Deciphering proto-Elamite

Jacob L. Dahl, Beijing University 10-6-2007
Un-deciphering linear-Elamite

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Original abstract:

- (When) can we distinguish early Iranian writing from early Mesopotamian writing?
- Can we isolate distinct writing phases in proto-Elamite?
- Can we verify Meriggi’s proposal of the existence of restricted „vocabularies“ in proto-Elamite?
- Can we use what we know about the proto-Elamite writing system to say something about early Iran?
Outline

- Origin of writing
  - proto-Elamite
    - paleography
    - chronology (internal and absolute)
  - linear-Elamite
    - corpus
    - content (or lack thereof)
Asking Basic Questions

Susa before the excavations
Susa after the excavations: more questions than answers
Susa after the excavations: more questions than answers
Susa after the excavations: more questions than answers
Origins of Writing Basics

Reconstructing the history of writing without a secure stratigraphy

From tokens to Tablets
Reconstructing the history of writing without a secure stratigraphy

From tokens to Tablets

Origins of Writing Basics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Writing Phase</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3400</td>
<td>Early Uruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3300</td>
<td>Early Uruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3200</td>
<td>Late Uruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3100</td>
<td>Jemdet Nasr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3000</td>
<td>Early Dynastic I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2900</td>
<td>Early Dynastic II</td>
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<tr>
<td>2800</td>
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<td>Early Dynastic III</td>
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<tr>
<td>2600</td>
<td>Dynasty of Akkad</td>
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<td>2500</td>
<td>Gudea of Lagash</td>
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<tr>
<td>2400</td>
<td>Ur III</td>
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<tr>
<td>2300</td>
<td>Old Assyrian</td>
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<td>2200</td>
<td>Old Babylonian</td>
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<tr>
<td>2100</td>
<td>Linear-Elamite</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Standard display texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
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</table>

Numerical tablets and clay bullae
Archaic texts from Uruk: Writing Phase Uruk IV, Writing Phase Uruk III
Archaic texts from Ur
Texts from Fara
Old Sumerian texts
Old Akkadian texts
Neo-Sumerian texts
Old Assyrian texts
Old Assyrian texts
Old Babylonian texts
Old Babylonian texts
more than 300 texts in the Ashmolean Museum digitized by the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) in 2007

the collection will form the basis for future paleographic studies of cuneiform
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Proto-Elamite Basics

- 1,600 texts
- 10,000 lines of text
- partially derived from proto-cuneiform
- semantic decipherment in progress
- nested pseudo-syllabary?
Proto-Elamite Paleography

Graphic Development of Sign Repertoire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M362</th>
<th>M269</th>
<th>M106a</th>
<th>M9</th>
<th>M206g</th>
<th>M102e</th>
<th>M309a</th>
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<tr>
<td>Early</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M362" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M269" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M106a" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M9" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M206g" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M102e" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M309a" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Late</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M359" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M269c" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M106b" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M9" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M292r" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M102d" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="M246m" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Semantic Development of Sign Repertoire

- Early: ![M362](image) Animal By-Products
- Late: ![M269c](image) Non-Object signs
- Animal By-Products

Structural Development of Text Micro Structure

- Early: "owner" described with one (complex) sign: ![M359](image)
- Late: "owner" described with string of signs: ![M269c](image)
Local Proto-Elamite

- Tying the relative chronology to the absolute
- Texts from across Iran
  - Susa - Sialk - Ozbaki
  - Susa - Malyan
Local Proto-Elamite

Tying the relative chronology to the absolute

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## Preliminary Results: Ripe with problems

### Proto-Elamite Absolute Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Susa: writing Phase</th>
<th>Susa: Akr. 1</th>
<th>Susa: stratified tablets</th>
<th>Susa: Morgan’s tablets unstratified</th>
<th>Malyan: stratified tablets</th>
<th>Sialk: stratified tablets</th>
<th>Ozbaki: no published stratigraphy</th>
<th>Absolute chronology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>late proto-Elamite</td>
<td>14b</td>
<td>CahDAFI 1, 58 n° 1</td>
<td>MDP 17, 153</td>
<td>TUV II</td>
<td>M 1155</td>
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<td>2950 BCE</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15a</td>
<td>CahDAFI 1, 58 n° 6</td>
<td>MDP 6, 213</td>
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<td>15b</td>
<td>CahDAFI 1, 58 n° 5</td>
<td>MDP 26, 5240</td>
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<td>middle proto-Elamite</td>
<td>16a</td>
<td>CahDAFI 1, 58 n° 14</td>
<td>MDP 17, 96+</td>
<td>TUV III</td>
<td>M 1469</td>
<td>IV.2</td>
<td>3000 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16b</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M 1475</td>
<td>IV.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16c</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ozbaki 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>early proto-Elamite</td>
<td>17ax / 17a</td>
<td>CahDAFI 1, 43 n° 1-3</td>
<td>MDP 17, 12</td>
<td>IV.1</td>
<td>S.1624</td>
<td>S.1628 etc.</td>
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<td>(unstratified)</td>
<td>MDP 17, 40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uruk-style (Uruk IV and V)</td>
<td>17b</td>
<td>CahDAFI 3, 103 n° 2</td>
<td>IV.1 S.539</td>
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<td>CahDAFI 3, 103 n° 6</td>
<td>S.1630 etc.</td>
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</table>
Linear-Elamite Basics

- less than 30 texts
- 3 groups
  - display texts
  - non-display texts
  - metal vases
- display texts belong to one monument constructed by Puzur-Inšušinak (ca. 2100 BC)
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Got Writing?

Texts A, B, C, E, P, U

Text O
Got Writing?

Texts A, B, C, E, P, U

Text O
Got Writing?

Texts A, B, C, E, P, U

Text O
Modern Parallels

Writing systems of Silas John and Sequoyah
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