Ilum-asu. A Scribe from Irisagrig*

Magnus Widell

Abstract

Based on the administrative accounts from the Ur III period (2112–2004 BC according to the Middle Chronology), this article offers an overview of the economic activities of the official Ilum-asu and his family, who worked as scribes in the important administrative center of Irisagrig in southern Mesopotamia. Ilum-asu’s father Bibi provided foodstuffs as rations to the female (sesame) oil pressers (mostly different types of birds and animals), and Ilum-asu and his two brothers (Mašum and Ašgi-ibra) can all be attested as the recipients of provisions for this group of workers in the city, in some cases directly from their father. The activities of Ilum-asu and his family of scribes illustrate the importance of familial affiliations and kinship groupings within the institutional economy of the Ur III state, and demonstrate that administrative roles within the public households would often transcend generations. The article argues that the institutional households of the Ur III state regularly relied on, and even took advantage of, existing hereditary structures and kinship ties within the society as a whole.

Keywords

Ur III | Iri-Sağrig | Al-Šarrākī | Ilum-asu | administration

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INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the administrative activities and the familial affiliations of the Ur III official Ilum-asu (written dingir-a-su₂), who worked as a scribe in the city of Irisagrig during the final century of the third millennium BC.¹ The city of Irisagrig (usually Iri-Sağrig/Al-Šarrākī), generally believed to have been located on the Tigris River, not too far from ancient Nippur, was an important administrative center in southern Mesopotamia throughout the third and early second millennia BC.² Most of our knowledge of the city stems from the approximately 2,500 administrative clay tablets dated to the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2100–2000 BC), of which well over 90% have been published in the last decade, by David I. Owen in 2015 (Nisaba 15/2), and Marcel Sigrist and Tohru Ozaki in 2019 (CUSAS 40/2).³ The publication of these texts has provided scholars of the Ur III period with a remarkable opportunity to study the wider historiography of the state’s provincial administration, particularly from a prosopographical perspective, and to analyze the various individuals living in the city and working within its bureaucratic structures.

Ilum-asu, the subject of this short communication, who worked as a scribe and administrator in Irisagrig for at least 12 years, from Amar-Suen 9 (month xii) until Ibbi-Suen 3, was brought to the attention of the author by a recent study of cuneiform texts from Irisagrig by Wafaa H. Zwaïd and Eric L. Cripps.⁴

¹ All references to cuneiform texts are according to the abbreviations used by the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) at https://cdli.ucla.edu (accessed September 20, 2021), with CDLI P-numbers for tablets, and S-numbers for seals. The reconstruction of the Irisagrig calendar, and the sequence of the month names in the city, is based on Tohru Ozaki, “On the Calendar of Urusagrig,” Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie 106, no. 2 (2016): 135. Readings of cuneiform signs follow the standards set out by the CDLI.


THE SEAL OF Ilum-asu

The impression of Ilum-asu’s seal is attested on seven tablets, dated from Šu-Suen 7/vii to Ibbi-Suen 2/x (S002157; see also Table 1). Based on the photos and descriptions available on BDTNS and CDLI of two of these tablets (Nisaba 15/2 439; P387927; and Nisaba 15/2 534; P388002), it is possible to reconstruct the motif on Ilum-asu’s seal as a common subtype of the so-called “presentation scene,” generally referred to as an “introduction” or “audience.”

Figure 1. Composite reconstruction of Ilum-asu’s seal.

The complex relationship between seal legends and the Ur III presentation scenes, and the identification of the figures in these scenes, has been the subject of much scholarly attention. The identification of the figures on Ilum-asu’s seal is particularly challenging due to the fragmentary nature of the impressions. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern certain patterns in the depictions of the figures that provide insight into the social and religious practices of the time.

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of considerable debate over the years. However, the most recent of these studies has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the person being introduced in these scenes should be identified with the individual for whom the artwork was commissioned, which for cylinder seals would be the seal owner. In other words, we may identify Ilum-asu on his seal, with some confidence, as the figure standing to the far left in the scene, with his left wrist firmly held by a minor goddess, who is introducing him to an unidentified seated goddess. The seated goddess has her right hand raised, acknowledging the presence of the minor goddess and Ilum-asu.

By studying the tablets impressed with Ilum-asu’s seal, it is possible to reconstruct the inscription as: “Ilum-asu, the scribe, the son of Bibi, the scribe” (dingir-a-su₂ / dub-sar / dumu bi₂-bi₂ / dub-sar).

