

Abhandlung

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Children in Institutional Households of Late Uruk Period Mesopotamia



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Abstract: The article discusses references to children in cuneiform records from Southern Mesopotamia dating to the Uruk III/Jemdet Nasr period (ca. 3000 B. C.). They confirm the presence of infants and children among the personnel of institutional households. Documents offer two patterns of classifying humans. The first describes individuals as male or female and then distinguishes between adults, children and babies. The second disregards gender but offers six age groups instead, four of which refer to children. The article summarizes and interprets the information these early economic records provide on the gender and age groups of children. It shows how officials of institutional households in ancient Sumer defined the childhood of their dependents.

1 Introduction

Children already appear in written sources from Mesopotamia in the earliest logographically written texts dating to the Uruk IV period (ca. 3200–3100 B. C.).¹ They record minors among the personnel and dependents of Mesopotamian larger urban households, the best known from that period being the Eanna from Uruk. While there are only a

few references to children in Uruk IV period, they become frequent in the Uruk III period (ca. 3100–3000 B. C.).

Vajman first identified notations for children in Uruk IV texts.² Scribes recorded children as well as juvenile animals with the sign  (N₈) whereas  (N₁) was reserved for adults.³ Accordingly, there were no logographic writings for children in that period. Its introduction into the script together with a developed system of terminology for children appears in the following, Uruk III period.

Presently, there are ca. 3750 published and unpublished administrative texts and fragments of diverse content dating to the Uruk III period.⁴ The most informative among them concerning children are accounts of personnel. There are about fifty of them.⁵ In this article, I will show that about two dozen of them offer data on children.

Two texts – W 23999,1 and W 20274,2 – gave a starting point to the present discussion of children in Uruk III administrative records: Both are of Uruk III date and were discussed by Englund in his overview of texts from the Late Uruk period⁶ and also in his article on possible evidence for slavery during that time span.⁷

¹ Date according to R. K. Englund, *Texts from the Late Uruk period*, in: J. Bauer [e.a.] (ed.), *Mesopotamien. Späturuk-Zeit und Frühdynastische Zeit*. OBO 160/1 (Göttingen 1998) 215. Different absolute date approximations for Uruk IV and Uruk III/Jemdet Nasr periods may be found elsewhere. This nonetheless bears little significance for the present discussion.

Article note: I am indebted to Robert K. Englund (UCLA) for his permission to discuss unpublished Late Uruk material in his responsibility for publication. I thank Salvatore F. Monaco (Rome) for reading the early draft of this article and proposing several corrections. I am also indebted to him for his permission to discuss unpublished material he is working on. I thank Hadas Weiss (MPI for Social Anthropology, Halle) for correcting my English. Abbreviations in the present article are those of the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* with the following additions: MS = siglum of unpublished tablets in the Schøyen Collection (Norway); ACTPC = S. F. Monaco, *Archaic Cuneiform Tablets from Private Collections* (unpublished; available via CDLI).

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² A. A. Vajman, *Über die protosumerische Schrift*, *ActAnt.* 22 (1974) 15–27.

³ See document W 9655,t (ATU 5, pl. 81) as an example. See ZATU, p. 166 for Late Uruk numerical signs and their transliteration.

⁴ According to “Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative” (CDLI) (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/search/>) as for July 2014.

⁵ R. K. Englund, *The smell of the gage*. *CDLI* 2009:4 (URL <http://cdli.ucla.edu/pubs/cdlj/2009/cdlj2009_004.pdf>) 15.

⁶ Englund, *OBO* 160/1, 176 f.

