

THE ECONOMICS OF RITUAL AT LATE OLD BABYLONIAN KISH

BY

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Abstract

A small archive of economic documents from the city of Kish in the late Old Babylonian period records amounts of money owed to the “supervisor of *kezertu* women” from the *kezertu* account. The employment of *kezertu* women in ritual performance is investigated as well as the managerial activities of the “supervisor of *kezertu* women.” The historical reasons for the migration of the cult of Ištar of Uruk to Kish and the economics of ritual performance are considered.

In his article for the Symposium on “modernity” that celebrates forty years of publication of *JESHO*, Klaas Veenhof¹⁾ is easily able to point to “modern” economic features (such as credit and entrepreneurial behavior) in ancient Mesopotamia (specifically in the Old Assyrian period, but as Veenhof notes, to be found in other periods as well). In the second part of the *JESHO* symposium,²⁾ Jack Goldstone³⁾ indicates that there are many features of modernity in “pre-modern” societies, but that modernity is holistic—it cannot be subdivided. Modernity (to summarize Goldstone’s argument) must refer to the ideal sociological type of a free and equal population (or at least the ideology of equality), with a secular government, economic market forces, experimental science and consequently the awareness and expectation of technological change, and social mobility.

For ancient historians, of course, the divisions of “modern,” “early-modern,” and “pre-modern” societies must gloss over large and even transformational changes in the past, such as those characterizing Jasper’s “axial age” civilizations.⁴⁾ The essays in the anniversary issue (November 1997, vol. 40 no. 4) explored, additionally, different kinds of modernity (than that of Western civilization). Here I consider aspects of Mesopotamian contracts, credit, social mobility, and political change. It is the ritual context of those activities, how-

1) Veenhof 1997.

2) This Symposium was entitled “History, Modernity, and Economic/Social Development in the Premodern World: Dialogues Across Civilizations”, the papers of which are published in this number.

3) This issue.

4) See Eisenstadt 1985.

ever, that make evident the pre-modern nature of the society in which they are embedded.

The primary sources for this investigation come mainly from a single, small administrative archive from the Old Babylonian (ca. 2000-1600 B.C.) city of Kish. Using this limited corpus to explore larger historical topics requires some justification in light of Marvin Powell's admonition⁵⁾ that one can rarely reconstruct the social context from the circumscribed nature of such small administrative archives. To claim an intellectual virtue of philological necessity, I undertake this analysis as an example of "microhistory," by which I refer to the school of Carlo Ginzburg,⁶⁾ which arose, in part, as reaction to the vast historical arenas of Braudel and Wallerstein. For Ginzburg, "a close reading of a relatively small number of texts, related to a possibly circumscribed belief, can be more rewarding than the massive accumulation of related evidence."⁷⁾ As Giovanni Levi points out,⁸⁾ microhistory is not simply a smaller-scale focus, but the employment of different combinations of scales through which one may find the unapparent historical importance of atypical social institutions. In this manner one attempts to evaluate how individuals—even those in the remote Mesopotamian past—negotiated their identities and defined their social groups according to the conflicts and solidarities of everyday life. This microhistorical focus, however, is not simply on "agents" but also on more general social phenomena. It seeks to explore the contradictions of normative systems, the overlapping networks of social and economic power, and the meaning of belief systems that are constitutive in social life.

The City of Kish

In order to situate the archive to be discussed, I sketch the history of the Mesopotamian city of Kish through the Old Babylonian period. Although the area around Kish (Figure 1) was occupied from the Ubaid period onward,⁹⁾ the few finds before the third millennium seem to indicate that Kish grew into a city-state¹⁰⁾ only after 3000 B.C.¹¹⁾ At the nearby site of Jemdet Nasr,¹²⁾ 27 kms

5) Powell 1978.

6) E.g., Ginzburg 1980, 1989, 1991.

7) Ginzburg 1989, p. 164; see Muir 1991.

8) Levi 1992.

9) See excavations at Ras al-Amiyah, about 8 km from Kish (Stronach 1961).

10) For the concept of city-state and its appropriateness to Mesopotamia, see Griffith and Thomas 1981; Nichols and Charlton 1997; Stone 1997; Yoffee 1997.

11) Gibson 1972; Moorey 1978; for latest excavations see Matsumoto 1989. Kish appears in the archaic texts from Uruk (Nissen 1985).

12) Matthews 1989.

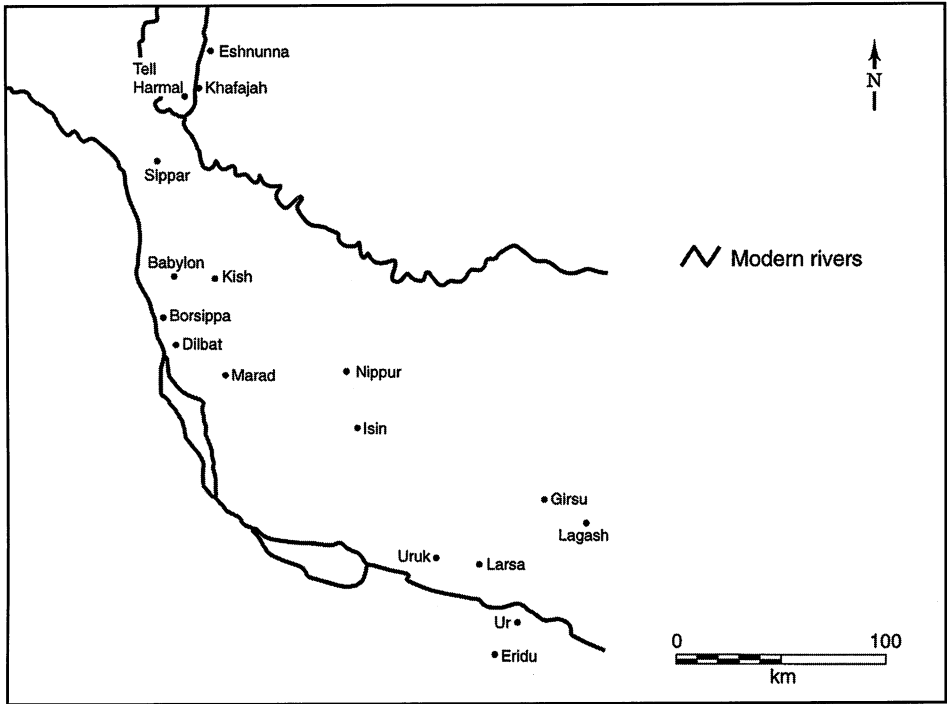


Figure 1 Old Babylonian Cities

from Kish, excavations revealed that Mesopotamian writing and “Sumerian” culture were firmly in place in central Mesopotamia at the start of the third millennium.¹³) At that time Kish consisted of two main mounds (Kish=Tell Uhaimir and Hursagkalama=Tell Ingharra, Figure 2), presumably in origin separate villages, but eventually including many collateral mounds strung out along an east-west axis. The overall area of the site is about 20 km², although this figure includes tells occupied from all time periods (more than 3000 years).

Kish is reasonably well known in historical records from the third millennium B.C., but its reputation also rests on later texts (when Kish was a satellite of its powerful neighbor, Babylon) in which the political landscape of the third millennium was constructed. Furthermore, Kish is known less from texts actually recovered from the site than from references to Kish in texts that come from other cities. The following is simply a digest of available information.

