

# The Widows' Market

an interpretation by Laurel Halbany

The recent discovery of this important tablet allows a glimpse into an ancient post-battle practice; after the fighting had ended, women would search the battlefield to collect valuable items (such as weapons, armor-masks, jewelry, etc.) left by the fallen combatants. The women would then gather to trade in groups called *našmadu* (literally, 'team', referring to a group of four to eight people).

Remarkably, the women were from enemy peoples, and had no common language beyond a handful of words used to facilitate trade. During these brief periods of post-conflict exchange, the women used their rudimentary common vocabulary and gestures, facial expressions, and posture to socialize and trade news. It is likely, though unconfirmed, that women who were repeat traders at these "widows' markets" developed a measure of friendship.

After the battle is gone, the iron silent, the shouts stilled,  
carrion-birds feasting halt and rise in a clatter of wings  
as the women<sup>1</sup> come to gather what they will trade,  
stooping between the corpses of the fallen,  
collecting weapons, tools, jewelry, coins,  
given over by the dead as trade-goods for the living.

When they have collected what they can carry  
the women of peoples who fought as enemies,  
the women come to the wide place<sup>2</sup>  
to trade what they have collected  
with the women who are kin to their dead foes  
the women whose kin slew their own fathers, brothers, sons,  
come to trade in the quiet wide place.

There is no war in the widows' market,  
no arrows hurled, no shouts of victory or wounding,  
only the rustling of skirts  
and the companionable work of women.

Their people are enemies and they share no tongue  
save a scattering of words of trade -  
how much, what is that, more, no, agreed -  
no other speech between them  
except gestures of their hands and bodies.

As they trade they exchange talk<sup>3</sup>,  
speaking of this one's children, that one's marriage,  
older widows giving advice to younger women,  
a friendship of common lives  
their duties to home and the gods alike  
even between enemy cities.

The women part with smiles and foreign words  
trudging back to their enemy homes,  
their arms full of trade-goods, their hearts full of stories,  
behind them the silence of the widows' market  
filled with the clattering of wings.

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<sup>1</sup> The symbol here (*gidri*) is a variant of the standard mark for 'female' and appears in the literature to describe various persons and spirits who call themselves female and occupy a female role. Given the usage and the symbology a more literally accurate translation of *gidri* is "a person/people who lives as female", but for the sake of brevity and clarity I have translated it here simply as "women".

<sup>2</sup> The meaning of this term (*murū-dagal*), literally 'wide place', is disputed. It commonly refers to outdoor, public gathering areas such as plazas, open-air markets, and areas set aside around \*stele\* for public viewing, and thus is often translated as "open-air market". However, there are scattered examples of its use to refer to indoor gatherings, such as large trading-tent markets or the public antechambers of temples on certain feast days. Particularly given the informal, unbounded area in which the 'market' here is said to occur, I have used the literal translation.

<sup>3</sup> Lit. "important stories" (*tēmu*), a symbology usually reserved for descriptions of informal letters and urgent personal news.

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## Designer Notes

I think my brain may have mashed this up from

- Too much struggling over Akkadian and Sumerian texts as an undergrad
- Living in a multicultural urban area where you quickly learn that gesture, context, and goodwill can make a conversation despite having less than a dozen actual words in common
- And the ways in which the necessities of women's work, throughout history, has often transcended grandiose battles between men.

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