# On Nakedness, Nudity, and Gender in Egyptian and Mesopotamian Art*

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The authors' analysis is based on the hypothesis that visual representation of the unclothed body in Egypt and Mesopotamia during the third and second millennium BCE derives from concepts of the human body and perceptual convention expressed through *form* of appearance. Comparing and contrasting visual and textual representations shows that nude and naked persons appear in various contexts ranging from practical and erotic to ritual and that differences as well as similarities exist between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In both cultures, clothing was considered 'normative', nakedness was situational, and nudity restricted to specific contexts and spheres.

## I. Introduction

> *Die Nacktheit ist immer weit mehr als das "Eigentliche" der Kleiderlosigkeit.* (König 1990: 63)
>
> *Le nu sert de concept de l'homme, il l'identifie dans son essence.* (Jullien 2000: 69)

A century ago nakedness was a widely discussed theme (Gerning 2002b). Walter A. Müller (1906) contributed the first study of nakedness in the ancient cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the eastern Mediterranean. Like many scholars at that time, Müller based his interpretations on the then predominant view: "Unter Nacktheit verstehen wir das Fehlen der Bekleidung, die *unsere*

* Many thanks to Gay Robins for reading and commenting on a draft version of this article, to Barbara Lüscher and Stefan Wimmer for bibliographic help, and to Ogden Goelet for allowing us to read his highly useful article in press, and his other unpublished essays on this topic. This article owes many of its ideas to the works of Oliver König (1990) and François Jullien (2000).

*Sitte* fordert" (Müller 1906: 3; our emphasis). In recent discourse on the body, nakedness has again become a central theme in cultural studies.[1]

The notion of 'nakedness' stands in opposition to clothing, an opposition imbued with sociocultural meaning. Western theories postulated that clothing evolved from a need for bodily protection, a 'sense of shame' innate in human 'nature', the attitude that the 'clothed' body is the 'natural' state in civilized society and that less restrictive attitudes towards the naked body are a sign of pre-reflective or less advanced levels of civilization.[2] Müller lists the purposes of clothing as: protection, "Schmucktrieb" (instinct of adornment), and "Schamtrieb" (instinctive sense of shame), associated with sexuality (Müller 1906: 3-7).

In his study of the interrelation of nakedness with social norms and morals, Oliver König (1990) attributes to clothing the same functions as Müller did in 1906 but in a different order: for König, the decorative/symbolic function of nakedness is the most important, in part because the contrast between nakedness and clothing is fundamental to systems of differentiation such as aesthetics, morals, and functionalism. In his view, the functionality of nakedness exists only in the framework of prevailing aesthetic and moral categories. He argues that clothing becomes a measure for the sense of shame, a prescriptive and thus moral category, and that the function of shame sets the boundary of nakedness.[3] The German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr concludes that the close interrelationship between shame and nakedness in both Western and non-Western cultures means that shame belongs to the essence of human nature (Duerr 1988-99 I: 335; cf. Jullien 2000: 57.59). Interrelation between nakedness and shame is observed across cultures,[4] including China, where the representation of naked human bodies was avoided (Jullien 2000).[5]

Shame and sexuality have remained the most discussed aspects of nakedness.[6] According to Jean-Claude Bologne (1991: 12), shame is often a result of sociological situations that evade historical analysis, but there is

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1 Within the context of this article only some of the recent seminal works on nakedness can be mentioned. For comprehensive treatment, cf. Duerr 1988-99 I; König 1990; Bologne 2001; Gernig (ed.) 2002c.

2 König 1990: 43-45.49-52.169-173; Bologne 2001: 369-416; Duelke 2002; Köpping 2002: 143-147; Gernig 2002b: 80-85.

3 König 1990, esp. chapter 2 ("Die Logik der Abgrenzung").

4 Cf. Duerr 1988-1999. Duerr rejects Norbert Elias' theory (1939) of civilizational process and progress arguing that historically societies always devised means to control desire and sexuality through restrictions; throughout his work Duerr quotes many examples of similarities between non-Western and Western attitudes concerning nakedness, shame, and related issues.

5 Jullien 2000: 57.59; for an exception in erotic illustrations in Chinese manuals of the art of love, cf. Jullien 2000: 62-66.

6 E.g. Duerr 1988-99 I; Perniola 1989; Bologne 2001; Gernig (ed.) 2002c.

some indication that some forms of shame are linked to social status.[7] It is not clear how far nakedness was associated with shame in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, as there are very few references to this issue. An interesting example appears in a literary text from the period of Roman rule in Egypt, the story of Setna Khaemuas and the Mummies (Simpson & al. 2003: 435-469). In this tale, Prince Setna steals a magical text from a tomb and is punished for his presumption by a hair-raising encounter with a fiendish seductress. Fortunately his misadventure turns out to be an evil dream, but Setna wakes to find himself lying naked in the road just as Pharaoh is driving by in his chariot. Setna wants to stand up before the king out of respect, but he is too ashamed to do so because he is naked. It is not clear, however, whether this incident also has connotations of sexual shame. Arguably, because this text is very late, contemporary attitudes to nudity and shame may also have been at work. However, it is certainly likely that nakedness could be linked to other forms of shame, when it was forced upon somebody else to humiliate them – for instance, stripping offenders naked for a beating (Beaux 1991: 53; Goelet 1993: 20) (**fig.** E1).

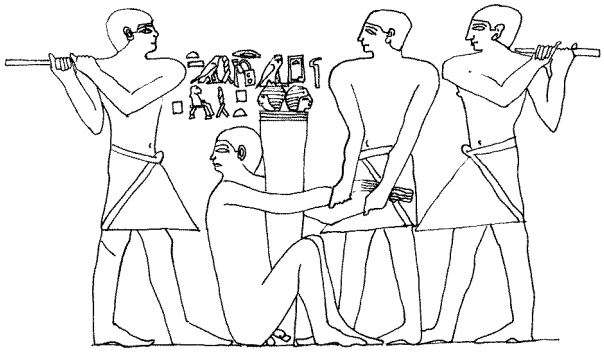

**fig.** E1 Tomb relief from Saqqara [Duell 1938: pl. 37]

As nakedness also signifies humiliation and deprivation, the uncovered body could be a 'shameful' state. Feelings of shame, interrelating with other factors, are present in various forms in most cultures (Duerr 1988-99 I; Bologne 2001). However, the association of nakedness, sexuality, and

7 König (1990: 30-31) argues that shame developed out of the decorative function of clothing, and that attitudes toward nakedness differ among social classes. Nakedness can be restricted, but is never totally absent; even medieval views were ambivalent and allowed nakedness a place in art (cf. Duerr 1988-99 I; Perniola 1989; Williams 1989; König 1990: 43-45; Bologne 2001).

shame with sin is a Judeo-Christian peculiarity.[8] Jean-Claude Bologne (2001: 173) assumes that the "Jewish feeling of shame" (i.e. the connection between flesh and sin) originated in Mesopotamian cultures. However, this teleological statement cannot be confirmed, as the Akkadian word for "shame" (*ba'ašu*, CAD B: 5-6) is not associated with sin or nakedness. However there may be a link between shame and nakedness, as *ba'ašu* derives from the word for "dignity", *baštu* (CAD B: 144), and having dignity can include wearing clothes, whereas having no dignity means being "shameless" (*bajašu*, CAD B: 34), which may perhaps also refer to being involuntarily without or stripped of clothes.

Nakedness' pre-eminent association with visual perception means that its provocation lies not only in its symbolism alone, but also in its trespassing of boundaries. This is acutely evident in contemporary debates about what is acceptable in public space, in the media, or on stage.[9]

The Chinese traditionally avoided representation of the nude body in art. The French philosopher and sinologist François Jullien examines why the Chinese consider representation of "le nu"[10] "impossible", as well as those conditions that make it "possible" in other cultures, and determines that the answer lies in different concepts of the human body and perceptual conventions (Jullien 2000). Chinese perception of the body derives from a concept of nature where all "things" – humans, animals, plants, rocks, etc. – co-originate and are creations of energies, as well as full of them; thus the Chinese focus not on anatomy, but on the quality of processes exchanged between the 'external' and the 'internal' that assures the body's entire vitality. Because the body is considered a "container" of energies with holes as receptacles, it may be depicted unclothed looking like a "sack" (Jullien 2000: 71-78).[11]

Anthony Tatlow has summarized the characteristics of Chinese art as always open and in movement, neither confined within a frame, nor mimetic-representational (Tatlow 1994: 106). According to Jullien, Chinese art is concerned with "formation" rather than form (morphology), renders "trans-formations" of conditions by reproducing process, and is marked by "prégnance", defined as "la capacité d'une immanence". Jullien concludes that Chinese did not represent "le nu" because they did not

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8 On this issue, cf. Duerr 1988-99 I; Perniola 1989; Williams 1989.

9 Much of the nudity exhibited in public and accepted by most young and middle-aged Western Europeans evokes indignation from older people, or is considered unacceptable by large groups in the USA as well as in other parts of the world. In this context it is of interest that Jullien ascribes to "the naked" a specific "presence", the "geste de rapture", and the "capacité de surgissement" (he also used the term "effraction"; Jullien 2000: 98.144.150).

10 In French "le nu" means "the naked" as well as "the nude".

11 In Chinese art humans could not be depicted frontally: "il faut le saisir sur le vif, non pas le contempler de face, mais l'épier de côte" (Jullien 2000: 95).

conceive of a plan of essences or imagine "incarnations of essences", such as mythological figures – they did not know the idea of an "essence" of the human, from which "le nu tire son auto-consistence" (Jullien 2000: 71.82.97.151).

The Chinese view contrasts fundamentally with the "representationalism" of ancient Greek and European art dominated by the concept of "form", and the paradigm that "being is form". According to Jullien, the nude female musicians in the wall-painting of the tomb of Nakht in Luxor can be considered "l'exigeante modélisation du nu", and he asks "nul besoin d'attendre la Grèce pour voir surgir le nu?" (Jullien 2000: 65). His reference to ancient art led us to inquire into the concepts that made the naked "possible" in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art and to investigate whether they relate to those discussed by Jullien. In sum: "le nu" cannot be equated with nature, because if clothing separates humans from animals, nudity enhances and emphasizes this contrast, evoking a double remove from nature since nudity, even more than clothing, incarnates the breach with nature. Further, "the nude" does not represent a particular person, but is a form identifying human essence – similar to the Greek statement that "form is essence" – and can only exist as "pure representation". Nudity is also a form of detachment, with the capacity of breach, that imposes itself through its "présence" (Jullien 2000: passim).

According to König (1990: 27-59), in societies where the clothed body is considered socially 'natural', nakedness constitutes its opposite as the second element in this system of binary classification and valuation. But nakedness assumes a marginal position that has its origin in the multiple possibilities clothing provides for the symbolic representation of social differentiation; simultaneously, however, nakedness is also conducive to the same social differentiation as clothing. Although König is less interested than Jullien in the philosophical aspects and artistic representation of the naked and more in its social implications, like Jullien he also associates nakedness with essence when he states that "die (nackte) 'Haut' des Menschen wird zum Symbol der Distanzierungsleistung, die jedem menschlichen Leben zugrunde liegt," and that distance is the "Grundvoraussetzung menschlicher Existenz" (König 1990: 27-28).

The discourse on the unclothed body in art encompasses controversial statements about the differentiation between nakedness and nudity. According to Kenneth Clark (1960: 1-7) "nakedness" is material reality whereas "nudity" transcends that physical state and is a form of cultural disguise, an "artistic nakedness". John Berger (1972: 54) has argued, in his re-evaluation of Clark's definitions, "To be naked is to be oneself," and "to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display."

Lynda Neal rejects any differentiation between nakedness and nudity because its connection to such binary oppositions as culture/nature, reason/passion, form/matter, subject/object, and art/obscenity is a relic of Western philosophical thought and patriarchal structures. According to Neal, "There can be no naked 'other' to the nude, for the body is always already in representation" (Neal 1992: 12-22, esp. 14.16). However, as we will show, although gender is treated differently in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, different forms of covering and exposing the body do not always relate to gender difference; the meaning of nakedness also depends on different contexts. In art, nudity is more often associated with images of naked women than naked men, but in the history of iconography "nudity" is not a purely female attribute.[12] Situational aspects, as well as associative and connotative contexts, define the meaning of the unclothed body. Kerstin Gernig argues that "nudity" is a form of "robe", recognizable and decipherable in the attributes transforming nakedness into nudity, while nakedness is the absence of such attributes.[13] To Jullien, "le nu" in art is a codified form, a mimetic image in the sense of imitation and representation, as well as a metaphoric process of transformation, and it is mimesis that produces the object (Jullien 2000: 119).

