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# Defining Collectives: Materialising and Recording the Sumerian Workforce in the Third Dynasty of Ur

Kinship is one of the main aspects that scholars have borne in mind in their attempts to characterise the workforce recorded in administrative texts of the Mesopotamian Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2112–2004 BCE). In my view, although some of the hypotheses proposed regarding marital status and filiation can improve our understanding of these texts, others risk distracting our attention from possible complementary or alternative readings.

The twentieth-century scholars who first proposed the translations of Sumerian terms that are currently quoted and used[1] began by considering the biological family and kinship as the main structuring institutions; only rather later did they begin to consider other ways of defining collectives and the workforce. In fact, their first translations may actually have been more a reflection of their own context than of the context they meant to describe. Aware of this possible bias, I propose to reassess some of these terms in an attempt to identify what they highlight, and consequently what they tell us about the ways in which work collectives were built and perceived.

Certain studies of the organisation of work and society in the Mesopotamian Third Dynasty of Ur give the impression that it was arranged on the basis of the heterosexual couple, the typical situation in most of the societies which have carried out research into Assyriology. This means that at different levels—that is, the biological level (for the production of new members of society), and the social or administrative level (for the production and distribution of goods)—the nuclear family is regarded as the foundation. However, extended families might also be focal points for the organisation of labour: great organisations like Mesopotamian temples and palaces could

**1** See the following sections for references—some of them merely quoted, others discussed in more detail. The transliteration of terms follows the Assyriological form: spacing for Sumerian, italicised for Akkadian. Abbreviations follow the usage of the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*. A complete list is also available at http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=abbreviations_for_assyriology (last accessed: December 2013). However, to simplify references for readers unfamiliar with the discipline, I include in the footnotes the reading of the abbreviation the first time it is quoted in the paper, together with its correspondence to the author and year as quoted in the final bibliography list.

be considered as extended families, reproducing the relationships of patriarchy and dependency that typify the family defined from the purely biological point of view.

Taking these different levels of social organisation into account, in this paper I intend to show that a careful study of the sources can alert us to the presence of collectives that are larger than the nuclear family and are not based solely on biological ties. In order to do this, I concentrate on a sample of texts dealing with textile production, one of the industries that flourished in southern Mesopotamia at the threshold of the third and second millennia BCE.

The paper is organised in four sections, plus some concluding remarks. First, I offer a short introduction to the context and sources of the Mesopotamian Third Dynasty of Ur. Second, I briefly present the theoretical framework used—that is, gender studies and, more specifically, feminist epistemologies and postfeminism. Third, I discuss how different premises have been used to analyse groups of both males and females, and how these analyses have led to different results, despite the fact that the evidence from the texts from different periods and the evidence we can deduce from archaeological records do not vary greatly. Fourth, I propose a new way of reading work groups as they are registered in Ur III texts, paying attention to their similarities and differences and focusing less on biological or sexual ties.

# 1  The Third Dynasty of Ur: Historical Context and Sources

The period known as the Third Dynasty of Ur, or Ur III, lasted for roughly 100 years. The exact chronology is still debated, but one of the most widely accepted possibilities is the period between 2112 and 2004 BCE.[2] We know the names of five monarchs who ruled the southern part of ancient Mesopotamia in this period: Ur-Namma (who ruled for 18 years), Šulgi (with the longest reign, 48 years), Amar-Suena (nine years), Šu-Suen (nine years) and Ibbi-Suen (25 years). From this period of approximately 100 years we have a large number of cuneiform texts written in Sumerian, most of them administrative texts. The data vary depending on the study we cite; however, taking BDTNS[3] as a reference, around 120,000 tablets from this period have been unearthed,

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**2** Among the relative chronologies, 2112–2004 BCE is the one that is most widely supported and is quoted by, among others, Marc Van de Mieroop 2004, 282, Jacob Dahl 2007, 2, and Piotr Michalowski 2011, 1. However, Walther Sallaberger proposed some slight differences in his Ur III reference volume (Sallaberger 1999, 123–124) where he suggested the chronology 2111–2003 BCE, and more recently 2110–2003 BCE (Sallaberger 2004, 42).

**3** The Online Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts: http://bdtns.filol.csic.es/ (last accessed: December 2013).

of which roughly 80,000 have been published so far.[4] Since this documentation is highly standardised, we can focus on only a few examples in order to broaden our understanding of the whole group.

Usually, the high volume of texts and the information they contain are interpreted as indications of the degree of centralisation and bureaucratisation[5] of the Ur III period. But there are other possibilities: this bureaucracy might have emerged due to institutional mistrust of administrative staff who were breaking the rules for their own personal benefit. If so, bureaucracy would have been a tool for preventing fraud.[6]

In any case, administrative texts are numerous in Ur III. Some of them are related to the textile sector.[7] There are lists showing the names of textile workers organised in teams under a supervisor, sometimes indicating the sum paid for the work. There are also lists of the types of cloth to be sold to the wealthier classes or to be traded abroad. Other administrative texts contain information on the stages of production and include terms related to tasks prior to spinning and weaving, such as sheep shearing and the initial work on the wool. Thus the administrative and economic texts provide both numerical data (prices, wages, the number of workers involved in each task), information on the quality of the cloth, and other data of a social nature, such as the origin of the workforce and the conditions in which they lived and worked.

Finally, we should note that this vast body of written material is not without its limitations as a source for research. One of them is that most clay tablets come from looting and illegal digs; as nothing is known of their archaeological context, a great deal of information is lost. Examples of this are Umma and Puzriš-Dagan, the two main settlements from which most Ur III tablets come, but which have never been systematically excavated.[8]

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**4** Molina 2008, 20.

**5** For a reflection on the use of the word "bureaucracy" when referring to Ur III administration, see Civil 1987, 43.

**6** Warburton 2005, 174.

**7** The main reference on the Ur III textile sector today is the volume edited by Hartmut Waetzoldt in 1972. Subsequent studies have added more information or have tried to summarise and interpret some of the data that Waetzoldt discusses. With a specific focus on the workforce see, among others, Firth 2013; Garcia-Ventura 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014a and 2014b; Maekawa 1980, 1989 and 1998; Uchitel 1984 and 2002; Verderame 2008; Verderame/Spada 2013; Waetzoldt 1987, 1988 and 2011; Wright 1996, 1998 and 2008.

