

The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body

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Researching the body in ancient Mesopotamian art and literature reveals how essential the body was considered in Mesopotamian thought. Western philosophical tradition denies the body a function in reason and spiritual meaning, but the ancient Mesopotamians may have had quite different structures of understanding. 'Objectivism' has been criticized for not giving consideration to the body as a component of rationality and understanding. Some philosophers have proposed that we need a theory of meaning and rationality that puts 'the body back into the mind'.¹ In ancient Mesopotamia the mind was still in the body, mind and body were inseparable, meaning and understanding were, to use Mark Johnson's term, 'embodied'.² This article focuses on how early Mesopotamian (c. 3000–1600 BCE) concepts of the body differ from subsequent Western views and on the analysis and meaning of selected Sumerian and Akkadian³ terminology as well as textual and visual evidence of how the body was marked, represented and understood.

The Graeco-European tradition inscribes the mind/body dichotomy with two binary gender categories assumed to be universal: male mind versus female body. The spate of recent publications on the body has been influenced firstly by the mind/body dichotomy and the long Western tradition from Plato to Descartes which denigrates the body, and thus women, and secondly by contemporary discourse on postmodern, feminist and gender theories.⁴ Caroline Bynum's article, 'Why All the Fuss About the Body', surveys the literature recently published about 'the Body'.⁵ The literature reveals that the term is used as a synonym for senses, sex, gender, sexuality, gestures, corporeal functions, disease, physical activities, the corpse, or even for the person and the self. Bynum remarks that the usage of 'body' is confusing and contradictory. While dualistic ontology need not necessarily imply something negative, feminism has exposed the fact that dualism in the Western philosophical tradition has unfortunately always included Plato's misogyny and his denigration of the body, with women designated as body-directed beings. Since Plato, nature, body, emotion and the particular have been equated with women and negative values, whereas culture, mind, reason and the universal have been equated with men and positive values.⁶

Platonic and Cartesian tradition contrasts body as anatomical, material, spatial, temporal and fallible to mind as mental, spiritual, eternal, universal and infallible. The views expressed in Sumerian and Babylonian sources, however, demonstrate that mind/body, mind/matter or spiritual/material dualisms are not at all 'universal', nor do they include a denigrating view of women.⁷

The Sumerian language⁸ offers several terms for body, addressing the different contexts in which the body is set:

- su** and **su-bar** (in the Akkadian language *zumru*)⁹ refers to the external body, and often stands for people, groups and society *per se*. It is used in phrases such as 'body of a deity', 'body of the king', 'body of a city', 'body of Sumer' or 'body of the land'.¹⁰ The term **su** (in Akkadian *erû*)¹¹ can also mean naked, and it is a synonym for image.
- ša₃** (in Akkadian *karšu* and *libbu*)¹² includes the external and internal body. The original meaning is heart. That **ša₃** came to mean the total body—not only individual organs such as heart, stomach, belly, womb but also mind, thought, plan, desire—indicates that the heart was perceived as the central core of the self. Knowing and feeling were located in the body.
- (**me-**) **dim₂** (in Akkadian *binātu* and *binūtu*)¹³ is written with an abstract sign whose original meaning is not known. It primarily means limbs but also creation and creature. The verb **dim₂** (in Akkadian *banû*)¹⁴ refers to the form and shape of the body and means 'to create, to form, to fashion'. It is also used for the fashioning of objects, such as statues and steles.¹⁵ In creation myths it can be applied to the creation of humanity by deities. The body is humanity, the object of creation.¹⁶

A hymn for King Išmedagan of Isin (1953–1935 BCE), a song celebrating the city of Nippur, juxtaposes two Sumerian words for body, **su** and **ša₃**:

City [= Nippur] your centre [**ša₃**] is sacred,
your appearance [**bar**] is lustrous,
your body [**su-bar**] exhibits awe-inspiring radiance [**melam**].¹⁷

The city of Nippur is compared with a divine body. The term **su-bar** is used metaphorically for the entire city as a larger body, meaning external, visible body and appearance. The body of the city emanates, like a deity, awe-inspiring radiance (**melam**).¹⁸ Nippur's main temple, which constitutes the centre of the city and makes Nippur holy, is the main temple of the god Enlil, the highest deity in the Sumerian and Old Babylonian pantheon before Hammurapi (1792–1750 BCE); **ša₃** is used for this sacred centre; the core is equally 'heart, mind and body'. Such a passage could also describe a deity by simply substituting for the city a deity's name.