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Women in a Men's World: Images of Sumerian Women

Susan Pollock

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

In a recent paper on women in ancient Mesopotamian art, Irene Winter begins by posing the question, "why so few?" (Winter 1987: 189). This query could also be extended to the domain of women in Mesopotamian literature. The relative invisibility of women in art and literature is striking, but we find that the picture is far more complex as we explore other domains and investigate the nuances of the representational evidence, as Winter, among others, has shown. Women are portrayed in inconsistent and contradictory ways in different representational media. At the very least, this raises questions about the ideologies of representation and their correspondence to what women "really" did. Representations may also offer important insights into changing relations of gender and power. In this paper I explore some of the ambiguities in representations of women in the historical context of early Sumerian and Akkadian civilization. I examine three forms of representations: written texts, burials, and the iconography of cylinder seals.

The Setting

The heartland of Sumerian civilization was southern Mesopotamia, a region also known as Sumer and Akkad. This area included, more or less, the land between the channels of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, from the area where they enter the alluvial plain in the north (near modern Baghdad) to the ancient head of the (Persian/Arabian) Gulf in the south

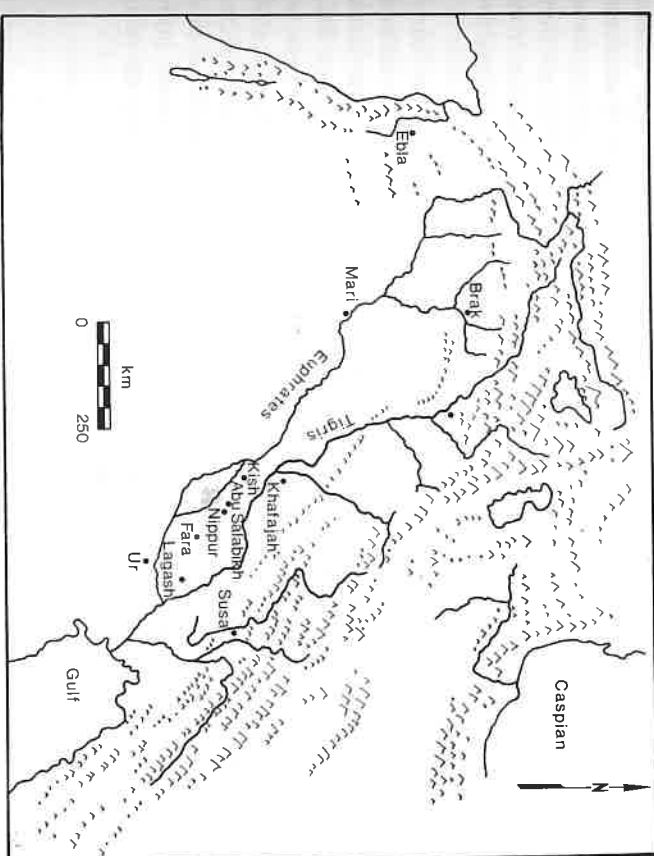


Figure 13.1 Map of Mesopotamia, with major Early Dynastic and Akkadian Period sites indicated.

(figure 13.1). "Classic" early Sumerian civilization refers to a period toward the middle of the third millennium BC (conventionally dated to ca.2600–2350 BC), known archaeologically as Early Dynastic (ED) III. A trend toward urbanization that had begun more than a millennium earlier took the form at this time of a constellation of city-states. Each city-state included one, or sometimes a few, large urban communities, surrounded by an agricultural hinterland under their immediate control. The relative power of these city-states waxed and waned, with no single city-state ever achieving a lasting political or economic dominance over the whole area. Inter-state relations were marked by chronic warfare and shifting allegiances, as well as by a strong degree of economic interdependence and a shared social and cultural history. The economy was based on plant cultivation, herding, and fishing, the products of which were exchanged locally and in an extensive trade network that provided Mesopotamia with a wide variety of raw materials that it lacked, including stones, metals, and woods.

ED III was followed by the Akkadian or Sargonic period, when, for the first time as far as we know, much of Mesopotamia was united under

a single political rule. This achievement is credited to a man named Sargon, who ruled from Akkad, a region in the northern part of southern Mesopotamia. Sargon and his successors managed to maintain some degree of political unity for approximately a century. Although they instituted a change in the (written) language of administration from Sumerian to Akkadian, this linguistic change was probably not closely – or simply – equated with ethnic identity.

The late ED and Sargonic periods are sometimes classified as “early historic”, a reference to the existence of written records. The earliest known evidence of writing in Mesopotamia comes from the Late Uruk period, during the last few centuries of the fourth millennium BC. However, it is not until the later Early Dynastic period that we have, at present, a fairly large, diverse, and comprehensible corpus of excavated texts, albeit still tantalizingly fragmentary and laconic in many respects. Much of the written material is in the form of specially prepared clay tablets, inscribed in the cuneiform script that was used to write both Sumerian and Akkadian. There are also inscriptions in stone, on such objects as stelae and cylinder seals.

Representations of Women

Representations cannot be simply equated with “reality” or the “objective conditions of existence”. But representations are integral to experience of the world, structuring conceptions of the world and positions and actions in that world (cf. Berger 1972). In this sense, it is not possible to adequately conceptualize relations of power without also considering prestige, or socially recognized and valued positions and actions.

Women in literary compositions

Among the written texts pertaining to the early Sumerian and Sargonic periods are those that have been termed “literary”. The texts grouped under this rubric include “myths”, “epic tales”, “hymns”, and accounts of events such as victories in battle. One of the dangers in using these texts is that many of the presumed early examples are known only or mainly from later “copies”, raising questions about how “true” they are to their ostensibly original versions. For the moment, however, let us consider the literary texts that are purported to refer to the Early Dynastic and Sargonic periods.

