

Hymn to the goddess Nanshe.

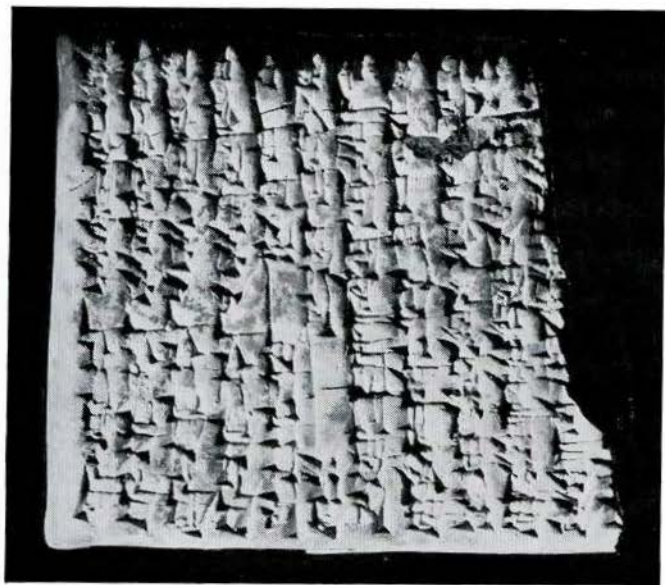


Plate VIII

Hymn to the goddess Nanshe.

MERCY, WISDOM, AND JUSTICE: SOME NEW DOCUMENTS FROM NIPPUR

One of the major goals of the new Joint Expedition to Nippur was to recover as many as possible of those Sumerian clay tablets and fragments which help to restore the literary works of the ancient Sumerians: their myths and epic tales, their hymns and lamentations, their proverbs, fables and other "wisdom" compositions. For as is now generally recognized, the restoration and translation of the hoary and long forgotten Sumerian literature should turn out to be a not insignificant contribution of our century to the humanities. In the first place, the Sumerian literary products rank well up among the aesthetic creations of civilized man, and represent an impressive addition to the world's belles lettres. Moreover, as mirrors reflecting the intellectual and spiritual life of the Sumerians, they help us understand and interpret the civilization of a people which for many centuries was the dominant cultural group in the ancient Near East—a people whose influence came to be felt in language and literature, in law and politics, in religion and philosophy, in science and education. Finally, because of their age—they antedate the oldest Greek and Hebrew writings by a good millennium—and as a result of their impress on the literary activities of the neighboring peoples, the Sumerian creative writings abound in source material fundamental to the study of man's cultural evolution.

It is to the great credit of the first Nippur expedition of the University of Pennsylvania that it recovered, at the close of the last century, the greater part of all our available Sumerian literary remains. These early pioneering excavators succeeded in bringing to light a huge number of tablets inscribed with Sumerian compositions of all types and genres. Unfortunately most of these tablets came out of the ground badly broken and in a very fragmentary condition. As a result, the works inscribed on them usually contain a large number of lacunae and breaks in their text, so that it is often impossible to get at the real meaning of the document. It is for

this reason that the new expedition is so important: every newly excavated literary fragment may turn out to contain those very portions of the document which were missing on the tablets found by the earlier expedition. In examining the tablets as they came out of the ground, Francis Steele, the epigraphist of the new Joint Expedition, has succeeded in recognizing some fifty as containing Sumerian literary compositions. These will be studied carefully and in great detail upon their arrival in our Museum, and an effort will be made to ascribe each piece to the particular work to which it belongs. But even now, before the arrival of the tablets themselves, it has been possible to identify more closely several important literary fragments, either by the excavators on the spot, or from photographs made in the field, and to begin to utilize their contents for the restoration of the compositions to which they belong. It is the results of these efforts which will be described in the pages that follow.

