Sumerians and their soups

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ABSTRACT:
This paper concerns the interpretation of a group of archaic sealings from the Sumerian city of Ur (ED I, c. 2,900–2,700 BC). These container sealings (in some cases from pots) bear, among others, the sign tu₇ = “soup”. The author suggests that in this case, the sign refers not to liquid soups, but rather to solid boiled-down soup extracts.

KEYWORDS:
Ancient Mesopotamia; Sumer; Ur; seals; food preparation

The study of ancient Mesopotamian history and culture, including the culinary sphere, constitutes an eloquent example of the fruitfulness of a multidisciplinary approach. In proportion to the quantitative growth of information supplied by textual and archaeological data and by ancient imagery, our chances at gaining deeper insights into this ancient civilization by combining the evidence offered by these and other disciplines have grown to a previously unimagined extent. Of course, this pertains also to the sphere of nourishment and partaking of food, of which we would so much like to be better informed. An eloquent example of such procedures is aptly illustrated by the range of topics tackled by the studies published in the Gedenkschrift in memory of Jean Bottéro, editor of the now well-known Mesopotamian cookbook (Faivre — Lion — Michel 2009). In the following pages, I take the liberty of placing before my kind readers another example of this procedure.

Some of the inscribed sealings found in what Leonard Woolley called the “archaic strata” of early Sumerian Ur, which he generally denoted as SIS (= Seal Impression strata; published in UE III, last summary and discussion in Šašková — Pecha — Charvát 2010; Charvát 2017) of the early 3rd pre-Christian millennium, contain references

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to KAM = tu₇, “soup”. The conjunction of archaeological data provided by the sealing
reverses, textual references, and seal imagery may open us the way towards a better
comprehension of this Sumerian expression.

Here is a summary of the evidence at hand (for the interpretation of the sealing
carriers according to seal reverses, see Martin — Matthews 1993: 37 and Matthews
1993: 44–46):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication (where published)</th>
<th>Sealing reverse (what is being sealed)</th>
<th>Counter-marks (does the sealing bear impression of other seals/seals?)</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UE III: 10 (= Scott 2005, No. 111), SIS 8</td>
<td>Pot</td>
<td>No counter-mark</td>
<td>KAM = tu₇ = liquid food?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TU₇ = not in ZATU but related to a group of signs HIxDIŠ, HIxAŠ, KAM, and KAM₄
(Steinkeller — Postgate 1992, table on p. 16). Piotr Steinkeller points to the occur-
rence of this sign in a text of archaic Ur (UET II: 18; III: 3) and interprets its meaning as
“soup”. Also, KAM = tu₇ = ummaru = “eine Suppe oder Fleischbrühe” (Bauer 1989–1990:
86), “soup” (Gelb — Steinkeller — Whiting 1991: 293), or “Eintopf(gericht)” (Brunke
2011: 382–383). In later ED Ur, a receptacle called HI x AŠ = sùr sometimes assumed
gigantic proportions, as no less than 500 minas of copper were needed for its produc-
tion; the lexeme also denoted a gigantic and cumbersome weapon there (Alberti —
Pomponio 1986: 97 ad text 44).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Field excavation number</th>
<th>Find division number</th>
<th>Museum number</th>
<th>Archaeological context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UE III: 14 (= Matthews 1993, No. 78 = Scott 2005, No. 84), found in SIS 8</td>
<td>Pot with covering</td>
<td>No counter-mark</td>
<td>KAM = tu₇ = liquid food?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TU₇ = see above.

around by a cord. The conically expanding end of the object consists of parallel seg-
ments. **Was this a bale wrapped in reed matting?** Cylindrical object: radius = 12 mm,
thus \( d = 24 \text{ mm} \). Widths of the terminal segments: 11.4 mm, 10.1 mm and 9.4 mm. Cord: only the CT = 5.9 mm can be measured. Traces of fine parallel grooves, perpendicular to the axis of the cord, are visible on the surface of the cord impression. Red-brown clay without visible admixtures.

**Column I:**

\( \text{ŠA}_3 = \text{ZATU No. 503 p. 280, frequently with field plots,} = \text{MSVO 1: 142. An alternative reading would be} \)  
\( \text{TU}_7 = \text{see above;} \)

The following sign is very difficult to decipher. Could it be  
\( \text{KUŠU}_2 = \text{ZATU 305 p. 234, missing in MSVO 1 and MSVO 4? Piotr Steinkeller (1995: 703 sub No. 305) believes that the identification of this sign as KUŠU}_2 \text{ is erroneous but offers no alternative identification. Might there be a connection with the site GIŠ.KUŠU }_2.KI, of which a king named Aka dedicated a lapis-lazuli bead to Inanna, discussed by Gebhard Selz (2003: 506–511)? Jeremiah Peterson now identifies KUŠU as an aquatic animal other than turtle (Peterson 2007: 213–217). Another possibility could be  
\( \text{SUKUD} = \text{ZATU 493 p. 278, in MSVO 1 only the double form on p. 141.} \)

\( \text{ŠA} = \text{ZATU No. 500 p. 279 = MSVO 1: 141–142. ŠA} = \text{na}_3 = \text{pitnu} = \text{in lexical lists “box, chest”} \)  

**Column II:**

X  
X  
“(Delivery of) seafood in containers”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UE III: 390</th>
<th>TU, DILMUN, TUN, UNUG, X, UDU, LUM?</th>
<th>No counter-mark</th>
<th>??</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

\( \text{TU}_7 = \text{see above;} \)

\( \text{DILMUN} = \text{see } \text{http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls.} \text{ v. dilmun} = \text{“(to be) made manifest; (to be) heavy; (to be) important; ritually unclean, impure person; instruction”. But I rather think that this is the toponym. On Dilmun see now Marchesi 2011.} \)