The frequent occurrence of images of naked humans in Mesopotamian art has been interpreted differently, primarily in connection with moral attitudes, but without any discussion concerning the conceptual conditions (such as the Chinese notion of "impossibility" mentioned above) underlying the representation of unclothed human bodies. Zainab Bahrani, for instance, sees the number of nudes in imagery as evidence that, contrary to Christian and Islamic attitudes, "the ancient Near Eastern attitude toward nudity was not one of prudery and fastidiousness", and that the ancients were never "ashamed of the undressed body" (Bahrani 1993: 12.17); nevertheless "Mesopotamia was not a liberal society of free sex" (Bahrani 2002: 57). Ursula Seidl (1998) and Julian Reade (2002), basing their interpretation on chronological criteria, conclude that attitudes towards nakedness changed from less to more restrictive; in Reade's opinion, in the Early Dynastic period, and according to Seidl, in the Old Babylonian period.[14]

Similarly, Egyptologists occasionally argue that, because the Egyptians sometimes went naked in certain contexts (see "Practical Nudity" below), they had grown used to seeing people unclothed and it made no especial

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12 Clark 1960; Neal 1992; Gernig 2002b: 77.

13 Gernig 2002a: 9-10. For the German distinction between 'Nacktheit' and 'Akt', cf. König 1990: 101-114; Reichel 2002.

14 According to Reade (2002: 561) three different attitudes relate to gender and sexuality depending on chronological ('early' and 'late'), geographical ('southern' and 'northern'), and social ('popular' and 'elite') criteria.

impact upon them. For example, Rosalind Janssen suggests, "the Egyptians were so accustomed to seeing naked or semi-naked persons of both sexes around that the sight of the nude human body for them had clearly lost any sense of mysterious allure" (1995-96: 41-42). We would argue, however, that nakedness and nudity are highly context-bound; what may have been a matter of course for workmen or for young children at home could have been unthinkable for members of the elite.

If interpretation of European views would be based on the number of images of naked figures in art, one could come to similar conclusions as Bahrani, Janssen, Reade, or Seidl. The number of naked bodies in pictorial representation is, however, a poor and misleading criterion for gauging a society's general attitude towards nakedness and shame, or for elucidating their moral codes. Images of naked bodies should not a priori be considered as evidence of an 'uncomplicated' or open attitude towards the naked body, eroticism, and sexuality,[15] or as lack of a sense of shame, but rather as conscious choices determined by concepts about the body.

## II. Sources and definitions

A major problem in interpreting the meaning of nakedness in the ancient world is the lack of written material (Biggs 1998: 64).[16] Although images of naked humans have recently received much attention, focusing primarily on typology, function, and identification, in particular in the case of the nude female (Moorey 2003: 30), it is rarely asked why the human body is represented without clothes, and what were the conditions that made nakedness possible in art but largely avoided in texts. We can assume that the naked was so common or 'normal' that it was not considered worthwhile mentioning in texts, or that it was confined to spheres generally not discussed in texts.

In cuneiform texts the word "naked" – in Sumerian (bar-šà-) sù(g), in Akkadian *erû* – is primarily used in connection with poverty, need, or the degradation of enemies (CAD E: 320; Biggs 1998). Stripping someone of their clothes was also used to degrade them (Waetzoldt 1980-83: 24); it could also happen to a wife who wanted to divorce or leave her husband for another (CAD E: 320). In such instances, to be stripped of clothes must have been "shameful".

The Egyptian term for nakedness is *ḥꜣwt*, derived from the word *ḥꜣj*, to be naked (Hannig 1995: 503). In Egypt, nakedness might also be associated with deprivation. Clothing the naked, like feeding the hungry, was one of the

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15 In spite of the Chinese avoidance of the naked in art, there are numerous erotic handbooks with illustrations of naked figures; cf. Jullien 2000: 62-66.

16 This contrasts with the plethora of texts concerned with clothing, cf. Waetzoldt 1980-83.

good deeds on which the Egyptians regularly prided themselves (Goelet 1993:20; Lichtheim 1988: 16-17; 1992: 14).

A Sumerian poem and the Gilgamesh Epic also mention negative associations of nakedness. The poem describes people of the distant past as ignorant of bread to eat or clothes to wear, and as going about naked, which is a metaphor for being uncivilized (Asher-Greve 1997: 444). Similarly, when Enkidu is first described in the Gilgamesh Epic, he is wild like an animal and naked; in the process of becoming civilized Enkidu is given clothes (Harris 1990: 224; Asher-Greve 2002: 14-15). In the myth of Inanna's descent to the Netherworld, being stripped naked is connected to loss of power (Katz 1985; Dalley 1989: 154-162); as Dina Katz (1985) has pointed out, the dead are usually not naked, and Inanna puts on garments that should empower her to take the rule of the Netherworld away from her sister Ereshkigal. However, Ereshkigal counters by having Inanna stripped of all clothes and attributes at the gates before she can enter the Netherworld, thus rendering her powerless.[17] The erotic aspect of nudity is a topic in the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal (see below).

Goelet (1993) uses the terms nudity and nakedness interchangeably for ancient Egypt: he speaks, for instance, of deprivation in terms of nudity rather than nakedness (1993: 20), and divides the topic partly by the identity of the naked (gods and kings, children), partly by the function of nakedness and nudity in a possible real-life context (deprivation, occupational nudity, entertainment and eroticism), and partly by the message which the image relayed to the viewer (afterlife renewal, and all the above categories). On the other hand, he stresses that the naked or nude female bodies depicted for entertainment and eroticism are definitely on display, a view also held by Peter Behrens.

Behrens, however, defines nakedness as the deprivation of status conveyed by clothing (1982). As such, nakedness identifies those who are humiliated (prisoners) or are not yet full members of the community (children). Child gods are also portrayed naked, and thus, as a secondary development, the Egyptians also associated nakedness with rejuvenation and rebirth. Nakedness could also be functional (stripping off for work or sex), and was sometimes part of the original iconography of imported deities.

However, although Egyptologists seldom differentiate between the terms nakedness and nudity, there is definitely an awareness that women's bodies were represented in a more sexualized way than those

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[17] According to Waetzoldt (1980-83: 18) clothes are "das zweite Ich des Trägers, dessen Macht auf seine Kleidung übergeht", and "Das Anlegen bestimmter Gewänder bewirkt einen Wechsel der Persönlichkeit im staatlichen religiösen und rechtlichen Bereich".

of men, and that women's bodies were more overtly displayed to be looked upon than those of men.

Two scholars have proposed classifications for images of unclothed bodies in ancient Mesopotamian art: Seidl (1998) differentiates three categories of nakedness with different connotations for men, women, and children: "natürliche", "ideelle", and "funktionale" nakedness. Seidl has argued that the nakedness of dancers, acrobats, wrestlers, battling gods, infants, and children is "natural"; that "ideelle" nakedness characterizes "Wesen" and statues of naked heroes, cultic officiants, nude men, or the bow-legged dwarf, but that the "basic idea" is rarely decipherable; in the category of functional nakedness Seidl places images of the "sacred marriage". Bahrani (1993) bases her five categories of nudity – fertility, eroticism, religious, heroes and gods, death and defeat – on semiotics and concludes that nudity was used symbolically as well as realistically.[18]

Such categories did not work for our cross-cultural approach. In seeking a better approach and trying to challenge the conventional assumption that both the unclothed body and its representation in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art were widely encountered, we focus on two issues: the relationship between gender and unclothing, and the concepts making the naked 'possible' in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art.[19] Although the differentiation between naked and nude in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art is controversial (Behrens 1982; Bahrani 1993: 17 n.1; Goelet 1993; Biggs 1998; Seidl 1998; Bahrani 2001: 42), we have based our definitions of different 'representation' of the unclothed body on the contexts in which they appear, mainly in third- and second-millennium Egyptian and Mesopotamian art:

- 'naked' refers to unclothed bodies depicted in circumstances where nakedness reflects actual practice and is not intended as a 'transcendent' form.
- 'nude' refers to those depictions which are intended as symbolic 'transcendent forms'.

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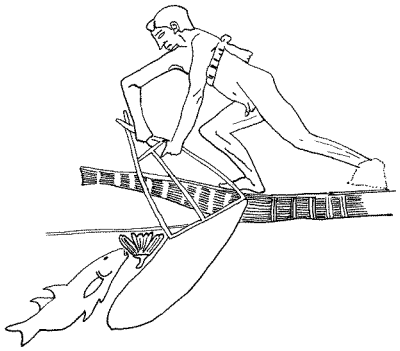
18 Bahrani later modified and revised some of her earlier positions (2001; 2002).

19 This does not imply we agree with Bahrani's theory that the undressed body is a main area of gender differentiation (2001: 44). Our interrogation is concerned with the socio-cultural gender construct as also manifest in visual representation of the naked. Because the clothed body predominates in visual art and because nakedness is not a topic in the literature of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, we assume that the unclothed body is not a main but a marginal form in the representation of gender difference; for the "marginal position" of nakedness, cf. König 1990: 29-30.

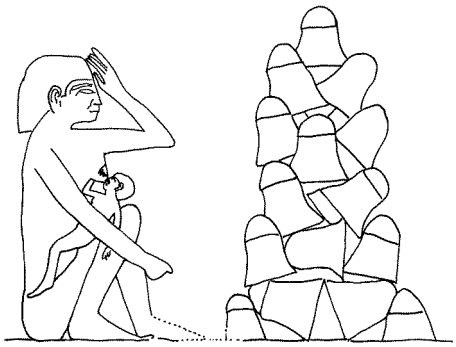
## III. Functional and practical nakedness: 'naked' men and women

According to König (1990: 31) "Funktionalität der Nacktheit gibt es nur im Rahmen der herrschenden ästhetischen und moralischen Kategorien", and nakedness is only 'functional' when it does not serve lewdness.

In Egypt, somewhat after the middle of the third millennium, both men and women are sometimes represented having stripped off their clothing for work,[20] for instance, in the case of men working in boats or in the water (**fig.** E2; Harpur 1987: pl. 10.12.19.21-22; fig. 103.111-115.117.128.144. 180.191.194.208), and women tending an oven (**fig.** E3) or performing strenuous work such as grinding flour are depicted bare to the waist.[21]



(**fig.** E2)



(**fig.** E3)

**fig.** E2 Relief from the tomb of Kagemni at Saqqara [Harpur 1987: pl. 22]
**fig.** E3 Tomb relief from the tomb of Nianchum and Chnumhotep at Saqqara [Robins 1993a: 78]

Although this nudity may have had a practical function, its representation also serves to differentiate between the elite and their servants. When travelling by boat, elite men always wear a short kilt (cf. Robins 1993a: 186). Similarly, in Mesopotamia in the Uruk period (around 3500-3000 BCE) male workers and servants are depicted naked whereas the highest-ranking men wear skirts (e.g. Amiet 1980; Boehmer 1999; Orthmann 1975: pl. 69.125-126).

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20 However, as Goelet (1993: 21) points out, in the same or similar contexts workers are also shown clothed, so nakedness was not obligatory.

21 Female field-workers are sometimes shown stripped to the waist in the 14th century BCE (e.g. TT 52 Lhote 1954: pl. 75; TT 57 Wreszinski 1923: 192; unidentified fragment in Mekhitarian 1994: pl. xxiv). This may reflect a differentiation between various non-elite groups, such as field-workers, as opposed to house servants (Gay Robins, personal communication; we thank her also for the references).

Bahrani (1993) and Seidl (1998) categorize the nakedness of working men in the late Uruk period as either real or functional, whereas Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck (2000) classify them as a third gender category of "genderless" workers at the bottom of society (**fig.** M1).

