

# Achaemenid court eunuchs in their Near Eastern context: images in the *longue durée*

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to compare some images of beardless attendants in monumental reliefs from the Achaemenid (c. 550-330 BCE) and Neo-Assyrian (c. 911-612 BCE) empires, which we consider relevant sources for the study of court eunuchs and cultural conceptions about *castrati*. We argue that such comparisons are possible since eunuchism was a long-standing institution in the Ancient Near East, as shown by several analogies with the Assyrian evidence. We also argue that scholars have downplayed the importance of court eunuchs due to gender/sex assumptions based on Western and modern perspectives that consider eunuchism incompatible with high-ranking social standing. With these theoretical considerations in mind, we finally sketch some possible analytical proposals to explore the images of beardless attendants in Persia and Assyria.

**KEYWORDS:** Achaemenid Empire. Neo-Assyrian Empire. Eunuchs. Gender. Monumental Reliefs.

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RESUMO: Esse artigo tem por objetivo comparar algumas imagens de servidores imberbes nos relevos monumentais dos Impérios Aquemênida (c. 559-330 a.C.) e Neoassírio (c. 911-612 a.C.), que consideramos fontes relevantes para o estudo dos eunucos da corte e de noções culturais sobre *castrati*. Argumentamos que tais comparações são possíveis, uma vez que a instituição dos eunucos tem uma longa história no Antigo Oriente Próximo, o que demonstramos através de diversas analogias com a evidência assíria. Também argumentamos que a importância dos eunucos da corte foi minimizada pelos especialistas em razão de pressupostos de gênero e sexo baseados em perspectivas ocidentais e modernas, as quais consideram a instituição de eunucos incompatível com posições sociais elevadas. Tendo em vista tais considerações teóricas, esboçamos, por fim, algumas possíveis propostas analíticas para explorar as imagens de servidores imberbes na Pérsia e na Assíria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Império Aquemênida. Império Neoassírio. Eunucos. Gênero. Relevos monumentais.

## INTRODUCTION

In 465/4 BCE, Xerxes (486-465 BCE) and the crown prince, Darius, were allegedly killed by a plot devised by a certain Artapanus and his eunuch ally and relative, Aspamitres.<sup>2</sup> Sometime later, the powerful eunuch Artoxares<sup>3</sup> reportedly helped king Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) to negotiate a truce with his rebellious brother-in-law, Megabyzus. This same Artoxares would later crown Darius II (423-405 BCE) as king during a succession crisis. According to Ctesias, the Paphlagonian eventually died after staging an unsuccessful *coup d'état*.<sup>4</sup> Artaxerxes III (359-338 BCE) and Artaxerxes IV (338-336 BCE) were both allegedly murdered by an able military commander and eunuch named Bagoas.<sup>5</sup> More well-known, however, is another Bagoas, the eunuch lover of Alexander the Great, who had originally been the favourite of Darius III (336-330 BCE).

Mysterious, bold and influential, court eunuchs are at the core of Greek and Roman tales about Ancient Persia. But were they nothing more than tales?

In a recent discussion of “effeminates” and court eunuchs in the Achaemenid Empire, Madreiter and Schnegg cautiously advise that “as long as Old Persian evidence does not support the importance of eunuchs, the Western sources have to be interpreted cautiously”.<sup>6</sup> While not denying that Classical sources must be critically assessed, this study shall argue that modern historians have downplayed part of the evidence (including iconography) for court eunuchs in the Ancient Near East (ANE) due to gender preconceptions and Orientalist misrepresentations. Especially concerning the issue of gender, this study will show how castration per se has no self-evident meaning in every context. I shall apply the argument put forward by Omar N’Shea regarding the Neo-Assyrian Empire to the Achaemenid case, concluding that one should avoid taking for granted that Achaemenid eunuchs were “effeminate”, “gender ambiguous”, or subsumed under the category of “subordinate masculinity”<sup>7</sup> — which actually amounts to uncritically accepting Greek evidence.

Two further sections of this study show that, despite the scholarly reluctance to accept the reality of Achaemenid *castrati*, eunuchism was a long-standing institution in the ANE (and beyond) and, accordingly, that we should study Achaemenid eunuchs (and their images) against their Mesopotamian historical background, particularly their Neo-Assyrian predecessors. Finally, the last section of this study provides a brief overview of possible analogies between “eunuchs” in Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monumental reliefs, defining and applying the

2. Kuhrt (2007, p. 307-308), and Waters (2017, p. 113). FGrH 688 F13 (33); F14(34). This man is named Mithradates in Diod. 11.69.1.

3. Identified with Artahshar from the cuneiform sources: Cardascia (1951, p. 7), Lewis (1977, p. 75, n. 168), Stolper (1985, p. 91-92), and Dandamayev (1992, p. 36, 94).

4. Brosius (2021, p. 154, 158-159).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

6. Madreiter and Schnegg (2021, p. 1133).

7. N’Shea (2016, 2018).

8. Lenfant (2020, p. 456-459). In this study, I understand Achaemenid “court eunuchism” as the institutionalized pre-pubertal castration of men and their subsequent education for administrative service.

9. In two of the most well-known historical romances set in Achaemenid Persia, Gore Vidal’s *Creation* (1981) and Marie Renault’s *Persian Boy* (1972), the association of eunuchs and the *seraglio* is an invariable element.

10. We do not know how Near Eastern court eunuchs were castrated. For castration in Antiquity, see Kuefler (2001, p. 33), Tougher (2013, p. 49), and Silva (2020, p. 308-309). Specialists on Neo-Assyrian eunuchs believe that only their testicles were removed, arguing that complete excision would offer a higher risk of infection in Antiquity, see Grayson (1995, p. 92) and Deller (1999, p. 305). The possibility of complete excision in the ANE must be at least deemed possible

since the Hebrew Bible has rules regarding such kind of castration (Deut. 23:1); cf. Burke (2013, p. 4). Finally, the MAL (§ 20) apparently punishes a man who “rapes” his equal by his “turning into a eunuch”, i.e., castration. If we understand the apodosis as logically implying a deterring effect to the reiteration of that crime, the penis removal could be necessary to avoid penetration. See Westbrook (2003, p. 93-94). Some sort of institutional castration in the ANE could therefore have involved complete excision.

11. Lenfant (2021).

12. Against the use of the word “harem” in the ANE: Westenholz (1990, p. 515), Van de Mieroop (1999, p. 145-149), Brosius (1996, p. 188), Lenfant (2020). But see Llewellyn-Jones (2002, p. 25). For a discussion of the concept of harem in Assyriology and Achaemenid Studies, see Treuk (2023b).

13. Institutionalized castration has a long historical record and existed in different cultures, times, and contexts, from the Byzantine Empire to Ming China. Men have been willingly or unwillingly subjected to castration for religious, professional, medical, or political reasons before or after puberty by the complete removal of the penis and scrotum or only the excision or crushing of the scrotum. Forced castration could be performed as a punitive measure or on other grounds, as seen above (Grayson, 1995; Tougher, 2002).

14. Kuefler (2001), and Tougher (2021).

aesthetic category of “uncanny” and the idea of “performative image” to the interpretation of ANE monumental art.

## TRAUMNOVELLE: EUNUCHS, SERAGLIO AND ORIENTALISM

Dictionaries and handbooks usually define court eunuchs as *Eastern* castrated officials who oversaw royal women and “harems”.<sup>8</sup> This conception, strongly inspired by Orientalist and Eurocentric descriptions of the Safavid and Ottoman courts in the Modern and Contemporary Eras, was often uncritically projected into Achaemenid Persia at the scholarly and artistic levels.<sup>9</sup>

However, the applicability of this notion to the realities of Ancient Persia is highly debatable. Eunuch is a word coming from the Ancient Greek *eunōikhos*, which classical sources widely used to describe pre-pubertal castrated courtiers<sup>10</sup> that may not have served exclusively as guardians of women<sup>11</sup> or even as overseers of a “harem” (whose existence in the ANE is in itself controversial).<sup>12</sup> We also know that, at least from a historical point of view, castrated officials<sup>13</sup> were present in civilizations usually associated with the Western tradition, such as the Roman Empire<sup>14</sup> and the Hellenistic kingdoms,<sup>15</sup> not to mention Classical Greece itself.<sup>16</sup> Finally, male castration was closely related to several spheres of the “high culture” and Christian religion in Western History, including, for example, the figure of the modern *castrati* (emasculated men acting as *soprani* or *mezzosoprani*).<sup>17</sup> It is clear, then, that the idea of eunuchs as an exclusively or typically Eastern institution, often used to reinforce the idea of Asian despotic rulers,<sup>18</sup> is a myth.

The fact that this myth remains widespread in contemporary artistic and scholarly works bears testimony to the far-reaching consequences of Western Orientalism. In fact, one of the characteristics of “Orientalism” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was precisely to presume a certain stagnation and immutability of Eastern civilizations,<sup>19</sup> which enabled the simple projection of contemporaneous European representations of the East into the past. The assumption that Western fantasies about “princesses”, “harems” and “eunuchs” could be a transhistorical reality in the “Orient” is therefore one expression of Orientalist thinking.<sup>20</sup>

## Gender, sex and castration

Unfortunately, these are not the only still widespread myths about ancient eunuchs. Historians take for granted, for instance, the eunuch's "effeminate" nature, his "homoerotic" behaviour,<sup>21</sup> and other aspects supposedly related to castration, reproducing views that are strongly contaminated by Classical and modern Western Orientalist descriptions of the institution. Several authors are also reluctant to accept that eunuchs could have extensively served in the military or in the administration or that they were ascribed attributes of masculinity in Near Eastern societies.<sup>22</sup> All such sex and gender preconceptions make it even harder to attain genuine knowledge on eunuchs in the ANE in general and in Achaemenid Persia in particular.