A striking impression of these compositions is how seldom and how few (human) women are mentioned. [*The texts do not always specify – in terms that we understand – whether a particular individual is female or*

male; rather, scholars have attributed gender on the basis of their understanding of personal names. How much may we be using this ambiguity to substantiate our own preconceptions?] Those women who do figure in these texts are depicted in auxiliary, nurturing roles, often acting to further the aims and positions of men (Winter 1987: 189). Most of the protagonists of these compositions are political rulers or “heroes” of some sort, and they are almost invariably men.

We do, however, read in texts that have been characterized as “economic” that women occasionally held political offices of some importance, usually as queens. Not all wives of kings seem to have been given this title (Hallo 1957: 30; Moorey 1977: 27–8), which may be related to contexts in which it was or was not appropriate to specify a title. Certain queens are said to have had control over land and the administration of economic activities on sizable estates (Foster 1987; Hallo 1976; Kramer 1976; Lambert 1987; Michalowski 1981). Although the “authenticity” of the Sumerian King List as a document of Mesopotamian dynasties and rulers must be questioned (Michalowski 1983), an intriguing twist comes from a mention in the King List (Jacobsen 1939) of a *king* (literally, “big man”) of the city of Kish who was a woman. A second possible female king of Kish is identified by Shaffer (1983). These instances throw the connection between political dominance and “maleness” into sharp relief. Titles aside, some women seem to have had significant, *recognized* political and economic power, but the number of such women who were written about was few in comparison to the number of men in such positions.

A significant domain in which women regularly held official positions was the temple hierarchy, although they were usually appointed to these positions by men (Lambert 1987: 125). Three different ranks of priestesses are documented for the ED period (Asher-Greve 1985: 157–8). The daughters and sisters of rulers were often made high priestesses and in that role were forbidden to bear children (see Shaffer 1983). One particularly renowned example was Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon. She was installed by her father as high priestess (*en*-priestess) of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur – and perhaps also of the sky god, An, at Uruk (Hallo and van Dijk 1968: 8). Enheduanna’s placement at Ur, and possibly Uruk, can be interpreted as a deliberate political ploy by Sargon to further establish his control in the southern cities, to ensure their allegiance to the empire in much the way that a dynastic marriage might do (Hallo and van Dijk 1968: 7–9; Moorey 1977: 38; Winter 1987: 200–1). Indeed, in Mesopotamian understanding, the high priestess was in some sense married to the god she served (Solberger and Kupper 1971: 100; Weadcock 1975: 101).

An even more powerful interpretation of Enheduanna’s position

comes from a reading of Mesopotamian history proposed by Nissen (1988). He has suggested that there was a long history of tension between centralizing political aims – usually associated with “secular” political leaders – and local, decentralizing ones. In these terms, Sargon’s ambitions fall squarely on the side of centralizing political power. But Sargon also attempted to consolidate and legitimate this position by placing his daughter in a traditional female domain through which he could hope to both pacify and control the local powers that opposed him. If positions in local temple hierarchies had indeed been the principal positions of political and economic power open to women of individual city polities, the Sargonic dynasty’s “coup” in imposing a centralized political organization might also represent an undercutting not just of local power but of women’s power.

Whatever Sargon’s motives, Enheduanna does not appear to us as simply a pawn. She is credited with the composition of at least three literary works. One of these, “The Exaltation of Inanna” (Hallo and van Dijk 1968), is a powerful political statement couched in religious terms. According to this composition, she has been driven out of her priestly office at Ur (and Uruk as well?), probably in the context of a political rebellion against Sargon (*ibid.*: 58–9). She complains that Nanna, the god she serves in Ur, has not helped her in her plight. She appeals to Inanna, a goddess closely associated with the Sargonic dynasty, to restore her to her position, which Inanna does. We could read this text to mean that Enheduanna, through her actions, was furthering her father’s political ambitions. But at the same time, she seeks to be restored to what she deems to be her rightful position of authority.

After banishment from Ur, Enheduanna seeks recourse from Nanna, who responds by giving her a dagger and a sword, saying that they become her. This has been interpreted by Hallo and van Dijk (1968: 59) as a suggestion that she immolate herself. A more intriguing reading is that the dagger and sword symbolize male political power, something that is considered inappropriate for a woman. Such a symbolic association can be suggested on the basis of both iconographic and burial evidence (e.g. Pollock 1983: 253; Watkins 1983). In this interpretation, Enheduanna can be seen as assuming male powers and male roles, and taking on the symbolic trappings of those powers and roles.

Enheduanna looms large in any picture of ancient Mesopotamian women, in part because of the quantity of inscriptional material we have by and about her. Yet with all her stature and presence, she represents one among relatively few women who held important political or economic roles, as recorded in written documents. For many elite women, as for Enheduanna, the primary route to political and economic power seems to have been through the domain of priestesshood and

associated ritual offices. For men, there was a range of “secular” positions to which they might aspire, most notably that of *lugal* or king. They also could hold priestly roles within the temple organization, including that of high priest in cities where the patron deity was a goddess.

If elite women, as portrayed in written documents, occupied a limited number of official positions of power compared to men, the same is not true of female deities. Many cities’ patron deities were goddesses (Lambert 1987: 128), and goddesses figure prominently in literary compositions where they play active and even dominant roles. While the attributes and prerogatives of Mesopotamian deities change through time and according to context (Jacobsen 1976), nevertheless each deity had a certain range of characteristics. In many cases, goddesses controlled domains that would seem to have been inappropriate for human females, for example the goddess Inanna’s association with warfare. There does not seem to have been any simple equation between the human and divine worlds.

