

Exclusionary Practices in Ancient Mesopotamia: Steps Towards a Bio-Cultural Approach

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Abstract This paper applies an embodied, biologically-grounded approach to analyze exclusionary practices related to notions of impurity in ancient Mesopotamia. It argues that these behaviors derive from innate cognitive responses designed to protect against environmental threats like disease, which were then culturally elaborated to serve additional social functions. Evidence is examined for the avoidance of infectious diseases, the stigmatization of menstruating women and parturients, and the enigmatic ‘gate of the unclean’ at the city of Nippur. The analysis highlights the continuity between biologically-prepared tendencies and their cultural articulations, showing how an embodied perspective can shed new light on long-standing issues in the humanities by grounding abstract concepts in the shared experiences of the body.

Keywords Hygiene. Purity. Disgust. Menstruation. Disease. Contagion. Stigma.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Exclusionary Practices Related to Infectious Disease. – 3 Banishment of ‘Unclean’ Women? – 4 The “Gate of the Impure People” on the Nippur Map. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

While the notion of impurity might strike many modern Westerners as an obscure and primitive idea, it remains necessary to come to terms with the fact that some variation of the notion of pollution seems universal to traditional societies. Why would such a seemingly irrational concept have emerged in disparate cultures around the world? Upon further consideration, however, this question turns out to be based on a misconception. Not only is impurity based on a psychological phenomenon that is eminently familiar even to a modern person living in a mostly secular society, closer investigation reveals that it is based on a set of intuitions that fulfill important biological and social functions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief sketch of how an embodied approach to impurity building on evolutionary principles can provide insight into exclusionary practices from ancient Mesopotamia. It will show how behavioral avoidance based on fear and disgust could serve as a valid strategy for protection against environmental dangers, but also how these innate tendencies could be co-opted by culture to serve additional social functions. The purpose of this analysis is not to justify the various types of exclusionary practice (e.g. by claiming that they are ‘natural’) but simply to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how these ideas and practices emerge and develop.

Since ‘embodiment’ has become quite a buzz-word in contemporary academic discourse, it is necessary to state more specifically the meaning of this concept in the present context.¹ Put simply, the embodied approach as briefly sketched here will offer a biological account for understanding the emer-

¹ This theoretical overview is by necessity very abbreviated. For a fuller presentation, see Feder 2022, 20-6.



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gence of pollution and related concepts and then to explain how they could then acquire additional social functions in cultural discourse. These two aspects can be viewed as successive logical steps:

1. Based on the evolutionary assumption that humans for all of their uniqueness share a common biological - and neurological - origin with 'lower' mammals, the unique cognitive capacities of humans are outgrowths of the biological needs and resources that govern the evolution of cognition in other creatures. Human brains developed to pursue physiological needs such as food and reproduction and avoid environmental threats such as predators and disease. The extension of this observation is that ostensibly 'religious' ideas (such as impurity) may often serve an underlying physiological function. Put simply, the human brain did not evolve to play chess.²
2. In the evolution of human languages - both historically and in individual human development - direct experience provides the necessary scaffolding for the emergence of more abstract (experientially distant) modes of discourse. In contrast with structuralist approaches to language which treat linguistic systems as independent from actual experience, cognitive linguistics has emphasized that the 'digital' (conventional) aspects of language are grounded in 'analog' images, based on embodied experience.³ For example, the acquisition of understanding regarding the meaning of the word 'dog' will be based to a large extent on accumulating experience of meeting actual dogs. Embodied concepts, grounded in concrete experience, provide the raw materials for abstract modes of social discourse.⁴

For our purposes, let it be summarized that the discourse on pollution is rooted in concerns that are thoroughly embodied, pertaining to affective processes of sense-making that enable the organism to survive and thrive in its environment. This embodied repertoire of meanings provided the raw materials for extending this imagery into the socio-moral domain.

This point of departure should be contrasted with the very influential approach of Mary Douglas to pollution, who famously equated impurity with "dirt", which she defined as "matter out of place".⁵ As scholars have pointed out, this framework is based on type of Cartesian dualism that privileges the mind (intellectual explanations) over the body.⁶ Of course, Douglas' symbolic approach was a step forward from the alternative view, still held by many today, that purity practices are primitive and irrational.⁷ Both of these approaches fail to appreciate the deeply biological roots of purity practices, which find expression in the high level of continuity between physiological and social forms of contagion.

