

The Tablet from Konar Sandal B (Jiroft) and its Pertinence to Elamite Studies

After Oriental archaeology, art and history, the ancient civilization named after the Iranian city of Jiroft is on the brink of modifying our knowledge of the most ancient scripts of the world. The mission led by Prof. Y. Majidzadeh recently unearthed an inscribed tablet at the site of Konar Sandal B [CHN 2006, April 8]. Previously, in mid-February 2004, an impression of an inscribed stamp seal was found on the same mound [Covington 2004]. While the civilization of Jiroft is usually defined as ‘independent’ or ‘indigenous’, these documents have been presented in the framework of the Elamite writing tradition until P. Steinkeller (Harvard University) proposed the neutral label ‘Eastern script’ for naming their writing [CHN 2006, May 29].

“Elamite” scripts

A brief survey on cuneiform Elamite sources may help in understanding what is currently linguistically classified under the label ‘Elamite’ by common agreement of the scholars.

The oldest Elamite texts in cuneiform writing, the so-called “treaty of Naram-Sin” and two tablets published by M. Lambert [1974], are dated back to the last centuries of the 3rd millennium BC. These texts are readable because the shapes and the values of the signs are the same as those of the contemporary Mesopotamian sources. However, their interpretation remains difficult due to our limited knowledge of the Elamite lexicon; the occurrence of words like *kik* ‘heaven’ and *murū* ‘earth’, still paired over 1500 years later in the Elamite version of the royal Achaemenid inscriptions, provides evidence for linguistic continuity.

Preceded by a couple of texts contemporaneous to Hammurabi of Babylon, the flourishing of Elamite documentation is ascribed to the 14th-12th centuries BC, when the rulers of the middle-Elamite dynasties were busy in building activities which had to be celebrated and recorded especially in inscribed bricks. Among these kings, Untaš-Napiriša stands out for his impressive ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil. The last king of this period producing inscribed documents is Hutelutuš-Inšušinak [cited in CHN 2006, May 29], who took refuge in Anšan (on the Zagros range to the east of Susa up to the borders of Fārs) after the raid of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (1125-1104 BC) in Susiana [Lambert 1972].

It should be stressed that between these latter Elamite inscriptions and the oldest ones, Akkadian was written and probably spoken at Susa [Malbran-Labat 1996], so Akkadian cuneiform writing made its own way in Elamite scribal schools. According to M.-J. Steve [1992: 4 §2.2], it is possible to single out an autonomous Elamite cuneiform writing tradition already in the first centuries of the 2nd millennium BC: son of the Akkadian one, and maintaining the same principles, it underwent a process of internal evolution towards simplification of the graphic appearance of the signs and reduction of poliphony and homophony, paving the way for the creation of the pseudo-alphabetical Old Persian script [Rossi 2006]. Therefore the label ‘Elamite (cuneiform) writing’ points to a regional scribal tradition writing in Akkadian cuneiform for recording also texts in Elamite language.

Two other writing systems are currently labelled through the adjective ‘Elamite’: the proto-Elamite and the linear Elamite scripts.

The first is somewhat parallel to the proto-cuneiform emergence in Mesopotamia, even if there are actually no similarities in the shape of the signs. If proto-cuneiform is conventionally dated starting from 3200 BC (Uruk IVa), proto-Elamite should be slightly later, about 3050-2900 BC [Englund 1998: 325]. Sources for this script are not lacking: P. Meriggi [1974] counted 393 basic signs plus a lot of variants for a total of 2280 different signs. By now, it is still early to assert that the language written in proto-Elamite script was an ancient form of Elamite language as it is known by us from the subsequent documents in Elamite cuneiform writing. This possibility has been suggested on a more reliable ground for the language written in linear Elamite script.

Linear Elamite seems to be a script apparently conceived for precise ideological needs and afterwards immediately discarded as soon as these needs passed away or the script proved to be inadequate to these needs (one can think of a somewhat similar process for the Old Persian script). In fact, 6 out of the 22 extant documents

in this script (André & Salvini 1989; Salvini 1998) make reference to a king named Puzur-Inšušinak (according to the Akkadian inscription engraved on the same support of linear Elamite text A) or Kutik-Inšušinak (according to the linear Elamite reading by W. Hinz); his reign is dated about 2150 BC. Meriggi [1971: 193-203] counted 62 basic signs, plus 20 variants, 41 *hapax* and one divider; Hinz [1969: 44] counted 56 basic signs plus 5 variants.

