THE RENTING OF FIELDS IN EARLY MESOPOTAMIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF “INTEREST” IN SUMERIAN *)

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1. Rental payments in the Ur III period

1.1. The last few years saw the publication of two important studies pertaining to the renting of fields in the Ur III period, authored by K. Maekawa 1) and F. R. Kraus 2), respectively. Maekawa’s article has as its topic the renting of fields belonging to the domain of the temple households in the province of Lagas, while Kraus devotes his study to a small group of Ur III field-rent documents, most of them from Dusabara, an agricultural settlement in the vicinity of Nippur 3). Additional material and comments to the texts collected by Kraus were subsequently offered by H. Waetzoldt 4).

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AAS J.-P. Grégoire, Archives administratives sumériennes (Paris, 1970)
AUAM Andrews University Archaeological Museum
Forde Nebraska Nels W. Forde, Nebraska Cuneiform Texts of the Sumerian Ur III Dynasty (Lawrance, Kansas, 1967)

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3) For Dusabara as the provenience of these texts, see R. M. Whiting, “Some Observations on the Drehem Calendar”, ZA 69 (1979): 16 and n. 19.

The significance of Maekawa’s findings can hardly be overstated. Most importantly, he proved that the enigmatic expressions más 2 gin-ta, más 1 1/2 gin-ta, más l gin-ta, and más nu-tuku, attested in the rent (apin-lal) texts from Lagaš, indicate the rate of silver which the tenant had to pay per būr of land at the outset of the rental agreement. Moreover, he was able to demonstrate that the amount designated in those texts as še-bi, “its barley”, denoted not the total yield but the rent due from the tenant (1/3 or 1/2 of the total yield).

Of the texts studied by Kraus, particularly important are six documents (TuM n.F. 1/2 247, 249, 250, 253, 254, N 621), which form a coherent group, with regard to both form and content. They all come from the same place (Dusabara), date to the same year (ŠS 5), deal with the renting of prebend plots located in the same field (a-šaga-dšul-pa-ê) and concern the same lessee (Ur-meme). Following the statement

5) The term apin-lal, written also nam-apin-lal (see, e.g., ZA 53 [1953]: 86 no. 24:6 [Ur III]), is used both in the sense “tenancy” (Akk. errešûnûm) and “rent” (as in še apin-lal). Depending on the context, these two translations are employed interchangeably in the present study. apin-lal also means “tenant/lessee”, and more generally “cultivator”. See, e.g., apin-lal-e še-uru₄, “the tenants seeded (the field)”, juxtaposed with gud-e še-uru₄, “the oxen (of the temple household) seeded (the field)” (RTC 181 i 11', 13'; also RTC 142 iii 6; ITT 4 7333 iii 2). See also the form lu-apin-lal-me in CBS 9181:13 (unpublished, courtesy D. I. Owen). The reading apin-lal, against uru₄-lal, seems to be proved beyond doubt by the spelling lu-ša-a-pil-lal = er-re-šu in a recently published bilingual text from Susa (D. O. Edzard, MDP 37, p. 12 i 23, 27). Other arguments in favor of this reading are the spelling GIŠAPIN.LAL in HSS 10 36 iv 5' (Sargonic, courtesy I. J. Gelb), also NAM.GIŠ.APIN.LA/LAL in OECT 8 15:10 (tablet and case, OB), demonstrating that the word in question is “plow”, and the fact that, as pointed out by Kraus, op. cit., p. 192, Sumerian does not have compounds of two verbs (with the exception of those with the auxiliary verb -ak). See also the spelling apin-ne-lal-še in UM 55-21-97:5, cited below in note 13. Note, however, the OB spelling NAM.APIN₄u.LAL Şe (Jean, Sumer et Akkad 216:6) and APIN₄u.LAL Şe (UM 29-13-262 rev. 1, unpublished, courtesy M. Roth). The only way to explain the last two examples would be to assume that they are scribal errors, which resulted from a confusion with the form URU₄u.DÈ, common in the rent texts. The reading of the second element of the term as lal is assured by the spellings [ap]in-la-še (Fish Catalogue 38:6 [Ur III]), NAM.APIN.LA. Şe (UET 5 218:4' [OB]), and NAM.GIŠ.APIN.LA (OECT 8 15:10, tablet [OB]).


7) Ibid., p. 19.

8) Published in transliteration and translation by Waetzoldt, op. cit., p. 203.

9) In TuM n.F. 1/2 253, the lessee is a person called Lu-Inanna. Lu-Inanna was