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The Sumerian Account of the Invention of Writing —A New Interpretation

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The invention of writing is something that fascinate not only modern scholars, but also their ancient counterparts. Almost all ancient people with a written history have their own accounts of the invention of writing. These accounts, embedded in their literature, reflect the annotations they could give on the origin of their own writing systems. These accounts are written forms of oral traditions, the beginning of which is lost in the darkness of history. The written forms of the accounts of the invention of writing usually came into existence several hundred years, or more, after the invention, at a time when the writing system had become capable of such an account. In the case of Mesopotamia, the earliest known account pertaining to the invention of writing which is usually interpreted as “the Sumerian account of the invention of writing”ⁱⁱ dates back to the Ur III (2112-2004 B.C.) period,ⁱⁱ was a millennium apart from the earliest evidence of the proto-cuneiform writing from Uruk.

The Sumerian narrative poem (also called epic) containing such an account is known among modern scholars as *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, first transliterated and translated into English and made available to the public by S.N.Kramer in 1943.ⁱⁱⁱ Its ancient name, the incipit, is “iri gud-huš AN.TÉŠ ní-gal gúr-ru”, meaning “city—majestic bull bearing vigour and great awesome splendor.”^{iv} There have been many articles dealing with certain problems of this narrative poem^v and the complete translations of it.^{vi}

According to the poem, Enmerkar, the second ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk,^{vii} sent a messenger to Aratta,^{viii} a remote city separated from Uruk by seven great mountains, demanding that the people of Aratta bring gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and many other precious stones, and build for him various shrines and temples, particularly the Abzu-temple in Eridu (lines 3364). Uruk, situated in the flood-plain of what is today’s southern Iraq, was devoid of raw materials and precious stones of any kind necessary for massive constructions and decorations. Coveting these raw materials and precious stones, he decided to make a vassal state of Aratta, not by means of a military expedition, but of “war of nerves,” the very first of its kind in human history.^{ix} It is in this “war of nerves” that the so-called “Sumerian account of the invention of writing” which we are going to deal with, was demonstrated.

Following the advice of Inanna, the protective deity of his city, Enmerkar selected an eloquent messenger and sent him to Aratta to deliver his demand and threat by repeating what he said to him verbatim. Refusing to submit, the Lord of Aratta raised each time a prerequisite condition for his subjugation that seemed impossible to meet. The messenger had to go back and forth playing the role of the verbal transmitter between the two kings. However, as the battle of words became more fierce and the content of the messages more complicated,^x the messenger became linguistically overwhelmed. Thus we see:

501. kig₂-gi₄-a ka-ni dugud šu nu-mu-un-da-an-gi₄-gi₄

502. bar kig₂-gi₄-a ka-ni dugud šu nu-mu-un-da-an-gi₄-gi₄-da-ka

503. en kul-aba₄^{ki}-a-ke₄ im-e šu bi₂-in-ra inim dub-gin₇ bi₂-in-gub

504. ud-bi-ta inim im-ma gub-bu nu-ub-ta-gal₂-la

505. i₃-ne-še₃ ^dutu ud ne-a ur₅ he₂-en-na-nam-ma-am₃

506. en kul-aba₄^{ki}-a-ke₄ inim [dub-gin₇] bi₂-in-gub ur₅ he₂-[en-na]-nam-ma

“(501) The messenger, whose mouth was heavy, was not able to repeat it. (502) Because the messenger, whose mouth was heavy, was not able to repeat it, (503) the Lord of Kulaba patted some clay and wrote the message like (on) a tablet. (504) Previously, the writing of messages on clay did not exist. (505) Now, under that sun and on that day, it indeed so exist. (506) The Lord of Kulaba wrote the message like on a tablet. It was indeed so.”

This passage is generally regarded as the Sumerian account of the invention of writing and the writing medium clay tablet, and Enmerkar as their inventor. In the words of Komoroczy: “It is clear, that the author of the epic here intended to describe the invention of clay tablet (*viz.* the Mesopotamian writing material) and the writing on it (*viz.* the cuneiform writing);...In the eyes of the author, Enmerkar is the inventor of the indigenous writing.”^{xi} Vanstiphout suggests “that the invention of writing is most aptly understood as an intergral part of the composition”.^{xii} As far as I know, all the Assyriologists who have ever written something about this passage share the same opinion as is stated above. The latest treatment of this passage by Glassner is no exception.^{xiii} However, the assignment of the invention of writing and its medium to Enmerkar is problematic.

