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THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST,
A LIFE!

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1947: TWO TABLETS AS A CHRISTMAS GIFT TO A LEUVEN ASSYRIOLOGIST

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With gratitude towards Karel Van Lerberghe, my mentor in the field of Assyriology, I present this contribution in celebration of his long commitment to ancient Near Eastern studies. His enthusiastic teaching and stories gave me insight into the history of Mesopotamia as well as the world of those who made it their life task to study it; the latter has truly proven bottomless. As a colleague he granted full freedom in all my endeavors and was never scarce with advice. For this and other reasons I am much indebted to Karel and wish him many more years in the company of cuneiform tablets.

After my formal studies in 2003, Karel gave me the opportunity and confidence to participate in a newly established interdisciplinary project on the development and use of technology to digitize and facilitate the study of cuneiform tablets, and archaeological objects in general, the outcome of which we called the ‘minidome’ or Portable Light Dome system (Willems et al., 2005; Hameeuw and Willems, 2011). During the testing phase several series of recordings were completed. One of these initial test subjects were the cuneiform tablets of the collection of the KU Leuven. These include two unpublished texts that drew my attention, and now form the subject of this contribution.

Introduction

Most of the cuneiform texts in the collection of Leuven were published by Leuven scholars in the past. The vast majority — those of Neo-Sumerian origin — by text copy in MVN II (Sauren, 1974) and by transcription and translation in OLP 4 (Naster and Sauren, 1973). Later, two small Old Babylonian texts were published in OLP 18 (Vandendriessche, 1987).

It was the collecting efforts by Leuven scholars in the Near East around 1911, plus gifts and bequests of a later date (Naster and Sauren, 1973, 17-19, 70; Naster, 1978, 15; Baudot 1987-1988, 113-114), which settled the

total number of tablets in the Leuven Collection. The oldest part of the collection has a museum accession number beginning with “MB”, indicating they are the texts formerly kept at the *Musée Biblique* in Leuven. In addition to these, the collection’s corpus includes forty-four tablets gathered in Beirut by Paul Naster, a former professor of Assyriology at Leuven; they received the accession prefix “NP” — *Naster Paul* — and together with the MB tablets dating to the Neo-Sumerian period are as thus part of the publications of Naster and Sauren mentioned above.¹ Since the division of the university in 1970, the MB collection is kept at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) and the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL). The NP tablets are all preserved at the KU Leuven. In the OLP 4 publication with the Neo-Sumerian material by Naster and Sauren, the authors promised a later publication of tablets more recent in date, but that study, which most probably intended to include the two texts presented in this contribution, never saw publication. The only non-Neo-Sumerian tablets of the Leuven collection to be published are the two Old Babylonian texts in OLP 18 by Mia Vandendriessche (1987).²

In Naster and Sauren’s publication of the Neo-Sumerian tablets, the corpus of the forty-four NP texts are mentioned and labeled as *almost all* the tablets belonging to Naster (Naster and Sauren, 1973, 18)³. The two tablets discussed below are most probably among those not listed by Naster on that occasion. Today all of them form part of the Leuven collection and include even a few other tablets, assumed to be collected by Naster as well. For the sake of completeness they are listed here:

NP 46	Letter	Middle Assyrian	this publication
NP 47	Delivery	Neo-Sumerian	this publication
NP 48	Messenger Text	Neo-Sumerian	unpublished
NP 49	Letter	Old Assyrian	unpublished
NP 50	List	Neo-Sumerian	unpublished

In addition to these tablets listed with a NP-number, the Leuven collection also contains six fragments of cuneiform tablets. Presumably they were collected by Paul Naster as well, but never received a collection number. Today they are labeled as NP 51 to NP 56.

¹ In the OLP 4 publication the NP-tablets are listed as belonging to Naster; today they are all part of the Leuven Collection.

² Spaey 1989-1990 includes the publication of three sealed docketts from the *Musée Biblique*.

³ That are NP 1-11 and 13-45; there is no NP 12.

The Christmas gift

The two texts treated in this contribution were to my knowledge not studied or published in the past. They are discussed together as apparently they found their way to the Leuven Collection together. In terms of both in time and probably provenance, there is no relation between the two tablets. However, the texts are accompanied with a similar label handwritten by Paul Naster connecting the texts with Susa.

