

THE TWO STELES OF SARGON: ICONOLOGY AND VISUAL PROPAGANDA AT THE BEGINNING OF ROYAL AKKADIAN RELIEF

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I. Introduction

Sargon's accession to the throne and the subsequent submission of Mesopotamia to Akkadian sovereignty were accompanied by a strong propaganda campaign, the first such cultural enterprise to go beyond the limits of a single city-state,¹ the echoes of which are reflected in various sources.² Being a usurper, Sargon devoted a large part of his propaganda to legitimizing his authority, on the one hand by stressing the continuity between Early Dynastic and Akkadian sovereignty and, on the other, by celebrating the religious legitimacy of Akkadian kingship (Liverani 1966: 21–4). Due to these political purposes, pictorial art achieved a central role in Sargonic propaganda (Amiet 1972: 97) as it was addressed to distinguished social groups deeply involved in the Akkadian political system (Foster 1993: 26–9; Westenholz 1993: 161). At the level of official art, royal relief became a functional medium for conveying ideological messages, as is attested by the exceptional findings at Susa and by written sources such as the copies of inscriptions on monuments erected in temples.³ Two steles kept in the Louvre testify to the strict links established between ideological purposes and visual media during the founding phase of the Akkadian empire.

II. Sargon's stele of Ishtar (Louvre Sb 2/6053)

The first Sargonic monument is part of a diorite stele,⁴ on which a scene rich in implications is carved (Fig. 1). The unique shape of the fragment suggests that it was the upper register of an ogival stele, since scant traces of a lower register are present.⁵

A standing figure, wearing the royal cloak over his left shoulder, holds in his left hand a net containing seven prisoners. With his right hand he is smiting a head which juts out of the net. Before him is an enthroned figure wearing a flounced skirt. Of this figure only an outstretched hand and part of a foot are visible. Three undulating rays rising from the shoulder of this figure are preserved on the top of the stele; one of them ends in a mace head.⁶ This detail has been convincingly interpreted as the attribute of a warrior deity, namely Ishtar, the Akkadian dynastic goddess (Moortgat 1969: 47; Amiet 1985: 195, No. 100).

The imagery is almost the same as that carved on the "symbolic side" (the obverse) of the Stele of the Vultures (Winter 1985: 13–15, Figs. 3–4). However, at least six major differences may be noticed:

1. *The material.* The stone used is diorite,⁷ the precious rock imported from south-central Oman, Akkadian Magan (Potts 1986: 273–5, 284–5). This convincingly fits Sargon's well-known statement that he had let ships from Magan and Meluhha dock at Akkad (Sargon Cl: 11–16; Gelb and

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¹ Celebrative monuments were placed in the major sanctuaries of the country, such as Enlil's temple at Nippur and Shamash's temple at Sippar, from where they were plundered by the king of Elam Shutrukh-Nahhunte I and brought to Susa (Scheil 1908: 4; Tallon 1993: 106, Pl. V). Furthermore, it was during Sargon's reign that such monuments were first produced in series and that copies of the same prototype were sent to many centres of the empire (see below, n. 38).

² M. Liverani has already skilfully outlined the ideological purposes and the historical contents of famous Mesopotamian literary accounts descending from this propagandistic programme, adapted to subsequent ideological issues (Liverani 1993).

³ About the reliability of these copies and their correspondence to actual monuments see Cooper 1990: 44; Liverani 1993: 50, n. 23.

⁴ For a complete bibliography and a detailed analysis see Börker-Klähn 1982: 129, No. 19, Pl. 110 (with a plan of the stele which shows its actual shape). The classic analysis of P. Amiet is still the most valid (Amiet 1976: 12–13, No. 6, Fig. 7, Pl. 6a–d).

⁵ Part of a human head (perhaps of an enemy) is visible (Amiet 1976: Pl. 6a; here Fig. 1, immediately below the king).

⁶ Note that this mace head has exactly the same shape as that visible on Stele Sb 1, which is wielded by Sargon (Side B, Figs. 8–9). It appears to be a thick stone mace with an S-shaped wooden handle, perhaps the same as that held by the Akkadian captain in the Stele of Naram-Sin (Nigro 1992: Fig. 5).

⁷ Petrographical analyses carried out on a stone sample taken from another fragment of Sargon's stele (Sb 11387), apparently strongly similar to the one we are dealing with, have shown that the stone is olivine-gabbro (Heimpel 1982).



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

Kienast 1990: 166). Hence, not only did Stele Sb 2 represent Sargon's victory but it also testified to his extended commercial influence. The use of such stone celebrated the establishment of Sargon's supremacy over the southern Mesopotamian city-states, through which he had gained free access to those commercial routes previously controlled by the newly subjugated states (Uruk, Ur, Umma, Lagash).

2. *The shape of the monument* (Fig. 2). The surviving section of the stele, being the tapered top, is the key to reading the entire monument, as it demonstrates in a single iconic statement the event celebrated.⁸ In contrast to plain double-faced steles, primarily destined to a narrative reading (Winter 1985: 18–19), this ogival monument, which can be looked at from many perspectives, groups individual figures in a unique sculpture that illustrates the victory epitomizing the blessing of Ishtar. Personages are carved on a single stone and take part in a unique event; however, they cannot be seen simultaneously, being depicted on opposite sides of the stele. The resulting continuous but fragmented reading transposes the celebrated event into a symbolic realm far beyond the mere “historical” narration produced by “realistic” directional reading. While one may surmise an arrangement in registers for the lacking lower part of the stele, the iconic statement, typical of the summit of such monuments where the most significant imagery was usually carved, is here combined with the multiple compositional arrangement of meaningful subjects, so that all figures may be considered either as parts of a unique representation or as emblematic icons of immediate intelligibility (as in the case of Sargon's and Ishtar's effigies).

3. *Iconography: the figure holding the net*. A strong connection with the Stele of the Vultures (what could be called a visual allusion) is exhibited by the use of the same iconographic device of the personage holding the net, although Sb 2 has the king himself rather than the god Ningirsu (Fig. 3). From the pictorial point of view this might seem like a slight transformation, for the postures of the two figures are quite similar, the only noteworthy difference being their garments. From the iconologic point of view, however, it represents a meaningful variation (Barrelet 1974: 42), since the

⁸ The allusive character of this kind of narrative was pointed out by A. Perkins (1957: 55) and thoroughly discussed by I. J. Winter (1985: 11–12).

