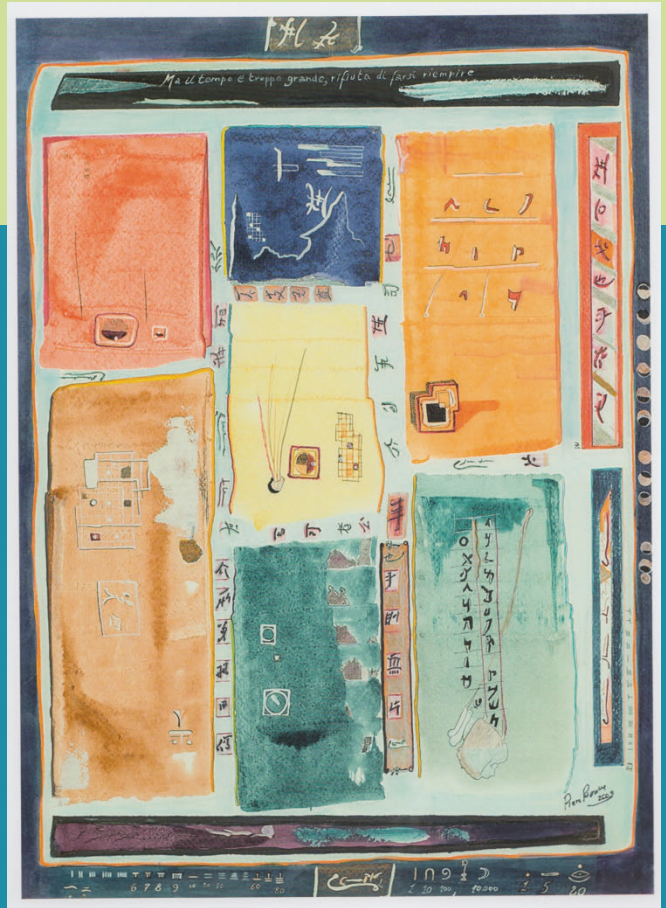


Assyriology, Anthropology and Theory

Analytical Perspectives and Interpretive Prospects

Edited by
Emanuel Pfoh and
Lorenzo Verderame



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wEdge

Cutting-Edge Research in Cuneiform Studies

Volume 5

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Zaphon

Münster

2025

Illustration on the cover: Piero Passone, *Segni* (acrylic, watercolours, ink;
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Printed in Germany.

Printed on acid-free paper.

ISBN 978-3-96327-318-6 (book)

ISBN 978-3-96327-319-3 (e-book)

ISSN 2698-7007

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The Sumerian Kinship System

Dialoguing with Anthropology

Lorenzo Verderame

This article examines kinship in Early Mesopotamia¹. Kinship is a major subject in Anthropology, however it has been ignored in Assyriological studies. In anthropological research, the discussion of kinship systems of Mesopotamia or, more generally, of ancient societies is absent. In Assyriological studies, Sumerian kinship has been the subject of studies which have focused mainly on lexicography, without any discussion on the kinship system and its significance for the interpretation of societal structures.

Thus kinship, which has been thoroughly explored in Anthropology from a theoretical standpoint, and in Assyriology from a lexicographical perspective, provides an excellent opportunity to assess a potentially constructive communication between two disciplines whose relationships have never been positive².

Anthropological interest in Mesopotamia, and more generally to ancient Near Eastern cultures, is limited. The few cases, however, have shown the great contribution Ancient Near Eastern studies may provide to the social sciences debates. Jack Goody³ has largely relied on and discussed Mesopotamian evidence in his works on literacy and written and oral tradition. Marc Van de Mieroop has recently advocated for the potentially relevant contribution of cuneiform studies on these topics⁴. The significance of Near Eastern studies to anthropological debate, however, remains meagre. Suffice it to say, regarding the topic of this article, that, although Goody has devoted several monographs to the concept and story of family, marriage, and kinship, he only deals with Near Eastern sources in a volume whose comparative approach is declared in the title, *The oriental, the ancient and*

¹ A detailed study on kinship and family in Early Mesopotamia was presented as a paper for a workshop held in Sapienza in 2015 (*Questioni di famiglia . . . nel Vicino Oriente*); almost ten years later, it is unlikely that the proceedings will be published. Here, I retained the lexicographic examination of Sumerian sources as well as the theoretical issues around kinship from the original paper. The section examining and discussing the family is currently being published as an article in the journal *Origini* (Verderame 2024). The section analysing Neo-Sumerian legal texts became the focus of the PhD dissertation of Andrea Rebecca Marrocchi Savoi (2024), to which I refer for a more in-depth examination of the sources and issues of family and kinship; see also Marrocchi Savoi 2022. Neo-Sumerian sources are quoted according to the *Bancos de datos Neo-Sumerios* (BDTNS).

² See Pfoh in this volume. However, it is worth noting how kinship has been the subject of mutual comparison in classical studies, including the works of Bettini 1986 and 2009.

³ Goody 1977, 1987, and 2000.

⁴ Van de Mieroop 2013.

*the primitive: Systems of marriage and the family in the pre-industrial societies of Eurasia*⁵. Otherwise, Mesopotamia and the ancient Near East is completely absent in the anthropological discourse on kinship⁶.

Conversely, there are few Assyriological studies with theoretical approaches borrowing models and themes from Anthropology. These have been discussed in occasional contributions to specific matters. Anthropology has informed the research perspective of some Assyriologists and historians such as Bendt Alster, Jean-Jacques Glassner, Mario Liverani, and Norman Yoffee, to mention just a few⁷. Notwithstanding, a critical reception and debate of anthropological and general social science theories and themes in Assyriological circles has never been fully developed⁸. In recent years, this gap has been somewhat filled by the emergence of specific research fields such as gender studies and sense studies, which, however, represent exceptions within a discipline that remains largely philological and positivist.

This incommunicability is grounded in the nature and fundamentals of the two disciplines. The study of ancient cultures is based on archaeological and epigraphic evidence and assumes a historical perspective. This contrasts with the anthropologist's immersion in the observed subject's daily culture and existence (participant observation). The anthropologist frequently refers to local people, the informants, who act as intermediaries between the observer (the anthropologist) and the object of observation. Aside from the reliability and subjectivism of their responses and explanations, informants can be questioned directly, whereas ancient sources are fossilised and "silent".

The nature of the sources in Anthropology and Assyriology may be dichotomised as follows:

- anthropologists refer to direct observation and dialogue with the informant;
- Assyriologists refer to indirect observation and limited historical sources;
- the punctual/immanent, synchronic perspective of anthropologists contrasts the historical perspective of Assyriologists.

Besides their sources, the two disciplines are opposed on their methodological and theoretical foundations. Anthropology is a nomothetic discipline and Assyriology an idiographic one⁹: anthropological analysis concerns the creation of models, while Assyriology is an historical and philological discipline grounded on

⁵ Goody 1990. The volume is divided in four parts: China; India; Near East; Greece and Rome. In the Near Eastern section, Goody explores Egyptian and Old Testament references, along with Arabic ones; see Goody 1990: 319–382.

⁶ See below.

⁷ For Miguel Civil's perspective on the Assyriologist as ethnographer ("chercheur ethnographe"), see Verderame 2022: 88.

⁸ See Pfoh in this volume.

⁹ Ingold 2008.

sources. Furthermore, there is debate over historical perspectives in Anthropology, which has been discussed by scholars such as Franz Boas, Bronisław Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss¹⁰.

While anthropologists remain reluctant to engage with historical approaches¹¹, the influence of anthropological research had a great impact on middle-age and modern historical studies, particularly in France (*Annales*) and Italy (*Microhistory*), generating a series within the so-called historical Anthropology¹² or social history¹³. It is not surprising that kinship and family in diachronic perspectives have emerged as a priority area of research in these historical developments. Family history is one of the key topics and is now an autonomous branch of social history, with a special focus on the notion of household and recent developments in studies on childhood.

