Inside and Out: Extra-Dimensional Aspects of the Mesopotamian Body, With Egyptian Parallels

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In the last two decades there has been an explosion of research on the body. With careful use of primary sources from the archaeological, visual and textual records, the body can teach us a great deal about antiquity. However, most studies look at the body as it is depicted in textual and visual representations.[1] As representations are created to transmit social messages to various audiences, they do not reflect reality but moreover how social features such as power and gender *should* interface. Even bodies from excavated gravesites are ultimately social statements prescribed by cultural traditions and may not say much about the real dynamics of any given domestic unit. In the end, the study of the body is actually an exploration of how the body was used to reinforce cultural attitudes.

As important as all this work is, what do we really know about the body as it was lived? How do we get inside its skin? This is not to say that the lived body was free from social conditioning; certainly it was not. We may know, in fact, a lot about how Mesopotamians went about in private life. What they ate, that they drank somewhere between 4 and 5 liters of beer a day, that girls married after puberty and boys in their early twenties. We often know what they customarily wore and the various hairstyles they wore to announce individual status or professions. We may know, for instance, that a woman in child birth usually delivered her baby with her feet planted on a specially prepared layer of bricks. But what did she experience? What should be avoided is the assumption that the biological processes of the body are essentially the same irrespective of time, place and culture. It should not be assumed, for instance, that since giving birth is "natural," it must then be cross-cultural and trans-historical. It should rather be kept in mind that bodies undergoing the same biological processes, such as giving birth, having intercourse or dying, experience them differently according to cultural and personal expectations. For

[1] My own work on representations of the body has grown from research in gender and sexuality, particularly the diverse functions of erotica in ancient Mesopotamia as well as critical analysis of the way earlier scholars have misread sexuality. See Assante 2000, 2002b, 2003, 2006, 2007 and forthcoming. Highly recommended for general discussion of the Mesopotamian body are the works of Asher-Greve 1997, Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006 and Winter 1989, 1994, 1995, 1996.

instance, many records relate a native American practice in which women from Western tribes about to give birth ride out alone on horses into the wilds, dig a hole in the earth into which the neonate is dropped, wrap it, rest for awhile, then get back up on their horses and ride back to camp. The experience of childbirth for such women cannot be compared to that of Mesopotamian women squatting on bricks assisted by midwives, or modern women lying in hospital beds surrounded by medical personnel and their technology.

What can we really know about the body at the feast table, or in the nuptial bed, the body dancing, chanting, parading in temple festivals or in solitary devotion at home before his or her personal god? What was it like to inhabit the adorned and anointed royal body, which in the times before Hammurabi was often invested with divinity? What can we know about the body during times of peace and plenty? Or the body during invasions and plagues, in famine, drought or flood? What of the body of the anonymous captive in a sea of some many thousands of others, including animals, trudging across desert wastes in heat that can reach over 50 degrees centigrade, moving farther and farther away from a devastated homeland never to be seen again on the way to labor camps in the foreign capital city of the conquering enemy? What is the difference between the experience of the female captive body and the male captive body? Or between the aged captive and the child captive? How are we to access the enslaved body? The criminalized body? The castrated, branded or maimed body?

What was it like to be in the body of the Middle Assyrian "woman of the palace" who was under constant scrutiny and threatened with death just for cursing the king or being in unorthodox proximity to a man, even if he were a eunuch?[2] Was every roll of her eye trained? Was her spatial sense different from ours? What is the meaning of the body in societies that view mutilation and death as laudatory practices of justice and conquest? Or that claim ownership over the bodies of women, children, captives and slaves? Even stranger, birth disorders were often read to predict destiny, and the hermaphrodite, the barren, like the physically deformed, appear in myth as purposefully shaped for a specific place in civilization, rather than being dismissed as medical aberrations. Unique portraits of the atypical as individual: the dwarf Seneb from Giza (c. 2530), and the sexually ambiguous Ur-Nina, the great singer from Mari (c. 2400), offer tantalizing but all too rare glimpses of authentic individuals. And finally, what was the experience of the body as it approached the transition from life to death? So far, scholarship has not tried to uncover their stories. We hardly dare to imagine them.

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[2] See the Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees, an incomplete compilation of nine Assyrian kings. For a recent editing, see Roth 1995. For discussion see Assante 2007:383.

