

SOME ASPECTS OF KINGSHIP IN THE SUMERIAN CITY AND KINGDOM OF UR

By T. FISH, Ph.D.

PROFESSOR OF MESOPOTAMIAN STUDIES
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

THIS short article presents the results of an examination of a large body of material concerning kings of a particular area at a particular time. The area is the plain which stretches approximately from below Baghdad to the head of the Persian Gulf, which was not so far away then as it is now. The period is, approximately, 2070-1950 B.C. We call that area at that time "Sumer and Akkad". What we know of it is got partly from non-literary remains but chiefly from written documents, i.e. Royal Inscriptions, comparatively few in number, and the thousands of Records of Income and Expenditure which have been found at the cities of Lagash, Umma, Drehem, Nippur and at Ur, the seat of government of the five kings of the contemporary Third Dynasty of Ur, known as "Ur III". The evidence relating to kingship which these texts supply is, in respect of content and length of time, without parallel in any period, before or after Ur III, in ancient Mesopotamia. But it must be emphasised that it is evidence for kingship in one period and one area only, and must not be made the basis of theories as to kingship at other times and in other areas of the history of the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates.

Kingship ought not to be considered in isolation. It is but one element of community life. It is not its own explanation and justification. Like other social institutions, it is designed to meet some local situation. On a famous "King List" of Sumerian Kings it is said that "kingship came from heaven". If we ask why? we may have a clue to the answer in that other local belief that the gods made man to exploit the land for their benefit. Certainly the literary evidence, which we have in abundance from the 3rd millennium B.C., is almost entirely the record of such exploitation. Ur III documents afford us a

detailed picture of local communities *at work*, highly organised and specialised. They are records of social labour. They are not records of wars, and only by the way do they reveal the externals of the local religion.¹ They deal with fields and cereals, reeds and bricks, animals and their skins and fats, canals and boats, wool and weaving, wages and prices. The persons mentioned in the documents are almost exclusively those who are engaged in the labour or the direction of the labour needed to produce, manufacture, repair, transport and administer *things*. The conclusion seems to be imposed by the evidence: here we have a community, or a number of communities, primarily occupied, both physically and mentally, with the production mostly of necessities, rarely of luxuries.

To return to our question: why kings? One answer consonant with the evidence is this: the king was primarily head of the local labour force in the service of the gods. The *raison d'être* of kings was primarily economic. Time and again the documents which record the king's actions show him as builder and restorer of temples, digger of canals, builder of walls. A stela shows Ur-Nammu, the first of the five kings of Ur III, carrying on his shoulder the tools with which he will lay the foundations of the ziggurat.² This same king made a canal, about 27 miles long, by drawing off water from the great "fisherman's marsh". He says he "made Ur to be watered". He built a temple because drought had made irrigation and navigation impossible.³ Kings call themselves "nourishers" of their city, and king Bur Sin is named *engar*, irrigator, of the national

¹ Why local scribes did not write down specifically religious matter, such as hymns, myths, rituals, we do not know. What needs to be asked is why they did write down, in such detail and with such precision of dating of day, month and year, the local income and expenditure of material goods, and, what is more, stored the records in labelled boxes. Why this impressive book-keeping and filing? Because, it may be suggested here, living was precarious owing to flood, drought, disease; so much so that local officials had, as we say, to "watch every penny" of local income and expenditure, so that gods and men might have a sufficiency from local produce. These thousands of small but detailed records are the monuments of that ancient social poverty, the struggle to make ends meet.

² See the frontispiece to *The Sumerians*, by C. Leonard Woolley.

³ *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*, nos. 284 and 50.

god, Enlil.¹ The texts make it clear that kings knew how dependent were the gods on canals. The king Ur-nammu records that he dug "the canal of Ur" which he calls "the canal of the food-offerings" of Enlil, the national deity.² Such evidence suggests that the piety of kings, and of the people subject to them, consisted primarily in social labour which would secure food for the deities. It was this labour, it seems, which justified both king and citizen in the eyes of the gods whose temples were the chief land-owners in every city. Sumerian society, at this time, was a mutual aid society of gods and men. By combining forces both could be fed.

