Women in Early Mesopotamian Royal Inscriptions

By Stefan Nowicki

Ancient Mesopotamian culture is widely known for royal inscriptions and reliefs that ancient rulers left to the next generations. But what can we learn about the role of women in those times? Direct references to women are found only in limited numbers of inscriptions. At the first glance this could be interpreted as reflective of poor social status. But is this true? There are reasons for doubts. For one thing, this impression can be caused by the briefness of preserved inscriptions, which consist mostly of only a few lines, or even sometimes just one. The second reason is that most texts consist only of the ‘signature’ inscribed on objects being offered or dedicated to a god. Finally, women are presented (or present themselves) as spouses and daughters of the ruling kings. But there are exceptions to the rule, which prove that some women had much higher status.

To understand these exceptions, we have to look at those women known by name, about whom it is possible to comment. The earliest chronologically is Ku-Baba, who according to the Sumerian King List became the queen of the southern city of Kiš. She is only woman known thus far who, according to the Mesopotamian literary tradition, ruled in her own name; others were queens only because they married kings.

Undoubtedly, the most famous woman from the Early Dynastic period, is Pū-abi, whose title is eresh or queen. Unfortunately, all the data comes from the Royal Cemetery at Ur (ca. 2600 BCE), where no significant textual sources were found, including any information concerning her life. But she is known from her own inscribed seal, found in the same grave with her famous headdress and two attendants, sacrificed to accompany her in death. Of particular interest is that her husband is not identified. This may indicate that she reigned alone.
Cylinder seal of Pu-abi.

Reconstruction of the Pu-abi headdress.
Another woman from the same era is worth mentioning, although there is no other information concerning her life. For a woman, Barag-irnum left a very unusual inscription on a beard shaped plaque, regarding the foundation of the dais for the god Šara in the E-maḫ temple. She presents herself in the text with the fullest genealogy for a woman known from royal inscriptions – as the wife of Giša-kidu, daughter of Ur-LUM-ma, granddaughter of En-akale, and finally daughter-in-law of Il.

Of the 13 women known by name from the Akkadian period (ca. 2350-2150 BCE), En-ḫedu-ana deserves particular attention. Her father Sargon, creator of the Akkadian empire in southern and central Mesopotamia, established her as the high entu priestess, and she remained in the position until the time of Narām-Sīn, Sargon's grandson. Along with Pū-abi, En-ḫedu-ana is probably the best-known woman from early Mesopotamian history. As daughter of the king and high priestess of Nanna she had an ideal background to leave unusually extensive traces of her life. For example, she wrote some 42 temple hymns that were later recopied, and a personal prayer statement called nin-me-šara or ‘Exhaltation to Innana’ which praises the goddess. In addition, she apparently commissioned a bas-relief object now called Enḫeduana's disc, depicting herself and signed “the editor of the tablet is Enheduanna; my lord, what has been created no one else has created,” which was found at Ur in the temple of Nanna’s consort, Nin-gal.
From the same period, one non-royal text is especially interesting, inscribed on the seal belonged to Aman-Aštar, which contains both her name and the name of her divine mistress. She describes herself in a very uncommon way, as “deaf lady” (MUNUS.Ú.HÚB), and “prattler.” Although these terms seem to contradict each other, Aman-Aštar herself is depicted on the plaque in front of her lady, holding (or even playing) a musical instrument, probably a harp or drum. The term MUNUS.Ú.ḪÚB should be perhaps understood as the player of the NI.ḪÚB-balag instrument, probably accompanying ḪÚB dancers.
In a slightly later period, that of Gudea of Lagaš (ca. 2144 BCE), the most popular term used for describing women in royal inscriptions is “mother.” But the term is not used to describe any particular woman, only for relations between mother and child. Similarly, the second popular term, “servant,” is used to describe the relations between a slave and her mistress. A very interesting passage deals with a daughter, who can become an heir if there is no male descendant in the family. A royal inscription of Gudea also notes that a widow, as a weak member of the society, must be protected by the king.

From the Ur III period (ca. 2114-2004 BCE) a corpus of 416 texts is preserved, among which 32 different women are mentioned. This is twice as many as in the time of Gudea and almost three times more than in the Sargonic period. The most popular term for women was “daughter”, which appears seven times, followed by “wife”, which appears in six texts, showing that the social status of a woman is set through her husband's. Other than inscriptions referring to royal women or kings, inscriptions mentioning women were usually written by their servants. Interestingly, in these cases the family status of the woman is usually underlined.
Another woman who played a great role for the king’s house during the Ur III dynasty was Abī-simti, wife of Šulgi and mother of the net to last king, Šū-Sîn. According to preserved texts, Abī-simti had many cultic duties and was described as a divine midwife, ideal woman and perfect mother. This is in keeping with her husband Šulgi’s self-glorification, as he was elevated to divine status and described as “King of Ur,” “King of Sumer and Akkad,” and finally “King of the four corners of the universe,” in effect king of the world.

Finally, we should also mention Nin-ḫiliya, wife of Ayakalla, governor of Umma. Her activity was closely connected with the social position of her husband, since she is only attested in sources after her husband became a governor and is never mentioned alone. But she was an active businesswoman with her own cylinder seal who appears several times in different documents concerning activities in Umma.

Looking deeper into the preserved textual sources we can state that, although rarely named in royal inscriptions, women played an important role in everyday life in early Mesopotamia. This is shown in Barag-irnun of Umma’s inscription, by the women pictured on public monuments, such as Menbara ’abzu, wife of Urnanše, and his daughter Nunusu, who took part in the ritual when the Ibgal Temple in Lagaš was opened, and by women in banquet-scenes depicted on seals from the Early Dynastic Period, among which the women-only scenes deserve special attention.
Ur-Nanshe relief with his wife facing him in the top register.

Many other references to women in royal inscriptions from the early periods of Mesopotamian history should be also underlined. Although they are mostly mentioned as the members of royal families, daughters and wives played an important role in society. In some ways this appears limited to cultic roles, especially the high priestesses, but it should be recalled that palaces and temples were uniquely important institutions in Mesopotamia. Large numbers of women’s votive and dedicatory inscriptions also prove their important social positions.

What is really worth noting is that, amid all women mentioned in royal inscriptions, mothers are rarely present. A mother is mentioned only six times, and what is even more surprising, such a term is never used in an inscription left to us by a woman. Third millennium women apparently wanted their social roles to be recalled rather than their maternal obligations.

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