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Women in Ancient Mesopotamia

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Ancient Mesopotamian texts and images carved into sculptures, cliffs, and palace walls monumentalized the primacy of the male ruler. Complementing such large-scale media, thousands of intaglio seals, and their innumerable impressions, legitimated male power through depictions of the ruler in audience with gods and goddesses. Indeed, a patriarchal power structure sustained Mesopotamian civilization. Even so, women played vital roles in all levels of society. In addition to their domestic and reproductive functions as mothers, wives, and daughters, elite women contributed to the male-dominated spheres of the arts, economy, religion, and government.

Information about ancient Mesopotamian women of diverse social classes survives in cuneiform documents (including legal, economic, labor, marriage, adoption, and temple records, as well as personal letters), visual art (especially friezes depicting ritual and votive sculptures), and archaeological contexts (such as intact burials). In drawing upon this pool of evidence, it is easiest to understand elite women because the corpora of complementary textual, visual, and archaeological data are far more extensive for these women.

Ancient Mesopotamian civilization spans more than three millennia, during which time diverse ethno-linguistic entities were politically dominant in different regions of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin, and as a result it is not possible to assemble a comprehensive or linear account of ancient Mesopotamian women's history (a task that has been likened to writing a history of European men from ancient Greece to the present by Bahrani 2001: 2). This essay therefore offers three case studies, each analyzing an elite female burial from a different millennium: Tomb 800 of the Royal Cemetery at Ur represents the third millennium BCE; Tomb 45 at Ashur represents the second millennium BCE; and Tomb II of the Queens' Tombs at Nimrud provides evidence from the first millennium BCE. Additional textual and visual material is incorporated to complement the mortuary record and provide a broader context for these case studies.

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1 Evidence from Elite Tombs

Intact elite tombs, which archeologists can analyze layer by layer, provide multidimensional evidence for women's significance within the context of ancient Mesopotamian society. When women, men, and children are interred within shared boundaries (of a cemetery, tomb, or a single sarcophagus), the burials can be compared to one another, and variables such as gender, age, and relative status can be assessed (see also Szpakowska, this volume, Chapter 2; Liston, this volume, Chapter 9; Shepherd, this volume, Chapter 16; and Salowey, this volume, Chapter 18). Elite Mesopotamian tombs are generally associated with privileged sites, such as a temple or palace, indicating an individual's high status and social affiliation. The architectural structure of a tomb and the placement of the body on a bier or in a sarcophagus attest to the special attention and protection given to elite deceased (compared to the common practice of inhumation, or direct burial in the ground). Inscriptions (including curses against those who would disturb the dead) may name the deceased, her spouse or lineage, and office held; they also reiterate membership in a high (literate) social stratum. Intact elite tombs generally contain copious grave goods bearing meaningful iconography and adornments that are sometimes found in place as they were last worn on the body. Finally, when preservation and circumstances permit, scientists can analyze human remains to confirm sex and interpret information such as age, stature, history of physical activity, and cause of death (see also Liston, this volume, Chapter 9).

An intact burial preserves the deceased as she was carefully prepared, deposited in her tomb in relation to a variety of objects, and viewed for the last time by the living. Whether or not a tomb's contents correspond to a woman's possessions and appearance in life, they record how the surviving community constructed her identity for eternity according to established social codes. Archaeologists may interpret the body as both a person with a social presence and an inanimate object at the center of a mortuary tableau (Sofaer 2006; Sørensen 2006). In this manner, the tomb of an elite woman simultaneously presents a portrait of life, indicating her rank, role, and identity, and a portrait of death, indicating how she was recognized, regarded, and idealized within living culture.

The masterfully produced objects of precious materials sealed in elite Mesopotamian tombs may have comprised funerary paraphernalia, offerings from the living, and institutional, familial, and personal assets (Mazzoni 2005). The willingness of the living to part with so much material wealth points to the esteem in which they held the deceased. Ritual and ideological customs may have motivated their disposal of valuable property. A lavish funeral may also have provided an opportunity for the surviving members of the household or community to display their wealth, power, and piety. In addition, at least some tomb "treasures" might have been included in the burial because they were understood as essential aspects of a woman's identity, if not her body. For example, would a queen buried without her crown still be a queen? Would a woman buried without her anklets and earrings be missing essential parts of her self?

Once ornamented and surrounded by a great concentration of wealth, the physically idealized corpse could be vulnerable to tangible and supernatural malice, and therefore required quantities of apotropaic objects in the burial. Ethnographic research shows that, in traditional twentieth century Middle Eastern cultures, the more "beautiful" a bride was on account of her adornments, the more important it was that she wore additional charms to protect herself (Gansell 2007a). If this formula applies to the presentation of ancient

Mesopotamian women in death, the mortuary costume itself might have necessitated another layer of ornamentation.

Overall, elite tombs reveal aspects of an individual's personal, social, and ideological identity, as well as the perspectives of the living toward the dead. The environment of ancient Iraq, the agricultural basis of Mesopotamian civilization, access to natural resources, and relationships with adjacent cultures underlay long-standing values and traditions reflected across all three of the tombs described below. Variations reflect changes in religion, government, and social structures across temporal and geographic distance, as well as differences in the rank, status, and roles of the deceased.

