
MITANNI PALAEOGRAPHY: A BRIEF LOOK AT THE TUŠRATTA LETTERS



ZENOBIA S. HOMAN

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

At present 33 cuneiform tablets have been discovered which have been identified as Mitannian (14 from el-Amarna, 6 from Boğazköy, 6 from Tell Brak, 3 from Alalah IV, 2 from Tall Bazi, 1 from Umm-el-Mara and 1 from Nuzi) (**Fig.1**). The most accessible of the Mitanni tablets are the Amarna documents (also known as the Tušratta letters), of which thirteen are written in Akkadian and one in Hurrian. They are all located either in the British Museum (London) or Vorderasiatisches Museum (Berlin). In isolation, these documents raised some of the following questions: in which ways do the writing styles on each tablet differ? How are sign-forms connected to tablet-genre? How does the Hurrian letter differ from the Akkadian documents?

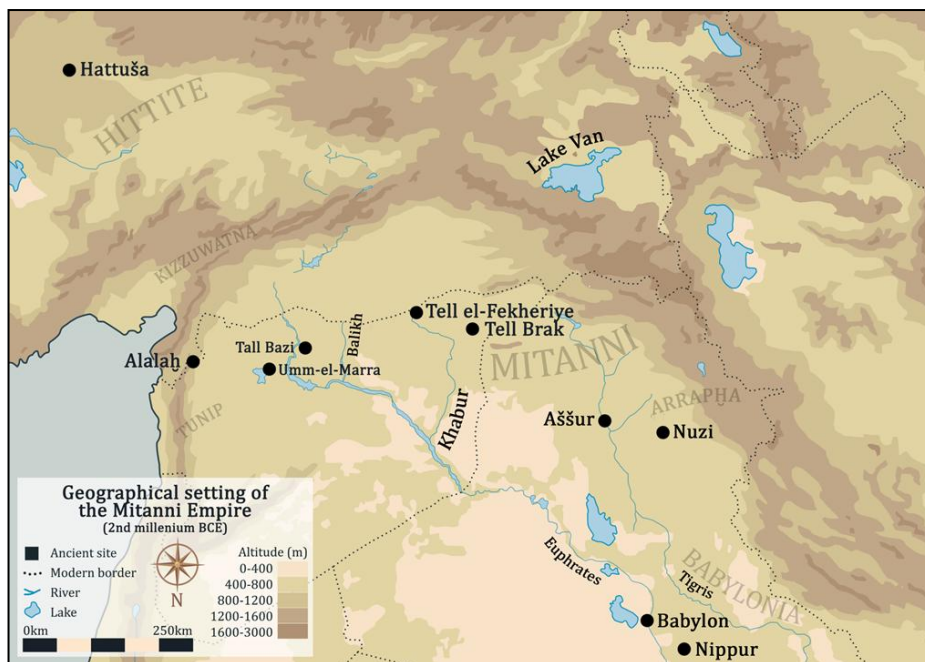


Fig. 1.

Map indicating the approximate area of the Mitanni Empire; drawn by author.

Palaeography remains an under-researched field in cuneiform studies, and often observations are based on intuition rather than subjected to scientific methodology. The approach used in this study is statistical, based on a database of sign-instances¹. This allows for the establishment of visual parameters of variation, and the calculation of percentages (such as the occurrence of different sign-forms). Using these data it is possible to create graphs illustrating sign-form frequency as well as combined frequency (co-occurring features). The aim of the database is to offer a more objective approach to comparing archives than previously possible. In the case of this project, it will eventually compare Mitanni (and ‘Assyro-Mitannian’) to Middle Assyrian, Middle Babylonian and Nuzi.

From the Tušratta letters the total number of extracted sign-instances was 17 380, with 215 different signs. Of these 215 signs, 22 were recorded only once and another 20 less than five times; a more balanced total is therefore 180-200 signs. This is comparable to contemporary corpora. However, of these 215 signs only 25 also have different sign-forms – and only 6 of these can be determined with certainty. This is unusually standardised compared to other corpora, where it is common for (many) more differences to occur.

