

Is It Emperor Shulgi or A Monument to Generosity? A Turkic Linguistic Reinterpretation of a Fragmented Statuette from Tello

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE DETAILS
This article re-examines a fragmented inscribed statuette from Tello whose lower body is preserved in the Istanbul Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi 438 (Istanbul Museum of Ancient Oriental Works) of Orientals Archaeological and Upper Body is held by the Musée du Louvre AO 36. C. E. Suter's identification of the two fragments as parts of a single Neo-Sumerian monument was an important contribution to the study of the object; on the basis of the inscription, she further interpreted the figure as Shulgi carrying a young sacrificial animal to the shrine of Igalim temple. The present study accepts the physical reunification of the fragments but reconsiders the proposed royal and ritual interpretation. Particular attention is given to the modest scale and material of the statuette, the cup held at the figure's chest, the weakened quadruped represented on his shoulder, and the uncertain syllabic restoration dšu-[l-g]-i. Applying the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method, the conventional transliteration is resegmented and tested against Azerbaijani Turkic phonetic and agglutinative patterns. The resulting alternative reading is argued to describe an act of compassion toward a dying dog rather than the self-representation of an emperor performing a sacrifice. The monument is therefore proposed as a didactic image of generosity. This reading is presented as a linguistic and iconographic hypothesis requiring evaluation against the original signs and future high-resolution documentation of both fragments. KEYWORDS: Tello; Girsu; Louvre Museum; Istanbul Museum of Ancient Oriental Works; fragmented statuette; cuneiform inscription; Shulgi; Neo-Sumerian art; Azerbaijani Turkic; Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method; generosity.	Published On: 13 August 2026 Available on: https://irijsh.com/

1. INTRODUCTION

The identification of separated fragments is among the most valuable forms of archaeological reconstruction. When pieces dispersed between museums are shown to belong to a single object, the monument recovers not only its physical form but also part of its historical context. The statuette examined here presents precisely such a case: its lower body is preserved in Istanbul, whereas its torso is held in Paris. C.E. Suter [1] established the relationship between the fragments through their common material, compatible form, shared provenance from the excavations at Tello, and matching inscription. Her reconstruction provides the essential foundation for the present study.

The historical identity and function of the reunited figure, however, remain open to discussion. Suter read the inscription as naming "Shulgi" and interpreted the object within the established framework of Neo-Sumerian royal votive imagery: the ruler carries a young quadruped as an offering and appears as an enduring petitioner before a deity. Yet several visible features do not readily accord with that explanation. The statuette is small and modest; the figure holds a conspicuous cup at chest level; which always symbolizes a beggar and the animal appears, in the present author's assessment, more like a weakened dog. The crucial royal name also depends on a partially restored sign sequence.

It's composed of partial syllables belonging to the different words. If read them separately, we get the symbol on the half-dead dog, not the king, who, according to the author, supposedly "ruled over a quarter of the world."

Based on the work of other colleagues, the author also believes, that if the emperor placed his half-dead dog above himself one of number of royal representations which embody different aspects of ideal rulership. [2].

This article therefore separates two questions that have often been treated as one. The first is whether the Istanbul and Louvre fragments belong to the same statuette; Suter's affirmative demonstration is accepted. The second is whether the joined figure necessarily represents Shulgi and a royal ritual act; that conclusion is reconsidered through a new analysis of the inscription and imagery.

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The study applies the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method, which examines how the syllabic units of an unsegmented cuneiform text may be regrouped according to Turkic phonetic and agglutinative principles. The conventional transliteration is first retained for comparison, after which alternative syllabic connections are proposed and read through Azerbaijani Turkic. Iconographic details are then used as an independent contextual test. The purpose is not to diminish Suter's important reconstruction, but to ask whether the same evidence permits a different interpretation: not an emperor's sacrificial offering, but a moral monument concerned with compassion and generosity.

2. THE FRAGMENTED STATUETTE AND SUTER'S RECONSTRUCTION

Several years ago, while working in the Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington in Seattle, I became acquainted with an article by C. E. Suter. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the author for her considerable work and her keen powers of observation. For the first time since the statuette had been unearthed, C.E. Suter managed to clarify the tragic fate of the so-called "Shulgi figure."

The statuette contains a cuneiform inscription that attracted the attention of the researcher. The figure is divided into two fragments: one part is preserved in the Louvre Museum in Paris, while the other is kept in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Suter proposed that these fragments once belonged to a single statue and was able to reconstruct their original unity schematically.