2 Case Studies

Tomb 800 of the Royal Cemetery at Ur, c. 2550–2400 BCE

Perhaps best known as the birthplace of the biblical patriarch Abraham (Genesis 11.31), the site of Ur (modern Tell Muqayyar) is located in southern Iraq about ten miles (sixteen kilometers) from modern Nasiriyah. Excavations at Ur between 1922 and 1934 revealed a prosperous Sumerian city-state dated to the mid third millennium BCE (c. 2550–2400 BCE, the Early Dynastic III period). Near the temple of its patron deity, the moon god Nanna, over 1800 burials were unearthed. These have become known as the "Royal Cemetery at Ur" (Woolley 1934).

In most cases, the deceased were simply inhumed at Ur. But excavators designated sixteen exceptional tombs as "royal" because they consisted of architectural structures containing the bodies of multiple people sacrificed in submission to a primary tomb occupant. Some of the deceased wore seals inscribed with their names and titles, such as LUGAL for "king" and ERESH or NIN for "queen."

In the primary chamber of Royal Tomb 800, the body of ERESH/NIN Puabi was displayed on a bier surrounded by three personal attendants (Figure 1.1). A woman about forty years old and just under five feet tall, Puabi was outfitted in a spectacular array of gold, silver, carnelian, and lapis lazuli adornments. Her headdress entailed gold ribbons, leaves, and flowers (Figure 1.2). This was probably placed upon a bulky wig with gold rings threaded through the hair. She also wore large gold earrings that would have rested on her shoulders, several necklaces, a beaded wrist cuff, ten finger rings, and a circlet over her right knee. A tangle of beads and pendants featuring bulls, goats, male and female date palm branches, and other fruits probably constituted several additional necklaces. Overall, images of nature adorned Puabi and would have evoked agricultural and reproductive fecundity.

The bodies of human sacrifice victims filled the antechamber to her tomb. This "death pit," as scholars call it, also contained banqueting vessels, musical instruments, a cart drawn by two oxen, and a large wooden chest likely used to store organic materials such as food or textiles. Variations in rank are evident among the sacrificed attendants, who might have included high-ranking courtiers, lower-ranking household staff, and/or ritual actors dedicated to the Nanna temple. The attendants do not appear to have been enslaved, because several individuals wore personal seals, which in Mesopotamian culture marked status and implied some degree of official responsibility. In Puabi's Tomb 800, and indeed across the cemetery, almost all of the bodies belonged to adults, indicating that age, and

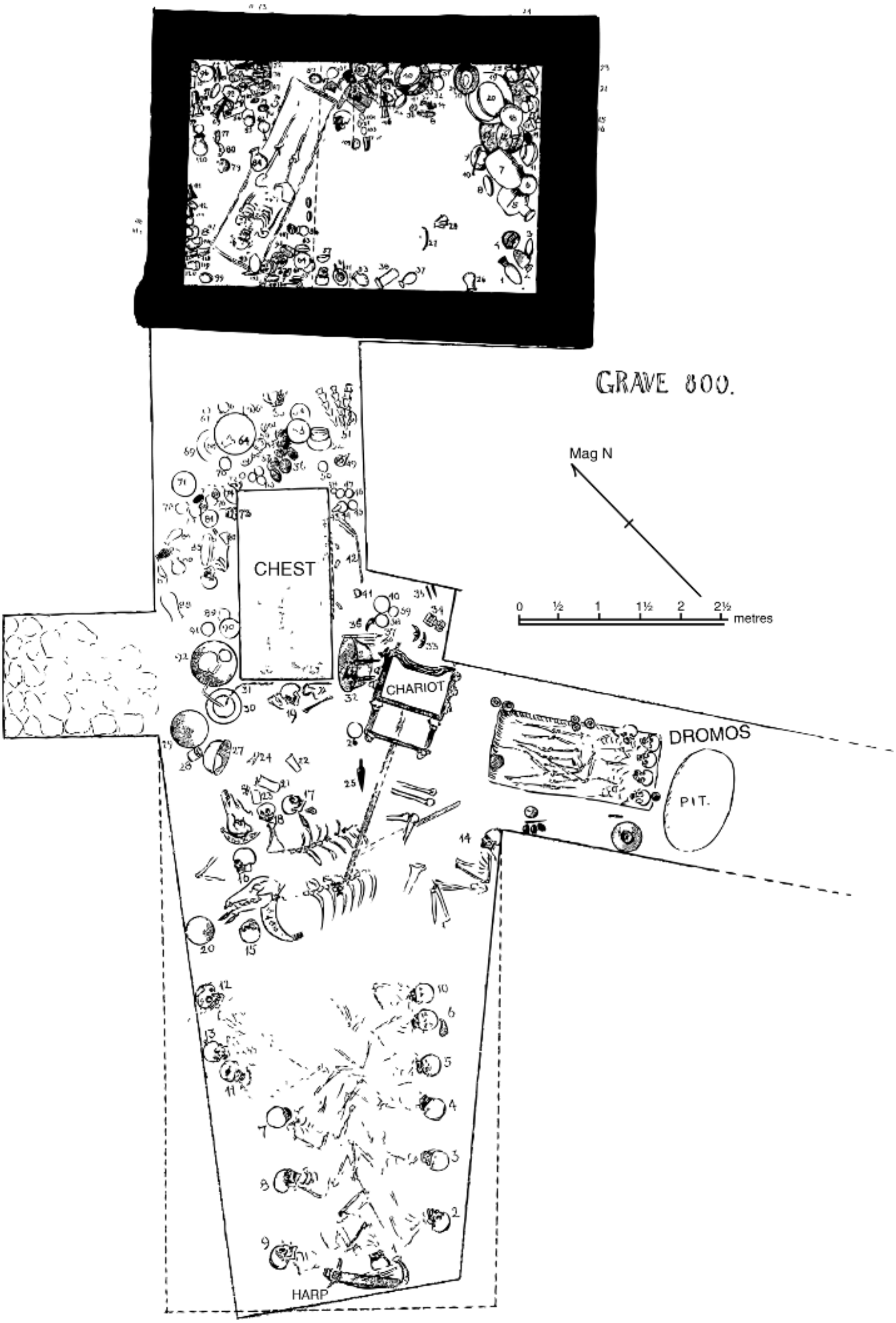
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Figure 1.1 Plan of Royal Tomb 800 at Ur, third millennium BCE. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, negative no. S8-56378.

