# Introduction

This primer for is intended for the beginning student. It introduces the language and literature of ancient Ugarit and provides some historical and social contexts. As the student advances in the study of Ugaritic language and literature, it will be necessary to learn to use the plethora of scholarly resources now available.

The pedagogy of this primer is guided by two questions. The first is what does the modern student of Ugaritic know when they come to learn Ugaritic and how can we build on that? The second is what would an ancient Ugaritic scribe have known and how would the Ugaritic language reflect it? The first question contextualizes the study of Ugaritic from the modern student's perspective. The second question contextualizes Ugarit from the ancient scribe's perspective.

We began this primer from the practical experience of teaching. Typically, the student who studies Ugaritic knows Hebrew. This is certainly the case for the students from the Claremont School of Theology, Fuller Seminary, and UCLA who were used as guinea pigs for this primer. At UCLA, there have also been students whose main languages were Akkadian, Hurrian, Hittite, and Egyptian. With this in mind, the primer does not presume knowledge of Hebrew or Akkadian; however, the more Semitic languages that a student brings to the study of the Ugaritic language, the easier it will be to begin to understand the Ugaritic texts. And, the more Near Eastern languages that a student knows, the more the student is like a scribe at ancient Ugarit! This aspect of the primer also suggests a word of caution. While it will be useful to build on a student's knowledge of biblical literature and Hebrew, the student must also guard against facile equations. Ancient Ugarit and ancient Israel were both geographically and chronically separated. As Anson Rainey emphatically pointed out, "Ugaritic is *not* Hebrew; it is not an older stage of Hebrew; it must

even be differentiated from the dialect(s) reflected in the Amarna glosses."[1] Thus, while Hebrew is a useful foundation for the study of Ugaritic, the student should also be aware of the differences. Often a student also knows Akkadian or will be learning it (or should be learning it). Ideally, a student will study Akkadian, and the comparisons will be helpful and informative. One reason for studying Akkadian is its pedagogical value, since almost all students of Ugaritic are also students of Semitic languages.

The importance of Akkadian relates to the second question that guides our pedagogy, namely, what did the scribes at ancient Ugarit know? They knew Akkadian. Akkadian was the diplomatic *lingua franca* in the Near East for most of the second millennium BCE and was a basic staple of scribal education. For this reason, it seems important to emphasize comparisons with Akkadian. This includes especially the peripheral Akkadian used in the west and known especially from the Amarna letters. Since Egypt also played a significant role in Ugarit's history during the second millennium BCE, it would be useful to draw comparisons with Egyptian where they seem appropriate. In addition, Ugaritian scribes seem to have had some training in Egyptian, Hittite, Hurrian, and Sumerian. Likewise, Hittite and Hurrian are underdeveloped avenues of investigation. The primary emphasis, however, falls on Akkadian.

The pedagogy of this primer is motivated not only by the question of what languages would a scribe from ancient Ugarit have known, but also by a more general interest in the world of ancient Ugarit. Ancient Ugarit was a meeting place of the cultures of the ancient Near East; and, consequently, it seems like an ideal topic to introduce students to the ancient Near East. To this end, the primer begins with a short overview of ancient Ugarit. This introduction tries to point to the significance of Ugarit within the context of the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze Age. The purpose of this primer is to introduce students to *Ugarit*, not simply the Ugaritic language. With this in mind, Chapter 1 provides some context to

[1] Rainey, "Observations on Ugaritic Grammar," *UF* 3 (1971), 153.

ancient Ugarit. The texts serve as a window into ancient Ugarit and the world of the late second millennium BCE.

Our experience is that most courses in Ugaritic begin with texts, not grammar. Grammar is acquired in the course of reading texts. This primer is organized for the student to begin immediately with the study of texts, rather than grammar. Chapter 2 introduces the alphabet under the rubric of school texts. The exercises begin in Chapter 3 with letters. The presentation of the first couple of letters is accompanied by substantial notes that integrate Ugaritic grammar in an inductive manner. Since the grammar is scattered throughout these exercises, we have provided a convenient grammatical precís (Chapter 7) as well as a glossary (chapter 8). Exercises with some notes are also provided for the genres of administrative texts (Chapter 4), legal texts (Chapter 5), and literary texts (Chapter 6).

