

21 Temple prostitution

Whether or not temple prostitution actually existed in Mesopotamia has been a widely discussed issue in academic circles. Points of view differ so vastly that some find evidence for it everywhere, and others detect it nowhere.¹ It all begins with tales in Herodotus, Lucian and the church fathers, writing in Greek about women in Babylonia or Phoenicia, who on one occasion in their lives offered their services in a temple. There are other Greek stories about temple prostitution going on regularly in Cyprus and Sicily, for example, but these are of less concern to us. We have already outlined the narrative of Herodotus about the rite of the first night, at the end of Chapter 11, when discussing rape. Even if that account is true, it concerned only a rite of passage, an initiation into marriage.²

21.1 Internal evidence

A tablet from Nuzi records that a girl, on account of her father's debt, was to be dedicated to the goddess Ištar and used 'for whoredom'.³ This confirms that cultic prostitutes really did exist. That this girl from Nuzi should be dedicated in this way was stated in the words of a curse made at the statue of King Kapara in Tell Halaf, the king of a small independent Aramaean kingdom.

Let him burn his seven sons before the god Adad.

Let him consign (*luramme*) his seven daughters to Ištar as whores (*ḫarimtu*).⁴

1 No temple prostitution existed according to D. Arnaud, J. Assante, M. I. Gruber, B. Menzel, M. van de Mieroop, J. G. Westenholz; in general see B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel* II (1981) 27* f. (note 308); J. S. Cooper, *RIA* XI/1-2 (2006) 18-20, §9, 'Sacred prostitution'; J. G. Westenholz, 'Heilige Hochzeit und kultische Prostitution im Alten Mesopotamien. Sexuelle Vereinigung im sakralen Raum?', in: *Wort und Dienst. Jahrbuch der Kirchlichen Hochschule Bethel*, Neue Folge 23 (1995) 43-62; M. van de Mieroop, *Cuneiform texts and the writing of history* (1999) 151-153.

2 The literature is abundant; see G. Wilhelm, *Studies W. L. Moran* (1990) 511 n. 36, 524 n. 98. The story can also be found in Strabo, *Geography* XVI.1.20; see further U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (1983) 334 ff.; F. Cumont, *Oriental religions in Roman paganism* (1956; originally 1911) 118 f., 246-248; K. van der Toorn, *From her cradle to her grave* (1994) 107; J. L. Lightfoot, *Lucian On the Syrian Goddess* (2003) 325 ('the story in Lucian cannot be true'); J. S. Cooper, 'Sex and the temple', in: K. Kaniuth, *Tempel im alten Orient* (2013) 49-57 (objects in art).

3 G. Wilhelm, 'Marginalien zu Herodot Klio 199', *Studies W. L. Moran* (1990) 505-524, esp. 517, 523. Julia Assante presents another explanation: an 'independent woman' who had stood bail and now has to work for the goddess; *UF* 30 (1998) 60 f.

4 Wilhelm, 513 f.; B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel* I (1981) 27-29; K. Radner, *Die neuassyrischen Privatrechtsurkunden* (1997) 211 f.

It has been pointed out that Tell Halaf lies in a region dominated by Aramaean culture, and that this inscription, dating from between 1000 and 850 BC, is older than the texts to be discussed later. It has also been suggested that these were barbaric foreign customs, perhaps Aramaean or perhaps Anatolian.⁵ The terminology however is Assyrian, and standard punishments in Neo-Assyrian contracts, listed among many others in long Assyrian formulas, include burning the oldest son and the oldest daughter and dedicating (*uššuru*) people to the temple. One such can be quoted here, which threatens anyone intending to break the agreement with dire consequences, including an obligation to give male *kezrus* and female *kezertus*.⁶

He must place one mina of silver and one mina of gold in the lap of the god Ninurta who resides in Calah. He must tie four white horses securely to the feet of the god Assur. He must bring in four ...-coloured horses to the feet of Nergal. He must eat one mina of plucked wool. He must drink a jar full of sludge from the tannery. He must burn his eldest son before the face of Sîn. He must burn his eldest daughter before the face of Belet-[šeri]. They must scatter thirty litres of mustard seed from the gate of Calah to the gate of the centre of Assur and he must pick that up with the tip of his tongue completely, the whole thirty litres. He must dedicate (*uššar*) seven male oblates (?) and seven female oblates (?) for Adad who dwells in Kurba-il. He must give seven *kezrus* and seven *kezertus* to Ištar who dwells in Arba-il. He must restore the purchase price tenfold to the owner. He is not allowed to win the lawsuit that he would begin.

There has been much discussion of these vicious punishments, including the idea that burning sons should not be taken literally. A more elaborate phrase says that the action is carried out together with various aromas, so it could refer to the dedication of persons to the temple, a most fitting occasion for incense – not a person – to be burned.⁷ Another suggestion has been that these formulas were taken over from a different culture, and that in Assyria itself they amounted to no more than empty threats. It must be said that the long list of punishments sounds exaggerated and one must wonder whether they were all actually imposed.

⁵ Menzel I, 28 f., II 24* (263), 27* (301).

⁶ CTN 2 no. 17:25 f., 30–32, cf. 15:25 f.; Menzel II, T 211 no. 257; Radner, *Privatrechtsurkunden* (1997) 189–194 (punishments), 211–219 (dedications).

⁷ M. Weinfeld, 'The worship of Molech and the Queen of Heaven and its background', *UF* 4 (1972) 133–154, esp. 144 ff.; see earlier K. Deller, *Or. NS* 34 (1965) 385. He discusses the parallel in 2 Kings 17:31: The Sepharvites burnt their children as offerings to Adrammelech (= Adad-milki) and Anammelech (= Anat-milki), the gods of Sepharvaim.