As already extensively discussed by gender theorists such as Judith Butler, Thomas Laqueur and Anne Fausto-Sterling, "sex" is constructed within a web of selective operations of categorization, grouping and intervention over the anatomic sphere. In our Western society,<sup>23</sup> it is a construct born within an already gendered reality and framed by gender normative binarism, asymmetrical gender relations and compulsory heterosexuality, which is continuously produced by the reiterated performance of normative gender acts.<sup>24</sup> Modern Western discourses create and sustain the binary gender as springing naturally from sex, whose essential appearance is discursively produced. There is no subject and no essence prior to the gendered discourse.<sup>25</sup>

When historians strive to find categories to describe "eunuchs", they often reproduce stereotypes emanating from their own binary gender ideals, presuming, for example, that the lack of testicles amounts to a sex/gender category different than the male/masculine one.<sup>26</sup> This happens, for instance, with the use of the category of "third gender",<sup>27</sup> which would necessarily presuppose a naturally binary gender system over which a third "layer" would be artificially added. However, sex and gender<sup>28</sup> are contingent and historically variable notions, and castration has no self-evident meaning in every context. In Classical and Late Antiquity, for instance, court eunuchs were often associated with feminine attributes and their lack of testicles was indeed taken as proof of their "imperfect" sex.<sup>29</sup> In the ANE, on the other hand, while ideal masculinity may have been characterized by sexual vigour and progeny,<sup>30</sup> it seems that *ša rēši/LÚ.SAG* were normally understood as one of the many possible manifestations of male sex and masculinity.<sup>31</sup>

Connell's model of masculinities<sup>32</sup> is helpful in understanding the situation of Near Eastern court eunuchs since it assumes that plural masculinities may arise inside the binary gender organization and entertain different power relations among

15. Badian (1958), Guyot (1980, p. 92-120), and Strootman (2017).

16. *Protag.* 314c-315d; see also Xen. *Symp.* 1.4.3-7; Miller (1997, p. 214), and Morgan (2017, p. 3, n. 8).

17. Italian chorist Alessandro Moreschi, also known as the "Angel of Rome", died in the not-so-remote 1920s and bequeathed the record of his conspicuous voice to posterity. See Tougher (2008, p. 12).

18. Montesquieu (1824, p. 95).

19. Said (1979, p. 240).

20. Bahrani (2001, p. 16).

21. Concerning eunuchs and "homosexuality", see Guyot (1980, p. 40), as well as the dubious associations in RLA (p. 486).

22. Oppenheim (1973, p. 332), Briant (1996, p. 286), Pirngruber (2011, p. 283, 305, 308-309), and Siddall (2007, p. 232-233).

23. It must be stressed that the decolonial critique has challenged this alleged universality of gender relations, as proposed by Western feminism. Nigerian gender theorist Oyèrónkè Oyèwùmí (1997, p. 176), for instance, highlights how the "gender-freeness" of the Yorùbá language contrasts with gender-biased Western languages, affirming that "gendered bodies are neither universal nor timeless. Yorùbá social categories were not based on anatomical differences". Similarly, Almudena Hernando (2018, p. 75-94) explores gender relations in the Brazilian Amazon and tests the Western concept of gender as a difference marked by power relations. She shows, for instance,

how women can be powerful decision-makers for the community in the case of the Indigenous group Awá(-Guajá) – even though they do not perform the most fundamental economic activities within the group.

24. Butler (1990, p. 7), Herdt (1996, p. 21-84), Bourdieu (1998, p. 29), and Soihet and Pedro (2007, p. 290).

25. Butler (1990, p. 24-25, 33, 129, 134-139), Bourdieu (1998, p. 23-27), and Fausto-Sterling (2000).

26. Male sex is discursively presented as a group of cohesive anatomic characteristics, such as the penis, a deep voice, and facial hair, all grouped together to appear as a natural given. Sex, gender performance, sexual desire, and gender identity are discursively presented as parts of a continuum and a necessary ontological unity. Discontinuities in these domains may expose the artificiality of this social construct. Butler (1990, p. 100-101, 137).

27. Herdt (1996), and Gabbay (2008, p. 54). See criticism in Peled (2016, p. 290).

28. “Sex” has been traditionally understood as a designation of bodily and anatomical differences, whereas “gender” would rather designate cultural phenomena attached to the human perception of such sexual differences. This distinction — crucial, for instance, in the writings of Joan Scott (“gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power”: 1996, p. 1067) —

themselves.<sup>33</sup> In this system, masculinity is not monolithic and exhibits several varieties: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, etc. “Hegemonic” masculinity is defined by Connell and Messerschmidt as “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue”. The authors also emphasize that “men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity”.<sup>34</sup>

It must be stressed that Achaemenid and Neo-Assyrian court eunuchs, while not belonging to the hegemonic masculinity epitomized by the king, were certainly not outside of their respective normative sex/gender systems since they were institutionalized and actively produced by the standing social and political order.<sup>35</sup> The idea that they were “deviant” in terms of sex or gender comes mainly from a Greco-Roman bias, but Near Eastern sources seem to indicate they could occupy a category of non-hegemonic masculinity, possibly a “complicit” one, as suggested by N’Shea.<sup>36</sup>

### *Kastrationsangst: historiography and the terminology for “eunuchs”*

In his ground-breaking assessment of court eunuchs in Assyria, Grayson regretted that Assyriologists had either ignored or dismissed the subject of eunuchism altogether as a despicable and trivial institution.<sup>37</sup> In fact, in the rare cases in which ancient eunuchs were deemed worthy of comment, they have been associated with “effeminacy” and “eastern decadence” in Western representations of the “Orient”.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, few studies have helped us understand the institution in depth in its respective historical contexts. Even if studies on eunuchs are now increasingly relevant due mainly to a growing interest in gender and sex in Antiquity and beyond following what we call the “Third Wave” of (post)feminist studies,<sup>39</sup> it is true that the “uncanny” feeling provoked by the image of male castration among Western audiences still hinders advances. This posture has had some consequences on the study of the sources and the terminology related to *castrati* in the ANE.

In both Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid historiography, for instance, studies on *ša rēši/eunoûkhos* have been marked by a strong reluctance to accept the possibility that the high administration could have employed numerous castrated men. Leo Oppenheim, one of the first authors to deny the automatic identification of *ša rēši* with castration, thought it was “inconceivable” that a eunuch could have been selected to act as the king of Assyria in a ritual of substitution.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Achaemenid Persia, both Pierre Briant and Reinhard Pirngruber, following a remark

by Paul Garelli, argued that the castration of numerous officials would be illogical and unnecessary.<sup>41</sup> These authors argue that noble Iranian and high-ranking dignitaries of the court that were called *eunoûkhoi* constituted a category of non-castrated courtiers, whereas only slave eunuchs would have been castrated.<sup>42</sup> In brief, they believe that castration and high-ranking positions were mutually exclusive.<sup>43</sup>

These arguments, however, must be critically approached. They come from modern and Western perspectives on sex and gender that consider the lack of a penis or testicles as an automatic sign of effeminacy and therefore of a lower hierarchical position in power relations.<sup>44</sup> To question the “necessity” of having numerous castrated officials in the palace is (i) to ignore the comparative evidence that proves that this was *at least possible* — such as the attestation of hundreds of eunuchs in the Ottoman court<sup>45</sup> or the existence of eleven thousand court eunuchs in the Abbasid caliphate of Al-Muqtadir (908-932 CE),<sup>46</sup> to mention only a few notable cases — and (ii) to search for essential and/or practical explanations for culturally oriented power relations. Comparative evidence also proves that court eunuchs could marry, adopt children,<sup>47</sup> and serve in the military and high positions,<sup>48</sup> being distinguished as a category from other non-castrated officials in the palace.<sup>49</sup>

Greek *eunoûkhos* etymologically means “he who has the bed”,<sup>50</sup> a title linked to the function of watching over the king when he was most vulnerable at his sleep, but it was almost certainly used by Classical authors to specifically designate castrated officials.<sup>51</sup> In Herodotus, the link is made absolutely clear in his story of Hermotimus, a Carian eunuch (*eunoûkhos*) at the Persian court who is explicitly described as having been castrated (the verb is *ektémnō*) and sold out by Painonios of Chios.<sup>52</sup> Herodotus also says that “beautiful boys” were selected to become eunuchs, the same criterion used when he describes the punitive castration of Ionian boys by the Persians.<sup>53</sup> The beauty of the eunuchs is a traditional topic of classical sources<sup>54</sup> and may have parallels in the eastern sources as well: an Ugaritic letter, for instance, describes the delivery of a prepubescent and “fair” (*damqu*) boy for castration.<sup>55</sup>

Akkadian *ša rēši* literally means “he of the head”.<sup>56</sup> The expression is more commonly rendered with the Sumerograms LÚ.SAG in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions.<sup>57</sup> Etymologically, Frazer has recently supported that the expression could have referred to the “head of the bed” of the king, probably designating an official who watched over the king in his chambers, exactly as the Greek *eunoûkhos* and similarly to the Byzantine title *parakoimómēnos* (“chamberlain”), a position usually reserved for *castrati*.<sup>58</sup>

became blurred in the “Third Wave” Feminist critique, which highlighted the discursive construction of sex and how its presentation as a “natural given” was in itself a product of discourse. As Butler states, “if the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (1990, p. 7). This study assumes “sex” to be a cultural construct just as “gender” and, thus I (intentionally) avoid making a systematic distinction between the two. ANE studies have diverse and contrasting applications of these notions. See Asher-Greve and Westenholz (2013, p. 15-17), Garcia-Ventura (2018, p. 189-190), and Budin (2023).