Thus far, I have avoided the sticky question of the audience that the texts addressed. Yet audience is critical in the sense that the understanding of any text or representation can be conceived as a product of both its context of production and the context of its reading (Berger 1972; Moore 1986). In a society in which most people were non-literate – including many members of the elite, officials, even kings – who read or otherwise used written texts? Texts were written by scribes, usually men, who must have read them as well as written them down. In the case of economic texts, scribes presumably had responsibility for both the recording and retrieval of information. Literary texts are more problematic. For the Old Babylonian period, Michalowski (1987) has suggested that literary texts may have been an integral part of the school curriculum, used in an “in-house” indoctrination of scribes who learned to write by copying texts. Perhaps it was also the possession of these mysterious sources of knowledge – in a medium that was very durable and hence permanent – that was key, rather than the ability of the possessor to decipher the contents. Such an interpretation fits best in the cases of inscriptions that accompany pictorial representations, as on stelae or seals, where the picture tells the story for all to read (cf. Winter 1985).

Women at work: economic texts

The documents that are generally categorized as “economic” are those that detail accounts of transactions, such as the distribution of rations to workers or the receipt of shipments of goods. Texts of this sort comprise

the bulk of the written material that we have from the mid-third millennium.

These accounts indicate that women formed a sizable, if not predominant, portion of the labor force at least of large "households" (including "private" estates, "palaces", and "temples") (Gelb 1976: 200). They were involved in a diverse range of tasks that included textile production, cooking, agricultural work, herding, midwifery (Asher-Greve 1987; Zagarell 1986). Men are said to have performed agricultural tasks, herding, canal maintenance, scribal functions, merchant activities, craft manufacturing (e.g. smiths, carpenters) (Zagarell 1986). Women routinely received smaller rations in return for their work than men; girls got less than boys at least some of the time (Gelb 1965: 232-5). From these accounts, we get a picture of women as actively involved in the economic structure of daily life. As queens and perhaps as *en-priestesses* (Wadcock 1975: 103) women may also have managed the operation of estates.

Women are also mentioned in legal texts that document the sale and purchase of land. Although these transactions were much more commonly carried out and authorized by men (Asher-Greve 1985; Diakonov 1969; Gelb 1969), women are attested as sellers and witnesses.

Women in death: Royal Cemetery of Ur burials

Burials are representations too. Burials incorporate stereotypes and ideologies: the appropriate ways to treat a deceased person ("funerary ritual"), the appropriate ways to express gender (and other) roles and categories. Yet this medium of expression and representation may be very different from that of images in texts.

In my examination of burials as representations, I focus on the Royal Cemetery of Ur during the first part of ED III - ED IIIA - when Ur enjoyed a period of political and economic ascendancy. This choice of a "case study" around which to base discussion is influenced by my own familiarity with the Royal Cemetery (see Pollock 1983) and the wealth of material offered by the cemetery.

The Royal Cemetery was discovered and so named by Sir Leonard Woolley who, in the 1920s and 1930s, conducted excavations at Ur (Woolley 1934). The cemetery includes more than 2,000 graves dug into rubbish heaps in what was probably the central part of the site, in proximity to the main temple area dedicated to the moon god, Nanna. This area was used as a graveyard continuously for at least 500 years, beginning around 2600 BC, although many people during these centuries must have been buried elsewhere, probably in other cemeteries or within

their houses. Approximately 153 graves, containing the burials of 482 individuals, can be attributed to ED IIIA (Pollock 1985).

The cemetery received its designation "royal" from 16 of the graves, all of which date to ED IIIA. While dissimilar from each other in many respects, these 16 graves stand out from the others in that they have chambers built of stone and/or brick; they include simultaneous burials of up to 75 individuals; and the richest of them includes a wealth of material unparalleled in the other graves. In two of these tombs, cylinder seals were found bearing inscriptions that include the term *lugal* (king). On this basis, as well as the presence of human sacrifice which he thought to be the prerogative of kings, Woolley argued that all 16 of these tombs were the graves of royalty, accompanied by retainers who were sacrificed at the time of the principal occupant's death. Although the ascription of royalty can be disputed on a number of grounds (Moorey 1977), the name, and often the assumption, has remained with us.

Woolley's excavation, recording, and publishing of the Royal Cemetery is commendable in many respects, given archaeological field standards at the time. Nevertheless, there are many areas in which the evidence is sadly lacking. In particular, very few of the skeletons were examined by a trained specialist, so direct information on sex and age¹ is minimal. However, it is possible to detect gender divisions among some of the burials.

For high status burials, gender divisions seem quite clear (Moorey 1977: 34-7; Pollock 1983: 153-6). These divisions are based primarily on non-overlapping sets of objects accompanying the burials. One category, presumably associated with females, includes those objects referred to by Woolley as hair ribbons, wreath headresses, "combs", double lunate earrings and dog-collar necklaces. The second or male category consists of axes, daggers or knives, whetstones, "brims" (headresses - see below), and toilet instruments. That these two distinct sets of objects can be ascribed to females and males is suggested by several lines of evidence. First, those few Royal Cemetery bodies that were sexed by a trained observer were associated with their sex-ascribed objects. Secondly, at the Kish A cemetery, which dates to the latter part of the ED III period and is thus immediately subsequent to the Royal Cemetery burials that we are considering, some of these types of objects were also found. Many of the Kish skeletons were examined by physical anthropologists (Buxton and Rice 1931; Field 1947; Rathburn 1975), and again the physical evidence supports the gender-based attributions. Finally, contemporary iconography shows some of these objects in association with men and women.

