

The Gecko Wears a Tiara

Ancient Sumerian Proverbs



Compiled by
Mark Saltveit

Happy Holidays 2007

Man's oldest recorded literature is found in the ancient proverbs of Sumeria, written down starting about 4,400 years ago (though most are only 3,800 years old). Then again, these were already proverbs passed down for generations back *then*, so they are probably far older.

Some of these seem very obvious now. Others are bizarre, many are funny, and a number contain real nuggets of wisdom. Than again, Sumeria was what we now call Iraq, so take that wisdom with a grain of salt.

Oxford University has created a web repository of these texts, and their English translations, called the "Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature." It's located at <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>

I've been fascinated by these and can't resist sharing my favorites, arranged by category. They're like a time travel machine, taking us back millennia and revealing what was strange about their society, and what is strangely similar.

-- Mark Saltveit, December 2007

Kind of Obvious

(Maybe they weren't, back then.)

3.161

Putting unwashed hands to one's mouth is disgusting.

2.141

The mother who has given birth to eight young men lies down exhausted.

19.c2

When the sun is setting outside so that you cannot even recognize the hand in front of you, go inside!

27.b6

To eat is good. When it comes up again, it is bad.

1.103

He who eats too much cannot sleep.

1.3

You should not cut the throat of that which has already had its throat cut.

1.52

There is no baked cake in the middle of the dough.

1.193-194

To be sick is acceptable; to be pregnant is painful; but to be pregnant and sick is just too much.

Beer

26.c8

He is fearful, like a man unacquainted with beer.

3.8

To serve beer with unwashed hands, to spit without trampling upon it, to sneeze without covering it with dust, to kiss with the tongue at midday without providing shade, are abominations to Utu.

5.77

A dog entered a tavern and said: "I can't see a thing. I'll open this one!"

21.c4

I would make the beer sweet but my neighbor would not appreciate it.

UET 6/2 249

Like a raven, you have your eyes on enormous quantities of malt.

1.77

Beer is a bull. The mouth is its stairway.

Truly Deep Sayings

3.119

Flies enter an open mouth.

16.d2

"My friend" might last just one day. "My colleague" lasts forever.

4.59

To appreciate the earth is for the gods; I am merely covered in dust.

19.b3

Build like a lord -- live like a slave!

Build like a slave -- live like a lord!

25.5

Although the number of unhappy days is endless,
yet life is better than death.

2.71

Tell a lie and then tell the truth: it will be considered a lie.

7.77

He said: "Woe!" and the boat sank with him. He said: "Alas!" and the rudder broke. The young man said: "Ah god!" and the boat reached its destination.

13.23

A lame man saw some runners: "The people who disappeared, where did they go?" he asked.

2.119

In the city of the lame, the cripple is a courier.

4.2

What is placed in the fire has a valuable role to play but leaves nothing behind when it's gone.

UET 6/2 368

For him who walks, the day lasts. For him who dances, the sun shines. For the hero whose strength is enormous, moonlight is given.

28.4

Accept your fate and make your mother happy! Run away fast and make your god happy!

28.1

The battle-club does not find out his name, it just finds his flesh.

27.b3

He who carries a light burden can dance.

1.7

What has been destroyed belongs to a god. No one is able to take it away.

2.4

I looked into the water. My destiny was drifting past.

Mystical, or Just Weird?

3.164

The gecko wears a tiara.

3.68

Let our odor be the smell of leeks -- let it not be the smell of turnips!

1.150

Like my own affairs, antimony paste is air: let fat be eaten in the mist.

1.166

At the top it is a wild cow, at the bottom it is a fish. At the top it is shattered potsherds, at the bottom it is half a cubit.

11.55

From within a tree, a spoon. Who is it?

1.53

Bread is the boat, water is the punt-pole.

4.1

Unique: a tall pot and a shouting statue.

26.b4

If oil is poured inside the shaft of a scepter, no one would know.

Insults

5.120

Like a whelping bitch he bites the workmen.

2.89

Your dancing is like wild cattle grazing.

1.95

In my heart you are a human being, but in my eyes you are not a man.

N 6119 (Alster 1997 p. 292) and N 4047 (Veldhuis 2000 fig. 8)

Come on, clown! Just for once, say: "..... my hips are heavier than 50 *mana* weight."

8.b15

Like a hyena, you will not eat food unless it stinks.

12.a5

May the master sleep at your side, and may the mistress slap your face.

5.121

Like a man's bitch you are walking behind a shaven-headed man.

UET 6/2 335

You grind with the pestle like a fearful slave girl.

14.15

You should drive them like pack-asses into a death-stricken city.

1.76

Like a clod thrown into the water, may it be destroyed as it disintegrates.

1.105

A heart never created hatred; speech created hatred.

26.a13

I did not answer the curse uttered against me with a curse of my own. My answering a curse would be answered with another curse.

Gender Constructs

1.156

A male aroused eats salt. A female aroused is dragged in the mud.

1.82

What has been spoken in secret will be revealed in the women's quarters.

1.185

A chattering girl is silenced by her mother. A chattering boy is not silenced by his mother.

28.21

When a man walks about, he finds something. When a woman walks about, she loses something.

1.176

I am a lady who wears large garments. Let me cut my loincloth!

19.c7

A man's wife is his supervisor. A man's son is his protective shade. A man's daughter is his eager servant. A man's daughter-in-law is his policeman.

Marriage

1.126

A plant as sweet as a husband does not grow in the steppe.

