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Journal Title: Images and gender :contributions to the hermeneutics of reading ancient art /Silvia Schroer (ed.).

Volume: Issue:

Month/Year: 2006

Pages: 177-207

Article Author: JULIA ASSANTE

Article Title: "Undressing the Nude: Problems in Analyzing Nudity in Ancient Art, With an Old Babylonian Case Study,"

Special Instructions:

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Title/Verso Page(s)

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Accompanying Images/Plates

Imprint: Via Scan and Deliver Service

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ORBIS BIBLICUS ET ORIENTALIS

Published by the BIBLE+ORIENT Foundation in cooperation with
the Department of Biblical Studies
of the University of Fribourg Switzerland,
the Egyptological Seminar of the University of Basel,
the Institute of Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology and Languages
of the University of Berne,
and the Swiss Society for Ancient Near Eastern Studies

by
Susanne Bickel, Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger

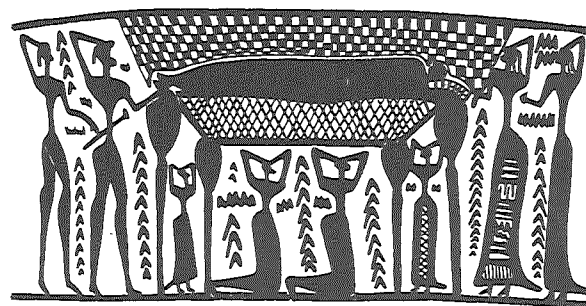
Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis

220

Silvia Schroer (ed.)

Images and Gender

Contributions to the Hermeneutics
of Reading Ancient Art



Academic Press Fribourg
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen

The editor

Silvia Schroer (1958) is a professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures at the University of Bern. She is the author of numerous publications on the iconography and religious history of Israel/Palestine, as well as on feminist exegesis and biblical hermeneutics. Her research interests are in gender and the interpretation of texts and images.

N
5327
.I427
2006

Publiziert mit Unterstützung des Schweizerischen Nationalfonds
zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung

TeilnehmerInnen des internationalen Symposions:

DER QUELLENWERT VON BILDERN BEI DER REKONSTRUKTION ANTIKER FRAUENGESCHICHTE
THE VALUE OF PICTURES AS A SOURCE FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S HISTORY IN ANTIQUITY
(CETheol, Bern, 2.-5.4.2004)



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Camera-ready text submitted by the editor

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen

Fabrication: Imprimerie Saint-Paul Fribourg Switzerland
ISBN-13: 978-3-7278-1558-4 ISBN-10: 3-7278-1558-2 (Academic Press Fribourg)
ISBN-13: 978-3-525-53020-7 ISBN-10: 3-525-53020-X (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht)

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Preface

From April 2-6, 2004 an interdisciplinary symposium took place in Bern, treating hermeneutical questions of gender study, entitled "The Value of Pictures as a Source for the Reconstruction of Women's History in Antiquity". The contributions contained in the present book have arisen out of the symposium, which took place in an unusually constructive and issue-focused atmosphere and whose inspiring interdisciplinarity has been most positively remembered by organizers and participants alike. I would like to take this occasion to thank all persons and institutions who contributed towards the success of the meeting and towards the emergence of this book. Such a process, which takes years to complete, is full of many hours and days of labour, which will never be seen again, and yet they are present in every page of this book.

My first thanks goes to Julia Müller-Clemm (Bern) who, in her function as my scientific assistant, took over the task of planning the symposium and was engaged and present everywhere, from the development of the first ideas all the way to the accommodation of the guests. Her knowledge in the field of "gender and archeology" supported and enriched the preparations for the symposium. Her content-related competences, as well as the experienced preparatory work and help with the realization of the event were irreplaceable and created the framework which made it possible that the symposium was considered a success by everyone.

The financing of the event was made possible most of all thanks to the support of the *Max and Elsa Beer-Brawand-Fonds* (Bern). I wish to express my great thankfulness for the uncomplicated and generous support.

I wish to thank Susanne Bickel (Freiburg CH/Basel) and those in charge of the *Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Orientalische Altertumswissenschaft* (SGOA) for helping to integrate a conference of the SGOA into the structure of the symposium, thereby enabling a presentation of particular lectures to a wider audience. Alex Müller-Clemm (amc Medien, Freiburg D) deserves special thanks for having preserved us from all the possible technical problems with projectors, beamers and similar useful but sometimes tricky appliances, so that we had the necessary calm to concentrate on the content of our lectures and the discussions during the meeting.

My thanks goes most notably also to the participants of the symposium, who came with excellent lectures and who promptly engaged in a lively

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Undressing the Nude: Problems in Analyzing Nudity in Ancient Art, with an Old Babylonian Case Study

Julia Assante

This paper seeks to highlight Post-Enlightenment assumptions and visual habits that modern scholarship brings to the research of ancient nude images.¹ These habits of thinking and seeing often work to cover rather than disclose the various social meanings and uses of nudity as they were originally intended. As they stem from a broad spectrum of modern thinking – Enlightenment ideas of science and power, Darwinian theory and Victorian anthropology, nineteenth-century esthetic conventions, as well as biased gender expectations – only a few points can be touched on here.

The two areas of focus, prehistory in general and the ancient Near East in particular, present two different sets of problems that, when compared, reveal more clearly the inconsistencies and double standards inherent in the way art history interprets ancient nudity. Prehistoric nudes are especially helpful diagnostic tools because interpretations applied to them have been, until recently, more the result of post-Darwinian fantasy than research. Despite the current theoretical material on the body that has led to significant breakthroughs in other areas of study, it has not adequately been applied to nudes of extreme antiquity and the ancient Near East, or it has been misapplied. Emphasis here will be on female nudity because the available interpretations for it are still more restricted than those of male nudity, which has historically been allowed a much wider range of meaning.

¹ Many thanks to Bärbel Hölscher for her helpful comments and insights on reading an earlier draft.

I. Introduction

The emergence of 'The Nude' as 'the loftiest aim of art', according to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, rearranged art history.² 'The Nude' became a specialized genre, apart from, and superior to others. It was, and continues to be, subject to the rigorous esthetic standards developed in the previous two centuries that placed great value on naturalism as a style and femininity as a chief criterion of beauty. The new primacy of 'The Nude' as an art form promoted the belief that making nudes for male visual pleasure was the inevitable outcome of human instinct. Thus, art historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appropriated images of naked females from as far back as the Palaeolithic into this genre. Removing female nudes of all periods from their contemporary contexts, they lined them up and presented them as an unbroken tradition of representation. The result has been a large number of distortions and misinterpretations. The greatest of these is that the meaning of nudity has remained essentially the same since the Dawn of Man.

One of the most entrenched interpretative frames for female nudes of the extreme past and the ancient Near East has been, of course, fertility. It is probably not news to most readers that designations of fertility functions, whether fertility goddesses and talismans or officiants in fertility cults, are increasingly less viable. In the last decade, much literature has appeared, mostly from scholars trained in gender studies in addition to their individual specializations, which shows that fertility and Mother Goddess descriptions of nudes are largely groundless.³ In an age liberated by 'The Pill', the former notion that procreation is women's paramount contribution to humanity has come under fire. There has been an attendant explosion of theory on sexuality and gender as social constructions that omits fertility as an issue. Whereas the current trend in the analysis of female nudity has shifted away from fertility toward discussion about sexuality, the study of male nudity, despite the important progress made in other fields of research, has not resulted in comparable shifts for prehistoric and ancient Near Eastern sources.⁴

² Winckelmann 1872: I 312-13.

³ The literature disproving the 'Goddess Culture' is too vast at this point to cite. Some foundational articles are various essays in Nelson & Kehoe 1990; Meskell 1995 & 1998 and especially Tringham & Conkey 1998 (including notes for bibliography). For an extensive feminist critique of prehistoric archaeology in general and historiography, see Nelson 1997.

⁴ For male nudity in ancient Mesopotamia, see Winter 1996 concerning the Akkadian King Naram-Sin, Cifarelli 1995 and 1998 for Neo-Assyrian discussion, Assante 2000 and 2002b for Old Babylonian; for Assyrian males, see Assante 2000 and forthcoming articles a and b.

