

Portrait of a Sumerian Princess

A realistic portrait of a princess during the reign of Gudea.

By Jerald Jack Starr, October 14, 2019. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

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



Neo-Sumerian period, c.2120 BC. Tello (ancient Girsu). Chlorite. Height:17.8 cm (7 inches)

This fragmentary statuette of a woman is in the Louvre Museum (AO 295). It is labeled as a "woman with a scarf." She is a "princess during the reign of Gudea."

There has been some debate on whether the woman is really Gudea's wife or his daughter. "Princess" gives the impression that she is his daughter, although the Louvre doesn't actually come right out and say it. On the other hand, she could just as easily be his wife, and therefore a queen rather than a princess. Then again, maybe the woman is just an unknown princess in the court of Gudea and she is not related to Gudea at all.

On my website, I posted several pictures of this woman labeled as a "Sumerian Princess." I also described her as "Ninalla, the wife of Gudea." That way I had both bases covered. I could rationalize this to myself because Ninalla was a royal princess before she became a queen. She was the daughter of Ur-Baba, the king of Lagash. Gudea married Ninalla and he became the king of Lagash after the death of her father. In this way, Ninalla was both a princess and a queen.

If I was forced to choose between the two options, between either a princess or a queen, I would have guessed she is Gudea's wife (the queen) and not his daughter (the princess).

I based this conclusion on one simple fact: There is no evidence that Gudea ever even had a daughter. Maybe he did, but there isn't any evidence for it. Obviously, he did have a wife, so she is the most likely candidate for the identity of the statue. Plus, Gudea commissioned many statues of his family (see the pages about his [Ur-Ningirsu](#) and [Lugal-agrig-zi](#)), so it's only natural to assume that he also had several statues of his wife.



This is the only surviving statue of Ninalla. We know it's Ninalla because it has her name written on it.

Unfortunately, the statue is heavily damaged (to say the least).

Nonetheless, I was reasonably certain that AO 295 in the Louvre was Ninalla, Gudea's wife and the queen of Lagash.

A few days ago, I was perusing the Facebook page for All Mesopotamia when I came across a posting for the Yale University Babylonian Collection. It had this banner illustration:



Something about this picture immediately caught my attention. I instantly recognized Ninalla on the left. At first, I thought it was the exact same statue that is shown on the top of this page. I thought it had been colorized to enhance its appearance.



Left profile of the statue in the Yale collection.

Then I noticed there is damage (on the ear, hair, and eyebrow) that isn't present on the Louvre statue. Other than that, the statues seemed exactly the same...

As a matter of fact, they are the same statue. I was later informed by Yale that their statue is a plaster cast of AO 295. I don't know why there is additional damage on the Yale statue.



Right profile of the statue in the Louvre.



[Enlarge](#)

I believe she is wearing a collared blouse, not a scarf, as stated by the Louvre. As seen on the [back](#), there are no ends to the scarf.

Notice the details of profile: the slope and the shape of the nose, the flat face, the slight overbite, and the receding chin.

This statue is a realistic portrait of an individual woman, and not just a generic depiction of “a woman's face” which is typical of ancient statuary, where all the women look alike.

It isn't very surprising that it is a recognizable portrait of an actual woman. That's because realistic human portraiture was invented during the reign of Gudea. See [The Face of Gudea](#). For the first time in history, stone statues began to resemble the people they portrayed.

I decided the statue had to be Ninalla. Surely only the queen would warrant the creation of a realistic portrait carved in stone. A few days ago, I started working on a new webpage about Ninalla. My working draft was titled “Ninalla.” I created a new picture folder called “Ninalla,” and filled it with pictures called “Ninalla.this” and “Ninalla.that” (Ninalla.face, Ninalla.profile, etc.).

I was halfway finished with the webpage. I was looking at the picture that is shown above. Then I realized something.

The shape of the nose, the flat face, the slight overbite, and the receding chin...

I had seen this profile before.

On Gudea himself, no less.



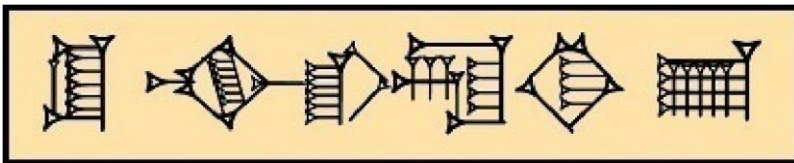
Click on any of the following five pictures to enlarge it in a separate window.)



She looks just like Gudea. They are obviously related.

She is not Gudea's wife, the queen.

She is Gudea's daughter, the princess.



Princess of Lagash.



She has the same profile as her father, the same nose and the same flat face. Perhaps the eyes were also the same. There are two main differences between the father and daughter. She has fuller lips, and her chin (when viewed from the front) is smaller and rounder.



Gudea was the first man (and king) to commission a realistic portrait of himself.

He is the first recognizable man in all of human history.



He also commissioned realistic portraits of his sons, Lugal-agrigzi (left) and Ur-Ningirsu ... and a portrait of his daughter...

Except for the joined eyebrows (a ubiquitous feature on most Sumerian statues) and the thick eyelids, this is a realistic portrait of the princess in the prime of her life.



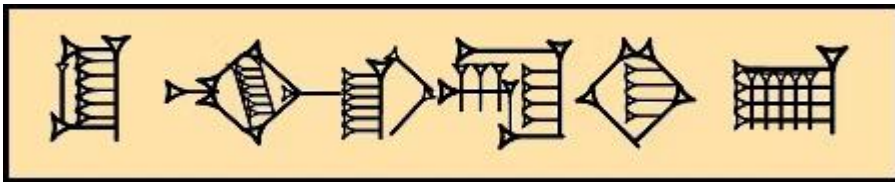
A Sumerian princess resurrected.

Were it not for this statue, she would be completely forgotten. Until just a few days ago, no one knew she existed. Now she has suddenly reappeared, after more than 4,000 years, looking the way she did when she was a young woman.



See high-resolution pictures from the Louvre: [left](#), [right](#), and [both](#).

We still don't know her name, but now we know who she is.



She is the Royal Princess of Lagash, the daughter of Gudea...

She is also the first recognizable woman in all of human history.



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