

V. V. Emelianov

FIRST ACCOUNT OF A BIRTHDAY IN HUMAN HISTORY

St. Petersburg State University, 7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation

The article deals with the five Old Sumerian cuneiform texts from the city of Lagash made during the time of Lugalanda (24th century BC). Every text contains the list of offerings made in the temple of the goddess Bau on the occasion of the birth of children in the king's family. It is established that there is the first mentioning of holiday on the occasion of people's birthday in the history of writing. The hypothesis of dating of the text of DP 218 by time of an autumn equinox is offered. The author assumes that need to celebrate birthdays is connected with submission of economy of the temple of Bau to the king's family and with emergence of a sacral genealogy of the king Lugalanda.

The article also contains information about birthdays from the sources of the Middle East and antiquity known to scholars since the 5th century BC. It is noted that birthdays are celebrated only in those societies where the growth of private property and the increase of egocentrism contribute to an interest in the individual destiny of a person. And vice versa, the predominance of the community neutralizes the facts of the individual's life. Refs 39.

Keywords: Sumer, Lagash, Lugalanda, Baranamtara, birthday.

ПЕРВОЕ В ИСТОРИИ УПОМИНАНИЕ ДНЯ РОЖДЕНИЯ

В. В. Емельянов

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7–9

В статье рассматриваются пять шумерских клинописных текстов из города Лагаша, составленных в эпоху царя Лугаланды (XXIV в. до н.э.). Тексты содержат список жертв, принесенных в храме богини Бау по случаю рождения детей в семье царя. Установлено, что это первые в истории письменности упоминания праздника по случаю рождения людей. Предложена гипотеза датировки текста DP 218 временем осеннего равноденствия. Автор предполагает, что необходимость отмечать событие рождения связана с подчинением хозяйства храма Бау царской семье и с возникновением сакрального родословия царя Лугаланды. Библиогр. 39 назв.

Ключевые слова: Шумер, Лагаш, Лугаланда, Баранамтара, день рождения.

Putting this question forward may come across as a little strange: where and since then did people first start celebrating their birthdays? Our contemporaries are so used to the birthday phenomenon that they can hardly imagine life and times when it did not exist. However, there is not a single text on record, from the Near East or from the High Classical Period, mentioning a celebration of a human birthday, whereas in the Middle Ages the only date which was recorded was the day a baby was christened.

If one were to believe the “Father of History” Herodotus, the first people to celebrate birthdays were the Persians — in the 5th century BC. In Book One of Herodotus's Histories it says:

“133. And of all days their wont is to honour most that on which they were born, each one: on this they think it right to set out a feast more liberal than on other days; and in this feast the wealthier of them set upon the table an ox or a horse or a camel or an ass, roasted whole in an oven, and the poor among them set out small animals in the same way.”

(Translated by G. C. Macaulay) [1].

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We see that for a Greek of the High Classical period celebrating a birthday was deemed unusual. Indeed, in the Golden Age of Athens celebrations of people's birthdays were unknown. The official birth date of Plato was proclaimed as the day dedicated to the worship of Apollo. It may have so happened that the Persians with their cults of Mithra (the sun) and Zurvan (time) imparted the custom of birthday celebration to the Romans. In the treatise entitled "De Die Natali" (The Birthday Book) written by a Roman scholar Censorinus (in the 3-rd century AD) it says that on every person's birthday an offering should be made to that person's *genius*, i.e. the birth spirit. The *genius* is the keeper of the gift bestowed upon the new-born, warranting a sacrificial libation:

"Here someone may be prompted to inquiry as to why he thinks a libation of wine is due to the *genius* as an offering, and not a sacrifice? The reason for this being so is that, as Varro relates in his book entitled "Atticus, or On Numbers", our ancestors practiced the following custom: on someone's birthday, when presenting the annual gift to their *genius*, they kept their hands clean of death or blood, so that light would not be taken from others on the day when it was bestowed on them. Finally, also on Delos, near the Shrine of Paternal Apollo, as Timaeus relates, no one kills sacrificial animals. Likewise, another observance of the day was that no other person, ahead of the donator himself, should taste of what he had offered to the *genius*" [2].

(after the Russian translation by V. L. Tsymbursky)

This fragment by Censorinus hearkens back to the Second Satire of Persius (34–62 AD):

"Set the whitest of white stones, Macrinus,
To mark this bright day that places the gliding years to your account!
Pour out libations to your Genius..." [3]

(translated by G. G. Ramsay)

The lines of Persius and the account to Censorinus concern the time of Late Antiquity. However, the custom to celebrate birthdays existed in Rome already at the time of the Roman Republic. Thus in Plautus's comedy entitled "Pseudolus", staged in 191 BC, a character proclaims:

For this day is my birthday; it befits you all to celebrate it. Take care to lay the gammon of bacon, the brawn, the collared neck, and the udder, in water; do you hear me? I wish to entertain tip-top men in first-rate style, that they may fancy that I have property. Go you in-doors, and get these things ready quickly, that there may be no delay when the cook comes. I'm going to market, that I may make purchase of whatever fish is there. Boy, go you before me; I must have a care that no one cuts away my purse [4].

