
Rosetta

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Ilona Zsolnay, (ed.) *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. x & 289. £110 (Hardback) ISBN: 978-1-138-18936-2

Reviewed by Eleanor Bennett.

Ilona Zsolnay's edited volume *Being a Man: Negotiating ancient constructs of masculinity* is a tentative first step in the study of masculinities in the ancient near East, with a fascinating interdisciplinary approach. Within the scope of gender studies in the ancient near East, studies of masculinities are still in a fledgling stage. This edited volume has contributions covering Sumerian, Assyrian, Sanskrit literature, and biblical cultures, and even includes a contribution on the reception of biblical masculinities in Victorian Europe. All of these form a volume which demonstrates that masculinity was not a static concept, but a fluid one which changed over time and between cultures (pp. 1-4).

There are illuminating contributions, such as Joan Goodnick Westenholz and Ilona Zsolnay's 'Categorizing men and masculinity in Sumer' (pp. 12-41). Here the various categories used for 'man' are discussed, with the conclusion that masculinity in Sumer was based on class distinctions and age parameters. Mary R. Bachvarova's 'Wisdom of former days: the manly Hittite king and foolish Kumarbi, father of the gods' outlines the masculinities present in the Kumarbi cycle from Hittite literature (pp. 83-111). She demonstrates that whilst the Hittite storm-god epitomised the ideal masculine man, the chthonic god Kumarbi epitomised the many ways masculinity could be undermined. J.S. Cooper's 'Female trouble and troubled males: roiled seas, decadent royals, and Mesopotamian masculinities in myth and practice' discusses the masculinities found in the Mesopotamian creation myth and the Erra Epic (pp. 112-122). Cooper argues that the hegemonic masculinity of Mesopotamia is in opposition to the characteristics of women. These all lend weight to the founding principle of the volume, that masculinity is not fixed, but is a fluid entity which changes depending on the culture and time period under discussion.

That having been said, it is clear that there are issues regarding methodology within some chapters. One of these is the tendency for some authors to use evidence from periods which are not the main focus of their contribution in an attempt to bolster their argument. Julia Assante's 'Men looking at men: the homoerotics of power in the state arts of Assyria' uses Mamluks, classical Greece and Rome, and the Middle Assyrian Laws to bolster her claims regarding the homoerotic dynamics of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs (pp. 42-82, esp. p. 48, p. 49, p. 52). This is a problem as it severely counters the main message of the book by implying that masculinity is the same throughout history.

As my own specialisation is with the Neo-Assyrian period, Assante's contribution particularly struck me. Here she imposes the concepts of homoeroticism upon the reliefs of the Neo-Assyrian kings depicting the kings and eunuchs. Her theory that there is a homoerotic desire between these two groups is based on what she calls the 'soft bodies' of the eunuchs, providing images to illustrate her point. The problem is that her images demonstrate the typical depiction of eunuchs, which is counter to her point. They do not have soft bodies, but are just as muscular or 'hard' as the king. I do not believe that there is any homoerotic tension or desire in these reliefs, but this contribution certainly outlines many of the issues surrounding the depiction of masculinity in Neo-Assyrian reliefs.

Another issue with the volume is the tendency for some authors to discuss topics which are not wholly relevant to the depiction of masculinity. In Marc Brettler's 'Happy is the man who fills his quiver with them (Ps. 127:5): constructions of masculinities in the Psalms', there is much discussion of topics surrounding the particular passage of Psalms quoted in its title, but little discussion of the passage itself (pp. 198-220). At the end we see that the motive behind this contribution was actually a desire to discuss the ancient distinction between sex and gender. Whilst this is important, the relevance to the discussion of masculinity in the Old Testament is questionable. In Martin Nissinen's 'Relative masculinities in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament', we have a fascinating look at the varying masculinities in the Old Testament with a brilliant discussion of the theories behind masculinity studies (pp.

221-247). Yet I am not entirely sure why Nissinen decided to include an image from the US during the Second World War, as it does not seem relevant to the discussion (fig. 9.1, p. 223). Finally, in Steven Holloway's 'The masculinity of male angels on the make: Genesis 6:1-4 in early nineteenth-century Gothic imagination', Holloway has little to say regarding the masculinities of the angels under discussion, spending more time on the biographies of the various artists and poets (248-281). This was likely a balancing issue to ensure that all readers in an interdisciplinary volume understood who those artists and poets were. Despite the issue of relevance, these contributions still point to fascinating areas regarding masculinity which could certainly be studied further by future scholars.

The interdisciplinary approach is largely successful, with many different cultures, theoretical backgrounds, and textual treatments covered. Simon Brocbeck's 'Mapping masculinities in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāraṇa*' is a wonderful example of how to provide explanations for non-specialists in Sanskrit literature (pp. 125-149). This is particularly important for a contribution on a culture found outside the ancient near East within a volume focused on the ancient near East. Ann Guinan and Peter Morris' 'Mesopotamia before and after Sodom: colleagues, crack troops, comrades-in-arms' is a contribution which looks at the Middle Assyrian Laws and discusses masculinities found within through the lens of Queer Theory (pp. 150-175). Queer Theory is explained in a manner that a non-specialist understands, and adds to Guinan and Morris' argument that the extreme punishment of sodomy may also exist alongside a widespread tolerance of the practice (pp. 158-163). Hilary Lipka's 'Shaved beards and bared buttocks: shame and the undermining of masculine performance in biblical texts' expands on the attributes of hegemonic masculinity – facial hair, genitals and weaponry (pp. 176-197). Unfortunately, there are some terms that have been left untranslated or un-transliterated in Hebrew. Those who are unable to speak Hebrew will not be able to read these terms, but that does not have much of an impact on the overall discussion. Even though there were some issues with the interdisciplinary approach, I believe this volume worked well to demonstrate different approaches to the topic of masculinity. It also contributed to the overarching message of the collection, that masculinity was not fixed.

Despite some issues regarding the methodology and the relevance of some contributions, I believe this volume is an important step in the studies of masculinity in the ancient near East. The research area is still in its infancy, and this interdisciplinary approach has solidified the view that masculinity was a fluid concept based on factors which changed depending on the culture and time period under discussion.

Bibliography

Zsolnay, I. (ed.) 2017. *Being a Man: Negotiating ancient constructs of masculinity*.
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