RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Who wears a kilt like men and a sash like women’

Negotiating foreignness, gender, and the body in New Kingdom representations of ‘Near Eastern’ goddesses

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Published: 19th December 2025

Abstract

Egypt’s imperial age saw the emergence of new deities within the country’s monumental and literary repertoires. Some were of Near Eastern origin, while others were Egyptian creations inspired by perceptions of Near Eastern cultures. Among these were the goddesses Qadesh, Astarte, and Anat, whose bodily characterisations in visual and textual media exhibit features that are unusual compared with Egyptian norms of gendered representation. We might hypothesise that such figures were uniquely placed to disrupt convention, being doubly peripheral as both ‘foreign’ and feminine within an androcentric representational system. This article evaluates the utility of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen’s model of gender negotiation for understanding the processes that produced these representations. The paper first outlines Sørensen’s argument that gender norms are produced by finding agreements between different understandings of roles and identities. It then discusses the origins of Qadesh, Astarte, and Anat, interrogating the nature of the ‘foreignness’ they might embody. Their characterisations are then examined within a select corpus of visual and textual sources: Qadesh’s triadic stelae, the literary text *Astarte and the Sea*, and a mythic precedent to a magic spell called *Anat, Seth, and the Seed of Pre*. While these representations are indeed unusual, traces of more standard dynamics are nonetheless discernible. Drawing on Sørensen, we might describe this process as a negotiation between message and medium, between the intent to create exceptional, exoticised personas and the culturally determined vocabulary available to do so.

Keywords: gender, goddesses, New Kingdom, Sørensen, negotiation

"من يرتدي النقبة مثل الرجال والوشاح مثل النساء": التفاوض حول الأجنبيّة والهوية الجنسية والجسد في تصويرات الدولة الحديثة لمعبودات "الشرق الأدنى"

الملخص

شهدت الحقبة الإمبراطورية في مصر ظهور آلهة جديدة ضمن حصيلتها من النصوص الأدبية والمعالم المعمارية. بعض هذه الآلهة كان يرجع أصلها إلى الشرق الأدنى، بينما كان البعض الآخر من ابتكارات مصرية مستوحاة من تصويرات التي يحملها المصريون عن ثقافات الشرق الأدنى. من بين هذه المعبودات كانت قادش، عشتروت، وعناة، حيث تظهر الصفات الجسدية لكل منهن في المصادر البصرية والنصية سمات غير مألوفة مقارنةً بالتصويرات المصرية التقليدية للهوية الجنسية. لذا يمكننا من خلال هذا الاختلاف أن نفترض أن هذه الشخصيات المصورة وُضعت بهذه الصورة الفريدة لإبراز خروجها عن القواعد المعتادة، وذلك لكونها تلعب دورًا ثانويًا مرتين: أولاً باعتبارها 'أجنبية'، وثانيًا كونها أنثوية، كما هو واضح من نظام التمثيل الموقعي. تعمل هذه المقالة على تقديم تقييم لمدى فائدة أحد النماذج التي طرحتها ماري لويز ستيج سورنسن، والتي تتناول الهوية الجنسية، في المساعدة على فهم العمليات التي أنتجت هذه

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DOI: 10.25365/integ.2025.x2.8
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التصويرات. تبدأ الورقة بتوضيح الحجة التي ترتكز عليها سورنسن، والتي تفيد بأن المعايير المحددة للهوية الجنسية تتشكل من خلال إيجاد نقاط اتفاق بين المفاهيم المختلفة للأدوار والهويات. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التصويرات غير مألوفة بالفعل، إلا أنه يمكن تمييز آثار لديناميكيات أكثر تقليدية بينها. من ثم تنتقل المقالة إلى مناقشة أصول المعبودات قادش، عشتروت، وعناة، حيث يستعرض البحث الطبيعة 'الأجنبية' التي قد تجسدها هذه الشخصيات. بينما بعد ذلك، يتم فحص الصفات المميزة الخاصة بمجموعة مختارة من المصادر البصرية والنصية: مثل اللوحات الثلاثية لقادش، والنص الأدبي " عشتروت والبحر"، نسخه أسطورية سابقه لأحدي التعويذات السحرية التي تُسمى "عناة، ست، وبذرة بري". وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التصويرات غير مألوفة بالفعل، إلا أنه يمكن تمييز آثار لديناميكيات أكثر تقليدية بينها. استناداً إلى سورنسن، يمكننا وصف هذه العملية بأنها مرحلة تفاوض بين الرسالة والوسيط، وبين الرغبة في إنشاء شخصيات استثنائية ذات طابع غريب والإمكانات المحددة ثقافياً التي تتيح تحقيق ذلك

الكلمات الدالة الهوية الجنسية، المعبودات، الدولة الحديثة، سورنسن، التفاوض

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1 Introduction

The New Kingdom (c.1550–1069 BCE) witnessed one of the most extensive imperial enterprises in Egyptian history. Whether through direct rule, vassal states, or assertion of cultural prestige, Egyptian influence was felt (at various points) from Nubia to the borders of the Hittite Empire. This period is often called an international age, in which Egyptian elites showed interest in aspects of the cultures they encountered or dominated (e.g. VAN DE MIEROOP, 2021: 175, 231–242). Cultural elements originating beyond the Nile valley, or interpretations of those elements, appeared in a range of contexts and media. Minoan motifs were incorporated into decorative arts, for instance in a ceiling painting from the palace of Amenhotep III at Malqata, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (accession number 11.215.451, PORTER & MOSS, 1964: 781; HAYES, 1959: fig. 148). Deities tracing their origin or inspiration to non-Egyptian cultures were absorbed into the pantheon. This included Near Eastern goddesses, who occupied an increasingly prominent role in visual and textual sources following the expansion of the empire into those regions during Dynasty 18. For example, a chariot found in the tomb of Thutmose IV is engraved with a scene in which the king is accompanied in his chariot by the god Montu and captioned as ‘standing on a chariot like (the goddess) Astarte’ (CARTER & NEWBERRY, 1904: pl. 10). By Dynasty 19, these goddesses were part of royal naming practices, with Ramesses II naming his daughter Bintanat meaning ‘Daughter of (the goddess) Anat’ (CORNELIUS, 2008: 85; VAN DE MIEROOP, 2021: 241). The Egyptian state continued to represent those beyond its borders in its traditionally alienating fashion, yet this was also a time when elite culture flirted with the aesthetics of otherness, when ‘out’ was ‘in’.

