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The Marginalization of Priestesses in Ancient Mesopotamia[1]

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In 1992 Tikva Frymer-Kensky coined the phrase the "marginalization of goddesses" in her study of goddesses in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. In a chapter of that study she argued convincingly that in ancient Mesopotamian mythological texts goddesses were over the course of time relegated to the background. Their traditional roles as creators were taken over by male gods, especially Enki, while the goddesses became passive spectators to the creation performed by male gods. As Frymer-Kensky pointed out, this may be most visible in the tale *Enuma elish*, "When On High," the so-called Babylonian Epic of Creation, or rather a mythological tale (or bricolage) composed to elevate the god Marduk to the highest position in the pantheon. In the tale it is Marduk who creates the cosmos; his female antagonist, Tiamat (the deified ocean), became so passive a participant in creation that her participation is reduced to her slain body which was used to create the cosmos from it: "*From her body, Marduk creates the world and organizes the cosmos as a divine state. We live in the body of the mother, but she has neither activity nor power.*" (Frymer-Kensky 1992, 76). This can be contrasted with the much older goddess Namma, the divine cosmic ocean, who created the universe all by herself (Wiggerman 1998–2001, 136). Her original mythology is lost in the fog of history (Brisch 2013), though she is mentioned in mythological texts about Enki, yet only in marginal roles (Wiggerman 1998–2001, 138).

It is suggested here that, in analogy to the marginalization of goddesses in the pantheon, a similar process may be observed regarding women that served as religious agents in ancient Mesopotamia. Susan Pollock's pioneering insights into women as high priestesses is the inspiration for this article in her honor, in the hope that this small contribution will be seen as a token of gratitude and friendship. In a novel way of writing history, Pollock (1991) pointed out that the appointment of elite women as high priestesses, first attested in the third millennium BCE, offered women a pathway into political and economic power.

Women and the priesthood

The most famous priestess from ancient Mesopotamia was undoubtedly Enheduanna, high priestess of the moon god Nanna in Ur (Westenholz 1989; Pollock 1991; Bahrani 2001, 113–17; Zgoll 2008; Stol 2016, 564–66). It is not entirely clear why Enheduanna was appointed high priestess of the moon god. Recently, Foster (2016, 137) suggested that her appointment may have been motivated by the special relationship of the Akkadian kings to the moon god, perhaps based on the dynasty's interest in divination. Following on from Marshall Sahlins's recent call for "*something like a Copernican revolution in the sciences of society and culture*" (Sahlins 2017, 57), where he argued for including (and taking seriously) religious beliefs in anthropological studies, the

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1 All abbreviations follow the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative's list of abbreviations for Assyriology (http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/abbreviations_for_assyriology).

appointment of a high priestess in a religious center should not be seen merely as a political move.

Most of the secondary literature about Enheduanna has focused on questions related to the authenticity of her authorship (see, for example, Civil 1980; Bahrani 2001, 116; Black 2002).[2] She is often hailed as the world's first named author, because she appears in a number of Sumerian literary works (Zgoll 2008; Foster 2016, 331–47). Yet, the point here is not whether or not her literacy is authentic, but that writing in the early phases of Mesopotamian history was associated with the female (see Robson 2007), and that hence the first person to whom authorship was assigned was a woman. Whether or not this claim reflects a historical truth is of secondary importance here, because it clearly shows that writing was ideologically the domain of the female; both of goddesses, and of priestesses (Brisch 2015).

Fig. 1. Statuette of En-anna-tumma, daughter of king Ishme-Dagan of Isin (r. 1955–1937 BCE), excavated in Ur in 1926. Photo: Courtesy of the Penn Museum, object no. B16229; image no. 296800.

