

Thresher of the Goddess Sud. An Early Dynastic Sealing from Kish

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This paper intended to analyze one single, and relatively inconspicuous artefact. However, it grew into a historical study of some extent, with numerous implications and side-lines. I hope that the readers will allow my indulgence.

The collections of the *Département des Antiquités Orientales* of the Louvre Museum in Paris includes an artefact bearing the inventory number AO 10496; the full catalogue entry for this item is as follows: “*Bulle, Gilgamesh et Enkidu contre les fauves, époque de Mesilim, Kish II p. 101, t. cuite, H. 0,063, larg. 0,061, Kish, don Genouillac, comité 5 Nov. 1925, bureau*” (for publication see [de Genouillac 1925](#), 22, Pl. I: 4).

The front side of this sealing displays two faces at an angle of about 60° to each other, bearing the impressions of two cylinder seals. The larger one (henceforth Seal A) shows the crossed figures of a lion and an ibex, and possibly a bull-man with free-flowing hair standing *en face* with a long and thin weapon in his right hand. His left hand holds a round shield (?). A fragmentary sign, reading LUGAL may be seen to the right of this figure.

The smaller seal (henceforth Seal B) depicts a naked (?) human figure and three symbols of cuneiform writing – LU₉, BAD and BU.gunû, which will be discussed in more depth later.

The reverse is irregular, with impressions of wide and flat folds of some pliable material, possibly cloth or leather. No firm features may be measured here; the sealing has a hole bored through it; the bored hole has a diameter of 2.65 mm. Its material may be characterized as ochre-colored clay, homogenous and without visible admixtures.

The findspot of the item, al-Uhaimir, or the eastern of the Kish tells, is not very well known archaeologically ([Moorey 1978](#), 20–29). However, we do know that the tutelary deity of Kish, Zababa, had his temple there. The divine name has been recorded for the first time on a newly published “Prisoner Plaque” of ED-II date ([Steinkeller 2013](#), 132). The Fara texts do not mention Zababa, who appears subsequently in the Abu Salabikh records as “king of Kish” (lugal kišⁱki: [Marchesi 2006](#), 223; [Ławecka 2014](#), 426–27).

The subject of this paper has been published several times. After its maiden appearance in Henri de Genouillac’s *Kish II* ([de Genouillac 1925](#), 22, Pl. I: 4), Pierre Amiet included it in his standard-setting publication ([Amiet 1980](#), Pl. 72bis, D), giving a date which may fall within the terminal ED II or initial ED IIIa period, that is, of the 27th or 26th centuries BCE ([Amiet 1980](#), 147: “*haute époque*”, “*style de Fara*”, probably ED II or initial ED III). Finally, Karin Rohn examined it in her remarkable treatise on 3rd millennium inscribed cylinder

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Fig. 1. Musée du Louvre, AO 10496.
 a. Obverse side, Seal A; b. obverse side, Seal B; c. reverse side. Photos: P. Charvát.

seals, where she noted it as sealing No. 5 (Rohn 2011, 14 with fn. 124–25, 106, 245 with references).

The inscription of AO 10496

The first seal (Seal A) bears the sign LUGAL, which, in later periods, denoted the king. There have been eight attestations of it in proto-cuneiform texts, and it is not attested in lexical lists (ZATU, sign No. 334 on page 240). Here we are in doubt whether the sign refers to either a LUGAL function, or to a personal name containing the LUGAL sign.

Of the inscription of three signs on the second seal (Seal B), Karin Rohn transcribes *lugal, -[x-]du₁₀* (Rohn 2011, 106, No. 5). Examination of the original (Fig. 1a–c) shows the identification of LU₂, BAD, and BU.gunû. The sign LU₂, attested in proto-cuneiform writing, refers to a human being (ZATU No. 332, 239; ePSD s. v. lu). In fact, this could once have also been the LUGAL sign, as the upper part of the sealing is broken away, at the point where the LUGAL “crown” would appear. As to the sign BAD (ZATU No. 41, 178; ATU 5, 112), the most appropriate translation here seems to be “to thresh grain” (ePSD s. v. bad). Good parallels are offered by the seals of archaic Ur where one of the impressions may even visualize the procedure (Charvát 2017, 40, 67 and 68, esp. 66, on the sealing UE III, No. 315).