First, although it is stated explicitly in this composition that the Lord of Kulaba patted some clay and wrote the message-like on a tablet and that the writing of messages on clay did not exist formerly, it is not stated here that the writing of messages on media other than clay tablet (DUB, IM) did not exist. This may imply that in the mind of the Sumerians the writing of messages on other medium had been in existence prior to the events described in this composition including writing message on clay by Enmerkar took place. Even today, many facts and observations suggest this remains a possibility, to which we will later return.

Second, it is clearly stated in the following passage of the same composition that the Lord of Aratta could read and understand what was written on the tablet handed over to him by the messenger from Uruk.

524. en-me-er-kar₂ dumu^dutu-ke₄ im ma-an-šum₂
 525. en aratta^{ki}-ke₄ im igi u₃-ni-bar šag₄ inim-ma u₃-bi₂-zu
 526. a-na ma-ab-be₂-en-na-bi u₃-mu-e-dug₄

“(524) Enmerkar, the son of Utu, has given me a clay tablet. (525) O Lord of Aratta, after you have examined the clay tablet, after you have learned the content of the message, (525) say whatever you will say to me”

This passage is another explicit evidence that even in the mind of the author of this epic composition the writing of messages on other medium existed before, or also in co-existence after the transformation of that medium to clay tablet took place. Otherwise it would be hard to imagine, how the Lord of Aratta could read and understand the written message on clay that was just invented.

Third, there is still a passage that may be taken as evidence that the Lord of Aratta understood the written message on clay presented to him by the messenger of Enmerkar, his powerful challenger.

536. ur₅-gin₇ hu-mu-na-ab-be₂-a-ka
 537. en aratta^{ki}-ke₄ ki₂-gi₄-a-ar
 538. imŠU.RIN.NA-nišu ba-ši-in-ti
 539. en arattaki-ke₄ im-ma igi i-ni-in-bar
 540. inim dug₄-ga gag-am₃ sag-ki mi-re₂-da-am₃
 541. en aratta^{ki}-ke₄ imŠU.RIN.NA-ni igi im-bar-bar-re

“(536) After he had spoken thus to him, (537-538) the Lord of Aratta received his kiln-fired tablet from the messenger. (539) The Lord of Aratta looked at the tablet. (540) The spoken words were just nails, and his brow was full of anger. (541) The Lord of Aratta looked at his kiln-fired tablet.”

The crucial message of this passage lies in line 540 which is, however, subject to different interpretations. Kramer translated this line as follows: “The commanded word is nail-like, the appearance is ...”^{xiv} and commented further: This line “seems to describe the appearance of the written signs; on the other hand, it may perhaps describe in some way the Lord of Aratta’s despondency upon reading its contents.”^{xv} This supposition presupposes that the Lord of Aratta understood the content of the written message he was looking at. Jacobsen agreed apparently with the supposition made by Kramer. His translation is “The words were fierce words, were frowning.”^{xvi} The Lord of

Aratta was frowning, because “the words were fierce words.” It is no question here that Jacobsen meant that the Lord of Aratta understood the content of the written message. The latest attempt to interpret this line is made by Glassner who allies himself with Jacobsen in opinion,^{xxvii} but differs from him slightly in wording: “The word spoken was the nail is inserted’, it was an imperious command.”^{xxviii}

For Komoroczy it is no doubt that “der Herr von Aratta die Note Enmerkars richtig verstanden hat.”^{xxix} But the prerequisite for his assumption is hard to believe. He assumed that the tablet handed over to the Lord of Aratta was of economic nature written in archaic script, and “Was den Charakter dieser Schrift betrifft, so kann man feststellen, da die Tafeln zu jener Zeit meistens auf den ersten Blick verständlich waren. Die Mehrzahl der Zeichen besteht aus Logogrammen; manche Zeichen sind sogar ihrer Form nach Piktogramme...Den Inhalt einer solchen Tafel, d.h. einer Note, konnte der Herr von Aratta richtig verstehen.”^{xxx} The tragedy of his explanation is that he depreciated the high standard of intelligence and learning process that might have been required to comprehend of anything that might be called writing. It is beyond doubt now that the proto-cuneiform texts from Uruk are written in Sumerian.^{xxi} No matter what they may deal with, no matter how simple they may seem to be in the eyes of the modern scholars who have become well acquainted with these texts through a long-time training, they cannot be understood by anyone who sees them for the first time, whoever he is and whatever intelligence quotient he has. This is as true of the present as of the past.

