

DENISE SCHMANDT-BESSERAT

WHEN *Writing* MET ART
from symbol to story



When Writing Met Art

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When
WRITING
MET ART



From Symbol to Story

Denise Schmandt-Besserat

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To my family:

Jurgen

Alex

Molly

Chris

Kathryn

Phillip

Nicolaus

Danielle

Mike

Cyra

Henry

Dennis

Lily

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Introduction: Writing and Art

Writing is a mechanism that permits us to change the format of our creative endeavors, the shape of our knowledge, our understanding of the world, and our activities within it.

—JACK GOODY¹

IN THIS VOLUME I examine the interface between writing and art during the early urban period in the ancient Near East. I propose that an exchange between the two media took place in two installments: in the late fourth millennium B.C., writing had an impact of great consequence on art, and, reciprocally, in the third millennium B.C., art had an impact of no less significance on writing. I will show that through this mutual exchange both writing and art multiplied their capacity to communicate information. Art became narrative and writing went beyond accounting to become a comprehensive medium of communication.

Part One is devoted to the impact of writing on art. I hold writing responsible for the fundamental changes that took place ca. 3500 B.C. in Near Eastern art composition — the way designs were organized. To make this case I will compare and contrast compositions of preliterate vs. literate pottery paintings, wall paintings, seals, and stone reliefs. I will argue that before the invention of writing, compositions typically consisted of geometric or animal motifs that were juxtaposed, dovetailed together, or placed in rotating arrangements that symbolized an idea or *evoked* a story. But after writing, as the process of copying the dispositions of signs on a tablet was introduced, Near Eastern art became linear and thus could *tell* a story. Parallel lines, used as an organizing principle in a scene, caused the figures within that scene to be arranged in the same upright position upon a ground line. The ground line meant that the individuals pictured shared the same space at the same time. Accordingly, their relative size, location, position, order, and direction could be used to signify hierarchy, rank,

intention, action, and interaction. For example, gods were taller than kings, and kings were taller than their fellow citizens. Figures facing one another were interacting, and those facing in the same direction were proceeding toward a common destination. Because the figures in a picture, like the signs of a text, were “read” in succession according to their disposition, the literate compositions were no longer apprehended globally but analytically. Images thus became an established pictorial language with its own conventions, rules, and vocabulary that could tell complex stories involving multiple characters.

Part Two addresses the impact of art on writing. I will show that ca. 2700–2600 B.C. written characters, deserting the mundane clay tablets, were inscribed on lavish funerary artifacts such as gold vessels and lapis lazuli seals. I will analyze how the funerary inscriptions borrowed the principle of writing personal names phonetically from previous economic and lexical lists. But they soon took on a life of their own, becoming increasingly phonetic and acquiring syntactical structures. The earliest funerary inscriptions, consisting of a name—“Meskalamdug,” for example—constituted the first non-economic or lexical texts. Their intent was to transcribe the sounds of an individual’s name into script to satisfy the Sumerian belief that pronouncing the name of the dead secured eternal life in the underworld. Later statues were inscribed with longer texts that included the deceased’s name, title, patronymics, the name of the god or the temple to which the statue was dedicated, and a plea for a “long” life. Because, following Ruth Mayer-Opificius, I interpret the statues as serving a funerary function, I propose that this statement refers to a long life in the hereafter.² The funerary texts that transcribed several names were primarily phonetic and, more importantly, they introduced syntax to build sentences that contained subjects, verbs, and complements. I will demonstrate that the funerary inscriptions bridged two phases of Mesopotamian writing, namely the stage when it was used exclusively as an accounting device, and that when it became a means of broad and proficient communication. I contend that by emulating the sound and structure of spoken language, the funerary inscriptions prompted the takeoff of writing. I conclude with an analysis of the second millennium B.C. stele of Hammurabi, which I will present as the ultimate outcome or epitome of the interface between writing and art.

As an introduction, I will define the use of the word “art” and review the background of the interface of writing and art, presenting the early phases of writing—impressed and pictographic writing—during the short but critical period when the first interface transformed art, ca. 3500–3300 B.C. I will also place my study in context.

The Background

Art has many definitions, none of which apply universally. In this book I label as “art” a wide range of artifacts—pottery and wall paintings, seals, stone reliefs, precious

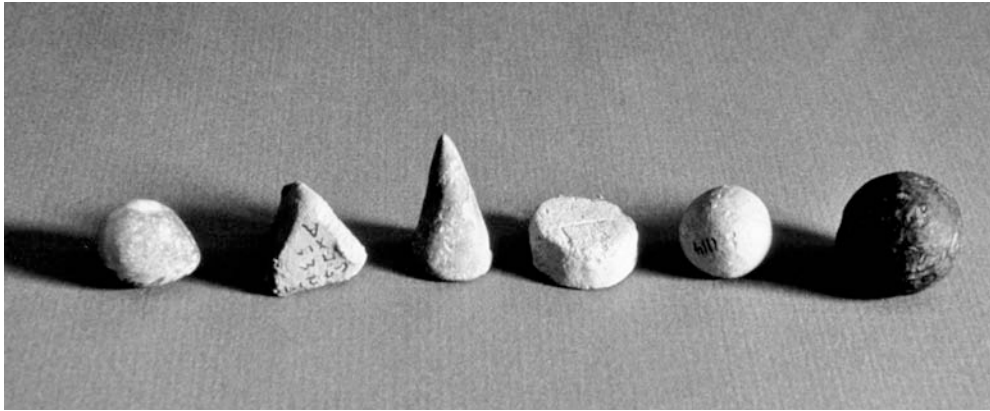


FIGURE 0.1. Plain tokens from Tepe Gawra, Iraq. Courtesy University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

metal vessels, and statues in the round—that had a domestic, administrative, ritual, funerary, votive, or historical function in the ancient Near East. The aesthetic quality and conscious artistry shared by the objects justify the designation from our own society’s point of view.

Art was age-old when writing began. In Anatolia, images of a bison and a deer engraved at the entrance of the cave of Beldibi and carved stones and antlers from Karain attest that in 15,000 B.C. Paleolithic humans produced meaning with pictures. In the following Neolithic period, Near Eastern farmers of the eighth and seventh millennium B.C., from Ain Ghazal in Jordan to Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, decorated either house walls or potteries with paintings, carved seals, statues, and reliefs in stone, plaster, and clay. When writing came about some three millennia later, ca. 3500–3300 B.C., it was a latecomer.

The interface between writing and art had a prehistory. Starting at about 7500 B.C., accounting in the Neolithic farming communities was performed by means of clay tokens of various forms³ (fig. 0.1). Each token shape was a symbol for one particular unit of merchandise. For example, a cone, a sphere, and a disk represented different measures of grain; a cylinder stood for an animal of the flock; and a tetrahedron was a unit of labor. The clay counters were teamed with seals immediately after these were invented, some 1,000 years after the tokens, around 6500 B.C. From then on, the two types of artifacts formed an administrative tandem: tokens recorded goods, and seals identified the people responsible for these goods, such as temple officials, donors, recipients, or debtors. Together, tokens and seals allowed the early farmers to manipulate and store information on an unlimited number of goods and individuals, making it possible to keep track of present, past, or future transactions such as debts or pledges. Over their three millennia of close association, between 6500–3500 B.C., each medium preserved its symbolic integrity. Seals displayed a great variety of



FIGURE 0.2. Envelope holding tokens covered with a cylinder seal impression, Susa (Sb 1935), Iran. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales.

FIGURE 0.3. Envelope bearing impressed markings (corresponding to the tokens held inside) next to seal impressions, Susa (Sb 1927), Iran. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales.

geometric, animal, and, more rarely, human designs to symbolize offices and individuals, and tokens took the shape of three-dimensional geometric and occasionally naturalistic symbols representing units of goods. No token form derived from seals, and exceedingly few seals feature designs in the shape of tokens.

Tokens and seals merged physically on the round, hollow clay balls called envelopes that were devised to keep together for a length of time the tokens of particular accounts in an office archive.⁴ The envelopes held the tokens inside and displayed sealings—the impression of seals—on the outside (fig. 0.2). This interface between tokens and seals resulted in no less than the birth of writing. There can be no doubt that later, when accountants had the idea to imprint the tokens themselves on the surface of the envelopes in order to make visible the type and number of tokens held inside, they were copying the practice of pressing seals on the envelopes (fig. 0.3). These negative impressions of tokens on the surface of envelopes were the first signs of writing. The appearance of this revolutionary technique, which reduced tokens to two-dimensional signs, dates to about 3350 B.C.⁵ It is the point of departure for the interface between writing and art discussed in this study.

The Impressed Texts

The texts responsible for writing's first interface with art consisted of markings impressed upon the clay envelopes holding tokens; on oblong solid bullae securing strings of tokens; and on the earliest tablets, made of a solid clay lump (fig. 0.4). These are the so-called "impressed texts" that represent the third and fourth stages in the long process of the development of cuneiform writing in the Near East. The stages can be summarized as follows:

1. Tokens (fig. 0.1)
2. Plain envelopes holding tokens (fig. 0.2)⁶
3. Impressed envelopes (fig. 0.3)
4. Impressed tablets (fig. 0.4)
5. Pictographic tablets (fig. 0.11)
6. Cuneiform script

The corpus of impressed texts, which includes about two dozen envelopes and solid bullae and 250 tablets, forms a cohesive assemblage. The impressed tablets were modeled in clay in a quadrangular or oval shape about 5 cm long and 4 cm wide. Similarly, the globular envelopes and oblong solid bullae measured about 5 to 7 cm. The function of these first written documents was exclusively for accounting. Notations recorded quantities of goods, most often grain or animals, delivered to or supplied by temple or palace granaries and sheepfold as part of a strict system of control over entries or expenditures. And the texts impressed on envelopes and tablets were by no means a local or esoteric phenomenon. On the contrary, the practice extended from Syria to Mesopotamia and Western Iran over four centuries.⁷

The technique that characterizes this earliest form of writing consisted of impressing the signs. At first, actual tokens were sunk into the clay of the envelope, bulla, or tablet, leaving images in negative. For example, a cone left a wedge-shaped indenta-

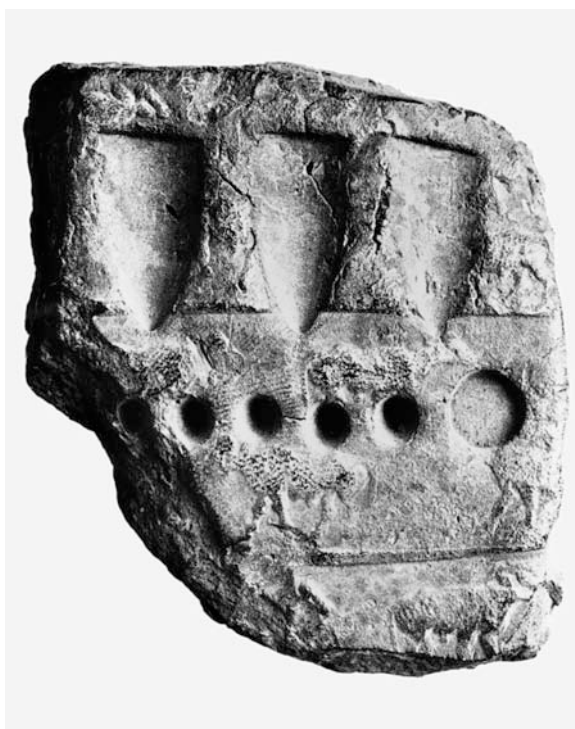


FIGURE 0.4. Impressed tablet from Susa (Sb 2313), Iran. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales.

tion, and a sphere a circular depression (fig. 0.4). Evidence that the impressions were made with actual tokens is visible on several artifacts, one of which is an envelope from Habuba Kabira holding incised ovoids representing jars of oil that fit perfectly in the impressions on the envelope's exterior (fig. 0.5). A second is a Susa tablet with three large wedges that distinctly show the entire outline of the cone used to impress them (fig. 0.4), and a third is another Susa tablet showing impressions of triangle tokens complete with an incised line to depict the original incised counter (fig. 0.6). In other cases, circular signs and wedges were already impressed with a stylus, presaging the cuneiform script (fig. 0.7).

For the present study, the significance of the impressed texts is in their layout. It is quite remarkable that the 300 Syrian, Mesopotamian, and Elamite impressed texts share the same format, with exceedingly rare exceptions. This demonstrates that between 3500–3100 B.C., scribes of the Uruk temple administration, though located in distant places, followed identical rules prescribing the direction of script and where and how signs were to be organized on a tablet. Generally, the impressed texts abided by the following set of conventions.⁸

1. *Each marking represented a unit of goods.*

Among the most frequent markings (fig. 0.8):

- A wedge represented one small unit of grain.
- A circular marking represented one medium unit of grain.
- A long wedge represented one domesticated animal.

2. *Size was semantic.*

Wedges existed in two sizes, small and large (figs. 0.4, 0.7, and 0.8):

- A small wedge corresponded to a *ban*, a small measure of grain (equivalent to a liter).
- A large wedge stood for a very large measure of grain.

Circular markings also existed in two sizes, small and large:

- A small circular marking represented a *bariga*, a medium unit of grain (equivalent to a bushel).
- A large circular marking stood for a large measure of grain.

3. *The number of units of goods was shown in one-to-one correspondence (figs. 0.3 and 0.7).*

- One small wedge = 1 small unit of grain.
- Two small wedges = 2 small units of grain.

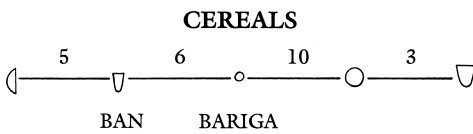
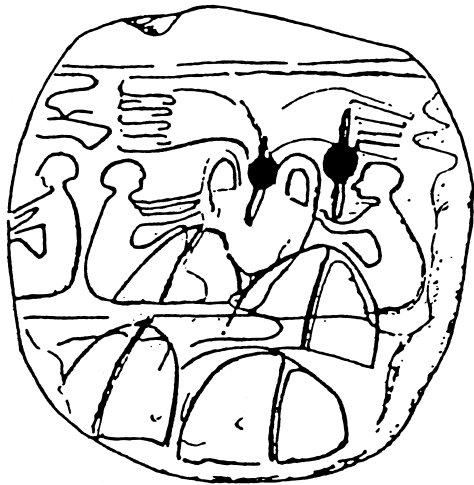


FIGURE 0.5. Envelope bearing the impression of incised ovoids, from Habuba Kabira (M II: 134), Syria. Courtesy Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Berlin.

FIGURE 0.6. Impressed tablet with deep circular incised and triangular incised signs, Susa (Sb 1975 bis), Iran. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales. Drawing by Ellen Simmons.

FIGURE 0.7. Tablet showing a line of four circular signs followed by a line of four small wedges, Godin Tepe (Gd 73-19), Iran. Courtesy T. Cuyler Young, Jr.

FIGURE 0.8. Grain measures: she-system. After Jöran Friberg, *The Third Millennium Roots of Babylonian Mathematics*, p. 10.

4. *Writing was linear (figs. 0.3 and 0.7).*

The impressed signs were inscribed in straight lines (figs. 0.4, 0.6, and 0.7). Signs of different types were usually not mixed on the same line. Instead, each line featured only one kind of sign, repeated as many times as needed. For example, on fig. 0.7, a line of four circular signs is followed by a line of four wedges.

Since the orientation of the signs on the impressed tablets is disputed, I take this opportunity to explain my views. I consider symmetry to be a fundamental aesthetic characteristic of Mesopotamian cultures. In other words, as illustrated by the popular master of animals or mirror effect compositions in Mesopotamian art, a feature to the right calls for a similar feature to the left; when a composition consists of an uneven number of figures, one is placed in the center and the others are distributed evenly on either side; and when the composition holds a single figure, it occupies the center of the field. My study of tokens showed that symmetry also governed the disposition of markings on tokens—lines and punctuations were consistently organized in symmetrical sets on either side of a central feature. For example, disks displayed a set of three lines on either side of a median line or a blank space. I propose that the scribes had the same propensity for symmetry when establishing the format of impressed tablets. Accordingly, the scribes arranged the signs in parallel, horizontal lines centered on the middle of the long side of a tablet. This is supported by the fact that when a line features a single sign, it is usually placed in the center of the long side of the tablet (fig. 0.9). When there is an uneven number of signs, one occupies the center, and the remaining signs are divided in equal number on either side; when there is an even number, the signs are displayed symmetrically across the center (fig. 0.7).

I should add that cases—lines separating signs referring to two or more transactions—do not occur on impressed tablets.

5. *Location (above/below) on the tablet was semantic.*

The lines of signs were by no means placed at random, but were arranged in strict hierarchical order. The signs representing the largest units of merchandise were placed on the uppermost line, followed by lines of lesser and lesser units. For instance, in fig. 0.7, circular signs are placed above the wedges, which represent smaller units. The standardized logical structure ensured easy, efficient reading. The tablet in fig. 0.7 could be read at a glance: “Four *bariga* and four *ban* of cereals.”

Signs of the same shape but different size, such as small and large wedges, were easily distinguishable because the large wedges, standing for large measures of grain, were placed in the upper part of the tablet (fig. 0.4), while the small wedges, representing small units of grain, were set along the lower edge (fig. 0.7). These signs were placed above and below the circular signs, which represented intermediary units of capacity of grain.



FIGURE 0.9. Impressed tablet displaying signs placed at the center of the field, Susa (Sb 4839), Iran. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales.

6. Order (right/left) on a line was semantic.

The layout of the impressed tablets again reflects the Mesopotamian love for symmetry and order in that, as mentioned above, when there was a single sign on a line, it was placed in the center of the tablet rather than on the right or left side (fig. 0.9). When, exceptionally, a line included different signs (fig. 0.4, second line), the larger unit was shown on the right and those of lesser value on the left.

7. The direction of the script was boustrophedon.

Notations were inscribed starting from the right and proceeding toward the left. But when all the signs did not fit on one line, the next line continued in the opposite direction, from left to right—in other words, boustrophedon. Both the right-to-left initial direction and the following boustrophedon reversal are well illustrated in several tablets, such as in fig. 0.10.

In sum, when impressed envelopes and tablets began to be used, their efficient format was already well established and perhaps even age-old. The concepts may well have had their roots in prehistory and been elaborated over centuries by generations of village chiefs who arranged tokens in neat lines according to types of merchandise and unit sizes in order to visualize the resources available for the next festival. The

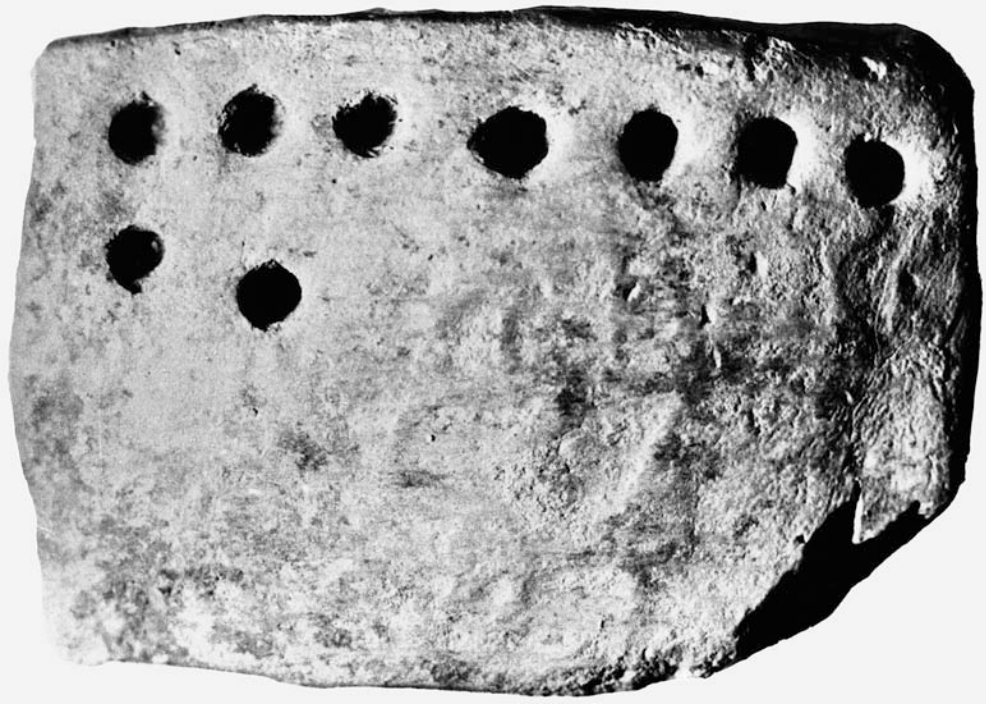


FIGURE 0.10. Impressed tablet illustrating boustrophedon direction, Godin Tepe (Gd 73–294), Iran. Courtesy T. Cuyler Young, Jr.

custom of organizing tokens according to goods and unit sizes was then transposed onto the markings on envelopes and, subsequently, tablets. Finally, as I will demonstrate, the efficient system of organizing economic notations was adapted to art to create complex visual narratives.

The important impressed texts that reveal the very beginning of writing and, as I will show, play a significant role in the history of the art of the Near East have been mostly ignored by archaeologists and philologists alike. This is especially true for the impressed tablets, although they have received attention in excavation reports. In particular, the impressed texts from Susa,⁹ Godin Tepe,¹⁰ and Jebel Aruda¹¹ have been the subject of special studies, and my two volumes *Before Writing* (1992) and *How Writing Came About* (1996) gave impressed texts a full treatment. Nevertheless, though the secondary literature shows a fascination for token envelopes and the later pictographic tablets, it typically skips the impressed tablets. The fact that the impressed tablets are continuously referred to as “numerical tablets,” as they were erroneously dubbed when first excavated at Uruk in 1930–1931, is the best evidence for their endemic misinterpretation.¹² I recently heard a noted Assyriologist, lecturing on the origin of writing, commiserating that “the ‘numerical tablets’ must have been confusing for the Uruk accountants, since they recorded numbers only.” The statement was wrong; it deceived the audience on two counts. First and foremost, at the time

of the impressed tablets, abstract numbers had not yet been invented. Instead, according to the system of concrete counting, each impressed marking expressed one unit of merchandise. Repeating the sign in a one-to-one correspondence indicated the number of units. The lecturer's object of commiseration was, in fact, a standard account of grain stipulating different measures of barley in various numbers—not a series of nonsensical numbers. Second, the lecturer misrepresented the Uruk accountants, who as early as the mid-fourth millennium B.C. kept precise records of several hundred types of goods with complex tokens. The impressed tablets, far from being a step backward, represented another great innovation by replacing loose tokens with permanent impressions bundled in clear lines. These lines became the fundamental structure of an efficient visual language; they made it possible to bestow meaning to the location, order, and direction of signs on the face of a tablet.

About 3100 B.C., the impressed technique was superseded by a new method of writing involving a reed stylus that ended in a prismatic tip. The so-called "pictographic" economic texts transcribed the more complex tokens via traces of their outlines and markings on the clay tablets. These signs—traced rather than impressed—are referred to as "incised signs." Incised signs were used to depict the tokens for oil, metal, wool, and various textiles, for example, while the signs corresponding to the most frequently transacted goods (rations, grain, animals, and area measures, among others) continued to be impressed.¹³ The predominant method of writing began to change from impressed to incised, but the layout continued to be linear. The size of signs still indicated different units of the same commodity, and the location of signs on the tablets remained semantic. In particular, when the state administration required entering the name of the donors or recipients of the goods, donors were featured on the right side of the tablet and the recipients on the left (fig. 0.11). These positions communicated the verbs "given" or "received" (or the prepositions "to" and "from") before verbs and grammatical forms were expressed by the script.¹⁴

I will show that the pictographic script created new types of signs that served as models to communicate information in narrative art. Among them were determina-

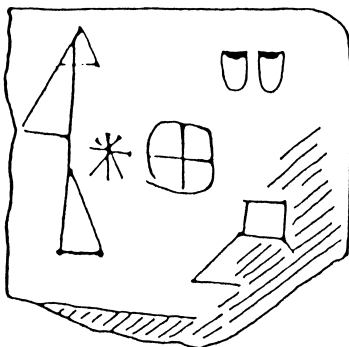


FIGURE 0.11. Pictographic tablet (W 21446) from Uruk, Iraq, showing an offering of two sheep to Inanna. The star-shaped determinative sign indicates that the next sign refers to a divine name. After Hans Nissen, "The Archaic Texts from Uruk," fig. 6.

tives: signs modifying meaning. For example, one of the earliest determinatives was the star-shaped sign *dingir*, which when placed next to a name indicated that the name referred to a deity (fig. 0.11).¹⁵ New logograms no longer based on tokens consisted of pictures that evoked a concept. “Female slave,” for example, was depicted by a pubic triangle and a scale pattern representing mountains — literally, “woman from the mountains.”¹⁶

In the following four chapters I will show that these conventions — namely linearity, one-to-one correspondence, and the relative size, location, and order of the signs — as well as determinatives and logograms were put to work for art, thus transforming the preliterate evocative symbolic compositions into a pictorial language able to convey a story.

Inscribed art monuments have received much attention in ancient Near Eastern scholarship by both philologists and art historians. Traditionally, the former considered only the text and the latter only the images, but this has changed. Recently, philologists such as Black and Green,¹⁷ Ellis,¹⁸ Finkel and Geller,¹⁹ Hallo,²⁰ Lambert,²¹ Postgate,²² and Wiggermann²³ have successfully identified the images of legendary heroes and monsters represented in art. Among art historians, Azarpay first recognized the value of inscribed monuments in creating chronological frameworks for the study of style.²⁴ Bahrani,²⁵ Barrelet,²⁶ Suter,²⁷ and Winter²⁸ have done remarkable work linking Mesopotamian artworks with inventories and the rhetoric of third- to first-millennium texts.

When Writing Met Art differs from all of the above, as it examines earlier stages of writing and focuses on the interdependence and reciprocal exchange between the two early visual media of communication. This study builds upon my previous work on the origins of writing, elucidating how writing finally shook off the yoke of accounting inherited from the token system and showing how the structures of meaning built to manipulate the token system made an indelible mark in human cognitive development.

I

How Writing Shaped Art

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Pottery Painting

Since redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural than is sparse linearity. Sparsely linear and analytical thought and speech is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing.

—WALTER J. ONG, S.J.¹

BEGINNING IN THE seventh millennium B.C., pottery painting became a major form of art in the ancient Near East. This chapter will show that a fundamental change in pottery painting compositions coincided with the invention of writing. Geometric designs or lines of repeated animal and human figures are typical of prehistoric painted potteries—*before* writing—whereas narrative scenes occur on Early Dynastic potteries—*after* writing. I credit writing for this change. By borrowing strategies of writing, art increased its capacity to communicate information and thus became narrative.

Pottery Painting before Writing

A description of the characteristics of preliterate pottery paintings will help place the discussion in context. Narrative compositions are practically nonexistent in preliterate Near Eastern pottery paintings. Among the exceedingly rare examples, Telul eth-Thalathat produced a singular Ubaid sherd (fig. 1.1) showing a calf following a cow (perhaps, in fact, a mere animal line),² and a painting inside a Susa I bowl³ features a hunter sporting an impressive hairdo or headdress who aims his bow toward an ibex located on the other side of a set of sweeping broken lines (fig 1.2). Also, a Halaf vase from an unusual context at Arpachiyah⁴ displays a series of scenes. Inside, a frieze shows two women holding a quadrangular object next to an archer facing a ferocious

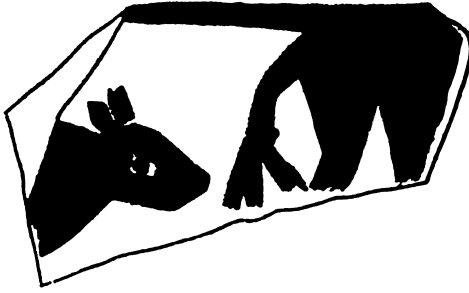


FIGURE 1.1. Vase decorated with a cow followed by her calf, Telul eth-Thalathat, Iraq, Ubaid I period. After Namio Egami, *Telul eth-Thalathat, The Excavations of Tell II, 1956–1957*, pl. 6. Copyright © Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo.



