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The Mittanian Cuneiform Documents: The Interplay between Content, Language, Material, Format, and Sealing Practices

Abstract: The corpus of cuneiform tablets from the kingdom of Mittani is very meagre in comparison with the written evidence from the contemporary West Asiatic states. Nevertheless, an overview of the formal features of these documents yields information on the production of texts by the Mittanian royal chancery.

1 The kingdom of Mittani

Mittani was one of the most powerful West Asiatic kingdoms at the zenith of its power from the beginning of the fifteenth century BCE until the Hittite conquest, around the middle of the fourteenth century BCE. The results of the German archaeological excavations at Tell Fekheriye support the assumption that the capital of Mittani, Waššukkanni, was located there.¹ Although the heartland of the country was the Upper Khabur region, Mittani controlled the middle Tigris region up to the territory of Aššur and Arrapḫe, as well as the middle Euphrates, since Terqa was for a time under Mittanian sovereignty. Furthermore, several polities in western Syria were under Mittanian control, and even Kizzuwatna, in south-eastern Anatolia, was subordinated to Mittani until it was annexed to the Hittite kingdom.²

The earliest known king of Mittani is Kirta, who is only documented from the seal of his son Šuttarna I. Parattarna I, probably the successor of Šuttarna I, was the overlord of Idrimi of Alalakh, as the inscription on Idrimi's statue records, as well as of Pilliya of Kizzuwatna, as the tablet ALT 14 states (see *ultra*). We argue that part of Parattarna's reign overlapped with that of Pharaoh Thutmose III, who ruled from 1479 until 1425 BCE.³ Thutmose III led several military

1 Bonatz 2014.

2 De Martino 2018; von Dassow 2022.

3 Hornung, Krauss and Warburton 2006.

expeditions in the Levantine and Syrian territories and confronted a coalition of rulers who were vassals of Mittani at Megiddo.

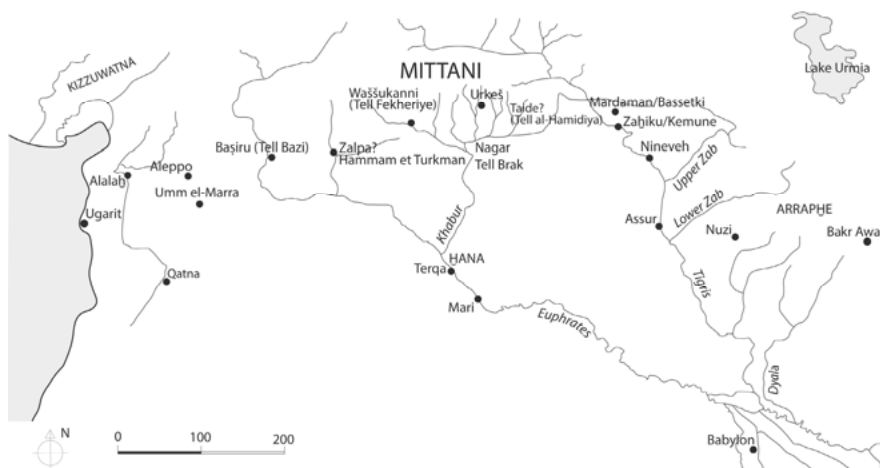


Fig. 1: Map of the kingdom of Mittani, drawn by Claudio Fossati, Department of History, University of Torino.

The period of Mittani's maximal expansion dates to the reign of King Sauštatar. Under his rule, the kingdom of Mittani comprised Syria, Upper Mesopotamia and south-eastern Anatolia, although the emergence of the powerful kingdom of Ḫatti, under King Tuḫaliya I, led to the loss of Kizzuwatna, which came under Hittite rule.

The threat posed by the Hittite expansion obliged the Mittanian kings to forge an alliance with Egypt, which was sealed by an inter-dynastic marriage. Thus, one of the daughters of the Mittanian King Artatama I married Pharaoh Thutmose IV. Another wedding was concluded in the following generation, and Artatama I's successor, Šuttarna II, gave his daughter, Kelu-Ḫeba, in marriage to Pharaoh Amenhotep III.