Different interpretation of the implicit tenor of this passage was first presented by Cohen. His translation of line 540 runs as follows: “The related message being incisive, (his) face expressing anger.”^{xxii} From this translation we cannot see whether the Lord of Aratta understood the written message or not. Cohen assumed that he did not, for he said that “the Lord of Aratta nevertheless brings a brazier to help the emissary read the written message.”^{xxiii} But his explanation cannot be borne out by the text, because nowhere does the text say that the messenger reads the tablet for the Lord of Aratta.^{xxiv}

The most explicit presentation of the view that the Lord of Aratta did not or could not understand the message written by Enmerkar is provided by Vanstiphout. His translation of line 540 is nothing special: “The spoken word was but a nail, his face darkened,”^{xxv} but his interpretation is unique and interesting: “The Lord of Aratta sees only nails where he had expected words. He is angry or depressed, however hard he keeps looking.”^{xxvi} He notes further: “Writing does not yet exist, and the cuneiform signs *because they are cuneiform* mean nothing at all to the untutored Lord of Aratta who is understandably dejected. Cuneiform is consciously used here as the ultimate and unbeatable problem.”^{xxvii} He concludes finally that “the Lord of Aratta could not read.”^{xxviii}

His interpretation is extraordinarily tempting, but suffers from several weaknesses. First of all, nowhere does the text say that Enmerkar invented writing in general, or for specific language, or even for specific use, but simply “wrote words like (on) clay tablet.” The equative adverbial *dub-gin₇*, as is shown more clearly in the next line of the composition, provides us with the information about the writing medium. Here, the emphasis on the writing medium clay is just as paramount as the emphasis on the action of “writing words.”

Second, the text states unmistakably that “formerly, the writing of messages on clay did not exist.” The locative adverbial “on clay” (*im-ma*) makes Enmerkar’s invention something specific: what he invented is not the writing of words on materials in general, but the writing of words on clay in particular.

Third, the expression “is nail-like” (*gag-am₃*) is most likely a pun, a phrase having a double meaning. It denotes the cuneiform appearance of the signs on clay on the one hand, and the imperious, nail-likely piercing content of the message on the other. From Jacobsen’s translation “The words were fierce words,”^{xxix} we may perceive that such an understanding was already in his mind, although he did not take the opportunity to make his interpretation more explicit. At any rate, the expression itself *inim dug₄-ga gag-am₃*, even translated as “The spoken word was but a nail,”^{xxx} as Vanstiphout did, is, linguistically, no evidence for the inability of the Lord of Aratta to understand the message. Note, however, that the reaction of the early European travellers on the appearance of the cuneiform signs of the inscriptions they found was very much the same as that of the Lord of Aratta. For them they bore “the resemblance of pyramids inverted or with bases upwards, Triangles or Delta’s,”^{xxxi} or were “three cornered,” in the form of “a Pyramide” or of “a little Obeliske.”^{xxxii} Such a reaction itself is no negative evidence for their comprehension ability. But we know for certain in this case that they could not read and understand the inscriptions. Note further, that the nail-like appearance of the signs does not conform with the appearance of the earliest signs which might be described as linear. The former is a development of the latter which achieved its full measure in the Fara period that, in all likelihood, is later than the time during which Enmerkar might have lived. Ignorant of the linear appearance of the earliest signs on clay of the Uruk IV-III period, the author of the composition of the Ur III

period took it for granted that the rudimental element of the signs on clay was nail-like in all periods. This error of his was due to the limitations of his time and should not prevent us from believing in the authenticity of his narration of an event happened in the distant past.

