

An Unknown Sumerian Queen

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.)



Alabaster plaque (door handle backplate). The door handle fit into the square hole.

Sumerian, from the city of Girsu. Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2600 BC to 2340 BC). Dimensions: 10 x 10 inches (25.4cm), 1.3 inch wide (3.3cm). From the collection of the Barakat Galleries. [Enlarge](#).

For reasons that I will later explain, I call this plaque "**The Queen's Banquet**."

The plaque shows a religious festival, a thanksgiving celebration for Inanna, the goddess of war.

The plaque is divided into three registers:

Top: A king and queen enjoy a feast while being attended by their servants.

Middle: Other servants bring more food and wine.

Bottom: Animals are led to the sacrifice.

During the religious festival, the commoners will also be feasting.



There are many other examples of decorative door plaques that show Sumerian kings and queens at Inanna's banquet. It was a common motif. The plaques were used to adorn temples and palaces. Five other examples are shown on a [separate page](#). However, none of them are anywhere near as beautiful as the one from the Barakat collection.



At the banquet, a Sumerian king and queen are attended by their servants. We know they are a king and queen, and not just a lord and lady, because both of them hold date clusters.

A date cluster was a symbol of royalty and the divine right to rule. Inanna bestowed it exclusively on kings and queens. Mere lords and ladies were not entitled to carry this exalted symbol of rank.

The crown of a Sumerian queen.



This plaque is different from all the others because it shows the queen wearing her crown. As explained on the page about [Sumerian Queens](#), this is a very rare example of a Sumerian queen wearing a crown. Her crown is a variation of the "shepherd crown," the crown of a Sumerian king.



A "shepherd priest." At the very beginning of Sumerian civilization, the cities were ruled by priests. The shepherd hat of a priest later became the crown of a Sumerian king.

The queen's crown was a feminine version of this one. Her crown was meant to look similar to the king's crown, but not the same. Her crown was taller and more rounded. It also resembled a polos, the headdress of a high-priestess.



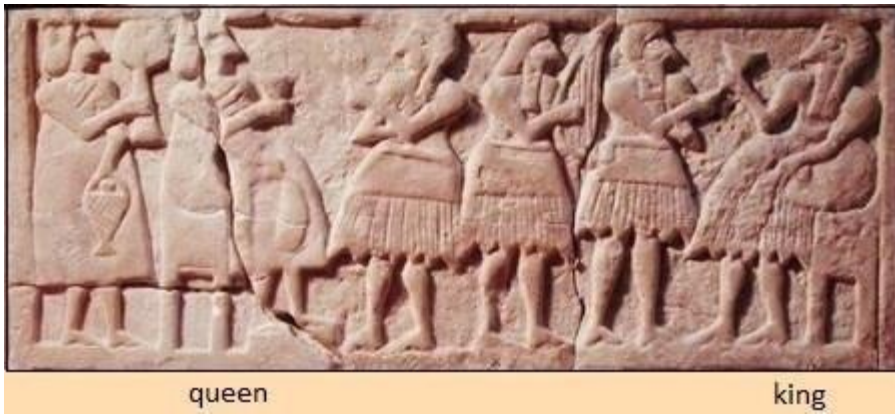
The crown is smaller than a polos and the hair is worn loose beneath it. The polos is larger and it covers the hair.



On the left is the headdress of a Sumerian princess. I've always thought it originated from the kind of headdress that was worn by the wife of the original shepherd priest (shown above), at the beginning of Sumerian civilization. It was thus the headdress of a priestess. Note the headband and the covering for the hair. "Inflate" the headdress and it becomes a polos (right), the headdress of a latter day Sumerian queen in her role as a high priestess.

This, and the prominence of female goddesses in the Sumerian pantheon, suggests that women were always intricately involved in the religious life of the Sumerians.

Apparently, women were also involved in governing the kingdom, more than anyone ever suspected. At the Queen's Banquet, it is somewhat surprising that the queen is wearing her crown.



On all the other plaques, neither the king nor the queen wears a crown.



On this plaque, the queen wears a crown, but her husband does not.

That can only mean one thing: She clearly outranks her husband, the king.

She is the ruling monarch in this relationship, not her husband.

Although both of them hold a date cluster, the symbol of royalty, she is the only one wearing a crown, symbolizing her right to rule. She also wears a regal robe.

The queen of Girsu or Lagash?

This plaque was found in Girsu, so it's natural to assume that the woman is the queen of Girsu. On the other hand, Girsu was the holy city for the larger city-state of Lagash. Many important temples in Girsu were supported by the kings of Lagash, so the woman may actually be the queen of Lagash.

There's just one problem:

There is no evidence that a Sumerian female ruler ever existed – not in Girsu, Lagash, or any other Sumerian city.

An unknown Sumerian female ruler?

More than three years ago, on the page about the Akkadian queen [Ku-Baba](#), I had written:

“There is no historic record of a Sumerian queen who ruled by her own right. Sumerian queens were always the wives of kings. They never governed on their own. Sumerian queens had considerable power and influence, but they did not rule the kingdom.”

