

ANIMADVERSIONES

Did Shalmaneser V Conquer the City of Samaria? An Investigation into the *ma/ba*-sign in Chronicle 1

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The only piece of extra-biblical evidence regarding Shalmaneser's conquest of Samaria has been preserved in Neo-Babylonian Chronicle 1 (Text A = BM 92502). This tablet reports that Shalmaneser conquered the city ^{𐎢𐎠𐎫𐎠𐎢𐎽} *ma/ba-ra-'i-in* (I 28). Some Assyriologists, however, hesitated to identify this city with Samaria for two reasons. First, the handwriting of the scribe is unclear and therefore the third sign can be read either *ma* or *ba*; second, the spelling of Samaria in this tablet is different from the spelling commonly used for Samaria in the rest of cuneiform sources. Despite these problems, many modern historians use this chronicle to reconstruct the fall of the Northern Kingdom. In order to answer the question whether the city mentioned in this tablet can be identified with the city of Samaria, in this paper I will present a detailed analysis of the cuneiform signs *ba* and *ma* based on the enhanced digital photographs of tablet BM 92502.

Preliminary observations

Before approaching the problem of identification of this sign let us offer a short review of the *status quaestionis*. The first publication of Text A of Chronicle 1 by H. Winckler states that in this tablet it is impossible to distinguish *ma*-signs from *ba*-signs and in his transliteration Winckler opted for *ba* without offering any persuasive argument¹. An important argument to identify this city with Samaria was offered by H. Tadmor. In this argument, which was of philological nature, he stated that the writing ^{𐎢𐎠𐎫𐎠𐎢𐎽} *ma-ra-'i-in* is "a good Neo-Babylonian rendering of the Aramaic form of Samaria"². Since the Aramaic form *Šmrjn* is attested in Ezr 4:10 (vocalized *Šāmērājin*) and in the Elephantine papyri³, Tadmor suggested that "the Assyrian form *Sa-me-ri-(i)-na* reflects this Aramaic *Šmrjn* probably pronounced at that time *Šamērēn/în* or *Šāmērajn*... The *aleph* in *Šamara'in* is replaced in *Šmrjn* by the glide *yod*"⁴. Thus he concluded that "two parallel groups existed side by side: (1) *Šōmērôn*, the regular biblical form which presupposes an earlier

¹ H. Winckler, "Studien und Beiträge zur babylonisch-assyrischen Geschichte, I. Chronicon Babylonicum editum et commentario instructum", *ZA* 2 (1887) 148-168 and 299-307, esp. 152.

² H. Tadmor, "The Campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: A Chronological-Historical Study, II. The Fall of Samaria", *JCS* 12 (1958) 33-40, esp. 40.

³ A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford 1923) 30:29.

⁴ Tadmor, *JCS* 12, 40.

**Šāmārān*, and (2) *Sāmerīna*, *Šāmara'in*, attested in the contemporaneous cuneiform documents and in the later Aramaic"⁵.

Tadmor's opinion has been followed by the majority of scholars. Some scholars still offer both possible readings (*ba/ma*), e.g. B. Becking⁶, A. K. Grayson⁷, K. L. Younger⁸; the others read the second sign as *ma*, e.g. J. A. Brinkman⁹, J.-J. Glassner¹⁰, G. Galil¹¹, J. H. Hayes and J. K. Kuan¹², N. Na'aman¹³, and R. Zadok¹⁴.

H. Tadmor and the scholars who followed his argumentation, however, did not answer the question why we should prefer the reading ^{𐤁𐤌}šá-ma-ra-'i-in instead of ^{𐤁𐤌}šá-ba-ra-'i-in. The argument that there is no such city as Šabara'in is insufficient since in this chronicle there are cities that have not yet been identified with any known city, such as the city of Ḥararatum that occurs only in Chronicle 1 II 25. Thus the goal of this paper is to study the handwriting of BM 92502 (Text A) and to determine the value of the second sign in *šá-x-ra-'i-in*. If we can show that this is a *ba*-sign than we should no longer use this tablet to reconstruct the last days of Samaria and consequently we should seriously re-evaluate any historical reconstructions of the fall of Samaria available at present. On the other hand, if we can show that this sign could be a *ma*-sign and accepting H. Tadmor's analysis (see above), then we can identify this city with Samaria.

