THE ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE CLOISTER IN ANCIENT BABYLONIA *)

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An institution, unique in the ancient Near East, flourished in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1800-1550 B.C.). This institution called gagûm in Akkadian is best translated as “cloister”, although this term has certain implications which are not valid for the ancient institution. The cloister housed a group of women, perhaps one hundred or more in number, who were referred to as naditus, which, to coin a term, means “the fallow (women)” 1). These women entered the cloister on reaching nubility and there lived a sequestered life until death.

Why an institution prohibiting marriage and childbearing, and thus in basic antithesis to the family-centered Babylonian society, emerged at this particular period is a question which remains unanswered. The Old Babylonian cloister undoubtedly had its antecedents in a much earlier period 2), but it would appear that its peculiar form and organization was evolved at this time.

*) This article is a chapter of a book dealing with a study of the cloister and naditu women of Sippar which is to be published along with a more extensive study of all the Sippar texts, a project in which the writer is now engaged. The abbreviations used here follow those of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary.

1) The term naditu is derived from the root nadd in its meaning of “to leave fallow”, a term usually applied to fields. But the comparison of a woman with land and an unmarried woman with an uncultivated field is a common simile in the literature of the ancient Near East. For references to such occurrences see J. Pedersen, Israel III-IV 713, note to page 47.

2) There is to our knowledge only one text which expressly mentions a cloister in a pre-Old Babylonian text. This is an administrative account of the Ur III period from Nippur which lists the number of bricks used to build a cloister (RA 16 6 No. 15). However, in several accounts of this same period listing the offerings given to Jesho VI
Unlike the inhabitants of the medieval cloister, an institution which only in some respects resembles its Babylonian counterpart, the naditu women, many of whom came from wealthy families, lived and functioned as private individuals despite certain ties and obligations to the cloister. They played a significant role in the economic life of their communities as lessors of their vast real estate holdings and as creditors, lending out money and commodities.

Cloisters are known to have existed in Sippar and Kish, in North Babylonia, in Nippur to the south, and in Ishchali, east of the Tigris River, and Elam. But it is the texts from Sippar which furnish the most detailed information of this institution and its naditu women, in this case the naditus of the god Šamaš, chief god of Sippar. The following description of the administration and organization of the cloister at Sippar is one which is probably representative of the other contemporary Old Babylonian cloisters.

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THE LAYOUT OF THE CLOISTER COMPOUND

1. The Excavation of Sippar

The site of ancient Sippar, present day Abbu Ḥabbu, was unfortunately not excavated systematically and scientifically by V. Scheil, who