29. Williams (2010, p. 184), Crawford (2019, p. 20-22, 76), Silva (2020), and Tougher (2021, p. 5, 18, 42). In Byzantium, some scholars believe that eunuchs occupied a “third gender” status, cf. Ringrose (2003, p. 2-8), whereas others think “third gender” is a modern construct that ignores the fluidity of gender categories ascribed to eunuchs in each context, cf. Tougher (2008, p. 109-115).

30. Winter (1996). Asher-Greve (1997). Peled (2016, p. 43-47).

31. N’Shea (2016, 2018).

32. Connell (1995).

33. Connell (1995, p. 76-80), Kuefler (2001, p. 4-5), Peled (2016, p. 27-42), and N’Shea (2018, p. 61-64).

34. Connell; Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832). For an anthropological feminist perspective of how intermale relations in specific groups may work to dominate women, see Strathern (1988, p. 334-339).

35. See Peled (2016, p. 212).

36. N'Shea (2018, p. 102). The fact that institutional castration was not a central topic in Near Eastern and Achaemenid discourses on sex is a matter of interest. Castration is mainly mentioned in contexts of criminal retribution (i.e., Middle Assyrian Laws) and in literary texts, in which the main concerns arising from it are related to the risk of sterility since offspring were considered important for the cult of the dead and the perpetuation of the family line, cf. Asher-Greve (1997, p. 452). Neo-Assyrian *ša rēši* was a title gradually specified to denote a class of castrated officials — compare it with Arabic *khadim*, cf. Ayalon (1985) — but it was first and foremost a social position. This must be seen as an indication that castration in specific contexts was not often a matter of anxiety in terms of gender/sex classification as it would become to the Greeks and Romans. The proliferation of Classical discourses on castration from a sex/gender perspective was, on the other hand, an attempt to exert power and control over divergent practices, such as the Victorian discourses on sex and sexuality in their historical context, as discussed by Foucault (2010, p. 23-42).

37. Grayson (1995, p. 85).

38. The unrest provoked by the idea of male castration in Europe is well attested,

The translation of *ša rēši* as “eunuch” in the sense of castrated official was established early in the history of Assyriology and accepted by many specialists.<sup>59</sup> Brinkman endorsed this view in his discussion of the Middle-Assyrian evidence, particularly the Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL)<sup>60</sup> and Middle Assyrian Palace Decrees (MAPD),<sup>61</sup> even though he believed that the equivalence was weaker in the Babylonian dialect,<sup>62</sup> a position he retained in a later article authored with Dalley.<sup>63</sup>

Authors who deny the identity of *ša rēši* and eunuchs even in the Assyrian context are mainly von Soden,<sup>64</sup> Oppenheim,<sup>65</sup> Dalley,<sup>66</sup> Pirngruber,<sup>67</sup> Siddall<sup>68</sup> and Budin.<sup>69</sup> Their arguments include some *ša rēši* family ties and doubts regarding the important evidence from the MAL and MAPD.<sup>70</sup> Most scholars, however, accept that the evidence relating *ša rēši* to lack of progeny and castration is much more significant, especially in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian (NA) context.<sup>71</sup> The evidence includes omen texts relating *ša rēši* to barrenness,<sup>72</sup> different treatments regarding *ša rēši*'s successors,<sup>73</sup> and their systematic distinction from *ša ziqni*.<sup>74</sup>

Biblical *sārîs* (a loanword from the Akkadian expression *ša rēši*) and its usual Greek translation as *eunoûkhos* in the Septuagint have been subjected to the same scrutiny, and some authors seem to believe that these expressions were also ambiguous regarding castration since nothing in most passages would be as specific as to determine a castrated status.<sup>75</sup> This position is untenable, however, because (i) one should not expect to find information specific enough if the title was already self-evident for their audiences and (ii) the biblical texts provide extraordinary remarks linking *sārîs* to barrenness, such as the allegory of eunuchs as dry trees in Isa. 56:3-4 or the threat that the sons of Judah would be made into *sārîsîm* by the Babylonians.<sup>76</sup>

If the arguments above are correct, we then have plenty of written evidence for eunuchs in the Greek sources, the Hebrew Bible and at least the NA sources. The Achaemenid Persian administrative, archival and royal evidence is, on the other hand, unfortunately less certain. The occurrences of *ša rēši* gradually decline in the Babylonian cuneiform sources from the post-Xerxes Period onwards and seem to be replaced by *ustarbaru*, apparently a loanword from Old Persian *vaçabara* (“garment bearer”), rendered in Elamite as *lipte kuktir*, an honorific title.<sup>77</sup> One important figure described as a *vaçabara* in the Persian sources was Aspathines, who is depicted as a bearded official in the Achaemenid reliefs.<sup>78</sup> Bearers of a towel/cloth (“garment bearers”?)<sup>79</sup> are depicted in the Persepolis reliefs but they may be bearded or beardless (see below). Unlike the Assyrian and Biblical evidence, we therefore have no unequivocal evidence that could connect these Achaemenid officials with castration. Besides, as we have seen, scholars agree that Babylonian *ša rēši* was a term not always implying castration and since the Achaemenid title *ustarbaru* replaces *ša rēši* mainly in a Babylonian context, it could be unspecific as well. It



seems to have been basically a title granted to Iranian and non-Iranian collaborators of the king.<sup>80</sup> This would not, however, exclude *castrati* from the title of *ša rēši/ustarbaru* merely for these being reserved to high-ranking officials, as previously discussed.

As I have already suggested, some questions regarding Achaemenid court eunuchs could be further clarified by comparisons with other Mesopotamian traditions and, more specifically, with the Neo-Assyrian Empire. At least three main reasons arise for this: (i) the Achaemenids directly or indirectly inherited a set of Neo-Assyrian artistic and literary motives and conventions, showing an active engagement with their venerably old Mesopotamian tradition;<sup>81</sup> (ii) the Achaemenid and the Neo-Assyrian polities are set in a *longue durée* continuity in terms of imperial strategies<sup>82</sup> and eunuchism is often linked to power dimensions;<sup>83</sup> and, finally (iii) while Near Eastern eunuchs seem to be attested at least since the Ur III Period,<sup>84</sup> the institution is (as we have seen) more easily traceable in the Neo-Assyrian sources, what can help us find less ambiguous parameters of comparison.

#### ACHAEMENID AND NEO-ASSYRIAN COURT EUNUCHS: SOME ANALOGIES

A comparison of Assyrian and Achaemenid written sources shows a series of relevant analogies.

Regarding castration practices, for instance, we know that court eunuchs were probably unwillingly<sup>85</sup> castrated as boys to serve in the palatial administration. This can be shown by (i) the Akkadian expression *ša rēšūtu*, a grammatical abstract noun derived from *ša rēši*, and therefore seemingly pointing to an institution to educate eunuchs in the Neo-Assyrian Period<sup>86</sup> and (ii) a document from Ugarit recording the delivery of a “fair boy”<sup>87</sup> to become a eunuch (LÚ.SAG).<sup>88</sup> Herodotus mentions the same mechanism at work in the Achaemenid Empire, especially by the castration of “fair” and foreign boys acquired as slaves or taken captive in punitive campaigns.<sup>89</sup> In the latter case, the evidence also resonates the biblical threats that the sons of Hezekiah would be turned into *sārīsim* by the Neo-Babylonians.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, Elamite administrative texts from Persepolis have been associated with the Greek description of “eunuch tributes”, since they describe the transfer of foreign “boys” (*puhu*) who were presumably kept at “treasuries”, trained and then allocated among the royal family and the palatial elite.<sup>91</sup>

Both Neo-Assyrian *ša rēši* and Achaemenid *ustarbaru* are associated with several different functions and cannot be reduced to a specific activity. Some

for example, in the early works of authors such as Montesquieu and Gibbon, who described eunuchs as a symptom of Eastern effeminacy and decadence. See Said (1979), Hall (1989, p. 157), and Tougher (2008, p. 14). In the early 20th century, eunuchs came to be used by German historiography to deplore what they wrongly saw as a “Semitic” institution; cf. Pirngruber, *op. cit.*, p. 284-286. From the post-war Period to the 1980s, the main studies on eunuchs were timid and casuistic: Badian (1958), Reade (1972), and Oppenheim (1973). However, a shift can be felt after the publishing of Guyot's monograph on eunuchs as slaves in Classical Antiquity (1980). Finally, with Grayson (1995), Deller (1999), Dalley (2002), and Tadmor (2002), authors turned their eyes to the complex issues related to Near Eastern eunuchs.