Goddesses might prove an especially powerful lens for observing the internalisation or re-imagining of exoticised cultural elements via imperial relationships, since those dynamics are often gendered. For instance, Edward Said famously delineated Orientalism as a Euro-American colonial discourse about ‘the East’ as opposed (and inferior) to ‘the West’. He noted that 19th century Orientalist scholars characterised this imagined monolith by ‘its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability (...) The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien’ (SAID, 2003: 206–207). While Said was describing a specific representational discourse, emerging from a particular socio-historical context, certain dynamics observed within that discourse could have wider applicability. The model demonstrates how the perceived ‘Other’ can be feminised in the rhetoric of an androcentric colonial power. Similar mechanisms appear to have been at work in the ancient Egyptian context, as shown by Uroš Matić in his discussion of the feminisation of foreign enemies in Egyptian texts (MATIĆ, 2021: 114–119). In the status-driven, male-oriented media of imperial Egypt, in which the representational possibilities for gods and men were structured (and constrained) by concerns of prominence and prestige, we might hypothesise that tensions between the familiar and the exotic would be highly pronounced in representations of foreign goddesses.

Yet we should also note that goddesses are worthy subjects of analysis regardless of whether they embody

wider social phenomena or the concerns of those who represented them. One could argue that divinities were just as 'real' and active in the Egyptian social world as living humans. For example, anthropologist Alfred Gell recognised that artworks have agency of their own, generating effects through interactions with both makers and audiences (Gell, 1998: ix). Similarly, while deities are conceptual entities, their attributes and mythologies generate effects, informing people's worldviews and practices and thereby shaping the very culture that created them. As Bruno Latour wrote when critiquing prevalent models of culture within the social sciences, 'if religion, arts or styles are necessary to 'reflect', 'reify', 'materialize', 'embody' society (…) then are objects not, in the end, its co-producers? Is not society built literally—not metaphorically—of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles?' (Latour, 1993: 54). We should therefore take deities seriously as actants in the processes that created the monuments, media, and material culture that are the bedrock of Egyptological studies.

The internalisation of foreign cultural elements poses a raft of questions, of which this paper is largely concerned with the following: what does 'foreign' mean in this or any context? By what mechanisms were these elements assimilated, re-imagined, or fabricated? In the case of 'foreign goddesses', we might also ask whether their real or imagined exteriority placed them outside of the norms that shaped representations of other goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon. Or are the mechanisms that maintain gender constructs still observable? Perhaps such norms are in fact rendered *more* visible, discernible through choices made at the periphery where (one might argue) there is a greater range of possibilities.

The questions I have raised are, at their core, theoretical. Any response to them will inevitably draw upon conceptual frameworks, regardless of whether those frameworks are acknowledged or even recognised. In short: theoretical questions can only have theoretical answers. Yet Egyptology is notorious for its aversion to engaging with theoretical discourse. The foundational goal of amassing knowledge about ancient Egypt has largely retained primacy over more abstract discussions and methodological debate, to the extent that David Wengrow has remarked that 'there is no strictly Egyptological way of researching or explaining anything' (Wengrow, 2020: 51). Suspicions linger about anachronism, exteriority to the cultural context under study, and the danger of shaping data to fit our own preconceived narratives.

While there may be some merit in caution, these concerns are not sufficient to disqualify theory as an Egyptological tool. Inappropriate impositions should indeed be minimised, yet as external observers of a past cultural system, impositions are unavoidable. We make them whether we intend to or not. Far from being a trap that will ensnare analysts in unsubstantiated storytelling, theory invites us to carefully examine assumptions that might otherwise go unchecked. To be intentional and transparent in the narratives we use or create. Not only can Egyptologists benefit greatly from the richness and diversity of theoretical models and methodologies—these constitute a toolkit or toy chest rather than a set of competing ideologies that demand allegiance—but Egyptology itself has much to contribute to wider theoretical discussions, whether that be through its wealth of possible case studies or the potential to build models grounded in ancient Egyptian culture. This potential was inspiringly demonstrated at the *Egyptology in Dialogue* conference.

In the spirit of exploring these avenues, this paper will evaluate the utility of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen's model of gender negotiation for observing the processes underlying bodily characterisations of goddesses of Near Eastern origin. To do so, I will primarily use her 2007 paper 'On Gender Negotiation and its Materiality', as well as her 2000 monograph *Gender Archaeology*. The characterisations in question—visual and textual renderings of the goddesses Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte—exhibit unusual features in the context of Egyptian gendered representational norms. I will argue that while notions of foreignness may indeed facilitate these departures from more standard depictions, the inclusion of such exoticising features is a choice that ultimately reflects Egyptian preoccupations. These characterisations are shaped by negotiations between message, medium, and gendered representational vocabularies.

2 Aspects of Sørensen

Before examining these goddesses and their associated material in greater detail, I will first summarise the aspects of Sørensen's model with which I primarily engage in exploring its viability for observing the processes at work in these representations.

The crux of Sørensen's idea is that gender norms are produced when individuals and groups seek agreements between different understandings of the roles, rights, responsibilities, and identities held by themselves and others (Sørensen, 2007: 47–48). It is a compelling thesis. We might suppose that each of us moves through the world in conscious or unconscious reference to a set of beliefs or assumptions about ourselves and our place in society. These may have been taught to us explicitly or learned through experience. They may align with the values of our community or stand in opposition to them. Our actions and self-image are shaped by these beliefs in one way or another. However, we are not the only actors in the world, and ours is not the only set of beliefs in existence. It is only a matter of time before our ways of doing and being come into contact or conflict with those of others. Moreover, it is rare that one's conception of self is not also concerned with other people. Whether as individuals or in groups, people shape themselves in reference to those around or apart from them, whether that be through emulation or opposition. Therefore, not only do we seek to act as we feel we should, or yearn to be able to, but we project those expectations onto others, and are ourselves projected onto. Workable middle grounds must be found between these positions which, when occurring on a societal level, produces gender norms. This is an ongoing, dynamic, and at times multivocal or contentious process.