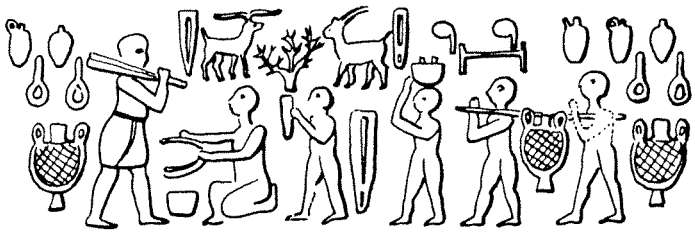

**fig.** M1 Seal impression from Uruk [Amiet 1980: No. 1609]

As in Egypt, some men probably worked naked for practical reasons, as depicted on Old Babylonian terracotta plaques (Barrelet 1968: pl. 81 nos. 778-779). However, there is no evidence that working men generally went naked, and from the Uruk period onwards, cloth and wool were distributed to workers as part of their rations (Englund 1998: 151.179; Waetzoldt 1980-83: 24-25). Nakedness, rather than being a sign of the 'genderless' mass at the bottom of the social hierarchy, contrasts with clothed men and women, thus indicating status differences among men as well as gender difference. Skirts distinguish some high-ranking men from all unclothed men, and, judging from their diverse activities, those without clothes represent social groups (in the plural!) ranking below the small elite. Women are generally depicted clothed (**fig.** M1 and M2).[22]

**fig.** M2 Seal impression from Uruk [Asher-Greve 1985: pl. 4 no. 20]

One should not read too much into the depiction of unclothed men on Uruk seals because the outline of the naked human body is the conventionalized form representing humans, often contrasted with animals at earlier

22 For more illustrations, cf. Amiet 1980; Aruz 2003: fig. 9; Boehmer 1999.

periods.[23] That nakedness is used as a visual code for "male human" is also evident in some depictions of the Etana legend (Black & Green 1992: 78; Boehmer 1965: pl. 58-59).[24]

From the third millennium (Early Dynastic period) to the middle of the second millennium, female and male musicians were depicted clothed as well as naked, indicating rank differences; some have erotic connotations (Blocher 1992b; U. Winter 1983: fig. 260, 261).[25] Dancers, wrestlers, and other entertainers are mostly naked, but may also be clothed; they often appear in ritual contexts.[26] The nakedness of dancers may have had practical reasons, since clothes can hinder movement. In mid-third- and early second-millennium Egypt, female dancers are sometimes depicted stripped to the waist (Decker & Herb 1994: pl. cdx-cdxxvii), and, for a short period in the second half of the second millennium only, female musicians, acrobats (**fig.** E4), and dancers (Decker & Herb 1994: pl. cdxxx-cdxxi) were depicted naked. There is certainly a status difference, since no elite woman would be represented in this way, but the musicians and later dancers are also represented as sexually alluring (e.g. Derriks 2001: 67).

**fig.** E4 Acrobat on ostracon Turin, Museo egizio inv. Suppl. 7052 [Minault-Gout 2002: 47]

23 In her forthcoming article "Naked Reality?", Asher-Greve will discuss male nakedness and social stratification in the late Uruk period (to be published in a special volume of NIN on "Masculinities").

24 See also the image on an Old Babylonian seal showing an inverted naked man between a clothed demon and a god (Black & Green 1992: 67).

25 For high-ranking singers/musicians wearing clothes, see the statue of the 'great singer' Urnanshe (Orthmann 1975: fig. 24) and terracotta plaques depicting a man with a 'royal' cap (Barrelet 1968: pl. 75 nos. 775-776).

26 Cf. Blocher 1992b; Reade 2002 (the unique image of a nude hermaphrodite, fig. 3, probably had a sensational and voyeuristic aspect). For illustrations, cf. Aruz 2003, passim; Canby 2002: pl. 15c, 16a; Orthmann 1975: passim.

In Mesopotamia, dead enemies and prisoners of war are depicted naked from the late Uruk period onwards. In the Uruk period all 'soldiers' were depicted naked,[27] but beginning in the Early Dynastic period, only enemies are rendered naked, emphasizing their humiliating situation, as for instance on the Stele of Vultures and various other Akkadian steles (**fig.** M3 and M4).[28]

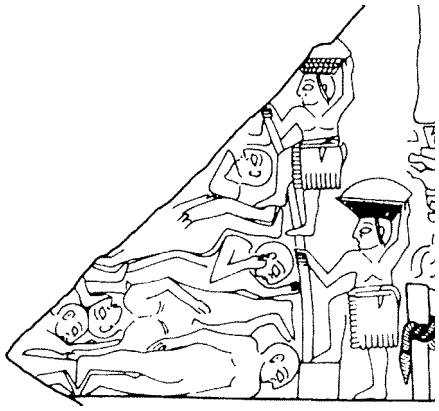

**fig.** M3 Detail of the Stele of Vultures from Tello [I. J. Winter 1985: Fig. 8]

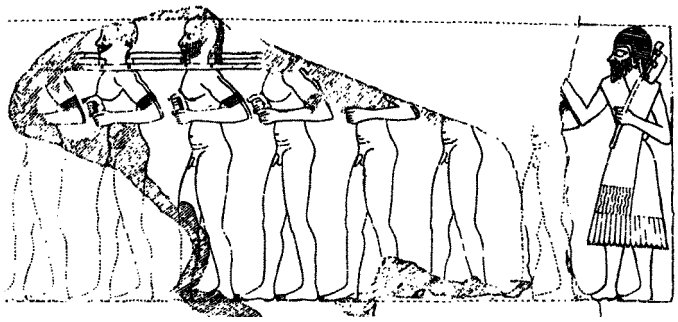

**fig.** M4 Detail from Akkadian stele [Amiet 1976: Fig. 19]

In Egypt, the damned and the enemies of the gods in the afterworld may be represented naked as they are beheaded and tortured (**fig.** E5; Hornung 1968: 18, pl. IIIb). Prisoners of war and the dead on the battlefield are depicted naked (and even castrated; Davies and Freedman 2002) at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third millennia BCE (Spencer 1993:

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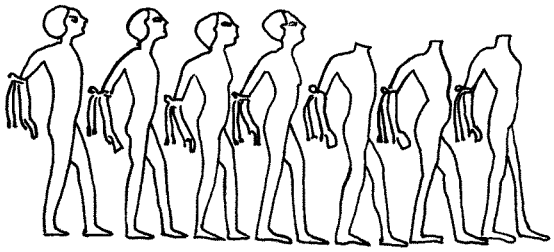
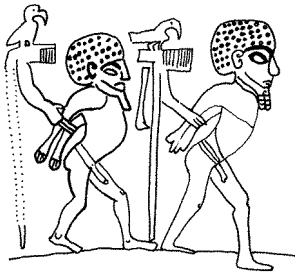
27 Boehmer 1999: 23-24 fig. 16-19; 76 fig. 64-65; 130 fig. 192b; 141 fig. 122.

28 Amiet 1976: 75.90-91; Aruz 2003: passim; Porada 1980; I. J. Winter 1985; for illustrations, cf. Orthmann 1975: passim.

52.54.68; **fig.** E6). Ogden Goelet (1993: 20) argues that at all periods captives may have been paraded naked to humiliate them. In contexts of royal triumph they may be depicted as being humiliated in other ways, such as being bound in painful positions (Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago 1970: pl. 627), a motif that is also known in Mesopotamian art (Orthmann 1975: fig. 98).



(**fig.** E5)



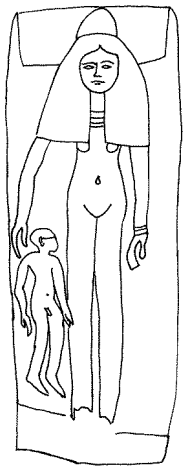
(**fig.** E6)

**fig.** E5 Naked enemies of sun god [Hornung 1968: 18]
**fig.** E6 The 'Battlefield Palette' [Spencer 1993: 54]

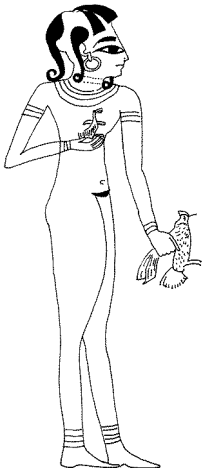
Another association between nakedness and deprivation appears in the images of women mourners in Egypt, who were represented with bared breasts, throwing dust over their hair to signify their loss and grief (Werbrouck 1938; **fig.** E7). Even well-to-do women, who otherwise would never appear undressed in this way, may be shown with bared breasts as they mourn their husbands (de Garis Davies 1925: pl. xxi).

**fig.** E7 Wall painting from the tomb of Ramose at Thebes [Werbroeuck 1938, pl. xii]

Depicting young children naked is common in many cultures (König 1990: 34-35). In Mesopotamia naked children sitting on the lap of their (clothed or occasionally naked) mother or a goddess appear occasionally on Akkadian seals; it was also a relatively popular motif for Old Babylonian terracotta plaques and statuettes. Plaques, figurines and drawings on ostraca depicting mothers and children are known from Egypt, especially from the New Kingdom (**fig.** E8).[29] Considering the dangers surrounding infants and the high mortality rate, such images may have been a form of visual incantation, i.e. magic images with a protective aspect. On Assyrian palace reliefs the nakedness of children is an indication of their age and they only appear among the conquered peoples (Albenda 1987: 19).[30] In Egyptian art, pre-pubescent children are often represented naked (**fig.** E9). Although children may have gone naked some of the time, it is clear that this was not always the case: children are also depicted clothed (**fig.** E10), and child-sized clothing has been found in excavations (Kühne 1978: fig. 7; Janssen & Janssen 1990: 32-37). To some extent, therefore, children's nakedness was an iconic convention, differentiating between children and adults. It is not clear what social conventions governed children's nakedness.



(**fig.** E8)



(**fig.** E9)

(**fig.** E10)

**fig.** E8 Mother and child plaque [Robins 1993a: 57]
**fig.** E9 Wall painting from the tomb of Inherkhau at Deir el-Medîna [Robins 1993a: 144]
**fig.** E10 Figure from stela Turin Museum 50085 from Deir el-Medîna [Tosi & Rocatti 1972: 299]

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29 Boehmer 1965: pl. 47; Kühne 1978; Vandier d'Abbadie 1937: pl. l; lii; liii; Brunner-Traut 1956: pl. xxv; Vandier d'Abbadie 1959: pl. cxx; Janssen & Janssen 1990: 8.16; Pinch 1993: 207.209.

30 For children on Assyrian reliefs see Schwyn in this volume.

## IV. The nudity of deities

Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature describe the bodies of deities as shining with brilliance, inspiring awe and fear, as well as in the form of strong, wild, impressive animals. Although it is difficult to equate these descriptions with visual forms, nudity must have been usually considered an inappropriate form in the representation of deities, as most are depicted clothed.

As the garments and attributes of Mesopotamian deities were vested with power (Waetzoldt 1980-83), their loss, as with Inanna/Ishtar, resulted in loss of all – including erotic – power (Katz 1985; Pientka 2002: 508), and one can therefore conclude that nakedness was not intrinsically erotic.

Of the relatively few depictions of nude goddesses in Mesopotamian art, the largest group is the winged goddesses on Old Babylonian terracotta plaques (around 2000-1700 BCE). Many are rather fragmentary, but well-preserved plaques were found in the scribal quarter at Nippur, at Kish, at Babylon, and at Nuzi (Barrelet 1952).[31] This type of goddess is also depicted on a much larger unprovenanced terracotta relief,[32] known as the 'Burney relief' (**fig.** M5; Osten-Sacken 2002). A similar goddess is engraved on a vase found in a grave at Larsa; in addition, four smaller plaques with her image are glued onto this vase, which is also decorated with a row of four birds below the rim, two fish, a bull, and a turtle (**fig.** M6).

Since the publication of the piece in 1936, the identity of the goddess on the Burney relief has been controversial. Scholars have identified her as Lilith, Ishtar, exhibitionist Ishtar, and Ishtar as Kilili (patron goddess of prostitutes) or Ereshkigal (Osten-Sacken 2002). Reade considers this type of goddess "the classic exhibitionist", and exhibitionism a "prime characteristic of Ishtar" and "hugely important, because female fecundity has a continuous immediate effect on everyday life" (Reade 2002: 557-558.561). However, Assante (2003) has shown that such interpretations must be reviewed as they derive from a tradition of scholarly reiteration of untenable theory.

