ASPECTS OF SUMERIAN CIVILISATION AS EVIDENCED ON TABLETS IN THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY.

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I. ABOUT BUILDING IN UR III.

A YEAR ago there was published a Catalogue of the Sumerian tablets which belong to the John Rylands Library. The primary purpose of the Librarian and the author was to put the material, about 900 tablets, at the disposal of students of Sumerian language and civilisation. In accordance with that admittedly narrow purpose, the volume contained nothing more than hand copies of the more important tablets and a transliteration of the remainder, with indices of names, of deities, persons and places.

It has since been suggested that readers of the BULLETIN would like to know what the tablets say. To meet this, at least in part, it is proposed to publish in the BULLETIN occasional articles based on the Rylands material. The method will be to select those tablets which are concerned exclusively with, or which contain references to some aspect of Sumerian life and custom and by co-ordination of that material with data scattered in other tablets of the same kind and date to present a substantially complete picture of that aspect or custom, as far as our tablets reveal it.

We may recall that the Rylands collection is typical of the written material of the Third Dynasty of Ur, circa 2300 B.C., discovered in the Sumerian towns of Lagash, Nippur, Adab, Umma and Drehem; all in the south extreme of the Tigris and Euphrates valley either on the Euphrates or on some river or canal leading from it. It is not a religious literature; it is a business literature: records of income, of expenditure, of work done on canal, in field or in temple. Actually no specially religious
piece from this area, dating from the hundred and eight years of the Third Dynasty of Ur, has ever been published. The con-
temporary records contain many references to local worship, temple ministers and religious calendar, as varied as at any time in the history of Babylon and Assyria, but never a word of the hymns sung or prayers said at feast or ceremony. So many tablets of that age have been found in towns scattered across Sumer that one can safely assert that purely religious literature was not written down at this date. The earliest religious texts proper belong to the age immediately succeeding Ur III. During Ur III the scribes' business was to record the daily labour neces-
sary to life in that land of river and desert and swamp.

Life in the third millennium B.C. in Sumer was not the life of primitives. Written remains as well as relics found, e.g. at Ur, have proved that. But though not primitive yet it was primary, i.e. it was concerned chiefly with the production and distribution of primary things, the essentials of living: food, clothing, and shelter. The matter of every tablet of the sort contained in the Rylands collection is referable to one or other of these primaries. With this difference as between town and town: the tablets from Lagash and from Ummu record a di-
versified business and cover most if not all departments of the external life of the people; whereas the tablets from Drehem contain hardly anything about agriculture, which occupies so much of the Umma material, but are almost exclusively con-
cerned with animals, as though Drehem were, as has been sug-
gested, nothing more than a huge animal park or preserve on which animals were born, reared and eventually distributed to serve the needs of private persons and of worship in local or national temples. But in every town of which we have contemporary record the main business entered up in the records was in primaries.

The Land of Sumer whence these tablets derive is land recovered from the waters of the Persian Gulf. The rivers Euphrates and Tigris, reinforced by rivers from Persia, deposit their burden of silt into the nearest waters of the Gulf and forming a bar attack, invade and advance leaving behind mud flats, marshes and lagoons. From land of such physical
nature the inhabitants had to derive the raw materials of life: stuff for food, for clothing, for shelter. In this short article we shall set out such information contained in the Rylands collection as bears on shelter, building; with relevant references to material of the same date published elsewhere.

The Sumerians built with clay of which there was an abundance to hand. Some of their buildings have survived to this day and have been uncovered by excavation. They may be studied in detail in the reports of expeditions, especially of those conducted by Mr. Woolley who has directed the ten years’ excavations at Ur. From those reports it is known that stone was used, though stone is not native to the place; but it was used only in the more important buildings, temples and palaces; and even then in small proportions because it had to be imported. Stone was never, I think, used in the construction of private houses. The staple material in all buildings was brick made out of earth mixed with water. We have a little of the language of brick making as early as the middle of the third millennium B.C. “He made a brick mould; he shaped the vessel of the brick mould; he engraved the brick stamp; he took the clay from a clean place; he made the bricks in a pure place.”¹ But from excavations we know that bricks were in use before the First Dynasty of Ur,² say 3000 B.C.

