

35) Babylonian Miscellanea 5. Tablets and envelopes in the Neo-Babylonian periods: some notes on the margin of diplomatics in the first millennium BC — In a series of studies devoted to diplomatics in the Neo- and Late-Babylonian periods, published in the newest AfO 54, the result of a conference held in Vienna in 2016, researchers pointed to the relationship between the format of the tablets, types of documents and time of their drafting, identifiable both in the early and late periods. In each period: early (from late Assyrian time to about thirtieth year of Nebuchadnezzar II's reign) and late (from about thirtieth year of Nebuchadnezzar II till the beginning of the fifth century BC) deviations are observed; among the texts that usually were written on portrait tablets, there are texts written on landscape tablets and vice versa. The purpose of the following considerations is to indicate one of the possible reasons for such a situation which has not been considered so far.

It seems that a deviation from the standard in each period may be explained by the organisation of the work of scribes writing tablets. Already in 1987,¹⁾ I drew attention to this issue, and the essence might be summarised in the question: did the scribe who began the work day prepare each tablet immediately before writing it, or on the contrary, did he prepare a number of tablets suitable for the tablets he usually drafted during the day, and a few more tablets in another format?²⁾ This organisation of work is supported by the production and use tablets of the proper shape for the proper content, as well as by a practical reason, because the scribe avoided repeated interruptions in writing tablets in order to make the next tablet, cleaning his hands and maybe changing his place of work, and so on. Such organisation of work explains the imprints of fabric visible on a number of tablets, intended for a later time and wrapped in wet cloth. The idea considered by Levavi (idem, p. 74) that fabric imprints may appear during the transport of the tablets to their place of destination seems unlikely. There is no rationale for wrapping written tablets in wet cloth; an imprint left by dry fabric on a finished tablet is doubtful. While some letter orders had to be delivered to the recipient as soon as possible, an imprint of the fabric pattern from dry cloth, even on a not fully dried tablet seems unlikely in the hot Mesopotamian climate. Besides, some tablets were written for the internal administration and rather did not leave the institution where they were written.

The preparation of more tablets at the beginning of the day is suggested not only by the imprints of cloth, but also the situation encountered probably by every scholar reading the tablets, especially those of an administrative nature. The cuneiform signs on some tablets - despite their good condition - are extremely shallow, and some wedges are partly or completely absent, suggesting that the tablet was too dry to impress the wedges deeper. Reverse situations are known, where the tablet was too wet, probably prepared just before writing the text.³⁾

The idea that some texts were written on tablets which were too dry is supported by the observation of errors. Although the scribe noticed his error(s) and attempted to remove it/them, in some cases, the attempt to remove the faulty signs has failed and the errors are preserved.⁴⁾

The assumption that the scribe prepared a larger number of tablets at the very beginning of the day may explain not only the presence of imprints of canvas on the tablets, but also cases of deviation from fitting the shape of the tablets to the content of tablet. If, at the end of the day, there were no tablets appropriate for a given category of document, but there was a tablet of another shape, the scribe did not hesitate to deviate from the standard. Such a situation probably occurred in the case of the tablets from 29.8.20Nbp (AfO 54, 141) discussed by R. Tarasiewicz, where five texts are written on portrait tablets and one on a landscape tablet; the last one against the accepted format. Presumably the scribe had already used all the available portrait tablets, but he had a landscape tablet and used it to complete his daily task.⁵⁾ A similar situation can be observed in the case of the correspondence analysed by Y. Levavi. From Uruk, from the early period, come 164 letters written on portrait tablets and 23 on landscape tablets, i.e. the proportion is over 7 (precisely 7.1) portrait tablets to one landscape tablet.⁶⁾ For the same early period from Sippar, we have 23 portrait tablets and 2 landscape tablets, i.e. there are 11.5 portraits tablets to one landscape tablet. This small number of landscape tablets for writing letters may result from the lack of the tablets of accepted shape at the end of the day, and the use of whatever was at hand.

