dating and peculiarities of both archives.

³On these colophons, see the present writer in Cagni (ed.), *Il bilinguismo a Ebla*. Naples (1984) p. 337–365.

noting when further reproductions are to be found elsewhere. The designs of the Fara-texts published by R. Jestin are directly reproduced in his copies of the texts. The designs from Abū-Ṣalābīkh have been studied by the text editor himself in OIP XCIX p. 30–31.

1. Inventory

Typ of text	Edition	Reproduction
Fara		
01)		
ED.Lú.A	SF 76	Taf. 32, e
		(WDOG 43 p. 71 e Taf. 8)
02)		
ED.Lú.A	SF 75	Taf. 28, b
	(partially: WDOG 40 (=LAK)	p. 73 n. 11)
03)		
Jestin,		
Übungen im Edubba	SF 77	Taf. 28, a
04)		
Word list	SF 62	Taf. 27, f
(possible readings of CVC signs)		(WDOG 43 p. 63)
05)		
UD.GAL.NUN	SF 39	Taf. 32, f
		(WDOG 43 p. 37)
06)		
Word list	SF 20	
(= SF 21, 22 = IAS 34)		
07) Word list	SF 13	
(= SF $12 = TSŠ 264 = MEE3 47^4$)	2L 12	
08)		
Small fragment	TSŠ 712	
09)	100 / 12	
Economic document	TSŠ 823 (?)	
10)	100 020 (.)	
Obscure content	TSŠ 972 ⁵	
Obscure Content	100 912	

⁴Cfr. most recently, G. Pettinato, *Testi lessicali monolingui della biblioteca L. 2769*. Naples (1981) pp. 158–159.

⁵ As it is unwritten, tablet TSŠ 77 must be excluded from the present study.

Abū–Ṣalābīkh		
01) ED.Lú.A	IAS 2	OIP XCIX p. 31
02) Word list; duplicate of SF 57	IAS 47	OIP XCIX p. 30 e pl. 27
03) ED.Lú.E	IAS 60	OIP XCIX pl. 34
04) Literary; some lines run parallel to SF 40	IAS 282	OIP XCIX pl. 130
Ebla		
01)		
MEE1 1452: list of Sumerian names and words	MEE3 59	MEE3/A Tav. 33, b (MEE3 p. 244)

2. Designs and colophons

Designs occurring on the same tablet together with colophons are so rare that it is impossible to establish whether both colophons and designs were used as an attribution mark (for authorship, property or else) at the end of the text. In this hypothesis, the colophon and the relative design were both intended to make the core of the same message clear at a glance by means of two different but converging ways of expression.

These are the only colophons we find contextually occurring with designs:

2.1. Fara

- a) SF 77
- b) SF 20
- c) SF 13
- d) TSŠ 972

We must stress that the designs of SF 20 and SF 13 are calligraphic elaboration on cuneiform signs rather than genuine designs. In later times aesthetic research of this kind was still meaningful, as shown in CT V t. 7.

On these colophons and the prosopographic relations between them, see the present writer in L. Cagni (ed.), *Il bilinguismo a Ebla*. Naples (1984) p. 338–344.

2.2. Abū–Salābīkh

- a) IAS 47
- b) IAS 60

No evidence is found to establish any direct connection between colophons

and designs also in these cases. It is possible – from a prosopographic point of view – to set IAS 47 in the chronological sequence of the colophons⁶, but the names of both the scribes of the colophon of IAS 60 are so badly preserved that no conclusion may be drawn from of them⁷.

2.3. Ebla

There is no colophon in the Eblaite text provided with a design.

3. Kinds of designs.

As Biggs previously pointed out, the Abu–Salabik tablets show geometric designs only, while at Fara figurative designs also appear 8.

3.1. Fara

Figurative designs from Fara are found in the tablets of the following texts 9:

- a) SF 62 (human figure holding a little vessel against his chest);
- b) SF 77 shows both kinds of designs; (figurative design: a kind of ibex eating a leaf from a tree standing behind);
- c) SF 75 (five knots made of rolled up snakes arranged in a definite order). while geometrical designs appear in these texts:
- a) SF 39: eight-rayed star;
- b) SF 76: a cross made by means of four hooks set at right angles;
- c) SF 77: geometric design: star-shaped sign compound of crossing lines;
- d) TSŠ 77 since there is no writing on this tablet, it should be excluded from the present inventory; we include it here nonetheless, since no catalogue of the Fara texts in Istanbul like the one by Heinrich for the Berlin tablets is available. Four circumferences inscribed within a square.
- e) TSŠ 712 only the final part of two round lines survives; these two lines run to a common original point, forming an image very like a crescent Moon.
- f) TSŠ: 823: traces of uncertain interpretation.
- g) TSŠ 972: three plait-like designs, the top left resembling a crux ansata 10.

