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Knowledge as Cultural Biography: Lives of Mesopotamian Monuments

With a converging interest in questions of agency, multivalency, and contextualization in art history and archaeology—two disciplines that Mesopotamian art has traditionally straddled—anthropological approaches have emerged as provocative and enriching interpretive schemes for assessing the power of art. For example, with reference to Islamic art, Oleg Grabar has described an “anthropology of objects” as the ways in which art objects participate as “active ingredients in the fabric of daily or ceremonial life or as carriers of real or contrived memories.”¹ Likewise, David Freedberg has argued that the efficacy of images resides at the nexus of “relations between images and people in history.”² Such approaches elicit a concern beyond the producers and production of art to consider also consumption, reuse, reception, and disposal—in short, activities that comprise knowledge of an object by past and present audiences and which can fall under the rubric of that item’s social or cultural “biography.”

Both art history and archaeology rely on material objects, such as pottery or sculpture, to organize the ancient world typologically. But because objects are more than props on a chronological or spatial stage—indeed, they are integral to human affairs—cultural biographies open up perspectives on the ways in which material production is invested with and generates meaning through the social interactions in which it is enmeshed.³

Moreover, the notion of biography highlights the significance of recontextualization as artifacts move into new circumstances, including modern excavation and museum display. Being relatively unchanging through time and space, physical objects derive their significance in large part from the persons and events to which they are connected. Yet this is hardly a unidirectional relationship: the specific physical form and detail that constitute an object catalyze diverse human responses. As people and things interact with one another and accumulate intertwined histories, they transform one another, thus endowing the physical items with an aura of potency. Complex material production—what we typically call art—seems to participate in this relationship with particular vibrancy.

The transformative qualities of art were heightened in the ancient Mesopotamian world, where many representational works of art manifested power and efficacy, especially images of gods, kings, and worshippers. Reconstructing their cultural biographies, we can view these Mesopotamian monuments as participants that construct and influence the field of social action in ways that would not occur if they did not exist. Two of the most celebrated works of art from ancient Mesopotamia, the victory stele of Naram-Sin and a copper cast head of a ruler, have had tumultuous existences that bespeak their past and ongoing affect (figs. 1–3).

i. Stele of Naram-Sin,
c. 2250 B.C.E., pink
limestone

Musée du Louvre, Paris; photograph
Réunion des musées nationaux / Art
Resource, New York

Both happen to be products of a singular period in Mesopotamian history, the Akkadian empire; yet during their long lives, the realms in which they were experienced diverged dramatically, as they continue to do today.

At the end of the third millennium, around 2350 B.C.E., a charismatic ruler, Sargon, and his successors, including Naram-Sin, forged the first unified territorial state in southern Mesopotamia (present-day southern Iraq), known at the time as Sumer and Akkad. This radical centralization of power came at the expense of preexisting city-states, fundamentally altering the political, economic, and social structures of the region.⁴ At the same time, a distinct change took place in the elite arts, most evident in an exquisite expression of materiality linked to a heroic, but human, ideal, which probably relates to the sociopolitical realignments set into motion by the new Akkadian kings. The memory of this first great Mesopotamian empire persisted in the collective imagination of later Mesopotamians, contributing to its legendary character as a "golden age."⁵

Naram-Sin created his stele to commemorate a series of military victories over various tribal groups who inhabited the mountainous area to the east of Mesopotamia.⁶ Standing well over six feet tall,⁷ the pink-orange limestone stele includes a partially preserved inscription that describes the victories depicted in the bas-relief image below it (see fig. 1). While foes plead for mercy or tumble headlong down the mountainside on the right side of the relief, Naram-Sin's soldiers march relentlessly upward in perfect formation on the left. Towering above them all and stepping firmly on two crossed and contorted bodies of naked enemies, Naram-Sin stands in triumph. He wears a horned helmet of godship, signaling his self-proclaimed divinization, which is also indicated in the placement of the divine determinative before his name in the inscription. The monument thus served as an explicit expression of political power and authority imposed by physical might, qualities that are conveyed through every aspect of its form, both visual and material.⁸

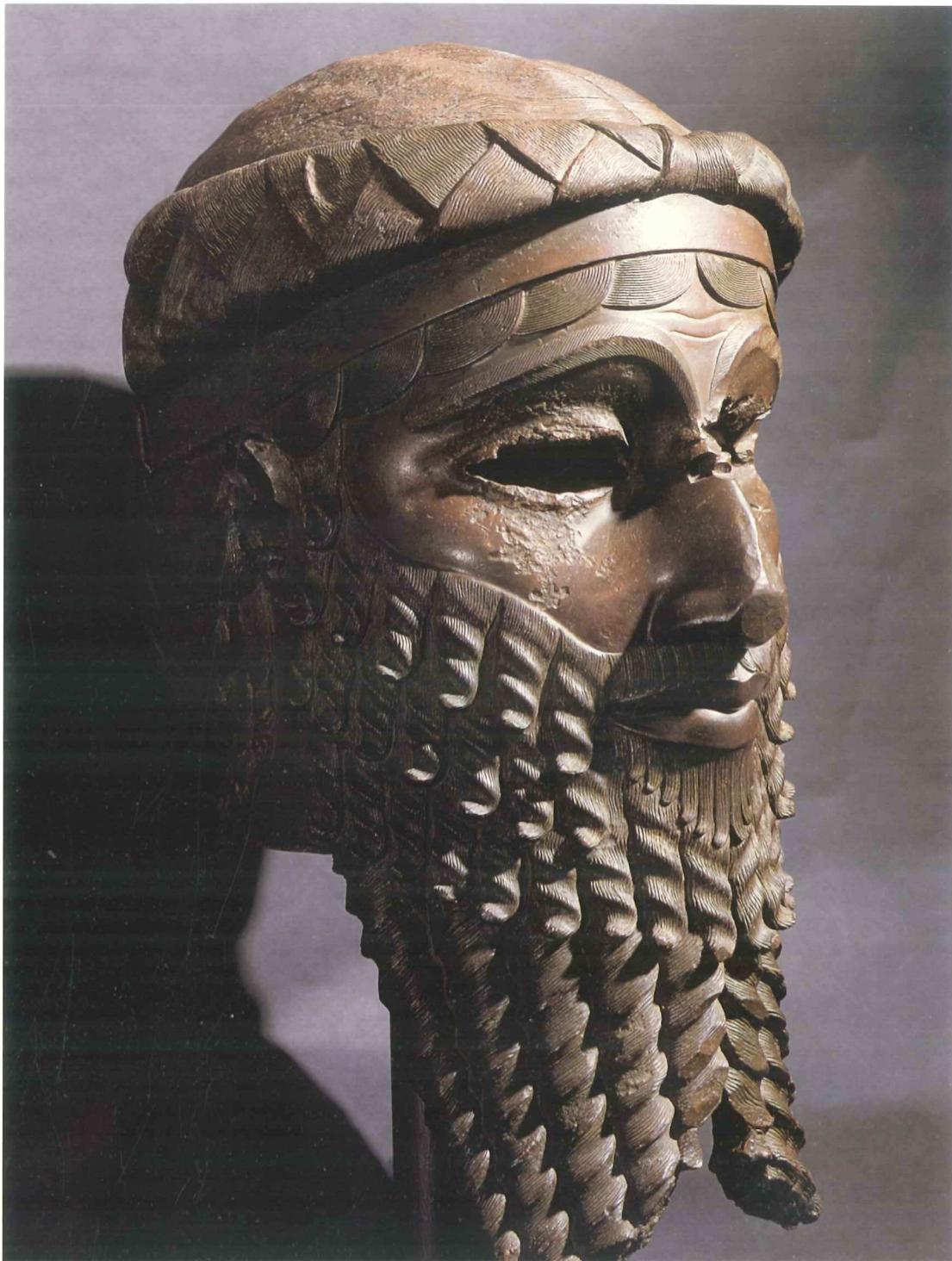
Despite Naram-Sin's dubious legacy in the Mesopotamian collective memory (later legends erroneously attributed the fall of



