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Buddies in Babylonia
Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Mesopotamian Homosexuality

Jerrold S. Cooper

In 1930, the 26-year-old Thorild Jacobsen published “How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?”1 We learn from the autobiographical essay “Searching for Sumer and Akkad;”2 written shortly before his death, that he spent the time between receiving his Ph.D. in Chicago (probably June, 1929) and joining the Diyala expedition (January, 1930) in Copenhagen, so it was probably there that he wrote about Gilgamesh. Looking at a photo taken in Iraq just a few years later of a tall, handsome Jacobsen,3 it reminds me of Jacobsen’s description of Gilgamesh’s great strength and “enormous . . . vigor,” whose “body is all of it loaded with kuzbu,” difficult to keep in check.4

Jacobsen argued that the elliptical passage in SB Gilgamesh i 111 describing Gilgamesh’s oppression of Uruk can be fully understood through the help of the figure of Enkidu. The latter was created as a foil for Gilgamesh, to distract him from his oppressive behavior. If, as “it has generally been assumed . . . he oppressed them by forcing the men to labor at the walls of Uruk and by abducting the young women to his harem,”5 there is nothing about Enkidu to suggest he would interrupt Gilgamesh’s building activities, and Enkidu’s history with the harlot indicates that he might well become one more sexual predator loosed on the young women of Uruk.

The key to the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Jacobsen continues, is in the dreams that foretell Enkidu’s coming: “Gilgamesh sees an axe, with which he

Author’s note: After this contribution was submitted in 1997, the monograph by M. Nissinen, Homeroticism in the Biblical World (Minneapolis, 1998), appeared, discussing many of the issues raised here.

3. Ibid., 2745, but larger and better reproduced in Sumerian Gods and Their Representations, ed. I. Finkel and M. Geller (Groningen, 1997), facing p. 1. The photo is of Jacobsen at age 30. I remember well fretting to Jacobsen about turning thirty myself, and his reassuring me with a warm and slightly wistful smile that one’s thirties are wonderful, the forties even better, and only in the fifties do little things start to go wrong. He was absolutely right!
5. Ibid., 62.
cohabits as with a woman; as the axe is equivalent to Engidu, the dream cannot mean anything but that homosexual intercourse is going to take place between Gilgamesh and the newcomer. If Enkidu is going to be Gilgamesh’s sexual partner, then the nature of the oppression must be sexual as well:

The youthful ruler of Uruk, the two-third god Gilgamesh, possesses superhuman strength and sexual vigor. To satiate this he violates his unhappy subjects male and female at random. . . . Aruru hears their prayers and creates Engidu, a being whose sexual vigor is as strong as Gilgameš’s, so that they, when falling in love with each other, may neutralize each other and the inhabitants of Uruk may return to tranquility.

At the end of the article, Jacobsen suggests that there may have been an early “popular view, which considered bisexuality a token of superior strength.”

The 1930 article was not reprinted in the 1970 collection of Jacobson’s work, Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture, and his interpretation of the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in The Treasures of Darkness of 1976 was very different:

From our first meeting with the young Gilgamesh he is characterized by tremendous vigor and energy. As ruler of Uruk he throws himself into his task with zeal. He maintains a constant military alert, calls his companions away from their games, and harrases the young men of the town to the point where it gets black before their eyes and they faint from weakness, and he leaves them no time for their families and sweethearts. . . . Gilgamesh’s superior energy and strength set him apart and make him lonely. He needs a friend, someone who measures up to him and can give him companionship on his own extraordinary level of potential and aspiration.

The “vigor” of 1930 is still there, but it is no longer “sexual.” And the dreams that are key to the 1930 interpretation are not even mentioned in the twelve-page synopsis of Gilgamesh in Treasures, though they do appear later on in his discussion of the epic’s meaning. For Jacobson in 1976, Gilgamesh is no longer a sexual predator but rather Peter Pan:

Throughout the epic Gilgamesh appears as young, a mere boy, and he holds on to that status, refusing to exchange it for adulthood as represented by marriage and parenthood. Like Barrie’s Peter Pan he will not grow up. His first meeting with Enkidu is a rejection of marriage for a boyhood friendship.

6. The word is actually allatu “wife,” which Jacobson correctly translates in his later treatments of the dreams (see below).


