

ANCIENT BABYLONIAN AGRICULTURAL PRECEPTS

TRANSLATED BY G. BERTIN

THE tablet which contains the agricultural precepts is one of the series called by the Babylonians, from the first line of the first tablet, *uludinebisu = ana itti-su*,¹ formerly read *ki-kankala-bi-su = ana itti-su*. This collection, which must have contained at least ten or twelve tablets, was a compendium of precepts and prescriptions written at an early date in Akkadian for the guidance of the people in their various professions.² The work, as we know it from the fragments in the British Museum, is accompanied with a Babylonian translation, probably of the time of Sargon of Agade; and the fragments recovered are those of a Ninevite transcription made in the time of Assurbanipal for his library.

The tablets are divided into two columns, the left-hand one giving the Akkadian and the right-hand one the translation. The first six tablets and part of the seventh contained what may be called the comment-

¹ E. G. Pinches.

² *S. B. A.*, vol. viii. part 2; *Akkadian Precepts*, pp. 4 and 5.

ary, that is, the list of the most difficult words and expressions, with explanations or translations. The notion, strange at first sight, of beginning with the commentary, appears natural when we bear in mind that these works were the text-books of the Babylonians, which they had to copy in order to master their complicated system of writing and the literary Akkadian language¹; the text-book therefore began, as in our reading-books for children, with simple expressions or isolated words; the learner having acquired these, next undertook and understood without difficulty the connected text.

These tablets contained no laws, as has been sometimes stated, but precepts drawn, perhaps by a philosopher like Confucius or Mencius, from the customs and usages of the time. The seventh tablet contained "Precepts for a man in his private life."² The agricultural precepts covered no doubt more than one tablet; the only one we possess is partly mutilated, and, the colophon being lost, we do not know what place exactly it occupied in the collection. What we possess, however, strange to say, has never been entirely published; the fragments found at first were published by the trustees of the British

¹ An exercise book (on clay) has been found in which some parts of these tablets have been copied three times over for practice; this fragment of a copy-book is now in the British Museum.

² *W. A. I.*, ii. pl. 10, and v. pls. 24 and 25. It is the tablet which revealed to me the real character of this collection. See my paper which contains a translation of it; it must be remembered that our knowledge of Akkadian has made great progress since its publication. A mutilated tablet of "Commercial Precepts," which belong probably to the same collection, is published, *W. A. I.*, ii. pl. 13.

Museum,¹ and a fragment found afterwards was published by Dr. Haupt.² No complete translation of the fragments has been attempted,³ no doubt because the tablet was considered to be a list of unconnected words and sentences; some of the paragraphs have, however, been incidentally explained in order to support the interpretation of other texts.⁴

In the following translation the Akkadian has been taken as the standard text, but it has often been necessary to follow the Babylonian translation. Some parts of the translation are doubtful, partly on account of the mutilated state of the text and partly because, as many words are not found anywhere else, we have no means of testing their signification,⁵ and some paragraphs are still obscure.

¹ *W. A. I.*, ii, pls. 14 and 15.

² *Keilschrifttexte*, p. 74. In the same publication Dr. Haupt has also republished the two first columns, pp. 71-73; it is difficult to see why he has not also republished the other parts, so as to make the publication complete.

³ Prof. Sayce has given in the *Records of the Past*, vol. xi. p. 153, the translation of the fourth column nearly complete.

⁴ The difficult passages have been generally omitted, and in the vocabularies already made public many words found in these texts are left out.

⁵ I may also state that the translation is free, as my object is to give the meaning of the text and not that of the isolated words; I reserve the discussion of the words for a critical paper, where the text can be reproduced.

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COLUMN I

(First paragraph lost.)