While conducting research based on the excavation reports of the French archaeologist Ernest de Sarzec, who carried out excavations in Tello (modern Iraq), C. E. Suter discovered an unusual artifact in the Istanbul Museum—only the lower part of a human figure had survived, without the torso or head.

She writes:

"Among the Neo-Sumerian remains from Tello in the Istanbul Museum is the lower body of an inscribed statuette (fig. 1). It had been published in the Tello excavation reports and mentioned in studies on Mesopotamian statuary or votive offerings, though its inscription remained unknown. During a visit to Istanbul, I copied the cuneiform text. The inscription corresponds to another inscription on the torso of a statuette in the Louvre (fig. 2), which, like the Istanbul fragment, originates from de Sarzec's excavations at Tello. Both fragments are made of steatite."

According to Suter, the combined fragments measure approximately 20 cm in height. They form the body of a striding male figure holding a young quadruped against his chest. The figure wears a knee-length kilt beneath a fringed mantle and stands on a flat base with a projecting dowel. Around the waist of the figure runs a votive inscription, which she attempted to read and restore.

Before analyzing this "votive inscription," however, it is important to emphasize that C.E. Suter's work helped restore an important historical connection. Thanks to her efforts, two fragments of the same ancient statue—scattered between different museums—were symbolically reunited. Although this reunification exists only in scholarly reconstruction, it nevertheless restores a certain degree of historical justice.

Yet justice, in a broader sense, should be restored even further. As will become evident from the results of our research, the upper body of the statuette represents part of the cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples. Therefore, it would be reasonable for the artifact to be reunited in Istanbul, among the descendants of the ancient people who created it.

The fate of this statuette evokes the fate of modern Azerbaijani Turks, whose historical homeland has been divided into several parts, while their cultural treasures are displayed in museums around the world under the names of neighboring peoples or other civilizations. In this context, the words of Sabir Rustamkhanli — "We are a book whose pages have been torn apart and scattered across the world"—serve as a powerful metaphor for the historical amnesia that has deprived a people of their own past.



Figure 1. Lower Body – İstanbul Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi 438; Upper Body – Muse'e du Louvre AO 36 (Left). The Statuettes in Drawings (Right).

3. THE CONVENTIONAL IDENTIFICATION AS SHULGI

The discovery made by Dr. Suter is undoubtedly significant and deserves recognition. However, her interpretation of the votive inscription and her analysis of the imagery—focusing primarily on the animal depicted in the figure—led the research in a direction that, in our opinion, does not reflect the true meaning of the monument.

Based on the cuneiform inscription on the torso, Suter concluded that the statue represents Shulgi, whom she and her colleagues regard as one of the early rulers of Sumer. According to her interpretation, the statuette depicts the ruler performing a ritual act:

“With the statuette Shulgi offering a kid in the shrine of Igalim, the ruler perpetuates his performance of a ritual act, representing himself as an eternal petitioner before the deity while demonstrating his ability to communicate with the divine.”

Thus, the statuette is interpreted as a work of art from the Neo-Sumerian period.

However, our analysis of the cuneiform inscriptions suggests a different historical context. Shulgi was indeed one of the early rulers of Sumer, but the dating traditionally assigned to the Neo-Sumerian period does not correspond to the evidence presented in the inscriptions themselves. According to certain written sources, Shulgi is associated with the construction of a temple complex discovered in a Ziggurat sanctuary.

Temples and rulers generally belong to the same historical period. Since the ziggurat tradition is at least six thousand years old, the dating of Shulgi must be reconsidered. Evidence for this appears in the well-known Prism of Ur, which contains a cuneiform inscription stating that Shulgi granted the people’s request to build a temple dedicated to the deity.

Thus, he ordered the construction of one of the most remarkable temple structures of ancient history—the ziggurat temple.

The illustration of line twelve is taken from the well-known Prism of Ur, which contains a cuneiform inscription stating that Shulgi “respected the request of the people to build the temple of God” and therefore ordered the construction of one of the most remarkable temple structures in ancient history — the ziggurat temple (in Turkish Cıqqır At, meaning “Give Voice to God”).

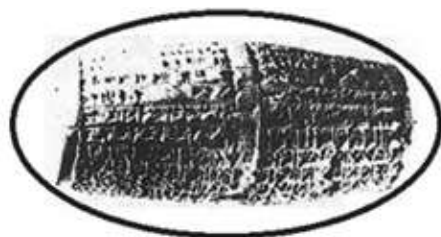


Figure 2. Prism from Ur, discovered among the remains of the temple complex, identifying Shulgi as ruler.

