

## On the journey to eternity: Memoirs of a cuneiform tablet and its tag

**Christina Tsouparopoulou**

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**On the journey to eternity:  
Memoirs of a cuneiform tablet and its tag**

Christina Tsouparopoulou (tsouparopoulou@uni-heidelberg.de)<sup>1</sup>

In the desert of Iraq, in the al-Qadisiyah province, close to the small village of Afak and the once mighty religious center of Mesopotamia Nippur, lay a small site, known locally as Drehem, three mounds all in all, deserted and full of holes. Once under the shelter of the god Dagan, once a huge administrative complex that held the lives and heard the voices of hundreds, bureaucrats and craftsmen, soldiers and guards, dogs and sheep, priests and priestesses, kings and queens, cooks and butchers, poor and wealthy. Until one day in 2026 BCE, a couple of years after Ibbi-Sin had ascended to the throne, it was abandoned. It lay hidden for many years; a hidden gem decorating the desert. Until it was found almost 3900 years later. By poor and rich, by villagers and collectors. And since then, the once mighty Puzrish-Dagan has been skimmed. Holes in the hundreds have been dug penetrating the rooms where once scribes and bureaucrats roamed.

Thousands of tablets have been taken away, separated from each other and flooded antiquities markets from Europe to Asia, from Australia to America. Within these thousands of objects, a small unimportant tablet written by a scribe in the winter of 2042 BCE and a round tag, beautifully written and sealed with the seal of the director of the livestock agency that operated at Puzrish-Dagan sometime in the spring of 2042 BCE. Homeless they wandered, from Iraq to Paris, from Paris to St Petersburg, from Iraq to New York, from New York to Chicago.

After millennia of oblivion and years of travelling, both tablet and tag have found a new home. Far away from each other, with an ocean and a continent between them, these two that were so close together for more than 4000 years, in the soils of what is now Iraq, deep down in the marshlands that once were, are back together. In a virtual space that is, on the Internet and the online webpages of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative project. Both have now acquired different names, or better to say IDs; the tablet now known as P124003, the tag as P212288. Their home now is the virtual world; they are everywhere and every time. Their lives and travels interwoven with poverty, chaos, fear, and pain, wealth, order, excitement, and scholarship. This is their biography.

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<sup>1</sup> This piece, in four parts, is a combination of fiction, for we do not know exactly the circumstances under which the two cuneiform objects treated here were found and transported to the US and Russia, but also of reality. Harsh conditions brought these objects out of their hiding places; harsh conditions brought the tablet into the US during the turbulent years of the 1910s and 1920s and harsh conditions brought the tag into Russia during the turbulent years of Red October. Information regarding their findspots is taken from accounts of nearby Girsu; archival practices are reconstructed based on the PhD dissertation of the author, and on the articles of Steinkeller; information regarding their initial sale and prices are also taken from accounts of archaeologists and other travellers at Iraq at the time.

## PART I: Puzrish-Dagan, Sumer, around 2040 BCE

*Puzrish-Dagan, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2042 BCE*

It was cold and rainy. The woolen dress was not really adequate. Today he preferred to work inside. He passed through the first door and sat close to the clay bench, in the middle of the small room. He stretched his hand to reach the vessel that held the clay, and took out a small lump. He had to document some transactions that took place today for his boss. In sooth, he didn't want to work today, but didn't really have a choice. So, hesitantly, he wetted the lump of clay with the water from another jar close-by and started shaping it. He made it almost square, with sharp edges, and held it in his left hand (for he was right-handed). He took his stylus, made of reed, on his right hand, and drew some lines. He could have used a thread to draw the lines, but decided against it, as it seemed he had no time for that and no thread ready by. He had to finish with this tablet soon, so he didn't want to waste any time. He had learned all this at the scribal school he attended some years ago, when his father had sent him there. He kept close to what he had learned, no deviations from the standard norm. He had to finish soon, and put the tablet on the shelf.