According to Meriggi, 19 signs of the linear Elamite syllabary are attested also in proto-Elamite; 16 more signs can be derived in shape from proto-Elamite ones. No links between the two scripts have been established in the reading of the signs or in graphotactic.

The Akkadian origin of the Elamite cuneiform writing leaves no room for connections between Elamite cuneiform and proto-Elamite or linear Elamite scripts.

The glottonym 'Elamite'

So far the data. The remainder is a question of labels, since not only 'proto-Elamite' and 'linear Elamite' are modern ethero-glottonyms, but even 'Elamite' alone is such: we do not know how today's Elamite was called by its ancient speakers. In the second half of the 19th century AD, a quest for the name of this language started: 'Scythic', 'Median', 'Protomedic', 'Amardian', 'Susian' and 'Anzanian' were the labels tentatively devised for it by scholars [Basello 2004]. So, without an ancient glottonym, scholars use today a label derived from the ancient choronym of the area where the language was thought to be spoken. Waiting for new data, this is legitimate by the location of the place where the bulk of tablets both in proto-Elamite (more than 1450 tablets), linear Elamite (16 inscriptions and 3 tablets) and cuneiform Elamite was found, Susa, the main centre paired to the choronym 'Elam' in the sources. Unfortunately this geographic continuity has been applied, without further evidence, to the linguistic domain, resulting somehow confusing when applied to the three different "Elamite" scripts.

Since 1980, F. Vallat [1980] proposed a double heart throbbing at the core of Elamite civilization, Susiana (Khuzestān) and Anšan, and located Elam in the latter, showing that the shifting of the choronym to Susiana was late, when Elamite people moved westward as a consequence of the Iranian pressure. So on an ethno-linguistic ground Vallat prefigured the role assigned to the mountainous area and to the highlands to the east of Susiana by the recent archaeological discoveries.

Being aware that proto-Elamite and linear Elamite are backward projections of a label devised in 19th century AD for a language unnamed by ancient sources in order to meet the (conventional) naming needs required by scientific discourse, texts in "Elamite" scripts were found also outside Susiana. Proto-Elamite tablets were found at Ozbaki (in north-western Iran; 1 fragment [Vallat 2003]), Sialk (23 tablets), Malyān (in Anšan proper; 32 tablets [Stolper 1985]), Yahya (75 km to the north of Jiroft; 27 tablets [Damerow & Englund 1989]) and Šahr-e Sokhta (1 tablet). A short linear Elamite inscription (text Q) was engraved on the rim of a silver vase found 1.5 km to the north-west of Persepolis; 6 linear Elamite signs (text S) were engraved on a clay vessel found at Šahdad [Hinz 1971]. Cuneiform Elamite tablets were written at Malyān around 1000 BC and, in a particular administrative context not pertaining to this survey, at Persepolis in Achaemenid period.

Considering the chronology and the geographical location, an inscribed tablet produced by the civilization of Jiroft should be studied starting from the background so far outlined.

The tablet from Konar Sandal B

The following notes, not conceived for being published but hopefully meant to be suitable for scholarly discussion, are based exclusively on the low-resolution JPEG picture (400 × 230 pixels, 24 bit color) published by the Iranian Cultural Heritage News Agency [CHN 2006, May 29] (the picture published in CHN 2006, April 8 seems to be one of the two gold specimens of the Achaemenid royal inscription DPh).

