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THE FOREIGN TRIANGLE IN SOUTH-EASTERN MESOPOTAMIA

P.S. VERMAAK

ABSTRACT

The province of Lagaš, whose major towns/cities Lagaš, Girsu and Nina each had several smaller villages surrounding them, had a major impact on the formation of the cultures of southern Mesopotamia. This article aims to reconstruct the richness of the variety of ancient cultures that could have had a great impact in the southern region between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Three concepts are utilized in order to understand the cultural scenario of south-eastern Mesopotamia, namely linguistic syncretism, religious syncretism and ethnic syncretism. This approach will hopefully begin to untangle some ideas which could be valuable for future research in this regard.¹

INTRODUCTION

During the earliest phases of civilization in southern Mesopotamia traces of regular contact were visible from all directions of the ancient Near East (cf. Nissen 1988). The distribution of the special painted pottery during the Ubaid period (around the fourth millennium B.C.E.) over the Near East as well as the Arabian Gulf provides an excellent glimpse into how certain artefacts could travel over such a large region (cf. Carter & Philip 2010). A millennium later the even greater Uruk expansion spread across the entire Near East indicating a larger cultural exchange which paved the way for tremendous external cultural contact (cf. Algaze 1993).

Since the cuneiform (Sumerian and Akkadian) documents became accessible to the scholarly world,² it was evident that the southern Mesopotamian region had direct and indirect contact with various foreign places and cultures during the second part of the third millennium B.C., such as Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha³ of which the first seems to be the nearest and the latter the farthest away from

¹ This article is a revised and updated version of the paper presented at the SASNES congress at the University of the Western Cape in September 2011.

² For the abbreviations of texts and references see Sigrist (1991).

³ Cf. the discussions by Thapar (1975:1-42), Michalowski (1988:156-164), Hansman (1973:553-554), Potts (1993b:423-440) and Oppenheim (1954:6-17).

Mesopotamia.⁴ From these far-away places originated a variety of goods, often exotic items, which were exchanged for local commodities.⁵

Large numbers of foreigners (cf. Leemans 1960: 39-142) also remained and settled in south-eastern Mesopotamia and integrated into the local (hybrid) Sumerian and Akkadian populations.⁶ These foreigners obviously stimulated cultural exchange, but were also responsible for acculturation of several ethnic groups which lived together in south-eastern Mesopotamia before and during the historical periods, namely Sumerians, Akkadians, Amorites, Hurrians and Kassites, etc. They played a substantial role in the economy of the country and even paid taxes (known as the **gun-mada**- texts)⁷ to the local government.

On the other hand it also gradually became clear that it is more difficult to untangle the peoples and their customs or to describe the exact nature of these peoples. This led to extensive discussions on ethnicity in southern Mesopotamia and it was eventually also the major theme for the 48th *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* which was held in Leiden during 2002.⁸

One of these foreign groups appears in local Sumerian and Akkadian texts from the pre-Sargonic period to the Ur III periods in a variety of contexts, namely the *Meluhhans*.⁹ These people with a *Meluhhan* heritage apparently

⁴ For the Pre-Sargonic and Sargonic place names mentioned in the texts see Edzard et al. (1977) and during the Ur III period see Edzard and Farber (1984).

⁵ Cf. Crawford (1973:232-241), Edens (1992:118-139), Potts (1993a:379-402), Potts 1993b:423-440) and Stieglitz (1984:134-142).

⁶ Cf. the discussions by Gelb (1960:258-271), Edzard (1960:241-258) and Falkenstein (1960:301-314).

⁷ For the foreign tributes paid to Neo-Sumerian authorities and **gun-mada**-texts see Michalowski (1978:34-49); Steinkeller (1987:19-41) and Gelb (1973:70-98).

⁸ Cf. volume of the published lectures of this congress in Van Soldt et al. (2005) as well as the earlier discussions by Foster (1982:297-354) and Emberling (1995).

⁹ The locality of the *Me-luh-ha*^{ki} has not been identified with certainty. The early Sumerologists Kramer (1963:61) and Jacobsen (1960:184, note 18) have been quite certain that *Meluhha* refers to an African location. It was later also connected to the area around the Gulf such as Oman, but the majority of scholars lately agree per convention that the Indus Valley is the most likely to be connected with the *Meluhha*, although it cannot be taken for granted at this stage. (Cf. Postgate 1992:217-218, Chakrabarti 1975:337-342, Kulke 1993:154-180, Leemans 1960, Michalowski 1988:156-164, Potts 1993a:379-402, Thapar 1975:1-42, Heimpel 1993:53-55 and Moorey 1994:xxii-xxii).

grouped together in settlements and eventually formed a *Meluhhan* village(s) and played a substantial role in the economy, mainly in the textile industry of Girsu.¹⁰ One text (MVN 7 420 = ITT 4 8024) from the Istanbul Archaeological Museum in Turkey firstly published by Delaporte in 1912 (ITT 4 8024) and later collated and republished by Pettinato (et al) in 1978 (MVN 7 420), has never been really noticed by scholars previously. It connects the *Meluhhan* village with the place name of Guabba (cf. the maps in fig. 1 & 2) and used its own temple called é-Nin-mar-ki and own god ^dNin-mar (cf. Vermaak 2008:553-570).