(Edited by Henry Thomas Riley)

This custom was severely denounced by Cicero, a philosopher and a rhetor, who would rather wish people celebrated the day on which wisdom was born in them¹. His enraged rejoinder of celebrating birthdays in Book Two of his treatise "De finibus bonorum

¹ It must be said that Cicero himself wanted to invite his friend to visit him on his birthday and also gladly celebrated the birthday of his daughter Tullia (as we read in his "Letters to Atticus"). I am indebted

et malorum” (On the Ends of Good and Evil) informs us that the Romans bequeathed that their birthdays should be honoured also after their death:

“102...but still I utterly deny that it is inconsistent with the wisdom of a philosopher, especially of a natural philosopher, which is the character he claims for himself, to think that there is such a day as the birthday of any one. What? Can any day which has once passed recur over again frequently. Most indubitably not; or can any day like it recur? Even that is impossible, unless it may happen after an interval of many thousand years, that there may be a return of all the stars at the same moment to the point from which they set out. There is, therefore, no such thing as anybody’s birthday. But still it is considered that there is. As if I did not know that. But even if there be, is it to be regarded after a man’s death? <...> 103. But if a day did deserve to be kept, which was it more fitting to observe, the day on which a man was born, or that on which he became wise?” [5]

(Translated by H. Rackham)

In Old Persian and Avestan texts compiled at the time of Herodotus the custom of celebrating birthdays is likewise not mentioned, while the only reference to a birthday in the Old Testament is debatable². However, in Mesopotamia following the Persian conquest and throughout the whole Hellenistic period (5th-2nd centuries BC) horoscopes of new born children were compiled. Historians know clearly that this period in Mesopotamia is marked with appearance of trade houses and banks, strengthening of private enterprise, and with money becoming a benchmark against which people’s social standing was measured [10]. Rich parents commissioned star charts of their children to be drawn by astrologers, for which purposes a baby’s date of birth had to be known. It was in those days that the text given below was put down:

“The 29th of December 248 BC (recalculated into contemporary time reckoning — V.E.): In the month of Tebêtu, in the evening of the second day, Anu-Belshunu was born. On that day the Sun was in 9 degrees 30 minutes of Capricorn, the Moon was in 12 degrees of Aquarius. Long will be his days. Jupiter was beginning to enter Scorpio — someone will help the prince. The child was born in Aquarius being in the region of Venus, — he will have sons. Mercury was in Capricorn, Saturn in Capricorn, Mars in Cancer” [11, p. 79–80].

It may be supposed that the Babylonians’ interest towards people’s birth dates had been provoked by the Persians, whose peculiar custom was recorded by Herodotus. However, if we refer ourselves to evidence provided by cuneiform texts of ancient Mesopotamia

to K. Liakou (Thessaloniki), the researcher at the Institute for Balkan Studies, for the elucidations I received concerning Roman textology.

² Despite the fact that Genesis 40:20 speaks of amnesty on the occasion of “the pharaoh’s birthday”, the current discourse in Egyptology does not permit a notion of a feast dedicated to a pharaoh’s birthday prior to Achaemenid Empire and the epoch of the Ptolemies (the 26th Dynasty). What we read about Egypt in the story of Joseph reflect historical realities not prior to the Saite Period, and it must be noted that birth dates of pharaohs were never recorded as such. Amnesties were declared on occasions of dates on which kings had assumed power. A birth festival is mentioned in the Rosetta and Canopus Decrees in three languages: in Egyptian it literally means “opening of the year (= new year) of his majesty” [6, p. 209–214; 7, p. 205–206; 8, p. 89–91; 9, p. 59, 64]. Here I would like to acknowledge the help of I. V. Bogdanov, a scholar of Egyptian studies, for briefing me on the matter.

tamia we shall see that marking of birth dates had started considerably earlier than the 5-th century BC. There are five cuneiform clay tablets, dating back to the time of King Lugalanda, which were recorded in the second half of the 24 century BC³ in the Sumerian city of Lagash. All tablets are dated from the fourth year of Lugalanda's reign. They hail from a temple of goddess Bau⁴, the spouse to the chief god of Lagash, the hero Ningirsu. All cuneiform inscriptions were published in autography as far back as the beginning of last century. Transliteration of the signs can be viewed in the electronic database. However, nobody has translated them from the Old Sumerian; neither has anybody considered them a source of information on chronopsychology, *i.e.* psychology of reckoning and perceiving time.

Tablet DP 218 [13, tabl. 218] is kept in the Louvre and referenced as AO 13426. It is dated from the fourth year of Lugalanda. The content of the table is a list of sacrificial items and feast rations associated with a certain event. In the end the tablet mentions two occupational titles: a tax collector and a cattle fattener. It was those two people who compiled the cuneiform document. The autography and the complete transliteration are given in [14], while translation is not provided. In view of the fact that several competing readings are supplied for a few lines of the text, here I offer my own variant of transliteration and full translation of the tablet.