FIGURE 1.2. Bowl decorated with a hunting scene from Susa I (Sb 3144), Iran, ca. 3800–3500 B.C. After E. Pottier, J. de Morgan, and R. de Mecquenem, *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, fig. 129. Drawn by Joan Rubin.

feline, while a bull looks in the opposite direction. On the exterior, a third scene depicts two small figures climbing an enormous vessel.

Each of these prehistoric narrative scenes involves a minimal number of participants. In most cases, the association between the figures is obvious—a cow and her calf or a hunter and his prey—and their interaction is simple and predictable: the calf follows his mother, the hunter aims at his prey. In other cases, the same figure is repeated in mirror effect—on the Halaf vase, the women and the climbers are symmetrically arranged around a central object.

But these are exceptions. Typical Mesopotamian pottery vessels from preliterate cultures such as Ubaid (ca. 4500–3500 B.C.), Halaf/Hassuna, and Eridu/Hajji-Mohammed (6500–4500 B.C.) were decorated with geometric designs.⁵ The potter covered a designated space of the vase with patterns drawn from a wide repertory, including parallel bands, wavy and zigzagged lines, herringbones, inverted triangles, diamonds, etc. Each motif is repeated as many times as necessary to cover the circumference of the vessel. A bowl from Telul eth-Thalathat shows a line of small triangles followed by broad oblique bands of crisscrossed lines replicated eight times. Lines play a large role in the composition of the prehistoric Mesopotamian pottery decorations. Single or multiple, the lines markedly delineate the various painted zones and bluntly separate the motifs (fig. 1.3).

In neighboring Elam, the potters of the contemporaneous Susiana and Susa I cultures preferred animal designs.⁶ For example, a Susa I tumbler (ca. 4000–3800 B.C.) displays lines of waterbirds, dogs, and ibexes to create one of the most complex preliterate Near Eastern pottery paintings (fig. 1.4). In Elam, as in Mesopotamia, repetition is a characteristic feature of prehistoric compositions. About sixty identical

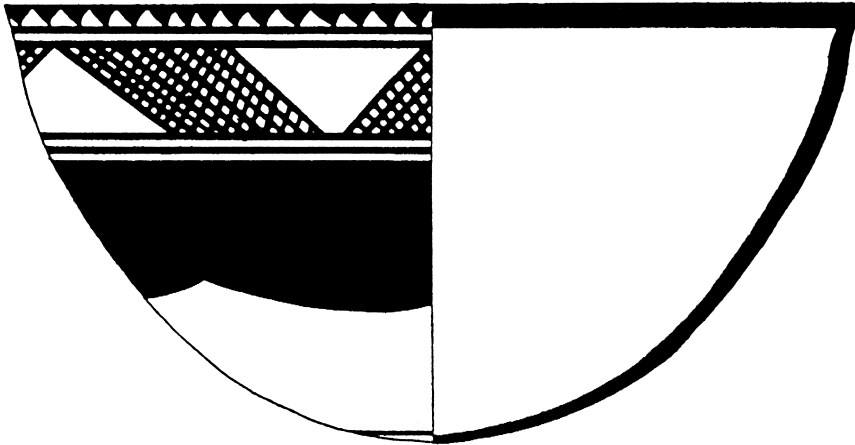


FIGURE 1.3. Prehistoric geometric painted bowl from Telul eth-Thalathat, Iraq, Ubaid period, ca. 4500–4000 B.C. After Namio Egami, *Telul eth-Thalathat, The Excavations of Tell II, 1956–1957*, fig. 12: 1. Copyright © Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo.



FIGURE 1.4. Prehistoric beaker decorated with animal lines, from Susa I, Iran, ca. 3800–3500 B.C., I (Sb 3174). Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

waterbirds are repeated around the tumbler, in addition to five dogs and three ibexes. Of course, the specific number is not important, since the painter's purpose was only to fill the entire circumference of a vase with images.

Susa I animal designs are extremely stylized. The long-necked birds of the upper register were created using only five strokes of various lengths and thicknesses to depict the creatures' heads, elongated necks, bodies, and legs. Below, the running dogs have pointed heads, long, thin bodies, stretched-out legs, and curly tails. Finally, the ibexes' horns take the shape of two concentric circles twice as large as the animals' bodies, which are reduced to triangles, with a few added strokes to represent ears, beards, and bushy tails. In fact, the animals are transformed into geometric motifs—the long-necked birds are stretched into vertical lines, the running dogs into horizontal lines, and the ibexes' horns into circles.

Also typical is the lack of interaction between the animals. The sixty birds perched on the same line stand still, tightly packed together and showing no awareness of one another. Below, the frieze of running dogs consists of five identical images juxtaposed one after the other, as do the three ibexes in the third register. In fact, the total disregard of the animals for their own kind is matched only by their utter indifference to the other species. The birds are unaware of the dogs, who in turn are oblivious of the ibexes. The total indifference of the beasts is exacerbated by their boustrophedon disposition around the tumbler: each species faces in the opposite direction from the one above. The birds are turned to the left, the dogs run toward the right, and the ibexes again look toward the left. Furthermore, the dogs are not aligned with the ibexes and therefore appear out of step.

The Susa I tumbler exemplifies the considerable role lines play in pottery painting compositions. It features thirteen lines of various thicknesses that create a dynamic visual rhythm. Note how the thick band around the lip echoes the band around the base. The three lines below the birds correspond to a parallel set of three lines below the ibex. Finally, a pair of lines of different thicknesses appears in reversed order above and below the dogs. The lines delineate and strikingly separate the motifs, isolating each animal species from the next. Five lines separate the water birds from the dogs; the dogs run between two sets of double lines, and the ibexes are tightly framed by rectangles that are bracketed between bold broken lines. In Elam, as in Mesopotamia, the lines frame the bands of motifs, highlighting them. In the Susa compositions, lines were used as dividers between the animal registers, which discouraged narrative compositions. In other words, in the preliterate animal compositions, the function of lines was exclusively aesthetic.

In the rare instances when humans are represented, at such late seventh–early sixth millennium sites as Arpachiyah, Baghouz, Chogha Mami, Hassuna, and Samarra in Mesopotamia or Moussian in Western Iran, the same figure is generally repeated in order to form an overall geometric composition or a single line.⁷ One of the most strik-

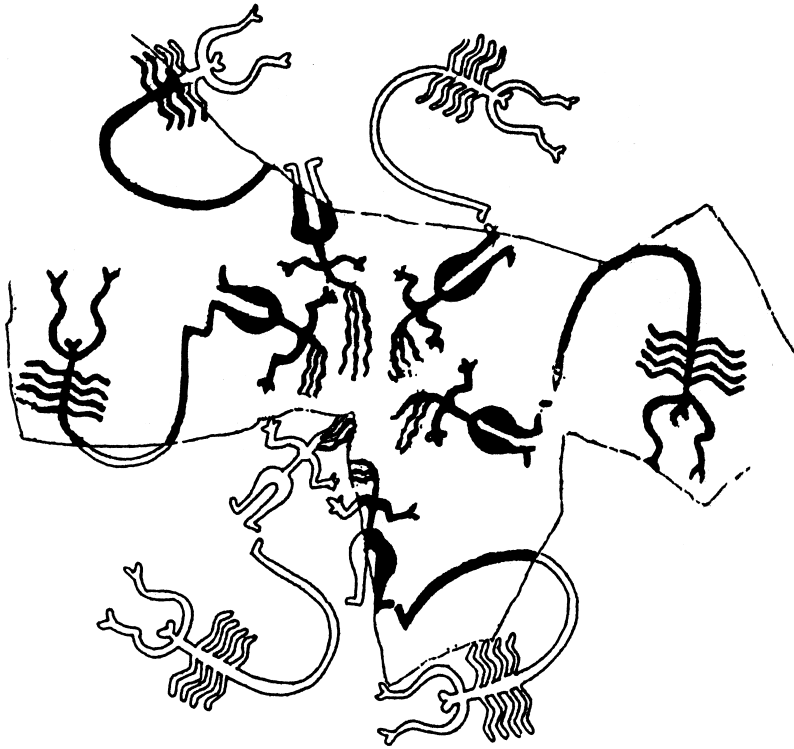


FIGURE 1.5. Women with flowing hair and scorpions, Samarra, Iraq. After Ernst Herzfeld, *Die Ausgrabungen von Samarra V: Die vorgeschichtlichen Töpfereien*, pl. 30. Copyright © 1930. Courtesy Dietrich Reimer.

ing of these prehistoric anthropomorphic compositions is painted in red inside a buff pottery bowl excavated at the site of Samarra. The design features six humans in the center of the bowl and six scorpions around the inner rim (fig. 1.5).⁸ The six identical anthropomorphic figures, shown frontally, are generally interpreted as females because of their wide hips, large thighs, and long, flowing hair. The shoulders are broad, the waists are thin, and the arms are spread open and bent at the elbows and fists to form a zigzag pattern ending with short, three-fingered hands. The legs do not indicate knees but depict feet pointing outward at 90-degree angles. The torsos, arms, hands, legs, and feet are fully symmetrical, but the long necks and featureless faces break the symmetry by leaning sharply toward the right. The long hair (or ribbons?), separated in three parallel wavy strands, accentuates this dissymmetry by flowing off to the right as well, as if blown by a violent wind.

Six identical scorpions, one following after the other in a single line, circle menacingly around the women. The design of the creatures includes heads, eyes, stretched-out pedipalps with pincers, four pairs of legs, and stingers. Interestingly, the scorpions share several features with the women, who are depicted as smaller than the insects. The pattern of the scorpions' pedipalps echoes that of the female legs, and the bodies

of both humans and insects are symmetrically designed except for one extremity—scorpions' stingers and the females' heads and hair, which break the symmetry by deviating toward the right.

The six identical anthropomorphic figures of the Samarra bowl have been interpreted as dancers,⁹ but other than their hair and perhaps their waving arms they are fully immobile. The legs are straight and although no ground line is traced, the feet are firmly anchored together. The only impression of movement is conveyed by the human hair flowing in one direction and, as is characteristic of the Samarra style, by the reverse movement of the scorpions walking in the opposite direction.

The Samarra vessel is not unique in showing sets of anthropomorphic figures many have regarded as dancers. A second incomplete bowl, also from Samarra, features five women similar to those described above, but no scorpions are visible on the small fragment.¹⁰ The females are again presented in silhouette, frontally, in the exact same position. Their heads are even more elongated, their flowing hair even longer. The arms, bent only at the elbow, end with the same three-fingered hands. The main difference is in the general composition. In the second bowl, the extended arms and flowing hair outline two concentric broken circles. Contemporaneous vessels from other Near Eastern sites, such as Sabi Abyad¹¹ and Tell Halaf¹² in Syria, depict lines of females in profile sporting high hairdos or headdresses that end with five strands of hair or ribbons. In each case the dancers follow one another in single file, with their arms bent at the elbow and raised (fig. 1.6). In Iranian sites such as Tchechme Ali¹³ and Khazineh¹⁴ the figures hold hands like paper dolls (fig. 1.7).

These human compositions are typical of preliterate pottery painting in their repetition of one motif that covers the circumference of a vessel or forms interesting geometric shapes. The number of figures is unimportant, since the intention was only to fill a given surface. Other than on one unique sherd from Chogha Mami featuring a male between two females,¹⁵ individuals included in the same composition are generally identical. They share the same size, position, gesture, and attire. Extreme stylization is also characteristic of preliterate anthropomorphic designs. The figures are silhouettes painted in solid color. Details such as facial features are never depicted, and it is difficult to make out whether the elongated heads represent headdresses or hairdos, or whether the flowing stripes are strands of hair or ribbons. In several instances, such as Chogha Mami, figures are reduced to a series of triangles representing heads, torsos, and legs.¹⁶ Also noteworthy is that interaction between the dancers is indicated by mere association. They are never shown face-to-face or gesturing toward one another. Instead, at Chogha Mami their triangular torsos are just touching, and the figures of Khazineh hold hands (fig. 1.7). All the dancers perform the same movement; none executes a different step. And, most importantly, all are depicted equally—none is taller or wears status symbols distinguishing him/herself as the most important individual in the group.

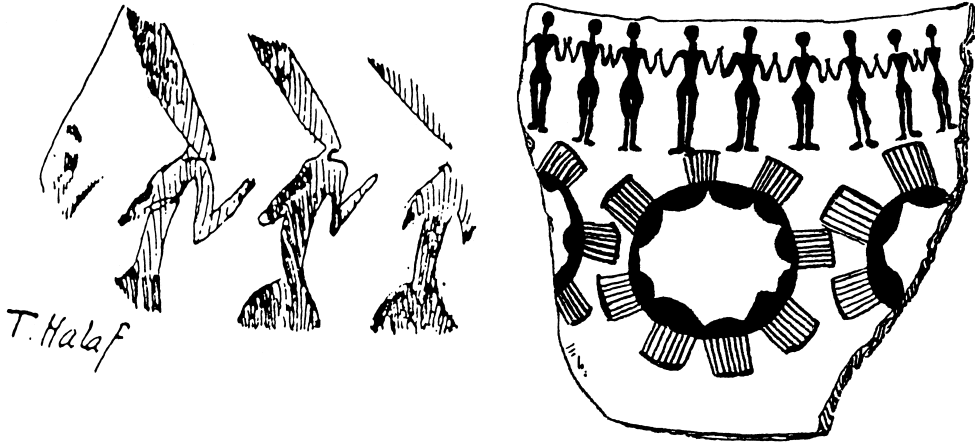


FIGURE 1.6. Line of dancers in profile, sporting either high hairdos or headdresses, from Tell Halaf, Syria. After Ernst Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, p. 99, fig. 195.

FIGURE 1.7. Line of dancers holding hands, Khazineh, Iran. After R. de Mecquenem, G. Contenau, R. Pfister, and N. Belaïew, *Mémoires de la mission archéologique en Iran*, p. 183, fig. 13. Copyright © 1943. Courtesy Presses Universitaires de France.

These sophisticated compositions, meant to be understood as a whole, are perhaps the most important feature of the preliterate Samarra potteries. The visual effect of the Samarra bowl was not derived from the individual female or scorpion motifs but was created using repetition to form an overall geometric pattern. The six women form a hexagon, the scorpions a large concentric circle (fig. 1.5). Motifs were manipulated using repetition, symmetry, and direction reversal in order to create a striking global composition.

Finally, preliterate geometric, animal, or anthropomorphic compositions were meant to be apprehended and appreciated as a whole. The painter of the Susa tumbler wove together an attractive pattern composed of vertical long-necked birds that contrasted with the vessel's horizontal lines, running dogs, and circular ibex horns. Similarly, the Samarra figures formed concentric circles, and the most typical Mesopotamian vessels were decorated with various overall geometric patterns.

In sum, Mesopotamian and Elamite preliterate pottery paintings and, for that matter, ancient Near Eastern pottery decoration from the Levant to Anatolia shared four main characteristics: the designs covered the entire circumference of the vessels; the designs were repetitious; lines divided the composition by separating the various patterns; and compositions were meant to be apprehended as a whole. Mesopotamian geometric motifs alternated to create handsome overall designs. The Susa tumblers played with contrasting vertical and horizontal lines and circles.

Though the characteristics of preliterate pottery painting might seem to indicate art for art's sake, the images are certainly not devoid of meaning. The ibexes and other animals featured on the Susa tumbler were generally assumed to have been symbols

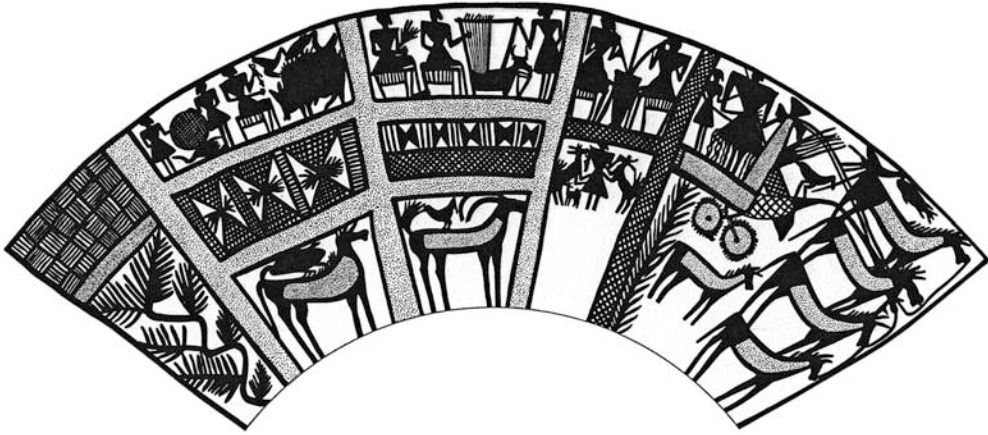


FIGURE 1.8. Scarlet ware jar decorated with four successive narrative scenes, Khafaje, Iraq, ED I, ca. 2900–2800 B.C. After Pinhas Delougaz, *Pottery from the Diyala Region*, pl. 138.

—as the dove is a symbol of peace in our culture— as were the lines of dancers and the Ubaid geometric motifs. Thus, the Mesopotamian and Elamite potteries evoked ideas—perhaps profound ideas—but they did not tell complex stories.

Pottery Painting after Writing

Painted potteries disappeared during the proto-literate period (3500–2900 B.C.), when plain or gray burnished wares prevailed.¹⁷ Painting on pottery reemerged in the Early Dynastic I period (ca. 2900–2750 B.C.).¹⁸ At that time, the so-called “scarlet ware” popular in the Diyala region and Susa II produced innovative narrative compositions.

The paintings on a Mesopotamian jar from Khafaje offer a good example of an extensive narrative organized into four seemingly related panels (fig. 1.8). The scenes depict, in order, a percussion ensemble; an individual listening to a singer accompanied by a lyre; a banquet involving two people sipping beer from a jar; and a chariot scene, in which the equipage consists of an individual and his attendant standing on a carriage drawn by a team of four equids. Vegetation, birds, a colt, and a fish may suggest the landscape.¹⁹

Susa II provides an Elamite parallel²⁰ (figs. 1.9a and 1.9b). Here, a frieze broken into three panels is painted above the carinated shoulder of a jar dated to the first half of the third millennium B.C. The paintings successively illustrate a chariot scene, a flight of eagles, and a symposium with a large vase holding plants. How the flight of birds might be related to the other panels remains elusive. What is clear, however, is that the pottery paintings of the literate period at both Khafaje and Susa no longer feature numbers of identical figures. Instead, each figure is distinctly individualized.

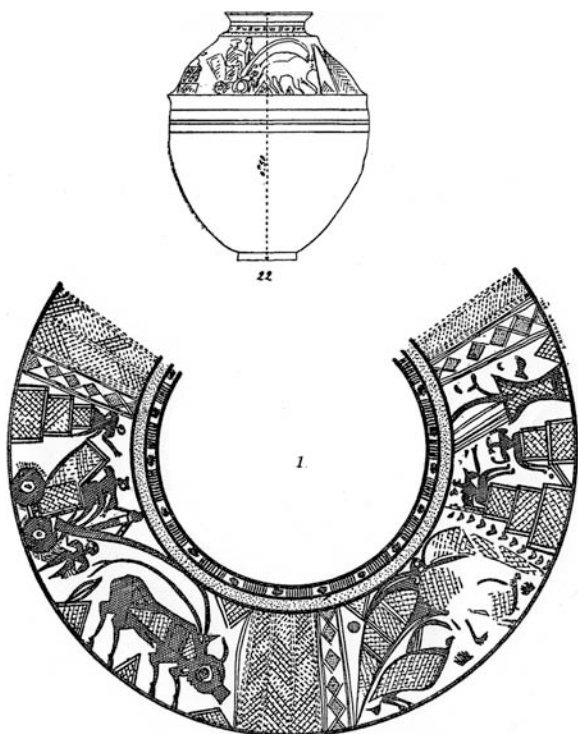


FIGURE 1.9A. Vase decorated with a chariot scene from Susa, Iran, Sumero-Elamite period, first half of the third millennium B.C., stored at Tehran Museum, no. 431. After R. de Mecquenem, G. Contenau, R. Pfister, and N. Belaiew, *Mémoires de la mission archéologique en Iran*, p. 87, fig. 72: 22 and p. 105, fig. 79: 1. Copyright © 1943. Courtesy Presses Universitaires de France.

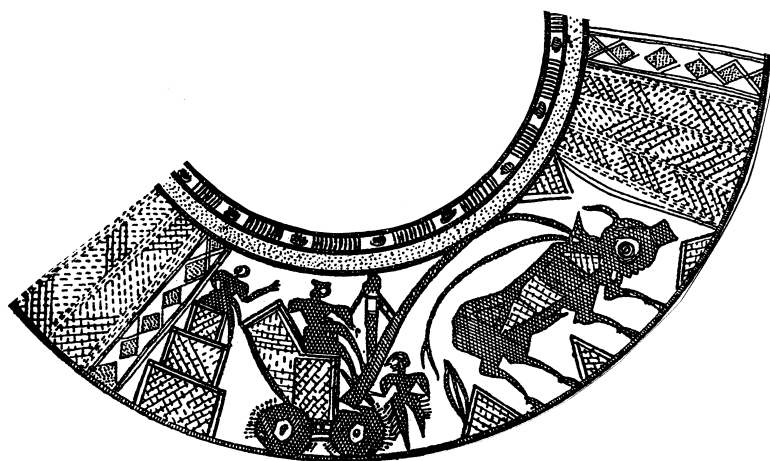


FIGURE 1.9B. Detail of vase.

Each character in the Susa chariot scene is differentiated from the next by his garb. The charioteer sports a flat cap probably indicative of his status, the individual seated on a three-tiered tower is dressed in a short tunic with large sleeves, and the bare-headed, clean-shaven attendant wears fringed attire. Each figure is also singled out by a specific context. The hero is seated in his four-wheeled vehicle, the figure behind him perches on a tower, and the attendant is squeezed between the wheels and the draft ox. And finally, each individual displays singular gestures. The charioteer is ready to pull the reins for departure, the secondary figure emphatically waves, and the attendant bustles around the equipage.

From all of this we can see that the style of pottery paintings from the literate period produces a greater amount of meaning. Whereas preliterate painters tried hard to achieve the utmost stylization, those of the literate period aim to be as informative as possible. The depiction of the chariot, for example, includes many accurate details. Its two-part box shows the basketwork of which it is made; it is provided with a high front pierced with an opening for the reins; the draft pole is curved; solid wheels rotate around an axle and show a copious set of copper nails securing the leather tires. The one ox drawing the chariot has the large round eyes and curved horns characteristic of its species.

The function of lines in pottery paintings also changed significantly between the preliterate and literate periods. Whereas the Ubaid and Susa I lines were used as dividers, those on particular scarlet ware vessels acted to unite the features of a composition. In the chariot scene, for example, the tower, the wheels of the chariot, the attendant's feet, and the animal hoofs are all aligned to form an imaginary ground line. And ground lines are important, because they signify that the connected figures shared the same space at the same time, participating in one specific event.²¹ Accordingly, all the figures in the composition are linked, and each is to be interpreted in relation to the others. Therefore, whereas the preliterate pottery compositions formed an all-over pattern meant to be apprehended as a whole, or *globally*, those of the literate period were to be viewed *analytically*. The story of the Susa II chariot scene unfolds when one takes into account the relative disposition or arrangement of the three figures along the ground line:

- Space denotes importance. The charioteer, who with his equipage occupies three quarters of the composition, stands out as the main hero of the scene. The prestigious individual seated on top of an impressive architectural feature is of lesser status, since he/she is only allocated one quarter of the space on the ground line. The attendant, squeezed between the carriage and the ox, is a minor figure.
- Location signifies hierarchy. The hero occupies the center of the composition. The secondary figure is located to the left, behind the charioteer.

- Garments mark status. The charioteer sports a flat beret, the figure on the tower wears a tunic with voluminous sleeves, and the attendant has peculiar fringed pants.
- Size shows rank. The charioteer is much taller than the two other figures and thus the most important.
- Position indicates dominance. The hero and the secondary figure are seated, but the attendant is standing.
- Gesturing exemplifies action: The figure on the tower waves to the hero. The charioteer holds the reins, set for immediate departure, while the attendant checks on the chariot.
- Orientation indicates interaction. The individual on the tower turns toward the charioteer to bid him farewell. The hero pays no attention, looking in the opposite direction toward his faithful attendant, who listens to the instructions.
- The context suggests the next development. The individual in the tower and the attendant will soon be left behind by the traveler.

In the literate period, “reading” images became akin to reading a text. Like the sets of identical signs shown on the same line of a tablet, figures sharing the same line were understood as belonging together. Just as the scribe identified each character by its shape and size, the status of each figure was established by stature and markers such as garb or headdress. The dynamics of a scene were determined by the position, direction, orientation, and order of the actors, in much the same way that the meaning of a text depended upon the location and relative order of the signs on the face of a tablet.

Conclusion

I propose that art benefited from the paradigm developed by writing to communicate information. Consciously or unconsciously, figures in an image were treated according to principles similar to those governing the signs of script. The pottery painting compositions of the literate period, therefore, differed fundamentally from those of the preliterate period. Figures were no longer merely repeated as many times as necessary to fill up a space, but each figure was individualized. Instead of reducing features to the least number of strokes, painters strived to include informative details in their images. Lines drastically changed their function, evolving from mere aesthetic separations between registers into representations of a shared space. As such they bound together the actors of a scene, allowing them to interact. Preliterate pottery paintings could only *evoke* an idea; pottery paintings of the literate period emulated writing, and in doing so were able to tell complex stories involving multiple figures.

Glyptic

Narrative is a deep structure independent of its medium. In other words, narrative is basically a kind of text organization and that organization, that schema, needs to be actualized: in writing words, as in stories and novels, in spoken words combined with the movement of actors imitating characters against sets which imitate places as plays and films; in drawings; in comic strips; in dance movements, as in narrative ballet and in mime; and even in music, at least in program music of the order of Peter and the Wolf.

—SEYMOUR CHATMAN¹

IN THIS CHAPTER I turn to glyptic, the art of carving seals, which like ceramic painting has its roots deep in prehistory.² I will propose that, as with pottery painting, glyptic compositions changed with the advent of writing. After analyzing the evolution of a single seal assemblage, that of Tepe Gawra in northern Mesopotamia, I will compare and contrast seal compositions—how designs were organized on the face of seals—before, at the time of, and after the invention of writing. I will show that at the first stage, preliterate circular compositions merely evoked ideas. At stage two, protoliterate seals told simple stories by adopting the linear mode of writing and creating a “syntax”—an established order to connect figures. And at stage three, after literacy had become well established, glyptic art was able to tell complex stories by pushing the ground line convention to new subtleties and developing a repertory of status markers imitating the determinative signs of cuneiform writing. First, I briefly introduce the art of seal carving in the ancient Near East and the Tepe Gawra glyptic assemblage.

Glyptic: The Seal Carver’s Art

Seals were used to identify individuals or offices responsible for shipping, registering, and storing merchandise.³ Goods transported in jars, baskets, sacks, or bundles were secured with strings, and a patch of clay was affixed on the terminal knot bearing the seal of the sender or recipient. Seals were also applied to envelopes holding tokens or

tablets registering entries or disbursements of merchandise (figs. 0.2 and 0.9). Finally, seals were placed on the doors of storerooms to control the movement of goods.⁴ The imprints of seals on clay are referred to as “sealings.”

