Male and Female Professions in Sumer
at the End of the IIIrd Millennium BC

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One of the goals of the REFEMA research program was to try to delineate professions and professional skills according to the gender of their holders, as this distribution is not always as simple as it sounds. For the Neo-Sumerian period (XXIst Century BC), through examples from the *Codex Ur-Namma* and the general administrative records, this short paper tries to delineate male and female occupations. Dedicated to some new evidence regarding women at work, this paper also deals with professions for which gender is not immediately apparent and that are automatically considered to be exercised by men, while they could actually have been performed by women. Finally, it is observed that, during the Ur III period, women were able to perform occupations that one would not have *a priori* expected, as they were in most cases held by men.

Keywords: Sumer, work, gender, professions, skills

During the three years of the REFEMA program¹ that ended in 2014 (though some future extensions are foreseen), various research issues were considered² that helped to prepare for the final REFEMA symposium (Nanterre, November 2014), papers of which will be published soon.

From evidence dating to the Neo-Sumerian period collected on this occasion, one of the goals was to try to delineate professions and professional skills according to the gender of their holders. As we shall see, the distribution is not always as simple as it sounds.

We may consider first all the occupations mentioned in the new edition of the *Codex Ur-Namma* recently proposed by M. Civil.³ All the data related to professional life are gathered between paragraphs D and E of this edition, and we observe what appears to be a clear gender distribution in the situations described:

A) Male Occupations

- § D1b: the following occupations are mentioned: šidim, “bricklayer”; nagar, “carpenter”; ašgab, “leatherworker”; ad-KID, “reed-mat maker”; tug₂-du₈, “felt maker”; simug, “metal

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Abbreviations in this contribution follow the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/abbreviations_for_assyriology).

¹ Japanese-French research program devoted to the “Economic Role of Women in Ancient Mesopotamia” (a CHORUS project supported by the French National Research Agency [ANR] and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [JSPS]).

² See, among others, the results of four workshops organized at Nanterre (November 2012), Tokyo (June 2013 and May 2014), and Carqueiranne (September 2013), and presented in the blog “Carnet de REFEMA” at <http://refema.hypotheses.org>.

³ M. Civil, “The Law Collection of Ur-Namma,” in A. George (ed.), *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection*, CUSAS 17, Bethesda, 2011, 221–287.

worker”; lu₂-azlag₂, “fuller”; ku₃-dim₂, “goldsmith”; burgul, “stone-cutter”;

- § D1c: the matter is here the making of pots and the paragraph therefore concerns the profession of bahar₂, “potter”;
- §§ D2–D6: these paragraphs concern the profession of a-zu, “physician.”

B) Female Occupations

- §§ D8–D9: the following female occupations are mentioned: geme₂ uš-bar, “weaver”; a-ga-am, “doorkeeper’s helper”;⁴
- § D9: SAL.lu₂-KAŠ.DIN / *sābītum*, “tavern-keeper”;
- § E2: nu-gig / *qadištum*, “midwife”; um-me-da, “nursemaid.”⁵

The occupations mentioned in paragraphs D9 and E2 are poorly documented in the administrative records. But we now have at least five references to the *sābītum*,⁶ to which we can probably add references to some geme₂ (e₂)-lunga.⁷ A first mention of a *qadištum* in the archives has also been recently published.⁸

This distribution found in the *Codex Ur-Namma* fits quite well with evidence from administrative records: in these, most of the occupations of the craft sector (metal, wood, leather, basket work, goldsmith work, pottery, or stone-cutting) are quite clearly male and women barely appear. It can also be noted that this list of male jobs fits almost perfectly the evidence found in the large administrative tablet UET 3 1498 [P137823]), where these various craftsmen are gathered in collective workshops (see the various sections with e₂ + professional specialty in this text).

Other occupations in administrative records also seem to be performed exclusively by men. Examples include (not exhaustively):

- aga₃-us₂, ra₂-gab, lu₂-kas₄, lu₂-kin-gi₄-a, lu₂-^{ges}tukul, sukkal, ma₂-lah₃
- sipa, na-gada, udul, ša₃-gu₄, engar, a-igi-du₈, ka-gur₇, šu-ku₆, kurušda, nu-^{ges}kiri₆, sa₁₂-du₅
- muhaldim, sagi, i₃-ra₂-ra₂, kuš₇, šu-i, šidim, etc.

