

# WORTH 5 SILVER SHEKELS: SLAVERY IN MESOPOTAMIAN'S PRIVATE ARCHIVES<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

We propose a reflection about the theme of slavery, from the study of the archives of an important businessman in the city of Larsa, in the south Mesopotamian, named Ubar-Šamaš, during the reign of King Rîm-Sîn (1822-1763 BCE). This merchant exercised relevant economic activities, such as buying and selling land in urban and rural areas, silver loans and slave trade. In paleobabylonian society, slave labor did not occupy an important role in the economy, and the conditions of the trade of servants were directly linked to political conditions, such as war and its economic and social consequences. Another objective of this article is to offer Brazilian readers research sources for the study of economic history of the ancient world, from the translation of documents directly from Akkadian language and cuneiform writing into Portuguese.

## Keywords

Slavery; archive, Mesopotamia.

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## **Resumo**

Propomos uma reflexão sobre a temática da escravidão, a partir do estudo dos arquivos de um importante homem de negócios da cidade de Larsa, no sul mesopotâmico, nomeado Ubar-Šamaš, durante o governo do rei Rīm-Sîn (1822-1763 AEC.). Este mercador exerceu atividades econômicas relevantes, como compra e venda de terrenos em áreas urbanas e rurais, empréstimos de prata e o comércio de escravos. Na sociedade paleobabilônica, o trabalho escravo não ocupava um papel importante na economia, e as condições do comércio de servos estavam diretamente ligadas às condições políticas, como as guerras e suas consequências econômicas e sociais. Outro objetivo deste artigo é oferecer ao leitor brasileiro fontes de pesquisa para o estudo da história econômica do mundo antigo, a partir da tradução de documentos diretamente da língua acádica e da escrita cuneiforme para o português.

## **Palavras-Chaves**

Escravidão, arquivo, Mesopotâmia.

Mesopotamia is in the Fertile Crescent area and its economy was based on agriculture and livestock, coupled with craft activities and trade. However, this region was devoid of rain, and therefore the use of irrigation was necessary to ensure food production. The artificially irrigated agriculture was one of the most important technological innovations of the beginning of the third millennium BC.

According to Code of Hammu-rabi, Mesopotamian society was divided in three distinct social groups: the *awîlum*, the free man who enjoyed all the rights; the *muškenum*, an intermediate social class, dependent on the palace; the *wardum*, male slave and *antum*, female slaves, that could be slave by birth, prisoners of war, or could even have been enslaved by debt bondage situations (Bouzon, 2000).

The practice of slavery existed in ancient oriental world, without, however, setting itself up as the predominant mode of production in economic relations. In this paper we propose a reflection on the theme of slavery, from the study of the archives of an important businessman from the city of Larsa, in southern Mesopotamia, named Ubar-Šamaš, during King's Rîm-Sîn's government (1822-1763 BCE ). This *tamkârû* (merchant) had relevant economic activities such as buying and selling land in urban and rural areas, silver loans and slave trade. We present below, the reconstitution of the private archives of Ubar-Šamaš related to the issue of slavery, with the translation and analysis of these documents.

## Introduction

The passage of the Ur III dynasty (2112-2004 BCE) for the period Isin-Larsa (2004-1750 BCE) brought profound changes to the lower Mesopotamian region. The most visible elements of these changes were the disintegration of political unity, the progressive fragmentation of empires, which gave rise to a multitude of city-states, a linguistic change that led to the supremacy of Akkadian at the expense of Sumerian, and a change in the ethnic composition of the population, with the arrival of the Amorite.

After the end of the Ur III Empire, private property and trade experienced great development, as shown by the legal and economic texts from the city of Ur (Van Mieroop, 1992). This phenomenon happened a little later in Larsa, where the number of merchants (*tamkarû*) increased under the reign of Warad-Sîn and during the first half of the reign of Rîm-Sîn. During this period, private economic activities have gained importance with the intensification of agriculture, which was equipped with an integrated system of irrigation, and the growth of urban populations. In public administration, there has been a differentiation between the South and the North, visible in writing, in the typology of legal forms and expanded usage of Akkadian. The

extended family has been supplanted by the nuclear family, and the management and transfer of land ownership was met, in turn, with some transformations.

In his study of the Old-Babylonian merchants, Leemans (1950: 113-115) describes them as elements independent from the palace and explains the prosperity of these agents by the large number of land and slaves they bought.