The situation is similar in the case of letters from the late period. From Uruk, 164 portrait letters are known, but only 4 landscape letters, i.e., the ratio is 41: 1. This may mean that in Uruk, in that period, only in exceptional circumstances did scribes use a tablet with the incorrect shape. In Sippar, the situation is less clear, because there are 43 portrait and 8 landscape tablets, i.e., the proportion is 5.1: 1, respectively, i.e. Sipparean scribes used landscape tablets to write letters more often. Perhaps this is because in Sippar, a much smaller center than Uruk, the same scribes wrote both letters as well as other types of documents and prepared tablets of both formats. If the portrait tablets accepted for letters were all used, the scribe wrote the letter on a landscape tablet.

As for the envelopes, it seems that one can agree with Levavi and Walker that only a small number of tablets were placed in envelopes. At this point, attention should be paid to some special cases where we have both the tablet and a well-preserved envelope, i.e. BM 66261 and BM 66251 A, respectively.⁷⁾ The first two lines on the envelope are the summary, followed by two additional lines (an additional entry) and seal stamps – all missing on the inner tablet.⁸⁾ This means that the scribe used the incorrect tablet for the content that was to be included on it. We might have expected that the scribe, instead of writing the missing lines on the envelope, would have made a new, larger tablet, written the entire contents on it and destroyed the previous tablet. The reasons why the scribe decided to act in such a surprising way may be different, e.g. needing to leave the scriptorium - the place of his work, the late hour (dusk falling), and so on. It is important to note that if the work on the tablet had not been completed, the seal owner would have been present the following day. The scribe chose a different, undoubtedly highly atypical, and imperfect solution: he made the envelope and placed the text and seal on it for which there was no place on the inner tablet.⁹⁾ Such a procedure can be recognised as further proof that tablets prepared earlier did not always correspond, not only to the accepted shape of tablet for given category of document, but also to the content the scribe was to write on the tablet.

Notes

1. Zawadzki 1987.
2. The problem was noted by Levavi in his text in AfO 54, but without attempting to point out the consequences of the situation. This does not apply to royal inscriptions, because the good arrangement of the final tablet suggests that the texts were first written on a wax (or clay) tablet, and finally copied from it.
3. See CT 56, 523: “clay very soft”. Here might be mentioned the unpublished document BM 79732, including a long list of people, presumably members of collegium, but its nature cannot be recognized as the first line is compressed so tightly that it is impossible to read it. The text is not dated but the presence of Bulṭa, son of Marduk-erība, the *Großpächter* (^{lit}rab giš.bán) makes it certain that it was written in the period between the fourth and seventeenth year of Darius I (Jursa 1995, 106-107).
4. For examples, Zawadzki 1987, 18-19. However, it seems to me now that some texts with errors discussed by me in 1987 might be not original tablets, but copies made by apprentices at a later time. This presumably concerns tablets mentioning the well-known Nergal-šar-bullit, the *qīpu* Ebabbar, and Mušēzib-Marduk, *šangū* Sippar. It is improbable that the errors in their names were made by scribes living in the time when they held office.
5. Only in Type B texts are they all written on landscape tablets, i.e. the scribe(s) chose this format consciously. The number of texts in Type A written on landscape format is so small that it might be explained in the way suggested here.
6. However, there is a problem with such a statistic in the situation where the letters are not dated, because it cannot be excluded that the known landscape tablets come from different days than the portrait tablets.
7. Published by Jursa 2004, 190-192. I wonder if what is identified by Jursa as obverse and reverse should not be inverted, as in Jursa’s edition the dating is at the very end of the obverse instead of the end of the reverse, a highly atypical situation. The suggested sequence is also a little strange, because the first line would be written on the upper edge. Again, such a situation happened only rarely.
8. For the seal, see Altavilla and Walker 2009, 108, no. 503 (the same stamp repeated three times, owner unidentified).
9. The presence of a seal stamp on an envelope might be interpreted as confirmation of the contents written on the internal tablet, as well as on the envelope, by the owner of the seal (kind suggestion of R. Tarasewicz).

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Stefan ZAWADZKI <stefanzawadzki@wp.pl>