

**A NEO-SUMERIAN CLAY NAIL OF GUDEA IN THE  
COLLECTION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT STUDIES OF  
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**

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**Summary: A Neo-Sumerian Clay Nail of Gudea in the Collection of the Department of Ancient Studies of Stellenbosch University**

This paper discusses a previously unpublished inscribed clay nail in the collection of the Department of Ancient Studies of Stellenbosch University. The clay nail dates to the reign of Gudea during the Second Dynasty of Lagaš during the Neo-Sumerian period (circa 22<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), and records the building of the temple of the god Nindara in the city of Girsu. A transcription, transliteration and English translation of the inscription are provided. The paper further includes discussions on Nindara and the temples of this god.

**Keywords:** Clay nail – Gudea – Nindara – Temple of Nindara

**Resumen: Un clavo de arcilla neo-sumerio de Gudea en la colección del Departamento de Estudios Antiguos de la Universidad de Stellenbosch**

Este artículo analiza un clavo de arcilla con inscripciones que se encuentra en la colección del Departamento de Estudios Antiguos de la Universidad de Stellenbosch, hasta ahora inédito. El clavo de arcilla data del reinado de Gudea durante la Segunda Dinastía de Lagaš durante el período neo-sumerio (*ca.* siglo XXII a.C.), y documenta la construcción del templo del dios Nindara en la ciudad de Girsu. Se proveen una transcripción, transliteración y traducción al inglés de la inscripción. Este artículo también incluye debates sobre Nindara y los templos de este dios.

**Palabras clave:** clavo de arcilla – Gudea – Nindara – templo de Nindara

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## INTRODUCTION

In the collection of the Department of Ancient Studies of Stellenbosch University is a previously unpublished clay nail<sup>1</sup> (**Fig. 1**). This clay nail of unknown provenance was previously in the collection of the Department of Visual Arts of Stellenbosch University with the collection number KG 75/2. It was presumably purchased by Professor

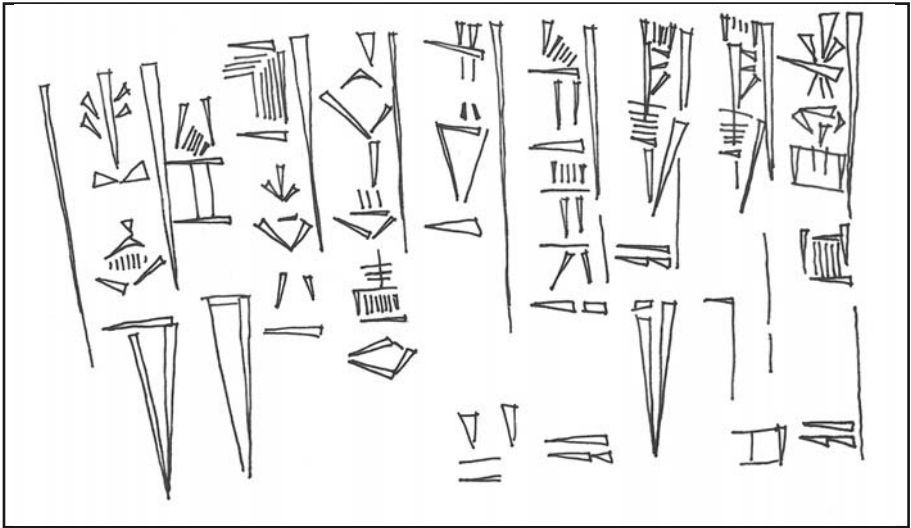


**Fig. 1.** Front view of the Neo-Sumerian clay nail.

<sup>1</sup> Also sometimes referred to as a clay clone, *e.g.* Edzard 1997: 4 *et passim*; Hallo 1962: 3 *et passim*, but see Von Dassow (2009: 76–77) for problems with this designation.

Schröder of the Department of Visual Arts. The clay nail is broken at the tip and in its present form measures 12,5 cm. in length. The head of the clay nail is 6,2 cm. in diameter, and the shaft measures 4,4 cm. at the base of the head, and 2,3 cm. at the tip.

At the base of the head the clay cone is an eight-line inscription in the cuneiform script. The bottom of this inscription is worn, especially in lines 5–7. The inscriptions can be restored as follows:



1	<sup>d</sup> nin-dar-a	For Nindara
2	lugal-[uru <sub>16</sub> ]	The powerful master
3	lugal-a-ni	His master
4	gù-dé-a	Gudea
5	énsi	Ruler
6	lagaš.[KI][ <sub>4</sub> -ke <sub>4</sub> ]	Of Lagaš
7	é-gír-[su][.KI]-ka-ni	His House of Girsu
8	mu-na-dù	Built

Gudea, ruler of Lagaš, built for the god Nindara, the powerful master, his master, his House of Girsu.