In addition, to link the information above there seems to exist a type of unity between the three places Girsu, Guabba and Nina (and Kinunir). Falkenstein (1966:17-21) has initially referred to **the triangle (German *Dreiecke*) of Girsu, Guabba and Nina** which very often appear as a unit in various occasions in the Lagash district or province. However, Falkenstein (1966) did not explore this triangle further nor tried to determine why they might be linked to each other on several occasions. In addition to the triangle referred to by Falkenstein (1966) there was also a different grouping which might have been a foreign grouping from the Ur III texts with the place name **Gú-ab-ba^{ki}** which was often listed¹¹ together with two other places, namely **Ni-na^{ki}** and **Ki-nu-nir^{ki}** (in 26 texts) within the region of Girsu/Lagaš (to be dealt with later). Although it is not certain what type of relationship these three places had, it has to be pursued in future.¹²

The evidence mentioned above lead the author to investigate the scenario of south-eastern Mesopotamia from the Pre-Sargonic to the Ur III periods and the

¹⁰ During the UR III period Guabba provides the largest group of people from Girsu working in the weaving sector, mainly women and children. In one text (HSS IV 3) 4272 women and 1800 children from Guabba are listed as being in the weaving industry (cf. Waetzoldt 1972:94). It still has to be determined why the largest group of weavers are to be found here, but if Guabba was indeed a *Meluhhan* village then one could speculate that this group could have been ancestors of a distant group which diffused into this area, bringing their skills of textiles into the region or being used as cheap labour.

¹¹ Cf. HLC 274 = ASJ 2 220; CT 05 17 BM 012231 = MVN 17, 002. Cf. the UR III (Neo-Sumerian) database (<http://bdtms.filol.csic.es/>).

¹² Yoffee (2005:57) divided the Girsu/Lagaš province into three levels of cities each playing a specific role in this regard. Girsu and Lagaš were both capitals of this province interchanged and regarded as first level cities. Guabba, Nina and Kinunur fulfilled the role of second level cities and then there were several more third level cities.

information in the south-eastern corner in the Lagaš region provides an abundance of information in this regard. It seems therefore appropriate to do a test of corroboration in order to investigate the possibility that the Lagaš region/province in southern Mesopotamia could be regarded as a foreign hub or maybe a foreign triangle acting as a sort of gateway of larger regions. The obvious hypothesis would then be to consider the possibility that Lagaš was the ideal place to accommodate an abundance of foreign groups which eventually also moulded the languages and other cultural components in southern Mesopotamia.

King (1923:278) remarked early in the twentieth century that “what we know about Lagaš during this period (after Naram-Sin) may probably be regarded as typical of the condition of the other great Sumerian cities”. Lagaš was then probably “destined to serve as our window into understanding the provinces of the Ur III state” (Sharlach 2004:61). However, as scholarly publications and new cuneiform tablets surfaced all over the world it became evident that the circumstances of Lagaš was not “typical”, but rather different or “unique” from the other cities in southern Mesopotamia.

This article aims to start untangling this complex scenario in order to eventually understand more of the hybrid society in south-eastern Mesopotamia. It aims to identify only some of the major issues which could be used to unravel the enigma of this extraordinary region. It should be evaluated as a starting point from which further research outputs might follow as more in depth studies surface. It seems appropriate to outline the broader region of the province of Lagaš before demarcating some of the basic issues in this complex society.