⁶ Cf. the present writer, in Cagni (ed.), *Il Bilinguismo a Ebla*, cit. p. 345–357; the colophon must be in the «parte media inferiore» [= middle inferior band] (p. 355).

⁷ Cf. R. Biggs, OIP XCIX p. 34: a-x-x; a-[x]-si.

⁸ Cf. R. Biggs, loc. cit. p. 31

⁹ See – for a detailed analysis of these drawings – E. Heinrich's work above quoted p. 61–66. ¹⁰ Cf. R. Jestin, TSŠ p. 46 ad T. 973.

3.2. Abū-Salābīkh

The following is a short description of the four geometrical designs:

- a) IAS 2 *crux ansata* with 4 «crescent moons» pointing in the opposit direction of the *ansæ*. This design is reproduced in a photograph in OIP XCIX p. 31.
- b) IAS 47 plait-like design similar to those of TSŠ 972 but more complex.
- c) IAS 60 two designs each made by a single continuous line crossing itself over and over; the two designs are inscribed into a circumference.
- d) IAS 282 same type of design as IAS 60.

3.3. Ebla

Unfortunately part of the design is lost; it is thus difficult to give a full description of it:

Rope-like design provided by wide *ansæ* that create four "eyes" set in the four corners; it is clear from what remains that this weaving must have been developed in more complex ways. This design is copied in MEE3 p. 244.

4. Relationship between geometrical designs and texts

There are only a few elements that can help us arrive at a satisfying interpretation of the designs engraved on the reverse of the cuneiform tablets.

We may point out some constants nevertheless. Because of the poor state of preservation of some of the designs, not all of them will here be taken into account.

We may divide the designs into two classes:

- cl. A) *Star-shaped cruciform designs* (where star-shaped is meant as an elaboration of the cross-like structure);
- cl. B) Plait-like designs.

To class A belong: SF 39, SF 76, SF 77 and IAS 2;

to class B:

TSŠ 972, IAS 47, IAS 60, IAS 282 and MEE3 59.

The five snake–knots of SF 75, even if they belong to the figurative style, should be included here in both classes, since four of them are tied according to a plait–like pattern, while the fifth one is also "tied" – so to speak – in a plait–like pattern, but in a way to compose a cross. A further consideration to highlight is that the pattern of the star of SF 77 recalls to the cruder designs of IAS 60 and IAS 282. The Eblaite design also, as far as its surviving part shows us, seems to

belong to both classes here proposed, with its cruciform pattern formed by woven lines.

Conceptually, as can be seen, there is no great difference between the two classes, since they both seem to be two different realizations of an original motif, that we should define as «warp and weft-shaped». The cruciform shapes (and – by consequence – the star-shaped also) should represent the warp and weft crossing, while the «plaits» should appear as the extreme fulfillment of the motif.

Following the classification of the geometrical designs here proposed, we shall enquire whether there exists a relationship between the texts and the designs associated with them; for this purpose, we shall start our analysis from the epigraphic documentation with the least varied feature: the profession list E.D.Lú.A. The two classes of designs can then be so arranged:

4.1. E.D.Lú.A:

SF 76, IAS 2: class A;

SF 75: figurative kind; referable to both classes A and B;

A strong similarity in the theme may be observed in the two designs SF 76 and IAS 2, in spite of their morphological difference. The four hooks have their tips converging towards the center of the image, in such a way that they create a cross, more exactly, a *crux ansata* whose hooks are inverted pointing to the center. Again, in the design of text SF 76, we find four more crosses displayed in the four corners of this capsized *crux ansata*. These last four crosses are made by means of couples of wavy lines, very similar to the pictographic shape of the cuneiform sign A. In the present writer's opinion, the meaning of the ideogram A, "water" is consistent with the picture, since we find another cuneiform sign in the very center, namely KUR. We do not prepose to discuss the interpretation of the Sumerian word KUR, since an excellent work on this topic has been published by F. Bruschweiter, as well as a few short observations by the present writer. The whole picture looks like a cosmological representation, where from a central kur emanate the four corners of the world, thus creating four regions where the waters (the rivers?) intersect each other.