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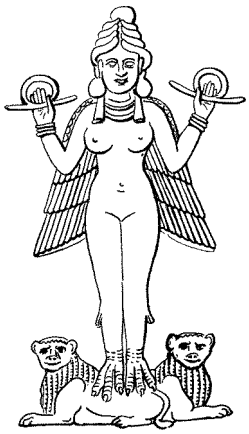
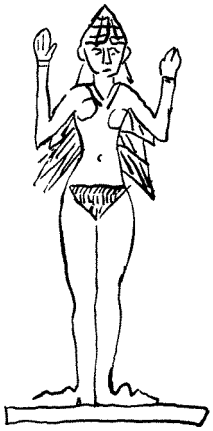
31 Although Wiggermann 1998; Uehlinger 1998; Assante 2002b: 14 discuss nude females lacking the divine attribute of horned crowns in the context of goddesses or supranatural beings (cf. Moorey 2003), Bahrani's rejection of such interpretations is more plausible (2001: 48-51). For more examples of nude goddesses, cf. Opificius 1961: 71-74; Wiggermann 1998: 51; McCown & al. 1967: pl. 134 nos. 6-8; Woolley and Mallowan 1976: pl. 81 nos. 153-155.158; cf. Wiggermann 1993-97.

32 The plaque measures about 50 x 40 cm. Terracotta figurines and plaques are usually miniature and fit well into the palm of a hand (Moorey 2003: 2.25); where full measurements of plaques depicting goddesses are indicated, they vary between 10 and 13 centimetres in height.



(**fig.** M5)



(**fig.** M6)

**fig.** M5 Detail from the 'Burney relief' [Barrelet 1952: Fig. 9]
**fig.** M6 Detail of vase from Larsa [Barrelet 1952: Fig. 8]

There are several differences in representations of the feet and attributes of winged goddesses,[33] but only the Burney goddess holds a ring and staff. All goddesses are shown in frontal view, except for the upper part of the goddess' body on the Nippur plaque (**fig.** M7).

**fig.** M7 Terracotta plaque from Nippur [Barrelet 1952: Fig. 4]

[33] On the excavated plaques human feet (or wavy lines) turn outward like ballet dancers; the ones with large claws and those standing on ibexes or lions are unprovenanced; cf. Barrelet 1952 (fig. 6 is not from Ur; cf. Reade 2002: fig. 8). For illustrations, cf. Orthmann 1975: pl. XIV; Parrot 1970: 300, fig. 367.

She is depicted in profile with arms raised in a gesture reminiscent of Lamma (**fig.** M8: second figure from left), the protective goddess often shown escorting kings and others in presentation scenes (Spycket 1980-83).

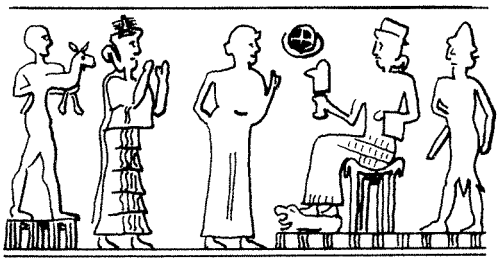


**fig.** M8 Old Babylonian seal impression [Blocher 1992a: Abb. 64 no. 29]

Many protective deities – also referred to in the plural as Lammas – are mentioned in texts, but the goddess Lamma is the only one we can identify with certainty in the visual repertoire; however, she is always fully clothed (Foxvog & al. 1980-83; Spycket 1980-83). However, two year-names, the twenty-ninth year of Ammiditana and the ninth year of Samsuditana, are named after images of "naked Lamma-deities", which is written in Sumerian with the gender neutral plural (dingir-dingir). In Ammiditana's year-name these statues are described in more detail than in Samsuditana's: "Year in which Ammiditana, the king, made and adorned with reddish gold and precious stones powerful naked protective deities who pray for his life and brought the Lammas to Inanna the great Lady of Kish who raises the head of her king."[34]

According to descriptions in texts, Lammas can be of both genders and different types, such as dancing Lammas, or Lammas holding a staff and ring, or Lammas standing on lions. Texts also mention that Lammas were made of precious materials, such as bronze, lapis lazuli, alabaster, and other special stones, and were considered an image of beauty "whose form nobody can match" (Foxvog & al. 1980-83). Indeed, the best of our examples show a goddess with a well-proportioned body and no emphasis on sexual attributes, apart from the pubic triangle of the goddess on the Larsa funerary vase (**fig.** M6). An Early Dynastic bronze statuette from Mari of a nude goddess with raised arms, decorated with gold and silver,[35]

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34 www: cdli.ucla.edu/dl/yearnames/HTML, 7.9.05.

35 The statuette was found among the hundred objects (including two statuettes of nude females) of the so-called treasure of Ur, in a vase buried underneath the floor of a court near a 'palace temple', perhaps hidden from an approaching enemy and never recovered (Parrot 1968: 11-12.15-22; Cholidis 2003: 139-140).

may also represent a nude Lamma, as described centuries later in Ammiditana's year-name (Parrot 1968: pl. 4-6; Cholidis 2003: 142, fig. 82).

Images of nude gods are even rarer than those of nude goddesses, and are very different in character (**fig.** M9 and M10).[36] Most numerous are the scenes of theomachy and the slaughter of gods on Akkadian seals (around 2350-2200 BCE), reminiscent of passages in the Epic of Creation (Boehmer 1957-71; Dalley 1989: 228-277). In the 'battle of gods'-scenes all the gods may be either clothed or naked, or some may be clothed while others are naked (Boehmer 1965: pl. 25-29). When all are naked, posture may indicate who is about to be killed (**fig.** M9).

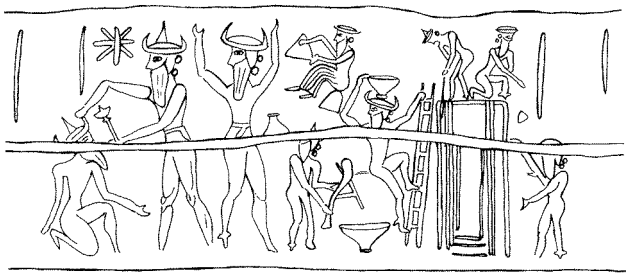

**fig.** M9 Akkadian cylinder seal [Suter 2000: 182 Fig. 20]

In other scenes gods in full regalia are about to kill unclothed gods, whose naked bodies signal loss of power and imminent elimination (**fig.** M10). Depicting the killing of gods or dead gods is unusual because deities usually were considered immortal, in contrast to ephemeral humans.

**fig.** M10 Detail from Akkadian cylinder seal [Black & Green 1992: Fig. 50]

[36] Assante 2002b: 12 suggests that "plaque artists avoided male deities."

Nude gods are represented quite differently from nude goddesses: while the nude Lammas' sexual attributes are clearly visible,[37] the bodies of nude gods are de-sexualized, that is, represented without genitals. Gods are shown in full violent action, moving their arms and legs, some even bending their bodies; goddesses are represented nearly motionless and only move their arms. Another difference concerns frontal versus profile view: frontality not only emphasizes the nude goddess' sexual attributes, but is also more immediate and direct, engaging the goddess with the spectator and vice versa, whereas the figures shown in profile are more remote.[38] The frontally-depicted nude goddesses possess what Jullien describes as "imposing présence".

Egyptian deities are normally represented clothed. By and large, formal art in contexts such as temples and tombs was subject to decorum, the "set of rules and practices" which John Baines has described as "defining what may be represented pictorially with captions, displayed, and possibly written down, in which context and in what form" (Baines 1990: 20). Decorum generally excluded representations of nakedness except in special cases.[39] Male gods are normally shown wearing kilts,[40] and goddesses are generally portrayed wearing tight dresses, like those of Egyptian women in third-millennium art.

As in Mesopotamia, certain apotropaic deities are depicted naked in Egypt.[41] Quite exceptionally in Egyptian art, they also face the viewer, like the Mesopotamian images discussed above. For instance, the god Bes, protector of pregnant women and small babies, who wards away evil disease-bringing demons, may be represented naked (Dasen 1993: 69, pl. 3,3; 4,1). The god Horus the Child can be portrayed naked, treading down crocodiles and seizing dangerous animals unhurt. These representations from the first millennium (Steinberg-El-Hotabi 1999) fall outside the scope of this paper, though the late second-millennium prototypes, stelae of the god Horus-Shed from the late fourteenth century onwards, sometimes show the god naked (Steinberg-El-Hotabi 1999: 67; **fig.** E11).

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37 Even when a nude goddess' body is rendered in profile, her bosom is depicted frontally (Boehmer 1965: 373 pl. 32; Black & Green 1992: fig. 45).

38 On the meaning and power of frontal images, cf. Asher-Greve (forthcoming).

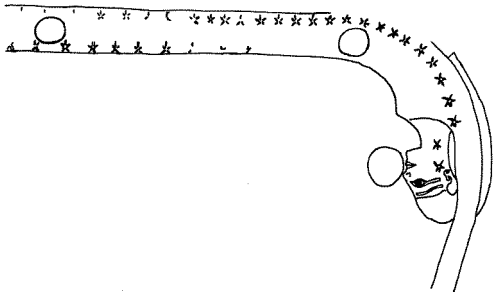
39 See however Parkinson 1999: 169-170 for examples of divine nudity from the early first millennium which contemporary Westerners would probably find somewhat alien..

40 Ithyphallic gods such as Min and Amun-Kamutef, the embodiments of male fertility (Hare 1999), are not represented naked but mummiform, apart from the very early colossi of Min from Coptos (Baqué-Manzano 2002).

41 In Mesopotamia, supernatural beings depicted nude but without horned crowns, usually with frightening faces, represent 'demons', such as Humwawa and Pazuzu; cf. Black & Green 1992; Heessel 2002; Assante 2003.

**fig.** E11 Stela Cairo General Catalogue no. 9403 [Sternberg-el-Hotabi 1999: 239]

Towards the end of the second millennium, the sky goddess Nut is shown naked on the ceilings of several of the royal tombs, as the sun makes its nightly journey through her body and is reborn again in the morning (e.g. Hornung 1990: 100-101; **fig.** E12).



(**fig.** E12)

(**fig.** E13)

**fig.** E12 Figure of Nut on the ceiling of the tomb of Ramesses VI [Hornung 1999: 122]
**fig.** E13 Ostracon BM 8506 [Robins 1993a: 71]

This nakedness might have some basis in reality. Women might have given birth naked: wall-paintings and drawings on ostraca from the village of Deir el-Medina are thought to represent the 'Wochenlaube' or birth arbour, in which women were secluded after giving birth (Brunner-Traut 1955; Pinch 1983; the actual place of giving birth is disputed) and these women are sometimes represented naked (e.g. Minault-Gout 2002: 37-40; **fig.** E13).[42]

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42 Queens and goddesses giving birth are always depicted clothed (Weindler 1915); however, since these scenes appear on temple walls, decorum may have prevented explicit representations of nudity.

However, the nakedness of child-gods can also simply be iconic, denoting their status as children. Horus the Child appears naked in contexts which are not necessarily apotropaic. In addition, the king is sometimes depicted in the form of a child or child god, evoking hopes for his regeneration and renewal (Feucht 1984).[43]

The gods' nakedness is occasionally erotic, but this eroticism is usually directed to gods, not to the human viewer (cf. Parkinson 1999: 169-170). In one text, Hathor, the goddess of love, revives her father, the god Pre-Harakhte, who has just been horribly insulted and has retired to nurse his injured ego. Hathor reveals her genitals to him and he cheers up at once (P Chester Beatty I 3.9-4.3; Broze 1996: 39-44). However, there are a few very rare cases when deities make sexual advances to human beings:[44] in one story a wild goddess emerges from the marshes and expresses her interest to a passing herdsman (Parkinson 1997: 287-288), a situation which is reminiscent of Inanna's advances to Gilgamesh. In both cases, our hero refuses the goddess' advances; in the Egyptian version, she later reappears as a naked woman and Goedicke (1970: 259) remarks hopefully "by its inner logic we can assume that the hero is now willing to accept the woman's advances and join her to mutual happiness and content", but unfortunately the remainder of the text is lost.

## V. Nude males

In second- and third-millennium Mesopotamian art nude men appear in various contexts. The three most common types are heroes in contest scenes, cultic officiants, and priests (Asher-Greve 1997).

