

# Munus-kin, a Sumerian Prostitute

I suggest munus-kin is the polite word for a Sumerian prostitute.

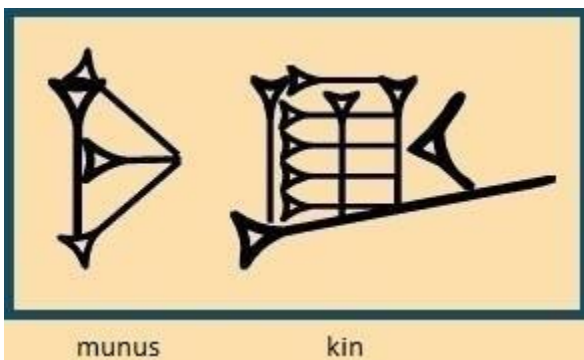
By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in [SumerianShakespeare.com](http://SumerianShakespeare.com).

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







A clay plaque shows a man and a woman (a prostitute) having sex. The woman sips beer through a long straw. This was a popular motif throughout Mesopotamia. There are many different variations on this theme. The plaques were made in molds for mass production. It was the Mesopotamian version of pornography.

Is he wearing a hat?



**Munus-kin** = woman-work = prostitute

Yes, munus (woman) is exactly what it looks like, turned on its side.

		man
		woman

The signs for man and woman were originally pictographs of their genitals, which probably saved a lot of gender confusion.

The man is uncircumcised, by the way.



This cylinder seal impression is described on a separate page. See [In Flagrate Delicto](#).

When I was trying to translate Tablet BE 31,28, the story of The Princess Wife, I had to look up the Sumerian word for “prostitute.” I was surprised when I couldn’t one on the ePSD (the electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary). All the references to prostitutes (kar-kid) were listed in the Old Babylonian period, after the end of Sumerian civilization. I thought, “Really?” How could the Sumerians *not* have a word for prostitute? After all, it is the “world’s oldest profession.”

I had assumed munus-kin was the Sumerian word for “prostitute” because of this sentence:



r6 lu2-zuh!-	ir- ra	nu-nus	munus-kin	du3 [...]
man-rob-	plunder-for	woman	prostitute	all

This is line r6 of Tablet BE 31,28, the story of [The Princess Wife](#). It translates as “All women are prostitutes (munus-kin) for men who rob and plunder.” Within the context of the story,

it means that all women willingly prostitute themselves to rich and powerful men (within and without marriage) in exchange for money.

I was convinced that *munus-kin* was the Sumerian word for prostitute. The problem is, Tablet BE31,28 is dated in the Old Babylonian period. I wondered if there was an earlier *Sumerian* citation for the word that hadn't yet been discovered, so I kept looking.

### Prostitutes in Mesopotamian art



One of these women is a prostitute and the other is not. Can you tell which is which?  
The answer is given on the page about [Babylonian Prostitutes](#).

Getting back to the subject at hand...

**Munus-kin:** “woman-to work.” Like I said, I think this is the Sumerian word for “prostitute.” This definition doesn't appear in the ePSD, the ETCSL, or the Sumerian Lexicon. The only occurrence of the signs on the CDLI is an inscription on a statue of Gudea (P431884, lines 54 – 58, see a [picture](#)). These lines describe the people that Gudea exiled from the city during the re-dedication of the holy temple of Ningirsu:

The sexually impure persons who inspire fear,  
the [...] man, {lu2 si gi4-a, the man who “deflowers” women?}  
he with a shriveled(?) penis,  
and the woman who had been in labor(?), {munus-kin}  
he sent out of the city.

The question mark after “the woman who had been in labor(?)” shows that the translator had serious doubts about this interpretation of munus-kin. Rightfully so, because if Gudea banished all the women who had once been in labor, then most women would end up outside the city walls. Plus, Gudea would not banish (and disgrace) all the mothers who had given birth to the citizens of his kingdom.