Two of the more important Sumerian literary finds of the new Nippur expedition are illustrated on Plate VIII; they help to restore a most unusual hymn dedicated to the ancient Sumerian goddess Nanshe, which stresses and underlines the value of social justice and moral order in the life of the ancient Sumerian community. Since the restoration of this hymn illustrates rather vividly the significance of the tablet discoveries of the new Nippur expedition, as well as of the method and procedure underlying the piecing together of the Sumerian literary works, it may be of interest to describe the relevant events in some detail.

In 1938, some twelve years ago, the writer copied, in the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, a six-column tablet inscribed with a hymn to the goddess Nanshe, one of the tutelary deities of the ancient Sumerian city of Lagash. The tablet was very badly damaged on both obverse and reverse, and in the introduction to the volume *Sumerian Literary Texts from Nippur* where it was published as text number 67, all he could say was that "Poorly preserved as the text is, it points to an unusual type of hymnal content, one that should prove very significant for the study of the religious concepts of the Sumerians." The same year he also copied in Istanbul a very small fragment of another tablet inscribed with the same hymn. At that time, however, it was possible to place only the reverse of the fragment in relation to the six-column tablet; the contents of the obverse could not be fitted into it.

In his review of the volume *Sumerian Literary Texts from Nippur* which appeared in 1946 in the BULLETIN of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Thorkild Jacobsen, who had evidently made a very careful study of its contents, was the first to indicate in some detail the nature of the text. He pointed out that the hymn presents the goddess Nanshe as a guarantor of the moral order and that it mentions specific cases of conduct which will call forth divine sanctions; that it indicated that Nanshe took a special interest in fair treatment of the weak in the community, particularly of the orphan and the widow. Jacobsen was also the first to translate several of the better preserved lines in the composition.

In the meantime, in the early forties, the writer had been studying the Nippur collection of the University Museum, and particularly that part of it which is inscribed with the Sumerian literary works. In the course of this work, it was possible to identify three additional pieces belonging to the hymn. Two of these were small fragments, but the third was a fairly well preserved single-column tablet containing about fifty lines of text which helped to restore the first column of the six-column tablet from Istanbul. It was felt, however, that there was still not enough material on hand to justify an attempt at a reconstruction and translation of the hymn as a whole, and they were put aside for further study at some opportune moment. This presented itself several months ago when Jacobsen, who was then acting as temporary director of the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the Oriental Institute and the University Museum, announced the excavation of two pieces belonging to our Nanshe hymn; one is an excellently preserved one-column tablet inscribed with thirty-seven lines of text, while the other is a fragment of another one-column tablet inscribed with about twenty-three lines of text. He prepared a transliteration of the two pieces on the spot, and forwarded it to the writer. With the help of these two newly excavated Nippur pieces which, as Jacobsen already saw, helped to restore the third and fourth column of the hymn, and with the help of the three still unpublished pieces in the University Museum from the old Nippur expedition, it was now possible to reconstruct the greater part of the text. With this fuller text now available it seemed advisable to examine once again those literary fragments in the University Museum, the contents of which for one reason or another are still unplaceable. And sure enough, it was now possible to identify among these two additional fragments belonging to the Nanshe hymn. One of these is particularly

interesting, since it contains the beginning lines of the composition which had still been missing, and the first words showed that our Nanshe hymn was one of the compositions listed in a literary catalogue prepared by an ancient Sumerian scribe which was excavated by the first Nippur expedition and is now in the University Museum. With all the material now available, it seemed reasonably safe to attempt a reconstruction and translation of the contents of the hymn. Needless to say, the text is still far from complete; over forty lines are entirely destroyed and another forty to fifty are badly damaged, and the following sketch of its contents should of course be taken as a first and highly tentative attempt to get at the meaning of the hymn. With this in mind, here is a broad outline of the contents of the composition as far as they can be penetrated at the moment.

