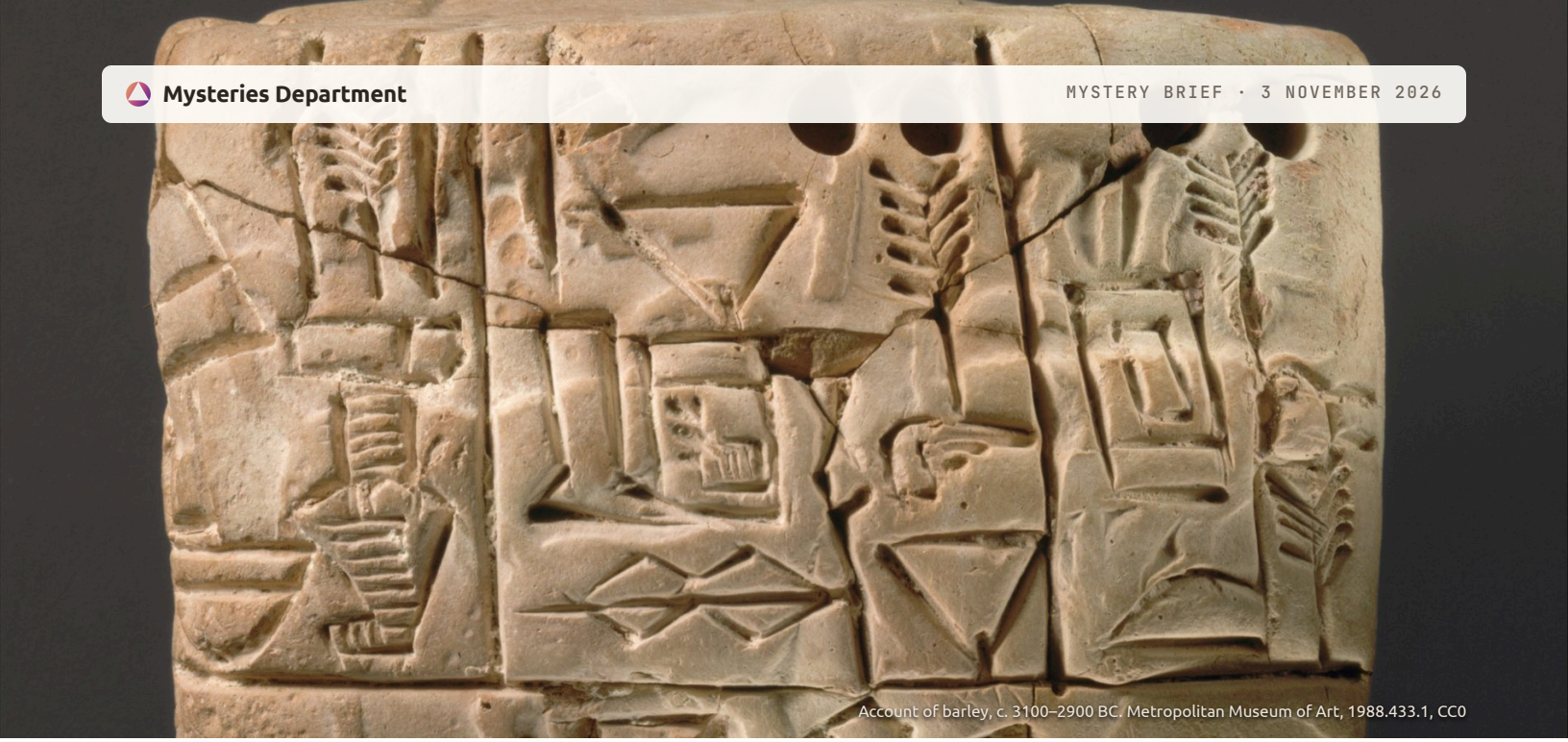


Account of barley, c. 3100–2900 BC. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.433.1, CC0

CLAY TABLETS · C. 3350–3000 BC

Proto-cuneiform

Among the earliest writing in the world: about 6,000 clay accounts from Uruk and its neighbours. Their numbers can be read. Not a single word can yet be sounded out, and no one knows what language their writers spoke.