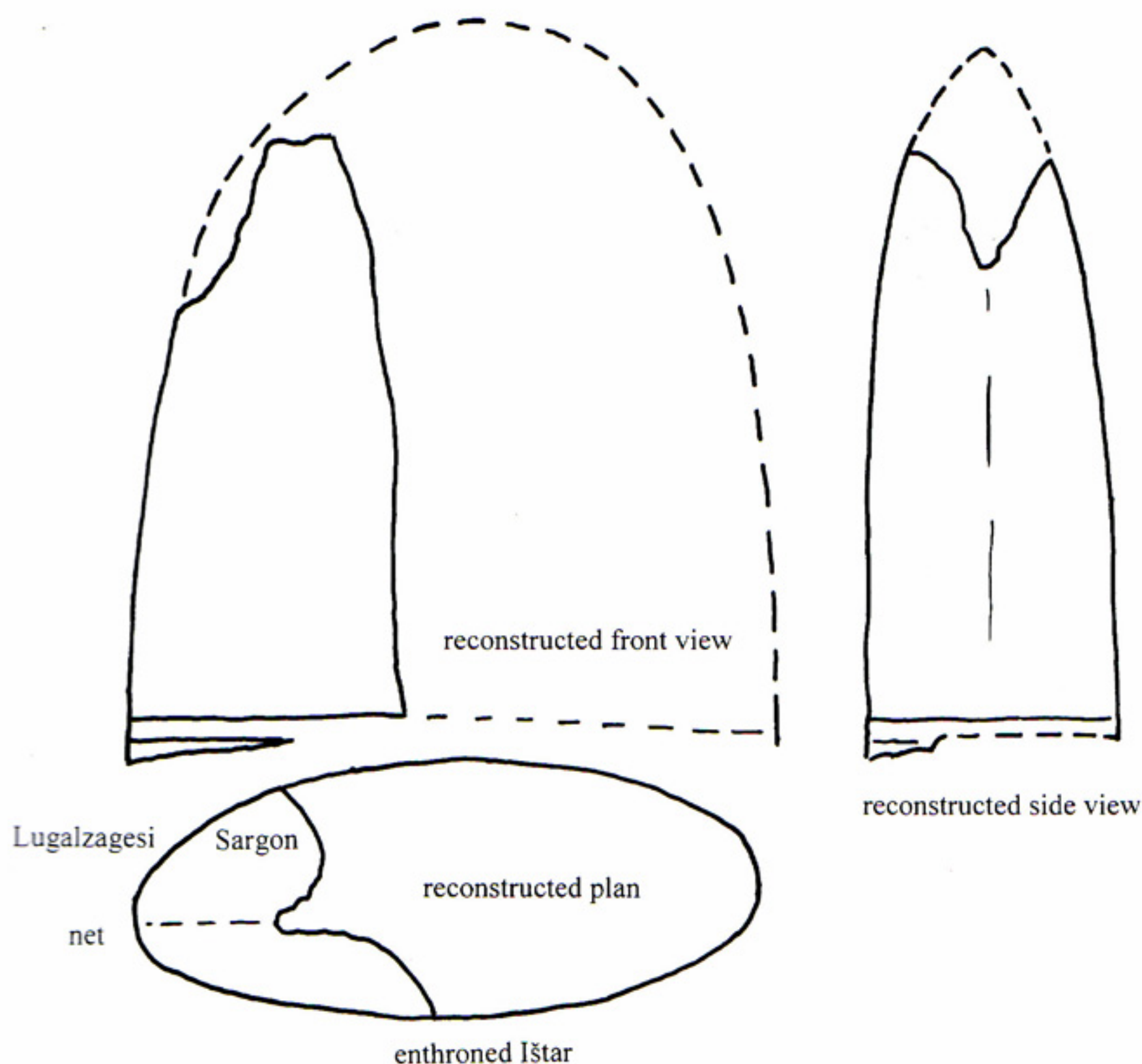


Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the original shape of the Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 2/6053), with location of the preserved fragment.

ideological significance of the imagery changes completely, ascribing to the king the primary merit of the victory. Sargon presents himself in the classic position of a city-god, a quite unusual issue for the Mesopotamian ideology of kingship (Liverani 1966: 24). Nevertheless, taking into consideration the political uncertainty of the beginning of Sargon's reign (Pomponio 1994: 10), one might hypothesize that taking the place of a city-god was a visual measure aimed at buttressing his authority over the other Mesopotamian city-states.⁹

Continuing the comparison with the obverse of the Stele of the Vultures, the Akkadian sculptors' skill for volumes is shown by the wavy fringes of the flounced cloak visible on the king's shoulder, and by the plastic and smoothed treatment of the muscles of the arm holding the net. The latter feature, especially, is totally different from the almost plain relief of Ningirsu and testifies to Sargonic attainments in depicting constrained dynamism.

4. *Iconography: the enthroned goddess.* The full-size enthroned Ishtar probably dominated the other side, achieving an outstanding visual role, especially if compared with the secondary position of the goddess appearing behind Ningirsu in the Stele of the Vultures (Barrelet 1970: Fig. 10a). In fact, as is shown by the Stele of the Vultures, Early Dynastic iconography did not foresee any seated deity in front of the personage holding the net, since the latter was specifically a divine task. Having replaced a god with a sovereign the Sargonic artists improved the religious impact of the imagery

⁹ A schematic representation of the Akkadian socio-political system as resulting after the king's dedication is offered by I. J. Winter (1987b: 88–9, Fig. 2).



