

## **The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East**

# **Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records**

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# **The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East**



Edited by  
Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel

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## Foreword

The idea for the conference on *Women in Work and Society* is already ten years old. It was first conceived to be an event open to historians of the classical world, as well as ethnologists. However, historians who specialize in ancient Greece and Rome are much ahead of Assyriologists on the matter of gender studies, and it appeared that it would be interesting to explore the involvement of women in the economy of ancient Mesopotamia.

In January 2012 the French-Japanese project *Le Rôle Economique des Femmes en Mésopotamie Ancienne* (REFEMA, *The Economic Role of Women in Ancient Mesopotamia*) was launched, involving researchers of the team *Histoire et Archéologie de l'Orient Cunéiforme* (HAROC, Archéologies et Sciences de l'Antiquité) in Nanterre and a group of Japanese colleagues from several institutions based in Tokyo, the majority of them belonging to Chuo University.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this project was to use ancient Mesopotamian written sources (3<sup>rd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> millennia BC) to study the various aspects of women as economic agents, both inside and outside the family structure. This program, which lasted three years (2012–2014) was divided into three main themes: the economic role of women in the family, women and external economy, and women and the estate. The four REFEMA workshops, two in France (Nanterre, Carqueiranne) and two in Tokyo, addressed the economic role of women as producers of wealth, both in the private sphere and in large institutions (temples and palaces), as operators in the transmission of estates, and as involved in all types of economic activities, even though they are less attested in this field than men and their transactions often concern smaller quantities.

The conference on *Women in Work and Society* was the closing event of the REFEMA research program. Many colleagues from various countries, including historians, art historians and a historian of law, all specializing in the ancient Near East, were invited to join the small REFEMA team. By gathering colleagues who work on different types of sources, we wanted to look for con-

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<sup>1</sup> The French team was lead by Francis Joannes (University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, ArScAn-HAROC) and involved the following Assyriologists: Laura Cousin (University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, ArScAn-HAROC), Josué Justel (University of Alcalá, Spain), Bertrand Lafont (CNRS, ArScAn-HAROC), Brigitte Lion (University Lille 3, HALMA), Cécile Michel (CNRS, ArScAn-HAROC) and Gauthier Tolini (ArScAn-HAROC). The Japanese team was conducted by Fumi Karahashi (Chuo University) and involved the following colleagues from Tokyo's various institutions: Eiko Matsushima (Hôsei University), Ichiro Nakata (Ancient Orient Museum, Chuo University), Yoko Watai (Chuo University) and Masamichi Yamada (Chuo University). An issue of the journal *Orient* was edited by Fumi Karahashi with contributions of nine members of this project (*Orient* 51, 2016).

stants, evolutions, and to show how each society produces its own gender categories. This book, as well as the conference, follows a chronological order, and its chapters cover the three millennia of Mesopotamian history.



Participants to the conference on November 6, 2014, in front of the Maison Archéologie et Ethnologie, Nanterre.

Adelheid Otto

## **Professional Women and Women at Work in Mesopotamia and Syria (3<sup>rd</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC): The (rare) information from visual images**

Women have always, today as well as in antiquity, made up roughly 50% of every society. Despite this banal fact, the search for pictorial representations of mortal women in the Ancient Near East is not easy. On the one hand, far less than half of the depicted humans are female; on the other hand, the existing representations are unevenly distributed over the periods and regions. While a considerable number of women were depicted as statues or on stelae and seals in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia, there is hardly a single one on such objects in 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia, while in contemporary Syria, Elam and Anatolia there are many.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, numerous Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, cheap everyday items, show mortal woman. Why are there these differences?

There are some obvious reasons for this. First of all is the nature of the sources: the few images that have reached us so far from the Ancient Near East are but a tiny fragment of what formerly must have existed. Most of the sculptures and reliefs from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium discovered so far, are made of stone, which was not a common material in the lowlands of Mesopotamia, and most of them were found in temples. Terracotta was used mostly for simple figurines. Therefore we have to bear in mind that many of the representations made of perishable materials disappeared in the course of time; those made of metal were melted down, and those used in domestic contexts have not been discovered yet.

Furthermore, the sources reflect society in general in an unequal way and this is also true for pictorial representations of women, as H. Crawford has

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**1** The evidence investigated here dates from the Early Dynastic until the Old Babylonian / Old Syrian period. For the Uruk period see C. Breniquet in this volume.

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described it recently for written sources: “The top echelon of society created most of the records that have survived and these deal largely with their own activities and concerns (...) The professional women in the middle ranks are not so well documented, and rural and nomadic women are barely mentioned at all” (Crawford 2013: 13).

Still more important are the intentions of Ancient Near Eastern art in general and, especially for this small study, the purpose of pictorial representations in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia and Syria. Works of “major art”, i.e. statues and reliefs, were not created with the intention of depicting real life, but were intended to enhance the roles or capacities of a limited number of persons through stereotypical renderings. They most often show people involved in cultic or ritual scenes that were deemed worthy enough to be depicted. They illustrate anything but “everyday life”. Their purpose was to perpetuate the most spectacular and exceptional events of a small part of former societies.

The purpose of certain works of “minor art”, especially of terracotta plaques, was clearly different. Some of them show at least a few depictions of daily life and work. But while many female figures seem to be represented, here again – as in the major arts of 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia – only a small percentage of them depict mortal women.

Much has been written about the depiction of women in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia. The most comprehensive studies on Mesopotamian women during Uruk- to ED III-period are those of Julia Asher-Greve (1985; 2006; 2013) and during the Akkadian and Ur III periods those of Claudia Suter (2007; 2008; 2013); the most recent summary was written by Harriet Crawford (2014). All of them focus on the Mesopotamian area proper. The representations of women in Syria, especially in Ebla and Mari, have been investigated by Frauke Weiershäuser (2006; 2008), Rita Dolce (2008) and Stefania Mazzoni (2002).

Asher-Greve (2006) called the later Early Dynastic period (ca. 2700–2350 BC) the “Golden Age” of women. This is certainly correct, at least as far as the number of depictions in the Mesopotamian area is concerned. Still in the Akkadian period and continuing into Ur III times, there are numerous images of various female persons engraved on cylinder seals, represented as statues and carved on reliefs. The depiction of mortal women stops abruptly in works of major art and seals at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, and this may also be the reason why most scholarly works on women do not go beyond the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Syrian art continues to depict women

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<sup>2</sup> The extremely valuable collection of depictions of women by Claudia Suter (2008) ends more or less, despite the title of the article, around 2000 BC, because only a handful of cylinder seals can be attributed to the Isin-Larsa period.

into the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. The same is true for the arts of Anatolia and Elam, which however lie beyond the scope of this study.

In the following, I will try to categorize the depictions of female mortals during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia according to the women's roles or professions. This is not an easy task, since only a few images bear inscriptions that clearly indicate the profession or title of the depicted person.

## 1 Queens and high-ranking women

### 1.1 Royal or high-ranking women engaged in cultic activities

It is supposed that the majority of the women depicted in 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia belonged to the upper crust of society and have normally been identified as royal or high-ranking women. Claudia Suter summarized our knowledge about royal women in Mesopotamia of Akkadian and Ur III times in the following way: "royal women were represented in public in the form of statuettes set up in temples and they were depicted on public monuments, such as a stela. On seal images that circulated within state administration, they participate in state ceremonies or cult festivals alongside the king, are received in audience by a deified king, receive themselves subordinates in audience and direct women's cult festivals" (Suter 2008: 26).