For us it is the women who are of interest.⁸ King Kapara spoke of ‘whores’, and these later Assyrian passages of the dedication of what are possibly male and female ‘oblates’ (BAR), and the ‘giving’ of male *kezrus* and female *kezertus* to the temple. The latter would fit with the cult of Ištar, where both men and women were present and men and women could interchange roles. In her temple there were men who dressed as women. What exactly the word BAR (*uššuru*), ‘oblate’, signifies we do not know, for it occurs only in Kurba-il in the service of the pair of deities Adad and Šala. The word *kezertu* can be derived from the verb *kezēru*, to have a particular hairstyle. It is not easy to prove that they were in fact prostitutes, but the gloss in a Babylonian word list suggests this: ‘*kezertu*: a female travelling companion, prostitute, woman of the street’.⁹ The only way to explain the phrase ‘to hand over to Ištar as whores’ in the curse of Kapara is by sacral prostitution. One could suggest that this is the only place where this use applies, but the parallelism of phrases concerning ‘whore’ and *kezertu* is so strong that we are obliged to consider sacral prostitution in Assyria and its Aramaean neighbours.¹⁰ The god Adad and the goddess Ištar had these women in their service.¹¹ We know of ‘sons of *kezertus*’, reminiscent of sons of whores, fatherless lads who were dedicated to the service of a deity.¹²

It is appropriate here to mention a few passages where the ordinary prostitute and the priestesses of the goddess of love are spoken of together in the same breath. This is seen most clearly in literary texts. In the Sumerian text ‘The Curse of Akkad’ they are cursed.

May the whore hang herself in the door of her drinking-house, may your mother the *nu.gig*, and your mother the *nu.bar* kill their child(ren).¹³

In Akkadian the priestesses *nu.gig* and *nu.bar* were called *qadištu* ‘holy woman’ and *kulmašitu*. Various other Sumerian texts mention these two but omit the deprecatory term ‘whore’. There are no indications that the *nu.gig* and the *nu.bar* were low-class prostitutes. On the contrary *nu.gig* was a respectable lady, as we shall see in Chapter 27 about the *qadištu*. My conclusion is that in the ‘The Curse of Akkad’ she is listed with the whore because all three women had Ištar as their guardian deity, not because they were occupied with the same work.

⁸ Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel I*, 27–33; Wilhelm, 513 f.; Radner, 217–219.

⁹ *Emar VI.4* (1987) 190 no. 602:345–350.

¹⁰ This is also the opinion of K. Radner, hidden in footnote 1193 on p. 218.

¹¹ D. Schwemer, *Wettergottgestalten* (2001) 598–600. He, too, is in favour of temple prostitution.

¹² J. N. Postgate, *Neo-Assyrian royal grants and decrees* (1969) 102, to 3’; SAA XII 68 rev. 28.

¹³ Ed. J. S. Cooper (1983) p. 240 f., lines 244 f.

More telling is the line in the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic (VI 158), where we read,

Ištar assembled the courtesans (*kezertu*), prostitutes (*šamḫatu*) and harlots (*ḫarimtu*).

In the Erra Epic, where it is concerned with the destruction of the city of Uruk, we find something similar said about the depraved cult servants of Ištar.

As to Uruk, the dwelling place of Anu and Ištar,
a city of *kezertus*, of strumpets and whores,
whom Ištar deprived of husbands and has left them to themselves,
the Sutiāns, men and women, yelled.
They rouse up Eanna, the cult actors and singers,
whose manhood Ištar turned into womanliness
in order to strike people with religious awe,
those who carry a dagger and a razor, a scalpel and a flint knife,
who transgress taboos to delight Ištar's heart (Erra Epic IV 52–58).

This grants us a glimpse into the dark orgies of Ištar's domain, and perhaps refers to castration. Since we are not concerned with men in this book we shall not discuss this further. We have already seen that a wisdom text warns against three women, the whore, the woman of Ištar (the *ištaritu*) and the *kulmašitu* (Chapter 20).

One of the laws of Hammurabi (§ 181) refers to the dedication of a daughter to a god to become 'a *nadītu*, a *qadištu*, or a *kulmašitu*'. These must have been recognised possibilities for the daughters of respectable citizens, to ensure that the girls maintained their right of inheritance. They would not have been poverty-stricken children, destined to earn their crust in a dishonourable way. The hierarchy for such priestesses, with *ereš.dingir* as the highest, then *nadītu*, *qadištu*, and *kulmašitu*, is echoed by the sequence in which they are listed in Hammurabi § 181.¹⁴

21.2 The *kezertu*

The laws make no mention at all of the *kezertu*. The word implies that this woman had a distinctive hairstyle, since the verb *kezēru* means to dress one's hair in a particular style. She does not occur explicitly in earlier Sumerian texts, but she

¹⁴ M. Stol, *Festschrift J. Oelsner* (2000) 465 (Lipit-Ištar § 22; Wilcke, *Festschrift J. Krecher*, 591 § e30); D. O. Edzard, *ZA* 55 (1962) 105.

does implicitly. The hymn about the sacred marriage of King Iddin-Dagan and Inanna has a summary of the cult personnel of the goddess, including ‘the girl, the *šugîtu*, with her hair tied in a bow (?)’.¹⁵ That phrase describing the hairstyle is given as an equivalent for *kezêru* in old word lists of the time. So we conclude that as early as this (ca. 1900 BC) women with this distinctive hairstyle were walking around the temple of the goddess of love.

