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TEXTILE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
ARCHAEOLOGY, EPIGRAPHY, ICONOGRAPHY

edited by
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6. Her Share of the Profits: Women, Agency, and Textile Production at Kültepe/Kanesh in the Early Second Millennium BC

Allison Karmel Thomason

Say to Pūšu-kēn, thus speaks Lamassī:

Kulumāya is bringing you nine textiles. Iddin-Sin is bringing you three textiles...Please my master, don't get angry because I haven't sent you the textiles you asked for in your letter. Oh, how the little one has grown and I had to make a couple of thick blankets for the cart. You see, I've only been making things for the house and the family, that's why I haven't sent you any textiles [to sell]. OK, I'll send all of the textiles that I can produce on the next caravan.

About Abum-ilī's house, Ikuppiya built his walls on top of your walls and when I objected, he just said: 'One common wall was built.' In no case should it be built! But then he built the wall and left! You, there, ask him why he built his walls on your walls? Act like a real master and protector!

*As for the bread and beer that you wrote me about, rest assured the bread and beer are made and are ready. [Your] little girl has grown so much; get on the road, come to place her in the womb of Assur and kiss the feet of your god!*¹

Thus wrote the Assyrian woman, Lamassī, to her husband who was traveling abroad conducting mercantile business in Anatolia. This letter is a window into the nature of the production of textiles, as it illuminates the nature of the micro-industries of textile production that both created and responded to supply and demand pressures in the Mesopotamian economy. In these few lines, probably written by Lamassī herself, we learn how in the context of producing textiles for consumption in a foreign land, Lamassī and her husband negotiated the difficulties of long-distance caravan travel by donkey, exchange rates, foreign city officials, royal taxes, and credit and loan-advancing entities. The letter gives us a glimpse into a sophisticated economy – surprisingly so according to the first Assyriologists working on the corpus of tablets – that was centered around the trade in textiles, silver, gold and tin.

The letter is found on a cuneiform tablet that was excavated from the site of modern Kültepe in east-central Anatolia, which was called *kārum* Kanesh by its ancient inhabitants. *Kārum* is the Akkadian word for 'market' or 'trading spaces' of a city, and often refers to activities occurring either within the city's walls or at its entrance gates. The letter from Lamassī is one of more than 23,000 similar tablets that were originally kept in archives from households in the lower city, the 'commercial quarter' of Kanesh. Veenhof estimates that 80 to 100 archives may eventually be reconstructed from the Kanesh tablets dating to Level II of the *kārum*.² It is commendable that the

¹ Michel 2001, 434–435.

² For number of known tablets, see Veenhof 1972, xxv; Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 46; Michel 2009, 265; and

painstaking research that goes into deciphering these texts and assigning them to archives, that is making sense of them and putting them into historical context, has resulted in the publication of approximately half of the 23,000 tablets excavated and known.

The archives contain any number of different types of cuneiform documents, the most common of which are letters to and from traders to other business people and their family members.³ Other texts include: lists, memoranda, receipts and contracts accounting the exchange of goods, land and people; undated inventories and caravan account lists; legal statutes, treaties and judicial decisions; official administrative decrees and calendars, called eponym lists; and occasional religious and literary texts.⁴ The Assyrian traders had traveled from their home city of Ashur in northern Mesopotamia, a distance of 621 miles (1000 km) or six to eight weeks' journey by donkey caravan, and set up households and storage facilities to trade their textiles and tin produced or procured in Ashur in exchange for the silver, gold and copper obtained within Anatolia. There are a number of fascinating aspects of the Kanesh tablets that illuminate a great deal about the economy of Old Assyrian long-distance trade, and the daily lives of the inhabitants of Ashur and *kārum* Kanesh, and their relationships to textiles. The picture that emerges from the seemingly endless mundane concerns of the correspondents in the tablets is that of an entrepreneurially inclined society, with highly evolved institutions designed to facilitate the lucrative trade in metals and textiles. While Ashur and its 'trade colony' in Anatolia must have been in some ways typically Mesopotamian – for example in the use of cuneiform for documentation, or in calendrical and legal practices and religious beliefs – it was also extraordinary due to the number of people traveling long distances in the society, the long periods away from the Assyrian homeland experienced by the traders, the frequency of their encounters with non-Assyrians, and their degree of literacy. It has been likened, therefore, to a 'frontier society' where the ordinary and extraordinary intermingled on a daily basis.⁵

The tablets document the commercial activities and daily lives of a number of fairly successful family firms based at Ashur that had sent members abroad to negotiate transactions in Anatolia. The term 'family firm' is used only loosely here, as we are probably witnessing groups of individuals aligned commercially. Larsen has shown that while most members of these firms were related (whether distantly or closely), the businesses also incorporated unrelated individuals.⁶ The Assyrian 'colonists' and their families, after all, were not trading and living in a vacuum as they frequently interacted with, contracted with, and even married local Anatolians. The traders and their families also negotiated on a daily basis with people in their home city of Ashur, including the king's officials and members of the city assembly at the Ashur city-hall.⁷ Aside from officials fostering and, in some cases, hindering the commerce, there were many supporting actors living in the Ashur and Kanesh communities, including extended families of the traders with women and children, servants and slaves, messengers and couriers, traders from other cities in Anatolia, and caravan travelers who did not necessarily own the goods that they transported.

Edward Stratford, personal communication, March 2010.

³ Michel estimates that between 30–40% of the texts are letters (2009, 254).

⁴ For a brief discussion of the range of texts at Kanesh, see Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 44.

⁵ Lumsden 2008.

⁶ Larsen 2007.

⁷ As ordered in the Kültepe Eponym List, published in Veenhof 2003a.

Textiles in the Old Assyrian Trade

Finished textiles played perhaps the most significant role in the trade, and one estimate places the total amount of textiles mentioned in the texts at approximately 100,000 pieces, which were traded along with more than 13 tons of tin.⁸ The textiles would have been produced in Ashur or other parts of Mesopotamia and sold along the caravan route, at Kanesh, or at other trading cities in Anatolia. The texts reveal a great deal about the amount and prices of the wool used in the production of the textiles. The weavers and traders also produced limited amounts of linen textiles.⁹ The traders and scribes used many vocabulary terms that refer to specific types of cloth, and occasionally finished garments, produced by the Assyrians; however, the bulk of the trade took the form of woven wool textiles that were not necessarily finished into any specific form of garment.¹⁰ From these studies, we know that the colony members chose the typical Sumerian ideogram TÚG to refer in general to textiles, frequently substituting idiomatic expressions and words peculiar to the Old Assyrian texts and their region to further designate either the type of weave, the quality of the fabric, or the origin of the textile.¹¹ For example, the traders referred to fine quality textiles, such as *raqqutum*, and *šubātum qatnum*, which were marked by their tiny weave, large number of threads, softness, or “thin” feel.¹² The traders also discussed the relative quality of the textiles for sale, which ranged from textiles of “royal class” (*ša šarruttim*), usually imported from southern Mesopotamia, to those “lacking in quality” (*maṭium*).¹³ The local Anatolian textiles, cheaper and rougher in quality than the Assyrian products, were often called *pirikannum*.¹⁴