39. Bahrani (2001), and Parpola and Whiting (2002).

40. Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

41. Briant, *op. cit.*, p. 288, and Pirngruber, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

42. Many authors from Achaemenid Studies share this idea, such as Waters (2017, p. 24) and Henkelman (2003, p. 120). Pirngruber (*op. cit.*, p. 283) also argued that it would be nonsensical for the famous eunuch Artoxares to have been married in his interpretation of the Ctesias' narrative.

43. See Henkelman (2003, p. 155).

44. Burke (2013, p. 24). Strassfeld (2022, p. 36-40). A comparative case in point is the willing castration of

Gazanfer Agha in the Ottoman Empire. His brother, Jafer, was also subjected to the operation and died. Both wanted to become close to the Ottoman prince Selim. Risky undertakings were therefore accepted for higher political goals. See Peirce (1993, p. 12), and Junne (2016, p. 118-119).

45. Peirce (1993, p. 11).

46. El-Azhari (2019, p. 162-163).

47. Grayson (1995, p. 86).

48. El-Azhari (2019, p. 162).

49. Tougher (2008, p. 22).

50. Chantraine (1968, p. 385).

51. As stated by Lenfant: “[...] the word εὐνοῦχος is absolutely unequivocal for a Greek. I know of no instance where it could be stated that the word could designate in Greek eyes a non-castrated man”. (2012, p. 285).

52. Hdt. 8.104-105. Lenfant (2012, p. 271-285).

53. Hdt. 6.32.

54. Tougher (2013).

55. Peled (2016, p. 220-221); *pace* Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

56. AHW (m/s, p. 973-974), and Grayson (1995, p. 90). This is an expression built with the relative-determinative pronoun *ša*, meaning “he/those of”, and independent from any nominal element preceding it (Caplice; Snell, 2002, p. 57-58). It is placed in construct/bound form with the noun *rēšu(m)*, head, in the sing., masc., gen. form: *rēši(m)*. One can also find the archaizing expression *šūt rēši* in Standard Babylonian, see Mattila

analogies, however, can be found, such as their prominence as overseers of royal tombs. Neo-Assyrian archives mention a class of *ša rēši* often associated with the overseeing of royal crypts.<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, as noted by Groß, “bearers of the Elamite title *lipte kutip*, which is thought to correspond to the Persian title *ustarbaru* (Babylonian rendering) and thus to *ša rēši*, are attested as guarding the royal tomb”.<sup>93</sup> Ctesias apparently reflects this view in his narratives of Achaemenid eunuchs, even if some authors cautiously advise that he may have conflated different officials and wrongly interpreted his sources.<sup>94</sup> The fact that bearded men such as Aspathines may have held the title of *vaçabara* could indicate its lesser specificity in the Achaemenid Period — again not precluding the possibility of some of them being *castrati*.

Achaemenid and Neo-Assyrian eunuchs often seem to be attendants close to the royal households, including queens and kings. Authors have noticed, for instance, the importance of eunuch attendants (*ša rēši*) under the household of the famous Sargonid queen Naqi’a, as compared to the composition of the staff of other members of the royal family.<sup>95</sup> In the Murašû Archive, bailiffs of the Achaemenid queen’s household<sup>96</sup> (and specifically one servant of queen Parysatis)<sup>97</sup> are *ustarbarū*.<sup>98</sup> The Greek sources also somehow reflect the link between eunuchs and some royal Achaemenid women for they frequently focus on the responsibility of queens in punishing rebellious *castrati*.<sup>99</sup> Etymologically, as we have seen, *ša rēši/eunoûkhos* indicate that eunuchs were originally associated with the task of protecting the king in his chambers. Evidence from the Middle and Neo-Assyrian Periods and other Near Eastern palatial administrations indicates that eunuchs had access to the king’s intimacy and that “they were some of the closest officials to the king”.<sup>100</sup> In the Greek sources on Achaemenid Persia, the association of kings’ bedrooms and eunuch guards is overwhelming, as shown by Lenfant.<sup>101</sup> Those carrying the Persian title *ustarbaru*, if they had anything to do with *castrati*, were also close to the royal family.<sup>102</sup>

Neo-Assyrian court eunuchs were employed in the royal administration, including in the military, provincial government, or palatial service and liturgical activities.<sup>103</sup> Neo-Assyrian sources, for instance, contain relevant references of eunuchs in high military positions and we know that the so-called “chief eunuch” was mainly a military position.<sup>104</sup> Classical references to able Achaemenid eunuch commanders (sometimes designated as “chiliarchs”) could be related to the same reality.<sup>105</sup> Ctesias seems to imply that Menostanēs, Artaxerxes I’s nephew and a military commander (in the Revolt of Megabyzus), was a eunuch,<sup>106</sup> and this man has been persuasively associated with a Manuštanu from the Murašû Archives.<sup>107</sup> Manuštanu is named a *mār bīti šarri* (“son of the royal house” i.e., “courtier” of the king)<sup>108</sup> and had formerly held the same responsibilities as a certain Artahšar, linked

to the eunuch Artoxares from Ctesias' *Persika*. However, since the archives contain no unequivocal reference to castration, there remains some doubt regarding the eunuch status of Manuštanu and others.<sup>109</sup>

The fact that eunuchs could attain high positions possibly explains why narratives concerning treacherous eunuchs gained wide currency in the ANE.<sup>110</sup> Esarhaddon feared coups from eunuchs<sup>111</sup> and Neo-Assyrian copies of the *šumma izbu* mention *ša rēši* who threaten the king.<sup>112</sup> In the case of Achaemenid Persia, the author of the Book of Esther imagined a plot devised by eunuchs against Xerxes.<sup>113</sup> A late Babylonian Dynastic prophecy seems to state that the troubled succession of Artaxerxes IV had something to do with a *ša rēši*, probably a reference to Bagoas.<sup>114</sup> The Greeks report actions of both trustworthy and treacherous Achaemenid eunuchs, indicating that *castrati* were seen through the binary scheme of securing or failing to secure the king's safety in his intimacy.

Biblical and Greek sources are unequivocal concerning the existence of *castrati* in the Achaemenid Empire and they generally agree with practices known from the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Achaemenid sources are elusive, but apparently provide some parallels with previous traditions that cannot be neglected. All these overlapping aspects make it clear that *castrati* should be studied as a Near Eastern *longue durée* phenomenon, and that Achaemenid Persia cannot be examined without due attention to previous Mesopotamian models, in which eunuchs assumed prestigious roles in the palace and beyond.<sup>115</sup>

## Beardless figures in the Achaemenid and Neo-Assyrian reliefs: some analytical possibilities

Except for some specific misidentifications,<sup>116</sup> most Assyriologists accept that numerous beardless attendants in the Neo-Assyrian monumental reliefs mostly referred to eunuch figures.<sup>117</sup> Achaemenid eunuchs, on the other hand, were earlier identified by Erich Schmidt in some beardless figures from the Persepolis reliefs,<sup>118</sup> but authors are now generally skeptical regarding such classifications and usually avoid the label. Eunuchs that had earlier been identified in the reliefs of the Southeastern palace (the so-called "Harem of Xerxes" structure), *tacara* ("palace" of Darius) and the Treasury Hall, for instance, are now rather associated with shaven priests due to the archaeological context<sup>119</sup> and some attributes, such as the bashlyk covering their chins and the presence of a scarf-like object (i.e., "towels"), that are compared to similar figures in the Oxus Treasure, Persepolis seals and to later Sasanian tools.<sup>120</sup> The argument, however, neither overcomes the strong analogies with

(2000, p. 131) and Siddall, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

57. Siddall, *op. cit.*, p. 225. Peled (2015, p. 208). N'Shea (2018, p. 263-264). In the Neo-Assyrian sources, we find constructions with the logograms LÚ, SAG (Sum. LU.SAĜ), and the plurality sign <sup>mes</sup>. When reference is made to a group: LÚ.<sup>mes</sup>. SAG, LÚ.SAG.<sup>mes</sup>, cf. Grayson (1995, p. 90) and Deller (1999, p. 303); (LÚ). ša-SAG, ša-SAG e ša-LÚ. SAG, cf. Groß (2020, p. 239). The title LÚ.SAG occurs in administrative texts and lists from the Early Dynastic Period and Ur III but the provided information does not enable us to ascertain whether such figures were *castrati*. See Peled (2016, p. 209).

58. Frazer (2022), and Tougher (2008, p. 21, 58).

59. Zimmern (1889, p. 116, n. 2), Peled (2016, p. 207), N'Shea (2018, p. 260).

60. MAL § 15; 20. Cf. Roth (1995, p. 153-194).

61. MAPD §3, 8, 9, 21, 22, 2. Cf. Roth (1995, p. 195-212).

62. Brinkman (1968, p. 309-311).

63. Brinkman and Dalley (1988, p. 85-86). The CDA states that the Babylonian dialect uses the expression for a class of courtiers, whereas the Middle and Neo-Assyrian dialects could render it as "eunuch" (CDA, p. 302). The CAD, on the other hand, specifically offers the translation of eunuch for the Middle Assyrian sources — which are less ambiguous (CAD, š, p. 292-296), whereas the AHw denies the translation for eunuchs in every case (AHw, m/s, p. 974). Finally, the RIA accepted the identification of *ša rēši* as

eunuchs but grouped them with figures whose castrated status was based on very thin evidence, such as the *gala*, *kalû*, *assinnu*, and the *kurgarrû* (see footnote 103).