\( \text{TUN}_3 = \text{see } \text{http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls.} \text{ v. tun3, “ax, adze”}. \)

\( \text{UNUG} = \text{ZATU No. 583 p. 303, MSVO 1: 160, the city of Uruk. Steinkeller 1995: 710 sub No. 583: Sumerian “city”, iri or uru, originally written with the UNUG sign. The toponym occurs in 3 Fara-age texts (Visicato 1997: 136).} \)

\( \text{UDU} = \text{ZATU No. 575 p. 300, MSVO 1: 158–159. Sheep.} \)

\( \text{LUM} = \text{ZATU No. 335 p. 240, in lexical lists of trees, vessels, and plants, missing in MSVO 1. The sign is MEA No. 565 p. 283, signifying either “to shatter, crush”, or “to destroy”, and alternatively, “to fertilize”, “to fructify”. See also } \text{http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls.} \text{ v. lum}. \)
Food?, Dilmun (or heavy?) axes, etc., which is the nature of this deposit?

One of the abovementioned seals shows a human figure walking towards what might have been a sacred hut(?), again with the TU\, sign (UE III: 10). As may be seen, the sign does sometimes occur with other deliveries of comestibles, such as a supply of seafood (UE III: 24) and even with heads of livestock, Dilmun axes, sheep, and goods from Uruk (UE III: 390). The last case may pertain to the LUM ceremony(?): TU, TUN, DILMUN, UDU, UNUG, LUM, tentatively: “soup”, Dilmun axes, sheep, Uruk, fecundation ceremony?

The idea of pouring a hot and vaporing soup into storage jars, its subsequent transport, and partaking of the cold, slimy and tasteless liquid by whomever it was assigned to, does not particularly appeal to me. Moreover, I cannot imagine the presence of liquid soup in a bale of reed matting. Reheating of the delivered soup in its container might be considered as a theoretical possibility. Yet the quality of the end product would, in such a case, be strongly affected by transportation times and storage conditions to which the potted food would have been exposed. On the whole, I am not inclined to imagine that liquid soup would have been transported in storage jars.

A possible interpretation of this evidence is offered by what is known as “portable soups”. The very first recipes for “pocket soup” appeared in cookbooks shortly after 1681. High-pressured steam cooking efficiently reduced meat products to concentrated gelatinous forms of various textures. Pocket soup yielded to further processing, rendering a hard substance similar to today’s bouillon cube. The end results were lightweight, portable, easily reconstituted, nutritious, and filling — not so very different from today’s “add water” commercial food products.

Late 17th and early 18th century pocket soup recipes were time-consuming and complicated, suggesting it was not commonly made at home or found in family pantries. Providers for long-range expeditions often hoarded mass quantities of commercial pocket soup to ensure supplies for their expedition crews. With nineteenth-century scientific advances (dehydration) and industrialization, mass production of several foods based on pocket soup became possible. During the U.S. Civil War, Union soldiers ate meat biscuits and desiccated vegetables produced in factories. Knorr marketed dried soups to the general public beginning in the 1870s.

“With the vogue [late 17th century] for thin soup based on chicken or veal broth came a new invention. Its earliest name was ‘veal glue’, and it was the forerunner of the bouillon cube. Strong veal stock was slowly stewed for many hours, strained and simmered again, allowed to set, scraped free of sediment, and then gently cooked... It was a great deal of work for such a small output. But veal glue, its name later changed to ‘pocket’ or ‘portable’ soup, continued in demand all through the eighteenth century. Jam or beef or sweet herbs were now often boiled with veal, to give a tastier flavour.” (Wilson 1991: 224)
The evidence suggests itself for the solution of our problems: we may imagine a solidification treatment of early Sumerian soups into what may have been the first form of “instant food”, easy to handle and to carry in containers of various kinds (on Sumerian foods in general, see Grotanelli — Milano 2004 and now Gaspa 2016). We can also speculate whether the structure rather alike the “huts with protrusions” of other Ur bullae shown on sealing UE III: 10 does not represent a “temple kitchen”, supplying (also such) foods to a circle of participants of one of the early social bodies of Sumer (for “temple kitchens” see e.g. Crawford 2004: 77, 83, 111). It seems that the products of Mr. Knorr and his confrères can indeed claim a respectable ancestry.

As a sort of a postscript, let me add here a 19th-century recipe for “portable soup”, quoted from Beeton 1861.

**Portable Soup**

180. INGREDIENTS. — 2 knuckles of veal, 3 shins of beef, 1 large faggot of herbs, 2 bay-leaves, 2 heads of celery, 3 onions, 3 carrots, 2 blades of mace, 6 cloves, a teaspoonful of salt, sufficient water to cover all the ingredients.

**Mode.** — Take the marrow from the bones; put all the ingredients in a stock-pot, and simmer slowly for 12 hours, or more, if the meat be not done to rags; strain it off, and put it in a very cool place; take off all the fat, reduce the liquor in a shallow pan, by setting it over a sharp fire, but be particular that it does not burn; boil it fast and uncovered for 8 hours, and keep it stirred. Put it into a deep dish, and set it by for a day. Have ready a stew-pan of boiling water, place the dish in it, and keep it boiling; stir occasionally, and when the soup is thick and ropy, it is done. Form it into little cakes by pouring a small quantity on to the bottom of cups or basins; when cold, turn them out on a flannel to dry. Keep them from the air in tin canisters.

Average cost of this quantity, 16s.

**Note.** — Soups can be made in 5 minutes with this, by dissolving a small piece, about the size of a walnut, in a pint of warm water, and simmering for 2 minutes. Vermicelli, macaroni, or other Italian pastes, may be added.

**REFERENCES**


Museums (The British Museum and The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia).


**ELECTRONIC SOURCES:**