**8** Zettler 2003, 59–61.

## 2 Theoretical Framework: Feminist Epistemologies and Postfeminism

The starting point for my analysis of the texts is the debate proposed above all by so-called "feminist epistemologies". The aim of this debate is to question and rethink the process of knowledge production and the choice of topics of study in an attempt to include women in historical discourses, avoiding the preconceptions that have led to androcentric interpretations and conclusions.[9]

In addition, I also start from some debates arising from postfeminism—more specifically, the academic postfeminism that is linked to the principles of post-modernism. I will refer especially to some of the proposals made by Judith Butler.

Of course, the label "postfeminism" groups together diverse, even contradictory schools of thought and trends.[10] Some postfeminist proposals, which are particularly relevant to the topic of this paper, deal with the notion of kinship understood as a cultural entity and not as a natural one. Usually, we tend to define kinship relationships as those established through sexual ties (basically through heterosexual marriage) or biological ties (basically through filiation), and then reduce kinship to them. However, taking into account these proposals and placing the emphasis on friendship and solidarity networks unrelated to sexual and biological ties creates new perspectives of analysis. In this regard the notion of "homosociality"[11] is interesting, referring as it does to same-sex relationships and ties that are not necessarily of a sexual or romantic nature.

The definition of kinship as surpassing biological and sexual ties was an issue raised by thinkers like Gayle S. Rubin and Monique Wittig. In her classic 1975 essay *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy'*,[12] Rubin analysed the concepts of "family" and "kinship" and discussed some proposals from Marxism (mainly the proposals of Marx and Engels) and from psychoanalysis (mainly from Lacan). Rubin insisted on the concept of kinship defined more as a social entity than as a biological one. For her part, Wittig proposed an idea of heterosexuality not merely as a sexual option but as a political one as well.[13]

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**9** As a classic reference see Alcoff/Potter 1993, including papers by (among others) Helen Longino and Sandra Harding.

**10** For a good summary of the diverse trends of postfeminism, see Genz/Bravon 2009 (especially pp. 106–131 for a presentation of "Postmodern (Post)feminism" and "Queer (Post)feminism", chapters 5 and 6). For a summary from a sociological perspective, see Seidman 2008, 235–249.

**11** On their potential application to the analysis of ancient Near Eastern written sources, see Lion 2007, 59–64. On their application to archaeological analysis, see Voss 2012.

**12** Rubin 1975, 169 and 179–180. See also Rubin 2011, 33–65 for a compilation of her essays, including the one referenced here.

**13** Wittig's best-known essay, *The Straight Mind,* was first published in 1980 in the first number of the journal *Feminist Issues* and had previously been read as a lecture in New York in 1978. However, the

More recently, taking these first proposals into account, Judith Butler[14] proposed to define kinship as follows:

> If we understand kinship as a set of practices that institutes relationships of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death, then kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few). Kinship is neither a fully autonomous sphere, proclaimed to be distinct from community and friendship—or the regulations of the state—through some definitional fiat, nor is it 'over' or 'dead'.[15]

Finally, to close this section, I should mention another issue that has been extensively discussed within feminist epistemologies and postfeminism, particularly by Butler herself—the very definition of "woman" as a category of analysis.[16] It is a problematic issue, especially for feminist epistemologies: while questioning certain terms and their uses, they defend and try to deconstruct "women" as a category of analysis.[17] To quote Donna Haraway, in an extract that also alludes to race and class and proposes that all three are culturally constructed:

> There is nothing about being «female» that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.[18]

At this point, as occurs with "race" as a category of analysis in postcolonial studies, the aim of feminist epistemologies is that the term "woman" should be discussed as a category of analysis in such a manner as to make it wither away. Wittig summarises it thus in her essay *The Straight Mind*:

> 'Man' and 'woman' are political concepts of opposition, and the copula which dialectically unites them is, at the same time, the one which abolishes them. It is the class struggle between women and men which will abolish men and women.[19]

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classic edition usually quoted is that of 1992, a volume that includes several more essays by Wittig. I quote only the 1992 reference in the final bibliography list and I use it for further citations.

**14** Butler 2004, 25–35 and 102–105.

**15** Butler 2004, 104.

**16** Butler 1990, 3–9.

**17** cf. Haraway 1991a, 148: "the identity of 'woman' is both claimed and deconstructed simultaneously".

**18** Haraway 1991b, 155.

**19** Wittig 1992, 29.

# 3 Homosociality versus the Harem: Two Patterns for Interpreting Groups

Ur III administrative texts contain two Sumerian words that identify the two main groups of low-ranking workers: geme$_2$ (female workers) and guruš (male workers). Their belonging to a group is usually defined by first considering their family context, understood as being based on biological and sexual ties. However, in this study I propose to analyse it by seeing the group as based on solidarity and kinship networks, which are not totally dependent on biology. In addition, as far as women are concerned, the only collectives considered in the secondary literature (besides the family) are harems. In this section I will discuss both models, focusing on homosociality and solidarity networks to explore the shaping of workers' groups and presenting some criticisms of the specific way in which women's collectives are treated in the secondary literature.

## 3.1 Homosociality and Solidarity Networks

Textile workers (mainly females) were organised in teams of varying sizes, which shared the same supervisor and performed similar day-to-day tasks. It is clear from the data compiled in the workers' lists that they spent many hours together. Sometimes they were listed together with children, probably their offspring.[20] Therefore, although in these administrative texts their existence is not explicitly stated, it is likely that in this context personal relationships and solidarity networks would have been key elements in these working groups.

One argument in favour of this hypothesis is the fact that female solidarity has supported both productive and reproductive work over the ages.[21] Probably for this reason, it has been feminist thinkers who have stressed the existence of solidarity networks as a characteristic of female work environments. Obviously this does not mean that I defend an essentialist view of female and male work environments—only that certain features of stereotypical femininity and stereotypical masculinity have been constructed, in certain working environments. For example, in the tobacco industry in nineteenth-century Spain, female cigar makers worked in groups, whereas male employees in the same factories performed more individual tasks.[22]

Indeed, throughout history, solidarity networks have traditionally been associated with activities considered pertinent to women's arenas.[23] Stories passed down in

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**20** For examples of texts, see the following section (number 4).
**21** Juliano 1998.
**22** Gálvez Muñoz 2000, 237.
**23** Juliano 1998, 79–84.

the oral tradition show how certain conceptions of kinship and homosociality operate in women's groups. Today, most of these stories are regarded as oppressive towards women. Nevertheless a closer analysis suggests that, on occasion, they may present opportunities for women: indeed, women have traditionally been the main transmitters of stories, which have sometimes been used to claim a space for freedom built upon solidarity networks.[24] An example is one of the possible interpretations of the *Sleeping Beauty* story: the princess grows up outside the heterosexual nuclear family, in a context in which she is cared for by fairies (all female). This tale is a good example of kinship based not only on biological or sexual ties—an example of a homosocial context.