Other kings also appointed sisters and daughters as high priestesses (Stol 2016, 555–77), for example, En-anna-tumma, daughter of king Ishme-Dagan of Isin (r. 1955–1937 BCE), who was also a high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur. There is even a statuette of her with a dedicatory inscription to the goddess Ningal, Nanna's wife (**Fig. 1**). The existence of such a statuette further attests to the importance that these women held. The custom of appointing high priestesses only ended after En-ane-du, the sister of king Rim-Sin of Larsa (r. 1822–1763), had passed away. The Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (r. 555–539), the last native king of Mesopotamia, attempted to revive this old custom by appointing his daughter, En-nigaldi-Nanna, as high priestess of the moon god in Ur. One of Nabonidus's cylinder inscriptions (the En-nigaldi-Nanna cylinder, probably found in Ur, see Schaudig 2001, 373–77) discusses this event at length, even including some archaeological information about having uncovered En-ane-du's inscription, in which she wrote about the building of the Gipar at Ur (for a discussion of the authenticity of this claim see Schaudig 2003, 482–85).

The high priestess of the moon god in Ur was not the only influential priestly office. Other priestly offices held by women included that of the eresh-dingir or NIN priestesses as well as the lukur priestesses.

2 The authenticity of Enheduanna's authorship is not in doubt because of her gender (so Bahrani 2001, 116), but because no manuscripts of the compositions mentioning her are actually preserved from the Old Akkadian period itself, and in addition, because the collection of temple hymns (Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969; ETCSL 4.80.1) lists a temple for king Shulgi of Ur, who lived about 200 years after Enheduanna (Black 2002).

Examples of Lukur/*nadītum* priestesses at Nippur

In order to illu strate what priestesses were marginalized from, the following will, by necessity, include a short discussion of one priestly office as a case study. I have chosen the office of the *nadītum* priestess, because, as has been frequently noted, it is one of the offices that is no longer attested after the Old Babylonian period.

Much has been written about *nadītum* priestesses in the Old Babylonian period (e.g., Harris 1964; 1975; Renger 1967; Finkelstein 1976; Stone 1982; Janssen 1991; Yoffee 2004, 116–21; Barberon 2012; Stol 2016, 584–604; De Graef 2016; 2018). The *nadītum* priestesses of Shamash in the city of Sippar have often been taken as paradigmatic in our understanding of the social and economic roles that these women played in ancient Mesopotamia; hence, all *nadītum* priestesses were described as celibate and childless. Yet, as more data is published, we can observe a growing amount of evidence that forces us to revise this picture. It has been known for a long time that the *nadītum* priestesses of Marduk did indeed marry, and new data from Nippur (Goddeeris 2016) also show that a *nadītum* priestess of Lugalaba (see below) married – in fact this particular priestess married not only once but twice – and she also adopted children. Additionally, and this has been acknowledged less frequently, the title lukur is already attested since the Early Dynastic period, where there seem to have been no prohibitions regarding getting married and having children (Sharlach 2008, 178).

I will focus on lukur priestesses from Nippur, the religious center of early Mesopotamia, in order to illuminate the religious and economic roles of these priestesses, before continuing with a brief discussion about the obvious absence of such priestly offices for women in the first millennium BCE. The title lukur is the Sumerian equivalent of *nadītum*, but both titles will be used in this paper. I will begin with a discussion of lukur priestesses of Ninurta from the Ur III period and then focus on the Old Babylonian period, which provides data in greater detail. Ninurta was the patron deity of Nippur, even though Nippur was also the home to his divine father Enlil, the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon (Sallaberger 1997; Selz 1992).

