

HOW TO CLASSIFY PIGS: OLD BABYLONIAN AND MIDDLE BABYLONIAN LEXICAL TEXTS

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Résumé

La liste lexicale des animaux sauvages, exercice scribal créé à l'époque paléo-babylonienne, montre la classification ambiguë du cochon (šáh) à la fois comme animal sauvage et domestique. La tradition lexicale n'est pas liée à la biologie ou à la taxonomie biologique, mais suit plutôt un système de classement fondé sur des principes culturels et linguistiques. À l'intérieur de ce système, la division principale du règne animal sépare les animaux domestiques des sauvages, de sorte que l'existence d'espèces relevant des deux catégories crée une difficulté. Plusieurs versions de cette liste, datées des périodes paléo- et médio-babylonienne, montrent les diverses manières dont les scribes ont traité ce problème.

Mots-clés : cochons, listes lexicales, classification sémantique.

Abstract

The list of wild animals, a lexical exercise created in the Old Babylonian period, demonstrates the ambiguous classification of pigs (šáh) as both wild and domestic. The lexical tradition does not deal with biology or biological taxonomy, but rather follows an ordering system based on cultural and linguistic principles. Within this system, the main division in the animal kingdom is the one between domestic and wild animals, so that the existence of species that straddle those categories created a difficulty. Several versions of the list from the Old and Middle Babylonian periods demonstrate different ways in which the scribes dealt with this problem.

Key words: pigs, lexical lists, semantic classification.

From the very beginning of the lexical tradition in ancient Mesopotamia, domestic animals and wild animals were treated separately. Lexical lists do not deal with an abstract sense of Biology, and classification in the biological sense of the word is not a concern of the ancient lexicographers. The existence, however, of both wild and domestic pigs did pose a problem for a proper ordering of the Sumerian lexicon. The solutions used in various versions of the ancient list illustrate different ways of dealing with a classificatory difficulty.

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In the Old Babylonian period, the thematic lexical list now usually labeled *ur₅-ra* (or *HAR-ra* = *hubullu*) is best known in a more-or-less standardized version from Nippur¹. The text was used in scribal education and is attested in numerous exemplars. The third chapter of the Old Babylonian Nippur version of *ur₅-ra* contains the terminology for domestic animals (sheep, goats, cows, and equids), wild animals, and meat cuts. In its most recent reconstruction the text has 507 lines²:

1-262	domestic animals
263-401	wild animals
402-506	meat cuts
507	doxology: Praise to Nisaba

The borderlines between these sections are never in any doubt; the section domestic animals ends with donkeys abruptly followed by a long list of snake names, indicating the beginning of wild animals. In the section meat cuts every line begins with the determinative *UZU*. Occasionally scribes use double horizontal lines to further accentuate the sub-division of the list.

In general, wild animals that are related to domestic animals are listed with the wild animals rather than with their domestic relatives. The list does not represent (biological) taxonomy, but follows an ordering system that is based on cultural and linguistic principles. Thus *am* (wild ox) is not found in the section *gud* (ox), but rather with *am-si* (elephant) and *am-si kur-ra* (camel). For (domestic) pig and (wild) boar, however, there are no separate words in Sumerian, so that all of the pig terminology (wild and domestic) is found in one place among wild animals.

In the Nippur list, the rather odd placement of the section pigs (lines 377-385) between turtles and ants may reflect the difficulty in assigning them their proper place. The wild animals section begins with the list of snakes and continues with other dangerous animals such as lions, wolves and leopards. This section is naturally followed by other large mammals, including ape, various goat-like animals (stags and mountain goats) and wild bovines. The lines 324-328 apparently end this section with collective words for animals:

<i>ú-ma-am</i>	animals (loan from Akkadian <i>umāmu</i>)
<i>níg-ki</i>	herd of wild animals
<i>a-za-lu-lu</i> ³	living creatures
<i>a-za-lu-lu</i>	vermin
<i>níg-zi-ġál-edin-na</i>	wild animals

¹ For a discussion of Old Babylonian *ur₅-ra* see VELDHUIS, 2004, pp. 86-89.

² See <http://cuneiform.ucla.edu/dcclt/web/Q000001/Q000001.html>, Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (DCCLT).

³ The repetition of the item *a-za-lu-lu* implies that the word had two different Akkadian translations (*nammaštu* and *zērmandu*), which were supplied orally by the teacher and memorized by the student. Later tradition had no less than five items *a-za-lu-lu* with five different Akkadian equivalents (*MSL* 8/2, pp. 40-41).

This looks like an appropriate final passage for a list of wild animals and it is likely that some version of the list did indeed end here, as indicated by the summation of the scribal curriculum in Edubba D 13-14⁴:

I have written all the lines from ^d*Inana-téš* (a list of personal names) until *níg-zi-ġál-edin-na* as far as *lú = šu*.

The list of wild animals continues with small nasty animals such as lice (eh), insects (umùn), flies (nim), locusts (bir₅), ants (kiš₈), scorpions (ġír-tab), and finally frogs (bí-za-za). Oddly placed between the locusts and the ants we find the rodents (péš), followed by a short section on turtles and lizards, followed by pigs (šáh).

The similarity between rodents and pigs is that they are both between wild and domesticated. Rodents as well as pigs were kept, fattened, and slaughtered; both were also caught in the wild. The association with turtles and lizards is less clear.

