

Chapter 13

**And They Said, Let Us
Make Gods in Our Image**Gendered Ideologies in Ancient Mesopotamia

Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck

In a now classic essay on gender as a category of analysis in history, Joan Scott (1986) urged historians to place both gender and ideology squarely in the center of their research, arguing that gender is a primary, persistent metaphor for the signification and legitimation of relations of power. One reason for the centrality of gender and sexuality is that they are regularly referred to in contexts that have nothing directly to do with them (Godelier 1981). The pervasiveness of these metaphorical references serves to embed certain specific meanings of gender relations and sexuality deep within sociocultural reality.

Scott's arguments can be applied equally to archaeology. In recent years, archaeology has moved away from a major preoccupation with reconstructing past social realities by accepting the importance of ideology. Even more recently, feminist perspectives have begun to make their way into archaeology, bringing an insistence on the centrality of gender to archaeological understandings of the past. But studies that explore the relationship between ideology and social reality in explicitly gendered terms remain uncommon.

We venture into the terrain of relations between gendered ideology and social reality in this chapter by focusing on a particularly fascinating time in ancient Mesopotamian (pre)history, the late fourth and early third millennium, known archaeologically as the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods. It was a time of profound changes in economic, political, and social spheres, which surely had marked impacts both on gendered social reality and ideology (Bernbeck 1995). We begin by clarifying what we mean by the term ideology.

Ideology

Ideology means different things to different people. We use the term here in a Marxist sense to refer to the portrayal of the particular interests and values of certain social groups as if they were the interests of everyone in a society (Marx and Engels 1939). Ideology structures systems of beliefs, knowledge, and values so that they legitimize a particular set of interests (cf. Pauketat and Emerson 1991:920). The ways that ideology does this are many and varied. Ideology may mask, naturalize, or flaunt a particular view of the world. Susan Kus (1982) has distinguished two broad categories of ideologies in terms of the way they relate the social to the natural world. Some ideologies confound the social with the natural order, creating a semblance of social reality as inevitable and unchangeable because it is "natural." Other ideologies seek to decouple the social world from direct dependence on nature and portray social relations as legitimate products of historical change, innovation, and creation of order.

In recent years it has become common to argue that not all groups in a society share a single, dominant ideology (Abercrombie et al. 1980). While there is every reason to accept the notion that a dominant ideology rarely fully controls *all* ideological production in a society, we contend that major elements of a dominant ideology *do* dominate.¹ Ideology in the sense we are using it is based upon the idea that people accept at least the major elements of a (dominant) ideology even if they themselves do not belong to the dominant groups and even though, on an "objective" level, their acceptance of such an ideology works against their own interests. Ideology convinces people that it is ultimately in their best interests to comply. Indeed, the power of ideology is that it works by consensus rather than coercion (Hall 1986:14–15). The notion of a dominant ideology does not, however, imply something done consciously by a dominant group to subordinate groups. Ideology is an effective and needed means of promoting cohesion among dominant groups (Abercrombie et al. 1980; Hall 1986:14).

**Social Reality: Mesopotamia in the
Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr Periods**

Investigating ideology necessitates some knowledge of "actual" social relations. In other words, a critique of ideology is only possible by comparing an ideological view of the world with the underlying conditions of socioeconomic life. Such a comparison does not imply the ability of an observer/analyst to uncover "objective" socioeconomic relations.

Rather, a critique, with its underlying emancipatory goals (Habermas 1971:308), allows us to discern major discrepancies between an ideological sphere and social conditions.

We first present a brief synopsis of the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (c. 3300–2900 B.C.E.) in Mesopotamia. We then examine some possibilities for engendering this picture, before turning to a consideration of ideology.

