

The Calendar of Neo-Sumerian Ur and Its Political Significance*

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§1.1. The calendar used in the city of Ur during the Ur III period before the twelfth month of the 30th year of ŕulgiŕs reign has been the subject of several earlier studies.¹ Based on a few tablets using Girsu month names and an alleged absence of month names belonging to the regular calendar

of Ur before this date, Edmond Sollberger (1954/56, 19-20) argued that Ur originally used the Girsu calendar. After the twelfth month of ŕulgi 30, Ur took over the calendar used in Puzriŕ-Dagan. Sollbergerŕs reconstruction of the early Ur calendar can be displayed as shown in figure 1.

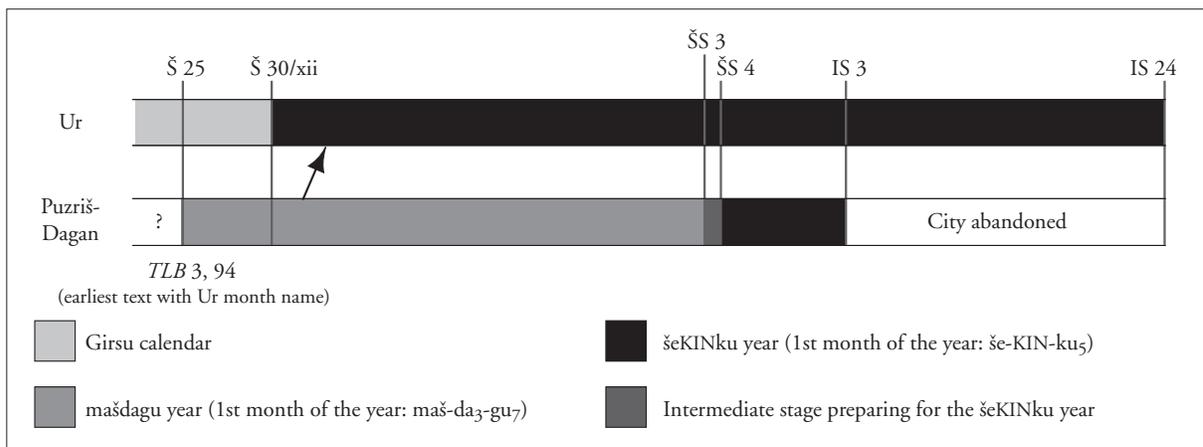


Figure 1: Traditional view of the relation between the Ur and Puzriŕ-Dagan calendars

§1.2. This view, which is widely accepted among Sumerologists, was questioned by Mark Cohen in his book on the calendars of the ancient Near East (1993, 131-132). According to Cohen, it seems more likely that the capital Ur provided the livestock center Puzriŕ-Dagan with its calendar, which was based on the pre-Sargonic

calendar of Ur. From the twelfth month of ŕulgi 30, Ur is attested with its regular Ur III calendar, which again would be taken over by the administration of Puzriŕ-Dagan from ŕu-Suen 4 and onwards. Cohenŕs alternative reconstruction of the development of the calendars in Ur can be displayed as shown in figure 2.

§1.3. The political history of the period between the fall of the Akkadian empire and the beginning of the Ur III state can be described as obscure, to say the very least. Therefore, any data that may throw light on the political development of the period are important. The choice of calendar used in the capital during the early history of the Ur III state may, in my opinion, offer some clues as to the circumstances surrounding the earliest history of the state.

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¹ E.g. Sollberger 1954/56; Gomi 1979; Whiting 1979; Cooper 1987 and Cohen 1993, 131-160.