It has been proposed that the titles of lukur/*nadītum* and eresh-dingir were partly interchangeable during the Old Babylonian period (Stol 2000; De Graef 2018, 78). Stol's (2000, 463) arguments were made on the basis of the observation that at Nippur the eresh-dingir priestesses only appear in the "Sattukku" archive, studied by Sigrist (1984). This archive consisted of the bookkeeping of food offerings and their redistribution among temple and palace personnel. By contrast, the lukur priestesses exclusively appeared in other legal and administrative texts from Nippur. However, lukur priestesses do occur, albeit rarely, in the "Sattukku" archive, though only in the small group of "4-column tablets" (Sigrist 1984, 31–33; see also Brisch forthcoming b). For example, the tablet 5NT 409 / NBC 11283 (= Sigrist 1984, no. 321, catalogue no. 331) mentions rations for the lukur priestesses of Ninurta (obv. i 2). Because the tablets demonstrate many similarities with other "Sattukku" tablets, Sigrist (1984, 31) concluded that they also dealt with the redistribution of food offerings. It is therefore highly unlikely that the titles of lukur and eresh-dingir were interchangeable, at least in Old Babylonian Nippur. Stol's observation that these priestesses appear to be attested in different groups of archival contexts may perhaps be explained by the different kinds of duties and positions in the hierarchy that these women had, although this will need to be studied in greater detail in the future.

Ur III period (ca. 2112–2004 BCE)

In the Ur III period, the title lukur was co-opted by the deified king as a designation for his junior wives (Steinkeller 1981; Sharlach 2008; Weiershäuser 2008, 237–40). One of the best known lukur wives of the deified king was Shulgi-simti (Weiershäuser 2008, 31–105). A major part of Shulgi-simti's activities revolved around administering food offerings, often in the form of animals assigned for sacrifice, and attending to the worship of various deities (Weiershäuser 2008, 46–94).

However, the title also existed as a priestly title independent of the divine king. We know of a lukur priestess of Ninurta named Geme-Enlila, who in one text has the designation „dumu-munus lugal lukur ^{d}Nin-urta," "daughter of the king, lukur priestess of the god Ninurta" (Owen 1982, text no. 859). The text is dated to the reign of Shu-Sin, thus it is possible that she was one of his daughters.[3] Otherwise little is known of her, a seal giving her name and titles is attested for her, and she is mentioned in some texts from Puzrish-Dagan (Sharlach 2008, 179–80), among others in a text that mentions rations for builders at her house (Sharlach 2008, 179n13). She is mentioned here, because this attestation indicates that during the Ur III period the title "lukur priestess of Ninurta" was important enough for a princess to have been appointed to this function, though there are perhaps some indications that not all lukur priestesses in the Ur III period were well off and of high standing (Sharlach 2008). In part the seemingly contradictory information may be due to strong local differences in the practice of religion in ancient Mesopotamia.

Old Babylonian period (ca. 2004–1595 BCE)

In the administrative records from Nippur dating to the Old Babylonian period we frequently find, among other individuals, a woman named Damiqtum, who is responsible for various goods related to food offerings; sometimes animals, sometimes other foods (grains or beer). A newly published legal document from Nippur also mentions a woman named Damiqtum, who has the title lukur of Ninurta. It is highly likely that this Damiqtum is the same woman who was in charge of food offerings.

Damiqtum first appears in a sales document relating to real estate in Nippur (Goddeeris 2016, 103–04, text no. 30). The legal document is about the purchase of a "built house plot" (e_2-du_3-a) in the compound of the lukur/*nadītum* priestesses (ki-lukur). The size of the plot was 1/3 of a sar, which is equal to about 12 square meters; thus not very large. The plot was next to the house of a man named Nanna-manshum, and was purchased from another *nadītum* priestess of Ninurta named Hunabatum. The price of this real estate was 11 shekels of silver (about 88 grams). Hunabatum, the seller of the real estate, stated that she would relinquish any future claims to the sold property. The contract is dated to the year Rim-Sin 9 and thus is about 20 years older than the documents in which Damiqtum is mentioned as being in charge of food offerings. One could contemplate that the real estate purchase in the quarters of the *nadītum* priestesses may have happened shortly after Damiqtum became a *nadītum* priestess, at which point she would still have been rather junior, and that she only took on more responsibilities at a later stage of her career.[4]

3 It has been speculated that the princess Geme-Enlila was identical to queen Geme-Enlila, wife of the last Ur III king Ibbi-Sîn. If that had been the case, the king would have married his sister. It is, however, unlikely that this was the case (Michalowski 1982, 136–37; Weiershäuser 2008, 165 with further references).

