

OLD AGE IN SUMER: LIFE EXPECTANCY AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE ELDERLY

Leonard Curchin

One of the more intriguing topics in the still largely untrodden field of Sumerian social history is the significance and social impact of old age. The present paper is an attempt to clarify the meaning of longevity within the Sumerian context, Sumerian attitudes toward old age, and the role of the elderly in Sumerian society.¹

The degree of old age attained by inhabitants of Sumer is not well attested. Among the rulers catalogued in the Sumerian King-List (excluding the earliest dynasties with their fabulous reign-lengths) we find that Sargon of Agade reigned 55 years, Naram-Sin of Agade reigned 56, and Shulgi of the third Ur dynasty reigned 48.² These regnal figures suggest that the three kings in question, even if they had ascended the throne at a fairly early age, probably lived into their sixties or seventies.³ What we lack, of course, is Sumerian epitaphs giving exact ages at death. Yet even epitaphs are of limited value in calculating ancient life expectancies.⁴

Anthropological data are somewhat more informative. Examination of 17 skeletons from al-Ubaid, of fourth millennium date, revealed three men aged 65 and a man and woman each aged 60.⁵ Thus 5 of the 17 -- nearly a third -- were of advanced years. At Kish, on the other hand, despite a few skeletons of very old age,⁶ the average age at death was only 30 years for males and 28 for females.⁷ Moreover, of 36 skeletons of determinable

age from the Early Dynastic III period at Kish, only 8, or 22%, were of persons who had lived past 35.⁸ The ravages of ancient warfare, disease, floods, and other calamities undoubtedly claimed many lives, severely restricting the likelihood of longevity. If the Sumerians attached a numerical equivalent to old age, it may well have been a lower figure than the axiomatic "65" in vogue today. Even so, the descriptions of old persons in Sumerian texts sometimes suggest a considerable physical deterioration characteristic of true old age, while the subjects of Sumerian statuary are not uncommonly bearded elders.

In the Sumerian literary composition "The Old Man and the Young Girl," the old man explains his predicament to the king (lines 24-28): "(I was) a youth, (but now) my luck, my strength, my personal god, and my youthful vigour have left my loins like an exhausted ass."⁹ More specifically, as the old man complains (lines 29-32), his black hair has turned to white, he is obliged to walk with a crutch, his nose is no longer sensitive to smell, and his once-strong teeth can no longer chew.¹⁰

A different sort of grievance is voiced by a Sumerian prostitute: "My vagina is fine, (yet) among my people it is said of me, 'It is finished with you.'"¹¹ In this case the elderly harlot blames society for imposing an age restriction on her livelihood; but the truth probably is that she was no longer physically attractive.¹²

The popular assumption that elderly persons are infirm may have triggered a rebellion among the governors of the aged Sargon. But they had underestimated the old man's strength: "In his old age, all the countries revolted against him and they besieged him in Agade. (But) Sargon made an armed sortie and defeated them, knocked them over, and crushed their vast army."¹³

The elderly enjoyed no exemption from the afflictions of warfare. and poverty. When a town was captured in battle its population might be seized as prisoners of war and removed to another locality.¹⁴ Such persons included women, children, and old persons. Those who did not die *en route*, as many undoubtedly did,¹⁵ would perish from hard work or disease in the new settlement.¹⁶ A text dated to the fifth year of King Bur-Sin of Ur III records the distribution of rations to prisoners of war. These include 167 women (of whom 46 are dead and 23 sick), 28

children (of whom 23 are dead), and two old women (of whom one is sick).¹⁷ The high casualty-rate among these prisoners makes it unlikely that they lived much longer; indeed, the miniscule proportion of old women on the ration rolls suggests that others had met their end already.

Paupers who found themselves unable to support very old or very young dependants had little choice but to entrust them to the temple-estates, where they would receive care in exchange for labour.¹⁸ Similarly, one suspects, old persons without means of support would be obliged to seek this form of refuge on their own. The ration-lists from the temple-estates sometimes mention old persons: the terms employed are *gurush-shugi* (old man), *geme-shugi* (old woman), *shugi* (old person, sex unspecified).¹⁹ Such citations are comparatively rare, since old persons are usually not listed separately but included among the adults or children.²⁰ Several Sumerian ration-lists specifically list old persons among the children or assign to them the same ration as children, which is substantially smaller than that given to adults.²¹ Those in this category are presumably too infirm for strenuous labour. Conversely, in instances where old persons receive the same ration as the adults, they are presumably functional workers.