There are two types of seals: stamp seals and cylinder seals. Both types of artifacts were carved in the negative in order to leave a positive design when impressed on clay. Stamp seals (figs. 2.1–2.4) were imprinted as many times as necessary to cover a required clay surface, whereas cylinder seals were rolled, producing a continuous frieze (fig. 0.5). Stamp seals are attested from as early as the seventh millennium B.C. No good explanation has yet been offered for the fact that stamp seals started dwindling away in the late fourth millennium B.C., to be replaced by cylinder seals in the early third millennium B.C.⁵

A priori, Uruk, the site where writing is held to have been invented, would seem ideal for studying writing’s impact on seals, especially because it yielded a rich and well-published glyptic collection. But in reality, since no seals or sealing were recovered in the controlled stratigraphic context of the deep sounding (*Tiefschnitt*), the dating of many artifacts is problematic. (This is illustrated by a recent review of Boehmer’s *Uruk, Früheste Siegelabrollungen*, listing the varied opinions of six scholars concerning the date of one particular Uruk seal.)⁶ The 25 Uruk envelopes, which could be pivotal for this study, are also notoriously difficult to date. Recovered in the Eanna Precinct immediately below the Parthian levels, the artifacts were tucked in a hole in a *Riemchen* wall in the complex of the Stone Cone Temple.⁷ According to Jürgen Schmidt, the colorful Stone Cone Temple was erected in levels V–IVc and dismantled in IVa.⁸ There is, therefore, no way to know whether the envelopes were dumped in the wall cavity during the occupation in levels V–IVc or after the dismantlement of the temple in IVa. The pottery associated with the Stone Cone Temple area adds little precision to the date of the envelopes, because it consists of fragments of shallow bowls, beveled-rim bowls, goblets, and tall-spouted jars, all of which were used consistently during periods VI–IV.

The Uruk assemblage, however, provides broad insights on the interface between glyptic and writing. First, it is noteworthy that the Uruk VI–IV glyptic produced few narrative scenes—less than a dozen.⁹ Second, all the narrative scenes are assigned to Uruk IVa and III. The envelopes, devoid of any token markings and therefore presumed to have been created *before writing*, bear no narrative compositions. Their motif repertory is limited to lines, humans, and animals—rearing caprids and a hero mastering snakes.¹⁰

On the other hand, several of the narrative scenes are impressed on tablets, undoubtedly dating them *after writing*. One sealing shows a charioteer holding the reins of his equipage while interacting with three individuals.¹¹ Other sealings on impressed tablets from the Anu Ziggurat display gesticulating figures.¹² The remaining narrative scenes, featuring prisoners pecked by vultures or in the process of being bound,¹³ and,

finally, the En watching over the beating of bound prisoners, are attributed to level IVa or III, when pictographic writing was well developed.¹⁴

As a matter of fact, micro-archaeology cannot be practiced in any of the sites that yielded envelopes, bullae, and impressed tablets, like Susa and Chogha Mish, because this type of administrative material was systematically discarded in antiquity as soon as the documents were no longer needed in the offices. As a consequence, artifacts that might have borne diagnostic seals *par excellence* for studying the impact of writing on seals are rarely, if ever, found in a secure stratigraphic context. For instance, at Chogha Mish, 76 percent of the door sealings, all of the bullae, 65 percent of the envelopes, and 79 percent of the impressed tablets were recovered in pits or among occupational debris. As a result, the objects are estimated to date from the late Uruk period not on the base of stratigraphy, but rather according to their glyptic style.¹⁵ At Susa, the envelopes and impressed tablets excavated by Mecquenem in the southern part of the tell were duly recorded at a depth of 17.5 meters, but the large 30 cm-deep earth lens where they originated is presumed to have been a rubbish heap.¹⁶ Finally, although the 17 envelopes, solid bullae, and impressed tablets most recently excavated at Susa were lying on the floor of a building, they are not likely to have been *in situ*,¹⁷ because the objects were not grouped together along a wall, as was the case of the archive excavated by Morgan. Instead, they formed odd clusters—a small jar held an envelope, a spindle whorl, a flint blade, a shell, and pierced stone disks, for example.¹⁸ It is also obvious that the material was not abandoned in a state of emergency and sealed *in situ* by rubble, but was embedded in one of the six reconstruction layers identified in levels 17–18.¹⁹ Consequently the envelopes and other administrative artifacts may have been discarded when the rooms were cleared for rebuilding or dumped from the outside when the building was out of repair. Whatever the circumstances, the landmarks for the chronology of the Susa glyptic are based more on assumptions than solid evidence, and the charts neatly plotting the material of proto-literate sites are more wishful thinking than reliable. For these reasons, I turn my attention to the less contentious, more secure material from Tepe Gawra.

The Tepe Gawra Seals

The Tepe Gawra seal assemblage is well suited for this study, because excavations in the 1930s produced a large collection of some 700 seals and sealings spanning four millennia.²⁰ The assemblage, well published by E. A. Speiser²¹ and Arthur Tobler,²² offers a remarkable sequence with which to examine the evolution of seal compositions at one specific site during the pre-, proto-, and literate periods. Although no cuneiform text has been recovered to date at Tepe Gawra—only a large collection of prehistoric tokens—one can assume that literacy pervaded the region, as it did in the rest of Mesopotamia.

Sixteen levels of continuous occupation can be correlated with three stages of the development of writing as follows:

- Stage 1. Preliterate: Halaf and Ubaid periods, levels XX–XIII, ca. 5500–4000 B.C. (The seals that originated in the well dug from level XIII are held to date at least from the preceding level XIV.)²³
- Stage 2. Protoliterate: Gawra period, levels XIIa–VIII, 4000–2900 B.C. The Gawra period was contemporaneous with the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods, when writing came about.
- Stage 3. Literate: Early Dynastic, Akkadian, Neo-Sumerian, and Isin-Larsa periods, levels VII–IV, 2900–1800 B.C. In these periods, cuneiform script was used for all possible endeavors. Among the many genres represented in royal archives were historical, religious, magic, and literary texts, as well as formal and informal correspondence.

The Preliterate Glyptic

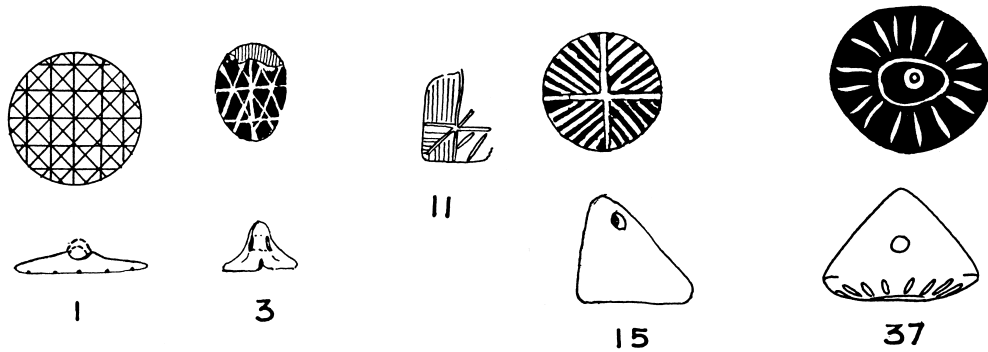
Starting with the deepest levels, the Tepe Gawra prehistoric seal assemblage of stage 1 consists of 39 stamp seals, of which five date from the Halaf period (5500–4900 B.C.) and 34 from the Ubaid period (4900–4000 B.C.). The carved designs are as follows:

Twenty-two (three from Halaf, 19 from Ubaid) of the 39 preliterate stamp seals bear geometric designs (fig. 2.1). These consist of crisscross patterns (fig. 2.1: 1, 3), “quartered circles” dividing the field into four quadrants filled with linear patterns (fig. 2.1: 11, 15), and “center points” with lines radiating from a central dot or circle (fig. 2.1: 37).

Animal designs were also popular (fig. 2.2). These include horned animals, such as antelopes, rams, mountain goats, and cows, along with birds, snakes, and fish(?). The animals can be readily identified because the seal carver highlighted details characteristic of each species, such as horns, ears, beards, tails, fetlocks, or fish gills(?). The birds are pictured in flight with their wings spread out (fig. 2.2: 173), but otherwise the animals are never shown in action. They stand motionless (fig. 2.2: 103, 123, 141).

Anthropoid figures are latecomers to preliterate glyptic art, appearing in level XIII, in the late Ubaid period, 4300–4000 B.C. The images feature an animal-headed creature with a pointed muzzle and sometimes long ears (fig. 2.3: 95) or horns (fig. 2.3: 94), a triangular torso with broad shoulders and narrow waist, long thin legs, and arms sometimes ending as prongs (fig. 2.3: 101). The anthropoid is treated as a silhouette, with no rendition of facial features. It is standing (fig. 2.3: 94), walking with bent knees in a semi-erect posture (fig. 2.3: 101), or, sometimes, seated in the air (fig. 2.3: 100).

The three types of motifs that epitomize the preliterate glyptic compositions at Tepe Gawra, namely geometric, horned animals and anthropoids, share the following important characteristics. First, the main concern of the preliterate seal carver was



Criss-cross

Quartered circle

Center point

FIGURE 2.1. Tepe Gawra preliterate geometric seal compositions.

1. Button shape, serpentine, level XIX, Halaf, G7-465. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 158, p. 244.

3. Button shape, marble, level XV, Ubaid, G7-176. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 158, p. 245.

11. Sealing, Area A, level D, Halaf, G6-544. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 158, p. 245.

15. Conoidal shape, terra cotta, level XVI(?), Ubaid, G7-185. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 158, p. 245.

37. Conoidal shape, terra cotta, level XIII, Ubaid, G6-451. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 160, p. 245.

to cover the entire face of the seal. To achieve his goal he chose geometric patterns (fig. 2.1) or drew an animal the same size as the field (fig. 2.2: 123). When multiple figures were involved, they were repeated cookie-cutter style, as many times as necessary to fill up the space (fig. 2.3: 92), or, more typically, animals and anthropoids were organized in circular compositions. For example, two beasts were placed one above the other, facing in opposite directions (fig. 2.2: 141); four mountain goats assumed a swastika formation (fig. 2.2: 162); and horned animals and anthropoids were scattered topsy-turvy (fig. 2.3: 94–95, 98, 100–102). When an empty space occurred between the figures, it was blocked with fillers of various shapes, such as stars (fig. 2.2: 103; fig. 2.3: 95) or mere squiggles (fig. 2.2: 141, 162).

Circular compositions are particularly mystifying because they have no privileged direction. When some of the figures are viewed standing up, the others are upside down (fig. 2.3: 94, 95, 98, 100, 101, 102). In seal 100 in fig. 2.3, when the anthropoid is upright, the horned animals hover upside down above him, and vice versa.

Another characteristic of the preliterate glyptic compositions at Tepe Gawra is that they show no privileged status. Anthropoids and animals are treated uniformly, on a similar scale; as a result, none of the figures emerge as more or less significant than the next. Status markers such as headdress, garment, scepter, etc., are not used.

And, finally, the figures do not interact; they are merely juxtaposed. The seal featuring a line of anthropoids uses the repetition strategy of the contemporaneous ceramic

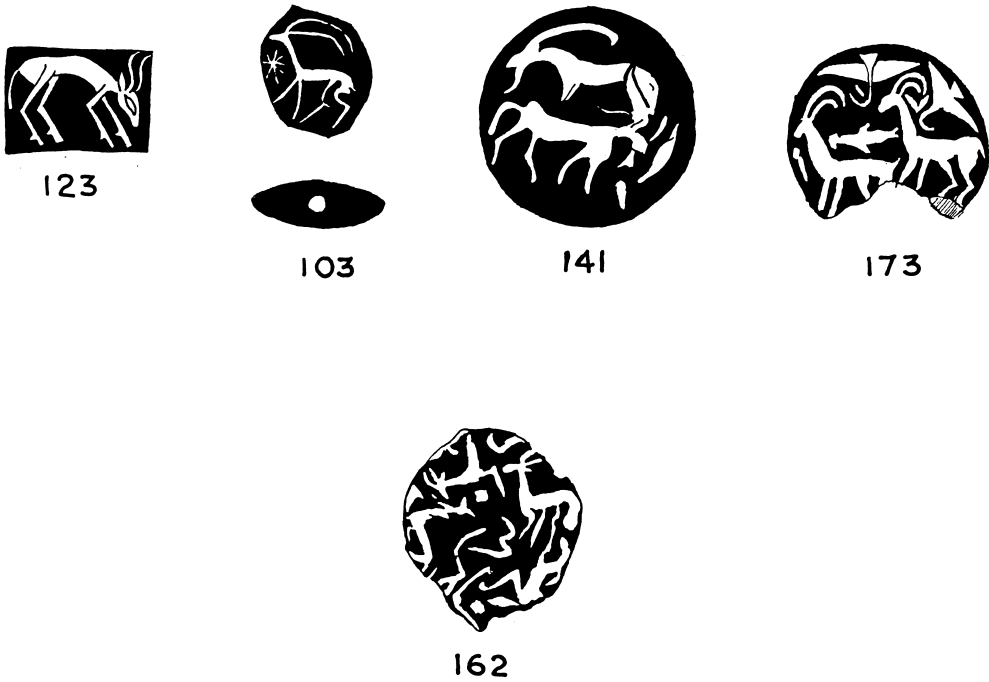


FIGURE 2.2. Tepe Gawra, preliterate animal seal compositions.

123. Impression, Area A, Halaf, G6-234. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 166, p. 247.

103. Lentoid shape, stone, level XVIII, Ubaid, G7-312. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 247.

141. Impression, Northeast Base, Halaf, G6-608. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 67.

173. Impression, level XIII well, Ubaid, G7-147. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 170, p. 248.

162. Impression, level XIII, Ubaid, G5-1637. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 169, p. 248.

decoration discussed in the preceding chapter. The anthropoids, holding hands like paper dolls, are replicated as many times as necessary to cover the field, with no attempt to show interaction (fig. 2.3: 92). In the circular compositions, the beasts facing in opposite directions ignore each other (fig. 2.2: 141), as do the animals and anthropoids suspended in a jumble in a timeless, fantastic space without gravity (fig. 2.2: 162; fig. 2.3: 94–95, 98, 100–102). Because the figures tumble haphazardly, each in their own direction, the meaning of their gestures remains enigmatic. Why the anthropoid of seal 98 waves one arm or that of seal 102 raises his hands is anyone's guess (fig. 2.3: 98, 102).

At this first stage, preceding the advent of writing, the seals represented an individual or an office by means of a unique geometric, animal, or figurative motif. The typical circular, rotating compositions transport the viewer into a joyous chaos that was meant to be seen globally, like leaves whirling in the fall wind or the images in a kaleidoscope. It is likely that these images had a meaning. For example, the anthro-

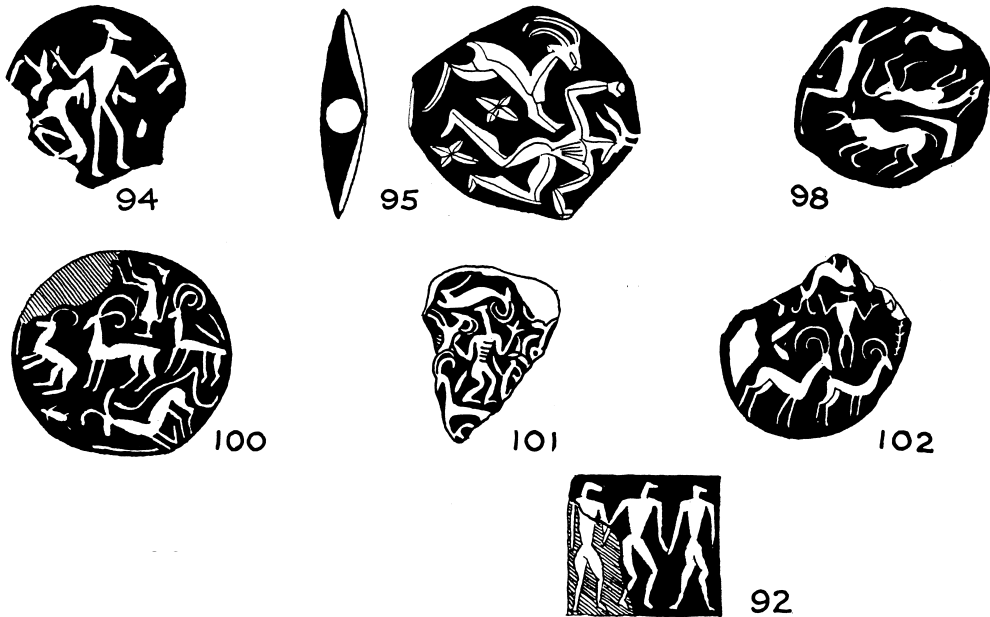


FIGURE 2.3. Tepe Gawra preliterate figural seal compositions.

94. Impression, level XIII well, Ubaid, G7-146. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 246.
 95. Gable shape, Serpentine, level XIII, Ubaid, G6-323. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 246.
 98. Impression, below level XV, Ubaid, G6-607. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 246.
 100. Impression, level XIII Well, Ubaid, G6-607. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 246.
 101. Impression, level XIII, Ubaid, G6-240. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 247.
 102. Impression, level XIII Well, Ubaid, G7-98. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 247.
 92. Impression, level XIII Well, Ubaid, G7-100. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.

poind associated with horned animals may have referred to a myth, in which case the composition evoked legendary figures but did not tell their stories.

The Proto-literate Glyptic

The proto-literate glyptic of Tepe Gawra preserved many of the preliterate characteristics. Fifty-six of the seals bore all-over geometric designs. Almost one-third of the 64 animal designs depicted a single beast drawn from the same menagerie as the preliterate. The anthropoid with pointed head and flexed legs continued to be mixed topsy-turvy with animals.

There were, however, significant changes in the proto-literate glyptic. Linear compositions, like the organizing designs of signs on the earliest impressed tablets (fig. 0.4), began to occur. For instance, 15 gazelle horns appear in five parallel rows (fig. 2.4: 171). Even more importantly, humans are placed in line with other features (fur-

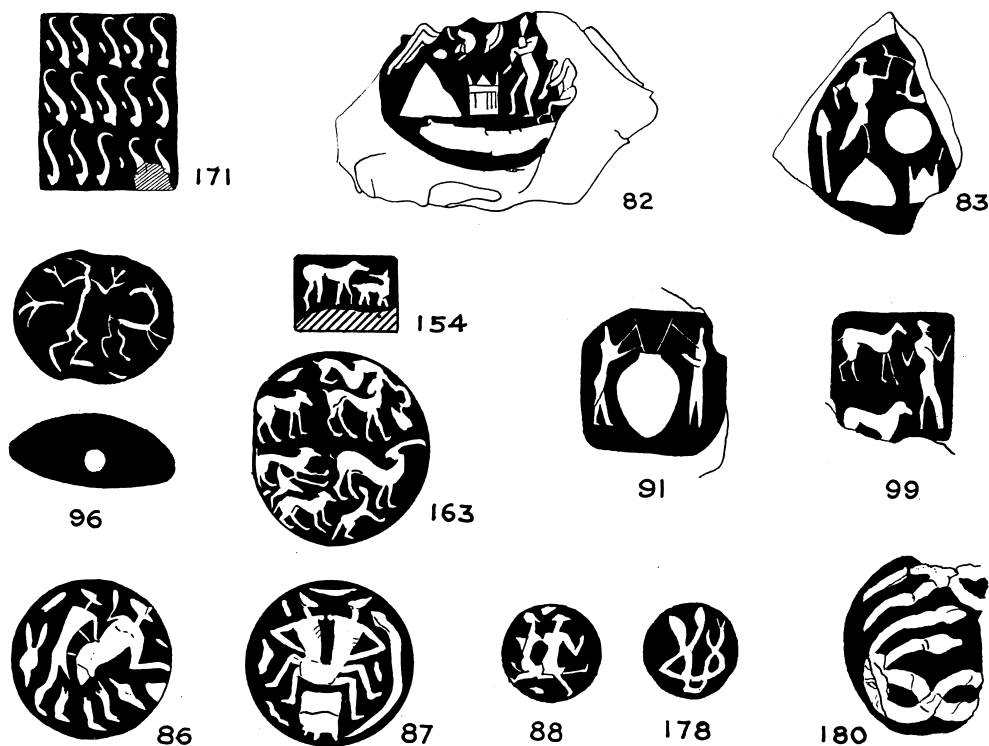


FIGURE 2.4. Tepe Gawra, proto-literate seal compositions.

171. Impression, level XI, Early Gawra Period, G7-65. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 170, p. 248.
82. Impression, level XIA, Early Gawra Period, G6-101. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
83. Impression, level XII, Early Gawra Period, G4-998. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
96. Seal Lentoid shape, marble, level X, Gawra Period, G4-605. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 166, p. 246.
154. Impression, level XIA, Early Gawra Period, G6-1651. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 168, p. 248.
163. Impression, level XI, Early Gawra Period, G5-1619. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 169, p. 248.
91. Impression, level XII, Early Gawra Period, G4-956. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
99. Impression, level XII, Early Gawra Period, G4-1193. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 164, p. 246.
86. Impression, level XIA, Early Gawra Period, G7-58. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
87. Impression, level XIA, Early Gawra Period, G5-1425. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
88. Impression, level XI, Early Gawra Period, G7-82. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 163, p. 246.
178. Impression, level X, Early Gawra Period, G3-481. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 170, p. 248.
180. Impression, level XI, Early Gawra Period, G5-1248. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, pl. 170, p. 248.

niture or altars?) in order to form an imaginary ground line (fig. 2.4: 82–83). The new linear compositions were important because a ground line defines the horizontal and vertical dimensions of a designed space. Accordingly, instead of the topsy-turvy preliterate arrangements, figures started to be organized in the same upright position, facilitating interaction.

After borrowing the linear mode of writing, art also adopted the syntax of writing. Just as the order of words on a tablet was semantic (e.g., in English, “Gilgamesh killed Humbaba” and “Humbaba killed Gilgamesh” have a different meaning), the order of figures in a design became semantic. Position and direction on the ground line was manipulated according to an established order to depict particular situations. For instance, an anthropoid behind an animal is understood as following it (fig. 2.4: 96); two dogs placed one above the other and a man, all facing in the same direction, are recognized as a group proceeding together, and since the man walks ahead, he is perceived as the leader (fig. 2.4: 99); and two individuals facing each other on either side of a large jar are identified as cooperating in churning a brew with long sticks (fig. 2.4: 91). Gestures that were nonsensical in the preliterate circular designs can now convey emotions, reactions, intentions, and expectations, according to the context. For example, anxiety is expressed when animals turn their heads backward to inspect an approaching anthropoid (fig. 2.4: 96) or a pack of dogs (fig. 2.4: 163), but the gesture becomes loving when a calf looks back toward his mother (fig. 2.4: 154).

The scenes characteristic of the proto-literate period, or stage 2, remained simple, most often involving only two obvious protagonists, such as copulating snakes (fig. 2.4: 178, 180) or lovers in various amorous positions (fig. 2.4: 86–88). The interaction was predictable—for example, animals were chased (fig. 2.4: 96), or a calf followed his mother (fig. 2.4: 154). Interestingly, status markers were still absent. Even in the erotic scenes, the status or sex of either partner was not revealed, except for one penis (fig. 2.4: 86). Generally, breasts, beards, or other aspects of sexual dimorphism were not noted, and status markers in the form of headdresses, hairdos, or garments were nonexistent.

The glyptic art of the Gawra period, contemporaneous with the advent of writing in Mesopotamia, marks the beginning of visual narratives at the site. When figures began to be organized according to an established order in linear compositions, like the signs in a text, seals started to depict action and thus tell stories. It is important to note that the development from global pell-mell compositions to linear analytical narratives occurred on stamp seals. Thus, the invention of the ground line took place on stamp seals—before the switch to cylinder seals. The change from circular to linear, therefore, cannot be related to the seal format; it suggests a new conceptual outlook.

Glyptic of the Literate Period

The simple scenes limited to few participants on the proto-literate seals were harbingers of the complex narrative compositions featured on the glyptic of the literate period. A single cylinder seal, Tepe Gawra 57 (fig. 2.5), shows the major developments in the glyptic of level VI, ca. 2200–2000 B.C., when during the Neo-Sumerian period cuneiform writing reached its classical form. The script at that time, mostly syllabic, had a repertory of some 600 signs. As I discussed in the introduction, writing also included various means of modifying the value of particular signs—for example, the size of the signs for abstract numbers was semantic, i.e., a small wedge stood for “one” and a large wedge for “sixty.” Determinatives denoted a general class. The star-shaped sign *dingir*, for instance, highlighted the divine names.²⁴ The *gunu* form consisted of covering a sign with short strokes to add meaning.²⁵ Gunification is particularly interesting because it may be as ancient as the striated tokens represented among most token types.²⁶ The convention that persisted on and off through the centuries is no longer understood as expressing a greater order of magnitude,²⁷ but no new interpretation has been offered. Finally, of course, the signs were placed in the strict order dictated by the Sumerian syntax, since in virtually all languages the order of words dictates meaning.

1. Status markers

Seal 57 is made of green serpentine and measures 31 by 18 mm (fig. 2.5). The seal features a presentation scene, a motif typical of the Neo-Sumerian period,²⁸ in which Enki, the great Mesopotamian god of water, gives audience to a worshipper introduced by two minor deities. Status markers identify the various figures and their roles as follows:

- a. Horned headdresses symbolize divinity. The three personages wearing the horned headdresses are deities. The individual who is bareheaded (or wears a feathered headdress?) is a common mortal.
- b. The undulating streams of water with six fish pouring from the shoulder of the seated figure identify it as Enki, the god of water, one of the three main male deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon.
- c. Size denotes importance. Although the figures’ heads and feet are at the same height in order to satisfy the Mesopotamian convention of isocephaly, the seated figure is roughly twice the size of those standing. Size earmarks Enki as a major god compared to the two minor deities. The worshipper, in turn, who is the same size as the minor gods, can be identified as an official of high status, probably a king.
- d. Space shows importance. Enki occupies about half of the composition, spelling



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FIGURE 2.5. Tepe Gawra, cylinder seal, no. 57, R 649. E. A. Speiser, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra*, p. 129, pl. 60.

out his importance. The smaller space allotted to the other figures highlights their lesser significance.

- e. Garments indicate sex. Long robes and fringed shawls, typical of male attire, identify the figures as men (as do the beards).
- f. Garb marks status. The more important the deity, the more intricate the attire. The great god Enki wears a flounced robe, the most elaborate garment in the composition. The first minor god has on a pleated dress, which in turn is more intricate than the tunics of his companions, which are merely decorated with a fringed hem. The complexity of the garb, and therefore the importance of the figures, is shown by an increasingly busy linear design, consisting respectively of series of short strokes, long parallel lines, and a crisscross pattern.
- g. Hair underscores rank. The shorter the beard, the lesser the god. The minor deity to the far right sports a short goatee, not a full beard like the two other gods, evidence that he is last in the divine pecking order. The common mortal is devoid of any facial hair and wears his hair short, as compared to the longer hair of the gods.

Seal 57 shows how status markers in a literate glyptic composition were as effective at encoding information in a visual narrative scene as the determinative signs in a text. The horned headdresses match the star-shaped sign *dingir*, which highlights a divine name in a cuneiform text. The size disparity between minor and major figures in art

corresponds to the value difference between small and large wedges in text. The busy flounced dresses of Enki and the first minor god are reminiscent of the *gunu* form, in which signs are covered with parallel strokes to express a greater order of magnitude. These status markers share yet another similarity with the determinative signs of writing in that their meanings could only be learned from cultural tradition — the meaning of an individual with rivers of fish emerging from his shoulders, for example, could not be guessed.

2. Image “syntax”

The nature and pecking order of the figures established, we turn next to the dynamics of Enki’s audience, which are conveyed by exploiting the semantic potential of a linear composition. The minor deities’ and petitioner’s feet are aligned with those of Enki and the legs of his throne, creating an imaginary ground line binding the figures in space and time. Once the figures have been introduced as participants in the same event, it is possible to give meaning to their orientation, position, order, and direction, as follows:

- a. Orientation suggests interaction. Enki faces the group and the group faces Enki, indicating a meeting.
- b. Position indicates location. Enki sits on his throne, suggesting that the meeting is taking place in his residence, the Abzu in the watery abyss. The other figures shown walking are visitors from elsewhere.
- c. Position illustrates dominance. Enki is seated in majesty, emphasizing his dominance. In contrast, the three supplicants are standing, denoting subservience.
- d. Order indicates eminence. The minor god close to Enki is more important than the one placed at the end of the composition.
- e. Situation shows participation. Although the torsos of the four individuals are shown frontally, their faces are turned in profile and all are placed at the same level. Eye contact suggests that the participants are devoting full attention to the meeting.
- f. Gesturing translates interaction. Enki extends his arm to welcome the visitors. The two minor gods cross their arms in adoration. The worshipper has a dual gesture: he lifts his right arm in reverence while presenting a lamb with his left.
- g. Placement indicates relationship. The two minor deities frame the worshipper, indicating their support.
- h. Rhythm shows attitude. The three figures advance in step toward the deity, denoting their cooperation.
- i. Direction suggests mood. By 2000 B.C., left to right had become well established as the direction for writing cuneiform script. Consequently, as

Arnheim proposed for modern readers, Mesopotamians probably instinctively read pictures from left to right.²⁹ The right-facing Enki is thus perceived as being at ease and benevolent. In contrast, the petitioners' apprehension at meeting Enki is hinted by their approach from the opposite direction, right to left.

