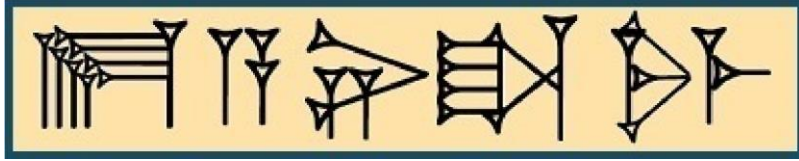


Sumerian lukurs

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 tab.)



Ea-niša, lukur

I was researching cuneiform tablets on the CDLI when I randomly noticed the Sumerian sign for lukur. I became interested in lukurs 15 years ago when I started reading Sumerian history. I was curious because a lukur is supposedly a priestess and a concubine (!?) I wondered, "How in the world can she possibly be both?" I had nothing else better to do, so I decided to research the subject.

I spent several days looking for information. Then I found the excellent and definitive book by Tonia. M. Sharlach, *An Ox of One's Own*. It refers to a woman having an ox that she can sacrifice to the gods (livestock was a major source of wealth and status in ancient Mesopotamia). This book, and the cuneiform tablets on the CDLI, provided most of the information on this page.

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The concept of a lukur priestess probably originated at the dawn of Sumerian civilization. A king and a selected priestess were married in a holy ritual called The Sacred Marriage. Their coupling mirrored the union of a god and goddess and it guaranteed fertility for all the land. In later times, the ritual was probably more ceremonial than sexual, but this cannot be known for certain:

I {Ur-Namma} am clad in linen in the ĝipar. I lie down on the splendid bed in its delightful bedchamber. A Praise Poem for Ur-Namma, line 73 - 74.

Ur-Namma ruled in the Ur III period, near the end of Sumerian civilization in 2004 BC. A ĝipar was the cloister for a priestess. This seems to suggest that the Sacred Marriage still involved conjugal relations between a king and a priestess. However, this praise poem was written in Babylonian times, after the end of Sumerian civilization, so it may reflect Babylonian sensibilities on the subject rather than actual Sumerian practices.

The role of lukurs depended on their time and place in history. Sometimes they were nuns in devoted service to a god. In the city of Umma, sixty-four lukurs served the god Shara. The women were celibate and unmarried.

In this way they were like modern nuns, the “brides of Christ.” It is reported that some of the women “fled,” indicating that it was not a happy marriage for them.

Some lukurs were relatives of the king. They did important jobs in the temples. For instance, the lukurs in the city of Girsu paralleled the seven junior wives of Ningîrsu, the patron god of the city.

Some of them were the sisters of Gudea, the king of Girsu. Many of the women had husbands and children of their own.

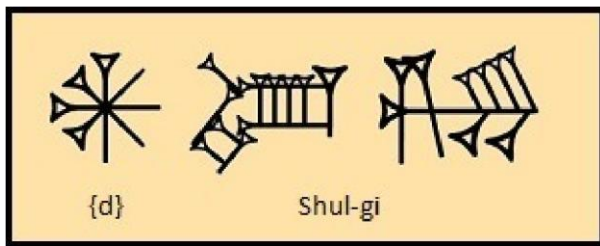
... his beloved lukur maidens, who create plenty for the myriads, stepped forward to Lord Ningîrsu with friendly entreaties on behalf of Gudea. The Building of Ningîrsu's Temple, lines 1058 - 1059.

The role of lukurs changed during the reign of Shulgi, the son of Ur-Namma. In the twentieth year of his kingship, Shulgi declared that he was a living god. Sumerian kings had always claimed to be “god-like,” and ordained by the gods with the divine right to rule, but Shulgi was the first Sumerian king to proclaim that he was an actual god, to be worshiped in his lifetime.



This is a foundation statue of Shulgi (2094 - 2046 BC). He carries a basket of earth to make the first bricks for the construction of a new temple. His face and head are shaven for the religious ceremonies. Some of the fabric that was wrapped around the

statue still remains after 4000 years. This is a realistic portrait of Shulgi's facial features. See [the Face of Shulgi](#). Also see a [brief biography of Shulgi](#).



The {d} is *dingir*, representing divinity. This sign was added to his name after he declared that he was a god.

Taram-Uram was Shulgi's first wife. Geme-Suen was his second wife. Both of them died before he declared his divinity. Afterwards the divine Shulgi decided he could have several wives at the same time, like the seven wives of Ningîrsu.

For Shulgi, one of his wives was the primary wife. The others ones were “junior wives.” Modern scholars commonly call them “consorts,” or more specifically, “concubines.”

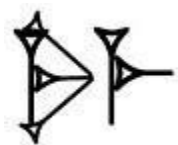
Consort: n. A wife, husband, or companion, in particular the spouse of a reigning monarch.

Concubine: n. A woman who lives with a man without being married; usually refers to a contractual state where the woman is a lesser member in a household which may already include other wives.