Mittani entered a phase of crisis a few years later. Artašumara, Šuttarna II's successor, was killed by a certain Pirḫi, who ruled the country until Tušratta, one of Artašumara's brothers, took the throne. Tušratta reinforced the alliance with Egypt and gave his daughter, Tadu-Ḫeba, in marriage to Amenhotep III. The Mittanian princess eventually became one of Amenhotep IV's wives after the death of Amenhotep III.

During the reign of Tušratta, Mittani was attacked and conquered by the Hittite King Šuppiluliuma I. Mittani became subordinated to Ḫatti, and Šuppiluliuma I gave the throne of Mittani to Šattiwaza, one of Tušratta's brothers, who had allied himself with the Hittite king and married his daughter. Thus, Mittani ceased to exist as an independent kingdom in the middle of the thirteenth century BCE.⁴

2 The Mittanian tablets and their contents

Although Mittani remained a powerful kingdom for about a century and half, written evidence from the centres inside its territory is scant. Indeed, Mittani is the most poorly documented political entity of the ancient Near East in the second millennium BCE. The interruption of archaeological research at the site of Tell Fekheriye, which was due to the political destabilization of Syria, prevented the German expedition active there from excavating the Mittanian layers, and, thus, there is not a single tablet from the capital Waššukkanni that can be dated to the period when Mittani was an independent state. Paradoxically, the main corpus of documents issued by the royal chancery of Mittani does not come from Syria, but from the Egyptian site of Tell el Amarna/Akhetaten, which was the royal residence of Akhenaten, and consists mostly of letters sent by Tušratta to the pharaoh.

We list here the documents issued by the Mittanian kings as well as administrative texts discovered in sites located inside the core of Mittani.

The oldest tablet recovered that may have been issued by a Mittanian king comes from the Syrian site of Tell Hammām et-Turkmān (HMM 86-O14). Its archaeological context and a stylistic analysis of its seal impression suggest that the document was produced around 1500 BCE.⁵ The tablet preserves a letter written by a king whose name is not given, but who was probably a Mittanian sovereign, to a certain Šatuwatri, presumably either a state official or the local ruler of the polity of Hammām et-Turkmān, possibly the ancient city of Zalpa.⁶

No documents issued by Kirta, Šuttarna I or Parattarna I are extant. The earliest dated tablets stem from the reign of Sauštatar. They comprise three texts that come from Alalaḫ (AIT 13 and 14)⁷ and from Tell Bazi, the ancient town of

⁴ For an overview of the history of Mittani, see von Dassow 2022; de Martino forthcoming.

⁵ van Soldt 1995, 277.

⁶ von Dassow 2022, 462–463 and n. 14.

⁷ von Dassow 2008, 46–49.

Bašīru (Bz 51).⁸ Text ALT 13 is a letter written by Sauštatar that records the results of a legal decision. The case was argued in the presence of the king. A judgement of Sauštatar on the dispute between Niqmepa of Alalah and Šunaššura of Kizzuwatna is preserved in tablet ALT 14. Text Bz 51 contains a royal grant issued by Sauštatar, who gave a town by the name of Baidali to the people of Bašīru.

Another tablet discovered at Tell Bazi (Bz 50) preserves a royal grant issued by King Artatama I.⁹ A tablet from the site of Tell Umm el-Marra (UEM T 1) dates to the reign of Šuttarna II.¹⁰ It records a legal act that was executed in the presence of the Mittanian king. Furthermore, an act validated by Artasumara was discovered at Tell Brak (TB 6002).¹¹

Fourteen tablets belong to the Mittanian dossier preserved at Akhetaten/Tell el Amarna. They vary in content and typology: ten of them are letters sent by the Mittanian King Tušratta to the pharaoh: EA 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 27, 28 and 29. One letter, EA 26, was addressed by Tušratta to Tiye, Amenhotep III's wife. Two tablets (EA 25 and 22) list the gifts sent by the Mittanian king to the Egyptian court. Finally, tablet EA 30, the so-called 'passport', preserves a message that Tušratta addressed to the rulers of polities under Egyptian sovereignty, requesting that they grant safe passage to his envoy on the journey to Egypt.¹² Its presence at Amarna probably indicates that it was valid only for the messenger who carried it, and for only one trip. Thus, it could not be reused and was kept by the Egyptians.¹³

The only other text that was issued by Tušratta is TB 8001, a legal act validated by this king.¹⁴ It does not come from Egypt but from Tell Brak, a centre not far from the Mittanian capital, Waššukkanni.

