

Ninurta's Pride and Punishment

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[This article is the translation of the only preserved episode of a myth that describes the fight between Ninurta and the eaglet (Amar-Anzu) for the possession of the stolen tablets of destiny. Enki punishes Ninurta by having him fall into a pit dug by a turtle. The text is published in copy in UET 6/1 2.]

UET VI No. 2 contains part of the text of a Ninurta myth whose beginning and end were no doubt inscribed on tablets whose contents preceded and followed those of the extant piece¹, the contents of which may be sketched as follows: the first four lines contain the concluding part of an address by Amar-Anzu to Ninurta, informing him that, because he (Ninurta) had attacked it (the Amar-Anzu) violently "at his command", it dropped the *me*, the *giš-hur*, the "tablet of destiny", out of its hand, and these have thus been returned to the Abzu (lines 1-4)². Stunned by this news, Ninurta laments the loss of the *me* and the powers that go with them, a bitter plaint whose implication Enki apprehended in the Abzu (lines 5-9)³. Rather surprisingly, we next find the Amar-Anzu taking his attacker Ninurta by the hand and "returning" him to the

1. To date only two duplicates of this text have been identified: a very small Nippur fragment published in *SLTN* 41 (see *RA* 60 p.92), and a very small Ur fragment (to be published by Aaron Shaffer in *UET VI* Part 3) that is, however, of little help: it reads as follows: O b v. 1. *me* ... 2. *me-mu* ... 3. *giš-hur-mu* ... 4. *dub-nam-tar-ra-[mu]* ... 5. *ur-sag-nin-urta* ... 6. *me-en-ki-ga-še* ... 7. *giš-hur-bi me-a* ... Rev. 1. *en-e* ... 2. *a-nam-[ur-sag]* ... 3. *sag-kal ba(?)ab* ... 4. *ug-gal* ... 5. *ug-tur* ...

[CBS 8319, CBS 15007, and CBS 15085 are all parts of a three-column tablet that contained the entire myth, which must have been about 300 lines long. The script is extremely small and the surface very badly preserved, but it seems, from the few readable lines, that the Anzu bird, the *me*'s and the tablets of destiny play a central role throughout the composition. M. Civil.]

2. To judge from these lines, some deity (either Enlil or Enki) had commanded Ninurta to attack Amar-Anzu. The reason for this command was no doubt Amar-Anzu's filching the *me* from the Abzu, an episode that must have been related in one of the tablets preceding the extant Ur tablet.

3. Line 8 might perhaps be expected to state that being deprived of the *me*, he will have no hope of becoming Enki's equal, but the reading and meaning of the preterite verbal form *mu-mu-n-bad* are uncertain, and the sense of the line remains obscure. As for line 9, its implication may be that Enki, upon hearing Ninurta's lamenting complaint, realized the danger he was in because of Ninurta's ambitious designs and was therefore put on his guard, as it were.

Abzu (lines 10-12)⁴. There he is greeted joyously by Enki who blesses him as the victor over the "bird", an unrivalled hero whose name will be duly honored (lines 13-24). This blessing, however, does not satisfy the ambitious god who made secret, hostile plans against Enki (lines 25-30)⁵. The latter, realizing that Ninurta meant to do him serious injury, sent his *sukkal* Isimud to eject him from the Abzu, but Ninurta not only refused to leave, but actually raised a hand against him (lines 31-35). Whereupon the troubled Enki fashioned a turtle out of the clay of the Abzu that proceeded to attack Ninurta who, however, counterattacked in self-defense (lines 36-41). Enki then had the turtle dig an "evil" pit into which he threw Ninurta alongside the turtle (lines 42-44). He then added insult to injury by denigrating the struggling Ninurta as a mountain-destroyer who could not climb out of a pit, and yet had dared to think of killing him (lines 45-54). But now Ninmenna, that is, Ninḫursag, came to her son's rescue. Reminding Enki, "the plant-eater", that she had once saved his life, she no doubt demanded him to show his gratitude by delivering Ninurta from his sad predicament and saving his life⁶.