The nude hero fights with or conquers at least one wild animal or hybrid beast (**fig.** M11 and M12), a popular motif on seals from the Uruk to the Neo-Babylonian periods (3500-539 BCE), or serves as gatekeeper.[45] Seals of this type were owned by both women and men. It has been suggested (Asher-Greve 1997) that the nude hero is the symbol of the masculine ideal described in texts, particularly in royal hymns. This ideal is based on physical power, strength, and courage, but not on sexual prowess.

As in the images of nude gods, the hero's genitals are either de-emphasized or even omitted, which epitomizes the lack of sexual connotations. The beard is an optional secondary sex attribute; in the Uruk and

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43 The king in this context is sometimes, but not invariably, depicted naked.

44 The royal birth legend relates that the chief god has intercourse with the great royal wife to beget the ruling king (Brunner 1964); the same arguments about decorum apply (Frandsen 1997: 85-86.89).

45 Cf. al-Gailani 1988; Aruz 2003: passim; Braun-Holzinger 1999; Collon 1987: 193-197; Collon 1982; 1986; Boehmer 1965; 1999.

Early Dynastic periods heroes are often beardless (**fig.** M11), whereas in later periods most are bearded (**fig.** M12). Heroes are either depicted as victorious heraldic figures (Aruz 2003: fig. 106) or fighting with lions and/or bulls; they also grasp gateposts or a 'flowing vase' while standing or kneeling (e.g. Boehmer 1965). Often our eyes are drawn to the nude hero as he 'stands out', i.e. has 'présence'.

**fig.** M11 Seal of a scribe from grave at Royal cemetary at Ur [H.J. Nissen 1988: 151 Fig. 58d]

**fig.** M12 Akkadian cylinder seal [Menant 1883: 78 Fig. 37]

The Egyptian equivalent to this figure is usually clothed: the pharaoh is the parallel Egyptian embodiment of heroic masculinity, power, and strength, but when he is depicted performing rituals, killing his enemies, and hunting wild beasts (**fig.** E14), he is always represented clothed in a kilt, as are elite men when hunting (e.g. Decker & Herb 1994).

**fig.** E14 Ostracon MMA 26.7.1453 showing Pharaoh spearing lion [Decker & Herb 1994: pl. clxxx]

Exceptions to this rule, however, are the colossi erected by Akhenaten at the temples he built in honour of the Aten in the early years of his reign at Karnak. Some of the statues represent the king naked and without genitals. Various explanations have been offered: these range from the hypothesis that the statues were intended to be clothed with a kilt (Redford 1984: 104), to deductions that the king was afflicted with some medical condition (Aldred 1968: 134-139), suggestions that the statues actually portray Nefertiti (e.g. Harris 1977; Vandersleyen 1984: 8-13), and interpretations of the statues as making a theological statement – such as differentiating between the king and ordinary mortals or equating the king with androgynous creator deities or fecundity figures (Robins 1993b: 37-38).

In Mesopotamian art, 'elite men' are generally clothed. Exceptions include the unclothed men appearing in cultic/ritual contexts from the late Uruk period onwards (**fig.** M2). They are mostly hairless and beardless,[46] carry offerings or a votive gift, and – from the Early Dynastic to the Old Babylonian periods – they are also shown pouring libations, making a suppliant gesture, or, as on the 'Urnamma' stele, doing something to a cult statue (**fig.** M13 and M14).[47]

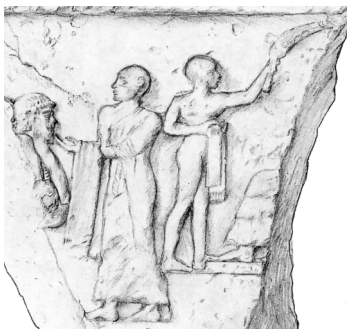

**fig.** M13 Detail of Uranmma' stele from Ur [Canby 2001: pl. 43 no. 29]

When appearing in groups, they may represent young cultic officiants in a pure, maybe even virginal state (Asher-Greve 1997: 442), perhaps a class of young priests, or young men groomed to be priests. However, representations of an unclothed man pouring a libation or bringing a sacrificial animal or votive object probably represent a priest, such as the i š i b -priest of the god Ningirsu depicted on seal impressions found at Tello (**fig.** M14). That these were high-ranking priests is also evident from Old Babylonian

46 Some Early Dynastic votive statuettes and objects depict nude men with hair and beards, e.g. Orthmann 1975: fig. 36a.39a; Braun-Holzinger 1984: nos. 35.50-53.

47 For more illustrations, cf. Orthmann 1975: passim; Blocher 1992a: 130 with figures; Collon 1986.

seals, as they sometimes stand on a dais.[48] Although never mentioned in texts, depictions of "naked" cultic officiants or priests probably reflect cultic reality. Here it is highly ambiguous whether these figures should be considered simply naked, i.e. devoid of symbolic intention, or nude.

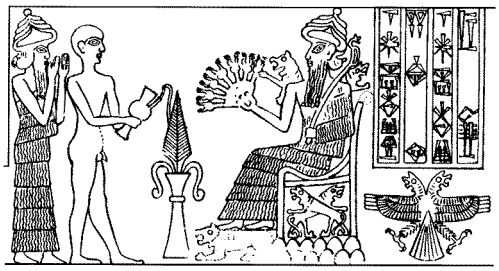

**fig.** M14 Seal of išib-priest from Tello [Suter 2000: 197 Fig. 21]

In Egypt, by contrast, cultic officiants are normally represented clothed. Nudity is rarely shown in formal temple art. Egyptologists tend to argue that nudity and representations of nudity would have been confined to informal and private religious practice or magic, such as a few figurines from the early second millennium BCE which depict a naked woman in the role of a protective lion goddess (e.g. Bourriau 1988: 110-111; **fig.** E15).

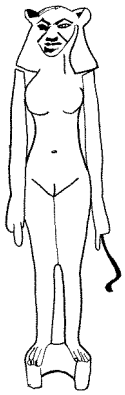

**fig.** E15 Wooden statuette from the Middle Kingdom [Bourriau 1988: 111]

Other Egyptologists argue that these lion-headed figurines represent the protective goddess herself (Dasen 1993: 70; Forman and Quirke 1996: 106). We have already seen that protective deities in Egypt might be nude.

48 Al-Gailani Werr 1988; Blocher 1992a: fig. 71.74-75; Collon 1986.

A more ambiguous representation appears on a fragment of a leather hanging found at the temple of Hathor, goddess of love, at Deir el-Bahri: given that it was found in a temple, does it have a cultic connection, or is this simply a representation of a bawdy dance, or do we see here, as Geraldine Pinch suggests, the god Bes in person (Pinch 1993: 240)?

Although members of the Egyptian elite are almost never shown entirely nude, there is an exception towards the end of the third millennium. About forty nude wooden[49] statues of men and women were found in tombs (Harvey 2001). They are of high quality, some are inscribed (Thomas 1995: 138-139; Harvey 2001: 221), and the male statues often hold staffs. They represent members of the tomb owner's family, probably the tomb owner and his wife. The purpose of these statues is unknown (Schulz 1995: 121; Russmann 2001: 75), but Egyptologists tend to interpret them as aimed at rejuvenating the tomb owners in the afterworld, allowing their rebirth into the afterlife.[50] While Gay Robins argues that the nakedness of such figures is related to the convention of representing children naked (Robins 1997: 71), Ogden Goelet suggests that the tomb owner is represented naked since one is born naked (Goelet 1993: 21-22).

## VI. Nude females

The upright, nude female is a 'pan-Mesopotamian' type, the oldest motif in ancient Near Eastern art, and has assumed the status of an icon (**fig.** M17 to M20). She represents a total contrast to the image of the nude hero.

Stone, copper, bronze, and ivory statues and figurines of nude women (or men) were exclusive items because the raw materials had to be imported. Only a few have been recovered. Nude figurines also decorated objects, such as pins, buckles, stands, or other items that were either votive gifts or luxury items belonging to the elite.[51] By far the largest groups of nude females are terracotta figurines and plaques (**fig.** M18 to M20).[52]

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49 A few stone examples exist, e.g. Seipel 1992: 106-107; Schulz 1995: 121.

50 Julia Harvey, however, argues that "the striding figure represents an active status in the afterlife in which the deceased continues to exercise the offices he enjoyed in life" (Harvey 2001: 2), following Wood (1979: 65): "Sculptors, realizing that wood could not compete with stone in durability, chose to emphasize by means of naturalistic, life-like effects the animate form that a tomb statue also required."

51 E.g. Asher-Greve 1985; Braun-Holzinger 1984; Reade 2002; for illustrations, cf. Aruz 2003: passim; Orthmann 1975: passim; Parrot 1970: passim.

52 Barrelet 1968; Assante 2002b; Pruss 2002. For recent summary of the development of female figurines, cf. Moorey 2003. The so-called 'goddess handles' are not discussed

Several theories have been proposed about the identity and meaning of nude females.[53] According to traditional theory, feminine nudity signifies either fertility (Mother Goddess theory), or a sacred or secular whore (cf. Assante 2003; Bahrani 2001: 46-55; Moorey 2003: 5-6.10). However, the new theories proposed by Assante (2002b) and Bahrani (2001; 2002) are not compatible, since Bahrani focuses on gender representation and Assante on the function of objects and images. Bahrani defines "nudity" as a "female genre" depicting the Mesopotamian idea of eternal and essential feminine allure, and suggests that female bodies were linked to notions of desire. For Assante, female nudes, like other motifs on terracotta reliefs, represent supernatural entities, whose "primary function was magical and twofold: to protect individual houses and to enhance the lives of their inhabitants". They are "images of a magical workforce that specifically laboured for the benefit of non-elite mortals", and the nude female, as well as erotic images, "might have disarmed evil by arousing sexual desire", as they were meant "to augment propitious elements while diminishing the potential for harmful presences" (Assante 2002b: 6.8.15).

As outlined in the introduction, the naked as form is essentially human[54] and it is therefore at least doubtful that the function of nude female images was exclusively limited to the realm of the supernatural and magic (Assante 2002b),[55] especially since indicative attributes are absent (Moorey 2003: 10).[56] Nudity may have a 'magic' aspect, as exposure of the bare body may symbolize 'power', in the sense that, even when naked, this being is powerful enough to be invincible. Although such intrinsic qualities cannot be verified, different types of nude female figures may have had different functions.[57]

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here (Moorey 2003: 26-27) because they are not nude, but 'abstract' images semiotically marked as 'female' (pubic triangle and breast on rectangular surfaces).

53 For the most recent general study of terracottas, cf. Moorey 2003.

54 This concept may lie behind the enigmatic image of mother/birth goddess flanked by two nude crouching human beings (Barrelet 1968: pl. 81 no. 819; Black and Green 1992: 132; cf. Braun-Holzinger 1984: pl. 39 no. 195).

55 According to Moorey (2003: 9), terracotta figurines illustrate an intimate relationship between religion and magic.

56 Although Moorey states that "magic use is not verifiable" (2003: 10), he argues that Old Babylonian plaques are linked to potency incantations (2003: 13).

57 There may have been primary and secondary use of terracottas (Moorey 2003: 7-8). Secondary use may have been in graves, where single nude female terracottas are occasionally found: a child's grave at Khafajeh contained a female figurine with outstretched arms that had been placed near the child's head. Perhaps the figurine was the child's doll (Delougaz 1967: 87 fig. 57). A burial at Ur contained a nude female with clasped hands (Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 205 [LG/117], pl. 68 no. 39). As, according to Mesopotamian belief, the ghosts (or souls) of the dead needed a temporary home, terracotta figures such as the block-like figure with eyes found in a burial at Ur

The most common type of nude female is depicted with her hands clasped at the waist (**fig.** M15); this type is represented in statues and figurines made of stone, ivory, bone, metal, and on terracotta figurines or plaques.[58]

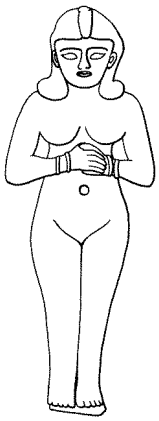
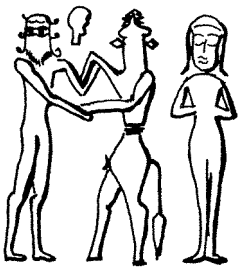
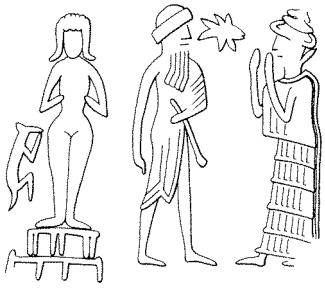


**fig.** M15 Old Babylonian bronze statuette [U. Winter 1983: Fig. 69]

Although she is not depicted on narrative reliefs, the nude female appears in seal imagery for about seventy years (1829-1750 BCE), from the reign of Apilsîn to the end of Hammurabi's reign (**fig.** M16 and M17). Like seals with nude heroes, seals depicting "frontal nude women" were owned by men as well as women (Blocher 1992a: 131; Collon 1986: 131-132 pl. 27-28).