While the logistics of the trade in textiles has been the subject of a great deal of interest in the literature about the colony archives, Michel has concluded that the texts contain relatively little information about how the cloth was produced.¹⁵ Assyriologists have therefore relied upon relevant texts regarding textile production from earlier periods in southern Mesopotamia to supplement the direct information gleaned from the Kanesh tablets. In part biased by the largely administrative nature of information about textile production, the majority of these related studies, however, are concerned with the relationship of textile production to state authority and the economic aspects of the trade.¹⁶

The exceptional secondary analysis is an extensive summary of information about textile production found in Veenhof’s 1972 work, *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade*, which is cited subsequently

⁸ Lamberg-Karlovsky 1996, 166. For methodological issues related to estimating total numbers of textiles, see Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 90.

⁹ Michel and Veenhof 2010, 216–218.

¹⁰ Michel and Veenhof 2010, 211.

¹¹ For example, the phrase “Abarnian” (Akkadian *ša abarnīum*) probably refers to textiles that were originally produced by the region of Abarnia, but eventually were imitated in Ashur and produced in the “Abarnian” style (Waetzoldt 1972, 123; Veenhof and Michel 2010, 219).

¹² For a thorough discussion of the terms used to designate different types of textiles, see Veenhof and Michel 2010.

¹³ Veenhof and Michel 2010, 246.

¹⁴ For an in-depth discussion of these and other terms referring to specific types of textiles, see Veenhof 1972, 89–91, 123–125, and 143–180. In one of the earliest and best documented occurrences of economic protectionism in the world, the “Abarnian” textiles were heavily taxed by the authorities at Ashur in an attempt to keep the price of Assyrian textiles high and prevent the market from being flooded with cheap “imports” (Waetzoldt 1972, 126–128; and Michel and Veenhof 2010, 226).

¹⁵ Michel 2006a, 290–293.

¹⁶ See, for example, Waetzoldt 1972.

as the authoritative work on the subject. More recently the Danish National Research Foundation's Center for Textile Research in Copenhagen has published several chapters on Mesopotamian textiles and weaving, including a detailed article by Veenhof and Michel, two of the most prominent scholars of the *kārum* period, regarding textile terminology in the Old Assyrian tablets.¹⁷ It is upon the shoulders of these scholars that I can build many of my own observations about the textile trade in Mesopotamia and Anatolia during the early second millennium BC.

Most of the textiles exported by the Assyrians to Anatolia were produced in Ashur. The Assyrians also imported a substantial amount of cloth from Babylonia, which they called "Akkadian" textiles, perhaps conflating all of southern Mesopotamia under this term and yet contrasting those inhabitants culturally with Assyrians and Amorites.¹⁸ On a few occasions, the traders also purchased textiles *en route* to Anatolia for resale at Kanesh. Or, they bought textiles in the market at Kanesh and brought them back to Ashur for either personal use or resale. As Veenhof notes, the primary weavers and garment finishers in the Old Assyrian world were women.¹⁹ The picture that emerges from the Kanesh tablets indicates that the women weaving at Ashur were not wards or dependents of the state, as in the Ur III period in southern Mesopotamia, but were local entrepreneurs working out of their homes in 'cottage industries'. The women were either self-employed or working under the auspices of their family 'firms' exporting their textiles to Anatolia. Letters to and from the women textile producers and their family members selling the textiles abroad are especially informative about the production and sale of textiles. The letters refer to specific consignments for sale by male relatives or by the women themselves, and often address the size, quality and cut of the garments produced. They indicate that the textile process involved first acquiring the wool, which was usually bought in Ashur or from Babylonia, but occasionally sent from Anatolia.²⁰ Then the women producers spun the wool and wove the cloth; they also pieced the fragments together to make larger textiles (as the horizontal loom limited the maximum width of any single weaving). There is some indication that other female members of the households in which they lived worked on textiles, or even that the Assyrian women hired unrelated women or used slaves to produce the cloth.²¹ Then, the textiles went through the processes of fulling, which included pressing or combing and finishing the cloth to make the surface smoother.²² The letters do not mention the dyeing or laundering of the cloth, but they do list colored textiles for sale, including red, white, yellow and black cloth; thus, the women probably contracted with other service providers for those finishing treatments.²³

The women were then responsible for insuring that their textiles reached Anatolia. They located caravans, contracted with caravan agents, and prepared the textiles and bundled them

¹⁷ Michel and Veenhof 2010, 210–271.

¹⁸ Veenhof 1972, 101.

¹⁹ Veenhof 1972, 100.

²⁰ Probably because the price of wool was cheaper in Anatolia at times, see Waetzoldt 1972, 116. Some wool was acquired from the herds of the so-called Sukhu nomads, who grazed their sheep west of Ashur in the area along the Middle Euphrates near Wadi Tarthar, see Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 83.

²¹ Although there is no direct evidence for this, Veenhof suggests that the quantity of textiles sent to Kanesh and mentioned in the letters is so large in some cases, that one woman could not have produced them by herself. In addition, many of the women in Assyria and Anatolia owned slaves, see Veenhof 1977, 113–114. See for example a contract between two women mentioning the sale of an Anatolian slave girl, Donbaz 1989.

²² Michel and Veenhof 2010, 249–252.

²³ The fullers and launderers were probably mostly male, according to later texts from southern Babylonia, as discussed in Waetzoldt 1972 and Waerzeggers 2006.

for transport with string and muslin sealed by clay tags. They also arranged for the payment of tithes and taxes in order to avoid pre-emptive confiscation of their textiles by local Anatolian officials once the goods had reached Kanesh.²⁴ The women were especially keen to trace whether their textiles reached Anatolia, and frequently wrote to their contacts there to ensure their safe arrival. The textile producers were principally concerned as well with receiving silver – their *tadmiqtum* – in exchange for the products of their labor, and it is quite clear that the silver was considered in most cases to be their own; it might, but did not automatically, revert to their husbands' or the family firms' accounts.²⁵

Tracing the activity of individual women will demonstrate the prominence and prevalence of women within this textile trade and illuminate the lives of female textile entrepreneurs/producers. By looking at correspondence and associated other tablets mentioning the women or written by or to the women, we can ascertain the extent of their involvement in the textile industry. In an effort to trace these activities and make some generalizations about the behaviors of women textile entrepreneurs, I have created a database that encodes the activities of more than 80 women mentioned in a majority of the published tablets. From this dataset, I can conclude that the women of Ashur and Kanesh participated in the following list of more than 25 activities in their roles as members of their family firms, heads of households and textile producers:

1. write and receive letters;
2. hire scribes to write and read letters;
3. produce, own, buy, or sell textiles;
4. buy wool;
5. contract with fullers and dyers;
6. deal with city authorities, taxes or tariffs, and court procedures;
7. deal with other traders, firms, associates;
8. own or sign with seal;
9. own, buy or sell property, including slaves and houses;
10. arrange for/contract with transport agents or caravans;
11. borrow and lend silver;
12. act as co-signers for loans;
13. enact "currency" exchanges/rate conversions;
14. participate in *ikribum* – or sale lots shared with other traders;
15. enter into marriage and divorce and remarriage contracts;
16. marry Anatolian husbands;
17. inherit land and property (occasionally ahead of younger brothers);
18. leave last wills and testaments;
19. purchase grain and brew beer;
20. hire laborers and repair houses;
21. argue with their male and female relatives;
22. travel to, from and within Anatolia;
23. guard archives and storerooms;
24. read documents/sealings;
25. rent out or lease houses;
26. attend to ancestors/spirits of the dead;
27. attend to personal/family religion and deities (visit shrines, give prayers and votive offerings);
27. serve as *ugbaltu* (specialised, elite) priestesses;
28. provide for/take care of children and other relatives (e.g. elderly)

²⁴ Dercksen 2004, 173; Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 83; and Michel and Veenhof 2010, 215.

²⁵ Veenhof 1972, 121–123.

While this list will give the reader an idea of the diversity of activities generated by the female textile entrepreneurs at Ashur and Kanesh, a detailed, if impressionistic, analysis of a few of the most relevant letters can provide a window into the world of the Assyrian female textile entrepreneurs.

Textiles and Profit

The archive of the Assyrian trader, Pušu-kēn, contains many letters to and from the various female members of his family, including his wife, Lamassī, whose words opened this chapter, his daughters Ahaha and Waqqurtum, and his sister, Tariš-matum. In a typical exchange of letters between Lamassī, who lived in Ashur, and Pušu-kēn, who traveled in Anatolia, we learn about several activities with which the female textile entrepreneurs concerned themselves. Most interesting is the precise and assured way in which Lamassī followed her consignments of textiles. She wrote to her husband about a group of textiles that she had sent by caravan for him to sell in Anatolia: "Concerning the thick textiles that I sent ... Try to confirm that they arrived and send me the silver or its equivalent in merchandise that I have been awaiting for years!"²⁶ We know that Lamassī either produced or procured the textiles at Ashur, arranged for them to be packed in a caravan to Anatolia, and expected to receive payment for her work. She also distributed wool to others in Ashur and received silver as compensation.²⁷ We also learn that she understood the exchange rates for textiles and silver, and that she relied on her payments to purchase other objects. Finally, we see how she rhetorically emphasized the importance of the payments to her by exaggerating how long she had been waiting for her payment, thus putting more pressure on her partner/husband to expedite the transaction. Her husband wrote back to her explaining that the profit from the sale of her textiles had been distributed to other parties, and he requested more textiles "of good quality" from Lamassī.²⁸

In further correspondence, we learn that Lamassī had the ability to procure or produce different qualities of textiles at Ashur, and that they were relatively valued within the market. She continued in another letter: "Why do you write me all the time: 'the textiles that you sent me each time aren't good'? Who is the fellow, who lives in your house, who is decrying the textiles when they arrive before him? As for me, for my part, I do my best to make and send you textiles before each trip, at least ten shekels of silver should arrive here."²⁹ At one point, she sent several different types of textiles to her husband, including those described as *kamsum*, *manšuḥum* and *nibrarum*.³⁰ In several letters, she also discussed with her husband the cost and amount of wool used in producing the yarn for the textiles: "When you send me my share of the profits, throw in some wool [from Anatolia] because wool in Ashur is very expensive."³¹ She experienced the classic capitalist's conundrum; in order to realize a profit, she had to strike a delicate balance between

²⁶ Michel 2001, 427–428.

²⁷ Veenhof 1972, 113.

²⁸ Michel 2001, 428–430.

²⁹ Michel 2001, 430 and Veenhof 1972, 114.

³⁰ Michel 2001, 430–431. Compare the letter written by their daughter (*ibid.* 444–445), Waqqurtum, which mentions several qualities of wool and textiles. On the translation of the Assyrian terms describing different varieties of finely woven textiles, see Michel and Veenhof 2010.

³¹ Michel 2001, 433.

the amount of capital that she invested in the raw materials, and the quality of goods that she produced as finished products. Understandably, she was concerned about quality control, and she was aware of the potential marketability and buyers' demands for her textiles. Her concern with the impression of the quality of her textiles was not within the context of pride of workmanship, but rather referred to the amount of silver that her products would fetch in the market. Like a Wall Street banker, she never lost sight of receiving her share of the profits.

Eventually, we understand that she needed the silver to repair a crumbling house. She explained in a letter to her husband that she paid a worker to purchase new wooden beams to repair the house, and that they developed cracks after he had set them in place. Here, she rhetorically emphasized the desperate state of the family's current house: "Since you left, Šalmi-aḥum has already rebuilt his house twice! As for us, when will we be able to do the same?" She appended this discussion with a statement that reveals a laser-like concern for her profits: "As for the textiles that Aššur-malik brought you, why don't you send me the equivalent in silver?"³² Perhaps she also needed the silver to pay off the family's debts and overdue taxes. She explained in one letter that she deftly fended off the tax collector: "As for the mina of silver that you sent me [to pay off] your export tax, the *musum*-official came to take it, and I was a little bit afraid for you, but I told him 'Oh, but the eponym official came to me and looked everywhere, but I haven't anything to give him.'" In the same letter, Lamassī contrasted her own craftiness with her husband's sense of honor and reputation: "Show your-self as a man of honor! Come and fulfill your obligations."³³ Her rhetoric was aimed at inducing shame in him to act, as she claimed that she was reduced to selling gifts: "Your own sister gave me a slave girl, but I had to sell her for 14 shekels of silver."³⁴ Lamassī's plaintive tone belies her drive for profit. In a patriarchal society as Assyria was, we might not expect to see the wife blatantly disrespecting her husband or trying to control his behavior; however, Lamassī did not hesitate to do so – and emphatically accentuated her situation in order to ensure that her silver arrived. She utilized such rhetoric shrewdly and expressed herself with such vehemence not because of her feminine nature or her particularly "emotional" personality, as some scholars have asserted,³⁵ but rather to ensure her own profits and her family's material health. This is a rhetorical strategy that we will see often in the letters from female entrepreneurs. Lamassī's rhetorical vehemence apparently benefitted her as she had intended, as we have several account records referring to payments of silver and goods that she received.³⁶

More letters reveal that Lamassi and Pušu-kēn's daughter, Ahaha, was apparently a "chip off the old block"; she was an involved businesswomen and effective correspondent in her own right. Her letters are lengthy and contain many details about the family's financial situation. She was concerned with the estate of her deceased father, and instructed her brothers to take care of his holdings in Kanesh. Her rhetoric is straightforward, emphatic, and dictatorial; yet she also appealed to her brothers' sense of honor:

As for the letter that you wrote concerning Kulumaya [an Anatolian indebted to the family]. Don't reject it or let it embarrass you. His payments are in arrears for three years! Since he left, he discredited the

³² Michel 2001, 433–434.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Larsen 1982; Larsen 2001.

