And they were tomb mates: Conceptualizing gender and sexuality in the Ancient Near East

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By Thomas A.R. Prins

Figure on the cover:
“The Monuments of Nineveh” by Sir Austen Henry Layard, 1853
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Conceptualizing gender and sexuality in the Ancient Near East

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Dedicated to all those brave enough to face their own biases
and think outside the norm.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Last century saw a significant archaeological discovery that many have still not heard of. That of two manicurists. In 1964, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, two male manicurist to the pharao, were found in a tomb together. The tomb was lined with depictions of the two men enjoyed in intimate embraces, and their wives seem to be glaringly absent. This raised many questions about the relationship of the two. The chief antiquities inspector of Lower Egypt at the time, Mounir Basta, speculated that they might be brothers, father and son, or even two officials who had enjoyed such a good friendship they wished to remain together in death (Reeder, 2008, p. 143). Eventually, the pair was published as being "twins" (Moussa et al., 1977, p. 22). After all, they had found the word *sn* or "brother", referring to the pair (Beines, 1985, p. 463). Baines used this in his study of ancient Egyptian twinship, along with another pair: Suty and Hor. However, there was a striking absence of any explicit mention of twinship. This might have meant that they were actually not twins. However, Baines concluded there must have been a taboo on twinship in ancient Egypt (Baines, 1985, p. 463). It was only after this work by Baines that scholars such as Shubert and Cherpion, who studied the iconography of the tomb more closely, made a seemingly obvious proposition: not of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep as twins, or even as relatives, but as lovers (Shubert 2004, pp. 159-60) (Cherpion, 1986, p. 66). You see, in ancient Egypt "brother" could be used between anyone on equal footing. Therefore, it could mean "colleague", "friend", but also "lover", and even "husband" (Revez, 2003, p. 127).

The story of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep illustrates the point of queer archaeology very well. It often takes a shift in the way we see the world and our own frame of reference to understand past queer identities better. Otherwise, indeed, one may conclude that lovers were brothers. But these gender issues are about more than just their relationships and sexualities. Gender can also be associated with the clothes people wore, the work they did, the way others regarded them in society, and their role in the family, to name a few examples. Considering all the facets of a society where gender plays a part, it truly warps our understanding of the past when we try to fit it into our modern (mostly Western) dichotomies. This is to say when we ignore the possible spectrum and different constructs for gender that may have been present then. We cannot hope to know a society when we keep trying to apply our modern views to them. This is as true for gender identity as for anything else. It is the all too important archaeological concept of *the past is a foreign country* expanded.

How can we practically research queer gender identities in the Ancient Near East based on the material evidence? That is the main question we aim to answer in this research. We will work toward strategies we may implore to better understand this immaterial concept of "queer gender identities" based on material evidence.

This question has to be broken down into sub-questions that we will examine throughout this thesis. These are as follows:

1. What research related to queer gender identities has been conducted in the study of the ancient Near East?
2. What are some of the main challenges these studies faced in regard to the gender identity of their subjects?
3. What material evidence did these studies rely on in order to interpret the gender identity of their subjects?
4. Are the methodologies of the aforementioned studies applicable to the study of gender in the broader ancient Near East?
5. What new methods and tools can we use to overcome some of the major issues past studies have faced when researching gender identities in the ancient Near East?

The rest of this research will proceed as follows. After some more context and information of queer and feminist research, Chapter 2 will outline the methods and strategies we will employ to answer the sub-questions listed above. Chapter 3 will present us with selected case studies from around the ancient Near East. The evidence, methods, and challenges the researchers in these case studies used and faced will also be analyzed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will be the Discussion, where we look at all we have learned in Chapter 3 and discuss how we can best apply the lessons from these case studies to the broader ancient Near East. Moreover, we will discuss the best ways to deal with some of the major problems studying gender identities in the ancient Near East presents us with. Chapter 5 will conclude this research by answering the main question by presenting a comprehensive strategy researchers can practically use to research queer gender identities in the Ancient Near East based on the material evidence.

Feminist and queer research

Queer theory is still relatively young within archaeology. It is intrinsically linked to the feminist movements of the 20th century. The 1970s and 80s saw a new wave of feminism in academia. This is also when Conkey and Spector published their 1984 article *Archaeology and the Study of Gender*. This is seen as the start shot of feminist archaeology (Voss, 2000, p. 181). What followed was an explosion of articles, such as the edited volume *Engendering Archaeology* (Gero and Conkey 1991), multiple conference proceedings (Balme and Beck 1995; Claassen 1992a; du Cros and Smith 1993; Miller 1988; Walde and Willows 1991), a special edition of *Historical Archaeology* (Seifer 1991), along with several other works. Researchers interested in integrating archaeology, feminist theory, and gender studies engaged with one another in discourses about interpreting a gendered past. This movement found intersectionality with Marxist, socialist, radical, liberal, and cultural feminists (Jagger, 1983, pp. 5-8). Besides recognizing the inequality of women, more and more people started recognizing androcentricity - the focus on the role and achievements of men - in the sciences and humanity studies (Voss, 2000, p. 181). As a result, feminist scholars prioritized research that documented women's experiences cross-culturally, especially regarding gender roles and the ways that patriarchy acted on women's lives (Voss, 2000, p. 181). The main aims of feminist archaeology are already evident in Conkey and Spector's article (Conkey *et al*, 1984). They called for new theories and methodologies that based themselves on gender-inclusive models of the past (Conkey *et al.*, 1984). Moreover, they challenged the inflexible sexual division of labor and the way that activities believed to be performed by men were valued more highly than those performed by women (Conkey *et al*, 1984).

Feminist politics of the 1980s and 90s contributed greatly to another movement in academia: queer studies. Epistemological considerations among feminist scholars shifted their attention towards examining the differences between women. Besides such things as race or class, scholars started approaching sexuality in new ways: as an extension of gender. Works by gay and lesbian scholars from the late 1970s (e.g. Katz,1976; Rowbotham and Weeks, 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1979) challenged conventional feminist ideas about gender as a signifier of oppression. The "Sex Wars" (Voss, 2000, p. 183) of the early 1980s saw much debate around the relationship between sexuality and patriarchy. However, it was the emerging AIDS crisis that launched discussions of same-sex relationships and practices into public discourse. This crisis spurred everyone, including researchers, to think about sexuality (Voss, 2000, p. 183). In archaeology and anthropology, people began sensing the theories pertaining to gender were not adequate to deal with sexuality as a signifier of oppression or as a social practice at all. As a result, the late 1980s and early 90s see a bloom of literature dealing with the cultural and political position of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, and sex workers to name a few, such as *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 1990), *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), and *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Warner, 1993). These diverse sexual minorities were increasingly identified as *queer.* The adoption of the term "queer" reflected the move away from traditional taxonomic sexual categories (such as homosexual and heterosexual), which were a product of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The emergence of queer theory marked a shift in academia towards seeing sexual identities that had always been "othered" as something to research. Something that can tell us more about these past societies. (Voss, 2000, pp. 183-184).