64. AHw (m/s, p. 973-974).

65. Oppenheim, *op. cit.*

66. Dalley (2002).

67. Pirngruber (2011).

68. Siddall, *op. cit.*

69. Budin (2023, p. 160-170).

70. The main arguments often presuppose gender/sex aspects, such as the idea that *ša rēši* would be unable to marry or adopt children.

71. Reade (1972, p. 91-92), Borger (1979, p. 269), Parpola (1979, p. 33, 2012, p. 616), Grayson (1995), Tadmor (1995), Deller (1999), Barjamovic (2011, p. 57), Groß (2020, p. 255-257), and Portuese (2020, p. 69).

72. CT 23 10:14. See Peled (2016, p. 225).

73. ABRT 24.4. See Peled (2016, p. 224).

74. The “bearded” courtiers. See Peled (2016, p. 229), and Fales (2023, p. 447-449).

75. Cornelius (2009, p. 328).

76. Kgs 20:18. See Tadmor (1995; 2002), Cornelius (2009, p. 329-330), and Carvalho (2023, p. 109).

77. Henkelman (2003), Jursa (2011), and Tavernier (2014).

78. Waters (2017, p. 41-44).

79. Razmjou links the title to the textiles brought by beardless figures in the

Neo-Assyrian imagery nor precludes the possibility of *castrati* having acted as priests in particular positions.<sup>121</sup>

In the following sections, I offer an outline of some noteworthy similarities between Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid beardless figures.

## Attendants flanking the king

In the Persepolis Southeastern Palace, which now seems to have served a cultic function,<sup>122</sup> some reliefs show the king flanked by bearded and beardless attendants carrying towels and fly-whisks. Some of these attendants (who do not wear bashlyks) are clearly beardless.<sup>123</sup> As we know, eunuch attendants with fly-whisks and towels are common motives from the Neo-Assyrian relief cycles<sup>124</sup> and the association of eunuchs/beardless attendants with fly-whisks and fans is a widespread feature of ANE court scenes.<sup>125</sup>



Figure 1 – “Gypsum wall panel relief; carved in low relief; Sennacherib watches the capture of Lachish. Production date: 700-692 BCE”. © The Trustees of the British Museum (BM 124911).

Striking similarities between Neo-Assyrian Sargonid<sup>126</sup> and Achaemenid conventions for depicting attendants with fly-whisks and towels can be noticed.<sup>127</sup> For instance, if we compare a section of Sennacherib's Lachish throne scene in the Southwest palace at Nineveh (Figure 1)<sup>128</sup> with the Persian throne reliefs on the jambs of the southern doorways of the Throne Hall (Figures 2-3),<sup>129</sup> we can see that these kings are depicted with emblems of power such as a scepter and a bow (Sennacherib) or a lotus flower and scepter (Persian king). They sit on thrones carried by "throne bearers" in the "Atlas pose" (raised arms).<sup>130</sup> Right behind the Persian king stands a beardless attendant wearing a bashlyk, carrying a fly-whisk (right hand) and a "towel" (left hand), whereas the Assyrian king is flanked by two bareheaded beardless attendants with the same tools in the same positions.

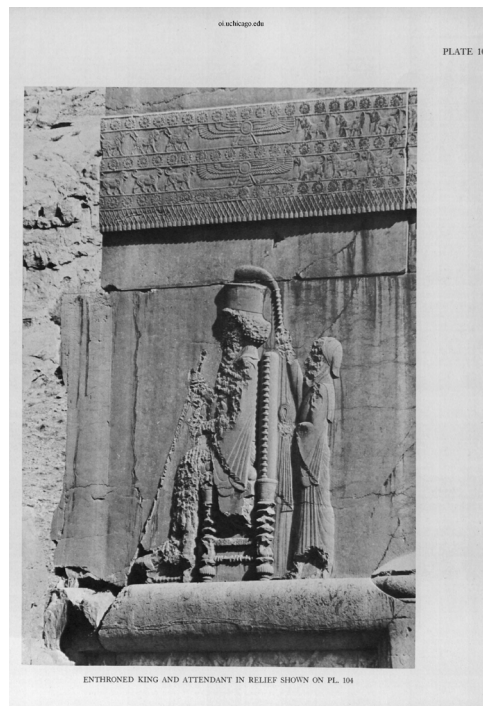
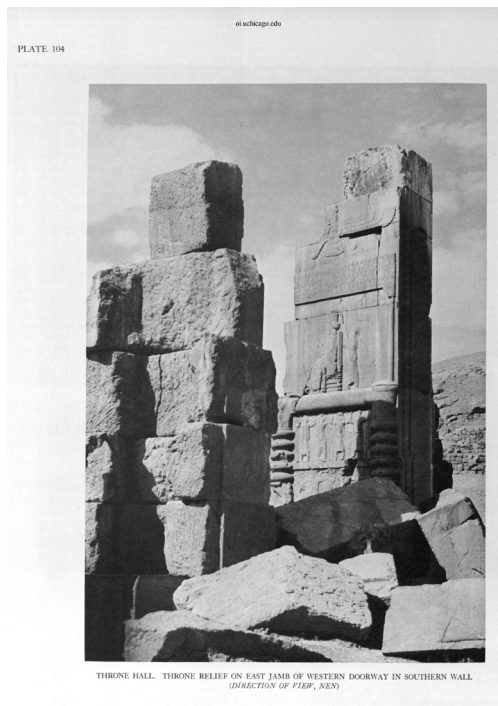


Figure 2 and 3 – "Throne Hall. Throne Relief on East Jamb of Western Doorway in the Southern Hall. (Direction of view, NEN)". / "Enthroned king and attendant in relief shown on Pl. 104". Schmidt (1953, pl. 104-105). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.

Persepolis reliefs (2005, p. 245).

80. Tavernier (2014). Late Persian *šabestān*, meaning "the overseer of the private quarters", was a word used to designate "eunuchs", who are usually depicted as beardless officials in the reliefs and seals – cf. Lerner and Skjærvø (2006, p. 115). It is therefore possible that another unattested Old Persian expression existed specifically for the *castrati*. See theories for an unattested \**xšapāstāna* in Shahbazi (2012), and Llewellyn-Jones (2013, p. 98).

81. Root (1979, p. 25, 165-176) and Feldman (2007, p. 273). See also the very interesting remark from Waters (2023, p. 390).

82. Rollinger (2021, p. 368-382).

83. Assante (2017). N'Shea (2018, p. 253).

84. Peled (2016, p. 209). N'Shea (2018, p. 255-258). I consider that the strongest candidate for a court eunuch in texts from this time is the Sumerian word "tīru", explicitly described as a castrated man in the *Bilgameš and the Netherworld* saga and associated with palace attendants in lexical lists, cf. Peled (2016, p. 252-257) and George (1997).

85. It was imposed from an early age.

86. Deller (1999, p. 305-306). KAV 94:4/ SAA 12.1, cf. Kataja and Whiting (1995, p. 4): *ša LÚ.SAG-ti-šú* ("of his eunuchship").

87. Peled (2016, p. 220).

88. Peled (2016, p. 220-221); *pace* Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, p. 326. Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions often mention eunuchs taken as

war spoils. E.g., Novotny and Jeffers (2018, p. 72).

89. Hdt. 6.9.4; 6.32.

90. 2 Kgs 20:18. See Tadmor (1995, p. 322).

91. Briant, *op. cit.*, p. 450, Giovinazzo (1995, p. 151), and Henkelman (2003, p. 134, n. 55). In both the Persian and the Neo-Assyrian cases, however, it has been speculated that eunuchs would have changed their names at some moment after their education in the palace and therefore it would be difficult to determine if they came mostly from foreign or local (even noble) origins. See Grayson (1995, p. 95), Deller (1999, p. 306), and Tougher (2002, p. 145-146).

92. See N'Shea (2016, p. 217), and Groß (2020, 304-307).

93. Groß (2020, p. 242, n. 468). See also Henkelman (2003, p. 154-156), Jursa (2011, p. 168-169), and Tavernier (2014, 311).

94. Henkelman (2003, p. 154-156). Waters (2017, p. 40-43).

95. Melville (1999, p. 106-10). Svärd says that "in the Neo-Assyrian texts, the eunuchs worked under the authority of the palace women although they were not exclusively working for them" (2015, p. 72). Note how Llewellyn-Jones (2020, p. 372) summarizes the fate of court eunuchs in Greek descriptions of the Achaemenid court: "[...] any treasonable activities from court eunuchs could lead to their torture or death – which was always ordered at the express command of the king's women (the king rarely doled out their fates)".