Both clay tablets appear to be a gift of Roman Ghirshman, director of the French excavations at Susa from 1946 to 1967, to Paul Naster. The two labels in the boxes wherein the tablets are kept mention this transaction, saying: “at/from Susa given (to Paul Naster) by R. Ghirshman, director of the (French) excavations on 24 December 1947” (see labels below). These gifts are dated to 24 December 1947, the day before Christmas; perhaps a present on Christmas Eve?

Paul Naster traveled throughout the Near East on several occasions, mostly accompanied by his wife, Lydie. The label from NP 46 suggest Naster received these tablets at Susa itself, implying he visited the site in the winter of 1947-48. When inspecting the *Journal de fouilles* of Ghirshman, his entry on 23 December 1947 mentions “visite de P. Naster de Bruxelles”⁴. This accords perfectly with the location and time of the gifts as mentioned on Naster’s labels in the Leuven Collection.

The main question in regard to this gift is where did these texts originate. When inspecting the work conducted by Ghirshman and his team since his first campaign from 4 December 1946 until 23 April 1947, and his second campaign which started on 21 November 1947, he had not yet excavated the site extensively by the time of Naster’s visit on 23/24 December 1947 (Steve et al., 1980, 107-108). In fact, during the first years of Ghirshman’s work at Susa, no mention is made of tablets being discovered. In addition, both texts have by their contents and paleography seemingly no relation to the ancient city of Susa. A Susa provenance, or finding place can therefore be doubted; establishing their place of origin is even harder. When R. Ghirshman started his series of excavation seasons at Susa he inherited the work of J. de Morgan and R. De Mecquenem. It could be suggested the two texts formed part of unspecified archaeological objects of the old excavations left in the cellars of the *château*, which turned up when they were cleaned by

⁴ Personal communication from Hermann Gasche; Dr. Gasche does bring up Ghirshman’s journal does not state Naster spent the night at Susa. Normally, Ghirshman noted this type of information in his journal.

Ghirshman in 1946-47. Still, in that case, it is questionable why well-preserved tablets would not have been registered by the previous directors of the French excavations at Susa; and in fact, it is known what was left by the previous excavation teams, was no more than fragments of archaeological objects, and by no means well-preserved clay tablets. In addition and of significance, why would R. Ghirshman present cuneiform texts to a visitor as Paul Naster? Ghirshman was not the person to disperse antiquities dug up during excavations.

The texts, based on their contents and paleography, most probably do not originate in Susa and secondly it is very implausible Ghirshman presented objects excavated at Susa to visitors. So how do the labels accompanying both tablets in the Leuven Collection and written by Paul Naster explain themselves? A solution can only be argued on uncertain grounds as no records with evidence or a hint concerning this issue have survived. Most probably the tablets were attained via one of the many antiquity dealers active all over the Near East at that time.⁵ The tablets seem to have a different place of origin, NP 46 somewhere in northeastern Syria and NP 47 in the Lagash region. Thus, they might have been acquired during more than one occasion at two geographically distinct locations. With caution, it can be suggested they were acquired during the trip towards Susa.

Texts

In 2010 both texts were digitally recorded with the Portable Light Dome system. Based on this recorded data, a ‘discolored/shaded image’, a ‘3D-image’ and an objective ‘line drawing’ have been extracted (see illustrations); here presented together with a transliterations, translations and commentary. These recordings can be consulted on-line, together with all the tablets of the Leuven Cuneiform Collection via the website of the ancient Near East unit of the KU Leuven.⁶

⁵ Interestingly, Hermann Gasche noted to the author of this contribution such antique dealers were even active at the small city of Shūsh, beside the tell of Susa. If the tablets were acquired at Shūsh, it can even be suggested Paul Naster bought the tablets himself. Of course, that idea would imply Naster wrote a false label, obscuring his purchase. That again would be surprising as Naster made no secret of for example the acquisition of tablets he made on the antiquities markets of Beirut (Naster and Sauren, 1973, 18).

⁶ I thank sincerely the appreciated input by Katrien De Graef, Stefan Jakob and David Owen for their suggestions in regard to the dating or correct interpretation of the texts contents.