Fourth, as for his interpretation “The Lord of Aratta sees only nails where he had expected words. He is angry or depressed, however hard he keeps looking,”^{xxxiii} it is hard for us to imagine how could the Lord of Aratta have “expected words” by not being reluctant to see the “nails.” Since Sumerian “words” can only be expressed by “nails,” the rudimental elements of the Sumerian (cuneiform) script, we must in fact pose the question, how could he not expect to see “nails,” if he had expected to see “words”? Reading Sumerian is nothing but fingering out words from the interwoven “nails.” It is as true of the past as of the present.

In other word, the assumption that the Lord of Aratta could not understand the message written by Enmerkar cannot be borne out by the text, however logical it may sound.

To the contrary, the emphasis laid on the writing medium, “clay,” of the text (lines 503-504) makes it possible to interpret Enmerkar’s deed as the “invention” of writing on clay, as is opposed to writing on other materials. In this sense, what Enmerkar did should not be regarded as the invention of writing, but as the initial transformation of the writing medium, from a certain material to clay. Furthermore, as we have seen from the argument we made above, that the Lord of Aratta did understand the message on clay written by Enmerkar has also textual support, and the literacy, or the ability, of the Lord of Aratta to understand the written message leads logically to the conclusion that writing on materials other than clay had already been in existence prior to Enmerkar’s “invention” of writing on clay. That is the point of this “Sumerian account of the invention of writing”!

This conclusion, borne out by the text, can also be supported by the following facts and observations.

(1) Besides clay tablets, writing materials of ivory, wood, wax, leather and even papyrus were also in common use during the latter part of the Mesopotamian history.^{xxxiv} Their origin is by no means clear. Some may be later inventions, others may well be the later development or even the continuation of an early tradition.

(2) Some signs of the proto-cuneiform writing from Uruk do not seem to be the original invention on clay, but borrowings of signs already in existence on materials other than clay. The head of some animals such as donkey (ANŠE), ibex (DARA₃), and ox (GIR₃). and some other signs made up of curves and circles such as IDIGNA (a kind of bird), NAM (swallow) and even LAGAB (a circle depicting a kind of enclosure) and its incorporated derivatives which were difficult to draw on clay, may be taken as such examples.^{xxxv}

(3) The proto-cuneiform writing system from Uruk displays such a high degree of complexity, stability and conventionality that it does not seem to represent the earliest stage of writing. This has already led many scholars to believe that the proto-cuneiform writing from Uruk represents a mature writing system, the beginning of which is lost in the darkness of prehistory.^{xxxvi} Unfortunately, traces of such an assumed earlier stage have not yet been discovered,^{xxxvii} so that “whether the pre-Uruk writing was on clay or perishable materials, took place in Uruk or elsewhere, and was used for sacred or economic purposes, we have no way of knowing.”^{xxxviii} But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

(4) Recently, Whittaker has propounded a theory about the origin of the proto-cuneiform writing that deserves our attention. He proposes that certain signs of the proto-cuneiform writing such as GIRI₃ “foot” (sign-form is the picture of an ox’s head in profile) and GURUŠ “young, able-bodied worker” (sign-form is the picture of a vehicle in profile)^{xxxix} might have been of Proto-Indo-European origin. The Sumerians borrowed them and adapted them for their own use on the basis of the phonetic similarities, that is, similarities between the pronunciations of the words they stood for in the Proto-Indo-European script and those for which they were to stand in the Sumerian.^{xl} To be sure, his evidence so far lies entirely in the area of comparative linguistics and has not yet been favoured by archaeological substantiation, and his interpretation of the proto-cuneiform text W 16632,b of the Uruk IV in Proto-Indo-European^{xli} is less convincing. But the direction of his thought is interesting. It coincides, to some extent, with the direction of thought which the Sumerian account of the invention of writing leads us to, that is, before the Sumerian invention of clay tablets, writing materials other than clay might have been in existence.