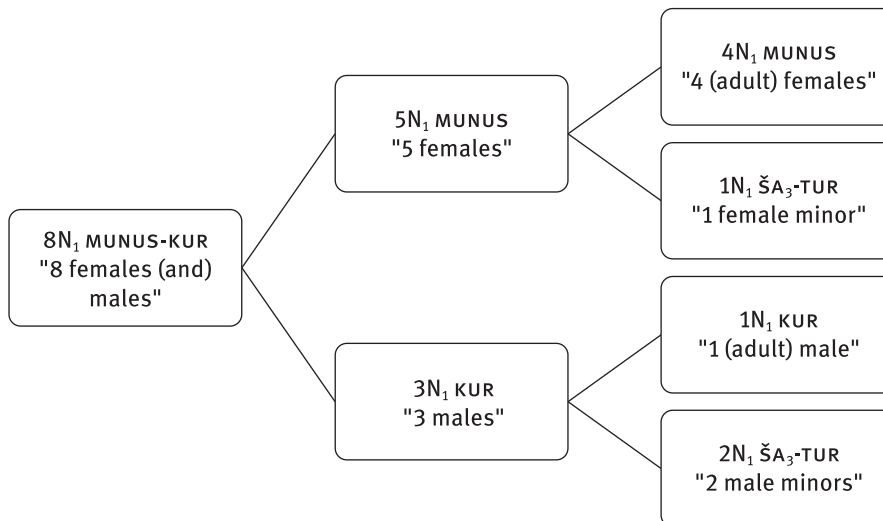
⁷ Englund, *CDLI* 2009:4.

Late Uruk texts are interpreted as Sumerian in this article. The recent works of Monaco illustrate that this is fully justified. He identifies Sumerian terminology for loans in Late Uruk texts.⁸ He also illustrates that the Sumerian verb e_3 “to go out, to issue” was written with sign $E_{(1)}$ in Late Uruk texts.⁹ It is also certain that Early Dynastic I-II texts exhibit a transitional stage between Late Uruk and “Fara” orthographies, both in numerical and logographic signs.¹⁰

2 Uruk III Accounts W 23999,1 and W 20274,2

Both texts, W 23999,1 and W 20274,2,¹¹ enumerate groups of individuals referred to by their personal names. These individuals were in all likelihood dependents of the Eanna household. Englund refers to them as “slaves”,¹² although no information on their legal status has so far been identified. Despite the similarities in the layout of both texts, as will be seen below, they represent two different ways of classifying humans.

Since both texts were transliterated by Englund on several occasions, I provide here only their structure. W 23999,1 runs as follows:



Individuals bear the term $MUNUS-KUR$, the designation for “female” and “male” individuals in Late Uruk texts.¹³ Since $MUNUS$ and KUR were sex qualifiers used for both humans and animals, I assume that their Sumerian readings correspond to their later equivalents $m u n u s$ “female” and $n i t a_x$ “male” respectively. One can safely say that Late Uruk bureaucrats recorded *sex* and not *gender* with these qualifiers since animals cannot have gender, a social classifier.

This document has two categories for humans, the first being their *sex* and the second being their *age class*. I will provide the interpretation of the term $\check{S}A_3-TUR$ below. For now, it will suffice to state that the text classifies humans into four groups:

1. $m u n u s$	“(adult) females”
2. $n i t a_x(KUR)$	“(adult) males”
3. $\check{S}A_3-TUR-m u n u s$	“female minors”
4. $\check{S}A_3-TUR-n i t a_x(KUR)$	“male minors”

It stands to reason that the differentiation between adult males and females hinges on their capacity to execute certain types of physical labor. Later, especially Ur III sources, clearly attest to a sexual division of labor. For instance, milling and weaving were typical women’s occupations. The reason for introducing age classes in the second level of classification is not as clear.

⁸ S. F. Monaco, Loan and interest in the archaic texts, ZA 102 (2012) 165–178.

⁹ S. F. Monaco, Proto-cuneiform and Sumerians, RSO 87 (2014) 277–282.