The view here submitted is not, in itself, inconsistent with the opinion widely held that the kings of Ur III were "priests"—not a well defined term! But were they? and in what sense and with what function? Were they, and, if they were, to what extent were they associated with the act and place of public cult? The texts of Ur III never tell us of any priestly activity of any king. They inform us merely that the king supplied gods and temples with animals and material goods. But so did commoners, though, since they were poorer, not so often and not so richly. The answer to our question, therefore, is not to be found in royal gifts to the gods and their "houses". Do the titles by which kings are described and which are usually translated "priest", supply the evidence we seek? These titles are: *en*, *sangu*, *ME*. Of these words, *sangu*, at this period, does not mean "priest". It is the word used to describe a very important administrator of temple property, perhaps a kind of chief accountant.³ The word *en* may connote a religious function, but this is not certain.⁴ In any case it is not used of Ur III kings, except Ur-Nammu who is called the *en* of Uruk and the *lugal* (king) of Ur, which is not very illuminating. The

¹ Legrain, *Les Temps des Rois d'Ur*, no. 324.

² *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*, nos. 45, 46.

³ Schneider who has made an exhaustive study of this term as used on Ur III texts, sums up: "keinerlei spezifisch priesterliche Funktionen vom *sangu* werden berichtet, weder Opferhandlungen, noch öffentliche Gebete noch sonstige Zeremonien aller Art" (*Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, vol. I, no. 2 (1947), p. 122).

⁴ In *Sumer*, vol. vii, No. 1 (1951), p. 59, M. Lambert translates *en* by "pontife". Why?

last of the three terms is *ME*. We read on a later, Larsa, text: "the *ME* who purifies the shrine of Eshébarra".¹ And on Ur III texts the fourth king of Ur III, Gimil Sin,² is called *ME an-na*, the *ME* of the god Anu, and Ibi Sin³ is called *nir-gal ME-níg-nam-ma* which Gadd would translate "prince of sublime power". Obviously there is not much to go on in these very scanty references of uncertain meaning. We can conclude that the evidence at our disposal does not justify us in describing any king of Ur III as "priest". Kings, of course, had a concern for cult, but beyond building and repairing temples and providing, "bringing", animals and produce for the deities, they appear to be no more "priests" than were the majority of their subjects. There is, in fact, a tradition regarding the greatest of Ur III kings, Shulgi, that he sinned by not performing the religious rites.⁴ This agrees with the contemporary evidence.⁵

It is customary to speak of the kings of Ur III as "gods" or as "divine". So they described themselves and so they were regarded by their subjects. The evidence adduced in support of this view is as follows. The sign for deity is written before their names; the names of the kings occur on lists of "offerings" together with the names of other deities;⁶ the names of kings form part of many personal names; the kings have feasts and shrines as deities have. This evidence is impressive but it must be taken together with other evidence of a negative sort. What is *not* said is also evidence towards understanding what the so-called "divinity" of kings implied.

First, we must distinguish between offerings, or rations, brought to the temples for gods and kings, and sacrifices. The most important of the latter is the sacrifice called *zur-ra* and

¹ CT. xxxvi, pl. 3. See also Contenau, *La Magie*, p. 105 f. Others would translate *ME* by "libator".

² *Yale Oriental Series*, I, no. 20.

³ *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*, no. 289, 35.

⁴ *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, Bd. 42 (1934), p. 53, lines 30-31.

⁵ Schneider is of the same opinion: *Die Vornahme von Kulthandlungen in ihrer engsten Bedeutung kam nur den verschiedenen Klassen von Priestern zu; der König war nicht dazu berechtigt* (*Analecta Orientalia* 45-46, p. 41).

⁶ Note that there is no record of "offerings" to Bur Sin or Gimil Sin on Lagash texts, none to Ibi Sin outside Ur, and none to Shulgi, Bur Sin or Gimil Sin at Ur.

níg-zur₇-ra. The cuneiform sign looks like a dish in which there is grain. Its Semitic equivalent means "to sacrifice" (*naqū*) or "to pray" (*karābu*) or "prayer" (*ikribu*), possibly because prayer accompanied the sacrifice. Another sacrificial term is *níg-gish-tag-ga*, a thing for slaughter. It is significant that nowhere is it recorded that either of these kinds of sacrifice was ever made to the kings, though they are both made to heavenly beings, and the king himself provides those beings with such sacrificial material. If, as it seems reasonable to argue, the most reliable test of divinity is not words or titles but action vis-à-vis the deity, then the omission of these sacrifices in what is called "the cult of the kings" is of the first importance.

Next, if *en* and *ME* are taken as priestly functionaries, then we never find any *en* or *ME* of kings, nor any *qashudu*, libator (?), whereas these functionaries are assigned to recognised deities.¹

What is even more difficult to reconcile with deity is the fact that kings made presents to deities and built them temples "for the king's own life", which can only mean for his preservation. Mortality was their lot, and after death they needed to be supplied with "offerings". In this they were like to their subjects but unlike their gods.²

It is against this background of practice that we must set the high-sounding titles used by the kings themselves or their subjects, such as "god of his land".³ They are not to be taken literally.

