

THE UR EXCAVATIONS AND SUMERIAN LITERATURE

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Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur have been justly acclaimed for their extraordinary, unexpected, and invaluable archaeological discoveries: the royal cemetery, the Ur-Nammu ziggurat, and the innumerable artifacts of diverse types and categories, including thousands of cuneiform tablets and fragments from virtually all periods of Mesopotamian history from the third millennium on. Among these are more than eight hundred pieces inscribed with Sumerian literary texts which, despite the fragmentary and incomplete state of most of them, are of immense value for the recovery and restoration of a large number of Sumerian literary compositions. And no wonder, since the Sumerian academy known as the *Edubba* (Tablet House) had a main branch not only in Nippur, Sumer's religious and cultural center, but also in Ur, Sumer's capital during the Third Dynasty of Ur, whose kings brought about a Sumerian renaissance. This paper will present a brief overview of the more significant contributions of the Ur material to the Sumerian literary repertoire current in the first half of the second millennium B.C., that consists of numerous myths, epic tales, and historiographic compositions; of hymns, prayers, and laments; of a broad spectrum of wisdom compositions such as disputations, school-essays, proverbs, precepts, fables, riddles, and "library" catalogues.

Let us begin with the contributions of the Ur literary pieces to the myths known in large part from earlier publications. "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World" is a composition whose contents have been pieced together over the decades from more than a score of tablets and fragments, virtually all from Nippur. But significant parts of the text

were still missing, and it was the Ur pieces that helped to fill in the gaps, especially the end of the myth with its rather surprising denouement. They also provide a number of significant variants, and one of the pieces, a well-preserved tablet, is inscribed with a version of the myth that differs considerably from that known hitherto.

Or take the Dilmun myth known as "Enki and Ninhursag: A Sumerian Paradise Myth." The text of this composition, based principally on a well-preserved six-column Nippur tablet in the University Museum, and a duplicating extract-tablet in the Louvre, has been known for some decades. The plot that revolves about the water-god Enki and the mother-goddess Ninhursag, includes a blessing of Dilmun by Enki, that turned it into a veritable divine garden, as well as into a port noted for its docks and quays. Only one piece belonging to this myth was unearthed in Ur, a fragment of the upper part of a six-column tablet. But incomplete as it is, this Ur piece provides us with a variant version of Enki's blessing, that illuminates Dilmun's role as an important ancient port, and is quite revealing for the wide range of international commercial trade some four thousand years ago, for the version of the blessing inscribed on the Ur fragment depicts Dilmun as a land to which eight countries, scattered all over the ancient Near East, transported their wares which consisted of such diversified commodities as gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian and other semi-precious stones, diorite, copper, grain, sesame oil, fine garments, and various kinds of wood.

Another myth for which the Ur material proved to be of no little value is "Inanna and Ebih," a composition depicting Inanna as a goddess of war, who virtually destroyed the

region of Mt. Ebih, modern Jebel Hamrin, because it had failed to do her homage. Quite a large number of pieces belonging to this myth are now known, but the six tablets unearthed in Ur were of considerable help in the restoration and reconstruction of its text.

On the other hand, there are several known myths to which the Ur tablets and fragments contributed relatively little, such as "The Deeds and Exploits of Ninurta," that revolves about the stormy god of the South Wind, who slew the demon of disease, and built a mountain barrier to the east of Sumer in order to prevent the waters coming from below the earth, from spreading wastefully to foreign lands; "The Death of Dumuzi," according to which the doomed Dumuzi had a death-dream whose ominous contents turned out to be only too true; "Damu and the Nether World," an obscure myth that depicts the journey of Geshtinanna to the Nether World where her brother Damu (and other Dumuzi-like figures) has been carried off by the demons of the Lower Region; "The Journey of Enki to Nippur," a "charter" myth concerned with Enki's journey to the *Ekur* to obtain the blessing of Enlil for his city; "The Journey of Nanna-Sin to Nippur," another "charter" myth that relates how the moon-god travelled from his city Ur to Nippur to obtain Enlil's blessing; "The Creation of the Pickaxe," a composition that begins with an important creation passage, and continues with a whole series of blessings of this invaluable implement by numerous deities.

