Non-Binary Gender in Ancient Mesopotamia

Notes About This Text

The rainbows you will see in this chapter are links to an appendix which includes additional information. Click on these links to learn more about the topics discussed in the main text.

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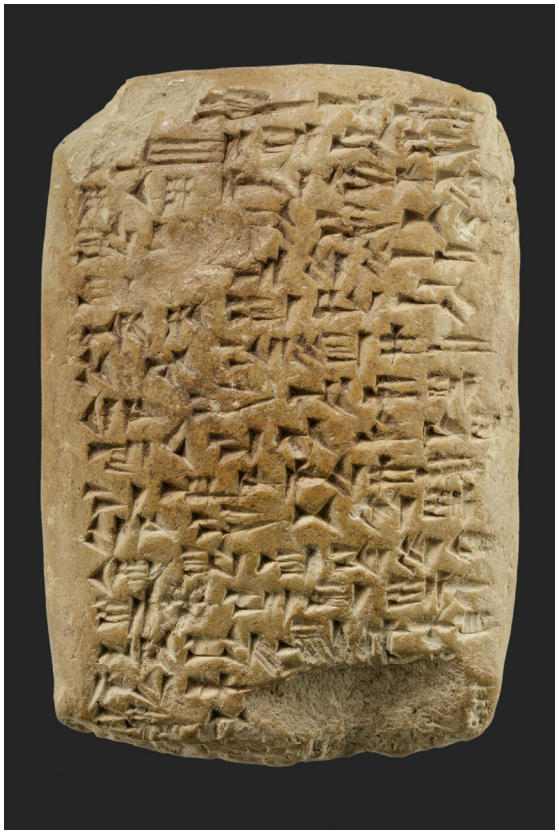
Please refer to the teachers' guide attached **here** for information about teaching this material, additional activities, and other guidance.

If you would like to get in touch with us, please send us an email at qtpcommittee@gmail.com.

Where is Mesopotamia?

What is now Iraq was once Mesopotamia; the name is actually Greek, meaning "the land between the rivers." It refers to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, which run through the land and were very important to the Mesopotamian way of life.

Mesopotamia is often described as a place of important cultural beginnings, with developments occurring as early as the Neolithic period (c. 10,000 BCE), and the world's first writing emerging in the fourth millennium BCE. The writing of Mesopotamia was done in a script called cuneiform, a series of combinations of wedge-shaped signs that were born from pictographic images representing their real-world counterparts. There were two languages in use in the region in that period, Sumerian and Akkadian; cuneiform was used to write both.



Amaran letter: Royal Letter from Abi-milku of Tyre to the king of Egypt.

MESOPOTAMIA *c.* 1200 BC

They were the two dominant languages of the region until the sixth century BCE, when Aramaic and Greek began to assert themselves. Both Sumerian and Akkadian were written throughout Mesopotamian history, but Sumerian died out as a spoken language in the third millennium BCE. Students learning how to write would practise making the wedge-like shapes of cuneiform in order to be able to write in both Sumerian and Akkadian.

Votive cone with cuneiform inscription of Gudea.

Who Were the Mesopotamians?

For thousands of years, ancient Mesopotamians created a complex and fascinating society. The north of Mesopotamia was known as Assyria, and was home to such famous figures as King Ashurbanipal and the Sargonids.

Marble Statue of Ashurbanipal

Ashurbanipal, who controlled much of the ancient Near East at the height of his reign, was perhaps best known for his extensive library, established because he wanted to be known as an intellectual king. The Assyrian rulers of the first millennium BCE find themselves referenced in the Hebrew Bible and in the inscriptions of many other surrounding peoples, as their influence in the region was strong.

Relief depicting Ashurbanipal hunting a lion. 645–635 BC.

