

Dan Hulseapple

“Structure, Ideology, Traditions”: Defining the Akkadian State

**Introduction**

Around 2334 BCE, the Akkadian peoples emerged in historical records in Mesopotamia, a region which encompasses most of modern Iraq, and parts of Syria (figure 1). With them came a new language which could be written using the cuneiform script, a new style of art which rendered figures with unparalleled plasticity and realism, and a new way of conceptualizing politics. Amidst a political climate characterized by competition and limited cooperation among independent city states in lower Babylonia (i.e. southern Mesopotamia), and apparently strictly authoritarian regional kingdoms in northern Babylonia, they consolidated political and military power into a single cohesive political entity. Their supposed state lasted for nearly two centuries and encompassed all of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), as well as parts of southern Anatolia (modern Turkey), and Elam (modern southwestern Iran). The Akkadian state was apparently ruled over by a sequence of five charismatic rulers who each worked hard to craft and maintain significant and influential cults of personality. By around 2154 BCE, however, the Akkadian state all but disappeared, apparently crushed by rebellion on all fronts. Despite its apparent dissolution in the late third-millennium, the influence of the Akkadian state continued to be felt in West Asia for roughly another two thousand years. Their language became the region's *lingua franca* until 8th-7th centuries BCE when it was supplanted by Aramaic, and remained a liturgical language into the first century CE. Their artistic plasticity, and their political system were utilized by nearly all subsequent West Asian states and became fully realized by the Assyrians and the Persians in the mid-first millennium BCE.

Given their tremendous influence, it is perhaps surprising that the Akkadians had long been forgotten in the study of history. Modern scholarship on them began only in 1861 when a Neo-Babylonian (7th-6th centuries BCE) cylinder was discovered containing the names of the dynasty's two most famous rulers: Sargon and Naram-Sin.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the Akkadians and their dynasty have been debated in terms of a wide variety of topics, including their racial origins, their relationships with biblical peoples and literature, and the nature of their successful rule over a relatively large territory. A particularly interesting topic which is still the subject of scholarly debate is the last one, i.e., the nature of the Akkadian political system. In 1897, the French Assyriologist, Francois Thureau-Dangin described the Akkadian state as “a large, unified empire [which] replace[d] a patchwork of small rival kingdoms.”<sup>2</sup> This view of the Akkadians apparently dominated scholarly discussion, with the Biblical scholar, Edgar Goodspeed, in 1902, describing the Akkadian state as a “single empire” into which independent Mesopotamian city-states had been incorporated.<sup>3</sup> In 1947, however, the view of Akkad as a single empire was challenged by Van der Meer, who contended that the Akkadian period, at least initially, was less a fundamental change in political, cultural, and economic systems than it was a simple regime change.<sup>4</sup>

The general form of this debate remains largely the same to this day, albeit backed by significantly more source material. Yale Assyriologist, Benjamin Foster, for instance, argues that Akkad's political system was indeed fundamentally new and inherently imperial,<sup>5</sup> while Piotr

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia*, (New York: Routledge, 2016) 289.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, “Management and Administration in the Sargonic Period,” in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 36-37.

Michalowski contends that such designations are simply impossible to make.<sup>6</sup> While both of the works referenced here are valuable in their own rights, they are insufficient in addressing the question of Akkadian statecraft. The latter raises crucial questions about the nature of textual evidence for the Akkadian dynasty, but is superfluously critical about the state's surviving material evidence. The former, conversely, demonstrates an excellent working knowledge of both the period's textual and material evidence, but simply describes the Akkadian political apparatus, rather than define and categorize it.

This essay thus seeks to weigh in on this debate by examining and defining the Akkadian political system as a whole. It attempts a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach and will examine available inscriptions and administrative texts (in translation from their original Sumerian and Akkadian languages), as well as surviving pieces of royal art, and archaeological reports to understand to the nature of the Akkadian state. Most helpful in guiding my interpretations of these pieces of evidence in light of their complexities and ambiguities have been the aforementioned Foster, Art Historian Irene Winter, and archaeologist Harvey Weiss. These three scholars are leaders in their respective fields, and are well known for their comprehensive, thorough, and sophisticated contributions to the study of ancient Mesopotamia; as such, their arguments and interpretations are given considerable weight in this essay.

Notwithstanding, the holistic approach aspired to in this essay is particularly salient for two major reasons. Firstly, a significant amount of scholarship, ranging from introductory textbooks to professional academic monographs and articles, evaluate the Akkadians based solely upon the content of their honorific royal texts; these works can essentially be understood

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<sup>6</sup> Piotr Michalowski, "Memory and Deed: the Historiography of the Expansion of the Akkad State," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 70.

as little more than exegeses. As Assyriologist Mario Liverani points out in his 1993 article on the methodology of studying the Akkadian state, these royal inscriptions were written and copied centuries later for specific purposes, and as such, searching for a “historical kernel” within them is a problematic endeavor.<sup>7</sup> It is thus crucial to include a variety of contemporary sources, particularly inscriptions, pieces of art, and architecture. Secondly, many objections to defining the state as imperial, or indeed to any positive statement about the dynasty, are made on the grounds that the surviving source material is insufficient to support any such claims. By including more sources which have received insufficient scholarly attention beyond their own narrowly defined fields of Assyriology, Mesopotamian history, and Near Eastern Art History, this essay aims to avoid this problem and thereby offer a more complete analysis of the Akkadian state.

The paper will be divided into three major chapters. The first concerns the Akkadian conception of kingship. It will analyze several pieces of Akkadian art, notably the steles of Sargon, and the victory stele of Naram-Sin, as well as several royal inscriptions in order to discuss how the Akkadians selectively engaged with earlier artistic, political, and religious traditions and synthesized them into their own unique royal ideology. The second section concerns how the Akkadians translated their royal ideology into practice by examining archaeological reports on recent excavations in Assyria (northern Mesopotamia), Akkadian administrative documents from the Iraq Museum found at various sites throughout Mesopotamia, and inscriptions detailing a policy of Akkadian royal patronage. These sources offer keen insight into the practical administration of the Akkadian state. In the final section, after giving a brief

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<sup>7</sup> Mario Liverani, “Model and Actualization: the Kings of Akkade in the Historical Tradition,” in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 51-52.

discussion about the definition of the term “empire,” the nature of the Akkadians’ rule will be discussed by synthesizing the points made in the previous two sections. Ultimately this examination will reveal a portrait of the Akkadian state that clearly aligns itself more with the traditional hypothesis which holds that the dynasty produced a fundamentally new, and perhaps imperial system.

### **I. The Akkadian Conception of Kingship**

As historian and cuneiform scholar, Marc Van de Mieroop points out, the rise of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia necessitated an ideological basis on which to justify it.<sup>8</sup> To examine the Akkadian conception of kingship, one key source is the royal art commemorating the deeds of the Akkadian kings, as well as the royal inscriptions that often accompany them. In order to understand the uniqueness of Akkadian kingship, this section will also examine the Sumerian sources to compare Sumerian and Akkadian kingship. On the basis of the above examination, it will define, as best it can, the Akkadian royal ideology and offer brief remarks on its influence in the political and intellectual history of ancient Mesopotamia.

#### **1. Sumerian kingship**

The Sumerian conception of kingship is perhaps best highlighted in the now-famous monument referred to as the “Stele of the Vultures,” or the “Stele of Eannatum” (figure 2). The stele dates to around 2500 BCE, and commemorates the victory of the city-state Girsu (also referred to as Lagash) over another city-state, Umma. The obverse side of the monument is divided into two

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.

registers, with the top one significantly larger than the other, and depicts a large figure standing with a mace in front of a net full of captured enemies. The reverse side is divided into four registers of roughly equal size, and depicts a standard battle scene which starts at the bottom of the stele and culminates at the top with a scene of vultures and dogs preying on the corpses of the defeated soldiers from Umma.

Acclaimed art historian, Irene Winter, has convincingly argued that the large figure on the obverse side is the patron deity of Girsu, Ningirsu.<sup>9</sup> Others, she points out, like Perkins in his own article on this stele, contend that the figure is actually the leader of Girsu, Eannatum. This position is evidenced by the motif of a large bird which appears twice next the large figure, called an *anzu*.<sup>10</sup> Since the *anzu* apparently shows up on several royal monuments, it would be reasonable to assume that it is a signifier of royalty. Winter contends, however, that while the *anzu* does appear on other pieces of royal art, it is found only in connection with Ningirsu. Eannatum, however, is not wholly absent from the stele; Winter identifies him as the figure presiding over the burial and ritual scene in the second register from the bottom on the reverse side.<sup>11</sup> That this is indeed Eannatum is marked by his characteristically royal Sumerian robe, as well as his also characteristically royal seated posture.