the Akkadian empire to his hubris in ignoring divine omens),⁹ the monument remained accessible in the temple courtyard of the sun god Shamash in the city of Sippar well beyond his reign. It joined many other monuments preserved from the Akkadian period that both owed their preservation to and actively contributed to the mythohistorical tradition of this period sustained by later Mesopotamian rulers. Five hundred years after the fall of the Akkadian empire, scribes

2. Head of an Akkadian ruler, c. 2350 B.C.E., copper, front view
National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad; photograph Hirmer Verlag

3. Head of an Akkadian ruler, c. 2250 B.C.E., copper, side view
National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad; photograph Hirmer Verlag



were still making careful written records, inscribed on clay tablets, of similar Akkadian monuments set up in temple courtyards.¹⁰

Naram-Sin's victory stele, however, was not found at Sippar but rather was excavated at the Elamite city of Susa, to the east of Mesopotamia in present-day southwest

ern Iran. The political entity of Elam developed more or less in parallel with that of Mesopotamia, though it constituted a separate cultural realm.¹¹ It was often a rival to the Mesopotamian states and had in fact numbered among the conquests of the Akkadian kings, who claimed to have captured

booty from Susa.¹² In the twelfth century B.C.E., almost exactly one thousand years after the Akkadian empire's collapse, an Elamite king, Shutruk-Nahhunte, conducted several successful military campaigns against Mesopotamian cities.¹³ During a raid on Sippar, Shutruk-Nahhunte captured Naram-Sin's stele and carried it back to Susa as booty, recounting his actions in an Elamite-language text that he added to the monument. This inscription, in its content and placement, reveals Shutruk-Nahhunte's sensitivity to the stele, both as an artistic monument and as a link to the Akkadian empire (the two qualities being, in fact, linked). Observing the existing aesthetics of the stele, Shutruk-Nahhunte integrated his text into the composition, extending it up the side of the mountaintop as if emanating from the mouth of an imploring enemy—an ironic location that was perhaps not lost on Shutruk-Nahhunte, a descendant of those who suffered similarly at the hand of the Akkadians. The inscription itself reads:

I am Shutruk-Nahhunte, son of Hallutush-Inshushinak, beloved servant of the god Inshushinak, king of Anshan and Susa, enlarger of my realm, protector of Elam, prince of Elam. At the command of (the god) Inshushinak, I struck down the city of Sippar. I took the stele of Naram-Sin in my hand, and I carried it off and brought it back to Elam. I set it up in dedication to my lord, Inshushinak.¹⁴

That Shutruk-Nahhunte did not overwrite or obliterate Naram-Sin's original inscription, as he did with other captured Mesopotamian monuments,¹⁵ and moreover, that in his own inscription he attributed the stele to Naram-Sin by name, suggests that this particular monument possessed a significance beyond simple war booty. Rather, Shutruk-Nahhunte's knowledge of the stele's association with a charismatic, if dishonored, ruler of the first great Near Eastern empire imbued the monument with added value. At the same time, Shutruk-Nahhunte's dedication of the stele to an Elamite god symbolically and physically inverted the Akkadian domination of Elam one thousand years earlier.

This relationship between power and art unfolds on yet a more profound level in the second monument under consideration, a hollow-cast, nearly pure copper head of an

unidentified Akkadian king, which presents a surprisingly different cultural biography (see figs. 2 and 3).¹⁶ Though it lacks an identifying inscription, it can be attributed to one of the later kings, perhaps even Naram-Sin, according to stylistic comparisons. The head's precise archaeological findspot is not entirely certain, but excavation reports locate it in a seventh-century B.C.E. level of the Ishtar temple at the Neo-Assyrian capital of Nineveh, near the modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq, which would place it nearly 1,500 years later than its date of creation at the end of the third millennium.¹⁷ There is no surviving evidence of when it arrived at Nineveh or its original place of display. It could have resided at the site since the Akkadian empire period, when the city might have fallen under Akkadian rule, or it might have been brought as either booty or restitution at several later historical points, such as during Shamshi-Adad's incorporation of the city into his northern Mesopotamian empire during the nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.E. or Ashurbanipal's recovery of stolen statuary in his conquest of Elam in the mid-seventh century B.C.E.¹⁸ That the head survived at all, given the eminently reusable nature of metals that were always scarce in Mesopotamia, is remarkable in itself and perhaps significant for understanding its embodied power.

The head is arresting not only for the metallurgical and sculptural virtuosity in the rendering of the physical details, but also for the contrasting damage apparent in the battered nose, the severed ears, the cut beard, and the absent eyes, in particular the left eye, which exhibits violent signs of chisel blows. Carl Nylander argued persuasively for the intentionality of this mutilation, suggesting that it follows a pattern known from texts that describe the physical mutilation of captured enemies and that this action might have taken place at the time of the sack of Nineveh by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C.E.¹⁹ He concludes, "It seems possible to interpret the damage to the Nineveh head as the result of a symbolic, propagandistic mutilation in connection with the Median-Babylonian sack of Nineveh, possibly according to Median or Iranian principles of bodily disfigurement."²⁰ In light of Nylander's conclusion and given the pos-

sible age of the head at the proposed time of mutilation, it is worth asking what efficacy this piece may have manifested.

