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Sexuality, Reproduction and Gender in Terracotta Plaques from the Late Third-Early Second Millennium BCE

Abstract: Clay was perhaps the most abundant resource of ancient Mesopotamia, and its importance in the ancient Near Eastern conceptual and mythological world, in which it is the basic material from which life was created, reflects its ubiquity. Molded baked clay (terracotta) plaques were produced in great numbers, especially during the end of the third millennium and early centuries of the second millennium BCE. Not only the subject matter – often the depiction of a nude female figure – but also the method by which these objects were created, in which raw material was given shape in a mold and brought forth in an analogue of birth, had strongly gendered associations. In recent decades there has been increasing interest in critically examining the basic assumptions that underlie the modern interpretation of these representations, starting as early as 1968 with Marie-Thérèse Barrelet's suggestion that there may have been female artisans working in clay in antiquity. More recently, scholars such as Zainab Bahrani have made a persuasive case for expanding the reading of terracottas depicting nude females beyond the realm of fertility and into that of sexual allure. This essay will examine the question of whether the manufacture and use of mold-made terracottas can be linked with sexuality – for both male and female viewers – and reproduction, with the aim of continuing to broaden the interpretation of nude female images in clay beyond the two poles of “mass-produced artifact” and “goddess.”

Keywords: birth, bricks, ceramic, clay, eroticism, fertility, figurine, gender, plaque, nudity, sexuality, terracotta

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Introduction

Clay was a universally available and symbolically loaded material for the manufacture of images in ancient Mesopotamia. Its ubiquity in both the physical and conceptual worlds is evident from mentions in literary and historical texts, from its importance in omens and incantations, and not least from the evidence of terracotta plaques and figurines, which have survived in great numbers. The height of the production of mold-made plaques was during the late third through early second millennium BCE in

Mesopotamia. In their exuberant variety and iconographic richness, these plaques present a valuable corpus for the exploration of the role of images in the lives of ordinary people in antiquity. This investigation will take as its starting point the plaques that depict nude frontal female figures, the most common image in the repertoire. After a brief critical overview of some recent approaches to these plaques, my primary concern is to focus attention on several aspects of their appearance, manufacture and the conceptual framework within which they acted, with an eye towards how ancient Near Eastern gender roles and ideologies can be traced through such investigations. I do not seek to define what these plaques meant nor how they were used, questions which continue to be debated and which no essay of limited scope could effectively encapsulate. Rather, my intent is to expand the possibilities for their interpretation and to explore what they may be able to tell us about the construction of interlinked concepts of gender, sexuality, and reproduction in ancient Mesopotamia.

It has been perceptively argued by scholars whose own worldview is informed by monotheistic religions that ancient polytheistic beliefs remain stubbornly out of reach of our efforts to comprehend them, because the entire conceptual structure of these beliefs is inescapably foreign to those operating within dominant modern monotheistic worldviews (Oppenheim 1964: 182–83; Westenholz 1998: 63; Moorey 2003: 9). It is not that evidence is insufficient, but that we can only view it through cultural “filters” that distort our understanding of the past. This limitation necessitates a different approach: instead of attempting to perfectly match image and interpretation, what is called for is an expansion of perspectives that allows for fluidity, multivalence, and the coexistence of multiple, even conflicting, interpretations. Such an approach is ideally suited for the images that are the focus of this paper, which present serious difficulties concerning even the foundational question of whom – divine or human – these images were meant to represent.¹ Rather than argue for any specific identification, I suggest here that it is worthwhile to explore the questions raised by these images, and to resist providing definitive answers at the expense of expanding possibilities.

Overview of the Plaques and their Imagery

Mold-made terracotta plaques were made during the Akkadian period (Auerbach 1994: 23–24, 74–76; Madhlum 1960: pl. 9, no. 9, pl. 10, no. 12; Auerbach 1992: 309), although the technology used to produce them was already known and not an innovation of that era.² These early plaques exclusively depicted images of a frontal

¹ See among others Dales 1960: 250–65; Opificius 1961: 203–205; Barrelet 1968: 233–41; U. Winter 1983; Blocher 1987; Wiggermann 1998–2001; Uehlinger 1998–2001; Pruss 2002.

² Barrelet 1968: 89–91, followed by Moorey 2005: 71–72; both scholars drew connections between the development of brick stamps and of clay molds. Barrelet notes opposing views by other scholars such

naked female figure with hands clasped to the chest, iconography clearly derived from the hand-modeled figurines of nude females in the round which already at this time had been produced in the ancient Near East for millennia. The earliest plaques have been attested to date only at Tell al-Wilayah and Tell Asmar, although archaeological evidence from well-stratified Akkadian contexts is rare, so perhaps they were more widespread than would seem from the available information. Plaques with other types of imagery appeared in subsequent periods, although the nude female image retained its prevalence and plaques depicting variations of this figure became widespread throughout Babylonia. Although changes in style and manufacture can be traced over time, the imagery is remarkably consistent. I will discuss plaques dating to the late third through early second millennium BCE – the Ur III, Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian periods – with comparisons to some Late Bronze Age examples from the western areas of the ancient Near East.