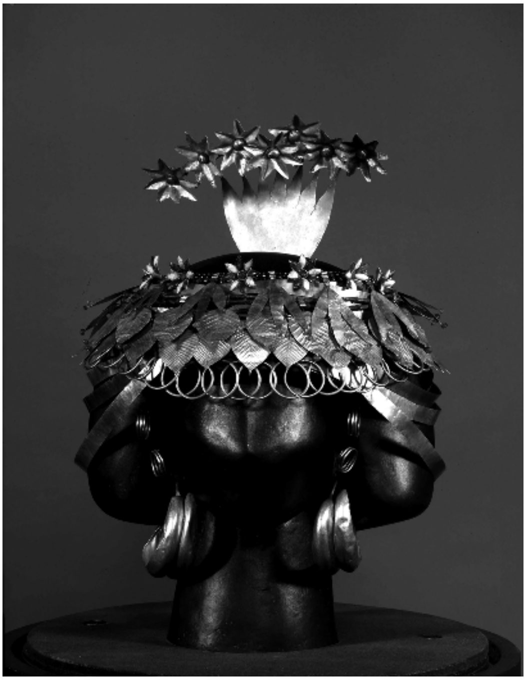

Figure 1.2 Adornment of Queen Puabi, Tomb 800 of the Royal Cemetery at Ur, third millennium BCE. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, negative no. 152100.

perhaps initiation into a group, dictated participation in these death rites, the circumstances of which remain unclear (Baadsgaard et al. 2011).

The sacrificed attendants at Ur included both men and women. For the most part, gender has been assigned according to particular objects or types of adornment that were present in conjunction with inscriptions naming an individual, or with bones well enough preserved to identify sex. In Puabi's burial chamber, at least one male and one female attendant were on hand. In her antechamber, four men, armed with daggers and a spear, accompanied the ox-drawn vehicle, and ten women were associated with musical instruments, including a harp and a lyre. Five additional men equipped with daggers were positioned at the tomb entrance.

An analysis of the deposition of jewelry on bodies across Ur's sixteen Royal Tombs reveals distinct adornment sets based on recurring configurations of standard pieces of jewelry (Gansell 2007b). In addition to signaling collective affiliation across the Royal Tombs, adornment sets illustrate categories that corresponded to gender and sometimes to responsibility. Differences in rank seem to correlate to variations in the material, size, quantity, and design of the standard items in a set. For example, higher-ranking individuals usually wore additional pieces of jewelry that supplemented the basic set, while in the death pits a beaded headband and single earring typically adorned male attendants. Men who demonstrated other forms of privilege, such as having multiple daggers and/or a personal seal, sometimes also wore a string of beads and a garment pin in addition to the standard headband and earring. Most women, some of whom were musicians, were bedecked in a predominantly gold and lapis lazuli adornment set, which entailed a leafy headdress, earrings, a beaded necklace, and garment pins. Puabi's adornment, detailed above, represents an exceptionally elaborate version of this jewelry set since it belonged to a queen. Several unique ornaments supplemented her costume as well.

Puabi and the other primary male and female occupants of the Royal Tombs probably led or belonged to Ur's ruling household—masculine names inscribed on some seals from the tombs correspond to those included in Sumerian king lists (Reade 2001: 17–24). Although men, as kings, held the highest political office, kings and queens received equally extravagant burials at Ur. Their analogous mortuary treatment might reflect the parity of their social or religious, rather than political, status (see also Shepherd, this volume, Chapter 16). Idealized in death, the primary occupants in Ur's Royal Tombs might even have transcended living inequities in emulation of gods and goddesses.