8. Ibid., 72.

9. Ibid., 74.


12. Ibid., 218.

13. Ibid., 219.


17. Ibid., 234 n. 7.


19. Cf. J. Tagay, The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic (Philadelphia, 1982), 184 n. 22; and G. Leick, Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature (London, 1994), 266 (despite the many sexual allusions in the narration of their relationship, “a ‘straight’ reading is possible!”) and 269 (after the two kill the Bull of Heaven, they have “one last night of triumph, and possibly sexual passion, and then fate intervenes”).
the notion that there was a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu,”
concludes by listing “other hints in the text . . . that may or may not indicate that
Gilgamesh and Enkidu enjoyed a loving sexual relationship.” Caution here is not
undue; for all of the wordplay and hints, there is no overt homosexual behavior in
the Gilgamesh Epic, and, as Lambert emphasizes, “Babylonian texts do not avoid
explicit language, so until further and less ambiguous evidence is forthcoming the
present writer does not assent to the proposal.”

Outside Assyriology, recent interest in gender studies has focused attention on
the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as the earliest exemplar of male friend-
ship, or rather, in the feminist reading of Hammond and Jablow, the earliest exam-
ple of a literary stereotype of male friendship that “dramatizes the devotion
between male friends, usually a dyad, forged in an agonistic setting.” Friendship
“provided a volitional alternative source of support without the restrictions of kin-
ship and may well have given more emotional gratification than the obligatory am-
ity of kin,” so that “narratives of friendship seem to be political propaganda for
abrogating familial ties in favor of male solidarity.”124 Ironically, although the literary
stereotype “idealizes men’s capacity for loyalty, devotion and self-sacrifice,” anthropo-
logical studies suggest that actual male friendships bear little resemblance to the
ideal. And this “myth of male friendship” is accompanied by a more pernicious
tereotype of women as “unable to form friendships,” either single and vying with
each other for men’s attentions, or married and absorbed by family and domestic
life, a stereotype quite familiar to students of Sumerian and Akkadian literature.

D. Halperin, in “Heroes and their Pals,” focuses on the three classic ancient
friendships cited by Hammond and Jablow: Gilgamesh and Enkidu, David and
Jonathan, Achilles and Patroclus. These are not, he emphasizes, sexual relationships;
rather, “conjugal . . . and kinship relations” are used to define friendship between
males. The sexuality of the language foretelling the meeting of Gilgamesh and
Enkidu underlines that “Enkidu’s friendship affords Gilgamesh a proleptic taste of

Studies . . . Kraus, ed. G. Van Driel, et al. (Leiden, 1982), 128.
21. Ibid., 1,30, emphasis mine.
156 f. n. 31.
24. Ibid., 245f.
25. Ibid., 241f.
27. Ibid., 84. See also T. Van Norwic, Somewhere I Have Never Travell: The Second Self and the
How’s Journey in Ancient Epic (New York, 1992), 18. It would be “reductive” to see the dreams of
Gilgamesh as his wrestling with Enkidu as an indication of a homosexual relationship. “Friendship in
general is a difficult relationship to fix, seen in our modern cultures as existing on the boundaries of
other bonds, familial or sexual, which provide the categories through which friendship itself is
defined.”

the pleasures of human sociality, including marriage and paternity.”28 When David
laments that his love for Jonathan surpassed the love of women, it means “not that
David had sexual motives,” but that “even without a sexual component, it was
stronger and more militant than sexual love.”29 And the friendship of Achilles and
Patroclus was said to be marvellous because Achilles’ feelings exceeded what would
be had for brothers or sons.30 These representations of “the erotics of male com-
radeship” all “invoke kinship and conjugalty . . . only to displace them.”

Perhaps the impulse to explore and to fix more precisely the social meaning of
friendship reflects a common desire, on the part of the interconnected cultures of
the eastern Mediterranean around the turn of the first millennium, to claim and to
colonize a larger share of . . . cultural space, for the play of male subjectivity.

Achilles and Patroclus represent “the final playing out . . . of an earlier narrative
tradition.”32 C. R. Beye, “Gilgamesh, Lolita and Huckleberry Finn,” similarly situ-
ates the friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu at the beginning of a millennia-long
tradition of buddies.33

As attractive as it might seem to assent to this vision of Gilgamesh and Enkidu
as the first in a long series of pals, I would like to return to Jacobsen’s original ques-
tion—How did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?—and attempt, as Ann Kilm, to re-
verse the trend to de-eroticize their relationship. Jacobsen justifiably lamented the
“broken state of the text” of Gilg. I ii, where the charges against Gilgamesh are set
forth, but because they are repeated, we can patch together a text that gives us
enough material to work with.34