All of the female objects can be categorized as jewelry, in our sense of that word (Figures 13.2 and 13.3). Hair ribbons are narrow strips of gold

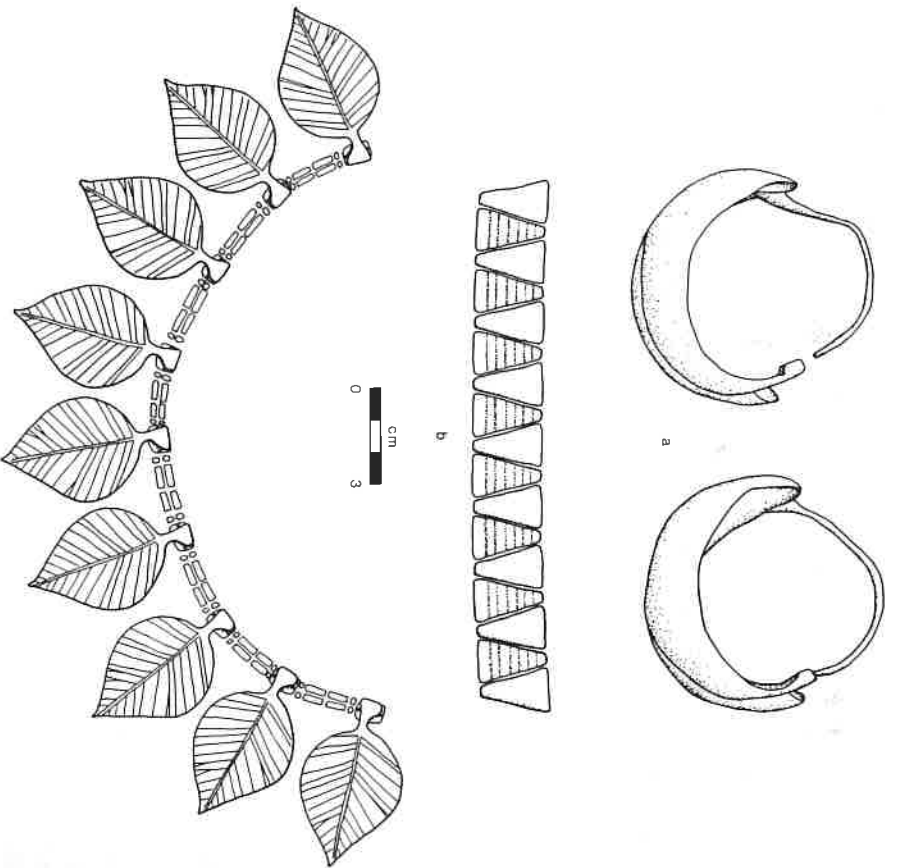


Figure 13.2 Female-associated artifacts from ED IIIA Ur: (a) pair of gold double lunate earrings (Grave 1237); (b) "dog collar" of lapis and gold triangular beads (schematic); (c) gold leaf wreath, on double string of lapis and carnelian beads (schematic).

or silver found wrapped around the head. Wreath headdresses were also worn around the head in such a way that they dangled over the forehead. There are several variations of these headdresses but all consist of multiple rows of lapis and carnelian beads from which are suspended gold or silver pendants in the form of leaves, rings, or discs. "Combs" are also a form of ornamentation worn on the head. They are gold or silver with a thin stem that could be pushed into the hair, broadening out to a thin flat sheet of metal with inlaid rosettes on spikes on their ends.