It is not a straightforward thing to define the term "queer". This is because "queer" covers a great number of different concepts, different kinds of people, and different ways of living. However, all of these share the feature that they are not what is considered the norm by the dominant society. When we consider this the common factor, I find myself agreeing with the definition Oxford Languages gives:

> *"…adjective* (2) denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms." (Oxford Languages, 2023)

"Queer" as a term is very broad, and the precise extent cannot be determined in advance of the research (Halperin, 1995, pp. 62-63). Queer research challenges the very notions of normality at the heart of social institutions and practices. It demands we do not assume anything is "normal" or "natural", but rather a social and cultural construct. Binary systems (homosexual and heterosexual, transgender and cisgender, male and female) are reexamined as a proliferation of differences that queer theory does not place in a hierarchy (Weedon, 1999, p. 73).

As Blackmore puts it, "queer becomes a verb" (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78). It is the very act of questioning and deconstructing the categories and methodologies that have been naturalized in research (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78). Before, sexuality was reduced only to intercourse and the function of male-female relations (Rubin, 1984, 307). However, gender and sexual identities are cultural constructions. Moreover, sexual differences were a part of socially regulated "gender performances" (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78). When looking at it like this, gender and sexual identity can no longer be seen as a matter of stable incontrovertible truth (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78).

While queer and feminist theories have grown together and share many key principles, such as their anti-essentialism, they have also presented each other with challenges. The focus in queer theory on deconstructing gender challenges the feminist practice of legitimizing gender studies (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78). After all, it is hard to keep highlighting the role of women, when others are not sure we are talking about a "woman" at all. Moreover, queer theory has often put emphasis on aggressive and public representations of queerness, often having the effect of leaving behind those attributes historically often associated with women (such as home life and producing children) (Blackmore, 2011, 78). However, the two overlap and become a productive point of engagement when it comes to deconstructing androcentric narratives and presenting a more fluid past. They focus on the interactions and contributions of members of society that are not (strictly) men (Blackmore, 2011, p. 78).

It should be noted that these queer experiences envelop a massive range of different gender identities, sexualities, and ways of living. Examples are what we now call "homosexuality", "bisexuality", "transgender", "genderfluid", "intersex", "two-spirited", but also concepts we might not have terms for any more today that would have been more fitting in that specific past cultural context. After all, "queer" is in itself a social construct for "unstable categories" (Walsh, 2022, p. 159). Therefore, queer gender identities are very different across the world. Here, these "queer" individuals are recognized socially as being different, perhaps more fluid, in their gender and sexual proclivities than most of society. Usually this is linked to their particular role in society, such as the castrated priests of the Great Mother in Rome (Roscoe, 1996, p. 202) or the eunuchs that served the Achaemenid emperors (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 24). This institutionalization of that which is queer may seem subversive to the category of "queer" itself, but it still relies on these gender identities varying from the established norm of the majority.

The definition of "queer" given by Oxford Languages works well in an archaeological context. However, it also demonstrates how when we term all these different identities under "queer", we are once again conceptualizing them in their relationship to the status quo. When we term something "queer", we are by definition saying that it is not normal (which is the original definition of queer, "to be strange" or "to be out of the ordinary"). In a historical context, this does not always mean the norm was strictly heterosexual and cis-gendered as we conceptualize it today.

Blackmore believes there is even a disconnect between queer theory and archaeology, as queer theory is situated in a modern context and this discourages archaeologists from incorporating it in their work (Blackmore, 2011, p. 79). Throughout this thesis, you will see how queer theory can and should be incorporated in our interpretations of the past.

Moreover, research into gender identity in the past can be very difficult. Not only due to our modern views and learned biases that might distort interpretations, but due to a lack of material evidence. After all, gender identity is an immaterial concept by nature. Luckily, archaeologists are no strangers to researching the immaterial using the material.

Relatively little of this research has been conducted in the Near East as of now. While neighboring areas, such as Greece or India have rich queer histories already explored. This could be due to many reasons: the norms and values of the modern Middle East, the lack of material evidence, or the internal biases of researchers, to name a few. Therefore, this thesis aims to build a strategy so that we might expand how we research gender identity in the Ancient Near East.

Chapter 2: Methods

To better understand how to study gender identity, we will examine literature about different case studies where people have theorized past people to be queer or discuss forms of gender identity in past societies. While immaterial in nature, there are many indicators surrounding gender identity that manifest physically. The case studies we will analyze to better understand the strategies and issues we face when studying gender identity in the ancient Near East all use some of these indicators. These indicators can be broken down into three types: material evidence, iconographic evidence, and textual evidence.

First, material evidence of gender. In this category, we can place things like clothing, burials, architecture, and certain tools and household objects associated with gender within a past society. When we look at society around us, objects are used every day to indicate gender identity. For example, we may associate certain clothing with certain genders and so did ancient peoples. It can be very culturally specific what kind of items are associated with which gender. Moreover, we can look at styles to indicate fashion that distinguishes between gender. Human remains can also help us decipher gender roles. While gender is distinct from biological sex, in many cultures one's gender (as they conceptualized themselves and as they were taught to conceptualize their own gender identity) starts with their anatomy. So when we find gender indicators, such as clothing, that are not usually found with the biological sex of the human remains there, we can speculate about queerness. In the same line of thought, those born intersex (a term that covers a wide variety of biological traits, not just one's genitals) might have more chance of being "queer" in their societies. All these things can be considered indicators of the gender identity and possibly even the sexual proclivities of these past individuals.

Iconographic evidence can be difficult to use. This is because in most cases, the surviving iconographical material was created in a rather "official" sort of context. This is to say for official business, or in important structures such as temples, palaces, or tombs. This means, especially if someone has something to hide (which, due to the subversive nature of the queer, could often be the case) they are not going to advertise it blatantly in their iconography. However, there are exceptions. Especially institutionalized "queer" genders, as discussed in the introduction, could be represented ichnographically even in official and state contexts. In tombs, iconography can sometimes tell us more about the individual people, such as with Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. It is striking how Khnumhotep is often depicted with iconographic traits usually reserved for women. Iconographic evidence like this can be incredibly subtle. The Devil really is in the details, sometimes as subtle as what kind of flowers they are holding. In all of these cases, it serves us well to compare with what material we already have and see what is different. Again, these symbols can be very culturally specific.

Textual evidence is extremely valuable when researching someone's gender identity, for it is the codification of immaterial thought and word. However, such textual evidence is scarce, especially pertaining to individual people. In these cases, it is often linked to archaeological material, such as inscriptions on statues, such as the one highlighting the statue of Idet and Ruiu. More on this in the next chapter. Less personal works such as stories, poetry, and laws. However, these too can prove important in research into queer identities. The ancient Greek poetess Sappho is widely considered queer, for love between women is a big theme in what we have of her poetry. Zoroastrian texts such as the Venidad state attitudes and rules surrounding homosexuality. However, it is important not to take this at face value. Just because it was written down does not mean it is what everyone thought. It does add more perspective to the material we find from Zoroastrian contexts. Linguistic evidence can also be used to better understand gender identities, as with the texts about Sumerian *assinu* and *kurgarra.* In this example, definite feminine language is used in contrast to the male speakers.