Applying Premise 1, let us note that pollution and associated exclusionary practices derive from one of the two basic opposing drives that motivate behavior, approach and avoidance. In cognitive psychology these two drives are viewed as expressions of two distinct neurological systems: the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS).⁸ Exclusionary practices relate to the BIS, which is responsible for avoiding harm and generally involves distancing oneself from potential threats. The emotions that serve as the primary gate-keepers in threat avoidance are disgust and fear. Whereas fear responds to perceived threats, disgust is elicited by stimuli that would, under other circumstances, arouse one's Behavior Activation System, such as food and sex. To a large degree, disgust is the inversion of desire, causing us to reject the same types of entities that usually attract us.⁹

This emphasis on the biological background of avoidance practices has helped filled a lacuna in modern analyses of impurity. Mary Douglas' emphasis on pollution as an abstract symbolic system never directly explained the obvious fact that they remain situated in the body, specifically those less pleasant aspects of it, and that it is in precisely these details one discovers a surprising degree of

² Semin, Smith 2009, 1.

³ Dor 2015, 34-59

⁴ A useful analogy is the emergence of human writing systems, including Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mesopotamian cuneiform and even the alphabet. The visual signs on which all of these systems are based originated as iconic symbols (pictures), which were only secondarily appropriated to 'represent' sounds (syllables and phonemes) by virtue of convention (Michalowski 2002).

⁵ Douglas 1966, 35.

⁶ Lemos 2013.

⁷ Smith 2007, 29-30.

⁸ See Carver, White 1994; Corr 2008. For the application of this distinction to moral psychology, see Janoff, Bulman, Sheikh-Hepp 2009.

⁹ Fleischman et al. 2015.

commonality between disparate cultures. In the past few decades, evolutionary psychologists have sought to understand this phenomenon by exploring the origins of bodily revulsion.

According to these accounts, disgust serves an adaptive function in protecting individuals against pathogen threats.¹⁰ This evolutionary explanation offers a plausible account for the universality of disgust elicitors, such as disease, vermin, corpses and the like.¹¹

In recent years, Thomas Kazen's ground-breaking work should be recognized for "applying these insights to pollution in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism, arguing compellingly that naturalistic (evolutionary) and cultural modes of explanation need not be viewed as contradictory".¹²

While the emphasis on disgust in these studies makes an important advancement, one cannot fully appreciate the notion of impurity without addressing the specific psychological phenomenon known as contagion (or contamination) appraisals, the perceived transfer of a negative essence from a source to a target.¹³ Everyday instances readily demonstrate that the transmission of an imperceptible quality is not inherently mysterious. We routinely encounter genuine transmission of characteristics across various contexts: touching a smelly item spreads its odor, contact with a sick person can result in disease transmission, and so on. Psychological research on contagion demonstrates that people respond differently to different perceived sources of contamination, and these responses are guided by one's personal experience as well as culturally-transmitted knowledge (e.g. germ theory) about how an unwanted essence is transmitted. In an analogous manner, different sources of impurity are distinguished in the manner of their transmission, the perceived effects of contact and the means by which one can be purified.

Turning to Premise 2, if the emphasis thus far has been on the roles of disgust and fear of contagion in protecting the animal from physiological threats, here it is necessary to add an additional layer of analysis in recognizing that these emotions are frequently co-opted to apply to social stimuli. The philosopher Dan Kelly explored this phenomenon in his treatise on disgust, appropriated called *Yuck!* (2011). One of his basic claims, which he calls the "co-opt thesis", asserts that once the emotion of disgust was formed by evolution, it was co-opted to play a number of additional roles in regulating human social interactions, most notably those related to social norms and group membership. Not only do social conventions guide social learning and influence what stimuli are perceived as disgusting (e.g. culture-specific attitudes regarding eating specific animals), they also associate disgust with the violation of certain norms and values. Through this process, cultures often develop norms of avoidance (i.e. prohibitions) that pertain to phenomena that are not necessarily dangerous.¹⁴

2 Exclusionary Practices Related to Infectious Disease

The discussion will now attempt to apply some of these theoretical insights to the Mesopotamian evidence. While this evidence lacks a clearly articulated notion of impurity compared with other such as ancient Hatti or Israel,¹⁵ it nevertheless provides robust documentation of the perception of contagion and associated avoidance practices.