In Mr. Woolley’s reports the bricks used at the various periods are described in their varied sizes, shapes and qualities. Early bricks are cushioned shaped; later ones square and flat. A very primitive type of bricks measure 0·23 m. by 0·135 m.;³ in the Isin-Larsa period they are larger: 0·27 by 0·18 m.⁴ The qualities are described as “crude,” “poor,” “very fine and hard”; “unbaked”; “lightly fired”; “kiln burnt.” The colours are “red,” “grey,” “chocolate brown,” “pale.” The bricks were baked in ovens or, less durably, in the sun, to save them from corrosion in rain and storm.

References to bricks are rare on the tablets of Ur III. On the tablets of the Rylands collection the only reference to bricks

¹ Gudea Statue C, 2: 20 f. SAKI, p. 76.
³ Ibid, p. 394; “0·23 m. by 0·135 m.” characteristic of Ur I.
⁴ Ibid, p. 387.
is in a month name of the Umma calendar. The second month is called *itu giš i-šub ba-gar*. This is the later Siwan which was the month in which people made their houses. Siwan is our May/June and so a hot month, a suitable season for baking clay and for building. The Sumerian month name means: the month when bricks (?) brick moulds) were made. A very interesting Ur III reference to bricks is to 20 sar (a sar was about 35½ square metres) of bricks for the temple foundation of the temple of Ninurra. Another tablet mentions along with other items, 15½ sar of bricks, apparently in connection with the building of Anzakar, i.e. *dimtu*, a sort of watch tower. Incidentally we may note that a Rylands tablet speaks of sheep of various sorts in connection with the *é-rim*, i.e. the couriers' quarters, of the Anzakar of the river of Girsu. Girsu was a part of the city of Lagash.

The bricks employed in public and private buildings were set usually in mud, less frequently in bitumen. Bitumen was used as mortar "only in important public buildings." Lime came into use at Ur much later. Bitumen served as covering for brick walls and steps, and for wooden coffin lids; as lining of troughs, tanks and pits; as proofing of floors; as filling, e.g. of the copper-bull's head; as basis on which a mosaic design was worked or as coating of wood over which a thin sheet of gold was hammered.

Bitumen (Sumerian *esir*) is an item on several Rylands tablets; as *esir-é-a*, i.e. bitumen for building; as *esir-ud* white (?) bitumen; and as *igi-esir*, i.e. asphalt. The unit of measurement of *esir-é-a* is the *gur*, a measure of grain, oils, and beer. The unit of measure of *esir-ud* and of *igi-esir* is the mina, shekel, etc., as for the silver and metals generally. From this it would appear that we have bitumen in softer and more solid states.

1 JR. 743; Bedale STU, 23.
2 JR. 783: 7.
8 Keiser, *ibid.*, no. 230.
9 Jr. 561:1; 562:1; 563:2.
10 JR. 560:2.
The precise destiny of the bitumen is not usually recorded. So on the John Rylands tablets. But one Ur III tablet \(^1\) records esir-é-a for the house of libations for the deified king Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Another tablet \(^2\) associates bitumen of the é-a, ud and gul, gul sort, sesame and swine fat with the building of a temple é-dir. Parenthetically we may add that Gudea of Lagash anointed the foundation stone of the temple of Innana at Lagash with oil. \(^3\)

An interesting tablet \(^4\) of this period gives us the account of a merchant. From it we can estimate the value in silver of esir-é-a relative to other commodities in the sixth year of the reign of Bur Sin. One gur of esir-é-a has a value of 2 shekels (on the basis of col. 5 line 13 where 1/5 (gur) esir-e-a, kù-bi 1/3 gín 12 še; and col. 2 : 28; col. 3 : 21; col. 4 : 2; col. 5 : 1); but dates had a value of 2/3 of a shekel per gur, barley 1 1/3 shekel per gur, soap 1/4 of a shekel per gur; šeli-, an unidentified ingredient of good oil, about 150 shekel per gur; and a black ointment (šim-gig) 1/3 of a mina. So that esir-é-a was then worth more than dates, barley, or soap; but much less than the oil ingredient or the salve.