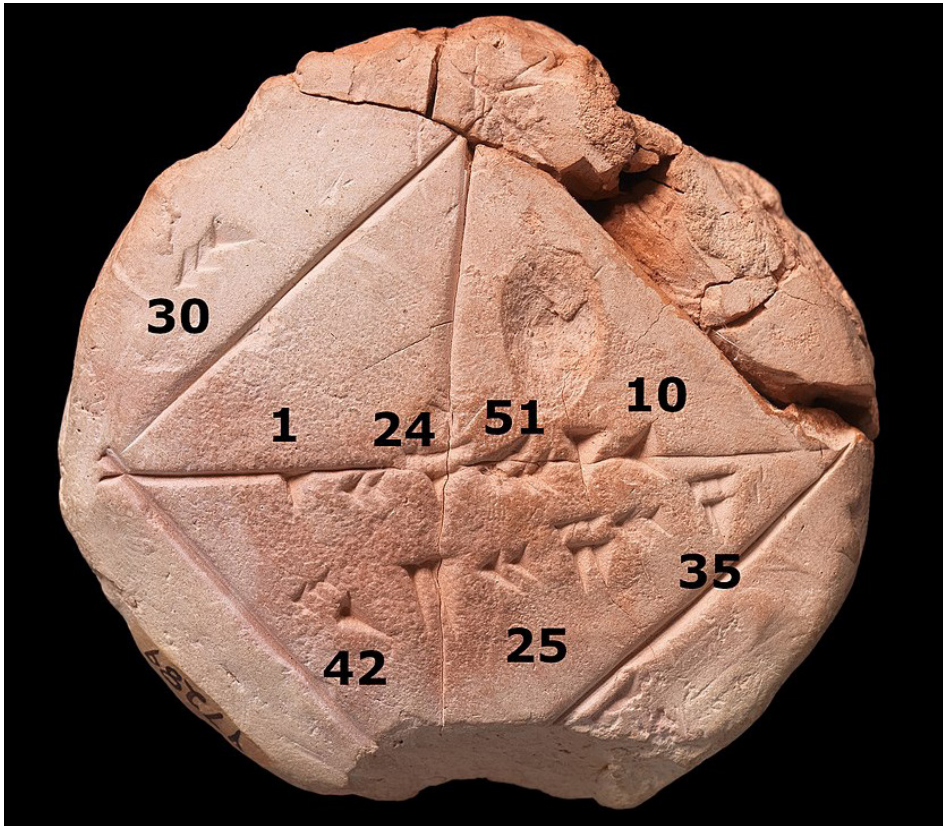
The most powerful of the Assyrian kings were known as the Sargonids, named for the first ruler in the dynasty, Sargon II, who himself is named for Sargon of Akkad.The south of Mesopotamia was known as Babylonia, which included the powerful city of Akkad. Sargon of Akkad was the first ruler of the Akkadian empire, which controlled most of the Babylonian city-states in the 24th and 23rd centuries BCE.

Mask of Sargon of Akkad.

Mesopotamian Culture

Mesopotamian literature, religion, culture, and technology of the period have stuck with us in ways that make our knowledge of the ancient past continually relevant. Their scientific knowledge led to many later discoveries, and they are credited with the invention of writing and the wheel. Many Mesopotamian scientists were adept at astronomy and mathematics, using their expertise for everything from predicting eclipses to finding the square root of two. Many Mesopotamian literary works are still studied today, like the Epic of Gilgamesh, which speaks to broad themes like friendship, eternal life, and what it means to be human, and has been interpreted by some as a queer narrative.

Click here to learn more about the Epic of Gilgamesh. 



Mathematical cuneiform tablet. Yale Babylonian Collection.

The Mesopotamian understanding of the universe divided the world into the heavens and earth, but made space for life in the in-between; that allowed people who were not strictly male or female to navigate those spaces. As a result, non-binary individuals served as powerful entities in Mesopotamian cultural practices.

We continue to study the Epic of Gilgamesh and our measurements of time and space are based on Babylonian mathematics; they used a base of six.

What Does Non-Binary Mean?