Winter does not see the depiction of god and ruler on opposite sides of the monument as a mere stylistic choice, however. For her, the reverse side of the stele, which contains the battle scene, depicts the realm of mortals, while the obverse side depicts the realm of the divine.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Irene J. Winter, "After the Battle is Over: The *Stele of the Vultures* and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East," in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume II, from the Third Millennium BCE*, ed. Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. R. Garr, B. Halpern, and Theo P. J. Van den Hout (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

These two realms, moreover, do not simply exist concurrently, but rather the mortal realm mirrors that of the divine. Taken this way, the events depicted on the reverse side of the “Stele of the Vultures,” are the mortal representations of the events depicted on the obverse side. Cuneiform scholar, Aage Westenholz takes this to be indicative of “the Sumerian mindset” as a whole, in which the earthly realm was thought to act in accordance with a cosmic order ordained by the gods.<sup>13</sup>

As such, it is not Eannatum who is responsible for the victory of Girsu, but rather the god Ningirsu. This interpretation is corroborated by the inscription found on the stele itself, which declares that Eannatum “restored [the city] to Ningirsu’s control.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the inscription describes Eannatum as having been given both the strength to win in battle, and kingship over Girsu by Ningirsu.<sup>15</sup> Here what we see is that while king<sup>16</sup> Eannatum does play a significant role in the events described, credit and praise are ultimately owed moreso to Ningirsu. In other words, though Eannatum is important, and is certainly afforded status above and beyond all other mortals, his importance is derived from the gifts bestowed upon him by Ningirsu; his position in society and the cosmic order, not he as an individual, is the object of praise and respect. This view of leaders as deriving important from their position, according to Westenholz, is characteristically Sumerian.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Aage Westenholz, “The World View of Sargonic Officials: Differences in Mentality between Sumerians and Akkadians,” in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 162.

<sup>14</sup> Jerrold S. Cooper (trans.), “Eanatum (Stela of the Vulture) in Cooper,” “Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: the Umma-Lagash Border Conflict,” in *Sources and Monographs on the Ancient Near East (SANE)* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983), 47.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> “King,” as we shall see, is a contentious designation. Here, however, it is used for the sake of expediency

<sup>17</sup> Westenholz, “World View of Sargonic Officials,” 161.

## 2. Akkadian kingship

The Akkadians, as will be shown, came to fundamentally disagree with this position. Despite this “difference in mentality,” however, the Akkadians did not reject the Sumerian understanding of kingship wholesale; at very least they did not reject Sumerian methods of depicting and understanding kingship. In fact, especially in the early years of their rule, the Akkadians seem to have incorporated a great deal of Sumerian custom into their royal ideology. Most notably, two steles now located in the Louvre attributed to Sargon, the dynasty’s first king, show clear Sumerian influence. The first stele is referred to only as “Sargon’s obelisk,” (figure 3) and has an inscription that proclaims that it is dedicated to Sargon. What remains of the stele is divided two registers (albeit with one significantly better preserved than the other), and depicts a procession of Akkadian soldiers led by Sargon (upper register), and several battle scenes which show Akkadian soldiers subduing enemies while dogs feed on their corpses. Archaeologist Lorenzo Nigro points that while the stele shows a definitively Akkadian message, its “delivery” is undeniable Sumerian. For instance, he firstly points out that the character of Sargon is depicted with a characteristically Akkadian hairstyle, but also dressed in full-fledged Sumerian royal garb.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, he points out that the motif of the dogs feeding on corpses in the top register is an unmistakable harking back to the “Stele of the Vultures.”<sup>19</sup>

He notes, however, that the stele has a distinctly Akkadian militaristic theme and a propagandistic purpose. The militaristic theme is perhaps obvious given that battle scenes are plainly visible, but it is worth pointing out that the five personages following Sargon are upper

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<sup>18</sup> Lorenzo Nigro, “The Two Steles of Sargon: Iconology and Visual Propaganda at the Beginning of Royal Akkadian Relief,” *Iraq* 60 (1998),

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.



class military officers, and can be marked as such by their clothing.<sup>20</sup> The propagandistic purposes, however, are slightly more subtle. Nigro points out that above Sargon's procession, there is another procession of captives who seem to be bound by their necks.<sup>21</sup> These bound prisoners are more than likely slaves. This is critical, Nigro argues, since conquests like those Sargon claimed to undertake inevitably meant a loss of both human and land resources.<sup>22</sup> The depiction of upper class military officials, along with slaves was thus likely a way for Sargon and the Akkadians to garner support for their military expeditions by making conquest seem more palatable to those who could most efficiently benefit from, and contribute to it.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, as Nigro argues, Sargon's position of leading the officers indicates that the piece means to attribute the military success depicted to Sargon himself.<sup>24</sup> Put simply, this stele likely served to entice upper class military leaders to support Sargon by advertising the benefits of plunder and loyalty to the Akkadian king. It should be noted that since much of the stele has been destroyed, it is certainly possible (plausible, even) that the piece once included depictions of deities and other themes that might, to some extent, de-emphasize the propagandistic message we see today. However, even if such themes were present, we would still be left with at least a single scene which was designed to spur loyalty to Sargon himself.

Akkadian art's emphasis on the character of the king himself, and its propagandistic nature are perhaps more apparent on the second Sargon stele, referred to here throughout as the stele of Ishtar (figure 4). The stele as a whole was ogival, and the scene that remains of it seems

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>22</sup> "Sargon 2.1.1.2-10," in *Sargonic and Gutian Periods (2334-2113 BC), Volume 2, The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods*, ed. Douglas Frayne (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Abbreviated here throughout as RIME.

<sup>23</sup> Nigro, "Two Steles of Sargon," 98.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

to have occupied its top register.<sup>25</sup> The scene depicts the king (likely Sargon) dressed in Sumerian royal garb smiting a net full of enemies in front of an enthroned deity, who has convincingly been argued to be the Akkadian warrior goddess, Ishtar.<sup>26</sup>

Here again we see the combination of Sumerian and Akkadian styles and motifs which characterizes the early period of the Akkadian dynasty. For instance, the motif of smiting a net filled with captured enemies is a clear harking back to the Stele of the Vultures. Moreover, a dedicatory inscription found on Sargon's shoulder mentions the god Ilaba.<sup>27</sup> Ilaba was the Akkadian counterpart of the Sumerian god associated with the city of Kish in northern Babylonia. This is significant because the city of Kish, in the Early Dynastic period exercised a great degree of hegemonic influence over northern Babylonia; because of this wide-reaching authority Kish became a symbol of political power.<sup>28</sup> Assyriologist Piotr Steinkeller contends that the use of the title "King of Kish" by Sumerian kings was itself a way to legitimize Sumerian kingship.<sup>29</sup> He suggests that Sumerian kingship (i.e. kingship in southern Babylonia) in the Early Dynastic periods was weak and theocratic in nature, while kingship in northern Babylonia during the same periods was strong and authoritarian. Seen in this light, the dedication of the stele to the city's god Ilaba, then, is a clear attempt by the Akkadian kings to utilize existing political and ideological traditions to advance their own political goals.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Anton Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York: Phaidon Publishers, Inc., 1969), 47.

<sup>27</sup> Nigro, "Two Steles of Sargon," 93.

<sup>28</sup> Cooper, "Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions," 7.

The title "King of Kish" and the city of Kish itself have become the topics of much scholarly debate. Though of paramount importance to the study of ancient Mesopotamia and its politics, this debate cannot be discussed here. For further reading on the subject, see: Tohru Maeda, "The King of Kish in Pre-Sargonic Sumer," *Orient* 17, 1-17, and Piotr Steinkeller, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia and the Origins of the Sargonic Empire," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 107-129.

<sup>29</sup> Piotr Steinkeller, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia and the Origins of the Sargonic Empire," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 120-121.

The Ishtar stele, however, differs from the Stele of the Vultures in significant ways that highlight its Akkadian character. Firstly, in the Stele of the Vultures, the god Ningirsu smites the net of enemies, while on the Ishtar stele, Sargon smites the net of enemies while Ishtar watches on approvingly. The “primary merit” for the act of defeating enemies thus belongs to Sargon, not the approving goddess.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, a royal inscription describing Sargon’s defeat of Lugalzagesi, leader of Ur, Eninmar, Lagash, and Umma, describes Sargon as wielding the “mace of the god Ilaba.”<sup>31</sup> For Nigro, the Ishtar stele is a visual representation of this text, and as such, the mace Sargon is using to smite the enemy leader is the mace of Ilaba.<sup>32</sup> If this interpretation is correct, the stele depicts Sargon himself as the sole harbinger of a new regime, divinely sanctioned by the Sumerian gods, and the Akkadian ones. Finally, the other figures in the net are seated orderly with their hands outstretched in a gesture of submission. Nigro contends that this was done to evoke an image of Sargon as a leader who: 1) does not wish to harm those who submit to him, and 2) brings order to conquered peoples.<sup>33</sup> In sum, the image we see of Sargon is one of a ruler whose unique individual character and abilities to bring order and prosperity are emphasized, but within the context of already existing traditions of kingship, religion, and art. Art historian, Melissa Eppihimer, put it best in her dissertation on the artistic influence of the Akkadian kings when she contends that the reign of Sargon “is better characterized as a negotiation between established kingship models and new royal functions that suited an ongoing transformation of the king’s role.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nigro, “Two Steles of Sargon,” 87.