Before we approach the analysis of the signs *ba* and *ma*, it is necessary to determine the corpus of tablets we should study. A. K. Grayson listed three tablets as fragments of Chronicle 1: BM 92502 (Text A), 75976 (Text B), 75977 (Text C). However, J. A. Brinkman suggested that fragments BM 75976 and 75977 were written by another hand than BM 92502. Moreover, according to Brinkman these two small fragments should not be taken as another version of Text A¹⁵. Therefore I will focus only on the handwriting of BM 92502 (Text A).

In tablet BM 92502 there are altogether 42 *ma*-signs and 8 *ba*-signs except the sign investigated in this paper (I 28). Out of these 42 *ma*-signs 5 signs are badly damaged (III 20; IV 2, 18, 38, 39b). Thus we have 37 *ma*-signs that can be used for the purpose of our analysis. Similarly out of 8 *ba*-signs 1 sign (IV 39c) is badly damaged and we have 7 *ba*-signs to be analyzed.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ B. Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Summary* (SHCANE 2; Leiden 1992) 23.

⁷ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (TCS 5; Locust Valley, N.Y. 1975) 73.

⁸ K. L. Younger, "The Fall of Samaria in Light of Recent Research", *CBQ* 61 (1999) 461-482, esp. 461-462.

⁹ J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia, 1158-722 B.C.* (AnOr 43; Roma 1968) 244.

¹⁰ J.-J. Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta, GA 2004) 194-195.

¹¹ G. Galil, "The Last Years of the Kingdom of Israel and the Fall of Samaria", *CBQ* 57 (1995) 52-64, esp. 54.

¹² J. L. Hayes and J. K. Kuan, "The Final Years of Samaria (730-720 BC)", *Bib* 72 (1991) 153-181, esp. 160-180.

¹³ N. Na'aman, "The Historical Background to the Conquest of Samaria (720 BC)", *Bib* 71 (1990) 206-225, esp. 207.

¹⁴ *RGTC* (= TAVO Beiheft B/7) 8, 285.

¹⁵ J. A. Brinkman, "The Babylonian Chronicle Revisited", in: I. Tzvi Abusch - J. Huehnergard - P. Steinkeller (eds), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta, GA 1990) 73-104, esp. 79-86.

Forms of *ba*- and *ma*-signs

In the Neo-Babylonian and Late-Babylonian scripts the *ma*-sign assumed several forms of which two are pertinent for our study: first, in order to distinguish the *ma*-sign from the *ba*-sign the scribes made the upper wedge longer and often the middle wedge was closer to the lower wedge; second, a less distinguishable form had the upper and the lower wedge equally long¹⁶. Having at our disposal the enhanced digital photographs of 37 *ma*-signs, we can notice that the scribes used besides the two forms mentioned above (Type 1 and 2 respectively) also a third form in which the upper wedge is shorter than the lower one (Type 3).

A typical Late-Babylonian form of the *ba*-sign had the lower wedge longer. In some texts the hallmark of the *ba*-sign is also the orientation of the wedges, i.e. the upper and the lower wedges were oriented inwards¹⁷. However, none of these forms occurs in this tablet and in consequence the *ba*-sign in this tablet are almost identical with the *ma*-sign.

The study of the handwriting of the scribe demonstrates that the *ma*- and *ba*-signs of this tablet can be divided into three categories according to the length of the upper horizontal wedge (Type 1, 2, and 3) and into three subcategories according to the position of the middle horizontal wedge (A, B, and C).

Type 1 – the upper wedge is longer

The common feature of this *ma*-sign is the length of the upper horizontal wedge. In this case the upper wedge is distinctively longer than the other two horizontal wedges. A typical representative of this category is the sign in line II 25. The upper wedge is clearly longer and larger than the other two wedges. According to the position of the middle wedge this type can be divided into two subcategories.