However, if we go back to ancient Mesopotamia and look now at male workers, the Ur III administrative texts recording only the male workforce (identified as g u r u š [low rank "male workers"] or e r i n₂ ["male gangs"]) include the same information as those recording only female workers. In other words, the workforces are recorded without any information about the sexual or biological ties among the individuals listed. As in lists of female workers, children are sometimes listed with male workers. As the data and the format of texts are the same, it seems plausible that we will also find examples of solidarity networks and homosociality as well. At a much later date, in eighteenth-century Turin, spinners working in textile production were mainly male: sources show that these men lived outside biologically based family structures, in households composed of fellow workers and neighbours.[25] This can be considered as another example of homosociality.

Another useful example, despite the even greater geographical and chronological distance from the texts of Mesopotamian Ur III, is the analysis of Chinatown in San José, California, at the end of the nineteenth century. The process was characterised by a clear sexual segregation: while the women stayed in China, the men emigrated to the US in order to trade, and created new communities abroad. This situation is not exceptional, as in fact sexual segregation is frequent in migratory processes. Barbara Voss[26] used this example to show how placing the focus on homosociality leads to interesting results. Voss's study shows that we can find evidence of solidarity networks that are usually hidden if the main research question focuses on traditional kinship (i.e., based on sexual and biological ties) and heterosexual relationships. In this regard, Voss notes that when we are asked about the frequency of homosexuality in homosocial contexts we fall into the trap of again imposing political content on the sexual options, as the question is heavily loaded.[27]

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**24** Juliano 1992, 53–54.
**25** Carbonell 1997, 52–53.
**26** Voss 2012. Cf. Hall 2012.
**27** Voss 2012, 187–188.

Moving back to the ancient Near East, it seems logical that solidarity relationships were common not only inside same-sex groups of workers, but among groups containing both males and females. If we focus on status instead of sex or gender in our research questions, then certain situations can be more easily explained. Solidarity networks seem to have worked better among workers of the same or similar status (regardless of their sex) than among workers of the same sex but different rank. A similar panorama is shown by María Rosa Oliver and Eleonora Ravenna in their analysis of certain aspects of Old Babylonian society in the light of some articles in the Code of Hammurabi (reign 1792–1759 BCE, according to the middle chronology).[28] As with the analysis of some Ur III texts, when the starting point is the interest in women in Antiquity and the construction of gender identity, paradoxically, we realise that concentrating on sex and gender alone cannot reflect what is in fact a very complex picture. To achieve our goal we need to combine several factors and apply an intersectional approach. In fact, intersecting gender and class usually produces stimulating results.

All of these reflections suggest that kinship (defined in a broad sense) and homosociality affected males and females of similar status interacting in a variety of arenas. Take, for example, the monastery, an institution that is closer to us as a cultural model and has survived over the centuries. Monastic communities are sexually segregated, and among same-sex groups (i.e., monks and nuns) there arise relationships of solidarity that are not necessarily based on sexual or biological ties. Bridging the gap, probably the females designated *nadītu* in ancient Mesopotamia also lived together in communities, i.e. in communities that were sexually segregated as well.[29] Moreover, even in these sexually segregated contexts there are examples of solidarity networks between male and female communities or individuals. The friendship and collaboration among San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Jesús in sixteenth-century Spain is one of the most emblematic examples.

Of course the performance of certain duties—for instance, some of those related to textile work—involved physical proximity and cooperation, which would have facilitated the emergence of these solidarity relationships.[30] It is also interesting to analyse this phenomenon through Butler's thoughts on how subjects are constituted. Butler explains what she terms "stubborn attachment" as the preference we have for being part of a collective (good or bad, better or worse) instead of being part of nothing.[31] Difference feminism also describes this condition as a feeling of lack, and a

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**28** Oliver/Ravenna 2001, especially p. 250.
**29** For an overview on *nadītu*, with further references, see Sallaberger/Huber Vuillet 2005, 633–634.
**30** Naji 2009.
**31** Butler 1997, 31–62.

consequent ongoing search that generates the wish to transcend ourselves through the relationships we establish.[32]

Thus, even assuming that many of the female and male workers registered in Ur III texts were probably members of heteronormative families, it also becomes clear that these families were neither their only resource nor their only daily context. Often, nuclear families survive precisely thanks to solidarity networks that extend beyond their limits. What is more, how a family is defined and formed is dynamic, and changes over a person's lifetime and over history. So we cannot expect a single model to be able to give a full account of the lifetime of a worker in Mesopotamia, as his or her situation may well have changed over time due to age, illness or factors over which they had no control (being taken prisoner in times of war, for example).

## 3.2    Collectives of Women: The "Harem" under Suspicion

So far, we have seen that we need to add more elements to our research, and not rely solely on gender. But paradoxically, we cannot help but pay special attention to gender because, in my view, it is a key to understanding why the study of groups of females in the ancient Near East focused on "harems" and not on groups of workers. The choice of one group over the other is the result of a process of hypersexualisation of women in traditional historiography.[33] This process places the spotlight on the "harem" (with the sexual connotation that the term implies), while neglecting collectives of work as potential groups in their own right and as scenarios for the creation of solidarity networks. Probably as a consequence, the "harem" has been studied in depth, and the suitability of the use of the term "harem" itself has come in for criticism. Let us now look at some of the main contributions on the "harem", applied to the study of the ancient Near East.

The publication that represents the turning point in the study of the "harem" in the ancient Near East is Nele Ziegler's monograph, published in 1999, entitled *Le harem de Zimri-Lim. La population féminine des Palais d'après les archives royales de Mari*. Ziegler begins by noting some criticisms of the use of the term "harem" applied to the ancient Near East, for instance, the objections raised by Joan Goodnick Westenholz.[34] Moreover, she acknowledges that there are major differences in the conceptions of women's seclusion and the sexual nature attributed to Ottoman harems (the main reference when discussing the term) and the collectives described as "harems" in Mari. However, in the end she accepts the use of the word on the grounds that it is applied to describe a collective of women living together in the same area of a palace,

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[32] Rivera Garretas 2001, 43.
[33] Cf. Assante 2006.
[34] Westenholz 1990.

the most private area, and that it has clear connotations of polygamy. She therefore uses "harem" for want of a more appropriate word to refer to

> [...] l'espace habité par les femmes dans le palais royal et plus largement l'ensemble des femmes appartenant à la famille ou au service du roi, qu'elles fussent mères, filles ou épouses du roi ou bien musiciennes, servantes ou gardiennes de portes.[35]

This definition is completed by a list of what is not included in Ziegler's concept of "harem": "Le harem ne comprend donc pas les femmes travaillant dans les ergastules (*nepârum*), tisseuses ou autres".

