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Cuneiform Manuscript Culture and Gender Studies

Abstract: Early studies on women in cuneiform manuscript culture were influenced by historical preconceptions based on the place of women in the classical world or Islam and reinforced by historiographical myths, such as sacred prostitution and a pseudo 'women's language'. The term 'gender' entered Assyriologist discourse in the early 1990s. The idea was to understand why women often appeared in subordinate positions compared to men, why they were less present in texts and iconography, and how Mesopotamian society attributed roles to each sex. Cuneiform texts document women unevenly, depending on the period, place and context considered. Women are visible through their own writings in specific milieus of the early second millennium BCE.

1 Introduction

The history of ancient Mesopotamia and neighbouring regions over more than three millennia is documented by a considerable mass of cuneiform texts of a very varied nature. Cuneiform writing, which used different systems (logographic, syllabic, alphabetic), was adopted by populations speaking a dozen different languages. Their output includes practical texts (such as letters and contracts), royal inscriptions, literary and scholarly texts and school exercises. Probably a million cuneiform texts have been unearthed to date, covering a very wide range of subjects. Assyriologists[1] have been in the phase of deciphering texts for over a hundred and seventy years because of the sheer volume of cuneiform clay tablets and inscriptions discovered, and the complexity of understanding cuneiform texts. Historiographical studies started only a few decades ago, as well as the introduction of concepts and models to interpret the data offered by the texts.

1 The term Assyriology includes more widely 'all scholarly fields related to the study of the ancient Near East in the time of the cuneiform cultures, from the fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE […] philological disciplines […], the history of the ancient Near East, and the archaeology and art history of the respective regions and periods', website of the International Association for Assyriology: <https://iaassyriology.com/> (accessed on 8 March 2023).

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In order to gain a better understanding of the development of women and gender studies in Assyriology, it is useful, first of all, to outline the different stages of the feminist and post-feminist movement in which the concept of gender was created, adopted by historians and developed. Scholars who have worked on cuneiform manuscripts since the mid-twentieth century took on the long journey from the history of woman to gender studies. Early studies on women were greatly influenced by historical preconceptions rooted in Classical Antiquity, on the one hand, and Orientalism, on the other, sometimes giving rise to some historiographical myths, such as the idea of sacred prostitution in Babylon or the existence of a Sumerian women's language.

The term 'gender' was adopted by Assyriologists in the early 1990s, and the number of studies dedicated to the topic of gender have grown exponentially since 2000, especially with the creation of regular conferences dedicated to 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' (GeMANE) in 2014. A diversity of methodologies and approaches have been applied to the cuneiform written artefacts, especially to those in which women are visible. The authors of cuneiform texts are generally anonymous, but texts have been attributed to men by default, because the male's voice clearly dominates in the cuneiform texts.[2] The history of ancient Mesopotamia is, therefore, primarily a history of men. However, this assumption needs to be put into perspective. Not only are women present in different contexts and environments, especially in early second millennium manuscripts, but recent studies have also shown that some women were literate. Thus, a history of women is possible in a gender perspective based on texts written by men, but also by women.

Furthermore, it seems impossible to hold a unitary discourse on the diverse civilisations that developed in Mesopotamia over three millennia and expressed themselves in different languages (Sumerian and Akkadian first), and many different factors need to be considered, such as time, place, context, ethnicity, legal status and social rank.

2 History of women and gender in manuscript cultures

The development of the feminist and post-feminist movement in the social sciences and humanities is currently perceived as three overlapping waves.[3] When trying to establish women's studies in the academic world during the 1960s and 1970s, scholars looked for women in primary sources in order to make invisible women visible

2 Asher-Greve 2002, 19.

3 van de Mieroop 1999, 138–160.

and include them in history. The publication in 1965 of the *Histoire mondiale de la femme* under the direction of Pierre Grimal was an important turning point.[4] In the introduction, this historian wrote:

> Et l'une des plus importantes 'émancipations' de la femme serait peut-être que l'histoire reconnût et mesurât son rôle réel dans le devenir humain [...] En définitive, c'était un certain idéal de la vie féminine qui commandait et servait de garant à la discipline établie par les hommes.[5]

The term 'gender' had already been used in 1968 by the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller in his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*.[6] 'Gender' can be defined as the construction of a social and cultural identity superimposed on the biological data of sex. It represents the identity built by the social environment of individuals and refers to the non-biological differences between women and men, in contrast to sex. Furthermore, according to Ann Oakley, author of *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not natural or self-evident categories but the results of mechanisms of construction and social reproduction, which are variable in time and space.

It was only in the 1980s that the word 'gender' was used by historians working on written artefacts. Françoise Thébaud explained in her book *Écrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre* published in 1998 that being a man or a woman, or considered as such, does not have the same meaning at all times and in all cultures.[7] This analytical perspective is applied by historians to ancient written artefacts in order to understand how a given society attributes roles to each sex. Ancient written artefacts mainly convey a standardised discourse influenced by the ideology of the dominant groups, gender being one way of signifying power relationships. Since the great majority of ancient texts are written from a male elite perspective, historians have looked for the realities of women's existence, even though this might be challenging when sources are very unbalanced.