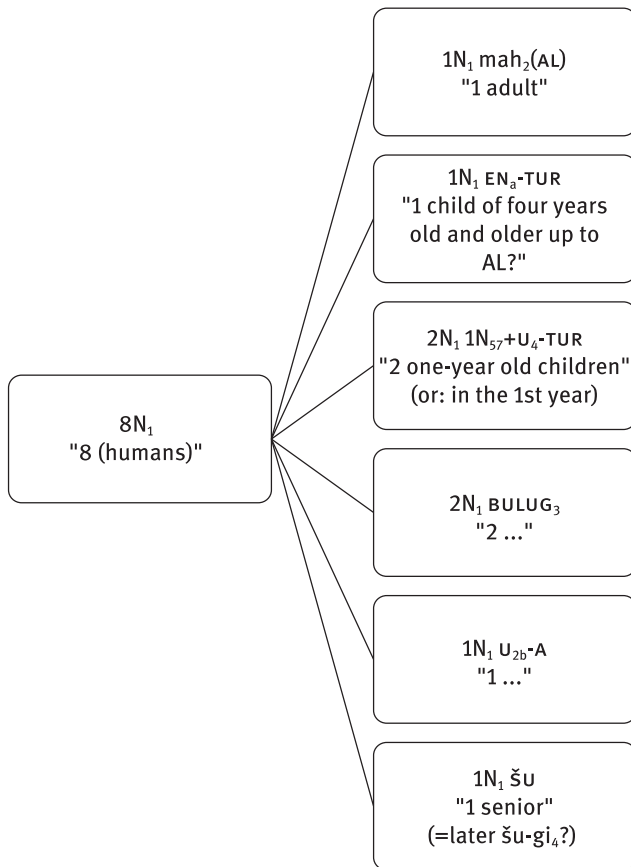
¹⁰ See C. Lecompte, Archaic tablets and fragments from Ur (ATFU) from L. Woolley’s excavations at the royal cemetery. Nisaba 25 (Messina 2013) 2f. for a discussion of the characteristics of Early Dynastic I–II texts.

¹¹ The texts and their publications history may be assessed most conveniently via the CDLI (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/search/>) with their numbers P004735 and P003500 respectively.

¹² Englund, OBO 160/1, 176.

¹³ See Englund, OBO 160/1, 176 and fn. 405 for the meaning of the signs and the history of scholarship.

W 20274,2 offers a different system of classifying humans. Firstly, there is no general term for individuals comparable to *m un us-n it a_x*(KUR) of the document W 23999,1. Secondly, W 20274,2 does not distinguish the sex of individuals. In contrast, it offers only age groups. Thirdly, these age groups differ completely from those of W 23999,1. The following is the structure of the text. The interpretation of terms are by Englund:¹⁴



3 W 23999,1 and terms of the first group of evidence (“sex > age classes”)

There are other texts that classify humans using the same terms as in W 23999,1 or in W 20274,2. Remarkably, these two sets are not compatible, that is, the terms for one group do not occur with terms of the other group. This implies that scribes of Late Uruk III households had at least two different ways of classifying humans with their respective terminology.

¹⁴ Englund, CDLJ 2009:4, 13–15.

The document W 23999,1 will serve as the exemplary specimen for the discussion of the texts of the *first group* of evidence, i.e. those that distinguish humans by their a) sex and b) age class. What follows is a discussion of terms for children evidenced in these texts.

3.1 šA₃-TUR: šA₃ = š a₃- (d u₁₀?) “babies” and TUR = d u m u “children”

Englund suggests that the category šA₃-TUR designated children who, due to their young age, were not exploitable.¹⁵ He regards šA₃-TUR to be identical with the Late Uruk terms šA₃-KUR and šA₃-MUNUS, which refer to “very young” boys and girls respectively.¹⁶ Englund also connects šA₃-TUR with š a₃-HI,¹⁷ a term attested from the Presargonic period onwards. Bauer argued that it should be read š a₃-du₁₀ and translated it “that, what is good to the heart”. He associated this term with infancy (“Kleinkind”).¹⁸ Selz joins Bauer’s reading and analyzes it as š a₃.g = e du₁₀ “pleasant to the heart”.¹⁹ The term š a₃-d u₁₀ was not reserved for humans, though. Presargonic documents from Girsu imply the meaning “juvenile animal” for š a₃-d u₁₀.²⁰

Late Uruk lexical lists bear no evidence of the term šA₃-TUR. Yet this combination appears in other texts besides W 23999,1. For instance, an unpublished Uruk III text W 17729, bp + bx²¹ mentions the sign combination šA₃-TUR-n it a_x(KUR) “male minors”. W 22104,3 is another account of humans where the term šA₃-TUR is associated with female and male adults.²² Here the term is written with the sign šA_{3a2}.²³

Interpreting šA₃-TUR on the assumption that these two signs belong together seems misleading. Supplementing the evidence discussed above with other texts makes clear that šA₃-TUR is a cumulative term composed of categories of minors: “children” (d u m u) and “babies” (šA₃). In this,

¹⁵ Englund, OBO 160/1, 176 fn. 406.