Obverse

I¹4 udu gur-ra ²U₂-U₂ ³agrig-ge ⁴niġ₂-gu₇-de₃ ⁵ba-ra ⁶1 udu gur-ra ⁷ensi₂ ⁸e₂-munus-
⁹e-ġen-na-a ¹⁰e₂-muġaldim-ma II¹ba-sa₆ ²¹munus^aaš₂-gar₃ ³¹sil₄ ⁴²kam-ma-ka ⁵e₂-
muġaldim ⁶ba-sa₆ ⁷¹ud⁵ ⁸En-gil-sa ⁹ba-de₆ ¹⁰¹udu En-en₃-tar-zi ¹¹¹udu Du-du III^{1d}Utu
^{u₄} nu₂-a-ka ²ba-gu₇ ³¹udu ^dNin-ġir₂-su ⁴¹udu ^dBa-U₂ ⁵¹maš ^d[Šul-ša₃]-ga-[na] ⁶[...] ⁷[...]

Reverse

I¹[...] ²[...] ³¹udu [E₃?]-li ⁴¹maš ^dMe²-[kul[?]]-aba₄^{ki}-ta ⁵aga₃ gi-a-bi ⁶gu₂ ^dBil₃-aga₃-mes-
ka II ¹ba-[gu₇] ²¹sil₄ ³e₂-muġaldim e₂-gal-ka ⁴ba-sa₆ ⁵¹maš Ur-e₂-zi-da ⁶saġġa e₂-gal
⁷ba-uš₂-a ⁸ba-gu₇ ⁹¹maš Dim₃-tur bar-iri šum-de₃ ¹⁰E₂-mete (TE. ME) ¹¹ba-de₆ III¹šu-
niġin₂ ¹udu nita ²²sil₄ ³¹ud⁵ ⁴¹munus^aaš₂-gar₃ ⁵⁵maš ⁶iti ezem-^dBa-U₂-ka ⁷Bara₂-nam-
tar-ra ⁸dam Lugal-an-da ⁹ensi₂ IV¹Lagaš^{ki}-ka-ke₄ ²dumu munus i₃-tu-da-a⁵ ³ba-gu₇ ⁴udu
gu₇-a ⁵en-ku₃ ⁶kurušda-kam 4

Obverse

I ¹4 fat ewes ²to Uu, ³the administrator, ⁴for eating ⁵slaughtered, ⁶1 fattened ewe ⁷for the
ensi, ⁸(when) into “the women's house” ⁹it was delivered, ¹⁰to the kitchen II ¹donated,
²¹doe kid, ³¹lamb ⁴for the second time ⁵to the kitchen ⁶donated. ⁷¹billy-goat ⁸Engilsa
⁹brought, ¹⁰¹ewe for Enentarzi, ¹¹¹ewe for Dudu III ¹on “the day of waning sun light”
²(they) ate. ³¹ewe to Ningirsu, ⁴¹ewe to Bau, ⁵¹kid to Šulšagan ... (lines 6–7 broken)

³ Lugalanda reigned approximately from 2324 to 2318 according to middle chronology. Texts speak of 7-year long term of this king's reign.

⁴ Exact pronunciation of her name is not certain: either Bau, or Baba. This goddess is related to the cult of the dead and the art of medicine [12, S. 37–38].

⁵ -a-a closing the syntagm i₃-tu-da-a is explained as the locative case functioning as a subordinating conjunction. The entire structure translates as “regarding (what)” or “in respect of (what)”. Here I translate as “on the occasion of (what)” followed by a gerundial construction.

Reverse

I (lines 1–2 broken) ³1 ewe to Eli, ⁴1 kid Me-Kulaba ⁵afterwards ⁶on “the bank of Bilgames” II ¹(they) ate. ²1 lamb ³to the palace kitchen ⁴was donated. ⁵1 kid Ur-Ezida, ⁶sanga-sacrificer of the palace, ⁷slaughtered, ⁷ate. ⁸1 kid Dimtur⁶, in order to slaughter (?) in the “outer city”, ⁹(in) E-mete ¹⁰(she) brought. III ¹In total: 1 ram, ²2 lambs, ³1 billy-goat, ⁴1 doe-kid, ⁵5 kids ⁶in the month of festival of Bau, ⁷(on the occasion of) Baranamtara, ⁸wife of Lugalanda, ⁹ensi of IV¹Lagash, ²giving birth to a daughter, ³were eaten. ⁴Eating of cattle. ⁵Tax collector. ⁶Cattle fattener. 4 (th year of Lugalanda)

The following lines possess specific significance for the topic under discussion:

Obverse

II¹⁰1 udu En-en₃-tar-zi ¹¹1 udu Du-du III ^{1d}Utu u₄ nu₂-a-ka ²ba-gu₇

Obverse

II ¹⁰1 ewe for Enentarzi, ¹¹1 ewe for Dudu III ¹on “the day of the waning sun light” ²(they) ate.

Reverse

III¹šu-niĝin₂ 1 udu nita ²2 sila₄ ³1 ud₅ ⁴1 munus aš₂-gar₃ ⁵5 maš ⁶iti ezem-^dBa-U₂-ka ⁷Bara₂-nam-tar-ra ⁸dam Lugal-an-da ⁹ensi₂ IV¹Lagaš^{ki}-ka-ke₄ ²dumu munus i₃-tu-da-a ³ba-gu₇

Reverse

III ¹In total: 1 ram, ²2 lambs, ³1 billy-goat, ⁴1 doe-kid, ⁵5 kids ⁶in the month of festival of Bau, ⁷(on the occasion of) Baranamtara, ⁸wife of Lugalanda, ⁹the 4th ensi of ¹Lagash, ²giving birth to a daughter, ³were eaten.