Indeed, Mesopotamian texts provide the earliest unambiguous testimony regarding an awareness of the infectiousness of disease and the enactment of various measures of quarantine. Aside from the dedicatory inscriptions of Gudea (twenty-first century BCE) where he praises himself for banishing the (m)uzug from the city, to be discussed below, the letters from Mari (eighteenth century BCE) testify to a clear awareness of contagion in response to the plague which afflicted the region. Here is just one example:

¹⁰ Cf. Schaller, Park 2011.

¹¹ Feder 2022, 6. Cf. Curtis, de Barra, Aunger 2011; Curtis 2013.

¹² Feder 2022, 6. Cf. Kazen 2010; Levavi Feinstein 2014, 11-41.

¹³ Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin pioneered the research on the 'contagion' response in the 1990s (summaries: Nemeroff, Rozin 2000; 2002).

¹⁴ Feder 2022, 175-206.

¹⁵ Feder 2016.

ARM 26/1 17 ll. 16-30

Šanītam ilum ina ḫalṣ[im el]im u[l]appat-ma
qātam ana qātim-ma ētiq
u bēlī liwa''er-ma
mārū ālāni ša kīma laptū
ana ālāni lā laptūtīm lā irrubū
assuri mātām kalaša ulappatū
u šumma gerrī bēlīya ana ḫalṣim elim ibašši
bēlī ina Terqā-ma likkali
ana Sagaratim lā ittiqam
mātām lupputat

The god is striking in the upper district, so I without delay took a bypass. Furthermore, my lord should give orders that the residents of the cities that have been touched [*laptūtu*] not enter cities that are not touched, lest they touch [*ulappatū*] the whole land. And if there will be a campaign of my lord to the upper district, my lord must stop in Terqa. He must not move on to Saggaram. The land is 'touched' (i.e., infected).¹⁶

On the background of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, these extreme measures seem strikingly familiar. Even the apparently strange idiom 'touched' (Akkadian *lapātu*) for infected cities is in fact an exact semantic parallel of the word 'contagion', from Latin *com-tangere* (touched with). Semantic parallels can also be found in biblical Hebrew (*n-g'*) and ancient Greek *epaphe*, all with the concrete meaning 'touch' used to describe the spread of disease. Such semantic parallels demonstrate unequivocally the basis of these concepts in shared conceptual processes, ultimately grounded in universal human experience.¹⁷

Additional evidence pertaining to quarantine pertain to the person suffering from the *saḫaršubba* skin disease. This ailment covered the body of its victim 'like a garment' and led to stigmatization and banishment from the community, reflecting a perception that it was contagious. Like biblical *šara'at* (often translated 'leprosy'), it was often viewed as a divine punishment or curse.¹⁸ Often the victim was forced to literally roam the steppe, as in the following boundary-stone (*kudurru*) inscription from the eleventh century BCE: "May Šin clothe his whole body in *saḫaršubbū* which will never abate so that all the days of his life he will be impure and, like a wild ass, wander outside his city".¹⁹

Similar points can be made about the dangers of physical contact with a sick person. The Mari letters warn against eating and drinking from the vessels of an infected individual, and a similar concern finds expression in the Šurpu incantation series in relation to a 'cursed' (*tamū*) individual, as has been noted by several scholars.²⁰

3 Banishment of 'Unclean' Women?

The evidence reviewed thus far dealing with the avoidance of sick people has been straightforward. A more controversial issue pertains to how the Mesopotamians treated women during their time of menstruation or following birth. Many Assyriologists have taken it as almost self-evident that the Mesopotamians separated these women from their households.²¹ However, Erica Couto-Ferreira and Agnes Garcia-Ventura (2013) challenged these assessments, arguing that "the relationship between menstruation and impurity is assumed by most scholars to be universal and self-evident, through a process that transforms what is a social and cultural category into something biological and natural" (515). This formulation provocatively accuses scholars of imposing their 'cultural' biases on the data, thereby naturalizing the concept of menstrual impurity.

¹⁶ My translation. For further discussion, see Farber 2004, 119-22; Feder 2022, ix, 67-8.

¹⁷ Feder 2022, 59-75.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of these curse formulas attested in documents from the fourteenth to seventh centuries BCE, see Watanabe 1984; also Feder 2022, 61-3.

¹⁹ Slanski 2003, 225-6; Kitz 2014, 148-9.

²⁰ Sigerist 1951, 446; Geller 1980, 188; Farber 2004, 126.

²¹ E.g. Lafont 1987; Durand 1988, 110-12.