It has been suggested that depictions of a *kezertu* can be seen on Old Babylonian terracotta reliefs, artefacts and statuettes of women, sometimes naked, with a particular hairstyle.¹⁶ The hair is parted centrally, and to the left and to the right it tumbles in waves down to the shoulders in one great tress. There are bands in the hair. In the same period these *kezertu* women occur in the temple administration lists of the goddess Nanaya in Uruk and Kish.¹⁷ The *kezertus* were active in Uruk in later texts. It seems that the wives of important citizens in Old Babylonian Kish had the responsibility for ‘rites’ to be carried out by these women, for which an amount of silver had to be paid. This group of texts can be compared with a similar group from Sippar, where rites were performed in the temple of the goddess Annunitum, including ‘the role of the whore’ (*ħarîmûtu*). Most of those texts are yet to be published.¹⁸ In Sippar men played this role, and women that of the *rêdûtu*, ‘the role of the suitor (lover)’ (or: the soldier?).¹⁹ We have a list of eleven prostitutes (*ħarîmtu*) supervised by the First Lamentation Singer,²⁰ which gives me the impression that these women in Sippar and the *kezertus* in Kish were

15 W. H. Ph. Römer, SKIZ (1965) 130:70 (ki.sikil šu-gi4-a sag.ki gú.lá.e); cf. Römer, TUAT II/5 (1989) 664: ‘die jungen Mädchen, die šu-gi4-a, mit Zopf versehen (?)’; Th. Jacobsen, *The harps that once*, 117: ‘maidens and crones, curling their hair (as harlots)’.

16 F. Blocher, *Untersuchungen zum Motiv der nackten Frau in der altbabylonischen Zeit* (1987) 231; cf. the description, 35 f. C. Michel thinks a woman on a cylinder seal from Mari could have been a *kezertu*; in: S. Lafont, *Jurer et maudire* (1996) 120.

17 M. L. Gallery, Or. NS 49 (1980) 333–338; J. Spaey, Akkadica 67 (1990) 1–9; Blocher, 225–230; Lambert in *Außenseiter*, 132, 137; N. Yoffee, JESHO 41 (1998) 312–343; Yoffee, *Myths of the archaic state* (2005) 123–127; J.-J. Glassner, CRRAI 47/I (2002) 159–161.

18 The terminology used is *ħarîmûtu*, and *ninda ħarîmti*, ‘prebend of the harlot’. M. Tanret, K. van Lerberghe, ‘Rituals and profits in the Ur-Utu archive’, in: J. Quaegebeur, *Ritual and sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (1993) 435–449. For other texts see CT 48 45:2–3, with M. L. Gallery, Or. NS 49 (1980) 334; K. van Lerberghe, MHET I 65:10, 14, 24; 66:19; the letter 78:9, 15; cf. AfO Beiheft 19 (1982) 280–283; see also M. Silver, UF 38 (2006) 655 f.

19 According to the letter *redûtu* means ‘following’, but *rêdû* means ‘soldier’. See J. S. Cooper, RIA XI/1–2 (2006) 18b. Sumerian SAL.UŠ is connected with prostitution, but is this prostitution among men? See J. Bauer, *Altorientalische Notizen* no. 30 (1985).

20 CT 4 15c with R. Harris, *Ancient Sippar* (1975) 332 (the references in her note 120 are wrong); M. Tanret, K. van Lerberghe, 441 f. There a male *ħarîmu* is mentioned. In a Neo-Assyrian list of workers a prostitute is followed by the son of a palace maid and a farmer, SAA XII 83 rev. 12.

the ones involved in sacred prostitution. The women who organized this were respectable ladies who participated in these temple services, providing them with a source of income, a kind of benefice.²¹

In the palace of Mari we find these *kezertu* women in the harem, and as such not playing a role in the cult. It is striking that there they are explicitly mentioned in ration lists for oil, ‘so much oil for the *kezertu* women’, but they are not named individually though the other harem women are. On two occasions they are mentioned in connection with childbirth, and we know that some of them performed as singers.²² From another source we know that these singers curled their hair in a particular way.²³ These could have been women in the service of Ištar who were staying temporarily in the harem, or they could have been pensioned off there because of their advanced age. That their names are not mentioned points to their low status in society. This sort of woman was not mentioned when the laws of Hammurabi deal with nuns and priestesses. The king was evidently not interested in them, for they were regarded as having a low position in society. This is illustrated by a sale contract for ‘a slave-girl, Anaṭṭal-iniša, a *kazertu*’, who was sold for the relatively small sum of eleven shekels of silver.²⁴ In Mari a princess requested ‘a girl, a *kezertu*, and good-looking (*nawru*)’, captured from a recently conquered palace.²⁵

According to B. Menzel, who prefers not to believe in sacral prostitution, the Assyrian *kezertu* indicated a particular class of person, not a profession, and specifically a class of men and women occupied in the service of Ištar. As such they would be involved in a variety of tasks, including singing, playing instruments, dancing and performing tricks.²⁶ But even those who deny the existence of temple prostitution admit that a *kezertu* could have worked as a prostitute in some way

21 Lists of women in Kish indicate that the ladies had a supervisory role (YOS 13 111–112). A typical list begins with the note ‘One woman’ followed by a female name, meaning that the woman supervised one named temple prostitute; once two prostitutes (2 SAL *kezertu*) are named (112:13).

22 N. Ziegler, *Le Harem de Zimrî-Lîm* (1999) 87 f.; *Florilegium Marianum IX* (2007) 50; Durand, *MARI 4* (1985) 389, 390; idem, in: E. Levy, *Le système palatial*, 85.

23 M. T. Roth, *JAOS* 103 (1983) 276:24, with B. Alster, *ZA* 82 (1992) 201 (‘His daughter U. curled her hair, she sang sweet songs, playing the role of a dancer’); also D. Shehata, *WZKM* 97 (2007) 521–529. Note the existence of a female singer with curled hair, nar-igi-suḫur-lá, *MSL* 12 (1969) 56:646.

