

# History of the Akkadian Language

*Volume 1*  
*Linguistic Background and Early Periods*

*Edited by*

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# Akkadian and Cuneiform

*Michael P. Streck*

## 1 Introduction

Akkadian (= Akk) was written, with very few exceptions, in cuneiform signs made by a reed stylus on clay tablets,<sup>1</sup> wax-covered writing boards,<sup>2</sup> and other writing materials like stone or metal.<sup>3</sup> Cuneiform was a writing system developed during the second half of the fourth millennium BCE in southern Mesopotamia by probably Sumerian speaking people. Some centuries later, during the later Early Dynastic Period, cuneiform was applied first to Akk.<sup>4</sup> The oldest known Akk text is a hymn to the sungod Šamaš<sup>5</sup> found in Ereš (Tell Abū Šalābīḥ, ca. 2600).<sup>6</sup> The use of cuneiform died out, together with the Akk language and the Ancient Mesopotamian civilization, in the first century CE.<sup>7</sup>

The original orientation of writing cuneiform was in columns from top to bottom, still maintained as an archaism on the stela of the Code of Hammurapi (ca. 1750). But already in the second half of the third millennium the general orientation had shifted 90° clockwise, so that Akk was written in lines from left to right. Only in OA texts a vertical wedge was used as a word divider, but never consistently. In literary and scientific texts, words could be separated by space, but this was unusual for other text genres like letters, administrative texts and

1 On clay tablets see Christopher B.F. Walker, “Tontafel, Tontafelhülle,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 14, ed. Michael P. Streck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014–2016), 101–4.

2 On wooden writings boards see Konrad Volk and Ursula Seidl, “Wachstafel. A. In Mesopotamien,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 14, ed. Michael P. Streck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014–2016), 609–12.

3 Dietz Otto Edzard, “Keilschrift,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 5, ed. Dietz Otto Edzard (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976–1980), 567–68.

4 On Akk names and loan words in Šuruppag (Fāra) and Ereš (Tell Abū Šalābīḥ) see Manfred Krebernik, “Die Texte aus Fāra und Tell Abū Šalābīḥ,” in *Mesopotamien. Späturuk-Zeit und Frühdynastische Zeit*, ed. Pascal Attinger and Markus Wäfler (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz—Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 1998), 260–70.

5 IAS 326 + 342.

6 For other contemporary (or older?) Akk(?) texts see Krebernik, “Die Texte aus Fāra und Tell Abū Šalābīḥ,” 270.

7 See chapter 25 in the present volume.

royal inscriptions. The shape of cuneiform signs underwent great change over time and showed regional variation as well.

Other writing systems were only used exceptionally to render the Akk language. In Levantine Ugarit, where we find a hodgepodge of different Ancient Near Eastern languages and writing systems, the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet was rarely applied for Akk religious texts (1400–1200).<sup>8</sup> At the turn of the eras, the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca were produced in Babylonia, a small group of cuneiform tablets with Sumerian and Akk lexical and literary texts written in Greek letters.<sup>9</sup> The use of Ugaritic and Greek alphabets to write Akk texts never went beyond an experimental stage, and the Akk language was firmly connected to cuneiform writing for more than 2500 years.

## 2 Logographic and Syllabic Writing

Cuneiform seems to have started as a logographic writing system: a sign corresponded to a word (probably in the Sumerian language<sup>10</sup>). But soon rose the need to render names and words phonetically. Phonetic values of cuneiform signs developed through the application of the rebus principle. Thus, for example, the sign 𒍪 (SAR) “herb” acquired a phonetic value /sar/ used to express the verb “to write”. The agglutinating structure of the Sumerian language favored a writing system in which the base (the semantic nucleus) of a word was written logographically, whereas grammatical prefixes and suffixes were rendered phonetically. Since most of the Sumerian bases were monosyllabic, the phonetic values of cuneiform signs derived from these bases were single syllables. Thus the word “kings” in Sumerian was typically written 𒌦𒍪𒍪𒍪𒍪

8 See chapter 4 in the present volume.

9 For the Graeco-Babyloniaca see Joachim Oelsner, “Zur Bedeutung der ‘Graeco-Babyloniaca’ für die Überlieferung des Sumerischen und Akkadischen,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 17 (1972): 356–64; Markham Geller, “The Last Wedge,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 87 (1997): 43–95; Aage Westenholz, “The Graeco-Babyloniaca Once Again,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 97 (2007): 262–313, as well as chapter 5 in the present volume.