- II. In the sixth month¹ of the year, he (the agriculturist) marks his establishment.
 - III. He agrees about the covenant.
 - IV. He completes the wording of the covenant.
 - V. He collects his tax-gift and surrounds the field with hedges.
 - VI. He brings together the gazelles (his flock) and gathers the birds.
 - VII. [He is to work] from dawn to dusk.
 - VIII. When the time of the working of the field comes, he ploughs, rakes, and divides it.
 - IX. For every sixty measures of grain the farmer takes eight measures, wheat produce, straw in stokes, grain thrashed and winnowed.
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- X. Field of half. In this case a field of culture is merely for culture.
 - XI. He (the agriculturist) goes as associate to his associate.
 - XII. He ploughs the field, he keeps his seeds, he takes the birds together, and gathers manure.
 - XIII. He waters the field and multiplies the seeds.

¹ Only the Akkadian text of this paragraph remains ; it is interesting to note that the month is designated by a number, as in some of the omen and astronomical tablets.

- XIV. When the time of working the field comes he ploughs and rakes it, and the overseer reports to the lord of the field.

- XV. Field of partnership. He (the agriculturist) takes a field of partnership with the lord of the field.
- XVI. Everything is made equal and on the same footing; man as man, house as house, seed as seed.
- XVII. When the time of working (reaping) comes, the master sends from his place as help a long cart, an ox for thrashing the corn; and the corn of the field . . .
- (One paragraph lost.)

COLUMN II

(Three paragraphs lost.)

- IV. He draws water¹ for the field . . .
- V. He takes possession of the field.
- VI. He fences with sticks the ground to be ploughed.
- VII. He has the field ploughed and rakes it.
- VIII. He waters it once and twice.
- IX. He fixes hooks for the pails for drawing water.
- X. When the time of working comes, in a field of fifths the farmer takes one part.

- XI. As for the other divisions, he takes the percentage according to the division.
- XII. In a field of a third, he takes a third.
- XIII. In a field of a fourth, he takes a fourth.
- XIV. In a field of a fifth, he takes a fifth.
- XV. In a field of a tenth, he takes a tenth.

¹ The paragraph is mutilated, it may refer to the establishment of some irrigating instrument.

XVI. As for the tithe, he gives one part as tithe to the palace.

(One paragraph lost.)

(REVERSE.)—COLUMN III

- I. Of property.
 - II. Various kinds of divisions (*or* land tenures) :
 division of half,
 division of a third,
 division of a fourth,
 division of a fifth,
 division of a tenth,
 division with a tithe.
 - III. Furnitures and fixtures :
 furniture of the palace,
 fences,
 sticks for fences,
 poles,
 threshold,
 ploughing instruments,
 ploughing instruments of the field,
 poles of the plantation.
 - IV. Enclosure (*or* garden) :
 enclosure of the palace,
 enclosure of the lord,
 enclosure of the associate.
-
- V. He (the agriculturist) marks the limit of his garden.
 - VI. He indicates the limit of the garden by means of boundary stones.¹
 - VII. He plants date-trees in it.
 - VIII. He waters the young plants.
 - IX. He strengthens the walls.
 - X. He completes the paling of the garden.

¹ Or palings.

- XI. The lord of the garden may give to the farmer his dismissal.
- XII. He pulls up the paling of the garden.
- XIII. He extends one enclosure to the other.
- XIV. He strengthens the walls.
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- XV. On the thirtieth of the eighth month,¹ in fine weather.
- XVI. At the time of drying dates.
- XVII. At the time of pulling off the paling.
- XVIII. In order to quit himself he delivers to the lord of the plantation two-thirds of the dates.
- XIX. He takes a fixed amount and he sends in money the amount of the produce of the date-trees.
- (A paragraph lost.)

COLUMN IV

- I. He makes secure the door and the gate.
- II. The servants' (*or* working) house and the dwelling house [also].
- III. He establishes for a dwelling his dwelling house as such.
- IV. Until the house is built, he prepares the beams and makes the foundations.
- V. He gathers together the beams which have been cut.
- VI. He arranges in rows the chief beams.
- VII. He strengthens the old house with bricks and sets up the uprights.
- VIII. When he does not work in the fields, he works in the house.
- IX. He makes a small house in the middle of the garden.
- X. He lays down the intermediary wall of his foundation.
- XI. He puts a roof over the wall he has devised.
- XII. He makes first the house of the man.

¹ In Akkadian the month *Apin*.

