

# Indiana Jones 101: Sumerian Cuneiform Name: \_\_\_\_\_

One of the earliest civilizations in the world belonged to the Sumerians, who lived roughly 3000-2000 BC in what is now southern Iraq.

Written Sumerian is called cuneiform, meaning wedge-shaped writing, because the symbols are composed of wedge-shaped strokes made in wet clay using reed “pencils.” The clay dried and hardened over time, or was baked to harden it.

Sumerian was written left-to-right, just like English. Each phrase of a sentence is written in a rectangular box.

Whereas English uses an alphabet of only 26 letters to spell out all words, Sumerian had different symbols for each word—thousands of symbols in all. We will only cover some of the most frequent symbols/words here.

Some of the most common Sumerian writings were inscriptions on construction projects, saying which god they were dedicated to and which ruler built them. These usually follow this pattern:

For [name of god/goddess—see list 1],  
[descriptive phrase about the god/goddess—see list 2],  
[name of ruler—see list 3],  
[descriptive phrase about the ruler—see list 2],  
[his/her construction project--temple, canal, wall, etc.—see list 4]  
[verb—built, restored, etc.—see list 5].

The grammatical order of words is different in Sumerian than English. For example, the verb comes last as shown above. Likewise, adjectives or other modifiers come after nouns instead of before them (e.g., “man mighty” vs. “mighty man,” or “temple her” vs. “her temple”).

Common prepositions and conjunctions, such as “for,” “of,” and “and,” are generally not written in Sumerian cuneiform, but we fill them in when translating into English.

Use the following Sumerian vocabulary lists to translate the provided Sumerian inscriptions into English.

## Books for further reading (try bn.com or amazon.com):

Arthur Cotterell (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Civilizations* (1980). Great overview of most major ancient civilizations.

J. T. Hooker (intro.), *Reading the Past* (1990). Wonderful overview and introduction to many ancient writing systems, including Egyptian, cuneiform, etc.

John L. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts* (2nd Ed., 2000). Basically the only available textbook on Sumerian.

Konrad Volk, *A Sumerian Reader* (2nd Ed., 1999). Contains copies of 44 Sumerian inscriptions on which you can practice (appendices but no actual answers in the back).

# Vocabulary List 1: Gods and Goddesses

 [Indicates divinity]

**King [of the gods] An**  "king god" chief god in theory

**En lil**  "lord of winds" chief god in practice

**En ki**  "lord of the earth" god of crafts helper of mankind

"lady of heaven" goddess of war and love

**Inanna** 

moon-god

**Nanna** 




"lady of winds" wife of Enlil





**Nin lil** 

"great lady" wife of Nanna

**Nin gal** 

[married to each other]