**Fig. 1: OIM A 5637. Credit: Oriental Institute, Chicago**

So, he started writing: *16 fattened cows, 9 cows, 20 minus 1 long-fleeced sheep*, no wait... according to his note it was 20 sheep, so he took a little bit of water again and tried to erase with his thumb the 'minus 1'. He managed to erase it somehow, but it was still visible. But in any case he would write the total sum of the animals on the edge of the tablet, when he was about to shelf it and that would count at the end. So, he didn't spend too much time over the small mistake. He continued: *on the 11th day, from Abba-saga* (his boss), no more space on this side and he flipped the tablet. He had to draw the lines again, but decided he would first write one line: *Ahu-Wer received*, then he would need to leave some space to distinguish between the transaction and the date. And he started writing again, *the month of the great festival; the year the en-priest of Inanna was installed*. And he was almost done. Now all that was left was to calculate the total number of animals that Ahu-Wer received from his boss, and write that on the edge so that when shelved, this would be visible to anyone checking the animals booked out of his boss' account. *25 cows, 20 sheep*. He looked at it once more and now he was done. He noticed that he didn't write the full name of the year, but it was clear that it indeed was the 5th year of His Highness' reign, Amar-Suena the mighty king. He didn't have enough space, he left quite a bit of space between the transaction and the date, and he felt he could not accommodate the full year-name, which would be: *the year Enunugalanna was installed as en-priest of Inanna at Uruk*. But he was content. He put the tablet on the shelf next to the tablets he and some of his colleagues had written that month, documenting the transactions between his boss and Ahu-Wer. He did almost the same thing day after day, for that is what he had learned at the school. And he was still cold.

*Puzrish-Dagan, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2042 BCE*

The months passed, that shelf was filled with similar clay tablets. It was now March, spring had come, barley was harvested and the weather was pleasant.

As the end of the (accounting) year was now approaching, the archivist had to check all these tablets and store them away, new tablets had to fill the shelves. Lugal-itida, a mighty man, responsible for these archival rooms, came in one day and took a leather bag, lying close by. It was the day he would put all the tablets from that shelf away. He started looking at the left edges and wrote down on a scrap clay piece the numbers. Almost 590 cattle and 1850 sheep and goats were transferred from Abba-saga's account to Ahu-Wer during that year. He took the tablets down from the shelf and put them in that leather bag. How many were there? He calculated about 80; the leather bag he chose would be enough.



Fig. 2: Erm 15281. Lugal-itida's tag.  
Credit: State Hermitage Museum

He took bands of reed and made some knots to make a big rope. He was to use this rope to tie the bag and close it. But he had now to authenticate this act of his. He took a bigger lump of clay, and attached it to the rope, to the knot actually after he had tied it around the bag. He shaped it around the knot and made it spherical. He took out his cylinder seal, he was wearing it around his neck, and he rolled it on this lump of clay, now spherically shaped and attached to the rope. He rolled it more than once, so that it would be clear that it was his. He had already used it quite a few times, but it was not really worn, even though he had it for quite a few years, since Shulgi was already in power. But he had it recarved only nine years ago, when the son of the mighty king Shulgi, Amar-Suena by name, took over the throne after his father died.

It was a seal of good quality, for the archivists were highly regarded and were given only the



Fig. 3: An ancient rolled-out impression of the seal of Lugal-itida

best. It was a bit old-fashioned though, depicting an audience with a god, with four-participants in total: himself (the worshipper) standing with both his arms close to his waist and wearing a fringed garment, common for mortals, while behind him an ascending god, saluting with one hand stands on a pedestal. In front of him, a supporting goddess wearing a flounced garment stands in salutation gesture before the god, holding both of her hands in front of her face. The god is depicted seated on an architectural throne, which rests on a dais with a star-disc crescent before him. To be honest, he was the one to choose this design among others he was shown, and he was responsible for that. But when he chose it, it was unique and not at all old-fashioned; but now he didn't really like it... He would try to find a way to change it soon, now that the situation was a bit tense between the two brothers, Amar-Suena and Shu-Suen, both sons of Shulgi. When Shu-Suen would officially ascend to the throne, Lugal-itida would change his seal, and get a new one. But enough of these thoughts for now...

