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Special Issue: Discussions in Assyriology

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Eastward Warfare and Westward Peace: On the “One-Sided” Foreign Policy of Ur III Dynasty (2112–2004 BC)

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(Zhejiang Normal University)

Abstract

The conference presentation that prompted the writing of this short communication formed a part of a new project entitled “A Study of the Foreign Relations of Ur III Mesopotamia,” which will study a wide range of textual data from the late third millennium BC to investigate the nature of Ur III foreign policy. After a general introduction to the project, the article offers a preliminary survey of Ur III year formulae as an accurate and reliable source of information on Ur III military and geopolitical state policy, demonstrating a distinct military emphasis on the eastern and northeastern regions of the state.

Introduction

The project “A Study of the Foreign Relations of Ur III Mesopotamia” investigates the relationship between the Ur III state and its neighbors from four directions: the East (e.g. Zabshali, Shimashki, Huhniuri, Pashime, Anshan, Marhashi), the West (e.g. Mari, Ebla, Gubla), the South and the Gulf (e.g. Dilmun, Magan, Meluhha), and the North (e.g. Simanum, Mardaman, Nineveh, Ashur, Urbilum, Simurru, Karahar).¹ A

1- I am grateful to the National Social Science Fund of China, which is generously supporting the project from 2020 to 2023 (Grant No. 20BSS011).

particular focus is to explain why the rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur appear to have practiced a rather “one-sided” foreign policy, with a military emphasis on the eastern and northeastern parts of the state, and a more peaceful approach to the western regions. In order to explain this foreign policy, discussions within the project take into account both geopolitical and economic factors as catalysts for political and military decisions within the Ur III state.

The Third Dynasty of Ur, spanning 109 years (according to the available year formulae) and consisting of the reigns of five kings (Ur-Namma, Šulgi, Amar-Suen, Šu-Suen, and Ibbi-Suen), was a highly centralized bureaucratic state, and is considered to be one of the best documented periods in the entire history of the ancient Near East.² The nature of Ur III foreign relations remains an important topic of discussion in Assyriological studies, which tend to focus on four separate but highly interrelated aspects: foreign wars, foreign trade, foreign marriage policies, and foreign diplomacy.

The primary textual evidence on foreign relations in the Ur III period consist of royal inscriptions, literary texts, year formulae, and administrative texts, including the so-called messenger texts. Of these, the administrative texts are by far the most important. Tens of thousands of administrative texts have survived from the period, offering numerous references to toponyms, particularly from the frontier areas to the north, northeast, and northwest of the state,³ and a number of important studies have been concerned with the state’s mostly military relationship to its eastern/northeastern neighbors.⁴

In addition to these geographical areas, a significant amount of previous scholarship has been devoted to the relationship between the Third Dynasty of Ur and the states in the regions northwest of the state, such as the lands surrounding the major urban centers Mari and Ebla.⁵ Finally, several studies of Ur III foreign relations and state governance in general should be mentioned, such as Tonia Sharlach’s work on the relationship between Ur III diplomacy and religious policy, or Steven Garfinkle’s recent discussion of the correlation between domestic and foreign policy in the Ur III period.⁶

Year Formulae

As an example of how contemporary textual evidence can enhance our understanding of diplomacy and foreign relations, we may turn to the Ur III year formulae. These records are concerned with specific political or religious events, such as wars, diplomatic marriages, erections of buildings/institutions, and office inductions. Based on references to conflicts in the year formulae, it would seem that the Ur III rulers frequently led military campaigns to the east of the state. Specific northeastern cities mentioned in the

2- For the general introduction to the Ur III Dynasty, see Sallaberger 1999; Stepien 2009; and Steinkeller 2021. For a recent discussion of the vast numbers of cuneiform texts from the period, see Widell 2022, in this volume.