Unfortunately, neither the LUGAL sign on Seal A, or the LU₂ (?) sign on Seal B have survived in a complete state, so it cannot be argued that the bearer of the LUGAL seal was administratively superior to that of the LU₂ seal. All that can be observed is that, of the two seals, the cylinder which impressed Seal B is likely to be earlier, due to the form of the LU₂ sign, compatible with the Fara attestations. The LUGAL sign of Seal A may be situated between the Fara- and Lagaš palaeographic phases.

The inscription on Seal B of Kish thus translates “thresher of BU.gunû”. It now remains to identify the BU.gunû sign.

While the BU.gunû sign is not particularly frequent (ZATU No. 487, 277 = SU₃), its pristine form, the sign BU (ZATU No. 56, 181, with readings GID₂ and SU₁₃; BU_b, in ATU 5, 114), has an unusually wide semantic field: it occurs in proto-cuneiform lexical lists, namely those of vessels, but it may also denote a city, a geographic entity, a tree, a plant, a kind of food, or various kinds of dogs and fish. According to Nissen and Green (ZATU No. 56, 181: “cf. BU+A and NUN+A”; the same in UD.GAL.NUN as BU = NUN: Krebernik 1998, 299), its variation with NUN in lexical texts may reflect phonetic similarity. Therefore, a more detailed investigation is needed to identify its meaning.

**The signs BU and BU.gunû
in proto-cuneiform writing
(ca. 3400–2900 BCE)**

Data collected from a series of relevant publications, namely ATU 5, MSVO 1, MSVO 4, and my own texts (Charvát 1997; 2012a; 2012b; 2014) outline a complex picture of activities linked to the entity referred to by this sign. I shall, for the time being, omit another entity of the early texts, BU + DU₆, as its investigation would become a distraction from the main point and purpose of this paper.

The BU.gunû sign occurs in one administrative, and one lexical text (Lu: šab-su₃).

The BU entity received grain (emmer wheat, barley) from unidentified fields, while the NAM₂ BU of the texts may refer to permanently tilled arable (Charvát 1997, 41–43). In addition to this, BU was responsible for herds of cattle, as well as both for food and traction force, and also for sheep and other animals (pigs, dogs) and possibly also poultry. It stored, received, or delivered craft

products such as textiles or metal objects. Comestibles like fish, bread, dried fruit (?), or beer circulated through BU, having been in many cases deposited in, and/or taken out of, storage facilities. The denizens of BU enjoyed “rations”, or whatever was meant by the sign BA (MSVO 4, 12). The BU entity represented a social organism of some complexity, having been headed by its own EN (Charvát 1997, 55). His office directed a group of officials including the SANGA (ATU 5, 71, W 7227), and a number of overseers, both of personnel and communities, who managed the workforce consisting – among others – of the ERIM hands and possibly of female slaves (SAL + KUR; ATU 5, 99, text W 9656,ef, line R0101). Specialists among them included persons like the GURUŠDA (ATU 5, 71, text W 7227,c), or messenger, SUKKAL (MSVO 4: 42, 39, line O0202).

The Uruk Standard Profession List (Wagensonner 2007) gives us the titles of BU-nun (“Noble one of BU?”) and BU-nun sanga (“Registrar, the noble one of BU?”; see tablet IM 067639, in Biggs 1974, 002 = 001 A; Civil et al. 1969, 008 A. Col. Iv, ll. 15. BU-nun; 16. BU-nun sanga; Uruk Standard Profession List, CDLI Lexical 000003, ex. 014. https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&ObjectID=P010078). The later, Shuruppak version, has GAL BU (“Great one of BU?”; see tablet VAT 09130, Deimel 1923, 075; Civil et al. 1969, 009 L; Brunke 2015, §2; Fara, col. vi: 8: GAL-BU).

The architectural layout of BU consisted of the AB or EŠ₃, probably a cultic center on an elevated terrace, and many production-, storage- and utility facilities referred to as E₂ (“house”: Charvát 1997, 26, fn. 243). Matters of economic character were apparently dealt here within the KISAL or “forecourt” (ATU 5, 72, text W 7227,k, line O0101). The entity may even have included a service settlement of “municipal” character, the URU (ATU 5, 93, text W 9656,f).