He had to write now on that tag the contents of the leather bag he had just closed and sealed. He wrote with his stylus: *In the house, 540 + 48 cattle, 1800 + 54 ovine animals from*

*Abba-saga Ahu-Wer received from the first month to the twelfth month of Amar-Suena's fifth year in power.* His job was almost done. The leather bag, with all these 80 tablets put by him inside was now lying on the floor, easily distinguished from the other leather bags that had come into the archival room from other offices far from here. Those had a different tag - a polyhedral shaped one - and did not have the phrase *in the house* written on them. He was content. But he was looking forward to changing his cylinder seal. And with these thoughts again prevalent, he stepped out of the room. He closed the heavy wooden door behind him, covered with hides, looked at the sun and the scribes seating outside scribbling on clay tablets and left.

*Puzrish-Dagan, 30th March 2037 BCE*

A few years passed. Shu-Suen had officially become the new king. He, with a renewed look at how things should be and happen, tried to erase all memory of his brother and king Amar-Suena. But the archival rooms remained the same. They were filled as always with clay tablets on shelves, documenting daily transactions, monthly and annual accounts. The floors were filled with leather bags and big boxes, tagged with simple etiquettes, shaped like tablets. And now the time had come to store some of these leather bags away, to actually recycle them and put their contents away in bigger containers and reuse the old bags for new tablets. They needed the leather bags and they didn't need the tablets stored in them anymore. The archivist came back, a different one this time; the king had decided that he wanted to give this position to one close to him. He chose Babati, his maternal uncle.

Babati was indeed very powerful and was really beloved by Shu-Suen. He was already dealing with some of this archiving business even before his nephew Shu-Suen took power, but now he was the strongest man at Puzrish-Dagan and beyond. Babati stepped into the archival rooms and ordered a scribe to take all leather bags which were *from the house* and those outside, open them without breaking their tag, by cutting only the rope and empty their contents in that big basket that laid on the floor. So the scribe did as he was ordered. He emptied the contents of 10 such leather bags into a big reed basket, which was manufactured some months ago and sent to Puzrish-Dagan by a mule, and took all the corresponding tags. He closed this big basket, which was also insulated with bitumen, so moisture could not go through and destroy the tablets, and started looking at the tags. Babati told him that he should note down who had checked these bags, and what the tablets stored in them were about, so that the scribe should make a new label and attach it on the outside of the reed tablet basket. Everything should be properly archived. And the scribe took notes, and made a label with two holes on the edge, not through holes though. He wrote that this tablet basket had the tablets of transfers and expenditures of Abba-saga over 5 years, which were sealed with the seal of Lugal-itida. And then he attached it with a rope to the reed basket. But his job was not done yet. He had to preserve the previous sealed tags. And he took them to the oven, and fired them. Returning, he put these fired tags within the reed basket.

And there they stayed for thousands of years. That tablet written by that scribe in the middle of the winter, who was cold and tired, that tag that was spherically shaped and sealed by the archivist Lugal-itida who was waiting for the chance to change his old-fashioned cylinder seal. And they all entered oblivion.

## **PART II: Iraq, around 1910s CE**

### *Tall 'ad-Duraihim, somewhere in the 1900s-1910s CE*

Word of mouth reached the village of Afej that the mound of the little drachma, the Tall 'ad Duraihim is a treasure trove. Objects dug out of there could fetch US dollars, or at least lots of cents. Locals were already going there to get whatever they could. Easy money in the no man's land; the tell was in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by desert. No village was close-by apart from Souk al-Afej, 3 km afar. A local boy heard that he could make a fortune out of digging such peculiar objects, and losing no time, inquired about going there. The next



**Fig. 4: The tell of Drehem in the 1980s. Augusta McMahon**

morning the 'leader' of the 'excavation', a local tribesman, gave him the permission to dig.

The tell was not imposing at all. It was not like the Niffur one, certainly not. It was U-shaped, and not high at all, at most 25 m. Groups of locals were digging at the lowest parts of the northeastern part of the tell, and obviously they were very productive for they were shoveling in the hundreds such small curious objects into baskets. The boy enquired another 'worker' sitting nearby and smoking his pipe about the nature of these objects. He was told that these were ugly little things, but apparently valuable for some crazy Westerners. That they are made of clay, can be easily destroyed and that they are scribbled on their surface and bring lots of cash.