These three categories work especially well when it is possible to study them in conjunction, like with the Tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. As we will see in the next chapter, within this case study the archaeology suggests a queer relationship between Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, but one can only really lend this view credence when one also considers the texts in the tomb and the iconography representing the pair of men. Moreover, one can only really understand the queerness of these indicators by comparing it to other evidence from that time and culture. That is why, without a good understanding of that time and culture, it is very difficult to say anything concrete about the gender identities and sexual proclivities of any individuals, even those one might suspect to be conforming to the norms of the time. The study of the past is not a place to assume anything.

The case studies will be from around the Near East, at different times and areas. This diversity of sites will contribute to creating a strategy that is more applicable to the wider Near East. The case studies will also include diverse types of evidence. To make the strategy as comprehensive as possible, we want to include as many types of evidence as we can. This is especially valuable when we consider that most sites will not have all types of evidence available in practice. Moreover, we want to test the limits of what evidence can be used in reconstructing gender identity. Besides these considerations when choosing the case studies, we must also consider that there are still a relatively small number of case studies involving queer theory in the Near East to choose from.

Analyzing these case studies using the three categories of evidence will give us a better idea of what evidence can be used when reconstructing past gender identities. In the following chapters, we will discuss the case studies, their challenges and considerations, and think about how the lessons from these case studies can be applied to the general ancient Near East. After analyzing and taking away what we can from the case studies, we will hopefully be in a position to construct a reliable approach to studying gender identity in the ancient Near East.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

Mesopotamia until 550 BCE

Before its domination by the Achaemenid Persians, Mesopotamia was home to many other countries and cultures, as far back as 6500 BCE. Despite the diversity of the region, these countries share a lot of continuity with each other. Their polytheistic religions were heavily linked and assimilated much from each other. Sumerian and Akkadian were the lingua francas of ancient Mesopotamia and the dominant languages in the great empires (Sumer, Babylonian Empire, Assyrian Empire) (Huehnegard, 2011, p. xxiv).

Throughout much of ancient Mesopotamian history, third genders were associated with temples and rituals. One of the most famous examples of these diverse gender identities is the institutionalized third gender associated with *gala* priests. Appearing in temple records as old as the third millennium BCE, *gala* priests were said to have been created by the god Enki specifically for the purpose of singing heart-soothing laments for the goddess Inanna (Roscoe, 1997, p. 65). Cuneiform tablets indicate this role had a specifically feminine character, at least originally. Therefore, the men who entered the role adopted the feminine form. They would sing the hymns in the Sumerian *eme-sal* dialect, which is used to render the speech of female gods, and some even took female names (Roscoe, 1997, p. 65). Later we see the *kur-gar-ra* (Akkadian *kurgarru*) in association with Inanna. They often appear with the closely associated *assinnu*. *Kurgarru* and *assinnu* are usually identified as servants of Inanna, and later of other goddesses historically associated with her, such as Ištar or Astarte (Roscoe, 1997, p. 66). An important part of our modern conceptualization of the *kurgarra* and *assinnu* comes from the myth of "Inanna/Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld". In the Sumerian version, the *kurgarra* and *galaturra* ("junior gala") rescue the goddess from the realm of the dead. In the Akkadian version, she is rescued by a *kurgarru* and *assinnu* (Peled, 2014, p. 284). It is generally assumed based on all this that the *assinnnu* and *kurgarru* were male by birth and later assumed feminine attributes, as seen with other members of the goddess' cult (Peled, 2014, p. 284).

There is still a lot of unclarity surrounding these figures. Researchers have speculated about the gender of these individuals. Some say they were men dressed as women, while others say circumcision may have been involved (Roscoe, 1997). Their feminine attributes included the performance of women's ritual behaviors, such as dancing and singing. Moreover, they were known to engage in homosexual behavior, especially as the penetrated party during sex (Peled, 2014, p. 285).

However, Peled challenges this view. Based on linguistic and logographic analysis of texts where the *kurgarru* appears, he argues for a more militant and masculine characterization of the *kurgarru*. That they contrasted the more effeminate *assinnu* (Peled, 2014, pp. 285-286).

The Epic of Gilgamesh is to date the oldest known epic poem, dating back from around 2100-1200 BCE. The Epic focuses on Gilgamesh, the tyrannic half-god king of Uruk, and his wild companion Enkidu. After starting out as an antithesis for Gilgamesh, Enkidu joins him on his quest for immortality. Together they face many perils and develop a deep relationship that culminates in Enkidu's death (Kovacs, 1998).

The Epic of Gilgamesh has often been examined for its homosexual and homoerotic traits, for example by Nissinen (1998) and Ackerman (2005). Indeed, Gilgamesh's insatiable lust and rape in the beginning of the story is directed at both men and women (Cooper, 2002, p. 80 in Shoulders, 2022, p. 22). As a response, the gods create one equal to Gilgamesh for him to focus his lust and violence on, Enkidu. From the beginning, their relationship involves lust and sex. The sex between them is actually meant to tame Gilgamesh' wild and violent nature. (Shoulders, 2022, p. 22). The text goes on into multiple instances of attraction and sex between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well as with a host of other characters (Shoulders, 2022, pp. 22-23). However, in recent years there has been a lot of criticism towards interpreting their relationship via our modern categories, utilizing terms such as "homosexual" and "bisexual", such as by Stone (2001) and Heacock (2007).

Nissinen addresses this in a later article in 2010. In his article, *Are There Homosexuals in Mesopotamian Literature?* (Nissinen, 2010), Nissinen takes steps to a new understanding of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and the way we should conceptualize sexuality within this epic tale. According to him, we need not downplay the sexual encounters (both homoerotic and heteroerotic) or the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the story (Nissinen, 2010, p. 74). According to him, the sexual acts between the two function as milestones in their arduous journey, and represent their mutual bonding (Nissinen, 2010, p. 74). As Nissinen puts it:

"The Epic is not about homosexuality, or even homoeroticism, but about love between two male persons – and more than that, about the constraints of desire and human fate." (Nissinen, 2010, 74)

He frames this idea with lines from the *Šumma ālu*, a series of 120 clay tablets outlining certain omens (Nissinen, 2010, p. 75). Three of the four omens that speak of intercourse with another male, represent dominance and gaining power (Nissinen, 2010, p. 75). Rather than presume a homosexual orientation, which Nissinen views as incomprehensible within the androcentric Mesopotamian worldview: one in which gender, social, and sexual hierarchy interconnect and sexual contact was seen as benefitting the penetrative partner rather than the penetrated partner (Nissinen, 2010, p. 75). Moreover, Nissinen points to Middle Assyrian laws that state if a man is proven to have had sex with his comrade, they shall have sex with him and turn him into a eunuch as punishment (Nissinen, 2010, p. 75). Here sex is once again used to dominate, and even to punish. Who someone had sex with was less about their gender identity, and more about power dynamics, social status, and even punishment (Nissinen, 2010, p. 75). As the Epic of Gilgamesh continues, the number of sexual acts peter out. The savagery and struggle for power between Gilgamesh and Enkidu becomes less, as both become more civilized. This does not diminish the deep love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as is apparent in Gilgamesh's heartbreaking lament over Enkidu's death (Nissinen, 2010, p. 74).