54 ul ili kininanna teba kalki[lu]
55 ina pukki[lu] teba ri[n][lu]
56 utaddar eriti lu uruk ina kur[mil]
57 ul umall[a]r Gilgames m[a]ra ana al[ilib]
58 [urra u [miš]) ikaddir . . . ]
59 ul umall[a]r Gilgames hatulna ana . . .
60 manat gušguši ḫiṭat eriti
61 tazzintatina [tšennemâ dalu]

29. Ibid., 83.
30. Ibid., 84.
31. Ibid., 84f.
32. Ibid., 87.
34. See the edition on pp. 200–211 of C. Wicke, “Die Anfänge des akkadischen Epen,” ZA 67
(1977). I will use his line numbers in the following discussion, citing the initial and more complete
version of the accretion, as restored from the repetition. [Here and elsewhere, recent new Gilgamesh
texts and studies could not be incorporated.]
He has no rival, [his] weapons are (ever) raised.

[His] comrades are roused up with his ball (game), 35

The young men of Uruk are continually disturbed in their bedrooms (with a summons to play),

Gilgamesh does not let the son go (home) to [his] father,

Day and night he postures aggressively . . .

Gilgamesh does not let [the young maiden] go (home) [to . . .],

The warrior's daughter, [the young man's wife].

[The gods were constantly hearing] their complaints.

We have seen that Jacobsen is among those scholars who interpret the pukku of line 55 as the 8ellag = pukku that occurs in the Sumerian "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" and SB Gilg. XII, which Jacobsen suggested should be a pukku.

This suggestion must be correct in light of uru2 am-ma-ir-ra-bi 21:74, 36 already cited by Landsberger. 37

sag-du 8ellag gur4-ra-am mi-ni-ib-gur4-gur4-re-en qaqqadi i kita pukku kubbuti uslanagar
I (I'mani/Ishtar) make heads roll about like a fat ball.

That is, the pukku must be spherical, able to roll, and thus cannot be a "puck," despite the attractive Gleichklänge, since a puck is a flat disk that glides. Landsberger himself, and others in his wake, disassociated pukku "ball" from our passage in Gilg. I ii, interpreting the word there instead as pukku "to pay attention," 38 but the parallels between "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" and Gilg. I ii compel us to retain pukku "ball" in the latter. 39

151 8ellag al-du1-du11-ge sila-ir-ra 8ellag na-mu-un-e
152 ni silim du1-du11-ge sila-ir-ra ni silim na-mu-un-e

35. The repetition in line 67 read insa pu-uk-kī in a bu-ú [ . . . ], which can only be normalized insa pukku šulltu [aššu]. "His comrades] are gotten roused up with the ball (game)," but most probably the 80 here is an error for the similar 80 of line 55 (or vice-versa).


39. Shaffer, "Sumerian Sources," 66ff., and see his new translation with notes in L'épopée de Gilgamesh, 248-74. For lines 151f., I follow P. Attinger, Éléments de linguistique sumérienne (Fribourg, 1993), 676. Variants are not indicated. 40. 154-155, present in the Ur ms., is absent in the Nippur version, hence omitted here.

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154 c-ne erin2 dumu mu-mu-un-su-a-ke4-ne ib-ba u4-a
155 a gū-mu a ib-mu a-nir im-ga-ga-ne
156 ama tuku dumu-ni-ir ninda mu-na-ab-tūm
157 ñinu tuku šeš-a-ni-ir ninda mu-na-ab-tūm
158 . . .
159 šu-dù-dù-a mu-mu-un-su-a-ta
160 i-šu-tu ki-skil tur-ra-ta
161 8ellag-a-ni ū 8ellag ma-ni dū kur-ra-tē ba-da-an-šub
162 . . .
163 . . .
164 He (Gilgamesh) who had very much wanted a ball was playing with the ball in the public square,
165 He who had done much boasting was boasting in the public square,
166 He was mounted on the hips of a group of widow's sons.
167 "Alas my neck! Alas my hips!" they lamented.
168 Whoever has a mother, she brings food for her son,
169 Whoever has a sister, she pours water for her brother.
170 . . .
171 . . .
172 . . .
173 Because of the widows' accusations,
174 Because of the young maidens' cries of injustice,
175 His ball together with his stick fell down to the bottom of the Netherworld.