So, we know the exact day when Baranamtara’s daughter was delivered. Simply put, u₄ nu₂-a would have meant “on the day of waning (moon) light”, *i.e.* the 29th day of a lunar month [15, bd. I, S. 62]. However, the text in question states ^dUtu u₄ nu₂-a-ka “on “the day of the waning sun light” (literally, “on the day of the sun’s lying down”)⁷. From the testimony of the text entitled “Inanna and An” (early II millennium BC) it is well known that when Inanna saddles her scorpion the night becomes longer than the day.

29. ^{id}U₂[?]-la-a a nir a-ba-naĝ-a-ta

30. ^dInana-ke₄ ĝiri₂ im-ma-da-an-gu₄-ud kun-bi im-ma-da-/kud\

31. /ur-maĥ\ -gin₇ gu₃ mir-a ba-ni-in-ra za-pa-aĝ₂ mu-da-an-sed₄-e

32. [...] /KA?\ BA im-da-an-šub [...] X im-mi-in-ge-en

⁶ Dimtur is the wife of Enentarzi and the mother of Lugalanda.

⁷ G. Selz assumes here either an archaic spelling for the same u₄ nu₂-a, or a designation of the lunar eclipse [12, S. 105, Anm. 383]. His hypothesis, however, cannot be correct because sacrifices for this date were made in different years of Lugalanda’s reign (cf. note 7), while eclipses could not occur in the same month of the year for several years in a row. There is also the opinion of B. Jagersma, according to whom, this combination of signs translates as “during daylight (Utu) of the day of the moon’s disappearance” [16, p. 305]. But even B. Jagersma himself admits that to his knowledge no parallels to this time exist in other texts. For this reason his hypothesis remains as yet unconfirmed. Specifically important for us is the fact that in all known cases the moment of time ^dUtu u₄ nu₂-a-ka is related exclusively to the month of the festival of Bau.

29. In the river Ulaya having drunk clear water,
30. Inanna hopped astride a scorpion, severed its tail
31. Like unto a lion, it bellowed, (but) its cry was quenched.
32. [...] she threw, ...set.

6 lines are broken

38. [...] nin gal an-na-ke₄ inim-bi an-ra šu-a ba-an-/gi\
39. [an-ne₂] inim-bi ġiš ba-an-tuku-a-ta
40. [X X]-a ħaš₂-«bi»-ni bi₂-in-ra u₃¹-u₈¹ dug₄-ge bi₂-in-si
41. /dumu\-\ġu₁₀ a-na-am₃ bi₂-in-ak ġe₂₆-e bi₂-in-dirig-ga
42. [d]/Inana\ a-na-am₃ bi₂-in-ak ġe₂₆-e bi₂-in-dirig-ga
43. i₃-ne-eš₂-ta ud-da šid-bi ba-da-tur ud ġi₆-bi-a ba-da-bur₂
44. ud-da-ta en-nu-uġ₃-bi 3-am₃ ud ġi₆-bi-a ba-an-da-sa₂
45. [i₃-ne]-eš₂ ^dUtu e₃-a ne₃ ħe₂-en-na-nam

38. [...], great Mistress of the sky, related to An these words.
39. An, having heard that,
40. [Out of vexation] smote himself on his loins, moaning filled his voice:
41. «My child! What has she done? Surpassed me!
42. Inanna! What has she done? Surpassed me!
43. Now the number of the day shall diminish, the day shall be covered by night,
44. Since this day 3 watches, night equals day.
45. Now the rise of Utu is truly so!”

[17]

Based on the above it is permissible to assume that ^dUtu u₄ nu₂-a-ka is the day of autumnal equinox⁸. So, when was the onset of the month of festival of Bau? M. Cohen points out that in ancient Sumer it was either the 4th, or the 9th-12th month of the Lagash calendar [19, p. 38, 53–54]⁹. For the 3rd dynasty of Ur it was the 8th month of Lagash city calendar, corresponding to October-November of the Julian calendar [15, bd. I, S. 288–291], whereas in the Neo-Assyrian list collating city calendars “the month of the festival of Bau” matches the 7th month of Tašrītu in the Babylonian system (September-October), related to autumnal equinox of the 2nd and 1st millennia BC: ^{iti}[EZEN].^dBA. U₂ = ^{iti}Tašrītu (DU₆.KU₃) [20, tabl. 43, line 36; 21, p. 253]. In view of the necessity to take into account precession of equinoxes and a possibility of there being an inserted month of the first

⁸ It is also mentioned in two more tablets for the first and the third years of Lugalanda's reign [13, tabl. 222, Obv., col. I, line 10; 18, tabl. 58, Obv., col. I, line 10] and relates to gift offerings to Enentarzi and Dudu on behalf of Baranamtara in the month of the festival of Bau. In all three cases commemorative sites are mentioned. I cannot entirely rule out the assumption that ^dUtu u₄ nu₂-a-ka here has not only temporal but also spatial meaning, and is used to denote “the place where sunlight is weak”, i.e. as a euphemism for the realm of the dead. In this case autumnal equinox would be a *sui generis* entry point to the Underworld. For that reason sacrifices were made not only to the deceased ancestors, but also to the site of worshipping Gilgamesh, who was the superintendant of the Underworld.