A key point for my analyses, and indeed for anyone who makes inferences from archaeological material—we should include texts in this seeing as they are carried and mediated by objects—is that material culture is pivotal in the process of negotiation. As Sørensen notes, 'it is within material culture that we find both the physical means, and the social expression, of gender agreements' (Sørensen, 2007: 42). Material culture can be used to express gender agreements and is also the arena in which they are forged. It is through material culture that these constructs are given a social reality, whether that be through the allocation and use of resources or the choices that shape iconography in a piece of art. Such a premise opens a world of possibilities. It is often said that the material record of ancient Egypt is fragmentary, and while this may be true, those fragments were themselves actors in ancient processes of gender negotiation to which they might bear witness.

Yet such a seemingly intuitive perspective is not without flaw or grounds for criticism. It could be argued that the suggested process of negotiation implies intentionality, that people are consciously calculating midpoints between their respective positions and conceive of the interaction in those terms. This seems implausible, not least because in any given situation we are unlikely to be aware of all the personal or cultural baggage that shapes our experience of the world. Furthermore, the idea of 'negotiation' between two or more parties might imply comparable agencies for the actors, that everyone involved is engaging from similarly strong positions. This notion ignores the realities of a world permeated by inequality and power imbalances. Surely any negotiations undertaken in such circumstances are conducted under duress; might they be better described as gender dictates or impositions? Sørensen herself addresses the issue, stating that 'agreements can be forced or voluntary' (Sørensen, 2007: 47), and elsewhere discusses, Archaeology's 'central dilemma' of agency and the relationship between the individual and wider social structures (Sørensen, 2007: 65–67).

While these critiques are valuable for nuancing our understanding of Sørensen's theory, they do not necessarily invalidate the model itself or preclude its use. I do not interpret gender negotiation as implying or requiring intentionality. Rather, I see this model as a means of describing how culture moves and evolves. The different conceptions of gender roles and identities held by respective individuals or groups are not positions in a debate, but nodes of tension attempting to act simultaneously on and despite one another. We might think of these tensions as cataracts in a river; a tangle of stones pressing on one another, whose interactions shape how the water (here representing cultural or social action) is able to flow through it. Conscious calculation

may indeed play a part in this process at certain junctures, especially in a setting like ancient Egypt where many forms of cultural media were structured by a complex algebra of hierarchy and prioritisation that John Baines terms ‘decorum’ (e.g. BAINES, 2007: 14–29). Yet calculation is not the core of the phenomenon itself. Furthermore, recognising the potential effects of imbalances is an important qualifier of gender negotiation, nevertheless objects of different sizes will still act upon one another. We should be cautious of reducing our understanding of agency to a binary of the unfettered and the utterly subjugated. Since Sørensen’s model is ultimately about interaction, the existence of power imbalances does not invalidate it, but refines it.

The concept of negotiation reveals the analytic potential of the sources examined by this paper. We might suggest that the unusual representations of Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte, are all ultimately part of that same process of negotiation in which gender agreements are sought and solidified. This assertion presents a further set of questions: what forms do those agreements take? What ideas are they between? And what function do such agreements ultimately serve in a wider sociocultural sense? The last question will lead us to visit another of Sørensen’s points over the course of the following discussions, namely that material culture and negotiation can at times be used to challenge or subvert normative ideas of gender (SØRENSEN, 2007: 48). In considering whether the characterisations of these goddesses are examples of such subversions, or whether they may in fact bear the marks of established structures, we must carefully examine the context of the sources as well as their content.

3 Exotic bodies: Goddesses of Near Eastern ‘origin’

As stated above, the material to which I will be applying Sørensen’s theory concerns three goddesses: Qadesh, Anat, and Astarte. Qadesh will be considered through visual sources, namely the so-called ‘triadic stelae’ that carry striking depictions of her (see §4 and Figure 1). She constitutes the primary focus of these discussions. The supporting analysis of Anat and Astarte is made in reference to textual sources, namely magical and literary texts dating to Dynasties 18 and 19 (see §5). Before examining these sources in greater depth, I will give some background to the goddesses they centre on, thereby returning to the issue of how ‘foreign’ these figures truly are.

The earliest attestation of Qadesh appears in the reign of Amenhotep III, in an inscription on a Memphite statue of a man called Ptahankh who was connected to the priesthood of Ptah (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2011: 3). The text refers to the city’s port of Peru-Nefer, an area associated with other foreign and particularly Near Eastern deities (HORN, 1969: 37; COLLOMBERT & COULON, 2000: 217–219), presumably due to its real or symbolic connection with distant foreign locations. Izak Cornelius identifies Qadesh as having Levantine origins (CORNELIUS, 2008: 86–87). Her frontally rendered nude form does indeed resemble iconography seen in the Levant. Cornelius suggests she was ‘brought back’ to Egypt by Egyptians who had served in the military or in imperial administration.

However, Christiane Zivie-Coche points out that Qadesh as a distinct deity does not appear in Near Eastern sources (ZIVIE-COCHE, 2011: 6). Instead, it seems the Egyptians built an entirely new deity, drawing on the religious ideas and iconography of the communities they interacted with. According to Youri Volokhine, Qadesh’s appearance utilises Hathoric iconography which had permeated into the Near East, namely her frontal depiction and hairstyle of two curled braids (VOLOKHINE, 2000: 68). Frontality was a relatively limited mode of representation in Egyptian visual media, as was nakedness for most goddesses and high-status adults (ROBINS, 1996: 33–39), though these features were not unknown. The goddesses Nut, for example, was frequently depicted as a naked woman from the New Kingdom onwards (BILLING, 2002: 13). Furthermore, Nut was associated with coffins from at least the Middle Kingdom (ASSMANN, 2001: 163–173), as a result of which her image appears on the inside of many coffins and sarcophagi. These images can be frontally rendered, sometimes showing her naked or partially clothed in a manner that, while not identical to Qadesh, is certainly reminiscent. Qadesh’s iconography might therefore have been designed to appear simultaneously familiar and alien. To round everything off, the Egyptians took the Semitic root *q-d-š*, meaning ‘sacred’ or

'holy', and used it to create a name for this new deity (Cornelius, 2008: 94; Zivie-Coche, 2011: 5–6).