Jacobsen was right to see here and in the Akkadian epic a "too rough" ball game "with the youth of Uruk, bruising them sorely." 41 The difficult line 154 seems to say, with Shaffer, that Gilgamesh was forcing the widows' sons—precisely the social group he, as king, was obligated to protect—to serve as his polo ponies, riding them piggy-back until they cried out in pain (155). He forces them to play continuously, so that their mothers and sisters have to bring them food and drink (156ff.). Similarly, in the Akkadian epic, Gilgamesh would get the young men out of bed to play ball and not let them go home. The potential violence of the Mesopotamian ballgame is revealed in the late elevation of Ishtar. 42

40. 153, present in the Ur ms., is absent in the Nippur version, hence omitted here.
could result in death. The Mesoamerican ballgame was likewise violent, and, like Ishtar, the Mayan gods played ball with human heads. That ballgame also had great cosmological and sociopolitical symbolism, which seems as well to be at least part of the function of the pukku-mekki game in Gilgamesh.

Thus Gilgamesh’s oppression of Uruk’s males is not overtly homosexual, but belongs to the homoerotic arenas of the ball- and battlefields. However, erotic associations are present, not only in the unsubtle symbols of ball, stick and weapons at the ready, but also in the very verb, teht, used to describe Gilgamesh’s raised weapons and roused companions in lines 54f; cited above, and then used soon after in Gilg. I iv 21 (~ P ii 6–8) to describe Enkidu’s superhuman sexuality: 6 uthu 17 mûtu Enkidu tebin mumu u šamšu išri, “for six days and seven nights Enkidu remained aroused and had intercourse with Šamšu.” In the Sumerian “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” Gilgamesh is ušu-4 “mounted” on the widows’ sons (154, above; also 161), a verb also used for animal copulation. And there is the matter of Gilgamesh’s dreams, so crucial to Jacobsen’s argument in 1930. Gilgamesh sees an ax, loves it (râmu) and “embraces” (ḫababû) it “like a wife.”48 The verb râmu, of course, need not denote sexual love, and, perhaps, as Lambert suggests, “wives were not necessarily the best sexual partners,” and the choice of “wife” and “woman” may have been to “emphasize the steadfastness of the love,”49 but the verb ḫababû when used for human activity always denotes sexual intercourse.50 The overt sexuality of this passage is reinforced by the covert eroticism present in the punning discovered by Kilmer.51 And yet, as Lambert insists,52 the text of the epic as preserved nowhere portrays sexual contact actually taking place between the two heroes; the homoerotic language, both explicit and implicit, may indeed be a device to, on the one hand, connote the insistent, compulsive and violent nature of Gilgamesh’s behavior on the battlefield, and, on the other, as a metaphor for intense same-sex friendship.

And what about the young women of Uruk? Did Gilgamesh oppress them, too? In the Sumerian “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” women are only oppressed because their sons or brothers are suffering. The widows and young maidens who cry out in lines 162f. are the mothers and sisters (156f.) who have brought bread and water to Gilgamesh’s victims in lines 154f. Could the young maidens, daughters, and spouses in lines 61–63 of the SB Gilgamesh cited above also simply be the relatives of the unwilling ballplayers, compelled to be spectators at the royal sport? If this were all we had, the answer would be affirmative, but we know from Gilg. II ii and P iv–v that Gilgamesh claimed the brides of Uruk for himself on their wedding night.53 In the Akkadian epic, the women of Uruk are oppressed in their own right.

In fact, the history of Gilgamesh’s troubled sexuality, which plays such a pivotal role in the Akkadian epic, is completely absent from the Sumerian tradition. “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld,” as we have seen, presents women only as indirect victims of Gilgamesh. Entirely absent in the Sumerian tradition is the portion of Akkadian epic that tells the early history of Enkidu, his initiation by the prostitute, and his meeting with Gilgamesh, where Enkidu blocks Gilgamesh from exercising his droit de seigneur by engaging him in an athletic contest (wrestling), thus forging a close friendship with him.54 The turning point of the Akkadian epic occurs in Tablet VI, when Gilgamesh viciously rejects Ishtar’s sexual advances, cataloguing her former lovers and the terrible fates she prepared for them. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven, loosed on Uruk by an angry Ishtar, and then throw its severed leg at her, Enkidu is doomed to die, and his death becomes the motor of the entire second half of the epic. In the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven,” Gilgamesh’s quarrel with Inana is quite different; sex, at least in the parts that are preserved, is never an issue.55 The Akkadian Gilgamesh epic is about growing up, as Jacobsen came to believe, but Gilgamesh’s friendship with Enkidu and his rejection of Ishtar were not part of a refusal to grow up, as Jacobsen

