

Enheduanna This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.



This votive statue was originally placed in a temple. It now resides in the Louvre Museum (AO 4754).

Click on any image. If an enlargement is available it will display in a separate tab

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

Here are the notes from the [Louvre website](#):

Bust of a seated orant [female worshipper], dressed in a kaunakès cloak, hair styled in a bun and held by a headband, the eyes and eyebrows were formerly inlaid.

Height: 22 cm [8.66 inches] Material: Limestone

Date: Akkadian (2350-2200 BC) and Neo-Sumerian (?) (c. 2112–2004 BC)

Place of discovery: Djokha = Umma (?)

In case you're wondering...

There's no way this statue dates to the Neo-Sumerian period (c. 2112–2004 BC). Artistically speaking, it's unlike anything else in the Neo-Sumerian period, which was the absolute end of Sumerian civilization. This statue clearly dates to the beginning of the Old Akkadian Period (c. 2350–2150 BC).

In other words, it dates to the time of Sargon the Great and the beginning of the Akkadian Empire.

The “?” after Umma, indicates that the provenance of the statue isn't known for certain.

If the statue was indeed found in Umma (or any other Sumerian city) it means the statue was placed in a temple after Sargon conquered the city. Conversely, the Sumerians placed votive statues in the Akkadian temples of the cities they conquered. Despite constant warfare, the Sumerians and the Akkadians practiced the same religion. See [The Standard of Mari](#).

I believe the statue is actually from the Sumerian city of Ur, for reasons that will soon become obvious.



Profile views: Enlarge [left](#), [right](#).

This statue is important for a number of reasons:

First, a portrait of an Akkadian woman is very rare. When the Akkadian empire finally fell, it was completely destroyed, and only a few artifacts remained.

Second, and most important, the woman is wearing a kaunakes, a garment of woolen leaf petals that was worn by Sumerian and Akkadian royals during ceremonial occasions. This means she wasn't merely a titled noblewoman, she was a member of the royal family, the ones who ruled the kingdom. In other words, she was either a royal princess or a reigning queen.

By extension, she was probably a high priestess, since royal women usually served in temples (to keep the secular and religious power of the kingdom "all in the family"). The kaunakes was most often used in temple settings.

See [Sumerian Queens](#).

Third, she wears her hair in a royal knotted bun with a simple headband.



The knotted bun was the hallmark of Akkadian royalty, male and female alike.



Notice that Sargon has the same kind of bun and headband. He is also wearing a royal kaunakes. Detail of a religious procession where he celebrates his victory over the Sumerians.

This leads us to a very interesting question.

Who is the woman portrayed on the statue?

She could easily be one of the many unknown royal women who lived in the Akkadian empire.

Maybe so, but I think she is much more important than that.

The surviving fragment, which only includes her body above the waist, is 8.66 inches tall. This means the entire seated statue was about 20 – 24 inches high. This is quite large compared to most (if not all) votive statues, which were usually displayed on an altar. If this was originally a standing statue, it would be even taller.

She is obviously a very important woman, one of the most important women in all of Akkad.

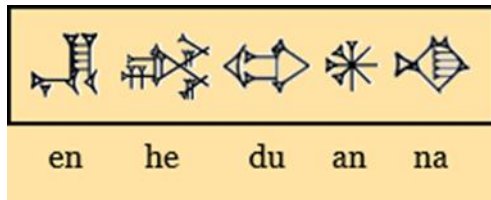


By contrast, this complete statue of the Sumerian Queen of Queens is only 7.5 inches tall.

It seems highly probable that the statue in the Louvre is a female relative of Sargon – perhaps his wife, mother, sister, or daughter.

It's entirely possible that she is actually the wife of Sargon, and thus the Queen of all Akkad.

There is another, more intriguing possibility – that she is Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon.



In the modern world, Enheduanna is perhaps more famous than her father.

Enheduanna is the first author in world history that we know by name (Mesopotamian scribes didn't sign their literary compositions). Not very many people know about Sargon the Great, but lots of people (mostly women) know about his illustrious daughter, Enheduanna.

There has been some academic debate on whether Enheduanna actually wrote all of the literature that has been ascribed to her. That's because the earliest known Babylonian copies of her work are dated a few centuries after her death. Personally, I think it means something that the very best Akkadian literature is credited to Enheduanna. She is noticeably better than the Babylonian writers.