Notice how the other people mentioned on the list can be described as “sexual deviants.” This means munus-kin also had a sexual connotation. So perhaps woman-work is like “working girl” in English, a euphemism for a prostitute. KIN also means to love or to seek. A “woman to love” and a “woman to seek” both suggest a prostitute. Now it makes sense that Gudea banished the prostitutes from the city during the dedication of a new temple. He didn't want them plying their trade during this solemn and dignified occasion.



This kind of hanky-panky would be quite unseemly during the dedication of a holy temple.

I suggest that munus-kin was the polite euphemism for a prostitute, which is why it is used on a royal monument like the Gudea statue.



Munus-kin appears in line r10 of [The Great Fatted Jackass](#) where it also means a prostitute:



r10 lu2 zuh! [ir#] ra munus munus-kin [du3 ...]

man-rob-plunder-for woman prostitute [all...]

This line has the same translation as r6 in the story of The Princess Wife, "All women are prostitutes for men who rob and plunder." In each story, this is the only translation of munus-kin that makes any sense, and it fits perfectly within the context of both stories.

It also appears in line r15 of The Great Fatted Bull and in line o18 of the sequel to the Princess Wife.

It also fits perfectly within the Gudea translation. That's a total of five different citations.

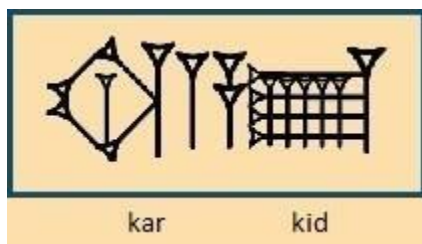
I therefore suggest that munus-kin means "prostitute." It shows that the Sumerians had a specific word for prostitute.

Actually, they had two.



CDLI [011028](#). [Enlarge](#).

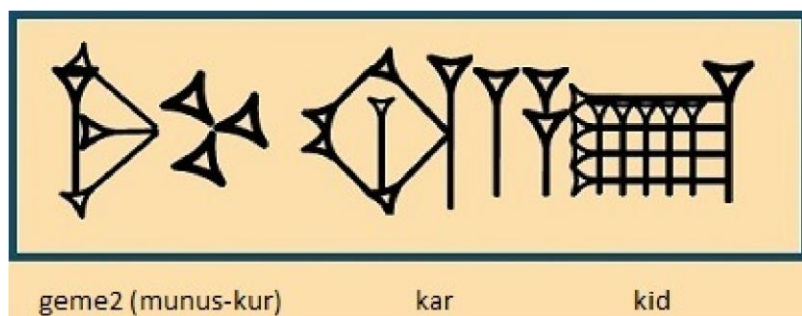
## Kar-kid



The day after I posted this page, a colleague informed me that kar-kid is often used to mean “prostitute.” I pointed out that all citations on the ePSD are dated in the Babylonian period, after the end of the Sumerian period. He replied, “Not all citations show up on the ePSD.”

That got me thinking about kar-kid.

I started looking for kar-kid on the CDLI. I found three tablets (CDLI #(s) 010764, 011028, and 011031) from the Early Dynastic IIIa period of Sumerian history (2600 - 2500 BC). They are accounting tablets that record the distribution of rations (wages) for various workers. They specifically mention “geme2-kar-kid.”

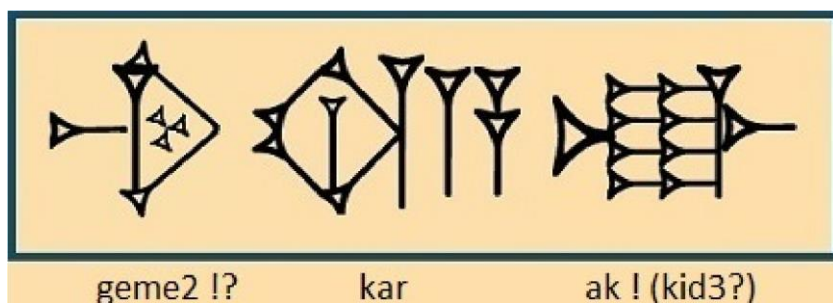


Geme2 (munus-kur) means “a female worker, servant, or slave.” It designates a profession, a job title. This leaves no doubt that a geme2 kar-kid was indeed a professional prostitute, someone who did it for a living.