44. See the essays in The Mesoamerican Ballgame, ed. V. Scarborough and D. Wilcox (Tucson, 1991).
45. Ibid., 325ff.
46. See the essays in Mesoamerican Ballgame, ed. Scarborough and Wilcox; and D. Freidel et al., Maya Cosmos (New York, 1993), chap. 8.
47. For a discussion of “Gilgamesh as an inveterate competitor,” and the ceremonial role of athletic contests in Mesopotamia, see Tigay, Evolution, 184–89.
49. Lambert, “Prostitution,” 156f. n. 31.
50. B. Gronenberg, “Ḫababû—râmu,” RA 80 (1986): 189. The only possible exception has, upon collation, been rejected (see ARM 26 [v. AEM] II, p. 443). It won’t do to simply dismiss the evidence of the verb as “in dispute” (Lambert, loc. cit.). And a careful reading of the dreams and their interpretation by Gilgamesh’s mother shows that all other elements of her interpretation are realized literally, so the inclusion of the lownaming in the interpretation (yazmatu li lattu u nameri) / tartamumma kina atštrē tālāḥabū ṣēli, “The axe which you saw is a man, / You will love him and ‘embrace’ him like a wife”; cf. Gronenberg, loc. cit.), again, cannot just be dismissed as “symbolic” (Lambert, loc. cit.).
51. Kilmer, “Word-Play”.
54. Tigay, Evolution, 286.
thought, but were important stages in the maturation process, as convincingly argued most recently by Vanstiphout. 56

Jacobsen concluded his 1930 article with some general observations on Mesopotamian homosexuality, and was led to the conclusion regarding bisexuality that I quoted above. The entire paragraph reads:

In Mesopotamia true enough paederasty was forbidden in the Assyrian laws, but this does not mean that the same was the fact in Babylonia and in older times. The kulu’a, the eunuch, is often mentioned as associated with the latar-cult, and in the omen literature we have in any case one omen referring to paederasty which is a lucky one: ‘If a man draws near to the anus of his comrade, that man will take the leadership of his brethren and his family.’ This may reflect an older, popular view, which considered bisexuality a token of superior strength. 57

The evidence for Mesopotamian homoerotic practice is not as scanty as this paragraph might make it seem; the dossier compiled by J. Bottéro runs to nearly ten pages. 58 Nevertheless, with the exception of Jacobsen’s kulu’a and similar cultic figures characterized by a variety of inversions, like the asisinu and kugarni, homosexuality seems to have been a pretty marginal affair in ancient Mesopotamia. 59 Since the cultic figures just mentioned have been treated at length recently, 60 I would like to touch on the two major sources of information on Mesopotamian male homosexuality mentioned by Jacobsen: laws and omen.

Of course, no one writing today would blithely use the word “paederasty” as a synonym for homosexuality. K. Dover has discussed in great detail the special Greek institution whereby a mature man would woo and become lover-mentor of an adolescent boy; the latter would somewhat reluctantly allow his older lover sex-

60. “How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?” 74.
61. Buddies in Babylonia

62. The word for intercourse is nūšu, “to fornicate,” used only for sexual relations outside of marriage.
63. M. Roth, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor (Atlanta, 1995), 159.
64. Ibid., 160.
65. RLA 4, 462.
67. Dutch satisfaction through intercrural intercourse, never through anal penetration. 61 There is no indication that anything of this sort was known in Mesopotamia. Two Middle Assyrian laws discuss intercourse, certainly anal, between males. 62 The first, MAL A 19, 63 concerns a man who falsely says of his “comrade” (Akk. tappa’u), that is, a fellow citizen, “they all fornicate with him.” The punishment includes beating, forced labor, and a fine. MAL A 20, 64 the law referred to by Jacobsen, states that if a man fornicates (as the active partner) with his “comrade,” again, a fellow citizen, that man shall be gang raped and castrated.

Bottéro interpreted 19 as meaning that a man is accusing another citizen of being a habitual passive homosexual, virtually a male prostitute; in 20, he sees the homosexual rape of one citizen by another. 65 Homosexuality itself is not being condemned. Lambert sees matters differently: In 20, it is consensual homosexual intercourse that is being condemned, since if rape was meant, the adverb emiqammatu “by force” would have been added, as it was for heterosexual rape in 16. Thus, in homosexual activity itself that is being proscribed, and 19 refers simply to an accusation that another “is a persistent homosexual.” 66 that is, that he engages in immoral activity.

