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A GENDER-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE ON MANNERS AND ETIQUETTE
FOR UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE ASSYRIAN QUEEN

Ludovico Portuese¹

1. Gendering etiquette

Assyrian history is apparently a male history, into which exceptional women occasionally intruded. In recent years, however, scholars have examined more closely the influence of women in Assyrian history, leading to several interesting and useful results that gave a voice to women from different perspectives. These included: by placing them into history and evaluating their social status; by developing the idea that biological sex is distinct from a socially constructed identity; by applying manifold approaches from queer theories, masculinity studies, and performativity; and by claiming that sex does not exist outside its social construction and that the research focus cannot be on women but on gender systems.² The different approaches applied in rereading the history of women have been developed since the 1960s, and these are commonly described as “waves” of scholarship.³ These studies basically offered new perspectives and methodologies for the study of women and their role in the political, economic, and social growth of Assyria. Nevertheless, a more sociological approach remains a *desideratum*. For example, it would be desirable to consider the female gender not as a separate social entity that occasionally sneaks into the male society, but as a gender which is integrated

1. This paper started life as a talk entitled “A Gender Perspective on Manners and Etiquette in Ancient Assyria” given at the American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR) annual meeting of Chicago (2021) within the session on “Gender in the Ancient Near East” organized by Dr. Stephanie Lynn Budin. The results presented here are part of the project GALATEO - Good Attitudes for Life in Assyrian Times: Etiquette and Observance of Norms in Male and Female Groups, which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101027543. The information contained in this article reflects only the author’s views.
2. Melville 1999, 2004; Bahrani 2001; Ornan 2002; Teppo 2007; Bernbeck 2008; Svärd – Luukko 2009; Macgregor 2012; Svärd 2012, 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; Gansell 2014; 2018a; 2018b; May 2018.
3. For a review of women’s studies and feminist theory in Assyriology, see Bahrani 2001, 7-27 and Svärd 2015a, 8-15.

in the interactional organization of Assyrian society as a whole. This was already pointed out by Saana Svärd, who rightly argued that any surviving text and artifact is evidence of social interactions.⁴ In other words, it is especially through the social interaction between the two biologically distinguished sexes that gender is achieved, constituted, exhibited, and then portrayed. In the field of sociology, studies by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman are still seminal and rewarding for the study of Mesopotamia, with particular reference to Assyrian social history.⁵ These authors overturned the notion of gender as an “ascribed status” and transformed it into an “achieved status”, re-conceptualizing masculinity and femininity from being the essential properties of individuals to being the interactional and social properties of a system of relationships. To the “being” they counterposed the “doing” of gender as an emergent feature, which was an outcome of and rationale for various social situations. To quote their definition of “doing” gender, “gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort. What then is the social doing of gender? It is more than the continuous creation of the meaning of gender through human actions [...]. We claim that gender itself is constituted through interaction”.⁶ In this light, West and Zimmerman state that “male” and “female” are not preconceived opposing categories that a rigid sex-gender division would imply, but rather results produced by individuals in social situations. Interaction produces gender while at the same time naturalizing it.

Building on this notion whereby gender is produced by social situations and interactions among individuals, this paper explores those social rules which governed interactions between men and women in terms of proprieties of conduct – in short, what is nowadays defined as “manners” and “etiquette”, the primordial scaffolding of everyday interaction.⁷

An interest in manners and etiquette can be traced back to the religious precepts of the Middle Ages and persists throughout the Renaissance period and French Revolution, where manners and etiquette were an essential aspect of the ideal of civilization, being a mirror of someone’s character,

4. Svärd 2015a, 14.

5. West – Zimmerman 1987; 2009.

6. West – Zimmerman 1987, 129.

7. The difference between manners and etiquette is vaguely defined in books and online resources. For instance, Wouters 2007 highlights that the difference lies in the perception of the terms and what they imply. He argues that etiquette is a more abstract and stronger concept used to refer to the good manners of a good society, which are thereby conceived as a social establishment. The term “etiquette” is thus often understood as being both superior, essential, and ideological. The term “manners”, by contrast, is perceived as less ideological and can be more easily used in an anthropological sense. One website, instead, proposes the following definition: “Etiquette is a code of conduct and a set of societal rules that acts as a catalyst for positive human interactions. On the other hand, manners are behaviors that reflect a person’s attitude. A key difference between etiquette and manners is that the former changes with a change in societal customs and norms, while the latter remains largely unchanged across communities” (<https://harappa.education/harappa-diaries/etiquette-and-manners/>, last accessed 04/10/2022). The two definitions are not opposing, and both emphasize the institutionalization of social rules when we use the term “etiquette”, including ideological implications accordingly. Such a view can be adopted in approaching and describing social interactions within Assyrian society. Therefore, I will use “etiquette” to refer to the sense of an established code of polite behavior (e.g. religious etiquette, political etiquette, etc.), and “manners” as polite behavior in a more general way. For a very recent and groundbreaking study of etiquette in Western culture, see Paternoster 2022.

accomplishments, habits, moral thought and aspirations.⁸ However, an interest in the history of manners and etiquette is fairly recent, and has grown together with an interest in the history of emotions, virtues, mentalities, and everyday life.⁹ Particularly seminal was the book by Norbert Elias, originally published in German, which revealed how changes in the interactions between individuals, and especially in the ways in which people act, are and feel themselves to be, were linked to profound social and political changes.¹⁰ In practical terms, Elias saw the process of changing power as the motor of changes in experience, ways of behaving and relating to others. With Elias, we can thus appreciate and understand that the study of manners and etiquette is not a trivial, formal, or mechanical study of formalities and “the external trappings of life”, to quote Karen Stohr,¹¹ but rather a means of illuminating social changes as well as the relations between individuals and groups, especially of different sexes.

In light of the scholarly reevaluation of women within Assyrian society, the social norms which regulate the interactions among individuals can be now seen in a new light, which resists biased presumptions that situated women as the weaker sex. Thanks to this, the key principles of this paper are: a) that the interactions between individuals can help to provide a better understanding of the interplay between gender, class, and status; and b) that manners and etiquette are an essential strategy for highlighting political changes and social interactions between men and women, in the formation of identity at the Assyrian court. Accordingly, it is assumed that manners and etiquette may contribute to gender persons in Assyrian society.

The investigation will proceed by analyzing a specific body of evidence from a royal courtly context, which thus includes the Assyrian queen and not any woman in Assyrian society. In light of West and Zimmerman’s claims that “doing” gender consists of managing specific occasions, so that, “whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-inappropriate”,¹² I will examine three iconographic representations of the Assyrian queen – the Stele of Libbali-sharrat, the Naqi’a’s bronze relief and a group of seals and sealings – which place the interaction between queen and king in a specific context, namely the religious one.

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify a few points and issues of terminology. First, the visual portraits must be evaluated as mimetic, ideal and idealistic representations (*salmu*) of the Assyrian queen, as a result of which they reveal only a partial or blurred truth of the reality.¹³ Second, there was no clear-cut separation between “sacred” and “secular” events in the Assyrian universe, since any experience (be it economic, political, societal) was firmly anchored to a religious conception of the

8. See Portuese – Scalisi 2021, 129-130 for a cursory review of precepts from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

9. See Wouters 2007 and: Paternoster 2022, 1-21 for a review of past studies.

10. Elias 1978.

11. Stohr 2012, 14.

12. West – Zimmerman 1987, 135.

13. Much has been written on this topic. In particular, see Winter 1997, 2009; Bonatz 2002, 14-17; Bahrani 2003, 125; Fales 2009, 261; Nadali 2018. For a brief discussion on Assyrian queen’s portraits and their identification, see Roobaert 2012.

world.¹⁴ Third, the rigid and standardized sequence of acts and words carried out within a “lay” or “religious” context do not help us to recognize a clear distinction between the anachronistic term “etiquette” and the more common term “ritual”, but rather encourage us to view them as overlapping spheres.¹⁵ By seeking to avoid these issues which would inevitably require a focused study, I will offer the following tentative solutions. First, we can only suspect that what lies behind the Assyrian images, although fictional rather than real or at least exaggerated for whatever reason, might contain a kernel of truth, a blurred representation of how people acted and behaved. Second, I will adopt a basic distinction between “religious” or “sacred”, in those cases in which individuals interact directly with the divine, and “lay” or “secular”, in those cases in which individuals interact with the non-divine. Third, the western term “etiquette” (as well as “manners”) will be used predominantly throughout the text, since it encapsulates what we commonly describe today as gestures, movements, postures, proxemic rather than ritual acts, which instead recall practices such as purification rites, funerary offerings, food offerings and libations. Notwithstanding this distinction, I would like to point out that what etiquette and ritual have in common in the Assyrian world is that dire consequences followed in the event of a serious failure to observe rules of etiquette or to follow a ritual.