To a large degree these latter scholars are correct in stressing the ‘cultural’ origins of menstrual separation. There is no physiological danger caused by contact with a menstruating woman, and hence it is not surprising that no other primate observes this practice. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the segregation of menstruants is nearly universal in traditional societies.²² Just to give an indication, the following heat-map generated by the eHRAF database represents mentions of menstrual lodges or huts, clearly one of the most extreme expressions of a menstrual taboo, within the ethnological literature:

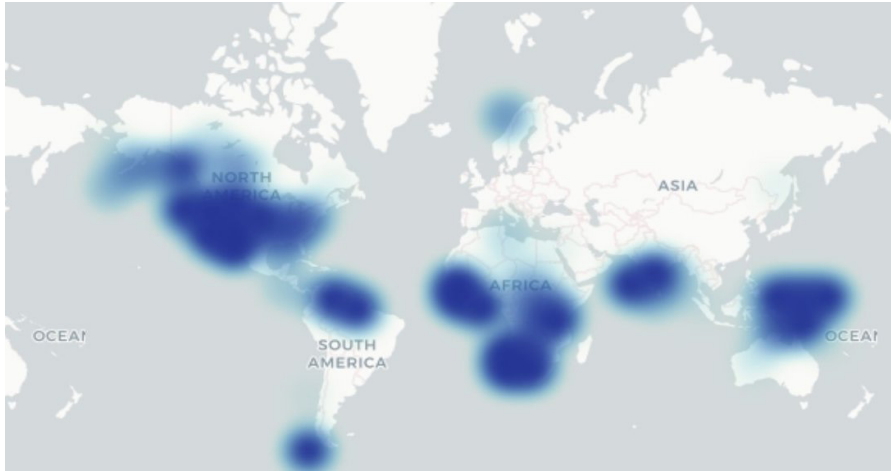


Figure 1
 Mentions of Menstrual Lodges or Huts in Ethnographic Literature (eHRAF)

Accordingly, one can hardly be blamed for expecting to find a menstrual taboo in the ancient Mesopotamian evidence. More importantly, this expectation is borne out by the evidence, as reflected in the typical terms that are employed to describe these groups of women. For example, the term *urruštu*, derived from (*w*)*aršu* (filthy), designates a woman perceived to be unclean, apparently as a result of menstruation or childbirth.²³ Specifically, it is likely that *urruštu* reflects a substantivized usage of the D verbal adjective: “the stained (one)”, referring directly to the sullied garments of these women.

Another term with similar pejorative connotations is *musukkatu*, which was employed to refer to a menstruating woman as well as a parturient (*harištu*). Contact with a *musukkatu* was considered contaminating, rendering individuals and objects unfit for ritual performances. Healing rituals requiring pure water specify that it must not come from a place where a *musukkatu* has washed or laundered her clothes.²⁴ Scholars have further argued that these women were isolated,²⁵ thought the archival evidence for Mari is open to alternative interpretations.²⁶

The corresponding masculine term *musukku* was used to designate an outcast, whether due to the violation of a taboo or a contagious disease such as *saḫaršubbū*. Apparently, these terms are cognate with the verb *masāku* (to be ugly, bad), whose usages in the D form include “to spoil, to make disgusting, to revile”.²⁷ These negative associations parallel those of the biblical Hebrew term for a menstruant, *nidda*. Derived from the root *n-d-d*, this term refers to the need to distance oneself, bearing negative connotations related to disgust and abhorrence.²⁸ The pejorative connotations of this term are represented in its metaphoric usages, such as Lam. 1:8-9: “Jerusalem has greatly sinned, therefore she has become a *nidda*. All who admired her despise her, for they have seen her disgraced...Her uncleanness clings to her skirts”.²⁹ In short, the lexical evidence in Mesopotamian texts suggests that

²² Ford 1964, 17-18; Montgomery 1974; Meyer 2005, 128-9.

²³ CAD A 309-10; CAD U-W 248; Feder 2016, 104-5.

²⁴ CAD M/2 239; e.g. a ritual for the treatment of *būšānu* (SpTU I 44, ll. 72-3; Hunger 1976, 53), which refers to the *musukkatu* alongside the *urruštu*.

²⁵ See Stol 2000, 205-6; 2016, 438-9; also fn. 21 above.

²⁶ Couto, Ferreira, Garcia-Ventura 2013, 519-22.

²⁷ CAD M/1 322; M/2 239-40. For discussion of this term’s etymology and its connection with Sumerian *uzug/k*, see Feder 2016, 112-16.

²⁸ Greenberg 1995.