Type 1A: The distinguishing mark of this subtype is the position of the middle wedge. It is impressed closer to the lower wedge and thus the upper wedge is distinctly separate from the middle and the lower wedges. Two *ma*-signs of this subtype were identified in the tablet (I 9; III 21b), but no *ba*-sign.

Type 1C: The middle wedge of this subcategory is impressed exactly in the midst between the upper and the lower horizontal wedges. The scribe used this type of the *ma*-sign seven times (I 11¹⁸, 34¹⁹; II 25; III 4a²⁰, 4b, 23, 41) and once for the *ba*-sign (III 31c²¹).

¹⁶ Fossey, *Manuel d'Assyriologie* II, 682-683 no. 22540-22564, Labat no. 342, *ABZ* no. 342, *MesZL* no. 552.

¹⁷ Fossey, *Manuel d'Assyriologie* II, 4-5 no. 124-137, Labat no. 5, *ABZ* no. 5, *MesZL* no. 14.

¹⁸ When properly illuminated, the sign has the upper wedge longer than the other two horizontal wedges.

¹⁹ The sign in I 34 has a sharper angle to the upper wedge thus separating the upper wedge even more from the other two wedges.

²⁰ The lower wedge of this sign is damaged but it is still possible to see that the upper wedge was longer than the lower one.

²¹ This sign because of the lack of space is compressed; however, the upper wedge is distinctly longer.

Type 2 – the upper and the lower wedges are equally long

The common feature of this category is the fact that even in a close study I was not able to determine whether the upper horizontal wedge is longer or shorter than the lower horizontal wedge. This type could be considered a transitory category between Type 1 and Type 3 and it contains most *ma*- and *ba*-signs. The signs can be divided into three subcategories:

Type 2A: The distinguishing mark of this subtype is the position of the middle wedge. It is impressed closer to the lower wedge and thus the upper wedge is distinctly separate from the middle and the lower wedges. This subtype was used five times for the *ma*-sign (II 27; III 14, 31b; IV 31, 39a) and once for the *ba*-sign (IV 12).

Type 2B: The middle horizontal wedge of this subtype is located closer to the upper wedge and thus the lower wedge is separated from the middle and the upper wedge. No *ba*-sign of this type was found. It was used only once for the *ma*-sign (III 31a).

Type 2C: Most *ma*-signs of this tablet fall into this category. There is no clearly distinguishable mark except the fact that the upper wedge is more pronounced and the upper and the lower wedges are almost equally long. The middle horizontal wedge is equally distant from the upper and the lower wedges. It was used twelve times for the *ma*-sign (I 3, 18²²; II 33²³, 37²⁴, 40²⁵, 42²⁶; III 10, 17, 18, 21a, 42; IV 7) and five times for the *ba*-sign (II 22²⁷; III 27, 30²⁸, 33²⁹, IV 11³⁰).

Type 3 – the upper wedge is shorter

The common feature of this category is the length of the upper wedge. This wedge is distinctively shorter but emphasized. It is possible to distinguish two ways of writing the *ma*-sign within this category (subtype B and C).

Type 3B: This subtype is similar to Type 2B, i.e. the middle wedge is closer to the upper wedge. It was used only once for the *ma*-sign (I 35). No *ba*-sign of this type was found in the tablet.

²² When properly illuminated and measured it can be seen that the upper wedge is as long as the lower wedge.

²³ The lower wedge of this sign is partly damaged, but on the contrast photography it appears as long as the upper wedge.

²⁴ The overemphasized upper wedge gives the impression that the middle and the lower wedges are closer to each other as in Type 2A, however, when carefully measured, the distance between the wedges is the same (Type 2C).

²⁵ The lower part of the upper horizontal wedge is longer and thus the upper wedge is as long as the lower wedge.

²⁶ Even though the horizontal wedges are quite far from each other as in Type 2B, they are longer and the overall proportion is closer to Type 2C.

