

Eblaite *sa-su-ga-lum* = Hebrew *ss^cgr*

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The Eblaite lexical texts, as with all such texts from the cuneiform world, abound with information on the flora and fauna of the Near East. In particular, there are numerous birds listed in these documents.¹ The identification of these birds can be a difficult matter, but the task is made simpler when collateral evidence is available. The Sumerian terms often can be linked with the same or similar terms appearing in other Sumerian texts,² while the Eblaite terms sometimes have cognates in the other Semitic languages.³

In MEE 4: #9–11:xi:28–29 appears the bilingual equation Sumerian *nam-dar-mušen* = Eblaite *sa-su-ga-lum* (=VE 1097). The Sumerian equivalent would suggest a colored bird of some sort (*dar* = “color”).⁴ While the exact form does not appear in previously attested Sumerian texts, about a dozen other terms for bird include the element *dar* (*a-dar-dar-mušen*, *da-dar-mušen*, *dar-mušen*, *dar-gi-zi-mušen*, etc.).⁵

The Eblaite form is no doubt the cognate of later Northwest Semitic *ss^cgr*, attested in Deir ‘Alla and in Hebrew. It appears in the former in Combination I, line 7, written consonantly *ss^cgr*.⁶

The context at this point in the inscription is the reversal of natural happenings, and in this particular case we read *ss^cgr hrpt nšr* ‘the *ss^cgr*-bird reproaches the eagle’. Accordingly, we may conclude from the Deir ‘Alla text that *ss^cgr* refers to a small bird, one that normally would not be a threat to the eagle.

Author's note: For assistance on Assyriological matters in the preparation of this brief article, I am indebted to my colleague David I. Owen.

¹ The standard work, though published before the Ebla texts came to light, is A. Salonen, *Vögel und Vogelfang im alten Mesopotamien* (Helsinki, 1973). For the bird list from Ebla, see G. Pettinato, “Liste presargoniche di uccelli nella documentazione di Fara ed Ebla,” *OA* 17 (1978) 165–78.

² See, e.g., D. I. Owen, “Of Birds, Eggs and Turtles,” *ZA* 71 (1981) 29–47; and idem, “Observations on the Ebla Bird Lists and the Ur III Summary Account FLP 145,” in MEE 3:277–78.

³ E.g., MEE 4: #89–90:iii:1–2 *buru₄-mušen* = *a-a-tum* (=VE 1370') with the latter equalling Hebrew *ʾayyā*, a forbidden bird mentioned in Lev 11:14, Deut 14:13, and Job 28:7. See C. H. Gordon, “Eblaitica,” in *Eblaitica* 1:22.

⁴ R. Labat, *Manuel d'épigraphie akkadienne* (Paris, 1976) 91.

⁵ Salonen, *Vögel und Vogelfang*, 101, 151–56; Owen, “Of Birds, Eggs and Turtles,” 36–37; Pettinato, “Liste presargoniche di uccelli,” 167–68.

⁶ J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā* (Chico, CA, 1980) 47.

The word appears in Biblical Hebrew in two places. In Isa 38:14 the name of the bird is written as two words *sûs* ^ç*âgûr*, and in Jer 8:7 the text actually treats the form as two separate terms *sûs* (Qere *sîs*) *wê*^ç*âgûr*. Early translators and commentators were split as to whether these words refer to one bird or to two separate birds.⁷ The LXX at Isa 38:14, for example, translates simply *chelidon* 'swallow', implying that *sûs* ^ç*âgûr* is but one species.⁸ Similarly, the Vulgate at Isa 38:14 translates *pullus hirundinis* 'young swallow', apparently understanding the word ^ç*âgûr* as an adjective following the noun *sûs*.

Other traditional sources, on the other hand, understood the Hebrew expression as referring to two separate birds, not only in Jer 8:7 where the word *and* is specifically included, but also in Isa 38:14 where the conjunction is lacking.⁹ The form *sûs* typically has been translated 'swallow' or 'swift',¹⁰ and the form ^ç*âgûr* generally has been rendered 'crane'.¹¹

The evidence of both the Deir ^çAlla inscription and the Eblaite bilingual suggests now that the latter interpretation of these words as two birds should be discontinued. Instead, we most probably are dealing with only one bird, as sensed by such early sources as the LXX and the Vulgate in their renderings of Isa 38:14.¹² To assist us in further identifying this species, note that Jer 8:7 refers to migration and that Isa 38:14 refers to the chirping (*špšp*) of this bird. It is more than likely, therefore, that the *ss*^ç*gr* was a migratory songbird.