Briefly stated, the passages we quoted above from the Sumerian epic composition *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* suggest that writing on materials other than clay was already in existence in southern Mesopotamia prior to the point when Enmerkar wrote the message on clay, and that Enmerkar was not the one who invented writing for the first time, but the one who transformed writing already in existence from a material that remains unmentioned in the text to clay, and that the transformation of the writing medium had its subsequent effect on the appearance of the signs. Furthermore, we see an explicit hint in them that the Sumerians ascribed the transformation of the writing

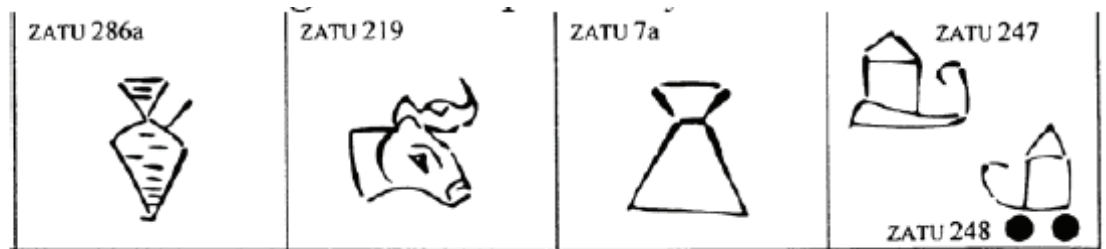
medium to man, while the invention of writing to gods,^{xlii} as is the case of another Sumerian literary composition known as *Inanna and Enki*.^{xliii}

We know for certain that the earliest evidence of the proto-cuneiform writing on clay tablet comes from Uruk IV, at the end of the fourth millennium B.C. (ca. 3200 B.C.), a time when the transformation of the writing medium described in our literary composition *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, must have taken place. According to the Sumerian Kinglist, Enmerkar is the second ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk,^{xliv} who is assigned by most chronologies to the Early Dynastic II period, several hundred years later than the earliest evidence of the proto-cuneiform texts on clay from Uruk IV. Nevertheless, this chronological irreconcilability between Enmerkar and the emergence of writing in reality poses no difficulties for us to combined them together. The reasons are twofold: (1) The discovery, made by Green,^{xlv} of a proto-cuneiform text from Uruk with “Lord of Aratta” written on the obverse may push the reign of Enmerkar considerably forward, almost to the very beginning of the archaeologically attested proto-cuneiform texts on clay, if the “Lord of Aratta” is identical with that one of our literary composition. (2) If that is not the case, we still find no difficulty in understanding that the author of this epic composition, regardless whether he was well aware of that discrepancy or was ignorant of it, combined them together to strengthen Sumer’s superiority over its political enemy^{xlvi} in the person of the protagonist of his composition.

1. Pictograms difficult to draw on clay



2. Possible PIE-Pictograms Proposed by Whittaker



3. Proto-Cuneiform Text of Economic Content



Fig. 20. Obverse (left) and reverse of tablet W16632,b of Uruk IV. Reproduced by courtesy of Robert K. Englund.

4. Proto-Cuneiform Text with “Lord of Aratta”

W 20494.6



EN-LAMxKUR-KUR+RU-KA
 “Lord of Aratta”
 (Green 1980, 27)

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ⁱ e.g. Glassner 2003, 9.

ⁱⁱ Since epic literature is already attested in Abu Salabikh around 26 century B.C., the account of the origin of writing might be earlier than its attestation we have.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a list of early literature of this poem, see Vanstiphout 1994, 135, fn.2; Vanstiphout 1999, 141.

^{iv} Vanstiphout 1994, 135, fn.1; Röllig 1990, 39; <http://www.etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section1>.

^v e.g. Komoroczy 1975; Vanstiphout 1999; Vanstiphout 1994.

^{vi} The earliest complete translation is Kramer 1952, followed by Cohen 1973. The latest is Jacobsen 1987, 275-319.

^{vii} Jacobsen 1939, 87.

^{viii} The location of Aratta is still controversial. For different propositions made by scholars up to 1980, s. Green 1980, 17, fn.89. An interesting view is expressed by Michalowski 1986, 133.

^{ix} So called ("The First 'War of Nerves'") by Kramer (Kramer 1959, 17).

^x Line 500: dug₄-ga-ni [mah] -am₃ Šag₄-bi su-su-a-am₃.