Although the change with regard to the female body is welcome and further exploration necessary, the current insistence on sexuality as a point of focus for extreme antiquity and the ancient Near East is, in the end, too limiting. Sexuality should be a neutral term, applicable to all representation, be it Whistler's Mother or rhinoceroses from the walls of Egyptian tombs. Yet when female nudity is involved, scholars fall into the trap of conflating sexuality with sexiness and subsequently measure the physical appeal of a nude against modern ideals. Sexuality read in this light confines nudes of the past to interpretations nearly as male centered and as biologically oriented as the discredited fertility explanations were. In addition, style is too strong a determinant in the study of the body. Art historians and archaeologists greatly privilege nude female images with naturalistic styles, whereas the sexuality of the schematic and highly stylized, which make up the vast majority of nudes from prehistory and the ancient Near East, seems to elude them. Further interpretative splits also anchored in nineteenth century systems of representation are based on the degree to which femininity or modesty is perceptible to the modern eye. As the Old Babylonian case study offered below demonstrates, the creation of nude figures, at least for what is provable from the ancient Near East, included a greater range of intentions, some of which had nothing to do with sexuality. This is not to say that the sexuality of such objects should go unexplored. However, it should be recognized that such investigation may be little more than a modern academic divergence, merely tangential to certain images. In some cases, it may be an outright imposition on ancient vision, so derailing research that the original intention of the image is no longer recoverable.

Ancient Near Eastern representations of nudity, whether male or female, carried a host of messages. Many of these would remain undetected in modern times without careful analysis of an object's specific archaeological and social environment. Nudity could indicate, for instance, a mythic moment at the beginning of time, before the gods created humans. Nudity could also unleash magical powers. It could signify criminalization, legendary heroism, priestly purity or religious subjugation. It could stand for an abstract quality, as we shall see, or indicate the dead, the defeated or the immortal. Even within the tighter frames of Mesopotamian erotic scenes in which the sexuality of both male and female participants is an explicit theme, the social meaning and the ultimate purpose of nudity in different sets of artifacts are quite various and were designed to elicit entirely different kinds of desire in the viewer. But as these different sets portrayed sexiness, art historians and archaeologists essentialized them, so that despite their substantial differences in content, in media, in time, place and consumer class, and so forth, they were read as exactly the same. Furthermore, interpretations were based on how scholars perceived the female nudes in the scenes. The refusal to acknowledge the nude and partially nude male sex partners in the same scenes is, as I will show, a

visual reflex, an unfortunate by-product of nineteenth century social conditioning, and it contributed to gross misinterpretations of not just the erotic scenes but of Mesopotamian women in general. The erotica reveals a great deal about ancient nudity, much of it surprising. Nevertheless, as I have written extensively about it elsewhere, it will not be included in the present study.⁵ Suffice to say for now that sexual scenes from ancient Mesopotamia have nothing to do with fertility, nor with its supposed cults of sacred prostitution, nor with secular prostitution. These readings are inventions of scholarship that drew most of their authority from the imaginary musings of Sir James Frazer (Assante 2003).

II. Modernity's creation of 'The Nude'

One of the first precepts of the Post-Enlightenment period to take to task is the notion that looking at images of female nakedness is an innate compulsion in Man. As such, they are made for men's visual pleasure as surely as Eve was made for Adam. This modern attitude of biological right naturalized the female body as an object of art, not much different from landscapes or the fruits and dead pheasants of still lifes. As part of nature, 'The Nude' of Modernity has no identity. Anonymity is expressed in common titles such as 'Woman at Bath', and often configured with a mental vacancy, such as that in the girl models of Renoir or in the fruit-and-flower-laden bare-breasted natives of Gauguin.⁶ Paradigms of who looks at what or at whom are social constructions that change from place to place and from period to period, rather than inherent tendencies in human nature. Our present paradigm is traceable to the Enlightenment. According to Foucault, the Enlightenment brought a certain brand of power to the fore, the power of observation (as in science), of watching, of looking, in short, the Male Gaze. Men as objects, as spectacles, retreated behind monotone suits, dropping their embroidered pastel silks, their bows and laces, by the wayside of the previous century. By the nineteenth century, a real man was expected to avoid attracting visual attention. By contrast, women's fashions, which remained elaborate, commanded increasing notice. Who looks and who is seen became separated by gender, rather than by class, with the male in the dominant viewer role. Within the new power structure, the male nude as an erotic object in art dropped away and the tradition of 'The Nude' was reproduced as originating from the beginning of human history. What best describes Foucault's observations is Manet's painting, 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe', which features men

and women picnicking in the countryside. The two men and one woman are grouped together sitting on a ground cloth. The men wear black jackets, but the woman is nude. Her prominent placement in the foreground, the contrast of her illuminated pearly flesh with the flat black of the men's clothing, and, above all, the extreme illogic of the scene all serve to maximize her objectification and force the viewer into a male role. Manet, often the daredevil among his colleagues, must have meant it as a mocking commentary of the art of his time.

The nudes that scholars tend to locate as important markers of cultural advancement meet certain criteria of representation in use before the fall of Realism, when beauty was still the primary aim of art. These criteria were mostly Post-Enlightenment revisions of Hellenistic idealizations. A nude must first and foremost be lovely. She should display a certain reluctance to be seen or, at least, a lack of awareness that she is seen. She must be presented as youthful and feminine, and as exemplary of the 'weaker sex'. It was male artists who ultimately determined what feminine beauty should look like, circulating their own definitions through various visual media. By the late nineteenth century, 'The Nude' was an unavoidable part of the urban landscape. The statements of womanly beauty that Modernity imbued in the canonical nude are loaded with gender biases to which viewers are still deeply habituated. In addition, nakedness registers a false impression of seeing something primal, the essential being under the robes of cultural conditioning. The wide propagation and acceptance of an artificial creation have shaped our perceptions of reality to such an extent that the esthetic and psychological conventions that make up 'The Nude' have become confused with the so-called biological, the natural and the real. Nudes that do not incorporate these biases – the great bulk of those from the ancient Near East and nearly all those from prehistory – are so difficult to visually assimilate that they have received little more than superficial treatment.

Artists furthermore created bodies in conformance with the contemporary idea of the Opposite Sexes. The modern categorization of men and women as biological opposites stems largely from the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment attempts to objectify the study of anatomy, to 'scientize' it, if you will.⁷ In the craze for highly defined, quantifiable taxonomies demanded by the new sciences, differences of height, weight, muscle mass, skeletal structure, hip and shoulder widths and so forth between men and women were first exaggerated and then standardized. The new models of Man and Woman put forth by medical science and disseminated pictorially in medical texts were accepted until recently as biological fact – the way things *should* be. Departures from the norm were regarded as irrelevant exceptions. The authorized portrayals of opposite naked sexes conveyed perhaps as many

⁵ See Assante 2000 for extensive and detailed coverage; see also Assante 2002b and forthcoming b.

⁶ Renoir was notorious for firing models who looked capable of thinking. For the erotic association of fruits with Gauguin's models, see Nochlin 1988.

⁷ See Gallagher & Laqueur 1987: vii-xv; Laqueur 1987: 1-41; 1990: 1-62.

psychological differences as physical differences, with women as much emotionally less stable, socially less significant, as they were physically weaker and smaller. Thinking in these categories has become an inevitable, dualistic reflex that forms the very basis of modern analytical approach to the naked body, whether from the present or from the distant past.

To compound the problem, the conception of femininity itself, a chief characteristic of 'The Nude', is also a modern construct, one that arose in response to the severe class breakdown of the Post-Enlightenment period. Femininity – docility, helplessness, dependency – largely determined masculinity and reformed the new bourgeoisie along gender hierarchies. The imposition of femininity on women allowed the bourgeois male to emerge from the chaotic social ambiguity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a secure position of dominance (Pollock 1988). The supposed biological qualities of the 'weaker sex', confirmed by the new sciences, left indelible imprints on representations of naked women.

Partly as a result of new gender definitions, by the later half of the nineteenth century, homosexuality 'as we know it today' came forward as a distinct category. It was regarded as an abnormality and set in opposition to another new category, heterosexuality.⁸ Although naked men were the prime objects of sketch and anatomy classes in the art academies of the era, preventing the attendance of women (Nochlin 1971), and thus anything approximating a female gaze, they were allowable in representation for public view, rippling muscles and all, only under certain desexualizing pretexts or as long as a definite heterosexual context was described. Rodin's 'The Thinker' and 'The Kiss' illustrate both points respectively.⁹ Within this framework, the eroticized and bound objects of naked masculinity that comprise the 'slave sculptures' become daring perversions that can only be explained by emphasizing Michelangelo's deviant taste for the same sex. In the strictly heterosexual social systems science projects on prehistory, images of naked men as natural objects of view are inconceivable. Thus the male nudes of prehistory and, for that matter, the ancient Near East, were never forced into a tradition as female nudes were. Unfortunately, they have remained understudied, despite the vast numbers of them, and when found in association with female nudes, recede into the background.