Their superior status can be deduced either from the accompanying inscriptions or from the context, but only in very few instances is it explicitly stated which status, profession or rank the depicted woman had. A good example is the stela from al-Hiba (Lagaš), which commemorates the inauguration of the Ibgal Temple (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The goddess for whom the temple was built, is depicted on the obverse. On the reverse the royal family of Ur-Nanše, **ensi**<sub>2</sub> of the First Dynasty of Lagaš, is represented in a remarkable way: while Ur-Nanše himself is standing in the upper register clasping his hands and is followed by a small cup-bearer, Men-bara-abzu (on the right) and Nin-usu (on the left), Ur-Nanše's wife and daughter respectively, are sitting in the lower register. Each has long hair, which falls over her back and shoulders, and each is probably holding a cup in one hand and a branch in the other. It is certainly not by chance that their hairdos and the branches in their hands resemble those of the goddess. Their seated position also mirrors that of the goddess and designates their special status. Since the seated position indicates generally a role

<sup>3</sup> Börker-Klähn 1982: no. 16; RIME 1.9.1.6a.

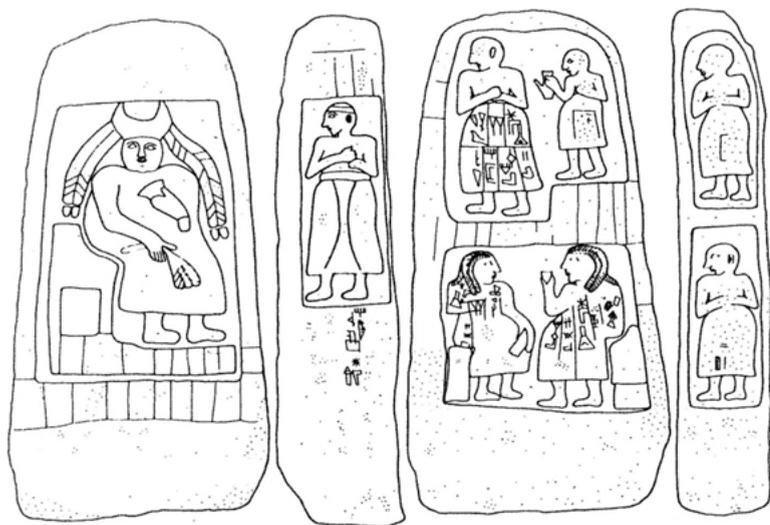


Fig. 1: Stela of Ur-Nanše, showing his wife and daughter seated (Asher-Greve 2006: 60, fig. 8).

superior to the standing one, the queen and princess seem to have played an important role, at least on this special occasion of the temple's inauguration. Unfortunately, we do not know whether in addition to being the wife and daughter of the ruler they were also priestesses in the service of the goddess: such a role was often fulfilled by members of royal families.<sup>4</sup>

The garments, the headdress or hairdo and the posture are usually the most explicit markers of the status of a depicted person. But it is often impossible to know whether certain clothes were typical of the profession, of the position held, of the momentary activity or situation the woman was represented in, or of the period or region. It is striking, for instance, that the main female person on a votive plaque from Ebla (Fig. 3) is wearing a smooth cloak over her head, while women on comparable votive plaques from central and southern

<sup>4</sup> Several votive plaques are known from the same **ensi**<sub>2</sub> Ur-Nanše. On one of them five of his children are shown approaching their father (Strommenger 1962: no. 73). ÁB-d[a?], Ur-Nanše's daughter, is standing ahead of the son Akurgal (his role as crown prince possibly expressed by his hairknot), and three other brothers. Because the daughter is heading the row, is depicted larger than her brothers, is the only one (except her father) wearing a tufted garment, shows one breast and because the Sumerian word **dumu** can mean either son or daughter, many scholars have argued that in fact another son or a male diviner was depicted: this was rejected convincingly by Strommenger 1962: 67; Asher-Greve 1985: 90–92 and Selz 2010: 189.



**Fig. 2:** Votive plaque from Khafaji (Strommenger 1962, pl. 45).



**Fig. 3:** Votive plaque from Ebla, Palace G (Pinnock 2013, fig. 28.13).

Mesopotamia (Fig. 2) wear pinned-up hair without a cloak.<sup>5</sup> Rita Dolce suggested that the cloak, worn over the head, “was chosen for banquets tied to funerary ceremonies” and was “perhaps connected to the cult of the dead” (Dolce 2008: 72). The different garments could be also regarded as regional peculiarities or as garments worn on special occasions. Since the cloak was worn by various women on Syro-Hittite reliefs in a ritual cultic context and on funerary monuments, Dolce supposes also “a deliberate use of the cloak in a sacred ritual sphere, at least in the Syro-Anatolian area” (Dolce 2008: 71). It cannot be excluded, though, that this special garment was meant to identify a woman as a priestess, as a widow, as a former queen, as an elderly woman or something else.

Many images of women without divine attributes – thus probably mortals – have been preserved from the later Early Dynastic period. Many of the votive statuettes, so-called “Beterstatuetten”, are female. Several stelae clearly render the high status of the depicted women. The early ED stele of Ušumgal, **pa<sub>4</sub>-šeš**-priest of Šara(?), for instance, commemorates the transactions of fields, houses and livestock, in which Ušumgal’s daughter Šara(?)-igizi-Abzu was prominently involved.<sup>6</sup> She is depicted as tall as her father opposite her.

<sup>5</sup> There is however a rather late votive plaque, presumably from Umma, which shows a woman with her head covered: Boese 1971, UM 1.

<sup>6</sup> Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting p. 43–47; Evans 2003a: no. 20.

Four other high-ranking persons are involved in the transactions, but since they are depicted much smaller, their status or their role in the relevant deal was probably less important. Among these four persons are the chief of the assembly, the foreman of the assembly, the chief herald, and another woman named IGI.RU<sup>2</sup>.NUN, daughter of Mesi, **pa<sub>4</sub>-šeš**-priest of the temple Enun. Again the size and position of the woman do not differ from those of the men. Both women are called ÈS.A, the meaning of which is obscure.

Women (and men) as principal participants in banquets were a common motif on votive plaques (Figs. 2, 3). It seems as if no individual rendering of specific people was depicted on votive plaques, although they were given by individuals, since there are many plaques which are more or less identical.<sup>7</sup> They seem to be stereotype icons of feasts, and they served to commemorate the most important political and social events. The main protagonists were usually rendered as two sitting and drinking persons, a female and a male (Fig. 2). This was probably meant as *pars pro toto* for a larger number of banqueters, since occasionally more than two seated main persons were depicted.<sup>8</sup> The banqueters are served by several standing female and male attendants and are surrounded by female and male musicians (the other depictions such as the wrestling, wagon or boat scenes are not mentioned here, since there are no women involved). These plaques were common at least from Susa in the East to Ebla in the West, where a fragmentary limestone plaque was found below Palace G (Fig. 3) (Dolce 2008, Pinnock 2013).

Several queens, secondary wives and princesses of the Ur III royal house are depicted on their own cylinder seals (Weiershäuser 2006; Suter 2013). At least three “Royal Gift Seals” are known, which were given to women, each called *lukur* by Šulgi and Šu-Suen respectively (Mayr and Owen 2004, p. 149–151, nos. 1, 2, 8). The distinguished status of the women becomes obvious through their position directly in front of the king with their hands outstretched towards him – a gesture that has never been found with men – perhaps indicating the special relationship between them. The seal of Geme-Ninlila, beloved consort of Šulgi, shows her standing in front of the warlike king

<sup>7</sup> Our Fig. 2 shows the fragmentary votive plaque from the Sîn-Tempel at Khafaji, the image of which can be restored with the help of the similar plaque from Ur: Boese 1971, CT 2 + U1 (this had been recognized already before by many scholars such as Frankfort, Hansen, Moortgat and others). This plaque is just one of many examples.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Boese 1971: AG 1 shows two women and a man in the upper register and two more men in the middle register; N 5 and N6 show at least two pairs of female and male drinkers. Also other media such as cylinder seals and standards, e.g. the standard of Ur, depict banquets with many participants.