While homosexual behavior is certainly attested in laws and stories from ancient Mesopotamia, Nissinen demonstrates that trying to categorize these people as homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or with any other modern classification fundamentally challenges the way they would have related sexual experiences to a person's identity.

Achaemenid Persia

Having been founded by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE, the Achaemenid Persian empire came to dominate most of the Near East till its demise under the conquests of Alexander the Great in 330 BCE (Taagepera, 1979, pp. 122-123). The Achaemenid Persians set themselves apart from the former rulers of the region with their unique religion: Zoroastrianism. This was a monotheistic religion practiced by the rulers of the Empire and mostly observed in Iran that worshipped the god Ahura Mazda. This was in stark contrast to the polytheistic religions that had always dominated the region. Zoroastrianism's most sacred scripture, the Avesta, consists of multiple books. One of the oldest of these books is the Vendidad. In the Vendidad, we find the first evidence of Zoroastrian attitudes toward homosexuality. As the Zoroastrians believed sexual activity for other purposes than procreation was wrong, homosexual activity was considered sinful. Moreover, it was considered a form of demon (Deava) worship. This becomes evident from the following passage:

> Ahura Mazda answered: 'The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind, or as woman lies with mankind, is the man that is a Daeva; this one is the man that is a worshipper of the Daevas, that is a male paramour of the Daevas, that is a female paramour of the Daevas… (Darmesteter, 1898)

The text continues by stating that the individuals that conduct homosexual sex, may be killed by anyone without consulting the high priest (Darmesteter, 1898). However, while this is good to keep in mind, it remains unclear what parts of the Vendidad are from when. It is therefore not certain if this part was already in use during the Achaemenid Empire.

So far I have discussed Persians as if they operated in a binary gender system. However, the Persians have a particularly interesting third gender to discuss. Here, we see a case of Western ideas being imposed on an ancient society: the case of eunuchs.

These Western myths are old. Greek and Latin texts describing the Assyrians also indicate the effeminates and eunuchs there, and see them as being a peculiarity. After all, effeminates and eunuchs are both neither entirely masculine nor feminine. However, the depictions of these individuals seem to be traditionally unflattering and serve to exoticize “the Orient” (Madreiter *et al*., 2021, p. 13). There is a Western myth about Persian eunuchs that sees them as guarding the beds of women against unwanted advances. However, even in the original Greek sources that talk about eunuchs, this is often untrue. It should be noted that these ancient Greek sources, such as the *Cyropaedia* and the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, are not necessarily historically sound. Rather than showcasing Persian society from a Persian point of view, they serve more as Greek commentary on the Persians. However, in both the *Cyropaedia* and the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana,* eunuchs are not described as protecting the chambers of women at all. In fact, in the *Cyropaedia* eunuchs are appointed as the protectors of the Persian king. Xenophon explains that eunuchs are especially valued because they are supposed to be faithful (Lefant, 2021, pp. 457-462). This may be because eunuchs could never sire a dynasty of their own. However, using women and eunuchs in their stories also served the Greeks by continuing to “feminize” the East (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 23).

Many modern, especially Western, interpretations of eunuchs in Achaemenid Persia still build on the idea of eunuchs as presiding over the harem of the king. However, we must be careful to look past Western biases, however old they may be. Llewellyn-Jones explores this in his text *Euncuhs and the Royal Harem in Achaemenid Persia* (2002). First, let us define “eunuch” in this context. According to Llewellyn-Jones: “a eunuch is a castrated man” (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 24). We see these figures depicted in artistic sources, such as those from the capital city of Persepolis. Here they are depicted as slim, elegant, and without anything that would indicate physical strength, which is the case with earlier Assyrian art. These eunuchs are depicted as elegantly dressed. They are always depicted in the context of servants, frequently carrying towels, ointment jars, parasols, and fly whisks (See figure 1). Of the six eunuchs depicted at the Persepolis reliefs, nearly all are accompanied by bearded men (see figure 1). This shows the stark contrast between the rough representations of these men and the smoother eunuchs (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, pp. 24-25).

1. **2.**

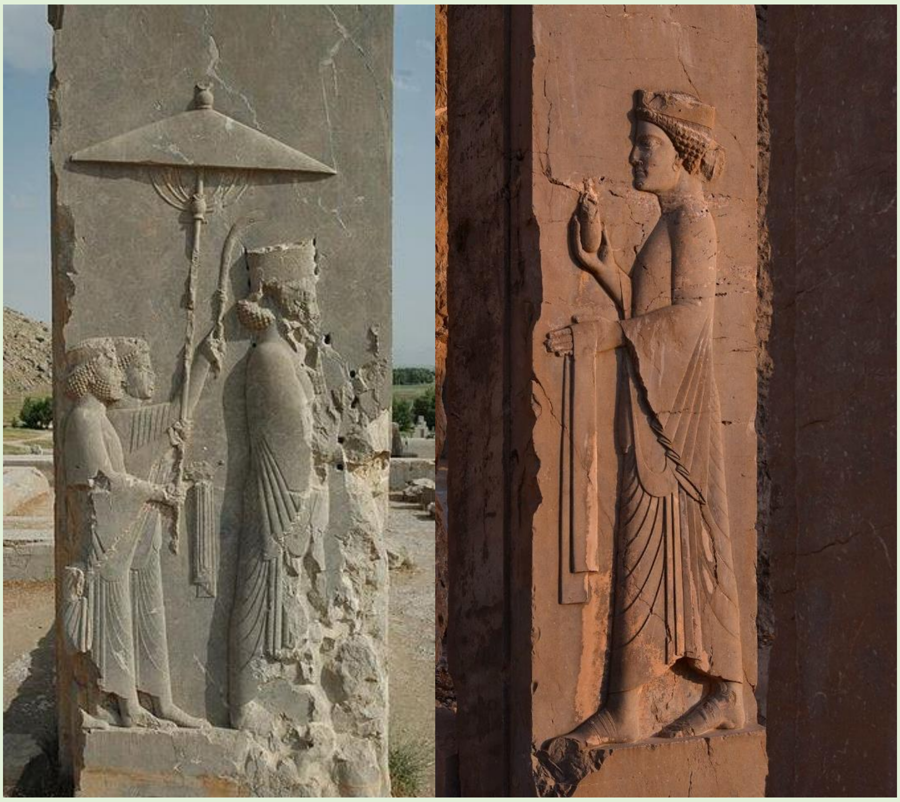

Figure 1 (left): *Relief at Persepolis showing a smooth-faced individual holding out domestic objects of the Emperor. They are accompanied by a bearded man, who holds an umbrella over the Emperor (Richard Stoneman, 2015).*
Figure 2 (right): *Relief at Persepolis showing a smooth-faced individual carrying a towel and a perfume bottle (Richard Stoneman, 2015).*

Second, is the role of these eunuchs and their connection to the harem. Llewellyn-Jones urges us to do away with the idea of a harem as a place where women were confined to the king's personal pleasure palace, away from the rest of society (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, pp. 24-25). Instead, Llewellyn-Jones presents a different model for the Achaemenid court. This new model is based more on the representations of eunuchs being close to the king and their family, and the iconography, especially its placement on the door handles (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 24). In this model, there is an "outer court" where guests are entertained, affairs of state are conducted, and the king fulfills his role as representative of Ahuramazda on earth. In contrast, the inner court is reserved for the king and his family (his mother, children, siblings, and the women of the royal harem). Eunuchs had a special position in this model, as they were the only other individuals present in the inner court, to serve the king and their families.
Besides the iconography of the images of eunuchs at Persepolis, Llewellyn-Jones considers another factor in this interpretation: the placement of these images. An example he uses is a relief on a door handle at the palace of Darius I that shows a eunuch standing ready with a towel and a perfume bottle (see figure 2). He connects this image with passing between the outer and inner courts (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, pp. 24-25).