<sup>31</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.2.

<sup>32</sup> Nigro, “Two Steles of Sargon,” 93.

<sup>33</sup> Nigro, “Two Steles of Sargon,” 89.

<sup>34</sup> Melissa Eppihimer, “The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009), 41.

The emphasis on the individual character of the king, which first appeared in the art and texts associated with Sargon reached full maturity under the reign of his grandson, Naram-Sin. No piece of Akkadian art exemplifies this as robustly as Naram-Sin's victory stele erected at Sippar (figure 5). The stele features Naram-Sin leading an army of Akkadian soldiers into battle against a group of enemies, while three celestial discs hover above a mountain which dominates the upper right quarter of the stele. The stele also features several trees scattered throughout, and an inscription running down the side of the mountain.

Akkadian emphasis on the individual character of the king and his abilities is perhaps most striking is found in the single most noted aspect of this stele: the deification of Naram-Sin. He is depicted with a two-horned crown, which, according to Eppihimer, was a common signifier of lower level deities.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, she points out that inscription on the stela dedicates the monument to the god Shamash.<sup>36</sup> This is of note because Naram-Sin seems to rise "alongside the mountain," which was a common motif in depictions of Shamash on Akkadian cylinder seals. Naram-Sin's deification is further evidenced in several royal inscriptions dedicated both to and by him. These inscriptions include the Sumerian and Old Akkadian<sup>37</sup> symbol, *dingir* (which was used to denote divine names) next to Naram-Sin's name.<sup>38</sup> Naram-Sin is the first, and indeed only Akkadian king to have used this sign next to his name. Where previously Sargon had

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Old Akkadian here is used with reference to the stage of the Akkadian language lasting from the mid to late third millennium. Though this dialect does have a significant deal of overlap with the Akkadian dynasty, the term "Old Akkadian" is slightly broader. For more information on periodization and the history of Mesopotamia, see: Marc Van de Mieroop, "On Writing a History of the Ancient Near East," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 65, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 289-295.

<sup>38</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.1-18.

blurred the line between king and god, Naram-Sin seems to have done away with the line completely.

In addition to the overtly religious themes the stele depicts, it also articulates clear secular messages as well. The most immediately striking example of this is, again, the figure of Naram-Sin himself. In stark contrast to the bulky, poorly-proportioned human figures depicted in Sumerian and earlier Akkadian art, Naram-Sin is depicted with a high degree of realism. Winter points out that in particular, his buttocks, calves, back, and beard are all accentuated in a more lifelike, and well-proportioned way than ever before seen in ancient art.<sup>39</sup> For Winter, these characteristics are visual representations of four Akkadian adjectives. The first, *banu*, roughly translates to “well-built” or “well formed”.<sup>40</sup> This characteristic is evident by the plasticity with which Naram-Sin is depicted. The second, *damqu*, which Winter translates to “wholeness” or “perfection,” and is similarly evidenced by his perfect body, particularly the visibility of his right-hand side, which was commonly associated with perfection in Mesopotamian omen texts.<sup>41</sup> The third, *bashtu*, translates roughly to “vitality of masculinity,” and is evidenced by his broad chest and robust beard.<sup>42</sup> The fourth is *kuzbu*, which Winter argues is best translated as “sexual allure,” and is evidenced by his well-formed buttocks.<sup>43</sup> Winter adds, moreover, that these characteristics are not indicative simply of mere stylistic choice. Instead, they served a propagandistic purpose, whereby the Akkadian cultural identity, which valued and emphasized

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<sup>39</sup> Irene J. Winter, “Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: the Alluring Body of Naram-Sin of Agade,” in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume II, from the Third Millennium BCE*, ed. Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. R. Garr, B. Halpern, and Theo P. J. Van den Hout (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 85.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

the individual king as well as male sexual virility and potency, assumed a hegemonic political expression.<sup>44</sup>

Eppihimer further points out that mountainous and arboreal landscape depicted on the stele was intended to give a specific narrative history of the battle depicted.<sup>45</sup> She concurs with Winter who argues that the mountains and the specific trees on the stele were native only to the Zagros mountain range in northern Mesopotamia, and as such, the stele does not tell us simply that a battle occurred, but rather that a specific battle occurred at a specific place.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Winter points out that the Akkadian soldiers standing behind Naram-Sin are distributed evenly, connoting a feeling of order.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, the figures in front of Naram-Sin are shown in positions of submission or defeated, and are scattered throughout the left hand side of the stele, invoking an image of chaos. Read this way, the stele proclaims the authority of Naram-Sin and the Akkadian state, and their roles as bringers of order, even in regions far-flung from the Akkadian homeland in central Mesopotamia. In other words, Naram-Sin is portrayed not simply as king of his Akkad, but as the king of a wider region.

This idea is also evident in Akkadian inscriptions. Previously, Akkadian kings described themselves as “Kings of Kish.” This is attested in inscriptions from Sargon,<sup>48</sup> Rimush,<sup>49</sup> and Manishtushu.<sup>50</sup> As noted previously, the title “King of Kish” was a traditional title from the Sumerian Early Dynastic period, and implied regional control over Sumer.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>45</sup> Melissa Eppihimer, “The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship,” 75.

<sup>46</sup> Irene J. Winter, “Tree(s) on the Mountain: Landscape and Territory on the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin of Agade,” in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume II, from the Third Millennium BCE*, ed. Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. R. Garr, B. Halpern, and Theo P. J. Van den Hout (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 122-123.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>48</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.9

<sup>49</sup> RIME, Rimush E2.1.2.3

<sup>50</sup> RIME, Manishtushu E2.1.3.1

<sup>51</sup> Cooper, “Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions,” 7.

specific meaning of the term might have been in the Early Dynastic period, it is clear that it was significant, and was, in turn, used by the Akkadian kings as a way to legitimize their new form of rule within an already established political tradition. Naram-Sin, however, referred to himself not as “King of Kish,” but rather as “King of the Four Quarters.”<sup>52</sup> Foster clarifies the meaning of this obscure phrasing by pointing out that the “four quarters” in question refer to the four banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.<sup>53</sup> Effectively, then, the title “King of the Four Quarters” is one which seeks to proclaim Naram-Sin as the ruler of all of Mesopotamia; indeed all of civilization, to him. As will be discussed in the next section, the Akkadian kings likely controlled all of Mesopotamia prior to the reign of Naram-Sin. The transition from “King of Kish” to the “King of the Four Quarters” thus denotes a change in ideology, rather than necessarily one in administration. It should be noted, however, that ideological change can often be just as (if not more impactful) a change in politicking. As Liverani points out, the sentiment expressed by the Naram-Sin stele, that a ruler’s dominion extended beyond the local, and over a wide and heterogeneous region, was among the single most well-received in the history of West Asian politics.<sup>54</sup>

## **II. Administration: the Akkadian Approach**

Having laid out the Akkadian conception of kingship and government, we turn now to its practical application. It has been suggested, most prominently and explicitly by Assyriologist

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<sup>52</sup> Naram-Sin, E2.1.4, for instance.

<sup>53</sup> Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 83.

<sup>54</sup> Liverani, “Model and Actualization,” 48-51.

Piotr Michalowski, that there is insufficient evidence to say much of value about Akkadian political systems.<sup>55</sup> Simply put: this is not true. While we may not be able to view the inner machinations of the Akkadian state as clearly as we can those of the Roman empire, it is certainly possible, through examining surviving archaeological, textual, epigraphic and art historical evidence, to give a rough sketch of Akkadian institutions. This section thus uses archaeological field reports, administrative documents, royal inscriptions, and several pieces of royal art to examine several major aspects of the Akkadian administration, namely its bureaucracy, redistribution of arable land, and its use of religion in garnering legitimacy. In short, it seeks to define the Akkadian political apparatus as one which was divided hierarchically, highly centralized for its time, and sought to provide individuals with incentives to support and participate in it. These characteristics and methods of statecraft were not maximally robust in Akkad, evidenced by the frequent rebellions it faced, but nevertheless afford us ample opportunity to understand and loosely define the Akkadian state.