- XIII. Let him hold himself cautioned once and twice, even if he is not told so.
- XIV. He works and toils for himself.
- XV. He pays the wages at the time of the cessation of work.
- XVI. If his wall is not constructed strongly, he must not set up props.
- XVII. The house of comfort must be a house for his comfort.
- XVIII. He makes a house as a (proper) house for a man, as (becoming to) a man.
- XIX. If the house is not arranged as a proper house, he shall pay a fine of ten shekels.
- (Two or more paragraphs and the colophon are lost.)

The tablet from which the above is a translation is of great importance as giving us information and particulars as to the system of land tenure and cultivation of the land in the early Akkadian period. The tablet speaks first of the simple tenure, and it shows (Paragraph II) that the tenure was to begin legally from the sixth month, that is the Babylonian *Ululu*. The end of that month is no doubt meant, and it would tend to confirm the opinion that at an earlier date *Tisritu* was the first and *Ululu* the last month of the year, though the Babylonians might have had an agricultural year, as we have a financial year, a scholastic or university year, etc. After having chosen the farm and agreed to the conditions of the contract, the first step of the farmer was to determine his position towards the treasury, for, among the Babylonians as among us, the payment of the taxes is a proof of the legality of the holding.

After that the farmer had to gather his live stock. The tablet says "gazelles," and so carries us back to the earliest period, for the ox and sheep did not come originally from Babylonia, and the first animal domesticated there must have been a kind of gazelle which was found wild in the country. In the tablet, however, the word "gazelle" is no doubt taken to mean any kind of quadruped; in the same way the word "birds" designates here domesticated birds,—doves, ostriches, and at a later period hens, which were introduced a long time before the Persian conquest.¹ Being once established in his farm, he is to give all his time to it.

After these preliminaries about tenure in general come the specifications about the various kinds of tenure. The first spoken of is the tenure by half, as it is called; it appears to signify the properties which used to belong half to the lord and half to the peasant who was attached to the soil as serf. In that case the farmer worked for his master, he kept the live stock and the seeds, but everything was controlled by the agent of the landlord. In the field of partnership, on the contrary, the landlord was placed on the same footing as his tenant; if the latter gave his labour, the former had to provide him with the material, implements, utensils, stock, grain, seeds, etc.

After a lacuna of a few paragraphs the tablet

¹ I have found on a Babylonian contract tablet, two centuries older than Cyrus, the representation of a cock.

speaks of the various works to be performed by the agriculturist or farmer. The tenure of a fifth, or the tenure in which the farmer took a fifth of the produce for himself, was probably the most common in early times, and for this reason is mentioned here; but we also get an account of the percentage to be taken in the other sorts of tenure. To understand this we must suppose that the character of the tenure depended on the quality of the land; in very bad land the farmer was obliged to take a third of the produce to be able to subsist and be prepared for the next season.

The first paragraphs of Column III are devoted to what might be termed "legal specification." They enumerate the various sorts of tenure, what are furnitures and fixtures, and the four sorts of garden, probably private gardens independent of the farm land. Then we are told about the general field work to be performed independently of the growing of seeds. The farmer may dissolve partnership or resign his contract at the end of the eighth month or Marcheswan, in fine weather, or at the time of drying the dates, or when the palings are to be pulled out, but only on certain conditions.

Column IV speaks of the works to be performed independently of the field works, and contains very interesting statements; for instance, the farmer was obliged to construct first the house of his workmen; we are even told that if the house is not constructed properly he will have to pay a fine. It is also stated

that the farmer must pay his men when the work is finished.

Part of Paragraph XIX and the colophon are lost at the end of the fourth column, but it is probable that these precepts covered at least another tablet.

Before closing it is needful to remark again that the tablet of agricultural precepts did not contain laws but only precepts ; in the time of the Babylonian Empire these were no doubt consulted by the lawyers, but the progress of civilisation had rendered some of the prescriptions impracticable, and, as is shown by the contract tablets recovered from Babylon, the laws of land tenure had become much more complicated.

END OF SAMPLE TEXT



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