Although scholars are far from agreeing on the precise nature of the political, economic, and social changes that took place around the turn of the third millennium, few would deny their magnitude (Adams 1981; Nissen 1988). A trend toward urbanization that had roots centuries earlier took on new dimensions at this time, with massive movements of population and the dramatic growth of the city of Uruk, which reached a size of more than 200 hectares (and housed perhaps as many as 40,000 people). The Late Uruk period saw a geographically widespread adoption or emulation of southern Mesopotamian styles of artifacts and architecture in parts of northern Mesopotamia and western Iran, thought by some scholars to represent colonization or “informal empire” (Algaze 1993).

The broad similarities in material culture throughout the region broke down substantially in the Jemdet Nasr period when localized styles reappeared. A variety of administrative and bureaucratic developments characterize the Late Uruk period, most notably the widespread adoption of cylinder seals and the invention of writing. Other evidence points to escalating conflict, involving military engagements and the taking of prisoners. By this time there appeared stratified societies throughout Mesopotamia in which social, political, and economic inequalities were considerable.

Analyses of the limited available evidence pertinent to the organization of production suggest that the domestic unit continued to be a primary locus of production of mundane goods during the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (Pollock 1999). At the same time, large households known in the scholarly literature on Mesopotamia as *oikoi* were being established. *Oikoi* employed large, highly specialized work forces engaged in production processes that were often subdivided into segments. *Oikoi* became a prominent feature of urban economies by the mid-third millennium.

The scholarly literature contains little in the way of gendered examinations of these periods (with the exception of Zagarell 1986). There are, however, two principal sources that can be used to begin such a project: written texts and pictorial evidence.

Written records in the form of clay tablets from the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods are collectively referred to as “archaic texts.” The

texts are extremely laconic, having been used primarily as administrative shorthands rather than prose (Nissen 1988:87–89, 135–38; Michalowski 1990). It is not even possible to specify with certainty what language is involved: signs are ideographic, containing no grammatical parts, and thus could have been read in any language. Approximately 85 percent of the texts are “economic,” dealing with the receipt and disbursement of such things as grain, beer, animals, and their products. Although personal names are sometimes mentioned, we have no way of knowing whether they refer to females or males. The remaining 15 percent of the texts consists principally of lists of words or phrases, probably designed as scribal *aides de mémoires* or training devices.

Most of the texts were found in excavations in the Eanna precinct, the ritual/religious and administrative center of the city of Uruk. Although nearly all were recovered from tertiary contexts, it is assumed that they were written and used by *oikoi* within the Eanna precinct. In short, the archaic texts offer some insights into kinds of goods produced and controlled by major *oikoi* of the time, but attaching genders to specific activities is not possible on the basis of the texts alone.

Texts from the mid-third millennium offer much greater detail on gender-related issues, especially the gender of people engaged in particular activities. It is probably unnecessary to mention the dangers of extrapolating from material written five hundred years after the fact and assuming that it applies to the time period under consideration. However, where other evidence suggests specific continuities, it can support the use of limited inferences about gendered activities based on later references. Of particular importance is the connection of women with textile manufacture, a subject we will return to later.

More information concerning gendered activities is contained in visual imagery. The Uruk period is the source of the first extensive body of pictorial material known from ancient Mesopotamia, much of it in the form of designs carved into cylinder seals. Seal imagery is preserved either in the form of the seal itself or the impressions on clay made by using the seals. A seal holder signified his or her authorization of a transaction by the act of sealing, rolling the seal across a piece of moist clay. Clay sealings were used to close doors, presumably of storerooms, as well as a variety of containers, including ceramic vessels, baskets, reed mat packages, and bags. Seals were also rolled across tablets, signifying authorization or witness of the information contained therein. Finds of sealings and tablets in association suggest that they were used by similar people or in similar contexts.