Already, Qadesh's origins call notions of 'foreignness' into question. In many ways she is just as Egyptian as long-attested goddesses like Isis or Hathor, since she appears to have been created by Egyptians, for Egyptians, and in an Egyptian context. Yet she has clearly been constructed with otherness or exoticism at her core, her name and iconography evoking non-Egyptian cultural settings. She is like the coronation chicken of goddesses; just as this curry-based dish is an imperial British reworking of South Asian flavours, Qadesh is the product of an imperial setting, produced in and for the imperial centre, using interpretations of foreign elements which the centre has metabolised. She is less a foreign artefact as she is a crystallisation of Egyptian imaginings of the foreign. She might therefore serve as a mirror we can hold up to Egyptian norms of gendered representation, her depictions being constructed as different yet understandable, a process which in turn casts light on the priorities and frameworks that underlie negotiations of gender norms.

I now turn to the goddesses Astarte and Anat. Like Qadesh, both were adopted into the Egyptian pantheon during the New Kingdom, the former in Dynasty 18 and the latter in Dynasty 19. Astarte was originally a fertility goddess known from Ugarit and Phoenicia, being the consort of Baal and the Levantine counterpart to the Mesopotamian Ishtar (Horn, 1969: 41). Her connection to Baal is echoed in Egyptian sources. Following her absorption into the pantheon, she became a consort of the god Seth, who could be identified with Baal (e.g. Te Velde, 1984: 909). Their association is attested in the literary text *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, when the goddess Neith suggests Astarte be given to Seth as compensation for not being awarded the throne of Osiris (Gardiner, 1932b: 40.3–5). In Ugaritic texts, Astarte is the sister and consort of the chief god El (Holland, 2010: 203) and was particularly associated with the horse. She sometimes appears on horseback in her Egyptian depictions (Cornelius, 2008: 42) and can also wield a bow and arrow, both communicating a link to warfare (Sadek, 1987: 156; Hoffmann, 2008: 50). Like Qadesh, Astarte can be depicted naked (see §4). She had a cult centre at Memphis (Sadek, 1987: 157) and at Per-Ramesses, the latter indicated by the *Praise of the Delta Residence* in P. Anastasi II of the *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*, which states that 'Astarte is in its east' (Gardiner, 1937: 12.12). Anat holds a very similar set of associations, being the daughter of El and closely associated with Baal, though not his consort (see Cornelius, 2008: 92). Indeed, the two goddesses are often mentioned or depicted alongside one another, whether in Near Eastern sources (Smith, 2014: 34) or Egyptian ones (she is offered to Seth alongside Astarte in *The Contendings*).

Perhaps Astarte and Anat might be termed 'foreign goddesses' with more certainty than is possible for Qadesh. While Qadesh's depictions draw upon iconographic traditions that were entangled with the places and peoples under Egypt's colonial influence, she is ultimately an Egyptian creation. Astarte and Anat have demonstrable lives outside of Egyptian religious and mythic traditions. Echoes of those contexts might be found in the goddesses' representations, such as Astarte's conveyance on horseback rather than in a chariot, as may be more usual for Egyptian iconography. Yet even here the question of foreignness is not straightforward. As will be discussed in the following sections, the inclusion of such features was not an inevitability of depicting these goddesses. It was a choice. I would therefore suggest that the true analytic value of observing the 'foreignness' of these goddesses is not in identifying some objective otherness. What I will interrogate here is a *perception* or *construction* of otherness. It is a belief held in the Egyptian cultural imagination. This paper examines how that belief might interact with, affect, and be affected by processes of gender negotiation.

4 Qadesh's triadic stelae

We might observe some of these processes first hand in the so-called 'triadic stelae' in which Qadesh features prominently. Indeed, she dominates. Figure 1 shows a typical example of this object type in the Museo Egizio (Cat. 1601 = CGT 50066), commissioned by the scribe Ramose in Dynasty 19. The stela's lunette depicts three deities: Qadesh, and the gods Min and Reshep. The naked Qadesh stands front and centre, looking directly out to the viewer, flanked by Min to our left and Reshep to our right. Cornelius presents ten such stelae in his iconographic analysis of Qadesh and other Levantine goddesses (Cornelius, 2008: 123–126, cat. 5.1–10).

Fig. 1: The ‘triadic stela’ of the scribe Ramose. Museo Egizio CGT 50066/Cat. 1601. © Museo Egizio. Shared under a CC0 1.0 Universal license.

Most of these, including the Ramose stela, are attributable to Deir el-Medina, though one example in the Cairo Museum is provenanced to Memphis (JE 45535, CORNELIUS, 2008: 126, cat. 5.10).

Some have assumed that the function of these objects related to fertility. This is largely due to Qadesh’s appearance, as well as the presence of the ithyphallic god Min. In the case of the Museo Egizio example this interpretation is also based on the presumption that Ramose’s apparent lack of biological children must have been a motivation in his votive practices (e.g. DAVIES, 1999: 81–82; VALBELLE & GOUT, 2002: 62). Yet there is little evidence to substantiate such claims. Nowhere in Ramose’s substantial body of votive material does he articulate a desire for offspring. Furthermore, examples of triadic stelae were dedicated by individuals known to have had children. The deities depicted on the stelae have associations that reach beyond matters of fertility; all three might be connected to the desert margins, with Qadesh and Reshep having influence over the dangerous animals that inhabit those areas as well as over disease (VOLOKHINE, 2000: 67; CORNELIUS, 2008: 97–98; MÜNNICH, 2013: 119). It therefore seems probable that these objects served apotropaic functions.

