

LOVERS, SISTERS, AND COOKS

SCENES FROM A MESOPOTAMIAN PALACE

To my lord, a letter from Shibtu, your servant. All is well at the palace. All is well, too, with the temples of the gods and the workshops. I have had omens read for the health of my lord. These omens are good . . . but my lord must take good care of himself when he is in the full sun.

Shibtu dictated this letter to a scribe and sent it by messenger to her “lord,” King Zimri-Lim of Mari. In it, she called herself a servant. But this was just a way of showing respect. Shibtu was not a hired servant. She was, instead, a very powerful woman: the king’s chief wife. As a king’s daughter herself, she had lived in palaces all her life and knew what was required of a queen.

Shibtu was very fond of her husband. When he was out fighting, she worried about him and often wrote, begging him to take care of himself. She warned him against staying too long in the sizzling desert sun, knowing that people could collapse—even die—from heat exhaustion and dehydration.

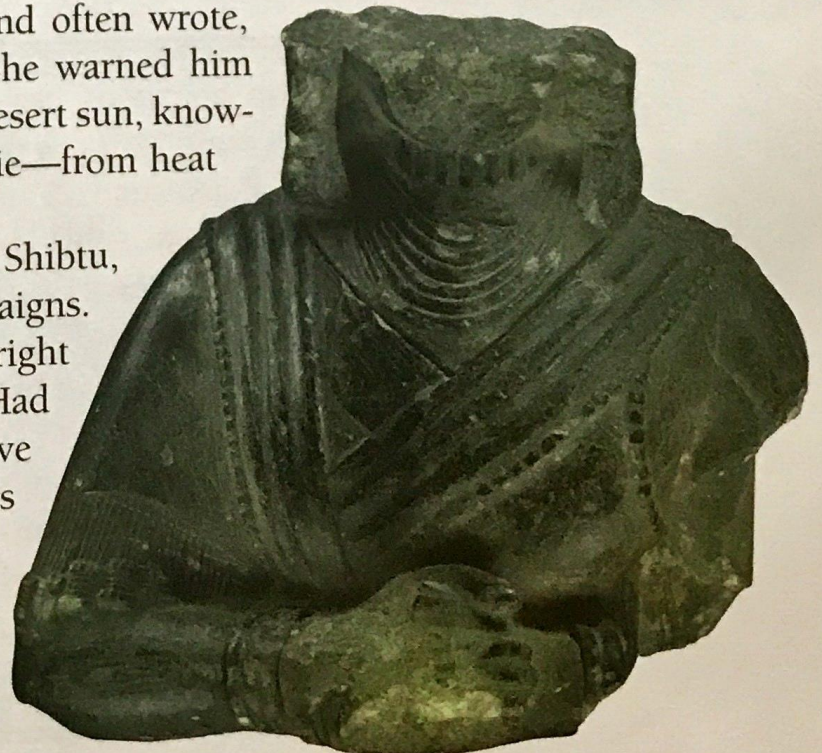
Zimri-Lim also sent letters home to Shibtu, often telling her about his military campaigns. But sometimes, he was unable to write right away, and then Shibtu would worry. Had he been injured . . . or killed? It must have been hard for her to wait for messengers

Too bad this royal lady from Mari has lost her head, but at least her tasseled shawl and elegant necklace remain. Her long hair, visible in the back of the statue, is braided.

“ LETTERS AND
A PALACE IN SYRIA

“ Shibtu, letter to Zimri-Lim,
18th century BCE

In Mesopotamia, kings often had more than one wife, which increased the odds of having an heir to follow them on the throne, but other men could marry only one woman at a time.



**BUBBLE, BUBBLE,
TOIL, AND... BEER**

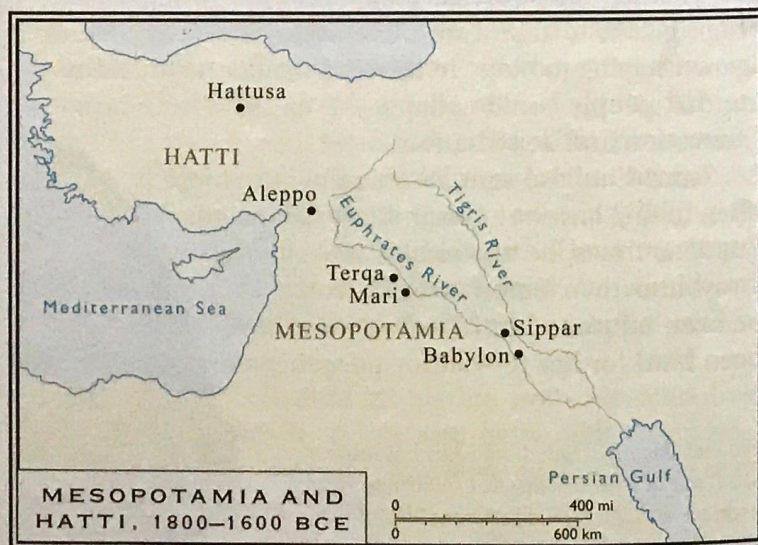
The people of Mari, like all Mesopotamians, drank beer more than any other beverage. And they were the first to brew it. They made their beer from barley and water, using natural yeast to ferment the mixture. (Yeast is a tiny fungus found in the air—the same organism that causes bread dough to rise.) Fermentation not only made the brew bubbly, but it also served to kill the bacteria that were often found in the water.

