

The Original Wordle

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ABSTRACT

The article calls attention to an ancient Ugaritic bilingual word game, written c. 1300 B.C.E., in which the correct response requires rearranging the given letters to create a sensible word or name. But since the word/name is actually in Hurrian, a second step is necessary, namely, to render the Hurrian into its Ugaritic equivalency. So while not quite the original Wordle, this short ancient text reminds us of the enduring allure of word games in literate cultures.

WELL, NOT QUITE THE ORIGINAL WORDLE, BUT AS THE READER SOON WILL realize, the bilingual word game presented here is worth bringing to our attention, given the current world-wide fascination with Wordle (along with similar word games).

In c. 1300 B.C.E., an Ugaritic master scribe wrote out the short school exercise which appears on a small clay tablet (3 cm x 4.4 cm x 1.5 cm), using the Ugaritic alphabet to present both the Ugaritic and Hurrian material in the text (see Fig. 1, below).

The wording and contents of the document suggest that the master scribe used this short text to teach an apprentice scribe.¹

First, though, some background information for the uninitiated. Ugaritic is a Semitic language that was used at ancient Ugarit (= modern Ras Shamra, on the Mediterranean coast, in northwestern Syria), which flourished c. 1400–c. 1200 B.C.E. (that is, during the Late Bronze Age). Ugaritic belongs to the Northwest Semitic group, closely related to Hebrew, Phoenician, and other Canaanite dialects.² The Ugaritic scribes used a 30-letter alphabet to write their language, though unlike the linear alphabet used for Hebrew, Phoenician, etc., their alphabetic symbols were cuneiform style, created under the influence of the Mesopotamian writing system.

1. On scribal training at Ugarit in general, see HAWLEY 2008; and HAWLEY, PARDEE, and ROCHE-HAWLEY 2015.

2. Some scholars, the present author included, would include Ugaritic within the Canaanite sub-group of Northwest Semitic, while other scholars classify Ugaritic as a separate language within the Northwest Semitic group.

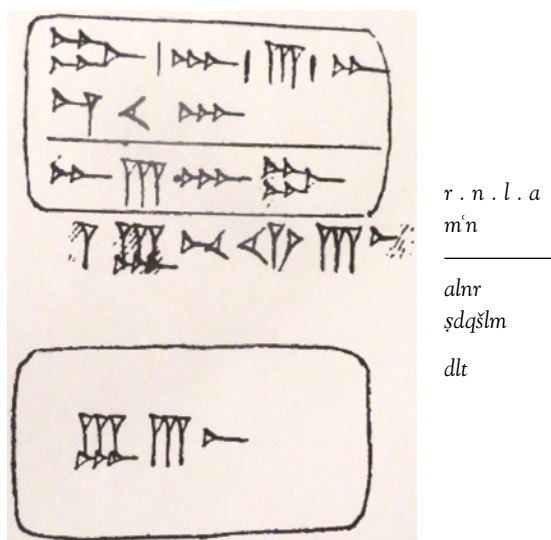


Figure 1. Line-drawing of Ugaritic tablet RS 12.64 = CAT 5.7 (published by Virolleaud 1951, 24; 1957, 198), reproduced here with kind permission granted by Valérie Matoïan (Collège de France).

As befitting an ancient cosmopolitan metropole, the archives at Ugarit also revealed additional scripts and languages, including Hurrian, a non-Semitic language, native to northern Mesopotamia, but whose influence reached unto the Hittite realm, the city of Ugarit, and elsewhere.³ Typically, Hurrian is written in the traditional Mesopotamian cuneiform script, used for Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, etc. — though at Ugarit occasionally one finds Hurrian material written in the Ugaritic alphabetic script (see, e.g., LAM 2011 and 2015).

