

# THE CARE AND FEEDING OF ANCIENT GODS

## PRIESTESSES AND PRIESTS IN MESOPOTAMIA

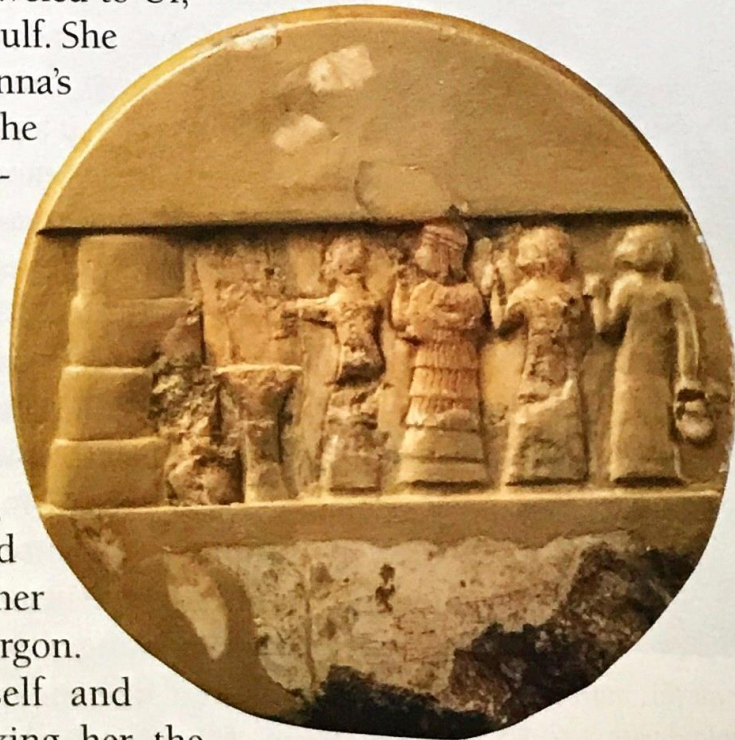
“ A HIGH PRIESTESS’S HYMN, A LIST OF OMENS, AND A POEM

King Sargon chose his daughter, Enheduanna, for one of the most important jobs in all of Mesopotamia: high priestess in the temple of Nanna, god of the moon. Nanna’s temple was in the walled city of Ur, one of the many cities that Sargon had conquered.

Obedying her father’s wishes, Enheduanna left her home in Sargon’s capital, Agade, and traveled to Ur, which was near the shore of the Gulf. She moved into the palace where Nanna’s priestesses lived. From then on, she lived shut away from the day-to-day life of ordinary people. She wasn’t allowed to marry. And although she probably lived in luxury with many servants to attend her, she herself was a servant in Nanna’s “house.”

Each day Enheduanna sang praises to Nanna and chanted prayers, begging him to support her family, especially her father, Sargon. She wrote some hymns herself and signed her name to them, making her the world’s first known author. More than 50 cuneiform copies of one of her hymns (or parts of it) have been found and are in museums around the world. Not all Enheduanna’s hymns were written to “her” god, Nanna. She also honored Inanna, the goddess of love. In one of her hymns to Inanna, Enheduanna says she hopes that Ashimbabbar, another name for Nanna, will not be jealous:

Many ancient gods had more than one name. The moon god was first called by his Sumerian name, Nanna, but he was also known as Ashimbabbar and later in Akkadian as Sin.



*Enheduanna and her assistants stand before the altar of the god Nanna to perform their sacred duties. This alabaster disk was found in the palace where the high priestess lived.*



66 Enheduanna, "Hymn to Inanna," around 2300 BCE

I, Enheduanna, will offer supplications to her,  
My tears, like sweet drinks,  
Will I present to the holy Inanna, I will greet her  
in peace,  
Let not Ashimbabbar be troubled.

