

Lament on the Death of a Princess

Roy Lisker

It is the auditorium of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. It is the opening session of a symposium on Mesopotamian antiquities. Standing on the stage is archaeologist *Dr. Rana Hassani-Geiser*. She is an academic authority in cuneiform tablets from the 2nd Millennium BC.

Positioned on a table before the podium is a looted cuneiform tablet that was recovered by the Oriental Institute.

Rana: Welcome to the annual meeting of the Society for Mesopotamian Studies, sponsored this year by the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. I am Dr. Rana Hassani-Geiser.

The stone tablets placed before you on the table in front of me were looted from the National Museum of Iraq in the aftermath of the widespread destruction in Baghdad wrought by the Shock and Awe bombing of March 2003.

This one is rather interesting (*She picks up one of the tablet.*) The manner by which it came into the Institute's possession was quite unusual. I noticed it at a party given by a friend of my husband's. As part of the arrangement, the former owner's name cannot be disclosed. Furthermore, doing so would make it more difficult to trace the looters in Iraq who sold it to him.

Negotiations ensued between him, my husband and myself. Eventually an undisclosed sum of money paid for it. The "suspicion of a dubious provenance" enabled us to put pressure on him to get a good price for it (*Smiles*).

The text written on its two faces dates from the middle of the 2nd Millennium BC. The script is Akkadian; the translation is my own. We're dealing with a long poem in the traditional form of a lament, actually an adaptation from much earlier Sumerian poetry depicting the destruction of the city of Ur in previous centuries.

The poem mourns the murder of a young princess of the royal house of the king Ibbi-Sin, last ruler of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur. In composing the lament, the poet uses the occasion to bewail the demolition of houses and shrines and the conquest of the Sumerian people by the Elamites.

**Lament on the murder of a princess of the
House of king Ybbi-Sin
circa 1500 BCE**

" Upon the fair girl, the comely maiden, the innocent doe, upon her the storm descended.

As the net captures the little bird, the nestling leaving its home for the first time, upon her the storm descended

As the helpless ewe is torn from its mother, upon her the storm descended

As the knife of sacrifice is applied to the throat of the ram, upon her the storm descended

The auburn fawn lies crushed like a broken clay jar. Upon her the storm descended. "

(Pause)

"Who can look upon her now, and not mourn?

I cry unto you, where is she now?

I cry unto you, where is now the comely face, the sweet smile, the gentle mouth?

I cry unto you, where is now the precious jewel?

I cry unto you, where is the gracious singing, the gay dancing, the joyous chanting?

I cry unto you, where now is the young maiden, where is she, who was lain in the grave like a sacrifice? Like a golden statue, like a

votive offering?

"May her name never perish from living memory

May her family be visited with good fortune

May the gods bring her back into the light, like Ishtar from the Underworld!

May the bitter storms that afflicted her be stilled"

(Pause)

" How long will Innana continue to weep? How much longer will she grieve?

For the demolished citadel of Ur, how much longer will Innana continue to weep? How much longer will she grieve?

For the demolished citadel of Ekur, how much longer will Innana continue to weep? How much longer will she grieve?

For the desecrated shrines of Nippur, how much longer will Innana continue to weep? How much longer will she grieve?

(Pause)

"Oh my city: let us proclaim a bitter lament!

The righteous city has been destroyed. Let us proclaim a bitter lament!

The city of high walls has perished. Our lamentation is bitter!

Cities of wealth, of great renown, have been destroyed. Let us proclaim a bitter lament!

The righteous house has been destroyed. The pickaxe and the mace have cut to the root. Like an uprooted tree, verily its sides have all been caved in. Our lamentation is bitter!

Like a failed harvest the righteous house, lies open, exposed to wind and rain. Let us proclaim a bitter lament!

All the houses have been demolished, the harvest put to the torch, the shrines desecrated, crops and livestock scattered. Our lamentation is bitter!

Long will grieving and bitter lamentation reign over the land."

(Pause)

"The all-devouring storm came, doing evil!

The storm covered Ur like a linen garment!

Raging incessantly, the storm lay waste the nation!

The people lay stacked against the walls, like shards, like broken urns...

Rotting corpses lay strewn around the high gates...

Men felled by the battle-mace drooped, like drunkards, neck over shoulder!

Blood flowed through the land like a river of molten bronze!

The bodies of the dead melted away like fat under the sun!

Those who sought to escape were laid prostrate by the storm!

Those who left not their houses were overcome by fire!

Lying in their mothers' laps, the children were carried off by the waters!"

(Pause)

"Behold the mighty storm, powered by hatred;

The storm which knows neither father nor mother;

The storm which knows neither brother nor sister;

The storm which knows not the wife nor the child;

The storm destroying cities, destroying houses;

The storm destroying sheepfolds and vineyards and farms!"

"Let not the storm continue.

Let not that storm which falls like rain continue

May that storm vanish, never to return.

May peace once more reign over the land"

Thank you

(Rana Hassani-Geiser descends from the podium and walks off stage)