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‘There is no one to set my table’

Gender Aspects in Food and Drink Preparation

Cécile Michel*

In memory of Jean Bottéro,
expert on ancient Mesopotamian food
and master in the art of cooking.

The contributions to this volume explore the themes of food and drink from many angles, from production to consumption, including the storage methods, the transformation of raw materials, as well as the economic and social aspects linked to food. This contribution tackles the topic from a perhaps less studied angle, the gender aspects of food and drink preparation. It does not include all the phases of food preparation from the providing of the flora and fauna products up to consumption, but focuses on *la cuisine*, i.e. the transformation of raw foodstuffs into ready-to-eat food.

A gender perspective allows us to analyse how a society attributes roles to each sex. But the differences between female and male roles in food and drink preparation depend also on the social status of the people, on the milieu and context in which they work, and on other factors, and thus involves the notion of intersectionality.¹

It is generally assumed that the daily preparation of meals at home is the task of women, while *haute cuisine* is the work of skilled men.² Although in France we are slowly breaking out of this traditional pattern with some women chefs, this gendered division of food preparation has presumably influenced our reconstructions of ancient history of food. This presentation proposes an overview of the topic based on written documentation from the middle of the third

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¹ Zsolnay, 2018: 464 among others.

² See already Emidoro, 2015: 24.

millennium to the first millennium BCE, focusing on specific corpuses found in palaces, large households, and family archives, and a few representations when it proves to be relevant for the purpose.³

Practical texts found in a domestic context give hints about the preparation of food at home, mainly done by women. They also mention occasionally the existence of shops where specialists sold their products, as butcher's shops or bakeries. Some literary and scholarly compositions confirm this reconstruction of a gendered division of food preparations at home. By contrast, the evidence from palaces and large households shows the organisation of food and drink preparation at larger scale, with many men and women involved. The archives found in these buildings also provide data about food preparation in the army and offer details on the work of some food professionals, such as millers, bakers, butchers, etc.

1. In Domestic Context and in the City

Daily kitchen chores, like everything else in daily life, have left very little written documentation; however, family archives and some literary texts suggest that these tasks were in the hands of women.

1.1. At home in private archives

The title of this contribution quotes a nineteenth century BCE letter sent by the Assyrian merchant Puzur-Aššur to his fiancée Nuhšatum:⁴

The day you hear my tablet, there, turn to your father (so that he agrees); set out and come here with my servants. I am alone. There is no one to serve me and set my table.

This man was eager to get married to have a housekeeper, who could keep him company, cook for him, and serve him. The Old Assyrian letters sent by women in Aššur to men in Kaneš illustrate the preparation of food in a domestic context. In Aššur, with the money they received from their husbands, Assyrian women bought cereals at the time of the harvest, and transformed them into food and drink. In wealthy families, flour grinding was done by female slaves.⁵ The work

³ The present survey does not include food preparation within temples as this would require a study on its own. The feeding of the gods involved very specific rituals. Moreover, prebends related to food preparation could be owned by certain people who did not necessarily perform the work related to it.

⁴ Michel, 2020: no. 3.

⁵ Michel, 2001, no. 218: "Give instructions to the female slave, she should grind for me the old barley for food". There are, however, Old Babylonian marriage contracts in which a *naditum* is married to a man together with her sister, the latter being in charge of the grinding, see for example CT 2, 44:17-25 cited by Barberon, 2012: 230.

was so difficult that even some of the slaves were reluctant to do it, as can be seen from this complaint of a daughter to her father:⁶

Forgive me, but you left a ‘real’ female slave behind to work for me. The female slave quarrels with me. When I tell her ‘Grind 5 litres’, she refuses. Even as little as 2 litres she refuses to grind. Over there, you have 10 female slaves at your disposal. Here, I appeal to the whole city for a (single) female miller!

The bread was baked in the tannur oven, often built in the courtyard of a house. The situation was similar at Beydar earlier, in the middle of the third millennium, where each village house had its own tannur, besides the existence of communal ovens. According to Elena Rova, baking bread in the tannur was done exclusively by women.⁷

The preparation of beer is a topic that is regularly discussed in the Old Assyrian letters, as it was the women, who prepared this beverage for the daily consumption of the household. They prepared beer bread and malt and stored them, so that they could have the beer made when necessary.⁸ A lonely woman wrote to her husband that she was missing him by stating: “The beer bread I made for you has become too old!”⁹ In some instances, when they had prepared too many beer breads, they could even sell some, earning money from their production. Thus, the preparation of beer appears as a typically feminine and daily occupation.

Women received cooking pots for their culinary activities: a man would send his wife the copper necessary for making a kettle. Inventories of goods belonging to women include various bronze and copper bowls, measuring cups, pitchers, a great variety of vessels, as well as cauldrons of different sizes.¹⁰

More generally, all the cuneiform texts recording women’s property mention crockery, millstones and mortars, sometimes with specifications.¹¹ Babylonian dowries of the second and first millennia also include cooking-pots, several millstones used for different types of cereals and mortars.¹² A man could also

⁶ Text Kt c/k 266:25-34 cited by Dercksen 2014: 105, n. 135.