2. The stele of Libbali-sharrat

To start with, I will carry out a brief analysis of the stele of Libbali-sharrat, the queen and wife of Assurbanipal, to introduce the reader to the notion that West and Zimmerman have questioned, the “gender display”. Their point of departure was Erving Goffman’s definition of “gender display”, understood as the natural signs which are given off or expressed by human beings when they interact with others in their environment.¹⁶ This applies to the case of small courtesies or rituals performed in society by men towards women, such as getting up, sitting down, entering a room, or leaving it, moving indoors or outdoors, and so forth. According to Goffman, these represent “identificatory stylings” that style people when they interact, so that a third person or observer can immediately know the gender and social identity and the hierarchical organization.¹⁷ Goffman thus uses the notion of “gender display” to refer to conventionalized portrayals or depictions of culturally established behaviors and correlates of sex, structured as two-part exchanges of the statement-reply type, in which the presence or absence of symmetry can establish deference or dominance. In sum, for Goffman, gendered expressive behaviors can reveal clues as to the underlying, fundamental dimensions of the female and male.

14. In this regard, see the introductory remarks to the publication of the Assyrian rituals and cultic texts (SAA 20, XV-XVI).

15. It is fascinating to note that the early Confucian philosophical conception of *li* tends to be translated as “etiquette” or “manners”, but also sometimes as “ritual” (Cline 2016). This suggests that *li* encompasses everyday etiquette, including court etiquette, religious ceremonies, mourning rites, and the social mores which govern all interactions and relationships between individuals.

16. Goffman 1976.

17. Goffman 1976, 70.

West and Zimmerman correctly observe that the notion of “gender display” cannot be segregated from the serious and more complicated “business of interaction”, whereby “doing” gender is an ongoing activity rather than something optional and occasional.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Goffman’s formulation offers an engaging sociological corrective to existing formulations of gender in Assyrian society and, for this reason, the notion of “gender display” can be applied to the stele of Libbali-sharrat before exploring the actual interaction between queen and king.

The stele was installed in the so-called *Stelenreihe* at Assur and found in the post-imperial building where it was used as a floor pavement (Fig. 1).¹⁹ The queen is identified by the inscription as “[I]mage of Libbāli-šar[rat], que[en] of Ashurbani[pa]l, king of the world, ki[ng] of As[syria]”.²⁰ The queen’s portrayal has already been described carefully by scholars,²¹ and certain similarities with the king’s portrayal have already been pointed out. For instance, the queen holds a flower like the one held by the king Sennacherib;²² she sits on a throne which is “a signal of importance and reverence in Mesopotamian imagery”,²³ and whose Akkadian term *kussiu* indicates not just a physical object “but a physical manifestation of the highest authority”;²⁴ and, finally, the term *wašabu* “to dwell, sit”, seems to be “inextricably linked with the politics of hegemonic masculinity”.²⁵ What is interesting in relation to the goal of this paper is the strict etiquette that the queen follows; for instance, she is depicted with an upright posture and a stance like the one which is held by the king.²⁶ The right hand, although fragmentary, seems to represent a particular gesture which involves the lifted right hand positioned at the level of the face. This gesture has been interpreted as the so-called *karābu*, which the standard lexicons gloss as “to greet, pray, bless, praise”.²⁷ In a context of meeting with an authoritative figure, this gesture should be read as a formal and reciprocal greeting and would mark the beginning of the audience.²⁸ According to Assyrian visual evidence, it seems that the gesture – which can be performed by an authoritative personality or a subordinate – connoted a reciprocal relationship governed by mutual obligations and benefits.²⁹ It is not by chance that the *karābu* gesture is often performed by the king towards the crown prince, and *vice versa*, or towards deities.³⁰ The addressee can be therefore human or otherworldly. For instance, in the Banquet Stele of Assurnasirpal II, the king greets both divine symbols and guests that were probably leaving the palace; in an audience scene of Tiglath-

18. West – Zimmerman 1987, 129-130.

19. Andrae 1913, 6-8, fig. 3 and pl. 10/1. Other queens had their own stelae at Assur. For a description and discussion of the stele of Libbali-sharrat and others, see Macgregor 2012, 88-89; Svärd 2015a, 75-77; May 2018, 253-254.

20. RINAP 5, 2001.

21. See especially Macgregor 2012, 88-89.

22. Barnett *et al.* 1998, pl. 35, 91, 108-109; Ornan 2002, 473. For the meaning of the flower in Assyrian art, see Portuese 2018. Details of the flower held by the queen are also noted in Andrae 1913, pl. 10/1.

23. Ornan 2002, 473.

24. Svärd 2015a, 81.

25. N’Shea 2018, 327.

26. E.g. Barnett – Falkner 1962, pls. VIII, XIX; Collins 2008, 95. In a similar way the queen, perhaps Libbali-sharrat, is depicted on the famous garden relief from Nineveh (Collins 2008, 136-137).

27. Frechette 2012, 35-38; Portuese 2020a, 115-116. For a recent examination of this gesture in relation to the gestures of *proskynēsis* in the Achaemenid Empire, see Rung 2020.

28. Zgoll 2003; Frechette 2012, 36-37; Portuese 2020a, 116.

29. Frechette 2012, 34; Portuese 2020a, 116.

30. Botta – Flandin 1849, pls. 14, 29.

pileser III, the king addresses his greeting gesture to the crown prince and other high-ranking officials as well as to divine symbols.³¹ However, in the case of the present stele, it remains unclear to whom the queen addresses her greeting/blessing gesture. The fragmentary status of the stele, together with the unclear meaning of the *Stelenreihen* in Assur, do not allow us to draw any conclusions in this respect. The top-right side of the stele may have shown divine symbols, as this was a common practice in Assyrian art, so the queen may be perennially greeting or blessing the deities. Alternatively, if we take for granted the interpretation that the place where the stelae were found was a depository, i.e. a *favis*, for monuments removed from a shrine, then the stelae may have performed the function of suppliants and statues set up in temples.³² This makes the gesture performed by the queen consistent, leading one to interpret it as a greeting/blessing gesture performed towards a deity as well as towards anyone entering the temple. By contrast, if the stelae were displayed along roads, then the gesture would have been addressed towards any passer-by, be it human or divine.³³ In any event, the queen performs a gesture that is often performed by the king and men in general, so there is apparently no distinction between manners and etiquette prescribed for the queen and for the king. The queen is iconographically assimilated to the king, and any formal gesture or posture flattened the potential differences between them. When we look at the Neo-Assyrian visual sources and try to identify the figures depicted, we tend not only to want to know the sex category of those depicted, but we also presume that Assyrian sculptors are displaying it for us, in as decisive a fashion as they can. However, the stele of Libbali-sharrat defies any identification if we rely on Goffman's "identificatory stylings" alone, because the divergences are owed to physical appearances and accoutrements rather than to ritualized behaviors. In other words, in this instance, manners and etiquette do not connote gender.

3. Naqi'a's bronze relief

In another famous example, the queen Naqi'a, wife of Sennacherib and mother of Esarhaddon, whose identity is inscribed on the gown of the figure, is involved in a ritual with the king (Fig. 2). The find-context of this bronze relief is not known exactly, although most scholars believe that it formed a part of an altar or a divine throne dais. It is even unclear whether the relief was displayed in the Esagil in Babylon or in the Assur temple at Assur.³⁴ Either way, it is unanimously acknowledged that both the queen and the king, who is presumably Esarhaddon,³⁵ are involved in "mouth-washing" (*mīš*

31. Portuese 2014; 2016, fig. 4.

32. Miglus 1984; Millard 1994, 11-12.

33. Nahm 2012, 122. In this regard, see the letter SAA 13, 188 sent to the mother of the king concerning statues of the queen mother which were apparently located in the streets. However, the letter is fragmentary in this case.

34. For two contrasting interpretations of the original location of the bronze relief, see Parrot – Nougayrol 1956 (Babylon) and Melville 1999, 49-52 (Assyria). For a general discussion on the relief with references to earlier bibliography, see Macgregor 2012, 109-117.