More recently, Adelina Millet[36] has studied the texts of the Chagar Bazar "harem". The Chagar Bazar and Mari "harems" are contemporary, geographically close, and share certain similarities. Millet quotes Ziegler with regard to the discussion of the suitability of the term, reiterating the differences between the realities of northern Syria at the beginning of the second millennium BCE and the Ottoman empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Millet's proposal to define the term "harem" in this context is more inclusive than the previous one: "nous utilisons le terme 'harem' au sens large pour désigner la famille d'un roi ou d'un personnage important et, dans le cas qui nous intéresse, la famille de Sîn-iqišam, dirigeant de Chagar-Bazar".[37] We see, then, that the term is not restricted to women here, but to all those receiving beer allocations, i.e., masculine deities, sons and other characters who can be identified by their proper names as males, alongside females.

Both Ziegler and Millet make convincing criticisms of the use of the term "harem", showing that the evidence from the ancient Near Eastern and the Ottoman era suggest that there are more differences than similarities. However, *faute de mieux*, both defend the use of the word.

Of course all words have connotations, and we are obliged to use them nonetheless. I think, though, that at least we can avoid using the ones that are most heavily loaded. In my view, "harem" is one such word: its definition in the Collins Dictionary is "a group of female animals of the same species that are the mates of a single male". Other definitions in this dictionary and in Webster's always link the term "harem" with women (wives, concubines, servants and so on) even though the "harem" recorded in Chagar Bazar texts also includes men.

Zainab Bahrani[38] contends that the use of the term "harem" is a paradigmatic example of the survival of the concept of "Orientalism" defined by Edward Said in 1978. Following Said, Bahrani observes that scholars use a static concept of the "Orient" as the starting point of their research and as a way to identify some common

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**35** Ziegler 1999, 8 and 8, footnote 5, respectively for both quotations.
**36** Millet Albà 2008.
**37** Millet Albà 2008, 239 and 248–249 for a breakdown of who is included in this "harem".
**38** Bahrani 2001, 16.

issues shared by both the ancient Near East and the Islamic world. Bahrani also states that the word "harem" is used to identify all the contexts and realities that link women and palaces. So the proposal of avoiding the use of this word aims to show that nothing is static and that the imaginary linked to the Ottoman Empire that we still apply in our research is one created in the nineteenth century, especially as depicted in Western art.[39]

On the other hand, when Ziegler and Millet justify their use of the term, they do it to highlight either polygamy (Ziegler) or the notion of family (Millet). Consequently, they reinforce the definition of kinship as based on sexual and biological ties, leaving aside the potential relevance of other ties like the ones described above, e.g., solidarity networks or friendship. In this regard the Mari letters are especially interesting, as they allow us a glimpse inside the "harem" and of the complex relationships that were created there by hierarchy and inequality—factors that were not restricted to, or totally dependent on, traditional kinship.[40] Millet also reports the participation of males in the so-called "harems" and questions the presence of eunuchs (at least in Mari and Chagar Bazar) at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, as their existence has not been proven. Taking all this evidence into account, we see that the idea of the "harem" as an entity linked exclusively to women fades away.

Finally, other scholars followed Ziegler and Millet in considering that the use of the term "harem" was more problematic than advantageous, and came up with new proposals. Saana Teppo,[41] for instance, proposes "female administrator" to translate the Akkadian *šakintu*, instead of "female manager of the harem". Similarly, Oliver suggests using "house of women" in contexts like Mari, avoiding the use of "harem", which, she says, "se utiliza por la imposición de su uso no porque se asimile al harem islámico ni turco otomano".[42] In taking these decisions, scholars show that kinship ties based on biology or sex are neither "natural" nor the only ones that are useful for interpreting data.

In summary, I think it is important to state explicitly that the use of the word "harem" emphasises certain relationships and renders others invisible. The same happens when we present a group of female or male workers as a work collective: we highlight some links while hiding others. So we should tread carefully when defining groups and collectives, and state explicitly why we privilege certain choices over others. Let us look now at some specific proposals along these lines.

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**39** Graham-Brown 1987.
**40** Solvang 2008, 420.
**41** Teppo 2007.
**42** Oliver 2008, footnotes 10 and 57; see also Oliver 2010, 117, especially footnote 6.

# 4   Materialising and Recording the Ur III Textile Workforce

In Ur III administrative texts, low-ranking female workers or low-ranking male workers may be recorded together, in the same text, or segregated by sex, i.e., in texts that list exclusively either males or females. When males and females appear segregated by sex, one of the frequent aims in the secondary literature is to look for possible relationships between these male and female workers.[43] These proposals all start from the heterosexual family model, and assess the extent to which the data fit this model. Here I propose to do the opposite, i.e., first analysing how people are grouped in the texts, in an attempt to see whether biological and sexual ties are among the criteria used to group them. I contend that this approach, which does not rely on preconceptions regarding the presence of the heterosexual nuclear family and the sexual relationship between males and females, may shed light on how the scribes who registered the workforce envisaged the collective and personal relationships.

As we are dealing with administrative texts, we have to keep in mind that the primary aim was not to provide information on the family context of the workforce. However, this can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, perhaps it was irrelevant to determine the marital status and offspring of the workers. On the other, things that are self-evident are not usually written down, and perhaps there was no need to record kinship relationships based on sexual or biological ties. If we consider this second option, it is impossible for us to determine whether it was evident to them that certain kinship ties did or did not exist.

In any case, I propose that marital status was probably not the main factor in listing the workforce in different groups. Analysing texts listing rations and allocations for the workforce and texts listing workers assigned to specific tasks, it is possible to determine the criteria that were applied to group personnel. Here I highlight four of these criteria: the sexual division of labour,[44] hierarchy, speciality, and workplace.