³⁶ Veenhof 1972, 118.

spirits of the house of our father and for us, he treats us like 'petty men' ... You and Šat-Aššur, go into the house of [Kulumaya], acquaint yourselves with what's in it and seal it up. But don't give any of the tin or textiles to anyone else. Convert the certified tablets (containing the receipts and completed orders) into silver for our Anatolian and Assyrian creditors... [the letter continues with more commands].³⁷

While she did not appear to be involved in the immediate production of the textiles, she was a recipient of the silver profits derived from their sale by the family firm. However, her letters reveal that ultimately she was more concerned for her own financial fortunes than for that of her family. She wrote to Puzur-Aššur, one of her father's debtors,

All of the capital of our father has been dispensed. Why, therefore, don't I have my supplementary part? ... As for Dan-Aššur's silver that I've been waiting for, you gave it to [my brother] Buzāzu. Then Buzāzu didn't give it to me. What kind of a brother refuses to give something to his sister, like Buzāzu has with me? ... You know well that I have no one else to turn to. But I keep hearing that you are holding the silver to give to Inna-Sin. Don't give it to my brothers ...³⁸

In order to maintain their wealth, the Assyrian women continued to use a rhetoric of desperation and shame to ensure that they received their share of the profits. Ahaha's sister, Waqqurtum, wrote to her brother: "I have put four textiles under my seal and carried them to the man ... You are my brother and my master...Don't ruin me! You are my brother, sell my textiles for silver, then seal the silver and send it to me. Act properly in front of the spirits and gods so that I am not ruined."³⁹ Waqqurtum was an entrepreneur, as she was involved in the production and sale of textiles. Letters to her from her colleague, Puzur-Aššur, indicate that she paid strict attention to the construction, finishing and quality of her textiles in order to make them the most desirable on the market. Puzur-Aššur instructed her:

Make sure that only one side of the textile is combed, and it shouldn't be sheared. The weave should be dense. Compared to the textiles that you sent me before, add a mina of wool to each (of the other textiles), and make sure that they're thin! The other side should be lightly combed, and if it is slightly hairy, then it will turn out like one of those *kutanum*-textiles.⁴⁰

Whatever quality of fabrics she sent her colleague, Waqqurtum's fortunes, however, might have continued to decline as her rhetoric to extract silver profits from the sale of her textiles from her brothers became increasingly desperate.⁴¹ It is possible that the market forces had changed for Waqqurtum, and she had to carefully negotiate and reserve her capital. However, she must have had enough silver in capital to purchase goods, as Puzur-Aššur continues, "If you don't have time to make fine textiles, I've learned that there are many for sale there; so buy them and send them to me! The textile that you buy must be nine cubits wide and eight cubits long."⁴² She also continued to send many lots of textiles to other trading partners. Like her mother, Lamassī, Waqqurtum had to make careful determinations as to the profitability of such capital and labor investments.

Waqqurtum's aunt, Tariš-matum, was no less resourceful and aware of the balance between

³⁷ Michel 2001, 440-441.

³⁸ Michel 2001, 441.

³⁹ Michel 2001, 443.

⁴⁰ Michel 2001, 444-445. Adapted from Veenhof 1972, 104-105.

⁴¹ Michel 2001, 445-446: "You are my brothers and my masters, but I sit in an empty house ... miserable ...".

⁴² Michel 2001, 444-445.

capital investment and profit, as she revealed in her own letters to and from her children and husband. Like Lamassī, she claimed to have a crumbling house in Ashur and saw to the physical repair of its walls herself: "On the subject of the house that we live in, oh, how much the house has deteriorated! I'm worried so I made some bricks in the springtime, and then I piled them up. As for the cement that you already wrote me about, send me the necessary silver so that I can buy some cement."⁴³ She also used forceful rhetoric to convince her brothers and direct their behavior. She wanted them to send the proper consignment of silver and share of the proceeds from the family textile sales that she felt she deserved:

Because of the [small amount?] of votive silver to our father [god?], Belātum [her daughter] is sick and we are mistreated by the demons and spirits of the dead. You are our brother! Over there, tell Pušu-kēn so that he'll sell all of the tin and textiles, to seal the silver [in a packet] and send it to us in order to save our lives ... Not a single one of you should touch that silver, not even a single cent.⁴⁴

We also learn that Tariš-matum, like many of the other women, owned a share in a sophisticated Old Assyrian investment vehicle called a *tadmiqtum*, which she entrusted to a merchant to sell and return a profit.⁴⁵

Anatolian women,⁴⁶ too, acted as entrepreneurs, as was the case for a woman named Sišahšušar, who was the *amtum*, or secondary wife, of the prominent Assyrian trader Aššur-nādā.⁴⁷ Her concerns centered around the receipt of silver to maintain the family compound in Kanesh. She wrote frequently to her husband requesting silver to purchase wheat and other staples, and also asked him to send her fine, imported oils from his travels. While evidence referring to this woman is limited in comparison to others, her correspondence reveals that her contact with textiles was as a consumer rather than a producer, as her husband assured her that he would bring a garment to their daughter, Ahar, when he arrived home.⁴⁸ Another daughter, Ishtar-lamassi (II), followed in her mother's footsteps and continued to live and travel throughout Anatolia with her husband, Puzur-Ishtar.⁴⁹ A woman named Lamaša was involved in the wool and copper trade and the production of household and dress items made of copper and wool in Anatolia. She instructed her colleague, Buzāzu, to send her some "good quality [copper] shoe-buckles" and she purchased copper to convert into implements. She also received large quantities of wool to re-sell.⁵⁰ She stood guard over her own storehouses, and owned a seal. In a series of letter, she precisely enumerated to her sister, Musa, possessions that she wished to extract from a house in Kanesh, including several tablets that probably referred to business deals or property: "three *kusitum* textiles, two *sum*-stones, 200 vats of beer, 20 sacks of grain, seven *arḫalum* objects, ... seven weights of silver, two of copper, 11 beams and a box of wood ... three tablet-boxes are sealed by my seal. You are my sister, go over to Pušu-kēn's house, enter it and get all of the stuff. Give

⁴³ Michel 2001, 447–448.