TRANSLATION⁷

1. "At his command your weapon struck me violently,
2. As I let go the *me* out of my hand, its *me* returned to the Abzu⁸,
3. As I let go the *giš-ḫur* out of my hand, its *giš-ḫur* returned to the Abzu.
4. [Its tablet of destiny] returned to the Abzu, I was deprived of the *me*⁹.
5. At [the word of Amar-An]zu, the hero Ninurta was stunned¹⁰,
6. [The *pašeš* of An] utters a wail:
7. "As for me, its *me* have not come to my hand, I shall not exercise its (the Abzu's) *en*-ship,
8. He did not let [me] ..., like him in the [shrine] Abzu¹¹".
9. Father Enki in the Abzu knew the word [he had spoken]¹².

4. These lines seem to imply that Ninurta had been in the Abzu before: perhaps he had come there at Enki's request in order to retrieve the *me* that had been carried off by Amar-Anzu.

5. Just what it was that Ninurta planned is not stated in the text, but to judge from line 49 he actually planned to kill Enki.

6. The assumption that the last four lines of our text are the introductory part of a plea by Ninmenna, that is, Ninḫursag, to Enki that he save her son's life is a reasonable surmise based primarily on line 60, which I would render "Pitiless death -- you, who has carried it off from you?" (note that the verbal form *m u -ra -ab -tū m* may be rendered either as "who has brought it to you" or by the diametrically opposite "who has carried it off from you"; cf., e.g., lines 88-89 of *Das Lugalbandaepos*.) According to this line, therefore, Ninḫursag is reminding Enki that she had once saved his life. Now as is known from "Enki and Ninḫursag: A Sumerian Myth," Ninḫursag had indeed saved Enki's life by giving birth to the eight deities who healed Enki's eight ailing organs after he had eaten the eight plants generated by the goddess from his semen. This explains the goddess' designation of Enki in line 57 as *ū -k ū -k ū* "plant-eater" (admittedly, however, the *m u -u š* following *ū -k ū -k ū* is difficult). The expression "my plant-eater" seems rather strange; note, too, that *m u -u š* may be the Emesal for *giš* "tree" or "penis", but neither of these meanings fit the context. As for lines 58-59, the rendering assumes that they contain a depiction of death personified at least in part (note the use of *lū*, but followed by *-bi* as the possessive). [Civil suggests reading [*ḡn in -m en*]-*na*, instead of [*pa, -šeš-an*]-*na*, and I tend to agree with him].

7. The text has been collated and translated by Bendt Alster (evidently with some help from Thorkild Jacobsen, cf. his comments to lines 28 and 59) in *JCS* 24(1972)120ff. My translation and interpretation differ considerably; in most instances the reasons for the difference will be readily apparent to the cuneiformist; where this may not be so an explanatory comment will be found in the notes.

8. "Its" in this line and the two following refers to the Abzu.

9. Alster's restoration of *dub-nam-tar-ra* is now confirmed by Obv. 4 of the Ur fragment mentioned in note 1. Note that the *me*, the *giš-ḫur*, and the *dub-nam-tar-ra* seem to be treated as synonymous by the author.

10. Note that the first complex is to be restored to read [*in im -am ar-an*]-*u -še*, and that since it is a genitive compound, one might have expected a *-da-* preceding *-še*: "stunned" is the rendering for *lul-aš-si*.

11. Preceding *abzu-a*, *ēš-e* should probably be restored.

12. If the rendering of this line is correct, *ḡn-k i* is an error for *ḡn-k i-ke*, and the *-da-* of the verbal form is not accounted for.

10. Amar-Anzu took the hero Ninurta by the hand¹³,
11. Approached with him to Enki's place, the Abzu,
12. Utulu was (thus) returned to the Abzu by Amar-Anzu.
13. The Lord rejoiced for the hero¹⁴.
14. Father Enki rejoiced for the hero.
15. The lord Nudim[mud] addresses him [affec]tionately:
16. "Hero! No god among [your] brother gods would have done so.
17. As for the bird which your mighty weapon has pinioned --
18. [You will set] your foot upon its neck from now to eternity¹⁵.
19. May the great gods [praise] fittingly [your] might of [heroism].
20. May your father Enlil perform [your] command (?),
21. May Ninmenna not fashion your likeness,
22. May she let no one possess awesomeness like you, may she let no one grasp(?) it (awesomeness(?)) before you.
23. Monthly may your ... be constant in the shrine Abzu,
24. May your name be pronounced in the seat of honor".
25. The hero -- his heart rejoiced not at this blessing¹⁶.
26. At his post, how(?) (his) face darkens, how it pales!
27. His heart turns over great things, his heart is hostile.
28. He ...d not his ..., he ...d his body,
29. The hero Ninurta set his face towards the entire world,
30. He told no one, his heart did not ...
31. The great lord Enki, in his own heart, understood the meaning of the plan,
32. In his shrine Abzu he agitated billowing waves¹⁷.
33. The *sukkal* Isimud threatened(?) him by the house¹⁸.
34. The hero Ninurta refuses to come out,
35. Raised his hand against Isimud.
36. Enki fashioned a turtle against him from the clay of the Abzu¹⁹.
37. He stationed the turtle against him at the entrance, the gate of the Abzu,