Of course, “concubine” also refers to a woman whose primary purpose is to gratify the sexual desires of a man – in other words, a mistress.

The problem is that Shulgi gave some of his “wives” the title of “lukur,” a priestess. After all, if a god-king is divine, then his wives must also be sanctified. However, to modern scholars it seems like a lame attempt to cover a rather tawdry situation with a thin veil of holiness. That is why the word lukur is so confusing.

So... is a lukur a priestess or a concubine?



lukur

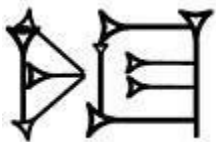
Shulgi's known wives/concubines were: Nin-kalla, Shulgi-simti, Šuqurtum, Ea-niša, and Geme-Ninlilla.

There has been some academic debate about their relative rank and importance. Technically, all of them might be concubines because there is no direct evidence that Shulgi officially married any of them. None of them were formally identified as “the wife of Shulgi.” They were “beloved” by Shulgi, perhaps, but not necessarily married to him.

Tonia Sharlach writes, “In the course of this book, I have referred to the concubines (Sumerian lukur) as junior wives of the king. Legally speaking, I am not at all sure that they were all formally married... So while I retain the terms concubine and junior wife for these women referred to in the cuneiform record as lukur, actual legal marriages may or may not have been contracted.”

However, I suggest there is indirect evidence that at least one of women was actually married to Shulgi, and that makes a big difference.

Supposedly, Shulgi had many other concubines, everyone from dancing girls to captured slave women, but nothing is known about them. They are nonetheless important, for reasons that I will later explain.



NIN = nin/ereš = a highborn Lady or a queen. The sign is very ambiguous.

Nin-kalla

The most important woman in Shulgi's court was Nin-kalla. She was probably the designated queen, the primary wife, although we cannot know this for certain because of the ambiguity of NIN. The queen had a number of important duties that included running the royal court, receiving foreign dignitaries, performing religious rites, and so on. These functions could not be properly performed by a mere concubine.

After Shulgi's death, Nin-kalla enjoyed a peaceful retirement on her estate in Nippur.

(Note: The “nin” in her name is written with a different sign than the one that means “queen”.)

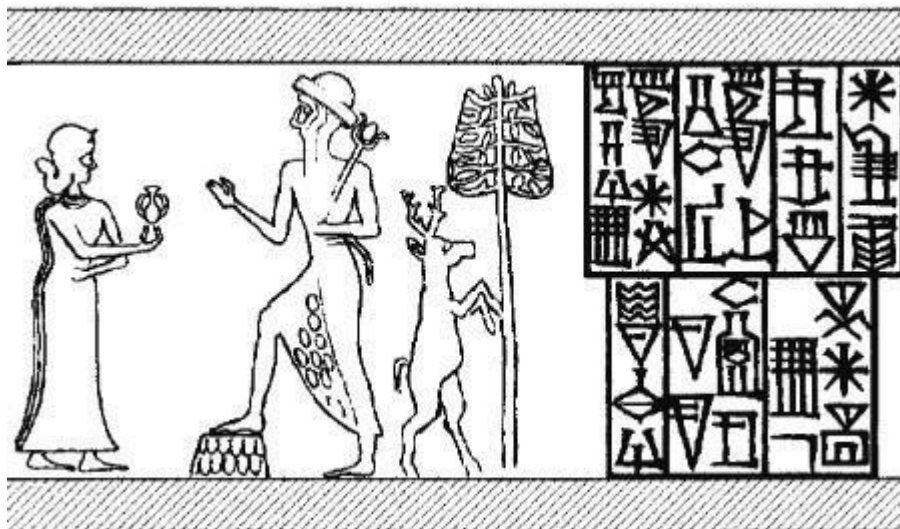
Shulgi-simti

This is obviously the name she took after her arrival in court, but the meaning of the name isn't clear. She first appeared in court sometime around the 30th year of Shulgi's reign. Her official title was "lukur kaskal," meaning she accompanied the king when he traveled.

She didn't have much wealth, her family wasn't nearby, and she didn't have her own house or servants. However, she seems to have been a favorite of the king. Shulgi-simti apparently exerted some power at court through "influence peddling." She had a religious foundation, and through a "symbiotic relationship with courtiers seeking favors and preferments from the king, they appear to have supported her foundation through donations of livestock to gain her goodwill and thereby access to Shulgi's ear." It seems very clever and resourceful. She also engaged in textile production.

Shulgi-simti died at the same time as Shulgi and there has been some speculation that she was buried with him.

Geme-Ninlilla



This is the personal seal of Geme-Ninlilla. She offers Shulgi a ceremonial cup. Shulgi gave her this seal as a gift.