The first criterion, the sexual division of labour, is evident in the lists segregated by sex. The second criterion (often interacting with the first one) is hierarchy. Accordingly, some lists only include foremen/forewomen and supervisors in various productive sectors; others include only low-ranking workers without separating females and

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**43**  See among others, Gelb 1973, 75; Maekawa 1987, 64; Waetzoldt 1988, 41–44; Wright 1996, 89, 91 and 98; Wright 2008, 259 (with previous references).

**44**  There is some debate concerning the suitability of the term "sexual" in this context. Some scholars propose the use of "gender" instead of "sex". See, among others, proposals like "gendered tasks" or "gendered division of labour" (Asher-Greve 2008, 128–132), or "division of labour by gender" (Harding 1986, 17). Despite the criticisms, here I will use "sexual division of labour" as it is the label that is most commonly used and is easy to understand outside the field of gender studies.

males. The third criterion, speciality, is clear when in the same list we find females and/or males who may or may not share the same status but are listed together simply because they were employed in the same productive sector—for instance, textile production. The fourth and last criterion proposed here is the shared workplace. After examining certain administrative texts that mentioned the workforce involved in textile production, I realised that most texts were governed by one or several of the criteria presented here.[45]

In my view, it is particularly interesting that kinship is rarely made explicit. In fact, there are only occasionally explicit references to offspring, although it is not possible to establish whether they are references to biological offspring.[46] Moreover, even when kinship is made explicit, it is never the main criterion for explaining why a specific group of workers is listed together. Below, I show some texts in transliteration and translation into English, which illustrate how the four criteria here proposed serve to shape collectives. At the end, I also include an example that does not fit in my proposal.

Beginning with the first criterion, there are a number of examples of the use of the sexual division of labour as a criterion for the recording of workers. See for example text 1:[47]

**Text 1**

| obverse | obverse |
|---|---|
| 1. 20+2 geme$_2$ u$_4$1-še$_3$ | 22 female workers for 1 working day |
| 2. ša$_3$ Umma$^{ki}$ | in Umma |
| 3. 2 geme$_2$ u$_4$6-še$_3$ | 2 female workers for 6 working days |
| 4. ša$_3$ I$_7$-lugal-ka | at the king's channel |
| 5. gir$_3$ Ur-e$_{11}$-e | under the authority of Ur-E'e |
| 6. udu kur-ra ur$_4$-ra | to shear mountain sheep.* |

**45** The sample I initially used to develop these proposals is a selection of 100 representative texts, in turn selected from a sample of almost 2000. See Garcia-Ventura 2012a, 103–117 and 432 for a description and for some statistics from the first sample (2000 texts) and for the complete list of the second sample (100 texts) respectively.

**46** For the state of research on the Sumerian term d u m u , usually translated as "son", see Pomponio 2013. Pomponio summarises arguments for and against considering dumu as proof of biological ties among those recorded in Ur III administrative texts. See also Verderame/Spada 2013, 426–427, and Garcia-Ventura 2014b, 305–312.

**47** NBC 887 = BPOA 6, 1319 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009a, t. 1319. The text is from Umma, from the 46th year of Šulgi's reign. Cf. among others with SAT II, 509 (= YBC 376 = Sigrist 2000, t. 509) or BPOA 7, 2108 (= NBC 3259 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009b, t. 2108), both from Umma, from the same regnal year and listing low-ranking female workers required for seasonal duties.

| reverse | reverse |
|---|---|
| 7. ki Da-da-ga-ta | From Dadaga |
| 8. kišib ensi$_2$-ka | sealed by the governor. |
| 9. iti $^d$Dumu-zi | Month: 12 |
| 10. mu ki-maš$^{ki}$ ba-hul | Year: 46th of Šulgi's reign |
| *+ seal* | *+ seal* |

**Notes on Text 1: *** For the translation "mountain sheep" and their frequent attestation in Umma, see Waetzoldt 1972, 8–9 and Steinkeller 1995, 54.

This text lists female workers using the Sumerian word geme$_2$. It is an example of the texts in which low-ranking female or male workers are required to carry out seasonal duties related to digging channels or to sheep shearing, among other tasks. These workers are usually divided by sex, without their specialisation or age, or any reference to offspring. Many other lists of workers, besides those referring to seasonal duties, follow the same pattern. In these texts the number of workers varies widely. For this reason, any consideration of the idea of the collective and the possible solidarity networks among workers should include the size of the group.

In other words, various scales should be considered when characterising workforce collectives. This is obvious enough in our modern-day employment contexts: groups of people working closely together coexist with other, larger groups. These other groups often comprise members we do not know directly if we work in a big company, but in some way (perhaps only symbolically) we all are part of the same collective, even though we do not share a direct, daily relationship. In my view, this is what we find (among other things), in text Um 2282.[48] In each line we have a number of female workers and the grain allotment they receive. The text includes only low-ranking female workers, geme$_2$ in Sumerian. This sequence is repeated 13 times with similar numbers of female workers: it is an account of the whole year (the third year of Šu-Suen's reign) detailed month by month. Each month, a group of more than 100 female workers is recorded. The fact that this number of workers is larger than the one shown above raises the question of different scales.

Moving on now to the criterion of hierarchy, let us look at text 2:[49]

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**48** Um. 2282 = UTI 3, 2282 = Yildiz/Gomi 1993, t. 2282.
**49** U 5086 = UET 9, 38 = Loding 1976, t. 38. The text is from Ur, from the 8th year of Ibbi-Suen's reign.

**Text 2**

| obverse | obverse |
|---|---|
| 1. 11 ugula uš-bar | 11 foremen/forewomen of the textile workshop |
| 2. 5 sila$_3$-ta | (receive) 5 sila each one |
| 3. 5 sila$_3$ Ur-AB šar$_2$-ra-ab-du | 5 sila (for) Ur-abba, *šarrabtû*\* official. |
| | |
| reverse | reverse |
| 4. iti a$_2$-ki-ti | Month: 7 |
| 5. mu us$_2$-sa bad$_3$-gal ba-du$_3$ mu us$_2$-sa-bi | Year: 8th of Ibbi-Suen's reign |

**Notes on Text 2:** \* I opt not to translate the term, as the duties of these officials are not clear to us. As a guide, I quote the description proposed by Waetzoldt: "a functionary with a scribal education who appears in the documents in the capacity of an inspector. The precise nature of this office remains uncertain" (Waetzoldt 1987, 136).