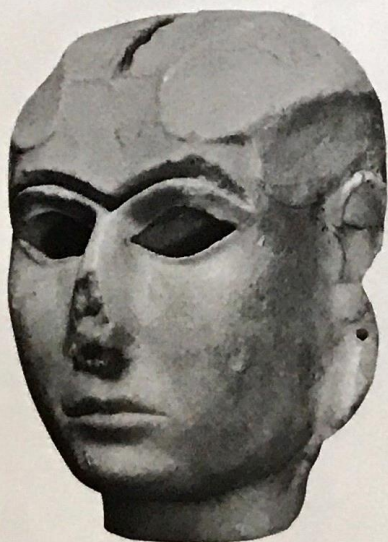
At this point in her life, Enheduanna was out of favor at Ur—and out of a job. We don't know what the problem was, but in her hymn to Inanna, she blames Nanna for her troubles:

As for me, my Nanna watched not over me,  
I have been attacked most cruelly. . .  
I, . . . have been driven forth from my house, . . .  
forced to flee . . . like a swallow

Eventually, Enheduanna regained power and returned to her duties in Nanna's temple. There she not only worshiped him, she also bathed, dressed, and fed him. How could anyone have believed that a person could do these things for the moon? To the Mesopotamians, the answer was simple: each god and goddess had two forms. The first was the spirit of the god as it lived in nature—Nanna in the sky, for instance, or the god Ea who lived in fresh water. But gods and goddesses also lived in the temples that were dedicated to them.

The Mesopotamians believed that the spirit of each god lived in a special statue, now called a cult statue. These statues, made in human form to represent the humanlike characters of the gods, had the same needs as any human. Not only could they fall in or out of love, they could become angry, tired, or hungry. So, each day Enheduanna and her assistants fixed fine meals for Nanna and set them before his statue. After Nanna had "eaten"—perhaps by absorbing the smell of the food—the high priestess and other temple workers ate and drank the meal.

No complete cult statues have survived. But we know that they existed because ancient texts mention them and because we have pictures of them in ancient sculpture and on cylinder seals. The statues appear to have been made from precious metals, such as bronze and gold, and decorated



The eyes and hair on this marble head would have been inlaid with precious materials such as gold and lapis lazuli. She probably represents a goddess.

The hands of these figures are folded in prayer. Wealthy Mesopotamian men and women could dedicate such statues of themselves in local temples to pray for them and their families.



with semi-precious stones. In these ancient images, the gods and goddesses wear beautiful clothes and are often seated on thrones. All gods had horns on their headdresses—a decoration reserved for divine beings—and male gods were often shown wearing beards.

Why did Sargon send Enheduanna so far away? After Sargon had conquered the southern Sumerian cities and brought them into his empire, he seems to have decided that he wanted to control religion as well as politics in the far reaches of his kingdom. So he put his daughter in a high position to represent him in Ur, one of the largest and most important cities in the south.

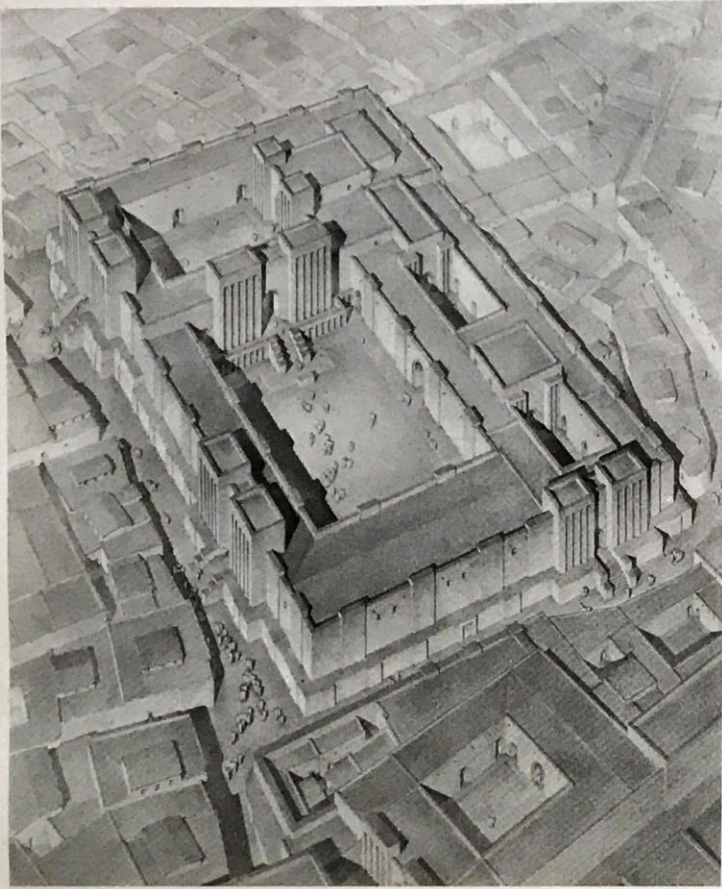
Each major city was "home" to a particular god or goddess. **Nippur** was the city of Enlil, ruler of the Mesopotamian gods, and Ur belonged to Nanna, Enlil's son. Ever since the time of the earliest towns (5000 to 3800 BCE), the Mesopotamians had built temples on platforms that were sometimes as tall as a house. Kings often bragged about having restored or rebuilt a particular temple in order to please their city's god.