Not much is known about Geme-Ninlilla but she was clearly a woman of wealth and influence in the court of Shulgi. She first appeared in the 37th year of Shulgi's reign. She probably had at least one child by him. Geme-Ninlilla is not officially identified as a lukur, perhaps because very few of her records have been found. In any case, she does not claim to be a lukur on her seal, only that she is beloved by the king. I personally think she was a lukur because she was similar to them in all regards.

Like Shulgi-simti, Geme-Ninlilla had her own religious foundation and she collected livestock from the courtiers, just as Shulgi-simti did. Both women seemed to have shared a common fate. They died at the same time, being mourned together, in the same week as their king.

There was another woman, **Šuqurtum**. She was his “beloved lukur,” but we know little else about her.

Shulgi had many low-ranking concubines, but it isn't necessary to speak of them now. Instead, let's talk about Ea-niša. This page is all about Ea-niša.

Ea-niša

Sharlach writes, “Ea-niša, at least during the reign of Shulgi, does not appear to have been much different in position than Geme-Ninlilla or Shulgi-simti. Ea-niša appears to have participated in the same kind of small-scale livestock receipts, especially of sheep and goats, and the same range of textile production as Shulgi-simti did. But her prominence appears to have risen in Shulgi's last years, and as a widow, she enjoyed her own estate, complete with boatman and orchard, and controlled a large staff. Returning to the court at intervals in the reigns of Amar-Suen and Shu-Suen [Shulgi's successors], Ea-niša would live about another fifteen years as Shulgi's widow. (In contrast, Nin-kalla, much more important during Shulgi's lifetime, lived a very retired life in Nippur afterwards).”

Here are some facts about Ea-niša that we need to discuss:

- 1) The first documentation of Ea-niša's presence at court is in the 30th year of Shulgi's reign. I suggest there is proof that she arrived several years before that.
- 2) I further suggest that Ea-niša had some wealth of her own before she became a lukur priestess.
- 3) I believe that Ea-niša closely identified herself with Inanna, the goddess of war.
- 4) There is also evidence that Ea-niša and Shulgi were actually married.

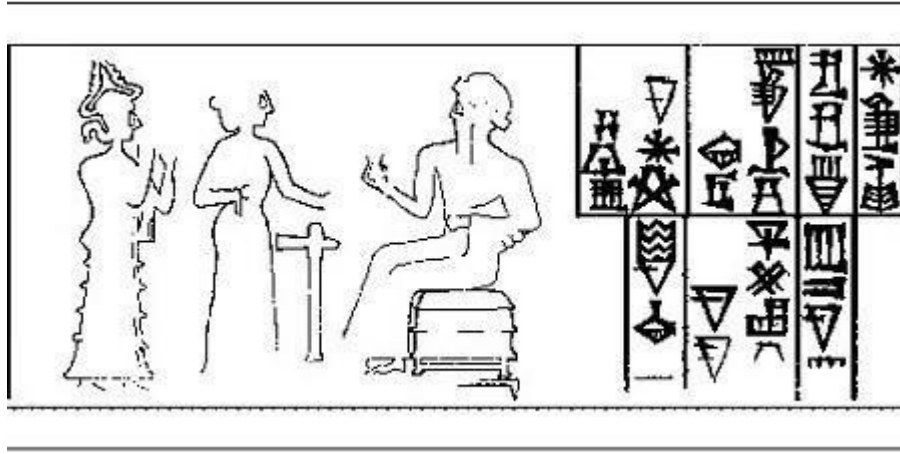
Her personal seals

Ea-niša had two seals. One simply said, kišib3 e2-a-ni-ša, “seal of Ea-niša.”

I suggest this was her seal when she was a young woman, before she arrived at the royal court.

Her name is written e2-a-ni-ša. The modern spelling is Ea-niša. It is pronounced E-a-ni-sha.

Her second seal is much more elaborate. This is her official seal, after she became a lukur priestess. It shows us who she truly was.



Ea-niša stands before the god-king Shulgi. She is accompanied by a major goddess. We know this is a major goddess because of the number of horns on her helmet (the more horns the higher the rank).

Notice that the goddess holds up her hands in a gesture of reverence to Shulgi, but Ea-niša does not. On cylinder seals, this kind of casual deportment indicates that the person is a member of the royal court and accustomed to being in the king's presence.

This seal was a royal gift from Shulgi to Ea-niša. Here is the inscription:

Shulgi
The mighty man
the king of Ur
The king of the four quarters {of the world}
to Ea-niša
his kaskal-concubine
he gave {this seal}

I disagree with the translation of the second-to-last line.

Instead of: his kaskal-concubine
The line should read: his traveling lukur priestess

First, for the sake of clarity, the Sumerian word kaskal should be translated as "traveling." Second, Ea-niša would *never* refer to herself as a concubine. She would use her official title, "lukur priestess." This is Ea-niša's personal seal. It was like her ID card and she also used it to sign official documents (see below). She would never identify herself on her personal seal as a mere concubine, nor would Shulgi degrade her by calling her a concubine on the seal that he gave to her as a gift.