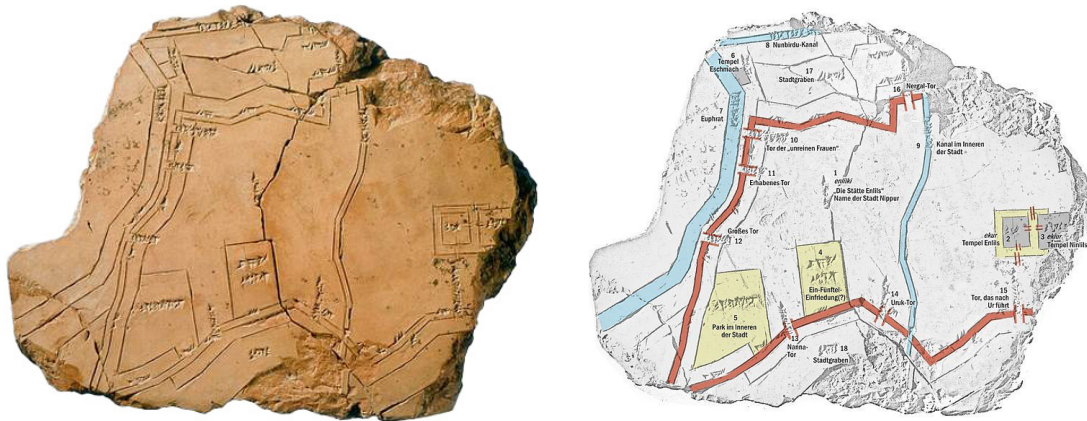
²⁹ For further analyses of the semantic field of this term, see Levavi Feinstein 2014, 81-3; Goldstein 2015, 51-61; Feder 2022, 218-21.

menstruants and parturients were stigmatized and avoided. These perceptions are represented in the Mesopotamian evidence itself, such that they cannot be written off as reflections of some of kind of modern scholarly bias.

4 The “Gate of the Impure People” on the Nippur Map

The final topic for discussion is the enigmatic name of a gate to Nippur, which according to l. 4 of the OB Proto-Kagal lexical list could be rendered as “the gate of unclean persons” (a bu l mu z u g₂-e-n-e).³⁰ What is implied by this toponym? Does it refer to a site to which impure people were banished, or perhaps to a place where they underwent purification? A possible analogy might be the “the lepers’ chamber” (*liškat ha-mešora'im*) mentioned in rabbinic sources as a separate division in the ‘women’s court’ on the Temple mount in Jerusalem.³¹ In this location, severe impurity bearers underwent purification following the instructions in the book of Leviticus. Though suggestive, this comparison is far from conclusive.

This toponym is also mentioned on a Middle-Babylonian (ca twelfth cent. BCE) annotated map³² of Nippur:³³



However, the expression in question appears with a significant variation. Instead of the masculine term (m)uzug which appears in single and plural forms in the lexical lists, we find on the Nippur map abul *musukkātum*: “the gate of the unclean women”.³⁴ Yet, the question remains: what was the significance of this gate?

³⁰ Landsberger 1971, 66 (MSL XIII; Proto-Kagal); <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt/Q000048.4>.

³¹ For attestations from the Mishna, see m. Middot 2:5; Negaim 14:8. The latter describes the purification of the person with the *šara'at* skin disease.

³² Photo: <https://images.app.goo.gl/bL5Picckgz381Ee18>; diagram with German translations based on Kramer 1967: <https://images.app.goo.gl/kgdzmxmvjBEwYipa7>. The gate in question is #10 on the diagram. See also Petersén et al. 2010, 131 for published versions.

³³ Kramer 1956, 271-5; Oelsner-Stein 2011.

³⁴ The plural reading *musukkātu* is preferable to the singular, especially considering that the corresponding term (a bu l mu z u g₂-e-n-e) in Proto-Kagal is also (common gender) plural. The canonical version of Kagal includes the feminine Akkadian term *musukkātu* (Landsberger 1971, 228) corresponding with the Nippur map.