The non-specialist may feel lost in the galaxy of labels for the new historical approaches influenced by Anthropology and social sciences, which include historical Anthropology and Social History, Ethnohistory, Anthropology of History, Cultural History, etc. Although all relating to the dialogue between history and Anthropology, these “schools” have different perspectives and focuses¹⁴. The same is true for the two main anthropological traditions: Social Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology. This means that scholars may start from very different premises and approaches and reach opposite conclusions on the same topic. This is the case, for instance, of the two main works on kinship by Lévi-Strauss (1949) and Murdock (1949), discussed below.

1. Kinship in Anthropology

Classification of kinship systems has been one of the focuses of early Anthropology since Lewis Henry Morgan (19th cent.)¹⁵, and contemporary scholars investigating the historical and legal origin of the family¹⁶ such as Johann Jakob Bachofen, Henry Sumner Maine, John Ferguson McLennan, and Friedrich Engels. Kinship is the pillar of Social Anthropology as it may be the key to under-

¹⁰ Remotti 1971.

¹¹ For a divergent opinion see, for instance, Kellogg 1991, whose analysis, however, is constrained by her discussion solely on works in English. The perspective of Anthropology in Italy that emerged post-World War II is opposite. Italian “demology”, influenced by Croce’s historicism and Gramsci’s subaltern-hegemonic dichotomy, addresses the examination of popular cultures (folklore) and prioritise a historical perspective; for a comprehensive description of this tradition, see Ricci 2020.

¹² Van Dülmen 2000; Viazzo 2000.

¹³ Burke 2006.

¹⁴ Burke 2006.

¹⁵ Morgan 1871 and 1877.

¹⁶ Many studies are devoted to Morgan, kinship, and the origin of Anthropology; for the topics discussed here see Trautmann 1987, among the others.

standing the social structure and its products, i.e. culture¹⁷. The cornerstones of the argument date back to the end of the 1940s, when Lévi-Strauss and Murdock published in the very same year their extended and comprehensive studies *Le structure de la parenté* and *The Social Structure* respectively¹⁸.

Kinship and its significance in the classification of cultures has been questioned as early as the 1930s with Malinowski's article in *MAN*¹⁹, but it has been heavily debated from the 1970s onward and declines in anthropological research from this point²⁰. Recently, the concept of kinship has been the centre of a resurgent interest among Anglo-American anthropologists, beginning with the writings of Marilyn Strathern and Marshall Sahlins²¹ and the positive critical reception of their works²². In France, the topic has been revived in the wake of the legal status of assisted reproductive technology²³ and new "non-traditional" couples and families²⁴, and it is worth mentioning the recent monographs by Maurice Godelier, *Métamorphose de la parenté* (2004), and by Laurent Barry, *La parenté* (2008).

Besides an erudite interest in the 19th century scholars investigating the historical roots of such institutions as marriage and family, references to ancient cultures, Mesopotamia, and the ancient Near East are usually absent from anthropological discourse, as well as from world surveys and classification of kinship systems²⁵. Two main works on the topic are emblematic of this: in his 600+ pages analysis of kinship, Lévi-Strauss references Mesopotamia cursorily in a discussion on celibacy and in reference to a putative Sumerian tale of "golden era" on the last page of the book²⁶. Murdock makes no mention of Mesopotamia or Near Eastern languages and cultures, instead referring to Egypt twice *en passant*²⁷. This may seem curious since Murdock adds an appendix "addressed primarily to his-

¹⁷ Kroeber 1909; Lowie 1917; Radcliffe-Brown 1941.

¹⁸ Lévi-Strauss 1949; Murdock 1949.

¹⁹ Malinowski 1930.

²⁰ See, for instance, the introduction in Needham 1971; however, for the critique of these positions, see de Heusch 1981.

²¹ Strathern 2005, Sahlins 2013.

²² See, for instance, Shapiro 2014.

²³ Heritier 1996: 3 states that her research on sex, gender, and kinship was stimulated by the debate on assisted reproduction at the beginning of the 1980s and her participation in the committee of the *Haut conseil de la population et de la famille*.

²⁴ Godelier 2004; see Barnes 2006. For a recent extended work on the history of the family from an anthropological perspective see Todd 2011. For ancient Mesopotamia, the only extensive study focused on family is Glassner 1986, see also the overview by Nielsen 2020.

²⁵ Goody 1990, discussed above, would be an exception; note, however, that Goody focuses on the historical roots of the Western family and the modern era.

²⁶ Lévi-Strauss 1949: 50 and 617.

²⁷ Murdock 1949: 191 and fn. 19 mentions the British diffusionists' idea of the origin of "the matrilineate from a single origin in ancient Egypt".

torians and to anthropologists with historical interests”²⁸ and whose aim is “to establish a probable association between a particular historical period or archaeological horizon and a specific type of social structure”²⁹. He also notes that “considerably greater time depth might thus be achieved for an aspect of culture which has hitherto proved singularly refractory to historical reconstruction”³⁰. However, Murdock’s objective is primarily to reduce the large variety of kinship systems to a few, i.e. at their “single historical origin”³¹, rather than to integrate ancient cultures into a broader discourse on kinship and social organisation³².

The anthropological interest on kinship is mainly connected to the study of marriage rules and prohibitions, i.e. incest. In *Le structure de la parenté*, Lévi-Strauss begins with incest and structures his analysis and study on the “givers” and “receivers” of women. In *The Social Structure*, Murdock begins with the nuclear family and analyses all the kinship systems; incest is found in a chapter at the end of the volume. The two researchers hold opposing views on the relationship between kinship and incest. In brief, for Lévi-Strauss, incest prohibition generates different types of kinship and marriage regulations, whereas for Murdock, family structure imposes the incest prohibition.

For anthropological analysis, kinship terminology is reduced to systems referred to by labels, abbreviations, and logical diagrams that are barely understandable to the non-specialist³³. Linguists and historians looking for lexical data and their chronological context will rarely find any reference in these works and must resort to Morgan’s study or early ethnological reports³⁴.

2. Studies on Sumerian Kinship

Within Assyriology, Sumerian kinship has been the subject of very few specific articles and has been occasionally discussed on larger studies on other topics. The earliest contribution dedicated to kinship terms is the pioneering work of Jensen in the very first *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* (1886). The article is a lexicographic study that advances preliminary interpretations of Sumerograms in Assyrian texts.

²⁸ Murdock 1949: 323–352 Appendix A.

²⁹ Murdock 1949: 323.

³⁰ Murdock 1949: 323.

³¹ Murdock 1949: 323.

³² For modern research on primeval kinship mixing genetic and linguistic evidence, see, for instance, the overview in Jones 2003 and the criticism advanced in the conclusions of this article.

³³ For an idea of the level of abstraction of such diagrams, it suffices to glance through the pages of Fox’s popular volume on kinship and marriage (Fox 1967).

³⁴ See fn. 51.

More than half a century after, Nakahara (1950) published an article entitled *On the family in the Sumerian city-state period: Considerations on lineage and titles*³⁵. Nakahara's focus is the matrilineal or patrilineal lineage in the Lagaš' tradition royal succession and religious thought³⁶, with a brief mention of Sumerian kinship words at the end³⁷.

In the article *Zu einigen Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen im Sumerischen*, Sjöberg (1967) collects and discusses lexical and literary references to non-primary kinship terms, i.e. "family" (i m - r i - a), descendant and ancestor (d u m u - K A, p a 4 - b i l 2 - g a), and in-laws (a / e - r i b, m u s s a, m u r u 5, u š b a r).