The hymn begins with a description of Nanshe's efforts to make Lagash a wealthy, civilized, and moral community. She invokes the *me*, the divine laws which underlie the universe and its cosmic and cultural processes (lines 1-5); performs a number of what may perhaps be ritualistic acts (lines 6-16); shows herself to be a goddess of mercy and justice (lines 17-30); brings wealth to Lagash and its great *ishakku* ("prince") Gudea (lines 31-37); Gudea then performs for Nanshe a number of rites of adoration and worship (lines 38-55). Following some 80 lines of obscure and poorly preserved text, the hymn continues with a passage listing the types of evil-doers whom Nanshe despises and punishes. This in turn is followed by a passage which seems to be concerned with filial piety. Following the commissioning by Nanshe of the god Hendur-sagga to supervise the just and moral order in Lagash, the hymn closes with a paean of praise for the city and its destiny.

To illustrate concretely the style and temper of the poem, here is a literal translation of several of the more intelligible and significant passages (all italicized words are uncertain translations or transliterations).

First the beginning lines:

1. The city, the city, she invokes its *me*,
Nina, the city, she invokes its *me*,
... of Uru-kug, the city, she invokes its *me*,
..., she invokes its *me*,
5. The faithful house, she leads out its *me*, she decrees its fate.

In the city she gloriously brings to existence whatsoever is
needful.

The rites of Nanshe's city she directs,
Its queen, the daughter born in Eridu,
Nanshe, the most precious queen, returns them (to their) place.

10. The mother of man, the . . . mother.
Nanshe, the mother of all that is straightforward and great,
Walks with . . . in compassion for the land.

She commanded the well like a . . . out of . . . ,
Set up reeds . . . ;

15. . . reeds of the . . . of the land,
Nanshe trod like river mud.

The queen who studied the tablets who studied the tablets,
Who uttered the wisdom of (the city) Aratta;
Nanshe, the queen who set toward heaven the . . . ,

20. Knows the orphan, knows the widow,
Knows the oppression of man over man, protects the orphan.

Nanshe knows the widow . . . ,
Cherishes the accursed . . . ,
The queen fondles the refugee,

25. Cares for the weak.

The evil types who suffer Nanshe's displeasure are described as:

Who walking in *transgression* reached out a high hand, . . . ,
Who changing what has been established, alters that which has
been sealed.

Who looked with favor on the places of evil, . . . ,
Who substituted a small weight for a large weight,
Who substituted a small measure for a large measure, . . . ,
Who having eaten (something not belonging to him) did not say
"I have eaten it."

Who having drunk, did not say "I have drunk it," . . .

Who said "I would eat that which is *forbidden*."

Who said "I would drink that which is *forbidden*."

Nanshe's social conscience is further revealed in lines which read:

To comfort the orphan, to make disappear the widow,
To set up a place of destruction for the mighty,
To *turn over* the mighty to the weak, . . . ,
Like (gazing through) a reed flute, Nanshe cast (her) eye on the
heart of the people.

In conclusion just a word about the dating of the Nanshe hymn. The tablets on which it has been found inscribed, like the vast majority of Sumerian literary tablets excavated in Nippur, date from the first half of the second millennium B. C. However, a considerable portion of the poem concerns the ritual and religious acts of Gudea, the prince of Lagash whose pious deeds are so well known as a result of the French excavations at Lagash conducted off and on over the past seventy years. It is not impossible, therefore, that our Nanshe hymn, or at least some parts of it, was actually first composed in the last quarter of the third millennium B. C.

We turn now from the Nanshe hymn to a Sumerian literary work of quite a different genre, a secular composition written primarily for didactic purposes. The fragment of what was originally a six-column tablet pictured on Plate IX, helps to restore a document of some 200 lines which seems to offer advice to the citizen on how to obtain fame, fortune, and divine favor. The beginning of this composition is of rather unusual interest; it reveals the important rôle ascribed to formal education in the life of the Sumerian community. Thus the first lines of this "guide to success" consist of a colloquy between two individuals, a young man and his superior and mentor; and reads (all italicized words are uncertain translations or restorations):

"Come *hither*."

"Here I come."

"Whither did you go?"

"I did not go anywhere."

"If you did not go anywhere, why are you late?"