⁸ Foucault (1978: 43.105) gives 1870 as the time when 'homosexual' as a word made its first public appearance, and refers to it as a new species. For discussion of the historical contexts and changing meaning of these terms, see Sedgwick 1990: 44-48, 67-90.

⁹ Two other bronze statues by Rodin depict youthful naked men with slender, feminized bodies and exposed genitals as objects of visual and sexual vulnerability. They were regarded as scandalous. Interestingly, the first of these, 'L'Âge d'Airain' (1876) and later renamed with a Man-awakes-from-Nature theme, equates the sexualized male nudes with an early or pre-civilized, close-to-nature state, putting it on a level similar to female nudes.

III. 'The Nude' and its impact on the nudes of prehistory

As we are accustomed to perceiving the sexes in terms of opposites, we expect cultures of the past to have done the same, and thus, read it into the archaeological record. This is especially true when sexing skeletons on relative sizes or on the basis of grave goods, where modern binary notions of gender frequently lead to skewed results. Yet the visual record has furnished us with male and female images that do not easily pair, especially for prehistory.

This simple fact, which has long gone unaddressed, should at least cast serious doubts on current sex/gender body dialectics as biological fact and therefore trans-historical. For those nudes who have come under the spotlight, such as the 'Venus of Willendorf', a masculine counterpart is unimaginable under the expected terms. Although we cannot presently answer for the lack of images in prehistory that pair men and women, so that, consequently, their various constructs of masculine and feminine cannot yet be formulated, the lack itself is very telling. At least it can be said that prehistoric peoples did not as a rule conceptualize sexes in terms of modern categories.¹⁰ In fact, the record defies categorization.

The great numbers of vaguely humanoid figurines found in the archaeological contexts with the more recognizable female nudes, as well as schematic anthropomorphic objects and images that portrayed no particular sex or that combined anatomical parts, such as breasts and testicles, and innumerable composite zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures show classifications too fluid to grapple with. They are so foreign to the modern imagination that they have been left out of mainstream discussion. Even though asexual and sexually ambiguous representation did not figure into the ordered world of earlier scholars, a serious attempt to study assemblages as a whole will eventually lead to a better understanding of the considerable gender flexibility recognized in extreme antiquity. The frequent and deliberate slippage between human and animal may represent a totemic self-identification that either supersedes gender or perhaps even describes genders that are currently alien to us.

Furthermore, although the sensational nudes of prehistory like the 'Venus of Willendorf' have been extracted from their contexts and essentialized as a consistent narrative with a single function, if looked at critically,

¹⁰ The absence presents a tantalizing question. One plausible hypothesis might be that the prominence of lone female figures represents a convention that employed the female body as standing for all humanity, a reversal of the male body as signifying humanity in historical times. Even more likely is that the social convention of man/woman sexual bonds, which are taken for granted today, was not a usual part of the prehistoric conceptual landscape. The nuclear family headed by a married, heterosexual couple is, after all, largely a creation of industrial societies.

they do not speak for a continuity of a tradition (Tringham & Conkey 1998). They are random and singular. The handful of them that have been presented as belonging to a definite tradition misrepresents the vast majority of artistic production of their times and serves to erase significant differences in individual representation. Arguing strongly against continuity are the enormous discrepancies of time and place in their distribution, the Upper Palaeolithic, from south-western Europe (France) eastward into Siberia, especially from sites dating to 25,000-10,000 years ago, and then again in the Neolithic of the circum-Mediterranean area and of south-eastern Europe 7,000-3,500 BCE (Tringham & Conkey 1998: 25). The blinding power of female nude images and the notion that making them is an inborn human tendency must be held responsible for the willingness to ignore the three-thousand year gap in which they were not produced as well as the extreme geographic variances in which they were found.

The versions offered up of female nudity, especially those of the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic, could not help but offend nineteenth century principles of feminine beauty. The sheer volumes of rounded flesh swelling from bellies, hips and thighs, breasts so large and heavy they hang near the waistline discouraged a reading of physical weakness and sexual modesty to which the modern eye was accustomed. The schematic and stylized ones fell so far afield from expected womanly carnations of sensuosity, they were not brought into the discourse at all. It would be one thing to blame the absence of nudes of modern archetypal beauty on a lack of artistic sensibility, but in view of the sometimes exquisite exhibitions of form in prehistory, the blame must lie elsewhere.

First, there is the question of whether there were any beautiful women in prehistory. Even scholars today would argue that the women of extreme yesteryear had no leisure for self-beautification. And since femininity was a phenomenon of upper class women, that is, women who did not do physical labor, did not work in the fields or scrub other people's floors, the classless women of the Neolithic and before, worn-down by the daily struggle for survival, could not be imagined as feminine. This vision of what women were really like in prehistory stems in part from Darwinian theories. Charles Darwin, a key contributor to the wheel of 'Conflict Theories' of the nineteenth century in which endless struggle and competition are regarded as integral to the condition of all life on the planet, put forth ideas that have taken hold not as hypotheses but as universal and ineradicable truths, hardwired in the psyche and biology of human beings. Under the widely accepted rubric of 'Survival of the Fittest', the role women played was of course the child bearer. Child bearing would begin soon after a girl's first menses. From then on, she was caught in a cycle of pregnancy and nursing until her fertility dried out. There is no room here for Modernity's lovely nubile body. It is no wonder then that early scholars

identified pregnancy as the chief physical condition responsible for distorting the female form in art, despite the lack of evidence.

Anthropology and the archaeologies of prehistory have embellished Darwin's picture. Although it is slowly changing, modern 'scientific' reconstructions from literature, television documentaries and museum exhibits hammer in the current beliefs about past lifeways and sex differences with sorry consistency. Scenes of 'Early Man' feature hominids at least half nude, wearing shaggy furs and unruly hair, graphically illustrating their uncivilized state. We witness broad-chested males standing bravely at center and in the foreground, in front of a cave or encampment, looking out with great purpose on the horizon. There is no doubt that it is men such as these who propel evolution ever forward. They are humanity's future. They usually hold a tool or weapon – clubs, spears, flints – emblems of their superiority over animals and, for that matter, over women, and extensions of their phallic power. They are visibly strong, muscular and sharp-eyed.¹¹ As men are genetically predestined to have superior power, as well as competitiveness and aggression in order to survive, we measure the degree to which these traits are present in images of male nudes of all periods, quickly comparing the size and tumescence of the penis and probably the breadth of the chest and shoulders to mental idealizations constructed by modern anthropology. It was not until recently when scholarship was able to face the anomaly of nude warriors with dainty penises – and *Athenian* warriors at that! – painted on vases.¹²

By contrast, the females of early prehistory squat in the dirt in the shadowy recesses of the cave or around the cook fire, huddled in little groups for protection. Their squatting, close-to-the-earth postures are reminiscent of the animal-like slouching depicted by modern reconstructions of Neanderthals, Darwin's failures. These bedraggled women do not look out, they look down, staring through tangled hair at the cooking pit, the grain-pounding rock in their hands, or the babies hanging on their pendulous breasts. The variations are endless but within the bounds of gendered messages about male as outward, aggressive, competitive, mobile, strong, intelligent, creative, technologically and materially oriented and, above all, phallic and dominant. Women, on the contrary, are inward, fearful, home-bound, passive, definitely weaker and smaller, nearly immobile, lacking imagination, farsightedness and inventiveness, and wholly dependent on men for survival. Unlike males of her group, she is stunted by her biologically fixed role as mother and feeder, an unadorned vehicle of procreation, Darwin's first and most sacrosanct law. She does not contribute to the

¹¹ Moser (1993: 75) identifies three main themes (Man the Hunter, Man the Toolmaker and Man the Artist) in her research on anthropological reconstructions.

¹² See Winkler 1990.

march toward civilization, the march whose giant leaps are named after the technological breakthroughs of men.¹³

Stereotypical thinking of the extreme past sticks with such surprising stubbornness that Linda Hurcombe refers to it as an endemic and self-propagating disease that not even reeducation can cure (Hurcombe 1995: 92). So it is no wonder then that when most of us imagine the women of prehistory, we conjure up pictures of drudgery, of women incapable of inspiring men. Worse than that, the prehistoric woman is emphatically not sexy, according to Modernity's acceptable versions. When prehistoric art depicts images of males or their individual anatomical parts there is little problem in detecting an aggressive potency, whether or not it is actually there; translating images of male nudes, even stick figures, as hunters, chiefs, priests and the like, whose sexiness is inherent in their social power, comes easily as a result.