4 Two more contracts concerning real estate mention Damiqtum, PBS 8/2 112 and PBS 8/2 181, see Goddeeris 2016, 104. Unfortunately, neither of these contracts has a date. PBS 8/2 181 seems to be about the exchange of real estate in the quarters of the *nadītum* priestesses, but the contract is partly broken.

The following two documents serve as examples for Damiqtum's economic activities in Nippur: the tablet CBS 7466 (Robertson 1981, 239) is the first example here:

Transliteration:
Obv.
1. 2(diš) udu $nita_2$
2. $siškur_2$ ^{d}en-lil_2
3. *ù* ^{d}nin-lil_2
4. $giri_3$ *da-mi-iq-tum*
5. 1(diš) $maš_2$-gal
Rev.
6. igi-kar_2 *ra-bu-ut-*^{d}*su'en*
7. iti du_6-ku_3 ud 17-kam
8. mu-us_2-sa i_3-si-in^{ki} ba-dab_5-ba

Translation:
Obv.
1. 2 male sheep
2. Offering (for the gods) Enlil
3. and Ninlil,
4. under the authority of (or: via) Damiqtum
5. 1 goat
Rev.
6. Travel provision (for) Rabut-Suen.
7. Month: *Tašrītum*, the 17th day.
8. The year following that (the city of Isin was taken (Rim-Sin 31 = 1791 BCE)

Damiqtum is designated as being responsible for conveying sheep as offerings for Enlil and Ninlil; it is not noted where the animals came from, although other texts do note the origins of offered goods, for which Damiqtum is responsible. The Sumerian term $giri_3$ "under the authority of" is frequently used in administrative texts to designate a person who is responsible for conveying goods to their destination (Van De Mieroop 1987, 93–94), and it is often men that appear in this administrative function. This, therefore, indicates that Damiqtum held an important position within the administration of food offerings at Nippur. Another tablet (Robertson 1984, 172–75, 186 = CBS 7111, rev. line 6) mentions several female slaves belonging to Damiqtum's household, a further indication of her wealthy status within the temple community.

A second example shows that Damiqtum also handled grain destined to be used as food offerings for the god Ninurta (Robertson 1981, 249 = CBS 7490):

Transliteration
Obv.
1. 1(bariga) še-bi
2. $siškur_2$ ^{d}nin-urta
3. $giri_3$ *da-mi-iq-tum*
4. 1(diš) uzud 2(diš) anše
5. $giri_3$ ^{d}*su'en-mu-ba-li-iṭ*
Rev.
6. 1(bariga) *u-ba-a-a-tum*
7. kaskal a-$ša_3$ a-nag-^{d}utu
8. iti ki 8(diš) kin-^{d}inanna ud 2(u)-kam
9. mu ki 5(diš) i_3-si-in^{ki} ba-dab_5-ba

Translation
Obv.
1. 60 liters of grain
2. offering for the god Ninurta
3. under the authority of Damiqtum,
4. 1 goat, 2 donkeys
5. under the authority of Sin-muballiṭ,
Rev.
6. 60 liters (for) Ubayatum,
7. (for) the journey to the field Maškit-Šamaš.
8. Month ki-8 (?) Elūlu, the 20th day.
9. The 5th year (?) after Isin was taken.[5] (Rim-Sin 34?)

5 The unusual year dates most likely refer to a change in the calendar introduced by king Rīm-Sîn I of Larsa. This experiment with the calendar, which involved the creation of super-months with up to 48 days and super-years with more than 12 months is still not fully understood, hence, it is not possible to fully translate the year dates in this text. For the latest discussion of this phenomenon, including a discussion of previous literature, see Goddeeris 2016, 335-40.

