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Two Mesopotamian bricks in Warsaw¹

Abstract

This paper comments on two Mesopotamian bricks belonging to collections of the Asia and Pacific Museum and the National Museum in Warsaw. Both bricks bear cuneiform inscriptions. The first was fashioned during the reign of the Ur king Amar-Suen (c. 2046–2038 BC) while the second is to be dated to the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC). They commemorate building projects commissioned by these two Mesopotamian kings.

Keywords: cuneiform writing, royal inscriptions, brick inscriptions, Amar-Suen, Shalmaneser III

In the autumn of 2018 two museums in Warsaw exchanged Mesopotamian bricks from their collections. Initially, the Asia and Pacific Museum owned a brick with a royal Assyrian inscription and the National Museum – one with a royal Sumerian inscription. Over a decade ago the Assyrian brick was lent to National Museum as a long-term deposit and it became a part of the Gallery of Ancient Art permanent exhibition. At the summer

¹ I would like to convey my thanks to Asia and Pacific Museum and National Museum Trustees for permission to publish the inscribed bricks. I am much indebted to Alfred Twardecki from National Museum, and Dominika Kossowska-Janik and Łukasz Brodowicz from Asian and Pacific Museum for their time and help. I would like to express my gratitude to Małgorzata Sandowicz for kind suggestions and Sara Manasterska for revising my English.



of 2011 the Gallery was temporarily closed due to the upcoming renovation. However, in the end, the work took up considerably longer than planned and the exhibition was reopened to the public in February 2021.²

During the first half of 2018 the project of a new temporal exhibition in Asia and Pacific Museum was accepted and its title: *Nonephemeral words – writing in the world cultures* was approved. Dominika Kossowska-Janik, the curator, started to assemble artefacts suitable for the narration of the exhibition, which interspersed with a renewed discussion with the trustees of the National Museum about the Assyrian brick on loan.³ The result was the above mentioned exchange; the Assyrian brick became a permanent part of the National Museum's collection and in return, the Asia and Pacific Museum was provided with another Mesopotamian brick, this time with a Sumerian inscription.

Both bricks were part of two different private collections beforehand, although no further details can be retrieved.

Brick of Amar-Suen

MAP 21643, which is currently housed in the Asia and Pacific Museum, is dated to the reign of Amar-Suen (2046–2038 BC), a king of the Ur III period (c. 2112–2004 BC).⁴ Museum's records point provenance to Ur (modern Tell el-Muqayyar, Iraq). The inscription is written in Sumerian and was created by pressing a stamp into the surface of the brick. The impression is of uneven depth; the upper part of inscription is extruded deeper into the brick than the bottom part where last lines of text are barely legible. This might have been caused by a worker's negligence or his inability to press deeper due to the surface of the brick being well on the way to drying completely when the stamp was pressed into it.

There is a second impression on the right side of the MAP 21643 with the same text but made with a different stamp. The sign placement is slightly different: the longer lines are broken into two but without change in the number of lines separating phrases. Additionally, on the left side there are rare remnants of bitumen, which was originally used as a binder between bricks. In several places, where a thicker layer of bitumen remains, mirror impressions of some signs from the adjacent brick and its side inscription can still be observed.

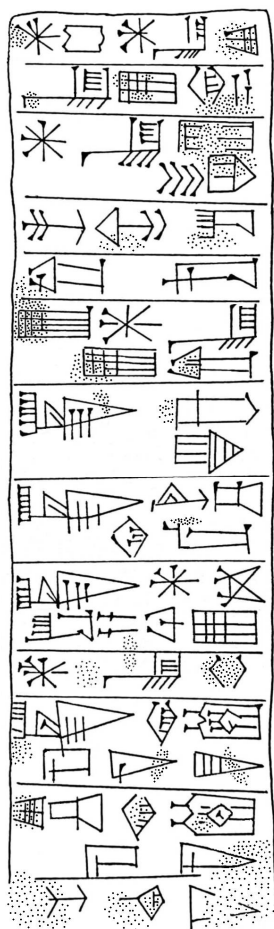
² 'Galeria Sztuki Starożytnej. #MityczneOtwarcie', Viewed 20 January 2022, <<https://www.mnw.art.pl/o-muzeum/galer/galeria-sztuki-starozytniej/>>.

³ Dominika Kossowska-Janik, private communication.

⁴ According to the middle chronology.

MAP 21643⁵

Dimensions: 26,5 x 26,5 x 7 cm



Transliteration:

1. ^damar-^den.zu
2. nibru^{ki}-a
3. ^den-líl-le
4. mu-pà-da
5. sag-ús
6. é ^den-líl-ka
7. lugal kala-ga
8. lugal uri^{ki}-ma
9. lugal an-ub-da limmu-ba-ke₄
10. ^den-ki
11. lugal ki-ág-ĝá-ni-ir
12. abzu ki-ág-ĝá-ni
13. [m]u-na-d[ù]

Translation:

¹⁻⁴ Amar-Suen, chosen in Nippur by the god Enlil,
⁵⁻⁶ provider of the god Enlil's temple, ⁷⁻⁹ mighty king,
 king of Ur, king of the four (world) quarters, ¹⁰⁻¹³ (for)
 Enki, his beloved king, he built his beloved Abzu.