Look again at this scene. It is from another drawing of the seal.



Ea-niša may be extending her hands to Shulgi as a gesture of greeting (or even affection). More likely, she is presenting the axe to the king.

The axe

An axe is a very strange symbol on the personal seal of a woman.

Claudia Suter speculates, “the axe on the seal of Ea-niša, who is explicitly identified as a travelling companion [sic]... may be a battle axe and allude to a military campaign.”

In the context of a military campaign, referring to Ea-niša as a traveling companion or a concubine makes her sound like a glorified camp follower.

The true purpose of a traveling lukur

Yes, a lukur kaskal traveled with the king on diplomatic missions and on military campaigns, but she wasn't there in the capacity of a companion or a concubine. She wasn't there for his sexual gratification or to keep him company. Other low-ranking concubines could easily serve these two purposes. Instead, Ea-niša was there in the capacity of a priestess and a secondary queen. Even in a war zone, Shulgi needed a woman to preside over his court, to meet with envoys, and to engage in religious ceremonies. It certainly wasn't going to be Nin-kalla, the Queen Bee, who stayed at home in the cushy palace while administering to the routine matters of the kingdom.

I suggest that when Shulgi was on the road (and he was on the road a lot), his traveling lukur acted as a secondary queen. Shulgi often toured his empire and he conducted many military campaigns, so he needed to have a queen/priestess by his side.

Shulgi-simti was also a traveling lukur. I believe that Shulgi took Shulgi-simti when he went on diplomatic missions and he took Ea-niša when he went on military campaigns. That is why Ea-niša is shown giving Shulgi a battle axe. The axe was probably meant for ceremonial display, with a brightly painted handle embossed with gold leaf (see an [example](#)). The blade of the battle axe probably had an engraved inscription dedicated to Inanna.

As explained below, the battle axe symbolizes Ea-niša's role as the lukur priestess who was most devoted to Inanna, the goddess of war.

Ea-niša's seal impression on the margin of two tablets

Surprisingly, Ea-niša's cylinder seal still exists. It is in a private collection somewhere, but it belongs in a museum.

A carved cylinder was rolled across a clay tablet to form a seal impression, the official signature of the owner.



The agate bead

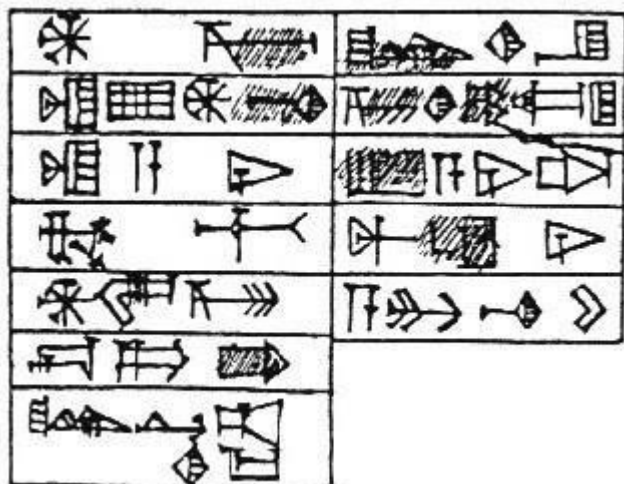
Note: This picture is courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, all copyright is reserved to them.



Actual size. [Enlarge](#).

This impressive agate bead is 8 x 0.6 cm (3.15 x 0.24 inches).

The bead is a votive offering from Ea-niša to the goddess Inanna on behalf of Shulgi. It is inscribed with the following dedication.



(for) Inanna
lady of the Eanna {temple}
her lady;
for the life
of Shulgi
the mighty man
the king of Ur
the king of Sumer and Akkad
Ea-niša
his lukur priestess
dedicated (this bead)

Think of it; Ea-niša actually held this bead in her hand, more than 4,000 years ago.

The bead is not just beautiful. It is also important for a number of different reasons:

1) *Ea-niša had been around longer than anyone suspected.* Sharlach writes, “though Ea-niša first appears in a tablet [dated in the 30th year of Shulgi’s reign] it is very possible that she had been living in the court for some time prior to that.” This is proven by the inscription on the bead. Shulgi is called “the king of Sumer and Akkad.” He used this title until the 27th year of his reign. Then he started using the grand title “king of the four quarters (of the world).” This means that Ea-niša was in the royal court by the 26th year of Shulgi’s reign, four years earlier than expected, and perhaps even earlier. It was sometime between year 20 when Shulgi declared his divinity, and year 27 when he changed his title.