In the Sumerian King List, Kish is named as the first city after the Flood to

13) Englund and Grégoire 1991.

rule over all Mesopotamia.¹⁴⁾ Its rulers include kings with animal names, presumably “totems” of lineages at Kish, and one mythical figure, Etana, who is known from an Akkadian poem¹⁵⁾ and from depictions on cylinder seals.¹⁶⁾ The last kings of the “first dynasty of Kish,” Enmebaragesi and Akka, seem to have exercised (in the literary imagination) some control over the south, or at least were significant presences in Nippur and Uruk.¹⁷⁾

Various Mesopotamian kings assumed the title “king of Kish” (e.g., Mesalim of Der [?], Mesanepada of Ur, Enšakušana and Lugalkignedudu of Uruk, Eanatum of Lagash), implying that they controlled Kish itself or were so powerful that such a claim evoked plausibility.¹⁸⁾ In either case the claim itself is a kind of evidence that rulers of Kish were considered exceptionally powerful by the middle of the third millennium. Some scholars¹⁹⁾ have thought that Kish in central Mesopotamia was the leading city of an Akkadian culture or an Akkadian sphere of influence, in distinction to a Sumerian culture in the south. In political terms it is thought that the kingship at Kish was more secular and hegemonic than in the south.²⁰⁾ Gelb dubbed the linguistic and social differences in central Mesopotamia, “Kish civilization,” in order to distinguish it culturally as well as politically from the south.²¹⁾

Although these interpretations of cultural and political differences between central and southern Mesopotamia can be debated,²²⁾ the material remains of mid-third millennium Kish testify to the centralized political power that has been inferred from the texts to have existed at this time. At the end of the Early Dynastic II period and during the ED IIIa, at Ingharra one moves on a roughly south-to-north line from the “Palace A” (deduced as a palace mainly from the decorative artifacts found in it and the presumed domestic apartments) to a sacred area containing twin ziggurats and temple courtyards²³⁾ and finally to the “Plano-Convex Building,” which has been interpreted as a fortified residence or arsenal (Figure 2). One is reminded of the ceremonial “street of the dead” at the new world city of Teotihuacan²⁴⁾ in the impressive series of buildings and

14) See Michałowski 1983 for the historiographic nature of this document.

15) See latest translation in Foster 1993a.

16) Black and Green 1992.

17) Postgate 1992, pp. 28ff.

18) See Maeda 1981.

19) E.g., Foster 1993b; Steinkeller 1993.

20) Mainly by the estimable pair of Steinkeller and Foster, who seem to agree on little else.

21) Gelb 1981.

22) Yoffee 1995.

23) The structures were barely disclosed, or they were destroyed in excavations.

24) Cowgill 1997.

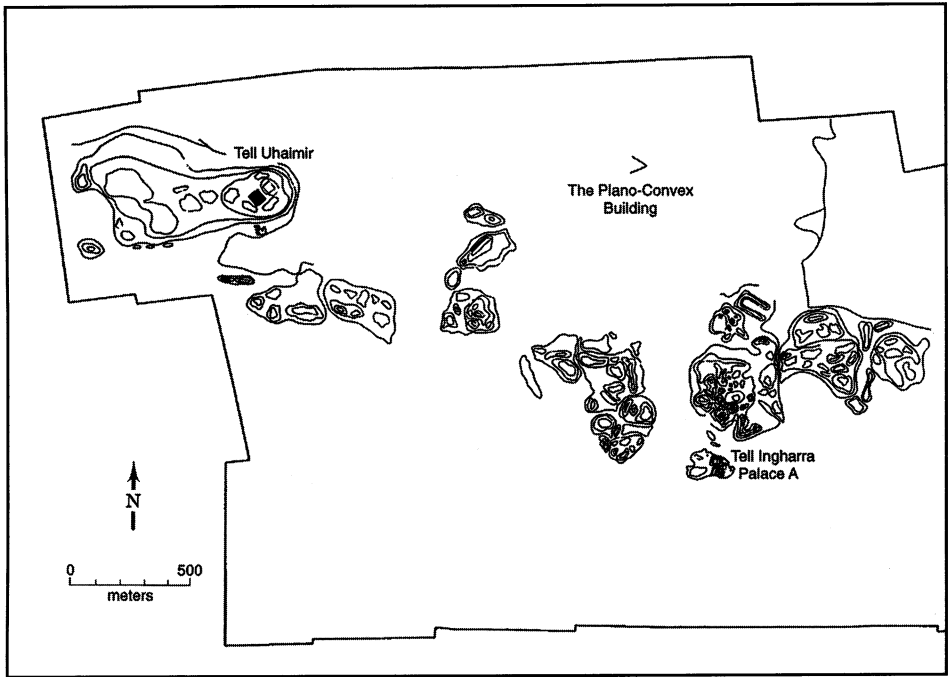


Figure 2 Tells at Kish

monuments that existed at Kish in this period. No one walking along this path in Ingharra could mistake the majesty and power of Kish.

The independence of Kish came to an end with the conquest of Sargon of Akkade and the absorption of Kish into the Akkadian state.²⁵⁾ After the fall of the Akkade, Kish eventually became part of the Ur III state. Little is known of the mode of governance by Ur in Kish and in central Mesopotamia,²⁶⁾ and evidence of the material life in Kish during the time ca. 2100-2000 is similarly lacking. After the fall of the Ur III state at the beginning of the second millennium, Kish became again independent. Along with rulers from many other city-states of the time, a king of Kish called Ashduni-yarim joined in the interne-cine skirmishes for independence and dominion. A later ruler of Kish, Yawium, alternately led an independent Kish and accepted the suzerainty of kings from other city-states.²⁷⁾ To judge from the number of kings from various cities who

25) Gelb 1970; Foster 1993b.

26) See Kraus 1955.

27) See Donbaz and Yoffee 1986.

claimed control over Kish, the venerable city must have been a foremost prize of mainly Amorite princes who were competing against and forming alliances with other leaders of non-urban social groups, as well as against rulers of city-states. Control over Kish seems to have lent weight to the claims of these princes, just as the title “king of Kish” had done about a millennium earlier.

This competition (in the “early Old Babylonian period”) was effectively ended when a king of Babylon named Sumulael (ca. 1880-1844)²⁸ conquered all rivals in central Mesopotamia and established a territorial state with Babylon as its capital. Kish, lying only fifteen kms to the east, became closely attached to its previously unimportant neighbor for the next 1500 years. The great-great-grandson of Sumulael, Hammurabi, went on from the base constructed by his ancestor to conquer the south of Mesopotamia (and territory to the east, north, and west, too). The conquests of Hammurabi, which he finished in the 39th of his 44 regnal years, were already successfully being resisted in the southern provinces in the early years of his son Samsuiluna, and the south was able to break away by the end of his reign. In the south, the territory that had been conquered by Hammurabi was now ruled by “kings of the sealand,” that is, the marshy land bordering the Gulf. Basically only the territorial state established by Sumulael in central Mesopotamia survived to be ruled by the last four rulers of his dynasty, although even these kings attempted to control strategic territory up the Euphrates and occasionally campaigned in the south. This period we may call the “late Old Babylonian” period.

During the early Old Babylonian period (from the fall of Ur III to the victories of Sumulael) the economic and social fabric of Mesopotamia underwent considerable change. Freed from the constraints of Ur III centralized control and in the confusion of political contests in the region, properties (especially in central Mesopotamia) were bought and sold, and great fortunes were amassed. This led to problems in Mesopotamia of how to keep newly established property together since inheritance rules were bilateral, and all children held partible shares in the estate.²⁹) For example, as represented in the archives of *naditu* women of Sippar, some wealthy daughters were sent to “cloisters,” forbidden to marry (but not to have sex), and held only usufruct rights over the portion of immovable property they received as their dowry. That property then reverted to their brothers when the *naditu* died.³⁰) In the late Old Babylonian period, too, social

28) All Old Babylonian dates are according to Brinkman 1977.