(**fig.** M16)



(**fig.** M17)

**fig.** M16 Detail of Old Babylonian seal from Sippar [al-Gailani Werr 1988: pl. 30 no. 2/195a]
**fig.** M17 Detail of Old Babylonian cylinder seal [U. Winter 1983: Fig. 95]

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(Woolley and Mallowan 1976: 211 [LG/179], pl. 97h [U. 17661]) may occasionally have served as a temporary abode (Scurlock 2002).

58 Barrelet 1968; Braun-Holzinger 1984; Opificius 1961; Orthmann 1975; Reade 2002.

In his study of the Old Babylonian nude woman, Felix Blocher has argued that on seals the nude female represents a symbol of Ishtar (**fig.** M16 and M17), but not Ishtar herself (Blocher 1987: 231-232). Around the same time, Frans Wiggermann has suggested that this female figure represents a personification of *baštu*, meaning "Dignity", a 'spirit' often mentioned together with the *udug* and *lamma* 'spirits'. Wiggermann interprets the so-called 'king with mace' (**fig.** M17: middle figure) as an *udug*, a supernatural being (Wiggermann 1985-86: 23-29; cf. Collon 1986: 36; Blocher 1992a: 126-128). If the nude female represents "Dignity" she would be the oldest example of an allegorical female figure. Admittedly, Assyriologists love to find 'oldests' and 'firsts' (e.g. Kramer 1956), and sometimes even dispute this point with Egyptologists, but Wiggermann's interpretation is not completely convincing.[59] Too many questions remain: why should there be an opposition between the frontal view and isolated appearance of the nude "Dignity" and the profile view and integration of the supernatural *udug* and the goddess Lamma (**fig.** M17: figure on right); why is the horned crown only an attribute of Lamma; why does "Dignity" hold her hands clasped at the waist, a gesture more appropriate to worshippers than to superhuman beings (Blocher 1992a: 131; Collon 1986: 131-132; Moorey 2003: 13.32-34).

Instead of an allegorical figure, this nude female may represent the counterpart to the nude hero, with whom she is associated on a number of seals (**fig.** M16). Frontality is linked to isolation and emphasizes the 'présence' inherent in the nude form; modesty of gesture and static posture are indicative of qualities thought essential to the feminine gender (Asher-Greve 2002).[60] This nude female is a symbol of ideal femininity, contrasting with the nude hero as a symbol of ideal masculinity (Asher-Greve 1997).[61] As with gender differentiation of deities, the nude form is augmented with sociocultural codes to represent prevailing ideas of femininity and masculinity: sexualized ('soft') female versus de-sexualized 'hard') male body, female immobility versus male motion, violent aggression versus the opposite, female frontality (engaging the viewer but isolated from action) versus male profile or mixed profile/en face (more detached from the viewer but engaged with other figures).

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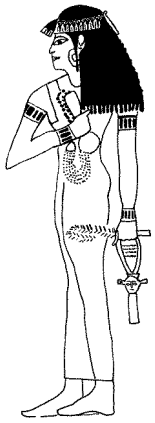
59 However, several scholars agree with Wiggermann's hypothesis, e.g. Braun-Holzinger 1999: 151; Bahrani 2001; Assante 2002b; Moorey 2003: 33.

60 The anatomical features ('sexualization') are primarily gender markers; the erotic aspect is secondary and lies in the eye of the beholder (Reichel 2002: 29); cf. Bahrani 2001: 43-45, 48-51.

61 Bahrani (2001: 55) argues that both "ideal masculine and feminine bodies were linked to notions of desire, and the desiring Gaze in that both ideals were seen as seductive and alluring".

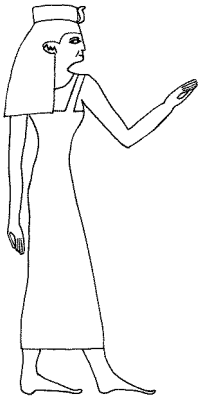
In Egypt, the codes for representing gender and status were somewhat different. As Gay Robins has shown, depictions of the female body in ancient Egyptian formal art are more explicitly sexualized than depictions of men (Robins 1993a: 181-182). From the Old Kingdom until the mid-18th Dynasty, women were depicted wearing a close-fitting sheath dress that shows every curve of their stomach, thighs, and breasts (Robins 1997: 76; Russmann 2001: 79; **fig.** E16).[62]

In two-dimensional art, the full outline of the leg nearest the viewer is shown under women's clothing, so that the genital area is outlined, and in standing statues in the Old Kingdom (Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999: passim), women's pubic triangles are clearly shown under their clothing. The genital area of elite men, on the other hand, is generally kept well hidden (Robins 1993a: 181-182). The navel is also visible through these dresses, so to some extent they are represented as transparent. We could define these images as *concealed nudity*.



(**fig.** E16)

(**fig.** E17)



(**fig.** E18)

**fig.** E16 Wall painting from the tomb of Sennefer at Thebes [Robins 1993a: 177]
**fig.** E17 Wall painting from the tomb of Rekhmire [de Garis Davis 1943: pl. lxvii]
**fig.** E18 Detail from the 'Donation' Stela [Robins 1993a: 26]

Gay Robins has pointed out that these closely-clinging sheath dresses are purely an artistic convention, since they are shown expanding elastically to accommodate kneeling and walking (Robins 1993a: 181; **fig.** E17 and E18). Nor do they correspond to the clothes which women actually wore: dresses with signs of wear found in excavations tend to be looser, with long sleeves (Hall 1986: 31). Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood has argued

62 Cf. Gernig 2000a: 17-18 for clothing accentuating women's breasts, thighs, and hips in the early 20th century CE.

that many Egyptian garments were actually pieces of cloth wrapped around the body (Kemp & Vogelsang-Eastwood 2001: 234-235, 449). The image of the closely-fitting sheath dress is clearly not a representation of how the garments actually looked, but a deliberate choice to convey other messages.

From the mid-18th Dynasty onwards, the clothes of both women and men begin to be represented as fuller and looser. However, in the Amarna period (mid-14th century BCE) the form of the female body was again made visible by the convention of treating the material as transparent and revealing the lines of the body beneath it (Robins 1993b: 31).

Most of the images described above come from tomb chapels. Egyptologists tend to interpret them as having primarily a magical function: the tomb owner, his wife, and his family were represented full of health, energy, and beauty in order to ensure that they would be so in the afterworld; the wife's sexuality in particular is accentuated in order to arouse the tomb owner's virility in the afterworld. Images of the tomb owner's wife are thought to have served symbolically as his sexual partner in reconceiving himself, so that he could be reborn in the next world (Westendorf 1967: 140; Roth 2000: 198).

Divorced from their context in museums and books on Egyptian art, it is easy to misunderstand these images as having primarily an aesthetic appeal. They do have an aesthetic appeal to the contemporary viewer, and it is conceivable that they did so for the Egyptians themselves, but it would be wrong to interpret their purpose as purely aesthetic.

## VII. Erotic nudity and related topics: nudity, eroticism, and sexuality

We are often at a loss to interpret the real function and purpose of many images of nudity from the ancient world. This is particularly the case with images which might have been erotic.

According to Perniola (1989: 237), "In the figurative arts, eroticism appears as a relationship between clothing and nudity. Therefore, it is conditional on the possibility of movement – transit – from one state to the other. If either of these poles take on a primary or essential significance to the exclusion of the other, then the possibility of transit is sacrificed, and with it the conditions for eroticism. In such cases, either clothing or nudity become an absolute value." Transition between clothing and nudity is described in the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal: "she (Ereshkigal) went to the bath, and dressed herself in a fine dress, and allowed him to catch a glimpse of her body"; although Nergal tries to resist his desire, aroused by Ereshkigal's seductive play of covering and revealing her body, he finally submits to it (Dalley 1989: 170-171). There are no images alluding to the partial nudity of a goddess from southern Mesopotamia, though two examples (presumably representing Ishtar) were found in the Ishtar temples at Mari and Assur (Barrelet 1952: fig. 1; Reade 2002: fig. 4).

A partly clothed woman, engaged with her partner in making love and music, is depicted on an Old Babylonian terracotta relief from Larsa (Barrelet 1968: pl. 54 no. 590); many terracotta figurines and plaques show the woman's body partly covered (see below).

In ancient Egypt, glimpses of women's bodies might also be considered erotic. In a story from the mid-second millennium BCE (Parkinson 1997: 109-111), King Snofru combats boredom by taking a boating trip on his palace lake with the ladies of the palace, attired in nets instead of their usual robes; he spends his time looking at them and enjoying himself. The nets the women wore seem to have been net-like fabrics or bead dresses, beneath which their bodies were visible (Janssen 1995-96; Knigge 1997).[63]

A love poem from the later second millennium also evokes partial nudity for erotic effect. The female lover is described as suggesting that she bathe in front of her boyfriend dressed in her tunic of finest royal linen (O Deir el-Medina 1266 + O Cairo Cat. 25218 r 9) – which presumably would become transparent and clinging when wet. This is particularly interesting since people are generally represented swimming unclothed (Decker & Herb 1994: pl. cdxxxvi-cdxl); however, it is not clear whether this was actually the case, since many of the depictions of women swimming are the decorative spoons discussed below, where their nudity may have had an erotic or aesthetic purpose.

The erotic aspects of nudity in ancient Egypt are often difficult to assess. A number of images from Egypt dating to the second half of the second millennium show sexual intercourse between heterosexual couples, such as drawings on ostraca (Manniche 1987) or the well-known erotic papyrus now in the Turin Museum (Omlin 1973). Depictions of the nude female body also appear on ostraca (e.g. Vandier d'Abbadie 1937: pl. lv; Brunner-Traut 1956: pl. xxiii; Vandier d'Abbadie 1959: pl. cxxiii; Minault-Gout 2002: 42-43, 50-51; **fig.** E19).

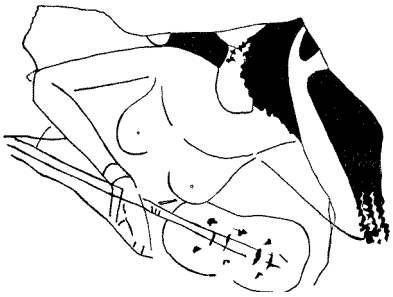


**fig.** E19 Ostracon Cairo Journal d'Entrée 63805 [Minault-Gout 2002: 51]

63 By contrast, the bead dresses worn by elite women in tomb chapel paintings seem to have been worn over linen garments (Janssen 1995-96: 42-43).

Although the pictures of intercourse are very likely to be erotic, it is less clear whether the other images should also be interpreted as such (Toivari 2001: 143-144).

Egyptologists tend to extrapolate from the more explicit depictions of intercourse, together with the cues for sexual attraction mentioned in love songs and other texts, to identify features which the Egyptians probably found erotic. For instance, Phillipe Derchain (1975) has shown that the Egyptians found hair and elaborate wigs sexually attractive (cf. also Hollis 1990: 89): in the Tale of the Two Brothers, a wicked woman lies to her husband that his younger brother has tried to seduce her, and claims that he said, "Come, let's spend a while making love – undo your plaits!" (P d'Orbiney 5.1-2; Graefe 1979). Here, luxuriant hair is considered desirable when making love. Many of the depictions of nude women on ostraca have lavish, elegantly arranged hair, so they too may have fallen into this category.

