Some Remarks on Women in the Presargonic E₂-MI₂ Corpus from Lagaš/Girsu

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Introduction

The city state of Lagaš was situated in the southeastern part of the alluvium plain created by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and had three districts, Lagash itself (modern al-Hiba), Girsu (modern Telloh), and Nina (modern Surghul). The Dynasty of Lagaš, founded by Ur-Nanše at c. 2500 BC, continued to be one of the competing city-states of the region till c. 2350 BC when conquered by Lugalzagesi of Umma (Brisch 2013: 116–120). Lugalzagesi was, in turn, defeated by Sargon of the Akkad Dynasty, which marks the beginning of the Old Akkadian (also called Sargonic) period. The era starting with Ur-Nanše and preceding Sargon is called the presargonic period and corresponds archaeologically to the ED IIIb period (Sallabeger - Schrakamp 2015: 67).

1. The Presargonic E₂-MI₂ Corpus from Girsu

The corpus comprises some 1,800 texts originating from the district of Girsu in the city-state of Lagaš.¹ The texts are mostly dated to the reigns of the last three rulers of Lagaš, namely Enentarzi, Lugala, and Urukagina, spanning more than twenty years, and are related to the E₂-MI₂ or "Queen’s Household," which was renamed E₂-Ba-ba₆, "Goddess Baba’s Household," during the early reign of Urukagina (Foxvog 2011: 59; Sallabeger - Schrakamp 2015: 74). The
majority of the documents are administrative records from this institution and deal with a variety of subjects, including cult and ritual activities, rations given to different categories of people, livestock, fish and aquatic resources, agricultural activities such as survey and distribution of land and work assignments for people who were allotted subsistence land, and other activities related to orchards, wood, reeds, flax, and metal (Beld 2002: 8–36; Foxvog 2011: 60).\(^2\)

The aim of this paper is to present a general view of the women who appear in these documents, identifying who they were, what they did, and what they received. In the present context an exhaustive survey is not possible, so we will focus on particular women from three social strata: the elite, mid-rank professionals, and dependents from the lower echelons of society. We must bear in mind that, in the course of research in this field, we encounter difficulties in identifying the sex of people partly due to the fact that Sumerian uses some gender-neutral words, such as the noun \textit{lu}, referring to a person (male or female), \textit{dumu} referring to a child (son or daughter), and \textit{dam} referring to a spouse (husband or wife). Also, some Sumerian personal names can be borne by either gender. Hence, we have to be careful when identifying the gender of participants in public life (Crawford 2014: 13).

2. Elite Women

To the top echelon of society belonged women who were members of the royal family, either by birth or marriage.

2.1. Royal Women
2.1.1. Queen

Most institutional activities recorded in the texts in question were carried out in the name of three successive queens: Dimtur, wife of Enentarzi; Baranamatara, wife of Lugalanda; and Sasa, wife of Urukagina, the last ruler of Lagaš. This paper follows Maekawa’s (1974–75) interpretation that although the institu-
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tion was renamed from E₆-MI₂ "Queen's Household" to E₆-Ba-ba₆, "The Goddess Baba's Household," it was still under the queen's supervision, and therefore "E₆-MI₂" in this paper subsumes "E₆-Ba-ba₆."

The E₆-MI₂ controlled vast agricultural lands, gardens, animals, and other resources, on which a total of 600 to 800 persons depended directly (Sallabarger and Prüß 2015: 74). It was hierarchically organized and composed of various categories of working men and women. The question arises as to how independent the queen was in the management of the E₆-MI₂. It seems that the king had some authority over it, especially if Urukagina's policies contributed to the increase in size of the E₆-Ba-ba₆ (Maekawa 1973–74: 99). There are, however, some indications of the queen's independence from her husband to some extent. For instance, Dintur did not disappear when her husband Enentarzi died, but rather remained in charge of the E₆-MI₂ at least in the first year of Lugalanda's reign (Van De Mieroop 1989: 55), and Barammtara had diplomatic relations, presumably of her own, with the queen of Adab (Van De Mieroop 1989: 56) as well as with the queen of Dilmun (Marchesi 2011: 189–199). Adopting a notion presented by Van De Mieroop (1999: 158–159), we may say that the E₆-MI₂ was a smaller institution but was parallel to the principal one controlled by the king.

The queen was allotted subsistence land (gan, šuku). The size of Dintur's land amounted to 210 iku in Enentarzi year 4 (Nik 1, 42 = AWEL 42) and 378 iku in Enentarzi year 5 (VS 14, 188 = AWL 8). Sasa's land was more than twice as large as that of Dintur (Steinkeller 1999: 295).