We now return to our small tablet presented above. As an aside, note that the tablet was found by Claude Schaeffer, *maître archéologue* of Ras Shamra, in 1948, the first season of renewed excavations after a decade of non-activity due to the ravages of World War II — and then quickly was published by his colleague Charles Virolleaud, chief epigrapher of the *Mission de Ras Shamra* (VIROLLEAUD 1951, 24), with the excavation number

3. Hurrian, attested in the 2nd millennium B.C.E., is closely related to Urartian, attested in the 1st millennium B.C.E.: most likely the latter is a ‘niece’ language (and not a ‘daughter’ language) of the former. The Hurro-Urartian group, in turn, is related to the modern-day Northeast Caucasian languages spoken in Chechnya, Dagestan, etc.; see DIAKANOFF and STAROSTIN 1986, even if not all scholars accede to their hypothesis.

RS 12.64 (that is, Ras Shamra, season 12, text no. 64).⁴ In time, the text received the official designation CAT 5.7.⁵

In the first line, the scribe wrote four letters separated by word dividers — the vertical strokes on the tablet, transcribed with full stop (period) in the transcription. As such, each of these letters stands alone: *r . n . l . a* ⁶ — which is to say, the scribe does not intend for the four graphemes to be read as a word, but rather as four letters. And in any case, no such potential word *rnla* exists in the language, nor could any meaning adhere to such a string of letters.

In the second line of the small tablet, the scribe wrote the single word *m'n*, meaning ‘answer’ (cf. Hebrew מַעֲנֶה *ma'ane* [Job 32:3, 32:5, etc.]), followed by a horizontal line to separate part one of the tablet from part two of the tablet. The use of the word ‘answer’ indicates that line 1 presents some sort of puzzle or riddle which needs to be elucidated by the clever reader — hence, a word game.

Line 3 of the tablet provides the response: *alnr*, the self-same four letters as appear in line 1, though this time in (simple) anagrammatic fashion, and without the word dividers, indicating a complete lexeme unto itself. If our Wordle-like tablet was in color, the four letters in line 1 all would be highlighted in mustard, indicating that the four letters are present in the actual word, though they are not in the correct place, while in line 3 they all would be highlighted in green, indicating the correct word.

Now, the word *alnr* does not resonate with anything in Ugaritic, but one may observe two Hurrian elements, which occur both as independent lexemes and as components within personal names: *al* and *nr*. The former equates with the Hurrian word *allai*, ‘lady, queen’, while the latter equates with the Hurrian word *niri*, ‘good’ (LAROCHÉ 1980, 42 and 185, respectively; WEGNER 2007, 246 and 269–70, respectively).

And indeed as a personal name, the form *alnr* is attested in another Ugaritic document, to wit, CAT 4.16 (line 6), an administrative text found during the very first season of excavations in 1929 (hence its excavation

4. See also VIROLLEAUD 1957, 198.

5. CAT = DIETRICH, LORETZ, and SANMARTÍN 2013. This standard reference work organizes the c. 1600 Ugaritic tablets into various categories, with classification no. 5 (per the siglum of our tablet) incorporating the scribal exercises.

6. Note that the Ugaritic script does not indicate vowels, except in the case of ‘aleph (glottal stop), for which three different symbols are used, one indicating ‘a, one indicating ‘i, and one indicating ‘u. Hence, the final letter in the first line normally would be read as glottal stop followed by the a-vowel, that is, ‘a.

number RS 1.15) (GRÖNDAHL 1967, 216, 243).⁷ Moreover, the name is known from the site of Alalakh, 110 km northwest of Ugarit, in modern-day south-central Turkey, written as *alli-niri* in the cuneiform syllabic script, from a few centuries earlier (WISEMAN 1953, 112 and plate XLIV [text no. 438, line 11]).⁸ All of which is to say, the form *aln̄r* inscribed in line 3 of our small Ugaritic tablet is a relatively well-attested Hurrian personal name in the general region of northern Syria during the Late Bronze Age, with the meaning ‘the lady is good’.