Seals of the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods can be placed into two broadly defined categories: those with naturalistic designs that were finished using engraving tools (Fig. 13.1, top), and schematic seals worked

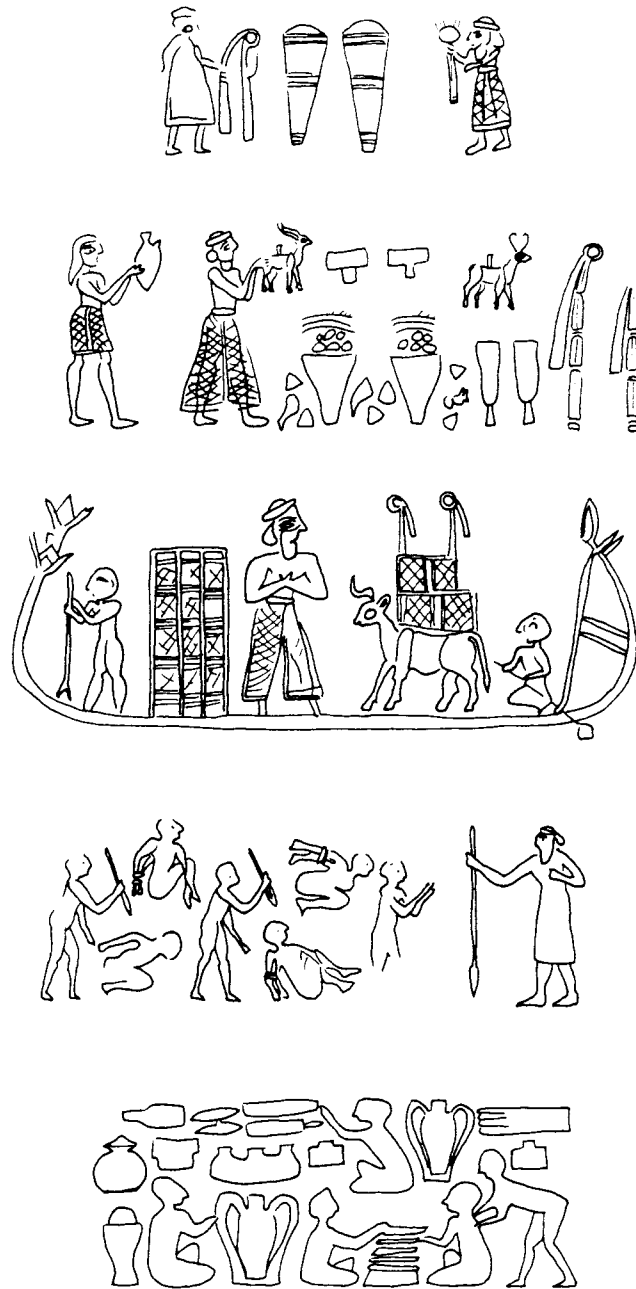


Figure 13.1. Seal imagery from the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods. The top three images show cultic/religious scenes: the fourth, bound captives being killed; and the bottom one, a scene of daily life (drawing after Amiet 1980).

solely with mechanical tools such as drills (Fig. 13.2, middle). Seals and sealings of these two categories are differentially represented: most seal impressions are of the naturalistic seals but few actual seals have been found, whereas numerous seals but few impressions of the schematic variety are known. Hans Nissen (1977) has argued that the naturalistic seals, which were usually larger and whose motifs exhibit considerable variety and distinctiveness, were used by individuals, whereas the schematic seals, which have quite repetitive motifs that are not always easily distinguishable, were used by “legal persons” on behalf of some institution (compare to Pittmann 1994).

Among those seals that have representations of people (and many do not), we can distinguish those that seem to represent cultic/religious scenes (indicated by depictions of temples or symbols associated with specific deities; see Fig. 13.1, top); those depicting political acts (e.g., killing bound captives, such as in Fig. 13.1, second from bottom); and images of daily life (including caring for animals, hunting, fishing, and textile manufacturing; see Fig. 13.2, bottom).

The figural images on seals offer important insights into gendered activities. In arguing from pictorial evidence, we make the assumption that *what* and *who* are depicted represent actual activities of particular groups of people in the past. In other words, depictions of women involved in textile manufacture are assumed to correspond to a portion of reality in which *some* women were engaged at least *some* of the time in the production of textiles. *How* these activities were portrayed is more indicative of their ideological content, as we will try to show later (cf. Marcus 1995). The existence of multiple, qualitatively different layers of meaning in pictorial images is well recognized by art historians (Panofsky 1955:26–41).