The actual orientation of the tablet is questionable, as we learn from the anticlockwise rotation of Akkadian cuneiform signs occurring at some time between their proto-cuneiform ancestors and the Old Babylonian development of the writing [Picchioni 1980]. Linear Elamite inscriptions are rather unpredictable from this respect, even when the signs are carved on an object with a fixed orientation, such as a statue (text I). What is relevant is the textual flow, i.e. the ordered sequence of signs, whatever be the orientation for the writer and reader. The following comparisons provide evidence for the orientation proposed in my drawing of the tablet: the tips of sign I 2 downwards in linear Elamite (see below); the dots of sign I 5 at the upper ends of the strokes in linear Elamite (see below); the tip of the triangle-shaped signs downwards both in Akkadian cuneiform and in

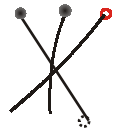
linear Elamite. Assuming a top-to-bottom textual flow, the crowding of signs on the left half of line 5 points to a left-to-right direction in writing.

The text is arranged in five lines. A breaking runs from the upper left corner to nearly the middle of the lower edge: the surface to the left of the breaking is missing on line 1 and effaced on line 2; one sign may be lost on line 3; the join is perfectly corresponding on lines 4 and 5. According to my interpretation of the text, 13 signs are extant in line 1; 11 signs are extant in line 2; 13 or 14 signs were engraved on line 3; 14 and 19 signs respectively were engraved on lines 4 and 5.

The text appears to be split in two sections, since the first ten signs (I 1-10), with the exception of the vertical strokes (I 4 and I 8; see below), are not repeated in the following lines, being moreover quite different in shape and style from the remainders; starting from sign I 11 or at least from line 2, a quite surprising iteration of basic geometric shapes follows.

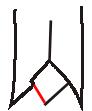
The most attested sign in both sections is the vertical stroke (without dots) occurring at least 13 times (a further one may be I 12). Actually the text ends with such a vertical stroke (V 19). In some instances, its height is nearly the same of the line. It seems suitable for this sign a function of (word-)divider. While a distinctive feature of proto-Elamite tablets (especially with respect to the proto-cuneiform ones [Englund 1998: 327]) is the lacking of cases and subcases arranging hierarchically the content, a divider is known in linear Elamite, even if not systematically attested, having the same shape of a vertical stroke [Meriggi 1971: 203-204, §§ 509-510]. In proto-Elamite the vertical stroke is generally shaped with a wedge above (subsequent cuneiform sign DIŠ); Meriggi considered the vertical stroke as a variant for the vertical stroke with wedge above [Meriggi 1974: 25, no. 1a].

Two more signs on line 1 are attested in linear Elamite. Sign I 3 has the same shape of linear Elamite sign no. 20 in Meriggi's sign list (attested 4 times). It is attested also in proto-Elamite (no. 371 of Meriggi's proto-Elamite sign list [Meriggi 1974]; henceforth M followed by sign number), being one of the most occurring signs (290 times [Dahl 2002]). Sign I 5 has the same shape of linear Elamite sign no. 21 in Meriggi's sign list and is one of the most attested signs (21 times) in linear Elamite extant texts; according to Meriggi, its reading is *uš*, *li* according to Hinz. The dots, at the upper end of the three strokes in linear Elamite, perhaps provide a clue for the orientation of the tablet. The position of the dots is different in linear Elamite text J.



Sign I 1 has close parallels both in proto-Elamite (signs M297 and following) and linear Elamite scripts (nos. 1 and 1b in Meriggi's sign list). While linear Elamite sign no. 1 has three horizontal strokes inside, none is clearly visible in sign I 1.

Sign I 2 has a close parallel in linear Elamite sign no. 41 in Meriggi's sign list. The difference is in the upper part of the sign, which is generally closed longitudinally and without the vertical stroke in the middle. However, notice the variant shapes of this sign in linear Elamite texts K and Q.



Signs I 2 and especially I 5 are not attested in proto-Elamite.



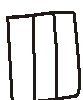
Sign I 6 has a lot of possible parallels in proto-Elamite (especially signs M260 and 261); however the short strokes generally protrudes from the upper part of the proto-Elamite signs.

Sign I 10 has a parallel in linear Elamite sign no. 47 in Meriggi's sign list.



The vertical stroke with a dot on the left (signs I 8 and II 8) is dubitatively proposed as an *hapax* by Meriggi [1971: 203, no. 67]. However, the linear Elamite text J, where this *hapax* occurs, seems to be quite free in placing dots on the surface. Several dots are spread on the tablet from Konar Sandal B: probably only those clearly and deeply sunken on the surface were intentionally obtained by the scribe by means of a vertical pressure of the stylus; they are generally placed in the middle of a sign.