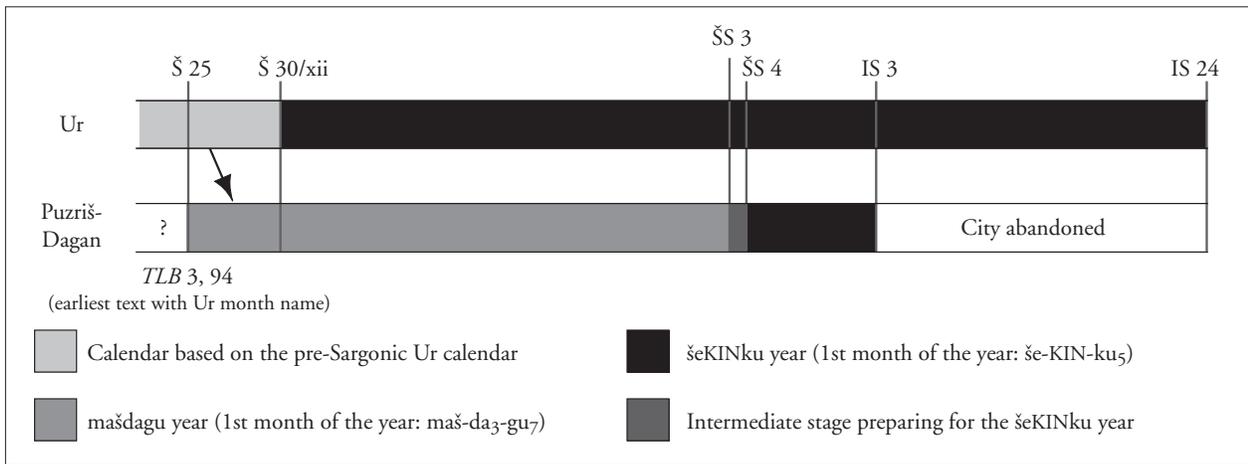


Figure 2: The relation between the Ur and Puzriš-Dagan calendars according to Cohen

§1.4. In this paper, we will first scrutinize the available evidence in order to determine which calendar Ur actually did use during this period of time. Second, we will examine how the choice of calendar in the capital Ur may shed some light on the political development of the period.

§2.1. In his critique, Cohen has pointed out the scarcity of the material on which Sollberger based his observations: only 15 tablets with month names preserved, dated to before Šulgi 30, month 12, were available to him. Nevertheless, the striking dominance of Girsu month names in these 15 attestations cannot be explained as a mere coincidence. Table 1 shows the month names found in these texts and the various local calendars in which these month names were used.

§2.2. While it is true that foreign or unknown month names continued to appear in the texts from Ur after month 12 of Šulgi 30 (Cohen 1993, 131), it should be kept in mind that the number of attestations are very low (approximately .3% of the total number of texts with preserved month names). This stands in stark contrast to the almost complete dominance of Girsu month names in the texts from before this date. Moreover, in 2001, Henri Limet published an additional text from Šulgi 30 with the Girsu month *ezem-dLi₉-si₄*. Six further texts can be found in the collection of tablets from Ur in the British Museum, currently being catalogued by a team of Italian scholars.² All of these new texts use the Girsu calendar, and an Ur/Puzriš-Dagan calendar

² That is, BM 16525, 18735, 18815, 18822b, 30182 and 30183. I am most grateful to the members of this im-

portant project, and to Lorenzo Verderame in particular, for generously providing me with information concerning these texts.

before the twelfth month of Šulgi 30 remains conspicuous by its absence. According to Cohen, the Girsu month names in Ur can easily be explained if the texts were all from a single archive involving individuals with economic ties to Girsu (1993, 131, see also Sallaberger 1999, 236, n. 324). Indeed, although these early texts were not excavated together,³ a closer examination of the texts suggests that all (or, at least, several) of them should be connected to the storehouse of the šabra administrator (*e₂-kišib-ba šabra*).

§2.3. The texts record the fact that various individuals received (*šu ba-ti*) or weighed (*i₃-la₂*) copper or other precious metals or materials from this storehouse for sundry luxury items (*UET 3, 294, 324, 1203; BM 30182* [see fn. 2 here]). Sometimes the individuals were acting on behalf of the palace (*UET 3, 293*) or the

³ Judging from the excavation numbers of the 14 texts with Girsu month names published in *UET 3* or *UET 9*, the tablets were unearthed in the third (2 texts), fourth (1), fifth (2), seventh (3), eighth (2) and ninth (4) seasons of excavations. The fact that the texts were found in different seasons makes it unlikely that they all derived from a single archive. However, the exact archaeological contexts of the tablets remain uncertain, although it seems as if the majority of the texts were found in the so-called royal cemetery of the city (see Widell 2003a, 91-101). The text *UET 3, 300* (U.17246) was found in the “Mausoleum site” (see Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 249-250), while at least one text (from Šulgi 27) came from “House 2” on “Straight Street” (see Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 159, n. 32).