We mention here two more documents that were issued by a Mittanian king whose name remains unknown and, thus, cannot be dated. One of these texts comes from Alalah (ALT 108)¹⁵ and preserves a letter sent by a Mittanian king to a certain Utti. The other text comes from Nuzi, a centre in the kingdom of Arraphē that was subordinated to Mittani (HSS 9.1).¹⁶ It is a letter sent by the Mittanian king to Ithi-Teššob, ruler of Arraphē.

⁸ Sallaberger, Einwag and Otto 2006.

⁹ Sallaberger, Einwag and Otto 2006.

¹⁰ Cooper, Schwartz and Westbrook 2005.

¹¹ Finkel 1985, 191–194.

¹² Rainey 2015.

¹³ Gestoso Singer 2017, 148.

¹⁴ Illingworth 1988.

¹⁵ See von Dassow 2008, 54.

¹⁶ See Homan 2020, 55–56 for bibliographical references on this letter.

Administrative records were discovered at two sites inside the core of Mittani: Tell Brak/Nagar and Tell al-Ḥamīdiya/Taide. Three tablets came from Tell Brak: TB 11021, a letter sent by a state official to a dignitary superior to him;¹⁷ TB 6001, an administrative record that lists the names of workmen,¹⁸ and TB 8002, another administrative document.¹⁹ A collection of fifty-one administrative records from Taide has recently been published.²⁰

A number of tablets were recently discovered at Bassetki/Mardaman and Kemune/Zaḥiku (?). Both sites are in the middle Tigris region, and we argue that they were under the direct control of the kings of Mittani.²¹ Two tablets come from a building of Mittanian date in Bassetki/Mardaman: BAS 17A-i166 and BAS 17A-i167; one of them preserves a memorandum concerning three business trips.²² Ten tablets have been found in a building dating to the Mittanian phase at the site of Kemune, probably the ancient town of Zaḥiku.²³ According to the preliminary report,²⁴ some of these tablets preserve administrative records,²⁵ one collects three different lists of people and donkeys,²⁶ and another one contains a letter that mentions copper and other goods.²⁷ The content of another text, KEM18A-i0060, is uncertain.

Finally, two tablets in the Schøyen Collection have recently been published:²⁸ MS 1848/1 and MS 1848/2. Both are letters, and the first one was sent by a certain Waššu, whose name also occurs in the tablet from Tell Brak TB 7035.

3 Language and writing

The core of the kingdom of Mittani was in a region of Syria that had been inhabited by Hurrian peoples since the last century of the third millennium BCE, and

¹⁷ See Wilhelm 2018, 159–173.

¹⁸ See Finkel 1985, 194–198.

¹⁹ See Illingworth 1988, 105.

²⁰ Kessler 2020.

²¹ See de Martino forthcoming.

²² Pfälzner and Qasim 2018, 68–69; Pfälzner and Faist 2020, 372.

²³ Puljiz et al. 2019.

²⁴ Betina Faist in Puljiz et al. 2019, 33–34.

²⁵ See tablets KEM18A-i0009, KEM18A-i0023, KEM18A-i0047, KEM 18A-i0059, KEM18A-i0068, KEM18A-i0069, and KEM18A-i0080.

²⁶ KEM18A-i01013 + KEM18A-i0105 + KEM18A-i0106.

²⁷ KEM18A-i0077.

²⁸ George 2017.

Hurrian was the main language of the Mittanian royal house.²⁹ Nevertheless, all of the texts examined here were written in Akkadian, the only exceptions being EA 24, which was sent by King Tušratta to the pharaoh, and the letter TB 11021, which was discovered at Tell Brak and sent by a Mittanian official, both written in Hurrian.

The use of Akkadian for the letters sent to the Egyptian court is not surprising because this language was usually adopted by the chanceries of all the West Asiatic polities for their international correspondence in the Late Bronze Age. The letter EA 24, however, is in Hurrian. As is well-known, this document was composed on the occasion of the inter-dynastic marriage between a Mittanian princess and the pharaoh and preserves a long narrative on relations between Egypt and Mittani.