Line 12 of this deciphered inscription may be interpreted in Turkic as follows:

U Shul-gi mari-shu a-mu-ri-ma

which can be modeled as:

“U Şulqi ma’ri şu əmürümə” — “Shulgi respects my command.”

(The line is spoken from the perspective of the temple itself.)

However, the temple name “Eninnu,” which appears in many scholarly publications, appears to be a later interpretation rather than a direct reading of the original inscription. It may therefore represent a misunderstanding resulting from the incomplete knowledge of the language in which the cuneiform texts were written.

According to archaeological literature, Tello—the place where the statue was discovered—is the modern name of the ancient city Girsu, located in present-day Iraq. Girsu was considered one of the capitals of the state of Lagash (modern al-Hiba) in Babylonia. Tello has proven to be one of the most productive archaeological sites in Mesopotamia, yielding more than forty thousand artifacts, including numerous cuneiform tablets.

Among these discoveries we shall examine one particular inscription. However, as will become clear later, even the name “**Girsu**” may require reconsideration. It may derive from the Turkic word **girsu** or **qırışı** appearing in a votive inscription and meaning “wrinkled lines.” According to the conventional interpretation, the title “king of Sumer and Akkad” suggests that Shulgi dedicated the statuette during the earlier period of his reign, before he adopted the title “king of the four quarters of the world.” (E. Suter).

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This change of title is usually interpreted as part of broader political reforms connected with the formation of a new imperial ideology.

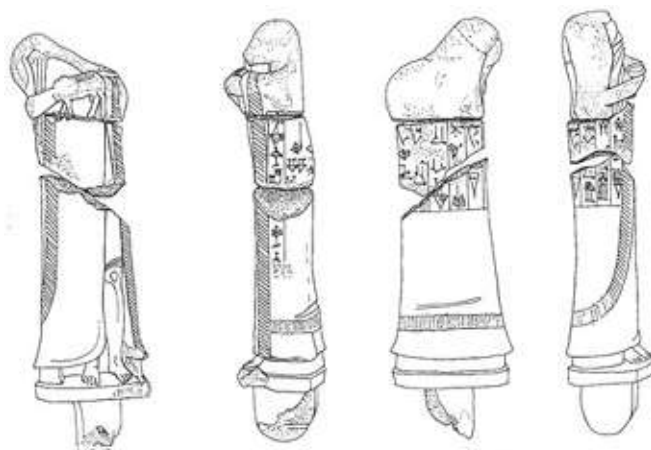


Figure 3. Reconstruction of the joined statuette by C. Suter and Ph. Adam.

Based on stylistic comparison and the matching cuneiform inscription engraved around the waist of the figure, C. E. Suter proposed that the fragment preserved in Istanbul and the torso preserved in the Louvre originally belonged to the same statuette. The hypothetical reconstruction of the complete figure, prepared by C. E. Suter and Ph. Adam, is shown in Figure 3.

The reconstruction of the statuette proposed by C. E. Suter and Ph. Adam represents an important contribution, since it reunited two fragments of the same monument that had long remained separated in different museums.

The statuette may originally have stood in a shrine of **Igalim** within the temple complex known as **Eninnu**, which Shulgi is said to have maintained. The figure depicted on the statue holds a young quadruped on his shoulder, a motif that scholars usually interpret as one of several symbolic representations of ideal kingship.

Historical literature also records that Shulgi conducted military campaigns in Elam, which suggests that his political influence may have extended over a large portion of the ancient Near East.

4. ICONOGRAPHIC AND EPIGRAPHIC PROBLEMS

The statuette under investigation is of particular interest because of three unusual features.

First, the cuneiform inscription engraved on the waist of the figure naturally attracts attention.

Second, the male figure holding a cup with both hands at chest level (see Fig. 4) constitutes one of the key attributes of the monument. This detail appears to have escaped the attention of Dr. Suter. The cup is an essential element for understanding the purpose of the statuette, although the inscription itself ultimately provides the decisive evidence for reconstructing the history and meaning of the monument.

Third, there is a half-dead dog carved on the right shoulder of the figure (see Fig. 1). This unusual element seems to have diverted the author from the main issue and may have influenced the direction of her interpretation.

Unfortunately, Dr. Suter's article does not provide a full interpretation of the ancient inscription. Moreover, separate photographs or clear reproductions of the cuneiform signs are not provided, and the schematic drawings that appear in the article are difficult to read. Consequently, it is difficult to determine with certainty what the original inscription actually states.