The boy started digging. By midday he came upon a hoard of objects stacked together. He forcefully stripped them off the ground. Among them was that tablet, written on that cold day in the middle of the winter (11<sup>th</sup> of January 2042 BCE) by that shivery and tired scribe, who made some mistakes and omitted some details, but who was content at the end with his tablet. It was that tablet which was documenting a transfer of some animals from his boss Abba-saga to the official named Ahu-Wer. But now the tablet, once clearly written and fondly shaped, lay salt-crusted and naked. Next to it laid that tag, sealed by that archivist who wanted to change his old-fashioned seal, Lugal-itida. The local held them both up in his hand, and thought no more of them. Their fate was prescribed that day: now that the phase of oblivion was abruptly ended, both would lose their anonymity, but they would always be naked and alone, stripped violently out of their shelter, where they lay for almost 4000 years.

And they were indeed under the shelter of the god Dagan (who no longer offered his protection, himself having vanished in oblivion along with so many other gods...), at ancient Puzrish-Dagan. But now they started a new journey towards unknown worlds, big and small, real and virtual.

*Souk al-Afej, a few months later*

A local was buying some foodstuff at Souk al-Afej. Walking through the stalls, he observed some curious looking objects. He had seen them before, covered in salt and mud, but did not know what they were. He went to the stall and asked the vendor. Full of pride, the vendor, a local woman, said that they were very ancient objects, called cuneiform tablets for they have text written on them composed of wedge-shaped signs, and bring lots of cash from Americans, who are eagerly trying to acquire them.

At the same time, the leader of this 'excavation' brought with him to the Souk al-Afej hundreds of such tablets amongst which the one of that scribe and the tag of that archivist, and sold them to the vendor. The vendor marketed them for 11 US cents each<sup>2</sup>, and she was to make a small fortune out of them for a few days later, the tablets were sold to antiquities dealers flooding the markets in Istanbul and Paris.

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on 19<sup>th</sup> century rumors. Relative value about \$3 in 2011 (measuringworth.com).

### PART III: Parallel lives, 1910s - 1930s

*Urfa, 22nd August 1915 CE*



**Fig. 5: Joseph Naayem, dressed as a Bedouin tribesman. Photo taken from his book 'Shall this Nation Die?'**

In the evening of August 21, 1915 Joseph Naayem a Catholic Assyro-Chaldean priest in the city of Urfa takes off his clerical robes, and disguises himself as a Bedouin tribesman. He is preparing for his escape from Urfa, just in time before the massacre of Christians.<sup>3</sup>

*Istanbul, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> February 1918 CE*

After having spent 130 days in prison in Istanbul, Joseph Naayem is freed. He is next seen in Paris.

*New York, 1920-3 CE*

Travelling by boat, father Naayem arrives in the United States and heads the so-called 'Chaldean Rescue Mission'. Trying to raise funds for the Assyrian widows and orphans, he tours among others Hazleton, the coal region's Catholic churches.<sup>4</sup>

*Chicago, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1924 CE*

A big bunch of cuneiform tablets is brought into the Oriental Institute Museum of Chicago, US, one of the most famous institutes for the study of the Ancient Near East. A certain J. C. Walsh shipped them from New York, from the Seymour Building, 503 Fifth Avenue. The Oriental Institute paid "The Chaldean Rescue", an organization headed by Reverend Naayem, 1,200 US dollars for this lot.<sup>5</sup> When and how Reverend Naayem or the 'Chaldean Rescue' acquired these tablets is not known.



**Fig. 6: Research archives at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (source)**

Within this box of 400 tablets, lay the tablet of that scribe, discarded, salt-crusted and almost illegible. It has not yet acquired fame, but it has managed to raise its price, almost 300%: from 11 cents that it had fetched that woman vendor at Souk al-Afej, now it was priced for 3

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Joseph Naayem 1920, *Shall this Nation Die?* New York: Chaldean Rescue. Accessible online at <http://www.atour.com/government/pdf/20040616a-STND.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Gettysburg Times - Jul 24, 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Relative value \$15,800.00 in 2011 (measuringworth.com).

dollars. Almost immediately it acquired a new name, an accession number written on its surface: from now on it would be known as A 5637. Regardless, it stayed in a box again for many years, underground and forgotten in the archives of the Oriental Institute Museum. A new phase of oblivion began.