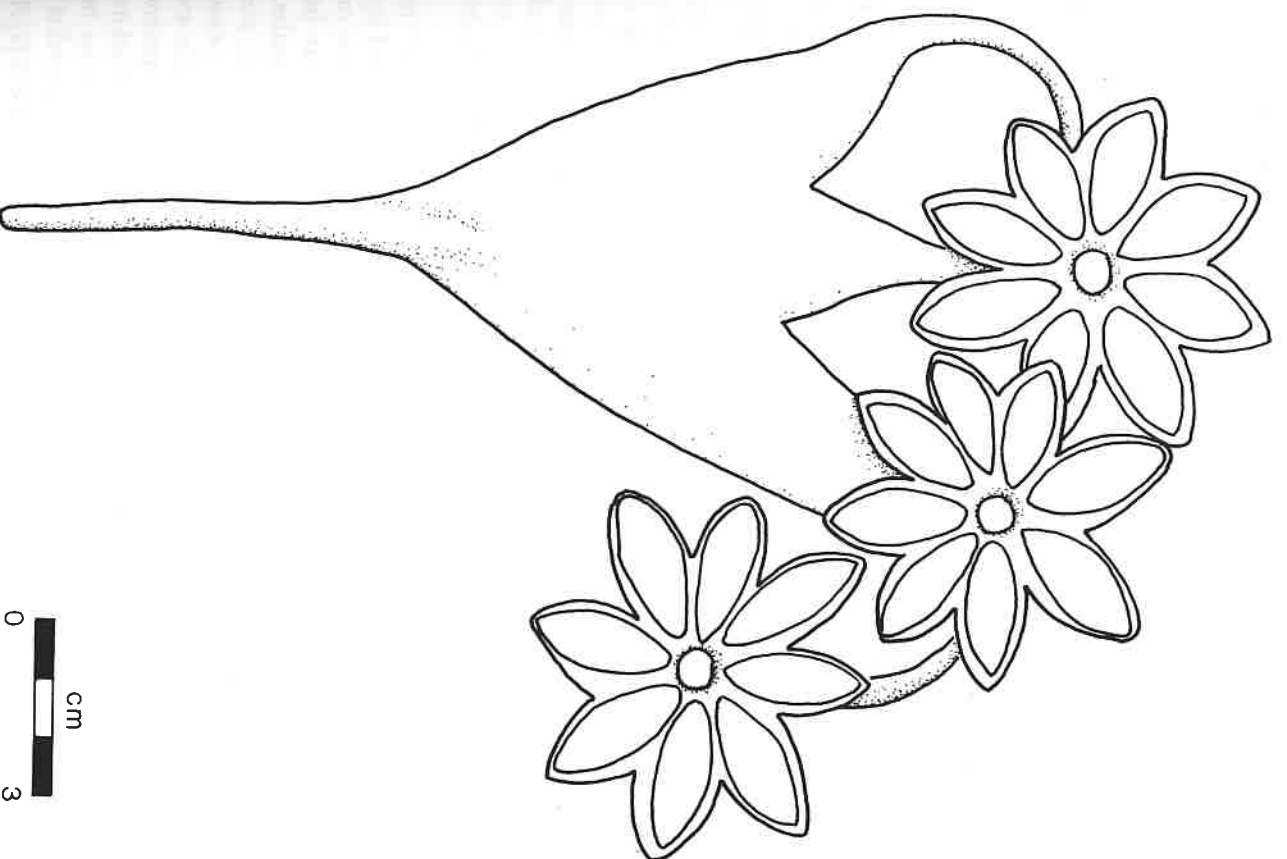


Figure 13.3 Female-associated artifact from ED IIIA Ur: silver "comb" with rosettes inlaid with lapis, carnelian and shell (schematic).

"Double lunate" earrings, just one variety of earrings found in the cemetery, are gold, formed of two large, hollow, crescent-shaped lobes side by side. Finally, the items that Woolley so graphically called "dog collars" are choker-style necklaces of triangular gold and lapis elements.

In the male-associated category (figure 13.4), axes are generally of cast copper/bronze – although silver and gold examples occur – socketed and hafted on a wooden handle. Usually, it would seem, they were carried over the shoulder. Daggers or knives include short-bladed pieces, usually copper/bronze but also of silver or gold, with elongated knob-like or crescent-shaped pommels. These were usually worn at the belt, held in rush-work sheaths. Whetstones are small, carefully shaped stones, pierced at one end for suspension, and worn at the belt. "Brims" consist of several large beads of stone and/or metal, on either end of which are gold or silver link chains. They were worn around the forehead and secured behind the head. The so-called "toilet instruments" include a small metal case which contains several tools including tweezers, a tiny cosmetic applicator, and a stiletto. They are usually found at the waist, presumably hung from a belt.

There are broad differences between the kinds of objects found with high status females and males. High status females were marked as such, at burial, by the types and quantities of jewelry that they wore. In a sense, they (and these objects) were on display. Males were also on display. They, too, wore the accompanying objects, but some of these objects symbolized a more active stance. Whether or not the actual artifacts in the graves, the axes and daggers and the whetstones to sharpen them, were used as tools, they remain symbols of things to be wielded, in battle, in defense of flocks, or in other active causes.

Both high status females and males were marked, made "visible" in death. But many lower status people were not clearly differentiated by gender, or at least not in ways that I have yet been able to recognize or that are preserved archaeologically. Possibly, however, gender may be more clearly or more often marked for "non-elite" males than females. There are numerous burials in which the deceased person carries an axe or a dagger, and may also be provided with at most a few pots, some beads, a copper pin, some shells containing cosmetics. These people are marked as male by their axe or dagger, but their overall burial equipment is not rich or elaborate (Pollock 1983: figure 8, 252–3; *contra* Watkins 1983). For females, on the other hand, there does not seem to be anything comparable: elite women were visible in death, "non-elite" women were not. This pattern also seems to hold for the people buried in the A cemetery at Kish. On the whole, the Kish burials were much less rich than those in the Royal Cemetery (Mackay 1925; Moorey 1978). Even so, it is possible to isolate a number of markers of maleness (here