An explanatory word is necessary about the strategy of beginning with the letters instead of the epic poetry. Although many teachers of Ugaritic themselves (including us) probably learned Ugaritic by reading the epic poetry, this volume begins with the letters for a variety of reasons. Among these is the fact that, to overstate the case slightly, starting Ugaritic with the Baal Cycle is akin to introducing Biblical Hebrew by an inductive study of Job. This analogy also raises the methodological problem of describing the grammar of a language on the basis of its poetry. One would not want to begin with, for example, English sonnets to describe English grammar. Likewise, we should not describe Biblical Hebrew grammar on the basis of its poetry. Although letters are not the perfect genre to describe the grammar of a language, they seem a more suitable place pedagogically to start than poetry. They should reflect some of the scribal standards but will also include some formulaic language.[2] Certainly, letter writing was part of basic scribal training (as the school texts illustrate; see

[2] Although it has been sometimes asserted that the letters are merely translations from Akkadian, this assertion is unfounded, as J.-L. Cunchillos demonstrated ("Correspondence," in *HUS*, 359–74).

*KTU* 5.9, 5.10, 5.11). Aside from this methodological issue, there is a more practical pedagogical issue that argues for beginning with letters. Poetry is often difficult to understand, especially in the early stages of learning a language. Even an intermediate student who reads the Hebrew narratives in Genesis with confidence will stumble on the poetry of Job. Some other advantages to beginning with the letters include the fact that many of the letters are short, thus allowing students to experience the accomplishment of reading a complete ancient text in one, perhaps lengthy, sitting. The letters are also often complete, so students do not have to begin with hypothetical (and multiple) reconstructions to fill in large gaps. Even if the gap may be filled in on the basis of another text or a parallel, the beginning Ugaritic student is not able to draw on this wealth of knowledge. The letters introduce the student to some of the people of Ugarit, albeit folks from the upper crust, and help the student to recognize that there are personal, political, and pecuniary dynamics to Ugarit in addition to the poetic perspectives that many may have heard about while studying the Hebrew Bible. Letters introduce students to issues of the use of stereotypical language and formulas alongside "free-form" writing. Students may readily contrast the stylized materials, such as greetings, with the body detailing some particular situation. Given the nature of the letters, students learn a rather limited vocabulary with confidence before launching into the study of more difficult texts.

This primer offers some basic resources for the student of Ugaritic, but it is only a beginning. There are many different ways that the teaching of Ugaritic can be approached. For example, some make students learn the cuneiform alphabet while others see it as unnecessary. Some emphasize the importance of reconstructing vowels while others argue that this is too hypothetical an enterprise. This primer is a beginning, and most teachers will want to supplement the primer in various ways (see Chapter 9).

# 1

# Ancient Ugarit

## 1.1 UGARIT'S LOCATION

The city of Ugarit lies on the northern coast of the eastern Mediterranean. The city is situated about a half mile (1 km) from the Mediterranean Sea, 6 miles north of the modern city of Latakia (ancient Greek, *Laodikeia*; Crusader, *Port Blanc*), and 150 miles north of Damascus (see Figure 1.1). The island of Cyprus lies just 50 nautical miles to the west. To the east, Ugarit was only a short distance from Alalakh. It was on the trade route from Mesopotamia up the Euphrates River from Mari, Emar, and Ebla—three well-known Late Bronze Age cities.