#### *Paris and St. Petersburg, 1910s CE*



**Fig. 7: Nikolai Likhachev, taken from the State Hermitage Museum website**

Elias Géjou, an antiquarian in Paris, whose emporium included cuneiform tablets coming out from Drehem and Umma in the thousands, sends a letter offering tablets for sale to N. Likhachev<sup>6</sup>, a prominent Russian historian and avid collector. Likhachev accepts to buy some, but peculiar in selecting his antiquities and illiterate in the cuneiform script, he chooses objects pleasant to the eye. And in the lot he chooses from Géjou are many of the tags once closing leather sacks at Puzrish-Dagan. Among these tags is the beautifully preserved and sealed tag of Lugal-itida, the once director and archivist at Puzrish-Dagan.

#### *St. Petersburg (Leningrad) 1917-1918 CE*

The Russian Revolution is underway; the last Emperor of Russia, Nicholas II, abdicates in March. Likhachev moves with his family to Moscow, leaving most of his collection behind. His collection is nationalized in 1918, creating the Institute of Paleography.

#### *Leningrad, 1920s-1930s CE*

The Institute of Paleography, renamed Museum of Paleography in 1925, becomes a department of the Institute of Books, Documents and Writing in 1930, carrying with it all the time these cuneiform objects acquired by Likhachev through Géjou. Within the hundreds of cuneiform tablets, now in 1936 part of the Leningrad division of the Institute of History under the jurisdiction of the Academy of Sciences, lies unknown still that clay tag of Lugal-itida. In 1938 the Institute closes down. Most of its holdings are passed on to the now national State Hermitage. The tag of Lugal-itida acquires a new name: it is called Erm 15281 and belongs now officially to Russia and the Hermitage. And though named, it is forgotten again.

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<sup>6</sup> Information acquired from Natalia Koslova, curator of the Cuneiform Tablet Collection at Hermitage Museum and from its website: [www.hermitagemuseum.org/html\\_En/12/2003/hm12\\_1\\_16\\_1.html](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/12/2003/hm12_1_16_1.html).

## PART IV: Worldwide, 1990s-2010s CE

### Germany, Chicago and St. Petersburg, 1990s-2000s CE

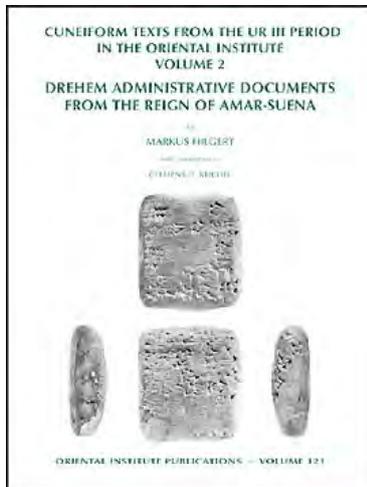


Fig. 8: Front cover of M. Hilgert's book, OIP 121

Word of mouth has reached Germany that the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago is a treasure trove for researchers trying to find information on life in Early Mesopotamia. For its archives are full of boxes with thousands of cuneiform tablets, rarely looked at, let alone even touched, that within their lines hide ancient secrets and ancient minds.

A researcher from Germany arrives in Chicago at the beginning of the 1990s to study some of the cuneiform tablets stored in the archives of the Oriental Institute. After studying them for more than 10 years, he makes them available to a small academic community. He publishes them in the Oriental Institute Publication Series, the title "Cuneiform Texts from the Ur III Period in the Oriental Institute Vol. 2: Drehem Administrative Documents from the Reign of Amar-Suena", and our tablet - that tablet written in the winter of 2042 BCE -

acquires a new name; from 2003 onwards it will be known to the academic community as OIP 121: 273.

Back to Russia, that tag though looked at and studied and photographed and used, remains still with its original name, Erm 15281.