Fig. 3 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 2/6053): the king holding the net. Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 4 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 2/6053): the enemies in the net. Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.

by adding the Warrior Ishtar, who had till then been a local deity (van Dijk 1969: 197–200; Winter 1987b: 89, n. 88). Furthermore, in order to be explained, this visual transformation has to be considered one of the many results of Sargon's religious reform, which among its major strategic points included the syncretism between Semitic Ishtar and Sumerian Inanna, the placement of the king's daughter Enheduanna in the office of *en*-priestess at Ur (van Dijk 1969: 191–3; Winter 1987a: 200) and the renewed central role assigned to Enlil (van Dijk 1969: 186–93), all means of obtaining a cultural and ideological supremacy over the South and of gaining the political consensus of the powerful Mesopotamian clergy (van Dijk 1969: 198). Thus the addition of the enthroned goddess was complementary to and associated with the transformation of the figure holding the net into a king, since, especially from the Sumerian point of view, the presence of a real deity was then necessary. The purpose of promoting the king to divine office (to defeat and constrain the enemies) and the intention of stressing Ishtar/Inanna's support for the rising Akkadian dynasty, elevating a



Fig. 5 Impression of an Akkadian cylinder seal with the representation of the enthroned Warrior Ishtar (after Boehmer 1965: Pl. XXXII: 384).

city-goddess to the rank of the great Sumerian goddess, were both aspects of a unique ideological program, where celebrating Ishtar automatically meant solemnizing her favourite “constable” (MAŠKIM.GI₄), Sargon. The dynastic goddess was therefore promoted to a primary role by Sargonic ideology, being widely represented in official art, so that it seems reasonable that her numerous attestations upon cylinder seals¹⁰ descended from monumental portraiture like that on the stele under examination (Fig. 5).¹¹ Again, while maintaining the resemblance of Early Dynastic iconography, Akkadian artists conveyed strongly innovative ideological messages.

5. Iconography: the captives. Early Dynastic artists often conceived enemies an indistinct realm. They were almost always depicted according to one of only two iconographies, either as corpses overrun by advancing soldiers or as prisoners bound and led by infantrymen in rows or singly, like those on the Standards of Ur (Winter 1985: 19, Fig. 13) and Ebla (Matthiae *et al.* 1995: 274–5, Nos. 20–8).¹² Though rooted in this tradition, the Sargonic masters interpreted the topic with a previously unknown sensitivity for personalities and ideological aims. Thus captives in Sargon’s net are not represented as a heaped-up mound of dead corpses,¹³ as in the Stele of the Vultures (Fig. 6), but as regularly seated figures, stretching their right hands towards Sargon in a gesture of submission (Fig. 4). Two main visual messages are conveyed by this imagery: (a) the king does not want to slay those enemies who are ready to accept his sovereignty, and (b) the Akkadian conquest brings order to defeated peoples. The latter aspect is particularly evident since the arranging of the enemies in superimposed rows, regularly subdivided by the oblique parallel lines of the net, communicates the concept of order, which in subsequent royal reliefs will be a peculiar characteristic of Akkadian soldiers confronted with disorderly enemies (Nigro 1992: 70, n. 16).

The apparent Early Dynastic iconography of the stele contrasts with the regular seated arrangement of the enemies, as does their accurate depiction with curly hair¹⁴ and well-formed muscles (Fig. 4). Captives so carefully grouped recall the practice of concentrating prisoners in camps for

¹⁰ Boehmer 1965: Pls. XXVI: 299–300; XXIX: 352; XXXI: 376; XXXII: 377; especially Pl. XXXII: 384.

¹¹ This observation may be complementary to one by E. Porada, who thought that deities featuring prominently on cylinder seals of the Sargonic Period were the same as those mentioned in royal inscriptions (Porada 1960: 118), that is to say that the celebrative program of the Akkadian kings was an overall project involving all media of propaganda (see also P. Amiet’s quotation of an hepatoscopic omen mentioning Sargon and Ishtar’s support: Amiet 1976: 13).

¹² Found re-employed as a doorstep in Royal Palace G, this Standard can be attributed to an earlier phase of the

building, dating to c. 2400 BC, so that its marble inlays are comparable with the almost contemporary ED IIIb specimens from Mari, Kish and Ur.

¹³ The custom of burying enemies in common pits or mounds was a celebrated *topos* until the Old Babylonian period (Westenholz 1970: 30), so that its visual contradiction, as on Stele Sb 2 where enemies appear alive, would have been particularly significant (Nigro in press: 3–4).

¹⁴ This hair-style is comparable with that of Sumerian soldiers carrying pieces of booty on the lower register of the Standard of Ur (Winter 1985: Fig. 14), thus confirming the South Mesopotamian provenance of the prisoners in the net.



Fig. 6 Stele of the Vultures (Louvre AO 50+2346–8+16109): the enemies in the net of Ningirsu. Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.

agricultural exploitation, a Sargonic innovation much more convenient than their mass slaughter (Foster 1982: 50).

6. *Iconography: the enemy chief.* The figure projecting from the net presents a precise iconography (Fig. 7). His royal rank is attested by the beard and long loose hair, suggesting that he had just lost his royal hair buns while fighting in battle (Amiet 1976: 12). The detailed representation and its correspondence with that of the smitten rebel ruler appearing on Rimush's stele from Telloh (Amiet 1976: 26, Fig. 25b; Foster 1985: 23) hint at a southern Mesopotamian origin for the portrayed figure. The profile of the nose is exactly the same as that of the copper head from Nineveh (Moortgat 1969: Pl. 154), while the design of the beard, though simply incised, may be compared with the royal head from Telloh (Spycket 1981: 148, Pl. 98), which, however, shows a volumetric rendering of the lips typical of the period of Naram-Sin (Amiet 1976: 33, Fig. 30). Thus a striking resemblance between the Akkadian iconography of the king and this enemy chief emerges. This is quite unusual, since one would expect that attributes such as the royal beard and the prominent



Fig. 7 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 2/6053): the portrayal of Lugalzagesi. Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.

nose were restricted to Sargon (compare Fig. 9). Moreover, the clear difference between the enemy chief and the other captives (a difference not seen on the Stele of the Vultures) and the precise depiction of the iconographic emblems of Mesopotamian — now Akkadian — kingship seem to suggest that a distinguished personage of royal rank is here portrayed. The importance of the smitten figure is further underlined by the size of his head, which matches the dimensions of that of Sargon himself, so that it seems quite out of proportion in relation to the other captives.¹⁵

III. *The portraiture of vanquished Lugalzagesi*

Summing up the results of the visual comparison with the symbolic side of the Stele of the Vultures, one may state that the main subjects of the imagery of Sb 2 are not only the victorious king and the dynastic goddess but also the enemies and their smitten chief. The Akkadian masters attributed a specific ideological content to these innovations. The replacement of the Early Dynastic iconography of the god holding the net, the destiny of the prisoners after the Akkadian victory, the detailed portraiture of the smitten king, and the iconic effigy of Ishtar are all highly individual traits which cannot be explained as exclusively depending on specific ideological purposes, and must be seen to refer to a crucial event that had acquired an overall exemplary significance in Sargon's propaganda.