to bring his letters. Once she wrote “My heart has been greatly alarmed. . . . May a tablet come from my lord so that my heart may be calmed.”

When Zimri-Lim was away from the palace, Shibtu handled the day-to-day running of the palace and the kingdom. Even when the king was at home, she managed the royal household. Her large staff included weavers, leather workers, stonemasons, jewelers, woodworkers, goldsmiths, bronze workers, gardeners, water carriers, basket weavers, cooks, and scribes. These workers included some prisoners of war as well as local people who had been trained in various crafts. All of them were paid in rations of bread, oil, and wool.

French archaeologists have found more than 20,000 cuneiform tablets in the palace at Mari, an ancient Syrian city on the Euphrates in ancient times. Many of them were written during the reign of Zimri-Lim, who lived at the same time as King Hammurabi of Babylon. The tablets from Mari, which include the short messages between Zimri-Lim and Shibtu, give us the clearest picture we have of royal life in Mesopotamia in the beginning of the 18th century BCE.

Like Hammurabi, Zimri-Lim was a warrior, judge, diplomat, religious leader, and devoted king to his people.



Although Hammurabi's personal life remains a mystery, we know quite a lot about Zimri-Lim. He had 11 daughters, maybe more. He had one son also, but the boy died young. At least nine of the daughters married the rulers of nearby lands. The girls had no say in choosing their husbands. Their marriages were designed to cement friendships between the king and his allies—insurance policies against war and rebellion. Love, if it bloomed, was a bonus, but often that didn't happen.

One of Zimri-Lim's daughters, Inib-sharri, was desperately unhappy in her marriage. Her husband, a king, already had a wife before he married Inib-sharri. The two women didn't get along, and Inib-sharri wrote to her father that the other wife had forced her “to sit in the corner, and caused me, like an idiot, to hold my cheek in my hand.” Inib-sharri wrote that the king made it clear that he liked the other wife more: “His eating and drinking is continuous before this woman, [while I could not] open my mouth. . . . What about me?”

Inib-sharri's complaints eventually convinced Zimri-Lim that the situation was impossible. He wrote to his daughter: “Gather your household [servants and belongings]. If that's not possible, just cover your head and leave.”

When another daughter, Shimatum, married, Zimri-Lim gave her a generous dowry, including fine furniture, fancy clothes, jewelry, and 10 maidservants to attend her every need. But things did not go well in the first years of Shimatum's marriage to King Haya-Sumu. Perhaps she was unable to give him an heir—the records don't say—but, after three years, Zimri-Lim sent Shimatum's sister Kirum to the same kingdom as a second wife for Haya-Sumu. Instead of sticking together, the sisters became rivals. Both women wrote to their father, and each one tried to convince him that *she* was the one who deserved his support.

The letters from Shimatum and Kirum have opened a window onto an ancient case of sibling rivalry. Kirum should have held the lesser position in court, because Shimatum was the king's first wife. But Kirum didn't see it that way. She wanted the place of honor. Shimatum tattled

66 Inib-sharri, letter to Zimri-Lim, 18th century BCE

66 Zimri-Lim, letter to Inib-sharri, 18th century BCE

66 Shimatum, letter to Zimri-Lim, 18th century BCE

to papa, painting herself as Kirum's innocent victim: "There is neither fault nor crime on my part."

Luckily for Shimatum, the King Haya-Sumu didn't like his pushy second wife and treated her badly in front of guests. So then Kirum wrote to papa:

66 Kirum, letter to Zimri-Lim, 18th century BCE

Haya-Sumu rose up against me and said, "Are you acting as the boss here?" . . . Then he took away from me my very last maidservants. May my father send me just one . . . reliable man among his servants, so that I can come home quickly? . . . If my lord does not . . . bring me home, I shall surely die.

When King Haya-Sumu finally divorced Kirum, Shimatum had no sympathy for her once-proud sister, even though Kirum had threatened to throw herself from the highest rooftop. The records suggest that Zimri-Lim *did* send for Kirum, and the battle between the sisters ended.