24 CT 48 28.

25 ARM 10 140:16, 28 with LAPO 18 (2000) 372 no. 1184; cf. *MARI 4* (1985) 389 (n. 38).

26 B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel I* (1981) 28 f., 33. She links these people with the ‘house of *ēqu*’ who, however, in Nuzi are associated with harlotry; perhaps they were beggars; see G. Wilhelm, *Studies W. L. Moran* (1990) 520 n. 78.

or other.²⁷ They admit, for example, that in the passages cited above from the Gilgamesh Epic and the Erra Epic she was associated with strumpets. It could be that this woman developed into a real temple prostitute in the first millennium BC.

As for her hairstyle, the idea that such a woman had ribbons in her hair comes from Herodotus, something which is also mentioned in the apocryphal Letter of Jeremiah, which is regarded as an independent source.²⁸

The women sit in the street with cords (*schoinia*) round them, burning bran for incense; and when one of them has been drawn aside by a passer-by and she has lain with him, she taunts her neighbour, who has not been thought as attractive as herself and whose cord has not been broken. Everything to do with these idols is a sham. How then can anyone suppose them to be gods or call them so? (Baruch 6:43–44).

W. Baumgartner and others take this observation seriously to show that at the very least the reference is to temple prostitution.²⁹ Indeed we now see that the hairstyle detailed in these later texts must have been linked to a woman such as a *kezertu*.

According to the Sumerologist M. Çığ, the significance of wearing a headscarf in modern Turkey is comparable to that of the headdress of a Sumerian prostitute, presumably referring to a *kezertu*. A press report reported her as claiming that ‘Islamic-style head scarves date back more than 5000 years, several millennia before the birth of Islam, and were worn by priestesses who initiated young men into sex’. She was convicted of slander, but in 2006 she was acquitted. Did the whistle-blower responsible for bringing matter to court really know the academic evidence behind the claim M. Çığ was making?³⁰

A woman of the temple called an *ištarītu* who is not often mentioned arouses suspicion about what she was doing when it is said ‘an *ištarītu*, who is named after a god(dess) (?), a *kulmašītu*, who is approached by many people’. We have no idea what function the *ištarītu* was expected to fulfil, but since the name means ‘a woman of Ištar’, it has more than once been suggested that this was a girl who had grown up in the temple of this goddess.³¹ We shall not go into this further.

²⁷ Cf. now C. Wilcke, ZA 75 (1985) 196 f.

²⁸ There is a remark about priests in the brothel in verses 9–11.

²⁹ W. Baumgartner, *Zum Alten Testament und seiner Umwelt* (1959) 296–298, 326 (originally in ArOr 18, 1950).

³⁰ See also J. Schmidt, BiOr 67 (2010) 17.

³¹ J. Bottéro, *Mésopotamie* (1987) 229.

21.3 Devaluing old titles

It can be seen that over time less and less interest came to be shown in distinguishing the roles of women in the cult. Later Babylonian dictionaries and word lists lump terms together, so that the ‘holy woman’ (*qadištu*) is equated with the strumpet (*šamuhtu*) and also with the nun (*nadītu*), and the *kezertu* is called a whore.³² In fact in the Old Babylonian period the nun (*nadītu*) was a fine chaste woman, but in later texts she appears to adopt more questionable behaviour. It may well be relevant that the Old Babylonian word for her ‘convent’ (*gagû*) recurs much later in Syriac as *gaguya’a* to mean ‘prostitute’³³ In a later fictitious bawdy letter a *nadītu* and a *kulmašītu* address a man with the invitation ‘I have opened for you my vulva, strike my clitoris’.³⁴ An omen speaks of there being in the city countless women known as *kulmašītu*, *qadištu*, *nadû* or *nadītu*,³⁵ by which whores must have been indicated. The meaning of old terms had been devalued, with their original meanings forgotten. It even results in the word *nadû*, an artificially coined masculine form of *nadītu*, for a man with such a function, a word that had never existed before. A later text describes women ‘of insight’ as

entus (?) who guard (?) the truth (at home) with their husbands; *nadītus* who keep the womb alive with wisdom; *qadištus* who bring purification with water.

Had all these women really become midwives?³⁶

21.4 Income

Was the motivation for temple prostitution just letting love be purchased to boost the temple coffers, or to conduct a ritual performance, a piece of theatre? After all, Ištar had men in her service who played various sexual roles.³⁷ A comparison has been made with the *dēvadasi*, women in India from the twelfth century onwards who were adept in musical entertainments, lasses who were always available as

³² Lambert in *Aufsenseiter*, 138 f. (Malku I 129–135, Explicit Malku I 82–87; ed. I. Hruša [2010] 39, 153 f., 204, 282); cf. Gruber, UF 18 (1986) 148.

³³ G. R. Driver, *The Babylonian Laws* II (1956) 200; S. Kaufman, *The Akkadian influences on Aramaic* (1974) 51.

³⁴ A. K. Grayson, JAOS 103 (1983) 145 f.

³⁵ V. Haas, *Aufsenseiter*, 42 f., lines 115–118; S. Freedman, *If a city is set on a height* I (1998) 36, Tablet I 136–139.

³⁶ Lambert, 143 f.