Like all royal Akkadian women, Enheduanna was also a high priestess. Sargon assigned her to the temple of Nanna, the moon god, in the Sumerian city of Ur. This was one of the most important cities that Sargon had conquered.



The Enheduanna disk. It shows the high priestess Enheduanna performing a religious ceremony in the temple of Inanna, the goddess of war.

Here Enheduanna wears the flounced dress of a Sumerian priestess. Her hair is loose and her headdress conforms to the appropriate attire for the Sumerian temple.

The back of the disk includes a heavily damaged inscription that originally stated, “Enheduana, zirru priestess (of Nanna), the wife of Nanna, daughter of Sargon, king of the world, built an altar in the temple of Inanna-Zaza, at Ur, and named it ‘The Table of Heaven.’”

Sargon had a great affinity for the goddess of war. So did Enheduanna. Many of her poems are addressed to Inanna.



Inanna, wearing a flounced dress.



Profile view of Enheduanna.

During the preceding Early Dynastic period, human portraits were rather crude. The faces were generic, without any attempt to make them resemble the people they portrayed. Portraits became more natural and realistic during the Neo-Sumerian revival (like the statues of Gudea and Ur-Namma, for instance) but until now there hasn't been a known realistic portrait of any person from Akkad.



This is a realistic portrait of Enheduanna. Her profile (with her slight double chin) is done precisely. It very much resembles the profile of Enheduanna that is shown on her disk. The frontal view, with the exception of the ubiquitous joined-eyebrows of Mesopotamian statues, is also done precisely.

It's inevitable that a statue of Enheduanna was made to look like this – with the royal kaunakes, the headband, the hairstyle, the knotted bun, the inlaid eyes, and all the rest of it.

Enheduanna is one of the few women who was important enough in her lifetime to warrant a large realistic portrait carved in stone.

This may not be the “glamor shot” of Enheduanna that many people might hope for, but it shows us exactly how she looked in real life. You would recognize this woman if she walked into the room.

(p.s. I cannot say this statue is officially the first realistic portrait in history because it does not have her name on it, and there are no other statues of Enheduanna that I can compare it to.)

Enheduanna was a princess, a poet, and a priestess. She is one of the most fascinating women who ever lived.



Enheduanna. This is one of the most important statues in the world today. Looking at this statue is just like looking at Enheduanna, the woman herself. It's hard to believe that it can be anyone else but her.



As explained on a separate page, this mother is an [unknown Akkadian queen](#).

The cylinder seal is from a rich grave in the Tombs of Ur. It is dated in the Akkadian period (ca. 2334–2154 BC). When I first saw it, I thought, “Hmm... an Akkadian woman, in Ur, at the time of the Akkadian occupation... I wonder if it is Enheduanna.”

Then I realized there is a slight problem with this assumption.

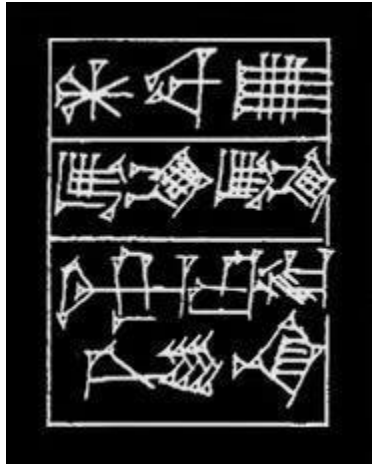
Enheduanna was a priestess, a celibate. She didn’t have kids.

Nonetheless, this got me to thinking about Enheduanna in a whole different way:

Enheduanna’s personal life

Most people (myself included) tend to think of Enheduanna as a young woman, a princess. We imagine her as a strong and independent “career woman” who busied herself with the glamorous job of being a priestess and a royal aristocrat. We don’t think of her as a wife, a mother, or even a daughter (except for being descended from Sargon).

On the disk, Enheduanna calls herself “the wife of Nanna,” the moon god. I thought this was merely a symbolic title, because most Mesopotamian priestesses were not celibate. For example, Shasha, the wife of king Urukagina, was a priestess in the temple of Baba.



(Temple of) Baba/ Shasha/ wife of Urukagina.

Royal women (queens/princesses) often served in temples. If they were required to be celibate, it would spell the end of their dynasties (!)