Old persons were clearly liable to a variety of social and even physical abuses, in addition to the natural discomforts of old age. Small wonder, then, that they dreamed of remedies for their plight. In "The Old Man and the Young Girl" the king gives the old man a young girl as wife: in this way "the old man will regain his youthful vigour, and the young girl will become a mature woman" (lines 20-21). This story has a parallel, if not a direct reference, in the theme of a Sumerian school tablet: "An old man took a young girl as wife."²² The theme of rejuvenation reappears in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ll.280-9). Gilgamesh obtains the secret plant known as "Old Men Become Young." He plans to eat it himself to regain his youth, and to take it to his kingdom Uruk to rejuvenate the old men there. His plan is thwarted when a snake carries off the plant and is itself reborn. Yet another example of "wishful thinking" against the harsh realities of growing old occurs in lines 22-25 of the Sumerian myth "Enki and Ninhursag." This passage describes the ideal conditions prevailing in the land of Dilmun (Bahrein) at a time when the

world was new, and old age and illness were unknown:

The sick-eyed says not "I am sick-eyed,"
 The sick-headed says not "I am sick-headed,"
 Its (Dilmun's) old woman says not "I am an old
 woman,"
 Its old man says not "I am an old man."²³

So far we have witnessed the disadvantages of old age and the escapism which they fostered. However, the status of the elderly in Sumerian society was not wholly unfavourable, and could be rather exalted. The Sumerians, like other Near Eastern peoples, practised ancestor worship;²⁴ and while this form of homage to the dead achieved little for the living, it does at least suggest a veneration for older generations. (Similarly, deceased kings were deified,²⁵ while the reign-lengths of the early rulers were grossly exaggerated in the king-lists to signify their importance.) The Sumerians frequently made votive offerings for the prolongation of their own life (*namti*) or that of their lord or of a relative. Obviously it was considered preferable to live to a ripe old age than to die young.²⁶

A special reverence was attached to the wisdom of one's elders. "Eldership" is even listed as one of the divine laws (*me's*) in the myth "Inanna and Enki."²⁷ In "The Curse of Agade" (lines 29-30) it is said of the city Agade that "its old women were endowed with counsel, its old men were endowed with eloquence."²⁸ Finally, in "The Father and his Disobedient Son" (lines 47-50) the father gives advice to his indolent offspring: "You stroll around the marketplace. You must be (more) ambitious! Seek out the older generation Inquire of them!"²⁹

The "elders of the city" (*abba uru*) played a particularly important role in local government, constituting the council which advised the king. This council was the upper chamber of the municipal congress (*ukkin*), the lower "house" being a popular assembly with legislative powers. The elders also exercised a judicial function, acting as a lawcourt during the Ur III period, a practice which continued into Old Babylonian times.³⁰

The title and function of the *abba uru* are of great antiquity. Already in the semi-pictographic tablets of the Protoliterate period we

find mention of the elders and assembly.³¹ Since *abba uru* literally means "father of the city," it has been plausibly suggested that the elders were "not only influential members of the community but heads of families,"³² and therefore a link between the primeval social unit (the family) and the city-state.³³

The elders are sometimes named in inscriptions, for instance Uresh-lilla, *abba uru* of Adab, who dedicates a statue for the life of Prince Baraganidu.³⁴ Most of our evidence, however, comes from literary sources. In the Sumerian poem "Gilgamesh and Agga" Gilgamesh of Uruk has received a warlike ultimatum from Agga, king of Kish. Gilgamesh seeks the advice of the council of elders, urging them to support a war. But the elders express unwillingness to fight: "Let us submit to the house of Kish, let us not smite it with weapons" (line 14). Dissatisfied with this counsel, Gilgamesh presents his case to the popular assembly, which decides upon war.³⁵ In the "Epic of Gilgamesh" the elders advise Gilgamesh against setting out to battle the forest monster Huwawa; but when he insists on going, they give him counsel to assist him in his mission, and wish him godspeed.³⁶ When Ziusudra (or Utnapishtim), the Sumerian "Noah," is told by the god to build an ark and sail from the city of Shuruppak, he expresses a sense of responsibility and guilt: "But what shall I answer the city, the people and the elders?" (*Gilg.* 11.1.35). It is perhaps significant that the elders are mentioned last. The general impression seems to be that the ruler was at liberty to accept or reject the advice of the elders, provided he was supported by the people.³⁷

Aside from their civic function as advisers of the sovereign, there is some evidence that elderly persons held religious appointments. The *abba* appears as a temple administrator at Jemdet-Nasr in the Protoliterate period, a time when the state may have been largely theocratic.³⁸ An Ur III tablet from Drehem mentions an elderly temple administrator.³⁹ Lastly, a wool document (UET 3.1505) of the same period lists expenditures for the "cult needs of the old woman of the temple (of) Ganuhum."⁴⁰ While this woman is not designated as a priestess, she appears to hold a singular but unidentified religious position in the temple. These examples, limited in number, none the less suffice to show that senior citizens were considered employable in religious offices.