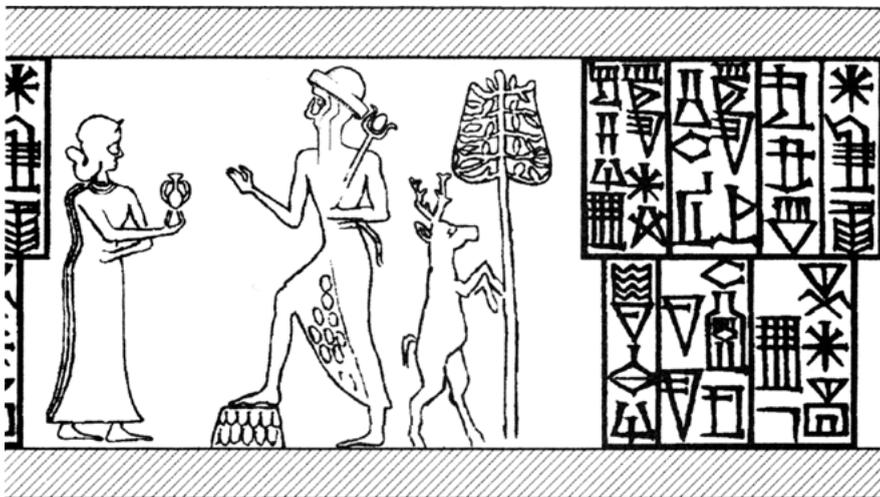


Fig. 4: Seal impression of Geme-Ninlila, beloved consort of Šulgi (Suter 2013, fig. 10.13).

and holding the small vessel, which is usually held by the king, in her outstretched hand (Fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> There occurs a prominent tree, an element, which seems to have had a specific symbolic value in relation to women.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2 The women with high polos and cape = a priestess, the queen or another high-ranking woman?

Seated women, wearing a high polos with a cloak above it, were interpreted as priestesses until recently. Examples are known from Mari as statuettes (e.g. Fig. 5). Sitting or standing women wearing a polos and no cloak above it are more frequent,<sup>11</sup> but it is not known, if these are depictions of the same person.

<sup>9</sup> The scene is unique in many ways. Usually the lion headed club is a typical weapon of deities, but here it is the king's attribute.

<sup>10</sup> It seems striking to the present writer that several seals belonging to women or their servants show this tree, e.g. the seal of Dada, the estate manager of Šarkališarri's consort (Suter 2013: fig. 10.14), and many more Akkadian seals, see here Fig. 31. It seems possible that this tree, which is never related to the main scene, might be a symbol especially apt for women, e.g. meaning fertility; but this has to be investigated further.

<sup>11</sup> For multiple examples from the Ištar temple at Mari see Parrot 1956: pl. XXXVI–XXXVII; Evans 2003c: no. 92.



**Fig. 5:** Seated female figure with cloak over a polos from Mari, Ninni-zaza temple (Evans 2003c: 153, no. 92a).



**Fig. 6:** Seal impression of the queen of Mari (Beyer 2007: 239, fig. 4c).

Since the impression of the magnificent seal of the queen of Mari<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 6) has come to light, it seems probable that the sitting woman with cloak should be interpreted as the queen. The Mari seal shows her in the upper register, seated and holding a vessel in one hand and a branch in the other. She is sitting opposite another seated person who could be the king or another high-ranking woman.<sup>13</sup> Were the image intact, she would be surrounded by more than twenty court ladies and female musicians. If her identity as the queen of Mari is correct, the other examples of women with a cloak over their heads may be considered the queens of Ebla and Mari respectively (Figs. 3, 5, and 6).

The depiction of royal and high-ranking women seems to end in Mesopotamia with the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, but it continues in Syria. Several representations are known from stelae, statues, and carved basins. The most elaborate depiction of a banquet of the queen and the king is found on the basalt basin in the cella of Temple D at Ebla (Fig. 7). The upper register of the front side shows a seated woman, dressed in a hatched garment, her head covered with a hat and a scarf, holding a beaker in her right hand. She is sitting opposite the king, marked as such by his peaked cap; between them is a table. Two

<sup>12</sup> The names of the queen and the king have not yet been deciphered, but the inscription designates her as the wife (**dam**) of the king (**en**) of Mari.

<sup>13</sup> These possibilities are evident in analogy to seals from the Ur cemetery and other sites.



Fig. 7: Basalt basin from Temple D at Ebla (Matthiae 1977: fig. 127)

women, dressed in calf-length garments, held by a belt, their hair tied up, are bringing buckets. Three men, holding a staff and spears or standards respectively, are their counterparts behind the king. The scene shows a striking continuity to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium depictions of banquet scenes, where the main couple is assisted by female and male attendants or courtiers.

Two basalt statues of women in elaborate cloaks, one with a fringed edge and the other with a swollen edge (early and late 18<sup>th</sup> century respectively), presumably representing the queen or a priestess, were found in Ebla in the sacred area near Temple P2.<sup>14</sup> The cloak with the swollen edge of the headless statue (Fig. 8) falls over her right shoulder and covers the right arm until the elbow, but covers her left arm completely. A quite similar cloak is worn by a woman depicted on a Classic Syrian cylinder seal in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Yamhad court style (Fig. 9)<sup>15</sup>. She is standing opposite the king of Yamhad in his typical cloak made from fur, and they each lift one hand in front of their faces.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Matthiae 2010: 285–286, fig. 146, pl. XX–XXI; Matthiae 2013: 376–379, figs. 198, 202.

<sup>15</sup> Tokyo Museum III–7–14; Ishida 1991: 52; Otto 2000: 96, pl. 28, no. 355.

<sup>16</sup> For the king in the cloak from fur (“König im Fellmantel”) as a typical representation of the king of Halab see Otto 2000: 232–233.



**Fig. 8:** Headless statue of a woman in an elaborate cloak; Ebla, sacred area P (Matthiae 2013: 377, fig. 198).



**Fig. 9:** Syrian cylinder seal showing the queen (?) opposite the king of Yamhad (Ishida 1991: 52).

## 2 Court ladies and female attendants

Many votive plaques and seals of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia show standing female persons in front of or behind the seated women. They hold various objects in their hands, among which are vessels and fans (Fig. 2). These women are often called female servants or attendants, and their male counterparts are also servants or attendants. Their lower rank in relation to the seated main persons is evident. But since they are often wearing the same garments and the same hairdo as the seated female, they must be considered not as simple servants, but as high-ranking court ladies.

The best illustrations of the numerous women who lived together at the court are found on the various seals which were worn by the court ladies in the Ur cemetery and by the seal from Mari, which shows the queen, court ladies, musicians and dancers in three registers (Fig. 6). In the Syrian orbit court ladies continue to be depicted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, see above (Fig. 7).

## 3 Priestesses

The secure identification of certain priestesses was made possible by Enheduanna's disk (Fig. 10). The main figure on the badly damaged object is identified as the **en**-priestess of the moon god by the inscription on the back of the disk.



**Fig. 10:** The **en**-priestess Enheduana on her disk (before restoration) (Hatz 2003: 200, fig. 60).



**Fig. 11:** Statuette of an **en**-priestess (Weiershäuser 2006: 20, 2).

She is dressed in a flounced garment and wears long hair, which is held by a broad rounded headband. Also Enanatum, daughter of Išme-Dagan of Isin, **en**-priestess at Ur, is depicted wearing a flounced garment (Spycket 1981: 176). Several more statuettes, and a wall plaque from Ur show a woman with this same costume, which has been convincingly interpreted as the standard costume of the **en**-priestess (Pinnock 1998; Seidl 2005: 646; Weiershäuser 2006; Suter 2007). They all wear as their professional dress their long hair held by a broad headband<sup>17</sup> and a flounced garment (Figs. 10, 11). Otherwise the flounced garment is reserved for deities or deified persons. Only the **en**-priestess is allowed to wear it, presumably because she was considered the god's spouse.

Already a late Early Dynastic votive plaque from the Giparu in Ur (Fig. 12)<sup>18</sup> shows a priestess with broad headband, represented frontally, in the center of the lower register and three other priestesses approaching the seated god in the upper register. Winter (1987) took it as an argument for the existence of the ritual office of **en**-priestess of Nanna already in the late Early Dynastic period. She is certainly right to identify the three cloaked women in the upper register of Fig. 12 wearing broad headbands around their long hair, as priestesses, doing service at the sanctuary of the moon god. Also a late Early Dynastic cylinder seal shows a priestess with the characteristic headband, carrying a bucket and being assisted by a libating servant (Moortgat 1940: no. 144).

