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 Eduba (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. Elith, modern Jobel 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 uncoverd in Uruk were of unequal value 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 Ningishzida," a myth that revolves about the storm god of the South Wind, who slew the demon of disease, and built a mountain barrier to the mountain gods in order to prevent the waters coming down from the earth, from spreading wastefully to the foreign lands. "The Death of Garsukin," according to which the doomed Dumuzi had a death-dream whose ominous contents turned out to be only too true; "Dumu and the Mother of the Lower World," an obscure myth that depicts the journey of Geshittenanna to the Mother of the Lower World where her beloved Dumuzi (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 Ninna to Sin to Nippur," another "charter" myth that describes how Ninna, the moon-god travelled from his city Ur to Nippur to obtain Enlil's blessing; "The Creation of the Plekakes," a composition that begins with an important creation passage, and concludes 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 describes the punishment meted out by Enki in his realm the Abzu, "the Deep," to the proud and ambitious Ninurta who had challenged his brother Enlil, the most threatening intruder. Another fairly well-preserved tablet is inscribed with the beginning of a myth involving Dumuzi, and his sister Geshittenanna who is depicted as deeply distressed by some unforeseen event that had taken place in Eresh. A third tablet is inscribed with part of a narrative concerning the god Ningishzida, his wife Azinnu, and a herald who carries distressing messages from one to the other. One small terra-cotta fragment is a school exercise that ends in the middle of a sentence, is inscribed with the very beginning of a statement that tells of Enki's plan to organize the universe, and bring order to heaven and earth, in order to insure the prosperity and well-being of gods and men. There is a small fragment inscribed with a myth involving a thornyacia; another that begins with an account of Nippur's prosperity; two small pieces whose contents are difficult to surmise because of their fragmentary condition.

The Sumerian epic tales are rather poorly reconstructed. Of the nine known epic tales concerned with the hero Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, only three texts can be reconstructed from the Ur pieces: "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta," "Lugalbanda and Enmerkar," and "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World." By and large, the Ur duplicates are significant only on the most unusual variants which they provide, except in case of the well-named epic tale, whose many gaps they help 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 "seas of Girsu," and of the great joy he brought to his palace and to the people and nations of Ereh, 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 such as the sukkal or the "deity of the water" as well; prayers for the ruler; even two love songs that were probably chanted by a couple to the king Shu-Adapa. Another previously unknown composition: a hymn to Enlil that glorifies him as a benefactor deity with whom his people can be inseparable; a hymn to Nisaba as the goddess in charge of households, which includes provisions and supplies for the palace and public; a self-laudatory hymn of Shu-Adapa; a hymn runner; another self-laudatory hymn of Shulgi as the ideal monarch—a learned, wise, just, pious, music-loving king who provided fully for the needs and well-being of his people; a hymn addressed to Idit-Dugan that exalts him as the blessed of Enlil, and as a king who has brought peace to Sumer and its neighbors and will therefore be remembered with praise by the academies of Sumer; a self-laudatory hymn of Idit-Dugan's son, Ishme-Dugan, in which he extols himself and his blessedness of Enlil, who has dedicated himself to the service and ministry of the Ekur in Nippur, and who has established equilibria in the land: a self-laudatory hymn of his son Lipt-Lihtar who extolls himself as a pious ruler blessed by all other gods and deities of the pantheon, who brought prosperity to his people, and who promulgated a code of laws; a fragment of a hymn to the Nippur temple; two duplicates inscribed with a prayer of the Nippur gas-Nanna who had travelled from Ur to the Ekur temple in Nippur, to plead with Enlil and Nisil that they bless the king Sin-dininnam with a happy, peaceful, prosperous, and long reign; and last, but by no means least, seven pieces, several of which are excellently preserved tablets, inscriptions of hymns to the divinities of heaven and the earth, which are some of the most characteristic and important of all the hymns the gods, particularly Nanna, to which they particularly appealed, in the Sumerian legal texts.