As the central figure, with the two gods either side facing inwards towards her, Qadesh is very much the focal point of these stelae. A particularly large and finely carved example in the British Museum (EA 191) renders her figure significantly larger and more sculptural than those of the accompanying gods. Everything about these images of Qadesh commands our attention. While her frontal depiction is not unparalleled, we have already seen that frontality is relatively specialised in Egyptian art, suggesting Qadesh’s appearance may have been striking to an ancient viewer. Similarly, nudity is not unknown for goddesses (e.g. Nut), but neither is it very common, perhaps due to issues of status. According to Julia Asher-Greve and Deborah Sweeney, clothedness was normative for most elites in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian media, unclothedness being highly contextual (ASHER-GREVE & SWEENEY, 2006: 151–153). It was more usual for Egyptian artists

to allude to the naked bodies of high-status women through translucent or tight-fitting clothing (Robins, 1996: 36–37). We might therefore propose that the treatment of Qadesh’s body is intended to mark her as unusual, an exoticised ‘Other’.

The remarkable rendering of Qadesh is accompanied by a seemingly exceptional position within group compositional dynamics, which in almost all other instances are structured according to mechanisms of androcentric gender hierarchy. As Gay Robins noted in her seminal explication of compositional dominance in Egyptian art, two-dimensional representations use various organisational and spatial techniques to communicate relative prestige or primacy among depicted individuals. This may be through the order in which figures appear in a group, whether they appear in the higher or lower areas of a composition or surface, and so on (Robins, 1994: 33–36). Broadly speaking, when deities of multiple genders are shown together as a collective unit, goddesses will occupy secondary positions, even if the arrangement might appear somewhat egalitarian at first sight. For example, in the tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina dating to Dynasty 19 (Theban Tomb 1, Porter & Moss, 1960: 1–5; Bruyère, 1959; Shedid, 1994), the tomb owner and his wife worship outside a shrine containing two registers of divine figures labelled as ‘all the gods of the *Duat*’ (see Figure 2). Both registers begin with two male deities (Ra-Horakhty on the upper register and Osiris on the lower) before beginning an alternating pattern with female ones. The genders of the generic divine figures that follow Ra-Horakhty and Osiris are discernible through the presence or absence of beards, in accordance with the patterns in the wider tomb programme. As a result, the five goddesses within the group are outnumbered by eight gods, and the goddesses’ presence in the composition appears weighted towards the back. As I shall discuss at greater length in a forthcoming volume, in most circumstances goddesses only assume primary positions in groups when: the members are entirely female; any male figures who appear rank lower in kinship hierarchies; the group itself occupies a less prestigious area of a larger composition or decorative programme.

It is not so with Qadesh. She is prominent to the extent so that the two accompanying gods appear almost as if they are her attendants. An unfinished example in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum is dominated by a large and carefully worked figure of Qadesh upon a lion, while the adjacent figure of Min is smaller and rougher, there being only lightly scratched traces of Reshep (Cornelius, 2008: cat. 5.5). This suggests Qadesh was the most important element. In most other instances where goddesses appear alongside gods, their posture or depicted actions often communicate a supportive role or emphasise the primacy of their male companion. Qadesh seems to be the main event in a manner rarely if ever replicated in other contexts. Perhaps the caption accompanying her on the Museo Egizio example is right when it refers to her as one ‘of whom there is no equal’.

Depictions of Qadesh on her triadic stelae lend weight to the notion that goddesses of foreign origin, whether actual or imagined, can stand outside the usual parameters of gendered representation. Exactly how far outside, and what role gender negotiation might play in bringing this about, shall be discussed shortly (see §6). Before then we turn to bodily characterisations of foreign goddesses in textual sources, considering whether these support or disrupt what we have observed in visual material.

5 Textual otherness: Characterisations of Astarte and Anat

The first of these texts is the mythological tale known as *Astarte and the Sea*. The text is highly fragmentary, being mostly preserved in P. Amherst IX (Gardiner, 1932a: 74–75) with the introductory section of the manuscript identified in Paris’ Bibliothèque nationale by Philippe Collombert and Laurent Coulon (P. BN 202: Collombert & Coulon, 2000). The dimensions of the complete manuscript would align with Ramessid standards, yet the introduction contains a dating formula referencing Amenhotep II (Collombert & Coulon, 2000: 195–199). This lends weight to the current scholarly consensus that the composition itself (though not necessarily this manuscript) dates to Dynasty 18.

Fig. 2: West wall of the tomb of Sennedjem, © Archivio Museo Egizio C00135. *Image cropped.* Shared under a CC0 1.0 Universal licence.

Despite the state of the manuscript, we can glean the general shape of the narrative (an English translation is available from Edward F. Wente, 2003). Following a cosmogonical opening, the text describes how a personified Sea grows tired of the tribute which the harvest goddess Renenutet has been bringing him on behalf of the Ennead. He threatens the destruction of the world, and so the Ennead send for Astarte to intercede. Upon seeing her, the Sea remarks at her appearance, asking ‘Where have you come from, you daughter of Ptah, you furious and tempestuous goddess? Did you wear through your sandals that are <on> your feet and did <you> tear your garments that are on you while you were transiting heaven and earth?’ (Gardiner, 1932b: pl. 9 ls. 18–19; Wente, 2003: 110). Astarte is captured by the Sea, prompting the Ennead to task Seth with her rescue. The tale seems to draw upon the Ugaritic Baal cycle (e.g. Oldenburg, 1966: 117–120, 134–137), though this is a case of adaptation, not simply of translation. There are clear efforts to Egyptianise the narrative; in place of the council of gods in the Ugaritic original, the text could have referenced the gods as a general designation, but instead names the Ennead specifically. The result is a text that references and incorporates foreign elements but is nonetheless an Egyptian product.

One of the tale’s striking details is its description of Astarte’s dishevelled, semi-naked appearance. This characterisation is echoed in visual sources, such as stelae that depict her naked on horseback (e.g. Museo Egizio supl. 1308 CGT 50068, Cornelius, 2008: cat. 4.4) or one from Tell el-Borg in North Sinai which shows her seated and topless (Hoffmeier & Kitchen, 2007: 128–129, figs. 1a–b). While one might assume this iconography is merely an inheritance from her original Near Eastern context, Astarte’s nakedness is not an inevitability. She appears on a stela of Ramesses II in the Louvre (E 26017: Cornelius, 2008: cat. 3.6; Málek, 2012: 7–8) wearing a standard sheath dress worn by many anthropomorphic Egyptian goddesses. We must therefore view occurrences of Astarte’s nakedness as representing conscious choices on the part of the artists, perhaps intended to emphasise the exoticised aspects of her persona. In the case of *Astarte and the Sea* the choice is a bold one; if nakedness is specialised for Egyptian goddesses, wearing torn clothes is practically unheard of.

