

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Gender Relations

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The concept of Mesopotamian culture (5000-2000 B.C.E.) is so broad, that it must at first be addressed in generalities. From Sumerian through Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian cultures--all interlinked through their roots in the land between Tigris and Euphrates--there is a gradual enforcement of patriarchal power in both family and state. What explanation for this development? Could it be that with the growing concentration of wealth, in male hands, the preponderance of male power asserted itself increasingly? Was money the power in this story?

Women and the family Throughout Mesopotamian culture, the father is the family ruler. He takes charge of choosing his daughter's husband to be, having worked out financial arrangements in advance, with the bride's dad. These arrangements involve first of all setting the brideprice, which he himself will pay down for his daughter, and then agreeing on the dowry which his daughter will bring to the marriage. The daughter will from puberty on--for that is when these negotiations begin--be aware that she is a movable piece in a system. She will not have been given the opportunity for schooling, and in extreme cases she may even have found herself sold into slavery or 'sacred prostitution.'

The marriage Immediately after marriage the daughter--we are talking middle class families, artisans, scribes, bakers, bankers--moves into the husband's family, thereby essentially marrying that family. From that time on the married woman's life is likely to transpire in child-raising, cooking, cleaning, and gossip. (*The Laws of Hammurabi*, 1754 B.C.E, effectively describe the parameters of the married woman's life, easily to be divorced, condemned to death if she commits adultery, subject to sale if her husband needs extra cash.) But there are outlets for women, although the availability of these outlets diminishes through the centuries of Mesopotamian culture.

Women's outlets From Sumerian times onward, through to the demise of Mesopotamian cultures (2000 B.C.E.), depending on your perspective, women had rights and roles in their society. The supreme role for the woman, juridically speaking, was to provide legitimate offspring for the integrity of the patriarchal system. Hence the death penalty for women caught in adultery; hence the increasing presence of the *veil*, in later Mesopotamian society, to shield women and men's eyes from danger. From the earliest times, however, Mesopotamian women enjoyed freedom to work outside the family; in Sumerian times, particularly, women were active in the market place and in trading in the precincts of temples, which regularly employed thousands of weavers. Other jobs commonly filled by women were the making and selling of beer and wine, or of perfumes and incense. And on a yet more managerial level--still in Sumer, yes--we find women forming businesses, working together with their husbands in business, working as scribes--always an influential post, and as physicians.

Readings

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, New York, 1992.

Leick, Gwendolyn, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, London, 1994.

Discussion questions

Mesopotamian epic gives various perspectives onto women and their social roles: what do *Gilgamesh*, the *Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)* and *The Descent of Inana* say about women's power in society?

What role did women's sexuality play in the all important issue of placating the gods? What kinds of erotic self-sacrifice did women carry out in Mesopotamian temples?

By 1500 B.C.E. upper class women, in Mesopotamian society, had begun to 'wear the veil,' as a way of protecting their modesty, and the purity of their offspring. Can you research this issue? Was wearing the veil common in Middle Eastern societies prior to Islam?