⁷ Rova, 2014: 124.

⁸ Michel, 2020: no. 132, letter from a man to his wife, “Soak 10 sacks of malt and 10 sacks of beer bread to prepare (beer)”. Also Michel, 2020: no. 166, from a woman to her husband, “Concerning the beer bread you wrote to me about – the beer bread is certainly made and ready!”

⁹ Michel, 2020: no. 129.

¹⁰ Michel, 2020: nos. 134-135.

¹¹ See for Old Babylonian examples Charpin, 1986: 105-108 or Lafont, 2001: 308, no. 5.

¹² Dalley, 1980: 57, CT 48, 50 and text no. 9; Wilcke, 1982: 459-460, text no. 6; Westbrook, 1988: 113 (BE 6/1 84), 118-119 (CT 8 2a), concerning *naditums*, and CT 8 34b; Barberon, 2012: 188-189.

make gifts to his wife, including for example “1 millstone for *isququm*-flour, 1 millstone for barley flour, 1 kettle of 20 litres.”¹³ Martha Roth, in her inventory of Neo-Babylonian dowries, mentions among other items: sieves, storage jars, pot stands, goblets, grates, oil bowls, washbowls, bowls, cooking pots, various vats, vessels, stands for vats, etc. With all such types of kitchen wares, women were well-equipped to cook.¹⁴

We must, however, stress the existence of some inventories of goods belonging to men which also included vessels, cooking pots, and millstones. According to an Ur III text, the goods belonging to Šunibasum to be divided between his sons included 3 copper cauldrons, several containers in copper, 4 knives, 1 millstone, pots of aromatic oil, as well as more than 10 000 litres of barley.¹⁵ And the very long Ur III inventory of goods belonging to the governor of Girsu contains no less than 30 bronze vessels, ten cooking pots in bronze and copper, eleven millstones, and various quantities of food products.¹⁶ However, the possession of kitchen utensils does not necessarily mean their use. Daily kitchen chores were clearly in the hand of women.

1.2. Food Preparations in Literary and Scholarly Compositions

Some literary and scholarly texts also give hints on the preparation of meals at home. For example, when Gilgameš finally met Utanapištim to learn how he gained immortality, the latter challenged the hero to stay awake for a full week, but exhausted by his long journey, Gilgameš fell asleep. Utanapištim’s wife took on her role of housewife, baked the bread every day, and placed a loaf of bread next to the sleeping man. When he woke up, the number of loaves and their state of preservation told the hero how many days he had slept.¹⁷

In the composition *Edubba A*, renamed ‘Schooldays’ by Samuel Noah Kramer, it was the mother who prepared the meals for the family.¹⁸ The boy, who was about to go to school in the morning, asked his mother for his lunch, and was so hungry that he ate the lunch at once, forcing her to provide him a second lunch.

The tasks of a good wife are depicted, albeit in an ironic manner, in the Sumerian debate of the *Two Women B*.¹⁹ The household chores that punctuated the women’s lives included pressing oil, grinding grain to make flour, baking big loaves of bread, and drawing water. Those who wanted to escape to this boring life

¹³ Westbrook, 1988: 119 (CT 8 34b:8-13), 113-114 (BE 6/1 95).

¹⁴ Roth, 1990.

¹⁵ Ur III text published by Steinkeller / Postgate, 1992: no. 7.

¹⁶ Lafont, 2001: 308-309, no. 7. A comparative study, which is not the scope of this contribution, would presumably show that items linked to kitchen activities are overwhelmingly in the possession of women.

¹⁷ George, 2003: vol 1, 716-719, Tablet XI:221-241

¹⁸ *Edubba A*:10-22, from Attinger, 2019.

¹⁹ Matuszak, 2016: 237-238, and for the complete edition of the text, Matuszak, 2021.

by buying ready-made food and beer were considered as bad behaving women. Naturally, rich families had female slaves to perform such repetitive tasks.

As noted by Jana Matuszak, grinding grain was the task of women, but unmarried men were forced to do it themselves according to a proverb of the Early Dynastic collection.²⁰ Literary texts thus suggest that food and drink preparation were performed daily by the women of the family.

1.3. Outside of the House and in the City

When going outside of their home, men and women could certainly buy meat at the butcher's shop or bread at the baker's shop, men could have a beer at the tavern, and travellers could eat at the inns. The female innkeeper is well documented for the late third and the early second millennium.²¹ The most famous female innkeeper is Šiduri, who is known by her name and had a job allowing her to earn her life. In the Old Babylonian version of the *Gilgameš Epic*, she not only served beer but also gave a long philosophical speech to the hero, highlighting the small pleasures of everyday life, the first one being eating well, then being cleanly dressed, having a wife and children.²² Thus, initially domestic, the preparation of beer became an independent institution during the late third and early second millennium. The social position of the female innkeeper remains poorly known, even though it is the most attested female profession in the law codes. She could be a single woman,²³ and according to the *Sumerian king list*, one of them would have become the queen Kubaba.

The Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian texts mention the existence of both *sabûm* and *sabîtum*, but their respective roles would be different according to Marten Stol, innkeeper for the women and chief of the brewers for the men.²⁴

The documentation concerning other professionals is not very informative. Several debt notes mention cooks as debtors,²⁵ and there are contracts settling associations, one of them between two bakers.²⁶ There are also some employment contracts, including the hiring of millers, both female and male.²⁷

²⁰ Alster, 1992: 20, l. 43–48: “He who does not support a wife, he who does not support a child the evil state of things is double bad for him: he grinds flour, he has no rushes (...).”

²¹ Lion, 2013. See also Michel, 2009: 206–208 and Langlois, 2016. Brewing activities are placed under the patronage to two female deities, Ninkasi and Siriš.

²² George, 2003: vol. 1, 279, iii:1–15.

²³ Stol, 2016: 363–367.

²⁴ Stol, 1971: 168, Lion, 2013 (Old Babylonian) and Michel, 2015 (Old Assyrian). Note that the tavern is more often referred to as the house of the *sabû* than its female counterpart.

²⁵ Cooks are mentioned for example in the following texts: CUSAS 8, 53; Harris 1955: no.10 and 33; UET 5, 535.

²⁶ Text TIM 7, 52 dated to Samsu-iluna 7.

²⁷ Richardson, 2010: no. 25 and 30.

2. Evidence from palaces and large households

Most of the cuneiform texts documenting the kitchen staff come from palaces and large households. The following survey gives a picture of what can be reconstructed from the kitchens of key sites presented in a chronological order. However, we must keep in mind that regional differences are important as well.

2.1. Some Mesopotamian palaces and their organisation

One of the earliest well-documented palaces is the one at Ebla, dated to the twenty-fourth century, in which the female population seems to have been in the majority. In addition to the women of the royal family, there were many female servants who performed a wide variety of tasks. Women working in the palace kitchens were cooks, millers, bakers, and brewers; they were also tasked with preparing vegetables, keeping the fire going, or fetching water.²⁸ However, according to Vanna Biga, the meals for the king and his court were prepared by a group of some thirteen to fourteen male cooks, who, in contrast to the women, are known by their names, and who received textiles from the administration as a remuneration for their work.²⁹

The picture is similar during the first centuries of the second millennium in Mari and Chagar Bazar, among others. Some 350 to 600 women lived in the Mari palace according to rations lists.³⁰ About 40 of them were working in the kitchen of the palace, under the supervision of female administrators (*abarakkātum*, *munus-agrig*),³¹ themselves operating under a man called Ilu-kān, who was responsible for stocks outside the palace.³² At Chagar Bazar, the organisation of the work in the kitchen is very similar: some 25 female administrators and bursars were belonging to the service of Lībur-bēli.³³

The female personnel working in the Mari palace kitchen included millers, those preparing *burrum*-cereals, bakers of bread, cooks, brewers of different types of beer, confectioners, water-carriers, and scribes. Ama-Duga, mother of king Yasmah-Addu,³⁴ was still supervising the kitchen administration during the first years of reign of Zimrī-Lîm (up to ZL 5): she sealed tablets recording the receipt of cereals by Ilu-kān,³⁵ and many delivery notices of oil for the king's meal.³⁶ Three female scribes, all of whom are known by their names, worked in pairs and wrote hundreds of tablets, which recorded the daily expenditures of the

²⁸ Archi, 2002 and Biga, 2016.

²⁹ Biga, 2016: 83.

³⁰ FM 3, no. 60 and Ziegler, 2016a: § 2.

³¹ Ziegler 1999: 100-101, Sasson, 2004: 189-197, Lion / Michel, 2022: 23-25. The word *abarakkātum* corresponds to two realities: "female administrators" and "bursars".

³² Chambon, 2018: 17-19.

³³ Lacambre / Millet Albà, 2008: 21, Lion / Michel, 2022: 24.

³⁴ Ziegler, 1999: 98-99.

³⁵ Chambon, 2018: 16, 19.

³⁶ Charpin, 1992: 67.

storerooms for the king's meal.³⁷ The rations received by the women working in the palace kitchen show that the millers, those in charge of the *burrum*-cereals, which were usually girls, and the water carrier were all considered less important professions, because their rations were smaller than those of other kitchen workers.³⁸

The Mari correspondence also mentions male specialists, who are referred to by their personal names and who were sometimes sent to different palaces as skilled specialists. During the reign of Šamšī-Addu, several cooks fled the service of the great king to join the palace of his son at Mari. They sometimes even participated in the dinners of Yasmah-Addu, which seem to have been quite relaxed.³⁹ Some cooks or brewers were bought in another country and brought back to Mari.⁴⁰

In Nuzi, during the fourteenth century BCE, ration lists mention male and female slaves working for the palace kitchen. One of these lists mentions barley rations for male slaves, which included 4 bakers (*ēpū*), 1 brewer (*sēbiu*), 1 person preparing groats (*ša mundu*), 2 brewers (*sirāšū*), and one cook.⁴¹ Another text refers to male cooks, together with female brewers (*sirāsātu*) and female flour-processers (*alahhennātu*). This last activity is also attested for men in the prince's archive (Šilwa-Tešsub).⁴² Both men and women are attested in connection with the tasks linked to the processing of grain for food and beer, even though the presence of men seems predominant.