A path towards a solution can be found in an additional text which mentions this place, a bilingual hymn that apparently describes Ninurta's entry into the Nippur, which probably was related to a procession in which his statue was carried into the city:³⁵

<p>5'. <i>dumu nibru^{ki} ildu₂-ildu₂-ba he₂-ĝal₂-ta u₄ m[u-un-zal-zal-e-n]e</i> <i>dumu.meš ni-ip-pu-ru ina il-la-ti-šū-nu ħi-in-ġál-la uš-[ta-bar-ru]</i></p> <p>6'. <i>šir₃-zu un sag ġi₆-ga me-teš₂im-i-i-[ne]</i> <i>zi-im-ri-ka ni-šū šal-mat qaq-qa-di ut-ta-<na>-`-a-d[a]</i></p> <p>7'. <i>ki-bi-ta igi-zu ġar-ra-[zu-ne]</i> <i>iš-tu aš-ri šū-a-tu₄ pa-ni-ka ina ša-ka-ni-[ka]</i></p> <p>8'. <i>abula u₂-zug₂ bar-še ġ₃-ġa₂-bi ku₄-ra-[zu-ne]</i> <i>ina a-bu-ul ú-suk-ki šar-bi-iš ina e-re-bi-i-k[a]</i></p> <p>9'. <i>silā dagal abula u₂-zug₂ asil₃-la₂ ġal₂-la dib-be₂-da-zu-[ne]</i> <i>ina re-bit a-bu-ul ú-suk-ki šá re-šá-ti ma-la-a-at ina ba-i-k[a]</i></p> <p>10'. <i>re¹-šū-me-ša₄e₂ an ki-da la₂-a bal-e-da-zu-[ne]</i> <i>[ana é-šū]-re¹-ša₄E₂ šá ana AN^e u KI^{tim} tar-šú ina e-re¹-[bi-(i)-ka]</i></p> <p>11'. <i>[nitala]m ki¹-aga₂-zu igi la₂-e-d[a-zu-ne]</i> <i>[ħi-ir-ti na-r]a-re¹am-ti-ka ina¹ n[a-ṭa-li-ka]</i></p>	<p>5'. The citizens of Nippur, clan by clan, spend the day in plenty,</p> <p>6'. The black headed people sing songs in praise of you.</p> <p>7'. As soon as you direct your glance to this place,</p> <p>8'. Enter like a cold draft through the Gate of the Unclean,</p> <p>9'. Promenade down the broad street leading from the Gate of the Unclean that is filled with jubilation,</p> <p>10'. Cross over into Ešumeša, the temple that stretches from the upper to the lower regions,</p> <p>11'. Cast your eyes on your beloved s[ouse (Nin-Nibru/ Šarrat-Nippuri)],</p>
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This text describes Ninurta's triumphant entry to the city through the "gate of the unclean" (*abula u₂ug / abul usukki*). At face value, this does not sound like the most venerable place for a god to make his entrance! A rather prosaic explanation has been given by scholars, namely that Ninurta entered through the most northern of the western gates to the city. In other words, this gate may have been the main point of entry to the city, at least to someone coming from the West (Michalowski 2017, 209-10).³⁶

Yet, the peculiar name of this gate demands explanation, and this riddle has in fact attracted the attention of some of the greatest minds in the history of Assyriology. Nearly a century ago, Benno Landsberger suggested that the name of this gate derives from the incident in the myth of Enlil and Ninlil, in which Enlil seduces the maiden Ninlil while the latter is bathing in the Nunbirdu canal. This illicit sexual act leads the divine council to stigmatize Enlil as a (m)u₂ug and banish him from the city.³⁷ It is also possible to suggest that the myth provided a secondary aetiology for the name of the gate, which was not understood. This ostensibly attractive line of explanation is not free of difficulties. From a geographic perspective, the Nunbirdu canal (#8 in the diagram of Nippur above) is in the vicinity but not immediately adjacent to the gate in question (#10). Moreover, it fails to explain why the Nippur map and corresponding entry in the canonical Kagal list employs the feminine plural form *musukkāti*.

In probably the most elaborate discussion of this question to date, Géza Komoróczy makes a bold proposal that the term *musukkātu* reflects an abstract noun (employing the morpheme *-āt-* instead of the more usual *-ūt-*) and refers to the sanctity of the gate, designating it "Heiligistor" or "Kulttor" (344).³⁸ Despite his sophisticated analysis, this suggestion is untenable. This explanation bases itself on the purported ambivalence of the notion of 'taboo', which can refer to sacred or proscribed status, at least in its original Polynesian context.³⁹ While this ambivalence may characterize terms for 'taboo' in many languages,⁴⁰ this analysis does not fit the lexical evidence for *musukku/musukkātu*. Firstly, this term always bears a strongly pejorative connotation, such that the rendering "sacred" finds no textual support. Secondly, this term appears without exception as a designation for a certain type of person, such that it cannot be interpreted as a general concept.