- j. A gift stipulates reciprocity. The worshipper brings a lamb offering to Enki in an effort to propitiate the great god before presenting his petition.
- k. Two objects (swords?) "floating" on either side of the worshipper remain ambiguous. Because they are unrelated to the ground line, it is unclear whether they are meant to identify or qualify the minor gods or the worshipper, or if they are mere aesthetic fillers.
- l. Hand orientation indicates mood or inner disposition. The worshipper turns the palm of his hand toward himself, covering his mouth, to express respect and submission. Based on common presentation scenes,³⁰ it is likely that Enki's hand (which is not shown) is turned outward, expressing his willingness to hear a petition. If that is true, things look good for the petitioners!
- m. The scene is to be understood as capturing the flow of an event at its climax. The viewer may reconstruct the sequence of events that led to the interview (and perhaps the outcome that will follow).

In sum, at this third stage, "reading" a glyptic scene, such as that carved on seal 57 of Tepe Gawra, took three types of analyses: (1) identify the images; (2) assess the status markers, such as a headdress or the lack thereof; and (3) interpret the plot by evaluating the respective order, direction, orientation, position, and size of each figure. These cognitive processes were akin to those involved in reading a cuneiform Sumerian tablet, which involved (1) identifying the signs; (2) assessing the determinatives; and (3) interpreting the text by considering the word order, or "syntax." By borrowing the strategies of writing, namely linearity, a syntax or determined arrangement of figures, and a repertory of status markers that functioned like determinatives, glyptic art could tell complex stories involving multiple protagonists of different status.

Conclusion

The evolution of glyptic art matches that of ceramic painting. The composition of seals enables a closer analysis of the genesis of narrative art in Mesopotamia, because unlike pottery painting, which was discontinued for several centuries during the proto-literate period, glyptic art experienced no interruption. The changes in both crafts illustrate writing's profound impact on Mesopotamian culture. In fact, they demonstrate that literacy brought about fundamental conceptual transformations.

The evolution from evocation to narrative in seal and pottery decoration denotes different cognitive skills—preliterate topsy-turvy glyptic compositions and repetitious pottery paintings were apprehended globally, but literate linear compositions were “read” analytically. Art, a unique mirror of culture, reflects the schism that separates preliterate from literate societies. Glyptic and pottery art illustrate with remarkable clarity how the preliterate Near Eastern societies perceived the world circularly and all-inclusively, while literate cultures viewed it analytically and sequentially.

The Uruk Vase: Sequential Narrative

Art is the very germ of civilization, as it is its crowning flower.

—BENJAMIN PARKE AVERY¹

THE TWO PRECEDING chapters made the case that coinciding with the invention of writing, two ancient Near Eastern art forms, pottery paintings and glyptic, adopted linear compositions to become narrative. The scenes depicted in these two media are often limited to a single register featuring the climax of an event. When two superimposed lines or successive panels of images are featured, it is usually impossible to ascertain how the scenes are related. They seem entirely disconnected. But after carved stone vases became popular in Mesopotamia, in the proto-literate period, one vessel from Uruk depicts a long, coherent narrative extending logically over five parallel registers. I propose that this remarkable proto-literate art composition broke new ground in articulating several parts of an event by borrowing the structure of the impressed accounting tablets.

The precise date of the Uruk vase is unknown, because it was not found *in situ* but was part of the so-called “temple treasury hoard” in the Eanna precinct, level III, ca. 3000 B.C.² The relation of the Uruk vase to the archaic impressed texts is particularly close, because 67 of the 250 impressed tablets were excavated in Uruk, and 40 of these came from Eanna, the precinct of the goddess Inanna, where the vase originated. Impressed tablets appear as early as level VI, ca. 3500 B.C., and were in use at Uruk for several centuries.³ They were still part of the level IVa assemblage at the Red Temple of Eanna and at the Anu Ziggurat, ca. 3100–3000 B.C.⁴ It is therefore not surprising that the system of organizing notations that proved efficient to communicate economic data was eventually adapted to the Uruk vase to create a visual narrative.



FIGURE 3.1. Alabaster vessel from Uruk, (W 14873-IM 19060). Courtesy German Archaeology Institute, Division Baghdad.

The Alabaster Vase

The vase was excavated in the 1930s at Warka, the site of Uruk,⁵ the ancient Sumerian city traditionally associated with the invention of writing. The footed vessel, almost one meter high, has a tall, straight, cylindrical body ending in a straight lip. The piece is made of alabaster, a soft, whitish stone that is easy to carve, and the body is entirely carved in bas relief (fig. 3.1). Because the vase was found in the temple precinct of Inanna, the patron goddess of Uruk, it is considered a ritual vessel. The 15-fragment vase has been restored, except for one major break on the upper register. The missing piece can be reconstructed by examining the human foot and lower part of an ankle-length robe visible at the edge of the break. The robe, made of a particular net-like textile, unmistakably identifies the lost personage as the En, or priest-king, of Uruk. The long fringed belt, held as a train by a faithful attendant, completes the picture of

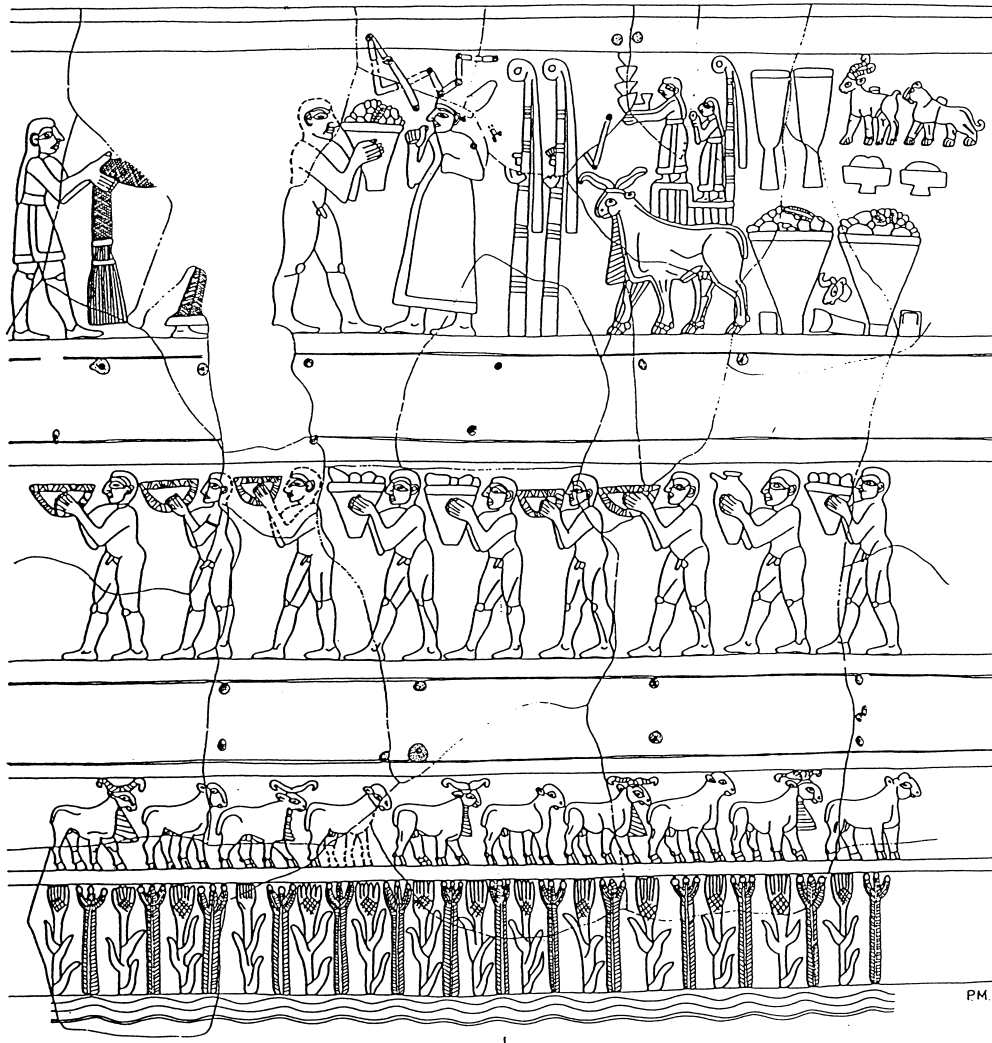


FIGURE 3.2. Line drawing of the Uruk alabaster vessel carvings (W 14873). After Elke Lindemeyer and Lutz Martin, *Uruk, Kleinfunde III*, no. 226, pl. 21, d. Courtesy German Archaeology Institute, Division Baghdad.

the Uruk ruler as he leads the festival procession in full attire, followed by his retinue (fig. 3.2).

The carved relief features 14 anthropomorphic figures, 10 animals, (30?) plants, and 16 vessels filled with offerings, constituting the longest and most elaborate Near Eastern proto-literate composition known. The scene is generally interpreted as representing the sacred marriage of Inanna, the goddess of love, to Dumuzi, her consort. This ritual, performed to ensure the fertility of the land and flocks, probably took place during the New Year celebrations and represented the greatest annual festival of the city of Uruk.⁶ The upper frieze illustrates the moment when the priest-king, play-

ing the part of the bridegroom, is greeted by a high priestess, standing for Inanna. The scene takes place at the temple gate, symbolized by two reed poles. The king and his retinue are followed by a long line of nude worshippers carrying gifts. Behind the temple gate, vessels lined up in pairs are filled to the brim with victuals. Among them are two tall vases in the same shape as the Uruk alabaster vessel. Finally, two enigmatic individuals or statues, mounted on rams, present the ruler with an object in the shape of the glyph for En, the title of the Uruk priest-king.⁷ Below the frieze of worshippers, the three lowest registers symbolize the sources of life in the ancient Near East: food staples—sheep, barley, and palms—and water.⁸

The Composition

The composition of the Uruk vase, which stresses linearity and repetition, is remarkably clear. It is divided into five parallel registers featuring, respectively, water, plants, animals, men, and, on the uppermost band, the meeting of Inanna and the ruler at the temple gate. Linearity is emphasized using all possible means. First, the friezes are separated by wide blank bands. Second, all of the heads are placed at the same height. Third, all registers except the uppermost feature a motif repeated as many times as necessary to cover the circumference of the vase. These motifs include waves symbolizing water, ears of cereal alternating with palm shoots, pairs of rams and ewes, and worshippers bringing offerings. Like the plants and animals, the individuals are treated in a repetitive pattern. The stout, nude males are identical and of equal size. All are shaven and sport the same hairdo; they walk in step, right foot forward, emphatically raising their heavy vessels to the same height with their extended arms. Only the offerings vary.

Parallels between the Uruk Vase Composition and the Impressed Tablets

The Uruk vase composition matches the layout of the impressed tablets as follows:

On the Uruk vase:

- Images are presented in parallel horizontal registers.
- Each register is separated from the next by a blank band.
- Lines (except the uppermost) feature a single motif repeated as many times as necessary to cover the circumference of the vase.

On an impressed tablet, such as that in fig. 0.7:

- Signs are presented in parallel horizontal lines.
- Each line is separated from the next by a blank space.
- Lines (as a rule) feature a single motif repeated as many times as there are units to be represented.

On the Uruk vase:

- Registers are organized hierarchically. Inanna and the ruler, the most important personages, are placed on the uppermost frieze, above the line of common citizens. In turn, the humans are above the animals. Still lower are the registers of inanimate plants and the inorganic stream of water.

On an impressed tablet (fig. 0.7):

- Signs are placed in a hierarchical order. The largest units occupy the uppermost line, followed by lines of lesser and lesser units.

On the Uruk vase:

- The two main characters, Inanna and the ruler, occupy the center of the upper frieze; each has a following. Inanna, the deity and therefore the most important figure, is placed to the right, and the ruler, her subordinate, is on the left.

On an impressed tablet:

- Whenever possible, signs are displayed at the center of a tablet (fig. 0.9).
- In those rare instances when different signs are placed on the same line, the larger unit is placed to the right of the lesser units on the left (fig. 0.4).

On the Uruk vase:

- Size indicates importance. Plants and animals are of equal height, humans are twice that height, and the goddess and the ruler three times as tall. It would be interesting to know if the missing deity was larger than the ruler, who in turn is larger than his fellow citizens.

On an impressed tablet⁹ (fig. 0.8):

- Size is semantic. Large circular signs and large wedges represented large measures of grain (fig. 0.4, line 1), and small circular signs and small wedges stood for small measures of grain (figs. 0.7, 0.8, and 0.9).

On the Uruk vase:

- The direction of the procession rotates from register to register. On the upper register, the goddess and her attendants face toward the left to meet the ruler and his retinue, who advance toward the right. In turn, the ruler is followed by the worshippers, who stride toward the left. Finally, the animals walk toward the right. This alternating direction creates the illusion that worshippers and animals follow the ruler in a long procession that winds around the vase.

On an impressed tablet:

- The direction of the script was from right to left. When a line could not accommodate all the necessary signs, it was continued boustrophedon, that is to say, the direction reversed on the next line, progressing left to right (fig. 0.10).

On the Uruk vase:

- Although it is generally thought that the vase should be “read” from bottom to top, in fact, the story of the New Year festival can be read from either direction. Starting at the bottom, the narration follows the solemn procession as offerings are brought to the goddess. From the top, the story begins at the temple filled with victuals and proceeds downward toward the water, which brings prosperity to the land.

On an impressed tablet:

- Signs can be read from top to bottom (starting with the largest units) or from bottom to top (starting with the smallest units) without loss of meaning.

The fact that the composition of the Uruk vase shares 12 characteristic features with the disposition of signs on contemporaneous impressed tablets cannot possibly be attributed to chance. Apparently, the designer of the vase emulated the accounting records by organizing images in lines and giving meaning to their size, order, location, and direction in the composition. As a result, the vase illustrates the complex New Year ritual by linking together in one composition the parts played by deities, high dignitaries, common citizens, and nature. This integration of sequential episodes in a visual narrative was a breakthrough in the history of the art of ancient Mesopotamia.

Conclusion

The Mesopotamian civilization that invented the first pristine script offers a unique insight into the pervasive impact of writing on art. The process was not instantaneous, but developed in stages. First, art borrowed the linearity of script. Then, status markers emulated writing’s determinative signs to indicate a general semantic class. Finally, integrating sequential episodes in a complex theme was successfully achieved by borrowing the technique of organizing on a tablet the various units of goods included in a transaction. Art, therefore, is indebted to accounting for its ability to recount such important events as the New Year festival on the Uruk vase.

Wall and Floor Painting

Literacy gives people the power to focus a little way in front of an image so that we take in the whole image or picture at a glance. Non-literate people have no such acquired habit and do not look at objects in our way. Rather, they scan objects and images as we do the printed page, segment by segment. Thus they have no point of view. They are wholly *with* the object.

— MARSHALL MCLUHAN¹

FLOOR AND WALL paintings constitute a fourth form of art shared by preliterate and literate cultures of the Near East.² Study of these works is not easy because, like the buildings they decorated, the dry frescoes have been subject to decay, collapse, and destruction. Only a few have survived and they are generally in a poor and fragmentary state. On the other hand, floor and wall paintings are of special interest because unlike seals or pottery paintings they were not confined to a small space, and thus they constitute some of the largest and most complex ancient Near Eastern art compositions. As in the preceding chapters, I will first analyze representative preliterate examples and then compare and contrast them to characteristic literate compositions.

Preliterate Wall and Floor Paintings

Floors and walls of prehistoric Near Eastern houses were sometimes decorated with paintings drawn from a limited repertory of motifs. The simplest and most popular decoration involved covering walls or floors with solid white or red color. This was done all along the Fertile Crescent as early as the Mesolithic period, ca. 10,000 B.C. — at Ain Mallaha, Palestine,³ for instance — and continued well into the late Chalcolithic, ca. 4000–3800 B.C., at sites such as Can Hasan, Anatolia,⁴ or Tepe Gawra, Iraq.⁵ During the Neolithic period, ca. 7500–5500 B.C., red walls and floors are found as far south



FIGURE 4.1. Red curvilinear designs traced with the fingers on a floor, Ain Ghazal, Jordan. Courtesy Gary O. Rollefson.

as Jericho⁶ and Yiftahel in the levant;⁷ as far north as Hacilar, Anatolia;⁸ and as far east as Tepe Guran⁹ and Ali Kosh, Iran.¹⁰

Geometric patterns were another popular option, adopted, for example, at Ain Ghazal, Jordan, where a floor was covered with red curvilinear designs traced with the fingers¹¹ (fig. 4.1). A more angular pattern of zigzagged lines was painted in red and black on a white background at Tell Mureybet, Syria, ca. 7500 B.C.,¹² while at Umm Dabaghiyah, Iraq, ca. 5800 B.C., sets of wavy parallel lines contrasted with areas filled with large dots.¹³ At Can Hasan, ca. 4800 B.C., intricate patterns of overlapping and interlacing bands with red borders formed lozenges, sometimes with a central dot.¹⁴

Lines of animals familiar from pottery and seals were also drawn on floor and wall paintings. At Umm Dabaghiyah, Iraq, equids are pictured walking one behind the other¹⁵ (fig. 4.2), and at Bouqras, ca. 6000 B.C., 18 cranes (or ostriches) are painted in red on a whitewashed wall.¹⁶ The birds are skillfully stylized, reduced to eight strokes and four concentric half circles depicting, respectively, the head, neck, body, legs, feet, and wings. The design seems to have been repeated in identical fashion as many times as necessary to cover the desired space. Like the equids of Umm Dabaghiyah, the long-necked cranes do not interact, but rather stand still, facing the same direction, either in a single line or in two superimposed lines.

Human female figures, stylized to the utmost, decorated a space close to the hearth on a floor at Tell Halula, Syria.¹⁷ The 23 women are drawn as silhouettes in solid color against a white background (fig. 4.3). They are presented in two positions: frontally and in profile. From the front the images resemble headless gingerbread figures, with extended arms ending in three-fingered hands, exaggerated waists and thighs, and triangular legs with no feet. The images in profile emphasize the head and have tiny arms or breasts, enormous legs and buttocks, and small feet. In each type, the figures are identical—none stands out as being more or less important. The women are

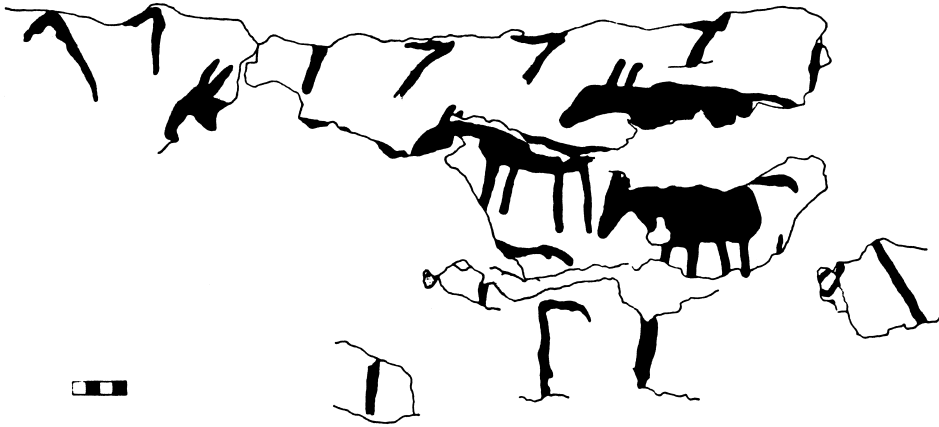


FIGURE 4.2. Line of equids, Umm Dabaghiyah, Iraq. After Diana Kirkbride, "Umm Dabaghiyah 1974," pl. 7a. Copyright © 1975. Courtesy British School of Archaeology, Iraq.



FIGURE 4.3. Female figures, Tell Halula, Syria. After Miguel Molist, "The Enigmatic Female Figures of Tell Halula," p. 238. Copyright © 1999.

connected in sets of two, three, or four. Female brochettes are scattered in diverging oblique directions around an enigmatic grid-like motif. Some stand straight up, others sideways, and still others upside down. Some face toward the right and some toward the left.

The house decorations of Ain Ghazal in Jordan; Tell Mureybet, Bouqras, and Tell Halula in Syria; Can Hasan in Turkey; and Umm Dabaghiyah in Iraq typify Neolithic and Chalcolithic floor and wall paintings. They also typify preliterate ancient Near Eastern art as a whole. The motifs are similar to those of pottery decorations, namely panels of solid colors, geometric arrangements with zigzag lines, and lines of animals. They share with preliterate glyptic art human motifs and circular, topsy-turvy arrangements. Like the contemporaneous paintings on pottery, the wall/floor paintings have the following characteristics: compositions are meant to be viewed globally; motifs are stylized to the extreme and repeated as many times as necessary to cover a desired surface; figures show no interaction; status symbols are absent; and the position, direction, order, and placement of the figures seem haphazard.

Çatal Hüyük deserves a separate treatment, because its assemblage of murals, dated 6000–5400 B.C., differs in many ways from those of the remainder of the Near East.¹⁸ The site has a large number of remarkably well-preserved wall paintings. The palette of the Çatal Hüyük painters was not limited to white, red, and black, but also included brown, yellow, pink, orange, bright blue, purple, gray, and green.¹⁹ The compositions share solid red panels with other Neolithic sites,²⁰ but otherwise, the repertory of images at Çatal Hüyük is unique. Rather than a pure interplay of lines and forms, the Çatal Hüyük geometric compositions seem inspired by textiles. The patterns—vertical bands, triangles, squares, lozenges, and zigzag motifs—are typical of woven materials, and in one case a painting even replicates a stitched seam finishing a piece of textile.²¹ Animal lines are nowhere to be seen. The closest the composition comes to repetitious motifs is its stylized human hands, arranged in two parallel lines connected by irregular crisscrossed lines;²² insects fluttering above flowers;²³ and architectural design detailing the many houses of a cityscape as seen from the sky, with an erupting volcano in the background.²⁴

The most complex compositions of Çatal Hüyük feature multiple animal and human figures. A first type consists of two animals symmetrically placed on either side of a human figure—two enormous vultures spread their huge wings on either side of a minuscule headless human, for example, in fig. 4.4.²⁵ The fact that the motif was repeated in several rooms suggests that the scene evoked a real or mythical event familiar to the people of Çatal Hüyük. In each composition, the vultures appear menacing because of their huge size, and the addition of such details as tufts of ruffled feathers on their long necks and ugly open curved beaks further emphasizes their fierceness. The humans are pathetic, with their minuscule headless bodies spread apart. Noteworthy is the lack of interaction between the participants: there is no contact and no action between birds and humans. The humans do not struggle, and the vultures hover with no sign of past or future carnage. Only the juxtaposition of giant birds of prey on either side of a helpless human suggests that the vultures are responsible for its decapitation. In other words, these threesome compositions are viewed globally and *evoke* a situation by association—whereas a story requires the analysis of actions making up a plot. Also noteworthy is that these symmetrical compositions presage the master of animals motif so popular in the ancient Near East, only with the roles reversed. For example, on the seal of Ishma-Illum from the literate period, ca. 2400 B.C., the central figure is the hero who single-handedly defeats two ferocious, diminutive felines²⁶ (fig. 4.5). The literate versions of the master of animals motif also differ in their dynamism. There is physical contact between the adversaries: the hero grasps his prey by the rear paws, horns, neck, beard, or tail and, reciprocally, the felines bite or claw. In some compositions, the protagonists are clinched in such intense hand-to-hand struggle that the outcome of the fight becomes unpredictable.

The large murals of Çatal Hüyük bring together medleys of humans and animals.

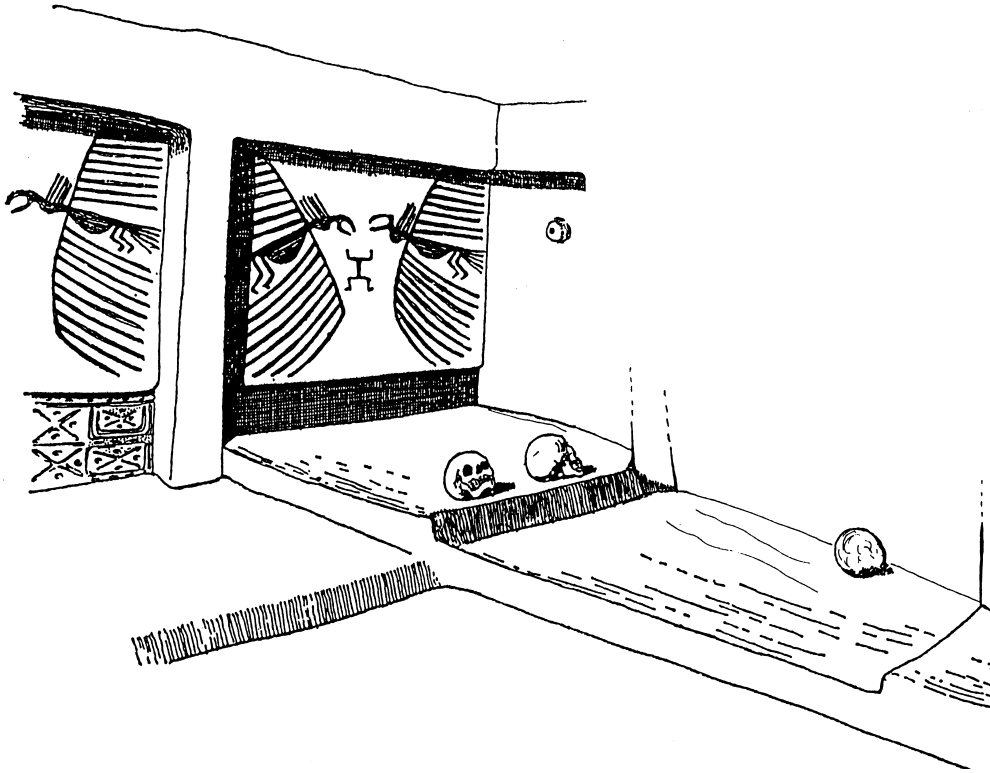


FIGURE 4.4. Vultures and human figure, Çatal Hüyük, Turkey. After James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük, A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*, p. 83, fig. 15. Drawing by Muwafaq Bataineh.

For example, a section of a wall in room FV,1 displays five large animals and 15 very small, sticklike human figures (fig. 4.6). The beasts can be identified as a bovid, deer, wild boar, and two does by the shapes of their bodies and heads and the presence or lack of antlers. The men are disproportionately small compared to the animals, and they are grouped together, except for five who mingle among the animals. Some are nude and bare-handed, but most wear stiff loincloths and brandish bows in their right hands. One nude individual carries a net. The figures, not anchored by a ground line, are disposed one above the other, possibly as a convention to note the animals closest or farthest away from the viewer. The most conspicuous feature of the composition is the lack of correlation between the protagonists. The animals do not interact, the men do not cooperate, and animals and humans do not interrelate. Each of the figures, animal or human, seems to act separately, as if in its own respective world. Each animal has its own tempo. The bull lies down, the wild boar walks, the deer gallops, and the two does run in the opposite direction. If the lying bull is meant to be dead, it is peculiar that it is the game farthest away from the hunters, and there is no trace of deadly arrows. Likewise, the men are not coordinated. Most run upright, but some are sideways. Some face left and others right. Only two men face each other as if to



FIGURE 4.5. Master of animals, seal inscribed to Ishma-Ilum, King of Kish, ca. 2400 B.C. After Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque*, p. 419, pl. 81: 1076. Copyright © 1980. Courtesy CNRS Editions.