In 2006, I was asked to write two entries for the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*.[3] The first on "Beauty" was limited to one page, including bibliography, and the second on "The Body" to four and a half pages, including bibliography. My instructions were not just to cover some 4000 years of Mesopotamian material, but to "throw in a little Egypt." Condensing what could be several books into six pages was a humiliating experience. But at the end of it, what was surprising were not the number of differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt, but the number of similarities. The differences are most obvious in the way bodies were portrayed in art, a subject outside the concerns of this paper. What is of interest here is how the body, or more properly, how the form of the body, operated in many dimensions at once. Even the brief discussion offered here indicates that ancient experiences and perceptions are likely to have been quite foreign to modern notions of the lived body.

Mesopotamians and Egyptian both regarded the body as made up of physical and non-physical components, each sentient to some degree. At the core of this cooperative collection of parts was the heart from which thought, emotion, conscience, courage and free will sprang (Asher-Greve 1997: 433-4, Meskell 1999: 115, 118-19). Although the head could stand for the whole self, no function was ordinarily attributed to the brain (Weeks 1995: 1789). The ear was an organ of receptivity and understanding. In Mesopotamia, it moreover signified intelligence and wisdom. The Sumerian phraseology for possessing wisdom was "wide of ear," geštu$_3$-dagal (Winter 1989: 570-81); the Akkadian for "intelligence" or "focusing the attention," *biš īt uzni* (*uznu* = ear), when put in the negative, means "ignorance" (*CAD* sub: *hasīsu*). For us in the modern age, these qualities are usually located in the brain. Furthermore, brain capacity is thought to be mostly determined by genetic makeup. The Intelligent Quotient Tests or IQ tests nicely demonstrate this assumption. They are given to children in the United States at a very young age before a child's social environment exerts enough influence to obscure his or her raw genetic aptitude. It is believed that these tests accurately measure a child's inborn brain capacity, which is given a number or Intelligence Quotient. What can Mesopotamians have been thinking to ascribe intelligence or wisdom to the ear? I have very little doubt that it expresses a wisdom gained by sharpened faculties for hearing the inner voice, the voice of intuition, which Mesopotamians might have regarded as the voices of the gods.[4] Nevertheless, Mesopotamians perceived wisdom and intelligence as something one receives rather than something one simply has from birth. It involves then some sort of reciprocity with an area of activity that lies beyond the physical self. Yet it is not properly part of the physical self.

[3] Volume B, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
[4] As implied by Irene Winter 1989: 579-81.

There are countless examples of individual bodily parts having what seems to be a life of their own from both Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources. Statements in cuneiform signs and hieroglyphs such as "my heart became glad," "my head was lifted high" and "my feet have forgotten how to move" conceive parts as independently aware. Both cultures made votive offerings in the shape of human parts. Until fragmentation is accepted as basic to the ancient perception of the body, the full significance of certain texts, such as those in Old Babylonian and New Kingdom love literature in which parts of the body are named and described, will not be grasped. Similarly, the significance of adornments made for particular parts will remain obscure. For example, the accessories worn by Inanna-Ishtar on specific areas of her body carried special life-giving powers, still unidentified. When they were ritually stripped from her body in her *Descent to the Underworld*, she lost those powers and was left literally at death's gates. In Egypt, individual parts were associated with, or protected by, specific divine entities, loaning each part a whole other dimension of meaning. To bring about a cure, the parts were enumerated in order to invoke their respective divinities. Working with the ancient perception of the body as fragmented would afford greater insight into how disease and physical ailments were not only conceived but also experience. It would furthermore allow the emergence of original meaning from magico-medical literature, incantations, as well as personal letters to the gods and lamentations. In fact, it would shed light on any source that employs the body or its parts, many myths and literary works, oath taking procedures, legal processes, rituals and so forth, and, of course, burial rituals as well as native iconography from state art to the humblest figurine.

In state art, the perception of head as uppermost in the body hierarchy and the foot as lowest is dramatically illustrated in numerous images from all periods and places in which a king tramples the neck of his enemy. In Mesopotamia, the neck held high spells pride, which is symbolically crushed underfoot or yoked (Cifarelli 1998; Assante forthcoming). In historical works, it is often the arm of the king that defeats a city.[5] As the arm is the locus of manly strength, the arms of male captives were often bound. Royal inscriptions boast the cutting off of the arms and hands of the enemy more frequently than any other type of physical punishment.[6] Second would be decapitation. Like the yoked or trampled neck, the bound or amputated

[5] As Winter notes, the notion of "strength" is closely connected to the Sumerian ideogram for "arm," so that the translated phrase "he was mighty of strength" literally means "he was massive of arm" (1989: 579).

