



LEATHER AND SKIN AS MARKERS OF EARLY EXCHANGES BETWEEN WESTERN ASIA AND EGYPT?

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
ABSTRACT

Leather is a durable and flexible material created by the tanning of animal rawhide and skin, the more often cattle hide. Rawhides and tanned hides are hence two separate commodities which may be traded under the different denominations of 'leather', 'skin' or 'hide'. The latter is important as these different terms, the former referring to the finished product and the latter to the raw ones, have come in many languages to qualify 'leather', hence the finished product whether water cleaned or tanned, or both. This when skins/hides, cleaned of fats but keeping the hair, constitute another separate trading commodity, but one this time however not only referred to as 'skin' or 'hide', but also as 'fur', yet not as 'leather' as it is not first apparent. It is with 'skin' and 'leather' as a finished and non hairy product that the present study is concerned.

Overall, leather items survive very badly in the archaeological record, even from Ancient Egypt as demonstrated by the very few rare items in museum collections.² Furs may hence have been used by the Neanderthal, at a point in time during a period ranging from 350.000 years ago, or before, to about 35/25.000 years ago, as well as by other *Homo sapiens*³. Skins seems to have been cleaned using *lissoirs* according to a recent discovery of these artefacts⁴ and were probably traded although this remains to be demonstrated. From a more factual point of view, archaeology seems to show that 'tanning' was carried out as early as 7000-3300 B.C. by the Neolithic inhabitants of Mehrgarh (Balochistan, Pakistan)⁵ using red ochre to cure the skins. By this later date leather clothing was already elaborate as demonstrated by the different skins and pieces of clothing worn by Ötzi (Ötztal Alps, Austrian/Italian border; 3300 BC.). Before 2500 B.C. and closer to our concern Sumerians clearly manufactured and used many leather items. This fact is betrayed by the many terms, qualifying these objects, which include as determinative the Sumerian word for leather, i.e. KUŠ. Kuš meaning 'skin' or 'leather' has 276 textual attestations⁶ between 3000 and 2500 B.C., an indirect evidence demonstrating that leather goods were produced in abundance. The Sumerian vocabulary available further confirming that goods made of leather were great many, including containers, bags and sacks, lids, covers, drums, straps, whips, quivers, garments, holders, etc..as early as prior to 2500 B.C., each of these words having the term 'Kuš' as determinative.⁷ Whereas the material source was equally varied

and plentiful as the Sumerian vocabulary lists many animals, including the ox, bull, cow, ram, goat, sheep, hyena, stag, wolf and even lion, tiger and elephant, among others.

Sumerian trade may have exported these leather items beyond Sumerian borders. What is certain however is that Sumerians imported an array of materials in Mesopotamia in exchange for manufactured goods, mainly textiles, foodstuffs and oils.⁸ This in particular during the Early Dynastic period (2800-2350 B.C.) which saw a rising level of prosperity accompanied by a major increase of importations. These imports arrived from various areas such as Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Levant (Mari notably), Iran (Susa in particular), the Gulf and even the Indus through a vast network of channels, the major of which were on water (the Euphrates for example). Anatolia is of particular interest to us as the term 'Kuš' is equally used as determinative for 'leather' in Hittite⁹ and used in such terms such as '(KUŠ)_apputri- (n.) 'leather part of harness'; (KUŠ)iš_iman- / iš_imen- (c.) 'string, line, cord, rope, strap.'¹⁰ As Hittites arrived in Anatolia around 2000 B.C., it seems reasonable to suggest that the term 'Kuš', then long used by the Sumerians as above demonstrated, is a loan word in Hittite¹¹ and one possibly brought through trade contacts; this as seemingly many other Sumerian ideograms and Akkadian terms.¹²

Now Sumerian  "Kuš' 'leather' or 'skin' is equally attested in Old Akkadian (c. 2500-1900 B.C.) and Old Babylonian (1950-1530 B.C.), whereas in later Akkadian it is

referred as 'masku'¹³. These cognates in Sumerian and Akkadian being not surprising in view of the contiguous cultural and continuous linguistic relations between Sumer and Akkad. It is however far more so to discover that both terms *Kuš'* and *masku* find in fact cognates in Egypt since the earliest of times although this correlation has till now seemingly not been made. Hence