The river motif may be compared to the «warp and weft» motif in ancient Mesopotamia. From its emergence from the waters ¹², until the creation of an exaustive network of canals, that region could not appear, in its inhabitants' eyes, anything else than the «warp and weft» of vital power – water – napištum mātim "life of the land" ¹³. The mythological thought gives a full depiction of this

¹¹ Respectively: F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie Sumérienne.* Leuven (1987); P. Mander, *Gilgameš e Dante, due itinerari alla ricerca dell'immortalità*, in V. Placella – M.A. Palumbo (ed.), *Miscellanea di studi di letteratura italiana in onore di R. Sirri Rubes.* Naples; forthcoming.

¹² Cfr. H. Nissen, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Frühzeit des Vorderen Orients*. Darmstadt (1983), quotations according the Italian edition, *Protostoria del Vicino Oriente*. Bari (1990) pp. 62–68.

¹³ Cfr. CAD N part 1 pp. 302B–303A 8B2' s. v. *napištum*. The importance of irrigation in the context of mythology is well illustrated by G.S. Kirk's study, *Myth, Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and other Cultures*. Berkeley– Cambridge 1970. Chapter III.

concept. In the cosmogonic myths reported in KAR 4 (5–6) ¹⁴, lugal–e (tab. VIII 340; 358) ¹⁵ and «Eridu genesis» ¹⁶ the two big rivers of the alluvial plain and, consequently, the canal network, are given great prominence.

The same motif, starting from rivers and canals, was extended to all the cosmic components: we learn from the «commentaries», how winds, waters and skies form crosses and hence «wefts and warps» in the cosmic fabric ¹⁷. We find this motif applied in a vertical direction also; it is on an imaginary vertical line that the different skies, lying in a horizontal position, that is, parallel to the ground, were considered aligned: compare the passage of *enūma eliš* V 119–122 and A. Livingstone's observations ¹⁸. We may safely conclude that a kind of «warp and weft» motif is peculiar to the Mesopotamian cosmogonic thought throughout all of its history; so when the mythical tales, in their symbolic language, depicted this motif as lying on on a horizontal plane, we must understand it as related to the whole cosmic reality.

Turning our attention once more to the great hydraulic works, we again encounter a theme often present in the cosmogonic myths, namely the work of man as a substitute for the work of the gods; the main goal of this work was the enlargement and the efficency of the canal network. We also find this topic in the mythological literature in the Akkadian language. Besides the aforementioned bilingual KAR 4, we may quote «Enki and Ninmah», and – if we understand it correctly – atra–hasīs. It is not inappropriate to suppose that the Hoe, created by Enlil – as recounted in the hymn dedicated to this humble but fundamental working tool – was conceived by the god as precisely an implement for the hydraulic works, for the realization of which he created the Sumerians.

So perhaps it is not just a coincidence that the design described above was engraved on the reverse of a text listing human professions, occupations and jobs.

The more abstract design of IAS 2 is to be considered in the same context as SF 76. The central *swastika* whose rightangle arms end in thin, hooked, counter–clockwise wedges, corresponds to the four centripetal hooks of SF 76; the four regions are not indicated by the intersecting water–courses, but by four crescents also forming a curvilinear *swastika*, in a clockwise direction, which is opposite of that of the central *crux ansata*.

¹⁴ Cfr. G. Pettinato, Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen. Heidelberg (1971) p. 74

¹⁵ G. Pettinato, ibid. pp. 91–93 verses 11 and 29; J. van Dijk, LUGAL UD ME-LÁM-bi NIR-GAL. Leiden (1983) p. 98–102.

¹⁶Th. Jacobsen, *The Harps that once ...: Sumerian Poetry in translation*. New Haven and London (1987) p. 147 "These cities [i. e. the primeval cities P. M.], which had been named by names, / and had been allotted half–bushel baskets, / dredged the canals, which were blocked with purplish/ (wind–borne) clay, and they carried water./ Their cleaning of the smaller canals / established abundant growth". Cf. also the author's first edition: *Eridu's Genesis* JBL 100 (1981) pp. 513–529, in particular, p. 518.

¹⁷ Cfr. A. Livingstone, Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars. Oxford (1986), p. 72–77 and p. 82.

¹⁸ ibid. pp. 79-82.

In the same context of the cross and the plait motifs, we shall place the snakes of SF 75; the simplest of them has been reproduced by Deimel in WDOG 40 (= LAK) p. 73 n. 11.

One of the snake designs is notable, because it represents a knot made by two snakes – so intertwined as to form a cross – whose heads are turned in a counter–clockwise direction and whose straight pointed tails recall the four rays of the star in SF 77. Two other snakes are entwined with themselves in such a way that one forms three crosses, and the other five. Yet another snake is the simplest possible knot. A different pattern is used to outline the last snake, which also forms a large cross two arms of which are united at their tips by the snake's semicircular body. This detail indicates the great care the scribe used to demonstrate that designing a single snake's body he could form one cross; indeed in all the five designs of the snakes we are able to follow their entwining by means of the precise details ¹⁹.