10 For Sumerian as the underlying language of the earliest cuneiform texts, see Manfred Krebernik, review of *Zeichenliste der archaischen Texte aus Uruk*, by M.W. Green and Hans J. Nissen, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 89 (1994): 384; sign MEN (GÁ X EN) with phonetic indicator EN; Piotr Steinkeller, review of *Zeichenliste der archaischen Texte aus Uruk*, by M.W. Green and Hans J. Nissen, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 52 (1995): 694f. phonetic indicators already in Uruk IV, “an iron-clad proof that the language underlying the Uruk script is in fact Sumerian”; Manfred Krebernik, “Die frühe Keilschrift und ihr Verhältnis zur Sprache,” in *Uruk. 5000 Jahre Megacity*, ed. Nicola Crüsemann et al. (Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2013), 189f. typical Sumerian homonyms in lexical lists.

(LUGAL-*e-ne*): 𒌦 (LUGAL) was the logogram for “king”, and 𒅗 (*e*) and 𒅗𒅗 (*ne*) were syllabic signs rendering the plural ending /ene/.<sup>11</sup> A third group of signs were determinatives, semantic classifiers which accompany words and names, like the sign 𒄠 (KI, in Sumerian “land”) following geographical names, as in 𒄠𒄠𒄠 𒄠𒄠 𒄠𒄠 (Ĝír-su<sup>ki</sup>) “(the city of) Girsu”.

The inflectional structure of Akk, however, required a basically phonetic rendering of the language. Many more syllabic signs than in Sumerian were necessary to write Akk. But logograms and determinatives were never abandoned entirely. They were rather used side by side with syllabograms. The result was a mixed syllabic-logographic writing system with a total of ca. 900 signs.<sup>12</sup>

The ratio between logograms and syllabograms varies between different Akk text genres. Letters, omen texts, and literary texts (with the exception of colophons) usually use only few logograms and are basically written syllabically. A typical example like the Hammurapi letter AbB 2, 1 (OB) is written with 212 syllabic signs, 14 logograms (names, occupational titles, numbers) and 11 determinatives. The Mari letters (OB) use some 30 common logograms.<sup>13</sup> Legal and economic documents and especially certain scientific texts employ more logograms. Extremely logographically written text genres are certain divinatory and astronomical texts. A typical line in an Astronomical Diaries (NB/LB) reads: 17 *ina še-rì šú-up* GÙ U ÛLU ŠÁR ŠÈG NA<sub>4</sub> TUR “the 17th, in the morning, overcast. Thunder, gusty south wind, rain, small (hail-)stones”.<sup>14</sup> The only syllabically written word here is *šeri*, *irup* is written half logographically and half syllabically, all other words are rendered by logograms.

In most cases, logograms rendered nouns. Verbs were less represented by logograms. Numbers and measures, but also certain divine names and geographical names were commonly written logographically everywhere.

11 On the development of Sumerian writing see Dietz Otto Edzard, “Orthographie. A. Sumerisch und Akkadisch bis einschl. Ur III-Zeit,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 10, ed. Dietz Otto Edzard and Michael P. Streck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003–2005), 132–37.

12 The authoritative sign list for Akk cuneiform is Rykle Borger, *Mesopotamisches Zeichenlexikon* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010).

13 Jean Bottéro and André Finet, *Répertoire analytique des Tomes 1 à v des Archives Royales de Mari* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1954), 70.

14 Abraham Sachs and Hermann Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia. Vol. 1: Diaries from 652 B. C. to 262 B. C.* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988), 42: 9.



### 3 Development of the Syllabary<sup>15</sup>

Most Akk syllabograms derived from Sumerian logograms, some of them already used in Sumerian itself as syllabograms, e.g., *da* from Sumerian DA “side”, *kur* from Sumerian KUR “mountain”. A second, later and smaller group of syllabograms derived from Akk readings of logograms, e.g., *id* (from Oakk onwards), derived from the Akk *idum* of the logogram Á “arm”, or *mat* (from OB onwards), derived from the Akk reading *mātu* “land” of the logogram KUR. A third group of syllabograms developed from syllabograms of the two mentioned groups by phonetic distinction, e.g., *ši* from *zí* (derived from Sumerian ZÍ “gall”) or *nat* from *mat*.