²⁷ Given the shape of the upper wedge at first glance this sign seems to belong to Type 3, however, careful measuring demonstrated that the upper wedge is as long as the lower one.

²⁸ Even though this sign is damaged it is possible to see that the upper wedge is as long as the lower one.

²⁹ This sign is damaged but when properly illuminated it can be put into this category.

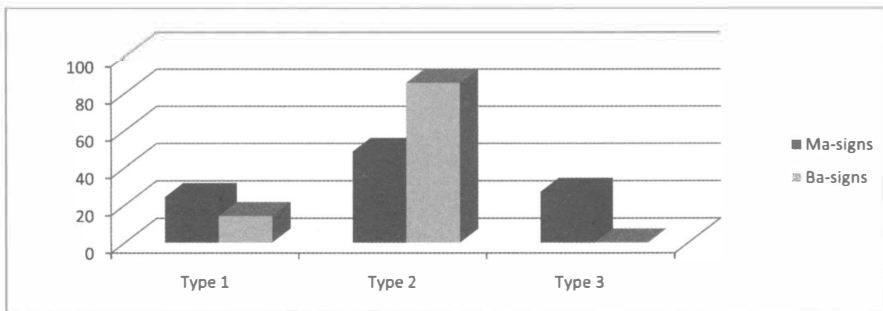
³⁰ The lower wedge is partly damaged and it is impossible to measure it in order to decide whether the sign belongs to Type 1 or Type 2. Comparing the shape of this sign with other similar signs I concluded that this sign is of Type 2.

Type 3C: The distinctive characteristic of this subtype is that the middle horizontal wedge is in the midst between the upper and the lower wedge. It occurs nine times as the *ma*-sign (I 33³¹, 36, 37, 38, 39; II 20³²; III 2; IV 8, 36). No *ba*-sign of this category was found in the tablet.

***ba-* versus *ma*-sign**

After having presented the major categories of the *ma*- and *ba*-signs in this tablet, the following tablet may help us to organize the results of the analysis done above.

Types	<i>ma</i> -signs	<i>ba</i> -signs
Type 1A	I 9; III 21b	III 31c
Type 1B		
Type 1C	I 11, 34; II 25; III 4a, 4b, 23, 41	
Type 2A	II 27; III 14, 31b; IV 31, 39a	IV 12
Type 2B	III 31a	NO EQUIVALENT
Type 2C	I 3, 18; II 33, 37, 40, 42; III 10, 17, 18, 21a, 42; IV 7	II 22; III 27, 30, 33, IV 11
Type 3A		
Type 3B	I 35	NO EQUIVALENT
Type 3C	I 33, 36, 37, 38, 39; II 20; III 2; IV 8, 36	



Graph 1: The percentage of *ba*- and *ma*-signs according to Types 1-3.

³¹ When properly illuminated, it can be seen that the upper sign is slightly shorter than the lower sign.

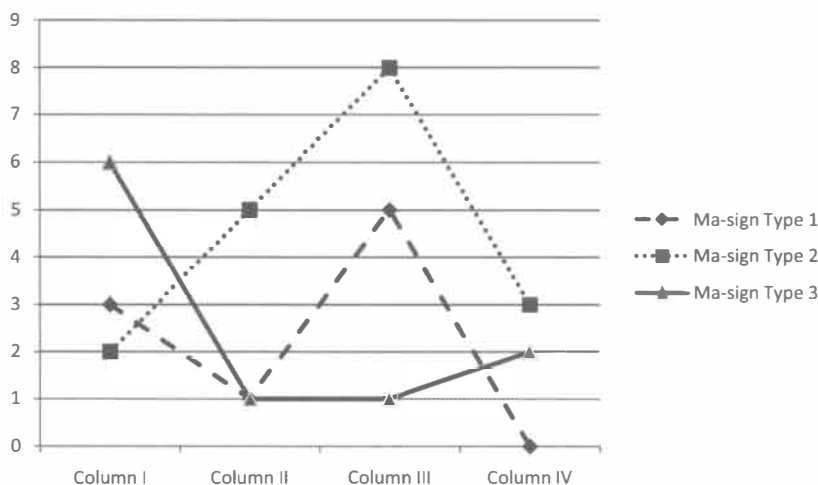
³² Even though the sign is partly damaged, when properly illuminated it is possible to see that the upper horizontal wedge is distinctly shorter.