## **1. Akkadian bureaucracy**

Before considering the anything else about the Akkadian administration, we must first consider the general structure of its bureaucracy. From his extensive reading of Akkadian administrative documents, Foster proposes a fairly strict hierarchy of officials within the Akkadian state. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the king sat atop this hierarchy, and all below were in some way subservient or accountable to him.<sup>56</sup> According to Foster, the Akkadian kings derived their

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<sup>55</sup> Piotr Michalowski, "Memory and Deed: the Historiography of the Expansion of the Akkad State," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 70.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, "Management and Administration in the Sargonic Period," in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 26.



ideological authority from the gods (as discussed in the previous section), and their practical authority from their ability to coerce using military power. This authoritarian interpretation of Akkadian kingship is confirmed in the fact that many royal inscriptions explicitly talk about the king in a military context. Perhaps most famously is the Sargonic royal inscription which states: “5,400 men daily eat in the presence of Sargon, the king to whom the god Enlil gave no rival.”<sup>57</sup> Though the exact figure of 5,400 (attested in other inscriptions<sup>58</sup>) is almost definitely an exaggeration, that the king occupied a place at the head of a standing army is clear enough; this is of particular interest because standing armies had not existed in Mesopotamia prior to the Akkadians.<sup>59</sup> After the king in the military hierarchy was his general, or *shagina*.<sup>60</sup> The *shagina* was likely the one directly responsible for the direct administration of the army, and for ensuring the initial cooperation of conquered city governors, *ensis*. In order to accomplish these fairly substantial tasks, the *shagina* employed several different workers under him: couriers, physicians, scribes, accountants, and diviners.<sup>61</sup>

Serving as the “civilian” equivalents of the *shaginas* were the *shabra-e*’s, who served as the king’s royal administrators. These royal administrators are mentioned several times in royal inscriptions, notably those of Sargon,<sup>62</sup> and Naram-Sin,<sup>63</sup> and were responsible for successfully incorporating the conquered governors (*ensis*) into the wider Akkadian political apparatus.<sup>64</sup> Where the authority of the *ensis* was local, and extended only over the city, the authority of the

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<sup>57</sup> “Sargon E2.1.1.11,” in RIME, 29.

<sup>58</sup> “Sargon E2.1.1.12, in RIME, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia*, (New York: Routledge, 2016) 156.

<sup>60</sup> Foster, “Management and Administration,” 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.2001; Sargon E2.1.1.2004.

<sup>63</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.1, line 6; Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2, line 34.

<sup>64</sup> Foster, “Management and Administration,” 29.

*shabra-e*'s was regional; it extended over several city-states, bringing all of their *ensis* under their dominion.

## 2. Land and managing resources

The *shabra-e*'s incorporated the conquered governors (*ensis*) into the Akkadian administration primarily through the apportionment of arable land.<sup>65</sup> Large tracts of land were “sold” to administrators, who were then responsible for divvying up the surpluses of the harvest between the Akkadian state, the city storehouses, and personal subsistence.<sup>66</sup> Steinkeller points out that this same reapportionment and strategic use of arable land and its profits is attested to in the records which survive from northern Babylonia (the region just above Sumer) in the Early Dynastic periods.<sup>67</sup> Archaeologist Norman Yoffee, in his monograph on the development of early states, contends that the sale of such arable land was largely symbolic, and signify that the sellers had essentially become clients of the crown.<sup>68</sup>

Several administrative texts from the city-state of Umma in southern Mesopotamia, naming Akkadian officials, and massive quantities of agricultural products (primarily wheat and barley) strongly suggest that this was the case.<sup>69</sup> Archaeologist Lauren Ristvet contends that the situation is similar at Gasur in northern Mesopotamia, where upwards of 200 administrative texts were found.<sup>70</sup> These texts also focus on the distribution of land and agricultural products.

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<sup>65</sup> Foster, “Management and Administration,” 29.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Steinkeller, “Early Political Development in Mesopotamia,” 126.

<sup>68</sup> Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111.

<sup>69</sup> “Nos. 13-17” in *Third-Millennium Legal and Administrative Texts tin the Iraq Museum, Baghdad*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 41-45.

<sup>70</sup> Lauren Ristvet, “The Development of Underdevelopment? Imperialism, Economic Exploitation and Settlement Dynamics on the Khabur Plains, ca. 2300-2200 BC,” in *Seven Generations since the Fall of Akkad* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 245.

Archaeologists Harvey Weiss and Elena Rova contend that the practice of divvying up arable land, and controlling the flow of the goods (namely wheat) derived from it underwrote the whole Akkadian system of government.<sup>71</sup>

Elsewhere in his massive corpus of works on the topic, Foster contends that beyond its clear practical and economic benefits, this reapportionment of land served to spur loyalty to the Akkadians state by giving portions of the city's land to private individuals.<sup>72</sup> Given the near 200 year reign of the Akkadians, this was somewhat successful. The giving of land, even if its fruits were subject to both city and imperial tax, to individuals who did not previously have it, understandably generates a sense of loyalty to the Akkadian king. Conversely, however, as Yoffee points out, each new Akkadian king was seemingly coronated by rebellion, led by *ensis*, who presumably felt slighted by the Akkadian state's reapportionment of their land.<sup>73</sup> These rebellions are attested in many royal inscriptions, notably from Rimush,<sup>74</sup> and Naram-Sin.<sup>75</sup> The latter of these inscriptions, in fact, describes how the Akkadian state put down a rebellion of a coalition of Sumerian city-states, and captured 6 generals, 17 governors, and 78 chiefs.<sup>76</sup> The system that emerges here is regimented, and centralized, but not necessarily the most effective at deterring rebellion when the opportunity presented itself.

Archaeological evidence seems to corroborate the emphasis on land and resource management found in the administrative texts. In a 2012 report on an excavation at Tell Leilan in modern northeastern Syria, Weiss tells us that a large building was found dating to the Akkadian

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<sup>71</sup> Elena Rova and Harvey Weiss, "The Origins of North Mesopotamian Civilization: Ninevite 5 Periods and Processes," in *Subartu* 9 (2003), 595.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, "The Sargonic Victory Stele from Telloh," in *Iraq* 47 (1985), 28.

<sup>73</sup> Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State*, 143.

<sup>74</sup> "Rimush E2.1.2.2," concerning the destruction of Umma and the recapture of its *ensi*.

<sup>75</sup> "Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2," in RIME 90-94.

<sup>76</sup> "Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2, ll. 20-22" in RIME 93-94.

period.<sup>77</sup> The entrance to the building lies adjacent to a street which connects it to another series of buildings already dated to the Akkadian period.<sup>78</sup> The building yielded a seal inscribed with the name of an Akkadian official (*shabra-e*). Since the excavation found storage vessels, grain processing tools, tannurs, and cereal grain ash from the building, it was probably used to collect, store, process, and distribute grain.<sup>79</sup> These pieces of evidence strongly suggest that the building was, in fact, an administrative building, rather than simply a large building which existed contemporaneously with the Akkadian state.

Interestingly, Ristvet also points out that the area around Tell Leilan shows significant changes in the size and placement of settlements starting roughly contemporaneously with the Akkadians.<sup>80</sup> She notes that when Akkadian presence becomes detectable in the region, small villages surrounding the city were abandoned, and new settlements were found just outside of areas where the amount of rainfall made farming ideal. This effectively created whole swathes of new farmland. Though Ristvet admits there could potentially be other explanations for this phenomenon, the relocation of whole villages and communities in such a way to create more farmland and hence more profit, seems to suggest that this could have very well been an official Akkadian policy. Though population redistribution is not mentioned explicitly, it is strongly alluded to in Akkadian royal inscriptions. Rimush, for instance, mentions taking upwards of 14,000 captives from Adab, and Zabala.<sup>81</sup> Naram-Sin also describes taking several captives,

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<sup>77</sup> Harvey Weiss, et al., "Tell Leilan Akkadian Imperialization, Collapse and Short-Lived Reoccupation Defined by High Resolution Radiocarbon Dating" in *Seven Generations since the Fall of Akkad* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 167.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>79</sup> Weiss, et al., "Tell Leilan Akkadian Imperialization," 169.

<sup>80</sup> Ristvet, "The Development of Underdevelopment?," 249.

<sup>81</sup> RIME, Rimush E2.1.2.1, lines 4-13.

though the exact number is lost.<sup>82</sup> Though the number of captives mentioned by Rimush is absurdly high, the inscriptions nevertheless demonstrate that the idea of capturing, rather than killing people in battle was not lost on the Akkadians at least as early as their second king. Moreover, since the practice of redistributing local populations to maximize agricultural productivity became commonplace in West Asian statecraft later on under the Assyrians,<sup>83</sup> it is conceivable, if not likely, that the processes attested to in the archaeological record and in Rimush's inscriptions refer to such a practice in the Akkadian period.

In sum, it is clear that the Akkadian state employed a system which placed heavy emphasis on the distribution of land, and its profits. This system was centralized, regular, and aimed (to some extent) to deter rebellion. Though rebellions against the Akkadian state were common, it is fair to say that their agriculture-based system contributed greatly to the state's relative longevity.

### **3. Religion and legitimacy**

Van de Mieroop's assertion that developments in kingship necessitate developments in ideology is once again relevant when considering the Akkadians' interactions with the Sumerian religion.