Dr. Suter's main conclusion appears to rest on the fifth line of the inscription, where the syllables or ideograms d-šu [lg]-i are read as the name Shulgi. On this basis she identifies the statuette as representing the ruler Shulgi. However, the uncertain rendering of the consonant cluster [l-g], which she herself places in brackets, suggests that the reading is not entirely secure.

Indeed, if the uncertain elements are ignored, the name Shulgi can easily be obtained from the sequence. In this respect the author's reading is understandable. Nevertheless, several linguistic nuances appear to have escaped attention.

In cuneiform writing the consonant "l" does not normally function independently without a vowel element. Therefore, combinations such as [l-g] cannot constitute a complete syllabic unit on their own. Such a structure would contradict the grammatical principles of the cuneiform writing system. The language of Babylonian or Sumerian cuneiform inscriptions is fundamentally syllabic and vowel-centered, in which vowels form the core of lexical structure.

Thus, the sequence of signs may represent three syllables rather than two. Instead of **šu-lgi**, the structure may have been **šu-[vowel]-gi**, where the missing vowel was probably **u**, corresponding to the rounded vowel **ö** known in modern Azerbaijani Turkic phonology. In that case the reconstructed syllables would appear as:

šu – ul – gi > šu – öl – gin

Such a reading opens the possibility of a different interpretation, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Before proceeding further, however, three observations should be noted that raise doubts about the traditional interpretation.

First, it is unlikely that such an important ruler would commission a monument made from simple sandstone. According to the author herself, the statue is relatively small and modest, which hardly corresponds to the monumental representation expected of a ruler whose empire allegedly extended to “the four corners of the world.”

Second, if the figure truly represented a powerful emperor acting as a mediator between the divine and human worlds, it would be difficult to explain why a starving and half-dead dog would be carved above his shoulder. Such an image would hardly serve as a dignified symbol for a ruler of such stature.

Third, the figure holds a cup in front of his chest. The cup is clearly visible and cannot be ignored. Yet it is not explained in the interpretation offered by Dr. Suter. This vessel does not resemble a ceremonial cup associated with power or authority. Rather, it appears to be a simple and worn container that resembles the traditional beggar’s bowl, a symbol historically associated with supplication or petition.

Because the presence of the cup complicates the interpretation of the statuette as a royal offering figure, this feature seems to have been largely overlooked. The author instead focuses on interpreting the figure as a ruler presenting a sacrificial animal.

In Mesopotamian iconography, figures holding a goat or lamb are often interpreted as priests presenting sacrificial animals for ritual divination practices such as Extispicy or haruspicy, in which the entrails of sacrificial animals were examined in order to predict the future. In such interpretations the sacrificial animal is usually a young goat or lamb (mash-kid) but not a dog.

However, in the present case the presence of the cup does not easily fit this interpretation. In order to maintain the sacrificial interpretation, the quadruped depicted on the statuette is assumed to be a goat or lamb, although the figure actually resembles a dog. Such inconsistencies raise important questions about the reliability of this interpretation.

5. REVISED ACADEMIC VERSION

A fourth point must also be emphasized, since it directly concerns the reliability of the interpretation proposed by C.E. Suter. According to her reconstruction, the ruler is depicted carrying a quadruped to the shrine of **Igalim** in order to perform a ritual act before the supernatural powers and to ensure the success of divinatory practices intended to reveal his future.

Such an interpretation raises serious questions. In the religious traditions of the ancient Near East, sacrificial animals were typically sheep, goats, or other domesticated livestock used in ritual practices such as Extispicy or haruspicy. The idea that a ruler would carry a dog as a sacred offering is, to say the least, highly unusual and without clear parallels in the known religious practices of the region.

Another question concerns the temple complex referred to by the author as Eninnu. She writes that:

“The statuette may originally have been located in a shrine of Igalim within the major temple complex Eninnu, which Shulgi is known to have maintained.”

However, one must ask: where in the inscription are the syllables that provide the name of this temple? The text engraved on the statuette does not explicitly identify the location of the monument.

These gaps—although perhaps incidental—are nevertheless significant. They reveal that the interpretation rests largely on assumptions derived from secondary literature rather than on a direct reading of the inscription itself.

Yet we possess an important advantage. The inscription engraved around the waist of the statuette has survived, and thanks to the work of the author who brought attention to the fragments, the text itself is available for analysis.

