

Stories from Sumer

A Praise song to King Šulgi (end III millennium BC)

I am Šulgi, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad



I do not flinch when a lion roars
I graduated in subtraction and addition
I am a heavenly star that never fades
I march at the head of my troops
I come first in the race
I am the best at playing the lyre
I can correct words of a foreigner in his own language
Utu, the sun god, is my brother and friend
I planted trees in the land

Let me boast of what I have done. The fame of my power is spread far and wide. My wisdom is complete.

A praise poem of Šulgi

To make his name famous for all time until distant days, King Šulgi, king of Ur, has praised his own strength and intelligence in songs.

(Here are the words of the king)

Let me boast of what I have done.

When I was small, I was at the **é.dub.ba**^{*}, where I learned the scribal art from the tablets of Sumer and Akkad. None could write on clay as I could. I graduated in subtraction, addition and accounting. The fair Nisaba^{**} provided me with all knowledge.

When I go to battle, I go ahead my troops. I like all weapons. I carry the spear, and I am skilled with a sling. The stones fly to the enemy like hail. I look to my brother and friend, Utu^{*}. I, Šulgi, converse with him and he stands by me in battles. I scatter the rebels like seed-grain. How could they resist my weapons?

I advance in majesty, capturing elephant after elephant, putting down the lions. I confront them only with my strength and my weapons, I do not flinch when they roar. I stretch the bowstring on the bow to shoot arrows at the great wild bull. No archer can surpass me. I am the most excellent fighter in the Land. Nothing resists me. I come first in the race, and my knees do not get tired. I am fearless.

I am the pure interpreter of omens^{*}. The words of the gods reveal how to perform the rites, when to attack or how to defeat the (foreign) lands. In extispicy^{*}, I never confuse a favourable sign with an unfavourable one. In the insides of just one sheep I, the king, can find the indications for everything and everywhere.

I, Šulgi, king of Ur, know everything about music. On the lyre I know the melodious tuning. I am familiar with drumming. I do not make the reed pipe sound like a rustic pipe. I bestow joy and happiness, and I pass my days in pomp and splendour.

I am a Sumerian, but I can hold a conversation with the men from the black mountains. No one switches to another language as quickly as I do. When I pronounce a verdict in all languages, it is heartily welcomed, since I am so wise. My assemblies^{*} sit together to care for the people, deliberate and debate. I triumph over a city with words as weapons, and my wisdom keeps it subjected just as violence would. The humble is important to me.

I have planted trees; I have built dams, ditches and canals. I have ensured surplus of oil and wool. Thanks to my efforts flax and barley are of the highest quality. I, Šulgi, am the life of Sumer.

In Ur, I built a House for Nisaba to write my hymns, in Nippur I established another. **É.dub.ba** is never to be altered; the places of learning shall never cease to exist.

No one can say that I lie in my songs. If it was the case, why should a singer put my achievements in songs? What is the use of writing if not to tell the truth? My songs are unforgettable. I am the best king of the Land. Even in the distant lands, where the Sumerians are not known, people will know and recite my songs.

It is good to praise me. Praise be to Nisaba^{*}.

Few notes to the text

From Hymn B to king Šulgi – original text is 385 lines long. This version is based upon ETCSL translation by J. Black and G. Cunningham ([The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature \(ox.ac.uk\)](http://www.ox.ac.uk))

* **Edubba**, literally, the “House of Tablet” is the school in Ancient Sumer, where young scribes learn to read and write cuneiform as well as mathematics, the “scribal art”.

* **Nisaba** is the goddess of writing and scribes.

* **Utu** is the sun god and the son of Nanna-Su'en, the moon god. Šulgi regards himself as the (adoptive) son of the moon god so that Utu is his ‘brother’.

* **Omens and divination** are essential in Ancient Sumer; signs from the gods were everywhere and guided the Sumerians in every aspect of their life. Diviners were the only qualified to interpret the signs, so Šulgi’s talent is extraordinary (and underlines his close relationship with the gods).

* **Extispicy**, reading the signs in the liver of an animal (sheep mostly), is one of the most common form of divination in Ancient Sumer.

* The exact role of **assemblies** in decision-making in Ancient Sumer, and their members, is still a matter under discussion among specialists.

* This text was probably copied and learnt by young scribes, which explains the last sentence “Praise to Nisaba”, goddess of scribal art.