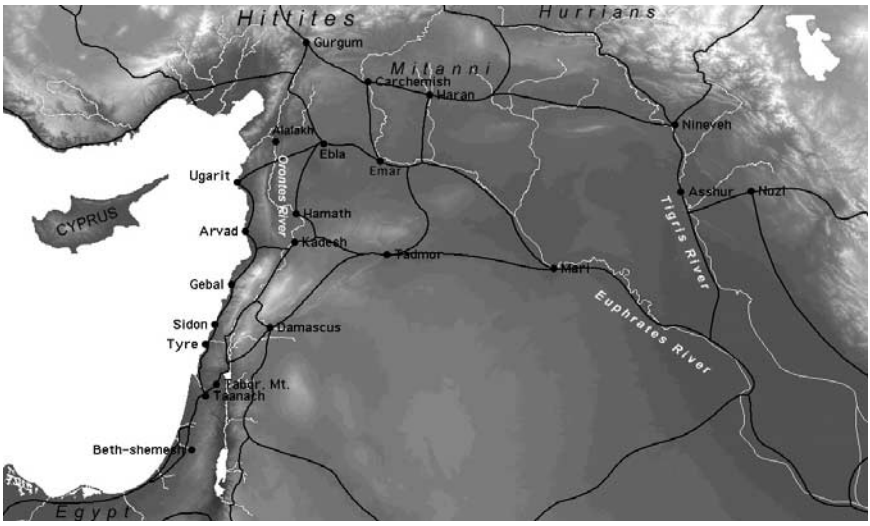


**Figure 1.1 Map of Near East in the Second Millennium BCE**

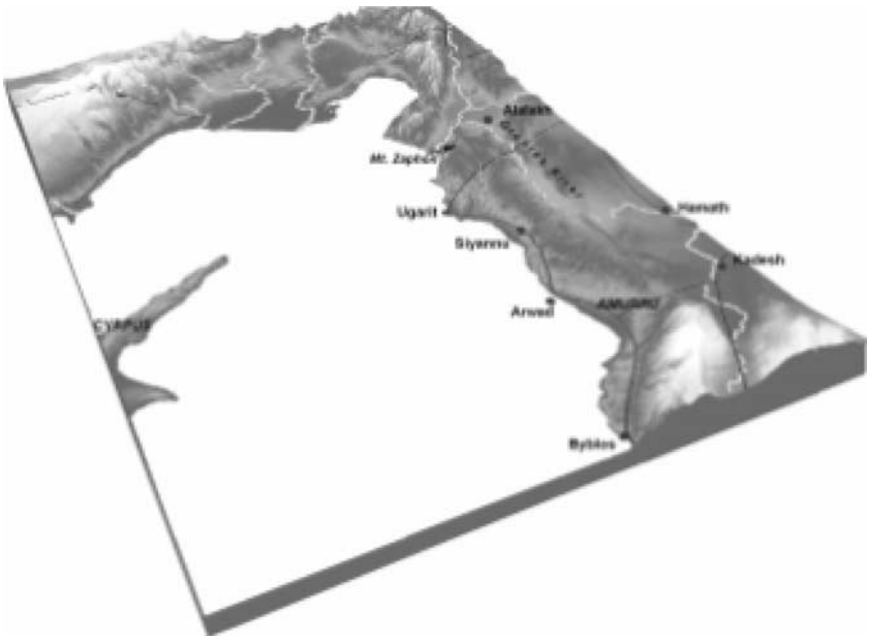


**Figure 1.2 Kingdom of Ugarit in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Natural boundaries defined the city of Ugarit. To the west, the Mediterranean Sea shaped its history as a commercial port. To the north, east, and south, Ugarit was bounded by mountains. A valley to the northeast of Ugarit (toward Alalakh and Ebla) provided an ideal gateway for commerce with the ancient kingdoms in north Syria and Mesopotamia. The ideal physical situation of Ugarit as a port on the Mediterranean and as a gateway to Mesopotamia and Asia Minor can be visualized as in Figure 1.2. Ugarit was as good a port as any of the famed Phoenician cities to the south but was much better situated as a gateway overland toward Mesopotamia. At its greatest extent, the kingdom of Ugarit extended north to Mount Zaphon, eastward to the Orontes River, and as far south as the tiny city-state of Siyannu, which became part of Ugarit's kingdom during its heyday during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE.

Ancient Mt. Zaphon (Jebel al-Aqra [1,780 m.]), which is known


**Figure 1.3 Region of Ras Shamra**

in biblical literature (Isa 14:13; cp. Ps 48:2), rises majestically on the horizon as one looks to the north from Ugarit. This was the dwelling place of the entire Ugaritic pantheon (*KTU* 1.47 [*KTU* is an abbreviation for the second edition of *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*, which is translated from the German original edition]) and, most prominently, the storm god Baal. Out of this mountain, according to the local religious beliefs, the cosmic waters of creation flowed (cp. Gen 1:2; 2:10–14).

Tel Ras Shamra itself is encircled by two small wadis, the Nahr Chbayyeb to the north and the Nahr ed-Delbeh to the south. These two wadis join to form the Nahr el-Feid, which flows into the bay of Minet el-Beida (see Figure 1.3), where a small port serviced the city of Ugarit. A bridge constructed over the Nahr ed-Delbeh to the south of the tel led out from the south central quarter of the city (see Figure 1.4). This bridge gave the city easier access to the harbor of Minet el-Beida, which was known in Greek as "the white harbor" because of the calcareous rocks that guarded it. The site of Ras Ibn Hani to the southeast served as a large port for Ugarit.

The plain around Ugarit was fertile, producing abundant wheat and barley. This was one of the sources of the prosperity of Ugarit, especially during the Late Bronze Age. Fishing afforded another ample supply of food. The Ugaritians cultivated the foothills and mountains that surrounded Ugarit's vineyards and olives. The mountains provided a ready source of the famed "cedars of Lebanon" for construction and trade.

At the end of the thirteenth century BCE, the population of the kingdom of Ugarit probably numbered about 50,000, with between 5,000 and 10,000 living in the city of Ugarit itself. The next largest towns were the ports like Ras Ibn Hani. The rest of the population lived in small villages. From economic and administrative documents discovered in the Ugaritic archives we know of at least 350 village names within the kingdom stretching from the Orontes River in the north to the city-state of Siyannu to the south. The autochthonous population of the kingdom was mostly composed of Semites and Hurrians, but the position of Ugarit as a hub of trade on the eastern Mediterranean attracted merchants and foreigners from nearby maritime towns as well as more distant locations like Egypt, Cyprus, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Phoenicians, Hittites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Canaanites, Cypriots, and other Aegeans came as merchants and mercenaries to Ugarit, and some stayed. As much as 16% of the population, according to archival texts, seem to have come from outside of Ugarit.[1]