Non-binary is defined in general terms as meaning not belonging to any one gender. In contemporary times, most people are assigned a gender at birth that matches their perceived biological sex, male or female. Thus who we are is to some extent shaped by how society views us. However, individuals may not perceive themselves as only fitting in one gender or the other, which can cause difficulty in our gendered world. They might receive negative comments or even physical abuse.

But many people from the past would find these comments difficult to comprehend since for them non-binary people were not simply an accepted part of society, but were powerful. We can see from this that people have long existed outside the gender binary and will continue to do so.

The non-binary flag

Who Were Non-Binary Mesopotamians?

There is no question that non-binary people existed in Mesopotamia and that they were endowed from the beginning with awesome powers and abilities. In one of the earliest Sumerian creation stories, the goddess Ninmah creates a figure with neither penis or vagina, and names it as a third gender separate from men and women. Enki, the god of wisdom, then decrees that this third gender person is destined to stand before the king in a position of privilege (pictured below).

The Adda Seal. Ishtar is pictured in the middle with wings.

Beginning as early as 5,000 years ago [3000 BCE], non-binary people served in positions of power, using their location between the male and female genders as a place from which to cross existential boundaries such as those between heaven and earth, life and death. We see the elevation and celebration of non-binary individuals in cuneiform texts. Non-binary individuals had a role to play in both subverting (without punishment) and maintaining structures of gender that are still in existence now.

Cylinder seal. Individuals present objects to a seated goddess, possibly Ishtar.

At the time, non-binary people comprised distinct groups in society with clearly-defined titles: assinnu, kurgarrû, and kalû. Ishtar is responsible for the existence of these figures.

Cylinder seal of Inanna with a facing worshiper. A27903. Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures.

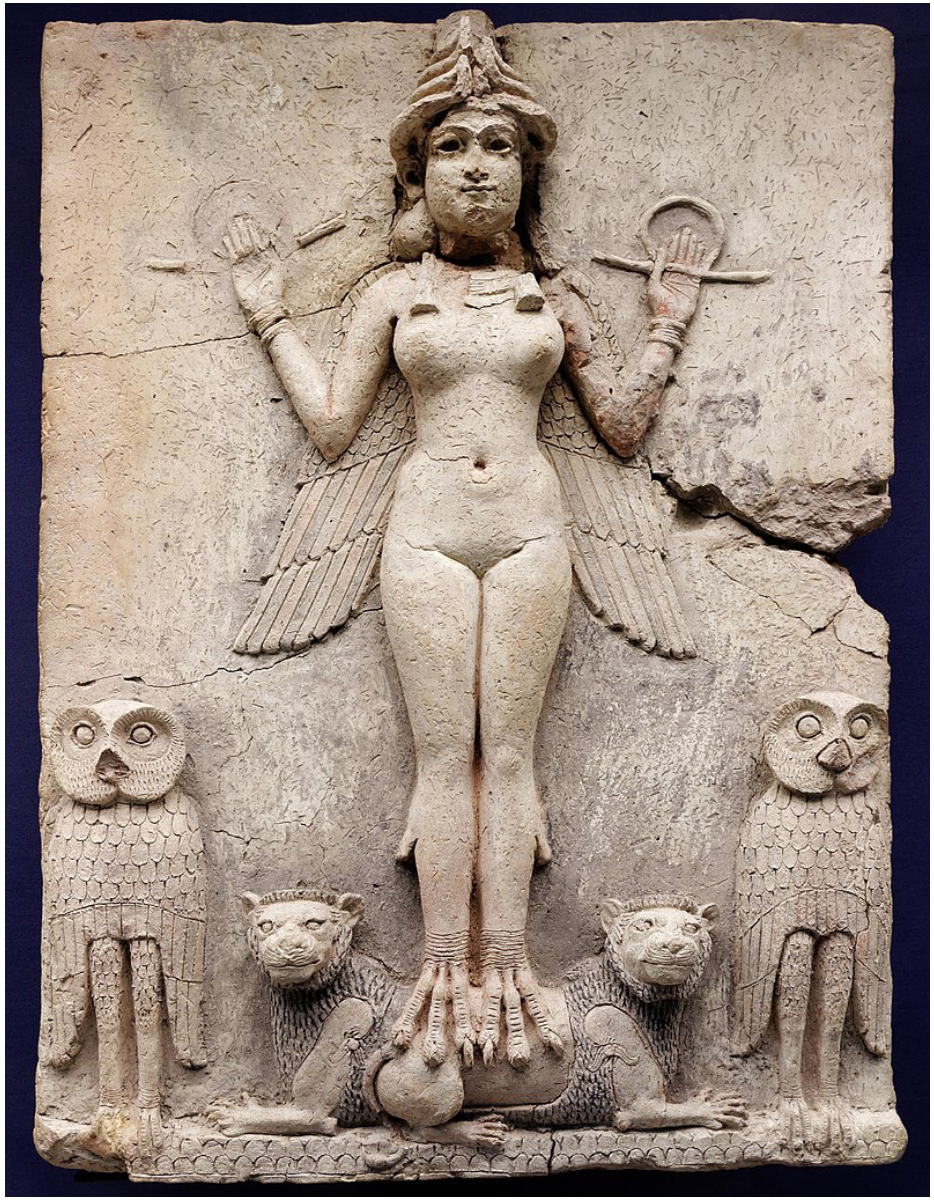
Who was Ishtar/Inanna?