Herodotus claims the chambers of men and women in the Persian palace were separate, but that eunuchs could move between one and the other. Plato and other Greek authors, as well as Hebrew texts, such as those describing the story of Esther, paint an image of a society with women and eunuchs in the women's quarters that were separate from the men's quarters. Here we clearly see the eunuchs acting as something other than the traditional two genders. Something that simultaneously straddles both genders, but is not a full member of either.

Egypt

As discussed in Chapter 1, the case of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, is an especially interesting case. The two males were found buried together in a 5th dynasty (Old Kingdom) tomb in 1964. Due to the closeness of the two men and the similarities in their names, they were called "twins" in the original publication about them (Baines, 1985). However, reexamination of the evidence makes for a compelling case of the two being lovers. In this paragraph, we will examine this evidence, and how the researchers came to their conclusions.

For those who could afford it, ancient Egyptian tombs were richly painted. These images can often tell us more about the people inside. The most striking iconographic evidence comes when we compare the images in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep to other iconography of a "conjugal" or marital nature. Cherpion published such a compendium in *Sentiment conjugal et figuration a l'Ancien Empire* (1995). This work depicts husbands and wives of the 4th, 5th, and 6th dynasties. In this work, she also noted the strange case of these two males, about whom she had this to say:

> "indeed, nowhere else in Egyptian art do we find an example in which affection between two males is thus affirmed. (…) Nor, except with married couples, do faces ever touch one another, as is the case here." (Cherpion, 1986, p. 66) (See figures 3 ad 4)

Throughout the tomb, one of the most consistent and striking images are those of the two males embracing. More specifically, face-to-face embraces, as seen in figures 3 and 4. This type of embrace is exceptionally rare for that time, even among depictions of husbands and their wives (Cherpion, 1986, 66). These images are comparable to another tomb in the area that was built only a little earlier: the tomb of Nefer and Kha-Hay. In this tomb, we see almost the exact same imagery between Kha-Hay and his wife Meter-Yetes (figure 5). For a clearer idea of the parallels, compare figure 5 and figure 6 below. What stands out is that in the case of the two males, Khnumhotep in figure 6 takes the same position as Meter-Yetes in figure 5. Moreover, while Kha-Hay is depicted as standing with her husband (figure 5), Niankhkhnum is depicted in as reaching for the arm of Khnumhotep, who clasps his shoulder (figure 6) (Reeder, 2008, p. 147-149).

While highly intimate for the art of the time, this is not the most intimate depiction of the couple we see in the tomb. In figure 4 we actually see a level of intimacy not even found in the tomb of Nefer and Kha-Hay. This depiction of the two (figure 4) was even titled "the most intimate" by Reeder to distinguish the rarity of such intimate portrayals in the Egyptian art of the time (Reeder, 2008, p. 150). Here, we see the pair touching their noses and standing so close together that the knots of their belts touch (figure 4). Reeder argues that this may very well be a depiction of the two men kissing, especially considering the Old Kingdom word for "kissing" (*sn*) shows two noses coming together (Reeder, 2008, p. 151). Such a face-to-face embrace is even rare among husband-and-wife couples of the time (Reeder, 2008, p. 149).

Another striking feature of this tomb is the absence of the wives of the two men, both physically and in the art. The bodies of the wives are not located in this tomb, and there is no indication that there were ever plans to build rooms to house their bodies (Reeder, 2008, pp. 149-150). Moreover, while the men are depicted about thirty times, the wives are only depicted four times in the tomb (Cherpion, 1986, p. 67). This is highly unusual, especially as their children are often depicted with the men (Reeder, 2008, pp. 144-151). The most striking evidence against the inclusion of the wives in this tomb can be found in the large banquet scene that decorated the large rock-cut chambre further inside the tomb (Reeder, 2008, p. 149). Here, we see the two men sitting on either side of a table laden with a sumptuous feast. What is striking, is that originally Niankhkhnum's wife was depicted behind him. This was also the only depiction in which she was the same size as her husband. However, the builders of the day almost completely removed her image from the scene, making the two men the only people depicted in this feast scene (Reeder, 2008, p. 149).

3. **4.**

Figure 3 (left): *Relief from the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at the entrance to the offering chamber. (Reeder, 2008, 150)*
Figure 4 (right): *Relief from the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep titled "the most intimate". Both of these images are examples of the murals found in the tomb of the two males that illustrate them embracing and holding their faces close together. (Reeder, 2008, 150)*

5. **6.**

Figure 5 (left): *Images on the false door of Kha-Hay and Meret-Yetes (Reeder, 2008, 150).*
Figure 6 (right): *Images on the false door of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (Reeder, 2008, 150).*

As we already touched upon briefly, it seems Khnumhotep is often depicted in ways usually reserved for women. Throughout the tomb, Khnumhotep is depicted to the left of and behind Niankhkhnum. In depictions of husband and wife, this is the typical way to depict the wife. Moreover, Khnumhotep is shown smelling a lotus. This is exceptionally rare for men in Egypt in the Old Kingdom. Besides three exceptions so far, men holding a lotus flower to their nose is only attested iconographically in the late 6th Dynasty (at the very end of the Old Kingdom) (Harpur, 1987, 134). This is typically a way to depict women in Old Kingdom art. Khnumhotep is one of only three men from the 5th dynasty shown smelling a lotus. The other men depicted in this tomb are not depicted in this way, only the women and Khnumhotep are. Reeder speculates that the tomb builders recognized that Khnumhotep was in some way filling the role of wife (Reeder, 2007, p. 151).

Moving along the timeline, we find a strikingly overt representation of homosexual relations in Middle Kingdom literature. Striking, because sexual acts in general are very under-attested in textual evidence from this time. It seems explicitly sexual motifs had a small role in art and literature. Instead, both texts and iconography from the middle kingdom contain a high proportion of coded metaphors and images. More explicit sexual representations can be found outside of "official" texts, such as on *ostraca*. (Parkinson, 1995, p. 57). There are almost no traces of sexual behavior between people of the same sex. However, the story of pharao Neferkare and his general Sasenet provides an interesting case study in understanding the culture around homosexuality in Middle Kingdom Egypt.

The story is only recorded in fragments, dating back to the New Kingdom. The text is divided over a wooden plaque from the 18th-19th Dynasty, an ostracon from the 20th Dynasty, and the Papyrus Chassinat I (also Papyrus Louvre E 25351) from the 25th Dynasty.