Since the scribe-in-training most likely was not (yet) expert in Hurrian, line 4 (written on the lower edge of the tablet) provides an additional step, as it glosses the Hurrian term *aln̄r* with the native Ugaritic equivalence: *šdqšlm*.⁹ As with *aln̄r* above, we may note that the personal name *šdqšlm* occurs elsewhere in the Ugaritic corpus, in fact, in four different administrative texts: CAT 4.102 (line 23), 4.103 (line 28), 4.165 (line 11), 4.616 (line 5).¹⁰ Naturally, we cannot know whether any or all of these people are the same person as *šdqšlm* in our tablet, CAT 5.7, but at least we are able to determine that the name is relatively well attested at Ugarit.

Note the equivalencies of the individual components in the two names on our tablet: Hurrian *nr* (*niri*) ‘good’ = Ugaritic *šdq* ‘just, lawful, righteous’ (hence within the same semantic field as ‘good’); and Hurrian *al* (*allai*) ‘lady, queen’ = Ugaritic *šlm* ‘Shalim’, the deity often associated with Venus as the Evening Star.¹¹

One further observes the different word orders between Hurrian *al nr*, that is, ‘lady’ ~ ‘good’, and Ugaritic *šdq šlm*, that is, ‘good, just’ ~ ‘(goddess)

7. As an aside, note that in CAT 4.16, the Hurrian personal name *aln̄r* (line 6) is immediately preceded by another Hurrian personal name *iwrnr* (line 5).

8. The name also may occur as a toponym in the Alalakh region, for which see ASTOUR 1963, 226.

9. This is how the text was originally understood by Virolleaud, and even though subsequent scholars offered different analyses (see below, n. 14), I for one believe that Virolleaud’s interpretation remains the most likely.

10. In the second and third of these passages, the name is written completely. In the first instance, the text is broken, but *šdqš[lm]* may be safely restored; ditto for the fourth citation, where *[s]dqšlm* may be safely restored. Note further the dialectal variant form *štqšlm*, which occurs 4x in CAT 3.12 (formerly CAT 2.19) (lines 1, 4, 10, 14), the legal record of manumission of a (now former) royal slave by this name. For the phonology of this latter form, see GORDON 1965, 33, §5.24.

11. In actuality, the gender identification is much more complex, since in one Ugaritic mythological text, “The Birth of the Gracious Gods” (CAT 1.23), the god *šlm* ‘Shalim’ appears to be masculine.

Shalim',¹² due to the different syntaxes of the two languages, especially in the construction of personal names. In the former, the subject precedes the predicate, for example *enna-madi* 'the gods are wisdom' (WEGNER 2007, 122; WEGNER 2020, 83); while in the latter typically the predicate, especially in the form of an adjective or stative verb, precedes the subject. Examples include Ugaritic *yrhd* 'Haddu is excellent', Phoenician כבדמלקרת *KBDMLQRT* 'Melqart is honored', Phoenician כבדעשתרת *KBD'ŠTRT* 'Ashtart (Astarte) is honored', Hebrew טובִיָּה *ṭobiyya* 'Yah is good' (whence Greek Τωβίας and the form 'Tobias' in various European languages), etc.¹³

Hence, in the present tablet, we may observe the attempt to equate Hurrian *al nr* 'the lady is good' with Ugaritic *šdq šlm* 'Shalim is just', as part of the process to educate the apprentice scribe in the workings of Ugaritic-Hurrian bilingualism.¹⁴ As intimated above, almost undoubtedly the two forms are personal names, perhaps even the names of the two scribes (mentor and pupil) at work, whose two names have a certain bilingual resonance with one another. Alternatively, the two wordings could represent the name of the single scribe who has created our little puzzle, with one form of his name in its Hurrian guise and with another form of his name in its Ugaritic guise.

Regardless of how the equivalencies are understood, at a distance of more than three millennia, it is truly remarkable to observe this teacher-student moment.

