Perhaps the first question one should ask about women in the art of ancient Mesopotamia is: “Why so few?” Despite the recent and comprehensive study of Julia Asher-Greve on old Sumerian women, and attention to women in special situations in recent analyses, the number of actual roles in which women appear are relatively few when compared with many other ancient cultures. As Rivka Harris has recently demonstrated, roles played by women in the epic literature of Mesopotamia are equally limited. Women are regarded favorably when they advise, nurture and encourage men in their struggles for success and fulfillment. Particularly valued is the mother-son relationship, and those situations in which women act to maintain the norms of society through ritual or through socially integrative action. And since these auxiliary roles generally take place on the sidelines, as “catalysts” in the narrative rather than as main characters, they fall outside of the usual Mesopotamian focus on “culminating scenes” in the visual arts.


Notable exceptions to this occur in the representations of female deities—not our subject today—and of elite women in socially-sanctioned public roles.

One role that permitted high public visibility was that of the wife of the incumbent ensí or local chief administrative officer of a given city-state; the other that of high-ranking priestess in the cult of a major (male) deity. In the first case, in the Early Dynastic period in Lagash, for example, it would appear that a significant portion of the state economy was under the control of the ensí’s wife. These are also the women for whom we have inscribed statues, particularly from Girsu/Lagash in the Neo-Sumerian period; while in the Ur III period, for which we have an unusual amount of information concerning royal and highly-placed women, we see that the imagery on personal seals of the wives of ensí have been tailored in subject matter to their female owners. For example, two seals have been preserved belonging to Ninhilia, identified by inscription as the wife of A’akalla, ensí of Umma under Amar-Su’en and Šu-Su’en, along with one seal belonging to the wife of the previous ensí, Ur-Lisi. The husbands of both of these women had seals that I would like to designate as official seals of the administrative bureaucracy of the state; the women’s seals, however, showed quite different imagery. The seals of Ninhilia are particularly interesting, because the seated figures in the presentation scenes—often male deities or kings—are here goddesses; and on the one seal where the presentee is preserved, that figure, too, is a woman—presumably the seal-owner herself.

These women are elite, but not themselves officials, and their seals probably represent them in the presence of a patron-deity, not necessarily one in whose cult they function. In the other case of publicly-sanctioned roles for women, that of highly-placed priestesses in major...