13. It is difficult to reconcile the statement in this line with that in line 17, unless "the bird" of line 17 is not identical with Amar-Anzu.

14. The -ši- of *ba-ši-hu1* seems to recapitulate the -ra- of the preceding complex.

15. Following G1R, the copy has *su*, and this is confirmed by my photograph of the tablet: there is little doubt, however, that this is a scribal error for *zu*.

16. While the general sense of the passage in lines 25-30 is quite clear, that is, the ambitious Ninurta, dissatisfied with Enki's rather unexciting benediction secretly devised hostile schemes against Enki, it includes numerous grammatical and lexical difficulties that make its translation rather problematic. Thus the meaning of the -bi of *ša-bi* in lines 25, 27, and 30; the -bi of *ka-da-bi* and *bar-bi* in line 28, and of *igi-bi* in line 29, is rather uncertain; my rendering assumes that in all these cases it is an error for (a-ni), an assumption that makes the rendering more than doubtful. (Alster, on the other hand, renders *ša-bi* as "secretly", which makes excellent sense, but is grammatically unjustifiable, since the adverbial -bi, as far as is known, must be attached to an adjective, not a substantive; as for his renderings of *ka-da-bi*, *bar-bi*, and *igi-bi*, they are no more than very dubious conjectures). In line 26, I read a-gim *igi* between *ki-gub-ba-ni* and *i-im-gi₆-gi₆-ge*. In line 28, the reading and meaning of the initial complex are quite uncertain; it might be expected to parallel in some way the *bar-bi* in the second half of the line. In line 30, the rendering "he told no one" for *lu-na-me nu-u-b-dug₄* seems reasonable; grammatically, however, one might have expected the Sumerian to read *lu-na-me-ra nu-mu-na-dug₄*.

17. Following *i-im-tuk₄-tuk₄* is probably an erasure, to judge from the photograph.

18. "Threatened" is a conjecture for *gir-ru-gu*; "house" seems to refer to the Abzu-shrine.

19. "From the clay" renders *im-abzu-a*, literally perhaps "in the Abzu-clay;" similarly in the line following *ka-abzu-a* means literally "in the Abzu-gate".

38. Enki kept talking to him at the place of combat²⁰
39. Brought him along to the place where the turtle stood.
40. The turtle seized his back with its sinews,
41. The hero Ninurta turned against its "feet"²¹.
42. Enki, as one perplexed, says "What now is this!"²².
43. He made it scrape the ground with its claws, made it dig an "evil" pit,
44. He threw the hero Ninurta into it alongside it.
45. The hero knew not how to ascend [from(?)] ...,^{22a}
46. The turtle kept on gnawing [at his fe]et with its [claws]²³.
47. The great lord Enki says to him:
48. "From ... I(?) have gathered(?) ...,
49. You who have set your face to kill me²⁴.
50. [The brag]gart who makes big claims I lay low, I raise up,
51. How is it that you have set your face against me!
52. What has your past acquired for you, what indeed is its ...²⁵
53. Whither has your strength gone! Where is your heroship!
54. You destroyed mountains -- why is it that now you cannot ascend!"
55. Ninmenna learned of this matter²⁶.
56. She rips the garment of her body, she ...:²⁷
57. "As for my plant-eater -- you, who has carried it (death) off from you?²⁸
58. The one whose head trembles not, that ... -- you, who has carried it off from you?
59. Enki, that which has no name, its name being 'the day that pours not ...',
60. Pitiless death -- you, who has carried it off from you?"

