

A note on the Sumerian expression SI-ge₄-de₃/dam *

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1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM

This short article aims to analyze the Sumerian expression SI-ge₄-de₃/dam, partly by revisiting a short and seemingly insignificant Ur III text (*SET*:238). The text was first published by Tom B. Jones and John W. Snyder in their pioneering work on the Ur III administration and economy ¹. The two initial lines, which are being discussed here, were later collated by Marc Cooper and John Snyder ².

The text can be described as follows: BARLEY, še ki-ba SI-ge₄-de₃, ki PN₁-ta, PN₂, šu ba-ti, MONTH, YEAR. Jones and Snyder saw the text as a receipt of the repayment of a loan by Ur-^dBa-u₂ (i.e. «Full repayment of the barley (loan)») and compared the text with *UET* 3:917 from Ur. The parallel to *UET* 3:917 is valid and it is possible that the editors are right in their assumption that *SET*:238

* This article was written within a research project dealing with the Ur III administration generously funded by the History Department at Northeast Normal University in Changchun, China. The abbreviations used in the article can be found in SIGRIST and GOMI 1991 with the following additions: *CAD: The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago – Glückstadt 1956–). *UTAMI* 3: Fatma YILDIZ and Tohru GOMI, *Die Umma-Texte aus den Archäologischen Museen zu Istanbul, Band III (Nr. 1601-2300)* (Bethesda 1993). *UTAMI* 4: Tohru GOMI and Fatma YILDIZ, *Die Umma-Texte aus den Archäologischen Museen zu Istanbul, Band IV (Nr. 2301-3000)* (Bethesda 1997).

¹ JONES and SNYDER 1961, p. 134.

² COOPER and SNYDER 1986, p. 232.

was also originally drawn up in Ur. It should be noted, however, that structurally similar texts can also be attested from other cities of the Ur III state³. As for the editors' interpretation of the barley in the text as a reimbursed loan, it is more problematic. Nothing in *SET*:238 or in the likewise unsealed *UET* 3:917 indicates that the barley in these texts should be seen as a loan (or as an interest rate or a «loan fee»). Loan contracts of the Ur III period all seem to derive from the creditors' archives, while contracts sealed by the creditors to be kept by the debtors are conspicuous by their absence. It seems to be a logical assumption that the practice of closing and sealing the contracts was a way for the debtor to insure that the contracts, stored by the creditor, remained unaltered. Hence, the envelope would be opened and the seal broken when the loan was repaid and contracts without sealed envelopes would be considered already repaid. This would also explain the absence of receipts of repayments (obviously to be kept by the ex-debtor) since the mere opening of the envelope would release the debtor from any future claims from the creditor, therefore rendering any further receipts superfluous. Thus, if this theory has any merit, only loan contracts still in their unbroken envelopes would represent unpaid loans while the loan contracts without, or with only fragments of envelopes, would represent the actual number of (repaid) loans made⁴.

Jones and Snyder's interpretation of *si-gi₄-de₃* as «to be fully repaid, returned» (i.e. *si* 'full' *malûm*, *gi₄* 'return, repay' *târum*) is based on Legrain's translation in *UET* 3. However, the translation and interpretation are difficult to accept since the verb *gi₄* is a reduplication verb and the expression therefore should appear as *si gi₄-gi₄-de₃*⁵. For the same reason, we have to reject any cons-

³ E.g. Umma: *TLB* 3:59; *UTAMI* 3:2162; *UTAMI* 4:2970. Ĝirsu: *ITT* 2-1:767 (= *TCT* 1:767). Nippur: *NRVN* 1:177a, 177b. Puzriš-Dagan: *PDT* 2:924; *MVN* 12:423.

⁴ This observation is of some importance since it has been suggested that contracts may have been destroyed (dissolved in water?) when the loans were repaid and loan contracts recovered. Hence *CIVIL* (1987, p. 39, n. 4): «If the loan documents were destroyed after repayment, the number of preserved documents would indicate not the number of loans made, but the number of unpaid loans. Could the debtor keep a copy after payment? Could the creditor?».