In 1985, Wilcke publishes a seminal study on the Old Babylonian period family which, even if not specifically focused on kinship and Sumerian language, deals extensively with the topic³⁸. Wilcke's article has been the source for the article of Götzelt (1995), which is the only one written by an anthropologist.

To these studies must be added those who investigated the topic from economic and administrative perspectives, such as the family within the debate on households between Ignace Gelb and Igor Diakonoff, or the recent works of Vitali Bartash, Andrea Rebecca Marrocchi Savoi, and Lorenzo Verderame³⁹.

None of these works deal primarily with Sumerian kinship system. Furthermore, except for Nakahara (1950) and Götzelt (1995), they have focused on terminology and collecting lexicographical data, while leaving aside the question of kinship. The data analysed are mostly taken from Old Babylonian lexical lists⁴⁰, therefore including terms not documented in third millennium sources in the discussion on kinship.

In these studies, the kinship problem is restricted to a lexical level, as there is nothing else to explore on the topic⁴¹. The meaning of a b - b a / a y a, a m a, d u m u, š e š, and n i n 9 is considered so obvious that scholars do not even provide a discussion or resumé on the terms⁴². Only Miguel Civil has identified the

³⁵ This article is erroneously quoted with the title *Sumerian Family Structure* by Sjöberg 1967: 201. Non-Japanese scholars will have difficulty accessing the article because it is written in Japanese; I am grateful to Hanna Rubatto who provided me with an English translation of the article.

³⁶ Nakahara 1950: 165–175.

³⁷ Nakahara 1950: 175–179.

³⁸ See, in particular, Wilcke 1985: 219–240.

³⁹ Gelb 1979, Diakonoff 1996, Bartash 2018, Marrocchi Savoi 2022 and 2024, Verderame 2024 and 2025. Other studies discussing kinship terms, such as Lambert 1957 and Edzard 1960, are quoted from and discussed below. For additional bibliography concerning the subject of family, see Verderame 2024.

⁴⁰ Edzard 1960: 254–258, Sjöberg 1965, Wilcke 1985, and Götzelt 1995.

⁴¹ The comments of Edzard 1960 and Civil 1975 and the significance of their interpretations will be discussed below.

⁴² Sjöberg 1965, Wilcke 1985.

issues of the Sumerian kinship system and cautioned on its significance for mythic interpretation⁴³.

To show how difficult it is to get rid of ethnocentric prejudices, it is enough to consider the problems involved in the translation of kinship terms, despite the fact that the *denotata* involved can be rigorously defined in objective terms. The implications of the lack of a term for “cousin” in Sumerian have not yet been realized by Sumerologists. The anthropologist will conclude that *šeš* and *nin*₉ apply not only to siblings but to cousins as well (i.e., that the Sumerian kinship system belongs to the so-called “Hawaiian” type). The importance of this conclusion for the correct interpretation of some mythical tales cannot be overrated. By the Akkadocentric approach I mean the procedure that stops the semantic investigation of a Sumerian word as soon as its Akkadian equivalent is determined⁴⁴.

3. The Sumerian Kinship Terms

Sumerian kinship terminology consists of only a few terms for first-degree relatives. The terms for second-degree and subsequent relatives are formed by combining first-degree relatives’ terms and are poorly attested. The terminological system is gender-neutral, using the same words to describe ego’s interactions with male and female relatives alike.

In Sumerian kinship terminology, there are several terms for the male parent, “father” (*a b (- b a) / a d (- d a) / a y a*)⁴⁵, and only one for the female parent, “mother” (*a m a*). The siblings are terminologically distinguished by gender as well, with “brother” (*šeš*) and “sister” (*nin*₉).

The term designating the descendants, *du mu*⁴⁶, does not differentiate gender. The term may mean both son or daughter, and when the context needs clarification the adjective *mu nu s* “female”, is added for the daughter (*du mu - mu nu s*)⁴⁷. The term followed by the adjective “male” (*du mu - ni ta*₍₂₎) is found in the total of labourers in Neo-Sumerian documents recording workers, in legal documents where the status of son is crucial for the case, and only rarely following a personal name.

Sumerian kinship system is thus based on generation and gender. It distinguishes only relatives of the first degree. The structure is vertical and generational:

⁴³ Civil comments first cursorily on the topic in the review of Sjöberg 1967 (Civil 1972: 222–223) and returns with his laconic style in the article on lexicography (Civil 1975: 142).

⁴⁴ Civil 1975: 142.

⁴⁵ Lambert 1957. To my knowledge, no studies exist on the difference and use of the three terms. From this point on, I will use *a b - b a* for convenience to also denote the other terms for “father” (*a d - d a*, *a y a*), unless stated otherwise.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the different meanings of this term, see below.

⁴⁷ For this custom, see Verderame 2025.

- two gendered members of the previous generation,
father (a d - d a / a b - b a / a y a , ♂) / mother (a m a , ♀);
- two gendered members of ego's generation,
brother (š e š , ♂) / sister (n i n , ♀);
- an unmarked and ungendered term for sons and descendants (d u m u , ♂).

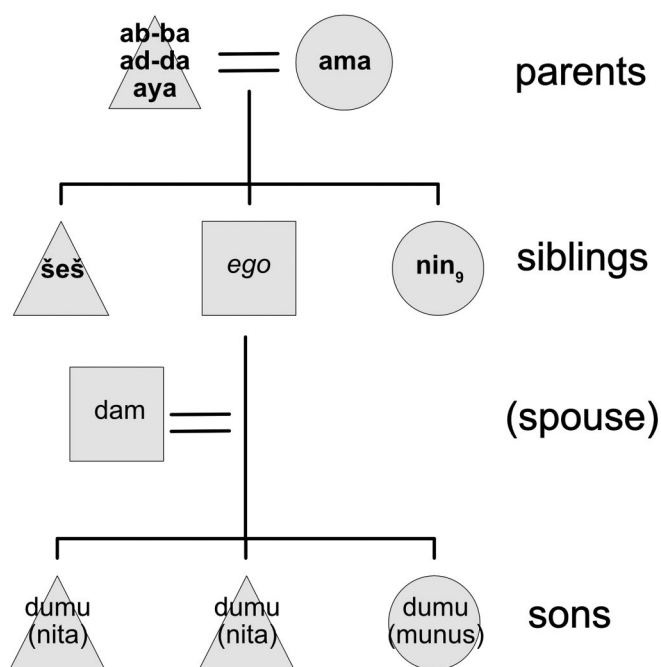


Fig. 1: Diagram of Sumerian kinship terms.

According to Civil⁴⁸, Sumerian kinship belongs to the so-called Hawaiian system, which is the most elemental of the numerous typologies known⁴⁹. It is described by Murdock as follows:

By definition, this structural type embraces all societies possessing cousin terms of Hawaiian type and lacking exogamous unilinear kin groups. In addition, it is characterized by the exceedingly frequent appearance of limited polygyny, the bilocal extended family, generation terminology for aunts and nieces, bilateral extension of incest taboos, and bilateral kindreds or demes⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ Civil 1975: 142.

⁴⁹ Götzelt 1995 wrongly relates the Sumerian system to the Sudanese, basing his reconstruction on terms discussed by Wilcke 1985, which are attested in Old Babylonian sources but are absent from third millennium Sumerian text.

⁵⁰ Murdock 1949: 228–231.

Sketched in kinship diagrams and schematic descriptions, the Hawaiian and the Sumerian kinship systems are similar for the anthropologists. The Hawaiian kinship terminology⁵¹ distinguishes only the first-degree members according to generation and gender like the Sumerian's.