Two journals were founded in 1989: *Journal of Women's History* and *Gender & History*, which suggested looking at texts differently as they reflect the ideology of the dominant groups (male) and promoting studies on the history of femininity and

4 Grimal (ed.) 1965.

5 Grimal (ed.) 1965, 8: 'And one of the most important "emancipations" of the woman would be perhaps that the history recognized and measured her real role in the human becoming [...] In short, it was a certain ideal of the feminine life that commanded and served as a guarantee to the discipline established by the men'.

6 Stoller 1968.

7 Thébaud 1998.

masculinity and of gender relations. The post-feminist trends have questioned this binary male/female structure as well as the motivations and presuppositions of the scientific process itself since the late 1980s. In 1990, the philosopher Judith Butler proposed in the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* considering gender not as a static characteristic but as a socially constructed performance, which implies that one has to perform and reaffirm his or her role as a male or a female.[8] Butler is the reference for the queer movement, which considers that the traditional opposition of sex versus gender is a purely political construction.

The focus is no longer centred on an androcentric approach but on differences, whatever they may be: social, ethnical, political, cultural or gender-related reasons. The black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw created the concept of intersectionality in 1989: a qualitative analytical framework built to understand how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. This concept was adopted by feminists at the very beginning of the twenty-first century and has only grown in the last twenty years. Today, it includes many aspects of social identity, such as race, gender, sex, sexuality, class, ability, nationality, citizenship, religion, and body type. The historians who have adopted this methodology investigate the way in which the difference has been culturally invested by societies in ancient written artefacts.

Even though the 'gender' concept has been criticised, Joan Scott wrote that, as representing only one of the constitutive elements of social relationships, it remains 'a useful category of analysis because it requires us to historicise the ways sex and sexual difference have been conceived'.[9] Indeed, gender does not reduce to some known quantity of masculine or feminine. The interpretation that we give to these terms needs to be deduced from the manuscripts we analyse.

However, the use of such concepts may be misunderstood by the wider public of some countries. When American historians, for example, seeking for models which could help one to understand the ancient texts use the expression 'gender theories', scholars in France prefer to speak of 'gender studies' because 'gender theories' has been used for this last decade by the Vatican and right-wing French politicians, detractors of the concept of gender.[10] Such a phenomenon is not limited to France, as the philosopher Judith Butler noted in a contribution in *The Guardian* in 2021 in which she addressed the backlash to gender studies in a global perspective:

8 Butler 1990.

9 Scott 2010.

10 Michel forthcoming.

> The anti-gender ideology movement crosses borders, linking organizations in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and east Asia. The opposition to 'gender' is voiced by governments as diverse as Macron's France and Duda's Poland, circulating in right-wing parties in Italy [...], most infamously at the European University in Budapest in 2017 before it relocated to Vienna.[11]

3 Gender studies applied to the cuneiform manuscript culture

The discipline gathering historians working on cuneiform written culture has long been dominated by men, perhaps because a significant proportion of scholars from the early generations came to the study of cuneiform texts through biblical studies. According to Marc van de Mieroop, Assyriology has also gone through three waves, from the history of women to the construction of gender.[12] Looking for women's contributions to history and the focus on 'the woman' (singular) in the cuneiform written artefacts goes back to the 6th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (RAI), which took place in Paris in 1956, on the following theme: 'La Femme dans l'Ancien Orient'.[13] Less than a decade later, Jean Bottéro gathered data on the topic for the first volume of *Histoire mondiale de la femme* edited by Pierre Grimal.[14]

Despite the fact that historians had already adopted the word 'gender' in 1980, French Assyriologists were still looking for 'the woman' (in the singular) in ancient clay manuscripts. Two workshops were organised by Edmond Levy in Strasbourg, whose proceedings were published in 1983 in the volume *La Femme dans les sociétés antiques*.[15] During the first workshop Jean-Marie Durand and Jean Margueron presented a paper on the harem in the Mari palace.[16] The anachronistic use of that term was not without creating major problems.[17] A second Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale,

11 Butler 2021. Gender studies are no longer a priority in the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) since the beginning of 2022. For the situation in Denmark and Japan, see Brisch and Karahashi 2023b.

12 van de Mieroop 1999, 137–158; see also Bahrani 2001, 7–27; Lion 2007.

13 6th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Paris, 27–30 June 1956, 'La Femme dans l'Ancien Orient'. No proceedings have been published. Summaries were published in *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 50 (1956), 220–221 (anonymous); *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 13 (1956), 178–179 by Paul Garelli and Louis Le Breton; and *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 25 (1956), 411–414 by Alfred Pohl. The following lectures have appeared as revised short articles: Falkenstein 1958; von Soden 1958.