<sup>84</sup> To legitimize their regimes, Akkadian kings actively supported the existing Sumerian religious traditions. It is crucial to remark here that many of the practical aspects of the Akkadian administration, most notably the strategic use of arable land, have detectable roots in the northern

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<sup>82</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2, lines 19-25.

<sup>83</sup> "Tiglath-pileser III (744-727): Campaigns against Syria and Palestine, lines 150-157" in *The Ancient Near East: an Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 265. The text reads: "I received from them 10 talents of gold, 1,000 (?) talents of silver as their [tri]bute and brought them to Assyria." The Hebrew Bible corroborates this account (2 Kings 15:30).

<sup>84</sup> Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City*, 33.

Babylonian political tradition during the Early Dynastic periods.<sup>85</sup> However, in light of the “predominantly secular” nature of northern Babylonian kingship, the strategic use of existing religious traditions is apparently an Akkadian innovation, and one which was crucial in securing Akkadian rule over the large and heterogeneous Mesopotamia.<sup>86</sup> Particularly important in this endeavor were two policies: (1) appointing kings’ daughters as high priestesses in culturally significant temples;<sup>87</sup> and (2) commissioning statues for various Sumerian temples.

### **(1) Akkadian legitimacy and the office of high priestess**

Strategic use of the Sumerian religion by the Akkadians is perhaps most evident in their placement of Akkadian officials and royal family members as high priests in important city temples. The most famous Akkadian to assume this position was Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon, who served as the high priestess of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur. We know this, firstly, through an inscription found on the reverse side of a disc depicting Enheduanna (figure 6) involved in some sort of ritual.<sup>88</sup> The inscription names her as both the daughter of Sargon,<sup>89</sup> and as the wife of the moon god Nanna.<sup>90</sup> We know this, secondly, because a significant corpus of her poetry and hymns survives to this day.<sup>91</sup>

The appointment of an Akkadian princess as the high priestess of Nanna clearly served a significant ideological purpose for the Akkadian state. Firstly, as Cooper notes, the city of Ur had a fair degree of cultural significance in the Early Dynastic period, since it was one of the

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<sup>85</sup> Steinkeller, “Early Political Development in Mesopotamia,” 126.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>87</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.16, for instance.

<sup>88</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.16

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 4-7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1-3.

<sup>91</sup> Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 140.

“traditional Babylonian seat[s] of kingship.”<sup>92</sup> He points out that the “Sumerian King List” repeatedly lists Ur (along with Kish and Uruk) as a city which frequently exerted regional hegemony over southern Sumer. In other words, the city’s past, whether mythical or historical, gave it a position of prominence in the Sumerian mind. Secondly, the Enheduanna disc depicts her engaging in a sort of religious ritual, and does so using characteristically Sumerian motifs and themes.<sup>93</sup> Winter takes this point further, contending that the Sumerian-ness of the disc indicates the existence of the office of high priestess prior in the Sumerian tradition.<sup>94</sup> As evidence for this point, she points to pieces of Early Dynastic glyptic which depict figures known to be priestesses wearing similar clothing, and being rendered in identical postures.<sup>95</sup>

The ideological significance of the office of high priestess, moreover, meant that the office had practical purposes as well, evidenced by the fact that the high priestesses did wield a fair degree of power, even if the exact nature of that power is ambiguous. This is evidenced primarily by the fact that they seemed to have entire staff at their disposal; several cylinder seals, for instance, list the names of Enheduanna’s attendants.<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, one such seal mentions someone named Adda, who is described as Enheduanna’s *shabra-e* (in this context, the title *shabra-e* is best understood as an “estate supervisor” or a “majordomo”).<sup>97</sup> This seems to suggest that the high priestess owned land, and enough of it to warrant an officer whose sole purpose was to ensure it was used properly. Further, Enheduanna was not the only Akkadian princess who

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<sup>92</sup> Jerrold S. Cooper, “Paradigm and Propaganda: the Dynasty of Akkade in the 21st Century,” in *Akkad, the First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Tradition*, (Padua: Sargon, 1993), 20.

<sup>93</sup> Eppihimer, “The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship,” 39-40.

<sup>94</sup> Irene J. Winter, “Women in Public: the Disk of Enheduanna, the Beginning of the Office of En-Priestess, and the Weight of Visual Evidence,” in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume II, from the Third Millennium BCE*, ed. Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. R. Garr, B. Halpern, and Theo P. J. Van den Hout (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 73-74.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>96</sup> Eppihimer, “The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship,” 97.

<sup>97</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.2004.

served as a high priestess. One of Naram-Sin's daughters, Enmenana, is mentioned in an inscription as holding the office of high priestess of Nanna, presumably as her great aunt's replacement.<sup>98</sup> She is also mentioned in three inscriptions as having a full staff of her own, including a *shabra-e*, a doorkeeper, and a scribe.<sup>99</sup> Another of Naram-Sin's daughters, Tutanapshum, is mentioned in two inscriptions as an high priestess of the god Enlil, associated with another significant city-state, Nippur; she too is described as having at least one servant.<sup>100</sup> A third daughter, named Shumshani, is also mentioned as being the high priestess of the god Shamash at the city of Sippar.<sup>101</sup>

We thus have at least three of Sumer's most culturally significant city temples presided over by at least four Akkadian royal family members. As Winter argues, this is a clear attempt by the Akkadian kings to grant themselves both political and religious legitimacy by further blurring the lines the Sumerians had traditionally drawn between the realm of mortals, and the realm of the divine.<sup>102</sup> Foster takes this point even further by suggesting that the presence of Akkadian princesses at these temples could have been part of an effort by the Akkadian kings to integrate the Akkadian and Sumerian pantheons, and in turn establish a religious unity to complement the period's political unity.<sup>103</sup> Whether this was actually the intent of the Akkadians, and whether it was successful at the time is unclear; but the prominence of Akkadian gods like Ishtar in subsequent periods of Mesopotamian religious history suggests that this unity was obtained, to some extent, well after the Akkadian period. What is clear, however, is that the appointment of

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<sup>98</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.33.

<sup>99</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2018-2020.

<sup>100</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.19-20 (mention Tutanapshum as high priestess of Enlil); RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2017

<sup>101</sup> RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.51.

<sup>102</sup> Winter, "Women in Public," 76.

<sup>103</sup> Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 46.



Akkadian royal women to the office of high priestess was of paramount importance to the preservation of Akkadian rule over the heterogeneous population of Mesopotamia.

## **(2) Akkadian legitimacy and religious patronage**

An Akkadian policy of religious patronage is most apparent under the dynasty's third king, Manishtushu (ca. 2269-2255 BCE). As Foster points out, his reign was likely far more important to the survival of the Akkadian state than the Mesopotamian historical tradition would have us believe.<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, little written evidence survives from his reign, with the exception of his so-called "standard inscription." Luckily for us, however, these inscriptions were found on statues, and fragments of statues of the king (figure 7, for instance). These statues and fragments, interestingly, constitute a larger corpus of visual evidence than is available for any other Akkadian king.<sup>105</sup>

In her 2010 article on the statues of Manishtushu, Eppihimer argues that the statues and their inscriptions reveal a policy of religious patronage by the Akkadian kings. Manishtushu's standard inscription recounts the king's campaigns in Sumer, and across the "Lower Sea," potentially in modern Oman.<sup>106</sup> It concludes with a brief section dedicating the inscription and the statue it was inscribed on to the god Enlil, as well as a section with a curse against any individual who removes the piece from its resting place.<sup>107</sup> Eppihimer points out, however, that the standard inscription is found on six different statues in four different and culturally

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>105</sup> Melissa Eppihimer, "Assembling Kingship and State: the Statues of Manishtushu and the Consolidation of Akkadian Kingship," in the *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, no. 3 (July 2010): 366.

<sup>106</sup> RIME, Manishtushu E2.1.3.1.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 42-63.

significant city temples: Nippur, Ur, Sippar, and Susa.<sup>108</sup> Though the inscription is largely the same at all of these places, the dedicatory section changes depending on where the statue was erected. For instance, the dedicatory section from the Ur inscription lists Sin, Ur's patron god, as the recipient deity, not Enlil.<sup>109</sup> The copy from Sippar, moreover, mentions Ishtar, the patron goddess of Akkad (presumably both the city, and the region, which Sippar sits firmly in the middle of).

The exact function these statues served is, like so many things from the Akkadian period, ambiguous at best. In her article on Sumerian and so-called "Neo-Sumerian" statuary, Winter contends that statues of rulers (like those of Manishtushu) served a ritual purpose, whereby they were seen as literal embodiments of the king, and as such were given various offerings.<sup>110</sup> Winter's argument here is convincing, but only with regard to the numerous statues of the post-Akkadian *ensi*, Gudea, for whom innumerable statues, inscriptions and texts survive. No such luxury is available for the Akkadian kings, including Manishtushu.