Among these mostly male occupations, one may nevertheless meet the occasional woman. For example, in the interesting list of women recorded in NYPL 12 [P122656], the job of muhaldim, “cook” (usually male)⁹ is performed by a woman named Geme-Ašnan-zi (o. ii 16); and the job of nu-^{ges}kiri₆, “gardener” is carried out by a certain Geme-Ašar (o. i 11).

We must therefore be careful: the mention of an occupation is in itself insufficient to

⁴ According to M. Civil’s rendition, *ibidem*, 280, and *contra* the usual interpretation “marsh worker,” linked to the word a-ga-am = Akk. *agammu*, “marsh” (cf. *PSD* A/1, 69–71).

⁵ See M. Civil, *ibidem*, 281–284.

⁶ BPOA 6, 694 [P312697]; *JCS* 54, 7, 50 [P332254]; NRVN 1, 8 [P122221]; *ZA* 93, 174, 6 [P299123]; and Nisaba 15/II, 279.

⁷ TMH 5, 28+193 [P020442]; Nisaba 15, 951 [P454137].

⁸ Nisaba 15, no. 1066 [P387874], although the context here seems to be rather linked to the cult.

⁹ Other women are also known elsewhere working as muhaldim, as this Geme-Enlil in Nisaba 15/II, 668, r. i 9 [P453995], or this Šat-Erri in Nisaba 15/II, 953 [P454138], o. iv 20 (they are called geme₂ ... muhaldim-me, in the summary at r. iv 31–32).

determine whether it was performed by a man or a woman.¹⁰ And we have certainly tended to make overly hasty delineations of occupations by gender based mainly on our own, naturally modern, criteria that remain of course subjective. For a proper evaluation of the situation, isolated references to an occupation are not enough: only a systematic survey of the terms “PN + occupation” would allow progress, by identifying among these PNs those that are undoubtedly female.

Concerning now some more specifically female occupations, if we set aside the occupations and/or situations related to cultic and religious personnel, and the women that can be characterized as “free” (geme₂ kar-KID),¹¹ we saw that the *Codex Ur-Namma* is mainly interested only in weavers (geme₂ uš-bar), doorkeeper’s helpers (geme₂ a-ga-am), tavern-keepers (*sābītum*), nurse-maids (um-me-da), and midwives (nu-gig).

But it has been shown¹² that, in the administrative records of the Ur III period, four major categories of female workers are distinguished according to their assignment or to their primary occupation, and that most of them are engaged in mass production:

- geme₂ uš-bar “weaver”¹³
- geme₂ i₃-sur “oil presser”
- geme₂ kikken₂ / ar₃-ra “miller / grinder”
- geme₂ un-IL₂ “unskilled female worker”

To this should be added the frequent presence of “female workers” (geme₂) in connection with various activities often described in the texts according to a pattern “geme₂ + noun + verb”:

- geme₂ udu gub-ba women for tending sheep
- geme₂ udu ur₄-ra women for shearing sheep
- geme₂ gu women for spinning wool
- geme₂ kisal-luh women for cleaning the yard
- geme₂ kaš-a gub-ba women for making beer
- geme₂ a-ša₃ / ki-su₇ / i₇ / kun-zi-da, etc. + ...
women for various agricultural and irrigation works
- geme₂ sig₄ ... women for making / carrying bricks
- geme₂ ... IL₂-ga₂ women for carrying ...

¹⁰ Thus the very useful and complete list of occupations that D. A. Foxvog has established for the Presargonic period (*Old Sumerian Occupations. A Handlist of Terminology Found in the Presargonic Lagash Texts*, self-publication available at <<http://home.comcast.net/~foxvog>>, dated to 2014) does not help to determine immediately what men or women do, and it gives the impression that almost all these occupations and professional skills are male.

¹¹ Cf. B. Lafont, “Women at Work and Women in Economy and Society during the Neo-Sumerian Period,” in B. Lion and C. Michel (eds.), *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East*, Berlin and Boston, forthcoming, n. 6.

¹² See for example B. Studevent-Hickman, “The Workforce at Umma: Some New Questions,” in S. J. Garfinkle and J. C. Johnson (eds.), *The Growth of an Early State in Mesopotamia: Studies in Ur III Administration*, BPOA 5, Madrid, 2008, 145.

¹³ In this basic sector of activity, some more specialized women are also attested: see for example the munus amatu₅(TAG), with the commentary of M. Civil, *op. cit.*, 280.