³⁷ Cooper, RIA XI/1–2 (2006) 19 f., § 10, ‘Male prostitution’.

temple servants, but at the same time known to be available for sexual sport. Their earnings went to the temple.³⁸ Did the earnings of our girls also end up in the temples in Babylonia? D. Arnaud thinks not, but suggests that the temple supported lower personnel 'of questionable morality, in close relationship with groups who were on the point of being delinquent. They were all frequently engaged in prostitution without it resulting in any income whatsoever for the sanctuary'.³⁹ At the beginning of this chapter we surmised that the *kezertus* of the goddess Nanaya were paid for their services. A proverb about copulating with a man says,

Let me lie with you. Let the deity enjoy his share.⁴⁰

This could refer to a payment destined for the god. There are two passages in the Old Testament which show that in certain circumstances 'a whore's wages' (*ètnan*) could benefit the temple treasury (Deuteronomy 23:18–19; Micah 1:7). K. van der Toorn suggests that we should see here incidents of temple prostitution, perhaps for women who had made a vow to the temple but could not keep their word, and were made to honour their vow in this unusual way. A few other sentences in the Bible (such as Proverbs 7:14 and Deuteronomy 23: 17–18) refer to the 'strange woman' who needed money in order to pay off her vow. Van der Toorn thinks that the far-fetched tale of Herodotus, that every woman would become a prostitute once in their lives, can possibly be explained as a misunderstanding of discharging a vow. In other words, it refers to occasional prostitution.⁴¹

21.5 Goddess and whore

We have already seen that the goddess Ištar portrayed herself as a whore.

Whenever I stay in the doorway of the drinking-house, I am the whore that the man knows.⁴²

38 Cooper, 19a.

39 *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 183 (1973) 114 f. J. G. Westenholz, 262, agrees.

40 *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* 227 ii 27 f., with p. 231 (bilingual). 'His share (?)': Sum. *zi.ga*; Akkad. *ša nisiḫti* (a temple tax).

41 K. van der Toorn, *From her cradle to her grave* (1994) 97–102, 109; idem, 'Female prostitution in payment of vows in Ancient Israel', *JBL* 108 (1989) 193–205.

42 Some scholars take the word *mu.lu* here to mean 'rod' or 'penis' in the Sumerian womens' language Emesal and not 'man': 'I am the whore that the rod knows'; cf. CAD Š/2 69 f.; see now K. Volk, *FAOS* 18 (1989) 196 Tafel 21:25 f., with comm., 219 f.; M. E. Cohen, *JAOS* 96 (1986) 606; *CLAM* II (1988) 581 c + 443–4, 597.

But in the same context of hymnody she has completely different functions, such as the goddess of war. We see a similar ambivalence in many other texts. One Sumerian passage lists a number of sanctuaries of Inanna which are all called drinking-houses, with good reason.⁴³ In the myth recounting the descent of Inanna to the netherworld her eye-salve is named ‘Let him come! Let him come!’. The toggle-pin on her chest is named ‘Come, O man! Come!’. Pins like this have been found with heads decorated with two figures closely embracing.⁴⁴ Earlier (in Chapter 20) we mentioned a landlord who referred to the goddess in an incantation to ensure the welfare of his inn, and these lines from a Sumerian hymn also associate her with the drinking-house.

Inanna, harlot, you set out to the drinking-house (...)
 My lady, you dress yourself in just one garment like a nameless person,
 You put around your neck the egg-shaped beads of a harlot,
 You seize a man from the drinking-house ...
 Inanna, your seven paranympths are bedding with you.⁴⁵

A hymn of praise to Ištar has the following lines:

Gather together for me the men of your city,
 And let us go to the shade of the city wall.
 Seven on her neck, seven on her hips,
 Sixty plus sixty are satisfied by her vessel.
 The men become exhausted, but not Ištar:
 ‘Men! Set upon my fine vulva!’

The refrain for the hymn is most fitting: ‘Pleasures are the foundations of the city’. There are many other verses in this hymn with suggestive content.⁴⁶ When necessary the insatiable Ištar would find satisfaction from the animal kingdom. On some occasions in Sumerian texts ‘she is lying with the horse’. When she asked Gilgamesh to marry her he reminded her of that.⁴⁷

⁴³ W. H. Ph. Römer, *Or. NS* 38 (1969) 110.

⁴⁴ *JCS* 5 (1951) 6:109 f.; *TUAT* III/3 (1993) 469; F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Phoenix* 56 (2010) 53 (with illustrations).

⁴⁵ H. Behrens, *Die Ninegalla-Hymne* (1998) 35:105, 111–115. Cf. ‘The harlot who goes out to the tavern, who makes the bed a delight’, H. Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian kings* (2004) 114:174 (‘Lugalbanda in the Wilderness’).

⁴⁶ W. von Soden, *Or. NS* 60 (1991) 339–342. Now B. R. Foster, ‘Ištar will not tire’, *Before the Muses* II (1993) 590; V. A. Hurowitz, ‘An Old Babylonian bawdy ballad’, *Studies J. C. Greenfield* (1995) 543–558.

⁴⁷ Also in H. Behrens, *Die Ninegalla-Hymne* (1998) 30:60, preceded by her love for the dog; in the Gilgamesh Epic it is the lion (VI 51 f.). Cf. J. S. Cooper, *RIA* XI/1–2 (2006) 17 f.; more examples in M. Civil, *JAOS* 120 (2000) 675b, to line 61.

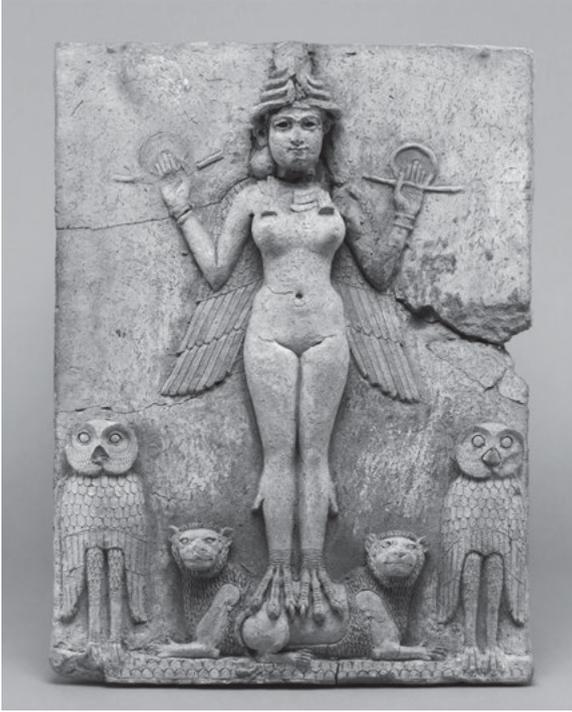


Fig. 34: ‘The Queen of the Night’ (formerly known as the Burney Relief). It has been generally assumed that the woman represents the goddess Ištar or the demon Lilith, but now it is thought that she could also be the goddess of the underworld. Some think the object is a forgery. Traces of colour are visible. Baked clay. Height 50 cm. *British Museum, London.*

You loved the horse, famed in battle.
 To him you have allotted whip, spurs and lash.
 To him you have allotted a seven league gallop.
 To him you have allotted muddy water to drink.
 To his mother Silili you have allotted perpetual weeping (Gilg. VI 53–57).