[6] Royal Inscriptions of Assyrian kings boastfully recount a frightening number of ways to mutilate the body. Body parts—especially hands and heads, but also eyes, noses and ears, and mostly in Egypt, penises —were often thrown in piles. Heads were also hung in trees or put on spikes for display. Flaying seemed to have been reserved for more elite enemies and traitors. Their skins were usually publicly exhibited on stakes. For inscriptions, see *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods*, vols. I, II and III by A. Kirk Grayson, University of Toronto Press.

hands and arms of the defeated are as much about psychological symbology imprinted on the body as about real practice.

The concept of fragmentation may have been even stronger in Egypt, as reflected in the myths of Osiris and folk tales as well as mummification practices in which organs are removed and placed in their own mummy cases. There is also a substantial repertoire of hieroglyphs of body parts, such as ears, eyes, feet, organs, as well as disembodied limbs portrayed in certain gestures. Until the 18th Dynasty, these signs transferred in art intact, some onto depictions of the body, so that a face in profile still has a whole frontal eye and legs end with two right feet. Each of these parts claimed unique properties and powers, which operated with or without the body. A close reading of Mesopotamian laments, incantations and other magical texts together with similar texts from Egypt indicate that each part possessed a separate will. The body and its movements, seemingly involuntary, its fluids, its breath, etc., could all be read for diagnostic purposes or as omens, as though they operated independently of the self. In addition, different meaning was attached to the left and right sides of the body. Although the right side was privileged, any damage or deformity on the right was read as presaging danger.[7] What would it feel like to inhabit such a body? Perhaps the ancients lived with a fuller physical awareness than one does in our modern era, in which so much activity is localized in the head. It is also possible that they might have relied on different parts for garnering different kinds of information and for the performance of abilities that are either no longer known today or are attributed solely to the brain.

Before scoffing at this idea, some recent scientific experiments have gone in the direction of investigating what are considered perceptual anomalies. For instance, clinical tests document blind-folded people routinely able to perceive colors from the area of their elbows. The most spectacular accounts of perceptual anomalies come from the growing literature on Near Death Experiences, in which a person pronounced clinically dead, with no brain-wave or heart activity whatsoever, returns to life after minutes or hours. Reports show that even the congenitally blind were nevertheless able to "see" exactly what went on in the hospital room during their moments of clinical death, as well as accurately read the various medical monitors and scans attached to them (Rommer 2000: 7). With what were they seeing? And if the accounts of children raised by wolves are at all true, there is perhaps no end to the flexibility of the body and its perceptions. The job of researchers studying other cultures is not to normalize the experience of the body but to exoticize it, to problematize it, and to expect the unexpected, so that it can speak in its own language rather than in ours. For example, textual descriptions in which the senses of smell, sight, touch and hearing cross over, as in the well-known phrase in Sumerian love literature: "You are honey to my eyes," should not necessarily be

[7] See Winter 1996.

discounted as merely figurative. Sensitive comparative analysis with like phrases may well uncover a more literal and quite unforeseen intention. The possibility that ancient peoples sometimes perceived through their senses in ways unknown to us—that the eye could somehow actually sense sweetness—should at least be tested.

The notion of the body as composed of liminal zones is another case in point. Orifices were imagined as permeable areas, where malevolent or auspicious forces could enter (Assante 200b). The Sumerian word for orifice is KÁ and in Akkadian, *bābu*. Both words also mean "door" or "gate." Orifices, like all liminal zones, were unstable areas of flux and transition. Texts often construct infirmities as black magic, demons, disturbed ghosts and of course divine disfavor, that invade the body through these gateways and orifices. The examples are beyond number. In some Egyptian texts, the seven openings of the head are referred to as vulnerable points placed under the special care of certain gods (Borghouts 1995: 1780). A demon entering the head tortured people with headaches and migraine. A spell describes the magician gradually pushing a mask with four openings which are protected by divine forces over the sufferer's head. The head is now regarded as a fortress, with only four gates to be defended rather than seven. Women routinely wore amulets to protect them from evil penetrating through the navel or vagina (Meskell 1999: 49).