Commentary:

This one-column text is the same as E3/2.1.3.15 with minor variation: line 2 and 3 are reversed.⁶ There are several different bricks bearing the same inscription in Polish collections.⁷

⁵ Copy, transliteration and translation (in Polish) of this inscription by the present author was first displayed during *Nonephemeral words – writing in the world cultures* temporary exhibition in Asia and Pacific Museum (4.10.2020–16.02.2021) and published in the exhibition book (Paulina Pikulska, 'Pismo klinowe', in: *Słowa nieulotne – pismo w kulturach świata*, eds. Dominika Kossowska-Janik and Aleksandra Twardokęs, Warszawa 2020, p. 75).

⁶ Douglas Frayne, *Ur III Period (2112–2004)*, The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Early Periods 3/2, Toronto 1997, pp. 260–262.

⁷ See: Marek Stępień, 'The foundation inscription of king Amar-Suen of the Third Dynasty of Ur', *Palamedes* 6 (2011), pp. 131–136; Aleksandra Szymkuć and Dorota Wanacka, 'Two Sumerian bricks from a private collection', in: *Here & there: across the ancient Near East. Studies in honour of Krystyna Łyczkowska*, ed. Olga Drewnowska, Warsaw 2009, pp. 257–260; Witold Tyborowski, 'Brick inscription from private collections in Wielkopolska', *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2001/4, pp. 89–91, Viewed 11 December 2019, <<http://sepoa.fr/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2001-4.pdf>>, and MNW 149793 in collection of National Museum in Warsaw, Viewed 11 December 2020, <<https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/katalog/613818>> and ZWS 6a+ZWS 6b in the collection of the Department of the Ancient Near East at the University of Warsaw.

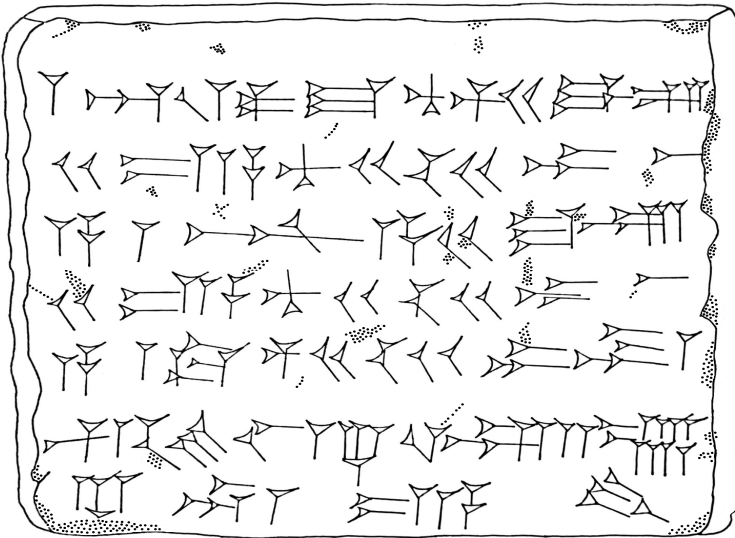
Brick of Shalmaneser III

The second brick, MNW 239302, currently in the possession of the National Museum, was produced in Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq) during the reign of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), a ruler of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934–609 BC). The inscription on the surface of this brick was written by hand. The writer planned the placement of signs very carefully – the first and the last sign in every line are positioned almost exactly under each other. In the seventh and shortest line of the text, all four signs were evenly spaced to make the layout appear more symmetrical. On the whole, the text gravitates towards lower edge of the brick, which results in additional space above first line of a text and nearly squeezes last line above the lower edge of a brick.

The remarkable condition of the MNW 239302 is worth mentioning. Beside very few minor scratches on the surface and slight damage in the lower left corner the state of preservation of this brick is impeccable.

MNW 239302

Dimensions: 12 x 35 x 35 cm



Transliteration:

1. ^{md}šùl-ma-nu-maš
man gal^ú
2. man dan-nu man
šú man kur^{aš}
3. a ^{maš}-pap-a man
gal^ú
4. man dan-nu man
šú man kur^{aš}
5. a ^mtukul-maš man
šú man kur^{aš}-ma
6. ri-šip-tú šá u₆.nir
7. šá uru^{kal}-hi

Translation:

¹⁻² Shalmaneser (III), the great king, the mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria, ³⁻⁵ son of Ashurnasirpal (II), the great king, the mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Tukulti-Ninurta (II), king of the world, king of Assyria. ⁶⁻⁷ The revetment of ziggurat in Kalhu.

Commentary

This is a very well preserved inscription and the same text is attested on large number of bricks in museums around the world, private collections and in Kalhu.⁸ All seven lines of the text are inscribed on the face of a brick. The content of inscription is standardised and only one distinct variation, although not unique, can be pointed out in the line 6.: there is an additional sign ŠÁ between *rišiptu* and U₆.NIR (akad. *ziqurratu*).⁹ Moreover, also in the line 6, scribe wrote the less commonly used Neo-Assyrian form of the sign UD with first wedge as *Winkelhaken* (𐎶𐎶) rather than slanted to the right and parallel to the second one (𐎶𐎶).¹⁰

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⁸ Albert K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC (858–754)*, Toronto 1996, p. 167.

⁹ This is a well attested variation, see: Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, p. 167, and Hendrik Hameeuw, Elynn Gorris and Jan Tavernier, ‘Written on Mud: Some more Brick Inscriptions from Mesopotamia’, *Akkadica* 136 (2015), p. 94.

¹⁰ Rykle Borger, *Assyrisch-babylonische Zeichenliste*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, p. 25, sign number 381.