

Ur-Ningirsu, an unfulfilled promise

By: Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

(Hint: press the CTRL key when clicking on a link to make it display in a separate tab.)



Ur-Ningirsu, *ensi* of Lagash, circa 2120 - 2113 B.C. See the [complete statue](#).

Ur-Ningirsu was the son of Gudea, the *ensi* (ruler, governor) of Lagash. Gudea reigned during difficult and dangerous times. The Akkadian Empire, which had ruled Sumer for almost 200 years, had been overrun by the Gutians, nomadic tribesmen from the north. The Gutians also conquered parts of Sumer. Despite the political instability of the region, Gudea managed to give his citizens twenty years of peace and prosperity. The people of Lagash also enjoyed an artistic renaissance during his reign.



Gudea, the father of Ur-Ningirsu.

Judging by the realistic statue of Ur-Ningirsu (shown at the end of the page) which was created near the end of Gudea's reign, Ur-Ningirsu was just 21 years old when he ascended to the throne.

The "years names" of Ur-Ningirsu's reign:

The Sumerians did not have a single comprehensive calendar for the entire nation. Instead, each city-state had its own individual calendar based on the reign of its monarch. The years were not numbered (e.g., 2013). Rather, each year was named for an important event that occurred within it.

The year Ur-Ningirsu became governor

The year after Ur-Ningirsu became governor

Year in which the šita-abba priest was chosen by means of the omens

Year in which the lumah priest of Baba was chosen by means of the omens

Year in which the high priestess of Iškur was chosen by means of the omens

Year the throne bearer of the god Ningirsu was chosen

Year in which the city of Uruk was destroyed

The first thing noticeable about this list is the second year of Ur-Ningirsu's reign, "the year *after* Ur-Ningirsu became governor." Although it wasn't unusual for a Sumerian year name to be titled "the year after" an important event, this suggests there were no accomplishments in Ur-Ningirsu's second year that were worthy of mention. By contrast, Gudea's second year was named "the year when the canal Ningirsu-ushumgal ('Ningirsu is a dragon') was dug." Ur-Namma's second year was "the year in which Ur-Namma the king put in order the ways (of the people in the country) from below to above." The lack of any major accomplishments in Ur-Ningirsu's second year may be due to his youth and inexperience. He was quite young when he became a king.

The other thing noticeable about the year names is the preponderance of religious themes. Although Sumerian year names frequently mention religion, in Ur-Ningirsu's reign there is little mention of anything else. There is no political agenda, such as "the year Ur-Namma made justice in the land" or the year that he built a defensive wall around the city of Ur. Notably absent from the year names of Ur-Ningirsu is a reference to major building projects, like the digging of a canal, the construction of a new temple, or the completion of a city wall. Also missing is any reference to war. He was named for the god of war (Ningirsu), and his statue shows humble [emissaries](#) at his feet offering him tribute, but there is no record of him being involved in wars of foreign conquest or civil wars against other Sumerian city-states. Although the year names indicate that Ur-Ningirsu was deeply religious like his father, it seems likely that Ur-Ningirsu would have added other non-religious year names (that dealt with war, politics, and justice) had he lived longer.

This leads to the third thing noticeable about the list. It is a very short list. Ur-Ningirsu reigned for only seven years. He was quite young when he died.

There is some debate about the final year name, "the year in which the city of Uruk was destroyed" by the Gutians. Some scholars think it occurred during the reign of Gudea rather than Ur-Ningirsu. In either case, it is a significant event. Uruk was the city of Utu-hengal. His seven year reign is roughly contemporaneous with that of Ur-Ningirsu. Along with his young military governor, Ur-Namma, Utu-hengal won a major victory over the Gutians, capturing their king Tirigan and two of his generals. It was the beginning of Sumerian independence after two centuries of foreign domination. Even so, the Gutians continued to be a threat. Ur-Namma fought them again after he became the king of Ur; one of his year names was called, "the year Gutium was destroyed." He would later die in combat in yet another battle with the Gutians.



Ur-Namma, the king of Ur.

If Uruk was defeated during the reigns of Gudea or Ur-Ningirsu it means that Utu-hengal's city was destroyed just before, or just after, his victory over the Gutians. This raises a couple of interesting questions. If Utu-hengal's city was destroyed beforehand, how did he manage to later defeat the Gutians if he did not have a home base? If his city was destroyed after his victory over the Gutians (and after his death), is this why Ur-Namma had to fight them again a second time? In any case, it seems that "the year Uruk was destroyed" should not be associated with Ur-Ningirsu, but with another king. If this year name is removed from Ur-Ningirsu's calendar, it means he reigned for only six years, not seven.