Who does what in the pictorial images?² Portrayals of people can be divided into four categories: men, women, “pig-tailed figures,” and naked, hairless individuals lacking identifiable sexual features (see Fig. 13.3). The first two categories—men and women—are clearly identified as such by primary and/or secondary sex characteristics such as beards, penises, or breasts. Men, and certain women, invariably occur on naturalistic rather than schematic seals.

The pig-tailed figures are usually identified as women (Collon 1987:16; Pittman 1994:182), an identification that can be supported by their hair-style, which is only occasionally seen on men in contemporary representations and is often seen on figurines that are clearly depicted with breasts (LeBreton 1957: Figs. 31/5 and 32/11; Harper et al. 1992: Figs. 25 and 31). Other pig-tailed figures wear garments that cover them from their shoulders to knees or below, a characteristic of women’s but not men’s dress (until the later part of the third millennium). Most seals with

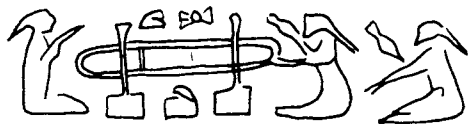
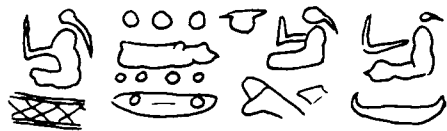
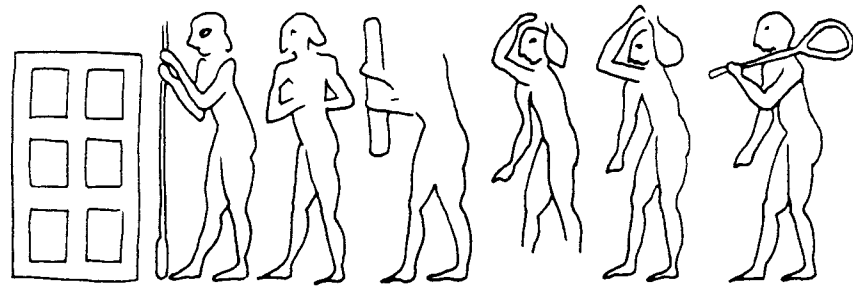


Figure 13.2. Seal imagery from the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods. The uppermost image depicts a procession; the other three represent scenes of daily life (drawing after Amiet 1980).

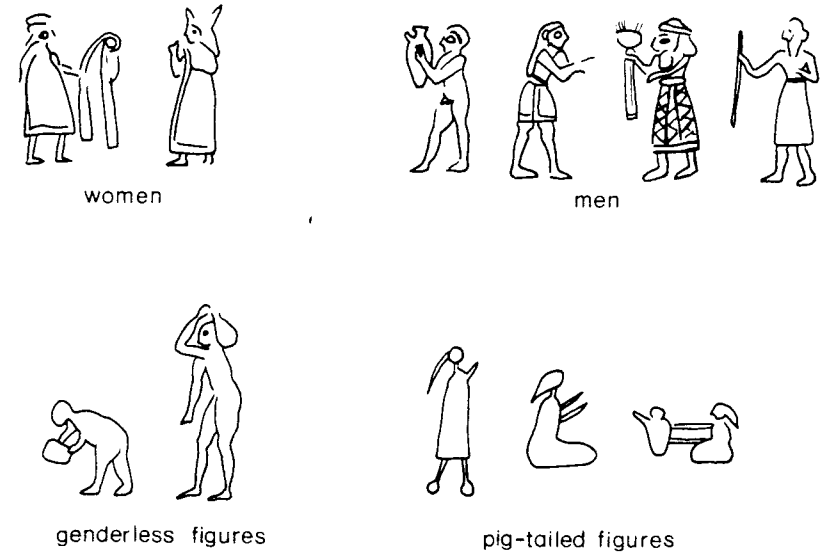


Figure 13.3. Examples of different types of figures from seal and relief imagery (drawing after Amiet 1980).

depictions of pig-tailed figures are of the schematic variety. The gender of the naked, hairless individuals is ambiguous; we will return to this point later. Seals portraying them are overwhelmingly of the naturalistic variety.