The sixteen Royal Tombs at Ur appear to have been separate burials, prompted by the natural deaths of elite men and women over the course of several decades. Consistency in the adornment of the deceased suggests that the burials belonged to an enduring household or institution, for which the disposal of massive amounts of wealth and human lives must have been an established policy (Pollock 2007). Upon the death of a king or queen, a surviving authority would have had to enforce and coordinate the funeral and the extraordinary requirement of human sacrifice. Whether this power rested with the royal household, temple, or an amalgam of both, the proximity of the cemetery to the Nanna temple suggests the moon god Nanna, who protected the city, would have sanctioned the disposal of riches and human lives.

Since we have yet to find any other burial site comparable in size and lavishness to the Royal Cemetery at Ur, it is difficult to craft a more general history of royal burial of the period. However, a votive object about ten inches (twenty-six centimeters) in diameter, known to scholars as the Disc of Enheduanna, supplements our understanding of elite women in Ur in the third millennium BCE. Created at least a century after the dramatic burials of the Royal Cemetery, the disc was discovered in Ur's sacred precinct. On the obverse, the high priestess Enheduanna is depicted overseeing a ritual; an inscription on the reverse identifies her as the daughter of the usurper Sargon (r. 2300–2245 BCE) and wife of the moon god Nanna (Winter 1987; Zgoll 1997). As princess, priestess, and divine consort, Enheduanna established the legitimacy of her father's rule. She maintained her tenure as high priestess at Ur into the reign of her nephew, Naram-Sin (r. 2200–2184 BCE), who was recognized as a god incarnate during his kingship. The relationship of elite men and women to the divine realm during the Sargonic dynasty may have built upon the precedent of elite proximity to the gods that was established at the Royal Cemetery.

Enheduanna is also credited with composing a corpus of poems to Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of sexuality and fertility. Her prominent position and her literary activities suggest the kinds of opportunities available to elite women in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE. In order to function as effective instruments of state ideology, Puabi and Enheduanna would have had to have been publicly recognized at least locally if not regionally. Both women also exemplified conceptions of fecundity that contributed to the coalescence of early Mesopotamian civilization.

Tomb 45 at Ashur, c. 1350–1200 BCE

The site of Ashur (modern Qal'at Sherqat) sits on a plateau overlooking the Tigris River in northern Iraq about sixty miles (110 kilometers) south of modern Mosul and roughly 350 miles (563 kilometers) north of Ur. In 1908, while excavating near the ancient palaces and temples of Ashur's walled inner city, archaeologists discovered a sealed burial chamber associated with a large house (Haller 1954). Tomb 45, as it is known, dates from the fourteenth to thirteenth century BCE (the Middle Assyrian period), when Ashur flourished as the capital of the emerging Assyrian empire. Of all the Middle Assyrian burials unearthed at Ashur and throughout the Mesopotamian heartland, Tomb 45 contained the greatest concentration of riches; it also contained the body of at least one elite woman.

Tomb 45 consisted of an entry shaft leading to a chamber about eight feet (two and a half meters) long and five feet (one and a half meters) wide that contained nine adults and one child. Most of the skeletons were found either collected in a large urn or heaped against a wall as if they had been cleared away to make room for the two most recently deposited bodies, indicating that they had been buried in phases, probably over the course of generations. The two recent burials were positioned flat on their backs, side by side, atop the other remains. Probably influenced by early twentieth-century social conventions, the excavators interpreted the skeletons as a man (on the left) and woman (on the right). They did not scientifically analyze the bones to determine sex, and the bones were discarded after excavation, preventing a modern restudy of the skeletal remains. More recent analyses of the adornment and grave goods associated with the two skeletons strongly suggest that both individuals were in fact female (Wartke 1992; Harper et al. 1995; Feldman 2006a).

Associated with the bodies was an array of jewelry made of gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian, and banded agate cut into discs with dark centers surrounded by white that closely resembled eyes. The eyestone beads and inlays probably had a protective valence (André-Salvini 1999: 378). Both of the deceased had earrings embellished with "eyes." Loose eyestone beads were associated with the woman on the right, who also wore a necklace or diadem featuring palmette, pomegranate, and floral elements. The skeleton on the left wore pendants in the form of calves.

Vessels, boxes, pins, and combs made of ivory surrounded the two bodies. An ivory jar was found near the skeleton on the right that was embellished with a frieze of plant and animal imagery and contained a pin topped with a female figure holding a tambourine. Also associated with this skeleton was an ivory comb on which women wearing crowns are shown processing among date palms toward a figure (somewhat damaged) that perhaps represents the goddess Ishtar (Figure 1.3). The women carry bunches of dates, a harp, a dish, and what may be wreaths or tambourines. They are probably meant to represent either priestesses or royalty, and the figures are likely engaged in a ritual celebrating the earth's bounty and/or female fecundity. The skeleton on the left was associated with the fragment of a stone ointment jar portraying a winged female figure (perhaps the sexual aspect of the goddess Ishtar, the Assyrian adaptation of Inanna), whose skirt is raised to reveal her pubic area. Also located near the left skeleton was a shallow ivory dish featuring handles in the form of heads of Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and motherhood.