Where it stands

AS OF 3 NOVEMBER 2026

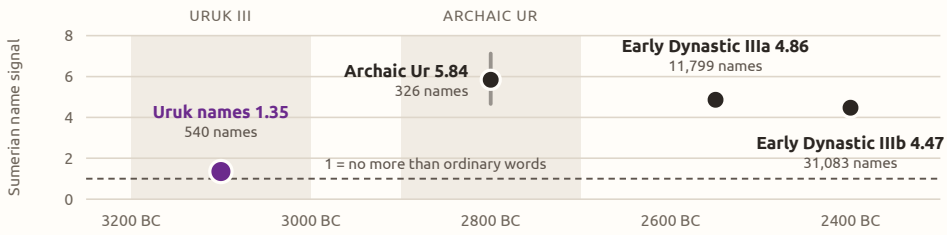
A **The tablets are accounts, and their numbers can be read.**
The bookkeeping is understood. The words behind it are not.
ESTABLISHED Page 2

B **The personal names are a real naming system, but not a Sumerian one.**
They barely use the stock parts of Sumerian names: 1.35, against 4.5–5.8.
SUPPORTED Page 3

C **Sumerian-style names appear only by about 2800 BC.**
In the Archaic Ur texts, names turn Sumerian and their word order follows.
SUPPORTED Page 4

D **No word in the earliest tablets has been read as sound.**
Every reading tested, ours included, has failed.
SUPPORTED Page 4

The Sumerian name signal, before and after



~6,000
tablets and fragments

540
personal names marked by the editors

1.35
Sumerian name signal in those names

4.5–5.8
the same signal in Sumerian names

18
tests run here, one rebuilt blind

A The tablets are accounts, and their numbers can be read.

Each case holds a number and a few signs, and totals add up. The signs say what was counted, not how it was said.



1. **Numbers.** Round and wedge-shaped impressions. Their values are known, so totals can be checked.
2. **Things counted.** An ear of barley: the sign that became cuneiform ŠE, "barley".
3. **A seal,** rolled on before writing: a man with dogs, hunting boars.

Account of barley, c. 3100–2900 BC, probably Uruk. 6 × 5.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.433.1, CC0.

A list of eight people, read line by line

Schematic facsimile: the layout of a tablet from Uruk (Iraq Museum; Englund 2009, §3.6.1), drawn from its CDLI transliteration. Numbers as impressed; other signs by their modern labels.

8 total BAR $ŠAM_2$ EZEN×SU 3N57.NUNUZ	AL MUŠEN TUR BU EN TUR BU $ŠA_3$ U4×N57 TUR LUGAL X MUŠEN 6N57? KAŠ $BULUG_3$ ŠU ZI ZI ŠUBUR PAP U_2 A GI&GI PIRIG ŠU DUR_2 DUR_2

1 person listed as AL
named MUŠEN·TUR·BU

1 person listed as EN·TUR
named BU·ŠA3

2 people listed as U4×N57·TUR
named LUGAL and X·MUŠEN·6N57?·KAŠ

2 people listed as BULUG3
named ŠU·ZI and ZI·ŠUBUR·PAP

1 person listed as U2·A
named GI&GI·PIRIG

1 person listed as ŠU
named DUR2·DUR2

1 + 1 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 1 = 8, the total in the first column.
The arithmetic can be checked. The names can't be pronounced.

A thousand years, in five steps

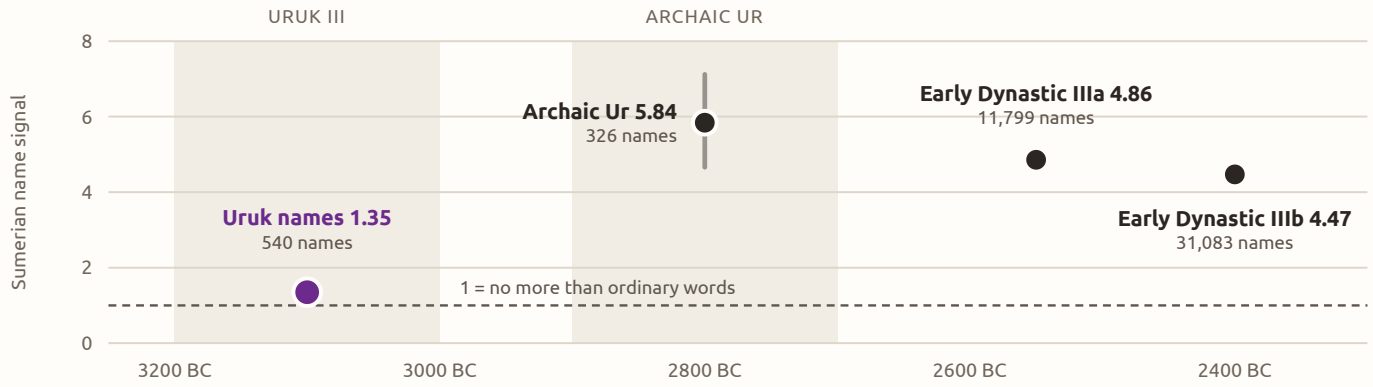
c. 3350 BC	c. 3100 BC	c. 2800 BC	c. 2600 BC	c. 2400 BC
First tablets at Uruk	The 540 names tested here	Archaic Ur: first sound-spellings and Sumerian names	First Sumerian literature, at Fara and Abu Salabikh	Lagash archives: 31,000 Sumerian name entries

B The personal names are a real naming system, but not a Sumerian one.