Prominent among the images of men are depictions of an individual with a beard and a rolled headdress, who is frequently dressed in a so-called net skirt (see Fig. 13.1). Representations of this man are found on seals, statuettes, a stela, a knife handle, and so forth, from a geographically widespread collection of sites. He engages in a variety of acts, including hunting and mastering wild animals, overseeing the slaughter of bound captives (or taking part himself), feeding domestic animals, leading processions, performing libations (Schmandt-Besserat 1993), and standing before an important person (see Fig. 13.1, top). In many of these scenes he is alone or accompanied by a single individual in the characteristic pose of an attendant. In the statuettes, he is portrayed standing in an unusual pose with fists clenched against his chest.

In several scenes, the net-skirted man is shown bearing offerings to or standing before an individual in a pose suggesting ritual attention. The most famous example is on the Uruk vase, which depicts the net-skirted

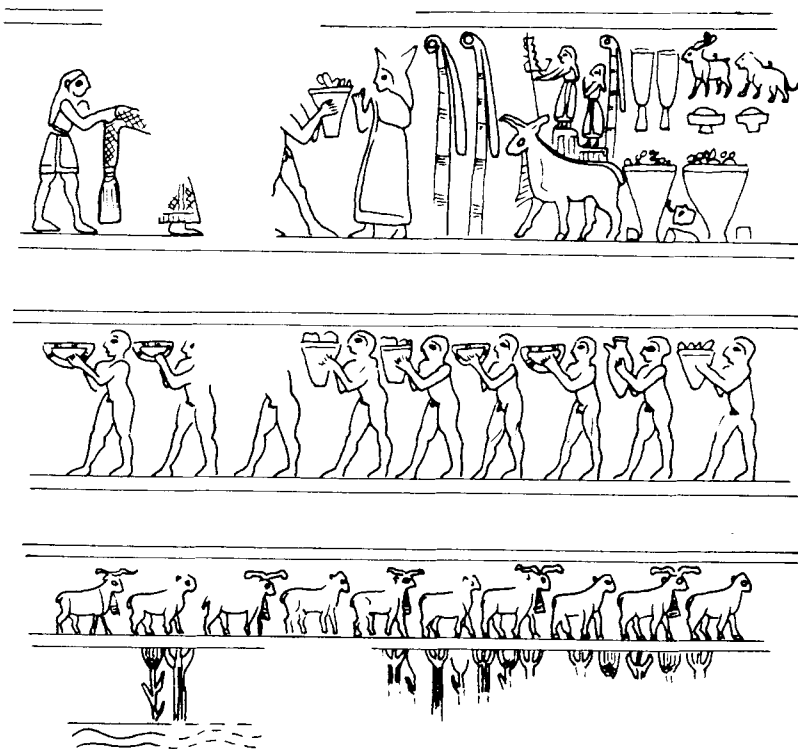


Figure 13.4. Imagery on the Uruk Vase (drawing after Amiet 1980).

man — albeit only partially preserved — at the head of a procession whose members carry containers filled with various fruits of the land (Fig. 13.4).

The focus of cultic attention in these scenes is always female. Needless to say, her identity has been of considerable interest. She has generally been interpreted either as the goddess Inanna — based on the reed bundle symbol of Inanna that is often present — or as Inanna's high priestess. Although her identity cannot be resolved with certainty, the weight of evidence points to her being a goddess. In a number of cases, she wears an unusual headdress; while not the characteristic horned variety known from depictions of deities in the later third millennium, it differs from any seen on other figures. Moreover, historical evidence indicates that the high priest/ess was of the opposite gender to the deity he/she served (Winter 1987:201 n. 44). If a similar practice prevailed in the late fourth millennium, we would not expect Inanna to be served by a priestess, but rather by a priest.