1.147

May **Inana** make a hot-limbed wife lie with you! May she bestow upon you broad-shouldered sons! May she seek out for you a happy place!

1.160

Marrying is human. Having children is divine.

1.154

A malicious wife living in the house is worse than all diseases.

1.125

My husband heaps up for me, my child measures out for me; let my lover pick the bones from the fish for me.

1.196

A brewing trough not previously tried is put to the test by means of salt. A mixing jar not previously tried is put to the test by means of water. A son-in-law whose behavior is unknown is put to the test by means of quarrels.

11.150

Don't choose a wife during a festival!

1.12

Something which has never occurred since time immemorial: a young woman did not fart in her husband's embrace.

2.124

For his pleasure he got married. On his thinking it over he got divorced.

14.43

My husband needn't bring me grass; it will not make a decoration for my genitals.

Not Sure What To Call These

1.109

You cannot butt me with your horns! Who is it that you are butting? You cannot kill me -- I am running away!

1.14

Whatever it is that hurts you, don't talk to anyone about it.

UET 6/2 253

A man without a god -- for a strong man it is no loss.

12.a13

A man lost his clothes: "Let me run away"

13.6

The thief extends winter to the beginning of summer.

17.b3/19.a1

I was a youth -- now my youthful vigor has left my loins, like a run-away donkey. My black mountain has sprouted white gypsum. My mongoose, which used to eat strong-smelling food, can no longer stretch its neck even towards a jar of ghee.

Relationships

26.c6

I am not dear to the man I hold dear. He has profited at my expense while I was flapping my arms like a bird.

1.148

Girl, your brother cannot choose for you; whom do you choose?

3.36

The voluptuous slave girl says: "Let Iškur, god king split the fertile ground like a cucumber."

1.159

An unfaithful penis matches an unfaithful vagina.

16.b4/23.7

A shepherd's sex appeal is his penis; a gardener's sex appeal is his hair.

21.c13

My vagina brings me slavery. Will anyone take my vagina then?

Class Warfare

1.57

The lives of the poor do not survive their deaths.

The instructions of Šuruppag: c.5.6.1

You should not have **sex** with your slave girl: she will chew you up.

1.16

He who possesses many things is constantly on guard.

17.b4

The poor man does not strike his son a single blow; he treasures him highly forever.

1.18

Possessions are flying birds -- they never find a place to settle.

19.d11

As a slave girl, I have no authority over my mistress. So let me pull at my husband's hair.

1.23

To be wealthy and demanding more is abominable.

UET 6/2 260

Moving about defeats poverty.

Potty Talk

2.100

The lamentation priest wipes his bottom: "One should not remove what belongs to my mistress **Inana**."

4.48

Its mouth, like a seal, is half; its anus is the place amongst the grass where boats are pulled from the water.

19.e3

A fool who was overwhelmed by his backside stuck his hand up his backside.

CBS 7867

Like a man who eats sesame oil, his anus farts.

4.60

In respect of both expenditures and capital goods, the anus is well supplied.

4.61

Bitterness afflicted the anus; but it entered by way of the mouth.

4.62

The anus breaks wind; talking produces excessive words.

About Beasts

5.94

Control the dog, but love the puppy!

5.97

A dog which is played with turns into a puppy.

2.d7

Now, you should not sleep in the reedbeds: the marsh rats will eat you.

5.x5

Nine wolves having caught 10 sheep, there was one too many and they did not know how to share out the portions. A fox came along and said: "Let me allocate the portions for you! The nine of you take one sheep. I by myself shall take nine -- this shall be my share!"

5.14

The dog snarls at an ox scrubbed with soap.

Truly Deep Sayings About Beasts

2.118

In the city with no dogs, the fox is boss.

3.33

He who says "I will live for today" is bound like a bull with a leash tied to his nose-ring.

2.14

Fate is a dog walking always behind a man.

2.79

For a donkey there is no stench. For a donkey there is no washing with soap.

5.26

From so many oxen, is there no dung?

5.56

When the lion came to the sheepfold, there was a dog wearing a leash of spun wool.

Mystical or Just Weird Sayings About Beasts

2.60

Each fox is even more of a fox than its mother.

3.153

The goat spoke in the manner of a wise old woman but acted in the manner of an unclean woman.

28.5

An eagle (?) enters a man's mouth.

2.62

The fox could not build his own house, so he got a job at his friend's house as a construction worker.

2.61

If the hearing of the fox is bad, its foot will be crippled.

The fox's tail is heavy: it carries a harrow.

The fox's door-bolt is a wooden beam.

Incredibly Obvious Potty Talk About Beasts

5.1

The elephant spoke to himself: "There is nothing like me among all the creatures of Šakkan!" The wren answered him: "But I, in my own small way, was created just as you were!" The elephant spoke to himself: "Among all the creatures of Šakkan, the one that can defecate like me has yet to be created!" The wren answered him: "But I, in my own small way, can defecate just as much as you!"

2.81

One does not marry a three-year-old wife, as a donkey does.

2.92

An ox with diarrhea -- its dung is a long trail!

2.117

The dog licks its shriveled penis with its tongue.

Mystical or Just Weird Potty Talk About Beasts

2.67

The fox, having urinated into the sea, said: "The depths of the sea are my urine!"

5.84

The dog gnawing on a bone says to his anus: "This is going to hurt you!"

2.78

A donkey beating its penis against its belly.

5.44

Make the donkey sit like this! Make it lift its shriveled penis!

2.80

A widow donkey distinguishes itself by breaking wind.

8.b9

He gets his behind in his mouth, like a hippopotamus (?).