¹⁶ Englund, CDLJ 2009:4, 15.

¹⁷ R. K. Englund, Administrative timekeeping in ancient Mesopotamia, JESHO 31 (1988) 148 and fn. 24.

¹⁸ “Das, was dem Herzen gut ist”: J. Bauer, Der vorsargonische Abschnitt der mesopotamischen Geschichte, in: OBO 160/1, 557.

¹⁹ “Dem Herzen angenehm”; G. J. Selz, Altsumerische Wirtschaftsurkunden aus amerikanischen Sammlungen, FAOS 15/2 (Stuttgart 1993) 198.

²⁰ G. J. Selz, Die altsumerischen Wirtschaftsurkunden der Eremitage zu Leningrad, FAOS 15/1 (Stuttgart 1989) 418–419.

²¹ CDLI number P002694, Uruk III from Uruk.

²² Published as ATU 7, 67 with pl. 86; Uruk III from Uruk.

²³ This confirms that both šA_{3a1} and šA_{3a2} are simply graphic variants of the same sign.

Text	Prov.	Terms									
		munus-nita _x (KUR) “(adult) female (and) male”			dumu “children”		šA ₃ “babies” šA ₃ -dumu “children (and) babies”				
		munus-nita _x (KUR)	munus	nita _x (KUR)	dumu-munus	dumu-nita _x (KUR)	šA ₃ -munus	šA ₃ -nita _x (KUR)	šA ₃ -dumu	šA ₃ -dumu-munus	šA ₃ -dumu-nita _x (KUR)
W 23999,1 (Englund, OBO 160/1, p. 177)	Uruk	+	+	+					+	(+)	(+)
W 17729,bp + bx* (unpubl.)	Uruk		+	+					+		
W 22104,3 (ATU 7, pl. 86)	Uruk		+	+						[+]	+
ACTPC 27*	uncertain	+	+		+	+	+	+			
W 17729,fg* (unpublished)	Uruk		[+]	+			+				
W 15860,a4* (ATU 6, pl. 74)	Uruk		[+]	+				+			

the term resembles the combination MUNUS-KUR “females (and) males”.

As for the interpretation of the signs, TUR is certainly connected to dumu “child”. šA₃ is less lucid, although it evidently denotes “babies”. Presargonic and later sources use terms such as dumu-gaba and dumu-ga for infants instead. It is possible that šA₃ in Late Uruk texts is an abbreviation for š a₃-d u₁₀ discussed above.

The table on this page records references to the terms of the first group. It shows that some texts group babies and older children together while others group them separately. Badly broken tablets are marked with an asterisk.

Document ACTPC 27 provides more terms than any other text and merits special attention. It records “females (and) males” (rev. i 1). However, only adult women, children and babies appear in the texts. There are no references to adult males. The upper part of the obverse records adult females, while the lower records children and babies.

Adult women bear the title HAR-MUNUS. I connect it to geme₂-kikken(HAR) “female millers”, the term amply attested in the Presargonic and later periods and representing a common occupation for women in larger households throughout the 3rd mill. BC. W 17729,fg = IM 046002²⁴ is another text mentioning both female millers HAR-MUNUS (= geme_x:kikken ?) and šA₃:munus

“female babies”. This shows that, as in later periods, children worked together with their parents.²⁵

4 W 20274,2 and terms of the second group of evidence (“different age classes”)

Besides W 20274,2, there are other texts employing the same pattern and set of terms qualifying humans. The figure below records the data contained in these manuscripts. They yield two major conclusions. First, two of the six terms of W 20274,2 – namely BULUG₃ and U₂-A – do not belong to the classification pattern employed in this text.²⁶ Second, six terms in total represent the second classification pattern. They are:

²⁵ H. Waetzoldt, Die Situation der Frauen und Kinder anhand ihrer Einkommensverhältnisse zur Zeit der III. Dynastie von Ur, AoF 15/1 (1988) 40.