The available evidence suggests that the elderly generally held a place of respect in Sumerian society. They enjoyed a reputation for wisdom and played a significant role in Sumerian government as advisers to the monarch, who could, however, choose to ignore them. Certainly they were liable to the sufferings of war and indigence, but these were common to young and old. Any social prejudice against the elderly appears to have been based chiefly upon physical disability, real or assumed, which was indeed their principal cause for complaint and for dreams of renewed youth.

University of Ottawa

NOTES

¹ The following abbreviations have been used for cuneiform texts and lexical works: ABL = R.F. Harper, *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters* (London and Chicago 1892-1914); BIN = *Babylonian Inscriptions in the Collection of J.B. Nies* (New Haven 1917-1954); CT = *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets, etc., in the British Museum* (London 1896 ff.); IR = H.C. Rawlinson and E. Norris, *Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia*, I (London 1861); LAS = S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars* (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970); *Gilg.* = *Epic of Gilgamesh* (translation in ANET³); MSL = *Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon* (Roma 1937 ff.); Sg. Wi. = H. Winckler, *Die Keilschrifttexte Sargons* (Leipzig 1889); ŠL = A. Deimel, *Šumerisches Lexikon* (Roma 1920-1947); TCL = *Textes cunéiformes du Musée du Louvre* (Paris 1910-1960); UET = *Ur Excavations, Texts* (London 1928-1965). Secondary works: ANET³ = *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edn., ed. J.B. Pritchard (Princeton 1969); JNES = *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*; RA = *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*.

² Th. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago 1939) 110-3, 122-3. The figures for Agade have been adjusted in light of the arguments of

W.W. Hallo, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York 1971) 55, 60.

³ As a modern comparison we might cite Queen Victoria, who reigned 64 years and died at the age of 81.

⁴ Cf. M.K. Hopkins, "The Probable Age Structure of the Roman Population," *Population Studies* 20 (1966) 245-64.

⁵ M. Cappieri, *The Mesopotamians of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages* (Coconut Grove, Florida 1970) 12.

⁶ Ibid. 19.

⁷ T.A. Rathbun, *A Study of the Physical Characteristics of the Ancient Inhabitants of Kish, Iraq* (Coconut Grove 1975) 187.

⁸ Ibid. 197.

⁹ Translated by B. Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs* (Copenhagen 1975) 93.

¹⁰ Ibid. 93, 95. For a Babylonian parallel see the paralyzed old man in the *Irra Epic* (1.47).

¹¹ Translated by W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford 1960) 248.

¹² Sexual relations with elderly women disgusted the Babylonians as well, as shown by the divination text CT 39.44: "If a man has approached an old woman (sexually), he shall be paralyzed every day."

¹³ "Sargon Chronicle" lines 11-12, translated by A.L. Oppenheim, *ANET*³ 266. I.M. Diakonoff, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Moscow 1969) 191 apparently interprets *ina shibütishu* to mean a revolt "among his Elders" (i.e. the "nome" aristocracy); but this violates the natural interpretation of the Akkadian.

¹⁴ See I.J. Gelb, "Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia," *JNES* 32 (1973) 70-98.

¹⁵ Ibid. 75; I.M. Diakonoff, "Slaves, Helots and Serfs in Early Antiquity," *Acta Antiqua* 22 (1974) 45-78, esp. 70.

¹⁶ Gelb (at n. 14) 86.

¹⁷ TCL 5.6039; Gelb (at n. 14) 74.

¹⁸ I.J. Gelb, "The Arua Institution," *RA* 66 (1972) 1-32, esp. 9-11.

¹⁹ E. Sollberger, *Business and Administrative Correspondence under the Kings of Ur* (Locust Valley 1966) 119 rejects the translation of *shugi* as "old," on the grounds that *gurush* is an adult worker and that

old age is inconsonant with work. He suggests that *gurush-shugi* means "a returned man" (which to our mind makes little sense). Fortunately there is no need for such speculation. The precise meaning of *shugi* is easily ascertained from the bilingual lexical series "Nigga" (MSL 13 p. 118 no. 137-138) which lists *shugi* as a synonym of Akkadian *shĪbum* and *shugūm* (the latter being a direct loan-word from the Sumerian). That both these terms mean "old man" is beyond question: see W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden 1958-) 1228, 1260.

²⁰ I.J. Gelb, "The Ancient Mesopotamian Ration System," *JNES* 24 (1965) 230-43, esp. 238; cf. Gelb (at n. 18) 2.