However, an in-depth examination into Hawaiian kinship terminology⁵² reveals crucial differences for linguists and historians. In the Hawaiian language, two terms encompass the parents and all the members of the parents' generation (*makua*) and the children (*kaiki* / *keiki*). Both terms specify the gender through the addition of the apposition "male" (*kāne*) and "female" (*wahine*). Members of ego's generation, siblings and cousins, are defined through a series of terms built on *kaiki* (*kaikua-ana*, *kaikaina*, *kaikunane*, *kaikuhine*).

Therefore, Hawaiian has two terms for the individuals of two generations (ego's and his/her parents'). Sumerian, however, has no collective names for parents and siblings, but distinguishes them by gender. Only the Sumerian term for child and descendant (*dumu*) can be related to the Hawaiian *makua* and *kaiki*, being general and collective and specified through apposition male/female (*nita₂* / *munus*).

3.1. Second-degree Relationship

The first thing that arises from this overview of Sumerian kinship is the absence of terms for second-degree relationships, both for members of ego's generation and his/her parents', that is cousins and uncle/aunt. This is not surprising from an anthropological standpoint, given that in the Hawaiian kinship system, terms for the first degree are also used for the second degree. That is, ego uses kinship language to distinguish members of generations rather than just near relatives. Thus, *mother* and *father* are employed for members of the previous generation, and not only for mother and father: ego calls *mother* and *father* also brothers and sisters of his/her parents.

In the same way, *brother* and *sister* refer to relatives of ego's generation, that is siblings as well as cousins. This aspect has been already highlighted by Civil in a short comment in his article on *Lexicography* mentioned above⁵³.

Despite being occasionally quoted, Civil's observation has never been discussed or considered for its consequences. Civil advances that in Sumerian, "brother" (*šeš*) and "sister" (*nin₉*) can also be used for cousins, as in Hawaiian, resulting in a new interpretation of mythology where the two terms recur. The use of brother/sister terms in Inanna and Dumuzi's relationship is the most prominent, but it is not the only one: Ninhursâga calls "brother" her partner Enki

⁵¹ Rivers 1914: 374–387.

⁵² Murdock 1949: 228–231. Lévi-Strauss quotes cursorily the Hawaiian system regarding incest, along with ancient Egypt and Peru; see Lévi-Strauss 1949: 10 and 60.

⁵³ Civil 1975: 142.

in *Enki and Ninhursagā* as Inanna does with Gilgameš in *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld*.

As the words for brother/sister refer to all members of ego's generation, so do those for parents refer to all members of the preceding generation. Cuneiform sources show that the terms for "father" (a d - d a / a b - b a / a y a) are employed for persons who are not the male parent. The term a b - b a (- a b - b a) is used to designate the "elders"⁵⁴, a group of authority in the community with their own assembly (u n k e n).

Gilgameš, before the elders of his city, presented the matter, pondering his words . . . In the convened assembly, his city's elders answered Gilgameš

. . .

(*Gilgameš and Agga* 3–4, 9–10)

In literary texts, the word for *father* is used as a term of respect and for fictive kinship (see below) to refer to male members of the previous generation⁵⁵. In *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, Ninšubur addresses her supplication to the gods Enlil, Nanna, and Enki, calling them all "father" (a y a) and they, in response, call Inanna "daughter" (d u m u). Only one of the three is the socio-biological father⁵⁶ of Inanna, the moon god Nanna-Su'en. While a hypothetical use of *aya* for Enlil in the sense of "grandfather" or "ancestor" could be advanced, the latter being the father of Nanna-Su'en, no first-degree family relationship exists between Inanna and Enki. Inanna, as well as other gods⁵⁷, refers to Enki as "father"⁵⁸ in other compositions. The same happens with Enlil, who is called "father" by Inanna⁵⁹ and Anzu⁶⁰. As Ninšubur in *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*,

⁵⁴ This institution finds parallels in worldwide cultures all referring to the elder status (Spartan γερουσία, Ancient Rome *senators* and Lithuanian *seniūnas*, Anglo-Saxon *alderman* or *ealdorman*, etc.) or a related feature (Turkish *aqsaqal* "white beard", Anglo-Saxon *witan* "wise man"). Aside from the similarities, these institutions have their own peculiarities related to the specific historical, socio-political, and religious context, as best exemplified by the case of the Arabic *sheikh* (س. شيخ, pl. شيوخ). A dedicated study on the institution of the "elders" (*abba*) in the Ancient Near East with a historical comparative perspective is much needed.

⁵⁵ In a recent article on literary and fictive kinship, Esposito 2009 has collected all of the references to kinship terms in the Old Testament and has shown that, with the exception of "mother" (אם), they are all (84 out of 118 references in Esposito's overview) used for fictive kinship. For the mother's uniqueness, see §5.

⁵⁶ For the definition of this concept see §5.

⁵⁷ Ninsikila in *Enki and Ninhursagā*.

⁵⁸ *Enki and the world order; Inanna and Šukaletuda*.

⁵⁹ *Inanna and Ebih*. In *Gilgameš and the bull of heaven* B 43, Inanna calls An "my father" (a y a - ḡ u 1 0).

⁶⁰ *Lugalbanda and Anzu*; the relationship between Anzu and Enlil is debatable, as with Ninmada and Pabilsaḡ, who also call Enlil "father" in *How grain came to Sumer* and

Gilgameš, the son of Lugalbanda, seek Enlil and Enki for help by calling them “father” (a ya) in *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. Other gods are called “father” and it should be noted that it is used with no reference as a title particularly with Enlil and Enki, but also with other gods⁶¹.

3.2. Ego’s Generation: the “Brothers”

The other significant observation arising from the Sumerian kinship system and from a wider analysis of sources is the relevance of generation. From the subject’s perspective, the key referents are individuals of their own generation. This appears in literary, administrative, legal, and economic texts, especially among male members, the šeš “brother(s)”.

In literature, the elder brother (šeš-gal) and the elder sister (nin9-gal)⁶² are considered the same as a mother and father.

The elder brother is indeed a father, the elder sister is indeed a mother!
Listen to your elder brother and be obedient to your elder sister as she was
your mother!⁶³

In legal documents, relationships between the sons of an individual are usually marked through the lateral / generational relationship rather than the vertical / intergenerational. The terms elder (šeš-gal) or younger brother (šeš-ban3-da, šeš-tur) are preferred to those of elder (dumu-gal, ibila) or younger son (dumu-ban3-da, dumu-tur). Among the thousands of Neo-Sumerian sources, there is only one reference to a younger son⁶⁴ and none to an elder

Pabilsaĝ’s journey to Nippur respectively.

⁶¹ “Father Nanna” and Utu “father of the black-headed” in *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave* A 206 (a ya - d n a n n a) and 240 (a ya - s a ĝ - g i ĝ 2 - g a) respectively.

⁶² In literature, a particular role is played by the “younger sister” (nin9-ban3-da). In the “dying god” compositions, she is the one who comes to the aid of her brother, and she is the main actor of his mourning (*Dumuzi’s dream* 14; *Dumuzi and his sisters* 75–77, *passim*; *Ninĝišzida’s journey to the Netherworld* 10); for the role played by female members of the family in the mourning, see Verderame 2021. In the Sumerian stories of Gilgameš, the younger sister appears thrice. In *Gilgameš e Huwawa A*, the hero offers her younger sister MA-tur as *lukur* to the guardian of the forest. This MA-tur may well be identified with Peš-tur (peš3-tur), Gilgameš’ younger sister mentioned twice in *Gilgameš and the bull of heaven* (l. 18, 21). See also the passage from *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld* 173, where Gilgameš says that he will treat the son of the carpenter as if he was his younger sister (dumu-nagar-ra nin9-ban3-da-ĝu10-ĝin7 nu-uš-ma-da-ĝal2-la-am3). For Gilgameš’ family ties, see Shaffer 1983: 310–313.