This tablet was intended to be an assertion of the Mittanian tradition and identity, and, hence, it had to be written in the Hurrian language. The size of the tablet (43 cm high) is exceptional, and this was probably not simply determined by the length of the text; in fact, the tablet itself was presumably intended to be a precious object to be preserved and displayed.³⁰ Thus, although we argue that no one at the Egyptian court could understand it without the assistance of an interpreter, this tablet affirmed the Hurrian ethnolinguistic origin of the Mittanian princess and her family.

The royal chancery of Mittani also wrote in Akkadian when the king issued acts in favour of Syrian polities, whose rulers probably did not speak any Hurrian; these include the aforementioned texts from Tell Bazi (Bz 50 and 51), Umm el-Marra (UEM T 1) and Alalah (AIT 13 and 14). Letters to officials and subordinate kings, such as texts HMM 86-O14, AIT 108 and HSS 9.1, were also composed in Akkadian.

Furthermore, the use of Akkadian for administrative purposes seems to have been common throughout the kingdom. We argue that Hurrian-speaking peoples and Amorrean communities lived next to each other in the Khabur region. Moreover, the weight of the Mesopotamian literary tradition was surely strong in Upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria. Thus, the royal family of Mittani did not mandate the use of the Hurrian language in the administration of its territories, and Akkadian was also commonly used for internal affairs.

Nevertheless, there were officials who used Hurrian for administrative purposes, as documented by the letter TB 11021, which was sent by a Mittanian official to his superior. The letters discovered at Qatna, which are written in

²⁹ See von Dassow 2022, 457.

³⁰ Homan 2020, 45.

Akkadian with several inserted Hurrian words, are a clear example of the multi-lingual reality of some regions of the Mittanian kingdom.³¹ Obviously, the discovery of archives or collections of texts from Waššukkanni could provide further support for the assumption that bilingualism, though probably reflecting varying degrees of linguistic competence, was common among some of the Mittanian officers and dignitaries.

Both groups of Mittanian texts – those written in Akkadian and those in Hurrian – show very similar features in their use of cuneiform. The recent book by Zenobia Homan, *Mittani Palaeography*,³² is devoted to a statistical analysis of the shapes of the cuneiform signs that are documented in the Mittanian texts. She reaches the conclusion that Mittanian, Assyro-Mittanian and Early Middle Assyrian texts belong to the same overarching script group, although various distinguishing features can be recognised in some of the tablets analysed.

By way of example, the Hurrian letter from Tell Brak TB 11021 is palaeographically close to the Mittani letter EA 24.³³ Jerrold Cooper, Glenn Schwartz and Raymond Westbrook³⁴ argued that the tablet from Umm el-Marra also shows palaeographical features that are closer to the Mittanian Amarna tablets than to the Syrian documents. Furthermore, palaeographical analysis of the two tablets from Tell Bazi supports the hypothesis that all these documents were written by scribes of the Mittanian chancery.³⁵

The assumption that all these texts were produced by the central chancery is bolstered by the fact that some of the aforementioned documents are said to have been executed in the presence of the king of Mittani (AIT 13, 14; UEM T 1; TB 6002; TB 8001), and we argue that this statement should be taken literally. Hence, even documents that refer to the subordinate polities might have been written either in the Mittanian capital or the centre where the king resided, together with his scribes.

Homan observed that the two largest tablets in the Amarna corpus,³⁶ EA 22, the gift list, and EA 24, the Mittani letter, show a higher number of sign-forms and variants. Moreover, these two documents share common palaeographic

³¹ See Richter and Lange 2012; van de Mieroop 2023, 89.

³² Homan 2020.

³³ Wilhelm 2018, 160, 173.

³⁴ Cooper, Schwartz and Westbrook 2005, 52.

³⁵ Sallaberger, Einwag and Otto 2006, 83–84.

