



2022

The Plain of Olishem

Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smoot, Stephen O.; Gee, John; Muhlestein, Kerry; and Thompson, John S. (2022) "The Plain of Olishem," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 61: Iss. 4, Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss4/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Plain of Olishem

The opening chapter of the Book of Abraham mentions a location called “the plain of Olishem” (Abr. 1:10). It isn’t clear from the text whether the plain itself was Olishem, or whether Olishem was some city or region in the area to which the plain was adjacent, or whether the plain takes its name from a major city on the plain. In any case, this “plain of Olishem” was near Abraham’s homeland of Ur of the Chaldees, according to the text.

In 1985, a Latter-day Saint archaeologist named John M. Lundquist published a pioneering article situating the Book of Abraham in an ancient geographical and cultural environment in northern Mesopotamia.¹ Among the points raised by Lundquist was the possible identification of the Book of Abraham’s Olishem with the ancient place name Ulisum (or Ulishum).² Lundquist pointed to inscriptional evidence

1. John M. Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham (Abraham 1 and 2),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 225–37.

2. Read as *u-li-si-im^{ki}* in C. J. Gadd and Leon Legrain, eds., *Ur Excavations, Texts I: Royal Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 75; *ú-li-si-im^{ki}* in Hans Hirsch, “Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 20 (1963): 74; *U-li-si-im^{ki}* in Benjamin R. Foster, “The Siege of Armanum,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14, no. 1 (1982): 29; *Ū-li-ši-im^{ki}* or *Ū-li-šé-em^{ki}* in John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 75; and *ú-li-si-im^{ki}* in Nashat Alkhafaji and Gianni Marchesi, “Naram-Sin’s War against Armanum and Ebla in a Newly-Discovered Inscription from Tulul al-Baqarat,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 79, no. 1 (2020): 16. On the acceptable normalization of the name as either Ulisum or Ulishum, see Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin’s War against Armanum and Ebla,” 14. Compare also Wolfram von Soden, *Das akkadische Syllabar*,

from the ancient city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia dating to the time of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (who reigned ca. 2254–2218 BC), which spoke of this Ulisum in what is today northern Syria or southern Turkey.³ The relevant portion of the inscription reads:

Whereas, for all time since the formation of humankind there has never been a king who overthrew Armanum and Ebla, by the weapon(?) of Nergal did Naram-Sin, the mighty, open the only path and he gave him Aranum and Ebla. He bestowed upon him Amanus, the Cedar Mountain and the Upper Sea, and, by the weapon of Dagan, exalter of his kingship, did Naram-Sin, the mighty, defeat Armanum and Ebla. Then, from the very mouth of the Eurphrates, he smote the river(-bank) as far as Ulisum [*u-li-si-im^{ki}*], as well as the people whom Dagan had for the first time bestowed upon him, and they bear for him the burden of Ilaba his god. The Amanus too, mount of cedars, he conquered completely.⁴

In 2020, additional inscriptional evidence from another site in modern Iraq (Tulul al-Baqarat) was published that further documented Naram-Sin's conquest of Armanum and Ebla.⁵ As with the inscription from Ur, this source also identifies a place called Ulisum: “[Indeed,] with the weapon of Dagan, the one who magnifies his kingship, Naram-Sin the mighty conquered Armanum and Ebla. Moreover, from the edge of the Euphrates as far as Ulisum, [he smote the peoples whom Dagan had newly bestowed upon him].”⁶ Scholars have debated the location of this ancient Ulisum, and multiple sites have been proposed over the

Analecta Orientalia 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1948), 43, 73; I. J. Gelb, *Old Akkadian Writing and Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 34–35; Arthur Ungnad, *Akkadian Grammar*, 5th rev. ed. (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1992), 25–26, on the s/š sibilants in Old Akkadian (but also note the counterarguments made against Gelb's reconstruction in Rebecca Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian: A Historical and Comparative Study of the Syllabic Texts* [Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005], 95–96); and Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla?,” 234, on the pronunciation of the u/o vowels in the name.

3. Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla?,” 233–34; compare Gadd and Legrain, *Ur Excavations, Texts I*, 74–75, plate LVI; Hirsch, “Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade,” 74; Foster, “Siege of Armanum,” 29; and Michael C. Astour, “Overland Trade Routes in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1995), 3:1407.

4. UET I 275, II, translation in Foster, “Siege of Armanum,” 31–32; compare the recent translation in Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 16.

5. Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 1–20.

6. Translation in Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 8–9.

years, with no clear consensus having been reached other than that it lies somewhere west of the Euphrates River in southern Turkey.⁷

Subsequent studies since Lundquist's initial proposal have strengthened his enticing identification of Olishem in the Book of Abraham as ancient Ulisum.⁸ In fact, one non-Latter-day Saint archaeologist working in the area has favorably suggested a possible (though inconclusive) connection between Olishem in the Book of Abraham and Ulisum from Naram-Sin's inscription.⁹ In 2013, excavators at the Turkish site of Oylum Höyük near the Syrian border announced that it was the ancient Ulisum mentioned in Naram-Sin's inscription and identified it as "the city of Abraham." Because more archaeological investigation needs to be undertaken at the site, the confirmatory significance of this evidence for the Book of Abraham is "promising but not [yet] proven."¹⁰ There are still gaps in the archaeological and inscriptional record that preclude a definitive identification of the Book of Abraham's Olishem with any particular archaeological site at this time.¹¹ Nevertheless, the following can be said with a fair amount of certainty:

There is definitely an ancient site with the name Ulisum or Ulishum.

There is no agreement as to the precise location of Ulisum, but it can most likely be identified in a specific general region (west of the Euphrates in southern Turkey). Many scholars are currently interested in exploring where precisely Ulisum may be in this region.

Olishem is a name from the Book of Abraham, which matches the phonetics and time period of the known site of Uli[s]h[um].

7. See the discussion Alkhafaji and Marchesi, "Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla," 14.

8. Gee and Ricks, "Historical Plausibility," 75–76.

9. Atilla Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi: Ulisum/Ullis/İllis," in *Armizzi: Engin Özgenç Armağan*, ed. Atilla Engin, Barbara Helwing, and Bora Uysal (Ankara, Turk.: Asitan Kitap, 2014), 136.

10. John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 105–6.

11. For instance, even the ancient name of the site of Oylum Höyük remains disputed. So, whereas Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi," 129–49, argues that the site was ancient Ulisum, another scholar has argued that it was called Ḫaššu(wa) based on his reading of some inscriptional evidence discovered at the site. Ahmet Ünal, "A Hittite Treaty Tablet from Oylum Höyük in Southeastern Turkey and the Location of Ḫaššu(wa)," *Anatolian Studies* 65 (2015): 19–34. In any case, "strong support from written sources and archaeological material is lacking," so "the question [of the identity of Oylum Höyük] remains to be answered unequivocally only if and when further evidence turns up, which can only be supplied by texts." Ünal, "Hittite Treaty Tablet from Oylum Höyük," 32.

A likely region of the ancient Ulisum matches well with some geographic interpretations of the Book of Abraham.¹²

Textual and archaeological studies about Ulisum can inform our understanding of the Book of Abraham, and studying the Book of Abraham can in turn inform these textual and archaeological studies because the Book of Abraham provides geographical information about Olishem not available in any other extant ancient source.¹³ Future discoveries may shed further light on this topic, but for now it can be said that Ulisum is plausible and promising (though not yet definitive) evidence for the Book of Abraham's Olishem.¹⁴

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Has Olishem Been Discovered?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7.

Gee, John, and Stephen D. Ricks. "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study." In *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson, 63–69. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001.

12. See the discussion in Stephen O. Smoot, "In the Land of the Chaldeans: The Search for Abraham's Homeland Revisited," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 7–37, esp. 33–34.

13. Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi," 136.

14. Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," 106.