



Sumerians and their soups

Petr Charvát

University of Western Bohemia in Plzeň

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 tu_7 = “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.¹ 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

1 Acknowledgements: The material is published herewith with kind consent of the Near Eastern Section of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA. I could not complete the research presented here without support of several academic sponsoring bodies. The academic year 2003–2004 I spent in Philadelphia thanks to a research grant from the Prague office of the John William Fulbright Foundation (grant No. 2003-28-02, Fulbright No. ME659). In 2005, I could pursue my goals further with the aid of the American Philosophical Society (grant no. Franklin 2005), as well as of the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in Prague (grant no. A8021401). No less helpful was another grant project conferred on me jointly by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GA ČR) and the Deutsche

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):

Publication (where published)	Sealing reverse (what is being sealed)	Counter-marks (does the sealing bear impression of other seals/seals?)	Text
UE III: 10 (= Scott 2005, No. 111), SIS 8	Pot	No counter-mark	KAM = tu ₇ = liquid food?

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 occurrence 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 = *sūr* sometimes assumed gigantic proportions, as no less than 500 minas of copper were needed for its production; the lexeme also denoted a gigantic and cumbersome weapon there (Alberti — Pomponio 1986: 97 ad text 44).

UE III: 14 (= Matthews 1993, No. 78 = Scott 2005, No. 84), found in SIS 8	Pot with covering	No counter-mark	KAM = tu ₇ = liquid food?
---	--------------------------	-----------------	---

TU₇ = see above.

Publication	Field excavation number	Find division number	Museum number	Archaeological context
UE III: 24	U 18 550	740	UM 33-35-478	Pit W, SIS 6-7

See Matthews 1993: 79 = Scott 2005: 227. Museum catalogue: “Ur PG. PIT W. SIS VI–VII, Found in Storage 1989”. Obverse: signs of writing. Reverse: a cylindrical object coiled around by a cord. The conically expanding end of the object consists of parallel segments. **Was this a bale wrapped in reed matting?** Cylindrical object: radius = 12 mm,

Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) under GA ČR grant no. 404/08/J013. I am deeply obliged to Holly Pittman, Curator as well as to Richard Zettler and Shannon White of the Near Eastern Section of the said University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



thus $d = 24$ 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:

$\check{S}A_3 = ZATU$ No. 503 p. 280, frequently with field plots, = *MSVO* 1: 142. An alternative reading would be

$TU_7 =$ see above;

The following sign is very difficult to decipher. Could it be

$KU\check{S}U_2 = ZATU$ 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 $KU\check{S}U_2$ is erroneous but offers no alternative identification. Might there be a connection with the site $GI\check{S}.KU\check{S}U_2.KI$, of which a king named Aka dedicated a lapis-lazuli bead to Inanna, discussed by Gebhard Selz (2003: 506–511)? Jeremiah Peterson now identifies $KU\check{S}U_2$ as an aquatic animal other than turtle (Peterson 2007: 213–217). Another possibility could be

$SUKUD = ZATU$ 493 p. 278, in *MSVO* 1 only the double form on p. 141.

$\check{S}A = ZATU$ No. 500 p. 279 = *MSVO* 1: 141–142. $\check{S}A = na_5 = pitnu =$ in lexical lists “box, chest” (Krispijn 2008: 178–179).

Column II:

X

X

“(Delivery of) seafood in containers”?

UE III: 390 = Scott 2005, 451	TU_7 , $DILMUN$, TUN_3 , $UNUG$, X,UDU , $LUM?$	No counter-mark	??
------------------------------------	--	-----------------	----

$TU_7 =$ see above;

$DILMUN =$ see <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls>. v. $dilmun =$ “(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.

$TUN_3 =$ see <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls>. v. tun_3 , “ax, adze”.

$UNUG = ZATU$ 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).

$UDU = ZATU$ No. 575 p. 300, *MSVO* 1: 158–159. Sheep.

$LUM = ZATU$ 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 <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.htmls>. v. lum .

X

X

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_7 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_7 , TUN_3 , DILMUN, UDU, UNUG, LUM, tentatively: “soup”, Dilmun axes, sheep, Uruk, fecundation ceremony?

The idea of pouring a hot and vaporeing 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. — *Soup 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

- Alberti, A. — Pomponio, F. (1986) *Pre-Sargonic and Sargonic Texts from Ur Edited in UET 2, Supplement* [Studia Pohl, Series Maior 13], Rome: Biblical Institute Press.
- Bauer, J. (1989–1990) *Altsumerische Wirtschaftsurkunden in Leningrad*, in: *Archiv für Orientforschung* 36–37, 78–90.
- Beeton, I. (1861) = Mrs. Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, published originally by S. O. Beeton in 24 monthly parts 1859–1861, first published in a bound edition 1861, this web edition published by eBooks@Adelaide, rendered into HTML by Steve Thomas, last updated Wednesday, July 4, 2012 at 11:57 (<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/beeton/isabella/household/chapter6.html>; accessed June 24, 2013).
- Brunke, H. (2011) *Zur Rekonstruktion von Speisen in Sumer anhand administrativer Urkunden*, in: G. J. Selz — K. Wagensohner