The mature Akk syllabary had signs of the following types: c(onso-  
nant)v(owel), CVC, VC and v. However, the values VC and v only developed after the weak consonants /ʔ/, /h/, /ḥ/, /ʿ/ and /j/ had disappeared (cf. section 4, below), e.g., later *i* was still /ji/ in Ebla and in Oakk,<sup>16</sup> *en* was /jin/ in Ebla etc.<sup>17</sup> Some VC signs like *id/t/ṭ* or *ug/k/q* were still not used in Ebla.<sup>18</sup> Some CVC signs enriched the Akk syllabary only after the OB period, e.g., *gid/t/ṭ* (BU) and *bid/t/ṭ* (É), and some only in the first mill. like *kuš* (SU) and *sim* (NAM).

The Akk syllabary never developed syllabograms which distinguished between syllable final voiced, voiceless and the so-called emphatic phonemes /q/, /ṣ/ and /ṭ/. For example, the sign 𒀪 (AD) had the syllabic values *ad*, *at* and *aṭ*, the sign 𒀫 (UD) the values *ud*, *ut* and *uṭ*. Syllable initial, voiced and voiceless phonemes were frequently, but not always distinguished. OB and other Akk varieties usually distinguished between 𒀭 (BA) for *ba* and 𒀮 (PA) for *pa*, whereas OA employed 𒀭 (BA) alone for both /ba/ and /pa/ (*pá*). Syllable initial emphatic phonemes were expressed by special signs only in some cases: e.g., 𒀱 (SÌLA) for *qa* from OB onwards (but not in OA), 𒀲 (KIN) for *qi* regularly only in

15 Cf. in general Wolfram von Soden and Wolfram Röllig, *Das akkadische Syllabar* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1991<sup>4</sup>), xvii–xxxvii; Michael P. Streck, “Syllabar,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 13, ed. Michael P. Streck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011–2013), 380 f.

16 Manfred Krebernik, “Zur Entwicklung der Keilschrift im III. Jahrtausend anhand der Keilschrifttexte aus Ebla. Ein Vergleich zwischen altakkadischem und eblaitischem Schriftsystem,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 32 (1985): 57; Rebecca Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian. A Historical and Comparative Study of the Syllabic Texts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 95.

17 Krebernik, “Zur Entwicklung der Keilschrift im III. Jahrtausend,” 56. The Oakk evidence also points to EN as a CVC sign, cf. Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian*, 67.

18 Krebernik, “Zur Entwicklung der Keilschrift im III. Jahrtausend,” 56 and 59.

MA and NA (elsewhere one wrote either 𒀭 (KI) = *qí* or 𒀮 (GI) = *qì*), 𒀭𒀭 (KUM) for *qu* from MB/MA onwards (elsewhere 𒀭𒀭 (KU) = *qú* or 𒀭𒀭 (GU) = *qù*).

The phoneme /w/ was spelled 𒀭 (PI, phonetic values *wa*, *we*, *wi*, *wu*) in Oakk, OB and OA, e.g., *a-wi-lum* CH §1 *awīlum* “man”, but from MB onwards M-signs were used to render /w/, e.g., *a-me-lu* TCL 9, 95: 13 (LB) for /awēlu/,<sup>19</sup> probably because the PI sign with its arbitrary vowel was strikingly different from the rest of the Akk syllabary. A special sign 𒀭 (A') for the phoneme /ʔ/ only developed in the MB/MA period; in earlier periods /ʔ/ was expressed by H-signs, as in *ú-wa-ḫe-e-er* CUSAS 18, 12: 69 (OB), or by additional vowel signs, as in *ú-wa-e-er* YOS 10, 56 i 17 (OB), both writings for *uwa*’er “he has given orders”. In some cases, /ʔ/ did not find any expression at all, as in *ku-lu-ù* OAIC 30: 11 (Oakk) *kulu*’ū “male prostitutes”.

An advantage of cuneiform compared to Ancient Egyptian writing, but also to later Semitic alphabets, was its ability to represent vowels. The vowels /a/, /i/ and /u/ were usually distinguished, with the exception of the sign 𒀭 (PI) for *wa/we/wi/wu* (Oakk, OB, OA), 𒀭 (AH) for *aḫ/eḫ/iḫ/uḫ* (*passim*) and the sign 𒀭 (A') for /ʔ/ in combination with any vowel before or after the /ʔ/.