After I read the transliteration, I looked at a picture of the tablet to see how the signs were written. When I saw the signs, I said, “Whoa!”

I was expecting to see the signs that are shown above.

What I saw was this:

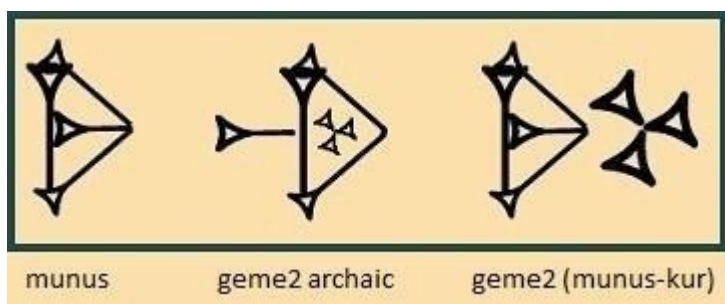


I wondered if I was looking at the wrong signs on the tablet.

Notice that the original version of geme2 is very different than the later standardized version. In the archaic form of geme2, the kur sign is written within the interior of the munus sign, and the horizontal line is moved to the exterior.

The horizontal line would be obliterated by the kur sign, so the line moved to the outside to preserve it. This shows it was originally part of the munus sign, thus maintaining the meaning of the sign. It also shows that the line is accounted for, and it wasn't omitted out of carelessness simply because the scribe forgot to write it (like forgetting to cross a "T").

It is difficult to write geme2 this way on a small scale, so after the ED III period, kur was written beside munus rather than within it:

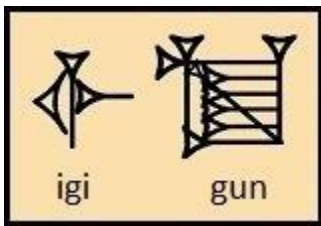


The other noticeable difference between the two versions of kar-kid is that the original Sumerian version is written with the sign ak rather than kid.

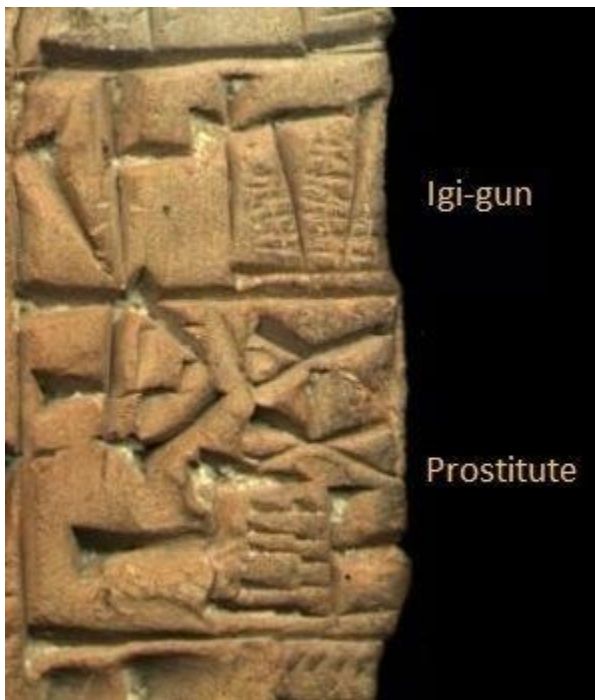
Ironically, an alternative pronunciation of ak is kid<sub>3</sub> (I know it's confusing, but that's just the way Sumerian is). I have no idea why none of the Sumerian citations for prostitutes (kar-kid<sub>3</sub> and/or kar-ak) show up on the ePSD.

I personally think that original Sumerian version of prostitute (kar-kid<sub>3</sub>) should be denoted as kar-ak, to distinguish it from the later versions, but that's just my opinion.

In any case, Sumerian prostitutes have been there all along.



Igi-gun5, a female name



Munus-kin, kar-ak. This means there has always been *two* Sumerian words for prostitute. They've been around for more than 4,000 years.

Which isn't very surprising when you come to think about it. After all, it's the world's oldest profession in the world's oldest civilization.



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