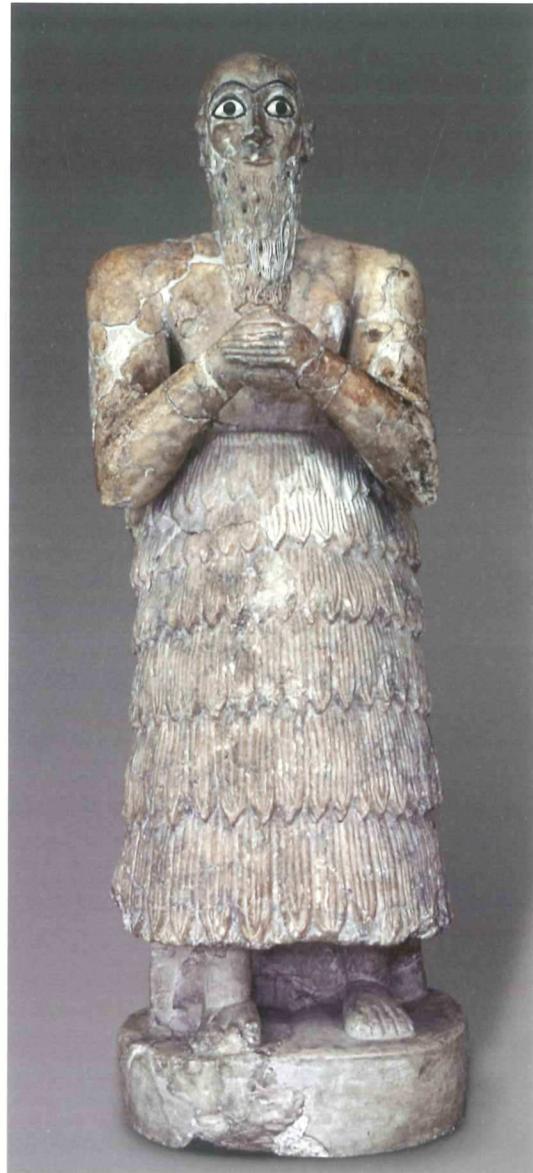
Since Nylander's article, the intentional mutilation of other Mesopotamian monuments has received more systematic analysis.²¹ These acts of violence leave a range of physical marks that signal differing motivations, like inflicting humiliation, defeat, disability, or even death.²² Complete, indiscriminate destruction may be understood as a moment of vengeful annihilation, such as might be attributed to pillaging soldiers. Such a scenario seems to explain the hundreds of smashed votive statues excavated in the destruction debris of mid-third-

4. Votive statue of Shibum,
c. 2450 B.C.E., gypsum,
front view

National Museum, Damascus;
photograph Hirmer Verlag

5. Votive statue of Shibum,
c. 2450 B.C.E., gypsum,
back view

National Museum, Damascus;
photograph Hirmer Verlag



millennium temples at the city of Mari. For example, the statue of Shubum, a surveyor (sometimes identified as King Ikun-Shamagan, also named in the inscription), was recovered and restored from forty-five fragments found near the main doorway of the cella of the temple of Ninni-zaza (figs. 4 and 5).²³ Its head showed signs of mutilation before being smashed, including gouged eyes and a missing nose.²⁴ The survival of only a relatively few sculptures, especially royal images, from ancient Mesopotamia may be due not just to deterioration over time or the vagaries of archaeology but also to intentional destruction.

An alternative form of intentional mutilation, the decapitation of statues that leaves the rest of the body intact and on view, served to both demonstrate and display defeat and humiliation. The large number of headless pieces among statues preserved today attests to the widespread occurrence of this form of destruction. Although such breakage might be attributed to accidental falls, heads are rarely found during excavations, and many statues are broken in a manner that does not exhibit random patterning. The diorite statue of Enmetena (formerly read



Entemena), a ruler of Lagash from around 2400 B.C.E., represents an intriguing case.²⁵ Its inscription indicates that it was intended for the temple of Enlil at Girsu (present-day Telloh), a principal city of Lagash. The seventy-six-centimeter-tall headless statue was excavated not at Telloh but rather at Ur, one of Lagash's rivals during Enmetena's reign. In addition, like the copper head, it was found in a much later archaeological period, the sixth century B.C.E., standing in a gate to the precinct of the moon god Nanna. Leonard Woolley, its discoverer, speculated that it might have come to Ur as a war trophy and owed its preservation there to

its having been regarded, in its headless condition, as a symbol of Ur's release from Lagashite subjection. The mutilation of the figure would be an act of symbolic revenge natural and normal enough, but there is more than that; where the head is broken off the once jagged surface of the hard diorite has been polished to a glassy smoothness, not by rubbing it down with a stone or other tool, for the original inequalities remain, but by the constant touch of something softer than the stone itself: it looks as if the dishonoured monument had stood in a public place where every passer-by flicked the cleft neck with his hand in token of triumph over a fallen master.²⁶

Textual references provide ample evidence for the deportation of royal and divine statues, along with living populations, as a consequence of defeat.²⁷ Visual representations, particularly from the richly detailed historical narratives of the Neo-Assyrian empire in the ninth through seventh centuries B.C.E., complement the written sources, as for example in a relief of the eighth-century Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III, in which Assyrian soldiers carry away divine statues (fig. 6).