<sup>17</sup> Enheduana herself mentions in her hymn to Inanna the **aga-zi/nam-en-na**, the true cap/ the sign of **en**-ship; see Winter 1987: 192 with note 20.

<sup>18</sup> Votive plaque; British Museum; limestone, H: 22 cm; Boese 1971, U4; Evans 2003b: no. 33.



**Fig. 12:** Votive plaque from the Giparu in Ur depicting various priestesses (Evans 2003b: 74, no. 33).

I would like to argue that also on Enheduana's disk two other women (not men, as usually argued) were depicted following her and bringing votive gifts; the first one probably wore her hair tied up like the woman on Fig. 12, bottom left; the second one held a bucket – an offering typical of women.<sup>19</sup>

An Akkadian or Ur III statuette of an **en**-priestess (Fig. 11) illustrates explicitly the intellectual abilities and the high educational level of these elite persons: there is a flat rectangular object, probably a cuneiform tablet, lying on the lap of the seated priestess.<sup>20</sup> If this is not an image of Enheduana herself, it reminds us at least of her fame as a gifted poet.

A Neo-Sumerian fragmentary votive plaque from Ur also shows a seated woman wearing the flounced garment (Boese 1971: K 12; Seidl 2005: 646, fig. 4; Weiershäuser 2006: pl. 20.4). Her long hair falls down over her shoulders and is held by the rounded headband. Usually, the person is interpreted as the

<sup>19</sup> These two persons are usually considered to be male servants. But the last one, of which only the bucket in the hand has been preserved, was certainly a woman, since only women carry buckets (containing what?) in Early Dynastic and Akkadian ritual scenes, while men carry animals. Also the person immediately following Enheduana must be female, since the photo of the disk before restoration (Fig. 10) shows a protrusion on the backside of the person's head, which is impossible for a clean-shaven male, but matches well the tied-up hair of women.

<sup>20</sup> Statuette, Museum Berlin, H: 11. 6 cm; see Weiershäuser 2006: 265, pl. 20.2.



**Fig. 13:** Stela from Mardikh, showing a priestess in front of the Storm God (Matthiae 2010: fig. 148).

priestess of the goddess Ninsun, whose name is the only remaining trace of the former inscription. Following the proposition of F. Weiershäuser (2006: 271), Šulgi-simti, the queen of Ur during the time of Šulgi, could be represented here in her cultic role, since one of her cultic duties consisted of regular offerings for the goddess Ninsun, the divine mother of the kings of Ur.

Several Ur III audience scenes of **lukur**-priestesses were depicted on seals, which had been donated by the king, e.g. the seal of Ea-niša, beloved consort of the king (the secondary wife of Šulgi) and of Simat-Ištaran, daughter of Amar-Sîn, called by Šu-Suen “his beloved sister” and “his **lukur**” (Mayr 2002; Mayr and Owen 2004, p. 150). Well attested on Ur III seals is also the important priestess Geme-Lamma, **ereš-dingir**-priestess of the goddess Baba at Lagaš (Fischer 1997: 174, no. 4). Her seal shows an audience scene. The priestess, her hair tied up and with one hand held in front of her face, is standing before the goddess, depicted *en face*, enthroned and holding a vessel from which water is flowing. To judge from the impressions, the seal must have been a very fine one, cut with greatest precision and held by granulated golden caps, which itself is a marker of status.<sup>21</sup>

For 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium depictions we must again switch to Syria. The fragmentary stele TM.88.S.500 (Fig. 13) was found in the village of Mardikh, but had

<sup>21</sup> The quality of her seal is especially evident, since her seal may be compared to a seal which belonged to one of her male servants. The seal of “Atašuta, servant of Geme-Lamma, **ereš-dingir**-priestess of Baba” shows an introduction scene in front of a seated goddess, but the carving is not as fine and it had no cap setting (Fischer 1997: 174, no. 3). The same difference in quality can be observed on other seals of Geme-Lamma’s servants (Fischer 1997: 175, nos. 10 and 11).



Fig. 14: Syrian seal with priestess in front of the standard with heads (Eisen 1940: no. 132).

certainly been erected in Ebla (Matthiae 1993). Only one register is partially preserved. It shows the Storm God as the largest figure, behind whom a standing and a sitting person are depicted. Because their heads are missing and their garments are quite similar, it is difficult to interpret them. Matthiae proposed that they are the king and queen of Ebla. In front of the Storm God and opposite a rectangular block, on top of which an incense burner is depicted, stands a woman dressed in a long garment. Her head is covered by a long veil, under which her long hair appears and falls down her back down to her hips. She holds a small bowl in her right hand. Because of this gesture, her garment and size (only 2/3 the size of the god), Matthiae convincingly interpreted her not as a goddess, but as a priestess.

If this interpretation is to be accepted, many other similar depictions of female persons should also be interpreted as priestesses. Some Old Assyrian seals from Karum Kaneš II and many Old Syrian Cylinder seals from the 19<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century show a woman wearing long hair or a veil (Fig. 14):<sup>22</sup> she is usually depicted standing, rarely sitting, is dressed in a flounced or plain garment, and lifts one hand in front of her face or carries a branch or a vessel.<sup>23</sup> On several seals she stands with one hand raised in front of a bull or the (double-) headed *semeion*-standard.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to determine whether the “woman with long hair” depicts a goddess or a priestess, because her attitudes and positions often resemble closely those of goddesses and because divine fig-

<sup>22</sup> Eisen 1940: no. 132; Otto 2000: no. 181.

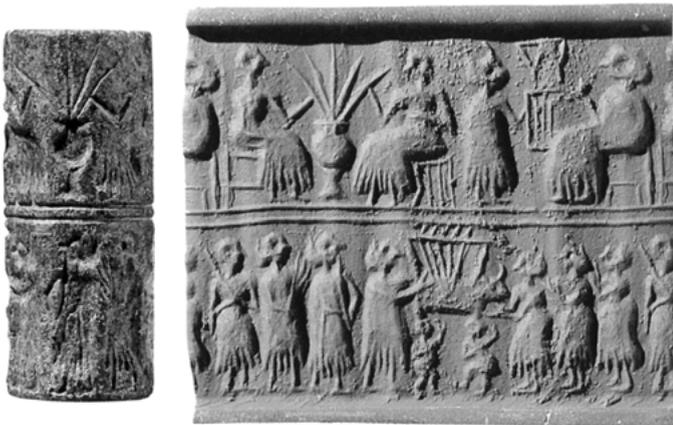
<sup>23</sup> For this woman see Otto 2000: 212–214.

<sup>24</sup> For this enigmatic standard with one or two human heads see Matthiae 2015 and Otto 2015. For seals from Karum Kaneš II depicting the woman with long hair in front of this standard see Teissier 1994: nos. 536, 537. For the woman in front of the bull see e.g. Özgüç 2006: pl. 83, CS 820; pl. 84, CS 823.

ures in Syria and Anatolia do not necessarily wear horned crowns. But if we consider that priestesses in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium were sometimes depicted with divine attributes, an intended similarity of the images of priestesses and goddesses seems plausible.

## 4 Female musicians and dancers

Many Early Dynastic votive plaques show female or male musicians accompanying the banquets with their music, played on bull-headed lyres or harps.<sup>25</sup> On the Mari queen's seal (Fig. 6) at least two women are depicted playing harps, two are beating curved sticks, and at least two are clapping their hands. Also ED seals from Fara, Tutub and other sites show female musicians (e.g. Amiet 1981: nos. 1200, 1201). Many seals which were found in the Ur cemetery, especially those which were found among the larger groups of court people, depict banquets in the upper register and musicians and dancers in the lower register. 68 female and 5 male servants and musicians were buried in PG 1237, the "Great Death Pit". An exceptional seal, inscribed **dumu-kisal** ("son or daughter of the court"), was found under the skeleton of no. 7, which lay close to three large lyres (Fig. 15). In the lower register of the seal a group



**Fig. 15:** Female musicians and dancers on a cylinder seal from the Great Death Pit at Ur (Zettler and Horne 1998, fig. 19).

