

# Hymn to Ninkasi - annotated

[Editor: My goal was to make this more poetic than the awkward transliterations out there.]

## CUNEIFORM WRITING



▲ Writing on a soft clay tablet with a reed pen.

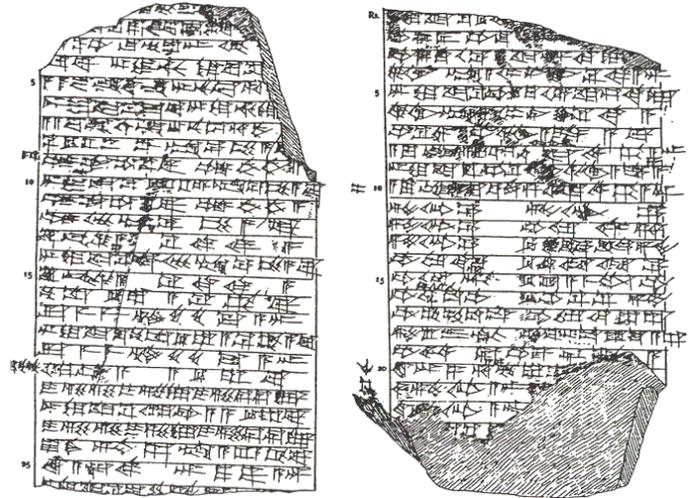
The Sumerian written language and the associated clay tablets are among the earliest human writings. Scholarly works from the early 1800s onward have developed some facility translating the various Sumerian documents. The Hymn to Ninkasi is the oldest record of a direct correlation between the importance of brewing, and the responsibility that women had with regards to supplying both bread and beer to the household. Ninkasi is female, and the fact that a female deity was invoked in prayer with regards to the production of brewed beverages illustrated the relationship between brewing and women as a domestic right and responsibility. The repetitive nature suggests that it was used as a tool in order to pass down information as a way of learning. It is in the form of a responsive reading:

The first stanza is given by the instructor.

The second stanza, addressed to Ninkasi, is the students' response.

The poem from c. 1800 BC is a recipe for brewing beer. It explains that grain was converted into bappir before fermentation, and grapes as well as honey were added to the mix. A translation from the University of Oxford describes combining bappir, a source for yeast, with malted and soaked grains, then keeping the liquid in a fermentation vessel. The liquid was finally filtered into a collecting vessel.

In the struggle of Light against the Dark, there was the Sumerian Goddess of Beer:



## Hymn to Ninkasi<sup>1</sup>

[I was] Borne of the flowing water...

[Several lines are missing here]

Tenderly cared for by the Ninhursag<sup>2</sup>.

Having founded your town by Abzu<sup>3</sup>, the sacred lake,

[I] finished its great walls for you.

Ninkasi, having founded our town by

Abzu, the sacred lake,

[You] finished its great walls for [us].

My father is Enki<sup>4</sup>, the Lord Nudimmud.

My mother is Ninti<sup>5</sup>, the queen of Abzu, the sacred lake.

Ninkasi, your father is Enki, the Lord

Nudimmud.

Your mother is Ninti, the queen of abzu, the sacred lake.

[Bread making provided yeast.]

I am the one who kneads the ... dough in a pit to make bappir<sup>6</sup> [and]

With a big shovel, mixes it with the sweet aromatics, dates, and honey.

Ninkasi, you are the one who kneads the

... dough in a pit to make bappir [and]

With a big shovel, mixes it with sweet aromatics, dates, and honey.

[Preparing the grain bill.]

I am the one who bakes the bappir in the big oven,  
and readies the piles of hulled grains.

Ninkasi, you are the one who bakes the bappir in  
the big oven, and readies the piles of hulled grains.

[Germination of malt...]

I am the one who waters the malt set on the ground.  
My noble dogs keep away even the potentates.

Ninkasi, you are the one who waters the  
malt set on the ground.

Your noble dogs keep away even the  
potentates.

[Mashing...]

I am the one who soaks the malt in a jar.  
The waves rise, the waves fall.

Ninkasi, you are the one who soaks the  
malt in a jar.

The waves rise, the waves fall.

[No clue what she is doing here...]

I am the one who spreads the cooked mash  
on large reed mats. Coolness overcomes...

Ninkasi, you are the one who spreads the  
cooked mash on large reed mats.

Coolness overcomes...

[Boiling...]

I am the one who holds with both hands the heavy  
pot of sweet wort, [then]  
Brewing [it] with honey [and] wine.

Ninkasi, you are the one who holds with  
both hands the pot of sweet wort, [then]  
Brewing [it] with honey [and] wine.

Line heavily damaged

I [add] the sweet wort to the [fermenting?] vessel.

Ninkasi, you [add] the sweet wort to the  
vessel.

I place a filtering vat carefully upon the large  
collector vat.

[When I pour in the wort(?)] it makes a pleasant  
sound.

Ninkasi, you place a filtering vat carefully  
upon the large collector vat.

