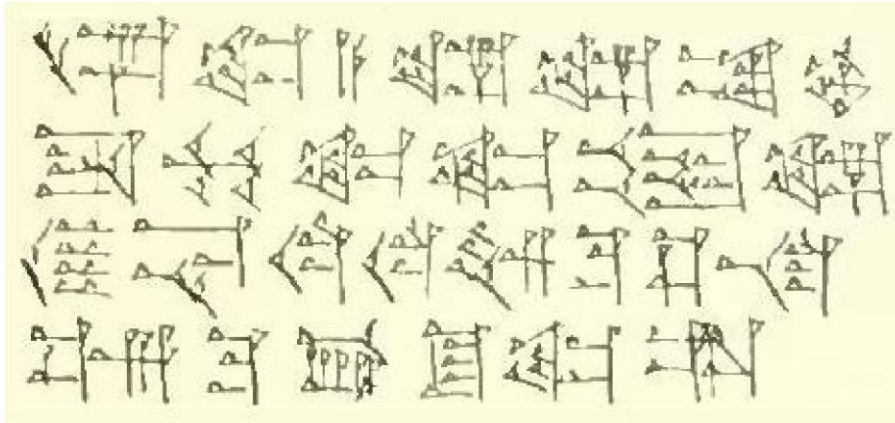


Transliteration for The Princess Wife (part 1)

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.)



Some of the cuneiform signs on tablet BE 31,28. (CDLI record [P345102](https://cdli.oxfordjournals.org/record/P345102)).

In 1914, Stephen H. Langdon wrote a scholarly paper about an obscure cuneiform tablet called BE 31,28. The tablet is owned by the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. Langdon classified it as a literary tablet, as A Dialogue between Two Women, but he never published a complete translation of it. That's because he couldn't read the entire tablet, so most of the writing remained untranslatable. BE 28 is officially entitled "Dialogue between fPN and fPN," where fPN means female Personal Name, which shows how little of the tablet was translated since even the names of the two protagonists wasn't known. Langdon was a world renowned Sumerologist, an expert in the field. He could translate complicated literary tablets, and yet he could not read this one simple tablet.

Throughout the years BE 28 made the scholarly rounds. Many prominent Sumerologists attempted to translate this tablet, but without success. They speculated on the meaning of various sentences, but they could not make any sense of the tablet as a whole. The sentences never coalesced into a single cohesive story.

The same is true for Tablet #36 in the Library of Congress. It had been around for 100 years and the experts couldn't translate it either.

In December 2008, I posted a translation of Tablet 36, the story of The Great Fatted Bull.

The very next day, December 7, a date that will live in infamy, Bendt Alster, a world famous Sumerologist, announced that Tablet #36 wasn't really about a great fatted bull. He said it was actually a missing part of the Dialogue between Two Women, based on Langdon's incomplete, unpublished translation and Alster's own "somewhat incomplete manuscript" that had also never been published. We had a big fight about it (via email).

So I posted a new page on my website where I challenged him to a "Sumerian Showdown!", my translation against his. I hoped to provoke Alster into attempting to disprove my translation, and failing that, he would be forced to confirm it. I said if these tablets are indeed a "Dialogue between Two Women," then they are of great historical importance, here in the Feminist Era, and he needs to publish them. I said this because I wanted to see why he thought the two tablets were related. Was BE 28 a continuation of The Great Fatted Bull? I also asked him to publish the line-drawing of the tablet, but he refused.

Needless to say, Alster could not convert the story of The Great Fatted Bull into a Dialogue between Two Women, and neither was he able to offer a complete translation of BE 28.

That was seven years ago. Just recently I finally saw a copy of the line-drawing for BE 28, and I immediately knew why Alster thought the tablets were two separate parts of the same story.

Many of the sentences occur word for word on both tablets. In addition, both tablets use many of the same "trick signs," such as mahX and gemeX (explained below) to disguise the meaning of the texts. That's because both stories are political satires about lords and kings. Since ridiculing kings was a dangerous thing to do, the scribes deliberately made the tablets difficult to read – to keep their meanings secret. That is why the professional Sumerologists were unable to decipher the tablets. The tablets were meant to fool even other Sumerians.