Most important are those Ur pieces that are inscribed with parts of myths hitherto unknown altogether. One of these is a well-preserved tablet inscribed with an extract from the middle of a myth whose beginning and end are still unknown; it depicts the dire punishment meted out by Enki in his realm the *Abzu*, "the Deep," to the proud and ambitious Ninurta who had come there as a threatening intruder. Another fairly well-preserved tablet is inscribed with the beginning of a myth involving Dumuzi and his sister Geshtinanna who is depicted as deeply distressed by some unfortunate event that had taken place in Erech. A third tablet is inscribed with part of a myth involving the god Ningishzida, his wife Azimua, and a herald who carries distressing messages from one to the other. One small tablet, a pupil's school exercise that ends in the middle of a sentence, is inscribed with the very beginning of a myth that tells of Enki's decision to organize the universe, and bring order to heaven and earth, in order to insure the prosperity and well-being of god and man. There is a small fragment inscribed with a myth involving a theomachy; another that begins with an account of Nippur's pros-

perity; two small pieces whose contents are difficult to surmise because of their fragmentary condition.

The Sumerian epic tales are rather poorly represented in the Ur material. Of the nine known epic tales concerned with the heroes Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, only four are duplicated to some extent by the Ur pieces: "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta," "Lugalbanda and Enmerkar," "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living," "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World." By and large, the Ur duplicates are significant only for the numerous variants which they provide, except in case of the last named epic tale, whose many gaps they helped to restore. There is also one Ur fragment that is inscribed with the last seventeen lines of an altogether new Gilgamesh tale. Its contents, which are not too intelligible, speak of a Gilgamesh victory over the "sons of Girsu," and of the great joy he brought to his palace and to the people and maidens of Erech, incidents unknown from the available texts of the Gilgamesh cycle.

As for the hymnal genre, almost all the types of compositions that constitute its wide and varied range are represented in the Ur material: hymns to deities, kings, and temples; hymns to deities interspersed with prayers for the ruler; even two love songs that were probably chanted by a hierodule to the king Shu-Sin. Some of the pieces belong to previously known compositions: a hymn to Enlil that glorifies him as a beneficent deity without whom civilized life would be inconceivable; a hymn to Nidaba as the goddess in charge of storehouses filled with provisions and supplies for temple and palace; a self-laudatory hymn of Shulgi as a champion runner; another self-laudatory hymn of Shulgi as the ideal monarch—a learned, wise, brave, just, pious, music-loving king who provided nobly for the needs and well-being of his people; a hymn addressed to Iddin-Dagan that exalts him especially as the blessed of Enlil, and as a king who has brought peace to Sumer and its neighbors and will therefore be ever glorified in the academies of Sumer; a self-laudatory hymn of Iddin-Dagan's son, Ishme-Dagan, in which he extols himself as a king blessed of Enlil, who has dedicated himself to the service and ministry of the *Ekur* in Nippur, and who has established equity and justice in the land; a self-laudatory hymn of his son Lipit-Ishtar who exalts himself as a pious ruler blessed by all the leading deities of the pantheon, who brought prosperity to his people, and who promulgated a code of laws; a fragment of a hymn to Enlil-bani, one of Lipit-Ishtar's successors, that extols him as a just, charismatic king blessed by the gods; three pieces inscribed with parts of a collection of hymns

to all the more important temples of Sumer and Akkad, that proved to be invaluable for the restoration and reconstruction of that important document; three small tablets inscribed with parts of the long-known hymn to the temple of Kesh; an excellently preserved tablet and three additional fragmentary pieces that filled in virtually all the gaps in a remarkable hymnal prayer to the goddess Inanna, purported to be uttered by Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon the Great, who was the high-priestess of Nanna in Ur, in which she pleads to be delivered from the misfortune that had befallen her.