⁵ Note, however, *PDT* 1:631: *SILVER*, *gi₄-gi₄-dam*, *ki PN₁-ta*, *PN₂*, *šu ba-ti* that indeed seems to denote a repayment of silver by *PN₁*.

truction involving the reduplication verb *si* (generally considered to have a final *g*, i.e. *si.g*⁶) 'to fill', which in our text would have to be written *še ki-ba si-si-ge₄-de₃*⁷. In loan contracts from Ur the expression «to be returned» was normally written with the reduplication verb *su* (i.e. *su-su-de₃/dam*) and the interest rates usually were established using the reduplication verb *ḡar* (i.e. *ḡa₂-ḡa₂-de₃/dam*) or with the expression *se-ge_{4/5}-de₃/dam* (but never *si gi₄-de₃/dam*⁸).

Thus, the expression *še ki-ba SI-ge₄-de₃* in our text is not referring to any transaction taking place in the actual document but should rather be understood as a designation or clarification of the intentions for the barley in the first line: «the grain shall be ... in its/this place/ground». There seems to be little doubt that our expression is closely related to the verbal construction *ḡa₂-ḡa₂-de₃/dam* 'shall/it is to be put'⁹. Apart from the already mentioned alternative formulae used in establishing interest rates or loan fees – sometimes using *ḡa₂-ḡa₂-de₃/dam* and sometimes *se-ge_{4/5}-de₃/dam* – there are further indications that the two verbs could replace each other, in the particular context found in *SET:238* as well. In *UET 3:358* the first 5 lines read: 1 1/3 ma-na urudu, ki-ba *ḡa₂-ḡa₂-de₃*, ki Šeš-kal-la-ta, Lugal-šar₂-ur₃-re, šu ba-an-ti «1 1/3 mina copper (≈ 2/3 kilogram), shall be put in its place, from Šeš-kal-la, Lugal-šar₂-ur₃-re received». Note also the last column (*Rev. III*) of the long text *UET 9:1370*, where large amounts of different fat and

⁶ E.g. CAVIGNEAUX and AL-RAWI (1995, p. 177): «... verbe *si(g)* 'fourrer, remplir' (différent de *si-ø* [à désinence vocalique] 'déployer, étendre...').» Cf., however, THOMSEN (1984, p. 314), who attributed the occasional «g-Auslaut» of the stem, to a confusion with the regular verb *si.g*, *si.ig* (see further below).

⁷ Hence the (superficially) similar expression *šu (...)* *loc. si.g* traditionally understood as 'to fill (someone's) hand (with something)' (see WILCKE 1988, p. 23, n. 87 and STEINKELLER 1989, pp. 30f. with further references). Cf., however, P. ATTINGER (1993, p. 246): «'enfoncer' (?) (probabl. pas 'remplir') dans les mains de qqn».

⁸ An expression *si ge₄-ge₄-de₃/dam* is, as far as I know, not found in the Ur III texts.

⁹ Note the somewhat different translation of the expression *ki-ba ḡa₂-ḡa₂* by Marcel SIGRIST (1995, p. 64 and n. 1): «to be recorded at the right place» with the explanation: «In instances of substitution it was imperative that all accounts affected be revised to reflect the substitution.» However logical this may seem, the interpretation of *ki* 'place' as the administrative place of a document or a document's data is not completely certain.

