The Mystery of Enheduanna's Disk

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Over four thousand years ago, a woman composed a hymn to the Sumerian goddess, Inanna. This woman remains the first known authoress; indeed, she is the first *identified* author of either sex. The existence of this ancient authoress was first evidenced by the discovery of a disk, excavated at Ur, which (among other things) recorded her name, Enheduanna. She was the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, founder of the first dynasty to successfully "attempt to centralize power by bringing the various cities of Mesopotamia under the permanent control of one dynasty of rulers."[1]

Although several scholars have addressed issues involved with the translation and interpretation of Enheduanna's written texts, there are still questions about the woman herself which have never been fully addressed. Most striking is why her disk was found in excavation deposits dated hundreds of years after her death, and the related issue of what the real significance of her disk may have been.

One of the early actions Sargon took after his rise to kingship was to install his daughter, Enheduanna, as the *en*-Priestess of the moon-god Nanna, at Ur. Sargon had already proven that he could lead in war, but to legitimize his seizure of power he had to move quickly to assume the king's traditional spiritual responsibilities. J. N. Postgate called this "an attempt to engage with the traditional religious ideology."[2] Sargon's actions made perfect sense; by making his daughter the *en*-Priestess, he was able to avoid "offending the traditional Sumerian sensitivities," by providing the appearance that he was not overtaking both the "political and cultic titles of the great southern cities to himself."[3] By installing his daughter as *en*-Priestess Sargon was apparently trying to cater to an ancient custom, as evidenced by

> a votive limestone plaque found in the Early Dynastic levels at the *giparu* at Ur. There, a nude male pours a libation from a spouted vessel into a date palm stand before the exterior of a building, while three figures stand behind him. The last two figures seem to be attendants—one possibly female, the other male and carrying a kid or lamb, presumably as sacrificial offering. The lead figure in the group is female, and is made to dominate the array, not by added height, but rather by her frontal posture. The position she occupies is identical to that taken by Enheduanna on the disk. This plaque falls clearly into a stylistic group of ED II votive tablets. These plaques are surely pre-Akkadian; yet their contents mirror that of the disk.[4]

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1. Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c.3000–330 BC* (London, 1995), 44.
2. J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London, 1992), 41.
3. William W. Hallo, "The Women of Sumer" in Denise Schmandt-Besserat, ed., *The Legacy of Sumer*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica (Malibu, 1976), 29.
4. Irene Winter, "Women in Public: The Disk of Enheduanna, The Beginning of the Office of En-Priestess, and the Weight of Visual Evidence," *RAI* 33 (1987), 195.

William Hallo proposed that this institution "formed a cultic link for all the Sumerian city-states, even in periods of disunity."[5] If this was the case, then the ultimate purpose of Enheduanna's disk may have been simply to record dynastic change, and to identify the new dynasty with the traditional gods of Sumer.

The disk itself was found in 1927, during excavations at Ur carried out by C. Leonard Woolley and his associates. It was discovered in the *giparu*, in the debris that filled the northeast end of a passageway that lay between excavation blocks A, B, and C.[6] The disk had been broken into several pieces and Woolley suggested that "the stone may have been deliberately defaced."[7] There is no real evidence that this was the case; Enheduanna's profile is clearly visible on the disk (before restoration), and her name had not been removed from the back. If, as Woolley had first claimed, it had been deliberately marred, it seems logical that both her name, and her features, would have been chiseled away.

There is an additional fact, often overlooked, which indicates that the disk was not purposely harmed; an Old Babylonian tablet exists which copied Enheduanna's inscription: "Enheduanna, the true woman of Nanna, the wife of Nanna, the daughter of Sargon, king of Kiš, in the temple of Inana-za.za (?) at Ur, built a low altar and named it 'Altar, table of An'."[8] Although this tablet is damaged, it is still possible to compare it with the original disk. An examination of photos of the disk,[9] as it was recovered from the debris, shows that it was broken into five pieces. The upper left section of the disk is the most heavily damaged, with only the rough outline of what has been reconstructed as a ziggurat, and an image of a figure which appears to have been chipped. It seems that, instead of the disk being defaced, it was damaged accidentally when it was either dropped or thrown down.