Most recently, Marten Stol has suggested that the "gate of unclean women" relates to purification: "[This gate] opened on to the Euphrates and it could have been the place where ritual washing took

³⁵ Text and translation: Michalowski 2017. Earlier edition: Lambert 1960, 120.

³⁶ Michalowski 2017, 209-10.

³⁷ See Landsberger 1928, 2102, followed by Falkenstein 1948, 164.

³⁸ For abstract nouns in *-ātum*, see GAG § 61n.

³⁹ Duhamel 2021; François 2022.

⁴⁰ I am currently working on an analysis of Sumerian *azag* that does seem to fit this pattern.

place”.⁴¹ While this observation is clearly true based on the topography of the map, it should be pointed out that the *ka-gal* list also refers to a “gate of pure water” (*abul á-sikil*) in l. 10.⁴² It would appear that this site would be more likely a place for purification than the gate in question.

Building on the topographical observation made above, an alternative interpretation may present itself. The name of the gate may imply that ‘impure’ people were forced to live in installations at the borders of the city. In other words, they were banished from the city itself but allowed to live at the margins, so that they would not die of starvation.

This inference is corroborated by the dedicatory hymns of Gudea, who takes pride in the fact that he banished the ‘unclean’ person as part of his ‘purification’ of Lagash. The Cylinder A inscription reads (xiii 12-15):⁴³

énsi-ke₄ iri mu-kug
izi im-ma-ta-lá
ùzug-ga ní-ġál lú-GI.AN
iri-ta ba-ta-è

The ruler cleansed the city, he let fire loose over it. He expelled the unclean person (*uzug*), *the fearsome one*,⁴⁴ and⁴⁵ from the city.

Admittedly, this passage is obscure, but it can be further illuminated by the parallel in Cylinder B (xvii 1-3)⁴⁶

iri-na ú-si₁₉-ni zag-bi-a mu-da-a-nú-àm nud
eme níġ-ġul-da inim ba-da-kúr
níġ-érim é-ba im-ma-a-ŋi₄

His unclean one⁴⁷ could sleep (only) at the border of his city. (Gudea) changed the word of the evil tongue, and returned evil to its home.⁴⁸

Here it says explicitly that the ‘outcast’ (*uzug*) “slept at the border of the city”.

Analogies to the practice of banishing impure people to the margins of the city can be found in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere. Consider the story of four “lepers” from 2 Kings 7:

³There were four men, lepers, outside the gate. They said to one another, “Why should we sit here waiting for death? ⁴If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, still we die. Come, let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they let us live, we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die”.

Taken together, these sources raise the possibility that Mesopotamian cities, or at least Nippur, banished certain types of ‘impure’ people to their outskirts. While this interpretation might seem farfetched from a practical perspective, it finds support in the widespread existence of such installations attested in ethnographical studies and more importantly in the Mesopotamian textual evidence cited above. Needless to say, this interpretation will remain tentative pending further evidence.

⁴¹ Stol 2016, 440.

⁴² This gate does not appear on the Nippur map.

⁴³ Text according to ETCSL 2.1.7.341-4. Translation and discussion: Feder 2016, 106-7.

⁴⁴ The usage of *ni₂-ġal₂* here is exceptional and may imply a monstrous-looking person. For discussion of this idiom, see Cunningham 2007, 92.

⁴⁵ *lú GI.AN* is left untranslated by nearly all translators. Averbeck proposes “the man inflamed (with venereal disease)” (Averbeck 1987, 637 and fn. 253). Cf. *GIŠ.BÍR* in the comparable passage, Statue B iii 15-iv 4, interpreted as a gonorrhoeic by Behrens 1978, 155 fn. 324 or (man with a) “flaccid penis” (PSD B 157).

⁴⁶ Text: ETCSL 2.1.7.1221-3. Translation and discussion: Feder 2016, 106-7.

⁴⁷ For *ú-si₁₉* as an orthographic (and phonetic) variant of *ú-zug*, see Falkenstein 1949, 32. ETCSL interprets the suffix *-ni* as a variant of the plural suffix *-(e)ne*, rendering: “ritually unclean ones”.

⁴⁸ For *é ...gi₄* as an idiom for “send back to its place”, see Hirsch 1966. Nevertheless, Hirsch takes *é* in the present text as a reference to the Eninnu temple, and this view has been followed by numerous translators, including Edzard: “he had anything disharmonious turned away from the House” (1997, 81), against his own translation of the parallel expression in Statue B 36-7: “I had anything disharmonious turned back ‘to its house’ (where it belongs)” (36), giving the expected locative sense to *é-bi-a*.