dairy products as well as a variety of fruits are recorded to have been «brought from the surrounding area via Ur-^dše-EŠ₂-nun-BU» (bar-ta ḡal₂-la, [ḡi]ri₃ Ur-^dše-EŠ₂-nun-BU, *lines* 6-7¹⁰), «put in their place by the inspector Da-a-a» (ki-b[a] ḡa₂-ḡa₂ Da-a-a šabra, *lines* 4-5) so that they could be «disbursed separately by (lit. ‘from’) Ga-til₃-e» ([z]i-ga didli, k[i G]a-til₃-e-ta, *lines* 2-3). The ki-ba ḡa₂-ḡa₂(-de₃/dam) is mainly found in connection with oxen/cows or other animals in texts from Puzriš-Dagan (*PDT* 1:50, 190, 533, 557 (*Rev.* III); *PDT* 2:882, 1263; *OrSP* 47-49:75; SIGRIST 1995:80, 106, 136; etc.) but may occasionally also appear in texts from other cities dealing with agricultural products (e.g. *MVN* 12:164 from Ĝirsu or *Nik.* 2:259; FALES 1989:43 from Umma). In Ur the expression is found in connection with copper (*UET* 3:358) or with rations consisting of agricultural and textile products (*UET* 3:1081¹¹).

2. SI.G = SE₃.G (ŠAKĀNUM, ŠAPĀKUM)

A meaning of the expression SI-ge₄-de₃/dam that is synonymous with ki-ba ḡa₂-ḡa₂-de₃/dam can be obtained if we read the SI as se and understand it as a phonetic variant to the regular verb se₃.g ‘to put’ or ‘to place’ (*šak ānum*)¹² but also ‘to heap up’, ‘to store’ different commodities such as barley, metal, etc. (*šap ākum*)¹³. Indeed, the alternating use of verbs se₃.g and ḡar/ḡa₂-ḡa₂ in texts from Ur concerning the decorations (i.e. the «puttings») of precious metal objects has already been demonstrated by H. LIMET (1960, pp. 163f.). As can be seen in *CAD* (Š/I, p. 412 with further references), not only se₃.g but also SI.g seems to have corresponded to the verb

¹⁰ The expression bar-ta ḡal₂-la can be found all over the Ur III state for different kind of food products, animals, wool/textiles, metal/metal objects, wood and bitumen. For the tentative translation ‘carried/brought from the surrounding area’, see *PSD* B, 97 translating bar ‘surrounding area (of a city)’. For ḡal₂ ‘to transport goods, carry, bring’ (*našūm*) see *CAD* N/II, pp. 80ff., esp. 87ff. The «surrounding area» may refer to small-scale – perhaps temporary – stores closer to the actual production areas situated outside the city. I have recently argued for the existence of such stores or stacks for textiles situated in the periphery of the city of Ur (see WIDELL 1999).

¹¹ The text has both ki-ba ḡa₂-ḡa₂ as well as the ki-ba ba-a-ḡar ‘it was put in its/this place’.

¹² See THOMSEN 1984, p. 314.

¹³ See *CAD* Š/I, p. 412; for the meaning ‘to store (stocks of grain and other provisions)’, see pp. 415f.

šap ākum and it seems therefore rather probable that SI.g in (at least) these cases can and should be read se.g as an unorthographic variant of se₃.g. The «probably regular verb» SI.g has been described as «not very clear; it is sometimes used about things which are placed on or into the ground, for instance foundation (cf. ex. 698 [Gudea, Cyl. A XI, 18-23]) or standards, ...»¹⁴. Thus, the combination with the noun *ki* in our text, which in addition to 'place' also denotes 'ground' or 'soil'¹⁵ seems fitting. However, it should be noted that the verb SI.g also appears without *ki* for products placed in boats (i.e. PRODUCT ma₂-a SI-ge₄-de₃)¹⁶ and the interpretation of *ki* as 'ground' or 'soil' in this context remains uncertain. Nevertheless, we should have no difficulty to speculate that the Ur III people – on a small-scale – were storing barley and other products in the ground or in semi-subterranean jars/silos as a protection against the elements (heat, damp, etc.), theft, noxious animals and pests. Possibly, such places were only used temporarily before the products could be either disbursed or put in more permanent locations such the e₂-kišib-ba 'store house' or the gur₇ 'granary' (see above and note 10)¹⁷. In a recent article, Christian Huber is discussing the expression guru₇-a im ur₃-ra and concludes «So, one might think of covering a pit with some kind of 'roof' a prominent component of which was clay after being filled with grain (or providing it with some protection otherwise), or some comparable operation.»¹⁸ Thus, while guru₇-a im ur₃-ra may have been the technical expression for the work of making or closing/sealing such storages, *ki-ba se-ge₄-de₃/dam* may perhaps have been used at an earlier stage to denote that the products in question were to be stored in this kind of storage.