These two examples suggest that Damiqtum, as the lukur priestess of Ninurta, was not only in charge of acquiring food offerings for Ninurta, the god to whom she was consecrated, but also for other gods; namely Enlil and Ninlil. This would also contradict earlier statements that lukur/*nadītum* women were not religious agents (e.g., Harris 1964, 108), and, interestingly, the duty of administering food offerings also overlaps with the duties of royal women in the Ur III period who held the title lukur, such as the afore-mentioned Shulgi-simti.

It is becoming increasingly likely that the various temples in Nippur may have organized themselves centrally, pooling resources from various temple officers to administer, collect, and distribute the food offerings for all of the gods in Nippur (Robertson 1984; Goddeeris 2016, 335–45). The coordination of the administration of food offerings between the different temples and their religious agents may have been a safe-guard against times when there was a scarcity of food, although this remains speculative.

Were lukur/*nadītum* priestesses unmarried and childless?

Much has been written about the supposed celibacy of lukur/*nadītum* priestesses. For example, the designation *nadītum* is derived from the Akkadian verb *nadûm*, which can mean "to be fallow," usually said of agricultural fields. This has been taken as an etymological indication that women with the title *nadītum* were not allowed to marry or have children (Stol 2016, 568). Furthermore, the Babylonian story of the flood (Lambert and Millard 1969; Finkel 2014) mentions that some priestly offices were created for women who had to remain childless as a means of introducing a measure of population control, so that humanity would not become too noisy again and disturb the gods (again) (Stol 2016, 568). Yet, evidence from the literary texts is rather tenuous in the reconstruction of actual social customs. Assumptions of celibacy are also based on the kinship affiliation mentioned in texts, thus if a woman is only identified through her father's or brother's name, it is assumed she was unmarried, yet if she is identified as the wife of a man, she is (clearly) married (Sharlach 2008, 182).

Harris (1964; 1975) in her pioneering work of the *nadītum* priestesses in the southern Mesopotamian town of Sippar also argued that lukur priestesses of the sun god Shamash were unmarried and had to remain celibate. Stone's (1982) study of lukur/*nadītum* priestesses in Nippur seemed to confirm this picture. Stone (1982, 55) even went so far as to state that the *nadītum* priestesses were "unmarried virgins."[6] Their supposed celibacy is underlined by their living arrangements, for which anachronistic terms like "cloister" are often used.

Living quarters for the *nadītum* priestesses existed in several cities, but under different designations. The Nippur quarter is called ki-lukur-ra ("place of the lukur priestess"), but in fact, as Stone (1982, 56) has already pointed out, men were also allowed to purchase real estate in the ki-lukur-ra compound in Nippur; and thus, one can hardly speak of a cloister for nuns in this context. De Graef (2018) has also shown recently that the *gagûm* district in Sippar, in which many *nadītum* priestesses lived, was far from a cloister.

With the publication of new data and more in-depth studies of priestesses, we can now see more and more evidence emerging that neither of these attributes can be applied uncritically or universally to all lukur priestesses.

6 It seems that regarding priestesses in ancient Mesopotamia there is no middle ground in modern interpretations of priestesses as celibate virgins or as promiscuous prostitutes.

There are texts that show that some lukur priestesses were allowed to inherit property, often on the same footing as their brothers (Goddeeris 2016, 78–80, text no. 15). There are also marriage contracts for lukur priestesses as well as adoption documents, in which the priestess adopted children. In one particularly interesting case, a lukur priestess adopted another lukur priestess with the provision that the younger woman takes care of her adopted mother in her old age, and the younger lukur priestess was then allowed to inherit the older woman's substantial property (Goddeeris 2016, 367–68). If Goddeeris's reconstruction is correct, lukur priestesses were normally provided for by their fathers and brothers, yet it seems that during economic hardships these priestesses had to find other means by which to sustain themselves (apparently they were not being cared for by the temples). Adopting a well-off child in exchange for the promise of inheriting her property and valuables seems to have been a way out of this dilemma. Goddeeris (2016, 368) suggests that the priestesses' brothers were able to buy back the family property by repaying the living costs that the family of the adopted priestess had spent on her behalf.