They are all important temples of Sumer and Akkad, that proved to be of great value for the restoration and reconstruction of that important document; three small tablets inscribed with a varied hymn to the temple of Kosh; an excellently preserved tablet and three additional fragmentary pieces that virtually fill all the gaps in a remarkable hymnary prayer to the goddess Nanna, purported to be uttered by Ilahun. Gilgamesh, one of the sons of Sargon the Great, who was the high-priestess of Nanna in Ur, in which she pleads to be delivered from the cruel hand of her enemy. Of even greater value for the restoration of the Sumerian hymnal genre are those Ur pieces that are inscribed with parts of hymnical 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 Ekihamugal; another well-preserved tablet inscribed with a hymn to Nanna as the possessor of various kinds of cows who sing his praises in the sacred precinct of his temple, known as the giper; the lower half of a tablet inscribed with a hymn to Enki's son Anshull as the judge of mankind, that includes a reference to trial by the king of the Ekur; another inscribed tablet that contains the last lines of a hymn that may be a variant of the recently published Ningishzida-hymn, which also includes a judicial reference to the river-ordeal; a fragment inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida as an executioner of the divine will; another fairly well-preserved small tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida; a fragment inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida at Ekur; two duplicate fragments inscribed with hymns to the king Ur-Nanna as the excavator of two canals to supply the land with its essential water-needs; a fragment of a large tablet inscribed with a prayer to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn glorifying Ningishzida as the goddess of justice; another inscribed tablet inscribed with a hymn to Ningishzida of the Larsa Dynasty; a well-preserved four-column tablet inscribed with the beginning of a composition that seems to be a hymn.
1. Lord who has perfected the lofty, endowed with great counsel,
Hair, who holds fast the great tablets, who adds wisdom to wisdom,
Who counts (and) divides the holy, the venerable inspector of the crypts of
Nidhaba’s house of wisdom,
The architect of the palace(s) of heaven and earth, who keeps count of all the
assigned tasks,
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
the holy An,
The soul-bearer of Father Enki, 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, Nidhumdu,
Haira, the linen-wearer of the Ekur, who multiplies the arts and
10. The most learned of the shrine Eridumgal, whose name is lady,
The discerning one, who resides in the great dining-hall alongside the
maid Ningal,
Fair of features, the beloved spouse of Nunsaragum,
Of lofty name, the father-in-law of Enki, the “Great Mountain”,
The grim administrator, the chosen overseer of heaven and earth,
Who recites the names of the gods, who expounds his word in the Ekur,
The distant shrine,
The knowing one, who “rides” the lofty me of primordial, who leads the . . .
to his side
He who delineates the wide heart, who holds in hand the holy plan of the
house of Irida,
Haira, he who at the pure abstractions of the enipum, wears the mantle of the
mountain.
The divine studd-hull who . . . from the mountain, the mouth-upper of the
gods,
15. Who is vested in the distant meaning of tablets, the craftsman of the
great gods,
Who fastens emblems on poles, the planter who carries the high
place of the lands
Who decorates the floor of the attractive dining-hall for Anu (and)
the Great Mountain.
Head high, lofty, the command from the Abzu-shrine is favorable,
The obedient one, who holds in hand the pure while bringing the house of the
gods,
20. Kisi (and) the divine studd-bull—without
them heaven would not be pure, the earth would not be bright.
They are the providers of the great food of An and Enki in their lofty
dining-hall.
You who gaze upon the holy countenance, upon the lord Nidhumdu,
Who holds the holy bronze (vessels), who rejoices the heart (and)TC spirit.
My king, I will exalt your loftiness in song.
25. Haira, I would pronounce your greatness unto eternity.
Who like nourishing the gods, is fit for the holy me?
Your beloved spouse, the maid Nidhaba, the queen of queens—
She who was born of her holy wombs, Nisili, the lofty spouse of Namurrit,
Sits with her on the days of the Ekur, head raised heavenward—
30. Performs the rite of the canoe of the god, the goddess who has no power,
You, studd-bull, who is endowed with right understanding, who constantly
cares for the gods,
Haira, who operates effectively the assigned me, who knows the
35. cult rites.
Enki has presented you his incantations of life out of the Abzu-shrine
You must perform all these, you must recite to the gupur, you put him there as its caretaker.
39. (As for) the shepherd of the land, you make him hold in hand the lofty
scepter unto distant days,
Haira, 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 gods of the
40. land,
When father Enki came forth out of the
Abzu,
He exalted you high, (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,
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
45. the gods.
50. Look steadfastly upon the king with your gracious eye that lengthens life,
Grant him a life of a great number of days to the prince, Rim-Sin.
Mark its (the reign’s) years on the tablet
of life, forever unalterable,
May An and Enki love the shepherd
Rim-Sin for the office of high-priest.
The poets will make sweet your praise in their mouth.
55. Haira, the poets will make sweet your praise in their mouth.
Lord of heaven and earth, king of the Abzu, sweet is it (the Abzu)
Father Enki, king of the Abzu, sweet is your praise.
It is its uru (a rubric of uncertain meaning),
Haira, god of the land, who loves (the prayer) “Let me live,” may you be one who spreads a wide hand over the
59. prince Rim-Sin.
It is its antiphon
Its number—fifty-eight are its lines