Year	UET	Months in Ur tablets from before Š 31	Girsu	Nippur	Umma	Ur šeKINku	PD mašdagu
Š ?	3, 291	ezem- ^d dumu-zi	vi	-	-	-	-
Š 24	3, 324	munu ₄ -gu ₇	v	-	-	-	-
	3, 293	mu-šu-du ₇	ix	-	-	-	-
	3, 772	diri	-	-	xii ^{II}	-	-
Š 25	3, 294	gu ₄ -ra ₂ -izi-mu ₂ -mu ₂	ii	-	-	-	-
	9, 1214	šu-numun	iv	iv	vi	-	-
Š 26	3, 368	[gu ₄ -ra ₂ -izi ^(?)]-mu ₂ -mu ₂ ⁴	ii	-	-	-	-
	3, 1203	munu ₄ -gu ₇	v	-	-	-	-
Š 27	9, 1183	še-KIN-ku ₅ ⁵	xi	xii	i	i	xii
	3, 296	diri še-KIN-ku ₅	xi ^{II}	xi ^{II}	-	-	xi ^{II}
	9, 1184	še-il ₂ -la	xii	-	-	-	-
Š 28	3, 289	gu ₄ -ra ₂ -izi-mu ₂ -mu ₂	ii	-	-	-	-
	3, 290	gu ₄ -ra ₂ -izi-mu ₂ -[mu ₂]	ii	-	-	-	-
Š 29	3, 340	šu-numun-na	iv	iv	vi	-	-
Š 30	3, 300	ezem- ^d dumu-zi	vi	-	-	-	-

Table 1: Early Months from Ur available to Sollberger

Nanna temple (UET 3, 340; see also Limet 2001 and BM 30182), but in most of the texts the affiliation of these officials is not specified. Were these texts written in Ur? An example of a text from Ur with a foreign month name may have been written in another city, and sometime later brought to the capital.⁶ However, this theory appears to be unfounded: the storehouse of the šabra administrators is attested exclusively in texts from Ur, and the institution is found also in later Ur III texts from the city using the regular Ur calendar (UET 3, 1327). The fact that some of the texts record transactions between the storehouse of the šabra administrator, which was found in Ur, and other well-

known institutions in this city, such as the palace or the Nanna temple, seems to speak against any economic interests of the city of Girsu in these texts. Moreover, as I have argued recently, it would make no sense for an archive to adjust its dating system to its foreign clients (Widell 2003b). Ur III texts are not written to please the involved parties, but to legally record a specific transaction. If these early texts were written in the administrative setting of Ur, they would almost certainly be drawn up according to the administrative practices and the calendar of this city, especially since these texts were written and archived within the public sphere of the city's economy.⁷

⁴ The broken part on the copy seems to be very small for the reconstruction suggested here (see UET 3, 294, 289, 290).

⁵ Note that the tablet has not been copied and the reading of the month name here is based solely on D. Loding's date of the tablet to the first month. The fact that Loding (1976, 42) reads the še-il₂-la (i.e. the twelfth month in the Girsu calendar) before the year name on (also not copied) UET 9, 1184, but does not give the tablet a month date, seems to imply that month 1 in UET 9, 1183, refers to the first month in the Ur calendar rather than the Girsu calendar.

⁶ See UET 3, 1224, from Amar-Suen 6, using the month diri še-KIN-ku₅. The text records four different barley-fed small cattle from Ḫalḫala to be sent to Nippur.

Since the animals were received by the well-known Puzriš-Dagan official Nalu (see Sigrist 1995, 43), who later in all likelihood would be responsible for their disbursement in Nippur (e.g. SACT 1, 144; YOS 18, 12, 13), it seems likely that the tablet was drawn up by a local scribe in Puzriš-Dagan (where diri še-KIN-ku₅ was the name of the intercalary month) and later brought to Ur where it was archived. Note, however, that Ḫalḫala, who is rather frequently attested in texts from Puzriš-Dagan, may have been active at the royal court in Ur (see Sallaberger 1993, 65, with references), in which case the text also may have been drawn up in that city.

⁷ Note, however, that in some rare cases it appears that some public institutions were using their own specific systems to record the months. Hence the continued use

§3.1. The data presented here unanimously supports Sollberger's original reconstruction of the early calendar of Ur. It does not, therefore, seem imprudent to conclude that the city employed the Girsu calendar until the twelfth month of Šulgi 30, when it changed to its own local calendar. However, if we were to accept this conclusion, we face a major problem, which is in fact the very reason for some scholars' attempts to revise Sollberger's reconstruction. A quarter of a century ago, Tohru Ozaki (Gomi 1979, 9 n. 4) commented upon – without attempting to explain – the peculiar fact that the city of Ur chose to keep the calendar of its one-time enemy Girsu after it had become independent:

... when we take account of the circumstances of the foundation of the empire by Ur-Nammu, it seems curious that its capital city continued to use the calendar of its one-time enemy during ca. half a century after the victory. In East Asian history the use of the Chinese era and calendar by its surrounding states meant the expression of their obedience to Chinese domination.