The aforementioned set of designs on the reverse of SF 75 is the key to connect the cruciform designs to those of the «warp and weft-type» as two aspects of the same idea.

On the subject of the «warp and weft», we should mention the role, in the cosmogonic myths, of the goddess of weaving, duttu, a role of great relevance to the considerations we have made up to this point. The goddess is mentioned in the tale of the primeval times in the «Debate between Ewe and Wheat» and in the myth called «Enki and Ninhursag». While in the former her presence is critical in establishing the cosmic order 20, in the latter her function is again crucial, since it is from her appearance in the plot that the "chaotic" tendency of the god Enki's behavior is inverted, through the action of Ninhursag 21.

These considerations corroborate the hypothesis of a cosmological meaning to the geometrical designs here examined.

Man, in Sumerian thought, was dignified by his work ²², and this work was mainly of an agricultural nature ²³. Agriculture was not so dissimilar, in Mesopotamia, from scribal art; we know the use of the sign SAR as ideogram for

¹⁹ As Prof. G. Careri pointed out, forming a cross – that is to say the intersections of the two main directions, horizontal and vertical – by means of a single line (i. e. the snake's body) is a way to emphasize the unity of the tracing; this consideration is even more important when extended to the signle–lined stars of the next paragraph. (Personal communication).

²⁰ Cfr. G. Pettinato, *Das altorientalische Menschenbild und die sumerischen und akkadischen Schöpfungsmythen.* Heidelberg (1971) p. 86–88 verses 4–5, 16–17.

²¹ Cfr. S. Kramer, BASOR SS 1 (1944) verses 138–187; and, more recently, Th. Jacobsen, *The Harps that once ...: Sumerian Poetry in translation*, quoted p. 181–204, in particular p. 196–200.

²² Cfr. G. Pettinato, *I Sumeri* cit. pp. 324–326; In another sense, P. Michalowski rightly – in my opinion – extends this concept to the Babylonian world; cfr. P. Michalowski, *Presence at the Creation* in: T. Abusch – J. Huenergard – P. Steinkeller (ed.), *Lingering over Words. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, 1990 p. 389.

²³Even more meritorious, the work dedicated to the building of temples to the gods was exalted in royal inscriptions. But this was a task for kings and not for the common man.

both the verb "to write" (Akkadian: *šatārum*) and the verb to mean the growing of vegetables ²⁴; the same sign is employed also as the determinativ for plant names, as an ideogram for specific terms of the kind of kiri₆ "orchard", of nu–giš–sar "gardener", or of the surface measure unit sar. Our case is less grounded in those peculiarities of the sign SAR, than on the observation that, in both cases, agriculture and writing, man had to "open" the earth (or clay) by engraving it with lines on the pattern of «warp and weft». The furrows may appear as parallel lines, perpendicular to the canalizations, while, similarly, the tablet is subdivided in columns that are perpendicular to the lines in which the cuneiform signs are engraved. We can not exclude the possibility that in this similarity lies the explanation for the concentration of all these different meanings under the same grapheme; there is also some likelihood that the popularity of the «warp and weft» graphic pattern with the scribes of the texts considered in this study, also implied speculations of the present kind.

4.2. SF 77:

First design: class A;

Second design: figurative type (ibex and tree).

Both designs of SF 77 may be related to the cosmological theme that we brought out in the E.D.Lú.A manuscripts, even if one is a figurative design. We do not mean, with this statement, to exclude the possibility that both the designs, the geometrical one as well as the figurative, are elements of the same unique representation.

We find an evident affinity between the star and the compositions of the *cruces ansatæ* we saw in the E.D.Lú.A manuscripts: we may note that the four rays of the star, though radiating from opposite sides, face in different directions: one pair of rays opposite appears counter–clockwise and the other pair of rays clockwise. In my opinion this design had to be drawn with a single line, uninterruptedly, never lifting the hand from the clay: the star is formed by the intersection of a single line ²⁵.

The ibex ²⁶ and the tree are represented in a position that makes them form a cross. The gesture of the ibex eating a leaf of the tree recall the touching of the tips of the two contiguous arms of the cross formed by the body of the snake in SF 75; in that case the scribe meant to show that there was no break in the body of the snake, in other words, that it was the same body that formed the arms of the cross. In this case the gesture of eating underlines the ideal continuity between two living beings, though they belong to two different realms, one of the two

²⁴ Cfr. CAD A part 2 pp. 356 sgg. s. v. aşû 2

²⁵ Se footnote 19.