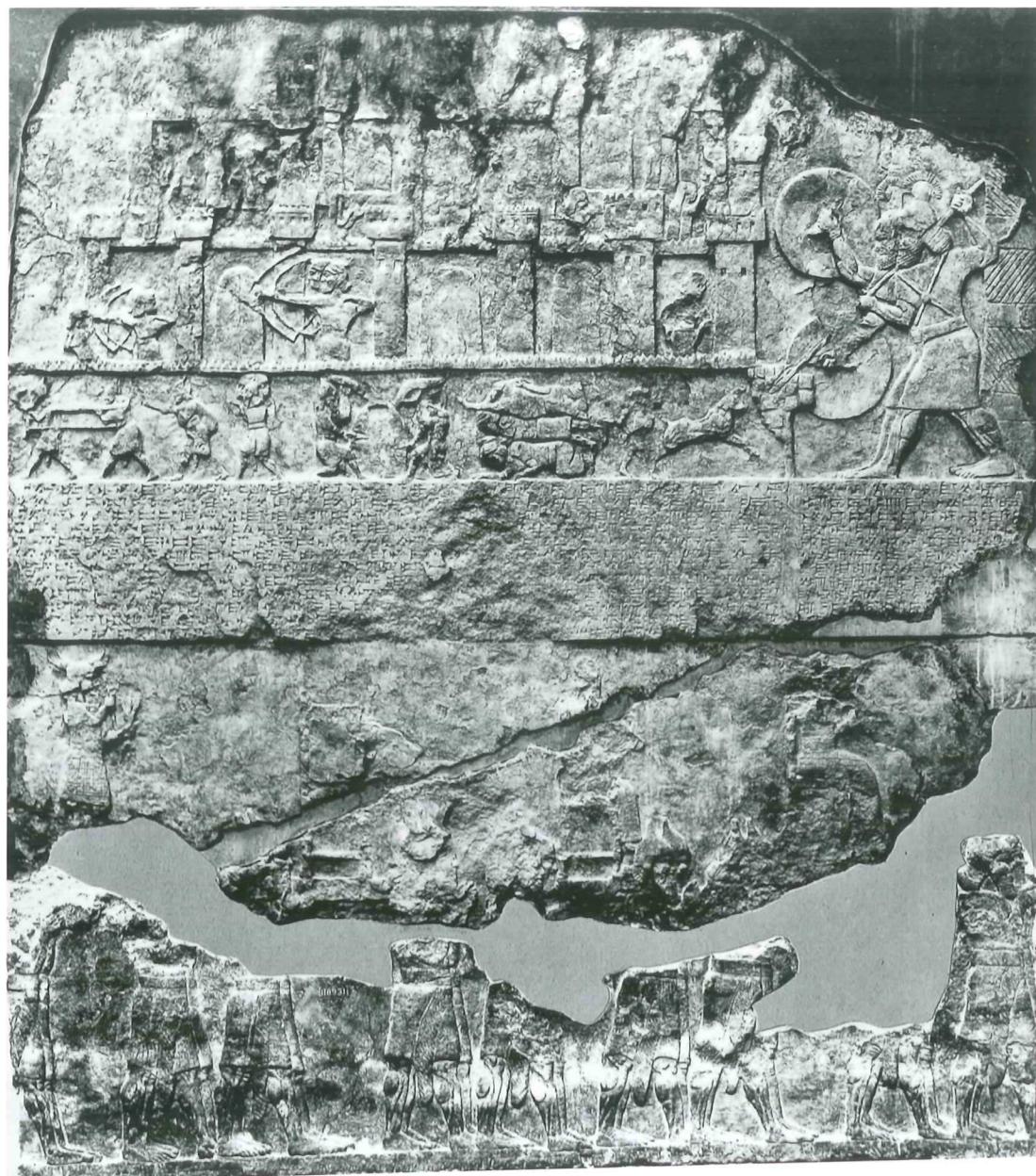
Yet another type of intentional destruction targets specific facial and other bodily parts associated with positive attributes or action, as with the Akkadian copper head. The obliteration of physical features connoting either essential or ideal elements of a ruler appears to be linked to a desire to disable a king's effectiveness to rule without necessarily annihilating the individual.²⁸ The role of determiner and promulgator of justice being essential to the ideal ruler, a sightless or

speechless king would have wielded little authority.

Intentional mutilation seems primarily to befall anthropomorphic figures, especially sculpture in the round, though relief sculpture also fell victim to attack, as is evident in the systematic defacement of the royal face in certain reliefs from the palaces at Nineveh in the seventh century B.C.E. (fig. 7).²⁹ That this kind of destruction was fairly widespread and embedded in the Mesopotamian cultural consciousness seems evident from the common inclusion on monuments of a curse formula intended to protect against exactly this kind of intentional abuse.³⁰ The curses were directed against such acts as replacing the name of the statue's identity with another, indicating the potency of the personal name in the investing of identity in an inanimate object.³¹ However, known occurrences of such name changes are exceedingly rare in Mesopotamia proper, especially in comparison to their frequency in Egypt.³² Given that stone is scarcer in Mesopotamia, one might expect the appropriation of statues to occur more often. That it did not suggests that deeper cultural issues were at work.

The apparent hesitancy to reuse statues may be traceable to the close correspondence posited by the ancient Mesopotamians between an individual and his or her image. The Akkadian term that refers to many such objects—*salmu*—has received considerable attention recently with respect to its complex meaning(s) as the physical rendering of unique and essential identity.³³ Though often translated as the specific form of a monument, such as a stele or statue, *salmu* denotes more broadly a concept of image or, in light of its use on aniconic monuments like several inscribed but non-figural stelae excavated at Assur, even *manifestation*, a term less tied to figural representation but which maintains the connotation of a physical rendering of unique and essential identity.³⁴ In contrast to the constitutively cultic aspect of depiction conveyed by *salmu*, the term *tamšilu* relates to more representationally mimetic aspects of appearance, the two words together expressing the outer appearance and inner essence of an entity.³⁵

6. Relief of Assyrian soldiers carrying captured cult statues, reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.E.), gypsum, from Nimrud
British Museum, London; photograph
© British Museum