𐎎𐎍 *gs* 'leather worker' and by extension 'shoemaker', which was most likely vocalised *{g[a]s[è] or *{g[è]s[è] because of later respective Coptic equivalents 'KACE' [kasè] or KHCE [késè], is attested since the Old Kingdom (c. 2670 - 2168),¹⁴ while the accompanying adjective 𐎎𐎍𐎎 *gs* 'leathery' is also attested.¹⁵ Whereas 𐎎𐎍𐎎 *msk3* 'skin, hide, leather', with seemingly no Coptic descendant known but which can safely be phonetically reconstructed as *{mska or possibly *{maska, is attested since Pyramid times;¹⁶ which is to say equally during the Old Kingdom. The double correlation between Sumerian *Kuš'*/Ancient Egyptian 'gs' [*{g[a]s[è]}] and Akkadian *masku*/Ancient Egyptian *msk3* [*{mska}] may point towards very early exchanges between Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Well attested early trade exchanges between Sumer and Egypt,¹⁷ and later Mesopotamia and Egypt, supporting this suggestion.¹⁸

The above linguistics connections take another dimension when juxtaposed to the birth of writing and accounting, domains where Sumer and Egypt compete and where leather takes in fact a part. In particular concerning the moot question of whether the birth of writing developed independently in Sumer and Egypt, or if the birth of one of the two led to the development of the other. Until 1988 evidence about the oldest writing clearly pointed to Mesopotamia where it emerged prior to 3000 B.C. from Sumerian bookkeeping and was tied to specific economic items represented by tokens kept in containers made of cloth or leather. In 1988 however Günter Dreyer's discoveries in the royal cemetery of

Umm El-Quaab I, near Abydos, of small inventory tags with proto-hieroglyphics identifying the provenance of various commodities found in what seems to be the tomb of King Scorpion I (c. 3400 B.C. to 3200 B.C.) suddenly challenged the precedence of the Sumerian writing system. It has been rightly pointed out that even if the origin of Dreyer's inventory tags can be shown to have preceded the envelope-token accounting, the fact remains that the later emerged out of token accounting, which can be traced back to 8000 B.C. by seemingly hard and fast evidence.¹⁹ However comparison of the Uruk tablets (c. 3300 B.C.) with the Umm El-Quaab labels shows a similar correlation of development in that commodities are identified by simple pictograms. Hence the first merit of both sets of artefacts is to provide us a relative terminus ante-quem timeframe during which writing was clearly born, hence perhaps around the mid-4th millennium B.C., and gradually developed. What influenced this development is a key question as is how does the presence of cognate terms for 'leather' and 'skin' in the early Sumerian and Ancient Egyptian languages affects this very issue? Answering this question will be first tied to the future attestations of these words on proto-dynastic labels such as found in Abydos and other such early supports. The presence or absence of *gs* as well as *msk3* may contribute to answering the above question and better define the extent of Sumero-Egyptian trade, possibly through the long distance export/import during the late 4th millennium B.C. of sophisticated leather items. Items which have so far left very little traces in the archaeological record due to their heavy biodegradable nature, even in the highly preservative Egyptian desert conditions. Epigraphists should hence look for both terms in very early Egyptian writings and archaeologists for leather items of foreign origin, perhaps Sumerian, which the surviving embedded parts made of other more durable materials may betray during excavation.

NOTES

- 1 <http://armenianegyptologycentre.wordpress.com>
- 2 See for example Loring, E. The Leather Funerary Shrine of Istemkheb B. *Advances in Egyptology* 1: 43-51 (2010) for a very rare Ancient Egyptian XXIa Theban Dynasty (1070-945 B.C.) leather item.
- 3 Soressi, M. et al. Neandertals made the first specialized bone tools in Europe. *PNAS* 110 (35): 14186-14190; 2013 [Online at <http://www.pnas.org/content/110/35/14186.full>].
- 4 Callaway, E. Neanderthals made leather-working tools like those in use today. *Nature* (August 12, 2013) [Online at <http://www.nature.com/news/neandertals-made-leather-working-tools-like-those-in-use-today-1.13542>].
- 5 Only the red ochre was found in the graves and not the skins which had disintegrated. *Encyclopedia of Prehistory* 8 (*South and Southwest Asia*):154-155; 2002.