Table 13.1 Depiction of Figures Seated or Engaged in Repetitive Scenes

	Goddess	Man in Net Skirt	Other Men	Genderless Figures	Pig-tailed Women
Seated position	20%	7%	0%	30%	80%
Repetitive scene	0%	0%	29%	31%	70%

Note: Percentages are calculated with reference to the total number of scenes in which such figures are depicted.

Apart from the depiction of this important female, probably a goddess, women are almost invariably represented as pig-tailed figures. They occur in scenes markedly different than those just considered: they are almost never shown individually; in most cases they are seated; and they occur only on seals. In more than half of the scenes in which they are portrayed, they are engaged in repetitive tasks in which two or more figures perform the same activity (Table 13.1). The most commonly attested, recognizable activities are those involving textile production and something to do with vessels (Fig. 13.2). A similar connection between textiles and vessels can be found among the archaic lexical lists. The reason for grouping these seemingly dissimilar things together in one list remains unclear. It does, however, seem that vessels in the list were important principally because of their contents, which included beverages — especially beer — and various kinds of animal fats (Englund and Nissen 1993:31).

Portrayals of genderless figures share some characteristics of depictions of males, on the one hand, and pig-tailed figures on the other. They sometimes occur alone, usually when shown hunting. They are sometimes depicted seated, in which case they frequently engage in activities similar to those of pig-tailed figures. Involvement in repetitive tasks is less common than for pig-tailed figures (Table 13.1). Like them, however, genderless figures are often shown doing something with vessels (Fig. 13.1, bottom), but nearly as often are involved in animal tending, hunting, or participating in processions (Fig. 13.2, top). Less common activities depicted include agricultural tasks, food preparation, and filling of storehouses; only one scene seems to be related to textile production.

The intermediate nature of the depictions of genderless figures permits a number of possible interpretations. Some may have represented females and some males, but this begs the question of why they were distinguished from pig-tailed figures and depictions of other males by omitting their distinctive features. Possibly they were of different social positions than those whose genders are clearly portrayed. The fact that they are more often portrayed in activities in which males are shown

lends some support to their identification as men, as do their bald heads, also seen on some depictions of men (Fig. 13.4). Another possibility is that they represent members of a third gender category. Or, the genderless figures may refer to other social identities, such as age groups, in which gender is unmarked.

How do the depictions fit with other archaeological and historical data? Oikoi were concerned with the storage, receipt, inventory, and distribution of goods such as grain, animals, and their products: many of the same kinds of goods seen in the pictorial images. Third-millennium texts indicate that women and children were by far the most important sources of labor in large-scale textile production enterprises (Waetzoldt 1972; Maekawa 1980). The pictorial connection of female figures with textile manufacture in the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr seals makes it likely that this connection was already established by that time (cf. Zagarell 1986). Later texts indicate that there were also at least some *elite* (mortal) women, including queens, known to have run households in their own names, carried on trade, and the like. Elite women, however, are not represented pictorially in the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods.

In summary, the imagery suggests that men and women engaged in quite different kinds of activities, based on their gender and social position (and no doubt age as well), but both women's and men's labor was instrumental to the political economy. Much of the evidence available speaks most directly to the organization of gendered and class-based labor within oikoi; the extent to which a similar organization prevailed in smaller domestic units is a question that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Ideology in Figural Imagery

An examination of gendered ideology must rely on pictorial evidence because of the absence of indications of gender in contemporary texts. Studying *how* gendered activities were portrayed and the relationship among the people involved may offer insights into the workings of gender in ideological constructions in this past society.