The text is incredibly fragmented, but the major players and general storyline are clear to us. The story tells of the nightly wanderings of king Neferkare (Pepi II) to the house of general Sasenet to do "what he desired with him" The story, originally published by Posener in 1957, follows the misadventures of a character known only as "the Petitioner of Memphis" (van Dijk, 1994, p. 387). He wants to present his case against the king in court but is constantly blocked by musicians. These musicians are put in place either by the courtiers or even by the king himself (van Dijk, 1994, pp. 387-388).

What is less clear, are the implications this story has for the attitudes of Egyptians at the time towards homosexual activity. In his analysis, van Dijk comments that the behavior of King Neferkare is obviously being disapproved of as not being in line with *ma'at* (the Egyptian concept of order in the world) (van Dijk, 1994, p. 392). However, he also points out this text was told in order to amuse an audience (van Dijk, 1994, p. 392). Therefore, it is hard for us to understand now how the story would have been used and received by Egyptian audiences. (van Dijk, 1994, p. 392).

Interesting in van Dijk's interpretation of this story, is that he believes there is a reference to Egyptian mythology hidden in it. According to him, the "sexual acts" between the king and the general, mirror the way the sun god Ra unifies with the ruler of the underworld Osiris every night while the sun travels through the underworld (van Dijk, 1994, pp. 389-390). While van Dijk is clear that this union between the two gods is never stated as sexual, he points to details in the story of Neferkare and Sasenet that mirror the myth. Both the king's nightly escapades and Ra's journey into the underworld repeat themselves every night. More specifically, the four hours Neferkare spends with Sasanet every night are during the same hours (about 5-8 am) that Ra encounters and unifies with the body of Osiris in the underworld (van Dijk, 1994, 389). According to van Dijk this may have added a deeper layer to the story for the audience of the time (van Dijk, 1994, p. 390).

It should be noted that all the case studies so far have focused on male figures. This is no coincidence. To date, we have no textual evidence of homoerotic activity between women in ancient Egypt. As we see in many cultures in the Near East, the experiences and lives of women are often underrepresented in the literature of the time and much less survives to this day. This is not to say that we have nothing. The following case study is that of the statue of Idet and Ruiu.

These New Kingdom women were depicted seated together side by side (see figure 7). Usually, these kinds of statues depict married couples. However, due to the statue being the only one of its kind depicting two women, it seems we cannot make any substantial case as to the relationship of these women. Especially as Idet is afforded the title "lady of the house" (*nebet per*). This could indicate her having some sort of importance above that of Ruiu, but could also indicate she is the main wife and Idet is a second wife, which is common tradition throughout ancient Egyptian history (https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/Cat_3056).

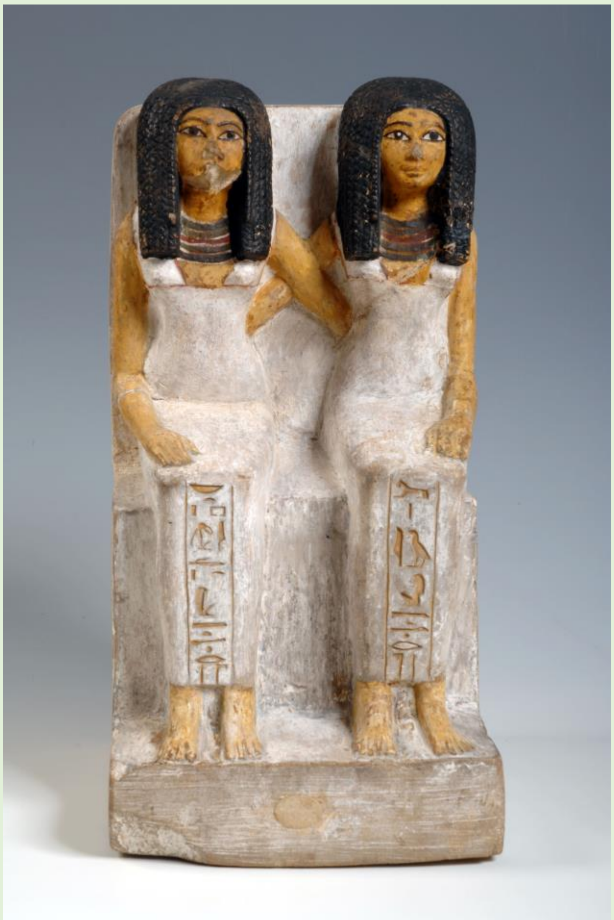

Figure 7: *Limestone statue of Idet (left) and Ruiu (right) (https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/en-GB/material/Cat_3056).*

Chapter 4: Discussion

The case studies in Chapter 3 reveal diverse ways to study someone's gender identity. From the diverse regions and periods within the ancient Near East, we have seen different strategies can be applied, with varying certainty. In this chapter, we will look a little closer at what kind of evidence proved relevant in the case studies, and how those researchers approached them. Then, we will think about how we can apply this to the greater Near East.

In Chapter 3, we saw researchers use very different kinds of evidence to try and gain an idea about the gender identity of past individuals. Iconography plays an important role in many of these case studies, such as when discussing the Eunuchs depicted at Persepolis, or the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. What proves important when trying to identify the "queer" in iconography, is comparing it to those examples we consider as representing "the norm". This can be an overt representation, such as in Persepolis where the eunuchs can be spotted through their clothing and lack of a beard. However, especially considering we are working with a category that subverts "the norm", we have to look at what stands out. More specifically, what would have stood out as "strange" for the people of the time. For example, seeing a depiction of a man smelling a lotus blossom from Egypt from the 5th dynasty. Besides attributes, it is also good to look at what kind of activities the figures are represented engaging in, and if these are usually associated with a certain gender identity in that culture.

First, especially when an iconographic detail seems "strange" to experienced researchers, compare it to similar evidence from the same time. Contrasting the iconography in one case with what is considered "the norm" is a good starting point to start thinking about the gender identity of this person. Second, "queer" is not enough to describe the gender identity of an individual. In an ideal case, you will have other clues to work with at the site that fill in more of the story. The first step can be an indicator of "queerness", and the second step can help us better reconstruct their specific gender identity.

The case study of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep provides a great example of this approach. When comparing this with the extensive body of other iconography of that time it is striking that Khnumhotep is depicted smelling a lotus. This is an iconographic motif usually reserved only for women. Thus, one may theorize the designers of the tomb were trying to convey "queer" or even feminine traits to Khnumhotep. This interpretation of Khnumhotep as being more "womanly" is further supported by images of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep together, where the latter takes on iconographic traits usually reserved for wives.

Due to the subversive nature of that which is queer, often people may not want it to be obvious at all. This could mean it is encoded or not present at all. We always need to think about these socio-political factors that influence the lives and iconography of these past peoples. Still, these two steps are the best way to work with iconography to try and gain an idea of someone's gender identity.

Moreover, the case study of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep has a relatively high wealth of iconography to work with. This is due to their time and place and social context, meaning Egyptians decorated tombs like this during the 5th dynasty for those who could afford it and/or were close to the pharaoh. Most sites in the Near East will not have so much iconography to work with, or at least not so much iconography relating to the lives of individuals. Luckily, there is more evidence outside of iconography that can inform us on the gender identities of past peoples.