The distinction between /e/, which only was a secondary phoneme or an allophone of /i/, and /i/ was, however, incomplete. In Oakk, the signs E, BI, GI, LI, ME, SI<sub>II</sub>, ŠĒ and ZÉ were used for /e/ or /ē/, as in *ga-gi-su* FAOS 19 p. 155 Di 2: 8 *kakkēšu* “weapons” (oblique case), whereas ì, BÍ, KI, LÍ, MI, SI, ŠI and ZI stood for syllables with /i/ and /ī/, as in *i-ki-ís* MDP 14, 44: 3 *yiqiś* “he presented”.<sup>20</sup> In OB and most other varieties of Akk, new sign-sets served to distinguish /e/, /ē/ and /i/, /ī/: E, ME, NE, ŠE and TE against I, MI, NI, ŠI and TI, e.g., *e-te-el* CH iii 70 (OB) *etel* “prince” against *aš-ša-ti-šu* CH §38 (OB) *aššatišu* “of his wife”. Many signs expressed syllables with both /e/ and /i/, for example, the sign BI: *ú-bé*(BI)-*el-li* CH xlvii 32 *ubellī* (OB) “I extinguished” and *bi-il-tam* CH xvi 73 *biltam* “yield”.

19 The traditional transcription is *amī/ēlu*.

20 Walter Sommerfeld, *Die Texte der Akkade-Zeit. 1. Das Dijala-Gebiet: Tutub* (Münster: Rhema, 1999), 18–20; Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian*, 41–57.

#### 4 Orthography<sup>21</sup>

“Orthography” in the world of cuneiform means writing conventions. These allowed for a certain degree of variance but were not arbitrary.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most characteristic features of Akk (and, to a lesser degree, Sumerian) cuneiform orthography was the frequent rendering of closed syllables by a combination of a C(onsonant)V(owel) sign with a VC sign: thus the word *udab-babka* “he will harrass you”, with two closed syllables /dab/ and /bab/, could be written *ú-da-ab-ba-ab-ka* AbB 9, 50: 23 (OB). This orthographic principle was only fully established, together with the development of VC signs, after the loss of certain weak consonants like /ʔ/ and /j/ (cf. section 3, above), from the OB period onwards, whereas in OAKk the scribes still had to use CVC-signs in many cases, e.g., *dam-ḫur* MAD 5, 72: 10 *tamḫur* “she received”.<sup>23</sup> Once implemented, it reduced the number of CVC signs which otherwise would have been necessary.

At the beginning and at the end of the history of writing Akk, closed syllables were rendered by two further methods besides CVC-signs or combinations of CV- and VC-signs. Since in Ebla some VC values still did not exist (section 3, above) or were only rarely employed, the scribes wrote either two open syllables CV-CV or defective CV for /CVC/,<sup>24</sup> e.g., *ga-na-ga-tum* MEE 4: \*464 for *kanaktum* “an incense-bearing tree” with *na-ga* for the closed syllable /nak/, or *a-za-me-ga* ARET 5, 1 ii 2 *ʾašmidka* “I have bound you” with defective *me* for /mid/. The spelling CV-CV for /CVC/ occurred again in the first millennium, especially in LB, less so in NB and NA, under the impact of the Aramaean alphabet: since the alphabet was able to render consonants exactly in all positions the scribes sometimes preferred to write unambiguous (or at least less ambiguous) CV instead of VC, e.g., *li-qi-bi* SAA 1, 124: 15 (NA) for *liqbi* “let him say” (unambiguous *qi* instead of ambiguous *iq/g/k*), or *a-di-gu-ul* OECT 12, A 135: 12 (LB) for *adgul* “I watched” (*di* less ambiguous than *id/t/ṭ*).

Gemination of consonants could be expressed in writing by repeating the consonant as in *a-šap-par* SAA 1, 1: 12 (NA) *ašappar* “I will send” or *i-da-ab-bu-ub* ib. 12: 3 *idabbub* “he talks”. This was, however, not obligatory, and in many

21 Cf. in general Edzard, “Orthographie”, and Michael P. Streck, “Orthographie. B. Akkadisch im II. und I. Jt.” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 10, ed. Dietz Otto Edzard and Michael P. Streck (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003–2005), 137–40.

22 Edzard, “Orthographie,” 132.

23 Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian*, 36.

24 Manfred Krebernik, “Zu Syllabar und Orthographie der lexikalischen Texte aus Ebla, Teil I,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 72 (1982): 224–28; Edzard, “Orthographie,” 134.

cases gemination was left unexpressed, especially in Ebla,<sup>25</sup> e.g., *ʾa<sub>5</sub>-ma-ra-am<sub>6</sub>* ARET 16, 2 r. ii 4 *ʾammaram* “I will see”, in OAkk,<sup>26</sup> e.g., *da-sa-bi-ir* OSP 1, 7 i 5 *tasabber* “you will break”, and in OA,<sup>27</sup> e.g., *a-ga-mi-il<sub>5</sub>-kà* AKT 8, 103: 6 *agam-milka* “I will do you a favor”.