35. The inscription compares well with a passage in an inscription of Esarhaddon commonly known as Assur-Babylon H (RINAP 4, 52). This text and others (see also RINAP 4, 60; SAA 10, 247 with comments in PNA 2/II, 723) attest to the intense process of renewing the cult images started by Esarhaddon. For further comments, see Melville 1999, 48-49 and Walker – Dick 2001, 24-27.

pī) and “mouth-opening” (*pīt pī*) rituals, since the text inscribed on the relief describes this ritual as being performed before the stars of the night in the groves and orchards of Ekarzagina, the temple of Ea in the Esagil complex in Babylon.³⁶ Therefore, it is fair to surmise that the two figures advance towards or are standing in front of the representation of deities (under the guise of symbols, perhaps), to which queen and king are paying homage.³⁷

As it has been noted by other scholars, the queen is involved in a “remarkably ritual action” which “fits well with the textual evidence regarding Naqi’a’s authority in the court”.³⁸ Her participation in the *mīs pī* and *pīt pī* rituals is even more remarkable in light of the actors who were primarily allowed to perform these rituals: the exorcist (*āšipū*), the diviner (*bārū*), the cult-singer (*kalū*), and the king in his priestly office.³⁹ All these performers must be pure, and the rituals often refer to the importance for the performer to be pure (*ellu*).⁴⁰ Therefore, by being depicted as involved in such a ritual, the queen had to be pure as much as the king and the religious group of men; she probably would have undergone several purifying and cleansing activities similar or the same to those of men.⁴¹ Such a reading is also supported by the similar gesture which the queen and king are portrayed as performing and the object they hold in their right hands. The left hand is occupied by an object – a mirror for the queen, a scepter for the king – while the right hand performs the well-known *appa labānu* “to stroke the nose”, which, as Ursula Magen has suggested, constituted an expression of “Rühmens und Preisens der Götter”.⁴² The object they hold, as Magen also notes, seems to be the *libbi gišimmarri* (“palm shoot”), a cult/cleansing instrument, which is also attested in other iconographic and textual evidence.⁴³ Magen’s hypothesis can be further supported by a textual reference which I consider particularly relevant in this respect. The use of the date-palm heart (*libbi gišimmarri*) and the heart of a wood (*libbi išši*) is often attested in the ritual *mīs pī*, which is the ritual performed by the queen and king in the bronze relief. The former, in particular, is mentioned on a list of aromatic woods used during the ritual,⁴⁴ while the second, translated by the editors also as “date-palm heart”, is encountered in the following sentence: “date-palm-“heart”...he/you lay down and raises his hand”.⁴⁵ The movement of the hand which holds the *libbi išši* described in the text might recall the ritual action performed by the queen and the king, thus making them active participants and performers of the ritual.

The queen and king are also similarly depicted, insofar as both possess an erect posture and a direct gaze. Although to an untrained eye such a posture may appear irrelevant, it has profound implications.

36. RINAP 4, 2010; Parrot – Nougayrol 1956, 151-155.

37. Parrot – Nougayrol 1956, 147. A similar representation, including divine symbols, would clearly recall the famous Sam’al stele of Esarhaddon (Porter 2003, pls. 28-29), which is also appropriate for the depiction.

38. Svärd 2015a, 79. See also Reade 1987, 143; Melville 1999, 52; Macgregor 2012, 99-102.

39. Walker – Dick 2001, 15-16.

40. RINAP 4, 48, 35-36, r. 84; SAA 10, 247.

41. It is not by chance that the queen Naqi’a is compared to the sage Adapa in a report sent by an exorcist to the king (SAA 10, 244, r. 1-9).

42. Magen 1986, 61. For more recent comments on the gesture, see Frechette 2012, 46-48.

43. Magen 1986, 55.

44. Walker – Dick 2001, 54-55 line 13.

45. Walker – Dick 2001, 62-63 line 142.

It was believed that deities, kings, temples, weapons, and other selected artefacts emanated a radiant and terrible aura called *melammu*.⁴⁶ Looking at such a luminescent and terrible aura was an exceptional psychological event. This is what we understand from *The Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince*: “I looked at him and my bones shivered! His grimly luminescent splendour overwhelmed me (*melammūšu ezziṭi isbuṭim*), I kissed the feet of his great divinity and knelt down. Then I stood up, while he looked at me, shaking his head”.⁴⁷ The verb *sabāpu* which is used here is highly evocative: it means “to cover, overwhelm, to spread over” and it can also be used in relation to natural and catastrophic events such as fog, flood, water to encapsulate metaphorically the impossibility of seeing, the difficulty of breathing, and the sensation of suffocating.⁴⁸ Hence, looking at the deity’s *melammu* not only represented a form of access into the divine sphere, but also probably evoked emotions ranging from intimacy to audacity and from sympathy to threat. This is something that is of particular concern in the Hebrew Bible, which very often associates looking upon the divine visage with danger, blindness, and death.⁴⁹ This was certainly a result of a deity’s actual face and body, which had such a potent radiance that it would have blinded or even killed the mortal who attempted to look directly into the eyes of the deity. At the same time, however, Assyrian texts and images reveal that a select few individuals were allowed to raise their heads, look at the deity and survive. Among these people was certainly the king, and images show this eye-contact by representing the king with an upright posture and the head held high; such a stance allowed the king to look directly at the deities. Relying on the Naqi’a’s bronze relief, the Assyrian queen was similarly depicted, with an erect posture and her head held high, suggesting that the queen was also allowed to look at the deity’s eyes and *melammu* and hence that she too was one of the few selected individuals who was allowed to follow the etiquette of eye-contact because she was pure like the king.

But there is more to the image still. In a text containing the dialogue between Assurbanipal and the god Nabu, the god replies positively to the king’s incessant prayer by bestowing on him physical and mental strength to prolong his life. Nabu’s response is to grant a long life to Assurbanipal by dispelling from him typical symptoms of old age or illness and telling him: “I will lift your head and straighten your body”.⁵⁰ What Nabu is proffering to Assurbanipal are not only the ideal conditions required for praying repeatedly to a deity, but also the physical vigor and vitality – a direct gaze and an upright stance. Now, these features characterize several representations of Mesopotamian rulers, and it has been noted that both are attributes of leadership and express the hegemonic masculinity of the king.⁵¹ These attributes, which are normally applied to kings, are similarly applied to the queen of the bronze relief. It thus connotes a meaningful visual association full of physical, political, and gender-laden implications: the queen has physical vigor and vitality, leadership abilities, and no less hegemonic masculinity as the king. At the same time, such an association flattens the ways that masculinity and femininity are constructed and visually expressed, since the features which are identified with masculinity contribute to build the femininity of the queen, ceasing to be the exclusive

46. For a recent discussion including earlier bibliography, see Portuese 2020a, 128-129.

47. SAA 3, 32, r. 14.

48. CAD S *s.v.*, 32.

49. Chavel 2012.

50. SAA 3, 13, 12.

51. Winter 1996; 1997, 370; N’Shea 2018, 326.

prerogatives of men. In this way the direct gaze and upright stable posture are no longer gender markers and do not carry a sense of associative masculinity and potency.

The question remains of the queen's proximity to the king. The position of the queen certainly constitutes a unique example in our iconographic evidence, since the king, except for the parasol and arms-bearer, is always at a distance from people such as officials and attendants.⁵² Even the crown prince usually stands at arm's length and in front of the king rather than behind him.⁵³ Thus, the queen occupies an exceptional position in relation to him. Now, if we look at the Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees assembled in the time of Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076 BCE), we realize that the distance between men and palace-women was very important and that, if distance was not respected, both men and women were punished. Relying on these decrees to evaluate the relationships between women and men in the late Assyrian period might seem anachronistic and deceptive. To complicate things further, it must be pointed out that their content may have been more symbolic than practical and designed "to concentrate people's mind on the higher values of justice".⁵⁴ Therefore, appealing to the Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees is certainly tantalizing but any conclusion must be considered as no more than hypothetical. I thus take it that the content of these texts may only be used to shed light on the late Assyrian period with considerable caution, and I wonder whether a cultural continuity might have existed in governing the spatial interactions between women and men. That having been said, one sentence is of particular interest from a decree which establishes the physical distance between court attendants and palace women, by establishing a specific space limit between the two: "If a court attendant wishes to speak with a palace woman, he shall approach no closer to her than seven paces".⁵⁵ According to this Middle Assyrian Palace Decree, it seems that *7 eberta^{mes}* (or seven paces) was the distance that had to be kept and respected by women and men within the royal palace. Now, 7 paces correspond to 5.33 m (17,48 feet), which is a significant distance: a man and a woman must speak loudly to talk with each other, cannot touch each other, and the main sensory experience involved is vision. This interpersonal distance could fall within the so-called close phase of "public" distance (> 3.5 m; greater than 12 feet), according to the theory of proxemic developed by the anthropologist Edward Hall on the basis of North American culture. At such a distance, details are no longer visible, and both the body and the head's size are either unperceived or perceived as distorted.⁵⁶ If we now look back at the Naqi'a's bronze relief with a Middle Assyrian individual's eye, the representation appears intrepid and the proximity of the king to the queen appears to be visually significant and exceptional.