Literary evidence has proven both important and tricky in the application of queer theory. In regards to textual evidence, those studying the ancient Near East are in luck that writing was so widespread in the ancient Near East from very early on. Textual evidence can be incredibly valuable in understanding gender identity, as a medium that allows people to put into words what cannot always be physically attested. This is to say, where material and iconographic evidence could be endlessly debated, textual evidence can provide much more context and clarity. As we saw in the case studies, there can be very overt representations of queerness recorded, such as the temple text about the gala priests or the Zoroastrian religious laws that forbid homosexual activity. In these cases, it is still necessary to think about how people then conceptualized sexuality and gender identity and how much we really know about this context around these texts.

Of course, researchers can still endlessly debate the translation and meaning of ancient texts and words. As in the case of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, researchers are still debating the correct interpretation of *sn* (brother, lover, husband, colleague, etc). In this case, the iconographic evidence actually lead to the shift in the way they looked at the textual evidence. Looking at the gala priests, we see something pretty unique to Sumerian, which is the use of a different dialect to indicate female speech. These two examples demonstrate the nuances in a language where clues towards queer identities can exist. In this case, it is the contrast between the language used in combination with the other evidence that indicates we may be dealing with queer figures.

Some of the case studies were also about laws and stories. It is very difficult to say anything about the individual gender experiences based on these kinds of texts. In the case of religious and judicial laws, it can also be called into question how seriously these were taken by the people. Moreover, the way they affected people's lives, especially depending on their socio-economic situation, could be wildly different. So it would not be wise to make assumptions about the individual experiences of people based solely on these texts. However, they can provide valuable context to inform us about the culture of the time and the level of acceptance and persecution queer people may have faced. This could affect how secret freely people expressed their queerness, both in life and in death. It can help us think about the need for coded messages and the danger or dishonor involved in the discovery of their queer gender identity.

Nissinen shows us how we can plausibly theorize about the way a culture looked at sex and sexuality. When we remove our own biases and ways of thinking about gender and sexuality, we may find ourselves left with very little framework to work with. By taking context from laws, omen tablets, and the Epic of Gilgamesh, Nissinen presents theorizes about how gender was conceptualized in ancient Mesopotamia. Developing our understanding of these cultural contexts also helps us better understand the experience of individuals. After all, cultural influences are very important in forming an identity of any kind, and in the way one conceptualized themselves and is conceptualized by others in their society. In understanding such cultural context, textual evidence is incredibly important.

Our methodology called for studying archaeological evidence of gender, specifically referring to objects loose from their iconography or textual information. However, despite my best efforts, I was not able to find sufficiently compelling case studies where researchers looked at the relationship between objects and gender. This can mean many things. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, so perhaps the appropriate material has not survived the ages, and perhaps such discoveries will still be made. Perhaps future research will reexamine objects and discover their connection to gender.

It is also entirely possible that my initial ideas were flawed. That it is much harder considering the (funerary) cultures prevalent in the ancient Near East might not have allowed for many objects that could be associated with gender. Alternatively, this simply is not the case for any study I could find. I can merely speculate as to this.

Human remains were also included in the methodology of this thesis, specifically the relation of the biological sex with indicators that point to the gender identity of that person. However, none of the case studies involve human remains. While only one of the case studies involved a funerary context, the bodies were not present there. Nor did I find any case studies where the bodies were involved in the application of queer theory. This may be due to a low amount of human remains found, but I would focus on something else in this case. It seems to me that researchers are generally pretty clear about the biological sex of the subjects. Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were consistently represented as men, had wives, and had masculine pronouns. Researchers also agree that the gala priests were born male. While human remains could certainly help fill in blanks (such as in the debate if Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep were brothers), from what I have seen from these case studies, I would suggest it is not the main concern. Rather, all the iconographic and textual evidence around it suggests something queer about the subject. This is in contrast to studies where the initial indication of queerness is a mismatch between the biological sex of the subject (apparent by human remains) and the gender indicators they were buried with.

Perhaps future research will allow for new strategies that do involve objects connected to gender, or perhaps human remains will prove more important in researching gender identity in the Near East in the future. However, due to a lack of evidence in the case studies, I will not be adding this category to the strategy. Perhaps future research will allow for new strategies that do involve objects connected to gender, or perhaps human remains will prove more important in researching gender identity in the Near East in the future.

What becomes incredibly apparent from the case studies, is that a good understanding of the socio-political contexts of these sites is vital to the application of queer theory. One must have a good understanding of the norm, before we can start to recognize where the evidence does not conform to it, both in text and iconography. Moreover, the better we understand the freedoms and restrictions of queer people in a specific time and place, the better we can study the evidence. Important factors to consider are if queer people would have faced persecution or social stigmas. Ways we can learn about this are from laws, stories, and religious rules. Queer people facing such restrictions, may not have their queerness represented or may have relied on encoded messages and iconography. Also understanding institutionalized forms of queerness, such as the gala priests, helps us understand the social spaces in which these people lived better.

Another important thing to consider is the way we incorporate queer research into our own research. We should not only begin to consider gender identities that diverge from the norm once we encounter evidence for it. Nor should we consider everyone queer until proven otherwise. It is apparent that the way we think about gender identity is not automatically the same as how people in the past experienced gender identities in the context of their culture. Therefore, when constructing anyone's gender identity, it is best to start with a blank slate. Instead of trying to categorize anyone, instead, we should think about how they interacted with other members of society and what role gender and sex played in those interactions. To better learn about how past people would have experienced and conceptualized gender identity, and to indeed start off our research with a "blank slate" understanding of their gender identity, we need to let go of our modern biases. This can be very challenging. To that end, I have found reading about all kinds of gender interpretations from modern and ancient peoples to help me deconstruct the way I think about gender and expand my thinking beyond my own biases.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I shall present my model for best understanding the gender identity of past people in the ancient Near East. One of the challenges that I would like to emphasize here, is that the Near East is or has ever been a cultural monolith. Nor should we attempt to approach it as such. The queer as a category depends very much on the norm. Both will vary between the diverse cultures and different times in the long history of the ancient Near East. That is why an important part of the strategy is a substantial understanding of the socio-political context of evidence one is examining, as previously discussed. Moreover, the way people understood and experienced their own gender identity and those of the people around them may be very different between different times and cultures. These differences in culture also mean types of evidence and approaches will work better in some cases than in others. Unlike Sumerian, the Akkadian language does not have a dialect that indicates a woman is talking. While Egyptians may have elaborate tomb decorations that tell us about the individuals buried there, the Achaemenid Persians decorated their tombs with more general depictions that did not necessarily relate to the people entombed there. These examples illustrate how we need to respect the rich diversity of cultures and practices in the ancient Near East, instead of trying to apply the same methods across all these cultures, which would thus be an ultimately futile endeavor.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Both feminist and queer archaeology are products of the political and academic feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s. Both were founded in opposition to the political and academic climate of the 1980s and have since achieved legitimacy and popularity in academia. We are still learning about gender in different ancient cultures. To that end, this thesis aims to construct a strategy better understanding gender identities in the ancient Near East. By examining diverse case studies from around the ancient Near East, we have seen what methods and types of evidence have proven effective before at understanding past gender identities.