In this text, 11 foremen or forewomen at the textile workshop receive a payment. Whether they are male or female is not specified, nor are their proper names listed. We do not have any information about the workers under their charge, or their tasks. The absence of these details suggests that the scribes making the record considered them as a collective by then. Indeed the only information given explicitly is their position, which suggests a concern with hierarchy.

For the third criterion—the speciality or productive sector—text 3[50] is a good example:

**Text 3**

| obverse | obverse |
|---|---|
| 1. 600 geme$_2$ uš-bar 1 sila$_3$ ninda-ta | 600 female weavers,1 sila of bread (for each one) |
| 2. 12 $^{lu_2}$azlag$_2$ 1 sila$_3$ ninda-ta | 12 fullers, 1 sila of bread (for each one) |
| 3. 8 ugula uš-bar 1 sila$_3$ ninda-ta | 8 foremen/forewomen at the textile workshop, |
| 4. 8 ra$_2$-gaba 1 sila$_3$ ninda-ta | 1 sila of bread (each one) |
| | 8 messengers, 1 sila of bread (each one) |
| | |
| reverse | reverse |
| 5. geme$_2$ uš-bar $^{lu_2}$azlag$_2$! | female weavers and fullers |
| 6. ugula uš-bar u$_3$ ra$_2$-gaba | foremen/forewomen at the textile workshop (and) messengers |
| 7. igi-kar$_2$-de$_3$ gen-na | going to pass inspection |
| 8. Gir$_2$-su$^{ki}$-ta Gu$_2$-ab-ba$^{ki}$-še$_3$ | from Girsu to Guabba |
| 9. šu ba-ab-ti | received. |
| 10. gir$_3$ Lu$_2$-kal-la | Under the authority of Lukalla, |

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**50** AO 27476 = DAS 255 = Lafont 1985, t. 255. The text is from Girsu, from the 1st year of Šu-Suen's reign.

| | |
|---|---|
| 11. gir$_3$ Inim-$^d$Ba-u$_2$- i$_3$-dab$_5$ | under the authority of Inim-Ba'u |
| 12. u$_3$ Lu$_2$-kiri$_3$-zal dumu na-mu | and Lu-Kirizal, son of Namu (all them) received. |
| 13. iti gu$_4$-ra$_2$-izi-´mu$_2$-mu$_2$` | Month: 2 |
| 14. mu $^d$Šu-$^d$Suen ´lugal` | Year: 1st of Šu-Suen's reign |

In lines 5 and 6, female weavers and fullers, foremen/forewomen of the textile work-shop, and messengers are mentioned. Therefore, there is neither a sexual division of labour nor a hierarchical criterion, as all of them have to pass the inspection. The heterogeneous group includes male and female workers of different ranks. But in this case, unlike others, the speciality is stated: with the exception of the messengers, all the others are explicitly linked to textile production.

An example of how some of the criteria mentioned to date (sexual division of labour, hierarchy, speciality or productive sector) might be combined is text 4,[51] where sexual division of labour and productive sector are presented together.

**Text 4**

| obverse | obverse |
|---|---|
| 1. 1 tug$_2$ Ša$_3$-igi-na engar | 1 garment for Ša-igina, the farmer |
| 2. 1 tug$_2$ Ur-$^d$Utu dumu bar-ra | 1 garment for Ur-Utu, son of Barra |
| --- *(1 line blank)* | --- *(1 line blank)* |
| 3. ugula Šeš-kal-la dumu da-da | foreman Šeškalla, son of Dada |
| 4. 2 tug$_2$ ka-guru$_7$ | 2 garments for the granary supervisor |
| 5. 2 tug$_2$ Ur-$^d$Nin-tu ugula uš-bar | 2 garments for Ur-Nintu, foreman at the textile workshop |
| 6. 1 tug$_2$ Šeš-kal-la dumu tir-gu | 1 garment Šeškalla, son of Tirgu |
| --- *(1 line blank)* | --- *(1 line blank)* |
| 7. lu$_2$ didli-me | they are for one (they are not part of a team) |
| 8. 1 tug$_2$ Ur-Gu$_2$-eden-na engar` | 1 garment for Ur-Guedena, the farmer |
| 9. 1 tug$_2$ A-kal-la ša$_3$-gu$_4$ | 1 garment for A(ya)kalla, the oxherd |
| | |
| *reverse* | *reverse* |
| --- *(1 line blank)* | --- *(1 line blank)* |
| 10. ugula Lugal-nesag-e | foreman: Lugal-nesag'e |
| ==== *(blank space)* | ==== *(blank space)* |
| 11. tug$_2$ mu-kuX iti min-eš$_3$ (=DU) | garments were delivered the 7th month |
| 12. mu $^d$Šu-$^d$Suen lugal | year: 1st of Šu-Suen's reign |

This text describes cloth allocations for several males (there are no females) sharing a professional sector in a broad sense, as all of them are related to animal husbandry and agriculture in some way. The text mentions two farmers, a granary supervisor, a foreman at the textile workshop and an oxherd. Someone called Ur-Utu receives allo-

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**51** Crozer 79 = Rochester, 106 = Sigrist 1991, t. 106. The text is from Umma, from the 1st year of Šu-Suen's reign.

cations as the son or apprentice of Barra (d u m u), although the occupations of these two characters are not stated. The same applies to Šeškalla, the son or apprentice of Tirgu. Two foremen are also mentioned as superiors (from the hierarchical point of view) of the farmers and the oxherd; they are recorded as distributing payment rather than receiving it. All the workers in their charge receive one garment, while the supervisor and the foreman of the textile workshop, apparently not listed under the authority of others, receive two. Here, then, the number of garments received plus the presence or absence of a superior are elements that reveal differences in rank but, despite these differences, they are listed together. So in this case the criterion used to group them seems to have been not hierarchy, but professional sector and sex.