29) Sons received their inheritance when the father died, while daughters received theirs as dowries.

30) Harris 1975; Janssen 1991; and Yoffee 1998.

and economic conditions changed as the Babylonian state contracted,³¹⁾ and as new rulers in the south effected massive demographic alterations.³²⁾ It is to these subjects that I now turn.

kezertu *Women at Kish*

Texts referring to *kezertu* women³³⁾ at Kish became known from the publication by E. Szlechter of eight texts conserved in the University of Manchester Museum.³⁴⁾ On the basis of those documents and with reference to a few other texts from various time periods, the *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* in 1965 and the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* in 1971 inferred the meaning of the term. Since *kezertu* is derived from the verb *kezēru*, which means “to curl the hair,” *kezertu* is “a woman with curled hair (a hair-do characteristic of a certain status” according to the *CAD*). Since lexical lists (mostly from much later periods) conjoin *kezertu* with *harimtu*, the normal Akkadian word for “prostitute,” the dictionaries simply cite the definition of *kezertu* as “prostitute.”

The amount of material on *kezertus* increased substantially with J.J. Finkelstein’s publication of 24 more texts housed at Yale.³⁵⁾ These texts were from the same archive as those published by Szlechter, and while it could be shown from internal criteria that they all came from Kish, they were bought from the antiquities’ market and did not come from the formal excavations at Kish.³⁶⁾ Indeed, the bulk of the late Old Babylonian texts that come from Kish and dated to the last three kings of the Old Babylonian period were all purchased by collectors and museums.³⁷⁾ Although discussions of *kezertus*, and especially whether they were really prostitutes, have been made by many scholars,³⁸⁾ the relevant texts, while hardly numerous, have not been studied exhaustively,³⁹⁾ and require further investigation.

31) Stol 1976; Yoffee 1977.

32) See Gasche 1989 and discussion below.

33) Hereafter *kezertu* women, *kezertus*, or the Akkadian plural *kezrētu*.

34) Szlechter 1963.

35) Finkelstein 1972.

36) See Moorey 1978 for description of the de Genouillac and the Oxford-Field Museum excavations.

37) Donbaz and Yoffee 1986; Dalley and Yoffee 1991.

38) Finkelstein 1972; Arnaud 1973; Wilcke 1976-80; Charpin 1986; Sallaberger 1988; Goodnick Westenholz 1989; Spaey 1990; Wilhelm 1990; Lambert 1992; Henshaw 1994; Goodnick Westenholz 1995; Tanret and van Lerberghe 1993.

39) Within the frame of this article I shall describe and edit a few of the texts. I consider only a few texts that are related to this archive but are not in fact from it. My forthcoming monograph on Kish in the Old Babylonian period will also include a discussion of these texts.

The kezertu Archive

I list first the texts and types of texts that concern *kezertu* women at Kish, and I summarize the careers of the supervisors of *kezertu* women. After presenting these basic data, I discuss the historical context of the social institution.

Table of texts

Texts ⁴⁰⁾	Date ⁴¹⁾	Supervisor of <i>kezertus</i> ⁴²⁾	Women named	Type
1. UMM G 22 pl. xxii	A-d 1 (?)	Iddin-Nanaya	Šamhatu	Debt
2. YOS 13 312	A-d 12		Binnartum DAM Ibni-Marduk	Debt
3. UMM G 17 pl. xx	A-d 16	Iddin-Nanaya (not titled)	Qīštum DAM Ina-Esagil-zēr	Debt
4. YOS 13 45	A-d 19		Nannatum	Debt
5. UMM G 10 pl. xxii	A-d 20	Etel-pî-Ištar	Ṭabatum DAM Ina-palêšu	Debt
6. UMM G 7 pl. xxii	A-d 21		Kezertu DAM Warad-Sin (?)	Debt
7. YOS 13 174	A-d 21 (?)	Etel-pî-Ištar		Management
8. YOS 13 306	A-d 23	Etel-pî-Ištar		Management
9. UMM G 12 pl. xxiii	A-d 23		Šāt-marišu DAM Ibni-Šamaš	Debt
10. YOS 13 46	A-d 23		Bēlessunu	Debt
11. YOS 13 327	A-d 23	Ili-iddinam (AN- MA.AN.SUM)	Bu-un-[] DAM Šallurum (!)	Debt
12. YOS 13 311	A-d 25	Ili-iddinam	Eṭertum DAM Ili-bēl-dumqi	Debt

40) UMM numbers are from Szlechter 1963; YOS 13 numbers are from Finkelstein 1972.

41) A-d = Ammiditāna 1683-1647, A-š = Ammišaduqa 1646-1626; S-d = Samsu-ditāna 1625-1595 (according to Brinkman 1977).

42) UGULA SUHUR.LÁ.MEŠ = *wakil kezrēti*.

Cont.

Texts	Date	Supervisor of <i>kezertus</i>	Women named	Type
13. YOS 13 527	A-d 35	Iddin-Nanaya		Management
14. UMM H 7 p. xxxii	A-ş 1	Iddin-Nanaya		Debt
15. YOS 13 194	A-ş 4	Iddin-Nanaya		Debt
16. UMM G 19 p. xxiv	A-ş 7 (?)		Taribatum	Debt
17. YOS 13 126	A-ş 7	Iddin-Nanaya		Management
18. YOS 13 313	A-ş 8	Iddin-Nanaya	Iltani ŠĀ.ZU	Debt
19. YOS 13 314	A-ş 9	Iddin-Nanaya		Debt
20. YOS 13 93	A-ş 12 (?)	Iddin-Nanaya		Debt
21. YOS 13 238	A-ş 14	Iddin-Nanaya		Management
22. YOS 13 52	A-ş 17		Nanaya-ummi DUMU.MUNUS Mār-Nintu (?)	Debt
23. YOS 13 111	A-ş 17+a			(Tally of <i>kezrētu</i>)
24. YOS 13 401	A-ş 17+b	Ili-iqīšam		Assignment of <i>paršu</i>
25. YOS 13 146	A-ş 17+d	Ili-iqīšam		Management
26. UMM G 18 pl. xxv	A-ş 17+b	Iddin-Nanaya		Assignment of <i>paršu (ana parši kezërim)</i>
27. YOS 13 63	S-d a		A-am-li-AN <i>Sutû</i> DUMU Tidabî	Debt
28. YOS 13 212	S-d 3	Ili-iqīšam		Management
29. YOS 13 224	S-d 4 (?)			Debt (related to <i>k.</i> -archive)

Cont.

Texts	Date	Supervisor of <i>kezertus</i>	Women named	Type
30. YOS 13 202	S-d 5	Ili-iqīšam, Nabi-ilišu, Gimil-Nanaya		Assignment of <i>paršu</i>
31. YOS 13 297	S-d 5	Ili-iqīšam		Assignment of <i>paršu</i>
32. YOS 13 236 + 326	S-d 5	Nabi-ilišu		Assignment of <i>paršu</i>

Types of Texts

a. Debts

Most of the texts (19) in the *kezertu* archive record debts in the following manner:⁴³⁾

1. Amount of GÍN KÙ.BABBAR⁴⁴⁾
2. (ŠÀ) KÙ.BABBAR *kezēr(t)i(m)*
ÍB.TAG₄ *nēbeh kezērim*⁴⁵⁾
ŠÀ KÙ.BABBAR *parši*⁴⁶⁾
3. *ša* ^fPN DUMU.MUNUS PN/DAM PN
4. *ša* PN UGULA SUHUR.LÁ^{meš}
5. *eliša iršú*⁴⁷⁾
6. *qāti* ^fPN
qāti PN *mutiša*
7. *nashatma*⁴⁸⁾

43) Only the major variants are recorded. Akkadian is given in transcription in order to avoid much scribal variation.