The plaques, which are generally tongue-shaped or rectangular, show images of frontally oriented women framed by a featureless background. (Figs. 1, 2) Some examples show the woman standing on a small platform. The figures' hair usually hangs to the shoulders and rests there in symmetrical bunches, while details preserved on some plaques imply curls. Thus the hair is shown as a carefully styled coiffure, not as simply loose and flowing tresses. Horned crowns or other headdresses are not worn, although some figures wear a fillet. The figures are very commonly adorned with jewelry – most often multi-stranded necklaces, but also bracelets, anklets, and girdles.

Their nudity requires further discussion, as Mesopotamian notions of nakedness differ from modern concepts; for example, there seems to have been no aesthetic distinction between “nude” and “naked,” as there is in Western art (Bahrani 2001: 43; Biggs 1998–2001: 64). The clearest example of female nudity in ancient texts appears in the Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld, in which the goddess must remove her clothing and adornments, including jewelry, at each of the seven gates to the Netherworld and enter the realm completely naked (Jacobsen 1987: 205–32). Thus, jewelry such as that worn by the figures on the plaques was an important component of dress. These figures were probably not interpreted by their original audiences as “nude” *per se*, but rather as dressed in an erotically charged manner, since female beauty and allure are strongly associated with jewelry (Bahrani 1993; Bahrani 2001: 87–88; Benz, forthcoming). Their bodies are slender and youthful. The vulva is clearly depicted, with or without additional patterning to indicate pubic hair. They usually lift their breasts with their hands or clasp their hands together at chest level. Some are shown holding or nursing infants, but the single figure is far more common. Their gestures, frontal aspect, and isolation against an undecorated background produce images that are non-narrative and engaged intently in an exchange of gazes with the viewer.

as van Buren, Parrot, Opificius and Dales, who argued that the technique of stamping an image on clay was “invented” during the Ur III period.



Figure 1: Mold-made terracotta figurine from Diqdiqqah, Ur, Iraq. British Museum 116801. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 2: Mold-made terracotta figurine, findspot unknown. Ashmolean Museum 1924.499. Photo courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Previous Interpretations and the Mother Goddess Legacy

It is clear from P.R.S. Moorey's (2005: 1–2) authoritative review of major developments in the study of ancient Near Eastern terracottas that the primary object of scholarly interest from the beginning has been the representations of female figures. This is in part because of the striking prevalence of female images in clay: although there are exceptions and legitimate doubts about the methods used to tally figurines' gender (compare Tringham and Conkey 1998: 27; Meskell 1998b: 51; Joyce 2008: 8–10, on figurines in general), representations of women are the most common images in terracotta for the entire span of ancient Near Eastern history. Beyond the sheer numerical facts, prehistoric female figurines in particular have been put forth as evidence for the worship of a "Mother Goddess" and likewise for the existence of matriarchal societies in "Old Europe" and the Near East (discussed in Goodison and Morris 1998: 6–21; Meskell 1998a; Moorey 2003: 5–6; Bahrani 2001: 46–47, with references). However, scholarly opinion has shifted decisively away from these theories and toward more nuanced, less uniform interpretations of prehistoric figurines that focus on excavation context and deeply engage with anthropological theories (Conkey and Tringham 1995; Hamilton *et al.* 1996; Goodison and Morris 1998; Bailey 2010). The work of Peter Ucko (1968), followed by that of Mary Voigt (1983), has been especially influential in opening up the interpretive possibilities for figurines by defining five functional categories: cult images, vehicles of magic, teaching tools, representations of known individuals (either living or dead), and toys. These categories are not rigid nor mutually exclusive: a single object could have had several functions during its lifespan, while objects that look similar could also have served quite different purposes, depending on the needs of the people who used them (Moorey 2003: 7). While several of these five categories could have applied to the plaques discussed here, the main point I wish to emphasize is the flexibility of meaning and purpose they suggest for these small, personal objects. The intended use of the Babylonian plaques may have been amuletic, but this could have been additional to their use in the context of teaching or storytelling, as remembrances or tokens of ritual observance, or other purposes that remain obscure to us because of their personal and popular (that is, non-elite, thus lacking textual corroboration) character (Moorey 1975: 98).