In sum, our word-game tablet incorporated two parts: a) scramble the four letters in line 1 to create the proper response (see line 2), as elucidated in line 3; and b) render the Hurrian name into its Semitic equivalency, as explicated in line 4.¹⁵

12. As indicated in the transcription above, there are no word dividers in the strings *alnṛ* and *šdqšlm* (especially since they are personal names), though for clarification and for ease of reading I include here spaces between the two elements in both forms.

13. For further examples and details, see GRÖNDAHL 1967, 43–44; BENZ 1972, 221; FOWLER 1988, 82–84; and GOLUB 2017, 36 (Table 6).

14. For earlier treatments of our text, with different analyses, see EISSFELDT 1952–1953, 118–9 (reprinted in EISSFELDT 1963, 368); and DIETRICH and LORETZ 1988, 183–4. Though all scholars agree that this small tablet is a scribal exercise of some sort.

15. We actually possess more than one hundred Hurrian-Ugaritic lexical equivalencies, as preserved in the polyglot S^a vocabulary texts found at Ras Shamra, though the two items under discussion here are not extant and/or

Finally, line 5 (written on the reverse side of the tablet) includes the single word *dlt* ‘tablet’. The basic meaning of this word is actually ‘door’ (cf. Hebrew דֶּלֶת *delet*), but since architectural terms frequently gain additional connotations relating to writing culture (consider our English word ‘column’),¹⁶ the word also came to mean ‘tablet, document, column of text, etc.’ (see most famously Jeremiah 36:23 where דֶּלֶת *delet* means either ‘column of text’ or ‘sheet of a papyrus scroll’).

Why the scribe may have written this word on the reverse of the tablet is unclear, but there it is, nonetheless. Notably, the lexeme belongs to the realm of scribal culture, and so perhaps the three-letter word *dlt* ‘tablet’ represents another teachable moment.¹⁷

Scholars of writing culture more broadly will recognize *dlt* ‘tablet’ as the source of Greek *deltos* ‘tablet’, a word used, for example, by Herodotus, *Histories*, 8.135, with reference to Carian writing, and by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.27, with reference to the Roman Twelve Tables.¹⁸

But back to the main point, the bilingual scribal exercise which constitutes the main content of our small Ugaritic tablet: word games are nothing new, but rather have been present in literate cultures for millennia.¹⁹ Our short text may not be “the original Wordle” *per se*, but it reminds us of the enduring allure of words as a most pleasant intellectual pursuit.²⁰

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simply were not treated. See the standard study by HUEHNERGARD 1987, esp. 21–45.

16. Other examples include Arabic *bayt* ‘house’ > ‘poetic verse’, and Hieroglyphic Egyptian *hwt* ‘house, temple’ > ‘stanza’. I plan one day to devote a more extensive study to this cross-cultural phenomenon.
17. BORDREUIL 2006 proposed that *dlt* in CAT 5.7 (line 5) should be understood literally as ‘door’, with reference to the entrance to the royal palace, and that the one or two individuals mentioned in our text should be understood as palace guard(s). He reached this conclusion on the basis of another Ugaritic text, RS 17.25 = CAT 6.66 (a cylinder seal), though note that the final line there (line 10) expressly states *dlt bt* ‘door of the house’ = ‘entrance to the palace’. As intimated above, given the word-game essence of CAT 5.7, the meaning ‘tablet’ inscribed on the reverse is much more likely.
18. Also related is the Greek letter name *delta* borrowed from Phoenician דֶּלֶת *DLT*.
19. Of similar antiquity, though much more complicated, are the ancient Egyptian crosswords, for which see ZANDEE 1966 and STEWART 1991.
20. My thanks to colleagues Richard Hess (Denver Seminary), John Huehnergard (University of Texas), and Joseph Lam (University of North Carolina) for their constructive comments and suggestions upon reading an earlier version of this article; I alone, though, remain responsible for the conclusions herein.

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