20. The rendering and implication of this line are rather incertain.

21. The rendering of this line which seems to depict Ninurta's defensive counterattack, is rather uncertain.

22. The first complex should probably be restored to read *en-ki-[ke].

22a. The three dots represent a complex that may have described the pit from which Ninurta could not ascend.

23. "Kept on gnawing" is a surmise for ba-a-n-sur-sur.

24. "To kill me" renders sag-giś-ra-m u-uš, literally "for my being killed".

25. The meaning of this line is not clear, especially because of the ambiguous ki-gub-ba.

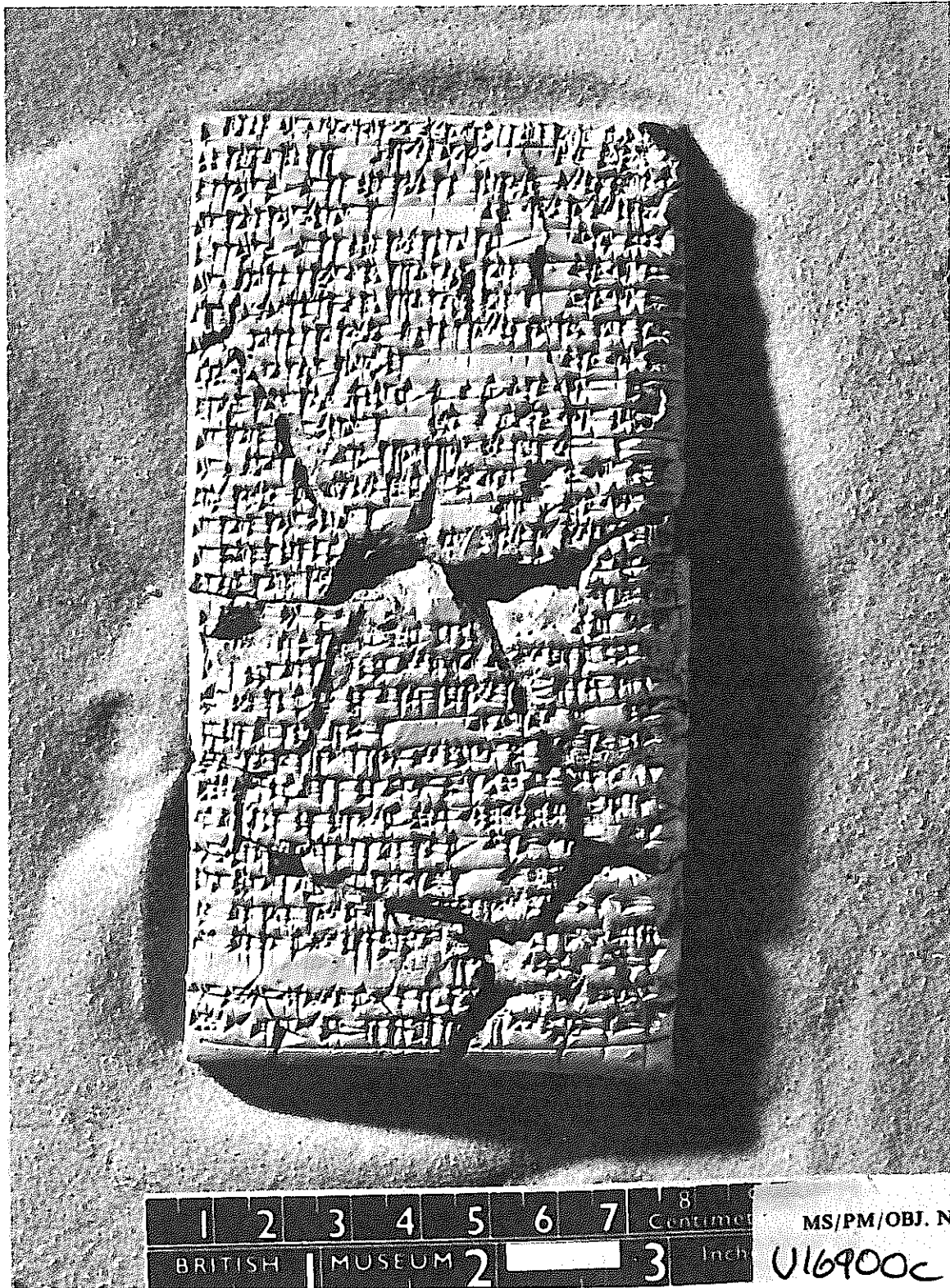
26. The nuance intended by the -da- of ba-da-an-pād is not clear.