14 Bottéro 1965.

15 Levy (ed.) 1983.

16 A written version was published the same year: Durand and Margueron 1980.

17 Westenholz 1990, 513–516.

the 33rd RAI, took place again in Paris in July 1986 on the same subject as the one held thirty years earlier: 'La Femme dans le Proche-Orient antique'.[18] The studies in the proceedings' volume focused on not only women and queens, but also other groups of women, such as Sippar priestesses and female workforces in large institutions. When linked to the private sphere, publications focused on family contracts, legal documents, and law codes to assess the place of women in the family and society. Most of the twenty-four papers aimed at making women visible and to accumulate data. The singular of the title was contradicted by the variety of sources used and the topic treated. This volume was severely criticised by some reviewers who reproached the editors and authors for ignoring feminist studies.[19]

During the second wave, scholars tried to understand why women often appear in subordinated positions compared to men, why they were less present in texts and iconography, and how Mesopotamian society attributed roles to each sex. The notion of gender was introduced in cuneiform studies on the American continent in the 1990s, and only a decade later in Europe. The late adoption of 'gender' by historians working on cuneiform text is due to different factors. Firstly, ancient Near Eastern studies are 'young' if compared to classics, as Assyriologists are still in the state of deciphering new texts, and, thus, are one step behind in historiographical research. Secondly, and linked to the latter, ancient Near Eastern studies are often forgotten in handbooks dealing with Antiquity, perceived as too far in terms of both chronology and geography. Fifteen years after the RAI in Paris dedicated to 'the woman', the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale took place in Helsinki and Tartu in July 2001 on the topic 'Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East' and the proceedings with the same title were published in 2002.[20] The evolution of the contribution titles is very significant as well as the size of the two-volume book, not including five papers of a session dedicated to masculinity published elsewhere. Theoretical debates were taken into account by some authors who tried to test their validity for written cuneiform artefacts. Several contributions were dedicated to the body and its representation or feminine and masculine sexuality. The same year, Zainab Bahrani (2001) published *Women of Babylon*, a fundamental book for a gender approach of ancient Near Eastern history, art history and archaeology.

A journal dedicated to gender in Classical Antiquity, Egypt and the ancient Near East was launched during the same period: *NIN: Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity*. NIN means 'sister' and 'queen' in Sumerian, but it is present in both gods and

18 A summary was published in *Akkadica*, 50 (1986), 22–26 and the proceedings in Durand (ed.) 1987.
19 Westenholz 1990.
20 Parpola and Whiting (eds) 2002.

goddesses' names.[21] The title of the journal was, thus, chosen to show that gender attribution is variable and represents a cultural phenomenon. The first of the four issues published was dedicated to Inanna/Ishtar, goddess of war and love, a violent deity, associated to the world of war reserved to men, and, simultaneously, the essence of femininity as built by men, without children, dangerous and transgressive.[22]

Initiatives gathering scholars carrying research on women and gender in Assyriology during several RAIs led to the creation of the series of workshops dedicated to 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' in 2014.[23] The proceedings of these workshops mix approaches that belong to the different waves of feminism and post-feminism. Conversely, Marten Stol claimed his interest in collecting facts in his comprehensive study on *Women in the Ancient Near East*, explaining that 'theorizing should not precede facts', and, thus, inscribed himself in the first 'wave', which consists of making women visible.[24] Published the same year, a collective volume dedicated to *Women in antiquity* includes fourteen chapters on Mesopotamia and Anatolia, showing various approaches to women and gender more connected to the second and third 'wave'.[25]

Several observations can be made from recent works published on the topic of gender in ancient Near Eastern written artefacts. There are still rare studies devoted to men and masculinities; however, by default, many studies are mostly devoted to men, although this is not specified in their titles. Additionally, Butler's approach has not been much used by Assyriologists, with the idea that it is not well adapted for the study of ancient societies.[26] However, Niek Veldhuis has suggested investigating it in cuneiform texts

21 It is, for example, used in the following names: the goddess Ninlil and the important warrior gods, Ninurta and Ningirsu.

22 Bahrani 2001, 141–160.

23 The GeMANE workshops were initiated by Agnès Garcia-Ventura from Barcelona and Saana Svärd from Helsinki. The three first workshops are published (Budin et al. (eds) 2018; Svärd and Garcia-Ventura (eds) 2018; de Graef et al. 2022), while the fourth and fifth ones will form one volume which is already in press.

24 Stol 2016, 4.

25 Budin and MacIntosh Turfa (eds) 2016. An important place was deliberately devoted to Mesopotamia and Egypt in this book in reaction, according to the editors, to the small place traditionally given to these civilizations in general works. Indeed, as an example, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, edited by James and Dillon (2012), includes only a small chapter on 'Women in Ancient Mesopotamia', by Amy R. Gansell (2012), which is limited to royal tombs in archaeology.

26 Except Bahrani 2001, 19–23. She is among the first to apply post-feminist theories to the study of ancient Near Eastern visual art (Bahrani 2001, 121–140).