§3.2. The victory that Ozaki refers to here is the defeat of the Lagaš II ruler Namḥani/Nammaḥni.⁸ According to Samuel Kramer's original edition of the prologue to the Codex Ur-Namma, Namḥani was killed by Ur-Namma, an event that has been thought to have led Ur-Namma to proclaim himself the founder and ruler of the Ur III state.⁹ It is, however, questionable whether the ancient Mesopotamian calendar really carried that much ideological significance. If the local calendar really was such a symbol of independence and pride, why did Ur not impose *its* local calendar in Girsu after Ur-Namma's victory, when it had the political and military power to do so? Such an act would certainly help Ur to recover some of the dignity it lost during the years with the Girsu calendar, and at the same time show Girsu – and the rest of Mesopotamia – who the new master in the house was.

of the so-called mašda year in the office of queen Šulgisimtum in Puzriš-Dagan until Š 48, although other offices in the city seem to have converted to the Akiti year already from Š 45 (Wu 2000, 81-82). Note also the so-called grain archive ("Getreidearchiv") in Nippur using Ur/Puzriš-Dagan month names, while the rest of the city was using the Nippur calendar (Sallaberger 1993, 7, n. 13 with further references).

⁸ Namḥani and Nammaḥni are in this article considered to be variants of the name of the same Lagaš II ruler (see Maeda 1993).

⁹ For the attribution of the Codex to Ur-Namma, see Flückiger-Hawker 1999, 4, n. 30, with further references.

§3.3. However, this did not happen and Mesopotamian calendar reforms in general appear to be more practically oriented than politically motivated. The Ur III administration, which otherwise can be characterized by a significant degree of systemic cohesion, never ceased to accept the local use of different calendars at the same time. Moreover, we know very little of the actual background of the supposed conflict of Ur-Namma and Namḥani, or how such a conflict would affect the relations between the two cities. The textual material from the Ur III period does not, in any way, indicate the existence of tensions or latent hostilities between the two cities. One might, on these grounds, speculate that Namḥani lacked substantial public support in his own city during the conflict. It seems at least plausible that the new governor in Girsu, installed by Ur-Namma after his victory, depicted Namḥani as a ruthless despot acting on his own selfish initiative in the conflict. The fact that Namḥani, as the only Lagaš II ruler and one of but several rulers in the entire history of Mesopotamia, may have been a victim of so-called *damnatio memoriae* (in which successors take steps to physically remove a ruler's name from the historical record; see Edzard 1997, 194, and Perlov 1980, 79), supports such an assumption.

§4.1. The uncertainties surrounding the proposed conflict between Ur and Girsu do not stop here, however, and some scholars, including Bertrand Lafont (1993, 678 and 681), have questioned the very existence of the conflict between the two cities. Others, such as François Carroué (1994, 74-75) and Claus Wilcke (1993, 60), have argued for a certain rivalry between the two cities. One thing seems certain: the repeated boundary disputes between the cities documented during Utu-ḫegal's reign certainly do not indicate that the cities were on good terms (see Flückiger-Hawker 1999, 4).

§4.2. Many years after he published his original treatment of the Codex Ur-Namma, Kramer admitted in a short article that his first reconstruction of the sign ug₅, "to kill", on the damaged line mentioning Namḥani, was uncertain (1983, 455, n. 12). The general agreement today seems to be that the sign should be read il₂, which means "to raise", and several more recent editions now understand the line to refer to Ur-Namma's elevation of Namḥani to the governorship of Girsu (e.g. Roth 1997; Frayne 1997).¹⁰ Obviously, a promotion,

¹⁰ Unfortunately, the still unpublished version of the Codex Ur-Namma in the private Schøyen collection in

rather than a slaying, would serve as a plausible explanation for the lack of any signs of hostilities between the two cities.

§4.3. This new interpretation is not entirely without problems. A promotion of a governor seems somewhat out of context in the prologue of the code. No other governors, or individuals for that matter, are mentioned by name in the text, and one cannot help wondering why Ur-Namma would make an effort to underscore the promotion of a governor, a quite common event. The promotion, or installment of a governor was never considered significant enough to be attached to year names in the Ur III period, and it seems strange that Namḥani's promotion should be even mentioned among the truly spectacular accomplishments of Ur-Namma listed in the prologue of his law-code.