The same anthropological models suggest that images of female nudes that have survived, on the other hand, cannot represent the real women of prehistory. For one thing, these bodies cannot portray real women because they show obesity, the result of overeating and excess food supply, which supposedly did not exist at that time. For another, women's social significance was beneath recording. Furthermore, their lack of feminine appeal would not merit artistic attention. These bodies then must be the products of fantasy. But why would artists create bodies that are so misshapen by modern standards? No one has suggested, so far as I am aware, that they are male sexual fantasies. However, since they are nude, the reasoning goes, they must represent some sexual aspect of womanliness. And if not sexual mates, then procreators. Either they represent the principle of fertility or fertility charms or they are all versions of the Mother Goddess or various postulated Earth Goddesses.

Whichever they are, they were understood as the by-products of Darwinian expediency, a larger-than-life desperation for an earthly abundance that would never come, projected onto imaginary larger-than-life female forms, over-rich in adipose tissue. What else could be expected? Since the evolution of man and the evolution of art were still in their infancy, and evolution was understood as a teleology of advancement, the male *psyche* had not yet developed sufficiently to envision 'The Nude'. Nevertheless, the nudes that were made in prehistory demonstrate the depth of the compulsion; within them, 'The Nude', the pinnacle of human evolution as it is expressed in art, lies latent.

¹³ Hurcombe (1995: 88) found that "visual constructions give the immediate impression that women are less numerous than men; that males define the species and changes of evolutionary history; and that throughout prehistory, male and females fulfilled the same roles as they commonly do now".

I want to address a few questions here. Given that fertility and Mother Goddess interpretations are no longer credible, why are discussions of the more sensational prehistoric nudes still limited to nature, biology and sexuality? Secondly, why is there not more interest in exploring prehistoric esthetics as the material presents it, perhaps going so far as developing a vocabulary capable of describing prehistoric vision neutrally? In fact, why is there not more consideration that at least some of these nudes represent real women? Even today, in the face of growing obesity among women and men, we continue to deny these nudes a role as illustrations of a reality-based ancient esthetics.

Scholars have mostly looked elsewhere for explanations, at, for instance, possible conceptions of a kind of super pregnancy or disfiguring physical diseases, which means such figurines would represent the unreal or monstrous aberrations rather than idealized norms. Some scholars have tried to explain the fleshy bizarreness as a result of a different perspective, looking down at the body rather than across, refreshingly suggesting that the artist was a woman modeling her work after her own form (McDermott 1996). We need not stretch so far. A realistic look at populations around the globe would show that such body types are indeed not that rare. Those who have recognized that the fat deposits of prehistoric nudes are not much different from those of modern-day women continue, nevertheless, to treat the body forms as medical conditions rather than as cultural idealizations.¹⁴

Çatalhöyük, a cattle town in Neolithic Anatolia, serves to highlight the way prehistoric images of male and female nudes were disparately interpreted. Of a total of 254 known pieces, nearly half represent animals, which earlier scholars mostly ignored. Many other figurines are schematic or semi-human. Yet what dominates our imagination of this site are the fat woman varieties, which the excavator James Mellaart designated as fertility goddesses (fig. 1).

Humanoid and animal figurines were seen as ex-voto images, with the humanoid ones having an apotropaic function, while the animal varieties were supposedly used in hunting magic (Hamilton 1996: 225). In a preliminary, yet sensitive restudy of the site's small finds, Naomi Hamilton stresses the astounding range of artifacts, their variety of contexts and the considerable changes in the assemblages over time. As to the primacy of animal and human fertility as a whole, she states there is a surprising dearth of symbols normally associated with fertility, such as phallic imagery and birth scenes. She sees no justification for reading the 'fat women' as pregnant or giving birth as Mellaart did, and suggests instead that they are

¹⁴ One description of the famous Lespugue statuette reads: "The Lespugue figurine combines hypermastia, displayed steatopygia joining the iliac deposits and steatomeria. Emaciation of the upper half of the body recalls superior lipoatrophy with inferior lipo-hypertrophy," which gives the impression of a near-death situation (Duhard 1991: 559).

quite similar to many *mature* women's bodies of modern-day Anatolia (ibid.). If, as Hamilton noted, the enormous nude female sitting in a leopard throne, which Mellaart named the 'Mistress of Animals' on the basis of the throne's leopard motif, and thereby stressing her unity with nature, has indeed a common body type, why then is she a goddess and not a mortal woman? Is it because the Mistress of Animals does not square with anthropology's production of the drudge? Or is it because she neglects Modernity's esthetic and psychological requirements for 'The Nude'?

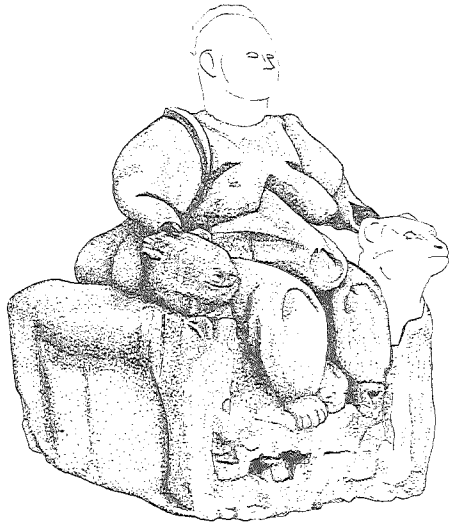


fig. 1 Sitting female, 'Mistress of Animals', Çatalhöyük, Anatolia, c. 5500 BCE [Amiet 1980: 349 fig. 163; drawing I. Haselbach]

Although there is no real reason to discount obese mature women as the supreme expressions of sexiness for the peoples of prehistory, perhaps the whole issue of sexuality here is a sidetrack. Hamilton describes the Mistress as a matron, her pose "relaxed, confident even commanding". In short, she appears "more in accord with the decision-making role played in some societies by the longer-lived experienced members" (ibid.). If this were a male body seated in a throne, nude or not, there would be no doubt as to his interpretation – he would either be the chief or priest-king. The throne's large cat motifs, rather than giving Mellaart leeway to add this figure to the mix of 'Nature Goddesses', would have been argued as belonging to the long tradition of decorations in the ancient Near East for thrones made for *mortal* royals, which later were typically lions. The application of this double standard is widespread. Minoan wall paintings of semi-nude women sitting in thrones are marginalized as goddesses, yet a fresco of a semi-nude youth with a plumed headdress is a prince. Equally curious is the designa-

tion of relief figures of Çatalhöyük as men in hunting rituals or men hunting, despite the fact that their sexual identities cannot be determined and despite the lack of scenes depicting the killing of animals. On the other hand, all humanoid figures that display anything like a curve or the merest bump in the chest area must represent goddesses. This can only mean that the Neolithic peoples of Çatalhöyük could not conceive of portraying real mortal women, although the portrayal of mortal men came easily. Did they really leave women altogether out of their record?

Whereas the equations of female nudity with anonymous sexuality and the natural world preclude it from belonging to the processes of power and civilization building, no such equation troubles the interpretations of male nudes. During historical periods of the ancient Near East, unless a nude or partially nude male wears or carries a well-known insignia for godhood, he is identified as either a hero, warrior, priest, chief, king or prince, in other words, males, even though nude, still belong to the movers and shakers of real-world civilizations. They are legendary men or men in great positions of power, which suits Darwinian theory as males as the agents of human evolution. Nor do such depictions need to be realistic to be awarded a prominent place in history. An Early Dynastic statuette shows a nude male standing with legs together. His beard is so highly defined that it appears false. He holds both hands curled into fists at his chest. His body lacks detail, with the exception of the scrotum, which, standing out against a comparatively smooth surface, seems overemphasized. The legs are rendered somewhat like a burlap sack with a line etched down the middle to indicate separation. The toes are mere incisions. But the decisive iconography is his head-dress, which is either a band around his head or a roll-brimmed cap (fig. 2).

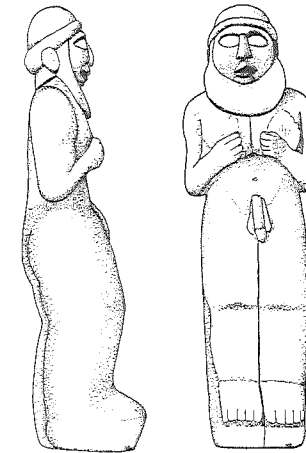


fig. 2 Standing male, Mesopotamia, c. 3300 BCE [Orthmann 1975: fig. 11a-b; drawing U. Zurkinden-Kolberg]

As the headdress has long been regarded as a sign for kingship, this, then, must be a king.¹⁵ Unbelievably, the instances in which female figures wear the same headdress have not been factored into this reading, wherever it has been applied; nor have they led to interpreting the females as queens. If this were a female nude, it would never be identified as a queen, but as a goddess. Turning the issue around, only the operation of modern biases could cast kingship onto what is otherwise a blank body, more reminiscent of the later herms than mortals. As we shall see below, some (half-nude) male figures wearing the same headdress that were formally labeled as kings are now known to be minor spirits. Whereas art historians have not seen nudity as inappropriate for male royal representation, nudity however is unthinkable for female royal representation. The double standards are sad reflections of modern arbitrariness. The record for the early periods of the ancient Near East indicates that what was worn or not worn may have had more to do with social class rather than gender in certain times and places.