²¹ Gelb (at n. 20) 238-9.

²² BIN 2.59; Alster (at n. 9) 93-4. Alster also cites old King David's marriage to the young Abishag in I Kings 1.1 ff. and 2.17 f.

²³ Translated by S.N. Kramer, *ANET*³ 38.

²⁴ A. Deimel, "Die Listen über den Ahnenkult aus der Zeit Lugalandas und Urukaginas," *Orientalia*, series prior 2 (1920) 32-51; P. Charvát, "Early Ur," *Archív Orientální* 47 (1979) 15-20, esp. 18. Parallels: H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago 1948) 89-98 (Egypt); H. Schaeffer, *The Social Legislation of the Primitive Semites* (New Haven 1915) 44 (Israel).

²⁵ On deification see W.W. Hallo, *Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles* (New Haven 1957) 56-62; M.-J. Seux, *Epithètes royales akkadiennes et sumériennes* (Paris 1967) 107-9, 389-90; L. Curchin, "Eannatum and the Kings of Adab," *RA* 71 (1977) 93-5.

²⁶ Babylonian and Assyrian kings often express the desire to achieve old age (*shĪbūtum*), e.g. IR 52 no. 6; 58 col. 10; 65 col. 3; ABL 114.12-13; 115.12-13; 177.6-7; LAS 186.10-11; 188.2; 197.5-9; Sg. Wi. 54.75-77; etc.

²⁷ S.N. Kramer, "Aspects of Mesopotamian Society," in *Beiträge zur sozialen Struktur des alten Vorderasien*, ed. H. Klengel (Berlin 1971) 1-13, esp. 9.

²⁸ Translated by Kramer, *ANET*³ 647.

²⁹ Cf. A.W. Sjöberg, "Der Vater und sein missratener Sohn," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 25 (1973) 105-69, esp. 116.

³⁰ H. Klengel, "Zu den *šĪbūtum* in altbabylonischer Zeit," *Orientalia* N.S. 29 (1960) 357-75, esp. 358-9; E. Ebeling, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*,

I (Berlin/Leipzig 1928) 76; I.M. Diakonoff in Klengel (at n. 27) 15-31, esp. 22.

³¹ Frankfort (at n. 24) 216.

³² Ibid. 215; cf. Th. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz* (Cambridge, Mass. 1970) 403. A parallel may be found in the title *Patres* ("fathers"), used of Roman senators.

³³ G. Evans has contended, on the basis of the Roman model, that membership in the council of elders was based not on age but on social status: "Ancient Mesopotamian Assemblies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 78 (1958) 1-11; cf. Klengel (at n. 30) 358. It seems probable, however, that the Sumerian elders (like the elders of Israel or the Greek *presbeis*) were originally the older, wiser men, and only later did the "elders" become a class. Even then many of them will have been old men. We should note too that *abba* equals Akkadian *shĪbu(m) purshumu(m)*, "old man", and that the Sumerian equivalent of Akkadian *shĪbūtu(m)*, "old age", is *nam-abba*. These lexical items confirm the close association of *abba* with old age.

³⁴ Hallo (at n. 25) 38; cf. P. Charvát, "Pre-Sargonic Adab," *Archív Orientální* 42 (1974) 161-6, esp. 162.

³⁵ Kramer, *ANET*³ 45. A similar ploy is adopted by the Israelite king Rehoboam when he rejects the advice of the elders and seeks that of the young men (I Kings 12.8).

³⁶ *Gilg.* 3.5. 8-19; 6. 19-48, 57-60; E.A. Speiser, *ANET*³ 80-1.

³⁷ The proof that he could not act against the people's will is provided in the tale "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta." Ensukeshdanna of Aratta sends an ultimatum to Enmerkar of Uruk but is reproached by the congress (*ukkin*) for acting without its consent, and is eventually cowered into apologizing to Enmerkar and acknowledging his supremacy (Jacobsen [at n. 32] 371-2). It is curious that *ukkin*, which normally refers to both elders and people, appears in the form *ukkin^{me-es} mes* as the synonym of Akkadian *purshumu* "old man" (CT 19.32 b.7; cf. ŠL 2 p. 84).

³⁸ Diakonoff (at n. 13) 183.

³⁹ *Shabra (PA.AL) libir-àm*: W.M. Nesbit, *Sumerian Records from Drehem* (New York 1914) no. 22.5; on this text cf. D.O. Edzard and

G. Farber, *Répertoire géographique des textes cunéiformes*, II (Wiesbaden 1974) 184.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jacobsen (at n. 32) 220.