The disk is described by art historian Irene Winter as being "of translucent alabaster; measuring c. 25.6cm. in diameter and 7.1cm thick."[10] Despite the disk's importance as both a historical artifact and an example of ancient artistry, the significance of its discovery is that it was not found, as might be expected, in the Sargonic graves, or even with other Ur III material. It was found, along with a "little seated figure," which turned out to be a small statue of Enannatumma, who was identified as the "second founder of the temple."[11] Why the disk was found in the Isin-Larsa level of the *giparu* is an issue that few scholars seem inclined to address. It is Enannatumma, and her father Ishme-dagan, whose actions provide answers to the mystery surrounding Enheduanna's disk. To understand their conduct it is necessary to take a brief look at the political maneuvering that took place after the "dra-

5. Hallo, "The Women of Sumer," 29.

6. Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Enheduanna, En-Priestess, Hen of Nanna, Spouse of Nanna," in *Duma-E-Dub-Ba-A: Studies in Honor of Ake Sjöberg* (Jerusalem, 1989), 540.

7. Winter, "Women in Public," 192; n.15. See also *Ur Excavation Texts*, IV, 49.

8. Edmond Sollberger. "Notes Breves no. 16," *RA* 63 (1969), 180.

9. For obvious reasons, this author had no access to the actual disk and, therefore, had to work from photographs. This, unfortunately, may account for some error in examination conclusions.

10. Winter, "Women in Public," 190.

11. P. R. S. Moorey, *Ur of the Chaldees* (Ithaca, 1982), 189.

matic and sudden collapse of the Sargonic empire about 2160 B.C.,"[12] up to, and under, the rule of Ishme-dagan during the Isin-Larsa period.

The end of Akkadian rule in Sumer allowed "petty-statism" free reign. During this period the Guti rose to dominance, and the era is often named the "Gudea period" after its most notable ruler. Within fifty years, however, the power of the Guti had faltered, and the Ur III period commenced. One of the most famous of the ancient Mesopotamian kings, Šulgi, reigned during the Ur III period which, like its predecessors, only lasted for about 100 years. The last of the Ur III kings, Ibbi-Sin, not only witnessed the demise of his ancestral rule, but also the destruction of Ur by a combined force of Elamite and Shimashki ravagers.[13] The Isin dynasty arose from the resulting chaos.

A great deal of the available evidence concerning the Isin kings indicate that they retained the ceremonies and rituals which had come down through the Ur III period. The Sumerian King List

> played a crucial role in showing that the Isin dynasty ruled in accordance with the divine will. The list presented the Isin kings as an integral part of the kaleidoscopic pattern of royal power since time began: famous kings, such as Sargon of Agade and Šulgi of Ur, were part of this divine lottery and now it was the turn of Isin's rulers.[14]

The king list was not enough to demonstrate the Isin dynasty's legitimate right to rule in Sumer. Laments were written describing the "break-down of civilized life" through divine command. Only the gods could give a king permission to rebuild a city (or temple) which had been destroyed by their will. The Isin kings claimed this permission and cities and temples were rebuilt, to illustrate the "divine harmony" with which the Isin kings ruled.[15]

At this point, Ishme-dagan's actions resemble those of Sargon's, over 200 years previously. He installed his daughter, Enannatumma, as *en*-Priestess, thereby continuing the "ancient tradition of appointing the chief king's daughter to the high priesthood at Ur."[16] Enannatumma was then assigned the duty of rebuilding the temple. This could not have been an easy task. Although there is insufficient data for a complete understanding of what was involved in the rebuilding process, it was apparently "accompanied by diverse rites and numerous rituals."[17] The existing evidence of such rites are "of two main types: ritual texts and building inscriptions."[18] Of great importance, too, were the building deposits: "integral parts of the structure of a building which were neither decorative (usually not even visible) nor structurally useful."[19] At this time, there are "no foundation deposits from Ur of the early

12. Hallo, "Women of Sumer," 30. For more information concerning the end of the Akkad empire, see Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 52–58.

13. Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 70–72.

14. Ibid., 77.

15. Loc. cit.

16. Hallo, "Women of Sumer," 32.

17. Samuel Noah Kramer, "Poets and Psalmists: Goddesses and Theologians," in Schmandt-Besserat, ed., *The Legacy of Sumer*, 7.

18. Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New Haven, 1968), 5.

19. Ibid., 1.

dynastic period found in situ,"[20] and the most common building deposits—pegs—were not used during the Akkadian period.

Although there is no direct evidence of the rituals performed at Ur, other sites have provided some understanding of what types of rituals may have been involved in the rebuilding of the *giparu*. Since the temple had been destroyed, there would likely have been a cleansing ceremony, to purify the ground and remaining foundation. This may have involved the sprinkling of clean earth over the site. An exorcism may have been performed, and, the temple would have been consecrated before use.[21]

Enannatumma, seemingly determined to rebuild the *giparu* on the "old lines but in better material, used burnt brick throughout."[22] Many of these bricks bear her name and are found "throughout the building both in the walls and in the floors."[23] These bricks are not technically building deposits or building inscriptions, even though the appearance of the *en*-Priestess's name illustrates her divine right to rebuild the temple.

This perceived consent also supported her father's right to take his place among the great kings of older periods, notably with Šulgi, Gudea, and Sargon. Even centuries afterward, the Akkadian empire "was seen as the major exemplar of the success that could be achieved by one city in imposing its control on the rest."[24] So, while his daughter supervised work on the *giparu*, Ishme-dagan, following Sargon's example, asserted:

> in one of his hymns, that he did not permit the powerful to oppress the weak, nor the noble to mistreat the commoner; that under his reign the poor dared to talk back to the rich, there were no bribed verdicts and no "twisted words," and the cry of the wronged, the widow, and the orphan was not in vain.[25]

His daughter was the *en*-priestess at Ur, and she was rebuilding the *giparu*. He had the favor of the gods, and had assumed the religious and social responsibilities carried by Sargon before him. In other words, Ishme-dagan had taken his rightful place as king.

Just as Ishme-dagan was imitating the actions of Sargon as a way of legitimizing his rule, it is very possible that Enannatumma was seeking ways to connect herself to the *en*-priestesses who had come before her. Enheduanna, as the illustrious hymn collector, poetess, and first attested *en*-priestess, would be a natural choice as a role model and patroness. It is quite feasible that Enannatumma would have searched for some relic associated with Enheduanna.

During the excavations at Ur, it was discovered that the *en*-priestesses had been buried under the floors of their houses. The excavators believed that at one time "brick vaults must have contained riches which tempted the avarice of the enemy who plundered the building."[26] There also appears to have been a small cemetery

20. Ibid., 56.
21. Ibid., 15–16 and 32.
22. Moorey, *Ur of the Chaldees*, 183.
23. Penelope Weadock, "The Giparu at Ur," *Iraq* 37 (1975), 108.
24. Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 55.
25. Kramer, "Poets and Psalmists," 9.
26. Moorey, *Ur*, 185.

located close to the *giparu*, where *en*-priestesses were also buried.[27] These graves, too, had been plundered by the Elamites.

With a cemetery located so near the *giparu*, it was unnecessary to utilize the floor of the dwelling for the burial of the priestesses. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that there was some compelling reason to retain the bodies, along with their relics, in the *giparu.* In her study of the *giparu* and the role of the *en*-priestesses, Penelope Weadock concluded that:

> The word *en* . . . denotes a successful economic manager who ensures prosperity for the community. And so powerful, seemingly, was this gift which the *en* possessed, that its potency was thought to continue after the death of its possessor, and offerings were made to the dead *ens* in the hope that the power would continue to be exercised for the good of the community. For the earliest periods of Sumerian history the beginning of a such a cult of dead *entus* seems to be discernable. At the time of the Isin-Larsa period there was in Ur what would appear to be a well-established cult of the dead *entus*.[28]

Whether or not earlier *en*-priestesses had been so venerated is still under investigation. Weadock does, however, have ample information regarding the worship of Enannatumma, and her successor, Enmegalanna. Both women were apparently receiving offerings of food and clothing more than thirty years after their respective deaths. This information provides "an indication more of the importance of the office of *entu* than of the importance of these two priestesses personally."[29]