What is known as the Burney Relief in the British Museum is often said to represent Ištar as a whore (Figure 34).⁴⁸ In the centre is a naked woman with horns on her head, identifying her as a goddess, standing on two lions, a typical stance for Ištar. Under her horned crown we see a fringe of hair, and hair was a sign of a woman’s sex appeal. A stone model of a woman’s ‘wig’ is inscribed ‘female sex

⁴⁸ H. Frankfort, *The art and architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954) plate 56 (‘Lilith’); D. Collon, *The Queen of the Night* (2005). We follow the explanation by Th. Jacobsen in M. Mindlin, *Figurative Language* (1987) 1–11. On similar images of an unclothed goddess, see J. E. Curtis, ‘Ladies of easy virtue’, in: *Études Agnès Spycket* (1996) 89–95. Stark examples from Old Babylonian Larsa are in the catalogue *Babylone* (Paris 2008) 89 f.; more discernable in A. Caubet, P. Pouyssegur, *The Ancient Near East* (1997) 186 f.; also W. Orthmann, *Der Alte Orient* (1975) plate XIV with p. 303.

appeal'.⁴⁹ On the relief she holds up both hands showing that she is carrying 'the staff and the ring'. These were interpreted as instruments for measuring the land and therefore signs of peace (Th. Jacobsen).⁵⁰ Around her neck she wears a necklace, possibly made from particular egg-shaped jewels. A Sumerian text says these are the gems that hang round the neck of a whore.⁵¹ She is winged on left and right and has bird's claws for her feet. Owls sit low on the ground to her left and her right. The owl may have been a figure for the goddess herself, with the name Kilili. A similar winged goddess with outspread arms often appears in art and one assumes that this was the way in which they portrayed Ištar as a 'winged storm demon', at least in the Old Babylonian period.⁵²

There are ongoing discussions about the Burney Relief. Some think it is not genuine. Others think that the female figure is the goddess of the underworld, as indicated by the drooping wings and the nocturnal owls.⁵³ Then there are others who say that Venus is portrayed there as the evening star, and that she is enjoying watching the amorous adventures of the night.⁵⁴ Because she looks like a demon the woman in this relief was identified with Lilith, the dangerous demon of Jewish magic folklore. More speculatively it has been said that Ištar here represents the soul of mankind. From below it is unclean and belongs to the goddess of the underworld, but from above it is pure and has risen again, an interpretation deriving from how Gnostic texts and Jewish mysticism imagined the path of the soul.⁵⁵

The image of a female head staring out from a window with a vague smile has a similarly speculative explanation (Figure 35). Well over a hundred examples were found in the lands of the Ancient Near East. The image occurs on ivory plaques for furniture in Phoenician art, something popular among Assyrian imports.⁵⁶ In Antiquity people became mesmerised by this mysterious woman, and Ovid and Plutarch recount the myth about her. A young man fell in love with a girl. But she was unwilling. So he took his own life. Even when she saw the

49 Šulgi inscr. 29:11 (hi.li nam.mi.ka). See Figure 9 in Chapter 1.

50 They do not belong to the emblems of the orgiastic cult of Ištar, including the spindle and fly-shaped beads; S. Parpola, *LAS Commentary* (1983) 315 f., on no. 308 (= SAA X 92).

51 Jacobsen, 5 f.; BE 31 12:17.

52 B. Groneberg, *Lob der Ištar* (1997) 126–128, with plates XXXVIII–XL. In Chapter 20 on prostitution we saw that a prostitute wore a necklace strung with evocative shells and phalluses.

53 D. Collon, *The Queen of the Night* (2005). Cf. Collon, 'The Queen under attack. A rejoinder', *Iraq* 69 (2007) 43–51; contra: P. Albenda, *NABU* 2008/47.

54 B. André-Salvini, catalogue *Babylone* (Paris 2008) 88 f.

55 P. Lapinkivi, *Ištar's descent and resurrection* (2010) 38–41.

56 U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (1983) 296–301, with Abb. 307–314; W. Fauth, *Aphrodite Parakypousa. Untersuchungen zum Erscheinungsbild der vorderasiatischen Dea Prospiciens* (1966).



Fig. 35: A woman looks out of a window. A decorative element on furniture from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) in Calah. Ivory. *British Museum, London.*

funeral procession passing her window she was unmoved. The goddess of love disapproved of her attitude and turned her into stone on the spot. That is the woman in the window.⁵⁷ According to the Bible Queen Jezebel from Phoenicia was a hated figure in Israel, and the story of how she was thrown out of a window on the command of Jehu is recorded with much gusto.

Then Jehu came to Jezreel. When Jezebel heard what had happened she painted her eyes and adorned her hair, and she stood looking down from a window. As Jehu entered the gate she said, 'Is it peace, you Zimri, you murderer of your master?' He looked up at the window and said, 'Who is on my side? Who?' Two or three eunuchs looked out to him, and he said, 'Throw her down.' They threw her down and some of her blood splashed on to the wall and the horses, which trampled her underfoot (2 Kings 9: 30–33).