From the outset, it is evident that interpretations of the naked female plaques have been colored by the idea of a universal Mother Goddess most closely associated with the prehistoric female figurines mentioned above, because of their nudity and the emphasis on their breasts and genitals (compare Wiggermann 1998–2001; discussion in Bahrani 2001: 48–51; Pruss 2002). They are often seen as connected with fertility because of these aspects, although Gwendolyn Leick (1994: 123) has made a strong case based on Sumerian literature of the late third and early second millen-

nium BCE that fertility was conceptually associated not with female bodies, but rather with the phallus and semen. Alternatively, they have also been identified as goddesses, or as priestesses or other religious functionaries such as temple prostitutes (see literature review in Blocher 1987: 54–76). More recently, theories have moved away from generalizations about the entire category of plaques and instead have presented focused interpretations of smaller groups. As the previous scholarship on the topic is immense, I will mention here only a selection in order to give a sense of the range of current interpretations.

In a general review of the naked female motif, Christoph Uehlinger (1998–2001: 58) suggests that the plaques may have been used in connection with the initiation of young women into adulthood, after which they were ceremonially broken. F.A.M. Wiggermann (1985–86), basing his argument on a bronze votive vulva from Assur dated to the Old Assyrian period and inscribed with the sign *TĒŠ/baštu*, interprets the nude female figures as embodiments of a concept meaning “dignity,” “pride,” “beauty” and other positive associations. He associates these concepts embodied by nude females with private life and intensely personal emotions, while noting that the philological evidence presents significant difficulties because the concepts it describes are associated so closely with the psychology of ancient people (Wiggermann 1998–2001). Zainab Bahrani (1996, 2001) outlined four different iconographic categories for images of nude females – the mother, the seductress, the sexual partner and the entertainer. The nude female plaques predominantly belong to her seductress category, although she emphasized that all four categories of nude female images presented an idealized femininity, centered on provocative display of sexual attributes, that was primarily intended for the erotic enjoyment of the male viewer. Moorey (2003: 34, addressing the arguments of U. Winter 1983 and Keel and Uehlinger 1998) noted that there was no evidence for identifying the image either as a representation of a goddess or as an embodiment of the goddess as woman with whom ordinary women could identify. He identified the sexualized nudity of the plaques with the general sphere of Inanna/Ishtar, but emphasized the need to situate individual plaques in their local contexts rather than treat them as expressions of a single motif (Moorey 2005: 77–79).

I would like to suggest an additional reason that these images have often been interpreted as religious in nature. Simply put, their sheer popularity is remarkable. Images of nude females appeared on the earliest mold-made plaques produced during the Akkadian period to the exclusion of other imagery, and continued to be the most widespread motif through the peak of terracotta plaque manufacture in the Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian period. Why would these images – often universalized as a single archetypal image of “woman,” although in fact there are significant differences in jewelry, hairstyle, posture, and style among them – have been produced in such profusion if not for religious purposes? What would justify the mass-production of images of non-divine women who were not priestesses, or at least engaged in ritual functions? These are evidently rather discomfiting questions, as perhaps the most direct answer is that the plaques were produced for purposes of aesthetic and erotic

pleasure (compare the related images of nude females on Canaanite metal plaques and pendants discussed by Benzel, forthcoming) – an issue we will return to below.

Archaeological Context: Disposition and Breakage

Archaeological context provides evidence that most terracottas from this period were used by private individuals in the home. Nearly all excavated plaques and figurines derive from domestic contexts, with a smaller number appearing in burials and in temples.³ However, even these were rarely found in situ – that is, they have generally been excavated in locations suggesting disposal rather than display. Many excavated plaques and figurines show signs of damage, and may have been deliberately broken once they had served their ritual purpose and it was no longer desirable for them to remain charged with power (Moorey 2003: 29). The lack of plastering or fittings for attachment on the backs of most terracotta plaques support the idea that these objects were not intended for permanent installation but rather for transitory use (Auerbach 1994: 3, 327–28). When terracottas are mentioned in texts, it is frequently in reference to what seems to be their inevitable destruction. In an Ur III letter to the sun-god Utu, Sin-iddinam wrote: “The people have been smashed like terracotta figurines; they (?) have perished all together” (ETCSL c.3.2.05; translation in Ornan 2010: 122). A text from the time of Hammurabi similarly refers to one “who destroys (enemy) warriors like a clay image (*ša-lam ti-di-im*)” (CAD *šalmu*: 79; LIH 60 iv 17). In both phrases a clear parallel is drawn between the actual death of people and the metaphoric death of this category of objects through breakage. The common occurrence of terracottas in domestic contexts and their frequent, potentially deliberate, breakage are powerful evidence for the widespread use of these objects in domestic ritual (Pruss 2002; Uehlinger 1998–2001). But deposition only indicates how a figurine or plaque was discarded and does not shed light on the multiple lives of these objects and the functional categories through which they may have passed.