THE FAMILY OF Ilum-asu

The study of the importance of familial affiliations and kinship ties within the institutional (and non-institutional) administration of the Ur III state is complicated by the fact that the Sumerian word for “son” (dumu), in some contexts, appears to refer to an administrative relationship between an apprentice and his master, rather than a biological one. The alternative meaning of dumu, as a kind of administrative apprentice or deputy, was originally proposed by Tom B. Jones and John W. Snyder in their important study on the Ur III administration from 1961, and an increasing body of evidence has since appeared in support of this hypothesis. So far, discussions of dumu as a reference to some kind of professional subordinate have primarily been of relevance for our increased

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7 Mayr, “The Figure of the Worshiper,” 229–31.

understanding of the structural organization of the many so-called “merchant houses” of the Ur III period. However, the uncertainty surrounding the expression is not limited to any specific socio-economic group, or even the third millennium. In her recent study of the organization of the household of the Nuzi scribe Taya, Jeannette Fincke writes:

Perhaps student scribes that had entered Taya’s household were later called his “sons.” Since according to all Ancient Near Eastern contracts of apprenticeship the young apprentice entered the household of a craftsman to be taught his profession, a similar procedure may have been adapted to train scribes.

In fact, Sumerian (and Akkadian) vocabulary pertaining to kinship associations often expresses a whole range of relationships of power and obligation, which have little to do with biological relationships. In other words, while the present study takes dumu as a genealogical term with the meaning “son,” an alternative understanding of the term as “apprentice” or “administrative subordinate” cannot be entirely ruled out.

As attested from his seal inscription, Ilum-asu was the son of the scribe Bibi, who can be securely attested from Amar-Suen 7/xii (CUSAS 40/2 276; P515060) until at least Ibbi-Suen 1/xi (Nisaba 15/2 578; P515260). As noted by Jacob Andersson in his brief discussion of this official, Bibi was not just a

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12 Note also CUSAS 40/2 1489 (P516273) from Amar-Suen 7, with an illegible month formula.

13 For possible identifications of Bibi in Ibbi-Suen 2, see CUSAS 40/2 576 (P515360) and JAFA 12/41 229 (BDTNS: 205200; no CDLI P-number).
scribe, but in fact a “scribe of oils” (dub-sar 13), which appears to be a unique professional specialization in the Ur III period. A small number of references to scribes, with what would appear to be very specific areas of expertise, such as “scribe of oils (and) dates” (dub-sar 13 zu2-lum) or “scribe of fish (and) vegetables” (dub-sar ku6 nisi), can be found in a group of labor assignments from Girsu. However, these scribes appear on their own in these texts and are never associated with specific/named individuals in the city, and the references to areas of expertise should therefore almost certainly be understood as references to assigned responsibilities (functions) of regular scribes, rather than actual (permanent) specializations. As recently observed by Steven J. Garfinkle, an important aspect of the analysis of Ur III administrative procedures is to distinguish between an individual’s function in a specific transaction, and his/her professional identity within the administration as a whole.

Most references to Bibi’s activities in the city date to two distinct periods: Amar-Suen 7–8 and from Šu-Suen 7 to Ibbi-Suen 1. During Amar-Suen 7–8, Bibi is almost exclusively attested providing foodstuffs (typically animal cadavers) to the female (sesame) oil pressers (geme2 13 sur-sur). With his children well established within the city bureaucracy, Bibi would already have been a senior official at a somewhat advanced age at this point. However, as less than 3% of all tablets recovered from Irisagrig date to the period before Amar-Suen 7, the site’s administration during the first 70 years of the Ur III state remains largely unchartered, and we know nothing about the earlier stages of Bibi’s career in the city. Bibi continued to provide foodstuffs to the female oil pressers during his second period of increased activity, although the geme2 13 sur-sur is in these later texts referred to as geme2 geš-i3 sur-sur. During this period, he is also attested as

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16 See, for example, FS Sigrist 16 4 (P381724); and Lance B. Allred, “Cooks and Kitchens: Centralized Food Production in Late Third Millennium Mesopotamia,” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 2006), 108–11.
18 These two periods of attested activities by Bibi roughly correspond to the overall chronological distribution of the tablets from Irisagrig, with over 80% of all recovered texts being dated to either Amar-Suen 7–Amar-Suen 9, or Šu-Suen 5–Ibbi-Suen 3.
the recipient of animal fats and other products from various officials/scribes, and for the delivery of sesame oil and labor.

