Reallexikon der Assyriologie
und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie

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Vogel (bird). A. In Mesopotamien.


§ 1. Sources for Mesopotamian avifauna.

§ 1.1. Lexical lists. For Sum. lex. lists up to the Old Bab. Period s. Veldhuis 2004, 149–207; s. a. CUSAS 12, 191f. The lex. list H₃ lists b. in tablet XVIII (MSL 8/2; commentary Hg. ibid. 165–177). For the Emar version s. Emar 674, 555, with additions by M. Civil, AulaOr. 7 (1989) 18f. An Old Bab. (lex.?) list of b. from Sippar was published in Edubba 7, 100 (previous ed.: Black/al-Rawi 1987).

§ 1.2. Literary texts. Many different b. names are mentioned in the Sum. lit. text Nanše and the birds (Veldhuis 2004, 115–147; ETCSL 4.14.3; Literatur* § 3.6.1.f; Nanše* A. § 3). B. figure as opponents in several Sum. debate poems (Streitgespräch*): Bird and fish (ETCSL 5.3.5; Literatur* § 3.6.1.b), Heron and turtle (Peterson 2007, 269–410; ETCSL 5.9.2; Literatur* § 3.6.1.f), Goose and raven (B. Alster, Wisdom of ancient Sumer [2005] 352–361). For b. in Sum. lit. texts in general s. Veldhuis 2004, 98–102, in Sum. proverbs ibid. 96–98.

The eagle plays an important role in the Akk. Etana epic (Literatur* § 4.1.1.e), and the Anzu b. in the Anzu epic (Literatur* § 4.1.1.b). Avian imagery is common in Akk. love literature (N. Wasserman, Fruits and desires: Akkadian literature of the 3rd and 2nd millennium BCE [= LAOS 4, 2016]). The so-called birdcall text relates b. to certain deities on the basis of the b.’s calls (W. G. Lambert, AnSt. 20 [1970] 111–117).

§ 1.3. Omen texts. S. Omina* und Orakel. § 4: Tab. 64–79 of the series Summa alū contain signs which were observed with b.; ibid. § 8: inspection of dead b.; ibid. § 12: observation of the flight of b.

§ 1.4. Secondary literature. Salonen 1973 is a monograph on b. in Sum. and Akk. sources. It contains, inter alia, a survey of modern avifauna in Iraq, a catalogue of Sum. and Akk. b. names, a list of body parts of b., a list of b. cries in cun. texts, and a list of the terminology related to b. Plates show illustrations of b.


Veldhuis 2004 offers an edition of the Sum. lit. composition Nanše and the birds and Sum. lex. lists mentioning b. The book also contains a catalogue of Sum. b. names and illustrations of some b.

A monograph on aviculture is von der Osten-Sacken 2015.

S. the survey in Tierwelt* § 4 on specific b.


Also Sum. buru₃/mus₄ correspond to Akk. iššāru (PSD B 206–209), but more specifically, at least in Old Bab. lit. texts, denotes a small b. that lives in flocks, perhaps the sparrow, s. Veldhuis 2004, 229. For Sem. cognates of Akk. iššāru s. Kogan 2011, 60f.; cf. also Militarev/Kogan 2005, 275–277 for Hebr. ippōr, Arab.ʼuşfūr etc.


§ 3. In Mesopotamian animal taxonomy b. form a separate class, including bats, which share the same habitat (Tierwelt* § 1.f.). In some lex. texts insects (Insekten*) are written with the b. determinative (nim₃/mus₄ “fly”, bir₃/mus₄ “locust”), s. Veldhuis 2004, 242, 272), but they are not classified as b. elsewhere.