> what types of behaviour are 'construed' as 'masculine' or 'feminine', and we may acknowledge the agency of the ancient actors who may have moved along that spectrum. […] Gender as performance may […] provide less-static identifications of the people, professions, or practices we are studying.[27]

Depending on the country and the research tradition, the study of ancient texts may or may not involve theoretical approaches. Saana Svärd and Agnès Garcia-Ventura pointed out in the introduction to the first GeMANE volume proceedings the importance of not forcing 'theory on primary sources. Instead, a nuanced understanding and balanced application of theoretical and methodological approaches will enable scholars to identify how Assyriological knowledge of the past is produced'.[28] This also raises a more general question linked to the objectivity of the historian studying cuneiform sources. We are not objective. Our approach to ancient written artefacts varies according to the traditions implemented. We ask specific questions regarding cuneiform texts based on systems of representations in our own culture. As noted by Agnès Garcia-Ventura, invoking the notion of 'situated knowledges' developed by Donna Haraway, it is important to be aware and explicit about our subjectivity, especially in manuscript studies dealing with antiquity.[29]

4 Historiographical myths in Assyriology: prostitutes and women's language

Despite the introduction of the notion of gender in cuneiform studies for a quarter of a century, a few studies on women are still influenced by historical preconceptions built during the past centuries on the place of women in the classical world or Islam. In addition to the idea that women were always economically dependent on men, the choice of vocabulary, for example, reflects these assumptions, such as the designation of the palace female population from the third millennium BCE on by the word 'harem' or the use of the word 'veil' to refer to any textile covering the

27 Veldhuis 2018, 452–453.

28 Svärd and Garcia-Ventura (eds) 2018, 9. See the review of this volume by Michel 2021. Garcia-Ventura (2018, 190) also notes that: 'the extremely theoretical nature of these proposals can help us to deconstruct certain preconceptions and to construct new theoretical frameworks'.

29 Haraway 1988; Garcia-Ventura 2018, 188. Agnès Garcia-Ventura is developing a project on historiographical myths and gender stereotypes which has inspired the following paragraphs on 'women's language'.

woman's head.[30] The use of certain terms rather than others may have an important impact on cuneiform studies as they condition the way we think. Both 'harem' and 'veil' offer a vision of Mesopotamian women that borrows characters from the Islamic world. Some historiographical myths, sometimes inspired by Orientalism, still survive in certain publications.

4.1 Prostitution in Babylonian temples

Such features are eventually borrowed from ancient Greece through its historians. Thus, the role of women in ancient Babylonian temples has been regarded as prostitution because of the description given by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE:

> The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger once in her life [...] there is a great multitude of women coming and going; passages marked by line run every way through the crowd, by which the men pass and make their choice. Once a woman has taken her place there, she does not go away to her home before some stranger has cast money into her lap, and had intercourse with her outside the temple [...] After their intercourse, having discharged her sacred duty to the goddess, she goes away to her home; and thereafter there is no bribe however great that will get her.[31]

Taking Herodotus's story for real, in the twentieth century, Assyriologists translated many different Sumerian and Akkadian terms as 'female prostitute'.[32] However, a better understanding of the roles of women working for the temple can only be achieved by taking into account the social and historical contexts of the cuneiform texts analysed.[33] Today, several of these terms have been reassessed and are translated differently.

This idea of sacred prostitution, as well as the use of the word 'harem' to refer to the female population of ancient palaces, derive from an Orientalist approach to ancient Near Eastern sources.[34] Mesopotamian statuettes showing a highly visible pubic triangle, in contrast to Greek statuary, contributed to the hyper-sexualisation of the 'Orient' in the imaginary of Western cultures (see Fig. 1).

30 For a critique of the use of these words, see Westenholz 1990, 513–516; van de Mieroop 1999, 147–155. More specifically on 'harem', see Garcia-Ventura 2017a.

31 Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 199, Godley (tr.) 1920.

32 See Brisch and Karahashi 2023b, 1–2, for an impact of this historiographical myth on modern studies of sex work.

33 Brisch 2021.

34 Assante 2006.

Fig. 1: Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827; © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN – Grand Palais / Chipault – Soligny; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delacroix_-_La_Mort_de_Sardanapale_(1827).jpg>.

One wonders why this imaginary is still resistant today, despite a much better knowledge of the primary sources and criticisms of 'Orientalist' discourse.

4.2 The idea of a 'women's language'

Another historiographical myth, still relayed in some Assyriological publications, is the idea of a 'women's language'.[35] Its origin derives from a wrong interpretation of the word 'Emesal'.[36] This term is applied to a variant of Sumerian (eme-gi$_7$). Dozens

35 See, for example, the announcement of a course in 2021 at the Institut des langues rares in 2020–2021, <https://ilara.hypotheses.org/formations/cours-de-lilara/proche-orient-ancien/emesal> (accessed on 9 March 2021).