- (eds.), *The Empirical Dimension of Ancient Near Eastern Studies — Die empirische Dimension altorientalischer Forschungen* [Wiener Offene Orientalistik, 6], Wien — Berlin: LIT Verlag, 375–403.
- Charvát, P. (2017) *Signs from Silence — Ur of the first Sumerians*, Praha: Karolinum.
- Crawford, H. (2004) *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Faivre, X. — Lion, B. — Michel, C., eds. (2009) *Et il y eut un esprit dans l'homme: Jean Bottéro et la Mésopotamie*, [Travaux de la Maison René-Ginouès, 6], Paris: De Boccard.
- Gelb, I. J. — Steinkeller, P. — Whiting, R. M., Jr. (1991) *Earliest Land Tenure Systems in the Near East: Ancient Kudurrus*, Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Gaspa, S. (2016) Condiments and sweetening agents in Assyria and their role in the development of royal food-writing in the Near East, in: S. Svård, R. Rollinger (edd.), *Cross-Cultural Studies in Near Eastern History and Literature*, Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 13–43.
- Grotanelli C., Milano L. (2004) *Food and Identity in the Ancient World* (History of the Ancient Near East — Studies IX), Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N.
- Krispijn, T. J. H. (2008) Music and healing for someone far away from home. HS 1556, a remarkable Ur III incantation, revisited, in: R. J. van der Spek (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern World View and Society Presented to Marten Stol on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 173–194.
- Marchesi, G. (2011) Goods from the Queen of Dilmun, in: J. G. Dercksen — J. Eidem — K. van der Toorn — K. R. Veenhof (eds.), *Akkade is King — A Collection of Papers by Friends and Colleagues Presented to Aage Westenholz on the occasion of His 70th Birthday 15th May 2009* [PIHANS CXVIII], Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 189–200.
- Martin, H. P. — Matthews, R. J. (1993) Seals and sealings, in: A. Green (ed.), *Abu Salabikh Excavations, Volume 4: The 6G Ash-Tip and its Contents: Cultic and Administrative Discard from the Temple?* London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 23–81.
- Matthews, R. J. (1993) *Cities, Seals and Writing: Archaic Seal Impressions from Jemdet Nasr and Ur* [Materialien zu den frühen Schrifterzeugnissen des Vorderen Orients, 2], Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- MEA: Labat, R. (1988) *Manuel d'épigraphie akkadienne*, Paris: Geuthner (sixième édition par Florence Malbran-Labat).
- MSVO 1: Englund, R. K. — Grégoire, J.-P. — Matthews, R. J. (1991) *The Proto-Cuneiform Texts from Jemdet Nasr. I: Copies, Transliterations and Glossary* [Materialien zu den frühen Schriftzeugnissen des Vorderen Orients, 1], Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- MSVO 4: Englund, R. K. — Matthews, R. J. (1996) *Proto-Cuneiform Texts from Diverse Collections* [Materialien zu den frühen Schriftzeugnissen des Vorderen Orients, 4], Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- Peterson, J. (2007) *A Study of Sumerian Faunal Conception with a Focus on the Terms Pertaining to the Order Testudines*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Scott, S. J. (2005) *Figure, Symbol and Sign: Semiotics and Function of Early Dynastic I Cylinder Seal Imagery from Ur*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Selz, G. J. (2003) Who is who? Akka, König von Ĝiš(š)a: zur Historizität eines Königs und seiner möglichen Identität mit Aka, König von Kiš, in: G. Selz (ed.), *Festschrift für Burkhardt Kienast zu seinem 70. Geburtstag dargebracht von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen* [Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 274], Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 499–518.
- Steinkeller, P. (1995) Review of ZATU, in: *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 52/5–6, 689–713.
- Steinkeller, P. — Postgate, J. N. (1992) *Third-Millennium Legal and Administrative Texts in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad*, Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns.
- Šašková, K. — Pecha, L. — Charvát, P., eds. (2010) *Shepherds of the Black-Headed People – The Royal Office Vis-à-vis Godhead in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Plzeň: Západočeská Univerzita.
- UET II: E. Burrows. (1935) *Ur Excavations, Volume II: Archaic Texts*, London — Philadelphia: The Trustees of the Two



Museums (The British Museum and The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia).
 UET III: L. Legrain. (1936) *Ur Excavations*, Volume III: *Archaic Seal Impressions*, London — Philadelphia: The Trustees of the Two Museums (The British Museum and The University Museum), by the aid of a Grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
 Visicato, G. (1997) *Indices of Early Dynastic Administrative Tablets of Šuruppak* [Series Maior, VI A], Napoli: Istituto Universitario

Orientale di Napoli, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici.

Wilson, C. A. (1991) *Food and Drink in Britain: From the Stone Age to the 19th Century*, Chicago: Academy Chicago (<http://www.foodtimeline.org/foodsoups.html#portable>; accessed September 7, 2013).
 ZATU: Nissen, H.-J. — Green, M. — Damerow, P. — Englund, R. K. (1987) *Zeichenliste der archaischen Texte aus Uruk*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.

ELECTRONIC SOURCES:

Philadelphia Sumerian Dictionary, <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html>.

“Portable Soup”, <http://www.soupsong.com/bstock.html>, cited July 14th, 2013.