FIGURE 4.6. Hunters and game, Çatal Hüyük, Turkey. After Astrid Nunn, *Die Wandmalerei und der Glasierte Wandschmuck im alten Orient*, fig. 22.

interact, but they run so fast toward each other that a crash seems unavoidable. If the men wearing loincloths are of a different status than the nude men, the inequality is not visible in their comportment. None of the participants stands out as occupying a privileged position or acts very differently from the rest of the gang. Most peculiarly, the men show no particular interest toward the animals. They do not bend their bows

or aim in the direction of the animals. The man carrying the net runs in an empty place where there is nothing to catch. The only human who is in direct contact with an animal, the deer, steps on its back, casually holding his weapon as if nothing were afoot. The animal, for its part, does not react either. In other words, hunters and game are juxtaposed, but there is no interaction among them. The wild animals seem unaware of the hunters, and vice versa — the hunters are not preoccupied with the game. Any viewer would interpret men carrying bows next to wild animals as a hunting scene. But this would be a mere association rather than a “reading” of clues in order to reconstruct a plot. In sum, the paintings at Çatal Hüyük exhibit new colors, new motifs, and more complexity than other Neolithic paintings because they introduce a larger number of figures, but the scenes are unstructured. The participants are scattered about in the field, disorganized and uncoordinated. The purpose or outcome of the hunt is left to the imagination of the viewer, since nothing is shown to happen. No coordinated action is depicted on this mural or on the others featuring large bulls and humans — only an array of mosquito-like men running aimlessly in all directions around large animals.

Teleilat Ghassul, a Levantine site located near the northeastern corner of the Dead Sea, produced a series of wall paintings of the Late Bronze Age, ca. 3800 B.C.²⁷ The best-known and best-preserved example, discovered during the 1930s excavations, displays a red, black, and white motif consisting of four concentric eight-pointed stars, the largest of which is 1.84 mm in diameter²⁸ (fig. 4.7). Beside the stars, fragments of winged and horned fantastic creatures and strange black heads with huge white round eyes denote a far more sophisticated technique and style of design than that of the earlier sites discussed above. But too little of the mural is preserved to reconstitute how the images were organized. In fact, because the paintings were redone at intervals, it is even difficult to identify whether the designs belong to the same or successive layers of repainting.²⁹ This might explain, for example, the differences in style and scale between a tall figure extending her hand and the fantastic creatures and black faces next to her. Other murals at Teleilat Ghassul depicting a large black bird,³⁰ a line of five pairs of human feet,³¹ and figures in procession³² are also too incomplete to shed light on wall paintings at the transition to the urban literate period.

The Literate Paintings

Many wall paintings of the fourth and third millennium B.C. are also too fragmentary to be meaningfully reconstituted. For example, dadoes decorated with rosettes and S-patterns in red, black, gray, and white are all that is left of the paintings at the palace at Tell Malyan, Iran, ca. 3300–3050 B.C.³³ A human procession and black-and-orange leopards framed by panels of geometric motifs are a poor memory of the paintings that once adorned the temple of Tell Uqair, Iraq.³⁴ Only two figures in short skirts

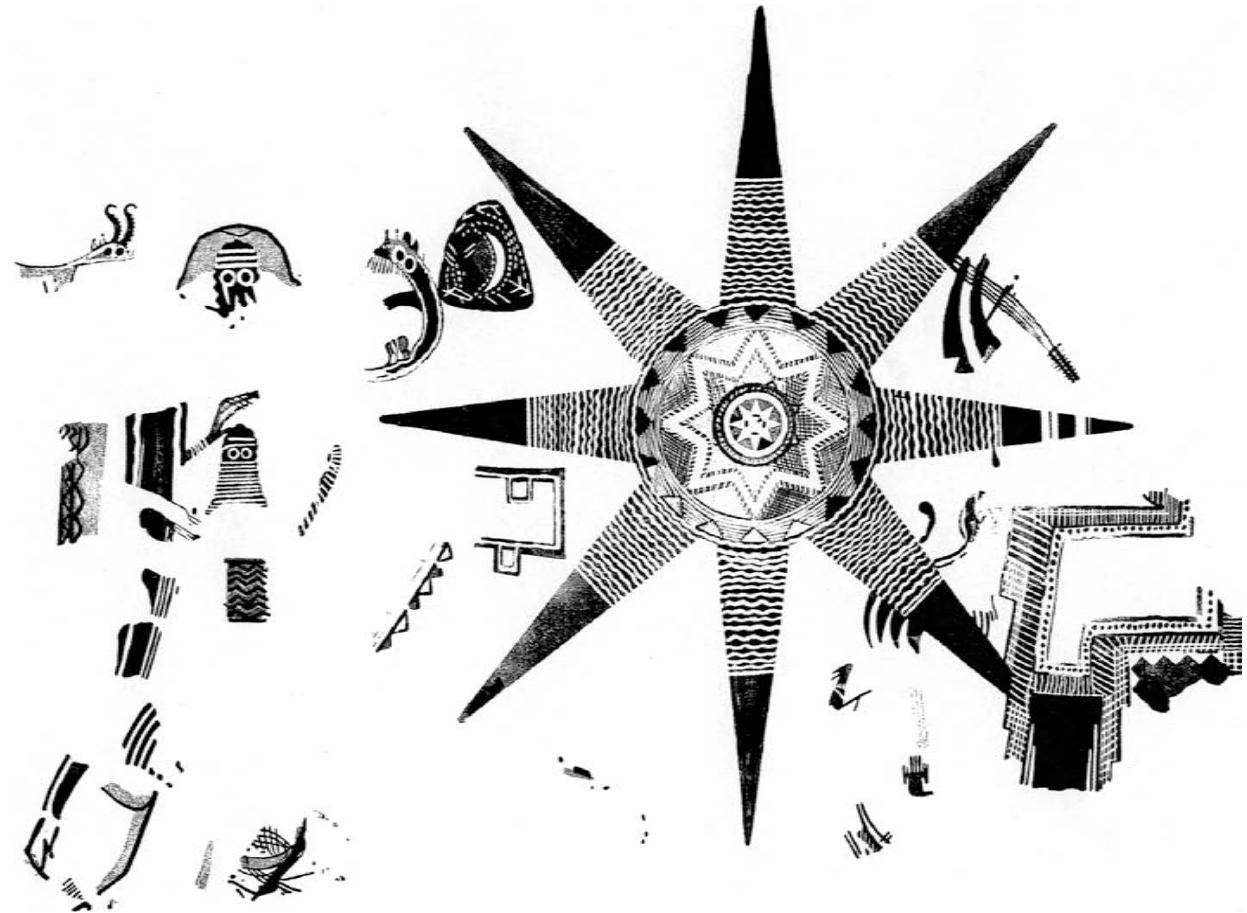


FIGURE 4.7. The Concentric Stars Painting, Teleilat Ghassul, Jordan. After A. Mallon, R. Koepfel, and R. Neuville, *Teleilat Ghassul I. Compte rendu des fouilles de l'Institut Biblique Pontifical 1929-1932*, frontispiece. Copyright © 1934. Courtesy Pontifical Biblical Institute.

could be identified among the painted fragments recovered at Tell al-Raqa'i in northern Syria, ca. 2900–2500 B.C.³⁵ Finally, two painted figures standing side by side and holding hands were found out of context in an Early Bronze IV public building at Tell Munbaka, about 2400–2250 B.C., also in northern Syria.³⁶

The earliest decipherable mural of the literate period comes from Tell Halawa, Tell B, Syria, from the mid-third millennium B.C.³⁷ (fig. 4.8). The painting is quite extraordinary, as it brings together a number of naively drawn figures into a sophisticated composition. A large oval-shaped human face with round eyes and pupils, thick eyelashes and eyebrows, and a T-shaped nose, placed in the middle of the composition, constitutes the obvious center of interest. A striking frame of concentric black and red ovals with a zigzag line running between them further draws the viewer's attention to the central mask. A cruciform pattern filled with crisscrossed lines emanates from the large face, dividing the composition into four quadrants that organize a congregation into clearly distinguished groups. In the upper quadrants, the personages are shown frontally and share the round eyes and T-shaped nose of the central mask. In the lower quadrants, people are represented in profile, sporting bird-like heads—one with long flowing hair. All the figures, regardless of the quadrant they occupy, face the central mask and emphatically extend their arms toward it. The figures in the upper-right quadrant hold leafy branches, and those to the left have palms. Those in the lower quadrants raise various unidentifiable objects. The mural is therefore highly successful, both in dividing an assembly fourfold (the mask and three groups of participants), and in uniting the various figures in an august celebration of the mask. Scale and placement distinguish the mask from the congregation; in turn, the frontal versus profile representations, locations vis-à-vis the mask, and objects the figures hold in their raised hands differentiate the groups of individuals, no doubt according to status. The intense bond that unites all the participants is expressed by the orientation of the figures and the direction of the gestures. The elaborate structure of the wall painting at Tell Halawa epitomizes the capacity of the art of the literate period to express status and narrate events.

The most celebrated mural ensemble of the literate period in the ancient Near East dates to about 1700 B.C. The scene, titled "The Investiture of Zimri-Lim," was found *in situ* at the royal palace of Mari, Syria, in a small hall interpreted as a chapel³⁸ (fig. 4.9). The polychrome painting in black, white, red, red-ochre, red-orange, yellow, pink, green, blue, and gray is about 1.75 m high and 2.5 m wide. Because the mural is governed by strict symmetry, the damaged left part of the composition can be easily reconstructed.

The composition of the investiture mural is emphatically divided into three parts defined by rectangular frames. The outermost border consists of loops, lines, and scrolls in red and blue that enclose an idyllic wooded garden full of doves in flight. Palm trees loaded with dates that are being harvested perhaps evoked those that



FIGURE 4.8. Tell Halawa, wall painting of Room 312. After F. Lueth, "Tell Halawa B," p. 103, fig. 66.

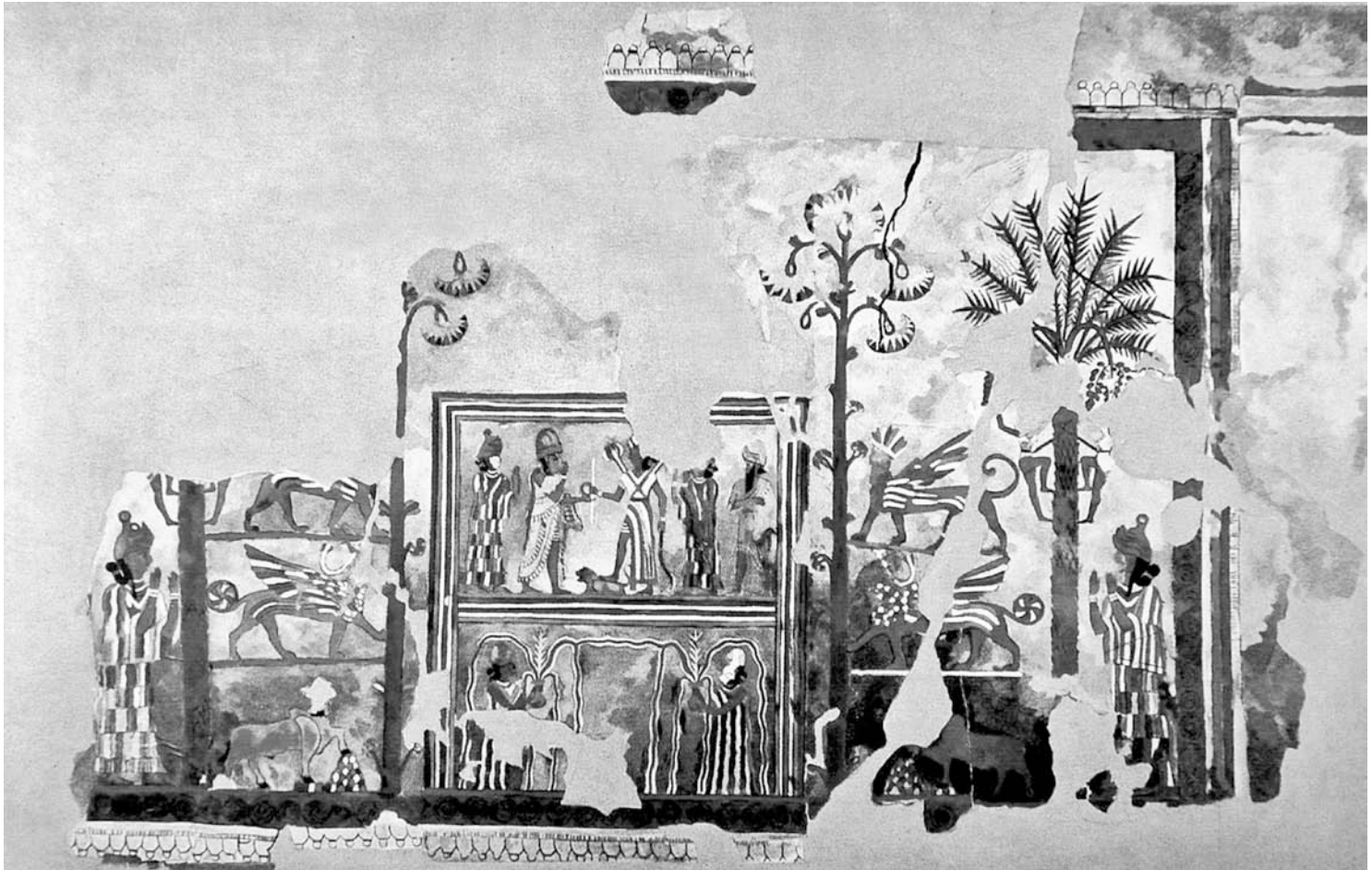


FIGURE 4.9. The Investiture of Zimri-Lim, Mari, Syria, ca. 1700 B.C. Photo Jean Arnaudet. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

graced the main courtyard of Mari.³⁹ Other stylized trees with red trunks and blue foliage with red buds and flowers are imaginary. Two so-called “Lama goddesses,” minor deities, raise their hands in prayer, signaling that the enchanting garden is not earthly. And three parallel, superimposed hieratic animals, perhaps godly symbols, reinforce the idea that the space is divine. Each of the animals is placed on a special ground line. The lowest is a mighty bull resting its front hooves on a mountain symbolized by a scale pattern. The middle creature touches the tree trunk with its right paw. The middle and top creatures combine the bodies of lions with the wings of eagles, and one of them is endowed with a feline mane and a tail ending in a colorful spiral. All the living creatures are turned symmetrically toward the center of the composition in order to direct the viewer’s attention toward the central registers—the focus of the mural.

The upper register, the center of attention, depicts the solemn investiture of King Zimri-Lim of Mari as he is presented with a ring and staff, symbols of authority, by the great goddess Inanna. The composition, which includes five personages, attracts the viewer’s eye because it is noticeably denser than the rest of the mural, but the figures stand against an empty background to avoid visual distraction. Each figure is distinguished by a set of markers, including dress and multiple status symbols. Inanna wears the divine horned crown and a special tunic over her short kilt. The warrior goddess rests her foot on a lion, her animal attribute; she holds a sickle-sword in her left hand and weapons emerge from her shoulders. The king stands out, with a round headdress and a short kilt covered by a large, elegantly bordered shawl. On either side, the two Lama goddesses are identified by their typical divine attire, with horned headdresses and flounced dresses. The last personage is Ninshubur, Inanna’s faithful attendant, who wears a horned headdress and a simple garment.

The status of the figures is established by the space they occupy, their size, and their order. Inanna occupies the center of the panel, where she is given the largest space. The tallest figure, her eyes are slightly above those of the king and, in turn, the king’s eyes are higher than those of the other figures, to mark his preeminence. The king is closest to the deity, the lesser Lama goddesses are behind the principal actors, and Ninshubur is behind the goddesses.

The orientation and gesturing indicate interaction between the participants. Inanna faces the king, and they gaze into each other’s eyes while the goddess presents the divine ring and staff. Zimri-Lim’s right hand rests in front of his mouth as a sign of deference or prayer, and he extends his left hand toward the symbols of authority. The Lama goddesses frame the two main personages with their imploring gestures, like two brackets, emphasizing the august transfer of power. Ninshubur, witness to the event, holds one hand crossed over the chest.

The lower panel, like the upper one, is framed by a set of six parallel lines of different colors, indicating that the two panels belong together. The two goddesses dispens-

ing water symbolize the prosperity of Zimri-Lim's forthcoming stewardship. Vegetation sprouts from the round vases they hold, and multiple fish swim up and down the streams. Here the composition is deliberately light and symmetrical around a central void, so as not to distract from the grand transfer of power.

The compositions of the preliterate figures of Halula and the hunting scenes of Çatal Hüyük were chaotic, but in the literate wall paintings of Halawa and Mari nothing is random. On the contrary, all is orderly and symmetrical. The mural of the investiture of Zimri-Lim focuses attention on the significant scene via a complex structure of frames, symmetry, and density of composition. The meaning is no longer understood by association but by analyzing the status of each participant according to the space they occupy, their relative size, their position, and their order. Instead of identical repetitious figures, each personage is singled out by multiple status symbols, such as headdress, garb, animal attribute, or icon (e.g., a weapon or the ring and staff). Only the Lama goddesses are repeated in identical pairs, serving the specific purpose of highlighting the most important figures of a scene by framing them between their dramatic gestures.

In literate compositions participants are no longer merely associated or juxtaposed but are intricately connected by a network of meaning derived from each character's strategic situation, position, order, orientation, size, and gesture. Figures are no longer repeated to cover a space; instead they are "syntactically" positioned in order to tell a story. The contemporaneous trained eye could instantaneously "read" the scene, because art had become a visual language. Inanna and Zimri-Lim are frozen at the climax of the investiture, allowing the viewer a summary of the august event. The composition compresses the information to its barest essentials by using well-known, instantly recognizable icons, such as Inanna stepping on her lion, the king holding his hand over his mouth, the ring and staff, and the Lama goddesses raising their hands. They were part of art's vocabulary—acting as glyphs in a visual language. Like the words in a sentence, the size, position, order, direction, and orientation of the icons could be manipulated in order to tell an infinite number of stories.

Conclusions for Part One

In the ancient Near East, art broke new ground with the advent of literacy. Following writing's lead, the major forms of art, namely pottery, seals, stone vases, steles, and wall paintings, changed from evocative to narrative. They went beyond the mere repetition or association of symbols to depict complex scenes involving multiple inter-related participants. Does the simultaneous occurrence of writing and narrative art confirm one of Marshall McLuhan's most celebrated concepts, that is, that media is not a passive conduit of information but rather a vortex of power that restructures our perceptions? Since McLuhan, the impact of literacy on humankind has become a

matter of much debate. Most recently, some, like Bruno Latour, take the view that it is the combination of images and writing, sharing the qualities of mobile but immutable materials, that allows us to foray into new ideas rather than creating new cognitive skills.⁴⁰ I side with the school of Ong,⁴¹ McLuhan,⁴² and Goody,⁴³ which regards the cognitive structures created by writing as those that change our thought processes and our relation to the world.⁴⁴ I view the transformations in pottery painting, stone relief, and glyptic art as illustrating the profound impact of writing on the ancient Near Eastern cultures. I see the change from topsy-turvy compositions apprehended globally to literate linear compositions “read” analytically—in other words, the change from evocative to narrative art—as demonstrating the fundamental conceptual transformations brought about by literacy. One should ask, then, what the consequences of the new, more abstract cognitive structures implemented in visual narrative art might be.

II

How Art Shaped Writing

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Funerary Inscriptions

. . . Any soldier who fell while on his lord's service,
Princes, Princesses,
All humanity, from the East to the West,
Who have no one to care for them or call their names,
Come, eat this, drink this,
And bless Ammi-Shaduqa, son of Ammiditana, King of Babylon.

—W. G. LAMBERT¹

THE FIRST FOUR chapters in this volume dealt with the impact of writing on ancient Near Eastern art. The following three chapters focus upon the reverse phenomenon: the impact of art on cuneiform writing. In this chapter, I will show that masterpieces of art inscribed with personal names liberated writing from the mundane task of accounting and set it up for the quest of immortality. Before presenting this new phase of the interface between writing and art, I will discuss the importance of personal names in Mesopotamia and the status of writing in 3000 B.C.

Personal Names in Mesopotamia

Universally, humans bear personal names with which they feel a unique bond. Names, however, have different connotations from culture to culture. In our own society, names identify people. We use them to address, talk about, refer to, quote, list, and register people. Expressions like “he has a good name” or “he made a name for himself” indicate that we associate names with reputation. Other idioms, such as “to speak in the name of,” illustrate that names are used as an extension of a person. Engraved tombstones and war memorials, which enshrine the names of fallen soldiers, show that names survive death, becoming the closest substitutes for the dead.

In the ancient Near East, names also identified people,² but the Mesopotamians

regarded their names differently than we do. As Bottéro expressed it, “Recevoir un nom et exister c’était tout un” (To have a name and exist were one and the same).³ Vice versa, something without a name could not exist.⁴ From Sumer to Babylon, a name was considered to be the essence of an individual.⁵ Like a vessel, it contained the fate of a person; like a genetic code, it programmed people to play given roles in the divine plans inscribed on the tablets of destiny.⁶ This explains why the kings of Lagash, Eannatum and Enannatum, boasted about the “fine name” bestowed upon them by the goddesses Inanna and Nanshe.⁷ As mythological texts illustrate, changes of status prompted the receipt of additional names. For example, after the goddess of love, Inanna, gave birth, she also became known as Ishara.⁸ Another text relates how Belet-Ili, the mother of Ninurta, was conferred a second name by the god of water, Ea, after she courageously talked to the assembly of gods in favor of her son:

“Previously we used to call you Mami
but now your name shall be Mistress of all gods.”⁹

Extraordinary personalities warranted several names to fulfill their remarkable destiny, as was the case for Ishtar (the Akkadian manifestation of Inanna)¹⁰ and Antu.¹¹ Ninlil, in her role of birth goddess and mother, was referred to with the following divine names:

Nin-mah — “August Lady”
 Ninhursaga — “Mistress of the Hursag”
 Dingir-mah — “August Deity”
 Nintur — “Lady Birth Hut”
 Ninnagarshaga — “The Womb’s Carpenter”
 Aruru — “The One Who Lets the Water Out”

It is, therefore, not surprising that Marduk, the mightiest god of the Babylonian pantheon, had no less than 50 names to express, or rather define, his greatness.¹²

Because names were considered a vital part of a person, it is natural that they played an important role in the Mesopotamian cult of the dead. In order to achieve peace in the afterlife, the deceased, after proper funerary rituals, required offerings of food and beverage and the invocation of their names at regular intervals.¹³ Should the names fail to be uttered, ghosts of the deceased would wander the earth and haunt the living.¹⁴ The ultimate threat was for one’s name to be erased from the tablets of destiny, signifying instant and total annihilation.¹⁵ The ritual of invoking the name (Akkadian, *shuma zakaru*) was executed by an appointed kin (Akkadian, *zakir shumi* — “the one who invokes by name”).¹⁶

Beyond the services of the family *zakir shumi*, the concern for the preservation of names after death motivated such poems as “Shulgi, the King of the Road”:

. . . That my name be established for distant days,
 that it never falls into oblivion,
 That my fame be praised in the land (of Sumer),
 That my glory be proclaimed in the foreign lands,
 Among the well-protected people of the four regions
 May my name be proclaimed . . .¹⁷

The fear of a name falling into oblivion was also to become the motivation for some of the greatest monuments of art.¹⁸

The Status of Writing ca. 3000 B.C.: Phonetization

Around 3000 B.C., personal names began to be entered on economic tablets as a bureaucratic formality. The Uruk administration was seemingly no longer satisfied with mere lists of the goods received or disbursed by the temple, so they began to keep information concerning *who* gave or received the listed goods. The scribes in their wisdom did not create new logograms to transcribe individual names. Instead, they initiated a new system of signs: phonograms, or signs standing for sounds. Phonograms consisted of small, easy-to-draw pictures evoking words that sounded like a given name. (For instance, in English, the name Neil could be written with a phonogram showing bent knees, for “kneel.”) When a name required several syllables, the corresponding phonograms or syllabograms were assembled like a rebus (for example, pictures of a bee and a leaf would represent the English word “belief”). A typical Mesopotamian name, such as “An is my life,” could be written by combining a star, the logogram for An (the god of heaven), and a picture of an arrow, because the words for “arrow” and “life” were homonyms in Sumerian.¹⁹ The verb was not transcribed, but this did not cause any difficulty, because this type of name was common in Sumer and thus was easy for people to complete.²⁰

The registration of individual names on administrative records about 3000 B.C. is unanimously recognized as an event of utmost importance to the development of Sumerian script, because conferring a sound value to a sign constituted the first link between writing and spoken language. The far-reaching consequences of inscribing personal names on art objects, however, have thus far been ignored.

Beyond Accounting: A Funerary Function

A dozen artifacts, engraved with personal names and ranking among the masterpieces of all time, triggered a new phase in the interface between writing and art. These objects, excavated in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, date to the second quarter of the third millennium B.C. They consist of metal vases and cylinder seals of great beauty and ad-

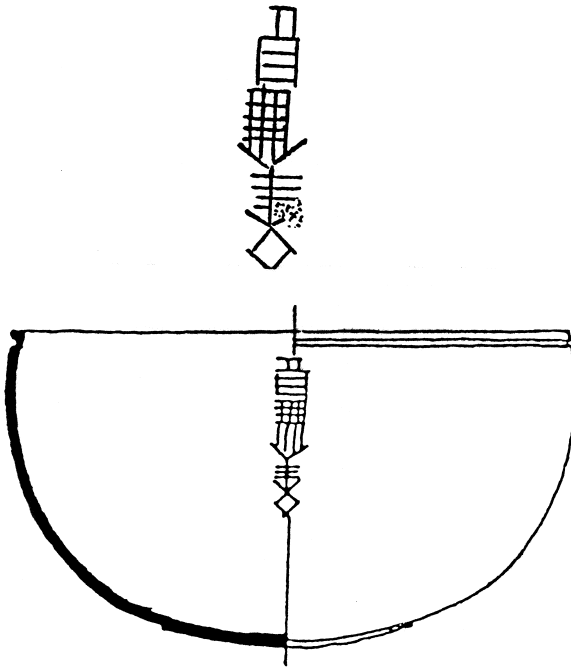


FIGURE 5.1. The name “Meskalamdug,” as inscribed on the golden vessel (U 10002) recovered in the private grave PG 755 of the Royal Cemetery of Ur. After Eric Burrows, “Inscribed Material,” pl. 191 (U 11751).

mirable craftsmanship. The four metal vessels include a copper bowl, two sumptuous gold bowls (fig. 5.1), and a gold lamp. All have elegant shapes with subtle decoration that underscores the brilliance of the gold and copper. The inscribed seals, carved in precious lapis lazuli, shell, or gold, are also of the finest quality. Some feature elaborate (funerary?) banquets²¹ where males and females clad in the typical fringed Sumerian garment, the *kaunakes*, are seated on stools, facing one another and raising their cups while faithful servants busily attend them (fig. 5.2). Other seals show lions mercilessly attacking horned animals. The felines and their prey are twisted into S and X shapes, forming an intricate but most harmonious braid composition²² (fig. 5.3).

The inscribed vases and seals from Ur were recovered from some of the wealthiest burials excavated in the Royal Cemetery. Three gold vessels engraved with the name “Meskalamdug” were part of the private grave of a male (PG 755) that was outfitted with an extraordinary number of sumptuous funerary gifts. The skeleton was surrounded by numerous copper, bronze, and gold weapons and tools; vessels of gold, copper, lapis lazuli, and alabaster; and a profusion of lapis lazuli and gold beads, as well as heaps of gold headdresses, bracelets, beads, spiral rings, and large and small lunated earrings.²³ The three inscribed vessels were in close proximity to the skeleton. The largest, an oval bowl, was near the chest; the gold spouted lamp was by the elbow; and, touchingly, the smaller bowl (fig. 5.1) lay between the man’s hands.²⁴ Three inscribed cylinder seals were recovered in a female tomb (RT 800) that was found intact and filled with splendid funerary gifts, among which were fluted gold tumblers and a mass of jewelry in the form of wreaths, gold ribbons, lunated earrings, pins, amulets, and



FIGURE 5.2. Banquet scene carved on Puabi's seal (U 10939), recovered in the royal tomb RT 800 of the Royal Cemetery of Ur. After Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptique mesopotamienne archaïque*, pl. 90: 1182. Copyright © 1980. Courtesy CNRS Editions.