**Nin gir su**   
**hero mighty**   
**En lil of** 

**Ba u**   
**woman beautiful**   
**daughter [of] sky**   
**lady [of] Iri ku** 

**Shullat [and]**

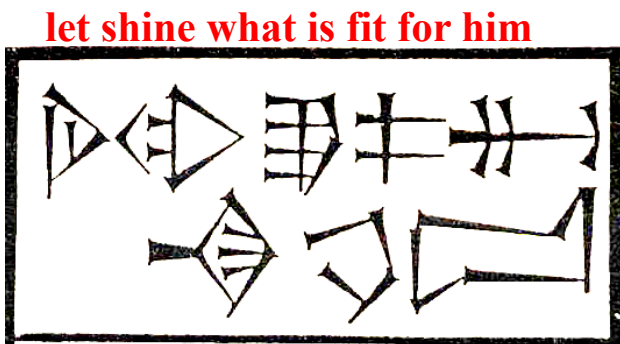


**Hanish [heralds of storms]**

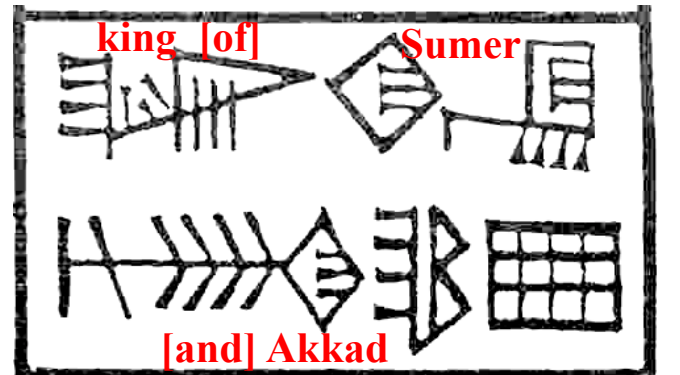
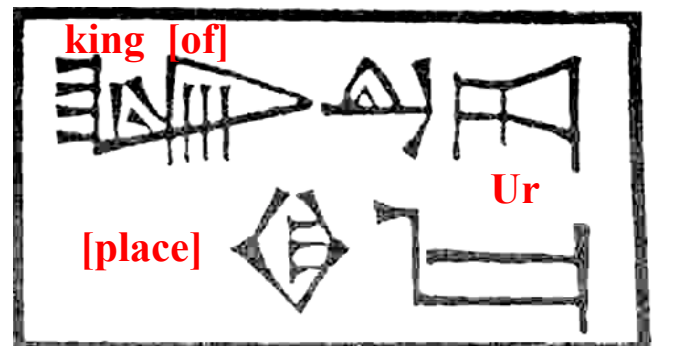
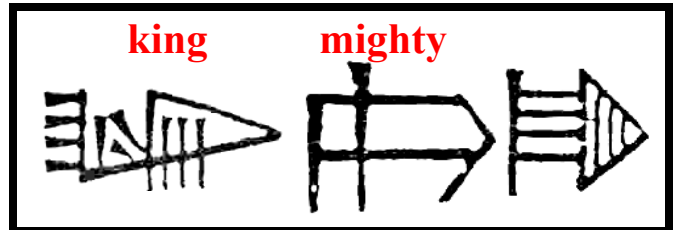
**Nin gis zi da**   
**god [of] Ra-ni [?]** 

# Vocabulary List 2: Descriptive Phrases

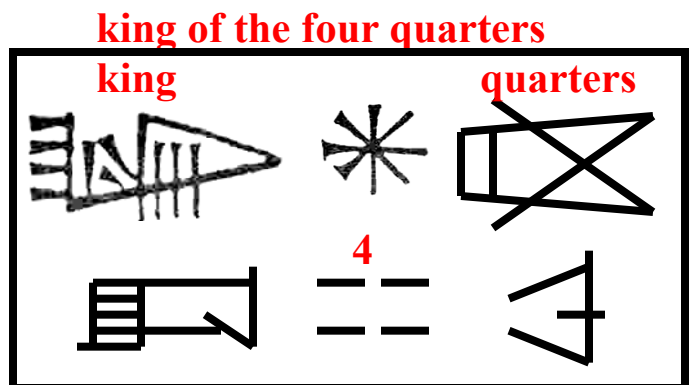
## For gods/goddesses:



## For kings:



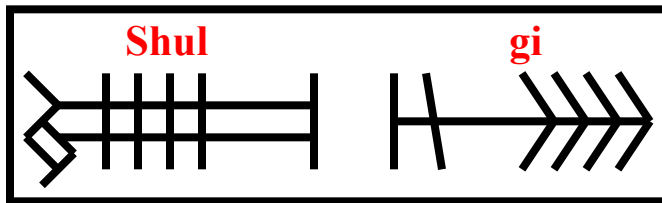
[Sumer = southern Iraq  
Akkad = northern Iraq]



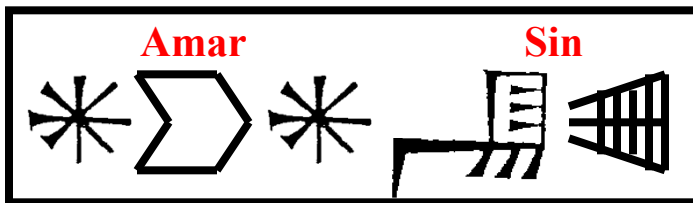
## Vocabulary List 3: Rulers



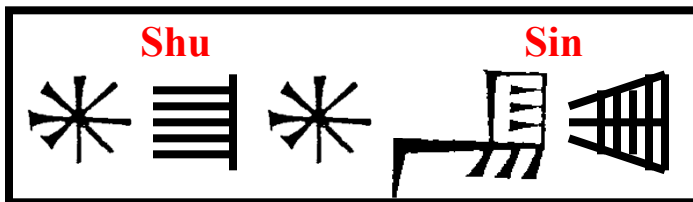
**King of Ur**  
**ca. 2112-2095 BC**  
**Founded 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty of Ur**