In Old-Babylonian society, slave labor did not occupy an important role in the economy, and the servant trading conditions were directly linked to political conditions. We know, for example, that in Ur, slaves were used mainly in household chores, but not in agriculture (Van Mierop 1992: 225).

### **Documents**

The Ubar-Šamaš merchant's archives contain evidence that testify clearly of commercial operations regarding slaves.

A large number of documents related to the businessman Ubar-Šamaš is in volume XIII of the *Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler* collection in the Berlin Museum, which was published by Figula (1914). The author stresses that these tablets resulted from clandestine excavations that took place probably in the ancient cities of Sippar, Babylon, Senkereh and Warka, among others.

Another part was published by Faust (1941) in YOS VIII and are a part of the *Yale Babylonian Collection*, with most of these tablets being from the Senkereh site. As the author himself indicates, some of these texts were the subject of a first publication by E. Grant in 1919 in his book *Babylonian Business Documents of the Classical Period*. They were also found as a result of clandestine excavations.

We present below, this set of documents according to their type: the contracts of slaves pledged as guarantee and those of purchase and sale of slaves, in chronological order.

## Contracts of Slaves in Guarantee

### Text 1

*Ikmatum is his name, he placed himself as guarantee for 5 shekels of silver to Ubar-Šamaš, Ubar-Šamaš revolved around five shekels of silver for its debt. On the day that Ikmatum bring the silver, he will be released. Before Ili-arni-Eštar, before Nur-Ištar, before Ikun-pî-Ištar, before Ani-illati, before Ibni-Irra, before Silli-Samas, son of Siqqûa, before Abum-Illum, before Ili-išmeni. The seal of the witnesses. Seal: Nur-Ištar, the son of Puzur-Ilisu, Ištar's server.*

### Text 2

*Issaya, (who was) made Ubar-Šamaš' slave by the royal word. Ubar-Šamaš gave as guarantee (put it in a safe place). Šāt-Samas, his wife received Issaya, if Issaya disappear if he runs away, Šāt-Samas, his wife and his house will be recognized [...] he will take [...] in [xxx]. Before Ubar-Šamaš, messenger, before Iddin-Samas, innkeeper, before Ubar-Šamaš, cutter, before [...] - u, Elamite, (two lines unreadable), before [...] scribe. The seal of the witnesses. Seals: Ubar-Šamaš, son of Irībam-Sîn, of Pabilsag's server; Ubar-Šamaš, son of Iamlik-Illum, Adad's server.*

### Text 3

*Isiqatar is your name, slave of Ubar-Šamaš (and) Sîn-damiq, shepherd. Sîn-damiq, shepherd, Sîn-iribam, his father, Ummi-erra, his mother, his house and his orchard they received Isiqatar in assurance by Sîn-damiq, shepherd. If Isiqatar escape, Sîn-irībam, his father and Ummi-erra his mother, his house and his orchard will recognize. Before Liphur-Anum, before Edê, before Kalabum, governor, before Iddin-Sîn. The seal of the witnesses.*

### Text 4

*1 slave Iddin-Amurru, is his name, Ibni-Amurru received as guarantee, of Ubar-Šamaš, its owner. If he disappears, if he flee, Ibni-Amurru will pay 1/3 silver mine. Before Lumur-sa-Amurru, before Nidnat-Sîn, before Ili-iddinam, before Gimillum the son of Nanna-mansum, before Sîn-imguranni, businessman, before Ubar-Šamaš, before Gimillum, son of Warad-Ilisu, before Warad-kubi priest.*

### Text 5

*1 Gimillum slave, is your name, slave of Ubar-Šamaš. Of Ubar-Šamaš, his owner, Šamaš-gamil, Gimillum brother, Taribûm the son of Šamaš-gamil*

and *Sîn-maḡir* the son of *Šamaš-gamil* received as guarantee, *Gimillum* his brother. If *Gimillum*, brother of *Šamaš-gamil* escape, *Šamaš-gamil*, brother of *Gimillum*, *Taribûm* the son of *Šamaš-gamil* and *Sîn-maḡir* the son of *Šamaš-gamil* will be liable to *Ubar-Šamaš*. They swore by the name of *Sîn*, *Šamaš* and king *Rîm-Sîn*. Before *Paniya*, head of masons, before *Abi iddinam*, before *Sîn-Samuh* his brother, before *Ibiyatum*, mason, before *Šaluti*, before *Išdum-kin*, before *Ahûm*. The seal of the witnesses. Seal *Paniya*, head of masons. Seal: *Abi-iddinam* the son of [x] -mi [x] -nu of [...] server.