⁶³ šeš-gal aya na-nam nin9-gal ama na-nam \ šeš-gal-zu-ur2 ĝizzal he2-em-ši-ak \ nin9-gal ama-zu-ĝin7 gu2 he2-em-ši-ĝal2, *The instructions of Šuruppak* 172–174.

⁶⁴ Eš3-ki-du10 dumu-banda3 Lugal-/ur-saĝ gala Hu-rim3^{ki} (UDT 57: ii 2).

one. *Ibila* “heir” and *nam-ibila* “status of heir” should be considered separately, since they imply legal values strictly related to inheritance rights⁶⁵.

In the following letter, a father and his elder son take an oath for the younger son, but the two sons are called “elder brother” (*šeš-gal*) and “younger brother” (*šeš-ban₃-da*).

1	Ur- ^d Su'en-ra	To Ur-Su'en
2	u ₃ -na-a-du ₁₁	say:
3	tukum-bi	if
4	ab-ba-a šeš-ban ₃ -da	the father for his younger son (lit. brother)
5	zi-lugal in-na-an-pa ₃	makes an oath
6	nam-engar-še ₃	and regarding to the office of <i>engar</i>
7	šeš-gal-e šeš-ban ₃ -da	the older brother for the younger brother
8	zi-lugal in-na-an-pa ₃	makes an oath,
9	nam-engar šeš-ban ₃ - da he ₂ -na-ab-sum-mu	(then) the younger brother will take the office <i>engar</i> . (NATN 971)

This use is evidenced in an important Neo-Sumerian legal document from Nippur⁶⁶. The *di-tila* records the case of Lugal-giskim-zi, eldest son and heir (*ibila*) of the overseer of the temple of Inanna in Nippur. He sues his father twice without success and the second time is condemned to the death penalty. The father thus gives Lugal-giskim-zi's status of heir (*nam-ibila*) to Lu-bala-saga, his younger son. In defining the position of the two heirs, the text calls Lugal-giskim-zi as “the son—the eldest brother” (*dumu šeš-gal*, o. i 2) and Lu-bala-saga as “the son—the youngest brother” (*dumu šeš-ban₃-da*, o. ii 11). Again, the kinship terms are focused on the generation of the protagonists, the brothers Lugal-giskim-zi and Lu-bala-saga, and not in relationship to the father, whose name is not even mentioned in the text. The expression “son—eldest brother” is found elsewhere in third millennium sources⁶⁷, notably in the so-called *Laws of Lipit-Ištar* (§32), “If the father, still living, gives a betrothal gift to his son—the

⁶⁵ See Marrocchi Savoi 2022 and 2024.

⁶⁶ Durand 1977. For a recent analysis of the text with discussion of the previous interpretations, see Marrocchi Savoi 2022: 10–29.

⁶⁷ See, for instance, the Early Dynastic document TCBI 1, 2: r. i 1' (*dumu(-)šeš-gal-na*) and the line from the literary composition *The home of the fish* 17 (*dumu(-)šeš-gal-zu dumu(-)šeš-ban₃-da-zu he₂-em-du*), usually translated “let come the sons of your elder brother and those of your younger brother” and that, possibly, should be translated “let come the your son – the eldest brother, and your son – the youngest brother”; see also the passage in the Neo-Sumerian administrative document Fs Cathcart 165–166: r. iv 19 (*dumu šeš-gal*). For *šeš-gal* as a term for an official see below.

eldest brother”⁶⁸, and in another Neo-Sumerian legal document again about inheritance and again against a father⁶⁹:

1	I Ur- ^d Bil ₃ -ra	For Ur-Bil(games)
2	a-ra ₂ 1-kam	for a first time
3	di ba-ab-dab ₅	a judgement was rendered.
4	dumu-dumu-munus-kam	It was (the case of his) daughters.
5	I Lu ₂ - ^d Šara ₂ dumu / šeš-gal	Lu-Šara, who is the son—the eldest brother
6	ibila-am ₃	and heir,
7	a-ra ₂ 2-kam	for a second time (laid charges against Ur-Bilgames)
	[. . .]	[. . .]
		(Fs Pomponio 167, 8)

In a tradition where the eldest son is the heir, the status of eldest brother (*nam-šeš-gal*) and of heir (*nam-ibila*) may seem the same. It is a question of nuance, yet it illustrates fundamental concepts about family and society. The above-mentioned passages demonstrate that the eldest brother’s right ensures the position of heir, and that the former clearly focuses on the lateral kinship relationship, the brothers. Thus, the inheritance right and extra share are based on the individual’s pre-eminence among his siblings rather than among the father’s sons.

This practice is maintained in the successive Old Babylonian period, where the *nam-šeš-gal* is the status of the son who gets the largest part of the inheritance⁷⁰, as the formula “additional share (of the inheritance) for the status of elder brother” (*sib₂-ta (mu) nam-šeš-gal-še₃*)⁷¹ in the inheritance documents proves.

The relevance of generational identities and the role of the *brothers* in Sumerian society was already noted by Edzard (1960: 257) who uses the term of *fratriarchy*⁷² to describe Mesopotamian society:

⁶⁸ *tukum-bi \ ad-da ti-‘la¹ \ dumu šeš-gal-a-ni-ir \ ni₃-mu₁₀-us₂-sa₂ in-na-an-sum*, ll. 388’–391’.

⁶⁹ Fs Pomponio 167, 8: o. 1–7; for the edition and discussion of the text see Molina 2021: 167–168.

⁷⁰ See Wilcke 1985: 221–224.

⁷¹ See, for instance, JCS 8, 137–143: o. 4; MC 3, 51: o. 11; PBS 8/2, 115: o. 3, 133: o. 5, 146: o. 13; SAOC 44 31: o. 6, 42: o. 3; TIM 4, 1: o. 9, 2: o. 6, 4: o. 4, 8: o. 6, 12: 2, 16: o. 6. For this formula and the inheritance rules see Claassens–van Wyk 2013. See also the passage of the inheritance document UET 5, 119: o. 3 “extra share for his status of eldest brother” (*DA DIRI NAM-ŠEŠ-GAL-A-NI*).

⁷² Koschaker 1933 had already used the term *fratriarchy* (*Fratriarchat*) to describe the social organisation of Mesopotamia. For a primary overview of related Neo-Sumerian evidence through a theoretical approach, see Marrocchi Savoi 2022; see also Wilcke 1985: 221.

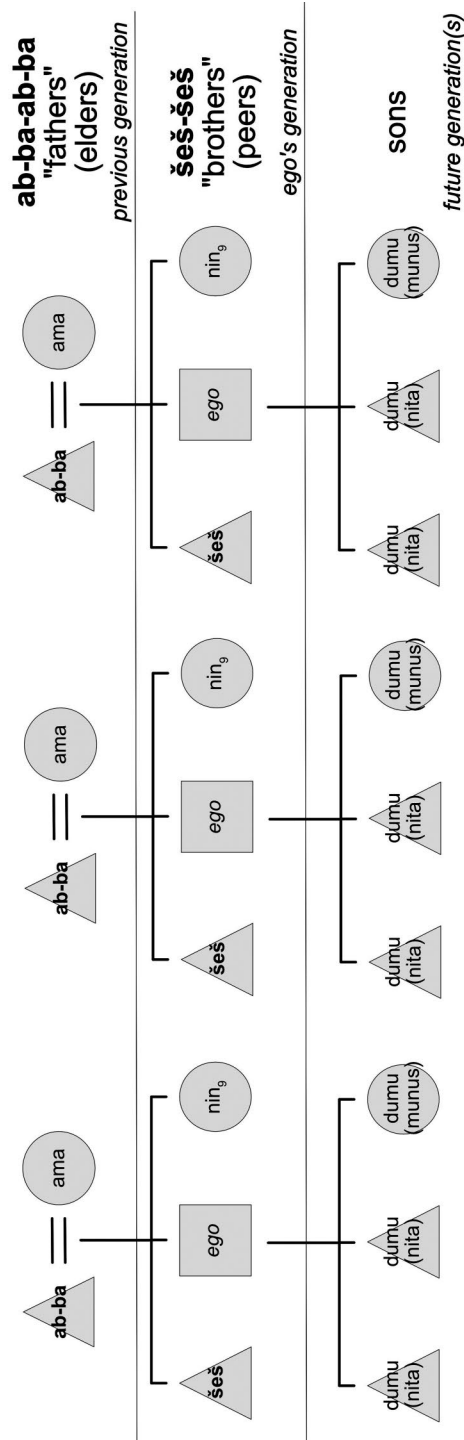


Fig. 2: Age based groups: elders and brothers.