A comparison of a section of Ashurbanipal's lion libation scene (North Palace, Nineveh) (Figure 4)<sup>131</sup> with the reliefs from Xerxes' Southeastern Palace in Persepolis (Figure 5)<sup>132</sup> reinforces these structural similarities: attendants are presented in pairs, two beardless attendants in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs, and one beardless and one bearded official in the Achaemenid reliefs.<sup>133</sup> They are figured symmetrically, one slightly covering the other's body, both wearing ordinary Assyrian or Persian clothes, carrying fly-whisks in their right hand and cloths in their left hand.<sup>134</sup> They flank the king with their tools. The king bears symbols of piety, prowess and majesty: lotus flowers, scepters, bows or libation bowls, according to their respective contexts.

These beardless figures from Assyria and Persia are shown as attributes of power and ascribed signs and performances of masculinity (albeit a non-hegemonic one).<sup>135</sup> Both Persian and Assyrian eunuchs are depicted as having privileged access to the king, bearing prestigious apotropaic instruments, such as "towels", parasols and fly-whisks. They are generally able to share the same gadgets and clothes and act in the same way as their bearded counterparts, and they occupy positions that are also ascribed to other masculine (i.e., bearded) figures (Figures 6-8).



Figure 4 – "Gypsum wall relief panel. The king himself is pouring a libation, which the caption tells us is wine, over the bodies of four lions. Behind him stand attendants with fans and towels, his bodyguards and grooms with the royal horses. Production date: 645-640 BCE". © The Trustees of the British Museum (BM 124886).



Figure 5 – “Harem of Xerxes, King, and Two Attendants on Southern Doorway of Main Hall. B. West Jamb”. Schmid (1953, pl. 193B). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago. (P 60726).

96. BE 9 28; 9 50. Stolper, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

97. PBS 2/1 38. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

98. Stolper, *op. cit.*, p. 62-63, Brosius (1996, p. 127, 2021, p. 157), and Tavernier (2014, p. 313).

99. Llewellyn-Jones (2020, p. 372-375, 2023). Finally, even if the Book of Esther was a later Hellenistic composition, its description of eunuchs in the queen’s households must reflect in some way the material from the Persian Period. Otherwise, we should wonder where the formulation came from since the Hellenistic courts apparently provide no similar models (Strootman, 2017).

100. Peled (2016, p. 214-222).

101. Lenfant (2021, p. 461).

102. Tavernier (2014, p. 320).

103. Court eunuchs must be separated from other “gender ambiguous” figures from Ancient Mesopotamia such as the *gala*, *kalû*, *kulu’u*, *assinnu* and the *kurgarrû*. The *gala/kalû* was a figure associated with specific liturgical performances, cf. Peled (2016, p. 280). The *kurgarrû* and the *assinnu* were priests from the cult of the Mesopotamian deity Inanna/Ishtar, who may have performed a kind of gender role “subversion” on specific occasions, cf. Frymer-Kensky (1989, p. 190), Peled (2016, p. 282-283), Svärd and Nissinen (2018). The *kulu’u*, according to Peled, was a word used to depreciatively designate men who were perceived as “effeminate” in the emic context (2016, p. 282). As Bottéro had already noticed regarding

all these figures, there is no evidence that they were castrated (1987, p. 346). Moreover, two other figures, the *girseqû* and the *tîru* may have been castrated royal officials. The *girseqû* could have designated a court eunuch in the Old Babylonian dialect since he was a palace official, usually described by lack of progeniture, the “typical” adoptive father in the “Hammurabi Laws”. The *tîru* was possibly another sort of palace attendant who may have been castrated as well. The evidence is, however, inconclusive, as explained by Peled (2016, p. 253, 286).

104. Mattila (2000, p. 63-66), Tadmor (2002), and Fales (2010, p. 142-143).

105. See Charles (2015, p. 290-293), who tends to doubt Bagoas was a eunuch.

106. Waters (2017, p. 113).

107. König (1928, p. 156), Cardascia, *op. cit.*, p. 7, Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 75, n. 168, Stolper (1985, p. 91-92), Dandamayev, *op. cit.*, p. 36, 94, Schmitt (2011, p. 124), Tuplin (2020, p. 35-36), and Dromard (2021, p. 224).

108. Rather than “prince”. Tuplin and Ma (2020, p. 32).

109. Stolper (1985, p. 91), and Treuk (2023a).

110. Ambos (2009).

111. N’Shea (2016, p. 219), and Frahm (2017, p. 187).

112. N’Shea (2018, p. 263).

113. Est. 2.21.

114. Grayson (1975, p. 34-35), Brosius (2021, p. 205), and Kuhrt, *op. cit.*, p. 425-426.

It must be stressed that, unlike the Achaemenid eunuchs, Neo-Assyrian eunuchs can also be depicted with visible muscles, in military performances and/or performing acts of violence against other men (e.g., BM 124802). Interestingly, Margaret Cool Root has noticed that, in the case of Xerxes’ palace:

On those doorjamb which show the king between an inner chamber of a building and the main hall of that building (a situation in which the king is always represented facing into the main hall), the attendant carrying the flywhisk and towel is always represented beardless. [...]. When figures are situated on doorjamb leading from the main hall to the outside of the palace, both attendants are bearded figures. This fact suggests that perhaps the beardless servants attended the king only within the palace, and that, therefore, by changing the fly-whisk carrier to a bearded figure here, an allusion has been made to the idea of the king’s imminent departure from the palace.<sup>136</sup>



Figure 6 – “Harem of Xerxes, King, and Two Attendants on Northern Doorway of Main Hall. B. East Jamb”. Schmid (1953, pl. 194B). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago. (P 57861).



This association of beardless attendants with inner spaces and non-military activities may indicate, in the Achaemenid visual sources, some slight departure from the Neo-Assyrian conceptions of *castrati*.<sup>137</sup> Neo-Assyrian depictions of the eunuch's male muscular body and his aggression of foes<sup>138</sup> overlap with some relevant traits ascribed to hegemonic masculinity in Mesopotamia<sup>139</sup> and Egypt.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, Achaemenid eunuchs are relatively more present in courtly or priestly settings and apparently did not assume so many military responsibilities as their Neo-Assyrian counterparts.<sup>141</sup> Thus, their relationship to other masculinities may have been shaped in different ways. We should, however, be careful not to overlook the peculiarities of Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid artistic conventions:<sup>142</sup> unlike the Neo-Assyrian figures, Achaemenid monumental reliefs rarely depict scenes of violence or narrative scenes, the exception being the Behistun relief.<sup>143</sup>



Figure 7 – “Harem of Xerxes, King, and Two Attendants on Northern Doorway of Main Hall. A. West Jamb”. Schmid (1953, pl. 194A). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago. (P 57860).

115. Most likely occupying a position of “complicit” masculinity, as argued by N’Shea (2018, p. 297-298).

116. The identification of a “royal eunuch” in the garden scene of Ashurbanipal (instead of an Assyrian queen) by Schmidt-Colinet is the most emblematic case. See discussion in Albenda (1998) and Ziffer (2023, p. 77).

117. Collins (2010, p. 182). In the same study that refused the general equivalence of *ša rēši* with *castrati* in the cuneiform sources, Oppenheim refused the identification of some beardless images in Neo-Assyrian monumental reliefs to eunuchs, arguing that they could have been boys or shaven officials (Oppenheim, 1973, p. 334). Reade, however, had earlier emphasized that the beardless figures were identifiable by their “eunuchoid features”. He also related them to the identification as *ša rēši* in the texts and concluded that this was “unlikely to be a coincidence” (Reade, 1972, p. 91). Grayson disagreed with Oppenheim as well, stating that “the beardless figures certainly look like mature adults, not boys, and the Assyrian artists were quite capable of portraying boys” (Grayson, 1995, p. 93). The presence of multiple Neo-Assyrian seals of beardless men named *ša rēši* in cultic scenes is further proof of this visual identity. Watanabe (1999). Niederreiter (2015; 2022).

118. Schmidt (1953, p. 133, 165, 169).

119. Razmjou (2005, p. 241-243).

120. Razmjou and Roaf (2013, p. 417-422).

121. The conflation of priests and *castrati* has some reverberance in related sources — Plato thought *Bardiya*, the magus, was a “eunuch” (*Nom.* 3. 695b); the Sasanian evidence has seals and sculptures of beardless men that are alternatively called *šabestān* (“eunuch”) or *magi*; cf. Lerner and Skjærvø (2006, p. 114). In this discussion, I assume that beardless figures from *tacara* and the Southeastern palace were *castrati* from the strong structural similarities with the Neo-Assyrian images and the higher degree of certainty concerning Neo-Assyrian eunuchs and eunuch figures overall.

122. Razmjou (2010, p. 243-244).

123. Schmidt (1953, pl. 193, A, B).

124. N'Shea (2018, p. 271-272). Ziffer (2023). See among others: BM 124535; 124564; 124886; 124911.

125. *Coşkun; Çavuşoğlu* (2022). More recently, Irit Ziffer proposes that the towel/napkin and the parasol actually configure emblems of eunuchs, even a “badge of office”. Ziffer traces its permanence up to the Sasanian Period and even later (2023, p. 88-91). The concept was incorporated in Greek perceptions of the Achaemenid royalty; see Llewellyn-Jones (2016, p. 34) on the “Camel *lekythos*”.