Hierarchical relationships are portrayed in some seal scenes in which pig-tailed or genderless figures are depicted. One figure may, for example, sit on a special platform or mat while others sit on the ground (Fig. 13.2, second from bottom) (Collon 1987:16). Hierarchical relationships are shown within a single gender, rather than across genders. Indeed, most scenes involving pig-tailed figures and, to a somewhat lesser extent, genderless figures portray only a single type of figure and hence people of a single gender.

Hierarchical relationships are also evident in other kinds of scenes.

The man in the net skirt is invariably depicted killing people or supervising others doing so. We have already mentioned the attendant who frequently accompanies the man in the net skirt. Procession scenes are led by the man in the net skirt, followed by others bearing offerings. Again, these representations tend to be restricted to a single (human) gender, in this case male. Let us look more closely at the most graphic of the procession scenes, the one depicted on the Uruk vase (Fig. 13.4).

Irene Winter (1985:19) has argued persuasively that narrative depictions in early Mesopotamian art are to be understood as beginning at the bottom and moving to the top. When we examine the Uruk vase in this light, we see a clear, divided sequence, with water at the bottom, followed by plants and domestic animals, then men bearing fruits of the land, and culminating in the man in the net skirt. The man in the net skirt is both followed and preceded by attendants, one of whom presents the first offerings to the female whom we have argued is probably the goddess Inanna.

That this sequence is to be interpreted as a hierarchical arrangement is suggested by appeal to other narrative pictorial works, the increasing size of the bands as one moves up the vase, and the clothing and poses of the individuals portrayed. From the vase, as well as depictions of similar figures on seals, we see that at the top of the hierarchy stood a female, not a mortal one but a goddess. At the top of the human hierarchy stands a male, namely the man in the net skirt. Below him are other males and below them are animals, plants, and water, in that order. Such a portrayal can be understood as depicting hierarchical relationships with reference to a naturalizing ideology. Mortal women are conspicuously absent from this "natural" hierarchy; they are categorically excluded.

This hierarchical pattern can be extended using the information from the Uruk Vase in conjunction with seals. Below the man in the net skirt are other males, genderless figures of at least two hierarchical categories, and pig-tailed women, also of two categories. Although not unequivocal, there is circumstantial evidence to support the placement of the pig-tailed figures at the bottom of this hierarchy. They are portrayed in ways that are most dissimilar to the man in the net skirt and the goddess: they are usually shown sitting, in groups, and engaged in repetitive activities; they are never shown in scenes that contain cult symbols. Furthermore, the seals containing pig-tailed figures are usually of the schematic sort, small, quick to produce, and relatively infrequently used to seal and thus authorize transactions.

Other values associated with gender can be discerned from the way in which scenes are composed. Recall that the man in the net skirt, as well as some other males and genderless figures, are shown hunting, mastering animals, and killing people. Imagery from both earlier and later periods

indicates that the symbolism of mastering wild animals was associated with maleness and especially with important males. Weapons also have a long history of association with elite men, based on pictorial images and mortuary associations (Marcus 1994:11; Pollock 1983). With the exception of depictions of hunting and killing captives, the scenes in which the man in the net skirt is present almost invariably contain one or more reed bundles, the symbol of the goddess Inanna. There is, thus, good reason to understand the man in the net skirt as a symbol of a powerful ruler whose duties and powers combine political and cultic leadership that are at the same time associated with masculinity.

The importance of Inanna and of cultic scenes in the pictorial imagery in general raises the question of how the images fit into the larger picture of Mesopotamian religion. The Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen (1976) claimed to be able to disentangle the threads of fourth-millennium religious beliefs from later texts. While it is certainly appropriate to treat his reconstruction with some caution, it nonetheless offers compelling insights into possible underlying themes in Mesopotamian religion.

Early characteristics of goddesses, according to Jacobsen, include associations with fish, cows, grain, grapes, wine, and storehouses: all products resulting from the fertility of the land and a place where they are stored. Gods, on the other hand, were associated with water (which is semantically connected to semen in Sumerian [Jacobsen 1976:111]), marsh plants and animals, bulls, the moon, sun, wind, thunderstorms, floods, the hoe, shepherds, and so forth: powers that produce fertility and yield, as well as powers that cause their destruction. The sexual metaphor here is quite clear.