The clay nail therefore dates to the reign of Gudea of Lagaš towards the end of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.<sup>2</sup> Its inscription is not unique, which allows for the restoration of the missing cuneiform signs. In the *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia* series, it is type E3/1.1.7.31.<sup>3</sup> Edzard<sup>4</sup> records 154 examples of this inscription, with 145 of these being on clay nails. Suter<sup>5</sup> records 159 examples, with 151 being on clay nails. Of these, 69 clay nail inscriptions are from Tello, 2 are from Uruk, 1 is from Larsa, and 79 are of unknown provenance.<sup>6</sup> The clay nail in the Stellenbosch University collection can be added to the clay nails of unknown provenance which bear this inscription. Although this inscription is only eight lines long, much can be learned from it.

## COMMENTARY

### *Clay Nails*

Clay nails differ from foundation pegs in that whereas one foundation peg, usually made of metal, would be buried vertically in the foundations of a building, many clay nails were placed horizontally in the walls of the superstructure of the building.<sup>7</sup> Clay nails were embedded in exterior walls of buildings,<sup>8</sup> roughly a metre apart from each other.<sup>9</sup>

The clay nails were meant to mark the property to which they were affixed as belonging to a certain individual.<sup>10</sup> In this way, clay nails which were inscribed with dedications to deities marked the

<sup>2</sup> The exact date of Gudea's reign is uncertain, but at least part of it coincided with that of Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Steinkeller 1988), which places Gudea's reign towards the end of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

<sup>3</sup> Edzard 1997: 13–131.

<sup>4</sup> Edzard 1997: 130.

<sup>5</sup> Suter 2000: 23.

<sup>6</sup> Suter 2000: 298.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis 1968: 85, 90. See Ellis (1968: 46–93) for more on foundation pegs. See also von Dassow (2009: 77–79) for more on the differences between pegs and nails in Mesopotamian architecture.

<sup>8</sup> von Dassow 2012: 124.

<sup>9</sup> Chiera 1938: 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis 1968: 87.

building to which they were originally affixed as being the property of the deity to whom they, and therefore the building itself, were dedicated. Additionally, because many clay nails bearing the same inscription would be used for one building, they could help identify that building if it fell into disuse or ruin, or if it was to be renovated.<sup>11</sup>

### *Gudea*

Gudea (line 4) was the seventh ruler of the Second Dynasty of Lagaš, and is well-known today for his statuaries—over twenty statues are known, the exact amount is debated based on authenticity, whether the statues from the art market are authentic or forgeries, and identity, whether the uninscribed statues represent Gudea or another royal figure from the Second Dynasty of Lagaš.<sup>12</sup> The *Gudea Cylinders*, the longest extant text in the Sumerian language,<sup>13</sup> record the building of the *Eninnu*, the main temple at Girsu, modern-day Tello, the religious capital of the Lagaš city-state, which was dedicated to Ningirsu, the patron deity of Lagaš. Gudea was so well respected and revered during his own time that he was posthumously deified, with his cult being continued by the Third Dynasty of Ur.<sup>14</sup>

### *Nindara*

Nindara (line 1) was the husband of the goddess Nanše. Nanše and Nindara were the city deities of Nina,<sup>15</sup> modern Zurghul, a harbour city in the southeast of the city-state of Lagaš.<sup>16</sup> This is evidenced in

<sup>11</sup> von Dassow 2012: 126.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Colbow (1987: 121–147) catalogues 20 statues, Edzard (1997: 29–67) provides the inscriptions for 26 statues, and Suter (2000: 29) notes 21 statues. See Muscarella (2005) for the difficulties with the subjectivity of judging the Gudea statuaries as authentic.

<sup>13</sup> For transliterations, translations, and discussions on the *Gudea Cylinders*, see Edzard 1997: 68–106 RIMEP E3/1.1.7.CylA-E3/1.1.7 Cylfragms 11(+)+2 and 12; Römer 2010; and Suter 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Suter 2012: 61.

<sup>15</sup> Also Niġin, Nenua or Ninâ, Edzard 1998–2001: 322–323.

<sup>16</sup> Edzard 1998–2001: 322; Frayne 2008: 78.

Segment A:15 of the *Ĥendersaġa Hymn* where Nindara is called the “king of Niġun [Nina] in its spacious location.”<sup>17</sup> Nindara is also called “the lord of the holy sea” in the *Ĥendersaġa Hymn*,<sup>18</sup> which may be linked to his rulership of Nina, which, as mentioned, was a harbour city.