- geme₂ ma₂ ... women for loading / unloading / hauling boats¹⁴
- geme₂ e₂ + ... women in the service of an institution / a factory / a household, etc.

The list is not exhaustive and could surely be extended: we may simply recall here, in the context of this brief inventory, that the new texts from Garšana, with their recent study by W. Heimpel,¹⁵ have yielded much new evidence regarding women at work, particularly in the sector of construction projects, where they were previously not well documented. A similar pattern emerges in a recent study on “Women, work and war” during the Neo-Sumerian period.¹⁶

In sum, it comes as no surprise on the one hand that most occupations in the primary sector of economy (farming, hunting, fishing, agriculture) are particularly male, but less obviously, we see how much female unskilled workforce could be used as reinforcements.

On the other hand, except for specialized crafts, many occupations in the productive (or secondary) sector and in the service (or tertiary) sector are held by women, especially occupations related to mass production needed to feed the basic system of ration distribution (food, clothing, oil) organized by official institutions.

But given this general division, it is then interesting to observe that, during the Ur III period, women were able to perform occupations that one would not have *a priori* expected, as they are in most cases held by men:¹⁷

- munus a-zu, “female physician”: the best known example is now given by a woman named Ubartum, whose career between Amar-Suen 5 and Ibbi-Sin 2 has been studied by A. Kleinerman.¹⁸
- gudu₄ munus, “purification priestess”: texts from Irisagrig give the first attestation of a woman in this office (Nisaba 15/I, 127, 437 and n. 838).
- munus dub-sar, “female scribe”: the activity of female scribes in the Neo-Sumerian archives was observed for the first time almost seventy years ago.¹⁹ Since then many other attestations have been recorded and today we know more than one hundred seal impressions whose holders are women (they have a seal cylinder even if they are not necessarily scribes).

¹⁴ For women hauling boats (just like men), see B. Lafont, “Sur quelques dossiers des archives de Girsu,” in A. Kleirnermann and J. M. Sasson (eds.), *Why Should Someone Who Knows Something Conceal It? Cuneiform Studies in Honor of David I. Owen on His 70th Birthday*, Bethesda, 2010, 178.

¹⁵ W. Heimpel, *Workers and Construction Work at Garšana*, CUSAS 5, Bethesda, 2009.

¹⁶ A. Garcia-Ventura, “Women, Work and War: A Proposal to analyze their relationship during the Neo-Sumerian period,” in H. Neumann (ed.), *Krieg und Frieden im Alten Vorderasien: Proceedings of the 52nd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Münster July-2006*, AOAT 401, Münster, 2014, 345–352.

¹⁷ We can refer to this remark of D. I. Owen: “The Garšana archives revealed surprising evidence for the role that women played in Ur III society. Now the new data from *Āl-Šarrāki* [Irisagrig] add to this picture (...) with the appearance of women in positions that are rarely, if ever, attested in our sources” (Nisaba 15/I, 125).

¹⁸ A. Kleinerman, “Doctor Šu-Kabta’s Family Practice,” in D. I. Owen (ed.), *Garšana Studies*, CUSAS 6, Bethesda, 2011, 179–180.

¹⁹ A. L. Oppenheim, *Catalogue of the Cuneiform Tablets of the Wilberforce Eames Babylonian Collection in the New York Public Library*, AOS 32, New Haven, 1948, 21–22 and n. 44a.

And there are likely other professions for which gender is not immediately apparent and that are automatically considered to be exercised by men, while they could actually have been performed by women.

This is the case, for example, with commercial agents, traders and merchants. From Antiquity to contemporary Wall Street through the Renaissance bankers, the role of “businessman” has been generally regarded as a male occupation. In Sumerian times, this was the profession of *dam-gar₃*.

It is not impossible, however, that during the Ur III period this profession could have been performed by women. Suffice it to cite here the example of the “*nin-ezem dam-gar₃*” mentioned in the tablet PPAC 5, 257 [P316629] (*Nin-ezem* is clearly a female proper name).

In conclusion, it should be stressed again here²⁰ what is a characteristic of the Neo-Sumerian period: men and women are engaged equally in all general activities of production and service; both could have real professional skills. But of course this does not erase a degree of specificity in the gender division of tasks. Nevertheless, recent new data and research continue to bring new surprises, showing that this division is not as immediately obvious as it may seem...

²⁰ See the general conclusion of my contribution (in press) in the proceedings of the REFEMA conference (above n. 11).