²⁶ Although the meaning buluĝ₃-(ĝa₂) “grown up, reared, brought up” fits well the context of age classes, there is hardly any evidence that such a category has ever existed. The lexical evidence is inconclusive: cf. lu₂-buluĝ₃-ĝa₂!(Giš) alongside lu₂-ĝuruš in “ED Lu₂B” l. 43 (MSL 12, 13). One of the individuals of the category BULUG₃ mentioned in W 20274,2 (ZI-ŠUBUR-PAP) is referred to as dumu:EN in an unpublished document W 20274,126 (obv. i 4b–4c3). Concern-

²⁴ Unpublished; P002789; Uruk III Uruk.

Text	Provenance								
		m a h ₂	d u m u : E N	d u m u : 1 N ₅₇ +U ₄	d u m u : 2 N ₅₇ +U ₄	d u m u : 3 N ₅₇ +U ₄	š u	BULUG ₃	U ₂ -A
W 20274,2 (Englund, OBO 160/1, 177)	Uruk	+	+	+			+	+	+
W 14777,c* (ATU 6, pl. 56)	Uruk		+	+	+				
W 15772,p* (ATU 6, pl. 64)	Uruk	+	+	+					
W 15772,z* (ATU 6, pl. 65)	Uruk	+		+					
W 15825,a1* (unpublished)	Uruk			+			+		
W 15825,a2* (unpublished)	Uruk		+	+					
W 20274,126* (unpublished)	Uruk	+	+				+		
W 20573,3* (unpublished)	Uruk			+	+?				
MSVO 1, 220	Jemdet Nasr	+	+						
MS 2863/18* (unpublished)	Umma?	+		+		+			
MS 3035 (unpublished)	Umma?	+	+	+	+	+			
MRAH O.4995 (unpublished)	Umma?	+	+	+	+	+			

- 1) m a h₂ “adults”
 2) d u m u : E N ‘... children’
 3–5) d u m u : N₅₇+U₄ “children of N years / in the Nth year” (where N may be 1, 2 or 3 only)
 6) š u - (g i₄) “elderly”

The following figure includes only those texts that have terms for children. Fragmentary texts are marked with an asterisk. Small fragments with no context are not considered.

4.1 d u m u : E N “developed children” (3–10/12? years)

Englund expresses the opinion that the term EN-TUR describes a child of “four years old and older up to AL?”. AL= m a h₂ in this case does not refer to an adult in its

modern sense but rather to a person physically ready to participate in labor.²⁷ It makes sense to interpret the EN-TUR category as an intermediary between m a h₂ “adults” and d u m u : N₅₇+U₄.

Late Uruk lexical lists do not record the sign combination EN-TUR. It appears that the term’s distribution was limited to the Uruk III period. The interpretation of the term is challenging. Accepting the most common value of the sign EN, one comes to the interpretation “child of the en” (d u m u : e n), where the latter is a generic term for a “chief administrator of a household” in the Late Uruk period.²⁸ Obviously, persons designated d u m u : E N are too numerous to be biological children of any given chief administrator of a temple household. Neither could “a child of en” have been a euphemism for “the en’s dependents, slaves”, since the term is undoubtedly an age and not a professional, social or legal classifier.

A probable reading of the sign EN in the present context is u r u₁₆-n.²⁹ This word means “strong, powerful”.³⁰

ing U₂-A, on the one hand it was a common personal name in the 3rd mill. BC. On the other hand it designated an official or professional connected to gardens and orchards: see G. Visicato, *The Bureaucracy of Šuruppak*. ALASPM 10 (Münster 1995) 130.

²⁷ Englund, CDLJ 2009:4, 15.

²⁸ Englund, OBO 160/1, 70 and fn. 135.

²⁹ MSL 14, 48: 416b.