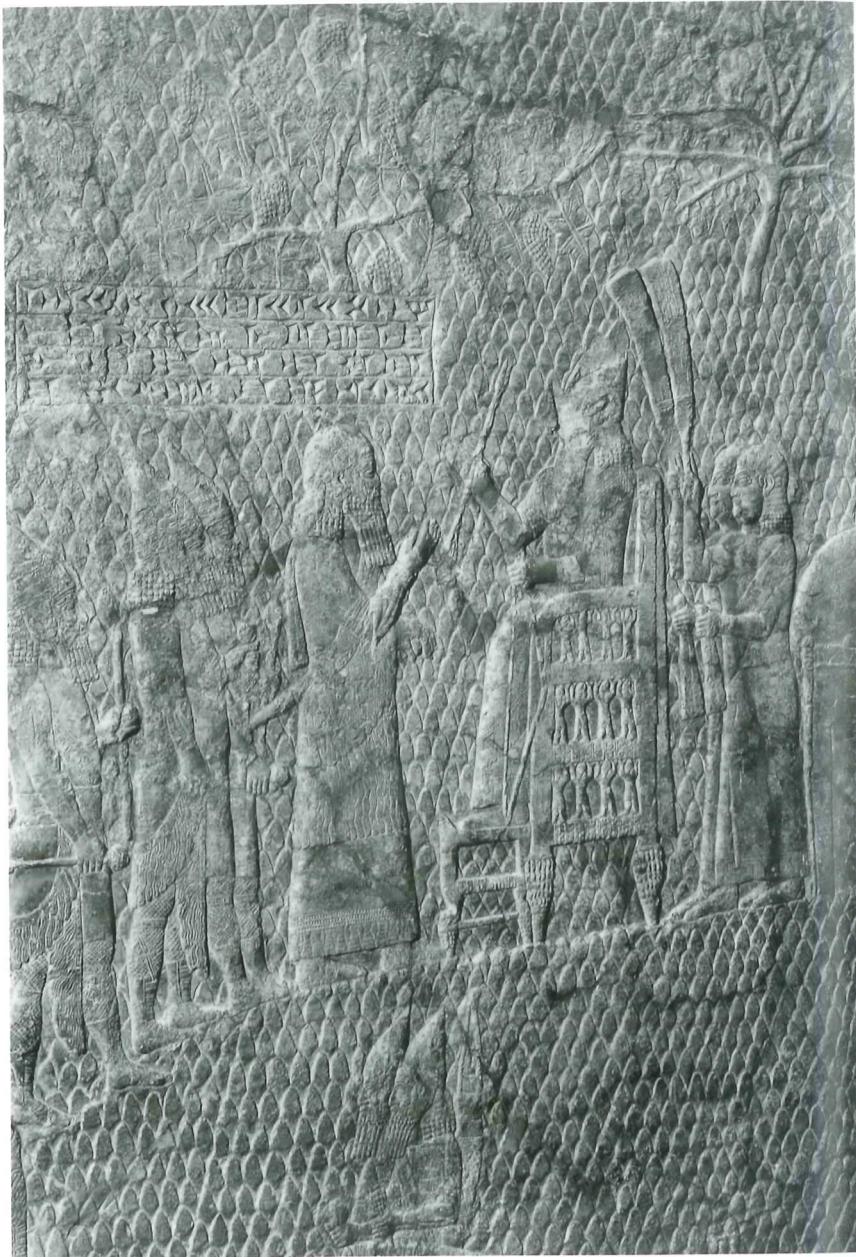


Third-millennium Mesopotamian sources seem to indicate that the corporeal body in its entirety constituted personhood, with no evidence of a mind-body dichotomy.³⁶ Notions of intelligence, emotion, and even spirit were conceived of in concrete ways as linked to the physical form of the body. Yet at the same time, the body, as the self, could extend itself in multiple physical manifestations as unique but linked entities.³⁷ Thus physicality played a critical role in the visual realm: so-called portrait statues,

as an extension of the corporeal, embodied and contained an individual's essence. This embodiment is demonstrated, for example, in the numerous "votive" statues dedicated to gods by individuals, such as that of Shibum, discussed earlier. These depict the dedicants using a standardized formula that was individualized through details and, in many cases, inscriptions naming the dedicant and divine object of devotion (see figs. 4 and 5). In them, we can see the conflation of what later is referred to as *salmu* and *tamšilu*,

along with the name, amounting as a whole to personhood. The burial of twelve such statues beside an altar of a mid-third-millennium temple at Tell Asmar in the Diyala River region of central Mesopotamia confirms the presence of the inalienable life force or individual essence in the image, whether of divine, royal, or merely personal nature (figs. 8 and 9).³⁸ Although the excavator, Henri Frankfort, considered the two largest statues, a male and female, to be cult images, scholars no longer share this opinion. Certainly nine of the other ten statues (excepting a nude, kneeling figure, which may be a semimythical hero) represent worldly figures, demonstrating that, at least during this period, the animating association between personhood and image extended to a fairly wide spectrum of the population. Likewise, although intentional destruction tended to target gods and kings as the most powerful entities, it was not restricted to them, as evidenced in the smashed statue of Shubum. Unlike the votive statues found in scattered pieces at Mari, the Tell Asmar statues were in excellent condition, with their eye inlays and even the traces of bitumen applied as paint to the hair and beards preserved, suggesting that their burial may have been motivated by a desire to protect the embodied personhood.

The physical production of divine images, and probably also royal images, was aided by what Angelika Berlejung has called “inspirational cooperation” between gods and specialized craftsmen.³⁹ This endowed the images with a latent supernatural quality. The use of birthing vocabulary to describe the making of special images signals this unique aspect of creation.⁴⁰ The bond between animate essence and inanimate image, while on one level inherent in the creation of an image, was actualized by rituals that transformed the image from the product of human hands into an animate entity, an irreversible process of identity fixing that could be terminated (by killing or disabling) but not transferred. The best-studied of these rituals is the *mīs pī* or Washing of the Mouth, known mainly from texts of the first millennium B.C.E., but also documented for royal statues of Gudea at the end of the third millennium B.C.E., suggesting that related forms of practice, at least, persisted



for a longer period.⁴¹ According to the later texts, the mouth-washing ritual served to purify the divinely inspired image, erasing the imprint of human agency in its creation and activating its efficacy. This efficacy was understood to endow the image with the senses of smell, taste, and sight. In first-millennium texts from Nineveh and Babylon, craftsmen associated with an image's production have their hands bound and ritually cut with a wooden tamarisk knife while swearing their own lack of participation in the image's creation and attributing it instead to the gods.⁴²

7. Relief of enthroned King Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.E.), gypsum, from the Southwest Palace, Nineveh
British Museum, London; photograph © British Museum



8. Group of twelve votive statues, c. 2700 B.C.E., gypsum, from the Square Temple, Tell Asmar

Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago, and National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad; photograph Oriental Institute Museum

9. Workman and votive statues in pit of Shrine II, Square Temple, Tell Asmar, photo 1934

Photograph Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago

The effects generated by the ritual transference of animate essence to created works also surface in the complex actions later required to deal with damaged statues.⁴³ Although divine and royal statues, as well as a range of other items, could undergo the *mīs pī* ritual, its application seems to have been restricted to specifically “cultic” objects.⁴⁴ Small terra-cotta figurines, typically of nude females, that proliferate in Near Eastern archaeology may offer evidence of the opposite situation, in which either overt signs of

manufacture (such as traces of modeling and fingerprints) or the mechanized process of molds reaffirms the inanimate nature of the figurines and links them directly to their human producers.⁴⁵ The designation of *salmu* may also have referred only to those images (and other material entities) that were understood to embody and manifest life forces.⁴⁶ Although the textual sources are uneven over the thousands of years of Mesopotamian history, and one must expect that changes in meaning and ritual occurred through time and space, the evidence for consistent mutilation and destruction of anthropomorphic images warrants ascribing some variant (or variants) of the concepts of object efficacy expressed primarily in the later texts to the *longue durée* of Mesopotamia.

Given these aspects of Mesopotamian art, it is hardly surprising to find rich histories of use, recontextualization, and intentional mutilation or destruction. Thomas Beran concluded an article on the life and death of Near Eastern images: “It is certain that the statue (or stele, relief, etc.) possessed a particular existence; that although not living, it had a magically numinous animation, an ‘essence,’ a ME.”⁴⁷ In his effort to convey the elusive nature of this animation, Beran turns to ancient terminology, the Sumerian word ME. The concept of ME denotes generally the divine powers that enabled civilized life, and it is sometimes translated as “divine ordinances.”⁴⁸ These seem to include both abstract concepts and concrete things that constituted the archetypes for civilization and culture. The ME could take physical form as literal adornments of the gods, their clothing, and ornaments, rather than inhering within a divinity’s being. Part of the *mīs pī* ritual acted to invest the image with the ME as a critical component in the presencing of the divine essence or manifestation.⁴⁹ As the bearer of ME, a cult image became the tangible, earthy equivalent of the divine reality.⁵⁰ As in the relationship between image and personhood, the conceptual and corporeal are conflated into a single entity.

