

Sumerian "known prostitutes"

Six Sumerian prostitutes known by name, the first ones in world history.

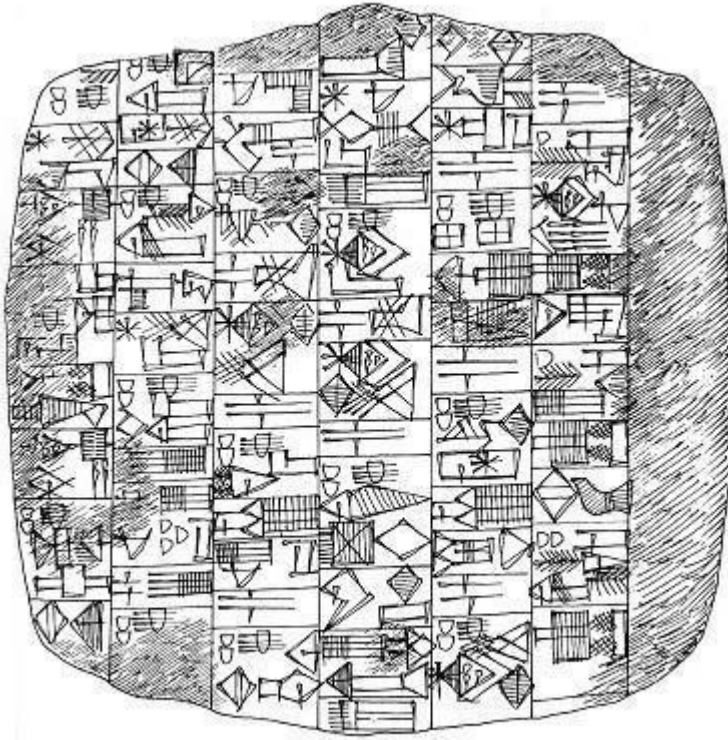
By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

(Hint: press the CTRL key when clicking on a link to make it display in a separate window.)



CDLI [011028](https://cdli.org/P023211)

CDLI [010764](#)



CDLI [011031](#)



These are three cuneiform tablets from the Sumerian city of Shuruppak (modern Fara, Iraq). They are dated in the Early Dynastic IIIa period, 2600 – 2500 BC.

Sumerian "known prostitutes"

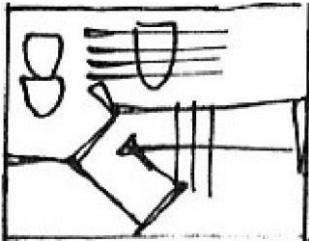
At first glance, these tablets seem unimportant. They are Sumerian “administration tablets” that were used for accounting purposes. As such, the tablets are similar to thousands of other Sumerian tablets (a cuneiform tablet is not as rare as most people think).

Generally, administration tablets are deadly dull to read. It’s like reading account ledgers. But these three tablets hold a few surprises.

The tablets record the distribution of rations (wages) to various workers. Among other commodities, most of the workers receive a standard issue ration of grain. The grain is measured in 2 large *barig* units and 4 smaller *ban2* units.

It's a very eclectic group of workers, including one (or more) of the following occupations: administrator, barber, carpenter, cook (and head cook), cup-bearer, doctor, farmer, felt-maker, herald, lamentation singer, land recorder, leather worker, maltster, merchant, midwife, musician, official (and high official), priestess, scribe, secretary, household steward, stone cutter, servant/slave, and weaver.

There are eight workers who are listed as *šubur* (see Footnote [\(1\)](#) on a separate page) meaning either a servant or a slave.



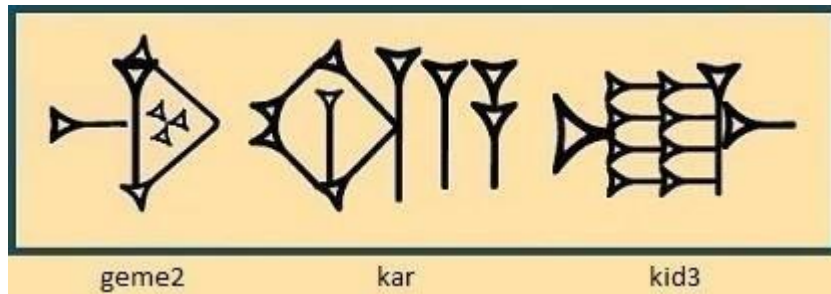
2 barig and 4 ban (grain units for the) servant/slave

These tablets are important because they have the world’s first written reference to prostitutes (seven of them, in fact). Not only is this among the first times in history that the word “prostitute” is written, but the tablets actually refer to the prostitutes by name. Their names are written down and their profession is listed as “prostitute.” To use the modern vernacular, each woman is a “known prostitute.” Now we know the names of the first professional prostitutes in recorded history.