The *Ĥendersaġa Hymn* also describes Nindara as “the king of Lagaš,”<sup>19</sup> but this title better suits Ningirsu, the tutelary deity of the Lagaš state. The cult of Nindara was centred at Ki’esa, which was in the “Nähe von Lagaš,”<sup>20</sup> but he also had places of worship in Girsu, as evidenced by the clay nail under discussion and similarly inscribed artefacts, in Nina, and in the temple of <sup>d</sup>nin-MAR.KI in Gu’aba, in the southeast of the Lagaš state.<sup>21</sup>

Lugal-uru<sub>16</sub>, “the powerful master” (line 2) is Nindara’s most common epithet.<sup>22</sup> Gudea also once refers to Nindara as “the master and warrior” in the inscription of Statue B viii:53–54.<sup>23</sup> The epithet “powerful master” was already used for Nindara during the Early Dynastic period by Enannatum I in a royal inscription on a boulder now housed in the British Museum BM 114399<sup>24</sup> and by Enmetana in an inscription on a door socket now housed in the Iraq Museum.<sup>25</sup> The epithets “the powerful master” and “the master and warrior” represent Nindara as a mighty and formidable god, which is further supported by the inscription on Gudea Statue B ii:12–15 which describes Gudea as the one “to whom Nin-dara gave strength.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>17</sup> etcs1 t.4.06.1. For the transliteration in the etcs1, see <http://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1.cgi?text=c.4.06.1#> and for the English translation, see <http://etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcs1.cgi?text=t.4.06.1#>

<sup>18</sup> etcs1 t.4.06.1 Segment A:25.

<sup>19</sup> etcs1 t.4.06.1 Segment A:26.

<sup>20</sup> “vicinity of Lagaš,” Edzard and Farber 1974: 98.

<sup>21</sup> Selz 1995: 217.

<sup>22</sup> Falkenstein 1966: 88.

<sup>23</sup> Edzard 1997:37 RIMEP E3/1/1/7/StB viii:53–54.

<sup>24</sup> Frayne 2008:182 RIMEP E1.9.4.10.

<sup>25</sup> IM number unknown. Frayne 2008: 225 RIMEP E1.9.5.20.

<sup>26</sup> Edzard 1997: 31 E3/1.1.7.StB ii:12–15.

A similar epithet is known for Nanše, nin-uru<sub>16</sub>(-n), “powerful mistress,” and, according to Selz,<sup>27</sup> can identify Nindara as the masculine equivalent of this goddess. In this regard, the Sumerian compositions Nanše and the Birds relates how Nanše created birds,<sup>28</sup> and in the *Hendersağa Hymn* Nindara is called dar<sup>mušen</sup>,<sup>29</sup> which can be translated “the cock”<sup>30</sup> or “francolin.”<sup>31</sup> Although the exact meaning of dar<sup>mušen</sup> is uncertain, the mušen determinative makes it clear that Nindara is described as some kind of bird, and Nanše and Nindara can therefore both be associated with birds and with each other.

### *The Temple of Nindara*

The clay nail records the building of the Temple of Nindara in Girsu (line 7). This is not the only temple of Nindara which was built (or rebuilt) by Gudea. A royal inscription of Gudea on a steatite tablet which was excavated at Ur and is now housed in the British Museum, BM 119012, records that Gudea built Nindara’s temple at Ki’esa, the é-làl-túm, the “House producing date syrup.”<sup>32</sup> One of Gudea’s year names is “year: the house of Nin-dara was built.”<sup>33</sup> The question is to which temple of Nindara does this refer, because if it refers to the temple at Girsu, the clay nail can be dated to a specific year in the reign of Gudea. Falkenstein<sup>34</sup> suggests that the temple at Girsu is the temple mentioned in the year name, but also states that this temple is once called the é-làl-túm in Ki’esa, and because these represented two distinct temples, the year name cannot refer to both temples. Edzard<sup>35</sup> identifies the year name as referencing the rebuilding of the é-làl-túm temple at Ki’esa.

<sup>27</sup> Selz 1995: 217.

<sup>28</sup> For this text and a full discussion thereof, see Veldhuis 2004.

<sup>29</sup> EtsI c.4.06.1.

<sup>30</sup> EtsI t.4.06.1 Segment A:25.

<sup>31</sup> Veldhuis 2004: 234. Although Veldhuis (2004: 122) also translates dar<sup>mušen</sup> as “partridge.”

<sup>32</sup> Edzard 1997: 132 RIMEP E3/1.1.7.32.

<sup>33</sup> Edzard 1997: 27.

<sup>34</sup> Falkenstein 1966: 88.

<sup>35</sup> Edzard 1997: 28.