5 Conclusion

This paper has sought to apply an embodied approach to understand purity-related exclusionary practices in ancient Mesopotamia. This approach involves an appreciation of how notions of impurity and contagion are rooted in the Behavioral Avoidance System, a set of cognitive responses designed to protect against environmental threats. This premise finds corroboration in the abundant evidence for the use of exclusionary practices to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This function is evident already in the Gudea inscriptions and finds more explicit development in relation to the plagues which struck Mari, banishment of individuals bearing *saḥaršubbû* disease and in healing rituals such as *Šurpu*.

The second premise dealt with how cultures co-opt these biologically based responses to serve additional social functions. Within the constraints of this short paper, it is difficult to do justice to this subtle point, but the evidence regarding attitudes towards impure women provides a partial illustration. Contrary to some more skeptical views, it has been shown how the avoidance of women during menstruation or following childbirth is expressed in the pejorative terms used to describe them such as *urruštu* and *musukkatu*, deriving from the semantic domains of filth and disgust, which connect them with the analogous term *nidda* in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, an even more extreme degree of seclusion has been suggested in relation to the “gate of the unclean” (which finds male and female iterations) from Nippur. Against alternative interpretations, it has been argued that the existence of this gate may suggest that people of *musukku* status were banished to the outskirts of the city, along the lines of the Gudea inscriptions.

The subtlety of this point lies in the fact that it is not possible to draw a sharp line between the physiological and social functions of pollution discourse. On one hand, there is no reason to view either menstruation or birth as posing a biological threat via contact. On the other hand, the near-universality of some form of menstrual taboo in traditional societies indicates that there is some underlying psychological aversion that finds expression in these practices. Indeed, here it is important to stress that the distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ is a false dichotomy. The purpose of an evolutionary approach is to trace the line of continuity between biologically-prepared tendencies and their variable cultural elaborations.⁴⁹

It is important to keep in mind that technological changes have transformed the embodied experiences of people in modern affluent countries compared with those existing in ancient or less developed societies. The widespread availability of hygienic products, not to mention running water, have made it easier for us to pretend that menstruation does not exist and that life goes on as usual - at least in the public sphere. Ironically, we are all privy to a modern “taboo”: instead of being horrified by menstruation, it is next to forbidden to acknowledge that it exists. Like other less convenient or pleasant aspects of our bodily conditions, modern technologies have made mind-body dualism seem like it is a valid option. Nevertheless, the taboo of speaking about menstruation shows that our innate discomfort with menstrual blood still has its say, even if it is through a repressed silence.

Unfortunately, these aversions have often become inextricably connected with misogynous attitudes and practices. Here it may be interesting to raise a difficult question that has troubled feminist scholars at least since Simone de Beauvoir: why have women been complicit in their subjugation throughout history? The bio-cultural approach advanced in the present article may raise a possible solution as it relates to menstrual practices, though a full evaluation of this suggestion is beyond the scope of the present article. In particular, a bio-cultural approach may shed light on two widespread forms of exclusion: the prohibition of sexual relations and physical banishment of ‘impure’ women to distinct living quarters (e.g. huts). While both of these practices are often expressed in misogynous terms, a biological perspective might suggest why they would be willingly adopted by women. Regarding the prohibition on sexual relations, it is readily understandable why menstruation would present a less than ideal time for romance, though it does not explain why more extreme modes of separation (spatially and temporally) are often practiced. Here it is worth noting that hormonal changes during this period can inhibit the female’s sex drive, which reinforce the inclination of women to separate themselves from men.⁵⁰ As for seclusion practices, many women in traditional societies have expressed the sentiment that seclusion provides a welcome respite from their demanding domestic labors during their time of

⁴⁹ In modern research, the synthesis of scientific and humanities-based approaches to human phenomena has been designated “vertical integration” or “conscience” (Slingerland, Collard 2011; Slingerland 2012). For further discussion, see Feder 2022, 263-70.

⁵⁰ Roney, Simmons 2013.

infirmity.⁵¹ In sum, a biological perspective raises the possibility that women may actually be the initiators, at least in part, of these separationist practices, even if they are often articulated in misogynous terms within male society. This suggestion shows how a biological dimension can provide a new perspective for addressing vexed questions in the humanities. Yet, a proper evaluation of this hypothesis must await a comprehensive integration of biological and historical sources of evidence.

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⁵¹ E.g. Karki 2021.

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