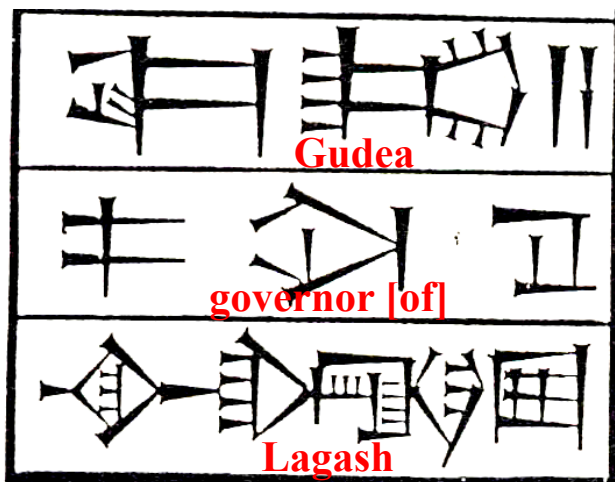
**King of Ur**  
**ca. 2094-2047 BC**  
**Son of Ur-Nammu**



**King of Ur**  
**ca. 2046-2037 BC**  
**Son of Shulgi**  
**(Note symbols of divinity added to name)**

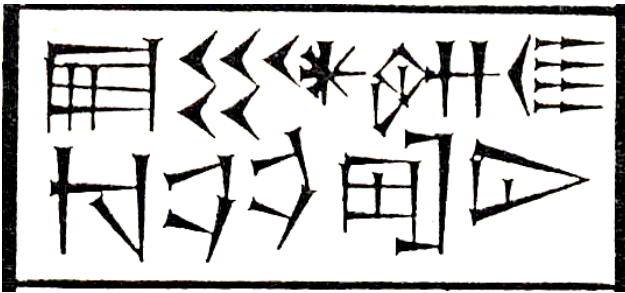
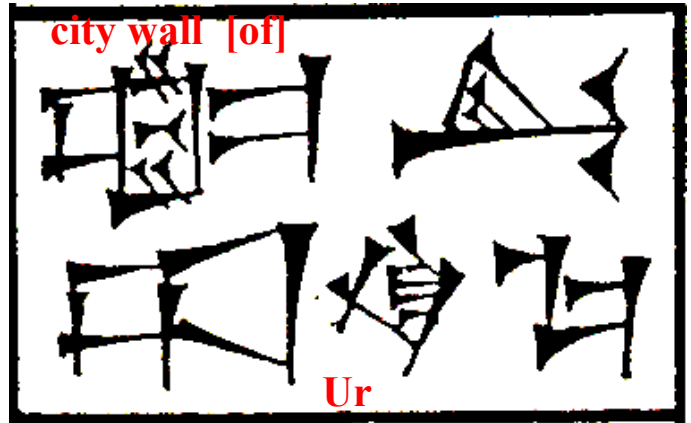


**King of Ur**  
**ca. 2036-2028 BC**  
**Younger brother of Amar-Sin**  
**(Note symbols of divinity)**

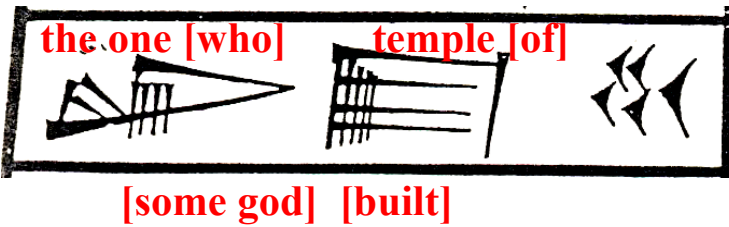
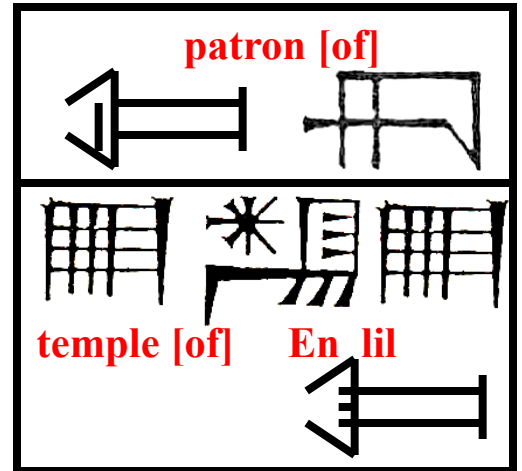