The vulnerability of sexual organs of both men and women is described in cuneiform texts in which witches or malignant spirits, especially from the *lilû* clan of demons, have intercourse with the living (Assante 2002b). Through involuntary mating, a person is married to a lifetime of miseries, paralysis, weeping or death. The incantations for male potency make up an entire corpus called ŠÁ.ZI.GA (Biggs 1967). Here the penis is treated as a problematic, independent and all too often uncooperative appendage of the body. Only elaborate spells and bizarre ritual action can induce it to properly perform. Women's sexual orifices were particularly exposed to dangers, especially in pregnancy when the fiendish *lamaštu* demon could cause miscarriage or stillborn infants; the fetus's life was snatched as it were from the woman's body (Scurlock 1991). But female genitals were also potent and hence dangerous to men, above all during menstruation. The notion of the vagina as threshold, which is attested not just in love literature but also in birth incantations, led to propitious imagery, more prevalent in Mesopotamia, of the female body as a house (Assante 2002b). When a woman's beloved enters her house, it is a double metaphor signifying sexual union and legitimate marriage.

How can we relate to the psychology of the body when it includes constant susceptibility to invasion from outside forces or to the withdrawal or, for that matter, infusion of divine favor? I want to propose a few modern mainstream conceptions that approximate this psychology, however poorly. One might be the modern notion of the body as punished by God, a theme well attested in Babylonian, Egyptian and Hebrew sources. But such a scenario in ancient literature was usually described as a complete breakdown of the body as well as the person's fortune, friendships and

good name. As the ancients regarded divine punishment for the most part as manifesting in a person as a wide range of social and physical ills, divine disfavor was not usually regarded as the cause of the more common single-symptom attacks, such as in the above-mentioned cases of migraine or stomach ailments. Another comparison might be the modern belief of the body possessed by evil, namely satanic possession, which many accounts purport to testify. Yet the kind of evil involved in Judeo-Christian possession is imagined as far more monolithic, more deeply malevolent and infinitely trickier. Exorcism requires great strength and endurance in rituals which may last for days if not years. The struggle is not just over the body of the inflicted but also over his or her soul. Rites and incantations for the removal of evil in ancient Mesopotamia were comparatively short and simple; many did not even require a priest. The very concepts of evil then are not really analogous nor are the rituals used to combat it. We might consider the random attack of air-born illnesses as a possible comparison. Yet germs and viruses are not considered as having intent but as random and impersonal. And lastly, what of the body infused with divine favor? The only modern western word that might approximate such a phenomenon is “grace.”

The most common liminal zones outside the body were thresholds of doors, gates and windows, which were often elaborately protected, altars and shrines, crossroads and beds (Assante 1998: 77; 2002a and b). The bed was another structure closely associated with the female body. Like all the others it is a place of transition, where the seen and the unseen intermix. But particularly it is where daytime consciousness slips away and a person enters the non-physical world of dreams or death. The perception of the material universe—and that includes the body—as having certain transition points where matter and non-matter somehow dissolve into each other, points that can weaken the barriers between realities or become supercharged with transformative energy, is one of the most important and as yet understudied differences between the ancient Near East and the modern West. The necessity of protecting thresholds and gateways gave rise to the largest repertoires of art and artifacts known from Mesopotamia, mostly produced by the terracotta plaque industries (Assante 2002a). But there was also statuary set at or buried under thresholds and the images of cylinder seals impressed on door locks and jar openings. Supernatural gateway guardians, such as Lu-lal and La-tarāk, the lama and bull *lamassu*’s, Humbaba and a multitude more known from text and archaeology attest to a real and salient perception of the liminal in the ancient Near East. The same could be said of ancient Egypt.

What emanated from the body’s orifices: tears, saliva, urine, blood, breathe, semen, menstrual blood, even excrement, was not automatically considered waste and disposed of, but was commonly supernaturally invested for use with other ingredients in magical and medical practices, along with nail pairings and hair. The use of body fluids was sanctioned by a cosmic precedent in which divine tears or