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
The panoramic overview of the literary material is based exclusively on the approximately one hundred tablets, fragments, and lines presented by Cyril Gold and published in UR Excavations: Texts VI part 1 (1968), and part 2 (1969). Another four hundred papers, approximately, have been copied in the British Museum by Arthur Shaffer, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and they 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.

Translation of a quite number of the compositions can be found in Adam Falkenstein’s contribution to Semitica and Akkadian Texts and Glosses (1939); in W. Kramer’s Sumerische Königsgeschichten der 13. Jahrtausend (1957); in my contributions to Ancient Near Eastern Texts (third edition, 1956), [open Pritchard, ed.]; and in such publications as Åke Björling’s The Collection of Tontum Huwia (1961); and G. Castellino’s Two Siliqal Huwia (1972).

In the post 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 the sponsorship of J. A. Cushing and of Arie Nehory]; 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 Numismatic Institute of the University of Munich under the sponsorship of Dieter Erdmann; a comprehensive study of the formal aspects of Sumerian literature has just been published by Claus Wilcke in Semitica 77 and 78 (1972), from which a complete catalogue of almost all known Sumerian literary texts, 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 (in 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 HEBREW MYRNAL-PRAYER
As the reader will note, quite a few of the words and phrases in the translation are italicized—this is to indicate doubt as to renditions. (An English word used for words left untranslated: mo [pronounce “may”], the divine name governing virtually the entire civilized life: gupur, a part of the temple where the high priest lived; rings and cuons, all kinds of costume and adornment. Also italicized are the names of the temples: Elur, Enki’s temple in Nippur, Samu’s holiest shrine; Azur, Enki’s central shrine, also known as Anum; Erum, the irrigating complex in Enki’s city, Enkí; and Oshumgal, 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; Nibir, the air-god, who gradually, took An’s place as leader of the gods, and who is often designated as “Great Mountain”; Nisili, Enki’s wife, daughter of Nidaba; Enki, the all-wise water-god (also known as Nunnampi); Ninda (also known as Ninarabumgal), the wife of Haira, the mother of Nisili (and thus the mother-in-law of Enki), the goddess of hearing, writing, and accountancy; Kusa, a goddess of gain.

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 uncertain. This is especially true in the case of adjectives, which are generally represented in the Sumerian language, and which may therefore have varied and problematic meanings, depending on the surrounding context (e.g., “lady of the day”, “lady of the Abzu”, “lady of the waters”); “lady of the night”, “lady of the mountains”, “lady of the seas”, “lady of the night”, “lady of the mountains”, “lady of the seas”, “lady of the mountains”, “lady of the seas”.

"great tablets,” “great king,” “great queen,” “great food,” “great mountain.”