Similarly, the texts documenting Neo-Assyrian palace kitchens preparing meals for hundreds of people suggest a male-dominated world, especially concerning the cooks. Male workers are listed in great numbers in a broken administrative text including 220 cupbearers, 400 cooks, 400 confectioners.⁴³ However, female personnel also worked in the kitchen, but in lesser numbers. There, we find for example female cupbearers and female bakers. It has been suggested that they were assigned to the Queen's service, together with male personnel.⁴⁴ Unlike the third and early second millennia Syrian palaces, such as those in Ebla or Mari, where kitchens were crowded with a busy female staff,

³⁷ Ziegler, 2016a: § 4.3.

³⁸ Ziegler, 2016b:305.

³⁹ Durand, 1997: no. 2, Sasson, 2015: 305, n. 27.

⁴⁰ ARM 26, 374, Sasson, 2015: 167.

⁴¹ HSS 14, 593:r76, see Lion, 2016: 363.

⁴² ERL 82+SMN 2963 cited by Lion, 2016: 363-364. According to Nicholas Postgate (2013:109-110), in the Middle Assyrian texts from the Aššur temple, *tē'inu* was the miller who produced flour, while the *alahhenu* prepared 'farinaceous products'. This term is also attested in the middle Assyrian texts of Dūr-Katlimmu, Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996: 147-153, no. 10: 12.

⁴³ SAA 7, 21.

⁴⁴ SAA 7, 26. See Emidoro, 2015: 216, n. 84. Text SAA 7, 9 which mentions the queen mother's cupbearer.

sometimes supervised by men, the textual documentation from the Nuzi palace or the Neo-Assyrian palaces in the north of Iraq show more men at work in the kitchens.

2.2. A Men's World: Soldiers on Military Campaigns

Quite unsurprisingly, the military campaigns show a masculine world, including mobile kitchens and staff. In the Old Assyrian satirical Sargon legend, the king recounts a disastrous meal for his army. First, there was not enough food for all the soldiers, and then the cook burned the meat and had to kill another three hundred animals. We can only assume that he was assisted by numerous staff.⁴⁵

The organisation of military camps is well illustrated for the Neo-Assyrian period, both in textual sources and in the representations on palace reliefs.⁴⁶ The reviewing of the troops of Mazamua under Sargon II shows that 29 men were preparing food and 20 cupbearers organised drinks for the Assyrian soldiers only, which counted 630 men.⁴⁷

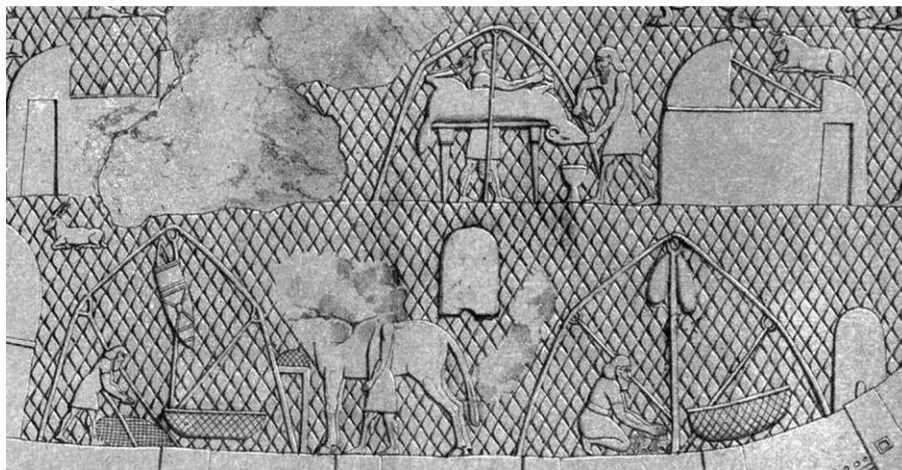


Fig. 1: On the upper register, a man bleeds out an animal lying on a table. On the lower register right, a man is grinding grain. From Layard, 1853: vol. II: pl. 36.

The representations of military camps are part of the imagery, in which the king was presented as a conqueror. The culinary activities that are depicted in the military camps offer many details regarding the preparation of foods in contrast to non-military scenes, which often only depict banquets but not the preparation

⁴⁵ Kt j/k 97, published by Günbatti, 1998. See the translation of the text by Foster 2005: 72-73.