In order to expand this point a further piece of evidence has to be taken into account. Over the shoulder of the king a small fragment of the dedicatory inscription is preserved. It is part of the final malediction mentioning the god Ilaba:¹⁶

...[ù]
[Il]-a-ba₄
SUHUŠ-šu...

... [and]
Ilaba
his roots...

Gelb and Kienast 1990: 125–6

¹⁵ In Early Dynastic art the relationship between rank and size was intentionally broken almost exclusively by violating the rule of isocephaly. This visual device is also employed in Akkadian art, for instance in the disc of Enheduanna (Winter 1987a: 193) and in Rimush's stele from Telloh (Amiet 1976: Fig. 25a–b: central frieze). However, Stele Sb 2 represents the first occurrence in an

Akkadian relief of the free adoption of size differences in order to focus the viewer's attention on a specific personage.

¹⁶ According to Roberts *Il-a-ba₄* is the most suitable reading (Roberts 1972: 34; Gelb and Kienast 1990: 169). Regarding this god see also Kupper 1971: 100–1 and Porada 1960: 118–19.

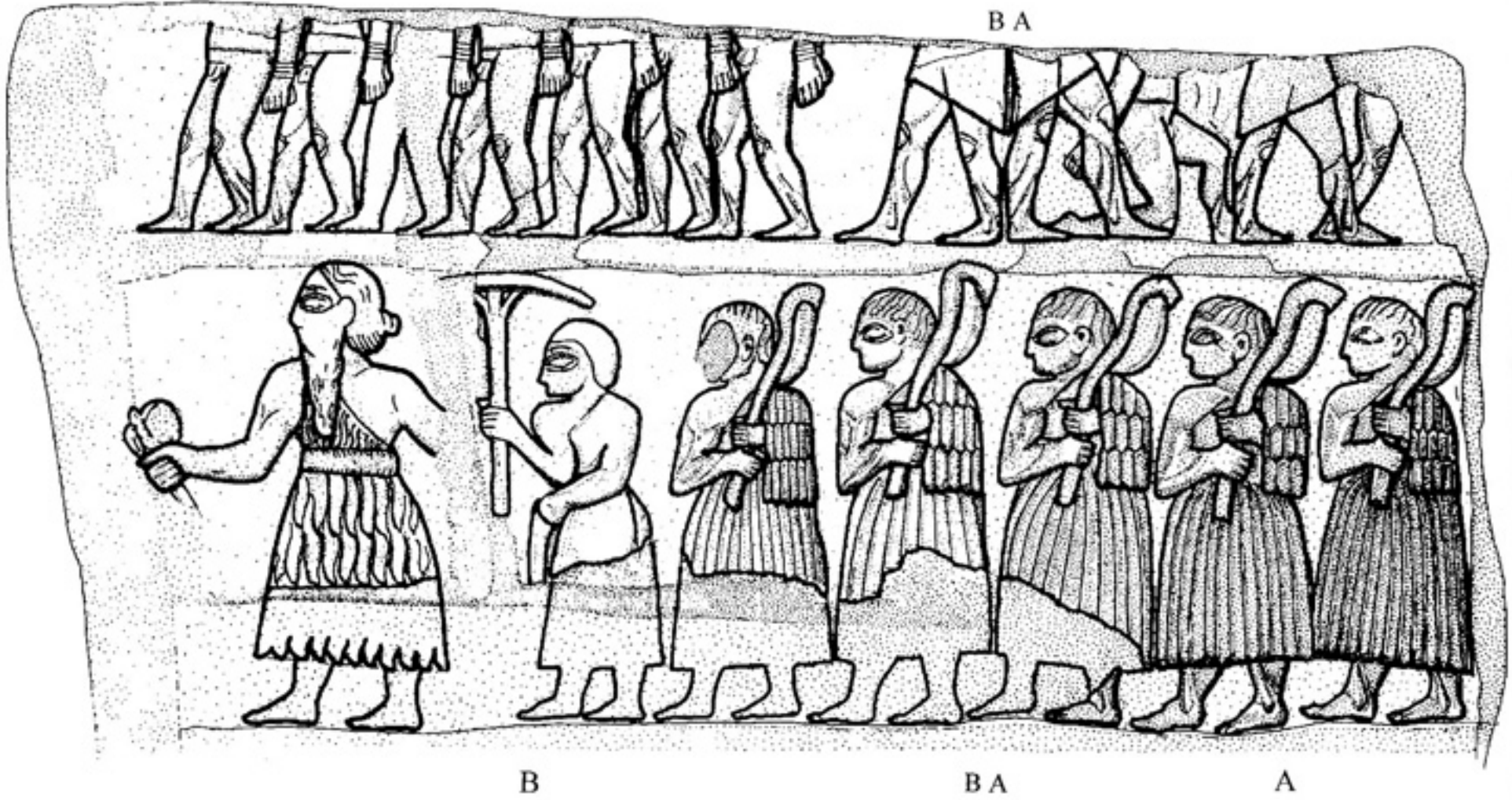


Fig. 8 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 1): Sides A and B.



Fig. 9 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 1): Side B, detail of Sargon. Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.

This warrior deity occurs only three times in Sargon's monumental inscriptions (C3, C4, Gelb and Kienast 1990: 167–74), always in association with the military enterprises in the South at the beginning of his reign. In C4 the “mace of Ilaba” is the weapon with which Sargon slays fifty southern Mesopotamian rulers, while inscription C3 starts with the presentation of Ilaba as Sargon's patron deity (Roberts 1972: 12). This is a very interesting point of Sargon's propaganda. The adoption of Ilaba to some extent may be compared with the assimilation of Akkadian Ishtar with Sumerian Inanna. In fact, Ilaba was identified with Zababa, the patron deity of Kish, when Sargon assumed the kingship of his home town, and he was later to be closely associated with Enlil (see, for instance, the caption on C3: “Ilaba, the powerful among the gods, to whom Enlil has given weapons”), just as Ishtar combined her warrior character with the fertility aspects of Inanna (van Dijk 1969: 188–91). This confirms that religious issues had a central role in Sargon's propaganda, especially those aimed at promoting an Akkadian cultural predominance over the South, a much more difficult task than its political control.