If the long dead *en*-priestesses, of the earlier dynasties, were being worshiped after their deaths, then it also seems logical that their internment in the *giparu* floor, in effect, made them an integral part of the building deposits. One motivation for including building deposits was that their presence sanctified the abode; "the placing of various valuables or pleasant materials in the lower parts of buildings can be regarded as a way of making them fit (pure) for divine or regal occupation. Building deposits also held a commemorative

> desire to preserve a record of one's pious or grandiose efforts. The earliest deposits were not inscribed. The inscription, once introduced, was at first considered desirable but not essential. In the Isin-Larsa period a tendency to regard the inscribed record as the most important feature of a building deposit becomes noticeable. From then on the commemorative monument occupies an increasingly prominent place among the types of deposits.[30]

It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that Enheduanna, along with several of her successors, may have been buried in the *giparu*. Their "holiness" as *en*-priestesses would then have inhabited the entire dwelling.

If this were the case, Enannatumma would have found herself in a dilemma; these graves had been pillaged. There is no evidence that even the bodies remained under the ruin of the *giparu*. Without the entombed *en*-priestesses to sanctify the dwelling, it seems possible that even the building rites could have been postponed, in order to recover whatever artifacts may have remained. Charged with the task of rebuilding the ancient temple, it is not difficult to imagine Enannatumma searching

27. Weadock, "The Giparu at Ur," 109.
28. Ibid., 104.
29. Loc. cit.
30. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits*, 165.

the rubble for anything which may have been overlooked by the looters. She would not have been simply seeking valuable relics, but *anything* which would have connected her new building endeavor to the *giparu* of antiquity.

It is proposed here that what Enannatumma finally found were pieces of a disk, tossed aside by thieves seeking riches. Enheduanna's disk shows no sign of having been encrusted with jewels or gold. Its only real value lay in the inscription on its back. The damage to the disk is not indicative of malicious defacement but is in keeping with its having been tossed aside as worthless—pieces of limestone waiting to be picked up by someone seeking ties to the past.

This could also explain why inscribed material took on greater significance, as building deposits, during the Isin period. If, as this author believes, the holy remains of the *entus* had been removed from the *giparu*, the inscriptions might still keep their names alive. The statue, which (during excavations) had been found with Enheduanna's disk, "bore a long inscription stating that it had been dedicated to Ningal" by Enannatumma herself.[31]

Still at issue, of course, is the Old Babylonian copy of the disk. Upon consideration of the proposed theory involving Enheduanna's disk, it seems probable that before committing the pieces to use as a dedicatory building deposit, Enannatumma had a tablet copy of the disk fragments reproduced for posterity.

Enannatumma completed the task her father had set for her. Her building efforts were continued by "several kings of the Isin-Larsa period, but it is difficult to link specific findings to particular rulers."[32] During the excavation at Ur

> the Isin-Larsa *giparu* was found destroyed with many broken votive objects scattered on the pavement of Unit C, suggesting that the structure met a violent end. Since [there are records of] the destruction of the city walls of Ur and Uruk, evidently during the suppression of a revolt of the two southern cities, it seems possible that at that time the *giparu* was burned and looted by the soldiers who destroyed the walls of Ur.[33]

The *giparu* was eventually rebuilt over the damaged level of the Isin building. Once again, Enheduanna's disk (or fragments) were overlooked as being worthless. It lay, along with Enannatumma's statue, among other discarded debris, until Woolley and his team found it nearly four millennia later.

The mystery of Enheduanna's disk really involves the lives of two women, born centuries apart, who fulfilled the similar needs of their fathers: Enheduanna and Enannatumma. The disk is what makes Enheduanna's time as Nanna's dam unique: for she is the first *named en*-priestess at Ur. From this time onward, all of the names of the *en*-priestesses are known.

Enannatumma was also an exceptional *en*-priestess. She rebuilt the *giparu*, and in doing so was able to retrieve the disk of her ancient predecessor. It was she who was likely to have had the disk copied onto a tablet. It is this copy that made possible the reconstruction of the fragmented disk that is now on display in the University Museum in Philadelphia.

31. Moorey, *Ur*, 189.
32. Weadock, "The Giparu at Ur," 108.
33. Ibid., 110.