Queens appear as the buyer in several sales documents (Prentice 2010: 129–148). Dintur purchased a foundling (RTC 16), a lamentation singer (gala) (RTC 17), and a house (BIN 8, 351), and Barammtara purchased two gala-singers (VS 25, 13; Nik 1, 17 = SRU 45) and two blind workers (igi-nu-du₆) (VS 14, 141 = AWL 192; VS 14, 144 = AWL 193). We also find a document in which a merchant bought a gala-singer on behalf of Sasa (BIN 8, 363). Of special interest in these transactions is the purchase of gala-singers by the queen,

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because it implies that the queen herself engaged in procuring gala-singers to fill vacancies, and that this was related to the queen’s responsibility for religious and cultic matters. The queen took the initiative in organizing offerings and ceremonies, and led processions from temple to temple (Cohen 2015: 29–50). Taking into consideration her economic and religious authority, it is plausible that the queen herself was the high priestess (ereš-dingir) of the goddess Baba (Maekawa 1996; Beld 2001: 185; Sallaberger and Huber-Vulliet 2005: 636; Suter 2007: 328; Goodnick Westenholz 2013: 260–261). The cultic duties of this office seem to have been centered on the cult of ancestors, including the queen’s own (Civil 2011: 258).

2.1.2. Mother of the King or Queen

Geme₂-ub₂-ku₃-ga is identified as the queen’s mother (ama munus) (VS 27, 81; dated to Lugalanda year 3), namely the mother of Baranamtar. In a text dated to Lugalanda year 4, she was allotted 36 iku of subsistence land (VS 14, 72 = AWL 5). A queen’s mother, presumably Sasa’s, was also allotted 36 (?) iku of land — not specified in the text but most likely subsistence land (DP 583; dated to Urukagina lugal year 2) — as well as 18 iku of leased land qualified as gan₃, 5-tuku “field that yields 720 šila, per iku” (TSA 7; dated to Urukagina lugal year 4). The ruler’s mother (ama ensi-ka), that is, Urukagina’s mother, who is named Giš-ri, is also known to us (VS 14, 164 = AWL 168; Beld 2002: 75–77).

2.1.3. Princess

In Lagash princes and princesses each had his or her own household, which was under the queen’s management. The barley rations for their personnel were provided from the E₂-MI₂, and the records for each household were put down together on a single tablet every month. These documents were, during Lugalanda year 6, given a new designation še-ba “(gem₂-dumu)” lu₃, di₃-di₃-la-ne “barley rations given to those of the households of royal children,” which
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Deimel (1928: 2) categorized as barley ration text Type IV.

2.1.3.1. Daughter of Lugalanda

Baranamtara gave birth to a daughter in the month of the Festival of Baba (= the twelfth month) of Lugalanda year 4.⁶³ The girl was named Munus-sa₆-ga and was a younger sister of Gême₄-Nanše. Text DP 160 mentions only personnel of Gême₄-Nanše, to whom the eleventh ration of Lugalanda year 4 was distributed, thus corroborating that Munus-sa₆-ga had not been born yet. The households of both Gême₄-Nanše and Munus-sa₆-ga employed several cupbearers (sagi), a wet nurse (um-me), a nursemaid (um-me-da), and a few female servants (ar₅-tu-munus), but the number of staff of the elder sister was always larger than that of the younger. Gême₄-Nanše’s additional personnel included women engaged in wool textile manufacture (ki-siki) or grinding grain (geme₄-kikken), a type of worker who was blind (igi-nu-du₆), an opener of the regulators of a water (conduit) (du₃-a-kus),⁷ and a gardener (nu-kiri₆) who worked in the orchard, and others with professions such as cook (muhaldim), smith (simug), brewer (lu₃-bappir₂), potter (bahar₄), and so forth, none of whom are found among the personnel of Munus-sa₆-ga (BIN 8, 23; RTC 53; DP 157; VS 25, 37; VS 25, 14) (Asher-Greve 1985: 152).

These two princesses owned animals. Lugalanda gave two donkeys to Gême₄-Nanše in his year 4 (Nik 1, 202 = AWEL 202). We find that when the assets of both princesses were concerned, they were put down together on a single tablet. This was the case for a tag attached to a tablet container (Nik 1, 205), which records both princesses’ possession of donkeys. But their animals were separately managed by two men: Ur₃-igi-ama-šes, overseer of royal children (nu-banda₃, nam-dumu), was in charge of Gême₄-Nanše’s animals (DP 214; DP 42), and a certain Lu₃-na-nam, a shepherd (sipa), was in charge of Munus-sa₆-ga’s (VS 14, 170 = AWL 7). Gême₄-Nanše owned thirteen donkeys, while Munus-sa₆-ga owned seven (Nik 1, 203–204 = AWEL 203–204). Two mother cows that were counted among the princesses’ possessions had been purchased
by Munus-kur-ra, a merchant (dam-gar₃), possibly a woman given the name that can be translated “woman of the mountain,” \(^8\) and the cows were put under the responsibility of Baranamtara and managed by the abovementioned Ur₄-Igi-
amasa-še₃ (VS 14, 55 = AWL 96).