Of even greater value for the restoration of the Sumerian hymnal genre are those Ur pieces that are inscribed with parts of hymnal compositions previously unknown or unidentified: an excellently preserved tablet inscribed with the initial sixty-eight lines of a hymn to Nanna and to his temple, the Ekishnugal; another well-preserved tablet inscribed with a hymn to Nanna as the possessor of vast numbers of various kinds of cows who sing his praises in the sacred precinct of his temple, known as the *gipar*; the lower half of a tablet inscribed with a hymn to Enki's son Asalluhi as the judge of mankind, that includes a reference to trial by the river-ordeal; a perfectly preserved small tablet that contains the last lines of a hymn that may be a variant of the recently published *Nungal*-hymn, which also includes a judicial reference to the river-ordeal; a fragment inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida as an awesome, terrifying, inscrutable deity; the upper part of a tablet inscribed with a hymn to the goddess Bau as the guardian angel of her beloved mankind; a fairly well-preserved small tablet inscribed with a rather obscure hymn inscribed to the goddess Ningublaga; two duplicating fragments inscribed with a hymn to the king Ur-Nammu as the excavator of two canals to supply the land with its essential water-needs; a fragment of a large tablet inscribed with a hymn to Sin-iddinam of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that consists almost entirely of a hymn glorifying Nippur as Sumer's most hallowed city; two duplicating fragments inscribed with an execration type of literary genre, that consists of a number of brief prayers to various gods, entreating them to frustrate and punish the enemies of Shulgi; a fairly well-preserved tablet inscribed with a hymnal prayer to the healing god Damu for the well-being of Ishme-Dagan; two duplicating pieces inscribed with a blessing bestowed upon Lipit-Ishtar at the behest of the goddess Ninisinna; a well-preserved tablet inscribed with a prayer of the god Nanna-Sin who had travelled from Ur to the *Ekur* temple in Nippur, to plead with Enlil and Ninlil that

they bless the king Sin-iddinam with a happy, peaceful, glorious, enduring reign; and last, but by no means least, seven pieces, several of which are excellently preserved tablets, inscribed with a varied and significant assortment of hitherto unknown types of hymnal prayers for Rim-Sin, a king who reigned for sixty years in his capital Larsa, until he was conquered by Hammurabi.

The lamentation type of composition that bewails the suffering and anguish of the people of Sumer and its cities, was originated and developed by the poets following the destruction of Ur by the Su-people and the Elamites, climaxed by the carrying off into captivity of Ibbi-Sin, the last, pathetic ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Two of the best preserved of these are "Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur," a composition of over four hundred lines divided into eleven stanzas, and "Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur," a composition of over five hundred lines divided into five stanzas. Both of these documents, which are of no little significance for the history, culture, and religion of Sumer, are richly represented in the Ur material: the former by six well-preserved tablets that helped to correct some of the more doubtful readings of the previously published texts to which they also added a large number of variants; the latter, by eleven pieces which proved to be of crucial importance for the restoration and reconstruction of the text. In addition to these two major works, the Ur material includes two fragments inscribed with parts of a lamentation over the destruction of Erech; one tablet inscribed with the third stanza of a lamentation over the destruction of Eridu; a fragment that seems to be inscribed with part of an hitherto unknown lamentation over the destruction of Nippur.

Another type of lament, originated and developed by the bards of Sumer, consists of a threnody uttered by a goddess for the ruler of the city, an unnamed Dumuzi-like figure, who had been killed in the course of the destruction of her city by its enemies. One of the fairly-well preserved Ur tablets is inscribed with a composition of this type: a lament by the goddess Lisinna for the ruler of her destroyed city, who is designated metaphorically as a wild donkey-foal for whom she had searched in vain over meadow and steppe.

Only one historiographic type of composition is represented in the Ur material, a fairly well-preserved tablet inscribed with part of "The Curse of Agade," whose complete text has been restored from a large number of previously published tablets and fragments.