Sumerian names are built from stock parts: *lugal* "king", *ama* "mother", *nin* "lady", *amar* "calf", *ur* "man of", and gods. We counted them.

The stock parts are missing from the Uruk names, and fully there three centuries later

How much more often names use the parts than ordinary words in the same texts, with 95 % intervals. RUN0DFVQR5WN96F



32 names from one Uruk list

MS 3035, column 1 (CDLI transliteration). Stock Sumerian parts filled in.

AL 2N57 MUN — **32** people of one kind, then their names:

PA	KAŠ DA	SUKUD NI	U_4 ŠU
ZATU659	BU ŠE ŠUBUR	EN U_2 DU	EZINU EN
ZATU659	ZATU659	ŠU ŠU	BU GI
$ŠU_2$ PAP	3N57 SAL	3N57 A	BU UR
3N57	DIM	EN GIŠ×$ŠU_2$	ŠU ŠU
EZEN EN	$ŠU_2$ SAL	EN AMAR ŠU	E_2 BU
DIM	PAP	$ŠA_3$ A TAK_4	NAM_2
$BAHAR_2$ EN	EN U_2 HI	$BAHAR_2$ 3N57	6N57 U_8

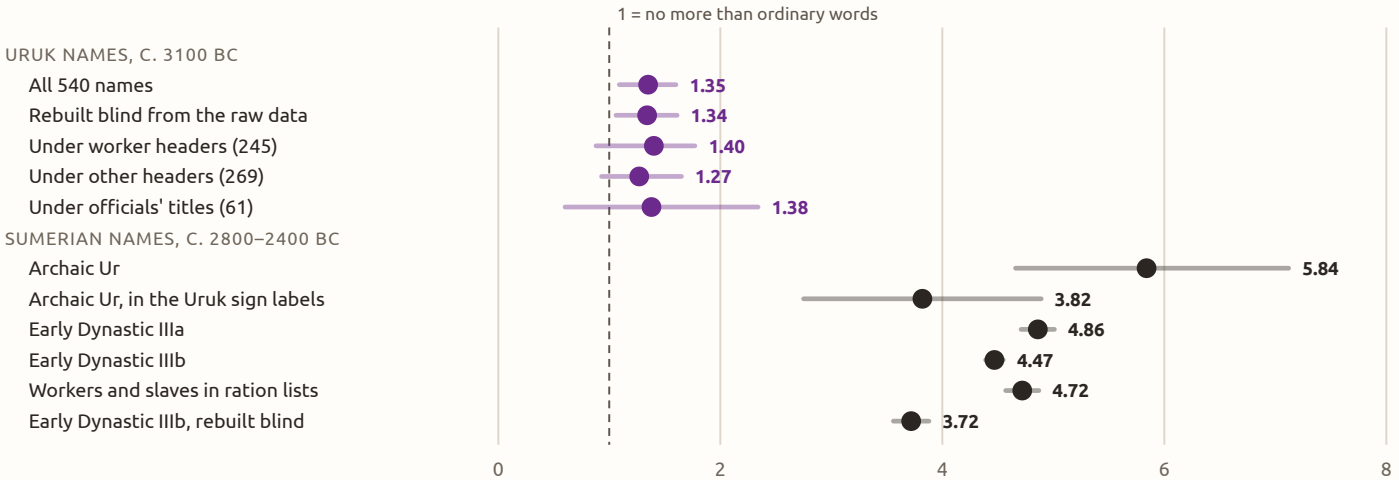
Sumerian names, c. 2800–2400 BC

as spelled in cuneiform, stock parts filled in

ur-{d}ba-ba_6	Ur-Baba
lugal-an-da	Lugal-anda
amar-$giri_{16}$	Amar-Girid
ama-ušum-gal	Ama-ušumgal
ur-nanna	Ur-Nanna
nin-$teš_2$-mu	Nin-teshmu
bara-nam-tar	Baranamtar

Every check gives the same answer

The same measure for every group of Uruk names and every Sumerian sample, including a blind rebuild from the raw data. 95 % intervals.