<sup>25</sup> E.g. the votive plaque from Nippur, Inanna Temple (ED III), dedicated by the stonemason Lumma to Inanna; Boese 1971, N6.



**Fig. 16:** Old Babylonian terracotta plaque showing dressed female or more probably male harp-player (Barrelet 1968: pl. 75, no. 775).



**Fig. 17:** Old Babylonian terracotta plaque showing singing female harp-player (Rashid 1984: fig. 65).

of 9 musicians and dancers is depicted: a woman playing a bull-headed lyre is depicted in the center; the woman behind her is playing a flute, and behind her a woman is shaking a percussion instrument – one of the earliest representations of a sistrum. On the other side of the large lyre, three more women are depicted with their lower bodies in motion (depicted as a wavy long skirt) with one foot raised off the ground: they clap their hands in front of their faces – a very lively representation of dancing and singing women. In even wilder movement are two small figures dancing below the lyre.

Female musicians are a fairly common motif on Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, which have been found in most excavated Old Babylonian sites. The female musicians appear either naked or clothed. Many of the dressed women wear long garments, their hair is covered by a cap, and they are sitting on stools playing the harp (Fig. 16).<sup>26</sup> A fragmentary plaque from the Iraq Museum shows a dressed female harp-player, whose hair is worn in a bun: her mouth is open and she is apparently singing (Fig. 17).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Barrelet 1968: no. 775. This complete and most detailed plaque unfortunately comes from the art market. Many more examples were assembled by Rashid 1984: 80–84.

<sup>27</sup> Rashid 1984: fig. 65. Iraq Museum IM 11135, without provenience.

Hundreds of terracotta plaques and moulded figurines from Babylonia, Elam and Syria show naked female musicians or dancers. They are usually not playing a harp or a lyre,<sup>28</sup> but a tambourine (e.g. Barrelet 1968: pls. XXXIII–XXXVII). A plaque from Larsa shows a naked woman with a tambourine with a male lute-player in a terribly twisted sexual intercourse (Barrelet 1968: 320, pl. LVI.591, and fig. 7 of J. Cooper in this volume). Blocher (1987: 231) interprets them as jugglers, comedians and musicians, who performed during rituals. Several terracotta figurines of naked female musicians were found inside and outside the “Grand Palais” at Mari (Fig. 18).<sup>29</sup> They are rendered *en face*, adorned with elaborate hairdos and necklaces and holding tambourines. Since similar figurines with naked male lute-players were also found in the Mari palace (Parrot 1959: M. 1022), their earlier interpretation as a group of musicians, who may have been associated with fertility rites (Collon 1986: 132), seems convincing. These naked female musicians, however, are but a part of the large group of depicted “Naked Women” – a terribly complicated issue that has been treated recently by Candida Felli (2015). Since many female musicians are well attested for the Mari palace by the texts (Ziegler 2007), it would be interesting to know why some musicians were depicted with and some without garment.

## 5 Naked women and women as sexual partners

Much has been written about the “oldest profession in the world” (for recent summaries see Assante 2006; Cooper 2006; Felli 2015). As concerns depictions, the challenge is to distinguish between the various forms of nudity and nakedness (Uehlinger 1998; Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006). The identity of the so-called “Naked Woman” / “Nackte Frau” has been discussed at length by many scholars (for the most recent summary see Felli 2015). As a result of these studies, the general trend today is to see her not as a prostitute or any other kind of mortal woman, but either as a supernatural creature or as a personification or symbol. Therefore I will not treat the well-defined type of the “Nackte Frau” here.

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**28** Exceptions are a few plaques showing a naked woman with a lyre with a dancing man holding a tambourine (Rashid 1984: 76–77).

**29** M. 990 (Fig. 18) was found in salle 104; the findspot of M. 761 is given as “palais, extérieur” (Parrot 1959: 71).



**Fig. 18:** Terracotta figurine of naked female musician, holding a tambourine (Parrot 1959: 71, fig. 18).



**Fig. 19:** Old Babylonian terracotta plaque from Susa showing sexual intercourse with a drinking woman (Trümpelmann 1984: pl. IIa).

To be distinguished from this type is another type of nude female. Quite certainly the standing woman, bent over a beer jar and drinking from it, while having sexual intercourse, can be interpreted as a prostitute (Fig. 19), especially since a context in Susa might suggest the association of such images with a pub (Trümpelmann 1984). But it is still debated whether the naked women, lying on Old Babylonian terracotta bed models together with a man, are indeed depictions of prostitutes, or illustrations of a (sacred) marriage, or symbols for the abstract concepts of procreation and fertility.

## 6 The woman as mother and the wet-nurse

The excavations at Tell Mozan have furnished excellent depictions of the queen's various roles, of her family life, and of female professions at the royal court of Urkeš during the Akkadian period (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996; Kelly-Buccellati 2015). Several seals of queen Uqnitum, the wife (**dam**) of the ruler of Tupkiš, depict her in an intimate “family scene” with a small child on her lap (Fig. 20), or being touched by a small child standing in front of her (Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 120, Fig. 7). Associated are either the king and another child, or musicians and court ladies or servants. As Kelly-Buccellati already remarked (2015: 120), only women occur on most of these seals in which these intimacies are rendered. Until recently it was not clear if the



**Fig. 20:** Seal impression of queen Uqnitum of Urkeš with her family (Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 113, fig. 1).



**Fig. 21:** Seal impression of Zamena, the nurse of Urkeš (Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 120, fig. 8).

mother or a wet-nurse was depicted on these seals. But in the light of a seal from Urkeš it seems probable that the woman with the child on her lap is indeed the queen and mother. The seal belongs to Zamena, the nurse (**eme<sub>2</sub>-da**) (Fig. 21). It shows the same seated woman with long hair, holding a child on her lap, and a standing woman in front of her, who grasps both hands of the child.

More Akkadian seals show similar intimate scenes of a woman associated with a child sitting on her lap (Fig. 22).<sup>30</sup> Since all four women on the seal from Ur (Fig. 22) are wearing the same garments with fringed borders and the same bun, a similar social rank may be deduced.<sup>31</sup>

Very similar depictions of a seated woman with a child on her lap continue to be depicted on Old Babylonian terracotta plaques. The mother on a plaque found in Isin (Fig. 23)<sup>32</sup> although apparently breastfeeding the child is dressed



**Fig. 22:** Akkadian cylinder seal from Ur (Woolley 1934: no. 291).

<sup>30</sup> Woolley 1934: 97–98, no. 291 (U. 10757); Boehmer 1965: no. 1301.

<sup>31</sup> For the social status of a wet-nurse and nurse see Stol 2000, 181–190.

<sup>32</sup> Hrouda 1977: 49, pl. 24, IB 314.



**Fig. 23:** Terracotta plaque from Isin showing mother or wet-nurse with a child on her lap (Hrouda 1977: pl. 24, IB 314).



**Fig. 24:** Terracotta plaque from Girsu showing mother or wet-nurse breastfeeding a child (Genouillac 1936: pl. 102,3).

in a long garment. The woman on a plaque from Girsu is depicted while breastfeeding her child (Fig. 24).<sup>33</sup> Since there is no inscription, this might be the depiction of a mother or of a wet-nurse.

A few seals certainly depict wet-nurses and nursemaids (e.g. Suter 2008: 19, S 39 and S 48). An Akkadian seal – the carving of which is extremely delicate and exquisite and which is made of lapis lazuli – was the property of Takunai, the wet-nurse of the daughter of Timmuzi, female estate administrator.<sup>34</sup> The goddess Lama introduces a woman dressed in a rather unusual, vertically pleated robe to the goddess Ninhursag and another woman dressed in the more usual fringed robe is following her carrying a pail in her left hand. Both mortal women wear their hair tied up, but their garments differ, and the introduced woman seems to wear multiple necklaces. Suter, following Collon and contradicting other interpretations, convincingly interprets the introduced woman as the seal-owner, since this “not only agrees with the general rule that the presentee represents the seal owner, but also makes more sense for the custom-made seal of a wet-nurse, since Ninhursag is the nurturing goddess” (Suter 2008: 19). This means that one of the finest Akkadian seals that has survived, made of *the prestigious material par excellence*,

<sup>33</sup> Genouillac 1936:pl. 102.3.