Temples, like palaces, owned fields, grazing lands, orchards, and irrigation canals. Many people lived and worked on temple-owned lands. These temple workers worked the soil, took care of the hundreds of sheep and goats, wove cloth and mats, made bread, brewed beer, and carved stone objects to glorify the gods. We know from cuneiform lists that other temple workers swept floors, carried buckets of water and fuel, and worked as security guards.

The priests and priestesses had the most important job

Because Nippur was Enlil's home city, Mesopotamians honored Nippur just as Catholics today respect Rome (where the Pope lives) and Muslims respect Mecca (the birthplace of Muhammad, Islam's founder).





Like most Mesopotamian temples, this one (by a modern painter) was built on a high platform in the city center. In it were courtyards, workshops, and store-rooms, as well as the holy room where the cult statue was kept.

of all: to serve and glorify the god or goddess, and each had particular duties. The purification priest had to make sure that the temple was free of ordinary dirt, but also clear of all wickedness and evil. Diviners, priests who were experts in divination, were supposed to figure out the will of the gods from signs such as a shooting star, an unusually bright planet, an eclipse of the sun, or the birth of a three-legged calf. To figure out the meaning of these signs (or omens), the diviner checked the records to see if this odd event had ever happened before, and if so, what had happened afterwards. One

ancient tablet warned that if the stars of the constellation Orion sparkle brightly, “somebody influential will get too much power and will commit evil deeds.”

A diviner also studied the innards of sacrificed animals—the liver of a sacrificed goat, for instance. He would compare the goat’s bloody liver with others that had been copied and kept as clay replicas in the temple. The will of the god would then be “read” from the various bumps, hollows, and deformities that he found and interpreted.

As high priestess, Enheduanna didn’t preach to a congregation because most worshippers weren’t even allowed inside the temples. But a man or woman could have a small stone statue made in his or her image. This statue, showing the person praying to the god, would be placed near the

66 List of omens, Iraq, 1st millennium BCE

god’s statue to remind him to watch over the person and his family. This was possible only for the wealthy. Most people practiced their religion in their own homes, saying prayers to their personal gods and goddesses. A poem called “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” describes a man whose string of bad luck convinced him that he had somehow neglected and angered the gods.

Like one who has not . . . called upon his goddess  
when he ate . . .

Like one who has gone crazy and forgotten his lord, . . .  
Like such a one do I appear.

66 “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” 13th century BCE

A religious Mesopotamian such as this poet would have followed daily rituals and celebrated all public holy days and festivals. He would have taught his children and servants to honor the gods. And he would never, ever have sworn to a false statement in the name of any god.

On festival days and holy days, priests carried the statues of the gods and goddesses through the streets of the city, and the people felt blessed simply by being there. Everyone had the day off work to join in the joyful celebration. But the high point of the year occurred when the gods went visiting. The cult statues were carried by boat to a neighboring city to express the friendship between the gods and their peoples. Everyone would celebrate with feasting, dancing, and socializing. The temple priests and priestesses organized these festivals for the gods and the people. Throughout her lifetime, Enheduanna must have presided over many of them in Nanna’s city of Ur.

The position of high priestess at Ur stayed in Enheduanna’s family for many years. The kings who followed Sargon, even when new dynasties came to the throne, continued to appoint women—their daughters or sisters—to serve as the high priestesses of Nanna. When these women died, they were buried in a special chamber under the palace. Grave robbers have stripped these tombs of their bones and burial treasures. Which tomb held the bones of Sargon’s daughter, princess and priestess of Nanna? The thieves were thorough and left no clues.

#### HONORING THE GODS

From the time of the Mesopotamians, building a large temple for a god or gods has been a sign of a leader’s greatness. Solomon, an Israelite king, built a huge temple to the Hebrew god Yahweh in Jerusalem. Christian kings built magnificent cathedrals in Europe when most people lived in small cottages, and Muslim leaders founded enormous mosques at holy sites across the Near East.