Go to school, stand before your *teacher*,

Read your assignment, open your *schoolbag*,

Write your tablet,

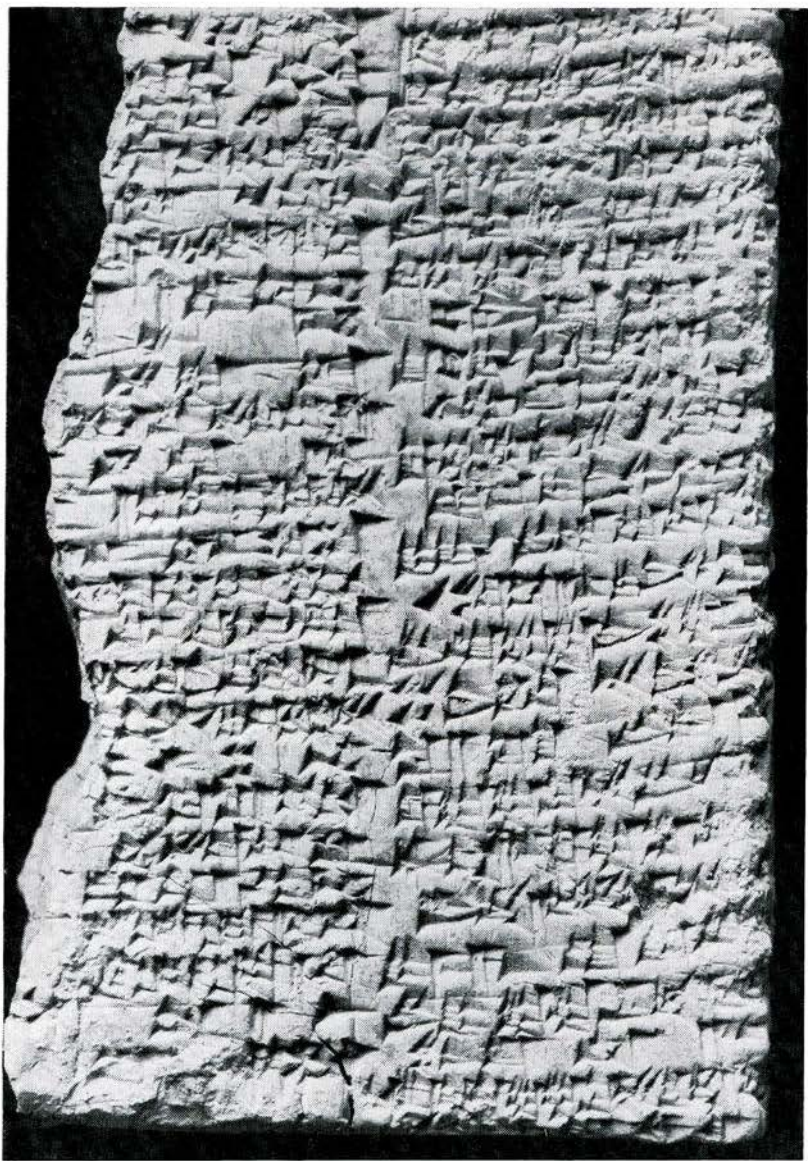
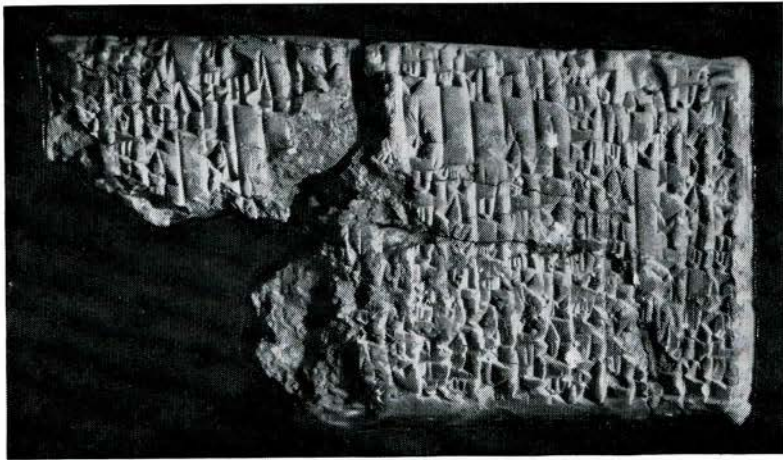


Plate IX

“Guide to success.”