However, many other questions about terracotta plaques and figurines remain worthy of consideration. Clay, as has often been noted, is a conceptually powerful material itself and its use for these objects has important implications. Additionally, while the practical reasons for the use of molds are well known, ideological factors that underlie their use could be investigated. We may also attempt to understand more about terracottas by looking at their imagery in the context of contemporary literary and magical texts, and by applying modern theoretical approaches.

³ Pruss and Novák 2000; Pruss 2002; Assante 2002b: 14–15 argue that the examples found in temples are intrusions, but this is unconvincing in the light of Auerbach’s (1994: 319–29) painstaking analysis of find context of plaques from the Diyala, many of which were found in temples. Auerbach (1994: 317) also notes that there is no clear line between domestic and religious contexts, as, for example, a niche used for a devotional image within a house belongs to both.

Material: Clay and Potters

Clay was both ubiquitous in Babylonia and important as the raw material of life. Prior to shaping, clay had no inherent form or order and was associated with chaos and the unknown (Malul 2005). As related in *Atra-ḫasīs*, Enki and the mother goddess Mami, also known as Nintu and Ninšubur (among other names), worked together to model the first humans from clay mixed with the blood of a rebellious god (Lambert and Millard 1999: 59–63). Enki mixed the clay, from which the mother goddess then nipped off pieces for shaping into humans. These shaped clay pieces were then incubated by birth goddesses, seven for the males and seven for the females. Only after their gestation were these creatures transformed into living beings. The transformation could also go in reverse: the metaphor of people turning into clay was used to convey death and destruction (CAD T, s.v. *ḫidu* 5c: 108–109; Barrelet 1968: 23; Lambert and Millard 1999: 21 n. 2; Malul 2005: 549 n. 5). Clay thus required active intervention, in the form of shaping and incubation, in order to come to life – a process parallel to the molding and baking required to produce terracotta plaques.

The Sumerian and Akkadian words *baḫār*/*paḫaru* are usually translated as “potter,” but as the work of potters extended to the manufacture of other clay objects, Marie-Thérèse Barrelet (1968: 12) suggests that this term should instead be used in an inclusive way to designate a specialist who worked with clay. In her investigation of the role of the potter, Barrelet (1968: 21–23) also notes that goddesses were often described working with clay, although they were replaced in late texts by solely male clay-working gods. Were there likewise female potters in Babylonia? Female potters probably made by hand much of the household wares in early periods, although it is widely supposed that this type of production was superseded by the introduction of the wheel and the subsequent mass-production it enabled (Barrelet 1968: 24–25, with references). However, the assumption that women gave up any substantial involvement with potting with the introduction of the wheel should be challenged. This belief has been shaped by the 18th–19th century ideology that there are “separate spheres” for the work of men and women – both in terms of the type of work and the place where that work occurs (Wright 1991: 195). Rita Wright demonstrates that, in many ethnographic studies, the work of the potter in fact has been shown to involve many different steps and types of labor, from gathering firewood for the kiln to painting the finished pots; family members of various ages and genders assist with these steps, even if one individual is given credit for the work. We have very little documentation that would illuminate a similar situation for Babylonia, beyond a list of masculine crafts from the Ur III period that includes the term *baḫār* (Waetzoldt 1987: 121). Like the ethnographic studies, this list tells us only who received credit for the work. However, it is important to raise the possibility that women, alone or together with men, were engaged in making terracotta plaques during the late third and early second millennium BCE. The nude female plaques should perhaps be understood as more than objects of erotic pleasure made by men for male enjoyment, or talismans of fertility made by men for women.

A rather puzzling feature of one of these plaques should be mentioned, although the example in question derives from a Late Bronze Age context at Tell Munbaqa on the Middle Euphrates, and thus serves as a comparison from outside the earlier Babylonian corpus. Alexander Pruss noted the presence of a Sumerian inscription on the reverse of a molds reading *munus*/*mí*, “woman,” but dismisses the inscription as unhelpfully obvious and in any case probably related to the object’s maker or patron rather than the imagery.⁴ Both Wiggermann (1998–2001: 49) and Uehlinger (1998–2001: 57) separately discuss this mold, but in each case doubted the validity of the reading, with Uehlinger preferring to see it as a potter’s mark. However, I would argue that the use of the *munus* sign, even if it was not meant as a label per se, does indeed relate to the image on the mold. It is a performative⁵ sign, rather than a communication that conveys informative content. Inscribing the mold with the sign for “woman” can be seen as an act analogous to consecration, through which the image and the word work together to transform the raw material of clay into an object that literally embodies femininity. Both sign and image communicate the same idea, but the inclusion of both is only redundant if one sees the function of the object as simply to identify the image as that of a woman – that is, to be a sign indicating “woman” just as the *munus* sign does. In this interpretation, in the semiotic terms defined by Charles Saunders Peirce, the plaque marked with the *munus* sign is read as a combination of icon (the mimetic depiction of a woman) and symbol (the cuneiform sign that is to be read as “woman”), both meaning the same thing. In my view, it is far more likely that the image functioned not primarily as a sign, but as an index, with an extensive set of associations clustering around femininity, reproduction, and desire.