**Only a governor**  
**(ca. 2141-2122 BC),**  
**not a king, but he**  
**left behind a zillion**  
**construction projects**  
**and inscriptions**

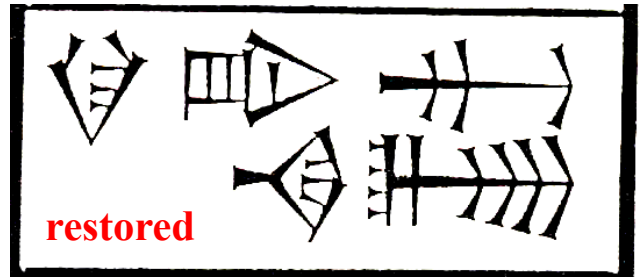
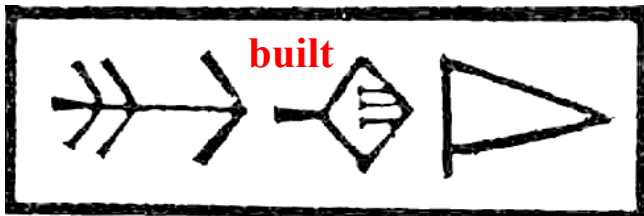
## Vocabulary List 4: Construction Projects



his temple Ninnu-anzu-musen-babbar  
[main temple of Ningirsu in Lagash]