In this context, it might be reasonable to suspect that the queen and king are in fact standing side by side. However, Assyrian sculptors were particularly keen to manage the space between figures and nothing was left to chance: individuals standing side by side were usually depicted with their feet overlapping, so as to express their spatial location.⁵⁷ Moreover, a reconstruction of the missing lower

52. See Portuese 2020a, 69-77 for a discussion of the processions moving towards the king according to palace reliefs.

53. For a detailed descriptive and iconographic examination of the crown prince in relation to the king, see Kertai 2017.

54. Stol 2016, 662.

55. Roth 1995, 206.

56. Hall 1966, 123-126.

57. Portuese 2020a, 119-120.

part of the bronze relief, based on the Esarhaddon's stele from Sam'al, suggests that the queen and king's feet do not overlap, so they were presumably set in single file (Fig. 3).

Taken altogether, despite the weakness of the textual reference cited above, what is remarkable is the indisputable proximity of the queen to the king, which is something rather unusual in Assyrian art, even among the few surviving representations of the Assyrian queen.

4. Queen's seals and sealings

Far more explicit information about "doing gender" through interaction is to be found in a group of seals and sealings which depict the queen and the king standing in front of a deity. This group of evidence, to which I now turn, includes a golden seal that is known to have belonged to the queen Hama, the wife of Shalmaneser IV (782-773) (Fig. 4 left), and a sealing that perhaps belonged to Atalia, the wife of Sargon II (721-705) (Fig. 4 right).⁵⁸ The most consistent group is represented by a chalcedony seal and clay sealings, which are all undated but one. The chalcedony stamp seal was acquired by the British Museum and its original provenance is unknown (Fig. 5).⁵⁹ Six sealings were also found during the excavations in Nineveh and another in Assur (Fig. 6), one of which is dated to the end of the reign of Sennacherib (Fig. 6f).⁶⁰ Because of this date and the similar motif that these sealings share, it is likely that they were used between the reigns of Sennacherib (704-681) and Esarhaddon (680-669).

Although the motif is basically similar, there are visible differences concerning the figures depicted. The golden seal of Hama shows the queen only, approaching a goddess who is probably Gula,⁶¹ and seated on a straight-backed throne supported by a crouched dog. A scorpion is located behind the throne. The alleged seal of Atalia shows the king and the queen approaching a god and a goddess, standing on a bull and a lion respectively, with the scorpion hovering above the scene.⁶² The chalcedony seal and the clay sealings all show a similar pattern: the king and the queen are approaching a goddess, who is probably to be identified with Mullissu or Ishtar or a syncretic representation of the two goddesses, standing or seated on a throne with stars at its back and supported by a standing lion.⁶³ The scorpion hovers above the scene.

58. That the golden seal of Hama belonged to this queen is proven by the inscription carved around its rim (Spurrier 2017, 155). The seal that presumably belonged to Atalia survives on four inscribed box sealings from the Northwest Palace at Kalhu, and the preserved dates prove that the seal was used during Sargon II's reign. See CTN 2 257, 260-262, pl. 86, photo plate 97k, 97j, 97i; Herbordt 1992, 200-201, Nimrud 114, 116; Radner 2008, 497 and 2012, 691.

59. Niederreiter 2021, 42-43.

60. For the sealing from Assur, see Ornan 2002, fig. 5b. For a complete bibliography on the seal and the sealings, see Niederreiter 2021.

61. Ornan 2004; Radner 2008, 497.

62. The god on the bull was interpreted as Adad (Herbordt 1992, 200 Nimrud 114).

63. Reade 1987, 144; Niederreiter 2021, 44-45 believes that the seated goddess of the chalcedony seal can be identified with Ishtar because of her peculiar attributes (headdress, stars on the back of the throne, and the lion). On the identity of Mullissu, used as an alternate name for Ishtar, see Porter 2004.

Despite these differences, both queen and king follow the same etiquette; they occupy an upright position and their gaze is directed to the divine figure. In every example, the queen is depicted raising her both cupped hands to the level of the mouth before the deity, while the king – if present – performs the *appa labānu* gesture. Now, what has been unnoticed so far is the exact meaning of the gesture the queen performs, which is clearly different from the one performed by the king. My discussion of the meaning and role of the figures begins with a reading of the queen’s gesture and then proceeds to consider its relation to the deity and the king.

On the basis of some textual evidence from the Neo-Assyrian period which describes a gesture implying the raising of the hand(s), the Akkadian expressions used to describe such a gesture are conventionally *šū’illakku* and *nīš qātī*, which can be interpreted as an idiom for “prayer” and commonly include a physical movement.⁶⁴ However, they are used differently in different contexts.

It seems that *šū’illakku* (lit. “of raised hands”) refers to a class of ritual-prayers, suggesting that, when it occurs, it does not stand for “prayer” but for the rubric employed to label, by synecdoche, *šūilla* (lit. “hand-lifting” or “lifted hand[s]”) prayers and their associated ritual activity.⁶⁵ Therefore, whenever it is found, the term identifies a specific prayer or ritual which is to be performed and recited. For instance, a letter written from the Assyrian scholar Marduk-shakin-shumi to Esarhaddon on the rituals connected with an eclipse of the moon informs the king that several “hand-lifting” prayers are to be performed.⁶⁶ In a prophylactic ritual from Nabu-nasir to Esarhaddon, we read that the “hand-lifting” prayers must be performed to counteract malaria, plague, pestilence, and sorcery.⁶⁷ The *šū’illakku* gesture/prayer is attested as being recited before Mullissu.⁶⁸ Similarly, in a manual addressed to the personnel active at the Assur temple, we find instructions for performing the *šū’illakku* prayer before Assur and Mullissu: “You set up a [fi]re-brick and sin[g]: “From the house soothing the heart”. “[...], lord of heaven and earth”, a psalm with uplifted hands (*šū’illakku*) to Aššur. “[Queen] of all the lands,” a psalm with uplifted hands (*šū’illakku*) to Mullissu”.⁶⁹

As for *nīš qātī*, the idiom appears to be less anchored to a class of ritual-prayers and would simply mean “to perform a hand-lifting” prior to praying. In fact, what follows this expression is the wording of a prayer text, suggesting that it refers to the gesture that precedes or accompanies the prayer. It also appears to be referred to in *The Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince*, where it is said that the suppliant “lifted his hands and prayed (*išši qātīšu usappi*) to Ereškigal, [his] tears flowing before Nergal, king of the [wide] underworld, her spouse”.⁷⁰ The lifting of the hands expressed in physical terms as

64. Frechette 2012, 46 listed three other expressions for “to lift the hand/arm” to a god: *qāta deku* “to lift one’s hand(s) in supplication”; *appa labānu* “to stroke the nose”; and *ubāna tarāšu* “to extend the finger and point”. However, these expressions are scarcely attested and are primarily addressed to kings (*qāta deku*) or imply praise to the deity rather than praying to the deity (*appa labānu* and *ubāna tarāšu*), and they are thus performed after petitioning the deity. As for the number of hands raised, this is difficult to determine, although the terms *šū’illakku* and *nīš qātī* imply that they could have been carried out with one or two hands (see Frechette 2012, 51-53).

65. CAD Š s.v., 212-213; Frechette 2012, 21-26.

66. SAA 10, 240, 5, r. 9-13. Frechette 2012, 25-26 offers an analysis of the verbs used in this letter in relation with the expression *šū’illakku*.