Since both inscriptions mentioning Ilaba belong to the initial phase of Sargon's reign, when the Akkadian king subdued the city-states of southern Mesopotamia and defeated their leader Lugalzagesi, the king of Uruk (Liverani 1966: 11), the dedication on Stele Sb 2 may probably be ascribed to the same early phase. Inscriptions copied from royal monuments¹⁷ show that the victory against Lugalzagesi was the pivotal event in Sargon's ascendance to Mesopotamian kingship, becoming a popular subject of visual propaganda.

If these epigraphic and historical data are combined with the observations from the above visual analysis — especially those concerning the accuracy of the portraiture of the vanquished king (Fig. 7) and the unusual respect reserved to prisoners in the net — one may conclude that the defeated king, who bears the clearly distinguishable emblems of Mesopotamian kingship, is Lugalzagesi of Uruk.

This highly communicative portraiture would have been a sound warning to all Mesopotamian rulers.¹⁸ Moreover, the representation of the enemies in the net, which has the purpose of not wanting to humiliate the conquered people, fits very well with the historical scenario of Sargon aiming for the political consensus of the South.¹⁹ The identification of the vanquished chief with the king of Uruk, who had gained supremacy over the other southern city-states, seems thus highly plausible. Sargon in fact succeeded in presenting himself as the divinely sanctioned, legitimate successor of Lugalzagesi (Cooper and Heimpel 1983: 69).

IV. *Sargon's obelisk (Louvre Sb 1)*

A second major fragment of Sargonic stele in the Louvre (Sb 1) is the first obelisk-like monument of ancient Mesopotamian art (Amiet 1976: 8–10, 71–3, Figs. 1–5; Pl. 1 a–d; Börker-Klähn 1982: 127–8, No. 18). This stele is a roughly rectangular obelisk, perhaps similar to that of Manishtusu; only three sides are preserved, carved in at least three friezes (Fig. 8).²⁰ On the carefully polished base a brief section of the dedicatory inscription has survived (Gelb and Kienast 1990: 62–3). On the opposite side the name of Sargon is inscribed in front of his figure, thus confirming the attribution of the monument (Fig. 9).

The subjects depicted on the various faces of the stele may be summarized as in Table 1.

1. *Expanding borders and military support (Sides A–B, lower register)*. In the front lower register Sargon leads a group of five dignitaries; immediately behind him is an attendant carrying a parasol. The king wears a flounced robe, fixed at the waist by a wide belt,²¹ and wields a mace in his right

¹⁷ The reliability of the Old Babylonian copies and their correspondence to actual Akkadian monuments is widely accepted (Liverani 1993: 50, n. 23).

¹⁸ Since at that time Lugalzagesi had most likely been reduced to the rank of *ensi* of Umma (Foster 1982: 155; Cooper 1986: 78–9, 94–5), one may also hypothesize that it was addressed to him.

¹⁹ A. Westenholz compared what he called Sargon's “Sumerian dilemma” with the later “Babylonian dilemma” of Neo-Assyrian kings (Westenholz 1979: 109–10).

²⁰ Four small fragments kept in the Louvre presumably belong to this stele: Sb 11482, Sb 11387, Sb 11388, 1359 (Börker-Klähn 1982: No. 18f–i).

²¹ See e.g. Matthiae *et al.* 1995: 312, No. 79.

TABLE 1: Subjects depicted on Louvre Sb 1. Arrows indicate the orientation of figures

Register	Front (= Side B)	Side (= Side A)	Rear (= Side C)	Side D
Upper	7 bound prisoners under the control of an Akkadian soldier ←	2 pairs of figures: (left) a soldier subdues a kneeling enemy; (right) a soldier captures an enemy →	5 battle encounters each consisting of an Akkadian soldier subduing an enemy →	—
Lower	Sargon, followed by a servant holding a parasol, leads a group of dignitaries (2 on this side) ←	3 more dignitaries of Sargon's retinue ←	Vultures and domestic dogs attack the dead corpses of the enemies	—
Base	—	—	Dedicatory inscription	—



Fig. 10 Impression of the cylinder seal of the scribe Kalki (BM 89137, after Collon 1982: Pl. XX).

hand. His hair is restricted by the pointed *chignon*, a typical royal Akkadian hair-style (Barrelet 1959: 26).²²

An interesting comparison helps in identifying the dignitaries who follow the sovereign. Comparable personages, wearing a flounced robe and showing a similar hair-style, appear on the well-known cylinder seal of the scribe Kalki (BM 89137; Collon 1982: 73–4, No. 141, Pl. XX; here Fig. 10), convincingly attributed on epigraphic and stylistic grounds to an advanced phase of Sargon's reign (Boehmer 1965: 128, no. 1686, Fig. 717; Nagel and Strommenger 1968: 170–8, Pl. 30:1). Since Kalki is described as servant of Ubil-Eshtar, “brother of the king”, in the accompanying legend (Edzard 1968–9: 16, No. 31; Gelb and Kienast 1990: 48, S-39), one may conclude that the central figure is an Akkadian prince, namely Sargon's brother, who carries the emblems of his royal rank, such as the hair buns, the beard, the axe and the flounced robe. He is accompanied by a bowman, two officials and a scribe. From the visual point of view, the prince occupies a central position, similar to that of Enheduanna on her disc (Winter 1987a: 192, Fig. 1), emphasized by the symmetric placement of flanking figures.²³ The heads of the bowman and of the first dignitary, who is carrying a stick, are turned back to look at him, thus indicating the actual leader of the group.²⁴ The prince is followed by a shaven personage wearing a fringed robe, who is to be identified with

²² This well-known royal attribute is now well illustrated by the slightly more recent head from Assur (Harrah 1988; Klengel-Brandt 1993: Fig. 3e–f). Of course the copper head from Nineveh is also comparable, though it has to be ascribed to the reign of Naram-Sin (Moortgat 1969: 51, Pl. 154); conversely, the head from Assur has been convincingly dated by E. Klengel-Brandt to the reign of Manishtusu (Klengel-Brandt 1993: 141).