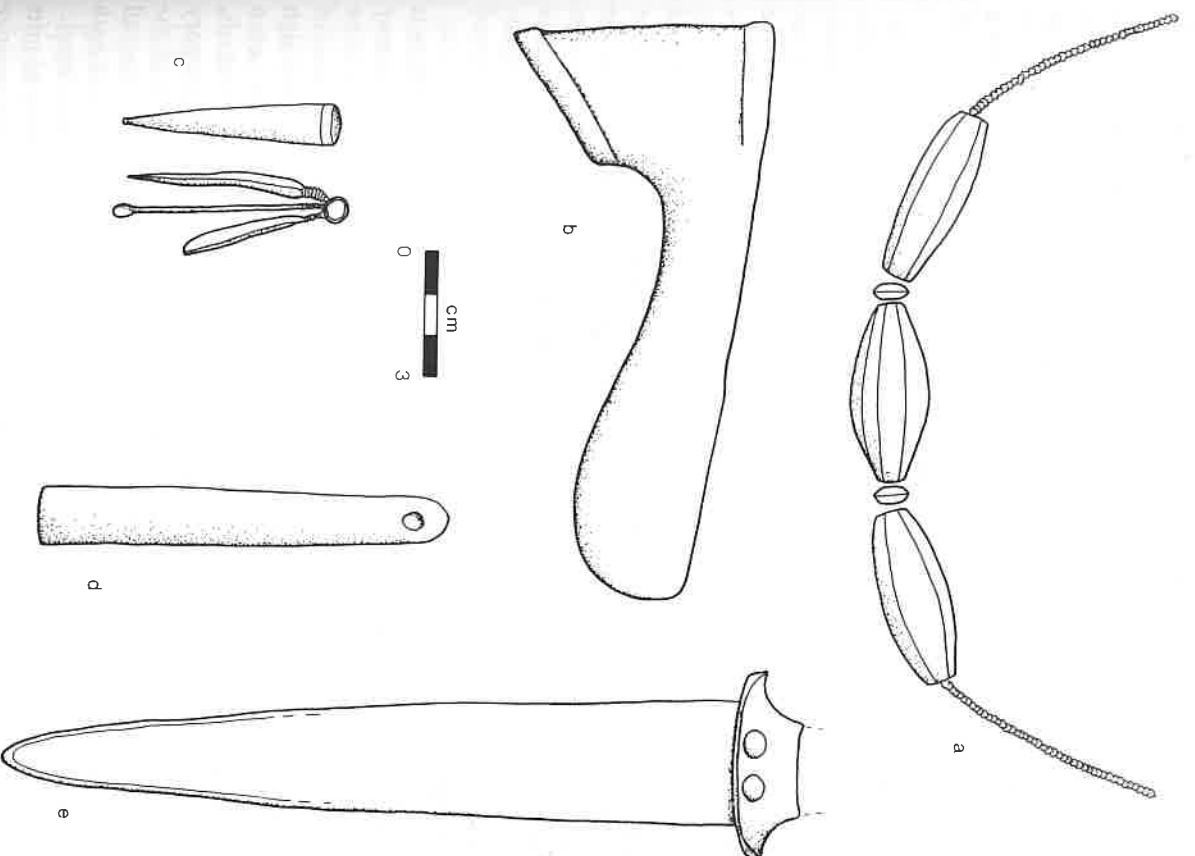


Figure 13.4 Male-associated artifacts from ED IIIA Ur: (a) brim of gold, lapis and carnelian beads, and gold chains (Grave 1312); (b) copper/bronze axe (Grave 1136); (c) copper/bronze reticule and toilet instruments (schematic); (d) whetstone (Grave 389); (e) copper/bronze dagger (Grave 1618).

supported by physical anthropological examinations of biological sex), whereas there are few clear-cut markers of femaleness.

Within the Royal Cemetery, the Royal Tombs are distinctive from a variety of standpoints, regardless of whether they should be attributed to royalty. They are characterized by the presence of multiple burials of up to 75 individuals who were all apparently interred simultaneously to accompany the deceased. Clearly, this "human sacrifice" was in part a display of the deceased person's rights or power over the lives of occupants of the Royal Tombs and of their relatives.

Unfortunately, all of the Royal Tombs were looted in antiquity, causing varying amounts of disturbance and damage in different tombs. Not surprisingly, the main occupant of the tombs was a prime target; one of the results is that we often have very little remaining evidence about that person. In only four cases can we identify the sex of the tomb's principal occupant with any real degree of confidence. Of these, one is certainly female (RT 800)² and another probably so (RT 1054), and two are male (RT 1618 and 1648). The two females had 24 and approximately³ 14 attendants respectively, the males approximately four each. In every tomb where the genders of the attendants can be ascertained, there are both males and females, although the proportions vary widely. Overall, females seem to predominate. The evidence suggests that both females and males received tomb burial as principals, implying that some individuals of both sexes had rights over the lives of subordinates, also of both sexes.

For the vast majority of the Royal Cemetery ED IIIA burials, there is a strict division between male and female markers; an individual may have objects from the female category or the male but not both. She or he may have one or more gender-neutral items in addition to or instead of female or male objects. In contrast to this majority pattern are seven high status burials with both female and male items. Two of the seven skeletons were sexed: one is female and one male. In five of these burials, including the two just mentioned, the objects of one gender category were placed on the body, in the "usual" position, whereas those of the other gender category were separate from the body, sometimes all together in a pile. However, in the remaining two burials, objects of *both* gender categories were placed on the body of the deceased individual.

We might interpret the objects found separate from the body as gifts from participants in the funeral, indicating a degree of honor and prestige accorded to the deceased but without implying that the individual had rights to or use of these symbols – and their accompanying prestige and power – during her/his life. In a similar vein, these items might have been intended for use by the deceased as offerings in the underworld (Moorey 1977: 29). In a text that has been entitled "The Death of Ur-Nammu and

His Descent to the Netherworld" (Kramer 1967), we read of the gifts that Ur-Nammu, a king of Ur around 2100 BC, gave to each of the famous occupants of the Netherworld when he died and descended to the world of the dead. All Mesopotamian accounts of the Netherworld portray it as a dreary, dismal place; a mortal's hope of even minor respite seems to have lain in currying favor with the powers that be through lavish gifts. These interpretations are not entirely satisfying, however, especially for the two burials in which objects from both gender categories were found *on* the dead person's body. Here perhaps we can begin to talk about some cross-cutting of gender roles, with women pushing at some of the traditional boundaries,⁴ especially those that may have usually denied them access to political roles. [No, I cannot be sure that these are not men pushing at their boundaries!]

Women in iconography

From representations of women in words and burials, we can turn to representations in images. Cylinder seals comprise the most numerous class of materials from the mid-third millennium to incorporate images. Seals were used to authorize or witness transactions. Rolling a seal across a piece of wet clay left an impression of the design cut into it. In addition to the impressions, or sealings, that could be created with a seal, possession of the seal itself seems to have been important. If the positions in which seals were placed in graves can be any guide, they were often worn attached to a pin that probably held a garment at the shoulder (Collon 1987: 110; Pollock 1983: 184), a position that would seem to be inconvenient for use of the seal to produce an impression. Rather, it may be the display of the seal itself that was important in such instances (see also Rathje 1977: 26).

