

A Glimpse into Everyday Life in Syria in the 24th Century BCE¹

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Over the past three decades our knowledge of the Early Bronze Age period in Syria has changed dramatically. In particular, during the last few years, further archaeological excavations have brought to light information that has overturned our perception of the events around 2350 BCE (Bretschneider, Van Vyve and Jans 2009). The ancient Near East in the mid-third millennium BCE was fragmented into various polities from the Sumerian city-states in southern Mesopotamia to the Semitic kingdoms in northern Syria. During the twenty-fourth century BCE, the political scene in the latter area was dominated by three almost equally powerful kingdoms: Ebla in northern Syria, Mari in the region of the Middle Euphrates and Nagar (modern Tell Brak) in Upper Mesopotamia in the Khabur river triangle. Periods of intense fighting for political domination and economic control were broken up by periods of peaceful co-existence. First, Mari was in the ascendancy controlling Ebla and Nagar. This was the golden age of Mari under the reign of her King Iblul'il (also read Yiplus'il), when Ebla, Nagar and its satellite Nabada (modern Tell Beydar) recognized the hegemony of Mari. At that time, all the trade routes from Ebla to Babylonia via Upper Mesopotamia and via the Euphrates were in the hands of Mari. As a result of this stranglehold, Ebla, in coalition with Upper Mesopotamian city-state of Abarsal (possibly to be located at modern Tell Chuera) and possibly also Nagar as well as the North Babylonian city of Kish, led a successful attack on Mari and broke free of its domination. This victory lasted for about thirty years until the king of Mari, possibly Tāb(ḪI)-da'ar² (Archi and Biga 2003: 35), but perhaps also jointly with Išqi-Mari, retaliated. Alfonso Archi and Giovanna Biga have proven that Mari was responsible for the destruction of Ebla and its palace archive around year 17 of Ebla's minister, Ibbi-zikir which was year 35 of its king Išar-damu. In its turn, Mari was destroyed, probably no earlier than thirteen years after the fall of Ebla around the tenth year of king Išqi-Mari and

¹ I am grateful for the help of Antoine Cavigneaux, who shared his forthcoming publication of the unpublished Mari tablets with me, Walther Sallaberger, who shared his forthcoming article pre-publication and provided references and Aage Westenholz, who read an early draft of my study of this tablet, made valuable suggestions and provided references.

² For the reading of the name of this king, as Tāb-dayar, see Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 127 n. 290.

most probably by Sargon of Akkade.³

Ancient Mari is identified with the modern mound of Tell Hariri located on the Middle Euphrates just north of the present-day Iraqi-Syrian border. It lies on the western bank of Euphrates river, some 120 kilometres southeast of Deir ez-Zor, Syria. A strategically important trading center between the Sumerian cities of lower Mesopotamia and the towns of northern Syria, Mari was advantageously situated for the redistribution of goods from a variety of sources. The second Early Dynastic town of Mari, the "Ville II" as labeled by the excavator Jean-Claude Margueron, was a prosperous, bustling metropolis. The city was encircled by a rampart and wall, with monumental palaces and ornate temples, elaborate residences of the local elite and industrial areas of production as well as an outer mercantile district (Margueron 2004: 125-315).

As the westernmost outpost of Sumerian culture, despite being 240 kilometres (150 mi) upriver from Nippur, its rulers were part of the Sumerian *koine* and appear in the Sumerian King List among the early dynasties of Sumer:

Then Adab was defeated and the kingship was taken to Mari.

In Mari, Anubu became king; he reigned for 30 years.

Anba, son of Anubu, reigned for 17 years.

Bazi, the leather worker, reigned for 30 years.

Zizi, the fuller, reigned for 20 years.

Lim-er, the *pašišu*-priest, reigned for 30 years.

Šarrum-īter reigned for 9 years.

Six kings reigned for 136 years.