²³ Note that symmetry is also pursued by the mirror-like placement of the axes wielded by the officials, which are on two symmetric oblique lines.
²⁴ This is an interesting attestation of the use of watching personages for focusing the viewer's attention on specific points of the representation. For subsequent developments of this visual device see Nigro 1992: 88–93, Fig. 12.



Fig. 11 Fragment of a Sargonic Stele (Louvre Sb 3). Photo. courtesy Musée du Louvre.

the scribe Kalki, the owner of the seal, since he holds a tablet in his left hand. The fifth figure is another dignitary or military chief, whose rank is indicated by the axe, the flounced robe, the beard (all traits occurring also on the prince), and the curly hair identical to that of the dignitaries on Sargon's stele. He is carrying a sling in the right hand and holds the axe in the crook of the left arm.

Because of the two servants below the legend, who carry respectively a stool and a crook from which a net-sack is hung, the scene has been interpreted as a ritual hunt (Boehmer 1965: 128) or, more convincingly, as the tour of inspection of a high official (Frankfort 1939: 140; Collon 1982: 73). The latter interpretation may be further specified assuming that it depicts a military tour for collecting tribute, as the presence of the Bowman and the weapons carried by the personages testify.²⁵ As regards the prince's iconography one may compare it with that of the Naram-Sin Stele from Diyarbakir (Börker-Klähn 1982: 133–4, No. 25), especially the flounced garb and the way he carries the axe. The latter monument was in fact erected in a centre where tribute was presumably collected. The presence of the scribe might also be explained thus, surmising that he followed his master on tribute expeditions for recording purposes, and consequently let himself be represented on such an occasion on his own seal.²⁶ Finally, one may suggest that the two servants below the legend are actually carrying items of tribute or booty.²⁷

Nevertheless, whatever the purpose of the tour of Sargon's brother (as portrayed on the Kalki

²⁵ Also the flat cap worn by the prince seems to be a distinctive type of military headgear (see for comparison the warriors on the standards of Mari and Kish: Dolce 1978: Pls. IX and XXXVII).

²⁶ D. Collon has convincingly suggested that the diorite from which the seal was carved was itself brought back

from the expedition in south-west Iran (Collon 1990: 23, Fig. 9).

²⁷ These figures may be comparable with those on the bottom register of the Peace side of the Standard of Ur (Winter 1985: Fig. 14).

seal), our interest here is the presence of the two dignitaries accompanying the prince Ubil-Eshtar and more specifically their iconography, since their garments, hair-style and placement are comparable with those of the dignitaries following Sargon on his stele. By comparing these two representations one may identify three iconographically distinct ranks of personages: (a) the king and his brother, (b) the high officials and (c) the attendants.²⁸ The officials on the seal wear the same flounced wool robe as the prince, which, except for the belt, is similar to that of Sargon on the stele (Fig. 9). This might be considered the garb of military chiefs.²⁹ By contrast, the five personages on the Sargon stele wear only a flounced shawl or short mantle,³⁰ which with the axe testify to their military status. Taking into consideration their hair-style, this iconography may be understood by reference to two statue heads showing the same hair-style, one in Boston (Starr 1941) and the other in the Louvre (Amiet 1976: 13–14, No. 7). They are made respectively of diorite and alabaster, precious stones which testify to the high social rank of the patrons, while the distinguishing hair-style confirms that they adhered to a specific iconography. Dignitaries portrayed on Stele Sb 1, therefore, belonged to a precise military class, iconographically identified in Akkadian visual propaganda.

Turning back to the royal figures, what distinguishes them visually are their postures.³¹ Sargon stretches his forearm wielding a mace, whereas the prince of the Kalki seal raises an axe to his left shoulder. The different poses suggest different ideological messages. Sargon is portrayed in a resolute advance,³² indicating the Akkadian policy of military expansion. The king is shown as the real author of the victory. The regularly arrayed officials following him represent members of the military class that benefited from the royal conquests. These commanders (whose rank is indicated by the crescent-like axe,³³ the flounced shawl and the bold skirt with long fringes) were the political élite whom Sargon attracted through his promise of great rewards (in terms of land and workers) from his military success.

2. *Captives as work-force (Side B, upper register)*. On the upper register of the same side, just above Sargon's procession, there is a row of seven bound prisoners under the control of an Akkadian soldier (Fig. 8). It is highly probable that the captives were bound together by long neck-stocks, like those on the Stele of Nasiriyah (Moortgat 1969: Pl. 136), since the leaning posture of the first three figures suggests they are held back by the neck. The Akkadian soldier wears a short skirt. On the basis of a comparison with a fragment of another obelisk-like monument of Sargon (Louvre Sb 3; Amiet 1976: 10–11, No. 5; here Fig. 11), one may hypothesize that this soldier held an axe and wore a kind of stole crossed on the chest, which, with the short skirt, might be considered the ordinary uniform of Akkadian infantrymen (Strommenger 1971: 41–2, Figs. 15–16).

Few data are available for an analysis of the ideological significance of this kind of representation. First of all, it seems reasonable to regard the imagery in strict relationship with that represented on the upper register of Side A (Fig. 8), the capture of enemies. On this side two pairs of figures can be seen, each consisting of an Akkadian soldier and a subdued enemy: in the first the soldier is capturing a kneeling enemy, in the second a captive is driven ahead by the soldier. The scenes can be read in a sequence which continues on to Side C. However, they also display the same patterns of imagery on the upper register of Side C, which in fact seems their direct continuation.

Reading the images of Sides A and B from bottom to top, according to the most frequent

²⁸ Servants on the Kalki seal are represented in a reduced size for reasons of composition, while the attendant's size on Sargon's stele is distinctly smaller than that of other figures. This difference in rank is here also obtained by breaking isocephaly.