Based on the case studies, I present the following strategy for researching gender identity in the ancient Near East. Before the researcher even begins to attempt to imagine the experience an individual may have had during their life, it is crucial that they understand the socio-political climate that past individuals found themselves in. This is wildly different for different cultures at different times in the Near East. The best way to learn more about this is probably through textual evidence. By examining laws, stories, and religious rules that involve gender and sex. The researcher must formulate an idea of how sex and gender would have played a part in the lives of these people, and how it would have affected their interactions with each other. This will be especially important when trying to understand the gender identity of an individual and the way they (and others) may have experienced that gender identity and expression. The researcher should gain an idea of "the norm" for individuals in that society when it comes to gender and gender expression. Part of understanding this norm, is understand the way it manifests itself in material and literary evidence. Here one can think of such matters as symbolism connected to gender, language connected to gender, what tasks and privileges were connected to gender. One would expect most individuals from a past society to fall in line with the "norm", meaning we can see consistent iconographic and textual motifs reoccur in patterns related to their gender. They will have certain things connected to their gender that we see connected to that gender-identity over and over again.

The researcher should also determine what kind of queerness was institutionalized (if any). Moreover, the researcher should gain an idea of what level of acceptance other queers (that is to say, queer people who did not fit into an institutionalized form of queerness) were, or what kind of stigma or persecution they would have faced. This is especially important when we turn to the context of one person.

Once the researcher has an understanding of the socio-political climate a person lived in, they can examine the evidence. I here remind the researcher once more that the goal should never be to lump past people into our modern categories, such as homosexual, heterosexual, cisgender, transgender, man, or woman. Rather, the goal is to see what their experience would have been like during their lives. This includes their gender identity and expressions. Any evidence pertaining to the person can indicate something about this experience. What seems especially important, judging by the case studies, is the language (if any) used pertaining to and the iconography surrounding the subject, is particularly valuable. The researcher, having an idea of "the norm" and how this is usually manifested iconographically and textually. Assuming this was, in fact, the norm, the researchers should have some idea of what patterns in the evidence consistently fall in line with a person's gender identity. This still does not necessarily mean someone was not queer, even if the patterns in the evidence surrounding them match those of the norm. That is why it is particularly important to know the attitudes of people towards queer individuals at that time, for a queer individual may have wanted to hide or encode such information about themselves. In such cases, we may never know.

When there are details that do not match the pattern in the evidence related to gender identity the researcher considers "the norm", the researcher may be seeing evidence of queerness. The key word here is "may", for coincidence exists, or maybe this discovery will further evolve their definition of the norm. This is where an understanding of how members of a past culture viewed gender is particularly important, as it will help the researcher interpret this evidence that diverges from "the norm". Important to look out for here are known indicators of gender, both textually and iconographically, that reoccur in this diverging evidence. This is to say, if the researcher can identify gender indicators within the diverging evidence.

In all cases, queer or not, the researcher is building their interpretation of the life of a person from the ground up. Through small indicators in text and iconography, the researcher may develop their theories about a person's life experience and gender identity.

This strategy relies on specific evidence that the researcher can relate to gender being present, and preferably in abundance. Moreover, it relies on enough such material from a culture being present, that the researcher can even construct an idea of what the "norm" for that society was supposed to look like. This is all too rarely the case. However, it is important we always build our interpretations of the lives of people and their gender identity from the ground up. If there is not enough compelling evidence to do so, then do not do so. Do not assume someone falls into the norm, or that they are queer, without evidence to support either. In such a case one simply needs to say we do not know (yet).

All in all, this is still a small step in the development of the study of the past and the application of queer theory. For future researchers, I would suggest keeping pushing the limits of where we can find information on someone's life and gender experience. In learning about past forms of queerness, it is easy to get stuck in a lot of literary evidence. Rather, I urge future researchers to look at material evidence. Iconographic evidence is also very valuable, but outside of grand and more official contexts, it is also a lot less occurring. Strictly adhering to literary and iconography for research into gender identity also limits the demographics we can research this for, as in cases attested by literature and/or that have a lot of iconographies to work with, one is probably dealing with members of the upper class. There for, I highly recommend future researchers continue to develop our understanding of gender identity in relation to material objects and household spaces.

For researchers specifically interested in the Near East, I recommend also looking at areas that were not featured in this thesis, such as the Levant, Anatolia, and Cyprus. These did not make it into the final draft of this thesis, even though they are as much a part of the ancient Near East as Egypt or Mesopotamia. I would even recommend looking at the Greco-Roman world, which, while not traditionally part of "the ancient Near East", was certainly closely connected to it. I found a lot of inspiration there, even if these regions did not make it into the final draft of this thesis.

If I would give this thesis another name, it would be "There Were no Men or Women in the ancient Near East". This title would seem very radical, but it gets straight to the point of queer studies. As we have seen throughout this thesis, our modern ways of thinking about gender, do not do justice to the cultural conceptualizations and the varied experiences of those living in the past. One could argue that there were no men and women, at least not in the same terms as today, because what it meant to be a "man" or a "woman" is entirely defined by the culture one lives in. It is not a case of hetero/cis-gendered erasure, for that in itself is a modern category we cannot apply to ancient peoples. It seems a mysterious and unknowable thing, the way people conceptualized their own gender identity and that of those around them. However, the strategy presented above is a small step in the right direction. A small step toward future researchers being willing and able to reconstruct gender identities from the ground up. This project has shown the way we must expand our thinking about gender and our biases concerned with it, and has, personally, given me more than a few headaches trying to do so. What does remain a fact, is that, while *queer* as an academic category might be relatively new, queer people are of all times and places. We, as academics and researchers, have a duty to this and all other truths. It turns out, the past is a much more complicated place than we gave it credit for.

Abstract

Feminist and queer archaeology both find their origins in the academic feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s. They opposed the political and academic androcentric climates of the time, and have since achieved legitimacy in academia. Still, we are constantly developing our understanding of gender in ancient cultures. This thesis takes the next step in deconstructing our understanding of gender, namely building our interpretations of gender identities of people in the past with incorporating our modern biases. The main question in this thesis is *How can we practically research queer gender identities in the Ancient Near East based on the material evidence?* To do this, the author focusses on literature about case studies from across the ancient Near East. In this study, the author analyzes these diverse case studies to pinpoint what methods those researchers used and what evidence they built their arguments about gender constructs and gender identity in the past. This study puts a specific emphasis om material, iconographic, and textual evidence. Based on these case studies, the author aims to construct a strategy future researchers can use in their research of gender in the ancient Near East, to reconstruct gender identities without incorporating their own personal biases. This research shows it is especially important to understand that the way people in the past conceptualized gender and the gender identity of themselves and those around them may be very different from the way we think now. This means, we can only ever make reliable claims about gender constructs and anyone's gender identity with sufficient evidenciary support. The author has found, that the best first step is understanding the context of gender in that time. Usually textual evidence, such as laws, stories, and religious rules, are particularly useful to develop such an understanding. Afterwards, once the researchers has a sufficient understanding of gender in a specific past culture, they can being theorizing over individuals. This should be done based on iconography and textual evidence connected to that individual.

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