The name of one prostitute is heavily damaged and cannot be read. This leaves a total of six women.

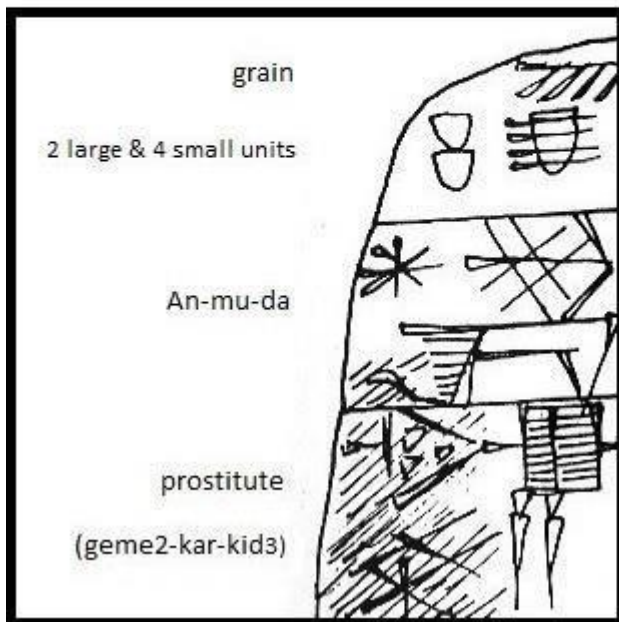
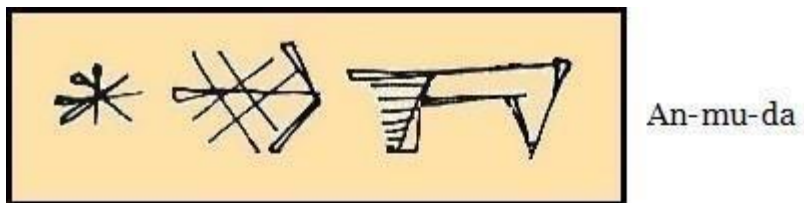
In alphabetic order, the women are: An-ama-gu, An-mu-da, Igi-gun, Nin-gu-gal, Nin-men, and Ninni-gi. [\(2\)](#)

The Sumerian word for prostitute is *kar-kid3*. A professional prostitute is a *geme2-kar-kid3*.



Geme2 means “a female worker, servant, or slave.” It denotes a professional status.

A known Sumerian prostitute:



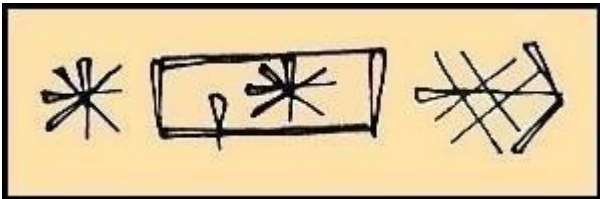
The upper corner of this tablet shows the record for An-mu-da receiving her rations of grain.

Notice that the scribe wrote the signs out of order. He wrote *kid3-kar* instead of *kar-kid3*. A scribe didn't always bother to keep the signs in the proper sequence. He often wrote them to best fit within the space provided, without worrying too much about the niceties of correct spelling. He just threw the signs in a box and expected the reader to sort them out. This was a common practice in early Sumerian writing. It is one of the many reasons why the language is so incredibly difficult to translate.

Fortunately, after the ED III period, the Sumerian scribes became more conscientious about keeping the signs in the correct order.

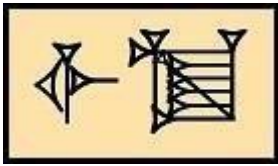
Five more Sumerian prostitutes:

We have already met An-mu-da. Here are the names of the other five prostitutes that are listed on the tablets:

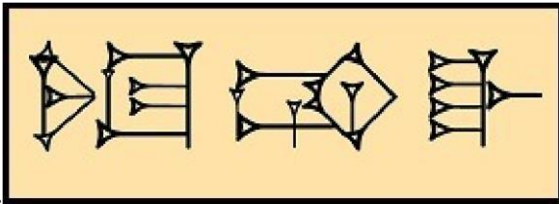


An-ama-gu10

Needless to say, the numeric subscript of a sign is not pronounced when the word is said aloud

