

## **Teacher Notes**

### 1. Where is Mesopotamia?

#### Activity: Mapping Mesopotamia

- Give students a blank map of the Mediterranean and Middle East (this could have modern borders or none at all). Question students on countries they recognise and then label where key Mesopotamian sites are such as Sumer, Ur, Babylon, Nineveh, Khorsabad, Susa, Persepolis and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
- Teacher could use Google Earth on the board to explore the regions via satellite imagery.
- The boundaries of the Assyrian empire could also be coloured onto the map to give students a sense of the geographical influence of the empire.

#### Activity: Making clay tablets

- Equipment required – air dry clay or play-doh, wooden sticks, paper to avoid mess, transliterated cuneiform alphabet
- Show students some examples of real cuneiform tablets and give a transliterated alphabet. Students have a go at making their own message using the sticks to make wedge shaped symbols. Discussions can be had about the practicalities of this writing style, why was this the first writing to be developed, what were the benefits and drawbacks of using clay tablets for messages and how it compares to other forms of communication (stone, paper, digital...)
- Some videos/podcasts listed in further reading could also be played in the background during the practical activity.

### 2. Who were the Assyrians?

#### Activity: Assyrian ruler top trumps

- Students read pop out profiles on the four greatest Assyrian rulers; Ashurbanipal, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon. Students discuss what their greatest achievements were and make a 'top trump' card for each of the rulers, giving a rating out of 10 for different categories of power such as expanse of empire, building cities etc to determine who was the 'greatest ruler'

#### Activity: Analysing British Museum Assyrian panels

- Using the link to Google Arts and Culture from the British Museum website <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/assyria-lion-hunts> students can walk around the lion hunt galleries of Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh, the Siege of Lachish under Sennacherib and the lamassu and hunting scenes from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad.
- Discuss the impression of these reliefs on the walls of a palace – what were these kings trying to promote? What values do the scenes represent/highlight in royal iconography? How would different visitors to the palace react to these scenes? Remind students they may have been painted in antiquity – how would this change the impact on the viewer? Note the lion hunts are happening with caged lions not in the wild – does that change the meaning of the scene?

#### Activity: Gilgamesh characterisation

## Queering the Past(s) Chapter 4 – Non Binary gender in Mesopotamia

- Using the information from the reading and/or further podcast and video suggestions, students make a comic strip of the main events in the Epic of Gilgamesh.
- Students could also make profiles of the main characters, stating their relationships with other characters, their aims, motivations and actions in the story as well as adjectives that best describe them
- Discussion could include reference to whether any characters in the story could be interpreted in a queer or non-binary way.

### 3. What does non-binary mean?

#### Activity: Terminology and flags

- Take a look at the different flags of the LGBTQ+ community (see main list here with explanations of representational meanings of each colour <https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/blog/an-introduction-to-lgbtq-flags/> ) Discuss with students the terminology for different sexualities and gender identities, explaining that this lesson will focus on non-binary. Emphasis will need to be placed on the fact that being non-binary does not describe a sexuality but a presentation of gender (i.e. you can be 'straight' and non binary or gay/bi etc and non-binary).

### 4. Who were the non-binary Mesopotamians?

#### Activity: Symbols of power in historical art

- Discuss with students what types of symbols they believe signify power in society. This could draw on wider knowledge of other historical time periods they are aware of. Then discuss how these symbols are often shown in artwork (e.g. larger figures, crowns, clothing etc).
- Discuss whether symbols differ between male and female characters before considering what could denote a non-binary person as powerful (in this Mesopotamian case study, it is proximity to the gods and king). This should draw out inclusive ideas that whilst the non-binary nature of some people in Mesopotamian society was clearly defined through their roles, the ways in which their power was portrayed was similar to others in society.
- Use the examples of seal impressions as a visual talking point.

### 5. Who was Innana/Ishtar?

#### Activity: Mesopotamian pantheon

- Use this section as an opportunity to discuss the Mesopotamian pantheon of gods. See <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/221/the-mesopotamian-pantheon/>
- This could be set up as a carousel activity where students have a list of the names of the gods and have to find out what their powers were and perhaps to give an a few adjectives they would use to describe each god
- As a class, come together and discuss Innana/Ishtar – why was she one of the most popular goddesses? How important were her powers? Why was her non-binary nature and ability to change the gender of others considered important to the Mesopotamians?

### 6. What were the three groups of non-binary Mesopotamian cult officials?

#### Activity: Cult official attributes and power

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- Following reading the text, hold a discussion on which of the three non-binary Mesopotamian cult officials students think held the most power. Encourage students to think about how their non-binary identity helped their status to increase/hold special significance in comparison to others in positions of power. Students can discuss which of the three roles they would most like to have held in Mesopotamian society and why.
  - This could be an opportunity to look at the Standard of Ur as one of the earliest representations of human societal hierarchies. Classroom resources on this object from the History of the world in 100 objects at the British Museum are available here [http://teachinghistory100.org/objects/about\\_the\\_object/ur\\_standard](http://teachinghistory100.org/objects/about_the_object/ur_standard)
7. How do we recognise non-binary Mesopotamians?