In other contexts, images of nudity may have been linked to sexual activity, regeneration, and rebirth in the afterworld. New Kingdom tomb chapels from the late 15th to mid-14th centuries BCE often include pictures of banquets where nude female musicians entertain the guests and nude young servant girls wait on the women, or sometimes on the married couples (e.g. Russmann 2001: 31; **fig.** E20).[64]

**fig.** E20 Detail from the tomb of Djeserkareseneb [Leclant & al. 1980: 239]

This nudity is clearly linked to status: elite women are never depicted naked in these contexts. However, it is not clear whether naked musicians and servants at banquets actually appeared in real life, since other scenes in

64 Women are occasionally shown waiting on men (Robins 1989: 112; Quack 2003: 60) but in this context they are fully clothed.

the tomb depict scenes such as the family going fowling and fishing dressed in their very best clothes, which are probably not true to life in many respects (Derchain 1976: 8-9), but form part of a conventionalized artistic repertoire of representing hopes and wishes for sexual activity, regeneration, and rebirth in the afterlife (Westendorf 1967:142; Robins 1993a: 187-188).

These banquets could certainly be included in such a category, since they include motifs of rebirth and regeneration, such as lotuses, and features associated with sexual activity, such as mandrakes (Derchain 1976: 8). It is therefore possible that the naked maidens are also included to assist the tomb owner's rebirth and regeneration in the afterlife.[65]

Erotic images from Mesopotamia were recently analysed by Julia Assante (2002b) and Stefania Mazzoni (2002).[66] The largest group, Old Babylonian terracotta plaques, depict either a nude couple making love on a bed or having intercourse while standing and drinking, or a single nude spread-legged woman with or without a phallus between her legs or sitting above a supine man.[67] Assante argues that the images on Old Babylonian reliefs are associated with Inanna's erotic adventures and belonged to household magic. Although not large, a much higher number of examples of this group is well preserved, compared to other plaque groups: perhaps this is an indication that they were not intentionally broken like other terracottas (cf. Moorey 2003). Indeed, if, as Assante assumes, Sumerian love songs had instructive value, the explicit 'erotic' scenes on terracotta reliefs may also be interpreted as 'instructive' illustrations.[68]

That "the nude also relates to lived sexuality" has been suggested by John Berger (1972: 54), though this is an aspect difficult to verify. Sumerian love songs, spoken by Inanna and Dumuzi, probably provide an ideal view of love and sex (Leick 1994; Assante 2003) and may represent things as they ought to be than as they were for mortal couples. Although much later in date, incantations and omens may reflect 'lived sexuality' more realistically (Biggs 2002; Guinan 1997 and 2002); sex omens, for example, attach negative value to women who are sexually dominant and assert their sexuality, because this threatened a man's relationship with his god and could even injure his health and finances (Guinan 1997 and 2002). As Walter Farber pointed out, Babylonian marriages were not based on love

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65 However, Assmann (1989: 11) argues that the erotic is to a great extent sublimated into the aesthetic in such cases.

66 See also Assante in this volume. Pornographic images are extremely rare in Mesopotamia (cf. Assante 2003).

67 Spread-legged women are also represented in the glyptic of the Uruk and Early Dynastic periods; cf. Mazzoni 2002, who interprets them as erotic and fertility images.

68 Use of terracottas as didactic and teaching aids has been suggested by Mary Voigt; for Voigt's functional categories, cf. Moorey 2003: 6-7.

but prearranged, and couples therefore could have used a little magic to induce sexual desire (Farber 1995: 1901; cf. Moorey 2003: 13). Farber uses this argument to explain the strong element of seduction in potency rituals and magical practices; the recitation of love songs plus viewing illustrations could also arouse desire.

Bahrani's suggestion that the "genre of the female body (was) displayed for the viewers' 'consumption'" is based on the inscription by King Assurbelkala of Assur (1073-1056 BCE) on the stone statues of nude women found at Nineveh (Asher-Greve 1997: fig. 11; Bahrani 2001: 43). According to the inscription, duplicates of the Nineveh statue were placed in several provinces, cities, and garrisons for "titillation" (Grayson 1999: 108 no. 10). Although this is not explicitly mentioned, these statues were erected for the pleasure of men, and we might speculate whether the king wanted to provide pleasure for his men, or to stimulate their libido with a view to boosting the production of future soldiers. It is not known whether such statues were traditionally on public view in Mesopotamian towns; Assurbelkala may have been the first king who placed images of a nude female in public space outside temple areas. However, the inscription informs us that the purpose of the images of nude females was erotic.

That contraceptives were known in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (Biggs 2000: 4-11; Toivari 2001: 168-170; Guiter 2001) provides evidence that sexual intercourse was not invariably linked to procreation, but was also engaged in purely for pleasure. It is known that Mesopotamian women had to provide no more than *one* son, and there are indications that at times overpopulation may have been a problem (Assante 2003: 26-27). In Egypt, by contrast, apart from years when the Nile was low, food was generally plentiful and the resources of the country were enough to support the population.

In Egypt, love poems are known from the late 14th to the 12th centuries BCE (Sweeney 2002). Egyptologists tend to assume that they do provide a key to lived sexuality in that the love songs give a reasonably accurate idea of what at least some Egyptians found sexually attractive. Elements which appear as erotic signifiers in the love poems are therefore identified as erotic signifiers when they appear elsewhere (Westendorf 1967: 143-144; Derchain 1976: 8).

On the other hand, the freedom of the young people described in the love poems is often viewed with considerable scepticism (Robins 1989: 110-111). It is not clear whether young people were actually allowed to meet unsupervised (cf. Wimmer 2000: 29) or to behave with so much sexual intimacy, or whether the freedom of the lovers is poetic licence.[69]

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[69] Mathieu (1996: 152-155) argues for a scenario where the couple are betrothed but have not yet established a common household.

The erotic/sexual allure of Mesopotamian female nudes is largely a matter of speculation (**fig.** M18 to M20). Because nude female terracotta figurines and plaques were found primarily in non-elite residential houses and areas,[70] Assante (2002b) argues that they belong in the realm of household magic; according to Pruss (2002) they have a divine aspect, whereas Moorey (2003: 10.29) cautions that magic use is not verifiable and that "any facile distinction between the religious and the secular, magic and religion, sexuality and maternity, has to be dismissed. They are too often symbiotic in these images." However, Moorey seems to agree with Bahrani that the nude female represents the feminine 'other' that is associated with sexuality and that therefore "sex in the symbolic order of Mesopotamia, is in the realm of Woman" (Bahrani 2002: 57; cf. Bahrani 2001; Moorey 2003: 11.32-33). Textual evidence is ambivalent: a woman could be sexually 'active' but was preferably a sexual object, or could act as a 'helpmate', for example, by reciting incantations to cure impotency. However, we can assume that, by the time a man needed help for impotency, erotic imagery was no longer efficient.[71]

As mentioned above, nudity is an ambivalent form, but not inherently 'erotic' as it is not only culture-specific, but also highly contingent on attributes and contexts.[72] The most common type of nude female figurines and plaques resembles that depicted on Old Babylonian seals (**fig.** M16 and M17): hands clasped at the waist, a generally well-formed body, mostly without exaggerated hips and/or pubic triangle, and a comparatively simple hairstyle (**fig.** M18).[73] The woman appears rather demure and may represent ideally 'beautiful' young women, whose erotic attraction may also have been sexual non-aggressiveness, or even inexperience.[74] 'Vulva-style' figures show extravagant and some exaggerated features (**fig.** M19),[75]

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70 Assante 2002b; Moorey 2003: 25-26. Nude females made of different materials were also found in temples and palaces; terracottas were found within buildings (shrines and residential), courtyards, open spaces, streets, extra-mural areas, and among household and urban rubbish (Pruss 2002; Moorey 2003).

71 E.g. Biggs 2002; Guinan 1997; 2002; Leick 1994. For sexual dreams and the use of male and female figurines in apotropaic rites, cf. Butler 1998.

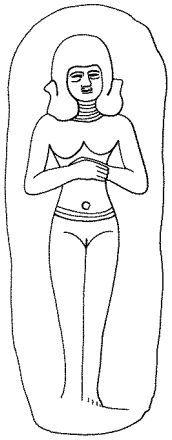
72 According to Pruss (2002: 541), there is no proof that seal motifs depict the same beings as terracottas. For typology of ancient Near Eastern figures, cf. Uehlinger 1998. Auerbach's PhD thesis (1994) was not available to us; according to Assante, Auerbach distinguished eight subtypes (Assante 2002b: 7 n. 19). Cf. also Moorey 2003.

73 For more illustrations, cf. Barrelet 1968: pl. 38-39; McCown & al. 1967: pl. 127; Woolley & Mallowan 1976: pl. 67-60.

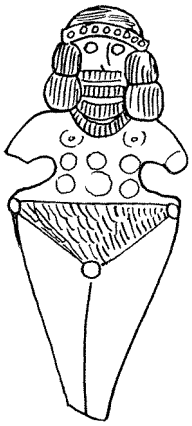
74 Cf. Pruss (2002: 543-544), who argues that nudity and frontal position are *not* signs of passivity, and that nude women are shown in "offensive and directly erotic manner" and appear self-confident. Porter (2002: 529-530) suggested that this type of nude female lying on a bed may represent a dead woman. For good illustrations, cf. Parrot 1970: 292 fig. 358B; 299 fig. 366.

75 For a good illustration, cf. Parrot 1970: 298 fig. 365.

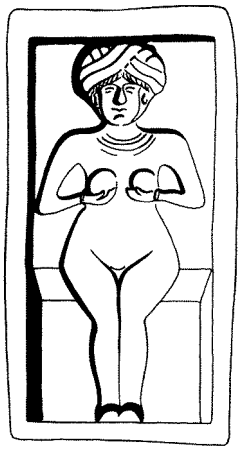
particularly the pubic area and hips, an elaborate hairstyle or head-gear, and some are partly dressed (e.g. Barrellet 1968; Woolley and Mallowan 1976). These nudes may represent more mature, sexually experienced women.



(**fig.** M18)



(**fig.** M19)



(**fig.** M20)

**fig.** M18 Old Babylonia terracotta plaque from Ishchali [U. Winter 1983: Fig. 68]
**fig.** M19 Ur III/Isin-Larsa terracotta plaque from Tell Asmar [Barrelet 1968: 74 Fig. 43]
**fig.** M20 Old Babylonian mould from palace at Mari [Parrot 1959: 38 Fig. 31]

Another type is women holding one or both breasts, an assertive if not a provocative erotic gesture (Barrelet 1968; McCown & al. 1967; Woolley and Mallowan 1976).[76] Three moulds for making such figurines were found in the Old Babylonian palace at Mari in a room next to a courtyard with a huge oven, proof that plaques were manufactured in the palace (Parrot 1959: 37-38 pl. 19). This nude woman wears a turban and a multiple chain necklace, and sits on a bench 'presenting' her breasts (**fig.** M20). While necklaces are a common attribute of nude women, turbans are rare in the Old Babylonian period but well attested in Early Dynastic sculpture and two-dimensional art. However, Early Dynastic turbaned women wear elaborate garments signifying high rank in statues found in temples, or in rituals depicted on various objects (Asher-Greve 1985). High-ranking women are generally not represented nude, though in the context of the Mari palace, which housed a harem, 'erotic' nudes may represent harem women, and the plaques may have had the 'magic' function of enhancing a

[76] The position of the hands indicates the 'presenting' of the breast rather than pressing out milk (Pruss 2002: 544). A variation of this type is the woman holding one breast (Braun-Holzinger 1984: pl. 43 nos. 197-199); a nude woman presenting her breast to her partner while both are lying on a bed is depicted on an unprovenanced terracotta plaque (U. Winter 1983: fig. 360).

woman's sexual attractiveness over competitors. As few women could read, such plaques may have been a woman's form of incantation. Some nude or partly nude women show rather exaggerated and even frightening features.[77] The aesthetic aspect may be significant for the meaning of these figurines, as exaggerated and/or frightening features might have had an apotropaic function.[78] Rites (or rage against a woman?) may have resulted in the deliberate breaking and/or discarding of these items, since most figurines and plaques were found as fragments.[79]

Anonymity sets images of nude females apart from votive statues and statuettes in temples (votive statues represent individuals; Braun-Holzinger 1991), meaning that nudity is associated with personification and has ontological implications. Female nudity is 'being plus woman' compared to a queen, female priestess, or a woman in another capacity (whether or not they are named). That the human body is an ontological form is evident in the mythological account of the creation of human beings, who were 'formed' out of clay. As a consequence, form dominates matter and the nude form can be considered the 'essence' of human beings, who were created as complementary couples in a second phase (Asher-Greve 1997: 433.455 n. 16; Asher-Greve 2003: 11-13).