## 1.2 Excavations and the Discovery of the Texts

Excavations at Ras Shamra began under the direction of Claude Schaeffer and his successors in 1929 after the chance discovery of a funerary vault at the tiny port of Minet el-Beida. Attention quickly shifted to the large mound, Ras Shamra, 1 kilometer to the east of Minet el-Beida. Excavations have continued year by year since then except for a decade hiatus around World War II (1939–1948). The excavators discovered documents primarily in

[1] See M. C. Astour, "Ma'hadu, the Harbor of Ugarit," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 13 (1970), 240–54; M. Heltzer, *The Internal Organization of the Kingdom of Ugarit* (Wiesbaden, 1982).

the palace and temple areas of Ras Shamra, although some texts were found in the homes of important individuals. A small number of Ugaritic texts were uncovered at Ras Ibn Hani (ancient name B'ir), 3 miles south of Ras Shamra. An even smaller number of short texts written in the Ugaritic alphabet have been found elsewhere in the western Mediterranean region: on Cyprus (Hala Sultan Tekke near Kition), in Syria (Tell Sukas; Kadesh; Kumidi [near Damascus]), in Lebanon (Sarepta), and in Israel (Mount Tabor; Taanach; Beth-Shemesh).

The tel Ras Shamra itself is dominated by the two large temples to Baal and Dagan located in the northwest quarter (see Figure 1.4). The royal quarter takes up much of the western part of the city, occupying as much as 10,000 square meters; it is isolated from the rest of the city and protected on the outside by a fortress. The palace served as both the royal residence and the administrative hub of the city. The residential quarters of the city do not evidence strong and organized central planning. Although there are traffic arteries, there seem to be no special commercial or residential zones, and luxurious homes are sometimes adjacent to commercial shops or modest homes. The city contained artisans of every type, working with clay, leather, stone, wood, and textiles. The numerous archives also suggest several scribal schools that developed both the utilitarian and intellectual uses of writing.

The archives at Ugarit also suggest that there were large scribal schools active in the city. Noteworthy caches in this regard include archives in the residential area just east of the palace and in the southern part of the city, where at least 470 texts were discovered, including about 200 school texts including abecedaries, lexical lists, grammatical lists, and god lists (Figure 1.4, #3). Included among these texts were the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Mesopotamian Flood Story*, which are typical school texts of the ancient Near East (see Chapter 2). The high proportion of school texts in these archives would suggest that these areas may have housed scribal schools. More recently, excavations in the southeastern quarter of the city yielded another large archive of more than 200 tablets, including an unusual *abecedary* (i.e., an ABC tablet), a trilingual (Ugaritic,

Akkadian, Hurrian) lexicographic document, and a fragment of the Gilgamesh epic. Indeed, it seems likely that Ugarit served as a major scribal training center in the Levant because of both its geographical position in the near east and its cosmopolitan, affluent society. The importance of Ugarit as a scribal center is particularly important when we reflect on the significant parallels between Ugaritic and biblical literature (see §1.6). Such scribal schools were undoubtedly a conduit for some of the literary and poetic similarities between Ugaritic and biblical literature.

At least seventeen archives containing texts have been located and over 1,500 texts have been published from the site of Ras Shamra.[2] The majority of the texts from Ugarit were excavated in the royal palace (Figure 1.4, #1), which was located on the western acropolis and measured about 110 by 75 meters. The western palace complex included eight archives with over 1,000 texts mostly written in Akkadian and Ugaritic. The palace also had small caches of texts in Hurrian and Hittite. Another important cache of 135 texts was discovered in the house of the High Priest, which was located between the temples of Ba'al and Dagan on the eastern acropolis (Figure 1.4, #2). These texts were mostly religious literature, including twenty-four tablets containing the famous epic literature of Ugarit (Keret, Aqhat, Baal Cycle, and Rephaim). Some of these texts were written down by the famous scribe Ilimilku, who was apparently a student of the High Priest Attenu, as we see in a colophon that concludes the Baal Cycle. Although most of the texts from the high priest's house were in Ugaritic, there are also lexical lists with Akkadian, Sumerian, and Hurrian as well as several religious texts in Hurrian.

The following colophon suggests that Ilimilku was supported by the patronage of king Niqmaddu, so that the composition of the Ugaritic epic literature would have been sponsored by the royal court: [3]

[2] See Pedersen, *Archives and Libraries of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, 1998), 70–74.

[3] See M. Smith, "The Baal Cycle," in *UNP*, 164, 176. The translation of the word *t̲ʿy* is difficult. Smith, for example, takes it as a gentilic, i.e., "the