I assumed that Enheduanna had a husband and children that no one ever heard about.

Every princess was expected to marry, to create an alliance with a powerful noble family. Every princess was also expected to have children, hopefully many children, to provide male heirs, and to create even more future alliances. (For the record, the same expectations were applied to a male prince: get married, have children, and thus provide for the safety and stability of the realm.) It seems that Sargon would insist on Enheduanna having many children. He had a vast empire to govern, so he wanted to manage it with many of his loyal family members.

Instead, Sargon decided that his young daughter was going to be celibate priestess. Obviously Enheduanna didn't have any say in the matter.

It wasn't easy being the daughter of Sargon. Everyone was afraid of him, including Enheduanna no doubt. Sargon had to govern millions of people, so he didn't have time to be a loving father to his daughter, even if he was so inclined. Sargon was quite elderly when she was born.

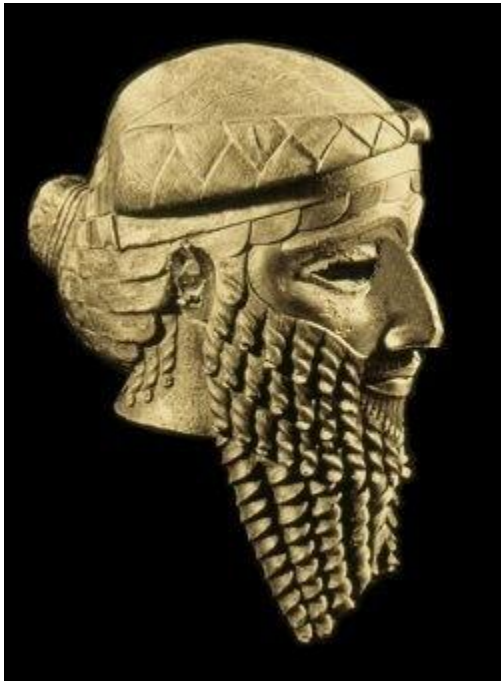
Enheduanna was probably in her early teens (below the normal age for marriage) when she was set apart from her friends and told that a different destiny was planned for her.

Did Enheduanna envy her friends, watching them grow up, getting married and having families of their own? Did she feel “separate, different, other” from everyone else?

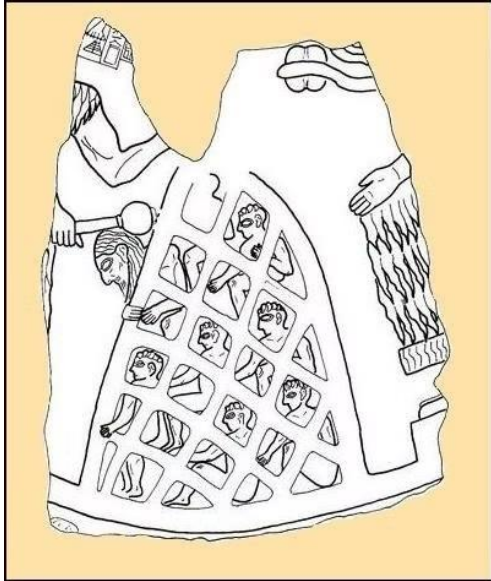
It is one thing for an adult woman to willingly choose a life of celibacy, it’s something else entirely for a young girl to be forced into it by her own father.

In retrospect, Enheduanna meant it literally when she called herself “the wife of Nanna,” in the same way that a celibate nun calls herself “the bride of Christ.”

In all regards, Sargon cast a giant shadow across Enheduanna’s entire life.

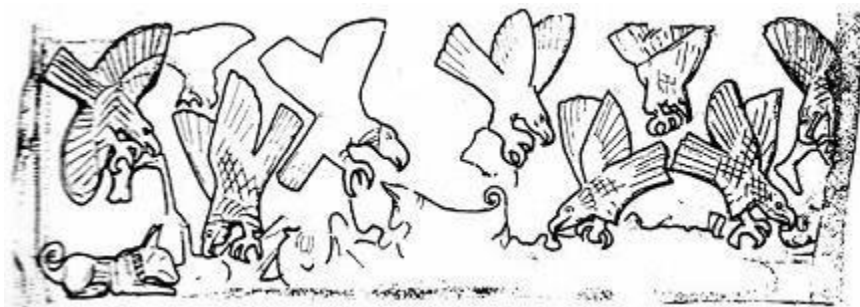


Sargon was, to put it mildly, a hard-ass. He unleashed a violent civil war against his rightful king (Ur-Zababa, the grandson of Ku-Baba). In so doing he created a “river of blood.” Then he executed Ur-Zababa.