According to this table and Graph 1 the most common type for both signs is Type 2. As a *ma*-sign it was used 18 times (48.6%) and as a *ba*-sign it was used 6 times (85.7%). In the case of the *ma*-sign a most common subcategory are Types 2A and 2C. Type 2B was used only once. Similarly the most common subcategory of the *ba*-sign is Type 2C. The *ba*-sign of Type 2A occurs only once and 2B does not occur at all. Type 1 is a more distinctive characteristic of the *ma*-sign. It was employed 9 times (24.3%) for the *ma*-sign and only once (14.3%) for the *ba*-sign. Thus, comparing the *ba*-signs with the *ma*-signs we can confirm the conclusion of the previously quoted Assyriologists that it is difficult to distinguish between these two signs especially when written as Type 1A, 2A, or 2C.

Besides Type 2B containing only one *ma*-sign and no *ba*-sign, Type 3 represents a statistically important difference between the *ma*- and *ba*-signs. It contains altogether 10 *ma*-signs (24.3%) of these 90% belong to Type 3C. However, no *ba*-sign corresponding to Type 3 was found on the tablet. Thus we can conclude that Type 3 was used in this tablet only for the *ma*-sign.

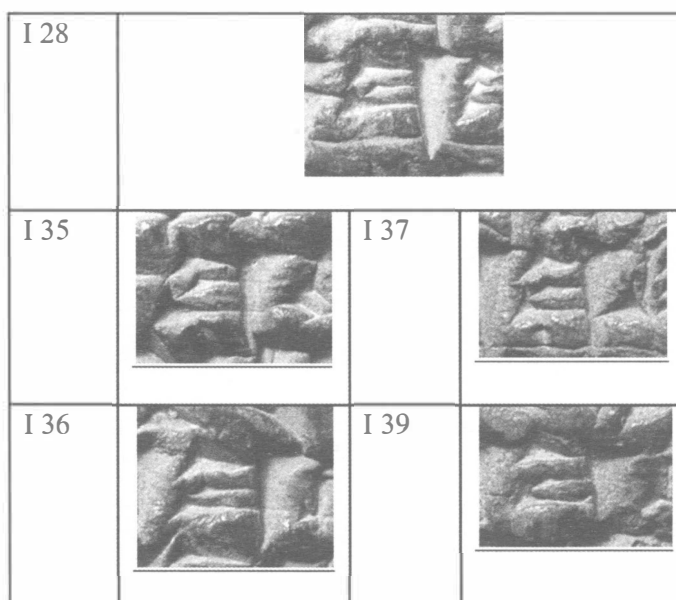
The sign used in the investigated case (^𒌶šá-x-ra-'i-in; I 28) belongs to Type 3C because it has the upper wedge distinctively shorter (Types 1 and 2 are excluded) and all three horizontal wedges are equally distant from each other (Type 3B is excluded). Since Type 3C in the tablet is used nine times for the *ma*-sign and never for the *ba*-sign, it is reasonable to conclude that the sign in I 28 is also a *ma*-sign.

The next part of my analysis investigates the frequency of the types studied above. The following graph indicates that the *ma*-sign of Type 1 was used in all columns but mainly in Column III. Type 2 was the preferred shape of the *ma*-sign (48.6% of all the *ma*-signs). It was used in all four columns, however, mainly in column III. Type 3 was the preferred shaped in Column I and then it was used only once or twice in other columns. This indicates that the preferred form of the *ma*-sign in Column I was that of Type 3, whereas in other columns Type 2 and 1 dominated. The sign investigated in I 28 is of Type 3 and is located in the midst of Column I. If this sign is taken as a *ma*-sign, then it would perfectly fit to the handwriting of the *ma*-signs in Column I.