67. SAA 10, 296, 10-r. 2.

68. SAA 20, 3, r. 7-8.

69. SAA 20, 12, 24-26; repeated in lines r. 16-18 and r. 23-26.

70. SAA 3, 32, 38.

an idiom for verbal prayer is additionally found in an astrological report sent by Bel-nasir to Esarhaddon: “The king lifted his hands and his prayer with uplifted hands (*qāssu iššū nīš-qātīšū*) was heard by the god”.⁷¹

Regarding these terms, Christopher G. Frechette concludes that *šū'illakku* corresponds to the rubric *šūilla*, while *nīš qātī* is the expression that is more commonly related to the rubric, although it does not imply the recitation of the prayer and the performance of the ritual activity. Which one is the gesture performed by the queen is not possible to say; constructing exact correlations between linguistic expressions and visual representations might be not wise and may result in hazardous conclusions. Nevertheless, both terms imply the gesture of hand-lifting, which condenses the act of praying. In addition, Neo-Assyrian iconographic parallels involving men supplicating the king suggest that the queen is shown praying or supplicating the deity.⁷² Now, whether the queen is reciting a not well-identified prayer or a *šūilla* prayer, we are informed that prayers contain certain ritual instructions so that some important general elements can be listed in order to imagine the verbal protocol followed by the suppliant, i.e. the queen, standing in front of the deity. First, there was 1) an invocation of the deity by name, which aimed at catching his or her attention. This could contain 2) a hymnic introduction or praise, which served as a formal greeting, expressed through a list of divine epithets, attributes, actions and other features. Then the suppliant identified himself/herself 3) by presenting his/her name, filiation and perhaps personal gods. The suppliant thus proceeded 4) to voice his/her concerns in the form of complaints or laments. The suppliant then referred to the various 5) ritual actions that have been performed, were performed, or will have been performed, and 6) the prayer was concluded with a praise.⁷³

Which one of these stages or steps was visually “frozen” in these seals and sealings is an act of educated guesswork. For instance, the raising of the hands might mark a more specific and well-defined step prescribed by a piece of “religious” etiquette when someone approached the deity. In this regard, it has been clearly demonstrated that the encounter with the divine can be studied as an example of an “Audienz-Konzept” with an authority of higher status, be it the king or the deity. Within this framework, it seems that no one could simply appear before an authority to make a request without observing the protocols for greeting, which typically included a gesture of hand-lifting and the offering of a gift.⁷⁴ The hand-lifting performed in the *šūilla* prayer, for example, was a gesture that emphasized greeting the deity in order to (re-)establish a favorable relationship, and the focal point of this greeting was the formal salutation of hand-lifting. In this sense, the lifting of the hand(s) was probably perceived by the deity as an entrance gift in order to be re-admitted to the divine presence and to please the deity for whatever divine anger was understood to have caused the

71. SAA 8, 464, r. 2-3. See also SAA 3, 12, 21; SAA 3, 36.

72. E.g. Curtis 2007, fig. 4; Collins 2008, 36-37; Botta – Flandin 1849, pl. 82. With respect to this visual evidence, it is tempting to translate the movements performed by enemies and the prisoners who are frightened in the face of the king with the expression *dekū idu* “raising the arms”, which is often attested in royal inscriptions (e.g. RINAP 3, 22, vi 18).

73. Lenzi 2011, 12-13; Lenzi 2015, 70-71.

74. Zgoll 2003, esp. 193, 196; Frechette 2012, 28-88; Portuese 2020a, 115-117.

speaker's past suffering.⁷⁵ In a similar way, the few examples listed above show that the lifting of the hand(s) (*nīš qātī*) was an action which was performed prior to praying, i.e. something that took place as soon as the suppliant stepped into the presence of the deity. These notions lead us to suspect that what we see in the seals and sealings as performed by the queen was a praying as well as a greeting gesture, or gift, for the deity; the queen performs the introductory etiquette to please the deity.⁷⁶

Now, if we accept the hypothesis that seals show the beginning of the “audience” with the deity, what remains unclear is the rationale behind the gesture performed by the queen in relation to the one performed by the king. The latter seems to be involved in what Karen Radner defines the “typical praying gesture”, namely the *appa labānu* “to stroke the nose”, which is commonly taken to represent a gesture expressing praise of the gods.⁷⁷ In the light of these readings of the gestures, one may be tempted to posit the following conclusions: the queen begins her prayer, while the king continues by humbly praising the deity. However, a temporal sequence of the action cannot be easily inferred by the iconographic representation, although it would come as no surprise.⁷⁸ In this context I would quote two textual references, which might be of assistance. In the so-called *The Sin of Sargon*, the king Sennacherib is seeking to understand the sin which his father committed against the god. To do so, he first performs an intense and righteous daily prayer (*ina šutēmuqīya u kīnūtīya*) and then investigates Shamash and Adad by means of extispicy. After receiving a reliable answer from the haruspices, Sennacherib declares: “I opened my han]ds (in prayer) and lifted [my hands (*ašši qātēya*), and in supplication and humility I prayed (*ina utnenni labān appi ušalli*) on account of Sarg]on, [my] fat[her]”.⁷⁹ In much the same way, the expression of “hand-lifting” and “humility” (*labān appi*, lit. “one who strokes the nose”) are mentioned after terms for supplication and prayer in a text of the king Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104), which informs us that the king prayed fervently and continuously because Marduk had abandoned Babylon to desolation. Although far from the period under investigation, this text recalls another one of Sennacherib: “Upon my piteous entreaties, my ardent prayers, my supplication(s) (*nīš qātīya*) and my expression(s) of humility (*labān appīya*) by which I daily besought him (and) prayed to him, in his generous heart he had pity and turned back unto the holy city”.⁸⁰ Now, if we take the sequence of the king's actions in both texts as being arranged to emphasize

75. Frechette 2012, 42-46. Bringing a gift to obtain an audience with an authority was part of the audience protocol (Zgoll 2003, 191).

76. Zgoll (2003, 193, fig. 1) similarly believes that the raising of the hands in front of a deity connotes greeting the deity. It was already interpreted as a gesture of salutation by Wiggermann 1985/1986, 25.

77. Compared to past works, such as Gruber 1975 and Asher-Greve 1985, the reading of this gesture by Magen 1986 is built on the most thorough analysis carried out so far. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive study is required, and an examination of this gesture will be one of the subjects of the GALATEO project which I am currently conducting.

78. See, for instance, the altar of the Middle Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243-1207 BCE) from the Ishtar Temple at Assur, which features an image showing the king twice, standing and kneeling, in front of an altar (Bahrani 2003, 185-201).

79. SAA 3, 33, 21-24. In this regard, a royal inscription of Sennacherib on the construction of a new *akītu*-house at Nineveh mentions the *labān appīya* (lit. “stroking of my nose”) after the term for prayer *šulē* (RINAP 3, 37). Again, this does not suggest a temporal sequence of the gestures, but that the *appa labānu* was performed within a sequence of praying acts.

80. RIMB 2, B.2.4.9, 9-11. This is a bilingual (Sumerian-Akkadian) inscription. For the Akkadian rendering of this passage, see Frechette 2012, 233 text 1.12.

his contrition for whatever prompted the god's anger, then the sequence of the description is not an explicitly temporal one. This means that both the king and the queen on seals and sealings are united in offering the goddess a stronger prayer. By contrast, if the sequence is temporal, then our evidence shows a reinterpretation of a particular prayer-etiquette which is usually followed by the king in exceptional circumstances and whose formulation is visually re-adapted to the representation of the queen praying along with the king. This implies that the queen begins her prayer by lifting her hands as a sign of greeting, and the king completes the prayer by stroking his nose in a gesture of humility. So, both figures and the gestures they perform are complementary for receiving a favor from the goddess. If this is the case, we may conclude that the seals and sealings' representation show a cooperative interaction between king and queen through a role-related rather than a gender-related etiquette.

However, an alternative reading of these images is possible and leads me to a further investigation that highlights a review of what may be called the "mental iconography" of the Mesopotamian representation of the audience with the divine.⁸¹

4.1 *The Assyrian queen as intermediary?*

The motif that most of the seals and sealings bears invites us to evaluate and not underestimate its internal organization, the position of the characters and their hierarchical distribution. Although it differs in some respects, it is undeniable that the motif recalls representations of audience scenes that is well attested in Mesopotamian glyptic artefacts from the Sargonic to the Old Babylonian period, which are conventionally known as "presentation scenes" (Fig. 7).