<sup>34</sup> 3.29 by 1.86 cm (Jerusalem, Bible Lands Museum). Collon 1987: no. 642; Suter 2008: Seal 48.

belonged to a wet-nurse. It demonstrates again that the rank of this profession could vary. While normal wet-nurses seem to have had a fairly low rank, those who had wet-nursed the princesses or princes were among the ladies of the highest rank in court (Biga 1991: 297–298 and in this volume; Stol 2000: 186–189).

## 7 Female kitchen personnel, female brewers and women in a garden

Several seals from Tell Mozan show the personnel of queen Uqnitum at the court of Urkeš. The seal of Tuli, the chief cook, depicts the cook himself about to butcher a sheep or goat, the results of his butchering (two animal's legs hang from the ceiling) and a woman (Fig. 25). She is depicted with her upper body bent forwards and stirring with two sticks something in two narrow-necked jars, presumably making butter or cheese.<sup>35</sup> Several Akkadian seals show brewing women with larger jars including one in a stand, from which a liquid is flowing into a jar below it – the usual depiction of a beer jar (Fig. 26).<sup>36</sup> Woman active in a palm tree garden are rendered on a few Akkadian



**Fig. 25:** Seal of Tuli, the chief cook, showing male and female kitchen personnel (Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 121, fig. 9).

<sup>35</sup> Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1995–1996: Fig. 14; Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 121, Fig. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Boehmer 1965: no. 1279, Fig. 549; Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien. See also a cylinder seal in the Louvre with a female brewer (Boehmer 1965: no. 1297, Fig. 555) and a seal in the de Clercq Collection with a male brewer (Boehmer 1965: no. 1299, Fig. 557).



**Fig. 26:** A female brewer and a woman and a man bringing a bucket and a kid to a seated woman (Boehmer 1965, fig. 549).



**Fig. 27:** Akkadian seal showing three women in garden with various plants and birds (Boehmer 1965, fig. 709).

seals (Fig. 27).<sup>37</sup> Since the palms are quite small in relation to the women, and since the women seem to touch the date clusters, one wonders if real agricultural work or perhaps a symbolic act of fertilization is depicted. A seal from an ED level at Tall Mozan show four standing women involved in some action with a large rectangular object above a flat object, presumably textiles or vessels (Dohmann-Pfälzner 2013: 231, Fig. 103.8).

## 8 Female textile workers

The depiction of textile work is extremely rare. Exceptions are the spinning women on the mosaic panel from Mari (see Fig. 33), a woman bringing a ball

<sup>37</sup> Boehmer 1965: no. 1676, Fig. 709; see also the secondary scene of a seal in Moscow: Boehmer 1965: no. 952, Fig. 383.



**Fig. 28:** Cylinder seal from the Ištar Temple at Mari, showing a weaving woman in front of a vertical loom ([http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car\\_not\\_frame&idNotice=9617](http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=9617)).

of thread on a seal from Tall Mozan (Kelly-Buccellati 2015: 122, fig. 11) and an ED III seal from the Ištar temple at Mari (Fig. 28).<sup>38</sup> It shows only women: in the upper register a symposium of two women accompanied by a female servant or court lady, and in the lower register a woman sitting in front of a large vertical loom.

## 9 An exceptional profession

A unique position was held by the deaf lady Aman-Aštar, who must have had despite (or because of) her handicap a high position with regard to her boss, the *ēntu*-priestess Tutanapšum, daughter of Naram-Sin (Fig. 29). The inscription reads: “Tutanapšum, *ēntu*-priestess of the god Enlil: Aman-Aštar, the deaf lady, the *prattler*, (is) her female servant” (Frayne 1993: 175, no. 2017).<sup>39</sup> The high-priestess is rendered like a goddess, enthroned on a block on top of a three-stepped dais, and wearing the flounced garment. Only the horned crown is missing. The deaf lady appears directly in front Aman-Aštar, which reveals her high status and a strong relationship to the *ēntu*-priestess. Aman-Aštar holds a strange instrument in her hands, which has been interpreted as a musical instrument or as “something used to perform amusing tricks” (Asher-Greve 2006: 68). A medical instrument seems a better interpretation. The object is unique, but somewhat similar to the medical tools on an equally exceptional

<sup>38</sup> Parrot 1956: 194, pl. LXVI, M. 1071.

<sup>39</sup> The translation is uncertain. According to Asher-Greve 2006: 68 she could be dumb not deaf. But I wonder if a dumb person would have owned a seal, which can be used in legal affairs.



**Fig. 29:** Cylinder seal of the deaf lady Aman-Aštar with her (medical?) instruments (Collon 1987: fig. 530).

seal (Collon 1987: no. 638), belonging to a male doctor who – according to the inscription – prays to Edin-mugi, vizier of the god Gir, who assists mothers in childbirth. Therefore it seems possible that the Aman-Aštar-seal is the only known depiction of a female physician so far.

## 10 Midwives and women giving birth

Professional midwives were depicted on cylinder seals. But the Neo-Sumerian seal of Ninkala, midwife of the goddess Baba, shows a standard introduction of the midwife to the enthroned goddess.<sup>40</sup> Only the lower register alludes explicitly to her profession, since it shows geese, the attributive animals of Baba, floating on water, and scorpions, the animals of Išhara, as symbols of fertility.<sup>41</sup>

It may be that midwives in action during childbirth were depicted.<sup>42</sup> Let us begin with a fascinating cylinder seal from the late ED III or Akkad period, the depiction of which has not previously been properly understood (Fig. 30).<sup>43</sup> In the lower register a woman in a long garment and with a bun lies on a bed that is decorated with bull's legs. Two people, one with long hair and the other

<sup>40</sup> Neo-Sumerian seal, formerly Erlenmeyer collection, Basel; Asher-Greve and Goodnick Westenholz 2013: 402, Fig. 48.

<sup>41</sup> For the frequent association of the scorpion with Išhara and with bed scenes see Zernecke 2008 (I am grateful to Alexander Tamm for this reference).

<sup>42</sup> I owe this idea to a fascinating lecture by Ursula Seidl about birth in Urartu. She is presently preparing the publication.

<sup>43</sup> Chicago: A 27 902; Asher-Greve 1985: no. 593. After I finished this article, B. Lion and C. Michel pointed out to me two articles by Laura Battini, where she already suggested that the two seals (here Figs. 30 and 31) show a woman giving birth: Battini 2002 and Battini 2006. I regret that I had not known these articles before, but I am happy that Battini and I arrived at the same conclusion.



**Fig. 30:** Cylinder seal showing a woman giving birth and a midwife in action (Asher-Greve 1985, pl. 30, no. 593).

with short or no hair, are standing near the curved headboard. A woman, her hair fashioned in a similar bun, is squatting at the lower end of the bed and is stretching her hands towards the feet of the lying woman. Below the bed is a scorpion, symbol of fertility, above it a star and a crescent.

The scene has been interpreted as a *hieros gamos* (Asher-Greve 1985: 113–114) or as an oneiromancy (Asher-Greve 1987). Both interpretations are implausible; the first one because a man is missing, and the second one, because the lying woman is holding her head actively up with her arm raised in front of her face, which would be an inappropriate position for dreaming, but is a typical posture during childbirth in many cultures. Since the woman squatting on the ground is by far the largest person and is placed in the center of the scene, i.e. below the central hero of the contest scene in the upper register, we suggest that this seal belonged to this person, i.e. to the midwife. This is one of the most explicit and detailed renderings of this female profession to date.