²⁹ See also Eannatum on the stele and two almost identical inlays from Ur and Mari of a king, identified by his hair buns (Dolce 1978: Pl. XXXIII: M 349, U 191).

³⁰ Also the officials following the hypothetical ruler in the Standard of Ur wear this flounced shawl (Winter 1985: 19, Fig. 13).

³¹ Several iconographical traits are different as well: Sargon has a long pointed beard, while that of Ubil-Eshtar is short. The latter wears a conical cap, while Sargon has pointed hair buns.

³² In order to attain this dynamic effect Sargon's artists

changed the common iconography of the king leading his troops reversing his arms (Amiet 1976: 10), so that the shoulder covered by the flounced cloak is here the right and not the left one, as usual. Actually, this permits us to grasp a visual rule of Akkadian art. The covered shoulder of the sovereign engaged in battle is not the left or the right one, depending on where the figure is oriented to, because the representation does not intend to reproduce reality. Hence, the covered shoulder is always the foremost, in order to enhance the advancing movement by means of the oblique line of the cloak and by its waving fringes.

³³ Compare the specimens found in Kish (Langdon 1924: Pls. XIX: 1; XXXVI) and Ur (Woolley 1934: Pl. 224, A 12, A 13). The superior extension of the handle over the blade might indicate the ceremonial function of this weapon (Amiet 1976: 9, n. 15).



Fig. 12 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 1): Side C.



Fig. 13 Stele of Sargon (Louvre Sb 1): Side C, upper register; schematic drawing showing the geometric pattern.

narrative orientation of this class of monuments (Winter 1985: 19; Nigro 1992: 80),³⁴ one is led to **interpret the capture of enemies and their enslavement as the celebrated result of Sargon's military campaign depicted below.** It has already been pointed out that the major outcome of Sargon's **policy was not merely the unification of Mesopotamia under his rule, but the constitution of a socio-political organization capable of dealing with crises such as those that had led to the sudden downfall of his predecessors, for instance Lugalzagesi and Enshakushana, after the over-extension of their territories** (Liverani 1988: 233). Problems in expanding states were in fact strictly dependent on (a) **demographic deficiency in Mesopotamia at the end of the Early Dynastic Period, or, more precisely, on the great need for manpower to exploit conquered regions and to maintain the army, and (b) on the capability of victorious rulers of incorporating the economical and productive structures of the vanquished states.** In conflicts between city-states heaping up enemy corpses meant

³⁴ The Rimush Stele from Telloh should be considered an exception from this point of view (Foster 1985: 22). However, the limited part preserved and its small size in

respect of other steles referred to here hamper a reliable comparison as regards reading orientation.

assured hegemony for a certain period, leaving the vanquished city-state in very dire straits. A regional Mesopotamian policy needed a much more integrated use of human and land resources (Foster 1982: 50). Hence, depicting squads of enslaved enemies brought from conquered regions would have been at once a noteworthy symbol of victory and presumably a meaningful reference to the delivering of workers to the members of Akkadian military aristocracy, who were also important landowners (Foster 1985: 25–7, n. 15). Thus, the representation of rows of bound prisoners has to be seen not only as a clear symbol of victory (Cooper 1990: 46–7), but also as a rich visual message addressed to that social group upon which Sargon founded his power.

3. *Educational narratives: movement and repetition (Side C, upper register)*. The upper register of Side C (Fig. 12) is occupied by the representation of a series of battle encounters, apparently continuing the picture on Side A (Fig. 8). The imagery is marked at regular intervals by the repetition of Akkadian soldiers, with their well-muscled legs visible through their skirts.³⁵ They well portray the resolute advance of the Akkadian army through the use of geometric patterns and oblique parallel lines which vigorously express a continuous movement (Fig. 13). The latter feature seems to characterize a mature phase of Sargon's pictorial art, especially if compared with the rather static composition of the Stele of Ishtar. Rhythmic dynamism represents a visual medium largely exploited by Sargonic artists for conveying the ideology of an expanding power, as it was conceived during the third phase of Sargon's reign, when an imperialistic policy was definitely embraced (Liverani 1966: 12; 1988: 234).

Confronted with those of soldiers, the enemy's postures build up a sequence of increasing drama. The first figure on the left has been struck in the flank by a spear that he is trying to extract in a final effort. His chiastic pose is a favourite of the Sargonic masters, as is shown by the dying enemy of the Stele of Naram-Sin (Nigro 1992: Figs. 3: 4, 13), by the Bassekti statue (Al-Fouadi and Madhloom 1976), and by several representations on seals (e.g. Collon 1982: No. 210, Pl. XXX; Frankfort 1939: Pl. XXIIIa). The second vanquished enemy is partly eroded; however, the remaining traces seem to indicate that he is suspended by the arms. His torso is reminiscent of the falling corpse on the Stele of Naram-Sin (Nigro 1992: Figs. 5, 8: 7) or of the statue of bituminous stone from Susa (Moortgat 1969: Pls. 145–6). The third enemy is kneeling with the head pushed down on the earth. The soldier is binding him with neck-stocks. The soldier wears a long fringed stole, like that depicted on the Stele of Rimush from Telloh and on the Stele of Nasiriyah (Moortgat 1969: Pls. 134–6). Of the fourth couple only two legs are preserved.

Although these pairs are placed in a sequence in the register they are not conceived as progressive representations of the same encounter. This would probably satisfy our concept of narrative and movement, but it does not fit the pictorial vision of the Akkadian artists. The battle is depicted as a series of different episodes, producing a dynamic narrative effect, even though narration is not a direct result of the movement, which is primarily aimed at conveying imperialistic expansion. In order to evaluate the narrative achievement of this composition, we need to know what was the historical-celebrative purpose of the Sargonic masters (Cooper 1990: 39–40), which is a matter of "visual historiography".³⁶ Unfortunately we do not know what events are commemorated on the stele, nor the circumstances of its erection. A thorough insight into Sargon's propaganda may be gained by analysing *how* narration and celebration were brought together in a visual synthesis.³⁷ Factual depiction as an ideological device is identifiable in the paratactic placement of battle subjects, repeated like the strophes of a celebrative written account, in order to influence the political belief of the viewer.