This goddess (known as either Ishtar or Inanna) is a fascinating character who is often described as liminal (i.e. operating on the boundaries between things), paradoxical, and contradictory. Some commentators have gone as far as to describe her as androgynous. In the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's hymn to Ishtar of Nineveh, the goddess is described as being "Like [the god] Ashur, she wears a beard and is clothed in brilliance […] The crown on her head gleams like the stars; the luminescent discs on her breasts shine like the sun!" Ishtar did not conform to the roles of wife and mother, standing at the boundary between male and female.

Terracotta relief of Ishtar. AO 12456. Louvre Museum.

Reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, Pergamon Museum

From the time of ancient Sumer in southern Mesopotamia (c. 4500-1900 BCE), one of Ishtar's powers was to change a person's gender. It is unclear how this transformation was executed, but it is explicit in the literature of the time. In a hymn to Inanna, the priestess Enheduana writes that the power "To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours, Inanna." The non-binary groups associated with Inanna/Ishtar appear to have made this power of transformation visible. Neither male nor female, these people were both traditionally feminine and very masculine. Presumably, each person represented the full spectrum of their patron goddess Ishtar's powers: erotic love and sexuality, on the one hand, and aggressive warfare on the other; that is, stereotypical feminine and masculine realms.



Burney Relief. British Museum.

Mesopotamian Cult Officials

Kudurru (cult officials) of the 2nd year of the reign of Marduk-zākir-šumi I recording a religious bequest to the Eanna temple in Uruk

Of the three types of cult official, the assinnu are the best documented. They appear as devotees of Inanna/Ishtar from Sumerian times until the Neo-Assyrian period (c. 911-612 BCE). In Akkadian cuneiform, the word assinnu means "man-woman." The assinnu are associated with bringing people back from the brink of illness, using their non-gendered position to stand in for their ability to occupy the space between life and death. Some assinnu served as prophets, bridging the cosmic divide between heaven and earth.

The kurgarrû are introduced to us for the first time in Sumerian religious texts beginning in 2000 BCE, eventually coming to appear alongside the assinnu in Akkadian texts. Their cultic rites were aimed at first provoking divine fury in the form of ritual chaos caused by their place between genders, and then resolving it. The kurgarrû are further defined by their ritual dress, which takes the form of a warrior ready for battle, a typically masculine presentation. However, in a list from the Neo-Assyrian period (the first millennium BCE), the kurgarrû are listed among the women musicians. It was not simply their title, then, that set them apart as non-binary citizens, but also their roles and presentation, straddling the divide between men and women.