The BU entity made up an outer component of the Late Uruk commonwealth, delivering its products to – or taking them from – the central storage facility or all-purpose deposit, referred to as GA + ZATU No. 753 (ATU 5, 99, text W 9656,eh, line Ed0101; ATU 5, 93, text W 9656,g, line O0504; on the facility see Charvát 1997, 51-52), or directly to/from Uruk (MSVO 1, 63, text 121, on side, O0101e). However, it did not belong to founding members of the “City League” of the Jemdet Nasr period (ca. 3100–2900 BCE; MSVO 2, 37–38).

A text bearing impression of a seal depicting a (cultic?) voyage of a person in a boat to whom offerings are made, and naming BU as one of the contributors, bears the mark BAR, “external” or “outer” (MSVO 4, text 37, 38, line O0101a). The text may record a cultic procession involving the Uruk fertility goddess Inanna (Matthews and Richardson 2019, 17–19). This may mean that the BU entity did not belong to communities closely connected with the Uruk cultic center. Finally, a short text refers to a “feast (?) of the BU”, indicating the existence of a cultic calendar linked to our entity (ATU 5, 88, text W 9579,ca, line O0101).

Where was the BU entity situated? One of the later texts lists it with PA KALAM EN KID, possibly Nippur (MSVO 1, 55, text 94, line R0101b1). A tablet found immured in one of the banks of the later Kish royal palace refers to BU, again under the authority of PA KALAM (MSVO 1, text 224, 80, line R0202); this is again likely to indicate a position somewhere in the central or northern regions of southern Mesopotamia.

It follows out of all this that in the Late Uruk (ca. 3400–3100 BCE) and Jemdet Nasr periods (ca. 3100–2900 BCE), preceding the age in consideration here, the BU probably represented one of the member communities of the still unified polity of the age, situated in central or central-northern Mesopotamia. We

now have to decide whether this community can be identified more closely.

BU in the ED period (ca. 2900–2334 BCE)

In search for the reading of both the BU.gunû sign and the BU sign (Fig. 1b; BU.gunû = UET II: 151 and LAK 235; BU = UET II: 149, LAK 233), the value SU₃ (ZATU No. 487, 277; ePSD s. v. sud = su₃) has been proposed as an “insignificant variant of ZATU 56 = BU” (Steinkeller 1995, 708 sub No. 487). In turn, the SU₃ (= sù) sign is likely to refer to a goddess named ^dku g-sù(g). Josef Bauer (cited in Alberti and Pomponio 1986, 30, with further references) understands sù-PA.SIKIL as ^{sù}sug_x and translates this as “ripe ear”, or “part of an ear”, with attestations in archaic Ur and Shuruppak (see also Krebernik 1998, 281 fn. 512; Mander 1986, 58), as well as in later Pre-Sargonic Ur text (25th century BCE?; Alberti and Pomponio 1986, 30; Lecompte 2016, 145; on BU in this period see also Charvát 2017, 102). The reference to wheat in the passage ^{sù}sug_x-gig (SF 36 obv.VI 2, Alberti and Pomponio 1986, 30) may point in the direction of Bauer’s translation.

As we have seen, in the preceding period the BU (= SU₃) sign referred to a localized community. The fact that in the ED period it probably denoted a deity points to the fact that it might have meant a toponym, named after its tutelary divine guardian, in the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods as well. The identification of this toponym presents difficulties. The entry of the geographical list Cities 53 and 54, consisting in the Late Uruk manuscripts of the signs SI AN, has SUG₃ PA SIKIL in the Fāra exemplars. Since in archaic texts from Ur we see PA.SUG₃ (= BU)+SIKIL, this change may have taken place as early as the ED I(–II) period (Lecompte 2013, 150–53; Lecompte and Benati 2017, 17). In fact, the “Cities List” already has an entry PA.SIKIL^{SU₃}, to which the Shuruppak version adds “LU₂ NU GU”

(Johnson 2014, 47, Cities 54 = SF 23 iii 17 = NTSS 168+Š 168 iv 30). That, however, tells us little about where this possible toponym is to be found.