2) *Ea-niša may have been wealthier than previously supposed.* Sharlach reports that “in the twelve-year period between S30 and S42 [years 30 – 42 of Shulgi’s reign] ... Ea-niša was a very obscure concubine ... For instance, in a Shoe Archive text dated to S41, a royal prince named Shu-Enlil received 5 pairs of boots and 5 pairs of shoes; the king’s sister, Ama-barag, received 5 pairs of boots.” Ea-niša received only one pair of boots. This gives the impression that Ea-niša was something of a “poor relation” in the royal court, but the bead seems to contradict this.

It was a *very* expensive bead. It had to be sawed from a much larger stone, then cut, shaped, drilled, and inscribed using only simple bronze tools. Plus, as can be seen in the enlargement, it doesn’t have a uniform width for its entire length, like a section of pipe, which is “easy enough” to make using a lathe. Instead, it was wider in the center than it is at the ends, creating a compound curve that is much more difficult to shape. It required countless hours of highly-skilled labor to manufacture this thin, delicate bead without breaking it.

This is one of the most impressive beads ever produced in Sumer (see [Jewelry, The Royal Tombs of Ur](#)). Sumerians didn’t have precious gems like rubies, diamonds, and emeralds, so this bead was “top of the line” in Sumerian jewelry. In terms of relative cost, the modern equivalent would be an expensive diamond pendant. It is truly fit for a king (or a goddess).

The fact that Ea-niša was able to buy this expensive bead, presumably not long after she arrived in court, suggests that Ea-niša came from a background of money. I’m guessing that Ea-niša was a daughter from a wealthy noble family, which is why Shulgi married her in the first place. I will say more about this later.

3) *Most importantly, this is further evidence of Ea-niša’s connection with Inanna.* Ea-niša calls Inanna “her lady” and she clearly identifies herself with Inanna, either personally or in some official capacity. Sumerian pronouns are gender-neutral, meaning “her lady” could also be translated as “his lady” (Shulgi’s lady). However, Ea-niša is the one who is addressing Inanna, so Inanna is “her lady.”

Presumably Ea-niša is rather young, and only recently arrived in court, but she is already aligned with the goddess of war. Since a Sumerian princess was usually trained to be the priestess of a temple, Ea-niša's association with Inanna may have predated her arrival in Shulgi's court. In any case, her association with Inanna will last for the rest of her life.



Inanna was the most important goddess for Sumerian kings because she was the goddess of war. The bead and the battle axe reinforce the notion that Shulgi took Ea-niša with him when he traveled on military campaigns. As will later be shown, this will have important ramifications for Ea-niša at the end of Shulgi's life.

Ea-niša, the wife of the king

At some point in her life Ea-niša was wealthy enough to commission a stone statue of Shulgi. The statue itself is missing but the inscription was recorded on a tablet. Like the bead, the statue was probably dedicated to Inanna. It expresses a rather touching sentiment:

beginning broken
For the life
of Shulgi,
the strong man,
king of Ur
and king of the four world quarters,
Ea-niša,
his traveling lukur-consort,
his beloved consort,

(a statue of) her king
she created,
and (this statue of) her husband
she set up before herself.
rest broken

Notice how the translator twice uses the word “consort” in reference to “lukur.” As previously mentioned, Ea-niša would never refer to herself in this way. Instead she would simply use her official title. She would say, “his traveling lukur, his beloved lukur.”

What is truly important about this passage is the fact that Ea-niša calls Shulgi “her husband” (mu-ud-na-ni). This is the only time when a lukur mentions her husband. It implies that they were actually married in a formal ceremony. It wasn’t just a tacit arrangement between a man and his concubine.

Perhaps you are thinking, “Maybe they’re not really married. Maybe she is just saying that. Perhaps it is just wishful thinking.”

There are a couple of problems with this supposition. First, Shulgi would never allow Ea-niša to exaggerate her marital status, simply because “with rank comes privileges.” If Ea-niša was allowed to promote herself from concubine to wife, she would be entitled to more wealth, status, and royal prerogatives. Second, even if Shulgi was willing to shrug off the matter, the other women in the royal court would never let her get away with it. You can be sure about that. There was a lot of rivalry among Shulgi’s women. Their fortunes rose and fell as they gained and lost favor with the king.

Scholars have always been skeptical about whether or not Shulgi actually married his lukurs, but the proof is right there. It was basically written in stone.

There is no getting around this one simple basic fact: If a woman is married, she is not a concubine.

If Shulgi married one lukur, he married all of them. This includes Shulgi-simti and Šuqurtum, both of whom were official lukurs. It indicates that the women were not concubines, so they should never again be labeled as such. It is demeaning to call them concubines.

I suggest they were royal wives, “royal” being the operative word.



Shulgi's women:

There were two types of women in Shulgi's life: wives and concubines. They were not "one and the same." They were not interchangeable. A concubine could never become a wife, or vice-versa.

All of Shulgi's wives were noblewomen. We know their names: Taram-Uram, Geme-Suen, Nin-kalla, Shulgi-simti, Geme-Ninlilla, Ea-niša, and Šuqurtum.