The third group of non-binary cultic personnel were the kalû, chanters of lamentations. This group of practitioners first appears in temple records at the beginning of the third millennium BCE, where they were usually mentioned alongside women mourners and wailers. In fact, the job of lamenting was once reserved solely for women. The laments were performed in a language called Emesal in Sumerian, meaning either “women’s language” or “thin voice.” Emesal was typically reserved for women and goddesses. Although the kalû were no longer strictly women by the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000-1600 BCE), these non-binary lamenters replaced the women, maintaining the female forms of the profession and adapting them into their gender identity. Like the assinnu, the kalû were integrated into the cult of Inanna/Ishtar, where their role was to soothe the heart of the goddess with their song.

Although it is possible that these non-binary officials were merely presenting as such as part of a performance for a cultic ritual, it is much more likely that it was a permanent role and a permanent social identity, standing at the border between chaos and order, life and death, heaven and earth.

A depiction of a singer and a lyre player entertaining guests at a banquet c. 2500 BCE. Mesopotamian cult officials would have participated in ceremonies such as these.

How Do We Recognize Non-Binary Mesopotamians?

There were many markers of gender ambiguity in Mesopotamia. Occasionally it bore a clear physical form, but it was not only based on biological characteristics. Scholars have pointed to depictions of men as beardless, perhaps stemming from castration. A hallmark of much royal Mesopotamian art is the picture of men with long, curly beards. We have several iconographic examples of beardless men, who stand in opposition to these heavily-bearded men. Iconography is ambiguous, but we can certainly imagine the first millennium BCE beardless male person as non-binary. Compare the bearded man and beardless royal attendant on the next page.

Relief panel, Neo-Assyrian, ca. 883–859 BCE, Mesopotamia, Nimrud.

Assyrian relief, 'Head of a Bearded Man', found in the Royal Palace in Dur-Sharrukin, circa 710–705 BC. British Museum.

Alabaster work relief of an Assyrian royal attendant, from the northwest palace of Ashurnasirpal II. The Burrell Collection, Glasgow.

How Do Non-Binary Cult Officials Link to Mesopotamian Mythology?

The close association with Inanna/Ishtar for these non-binary personnel was not simply a connection between their gender identity and the ambiguity of the goddess herself. Embedded in the praise poems and literature of Mesopotamia are the origin stories of these people, imbuing them with the ability to occupy multiple spaces at once. In the "Epic of Erra," when the lamenters are introduced, they are referred to as "the actors and singers (of) Eanna [the temple of Inanna/Ishtar], whose manhood Ishtar changed to womanhood to strike awe into the people." Here, the author refers both to the multiplicity of gender these people carried along with Ishtar's ability to accomplish gender transformation.

These cultic professionals are celebrated in a praise poem of the king Iddin-Dagan as fluid, presenting as multiple genders at once, rather than shifting from one end of the spectrum to the other. Their entrance into the royal parade is described in this way: “Dressed with men's clothing on the right side, they parade before her, holy Inanna. I shall greet the great lady of heaven, Inanna! Adorned with women's clothing on the left side, they parade before her, holy Inanna. I shall greet the great lady of heaven, Inanna!”

Assyrian Wall Relief Depicting Musical Instruments. From Nineveh, northern Mesopotamia, Iraq. 705-681 BCE.

The ideological basis for the existence of many non-binary figures and the background of their cultic performance is strongly alluded to in the myth of Inanna’s/Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld. The story exists in two versions: one in Sumerian featuring Inanna, and another in Akkadian featuring Ishtar. Both follow similar storylines in which the goddess makes a dangerous trip across cosmic boundaries to the Netherworld only to find herself trapped.

An ancient Sumerian depiction of the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzid, both of whom are featured in the story of Inanna's/Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld.