Ilum-asu was in all likelihood the brother of the scribe Mašum (ma-šum), who is attested receiving foodstuffs for the female sesame oil pressers from his father Bibi (S003789) from Amar-Suen 8/i to Šu-Suen 2/ix. Mašum’s receipts from Bibi consisted of different types of birds and animals (both live and as cadavers) and ordinary beer (CUSAS 40/2 235; P515019, Nisaba 15/2 82; P412146, Nisaba 15/2 158; P453677 and Nisaba 15/2 218; P388086). Other receipts of foodstuff for the gene2 (geš-)i3 sur-sur by Mašum, with no clear connection to his father Bibi, included barley and (fresh) fish (CUSAS 40/2 1810; P516594, CUSAS 40/2 1897; P516681 and Nisaba 15/2 120; P412120). Some ten years later, in Šu-Suen 9, Ilum-asu is himself attested as the recipient of sesame oil (i3-geš)19 from his father Bibi (CUSAS 40/2 1214; P515998), and other texts from the city, such as Nisaba 15/2 657 (P453987), demonstrate a clear link between Ilum-asu’s office and the collection of rations for the female sesame oil pressers. The last secure attestation of the scribe Mašum dates to Šu-Suen 8/v (Nisaba 15/2 441; P453846), thus overlapping with Ilum-asu’s earlier career as a scribe in the city.

In this context, it is also worth pointing out that in CUSAS 40/2 622 (P515406; and S014217), from Amar-Suen 8/xii, Bibi is again providing food for the gene2 <geš>-i3 sur-sur (animal cadavers and birds), this time through his son Ašgi-ibra (‘ašš-gi3-ib2-ra3), who thus also might be identified as an (older?) brother of Ilum-asu. Unfortunately, we only have this one reference to Ašgi-ibra in Irisagrig, and nothing further can be said about his activities in the city.

An unlikely additional brother of Ilum-asu is the scribe and chief household administrator (šabra) Aḫuamur (a-ḫu-a-mur), attested in Nisaba 15 415 (P333736; S001746) from Šu-Suen 7/ix, but the identification of Aḫuamur’s father Bibi in this text with the father of Ilum-asu remains unconvincing. Bibi is identified as a scribe (dub-sar) in the seals belonging to Ilum-asu and his brothers, and line 5 (obv) in Nisaba 15 415 appears to link an official named Bibi to the city of Mašan-puša (maš-kan2-pu-ša3).

Assuming that the text Santag 7 26 (P218101) from Ibbi-Suen 2 is from Irisagrig (see the somewhat similar CUSAS 40/2 1870; P516654), it is possible

that *Ilum-asu* had a son named Lu-Nanna, who followed the family tradition and pursued a career as a scribe in the city. It should be noted that a (royal) scribe named Lu-Nanna is securely attested in Irisagrig, from Amar-Suen 8/vi/24 (CUSAS 40/2 1465; P516249) to Šu-Suen 3/ix/5 (Nisaba 15/2 249; P453729). A problem with the identification of this Irisagrig official with *Ilum-asu’s* son Lu-Nanna in Santag 7 26, is the eight years without references to any Lu-Nanna in the period between the earlier texts and our single reference to Lu-Nanna (son of *Ilum-asu*) in Ibbi-Suen 2.\(^{20}\) Moreover, if the earlier Lu-Nanna indeed was *Ilum-asu’s* son (and thus Bibi’s grandson), we would have to assume that Bibi was (at least) 60 years old when he first appeared in our records at the end of Amar-Suen 7, and well into his seventies by the time he retired from his office toward the end of Ibbi-Suen 1. While not impossible, this has to be considered a rather unlikely scenario, especially if we take into account that Lu-Nanna was a relatively common name in the Ur III period.