⁴⁴ Michel 2001, 451.

⁴⁵ For the meaning of *tadmiqtum*, see Veenhof 1972, 110–111. For Tariš-matum's *tadmiqtum*, see Michel 2001, 452–453.

⁴⁶ Assyriologists are able to distinguish the ethnicity of the correspondents through orthography.

⁴⁷ The difference between primary and secondary wives in the Old Assyrian system seems to be one of legal technicality. Secondary wives could be either Assyrian or Anatolian, but could not legally reside in the same city as the primary wives (*aššatum*). They were not necessarily of lower status than the primary wives. For a discussion of marriage in the Old Assyrian period, see Michel 2006b.

⁴⁸ Michel 2001, 479–480.

⁴⁹ Michel 2001, 481.

⁵⁰ Michel 2001, 483–485.

the tablets to Pušu-kēn.”⁵¹ From this letter we see a woman with her thumb on the pulse of her possessions and property. Regarding consumption of textiles in particular, we know that women owned their own finished garments, as they mention them in their letters.⁵² For example, Ummi-Ishara wrote to her brother, asking “Why did you hold back the garment my sister sent for me to wear?”⁵³ To add to their profits, some women stripped wrapped garments off their own backs to include in lots of textiles for sale to both men and women.⁵⁴ This action reveals that when the women did produce finished garments at Ashur, they must have been in the form of a ‘standard type’, which could have been worn by either males or females.⁵⁵ It also shows the existence of a women-to-women network that allowed goods to circulate throughout the region and that created a parallel commerce in movable property and other services. Certainly the women transacted business with each other with regard to textile production and the family’s capital. Carol Meyers has used archaeological evidence in combination with Biblical texts to trace similar “women’s informal associations, or networks in Israelite agrarian communities”⁵⁶ of the Iron Age. There is no doubt that the men involved in the ‘Cappadocian trade’ formed informal as well as formal associations with each other, as well as with women, in order to conduct their commerce. Several studies have demonstrated the existence of such business entities in the Old Assyrian system; for instance, many male traders took part in *naruqqums*, which have been likened to joint stock funds that advanced credit and distributed profits and dividends to shareholders.⁵⁷ So, too, women facilitated the transfer of property by exchanging goods with each other and carefully tabulating those exchanges.

Another effective method that the women deployed to insure their profits was to appeal to their husbands’ sense of religious duty and fear of the gods’ reprisal. The master at such rhetoric was a woman named Taram-kubi, wife of the trader Innaya. Taram-kubi had a long life of helping to run the family firm and producing textiles. She gave birth to several children, outlived her husband, and came to some prominence on her own in Ashur. Her frequent references to deities and omens have led some scholars to conclude that she (and other women like her) were more superstitious or religious than the men; however, we must caution that there were men in the tablets who were equally ‘superstitious.’ The women deployed the rhetoric that they felt necessary in order to receive their silver: “If you are my brother, who else can I rely on? Kutallanum came and you didn’t give him anything to bring to me. I will pray in front of my god for you.”⁵⁸ Taram-kubi tried to remind her son to be more thrifty and pious, which was the main purpose of her entreaty; however, she appended her letter with a final sentence regarding his most important duty (emphasized in *italics*): “Here at Ashur, we consulted the omen priests, the diviners and the spirits; the god Aššur can’t stop you: you love silver too much and will ruin your life! Don’t you want to please the god Aššur in the city? Please, if you get this letter, come home, visit Ashur’s

⁵¹ Michel 2001, 486–487. For another woman seal-owner, see the letters written by Walawala (p. 500).

⁵² Michel and Veenhof 2010, 263, 265.

⁵³ Michel and Veenhof 2010, 265.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Michel and Veenhof 2010, 263, argue that “there is almost no evidence of specific textiles meant as garments for women”.

⁵⁶ Meyers 1999.

⁵⁷ Veenhof 1978; Dercksen 2004.

⁵⁸ Michel 2001, 469–470.

temple and save your life! Why haven't you sent me the profits from my textiles?"⁵⁹

While Kunnaniya's husband was alive, she did not appear to have produced textiles, but requested them for her own family to wear as she confidently managed a large household in Kanesh that owned several slaves.⁶⁰ Among other things, Kunnaniya was responsible for raising the pigs owned by the family. She was also responsible for guarding the storehouses containing the couple's inventory and most importantly, for maintaining the family's archives, which contained important documentation concerning her husband's inheritance from his father and other property. Consequently, she was probably literate, as she often had to account for and retrieve specific tablets in the archive.⁶¹ She moved unimpeded around the Anatolian countryside and to Ashur in her husband's absence, as he frequently reproached her for leaving the house unguarded. According to her correspondence, she became embroiled in a dispute with her deceased husband's relatives over his estate.

Kunnaniya's travails indicate that many of the women from the Old Assyrian period were financially independent enough to act as their own guardians and make their own decisions regarding where and how they wanted to live – they were the primary agents in their lives. We also see this in the correspondence and contracts of several *ugbaltum*-priestesses, specialized religious personnel from elite families who lived in cloister. These elite women were prohibited from marrying; thus they lived independently, produced textiles, and controlled their own financial affairs.⁶² They have been compared to the famed *naditu*-priestesses of southern Mesopotamia.⁶³ One *ugbaltum*, Ahatum, was addressed honorifically by several young male relatives when they used the same rhetoric of obeisance that the women often reserved for their male relatives: "You are my mother, my mistress."⁶⁴

The testaments of widows especially reveal this financial agency, as the women left their estates to their heirs as they saw fit. For example, Lamassatum directed her 'masters' to pay off her taxes and debts in Ashur: "If you are my fathers, to pay the tax bill on the house in Kanesh: seal up everything it contains – the furniture, the servants, the tablets, the silver hoards. Don't leave even one shekel and bring them to me. Please, don't sell the slave or the textiles."⁶⁵ Perhaps the textiles were important family possessions or a nest-egg to keep for lean times; or perhaps Lamassatum was waiting for better market conditions to sell her textiles at a good price. Ishtar-lamassi had enough property left in her name when she died to require her to write a *simtum*, or testament which was disputed by her heirs after her death.⁶⁶ The estate of Ishtar-lamassi must have been substantial enough to warrant the flurry of letters concerning its distribution that were preserved at Kanesh.

⁵⁹ Michel 2001, 470.

⁶⁰ There are a few contracts mentioning the purchase and sale of slaves by Kunnaniya.

⁶¹ See for example Michel 2001, 496–497.

⁶² For example, the priestess Ab-šalim (Michel 2001, 459–464). Several other *ugbaltum* priestesses are mentioned in contracts, see for example Ishtar-lamassi II (Michel 2001, 482).