Whence did the Sumerians get this bitumen? Gudea's reference to Magda, the mountain of the men who work (?) “asphalt” is, to us, vague. An Ur III text refers to various kinds of esir as of coming from Ma-da-ga. Is this the Magda of Gudea? \(^5\) But we do know that bitumen abounds in Hit, “the mouth of hell” as the natives have called it, on the Euphrates above Babylon, and accessible to the people of Sumer. Peters \(^6\) gives the following interesting description of Hit. “It is on a hill, or rather a line of hills running along the Euphrates. . . . Behind it and around it is quite a large plain, partly sandy, partly rocky, and partly muddy. Down this plain flow several streams of bitter water from various bitumen springs.

\(^1\) Schneider, Montserrat Coll., Analecta Orientalia, 7; 1932; no. 146.
\(^3\) Gudea Statue C, 3 : 8. SAKI, p. 76.
\(^4\) Chiera, Selected Temple Accounts, no. 23.
\(^5\) Gudea Statue B, 6 : 51-54. SAKI, p. 70. Chiera STA, no. 11, col. 3, 18.
\(^6\) Nippur, First Campaign, pp. 159-163.
Directly behind the town are two springs within thirty feet of one another, from one of which flows hot water, black with bitumen, while the other discharges intermittently bitumen, or, after a rain-storm, bitumen and cold water. The latter is the source of the bitumen of commerce of a great part of Babylonia. . . . Where rocks crop out in the plain about Hit, they are full of seams of bitumen, and one observes the same seams on the face of the buffs on the edge of the plateau. The rock in which these veins occur is gypsum. . . . Herodotus calls the town Is and says, speaking of the building of Nebuchadrezzar’s great quays at Babylon: ‘The bitumen used in the work was brought to Babylon from Is, a small stream which flows into the Euphrates at the point where the city of the same name stands, eight days’ journey from Babylon. Lumps of bitumen are found in great abundance in this river.’”

Houses and temples were called é; i.e. house. The word might be qualified by the addition of the name of a deity, of a person, of a profession or title, or of an animal. We shall concern ourselves here only with private houses. There is first the house of the king. Besides the palace (é-gal, the great house) there was a ‘house of the king’ (é-lugal), probably a residence smaller and more private than the great house. In connection with the king’s house we read on a Rylands tablet of the “wood or forest (tir) of the king’s house” from which come ten wooden instruments (giš ri) for the má-lal-a, a sailing vessel. A royal park or wood is mentioned elsewhere during Bur Sin’s time. On one Rylands tablet we find mention of a house belonging to Meisdar, a son of the king. Two oxen and one he-goat were despatched to this house and expended in Ur, the royal city and the capital of the kingdom of Ur. This royal personage, Meisdar, is not otherwise known to us. He is called simply “son of the King.” The king is not named and the date of the tablet is of itself indecisive, for the date formula occurs both as a date in the reign of Šulgi and of his successor Bur Sin, so that it is doubtful whether Meisdar was the son of Šulgi or of Bur Sin. If he was the son of Šulgi he is the fifth son of whom we

1 JR. 593.
2 Contenau TEU, 6674, vii, 18; Schneider GDD, 382 : 48.
3 JR. 470.
have record. If he was the son of Bur Sin he is the eighth son of Bur Sin known to us.

In each city other than the royal city, there was a chief official, the patesi. We read on a Rylands tablet of a dyed garment (tug-muh) in connection with the house of the patesi of Unima. Another tablet, in the Bedale group, refers to barley from the patesi's house, as food for sheep.

We know that slaves could and did have their own separate dwellings. But actually there is only one text of Ur III that refers to a slave's house and this was the slave of the patesi. It is recorded that barley came from this slave's house as offerings for Šulgi the divinised second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

Already we have mentioned a text which mentions the house or quarters of the couriers (ē-rim). Another Rylands tablet mentions the house of builders. "Šesani builder, from the month murub to the month dir, present at the house of builders (ē-dim), when (whilst) the temple of Sara was (being) built." This same Šesani the builder, is described elsewhere as a builder, again in connection with the temple of Sara, the chief god at Umma.