36 Garcia-Ventura 2017b.

of thousands of cuneiform tablets written in Sumerian have been unearthed; they date from the second half of the fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE. However, Sumerian was only spoken during the fourth and third millennia. Regarding texts in Emesal, these are attested only since the beginning of the second millennium BCE, when Sumerian was already a dead language, but studied by the apprentice scribes. The word Emesal is composed by two Sumerian words or signs which have been translated in the early years as 'language' (eme) and 'woman' (sal), an etymology that gave rise from the end of the nineteenth century on to the translation of the expression as 'women's language', a translation much debated until today.

The texts written in this dialect are very heterogeneous, however, some Assyriologists noted that they regularly concern women in funerary contexts and gala priests, which led several scholars to see there a 'non-normative sexual identification or activity'.[37] Following a remark by Agnès Garcia-Ventura, an interpretation linking language and gender has created the existence of a 'genderlect' in ancient Mesopotamia with the wrong idea that Emesal is linked to women, and Emegi or 'standard Sumerian' almost always to men, thus, reproducing the culturally constructed binary opposition between women and particular, on the one hand, and men and general, on the other.[38] This division has contributed to the creation of two distinct spheres of unequal sizes within society, one reserved for men and the other for women.[39]

The second element, 'sal' can be interpreted differently, as it means also 'thin' and the word Emesal could then be translated as 'thin tongue'.[40] There is no consensus nowadays on what Emesal was exactly, and the use of this language has been reassessed recently. Piotr Michalowski, looking at the context in which Emesal was used and the nature of the texts written in Emesal, noted:

> The main source of our knowledge of Emesal is a voluminous set of ritual prayers, often referred to as laments, that were sung or chanted by cultic practitioners designated as gala [...] The principal function of these prayers was the appeasement of divine anger in the regular temple cult and at critical social liminal moments, sung in daily, periodic, and episodic ceremonies.[41]

Furthermore, Emesal is associated with the direct speech of certain goddesses and their messengers in literary texts, although these same goddesses spoke Emegi in other contexts. By contrast, there are no traces of the use of Emesal in Mesopotamian

37 Veldhuis 2018, 451.
38 Garcia-Ventura 2017b, 153–156.
39 Crawford 2014, 24.
40 Stol 2016, 56.
41 Michalowski 2023, 225–226.

women's writing. This led Michalowski to suggest that Emesal can best be described as an emotional language, used in certain situations that evoke strong emotions.[42]

Assyriologists have tried to make women visible in cuneiform sources for the last half century or more, and Agnès Garcia-Ventura has suggested that this has 'reinforced' certain negative preconceptions:

> After engendering, I propose the second step of ungendering, understood as a way of avoiding the preconceptions that abound in our studies as well as in other fields of research [… post-feminist theories] are among the prisms we have at our disposal, prisms that allow us to see a variety of colours that were previously invisible.[43]

5 Data from cuneiform written artefacts

The reinterpretations of the words previously translated as 'prostitute' or of the Emesal language are based on an in-depth study of the cuneiform manuscripts and their social and chronological context. Indeed, Assyriologists have a great number of texts at their disposal, which are distributed unevenly in time and space, and the place of women in these texts varies a lot.[44] Third and early second millennia palace and large domain archives document the elite women and their servants. Thousands of women were involved in the production of everyday goods in large institutions, where they were often supervised by male overseers.[45] Some of the large estates were managed by women of the royal family. Letters and administrative texts found in the Mari palace, for example, highlight the powers and duties of the queen and the spying activities of the king's daughters married to vassal rulers. For the first millennium, women from the royal family are documented by stelae and funerary inscriptions.

Most heroes in the literary texts are males, but women may have important second roles, such as Ninsun, the heroes' mother, Šiduri, the innkeeper, and Šamhat, the prostitute in the *Gilgameš Epic*.[46]

Women are more or less visible in the early second millennium private archives, which include letters, contracts and other legal documents. They are, for example, quite rare in the many Old Babylonian contracts concerning land and real estate, presumably because they were often economically dependent on men. As

42 Michalowski 2023, 243–249.
43 Garcia-Ventura 2018, 197–198.
44 Michel 2015a.
45 Lion and Michel 2016b, 3.
46 Harris 2001.

they received their share of the inheritance in their dowry when they got married, they are mostly absent in inheritance divisions, and, consequently, the family trees reconstructed by scholars include very few women.[47] By contrast, the better attested women in this period lived in environments where they had the capacity and freedom to act on their own. This is the case, for example, of the priestesses consecrated to the god Šamaš in the city of Sippar who remained single; they inherited from their fathers and appear as landowners.[48] The women of Aššur, who had to manage their household alone waiting for the return of their husbands who were absent for long-distance trade, are also visible.

Archives from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, found at Nuzi, in the Transtigris area, and at Emar, on the Euphrates River, contain legal documents highlighting the place of girls in their family. A man who had only daughters could adopt them as sons in his will so that they could have a share of the inheritance. As a result, they received part of his property, including his fields and houses.[49] Such a possibility tends to show that the ancient Mesopotamians were making a difference between biological sex and social gender.

