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Are There Homosexuals in Mesopotamian Literature?

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Same-sex interaction is not a frequent topic in Mesopotamian literature, but neither is it unknown: the Epic of Gilgameš, the Middle Assyrian Laws, excerpts from omen literature, and texts referring to people with ambiguous sexuality are regularly mentioned when the issue of homosexuality is raised with regard to cuneiform sources.

These sources suggest that love between male persons, as well as some kind of intimate interaction between males (much less often between females), was quite as thinkable in the world of the audience of Mesopotamian texts as it is worldwide in different times and cultures. The question is rather how this interaction was interpreted by the ancient readerships and by modern scholarship; in other words, what conception of gender is implied in the understanding of relationships between people of same sex? The title of this paper indicates that in the language of modern scholarship there is a category of “homosexuals,” that is, a definable class of human beings whose common denominator is that they are sexually oriented towards their own rather than the opposite sex. The underlying assumption here is that of an individual sexual orientation, whether due to “nature” or “nurture,” that has a fundamental effect on the sexual behavior of the person in question. This, again, rests on the idea of an individual “sexuality,” a deep-seated domain in human body and mind that presides over the person’s life from her cradle to her grave and is only partially controlled by the person herself.

It is well known that the idea of “sexuality” is based on sexological research since the last part of the nineteenth century C.E. (I use the term “sexology” as a shorthand for the psychiatric, psychological, and social-scientific studies on human sexual conduct and its causes; cf. Crozier 2008). The modern categories of homo- and heterosexuality, as well as the fully developed differentiation implied by the acronym LGBTQ, make perfect sense today when sexological categorizations of people have become self-determining classifications of their identity, life-style, and self-conception. It is equally well known that ancient written sources were not composed with the above-described idea of “sexuality” in mind and do not categorize human gender and its manifestations accordingly. Hence the title of this essay is a conscious anachronism.

In my *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Nissinen 1998), published more than a decade ago, I attempted to investigate the “cases” of same-sex intimate interaction in biblical and other ancient literature from a perspective that challenged the anachronistic imposition of sexological categories onto ancient texts. Greatly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (1978) and David Halperin (1990), I interpreted the construction of gender in the ancient sources as based on a distinction between the active and passive roles in sexual relationships, which produced a hierarchical structure, rather than seeing the persons involved in the available “cases” as homosexuals or heterosexuals. In the wake of the growing body of studies on gender in ancient sources since the 1990s, the traditional sexological categories have been reassessed in many other studies of same-sex eroticism in biblical and other ancient literature, either from an ancient Near Eastern (e.g., Cooper 2002; Ackerman 2005), classical (e.g., Williams 2010), or Arab-Islamic (e.g., El-Rouayheb 2005) perspective.

My approach has been criticized, not only from the conservative evangelical point of view for being too liberal, but also from that of gay and lesbian—or queer—studies for not being advanced enough. For instance, Ken Stone (2001) pointed out that in positioning “homosexuality” as the object of research, I actively, if unintentionally, sustain a heteronormative interpretation of gender. Stone advocates a “queer commentary on the Bible,” which would denaturalize concepts originating in the heteronormative matrix of sexological thinking altogether. Another critical assessment comes from Anthony Heacock (2007), according to whom both Susan Ackerman and I fall short of our own intellectual aims, in that while critiquing the anachronistic imposition of the concept of homosexuality onto ancient texts, our interpretations in practice do the same thing by sexualizing the relationship of the biblical characters David and Jonathan (and, by implication, that of Gilgameš and Enkidu).

I welcome this criticism because it makes me aware that anyone writing the “history of homosexuality” in ancient texts (in the Foucauldian sense) contributes to “how the field produces knowledge about humans; how the very objects emerge in discourse itself” (Crozier 2008: 397). If naturalized concepts like “homosexuality” are taken for granted, respective meanings are imposed onto ancient texts and the multiple “moments of incoherence and transgression” (Stone 2001: 117) in the gender discourse of ancient literature are easily overlooked. So let me now try to go a step further and take a very brief look at the aforementioned Mesopotamian sources.

The Epic of Gilgameš (Standard Babylonian version) is full of word-plays and other suggestive language, as well as erotic encounters between Gilgameš and the women of Uruk, between Gilgameš and Enkidu, between Enkidu and Šamhat, and, in a sense, also between Gilgameš and Ištār. There is absolutely no need to downplay the sexual character of the homoerotic and heteroerotic encounters or the deep love between Gilgameš and Enkidu; the question is, rather, whether the concept of homosexuality is at all meaningful as an interpretative tool here. Susan Ackerman (2005) has recently read the Epic from the point of view of liminality, and Neal Walls (2001: 9–92) from that of queer studies, revealing its polyphonous discourse of desire that transcends traditional erotic categories. The Epic plays constantly on boundaries such as those between men and gods, humans and animals, man and woman, man and man, life and death, constructing “queer” relationships and transgressions of categories and involving liminal characters quite far from the average citizen: the semidivine Gilgameš, the bestial Enkidu, the goddess Ištār. In fact, Šamhat the prostitute is probably the only character whose sexual role would have been considered “normal” by ancient audiences of the Epic.

It is quite clear that neither Gilgameš nor Enkidu can be characterized as “homosexuals” because of their mutual relationship, or “bisexuals” because they have relations with both sexes. The sexual acts performed by them present themselves as milestones in their troubled journey, in which the erotic, even “queer,” features determining their relationship are but one aspect of their mutual bonding. Sex fades away as the story progresses; Gilgameš’s rejection of Ištār’s proposal marks a turning point where sex peters out, giving way to Gilgameš’s development towards what might rather be called masculine asceticism. This does not diminish Gilgameš’s love for Enkidu, as his heartbreaking lament over Enkidu’s dead body testifies. 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.