Moving on now to the fourth and last criterion, the workforce's shared workplace, we find good examples in a number of texts listing working groups and their foreman or supervisor. When a duty is mentioned in these texts, I suggest that the whole group would have worked together in the same place, carrying out the same task. Some of the texts mentioned above evidence this, but below I will show two slightly different examples, texts 5 and 6:[52]

**Text 5**

| *obverse* | *obverse* |
| --- | --- |
| 1. 300 sa gi | 300 reed bundles* |
| 2. gu-nigin$_2$-ba 16 sa-ta | there are 16 bundles in each bale** |
| 3. ša$_3$-gu$_4$-´ke$_4$` ga$_6$-ga$_2$ | carried by the oxherd |
| 4. 1200 s[a-gi] | 1200 reed bundles |
| 5. gu-[nigin$_2$-ba 16 sa-ta] | there are 16 bundles in each bale |
| 6. ša$_3$ [giš-gi] | from the reed bed |
| | |
| *reverse* | *reverse* |
| 7. geme$_2$ [uš-bar ga$_6$-ga$_2$] | carried by the female weavers |
| 8. ga$_2$-nun e$_2$-lu[gal]-/ka ku$_4$-r[a] | to the royal storehouse |
| 9. ugula Ur-lugal | foreman: Ur-lugal |
| 10. Kišib A-kal-la | sealed by A(ya)kalla |
| 11. mu bad$_3$ mar-/tu ba-du$_3$ | year: 4th of Šu-Suen's reign |
| | |
| *seal* | *seal* |
| 1. A-kal-l[a] | A(ya)kalla |
| 2. dub-s[ar] | scribe |
| 3. dumu Lu$_2$-sa$_6$-[ga] | son of Lu-saga |

**Notes on Text 5:** * On the sorts of reeds and their use in Ur III texts from Umma, see Waetzoldt 1992. On the collection and management of this type of reed as a duty of foresters in Umma, see Steinkeller 1987, especially 92–93.  ** For the transliteration g u - n i g i n$_2$ instead of g u - k i l i b (Sumerian terms for "bale") in texts from Umma, see Heimpel 2003 (with previous references).

**52** Text 5: MM 381 = AuOrS 11, t. 187 = Molina 1996, t. 187 // Text 6: MM 853 = AuOrS 11, t. 611 = Molina 1996, t. 611. Both are from Umma, from the 4th year of Šu-Suen's reign.

**Text 6**

| obverse | obverse |
|---|---|
| 1. ´1800+60`[(+x) sa gi] | 1860 reed bundles |
| 2. gu-nigin$_2$-ba 10[+6$^?$ sa-ta] | there are 16 bundles in each bale |
| 3. ša$_3$-gu$_4$-k[e$_4$ g]a$_6$-[ga$_2$] | carried by the oxherd |
| 4. 1200 sa gi | 1200 reed bundles |
| 5. gu-nigin$_2$-ba 16 sa-ta | there are 16 bundles in each bale |
| 6. ša$_3$ giš-gi | from the reed bed |
| | |
| reverse | reverse |
| 7. geme$_2$ uš-bar ga$_6$-/ga$_2$ | carried by the female weavers |
| 8. ga$_2$-nun E$_2$-lugal-/ka ku$_4$-ra | to the royal storehouse |
| 9. ugula Ab-ba-sig$_5$ | foreman: Abbasig |
| 10. kišib A-kal-l[a] | sealed by A(ya)kalla |
| 11. [m]u bad$_3$ [mar-tu ba-du$_3$] | year: 4th of Šu-Suen's reign |
| | |
| seal | seal |
| 1. [A-a-]-kal-[la] | A(ya)kalla |
| 2. dub-sar | scribe |
| 3. dumu Lu$_2$-sa$_6$-[ga] | son of Lu-saga |

These texts count reed bundles and bales taken by the oxherd and the female weavers to the royal storehouse. We have no information about the number of female weavers involved in this operation. Nevertheless, we do have other data: we know that both texts refer to the same year (the fourth year of Šu-Suen's reign), that both were sealed by A(ya)kalla, and that the foreman supervised the work being performed. Taking all this into account, here I propose that there are probably two different foremen controlling two different gangs of workers, and so the members of each group would have shared the same place or places where the transport tasks were carried out. In addition, the two groups would sometimes have coincided. Another possibility is that the two texts actually mention only one group, and that it was the same group controlled by two different foremen at two different points in time. In my view, it is difficult to determine which option is more plausible, as we lack other potentially helpful data such as month names.

Other examples of this fourth criterion, the shared workplace, are texts that list female weavers and millers together. In some cases it is not specified how many were weavers and how many were millers; they are considered as a group, and consequently were not listed separately. In text 7,[53] for instance, female weavers and female millers are referred to as a collective receiving allocations of oats, fat and bread:

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[53] Text 7: NBC 476 = BPOA 6, 1072 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009a, t. 1072. The text is from Umma, from the 1st year of Amar-Suena's reign.

**Text 7**

| *obverse* | *obverse* |
|---|---|
| 1. 0.3.0 ninda-gen | 3 *bariga* of regular quality bread |
| 2. 0.0.1 nig$_2$-ar$_3$-ra sig$_5$ | 10 silas of good quality oats |
| 3. 0.0.1 3 sila$_3$ i$_3$-šah$_2$ | 13 silas of fat |
| 4. [...] geme$_2$ uš-bar geme$_2$ kinkin-na | [...] for the female weavers and the female millers |
| 5. [...]-še$_3$ de$_6$-a u$_3$ | [...] (some of them) going to [...] and |
| 6. [...]-uru-sag tuš-a | [...] (the others) settled at [...]-irisag |
| | |
| *reverse* | *reverse* |
| 7. gir$_3$ Ur-e$_{11}$-e | under the authority of Ur-E'e |
| 8. mu $^d$Amar-$^d$Suen lugal | year: 1st of Amar-Suena's reign |

These cases of female weavers and millers show how several criteria coexisted in shaping an idea of the collective, e.g. the sexual division of labour, hierarchy and work-place—but, in this case, not speciality. The example is especially interesting because it highlights a well-known feature often mentioned in Ur III workforce studies, i.e., that female weavers and female millers sometimes worked together and might even exchange duties. Lorenzo Verderame has compiled several texts and references to this phenomenon, and has shown that the same people might supervise both sectors.[54]

However, this relationship between female weavers and millers has led to some misunderstandings in the translation and presentation of texts. Although their tasks may be interchanged in the records, if they are explicitly mentioned as female weavers and female millers and not only as female workers, this should be reflected in the translation. An example is the case of two texts published recently in transliteration by Marcel Sigrist and Tohru Ozaki.[55] Both mention garment allocations for female millers (geme$_2$ kinkin), but both texts are presented in the catalogues of the two volumes as "garments for weaver women".

To complete the examples for this proposed classification, let us look at a particular case that does not fit into my model—the exception that proves the rule. Text 8[56] lists several proper names with their garment allocations.[57] The last lines of the text specify specialties of these preceding proper names, and specialties of some other individuals who also received garment allocations. Below are a transliteration and

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**54** Verderame 2008, 114, footnote 25; Verderame/Spada 2013, 439−441.