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\(^{20}\) On the other hand, an equally long and unexpected period of absence can be observed for *Ilum-asu* himself, between his first appearance in the city in Amar-Suen 9/xii, in the recently published text Akkadica 140 99 1 (BDTNS: 205041), and his second attestation in the city’s administration, in Šu-Suen 7/vii in Nisaba 15/2 414 (P412049), after which he appears more frequently in the texts. Incidentally, this seven-year period of “silence” from *Ilum-asu* roughly coincides with the intermediate period with a limited number of attestations to Bibi, which occurred between Amar-Suen 7–8 and Šu-Suen 7–Ibbi-Suen 1.
The emerging picture of an administrative model that relies heavily on existing kinship ties should not come as a surprise. Scholars of the socio-economic history of early Mesopotamia have long recognized the importance of familial affiliations in establishing the rules for the organization of households and office inheritance within the state’s bureaucratic structures. In his 1966 monograph on the development of urbanism in early Mesopotamia, Robert McC. Adams wrote:

Clearly, there were groupings of nuclear families into ascriptive units organized at least in part along lines of descent. Such groups in some (and perhaps in most) cases corporately held title to agricultural lands. They also played a role in the organization of the crafts, of corvée labor called up by the state for certain purposes, and probably of the army. Such widely manifested functions suggest that lineage groupings had not become merely vestigial by late Early Dynastic and Akkadian times but, instead, were still both powerful and important.

Moreover, as demonstrated by Jacob L. Dahl, both patrilineal and fratilineal succession (typically a combination of the two) are frequently attested at all levels within the provincial administration of the Ur III state.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES OF Ilum-asu

The administrative functions of the scribe Ilum-asu, as attested in the recovered texts from Irisagrig, are outlined in Table 1 below. Two principal responsibilities within the administration stand out among the attestations:

1. Throughout the entire period of Ilum-asu’s activities in Irisagrig, he is attested as the recipient (šu ba-ti) of barley (nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 20) and

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23 Ilum-asu’s receipt of barley in the account Nisaba 15 897 (P387854) is recorded with kišib₃ “sealed (and received).” For a comprehensive discussion of Ur III bookkeeping accounts, and the primary documents upon which such accounts relied, see Robert K. Englund, “The Year:
of rations for groups of workers (nos. 15, 16, 17, 19). Once he received wool (no. 6), and once sesame oil (no. 10). These receipts were made from the wide range of specialized scribes (dub-sar mun-gazi, dub-sar siki, dub-sar iš), foremen (ugula gemet geš-iš sur-sur, ugula simug), and the “steward” (agrig). The rations received by Ilum-asu were intended for different types of male and female dependent workers, under the supervision of dedicated officials.

2. In addition to his role taking possession of barley and worker rations, Ilum-asu is frequently attested as the “conveyor” (giri), facilitating the “expenditure” (zi-ga) of labor and rations/barley for workers. In his capacity as conveyor, Ilum-asu was clearly expected to seal the transactions, and the only unsealed giri-PN tablet in our table is Akkadica 141991 from Amar-Suen 9/xiii (no. 1), possibly because it was written before Ilum-asu even owned a seal. Ur III receipts were typically sealed by the recipient of their transferred commodities, which would include labor, and it seems likely that the conveyor Ilum-asu was, also in these texts, the de-facto recipient of the booked out labor/commodities. The focus of these texts is either on the work conducted by geme- and guruš workers with dedicated foremen (nos. 1, 2, 7) and by workers with higher qualifications (no. 11), or on the rations/barley allocated to the workers in question (nos. 13, 14, 21).

CONCLUSIONS

The scribe Ilum-asu is attested in Irisagrig for at least 12 years, from Amar-Suen 9/xii until Ibbi-Suen 3. The texts show that he was primarily responsible for receiving barley and rations for different types of male and female dependent workers, overseen by a variety of specialized supervisors. He often served as a


“conveyor” (giri3), and in this capacity he booked out both labor and different types of rations and barley for work teams in the city.

Ilum-asu’s father Bibi, attested from Amar-Suen 7/xii to Ibbi-Suen 1/xi, was a “scribe of oils” (dub-sar i3), and was responsible for the provisioning of foodstuffs (mostly animal cadavers) to the female (sesame) oil pressers (geme2 (geš-)i3,sur-sur). Ilum-asu appears to have had (at least) two brothers working as scribes in the city, Mašum and Ašgi-ibra, and all three are attested as the recipients of foodstuff provisions from their father Bibi. It is possible that Ilum-asu also had a son named Lu-Nanna, who may have been a scribe in the city, although the concrete evidence for this identification is rather tenuous.

As recently noted by John P. Nielsen,26 “[f]amily and kinship may be rooted in the biology of procreation, but out of that reality emerged a range of cultural constructs expressed in Mesopotamian society, religion, politics, and institutions.” Ilum-asu and his family of scribes in Irisagrig offers another excellent example of how several generations of officials often ended up working alongside one another within the Ur III administration, and highlights the importance of kinship ties and familial relationships in the state’s organizational structures.