This motif of "presentation scenes" probably first appeared in the Akkadian period and gradually came to be standardized in a way that it usually includes a standing individual, with or without the mediation of an interceding goddess, who confronts a seated deity.⁸² Presentation scenes follow a specific configuration or core dynamic, namely that of the audience with an authority, which is manifested through dominance and submission. This linear depiction usually includes the authority, a female or male deity, who remains seated and faces the subordinate; the standing subordinate, male or female, who may stand alone or next to or be introduced by a deity to the authority; one deity in the role of mediator or intercessor, which is usually a goddess and who leads the subordinate or stands behind the subordinate with both hands raised and facing the authority.⁸³ The intermediary goddess is generally identified with the goddess Lamma, who performs the introductory functions in order to seek and build good relations between the suppliant and the deity.⁸⁴ The exchange of gestures

81. This expression is used by Mettinger 1995, 20 to describe the mental image we may have of the deity as a king on his throne. Hartenstein 2008, 53-57 explores this notion, noting that the theme of "dominance and submission" is conveyed through specific visual elements such as the sitting or standing figure receiving someone, specific bodily postures of the subordinate, and the presence of intermediaries.

82. Collon 1994, 32-52; Pittman 2013, 336-338. For a specific examination of presentation scenes in the Neo-Sumerian period, see Winter 1986.

83. Winter 1986, 254.

84. Wiggermann 1987, 25-26; Mayr 1997, 76; Woods 2004, 46.

in presentation scenes conveys the asymmetry of the relationship between authority and subordinate, turning the directionality of hand-gestures into an indicator of the asymmetrical relationship.⁸⁵ The authority and subordinate's respective gestures also usually involve the right hand being positioned at chest-height or higher. However, they differ in spatial terms: the authority's gesture moves outward and is more horizontal than that of the subordinate, so as to reach out and reach down the subordinate; conversely, the subordinate generally lifts a hand up to the deity, because he/she is below and so the hand must be lifted upward to salute the deity, who is above.⁸⁶

Such a model for presentation scenes has a continuity through time and space, and enduring elements can be seen throughout the first millennium even when it becomes rare and falls out of use. There appears to have been a deliberate and well-thought-out antiquarian usage of the archaic motif with the same pattern and rationale in the case of the Sun-God tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina (887-855).⁸⁷ Further, the seals of former ages may have been known in some way, re-used for specific purposes, and even ended up being rolled anew, as happened with the huge tablets with vassal treaties which date to Esarhaddon's reign.⁸⁸ It would, therefore, come as no surprise if the queen's seals are reminiscent of the southern presentation scenes of former ages. One may compare, at least in form, earlier presentation scenes and the motif of the Assyrian queen with the king standing in front of the deity, and judge the latter to be a first millennium (re-)elaboration of a past model. I use the word "(re-)elaboration" here to point to the implicit reference that the images on the queen's seals make through a deliberate process of intericonical re-adaptation. The result is not an imitation, copy, plagiarism, or simple quotation, but a reference that may reveal hidden and new meanings that could have influenced the viewer historically, politically, and especially ideologically.⁸⁹ Thus, if answers to the questions "from where does the motif on the queen's seals come?" and "what does it show?" are straightforward, the questions "why?" and "how?" past presentation scenes were reused and readapted in the first millennium to represent the Assyrian queen together with the king are correspondingly difficult.

By relating the canonical organization that characterizes presentation scenes with that of the queen's images, one may note that a sense of *déjà-vu* effect in the viewer is indicated by the position of the figures depicted and the etiquette they adhere to. Specifically, the queen with raised arms and hands recalls the role of the intermediary goddess, who is usually a female god (*Lamma*) that raises both arms and hands, while the king recalls the subordinate party who is led into the presence of the deity. The deity also performs an unchanged gesture of blessing/greeting raising her/his right hand. Conceived in light of such a comparison, the roles that the figures perform may have appeared familiar to a contemporary viewer: the queen/female god participates as an assistant/intermediary in the encounter between the king/suppliant and the deity. The Assyrian queen is by no means a goddess, but she performs a similar role to her.

85. Frechette 2012, 64-66.

86. The gesture is perhaps to be identified with the Akkadian *karābu* (Frechette 2012, 35-38).

87. Woods 2004, 45-49, 76-82. On the gestures performed by the figures of the tablet, see Frechette 2012, 73-76.

88. Collon 1994, 131-134. The oldest cylinder dates to the 19th c. BCE, and another to the 13th c. BCE.

89. On the phenomenon of intericonicity in Mesopotamian art, see Nadali 2019; Nadali – Portuese 2020; Portuese 2020b; 2020c.

Furthermore, in her analysis of the audience as a model for understanding the Mesopotamian ritual-prayers of hand-lifting (*šullas*), Annette Zgoll has argued that the ritual may involve two variations in the concept of audience. If the person seeking for help is sick and must stay in bed, it may arise that one or more deities visit the sick person. Alternatively, the person turns to a mediating deity with a petition presenting her/his request to the god. Usually, the latter is the wife of the god.⁹⁰

Now, the two goddesses represented on the queen's seals are Gula and Mullissu/Ishtar, and, interestingly, their role as intermediaries is often attested in textual sources. Gula, for instance, is requested to intercede with Marduk and put in a good word on the suppliant's behalf: "With Marduk, king of the gods, merciful lord, Intercede! Speak a favorable word!"⁹¹ Patients and suppliants therefore sometimes ask her to entreat other gods and thereby relieve their anger against them.⁹² Similarly, Mullissu acts as a mediator together with her consort Assur. In the curses protecting Esarhaddon's succession treaty, it is Mullissu who serves as guarantor of the treaty who may or may not intercede with Assur: "May Mullissu, his beloved wife, make the utterance of his mouth evil, may she not intercede for you"⁹³ After Mullissu and the Lady of Arbela have merged into one, the goddess intercedes on Assurbanipal's behalf in the "assembly of all the gods".⁹⁴ Besides this evidence, what is more interesting is that such a mediating role of the goddesses was shared with the Assyrian queen who, according to the famous examples of the queen mothers Sammu-ramat and Naqi'a, could play an important role in helping her son to consolidate the succession to the throne and to maintain the empire: an institutional role of the Assyrian queen which was probably held during "emergency" circumstances for dynastic stability and the maintenance of the empire.⁹⁵ In particular, the queen mother Naqi'a often appears as an interceding figure for the king, her son Esarhaddon: "I am the Lady of Arbela. To the king's mother: Because you implored me, saying: "You have placed the ones at the (king's) right and left side in your lap, but made my own offspring roam the steppe" – Now fear not, *my* king! The kingdom is yours, yours is the power!"⁹⁶ The queen mother Naqi'a is also the addressee of oracles together with her son Esarhaddon: "Esarhaddon, king of Assyria! I will seize [your enemies] and trample [them under my foot]. [Be not a]fraid, mother of the king"⁹⁷ The Assyrian king thus has a human mother who gave birth to him, but he is also "the son of Mullissu".⁹⁸ To support such a parallelism between the queen and Mullissu, we need only mention a letter where Mullissu is the addressee of an oracle together with Assurbanipal: "[I] am the Lord. I have entered and made peace with Mullissu. Assurbanipal, king of Assyria whom she raised, fear not! I am the

90. Zgoll 2003, 199.

91. Lenzi 2011, 254, lines 21-22.

92. For a discussion on Gula as intermediary, see Avalos 1995, 189. For other textual evidence regarding Gula, see Mullo-Weir 1929 and Lambert 1967. Zgoll 2003, 199 also mentions the goddess Ningal as intermediary between the suppliant and her consort, the god Sin.

93. SAA 2, 6, 417.

94. SAA 9, 9, 16-19. For a discussion on Mullissu as intermediary, see Tiemeyer 2013, 257-261.

95. In this context, it is relevant the fact that Naqi'a made the whole nation of Assyria swear fealty to her grandson Assurbanipal (SAA 2, 8). As for Sammu-ramat and her role in protecting her young and inexperienced son Adad-nirari III, see Siddall 2013, 86-100.

96. SAA 9, 1.8, 12-23.

97. SAA 9, 2.1, 10-13.

98. SAA 9, XXXVI. See oracle SAA 9, 2.5, 26-28.

Lord. I have forgiven you (Mullissu). Assurbanipal is in a country which is loyal. Together with his country, I have forgiven you”.⁹⁹ This passage should be interpreted as a display of mercy on the part of Bel, the divine king, in response to a plea of Mullissu on behalf of her son. As noted by Nissinen and Parpola, this action was actually taken “in response to a prayer of Assurbanipal, which his “mother”, as intercessor between king and god, had pleaded for in the divine council”.¹⁰⁰ In addition, Parpola notes that the association of the queen with Mullissu is displayed in art, where the mural crown and other attributes, such as the mirror, are similarly worn by the Assyrian queens and Mullissu, thereby portraying the queens as images of the goddess.¹⁰¹ All this evidence suggests that the Assyrian queen was considered as an image of Mullissu, and thus the mediator *par excellence* to intercede for her son.