44) The number of shekels vary from 11/6 to 5. A shekel of silver is basically the wages for a month's work (see Farber 1978).

45) Also ŠÀ *nēbeh kezērim* and *nēbeh kezērim*.

46) Also ŠÀ KÙ.BABBAR *zag-[muk-ki]* (?) (text no. 10), "from the silver of the New Year's account (?)"; ÍB.TAG₄ *nēbeh parši* (no. 29).

47) If there is no woman mentioned, the debt is owed by a man to the supervisor of the *kezertus* (e.g., text no. 20).

48) Kümmel 1974-77.

8. PN *ana* period of time⁴⁹⁾
9. *ana nāši kanikišu* Ì.LÁ.E
10. Witnesses and date

Translation:

1. Amount of shekels of silver
2. From the *kezertu* silver/from the remainder of the *kezertu* account/from the benefice silver
3. Of name of woman, daughter of a man/name of woman, wife of a man
- 4-5. which was owed to the (named) supervisor of the *kezertus*:
6. The named woman (or her husband)
7. Is not responsible (literally: “the hand of the person is removed [from this debt].”

8-9. A named man (not previously referred to in the text) will pay the amount of silver in a designated period of time (in no case more than 2 months) to the bearer of his tablet.

10. List of witnesses and date.

Summary: In these texts a certain amount of silver is recorded. The money came from an account from the rites⁵⁰⁾ performed by *kezertu* women. This money is owed by a woman to the “supervisor of the *kezertu* women.” Neither the woman listed nor her husband is responsible for repaying the debt. Rather, another man, unidentified in the texts, will pay the money in a few days to the bearer of his tablet.⁵¹⁾

b. *Management activities by the supervisor of kezertu women*

In addition to supervising debts connected with *kezertu* women and the *paršu*-benefice (which will be discussed below), the supervisor of *kezertu* women (three different individuals) managed various materials that are recorded in seven texts. In #7 large amounts of gold and silver, which were weighed and stored in baskets, were entrusted to a supervisor and a colleague by temple administrators (SANGA and *ērib bīt Nanaya*). In #8 the same supervisor (Étel-pî-Ištar) loaned sesame to a man who had to repay it at the market rate at the quai (*kārum*) of the town of Habuz.

49) From 10 days to 2 months.

50) *Paršu* is translated both as the “benefice” granted by the temple to perform a service or ritual, and the “ritual” (or “rite”) itself.

51) See Veenhof 1997, pp. 355ff. for the most recent discussion of this phrase.

In #13 a supervisor (Iddin-Nanaya) loaned grain to a man who had to repay it in five days. The text was witnessed by an *ērib bītim* and a SANGA of Kani-surra, showing presumably that the grain came from a temple's stores. In text #17 the same supervisor is responsible for an amount of silver that was "deducted from a settled account." In text #21 this supervisor delivered the "*nēmettu*-tax of the supervisor of *kezertu* women" to a *dēkû* ("summoner") official.

The last two texts, #25 and #28 concern the supervisor Ili-iqīšam who receives bread from cooks. To summarize: the supervisor of the *kezertu* women was responsible for various economic activities that might or might not have had directly to do with *kezertu* women and the rites in which they performed. In this archive six supervisors are mentioned.

As the table shows Iddin-Nanaya held his rank the longest. Leaving aside the problematic dates of the first two attestations of Iddin-Nanaya,⁵² the supervisors held their office serially, Etel-pî-Ištar being followed by Ili-iddinam, then Iddin-Nanaya, followed by Ili-iqīšam. In Samsu-ditāna 5, in text #30, three supervisors appear—Ili-iqīšam, Nabi-ilišu, and Gimil-Nanaya. In the seals of this tablet their patronymics are given, and we see that Nabi-ilišu is the son of Iddin-Nanaya, who is presumably the aforementioned supervisor. Gimil-Nanaya is the son of Ì-lí-[x x x]. If he is also the son of a previous supervisor, we could restore his father as Ili-iqīšam, thus having father and son in the same text. A further speculation would be that Ili-iqīšam had died in this year.

c. Assignment of *paršu*

Five texts inform us about the *paršu* benefice (or rite, see below for discussion) which were assigned by the supervisors of *kezertu* women. These difficult and interesting texts can best be interpreted after a presentation of transliterations and translations of the texts in order of their date.

Text #26 (UMM G 18, pl. xxv), A-š 17+b the last attested year of the supervisor Iddin-Nanaya:

1. ^{id}A-ra-ah-tum AN.TA
2. iš-tu pí-ša si^{1?}-ib-ba^{1?}-<ti[?]>-ša⁵³)
3. a-di ABUL EŠ₄.DAR
4. har-ra-an I-din-^dNa-na-a ¹UGULA¹ munus¹SUHUR.LÁ^{meš}

52) The texts dating to Ammi-ditāna 1 and 16 might benefit from collation.

53) For this reading, see YOS 13 297:2.

Table of supervisors of *kezertu* women

Iddin-Nanaya	Etel-pî-Ištar	Ili-iddinam	Ili-iqīšam	Nabi-ilišu	Gimil-Nanaya
A-d 1 (?)					
16	A-d 20	A-d 23			
35	21	25			
A-š 1	23				
4					
7					
8					
9					
12					
14					
17+b			A-š 17+b		
			17+d		
			S-d 3		
			5		
			5	S-d 5	S-d 5
				?1	

5. KI I-din-^dNan-na-a UGULA ^{munus}SUHUR.LÁ^{meš}

6. Ma-a-ad-a-hi-ú-ta DUMU ^{dr}X X X¹

7. a-na ʾpa-ar¹-ši ke-ze-ri-im

8. ù GÚ.UN šu-ud-du-nim

9. ú-še-[ši]

10. pa-ar-[ša-am]

11. ú-še-[pi-iš ?]

(some lines lost or fragmentary)

15. ì.[LÁ.E]
16. x GÍN KÙ.BABBAR
17. ʿx xʿ KASKAL (?)
18. 7 GÍN KÙ.BABBAR x[]
19. ma-ah-ri [?]
20. mu-uš-ta-bi-il-ti? [URU ?]
21. É.GAL i-ip-p[a-al]

Witnesses, including DUMU.É.DUB.BA.A, and date.

Translation: On the upper side of the Arahtum canal, from its mouth to its tail,⁵⁴) until the Great Gate of Ištar, is the *harrānu* (transaction in the countryside) of Iddin-Nanaya, the supervisor of *kezertu* women. From Iddin-Nanaya, the supervisor of *kezertu* women, M. son of X. obtained for payment, (lit. “rented”) the *kezēru*-benefice and (promised) to deliver the *biltu* tax. He (the supervisor) assigned the *paršu* benefice. . . . The money for the *harrānu* . . . and the money . . . of the *muštābiltu* tax he will pay the palace.

Texts #s 24, 202, and 297 refer to activities of the supervisor Ilī-iqīšam.

Text 24, YOS 13 401

1. 4 GÍN [KÙ.BABBAR]
2. iš-tu []
3. a-di []
4. ša Ì-lí-[i-qí-ša-am]
5. KI Ì-lí-i-[qí-ša-am]
6. ʿNa-na-a-[x x DUMU I-di]n-^dNa-na-a [x]
7. ù Ì-lí-i-qí-ša-ʿam UGULA^{ʿmunus} SUHUR.LÁ
8. a-na TAB.BA
9. a-na pa-ar-ši šu-pu-ši
10. [a-n]a GÚ.UN šu-ud-du-nim
11. [ÍB].TA.È.E.[EŠ]
12. [x +]2 GÍN KÙ.BABBAR
13. [É.GAL] i-ip-pa-lu

fragmentary lines

17. [x x x x x x] ša a-li-šu
18. a-na x x x [x x ì].LÁ.E

Witnesses and date.