For now, what we can say about the statues and inscription of Manishtushu is that they clearly aimed at attaining religious legitimacy for the Akkadian kings. Their presence at significant Sumerian temples, and the strategic changes to the dedicatory sections of the inscriptions strongly suggests that the Akkadian kings were seeking to acknowledge (if only symbolically) the legitimacy of the localized Sumerian religious tradition, and in a sense, continue it.<sup>111</sup> The statues and inscription of Manishtushu thus emerge as an attempt to

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<sup>108</sup> Eppihimer, "Assembling Kingship and State," 372.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>110</sup> Irene J. Winter, "'Idols of the King': Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *On Art in the Ancient Near East: Volume II, from the Third Millennium BCE*, ed. Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. R. Garr, B. Halpern, and Theo P. J. Van den Hout (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 169.

<sup>111</sup> Eppihimer, "Assembling Kingship and State," 376.

strategically utilize the existing Sumerian religious framework to grant the Akkadian state legitimacy grounded in the earlier Sumerian tradition of kingship, while at the same time embarking on a profoundly new and distinctly Akkadian project of regional governance. In this respect, the strategic placement of the statues and inscriptions of Manishtushu served a similar function to that of the high priestess: to procure for the Akkadians the cultural and religious legitimacy it needed to rule over a region as heterogeneous as Mesopotamia.

### **III. Defining Empire, and the Akkadian State**

The discussion above has (I hope) successfully and thoroughly addressed the point made by Michalowski that little of value can be said of the Akkadian state.<sup>112</sup> It has argued that the Akkadian state: was driven by a fundamentally new and unique conception of kingship, which focused on the individual character of the king; was geographically large (relative to any state we know to have existed earlier or contemporaneously) and culturally heterogeneous; was centrally and hierarchically organized to extract profits from conquered peoples, primarily in the form of agricultural goods; and pursued a policy of religious patronage aimed at securing ideological legitimacy. These qualities, to me, demonstrate fundamentally the different nature of the Akkadian ruling system and the political ideology in comparison with those of other states that had existed in Mesopotamia. This leads us to our final question: how can we define or evaluate the Akkadian system?

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<sup>112</sup> Michalowski, "Memory and Deed," 70.

As mentioned in the introduction, scholarly discussions on this issue largely focus on whether or not the Akkadians can be called as the first empire. Michalowski, perhaps unsurprisingly, contends that we simply cannot positively assert that Akkad was an empire.<sup>113</sup> For him, there is simply not enough information available from surviving source material to support such a claim. Foster, conversely, argues that we can label Akkad as an empire without much concern for how to define such a term.<sup>114</sup> Both of these positions, however, are regrettably devoid of any substantial discussion of what empire is. In my mind, the term “empire” is too contentious, ambiguous, and complex to be left undefined in any work that seeks to touch on it even tangentially. Consequently, any work which endeavors to define a state as an empire (as this work does) must strive toward a definition of empire itself in order to sufficiently argue its point. In light of this, I will here offer a few remarks on the topic, and attempt to offer a loose definition of empire.

One of the most prominent works dealing with the concept of empire is Michael Doyle’s 1986 monograph. He defines empire as “effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial society”<sup>115</sup> and proposes four major criteria to apply it to a given state: 1) its political and economic cores; 2) its subservient peripheries; 3) the “transnational system” and its needs; and 4) the incentives offered to it by a wider political climate.<sup>116</sup> Discussion of ancient empires is not wholly absent from Doyle’s monograph, but his discussion is more geared toward modern, “Western” empires. Archaeologist Michael E. Smith, in his 2001 chapter on the Aztec empire, acknowledges this issue, and seeks to alter Doyle’s

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Foster, “Management and Administration,” 36.

Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 80.

<sup>115</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Empires*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press): 30.

<sup>116</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, 46.

model to make it applicable to ancient empires.<sup>117</sup> Smith contends that though most of Doyle's factors are important and valid criteria by which to understand empire, the core-periphery model is problematic, since it is often difficult, if not impossible, to define a peoples as periphery based on the scant evidence available from ancient sources and archaeology. Nevertheless, Smith largely accepts Doyle's definition, and makes it applicable to ancient and non "Western" empires by clarifying what kinds of evidence we would need to find in order for an ancient state to meet the remaining three of Doyle's four criteria.<sup>118</sup> For instance, for an ancient empire to meet Doyle's "transnational system" criterion, Smith contends that we must be able to prove that the imperial state dominated a particular territory or territories. Evidence of such domination can include imperial goods found throughout imperial provinces (and vice versa), imposition of taxes or tribute, and reorganization of settlements.

Doyle's model, however, is far from universally accepted. Among its several issues is that it allows for little variation among empires. Sinologist Thomas Barfield tacitly concurs with this criticism, and argues there are numerous examples of empires which do not conform to Doyle's model, pointing to the Xiongnu in 1st-2nd century CE China.<sup>119</sup> He contends that the Xiongnu, a group of nomads without a fixed territory, constituted an empire, albeit one of a fundamentally different category than its Han contemporary, which was a more traditional, agriculture-based empire. Historian of early modern India, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, takes this point about defining empire flexibly even further, proposing a "minimal" approach to the topic.

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<sup>117</sup> Michael E. Smith, "The Aztec Empire and the Mesoamerican World System," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock, et. al., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, "The Aztec Empire," 130.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, "The shadow empires: imperial state formation along the Chinese-Nomad Frontier," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock, et. al., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

<sup>120</sup> He proposes that empires are states which expand over more than one territory and culture, are driven by an ideology claiming extensive or even universal dominance, and are governed by a hierarchical system of authority, headed by monarch who was not just a king, but a “king over kings.”

Though these counter definitions entail their own sets of problems, they bring to light important issues in defining empires most notably the importance of flexible definitions, and the role of imperial ideology. The term “empire” is so contentious, and used to describe states throughout millennia of human history, that any definition which fails to allow for adequate flexibility is necessarily incomplete. How can we, for instance, describe both Rome and 19th century England, which existed with over a thousand years of history between them, as imperial if the term has little flexibility? The issue of imperial ideology is also particularly potent. It seems doubtful that any state would expend the kind of time, energy, and resources involved in expanding, preserving, and governing an empire without some sort of ideology to justify it. It is important to keep in mind, as Indologist Carla Sinopoli points out, that it is indeed possible for a state to hold an imperial ideology (i.e. the “form” of empire”) while not actually engaging in imperial practices (i.e. the “substance” of empire).<sup>121</sup> In other words, an imperial ideology is not the sole determinant of “empire.” Nevertheless, it is crucial to note the importance of imperial ideology as a defining characteristic of empire, even if it is not the defining characteristic.

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<sup>120</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Written on Water: Designs and Dynamics in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock, et. al., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

<sup>121</sup> Carla M. Sinopoli, "On the Edge of Empire: Form and Substance in the Satavahana Dynasty," in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, eds. Susan E. Alcock, et. al., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 177.

It seems appropriate, then, to consider the strengths of the aforementioned theories and definitions, and attempt to synthesize them into a more cogent definition. With regard to determining whether or not a given state can be called an empire, Subrahmanyam's minimal approach is most salient.<sup>122</sup> It seems, to me, that his criteria of geographical size, hierarchical ruling structure, and imperial ideology adequately constitute the minimum standard for a state to be called an empire. Once this has been established, we can use Smith's interpretation of Doyle's framework to measure the extent to which the given empire has what Sinopoli calls the substance of empire.<sup>123</sup> For the sake of our discussion, therefore, I define empires as follows: they are states which exert varying degrees of political, economic, or cultural influence over a relatively large area which encompasses a plurality of different peoples and cultures. In exerting this influence, they must have some sort of imperial ideology which acknowledges the empire as having either sovereignty or suzerainty over the different peoples, cultures and institutions living within its territory.

With this brief theoretical discussion of empire and our own definition of it, we can now discuss the imperial nature of the Akkadian state. It is clear that the Akkadians exerted political, economic, and cultural influence over at least the whole of Mesopotamia; a heterogeneous region consisting of Akkadians, Sumerians, Elamites, and Assyrians, as well as populations accounted for the archaeological record, but whose cultural and ethnic identities are unknown.<sup>124</sup> The Akkadians' political and economic influence is evidenced by Akkadian administrative documents from southern Mesopotamia that illuminate an Akkadian policy of land distribution.

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<sup>122</sup> Subrahmanyam, "Designs and Dynamics," 43.

<sup>123</sup> Smith, "The Aztec Empire," 131; Sinopoli, "On the Edge of Empire," 177.

<sup>124</sup> Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 63-64; Rova and Weiss, "Tell Leilan 1989," 193-194.