Sargon holds a net full of prisoners, men he captured during the civil war. Ur-Zababa struggles to escape from the net. Sargon clubs him with a mace.

After Sargon defeated the Sumerian king Lugalzagesi, he paraded him through the streets in a neck stock. Then he forced Lugalzagesi to watch the construction of a victory stele commemorating his own defeat. After the stele was completed, Lugalzagesi was executed. Then Sargon forced Lugalzagesi's widow to marry him so he could unite Sumer and Akkad under a single dynasty.



Vultures and war dogs feed on the bodies of dead Sumerian soldiers.

Then Sargon sent Enheduanna to Sumer as a gesture of reconciliation.

Sargon shipped her off to this hostile foreign land to be the benign face of his military regime. The Sumerians were a proud people. They hated Sargon, positively *hated* him, because he had taken away their freedom. By extension they

hated Enheduanna too. Being an apologist for her father (like she had any other choice) did not endear Enheduanna to the Sumerians. It's doubtful that she had a single Sumerian friend. She probably socialized only with her Akkadian entourage, but even then she was isolated by being the daughter of the dictator. She couldn't be sure if anyone sincerely liked her, or if they were merely trying to curry favor with her father.

The sacking of the temple

At some time after the death of Sargon, the Akkadian empire was teetering on the brink of collapse. There were scattered rebellions everywhere. In Ur, one revolt was led by a man named Lugal-Ane. He invaded and ransacked the temple of Nanna, killing the attendants before confronting Enheduanna. "He took the crown of the high priestess from me, giving me a knife and dagger instead. 'These suit you better,' he said." This was either a threat or an invitation to suicide. He demanded that Enheduanna recognize his authority. She refused, and was forced into exile. Lugal-Ane was eventually defeated by Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin, who regained control over Ur. He restored Enheduanna to her position in the temple, and she served for a short time before she died.

Enheduanna's account of the events is given in "The Exaltation of Inanna," which is her best known literary work. She pleads to Nanna the moon god, and his daughter Inanna, to avenge the crimes against her and to capture Lugal-Ane.

I suggest that Enheduanna's statue was destroyed when Lugal-Ane ransacked her temple. This statue lay shattered at her feet when she was being threatened by Lugal-Ane.

The broken statue is a testament to the bravery of Enheduanna. She refused to be intimidated. She did not back down, even after her attendants had been murdered.

See the statue of Enheduanna shown at its [actual size](#).

In closing, who was Enheduanna?



I think that beneath it all, Enheduanna was a lonely woman, cut off from any real companionship. I think the only time she felt truly content is when she was writing. It was the only time when she could shut out the world, think her own thoughts, and just be herself.

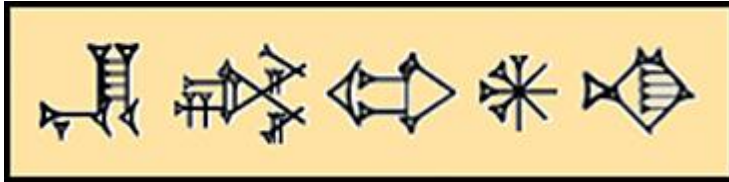
Her face is an enigma. Is she looking at you with clear-eyed intelligence, or is she staring into middle distance, keeping her opinions private. You should decide for yourself what you can see in her face.

To me, her face looks sad. Perhaps it's because of the vacant eyes, or maybe it's because I think her life was not as fulfilling and glamorous as it is made out to be. It was a stressful and demanding life, filled with onerous responsibilities. It was not the life she chose, but the life that was forced upon her.

Yet she somehow persevered, and made herself famous – in her own right.
Now she is more famous than her father.

It is said that Enheduanna died young, when she was only 35 years old,
but now she lives forever.

Today, in the modern age, Enheduanna is a feminist icon. She certainly
deserves the proper recognition for her achievements, but let us not forget
the woman behind the myth.



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