**Table 1: Slave On Guarantee**

TEXT	DATE	TYPE	NAME OF THE SLAVE	GUARANTEE	WHO PUT ON GUARANTEE
TEXT 1	-/V/RS 28	Guarantee	<i>Ikmatum</i>	5 pieces of silver	himself
TEXT 2	-/RS 31	Guarantee	<i>Issaya</i>	<i>Šât-Šamaš</i> and his house	<i>Ubar-Šamaš</i>
TEXT 3	25/V/RS 35	Guarantee	<i>Isiqatar</i>	his home and his garden	<i>Ubar-Šamaš e Sîn-damiq</i>
TEXT 4	-/I/RS 39	Guarantee	<i>Iddin-Amurram</i>	1/3 silver mine	<i>Ubar-Šamaš</i>
TEXT 5	26/V/RS 45	Guarantee	<i>Gimillum</i>	-	<i>Ubar-Šamaš</i>

Examining the table above, we find that the contracts of slaves pledged as guarantee are very different from each other, each having specific clauses of assurance and price of the payment declaration. Contracts N° 1 (RS 28) and N° 4 (RS 39) have, however, some similarities because, in both cases, the slave is given as guarantee in exchange for silver. The text 1, line 6 also explains that it is the payment of a debt. Otherwise, in the text N° 3 (RS 35), the slave is given as guarantee in exchange for a house and an orchard. This procedure has already been pointed out by Van de Mieroop (1987: 7), quoting the YOS text VIII, 35 (RS 19) to illustrate his claim, and, more recently, by Skaist (1994: 212-213). The only text where no asset is pledged is in contract N° 5 (RS 45), in which three members of the slave's family were engaged only morally. Finally,

text 2 (RS 31) is an atypical contract, because it is said that the slave status of the person concerned was established by a decision of the king. A possible explanation would be that this is a royal decree or a sentence presented in a process.

Contract N° 1, through which Ikmatum gave himself as guarantee of Ubar-Šamaš, states that the contractor took advantage of this mechanism to repay a debt of five pieces of silver. It also states that Ikmatum could regain his freedom once the due sum was paid.

Text 2 (RS 31) reports the placing as guarantee of a slave of Ubar-Šamaš, called Issaya, with the wife of the latter. It is expressed, although Issaya was made a slave by royal order. One might think that it was a prisoner of war, for Rîm-Sîn had just conquered Isin; furthermore, one of the witnesses was an Elamite (a foreigner). Instead of a quantity of silver, it is the person that receives the slave, and his own wife, and a house of its property are placed as guarantee in this transaction. This example illustrates once again that this practice - giving up real estate as guarantee - was still usual in the kingdom of Larsa at that time.

In text N° 3, we find the same kind of business, ie., a slave given as guarantee to the very family of the merchant in return for an orchard and a house. We realize that Ubar-Šamaš was designated as the owner of a slave but it was Sîn-damiq, a shepherd, who made the transaction, which leads us to think that this slave worked under the orders of the latter.

Contract N° 4 shows Ubar-Šamaš pledging his slave Iddin-Amurru to a certain Ibni-Amurru who should pay 20 shekels of silver to the merchant in the case of disappearance of the slave.

Text N° 5 records Ubar-Šamaš putting in guarantee its slave Gimillum into the servant family, specifically his brother and his two nephews; however, no amount of silver, or any immovable property, were involved in this case.

This type of transaction consisted in letting a slave in the services of the captive's own family (Charpin; Durand, 1993: 367-368). It was much more profitable for the owner, who no longer had the obligation to feed, clothe or watch the slave, as he passed the responsibility to his new master (Van Mieroop 1987: 11). We realized that in all such contracts, whose reasons are not indicated, Ubar-Šamaš appears as the owner of the slave, and thus, as the transaction's beneficiary. We must remember that the seasonal nature of agricultural work affect the need for slaves, and consequently, on the period of their releases by guarantee to members of their families.