2.1.3.2. Daughter of Urukagina

Two daughters of Urukagina, Game₂-Ba-ba₆ and Gême₂-tar-sir₂-sir₂ are attested in Type IV ration lists together with their two brothers (ex., DP 116; HSS 3, 25 = AWAS 24; Nik 1, 16 = AWEL 16; TSA 18). Game₂-Ba-ba₆ is always mentioned first in these lists, meaning that she was the eldest, and she owned the largest household among the four. The households of both Game₂-
Ba-ba₆ and Gême₂-tar-sir₂-sir₂ included cupbearers (sagi), female servants (ar₂-tu-munus), one or two barbers (šu-i₂), and female textile workers (ki-siki), but several professions such as carpenter (nagar), fisherman (šu-ku₄), igi-nigin₄-
man (lu₄-igi-nigin₂), herder of donkey teams (sipa anše sur₃-ka), and plowman (sag-apin) are listed only with the former (Asher-Greve 1985: 152).

Excursus:

From the period of Ur-Nansê, the founder of the Presargonic Lagaš dynasty, two texts with iconographical representations are indicative of the importance of wives and daughters of the ruler. A limestone plaque (RIME 1.9.1.2 = Frayne 2008: 83–84) depicts a row of Ur-Nansê’s children facing him, the first of whom (the leftmost) is a woman with the caption above her left shoulder, “ABd [a?], daughter” (AB₂-d[a]? dumu), who is represented larger than any of her brothers, even A-kur-gal, Ur-Nansê’s successor (Asher-Greve 2006: 60–61; Suter 2013: 209 fig. 10.3). The other one is a limestone stele commemorating the construction of the temple of Inanna Ibgal (RIME1.9.1.6a = Frayne 2008: 87–89). This shows Men-bar₃-abzu, the wife of Ur₄-Nansê (dam Ur₄-Nansê), and Ur₄-Nansê’s daughter Nin-u₃-su₃ (dumu Ur₄-Nansê) seated facing each other (Asher-Greve 2006: 60 fig. 8; Suter 2013: 208 fig. 10.2). These depictions
permit the interpretation that some princesses may have played the role of high priestess, a possibility which has been discussed by Asher-Greve (2006, 2013), Suter (2007), and Goodnick Westenholz (2013), among others.

2.1.4. Sister of Lugalandu or Baranamtara

The so-called ereš-dingir ration texts, classified as “barley rations, emmer rations, (and first fruit rations) of the festival of Baba” (še-ba ziz₃-ba (nig₄-sa-ha-ba) ezem ⁴Ba-ba₄-ka) are important sources for the studies of Lagashite royal sisters. These texts, all dated to the reign of Lugalandu, mention the ereš-dingir-priestess of the goddess Baba (ereš-dingir ⁴Ba-ba₄) as the first recipient, immediately followed either by the names of eight women and the description “ruler’s sisters” (nin ensi₃-ka-me) (DP 127 = AWEL 53) or by the names of two “men of the ereš-dingir-priestess” (lu₄ ereš-dingir-me) plus the names of nine women with the designation lukur-priestess (Nik 1, 53 = AWEL 53; RTC 61; DP 134). Table 1 lists the ereš-dingir and these women together with their rations (barley+emmer). As already mentioned, the ereš-dingir of the goddess Baba in the state of Lagaš might have been the queen of Lagaš. Geme₃-ub₃-ku₃-ga, who was second to the ereš-dingir in terms of the amount of rations, is most likely Baranamtara’s mother (Beld 2002: 187; see also above 2.1.2). If we understand that the expression nin ensi₃-ka-me refers to the women other than the ereš-dingir priestess and Geme₃-ub₃-ku₃-ga, it follows that the seven women listed in Group A in Table 1 (Bara₂₄-lu₂₄, Bara₂₄-gišgal-a-DU, Nin-ga-eš₄, Nin-igi-an-na-ke₄-su, Ku₃₂-ge-pa₃-da, Bara₂₄-ir-nun, and Gišgal-uru-nun) were Lugalandu’s sisters. Group B in Table 1 includes six of the same women as A (one of the two persons named Bara₂₄-gišgal-a-DU, Bara₂₄-lu₂₄, Nin-igi-an-na-ke₄-su, Ku₃₂-ge-pa₃-da, Bara₂₄-ir-nun, and Gišgal-uru-nun). Nin-ga-eš₄, who received as much in rations as the ereš-dingir in A, is not mentioned in B. While in B Bara₂₄-ra-nu₃ preceded Geme₃-ub₃-ku₃-ga and once received the same amount of rations as Geme₃-ub₃-ku₃-ga, in text DP 127 we find her (Bara₂₄-ra-nu₃ / dam Lugal-mu-da-kuš₃) with 72 sila of barley and 72 sila