A woman named Naramtum can serve as another example in this context. She worked and lived in Nippur around the same time as Damiqtum. Naramtum was a lukur priestess of a god named Lugalaba, and she is the only priestess attested for this god (Goddeeris 2016, 362). Naramtum married, not only once but twice, and she adopted two male children; her surviving adopted son and Narāmtum's step-daughter, Narubtum, daughter of her first husband, inherited an equal share of her property and valuables (Goddeeris 2016, 361–63). Whether Narāmtum was forced to leave her possessions to adopted family members, because there were no brothers that could have inherited her possessions, is not known. Whether the case of Narāmtum is exceptional is difficult to establish at this point.

Thus, it is not clear whether only lukur/*nadītum* priestesses in certain cities, or consecrated to certain gods, were allowed to marry and adopt (see also the data on the *nadītum* of Marduk collected in Barberon 2012), or whether it may have been particular historical circumstances that allowed lukur/*nadītum* women to adopt; as suggested by Goddeeris (2016, 368). Paragraph 137 of the Code of Hammurabi clearly states that *nadītum* priestesses were allowed to marry. Regardless of whether we consider the Code of Hammurabi to have been normative law or not, the paragraph clearly shows that it was not unthinkable for these priestesses to get married and have children. Although it is often assumed that the paragraph refers only to the *nadītum* priestesses of Marduk (Barberon 2012, 146; Stol 2016, 585), one should note that this is not explicitly stated in the text. Furthermore, the new data from Nippur force us to reconsider whether such prohibitions for priestesses ever existed, or whether this is not instead based on scholarly interpretations of a fragmentary record (or of the absence of certain records, such as marriage contracts).

Perhaps some of these women were unable to bear children, this is not clear, but whether this was at the heart of their consecration into the service of a deity remains speculative. One still notes that it is remarkable that scholarly discourse has often focused on these women's sexuality rather than their religious or administrative duties. If the office of the lukur/*nadītum* priestesses was indeed in charge of the acquisition and administration of food offerings for deities, it would represent a significant step toward gaining a better understanding of their roles in religion and society. Given that the daily ritual of offering foods to gods was one of the most central rituals in Mesopotamian religious worship,

the organization of this religious ritual would have presented an important task in the temples, both religiously and economically.[7]

The marginalization of priestesses

Given the importance of their roles in society and economy, it is all the more surprising that women, who had a distinct and culturally significant presence in religious offices during the third and second millennia BCE, seem to have all but disappeared from temple offices in the first millennium BCE. Appointing a princess to the office of high priestesses, which had started with king Sargon of Agade appointing his daughter Enheduanna as high priestess of the moon god in Ur, ended with the Old Babylonian period. Nabonidus's single attempt to revive this custom seems to have fallen flat. In addition, one can observe that many of the most ancient titles connected with offices of priestesses acquired a negative connotation. In this manner, the offices of the *qadištum*, *nadītum*, and *kezertum* became grouped together and equated to meaning prostitutes ("whores") (Stol 2016, 426, with further references). This is all the more remarkable when one considers that the indications for these women ever having been "sacred prostitutes", or equivalents, is exceedingly problematic and tenuous (Assante 1998; Rubio 1999; Roth 2006; Brisch forthcoming a).

It is not clear why women were less represented in religious offices in the first millennium, nor is it clear why many of the old titles became stigmatized. Societal and religious changes may be behind this, but it remains for another contribution to propose reasons for this marginalization of priestesses in ancient Mesopotamia.

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7 I hope to address the ritual of food offerings in a comprehensive study in the near future.

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