³⁰ Civil, Fs. Å. W. Sjöberg, 55.

Therefore, it might be $dumu:uru_{16}$ meaning “strong”, i.e. “developed child”.

The document W 14777,c (ATU 6, pl. 56) is important for the present discussion since it frequently mentions individuals of both $dumu:EN$ and $dumu:N_{57}+U_4$ categories. The latter appears in an abbreviated form $N_{57}+U_4$. The text is only partly preserved. Its intact part allows us to reconstruct the following pattern of classifying humans, which repeats itself throughout the document:

	Personal name, (profession)	BA
	–	GI
Number	$dumu:EN$	BA
		GI
	$1N_{57}+U_4$ or $2N_{57}+U_4$	GI

A portion of the text, which exemplifies this pattern, is as follows (line 4):

4a	$2N_1 E_2-NUN-HI$ BA	2 (adults) “released” (to) ... (personal name?);
4b	$1N_1 EN-PA$	1 (adult): ... (personal name?);
4c	$1N_1 U_4-E_2-AN-MAR$	1 (adult): ... (personal name?);
4d	$2N_1$ DUMU:EN BA	2 <i>advanced</i> children “released”;
4e	$3N_1$ $2N_{57}+U_4$ GI	3 (children) in the 2 nd year “confirmed”;

The first group of individuals does not have any special designation. Nevertheless, it is probable that they are identical with $ma h_2$ “adults” of other texts. As such, numerical signs refer to them alone. Either sign BA or GI appear in connection with these individuals. Complex sign combinations accompanying the supposed adults may be interpreted as personal, geographical or institutional names. Some personal names have professional titles such as a high official NAM_2-KAB , cultic specialists $\dot{s}ita$ and $lagar$, and $\dot{s}itim$ “architect”.

Children – $dumu:EN$, $1N_{57}+U_4$ or $2N_{57}+U_4$ – are mostly mentioned alone and also have either BA or GI qualifiers. Noteworthy is the absence of the category $3N_{57}+U_4$ on the one hand and the absence of the qualifier BA with smaller children (categories $1N_{57}+U_4$ and $2N_{57}+U_4$) on the other.

The meaning of the document depends on the interpretation of the administrative procedures BA and GI. Scholars agree that they must represent verbs. Compared

with evidence from Presargonic and later texts, BA may be ba “to allocate” and GI may be gi_4 “to return”. However, as justly argued by Englund, these interpretations do not fit many contexts of Late Uruk administrative accounts, and consequently, their meaning in Late Uruk texts should be restudied.³¹ The translation of the passage above shows that other interpretations for these terms are possible. One hypothesis suggests that BA might be associated with bar “to release” and GI with $ge-n$ “to confirm”. Hence, the verbs convey the idea of resources leaving an institution (bar) or entering it ($ge-n$).³²

Relying on this interpretation, W 14777,c is a cumulative account of individuals, adults and children, entering or leaving a central institution. Personal and institutional names, which occur in relation to the groups of individuals, might represent those in charge of human resources that are bar “released”. One fact about W 14777,c remains undisputable: the document records the management of a substantial number of minors of different ages. The preserved part of the text alone mentions 32 developed children and 20 babies.

To sum up the discussion of the term $dumu:EN$, it applies to humans only and, as will be seen below, refers to children older than 36 months but younger than $ma h_2$, meaning “adult”. The actual age of the latter cannot be determined with certainty based on the evidence of Late Uruk texts. Although Englund believes that these individuals could be of 5–7 years old, I connect the term $ma h_2$ “adult” with the beginning of puberty, i.e. ca 10–11 years for girls and 11–12 for boys.

4.2 $dumu:N_{57}+U_4$ “babies” (0–3 years old)

No lexical lists mention the term. It occurs in administrative accounts also in the abbreviation $N_{57}+U_4$. This can be confusing since a similar notation occurs in animal accounts. There it also designates *age* in years. In contrast to animal accounts, where the number can be 5 or even 6, the term $dumu:N_{57}+U_4$, when applied for humans, can only have the numbers 1, 2 or 3. Furthermore, the notation $N_{57}+U_4$ in other contexts denotes a time span. For example, in loan documents it refers to credit periods: “such and such amount of barley for N years”.³³

³¹ Englund, OBO160/1, 77.