## Contracts Sales of Slaves

### Text 6

*1 slave named Ilam-Nisu, slave of Naram-Sîn, his brother, Simat-Sîn, his mother and children. Ubar-Šamaš bought Naram-Sîn, his brother, Simat-Sîn, his mother, and children, the slave's owners, and he paid him 15 1/6 shekels of silver for its cash price. In the future, forever, Naram-Sîn, his brother, Simat-Sîn, her mother and the children will recognize the Slave's claim, they will not say, is my slave, they will not turn back. They swore by the name of Sîn, Šamaš, and King Rîm-Sîn. Before Ubar-Šamaš, cutter, before Ilšu-nasir, innkeeper, before Sîn-išmeani, doctor, before Inanna-Ili, priest, before Alîwaqrum the priest, before Dumuqum, scribe, before Ili-turram, blacksmith. The seals of the witnesses. Seal: Ubar-Šamaš, son of Iribam-Sîn, of Pabilsag server.*

### Text 7

*1 slave Kabta-lamassi, is her name, the daughter of Mār-ersetim, Ubar-Šamaš bought from Simat-Sîn, her owner and Naram-Sîn, her owner. He expounded to him 12 pieces of silver for its price in cash, he transferred the baton. Before Adayatum the son of Iddin-Adad, before Ili-turram the son of Šu-geštinanna, before Sîn-imguranni the son of Nûratum, before Aplum the son of Mannum-illum, before Iballût, scribe. The seal of the witnesses. Seal: Adad, Enki-imgurra [...].*

### Text 8

*1 slave, Sîn-gimlanni is your name, Ubar-Šamaš, his owner. Tarâm-Ulmaš in exchange for Sîn-gimlanni gave Šamaš-Tukulti, athlete to Ubar-Šamaš. In the future, forever Taram-Ulmaš recognize a claim related to Samas Tukulti, he will not turn back, he swore by their king. Before Imgur-Sîn, son of [...] before Sîn-iribam, businessman, son of Ili-Tayyar, before Urri-urnum, blacksmith, son of Andakullum, before Ibalût the son of Ilî- išmeani, before Ahûm the son of Ili-imitti, before Dagan-Eris, son of Puzur- Šamaš, before Sîn-uselli the son of Nanna-mansum, before Dumuq-Šamaš, son of Šamaš-Hazir, before Naram-Sîn, son of Naram-šarûr. The seal of the witnesses. Seal: Ilî-imitti the son of Sîn-rimenni, of Ninsianna server.*



**Table 2: Slaves of Sale**

TEXT	DATE	TYPE	NAME OF THE SLAVE	PRICE	SALESMAN
TEXT 6	19/X/RS 36	Buy	<i>Ilam-nišu</i>	15 1/6 silver shekels	<i>Naram-Sîn, his brother and Šimat-Sîn, his mother</i>
TEXT 7	-/IV/RS 37	Buy	<i>Kabta-lamassi</i>	12 silver shekels	<i>Šimat-Sîn and Naram-Sîn</i>
TEXT 8	-/VIII/RS 45	Exchange	<i>Sîn-gimlanni Šamaš-tukulti</i>	-	<i>Ubar-Šamaš and Tarâm-Ulmaš</i>

These two slave sale contracts are part of the aforementioned archives of the businessman Ubar-Šamaš, which, in both cases, appears as the buyer. In the first (N<sup>o</sup> 6), the slave is sold by members of his family, namely his mother and his brother, probably as payment for a debt. This constitutes a current and well-documented situation in the sources of the time, and paragraph 117 of Hammu-rabi Code limited such kind of slavery to three years (Bouzon, 2000).

The second contract (N<sup>o</sup> 7) shows the *bukannu*<sup>3</sup> clause, which provides for the realization of a symbolic act of property transfer, through which the slave passed before a erected pylon on the ground, an act that represented his passing from an owner to another (Matouš, 1950; Charpin, 1991: 65-73). This clause existed, especially in North Babylon, having disappeared from the archives at the end of Old-Babylonian period. Some authors consider that this disappearance is connected to the conquest of the region by king Hammu-rabi, for that provision had not existed in the contracts of the southern regions. However, this is contradicted by text 7 (- / IV / RS 37), which belonged to the archives of the businessmen Ubar-Šamaš. Although rare, this clause also appeared at this time in South Babylonian documents.

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<sup>3</sup> CAD B 308 1b, literally means wooden pestle.

In contract 6, Ubar-Šamaš bought the slave Ilam-Nisu from the servant's older brother, Naram-Sîn, the mother, Simat-Sîn, and from his other brothers and sisters<sup>4</sup>. The second purchase contract (7) established between them refers to a slave called Kabta-lamassi. In this contract there is a *bukannum* clause, a rare case in Larsa.

Text N° 8 is the only document in our archives that reports the exchange of two slaves held between Ubar-Šamaš and a woman named Taram-Ulmaš. The contract was written from the perspective of Ubar-Šamaš because the clauses of eviction and irrevocability aim to protect him, assuring him the slave's property given in exchange.