Here, as with Qadesh, we see a goddess of foreign origin whose exoticisation goes hand in hand with exceptionalism. The Ennead clearly believes Astarte will be able to connect with the Sea where Renenutet cannot. Unfortunately for Astarte, they are only too right. Singling her out as an exceptional figure is fitting from a narrative standpoint, seeing as she is one of the main protagonists, and also when considering historical context. Astarte was becoming increasingly prominent during early Dynasty 18. She was a favourite of Egypt’s militaristic kings with Near Eastern geopolitical interests, whether that be Thutmose IV and his chariot inscription (see §1) or Amenhotep II himself. The Great Sphinx Stela recounts Amenhotep’s talent for horsemanship, stating that ‘Reshep and Astarte rejoiced over him doing all that his heart desired’ (Helck, 1955: 1282, l. 23). Our text was produced at a time when Astarte was actively promoted in the spheres of state religion and monumentality; it may even have been intended to facilitate that process. Yet while centring Astarte in the text might be expected from both a storytelling and a historical perspective, what may not be anticipated is the manner in which it has been done. She stands out because the characterisation of her body emphasises her otherness and places her outside the usual realms of goddesses’ representation.

A similar singling out occurs with Anat in a text known as *Anat, Seth, and the Seed of Pre*. The text is a mythic precedent to a magic spell dating to the Ramessid period and is known from five fragmentary manuscripts, four of which are provenanced to Deir el-Medina (P. Chester Beatty VII, P. Turin, O. DM 1591, O. DM 1592; Gardiner, 1935: pl. 36; Roccati, 1972: 152–159; Posener, 1977: pls 45–45A). The fifth manuscript was discovered among the mudbrick structures surrounding the Ramesseum (O. UC 31942: see Spiegelberg, 1898: pls. I–IA). The text describes Seth’s attempt to rape the Seed Goddess, who is interpreted by van Dijk as being the wife of the sun god Pre and a personification of his own regenerative power, through which he fathers himself every night for rebirth the morning (van Dijk, 1986: 40). After Seth attempts to mount the Seed Goddess, she flies up to his brow and causes him to become ill. Anat, who as we have seen can be a consort of Seth in Egyptian sources, asks her father Pre to release Seth from the affliction. An unsympathetic Pre remarks ‘what is the matter with you, Anat, victorious goddess, who acts as a warrior,

who wears a kilt like men and a sash like women?’ (vs. 1.9–2.1, Gardiner, 1935: pl. 36).

This description of Anat’s clothing might perform a similar function to the characterisation of Astarte in the previous tale. It draws the audience’s attention, thereby centring her in the action as a main protagonist. It also singles her out as exceptional, perhaps marking her as the most capable of intercession, as we saw with Astarte and her interaction with the Sea. It is intriguing that these tasks, which may require their agents to be less constrained by convention and the standard frameworks of divine society, are given over to foreign goddesses. In the case of Anat, the text explicitly connects this exceptionalism with gender presentation.

As with Qadesh, these characterisations of Anat and Astarte evoke unusual modes of bodily presentation which go hand in hand with their exoticisation. This observation aligns with the hypothesis at the beginning of this study: that the convergence of femininity and foreignness might provide a unique environment for Egyptian cultural frameworks to become malleable. It is a peripheral space where the right actors can perform functions unfeasible for those whose ways of being are more constrained by the structures of the centre. What insights might emerge when using Sørensen’s theory of gender negotiation as a lens for observing this process?

6 Negotiating message and medium

The explanatory value of the model can be demonstrated by re-examining some of these bodily characterisations, specifically the triadic stelae of Qadesh. While the goddess’ prominence on these objects may indeed be exceptional, even here traces of more usual gender dynamics might be discernible. As I shall argue, the mediation of these structures while attempting to create something outside of the norm is a process which the prism of gender negotiation helps us to observe and understand.

Returning to Ramose’s triadic stela in the Museo Egizio (see Figure 1) we see that Qadesh does not exist in a vacuum. Our eye is led to her as an almost startling focal point, yet her figure is also entangled with the gods either side of her through a set of compositional relationships. She holds her lotus flowers to the nose of Min on the left side of the scene, whilst holding a snake towards the face of Reshep on the right. Cornelius argues that Qadesh’s snakes and flowers are her own attributes and do not necessarily pertain to the gods who accompany her, as suggested by examples where Qadesh appears alone yet still holds these objects (Cornelius, 2008: 127–129, cat. 5.14–5.16). Even if so, the placement of these attributes in relation to Min and Reshep appears purposeful. The lotus, held to Min’s nose, signifies rejuvenation and sensuality (Hartwig, 2004: 64, 99), perhaps resonating with Min’s well-noted associations with fertility and virility. Meanwhile, the snake which Qadesh presents to Reshep may recall his association with the desert margins and his role as a guardian against the venoms inflicted by the animals of those areas, as attested in contemporary magico-medical texts such as on P. Chester Beatty VII (BM EA 10687.3, Gardiner, 1935: 64, pl. 36). Min and Reshep are therefore depicted as the recipients of iconographic paraphernalia whose associations interweave with their own, enhancing their presence within the scene. They do not act analogously toward Qadesh; they merely stand statically alongside her. Therefore, this enhancement of presence is not a reciprocal process within the group, it moves outwards from the central goddess to the gods on either side. It seems that, even here, the expectation that goddesses support or bolster gods in multi-gender groups cannot be fully escaped.