THE PROVINCE OF LAGAŠ

The province of Lagaš¹³ has played a significant role in south-eastern Mesopotamia since the pre-Sargonic period and became a flourishing economic

¹³ The first phase of the excavations at Lagaš had been done by Ernest de Sarzec (1884-1912) and the second phase by Herni de Genouillac (1936). For a history of the excavations see Parrot (1948:14-33). For the latest updated analysis of the archaeological data from the Ubaid to the Old- Babylonian periods in the region of Lagaš consult excellent study by Huh (2008).

centre during the Neo-Sumerian period (cf. Zarins 1992:55-77 & Huh 2008:253-322). It had the largest wheat producers in southern Sumer and provided the capital city of Ur with all the necessary requirements (cf. Pettinato 1969:44-45 & Neumann 1987:91). Livestock played an essential role in Lagaš with its breeding programmes of sheep and cattle (cf. Maekawa 1983:81-111). The textile industry in Lagaš was exceptionally productive (Gelb 1979:1-97) and even the weaving skills with its variety of handicrafts could not be ignored (Waetzoldt 1972:91-99 & Neumann 1987:92). At Lagaš a local calendar had been utilized which was different from the official *Reichskalender* used at the other cities; actually, this calendar ran one month before the other calendars (Sallaberger 1993:280). The **bala**-system that was in use in southern Mesopotamia had affected Lagaš differently from the other places in that they had to deliver products as provision to the royal, religious and workers' centres. Lagaš had to supply royal provisions for four of the twelve months in a year while most other cities were due to deliver for only one month per annum.¹⁴

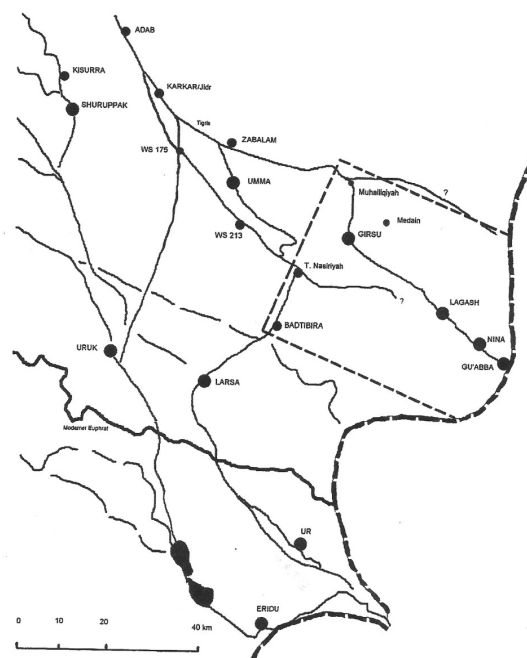


Fig. 1 (Huh 2008:10: Fig 3a)

¹⁴ Cf. the detailed discussions by Sharlach (2004:61-102) and Steinkeller (1982:19-41).

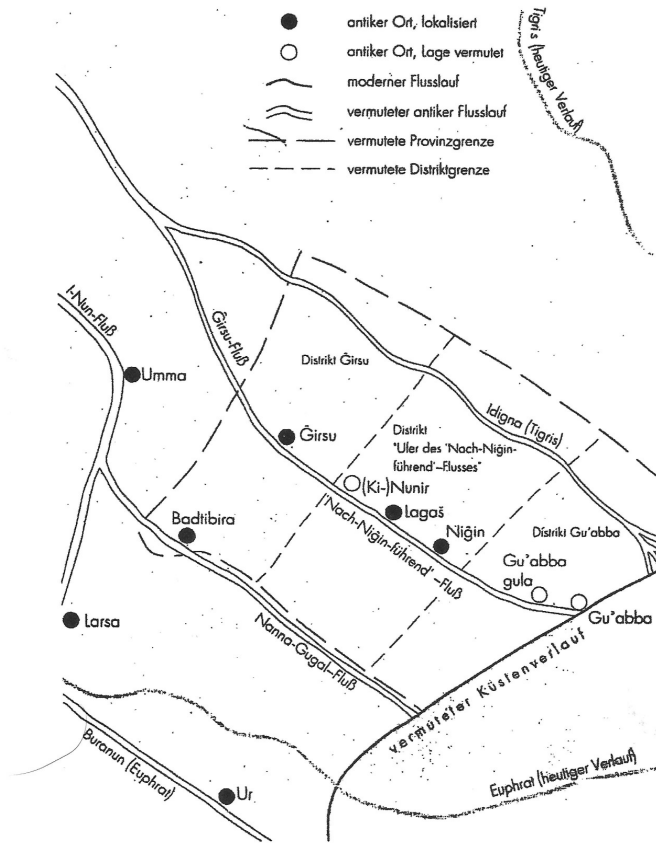


Fig. 2 (Sallaberger 1993)

Sharlach (2004) in her analysis of the Ur III taxes brought forward some very interesting information. It has been shown that about 25-30% of the bala-taxes were paid via the basket of Lagaš which implies that Lagaš has to be considered as a major factor in the Ur III period. Lagaš also differed from other places in that Lagaš was mainly run by the variety of temple households and not the royal governance (Selz 1995).