The two purchase agreements already mentioned, by which the merchant Ubar-Šamaš first acquired a slave and, a few months later, a slave woman from the same owners, are the only ones of their kind that relate to this merchant, and thus I can assume that he regularly practiced the slave trade. On the other hand, we must realize that these two contracts, 6 (RS 36) and N° 7 (RS 37), record prices below the average for the season (Farber 1978: 12-14), which ranged between 20 and 30 shekels silver.

## **Conclusions**

Finally, we note that, in contracts where Ubar-Šamaš was the one who gave the pledge or sold the slave, the value of the guarantee was significantly higher than that of other contracts, which is to suggest the existence of a clearly unequal relationship between contractors for the benefit of Ubar-Šamaš.

Slave prices experienced significant variations in Old-Babylonian period, to which Van Mieroop (1987: 9-12) assigns different possible causes, such as wars, the proximity of crops and other agricultural work.

In his study of the fluctuation in prices and wages in North Babylon, Farber (1978: 13) deepens the hypothesis that the price of slaves was usually connected to the phenomenon of labor force capture through wars. In fact, according to the table of prices, it is evident that they fell after the wars, because of the increase in the number of slaves. Larsa also experienced a significant fluctuation in these prices. From the year 6 of Warad-Sîn to the RS 23, a slave was worth 20-30 shekels of silver and worth about 60 shekels of silver between RS 24 and RS 26. If we restrict ourselves to the period of

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<sup>4</sup> This scheme follows the Mesopotamian legal tradition under which the eldest son held the upper hand in the family business.

the reign of Rîm-Sîn, we will see that in his accession to the throne of Larsa, the price of slaves was 20 pieces of silver for men and slightly lower for women. But this situation would change abruptly in 1793 BCE, the year when, in South Babylon, Rîm-Sîn conquered Isin. The price of slaves would fall then to half of its value, thus corroborating the situation described above. Later, prices would again fluctuate and experience a slight increase in the time of Hammu-rabbi, passing 24 pieces of silver for men and 13 pieces of silver for women<sup>5</sup>.

Examining Tables 1 and 2, we find that the prices present a proportional difference of values between men and women to that of North Babylon. Men were bought by 15 1/6 shekels of silver and women, by 12. In the text N° 4 (RS 39), Ubar-Šamaš is seen pledging a male slave for the sum of 20 shekels of silver. Through the contract 1 (RS 28), it is Ikmatum that is offered as guarantee to Ubar-Šamaš, to pay a debt of five shekels of silver. According to the document, the merchant would have advanced the sum and would own the slave until the day that he was payed back, which may explain this low price in relation to to the average of the season (Skaist 1994: 209). On this subject, Van Mieroop (1987: 9-10) points out: "The lower price often occurs when persons sell themselves because of their debts, or when parents sell their child."

In two other contracts, N° 2 (RS 31) and N° 3 (RS 35), Ubar-Šamaš received for a slave the guarantee of real estate, allowing us to suppose that the merchant has obtained in the transaction an important advantage, since the value of these assets was clearly superior to the slave. Only the text N° 5 (RS 45) does not inform us about the value of the guarantee. Finally, the contract N° 8 (RS 45) seals an exchange of slaves, but no indication for the reasons and the benefits of such a procedure.

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<sup>5</sup> The Hammu-rabi Code assessed the price of a slave in 20 pieces of silver.

**Table 3: Texts Correspondence Table**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Publication Code</b>	<b>Dating (Old Calendar)</b>	<b>Dating (Current Calendar)</b>
<b>1</b>	VS XIII, 96	(-/V/RS 28)	1795 AEC
<b>2</b>	VS XIII, 68	(-/X/RS 31)	1792 AEC
<b>3</b>	VS XIII, 73	(25/V/RS 35)	1788 AEC
<b>4</b>	YOS VIII, 146	(-/I/RS 38)	1785 AEC
<b>5</b>	VS XIII, 84	(26/V/RS 45)	1778 AEC
<b>6</b>	VS XIII, 76	(19/X/RS 36)	1787 AEC
<b>7</b>	YOS VIII, 144	(-/IV/RS 37)	1786 AEC
<b>8</b>	VS XIII, 85	(-/VIII/RS 45)	1778 AEC

**Table 4: Ponderal Measurement Units**

<b>1 mine = 60 shekels</b>
<b>1 shekel = 8 grams</b>

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