Farmer's "almanac."



Trial for Murder.

Plate X

Let your big brother (teacher's assistant) write your new tablet
for you,

After you have done your assignment,
And after you have reported to your overseer, come pray to me . . . ,
Do not wander about in the street, return to me;
. . . , do you know what I said to you?"

"I know, I will tell it to you."

"Come, repeat it to me."

"I will repeat it to you."

"Tell it to me."

"I will tell it to you."

"Come, tell it to me."

"You told me to go to school,
To read my assignment, to open my *schoolbag*,
To write my tablet,
My big brother will write my new tablet;
After I have done my assignment, to proceed to my job,
And after I have reported to my overseer, to come to you, you
told me."

"Come now indeed be a man,
Do not stand about in the public square,
Do not wander about in the boulevard,
When walking in the street, do not look all around,
Be humble, show fear before your overseer,
When you show terror, your overseer will like you. . . ."

Another didactic composition which it will be possible to restore with the help of a tablet dug up by the new Nippur expedition deals with agriculture and may be entitled "The Instructions of a Farmer to His Son." The document consists of 108 lines of text, and the new tablet (see Plate X) helps to fill in a considerable part of the middle of the work. Beginning with an introductory line which reads, "In days of yore the farmer advised his son," the composition continues with a number of precepts and instructions on the time and technique of irrigating, plowing and harvesting. Because of the technical terminology used throughout the text, its

translation will prove particularly difficult, and it will take the coöperative efforts of several scholars to get at the full meaning of the document. Once translated, however, this particular Sumerian composition should prove invaluable for the history of agriculture, since it is by all odds the oldest "Farmer's Almanac" known to man.

We conclude this brief summary of some of the more significant tablet-finds of the new Joint Expedition with a document which is legal rather than literary in character; it reports the case of a rather unusual murder-trial which took place some time about 1850 B. C. (see Plate X). The trial must have been celebrated throughout the legal circles of ancient Sumer, and was probably used as a sample case decision or precedent not unlike the more important court decisions of our own day and age. In any case, another copy of this very same document had been found at Nippur by the first expedition some fifty years ago. The fragment was so badly broken, however, that little could be done with its contents until the new and much more complete piece was uncovered in the course of this season's excavations by the Joint Expedition; the two pieces complement each other in a way which makes a practically complete restoration of the text possible. What is unusually interesting about this hoary murder-trial is that it involves the guilt of an "accessory after the fact"; moreover the verdict was quite in line with the legal practice of our own courts. The text of the tablet was identified and transliterated by Thorkild Jacobsen while he was in the field; he later prepared an excellent translation and forwarded it to the present writer who made several minor changes and suggestions. In brief, our text records the story of the murder-trial as follows:

Three men, Nanna-sig, Ku-Enlil, and Enlil-ennam by name, killed a man named Lu-Inanna, and then informed his wife Nin-dada that her husband had been murdered. The wife, strangely enough, kept their secret and made no complaint to the authorities. The case was then brought before Ur-Ninurta who ruled over Sumer in his capital Isin (about 1850 B.C.), and the king, in accordance with his royal prerogative, turned it over to the Nippur assembly, which acted as a court of justice, for the trial. In the Nippur assembly nine men stood up to prosecute the four accused; they argued that not only the three actual murderers, but the woman as well, though only an accessory after the fact, should be executed "before Lu-Inanna's chair." Two men then arose in the assembly to defend the woman; they pleaded that the wife took no part in the murder of the hus-

band and therefore should go unpunished. The members of the assembly seemed to agree with the defense—unfortunately the meaning of the relevant lines is rather uncertain. In any case, only the three murderers were turned over by the Nippur assembly, acting as a court of justice, to be executed; the wife was set free.

S. N. K.

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