Bibliography (I)


II. Texts from the Ur III Period: ca. 2112–2004 BCE

The collapse of the Akkadian Empire brought chaos to Babylonia. Gutian invaders dealt the final blow, but it appears that their efforts were less successful in the south, where pockets of Sumerian resistance were strongest. According to the Sumerian King List (SKL), kingship was ultimately transferred to Uruk and subsumed under Utu-hegal, and this is supported by later copies of his inscriptions. The governor of Ur at this time was Ur-Namma (also called Ur-Nammutu), a military general of Utu-hegal and perhaps his brother. Under circumstances that remain unclear, Ur-Namma assumed kingship in Ur. This is third time in the SKL that hegemony was exercised from there, hence the phrase “Ur III.”

The Ur III period is sometimes called the “Sumerian Renaissance,” and for good reason. Sumerian again became the language of the administration, and Sumerian literary compositions were created and preserved on an unprecedented scale. With this came the establishment of the scribal school (Sumerian *eduba*, literally “house of the tablet”) in the political and religious centers of the land. Although there is evidence for Ur-Namma’s hand in these developments, the real inspiration appears to have come from his son Shulgi, one of three kings in Mesopotamian history who claimed to have mastered writing.

Several texts from or dealing with the Ur III period are offered below. They provide a broad look at the political, socio-economic, and religious dimensions of the Sumerian state during its heyday.

Inscriptions of the Ur III Kings

Outside administrative texts, royal inscriptions are our primary source of contemporary evidence for the Ur III state. Like other royal inscriptions from
ancient Mesopotamia, they record the military campaigns and building projects undertaken by the Ur III kings in a highly religious and congratulatory language. Most commemorate building and agricultural projects and are very short. They appear in various forms as foundation deposits; extremely common are brick inscriptions, many of which were made by carving a stamp in reverse and pressing it into the moist mud brick of the structure commemorated. The basic collections of Ur III inscriptions are Frayne 1997 and Steible 1991; Hallo’s discussion of their typology remains indispensable (1962).

**Bibliography (II introduction)**


Frayne, D. R. *Ur III Period (2112–2004 BC)*. RIME


**A. Ur-Namma: ca. 2112–2095 BCE (Studevent-Hickman)**

25. The restoration of the temple wall named Etemennigir (“the temple ‘platform clad in ominousness’”)

Ur-Namma enjoyed a relatively peaceful reign, which allowed him to undertake massive agricultural and building projects. His role as the royal builder par excellence is well attested in both the textual and iconographic records.

Understandably, one of Ur-Namma’s first priorities was the renovation of the temple complex of Ur’s patron deity, the moon-god Nanna (Akkadian Su’en). Within the larger complex stood the Etemennigir, the temenos or platform for the ziggurat. Two versions of an inscription commemorating its renovation are preserved: one on cones recovered from the temenos wall as foundation deposits, another on the mud bricks themselves. A translation of each appears below.

The cone inscription (Frayne 1997: 31–4; Steible 1991: 97–8):

*For Nanna (the wild calf of An, the eldest son of Enlil, his [Ur-Namma’s] master), Ur-Namma (the mighty man, the king of Ur) built his [Nanna’s] Etemennigir.*

The brick inscription (Frayne 1997: 35; Steible 1991: 104–5):

*For Nanna (the eldest son of Enlil, his [Ur-Namma’s] master), Ur-Namma (the mighty man, the lord of Uruk, the king of Ur, the king of Sumer and Akkad) built the Etemennigir, his [Nanna’s] beloved temple, [and] restored it.*
These inscriptions raise several issues of interest to scholars. Nanna is called the “wild calf” of An, the chief god of the heavens – indeed, the heavens themselves. Nanna’s association with a bull is well attested and self-evident: the crescent moon looks very much like a bull’s horns. His relationship to Enlil, the chief god of Nippur, is also an important datum not only for the ancient Mesopotamian religious tradition but also for the political realities that underlay them.

The titulary is a constant source of interest, particularly when it varies in copies of the same inscription. In the first inscription Ur-Namma is called simply “the king of Ur.” In the second he is also called “the lord [Sumerian en] of Uruk” and “the king of Sumer and Akkad.” “Lord of Uruk” has a complex religious and political tradition (Steinkeller 1999); the fact that it appears here but not in the first inscription may suggest that Utu-hegal has died (see above), allowing Ur-Namma to adopt the title. “King of Sumer and Akkad” suggests hegemony over all of Babylonia, and it is well known that kings needed the approval of Enlil in Nippur to validate this form of kingship. This inevitably involved a trip to Nippur, and such a trip is attested for Ur-Namma in a hymn very much concerned with his legitimization (Flückiger-Hawker 1999: 204–207, see esp. lines 103–114). Since he adopts this epithet in the second of these inscriptions, he may have gone to Nippur during the renovation of the Etemennigur (Frayne 1997: 12). Indeed, some scholars divide his inscriptions chronologically based on the absence or presence of this title (Hallo 1957: 77–83). While none of these matters can be confirmed with certainty, they illustrate well the subtleties of these texts and the information potentially available when they are considered within the larger sociopolitical and religious context of Sumerian kingship.