¹⁴ See THOMSEN 1984, p. 314.

¹⁵ I.e. *eršetum* (CAD E, pp. 308ff, esp. 3-4) or *qaqqarum* (CAD Q, pp. 113ff.).

¹⁶ See HUBER 2000, 486 with further references. The fact that there is no verbal reduplication (i.e. si-si-ge₄-de₃) seems to make Huber's interpretation of the verb as the reduplication verb si.g 'to fill' problematic (see also above).

¹⁷ Indeed, large storage jars for barley have been found from the Ur III period (see BRECKWOLDT 1995/96, p. 64 with further references) and we know that similar jars for different food products were submerged in the ground, at least in later periods (HODJASCH 1999, p. 226).

¹⁸ HUBER 2000, p. 489.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We may conclude that the *se.g* in our particular context most likely should be understood as a phonetic writing of the verb *se_{3.g}*. If all attestations of the verb *SI.g* should be analyzed this way remains uncertain but is by no means impossible. This analysis of the verb seems – in *SET:238* – to suggest that a more regional, small-scale storage of barley may have existed side by side with the central storages of the Ur III state:

		<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Obv.	1	2;0,0 še gur lugal	2 royal kor barley (\approx 600 liters),
	2	še ki-ba se-ge ₄ -de ₃	in its/this place/ground, the barley shall be put/stored
	3	ki Ur- ^d Ba-u ₂ -ta	From Ur- ^d Ba-u ₂ ,
	4	Ur- ^d Nun-gal	Ur- ^d Nun-gal
Rev.	5	šu ba-ti	received.
	6	Month (Ur: xii / PD: xi)	
	7	Year (Šulgi 45)	

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RESUMEN

La expresión SI-ge₄-dam/de₃ aparece en algunos contratos de préstamo del período de Ur III, donde se empleaba para determinar el interés de dicho préstamo. Por otra parte, este término se hallaba a veces precedido de ki-ba 'en su/este lugar/suelo', y en algunos casos por ma₂-a 'en la barca'. El verbo regular SI.g está muy relacionado (quizás es incluso sinónimo) con el verbo de la clase de la reduplicación ġar/ġa₂-ġa₂ 'poner' o 'colocar'. Mientras que puede concluirse que SI-ge₄-dam/de₃ no tiene nada que ver con el verbo si 'llenar', ni con gi₄ 'regresar, devolver', el análisis correcto de la expresión sigue siendo, de algún modo, incierto. En el artículo se propone que SI puede leerse como se, entendiéndolo como una escritura fonética del verbo regular se₃.g 'poner', 'colocar'. La combinación del verbo con ki-ba podría indicar que, junto a los grandes graneros y almacenes centrales de la ciudad, había un modo distinto y más modesto de conservar los productos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Lengua sumeria, Ur III, administración, economía.

SUMMARY

The expression SI-ge₄-dam/de₃ appears in some of the loan documents of the Ur III period where it was used to establish the interest rate or the loan fee. In addition, it is sometimes preceded by ki-ba 'in its/this place/ground' or, in some cases, ma₂-a 'in the boat'. The regular verb SI.g was closely related, perhaps even synonymous with, the reduplication verb ġar/ġa₂-ġa₂ 'to put' or 'to place'. While it may be concluded that SI-ge₄-dam/de₃ had nothing to do with the verb si 'to fill' or gi₄ 'to return', the correct analysis of the expression remains somewhat uncertain. The article proposes that the SI should be read se and understood as a phonetic writing for the regular verb se₃.g 'to put', 'to place'. The combination of the verb with the ki-ba may suggest that a more parochial form of keeping products existed side by side with the large centralized granaries and storehouses of the city.

KEYWORDS: Sumerian, Ur III, administration, economy.