The purpose of this article is therefore to consider the obvious three categories, namely (i) textual references to various foreign peoples, (ii) the varieties of languages and dialects and (iii) the connection to various gods and temples.

ETHNIC SYNCRETISM IN LAGAŠ

The core of the population in southern Mesopotamia has often been discussed since the end of the nineteenth century. The variety of groups and peoples contributed to the search for the core of the society and eventually the uncertainty of their origins has been formulated as the so-called “Sumerian problem”.¹⁵ The enigma of the Sumerians is threefold: Where did they come from, what did they bring with them, and how did they achieve all the successes that are normally assigned to them? They have left markers behind them which cannot be ignored such as the language, cuneiform script and various other elements of material culture (cf. Kramer 1963).

Landsberger (1974:11-14) initially proposed the idea that there had to be an earlier “pre-stratum” phase in the Sumerian community of some unknown origin. The basic vocabulary for farming, pottery, gardening, brewing, leather work, building and other handicrafts do not fit into the local scenario in southern Mesopotamia (cf. Landsberger 1974:10-12, Speiser 1969:102-105 & Rubio 1999:1-16).

Nissen (1988:58-60) indicated that the most probable transition would have been between the Early Uruk to the Late Uruk periods. The suspicion by Høystrup (1992:27) was that a large variety of peoples and cultures immigrated to southern Mesopotamia and that these body of immigrants formed the majority of the working population in this region while the “ruling class” would have been “autochthonous”. This eventually lead Høystrup (1992:21-72) to the point where the language emerged into a hybrid format with traces of all these major communities and coined Sumerian as a “creole language”.

The variety of linguistic elements led Rubio (1999:1-16) to propose that several so-called Sumerian or *Eme-gir* words had a pre-Sumerian stratum, because they do not really fit into the normal Sumerian vocabulary and this strengthens the idea that some strangers had to be around for quite some time in the area around Lagaš before the formulation of the well-known *Pax Sumerica*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. the discussions by Frankfort (1932), Falkenstein (1960:301-314), Speiser (1969:93-109), Jones (1969), Ziskind (1972:34-41), Høystrup (1992:21-72) and Bahrani (2006:48-59).

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion by Foster (1982:297-354), Emberling (1995) and the congress volume (Van Soldt et al. 2005) and Bahrani (2006:48-59).

Although, several scholars have described the presence of Sumerians and Akkadians since the middle of the third millennium B.C.,¹⁷ the exchange of all cultural components such as language, religion, arts, trade and ideas would be necessary to live together. This evidence indicates that a variety of other foreign groups had to be around for some time in Mesopotamia.¹⁸

LINGUISTIC SYNCRETISM IN LAGAŠ

The so-called *Emegir* has been regarded as the main and standard Sumerian language utilized in southern Mesopotamia. *Emesal* on the other hand is coined as a “women’s language”, a “dialect” or a “sociolect” which was used concurrently with the main Sumerian language *Emegir* and there is no consensus among scholars as to what this really portrays.¹⁹

However, it was never really considered as having linguistic elements of a different (foreign) ethnic community living in the region of Lagaš amongst the hybrid population in southern Mesopotamia. This article investigates the possibility of a possible foreign or maybe a *Meluhhan* language due to reasons mentioned above. The possibility that the *Emesal* was part of a group of languages which Rubio (1999:1-16) called the “sub-stratum” of Sumerian should also be considered as a possibility.

The main location where *Emesal* occurs is in the Lagaš province or city-state and has not really been found in other regions. One therefore has to consider the possibility that these “*Emesal*-like” features in the texts from Lagaš could point in the direction of a foreign language such as those of the *Meluhhans*. The presence of the *Meluhhans* in southern Mesopotamia has already been confirmed by the Sargonic cylinder seal of *Šu-ilišu*, the **ema-bal me-luḥ-ḥa-ki** (*Meluhhan* “interpreter”) which indicate that a *Meluhhan* group or other groups have been

¹⁷ Cf. the discussions by Gelb (1960:258-271), Edzard (1960:241-258) and Falkenstein (1960:301-314).

¹⁸ Cf. Parpola et al (1977:129-165), Michalowski (1978:34-49), Steinkeller (1980:1-9 & 1982:19-41) and Rubio (1999:1-16).

¹⁹ Cf. the discussions by Thomsen (1984:285-294), Edzard (2003:171-172), Krecher (1967:87-110), and the detailed layout by Schretter (1990:124-136).

around there for some time.²⁰ Unfortunately the seal does not show any “foreign” features which might help us to identify the location of *Meluhha*. The reference to the *Meluhhan* interpreter (**eme-bal**) is a possible indication to the foreign group who settled there during an earlier period.