Cross-cultural anthropological examples offer further insight into the phenomenon of animated images and objects. For example, ethnographic studies conducted by Marilyn Strathern suggest that Melanesians view

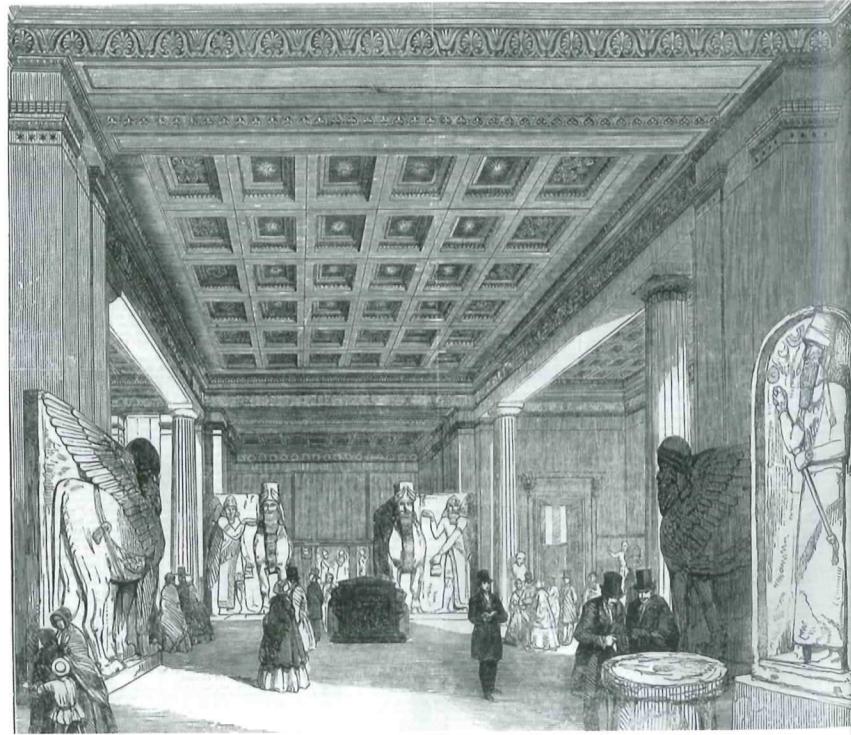
objects as the detached parts of people: both move through social spaces in relationally contingent ways.⁵¹ At the root of this notion lies a concept of distributed personhood that encompasses not just the physical body but also all objects made or transacted by that body. Objects thus acquire a secondary agency that can create effects at a considerable distance from the physical body and may continue to do so after the human body is dead. Although these conclusions cannot be applied uncritically to other times and places, they confirm that no universal understanding exists of what constitutes an "object." They also provide a compelling alternative perspective on the means by which *salmu* functioned in Mesopotamia, illuminating the logic behind the ancient responses to these images.

However, not only did these monuments possess a potent force in ancient Mesopotamia, but they continue to manifest and cast their power over us in complex ways today. In spite of what might be interpreted as the ancient "disabling" of the Akkadian copper head and the abduction of Naram-Sin's stele, the extraordinary lives of these two pieces continue, defying death through their very archaeological survival. The stele of Naram-Sin rested, perhaps still in the ruins of an Elamite temple, at Susa until a French archaeological team excavated it during the final years of the nineteenth century.⁵² The Near East had been already for some years contested by competing European powers, who sought to gain material advantage during the waning years of Ottoman power.⁵³ The acquisition of ancient monuments, proudly displayed in new national museums in London, Paris, and Berlin, motivated much of the archaeological exploration of the time. Galleries of Mesopotamian art opened at the British Museum and the Louvre in the 1850s (figs. 10 and 11). The stele of Naram-Sin was immediately heralded as a major work of artistic genius and installed in the Louvre's Near Eastern galleries, where it still stands today (fig. 12). The excavator, Jacques de Morgan, writes in his 1900 publication of the piece: "The stele of Naram-Sin, discovered at Susa on April 6, 1898, is without dispute the most remarkable artistic masterpiece, as well as one of the oldest that has ever been encountered in Chaldea

and its neighboring regions. This relief is incomparable above all for the unity of its composition, though the execution of its details surpasses all that we know about Asiatic sculpture."⁵⁴ Indeed, it resonated with European audiences of the time in ways comparable to those expressed in the twelfth century B.C.E. by Shutruk-Nahhunte, serving as a unique witness to the control and appropriation of foreign conquered lands by means of its physical presence in a new temple of art, the museum. A 1902 article on the Susa excavations in the popular illustrated journal *L'Illustration* (in which fig. 12 was published) makes this analogy explicit, commenting: "At the moment, the lucky can see them [de Morgan and Father Vincent Scheil], each day, in one of the lower rooms of the Louvre along the wall under the Perrault colonnade, unpacking with infinite care their precious booty. . . . They come and go among the artworks that they have conquered, of which the stele of king Naram-Sin is one of the most beautiful."⁵⁵

Transcending or perhaps augmenting its initial colonialist association, the monument continues to awe visitors at the Louvre with its exquisite style and composition. Because its formal properties accord comfortably with Western art historical aesthetic

10. Nineveh room at the British Museum, from *Illustrated London News*, March 26, 1853



11. Assyro-Chaldean gallery

at the Louvre, c. 1900

Musée du Louvre, Paris; photograph
Alinari / Art Resource, New York



sensibilities, it retains a central place in general art surveys as well as within our reconstructed "canon" of Mesopotamian art, regardless of, or even in spite of, how it functioned in antiquity.⁵⁶

A rather different fate has befallen the copper head. It was excavated in 1931 after the establishment of an independent Iraqi department of antiquities that instituted a policy of division of finds between foreign excavators and the state of Iraq.⁵⁷ As a unique find, the piece stayed in Iraq, becoming a cornerstone of the collection in the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. The history of archaeology in Iraq and its (ab)uses by various political powers, including the British and Saddam Hussein, represents yet another phase in the social life of this piece.⁵⁸ The looting of the museum after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 raised grave concern for the copper head, and the frequent inclusion of its image in stories covering the disaster made it one of the most potent symbols for what appeared to be unnecessary and wanton disregard of cultural heritage.⁵⁹ News that the head was

safe in an underground vault was met with relief by archaeologists, but, with the persisting critical security situation in Iraq, it remains sequestered. The copper head stands today as a formidable repository and generator of multiple contested agendas and emotions: as a data point in the quest for "rational" knowledge, as a foundation block in the consolidation of a national heritage meant to bind together disparate and antagonistic factions, and as a symbol of imbalanced power relations, whether between "Western occupiers" and Iraqis or between an internal dictator and his people. The power that this piece commands, along with other monuments of Iraq's ancient past, was tragically revealed in the scale and violence of the museum looting and the resulting call to action. While some have criticized archaeologists for putting material things before people (although all ancient Near Eastern scholars have publicly voiced the tenet that no object is worth a human life), the worldwide outrage at the looting of the National Museum of Iraq (like the response to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas)

12. Jacques de Morgan and Father Vincent Scheil at the Louvre with archaeological finds from Susa, *L'Illustration*, February 1, 1902



reveals the visceral emotions that supposedly inanimate artworks still elicit. Although we may not subscribe to the ancient Mesopotamian conception of the numinous ani-

mation of objects, nonetheless we are intrinsically bound, in our own culturally and individually conditioned ways, to the affective qualities of the material world.