Haben wir versucht, die älteste sumerische Familie auf Grund der Verwandtschaftsterminologie als eine fratriarchale hinzustellen, dürfen wir den Übergang zur patriarchalen Struktur vielleicht nicht einzig und allein auf akkadischen Einfluß zurückführen.

If the “elders” (lit. fathers) may be regarded as a group based on age, “brotherhood” should be too. The evidence from the third millennium is sparse or indirect, but succeeding periods are more consistent. In the *Epic of Gilgameš*, the hero’s appeal to the assembly of younger people is opposed to that of the elders, which may be a literary echo of the generational division of society. However, institutions like the *brothers* at Emar and elsewhere show that *brotherhood* is a recognised social structure.

4. Fictive Kinship

A further feature known to Assyriologists, but better described and theorised through Anthropology, is pseudo or fictive kinship, which is the use of kinship words to describe hierarchical and dependent relationships. Kinship terminology is used to refer to family-unconnected people, establishing different types of socio-political relationships.

The *ab-ba/dumu* terms express a vertical, unequal, hierarchical, and dependant relationship that goes beyond family circles. An individual may refer to a man by calling him “father”, stating the latter’s elder, authoritative, superior status. On the contrary, an individual may refer to a man by calling him “son”, stating the latter’s younger and inferior status. Peers call themselves *brothers* (§3.2), while father / son terms establish a hierarchical relationship with superiority / inferiority based on age, authority, and/or dependence.

In §3.1, we discussed the use of father-son/daughter relationships in literature. We can provide another example here to clarify this point. In *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*, the messenger who speaks to the lord of Aratta calls Enmerkar “your father, my lord” (a y a - z u l u g a l - ĝ u l o), thus establishing a hierarchy based on father/son relationship, where a higher status or power is attributed to Enmerkar. In *Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana*, on the other hand, the king of Aratta, recognizes Enmerkar’s superiority by calling him “eldest brother”⁷³. The idea of a *brotherhood* of kings prevails in the diplomacy of the second millennium⁷⁴ but has earlier evidence dating to the mid of the third millennium. In his inscriptions, EnMETena of Lagaš remembers that he “made brotherhood” (n a m - š e š e - a k), i.e. alliance, with the king of Uruk, Lugal-ki(ĝe)neš-du⁷⁵.

⁷³ a r u - a - t a g a b a - r i - z u n u - m e - e n š e š - g a l z a - e - m e - e n “From the moment of the conception, I am not your equal, you are the eldest brother”, *Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana* A 279.

⁷⁴ See Liverani 1994 and Podany 2010.

⁷⁵ u - b a e n - m e : t e - n a \ e n s i _ 2 \ l a g a š ^ { k i } \ l u g a l - k i - n e _ 2 - e š _ 2 - d u _ 7 - d u _ 7 \

These passages show that “brotherhood” (n a m - š e š) may be created (a k)⁷⁶, and also that socio-political relationships can be established through kinship terms (š e š vs. š e š - g a l, a b - b a / d u m u).

Both Sumerian and Akkadian have no word for citizen. The concept is expressed through a periphrasis using the term *dumu*. The citizen is the “son (of the city of) . . .” (d u m u ^{u r u} . . .). The city-god’s spouse may be referred to as the “mother of the city” (a m a - u r u), thus creating an idea of community and relationships based on kinship terms. Consequently, the citizens are members of the same “family” and considered “brothers”, as shown in the passage from *Inanna and Šukaletuda*, where Enki suggests Šukaletuda hide in the city among his “brothers”⁷⁷.

In the Old-Babylonian “school” (e₂ - d u b - b a), relationships among its members are defined through kinship terms⁷⁸. The students are the “son of the ‘house of the tablet(s)’” (d u m u - e₂ - d u b - b a). The advanced students are called “elder brother” (š e š - g a l) and they mentor the juniors, called “younger brother” (š e š - b a n d a₃).

Once son of the *eduba*, come here to me . . . Do not reject the appeal (of the company) of an advanced student (lit. older brother) or of a junior one (lit. younger brother).⁷⁹

In the Neo-Sumerian sources, various individuals are qualified as “elder brother” (š e š - g a l)⁸⁰. This term follows the personal name and has no reference to the other individuals previously mentioned in the text⁸¹. A good example is the text

ens₂ \ unug^{ki} - b e \ n a m - š e š e - a k, RIME 1.09.05.03: ii 4–10 // RIME 1.09.05. add32: 6’–12’.

⁷⁶ Two literary passages mention “brotherhood” (n a m - š e š). At the end of *Winter and Summer*, after the dispute has been settled by Enlil, the two protagonists “like fine oil they pour out brotherhood and friendship” (n a m - š e š n a m - d u b₃ - s a i₃ - l i - g i n₇ i - i m - b a l - b a l - e - n e, l. 314); the passage may be better translated as “Like fine oil they transformed brotherhood in friendship” maintaining the original meaning of b a l. In the composition, Winter and Summer are presented as brothers, generated by Enlil and Earth, and they start a “quarrel” (d u₁₄ . . . ġ a r, l. 112). The idea that “brotherhood” is founded on dispute is supported by the second reference to “brotherhood”, a proverb stating that “Brotherhood is founded on the words of a quarrel” (i n i m - d u₁₄ - d a - k a n a m - š e š - e m u - u n - d i m₂ - d i m₂, Proverbs from Ur, UET 6, 276: o. 1–2).

⁷⁷ u r u š e š - z u - n e / - a - n i, *Inanna and Šukaletuda* 179, *passim*.

⁷⁸ Marrocchi Savoi 2022: 8.

⁷⁹ d u m u - e₂ - d u b - b a - a u₄ - u l - l a ġ a₂ - n u k i - ġ u₁₀ - š e₃ . . . š e š - g a l š e š - b a n₃ - d a h i - l i - a - b i n a - a n - n a - n i - i b - g i₄ - g i₄, *The advice of a supervisor to a younger scribe* (E-dub-ba-a C) l and 19.

⁸⁰ For “brothers” as a reference system in inheritance documents and *šeš-gal* as title for the preeminent heir see above §3.2.

⁸¹ The term “younger brother” (š e š - b a n d a₃) is found in a similar use in only one text,

Berens 73 from Ġirsu, where the first four entries record individuals labelled as *šeš-gal*:

- o. 1) 10 eren₂ hun-ĝa₂ Ur-sa₆-ga šeš-gal
- 2) 10 eren₂ hun-ĝa₂ Lu₂-^dBa-u₂ šeš-gal
- 3) A.LAGAB ugula Ur-dingir-ra
- 4) 10 eren₂ Lu₂-bala-sig₅ šeš-gal
- 5) 8 Lu₂-kal-la šeš-gal
- 6) 7 Lu₂-bala-i₃-zu
- r. 1) 10 Lu₂-^dNa-du₃-a šeš-gal

In some passages, individuals are qualified as “*šeš-gal* of the *eren* workers” (šeš-gal-eren₂-na)⁸² or “*šeš-gal* of (a team of) ten (persons)” (šeš-gal-nam-10)⁸³ showing that *šeš-gal* is a title⁸⁴. Other kinship terms are used in administrative texts to refer to a class of workers as, for instance, the compound term with *šeš*, *šeš-tab(a)* (šeš-ta b(-ba)), which has been interpreted as “companion, assistant”, or the “sons of the palace” (dumu-dumu ša₃ e₂-gal) in Early Dynastic tablets from Šuruppag⁸⁵.