3- See e.g. Owen 1997; and Edzard and Farber 1974. Bibliographic information on studies of Ur III administrative texts and culture is available for the periods 1882-1990 (Sigrist & Gomi 1991), 1990-1997 (Sallaberger 1999), 1997-2014 (Garcia-Ventura 2015), and 2015-2020 (Liu, Forthcoming). The two online databases, the *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (CDLI) at <https://cdli.ucla.edu/> and the *Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts* (BDTNS) at <http://bdtms.filol.csic.es>, remain indispensable for any scholarly work on the Ur III period.

4- Frayne 2008 (the Zagros), Marhashi (Steinkeller 1982 and 2012), Shimashki (Steinkeller 2014), Duduli (Goetze 1953; Notizia 2010), Simanum (Michalowski 1975), Assur (Michalowski 2009), Simurru (Halla 1978), and Kimash (Potts 2010).

5- E.g. Owen 1992; Michalowski 2005 (Mari); and Owen and Veenker 1987 (Ebla).

6- Sharlach 2005; Garfinkle 2013. Note also the recent studies on III military matters and the Ur III army by Sebastian Fink (2016) and Daniel Patterson (2018).

year formulae include Der (SH11; SH21), Karakar (SH24; SH31; SH33; SH45), Simurum (SH25; SH26; SH32; SH44; SH45; IS3), Zabshali (SS7), Kimash (SH46; SH48), Hurti (SH46; SH48), Harshi (SH27; SH48), Shashrum (SH42; AS6), Urbilum (SH45; AS2), Simanum (SS3), and Lulubum (SH44; SH45), while southeastern cities include Susa (IS14), Huhnuri (AS7; IS9), Adamdun (IS14), and Anshan (SH34).⁷ Such long enumerations of eastern cities stand in stark contrast to the infrequent attestations of western toponyms in the year formula, and reflects the state's overall foreign policy (Eastward-Warfare & Westward-Peace; EW&WP). Of course, the military achievements recorded in the year names could be overstated, or possibly even entirely fictional. As argued by Magnus Widell some 20 years ago, the year formulae played an important role within the state's propaganda effort, and frequent proclamations of repeated destructions of cities do not prove, or even imply, that the cities in question were in fact incorporated into the Ur III state.⁸ Nevertheless, all concerted propaganda efforts are likely to reflect official state policy; in fact, this would be particularly true for exaggerated or entirely untrue statements and declarations by the state. Therefore, the year formulae of the Ur III state can offer important information on the nature of the Ur III state's "one-sided" foreign policy in Upper Mesopotamia.

Conclusions

A wide range of textual sources are available to study Ur III foreign policy and the state's military relationship to its eastern/northeastern neighbors, including literary texts, royal inscriptions, and administrative texts. One of the more frequently used sources of information on Ur III political history are the state's year formulae, which have survived on the tens of thousands of administrative texts from the period. It has been argued that the Ur III year formulae should be understood as royal inscriptions (or perhaps even as a literary sub-genre), and these records formed a part of the state's propaganda effort.⁹ These concerns and objections are no-doubt correct, and specific details in the year formulae, such as the individual destruction of a particular city, can only be adopted as historical facts when they are corroborated in alternative and less biased sources. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that royal propaganda reflected actual ambitions, and references to military campaigns in the Ur III year formulae therefore offer reliable evidence of the Ur III rulers' overall military aspirations in the eastern and northeastern regions of the state, and their relatively peaceful approach to the western regions.

These initial findings on Ur III foreign policy based on year formulae will be recorded in a comprehensive database, which will form the basis for more far-reaching conclusions related to the foreign policy of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

7- For an important discussion of the practical difficulties surrounding the linking of events in year formulae to absolute dates in historical reconstructions, see Dahl 2010; with further references. For the general lack of traditional "historical texts" for the early Mesopotamia history, see Sallaberger 2002. As noted a long time ago by Marc Cooper (1987: 177, n. 4), and recently reiterated by Marcos Such-Gutiérrez (2020: 10-11), any event – including a military campaign – described in an Ur III year formula must have taken place in the year prior to the year to which the formula referred.

8- Widell 2002; see also Limet 2007; and Such-Gutiérrez 2020.

9- Widell 2002: 101-102; see also Radner 2005: 112; and Such-Gutiérrez 2020: 13.

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