The section pigs in the Nippur text runs as follows:

377.	šáh	pig
378.	šáh ġiš-gi	wild pig
379.	šáh ud šú-uš	daily pig (daily fed?)
380.	šáh niga	fattened pig
381.	šáh má-gan	Magan pig
382.	šáh nam-erím-ma	pig of the Oath(?)
383.	šáh nam-en-ak	pig owned by a lord ⁵
384.	šáh zé-eh tur ⁶	piglet
385.	megida _x (KUN)	sow

At least some of these words clearly belong in the wild pig vocabulary (šáh ġiš-gi), while others are part of the semantic field of domestic pigs (šáh niga; šáh nam-en-ak).

While ur₅-ra was reasonably standardized in Old Babylonian Nippur, this was not the case for Babylonia at large. Different cities had their own version of the list; the composition continuously developed, meaning in practice that items could be added or omitted or that whole sections were moved. The section šáh is preserved in two other Old Babylonian versions of the word list. One comes from Nippur, but follows a non-standard text. While the text is broken and may not be analyzed in much detail, it is certain that in this version the pigs appear with the other big mammals⁷.

⁴ See the edition in CIVIL, 1985 with commentary p. 74. Civil understands *níg-zi-ġál-edin-na* in this context as students' idiom for « obsolete words ».

⁵ The term *nam-en-ak* (or *nam-en-na*) probably refers to an animal that is fed and supervised by a farmer but owned by somebody else. See VAN DE MIEROOP, 1993, p. 168.

⁶ With variant *šáh zah(NE)^{eh} tur*, confirming the now common reading *šáh zah tur* in Ur III sources (previously read *šáh izi-tur*).

⁷ *SLT 51* (CBS 6434) reverse column 2; <http://cdli.ucla.edu/P229115>; for this tablet see VELDHUIS, 2004, p. 91.

More revealing is a large tablet of unknown origin now housed in the Yale Babylonian collection (*YBC 4679*)⁸. This tablet, almost entirely preserved, has an extended version of the list of domestic animals (originally over 340 lines), followed by the list of wild animals. The section domestic animals ends (as in the Nippur version) with equids; the section wild animals runs as follows:

Reverse column 3		
36.	šáh	pig
37.	šáh ġiš-gi	wild pig
38.	šáh niga	fattened pig
39.	šáh ama-gan	breeding pig
40.	šáh zé-eh tur	piglet
41.	šáh SIG ₄ -SIG ₄	?
42.	[šáh n]am-a-a-ak	pig owned by a lord
Column 4		
1.	šáh LIŠ-a	?
2.	šáh iri	domestic pig
3.	šáh si-mu-ra	Simurru pig
4.	megidá	sow
5.	am	wild ox
6.	am-si	elephant
7.	am-si har-ra-an-na	camel
8.	am kur-ra	camel?
9.	sún	wild cow
10.	lu-lim	stag
11.	udu-ti	wild sheep ⁹
12.	piriġ	lion
13.	nemur _x (PIRIG.TUR)	leopard
14.	maš-darà	wild ram (error for darà-maš)

Here the text suddenly stops, with more than one and a half column left unscribed. Significantly, the Yale version places the pigs between the domestic and the wild animals, illustrating the ambiguity of their classification.

A final example is UM 29-15-944 from Nippur¹⁰. This is a typical Kassite exercise text with on the obverse an undeciphered (literary?) extract in landscape format, and on the reverse a few lines from a lexical list in portrait format. The reverse reads as follows:

⁸ <http://cdli.ucla.edu/P235796>.

⁹ This item is usually written udu-til (*bibbu*) and was read until recently udu-idim; see CIVIL, 1989, p. 17. The present text confirms Civil's reading.

¹⁰ See VELDHUIS, 2000, p. 78; p. 92 fig. 18; <http://cdli.ucla.edu/P230844>.

1.	šáh si-mur-rum	Simurru pig
2.	nam-ni-ak-a	(pig) owned by a lord
3.	ġiš-gi	wild (boar)
4.	iri nita	domestic male (pig)
5.	^{munus} megidá ¹¹	sow
6.	^{munus} megidá šag ₄ <U>	pregnant sow
7.	šag ₄ -peš-šu	pregnant (sow)
8.	ù-tu	(sow) that has given birth
9.	nu-MIN	sow that has not (idem)
10.	zu-zu	(sow) that has been mounted ¹²
11.	nu-MIN	(sow) that has not been (idem)

The text uses some unusual orthographies (for instance peš-šu for peš₄ = ŠAG₄xA) and generally omits repeated elements (šáh and megiddá), a convention well-known from the Middle Babylonian lexical texts from Emar and Ugarit. The first five lines are more or less expected and identical or almost identical to lines found in versions discussed above. More interesting are the lines 6-11, which contain a set of expressions for the reproductive stages of domestic animals. This set is rather standardized and is in one form or another found for various female animals such as ewe, cow, she-goat, and jenny in different versions of the list of domestic animals from various periods. This set of qualifications is one of the building blocks of the thematic lists, comparable to, for instance, the set of colours. It is, however, never applied to wild animals and this is the only tablet in the lexical corpus known so far where it is applied to pigs. The passage is unparalleled in the lexical tradition, even though it is created out of standard building blocks; as a result the pigs, for the duration of this exercise, have become a little more domestic and a little less wild.

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¹¹ The spelling of megidá with MUNUS is otherwise unknown to me.

¹² The regular expression is ġiš zu-zu «that knows the penis.»