³² I owe these interpretations to Walther Sallaberger.

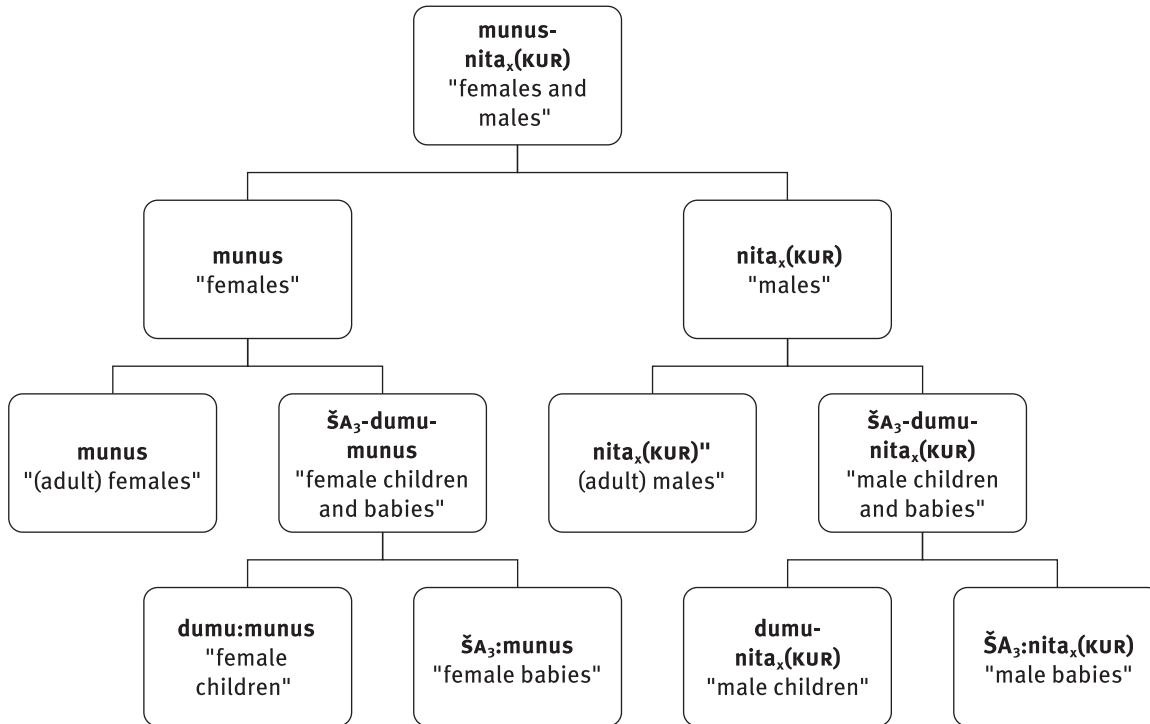
³³ The identification of notations for “year”, “month” and “day” in Late Uruk texts was discovered by A. Vaiman: see Englund, JESHO 31, 136 f. For examples of the use of the year notations in loan documents from the Late Uruk period see Monaco, ZA 102, 165 f.

With reference to humans, the numbers have a slightly different meaning. Whereas in animal accounts, $1N_{57}+U_4$ designates “animal of one”, the same term used for humans designates a “child in its first year”, i.e. baby up to 12 months old. Similarly, $2N_{57}+U_4$ are babies 12 to 24 months old and $3N_{57}+U_4$ are 24 to 36 months old. This interpretation fits well what we know about early childhood in Mesopotamia. Mothers breastfed their children for about three years.³⁴ Therefore, the term $dumu:N_{57}+U_4$ applied to breastfed babies, whereas $dumu:EN$ designated infants who had been weaned and were less dependent on their caregivers.

5 Conclusions

Written evidence from the Uruk III/Jemdet Nasr period provides substantial evidence for the presence of infants and children in larger communal households. Drawing on the preliminary studies of human terminology in Late Uruk accounts by Englund, and on my reevaluation and supplementation of the evidence, I was able to identify two sets of terms which represented different approaches to classifying human resources in central households.