I was able to translate this tablet only because I had already "decoded" Tablet #36, so I wasn't fooled by the trick signs. As soon as I saw tablet BE 28 I knew it was a story about the Great Fatted Something, though at first I didn't know what. Soon afterwards, when I saw *anše* in line r4, I quickly realized that it's the story of The Great Fatted Donkey. However, I entitled it The Princess Wife because she is the star of the show. If you want to read a version of The Great Fatted Donkey, you can always check out my translation of SEM 114, the story of [The Great Fatted Jackass](#).

When I first published my translation of Tablet #36, the story of The Great Fatted Bull, it was quite the anomaly because there were no other tablets like it. Tablets BE 31,28 and SEM 114 prove that my reading of the signs was correct all along.

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Transliteration of tablet BE 28 31, the story of **The Princess Wife**.

by Jerald Jack Starr

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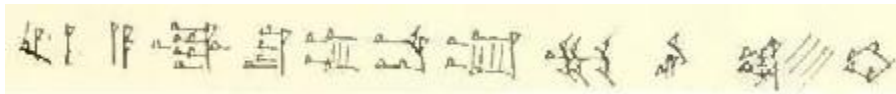
If this is your first time reading a Sumerian transliteration, you may want to read the explanatory comments at the beginning of the [Transliteration for Tablet #36](#).

See the entire line-drawing of the tablet [with line numbers](#) or [without line numbers](#)..

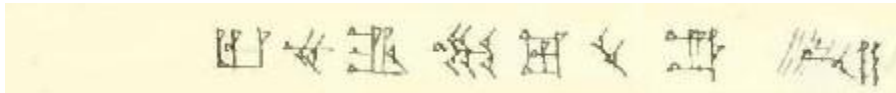
= damaged but readable sign x = damaged unreadable sign [...] = missing signs

! = miswritten sign {...} = prefix or suffix (ES) = Emesal dialect PN = personal name

Obverse:



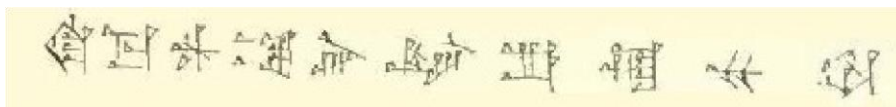
o1a #? a ak šu-um-du-um mu- ni inim#- dug3
 ? to act lip (ES, nundum) name his/her word sweet



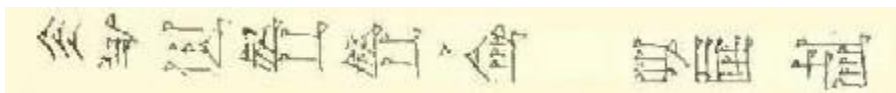
o1b ur nu za3 mu-lu gam kalag #?
 servant without-equal PN bow down powerful ?

The sign inim is partially damaged, with just the “head” of the sign remaining.

In the Sumerian format, the indentation of the second part of the line shows that it is a continuation of the first part.



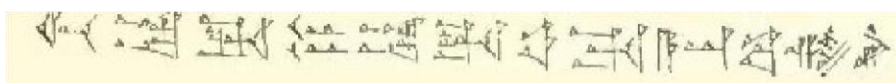
o2 ki-ma an ze2-ir lu2- kal-la nu- te
 earth heaven feel worried man- strong not- near



o3 eš- ir- -da zu2-zu2 na- guru3- la
 much-plunder-with PN man- imbued- wealth

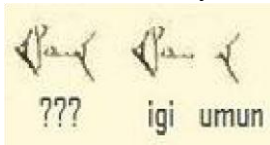
Guru3 is often used as a modifier meaning “to bear, carry, to be imbued with, to be loaded.” Thus, man-imbued-wealth becomes “wealthy man.”

Zuzu's name could be interpreted as Zuh-zuh (the same signs but with different definitions and pronunciations) meaning "steal-steal."