All of Shulgi's concubines were commoners. They were musicians, dancers, captive prisoners of war (slave women), and pretty local girls who caught his fancy. There were dozens of them, perhaps more. We don't know their names.

Wives

Shulgi, like all kings, married for wealth and power. This has always been the royal tradition.

Shulgi married women from the aristocracy, either foreign or domestic, so he could forge alliances with their powerful families. The daughters of the nobility also brought hefty dowries of land and gold. Plus, it's highly doubtful that a noble family would give their beloved daughter to Shulgi as a mere concubine without the prestige and the legal protections of a lawful wife.

Marriage alliances with the Sumerian kingdoms strengthened Shulgi's power base at home. Strategic marriages with the daughters of foreign kings nullified potential enemies. For instance, Nin-kalla, Shulgi-simti, and Taram-Uram are thought to be Elamite, Akkadian, and Mariote respectively. The advantage for Shulgi in having many wives is he could create many of alliances.

Shulgi gave his noble wives the title of lukur, “priestess.” They ran religious foundations. They lived in the palace, and they had a certain amount of wealth and status.

Concubines

Shulgi's concubines were low-ranking commoners (singers, dancers, and slaves). He used them for entertainment and for his sexual gratification. He did not marry them. He did not give them priestly titles.

I earlier said that the concubines are important. This is simply because they provide a contrast to the royal wives. For Shulgi, concubines were basically "a dime a dozen." Why should he marry any of them?

There is another more important reason why Shulgi did not marry commoners:

Shulgi would never tell the proud lords and ladies of his royal court, “This concubine is my flavor of the month. I’m going to marry her and make her a priestess. You need to bow down to her and treat her like your equal, even your superior.” He would cause a riot if he did that. It would infuriate his entire aristocracy, the people on whom his power depended.

I therefore suggest:

A lukur was never a concubine

The celibate lukur priestesses who served in the temple of Shara were not concubines.

The lukur maidens who served in the temple Ningîrsu, many of whom were the sisters of Gudea, were not concubines.

Shulgi’s lukur wives were not concubines. Neither were the lukur wives of his successors, Amar-Suen, Shu-Suen, and Ibbi-Suen.

After the fall of Sumer, the custom of keeping lukur wives continued into Babylonian times. It became the norm. The Babylonian kings did the same thing that Shulgi did. They married aristocratic lukur wives for political alliances (“it is easier to gain a kingdom by marriage than by conquest”) and they kept their concubines on the side.

Sin-magir was an important Babylonian king (c. 1827 – 1817 BC). He was the king of Isin and the king of Sumer and Akkad. Nutuptum, his “beloved traveling lukur,” was the mother of his heir. Sin-magir and Nutuptum were obviously married. It is highly unlikely that he named a bastard son (born out of wedlock to a concubine) as the legitimate heir to his throne.

I looked through all the Sumerian tablets on the CDLI and I could not find a single credible example where lukur was translated simply as a “concubine.”

The definition of lukur

Lukur simply means “priestess,” a female priestess for a male god. It has never literally meant companion, consort, or concubine. These words should never be included in the translation of the word lukur.

All translations of lukur should simply be: “lukur,” or “priestess,” or “lukur priestess.” There is no need to editorialize by also calling the lukur a companion, consort, or concubine.

The word “concubine” in particular should never be used, especially when the lukur is identifying herself (on her seal or her dedicatory inscriptions).

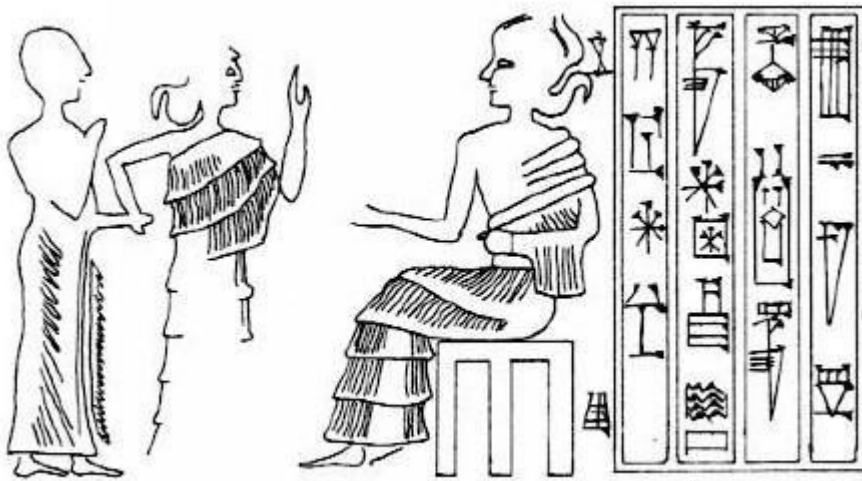
As a general rule, don’t ever call a lukur a concubine. She will slap your face if she hears you say that.