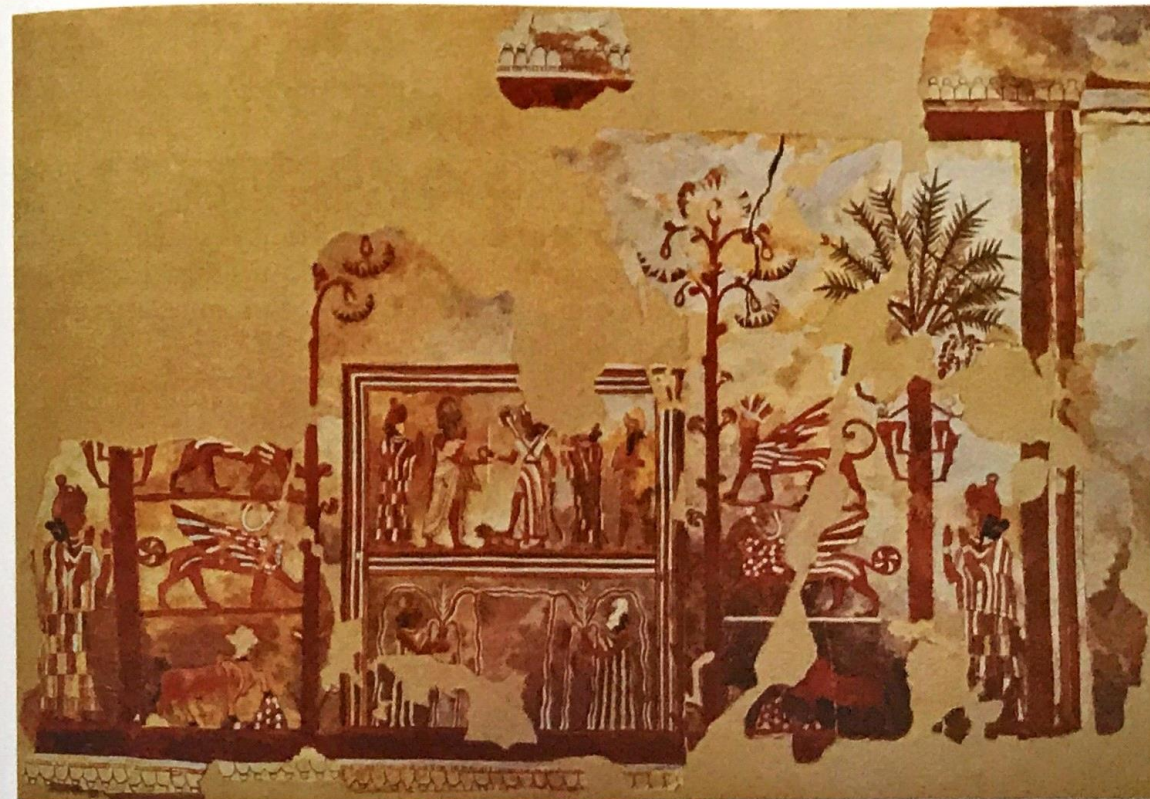
The letters from Zimri-Lim's many daughters show that they stayed in touch with their parents and siblings after their marriages. They sent and received gifts, and they kept their father up-to-date on politics in their adopted lands. Zimri-Lim received letters from his advisors and various palace officials, too. Governors of the cities within the kingdom also wrote to the king, as did his ambassadors to foreign courts. Many of the letters written to Zimri-Lim have survived.

The palace at Mari was enormous in Zimri-Lim's time. Covering about six acres, it had more than 260 rooms on the ground floor alone. Much of the palace was given over to official business, but the king and his family had their private quarters, where guards protected their safety and privacy.

When an ambassador first arrived at Zimri-Lim's court, servants would have filled the bathtub in the palace bathroom so that the ambassador could enjoy a nice soak after his travels. This bathroom even had a "flush toilet" perched over a running stream that washed away the



This bronze lion protected Dagan's temple at Mari. Wild lions roamed Syria in the 18th century BCE. When one was captured, the hunter would send it to King Zimri-Lim so that he could hunt it on his royal estate.



waste. Refreshed and tidied up, the ambassador would have been escorted through a small door on the far right side of the large courtyard into a dark, L-shaped corridor. The sunlight streaming through a door in the corridor would have lit his way into the king's own court. Here, the visiting ambassador would wait in the shade of tall potted palm trees until Zimri-Lim was ready to receive him in his throne room.

One wall in the throne room was decorated with a large painting that depicted a king dressed in elegant robes, receiving the symbols of authority (the rod and ring) from a goddess. The other walls were probably hung with tapestries and rich carpets probably covered the floor. When the ambassador was finally admitted to the king's presence, Zimri-Lim would have been seated upon an elaborate throne made from ivory and gold.