The organization of lex. texts sometimes allows us to recognize groups of b. that
share certain characteristics. E.g., Old Bab. Hb. has a section for b. of prey (nin-ninna “harrier”, the mythological Anzu “eagle”, súr-du “falcon”), followed by waterfowl (bibad “duck”, igirâ “heron”), s. Veldhuis 2004, 87f. The b. list Edubba 7, 100 starts with a group of edible b.: tarlugallu “rooster”, kurkû “goose”, usu “(wild) duck” (ll. 1–5); other groups consist of “doves” (summatu, uršamu, s스크ammunu; ll. 8–10), waterfowl (igirâ “heron”, arabû, kîpû, uburrû; ll. 11–15), which means that the otherwise unknown Abratemu [l. 12] is probably a water b., too, and of prey (súrdu “falcon”, erû “eagle”, šê’tû, lit. “searching”, mesukku “falcon”; ll. 45–49).

§ 4. Terminology related to birds. Only a few important terms can be mentioned here:

“Nest”: Sum. gûd (U.K.IS.GA), Akk. qinna.

“Egg”: Sum. nunuz, Akk. pelû.

“Fledgling”: Sum. amar mušen, lit. “young of the b.”, Akk. (u)šatmu.

“Wing”: Sum. pâ, Akk. kappu, NA (a)gatpu.

“Claw”: Sum. umbin, Akk. špurû.

“to fly”: Sum. dal, Akk. naprusu, sâ’ul šê’tu.


§ 5. Bird imagery.

§ 5.1. In Sumerian texts, the vehicle mušen occurs with the following main groups of tertia comparationis:

a) Tertium comparationis: flying: nin-bi/Nin-gal-e mušen dal-la-gin, uru-ni ba-ra-ê “Its queen/Ningal, like a flying b., departed from her city” Lament for Ur (ETCSL 2.2.2) 2356f.; kig-gi-a mušen-gin, a dûb i-ak-ê “The messenger, like a b., constantly flapped his wings” Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta (ETCSL 1.8.2.3) 507.

b) Tertium comparationis: trapping, catching: mušen-du ku-zu-gin, iqi-te-en sa là-a-ni mušen nu-ê “Like from (the net) of a clever fowler, no b. escapes the mesh of her spread net” Inanna C (ETCSL 4.7.3) 65.

Cf. W. Heimpel, Tierbilder in der sumerischen Literatur (= StPohl 9, 1968) 380–389. Based on the word burû, Black 1996 distinguishes the following images in Old Bab. lit. texts: “catching b. in a net”, “the gods are small b.”, “chasing b. from reed-beds, from their hiding places”, “b. flocking together”, “b. wheeling around in the air”, “b. flying away” and “b. rising suddenly into the air”.

§ 5.2. In Akkadian texts, the vehicle isšûru is used similarly to Sum. mušen and burû, (s. § 5.1, above) and occurs with two groups of tertia comparationis:

a) Tertium comparationis: flying, e.g., ana qereb birâti še’dâtina kima isšûri ip-parâ “They flew like a b. into those fortresses” TCL 3: 291 (NA royal inscription).

b) Tertium comparationis: hunting, trapping and binding: ša sâri lemmi kima isšûri akassâ idâšu “I shall bind the arms of the evil wind as (the wings) of a b.” Erra I 187. ašib Babili šumnâti isšûnumma arrašunu at-tama “These inhabitants of Babylon – they are a b. and you their decoy” Erra IV 18. The following simile is hardly understandable without assuming falconry: kima isšûri ša ina pâni kasûsi ana sîn awilim irûbu “Like a bird which enters a man’s lap (fleeing) before a falcon” Sumer 23, 161: 12–15 (OB letter); the point is that the bird’s panic-stricken flight leads him in a situation even worse for him.

Cf. CAD I 211 isšûru 1b. For b. as a vehicle in similes and metaphors in Akk. epic texts s. Streck, Die Bildersprache der akkadischen Epik (= AOAT 264, 1999) 174f. For b. as a vehicle in similes in Old Bab. lit. s. Wasserman, Style and form in Old-Babylonian literary texts (= CunMon. 27, 2003) 144, 154 (“image of the running ducks”); 155 (“image of the flying b.”).

§ 6. Typology of Sumerian and Akkad. bird names. The following survey cannot be exhaustive. It rather gives characteristic examples for the different types. Many names cannot be classified, e.g., Akk. lurnu “ostrich” (Strauß), which has, as far as we know, neither a Sum. nor a Sem. etymology, nor a meaning deducible from an Akk. word.