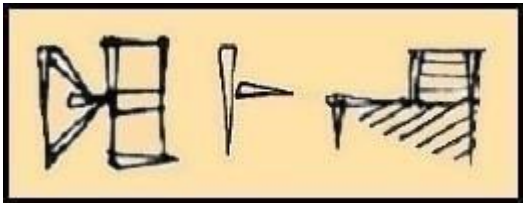


Igi-gun3



Nin-gu2-gal

On the front of the tablet, Nin-gu-gal receives a standard grain ration of 2barig 4ban units. On the reverse side, she receives an identical grain ration (!). Did she get back in line? Is she “double dipping”? In both instances she is clearly identified as a prostitute, so it’s not like she’s fooling anyone. Perhaps there's a mundane explanation for the extra rations (back wages?) but there seems to be something else going on here. Did the scribe who recorded the transactions let her get extra food? Or did his supervisor let her do it? Is the food a gift, or was something expected in return? (3)

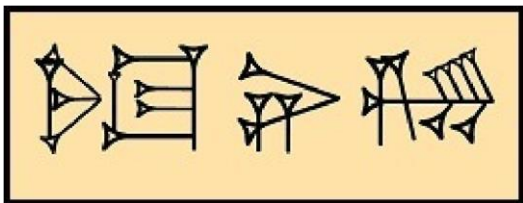


Nin-me-en

Two adjacent vowels are pronounced as one, so me-en is pronounced as “men.”

There’s something very surprising about Nin-men, as we shall soon discover.

The record of Nin-men’s grain ration occurs sequentially right after the record for An-mu-da. That means Nin-men and An-mu-da were standing in line right next to each other while they waited for their rations.



Nin-ni-gi (4) also written as “Ninigi”



geme2-kar-kid3



2 barig 4 ban (grain units for) Nin-ni-gi

prostitute

This is how the signs look on the tablet. Notice that the signs are written out of order, in both her name (Nin-gi-ni) and her profession (kar-kid3-geme2).

The first known prostitute in world history:

All of the women listed above are "known prostitutes," but is it possible to pick just one as the absolute first prostitute known to history?

This "honor" belongs to the first woman listed on the tablet that was written the earliest. Unfortunately, none of the tablets have a date. We know they belong within the 100 years of the ED IIIa period, but that's a very wide range.

Fortunately, we do know that all three tablets are contemporary to each other. They were written within a span of a few years, or most probably within the same year.

That's because there are many names in common on the three tablets. I did a quick count and came up with a partial list of 18 names that match on any two or all three of the tablets including five ugulas (overseers).

Even so, the fact that the tablets are not dated means we cannot pick out the world's first prostitute in recorded history. The name of the prostitute on one tablet is damaged and cannot be read, so we will have to settle for a two-way tie, with the names written first on the other two tablets.

They are: An-mu-da and Nin-ni-gi. These are the first prostitutes known to history.



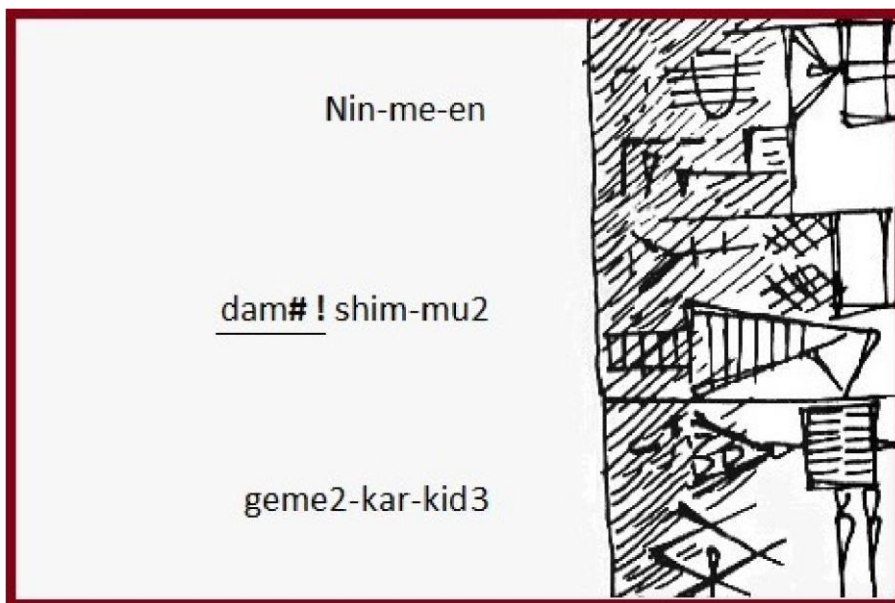
However, the fact that the tablets are closely contemporary to each other tells us something very interesting about the seven women: They lived in the same city, they were in the same profession, and they received rations from the same facility (either a temple or a government warehouse). This means all the prostitutes no doubt knew each other. They may have been friends, perhaps rivals, and some of them probably worked together.