Sumerian wisdom compositions, on the other hand, are abundantly represented in the

Ur material. The texts of virtually all the known disputations have been greatly enriched by the relevant Ur pieces, some of which are excellently preserved tablets: the disputation between Cattle and Grain, between Summer and Winter, between Bird and Fish, between two unnamed graduates of the Edubba, between two angry women, between the schoolmen Enkimansi and Girni-ishag, between the schoolmen Enkitalu and Enkihegal. The Ur pieces also proved to be invaluable for such wisdom documents as "The Home of the Fish"; "The Farmer's Almanac"; "The Instructions of Shuruppak to his son Ziusudra." They also include a number of tablets and fragments inscribed with hitherto unknown essays about school-life, and with "library" catalogues that list the titles of numerous literary works available to the compiler. Close to two hundred Ur pieces, mostly in the shape of lenticular buns, are inscribed with a varied assortment of proverbs, fables, and riddles, many of which were previously unknown.

So much for the panoramic overview of the Ur literary pieces and their contribution to the recovery and restoration of Sumerian literature. A striking, concrete example of this contribution is a unique hymn to the god Haia that concludes with a prayer for the blessing of the king Rim-Sin. Previous to the publication of this document only a few bare, meager facts were known about this relatively minor deity: he was known to be the husband of the goddess Nidaba, the father of the goddess Ninlil, the steward of Enlil in charge of tablets and seals. Now the Ur text delineates for us a remarkably detailed and revealing portrait of the god, attributing to him qualities, duties, and powers, some of which could hardly have been suspected. He was an extraordinary wise and learned deity, a punctilious archivist who kept careful count of the tasks assigned in the palaces of heaven and earth, and who with his holy reed made "shine" the great tablets of destiny. He performed important functions for the three leading deities of the pantheon, An, Enlil, and especially Enki whose favorite he was. As the savant of the Ekishnugal, the far-famed

Copy by Cyril Gadd of the "Hymn to the God Haia" UET, vol. VI, part I, Literary Texts, pls. CIII, CV.

Handwritten Sumerian cuneiform script, organized into columns and numbered 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 on the left margin.

19. 3rd sign, 7730 has 𒀭𒀭𒀭. 29. Obv. of 7738 ends. 30. At end, 7739 omits 𒀭𒀭

Handwritten Sumerian cuneiform script, organized into columns and numbered 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 on the left margin. Includes a section labeled 'Rev' at the bottom.

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𒀭𒀭𒀭

temple of Nanna and his wife Ningal in Ur, he dwelt in its dining-hall alongside the goddess. Fair of countenance, he became the beloved husband of Nidaba, the patroness of writing, learning, and accounting, who was the mother of Ninlil, the wife of the greatest of the gods, Enlil, who thus became his son-in-law. He controlled the divine laws known as me that governed princeship; held in his hand the plan of Enki's "Sea-house" in Eridu, and attended to its lustration-rites, wearing the holy me-garment. As the craftsman of the great gods, he decorated the beautiful dining-halls of An and Enlil. Having received a favorable command from Enki's shrine, the Abzu, he takes in hand the pure white breads and provides An and Enlil with food, and with drink that rejoices the heart and soothes the spirit. He is a great stud-bull who knows how to operate the assigned me, and to whom Enki had presented the "incantations of life." He appoints the high-priest in the gipar, and gives the scepter to the king, the shepherd of the land. As the god of the land who gives ear to the prayers of all its people, he sees to it that the king has firm control over the wide land. Father Enki, coming forth out of his abode, the Abzu, meted out to him the great destiny of the land, and he therefore exalts its people and makes them ever happy.

It is only after this lofty glorification of the god that the poet introduces his prayer for the blessing of Rim-Sin, entreating Haia to look upon the king with favor, to grant him an enduring reign, and to see to it that An and Enlil love him as their high priest, and ends by assuring the god that the poets will sing his sweet praise. Haia, however, for all the poet's exaltation and glorification, was not a leading deity of the pantheon, only one of a number of deities in the circle of Enki, and the poet therefore concludes his prayer with a two-line refrain exalting Enki as the lord of the universe and the king of the Abzu. Following a rubric of uncertain meaning, the text closes with an antiphon exhorting Haia as the king of the land who loves supplications, to take the king under his protective care.