Divinely Facilitated Births: Wombs and Goddesses

There were many names for mother goddesses and goddesses of birth in Sumerian and Akkadian. Epithets for the mother goddess included “Lady Potter,”⁶ “Sculptor of the Land/Gods,” and “Carpenter of Mankind,”⁷ which compare her skills in crafting life to those of various artisans who give form to raw materials. However, shaping clay is the only craft activity the goddess is described as actually performing in order to create life. In *Atra-ḫasis*, as discussed above, the goddess Mami

⁴ Pruss 2002: 540; the mold is published in Kühne 1980: pl. VII, fig. 13; Pruss also mentions a mold inscribed with the sign *túg*, but as he gives no further reference to this object I will discuss only the mold with the *munus* sign.

⁵ Derrida 1982; on performativity in ancient Near Eastern art, see Bahrani 2001: 138–39.

⁶ “Potter” is also an epithet of Enlil; Lambert 1998: 191.

⁷ Stol 2000: 74–75, taken from the god list An=Anum; see also Stol 2000: 79, where a high priestess assisting a birth goddess may be referred to as “Copper-caster,” although the translation is uncertain.

mixes the flesh and blood of a slain god, “Wê-ila, who had personality,” into clay that Ea treads while Mami recites an incantation, after which she nips off fourteen pieces for shaping into the first humans (Lambert and Millard 1999: 59–63). Other texts describe her, under the name Bēlet-ili, pinching off clay and shaping it into beings; as the goddess Aruru, who shapes Enkidu from clay in the Gilgamesh epic, she also appears in a wisdom text that describes humans as “those whom Aruru had pinched off as lumps of clay” (Stol 2000: 78). Although she may have had other crafting skills, as demonstrated in her epithets, the specific way in which the mother goddess(es) is/are conceptualized as a creator is in relation to working with clay.

The birth goddesses are described assisting the mother goddess with her work in forming and birthing children (summarized in Stol 2000: 80–83). They are often referred to as simply *šassūru*, “wombs,” as is the mother goddess herself occasionally. Jean Bottéro translates the term *šassūru* in the context of referring to the birth goddesses as “mothers,” but suggests the word could have been used to metaphorically refer to the molds familiar in ancient Mesopotamia.⁸ The description of the work they are assigned in *Atra-ḫasis* closely resembles the work of manufacturing terracotta plaques, involving both shaping and incubating (figuratively “baking”) the shaped pieces of clay before producing the finished seven males and seven females. It is possible that there was an intentional linguistic flexibility or resonance between the maternal womb and the clay mold in this and other texts.

Male Creator Gods

Whether or not the work of creation required input from male gods varied.⁹ The two earliest theogonies differ in this respect: in the Nippur tradition, Heaven (An) and Earth (Ki) were the first male-female pair, while the Eridu tradition has only a single goddess, Nammu, who personifies the waters of the Apsû, as the mother of all the gods including An and Ki (Westenholz 1998: 68). Alternately, in the poem *The Creation of the Pickax*, Enlil alone makes flesh sprout forth by driving the pickax into a certain sacred area of the ground, without the involvement of a female counterpart (Kramer 1944: 51–53; Jacobsen 1946: 134–36; Lambert 1980–1983: 221). The problem with a bisexual model of reproduction in Mesopotamian creation myths was that it required brother-sister marriage, in spite of societal prohibitions against incest (Lam-

⁸ Bottéro 1952: 84: “...la déesse Mami fabrique avec l’argile quatorze “meres” (matrices? moules? forms?).”

⁹ Lambert 1980–1983; Vogelzang (1989–90: 71) suggests that Sumerian creation myths tended to feature a male-female pair, while Akkadian texts assigned creation to Ea alone. Leick (1994: 11–20) notes that while participants in the original act of creation can vary, the ongoing process that stems from it always involves a male-female pair.

bert 1980–1983: 221). The existence of versions of creation myths with male/female, lone male, and lone female protagonists suggest that, for this or other reasons, considerable flexibility was favored in these myths.