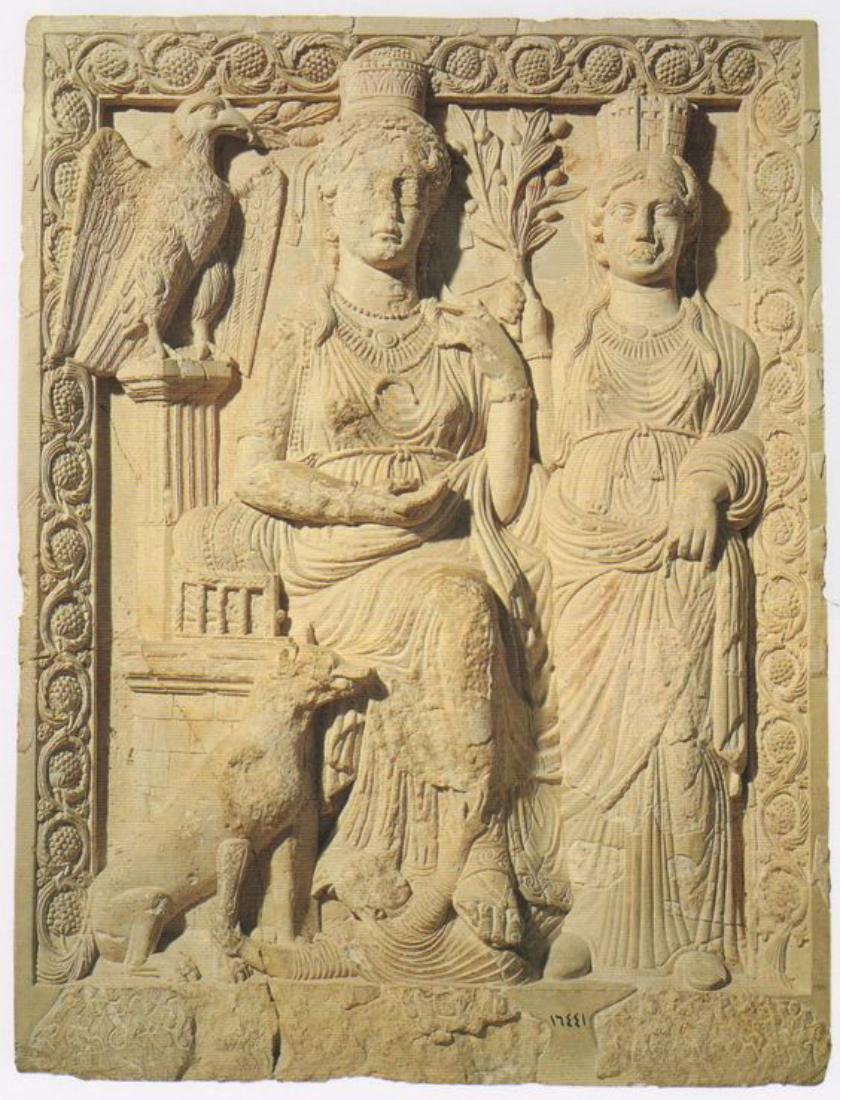
In the Sumerian version, her father Enki uses the dirt from his fingernails to create the GALA (kalû) and the KUR.GARA (kurgarrû). They are then given the instruction to "Go and direct your steps to the Netherworld. Flit past the door like flies." This series of events is mirrored in the Akkadian version of the tale, Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld. The third gender character Asushunamir is created and told to "make your way to the Netherworld, let the seven gates of the Netherworld be opened before you." He is then instructed to dwell in the threshold between the earth and the Netherworld.