Bibliography (II A)


as smoothly. As is common in Sumerian literature, the moment things turn is introduced by the phrase “at that time”:

I indeed rose like a... bird
[and] returned to Nippur in my jubilation.
At that time, a storm [began to] rage [and] the west wind swirled.
The north wind and the south wind howled together.
With the seven winds lightning consumed everything in the heavens.
The raging storm did shake the earth.
[šikur]8 indeed thundred to the vast heavens.
The [stormy] clouds of heaven did mingle[?] with the waters of earth.
Their small stones [and] their big stones
pelted my back, [but],
since I am the king, I did not fear. I was not scared.
Like an impending lion I showed my ferocity[?].
Like a wild donkey I ran...

But he does make it back to Nippur, apparently before sunset.

...[Before] Utu set his sights on his house,
I indeed completed a fifteen-mile stretch.
My... priest gazed upon me.
In one day I verify perform the... festivals[?] in Nippur and Ur.

At the completion of his journey Shulgi enjoyed a banquet with the gods Utu and Inanna. Predictably, his journey ended in the Ekur, the temple of Enlil in Nippur, where he performed a variety of acts symbolizing the legitimacy and consolidation of his kingship. The text ends with a short praise to Shulgi typical of the royal hymns:

Shulgi, who continual destroys the foreign lands [and] strengthens the land,
the purification priest of heaven and earth [who] has no rival;
Shulgi, the one nurtured by the noble son of An.
Nisaba be praised!

As is often the case in literary compositions, Nisaba, the goddess of writing and the scribal art, receives the final praise.

Bibliography (II F: 30)

The passage suggests that Ur-Nammu was brought back to Ur to be buried. As it happens, there is considerable textual and archaeological evidence to support the fact that several of the Ur III kings were buried there. What is more revealing is the nature of the burial itself. This is outlined in the following section:

His donkeys dwelt with him; the donkeys were buried with him.
His donkeys dwelt with Ur-Nammu; the donkeys were buried with him.
He crossed the... of the land; the pride of the land was changed. 20
The road he took to the netherworld was desolate.
... the chariot was covered; the road was difficult [so] he could not proceed [easily].

This description raises several important points concerning the ancient Mesopotamian concepts of death and the afterlife. First, there was indeed a life after death in the Mesopotamian conceptual framework: virtually everyone went to the netherworld, a dismal place known above all as the "land of no return." Second, Ur-Nammu takes a journey to get there, a motif that is well documented for humans and deities alike. Finally, it is clear from this passage that Ur-Nammu was buried with his retinue and, as we learn later, various other accoutrements. This is precisely what one finds in the many graves that have been excavated in Mesopotamia, and in some cases the items that accompany the deceased can be quite lavish. 21 The purpose of these goods remains a topic of debate among scholars, but the "Death of Ur-Nammu" provides some possible answers:

He gives gifts to the seven porters of the netherworld...
The famous kings who had died.
The dead purification priest... priest, and en-priestess who had been selected by expropriation...
Informed the people of the King's arrival, [and] a din was established in the netherworld.
They informed the people of Ur-Nammu's arrival and a din was established in the netherworld.
Whereupon] the king slaughtered oxen and sacrificed sheep.
On Ur-Nammu's account they sat at the largest table.
The food of the netherworld is bitter; the water of the netherworld is brackish.
The faithful shepherd learned the proper order of the netherworld.
Ur-Nammu learned the proper order of the netherworld.
The king sacrificed the offerings of the netherworld.
Ur-Nammu sacrificed the offerings of the netherworld.
Renowned bulls, renowned goats, [and] grain-fed sheep, as many as could be led in.