54) In YOS 13, 297:2, the geographical description of the watercourse is “from its mouth to its tail” which is the basis for the reading here. Note, however, that line 3 reads “to the great gate of Ishtar” which implies that the restoration *adi sibbatīša* may not be correct here.

Translation: Amount of silver . . . from . . . (place name) until . . . (place name) of Ili-[iqišam]. From Ili-[iqišam], Nanaya-x son of Iddin-Nanaya and Ili-iqišam, the supervisor of *kezertu* women in partnership obtained for payment (lit. “rented” the aforementioned money or land) in order to assign the *paršu* benefice and (the promise) to deliver the *biltu* tax. They will repay the palace. [The *mustābiltu* (?) tax] of his city to [] he will pay.

Text #30, YOS 13 202

1. ¹Na-bi-ì-lí-šu UGULA munus[SUHUR.LÁ^{meš}]
 2. ¹Gi-mil-^dNa-na-a UGULA munusSU[HUR.LÁ^{meš}]
 3. ù Ì-lí-i-qí-ša-am UGULA munusSUH[UR.LÁ^{meš}]
 4. a-wi-lum ù-lu a-wi-lim
 5. i-na ki-di-im ù-lu šÀ a-lim
 6. pa-ar-ša-am ú-ul ú-še-ep-pe-šu
 7. ša pa-ar-ša-am eš-ša-am
 8. a-na la-bi-ri-im ú-ub-ba-lam
 9. ú-ka-an-nu-šu-ma
 10. 3 MA.NA KÙ.BABBAR pí-ha-tam
 11. É.GAL i-ip-pa-lu
 12. pa-ar-ša-am eš-ša-am ma-la ú-še-ep-pé-šu
 13. 3 GÍN KÙ.BABBAR a-na NÍG.KA₉-šu-nu
 14. ú-ub-ba-lu-nim
 15. i-na ah-^rhi^l-šu-nu še-eh-he-ru-ti-šu-nu
 16. ù DUMU.MEŠ a-wi-lim ša it-ti-šu-nu
 17. ša i-na ri-ik-sa-tim an-ni-a-am
 18. la ša-aṭ-ru
 19. pa-ar-šu šu-pu-šu b[a-]
 20. i-na ki-di-im ù l[i-ib-bi a-lim(?)]
 21. i-na [x 1 GÍN ?]
- Lower edge destroyed
22. 2 GÍN []
 23. i-[]
 24. u us? [x]
 25. ša mu [x]
 26. a-na ri-ik-sa-ti-šu-nu la []

Oath by Marduk and Samsu-ditāna. No witnesses. Date

Seals: Nabi-ilišu UGULA SUHUR.LÁ^{meš} DUMU I-din-^dNa-[na-a] ÌR Ammišaduqa
 Ili-iqišam UGULA [] DUMU ^dURAŠ-[] ÌR Samsudi[tāna]
 Gimil-Nanaya UGULA SUHUR.LÁ^{meš} DUMU Ì-lí-[]

Translation

Neither Nabi-ilišu, supervisor of *kezertu* women, nor Gimil-Nanaya, supervisor of *kezertu* women, nor Ili-iqīšam, supervisor of *kezertu* women shall assign a *paršu*-benefice either in the countryside or inside the city (without agreeing) one with the other. If anyone tries to add a new to an old *paršu*-benefice, he will pay the palace a *pīhatu*-responsibility of three minas of silver. For each new *paršu*-benefice they assign, they will enter three shekels silver to their account. As concerns their junior partners and the gentlemen who are with them but who are not recorded in this contract, the assigned *paršu*-benefice . . . in the country [or in the city] . . . [fragmentary lines] . . . [they have sworn] not to [change?] their contract. Oath and date.

#32, YOS 13 236 + 326

1. aš-šum ÍD UD.KIB.NUN.NA [x]
 2. ù ÍD Ši-ma-at-^dEN+ZU
 3. KASKAL Na-bi-ì-lí-šu
 4. UGULA ^{munus}SUHUR.LA^{meš}
 5. [i]š-tu MU 10-KAM^{hi-a}
 6. [Gi-]mil-lum ù ^dEN+ZU-eri₄-ba-am DUMU.A.NI
 7. [ÍB.TA.È.MEŠ ?]
 - 1' [] ITI GÁN.[GÁN.E]
 - 2' MU Sa-am-su-dí-t[a na]
 - 3' Á NIR GAL.GAL.L[A]
 - 4' ^dUTU ^dMARDUK.BI [DA.KE₄]
 - 5' i-na pa-ar-ši šu-[pu-ši]
 - 6' ù GÚ.UN le-qé-[e]
 - 7' ú-ka-an-nu-šu-nu-[ti]
 - 8' 1/3 MA.NA KÙ.BABBAR mu-uš-ta-[bi-il-ti]
 - 9' É.GAL i-ip-pa-[lu]
- Rest fragmentary
(Date on YOS 13 236)

Translation

Concerning the (area of the) Euphrates and Šīmat-Sīn canal, the *harrānum*-transaction of/(responsibility of) Nabi-ilishu, the overseer of *kezertu* women: after 10 years, in which Gimillum and Sīn-erībam, his son [rented?], . . . in the ninth month, year Samsu-ditana 5, they will establish for them (the right) to assign the *paršu*-benefice and to take the *biltu*-tax. One-third mina of silver, the *mustābiltu*-tax, they will pay the palace.

From these texts that date to the last years of kingship before the collapse

of the dynasty of Hammurabi, we see that supervisors of *kezertu* women obtain the right to assign *paršu*-benefices to men and which are to be performed in the countryside alongside a watercourse. A tax to the palace had to be paid. In #30 a directive is issued to three supervisors of *kezertu* women not to assign any new benefices upon penalty of very large fines.

d. Tally of *kezertu* women

A unique text in the archive of *kezertu* women is #23, YOS 13 111.

1. 1 MUNUS É.GIA Hu-la-am-hu-uš UGULA MAR.TU
 2. 1 MUNUS DUMU.MUNUS Tam-la-tum LÚ.KURUN₂.NA
 3. MUNUS a-ši-ba-at URU I-li-ip^{ki}
 4. 1 DUMU.MUNUS ^d EN+ZU-mu-ša-lim MÁŠ.ŠU.GÍD.GÍD
 5. [MUNUS a-ši-ba-at ?] A-ra-bi^{ki}
 6. 1 [n]a-di-in-šu-mi UGULA MAR.TU
 7. [MUNUS a-ši-ba-at x x] KI (?)
 8. [1 x x] LÚ KURUN₂.NA
 9. [MUNUS a-ši-ba-at x x]-zi (?).KI
 10. 1 É.GIA ^dDumu-zi-[]
 11. a-ši-ib-tu Kiš^{ki}
 12. 1 É.GIA Si-na-tum
 13. a-ši-ib-tu URU Ša-ap-pa-ta-ni
 14. 1 DUMU.MUNUS Šu-nu-ma-AN
 15. DUMU.MUNUS Uš-ri-ya
 16. DAM Be-el-šu-nu
-
17. ŠU.NIGIN 8 MUNUS ke-ez-re-tum

Eight unnamed *kezertu* women are totaled in the last line of the text. Each *kezertu* is listed as the number “1” and assigned to (or hired by) a woman, described as the bride, daughter, or wife of a high official.⁵⁵) The following are the eight assignments of *kezertus*:

- 1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Bride of H., an UGULA MAR.TU (“general”)
- 1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Daughter of T., *sābû* (“innkeeper”), a woman, resident of the town of Ilip
- 1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Daughter of S., the *bārû* (“divination priest”), [a woman, resident of the town of] Arabi (?)
- 1 (*kezertu* assigned to) [Daughter (?) of Šîn-nā]din-šumi, the UGULA MAR.TU (“general”), [a woman, resident of (broken place name)]

55) This interpretation was suggested by Marten Stol.