<sup>125</sup> In northern Mesopotamia, as Ristvet points out, the Akkadian state seemed to have a similar goal of extracting resources.<sup>126</sup> Archaeological evidence strongly suggests that they displaced populations, and introduced and modified technology in this endeavor. In addition, the Akkadian state also meets the hierarchical organization criterion. This is evidenced by the numerous royal offices attested to in royal inscriptions, and in administrative texts.<sup>127</sup> In the case of the Akkadian state, the criterion of varying degrees of imperial control is intimately connected with the Akkadian bureaucracy. As discussed previously, the Akkadians left local *ensis* in control of their cities, and subordinated them to Akkadian *shabra-e*'s, whose sole purpose was to ensure resources, profits, and capital flowed from the cities to the wide Akkadian political apparatus.<sup>128</sup> With this in mind, it is probable that some cities operated with a fair degree of autonomy from direct Akkadian rule, while some were wholly subservient to the Akkadian *shabra-e*, and thus the Akkadian state as a whole. The Akkadians' political and economic influence over Mesopotamia is thus strongly established.

It is important to remark here that administrative apparatuses mentioned above were, by and large, not Akkadian innovations. We can account for similar processes and strategies in northern Babylonia during the Early Dynastic period which predate the Akkadians by at least a century and a half.<sup>129</sup> However, these strategies were applied only over the comparatively small region of northern Babylonia. What appears to have made the Akkadian state unique was its ability to overcome, apparently through appeals to existing ideologies and traditions, the heterogeneity of Mesopotamia. This is what distinguishes the Akkadian system from its Early

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<sup>125</sup> "Nos. 13-17," *Third Millennium Legal and Administrative Texts*, 41-55.

<sup>126</sup> Ristvet, "The Development of Underdevelopment," 254.

<sup>127</sup> Foster, "Management and Administration," 26; RIME, Naram-Sin E2.1.4.2, line 34, for instance.

<sup>128</sup> Foster, "Management and Administration," 29.

<sup>129</sup> Steinkeller, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia," 120.



Dynastic counterparts in northern Mesopotamia as imperial. During the Akkadian period, the state's cultural influence can only be strongly attested to in the south, primarily in the form of the Akkadian high priestesses, and the Manishtushu's policy of royal patronage.<sup>130</sup> In the north, there is a dearth of evidence of Akkadian cultural influence in the Akkadian period itself, save for the cylinder seals associated with Akkadian officials.<sup>131</sup> Eppihimer makes a strong case for Akkadian cultural influence in northern Mesopotamia after the Akkadian period, pointing to the several ways in which the Old Assyrian kings (ca. 1920-1818 BCE) explicitly engaged with the Akkadian tradition.<sup>132</sup> However, this does not necessarily indicate Akkadian cultural influence over the north while the Akkadians controlled the region.

It is clear, moreover, that the Akkadian state met the ideological criteria for empire. As discussed at greater length previously, the Akkadian royal ideology emphasized its kings as kings of entire regions. This is expressed most fully in Naram-Sin's proclaiming himself to be the "King of the Four Quarters,"<sup>133</sup> but even the earlier title "King of Kish"<sup>134</sup> connotes rule over a larger territory and groups of people than simply the city of Kish.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, several of the pieces of propagandistic Akkadian art discussed previously depict the king as conquering other lands and peoples, and absorbing them into the Akkadian state, most notably the Ishtar stele, and Naram-Sin's victory stele.

The above discussion has shown that the Akkadian state did, in fact, meet the minimum criteria to be called an empire. The region it ruled over, Mesopotamia, was geographically large,

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<sup>130</sup> Eppihimer, "Assembling Kingship and State," 376; Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 46.

<sup>131</sup> Weiss, et al., "Tell Leilan Akkadian Imperialization," 167.

<sup>132</sup> Eppihimer, "The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship," 170.

<sup>133</sup> Naram-Sin, E2.1.4, for instance.

<sup>134</sup> RIME, Sargon E2.1.1.9, for instance.

<sup>135</sup> Cooper, "Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions," 7; Tohru Maeda, "The King of Kish in Pre-Sargonic Sumer," *Orient* 17, 1-17.

and culturally heterogeneous. The state exerted notable political and economic influence over the entire region, as well as definite cultural influence in the south, and ambiguous cultural influence in the north.; it was cohesively and hierarchically organized, and allowed for variations of direct and indirect control. Akkadian political, economic, and cultural influence was complemented by a unique and easily identifiable imperial ideology which acknowledged the Akkadian king as ruling over a multitude of different peoples, traditions, and institutions. Taken this way, we may confidently speak of an Akkadian empire, rather than simply an Akkadian state. The extent of Akkad's imperial-ness, however, remains open to debate.

## **Conclusion**

This present discussion of Akkadian statecraft has painted a picture of the Akkadian system as a centrally organized, ideology-driven, body politic which spanned over the whole of Mesopotamia, and was constituted by several different groups of people. Taken together, all of these characteristics strongly suggest that the Akkadian state can be defined as an empire according to the broad, and minimalist approach suggested by Subrahmanyam.

This imperial Akkadian system was used and adapted by nearly all subsequent West Asian states well into the first millennium BCE. This is perhaps most prominently and immediately apparent in the case with the Third Dynasty of Ur, which arose just decades after the Akkadian empire fell.<sup>136</sup> It, too, was most certainly an empire in its own right, and it is clear

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<sup>136</sup> Cooper, "Paradigm and Propaganda," 20-22.

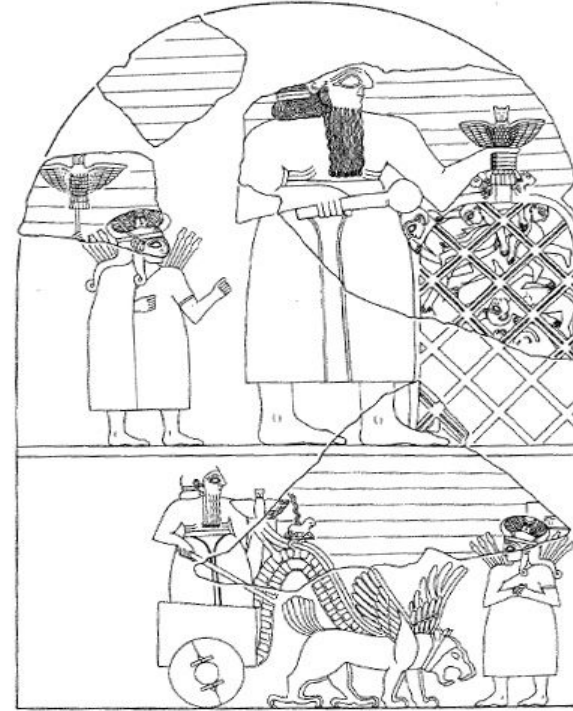
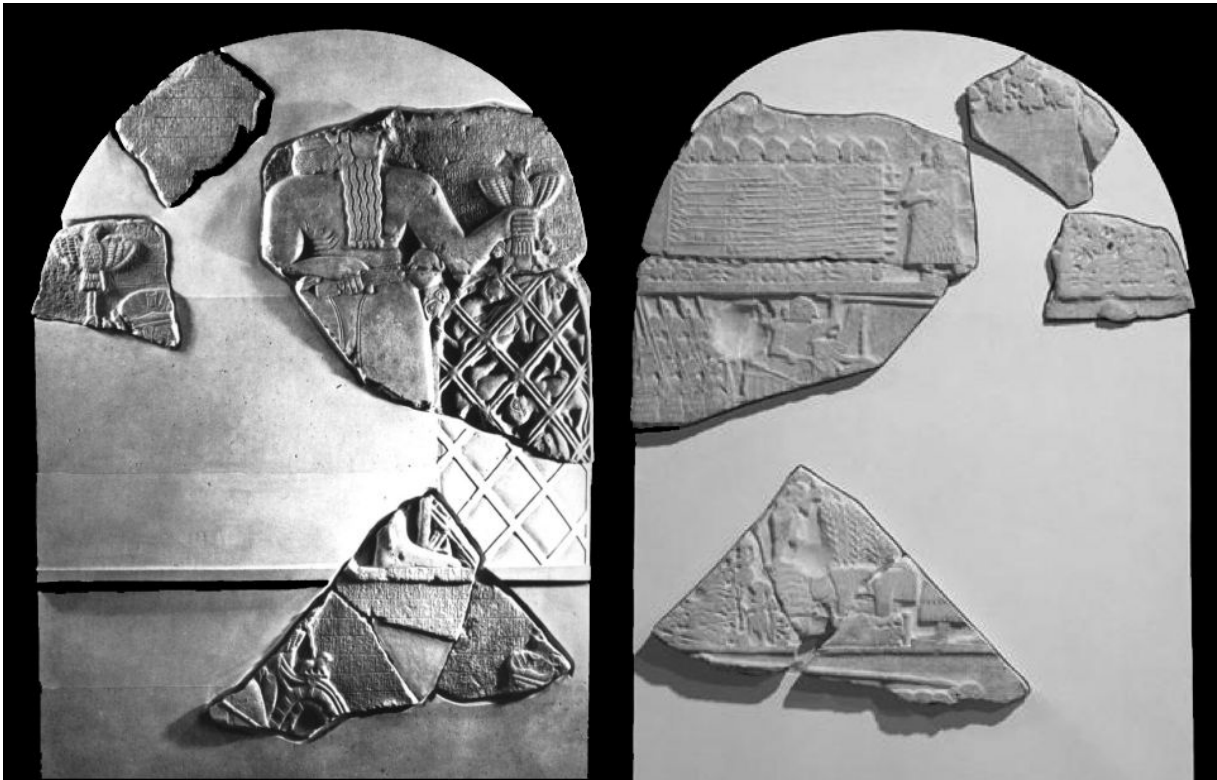
that they adopted and expanded upon Akkadian imperial practices.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the system was further adapted, developed, and expanded upon by the Assyrians and Babylonians (both in the second and first millennia BCE), as well as the Achaemenid Persians (ca. 550-330 BCE). It is regrettable that such developments and adaptations of the Akkadian system by subsequent West Asian states could not be adequately discussed here. However, I hope to address this topic in greater detail in a future project examining the survival of the Akkadian system through the first millennium. Nevertheless, exploring the nature and responses to Akkadian imperialism allow us to understand empire as a wide-reaching phenomenon which extends further back into the human past than may have originally been thought. Perhaps most importantly, they allow us to see how millennia-old events, peoples, and institutions have resonance in those of our own time.