6 Women and writing

All the data used to consider the place of women in ancient Mesopotamian society are provided by cuneiform texts that have mainly been written by men. However, women are also present in these written artefacts, for example, receiving or sending letters, initiating contracts or sealing a document with their seal. Moreover, the world's oldest known author is a woman: the moon god priestess Enheduana, daughter of King Sargon of Akkad, represented on an inscribed alabaster disk together with priests (see Fig. 2). She lived in the city of Ur during the twenty-third century BCE, and left hymns to Inanna in which she addressed the goddess sometimes in the first person. She also left temple hymns known by copies of the late third millennium.[50] Although she is so famous that a crater on the planet Mercury has been named Enheduana in her honour in 2015, it is still debated whether she is the real author of these hymns or if someone wrote them for her.[51]

47 Lion 2018a, 234.

48 De Graef (eds) 2016, with previous literature.

49 Lion 2009a.

50 She was at the center of an important exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York in 2021–2022, see Babcock, Bahrani and Tamur 2021.

51 Wagensonner 2020; Konstantopoulos 2021.

Fig. 2: Disk of Enheduana showing the priestess with priests in a ritual scene. Alabaster, twenty-fourth century BCE, Larsa; Penn Museum (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) in Philadelphia; Limestone/Calcite; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Disk_of_Enheduanna_(2).jpg>.

This debate stems from the fact that the great majority of the scribes attested in cuneiform manuscripts are men. However, female scribes existed, and according to contexts and periods, some women were literate just like men. Indeed, even if the number of people with access to a written culture was relatively small in comparison to the general population, it was not necessarily limited to professional scribes.

The earliest attestation of a female scribe dates to the Old Akkadian Period (twenty-fourth century BCE) and she worked for the Ekur temple in Nippur.[52] During

52 Lion 2011.

the late third millennium, some of the dozens of thousands of administrative texts of the Third Dynasty of Ur mention scribes receiving food rations distributed by the institutions for which they worked, female scribes are exceptional. However, four statuettes, dating to this period, show seated women holding a tablet on their laps (see Fig. 3). The tablets are divided into lines and columns in which text was written, presumably of an administrative nature. The women's hands are joined in a gesture of prayer; thus, following Claudia Suter, they might represent high priestesses.[53]

Fig. 3: Alabaster statuette of a seated female with a tablet on her lap. Tello, Ur III (twenty-first century BCE); Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, VA 04854 (acquired 1913); © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo: Olaf M. Teßmer; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statuette_of_a_seated_sumerian_goddess_or_adorant_03.jpg>.

53 Suter 2007, 334–335. For a similar statuette in the Louvre (AO 40) <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010119593> (accessed on 11 June 2023).

6.1 Female scribes in early second millennium texts

The education of scribes is well-known for the early second millennium thanks to the many school texts found at Nippur, a religious and cultural centre of Mesopotamia. These texts allowed the reconstruction of the curriculum used to learn Sumerian and mathematics. The great majority of school exercises are anonymous, however, in some instances, they could be signed by the student. Four school tablets of unknown provenance have been identified as being written by 'the hand of a female scribe'.[54] One of these corresponds to a list of syllables and belong to the first exercises of the cursus. Two others have Sumerian word lists, learned a little later, and the last tablet is the copy of a literary composition which was part of the advanced level of education. This suggests that girls could follow the same cursus as boys, and, thus, could write the same types of texts once they had completed their education.[55]

For whom did these women scribes practice their art? As a rule, female scribes are better known in specific milieus where men were few. This is especially the case during the first centuries of the second millennium BCE within the female population of the palace and the communities of consecrated women. Several female scribes occur in the royal archives of Mari, in Syria on the middle Euphrates, dating for the great majority to King Zimrī-Lîm (1775–1761 BCE). A large number of women were living in the palace, including the king's wives, concubines and daughters, as well as the many female slaves in charge of the maintenance of the house, water supply and cooking.[56] These women received regular allowances of oil and food as part of their retribution. In all, there are nine female scribes mentioned among the five hundred women belonging to the servile staff.[57] Among these, three female scribes are known by their names, and worked in pairs for the palace kitchen. They are the authors of the hundreds of tablets recording the daily expenditures of the storerooms for the king's meal.[58] Female scribes are also found among the female personnel given as a dowry by the king to his daughters when they married a vassal king. Living in a foreign country, the king's daughters acted as spies for their father, sending him many letters to keep him informed.[59]

54 Lion 2009b.

55 Brigitte Lion (2011, 100) has suggested that some of these women would have learnt from their father; at least one of the female Sippar scribes is known as the daughter of a scribe.

