

## Ninkhursaga

**I. Introduction.** *Sumerian–Akkadian goddess.* N. was an important and ancient “great goddess”/→“mother goddess” and was known under a wide variety of names (JACOBSEN 1970 [detailed study]; JACOBSEN 1976: 104; FRANKFORT 1978 [epithets]: 279f; JACOBSEN 1987; COULTER/TURNER 2000: 346; BLACK/GREEN 1992: 140 [etymology as given in the poem *Lugale*]; HEIMPEL 1998–2001 [literary and inscriptional evidence]). The Sumerian *nin ħur-saĝ.a(k)* means “lady of the foothills/stony ground,” presumably referencing both the western flanks of the Zagros mountain range (see also →Mountain god) to the east of the river valleys, and the stony desert to the west of the river valleys (JACOBSEN 1970: 281f; JACOBSEN 1976: 104). Her name first occurs in the Fara god list (JACOBSEN 1970: 285). JACOBSEN (1970: 281–86; JACOBSEN 1987) saw her as the syncretism (from the period of Gudea onward) of two deities: Khursaga, a goddess of the “wilderness of foothills and stony deserts” and the power in those places to produce (and kill) wildlife; and Nintur, a goddess of birth especially associated with the “cowpen of the domestic herd.”

JACOBSEN (1976: 105–110) identified four principal areas of concern for the goddess: mother of wildlife, “form giver and birth giver,” midwifery, and source of kingship. The goddess played an especially prominent role with regard to birthing (of deities, humans, and animals; note, e.g., the inscription on Statue A of Gudea [JACOBSEN 1970: 277f]). In their inscriptions three Sumerian kings claim to have been suckled by N. (LEICK 1991: 132; FRANKFORT 1978: 238 and 301 for translations of some of the texts of Eannatum of Lagash, who specifically claimed in his famous stela that the goddess gave birth to him).

The goddess was a member with An and →Enlil of the major Sumerian triad of ruling deities; she was later replaced by →Ea/Enki (JACOBSEN 1976: 104f; JACOBSEN 1987). There are multiple traditions concerning the goddess; in one she is the consort of Enlil and mother of →Ninurta/Ningirsu, in another the consort of Shulpae and sister to Enlil (JACOBSEN 1987). An early text from Nippur concerns the goddess and Enlil (KRAMER 1961: 18, pl. 3). In *Enki and Ninkhursag* she is the female creative counterpart to Enki (LEICK 1991: 132; KRAMER 1961: 56f [summary]; LAMBERT/TOURNAY 1949 [extensive analysis]).

Major temples of N. were located at Kesh, Lagash, and Al Ubaid. She was also worshipped at Susa. Puzur-Inshushinak (c. 2100), last king of the dynasty of Awan, mentioned the goddess in a curse (VALLAT 1998: 336; POTTS 1999: 123, table 4.12, no. 2 for a translation). Shulgi (c. 2094–2047) of the Third Dynasty of Ur built or restored a temple of Ninhursag–of–Susa, which remained in use well into the Middle Elamite Period. The remains of that temple were found by the French mission immediately east of the ziggurat massif (AMIET 1970: 24; HARPER et al. 1992: 7, 123f, fig. 41). GRILLOT (1986: 179) noted the “rapport” between the Elamite goddess Kiririsha and N., and saw a parallel between the union of the Sumerian–Akkadian deities Ea/Enki–N. and the Elamite deities Napirisha\*–Kiririsha.

**II. Typology.** Visual depictions of N. are difficult to identify with certainty (see BRAUN–HOLZINGER 1998–2001 for a brief survey). An Early Dynastic fragmentary relief from a stone vase shows a frontally facing, seated goddess wearing a horned headdress, with maces or vegetation stalks extending from her shoulders, and holding a sheaf of grain (1\*). The relief carries an inscription naming Entemena of Lagash (WINTER 1985: 14f identifies the figure as N. based on the inscription). The same goddess is apparently shown on an (uninscribed) votive plaque from Girsu (Tello) that shows a frontally facing, seated goddess, with maces (?) or stalks of vegetation extending from her shoulders and the mountain–scale pattern (2; note AMIET 1980: 447, fig. 337 where the figure is identified only as a “vegetation” goddess). WINTER has argued that the fragmentary figures, of which only the horned crowns are preserved on the obverse of the famous victory stela of Eannatum, are N. (WINTER 1985: 14–16). Cows suckling calves and scenes of milking and dairy production have often been associated with the goddess (e.g., FRANKFORT 1939: 177; KEEL 1980: 107; HARPER et al. 1992: 109). Some commentators have identified the “omega” symbol (uterus?), which occurs commonly in Mesopotamian art from the Early Dynastic through the Neo-Babylonian Periods, as a divine emblem of the goddess (e.g., JACOBSEN 1970: 280f; JACOBSEN 1987; BRAUN–HOLZINGER 1998–2001: 381; BLACK/GREEN 1992: 146).

**Catalogue**

**1\*** Vessel (fragment), basalt, 25\* x 18.9\* cm, 2400. Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, VA 7248 MOORTGAT 1969: 42, pl. 115 **2** Votive plaque, limestone, Girsu (Tello), 2500–2350. MOORTGAT 1969: 42, pl. 114; WINTER 1985: 14f, fig. 6

*Mark A. Garrison*

## Bibliography

- AMIET P., 1980, *Art of the Ancient Near East*, New York.
- BLACK J./GREEN A., 1992, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia. An Illustrated Dictionary*, Austin.
- BRAUN-HOLZINGER E.A., 1998–2001, Art. Nin-ḫursaġa. B., in: *RIA* 9:381f.
- COULTER C.R./TURNER P., 2000, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities*, Jefferson, NC.
- FRANKFORT H., 1939, *Cylinder Seals*, London.
- 1978, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago.
- HARPER P.O. et al., 1992, *The Royal City of Susa. Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre*, New York.
- HEIMPEL H., 1998–2001, Art. Nin-ḫursaġa. A., in: *RIA* 9:378–381.
- JACOBSEN T., 1970, Notes on Nintur: *Orientalia* 42, 274–298.
- 1976, *Treasures of Darkness. A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, New Haven.
- 1987, Art. Ninḫursaga, in: ELIADE M., ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York, 10:447.
- KEEL O., 1980, *Das Böcklein in der Milch seiner Mutter und Verwandtes. Im Lichte eines altorientalischen Bildmotivs (OBO 33)*, Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen.
- KRAMER S.N., 1961, *Sumerian Mythology. A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.*, New York.
- LAMBERT M./TOURNAY R., 1949, “Enki et Ninḫursag” à propos d’un ouvrage récent: *RA* 43, 105–136.
- LEICK G., 1991, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, London.
- MOORTGAT A., 1969, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia*, New York.
- POTTS D.T., 1999, *The Archaeology of Elam. Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*, Cambridge.
- RLA = EBELING E./EDZARD D.O., eds., 1932–, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, Berlin.
- VALLAT F., 1998, Art. Elam–Elam VI: Elamite Religion, in: YARSHATER E., ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Malibu, 8/3:335–342.
- WINTER, I.J., 1985, *After the Battle is Over: the Stele of the Vultures and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East*, in: KESSLER H.L./SIMPSON M.S., eds., *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. National Gallery of Art (Studies in the History of Art 16, Symposium Series 4)*, Washington DC, 11–32.