126. Collins (2010, p. 192).

127. Root (1979, p. 286-290) and Collins (2010, p. 197).

128. BM 124911.

129. Schmidt (1953, pl. 102-113) and Amiet (1977, pl. 143).

130. An allegory of subject

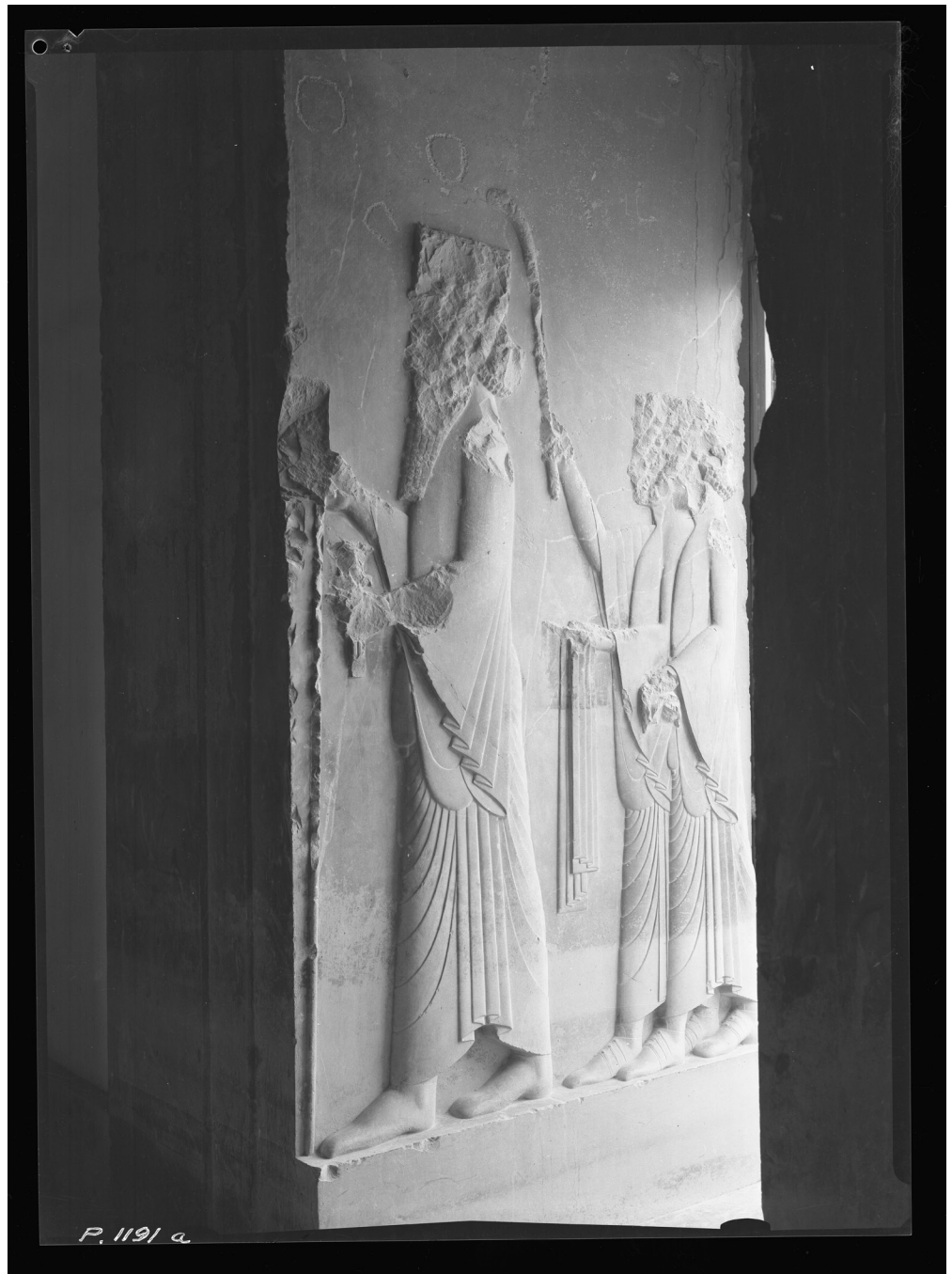


Figure 8 – “Harem of Xerxes, King, and Two Attendants on Southern Doorway of Main Hall. A. East Jamb”. Schmid (1953, pl. 193A). Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago. (P 60725).

## “Das Unheimliche”

This section endeavors to apply the category of “uncanny” to the analysis of eunuch images, proposing functional analogies in both the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid contexts. However, it must be stressed from the start that a strictly psychoanalytical definition of the “uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*) as developed by Sigmund Freud would be restricted mainly to Western modern experiences since Freud argued that this phenomenon was fundamentally linked to situations in which a “repressed animistic worldview” suddenly seemed to be supported by a specific event (or when “repressed infantile complexes”, including the “castration-complex”, were revived by some particular impression).<sup>144</sup> Accordingly, in Freud’s system, Assyrian and Persian reliefs would belong to the realm of “animism”, i.e., precisely the mentalities which the “modern mind” had “repressed”, and therefore they would be out of the scope of his theory.<sup>145</sup>

That the category of “uncanny” can still be applied to understand ANE images is, however, demonstrated by some relevant observations. First, as Freud himself acknowledges, the “uncanny” was not a psychoanalytical tool, but an *aesthetic* category<sup>146</sup> that psychoanalysis sought to explain in terms of its psychic effects. Secondly, the “uncanny” is an autonomous category that had existed before psychoanalysis.<sup>147</sup> It is associated with experiences of dread or sudden fear in encounters with gruesome phenomena and has parallels in the Mesopotamian world — even if cultural reactions to it varied substantially.<sup>148</sup>

In what follows, I therefore consider the “uncanny” as a broad category.<sup>149</sup> In such definition, an “uncanny experience”:

[...] involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one’s sense of oneself (of one’s so-called ‘personality’ or ‘sexuality,’ for example) seems strangely questionable. The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper [...]. It is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context.<sup>150</sup>

Through the category of uncanny, we may try to demonstrate how some Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid images of beardless attendants could be related on a more fundamental and functional level, taking into consideration what eunuch reliefs effectively *worked to do* in their original contexts.<sup>151</sup> An “ascribed” agency<sup>152</sup>

peoples supporting the kingship — the Persian model differing from the Assyrian one in the scale and individualization of the throne bearers’ figures. Both images reflect conceptualizations of kingship that emphasize the subjects supporting the realm, the king’s supremacy, and his protection with the help of diligent “staff-bearers”, often beardless ones. See Root (1979, p. 147-153).

131. Barnett (1976, pl. LVI).

132. Schmidt (1953, pl. 193 A & B).

133. Bearded and beardless attendants flanking the king possibly evoked (by metonymy) two classes of palace servants. Note, however, that some reliefs show both servants as bearded officials (Figure 6).

134. In the Achaemenid reliefs, only one servant carries the fly-whisk.

135. N’Shea (2018, p. 102-103), and Ziffer (2023, p. 80-86).

136. Root (1979, p. 287).

137. Collins (2010, p. 197) and N’Shea (2018, p. 298-306). For a discussion of how images of violence are used to establish or vehiculate gender hierarchies in Ancient Egypt, see Matic (2021, p. 4-5). See also Llewellyn-Jones’ (2002, p. 24) description of these beardless attendants in the *tacara*: “The eunuch’s face is smooth, clean-shaven and youthful; his eyes are wide and alert and his mouth extends into a serene smile. His presence on the door jamb confirms the idea that the rooms beyond this doorway were given over for private uses of the king and his immediate family.

All in all, some six eunuchs are depicted in the Persepolis reliefs, often (but not always) accompanied by a bearded official who is no doubt meant to contrast with the eunuch's smooth effeminacy".

138. Note that the Assyrian depiction of eunuchs changes throughout the times, whereas the Persian one is more stable — a matter for future study.

139. Winter (1996, 2008, p. 81).

140. Parkinson (2008, p. 122-123). In the Mesopotamian and Egyptian cases, these conventions have been linked to eroticism. See Assante (2008) and Parkinson (2008).

141. Fales (2023, p. 447).

142. The omega-shaped Persian dress is an Achaemenid innovation under Greek influence, Boardman (2000, p. 109-111) and Feldman (2007, p. 270-271). Persian beardless figures also have bodies that are exactly as their bearded counterparts, with no conspicuous proportion of breasts and chins.

143. Root (1979, p. 192).

144. Freud (1919, p. 321): "Das Unheimliche des Erlebens kommt zustande, wenn verdrängte infantile Komplexe durch einen Eindruck wieder belebt werden, oder wenn überwundene primitive Überzeugungen wieder bestätigt scheinen".