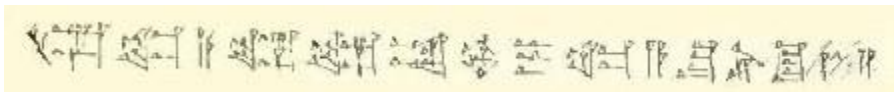
o4 igi umun ze2 la-na- lum ze2 šu-na-tam ba-na-am3 ba gi- ni

behold lord you wealth- man-satisfied you authority-man-trusted giving-man rations verdict-his



I went crazy looking for a sign that looked like the first one in this sentence. Then I realized it was actually two signs joined together, *igi* and *umun* (ES, en). Four of the signs in this sentence are joined together in this same way, some of which are merged across each other. There are so many joined signs that I thought maybe they were some sort of “ligatures” (signs that are “tied” together and pronounced in reverse order, like *lugal*, which is written *gal-lu2* but pronounced *lu2-gal*). As it turns out, they are just normal signs. Perhaps they are merged together to save space on the line because there are so many signs crowded into the sentence. On the other hand, perhaps they were written this way to help obscure the context of the tablet, to disguise the secret meaning of the story.

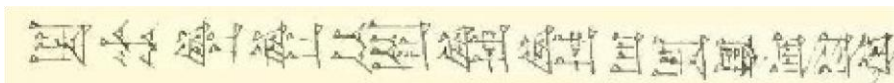
Speaking of which: U (*umun*) is a seldom-used alternative sign for *en*, meaning “lord.” It is definitely used to obscure the fact that the story is mocking great lords and kings. In this way, it is like *Lu2-mahX* on Tablet #36, which is used to disguise the “king” context in the story of The Great Fatted Bull, as described in the [Transliteration](#).



o5 šah2 ka-a gu7 gu7 zi2 mur-i ka-a šu eš2-la2-a
pig mouth-in food cut fodder-captured mouth-in hand choke-in/on

Many sentences on this tablet also occur on Tablet #36, the story of The Great Fatted Bull, and on tablet SEM 114, the story of [The Great Fatted Jackass](#). In this transliteration, I do not point out all of the occurrences because there are so many of them. I mention them only when they are relevant to the discussion at hand.

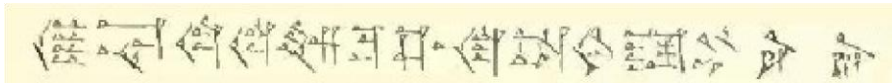
This line is lacking a verb meaning “to place” the food in his mouth, so I used the verb from the corresponding line on Tablet #36 ([r4](#)). *Du3* means “to drive in,” which in the context of the sentence is interpreted as “to cram.” He crams the food into his mouth and chokes on it.



o6 da-gu10 gu3 ka aĝ2-(ES, niĝ2)- gu7-gu7 šu- da- bi eš2-dab5#-ba
side-my cry out mouth thing(s) to eat (food) hands-with-these to-grasp

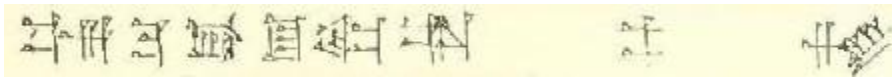
The first part of this sentence is written *da-ĝu10*, “my flanks” but I translated it as *da-ĝu10 lu*, “my flanks grow fat” because that’s the way it’s written on Tablet #36 (line [r5](#)). The *lu* sign is missing in the above sentence. On both tablets, *lu* (defined as “abundant”) means “to be fat.”

Gu3: “to cry out, often said of animals.” The definition of this sign changes depending on which animal is mentioned. A bull *bellows*, a lion *roars*, a donkey *brays*, etc.



o7 ġi6 dim2 sa2-sa2 ni2-ba nigin na-ta utul2 gug2-munu4 ir-ir
 night forms rivals by themselves wander man-from large bowl cakes-malted plunder

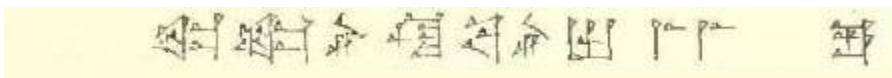
Ir = plunder/steal. The sentence is written “a man is *plundering* a bowl of malted cakes,” but I translated it as “a man is *stealing* a bowl of malted cakes.” “Plundering” is more meaningful in the context of the tablet, but “plundering a bowl of malted cakes” would be confusing for a first-time reader.