As noted above, the second section of the text is characterized by the iteration of basic geometric shapes: 9 circles, 3 X-shaped crossing strokes, 10 triangles, 9 rectangles (plus probably II 11) and 4 rhombs. Some have a deeply sunken dot in the middle: 3 circles, 2 triangles and 1 rectangle (plus perhaps I 11). The only exceptions are represented by signs III 2 and V 7.



Another shape recurring several times (9) is a rectangle with two vertical strokes inside. It is possible, as suggested by archaeologist M. Passarelli, that these geometric signs were devised through a progressive addition of a stroke. In this case, we could reconstruct the following sequence: X-shaped sign (two strokes), triangle (three strokes), rectangle or rhomb (four strokes) and rectangle with two vertical strokes inside (six strokes). The circle may be at the beginning of this sequence, instead of a single straight

stroke (it may be confused with the divider). While two signs (the rectangle and the rhomb) are shaped with four strokes, a five-stroke sign is lacking, unless the rhomb is intended as the sum of two triangles with a joint side (omitted being not distinctive).

The rhomb is one of the most attested linear Elamite sign. Its value is *hu* both for Hinz and Meriggi. It is well known also in proto-Elamite [Meriggi 1971: 155, § 409]; according to Meriggi, it follows the list of quantities and precedes the sum.

The circle represents number 100 in proto-Elamite.

Some sequences of signs are repeated: II 4-5 and II 6-7; III 3-6 and III 6-9; IV 10-11 and IV 12-13, also IV 11-12 and IV 13-14.

* * *

It is clear that both proto-Elamite and linear Elamite scripts were not monolithic system of writing. A supposed linear Elamite document such as text O, crowded by singletons (*hapax* signs) and one of the few engraved on clay tablets, can be considered as a forerunner of further discoveries from the mounds of Konar Sandal. “New” ancient scripts, diverging from our present knowledge, were devised on the Iranian plateau in order to accomplish one of the most enduring task of mankind: that of progress and civilization.

My knowledge of the civilization of Jiroft derived from the following publications:

Jiroft. *Fabuleuse découverte en Iran* (Dossiers d'Archéologie, 287 (October 2003)), Dijon.

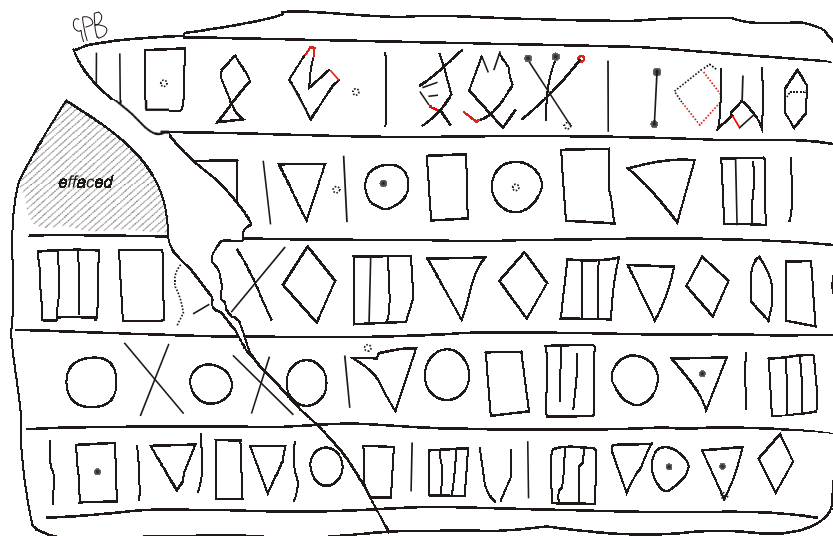
COVINGTON, Richard (2004) 'What Was Jirof?', *Saudi Aramco World*, September-October 2004, pp. 2-11.

MADJIDZADEH, Y. (2003) *Jiroft: The Earliest Oriental Civilization*, Tehran.