The first mention of a temple of Nindara is in the Early Dynastic III period in two inscriptions of Enannatum I, one being a clay tablet from Lagaš now in the Iraq Museum (IM 76644), and the other an inscribed boulder of unknown provenance now in the British Museum (BM 114399). Both inscriptions record Enannatum's restoration of this temple.<sup>36</sup> Because these inscriptions record the restoration of Nindara's temple, and not its building, the original temple must date to before the Early Dynastic III period. The inscription on AO 9, a statue of Ur-Bau, Gudea's predecessor, also records the building of a temple for Nindara.<sup>37</sup> However, neither the Enannatum I inscriptions or the Ur-Bau inscription give more information regarding the location of the temple, and George<sup>38</sup> notes that these inscriptions could refer to either the temple at Girsu or the *é-làl-túm* temple at Ki'esa.

A royal inscription of Uruinimgina/Urukagina<sup>39</sup> on a tablet from Lagaš and now in the Louvre, AO 4126, records an attack by Lugal-Zagesi of Umma against Lagaš in which "in Ki'eš, he [Lugal-Zagesi] plundered the temple of Nindara and bundled off its precious metals and lapis lazuli."<sup>40</sup> Because the cult of Nindara was centred at Ki'esa, it could logically be argued that the *é-làl-túm* temple was of such importance, and its rebuilding was so important that it would be recorded in a year name of Gudea. However, the temple in the year name is merely "*é-dnin-dar-a*,"<sup>41</sup> and not *é-làl-túm* as could be expected if this was the temple which was built. Other year names of Gudea include "*mu ÍD.dnin.gír.su-ušumgal ba-ba-al-la*," "year: the canal 'Ningirsu, the dragon', was dug," and "*mu balag ušumgal-kalam-ma*

<sup>36</sup> Frayne 2008: 171 RIMEP E1.9.4.2 iv:7–8; 182 RIMEP E1.9.4.10 i:11–ii:3 respectively.

<sup>37</sup> Edzard 1997: 19 RIMEP E3/1.1.6.5 v:2–3.

<sup>38</sup> George 1993: 118, 167.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the reading of this name, see for example Edzard 1991 and Lambert 1992. See also Frayne (2008: 245–246), who calls this ruler "URU-KA-gina," for a discussion on the previous literature of the reading of the name. The present work follows the more recent trend to use both names, as for example Selz (2005: 17), "Uru-inimgina/Iri-KA-gina," and Marchesi and Marchetti (2011: 244), "Uru'inimgina, Urukagina" who also transcribe the name as "Eri'enimgennāk."

<sup>40</sup> Frayne 2008: 278 RIMEP E1.9.9.5 v:3–7.

<sup>41</sup> Edzard 1997: 27; Falkenstein 1966: 8.



ba-dím-ma,” “year: the harp ‘Dragon of the Land’ was fashioned.”<sup>42</sup> This suggests that if an object or structure had a unique name, like Nindara’s é-làl-túm temple at Ki’esa, that this name would be included in the year name rather than the more generic “é-dnin-dar-a,” or “temple of Nindara.” This would argue instead that the temple mentioned in Gudea’s year name is the temple of Nindara at Girsu, which is simply called the é-gír-su, the “house of Girsu” or the “temple located at Girsu,” and which does not appear to have a unique name as the é-làl-túm at Ki’esa does.

Furthermore, Suter<sup>43</sup> lists 159 records for the building of the temple of Nindara at Girsu—one foundation tablet, seven bricks and 151 clay nails—but only one foundation tablet which records the building of the temple of Nindara at Ki’esa. While the lack of objects recording the building of the temple at Ki’esa can be partly explained by the fact that Ki’esa has not been located or excavated, this cannot fully explain it because, as previously mentioned, of the 151 clay nails recording the building of the temple at Girsu, only 69 of these were excavated at Tello/Girsu. This suggests that if the building of the é-làl-túm at Ki’esa was of such importance that its building was commemorated in one of Gudea’s year names, that more objects recording this building would be known. The evidence then seems to point to the Gudea year name referring to the building of the temple of Nindara at Girsu, and not the building of the é-làl-túm at Ki’esa.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the provenance of the clay nail in the collection of the Department of Ancient Studies of Stellenbosch University is unknown and the inscription is only eight lines long, it provides a wealth of information about its origin. The inscription on the clay nail is a dedication to the god Nindara and marks both itself and the temple to which it was attached as the property of this god. The original location of the clay

<sup>42</sup> Edzard 1997: 27.

<sup>43</sup> Suter 2000: 23.

nail was therefore the temple of Nindara at Girsu, and it can be dated to a specific year in the reign of Gudea because of the year name which mentions the building of this temple.

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