One tablet tells us that An-mu-da and Nin-men were standing in line right next to each other while waiting for their grain rations. On another tablet, Nin-ni-gi, Nin-gu-gal, Igi-gun, and An-ama-gu were all standing in the same line. On a third tablet, An-ama-gu shows up again with two other prostitutes (5).

I believe they all knew each other. As the outcasts of society, prostitutes are their own little community. Through their shared experiences (and hardships) they tend to bond most closely with each other.



Remember when I said there is something surprising about Nin-men?



The pound sign “#” means that a Sumerian sign is damaged but still readable. The exclamation point “!” usually indicates a scribal error, like an incorrect word or a miswritten sign.

Occasionally, the exclamation point indicates surprise on the part of the translator. This is certainly the case here. It’s like he’s saying, “Damn! Look at that!”

This is because *dam* is actually the Sumerian word for “spouse.” It means that Nin-men,

the prostitute, is married! This is shocking enough to begin with, but there's more.

The husband is listed as *šim-mu2* (pronounced as "Shimu"). It's not quite clear if that is his name or his profession (6). *Šim-mu2* is defined as a "perfumer," so perhaps Nin-men married a man who made perfume. *Šim-mu2* also occurs in later Babylonian texts as a translation of the Akkadian word *ašīpu*, meaning "an incantation priest, sorcerer, magician, or dream interpreter" (all Sumerian signs have multiple meanings).

Now there's an interesting couple, a prostitute married to a sorcerer/magician.

However, we must not over romanticize this union. As we will see, Shimu is no magic man.

I'm inclined to believe that Shimu is the man's name, not his profession. Besides that, I don't think Shimu was anything glamorous like a sorcerer or a magician, or even a perfumer or an incantation priest. It speaks volumes about Shimu's character that his wife is still a prostitute even after their marriage. He kept his wife in prostitution and he thus benefited from the money she made by selling her body to strangers. What kind of man would do such a thing? This tells us everything we need to know about Shimu's character.

Usually, when a prostitute gets married, she becomes an *ex*-prostitute. For her, that's the whole point of the operation. So why is Nin-men still a prostitute?

And what happened to the money she made by prostituting herself?

Legally, the husband has control over the finances, so Shimu directly benefited from his wife's prostitution.

I suggest that so far as husbands go, Shimu is the lowest of the low.

But wait, there's more!

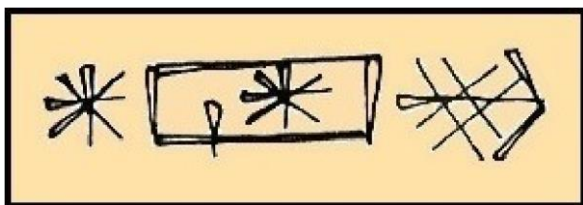


2 barig units for A-lal₃

wife of Šim-mu₂

2 barig units for An-ama#-gu₁₀

This tablet tells us that Shimu is also married to a woman named A-lal (!) And standing right beside her is An-ama-gu (!!) Their rations were recorded consecutively. Remember, An-ama-gu is a known prostitute. This *strongly* suggests that A-lal is also a prostitute (!!!).



An-ama-gu



I bet you didn't see that one coming.

On this tablet, A-lal isn't officially labeled as a prostitute, but this particular tablet doesn't usually list a person's profession (An-ama-gu isn't labeled as a prostitute either).

However, A-lal is in the company of a known prostitute and she is wedded to a man who married another prostitute. I therefore suggest that if A-lal isn't already a prostitute, she soon will be.

We don't know for certain which woman Shimu married first. Was it Nin-men or A-lal? Had one of them died, or been divorced?

It's also possible that Shimu was married to both women simultaneously. Polygamy was sometimes practiced in ancient Sumer, so it's entirely possible that Shimu was married to both women at the same time.

