



## Ugaritic Letters and Ritual Texts

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Two years ago I reported on a new publication project of the Ugaritic letters and ritual texts which was to be partially funded by NEH. The grant was for two years and was intended to cover the development of the photographs of these texts that I had taken during a stay in Syria and the salary of a research assistant to do some of the initial philological work. It was projected that the texts would be published in two volumes; completion dates were proposed of one year after the termination of the grant for the volume of ritual texts and about two years later for the volume of letters.

The goals for the first two years have been met. All the photographs have been printed and filed with my hand copies for each text and have proved invaluable in the interpretative work. No matter how representative the copy, one always asks oneself at some point in the attempt at making sense of the text: Could this sign really be another? or, Could this trace really have been slightly different so as to permit another reading or restoration? Of course, nothing can replace having the tablet immediately accessible but photographs are a very big help. They serve to answer at least half, perhaps more, of the epigraphic questions that come up.

The philological work has advanced well also. Several letters have actually been published in preliminary form and Robert M. Whiting and I have written a long article on a syntactic feature of the letters (the “epistolary perfect”) which has a very close parallel in Akkadian letters—and in Hittite, Greek, and Latin letters, for that matter. Since the first volume promised was to be on ritual texts, however, we have concentrated our efforts on the ritual texts. A first translation and philological commentary of the cult rituals has been prepared by my assistant Donna Freilich and reviewed by me. I have just finished a long preliminary publication of a text consisting of prognoses based on abnormal births of sheep and goats. This is a well-known *genre* in Mesopotamia and goes in Assyriological circles by the first two words of a given omen *šumma izbu*, “If an anomaly . . .”. The Ugaritic text almost certainly derives ultimately from a Mesopotamian ancestor but since it does not reproduce exactly any of the known Mesopotamian or Hittite versions its precise pedigree is still unknown. As an appendix I also re-edited a small fragment of a text dealing with abnormal human births. This



*The obverse of the Ugaritic šumma izbu tablet, RS 24.247+. The first line reads ʿatt šin [kt]ldn<sup>1</sup> ’abn m’adtn tqln bhwt “As for the ewes of the flock, [if t]hey give birth to a stone, many will fall in the land” (i.e., if a ewe gives birth to a stone, the homeland will suffer many casualties in battle). In spite of the heavily damaged condition of the tablet, many of the lines can be partially or wholly reconstructed on the basis of Akkadian parallels. Photograph Dennis Pardee, courtesy Mission de Ras Shamra.*

sub-*genre* is also well known from Mesopotamian sources and in this case the Ugaritic text, though very fragmentary, is much closer to the Akkadian model. Finally, as the subject of four lectures at the Collège de France in June of 1984, I dealt with five Ugaritic texts in which ritual features are mixed with mythological ones. I have termed these texts “para-mythological” and am preparing them for a separate publication.

Which brings me to future plans. As stated above, the original project called for two volumes. The current excavators of the site of Ras Shamra, the source of the Ugaritic tablets, have requested that our publications figure in the *Mission de Ras Shamra* publication series and editorial groups have been set up which include, variously distributed, me, Donna Freilich, and our French colleagues Pierre Bordreuil and Jesus-Luis Cunchillos. The great advantage of this arrangement, aside from having more eyes and brains to correct each other's mistakes, is that the French participation will permit full-fledged publications, virtual *editiones principes*, with, for each text, photographs, hand copies, transliteration, translation, commentary, and a complete word index for each volume. I call this an advantage because virtually none of these tablets has ever received such a full publication based on autopsy of the tablet itself. Because they are official *Mission de Ras Shamra* publications, however, they must be in French, which did not sit well with the NEH. We have reached the following agreement which should be to the advantage of everyone. The bulky technical publications just described will be in French and will consist of three volumes, one on the cult rituals, one on the “para-mythological” texts, and one on the letters. Appearing more or less concurrently with these publications there will be two English volumes, one on ritual texts, one on letters, as first projected. With the technical details out of the way in the French publications, the English volumes can be less epigraphically and philologically oriented and devote a bit more space to larger social and historical questions. The NEH are thus getting good value for their money: instead of two technical volumes, there will be three technical ones and two others which will have a broader view and thus will appeal to a larger audience.

According to the current publication schedule the first volume, on the “para-mythological” texts, should be ready for the press within about a year, the second on the cult rituals about a year after that (though that estimate may be a bit too sanguine), and the letters about two years later.