(Sumerian King List, see Glassner 2005: 122-3 [“Chronicle of the Single Monarchy”], ll. v 22-33 on the names of this dynasty see Vincente 1995: 257-60)

With the exception of Anubu, no historical records⁴ of these kings are known.

³ Further arguments regarding this historical sketch can be found in Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 138-140, see also their chronological table on p. 123 and notes and in Cavigneaux forthcoming. The publication of the Mari sealings by Dominique Beyer in 2007 added two more possible kings as the last kings of Mari.

Nevertheless, there are other sources for the history of Mari in Presargonic times. The major source of information is the documents in the royal archives of the city of Ebla with whom Mari was in constant contact, but, of course, they give us mostly the Ebla perspective. Official messengers, merchants, tradesmen, and persons of various professions, in particular musicians, traveled back and forth between the two cities. The Ebla chancellery contained one letter from king Enna-Dagan of Mari (TM.G.1975.2367, see most recently Frayne 2008: 295-296 for references and treatments), which lists a series of victories won by his predecessors. From Mari itself, written sources are fewer. There are a small number of inscriptions (Frayne 2008 [RIME 1]: 293-347), dedications on statues and votive objects as well as royal seal inscriptions.⁵ The few presargonic economic texts excavated in the palace, temples, residential and industrial areas illuminate the everyday life in the city. In addition, there are six lexical tablets as well as an enigmatic fragmentary composition, probably an incantation ritual, written in Akkadian regarding oneiromancy (TH 80.111, see Bonechi and Durand 1992) that gives voice to the spiritual anxieties of the inhabitants. Oneiromancy is a form of divination based upon dreams; it is a system of dream interpretation that uses dreams to predict the future.

Notwithstanding its importance, the number of administrative documents recovered from the city of Mari is extremely meager in comparison with Ebla (fifteen thousand) and even Nabada (over two hundred). Approximately 68 tablets were found in the excavations, 43 of which are published and further 25 tablets were unearthed in the years 1998-2007, but not yet published. Additionally, further tablets have been located in private collections. Eight belonging to the Idemitsu Museum of Arts were published in 2009 by Harumi Horioka and five from the RGK collection are available on line at CDLI.⁶ The distribution of the excavated tablets is (Charpin 1987: 66 and Cavigneaux forthcoming):

1. « Sanctuary P. 25 », *Groupe A* (Charpin 1987: 66), one tablet.
2. « Maison rouge » (Margueron 2004: 172-174, 188f. [tablets], figs. 150-153). *Groupe B* (Charpin 1987: 66, 68), three tablets.

⁴ On Bazi and Zizi, who are also literary figures, see the latest discussion and references in George 2009: 1-15. For these names as personal names of individuals from Mari and southern Babylonia, see Steinkeller 1993: 238 sub no. 15.

⁵ For a survey of these objects, see Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 67-74.

⁶ CDLI (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/>): P 271221, P271227, P271232, P271240, P271241. According to Sallaberger, there are six further tablets of this group.

