

# A Jemdet Nasr Fragment in the Collections of the Oriental Institute of Chicago\*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Archaic texts in the collections of the Oriental Institute

The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago houses a small collection of archaic cuneiform documents. Copies of five of them ([A 2513-2516](#) + one missing) were first published by V. Scheil (1929: 15-17), where they are said to come from clandestine excavations at Jemdet Nasr before 1915. These tablets are among the first Mesopotamian known documents dating to the Uruk III / Jemdet Nasr period (for a history of the first purchases and acquisitions, see Englund 1998: 23ff.). Transliterations and new copies of these texts were offered later by R. K. Englund (MSVO 1: nos. 10, 25, 68 and 222), who reports that one of the tablets, namely Scheil 1929 no. 3, “seems however to have been lost in Chicago, although a fifth tablet was never assigned an OI number” (MSVO 1: 7, fn. 3). After a brief stay in Paris, these five tablets were accessioned in Chicago on October 6th 1920 together with an Ur III administrative text from Drehem ([A 2517](#), OIP 115: no. 482) and some Hellenistic legal documents from Warka ([A 2518-2527](#), *BiMes* 24: nos. 1, 13, 14, 19-23, 28, 35). For more details on the history of the archaic documents of this lot, see MSVO 1, p. 7.

One more text in the collections of the Oriental Institute ([A 12259](#)) comes from regular excavations conducted by H. Frankfort at Tell Asmar in 1933-1934 and was first published as a photo by P. Delougaz (OIP 63: 77, pl. 64 no. 68). As in the case of the Jemdet Nasr tablets, a transliteration and a copy were later provided by Englund (MSVO 4 no. 79).

### 1.2. A 2564

The fragment here presented, [A 2564](#), is the last archaic text in the collections of the Oriental Institute and until now has never caught the attention of scholars. It was purchased in Cairo in 1919 in a lot of Ur III tablets mostly from Drehem and Jokha, with a few perhaps from Muqayyar (W. Farber, personal communication, November 18th 2014), being itself part of the small bunch of archaic texts known before the regular excavation of the archaic levels of the most important southern Mesopotamian cities. It is the upper-left corner (32 × 25 × 14 mm) of a tablet of ca. 80 × 60 mm or slightly smaller (**fig. 1**), probably not a lot thicker than the fragment itself. It constitutes alone the first entry of an administrative account, running the lower break on the ruling. For more complete tablets of the same format see among others [MSVO 1: 26](#) (80 × 50 × 18 mm), [MSVO 1: 126](#) (90 × 56 × 18 mm), [MSVO 3: 3](#) (84 × 59 × 17 mm), [CUSAS 1: 77](#) (81 × 58 × 15 mm).



Fig. 1: Copy, photos and tentative reconstruction of the tablet format  
(Photos and graphic elaboration by the author)

The ductus of the few readable signs does not leave any doubt about the archaic dating (see *infra*). The format and the physical features of the fragment may provide some first hints about its provenance: the obverse is slightly convex and the reverse rather flat, unlike most of the tablets from archaic Ur and more similarly to the Jemdet Nasr ones (JET 2: 4), while the shape of the corner and the limited thickness point to Jemdet Nasr or Uruk. The date of acquisition restricts the choice, since not many excavated archaeological sites would have offered accessible archaic levels for plunderers in these years. As for Uruk, one should consider the possibility of the renewed interest of looters after the first campaign of J. Jordan in 1912. This excavation left the site exposed to plunder until 1928, the date in which field-work resumed after the forced interruption caused by World War I. Nevertheless, no archaic text until now is known to have found its way to the market during these years. A noteworthy exception is constituted by a gypsum numerical tablet (BM 1851-1-1, 217) collected in the late 40s of the 19th century by the explorer W. K. Loftus (Reade 1992: 177-178). On comparative grounds it is likely to have been found in the White Temple, and leaves open the possibility of the exposure of further archaic material from Uruk before 1928. Nonetheless, a provenance other than Jemdet Nasr in the case of our fragment is still improbable.

## 2. Transliteration

Oo101 1N<sub>46</sub>; LAGAB<sub>b</sub><sup>2</sup> TE<sup>2</sup> BA GIŠ<sub>3b</sub> DUB<sub>a</sub> SANGA<sub>a</sub>

## 3. Commentary

**N<sub>46</sub>**: This numerical sign is exclusively associated with the Š” system, which traditionally qualifies capacity measures of cereals and specifically emmer. Like here, both in Uruk and in Jemdet Nasr the sign form is a deeper rounded impression crossed by two shallow wedges, whereas in archaic Ur they are almost always three wedges crossing a rounded or squared impression. The diameter of the

impression measures 6 mm, almost twice the usual form of  $N_{19}$ , of which it represents a multiple. Traces of an erased sign, maybe a DA, are visible directly above the numeral.