FIGURE 5.3. Animal contest carved on Ezi's seal (U 11174), recovered in the royal tomb RT 779 of the Royal Cemetery of Ur. After Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptique mesopotamienne archaïque*, pl. 78: 1035. Copyright © 1980. Courtesy CNRS Editions.

strings of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, agate, and chalcedony beads.²⁵ The first seal associated with tomb RT 800 was inscribed with a male personal name, “Lugal-sapada” (King Sapada). It was located in the filling of the shaft, immediately above the roof of the chamber, where, according to the excavators, it may have been deposited in the course of funerary rituals.²⁶ A second seal, bearing the male name “Abarage,” was found loose in the pit. Finally, the third seal, inscribed “Puabi” [Queen] (fig. 5.2), is thought to disclose the name and title of the female tomb occupant.²⁷

The texts engraved on the lavish Ur artifacts are exceedingly succinct. They consist mostly of a single personal name:²⁸

Meskalamdug (PG 755) (fig. 5.1)

Abarage (RT 800)

Lugalsapada (RT 800)

Enshagan (RT 1236)

A-Imdugud (RT 1236)

Ezi (RT 779) (fig. 5.3)

Or they can consist of a name and a title:

Ninbanda, Queen²⁹ (PG 755)

Puabi, Queen (RT 800) (fig. 5.2)

Hekunsig, Priestess of Pabilsag (RT 580)

Meskalamdug, King (RT 1054)

A royal pair, associating two names and their respective titles, constitutes the longest inscription:

Akalamdug, King of Ur, Ashusikildingir, wife (RT 1050) (fig. 5.4)

The Ur inscriptions differed from previous texts in both form and content. Their most obvious distinction from former texts is that they were inscribed on artistic masterpieces rather than on mundane tablets. Economic and lexical texts were written on clay, the cheapest possible material, but the Ur texts were engraved on gold and lapis lazuli, the most prized metal and stone in Sumer. Making a tablet involved only patting a lump of clay between the hands, but the Ur objects were wrought by singularly talented specialists in the difficult crafts of metalwork and seal carving. The tablets had a plain cushion shape, but the vases were designed using elegant forms, and the seals bore some of the most intricate compositions of the entire Mesopotamian glyptic repertory. To preserve their names in writing, Meskalamdug, Ninbanda, Lugalsapada, and Puabi exchanged the dull color of clay for, respectively, the warm gleam of gold, shiny copper, glossy white shell, and the deep-blue lapis lazuli that in Sumer evoked a starry night. Like lapis lazuli, which was the Mesopotamian symbol of perfection, all of these lavish materials must have had a profound significance.³⁰ The fact that the banquet and animal contest scenes were used over and over again, the former often

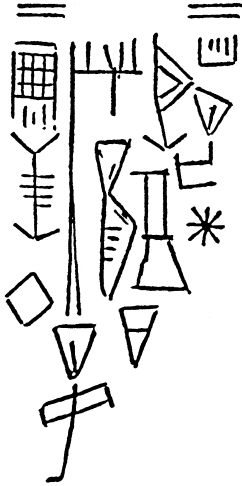


FIGURE 5.4. Names of Akalamdug (King of Ur) and his wife Asusikildigir, as inscribed on a cylinder seal (U 11825) from the royal tomb RT 1050 of the Royal Cemetery of Ur. After Eric Burrows, “Inscribed Material,” pl. 191.

in female tombs and the latter in those of males, suggests that the designs were important symbols, probably beneficent to the dead in the afterlife.³¹ But of all the changes created by the substitution of clay for stone, shell, and metal, probably the most important was the replacement of friable, breakable tablets with hard and durable objects that (except for copper) did not corrode nor tarnish. The Ur inscribed objects differed fundamentally from the mundane accounting tablets that preceded them — they epitomized wealth, preciousness, beauty, elegance, and symbolism, but also permanence.

The Ur inscriptions also differed in content. Unlike the thousands of economic tablets, including *kudurrus* (land donations), and unlike the hundreds of lexical texts, in which each entry is preceded by the digit “1,” the Ur texts did not feature any numerals. Whereas the economic tablets commonly used logograms to refer to goods, and the lexical texts listed all the logograms pertaining to a topic, the Ur texts consisted entirely of syllabograms. In other words, the ever-so-short Ur inscriptions constituted the first entirely phonetic texts.

The Ur texts did not refer to quantities of goods and they were not repertories of signs. They represented a break from the age-old traditions of written administrative records and didactic sign lists. The engraved Ur inscriptions stand out as the first texts having no ties either to accounting or the scribal arts. Writing had a new function.

That names were inscribed on grave goods in the Royal Cemetery, and that these objects were deposited immediately above a tomb³² or close to the deceased³³ — or even clutched by a skeleton’s hands³⁴ — leaves little doubt that the new function assumed by writing was funerary. Furthermore, because all the Ur texts featured a name, and several consisted of merely one name, we can safely deduce that inscribing the name of a deceased individual was the main purpose of the funerary inscriptions. The selection of precious materials loaded with symbolism implies that the intent of the inscribed objects was to iconize the names of the deceased and associate them with the brilliance of metal or the benefic color of a particular semi-precious stone. Also,

the choice of hard, impervious materials suggests an attempt to ensure eternal preservation.

The Ur inscriptions mark a recognition of the awesome power of writing as a means to permanently capture the sounds of speech. And, given the importance of preserving names in Sumer, as illustrated by the ritual of regularly pronouncing aloud those of the deceased, it is logical to assume that casting the ephemeral sounds of names into a permanent form by couching them in writing was conceived as equivalent to a perpetual utterance.³⁵ The new function of writing was supplementing, or even replacing, the role of the *zakir shumi*, the individual in charge of uttering kin names, in guaranteeing the survival of ghosts in the afterlife. Puabi's seal, with its associations of images and glyphs that depict a banquet, was perhaps meant to magically set in motion the monthly funerary banquet to be held by her descendants, either on a new moon³⁶ or on a moonless night (*bubbulu*), at which prescribed libations were drunk, food offerings were performed, and her name was uttered for the preservation of her ghost.³⁷ The Ur inscriptions disclose that, after some seven centuries of the exclusive use of writing for accounting, art carried writing to the service of the dead. In its new funerary function, writing was meant to secure eternal life and placate the fear of death and oblivion.

The Ur material also provides a date for this new function. The richest graves of the Royal Cemetery of Ur are presently considered the most ancient.³⁸ Accordingly, Hallo dates the Ur kings Meskalamdug and Akalamdug to as early as the Early Dynastic II period, rather than the more traditional Early Dynastic IIIa.³⁹ If this is the case, the Ur inscriptions can be dated to ca. 2700–2500 B.C., making them not only the oldest known royal texts of Ur but also of Sumer. In particular, they antedate the royal inscriptions from Kish,⁴⁰ Uruk, Adab, and Lagash by two generations or one century.⁴¹ Because they precede these royal texts, as well as the literary texts from Fara dated to the Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2400–2300 B.C.),⁴² the Ur texts represent the very first step in the critical transition from an economic to a literary textual function.

Conclusion: The Name and Mesopotamian Art

The alabaster vase of Uruk, discussed in Chapter 3, remains unique in the proto-literate period in its association of a glyph with images in order to convey a politico-religious message. But the funerary gifts from Ur inscribed with personal names opened a new avenue in the interface between writing and art. The awesome idea of the kings and queens of Ur to secure eternal peace in the hereafter by capturing the sounds of their personal names with glyphs wrought in gold and stone finally freed writing from accounting and irreversibly joined it to art. The consequences of this association were great for both writing and art. By enshrining their names within art objects, the kings and queens of Ur started a tradition that was to produce the greatest monuments of the ancient Near East.

Votive and Dedicatory Inscriptions

Men, as many as are given names,
 their (funerary) statues have been fashioned since days of old,
 and stationed in chapels in the temples of the gods:
 how their names are pronounced will never be forgotten!

—THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH¹

ART PROVED TO be fertile ground for the emancipation of writing. Following or overlapping with the Ur inscribed funerary artifacts, a variety of votive objects, among them stone bowls, boulders, beads, and statues,² brought writing to emulate the syntax of speech. Building simple sentences with subjects, verbs, and complements paved the way for writing to evolve into a flexible medium of communication able to express all possible ideas. In this chapter I will focus on representative inscriptions engraved on votive statues and analyze how the inscribed figures constitute one of the most significant steps in the evolution of writing through art.

Votive Statues

These statues of men and women were, according to the inscriptions carved upon some, gifts to deities — thus their designation as “votive.” As is typical of Sumerian art, the statues are made of a soft, whitish, easy-to-work stone, such as gypsum, alabaster, or limestone, plus the addition of other materials. Lapis lazuli was used for inlays, and bitumen, a natural tar common in the Middle East, as a black colorant or glue. The figures are generally quite small, ranging between 10 and 30 cm, but occasionally they reach between 60 and 90 cm. The heads of a few specimens were attached to the shoulders with dowels or glued with bitumen, but most of the votive statues were made from one piece of stone, including the base. The statuettes are divided into



FIGURE 6.1. Male statue from hoard in Nintu Temple V at Khafaje, Iraq. Alabaster, 37 cm. Courtesy Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, museum purchase. Henri Frankfort, *More Sculpture of the 3rd Millennium BC from Tell Asmar and Khafajah*, pl. 2: 209, pp. 24–25.

two groups according to style.³ The earlier group is referred to as “geometric” because the figures ruthlessly transpose the human body into geometric forms (fig. 6.1). The second group, represented by the statue of an individual named Nani, is called the “naturalistic” or “smiling” style (fig. 6.2).

Both types of figures are strikingly lively. The faces are expressive, with disproportionately large eyes that are often inlaid with a white stone to represent the eyeball and a colorful stone, such as lapis lazuli, for the pupil. The bitumen, used as glue to hold the inlays, forms a black oval frame around the eyes, emphasizing their form and size. Some figures whose eyes were not inlaid but carved were probably painted to achieve the same intense stare.⁴ Eyebrows connecting above the nose were often deeply carved across the low forehead and filled with bitumen. The geometric figures’ stern expressions result from their thin lips, which consist of two straight parallel segments. The naturalistic figures’ mouths, whether small or large, are tightly pinched into “archaic” smiles. Some of the more jovial faces with round cheeks have individualized features, suggesting portraiture. Noses, shown straight, bulging, flaring, or hook-shaped, are always prominent. In the geometric style, males have long hair parted in the middle. The completely shaven skulls of the men in the naturalistic style are particularly well shaped, but the ears are disproportionately large and uneven. When present, beards are treated as a single striated mass to show a wavy texture. The women’s hairstyles, sometimes braided or held with a comb, are more complicated.

Few of the figures are seated. They generally stand, with feet together or with the

left foot placed slightly forward. The heads are somewhat inclined, as if to suggest concentration. Body proportions are stylized. The heads are about one-fifth the size of the bodies, giving the figures a stout look. Necks are short, buried into the broad shoulders. Males are shown with bare torsos. Compared to the figures in the geometric style, the naturalistic statuettes include more anatomical details. The fleshy chests often define the collarbone and the nipples, which are sometimes inlaid with lapis lazuli. The few female statuettes were made of less desirable flat stones. In earlier

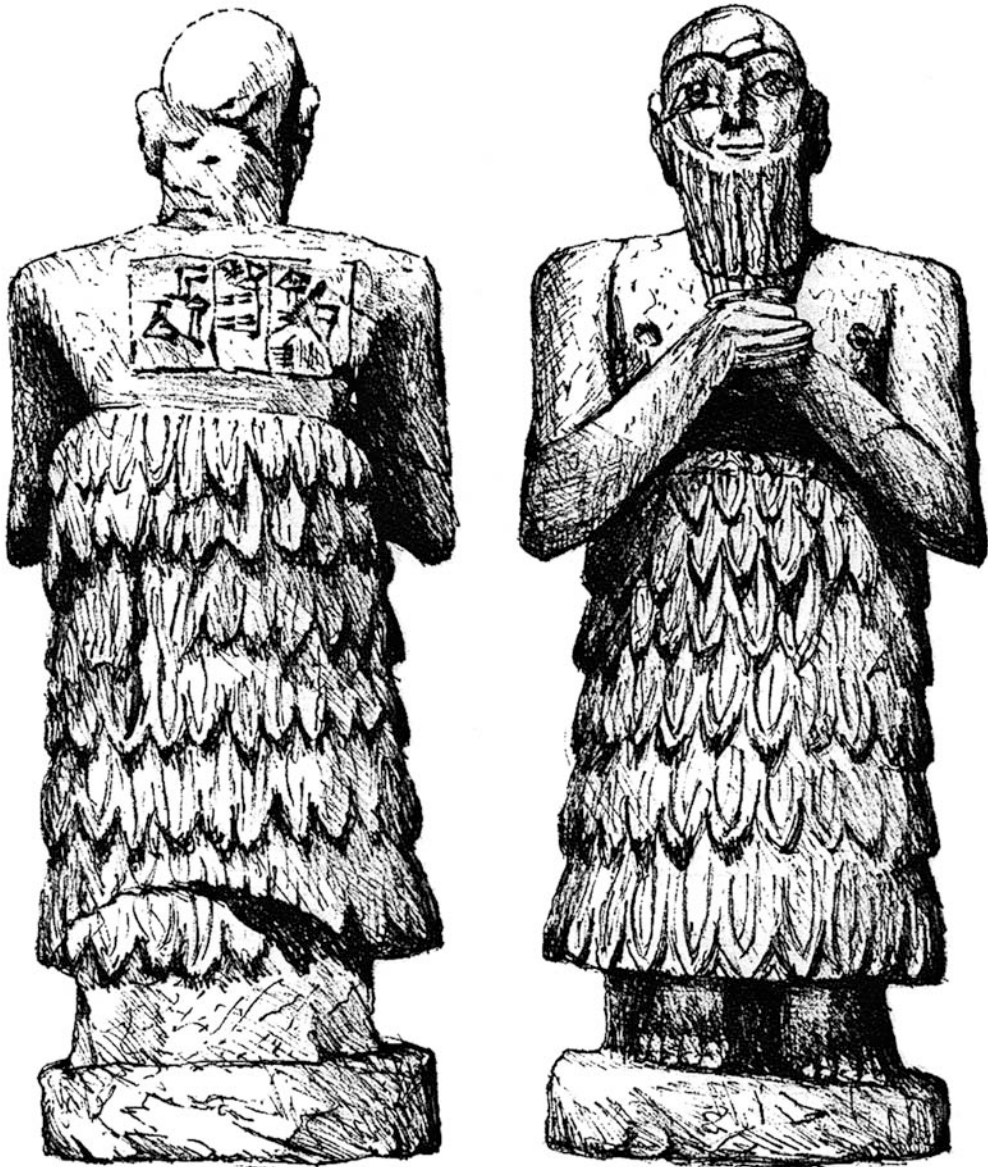


FIGURE 6.2. Front and back views of the statue of Nani, Mari, Syria, Temple of Ninni-zaza (2420 + 2441). Drawn by Lewis R. (Bill) Wiman.

works plain dresses cover one shoulder, whereas the later versions sport heavy tasseled cloaks or shawls that hide the female figure. In the geometric style, men wear fringed skirts. Those of the naturalistic style, like Nani (fig. 6.2), wear Sumerian *kau-nakes*, sheepskin kilts with three to six superimposed layers of tufts of wool arranged in a regular pattern. Both types of garments, held by broad belts that tie at the back, form bulky cones that taper toward the waist and end below the knee but above the ankle. The spaces between the arms and chest are always carved, but the area between the legs remains mostly intact, attached to the back pillar for support.⁵ The signs of movement—joining the hands in prayer or holding a libation cup—look convincing, although the folded arms are disproportionately long and the strangely pointed elbows reach below the waist. Females have their hands crossed or hold a branch. Males cover one hand with the other, their fingers folded into a curious pattern with the thumbs symmetrically crossed over a long, boneless-looking index finger that curls as a volute. Couples featuring a husband and wife occur;⁶ there is a unique example of two male musicians in Mari.⁷

Statues of excellent craftsmanship occur side by side with cruder ones, which may suggest workshops and craftsmen of different talents rather than a stylistic progression, as proposed by Eva Braun-Holzinger.⁸ The disparity in quality proves, however, that a naturalistic rendering of the human anatomy was not crucial to the function of the statues. The fact that some of them, like Eshpum's in Susa, were usurped by merely changing the name in the inscription meant that accuracy of portraiture was also unnecessary.⁹ And repairs of broken noses with bitumen or the replacement of a face with a mask cut separately demonstrate that the statuettes were valued enough to warrant ongoing restoration.¹⁰

The Chronology

No votive statues are known from the Early Dynastic I period (2900–2750 B.C.). An array of figures, including those of the Square Temple at Tell Asmar and examples from the Nintu Temple at Khafaje, the Inanna Temple of Nippur, and the Ninni-zaza Temple of Mari, mark the beginning of the tradition in the Early Dynastic II period (2750–2600 B.C.).¹¹ Votive statues reached their climax during the Early Dynastic III period (2600–2340 B.C.); their number started dwindling during the Akkadian period in the second half of the third millennium. In sum, the creation of votive figures endured for 400 years, between 2750–2340 B.C., during the period defined as Early Dynastic (ED) II and III.¹²

The Genre

Votive figures stand out as a remarkable phenomenon in ancient Near Eastern art for the following reasons: (1) they mark the time when sculpture in the round reached its

greatest popularity; (2) the geometric and naturalistic styles spread widely throughout the Near East; (3) the genre was not inherited from the past but was a new creation; (4) the statues represented primarily private citizens rather than royalty; (5) groups of the figures were found buried in caches; and, most importantly for this study, (6) they are the earliest statues to bear inscriptions.

Sculpture in the round was seldom produced during the proto-literate period. The assemblages of the combined Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods, ca. 3500–2900 B.C., consist of less than a dozen anthropomorphic pieces,¹³ compared to more than 600 votive figures between 2750–2340 B.C.¹⁴ Mesopotamian proto-literate sculptures came exclusively from Warka, the site of the Sumerian city of Uruk, with the exception of one figurine from Khafaje in the Diyala region.¹⁵ In the next ED II and III periods, however, votive statues were recovered in various numbers in the following south and north Mesopotamian cities:¹⁶ Adab (7), Assur (2), Fara (3), Girsu (21), Kish (4), Larsa (1), Nineveh (1), Nippur (28), Tell Ubaid (2), Umma (2), Ur (9), and Uruk (8). The largest collections, numbering 61 pieces, come from the Diyala region, at Khafaje, Tell Asmar, and Tell Agrab.¹⁷ Furthermore, the statues had a wide distribution from the Mediterranean coast in Syria to beyond the Zagros mountains in Elam. They were part of Syrian assemblages at Ebla (1), Gebelet el Beida (1), Mari (33), Tell Aswad (1), Tell Chuera (5), and Terqa (2).¹⁸ A sizeable collection was also excavated at Susa in Elam (20).¹⁹

Four of the proto-literate Uruk statues feature the priest-king in cultic nudity or wearing his characteristic long kilt.²⁰ In neither case is he shown with the clasped hands; rather both fists are tightened in front of him in a powerful symbolic gesture. The Uruk assemblage also includes two pieces considered to be representations of Inanna, the goddess of love and patron deity of Uruk.²¹ The first is the face of an almost life-size woman, and the second is a small nude female statuette standing straight with her hands alongside her body. The types of representations and the style of the late fourth millennium statuary at Uruk are therefore different from that of the third millennium. Only the figurine from the Sin Temple IV at Khafaje, a bare-breasted female with long hair and joined hands, could be considered a modest antecedent of the Early Dynastic votive figures²² (fig. 6.3).

The Uruk assemblage suggests that in the early proto-literate period the privilege of being portrayed in stone was restricted to deities and rulers. But according to the inscriptions on votive figures, many of the individuals portrayed were commoners. In Mari, Nani was a high official (fig. 6.2), Idi-Narum a miller, Shibum a land registrar, I-pum-Sar a “great” scribe, Ebih-il a steward, and Ur-Nanshe a singer. At Khafaje, Ur-nin-Kilim was an overseer; at Nippur, Za-nini was overseer of couriers, Ginak was priest of Enlil, and Shes-ki-na was a captain; and at Umma, Sag-Tim was a land registrar.²³ The statuettes, therefore, indicate a surprising democratization of art.²⁴ The royal family, however, was not excluded—for example, Lugaldalu and Meskigal were kings of Adab, and Iku-Shamash, Iku-Shamagan, and Ishqi-Mari ruled Mari. Kumduru was the brother of the king of Mari, and Gulla was his nephew.²⁵ Then, however,



FIGURE 6.3. Female statuette from Sin Temple IV, Khafaje, Iraq, Baghdad Museum. White stone, 11 cm. Henri Frankfort, *More Sculpture of the 3rd Millennium BC from Tell Asmar and Khafajah*, pl. 1: 208, pp. 24–25. Courtesy Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

for reasons that escape us, the social phenomenon that gave a commoner the right to commission and dedicate a figure to a deity came to an end. Sculpture reverted to royal prerogative during the Akkadian dynasty²⁶ and thereafter in the Neo-Sumerian²⁷ and subsequent dynasties. The reversal may have been abrupt, which could explain why the statuettes appear to have been hoarded together and swiftly buried.

Few statuettes were found in context. Among them, three votive figures were excavated in a private house area in the Diyala region.²⁸ At Ur a statue of a woman was part of a soldier's grave goods in the Early Dynastic cemetery,²⁹ and statuettes from Assur were located on a low bench of brick built along a wall inside a temple.³⁰ Otherwise, most votive statues were found in groups of a dozen or fewer neatly piled in specially prepared plaster installations or small pits dug on temple grounds. In Khafaje, most of the caches belonged to the Nintu,³¹ Sin, and Oval Temples;³² at Tell Asmar they were part of the Square Temple;³³ and at Mari of the Ninni-zaza Temple.³⁴ The tradition of burying statues was otherwise unknown in the ancient Near East since the remote pre-pottery Neolithic cultures of Palestine. Of course, the gap of four thousand years that separates the caches of plaster statues at Ain Ghazal, near Amman, Jordan, ca. 6750–6570 B.C., from the Early Dynastic votive statuettes precludes any connection.³⁵ The statue of Idrimi at Alalah, ca. 1500 B.C., constitutes later evidence of statue burial.³⁶

The Inscriptions

None of the proto-literate statuary or, for that matter, the late fourth millennium fine stone or metal artifacts bore any signs of writing. But 87 of the some 600 known votive statues bear inscriptions, of which 43 are legible.³⁷ The association of the human figure with writing was a momentous innovation, the start of a tradition that continues to the present day.

Inscriptions were commonly carved on male figures—inscribed female statuettes exist, but they are exceedingly rare. At first, the texts were placed on the front of the statues. For example, the fragmentary male statuette recovered in Nintu Temple VI of Khafaje is inscribed on the chest,³⁸ and in Mari the statue of a man named Tagge bore its inscription on the front of the skirt (fig. 6.4).³⁹ But on the later examples, chest inscriptions became the exception. The texts were moved to the back and often placed on the figure's right shoulder. Characters were sloppily or neatly carved in vertical columns. Some inscriptions, like Nani's, were enclosed in a rectangular case (fig. 6.2).

Eva Andrea Braun-Holzinger has classified the formulaic, repetitive texts into two major groups.⁴⁰ Group I yields the simplest inscriptions, consisting of a personal name (P.N.) either alone or followed by a title:

“SAL-ki-gal” (P.N.)⁴¹

“Ginak, Ensi of Edin-e” (P.N., title)⁴²

In other Group I inscriptions, the personal name is followed by patronymics and/or the mention of a profession:

“Geme-Bau, daughter of Entarzi, priest of Ningirsu”⁴³ (P.N., patronymics)

“Ur-Nin-kilim, overseer”⁴⁴ (P.N., profession)

“I-di-lum, priest of Enlil”⁴⁵ (P.N., profession)

Further inscriptions of Group I state the name of a god to whom the piece was dedicated or a temple. The deity's name (G.N.) may be alone:

“Inanna”⁴⁶ (G.N.)

In other cases, the temple name precedes or follows a personal name, with or without qualification:

“Esar, Lugal-da-Lu, King of Adab”⁴⁷ (temple, P.N., title)

In Braun-Holzinger's Group II, inscriptions are no longer restricted to a series of names but feature a verb, usually expressing dedication (Sumerian *a-ru*, Akkadian SAG.RIGx):⁴⁸

“To Inanna, Zani[ni], overseer of couriers, has dedicated [this statue].” (G.N., P.N., profession, verb)⁴⁹

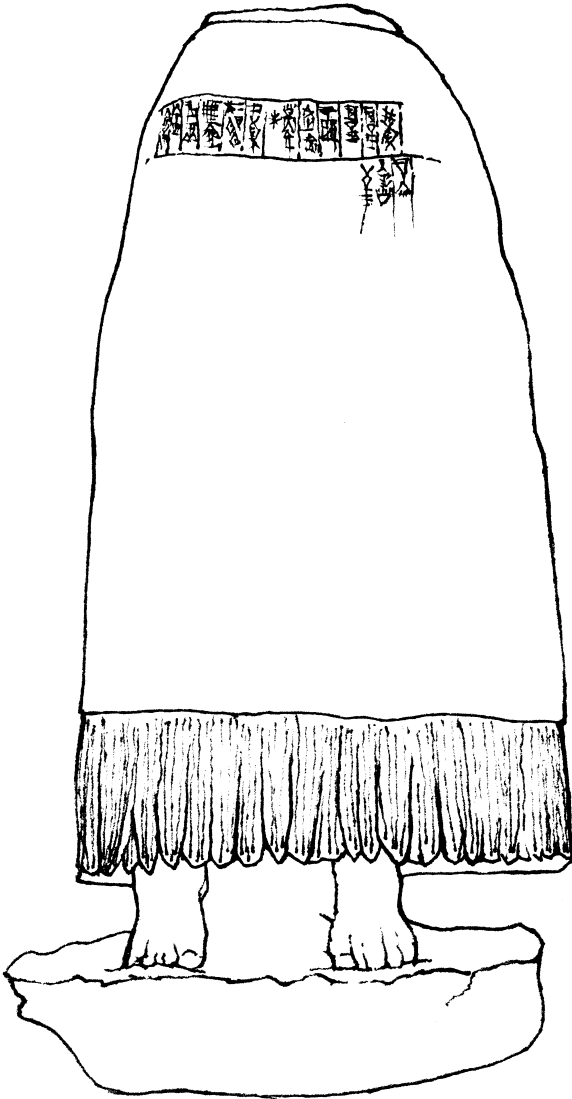


FIGURE 6.4. Statue of Tagge, Mari, Syria, Temple of Ninni-zaza (2350). Drawn by Lewis R. (Bill) Wiman.

