

Preface

Innovation and playfulness are displayed in the very earliest written records known to us—new sign forms were devised with no practical application (Damerow 2006: §8.3 and Fig. 5), and mathematical exercises with difficult or extraordinary numbers were set (Nissen, Englund, and Damerow 1990: 98)—but we should not forget the darker sides of our history. In the texts published here, all from the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100–2000 BC), as well as throughout the combined extant records from that period, by far the greatest effort invested by the ancient administrators was in the excessively long monthly and yearly rosters assigning tiny parcels of land to countless prebend holders, or starvation rations to even more numerous estate slaves. Forget private enterprise, forget literature, forget mathematics—judging from the sheer amount of textual material left us, the ancient rulers were above all obsessed with keeping track of their subjects, and recording with frightening detail the whereabouts of the poorest individuals making up the majority of the population under their jurisdiction. They did this year after year, noting even minute changes in the staffing of their teams. Take, for example, the following excerpt from the monthly roster of cattle hands on a state-run estate, text No. 130 (edited in Chapter 8). This excerpt is found at the beginning of the second column of the obverse: “One prebend plot (for) Lugal-ezem (and for) Šeš-kala (and for) Ur-Sukkal. They (Šeš-kala and Ur-Sukkal) are his children, returned from flight.” While we know all too well the circumstances surrounding flight, pursuit, and punishment from much later New World slavery, the full picture from ancient Mesopotamia is only now being revealed (Reid 2015).

This book presents editions of 244 cuneiform tablets from the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur. The vast majority of them are previously unpublished. For the more recent collection history, see

the collector’s statement prefixed to this study. The ancient provenience is for the most part the province Umma, whereas the other core provinces are represented in smaller numbers. In addition, the collection provides notable contributions of texts from ancient Adab, otherwise under-represented in the published record. In order to provide a fuller picture of the administration of the Ur III state, many texts from other collections, both published and unpublished, have been included in this book.

I wish to thank Martin Schøyen for his permission to study these tablets in the Schøyen Collection, and for his gracious hospitality during my visits to the collection. My work in Norway was also supported by Jens E. Braarvig and Elizabeth Sørensen.

Naturally, a project of this sort does not occur in a vacuum, and I would like to thank the following persons for their assistance at various stages of the work (in alphabetical order): B. Alster (†), S. Dahl, P. Damerow (†), R. K. Englund, A. R. George, B. Lafont, T. Ozaki, D. I. Owen, J. N. Reid, K. Wagonsonner, and M. Widell. Finally, I wish to thank Axel Theodore Dahl and James Lawrence Dahl for their help with the final editing of this book.

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Since my first visit to the Schøyen Collection in 2001, I have kept all the core records concerning the Ur III texts in the collection up to date and made them freely accessible to other researchers through the web-pages of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI, see <https://cdli.ucla.edu>). Thus, my publication of the tablets has benefited over time from comments from colleagues, and it is my understanding that the work of others has benefited from unhindered access to these documents.

Given the nature of the sources, I have refrained from making hand copies of the tablets and refer the reader to the photographs available online. Several generations of images are available, varying from hand copies of some of those tablets that

were previously published, scanned images made by myself, photographs made by the team of Braarvig, and most recently HDR photos and RTI images made by Klaus Wagensohnner for the CDLI.

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