⁴⁶ Bachelot, 2013 and Fales / Rigo, 2014.

⁴⁷ SAA 5, 215 lists, among others, 20 cupbearers, 12 confectioners, 7 bakers, 10 cooks. There were also 360 Gurreans and 440 Itu'eans presumably including their own staff. The deportees had to eat the foods they brought with them.

of such banquets (Fig. 1). For example, scenes on the Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser are an illustration of the different steps necessary in the processing of cereals: threshing with an equid, sieving, grinding, sifting, etc.⁴⁸ Similar scenes can be found on some of the reliefs of the Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh.⁴⁹

The butcher's tasks, especially the cutting up of the animal, are also well-represented. On a Nineveh relief, a man bleeds out an animal, sheep or goat, which is lying on the back on a table.⁵⁰ The head of the animal protrudes from the table and a jar is placed under it on the ground to collect the blood. At the opposite end of the table, another man holds the hind legs of the animal.

Another relief, which depicts actions after the capture of a city, shows soldiers cutting of a ram with their swords and grilling the pieces directly on an open air fire; no real cooking is involved in the scene.⁵¹ The actual cooking activities, beside the baking of breads, are limited to the supervision of the cookpot placed on a brazier, and the preparation of what may be interpreted as condiments in jars.⁵²

2.3. Professions related to cooking

To better understand the tasks of men and women working in the kitchens of palaces and large households, it is necessary to take a closer look at the professions attested. The different steps involved in turning raw ingredients into meals call for a whole series of specialists, who were in charge of specific operations, such as grinding, cutting, mixing, baking, seasoning, etc.⁵³ These specialists may be referred to as professionals or not. For example, the Old Babylonian Nippur Lu lexical list includes words for male cook, brewer, oil presser, and seasoning specialists, as well as female counterparts of these professions.⁵⁴ Other professions are only attested as male ones, as for example the butcher (see below 2.3.3). Some of the terms attested in the lexical lists are absent or rarely mentioned in the administrative documents. Moreover, this list covers

⁴⁸ Schachner, 2007, pl. 2, 4-5, 9, 13. See Curtis and Tallis, 2008 for the Balawat Gates of Assurnasirpal II.

⁴⁹ Layard, 1853: vol. II, pl. 36: on the left a man brings a large basket, presumably filled with cereals, while on the right a man is kneeling in front of a millstone.

⁵⁰ Layard, 1853: vol. II, pl 36 and Barnett / Bleibtreu / Turner, 1998: pl. 138.

⁵¹ Barnett / Bleibtreu / Turner, 1998: pl. 252 (XXVII).

⁵² For example Barnett / Bleibtreu / Turner, 1998: pl. 138.

⁵³ Some literary texts allude to such professionals. For example, in the later version of the myth of Nergal and Ereškigal, when Ea gives instructions to Nergal on how to behave in the Netherworld, he specifies: "When you arrive there (...) when the baker brings you bread, do not proceed to eat. When the butcher brings you meat, do not proceed to eat. When the brewer brings beer, do not proceed to drink." Foster, 2005: 515. Baker, butcher and brewer are among the various professionals to be found in the kitchens of big institutions, both the baker and the brewer using cereals as basic ingredients.

⁵⁴ <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt/corpus> (accessed on 20 March 2022), Old Babylonian Nippur Lu₂ (Proto-lu₂, Q000047): lines 95-104, 118-127 708, 789-790.

only part of the activities of both men and women in the preparation of food and drink.

2.3.1. Millers

The miller was in charge of transforming cereals into flour. Palaces consumed enormous quantities of flour and the personnel assigned to the grinding of cereals was the most numerous, along with weavers. Grinding cereals does not require specific skills and people assigned to this task were usually of low status. Grinding was carried out mainly by women from the Neolithic times. The analysis of some skeletons of women and girls shows compression injuries to some dorsal vertebra resulting from the rocking movement of grinding, and also articular changes of the toe bones linked to kneeling.⁵⁵

However, Ur III texts mention the existence of a few male millers working alongside female millers. A text from Girsu dated the 48th year of the reign of Šulgi lists the semi-free staff working for the great millhouse: the first group consists of 490 millers (*kikken₂-me*), including 364 female, 69 children, 56 men, and 1 elder female, then 11 oil pressers (4 women 7 children), weavers and a great variety of other personnel including overseer of millers, maltsters (4 men, 1 woman), cook, etc.⁵⁶ Most of the supervising staff of this great mill were males. At Garšana, there were also a few male millers working alongside female millers: “12 female millers, 3 male millers, 4 female sesame pressers.”⁵⁷ By contrast, the work of sesame oil presser seems to have been a task that was performed by women and children at Garšana and Irisagrig.⁵⁸

The situation of millers is rather the same in the early second millennium Syrian palaces: grinding was regularly done on a large scale in the *nēpārātum* outside of the palace; however, some female millers (*tē'ittum*) were also employed in the palace kitchen. Ration lists mention 14 millers at Mari and 16 at Chagar Bazar.⁵⁹ This corresponds to the number of millstone stations unearthed in the Old Syrian palace Q of Ebla in a room of the north-west wing (L. 3135).⁶⁰ We should note, however, that there were also male millers, though in smaller

⁵⁵ Molleson, 2014: 15.