blood was basic stuff in the creation of humankind. The extensive documentation on body fluids indicates a wide variety of functions, while suggesting that each fluid carried several layers of meaning. For example, the excretion from Inanna/Ishtar's sexually aroused vagina indicated the pleasures of sex but was also was magically invested and highly auspicious (Assante 2002b). Furthermore, it was visually and textually so closely associated with sweet beer that in some cases the two were interchangeable. The goddess's vaginal wetness was intrinsically present in quite common Old Babylonian terracotta plaques that depict her in intercourse, sometimes while drinking beer. I have argued that these and related erotic plaques were used to defend the home and its residents through sympathetic magic. About a millennium later, a Namburbû ritual calls for sweet beer as a substitute for the goddess's sexual fluids to be used in a rite of purification (Assante 1998: 77-82). What was to be purified was a place of business so that a person's trade would improve. Body fluids could also be harmful. Semen, for instance, was linked to poison in both cultures. There is even an Egyptian spell to protect a sleeper against a demon ejaculating in his ear (Pinch 1994: 82). Female genital excretions and semen were also paired with saliva, another generative force, just as the vagina was paired with the mouth. In Egypt, there were over twenty words for spit (Meskell 1999: 47), demonstrating a highly nuanced appreciation of this bodily fluid lost to us today.

From the reverse angle, the body's orifices were also the sites most often medically treated. Magico-medical ingredients or even written incantations, prayers and spells were inserted in the mouth, licked or swallowed. One Mesopotamian text directs a man to put a pubic hair of an old woman in his mouth (*CAD* sub: *šārtu*, 126). Some Egyptian medico-magical texts speak of spells written on the flesh and then licked off while others were written on papyri then burnt, ground up, dissolved in water and drunk, so that its potency was ingested (Meskell 1999: 47). Egyptian deities could be painted on the tongue, their powers transmitted through fluids. In this way they also became animated and able to empower other substances that circulated around and in the body. Lastly, many of the most common remedies in both societies were administered in the form of vaginal and anal suppositories.

Additional evidence of the body's extra-physical dimensions is the Mesopotamian phenomenon of hi.li in Sumerian or *kuzbu* in Akkadian, a complex combination of charisma, allure and vital force. *kuzbu* could be spell-binding. Irene Winter (1994 and 1995) further notes its relation to the shining of heavenly bodies, which Mesopotamians believed were deities. *kuzbu* visibly radiated from the gods, as well as from humans, objects, such as crowns, and important statuary and buildings. It could not just be seen, it could also be felt. High Mesopotamian deities are praised consistently as having "awe-inspiring radiance," an emanation so intense it can strike terror in the beholder. Normally scholars have ascribed *kuzbu* to the most powerful and mighty, or whatever else had been touched by the gods. But in one text belonging to the first-millennium BCE Maqlû corpus of anti-witchcraft

rituals, a witch is described as roaming the streets, looking for human targets (Maqlû III, 1-12). With no more than a glance, she steals the *kuzbu* of a pretty girl. From this text it is clear that *kuzbu* can belong to nearly anyone to a greater or lesser degree. What happens when *kuzbu* is taken away? Do people whither and die or do they simply lose their good looks? Were Mesopotamians aware of the radiating strength of their personal *kuzbu* at any given moment? Were they also able to somehow gauge the *kuzbu* of others? Did young betrothed girls, for instance, sigh and wonder if the boys they are supposed to marry really possessed enough *kuzbu*?

Mesopotamian and Egyptian rulers, as divine or at least divinely ordained, were usually described as resplendent. The Middle-Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1077) was identified as "bright day whose aura overwhelms the regions."[8] The word aura here is translated from *melammu*, also translated as "splendor." The *melammu*-aura of kingship was a quality or substance that the gods conferred on worthy kings or removed from unworthy kings. Luster, brilliance and shine are common descriptions for the body of the beloved in ancient Near Eastern love lyrics (Mesopotamia: mostly Old Babylonian, Egypt: all New Kingdom, and the Hebrew "Song of Songs"). They further link the body with precious statuary. Associations of body parts with dazzling gems, lustrous stones and shining metals abound. Hair (including the beard and male and female pubic hair in Mesopotamia) is typically lapis lazuli, glossy and dark. Limbs are compared to ivory, alabaster, copper or gold.