### Los Angeles, Berlin, and St. Petersburg, 2000s

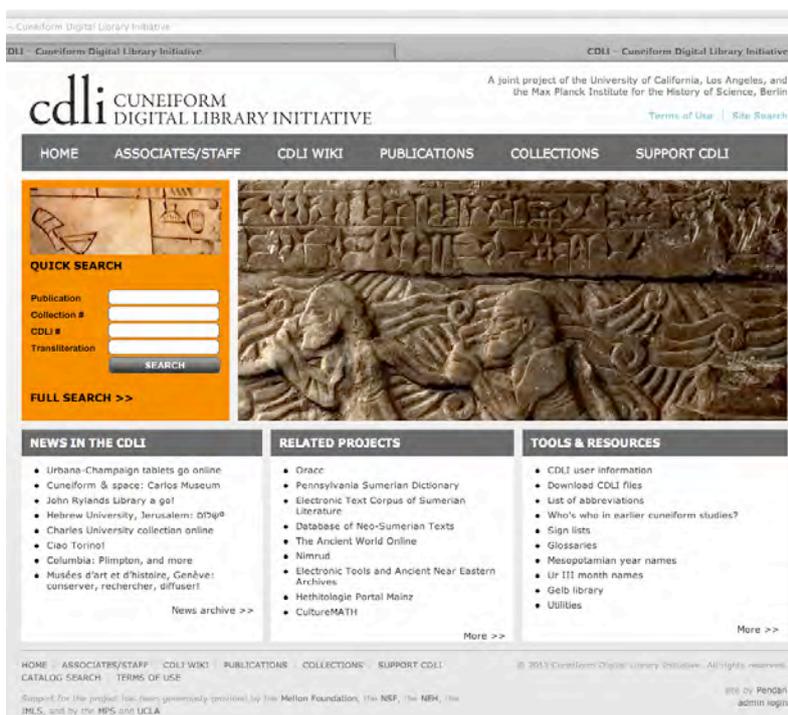


Fig. 9: Screenshot of the website of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative

Digital humanities is a new and emerging field of research. Few specialists exist and even fewer endeavor to use the Internet to present their findings and share their knowledge, let alone in the world of cuneiform studies.

Robert K. Englund, of the University of California at Los Angeles, and Peter Damerow, of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin (MPIWG), envision building an electronic library for all cuneiform inscriptions. With funding from the Digital Library Initiative of the

National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, they set out in 2000 to create the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI), a library freely available online with digital documentation and digitization of cuneiform texts from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BCE. In a three-year period they manage to digitize and disseminate online the collections of 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium texts in the Vorderasiatisches Museum (VAM) in Berlin, the Institut Catholique in Paris (ICP), the Hearst Museum of the University of California at Berkeley, the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

In 2003 Natalia Koslova, the curator of the cuneiform collection at the Hermitage Museum, and the Hermitage Museum cooperate with the CDLI project to make all objects from their collection from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BCE accessible to the digital world; she allows their photography and distribution on the World Wide Web. Within these now digital objects is Lugal-itida's tag. Accessed now with a new ID: P212288, the tag is available to everyone.



Fig. 10: Screenshot of digital presentation of Lugal-itida's tag @ CDLI

### Chicago, 2010s



Fig. 10: Screenshot of digital presentation of tablet OIP 121:273 @ CDLI

Walter Farber, the curator of the Cuneiform Tablet Collection of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, agrees to move forward with CDLI to digitize and disseminate their collection. Most of the tablets housed there are made available through photographs. Within these, the tablet of that scribe, with its new publication name OIP 121: 273.

### The World Wide Web, together at last, 2013 CE

In the virtual world, in the webpages of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, these two objects are back together, the tablet written by that tired and shivering scribe, that tag shaped and sealed by Lugal-itida, the director of Puzrish-Dagan who was looking forward to changing his seal, sometime in 2040 BCE.

But truth be told, pressing buttons and filling in fields does not automatically put them next to each other... Stripped forcefully from their hiding place, they can never be put back together exactly as they were in the ground. But at least, now physically separated by a continent and an ocean, one can find them together in the virtual world. No easy task; only research and time and effort can bring these two objects truly back together conceptually. The digital world

is their new home, bigger and more chaotic than their own ordered world, but it is now their home. After being forgotten for almost four millennia and wondering for a hundred years, one can put them back next to each other as they lay for thousands of years. This was their biography. And let us now say that the director at Puzrish-Dagan did manage to change his seal.

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