Vowel length could be represented by so-called plene spellings, i.e., an additional vowel sign, as in *ab-nu-ú* AbB 9, 61: 6 (OB) *abnū* “stones”, or *a-de-e* SAA 1, 76: 6 (NA) *adê* “treaty”. In Ebla and OAkk, however, this writing principle was unusual because the later simple vowel signs were in fact still CV-signs with C representing a still strong, but later weak consonant like /ʔ/, /h/, /ḥ/, /ʿ/ or /j/.<sup>28</sup>

In the first millennium (especially in LB), under the impact of the Aramaic alphabet, cuneiform orthography occasionally strived for a more exact rendering of consonants and sometimes neglected vowel notation.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the CV-CV-spellings for closed syllables mentioned above, one finds spellings like *taq-qa-ba-ʾ* CT 22, 189: 9 (LB) *taqbâ* “you said to me”, where *qa* is added to ambiguous *taq/k/g* in order to represent /q/ exactly. CVC-signs were sometimes used with indifferent vowel, as in *a-nam-dan* ABL 795 r. 14 (NB) *anandin* “I will give”, with *dan* (KAL) for /din/.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes vowels were not written at all, as in *taḥ-ru-ba* SAA 1, 98: 8 (NA) *taḥarrubā* “you will do first”.<sup>31</sup>

## 5 Transliteration and Transcription

In Ancient Near Eastern studies, cuneiform is transcribed in alphabetic script for practical reasons. We distinguish between transliteration and transcription. Transliteration is a sign-by-sign rendering of cuneiform. Signs in the same word are connected by hyphens. Transcription is a phonemic reconstruction, i.e., a

25 Cf. the examples for the present tense in Amalia Catagnoti, *La grammatica della lingua di Ebla* (Firenze: Università di Firenze, 2012), 131.

26 Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian*, 37.

27 N.J.C. Kouwenberg, *A Grammar of Old Assyrian* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), 27.

28 Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian*, 37; Catagnoti, *La grammatica*, 16–18.

29 Michael P. Streck, “Keilschrift und Alphabet,” in *Hieroglyphen, Alphabete, Schriftreformen: Studien zu Multiliteralismus, Schriftwechsel und Orthographienneuregelung*, ed. Dörte Borchers et al. (Göttingen: Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 2001), 77–97; Streck, “Orthographie,” 139 f.

30 It is misleading to introduce new late syllabic values (“*dín*” von Soden and Röllig, *Das akkadische Syllabar*, 134 no. 173) in this and similar cases.

31 It makes no sense to introduce syllabic values “mit überhängendem Vokal” in this and similar cases (“*taḥa*” Borger, *Mesopotamisches Zeichenlexikon*, 459).

rendering of the pronunciation of a word. Thus the sign sequence 𒀭 𒄠 𒆪 is transliterated *i-lu-um* “god” but transcribed *ilum*.

Capital letters<sup>32</sup> render logograms according to their Sumerian pronunciation. If, e.g., the sign 𒀭 (AN) is used for the Akk word *šamû* “heaven”, it is transliterated as AN (derived from Sumerian *an* “heaven”). Determinatives only appear in transliteration according to their Sumerian pronunciation as superscripts: 𒀭𒄠𒆪<sup>meš</sup> DINGIR<sup>meš</sup> for *ilû* “deities”.

Identical phonetic values of different signs are distinguished by accents or number in subscript. For example, there are several signs which all have the phonetic value /u/: 𒄠 is *u* without accent, 𒄠<sup>u</sup> is *ú* or *u*<sub>2</sub>, 𒄠<sup>u</sup>𒄠<sup>u</sup> is *û* or *u*<sub>3</sub> etc.

Vowel length is only indicated in transcription but not in transliteration. Two types of vowel length are distinguished: vowel length originating in the contraction of two vowels is rendered by a circumflex, e.g., /û/ < /ī-u/; every other type of vowel length, i.e. structural vowel length, length originating in the monophthongization of a diphthong, or length after the loss of an /ʾ/, is indicated by a macron, e.g., /ū/.

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32 Many scholars use small capital letters for logograms of known Sumerian reading and capital letters for logograms of unknown reading or where only the cuneiform sign needs to be identified.

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