3. « *Communs* », seemingly a series of storerooms belonging to the administrative buildings of the religious quarter, between the sacred precinct of the Pre-Sargonic Palace and the Massif Rouge; also referred to in the literature as « dépendances du temple de Dagan présargonique » (Margueron 2007: 245). A more recent classification of these buildings is « *Le quartier du Grand Prêtre* » (Margueron 2004: 174-179, 188f. [tablets], 259f. figs. 154-159, Margueron 2007: 259; Sallaberger forthcoming). *Groupe C* (Charpin 1987: 66, 70-71), eight tablets (see forthcoming discussion by Sallaberger). Whereas Margueron (2007: 256-259) speculated that the upper storey of « La Maison du Grande Prêtre » could have functioned as a kind of temple, Cavigneaux takes into serious consideration not only the owners of the sealings found together with the tablets but also the mosaic panel found in another room (forthcoming n. 15): “Le bâtiment est étudié à neuf par MARGUERON 2007, p. 245-259; les commentaires de J.-C. Margueron, aux pages 257-259, nous suggèrent que ce bâtiment hébergeait une administration où les femmes, aussi les femmes de la famille royale, étaient impliquées, un peu comme dans le é-mi de Girsu. Cette interprétation s’appuie sur les sceaux découverts lors du sondage et publiés dans BEYER 2007, p. 237-244, en particulier les n° 4, 7 et 9). Noter aussi la place dominante des femmes dans le panneau reproduit MARGUERON 2007, p. 258, fig. 12.” His conclusion that the building was under female administration is most intriguing. In 1998-9, three more tablets from « Chantier H » were excavated.
4. Palace P.1 (Margueron 2004: 207-209, 224f., figs. 189-193). *Groupe D* (Charpin 1987: 66, 76-77), eight tablets. New excavations in the northern sector of the palace has produced 23 more tablets including six lexical tablets (Cavigneaux forthcoming).
5. Scattered tablet finds, Secteur G, chantier Temple Nord 1 (TN1) and other sectors in years 1999-2000 have produced five more tablets (Cavigneaux forthcoming).
6. « Chantier B » la residence aux installations artisanales, a building on the northern fringe of *Ville II* close to the river Euphrates (Margueron 2004: 167-172, 188f. [tablets], figs. 141-149). *Groupe E* (Charpin 1987: 66) twenty-three tablets, of which seventeen administrative documents and the one literary composition were excavated in 1980 from chantier B, pièce V, VIII, and X (Charpin 1987: 80ff.) and five in 1986 from 50 cm west of the area, in pièce I, the western end of square III Z 17 (Charpin 1990: 245). In addition, tablets belonging to private collections apparently also are related to this group (Charpin 2009).

The texts from Chantier B relate to agricultural affairs, the production of grain and the care of donkey herds. Walther Sallaberger (forthcoming) describes Chantier B as a household specializing in the breeding of donkeys and the care of boats due to its location close to the Euphrates. Thus, it was well situated for both the overland trade by donkeys and the riverine traffic by boat. The importance of the donkey for overland traffic is reflected not only in texts but also in the visual record (see Gallery 5). Emar on the Euphrates was even named the “Donkey-town” (see Gallery 10). So the donkey business fits very well into the commercial network of an entrepôt such as Mari. In the Pre-Sargonic period donkeys were also used beside oxen as draft animals for ploughing both in Southern and Upper Mesopotamia, e.g. at Ġirsu and at Nabada (Sallaberger forthcoming). In the Ur III period, Wolfgang Heimpel (1995) has demonstrated that working plough donkeys included females. In addition, small herds of female equids may have been kept for breeding.

According to its format, contents, calendrical notations and personal names, the BLMJ tablet belongs to the Early Dynastic archive discovered in Chantier B in Mari. Specific parallels are: Charpin 1987: 83 no. 24 (year 22), Charpin 1990: 245f. no. 38 (year 18), 248 no. 39 (year 20), Horioka 2009: 127f. no. 4 (year [1]7² / [2]7², see Charpin 2009), and RGK 20050523c (CDLI P271221, year 19). These five tablets have the same subject, fodder for donkeys, and the same person NE.NE /Bí-bí. In addition Horioka 2009: 127f. no. 4, also has the individual Pa₄-bù as a recipient of barley fodder.

The dating system employed is that of the Early Semitic Calendar which was apparently used in all Syria and northern Mesopotamia and found sporadically in southern Mesopotamia (Cohen 1993: 23-29) with the exception of Nabada (Sallaberger 1996: 86). It is also known as the old Calendar of Ebla since it was superseded there by a different calendrical system. The presently accepted sequence of the twelve months was reconstructed by Dominique Charpin (1982, 1993). He placed the first month of the year in the spring, corresponding roughly to April and to *Nisannu* of the later Babylonian calendar, which was adopted by the Jewish exiles in Babylon. The BLMJ tablet is dated to month MAxGÁNA^{tenú}-ÚGUR (SIG₇) which, in this sequence, is designated as the XIIth month of the year (see discussion Charpin 1993 and Cohen 1993: 28). It has been suggested that the