More generally, the use of the term *dumu* as “dependant, employee, apprentice” is evident⁸⁶. *Dumu*, followed by a noun for profession, identifies the lowest level of that career, the “apprentice”. In third-millennium sources, the documents record frequently “sons” of builders (dumu-šidim), carpenters (dumu-na-gar), shepherds (dumu-na-gada), and so on up to the “junior masters/experts” (dumu-um-mi-a). One could wonder if the relationship between the master and the apprentice is familiar or simply cast in a kinship frame, such as the apprenticeship system in mediaeval Europe, in which the apprentice moved into the master’s home and lived with his family to learn the trade and, on occasion, even took the master’s surname. This is the case in the only Mesopotamian apprenticeship contract of this kind, which may probably be an Old Babylonian school exercise in Sumerian language. According to the text, the apprentice’s father pays the master an amount of silver to teach music, and the apprentice moves into the teacher’s residence.

HLC 2, 53, where it is used to qualify Ur-BaU (kišib Ur-^dBa-U₂ šeš-banda₃, o. i 17 and r. i 8.).

⁸² CUSAS 40-2, 1701: r. i 9; Nisaba 15/2, 877: r. i 2; UET 3, 1455: o. 4, r. 5^o; UET 9, 85: o. 1.

⁸³ HLC 2, 112: o. 1; Nisaba 10, 32: o. 5; NRVN 1, 237: r. 2; Syracuse 386: r. 1; TCTI 2, 3475: o. 4; UET 3, 1063: r. 2; UET 3, 1721: o. 2, 7, 16. In the text Berens 73 discussed above, all the *šeš-gal* oversee ten *eren* workers, but Lukala (o. 5).

⁸⁴ Compare the Akkadian cognate *šešgallu*, an official, and the abstract *šešgallūtu* (CAD Š₂ 336–337).

⁸⁵ Visicato 1995.

⁸⁶ Compare the use of *māru* in Akkadian and the references in CAD M₁ 314–315.

Hedu-Eridu, son of Adad-lamassī, to learn the musician's craft went to live with Ilī-širi. In that period, to teach (Hedu-Eridu) to be a musician, the *tig-idlu*, *asila*, *tigi*, and *adab* instruments to the seventh degree, Adad-lamassī gave five shekels of silver to Ilī-širi as (his) wage. (Colophon:) Ilī-ippal-sam, the *umma*'s apprentice.⁸⁷

Further evidence from later periods⁸⁸ even suggest the adoption of the apprenticeship by the master⁸⁹. This raises the question of whether these families of artisans and scribes, such as those of later periods who claim descent from the same ancestor, were biological families or guilds.

In this sense, the interpretation of the *dumu* relationship in Neo-Sumerian documents as a master / dependant bond instead of a biological or familial father / son relationship has been advanced by some scholars⁹⁰: if someone refers to himself in his seal or is classified as the *dumu* of another person in a document, he is establishing a hierarchical and subordinative relationship, implying that he may be that person's son, dependent, or both. This implies that the same person, throughout his life and career, may refer to different people as "father", although they are not his socio-biological father. Despite the abundance of data in this regard, and the fact that later era prosopographical studies take this assumption for granted⁹¹, this is largely ignored in third-millennium studies.

5. Genitor / genitrix

An example of a minor contribution of Assyriology to anthropological discussion, specifically to anthropological linguistics, is that of the non-correspondence of parents with genitors⁹², or of social with biological parenthood. In many cultures, there exists a distinction between the parents who begot the child (genitor / genitrix) and those who have social rights on them (father / mother)⁹³. This is made apparent by the current discussion over adoption, assisted reproduction, and surrogate motherhood.

In Sumerian sources, the parents (a m a / a b (- b a), a d (- d a), a y a) may be identified with the "father who begot him/her" (a y a - u g u) and the "mother who begot him/her" (a m a - u g u)⁹⁴. In adoptions, it should be remembered that

⁸⁷ George / Spada 2019: 116–117 no. 55, with previous bibliography.

⁸⁸ For apprenticeship and adoption in the Old Babylonian period, see Démare-Lafont 2016; for the Nuzi apprenticeship contracts, see Fincke 2014, and for the Neo-Babylonian ones, see J. Hackl *apud* Jursa 2010: 700–725 and Kedar 2014.

⁸⁹ See, in particular, Démare-Lafont 2016.

⁹⁰ Jones / Snyder 1961: 330; Hallo 1981; Pomponio 1992, 2013, and 2020.

⁹¹ See, for instance, CAD M₁ 308.

⁹² See Wierzbicka 1987 (now included in the collected works Wierzbicka 1992 as chapter 9) and, in general, for kinship in Linguistic Anthropology, see Foley 1997: 131–149.

⁹³ Lévi-Strauss 1956.

⁹⁴ For u g u "to begot" see Attinger 2021: 1101; note, however, the observation of Ca-

the individual enters in the relationship with a higher authority (the father) by accepting his status of son (n a m - d u m u) and the bonds of dependence this involves. Similarly, not only the adopted, but also the “biological” child may exit this relationship by refusing the father’s authority. In laws and legal texts, this is often made explicit by the son’s statement “you are not my father” (a y a - ĝ u₁₀ n u - m e - e n), which is paralleled by the father in the statement “you are not my son” (d u m u - ĝ u₁₀ n u - m e - e n).

Two animal-related proverbs provide an improved comprehension of the individual’s relationship with genitors and parents. The first refers to the way that the pig’s “sire” (n i n d a₂) and ancestors (p a - b i l - g a) have already walked.

A pig which was about to be slaughtered by the pig-butcher squealed. (The butcher said:) “Your *sire* (n i n d a₂) and ancestors (p a - b i l - g a) walked this road, and now you too are walking it, so why (?) are you squealing?”⁹⁵

The second proverb plays with the genitors of the mule, asking if he knows his “sire” and his “mother” (a m a).

O mule, do you know your *sire* (n i n d a₂), and do you know your mother (a m a)?⁹⁶

The term which is translated as “sire”, n i n d a₂, refers to the seed-funnel of the plow. The translation “sire” is derived from the context of the two proverbs. n i n d a₂ is mentioned in parallel with the male ancestors (p a - b i l - g a) in the first proverb and with the mother (a m a) in the second proverb. Thus, n i n d a₂ is a synonym for genitor based on a figurative and metaphorical use of the term for the seed-funnel⁹⁷. This is not only suggested by these two proverbs but is confirmed by the passage from the *Lu* and *Ea* lexical lists where n i n d a₂ is equated to *abu(m)* “father”⁹⁸.

In these passages, the use of n i n d a₂ instead of father and of a m a for mother suggest a phenomenon that is found in most cultures: the correspondence of genitrix and mother and the distinction genitor and father⁹⁹.

vigneaux 2022 with a different interpretation of the expressions aya-ugu and ama-ugu (“mère sommitale, père sommital”).

⁹⁵ šah₂ lu₂-šah₂-šum-ma mi-ni-ib-šum-e \ gu₃ i₃-ra-¹ra¹ kaskal ninda₂-zu \ u₃ pa-bil-¹ga-zu¹ i₃-re₇-eš-am₃ \ u₃ za-e al-du-un-¹na¹-ni gu₃ i₃-ra-ra-e-še, Proverbs collection 8.a2.