That the female nude is the most common image in terracottas of the earlier second millennium is explained by Moorey as the result of the growth of masculinization in that period (Moorey 2003: 25.29.31). Although eroticism and sexual attractiveness were not considered prerogatives of the feminine gender (e.g. Leick 1994; Assante 2002a; 2002b), femininity was perceived and represented by men as either idealized, ambiguous, or even frightening (Asher-Greve 2002: 18-19; Bahrani 2002: 57). 'Lived sexuality' was not merely a pleasurable or procreative activity but had ambiguous aspects and was also perceived as a liminal experience (Assante 2002a; Guinan 1997 and 2002). That 'Man' devised stereotyped images of the static unclothed female body may be interpreted as an attempt to hold 'Her' spellbound; by 'capturing' feminine powers in an image, the female nude became the most polyvalent of all nude figures. In contrast, masculine nudity, although it has a different meaning, is less ambivalent, thanks to its association with either cult/ritual or the hero, fighting threatening forces or guarding divine space to uphold order.

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77 E.g. Barrelet 1968: pl. 33.35.74; McCown & al. 1967: pl. 122; Parrot 1970: fig. XIV(A).

78 Many of these hold a tambourine (Barrelet 1968: pl. 35-37); Assante (2002b) suggests the noise of music instruments had a magical function, serving to keep evil away. Clay figures of witches are mentioned in Maqlu (CAD E: 144), and the 'hideous' types may represent witches.

79 Moorey (2003: 10.29). Moorey argues that terracottas were used and deposed of like household pots (2003: 22, cf. 2003: 2.20).

Comparable representations of nude females are known from Egypt. Statuettes of naked women from the second millennium BCE are found in houses, but, unlike the Mesopotamian terracottas, they are also frequently found in tombs of both men and women and as votive offerings in the temples of Hathor (Pinch 1993: 198-225).

Generally, these statuettes have an elaborate hairstyle and wear nothing but their jewellery. We suggest that the jewellery worn by images of nude women in both Egypt and Mesopotamia differentiates them from naked figures, stressing that although these women are unclothed they are not physically deprived: they, or their family, or beloved, or master, can afford to buy jewellery. It is difficult to relate this jewellery to real-life practice: We imagine it could be rather scratchy when making love, or what if the threads broke and the beads sprang in all directions? We wonder whether, as for modern designer underwear, the point was to enjoy removing it.

The earlier Egyptian statuettes were made of faience (**fig.** E21); in the mid-second millennium, more schematic versions made from wood and clay appear.

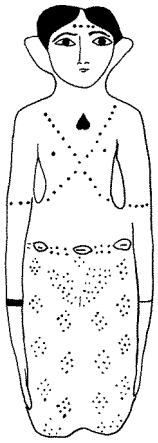

**fig.** E21 Faience figurine [Robins 1993a: 57]

In the second half of the second millennium, these figurines may lie on a bed, and be accompanied by small children (**fig.** E8). They were once interpreted only in terms of arousing male desire – for instance, Winlock suggested that they were dancing girls placed in tombs "in order that their spirits might while away the time of the Theban grandees in the tedious hours of eternity" (Winlock 1932: 36) – but in fact, as Wolfgang Helck (1975: 684) and Geraldine Pinch (1983: 225) have remarked, since they are also found in women's tombs, in houses, and in temples of deities connected to fertility, they may well have a much wider and more generalized connection with sexual activity. As Robert Bianchi put it, "any one figurine

might serve any aspect of the range of human sexual experience, from physical sex, including conception and childbirth, to metaphysical regeneration and fecundity in the broadest sense" (Fazzini & al. 1989: no. 26; cf. Parkinson 1999: 172). These images apparently had a range of meanings, from hopes and wishes for sexual activity and fertility in this life to rebirth in the next. Since these statuettes were found in women's tombs, does this mean that women appropriated this iconography for themselves? Or did the presence of these statuettes in women's tombs reflect the ideals and wishes of those who buried them?

Another group of objects depicting nudes are the representations of nude young women from the second half of the second millennium. Young women appear frequently as mirror handles (Derriks 2001; Quack 2003), or as part of ornamental cosmetic vessels, and as elaborate spoons which may have been used in a ritual context (Gamer-Wallert 1967; Kozloff 1996: 331-358; Müller 2003: 71-82). In Mesopotamia too, nude female figurines were also used as decorative objects, or as decorative motifs on objects, such as pins, buckles, stands, or other items, either as votive gifts or luxury items belonging to the 'elite'.

By and large, these images are beautifully made and aesthetically attractive. It is clear from Egyptian texts that the Egyptians did indeed derive pleasure from looking at beautiful people (M. Müller 1998; Green 2001). However, the nudes are not only aesthetically attractive, but also magical, communicating renewal and rejuvenation to their users (Derriks 2001: 61), and also have erotic connotations, echoing aspects of Hathor, goddess of love and sex.[80] Many of these images form the handles of mirrors, which have a strong connection with Hathor and with rejuvenation; others are depicted playing musical instruments, which again are associated with Hathor (Robins 1993a: 185). The images also include features which occur in explicitly erotic contexts elsewhere: like the figurines and the women in the Turin Erotic Papyrus, these young women often wear elaborate hairstyles, jewellery, and hip girdles (Derchain 1976: 8; Robins 1993a: 185; Meskell 2000: 434), which might indicate that they were intended to be erotic.

The modern viewer might see some of these images as children, but given that women probably married young to make the most of their childbearing years (Toivari 2001: 52-53), Egyptians might well have considered them to be young marriageable women, "à l'aube d'une maturité de femme", as Derriks (2001: 59) elegantly puts it.

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80 By contrast, Quack (2003: 58-59) interprets the mirrors as primarily for practical use in this life, rather than rejuvenation in the next. He suggests that the nudity also refers to young girls in this-life contexts, such as servant girls, or maybe a young daughter helping her mother with her hairdo (2003: 60-62).

## VIII. Summary and conclusions

We have found the following five categories of nakedness/nudity more or less applicable to both ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. However, an image may have a range of meanings and functions and often can be assigned to more than one category. Some reasons for "unclothedness" remain inexplicable.

1. Status and gender. The unclothed body is contrasted to the clothed body in order to signify rank (elite versus non-elite), gender differences, or age (children/youths versus adults). With children it may reflect real life, although childhood nudity might also be iconic; however, children were not always depicted naked.
2. Nakedness as a sign of deprivation, humiliation, and death in the depiction of prisoners of war and slain enemies; these may reflect situations in real life.
3. Practical or functional nakedness. The body is unclothed for practical reasons, such as certain work activities, swimming, making love, or giving birth. Wrestlers and possibly 'entertainers' (musicians, dancers, acrobats) may have been naked for practical or functional reasons. The nakedness of 'entertainers' may also be a sign of status and/or erotic nature; lovemaking scenes with naked couples undoubtedly have sensual/erotic implications.
4. Erotic nudity. The totally or partly unclothed body evokes desire or is an object of desire, enhances pleasure, and/or is a sexual object. These representations may have instructional or magical functions, and in the context of Egyptian tombs express desires and hopes for this world or the next.
5. Some bodies are unclothed for ritual and/or symbolic reasons, others possibly for magic/apotropaic purposes: e.g. nude deities, nude heroes, nude females, cultic officiants, and priests.

There seem to be three major differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Firstly, the Egyptians seem to have understood the naked body also as a means for rebirth, renewal, and rejuvenation in the afterworld. Secondly, although elite women in ancient Egypt were virtually never represented naked, they were depicted in clothes which revealed a great deal of body shape in a manner in which elite men in ancient Egypt were not depicted. In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, both elite men and elite women are dressed in comparatively loose garments.

As far as we know, our material was designed by male artists, and much of it was produced for a male clientele (Robins 1993a: 176; Toivari 2001: 143-146; Reade 2002: 551). Images of nude women may have been displayed for the male gaze, as the modes of gender representation exhibit a certain male bias in depictions of nude women. Female nudes are portrayed rather differently from male nudes: not only is the sexualized and static

female body contrasted with the relatively de-sexualized and active male body, but women's bodies can be depicted in an exaggerated, even 'ugly' manner which is not found in representations of male nudes. In Egyptian art, women are almost invariably represented in an idealized fashion as young and beautiful (Robins 1993a: 180), irrespective of their actual age. Images of wise, experienced older women, for instance, are very rare (but see Arnold 1996: 30-31.76-79). These images were mostly generated for the rich, privileged male gaze. However, a more subversive reading of the images from a female gaze might be possible. Here the viewer is very much in the realm of guesswork, so that our reconstructions are probably strongly shaped by our own views. Lynn Meskell, for instance, thinks that women could have been unhappy with the way they were represented: "How women viewed their explicit sexualization, along with their female offspring, is incalculable … it is nonetheless possible that female viewers were aware of, and even dissatisfied with, their unequal treatment" (Meskell 2002: 140). One might wonder whether, in addition to the message that a given man has a certain beautiful woman available to him in the afterworld for his joy and delight, one could also imagine a message that the woman has the same handsome man available to her.

Images of unclothed humans appear in very different contexts. In Mesopotamia unclothed men feature in sculpture or ritual scenes on view in temple areas and palaces, where visual representation conformed to 'official ideology' and had to satisfy the demands of the institution as well as the person(s) commissioning them. This meant that they were 'performative' in different ways from non-formal art, the latter representing generic categories instead of historic events, cultic rituals, or individuals. Nude heroes and female nudes are anonymous, detached from 'reality' as in the case of the hero, or from context, as in the case of the frontal female nude. The female nude, more than the nude hero, is a common motif on objects made for private use, which seem to have allowed artists more freedom to experiment. The popularity of the female nude may have roots in folk religion and practices, to some degree. Images of nude females were relatively widespread in Egypt. A wall painting in one of the houses in the tomb-builders' village at Deir el-Medina depicts a nearly nude dancing girl (**fig.** E22). Such images may have enjoyed a fairly wide distribution, if Lynn Meskell is correct in asserting that the material culture of Deir el-Medina is fairly typical of Egypt at that period.[81]

[81] Meskell 2002: 38; cf. Grandet (2002: 56), who calls the inhabitants of the village "Égyptiens presque ordinaires", and Eyre: "There is no reason to imagine that the village had an atypical sociology" (1999: 39).

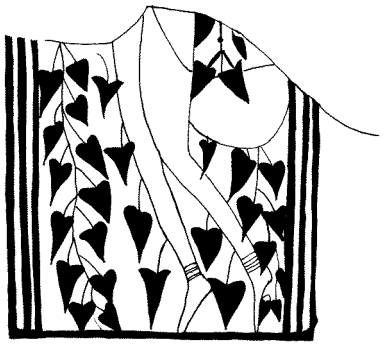

**fig.** E22 Wall painting from Deir el-Medina [Andreu 2002: 28]

As clothing was normative, the unclothed body occupied a marginal position, confined to specific spheres (mythic/religious, cultic/ritual, war, death and afterlife), or as a sign of social status (low(er) rank, age). Representation of the naked or nude body cannot be considered self-evident, "natural", or "universal" (cf. the Chinese attitude described above), and its appearance in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art is the result of particular perceptual conventions. The basis of images of nakedness/nudity is morphological, i.e. the representation – often idealized or stylized – of the anatomically formed human body (mimesis). As for the distinction between nakedness and nudity, figures depicted 'naked' also appear clothed in identical contexts or functions (e.g. engaged in cultic-ritual tasks, musicians, singers, enemy soldiers, prisoners of war, mother with infant, children); showing them naked may have been optional to some degree, and, although it remains unclear what or who influenced the choice, the alternative of 'clothedness' was considered an inherent characteristic of nakedness. In contrast, 'the nude' as eternal, archetypical, and ontological form was not optional because meaning depended on this form. Returning to François Jullien's question, quoted in the introduction, as to whether the concept of 'le nu' was known before the Greeks, our answer is yes: ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians perceived the nude as 'incarnating' essences and as a polyvalent form also used to 'embody' views on gender 'différance' (Derrida).

## ABBREVIATIONS

CAD = The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago, Chicago, 1956-.

LÄ = Helck, Wolfgang & al. (ed.), 1975-92), Lexikon der Ägyptologie, 7 vol., Wiesbaden.

RLA = Ebeling, Erich & al. (ed.), 1928-, Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie, 10 vol. completed, Berlin & New York.

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