56 Ziegler 1999.

57 Lion 2011, 99.

58 Ziegler 2016, § 17–23.

59 Durand 2000, 422–479.

Women scribes are also present in private contexts, working, for example, for consecrated women (*nadītum*). This is particularly well illustrated in the city of Sippar, some fifty kilometres north of Babylon, where some girls belonging to rich families were consecrated to the Sun God Šamaš, the main deity of the city.[60] These women were not allowed to marry and give birth to children, and in order to be economically independent, they received a dowry including an estate, from their parents. They used writing in order to manage this estate and communicate with their family, often through the services of scribes. The many contracts belonging to these consecrated women, purchase of lands or slaves, leasing or court proceedings, regularly include a list of witnesses, which often ends with the name of the scribe who wrote the legal text. Many of these scribes were men, but some twenty of them were female scribes.[61] The texts they wrote involved not only consecrated women but also men.

6.2 Literate women in early second millennium private archives

Within this religious society, some of the consecrated women from wealthy families might have had direct access to writing, being educated in a similar way to boys. One of the best examples is provided by a dispute deed also found in Sippar and dating to the late nineteenth or early eighteenth centuries BCE.[62] A consecrated woman named Amat-Šamaš adopted another consecrated woman in order to be able to pass on all her property. After the death of Amat-Samaš, two men, presumably of her family, sued the heiress, and declared: 'In no case did Amat-Samaš give you property, nor did she write a tablet for you. It was you who, after her death, (wrote) it.' Since the heiress was accused of forging a document, it must be assumed that she was literate, able to write a will or an adoption contract, and even knew specific legal formulae in Sumerian. Moreover, the witnesses interviewed, both male and female, declared that Amat-Šamaš herself wrote the adoption contract, which was also her own testament. Whether both of these consecrated women learned to read and to write at home with their parents or with a master is unknown.

Learning from one's parents how to read and write was presumably the case among the Assyrians of the nineteenth century BCE according to their archives found in central Anatolia on the site of Kültepe, the ancient city of Kaneš. These

60 Harris 1975.

61 Lion 2009b.

62 Text CT 2, 47, discussed by Lion 2018b, who noted that the verb used in this text, *šaṭārum*, means literally 'to write'.

merchants settled in Kaneš, a thousand kilometres away from their hometown, for trade, and left there some twenty-three thousand cuneiform tablets. They originated from the city of Aššur, on the west bank of the Tigris River in northern Iraq, where, in a first stage, their wives and children were living. This cuneiform corpus has been widely exploited for its rich data on trade and markets with important financial innovations, and the activities and lives of several important male merchants have been the subject of detailed studies. However, some Assyrian women, residing in Aššur and known from the letters they sent to Kaneš, are particularly visible.

About nine thousand letters written in the Old Assyrian dialect have been unearthed at Kültepe to date. They represent the epistolary exchanges between the merchants of Kaneš and, on the one hand, their families and colleagues who remained in Aššur, and, on the other hand, their correspondents settled in other Anatolian towns. The great majority of the letters have men as senders and recipients and deal with commercial and financial matters. Letters addressed or received by women, however, represent some 20% of those published, and half of these were sent mainly by women who remained alone at Aššur while their husbands were away, or those who were single, consecrated to a deity.[63] These women were at the head of their households and wrote to their husbands, brothers or sons in Anatolia concerning both commercial and domestic matters (see Fig. 4). They used writing as a communication tool and their letters show a certain expression of feelings and manifestations of emotions, less present in men's letters:

> Urgent! When you hear this letter, come, look to Aššur, your god, and your home hearth, and let me see you in person while I am still alive! Misery has entered our minds.[64]

Sensitive to their family members' reputation, women give the men real lessons in morality dictated not only by a deep attachment to the worship of deities but also by the desire to offer the best possible image to their neighbours:

> You hear that people are behaving badly, one tries to gobble up the other! Be an honourable man, break your obligations, and come here! Consecrate our young daughter to the god Aššur.[65]