NP 46

Date: Middle Assyrian (13th century)

Provenance: Susa?/unknown

Origin: Northeast Syria

Dimensions: 5.9 × 5.3 × 2.3 cm

Label by Naster:

te <u>Susa</u>	at <u>Susa</u> ,
aan P.N. 24 dec. 1947	to P[aul] N[aster], 24 Dec[ember] 1947
geschonken door	given by
Ghirshman, dir ^f der ⁷	Ghirshman, dir[ecto]r of the
Franse opgravingen	French excavations

OBVERSE

1. <i>a-na</i> ^{Id} <i>iškur-en-dingir</i> ^{meš}	To Adad-bēl-ilāni
2. <i>qí-bi-ma</i>	speak,
3. <i>um-ma</i> ¹ <i>sa-mi-du-ma</i>	thus: Sāmīdu.
<hr/>	
4. <i>a-na ku-a-ša é-ka</i>	May you and your house
5. <i>lu-ú šul-mu</i>	be well.
<hr/>	
6. <i>pa-ni-ma iš-^rtu¹ a-^rḥa¹-iš</i>	Previously together
7. <i>ni-id-du-bu-ub</i>	we have spoken,
8. <i>ta-at-ta-at-la-ak</i>	you left,
9. <i>^rla-a¹ ta-tu-ra</i>	you did not return.
10. [...] ^r <i>u⁴?¹-ma ^rar¹-ḥi-iš</i>	... today at once
11. [...] ^r <i>2¹ anše.nigida [še[?]] ^rSIG₅¹.meš</i>	... 2 <i>emār</i> 6 <i>sūt</i> of good barley [?]

LOWER EDGE

12. <i>le-^rqe¹-a</i>	take
13. <i>ar-ḥi-iš</i>	at once

REVERSE

14. <i>a-^rdi us¹-ba-ku-ni</i>	till I remain
15. <i>a-na</i> ^{URU} <i>ta-^ri¹-di</i>	to Ta'īdu
16. <i>al-ka še-am</i>	come! The barley

⁷ The now-obsolete Dutch plural genitive “*der*” < “*van de*” (= “of the”).

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| 17. <i>la-a ad-di-na-ak-ku</i> | I did not give to you |
| 18. <i>a-di ia-ʿx-ša¹-am-ma</i> | till... |
| 19. <i>la-a ni-lu-ku-né</i> | we do not come |
| 20. <i>še-am la-a ad-di-na-ku</i> | the barley I will not give to you. |
| 21. <i>u₄-26-kam</i> | Day 26. |

Light brown-orange, almost squared, tablet with some damage and cracks on its surface. The letter is of the typical Middle Assyrian squared-shape type. While the label written by P. Naster accompanying the tablet in the Leuven Collection mentions he received the tablet from R. Ghirshman at Susa, it does not suggest its provenance was Susa itself, in contrast to the label of NP 47. Based on the *ductus* and contents — the city of Ta'idu is mentioned in line 15 — a northeastern Syrian origin and date in the late 13th century BCE for the tablet is likely.

Concerning the appearance of Ta'idu in the letter, the exact location of this city is still debated; a number of settlements are in the balance (Wäfler, 1994; Szuchman, 2007, 4-5, 47-50 & 75-78). Several texts title the city as a Mittanian and Middle Assyrian capital. Based on the archaeological evidence and in relation to the textual evidence in the Dur-Katlimmu texts (Röllig, 1983), Ta'idu corresponds best with modern Tell Hamidiye in the Upper Khabur (Eichler et al., 1985, 53-76; Wäfler, 2003). Other settlements in the northern Assyrian provinces, i.e. the region around Mardin and in between Cizre and Diyarbakir, have also been suggested for Ta'idu's location. Kessler considered on well-examined grounds (Kessler, 1980, 95-109) the tell next to the modern Turkish village of Üçtepe to be the ancient city. When he wrote that argumentation, Kessler had no knowledge of the Dur-Katlimmu texts who suggest Tell Hamidiye as Ta'idu and recently, he argued in favor of Tell al-Hamidiye.⁸ An alternative proposition for the northern location is Tell Ermen in the centre of the modern Turkish city of Kiziltepe, south of Mardin (Lipiński, 2000, 142-144). As a consequence, it is put forward there may have been two settlements called Ta'idu in the region, although that possibility is contested as well (Szuchman, 2007, 49-50).

The text is a letter order with a standard address formula and *šulmu*-well being formula⁹. The letter deals with a transaction of barley. While

⁸ During the *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* at Paris in 2009 he presented a small archive found at Tell Hamidiye as Ta'idian.