o8a uġ3 ba- bi eš2- gu3 mahX sig3 gin6
 people ration these to- cry out great burning indigestion permanent

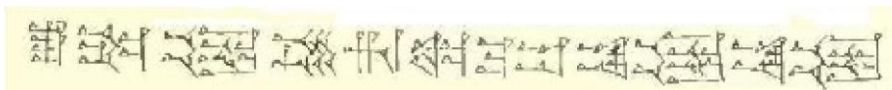
MahX (AL/mah2) is *the* trick sign on Tablet #36, the story of The Great Fatted Bull. It is used to obscure the “king” context of the story, as explained in line o3 of the [Transliteration](#). It is also used on SEM 114, The Great Fatted Jackass, in line [o1](#).

For a description of all the trick signs on the tablets, see [Sumerian Trick Signs](#).

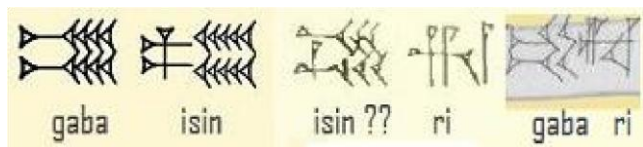


o8b kiri3 kiri3- mu5 la-ba-ni-ur la2-la2-{e}
 nose nose- fattened not-his-servant throttle

Variations of this sentence occurs on all three tablets (SEM 114, [r8](#) and Tablet #36, [r8](#)). On Tablet #36 the phrase is written kiri3 kiri3, “nose to nose,” but in the above sentence it is written kiri3 kiri3-*ni*, where ni is the suffix for “his,” meaning “nose to *his* nose.” This would be the normal way to translate the phrase. However, ni is completely unnecessary because both noses are “his nose,” as it were, since two men are fighting. In this sentence, NI is actually mu5, meaning “good, beautiful, pleasing, plump, and rarely, “fatted.” The scribe had to get “fatted” in there somewhere. After all, this is the story of the Great *Fatted* Donkey. But the scribe uses the lesser known definition of NI (mu5) to get the message across, rather than the usual niga (fatted), which would be too obvious.



o9 e-ne-eġ3 (ES, inim) gaba!-ri ka-{ba}-ab ze2-eġ3 ze2-eġ3 (ES, šum2, twice)
 oath adversary mouth opened give (plural)



gaba-ri, "enemy," as written on this tablet and on Tablet #36.

This line appears word-for-word on Tablet #36, but on BE 31,28 it has a slight difference.

There is a small vertical mark added to gaba. It's a very minor difference, but it's enough to change the definition of the sign. With the added mark, gaba becomes isin, meaning "stalk." Stalk doesn't make any sense in the sentence, making it confusing for the reader. It also "hides" the enemy (gaba-ri). In a way, the enemy disappears completely behind that one single stalk. Now there's no enemy in the sentence, only a stalk, so the reader would not guess that la2 in the previous sentence actually means "to throttle." In a normal sentence, la2 has a dozen other meanings that would make more sense in the context of a stalk ("small, light, hold, carry," to name just a few). So, without an enemy in this sentence, it's unlikely that anyone would correctly guess the meaning of "throttle" for the sign la2. Fortunately, I was able to easily read the above sentence because it is written correctly on Tablet #36. Otherwise it would have been a struggle to decipher this sentence if I was reading it for the first time.

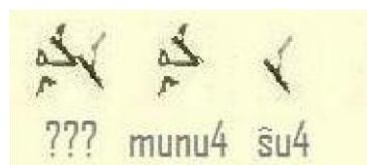
Without an enemy in this sentence, there is no conflict. Without a conflict, the overall context of the tablet becomes difficult to discern, making it harder to translate the tablet. When I was trying to translate Tablet #36, a big breakthrough occurred when I realized there was a conflict in the story, so I was able to correctly interpret the signs by using this context. On this tablet, the conflict is obscured by the simple addition of one little mark.

It's not like the scribe didn't know any better. He wrote the same sign (du8) correctly at the end of line o14.