Following is a line by line translation of the text:

1. Lord who has perfected the lofty me,
endowed with great counsel,
Haia, who holds fast the great tablets,
who adds wisdom to wisdom,
Who counts (and) divides, the holy god,
the venerable inspector of the crafts
of Nidaba's house of wisdom,
The archivist of the palace(s) of heaven
and earth, who keeps count of all the
(assigned) tasks,
5. Who holds the holy reed in hand, who
makes shine the great tablets
of destiny,
The knowing one, who directs the mind
to the word at its (proper) time
for holy An,
The seal-holder of Father Enlil, he who
brings forth the treasures of the
storehouses of the Ekur,
The ornament of the Abzu-shrine, who
binds fast the hair on the back for
the lord, Nudimmud
Haia, the linen-wearer of the Eunirra,
who multiples the uzga,
10. The most learned of the shrine
Ekishnugal, whose name is lofty,
The discerning one, who dwells in the
great dining-hall alongside the
maid Ningal.
Fair of features, the beloved spouse of
Nunbarshegunu,
He of lofty name, the father-in-law
of Enlil, the "Great Mountain,"
The grim administrator, the chosen
overseer of heaven and earth,
15. Who receives the tribute of the gods, who
expounds his word in the Ekur,
the distant shrine,
The knowing one, who "rides" the lofty
me of princeship, who binds the . . .
to his side
He who delimits the wide heart, who
holds in hand the holy plan of the
house of Eridu,
Haia, he who at the pure lustrations of
the engur, wears the me-garments
The divine stud-bull who . . . from the
mountain, the mouth-opener of
the gods
20. Who is versed in the distant meaning of
tablets, the craftsman of the
great gods,
Who fastens emblems on nails, the
planner who quarries the high
places of the land,
Who decorates the floor of the attractive
dining-hall for Anshar (and)
the "Great Mountain,"
Head high, lofty, whose command from
the Abzu-shrine is favorable,
The obedient one, who holds in hand the
pure white bread of the house of
the gods,
25. Kusu (and) the divine stud-bull—without

- them heaven would not be pure,
earth would not be bright,
They are the providers of the great food
of An and Enlil in their lofty
dining-hall
You who gaze upon the holy countenance,
upon the lord Nudimmud,
Who holds the holy bronze (vessels), who
rejoices the heart, (and) soothes
the spirit,
My king, I would exalt your loftiness
in song,
30. Haia, I would pronounce your greatness
unto eternity.
Who like you among the gods, is fit for
the holy me!
Your beloved spouse, the maid Nidaba,
the great queen of queens—
She who was born of her holy womb,
Ninlil, the lofty spouse of Nunamnir,
Sits with her on the dais of the Ekur,
head raised heavenward—
35. Performs the irga-me of the queenship
of the gods—the goddess who
has no peer.
You, stud-bull, who is endowed with
right understanding, who constantly
cares for the gods,
Haia, you who operates effectively the
assigned me, who knows the
cult-rites,
Enki has presented you his incantations
of life out of the Abzu-shrine
You appoint the high priest at the gipar,
you put him there as (its) caretaker,
40. (As for) the shepherd of the land, you
make him hold in his hand the lofty
scepter unto distant days.
Haia, you who are the god of the land
who gives ear to the prayers of all the
people,
You make him hold the wide land in his
hand for the great gods.
When father Enki came forth out of the
Abzu,
He meted out to you its (the land's)
great destiny,
You exalt to heaven the people who are
in its midst,
You make its mankind spend (their) days
in rejoicing,
You make all its people happy of heart
unto eternity,
You establish the feasts of the houses of
the great gods, you fill them with
happiness.
Supreme leader of the gods, render full
the great (allotted) shares of
the people,
50. Look steadfastly upon the king with your
gracious eye that lengthens life.
Grant duly a joyous reign of long days to
the prince, Rim-Sin,
Mark its (the reign's) years on the tablet

of life, forever unalterable,
May An and Enlil love the shepherd
Rim-Sin for the office of high-priest.
The poets will make sweet your praise
in their mouth.

55. Haia, the poets will make sweet your
praise in their mouth.
Lord of heaven and earth, king of the
Abzu, sweet is its (the Abzu's) praise.
Father Enki, king of the Abzu, sweet is
your praise.