⁹ It is perhaps necessary to bear in mind that Sumerian household texts distinguished between the administrative and the sacred calendars, which fact has long been known from the book of W. Sallaberger [15, bd. I, S. 142–143, 310]. The onset of the administrative new year could well not be the same as the start of the calendar year. The confusion with the month of the festival of Bau falling either in the middle or in the end of the year should be understood in the light of this variability in commencement of the administrative year. However, the sacred status of the month did not so vary, always being associated with the autumnal equinox.

half year, autumnal equinox in Sumerian time fell at the 7th or the 8th month, the time when the constellation of Scorpio ascended (which is also mentioned in the text quoted above). It means that Lugalanda and Baranamtara's daughter was born in October or early November at the time of Scorpio rising, which designated autumnal equinox in the 3rd millennium BC. This time was believed to be linked to the world of the dead (as darkness commenced its reign on earth) [22]. That was the reason for there being sacrifices to the deceased rulers of the city called Enentarzi and Dudu and the site of Gilgamesh worship (Rev. 1, 6 gu₂ d^dBil₃-aga₃-mes-ka "the bank of Bilgames"). On the occasion of the birth of the king's daughter a massive banquet for the king's retainers was held, of which the dead were also invited to partake. Though I regret the reality of not knowing the name of the new-born daughter. This is probably due a practice of not naming new-borns immediately upon delivery. A. Deimel is convinced that the baby referred to is Lugalanda's daughter known as Munus-saga [23, S. 126].

There exist two more tablets which hail from the time of Lugalanda's rule detailing sacrifices and feast menus related to the king's wife Baranamtara giving birth to a daughter. The tablets in question hail from the collection of N. P. Likhachev and are kept in the Hermitage Museum. Their copies were published by a pioneer Russian Assyriologist M. V. Nikolsky (Nik 1, 157; Nik 1, 209). One of the tablets contains no reference to the month of birth, while the other one speaks of the same month in which the festival of Bau was observed. There is a possibility that in both latter instances the baby being mentioned is identical to the king's daughter referred to in the tablet DP 218 described above.

Erm 14157 (Nik 1,157)

Obverse

I¹1 udu nita ²maš-da-re-a ³dam lu₂ ma₂-lah₅-ka-kam ⁴U₂-U₂ ⁵ugula ⁶niĝ₂-gu₇-de₃ ⁷ba-de₆ II¹1 udu nita ²Igi-mu-an-še₃-ĝal₂ ³dub-sar E₂-ša₃-ga-ka-kam ⁴1 udu Ama-nagar ⁵dam ga:eš₈-ka-kam

Reverse

I¹Lugal-he₂ ²ar₃-du₂ E₂-ša₃-ga-ke₄ ³niĝ₂-gu₇-de₃ ⁴ba-ra ⁵gu₇-a ⁶en-ku₃ II¹kurušda ²maš-da-re-a ³Bara₂-nam-tar-ra ⁴dumu munus i₃-tu-da-a ⁵e₂-gal-še₃ III¹mu-na-ku_x(DU)-re₆-na-kam 4

Obverse

I¹1 ram ²as a gift ³to the wife of the shipbuilder ⁴Uu, ⁵the administrator, ⁶as food ⁷brought.
II ¹1 ram ²to Igmuanšegal, ³a scribe of Ešaga, ⁴1 ewe to Amanagar, ⁵wife of a merchant,

Reverse

I ¹Lugalhe, ²a slave of Ešaga, ³as food ⁴slaughtered. ⁵Feeding. ⁶Tax collector, II cattle fattener ²gifts ³(on the occasion of) Baranamtara ⁴giving birth to a daughter, ⁵into the palace III ¹(they) brought. 4 (th year of Lugalanda)

[24, tabl. 157]

Here, as we can clearly see, neither the month nor the day is mentioned. What is spoken of, however, is the presents to certain women, who have something to do with the queen's labour and delivery. Also mentioned is a scribe of Ešaga (the inner House).

Obverse

I¹ Igu₄ amar sig² maš-da-re-a³ Ur-šu-ga-lam-ma⁴ sagi-maḥ-kam II¹ Bara₂-nam-tar-ra² dumu munus i₃-tu-da-a³ mu-na-ku_x(DU)⁴ iti ezem-^(d) Ba-U₂-ka

Reverse

I¹ En-ig-gal² nu-banda³ za₃ bi₂-šu₄⁴ Ur-^(d) Dumu-zi⁵ sipa amar ru-ga-ke₄ II¹ ba-gar₄

Obverse

I¹ lean¹⁰ calf² as a gift to³ Uršugalama, ⁴the senior wine steward, II¹(on the occasion of) Baranamtara² giving birth to a daughter, ³brought in. ⁴The month of the festival of Bau.

Reverse

I¹ Eniggal, ²a nubanda, ³put a stamp on (?), ⁴Ur-Dumuzi, ⁵a shepherd (of) calves, II¹ delivered. ⁴(th year of Lugalanda)

[24, tabl. 209]

The senior wine steward brings an offering of a lean calf, the animal is not fattened of well fed. The calf is taken from the herd of the shepherd Ur-Dumuzi. The herd, evidently, belongs to the temple. The officer (nubanda) Eniggal does something to the calf. The verb za₃-šu₄ is not referenced in syllabaries: za₃ “edge”, šu₄ “cover”. It is possible that the officer brands the calf. On the whole one may say that the calf is dressed to marketable quality following which the shepherd delivers the calf to the recently delivered woman. The month of the festival of Bau is mentioned, similarly to DP 218, while the day is not.