**LAGAB<sub>b</sub> TE:** also transliterated as GIŠ TE. Attested some thirty times in many different archaic corpora. This wording occurs in administrative documents only, mostly associated to the Š” system and more rarely with the Š system (i.e. emmer and barley accounts). The physical format of these documents is often the same of the fragment under study with the noteworthy exception of an ancient kudurru (OIP 104: no. 1). LAGAB<sub>b</sub> TE occurs a few times in sheep accounts (e.g., in CUSAS 1: no. 59 and Green 1980: nos. 7 and 26). It seems to refer to a total (see among others CUSAS 1: no. 98, where it follows a large amount of emmer, in the final part of the account). In my knowledge, it occurs four times as LAGAB<sub>b</sub> TE A (Green 1980: nos. 7 and 26, W 20511,1 and W 20274,1), suggesting the use of this wording as a participle. Nevertheless, the meaning remains unclear. LAGAB<sub>b</sub> was partially pressed down on the fresh clay and probably written over an erasure; TE is broken and barely recognizable. Hence, this should be considered a tentative reading.

**BA:** as in the case of LAGAB<sub>b</sub>, the sign was partially pressed down on the fresh clay. This action might have also slightly curved the first vertical to the left, making the sign less recognizable. The high frequency of this sign in the archaic corpora and its position right after the counted item leave little doubt about its meaning, “distribution”.

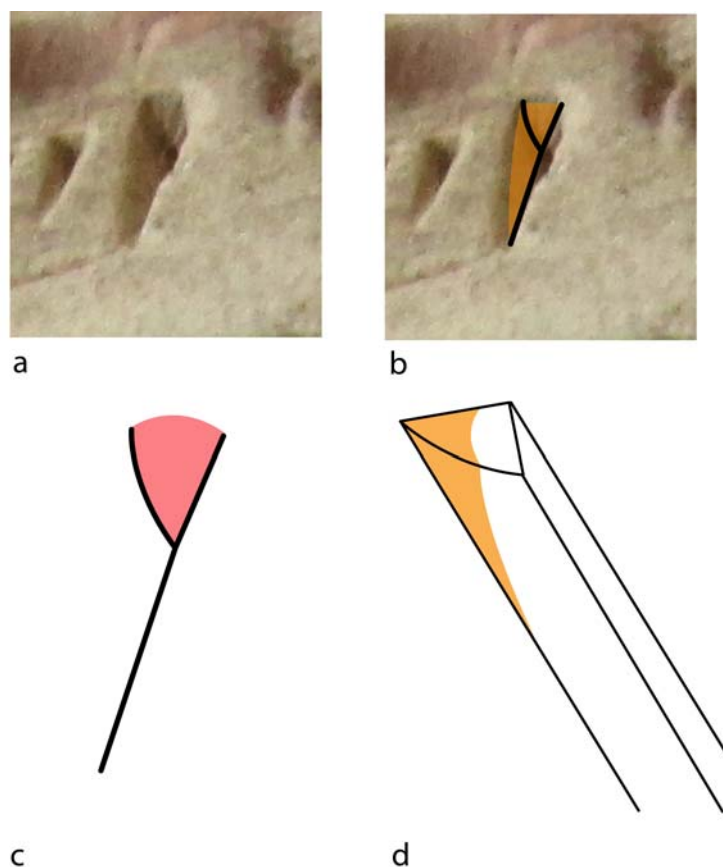
**GIŠ<sub>3b</sub>:** maybe (part of?) a PN. It occurs in the archaic lists of fish and birds (*Fish* 16 and *Birds* 2) and in another unidentified fragment of lexical nature (ATU 3: pl. 94, W 21019,5). Mostly attested in administrative documents from Jemdet Nasr and Umma, where it occurs more often than the sign form GIŠ<sub>3a</sub>, preferred in Uruk. Englund (2009: appendix) lists GIŠ<sub>3b</sub> UR<sub>a</sub> among the PNs occurring in the archaic slave accounts. Nonetheless, the presence of another broken sign in this line is not very probable. This PN might be connected to the name of an ED ensi of Umma, conventionally read UŠ (RIME 1.9.5.1). It is relatively well-attested at ED Umma and is probably to be read as *n i t a*, male. GIŠ<sub>3b</sub> SANGA<sub>a</sub> is twice attested (CUSAS 1: no. 160; *BaM* 22: 117).