1 (*kezertu* assigned to) [Daughter (?) of broken personal name, *sābû* (“inn-keeper”), [a woman, resident of (broken place name)]

1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Bride of D., resident of Kish

1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Bride of S., resident of the town of Šappatani

1 (*kezertu* assigned to) Daughter of Š., daughter of U., (and) the wife of B.

Apparently, elite woman, mainly from villages near Kish, came to Kish to perform rites that required *kezertu* women.⁵⁶⁾

Other Texts Mentioning kezertu Women

In the Old Babylonian period, roughly contemporary with the Kish archive texts, there are only a few other references to *kezertus*. In Mari two fragmentary lists of women of the court include *kezertus* (*ARM* 7 206 and 275).⁵⁷⁾ J.-M. Durand⁵⁸⁾ finds that *kezertus* are of low status in the harem, following *nārātum*, “concubines.”⁵⁹⁾ In a well known letter from Mari (*ARM* 10 140)⁶⁰⁾ the king Zimri-Lim writes a woman, perhaps the wife of local potentate, about establishing good relations. He promises to send a “fair [high-quality] *kezertu* woman” (*kezertum nawirtum*) to her when he can obtain one in a future campaign. In *AbB* 2⁶¹⁾ 34:12 Hammurabi asks Sin-iddinam, his agent in the south, to send women in the cult of Ištar (*ištarātum*) and *kezertu* women to Babylon. In *CT* 48:28 a named *kazirtum* slave is purchased by a man for 11 shekels silver.⁶²⁾ The text is dated to Samsu-iluna 9. The first five witnesses are women, named and with patronymics. The first is the daughter of Tutu-nāšir, who is perhaps the well known Babylonian official at Kish.⁶³⁾

Post-Old Babylonian references consistently (most famously in the Gilgamesh and Erra epics) connect *kezertu* women with Ištar, Uruk, and *harimtu*,

56) Marten Stol has found the only similar text of this type concerning *kezertu* in *RA* 10, no. 53, pl. v which lists individual women, their town of residence, and the notation that her *biltu*-tax was in her house. The reverse begins with the case of 1 *ke-ze-er-tum wa-ši-ib-ti ši-i šar-ra-tum i-na É URU Da-da wa-aš-ba-at GÚ.UN-ša i-na bi-ti-ša*. *YOS* 13 112 also lists women attached to other women. Line 9: 1 *ke-ze-er-tum DAM Ib-ni-^dMAR.TU*. In light of lines 13-14 (2 *MUNUS ke-ze-er-tum DUMU.MUNUS La-qí-pu ù Ú-sa-al-tum NIN.A.NI-sà*), *kezertu* is not a personal name in this text.

57) Bottéro 1957.

58) Durand 1990, p. 291, n. 52.

59) See also Durand 1985, p. 390; Charpin 1984 p. 56, no. 7, line 4.

60) Dossin 1967.

61) Frankena 1966.

62) Finkelstein 1968. Marten Stol informs me of a seal referred to in Krausz 1911, p. 84, and published in W.P. Fogg 1875: *ke-ze-er-tum DUMU.MUNUS ^dŠE.TIR-ba-ni GEME₃ ^dINANNA ù ^dNa-na-a*.

63) Kupper 1959.

“prostitution.”⁶⁴) In Gilgamesh, tablet VI:165, Ištar gathered *kezertu* women along with other prostitutes (*šamhātu* and *harimātu*, and Uruk is described as the city of prostitutes. They have distinctive hair-dos, sing songs, and dance in cultic performances.⁶⁵) In the Sumerian literary text published by Roth, a female slave is “expelled from the escorts, [rejected by] the troops, and shunned by the people.”⁶⁶) The daughter of her owner, a godless man, does *kezertu*-service.

Old Babylonian Documents from Sippar Related to kezertu Women

M. Gallery⁶⁷) suggested that the *paršu* benefice received by *kezertu* women could be explained through comparison to several contemporaneous texts from Sippar. In these texts *paršus* were owed by certain women to a goddess, and amounts of foodstuffs that resulted from the activities of those *paršus* were disbursed to members of the temple personnel. The *paršus* are explained in these texts explicitly as *ru'ūtum* (“companionship”), *rēdūtum* (“escortship”), and *harimūtum* (“prostitution”).

In a learned discussion of the objects recorded with the women and their benefices, Gallery defined the items as “comb” and “combing/scraping tool.” She connected these objects to *kezertu* women, since the verb *kezēru* means “to curl the hair.” Finkelstein, who first studied the *kezertu* texts, thought *kezertus* were, among other things, “hairstylists.”⁶⁸) Gallery further noted that the text CT 48 45⁶⁹) connected *paršu* with *harimūtu*.

CT 48 45

1. [?] 14 G[fn]
2. ša pa-ar-ši š[a x -t]um (?)
3. ha-ri-mu-tum re-du-tum
4. ZA.HA.DA ZABAR NA₄.KIŠIB
5. ša munusII-ta-ni DAM ÌR-^dMarduk DUMU Ib-ni-^dMarduk
6. ù mu-ba-bi-lu-tim
7. ša ÌR-^dMarduk DUMU Ib-ni-^dMarduk

64) Most recently collected in Henshaw 1994, pp. 197ff. An additional lexical text is Arnaud 1987, Emar VI.4, 190, no. 602: 345.

65) Postgate 1979, p. 92: 20; Alster 1992: 200; Roth 1983. See Menzel 1981, pp. 29-32 for discussion of male and female “whores” of Ištar.

66) Roth 1983, pp. 275, 278; see also Güterbock 1983: 159.

67) Gallery 1980.

68) See in Yamauchi 1973, p. 215 n. 27.

69) Finkelstein 1968.

8. ga-du ne-in-da-ab-bi-šu-nu
9. ša Hu-za-lum DUMU ^dINANNA-MA.AN.SUM
10. ú-še-pí-šu-šu-nu-ti
11. a-na da-ba-ab ib-ba-aš-šu
12. ^hhu-za-lum DUMU ^dINANNA-MA.AN.SUM
13. a-na ^dMarduk-mu-ba-lí-iṭ
14. GALA.MAH An-nu-ni-tum
15. qá-tam i-na-as-sà-ah

lines 16-25 7 witnesses and date (S-d 4)

Translation

Amount of money, the *paršu* benefice of . . . prostitution and escortship (symbolized by) the axe of sealed(?) bronze of Iltani, wife of Warad-Marduk, son of Ibni-Marduk and the jugglers of Warad-Marduk, son of Ibni-Marduk, together with their bread offerings, which Huzālum, son of Inanna-mansum, assigned to them. Against any claim which might arise, Huzālum, son of Inanna-mansum, will not be responsible⁷⁰) to Marduk-muballit, the lamentation priest of Annunitum. (Witnesses; year Samsu-ditana 4).

Recently published texts from Tell ed-Der, Sippar Amnānum, (and reports about unpublished texts that have been studied) contribute significantly to the understanding of the relations between *paršu* benefices, the temple's priests and bureaucracy, the role of the palace, and the high officials who are mentioned in the *kezertu* archive of late Old Babylonian Kish.⁷¹) The tablets come from the house of the lamentation priest who sang dirges at funerary rites and various ceremonies⁷²) that included fire-eaters, jugglers, and wrestlers.⁷³) He also administered a section of the temple economy, including assigning *paršu* benefices and collecting the profits therefrom.⁷⁴) The form of documents, most unpublished but reported by Tanret and van Lerberghe, is as follows:

1. Remainder (ÍB.TAG₄) of silver (or foodstuff) for a rite that is assigned to be performed (*paršam šūpušum*).

70) Kümmel 1974-77, literally "remove the hand."