⁵⁷ Ovid: *Metamorphoses* XIV 698–764 (Anaxarete). Plutarch: *Moralia: Erôtikos / Amatorius*, 20, end (766D), in M. Cuvigny, *Plutarque. Oeuvres Morales* X (1980) 94.

Scholars mostly take that woman to be the goddess of love. She was revered in the city of Salamis on Cyprus as ‘The Aphrodite who leans over face forwards (*parakypitousa*)’. Daniel Wyttenbach in the eighteenth century showed that such posturing in a window was regarded as an unseemly habit. In fact the Babylonian Ištar was sometimes referred to in Sumerian as ‘The one who hangs out of a window’ to indicate someone with loose morals. Her Akkadian name Kilili means that she is the goddess of the night,⁵⁸ but it is unlikely that the respectable woman on the ivory plaques, smiling innocently in the window, was the same. The decorated legs of the throne of Ashurbanipal, on which he sat with his consort, show two women in a window beside each other, a scene which must have been significant in its context. Those images of women in the window, whoever they were, must have been auspicious. E. Rehm concluded that they offered some protection (*apotropaion*) and the window was part of the palace.⁵⁹

There are very many other objects which are associated with this goddess. One example is a scene of copulation cast in lead, known in German as ‘Die pornographischen Bleiplaketten’, which is often used as an illustration in books.⁶⁰ It was an object which would have come from the temple of Ištar, where the deed could have been performed on an altar. This idea has been rejected.⁶¹ However, it has been noted that stone seats such as the one on which the woman is lying can also be found in temples, an observation which is hardly significant.

We have hundreds of terracotta plaques or figurines from the Old Babylonian period exemplifying an artistic motif which scholars refer to as ‘Die nackte Frau’, a naked woman raising her hands under her breasts.⁶² We even have a pottery baking mould for bread from Mari with this motif. What does this woman represent? People like to see in her a symbol of eroticism or fertility, and as such she is supposed to represent the goddess of love. That is possibly not true. Attention has been drawn to the fact that this woman does not give the impression of being provocative, she simply stares at you. It has been suggested that she represents a

58 H. Behrens, *Die Ninegalla-Hymne* (1998) 127; R. Da Riva, E. Frahm, *AfO* 46–47 (1999–2000) 178. Cf. W. G. Lambert, *Studies F.R. Kraus* (1982) 194 ii 18–20, ‘Kilili, who peers into bedchambers, leaned malevolently out of the window (and) heard him’. For a prostitute named Ama-ab-é-ta, ‘Mother from the window of the house’, see M. Silver, *UF* 38 (2006) 647 n. 12.

59 E. Rehm, ‘Abschied von der Heiligen Hure. Zum Bildmotiv der “Frau am Fenster” in der phönizisch-nordsyrischen Elfenbeinschnitzkunst’, *UF* 35 (2003) 487–519.

60 Catalogue *Das Vorderasiatische Museum Berlin* (1992) 151 f., no. 93.

61 Winter, 350; J. Scurlock, *NABU* 1993/20; J. G. Westenholz in: *Wort und Dienst* (see note 1), 60 f.: found in a palace, outside Assur. The many objects of art so often adduced are not helpful according to J. S. Cooper in: K. Kaniuth, *Tempel im alten Orient* (2013) 52–54.

62 Catalogue *Land des Baal. Syrien – Forum der Völker und Kulturen* (1982) 108 f. no. 93 (right side).

guardian deity (*lamassu*). F. A. M. Wiggermann sees dignity (*bāstu*) in her, which may well be a possibility,⁶³ but others think rather of ‘good fortune’. Most commentators are agreed that she is a goddess. It has further been suggested that the clay or metal models of vulvas which are commonly found have *pars pro toto* the same significance.⁶⁴ Most ‘naked women’ figures have been found in private quarters, so often that they may reflect popular notions of piety.⁶⁵ All of them radiate positive vibes as a sort of amulet.⁶⁶ The figure appears on cylinder seals for a short period of seventy years. We can only guess about what function they had there, but note that many of such seals which are inscribed belonged to women.⁶⁷

There are also items that depict the female pudendum, mostly in the form of a downward pointed triangle. A number were found in temples with clay phalluses. They are pierced, which may indicate that they were worn threaded on a string.⁶⁸ In Chapter 4 about the family we discussed the inscription from Assur in which a woman dedicated a pudendum for the well-being of her family. That would have been an appropriate offering for Ištar, and only a woman could make such an offering. It is said that particular shells made of blue lapis lazuli symbolised the goddess’s vulva in the myths surrounding her.⁶⁹ The necklace of the whore consisted of shells and clay phalluses.

Copious praises for the ‘vessel’ of Inanna occur in songs of debauchery confirming the idea of salacious associations. In Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (1994), Chapter 9 is wholly devoted to ‘Inanna rejoicing in her vulva’. Much more can be found in this adult book, but for the sake of brevity and to spare our blushes here we will not repeat what she says.⁷⁰

It is certainly possible that the goddess had different names in her diverse hypostases. The name Nanaya crops up frequently in love songs and incanta-

63 F. A. M. Wiggermann, JEOL 29 (1985–86) 28 f.; J. Asher-Greve in: S. Schroer, *Images and gender. Contributions to the hermeneutics of reading ancient art* (2006) 150–153, 160 f.

64 Wiggermann, ‘Nackte Göttin. A’, RIA IX/1–2 (1998) 46 f., 49 § 5, ‘Votives’.

65 C. Uehlinger, RIA IX/1–2 (1998) 57 f.

66 K. van der Toorn, BiOr 43 (1986) 495–499, in his review of the book by U. Winter.

67 D. Collon, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic seals in the British Museum. Cylinder seals III* (1986) 131 f., ‘The Nude Goddess’. An Old Babylonian cylinder seal from Qatna has an introduction scene picturing a naked woman on a socle; she may have had a mediating role between god and man; M. al-Maqdisi, *Schätze des alten Syrien: die Entdeckung des Königreichs Qatna* (2009) 183.