MUSCARELLA, Oscar White (2005) 'Jiroft and "Jiroft-Aratta". A Review Article of Yousef Madjidzadeh, *Jiroft: The Earliest Oriental Civilization*', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*. New Series, 15, pp. 173-198, Bloomfield Hills, MI.

Please find the updated version of this paper at the following Internet address:

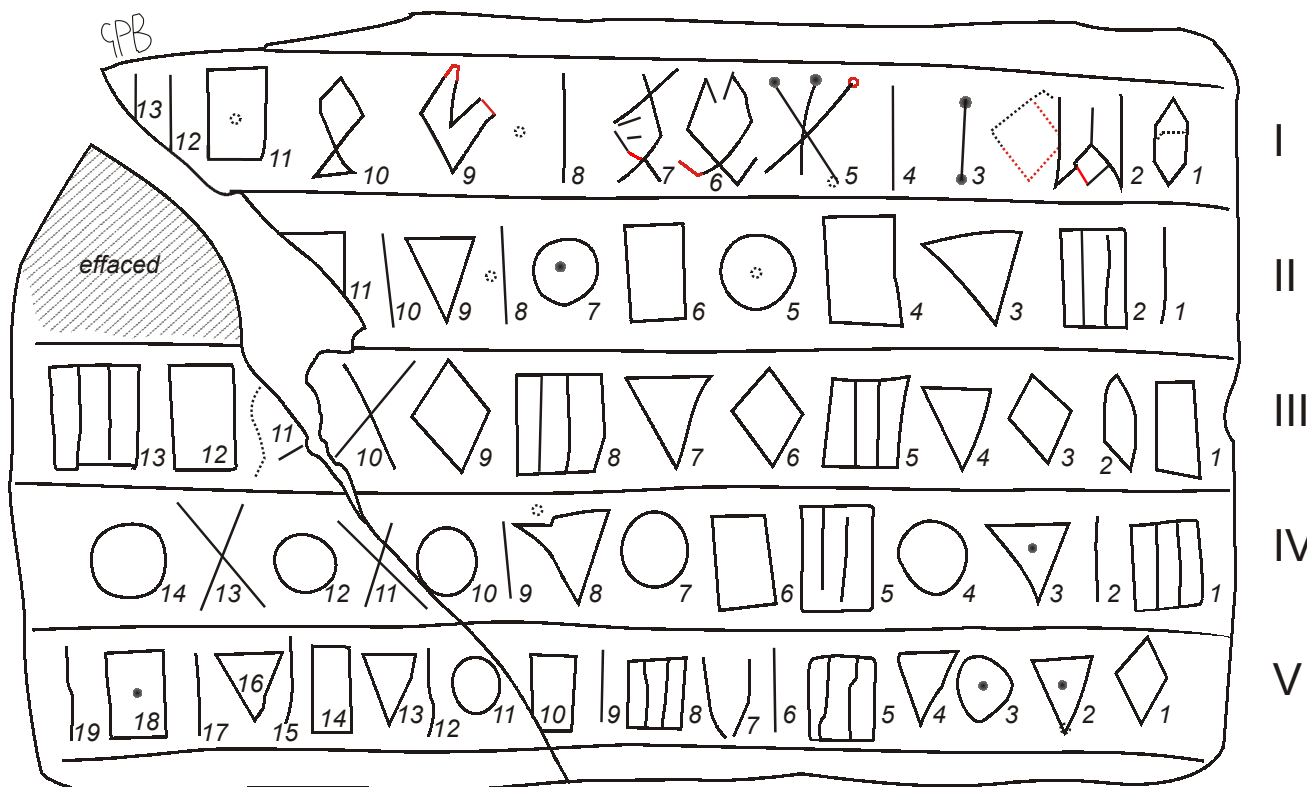
www.elamit.net/elam/jiroft.pdf



(above) Drawing of the tablet, nearly original size (11 × 7 cm), obtained from the JPEG picture (400 × 230 pixels, 24 bit color) published by the Iranian Cultural Heritage News Agency [CHN 2006, May 29].

Dashed lines: strokes not voluntarily engraved by the scribe, i.e. not relevant for the interpretation of the text.
Red lines: restored strokes.

(below) The same drawing with indexes for sign referencing.



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