²⁶Whether the ibex is to be considered here as a symbol for Enki or the Abzu (see W. Heimpel, *Tierbilder in der Sumerischen Literature*, Rome 1968 p. 247 f.), is difficult to state; in that case, however, some further considerations should be made.

beings growing in a vertical direction, the other moving on the ground on a horizontal plane ²⁷.

We have seen, in the case of the E.D.Lú.A list that the cosmological design was related to the text by means of the Mesopotamian assumption that the work of man was to continue and substitute the work of the gods, but in the present case we must search in other directions.

The association of cosmogonic themes and syllabic signs is well known in Mesopotamian literature, as shown by KAR 4, whose implications have been studied by B. Landsberger ²⁸; this association is part of a larger Mesopotamian speculative trend, which recent studies by J. Bottéro ²⁹, T. Larsen ³⁰ and H. Limet ³¹ have addressed.

A text where readings for CVC signs are given – see the study on this text by R. Jestin ³² – is fitting to the scribal world, in particular to scholarly life, and therefore to the abovementioned connection between: work – agriculture – writing.

4.3. Non-homogeneous group; TSŠ 972, IAS 47:

The two designs of TSŠ 972 and IAS 47 share an uniform structure. It is through them that we may trace the most certain direct link between the Fara and Abū-Ṣalābīkh geometrical designs. If we line up the three designs of the Fara text in a sequence by increasing level of elaboration, than the design of IAS 47 comes as fourth in the series. In these cases «warp and weft» structure is perfectly clear. The stylus follows the course of a sewing needle. These designs as well have been traced without interruption.

4.4. Non-homogeneous group; IAS 60, IAS 282:

These two designs are simpler than those we dealt with in the preceding paragraph; both have been engraved following the same pattern, similar to the one of the star of SF 77. The ample curvilinear stroke linking opposite tips recalls the

²⁷ Again we recall Careri's observations (footnotes 19 and 25). Careri stressed that the unity of tracing is a way to express the unity of the Cosmos.

²⁸ See: B. Landsberger, *Die angebliche babylonische Notenschrift*. AfO Bh 1 (1933) pp. 170–178; id., *Zum "Silbenalphabet B"*, in M. Çig – H. Kizilyay, *Eski Babil Zamanina ait Nippur Menşeli iki okul kitabi*. Ankara (1959), p. 97–116.

²⁹ Cfr. J. Bottéro, *Le noms de Marduk, l'ecriture et la "logique" en Mesopotamie ancienne* in: M. de Jong Ellis (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memoriam of J.J. Finkelstein*, Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences. Hamden (1977) pp. 5–28.

³⁰ Cfr. M. Trolle Larsen, *The Mesopotamian Lukewarm Mind: Reflections on Science, Divination and Literacy* in F. Rochberg–Halton (ed.), *Language, Literature and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to E. Reiner* (= AOS 67, 1987), p. 203–225.

³¹ H. Limet, *De la philologie à la mystique en Babylonie*, in: J. Quaegebeur (ed.), *Studia Paulo Naster Oblata II. Orientalia Antiqua*. Leuven (1982), p. 131–142.

³² R. Jestin, Übungen im Edubba. ZA LI NF XVII (1955) p. 37-44.

design of the cruciform snake of SF 75. On the grounds of these observations, we may also place these designs in the graphic tradition here illustrated.

4.5. Separate case; MEE3 59:

The Eblaite design, from the point of view of its massive line – which we have defined as «rope–like» –, seems to recall the snakes of SF 75, but, from the point of view of the sweep of the pattern, should rather be related to groups 3 and 4 just mentioned. In spite of its eccentricity (due perhaps to the region of its provenance, the Syrian area) it can be linked with certainty to the Mesopotamian tradition here documented.

5. Conclusions

We will never know, unfortunately, what was taught per os in the ancient Mesopotamian schools alongside writing techniques. The presence of motifs inspired by cosmological subjects, drawn on the reverse of tablets whose content was of a particular kind (i. e. profession lists, grapheme lists) leads us to consider the possibility that the oral teaching was not limited to dictation or to those explanations that gave origin to the glosses – such as those that an Eblaite scribe helpfully included when drawing up his manuscript of the E.D.Lú.A list ³³ – but may have touched on subjects that, centuries later, would give rise to the «Commentaries».

³³ Cfr. G. Pettinato, MEE 3 cit. p. 23 ad 44 and 48.