“Ur-kisala, the *sangu*-priest of Sin of Akshak, son of Na-ti, *pasisu*-priest of Sin to Salam presented [this statue].”⁵⁰ (P.N., profession, patronymics, G.N., verb)

“For Iku(n)shamagan, king of Mari, Shibum, the land registrar dedicated his [statue] to [Ina]na.”⁵¹ (king name, P.N., profession, G.N., verb)

When the purpose of the dedication is stated, the usual formula is: (nam-ti . . . se) “for the life of” P.N. (the individual portrayed). Other times the inscription is dedicated to the life of the ruler or another family member:⁵²

[To Abu] has P.N. for his life, for the life of his wife and children presented this.⁵³

Finally, the decapitated diorite statue found at Ur of Enmetena (formerly read “Entemena”), king of Lagash, shows that ca. 2420 B.C. the Sumerian syllabary and the use of syntax made writing a proficient medium of communication. Enmetena’s lengthy six-column inscription includes G.N., P.N., title, patronymics, building activity, making of the statue, naming of the statue, disposition of the statue in the temple, a request for the personal god to pray for his life, and an account of land transactions:⁵⁴

“For Enlil of [E] ad [da] — Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, chosen in her heart by Nanshe, chief executive for Ningirsu, [son of E]nanatum [ruler] of Lagash, descendant of Urnanshe king of Lagash, built the Eshdugru for Ningirsu and built him the Ahush, the temple he looks upon approvingly. He built his ‘palace’ of Urub for Lagalurub; he built the E’engura of Sulum for Nanshe; he built Abzupasira for Enki, king of Eridu; he built the *gigunu* of the sacred groove for Ninhursag; he built Antasura for Ningirsu and built him the Shapada; he built the temple of Gatumdug; he built her lofty *giguna* for Nanshe, and restored her temple for her; and he built the Eadda-Imsaga for Enlil.

At that time, Enmetena fashioned his statue, named it ‘Enmetena Whom Enlil Loves,’ and set it up before Enlil in the temple.

Enmetena who built the Eadda — may his personal god, Shulutul, forever pray Enlil for the life of Enmetena.

Eanatum had ceded 25 *bur* from Surnanshe. 11 *bur* of . . . rushes?, land in the marshes of Nina, adjacent to the Holy Canal and 60 *bur* (already belonging to?) Enlil, land in the Gu’edena, Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, . . . to Enlil of Eadda.”⁵⁵

It should be well understood that inscriptions similar to those of Groups I and II also occur on other contemporaneous votive objects. For instance, three inscriptions were carved on a mace head, a stone vessel, and a stone cup, respectively:

“Lugaltutu, the king”⁵⁶ (P.N., title)

“For the Esar, Medurba, King of Adab” (temple, P.N., title)⁵⁷

“For Ba’u, Urnanshe, king of Lagash, son of Gunidu, dedicated (this)”⁵⁸

(god, P.N., title, patronymics, verb)

Inscriptions engraved on votive objects, particularly on the statues, are of great significance because they document the extraordinary transformations that took place in writing: phonetization and syntax. In other words, they document the metamorphosis of writing from an accounting device limited to recording quantities of merchandise to a medium of communication able to convey any possible idea.

The simplest inscriptions engraved on the votive statues are comparable to the in-

scriptions of the Ur cemetery discussed in the previous chapter. Like the bowl of Mes-kalamdug, Sal-ki-Gal's statue bears only a personal name written phonetically. Like the seal of Queen Puabi, the statue of Ginak lists his name and title, "Ginak, Ensi of Edin-e." But some of the Group I inscriptions on votive figures were lengthened by the addition of the individual's patronymics and/or profession. This was important, because it meant that texts unrelated to accounting became longer, more numerous, and therefore familiar to more individuals. Most significantly, since the inscriptions consisted mostly of names of individuals, gods, or temples, they had the distinction of being almost entirely phonetic. Still, like the examples from Ur discussed above, the Group I texts consisted of strings of names that were merely juxtaposed and lacked syntactic construct:

"Esar, Lugal-da-Lu, King of Adab"⁵⁹ (temple, P.N., title)

The Group II texts were entirely different in that they linked a name to a verb to form a simple sentence—a grammatically self-contained unit consisting of a syntactically related group of words expressing an assertion:

"To Inanna, Zani[ni], overseer of couriers, has dedicated (this statue)."
(G.N., P.N., profession, verb)⁶⁰

Most significantly, a number of Group II texts provide evidence that a system of prefixes and suffixes was initiated to translate grammatical elements of speech in order to transcribe complete sentences.⁶¹ These sentences contained (1) the P.N. as subject to a transitive verb, or nominative; (2) a predicate verb, most often expressing the act of dedication or building; (3) the god or temple to which the statue was dedicated, appearing as the indirect object, or dative; and (4) the inscribed statue, either implied or designated by a logogram (DUL = *shalam*), serving as the object of the verb, or accusative:

"[N]ani his statue to Ninni-zaza dedicated."⁶² (fig. 6.2) (P.N., accusative, G.N., verb)⁶³

Further inscriptions include a preposition (*a-na* = to):

"Ishqimari, king of Mari, chief executive for Enlil, his statue to Inanna dedicated."⁶⁴ (P.N., titles, accusative, preposition, G.N., verb.)⁶⁵

In addition, when the statue is offered "for the life" of a person, the name of that individual can appear in the genitive case or the nominative associated with a possessive pronoun:⁶⁶

"For Ninshubur, the emissary of An, for the life of [Mes]kigala, [gover]nor of Adab [. . .] from the cedar mountains he [. . .] For the lives of his wife and chil-

dren, he dedicated this to Ninshubur, his [go]d. [. . .] Its [the statue's] name is 'Have mercy(?) on [my] prayers!'"⁶⁷

The Group I inscriptions of the votive statues were significant in their emulation of the sound of speech; those of Group II were even more significant in their emulation of the syntax of speech. Both the sound and structure of speech were copied simultaneously.

Writing Emulates Speech

In the course of their four-century existence, votive statues changed. During the Early Dynastic II and III periods, the artistic style shifted from geometric to naturalistic, from stern to smiling. The style of the script changed also. Eva Braun-Holzinger recognizes three paleographic levels, organized according to the form and usage of particular signs (Schriftstufe I–III, from most to least archaic).⁶⁸ What is remarkable is that no such evolution can be traced for the acquisition of syntax. Complex sentences including predicate verbs and written in the most archaic script level (Schriftstufe I) are present on geometric votive statues of Early Dynastic II. This is the case for the flowery inscription carved on Tagge's statue from the Temple of Ninni-zaza at Mari (fig. 6.4).⁶⁹ The text, after Georges Dossin, reads as follows:

“Tagge, comme d'un flot, aux eaux abondantes le pays (?) il a réjoui. Protégé par les dieux, Tagge, le . . . de An-shar, le ‘temple de la prière,’ le Uru-ad et le Dul (?) Sir.gir (pour Nina), sa dame, (il a construit).”⁷⁰ [Tagge, as a stream of plentiful water, has delighted the land. Protected by the gods, Tagge, the . . . of An-shar, the “Prayer Temple,” the Uru-ad and the Dul (?) Sir.gir (for Nina), his lady, (he has built).]

On the other hand, Group I inscriptions consisting of strings of names can be found on ED III statues in the more elaborate script (Schriftstufe III) of the naturalistic style:

“Esar, Lugal-da-Lu, King of Adab”⁷¹ (temple, P.N., title)

The ED II texts containing sentences suggest that the acquisition of syntax took place in a short interval: they demonstrate that writing started mimicking speech during the ED II period and that this system spread unevenly over the ED III period. But it is important to realize that the phenomenon of syntax acquisition took place only on votive objects, among which the statues are most representative. Otherwise, syntax continued to be ignored during the proto-literate, ED I, and ED II periods in other applications of writing, namely economic and lexical texts. The inscriptions on the statues and other votive objects, therefore, suggest the possibility and even the great

probability that it was art that set the stage for writing to emulate the syntax of speech. The statues might also give us an insight into the reason for this momentous event.

The Function

Ruth Mayer-Opificius was among the first to bring attention to the western bias inherent in calling the votive statues “worshipper figures,” as is often done in the literature. Unlike European medieval statuary, she proposed, the Mesopotamian third-millennium figures had a funerary function.⁷²

Mayer-Opificius’s interpretation is supported by recent studies on the ancient Near Eastern cult of the dead.⁷³ Literary, economic, and magical texts of the third and second millennium B.C. make it clear that in Mesopotamia deceased parents and grandparents continued to be included in daily life. Their descendants invoked their names during meals and presented them with food offerings and libations. More elaborate funerary rituals, including a meal, took place at the end of the month, when there was no moon.⁷⁴

Literary texts document that statues were involved in the cult of the dead.⁷⁵ See, for example, the poem entitled “The Death of Bilgames: the great wild bull is lying down,” from the epic of Gilgamesh:

Men, as many as are given names,
 their (funerary) statues have been fashioned since days of old,
 and stationed in chapels in the temples of the gods:
 how their names are pronounced will never be forgotten!
 The goddess Aruru, the older sister of Enlil
 For the sake of his name gave (men) offspring:
 Their statues have been fashioned since days of old and (their
 names still) spoken in the land.⁷⁶

In a Sumerian ritual and lamentation text entitled “Lulil and His Sister,” the ghost of the young man Lulil gives instructions to his sister on how to perform funerary rites over his funerary statue:

. . . set up a chair and seat the statue (on it)
 place the garment on the chair and cover
 the statue (with it)!
 Place the bread offering and wipe it!
 Pour out the water into the libation pipe,
 Pour it in the dust of the netherworld! . . .⁷⁷

The text of “Lulil and his Sister,” in describing the use of an icon of the dead to perform funerary rituals, sheds light on formerly ambiguous verses in a second lamentation text, entitled “The Messenger and the Maiden”:

. . . He has eyes but he cannot see
 He has a mouth but he cannot converse,
 . . . With my good oil I anointed the figure
 With my new garment I dressed the chair.⁷⁸

The epic of Gilgamesh also explicitly refers to a statue made to honor Enkidu after his death:⁷⁹

O forgemaster! [*lapidary!*] Coppersmith! Goldsmith! Jeweller!
 Fashion my friend, . . . !
 . . . he made a statue of his friend:
 “the limbs of my friend shall be of . . .”
 “Your eyebrows shall be of lapis lazuli, your chest of gold,
 your body shall be of . . .”⁸⁰

Further verses following the narration of Gilgamesh’s encounter with the Bull of Heaven in Tablet VI of the Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic are also interpreted as attesting that Gilgamesh kept in his bedroom a statue of his dead father, “god Lugalbanda,” that he regularly anointed:⁸¹

Gilgamesh called craftsmen, all the armourers,
 and the craftsmen admired the thickness of its (the Bull
 of Heaven’s) horns.
 Thirty minas of lapis lazuli was (needed for) each of the
 sheathings,
 six kor of oil was the capacity of both.
 He dedicated (them) for anointing his god Lugalbanda,
 Took them in and hung them on his bed (where he slept)
 as head of the family.⁸²

The most specific and detailed evidence of the use of funerary statues comes from the ED III economic-administrative archives of the *emi*, or household, of the Queen of Lagash.⁸³ Among these so-called *nig-gish-tag-ga* texts are records showing expenditures for 16 statues of family members. Seven of the statues identified in the text are

those of the following deceased Lagashite kings and their queens: Ur-Nanshe; Enmetena and his wife Ninhilisud; Lugalanda (two statues) and his wife Barnamtarra; and Sagsag, wife of Uruinimgina. The eighth statue belonged to an otherwise unknown individual named Irkunnunna. According to the texts, it was Queen Sagsag's personal responsibility to present various victuals as offerings to the statues on the third day, or climax, of the Festival of Eating Malt. This means that the queen made sacrifices to the statues of Ur-Nanshe, Enmetena, and other long-deceased ancestors of the dynasty. She also made offerings to her own statue.

Magical texts illustrate that the cult of the dead (*kispum*) was also performed in private households and specify that if offerings were not satisfactory, a ghost could become malevolent and come to earth to pester the living.⁸⁴ It is likely, therefore, that a similar cult of funerary statues existed outside the palace. Karel van der Toorn suggests that statues may have played a special role in representing ancestors who were not buried below the house, as was usual, but outside the compound, in a cemetery.⁸⁵ Thus it may not be by chance that one of the statues found in the house area of Khafaje represents a couple.⁸⁶ But there are no texts to support this idea, since unlike palaces, private households did not keep official records of offering expenditures.

The following inscriptions of Pabilgagi and Iku-Shamagan, which state that their effigies were presented as gifts to Enlil and Inanna, respectively, as well as those of Gulla and Enmetena, which specify that their statues were placed in front of Inanna and Enlil, provide a good explanation of why most figures were recovered on temple grounds.

“For Enlil, Pabilgagi, King of Umma”⁸⁷

“For Iku(n)shamagan, king of Mari, Shibum, the land registrar dedicated his [statue] to [Ina]na.”⁸⁸

“Gulla, son of Kumdorum, the brother of the king, set up this statue in front of Inanna”⁸⁹

“... At that time, Enmetena fashioned his statue, named it ‘Enmetena Whom Enlil Loves,’ and set it up before Enlil in the temple.”⁹⁰

Placing a statue in front of a deity was probably believed to give a devotee the advantage of constantly being a part of a tutelary god's awareness. But the greatest privilege involved partaking in a temple's collective food offerings, as mentioned in the Lagash texts.⁹¹ The tablets describe Sagsag not only making individual sacrifices to particular royal statues during festivals but also communal offerings that may have been given to groups of non-royal votive statues.

The statues' inscriptions showcasing proper names also speak in favor of a funerary function. The statues continue and perfect the tradition of the Royal Cemetery of Ur. Like Meskalamdug, Nani (fig. 6.2) apparently believed that engraving his name could supplement or replace the daily invocation of ancestor names necessary for the

survival of their ghosts in the hereafter. The function of the inscription was to shelter the dead from oblivion on earth and, subsequently, a grim afterlife. But the statuettes were meant to do far more than Meskalamdug's precious bowl—in Sumer, statues were thought to have a life of their own.⁹²

Once carved, statues were given a name. Enmetena and Meskigala specify in their inscriptions that they named their effigies, respectively, “Enmetena whom Enlil loves” and “Have mercy on my prayers.” Naming the statues gave them life;⁹³ later, when they were ritually animated, the statues could perpetually pray to the gods for a blessed afterlife. The stone figures became the intercessors between humans and deities.

The Interface between Writing and Art

The Early Dynastic statuettes represent perhaps the most remarkable interface between writing and art. The sculptures in the round gave presence to the departed, and the inscriptions granted them speech.

The stone statues immortalized individuals and their demeanors. Figures cast in a desired gesture of devotion seemed in action. Ideally, as seems to be the case for Nani, a figure's visage was portrayed (fig. 6.2). More importantly, the visage was enlivened by an intense expression produced by enlarging the eyes, defining the pupil, and tilting the head to direct the glance slightly upward.

These figures perpetuated the physical appearance of the departed, but the text gave Nani and his friends a voice with which to speak to Inanna.⁹⁴ Mimahirshu prayed for his king, Iplulil.⁹⁵ Ninshubur prayed for his wife and children.⁹⁶ Tagge reminded Nina of the three shrines he had built in her honor.⁹⁷ The horror of death thus challenged writing, provoking new accomplishments. The yearning that the plea for a long afterlife be heard and understood by the gods gave Mesopotamians a strong incentive to reproduce syntax to emulate speech in writing.

Conclusion

The Early Dynastic inscribed statues and other votive objects are significant because they document the beginning of writing as a full-fledged communication system. In other words, they illustrate the transition from a logographic accounting device to a phonetic and syntactic system of communication able to reproduce speech. This was the final and ultimate stage of the emancipation of writing from accounting.

The inscribed statues so typical of the Early Dynastic II and III periods illustrate writing's shift from a funerary to a dedicatory and, finally, a votive function. The funerary function required writing a name on an artifact, as seen on Meskalamdug's inscription on the gold bowl of Ur. The dedicatory function entailed the addition of the name of a god or a temple to whom the object was presented. The multiplication

of names increased reliance on phonetization, paving the way toward a syllabary. In turn, the votive function demanded the formulation of wishes that the statues would transmit to the gods. Thus it was the desire to articulate a plea for immortality in a way that the gods could hear and understand that led Mesopotamians to reproduce speech in writing. The fear of death was at the origin of the systematization of phonetization and the creation of written syntax. And once systematized into a syllabary, phonetization could be applied to all possible words, including foreign terms as well as place names. Syntax could serve to formulate any form of expression, assertion, question, or negation. The inscriptions on the votive statues proved to be the gateway to the creation of extensive literary texts, such as those of Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures or the Fara and Abu Salabikh archives.⁹⁸

The Stele of Hammurabi

I am Hammurabi the king of righteousness,
to whom Shamash has entrusted the truth.
My words are special.

.

If that man has not paid attention
To the commandments I have inscribed on this stone . . .
If he has . . . emended what I have written,
And if he has removed my name from the inscription . . .
. . . Almighty Anu, the father of the gods,
. . . will smash his staff and curse his destiny.

—HAMMURABI (TRANSLATED BY M. E. J. RICHARDSON)¹

DURING THE LAST years of his reign, King Hammurabi, who ruled Babylon for over four decades between 1792 and 1750 B.C., wished to commit to stone his name, his image, and his wise legal verdicts. The monument he commissioned forcefully combines the power of writing with the power of images and is considered here the epitome of the interface between writing and art in the ancient Near East (fig. 7.1). In this chapter, I describe the stele and analyze how each medium contributed to the monument.

The Stele

The monument to Hammurabi, the sixth king of the Amorite Dynasty of Babylon, has a long, eventful story. It is the only extant example of what may have been a series of similar or even identical steles distributed for display in the various cities of the empire. The monolith was carved sometime before 1750 B.C. and probably erected in the temple of the sun god Shamash at Sippar.² The stele presumably remained on view in the Mesopotamian oracular center for about six centuries until it was looted by Shutruk-Nahhunte I in 1158 B.C. The Elamite king then transported the monument to his capital to be displayed as a war trophy in the sanctuary of the great god Inshushinak.³ This explains why the Babylonian stele was found at Susa by the French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan in the course of his 1901–1902 excavation campaign in western Iran. It is now on display at the Louvre, in Paris.



FIGURE 7.1. The Stele of Hammurabi, obverse. Photo by Christian Larrieu. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

Broken into three closely fitting fragments, the monument has been restored with minimal loss to its original long, conical shape with a semi-circular apex (fig. 7.2). The stele is made of basalt, a black, white-veined, hard stone that is difficult to carve but able to be polished to a shiny gloss. It is 2.25 m high, 65 cm wide, 1.90 m in circumference at the base, and 1.65 m in circumference at the top. Except for the base, which was left blank, the monument is entirely carved. Images project in bold relief in the upper third of the monument (fig. 7.3), and cuneiform text is evenly engraved on the remaining surface of the stele (fig. 7.4). About 3,500 of the original 4,000 lines of text are preserved. The inscription was laid out in columns, seven of which were erased, probably by order of Shutruk-Nahhunte, presumably with the intention of filling the space with an Elamite inscription in his own name.⁴ The subject matter of the missing columns is partly known because the text of the stele was a famous literary model

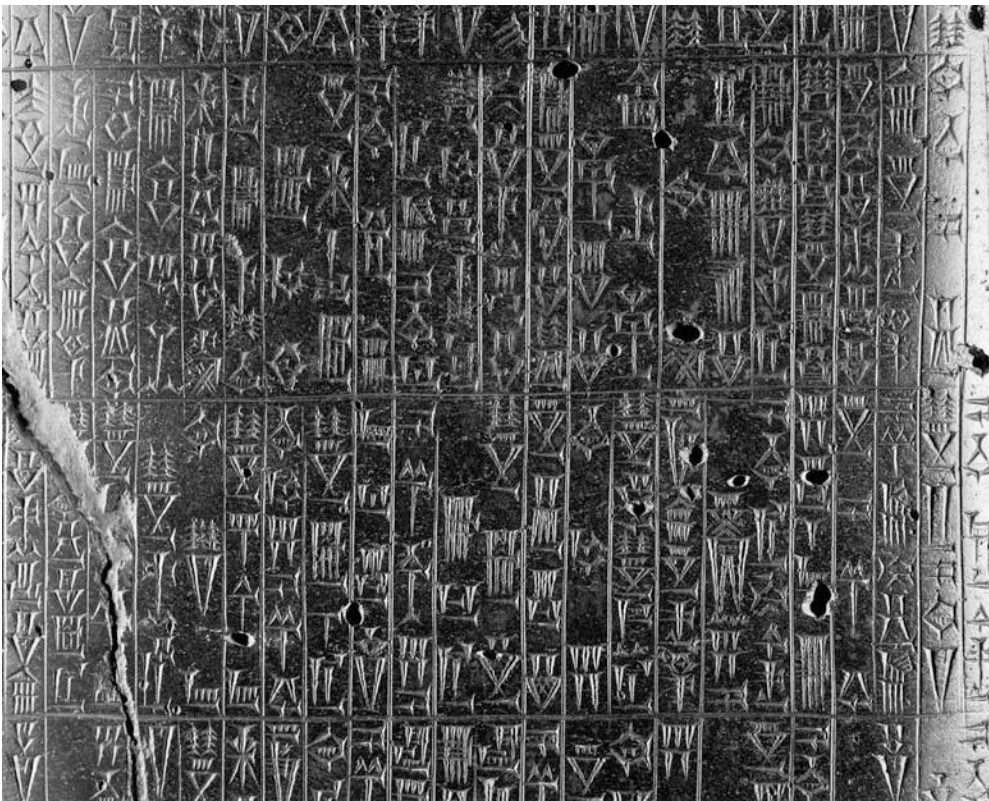
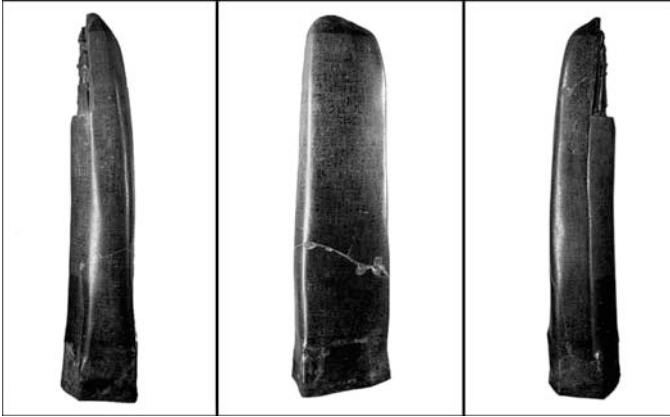


FIGURE 7.2. The Stele of Hammurabi, profiles and reverse. Photo by Raphael Chipaut. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

FIGURE 7.3. (opposite) The Stele of Hammurabi, the relief. Photo by Christian Larrieu. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

FIGURE 7.4. The Stele of Hammurabi, the calligraphy. Photo by Raphael Chipaut. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.



FIGURE 7.5. Stele of Investiture, late third millennium B.C. Photo by Christian Larrieu. Courtesy Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

that was copied and recopied in scribal schools. Some 40 ancient surviving copies not only help to fill gaps, but also expose scribal errors on the stele—for example, when a line was jumped or repeated twice.⁵ The monument now stands as the longest and most important cuneiform Babylonian document. It plays a fundamental role in our knowledge of Mesopotamian history, society, religion, justice, and economy.⁶ The stele also contributes to our understanding of the Babylonian use of art and writing as media of communication.

Text and Images

The stele of Hammurabi combined text and images in a new way. There is no evidence that the previous “codes” of Ur-Nammu (2112–2095 B.C.),⁷ Lipit-Ishtar (1934–1924 B.C.),⁸ or Eshnunna’s Dadusa⁹ used images. There is also no evidence of any text on other Babylonian steles featuring scenes of royal investiture similar to Hammurabi’s¹⁰ (fig. 7.5). The stele differs significantly from earlier royal monuments, such as the Sumerian stele of the Vultures¹¹ or the Akkadian stele of Naram Sin. The former squeezed a lengthy text between images, and the latter featured a neatly encased caption in the middle of a victory scene. In contrast, the stele of Hammurabi keeps the two media entirely separate. The relief is devoid of inscriptions, and the text spreads

uninterrupted; even so, writing and images are closely juxtaposed. On the obverse, the first line of characters abuts directly against the relief, while on the reverse, the inscription reaches to the edge of the relief, hugging the scene tightly with no space or frame in between. The emphatic association of text and image on the stele of Hammurabi epitomizes the parities and disparities between the two media. In the following section I will explore how writing and art shared the task of conveying the royal message.

The Content

The text of Hammurabi's stele includes a prologue introducing Hammurabi, a list of laws, and an epilogue ending with a curse. Each of the three parts is loaded with specific data. The prologue weaves together three types of information. First, Hammurabi enumerates his epithets and eminent qualities:

Enlil's chosen shepherd . . . powerful king . . . descendant of the royal line . . . prudent king . . . hero . . . most fearsome of kings . . . the net that traps enemies . . . perfect arbitrator . . . the clever one who gets things done . . . the leader of kings . . . the one who demonstrates justice. . .¹²

Then the cities of the realm are listed (Eridu, Babylon, Ur, Sippar, Larsa, Uruk, Isin, Kish, Kutha, Borsippa, Lagash, Girsu, Adab, etc.), and the memorable royal contributions made to each community and their gods are itemized:

I am the powerful king, who restored the site of Eridu,
 who purified worship in Eabzu,
 who marched in every corner of the world,
 who made the name Babylon famous . . .¹³

The body of the document compiles close to 300 laws.¹⁴ Scheil's pioneering studies considered the articles as a series of laws or edicts that the king promulgated or inherited from former rulers.¹⁵ More recent analyses¹⁶ view the list of cases as a selection of Hammurabi's wisest verdicts¹⁷ or a traditional royal text.¹⁸ Penalties are listed for offenses, such as false testimony, impersonation, theft, looting, kidnapping, adultery, etc. Sixteen articles concern the tenure of royal fields, 25 are related to agricultural work, 24 to commerce, 10 to places of dwelling, 15 to deposits and debts, 67 to wives and family, 20 to assault and battery, 61 to free professions, and 5 to slaves.¹⁹ The selection conspicuously excludes, however, other important matters, such as fiscal policy. There is little emphasis on agriculture and animal husbandry, for example, even though these were the basis of the Babylonian economy.²⁰

The epilogue, after urging future rulers to emulate “the just king” in protecting the weak, the widow, and the orphan from the oppressor, ends with a list of Babylonian gods, among whom are Enlil, Ninlil, Ea, Shamash, Sin, Adab, Zababa, Ishtar, Nergal, Nintu, and all the Annunaki, who will curse anyone who has, in Hammurabi’s words,

. . . destroyed the rules I ordained
and changed my commandments,
and emended what I have written
and if he has removed my name from the inscription
and inscribed his own.²¹

This last sentence reveals that the name of Hammurabi is yet another significant component of the text.²² The stele served to harbor the king’s name during his rule and after death. It was meant to make the name of Hammurabi known to future generations, who would associate his memory with justice.

It goes without saying that the encoding of the three parts of the text, each packed with a considerable amount of information, resulted from a long process of compiling, assembling, listing, sorting, selecting, and organizing data that required the knowledge, judgment, consideration, and deliberation of multiple experts.²³ The vast amount of precise information compiled in the text sharply contrasts with the one instant evoked by the relief: Hammurabi’s imaginary investiture. The process of assembling data to compose the text was matched by a process of elimination to compose the relief. None of Hammurabi’s heroic deeds, the 282 legal cases and their punishments, or the Babylonian gods protecting the monument, all of which are presented in the text, are represented as images. The relief illustrates one clause of one sentence of Hammurabi’s self-praise in the prologue:

I am a prudent king, who listens obediently to Shamash²⁴

Of course, Hammurabi never stood in front of the god, as represented in the image — except perhaps in the king’s imagination or dreams. The content of the text and relief, therefore, not only differed in volume but also in the nature of the information they carried. The text was factual, the relief fictional.

The Style

The stele of Hammurabi was meant not to innovate, but to honor tradition.²⁵ The inscription maintains the three-part composition of earlier “codes,” with a prologue, a legal treatise, and an epilogue. Only the sophistication of its style of expression makes the royal statement the epitome of the genre.

In the prologue, Hammurabi speaks in the first person, praising himself in a forceful, often archaizing lyrical style:

I am the descendant of Sumu-la-il,
the mighty heir of Sin-muballit,
with royal ancestors for generations; the mighty king
the sun of Babylon who shines over the lands of Sumer and Akkad;
the king who has made the four parts of the world listen;
the one beloved of Ishtar.

And so when Marduk urged me to direct the people of the land
to adopt correct behaviour,
I made the land speak with justice and truth,
and improved the welfare of the people.²⁶

Following the heroic prologue, the legal text then switches to everyday language.²⁷ The sentences are short, clear, and matter-of-fact. For each article, the crime is presented as a conditional sentence:

. . . If a woman has let her husband be killed because of another man . . .