We shouldn’t speculate about her social position when we translate her official title, but when speaking about her personal life we sometimes need to describe her marital status.

In this context, “concubine” is completely out of the question. “Consort” is perfectly acceptable, but it is too ambiguous. It can mean a legitimate wife or merely a companion. Also, when applied to a woman, the word has a faintly sexual aspect, suggesting an escort or a mistress.

“Junior wife” is also correct, but it sounds diminutive and slightly comical, like a “junior cadet.” A “secondary wife” sounds unimportant. I recommend just using the word “wife” when speaking about her in general terms, and calling her a “lukur wife” when it is necessary to distinguish her from other wives.

Ea-niša's later years



This is the personal seal of one of Ea-niša's scribes:

Ea-niša
lukur priestess beloved by the king
Lu-Namma, scribe
son of Ur-Ištaran
your servant

Ea-niša had at least one son by Shulgi, and maybe other children that we don't know about. His name is written NE-NE because the exact rendering of the cuneiform signs isn't known. He was a member of the royal court and he continued his friendship with the son of Shu-Suen after the death of Shulgi. Ea-niša's brother Iddin-Ea also shows up in the public records.

T.M. Sharlach writes of Ea-niša, "Though originally to be found amongst the obscurest of the junior concubines [sic] and apparently without supplies of livestock of her own for the first twelve years or so, her star was on the rise from about S43 onwards. She had a high enough position from about S44 to S47 that offerings were made by her or by her majordomo (šabra) to major deities in the state pantheon—Ninlil, Nannaya, and Utu... Furthermore, Ea-niša had the honor of receiving booty from the conquest of Shimashki in S47."

A share of the booty is not surprising considering her role as traveling lukur during Shulgi's military campaigns.

"In the last five years or so of Shulgi's reign, Ea-niša's status appears to have risen dramatically. Now Ea-niša had livestock of her own and herders to mind it. Now Ea-niša had substantial textile interests, not just where she lived, but also in the Girsu province." Ea-niša employed more than a dozen men during the course of her life. These included servants, scribes, animal herders, gardeners, textile workers, a major domo, and even a boat captain. She also supervised numerous female servants.

Now the question is:

How did Ea-niša become Shulgi's favorite wife?

It wasn't easy being married to Shulgi. He was the ultimate egotist. He called himself a god and he may have even believed it (although it was also a pragmatic tool to help him govern the kingdom). He had boundless energy – he did not delegate responsibilities, instead he did it all himself. He was demanding and controlling – everything had to be done his way, right now. He was intolerant of weakness and failure. In war, Shulgi had killed thousands of men, and seen hundreds of women sold into slavery, without batting an eye. (To be fair, he was also a truly great king and the world's most interesting man. He was generous to his friends, and most important, he was genuinely concerned about the welfare of his subjects.)

There were lots of women competing for Shulgi's attention in the royal court. Then, in the last eight years of his reign, Ea-niša rose from relative obscurity to become Shulgi's favorite and most respected wife. What set Ea-niša apart from all the other women?

Of course, much of it had to do with her basic character – her personality and intelligence, her virtue and devotion, and so on, but she always had these qualities, even when she was hidden in the background. Why then did her star rise above the others?

I suggest it is because she was the traveling *lukur* who accompanied Shulgi on his military campaigns.

During the last eight years of his reign, Shulgi was engaged in ceaseless warfare. Most of the years in this period were named for military conflicts; for instance, "The year Karhar was destroyed for the third time."

Ea-niša dedicated the agate votive bead to Inanna, the goddess of war, to protect the life of Shulgi. She offered the bead soon after she arrived in the royal court, indicating her early identification with Inanna.

On her personal seal, Ea-niša shows herself presenting a battle axe to Shulgi. No woman had *ever* been seen offering a weapon of war to her husband. On the seal, she identifies herself as Shulgi's traveling *lukur*. The inference is clear, Ea-niša was the *lukur* wife who escorted her husband on military campaigns.



Ea-niša and Shulgi. The fact that Shulgi included the battle axe on the seal he made for Ea-niša is recognition of her service as his military lukur.

Through eight years of warfare on the northern front, Ea-niša was always by his side. The ceaseless campaigning would not be easy for either one of them. By now Shulgi was elderly and Ea-niša was pushing middle age. Although Ea-niša traveled as a queen, it was certainly no picnic. She rode in wagons over bumpy dirt roads, through every kind of weather, in the heat and the dust, the wind and the rain. She was in constant danger. If she was captured in a sudden ambush by the barbarians, she would have suffered a fate worse than death.

And then there was the constant stress in her role as a priestess. “Am I praying enough? Am I properly performing the rituals? Is Inanna hearing my pleas?” The safety of her husband and the army depended on it.

Through it all, Shulgi saw what a trooper she was. He saw the strength of her character. He couldn’t help but admire her, even love her.