⁵⁶ CT 3, 9-10, see Lafont, 2016: 160. According to Englund, 1991: 398, a woman could grind 10 litres of grain per day.

⁵⁷ Kleinerman / Owen, 2009: 312 cite texts 291:1-5//292:1-5. Note that Garšana texts distinguish two types of millers, *ar₃-ra* and *kikken₂*, even though the tasks of both seems to be quite similar. Lafont, 2016: 156 notes that weavers, millers and oil pressers were associated in the ration lists, as in the Ur tablet UET 3, 1504.

⁵⁸ This is not the case in the Old Babylonian sources, when men are regularly attested as oil pressers.

⁵⁹ ARM 19, 248 and 248*. See also ARM 33, 35, an inventory of the Yahdun-Lîm fortress staff receiving rations: in all, there were 173 persons, including 10 female millers. At Mari, women could also be specialised in the preparation of *burrum* cereals (*lāqitāt burri*), a task for which no men are attested, Lion / Michel, 2022: 25, n. 35.

⁶⁰ Matthiae, 1989: 170 et pl. 88.

numbers, at Mari.⁶¹ At Qaṭṭarā, 300 litres of barley were given to three men with the requirement to grind the barley in three days.⁶²

In another geographical area and a few centuries later, at Nuzi, there were both female (*tē'intu*) and male millers (*kaššiddaššu*).⁶³ In first millennium Sippar, male prisoners were assigned to grinding flour.⁶⁴ Thus, the task of grinding cereals, usually performed by women, could also be done by men, some of them being prisoners.

2.3.2. Baker

The flour was then given to bakers. Female bakers were working for the palace at Ebla in order to bake breads, and they received rations as a remuneration.⁶⁵ In the Mari palace, eight female bakers (*ēpītū*) were producing a great variety of breads for the king's meal at the beginning of Zimrī-Lîm's reign. At Tuttul, they were three. At Chagar Bazar male bakers are attested in connection with millers.⁶⁶

A text from Nuzi mentions four men belonging to the palace bakers, presumably working for them.⁶⁷ Neo-Assyrian texts mention mainly male bakers, together with other male professionals, such as cooks, cupbearers and confectioners.⁶⁸

Thus, though the bakers in the early Syrian palaces were predominantly female, male bakers do exist and are the majority in the Mesopotamian palaces from the second half of the second millennium on.

2.3.3. Butchers and Cooks

The case of the butchers is different: it is always a masculine task that was performed in different places, using different methods, depending on the size of

⁶¹ ARM 21, 381: delivery of textiles to the palace staff including 8 male millers; ARM 23, 610: delivery of wool to various people including male bakers (*ēpū*) and millers (*kaššidakū*), using here another term to refer to these professionals.

⁶² OBTR 187:1-5. See also for Old Babylonian male millers OECT 15, 41 from Larsa, in which two men received grain to produce flour.

⁶³ HSS 14, 97:12 and 98:13 cited by Lion, 2016: 363-365.

⁶⁴ Kim, 2013.

⁶⁵ Milano, 1990: 44, 57.

⁶⁶ For Tuttul and Chagar Bazar references see Lion / Michel, 2022: 24-26.

⁶⁷ HSS 14, 593:26. From the same period, there are female bakers at Alalakh (JCS 8: 11, no. 159:7).

⁶⁸ SAA 4, 144:8 et SAA 4, 139:8. However, SAA 7, 24 quotes 1 female spice-bread baker and her 2 maids.

the animal.⁶⁹ In Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian texts, the butcher could receive complete animals or meat pieces to be prepared.⁷⁰

Long before the Neo-Assyrian reliefs already mentioned above (§2.2), which show butchers working in military camps, the butchering of animals is already depicted on cylinder seals of the female cook of queen Uqnitum at the court of Urkeš.⁷¹

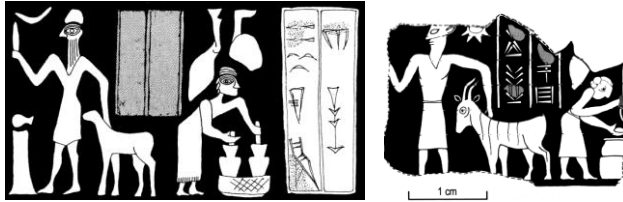


Fig. 2: The two seals of Tuli, female cook of queen Uqnitum at Urkeš.
From Kelly-Buccellati, 2019: 121, figs. 11 and 16.