A Pleistocene stone relief from about 20000 years ago in the Dordogne, the so-called Laussel Venus, features a woman standing front with large eggplant-shaped breasts and fat accumulations around her hips and thighs (fig. 3).

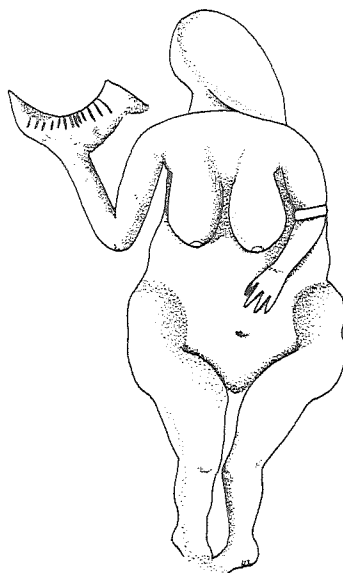


fig. 3 'Femme à la corne' or 'The Laussel Venus', France, c. 25000-20000 BCE [Huyghe 1962: 29 fig. 24; drawing U. Zurkinden-Kolberg]

¹⁵ Although 'king' or 'priest-king' is the usual identification, Amiet (1980: 356 fig. 226) refers to the figure as a "naked dignitary".

She looks at a striated horn, which she holds up with her right hand. Her face has been damaged, no doubt deliberately, indicating that it was understood at some point in time to portray a specific identity. When I first saw this image, I was struck by the impression of power unleashed by her nudity. The figure, like the Çatalhöyük figure above, has great presence. The build up of flesh seemed to me a physicalized representation of the accretions of time and experience. She stood for me like a book of ancient wisdom written in human form, a form, which might be construed as interesting rather than sensuous or lovely. Perhaps she is a legendary chieftain or someone who spawned an entire tribe, or a great shaman or healer or the official keeper of the seasons? Or perhaps a call on her horn once saved others from danger. The possibilities are vast. The qualities that I ascribed to this figure cannot of course be proved, but if we insist on labeling prehistoric female nudes as goddesses and reading them exclusively through the lens of sexuality, there is little hope of perceiving the potentially endless meanings nudity might convey. I am not trying to argue here for evidence of an ancient matriarchy but rather to show that it is just as problematic to identify male nudes as figures prominent in government, religion or in civilization building in general, which is often just guesswork, as it is to identify female nudes as invariably divine.¹⁶ It may be, in the end, as we know more, that much of what we see in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms has more to do with the spirit world, a region between the realms of mortals and the later attested high deities.

IV. Naturalism, the great deceiver, with an Old Babylonian case study

As mentioned earlier, the privileging of naturalism filters out a countless number of female nudes of prehistory and of all periods in the ancient Near East from the art historical discourse of sexuality. These figures, which in the ancient Near East were mostly molded in common clay and often not much more than low reliefs, are regarded as primitive. As too strange to be biologically recognizable and too crude to be art, they are mute, dumbfounding scholars, who have limited their commentary on them to typolo-

¹⁶ For various reasons, scholarship exhibits a paranoid trepidation for identifying female images of extreme antiquity as real women in situations of power. For one thing, such identification complicates the 'Big Man' social theories of anthropology. Accepted androcentric thinking has wiped ancient matriarchal systems off the board of reasonable possibilities for all times and places, barring none. Lastly, within gender sensitive scholarship, one risks being accused of so-called Second Wave feminism – the 'add-and-mix' passé form of feminist research that attempts to make women of the past more visible.

gies. Because of their irrelevancy as art, their lack of modeled sensuosity and their non-elite archaeological contexts, mostly in the domestic sphere, the sex of their makers has been open to question. Moreover, since they have nothing to do with modern masculine idealizations of 'The Nude', these then, perhaps, are candidates for objects fashioned by and for women.

Why, however, should breasts made in a naturalistic style merit more interest than those that are not? Do they have greater significance? Why would pinched or appliqué breasts or those indicated by incised half circles or full circles *not* carry the same statements as the more realistic ones? Both sets are nothing more than signs in different stylistic systems and it is often the abbreviated, abstracted sign that is capable of carrying the most meaning. Whereas the cold sexlessness of the pinched, appliqué and incised varieties rules out entrance into the ever-widening conversation on 'The Body', naturalistic breasts prompt enthusiastic discussion as well as admiration. If sexuality is a neutral region of study, as it is purported to be, it should be fully liberated from naturalism.

Perhaps a more important question is, why should breasts, realistic or not, point to sexuality in the first place? A woman's body comes with breasts in the same way as a table comes with legs. As one of many signs for the female body in the language of imagery, it may not convey more messages about sexuality than a letter in a given word does. Another major sign is of course the vulva. In fact, a triangle with a slash at the bottom corner – a schematic vulva – is a word in cuneiform writing, standing for 'woman', just as a simple phallic symbol similar to an arrow pointing up means 'man'. A triangle with a slash may not be great art by our standards but one could probably claim that as a metonymic sign it carried vaster, deeper meaning than a naked female body did to its contemporaries.

Do we read style in two ways, naturalism as like us and stylistic or schematic as not like us? And thus better or worse, advanced or backward? Do we see behind realistic representation artists and audiences who are sufficiently akin to us to assume that they shared our systems of gender recognition and our appreciation of 'The Nude'? Because many realistic nudes of the ancient Mesopotamian repertoire somewhat resemble 'The Nude' of western conventions, they are regarded as art, the products of, and for, civilized man. As art, we elevate them to a position in our visual tradition where they ride above their artifact classes, their archaeological and social contexts, all the things that would actually tell us about their original meaning and function. We are blinded by their frank nakedness, excavating messages about sex and sexuality that may or may not be there.

Nearly all of them – the sleek ones, the violin-shaped ones, those holding infants or tambourines or clasping their hands under their breasts – stand in frontal positions, boldly facing the viewer/subject. This 'confrontational' position has given rise to serious overstatements about the sexual openness of the ancient Near East before the androcentric Greeks and the

moralizing Christians. Even the baby at the breast cannot shield the naked Nursing Mother of the Old Babylonian period from excessive sexualization. One scholar asks us to ignore the chief identifying iconography of this figure, her infant, and see her "not as a mother as a reproductive agent, but one who is an object of male sexual desire and pleasure. Her straightforward reproductive capabilities are de-emphasized in favour of her desirability. They are no longer as important as her ability to lure the male gaze, to please the male viewer sexually" (Bahrani 1996: 8). Realism is of course the culprit here because it tends to erase all awareness of cultural difference, in this case, as extreme as 4000 years and from the ancient banks of the Tigris and Euphrates to modern urban America.

The above slant on the Nursing Mother's sexuality is not the result of research; it is contrary to it. Stating that female nudes belong to an all-male province implies that women have no sensitivity, interest or even awareness of their own bodies (or, if women created nudes for male sexual delectation, are they not then pimping their own sex?). Furthermore, it implies that women are culturally conditioned to avoid looking at realistic images of female nudity. Rather than extracting the Nursing Mother from the artifact class to which it belongs, as in the case above, it is of the upmost importance to study the motif *within* that context before any claims about its meaning can even be considered. The Nursing Mother is a minor motif that belongs to a vast group of Old Babylonian terracotta plaque reliefs, which began appearing toward the end of the third millennium and circulated throughout Mesopotamia until around the end of the eighteenth century BCE. Plaques proliferated during an era of extreme social breakdown and one that witnessed the erosion of temple authority and the privatization of religion.