However, the tablet DP 219, kept in the Louvre, warrants a much greater interest. I shall quote it here completely:

Obverse

I¹ I udu nita² Bara₂-ir-nun³ dam Al-la⁴ tug₂-du₈-a-ke₄⁵ dumu i₃-tu-da-a II¹ iti ezem^d Lugal-uru₁₁^{ki}-ka til-la-ba² e₂-muḥaldim-ma ba-na-sa₆³ udu gu₇-a

Reverse

I¹ en-ku₃² kurušda-kam₄

Obverse

I¹ ram²(on the occasion of) Barairnun, ³wife of Alla, ⁴fuller (of felt hats), ⁵giving birth to a son, II¹ in the month of the festival of Lugal-uru at the end thereof² To the (palace) kitchen is donated. ³Eating of cattle.

Reverse

I¹ Tax collector, ²cattle fattener. ⁴(th year of Lugalanda)
[13, tabl. 219]

¹⁰ amar-sig. It is probable that *sig* here may denote “clean” (similar to a-sig-ga “clean water”). In this case the meaning would be “a calf without mark or blemish”. However, this meaning of the root *sig* is encountered first only in Old Babylonian texts. The older language testimony only has this word as meaning “weak, lean, sickly”.

The child was delivered not by the king's wife but by the wife of the fuller of the king's head-dress. Some texts refer to Barairnun as a *lukur*-priestess. There is also a possibility that she was a sister to king Lugalanda himself (DP 134 III 3–4) [25]. Notably, she gave birth to a male child, and it was on that occasion that the palace kitchen, responsible for providing the king's nourishment, received a ram. We are informed also of the month when that nameless boy was born. Lugal-uru(b) "king of the city" is an epithet for god Dumuzi. In the calendar of Lugalanda's epoch it is the tenth month (December-January) [19, p. 55–56]. It is stated that the birth occurred in the end of that month. The day of sacrifice is not known.

There exists one more tablet of the 4th year of Lugalanda, in which it says that a certain woman gave birth to a son (munus-e dumu i₃-tu-da-a). It contains no reference to either dates of sacrifices or to feast rations. What is really peculiar, however, is that it does not name even the recently delivered woman, let alone the name of her husband. Tablet ref. TSA 45 is kept in Brussels, in the Royal Museum of Arts and History:

Obverse

I¹2 sa₂-du₁₁ kas sig₁₅ ²imgaga₃-bi 4(ban₂) ³še-bi 1(barig) 3(ban₂) 2 (diš) sila₃ ⁴sa₂-du₁₁ gu-la ⁵a-ra₂ 2 (diš)-am₆ ⁶e-da-ru II¹8 gur₄-gur₄ kas ġe₆ ²imgaga₃-bi 3 (ban₂) ³ninda kum₄-ma-bi 3 (ban₂) ⁴bappir₃-bi 4(ban₂) ⁵munu₄-bi 1(barig) ⁶a-ra₂ 2 (diš)-am₆

Reverse

I¹₃-ku_x(DU) II¹šū-niġin₂ 1(barig) 1(ban₂) imgaga₃ ²1 4 (diš) sila₃ še gur saġal ³munus-e dumu i₃-tu-da-a III¹e₂-gal-la ²ba-ku_x(DU) ³gu₇-a ⁴amar-giri₁₆ ⁵[u₂]¹lunga_x 4

Obverse

I¹2 libations of the best beer, ²emmer wheat 4 bans (= 40 l), ³barley 1 bariga (= 60 l), 3 bans (= 30 l), 2 litres — ⁴the great offering, ⁵multiplied by two, ⁶was made. II ¹8 pitchers of dark beer, ²emmer wheat 3 bans (= 30 l), ³hot bread 3 bans (= 30 l), ⁴beer 4 bans (= 40 l), ⁵malt 1 bariga (= 60 l), ⁶multiplied by two,

Reverse

I¹were brought in. II¹In total: 1 bariga 1 ban (= 70 l) of emmer wheat, ²1 x 240 litres, gursagga¹¹ of barley ³(on the occasion of) a woman giving birth to a son, III¹to the palace ²were brought. ³Feeding. ⁴Amar-girid, ⁵brewer. 4(th year of Lugalanda).

[26, tabl. 45]

What are then the main considerations that the documents mentioning human births point to?

1. Those documents were all put down exclusively during the reign of Lugalanda.
2. Sacrifices were made both to the living, and to the dead. In contrast to the Romans, recipients of sacrifices were not spirits associated with people's births (although they existed with the Ancient Sumerians), but the ancestors of the new-born's father. Tentatively, one might say it points in the direction of a belief, that the dead, when fed, would assist their progeny in coming into the world.
3. Birthdays of royal children, and of those born to the courtiers, were celebrated.

¹¹ 1 gursagga = 240 l of barley.