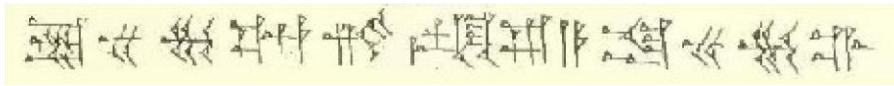
o10 munu4 šu4 gu7 ġeš-ur3 ne ? [maḫX gu7-ka be6] ud?!

malt all fodder abandon this [great food-mouth (eating) to diminish]



I drove myself crazy looking for a sign that looked like the first one in this sentence. Then I realized it is really just two signs joined together. The first sign is actually a simplified version of munu4, "malt," as shown on CDLI [P392795](https://cdli.ucla.edu/p392795). The second sign is U (šu4, "totality, all"). It seems I would have learned my lesson the first time, as explained in line o4 above.

I translated the rest of the line as, "This great eating to diminish!" because that's the way it is written on Tablet #36 (line r10). The last sign in this sentence, designated as ud?!, should be be6, like on Tablet #36.

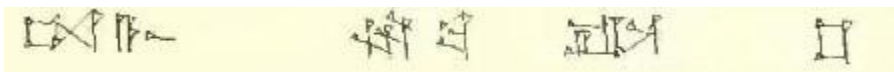


o11 nir-nu- mu uĝ3 gi {d}en-lil2-a suhuš nu- mu mar
lordly-not- he people judgment Enlil support not-he place



O12 dam a-ni henburX tar gemeX-ni# gemeX zi2 li- ne henburX konu
wife his grain-his decide servant-her slave cut twig this(one) grain-his get

There are two trick signs in this sentence, henburX and gemeX. They both occur twice.
See [Sumerian Trick Signs](#).



O13 ta-a-aš šag4 ba/zu! mahX lugud2
why? what reason? stomach know great reduction



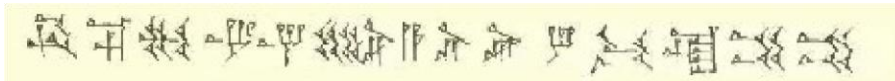
zu, as it appears in line r2

zu!: A variation of this sentence occurs on Tablet #36. It is written šag4 **zu** mahX lugud2, "his stomach **knows** a great reduction," meaning "a great hunger." In the above sentence, zu seems to be written as ba, but it is actually zu. The scribe uses a very simplified version of zu in line r2, with only one interior vertical line, as shown on the above left. The scribe omits the vertical line for the sign in the above sentence so that it looks like ba.

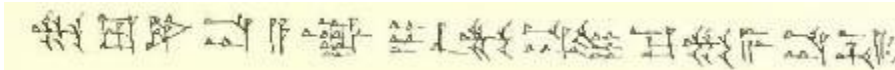
As explained in o9, the scribe adds a mark to gaba so that it looks like isin. Now the scribe omits a line on zu so that it looks like ba. The scribe does this several times on the tablet. That's why many signs in the linedrawing are denoted with a "!", meaning "written wrong." Of course they could all be scribal errors, but I believe they're done deliberately to obscure the meaning of the text. Sometimes the scribe adds a mark, (gaba o9, dim2 o20, and še r9). Sometimes he omits a mark (zu o13 and zuh r6). They are all signs that are written correctly elsewhere on the tablet.

It's just a little something something here and there to keep the reader off balance.

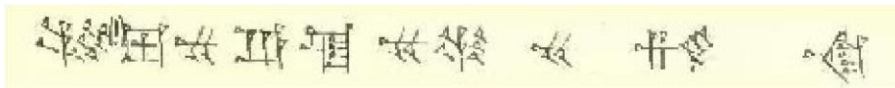
The scribe of Tablet #36 does something similar. On four out of five occurrences of gu4 (bull), the sign is missing the vertical mark,



o14 geštin si mu sur-sur henburX a-ni ir gar gemeX-la du8-du8
 wine fill he squeezes henbur his plunder pile slave-happy spread



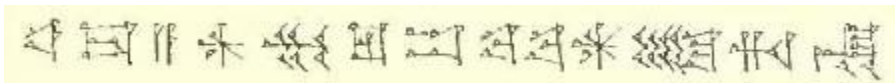
o15 mu-lu lu2 du a- ak i bar mu ġen lum ma mu ukur3 dim2!
 PN person go to- act defeat outside he walk manure he pauper made



o16 nunusX-a! lu nu-kal-la nunusX nu-zid na
 woman-in abundance not-powerful no-woman no- virtue man

NunusX is *the* trick sign of this tablet. It is best explained with pictures on a separate page, see [Nu-nus](#).