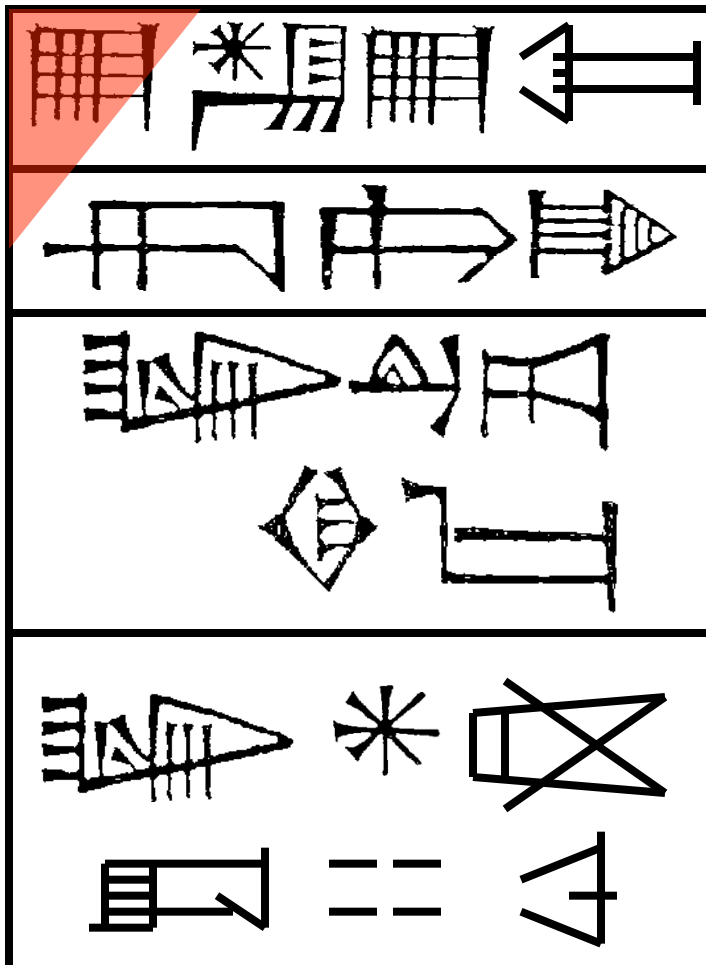
## Vocabulary List 5: Verbs



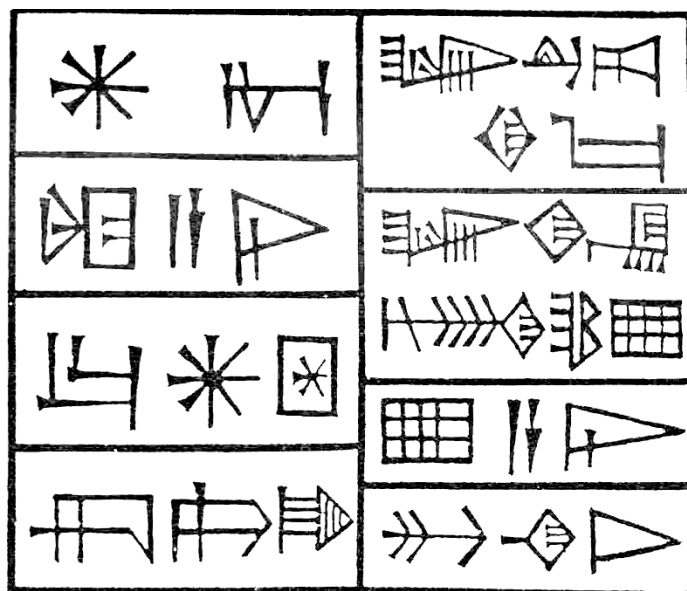
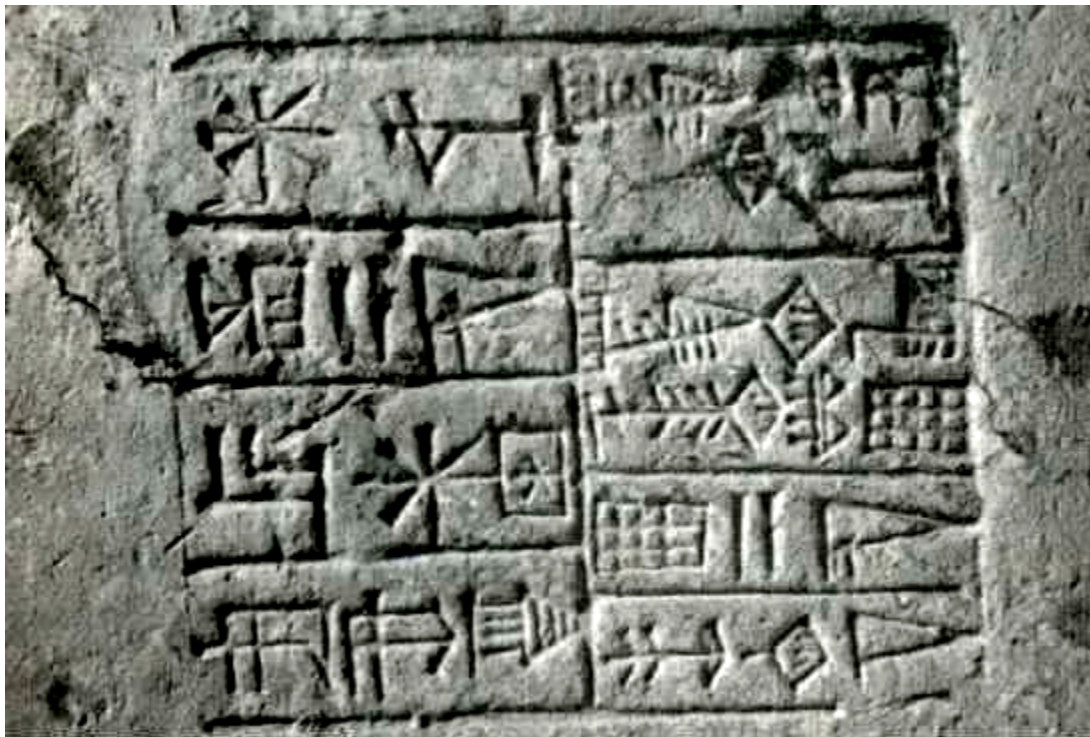
**Translation Exercise 1: Statue of a Ruler—Who???**  
**Harvard Semitic Museum**