What are these various radiations? Did Mesopotamians perceive lights around certain bodies and objects? The modern application of the word "star" to celebrated film actors of the modern era carries similar connotations of ascendant radiance. Who would deny that women such as Maria Callas and Princess Diana or men like Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy possessed a special charisma, an aura if you will, that extended beyond the purely physical? The emphatic repetition over millennia of the properties of *kuzbu* in Mesopotamian texts suggests that it was a palpable phenomenon. Whether this is true or not, the fact remains that it was a recognized and accepted part of the human package and as such could be consciously manipulated to affect one's life conditions. Other elements assumed or detected within a person's auric field were specific positive agents, such as personal minor gods and protective spirits like the female *lamassu* and the male *šēdu*. These were thought to accompany an individual through life. They were accompanied by certain qualities, for instance, *baštu*, meaning "dignity" but also "vitality," which was personified as a nude female (Assante 2006: 195-202). These psychic elements seemed to operate almost as separate secondary personalities. To what extent were Mesopotamians aware of them?

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[8] For discussion on *melammu* and other related aspects of the body, such as *banū*, a physically perceptible mark of divine favor and high breeding, see Winter 1995 and Ataç 2007.

In addition were heightened sensitivities to changes in the atmosphere. According to primary sources, they were felt most especially on the battlefield, in the bed, at the banquet feast, in the local tavern and certainly in the temple. In most cases, the atmospheric shift was attributed to the appearance and presence of a deity, very often Ishtar. This special atmosphere could also be personified as a deity or held to be the result of a deity's action. A very common personification for the charged atmosphere of war was Ishtar in her most fearsome aspects, leading her chosen king and his men into battle, her weapons brisling from her back. This flashing figure of dread-inspiring violence was no metaphor to Mesopotamians but a real and interactive presence (Assante: in press). The military aura of deities, including others such as Ningirsu, Assur, Addu, Nergal and Marduk, was believed to envelope the troops and lead them to victory. Such atmospheric auras were also sometimes described as nets. Ningirsu, for instance, captures the enemies in his net. In the tavern, there is an ambiance of enchantment when Ishtar throws her net over men and women, making them fall in love.[9]

A few poorly understood psychic identities further extended the body's range beyond matter. Some functioned independently of, or lay latent within, the body, activated only during periods of sleep or at death. In Egypt, there were primarily the *ba*, *ka* and *akh*. Mesopotamians, like Egyptians, saw humans as infused by several invisible forces. The *napištu* was the divine breath breathed into the first humans, who the gods fashioned with clay mixed with divine blood, and in one myth also with divine flesh. *Napištu* is what some translate as "soul."[10] But unlike the modern concept of the soul, it does not seem to be the carrier of identity after death. Another wind-like force was the *zaqiqu*, which was often imagined as a winged creature because it was seen flitting or flying about. It was regarded as active whenever the personality was absent from the body, as in sleep.

Proper burial was crucial to the well-being of the surviving personality. In fact, the condition of the buried body was the greatest determinant for the conditions of the personality after life, to which the sophisticated technologies of mummification are our greatest testimony. Ghosts were heard, felt and especially seen, particularly in dreams. The Mesopotamian *etemmu* or ghost normally retained the body's form and features (Abusch 1995; Asher-Greve 1997: 447-52). I use the word "ghost" here for *etemmu* because the *etemmu*, like a ghost, seems to maintain continuity with its former physical characteristics. The terms "spirit" or "soul" are too disembodied in the way they are currently conceived to fit the indigenous meaning. Unlike the *akh*

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[9] Assante 1998: 73-7 and see Michalowski 1994 for drinking among the gods as a precondition for many cosmic events that resulted in the transformation of human civilization.

[10] For an accessible discussion on the Mesopotamian concepts of what survives after death, see Scurlock 1995. See also Groneberg 1990. For Egypt see Lesko 1995. For in-depth discussion of the afterlife in antiquity, see Segal 1989.