**DUB<sub>a</sub> SANGA<sub>a</sub>:** well attested in the archaic list of professions *Lu*<sub>2</sub> A (*Lu*<sub>2</sub> 48 and 70). Probably a cultic officiant. S. F. Monaco suggested that SANGA<sub>a</sub> alone might designate an official responsible for accounting and its registration, not necessarily responsible for cults (personal communication, November 20th 2014). For later readings *p i s a n*<sub>2/3</sub> and *u m b i s a ĝ*, see Selz 1997: 172 and 192, fn. 99 with former literature.

#### 4. Further remarks

Evidently the fragment A 2564 does not offer many wedges for an in-depth palaeographical study. The wedges are thin and mostly quite shallow. The last vertical of DUB<sub>a</sub> is the most deeply impressed and leaves some space for technical analysis withal. A different view of the wedge (**fig. 2, a**) let us clearly see the traces left by the head of the stylus, i.e., the three inner edges in form of a “Y” (**fig. 2, b**). This pattern suggests that only the tip of the stylus to have come into contact with the clay was tetrahedral, and cannot, in any case, on its own provide a certain reconstruction of the whole tool (for a methodological and terminological insight, see Cammarosano et al. 2014). The apertural angle between the left and the right inner edges is approximately equal to 40° (**fig. 2, c**) and constitutes the maximum

aperture of one of the angles of the section of the tool. This datum is obviously subjected to a certain extent to the “lateral tilt” which the scribe himself could have issued with a rotation of the wrist, increasing the angle. The curvilinear trace of one of the inner edges is a marker of the usage of a reed stylus, which in the reconstructions of Messerschmidt (1906: 305, Abb. 6) and Falkenstein (ATU 1: 6, Abb. 1) features a right triangular section. An angle  $\geq 40^\circ$  is always the narrowest angle of an approximately right triangle: this suggests how the scribe might have had at his disposal three different writing tips, choosing in this case the narrowest of them (**fig. 2, d**). Nevertheless, scribes did not necessarily make the same choice during the course of the centuries and in different regions. The meticulous analysis of features like the (eventual) disposition of the curvilinear inner edge and of the fibrous reed impressions and the width of the angle of aperture might be crucial in order to trace the history of the usage of an everyday object like the writing stylus, which cannot be ignored anymore in the scope of future palaeographic research. A forthcoming article of M. Cammarosano provides, for instance, the state of the arts of iconographic and archaeological sources regarding the writing stylus, then focusing on 2nd millennium Mesopotamian and Anatolian primary sources. Analogous research is in the case of earlier times still a big *desideratum*.



**Fig. 2:** **(a)** different view of a sample wedge; **(b)** pattern of the inner edges of the wedge; **(c)** apertural angle between the left and the right inner edges; **(d)** reconstruction of the writing tip (area of contact with the clay marked in color)  
(Photos and graphic elaboration by the author)

## 5. Conclusions

The fragment A 2564 is the first entry of an administrative account, yielded almost certainly in unofficial excavations at Jemdet Nasr before 1919, not very differently from the other archaic texts which reached the market before the first official excavations at Jemdet Nasr, Uqair, Warka etc. Just a few dozens of

archaic texts were known at the time in which the Oriental Institute accessioned this fragment, all of them coming virtually from Jemdet Nasr. This (and obviously its dimensions and the scarce amount of explicit data) might explain why it did not gain the attention of the scholars until now. Both the general ductus of the signs and the other general features of the fragment point to the period generally referred as Uruk III / Jemdet Nasr (3100-3000 BCE) in which proto-cuneiform developed in the direction of a full writing system capable of timekeeping, administration and tradition of knowledge. The administrative account of which this fragment constitutes the *incipit* deals with distributions of emmer, the second most frequently attested Mesopotamian type of grain after barley. The person involved in the distribution is most probably a high-ranking official, as suggested by the presence of a big numeral (N<sub>46</sub>) sixty times multiple of the basic unity of the Š” system (N<sub>4</sub>) (Englund 1998: 111-120 with former literature). The wording LAGAB<sub>b</sub> TE might convey the meaning of total, but it is unfortunately impossible to know whether it referred to a total of previous accounts or to a sum of other entries of the same tablets, now broken.

Despite providing some interesting information, this fragment – as many analogous ones – is destined to long remain a small piece of the big jigsaw puzzle of the archaic Mesopotamian administration.

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