145. As discussed by Hernando, Freud drew analogies between individuals and cultures — seen through an evolutionist perspective — believing that "primitive" cultures expressed similar

can be inferred, for example, from the emotional effects<sup>153</sup> provoked by the uncanniness of such monuments over their audiences.<sup>154</sup>

Let us consider, for example, some panels in Room G of Ashurnasirpal's II Northwest Palace in Nimrud. These show the king flanked by either beardless attendants or mythical creatures ("genii"), possibly performing purification rituals.<sup>155</sup> One scene shows the attendant with a fan/fly-whisk and a cloth on his shoulders and facing the king in an apparent ritual (Figure 9). Overall, the images from Room G (and the entire East Suite)<sup>156</sup> are associated with a supernatural set and depict the king's relation to the gods and his role as a performer of religious rituals.<sup>157</sup> The images of the Persepolis Southeastern Palace (figures 5-8), on the other hand, are placed on the jambs of the doorways.<sup>158</sup> They alternate images of the king flanked by bearded and beardless attendants with fly-whisks, parasols and "towels" alongside scenes of the "heroic encounter", which shows a Persian hero or the king himself fighting a beast<sup>159</sup> and even killing lions with a dagger.<sup>160</sup>



Figure 9 – "Gypsum wall panel relief: showing a formal scene. Ashurnasirpal II appears holding a bow and bowl flanked by a human attendant with a fly-flapper". Production date: 865-860 BCE". © The Trustees of the British Museum (BM 124569).

Through figures of *genii*, as well as ritual and heroic encounter scenes, the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid reliefs fill their respective environments with images of supernatural and cosmological overtones.<sup>161</sup> The well-known repetition of similar motives in these settings most likely provoked a feeling of *déjà vu* — an uncanny experience *par excellence*, defined by the uncertain feeling of having lived something before.<sup>162</sup> It should be added that ceremonial activities possibly took place in the vicinities of Room G<sup>163</sup> and the Southeastern Palace.<sup>164</sup> It seems therefore much likely that ritual activities and supernatural scenes were enhanced by the presence of “uncanny” bodies, such as eunuchs’ — figured and possibly organic as well. The vision of these eunuch bodies could be spontaneously felt as awe and disorientation when spectators, for example, realized unexpected or strange features on a familiar body, such as the lack of a beard or “androgynous” characteristics on a full-grown male.<sup>165</sup> This could have led them to infer the act of castration, which, in an ANE context, probably induced feelings of unease among the non-castrated male elite, especially by evoking the notion of barrenness.<sup>166</sup> This reinforces Ataç’s statements regarding mainly some scenes of royal cults from the reigns of Sennacherib and Ashurnasirpal II, saying that the eunuch figures pointed “toward an environment” that was “to a great extent removed from the mundane”.<sup>167</sup>

Thus, “uncanny” eunuch figures could contribute to the royal programs’ general “unfamiliar”, awe-inspiring and mythological atmosphere. Accordingly, the reason why eunuch figures are often found among cosmological scenes of *genii*, sacred trees, royal hunts and mythological “heroic encounters” is because aesthetically, all these figures contributed to elicit emotions of strong estrangement.

### A key for future interpretations? Reliefs, barrenness and performance.

Also, differently from an evolutionist conception of monumental images as forms of “animism”, eunuch reliefs can be better understood if examined through the theory of “performative image”.<sup>168</sup> Drawing from Bahrani’s reflections on the concept of *šalmu* in the Assyro-Babylonian tradition, one should consider monumental reliefs as more than mere “visual descriptions” of eunuchs. According to this perspective, the Mesopotamians could conceive of images as *potentially enacting* presences via similitude, metaphor or synecdoche, in what would be an endless chain of ontological identities inscribed in the world.<sup>169</sup> As elucidated by Bahrani:

phenomena as the individual in his early psychological development. Cf. Hernando, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

146. Freud (1919, p. 297).

147. It was conceptualized by other authors from different traditions, including the one that Freud criticized in his famous essay *Das Unheimliche*: Ernst Jentsch (1906).

148. Sonik (2023b).

149. Royle (2003, p. 1-38). For strictly psychoanalytical approaches, see Freud (1919, p. 315-316) and Bahrani (2003, p. 171-173).

150. Royle (2003, p. 1).

151. Monumental reliefs are traditionally analyzed as “ideology” or “propaganda” for an intended audience but this view is undermined by the fact that they were hardly accessible to outsiders. See a summary of possible approaches in Nadali (2012). See also Ranieri (2018).

152. Winter (2007, p. 42-69).

153. See Sonik (2023a).

154. This agency can be formulated in terms of the spontaneous emotional experience provoked by the uncanniness of the reliefs over their audiences.

155. Meuszyński (1981, p. 40-49).

156. Brown (2010).

157. Collins (2010, p. 182).

158. Persian sculptures usually have “emblematic” rather than “narrative” nature. For this distinction, see Root (1979, p. 193).

159. Schmidt (1953, pl 195-196).

160. Some lion libation scenes provide similar analogies. See Barnett (1976, p. 53-54), Root (1979, p. 304), Garrison (2010), Rede (2018, p. 106-108), N'Shea (2018, p. 196-252), and Biazotto (2018).

161. Reflecting the erudite knowledge of their idealizers. See Ataç (2010).

162. Royle (2003, p. 178): “*Déjà vu*: the uncanny figure of that which is irreducible to the psychical or the real, an undecidable trembling that phantomizes the possibility of ‘belief’”. Rahimi (2013, p. 4): “Ghosts and doppelgangers, automatons and living dolls, mirror images, shadows, phantoms, twins, apparitions, looking-glass worlds, *déjà vu*, alter-egos, self-alienated or split personhoods, these all share the basic feature of a doubleness imposed on a presumably unique original object, and the in-between liminality resulting from that process [...]”.

163. Collins (2010, p. 187).

164. Razmjou (2005, p. 244).

165. Didi-Huberman (2010, p. 227-230).

166. The fear of not having offspring to care for the ancestors is clearly manifested in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. See George (2003, p. 530). In this passage, the shade of Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about the conditions in the Netherworld, showing that a man has better circumstances whenever he has had many sons to perform ancestral cults and libations on his behalf, whereas those who were childless, such as the *tīru*, were left unattended (George, 1997).

*šalmu* is [...] clearly part of a configuration that enables presence through reproduction. It is necessary for a valid representation. It is not a statue or a relief or a painting; in other words, it is not a work of art.<sup>170</sup>

Therefore, I suggest that the prominence and repetition of beardless figures in Achaemenid and Neo-Assyrian palaces may be linked to a conscious effort to perpetuate eunuchs as individuals or as a group by their numerous sculptures. For, as explained by Bahrani, “representation in portraiture is a doubling or a reproduction of the represented. It can immortalize the sitter through reproduction, *just as progeny does*, according to Freud and Lacan”.<sup>171</sup> But then, why would Persians and Assyrians want to perpetuate courtiers in their palatial programs?<sup>172</sup>

As discussed above, eunuchs were loyal servants of the Persian and Assyrian kings, but were unable to beget children. Thus, their “multiplication” through images — whose ontological identity with living bodies was safeguarded via similitude and liturgy — would amount to a due compensation for their lack of progeny. Compensatory mechanisms for the eunuch’s lack of progeny seem to have been important for the Mesopotamian ideologies, as attested by documents recording land grants to *castrati*,<sup>173</sup> the possibility of eunuchs owning large estates,<sup>174</sup> and even literary texts promising divine compensation for *castrati* (as seen in Isa. 56:3-4 above).<sup>175</sup> Rock reliefs could therefore integrate part of this strategy and, accordingly, would justify the prominent presence of eunuchs in bas-reliefs. A careful consideration of this hypothesis in the future will require a thorough examination of the Persian evidence as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Castrati* should not be outrightly seen as despised and “effeminate” attendants occupying low positions, and therefore there is nothing to dissuade us from thinking they could have been powerful courtiers in both the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid Empires — aside from our own modern Western preconceptions. The written and visual evidence points towards a different direction and shows that eunuchs were indeed performers of a kind of (non-hegemonic) masculinity, occupying prominent positions in the ANE.

The Akkadian texts from the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the Greek and Hebrew sources from the Achaemenid Empire show little ambiguity regarding castrated courtiers and describe these officials in very similar terms. The ambiguous

Old Persian, Elamite and Late Babylonian texts are harder to interpret but seem to provide at least some clues to the important attributes and functions of *castrati*.

Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid monumental depictions of *castrati* show several striking analogies. Accordingly, these cultures most likely shared similar notions concerning eunuchs and possibly even the same prototypes for the reliefs in specific cases.<sup>176</sup> But images give us information that the texts cannot provide. We see, for instance, that the Achaemenids slightly depart from the Assyrian conception of *castrati* in their visual expression. Besides, the archaeological context and the concept of “uncanny” can show how eunuch figures affected viewers with emotions of disorientation, fear and awe, evoking a supernatural and cosmological setting. Finally, given the historical context and ANE conceptions of monumental reliefs, we could propose that these images *enacted* the presence of individual and collective eunuchs, compensating these highly esteemed officials for their lack of progeny in a society that put extreme value in the cult of ancestors and other activities usually ascribed to one’s descendants. Thus, eunuch figures could have filled a *performative* function as well. I expect to explore all these theoretical possibilities in depth in the future.

167. Ataç (2010, p. 171).

168. Bahrani (2003, 2004, 2008, 2014).

169. *Id.*, 2003, p. 128-138.

170. *Ibid.*, 131.

171. *Ibid.*, p. 172, emphasis added.

172. At this point, only a speculative answer can be proposed, which I intend to test in future discussions of the topic.

173. N’Shea (2018, p. 279-280).

174. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

175. Carvalho (2023, p. 110).

176. Collins considers Neo-Assyrian beardless attendants as “prototypes” of the Achaemenid ones (2010, p. 197).

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