71) van Lerberghe and Voet 1991, see texts 64, 65, 66; Tanret and van Lerberghe 1993.

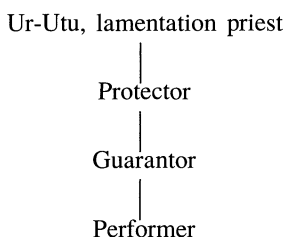
72) See Cohen 1981, pp. 40ff. and 1988, pp. 13ff., p. 31 and especially his discussion of the OB ritual text from Mari (Dossin 1938). Many of the late texts concern rites of Ištar of Uruk.

73) See also Blocher 1992.

74) The title of this article is meant to reflect the high significance of Tanret's and van Lerberghe's study, which is entitled "Rituals and Profits in the Ur-Utu Archive." Fn. 19 specifically relates their texts to the *kezertu* archive. I am grateful to G. van Driel and K. Veenhof for calling this article to my attention.

2. This remaining amount is “in the hand of” (that is, the responsibility of) a woman and/or her husband.
3. The amount is, however, transferred to a third party, called by Tanret and van Lerberghe “the guarantor.”
4. The guarantor will pay the money to the person who has the tablet of debt (*ana nāši kanikišu*).⁷⁵⁾

In addition to the performer of the rite, the guarantor, and the lamentation priest himself, in letters from the Ur-Utu archive still other people are mentioned, called by Tanret and van Lerberghe “protectors” and “commissioners.” “Protectors” interceded with the lamentation priest directly in order to assign the benefices, and “commissioners” were responsible to “protectors” (and thus could also be “guarantors”).⁷⁶⁾ A chart of these activities can be drawn:



The *paršu* rites (with the attached benefice) that were performed included *harimūtu* and *rēdūtu*, that is, prostitution. Although males were invariably mentioned with *harimūtu*, this was not the case in other documents from Sippar studied by Gallery.⁷⁷⁾ The performers, guarantors, and protectors had to make an initial payment to the lamentation priest, in order to pay for food, drink, and other expenses of the rite. After the rite was performed, the rest of the payment, in the form of a “tax” had to be paid.

kezertus as Performers in Rites of the Ishtar Cult at Kish

On the model that can be constructed from the above data from Sippar, the laconic texts from Kish relating activities of *kezertu* women can be now interpreted. In the debt texts, an amount of money is recorded that is called the

75) Or, in the Sippar texts, to certain “fatteners.”

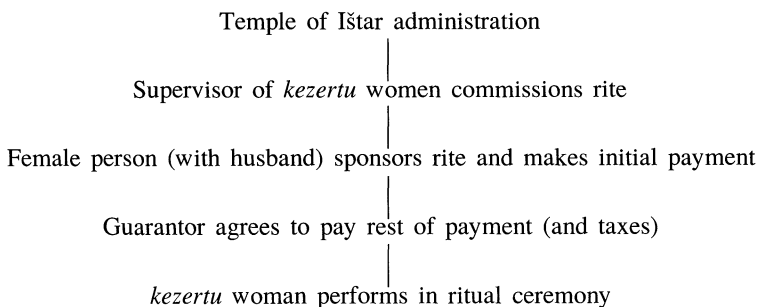
76) Until the texts are published and C. Janssen’s study of the letters, which is noted in Tanret and van Lerberghe, p. 440, n. 12, I cannot discuss the role of this “commissioner” which is unclearly portrayed.

77) Male *SUHUR.LÁ* also exist; see Bottéro and Petschow 1972-75. For one discussion of performers in the cult of Ishtar, see Kilmer 1971.

remainder of the *kezertu* money or money from the *kezertu* account. It is owed by a woman, often described as the wife of a man, to a “supervisor of *kezertu* women.” The amount of money is then transferred to another man, whom we may dub the “guarantor” (following Tanret and van Lerberghe). The “supervisor of *kezertu* women” occupies the position called “protector” (by Tanret and van Lerberghe). It is he who commissions the rite that was performed by the woman (and her husband) who held the benefice. The actual performance was by a *kezertu* woman, as is discussed below. The identity of the “guarantor” and his relation to the woman who sponsored the rite are uncertain. He must repay the supervisor of *kezertu* women in a few days, in no case longer than 2 months. An additional amount was paid to the palace.

The *parṣu* benefice and the rites attendant to it took place in the countryside, along a stretch of water, already seen by Finkelstein in his description of the *kezertu* texts.⁷⁸) The “remainder” of the payment owed by the woman performer was described as a tax (*biltu* or *muštābiltu*), and it had to be paid to the palace, which presumably oversaw the rite. Text #30 (YOS 13 202) explicitly shows the palace’s interest in allowing or disallowing rites to be performed. Part of the supervisor of *kezertu* women’s responsibilities were to administer financial proceeds, collect and disburse food (for the rites?), and to make sure that various taxes were paid.

The relation of the female performers to *kezertu* women is seen in the unusual text #23 (YOS 13 111). In this document eight *kezertu* women are assigned, each one to a woman (or women), who were brides, daughters, and wives of high ranking men. Some of these women are from villages and towns near Kish. One *kezertu* woman is assigned to three women. The *kezertu* women are themselves unnamed, as befits their low standing at court and in the cult performances.



78) Finkelstein 1972, p. 10.

The History of kezertu Women at Kish

Kezertu women appear in Kish only in the last part of the Old Babylonian period, having moved to Kish from Uruk along with the cult of Ištar of Uruk including its retinue of priests and attendants.⁷⁹⁾ Priests and attendants include an *iŠIB* (“purification priest”) of the divine Ishtar, a *SANGA* (“priest”) of the divine Ishtar, a *GALAMAH* (“lamentation priest”) of Ishtar, a *ŠUI* (“barber”) of Ishtar, and an *ērib bītim* (“temple-entrant”), along with the goddesses Nanaya⁸⁰⁾ and Kanisurra.⁸¹⁾ In the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut surveys of the city of Uruk, it is now clear that in the late Old Babylonian period the city was completely abandoned.⁸²⁾ Other cities in the south were similarly abandoned during this period.⁸³⁾ The cause or causes for these abandonments may have been natural shifts in the bed of the Euphrates, military action by Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna,⁸⁴⁾ who fought to control the south of Mesopotamia against local kings, and tactics of the “kings of the sealand”—or a combination of these causes.

Since the marshy region of southern Iraq afforded the possibility of guerilla warfare against their Babylonian rivals, the “kings of the sealand” may have exploited their position against the pro-Babylonian inhabitants of southern cities. These included, presumably, local officials who had served in the temporarily victorious Babylonian bureaucracy and the religious leaders of the urban establishment. This scenario of factionalism in the south, with pro- and anti-northern elements in Uruk and other cities, is reminiscent of politics known in the first millennium when new Chaldean kings also used the marshy southlands as their base to evade northern armies and to gather support in the countryside against urban, largely pro-northern foes.⁸⁵⁾ The “kings of the sealand” may have forced the urban population out of cities and into the countryside which they controlled.

The temple establishment of Ishtar of Uruk had to move from unoccupied Uruk, and Kish, a venerable center of Ishtar worship,⁸⁶⁾ was a logical choice for the new home of Ishtar, the attendant divinities associated with her, priests, officials, and various functionaries. Furthermore, the ruling families of Babylon, 15 km from Kish, had long been allied with their Amorite kinsmen from Uruk,

79) Finkelstein 1972; Charpin 1986, p. 404; Sallaberger 1988; Pientka 1997.