I therefore propose that the queen’s seals and sealings show a particular frozen moment of the meeting with the divine: the queen is praying for the king, while the king is praising the goddess. The queen acts as a mediator or intercessor, like the accompanying goddess, has both her hands raised and intercedes for the subordinate, as we see in presentation scenes in glyptic artifacts from the Sargonic to the Old Babylonian period. If this interpretation is correct, the whole picture that emerges from these seals would comply with the presence of the scorpion. As has been pointed out by other scholars, the scorpion mother fiercely guards and defends her young which she carries on her back.¹⁰² Hence, the presence of the scorpion, along with the religious etiquette followed by the queen praying for the king, was the visual shorthand for the ideal queen.

In light of this alternative proposal, I feel inclined to consider the images represented on the queen’s seals through the lens of the notions of “gender display” and “doing gender”, since the gestures performed by the queen appears to be women’s prerogatives. Although texts often mention the king as performing the gesture of raising his hands, such a gesture becomes an artistic shorthand for emphasizing the mediating role of the goddess/queen. Even if we look back at the Hama’s seal, where the king is omitted from the scene, the raising of the hands is conceptualized as a female gesture and becomes an “identificatory styling”, in Goffman’s terms. This is further emphasized if the gesture is performed in the presence of the king: the interaction between queen and king produces and naturalizes gender, and places the queen in a position that is not subordinate but rather authoritative, fundamental, and dominant.

5. Queens, king’s mothers, and conclusions

The foregoing discussion shows that the king and queen in Assyrian society may have shared the same etiquette, at least during the 8th and 7th centuries. The portrayal of the Assyrian queen represented on the Stele of Libbali-sharrat and the Naqi’a’s bronze relief was conceived and deployed advisedly in order to visually anchor her role (rather than her sex) to gestures, postures, and proxemic.

99. SAA 13, 139, 1-9.

100. Nissinen – Parpola 2004, 206.

101. SAA 9, XCVIII, n. 159. The parallelism between the Assyrian queen and Mullissu was already observed by Reade 1987, 143.

102. On the scorpion motif, see Herbordt 1997, 282-283; Radner 2008, 494-496 and 2012, 690-693.

This suggests not a gender-related etiquette but a role-related one. Indeed, by looking at the queen's seals, the interaction between queen and king appears to have been built on the examples of the past. Such a well-thought-out artistic transfer complicates our understanding of the ways that gender was produced and, at the same time, may entitle us to speak of a gender-related etiquette in Assyrian society, at least within the royal family. In this respect, the ultimate question to be posed here concerns the consequences of using this intericonical strategy to represent the queen and her role as mediator. What historical, political, and ideological implications does such an intericonical re-adaptation have? How do gestures and postures mix with politics? To look back to Elias, it is interesting to observe that the originality of his thesis consists in relating changes concerning manners and bodily propriety to the rise of a new polity and economy which occurred in Western Europe between the late Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. A similar correlation may be suggested for Assyrian history too.

Beyond a broken glazed tile from the temple of Ishtar of Nineveh, which has been cautiously suggested to belong to Assurnasirpal II's wife, it is with Sargon II that we actually start to see the queen or queen mother depicted.¹⁰³ In the sealings dated to Sargon II's reign, the queen is portrayed along with her husband or son standing before a couple of deities. The motif may recall the above-discussed third millennium presentation scenes, but I doubt that the original seal was inspired by past examples. Rather, it seems that the human couple mirrors the divine one and the four figures are depicted in a symmetrical and balanced way. It is certainly with Sennacherib that the situation changes, and textual evidence proves that the queen developed and acquired dominance in a more public way under his reign.¹⁰⁴ The rise of the queen's power and influence has been linked to the king's desire, perhaps started by Sennacherib, to shift power from the magnates to the royal family members.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, *when* visual evidence begins to be used to present the queen as assimilated in some way to the king is not known exactly, and much depends on which queen was the actual owner of the only docket (Fig. 6f) bearing the date, which is IX/681 BCE. Radner asserted that the docket and two sealings (Figs. 6a, 6d) were impressed with the chalcedony seal (Fig. 5) and accordingly suggests that the seal was used by a queen shortly before the murder of Sennacherib in 20/X/681 BCE.¹⁰⁶ Since Naqi'a is never mentioned as a queen (*sēgallu*=MÍ.É.GAL) during the reign of Sennacherib, Radner concludes that Tashmetum-sharrat was still the queen later on in Sennacherib's lifetime and thus proposes Tashmetum-sharrat as the owner of the chalcedony seal which was impressed on the docket and the other two sealings.¹⁰⁷ However, by relying on a close analysis and formal comparison of the chalcedony seal with the extant sealings, Zoltán Niederreiter has convincingly demonstrated that there is no link between the chalcedony seal and the sealings since they differ in some aspects, thus invalidating the dating suggested by Radner.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the debate remains open which queen was active during the date indicated on the docket. Relying on an inscribed bead reading "Naqi'a, queen of Senna[cherib]", Svärd has suggested that Tashmetum-sharrat died or may have been deposed shortly after Esarhaddon became crown prince in 683 and that she was replaced by Naqi'a

103. Reade 1987, 139-140; Svärd 2015b, 162-168.

104. Reade 1987, 140-142; Svärd 2015a, 187-188.

105. Reade 1987; Radner 2008, 510 and 2012, 692-693.

106. Radner 2008; 2012.

107. Radner 2012, 693-695.

108. Niederreiter 2021, 46-47.

as MÍ.É.GAL before Sennacherib was murdered.¹⁰⁹ The consequence of this would be that Tashmetum-sharrat and Naqi'a were consecutive MÍ.É.GALs of Sennacherib. Svärd acknowledges the uncertainty of the source, since it is not possible to tell whether or not the text on the bead ends with Sennacherib's name or goes on to mention her as the mother of Esarhaddon.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, this evidence leaves open the possibility that Naqi'a was the owner of the seal impressed on the docket. Notwithstanding the difficulty in finding an answer to this question, what is certain is that the textual sources on which both scholars built their arguments highlight that the country was in turmoil after Sennacherib's brutal death and that Tashmetum-sharrat lost her role as the queen of Assyria.¹¹¹

In this context, the iconographic value of the seals, along with the etiquette rules displayed, should not be underestimated for dating, but rather represents a useful source. According to the archaeological evidence, the visual representations of the queen prevailed within a very specific timespan: before Sennacherib's death, during Esarhaddon's reign, and later under Assurbanipal. The rationale lying behind these 7th-century representations places the queen not only with the king but especially near the king, and both are involved in worshipping acts in front of the divine. This pattern constitutes the basic scheme that characterized the artistic rendering of Naqi'a's bronze relief (Fig. 2). In fact, compared to the Hama's seal and the Libbali-sharrat's stele as well as the representation of an Assyrian queen (presumably Libbali-sharrat) together with Assurbanipal in the garden scene, the only depictions of the queen near the king seems to belong to those of Esarhaddon's reign. Beside Naqi'a's bronze relief, the chalcedony seal and sealings all show a similar composition that places the queen in proximity to the king and in front of the deity. This is what Julian Reade called the "Naqi'a variety".¹¹² Now, if we accept the idea that the "Naqi'a variety" has third millennium reminiscences, this has profound implications. First, in third millennium presentation scenes the goddess acts as a mediator between the suppliant and the supplicated deity. In the first millennium, Naqi'a is the only queen who explicitly acts in oracles and letters as a mediator with the divine on behalf of her son Esarhaddon.¹¹³ Second, the motif chosen comes from the south, and we know that Esarhaddon reversed Sennacherib's anti-Babylonia policy. In fact, he received Babylonian support while he was still only a prince, and he may have received Babylonian assistance in the assassination of Sennacherib.¹¹⁴ Third, if we consider plausible the idea of Esarhaddon's involvement in the murder of Sennacherib, leading to his forced escape from Nineveh, we may better understand the words addressed by his mother Naqi'a – "but made my own offspring roam the steppe" – to the Lady of

109. Svärd 2015a, 43, 68. On the inscription and comments, see RINAP 4, 2009. Reade 1987, 142 seems to support this idea by arguing that Tashmetum-sharrat "is likely to have overlapped with Sennacherib's best-known wife, Naqia/Zaqitu, since the latter's grandchildren, Ashurbanipal and Shamashshumukin, should have been over fifteen by 670 BC".