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Table 1. The scribe Ilum-asu’s administrative activities in Irisagrig.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Subject Matter</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Transaction</th>
<th>Seal</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>CDLI</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>AS9/xii/-</td>
<td>geme₂ / guruš (zu₂-si / ugula a-li₂-ni-su)²⁷</td>
<td>girî /</td>
<td>zi-ga</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Akkadica 141 99 1</td>
<td>BDTNS: 205041</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>dub-sar</td>
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<td>ŠS7/vii/-</td>
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<td>girî /</td>
<td>zi-ga</td>
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<td>Nisaba 15/2 414</td>
<td>P412049</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>dub-sar</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ŠS8/-/</td>
<td>še (la₂-ia₃-su-ga)²⁸</td>
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<td>šu ba-ti (ki</td>
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<td>geš-ši sur-sur-ta</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>ŠS8/-/</td>
<td>še (la₂-ia₃-su-ga)</td>
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<td>šu ba-ti (ki</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>ŠS8/-/</td>
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<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>šu ba-ti (&lt;ki&gt;</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>ŠS8/-/</td>
<td>siki / še</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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<td>geme₂ / guruš ([… ……])</td>
<td>girî /</td>
<td>&lt;zi-ga&gt;</td>
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<td>Nisaba 15/2 439</td>
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<td>šu ba-ti (pi-sa</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CUSAS 40/2 565</td>
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<td>dub-ba ... ı₃-</td>
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<td>gal₂)</td>
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<td>ŠS9/-/</td>
<td>še (si₁₃-tum še na-di₃-tum ²ištaran)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>&lt;šu ba-ti (ki pu-šu-anumta)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>CUSAS 40/2 1188</td>
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²⁷ For zu₂-si “sheep plucking” in this text, and in no. 11 (Nisaba 15/2 534), see Zwaïd and Cripps, “Some Ur III Texts from Irisagrig,” 100, n. 3.
²⁸ For su.g (Akkadian ri₃ʻûbum) and la₂-ia₃ su-ga “repaid/restored arrear,” see Dahl, Ur III Texts, 36–37, n. 92.
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<td>i3-geš</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>šu ba-ti (ki biz-biz dub-sar i3-ta)</td>
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<td>giris / dub-sar</td>
<td>&lt;zi-ga&gt;</td>
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<td>Nisaba 15/2 534</td>
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<td>še-ba (lu₂-kin-gis-a lugal)</td>
<td>giris / dub-sar</td>
<td>šu ba-ab-ti / zi-ga</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Nisaba 15/2 627</td>
<td>P453967</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>IS1/x/-</td>
<td>še ( [...] u₄ l₁(diš)-še₃)</td>
<td>giris / dub-sar</td>
<td>zi-ga</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>CUSAS 40/2 1150</td>
<td>P515934</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>IS1/i-xiii/-</td>
<td>še-ba (geme₂ geš₁₃ sur-sur sag-dub nu-dab / uгуula a-da-lals)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>šu ba-ti</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Nisaba 15/2 657</td>
<td>P453987</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>IS1/i-xiii/-</td>
<td>še-ba (geme₂ uš₂-bar sag-dub nu-dab / nu-banda₁ a-li₂-ni-su)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>šu ba-ti</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>IS1/i-xiii/-</td>
<td>še-ba (geme₂ / ARAD₂)</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>IS1/i-xii/-</td>
<td>še-ba (guruš azlag₂ ba-uš₂ / nu-banda₁ a-li₂-ni-su)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>IS1/i-xii/-</td>
<td>še-ba (guruš eren₂ mar-sa ba-uš₂ / uuguula qu₂-ru-ud-sas)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>IS2/-/</td>
<td>še (šuku nu₃-ši₃-kiria)</td>
<td>dub-sar</td>
<td>kisib₁ (i₃-dub di₃-ni-ik-turn₂)</td>
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<td>Nisaba 15/2 897</td>
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<td>IS2/x/-</td>
<td>še-ba (lu₂-kin-gis-a lugal)</td>
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<td>šu ba-ab-ti / zi-ga</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>IS3/-/</td>
<td>še giš-e₃-a (a-sa₃ gid₃-da)</td>
<td>giris / dub-sar</td>
<td>- (pisan dub-ba)</td>
<td>CUSAS 40/2 409</td>
<td>P515193</td>
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REFERENCES