The word which we have translated builder is dim, maker, constructor. Of the hundreds of persons mentioned on Ur III tablets, very very few are described as dim. I should say not more than twenty or twenty-five. This suggests that builders were not a special class. Men might be grouped together as dim for a special occasion: pressed into service for a special work. But it may be that most of the male inhabitants could build, and that then as now a man who wished to set up house built his own; a state of affairs fairly common in our own country until recently. It seems likely that a Sumerian was competent to carry through the whole process from brick making to brick setting. Occasionally, indeed very occasionally, Ur III records refer to "the house of" so-and-so. But all the information we are vouchsafed is that something is destined for a house or has been taken from it; e.g. dates for the house of Lubanda;

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1 JR. 601, Rev. 6. 2 Bedale STU, 5. 3 Contenau HEU, 94 : 3. 4 JR. 555. 5 Keiser STD, 176. 6 Schneider GDD, 475 : 2.
cows, sheep and goats returned to the house of Abbasaga; or barley from a house, as offerings, or as food for sheep; or sheep and goats from a house. Not very illuminating!

Number 359 of the Rylands collection is concerned with money for work on a building. It is a receipt for the balance of income, of 2/3 of a shekel for each piece of work involved in the construction of a house of the women’s quarters (é-dam), whose length is 1½ gar, i.e. about 9 metres, and its width ½ a gar, i.e. about 3 metres. The money is received from the ad-é official. The ad-é was a craftsman whose precise craft is uncertain. In one text he is a basket-maker; a worker who plaita reeds; and, as reeds were used in the making of boats, the ad-é, Semitic aduppu, had a hand in shipbuilding. Another Rylands tablet gives details of measurement of a door or, perhaps, merely a door panel. The tablet reads: “I ig giš-ù (?) gid-bi I ú 4[šu]-si damal-bi I ú, ki-Bu-ú-u-a-ta, E-la-ha qa-šu-du, šu-ba-ti, šu-ba-ti, E-la-ha qa-šu-du, šu-ba-ti, E-la-ha qa-šu-du.”

The material is some sort of cedar wood, perhaps; more fully written giš-ù-ku on another Rylands text. The measurements are small. 1 finger is little more than 1.65 cm.; and 1 cubit is about 49½ cm. These are probably not the measurements of a door but only of a part, such as a panel. On another Rylands tablet, there is mention of 2 giš ig har-ra, i.e. two doors, or panels, fashioned, shaped.

Finally, clay tablets served the purposes of our writing paper and also as our drawing paper on which was traced an outline of field or house with measurements written along the lines of the plan. Field plans were drawn for purposes of land division and were preserved for reference in case of dispute. But the purpose of house plans is not so clear. No doubt they might

1 Chiera, Cuneiform Bullae, 122 : 2; cp. Jean SA. XLII.
2 GDD, 159 : 2; 379 : 2; HEU, 94 : 3.
3 Bedale STU. 14.
4 Legrain TRU, 21 : 17.
5 Legrain TRU 389 is very like to the JR. tablet, but dated a year earlier.
6 Thureau-Dangin, Rituels Accadiens, p. 53, n. 54.
7 JR. 878.
8 JR. 587.
9 JR. 561 : 3.
serve as a guide in construction. But they are mere sketches, little more than an outline formed by the exterior walls. In the large mass of Ur III material only one house plan tablet has been published.¹ On the tablet there are three plans; two on the obverse and one on the reverse. The two on the obverse are adjoining; the one, belonging to Kilari, is 3½ gar 3 ú square, i.e. *circa* 18 metres square; the other belonging to Ḥunar is 2½ gar 1 ú, i.e. *circa* 15 metres, by 5 gar 3 ú, i.e. *circa* 30 metres, and annexed is a rectangle 1 gar 3 ú, i.e. 6 metres by ½ gar, i.e. less than 3 metres. On the reverse is a more complex plan with cross divisions and extensions, described as the house of Sarazida.

¹ GDD, 506.