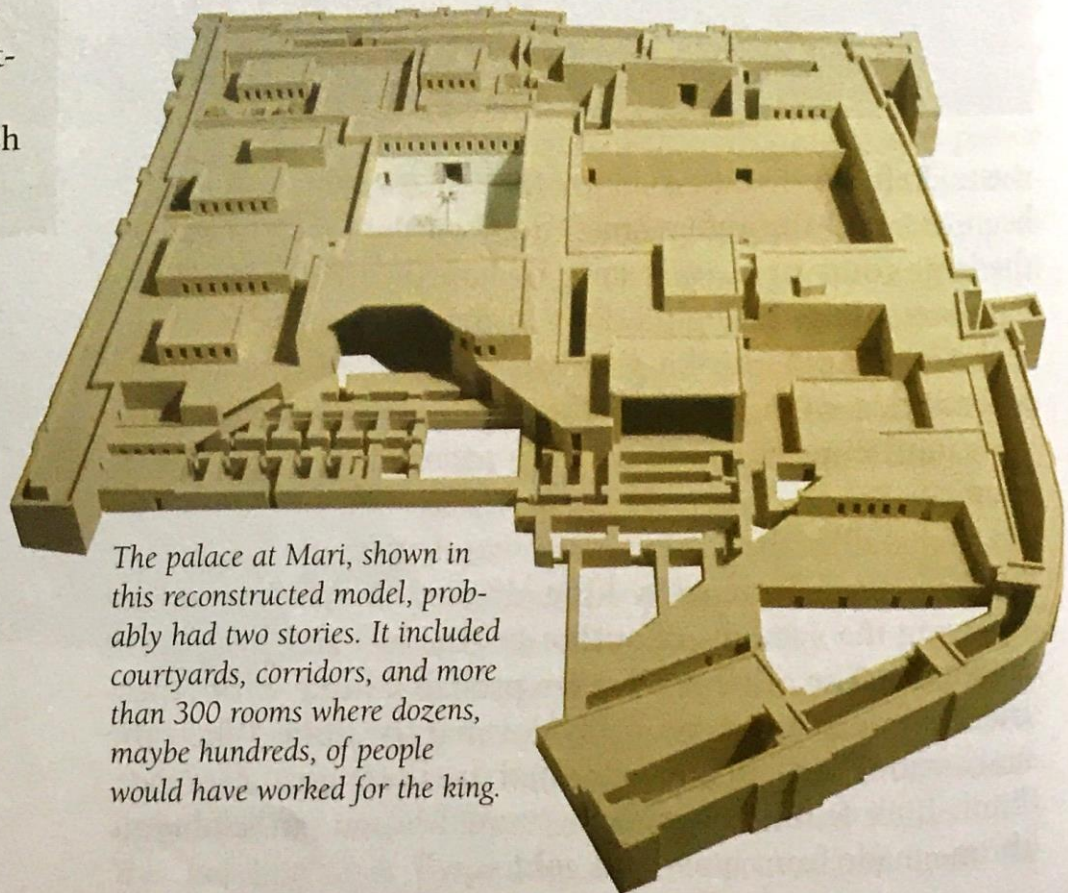
In this palace wall painting, the king of Mari, wearing a white robe and tall hat, receives the symbols of power—the ring and the rod—from a goddess. Goddesses and fantastic animals watch among tall palms.

ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST RECIPES

This ancient Mesopotamian recipe tells how to cook Kippu-Bird in Mint Sauce. The birds “are first split open, rinsed in cold water . . . [and] placed in a kettle,” where they are quickly seared. The instructions continue: remove the kettle from the heat and add “a little cold water . . . and a sprinkling of vinegar. Then mint and salt are pounded together and rubbed into the kippu, after which the liquid . . . is strained and mint is added to this sauce.” The bird is then put back into the kettle. When all the ingredients have blended, the dish is complete.

After seeing the king, perhaps the ambassador would have been invited to visit Zimri-Lim’s temple or to see the archive rooms where the palace records were stored. And then that night, the king would have honored him and his assistants with a feast. Cooks and kitchen servants would have worked all day, scurrying back and forth between the storage rooms, the kitchens, and the dining hall.

A high-ranking woman named Ama-dugga controlled all the food in Zimri-Lim’s palace. She commanded a large staff of men and women who brewed beer, ground flour, made cakes and pastries, then cooked and served the meals. Excavations from other Mesopotamian sites have even provided us with recipes written on clay tablets—the earliest known recipes in the world. These recipes, mostly for meat and bread dishes, feature herbs (such as mint), spices (such as cumin), plus lots of onions, garlic, and leeks. Unlike the average person, Zimri-Lim probably ate meat every day. And what did Ama-dugga keep in the pantry for royal desserts? Dates—the Mesopotamians’ favorite fruit.



The palace at Mari, shown in this reconstructed model, probably had two stories. It included courtyards, corridors, and more than 300 rooms where dozens, maybe hundreds, of people would have worked for the king.