80) Reiner 1974; Wilcke 1976-80.

81) Edzard 1980.

82) van Ess 1991, p. 91.

83) Stone 1977.

84) Renger 1970.

85) Brinkman 1964.

86) Sallaberger 1988 summarizes the evidence.

considering themselves of “one house” (the same lineage?).⁸⁷⁾ Women were exchanged between kings of Babylon and Uruk in the early Old Babylonian period, and a southern ruler asked the Babylonian king for help against his local enemies. When circumstances made the occupation of Uruk impossible, the religious establishment of the temple of Ishtar of Uruk moved into Babylonian territory, and Kish became the new home of *kezertu* women.

Artifacts, Analogies, and Microhistory

Artifacts from Kish, mostly unprovenienced,⁸⁸⁾ include many terra cotta plaques of naked women, sexual scenes, and depictions of the goddess Ishtar herself.⁸⁹⁾ Recently, E. Carter⁹⁰⁾ has shown that in Susa such plaques are associated with those of musicians and empty-bed models. She notes that the excavators have considered the area in the temple where more than 200 of these plaques were found as “a beer hall and brothel associated with the cult.”

The translation of *kezertu* as “prostitute” is, of course, an anachronism since the role of *kezertus* in the cult of Ishtar has little in common with the modern connotations of the term.⁹¹⁾ It also brings to mind the famous passage in Herodotus about women’s sexual duties in Mesopotamia.⁹²⁾ Employing modern

87) Falkenstein 1963.

88) Moorey 1978, 1975.

89) Opificius 1961; Blocher 1987.

90) Carter 1997.

91) Discussed at length in Goodnick Westenholz 1989, 1995.

92) “There is one custom amongst these people which is wholly shameful: every woman who is a native of the country must once in her life go and sit in the temple of Aphrodite and there give herself to a strange man. Many of the rich women, who are too proud to mix with the rest, drive to the temple in covered carriages with a whole host of servants following behind, and there wait; most, however, sit in the precinct of the temple with a band of plaited string round their heads—and a great crowd they are, what with some sitting there, others arriving, others going away—and through them all gangways are marked off running in every direction for the men to pass along and make their choice. Once a woman has taken her seat she is not allowed to go home until a man has thrown a silver coin into her lap and taken her outside to lie with her. As he throws the coin, the man has to say, “In the name of the goddess Mylitta”—that being the Assyrian name for Aphrodite. The value of the coin is of no consequence; once thrown it becomes sacred, and the law forbids that it should ever be refused. The woman has no privilege of choice—she must go with the first man who throws her the money. When she has lain with him, her duty to the goddess is discharged and she may go home, after which it will be impossible to seduce her by any offer, however large. Tall, handsome women soon manage to get home again, but the ugly ones stay a long time before they can fulfill the condition which the law demands, some of them, indeed, as much as three or four years.” (Herodotus, translation 1954)

Here is Gore Vidal’s version (1981), which was composed without benefit of ed-Der texts mentioning male as well as female prostitutes:

terms to gloss ancient practices and beliefs is, to be sure, a well known hazard in ancient studies, particularly in Mesopotamian studies. Another danger, however, is not to take seriously the practices of people who were culturally remote from the world of the modern analyst. One can open the imagination, perhaps, by considering ethnographic and historical documentation that allow the customs of the distant past to be analyzed in other than a modern experiential frame. Thus, in attempting to understand the practices of *kezertu* women in the cult of Ishtar one might consider the case of *dēvadasī* women in pre-modern India.⁹³⁾ Perhaps first attested in the 12th century A.D., these women were consecrated to the worship of certain gods, were highly literate and skilled entertainers, and also engaged in sexual practices with kings, priests, and the faithful of all castes. While neither *dēvadasīs* nor *kezertu* women can be considered “prostitutes” in modern parlance, their sexual roles as part of their larger ritual persona need to be recognized. Decontextualizing social institutions leads often to stigmatizing them, and this was as true in the past as it is in modern times:

The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and glittered with gold and pearls, and she was holding a gold winecup filled with the disgusting filth of her prostitution; on her head was written a name, a cryptic name: “Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes and all the filthy practices on the earth.” (Rev. 17: 4-5)⁹⁴⁾

Like every visitor to Babylon, we went straight to the temple of Ishtar, where the women prostitute themselves. According to an ancient law of the land, each Babylonian woman is required to go, once in a lifetime, to the temple of Ishtar and wait in the courtyard until a man offers her silver to make love to him. The first to offer her the money gets her. In other temples to the goddess, young men and boys act as prostitutes, and the man who goes with a temple catamite is thought to have earned himself the special blessing of the goddess. Luckily for the Babylonian male, he is *not* required once in a lifetime to be a temple prostitute. Only the ladies are so honored.

Strangely enough, Babylonian men seldom visit the temple. I suppose that they are used to it. Also, they must experience a certain embarrassment at the sight of their wives or sisters or daughters serving the goddess. Fortunately, a sufficient number of strangers come from every part of the world to help the ladies achieve Ishtar’s blessing.

According to custom, you make your choice by dropping silver into a woman’s lap. She then rises, takes your arm and leads you into the temple, where hundreds of wooden partitions have been set up to create a series of doorless cells. If you can find an empty cell, you couple on the floor. Although spectators are not encouraged by the eunuchs, good-looking women or men often attract a considerable audience—briefly. The circumstances are such that precipitous speed tends to be the rule in Ishtar’s service. For one thing, to disguise the all-prevading odour of sexuality, so much incense is burned in braziers that not only is the stifling air an opaque blue but if one stays too long in celebration of the goddess, one is apt to turn blue oneself.

For the Arabic traditions on Babylon, see Janssen 1995.

93) Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Prasad 1991.

94) Translation by New Jerusalem Bible, cited by Goodnick Westenholz 1989, p. 245.

As is often the case, for ancient commentators who were constructing an alterity called “Babylon” and for modern commentators who fail to find (or who find vast incidences of) “prostitution” in Mesopotamia, more is said about the commentator than about the ancient situation.

From this small archive of texts and the necessarily reduced scale of observation of this essay, one is brought tantalizing close to the daily working of ritual in Mesopotamian society. It is this sort of behavior that is normally not characterized in the grand histories of Mesopotamia which tend to portray kings and their accomplishments and accounts of ethnic and social struggle. Still, our archive consists of economic documents, and we can say little about the nature of the rites that *kezertu* women performed, why these rites often took place along stretches of water in the countryside,⁹⁵) and how elite women (or, rather, their husbands) hired *kezertu* women. Nevertheless, this study of *kezertu* women at Kish reminds us that in ancient Mesopotamian cities much of the social and economic behavior depicted in our texts cannot be understood apart from the cultural context that gave meaning to the transactions. Although Mesopotamian cities were the prime arenas in which individuals and networks of social groups interacted with one another and with the “great institutions” of temple and palace,⁹⁶) the larger ideological system that overarched them was as important as the political victories of kings that occasionally drew the cities together in regional political systems. The microhistorical investigation of *kezertu* women in late Old Babylonian Kish can be a point of entry into the construction of an historical narrative that is centered on this complex, if pre-modern, network of lives and beliefs.

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95) Michałowski is writing an article on the liminality of the countryside as location for rituals.

96) Van de Mieroop 1997.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AHw *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* W. von Soden. Entries *kezertu*, *kezēru*, vol. 2 (1965), p. 468

CAD *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago*. Articles "kezertu, kezēru" vol. K (1971), pp. 314-316

For other abbreviations see CAD.

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