The details upon which these inferences are based may appear inconsequential to a modern observer, but to an ancient Egyptian audience they would likely have been dense with meaning. As John Robb and Oliver Harris discuss when introducing their concept of body worlds (Robb & Harris, 2013: 7; Harris & Robb, 2012), spatial and person-object relationships are key in negotiating the borders of one another’s bodily realities. Where we stand in relation to others, how that space may be crossed, the objects we interact with; these dynamics can construct or obstruct social connections and help determine interpersonal status. According to Robb and Harris, this process occurs cross-culturally, albeit in varying permutations and according to culturally specific concepts and priorities. It stands to reason that it also occurred in ancient Egypt, where

figurative art was relationally structured according to underlying sociocultural models. Interactions between depicted figures may have materialised Egyptian understandings of body worlds and the gender norms communicated when they interact. Indeed, they would perpetuate and shape those understandings. Harris notes that monuments constitute bodies in themselves, exerting agency that draws humans to interact with them and embeds them as powerful actors in social relations (Harris, 2018: 186–189). In this way, triadic stelae and Qadesh herself were active participants in negotiation, the compositional relationships constituting the 'understandings' they contribute to the process of forming gender agreements.

This re-examination of the stelae's iconography calls into question the applicability of one of Sørensen's arguments, that gender negotiation can challenge or subvert dominant notions of gender. Perhaps we might previously have viewed Qadesh's depictions in this light, but the traces of normative relationships within them destabilise that conclusion. We must also remember that the records we have examined were created at the cultural centre. Qadesh's triadic stelae were mostly produced in the royally supported artisans' community at Deir el-Medina. *Astarte and the Sea* was very possibly a royal commission or produced in a courtly setting, seeing as it anchors itself to Amenhotep II. *Anat, Seth and the Seed of Pre* was an established aspect of magico-medical literature among the influential communities of the Theban west bank. These are not products of the periphery. Therefore, while Sørensen is probably right to argue that negotiation can be used to challenge gender norms in certain contexts, it seems unlikely that there is disruptive intent behind these sources.

If anything, the sense of otherness with which Qadesh was purposefully imbued may have tacitly emphasised and reinforced the norm. Knowledge, as discussed by Nathalia Junqueira in relation to Herodotus' reporting of Egyptian gender roles (Junqueira, 2018: 208, 212–214), is often expressed as a discourse about the thing it pertains to. The place of women in ancient Egyptian society was described by Herodotus as an inversion of what one might expect in Hellenic culture, thus was ultimately a comment on how Athenian women should behave. Similar processes may be at work in our sources. This need not be a conscious process; Rachel Crellin and Oliver Harris have discussed how human and non-human entities simultaneously affect one another, meaning that the objects and forms created by a culture are products of interaction within assemblages of diverse actants (Crellin & Harris, 2021: 472–473). Each element, including the norms of gendered representation, leaves its fingerprint. In this way, even when artists attempt to create the exceptional, something of the familiar might still be felt within it.

While the subversive aspect of Sørensen's model may not be fully applicable in this instance, gender negotiation can still help us to understand the process by which normative structures might become baked into representations that, to some degree, attempt to shirk them. Gender agreements, which are made and manifested in material culture, are temporary equilibria between different understandings of gender roles. We might theorise that, in the case of the triadic stelae, the different understandings in question are between the message and the medium, between what the artists are trying to communicate and the representational vocabulary available to do so. On the one hand, we have a goddess who is imagined as foreign, as coming from outside of Egypt and being outside of convention, one 'of whom there is no equal'. On the other is the representational system with which she is depicted, a system whose very frameworks are infused with androcentric hierarchies. Both sets of priorities are negotiated within the triadic stelae, rendering Qadesh's body and her interactions with the surrounding figures in a way that holds these understandings in balance. The extent to which this negotiation is a conscious effort of the artists or more of a cultural reflex response is a matter for debate. Perhaps the outcome is an inevitability of attempting to represent something outside of the norm; whatever we describe, we can only do so with the language available to us.

7 Conclusion

In the bodily characterisation of goddesses of actual or perceived Near Eastern origin, perceptions of foreignness could allow these figures to stand somewhat outside the norms of gendered representation. This was perhaps made possible by the double peripherality of being feminine and (conceptually) non-Egyptian in

an andro- and Egypto-centric representational system. These unusual depictions might emphasise a deity’s exceptional or exotic nature, with the expression of ‘foreign’ elements being an active choice even for goddesses who had been assimilated into the pantheon from other cultures. However, the mechanisms at work in generating these representations could preserve traces of normative dynamics, since Egyptian representational vocabularies were permeated with androcentrism. Sørensen’s model of gender negotiation has proved useful in observing and describing this process. As may be well-known to politicians and diplomats, it seems the outcome of negotiations will always be shaped by the terms available to the negotiators.