However, there are a couple of problems with this assumption. First, there's a specific word for a secondary wife (usar) but this word isn't used, it's just dam, "a wife." Second, polygamy (maintaining two or more wives) is an expensive habit, so it was usually reserved for rich merchants and members of the nobility. We know that Shimu, with at least one wife in prostitution, was neither rich nor noble. Nonetheless, it's still possible that Shimu is married to both women at the same time. Remember, these tablets were probably written within the same year.

It's also possible that "Shimu" is actually two different men with the same name. But... really? Two *different* men named Shimu consorting with known prostitutes? And *marrying* them? I'm not buying it. It's the same Shimu, there's no question about it.

Shimu

I tried to give Shimu the benefit of the doubt. I thought, "Perhaps after the death of his beloved wife A-lal, Shimu married her dearest friend, Nin-men, and they comforted each other during their loss." Or perhaps Shimu was a decent man who married "the prostitute with a heart of gold" (Nin-men). Or something like that. I wanted to believe it.

Then I remembered that Nin-men was still a prostitute after she married Shimu. There's just no getting around that one central fact. Again, this tells us everything we need to know about Shimu.

With one, and probably two wives in prostitution, Shimu is a very unsavory character. It would be difficult to find another man in history who married an active prostitute that continued to practice her profession after her marriage. It would be doubly difficult to find a man who married *two* prostitutes (either consecutively or simultaneously).



A woman of Diqdiqqeh

I'm beginning to doubt the validity of these so-called marriages. I'm thinking they are sham marriages. Perhaps each marriage was a pretense that the women willingly agreed to, for their own personal reasons. Maybe Shimu promised to make "honest women" of them. If this is what Ninmen thought, she was sorely mistaken, because her prostitution continued after her marriage. In any case, I believe Shimu "married" these women (legitimately or not) so he could use them.

Again, what kind of man would do such a thing?

I'll tell you what kind of man – a pimp. That kind of man.

Shimu had two wives in prostitution, and he lived off their earnings. Even if both women were already prostitutes, Shimu kept them that way, even after marriage. He probably did it in the usual way, through lies and manipulation, threats and violence. In my opinion, Shimu is a predator, preying on the most vulnerable women in society. I think he was building his own little harem.

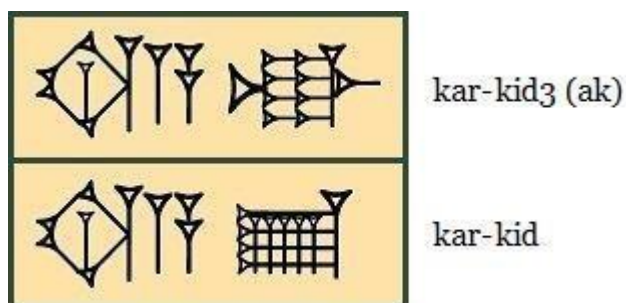
I therefore suggest that Shimu is the first pimp known to history.

I have no proof of it, but that's what I'm saying.

If you don't believe me, then just ask yourself, "What kind of man keeps a wife (or two) in prostitution?"

Anyway, that's my opinion. In the meantime, I'll let the readers make up their own minds about Shimu, his character and his motives.

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Right after the ED IIIa period, in the ED IIIb period (of course), kar-kid3 (ak) became kar-kid.



Ama-ab (Amab) prostitute

Besides the three tablets from Shuruppak, this ED IIIb tablet from Girsu is one of only four administrative tablets listed on the CDLI that mention a prostitute (CDLI [020349](#)). The tablets are ED IIIb.

This leads us to the question: Why are these the *only* tablets that mention prostitutes?

Obviously, there were plenty of prostitutes in the ED III period (2600 – 2340 BC), but they don't show up on any other tablets. Neither do they show up on the hundreds of thousands of administrative tablets during the 340 years remaining in Sumerian history. "Prostitute" appears on some lexical and literary tablets in the Babylonian period (2000 – 1600 BC) but not on any administrative tablets. There is no mention of prostitutes receiving rations along with all the other workers in Sumerian society. Basically, the prostitutes disappear from the public record. Why is that?

Here's my best guess: I think the women resented being labeled as prostitutes every time they received their rations (whether or not it was true). I believe that in deference to these women, the administrators accepted the polite custom of simply labeling them as *gemes*, "female workers." I suggest that many of the "female workers" that are listed on some other administrative tablets were actually prostitutes.



[Enlarge](#)

Surprisingly, there was a bird called kar-kid. It'd be interesting to know how or why the bird got its name (though these birds are not necessarily "known kar-kids").

February 9, 2019