On this seal, a butcher holds a knife and is ready to kill a sheep, while a woman, is churning butter or cheese in two jars simultaneously. The scene presents the preparation of food in the palace kitchen, supervised by the female cook whose name is mentioned in a later seal as Tuli. The later seal also shows a woman, who is inserting a loaf of bread in a tannur oven, next to the butcher (fig. 2).

It is striking that the Mari corpus which gives so many details concerning the food sector of the palace, and especially meat, does not mention butchers. For this reason, Jack Sasson proposed to translate *nuhattimum*, commonly translated as ‘cook, with ‘butcher’ instead: these butchers would have been in charge of the preparation and the conservation of the meat.⁷² In a letter to the king, a high official writes: “Let my lord send me a cook so that he can slaughter(?) that ox and so its meat can go to the palace.”⁷³ Here the cook is clearly performing the task of the butcher. It is not impossible that the cook at Mari was acting both as a butcher and a cook, also supervising the preparation of the king’s meal.⁷⁴ Indeed,

⁶⁹ The Sumerian term *gir₂-la₂* is mainly attested in literary and lexical texts and a few other royal or administrative tablets from scattered periods, as in Nisaba 15, 90:ii4. The Akkadian word *ṭābihu*, besides religious, ritual, literary and lexical texts, occurs in a few administrative texts from the Old Babylonian period on (CAD T: 6-8).

⁷⁰ UET 5, 404. Butchers are also attested in Old Babylonian and Neo Assyrian texts as witnesses in transactions (CT 48, 39:18, MDP 22, 21:r7; SAA 6, 6:r9, 6, 6:r10), and they are also found Neo-Assyrian administrative texts listing professionals (SAA 7, 21:10//22, r1; 5ii:46).

⁷¹ Kelly-Buccellati, 2019: 416, fig. 11 and 16.

⁷² Sasson, 2004: 192-194.

⁷³ Durand, 2000: no. 972. In ARM 25, 137, a *muhaldim* named Mutu-ekallim received a bronze knife.

⁷⁴ In the debate between the date palm and the tamarisk, the latter specifies: “the cook kneads dough in my trough.” Foster, 2005: 928.

to prepare dishes, the cook received various ingredients including vinegar for maceration, and flour, butter, and animal fat for cooking.⁷⁵

Both male and female cooks worked in the kitchen palaces at Ebla and Mari, but they are mentioned in different contexts. It is possible that this was due to a difference in status of male and female cooks, or that male and female cooks were involved in different activities: male cooks are better identified, they could travel, and even be exchanged between courts, they also could even receive fields for their services.⁷⁶ Only three female cooks are attested at Mari, which seems quite few, they could have been supervising the kitchen work, just like Tuli at Urkeš.⁷⁷

During the Neo-Assyrian period, a letter addressed to the king mentions cooks and other specialists working in the kitchen, who came from Til-Barsip, and all of them were eunuchs.⁷⁸ Several cooks at the king's service are known by their personal names, just as in the Ebla and Mari.

2.3.4. Others specialists preparing food

Several other specialists were working in palace kitchens, such as the *lurakkum* in Mari and Šubat-Enlil, who was in charge of preparing specific types of seasonings, among others a kind of *garum* (*šiqqum*) made of locusts, shrimps and fish.⁷⁹ This profession is also attested for women, as we learn from a letter from Inbatum, who asked her father Zimrī-Lîm for some servants including a *lurakkîtum* or a female cook.⁸⁰

At Mari, eight women were in charge of preparing the *mersum*, a kind of sweet cake, porridge or simply a filling made of flour, oil, dates, terebinth, figs and other fruits, garlic, cumin, and coriander.⁸¹ Other corpuses mention various kind of confectioners, all males.⁸² There were many other people working in the large household kitchen, but without professional qualification.

⁷⁵ Cooks received low-quality wine at Mari (FM 11, 34, 50, 99, 103, 160), beer at Chagar Bazar (Lacambre / Millet-Albà 2008: no. 171), flour at Ur (UET 5, 447) or butter at Larsa (JCS 24, 3).

⁷⁶ Cooks known by their names at Ebla (Biga, 2016: 83) and at Mari (M.6799, ARM 30: 228-229; M.6824, ARM 30: 470; M.6907, ARM 30: 333; M.7484, ARM 30: 468). For cooks travelling, see Sasson, 2004: 214-215 and Sasson, 2015: 221, n. 12 and 14, or bought abroad ARM 26, 374. At Mari they could receive textiles (ARM 21, 381), in other Old Babylonian texts, even fields (OECT 3, 10:4).

⁷⁷ Ziegler, 1999: 102.

⁷⁸ SAA 1, 184:4-19.

⁷⁹ Lion / Michel, 1997: 718-719.

⁸⁰ Durand, 2000: no. 1234.

⁸¹ Sasson, 2004: 190-191; Durand, 2000: no. 959.

⁸² See *sum-ninda*, *karkadîmmu*, and the first millennium *epišānu* confectioning the sweet meat called *muttāqu*.