Some objects and ornaments from Tomb 45 are wholly Mesopotamian, while other items, such as the ivory dish with Hathor-heads, incorporate Mediterranean, Egyptian, and Levantine forms, iconography, and raw materials. The latter category of objects is related to an artistic tradition (often referred to by scholars as the "international style") that the dominant civilizations of the period employed in the production of portable luxury goods that they exchanged as diplomatic gifts (Feldman 2006b). Works such as Tomb 45's ivory jar with a plant and animal frieze and some of the vegetal jewelry designs are also closely related to the international style and would have evoked the cosmopolitan aspirations of their elite owners.

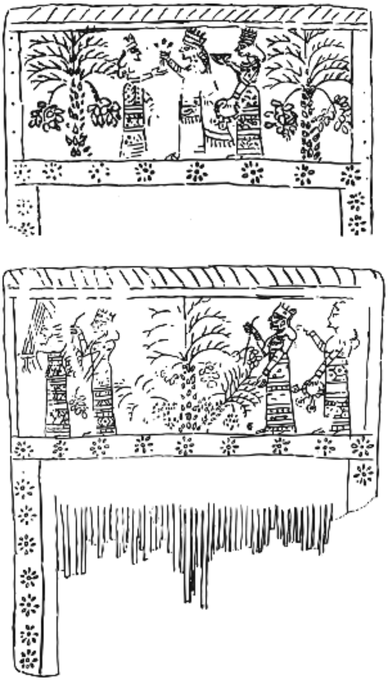

Figure 1.3 Drawing of the front and back of an ivory comb, Tomb 45 at Ashur, second millennium BCE. H. 4.7 cm. Vorderasiatische Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, VA Ass 1097 [Ass 14630 ax]. From Haller (1954), Figs. 163a–b. Drawing: Courtesy Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft.

The archaeological layer immediately above Tomb 45 yielded an archive of cuneiform tablets that name individuals who probably belonged to the family interred there. Dated between 1243 and 1207 BCE, the archive includes letters recording the international trade of raw materials, including ivory, and a shipment of textiles to the Levant. While the primary participant in these transactions is Babu-aha-iddina, who served as the second-ranking official in the Assyrian palace, the tablets also mention two of his female relatives, Marat-ili and Mushallimat-Ishtar. It is impossible to tell whether Marat-ili and Mushallimat-Ishtar were themselves buried in Tomb 45, but they at least are likely to have received similar burials, reflecting the prosperity and international engagement of their household.

During the late second millennium BCE, Mesopotamian rulers participated in complex diplomatic interactions with foreign polities of the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia. Assyria, with its capital at Ashur, was a latecomer to the world stage, and letters between the more established powers attest that Assyria was regarded as a disruptive and immature polity (Moran 1992). Assyrian correspondence, however, demonstrates that at Ashur the king took international recognition seriously.

The visual and material evidence from Tomb 45 emulates and reiterates the imperial ambitions of the nascent Assyrian empire (Feldman 2006a). The elite women buried here participated in Assyrian imperial ideology through their consumption of luxury goods related to the international style. They may also have engaged in international trade. Royal women, whose tombs have not been located, would surely have had even greater stock in international affairs. In fact, princesses themselves were exchanged in marriage between international royal courts to strengthen diplomatic relations (Meier 2000).

The recurrent iconography of fertility on the objects from Tomb 45 highlights women's generative role in sustaining elite bloodlines and perhaps in embodying the vitality of the Assyrian empire. A lapis lazuli seal found loose in the tomb depicts a ewe suckling a lamb by a leafy tree. Above the mother is the cuneiform sign for "god." While it is not certain whether a woman once owned this seal, its imagery (and the impressions it would have proliferated) demonstrate an emphasis among Middle Assyrian elites on the maternal capacity to support life, the fruitfulness of nature, and perhaps the divine protection of their burgeoning empire. Although Ashur's Tomb 45 does not preserve the personal identities and specific roles of the woman or women buried within it, its material culture illuminates the multifaceted significance of elite women in the formation of Assyrian imperial identity.

Tomb II of the Queens' Tombs at Nimrud, c. 750–625 BCE

By the Neo-Assyrian period of the early first millennium BCE, Assyria had become a Near Eastern superpower. Ashur remained the ceremonial center of the empire, but Nimrud (ancient Kalhu, biblical Calah (Genesis 10.8–12)), located roughly forty miles (sixty-four kilometers) to the north on the Tigris River, was rebuilt after almost two millennia of occupation as an administrative and residential capital.

In 1988 and 1989, excavations at Nimrud uncovered four tombs containing several bodies and massive amounts of material wealth mostly dating to the eighth century BCE (Damerji 1999; Hussein and Suleiman 1999; Curtis et al. 2008). Inscriptions naming the deceased and physical remains that were well enough preserved to permit scientific study reveal that the Queens' Tombs, as they are known, contained high-ranking male or eunuch courtiers, children, and generations of elite palace women. The women may have included queen mothers, primary and/or secondary wives, and the sisters and daughters of the king. Biological analysis of their remains indicates that they ate soft foods and led relatively sedentary lives.