## Translation Exercise 2: Ziggurat of Ur



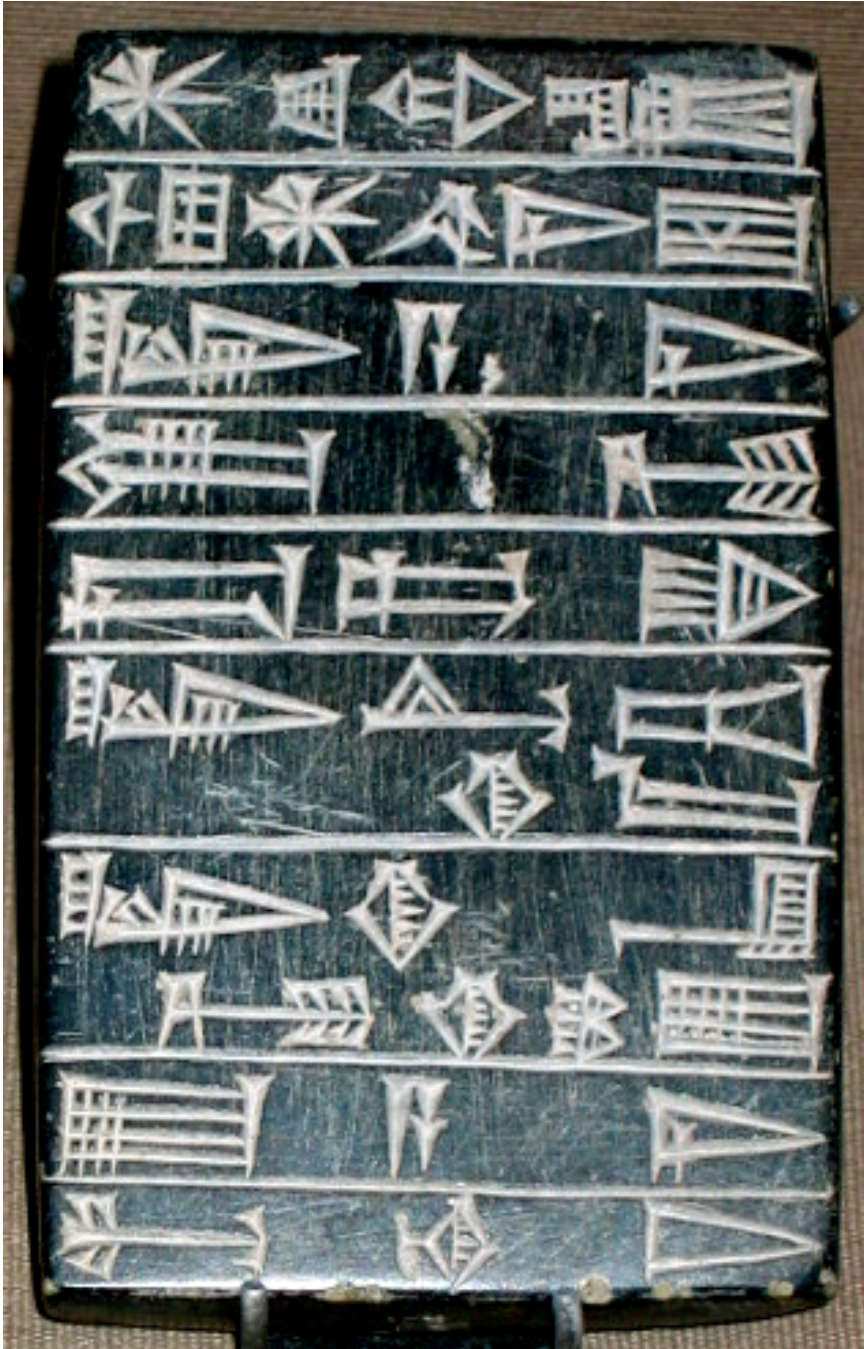
### Translation Exercise 3: Inscribed Brick







## Translation Exercise 5: Stone Tablet



# Answers

## Exercise 1

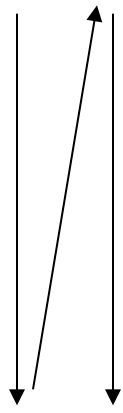
Gudea  
governor of  
Lagash

## Exercise 2

[Temple] of Enlil,  
The mighty man,  
King of Ur,  
King of the four quarters

## Exercise 3

For Inanna,  
his lady,  
Ur-Nammu,  
the mighty man,



the king  
of Ur,  
the king  
of Sumer  
and Akkad,  
her temple  
built.

## Exercise 4

For Ningirsu,  
the mighty hero  
of Enlil--  
Gudea,  
governor of  
Lagash,  
let shine what is fit for him,  
his temple Ninnu-anzu-musen-babbar  
built  
[and] restored.

## Exercise 5

For Shullat  
and Hanish,  
his kings,  
Shulgi,  
the mighty man,  
the king of Ur,  
the king of Sumer  
and Akkad,  
their temple  
built.