

Art as Expression of Authority: Akkad and Assyria

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Power and authority were important to leaders in past empires. Rulers such as those from the Akkadian and Assyrian Empires often used art to depict and express dominance over their rivals. In this lesson, you will explore:

1. Time Period and Location: Akkad and Assyria
2. The Lamassu
3. Hieratic Scale
4. Stele of Naram-Sin
5. The Stele
6. Palace Reliefs



BIG IDEA

Akkadian and Assyrian rulers used art to express their authority.

1. Time Period and Location: Akkad and Assyria

This lesson explores two different empires, separated by about 800 years. The Akkadian Empire was founded around 2300 BCE and dissolved around 2150 BC; the Assyrian Empire rose to power around 1300 BCE and dissolved around 612 BCE.

In addition to the Akkadian and Assyrian Empires, you will learn about the Babylonian Empire.



DID YOU KNOW

At one point or another, each of these empires was the dominant force of its day, ruling over most of Mesopotamia. Take a look below to see the origins of Syria in the north and Babylon in the south.



2. The Lamassu

The **lamassu** was important to these empires. A representation of an important guardian deity of Sumerian origin, the lamassu was a potpourri of animal bits and pieces. It typically featured the head of a human, the body of a lion or bull, and the wings of an eagle.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Below is a relief figure of the lamassu from the palace of Sargon II, who was an Assyrian king, not to be confused with Sargon of Akkad.



Lamassu from the palace of Sargon II

721–705 BCE

Relief carving

In the image above, you can see the body of a bull, the human head, and the wings of an eagle. Note the use of twisted perspective—the head is facing the viewer, while the body is in profile.

Lamassu can be seen throughout the remains of Sargon II's palace and are thought to serve as protective figures, like eternal guardians made of stone.



TERM TO KNOW

Lamassu

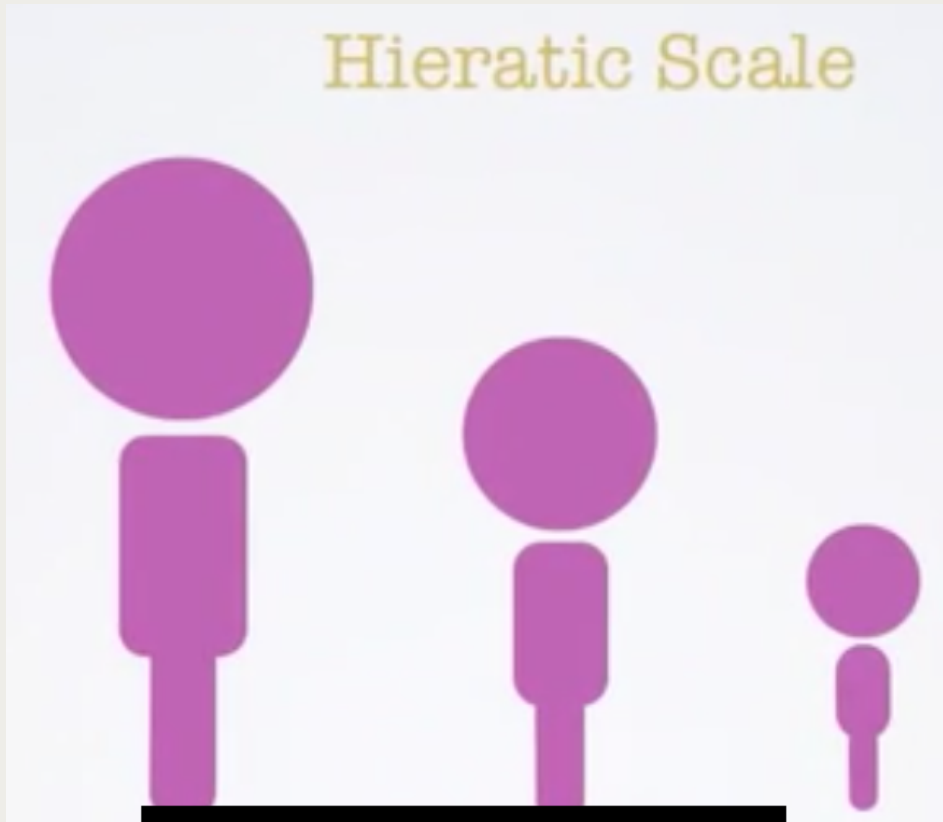
A deity of Sumerian origin, usually depicted with a bull's or lion's body, eagle's wings, and a human head.