⁶³ See Harris 1987.

⁶⁴ Michel 2001, 504–505.

⁶⁵ Michel 2001, 503–504.

⁶⁶ Many examples of *simtum* of men have been found amongst the tablets at Kanesh. They refer to the dispensation of probate matters regarding the estate of the deceased (e.g. taxes and debts owed) and list the inheritance passed down to each of the trader's heirs. Ishtar-lamassi's is the only known *simtum* of a woman. For a general discussion of testaments and wills in Ashur and Kanesh, see Veenhof 2008a and references cited therein.

We also hear frequently of women who repeatedly “bucked the system” by refusing to comply with either the wishes of their male relatives or even the legal authorities. Some daughters left their fathers’ homes to live with others, either in Anatolia or Ashur, perhaps because of their financial independence. For example, Aššur-rabi wrote to his daughter, Maganika, who apparently rented out her family’s house and went to live with her boyfriend: “Why do you let someone unknown live in our house while you leave to live with a man? If you are my daughter, watch over the house. I’ll be home in ten days.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere at Ashur, the granddaughters of the trader Imdilum left and abandoned their elderly relative on their own accord. He complained bitterly of their departure to his son, Aššur-nādā: “I raised your son, but he said ‘You are not my father!’ He got up and left. Also your daughters have I raised, and they said: ‘You are not our father!’ On the third day they got up and left to go to you.”⁶⁸ One could speculate that textile production and sales could have allowed these daughters’ independent actions, but no evidence exists beyond these letters to confirm such speculation.

The most actively defiant and financially independent woman was Ishtar-bašti. Her correspondence shows that she moved to Kanesh to take care of family business affairs there, perhaps against the wishes of her father, Imdi-īlum. Upon hearing that she married an Anatolian man,⁶⁹ he wrote: “Me and my sons, we’re not important to you. If we were important to you, you would honor me like a daughter [should]. Since I left Ashur I have lost a lot of money, but you ignore me.” In spite of this, Ishtar-bašti was clearly irreplaceable to her family and through her textile production and shrewd lending practices, as well as attention to laws and suits, she directed much of the firm’s business while her brothers traveled abroad. She wrote, “about the Kura family affair, Puzur-Aššur was worried, but we told him: ‘Don’t worry, let it go’, the man went to the authorities, but I asked him, and then he settled [with us].”⁷⁰ And, “Relating to the thick textile that I gave you for the *tadmiqtum*-loan. If you are my master, sell it for a profit and give the silver, the price of the thick textile, to Amur-ili so that he can bring it to me.”⁷¹ Another letter written by her brother indicates that he conformed to her requests: “Say to Ishtar-bašti. I got 15 shekels of silver from your brother for your *tadmiqtum*...You’re my sister, don’t get mad at me.”⁷² In fact, it was Ishtar-bašti upon whom their father, Imdi-īlum, relied to keep her brothers on task in Anatolia. Like other female traders, she rhetorically emphasized the family’s respectability and reputation to bring her brothers into line: “Inform [your brother] Amur-ili that he ought to respect people. He shouldn’t think only about eating and drinking, he should be a respectable man.”⁷³ Consequently, she wrote to her brother Puzur-Ishtar: “Be a respectable man and mind your father’s instructions ... Come quickly so that I can leave with you and I can survey our father’s house and guard it in Kanesh.”⁷⁴ It is Ishtar-bašti, therefore, who seems to have controlled a good part of the family’s purse strings, perhaps due as much to her abilities as to the profits that her textiles produced. Her father wrote to her: “I beg of you, make your merchandise available to sell

⁶⁷ Michel 2001, 458.

⁶⁸ Larsen 2001, 276.

⁶⁹ He had already given dowry money to another suitor. Thus, he would be seen as breaking a contract.

⁷⁰ Michel 2001, 466–468.

⁷¹ Michel 2001, 471.

⁷² Michel 2001, 472–473. Note the simultaneous use of “master,” and the commanding tone of the letter.

⁷³ Michel 2001, 474–475.

⁷⁴ Michel 2001, 473.

on credit. Give the gold to the son of Limiššar and send it to me.”⁷⁵ This daughter, it seems, did not always ‘obey’ the commands of her male family members. Rather, by sliding deftly between ‘public’ and ‘domestic/household’ contexts, Ishtar-bašti eluded traditional patriarchal authority. Some women defied patriarchal rules within the broader context of the city of Ashur’s legal authorities. An unnamed woman, the “wife of the Rabi Sisi’e”, refused to settle a case with a debtor. A letter from Kanesh reads: “Her case concerning the 3½ minas of silver is settled, but she refuses to take the silver. She (now) says: ‘Neither will I make Buzazu pay, nor will I drop the case against him!’ You are my father why does she keep putting forward claims against me?”⁷⁶

Problematizing Women’s Textile Production in the Old Assyrian Period: Historiography

While the process of textile production is interesting in itself, and the letters do give some detail about it, the prominence of the women textile entrepreneurs in the entire business of textile commerce is perhaps most interesting, as it relates to the important topics of gender, agency and identity. In the case of the Assyrian women, we learn of their agency in economic matters not from how they use the textiles to dress themselves but from how they use their *labour* in producing the textiles to negotiate their financial and familial situations. In the past, studies of textile production in the Old Assyrian period have suggested that the women of Ashur and Kanesh, producing their textiles in the “privacy of their homes,” were only slightly additive to the more public nature of their husbands’ commercial endeavors.⁷⁷ Although they do not state so explicitly, the scholars of the Old Assyrian period were influenced by the first wave of feminist historical scholarship. Early historians of women desired to ‘find’ women in the written historical records. However, a second and even third wave of feminist historical scholarship has emerged, and drives my own historiographic analysis here.⁷⁸ In the second wave of feminist thought, scholars seek to expose the historical oppression of women in society and historiography in order to “form alternative methods of defining relations of gender and society.”⁷⁹ In the third wave, feminist scholars are forming new methodologies and alternative ways of exploring gender difference in the historical record as it relates especially to power.⁸⁰ I suggest that many of the publications about the ‘remarkable’ women of Ashur and Kanesh have resulted in *minimising* the Assyrian textile producers’ achievements. For until very recently, the modern scholars usually concluded that the women were the supporters of the family firms, and not driving the business decisions, much less independent or entrepreneurial in their own right. Early in the historiography of the archives, the leading scholar on the Old Assyrian period, Klaas Veenhof wrote, “Various merchants wives in the absence of their husbands, came to function as heads of households, acquiring a number of responsibilities as their correspondence with their husbands abroad shows.”⁸¹ Two years later, he reiterated this assumption: “All the women remain in Assyria keeping their husbands’ affairs

⁷⁵ Michel 2001, 473–474.