In myths of the creation of humans, male participation is more prominent. As already mentioned, Ea treads the clay for the mother goddess to mold in *Atra-ḫasis*. In the praise hymn *Enki and Ninmah*, the two gods fashion creatures from the clay of the Apsû in a drunken contest, of which Enki is the clear winner. The text is damaged and difficult to read, but it is possible that Enki won the contest by creating – and then impregnating – the first human female capable of reproduction (Kilmer 1976). As Leick (1994: 28) states, “The lines in the centre of the text comprise the theory of conception and birth: the germ of life, the male semen, is received by the womb, which gives birth. ... The male semen is able to create life; hence it is a divine substance, endowed on mankind by Enki.” However crucial the role of the mother goddesses and “wombs,” creation (in myth, as in life) required the contribution of a male.

Another case in support of this interpretation is the praise hymn *Enki and Ninhursaga*, in which Enki eats the plants that Ninhursaga grew from his spilled semen, enraging her so that she curses him with sickness that is only healed after she places him inside her vagina and gives birth to deities that correspond to his limbs. Although Enki is presented here in a comic situation, in which he seems to have become pregnant from ingesting his own semen and cannot find relief from his condition without availing himself of the reproductive capabilities of Ninhursaga (Leick 1994: 35–39), the generative power is still his own, not the goddess’. She can nurture it, in the form of the plants, and can bring it to fruition in a way that Enki cannot, but she cannot produce it herself. Leick (1994: 39) suggests that the double entendres in this text hinged on the alternate readings of the Sumerian sign **a** as either semen or water, with obvious implications for the power of both substances to produce and sustain life.

Human Birth: Bricks and Plaques

Much of the evidence for the importance of clay as a ritually charged material comes from its use not as plaques, but as bricks. Bricks (which like plaques could be molded, stamped, and baked) were used in birth rituals, where they seem to have played both practical and symbolic roles. Anne D. Kilmer (1987: 212) presents the evidence for the metaphoric and actual uses of the “brick of birth,” arguing for a connection between unbaked clay bricks and placental material, namely that “the fetus may have been thought of as the product that developed in and from the malleable, clay-like placenta.” To support this analogy, she cites several examples of wordplay between terms for bricks and womb/innards/placenta, such as a line from Gudea that reads: “It (the brick, sig₄) looks at the clay-pit (ka-al(a)) of its earth-of-the-womb (im-agarin-

na).¹⁰ The Sumerian hymn to the temple of the mother goddess Ninhursaga in her city, Keš, contains the epithet “Keš, brick(-work) (of?) birthgiving.”¹¹ In the omen series *Šumma izbu*, omens describe a woman giving birth to a variety of clay objects: a brick; two or three bricks; clay; a child whose eyes are “like the brick(s) of a wall”; and either clay or a brick. The Old Babylonian version of the text likewise contains the line “If an anomaly is like a brick.”¹² Although many of the anomalous births listed in this omen series likely were never actually observed, that does not mean that the priests who compiled the series considered these and similarly impossible events to be meaningless or merely fantastical (see Veldhuis 2006 on the creative rather than documentary aspects of omen compendia). The inclusion of births involving bricks and clay in the omen compendia tells us that such events were matters of particular interest. The textual evidence strongly suggests there was thought to be an ideological connection between human reproduction and the process of crafting objects from clay (compare McGeough 2006, who further explores this “conceptual link” in Mesopotamian, Biblical and Egyptian contexts).

Kilmer (1987: 212) further notes that at the birth of a child, as described in *Atrahasis*, a brick was placed by the midwife during the delivery and then remained in place for either seven or nine days after the birth to honor the birth goddess (Lambert and Millard 1999: 63–65). I would argue that the brick of birth served as a substitute or double for the newborn during the first week of life. This was a dangerous time of transition from fetus to fully-developed human, which may be reflected in the demonic beings known by the name *kūbu* that were depicted as late-term fetuses and that could bring either illness or protection to humans.¹³ After this window of time had closed and the brick had fulfilled its function as substitute, it could then be discarded (compare Stol 2000: 144–45 for methods of disposal of the placenta). Although the text does not explicitly ascribe this function to the brick of birth, the creation or designation of a substitute in order to absorb misfortune intended for someone else was a well-known ritual technique in the ancient Near East.¹⁴ For purposes of comparison with terracotta plaques, it is important to note that bricks in some cases seem to have belonged to the same ontological category as humans and could stand

10 Note however the different reading of this line in RIME 3/1: 81, xix 3–5: “he [Gudea] looked with complete satisfaction towards the clay pit, the clay of the ‘crucible’ (of the brick).”