Conclusions should not be drawn from an isolated corpus prior to comparison with other archives – but it is possible to provide some initial observations. The two largest tablets in the Tušratta collection - EA 24 (43.5 x 25 cm) and EA 25 (37 x 21.5 cm) (but possibly EA 22 (30.5 x 17.5 cm) and EA 29 (43.2 x 24.9 cm) as well) - stand out from the others in various ways. They have unusual or less prevalent signs-forms in common, namely forms of RU (111), AK (127), TA (248) and MEŠ (754), and they have the same variant of NU (112) (**Fig. 2-3**). Moreover, the impression of signs is similar: they all have a high frequency of middle- to low placed horizontal wedges (compared against the verticals), strong emphasis on wedges in signs such as BA (14), SU (15) and ZU (16), and a deeply impressed U (661) and DIŠ (748). In addition, the smallest tablet, EA 30 (4.8 x 6 cm), is noteworthy for having only common sign-forms. Altogether, this potentially represents a relationship between sign-forms and variants, and tablet-shape or genre.

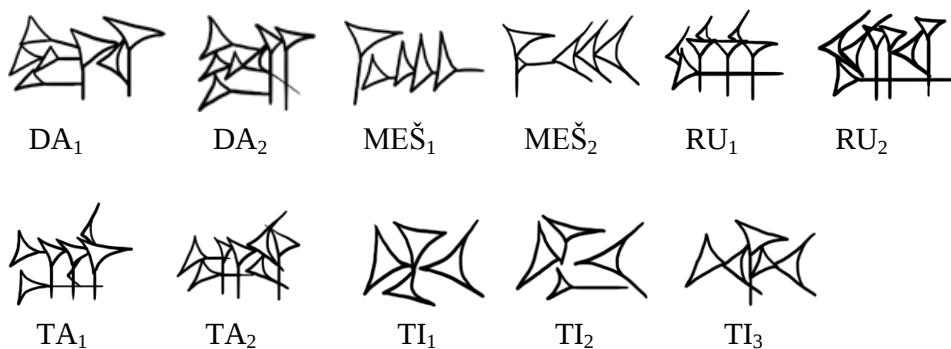


Fig. 2.

The different sign-forms found in the Tušratta documents (illustrated after photos from the British Museum, London, and Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin)



Fig. 3.

Variants of NU (illustrated after photos from (illustrated after photos from the British Museum, London, and Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin).

EA 24 is not only the largest tablet in the collection, it is also completely written in Hurrian. Consequently, this raises questions about the importance of language, and the identity of the scribe. These large documents were heavy and visually impressive. Although unconfirmed, it seems likely that their purpose was not only to be read, but also to make a political statement. From this follows that if appearance was a key purpose of these documents, then it is unsurprising if the script impressed on them was purposefully different. Would this have been a conscious decision made by the scribe? Were certain scribes appointed to certain jobs (small versus large documents)?

Considering the bigger picture it has to be remembered that the parameters which determine differences are incredibly small in this case. Little is known about scribal education in the period in which the Mitanni tablets were written, and to date no Mitanni school tablets have been found. However, the standardized nature of the script in the Mitanni Amarna letters, and the absence of a large variety of sign-forms, hints at a centrally organized imperial education system.

On a technical note, it should be clear that the terminology of signs, sign-forms and sign-variation still lacks firm footing. Many would agree that there should at least be different levels of distinction between scribe and scribal school. More nuanced layers, such as order of impression (displacement of clay), remain difficult to detect and debatable. Therefore, determining levels of sign-variation is one of the biggest challenges in cuneiform palaeography. To what extent is hand-writing conscious, unconscious, or the result of education? This is what decides to which degree it is scientifically possible to distinguish identity in hand-writing; something many would like to see, but requires much more evidence than currently available.

NOTES

¹ Designed by Dr. Leszek Świrski, Faculty of Computer Science and Technology, University of Cambridge (UK).

ABBREVIATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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