⁷⁶ Farber 2001, 41.

⁷⁷ Veenhof 1972; Veenhof 1977; Garelli 1979; Larsen 1982; Barber 1994; Dercksen 2004; Veenhof 2008b.

⁷⁸ For discussion of feminist scholarship in Mesopotamian studies, see: Meyers 2001, 278–279; Asher-Greve 1997; Bahrani 2001.

⁷⁹ Bahrani 2001, 15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Veenhof 1977, 113.

in order, producing textiles that they send and receiving gifts and money in return.”⁸² In 1992, Gunbatti suggested that the women “helped” their husbands and brothers and were “almost as active” as them in business affairs.⁸³

Elizabeth Barber, the foremost authority on ancient weaving (if not on Mesopotamia), whose books from 1991, *Prehistoric Textiles: the Development of Cloth in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages* and from 1994, *Women’s Work, the First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times* are the most frequently cited works on the subject, falls squarely into this school of thought. Barber reiterates the surprise of Veenhof, whose work she cites for her own material. She writes:

Unlike the women of later times who were strictly confined to the harems, these women were free to go out to the market places and buy textiles from other women or buy the wool to make more cloths. They also dealt directly with donkey drivers and sometimes were asked to attend legal matters for their absent men ... The women’s rights were far from equal to those of their husbands.⁸⁴

Barber and the Assyriologists were influenced by their own post-Industrial Revolution, twentieth-century model of women and work, which privileged the “stay-at-home” wife and mother.⁸⁵ This model, however, forces scholars to form a literal interpretation of the written record from Mesopotamia; it was inconceivable that women could have owned businesses outright or to have been the driving force behind them in the ancient world. Indeed, scholars concluded that the female textile entrepreneurs of Ashur were conducting business within the confines of their homes but only secondarily to other duties for which they were responsible – taking care of the household while their husbands were away in Anatolia. As recently as 2008, Veenhof has reinforced the image of the women stalwartly standing by their men: “thus women took part in and supported their husbands’ and fathers businesses.” Yet he also notes secondarily that, “[they] were also able to earn some silver for their own purses.”⁸⁶

From the modern Assyriologists’ point of view, men were the central actors in the ‘public’ institutions of commerce and politics, whereas women were involved in the family’s ‘private’ affairs (or daily life) such as raising the children and taking care of the household. In fact, a whole new body of scholarship devoted to understanding the difference between ‘private’ and ‘public’ enterprise in Mesopotamia has emerged in Assyriology in the last few decades.⁸⁷ Throughout these discussions, the central concern of the scholars has been to define the primary context in which individuals owned property, and their relationship to state economic institutions.⁸⁸ All of these discussions have been driven by a long-accepted view of labor and property in history forwarded by Jürgen Habermas, which distinguishes between two separate (and unequal) ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres of social agency. Critiquing the unconditional acceptance of Habermas’ description of history, Garfinkle has recently argued for a continued differentiation in the activities

⁸² Original in French, my translation of Garelli 1979, 42.

⁸³ Gunbatti 1992.

⁸⁴ Barber 1994, 171. Barber has recently updated her interpretation, writing in 2008 that the “women were in business for themselves”, Barber 2008, 174.

⁸⁵ Carol Meyers 1999, who influences my work here, has argued for a similar historiographic narrative for biblical scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries.

⁸⁶ Veenhof 2008b, 285.

⁸⁷ Perhaps this arose as a response to Cold War politics and debates over socialism in modern government, a debate that continues with regard to the Mesopotamian economy well into the 21st century. For a recent contribution, see for example, Silver 2006.

⁸⁸ The literature on this subject is vast. See Garfinkle 2005 for further references.

of individuals, but he suggests using the terms 'institutional' and 'non-institutional' in the place of 'public' and 'private'; this terminology seems more descriptive and less anachronistic to him.⁸⁹

However, the terms 'public' and 'private' continue to be used today without regard to their connotations or the role of gender in their conception and differentiation. For example, Larsen uses the term 'private' to describe the level of intimacy between the senders of letters at Ashur and Kanesh, and the restricted number of people who would have been privy to the information in them: "[The letters could] therefore be entirely private exchanges directly between a person and his or her close kin or friends and colleagues, a privacy ensured also by the practice of placing letters in sealed envelopes."⁹⁰ Private, in this context, describes interpersonal relationships – yet those 'private' exchanges often concerned very 'public' subjects, such as the collection of city taxes. Private, to other scholars and in other contexts, refers to the level of economic interaction, again, without regard to gender and the implications the modern term has in our own society. When Garfinkle writes: "It has become obvious that the ancient entrepreneur operated in an economic system that was not governed by the same mechanisms as the modern economy. At the same time, the entrepreneur of the Ancient Near East was interested in acquiring ever greater wealth, and as a result he sought opportunities to maximize his gain, and to do so on behalf of his household," he assumes that the generic entrepreneur was a male.⁹¹ This sentiment is echoed by scholars interested in the Old Assyrian economy. Dercksen uses the terms private and institutional to differentiate between two modes of textile production, asserting that the male-dominated institutional mode was more important to profit-building. He writes, "the businessmen [at Kültepe were] *private* (italics orig.) entrepreneurs and the sole motivation of their undertaking was profit."⁹² In a later article, he argues that

Small-scale spinning and weaving was usually done by women and will have been performed largely within a domestic context. The 'local production' [of textiles at Ashur] was different from the home weaving performed within the context of the households of the traders...the quantity of textiles produced in that way, estimated at several hundred pieces, probably carried little weight in economic terms.⁹³

While quantitatively we have far more textual evidence for male entrepreneurs than for females in Mesopotamia in general, such language is engrained in and contributes to a furthering of modern anachronistic stereotypes about women, men, work and agency. Feminist historians from other fields indeed have argued that the dichotomy that relegates female labor to the private sphere and male commercial activities to the public sphere was constructed in the eighteenth century (AD) in Europe in response to the Industrial Revolution and the concurrent Cult of Women's Domesticity that built an emerging middle class identity.⁹⁴ The 18th and 19th centuries' model of women's status and roles in society subordinated women legally and relegated them to the 'private' sphere in order to 'liberate' them from the toil of work. This ideological insistence and naturalisation of the "bourgeois domesticity" of separate spheres created a social space where middle class males could distinguish themselves from the working classes.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* See also Dercksen 2000.

⁹⁰ Larsen 2001, 277.

⁹¹ *op. cit.*, 408

⁹² Dercksen and Lamberg-Karlovsky 1996, 168.

⁹³ Dercksen 2004, 15.

⁹⁴ Riverby and Helly 1992, 8–9.

⁹⁵ For a concise discussion of the historical contingency of the notion of "separate spheres", see Katz 1999, 295–300.