Situated beneath the domestic quarters of the palace, where the deceased probably lived, the tombs would have protected the women's bodies and belongings while maintaining their proximity to surviving household members. A vertical five-foot-long pipe concealed beneath the brick pavement of the palace floor rested upon the vault of Tomb II, directly above its sarcophagus. The living would have passed sustenance to the deceased through this channel—an inscription in the tomb refers to offerings of fresh water, beer, wine, and flour. The ritual feeding of the dead, which is archaeologically attested over a thousand years earlier by similar conduits at the third millennium BCE Royal Cemetery at Ur, would have maintained the memory of the deceased and reiterated their status within the palace.

Luckily, ancient robbers left Tomb II undisturbed. Its sarcophagus contained two women, piled one on top of the other, who died when they were between thirty and forty years old. Cuneiform texts and inscribed objects identify the pair as Atalia, wife of King Sargon II (r. 721–705 BCE), and Yaba, wife of King Tiglath-Pileser III (r. 745–727 BCE). Considering their ages at death and the reign dates of their husbands, Atalia would have been interred between twenty and fifty years after Yaba. Because they shared a coffin, it is tempting to speculate that these women were related, but their lineage is not documented.

The names "Atalia" and "Yaba" are of West Semitic origin, suggesting that the women in Tomb II may have been Levantine princesses who entered the Assyrian palace through marriage—Neo-Assyrian rulers regularly gave and received ranking women in diplomatic unions (Dalley 1998). Interestingly, a third name, "Banitu, wife of King Shalmaneser V" (r. 726–722 BCE), is inscribed on objects in the sarcophagus, but it does not refer to a third individual. "Banitu" is an Assyrian translation of "Yaba." At some point, probably when Tiglath-Pileser died and Yaba transitioned into the court of Tiglath-Pileser's son and successor Shalmaneser, Yaba became "Banitu."

Tomb II contained hundreds of grave goods and almost thirty-one pounds (fourteen kilograms) of gold objects and jewelry. Among the luxury items found in the sarcophagus were gold and rock crystal vessels, silver and ivory mirrors, and more jewelry than the women could reasonably have worn—excavators counted nearly ninety necklaces and eighty single earrings. Atalia and Yaba/Banitu wore similar configurations of outsized ornaments made predominantly of gold and agate eyestones. Both women had diadems, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, finger rings, anklets, and, between them, more than 700 tiny gold appliqués that would have decorated their clothing. In addition to funerary gear, the objects in Tomb II may have included offerings or gifts from mourners, riches of the court, dowries, and the women's personal accrued assets—texts record that palace women managed lucrative estates, lent capital, and commissioned large architectural projects (Melville 1999).

Examples of jewelry from Tomb II match those represented on a rare large-scale relief portraying King Ashurbanipal (r. 685–627 BCE) and his primary wife, Libbali-Sharrat, sharing a victory banquet in the royal garden (Figure 1.4). Earrings found in the sarcophagus resemble the type worn by the queen, and the discs etched on her garment probably denote appliqués of the variety found with the bodies. The rosette bracelets depicted on the relief are also analogous to examples recovered archaeologically. Libbali-Sharrat wears a crown of fortified walls, indicating her status as the principal queen (i.e., the mother of the crown prince) and personifying the inviolability of the Assyrian empire (Börker-Klähn 1997; Ornan 2002). No mural crowns, however, have been discovered at Nimrud or elsewhere in Mesopotamia. There are a variety of explanations for this lack; for example, a single state crown may have been passed down from queen to queen, and the women buried at Nimrud would not themselves have had mural crowns if they were not primary wives (at least some of whom texts indicate were buried with the kings at Ashur, but no intact royal tombs have been found there).

In lieu of mural crowns, Tomb II preserved two diadems near the skulls of Atalia and Yaba/Banitu. The first is a rigid circlet comprising three rows of gold flowers. The second consists of a gold mesh headband with a dorsal ribbon inlayed at regular intervals with large eyestones. It also features a large forehead panel embellished with fringes terminating in miniature pomegranates. In Nimrud's Tomb III, yet a third type of crown was found on a child's skull. Sized to fit an adult (perhaps indicating a future privilege assured by birthright), this elaborate headdress incorporates tiers of pomegranates, flowers, winged female figures, and leafy vines from which tiny grape clusters dangle. Juxtaposed with the codified dress of the Neo-Assyrian court, the variety of headdresses in the Queens' Tombs would have differentiated the women, perhaps according to age, ethnicity, status, king's reign, or other variables.