The liminal and queer connotations of human sexuality find another expression in the sex omens in *Šumma ālu*, four of which assume sexual contact between two males:

If a man has sexual relations with an *assinnu*, hardships will be unleashed from him (CT 39 45:32).

If a man has sexual relations with a *geršeqqû*, for an entire year the deprivations which beset him will be kept away (CT 39 45:33).

If a man has sexual relations with a male house(-born) slave, hardship will seize him (CT 39 45:34).

If a man has sex *per anum* with his social peer, that man will become foremost among his brothers and colleagues (CT 39 44:13).

Three of these four omens are plainly auspicious: intercourse with another male represents dominance and gaining of power. As Ann Guinan puts it, “These omens eroticize social categories and value those sexual acts and objects that extend the domain of social influence” (Guinan 1997: 468). What matters here is the masculine social space, masculine social body, and socially sanctioned boundaries of sexual behavior. A homosexual orientation is not presupposed by the omen apodoses; if it were, such propitious omens could be read as a general invitation to any male person to become gay! But this would have been entirely incomprehensible within the male-dominated Mesopotamian interpretation of gender, social space, and sexual hierarchy, in which sexual contact benefited the active and penetrative party, not the passive one.

The omens are not concerned with morals and they do not define what kind of behavior is acceptable; they rather deal with individual, rather unlikely, cases where the behavior of a male citizen may go beyond the constraints of social norms. That male-to-male sexual intercourse was not only understood to occur but that it was also seen as a transgression of socially determined boundaries is suggested by two paragraphs of the Middle Assyrian Laws:

If a man furtively spreads rumors about his comrade (*tappā’u*), saying, “Everyone has sex with him,” or in a quarrel in public says to him, “Everyone has sex with you, I can prove the charges,” but he is unable to prove the charges and does not prove the charges, they shall strike him fifty blows with rods; he shall perform the king’s service one full month; they shall cut off (his hair?) and he shall pay one talent of lead. (MAL A §19)

If a man has sex with his comrade and they prove the charges against him and find him guilty, they shall have sex with him and they shall turn him into a eunuch. (MAL A §20)

The first paragraph concerns a false accusation of habitual submission to a sexual act with another male, while the other is about the act itself. One might want to identify the accused party as a homosexual, but this is not what the text says. The laws do not talk about the desires, let alone the sexual orientation of the accused, but criminalize the use of another citizen as a passive partner in a sexual act (Cooper 2002: 84). They reflect exactly the same sexual hierarchy presupposed by the omens discussed above, viewing a male-to-male sexual act (like any sexual act) as reflecting a socially sanctioned sexual asymmetry. As I have argued elsewhere, penetrating a fellow citizen of one’s own social standing is tantamount to rape (Nissinen 1998: 25–26). Unlike the omens, the Middle Assyrian laws mark off the appropriate social space and regulate the liminal and precarious qualities of human sexuality. Both the omens and the laws thus speak volumes about the Mesopotamian understanding of masculinity but say nothing about homosexuality.

The issue of homosexuality has sometimes been raised with regard to the devotees of Ištar called *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, *sinnišānu*, and sometimes also the *kalû* and *kulu’u* mentioned in several texts from various periods as representatives of an ambiguous gender (Teppo 2008; Gabbay 2008). These people feature in different roles, including cross-dressing, ritual dance, healing, prophecy, and lament. Whether or not castrated, and whether or not involved in sexual acts with male persons (there is some unclear evidence of both), their role was that of

a permanent third gender, if not a non-gender, deriving from the mythological explanation of their existence. This role was institutionalized because they “existed between myth and reality and embodied the divine Otherness” (Teppo 2008: 87). This was also the justification for their manifest transgression of conventional sexual roles: being neither men nor women, they were not expected to conform to the dominant and active sexual role of a male citizen; nevertheless, at the same time, they emulated Ištar’s own liminality and her power to transgress sexual boundaries (see, e.g., Bahrani 2001: 141–60), thus highlighting acceptable gender roles by way of manifestly violating them. Who knows—perhaps this role could be assumed by members of society who did not fit into the prevailing gender matrix of masculinity or femininity, such as persons born as hermaphrodites and males for whom sexual contact with the opposite sex was impossible.

So are there homosexuals in Mesopotamian literature? This is ultimately something that can only be decided by the community using the category of homosexuality. If love between people of same sex, sexual coercion, random homoerotic encounters, and a gender-neutral sexual role are not considered expressions of homosexuality, as I believe they are not, then the answer is inevitably “no.”

Perhaps the most important outcome of the above discussion is how little sense it makes to strain “homosexual” lumps out of the gravy of ancient literature, even when this is done in order to find out how the modern concept of homosexuality works in texts to whose authors the whole concept was unknown. A decade or two ago, this was a necessary and well-grounded enterprise, and, to be sure, it is not entirely obsolete even today when chapters and verses are still quoted in political discourse concerning the position of LGBTQ people. In scholarship, however, the once-common sexological categories have begun to erode in favor of—hopefully—more helpful kinds of conceptualization.

Ivan Crozier wrote recently concerning his own sexological case studies of the late nineteenth century: “This approach requires that the historian focus not only on what doctors wrote, but also upon the practices on which sexology relies” (Crozier 2008: 397). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said of the presuppositions of modern scholars. Questioning the applicability of modern categories is one of the most recent episodes in the “history of sexuality,” but it is certainly not the end of it.

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