This may have been the secret of success between the two of them. I believe that through their shared experience, including the danger and the hardships, they grew to genuinely love each other, despite their age difference. What started as an arranged marriage between a young woman and a middle-aged man evolved into a profound friendship based on mutual respect and admiration. This was particularly important for Shulgi. He saw that Ea-niša genuinely loved him, unlike everyone else in the court who only pretended they did. This may be the real reason why she became his favorite wife (and maybe his best friend).

The death of Shulgi and two of his wives

As previously mentioned, Geme-Ninlilla and Shulgi-simti died within days of Shulgi.

It has been speculated that they were murdered in a single attack. However, this seems highly unlikely because if a god-king and two of his wives were assassinated in a palace coup, then everyone would know about it. A different scenario is they died from a contagious disease that swept through the court. This was always a real possibility in the ancient world. Another more sinister theory is that Shulgi died of age-related natural causes, then his wives were sacrificed and buried with him.



The doorway to Shulgi's tomb.

Many graves in the Royal Tombs of Ur had the remains of sacrificial victims. One gravesite had the bodies of 74 men and women who were sacrificed to serve a king for all eternity. This was during the Early Dynastic period, ca 2500 BC, about 400 years before Shulgi. It is believed that the practice had died out in the intervening years, but perhaps some special funeral arrangements were made for the death of a god-king.

If Shulgi-simti and Geme-Ninlilla died of a contagious disease at the same time as Shulgi, then I think it is perfectly possible that they were buried in his tomb. On the other hand, if Shulgi died a natural death, then it's highly unlikely that two of his healthy wives were executed and buried with him, or even worse, entombed alive. First, there is absolutely no evidence that the Sumerians ever killed a living queen and buried her with her husband. Second, royals did not sacrifice other royals to serve a king in the afterlife. They sacrificed commoners.



This royal headdress and jewelry were found in a royal tomb of Ur, but the woman who was wearing it wasn't a princess or a queen.

Many men and women were sacrificed in the King's Grave (PG 789). The men were dressed as soldiers. They had weapons of gold and silver and they wore the insignia of their rank. The women had golden headdresses and were heavily bejeweled. They looked like royalty, but in real life, the soldiers were commoners and the women were servants. Leonard Woolley, who excavated the tomb, thought they went willingly to their deaths. In sacrificing themselves, they were hoping for a better life for all eternity. They hoped to be the new nobility in the afterworld. See [Exploration of the Royal Tombs of Ur](#).

Although the Sumerians had not previously sacrificed a widowed queen to be buried with her husband, did they make an exception for the funeral of a god-king?

Again, I seriously doubt it. I'm thinking that if Shulgi wanted women to keep him company in the afterlife, he would have chosen his beautiful young concubines rather than his middle-aged wives. I'm just saying.

Some people may think, "Not all men are as shallow as you are, Mr. Starr. Many men would prefer to spend eternity with a mature wife whom they have loved for most of their life."

Maybe so, but why didn't Shulgi sacrifice *all* of his wives? Why didn't he sacrifice Nin-Kalla? She was his designated queen and the one who had been with him the longest. Why didn't he sacrifice Ea-niša? She was his favorite.

In the absence of convincing proof, we cannot assume that two of Shulgi's wives were deliberately sacrificed so they could be buried in his tomb.

Life after Shulgi

After the death of Shulgi, Nin-Kalla led a quiet life of semi-retirement and seldom appeared at state occasions. She was probably sick and tired of the hustle and bustle of the royal court. Who can blame her?

By contrast, Ea-niša led a very active retirement. She lived for another 15 years as Shulgi's widow.

According to Sharlach, "As a widow, Ea-niša's economic interests are represented in tablets from Umma and Girsu/Lagash, suggesting that she had an estate or at least livestock interests in both provinces. Whether her interests were limited to this region we do not know, but quite possibly she had still more property scattered throughout the Land [of Sumer]."

It was okay if Ea-niša had far-flung business interests because she had her own boat (probably a highly-decorated royal barge). She traveled up and down the canals of Sumer in stately splendor. She had her own captain dedicated to her service.

She also had her own estate, complete with an orchard and a horticulturalist to tend to it, and she supervised a large staff.

Unlike Nin-kalla, Ea-niša regularly returned to the court during the reigns of Amar-Suen and Shu-Suen. It's interesting that Ea-niša was thus honored by Shulgi's son and his grandson. The fact that they still esteemed their "stepmother" speaks well of her character and her personality. Like Shulgi, they probably respected and admired Ea-niša.

Amar-Suen died after nine years of rule. Ea-niša last appears in the public records in the sixth year in the reign of Shu-Suen.

She was probably less than 60 years old when she died, but she had lived a very full life.

In the modern era, we do her a disservice when we call her a concubine. Ea-niša was a royal wife, and a truly remarkable woman.

A faint image of Ea-niša emerges from the 21st century BC...



into the 21st century AD.

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