11 Biggs 1974: 48, line 75; Stol (2000: 76) translates the city’s epithet as “brick of birth.”

12 Leichty 1970, Tablet I, lines 33, 34, 45; Tablet II, line 65’; Tablet IV, line 39; OB omen: p. 202, lines 8–9. See also remarks in Stol 2000: 160–61.

13 Kilmer 1987: 212; Stol 2000: 29–32; Oppenheim *et al.* (1970: 32–33) noted the process of making offerings to “*Kūbu*-images” set up near a kiln that was to be used in glassmaking.

14 The clearest example of this technique occurs in the substitute king ritual during the Neo-Assyrian period, although there are many other instances of substitution as a means for transferring evil from an afflicted person to figurines of various substances or animals (Bottéro 1992: 138–55). See also the remarks of Moorey (2003: 11–13) on the use of clay figurines as either generalized substitutes, or as representations of particular people.

in for them. The importance of material and proper ritual preparation that activated the brick likely applied to terracottas as well.

It is important to note that the ubiquity of mundane objects made of clay did not diminish the power of clay as the raw material of life. A useful parallel in support of this view involves the use of pots in burials as containers for the corpse. An interesting argument has been made for interpreting the burials of very young or stillborn babies in either specially made pots or, more commonly, reused household wares – a widespread practice in Mesopotamia from the later Neolithic through Parthian periods – as symbolically returning the child to the uterus for protection and rebirth into another realm (Kulemann-Ossen and Novák 2000). Evidence for this interpretation includes the fetal position in which the skeletal remains are commonly found, with heads oriented toward the vessel opening, as in the last months of pregnancy (Kulemann-Ossen and Novák 2000: 124–26). A pot used in this fashion is convincingly equated with a pregnant uterus. However, this does not mean that every pot was considered to have this meaning while employed in the household for storage or cooking, but rather that the potential meaning was inherent in a pot's form and was activated by the placement of the corpse inside, and by the specific arrangement of the body. I would suggest that another crucial aspect of the burial pot's potential meaning as a substitute womb depended on the conceptual resonance of its material, clay.

Likewise, I argue that the symbolic resonance between wombs and molds, which both give shape to unformed clay, was a potential, not universal, aspect of the mold-made plaques. It could have been a meaningful trait of certain plaques whose imagery was explicitly connected with pregnancy and birth, such as the four plaques dating to the Isin-Larsa period depicting the birth goddess Nintu, shown with two heads emerging from her shoulders, nursing a baby and flanked by two fetuses or *kūbus* below and two womb symbols above; or the later example of three Canaanite plaques convincingly interpreted by Tallay Ornan as amulets for women pregnant with twins (Ornan 2007; for the Isin-Larsa plaques, see Ornan 2007: 220–21, with references). Indeed, Ornan (2007: 231) notes that while it is widely believed that the common availability of clay made it suitable for use by ordinary people to make objects expressing beliefs restricted to the lower strata of society, this idea is contradicted by the excavation of the Canaanite plaques from both elite and non-elite residential contexts. In the cases of the two plaques excavated from stratified contexts, both bear identical imagery and were probably made from the same mold. Ornan's observation that all levels of society drew upon the same apotropaic means for protecting women and newborns casts the material and manufacture of terracotta plaques in a new light.¹⁵ Perhaps it was precisely these features that were selected for their magical

15 Similarly, Moorey (1975: 98) stated that the amuletic role of terracotta plaques may have been usurped by cylinder seals during the later seventeenth-sixteenth century; although cylinder seals are usually more likely to be grouped with elite art and terracotta plaques with popular art, if the former replaced the latter it would imply similar audiences for both as propitious objects.

efficacy. Rather than being seen as mass-produced and cheap, the plaques could have been understood as objects made from the powerful medium of clay and brought forth like infants through a successful pregnancy.

Imagery: Objects of Desire, Objects of Self-identification

The nude female plaques under discussion have a long history of interpretation as fertility talismans: the gesture of presenting the breasts with the hands and unshamed display of sexual parts have been interpreted as direct references to the generative and nourishing power of female bodies. However, such an interpretation makes fertility the “excuse” for sexual display in a manner that speaks more to a specific modern prudishness than to ancient Babylonia (see discussion in Benzel, forthcoming, with references). In fact, sexual enjoyment was seen as a legitimate end in itself: for instance, the quite explicit potency incantations focus on sexual vigor and especially on the male partner’s erection, and do not mention any desire to increase the chances of successful conception.¹⁶ Fertility and eroticism were complementary rather than separate in the ancient Near East, as Bahrani (2001: 80–89) has demonstrated. Her reading of the nude female plaques as images of desirable women presented for male physical pleasure, supported by references to contemporary love poems, convincingly explains what must have been one of their primary functions.