Graph 2: Occurrences of Types 1-3 of the *ma*-signs in tablet BM 92502.

Finally, we should investigate whether there are *ma*- or *ba*-signs on the tablet similar to the sign in I 28. The signs most similar to the sign in I 28 are the signs in lines I 35 and 36. The second most similar group of signs are signs in lines I 37 and 39. A most important representative of this cluster is the *ma*-sign in I 36. Both signs (I 28 and 36) have the upper wedge shorter; the upper and the lower wedges touch each other. The signs are quite compact, even though the sign in I 28 is slightly more compact, and finally in both signs the middle wedge is placed in the midst between the upper and the lower wedge. No such similarity to the sign in I 28 can be found among the *ba*-signs. Moreover, this cluster of similar signs follows the sign in I 28 and thus indicates that the scribe used a similar pattern for writing the *ma*-sign in most cases in the second half of Column I.



In conclusion, we can confirm that in certain cases the *ma*-signs of this tablet are almost indistinguishable from the *ba*-signs. However, our analysis suggested that in line I 28 the reading *ma* instead of *ba* is more probable. Let us summarize the arguments presented above.

First, the toponym ^ušá-x-ra-'i-in in I 28 contains the sign of Type 3C. In all remaining cases this sign was a *ma*-sign and no corresponding Type 3C *ba*-sign was found in the tablet.

Second, Type 3 was a preferred form for writing the *ma*-sign in Column I in contrast to the other columns and our geographical term is located in the midst of Column I. Therefore, if taken as a *ma*-sign, it would perfectly fit the scribe's way of writing the *ma*-sign in Column I.

Finally a comparison of all the *ba*- and *ma*-signs indicates that the sign most similar to the sign used in I 28 are the *ma*-signs in I 35, 36, 37, 39.

These three arguments suggest that we should prefer reading ^{𐤌𐤔}á-*ma-ra-i-in* instead of ^{𐤌𐤔}á-*ba-ra-i-in*.

Date of the tablet

Finally for the analysis of the handwriting it is also important to date the tablet. J. A. Brinkman suggested that Chronicle 1 should be dated around 500 BC³³. Brinkman's dating can be further supported by the study of C. Waerzeggers. At the 56th RAI in Barcelona she discussed the provenance of the chronicles in the British Museum and came to the conclusion that the Babylonian chronicles could be divided into a Borsippa group, dated before the second half of the 6th century BC and a Babylon group, dated after 350 BC. According to her analysis Chronicle 1 does not belong to any of these groups. Her conclusion would thus indirectly confirm Brinkman's proposal. If we accept his date, then Chronicle 1 would be composed in the period when the Aramaic rendering of Samaria was already a well-known spelling.

The Aramaic impact upon the vocabulary of this tablet can be also seen in the case of the verb *beḥēru* (IV 4) instead of *bēru*. The verb *beḥēru* is a loan word from Aramaic (*bḥr*) and it occurs only in Late-Babylonian (see also Chronicle 16:19)³⁴.

Thus the date of the tablet as well as the Aramaic loan word also suggest that the spelling ^{𐤌𐤔}á-*ma-ra-i-in* would be a normal Babylonian/Aramaic equivalent of the spelling of Samaria in the post-exilic period as suggested by H. Tadmor.

Conclusion

This investigation has suggested that in line I 28 of tablet BM 92502 (Text A of Chronicle 1) we should prefer the reading ^{𐤌𐤔}á-*ma-ra-i-in* to ^{𐤌𐤔}á-*ba-ra-i-in*. Moreover the date of the tablet and the Aramaic loan word employed in line IV 4 suggest that the Babylonian spelling could have been influenced by Aramaic that further buttresses Tadmor's argument. Therefore, it is plausible that the city mentioned in Chronicle 1 I 28 could be identified with the Israelite city of Samaria.

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³³ Brinkman, in: *Fs. Moran* 78.