The industry furnished Mesopotamia with its chief art form for over three centuries. Although plaques, usually no more than half the size of a hand, are mold-made and mass-produced for the non-elite, they nevertheless display an unusually high quality of craftsmanship. They portrayed both male and female nudity realistically and often in exquisite detail. A few of the eighty or so motifs (a great many being nudes of both sexes) are shared with those of the higher-status cylinder seals. Until recently, much has been guessed or claimed about individual motifs without doing the real work it takes to establish the function of the artifact class in general.¹⁷

As it was once my task to analyze the third most popular set of motifs, the erotic scenes, I endeavored to uncover why the terracotta plaque industry arose and what its overall purpose was in order to understand the

¹⁷ See namely the catalogues of Klengel-Brandt (1974) and Mayer-Opificius (1961). Elise Auerbach's dissertation (1994) is more comprehensive and very useful, although I have reached different conclusions, especially with regard to archaeological contexts (Assante 2000: 108-78).

erotic subset. After hundreds of pages of files on motifs and their archaeological contexts, of literary allusions to the motifs, and so forth (unfortunately too little of this grunt work is reflected in what I have so far published on plaques), it became clear that most of what appears on Old Babylonian plaques has to do, first, with protecting the household and its members from harm, mostly in the form of evil spirits, and, second, with promoting an auspicious life for the residents.¹⁸ They were, in short, tools of unofficial magico-religious practices of domestic life, along with the household shrine that occurs in the same period. They employed supernatural beings, native to unofficial religion, to do their work – minor deities, demons, semi-divine heroes and legendary figures, divine personifications and the more minor folk aspects of higher gods. Much of the imagery and some of the find spots point to a special relationship between plaques and doorways or other thresholds, which were areas looked upon as particularly vulnerable to the penetration of the malignant and therefore in special need of protection.

Individual plaque characters, such as the Nursing Mother, appear with careful consistency despite a three hundred year life span and wide geographic diffusion of their images. None are anonymous, nude or not. Nude females of any variety were certainly not made for the male gaze any more than other plaque figures were, such as the very popular bull-eared god. Furthermore, plaques were often displayed at the entrances and shrines of typically one and two-room homes, necessarily viewed then by *all* family members, including women and children.

The Nursing Mother is a known entity from the folk religion of ancient Mesopotamia with a specific set of powers, as are all those that can currently be traced. Perhaps she is a wet nurse or the then minor goddess Ninisina, who lost her child.¹⁹ Most likely the figure protected against demonic 'baby-snatching', meaning against infant mortality, a severe problem of the time (Scurlock 1991), which would mean that her images were made primarily for women and infants. Such a function with its subsequent viewing audience is a long way from sexual titillation for men. The Nursing Mother's posture and gestures, as well as the infant she holds are necessarily present for the explicit purpose of identifying her. Exact replication of the Nursing Mother's iconography in style and content or of any other plaque motif was crucial for easy recognition of the figure's identity over a broad and culturally various geographic region, not just to the owners of these plaques, but also to the unseen spirits these figures were made to manipulate (Assante 2002a). Their visual exactitude is also comparable to ritual exactitude. A change in any one of the portrait's

¹⁸ For sexual plaques see Assante 2000; 2002b; for plaques in general see Assante 2002a.

¹⁹ Ninisina means 'Lady of Isin', a city where many examples of this motif were found. See Hrouda's excavation reports from Isin-Išān Bahrīyāt (1977; 1981; 1987).

conventions, including its style, reduces the efficacy of the figure, if not annulling it altogether.

Overwhelmingly the most popular of all Old Babylonian plaque types was the Nude Female, found in some places such as Kish by the hundreds. Elise Auerbach identified at least eight sub-typologies, not counting those lying on beds, nursing or carrying musical instruments (Auerbach 1994: 46-49). The widest spread of these is also the earliest plaque type known (fig. 4).²⁰ This figure, henceforth the 'Nackte Frau', as we affectionately called her in Edith Porada's classes, to distinguish her from other female nudes, has been the target of extreme over-sexualization because of, first, her naturalistic and modeled loveliness, second, her audacity to expose herself so blatantly and, third, her frontal stare.

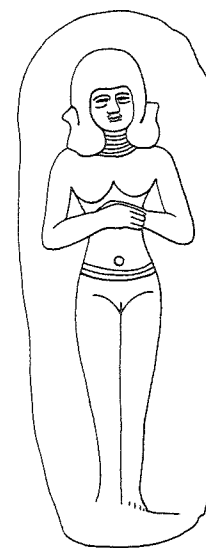


fig. 4 Nude Female, Old Babylonian Terracotta Plaque, c. 2000-1700 BCE [Winter 1987: fig. 68]

Her body – slender frame, long-legged, unexaggerated secondary sexual characteristics – conforms to modern tastes. Yet as it was the template for most other realistic representations of womanhood produced by the plaque industry, including those in narrative scenes, it may not say much about concepts of womanly beauty as does the modern Nude but rather presents female generically as a neutral zone, an average, yet also undamaged body. What does differentiate her from other lone nudes is her position: legs held

²⁰ According to Auerbach, this motif probably came from Akkadian figurines (1994: 258).

primly together, head upright, chin tucked in and hands locked just below her breasts. This specific pose remained unchanged for 300 years. It is iconographical. And it tells us precisely who she is.

Unmistakably, she is the same nude who appears on Old Babylonian cylinder seals often as an object, a figurine or the very terracotta plaque just described, sometimes as a filler motif or field element, perhaps lying sideways in the background (fig. 5).



fig. 5 *Lamassu, šēdu, Warring Ishtar and Nude Female. Old Babylonian Seal Impression, c. 2000-1700 BCE [Buchanan 1981: fig. 935; drawing U. Zurkinden-Kolberg]*

Despite her frontality and nakedness, her fixed stance, the closed gesture of her hands, the sharp T-form outline created by the angles of her arms, convey an impression of the inert, the closed and the static. She does not represent the living. She is often in seals a representation of a representation. In a very few scenes, she wears the horned miter, commonly seen on male and female statuettes to depict divine status. Less frequently, she is the recipient of worship, as many objects were in ancient Mesopotamia. In seal scenes, her fixedness and frontality are in sharp contrast to the action taking place around her and work to interrupt action rather than further it, like a misplaced exclamation point stranded in the middle of a sentence. In short, artists did not depict her as they depicted other figures in the same scene but as aloof and unresponsive. The Nude Female was clearly an icon, an object, hardly understood as a woman at all by her contemporaries.

Nevertheless, this prim little lifeless copy of a mass-replication has been regarded in older literature generally as a fertility goddess or charm (e.g. Teissier 1984: 26), as the fiery goddess of sex and war, Inanna/Ishtar, as a *kezertu*, meaning 'curly-headed one' (e.g. Blocher 1987: 225-30), who scholars have associated with prostitution, either in Ishtar's supposed sacred cults or on the streets, or she is a dancer (e.g. Collon 1986: 132), in

spite of her wooden inertia, either connected to fertility rituals or to extra-curricular prostitution. More recently, one art historian sees her as the quintessential 'seductress', explicitly made for – and engaged in – sexually exciting men (Bahrani 1996: 8-9). Never mind that she appears frequently on seals whose owners are women (Collon 1986: 132). All of these interpretations turn the 'Nackte Frau' into an active sexual agent, and, as I will presently show, all are likely to be wrong.

A chief reason scholars see the 'Nackte Frau' as practiced in the ways of sex is her position facing the viewer. The reading of this position as confrontational or challenging is the result of visual habits inherited from the nineteenth century, conditioned by endless presentations of 'The Nude'. As mentioned earlier, modern viewers are accustomed to naked women who we can see but who cannot see us. The nudes of Modernity are regularly shown in profile or semi-profile rather than frontally, and nearly always looking away from the viewer. They either are not aware of being seen, or, if they are, they attempt to hide their nakedness. Typical would be the women bathing motif, in which a woman is unaware of the presumably male voyeur nearby (e.g. Bathsheba or Susanna at her bath). Harsher versions of nude women appear in orientalized frames, such as women stripped and defenseless, exposed in shame for sale at slave markets for male buyers (and viewers), or those who are seasoned sexual objects, such as odalisques who display their creamy bodies for the choosy eye of their owners, the local caliphs (and again, of course, male viewers).