68 J. S. Cooper, BiOr 36 (1979) 329, on W. Farber, BID (1977) 157 f.

69 S. Maul in: V. Haas, *Außenseiter*, 161, 165 (on the Akkadian version of ‘The Descent of Ištar’, 112). Cf. A. L. Oppenheim, Or. NS 32 (1963) 407–410.

70 See also V. Haas, *Babylonischer Liebesgarten. Erotik und Sexualität im Alten Orient* (1999), especially the chapter ‘Die Liebesgöttin Inana-Ištar’.

tions for potency.⁷¹ She clearly represents fleshly desire. The problematic *kezertu* women served her. We know of a woman called Nanaya-šamḫat, ‘Nanaya is provocative’,⁷² and as we have seen earlier *šamḫatu* is also a word for ‘strumpet’.

Išḫara as the hypostasis of Ištar is completely different from Nanaya. She is the goddess who helps in a marriage. Her symbol is the scorpion and we often see a scorpion depicted in bed-scenes,⁷³ so she seems to have favoured marital relationships. With this can be contrasted the scenes in a drinking-house, where a man copulates from behind with a woman drinking beer. A line from an incantation picks up this contrast between Nanaya and Išḫara.

What Ištar did for Tammuz, what Nanaya did for her lover (*ḫā'iru*), what Išḫara did for her husband (*mutu*; variant *almanu*).⁷⁴

Although we spoke of a hypostasis we now note cautiously that Nanaya and Išḫara were always differentiated from Ištar.

The separate names of these goddesses with the distinct qualities associated with them relates to the ambivalent qualities associated with Ištar. Ištar/Inanna is a goddess of opposites, simultaneously aggressive and tender, representing both war and sex. The aggressive element was excluded when presenting her as Nanaya or Išḫara. She was also the planet Venus, who was feminine as the evening star and masculine as the morning star.⁷⁵ These contrasting qualities continue to be the subject of discussion among historians of religions.⁷⁶ Ignorance forbids us to intervene in that discussion.

71 TUAT II/5 (1989) 741f., A 49; B 6, 9; 744 i 24, 746 iv 6; 749:27; Wilcke, ZA 75 (1985) 200–204:45, 84, 94, 98; Sjöberg, JCS 29 (1977) 16–27; in potency incantations.

72 In D. Arnaud, BBVOT 1 no. 23, with C. Wilcke, *Festschrift W. Röllig* (1997) 414, and AbB 14 184:5.

73 E. Douglas van Buren, Or. NS 13 (1944) 5f. (‘She was the bride who presided over the consummation of marriage ...’); Winter, *Frau und Göttin*, 355.

74 R. D. Biggs, TCS 2 (1967) 44 no. 25, with comments.

75 I. Wegner, *Gestalt und Kult der Ištar-Šawuška in Kleinasien* (1981) 41, 46.

76 H. L. J. Vanstiphout, ‘Inanna/Ishtar as a figure of controversy’, in: H. Kippenberg, *Struggles of the Gods* (1984) 225–238; J. Bottéro, ‘La femme, l’amour et la guerre en Mésopotamie ancienne’, in: *Poikilia. Études offerts à Jean-Pierre Vernant* (1987) 165–183; R. Harris, ‘Inanna-Ishtar as paradox and coincidence of opposites’, *History of Religions* 30 (1991) 261–278; U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (1983) 217–238 (notably on the ‘virgin’ goddess Anat).

21.6 A wild celebration

In Babylon at the beginning of the fourth month a remarkable feast was celebrated. When parts of the description of that ritual and a few of the songs were published the editor described them as love songs. Ištar was often mentioned and the tone was debauched. We now know the background.⁷⁷ Marduk, the god of Babylon, had a respectable goddess as a wife, but to her annoyance he had an affair with Ištar. That motif echoes Hera and Zeus with his endless girlfriends. While the wife sat downstairs inside the house, up on the roof Marduk was occupying himself with his girlfriend. The songs are slanging-matches, full of reproachful statements expressed in coarse language. Her rival tells Ištar that ‘You are made of silver’, implying that people had to pay for her services. She continues,

Into your vessel, which you so much rely on, into it I shall let a dog go, and tie the door shut.
Into it I shall let a raven go, and he shall make a nest there.

And in similar vein,

O vessel of two fingers, why do you still sow discord?

Commentators suspect that these words were sung at a rather licentious street festival, some kind of ribald carnival, and it continued to be celebrated until the Arsacid period. The well-known description of Herodotus with which we began this chapter, of Babylonian women turning to prostitution once in their lives, possibly also had elements seen in this festival. For Herodotus the chief personality was the goddess Mylitta, a name to be identified with Mulissu by which Ištar must be meant. The fact that women have a ‘garland of ribbons round their heads’ is reminiscent of the hairstyle of the *kezertu*. Perhaps this feast was an occasion for the men of Babylon to go outside with hussies.⁷⁸ This exuberance displayed at the beginning of the month can be contrasted with the sombre mourning for Tammuz, the beloved of Ištar, at the end, but for this we must wait until Chapter 29.

⁷⁷ Discovered by D. O. Edzard; see now G. Leick, *Sex and eroticism in Mesopotamian literature* (1994) 239–246. The inventory of the songs published by J. A. Black fits this festival well; ‘Babylonian ballads: a new genre’, *JAOS* 103 (1983) 25–34.

⁷⁸ R. Da Riva, *E. Frahm, AfO* 46–47 (1999–2000) 178–181.