- 6 Search for *kuš* [SKIN] at online Sumerian dictionary: <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/cpsd1/nepsd-frame.html> [letter 'K', bottom; 3818 instances are recorded from 3000-2500 B.C. to prior 1500 B.C.].
- 7 Examples of Sumerian objects in leather: 3000-2500 BC: *kuš/kab2-kul* 'container'; *kuš/ka-dug3* 'cover'. 2500-2000 BC. *kuš/ka-tab* 'a lid, covering an object'; *kuš/a-ğa2-la2*; *kuša2-ğa2-la2* "leather sack"; *kuš/ka-ba-bu-um* "shield"; *kuš/KA-usan3* "a designation of whips" *kuš/a2-la2*; *kuša-la*; *kuš/ala* "a wooden [and leather] drum"; *kuš/a2-si*; *uruda2* "whip; hinge; strap"; *kuš/du10* "leather bag"; *kuš/dam-ga* "a [leather] part of a plow" (before 2500 BC); *kuš/balağ* = *balag*; *ğešbalağ* "a large [leather] drum or harp". *kuš/bar-ed3-da* "a type of [leather] strap"; *ba-ru-tum* "a quiver or other leather item"; *kuš/da-ba* [leather] "strap"; *kuš/dabašin* "a leather object"; *kuš/da-lu* "a leather object", etc.; 2000-1500 BC. *kuš/la* "a garment; a functionary" *kuš/A2* "a weapon or a leather holder for a weapon", etc...

- ⁸ Crawford, H. Trade in the Sumerian World. In: Crawford, H. (ed.) *The Sumerian World*. Routledge, Abingdon: 448 & 452; 2013.
- ⁹ Kloekhorst, A. *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon*. Brill, Leiden: 735.
- ¹⁰ Kloekhorst: 298 & 392.
- ¹¹ Interestingly through various linguistic shifts and routes which remain to be determined the word ended in Armenian as կաշի [kashi] and in various Slavonic and Roman languages: Russian and Bulgarian 'кожа' [kojha], Bosnian and Croatian 'koža', Czech, 'kůže', Bielorussian 'скура' [skura], Ukrainian 'шкіра' [shkíra], then Latin 'corium', Galician 'coiro', Portuguese 'couro', Spanish 'cuero' or French and Catalan 'cuir', etc...
- ¹² Sturtevant, Edgar H. *Hittite glossary: words of known or conjectured meaning, with Sumerian ideograms and Accadian words common in Hittite texts*. *Language*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 3–82., *Language Monograph* No. 9.; 1931
- ¹³ Akkadian Dictionary of the Association Assyriophile de France <http://www.premiumwanadoo.com/cuneiform.languages/dictionary/dossearch.php?searchkey=ma%9Aku&language=rawakkadian>. A methathesis with *Kuš*?
- ¹⁴ *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae (TLA)* 30.711.130 = Wb 5, 203.1-6.
- ¹⁵ Vyus, M. Hieroglyph Dictionary; 2012 [Online at http://renfield.physics.utah.edu/wiki/images/d/d1/Pdf_dictionary.pdf]
- ¹⁶ *TLA* DZA 24.393.860 = Wb 2, 150.3-5.
- ¹⁷ See for example Stevenson, A. Egypt and Mesopotamia. In: Crawford, H. (ed.) 2013 *The Sumerian World*. Routledge, Abingdon: 620-638; 2013.
- ¹⁸ It must be pointed out that if the Sumerian language is currently classified as genetically unrelated to any other¹, and if a phonetic relation of *Kuš*/*gs* to Proto Indo European 'g^hēi-', or 'g^hejə-' : 'g^hī-' 'hide, skin' seems perhaps tenuous¹, less so seems Proto Indo European 'mak-' 'skin, leather bag' with the duo *mašku/msk3*. Proto Indo European term which incidentally most likely gave Armenian մաշկ [mashk] 'skin, hide, web', Russian мешок [meshok] 'bag', Bielorussian мяшок [miashok] 'sack', Lithuanian maišas [maishas] 'bag', etc... Which is also to say that Armenian has, like Ancient Egyptian, possesses possible derivatives of the tandem *Kuš*/*mašku* in its vocabulary, perhaps demonstrating the extent of Sumerian influence across geography and time. For another linguistic example of a term denominating a commodity and ending in the Ancient Egyptian vocabulary see Manassa, C. From Wool to Basketry. Materials, Contact Linguistics, and *thbs(t)* in Ancient Egyptian. *Lingua Aegyptia* 20: 99-110 (2012). The article discusses the ancient Egyptian term *thbs(t)*, a type of basket, in different sources, including a comparison of orthographies and examination of the lexeme in each context. Hurrian is identified as the source language for the Egyptian term which also appears as a loan word in Akkadian and Ugaritic.
- ¹⁹ See for example Mattessich, R. The Oldest Writings and Inventory Tags of Egypt. *Accounting Historians Journal* 29 (1): 195-208; 1998.