However, if indeed the BU sign represents a variant of the sign SU_3 , then it might have served as an abbreviated writing for SU.KUR.RU = Sùd, the name of the deity Sud, a tutelary goddess of Shuruppak (Krebernik 1998, 239–40), appearing in the deity list from Fara (Krebernik 1998, 321). In proto-cuneiform writing, we have the sign group KUR + RU. Only after ca. 2900 BCE did it bifurcate into LAM.KUR + RU (= Aratta) and SU.KUR + RU (= SUD_3 = Shuruppak); a more usual orthography for this toponym (Krebernik 1998, 239, 241). In this case, however, the relevant sign is not SU_3 (= BU), but ZU.

The possible sign SUD_3 = Shuruppak is not the only conceivable explanation of our sign. First, an alternative interpretation may be furnished with the ^dSaman entries of the Shuruppak- and Abu Salabikh god lists. In view of the fact that all three names begin with the BU sign, we may be entitled to see in the Seal-B inscription an abbreviated reference to one of these deities (Mander 1986, 57–58). In that case the deity could relate to the SAMAN₃ item of the great collective seal of archaic Ur (Charvát 2017, 101, for sealing UE III: 431, l. 6'), but no certainty can be reached. The same idea of abbreviation may pertain to the data of the god lists from Shuruppak and Abu Salabikh, which also contain a reference to a deity named ^dnin.BU.ŠAxDIŠ NUN.KI, or ^dnin.BU.NUN.KI.x(TAR?; Mander 1986, 61–62, 113, see also the deity ^dlugal-BU.NUN.gána.x: Mander 1986, 29, l. 290). Whether the deity ^d.sir.sirAB of the Abu Salabikh god lists, to whom one of the ZA₃.MI₃ hymns is addressed, belongs here, eludes us also. In this case, however, the god in question definitely had a temple, and thus presumably also an adjacent settlement (Biggs

1974, 49, 54; also Mander 1986, 122, ll. 63, 123).

To complicate things even further, there exist variants of the theonym /SUD/, probably relating to names of other deities. In ancient legal documents of this time period concerning purchases of land, the sign group AN.RU may also be an abbreviated form of ^dSud₃ (Gelb et al. 1991, 104). A personal name Ur-^dSud-da probably refers to a deity named Sud, probably different from ^dSùd, the tutelary goddess of Shuruppak (Gelb et al. 1991, 63). The divine element Šudda, “the light of heaven”, in the personal name Ur-Su-da is, however, very rare. An ED stone bowl, found at Sippar, possibly in the Ebabbar, bears an inscription naming Ur-^dSu-da, [dub-]sar (Andersson 2016, 54 Fig. 3). After the ED period, it occurs in the personal name Puzur-šu-da in an unpublished tablet of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, A 2980: 8), and in several names of the Kassite period (Gelb 1955, 198).

The phonetic closeness of BU to NUN in Late Uruk lexical lists (see above) may even point to the city of Eridu, as NUN^(ki).

All this means that the following assumptions may be valid:

- 1) One of the readings of the sign BU (assumed for BU.gunû) is likely to have been SU_3 ;
- 2) The lexeme SU_3 may refer to a host of divine beings including the deities ^dkug-sù(g), ^dSùd, or to ^dSud-da, with /SUD/ as the name of the tutelary goddess of Shuruppak being the most probable;
- 3) The name of this deity may point to one of the Šuruppak cults;
- 4) The sealing thus visualizes the link between Kish/Uhaimir and Šuruppak;
- 5) Unlike the other cylinder seal inscriptions from Shuruppak and Kish featuring personal names (see below), our item seems

to represent an official with a regional competence. It may thereby represent an institutional, and not personal, seal;

- 6) The sealing thus visualizes a system of regional agency supplies to the Kish centre, much alike the Ur “City League” institutional sealings, and demonstrates the takeover of the system of regional receptors delivering supplies to the centre. In other words, the usurpation of the Ur “City League” privileges by the kingdom of Kish.