Under the 3rd dynasty of Ur a few texts, having their origins in Umma, were recorded, which deal with offerings to recently delivered women of royal stock. Those offerings, however, were made outside the time of festivities and did not concern the dead ancestors. Rather, they were intended only for the recently delivered woman herself, as well as for her husband. For instance, in MVN 2, 317 goats and sheep are offered to the daughter and the son-in-law of king Shulgi in the end of the year on the occasion of Ninturtur giving birth to a boy. What is more, the offerings are brought not to a temple but to the place where a baby was born (ki Nin₉-tur-tur-še₃). Incidentally, the text ref. MVN 16, 960 speaks of bringing vestments to the place where the wife of Shu-Suen, queen Kubatum, also gave birth to a boy. The sacrifices were made in the month of the festival of Ninazu. Gifts, marking births of children, in those times were designated with a special term *igi-kar₂* “supplies” [27, p. 133].

Unfortunately, household texts constitute the only source from which any information on the matter can be gleaned. Not a single royal inscription or a legal document contains any information on the time when people were born. We have no knowledge of a person’s exact age, including the ages of rulers of ancient Mesopotamia. Since late 4th century BC it was customary for cuneiform texts to mark nothing but the social age. People were divided into babies whom as yet it was not possible to wean, young children, youths, mature men and elders. Thereat men and women were counted separately, the latter never being referred to as “people” [28].

Exact age in household texts is mentioned only for livestock cattle and beasts of burden. For example, a yearling donkey, bull, cow or ewe were different to a three-year old animal in terms of their working and breeding capacities. Births of livestock were categorized into seasons (“spring ewe”, “summer ewe”, *etc.*). No such significance was ever accorded to the age of people, inasmuch as human beings living in a community were not looked upon as being unique individuals¹². Human purpose in life from the point of view espoused by Sumero-Akkadian religion consisted in working for gods, while caring for one’s family was considered a second priority [30]. Both kings and common folk were made equal by their shared final destination in the afterlife — the dark and hungry abode of the Underworld where their relatives were expected to send them food. That is to say, the world outlook of the ancient Sumerians and the Babylonians never warranted any pretext whatsoever whereby birthdays should be celebrated. A really curious phenomenon which so far has not been fully elucidated is the mentioning of the birthday of *asakku*-demons. Even the date of their birth is known — the 21st day of the winter month of Kislimu (November-December), which in Sumerian beliefs was associated with the god of darkness and death Nergal entering the earthly realms [31, p. 112–117]. Thus, in the Sumerian epic “Ninurta and Asag” (not earlier than the 22nd century BC) it says:

u₄ tu-da A₂-sag₃ u₄ ha-lam-ma-bi-a ba-ni-ib-ĝa₂-ĝa₂-ne
 “Birthday of Asag they established as being the day of catastrophe”.
 [32, line 105]

¹² A question arises as to the manner in which people of that time measured their age. In Assyrian studies there is still no answer to this question. Individual age reckoning might have been performed by means of counting days starting with the day of the new year, which was celebrated in spring. There is only one text known to us which enumerates notable dates of human life and their religious significance [29, tabl. 400]. That text, however, was put down in Assyria in the end of 8th century BC and does not mention the way personal age was counted.

The inscription of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681–669) is even more unequivocal: “The 21st day of Kislimu is the fell day of birth of *asakku*-demons” (*ūmu lemnu illiti asakki*) [33, vol. A 2, p. 326]¹³.

Thus, one can know the day of demons’ birth, yet this is more than can be said for people. While the phrase *u₄ tu-da* meaning “birthday” is well-documented in Sumerian texts, its use was confined to rhetorical embellishments of hymns and royal letters, for instance: *u₄ tu-da-mu-ta^dUtu-ra u₃-ne-du₁₁ nam-sipa kalam-ma-ni ma-an-šum* “Since the day of my birth, when you spoke to Utu (and) he granted me ministry (over) his country...” [35] (letter of Sin-Iddinam, the King of Larsa, to goddess Ninisina). So, it appears that Lugalanda’s tablets represent an exception to the pan-Sumerian custom of not paying attention to dates of individual biography.

What then can be said about the character of Lugalanda? Every person, who somehow happened to be studying for their exam in Ancient Oriental History during their first year in college should remember that he was that selfsame unhinged, unkind and corrupt individual, who, as far as we can tell from the testimony of clay cones of Urukagina, the one to succeed Lugalanda as king, installed administrators over craftsmen, confiscated temple lands to make it a property of his own family and increased the funeral tax. During the reign of Lugalanda there was an upsurge in corruption and sharp practice perpetrated by rich and powerful people, the priests of the temple of Bau came to play the leading role in the city policy [36, p. 190–191], social stratification, discrimination and egocentricity were on the rise [37]. It is peculiar enough that it was in those years, rife with social inequality, that we notice the sudden heightening of the interest to individual birthdays.