One detail deserves particular attention. In several places within the inscription the sign “d” appears before certain names. According to the traditional interpretation, this determinative indicates divine names. Consequently, the text has been interpreted as referring to several deities, including Igalim, Umu, Ningirsu, Dumu, and even Shulgi himself as a divine figure.

If this interpretation were correct, the short inscription would contain references to four different divine entities within a very limited space. Such a concentration of divine references is unusual and raises doubts about the accuracy of the proposed reading.

6. ALTERNATIVE SYLLABIC REMODELING AND TURKIC READING

After considering these problems, we may now turn to the central element of the monument: the cuneiform inscription engraved around the waist of the figure.

In order to approach the text objectively, it is necessary to examine the syllabic structure of the inscription and to reconsider its phonetic values. By analyzing the syllables and their possible combinations according to Turkic phonetic principles, an alternative reading becomes possible.

The transliteration of the inscription proposed in previous scholarship reads as follows:

d₁ [g] -alim

dumu k [i-a] g

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^dn [in-gir-s] u-ka
[lu] gal- [a] -ni
^dshu [l-g] i
[ni] ta [k] ala-ga
[lu] gal [u]+ ri [^{ki}-ma]
[lu] gal ki-en-g [i] ki-uri-k [e]
nam-ti-la- [ni-sha]
[a-mu-n] [a-ru]

If we reconsider the phonetic connections between the syllables and allow for minor phonetic adjustments, the text can be reorganized as follows:

ig alim umu ki
ag nin girsu kalu
galani
shu ulgin
ita kala galu
gal uri ki malu galki
en ciku uri gen
am tilenishe
amun aru

When read according to Azerbaijani Turkic phonetic patterns, the text begins to form meaningful phrases that resemble natural speech. In simplified form, the passage may be rendered approximately as:

İç əlimdümü ki, ağlın qırşu qalu?

Qalanı şu ölgün itə yala qalu.

Gəl uri ki, mal u gəlikü.

Ən cikü uri gen.

Am tilənisə, amun aru. [3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

Among the many inscriptions studied, this text proved remarkably accessible. Once the phonetic structure was reorganized, the meaning emerged with relative clarity. The philosophical tone of the passage reflects a form of practical wisdom characteristic of ancient didactic traditions.

In order not to take up more space, we avoided vocabulary, being fully confident that all the modified words belong to the purely Turkic language of the Azerbaijani Oghuz dialect.

Now, whole text in English:

Wealth is none a line of life in my hand so that to accompany me to the beyond world?

What is remains after our death, remain only to this half-dead dog.

Give from your wealth it's will come again.

Give more even from your small wealthy.

If everyone is begging, you do as everyone. [3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

Only minimal phonetic adjustments are required for the text to reveal its meaning. When these small corrections are applied, the inscription unfolds naturally and conveys the voice of a wise elder speaking across the centuries.

7. CONCLUSION

C. E. Suter's most secure and lasting contribution was the recognition that the Istanbul and Louvre fragments once formed a single inscribed statuette from Tello. The present study accepts that reconstruction while questioning the further identification of the figure as Shulgi. The partially restored sequence conventionally read as the royal name is not, in the present author's view, sufficiently certain to determine the identity and function of the monument by itself.

When the inscription is resegmented according to the Azerturk Linguistic Remodeling Method and approached through Azerbaijani Turkic phonetic patterns, it yields an alternative didactic reading. In this interpretation, the vessel and the weakened animal are not secondary or troublesome details: they become mutually explanatory elements of a scene centered on need, supplication, compassion, and the giving of sustenance. The figure would thus represent not an emperor displaying ritual authority, but a moral exemplar—or a personification of generosity—responding to a dying dog.

This proposal also illustrates a broader methodological principle. The reading of an ancient inscription should be tested not only against inherited lexical identifications but also against syllabic structure, grammatical coherence, and the visual program of the

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object. Where the text and imagery reinforce one another, an alternative historical explanation deserves consideration even when it challenges a long-established attribution.

At the same time, the proposed reading should be treated as a testable hypothesis. A definitive evaluation requires direct collation of both fragments, high-resolution photographs and sign drawings, and sign-by-sign comparison with the original museum objects. Such documentation would allow scholars to assess the uncertain restorations, phonetic values, and word boundaries more precisely. Until that work is undertaken, the monument should remain open to interpretation—as a fragmented object physically reunited by Suter and, in the present study, linguistically reconsidered as a monument to generosity.

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