Seals cannot automatically be assumed to imply ownership or even personal authorization; some seem to have been associated with offices rather than with particular individuals who occupied those offices (Collon 1987: 15–16; Nissen 1977, 1988: 77–8). There is, however, a gradual shift toward more individualization of seals. During the time span from the beginning of the third millennium through the Sargonic period, cylinder seals become more and more common in burials, and an increasing proportion of them bear inscriptions that name a particular person (Collon 1987: 105; Nissen 1977; Pollock 1983: 224–5, 266).

Most ED III cylinder seals can be divided into the category of "banquet" or "contest" seals on the basis of their iconography (Collon 1987). Generally, a seal contains a scene or scenes of only one type, but some have one horizontal register depicting a banquet and a second one

with a contest. Banquet scenes portray one or more seated figures holding a cup in one hand or sitting before a large jar provided with straws. The drinkers are waited on by attendants, sometimes shown bringing in or standing before heaps of food. Musicians and dancers may also be present. Stated succinctly, in banquet scenes participants sit and attendants wait on them. The seated drinkers may be women or men, as indicated by their hair and clothing styles. In the set of banquet seals from ED IIIA burials in the Royal Cemetery, there are 22 examples of scenes (registers) with both men and women drinkers, eleven with men only and four with women only.

Contest seals depict a scene of struggling figures, the theme of which seems to be the attack of domesticated animals by wild ones and, usually, the defense of the flocks by humans or half humans. These are invariably male. In contrast to banquet scenes, contest scenes are filled with movement and action.

Both banquet and contest scenes are "ritualized" portrayals. Both are linked to important themes in Sumerian society and culture: feasting on the one hand, and the ceaseless struggle between domestic/tamed and wild/untamed on the other. Both kinds of scenes are also found in media other than seals, such as "votive" plaques and inlaid scenes on wooden boxes, musical instruments, and game boards.

Among the ED IIIA Royal Cemetery burials, males and females seem to be equally likely to have a seal. However, seals with banquet scenes show a strong association with females (16 with females, five with males ((of which two have one contest and one banquet register)), and eight with burials of unmarked gender), and contest scenes with males (ten with males, two with females ((both with a second register containing a banquet scene)), and 12 with people of unmarked gender). In the Kish A cemetery, there is also a strong association between males and seals bearing contest scenes; very few banquet seals occur in the cemetery and none with burials of identifiable gender (see Mackay 1925, 1929; Moorey 1978). At the site of Khafajah, the six graves that have published illustrations of contest seals all have "male items"; there are no published illustrations of banquet seals from the graves (Delougaz et al. 1967; Frankfort 1955).

Despite the marked difference in iconography, an approximately equal proportion of females and males buried in the Royal Cemetery have seals. But what does "having" a seal mean? Does it imply that women and men had equal opportunities to *use* seals and thus the responsibility and authority that went with their use? To answer this, we must distinguish possession of the object (the seal) from its use in authorization (the sealing). From rubbish heaps into which the Royal Cemetery graves were dug come a collection of sealings (Legrain 1936). Those from "seal

impression strata and 1 and 2" are approximately contemporary with the Royal Cemetery burials that we are considering. There is only one illustrated impression of a banquet seal from these strata, but 26 impressions of contest seals. Although this is a single and limited sample, it is suggestive of a limited use of banquet seals for sealing. For women, seals may have been more a form of jewelry than a means of authorizing or witnessing economic transactions.

Inscriptions are relatively uncommon on ED III seals. When they are present, they name an individual; sometimes they also specify a family relationship, and sometimes they indicate the individual's title or occupation. Of the 29 Royal Cemetery banquet seals, only five contain inscriptions. Three of these give only a name, but one specifies the person as a *nin*, lady of high rank or queen, and another as priestess. Seven of 23 contest seals from the Royal Cemetery contain inscriptions, including one that mentions the title "scribe" and two that term the person "king".

It would seem, then, that the motifs on seals found with females and males, based on occurrences in burials and limited inscriptional evidence on the seals themselves, are markedly different. Females usually have seals that portray both women and men in what is probably a ritually important act but one that involves little action (cf. Asher-Greve 1985: 168). In contrast, males' seals with contest motifs depict only males, engaged in active struggle. An intriguing implication is that males frequently participate in rituals with females, but there are other (ritual) domains that are exclusively the purview of males.

In contrast to the limited number of themes and very conventionalized representations on ED III seals,⁵ earlier cylinder seals, especially those of Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr date, are much more diverse. They include numerous images of women engaged in a wide range of productive activities, such as weaving, harvesting, pottery making, dairying, animal husbandry, as well as a range of ritual activities (Asher-Greve 1985: 48–54). Some scholars have suggested that these seals may have belonged to "public" or large "private" institutions, perhaps those in which women performed these labors (Collon 1987: 15–16; Nissen 1988: 77–8; cf. Asher-Greve 1985: 58–60). Certainly the types of productive activities shown on Late Uruk seals are very much in line with those that women are reported doing in ED III economic texts. This perhaps represents a trend toward making the labor of women (and men . . .) in "economic" activities less visible. The seal evidence can also be "read" in somewhat different terms, to indicate a more general movement away from the portrayal of mundane, productive tasks toward an emphasis on ritual scenes (undoubtedly with strong political undertones). In the process of making this transition, women come to be shown less frequently and to

be relegated to less active poses. Men, on the other hand, remain active, albeit in different ways.