Cécile Michel, on the contrary, argues that our ancient businesswomen were as equally attentive to their own capital and profits as were their husbands. She writes, "they stridently defend their interests and [the women] guard against any use of their capital by their husbands or their representatives."⁹⁶ The un-self-conscious use of public and private to differentiate between women's and men's (unequal) spheres of labor begs further consideration, especially when Assyriologists wish to discuss the household and 'domestic economy.' The feminist Biblical historian and archaeologist, Carol Meyers, has argued for such a gendered interrogation of the division of labor, observing that modern biases will lead to inappropriate archaeological analogies.⁹⁷ As for the 'household', Garfinkle suggests that "the ordinary urban household...was usually a patriarchal household and the head of the family controlled all of the household's material wealth."⁹⁸ Such assumptions and their constant reiteration therefore lead to "surprise" when a female "head of household" or entrepreneur is encountered, as in the case of the women textile entrepreneurs at Ashur and Kanesh. As Meyers has argued, they also "subtly reinforce essentialist notions about female (and male) behavior."⁹⁹ I offer here an alternative to analyses of the Old Assyrian material that have naturalized a model based exclusively on the public/private dichotomy, when in fact we have many other models that undermine such an interpretation. For if we do not question such a model, and we portray such texts as "hopelessly patriarchal, [such a portrayal] risks being an act of cultural hubris, if not academic orientalism."¹⁰⁰

Studies of textiles and their production, in particular, can serve centrally in feminist historians' desire to de-naturalize this private/public dichotomy since, as Schneider has argued:

The study of cloth can illuminate women's contributions to social and political organization that are otherwise over looked ... women's involvement with cloth production exposes in complex ways the complementarity, the domination and the subversive tactics that together comprise gender relations, forcing us to rethink women's roles in kinship, economic, and political domains ... cloth gives women a measure of economic autonomy.¹⁰¹

It is the task of the ancient historian of Mesopotamia, therefore, not only to make the invisible visible, but also to find the spaces in which the women of Ashur maneuvered, while recognizing that such spaces are not necessarily always 'private' or never 'public'. In fact we have in the Old Assyrian tablets a rare occurrence of the *obvious visibility* of women in an arena – written records about public or private commerce – in which males are typically more visible, especially in southern Mesopotamia. The archives demonstrate that despite frequent assertions by modern scholars to the contrary, the women of the Old Assyrian period were not always dependent upon and unequal to their male relatives.

I suggest that the Ashur-Kanesh culture was a frontier society with an entrepreneurially minded population in which traditional societal practices might have been altered or disregarded entirely. Indeed, Steven Lumsden has noted that the Old Assyrian colony period should "be understood as one of dramatic change ... that was extraordinarily transformative for local Anatolian societies."

⁹⁶ Michel 2001, 423.

⁹⁷ Meyers 2001, 279.

⁹⁸ Garfinkle 2005, 409.

⁹⁹ Meyers, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Schneider and Weiner 1989, 4, 25. This idea is reiterated in an article about female tailors in Renaissance Florence by my colleague at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Carole Frick 2005.

Therefore, the period led to the formation of “new social realities, new institutional practices, new identities and new ways of thinking,”¹⁰² especially in Anatolian societies, but also likely in Assyrian society. Borrowing a concept that Richard White framed for the French and Algonquian Indians in North America during the pre-modern period, Lumsden describes the encounter between Anatolians and Assyrians as a “Middle Ground ... an ambivalent place ‘in-between’ cultures and peoples in social encounters, where accommodation and invention takes place, and social identities are negotiated.”¹⁰³ For the Algonquian Indians and the French, Indian women played a crucial role in this Middle Ground for a variety of reasons that I do not have space to reiterate here.

While I am not directly comparing the Old Assyrian colony period with the North American fur trade, I do think that we can frame similar questions about our respective materials. One historical contingency of the period is the fact that traders were often traveling and not able to be present in person when legal matters arose.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the Old Assyrians were forced to be original and creative in their legal practices, which led in part to a situation in which “women in many respects were equal to men in law,” a condition not always present in other parts of Mesopotamia or in other time periods.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, individuals within merchant firms were linked together by movable property and loose business connections and not by common land ownership and inheritance.¹⁰⁶ The Assyrians of this time determined that wives and daughters could serve this linking function as well as male relatives.

In a society that valued *movable* over landed property, it is not surprising that women would play an equally important role in the ownership and management of such property, since the women were largely in charge of manufacturing and/or procuring such movable capital, mainly in the form of textiles. However, exchanges of other material culture must have led to the prominence of women in this period. Lumsden notes that luxury items and votive objects were often discussed in the tablets as traveling between Assyria and Anatolia and intended for family members of traders, along with the more commercially-intended trade items of bulk silver and other goods. We have seen this transference of property in some of the women’s correspondence. Moreover, he argues that the intermarriage of Assyrians and Anatolians contributed to this exchange of material culture, and furthered the unique ‘hybridity’ of this Middle Ground situation.¹⁰⁷ In sum, the general historical contingencies of the Old Assyrian colony are unique in Mesopotamian history. However, the prominence of women in the business affairs of the trading firms was not the *cause* of the unique and surprising nature of the correspondence, but rather a *result* of the historical context of a unique frontier society. This example demonstrates the importance of assessing scholarly models and de-naturalizing the public/private dichotomy in studies of the ancient world.

¹⁰² Lumsden 2008, 24.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, citing White 1991, x.

¹⁰⁴ Veenhof, Eidem and Wäfler 2008, 95.

¹⁰⁵ There are, of course, many exceptions to this rule. Queens (royal wives) certainly had higher legal status than others, even males. Or, certain priestesses of a particular class enjoyed such (near) equality during the Old Babylonian period in the south. For discussion of *naditu*-priestesses, see Harris 1987. The *ugbaltu*-priestesses from Ashur, well-known from the Kanesh archives, might have also enjoyed such status. However, the difference during the Old Assyrian period is that women did not have to belong to such priestly classes to garner legal equality and economic independence.

¹⁰⁶ As noted by Lumsden 2008, 37; Larsen 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Lumsden 2008, 37.

Conclusion

Textiles were the form of material culture that played perhaps a primary role in the hybridization of the community at Kanesh. While we do not have any actual representations of the textiles or fragments of cloth from this period and place in Mesopotamia, the phantom trails left in the letters from the trading families of Ashur allow us to follow the lives of female textile entrepreneurs. Without the textiles, and the importance of their trade within the Old Assyrian *kārum* system, we might not have known about the shrewdly resourceful businesswomen of the period. It is through their ability to produce and trade textiles that the woman used their voices, and in a rhetorically creative and effective manner, shaped their identities as actively agent participants in all spaces – ‘public’ or ‘private’, ‘institutional’ or ‘individual’ – of their society.

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