Let us now venture to understand why it was specifically during the reign of Lugalanda that they began to put down birth dates of children born to the royal household in routine documents from the archives of the temple of Bau. First, let me refer the reader to the only inscription of this king on a brick from Girsu, preserved at the Istanbul Museum (EŞEM 6402). The author of the inscription is not certain as the inception and several more lines are spalled off. However, the text is concluded with the full name of the ruler, being Lugalanda-nuhunga (“King, who has not rested with An”, *i.e.* “king, who has taken constant care of An”). Until quite recently the inscription in question has been attributed to Urukagina (Ukg. 9) and, I might add, for no obvious reasons. Urukagina clearly had no point in glorifying his predecessor who had been supplanted by disgruntled townspeople. Currently, it has to be assumed, in line with the opinion voiced by D. Frayne, that this text belongs to a brief corpus of sources written in the time of Lugalanda:

I¹[...La]gash, ²chosen by the heart ³of Nanshe, ⁴endowed with the scepter ⁵of Ningirsu, ⁶the child, begotten of ⁷Bau II ¹[...] Lagash, ²to his beloved king ³Ningirsu, ⁴a stele ⁵erected, ⁶“Ningirsu — en, from Nippur for long years exalted” — ⁷[gave it the name], III¹ [his] statue ²created, ³“Lugalanda-nuhunga, with Girnun not [weary]” — ⁴[gave] it a name.

[38, p. 242–243]

¹³ In a recent publication which deals with this problem an opinion was voiced according to which Esarhaddon saw himself as Nergal, the ruler of the month of Kislimu, who had embarked on a military campaign against an enemy, whom he equated with *asakku*-demons [34, p. 55]. However, there is no reasonable ground for splitting the month and the day into the king and his enemy.

Paramount importance and singularity in the history of Sumer is ascribed to the epithet *dumu-tu-da-dBa-U₂* “a son begotten of Bau” (I 6–7). This phrase alone is enough to divert the provenance of the text from Urukagina, in view of the fact that there is not a single incidence of these words appearing anywhere else in the numerous corpus of inscriptions attributable to Lugalanda’s successor. It stands to reason to assume now that Lugalanda officially considered himself a son of goddess Bau. Now let me adduce a few more facts. Property of the temple of Bau in the time of Lugalanda and his spouse Baranamtara in a large selection of texts (73 instances of its use in the DP) is referred to as *u₂-rum Lugal-an-da* “possessions of Lugalanda”, *u₂-rum Bara-nam-tar-ra* “possessions of Baranamtara”. Lugalanda’s daughters were named Geme Bau “Slave of Bau” and Munus-saga “Beautiful Woman” (an epithet for Bau), and likewise owned a certain share of the temple property (*u₂-rum*). The temple *de facto* came into possession of the ensi’s family. Conversely, all children born in this family came to be regarded as an increase in the family of the goddess. When either Baranamtara or her female relative gave births, those occasions were seen as births of grandchildren to goddess Bau, in both ritual and economic terms. Hence, there was the necessity to celebrate and commemorate those births on the overall temple level¹⁴. Hence also, is the sharing of the meal with the deceased ancestors, who were seen as not only the earthly relatives to the king and the queen, but also as the sacred relatives of Bau. Now the entire situation can be explained. Until the temple with all its property entered into possession of the ensi’s family there had been no point in marking births on the temple level. Correspondingly, as soon as the priesthood of the temple were reinstated as possessors of its property (which happened, judging by the testimony of the clay cones and tablets, already at the early stage of Urukagina’s reign) records of births ceased.

Collating the testimony of Lugalanda’s tablets with that of private horoscopes of the 5th-3rd centuries BC leads to an unequivocal conclusion that growth of private property and rampant egocentricity in society warranted increased interest to a person’s individual destiny. By way of contrast, predominance of communal spirit acted as an overall leveller, whereby facts of individual biographies lost their value. It is for that reason that today it is quite difficult to know anything about births of even the greatest thinkers, whereas the horoscope of Proclus, compiled in Late Antiquity, when the interest to the private life of an individual was on the rise, has been preserved until the present day [39].

To conclude, we have established the first instance of a person’s birthday being mentioned in history. It has also become clear that the occasion of birth was celebrated with sacrifices of animals which the living shared with the dead. However, we have not yet seen any texts where a celebration of someone’s birthday would recur following many years after the actual birth. Such celebrations might have, indeed, taken place but so far the texts have remained silent. So, when did recurrent commemorative celebrations of birthdays begin? In the 5th century BC, as described by Herodotus, or in the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, as we have just been able to establish based on the testimony of Sumerian

¹⁴ I received intelligence from a specialist on Pompeii, Y. Uletova, informing me that October-November in the calendar of the ancient Greeks was the time of the festival of Apaturia, during which fathers introduced their new-born babies to their phratries. Each child warranted a sacrifice of a ewe or a goat. This calendar synchronicity of antiquity is perhaps unrelated to the Sumerian texts under consideration. But if one were to assume that the Sumerians had something similar, then it is not impossible that the Festival of Bau was an occasion to present the new-borns to the public. I am indebted to Y. Uletova for this valuable information.

clay tablets. Or might it have been the case that birthdays were celebrated even earlier, prior to emergence of writing? Only one thing can be established with certainty — the day of birth is something that clearly sets one person apart from the other. This difference evokes a sensation of joy. However, when a society is governed by the communal spirit a person would do better if he or she were more similar to every other member of that society. As soon as the next epoch of shedding communal ideas ensues and the role played by the individual in history acquires larger importance, one's birthday becomes a landmark of personal existence and a cornerstone of individual success. That is the reason why the interest to birthdays in history is a vacillating phenomenon, intermittently acquiring or losing its historical relevance.

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Емельянов Владимир Владимирович — доктор философских наук, кандидат исторических наук, banshur69@gmail.com

Emelianov Vladimir V. — PhD (History), Dr. Sci. (Philosophy); banshur69@gmail.com