The sign a! is explained below in line o20b.



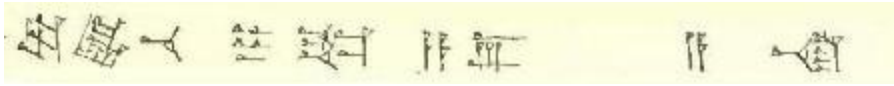
o17 u4-da-am3 mu-lu ab-ba ba-an-tu dal/dirig en
 storm-like PN father PN fly/supreme lord

RI = dal/dirig = fly/supreme.

Dal is a verb meaning “to fly.” If used as such, the verb is awkwardly placed in the sentence, almost at the end of the line with just one sign dangling after it. Another interpretation is that the sign is a seldom-used alternative definition for dirig, an adjective meaning “supreme.” In this case it would apply to en (lord), meaning “supreme lord.” But if it’s used this way, then the sentence is lacking a verb.

I doubt that it’s a scribal error, that the scribe simply forgot to add the verb. I believe the sentence was deliberately written this way to make it difficult to read. I also think the scribe fully intended for the sign to do “double duty” as both a verb and an adjective, so that’s the way I used it: “Like a storm Mulu **flies** to his father Bantu, the **supreme** lord.”

In Sumerian, if a syllable begins with the same letter that the previous syllable ended with, then the syllables merge together. Thus, Ba-an-tu becomes Ban-tu.



o18 šag4-kug bad i-bi2 (ES, igi) za sa a na
heart-pure open behold bead jewelry of stone



o19 bi sam2 sam2 aĝ2-(ES, niĝ2)-ne pisan gu7- gu7
these barter thing-this basket food

As per the *Sumerian Lexicon*, page 228, sam2 (sa10) means, “n., equivalent; (barter) purchase; sale price; merchandise (Akk. loanword from *šīmu(m)* I, ‘to buy, purchase; goods for commerce’ and “v., to barter, exchange.”

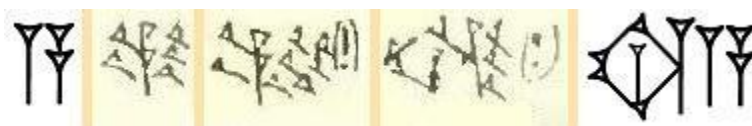


o20a i-bi2 (ES, igi) mahX! ba dim2 mahX mahX dim2
behold great gift make splendid magnificent to fashion

Ba usually means "give" (verb). Here it means "gift" (noun).



o20b ta-nu kar! bi
from-not marketplace these



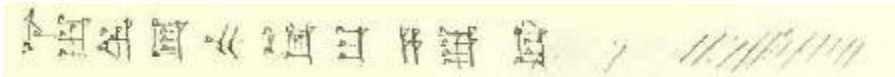
a nunusX nunusX-a ! kar ! kar (te-a)

In [o16](#), nunusX-a is written with the sign **a** compressed between nunusX and lu, as if it had originally been omitted and then squeezed in afterwards (as shown in the third sign from the left, denoted by the !). As a result, the sign **a** looks like three vertical strokes. These same vertical strokes appear after the sign kar! (te-a), even though there is plenty of room to draw the sign **a** correctly. I don't know if was carelessness on the part of the scribe or if it was done to obscure the meaning of the sign kar.



Mulu. Or is it Zuzu?