The Tomb II diadem with the forehead panel poses an interesting case. Additional but highly fragmentary examples of this type of headdress were found among the Queens' Tombs, and the forehead ornament also appears on ivory sculptures of women that were

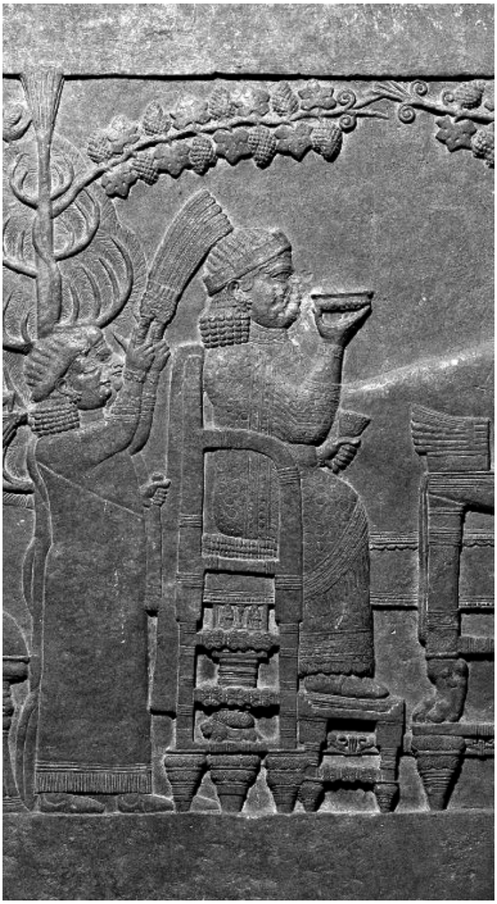

Figure 1.4 Detail of the queen from a relief showing King Ashurbanipal and his queen banqueting in the royal garden, the North Palace at Nineveh, first millennium BCE. British Museum, WA 124920. Photo: © Trustees of The British Museum.

produced in the Levant. Portraying fictive or quasi-divine, idealized, and often nude women, the ivories were imported from Syria or Phoenicia to Nimrud, where they decorated palace furniture and portable objects (Figure 1.5). Atalia or Yaba/Banitu, if of Levantine heritage, might have been buried with her maiden headgear. Alternatively, the diadem might be an Assyrian creation imitating ornaments depicted on the ivory figures. Perhaps the headdress was a diplomatic gift from a foreign court, or a Neo-Assyrian iteration of the second millennium BCE international style (emulated by goods from Tomb 45 at Ashur), which mixed elements of foreign and Mesopotamian artistic traditions.

Regardless of the origin of the headdress, aesthetics may explain why the wife of the Assyrian king would wear the same type of adornment as was depicted on foreign and nude ivory figures decorating objects such as equestrian gear and flywhisks. The full faces and curvaceous bodies of the ivory women would have expressed nourishment, health, and reproductive fertility to both Levantine and Assyrian viewers (Gansell 2009: 156–8). The distinctive forehead ornament may have served as a link between Assyrian queens and the

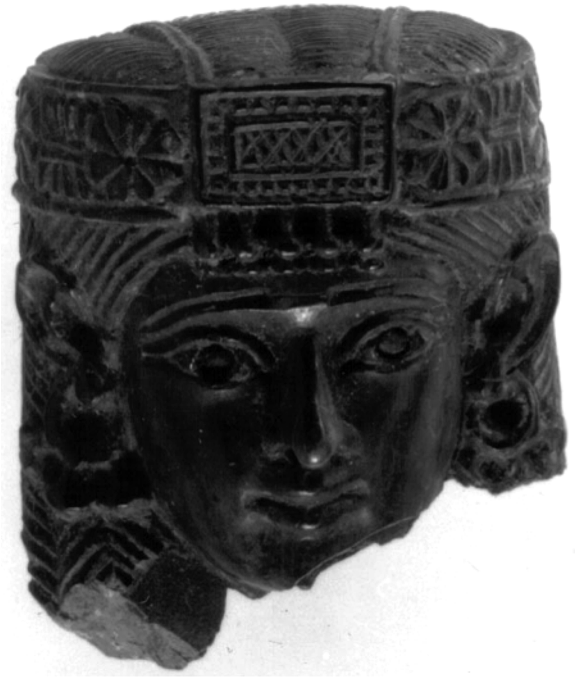

Figure 1.5 Levantine ivory head of a woman wearing a diadem, the Burnt Palace at Nimrud, first millennium BCE. H. 4.19 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1954, 54.117.8. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ideal forms and qualities embodied in the ivory sculptures. Reiterating the significance of the physical appearance of Assyrian queens, the name Yaba/Banitu literally means "attractive" or "well formed," and, in a text carved into palace architecture, King Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE) addressed his queen Tashmetum-sharrat as "beloved wife, whose features [the god] Belit-ili has made perfect above all women" (Galter et al. 1986: 32; Reade 1987: 141–2).

In general, the iconography of fruits and flowers on the headdresses from the Queens' Tombs at Nimrud evoke life and fecundity. Images of scorpions, a motif associated with women and reproductive fertility in Assyrian culture, also grace objects from the tombs (Ornan 2002). The prolific use of eyestones, especially on jewelry positioned over the vital sites of the throat and spine, indicates anxiety over women's vulnerability and implies their essential importance. Indeed, elite Neo-Assyrian women played vital reproductive roles in sustaining the royal lineage and, in the case of international marriages, reinforcing diplomatic ties between sovereigns.