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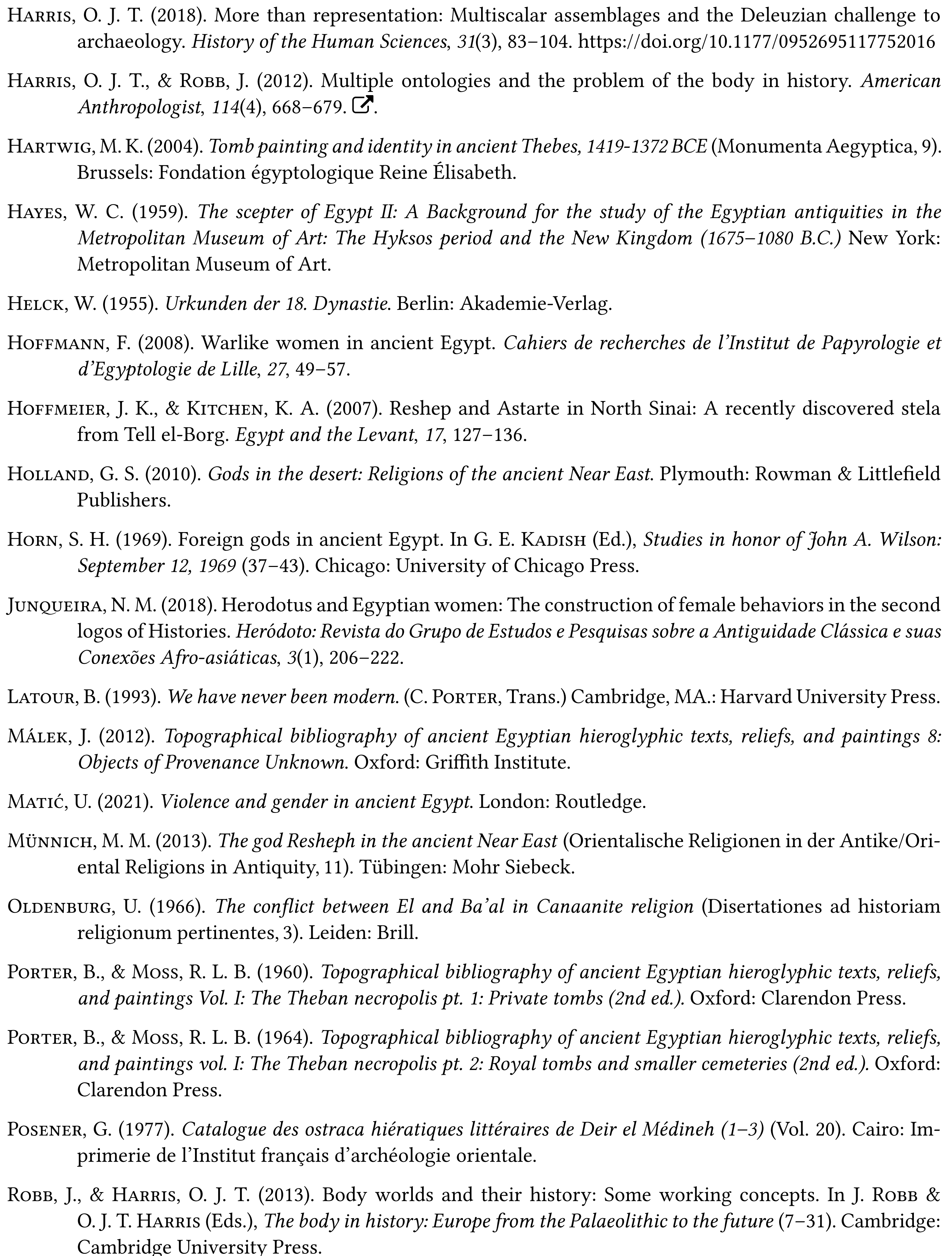

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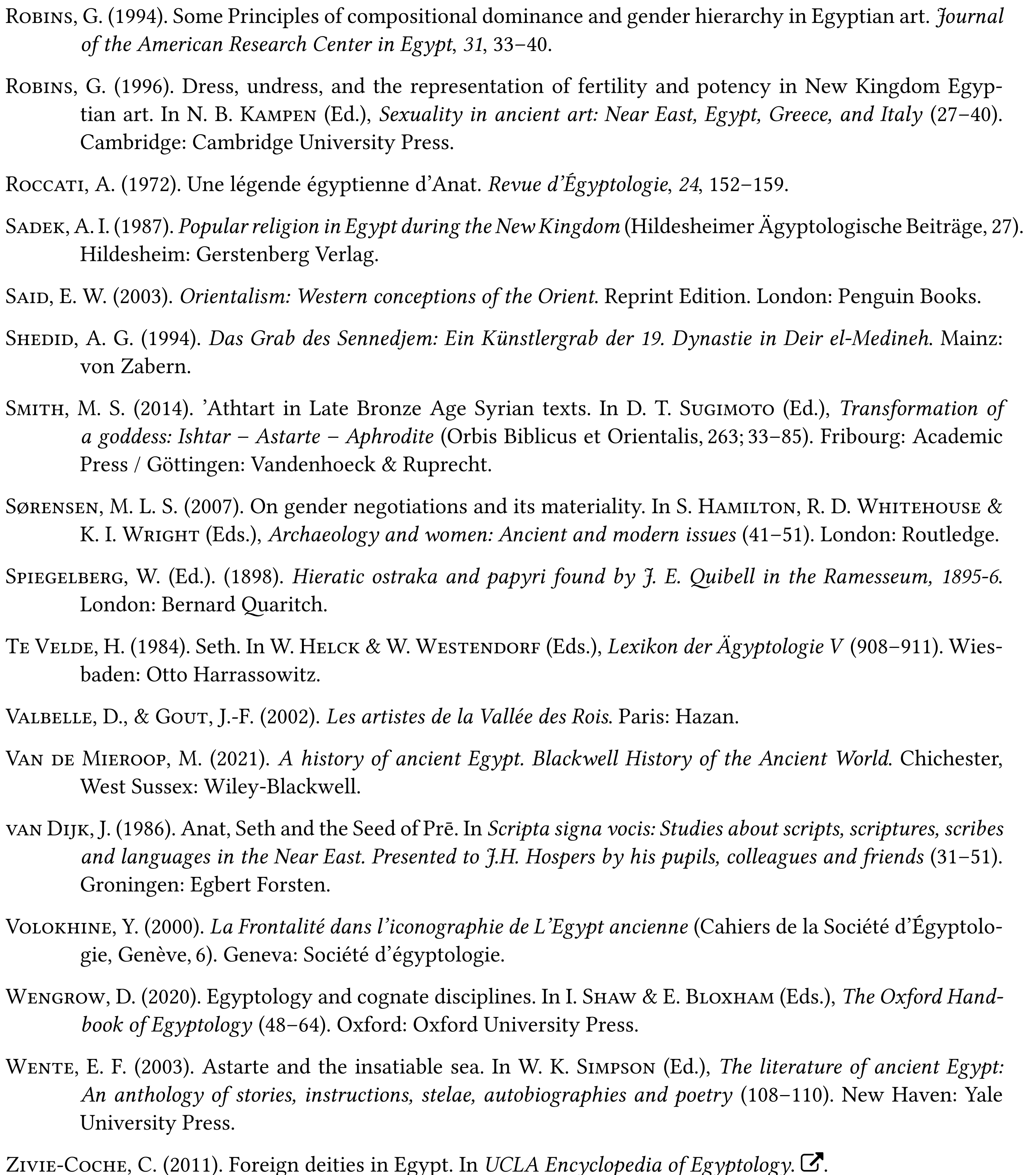

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