⁹ On this formula see Cancik-Kirschbaum (1996, 59-60).

line 18 is difficult to understand and the passage of lines 10-11 is partly damaged, it seems that it was previously agreed that barley would be brought by Sāmidu to Adad-bēl-ilāni when he came to Ta'idu, but that did not occur and therefore the letter informs Adad-bēl-ilāni the barley is not yet given.

NP 47

Date: Ibbi-Sîn 2

Provenance: Susa?/unknown

Origin: Central Sumer — Lagash

Dimensions: 7.2 × 4.7 × 2.2 cm

Label by P. Naster:

van <u>Susa</u>	from <u>Susa</u>
gegeven door	given by
R Ghirshman, dir ^r	R. Ghirshman, dir[ecto]r
v. de opgravingen	o[f] the excavations
24 dec. 1947	24 Dec[ember] 1947

OBVERSE

1. 5.0.0.0 še.gur	5 <i>gur</i> barley
2. kišib lú- ^d nin.gír.su	received by Lu-Ningirsu
3. dub.sar edin	the 'edin-scribe' ¹⁰ ,
4. 6.1.0.0 gur ¹¹ še kù.ga	6 <i>gur</i> and 1 (<i>pi</i>) barley (in?) silver,
5. 1.2.0.0 gîri ur.mes É.ŠU	1 (<i>gur</i>) and 2 (<i>pi</i> of barley) <i>via</i> Urmes ...,
6. 1.0.0.0 ur. ^d ba.ba ₆	1 (<i>gur</i> of barley) Ur-Baba
7. dumu ur.sa ₆ .sa ₆ .ga	son of Ur-Sasaga,
8. 0.1.0.0 nu.za.ba nar	1 (<i>pi</i> of barley) Nuzaba the singer,
9. 0.2.0.0 géme. ^d šul.pa.è	2 (<i>pi</i> of barley) Geme-Šul-pa'e
10. gîri lugal.ezem	<i>via</i> Lugal-ezem,
11. 0.1.0.0 ur. ^d ig.alim	1 (<i>pi</i> of barley) Ur-Igalim
12. lú.laḥtan ₄	the LU-LAḤTAN ¹² ,

¹⁰ Same title at MVN 22, 84:3.

¹¹ Above erasure of še?

¹² Schneider 1935: 614, 616 or REC 286; see also HSS 04, 049: lu₂-lahtan₄-me", Hussey 1915, text 49: rev. II 10.

REVERSE

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 13. šu.nigin 10+4.2.0.0 gur | a total of 14 <i>gur</i> and 2 <i>pi</i> (barley) |
| 14. ki nimgir.ra.kam.ta | from Nimgirra-kam ¹³ |
| 15. mu.túm | delivery. |
| 16. mu en. ^d innana | The year the <i>en</i> -priest of Inanna |
| 17. maš.e ì.pàd | by means of the omens was chosen. |

Light brown rectangular plano-convex shaped tablet. Its top left corner is broken off — most probably modern damage — and repaired. The label accompanying NP 47 in the Leuven Cuneiform Collection says: “from Susa”, in contrast to the label of NP 46 that mentions Naster received the tablet “at Susa”. This small difference in notation by Naster, if it was intended, suggests NP 46 tablet was only given “at” Susa but was not found at Susa, whereas NP 47 does reveals the provenance by writing “from”. The date on the tablet, Ibbi-Sîn 2, allows this provenance; it is generally accepted the rule of the Ur III dynasty at Susa only faded away by the beginning of the Ibbi-Sîn 3 (Jacobsen, 1970; Potts, 1999, 142). Nevertheless, the language, paleography and prosopography do not argue for a Susian origin for the tablet, but rather a Southern Mesopotamian — Central Sumer one. The official Nimgirra-kam (l. 14) is uniquely known from Girsu; it is therefore in the Lagash region the origin of this tablet most probably has to be found.

The contents of the document is a typical Neo-Sumerian delivery-document, wherein varying amounts of barley are allocated to different persons.

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¹³ Nimgirra-kam is known from Nebraska 65 (Ibbi-Sîn 4 – provenance unclear); STA 25 (Šulgi 46 – Girsu); TCTI 2: 4195 (Šu-Sîn 7 – Girsu); Zinbun 21, pl. 1: 37 (Amar-Sîn 2 – Girsu); BPOA 1: 155 + seal (Šulgi 45 – Girsu); RA 10, p.66: 104 (no date – Girsu); MVN 9:151 (no data – Girsu); a time span of Šulgi 46 to Ibbi-Sîn 4, some 25 years.