Such modern conventions establish a naturalized voyeuristic relationship between the subject/viewer and the object viewed, and maintain the male's position of dominance. The account of the reception of Manet's painting 'Olympia' illustrates what can happen if they are not observed. Subsequent to the first public exhibition of 'Olympia', in which a nude stares with seeming defiance out at the viewer and thereby challenges him, chaos broke loose among art critics and social commentators.²¹ It was not enough to regard the figure, Olympia, as a sexually sophisticated woman or even as a sexually calloused prostitute. Men condemned her as the most defiled of whores, as though she were a flesh and blood creature of independent volition. She was a filthy perversion of womanhood of the lowest class (read 'unfeminine'), who deliberately defies the natural order of male dominance. The visual disturbance was so threatening, so offensive and blame so hotly and irrationally put on the imaginary object that Manet, the actual author of this offense, all but escaped criticism. In a milder vein, the association between a nude female's outward gaze with professional sexual experience has also been attached to Titian's 'Venus of Urbino', a nude

²¹ See Clark's fascinating discussion (1984: 79-145). Clark attributed the scathing reception of the Olympia to problems of class representation, to which I and others do not agree, e.g. Pollock 1988.

who displays herself quite lavishly across a canvas, gazing outwardly at the viewer. She has been wrongly judged by the art authorities of the nineteenth century as a courtesan. She was not. The painting was a wedding gift given by a groom to his young bride in order to help her familiarize herself with her body.²²

Similar distortions have been applied to ancient Near Eastern material as well. The famous 'Burney Relief', an unusually large Old Babylonian terracotta plaque featuring a well-formed, busty nude facing front has been grouped along with others showing similar iconography as a 'Lady of Easy Virtue' or, even stronger, as "a cult relief showing Inanna as goddess of harlots, [which] would have been set up in a brothel" (Curtis & Collon 1996: 92). Were scholars too blinded by what seemed to be a shameless display of naturalistic nudity to see the more important identifying iconography of this figure – her wings, her bird-claw feet planted on lions, the flanking owls? This proto-sphinx was a symbol of death, a she-demon from the Underworld. What could it have to do with prostitution? Certainly, such a frightening specter could not be expected to attract customers.

Neither the 'Nackte Frau' nor the 'Burney Relief' portrays prostitutes or women of 'easy virtue'. Furthermore, prostitution and brothels are subjects that were flatly ignored in ancient Mesopotamia, despite the endless mistranslations and willful distortions of modern scholarship that insist on inserting it in its arts and texts. If primary sources purported to be about prostitution are looked at critically, texts mention it only twice, and that merely as allusions (Assante 1998: 86 and *passim*). In view of this and other reasons given below, the wide general appeal of the 'Nackte Frau' for women, children and men of humble homes from the Diyala in the north to the southern reaches of old Sumer makes untenable a reading of prostitutes and temptresses for the most commonplace of all Old Babylonian images. Even love charms would not account for such a profuse and long-lived distribution. Although prostitution no doubt existed in some form, it was simply not talked about, nor was it visually represented. In view of the social climate, it is more than unlikely that Mesopotamians modeled ritual or secular prostitutes for regular household consumption.

Although it might have been reasonable to assume that the mass appeal of the 'Nackte Frau' reflected a pervasive practice of fertility cults and related household rituals, there is nothing whatsoever in primary sources to support such a claim. In fact, as I have shown elsewhere, the fertility cult theories and religious prostitutes who supposedly conducted them are largely the fictions of the Victorian anthropologist, Sir James Frazer. Such practices are not attested in this region in either the visual or written record,

²² Personal communication, Prof. David Rosand. See Clark 1984: 93-95. The Olympia is a deliberate inversion of the Venus of Urbino.

and are, in any case, contrary to the social concerns of overpopulation in all historical periods of Mesopotamia (Assante 2003). The proposal that our nude portrays Inanna/Ishtar could account for the commonness of this motif if there were anything in the image or in contemporary texts that actually linked the goddess to this imagery. First, why would Inanna/Ishtar, the most popular goddess of the pantheon of high Mesopotamian deities, be represented as a field element lying on its side in some cylinder seals? And what aspect would representation of her nudity be trying to depict? Her sexiness? If so, why then would she be portrayed in such a stilted posture? And why as a terracotta figurine or plaque and not as an active living being? Even more prohibiting is that in some cylinder scenes Ishtar appears along with our Nude (fig. 5).

One might argue that the seal carver was depicting the two chief aspects of the goddess, as goddess of both war and sex. But when Old Babylonian artists wanted to show Inanna's sexy aspects, which were *minor* aspects from this period on, they portrayed them with absolute clarity and without the least subterfuge, either in the moments just before coitus or actually in the act.²³ It seems obvious to me that female nudity in ancient Mesopotamia does not communicate messages about sex, sexual functions, such as fertility, or even sexual appeal unless accompanying iconography specifically spells it out. In fact, many female nudes of the ancient Near East may be largely silent about biological sex, or only vaguely refer to gender as an abstract condition, as impartial as the feminine or masculine gender of the word table in French or German.

If all the interpretations of the 'Nackte Frau' are so far wrong, as I am claiming, then how does one proceed? Whatever her identity turns out to be, it must satisfy certain questions, such as why the mass popularity and the domestic contexts. Moreover, what is the significance of her representation as an object on seals rather than as a living personage? Why put her in a pose with her hands locked at chest level? Who are the other characters she most often appears with in presentation scenes, the most frequently occurring motif of Old Babylonian cylinder seals? The most common grouping of these scenes feature a mace-carrying, semi-nude bearded male and a divine female figure in addition to the 'Nackte Frau' (fig. 5). What are the functions of this accompanying pair? What functions that crossed over from plaques to seals could help illuminate the purpose of the 'Nackte Frau'? And is there anything in texts that can point to her identity or, perhaps, the identity of her cohorts? On a broader scale, what was the

²³ The Old Babylonian period featured Inanna/Ishtar in literature and art as the single woman (the *harimtu*) going to the tavern for sex, or as the young bride-to-be preparing to make love with Dumuzi. For thorough discussion on these themes in both media, see Assante 2000; 2002. In later periods, her explicitly sexual roles were quite limited, if not nonexistent in certain places.

social background in Mesopotamia of the period that would require mass production of this Nude?

I have already mentioned that prior to and during the Old Babylonian period, the rise of unofficial household religion and domestic cults make themselves evident in architecture, small finds and texts. From texts, we learn that in the popular imagination of the period everyone ideally had two protective spirits, the suppliant goddess or *lamassu* (in Akkadian, *la m m a* in Sumerian) and the male spirit, the *šēdu* (in Akkadian, *u d u g* in Sumerian) (Westenholz 1998: 75). The *lamassu* has been fairly easy to identify in art because of her typical gesture of supplication, the upraised hands. In addition, she always wears a horned miter and ceremonial sheepskin robe. The *lamassu* is a guide who accompanies mortals on the life path. She also guards good fortune, spiritual health and the physical appearance of human beings and of things, such as temples, etc (CAD L: 60-64). As a suppliant, she is furthermore a mediator between celestial and mortal realms, and it is in this function that she appears most often as a single figure on terracotta plaques.

The male of the triad, who was formerly referred to as a king, has more recently been identified as the spirit, *šēdu* (Wiggermann 1986: 23-27), supplying another example of the double standards mentioned above in which full and partially nude males provoke willy-nilly descriptions of mortals in positions of power, here, of course, wrongly.²⁴ The *šēdu* is the *lamassu*'s most regular companion in both visual and written sources. Like her, he appears as a solo figure on plaques, and on a few they appear together, although these plaque motifs are rare. Unlike the 'Nackte Frau', which is first known in clay, the pair seems to have originated in the glyptic and later copied on terracotta plaques and with great fidelity, again showing the importance for exacting replication despite the technical demands of different media. The *šēdu*, like the *lamassu*, is a propitious protective spirit who intercedes with high deities on behalf of individual mortals. He can also represent an individual's life force and help in the recovery of illness (CAD Š: 256-58). Both the *lamassu* and the *šēdu* have additional functions of protecting thresholds and regulating what goes in and out of doorways, a function common to plaques. Both are minor deities, which also fits what is known about the magical workforce of the plaque industry. So far, everything seems to fit nicely.

Given that two of the three personages in the most common configuration of the Old Babylonian period are in the main protective spirits, the third figure, the 'Nackte Frau', should be as well. But there are substantial differences. The *lamassu* and the *šēdu* appear in plaques and seals in

²⁴ He has been called a king (e.g. Porada 1948: 54; Barrelet 1971: 59) or at least an aspect of 'active kingship' (e.g. Collon 1986: 101), a warrior, a divine warrior king (e.g. Moortgat 1940: 33), and so forth, with his mace as a symbol of royal authority.

profile, often in a narrative sequence. In seals they are in action. For example, the *lamassu* raises her hands in supplication or guides someone by the hand; the *šēdu* strides holding his mace. In prayers for help and good fortune they were called upon to *accompany* a person through life, imagined as a physical activity: "may a good *šēdu* and a good *lamassu* walk by my side daily" (CAD Š: 257-8), which is a Babylonian expression of personal happiness (Wiggermann 1986: 26). Similarly, losing these protective spirits is expressed by motion – they 'move away', sometimes withdrawing from a person in anger. These are true spirits, possessing emotion and free will; hence, it was allowable to portray them in cylinder seal scenes taking different positions and performing different actions. Conversely, the nude female is allowed only one static position, regardless of the media, and as an object incapable of participating in the narrative action going on around her. This considerable difference indicates that she operates on a very different level from her cohorts.