110. If one wants to consider this possibility, Svärd 2015a, 44 suggests that the title MÍ.É.GAL was given to Naqi'a retrospectively in the light of her high position during Esarhaddon's reign.

111. On her involvement on Sennacherib's assassination, see Parpola 1980; Reade 1987, 142; Radner 2012, 695 and Svärd 2015a, 52-53.

112. Reade 1987, 144.

113. In this regard, the letter sent by a priest was presumably intended to assure the king's mother Naqi'a that Bel and Nabu shall protect the king (SAA 10, 154).

114. Knapp 2020, 176-178.

Arbela; Esarhaddon was perhaps exiled, and his estrangement directly benefitted his rival siblings.¹¹⁵ Following these lines of thought, a strong and protective role of Naqi'a, who may have been complicit in the murder out of ambition, is to be envisioned.¹¹⁶ Although these aspects do not offer conclusive proof for a dating, they do suggest that the role performed by the goddess on past presentation scenes was well suited on a queen like Naqi'a, who best represented the mediating mother between her son and the divine. Taken altogether, I conclude that the chalcedony seal and all the sealings did not only aim at representing the ideal queen and queen mother Naqi'a; the image impressed on sealings might have been the "silent manifesto" of Naqi'a's involvement in Sennacherib's assassination and her protecting role towards her son Esarhaddon.

Having suggested a date, such a reading leads to a thorny concluding question: can we generalize on the rules of etiquette which can be inferred from the visual evidence? The answer is negative for obvious reasons. Like Sammu-ramat, the circumstances in which Naqi'a wielded authority during her son's reign were *exceptional*, inasmuch as the visual evidence shows the mother and son close to each other. Naqi'a exceptionally achieved "male status", using the words of West and Zimmerman. This implies that the Naqi'a's bronze relief, along with her alleged seals, inform us about similarly *exceptional* manners and etiquette which governed the relationship between queen and king, but that no longer we see in other visual evidence. Accordingly, any generalization could be mistaken. In terms of modern etiquette, moreover, the assimilation of Naqi'a to Esarhaddon was not only physical (gestures, postures, and spatial proxemic) but also linguistic in nature: in letters, the attitude of scholars towards her is very humble, they sometimes address letters calling her "his lord", and she is credited with powers that are usually reserved for the king.¹¹⁷ Therefore, what we read in texts and see in images on Naqi'a is *exceptional*. Further, it is such exceptionality that emphasizes the great influence exerted on human interactions by remarkable political and societal changes, as pointed out by Elias. The etiquette that I have tried to reconstruct might have regulated the interactions between males and females only during a specific timespan and within a specific social group, perhaps even only between queen and king. The customs and proprieties of conduct traced in this discussion may thus reflect fundamental shifts in the way that queens and kings behaved and felt, and they may have been strictly linked to changes in the forms of authority. In summary, it is natural to conclude that, if we want to imagine how Assyrians interacted and organized their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, we should perhaps turn upside down what the discussed evidence shows and consider what the Middle Assyrian Palace Decree provides as a clue: a physical and psychological distance between men and women, rather than an exceptional closeness. On either approach, the foregoing discussion demonstrates that gender was not an "ascribed status" but an "achieved" one and, especially, that the available sources can be read and analyzed anew relying on an interpretative model which reveals to be rewarding for the study of Mesopotamia.

115.SAA 9, 1.8, 14-20. The evidence collected by Knapp 2020 and Dalley – Siddall 2021 in this respect is extensive and leaves open the possibility of Esarhaddon's involvement in Sennacherib's assassination.

116.Dalley – Siddall 2021, 54.

117.Svärd 2015a, 55-56.

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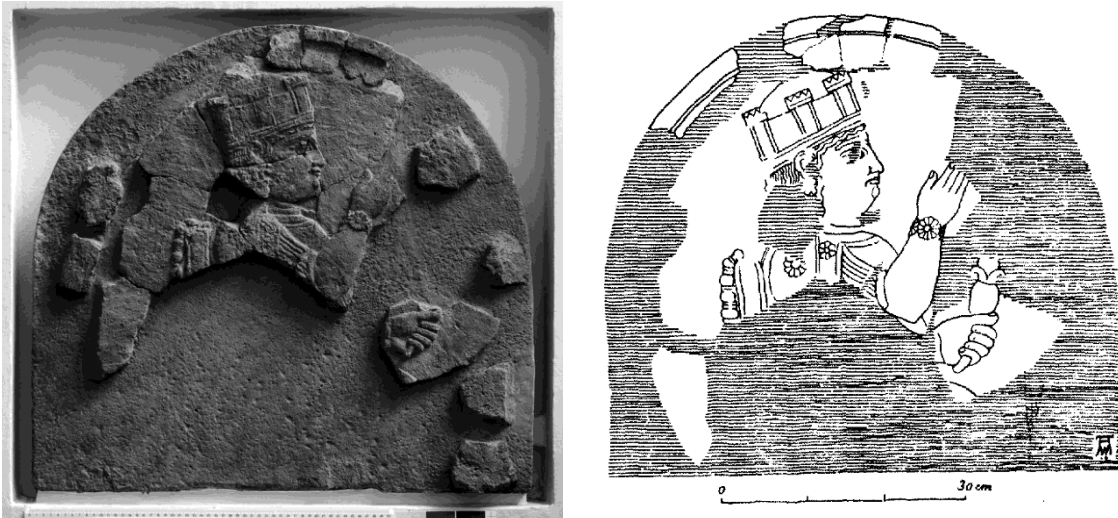


Figure 1. Stele of Libbali-sharrat from Assur (VA 8847, © BPK, Vorderasiatische Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) and drawing (Andrae 1913, fig. 3)



Figure 2. Naqi'a's bronze relief (AO 20185 © RMN-Grand Palais, Musée du Louvre / Franck Raux)



Figure 3. Naqi'a's bronze relief reconstruction (author)

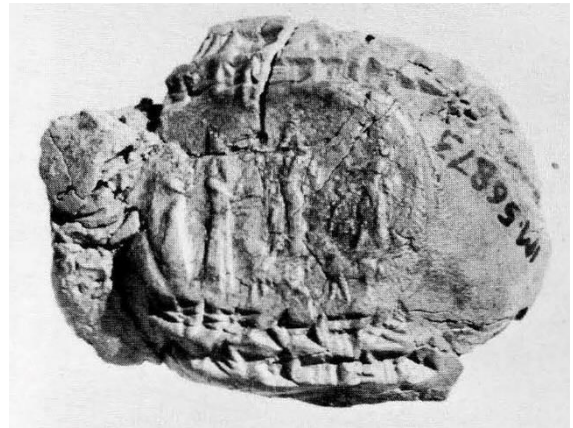


Figure 4. Left: Hama's seal, from coffin 2, tomb III, from Kalhu (Spurrier 2007, fig. 6); Right: Queen's sealing dated to the reign of Sargon II, from the Northwest Palace, Room HH, Kalhu (CTN II, pl. 97, n. 257)

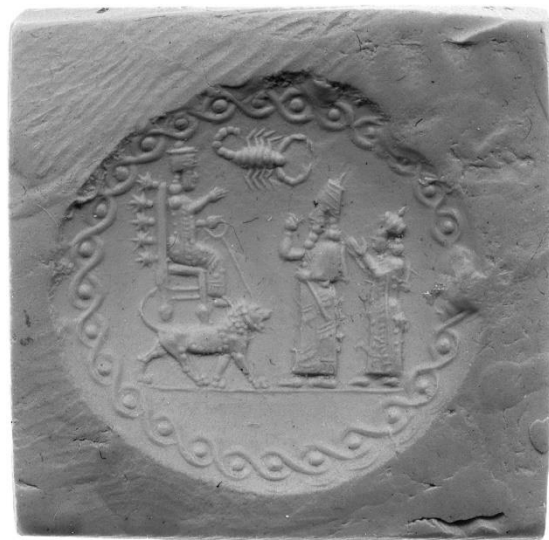


Figure 5. Seal (BM WA 2002-05-15.1) and its modern impression (© The Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure 6. Sealings from Nineveh. a) BM WA 84671; b) BM WA 84789; c) BM WA 84802; d) BM WA 84553; e) BM WA 50781 (© The Trustees of the British Museum); f) BM WA 99214 (Niederreiter 2021, fig. 6)



Figure 7. Left: Old Babylonian cylinder seal (BM 89714); b); Right: Ur III cylinder seal (BM 89126) (© The Trustees of the British Museum)