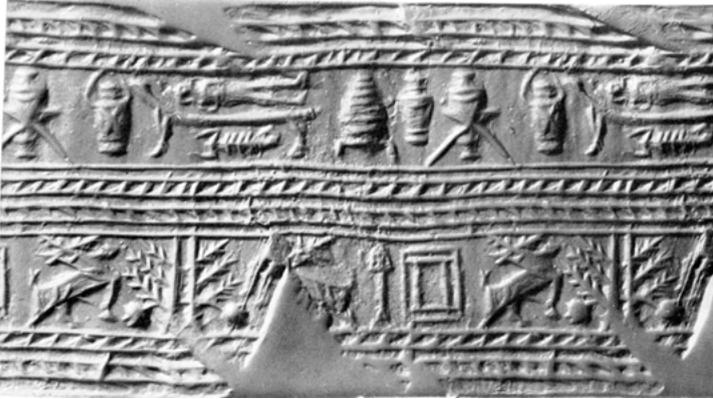
This seal is not unique in showing a woman giving birth, since at least one other Akkadian seal<sup>44</sup> shows a lady lying on a bed with bull's legs and a scorpion below the bed (Fig. 31).<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, many vessels and trees or plants are depicted there – apparently important elements of female equipment or symbols of the female world, since they frequently occur on women's seals (see below).

A late Early Dynastic votive plaque from the Abu Temple in Tall Asmar (Ešnunna) shows a similar scene in the upper register (Fig. 32)<sup>46</sup>: Two women

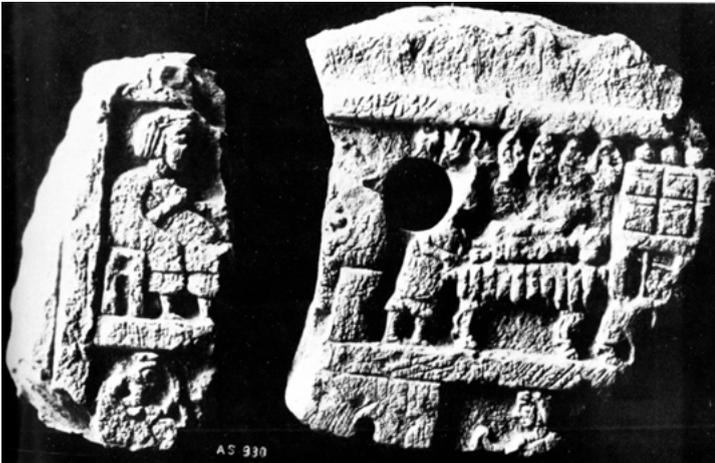
<sup>44</sup> Boehmer 1965: no. 1656, Fig. 690 = Buchanan 1981: no. 458.

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan 1981: 176–177, no. 458.

<sup>46</sup> Limestone plaque from Tell Asmar, Abu Temple; Iraq Mus. IM 15547; Selz 1983: pl. IX, no. 110. Earlier interpretations speak of a *hieros gamos* or of the slaughtering of an animal (Asher-Greve 1985: 101–102).



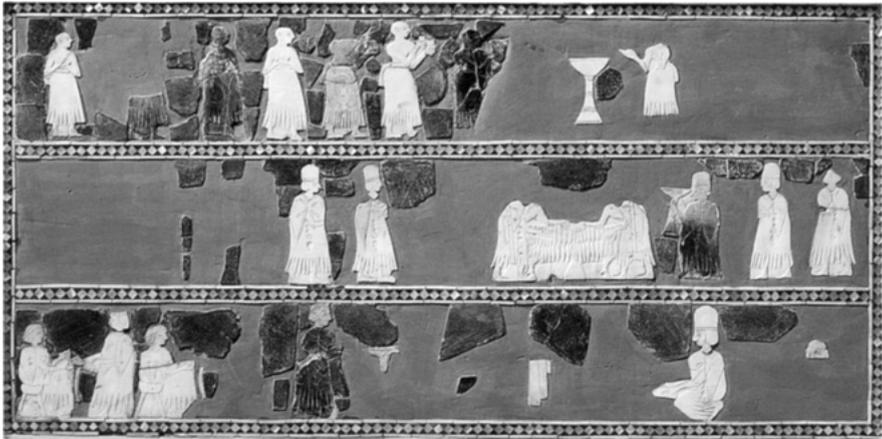
**Fig. 31:** Cylinder seal with a woman lying on a bed with bull's legs, oil vessels and the birth plant (Buchanan 1981: no. 458).



**Fig. 32:** Votive plaque showing a midwife and a birth-giving woman (right) and two banqueting women (left) (Selz 1983: pl. 9, no. 110).

are sitting on the left side. On the right side, there is a table with bull's legs, covered with a flounced cloth. A horizontal figure is lying on top, and another smaller object on top of it. Seven lancet-shaped objects (plants?<sup>47</sup>) appear above the scene. Exactly in the middle of the upper register is depicted the

<sup>47</sup> Selz (1983: 207–208) interprets them as the 7 heads of a serpent-dragon, which had been cut off and were to serve as apotropaic objects.



**Fig. 33:** Tentatively reconstructed mosaic panel from Mari showing female and male persons carrying goods, spinning women and a bed.

midwife: she is standing at the end of the bed, is inclined towards the bed and stretches her hands to the mother. Perhaps – if the object on top of the woman is the child who lies on the mother’s belly – she has just given birth.

A mosaic panel from Mari (Fig. 33), the “Panneau des rites” M. 303 was excavated in room 10 of the so-called “secteur dit des dépendances du temple de Dagan.” Unfortunately, the pieces when found were completely dispersed which is why Parrot’s reconstruction is only a guess (Parrot 1962: 163–169; Couturaud 2014). Parrot assembled the figures of several female and male people, who are carrying goods. At least five of the women wearing a high polos, a long garment and a shawl covering their shoulders are bringing large vessels on a stand. Another five women in the lower left corner have their hair covered by a turban and are busy with spinning.

Very different is the largest piece of the panel (Fig. 34). It features two headless figures bending over a large bed with bull’s legs, which is covered with a tufted cloth. The two persons are characterized as women by their coats, which are held together by a large pin from which beads or seals are hanging down. The ladies are stretching their hands towards a vertical stick, which emerges from a conical base, or are about to do something with the covered bed. Since the position of their bent upper body is unusual, their activity must have been an important one, worth being depicted, and the scene must have had a crucial meaning for the whole panel. This scene was interpreted before as a *hieros gamos* (Asher-Greve 1985), or as a female oneiromancer (Asher-Greve 1987). Crawford (2013: 18) recently suggested, without further argu-



**Fig. 34:** Detail of the panel: Two midwives busy with the childbed (Parrot 1962, fig. 13).

ments, to see in them “perhaps” the representation of midwives – an interpretation, that seems extremely probable in the light of the afore-mentioned plaque and seal.

This re-interpretation leads to a new understanding of the mosaic plaques in general, the iconography of which differs distinctly from that of other media. The intention of the Mari panel was probably to depict the childbirth of a high-ranking woman – perhaps the queen – and the related festivals, especially the offering of gifts to the woman in childbirth by an impressive number of high-ranking women and men. Contemporary texts from Ebla note ample festivities and presentation of gifts on the occasion of the childbirth of a queen; and not only royal women but also other high-ranking women received gifts on the occasion of their birth-giving.<sup>48</sup> If we compare this interpretation of the plaque to the interpretations of other mosaic panels, for example the so-called Standard of Ur, we may recognize that these mosaic panels commemorate and celebrate the most essential and perhaps also the most life-threatening events in the lives of women and men, the victorious return from a battle and the successful birth of a healthy child.

A fragmentary Akkadian seal from Ur shows the most explicit rendering of a woman giving birth (Fig. 35).<sup>49</sup> The woman, with her hair in a bun and wearing a fringed robe, sits on the front edge of a bed with bull’s legs and holds a

<sup>48</sup> Biga 1991: 294; Weiershäuser 2008: 189–193; Sallaberger 2003: 619.