Working from the standpoint of textual sources, Frans A. M. Wiggermann tentatively put forth the idea that the Nude of Old Babylonian presentation scenes was *baštu*, the personification of dignity (1986: 28). *Baštu* is the figure most often paired in texts with the *lamassu* and *šēdu*; the triad expresses the Babylonian formula for the good life. Art historical analysis supports Wiggermann's supposition. The portrayal of a personification of an abstract quality would explain why this figure is represented as inert and lifeless, a pictorial rather than written symbol. Furthermore, personifications of abstract principles were gendered, so that e.g. *kittum*, 'truth', is feminine and *mešarum*, 'justice' is masculine (Westenholz 1998: 78). On the most fundamental level then, a female body was used to designate *baštu*, because the word itself is feminine. Nevertheless, the triad of male, female and an abstract neuter represents a certain gender balance required for a good life. Like the *lamassu* and *šēdu*, *baštu* is a protective spirit, so she not only stands for dignity but she protects it as well. The Assyrian Dictionary (CAD B: 142-44) further defines *baštu* as the positive qualities of decorum in action and looks, good looks, pride, more or less the way one presents oneself to the world. The word is further used to describe gods, animals, buildings, and other objects. There is a cautionary note at the end of the entry *not* to read the word *baštu* as denoting sexual parts or sexual power.

We cannot know at this remove what exactly dignity meant to the ancient people of the Land Between the Two Rivers. It seems to be connected in certain textual allusions to a kind of personal power, a visible charisma called *kuzbu* (in Akkadian, *hili* in Sumerian), which important objects and buildings also possessed. In one Old Babylonian textual reference, it is a gift conferred by Inanna/Ishtar's gaze, along with splendor and the protection of a *lamassu* and *šēdu* (CAD B: 143). In the world of western languages, dignity is the one human property that can remain after everything

else is lost. One hopes to die in dignity. To lose it is to lose the last of one's personhood. It is self-respect and respect in the eyes of others. Mesopotamians seem to have regarded dignity, perhaps rightly, as indispensable to healthy survival, a personal climate that optimized all relations one hopes to have in life, in the family, in the community and with people of power and influence in general. Dignity and its resultant aspect of good looks were in all likelihood essential considerations in securing a good spouse. More importantly, cuneiform texts of all periods speak of the necessity for mortals to be pleasing to the gods of temple and state, and especially to one's personal deities in order to avert misfortune and to insure a long, happy life. No doubt, presenting oneself with *baštu* to the gods was essential to the making and maintenance of good relations with the divine. It seems that with *baštu*, all walks of life were expected to be smoother and to lead to greater promise. It is really no wonder then why the little clay figure that personified it was ubiquitous in Mesopotamian neighborhoods.

It may seem ironic at first glance to use a nude to personify the way a person presents him or herself to the world. Looking at it from another standpoint, how would one dress dignity? Any item of clothing in the art of this period and, for that matter, of most periods in the ancient Near East, were powerful markers of identity as well as iconographical cues for the wearer's function, class and so forth. The *lamassu* always wears the identifying ceremonial robe because, as *the* suppliant of Mesopotamia, she is frequently in the presence of higher deities. The *šēdu* has his warrior kilt and mace; both clearly identify his innate fighting spirit. Dignity is too basic to have such dress. It is something essential, bone deep and unadorned, and it can belong to everyone, regardless of class or gender. Perhaps the ancients regarded dignity in a similar light to our own, as that which remains to a person when all else is stripped away.

Nudity here is also a way of universalizing a symbol, democratizing it, while at the same time suggesting that *baštu* originated before or outside of human civilization. In addition, the secondary meanings, 'good looks', 'decorum', properties of flesh and bone, are not complicated by clothing but fully exposed and made as free as possible from social markers. Nevertheless, the lovely body displayed, prim as it is, is no more than a template for the well-formed. Other than its posture, a sign of decorum and possibly even piousness and modesty, no deviations are tolerated. If there were deviations, they would emphatically signify a specific identity, sometimes in the extreme, such as one sees in a plaque motif where the figure is nude but squat, bow-legged and sexually ambivalent. The nakedness of *baštu* is more acceptable for representation because viewers and owners of either plaques or seals know her as an abstract, as something not quite alive and lacking sexual appetites. In the elite medium of cylinder seals, since she is understood as a copy of a copy, she is twice removed, too distanced from any citation of palpable sexuality to stir desire.

V. Conclusion

Analyzing the imagery of nudity from prehistory or the ancient Near East is far from simple. Art historians and archaeologists are often confronted with a near total silence about the social meaning and function of an image. Nevertheless, an object's obscurity should work to motivate a healthy uncertainty and a higher degree of self-scrutiny as well as a rigorous interrogation of standing interpretations. Modern theory on the body and, of course, older theory anchored in nineteenth century anthropology, should be applied only if they are consistent with the material evidence and its temporal and geographical contexts, rather than distorting material to support theory, as in the examples given here.

The realistic nude body tempts essentialization; its blankness seduces the eye to dress it with the familiar in which failure to keep in view the exotic and the unexpected is all too easy. 'The Nude' of Modernity, long regarded as a signpost of evolutionary ascendancy, has been the ultimate reference point from which all other nudes are derivative. The embodiment of Post-Enlightenment social constructions about power and gender, 'The Nude' has set standards of beauty, youth, femininity, modesty and naturalism that still dictate our approach to female nudity of long-ago. Scholars of prehistory and the ancient Near East have used the departures from anyone of these standards as the spring-boards for their interpretations.

From the simple departures of physical maturity, obesity and frontality, I have followed only two trajectories among many possible others – the real versus the unreal, the normal versus the abnormal – that may seem at first contradictory or at least nonconvergent, only to show different sides of the same issue. For instance, physical maturity or obesity has been construed as reflecting the abnormal and the unreal in certain imagery that may very well be reality-based. Whereas frontality combined with realism were read as real but also as indicating an abnormal degree of sexual experience for an image that, on investigation, turns out to be quite distanced from the real. The consequent implications of unexamined readings have promoted long-standing mistaken impressions of prehistory as uninhabited by women worthy of representation, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the ancient Near East as preoccupied with the arts of seduction.²⁵ One wonders how different our versions of the remote past might have been if artists had fashioned nude females more in accordance with modern tastes.

²⁵ It should be obvious that interpreting female images of all types as deities does not elevate the status of women but rather expunges women from the annals of human history. Modern anthropological reconstructions of prehistory further contribute to this erasure (see above n. 16). For historiography of the ancient Near East that wrongly portrays women as abnormally experienced sexually, see Assante 1998; 2003.

I have also questioned the application of modern theory of sexuality on prehistoric and ancient Near Eastern nudes largely because scholars of sexuality, men and women alike, usually presuppose a modern male standpoint, which reduces female nudity to being about sexual charge. For objects that portray a naturalistic sensuousness recognizable to the modern eye, ancient male authorship as well as male audiences are tacitly presumed. Such presumptions may be true for state art in certain times and places in ancient Mesopotamia, but cannot be true for all representation, especially in view of the multi-vocalism of Mesopotamian artistic production. These conjectures as they are applied to prehistory are as skewed as the popularized, reactionary alternative anthropology of Marija Gimbutas (e.g. 1989; 1991), which insists that art in prehistory was produced by women for women's consumption.

The forms of female sensuousness, as they have appeared for some forty thousand years, cannot possibly belong to a single-sex province, whether all-male or all-female, nor can a single function be assigned to them. Our current inability to investigate the sexuality of schematic and stylized nudes of the extreme past further demonstrates the prevailing notion that a male point of view operates behind images of naturalistic female nudity. Since we cannot locate with certainty a gendered intention for unrealistic nudes, we cannot talk about their sexuality. By contrast, art historians of Post-Impressionist periods can fit unrealistic nudes, such as Picasso's, into the discourse because, since they are deconstructions of the canonical, they still cite the male-oriented 'Nude' of Modernity.

Lastly, I have questioned the whole category of sexuality as a viable focus of study for certain images because it may obscure original meaning rather than recover it, which the 'Nackte Frau' example illustrates. As Caroline W. Bynum found for medieval representations of the body, sexuality may simply be beside the point.²⁶ As long as nineteenth-century visual habits and gender attitudes persist and the current preoccupation with sexuality remains unexamined, the diversity of meaning represented by the nudes of antiquity will be beyond our grasp.

ABBREVIATIONS

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

²⁶ Bynum (1995) argues that representations of the medieval body make statements about putrefaction and religious anxiety rather than sexuality.

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