Thus, at the turn of ED II and ED IIIa periods, sometime in the 27th or 26th century BCE, two persons, one of them a dignitary of ^dkug-sù(g), ^dSùd, or ^dSud-da, possibly an agent of one of the Shuruppak cults, delivered a mobile container with goods to (an agency active at) Kish-Uhaimir. At this destination, the delivery, and its sealing, went through the usual administrative routine, i.e., after being removed from the package, it was pierced for easy transport and presumably taken to the central (?) registry.

These facts, however, provide us with very important historical information. The full-fledged apparatus of statehood, including a redistribution system in which the center collects surplus products by means of a series of receptors marked by cylinder seals, and re-directs them to consumers different from their producers, has hitherto been attested for the Late Uruk commonwealth and for the “City League”, or amphictyony, of Ur. Its existence may be assumed for Shuruppak, but up to now we have no detailed epigraphic evidence for the redistributive functionality of the local cylinder sealings, as they name only individuals (Rohn 2011, 106–08). On the other hand, Shuruppak had once acknowledged the suzerainty of the “City League” of Ur, as shown by finds of a “City League” sealing there (Matthews and Richardson 2019, 13–

15). Our sealing attests to the adoption of such a practice at Kish/Uhaimir, wherever the community providing the goods might have been located.

If the dispatch location can be identified as Shuruppak, then the “Thresher” sealing discussed here visualizes a “missing link” between the administrations of the earlier Ur-cum-Shuruppak and its “Hexapolis” on one side, and the later, newly emergent power of Kish on the other side (Ławecka 2014, 427–28). The Shuruppak texts refer to the “Hexapolis” as ki-en-gi, in other words, a successor polity to the archaic Ur “City League” (Steinkeller 2013, 150 fn. 81). The cities of Ur and Šuruppak both feature sealings related to the earlier “City League” ensigns (Matthews and Richardson 2019, 14); impression discussed here, naming a deity ^dkug-sù(g), ^dSùd, or ^dSud-da, and so possibly referring to a Shuruppak cult, relates to Kish by its findspot. Seal B of the item, AO 10496, belonged to an earlier class of institutional markers of receptors in a redistributive system. Thus, it testifies to the transfer of power (= *translatio regni*) between the old power sphere of archaic Ur-cum-Shuruppak, and the newly emerging kingdom of Kish.

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Abbreviations

- ATU 5: Englund, Robert K. 1994. *Archaic Administrative Texts from Uruk. The Early Campaigns*. ATU 5. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- ePSD: *electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology. <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu>.
- Fara: Heinrich, Ernst. 1931. *Fara, Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft in Fara und Abu Hatab 1902/03*. Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
- LAK: Deimel, Anton. 1922. *Die Inschriften von Fara I: Liste der archaischen Keilschriftzeichen*. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.
- MSVO 1: Englund, Robert K., Jean-Pierre Grégoire, and Roger J. Matthews. 1991. *The Proto-Cuneiform Texts from Jemdet Nasr 1: Copies, Transliterations and Glossary*. MSVO 1. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- MSVO 2: Matthews, Roger J. 1993. *Cities, Seals and Writing: Archaic Seal Impressions from Jemdet Nasr and Ur*. MSVO 2. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- MSVO 4: Englund, Robert K., with a contribution by Roger J. Matthews. 1996. *Proto-Cuneiform Texts from Diverse Collections*. MSVO 4. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.
- NTSŠ: Jestin, Raymond R. 1957. *Nouvelles tablettes sumériennes de Šuruppak au Musée d'Istanbul*. Paris: de Boccard.
- SF: Deimel, Anton. 1923. *Schultexte aus Fara*. WDOG 43. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.
- UET II: Burrows, Eric. 1935. *Ur Excavations Texts. Vol. II: Archaic Texts*. London and Philadelphia: The British Museum and The University Museum.
- UE III: Legrain, Leon. 1936. *Ur Excavations. Vol. III: Archaic Seal Impressions*. London and Philadelphia: The British Museum and The University Museum.
- ZATU: Green, Margaret W., and Hans J. Nissen. 1987. *Zeichenliste der archaischen Texte aus Uruk*. ATU 2. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag.

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