³⁶ Homan 2020, 110–111.

traits, and, hence, Homan assumed that EA 22 and 24 may have been the product of learned scribes who wanted to show their erudition.³⁷

4 Material and format

Data on the chemical and physical nature of the clay of the Mittanian tablets are only available for the documents discovered at Tell el Amarna. An in-depth analysis of the clay of the Mittanian Amarna tablets was first conducted by Allen Dobel, Frank Asaro and Helen V. Michel, who identified two different chemical profiles among the tablets.³⁸ Yuval Goren and his team examined the tablets more recently and reached the similar conclusion that ‘two distinctive clay types were used by the Mittani scribes: a marly type (including EA 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29 and 30) and a clayey type (including EA 18, 19, 21, and 27).’³⁹

Tablet EA 27 bears a note written in hieratic; it states that the tablet is the ‘copy of the Naharina letter that the envoy Pirissi and the envoy [Tulubri] brought’.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the mineralogical features of this tablet match those of other letters in the correspondence of Tušratta, such as EA 23. Hence, EA 27 is the product of Mittanian scribes.⁴¹

Therefore, two different types of clay were in use contemporaneously in the reign of Tušratta; in fact, out of the four tablets of a clayey type, three letters: EA 18, 19 and 21, were sent to Amenhotep III, and the fourth one, EA 27, to Amenhotep IV. Both of these pharaohs also received letters written on tablets made from a marly clay.

Despite the differences in the texture of the clay, the ‘two fabrics include similar types of clastic components (silt and sand), indicating a very similar depositional environment’, and, hence, ‘the environs of Waššukkanni apparently included two types of workable clay that were occasionally alternated by the scribes of Tušratta’s court’, as Goren and his colleagues argued.⁴²

³⁷ By way of comparison, we mention here that some Hittite scribes ‘liked to show off their learnedness by using archaic non-standard and foreign cuneiform signs in regular Hittite-language compositions’, van den Hout 2020, 325–326.

³⁸ Dobel, Asaro and Michel 1977.

³⁹ Goren, Finkelstein and Na’aman 2004, 38–44.

⁴⁰ See Rainey 2015, 294–295.

⁴¹ Goren, Finkelstein and Na’aman 2004, 42.

⁴² Goren, Finkelstein and Na’aman 2004, 42.

The Mittanian tablets appear in two formats: the ‘portrait format’ and the ‘landscape format’. These terms come from painting and photography and refer, respectively, to tablets whose height is greater than the width (‘portrait format’), and that have a horizontal orientation (‘landscape format’).

Although there are some exceptions, administrative tablets generally have a ‘landscape format’ and are wider than they are high.⁴³ The adoption of a standard format for administrative tablets written at different sites in Mittani, such as Tell Brak, Taide, Bassetki and Kemune, supports the assumption that the central government of the state controlled the production of texts.

Occasionally, when a larger writing space was required, the ‘portrait format’ was preferred, as in the case of the tablet from Tell Brak TB 8001 (7.2 cm high and 5.8 cm wide) and the record from Kemune KEM18A-i01013 (8.4 cm. high and 5.2 cm wide). The tablet TB 6002, from Tell Brak, though fragmentary, seems to have been larger than usual; it was divided into two columns and may have contained a list of about one hundred personal names.⁴⁴

The letters sent to the Egyptian rulers are somewhat taller than they are wide, and this agrees with the ‘portrait format’ standardly used for international correspondence during the Late Bronze Age. The letter sent by Tušratta to the pharaoh and the gift lists stand out for their large size.

Only one of the Mittanian tablets discovered at Amarna, EA 30, shows the same small ‘landscape format’ as the administrative texts. As mentioned earlier, this tablet preserves a *laissez-passer* that was carried by a Mittanian messenger travelling to Egypt. The brief text did not require a larger tablet, and, indeed, by its very nature, such a document should be easily portable.

5 Sealing practices

Several tablets issued by the Mittanian kings are sealed. The rulers of Mittani sometimes used their personal seal, but very often opted for the seal of one of their predecessors. The use of a dynastic seal, i.e. the personal seal of a former sovereign, was presumably intended to confer an enduring legitimacy on the acts recorded on the tablet and on the tablet itself. In fact, the dynastic seal referred not only to the living king but to the whole ruling dynasty.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Cooper, Schwartz and Westbrook 2005, 43–45. For the dimensions of Mittanian tablets from Amarna and elsewhere, see Homan 2020, 41–47, 51–56.

⁴⁴ Finkel 1985, 194.

⁴⁵ Postgate 2013, 386 and n. 9.

Sauštatar sealed the aforementioned documents AIT 13 and 14 with the seal of Šuttarna I, but he sealed tablet Bz 51 with his personal seal. We argue that this king preferred the seal of his predecessor in the early years of his rule, probably in order to stress his legitimacy as Šuttarna I's successor. When he felt that he had consolidated his power, he used his own seal.