The real meaning of these Middle Assyrian laws emerges from a study of the Greek attitude toward homosexual intercourse, as set forth by Dover. 67 Crucial here is the “specific offense called ‘hubris’ in Attic law... an offence against the community as a whole,” whose penalty could be death. For an act of violence to qualify as “hubris” rather than simple assault, “it was necessary to persuade the jury that it proceeded from a certain attitude and disposition on the part of the accused...”, to establish a dominant position over his victim. 68

Unwilling homosexual submission was held to be the product of dishonest enticement, threats, blackmail, the collaboration of accomplices, or some other means which indicated premeditation... and automatically put the aggressor in danger of indictment for hubris. 69

In addition, any citizen who prostituted himself, that is, willingly allowed another citizen to penetrate him in return for money or other favors, “was debarred from
addressing the assembly, and from many other civic rights,” as was “any citizen who had maltreated his parents, evaded military service, fled in battle.”70

But the Greeks went one step further. Any citizen who willingly submitted to anal penetration was regarded as a prostitute, whether or not he received anything in return:

(1)n what circumstances does a male in fact submit to anal penetration by another male, and how does society regard his submission? . . . In Greek eyes the male who breaks the ’rules’ of legitimate eros detaches himself from the ranks of male citizenry and classifies himself with women and foreigners; the [male] prostitute is assumed to have broken the rules simply because his economic dependence on clients forces him to do what they want him to do; and conversely, any male believed to have done whatever his senior homosexual partner(s) wanted him to do is assumed to have prostituted himself.71

Thus, whereas there was absolutely no stigma attached to active homosexual behavior with male prostitutes or slaves, the anal penetration of a fellow citizen, if in any way unwanted, was a crime against the community and potentially a capital offense, while allowing oneself to be penetrated without duress was “to resign one’s own standing as a citizen.”72

Although Greek civic institutions were very different from Assyrian ones, the general attitude toward homosexual acts was similar, namely, that it is shameful to be penetrated by another male, and it is a grave offense to penetrate a fellow citizen, thus shaming him. Whereas Lambert is correct that MAL A 19 does not refer to prostitution specifically, Bottéro is probably right to assume that any Assyrian citizen who allowed himself to be penetrated with regularity was, like the Greek citizen who behaved that way, considered to be a prostitute by his fellows. And MAL A 20 means either that the victim was forced or constrained in some way to submit to anal penetration,73 or that using another citizen as a passive partner, whatever the circumstances, was regarded as grave offensiveness. Thus the Assyrian laws are not a “condemnation of homosexuality,”74 but neither can we say that a homosexual relationship with another citizen “n’a rien de plus blamable ou déshonorant que l’amour hétérosexuel.”75 Male citizens, as well as their wives and daughters, were not to be the object of sexual penetration. There was no free love in ancient Mesopotamia; a free male’s sexual opportunities were limited to his wife, his slaves, and prostitutes. As in ancient Greece, the slaves and prostitutes could be male or female,76 and a “normal” Assyrian may well have frequented both.77

The omen cited by Jacobsen should be interpreted in this spirit. The reason that a man who analytically penetrates “his equal,” that is, sexually shames a fellow citizen, “will take the lead” among his brothers and kin is not because his deed has won their approval; to the contrary, no one wants to stand in front of him and risk being his next victim.

It is a measure of the enormous change in attitudes toward human sexuality that the notion of an erotic relationship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh could have seemed “strange and grotesque” in 193078 but now seems perfectly acceptable if the philology supports it. It is a tribute to Thorkild Jacobsen that his early intuition about the two heroes is, nearly seventy years later, still debated by Assyriologists.

70. Ibid., 19, and see Halperin, “The Democratic Body: Prostitution and Citizenship in Classical Athens,” in One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, 88–112.
71. Dover, Greek Homosexuality, 103.
72. Ibid., 104.
73. In this case, it would not have been necessary to specify that force was used. Cf. 23, where a man fornicates with a woman who has been tricked into being alone with him, and she reports the act at the first opportunity. Certainly this is rape, but emiqamma is not used.
74. Lambert, “Prostitution,” 147.
75. Bottéro, RLA 4, 462.
76. Because there was no opprobrium attached to homosexual penetration per se, the punishment imposed by MAL A 20, that the penetrator of another citizen himself be gang raped, poses no problem, and ranges itself alongside the other talionic punishments of the MAL.
77. See Halperin’s very important title essay in One Hundred Years of Homosexuality on the relatively recent construction of the homosexual and the heterosexual as types. Jacobsen was on to something in 1930 when he used the term “bisexuality.”