Iconography depicting women and men is not confirmed to cylinder seals; "votive" plaques, statues, stela, and inlay on boxes, musical instruments and game boards all incorporate such representations. Without reviewing these in detail, the late ED and Akkadian examples seem to follow a pattern similar to that on seals in which women are shown in static, usually ritual and/or auxiliary poses (Asher-Greve 1987: 27, 1985: 168). Interestingly, statues include large numbers of representations of women. These statues are usually associated with buildings interpreted as temples and portray individuals in stationary standing or seated poses. At the sites of Khafajah and Asmar where many such statues were found, women constitute slightly less than half of the statues of identifiable gender (see Frankfort 1939). However, within each site, it is only in the Sin Temple (Khafajah), dedicated to the god of the moon, that there are more statues of women than men.

In contrast to women, representations of men portray them doing things, including dairying, soldiering, bearing burdens, making music. In these representations women are participants in fewer domains than men and fewer than women in earlier (i.e. Late Uruk/Jemdet Nasr) seal depictions.

Might this imply that we are seeing women (and men) through the eyes of men, rather than women's portrayals of themselves? We do not know who made these images, but they do suggest a "man's view" of gender roles – even if women actually made some of them (cf. Moore 1986).

Conclusion

New streets had been opened, automobiles brought in, mansions built, roads constructed, newspapers published, clubs organized – *Ilhéus* was transformed. But the ways men think and feel evolve more slowly. Thus it has always been, in every society. (Amado 1978: 2)

Of possible conclusions there are many, variable in their tenor and timbre. In a tentative key, I might emphasize such points as the problems of identifying females and males from textual references, the difficulties of working with unsexed burials. On a more soothing note, I could point to those women who made a name for themselves, quite literally, in the Sumerian and Sargonic world. And then there is the more discordant theme, of women with limited opportunities, women whose scope for action and for recognition was being restricted, but whose voices can still be heard, if we listen.

I began this paper by pointing to the minimal and contradictory representations of women in Sumerian art and literature. I suggest that one reason for this may lie in the prevailing male-dominated discourse of mid-third millennium Sumerian society. This discourse, as it was translated into representations, glorified action, specifically action in the domain of *political*/*heroic* struggles. It was precisely in this domain that women were denied recognized roles as *women* (the female "king" of Kish is a dramatic case in point), leaving little place for them in such representational fields. Another major theme of Early Dynastic representations is ritual attendance, and it is there that we find many of the portrayals of women – in statuary, plaques, banquet seals, and in burials within the Royal Tombs. On a more general note, feminist anthropologists are increasingly drawing our attention to the multiple and contradictory powers and manipulations of gender relations as well as individuals' actions within a social context (see especially Silverblatt 1988).

The representations I have discussed include women of distinctly different social classes. There is every reason to think that women (and men) of different classes experienced the world in significantly different ways – we should not aim to investigate some monolithic entity called "women's status".

Many low status, perhaps "semi-free" women and men worked for large households, engaged in a diverse range of specialized productive activities. Many Early Dynastic and Akkadian economic texts touch at least peripherally on this organization of labor, but pictorial images of this segment of economic life, especially on cylinder seals, became less common over time. Texts represent these activities but were much less accessible to most people than images, serving as they did specific bureaucratic accounting purposes.

Women were able to attain positions of high status and power mainly through ritual rather than "secular" political domains. Both ritual and political domains held a potential for some degree of economic power and control. To the extent that centralized political interests were gaining power at the expense of locally based ritual/religious interests, I would argue that we may also speak of an erosion of women's power in the higher social echelons. The undercutting of women's sources of power seems to be a common strategy and product of the formation of states, although neither the form nor the degree of women's subjugation is uniform from case to case (Silverblatt 1988). There are indications, in the Royal Cemetery burials and in the works of Enheduanna, that some women may have gained access to male domains of political power, perhaps as their traditional opportunities were being denied to them. That they were granted some of the symbolic trappings of male positions

implies some degree of social recognition of their aspirations and achievements, but whether for their achievements *as women* or not is more difficult to say (cf. Moore 1986: 115).

I have suggested that women of intermediate social ranks may have been more "invisible", at least in death, than men. Those who were visible, most notably some of the attendants in the Royal Tombs, may have been so in part as displays of the power of their superiors (some of whom were women).

Overall, fewer women than men attained *recognized, represented* positions of political and economic power. When they did, their possibilities were often circumscribed. The domains in which women could act and aspire to power and prestige were more limited than those open to men. Nevertheless, we must not assume from this that Sumerian women were "invisible" or passively accepted their socially given roles. To the contrary, they strove to achieve some measure of esteem and prestige within the world of male voices and values in which they found themselves.

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NOTES

- 1 It seems that the vast majority of the individuals buried in the Royal Cemetery were adults. Woolley noted those bodies that he thought were children or infants; while his assignments are unlikely to have been entirely accurate, he was probably a careful enough observer to recognize juveniles.
- 2 All grave numbers refer to Woolley's (1934) published numbering system.
- 3 The approximation is due to the fact that the bodies were often badly disturbed and fragmentary. In these cases, the number given should be regarded as a minimum figure.
- 4 I would like to thank Jane Collins who suggested this interpretation to me.
- 5 In the Akkadian period, contest scenes on seals continue. Banquet scenes begin to be replaced by "presentation" scenes portraying a highly ritualized scene of introduction of a mortal to a deity (Collon 1987: 32).

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