It is its uru (a rubric of uncertain
meaning)

Haia, god of the land, who loves (the
prayer) "Let me live," may you be
one who spreads a wide hand over
the prince Rim-Sin.

It is its antiphon

Its number—fifty-eight are its lines

Samuel Noah Kramer,
Curator Emeritus of the
Babylonian Tablet
Collection in the Univer-
sity Museum, continues
his work of transcribing
and translating the cunei-
form tablets from Ur and
Nippur. His *History
Begins at Sumer* (1959)
and *The Sumerians* (1963)
have introduced today's
readers to the literature
of those ancient people.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The panoramic overview of the Literary material is based exclusively on the approximately four hundred tablets, fragments, and lenticular buns, copied by Cyril Gadd and published in *Ur Excavation Texts VI* part 1 (1963), and part 2 (1966). Another four hundred pieces, approximately, have been copied in the British Museum by Aaron Shaffer, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and these will be published in the near future. This group consists principally of small fragments, the vast majority of which belong to previously known compositions, some of whose gaps and breaks they will help to restore.

A description of the contents of almost all the compositions mentioned in this paper can be found in my *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (1963), by looking through the Index. Translations of quite a number of the compositions can be found in Adam Falkenstein's contribution to *Sumerische und Akkaische Hymnen und Gebete* (1953); in W. Römer's *Sumerische Königshymnen der Isin Zeit* (1965); in my contributions to *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (third edition, 1969, James Pritchard, editor); and in such publications as Åke Sjöberg's *The Collection of Temple Hymns* (1969), and G. Castellino's *Two Shulgi Hymns* (1972).

In the past fifteen years quite a number of doctoral dissertations consisting of editions of one or more of the Sumerian literary works, have been prepared in various universities, especially in the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania (under my sponsorship and that of Åke Sjöberg); in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (under the sponsorship of Miguel Civil); in the Babylonian Collection of Yale University (under the sponsorship of William Hallo); in the Assyriological Institute of the University of Munich (under the sponsorship of Dietz Edzard). A comprehensive study of the formal aspects of Sumerian literature has just been published by Claus Wilke in *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen* (1975). A comprehensive catalogue of almost all known Sumerian literary works, together with a list of the tablets and fragments, published and unpublished, that belong to each, has been prepared by Miguel Civil of the

Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (a former Research Associate in the University Museum); its publication in the near future will mark a milestone in the ongoing process of the recovery and restoration of the Sumerian *belles lettres*.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION OF THE HAIA HYMNAL-PRAYER

As the reader will note, quite a few of the words and phrases in the translation are italicized—this is to indicate doubtful renderings. Italics are also used for words left untranslated: *me* (pronounce "may"), the divine laws governing virtually every aspect of civilized life; *gipar*, a part of the temple where the high-priest lived; *irga* and *uzga*, two words of uncertain meaning. Also italicized are the names of the temples: *Ekur*, Enlil's temple in Nippur, Sumer's holiest shrine; *Abzu*, Enki's watery shrine, also known as *Engur*; *Eunirra*, the ziggurat complex in Enki's city, Eridu; *Ekishnugal*, the temple of the moon-god Nanna in Ur.

The gods mentioned in the text are: An (also known as Anshar), the god of heaven, originally the leading deity of the pantheon; Enlil, the air-god, who gradually took An's place as leader of the gods, and who is often designated as "Great Mountain"; Ninlil, Enlil's wife, daughter of Nidaba; Enki, the all-wise water-god (also known as Nudimmud); Nidaba (also known as Nunbarshegunu), the wife of Haia, the mother of Ninlil (and thus the mother-in-law of Enlil), the goddess of learning, writing, and accounting; Kusu, a goddess of grain.

Finally, the reader should bear in mind that not a few of the translated words and phrases are rather obscure in meaning, due to the fact that their implications and connotations are quite uncertain. This is especially true in the case of adjectives, which are poorly represented in the Sumerian language, and which may therefore have varied and problematical nuances, depending on the surrounding context (cf. e.g. "lofty me," "lofty name," "lofty dining-hall," "lofty scepter," or "great counsel," "great tablets," "great gods," "great mountain," "great queen," "great food," "great destiny").