Sauštatar's seal remained in use for about fifty years; it was impressed on documents issued by his successors: Bz 50, which preserves a legal act of Artatama I; UEM T 1, which preserves an act executed in the presence of Šuttarna II; TB 6002, issued by Artašumara; and TB 8001, which records an act validated by Tušratta.

An in-depth study of the impressions of the Sauštatar seal led Walther Sallaberger, Berthold Einwag and Otto Adelheid to argue that although the same seal was used to form them, three different seal caps had encased this seal. The seal cap was probably replaced over the decades when this dynastic seal remained in use.⁴⁶

Since dynastic seals were precious and the exclusive property of the royal family, it is unlikely that a state official would have been allowed to travel with one of them when an important act needed to be validated. Hence, in our opinion, this supports the assumption that texts discovered in western Syrian sites, such as Alalakh, Tell Bazi and Umm el-Marra, were written in either Waššukkanani or the city where the king and the court resided at the time when the acts recorded on the tablets were executed.

The letters sent by Tušratta to the pharaoh and the other letters of the international correspondence discovered there are not sealed. Mario Liverani argued that these letters may have been enclosed in sealed envelopes, though none of the envelopes have been found at Amarna.⁴⁷

The only Mittanian tablet from Amarna that bears a seal impression is the 'passport' EA 30, presumably because it had to be shown at the checkpoints of the Levantine polities and the seal proved the authenticity of the document.⁴⁸ The seal on the tablet EA 30 may be that of Tušratta, although the impression is not very legible.⁴⁹

As far as the administrative records from Tell Brak, Taide, Bassetki and Kemune are concerned, most of these tablets were not sealed. However, two tablets from Kemune are sealed: KEM18A-i0077, a letter that bears the seal of

⁴⁶ Sallaberger, Einwag and Otto 2006, 86–90.

⁴⁷ Liverani 1998, 50.

⁴⁸ Liverani 1998, 50.

⁴⁹ Porada 1974–1977.

the sender,⁵⁰ and KEM18A-i0068, which bears the seals of three different people.⁵¹ The seals may have belonged to the witnesses of the act preserved in the tablet, which records the assignment of two people to a man.⁵²

6 Summing up

The preserved Mittanian documents date from the reign of Sauštatar until that of Tušratta, approximately from the last decades of the fifteenth century BCE until the first half of the following century. Any enquiries regarding the Mittanian tablets face objective difficulties: the limited number of documents available and the fact that none of them come from the Mittanian capital Waššukkanni; instead, as has been stated, they come from sites either on the Upper Khabur or in Syria, or else in Upper Mesopotamia.

Mittani was a multi-ethnic and multilingual political entity where Amorreans lived close to Hurrian peoples. Although Hurrian was perceived as the idenitarian language of the royal family and the kingdom, Akkadian was commonly used for official documents issued by the kings and for administrative purposes. The scribes adopted the same inventory of signs regardless of the language of the texts they were writing. Acts issued by the Mittanian kings were probably written by the scribes of the central chancery, even if they concerned Syrian centres.

As far as the results from the chemical and physical features of the Mittanian tablets discovered at Tell el Amarna show, clays from two different sources, both in the environs of Waššukkanni, were used contemporaneously by the scribes of the Mittanian chancery.

The uniformity of the format of the greatest portion of the administrative tablets, regardless of the place where they had presumably been written, leads us to assume that scribes active in different parts of the kingdom were instructed to produce tablets following precise standards of size and shape. However, we are aware that the small number of tablets available prevents any statistical analysis.

Most of the administrative tablets available do not bear any seal impressions; the royal acts, however, were sealed, and Mittanian kings preferred to seal their official documents with a dynastic seal rather than with their personal seal.

⁵⁰ See Faist in Puljiz et al. 2019, 34.

⁵¹ Puljiz et al. 2019, 29.

⁵² Faist in Puljiz et al. 2019, 33–34.

Abbreviations

ALT = The Tablets from Alalah
 BAS = Bassetki
 Bz = Tell Bazi
 EA = El Amarna
 HMM = Tell Hammām et-Turkmān
 ȚT = The Tablets from Tell al-Ĥamīdiya
 HSS = Harvard Semitic Series
 KEM = Kemune
 TB = Tell Brak
 UEM = Tell Umm el-Marra

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