literal translation is the “month of the later harvest of ripened fruits / figs / first fruits” since it follows the month MAXGÁNA^{tenú}-saĝ “month of the earlier harvest of first fruits” (Cohen 1993: 28). His reasoning is: “Archi suggests that MAXGÁNA^{tenú} may denote a type of fruit (thus the months of “first fruits” and “ripe fruits”), which, as Charpin (1987: 74) observes, may be based upon the similar terms ĝiš.pèš(MA), ‘figs,’ and ĜIŠ.MA^{gunú} = ĝiš.ħašħur, ‘apple.’ In the third millennium the sign GÁNA has a reading buru_x and meaning ‘harvest.’ Therefore, perhaps the sign MAXGÁNA^{tenú} indicates the fig(?) harvest.” Filip Vukosavović (personal communication) comments on this proposal that while semantically MAXGÁNA^{tenú}-ÚGUR (SIG₇) may be related to the fig(?) harvest, biologically that is impossible. Figs are harvested twice a year, early harvest in June-July and late harvest August-September. Since MAXGÁNA^{tenú}-ÚGUR (SIG₇) is the XIIth month, it falls approximately in February/March. For the reading of the last sign as ÚGUR, see Charpin 1987: 74 note to l. 10. On ÚGUR (SIG₇), Cohen, following Charpin and Civil, understands this Sumerogram as a writing for EGIR ‘later’.⁷ As to the Semitic month name rendered by this exceptional Sumerian orthography, the documents have not left us a clue.

The series of tablets from Chantier B is dated to a long reign of an unnamed king, years 18 through 35.⁸ The BLMJ text is written in the 19th year of the reign. As to possible candidates for the unnamed king, Charpin (2005, 2009) suggested ĤI-da’ar (Ṭāb-dayar) while Horioka (2009: 121, 135), unaware of Charpin’s argument, preferred the earlier king Iblul-II. Nevertheless, Marchesi and Marchetti (2011: 127 n. 290, 139 nn. 53, 54) agree with his assumption (reading the name as Yiplus’il). New tablets from the Palace give the unknown king a length of reign up to 40 years (Cavigneaux forthcoming).

Summary of Contents

The tablet contains an account of barley put to various uses. Not only was barley given as fodder for donkeys and distributed to individuals but also it apparently was used as ‘money’ for expenditures. In particular, the BLMJ text has a barley payment for the purchase of fish as does Horioka 2009: 132f. no. 8.

⁷ For the more common reading of ÚGUR (SIG₇) as the equivalent of Sumerian a-gār and Akkadian *ugārum* ‘field’ as well as denoting a clay pot in Sumerian, see Marchesi 2001.

⁸ Note the new tablets from the north sector of the Palace have year dates up to 40.

Paleography, Orthography and Language

The paleographic appearance of the Mari tablets (later than Beydar and Ebla, but before Sargonic) corresponds with the historical sequence proposed by Charpin 2005 (Sallaberger 2007: 422 n. 30). The documents in this archive are written mostly in logograms, word signs in Sumerian (Sumerograms), which are transcribed below in capitals. A comparison with the other texts from the archive provides evidence of Semitic/Akkadian words⁹ and especially prepositions which are missing in the BLMJ text.¹⁰ On the other hand, almost all the personal names in the Mari documents are written in the Akkadian or another Semitic language. For this reason, in the following transliteration, the names are written in lower case and in italics while all the logograms are written in upper case.