§4.4. Moreover, the first year name in Namḥani's reign is a local Girsu year, not the year used by Ur-Namma in Ur. If Namḥani was made governor by Ur-Namma, he certainly failed to acknowledge this in his initial year formula (Maeda 1988, 22-23). Also, the new interpretation does not explain the proposed *damnatio memoriae* of Namḥani. If Namḥani was promoted – and presumably supported – by the king in Ur, then who was responsible for partially destroying or erasing his name in several of his inscriptions? The damaged inscriptions come from Girsu, and one explanation for this last point could be that Namḥani was succeeded by another independent governor in Girsu. This successor was not only an enemy of the city of Ur, but also of his predecessor Namḥani, who obviously had been cooperating with Ur.

§4.5. In Sollberger's sequence of Lagaš II rulers, Namḥani was followed by the governor Ur-Aba in Girsu. However, based on an enumeration of mortuary offering places (*ki-a-nag*) for various Lagaš II rulers, Tohrū Maeda revised Sollberger's sequence and Namḥani became the last independent ruler of Girsu (1988; see also Monaco 1990). While Maeda's sequence, or slight variations of it, has achieved a general acceptance among Sumerologists, it should by no means be regarded as definitive.¹¹ According to Esther Flückiger-Hawker (1999, 5), Ur-Namma must have been in

Oslo does not include this problematic line and therefore cannot solve the issue definitely.

¹¹ See, e.g., P. Steinkeller's suggestion (1988) that Namḥani may have ruled before Gudea, Ur-Ningirsu and Pirigme.

control of Lagaš for at least some part of Ur-Aba's reign. Moreover, we know that Ur-Aba started his reign using Girsu year formulae but that he changed and started to use the year formulae of the Ur III state sometime thereafter. As we have seen above, Namḥani started his rule with a Girsu year. Contrary to Ur-Aba, he appears to have continued to use the local Girsu year formulae throughout his reign (Maeda 1988, 22-23). These facts seem to support Sollberger's original sequence from 1954/56, which placed Ur-Aba after Namḥani.

§5.1. To sum up, we may conclude that the circumstances surrounding Ur-Namma's rise to power in the Ur III state, and the involvement of the Lagaš II rulers in this process, remain unclear. The use of the Girsu calendar in Ur during both the reign of Ur-Namma and the larger part of the reign of Šulgi, suggests that the cities were on friendly terms. Or, does it? One might argue that if it really had any significance at all, it would rather show that the kings in Ur were anxious to demonstrate, to Girsu, to Ur, and to the rest of Mesopotamia, that that the two cities were *not* on *unfriendly* terms.

§5.2. There are other indications that the relations between the cities may have been rather tense, at least during the reign of Utu-ḫegal. The administrative texts from the Ur III period do not seem to demonstrate any feelings of hostility between Girsu and Ur. However, an earlier conflict between Ur and Girsu would not necessarily result in a prolonged animosity between the people of the two cities. The hostility the people of both Ur and Girsu would have felt could adroitly be transmitted to the defeated, and presumably dead, ruler of Girsu. One thing is certain: having served as a military governor under the Uruk king Utu-ḫegal, Ur-Namma was fully aware of the significance of a politically correct "liberation".¹² Having no Gutians at hand, a war with, and the defeat of, the ruler of Girsu might have become Ur-Namma's chance to both bestow himself with an appropriate image of a liberator and to gain full control of the rival city of Girsu.

¹² A text copied during the Old Babylonian period (the original text was probably composed earlier, presumably commissioned by Utu-ḫegal himself), tells in a poetic way about the circumstances of Utu-ḫegal's war against the Gutians. This important text first describes a six day mobilizing campaign beginning in Utu-ḫegal's hometown Uruk and continuing through Kullab, Nagsu by the Iturungal canal, Bara-ilī-tappū and Karkar (areas obviously not under the control of the Gutians). Thereafter follows a description of the actual war, victory and capture of the Gutian king Tirigan (see Römer

§5.3. As a cautionary note, the political and ideological significance of the Ur III calendars should certainly not be exaggerated. However, if the choice of calendar had *any* significance, we would expect that if Ur-Namma tried to keep, or create, such a positive image by denouncing the defeated ruler of Girsu, he – and later also Šulgi – intentionally refrained from introducing the Ur calendar in Girsu. For the same reason, the Ur kings chose not to immediately abolish the Girsu calendar in the capital. The enforcement of a new calendar and the

abolishment of an old one, rather than the actual use of a calendar once it has been established, may feel humiliating and can be seen as an expression, of obedience or aggression. Ur-Namma and Šulgi were powerful kings with great armies, but they also realized the power of diplomacy. The use of force to remove a calendar that the people and the administration of some were used to for the sake of sheer imperial principle would only confine and nurture underlying hostilities within the state.

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