The penalty follows in future tense:

. . . they shall stick that woman on a stake.²⁸

Finally, the curse stacks violent terms on horrific metaphors to intimidate potential violators:

. . . deprive him of showers from heaven
and spring water from the ground;
destroy his land by famine and pestilence;
thunder angrily over his city;
turn his land into the ruin left after the flood;

. . . shatter his weapon on the battle field;
turn his day into night;
let his enemy stand victorious over him.
. . . crush his limbs like those of a clay doll.

. . . let him have no heir, deprive him from posterity, . . .

. . . summon up a terrible illness in his body,
with demonic pain and fever and weeping sores . . .²⁹

The theme of the relief, like that of the text, was not original to the stele. Rather, the presentation of a ring and staff by a deity was the conventional depiction of a royal investiture featured on royal seals³⁰ and steles³¹ (figs. 7.5 and 7.6). The composition of Hammurabi's stele, with only two figures, is simple. The king and the god project in high relief—the arms, hands, and clenched fist are carved almost in the round. Shamash, the sun god, extends toward Hammurabi the ring and staff, emblems of authority. The deity is identified by the rays of sun emanating from his shoulders and a divine headdress with a foursome of horns worn over a voluminous hair bun.³² He sports a square beard divided into 15 horizontal rows of curls and wears a flounced garment with a pattern of horizontal and diagonal lines, two rigid necklaces, and bracelets at both wrists. He sits on a throne decorated with lintels evoking a city gate or a temple portal.³³ The scale pattern on the divine footstool symbolizes mountains, alluding that the scene was taking place on high ground.

Hammurabi looks the deity in the eye while covering his mouth with deference. He wears a royal polos headdress that hides most of his short, curly hair. His full beard, shown by four horizontal rolls on the cheeks, extends below his chin as a flat mass with six parallel incisions to suggest wavy hair. The king's robe falls in tubular folds that flare only slightly above his sandaled feet. The garment is wrapped over his left shoulder, covering his arm with voluminous pleats; the right shoulder is bare. Around his neck, the king wears a metal torque and a string of round beads. He has a bracelet on his right arm.

Both Ur-Nammu's stele (ca. 2112–2095)³⁴ (fig. 7.6) and a late third millennium Babylonian carved investiture scene³⁵ (fig. 7.5) illustrate the elements Hammurabi's stele derived from earlier models. Ur-Nammu's stele depicts the Neo-Sumerian king facing the moon god Nanna in an investiture scene similar to Hammurabi's. The deities in both works, Shamash and Nanna, present the ring and staff. Both bear the horned tiara, are dressed in a flounced robe, and sit on similar thrones. The two kings, Hammurabi and Ur-Nammu, wear the same garb. The mountain symbol appears on Nanna's throne and on Hammurabi's footstool. The stele of Hammurabi, however, departs from both the Ur-Nammu and Babylonian prototypes in that the background is empty. The star that occupied the center of the composition on the Babylonian stele is gone. The god is no longer propped on a podium, and the altar with a palm has vanished. Consequently, Hammurabi no longer pours a libation. The space between the king and the deity has been freed, allowing the two figures to be closer and emphatically gaze into each other's eyes.

The stele improved upon the earlier literary and artistic models it emulated. Hammurabi's redactors, poets, and scribes elaborated on the earlier "codes" and increased the flamboyance of the text by modulating its style with virtuosity. They switched the tone with great skill, from lyrical and heroic when glorifying the king, to plain and factual when stating the law, to threatening when warding off violators. In doing so

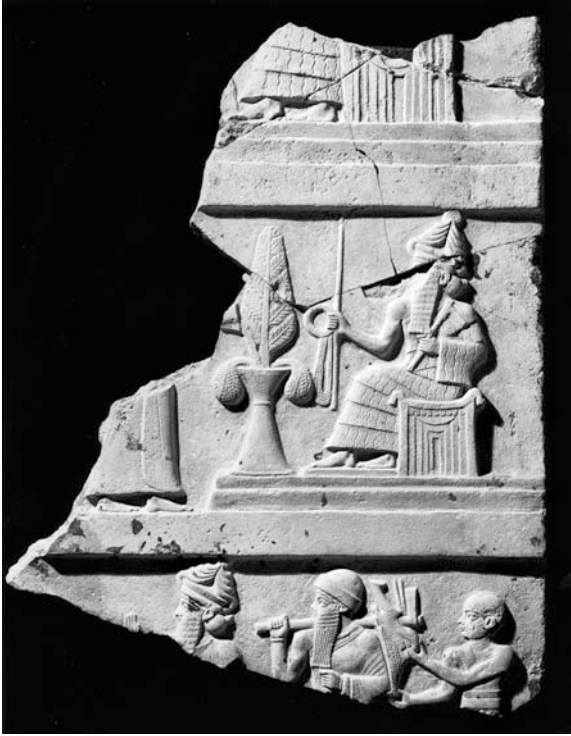


FIGURE 7.6. Stele of Ur-Nammu. Detail of Ur-Nammu pouring a libation before god Nanna. Courtesy University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

they expressed more emphatically and eloquently than ever before the greatness of the king and his divine mission to bring justice to the land. In contrast, the sculptor perfected the relief by streamlining the composition. Representing Shamash and Hammurabi on a blank background highlighted the intense eye contact between king and god and emphasized the bond between them. The styles of the text and the relief were improved by opposite means — the complex literary document became more complex, and the plain visual composition became simpler.

The Form

The text of Hammurabi's stele was engraved with great care (fig. 7.4). It is likely that a royal scribe first traced the inscription on the stone and it was subsequently carved by a sculptor.³⁶ The text is laid out in 51 columns, of which four are earmarked for the prologue, 42 for the legal text, and five for the epilogue. The columns, traced with light vertical lines, are cleverly adapted to the irregular shape of the monument.³⁷ They intersect at regular intervals with deep horizontal lines to form cases in which the signs are entered in vertical columns. The resulting grid forms a rhythmic, harmonious visual design. The wedge-shaped cuneiform characters, carved in perfectly regular vertical lines, are famous for their elegant aesthetic quality.

The admirable calligraphy of the text sharply contrasts the paucity of craftsman-

ship of the sculpture. To begin with, the deity's proportions are clumsy. Shamash's torso is too large for the rest of his figure, and his right arm is longer than his left. His beard dwindles into a thin rectangle that hangs miserably like a pleated rag. His solemn gesture is gauche. He holds the staff precariously with his thumb, and the ring clings miraculously to the back of his hand. The staff bends across the divine hand, and the ring that should dominate the center of the composition is awkwardly pressed against the king's arm.

Hammurabi's portrayal is even worse. The king's shoulders, presented from two different points of view—one frontal and the other almost in profile—are heavily distorted. In addition, the left arm, closer to the viewer, is represented in reverse perspective, one-third larger than the right. The depiction of the textiles is incorrect—instead of falling straight, the folds curve below the arm, and, for the sake of symmetry, the robe that opens in front is turned aside toward the viewer. Finally, Hammurabi's right hand looks swollen, and his stick-like fingers are shown frontally when they should be in profile in order to cover his mouth.

The coarse craftsmanship is even more blatant when comparing Hammurabi's relief with Ur-Nammu's investiture scene created three centuries earlier (fig. 7.6). Compared to Hammurabi's tubular garment, Ur-Nammu has an elegant flowing robe with fine details, such as an embroidered seam. In both compositions, the kings and deities are twisted into untenable positions, with the heads and feet in profile and frontal chests, according to the archaic Mesopotamian formula. But Nanna's left shoulder is somewhat lowered to soften the awkwardness. Hammurabi's sculptor must be recognized for showing the god's tiara in profile, whereas Nanna's was turned frontally above the facial profile, but otherwise the craftsman curtailed many details included in Ur-Nammu's stele. For instance, Nanna's flounced robe shows fringes of parallel wavy strands indicating that it is made of wool. The moon god holds the ring and staff naturally with his closed hand, extending his arm at a comfortable angle. He holds a battle-axe in his left hand, which appears more natural than Shamash's empty tight fist. Nanna's throne, decorated with duck heads and cleverly inserted mountain symbols between the gracefully curving lintel-pattern, makes Shamash's throne look terribly crude.

The care given to engraving the Hammurabi inscription compared to that given to the creation of the images evidences one of the greatest disparities between the two media. It was mandatory for each character of text to be carved with precision, because misreading or confusing one sign for another could cause major misunderstandings. A text must be clear and exact to assure a correct decoding, because reading relies on accuracy. Art, on the other hand, need not be perfect to touch a viewer. Pictures can afford stylization—selecting, emphasizing, reducing, or rejecting particular features of the represented items.³⁸ Art can bear imperfection, imprecision, approximation, and negligence, or even be left unfinished, because the imagination spontaneously fills in missing details and rectifies abnormalities.

Signs and Symbols

A huge number of cuneiform signs were necessary to encode the Hammurabi stele's 4,000-line text. The Akkadian dialect used for the text was spoken in Babylon, but the script selected was not that of everyday life; it was the more prestigious classical cuneiform style of the Sumerian third dynasty of Ur, 300 years earlier (fig. 7.4).³⁹

The text is written with signs typified by a narrow, specific meaning, but the image of Hammurabi's investiture is encoded with open-ended symbols. The mountains where Shamash convened with Hammurabi are symbolized by a mere scale pattern. The king is identified by conventional royal status symbols, the god—or perhaps the statue of the god—by his tiara, sunrays, and throne. The awesome transfer of power is expressed by the presentation of the ring and staff. The few “naturalistic” traits in the composition are limited to Hammurabi's facial features, ear, neck, right bicep, and sandaled feet. Since gods were by definition invisible, it is of course ludicrous to speak of Shamash's representation as true to nature. But the sculptor was successful in imparting life and movement to Shamash by finely modeling the torso, which was partly bare and partly covered by the robe, and by showing a light undulation across the flounced skirt.

Symbols also spell out the superiority of the deity. Hammurabi stands up, but the god is seated. Shamash is taller—although seated, he faces the king eye to eye. His divine horned crown and flounced garment are more elaborate than Hammurabi's headdress and straight robe. The god's beard is larger than the king's. The deity's jewelry includes a double torque and bracelets, but the king has only one torque and a single bracelet. Finally, the king's gesture is submissive, but that of the god is authoritative.

Hammurabi harnessed two vastly different units of communication to convey his message: signs and symbols. The former are objective, the latter subjective. Signs endowed with a fixed meaning determined by an established code transcribed the royal victories, deeds, and list of offenses with their punishments. In contrast, the king's authority was conveyed using symbols whose meaning was in the eye of the beholder. The significance of the ring and staff presented by Shamash was conditioned by the experience, knowledge, and even the state of mind of the viewer.

The Audience

The text of Hammurabi's stele was addressed to the Mesopotamian literate elite, the gods, posterity, and, as stated in the text, those in quest of justice:

Let any man oppressed, anyone who has a complaint, come
before this statue of the king of Justice
and let him have the message on the stone read aloud,

and let him listen to the treasured words I have written,
 and may my stela resolve his complaint,
 and may he understand his problem . . .⁴⁰

But since perhaps a mere 1 percent of Babylonians were literate, rare was the individual who could comprehend the elaborate legal text, let alone appreciate the poetic style of the prologue and epilogue. Reading the inscription was arduous even for the most able scribes. It necessitated complex analytical processes to break down the lines of characters into sentences, words, and syllables. It took talent and knowledge to attribute the correct value to each sign and then re-encode them into words and sentences. Misreading a sign or displacing even one word severely alters the intended meaning. For example, in English “Shamash ordains Hammurabi” is different from “Hammurabi ordains Shamash.” The physical requirements of deciphering the long text spiraling down the stele would have been particularly challenging and strenuous, involving bending, kneeling, or squatting to follow the inscription from the top of the 2-meter stele to the bottom.

It would be wrong to assume that the casual passer-by would be oblivious to the inscription. There can be no doubt that writing inspired awe to the literate and illiterate alike, and that the long calligraphic text had a special aura that evoked the learned scribes and their great knowledge. The text brought to mind the power of the state bureaucracy, the palace, and the temple. Moreover, writing was seen as divine, since from the beginning of time gods were deemed to record in writing all human deeds on the Tablets of Destinies.⁴¹ Likewise, the arts of civilization and the functioning of institutions (*me*) taught to humans by the mythical Oannes were believed to be preserved on tablets.⁴² And, finally, writing was thought to have a power of its own. Curses could magically execute themselves long after they were inscribed, went the belief. The stele’s text brought together all the awesome aspects of writing: it was royal and divine. It was a scholarly text with a potent curse.

Unlike the text, the meaning of the relief was not restricted to the elite but was accessible to a broad audience of literate as well as illiterate viewers. No doubt the images captured the attention of passers-by who otherwise glossed over the inscription. Unlike the text, which remained unintelligible to most, the images were accessible to anyone. “Reading” the pictures required using the skills of everyday life to evaluate clues such as garments, headdresses, gestures, and body language. Compared to the time and effort it would have taken to retrieve the written message, the pictures were effortlessly understood and provoked an instant reaction. One glimpse at the image of Hammurabi presented with the ring and staff spoke a thousand words and immediately generated a wealth of information.

The Interface between Images and Text

The stele of Hammurabi exploited the interface between art and writing with a sophistication never reached before. The composition judiciously used each medium to its advantage. The inscription, read analytically, one character at a time, was wrapped around the stele, but the carved investiture was strategically placed on one face only, at eye level, because images must be viewed globally. Pictures cannot be broken down without compromising their meaning.

Also, the two media were made to blend together. The calligraphic text was engraved with a visible concern for aesthetics, forming a crisp all-over pattern that blurs the difference between text and art. On the other hand, the scale motif signifying the mountains functioned like a logogram, and the god's tiara and king's headdress like determinatives, modifying the meaning of the figures.

More importantly, the monument balanced the strength of one medium with the weaknesses of the other. For example, Hammurabi's eloquent discourse praising his great deeds was abstracted into a mere calligraphic design once carved in stone. Even for the literate the glorious prologue was subdued or muted, because as soon as words enter into the visual world they become rigid and unchangeable. Although the text was written in the first person, the prologue was depersonalized and cold—there are 1,001 ways to say "I am Hammurabi," but there is only one way to write it. On the contrary, the images contextualized the monument, giving a sense of place and time. The scene concretized the interaction between the king and the deity animating the stele. By giving a face to the invisible god and lending features to the famous ruler, the relief personalized the monument. People could relate to the picture of the king almost as if seeing him face to face. The image of Shamash sparked the imagination, evoking the great sun god, who in the course of his daily travel through the sky saw everything and therefore knew everything. The images gave warmth to the cold inscription.

Finally, the inscription and the relief dealt with two different worlds. The mundane legal text dwelt on dishonesty, impropriety, and crime, with no provision for redemption and no compassion for the human drama it entailed. But the relief transcended humanity and brought the deity into earthly time and space, giving the illusion that the viewer was partaking in a supernatural, mystical event. The images lifted earth to heaven.

Conclusion

Hammurabi's yearning for immortality can be considered granted. His name, uttered by countless generations in scribal (and philological) schools from the second millennium B.C. to the present day, may well be called immortal. The memory of the great king who ruled Babylon about 4,000 years ago has reached us not so much because

of his military victories or his judiciary wisdom, but because of the dynamic interface of writing and art on his stele.

The monument confronts the viewer with two simultaneous media of a very different nature. The inscriptions and the relief were both conceived and executed by special experts, but the text was entrusted to the best scribes, who raised writing to an art, while the relief, perhaps judged secondary, made do with less-accomplished sculptors. The encoding of the two media was different: the legal text was scrupulously entered one syllable or word at a time, but an approximate picture of a ring and a staff encapsulated the whole concept of royal power.

The acts of decoding the inscription and decoding the relief can also be described with almost opposite terms. The text was read analytically, one character at a time, but the relief was apprehended globally. Reading the text required knowledge, but the images relied on imagination. The images touched the audience directly, but the inscription required mediation. The most significant disparity lies in the fact that each character of the text was meant to be read in a definite way, but there was no one single correct interpretation for the pictures. No two people can ever experience an image in the same way. The symbol of the divine ring and staff had a different connotation for each and every Babylonian.

Images and text in some ways seem at odds with each other. The text of the stele is static and cold, whereas the relief is dynamic and warm. The inscription is complex, the sculpture simple. Writing dealt with facts, art with fiction. The text was didactic and the relief inspirational. The inscription gave explicitly specific information on Hammurabi's laws, whereas the pictures implicitly conveyed Shamash's blessings for his rule. But the two media do in fact combine harmoniously. Each contributes to the monument distinctive, non-exchangeable, supplementary information. The text reveals the name of Hammurabi, identifying his titles and spelling out "verbatim" the historical message of the great Babylonian king. The images actuate the king, idealizing his relation with the great god of justice. The greatest accomplishment of the stele is that it demonstrates simultaneously the two human faculties of processing information: cognitively and affectively, rationally and intuitively. What is remarkable is that there is no tension between the two media in the monument; one does not override the other, but rather they compound dynamically.

The monument is unimaginable without art or without writing. Without the text, Hammurabi's stele would be an anonymous fictional picture. Without images, the written monument would be awesome, cold, dry, and dull.

Conclusion: The Interface between Writing and Art

There seems little doubt that writing and reading played a critical role in producing the shift from thinking about things to thinking about representations of those things, that is, thinking about thought.

—DAVID R. OLSON¹

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN writing and art in the ancient Near East is singular because the exchange was fully reciprocal. In the late fourth millennium B.C. writing bestowed to art a paradigm for building complex visual narratives and supplied conventions for loading pictures with information. In the early third millennium B.C., in turn, writing separated itself from accounting by piggybacking onto lavish art objects and assuming a funerary function. In this second episode of interface, the yearning to communicate with the gods compelled writing to develop in two ways. First, the repertory of phonetic signs was expanded, paving the way toward a syllabary, and second, the script endeavored to express full sentences of speech.

Writing Influences Art

Art was the beneficiary of the first interface between the two media. Writing provided art with the ability to translate into visual form the age-old myths recited around the fire. Stories are told in all human societies, but converting chains of events into pictures is problematic. The most obvious obstacle is that heroes live their adventures not as *tableaux vivants* but in a constant flux, and there is no way to stop life like the frame of a film. Therefore, cultures create visual formulae to translate the sequence of a plot atemporally. These structures of meaning, which allow a community to share a story by way of pictures, are not spontaneous. They have to be forged. In the Near East, I propose, the formulae to tell complex narratives visually was derived from writ-

ing. This concept is supported by the timing of the appearance of such structures, which coincided with the birth of writing in the middle of the fourth millennium B.C., and further warranted by the configuration of the formulae — the interrelation of the constituent elements of an image. Four main features linked intrinsically to writing characterize the Near Eastern visual narrative structures: linearity; semanticity of size, placement, direction, and order; logograms, or symbols embodying a concept; and determinatives, or symbols modifying meaning.

In the late fourth millennium B.C., pottery paintings left behind preliterate repetitious animal motifs and glyptic abandoned its circular topsy-turvy compositions in order to tell stories. Ancient Near Eastern art adopted horizontal parallel lines as the central principle for organizing its images. Figures were arranged in linear compositions in the same way that signs were disposed on a tablet. As a result, the personages of a scene were compelled to assume the same upright posture, rather than the upside-down disposition of former works. A ground line linked figures to the same place and the same particular moment in time. The idea of time concurrence allowed for the artifice of interrupting or freezing an event at a climactic moment that evoked both what preceded and what was to follow. For example, on the Uruk vase the priest-king, leading a long procession of worshippers, meets Inanna at the temple gate immediately before the celebration of the sacred marriage (fig. 3.1).

The size, position, order, and direction of figures standing on a common ground line became semantic, as was the case for the signs on a tablet. Deities, rulers, and commoners could be distinguished and ranked according to their relative height in the same way that small and large wedges denoted small and large measures of grain on a tablet. The heroes' actions and interactions were indicated by their orientation, order, and direction just as the values of signs depended on their location — above or below on a tablet and right or left on a line. A figure standing in front of a god was understood as more important than another pictured behind the god.

Art learned from writing how to load images with information by using symbols modeled on logograms and determinatives. For instance, the parallel undulating lines of the Uruk vase and the scale pattern on the stele of Hammurabi act as logograms, standing for a stream and mountains, respectively. The deities' tiaras and the rulers' headdresses and garb modify the status of the figures like determinatives.² A hero's mood was communicated not by facial expressions but by a repertory of canonized gestures that acted like the determinative signs of writing.³ The faces of Hammurabi and Shamash are impassive. The king's hand, placed over his mouth, translates his deference, and the presentation of the ring and staff by the deity signifies that the king is being invested with authority. "Reading" art became akin to reading a text. As opposed to the preliterate compositions, which were apprehended globally, the literate compositions were read analytically, sequentially.

The interface between art and writing took place within a short interval between 3500–3000 B.C., changing ancient Near Eastern art permanently. Rulers were first to

realize the potential of narrative art for their own benefit. The first kings, for the edification of their subjects, had themselves depicted in various artistic media and materials as victorious warriors, pious devotees of the gods, architects, legislators, hunters, and masters of ferocious animals.⁴ Visual narratives were used by the temple to introduce the supernatural into the human sphere, and the images actualized the otherwise invisible and abstract deities and demons and their momentous deeds.

Once established, the conventions of art as a visual language took on a life of their own. Following the Sumerians, each of the many cultures that ruled in the Near East, such as the Akkadians, Elamites, Eblaites, Hittites, Babylonians, Hurrians, Mitanni, Assyrians, and Persians, manipulated the formulae of visual narratives to satisfy its own sense of aesthetics and ideological needs. Some of the original conventions, such as size as an indicator of importance, were generally adopted, while the status symbols for kings and gods varied according to periods and local customs. In each case, however, because visual schemata are ready-made modules to communicate meaning and because repeating is far easier than creating, the formulae were handed down from generation to generation with the result that the same motifs were repeated over and over with little variation. For example, Sumerian art boasts numerous animal contests and chariot, banquet, and audience scenes that share not only an amazing multiformity of details, but also a striking morphological uniformity and repetition. Popular formulae were reiterated at the expense of others; for instance, among the multitude of Mesopotamian legendary heroes, only Etana is represented in art, during his memorable eagle flight — there are few if any images depicting the adventures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Lugalbanda, or Enmerkar.⁵ The choice of visual schemata elected by a culture and the particular set of conventions developed to communicate information constitute the style or unique and recognizable visual artistic character of that community.

A popular assumption holds that images led the way to writing. But pottery and wall paintings, glyptic, and stone reliefs illustrate that the opposite was true in the Near East. The evolution of visual composition reveals that preliterate art organized images in circular decorative patterns that ignored the use of status markers. It was by borrowing the linear layout and hallmark strategies of writing to communicate information that art began to tell simple stories in the proto-literate period. Status markers that encoded qualitative information, mimicking determinative signs, were not created before pictographic writing was developed, leaving little doubt that it was art that emulated writing, not the contrary. This incremental emulation made it possible for visual art to tell more and more complex stories.

Art Influences Writing

Some five centuries after the first interface, the concern for eternal life brought text and art together again and shifted writing onto a new course. The three inscribed arti-

facts highlighted in Chapters 5–7—the gold bowl of Meskalamdug, the statue of Nani, and Hammurabi’s stele—attest that eternal life was not only Gilgamesh’s obsession. Fear of death and oblivion was deeply and widely shared by his fellow Mesopotamians. The three individuals enshrined their names on art each in their own way, but all for the same reason: immortality. By writing his name on a gold bowl, Meskalamdug attempted to replace the ritual uttering of his name necessary for his survival in the netherworld. By combining his likeness with his written name, Nani created a statue that could pray to the gods for eternal life. Hammurabi imported from distant lands the densest of stones to preserve his name forever in history.

The teaming of text and finely crafted artifacts in the quest for eternal life forced writing and art into a dynamic exchange to fulfill more and more complex funerary, dedicatory, votive, and historical functions. Inscriptions displayed on art objects became part of a system for communicating with the gods. The incentive to secure divine attention drove the crafts to excellence and the inscriptions to emulate speech. Contrary to the brief first episode of interface between writing and art, the second phase persisted over centuries as the relations between inscriptions and artifacts fluctuated. Meskalamdug used the gold bowl merely as a splendid, long-lasting showcase for his name. For Nani, associating the human form with writing gave a statue the gift of speech with which to address the gods. Hammurabi considered the stele an indestructible stone to harbor his name for posterity. The spatial relations between text and image varied. The lone name of Meskalamdug was clearly on view on his vessel. Nani’s invocation to his tutelary goddess was discretely placed on his back. The name of King Hammurabi was set in a 4,000-line text, establishing his authority to dictate the law and confining the relief to a limited surface at one extremity of the stele. From century to century, inscribed artifacts reached greater audiences. Meskalamdug’s bowl was enclosed in a tomb, statues like that of Nani were displayed in a temple cella or a home, and Hammurabi’s stele was exhibited in a public place. The association of the two media was also conceived differently. For Meskalamdug and Nani the combination of writing and art was akin to magic. But Hammurabi’s stele demonstrates a full understanding of each medium’s strength. Images were used to evoke the pious king, beloved of the gods, with the greatest economy of means. Writing was utilized for its unique ability to compile, organize, and synthesize unlimited amounts of complex data and preserve it for an unlimited length of time. The calligraphic inscription allowed for reading and rereading—scrutinizing information. An engraved text displayed in a public area made possible consultation at any time, ensuring equal justice for citizens of the same class. Finally, the inscription could be copied, recopied, translated, and disseminated in the empire and beyond.

In sum, in the period that separated Sumer from Babylon, the relationship between text and art object never ceased to evolve. Inscription and artifact were merely juxtaposed on Meskalamdug’s bowl; on Nani’s statue, they complemented each other to

animate his stone likeness. Hammurabi's stele represents the epitome or ideal expression of the interface between writing and art, because the text and relief buttressed, enhanced, and supplemented each other. The writing had the power to state the law of the land with authority. The relief had the power to evoke the divine origin of justice.

Of course, the major outcome of the interface between writing and art was that it transformed writing from an accounting device to a proficient medium of visual communication. The funerary inscriptions endeavored to replicate the sound of speech so as to phonetically represent chains of names of individuals, gods, and temples. Votive and dedicatory art objects expressed to the gods in writing *to whom* the precious gifts were dedicated and *for what purpose*. The inscribed name of Meskalamdug was one of the first fully phonetic texts. Nani wrote one of the first sentences. By the time of Hammurabi, the Akkadian syllabary could express the subtlest thoughts in a lyrical, heroic, legal, or everyday style.

Writing and art readily interfaced because they were naturally compatible. As visual languages, they both depended on the same skills based on hand and eye coordination. In the period of the first interface, both media were based on one-to-one correspondence. The most significant outcome of their interface was that each of the two visual languages was brought to a higher level of abstraction. The narrative visual paradigms abstracted time, action, motion, depth, volume, context, sound, speech, facial expression, and body language. Writing eliminated the sound of speech, abstracting from discourse sentences, clauses, words, syllables, and grammatical elements such as prefixes and suffixes.

For both media the increased abstraction had profound consequences. The information each of the two visual languages could transmit was multiplied. Iagemaking became a powerful didactic tool that could communicate information relentlessly over generations to an audience wider than any verbal language could ever reach. And, finally, the interface with art brought writing to replicate speech. The development of a comprehensive written visual language caused civilization to grow more complex. Literacy makes for larger organizational and political units, allowing empires to push their domination farther afield. With a tighter control over goods, literate economies could reach new dimensions. Trade extended its network to ever more distant places. Writing made possible the mastery of complex materials into organized syntheses such as the codification of laws, resulting in the articulation and accumulation of knowledge. Literacy gives cultures the privilege of knowing their past. Since the West is the heir of the ancient Mesopotamian tradition, the interface between art and writing in the ancient Near East still resonates in the way we communicate today.

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Conclusion

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2. Donald M. Matthews, *Principles of Composition in Near Eastern Glyptic of the 2d Millennium B.C.*, p. 295.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
4. Schmandt-Besserat, “Images of Enship,” pp. 214–217.
5. Postgate, “Text and Figures,” p. 182.

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