NOTES

1. Oleg Grabar, "The Shared Culture of Objects," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, 1997), 116. See also Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).
2. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), xix.
3. See, for example, the issue devoted to the cultural biography of objects in *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (October 1999).
4. Mario Liverani, ed., *Akkad, The First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Traditions* (Padua, 1993); Hans J. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000–2000 B.C.*, trans. Elizabeth Lutzeier, with Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago, 1988), chapter 6, 165–197; Donald P. Hansen, "Art of the Akkadian Dynasty," in *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, ed. Joan Aruz [exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 2003), 189–198.
5. Piotr Michalowski, "Memory and Deed: The Historiography of the Political Expansion of the Akkad State," in Liverani 1993, 69–90.
6. With references to earlier studies, see Prudence O. Harper, Joan Aruz, and Francoise Tallon, eds., *The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre* [exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 1992), no. 109; Irene J. Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: The Alluring Body of Naram-Sin of Agade," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy*, ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen (Cambridge, 1996), 11–26; Irene J. Winter, "Tree(s) on the Mountain: Landscape and Territory on the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin of Agade," in *Landscape: Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East, Papers Presented to the XLIVe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Venice, 7–11 July 1997*, part 1, ed. S. de Martino et al. (Padua, 1998), 1–10; Irene J. Winter, "How Tall Was Naram-Sin's Victory Stele? Speculation on the Broken Bottom," in *Leaving No Stones Unturned: Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt in Honor of Donald P. Hansen*, ed. Erica Ehrenberg (Winona Lake, Ind., 2002), 301–311; Irene J. Winter, "The Conquest of Space in Time: Three Suns on the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin," in *Assyria and Beyond: Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (Leuven, 2004), 607–628.
7. Winter 2002.
8. Winter 1996; Winter 1998; Winter 2004.
9. For a general overview of and bibliography for the reigns of Sargon and Naram-Sin, see Sabina Franke, "Kings of Akkad: Sargon and Naram-Sin," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York, 1995), esp. 838–840.
10. For example, in the Ekur temple at Nippur. Giorgio Buccellati, "Through a Tablet Darkly: A Re- construction of Old Akkadian Monuments Described in Old Babylonian Copies," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell, and D. B. Weisberg (Bethesda, Md., 1993), 58–71.
11. Daniel T. Potts, *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State* (Cambridge, 1999).
12. Potts 1999, 101–109, esp. 102.
13. Harper et al. 1992, 159–162; Potts 1999, 233–236.
14. From the German translation of the Elamite text: Friedrich Wilhelm König, *Die elamischen Königsinschriften*, Archiv für Orientforschung supplement 16 (Graz, 1965), 76, no. 22.
15. Harper et al. 1992, 159–162.
16. In his foundational article (discussed below), Carl Nylander writes, "Yet, while haunting us with its power and beauty, it still eludes our questions. Many aspects of its beginning and of its end are still unknown." Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh: Who Mutilated 'Sargon's' Head?" *American Journal of Archaeology* 84 (1980): 329.
17. Julian Reade, in a recent reassessment of Reginald Campbell Thompson's field excavation notes, has disputed the late date previously assigned to the head's findspot, which according to Reade rested primarily on the paleography of an inscribed spear point found along with the head. See Julian Reade, "The Ishtar Temple at Nineveh," in *Nineveh, Papers Presented to the XLIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, London, 7–11 July 2003*, ed. Dominique Collon and Andrew George (London, 2005), 358–361; first published in *Iraq* 67, part 1 (2005): 347–390. Reade suggests that the head and spear point may have been deposited as early as the fall of the Akkadian empire around 2150 B.C.E. or during the Old Assyrian period of the early second millennium B.C.E. It is clear from his presentation of the archaeological evidence that little can be said with any authority regarding the chronological level in which the head was found, since its depth (which he considered to be stratigraphically level with late third- and early second-millennium architectural remains) might easily be attributed to burial in a pit. Reade does, however, argue compellingly against Nylander's thesis that the head was mutilated during the final siege of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E., noting that its remarkable state of preservation, in spite of the mutilation, suggests that it was buried before the conflagration that consumed the Ishtar temple.
18. Whether the head was originally intended to be set up in the Ishtar temple at Nineveh or arrived there at a later date remains disputed. Joan Goodnick Westenholz has argued that there was no Akkadian empire presence at the site, instead attributing the Akkadian period artifacts such as the copper head to later circulation. See Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "The Old Akkadian Presence in Nineveh: Fact or Fiction," in Collon and George 2005, 7–18; first