⁹⁶ an^{še}kunga₂ ninda₂-zu i₃-zu-de₃-en \ u₃ ama-zu i₃-zu-de₃-en, Proverbs from Ur (UET 6/2, 233: 1–2).

⁹⁷ For figurative and metaphorical sexual language related to the plow and agriculture, see Wilcke 1987 and Couto-Ferreira 2017. Note also the use of ^{gu}4 ninda₂ and ninda₂ for “breeding bull”; Attinger 2021: 573–574.

⁹⁸ ninda₂ = a-bu, *Lu* III iv 69 (MSL 12, 127); ^{in-da} ninda₂ = a-bu-[um], *Ea* mBab VII i 3 (CUSAS 12, 8).

⁹⁹ Wierzbicka 1987.

genitor	≠	father	n i n d a ₂	≠	a b(-b a), a d(-d a), a y a
genitrix	=	mother	a m a	=	a m a

Tab. 1: Genitors vs. parents.

This difference *genitor* ≠ *father* opposed to the equation *genitrix* = *mother* is corroborated by a passage from the so-called *Laws of Lipit-Ištar*, where a man unable to raise a child must return him/her to the mother who bore him/her.

If a man is unable to raise a child according to his capabilities and this has been confirmed in front of the judges, the child is returned to the mother who has borne him.¹⁰⁰

Sophie Démare-Lafont¹⁰¹ considered the passage as alluding to an adoption for apprenticeship, meaning that the child returns to the mother because his father has died. None of this is in the text, but besides the interpretation of the passage, what is essential is that while adoption allows an individual to enter (or exit) the status of son and “fathers” may change, the status of the mother, and specifically the one “who bore” the child, remains dominant. The concept of the child returning to the mother has an interesting lexical relationship with the term for freed slave, *a m a - a r - g i₄*, literally “to return to the mother”. The latter may imply that the individual returns to him/her original, basic, and fundamental relationship once other dependence bonds are removed¹⁰².

The cultural construction of family bonds is shown by the practice of the father accepting a new member of the family by sitting him/her on his lap. This is the way to introduce and embed within the family a new-born or adopted child, an adopted adult, or a daughter-in-law. This custom demonstrates the socially and culturally created bonds, which add to the biological and are foundational to the family¹⁰³.

¹⁰⁰ *tukum-bi lu₂-u₃ dumu a₂-e₃-a usu-ni-gin₇ nu-bulug₃-e-de₃ igi di-ku₅-ne-še₃ un-ge-en ama tu-da-na ba-an-ši-gur-ru*, *Laws of Lipit-Ištar* §20b ll. 243’–246’.

¹⁰¹ Démare-Lafont 2016: 47, after a suggestion by K. R. Veenhof.

¹⁰² Verderame 2018: 30–31.

¹⁰³ Lévi-Strauss 1956. The concept of family or *oikos*, over which the *pater familias* rules, needs more investigations in Mesopotamian sources; see Verderame 2024 and Marrocchi Savoi 2024 with previous bibliography. An important matter, for instance, is the status of the house-born slaves or the right that the “father”, i.e. the head of the house, has over his slaves’ sons; see Verderame 2018: 20–21 and fn. 29.

6. Comparative Approach to Early States' Kinship Systems

A comparative analysis of Sumerian and other early state cultures reveals remarkable similarities. The so-called Hawaiian system is not exclusively related to Sumerian. Egyptian has a similar structure and terminology¹⁰⁴, though compounds for second-degree relations are more widespread, as in Akkadian. Both Sumerian and Egyptian have two different terms for the male and the female parent. Differently from the Sumerian that has no grammatical marks for gender, Egyptian and Akkadian have only one term for siblings (Eg. *sn(t)*; Akk. *ah(at)u*) whose gender is distinguished through the feminine ending *t*, as it is for the term for son (Eg. *s3(t)*; Akk. *mār(t)u*).

	Parents		Siblings		Son
	Father	Mother	Brother	Sister	Son
Sum.	a d (- d a) / a b (- b a) / a y a	a m a	š e š	n i n 9	d u m u
Akk.	<i>abu</i>	<i>ummu</i>	<i>ah(at)u</i>		<i>mār(t)u</i>
Eg.	<i>jt</i>	<i>mwt</i>	<i>sn(t)</i>		<i>s3(t)</i>

Tab. 2: Comparative diagram of Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian kinship terms.

The Chinese kinship has a system next to the Hawaiian, the Sudanese. It should be noted that the Chinese kinship system is only attested after the third century, while Götzelt (1995) uses the Sudanese kinship system to define the Sumerian system¹⁰⁵.

Analysis of ancient DNA¹⁰⁶ has driven modern developments in kinship studies, creating a diffusionist perspective which establishes a close relationship between kinship systems and languages. It is surprising that this “historical” research on kinship has consistently ignored the most ancient evidence on the subject, i.e. written sources from the Ancient Near East and Egypt. A simple inquiry into the latter would have revealed that their kinship terms are comparable to the so-called Hawaiian system.

The perspective of genetic-linguistic relationship evokes the spectres of evolutionist and diffusionist models, with the emergence (or revival) of fictional primigenial proto-forms (proto-Indo-European, proto-Oceanic, etc.) rooted in their pre-historic phases, none of which have direct historical evidence available. The risk of this approach as opposed to a historically relevant one must be considered. In terms of kinship, the parallels between the Hawaiian, Sumerian, and

¹⁰⁴ Campagno 2009; Olabarria 2020.

¹⁰⁵ See fn. 49.

¹⁰⁶ See, for instance, the overview in Jones 2003.

Egyptian kinship systems cannot be explained using linguistic, geographic, or human dispersion models, unless we postulate a pre-historic migration to the Near East and Pacific. Even if this were the case, the linguistic connection would still be absent, as there are no relations between Sumerian, Egyptian, and Hawaiian languages.

Another interpretation, based on the socio-historical perspective, can be proposed. Although anthropologists generally abhor the historical perspective and the term “complex society”, these cultures are early urban/state communities. This comparative analysis indicates that early-state societies, such as Egypt, Sumer, and Hawaii, use similar kinship systems. A more in-depth comparative investigation of these cultures may find additional parallel social institutions beyond kinship, starting from kingship.

Aside from these issues, the first contribution of Assyriology to Anthropology would be, at the very least, a correction to the conventional description of the Hawaiian system. This is modelled after the Hawaiian pre-contact native system and is said to be common among Malayo-Polynesian-speaking cultures. The Egyptian and Sumerian examples challenge this linguistic-geographical, and possibly socioeconomic, characterisation.

7. Conclusions

To summarise, this brief study has demonstrated the potential value of a dialogue between Assyriology and Anthropology. This is not to say that anthropological theories and models, particularly those that are modish (Bourdieu and Descola *in primis*), should be blindly accepted and employed uncritically or out of context.

Going beyond the fascination, anthropological and social sciences theories should be tested on primary sources. Furthermore, Assyriology has the potential to significantly contribute to anthropological debate.

The study of civilisations that fall between preliterate and contemporary societies has been consistently overlooked in the social sciences. Anthropology has focused on the first, and in modern times on the second, ignoring anything in between, particularly the protoliterate or early state cultures, primarily ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. Thus, these civilisations are absent in anthropological works in general, and on kinship in particular¹⁰⁷.

Anthropology's primary concern in kinship is related to marriage regulations and restrictions, with a scepticism—if not open hostility—towards historical approaches. However, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Chinese sources provide invaluable material for studying the emergence of early states and complex societies. Historians may gain a better understanding of them through theoretical approaches, while anthropologists may benefit from relevant information and case studies.

¹⁰⁷ This is the case of Lévi-Strauss 1947, Murdock 1949, Godelier 2004, Barry 2008, to mention only the most relevant recent overviews.

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