Ur-Namma and Ur-Ningirsu were about the same age. Growing up, they were young noblemen from neighboring city-states (although Ur-Namma had a lesser rank). They lived only 40 miles apart, so it's reasonable to assume that they knew each other. They may have even been friends.

Lagash had always been one of the most important Sumerian city-states. Evidence seems to suggest that it was preeminent during the reign of Gudea as the Sumerians began to emerge from centuries of foreign domination. Gudea himself was a very shrewd and successful king, and Ur-Ningirsu was tutored during his entire life on the subtleties of kingship and diplomacy. Ur-Ningirsu was poised to become one of the great kings of Sumerian history, but his life was tragically cut short.



How did he die? Was it an accident or a disease? An accident seems a likely explanation for the death of such a young man, although an early death by disease was always a possibility in the ancient world. Another possibility is that he died in battle, in one of the many unrecorded wars of the region, in an attempt to establish his credentials as a strong and effective king. Although Ur-Ningirsu seems to have been a pacifist like his father, even Gudea was known to have fought at least one battle, “the year in which the city of Anšan was smitten by weapons.”

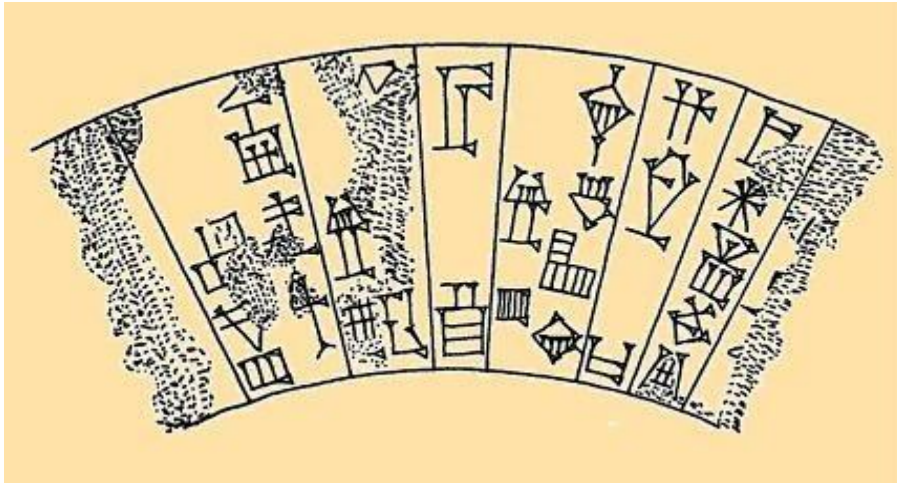
One more possibility remains: a coup d'état. At first, this would seem unlikely. A coup d'état against the son of Gudea? Nonetheless, in the seven years after his death there were five different ensis of Lagash. This would suggest a mad scramble for power by numerous pretenders to the throne, a sure sign of political upheaval, or possibly a bloody civil war. However, it cannot be known with certainty if this was the result of a coup d'état.

Ur-Namma, the king of Ur, soon became the king of all of Sumer, including Lagash. Ur-Namma thus became the king of the Neo-Sumerian Revival, instead of Ur-Ningirsu.

Unfortunately, given the vagaries of the ancient past, we may never know why Ur-Ningirsu died so young. He was destined for greatness.

He was only 28 years old.

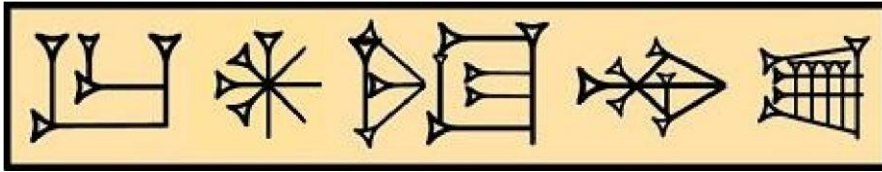
Inscriptions on a ceremonial mace dedicated to Ur-Ningirsu:



A realistic portrait of **Ur-Ningirsu** (Louvre, AO 4351). See [The Face of Ur-Ningirsu](#).

Here is a handsome, intelligent, and confident young man. He has a quizzical, bemused expression. His character is not yet written on his face, showing years of diligence and strain, like the faces of Gudea and Ur-Namma. This is the face of a young man at the beginning of

his life and career. This is how Ur-Ningirsu looked when he became a king, full of promise,
his life a promise unfulfilled.



Ur-Ningirsu