27. The reading and meaning of the fragmentary second half of the line are uncertain: in any case it does not seem to include a verb of saying to introduce the following speech.

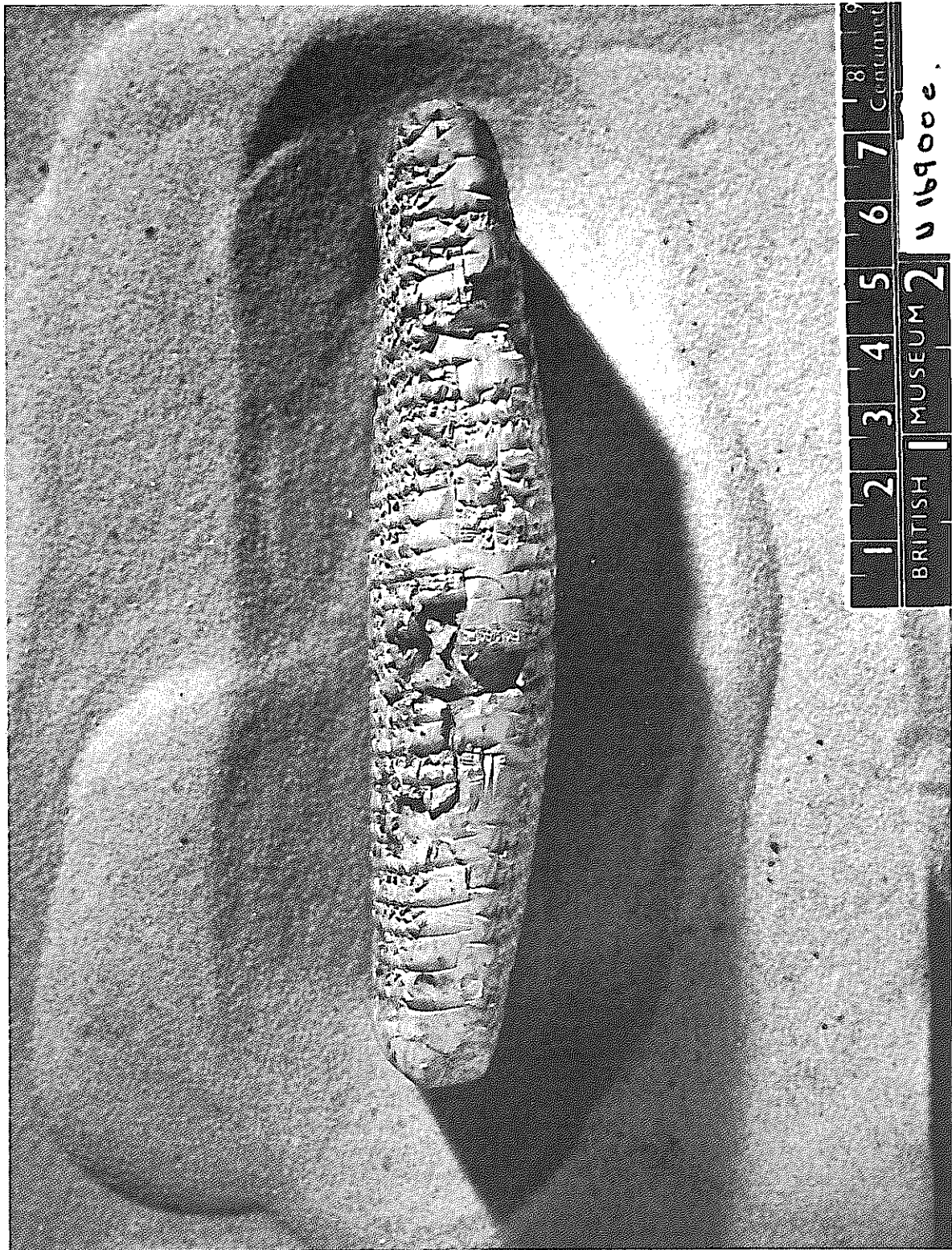
28. For this concluding passage, cf. note 6.



UET VI/2 obverse



UET VI/2 reverse



UET VI/2 right edge



UET VI/2 right edge