Demonstrating their membership in the Assyrian court and implying their ideological inclusion in the affairs of the empire, other elements of the queens' adornment from Tomb II bear official, non-gendered iconography that was also depicted in large scale in the palace. Prominent among this imagery is a stylized tree, understood by scholars to represent the vitality of the empire. Finally, epitomizing the blending of feminine and official imagery, a Neo-Assyrian seal found in the tomb of an unidentified woman at Nimrud depicts a ritual scene of female figures playing pipes on either side of a stylized tree beneath an emblem of the state god (Mallowan 1966: 114). Although no seals were found in Tomb II, additional seals from the Queens' Tombs (Al-Gailani Werr 2008) demonstrate that, with royal and divine sanction, elite women of the palace acted as their own agents, strengthening and sustaining the international primacy of the Neo-Assyrian empire.

3 Summary and Conclusion

Although texts and images represent ancient Mesopotamian women far less frequently than they do men, and although women did not have independent access to political power, elite women nonetheless played crucial roles in the highest levels of society, and many appear to have had some degree of creative, cultic, and economic autonomy. The tombs presented here demonstrate the attention, protection, and wealth dedicated to diverse elite women. In some cases, inscriptions distinguish women by name and office (e.g., Enheduanna's position as high priestess and consort of the moon god Nanna), thus establishing their authority. Meanwhile, adornment illustrates female membership in the dominant elite while communicating rank, responsibility, and other aspects of social, cultural, and personal identity.

The iconography of jewelry and grave goods reflects broad cultural and ideological values. Across the case studies presented here, an abundance of floral and faunal imagery, as well as references to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, probably evoke the role of women in the cycle of life and regeneration. Women's biological importance may also have been emblematic of agricultural productivity, images of which were ultimately stylized as Neo-Assyrian imperial iconography.

While elite women contributed to state and family lineages by producing heirs, women also legitimated and bonded dynasties through marriage and cultic participation. Texts and images record elite women as patrons of architecture and monuments, managers of personal estates, participants in public rituals, musicians, and priestesses of various ranks. Royal women could serve as regents and in some cases appear to have imparted influence over the politics of their husbands and sons. Less is known about non-elite women, but their lives were not necessarily parallel to those of elite women, whose privileges were most likely politically motivated.

Because a single essay cannot encapsulate three millennia of women's history, this one provides distinctive but complementary windows into the lives of elite women. A focus on tombs maintains consistency across time and geography as Mesopotamian civilization evolved from disparate city-states into a powerful empire. Although elite mortuary evidence presents idealized images of exceptional women, it also offers tangible contexts that were consciously constructed by the living according to established social codes and ideologies.

As demonstrated here, interdisciplinary methodologies are essential as we continue to restore ancient Mesopotamian women into the worlds in which they lived and to which they contributed. Ur, Ashur, and Nimrud remain only partially excavated and will likely yield new evidence, which could resolve many points of speculation (such as whether any Neo-Assyrian queens were buried with mural crowns). Casting a broader net, future initiatives would also benefit from integrating women's histories across social strata, sites, and cultures to build not only a more specific but also a more holistic picture of ancient reality.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Summaries (Harris 1992; Stol 1995), period surveys (Saporetti 1979; Albenda 1983; Asher-Greve 1985; Kuhrt 1989; Beaulieu 1993), and site-specific studies (Batto 1974; Grosz 1989) of Mesopotamian women are available. Pollock (1999) offers the only history of Mesopotamian civilization emphasizing gender, but its temporal scope is limited to between 5000 and 2100 BCE. Tetlow (2004) covers women's legal history from the third millennium to the first millennium BCE.

A number of studies on marriage, especially texts recording bridewealth and dowry, are available (Dalley 1980; Grosz 1983; Roth 1987, 1989, 1991; Westbrook 1987). Further investigations present the subjects of pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and family (Albenda 1987; Scurlock 1991; Roth 1994; Biggs 2000; Harris 2000; Stol 2000). Reflecting available evidence, scholarship on royal Mesopotamian women focuses on the first millennium BCE Neo-Assyrian period (Melville 2004) and the Ur III period of the late third millennium BCE (Weiershäuser 2010).

Outside of the home, women's diverse roles in the economy have been investigated (Veenhof 1972; van de Mieroop 1989; Meier 1991), with the female labor force of the third millennium BCE textile industry being especially well documented (Wright 2008). On prostitution see Assante (2003) and Cooper (2006). Women's participation in religion and in the temple hierarchy is presented in Fleming (1992), van der Toorn (1994), Collon (1999), Westenholz (2006), and Suter (2007). The cloistered second millennium BCE *naditu* priestesses receive specific attention (Stone 1982; Harris 1989), and Abusch (2002) and Sefati and Klein (2002) offer studies on female witches.

Since the 1990s, scholars have theorized Mesopotamian women in terms of gender and sexuality through feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and historiographic approaches (Asher-Greve 1997; Parpola and Whiting 2002; Bahrani 2003). Orientalism is probed by Bohrer (2003) and Halloway (2006). Asher-Greve (2006) provides a detailed historiography of the legendary Assyrian queen Semiramis, and Solvang (2006) discusses the so-called "harem." Also of contemporary interest, van der Toorn (1995) investigates the practice of female veiling.

For comprehensive bibliographies on Mesopotamian women refer to Asher-Greve and Wogec (2002) and Wilfong (1992), although these are not up to date.