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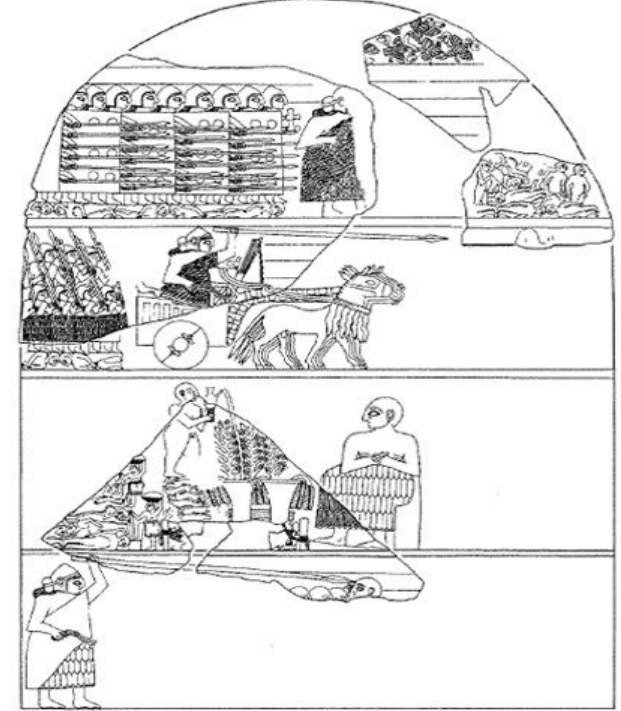
<sup>137</sup> For instance, the Ur III kings, like the Akkadian kings, left *ensis* in control of cities. Unlike the Akkadians, however, the Ur III kings strategically moved the *ensis* to different cities from those they originally ruled over, presumably in an effort to curb rebellion. For more information, see: Foster, "Management and Administration," 28.



Figure 1: Map of West Asia with emphasis on Mesopotamia (Photo: Aruz and Wallenfels, fig. 2)



Reconstruction drawing, obverse, Stele of the Vultures (drawing by Elizabeth Simpson)



Reconstruction drawing, reverse, Stele of the Vultures

Figure 2: Victory stele of Eannatum, King of Lagash, called the “Vulture Stele,” Early Dynastic Period, ca. 2450 BCE, Tello (ancient Girsu), Musée du Louvre (AO 50 + 2436-8 + 16109), and Drawing. (Photo: <http://arthistorypart1.blogspot.com/2011/01/sumerian-art-stele-of-vultures.html>; Drawing: Winter 2010, figs 3 and 8).



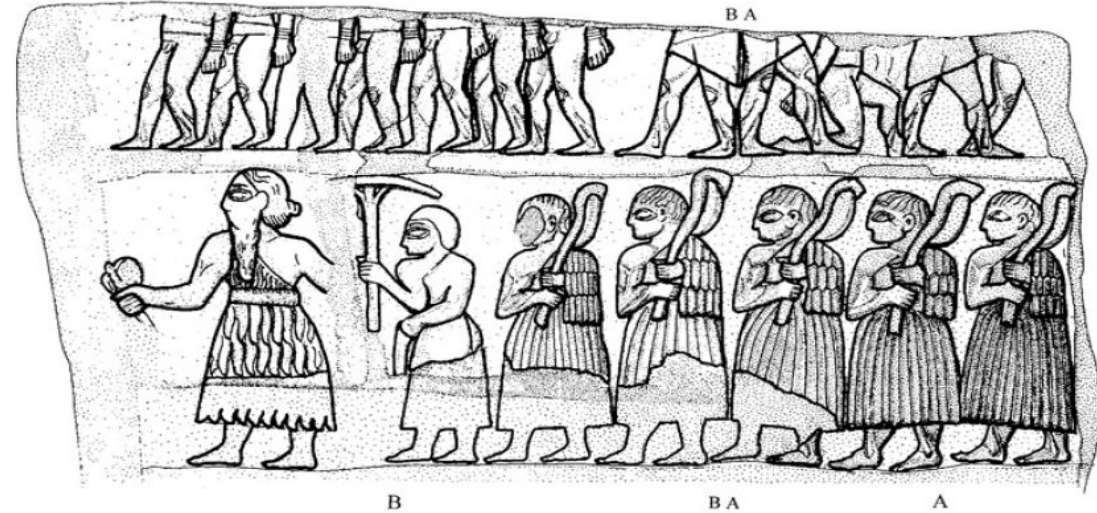


Fig. 8 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 1): Sides A and B.

Figure 3: Diorite fragment of a stele of Sargon, Akkadian, ca. 2300-2245 BCE, Susa Musée du Louvre (sb1) and drawing. (Photo: Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, fig. 54. Drawing: Nigro 1998, fig. 8)



Fig. 1 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 2/6053): schematic drawing.

Figure 4: Diorite fragment of a stele of Sargon, Akkadian, ca. 2300-2245 BCE, Susa, Musée du Louvre (sb2) and drawing. (Photo: Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, fig. 55. Drawing: Nigro 1998, fig. 1)



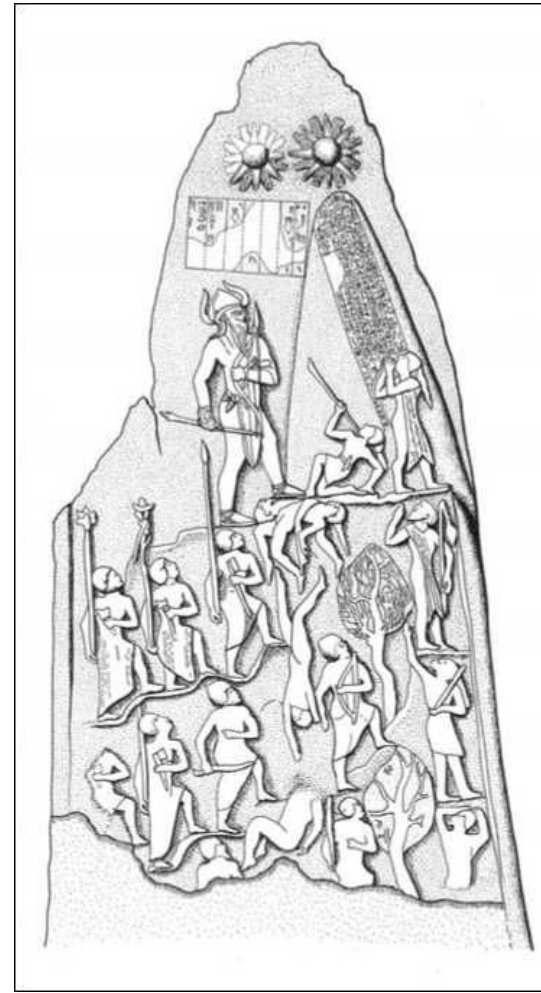


Figure 5: Victory stele of Naram-Sin, Akkadian, ca. 2250 BCE, erected at Sippar but found at Susa, Musée du Louvre (sb4) and drawing. (Photo: <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/victory-stele-naram-sin>. Drawing: <http://www.worldhistory.biz/ancient-history/64982-the-stele-of-naram-sin.html>)





Figure 6: Disc of Enheduanna, Akkadian, ca. 2350-2300 BCE, Ur, Penn Museum (B16665).

(Photo: <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/293415>)



Figure 7: Diorite statue of Manishtushu, Akkadian, ca. 2235-2221 BCE, Susa, Musée du Louvre (Sb 9099). (Photo: Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, fig. 56).

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