and the later Greek soul, the *etemmu* was not transcendent but simply joined the community of the dead and its ancestors, presumably in the vast city-state like realm of the Netherworld. Burial goods laid in the graves of the ancient Near East, such as food, clothing and combs, also demonstrate the enduring links between body and spirit. The "restless ghost" of the unburied or disturbed corpse wandered earth-bound in search of food and water, often on the wild, formless steppes, that is, outside the bounds of civilization. When the "hand" of such a ghost seized someone, that person was likely to become ill or die. Similar tribulations descend on the body when the hand of a god is upon a person. Egyptians refer to the breath of the dead as well (Borghouts 1995: 1777). Ghosts could be used by gods and sorcerers to work harm. Not burying the dead, burning people alive so that the body was destroyed, or digging up graves were the cruelest punishments kings could inflict on enemy peoples. The Neo-Assyrian ruler Assurbanipal proudly relates: "I ravaged, tore down, and laid open to the sun the graves of their kings, both the earlier and the later ones, I took their bones to Assyria, thus I inflicted unrest upon their ghosts" (Asb. 56 v 74). The same king sometimes forced his enemies to dig up their own ancestral bones, as attested in his palace reliefs of war with the Elamites. Other palace reliefs portray Assyrians hacking up the bones of the defeated enemy. The bones could also be ground up. These and countless other sources attest to the notion that a properly maintained corpse was necessary for anchoring the *etemmu* to its rightful place in an otherworldly society even when the flesh had long rotted away. The strong and enduring connections between the surviving personality and its remains in Egypt and Mesopotamia are later reflected in Apocalyptic theologies of Jewish, Christian and Islamic resurrection of the body.

The fundamental corporality of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian dead is further illustrated by the belief that they, like the "restless" earth-bound ghost, needed food and drink to survive. These were provided by the family on a ritual basis. The Mesopotamian Queen of the Netherworld, Ereshkigal, also needed sex, and apparently lots of it! And even in the afterlife, lepers were still kept apart from the other dead (Scurlock 1995: 1888) That the spirit is thought to retain its human shape is implied in Early Dynastic economic texts that list offerings of clothes for the statues and spirits of male and female ancestors (Bauer 1969: 109). In other times, families made chairs for their discarnate relatives to sit on and gave them presents, in addition to honor and praise. One Egyptian spell makes the corporality of the dead explicit: "Your eyes are given back to you, in order to see, your ears, in order to hear words. Your mouth speaks words, your feet go. Your arms and shoulders serve you, your flesh is strong. Your veins are sweet. You rejoice at all your limbs. You count all your limbs, while they are healthy" (Meskell 1999: 115).

In both cultures, the dead and their living kin maintained a permanent relationship and were dependent on each other. Through personal letters and verbal requests, necromancy, dreams and other means, the living made their needs known

to the dead. Some necromantic incantations involved preparation for a special ointment which was smeared on the practitioner's face. This salve supposedly made the ghost visible in order to enhance communication (Scurlock 1995: 1889). Petitioners might ask for general aid, such as better health or the restoration of one's reputation. The dead could dispatch unfriendly ghosts and remove other evils by taking them down to the underworld. In Mesopotamia, spirits were thought to be effective in ending droughts and increasing herds. People brought offerings, said prayers and wrote petitions to the dead in much the same way as they did for deities. What to us is regarded as remote or even nonexistent, was to them real and ever-present. As Julia Asher-Greve so rightly notes, there was no dichotomy between the body on one side and the soul or mind on the other (1997).

What is it like to inhabit a body that even after death retains its basic form and identity as well as its needs? Where the ultimate destiny is not wondered about, not a mystery, not perhaps even feared, but more like moving to a far off city? There relatives and friends who have gone before await the newly deceased who takes his or her place in an already established community. More importantly, the dying would not expect to suffer an abrupt and irrevocable break with the living. Communication is instead believed to remain constant, continuing through ritual, sightings, voice phenomena and dreams. It seems to me that even the mortality of the body carries a far different meaning than it does today. Rather than final, it is fluid. From the point of view of the living, how does this on-going reciprocity, this physical and psychological closeness with the dead effect attitudes toward the body?

Much more could be said about the experience of death and the physicality of the deceased, but I want to move on to the final point. The body's reach was also extended through the recreation of corporal form in images. For the non-elite, the medium was usually clay. Here again, Mesopotamians and Egyptians held similar views. Neither accepted a dividing line between animate and inanimate. To them, images had vital, individual force. Some were especially crafted body doubles, housing identity like the body and substituting for it to perform certain actions. The anthropomorphic coffins of Egypt were nothing less than body shells that protected the corpse at visible and invisible fronts. It is too easy to forget that the uses of body images were not merely symbolic. Most images, whether carved or painted, were regarded as entities with some measure of potency. Even a poorly modeled lump of clay had agency. For example, many Mesopotamian incantations directed a person to make a figurine out of clay, which was used as a living effigy of that person. It was then subject to ritual actions and various material applications in order to affect a cure or disperse an evil spell. In the purification rites called *Šurpu*, such a figurine might be burned to cleanse the person for whom it substituted. In others, a person might be directed to make an image "of the ghost of his or her father" onto which "sins" were transferred and taken to the underworld. If it was believed that an unknown ghost was causing havoc, a generic image of a ghost might be made and

then buried, in the hope that its ghost would finally find rest and cease its haunting. In a similar vein, Maqlû texts commonly speak of witches and sorcerers working their malice against someone by making figurines of the victim. Conversely, combating witchcraft often involved making an effigy of the witch or sorcerer, which was then put on trial and afterwards burned.