2.3.5. Brewer

As already noted above (§1.3), brewing activities were mainly performed by women during the third and early second millennia. The Sumerian hymn of Ninkasi details the operations to prepare beer. Akkadian seals show women brewing beer in various types of jars.⁸³ However, in the early second millennium large households, these activities were supervised by men.⁸⁴ In the Mari palace, female brewers were preparing different types of beer.⁸⁵ At Qaṭṭarā, there was a female beer brewer at the service of Iltani.⁸⁶

In Nuzi, both male *sēbiū* and *sirāšū* and a few female brewers (*sirāšātu*) are attested.⁸⁷ In Middle Assyrian sources, male brewers are the great majority.⁸⁸ First millennium Assyrian texts only refer to male brewers.

2.3.6. Cupbearers

The cupbearer, whose task it was to serve beverages to the king, was a high-status professional. He was sometimes represented just behind the king, for example, on the relief of Ur-Nanše, king of Lagaš.⁸⁹ At Ebla, there was a cupbearer for beer and another one for wine, both were male and are known by their personal names.⁹⁰

Cupbearers were probably not involved in the preparation of drinks, but servicing the drinks would have implied some preparation, such as portioning and pouring. Mari cupbearers (*dumu šāqī*) were sent to Terqa to collect ice, presumably to present fresh drinks to the king.⁹¹ In Neo-Assyrian texts, this profession could also be held by women, whose title was *šāqītu*, presumably she was in the service of the queen.⁹²

*

This brief overview of tasks linked to the preparation of foods and drinks in cuneiform sources from a gender perspective does not provide a clear-cut picture. If in general, the slaughtering of animals seems to be clearly a male task, all other kitchen activities were performed by both men and women, but in very different

⁸³ Otto, 2016: 135-136.

⁸⁴ Breniquet, 2009: 187; Michel, 2009: 206–207. This was for example the case for the beer office at Chagar Bazar, but these official are not necessarily referred to as brewers (*lu₂-bappir*), Lacambre, 2008: 193-203. Texts from the beer bureau do not specify the gender of the staff producing the drink.

⁸⁵ Michel, 2009: 206-207.

⁸⁶ OBTR 207: i22, Langlois, 2017: vol. 2, 192.

⁸⁷ Lion, 2016: 364.

⁸⁸ Jakob, 2003: 401–407.

⁸⁹ See <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010121762> accessed on 10 January 2022.

⁹⁰ Biga, 2016: 85.

⁹¹ ARM 26, 400.

⁹² Emidoro, 2015: 219.

proportions. The gender distribution of kitchen activities depends on many factors, including context, social status, geographical area, and time period.

In domestic contexts, women were generally preparing food and beer for the family and they possessed all the necessary utensils for these activities. Single men and travellers, when they were not eating at the inn, had to cook for themselves. Wealthy families had slaves to prepare the meals. The preparation of beer seems to be a typically female activity in the third and early second millennia, but later on, more and more men are involved in this occupation.

The picture is quite different when looking at large household and palaces, on the one hand, the Syrian palaces of the third and early second millennia, such as Ebla and Mari, and on the other hand, the late second and first millennia palaces of northern Iraq. In the first instances, the administrative texts highlight the female palace personnel, including the kitchen staff mentioned in long ration lists, while letters describe male staff travelling between courts. For example, the cooks mentioned in ration lists were female, while the cooks mentioned in letters were male. However, we know that in some instances, women could have some responsibilities at the head of the kitchen personnel.

In the Nuzi archives and Neo-Assyrian texts, by contrast, many kitchen activities seem to have been performed by men. Neo-Assyrian reliefs depict the organisation of military camps and the male kitchen personnel accompanying the king on his campaigns.

Regarding activities of daily life, the textual documentation offers only a partial picture, and the uneven distribution of sources does not always allow for comparisons between different time periods and geographical areas. The conclusion that can be drawn from this survey is that the traditional view, in which the daily preparation of meals at home is interpreted as the task of women while haute cuisine is the work of skilled men, should be more nuanced; the queen of Urkeš, for example, had a female chief at the head of her kitchen, and the situation might have been the same at Mari, where women had responsibilities in the preparation of the king's meal.

Abbreviations

ARM	Archives Royales de Mari. Paris.
BE	The Babylonian Expedition of the University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia.
CT	Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum. London.
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology. Bethesda.
FM	Florilegium marianum. Paris.
Kt x/k	

HSS	Harvard Semitic Series. Cambridge.
MDP	Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse. Paris.
Nisaba	Nisaba. Studi assiriologici Messinesi. Messina.
OBTR	Dalley, S. / Walker, C. B. F. / Hawkins, J. D., 1976: <i>The Old Babylonian tablets from Tell al Rimah</i> . Hertford: The British School of Archaeology in Iraq.
OECT	Oxford Editions of Cuneiform Texts. Oxford.
SAA	State Archives of Assyria. Helsinki.
TIM	Texts in the Iraq Museum. Baghdad/Wiesbaden.
UET	Ur Excavations. Publications of the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia.

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