³⁴ *AHW* 117^b-118^a and W. von Soden, "Aramäische Wörter in neuassyrischen und neu- und spätbabylonischen Texten. Ein Vorbericht. III", *Or* 46 (1977) 183-197, esp. 185 no. 13.

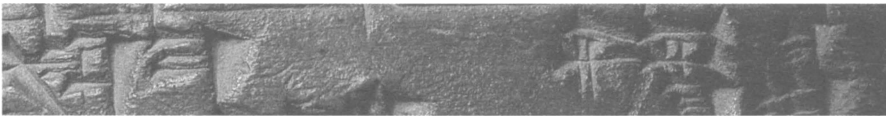
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum; Photos: P. Dubovský



URU.šá-*ma*/*ba-ra*-*'-in* (I 28).

TYPE 1A

I 9; III 21b



um-ma-ni-ga-áš (I 9).



at-ma-a (III 21b).

TYPE 1C

ma I 11, 34; II 25; III 4a, 4b, 23, 41
ba III 31c



GIG-ma (I 11).



DÛ-ma (I 34).



URU.*hi-ri-im-ma* (II 25).



DÛ-*uš-ma* (III 4a).



ša-*bit-ma* (III 4b).



ša-*bit-ma* (III 23).



ZÁḪ-*ma* (III 41).



ḫum-*ba-AN-da-šú* (III 31c).

TYPE 2A

ma II 27; III 14, 31b; IV 31, 39a

ba IV 12



ur-*dam-ma* (II 27).



ša-bit-ma (III 14).



ma-ḫi-iš-ma (III 31b).



GIG-ma (IV 31).



ki-ma (IV 39a).



ḫum-ba-ḫal-da-šú (IV 12).

TYPE 2B

III 31a



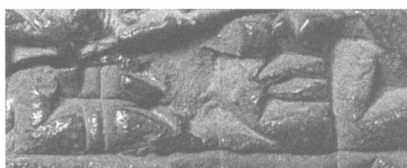
ma-ḫi-iš-ma (III 31a).

TYPE 2C

ma I 3, 18; II 33, 37, 40, 42; III 10, 17, 18, 21a, 42; IV 7
 ba II 22; III 27, 30, 33; IV 11



ur-dam-ma (I 3).



ZI-šú-ma (I 18).



iṣ-bat-su-ma (II 33).



ú-riḍ-ma (II 37).



DU-kám-ma (II 40).



DAB-ma (II 42).



ú-riid-ma (III 10).



id-ke-e-ma (III 17).



DÚ-uš-ma (III 18).



ṣa-bit-ma (III 21a).



iṣ-bat-su-ma (III 42).



KU₅-is-ma (IV 7).



URU.sar-ra-ba-[nu] (II 22).



ḥum-ba-ḥal-da-šú (III 27).



ḥum-b[a-ḥal]-da-šú (III 30).



ḥum-ba-ḥal-da-šú (III 33).



ḥum-ba-ḥal-da-šú (IV 11).

TYPE 3B

ma I 35



ma-'-diš (I 35).

TYPE 3C

ma I 33, 36, 37, 38, 39; II 20; III 2; IV 36



um-ma-ni-ga-áš (I 33).



um-ma-ni-šu (I 36).



LUGAL NIM-MA KI (I 37).



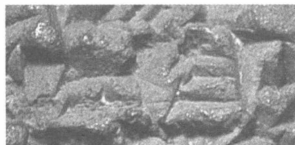
um-ma-ni-ga-áš (I 38)



um-ma-ni-ga-áš (I 39).



ir-tib/dip-ma (II 20).



DU-*ma* (III 2).



KU₅-*is-ma* (IV 8).



ú-šu-nim-ma (IV 36).

DAMAGED

ma III 20; IV 2, 18, 38, 39b

ba IV 39c



i-mi-šid-su-ma (III 20).



ab-ku-ma (IV 2).



DU.MEŠ-*nim-ma* (IV 18).



ša-bit-ma (IV 38).



SAR(*šaṭir*)-*ma* (IV 39b).



ba-ru (IV 39c).