Verbal incantations against a known demonic force might involve detailed descriptions of its body and the body's characteristic movements. As such, written and spoken depictions, like visual depictions, had powers, for better or for worse, most often to disparage the demon in order to control it. The description of the swamp creature, the *lamaštu*, the scourge of pregnant women mentioned earlier, is given in ugly detail for use; it includes feet of the eagle, a bird of prey, hands as signs of decay, overgrown fingernails and unshaven armpits. Likenesses of the *lamaštu* were used in two ways: as amulets that warded off her approach and as effigies that were killed, destroyed, buried, sent downstream or dispatched to the desert.[11] In Egypt, whenever possible, the outward appearance of the enemy force was described and ridiculed in order to maintain ascendancy over him as soon as possible. A spell against one demon reads: "turn back, Sehaqeq who has come forth from the heaven and earth, whose eyes are in his head, whose tongue is in his anus, who eats bread-of-his-buttocks, his right paw turning away from him, his left paw crossing over his brow, who lives on dung, whom the gods in the necropolis fear" (Borghouts 1995: 1778).

With some artifact classes, the exactitude of an image was of the utmost importance to ensure its efficacy. Thus ubiquitous Old Babylonian clay plaques, which carried the iconic portraits of an enormous supernatural workforce, duplicated the individual physical forms of specific demons, heroes and lesser gods with hardly any variation for over 300 years (Assante 2002a). I have argued that the exactitude of replication was necessary, first, because the entity could not inhabit its image if it were not accurate and, second, because the identity of that entity must be unmistakable to the very invisible forces it was made to defeat.

For the more elite of Mesopotamia, statues were made to stand in perpetual prayer for the life of the donor before a statue of a deity.[12] In a sense the donor was at two places at once, in the statue and in the body to which he was born. Inscribing a person's name and praiseworthy deeds greatly boosted the immediate power of his or her likeness. In one case, the mid-eighteenth-century king of Larsa, Sin-iddinam, commissioned a statue of his father and royal predecessor to stand before the sun god Utu, the patron deity of their dynasty. In this way, the father forwarded the

[11] Farber 1980/1983, *lamaštu* Text I.

[12] The following discussion of images is a compilation from a number of sources, including especially Jacobsen 1987 and Winter 1992. See also J. Renger's *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* entry "Kultbild" in Band 6, 1980-1983.

son's prayers to the god, which had been written down as letters and placed in the statue's mouth (Hallo 1976).

Images also gave body to the gods. Statues of deities were considered fully sentient and responsive to prayers and requests. They were washed, clothed and fed, put to bed with their spouses and taken on visiting tours to other gods. Damaging or abducting them could incur death. Mesopotamian lamentations show that the destruction or removal of a divine statue of a city's patron deity spelled doom for that city.[13] Similarly, some sculptured royal images were also regarded as live manifestations of rulers, capable of acting and speaking on the ruler's behalf (Winter 1992). The process of animation was ritualized, involving opening of the mouth and eyes. Such images were the objects of various rites and physically cared for, washed, fed and clothed, in royal style. Clearly the inanimate bodies of statues, figurines and reliefs were sites where various dimensions of the seen and the unseen intersected. The mortal body could, through its image, operate in psychic spheres just as the supernatural body could, through its image, materialize in the every-day world. The point of intersection had nothing to do with flesh and blood meeting stone, clay or wood, it had to do, rather, with ineffable validity of form in any medium, living or not.

The ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian body seemed to have been equipped with many extra-dimensional features no longer recognized as valid today. The body and the environment it lived in were both composed of many visible and invisible planes that constantly interacted. These networked experiences of the bodies of antiquity seem to have crossed the boundaries of materiality and non-materiality, of animate and inanimate, of supernatural and mortal on a daily basis.

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[13] See, for instance, the lamentations over a city's destruction in Cooper 1983, Michalowski 1989 and Kramer 1991.

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