Inanna was one of the most prominent goddesses, not least because of her position as patron goddess of Uruk. As we have seen, she is frequently represented by her symbol, a reed bundle, which is an indication of her connection to community storehouses. In a series of stories concerning her association with and ultimate marriage to the half-god Dumuzi, who is usually said to be a shepherd, she is said to be attracted to him because of his qualities as an embodiment of fertility and yield. The wedding of Dumuzi and Inanna symbolized the power for productivity joined to the community storehouse and hence captured for the benefit of the community.

Conclusion: Gender Ideology and Social Reality in the Fourth Millennium B.C.E.

The various lines of evidence we have explored in this chapter show the complex relationships between ideology and social reality. The late fourth-millennium world was built to a significant extent on women: in

reality on women's labor and ideologically on a powerful goddess who could claim the principal city of the time as hers. People at the time — as well as modern scholars — might have been tempted to assume that women's power in the human world would correspond to the power of Inanna in the world of the gods (cf. Westenholz 1990). There is, however, little indication that this was the case.

Instead, members of the upper social echelons, who were those most likely to be consumers of pictorial imagery on seals, statues, and the like, were treated to representations of women as menial laborers. Not all women *were* menial laborers; class differences among women may have been as sharp as gender differences (Sacks 1974:218). Men were shown performing various kinds of menial labor, too, but also attaining the highest political and cultic positions and a variety of positions in between. In other words, the same ideology that depicted a powerful deity as female also made clear that the epitome of human power was male. Sexually-laden metaphors connecting women to products that were engendered through the male power of fertilization were belied by social reality in which women were doubtless responsible for major portions of the productive labor, not least the manufacture of textiles which were among the most critical commodities in the political economy of Mesopotamian states. Human labor, both female and male, was portrayed to be in service of the deities, in particular Inanna, just as the most powerful human figure, the man in the net skirt, is depicted as being in her service. The ideological message that all people must labor in service of the goddess was a legitimation for labor in the service of powerful men. It is an ideological message that works to represent a world of human making as really the result of the acts of the gods and goddesses. It is surely no coincidence that Inanna herself exhibits an ambiguous combination of gendered characteristics. She is not in any way associated with motherhood or maternal characteristics (Hallo 1987:49), but rather is protectress of harlots, connected to rain and thunderstorms, and goddess of war as well as love.

Having a powerful goddess as principal deity of the major city of southern Mesopotamia was an ideologically potent symbol. At the same time that people in general, and perhaps women in particular, were being exploited as never before, they were confronted with images which at once reinforced the exploited positions of many women by portraying their socioeconomic position as natural and which proposed that, at least at the divine level, some females *were* in fact powerful. It was a way to legitimate the interests of elite men by suggesting that in fact both men and women had a share in power.

At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that ideology can work in very different ways. In the Mesopotamian case we have examined,

ideology represented hierarchical relations between people of the same gender as natural. However, for the most part, hierarchical relations *between* genders were denied by the simple expedient of avoiding portrayal of women and men together. Powerful men created the image of a world, which had very little place for women at all.

Notes

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1. An example might be the consumerism that is an integral part of capitalism.

2. The sample used in this analysis includes both seals and impressions, as well as occasional other objects that bear images (for a total of 151 items). The sample included examples with one or more anthropomorphic figures and those fragments of impressions that were complete enough so that one could discern what was occurring in the scene. Sources of these images included Frankfort (1955), Le Brun and Vallat (1978), Brandes (1979), Amiet (1980), Strommenger (1980), Collon (1987). For discussion of seal themes, see Pittman (1994). The final publication of Chogha Mish (Delougaz et al. 1996) was available to us only after this chapter was completed, and those images, therefore, could not be included in the analysis.

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