^{xi} Komoroczy 1975, 20: "Es ist durchaus klar, daß der Dichter des Epos hier die Erfindung der Tontafel (d.h. des mesopotamischen Schreibmaterials) und der darauf geschriebenen Schrift (d.h. der Keilschrift) darstellen wollte; ...Also gilt Enmerkar in seinen Augen als der Erfinder der einheimischen Schrift."

^{xii} Vanstiphout 1989, 524.

^{xiii} Glassner 2003, 16 and 28.

^{xiv} Kramer 1952, 41.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p.51.

^{xvi} Jacobsen 1987, 314.

^{xvii} "To learn its contents, the lord of Aratta had no choice but to take in his hand the clay lump so he could read the message that was written on it" (Glassner 2003, 16).

^{xviii} Glassner 2003, 24.

^{xix} Komoroczy 1975, 21.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p.23.

^{xxi} "Since systems of counting, like grammatical structures, tend to be stable elements in a language, the presence of sexagesimal structures in the early tablets constitutes cogent evidence that the language in which they are written is Sumerian" (Powell 1981, 423). There are scholars who hold different opinions on this issue, Englund (1998, 7475), for instance. A brief introduction of the controversy would be beyond the scope of this essay.

^{xxii} Cohen 1973, 138.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p.38.

^{xxiv} Already Vanstiphout 1989, 517.

^{xxv} Vanstiphout 1989, 516.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p.520.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p.521.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p.522.

^{xxix} Jacobsen 1989, 314.

^{xxx} Vanstiphout 1989, 516.

^{xxxi} Pallis 1956, 60-61.

^{xxxii} Rogers 1915, 19-20.

^{xxxiii} Vanstiphout 1989, 520.

^{xxxiv} For the different writing materials found in Nimrud, see Wiseman 1955. For the use of wood tablets during the Ur III period, see Steinkeller 2004, 75 with Footnotes; for the use of wax (tablets), see *ibid.*, 76 with Fn. 18.

^{xxxv} For examples of these signlist, see the signlist in Green / Nissen 1987.

^{xxxvi} Lieberman 1980, 358: The Uruk tablets “point, rather, towards an unknown prehistory”; Schmandt-Besserat 1977, 3: “The abstract character of the signs, the extensive repertory of vocabulary, and its immediate standardization seem to indicate that, as we have it, it was already a well developed and sophisticated writing system, not a humble beginning”; Green 1981, 361: “What preliminary stages might have preceded the mature Uruk IV writing system we cannot yet establish precisely”; Green 1981, 356: “The signs they wrote were severely stylized and standardized”. The same or similar view is shared by many others including Nissen (Nissen 1990, 55).

^{xxxvii} The token-theory developed by D.Schmandt-Besserat (e.g. Schmandt-Besserat 1977, 1979, 1992) should not remain unmentioned here. Her contributions have evoked strong repercussions in academic circles. Some of them sceptical (e.g. Michalowski 1990, 54, 55-56), and some very positive (e.g. Powell 1981). At any rate, the tokens cannot explain the overwhelming majority of the proto-cuneiform signs from Uruk, especially those signs which might be called realistic pictures of the objects they depict.

^{xxxviii} Lieberman 1980, 358.

^{xxxix} Whittaker 2001, 16.

^{xl} Englund made a similar assumption, but did not specify the possible linkage (Englund 1998, 81).

^{xli} Whittaker 2001, 39.

^{xlii} A different interpretation has been made by Glassner: “The theory can be summed up in one sentence: if spoken language is the gift of the gods, writing is a human creation” (Glassner 2003, 9).

^{xliii} Farber-Flügge 1973. The latest transliteration and translation have been published by the “Oxford Sumerian Literature Homepage” (<http://www.etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section1>). The composition relates that “the scribal art” (nam-dub-sar) was stolen by Inanna from her father Enki and was given to the people of Uruk. This is a strong evidence for the Sumerian view that the writing from Uruk was of divine origin. A different interpretation has been made recently by Glassner: “In this passing on of the me from father to daughter we can see an allusion only to the function of scribe rather than to the creation of writing itself” (Glassner 2003, 9).

^{xliv} Jacobsen 1939, 87.

^{xlv} Green 1980, 17 and 27.

^{xlvi} A number of clues and traces show that the people of Uruk and Aratta were not only trade partners, but could also be the descendants of common ancestors.