¹ The *qashudu* was an important official at Ur, and servant of the *en* of god Nannar (see Legrain, *Business Documents of Ur*, Catalogue to Text no. 155).

² To quote only texts from the capital city Ur, residence of kings, and therefore of particular importance, see *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*; for Ur Nammu, nos. 32, 34, 49; for Shulgi, no. 52; for Bur Sin, no. 67, and no. 71 says: "the days of Bur Sin shall be prolonged with it", i.e. the house *dublalmaḥ* which Bur Sin built; for Gimil Sin, *Yale Bab. Texts*, I, no. 20. Votive offerings by others "for the king's Life", *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*, nos. 48, 54, 85.

³ Used of Shulgi on an Ur text (no. 54) and one found at Susa (*Die Sumerischen und akkadischen Königsinschriften*, p. 194, y): of Bur Sin (CT. xxxvi, no. 114684); of Ibi Sin, *Royal Inscriptions from Ur*, nos. 86, 88, 96, on which Ibi Sin so styles himself, and is so styled by "his servant" the patesi of Nippur, no. 89, but on other texts his "servants" do not so style him, e.g. Ur texts nos. 90-93, 95. The patesi of Ur calls Gimil Sin "his god" (*Die sum. ũ. akk. K.*, p. 200, top). It is noteworthy that on seals found at Ur, Ibi Sin only is styled "god of his land", Legrain, *Business Documents from Ur*, nos. 41, 45, 52, 252, 254, 276, 1157, but on seals found in other cities none of the Ur III kings is so called.

We do not know in what circumstances or at what ceremony the title "god" (unless the sign means no more than "heavenly") was conferred on the king. A single text mentions Gimil Sin in the life of his predecessor, Bur Sin, and the name is written *without* the sign for deity.¹ It is remarkable that during the early days of the new reign texts from cities other than Ur do not date the first year of the reigns of Bur Sin, Gimil Sin and Ibi Sin by the usual formula "the year when the divine Bur Sin etc. became king", but by the formula "the year after" the event recorded in the last date formula of the previous king. But at Ur tablets dated in the first month of the new reign always bear the formula: the year when the divine Gimil Sin/Ibi/Sin became king.² It would therefore seem that in the capital city the sign for deity was written before the king's name from the very beginning of his reign, and in other cities not until later, possibly only after authorisation from the capital.

It is not clear what precisely Shulgi meant when he called the goddess of Ur, Ningal, his "mother",³ or Bur Sin when he called himself the beloved son of Nannar, the god of Ur,⁴ or Gimil Sin when he called the god Shara his "father". When, shortly before Ur III, Gudea of Lagash says that he is the "child born of" the goddess Gatumdug⁵ the verb used is that used also to express the making of a statue. So it may well be that the phrases used by the kings of Ur III which we have quoted mean no more than that the deities have made the king what he is, which is what earlier rulers were fond of stating in greater detail. But, whatever their precise meaning, all such titles and the beliefs associated with them gave to society a sanctified order personified in the king beloved by the gods.

The purpose of this article has been to convey something of what the contemporary texts reveal concerning the kings of Ur III. It may be that the kings did in fact all sorts of things

¹ Keiser, *Selected Temple Documents*, no. 246, 33, 6666.

² For Gimil Sin, Legrain, *Business Documents from Ur*, nos. 26, 75; for Ibi Sin, *ibid.*, nos. 361, 950, 1132. For texts from other sites, Schneider *Die Zeitbestimmungen* (*An. Or.* 13 (1936), pp. 24 ff.).

³ Text found at Susa, *Die sum. und akkad. K.*, p. 194 f.

⁴ CT. xxxv, I R.

⁵ *Die sum. und akkad. K.*, p. 66 b, 2, 16-17.

which were religious and that they were indeed, as common opinion would have it, before all else, "priests". But, it must be repeated, that there is no evidence whatsoever for such a view on the documents we possess at present.¹

¹ Old Testament students who have taken over the opinion that the kings were gods, are not to be blamed. Engnell quotes an acknowledged authority as saying: "However it may be explained, the difficult fact remains that the apotheosis of kings clearly replaced in importance the worship of the great gods for three centuries under the kings of Ur and Isin". In this article we have not been concerned with Isin, but we can say with confidence that, so far as Ur is concerned, there is no truth whatever in the statement quoted by Engnell in his *Studies in Divine Kingship*, p. 30.