



The Art of Conservative Rebellion: A Short Introduction to the First Sealand Dynasty

By Odette Boivin

With at least 500,000 excavated cuneiform tablets, and perhaps 100,000 translated, one would think that the basics of Mesopotamian history have mostly been worked out. But new finds continue to fill in important gaps in our fundamental understanding of political history.

Until very recently, next to nothing was known of the nebulous dynasty of “kings of Urukug” that entered later Mesopotamian king lists. The scribes who compiled these lists positioned it between the Amorite (Old Babylonian) and the Kassite (Middle Babylonian) dynasties on Babylon’s throne, anchoring its existence around the middle of the second millennium BCE. A few other sources, including a *Chronicle of Ancient Kings*, associate it with another more evocative toponym, the “Sealand,” which suggested to modern scholars geographic continuity between that kingdom and the later province or region called Sealand, in southernmost Mesopotamia.



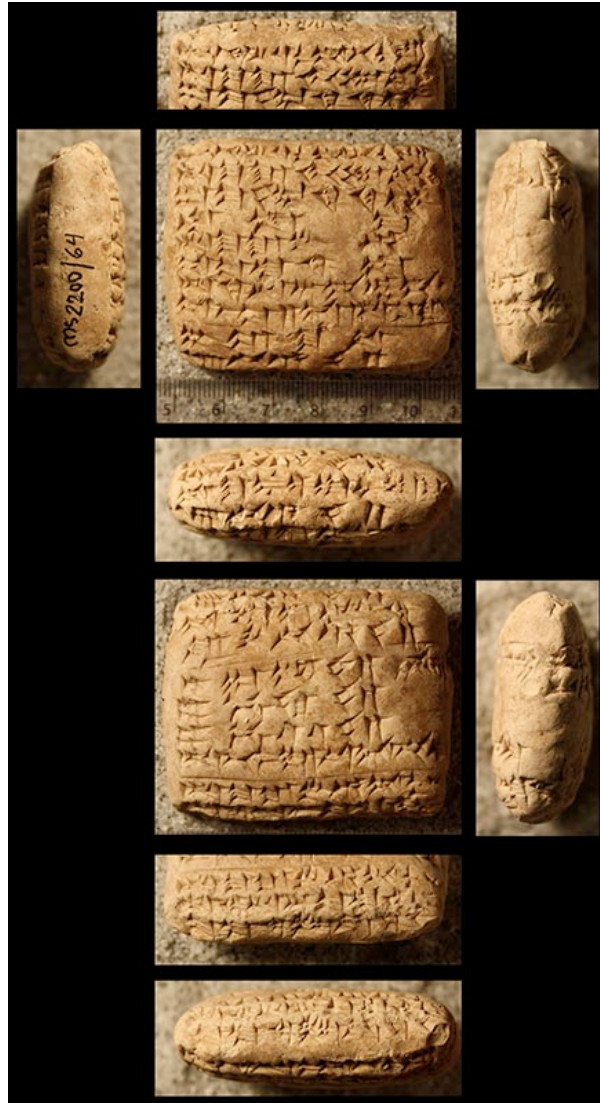
Map showing location of the Sealand and sites mentioned in the text. Courtesy Mary Shepperson.

The *Chronicle of Ancient Kings* contains brief accounts of belligerent encounters between Babylon and the Sealand, including the latter's conquest by Kassite kings. This trail of textual bread crumbs was meagre but led to placing the realm of the "First Sealand Dynasty" in southern Iraq at a time in which both archaeological and textual evidence present a major hiatus. Cities were largely deserted for some time, probably partly due to severe water supply problems. But the textual record went silent around 1738 BCE, following the retreat of Babylonian troops, apparently unable to effectively quell a widespread rebellion that broke out a mere generation after Hammurapi had incorporated the area into his Babylonian kingdom in 1763 BCE.

Whatever role a Sealand leader may or may not have played alongside other rebel kings who met with short-lived success in the early days of the rebellion is unclear. But the incipient Sealand must ultimately have profited from Babylon defeating them during its counter-rebellion effort. Indeed, a handful of records found at Nippur in central Babylonia bear laconic date formulae acknowledging as king Ili-ma-ilu, the founder of the First Sealand dynasty, probably around 1720 BCE. Hence, well over a decade after Babylon had definitively lost the south, the disintegration of the kingdom was creeping northwards into central Babylonia, and it was clearly associated with the emergence of the Sealand kingdom. But except for the few date formulae on Nippur texts, it apparently left behind a silent and gaping void, until Kassite kings unified the region once again and started rebuilding ancient temples about two and a half centuries later.

There was, therefore, not much one could say about the Sealand Kingdom. It formed as a secessionist state in the area corresponding roughly to ancient Sumer, outlived the Amorite dynasty in Babylon, before being reclaimed by Babylon under Kassite rule. But it presented itself to scholars mostly in negatives, existing where and when a major power was momentarily absent, largely outside the written record, and, it seems, principally outside the ancient urban centers, and thus outside the material record known to us. The frail outline of Sealand history that was available to us a few decades ago was, as far as we can judge today, essentially correct, but our understanding of it was limited to its "outer shell."

Consequently, the publication in 2009 of nearly 500 administrative texts dated to two kings of the middle of that dynasty, Peshgaldaramesh and Ayadaragalama, appeared like a minor miracle; they were edited by S. Dalley in *Babylonian Tablets from the First Sealand Dynasty in the Schøyen Collection*. The clay tablets, unfortunately unprovenanced, began giving substance to the elusive Sealand Kingdom. They were clearly the produce of a palace administration and reveal an institution controlling movements of goods with painstaking and typically Mesopotamian rigor.