[When you pour in the wort(?)] it makes a  
pleasant sound.

When I pour the filtered beer out of the collector  
vat,  
It is [like] the onrush of Tigris and Euphrates.

Ninkasi, when you pour the filtered beer  
out of the collector vat,

It is [like] the onrush of Tigris and  
Euphrates.



*Sumerian mythology is confounding. A single entity  
may have many names and functions. Many entities  
may have the same function. Spellings of the names often  
vary.*

<sup>1</sup> **Ninkasi** – ancient [Sumerian tutelary goddess](#) of  
[beer](#). Borne of “sparkling fresh water.” She is the  
goddess made to “satisfy the desire” and “sate the  
heart.” She would prepare the  
beverage daily for the Gods.  
Her name means “the lady  
who fills the mouth.” The  
daughter of Enki, the lord  
Nudimmud, and  
Ninhursag, she was one of  
the eight children born to heal  
Enki’s wounds. In other  
stories she is the daughter of  
Ninti, the queen of the Abzu.



In ancient Mesopotamia the  
brewer’s craft was the only profession which  
derived social sanction and divine protection from  
female deities/goddesses, specifically: Ninkasi, who  
covered the production of beer, Siris, who was used  
in a metaphoric way to refer to beer, and Siduri,  
who covered the enjoyment of beer.

<sup>2</sup> **Ninhursag** – the Sumerian Mother Goddess - the  
earth mother, the principal Goddess of fertility.  
She is known as the Mother of Gods and Mother of  
Men for her part in creating both divine and mortal  
entities. Ninhursag’s name means “Lady of the  
Mountains.” She was also called Ninti (lady of

birth), Ninmenna (lady of the tiara), and Ninmah (exalted lady), although it is likely that these were names of other Goddesses who were later assimilated with Ninhursag. Myths of her origin vary. Whatever her origin, Ninhursag is most closely associated with Enki, God of the waters, as his consort. Other names associated with her include Ninmug (lady of the vulva), Ninzinak (lady of the embryo), Ninsigsig (lady of silence), Ninbahar (lady of pottery), Nindim (lady fashioner) ...*ad nauseum*.

In a well-preserved myth entitled *Enki and Ninhursag*, Ninhursag bears Enki a daughter named Ninsar, who in turn is impregnated by Enki and bears Ninkurra. Ninkurra too has Enki's child, a daughter named Uttu. Uttu, unwilling to bear Enki's child, was advised by Ninhursag to bury his semen in the ground, where it grew into eight plants. These were the first plants on the earth. Enki ate them.

Ninhursag was furious with Enki for eating the plants, and she cursed him so that each plant caused a disease in a different part of his body. The other Gods pleaded with Ninhursag to take the curse off Enki, because without his waters, the earth and its people were dying. To cure him of the diseases, Ninhursag gave birth to eight deities—five Goddesses including Ninkasi, and three Gods. These eight were each able to heal one of Enki's diseases, and leave him whole and healthy.

<sup>3</sup> Abzu - the name for fresh water from underground aquifers which was given a religious fertilizing quality in Sumerian mythology. Lakes, springs, rivers, wells, and other sources of fresh water were thought to draw their water from the Abzu. In Sumerian mythology it referred to the primeval sea below the void space of the underworld (Kur) and the earth (Ma) above.

<sup>4</sup> Enki,– the Sumerian god of wisdom, fresh water, intelligence, trickery and mischief, crafts, magic, exorcism, healing, creation, virility, fertility, and art. He is also known as ... Nudimmud - that means 'Begetter of Mankind.' Iconography depicts him as a bearded man wearing a horned cap and long robes as he ascends the Mountain of the Sunrise; flowing streams of water run from his shoulders,

emphasizing his association with life-giving water, while trees representing the male and female principle stand in the background. The streams are interpreted as the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which, according to one myth, were formed from Enki's semen. His name means "Lord of the Earth" and his symbols are the fish and the goat, both representations of fertility. In the poem *Enki and Ninmah [Ninhursag]*, the Ninhursag loses prestige when she is beaten in a drinking game by Enki.



<sup>5</sup> Ninti - the Sumerian goddess of life. Ninti is also one of the eight goddesses of healing who were created by Ninhursag to heal Enki's body. Her specific healing area was the rib (Sumerian Ti means rib and to live).

<sup>6</sup> Bappir - a Sumerian twice-baked barley bread that was primarily used in ancient Mesopotamian beer brewing. Historical research done at Anchor Brewing Co. in 1989 (documented in Charlie Papazian's *Home Brewer's Companion* reconstructed a bread made from malted barley and barley flour with honey and water and baked until hard enough to store for long periods of time; the finished product was probably crumbled and mixed with water, malt and either dates or honey and allowed to ferment, producing a somewhat sweet brew. It seems to have been drunk with a straw.



Adapa (?). Ninhursag, Isumud – two-faced vizier, Enki, and a primitive male attendant.