<sup>49</sup> BM 119219; Boehmer 1965: no. 1658; Collon 1982: 74–75, no. 143, pl. XX. I am grateful to Ursula Seidl who pointed this seal out to me, since the published illustrations are not very clear. I thank Rainer Michael Boehmer for kindly providing me with a better photo, which he made for his dissertation.

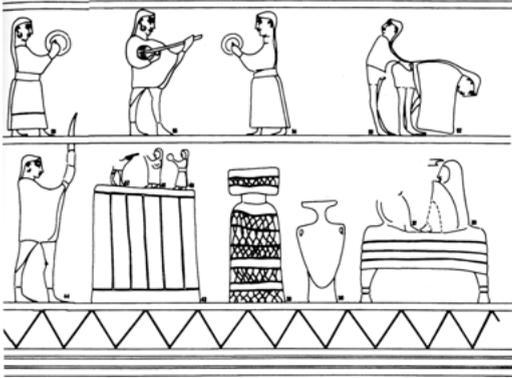


**Fig. 35:** Akkadian seal from Ur showing a woman giving birth (to the right), assisted by two midwives (Photo courtesy R. M. Boehmer).

cup in her right hand, while her left lies in her lap. Her feet rest between the knees of a smaller woman who sits on a stool. This smaller woman is grasping towards the woman's feet with both hands. A third woman stands behind her and holds a towel in her right hand and something (the seal is broken here) in her left hand.

In order to substantiate our interpretation of these scenes as renderings of childbirth, we may have a look at some Old Hittite relief vases (Figs. 36–37). These exceptionally large, colorful vases were splendidly decorated with narrative depictions of festivals, including sacrifices, banquets, ritual sex, and offerings, all of which were accompanied by music, dance and acrobats. Examples are known from Inandik, Bitik, Boğazköy and Hüseyindede Tepesi (Sipahi 2001; Yıldırım 2008). The partly damaged scene on the Inandik vase (Fig. 36), where two people are crouching on a bed opposite each other, has been interpreted as a sacred marriage<sup>50</sup> or as the representation of a couple of gods or goddesses or the king and the queen (for a summary see Yıldırım 2008: 844). But a similar, completely preserved depiction on the Hüseyindede vase (Fig. 37) clearly shows that the two people on top of the high bed are far from having sexual intercourse, they are not even touching each other. Two crouching persons are depicted. The one in a white garment with long hair has her legs tightly tucked up, is leaning backwards, and holds a bowl in one hand. Her head is higher than the head of the other person, who is wearing a black dress and has her head covered by white scarf. She seems to be busy with the person

<sup>50</sup> The interpretation as sacred marriage is especially strange, since this is already depicted in the upper register exactly above the bed scene.



**Fig. 36:** Detail of the Old Hittite Inandik vase showing two people crouching on a bed opposite each other (Özgül 2002: 253).



**Fig. 37:** Detail of the Hüseyindede vase showing a midwife and a woman giving birth (Alparslan – Dogan-Alparslan 2013: 227).

opposite her, since one hand is emerging from the amorphous mass of her body. Obviously – as has been described already by Yıldırım – two women are depicted. The most logical interpretation is that of a birth scene, in which a midwife and a woman giving birth are involved. There is a striking similarity between these birth scenes and those from 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia including such details as the beds with bull's legs and the sophisticated blankets covering them.

When I presented this interpretation during the conference in Nanterre, various scholars rightly uttered their doubts, because “the brick of birth” is considered the crucial object during childbirth in ancient Babylonia and Egypt and was used until recently in remote areas of the Near East. The woman leaves her bed for the delivering of the baby and takes place in a crouching position on two sets of bricks on either side, which leave a space in the middle for the baby to come out (Stol 2000: 118–122). However, the earliest attestation for the birth bricks is – according to Stol – from the Old Babylonian period. The Mesopotamian depictions so far recognized and discussed here are earlier. Therefore, and because of pictorial representations, I am very much inclined to think that an uncomfortably hard brick was not the only possible accessory which was used for giving birth throughout Near Eastern history. Indeed, birthstools are attested from the Hittite period onwards; the stool “consisted of a ‘bowl’ upon which the mother sat (and) two pegs which the woman grasped during her delivery ... It was purified before being used ...” (Stol 2000: 121–122). A Hittite birth ritual describes it in the following way: “[When] a woman is

giving birth, then the midwife prepares the following: [two stools] (and) three cushions. On each stool is placed one cushion. And one spreads [on]e cushion between the stools on the ground. When the child begins to fall, [then] the woman seats herself on the stools. And the midwife holds the receiving blanket with (her) [ha]nd.” (Stol 2000: 122).

This birth-stool is probably depicted on the mentioned images: it is covered with cushions (Figs 32, 34, 36, 37); it was purified (Fig. 34); there were pegs which the woman could grasp (Fig. 34); and a towel was prepared (Fig. 35). Also the frequently associated depictions of plants and vessels (Fig. 30, 31, 33, 36) are understandable, since certain plants were thought to promote pregnancy and birth (Stol 2000: 52–59), and “oil has always been a very important ingredient in easing deliveries” (Stol 2000: 124). The cup in the hand of the mother (Figs. 35, 37) illustrates perhaps the medicine which was consumed by the women in labour (Stol 2000: 52–59).

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This short survey has shown that the following female professions and activities were depicted during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in Mesopotamia and Syria:

- Royal and high-ranking women
- Court ladies and female attendants
- Priestesses
- Female musicians and dancers
- Prostitutes and perhaps other women having sexual intercourse or indulging in other sexual activities
- Women as mothers and as wet-nurses
- Female kitchen personnel and female brewers
- Female textile workers
- Midwives
- Women in childbirth or childbed.

Generally, mortal females are represented in Mesopotamia quite frequently in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium on works of major art and cylinder seals. The majority of depicted women belongs to the upper class. This stops abruptly at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium in Mesopotamia, but it continues in Syria, Anatolia and Elam. In the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium mortal women are mainly depicted on thousands of cheap terracotta images, which were present in domestic and the every-day contexts in every Mesopotamian settlement. Many of them, especially specific types of naked women and musicians, probably

prostitutes and itinerant artists, do not seem to have been part of the upper social class. The lack of representations in Babylonia in the major arts might be explained by the fact that several female activities seem to have been transferred to the divine world, not only, but especially, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. If we look at the scenes on Old Babylonian cylinder seals, which are our richest source of pictorial representations, we register a multitude of goddesses and gods, who might have covered a wide range of everyday concerns of the mortal women. Thousands of representations of Ištar and other armed goddesses, of the rain goddess accompanying the weather god, of the goddess holding a water vessel, of Gula and of many others, may refer to war and love, fertility, surgery<sup>51</sup>, and other fields in which women were active. But – as stated at the beginning – only professions and activities that were deemed important enough were depicted.

The biggest difference between the representations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium is a fundamental one, which has nothing to do with a possibly changed status of women. All pictorial genres of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium generally feature individual women and men. This equally applies to stelae, reliefs, statues and seals of the Early Dynastic, Akkadian and Neo-Sumerian periods. In Old Babylonian major art and seals, by contrast, hardly any individuals were depicted any more. The few mortals being represented at all (especially the king in many variations) are little more than stereotypical formulas for abstract characteristics such as the strength of kingship, the justice of the ruler, piety or fertility.<sup>52</sup> The individual disappears. It is mainly on the cheap terracotta plaques that we find images of mortals in scenes, which are related to everyday life.

The most astonishing result of this study is the discovery of scenes depicting women in childbirth or giving birth assisted by midwives. Since depictions are known from Mari, the Diyala region, Ur and Anatolia during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia, they may have existed at other times and in different regions, but have not yet been recognized as such. The associated scenes always show large festivals, where numerous female and male persons are bringing various gifts, accompanied by music and dance. Cuneiform sources from various periods tell us about the celebrations for the birth of a child, but these are the first known depictions of this celebratory as well as life-threatening event in the lives of Near Eastern women.

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**51** Female physicians are attested e.g. at Ebla (see Biga, this volume).

**52** For the codification of the king's main characteristics on cylinder seals see Otto 2013.

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