Sealand Dynasty text.

https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/search_results.php?SearchMode=Text&PrimaryPublication=&MuseumNumber=&Provenience=&Period=&TextSearch=&ObjectID=P251012&requestFrom=Submit

The texts record for instance the payment of taxes in barley and other cereals, various steps in their transformation into flour or beer, the delivery of animals—mainly sheep—for sacrifice, haruspicy, or consumption, the expenditure of sacrificial foods for various deities, and the payment of salaries or rations to workers, both men and women. While it is impossible to determine whether any of the economic and administrative structures reflected in these texts went beyond a local or small-scale regional system centered on the palace, they have the trappings of state administration. Unsurprisingly, they present characteristics that can be placed between Old and Middle Babylonian administrative and scribal habits.

A number of features within the texts suggest that this palace archive comes from the lower Euphrates area, which could thus be where the capital of the kingdom, perhaps called Urukug, was located. The evidence for this includes likely place name connections with contemporary administrative tablets that were found at Tell Khaiber, located near Ur, in the controlled excavation of a large administrative building. The archaeological excavation was conducted between 2013 and 2018; the tablets are being edited by Eleanor Robson.



Aerial view and plan of Tell Khaiber administrative building. Courtesy Mary Shepperson.



Tablets from Tell Khaiber. Courtesy Mary Shepperson.

This discovery of an administrative building containing tablets from the time of the First Sealand dynasty was the second recent minor miracle on the path toward piecing together the history of the Sealand Kingdom, and thus filling part of the gap in the history of southernmost Mesopotamia. For one thing, it

confirms that in order to discover evidence of Sealand date, we have been looking largely in the wrong places.

The potential for such finds may well be mainly in sites that have not been excavated yet, or are just beginning to be. A promising site is Tell Dehaila, between Ur and Eridu, where an [Iraqi-Russian team](#) has recently undertaken archaeological work. It was occupied during only one phase, around that period, and, tantalizingly, it presents several looting pits, perhaps the origin of unprovenanced Sealand tablets.

Another important contribution of the Tell Khaiber excavation is that it yielded pottery that can be dated to the period of the First Sealand dynasty alongside dated texts. A better understanding of southern Mesopotamian pottery sequences in that period has the potential for identifying traces of occupation of Sealand date elsewhere.



Dan Calderbank, working with the first excavated Sealand pot assemblage. Courtesy Mary Shepperson.



Pottery from Tell Khaiber. Courtesy of Daniel Calderbank.

From the material we have at present, the Sealand appears like a typical small southern Babylonian kingdom. Its administrative and cultic practices were roughly in continuity with Old Babylonian practices, in particular from the former Old Babylonian kingdom of Larsa, whose territory must have partly coincided with that of the Sealand, before its annexation by Hammurapi. No royal inscriptions are yet known, which makes it difficult to reconstruct the ideological program of the Sealand kings. But a royal epic, a few year names celebrating royal deeds, two hymns, and administrative texts about the cult, all suggest that the Sealand kings largely inscribed their rule in existing local and regional traditions.

Texts were written mainly in Babylonian, but also in Sumerian, which had been a dead language for some time, its use confined mostly to hymns and year names. The language and style of the texts are generally in the continuum of second millennium developments. However, divinatory, literary, as well as archival texts contain unusual spellings and a few idiosyncrasies that reveal disruptions in the “stream of tradition” in both learned and administrative circles. The ideological foundation of the secessionist state seems to have been partly turned towards its more remote past since several Sealand kings adopted Sumerian names, while the royal names in the centuries preceding Sealand rule were overwhelmingly Semitic. But, in another sign of a disrupted tradition, a number of these names appear fanciful, novel in a sense, and, for lack of parallels, their reading and interpretation remain uncertain.

In fact, scribal practices at the time were probably also influenced by contacts with Elam, in southwestern Iran, as can be observed for example in close parallels between divinatory texts from Susa and from the Sealand. And indeed, administrative texts from the Sealand palace archive reveal that it maintained diplomatic relations with its eastern neighbor, as it did with Kassite groups, whose seats of power were probably north of the Sealand.

In addition to its eastern (and perhaps northern) connections, the Sealand had apparently access to western goods, presumably traded along the Euphrates, since aromatics from the northern Levant appear in the palace archive. Finally, by the end of its existence, the Sealand had extended its political influence southwards to Dilmun, modern Bahrain, where a text was found with a date formula of the last king of the dynasty. The Sealand must thus have been an active actor in the Persian Gulf trade.

We do not know whether Sealand kings ever occupied Babylon—if so, it could only have been for a time, after the last Old Babylonian king had been defeated. But we do not even know whether the Sealand belonged to the coalition of forces that marched on Babylon in c. 1595 BCE. Regardless, the Sealand kings who ruled over southernmost Mesopotamia from c. 1720 until c. 1475 BCE entered later Babylonian historiography in an ambiguous position, both as opponents of Babylon, in a *Chronicle of Ancient Kings*, and as legitimate Babylonian rulers, in Babylonian king lists. It is hoped that current and future excavations will reveal more on this secessionist state, the last serious stand against the annexation of the southernmost Mesopotamian alluvial plain into a larger Babylonia.

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For further reading:

Boivin, O. 2018. *The First Dynasty of the Sealand in Mesopotamia*. Boston: De Gruyter

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Dalley, S. 2009. *Babylonian Tablets from The First Sealand Dynasty in the Schøyen Collection*. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press.