63 Michel 2020, 27–29; Michel 2023.
64 Michel 2020, 216–218, no. 129.
65 Michel 2020, 239–240, no. 147.

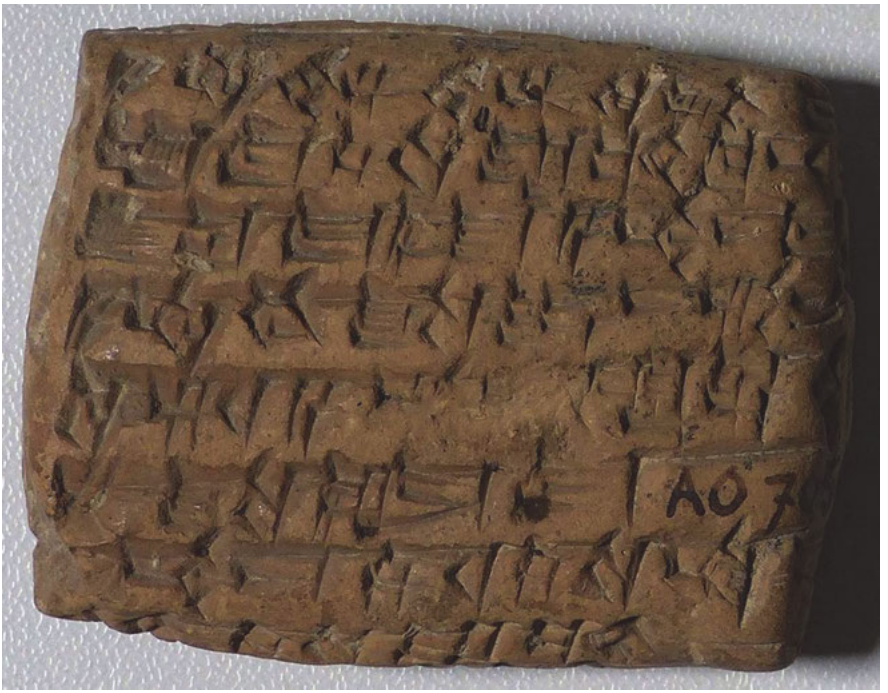

Fig. 4: Old Assyrian letter sent by two women to their brother; Louvre, AO 7054; Photo: Cécile Michel.

The Old Assyrian letters used a relatively limited syllabary containing, at most, some 150 signs, including a limited number of logograms. There were professional scribes taking part in the daily administration of the trade bureau. These scribes are to be distinguished from the educated traders, capable of writing their letters and contracts themselves. Indeed, personal letters were often written directly by their authors, whose mobility would explain the absence of recourse to the services of scribes.[66] Women were able, in the absence of their husbands, to extract documents from their archives, and some of them could write and count as well.[67] One can distinguish between letters written quickly and carelessly by men and women who learned by doing, and those with a very beautiful and regular handwriting, written by those who had followed a real school curriculum. Palaeographical analyses to identify writers' hands confirm that many men and women were literate. In some families, children learned from their father, while in others, they learned

66 Michel 2008.

67 Michel 2015b; Michel 2020, 333–338.

from someone outside the family.[68] As well as the consecrated women who were single, the women of Aššur found themselves alone, separated from their husbands for long periods and in need of exchanging information with them in a written form.

These women were fuelling the international trade with their textile production and earned their own money. They were using part of their revenues to manage their house and the remainder was invested in trade and financial transactions. They had their own capital, separate from that of their husbands, and were excellent accountants. At least one document, an account, is explicitly said to have been written by a woman.[69] These women, who participated in the economic life and benefited from the profits generated by trade, are particularly visible in the written documentation they have produced.

7 Conclusion

In *Women of Aššur and Kaneš: Texts from the Archives of Assyrian Merchants* (2020), a book dedicated to these women, studying their place in society and their activities in comparison to those of men, I specified in the introduction that:

> The purpose of the present book is to make their voices heard. But women do not exist without men, and vice versa; thus, this study about women is conducted from the perspective of gender: when applicable, I compare the place of women in the society and their activities with that of men, trying to emancipate myself from any preconceptions about gender division. For example, the following questions are raised: Who kept marriage contracts, husband or wife? Is there a great difference between men's and women's testaments, between men's and women's loans? What kind of mutual representations exist between men and women in business? And so on. This work thus inscribes itself in the first two feminist waves, and it provides unique textual material for more theoretical studies.[70]

Researchers working on ancient manuscript cultures only have fragmentary data linked to specific social groups. Even if, regarding cuneiform written artefacts, we deal in general with direct sources, these do not cover all social categories equally; data on poor people, for example, are usually scarce. The various examples presented above show that some women from different milieus were literate and could enjoy a certain autonomy. Some of them had activities that were not limited to the

68 Beyer 2021.
69 Michel 2020, 335 and n. 70.
70 Michel 2020, 5–6.

domestic sphere; they contributed to public life, but their contribution remains less visible in the ancient texts than that of men.

Tracing the identity of the authors of ancient texts is essential for writing their history, whether they were men or women. The denial by some Assyriologists to recognise the great priestess Enheduana as the first author in world history makes her the very first victim of the 'Matilda effect'. Inspired by a passage in Matthew's Gospel about giving to the rich and taking from the poor, the sociologist Robert Merton showed that the institutional reputation acquired by scientists determines the importance attached to their work and the funding available to them.[71] The historian of sciences Margaret Rossiter, building on this idea, noticed the recurrent minimisation of the contribution of women to scientific research. She called this phenomenon the 'Matilda effect' in reference to the American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–1898), who had noticed that men were often appropriating women's ideas.[72]

Since women are less present than men in cuneiform sources, it can be tempting to attribute literary and scholarly texts to men. Nevertheless, some women were literate, as were some men, and training seems to have been the same for men and women. When studying ancient written artefacts, it is necessary to understand why the texts were written, by whom they were initiated and written, and for what reason they were kept.

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71 Merton 1968.
72 Rossiter 1993.

Abbreviations

GeMANE = 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' (every two years workshops).
RAI = Rencontre Assyriologique International (annual congress of Assyriology).

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