For a typology of Akk. b. names s. the remarks in Black/al-Rawi 1987, 119–122. For an extensive
discussion of Sum. faunal terminology in general, including b. names, s. Peterson 2007, 41-120.


§ 6.2. Akkadian primary names with Semitic etymology. arišu “crow, raven” Militarev/Kogan 2005, 129-131 (Rabe(nvögel*)). eru “eagle” ibid. 58f. (but s. Geier*). simintu “swallow” ibid. 258f. (Schwalbe*). summatu “(wild?) dove” ibid. 257f. (Taube*). ıtunu “crane” ibid. 131f. zibu “vulture” ibid. 105f. (in other Sem. languages meaning “wolf” or “hyena”; s. Schakal*).


§ 6.5. Reference to the appearance of the bird. burnutu “beautiful” Edubba 7, 100: 61. daqqaqaru (cf. daqaqaru “to be minute”) “wren” (Zaunkönig*). kubši-barmat, lit. “my cap is multicolored”, “hoopoe(?)” (cf. Salonen 1973, 198 s. v. iššur kübü “b. with a crest”). usukkānu “the one with a (multi-colored) check” Edubba 7, 100: 61.


M. P. Streck

Vogel (bird). B. Bei den Hethitern.

§ 1. Attested bird varieties. – § 2. Hunting and fowling. – § 3. Oracles, rituals, incantations and myths.

§ 1. Attested bird varieties. Hitt. watattai- “b.” is, with a single exception (KBo. 4, 2 ii 32), always written with the logogr. writings of b. varieties (with the exception of the two bat species), but for syll. writings, it is used only inconsistently and only in pre-Neo-Hitt. texts.

Sakuma (2009/1, 254) notes that the use or non-use of the determinative in the oracle reports is tablet-dependent.


duck”[2]), KA₂₃.A (“fruit bat”), SIMμusˇen (“swallow”), bâpap-[2], MUS₂₃EN.MUS₂₃EN (“snake b.”, perhaps darter or snake eagle), MUS₂₃EN.TUR (lit. “small b.”), PÊŠ (“bat”), UGAμusˇen (“crow”, “raven”), also wr. IRIBμusˇen.

Most of these terms appear exclusively in b. oracle texts, others are attested only outside of them. The eagle and falcon are widely attested both within and outside of the b. oracle reports, while the HURRI-b. features in its own distinct oracular procedure in addition to rituals (cf. § 3.2). Of the few names with proposed identifications, two are bats (KA₂₃.A, PÊŠ), five are b. of prey (aramant-, bâram-, kalìkašši-, kaššar-, pattarapallši-), one is an owl (biwašša-), and two are water fowl (biwašša, kallšaššaše-; Sakuma 2009/1, 335–411).

§ 2. Hunting and fowling. Visual references to fowling and falconry are linked to royal imagery and so of limited use in reconstructing actual practice. Falconry may have been practiced (Canby 2002), but is not attested in the texts themselves, and it is possible that the relevant iconography projects only an ideology of kingship.

The frontier-post governors (CTH 261) were instructed to maintain the health of the b. ponds in their jurisdiction (KUB 13, 2 i 24.f.). Such ponds may have been made in such cases, as, for example, the reservoirs located adjacent to the citadel at Ḫattūssa, which may have attracted water fowl (luššaš MUS₂₃EN). That such b. were highly valued is indicated in the Hitt. laws where a stife fine was imposed on anyone stealing one. LH § 159 states: “If anyone [steals] a trained water b., … [or] a trained gaggapa-,[2] formerly they paid [one] mina of silver, but now [he shall pay] twelve shekels [of silver], and he shall look [to his house for it].” Much less valued were ummijant-b., the theft of ten of these incurring a penalty of only one shekel (LH § 220).

B. were also actively hunted for captivity as indicated by a letter written to the Hitt. king by his officials in Tapikka (Mašat-hoûûkû. A. § 2): “Concerning the fact that you, Your Majesty, my lord, commanded me, Ḥabiri, as follows: ‘On this trip collect b.’ (People) kindly collected b. for us, …