Krispijn (2005:153-175) has made an extensive layout to display that there was another “*Emesal*-like” language what he calls a Sumerian “vernacular” which was different from the well-known *Emesal* which has been known for almost a century. He provides seven features of this other “*Emesal*-like” language.²¹ The most enlightening of this analysis is that the examples used for this new language/dialect came mainly from the so-called “foreign triangle” (Lagaš, Girsu and Nina, including Kinunir) which is reflected here in this article. The possibility should therefore be pursued to what extent this additional Sumerian “vernacular” reflects elements of foreign groups or languages utilized in the region of Lagaš. It hints in the direction that these “*Emesal*-like” language features might refer to elements of the *Meluhhan* language or other similar languages of which we currently don’t have any verified information. However, this might stimulate scholars to pursue this option and might later even assist to locate the place or location of *Meluhha* which often occurs in the cuneiform literature.

The phenomenon of various Sumerian dialects in the Sumerian literature have been referred to in the 1930s and Bauer (1980:419-422, 1998a & 1998b) has lately discussed this issue by referring to the composition of the personal and geographical names.

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN LAGAŠ

Oppenheim (1964:172-183) has stated previously that a “Mesopotamian religion” cannot be written due to the large variety peoples, gods, periods and religions

²⁰ Cf. Possehl (2006:42-43) and Oppenheim (1964:353, note 24).

²¹ Scholars do not agree about the nature of the so-called *Emesal* language. It has initially been called the “women’s language” due to the use of this sociolect or perhaps dialect, but the answer will have to be determined by sociolinguistics. Cf. Thomsen (1984:285-294) and Edzard (2003:171-172), but especially Schretter (1990).

that were identified in this region and it was and is almost impossible to conclude on any of these concepts. Deimel (1914) in his earliest analysis of the *Pantheon Babylonicum* lists more than 3200 names of gods. Selz (1990:111) lately described the Mesopotamian religion as “a disturbing, somewhat amorphous picture”. The major god in the pre-Sargonic period in Lagaš was the non-Sumerian god Gatumdug (cf. Hansen 1980:419-420)²² which somehow correlates with the ethnic syncretism in this region as well as the pre-Sumerian ethnic stratum.

The province of Lagaš had within its region three main centra, namely Girsu, Lagaš and Nina a visible abundance of gods and temples which is quite different from all the regions in Mesopotamia, stretching over various periods before the Old Babylonian periods (cf. Selz 1995). This in itself is extraordinary and provides a wealth of information which could point in the direction of a large variety of cultural, ethnic or racial groupings which could have been responsible for otherness towards the rest of the Mesopotamian region.

It was from these documents of Lagaš that the temples played a more prominent role than in any of the other regions of the Ur III period. The entire temple economy theory has previously been built on this large variety of temples and gods and was eventually regarded as the norm of the entire southern Mesopotamia (Foster 1981:225-241). This misconception which was built on the evidence from Lagaš was only realised much later when the documentary evidence from Lagaš has proved to be the exception and not the rule in the region. Relatively more information was captured by just over ten temples in the Lagaš region, namely é-Gá-tùm-du₁₀, é-^dNin-gír-su, é-^dIg-alima, é-^dŠul-gi, é-Dumu-za, é-Nin-dar-a, é-Nin-mar-ki, é-Nin-gi-zi-da, é-Nanše, é-man-ha-ni, é-Giš-bar-e, é-URU-KÁR^{ki},²³ and é-^dBa-ú. The large remaining part of the temple seemed to have played a minor role in their decentralised areas. The diagram used by Selz (1990:127, fig. 3) provides some inside information regarding the religious complexity of the region most probably due to the variety of foreign peoples that grouped together in this south-eastern corner of ancient

²² For a more detailed discussion of this god see Falkenstein (1960:72) and Selz (1995:134-136).

²³ This occurs quite regular in the texts without knowing its exact stronghold.

the Sumerians entered southern Mesopotamia during the prehistoric period, their major cultural impact on the region cannot be ignored. They have invented so many cultural contributions to the region and the extent to which they changed the entire ancient world cultures, not only in Mesopotamia but also in the larger region of the ancient Near East, becomes really remarkable.

The utilization of three components of culture such as ethnicity, linguistics and religion reflects only a small portion of the complexities of the ancient Near Eastern societies. It provides a small window into a larger overall picture of an incomplete puzzle. To itemise these components under the umbrella of syncretism is only the starting point and not the final conclusions and actually opens up various avenues for further research. It provides a hint that this region in south-eastern Mesopotamia and more specific the triangle of the Lagaš province formed the core area of the very important economic international gateway in the ancient world and needs further investigation.

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