- published in *Iraq* 66 (2004): 7–18. Regardless of these uncertainties, the systematic mutilation of the head and its apparently careful burial in the temple at some time after the Akkadian period argue for its ongoing efficacy.
19. Nylander 1980.
 20. Nylander 1980, 332.
 21. Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia, 2003), 149–184; Thomas Beran, “Leben und Tod der Bilder,” in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festgabe für Karlheinz Deller zum 21. Februar 1987*, ed. Gerlinde Mauer and Ursula Magen, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 220 (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1988), 55–60; Mark A. Brandes, “Destruction et mutilation des statues en Mesopotamie,” *Akkadica* 16 (1980): 28–41; Barbara Kaim, “Killing and Dishonouring the Royal Statue in the Mesopotamian World,” in *Studi sul Vicino Oriente antico dedicati alla memoria di Luigi Cagni*, vol. 1, ed. Simonetta Graziani (Naples, 2000), 515–520.
 22. Kaim 2000.
 23. André Parrot, *Les Temples d’Ishtarat et de Ninni-zaza*, vol. 3 of *Mission archéologique de Mari*, Institut français d’archéologie de Beyrouth, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique, vol. 86 (Paris, 1967), 11, 37–39.
 24. The statue has been restored to re-create the nose and add inlays to the eyes and eyebrows.
 25. Leonard Woolley, *The Early Periods*, vol. 4 of *Ur Excavations* (Philadelphia, 1955), 47–48, pl. 40.
 26. Woolley 1955, 47–48.
 27. Brandes 1980, 29.
 28. Such physical features have been associated with ideal qualities of rulership in the statues of Gudea, ruler of Lagash around 2100 B.C.E. See Irene J. Winter, “The Body of the Able Ruler: Toward an Understanding of the Statues of Gudea,” in *Dumu-e₂-dub-ba-a: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg*, ed. Hermann Behrens, Darlene Loding, and Martha T. Roth (Philadelphia, 1989), 573–583. Although Gudea’s statues escaped defacement, thus preserving these features, they were decapitated.
 29. This destruction is generally attributed to the Babylonian and Median sack of 612 B.C.E. The defacement was not executed comprehensively throughout the palace (for example, not every image of Ashurbanipal is mutilated; most notably, the famous lion hunts from Room C were left undamaged) but rather seems to be focused on those scenes referring to specific military activity. My thanks to Brian Brown for bringing this point to my attention, and to Farzana Ali, who pursued the idea systematically in her unpublished senior honors thesis for the Near Eastern Studies Department, “Prisoners of War: Political Iconoclasm in Nineveh Palace Reliefs” (University of California–Berkeley, 2005).
 30. Brandes 1980, 35–36.
 31. Bahrani 2003, 170.
 32. For one Mesopotamian example, see Beran 1988, 56. This does not appear to have been an issue for non-Mesopotamian (Sumero-Assyro-Babylonian) cultures like Elam that reused Mesopotamian statues (Beran 1988, 58).
 33. Bahrani 2003, 121–148; Angelika Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bildpolemik*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 162 (Freiburg and Göttingen, 1998), 62–66; Dominik Bonatz, “Was ist ein Bild im Alten Orient? Aspekte bildlicher Darstellung aus altorientalischer Sicht,” in *Bild, Macht, Geschichte: Visuelle Kommunikation im Alten Orient*, ed. Marlies Heinz and Dominik Bonatz (Berlin, 2002), 9–20; Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren, “The *salmé* in Mesopotamian Art and Religion,” *Orientalia*, n.s., 10 (1941); Irene J. Winter, “Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology,” in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki, 1997), 364–369.
 34. Among others, Winter (1997, 365) has most forcefully argued for the less specific translation *image*. For the Assur stelae, with references to earlier publications, see Jeanny Vorys Canby, “The Stelenreihen at Assur, Tell Halaf, and Maşçebot,” *Iraq* 38 (1976): 123.
 35. Bonatz 2002, 11–16; see also Winter 1997, 368–369.
 36. Julia M. Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body,” *Gender and History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 447.
 37. Asher-Greve 1997, 452.
 38. Henri Frankfort and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Oriental Institute Discoveries in Iraq, 1933–4: Fourth Preliminary Report on the Iraq Expedition*, Oriental Institute Communications 19 (Chicago, 1935), 10–13, 55–73; Henri Frankfort, *Sculpture of the Third Millennium B.C. from Tell Asmar and Khasajah*, Oriental Institute Publications 44 (Chicago, 1939), 3–5.
 39. Angelika Berlejung, “Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leiden, 1997), 45–46. For royal images, see Brandes 1980, 35; Irene J. Winter, “Idols of the King: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 13–42.
 40. Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *mīs pī* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, Ind., 1999), 116–117; Winter 1992, 21–22.

41. In addition to the *mīs pi*, there is the *pīt pi* (Opening of the Mouth). Berlejung 1997; Berlejung 1998; Peggy Jean Boden, "The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth (*mīs pi*) Ritual: An Examination of Some of the Social and Communication Strategies which Guided the Development and Performance of the Ritual which Transferred the Essence of the Deity into Its Temple Statue" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998); Walker and Dick 1999; Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pi Ritual*, State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts 1 (Helsinki, 2001); Winter 1992, 22.
42. Walker and Dick 1999, 81, 114.
43. Walker and Dick 1999, 64–66; see also Walter Farber, "Singing an *eršemma* for the Damaged Statue of a God," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 93, no. 2 (2003): 208–213.
44. In other words, our modern scholarly designation of art probably does not overlap comfortably with the way ancient Mesopotamians classified objects, which appears to be based instead on distinctions of animation that have not yet been fully studied.
45. Alice A. Petty, "Anthropomorphic Figurines from Umm el-Marra, Syria: Chronology, Visual Analysis and Function" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2005).
46. Some other items that are referred to by the term *salmu* include containers, apotropaic figurines, and animals (see, for example, Van Buren 1941). It is, however, difficult to enumerate all the objects to which the term *salmu* may have referred, as the ancient documents tend not to record the full scope of human creative production.
47. "Gewiß ist, daß die Statue [oder Stele, Relief usw.] eine eigene Existenz besaß, daß sie, obgleich nicht lebendig, doch ein magisch-numinöses Leben hatte, ein Sein, ein ME" (Beran 1988, 60).
48. It is unlikely that a single English translation can accurately convey the many senses of this Sumerian word, and even Akkadian writers appear to be not entirely comfortable with the concept (thanks to Niek Veldhuis for discussing this with me). For some discussions on ME, see Berlejung 1998, 20–25; Jeremy A. Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin, 1992), 130; Gertrud Farber-Flügge, "ME," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, vol. 7, ed. Dietz Otto Edzard (Berlin, 1987–1990), 610–613; Jacob Klein, "The Sumerian ME as a Concrete Object," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 24 (1997): 211–218.
49. Berlejung 1997, 66, 71.
50. Berlejung 1998, 24–25.
51. Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, 1988); discussed in Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (October 1999): 173.
52. The excavation itself was not conducted so as to allow a full understanding of the precise archaeological context. Harper et al. 1992, 20–24, 123–127; Jacques de Morgan, *Mémoires de la délégation en Perse*, vol. 1: *Recherches archéologiques 1; Fouilles à Suse en 1897–1898 et 1898–1899* (Paris, 1900), 100–123.
53. Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003); Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley, 2003).
54. "La stèle de Naram-Sin, découverte à Suse le 6 avril 1898, est, sans contredit, l'œuvre artistique la plus remarquable en même temps que l'une des plus anciennes qui aient jamais été rencontrées en Chaldée et dans les pays voisins. C'est surtout par l'ensemble de sa composition que ce bas-relief est incomparable, bien que l'exécution des détails surpassé tout ce que nous connaissons de la statuaire asiatique" (de Morgan 1900, 144).
55. "Actuellement, les privilégiés peuvent les [de Morgan and Scheil] voir, chaque jour, dans une des salles basses du Louvre en façade sous la colonnade de Perrault, déballant avec des précautions infinies leur précieux butin. . . . Ils vont et viennent, parmi les œuvres d'art qu'ils ont conquises et dont l'une des plus belles est la stèle du roi Naramsin" ("La Mission de M. de Morgan, à Susc," *L'Illustration*, February 1, 1902, 69).
56. Marian H. Feldman, "Mesopotamian Art," in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. Daniel C. Snell (Oxford, 2005), 292–294; Irene J. Winter, "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York, 1995), 2578.
57. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin, 2005), 112–129.
58. Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968–89* (New York, 1991); Bernhardsson 2005.
59. For one example, see the op-ed page devoted to the looting of the National Museum of Iraq, *New York Times*, April 17, 2003.

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*Dialogues in Art History,
from Mesopotamian to Modern:
Readings for a New Century*

Edited by Elizabeth Cropper

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