### Activity: Identifying non-binary characters

- Using Mesopotamian artwork, discuss with students what characteristics are used to define gender in the Mesopotamian world. For men with long beards this is quite obvious, but compare the ‘unbearded men’ with the faces of female figures. Most significantly, consider the clothing and jewellery worn by both men and women in Mesopotamian art (very similar robes and earrings etc) – use this as a starting point of discussion with students about how ideas of gender identity have changed through time. Consider how a Mesopotamian would view modern fashions.
8. How do the non-binary assinnu, kurgarru and kalu link to Mesopotamian mythology?

### Activity: Analysing texts

- Students read the sections of the Epic of Erra and Ishtar’s descent to the Netherworld as written in the text. What interactions with gods and kings show the power and prestige of non-binary people in Mesopotamian mythology?
  - Creative tasks could be encouraged to artistically illustrate the royal parade in the Epic of Erra or Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld, focusing on the power of the non-binary characters in these stories.
9. Modern representations of non-binary Mesopotamians?

### Activity: Video/article discussions

- In this 2.5 min video interview from the BBC in 2022, Varin a non-binary person living in Iraq, explains the current dangers <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-61473241>
- Read Human Rights’ Watch article Aug 2023 on modern Iraqi anti LGBTQ+ laws being passed <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/23/iraq-scrap-anti-lgbt-bill>
- Discuss with students what the threats are to non-binary expression in modern Iraq and how this contrasts with the ancient Mesopotamian world

### **Further Reading/Listening ideas**

Here are some suggested reading / listening ideas for students who wish to explore the topic further. Some are suggestions on the general Mesopotamian world to enhance greater understanding of the ancient civilisations in this region.

## Queering the Past(s) Chapter 4 – Non Binary gender in Mesopotamia

### Podcasts

Greeking Out (National Geographic for kids) S4E6 Mesopotamian Around with Gilgamesh (27mins)

Tides of History (Wondery) Mesopotamia at the Dawn of History (45mins)

Tides of History (Wondery) Cuneiform Literature, Medicine and Mental Health: Interview with Dr Moudhy Al-Rashid (45mins)

Tides of History (Wondery) Sargon of Akkad and the world's first empire (54 mins)

50 Things that made the modern economy (BBC News World Service) Cuneiform (9 mins)

The Ancients (History Hit) The Sumerians (54 mins)

The Ancients (History Hit) Rise of the Assyrians (42 mins)

Assyrian Podcast (Assyrians Everywhere) LGBTQ+ Assyrian Stories – interviews with modern Americans with Assyrian heritage (1 hour 48mins)

### Videos

Ted-Ed animation on the Epic of Gilgamesh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BV9t3Cp18Rc>

Ted-Ed animation on the rise and fall of the world's first empire (Sumer)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBk9KywTlgk>

Ted-Ed animation on the rise and fall of the Assyrian empire  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pa54hWROpQ>

Mesopotamia: Crash Course World History #3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sohXPx\\_XZ6Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sohXPx_XZ6Y)

World History Encyclopaedia - A Short History of Assyria and the Neo-Assyrian Empire  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkcNhFEZj4E>

World History Encyclopaedia - Cuneiform: The Earliest Form of Writing from Ancient Mesopotamia  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DONiq9pyLg4>

Excavating Cuneiform Tablets in Iraq with the Girsu Project, British Museum Curator's Corner S8 Ep3  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwGmyy2Aabg>

Irving Finkel teaches how to write cuneiform, British Museum Curator's Corner Season 4 Episode 8  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVmsfL5LG90>

Deciphering the world's oldest rule book, Irving Finkel British Museum Curator's Corner pilot  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHjzvnH54Cw>

### Books

Dalley, Stephanie (1989) Myths from Mesopotamia, Oxford World's Classics

Leick, Gwendolyn (2002) Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City

Van de Mieroop, Marc (2015) A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC, 3rd Edition  
Blackwell History of the Ancient World

### Academic articles

## Queering the Past(s) Chapter 4 – Non Binary gender in Mesopotamia

Ehalt, Kelsie Anne (2021) *Assumptions About the Assinnu: Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Ancient Texts and Modern Scholarship*

Garcia-Ventura, Agnès (2020) *Shaping Gender, Shaping Emotions: On the Mutual Construction of Gender Identities and Emotional Roles in Ancient Mesopotamia*, p220-237 in *The Expression of Emotions in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*, Brill

Helle, Sophus (2018) *“Only in Dress?” Methodological concerns regarding non-binary gender*, *Gender and methodology in the ancient Near East: Approaches from Assyriology*

Ortega, Christopher (2015) *Inanna Ishtar: Reinforcer of Heteronormativity, or Legitimizing of Non-Heteronormativity?*