As the first few lines suggest, the items that accompany the dead in their burials may be intended to serve as gifts in the netherworld (see Tinney 1998 for this specific connection). Indeed, a large section of the text that follows is devoted to the various gifts that Ur-Nammu gave to the deities there. In many cases the meanings of the terms used for these items are unclear, but a few examples may be offered here:

A mace, a large bow [with] quiver and arrow, a skillfully made [flint(?)] dagger, and a speckled leather bag which was at [his] hip, the shepherd. Ur-Nammu, sacrificed to Nergal, the Enlil of the netherworld, 22 in his [Nergal's] palace.
A dagger, a leather bag made [for] the saddle, [and] a... mace (the lion of heaven), a leather shield lying against the ground (the strength of heroism), [and] an axe (a cherished item of Ereshkigal), the shepherd Ur-Nammu sacrificed to Gilgamesh, the king of the netherworld, in his [Gilgamesh's] palace.
A container in which he had poured oil, a bowl perfectly [made], a heavy garment, a fleecy garment, a... garment of quiescence... the shepherd Ur-Nammu sacrificed to Ereshkigal, the mother of Ninazu, in her palace...

The list goes on to include other netherworld deities, among them Dumuzi, Namtar (the vizier of Ereshkigal), Hushbisag (the wife of Namtar), Ningishzida, Dimpi(me)kg, Ninazimun, and Geshninana (Dumuzi's brother). Of particular interest is the presence of Gilgamesh, whose connection to the Ur III kings was noted above.

After the accounting of Ur-Nammu's gifts the text returns to Ur-Nammu's conditions in the netherworld:

After the king put... [the sacrifices] of the netherworld in order, after Ur-Nammu put... [the sacrifices] of the netherworld in order... they enthroned Ur-Nammu on the great dais of the netherworld.
They established a dwelling place in the netherworld for him.
By the command of Ereshkigal, the troops... who were killed by the weapon, and all the captives who were known[2], were given to the king. 23

For his beloved brother Gilgamesh,
he himself judges the cases of the netherworld and makes the decisions of the netherworld.

As it appears, Ur-Nammu himself was fitted with a palace by the order of Ereshkigal, Nergal's wife and the chief goddess of the netherworld. Moreover, he was given a position alongside Gilgamesh, who serves as the judge of the dead lords (Sumerian on) there.

But Ur-Nammu's attention to matters in his new home is short-lived. Within a few days the lamentations of his people reached him, and he is forced to contemplate the joys of life among the living, joys he will no longer experience:
When seven days, even ten, had passed.
The wailing of Sumer reached my king.
The wailing of Sumer reached Ur-Nammu.
Since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
since he had not finished the wall of Ur,
O my lord, his heart sinking, weeps bitter tears.
The faithful shepherd utters a silent [lament] for himself:
"When I, myself, did these things,
standing before the gods and providing for them,
[my work] emerging in abundance for the chief deities;
when I set up treasures for them, beds spread with lapis and straw[?],
no god stood with me; my heart was not soothed.
I am... an auspicious sign [was] as distant as the heavens.
[Now] what have I received in serving... standing by day?
In standing by night [and] not sleeping my days are never ending."

The text goes on to describe how Ur-Nammu cannot return to Ur from the netherworld. As a result, his wife – now a widow – whisks for him, and it appears that a similar fate befalls her.

But what is more striking about the above passage is the view of the world Ur-Nammu so boldly articulates. Much like Job or Ecclesiastes, Ur-Nammu is upset because all of the good deeds he has performed for the gods are pointless – the gods do not ultimately look with favor upon him but let him die a premature death. True, divine abandonment is the source of catastrophe in ancient Mesopotamia, but it is extremely rare to find an individual not taking responsibility for having upset the gods.

Ultimately, Inanna hears what has happened to Ur-Nammu, and is visibly upset:

Inanna, the fierce storm, the eldest child of Suen...  
Making the heavens rumble [and] the earth quake.
Inanna destroyed the cattle pen and devastated the sheepfold [saying]:
"Let me curse Ar, the king of the gods.
When Enil has raised someone, who [can] alter that command?
Who has altered the magnificient utterance of An, the king?
When designs have been firmly established in the land, [and] they have not been observed,
there can be no abundance for the gods at the place where the sun rises,
the holy gigan, my sanctuary of the Enanna... like a mountain.
O that my shepherd would bring his allure! I must not enter it.
That my mighty one could grow for me like fragrant herbs in the steppe.
That he could hold firm for me like a riverboat in a calm harbor."
Inanna indeed observes[?] his lament.

32. The death of Shulgi

The Ur III period is perhaps best known for the massive number of administrative and legal texts it generated. As of this publication, some 65,000 texts covering roughly 40 years of bureaucratic activity have been published, and there may be twice to three times as many in museums and private collections still waiting to be examined. For the most part these texts were used to calculate payments in goods and services by provincial officials (Steinkeller 1987; Sharlach 2004). When pieced together, they provide unbelievable detail concerning the social and economic conditions of southern Babylonia at this time.