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Computer-generated images based on the recording of tablet NP 46 with the Portable Light Dome system

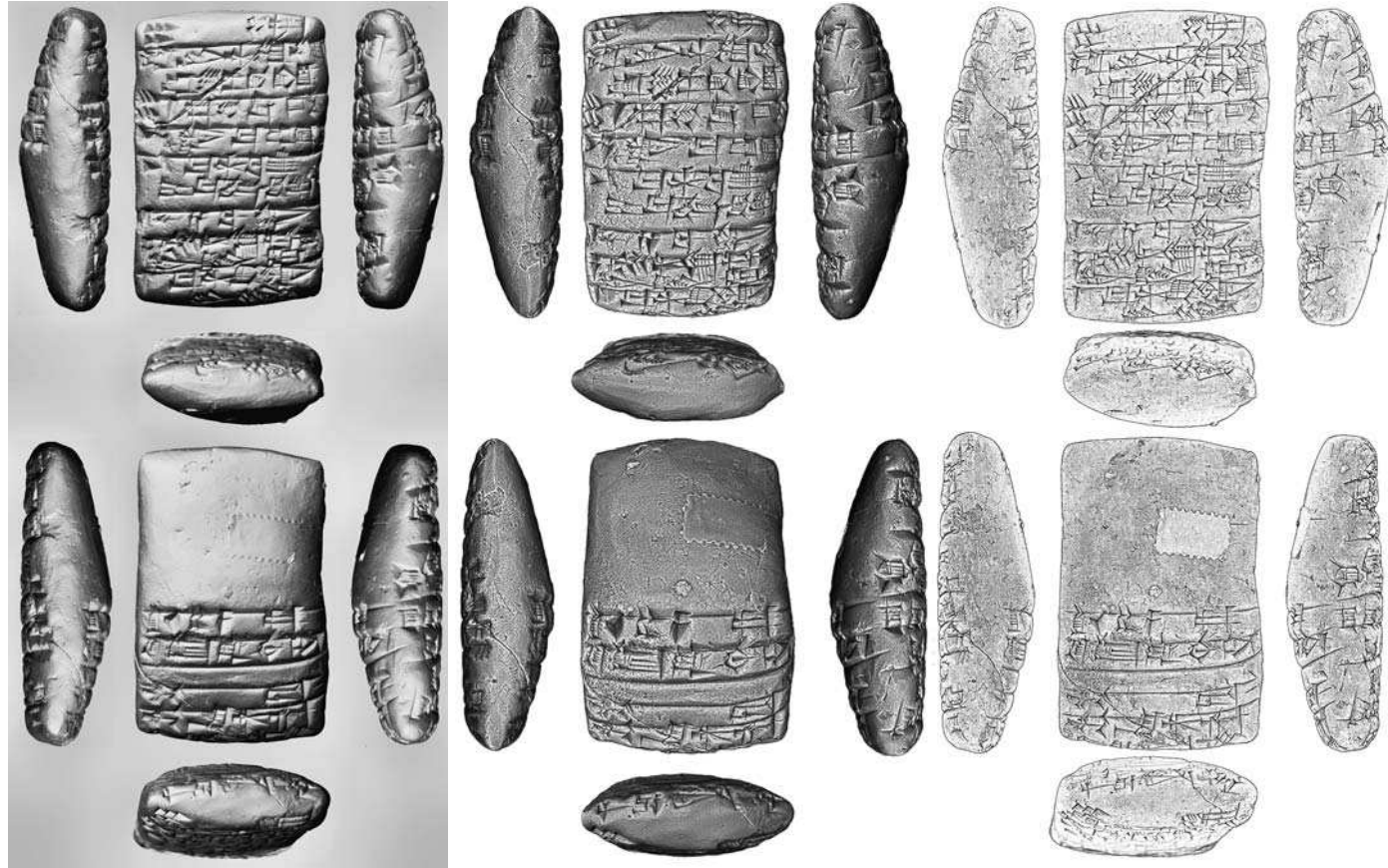
Shaded filter
(PLD viewer)



3D images with radiance scaling filter
(Meshlab v1.3.0 viewer)



Line drawing
(PLD viewer)



Computer-generated images based on the recording of tablet NP 47 with the Portable Light Dome system

Shaded filter
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