Reverse:

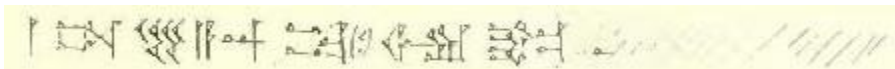


r1 dam šag4-egir2 nu- mes- ba za-e umuš [...]
 wife heart-princess not-hero-give you plan



r2 gemeX-gin zu! am3 ta [lal]
 maidservant- trust inform that character [lack]

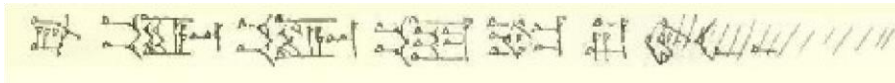
Lal/la2, “lack, deficiency.” The end of this sentence is damaged, but the corresponding line on SEM 114 ([r5](#)) shows lal at the end of the line, meaning “a *lack* of character.”



r3 1 {diš}-ta še-am3 ad pad3 ne [en na ba]
 one- each sale price bead reveal this [lord stone give]

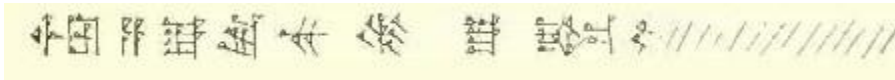
En na ba. These signs occur at the end of [r6](#) on tablet SEM 114. It translates as “the lord gave you these stones (beads).”

Sam2/še-am3: The sign sam2 is composed of the sign ninda, which forms the outer shell, and the internal signs of še-am3, as shown below. In the above sentence, only the signs še-am3 appear. Perhaps the scribe omitted the ninda portion of the sign, intentionally or not. On the other hand, the corresponding line on SEM 114 reads "še 1 {diš} sila3," which translates as "grain 1 unit" (še is the sign for grain) as the selling price for each bead. So perhaps the above line should read "1 each [unit of] grain" for each bead. Take your pick.



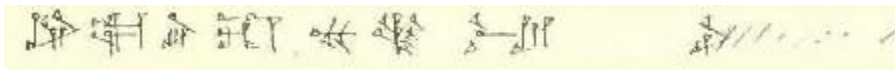
r4 bi sam2-sam2 aĝ2-(ES, niĝ2)-ne pisan-sur3# [x,...]
 these purchase thing-this basket-half

At the end of the corresponding line on SEM 114 ([r7](#)) there appears to be a damaged and compressed version of šaĥ2, meaning “pig,” which leads me to believe that the half basket contains “pig slop.” Mulu "eats his food like a pig" and so does Lu-mah on Tablet #36.



r5 u3 za-e zu- nu nunusX e-ne-[eĝ3#? (ES, inim)] [...]
 and you know- not woman ...

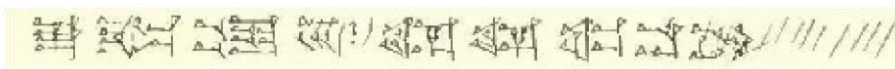
I translated this line as, "You don't know women," but with the trick meaning of the sign nu-nus, this line could easily be translated as, "You don't know beads." Both translations fit perfectly in the context of the story, and I believe both versions are the intended meanings of the signs. That is why I used both versions in the translation..



r6 lu2-zuh!- ir- ra nu-nus munus-kin du3 [...]
 man-rob-plunder- to/for woman prostitute all

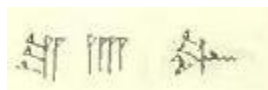
Gu3/zuh/saĝ: This phrase occurs in line [r2](#) of Tablet #36, except it is written as lu2 **gu3** ir, “man who cries out (bellows) for plunder.” In the above sentence, it is clearly written as lu2 **saĝ** ir. It is also written this way on [r10](#) of SEM 114. With **saĝ** it could be translated as “he who is a person who plunders,” which is awkward sounding. So I translated it as **zuh**, which means “to steal,” i.e., “man who robs and plunders,” because it sounds better and it does not change the meaning of the sentence. The sign was probably miswritten to obscure the meaning of the sentence. KA (gu3,zuh) and saĝ are essentially the same sign, except ka has a few more interior marks. As mentioned before, the scribe adds or omits marks on a sign to keep the reader off balance.

Munus-kin: Munus means “woman,” kin means “work.” I suggest munus-kin means “prostitute.” This is described in detail on a separate page. See [Munus-kin](#) on SumerianShakespeare.com.



r7 e-ne-eĝ3 (ES, inim) pisan#? gu7-gu7 sag du [x, ...]
 decree basket food person go

Mur means "fodder," hur means "forever" and "ever again." The "ever again" adds a nice twist to the end of the story, suggesting the events have happened before, and they will happen again, ever again, for all of eternity. It's very clever.



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te? 4{diš} ?

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