For the identification of Eblaite *sa-su-ga-lum* and Hebrew and Deir ^çAlla *ss*^ç*gr* to be correct, we must assume that in this instance the consonant *s* is represented in the Eblaite syllabary by the S-signs. This would run contrary to the normal use of the Z-signs to signify *s*.¹³ But occasionally, other examples of

⁷ For much of what follows I am indebted to two unsigned entries in the *ʿEnšiqlopediya Miqrāʿit*: 5 (1968) 1008–9, and 6 (1971) 73–74. See also E. Ben-Yehuda, *Millon ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 8:3988–89, 9:4305–6.

⁸ The Revised English Bible (Oxford and Cambridge, 1989) 622 also translates 'swallow', but then adds a marginal note "so Gk; Heb. adds a wryneck." Apparently, the scholars who produced the REB believed that the *Vorlage* of the LXX had only *ss*, without the ^ç*gr* of the MT. But this remains an unproved assumption, and it is just as likely that the *Vorlage* of the LXX read *ss*^ç*gr* (either as one word or as two), which the translators correctly understood as the name of a single bird. On the specific choice of 'wryneck' to render ^ç*âgûr*, see G. R. Driver, "Birds in the Old Testament, II: Birds in Life," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 86 (1955) 132.

⁹ Note the comment of I. W. Slotki, *Isaiah* (London, 1949) 180: "The word *or* is implied."

¹⁰ F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1906) 692; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Leiden, 1953) 656; and Driver, "Birds in the Old Testament," 131.

¹¹ Thus already Saadia Gaon on his comment to Isa 38:14, and the Jewish Publication Society versions of both 1916 and 1978. See the discussion in Driver, "Birds in the Old Testament," 131–32.

¹² The presumed Hebrew original *ss*^ç*gr* may have split into two words due to the attraction of the first syllable to the word *sûs* 'horse', with ^ç*âgûr* developing into an independent vocable. Or, there may have been a bird name *sîs*, as actually exists in Arabic, meaning 'swift', and this may have led to splitting *ss*^ç*gr* into two terms.

¹³ M. Krebernik, "Zu Syllabar und Orthographie der lexikalischen Texte aus Ebla, Teil I," *ZA* 72 (1982) 214.

S-signs to represent *s* have been posited, for example, Eblaite *sà-la-tum*, *sà-a-tum* 'farina', cognate with Akkadian *siltu*, Hebrew *sōlet*, Aramaic *sōlētā*;¹⁴ Eblaite *sa-à-bù* 'drag away', cognate with Hebrew, Arabic, and Ethiopic *shb*;¹⁵ Eblaite *ra-sa-um* 'wet, damp', cognate with Akkadian *russû* 'bathe', Ethiopic *rasha* 'damp';¹⁶ and perhaps Eblaite *su-bù-lu* 'fastening stone' (?), cognate with Mari Akkadian *sablum*, Hebrew *sēbel* 'burden'.¹⁷

In light of these examples of S-signs used to represent *s*—three sure and one possible—there can be little doubt that Eblaite *sa-su-ga-lum* is a third-millennium etymon of Hebrew and Deir ʿAlla *ss^cgr*.

The exact identification of this bird still cannot be determined with certainty, but the clues from Ebla, Deir ʿAlla, and the Bible allow us to conclude that it was a small, colored, migratory songbird. My tentative suggestion is the golden oriole.¹⁸ This species is common throughout the Near East (including northern Syria and Israel), it migrates to Africa in the winter, it is "colourful and quite unmistakable," and it is well known for "the flutish and distinctive song of the male."¹⁹ In short, it meets all the requirements of the *ss^cgr*, at least as far as can be determined from the references to this bird in ancient Near Eastern texts.

¹⁴ See F. Pomponio, "'Peculiarita' della grafia dei termini semitici nei testi amministrativi eblaiti," in *Bilinguismo*, 315.

¹⁵ G. Conti, *Il sillabario della quarta fonte della lista lessicale bilingue eblaita* (Quaderni di Semitistica 17 = Miscellanea Eblaitica 3; Florence, 1990) 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

¹⁷ See K. Butz, "Bilinguismus als Katalysator," in *Bilinguismo*, 132.

¹⁸ Other possibilities are several species of warblers and wagtails, but the golden oriole is the most likely candidate.

¹⁹ U. Paz, *The Birds of Israel* (Lexington, MA, 1987) 228. See also F. S. Bodenheimer, *Animal Life in Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1935) 140, 155; E. Smolly, *Šipporim be-Yiśraʿel* (Ramat-Gan, 1968) 64–65; R. Inbar, *Šippore ʿEreš Yiśraʿel* (Tel Aviv, 1971) 50–51; and B. E. Allouse, *Birds of Iraq* (Baghdad, 1962), 3:39–40 and plate XIII (this plate also appears in Salonen, *Vögel und Vogelfang*, Tafel XIII).

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