**55** NBC 637 = BPOA 6, 1204 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009a, t. 1204. The text is from Umma, from the 9th year of Šu-Suen's reign / NCBT 1315 = BPOA 7, 2614 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009b, t. 2614. The text is from Umma, from the 8th year of Amar-Suena's reign.

**56** Text 8: YBC 13419 = BPOA 6, 21 = Sigrist/Ozaki 2009a, t. 21. The text is from Umma, from the 2nd year of Šu-Suen's reign.

**57** Each line, from line 1 to line 21, reproduces the structure "1 garment for PNx".

translation into English of the last lines of the text in which these occupations are explicitly stated:

**Text 8**

| *reverse* | *reverse* |
| --- | --- |
| [...] | [...] |
| 22. lu$_2$-tir-me ugula Ur-e$_2$-maš | They are foresters;* foreman: Ur-emaš; |
| 23. 7 nar-munus | 7 (garments) for the female musicians |
| 24. 1 Šeš-kal-la šu-ku$_6$ | 1 (garment) for Šeškalla, the fisherman |
| 25. 1 Ze$_2$-ze$_2$-ga šu-ku$_6$ | 1 (garment) for Zezega, the fisherman |
| 26. 1 Lugal-sig$_5$ šu-ku$_6$ | 1 (garment) for Lugal-sig, the fisherman |
| 27. 1 [... šu-k]u$_6$ ugula Šeš-pad$_3$-da | 1 (garment) for [NP?], the fisherman, foreman Šeš-pada |
| 28. mu-kuX mu ma$_2$ $^d$En-ki ba-ab-du$_8$ (=DU) | Delivery. Year: 2nd of Šu-Suen's reign |

**Notes on Text 8:** *  Referring to all workers listed in previous lines (lines 1 to 21).

This text records garment allocations for foresters (previously mentioned individually with their names), for female musicians (referred to as a collective, without listing their personal names), and for fishermen, again listed in detail along with their personal names. In my view, the data detailed in the text do not indicate why they were listed together, and were considered in the same register for the distribution of the garment allocation.

Consequently, none of the criteria mentioned here apply to text 8. Sexual division of labour does not apply, because males (foremen and fishermen) and females (musicians) are explicitly mentioned together. Equally, neither speciality nor shared workplace serves as a criterion: it is difficult to imagine a context in which foresters, fishermen and musicians would share a workplace. Only one of our criteria remains: hierarchy or status. Indeed, all of these occupations probably shared the same status, but as far as I know there is no clear evidence to support this claim. An additional (fifth) criterion to be considered would be a geographical one, so listing together workers with a shared origin or having been stationed in the same place during periods of compulsory service to the state, like the b a l a.[58] Whether this criterion would work for this and other texts that do not fit the previous proposal is a possible path for future research.

In any case, in this example, it is difficult to defend the idea of the collective as we have done in this section. What it shows, I think, is that the proposal works for most texts, though not for all. For this reason, my proposal may be useful for explaining who is listed together in accounts including relatively small numbers of workers, but

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**58** This geographical criterion has been suggested by Lorenzo Verderame (personal communication).

not for general accounts in which the idea of the collective is blurred by the diversity of the people listed together and/or for the size of the group considered. So the proposed model appears to have been valid for both the scribes writing the texts and the workers who appeared in them.

# 5 Some Concluding Remarks

One frequent research question when analysing Ur III lists of workers is whether the men and women registered had a "family life", that is, whether they were married, whether they had offspring, and who they lived and shared their lives with when they were not at work. Here I have outlined two main objections to this approach. First, asking this question presumes that the nuclear family, understood as it is today in our Western societies, was also a structural feature of ancient Mesopotamia several millennia ago. Second, the question has been applied in different ways to male workers and to female workers, thus generating different results.

Regarding the first objection, I have suggested considering kinship in a broad sense following the proposals made in gender studies—among others, those of Judith Butler. With this broad definition, I do not propose to abandon the idea of the heterosexual couple as one of the axes of ancient societies, but rather to highlight the greater complexity of the concept of kinship. In this regard, then, kinship is understood as including all the practices that establish relationships with the aim of managing production, reproduction, the maintenance of life, death, and physical and emotional dependency. From this perspective, whether or not these practices were carried out by people with blood ties loses some of its relevance and, in my view, bearing this definition in mind when analysing Ur III administrative texts will help to enrich the resulting picture. Rather than (or in some cases in addition to) widows, single women, abandoned sons and daughters and happily married men, we find solidarity networks and working groups that provide the context for kinship ties in a broad sense.

In brief, if we move the focus of the research from biological and sexual ties to how collectives were shaped, new possible readings appear. Shifting the emphasis from marital status or filiation to non-family contexts allows us to see that the people who registered the workforce applied certain criteria in order to group workers, criteria which were not related to biological kinship. In other words, here I have suggested that collectives and groups of workers are valid categories of analysis that help us to gain a better understanding of how the workforce was organised.

Moving to the second objection (the differential treatment of men and women in the lists in secondary literature) I discussed the use of the term "harem". Collectives of men are usually described on the basis of sharing a professional relationship. This is clear from the Sumerian term $erin_2$, usually translated as "male gangs", a translation that highlights the idea of men working together. Groups of women, however,

are usually explained via the model of the "harem", i.e., emphasising sexual ties and kinship as based on blood ties. This differential treatment reinforces the links "men: professional world" and "women: sex & body", and the ideal of the function of the male (working outside the home, concentrating on productive work) in contrast to that of the female (working at home, concentrating on reproductive work).[59]

Needless to say, this model is wholly inapplicable to the Mesopotamia of the end of the third millennium BCE, where most of the population worked only part-time for great organisations like temples or palaces. Therefore, most of the workforce would not have been registered. To quote Marc Van de Mieroop: "The common worker in the state sector of the Ur III period was thus only part-time employed by the state, worked with other family members, and spent a substantial amount of time engaged in a world inaccessible to us".[60] While agreeing and acknowledging that most issues are "inaccessible to us", I would contend that applying explicit theoretical approaches like the ones proposed by feminist epistemologies would help us to gain a better and closer understanding of the realities which we might, to a greater or lesser extent, find to be "accessible".

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59 Garcia-Ventura 2014b.
60 Van de Mieroop 1999, 92.

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