A "historical" intent is also revealed by realistic depiction, which permits one to recognize figures and facts. This was possible because a precise iconographical code was established which allowed for the identification of personages, their poses and attributes. It was during Sargon's reign in fact that the vast majority of Akkadian iconographies were fixed, not only for the mythological world

³⁵ Paired encounters are attested on the slightly earlier Standard of Ebla, where a number of Eblaite soldiers kill enemies or carry their naked corpses (Matthiae *et al.* 1995: 275, Nos. 23–5).

³⁶ About scope and forms of historical narrative in Early

Dynastic and Sargonic Mesopotamia (especially as regards the "ontological status" of facts and the question of "realism"), see Michalowski 1983: 237–8.

³⁷ See H. Groenewegen-Frankfort's observation as reported by I. J. Winter (1985: 28).

but also for realistic representations.³⁸ Exactness in the depiction of each detail enhanced the referential character of figures and contributed to making the celebrated event an easily readable, exemplary one. Thus visual narrative would seem, according to our logic categories, to be intrinsically contradictory, since it is conceived as the epitome of an event which, in this case, is not projected into a symbolic realm like that of Stele Sb 2, but is realistically represented, even though beyond the boundaries of space and time, by means of the placement side by side of groups illustrating contemporary events, which have been put in a specious sequence in a sort of simultaneous view. Such a simultaneous conception of factual narrative may be compared, for instance, with the historical vision which caused the authors of the Sumerian King List to put into a sequence kings and dynasties that were actually contemporary (Michalowski 1983: 247–8). Both operations imply giving up the real order of events and reorganizing them in a more “ideologically correct” sequence. In the case of official relief, the guiding criterion is that of maximum exploitation of visual media to convey ideological messages.

As rightly pointed out by I. J. Winter, what is of pivotal importance is *how* the ideological content was visualized (Winter 1985: 20). This implies that one also has to consider by whom the imagery was to be read. From this perspective Sargon’s Stele Sb 1 exhibits a narrative pictorial mode, where movement and realism produce an apparent “historically objective” depiction, actually conveying an expansionistic ideology. This visual communication was not only posited at the basic level of immediate reading but also, by means of geometric patterns and volumes signifying strong and resolute advance, appealed to sub-conscious perception. Multiple readings are also allowed by detailed depiction, since some iconographical indicators stimulate specific groups of viewers, such as military officials, to identify themselves with depicted personages. This mechanism of stimulating viewers to identify was the basic instrument of Akkadian visual propaganda. Viewers were to absorb the same political thoughts of portrayed figures as were displayed by visual devices.

4. *The icon of enemy culpability (Side C, lower register).* The results of the battle are depicted on the lower register of the same side (Fig. 12). Enemy corpses are abandoned to vultures and dogs.³⁹ The scene has a direct impact on the viewer. In comparison with Eannatum’s stele the vultures are more realistically portrayed, appearing in various flying poses. Cruel details, such as the dog on the left devouring human limbs⁴⁰ or the vulture on the right carrying off a leg, increase the tragic climax of the imagery. In looking at the flock of vultures a coherent use of space may be noticed. The different dimensions of the birds of prey, with the smallest birds at the top, give the illusion of spatial depth. Again, a classic Early Dynastic iconography of victory has been reinterpreted according to the Akkadian ideological programme. Mutilated enemies eloquently represent the destiny reserved for those who will not accept Sargon’s authority. What is more unusual is the placement of this imagery in the lowest register of the stele, which is exactly the opposite of what can be seen on the Stele of the Vultures. One might surmise that the scene of Sargon and the dignitaries carved on Side B continued on the missing part of the stele with a struggle (Side D), ending with a final scene, after the battle is over (Side C). Several fragments of fighting soldiers attributed to Stele Sb 1 may, in fact, belong to the lacking face (Side D). However, this reconstruction is difficult to prove since the height of the registers is consistently different. One might alternatively hypothesize a relationship between the imagery and the underlying text, as a visual commentary on the final maledictions.

What was the ideological significance of such a communicative picture? The first realm to be involved is that of funerary religion: being exposed to injury from beasts or remaining without burial meant the complete abandonment by the gods (Westenholz 1970: 30), the opposite of the divine favour accorded to the king and his followers. Moreover, one cannot overlook the fact that birds of prey as an evil symbol occur on Akkadian seals (Frankfort 1939: 132–4), so that a mythological reference to damnation is evident. If we suppose that a representation of Sargon’s

³⁸ Royal workshops played an important role during this period, since royal steles were produced in many copies and were sent to several centres of the empire, as is demonstrated by identical fragments found in Nasiriyah and Khafaje (Hauptmann 1991).

³⁹ As rightly pointed out by P. Amiet (1976: 10), the collars worn by the dogs suggest that they were domesticated animals, presumably used in military operations.

⁴⁰ A second dog is in the middle of the scene: Nassouhi 1924: Figs. 1–2.

divine support was carved at the top of the stele (for instance the king in front of his favourite patron deities), this would explain why its visual counterpart was put, by opposition, at the bottom of the monument.

V. Conclusions

The Sargon steles examined here represent two different visual and ideological aspects of Akkadian royal relief art, which can be attributed to the different purposes for which they were erected, one representing the celebration of the founding event of Sargon's power — the victory against Lugalzagesi of Uruk — the other testifying to the imperialistic policy of the mature phase of Sargon's reign, when he extended his military enterprises far beyond Mesopotamia proper. Both monuments, however, show the Sargonic masters' skill at adapting visual media to ideological aims, thus demonstrating that those "typically Akkadian" artistic achievements (realism, movement, narrative) which A. Moortgat ascribed to the "Akkadian Spirit" (Moortgat 1969: 47), following an idealistic concept of *Volksgeist*⁴¹ (a view silently accepted by many scholars), should instead be attributed principally to Sargon's propaganda, celebrating his divinely sanctioned succession to Lugalzagesi and subsequent expansionistic career.

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Figs. 8, 12 and 13 are computer-aided elaborations based on original drawings by J. Börker-Klähn (1982: Fig. 18) and adapted by the author after personal examination of the stele (Louvre Sb 1). All drawings are by the author.

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⁴¹ It was frequently opposed to the "Sumerian Spirit" (e.g. Groenewegen Frankfort 1951: 164).

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