The first set had two levels of classification. The primary level defines the sex of the individual. The second level refers to individuals as adults, children or babies. There is no specific term for adults in this scheme, nor is there any reference to the elderly. The following figure offers an overview of the classificatory logic and its complete set of terms with their interpretations:



There is no indication of the biological age of individuals described with these categories. We do not know how old a person described as “baby”, “child”, or “adult” actually was. I assume that these terms do not accurately reflect the objective stages of biological development. Nor do they represent how the Late Uruk society viewed babies, children or adults. It seems that this classificatory

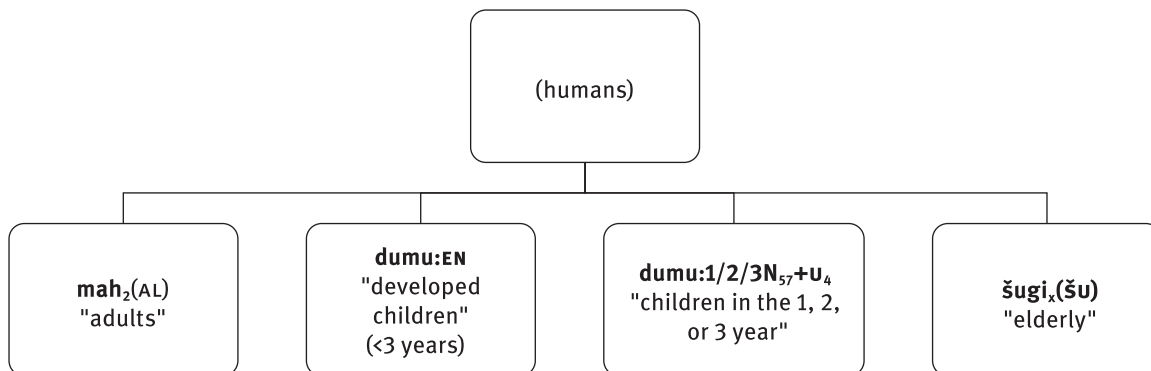
system was merely the means of accounting for human resources by bureaucrats of central households. The biological, social or even legal characteristics of individuals accounted therein remain obscure due to our insufficient understanding of the colophons of the accounts in question, where the purpose of the accounting lies. Evidence from subsequent periods shows that the terminology reflected the individual’s value as laborer and consequently defined his/her ration in food and other goods.

³⁴ M. Stol, *Women in Mesopotamia*, JESHO 38 (1995) 129.

It is remarkable that this pattern of classification was used with minor differences in subsequent periods. When compared to Sumerian terms used from the Presargonic period onwards, the correspondences are as follows:

munus	> geme ₂
nita _x (KUR)	> ĝuruš
dumu:munus	> dumu-munus
dumu:nita _x (KUR)	> dumu-nita
šA ₃ :munus	> dumu-gaba/ga-munus
šA ₃ :nita _x (KUR)	> dumu-gaba/ga-nita

The second classification pattern takes a different approach in classifying human resources. Its set is single-level and it lacks any reference to sex. All terms refer to age groups, some of which are very precise in noting the age of infants. The following figure sums up the terms and their respective interpretations:



The exact biological age of the individuals described by these terms is determined only for babies (dumu:1/2/3N₅₇+U₄). It is also certain that “developed children” were older than three. Otherwise, one can only guess when “adulthood” or “old age” had actually begun.

In contrast to the first classificatory pattern, only the term for elderly has survived in later periods. This implies that the second mode of classifying humans died out after the Late Uruk period. Texts from subsequent periods illustrate that seniors, as a ration and labor class, have been integrated into the “sex>age” classification pattern.³⁵ This leaves us with an open question: why did Late Uruk officials need two ways of classifying humans, and why did the second one emerge?

³⁵ Cf. ĝuruš šu-gi₄ and geme₂ šu-gi₄ „senior male/female worker“ of Ur III records (*passim*).