Bahrani focused on the relationship between the male viewer and the image of femininity presented in the terracotta plaques as the idealized object of desire. How, then, did female viewers respond to these plaques? I believe we can identify several ways in which these plaques enacted, and reinforced, the culturally specific binary structure of gender of late third-early second millennium Mesopotamian society.

The work of Judith Butler (1993) and other feminist scholars (compare Wittig 1993) has presented a convincing case that sex and gender are not biological facts but are discursively produced, or materialized – a word with interesting resonance for the current investigation, with its focus on giving shape to matter – in an ongoing process. In her study of the depiction of the sexually alluring body of the king on the stele of Naram-Sin, Irene Winter (1996) notes the important role of displays of sexuality in constituting self-identification along gendered lines. She identified several processes at work in the viewer’s appreciative gazing at Naram-Sin: “for women, their subordination to desire and by men; for men, their fusion with authority at the same time as

¹⁶ Cf. Biggs 2002: 72: “There is no indication whatever [the Babylonian sexual potency texts] had any goal other than the sexual pleasure of the partners, that is, there is no evidence they were used to increase likelihood of pregnancy.” See also Biggs 1968.

they are subject to it” (I. Winter 1996: 21). The nude female plaques are very different types of objects, not least in that they were likely for private rather than public consumption, but both they and the aestheticized body of the king affected viewers through a display of sexual allure, in Akkadian the complex term *kuzbu* (a term discussed in depth by I. Winter 1996; Bahrani 2001; Benzal, forthcoming). Complementing the male viewers’ appreciative gazing at these idealized objects of desire, it could be argued that female viewers experienced a desire to identify themselves with this ideal image of feminine erotic allure, and in doing so to take their proper place in the Mesopotamian construction of gender in which eroticism was gendered as feminine.¹⁷ I suggest that, like male viewers of the aestheticized body of Naram-Sin, female viewers of these *kuzbu*-laden images fused themselves with the image and subjected themselves to, or accepted, the role it embodied.

Within this ideological framework, the power that was assigned to women was connected with their sexuality and physical attributes. Specifically, the vulva was a powerful index of femininity and stood in for sexual enjoyment and potency. Masculine power, on the other hand, became increasingly connected with military strength from the Early Dynastic period onwards, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that this development coincided with the increased popularity of nude female representations during the periods under discussion here (Asher-Greve 1997: 454). Feminine power could have strongly positive associations, but could also be associated with the uncanny. The erotic zones of the female body – mouth, vulva, and anus – are liminal, demarcating the areas where the body can be penetrated by or can seize another body (Assante 2002a). As thresholds, they are nexuses of magical power, and Julia Assante (2000: 242–55; 2002a) argues that terracotta plaques showing couples or women engaged in sexual acts were used as apotropaia because they drew on this power through the metaphor of sexuality.¹⁸ In her study of sex omens, Ann K. Guinan (1997: 465) notes that the liminality that characterizes human sexuality is charged with meaning, both auspicious and dangerous, because the “asymmetries of power and the binary construction of gender electrify the boundary between male and female bodies and constrain the way the erotic body is experienced and deployed.” Thus, one way in which power is enacted in the sex omens is through looking, an act that sets up the one who looks as the subject and the one who is viewed as the object. If the looking reinforces the dominant status of the male, who by looking takes possession

¹⁷ Bahrani 2001, 2002; note that Sumerian literature consistently shows women and girls taking the lead in sexual encounters, especially in the erotic songs concerning Inanna; see Leick 1994: 40–41, 56.

¹⁸ See however Graff (2012: 128–29) concerning two plaques from Kish that show a couple engaged in intercourse below a Humbaba head; the latter is clearly apotropaic in this instance, but it is not clear whether the sexual scene is also an apotropaion, or – more likely in my view – whether the dangerously liminal state of sex required protection in the form of the Humbaba head. Distinctions should also be made between depictions of sex between gods and sex between mortals, as it is not clear whether divine or human lovers were depicted on the plaques.

of what is his, that is, “his woman’s vagina,” the omen is auspicious; if it is a woman who looks at the penis of a man, the omen has a negative outcome because it reverses the subject/object relationship of man/woman through the sexualized gaze (Guinan 1997: 464–66). In this light, the plaques reinforce the place of the nude female, an index of femininity, as the object of the desiring gaze. The women who also gazed at these representations, rather than claiming a subject position through their gaze, could be seen as recognizing (representations of) themselves.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Mulvey 1975, 1989; see Bahrani 2001: 35–36 for an overview of literature on the Gaze in the context of ancient Near Eastern art.

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