“A ruling queen would be a notable exception to the hundreds of kings in Sumerian history. It seems there should be some record of her existence – many records, in fact. She would be famous, or infamous, but there are no references to a female ruler in Sumerian history. More importantly, there is no mention of a Sumerian female monarch on the [King List](#), the definitive compilation of the kings who ruled in Mesopotamia (but for some reason, none of the kings of Girsu/Lagash are included on the King List). And neither does a Sumerian female ruler show up on the separate list of the [Rulers of Lagash](#).”

No suspected she even existed...



Yet here she is. She sits on her throne, presiding over the kingdom.

It doesn't matter if she isn't mentioned on any king list. She is clearly a reigning monarch.

She rules the kingdom by her own right. In effect, she is the king.

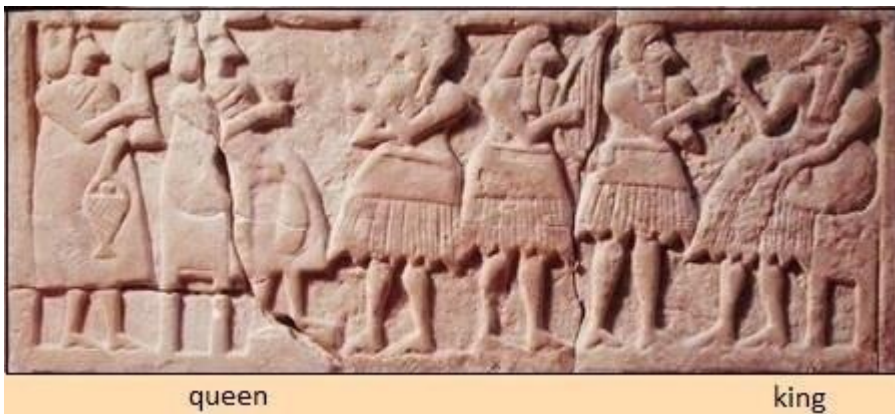
Interestingly, Queen Ku-Baba, the only female monarch named on the King List, is called *lugal* (king), and not *eresh* (queen).

It's not just the crown that makes her a ruler.

There is additional evidence that proves she is a ruling monarch.

In ancient art, it was common practice to draw a king larger than other men to symbolize his greater importance.

However, on all the other plaques, the king and queen are roughly same size.



On this plaque, and on all the others, the king and queen are the same height. There is no need to make the king taller than his wife. He's the king, he is obviously more important, so it isn't necessary to belabor the point by making him noticeably larger than his wife.



On this plaque, the queen is intentionally drawn taller than her husband, the king. Physically, she is slightly shorter than her husband, but her crown makes her taller, giving her greater stature (and status). She noticeably exceeds the border of the frame. Her husband only slightly exceeds the border.

In Sumerian art, it means something when a person is drawn large enough to actually exceed the picture frame. It is a deliberate effect that tells the viewer, "This is the most important person in the picture." In other words, "This is the king."



The king on the Standard of Ur.

We know this is a king because he wears the royal kaunakes (a skirt of woolen leaf petals), he is drawn taller than everyone else, and he exceeds the border of the frame.



The queen at the banquet.

We know this is a queen because she holds a date cluster, she wears a robe and a crown, she is drawn taller than everyone else, and she exceeds the border of the frame.

This is the first time in ancient history when a woman is drawn taller than her husband to emphasize her greater importance. It might also be the *only* time.

Clearly, she was born with the titles of nobility that gave her the right to rule. Her husband was a nobleman who became a king when he married her. It wasn't the other way around.

She didn't become a queen by marrying a king. She was already a queen. What's more, she didn't relinquish her power after marriage. She maintained her royal prerogatives.

There's no doubt about it, this is a powerful Sumerian queen. She didn't just reign, she ruled. She wasn't just the wife of the king, she ruled by her own right.

The first female ruler in history?

As a ruling queen in the ED III period (2600 – 2340 BC), she automatically qualifies as one of the first female rulers in all of history. However, she does not predate Ku-Baba, the first known female ruler and the only one who is mentioned on the Sumerian King List. Ku-Baba died 31 years before the end of the ED III period. Judging by the artistic merit of this plaque, I suggest it was created at the very end of the ED III period (or later), when human beings were portrayed in a more natural and realistic manner.

Who is she?

We don't know her name.

It is awkward to refer to a woman without knowing her name, so I call her Nin-lugal.



Nin means “a Lady, a noblewoman.”

The monarchs of Lagash commonly referred to themselves as an *ensi*, which means “a ruler or a governor,” but it basically means “a king.” The Sumerian word for king is *lugal*.

Therefore, Nin-lugal is the “Lady King.”



This is not a generic portrayal of “some queen.” This is a portrait of an extraordinary woman, a real-life monarch who lived and reigned more than 4,000 years ago.

She was a woman of wealth and power, and judging by this plaque, she was a woman with exquisite taste in art.

This plaque may have decorated the door in a temple, or perhaps a door in her palace, possibly the throne room.



The Queen's Banquet. This is the queen at the height of her power and glory.

As a female monarch who lived and reigned at the dawn of civilization, she is one of the most important women in all of human history.

She is not the only Sumerian female ruler who isn't mentioned on the King List.
See [Another Unknown Sumerian Queen](#).

Also see: [Pu-abi, the Queen?](#) (or the king?).

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