Image of the Sumerian god Enki. Modern reproduction of the Adda seal (c. 2300 BCE)

In Mesopotamian cosmic geography, the boundaries between the heavens and earth, and between earth and the Netherworld were not to be crossed by just anyone. In fact, no one was allowed to cross to the Netherworld and return to earth, a notion reflecting the finality of death. The story of Inanna's/ Ishtar's Descent stands out in Mesopotamian myth for its description of such unusual and forbidden circumstances. More important than the goddess's ability to travel to such a forbidden place and still return is the same ability seen in the non-binary characters, who were created specifically for this purpose. Non-binary people did not simply exist in the Mesopotamian world. They held a special place in the cult and in the royal palace due to the belief that they could go where no other mortal could go.

Boundary stone depicting Mesopotamian cosmic geography.

The association of non-binary people with thresholds and the space between really comes from the Descent stories, in which they are able to work around and transgress a space beyond what is usually acceptable in the natural order of the world. Inanna/Ishtar herself was a fundamentally borderline figure. She crosses all boundaries just as she crosses boundaries of gender. In their association with her, the non-binary people of Mesopotamia were afforded these skills. To be positioned at an intersection between opposites implies the ability to manipulate that intersection.



Bas-relief from Palmyra representing Ishtar, alongside a servant. Third century AD. Damascus, Syria.

Modern depiction of the Ishtar gate, where Mesopotamian festivals involving cult officials would have taken place

In the case of the assinnu, they use the ability afforded to them through their mythical creation to straddle the line between life and death, and therefore, between sickness and health. The roles of the kurgarrû and the kalû involve divine ritual practice, to effect change on earth and in the heavens. Though these people live beyond the gender binary, the most important binary they traverse, according to Mesopotamian belief, is that between humanity and divinity. As physical embodiments of the fluidity of divine boundaries, they were thus thought to be a concrete presence of the divine in the human sphere. They constituted a link and mediated between myth and everyday life. This privileged state provided them with the divine power to carry out the sacred rituals that were part of their cultic functions.

Modern Context

However, as we said earlier, in the present, we don’t allow the space that Mesopotamians did for non-binary people. In the west, especially the U.S. and U.K. battles rage about transgender identity–what kind of medical care transgender children can receive, what sports teams they play on, or what bathrooms they use. In Iraq, there are many accounts of violence against LGBT people, and fear of reporting that activity. The Human Rights Commission stated “This has created an environment in which armed government actors, including the police, can abuse LGBT people with impunity. . .”., which would explicitly criminalise LGBT people. The long history of respect for non-binary individuals in Mesopotamia might be a useful reference in this struggle for human rights for all people.

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With many important contributions from the Queering the Pasts team!

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The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the world's oldest written stories. It was inscribed on twelve tablets; the story itself was originally from ancient Sumeria, written in cuneiform script.

Gilgamesh was the king of a city called Uruk. The Epic of Gilgamesh recounts many events that took place in his life, during many of which he is accompanied by Enkidu. Though the two were originally enemies, they eventually fight and become equals and friends. Many believe that the two were actually in a romantic relationship.

Neo-Assyrian clay tablet. Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet 11: Story of the Flood. From the Library of Ashurbanipal, 7th century BC.

There are many reasons for this interpretation. Gilgamesh is told by his mother, who is a goddess, that he “shall love [Enkidu] as a wife”. Another character in the epic tells Enkidu that he and Gilgamesh “will love one another”. Additionally, after the death of Enkidu because the two angered the gods, Gilgamesh is extremely distraught. Not only does he build a statue to Enkidu, he leaves his beloved Uruk and goes on a long and intense search for immortality. Ultimately, he realizes that he does not need to live forever physically; his and Enkidu’s memory will live forever in the form of the city of Uruk. [For a parallel story, see the chapter on Achilles and Patroclus with the popout on Orestes and Pylades; also David and Jonathan in the Book of Samuel]

This epic spread throughout the Near East, becoming very widely read, and has inspired many other stories and poems.

Possible representation of Gilgamesh as Master of Animals in an Assyrian palace relief (713–706 BC), from Dur-Sharrukin.

Click here to return to the text.