However, the three personal names in the BLMJ document: Pa₄-bù, Bí-bí, and Ḫa-ba, are all of uncertain linguistic derivation (cf. Charpin 1987: 92). Their bisyllabic nature, typical of Mari names,¹¹ are unclassifiable meaningless names (Lallnamen). All three occur in other Mari texts. The most common is NE.NE / Bí-bí (see references in Horioka 2009: 126, comments on no. 4 ii 3). NE.NE was also the name of a brother of the king of Mari, of Ṭāb(ḪI)-da'ar, according to TM.75.G.2335 rev. vi 14-21. For the uncertain reading of the personal name NE-NE of individuals from Mari and southern Babylonia, see Steinkeller 1993: 238 sub no. 13. Bí-bí is one conjecture. For individuals named NE-NE in Ebla, see Krebernik 1988: 260. As to the name Pa₄-pù, the same name/person occurs in Horioka 2009: no. 4 i 3. The crucial problem in understanding this personal name is whether to read it as Semitic or Sumerian, phonetic or logographic. Names beginning with PAP, are commonly found in Mari: Pa₄-ba₄ (Steinkeller 1993: 241 no. 21) was the name of the queen, wife of Iblul-II. Note that this personal name is a feminine name in all instances which would indicate that it would be unexpected and peculiar if read in Sumerian as pa "elder male relative, in particular, older brother".¹²

The last name is a conjecture. Since a possible reading KU₆.BA is problematic, Walther Sallaberger suggested that these signs could be understood it as a PN Ḫa-ba, similar to that in 2009: 126, no. 3 iii 3. For individuals named Ḫa-ba in Ebla, see Krebernik

⁹ For a discussion of the Early Dynastic East Semitic dialect continuum, see Rubio 2006: 112.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the language of these texts, see Charpin 1987: 89f.

¹¹ For instance, these names are not to be found among the texts from the Khabur triangle, cf. Catagnoti 1998.

¹² For pa₄ in Sumerian names see Krebernik 2002: 14 and *passim* in article.

1988: 192. An entry person + days is also known from Charpin 1987: 83, no. 24 and Horioka 2009: 132, no. 8. The indication of days makes it probable that this individual was hired for some specific work.

Description of Tablet

The obverse of this perfectly preserved tablet contains three columns of text with 21 lines in all while the reverse is blank. The tablet was baked in antiquity.

BLMJ 1146 (7.8 cm × 7.7 cm × 2.7 cm)

Transliteration

- col. i 1. 0.0.1.5 SÌLA ŠE KÚ
 2. EME₆ (ANŠE.MUNUS)
 3. *Pa4-pù*(KAxŠU)
 4. 25 U₄
 5. 0.0.1 ŠE KÚ
 6. EME₆ GAL
- col. ii 7. ITI(wr. over erasure).SAR
 8. 0.0.1 lá 0.0.1(sic) ŠE KÚ
 9. EME₆ (ANŠE.MUNUS)
 10. *Bí-bí*
 11. ITI(wr. over erasure).SAR
 12. 0.0.1 ŠE
 13. *Ha-ba*
 14. 2 U₄
- col. iii 15. 0.0.1.5 SÌLA
 16. *Ha-ba*
 17. 2 U₄
 18. 0.0.3 ŠE
 19. SAM_x (NINDÁxŠE.A)
 20. KU₆

21. ITI.MAxGÁNA^{tenú}-ÚGUR 20 LÁ 1 MU**Translation**

- col. i 1. 15 litres of barley fodder
 2. (for a) jenny
 3. (belonging to) *Pa-pù*
 4. (for) twenty-five days.
 5. 10 (litres of) barley fodder
 6. (for an) adult/mature jenny
- col. ii 7. (for a) month, (and)
 8. 9^{1?} (litres of) barley fodder
 9. (for a) jenny
 10. (belonging to) *Bi-bí*
 11. (for a) month.
 12. 10 (litres of) barley
 13. (for) *Ha-ba*
 14. (for) two days
- col. iii 15. 15 litres (of barley?)
 16. (for) *Ha-ba*
 17. (for another?) two days
 18. 30 (litres of) barley
 19. purchase price
 20. (of) fish
 21. Month MAxGÁNA^{tenú}-ÚGUR, Year 19

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