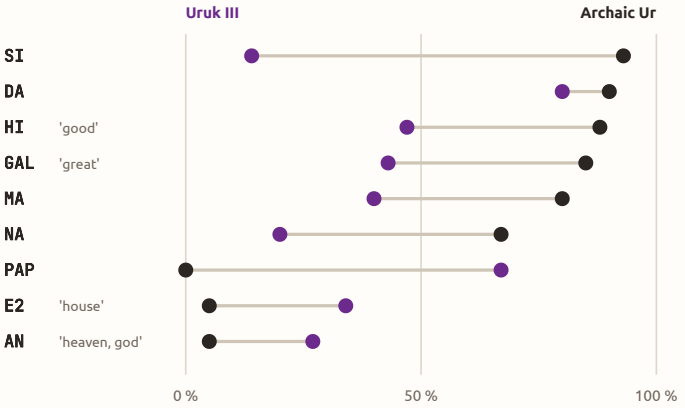
Limits. Under 1 % of the corpus, mostly unexcavated tablets. Names show who gave them, not for certain what the scribes spoke. Not peer-reviewed.

C Sumerian-style names appear only by about 2800 BC.

In the Archaic Ur texts, names turn Sumerian and their word order follows.

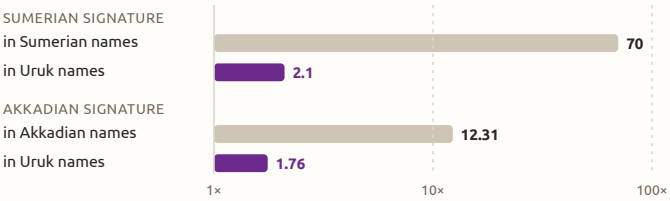
Sumerian word order arrives with the names

Share of each sign's uses that come last in a name. In Sumerian names, words like "great" and "good" come last. RUN0DG378H71FBR



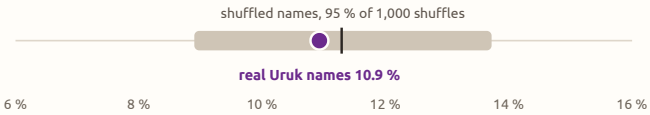
Not Akkadian either

Signatures learned from each language's names. RUN0DG2PZ8W546J



No Uruk name survives as a Sumerian name

Uruk names matching an attested later name, against the same signs shuffled. RUN0DG377KDWWGK



D No word in the earliest tablets has been read as sound.

1936	**Falkenstein**	The tablets are the first stage of Sumerian writing	UNSETTLED	The signs continue into Sumerian, but no sound is spelled.
1995	**Steinkeller**	Some signs are Sumerian sound-spellings (rebuses)	OPEN	No case in the oldest tablets is secure (Whittaker 2005).
2006	**Damerow**	It is a notation for accounts, not yet writing of speech	OPEN	Here: the names behave like real names, not labels.
2009	**Englund**	About 440 names show no Sumerian pattern	HOLDS	Tested here: 1.35 against 4.5–5.8 in Sumerian names.
2025	**Dahl**	Sound-spelling begins at Archaic Ur, in names	HOLDS	Here: Sumerian names and name order arrive then too.
2026	**This project**	A Sumerian possessive -ni in the names	RULED OUT	Later Sumerian names show no such pattern.
2026	**This project**	The god Enlil written in an Uruk name	RULED OUT	Enlil is written EN.KID in this period.
2026	**This project**	Uruk names that survive as Sumerian names	RULED OUT	Withdrawn: at the rate of shuffled names.

Sumerian from the start

Most Assyriologists

- FAILS Names show the Sumerian pattern
- UNTESTED A secure sound-spelling in Uruk IV
- UNTESTED Word-list readings that only sound explains

An unidentified language

Englund

- HOLDS Names not Sumerian-pattern
- HOLDS Names not Akkadian-pattern (weak)
- UNTESTED Identify the naming tradition

A notation, not yet language

Damerow

- FAILS Name entries behave like labels
- HOLDS No grammar before Archaic Ur
- UNTESTED Sign positions vs simulated notation

What would move it forward

→ Check each proposed Sumerian sound-spelling against the rate chance homophones give

→ Test whether Sumerian accounts also put the number before the noun

→ Score the word lists' later Sumerian readings by picture, use and sound

Text and charts CC BY 4.0, Mysteries Department.
Tablet photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0.
Transliterations: CDLI; Oracc ePSD2 (CC0).