3. Hieratic Scale

Hieratic scale, frequently used throughout ancient Mesopotamian art, refers to the use of relative size to show relative importance. The larger the figure, the more important it is.

IN CONTEXT

Here is an example of hieratic scale:



If you were looking at these three figures as a part of the same composition, the larger figure, such as a deity or king, would be most important. The next largest would be someone of importance, but less so relative to the larger figures, such as the son and heir of the king. The smaller figures would be people with the least amount of importance, perhaps enemies of the king or his slaves or servants.



TERM TO KNOW

Hieratic Scale

A system that represents sizes of things according to importance and based on fixed religious traditions.

4. Stele of Naram-Sin

Yet another example of hieratic scale in action is the Stele of Naram-Sin. Naram-Sin was the grandson of Sargon of Akkad. A **stele** is a slab of stone or terracotta. It was used as a tool for communication, as well as a commemoration of an important event, such as the victory of an important battle.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Pictured here is Naram-Sin's conquest of the Lullubi people from Eastern Mesopotamia.



The Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin victorious

2254–2218 BCE

Notice in the above image that Naram-Sin is the most important figure in the composition and, therefore, the largest figure. Naram-Sin also wears a helmet with animal horns on it, making him look like a god. Some of his crew or soldiers can be seen directly beneath him, and they are the next largest figures in the composition. The smallest figures are the enemies of Naram-Sin, such as the gentleman with a spear through his throat. Notice how the enemies appear chaotic and disorganized, with Naram-Sin and his soldiers easily trampling them. At the top of the stele are two sun-like objects that might represent deities. The fact that Naram-Sin is closest to them indicates that they have favored him in battle.



TERM TO KNOW

Stele

A slab of stone or terracotta, usually oblong and carved.

5. The Stele

As far as the importance of art and architecture as a means of demonstrating authority, there is another very important aspect of the stele. These rays of light here are thought to represent deities that were important to the Akkadians. Conquest under the careful observance and consent of a deity would serve to reinforce the legitimacy of Naram-Sin's rule.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Here is the Stele of Hammurabi, named after the first king of the Babylonian Empire, Hammurabi.



HAMMURABI ADORING THE SUN-GOD.

Hammurabi with the god Shamash

~1750 BCE

Relief carving on diorite (stone)

This stele (above) depicts two important things. First, we see Hammurabi on the left receiving the law or code of conduct for the Babylonian people from the god Shamash. Notice how although Shamash is larger than Hammurabi, the heads of the two figures line up at the same point. This is a subtle way of indicating the ruler's proximity to the god. This depiction serves to legitimize Hammurabi's code, which is inscribed below him. In addition to being an example of authority and legitimacy for Hammurabi, it also serves as a means of communicating the law to his citizens.



DID YOU KNOW

The Code of Hammurabi is one of the longest examples of early writing, as well as one of the first sets of codified laws. It includes such laws as an eye for an eye, and throwing an alleged adulterer in the water to see if she floated or sank.

➦ **EXAMPLE** This next example is a bust of an Akkadian ruler, likely Sargon of Akkad, aka Sargon the Great.



Possibly Sargon of Akkad

23rd–22nd century BCE

Bronze (cast)

This highly stylized bronze casting was once attached to a body, which is now lost. It was most likely a representation of royalty and authority instead of the actual appearance of Sargon himself. Portraying someone in an idealized form was a way of impressing observers and reinforcing a ruler's authority. The damage to the eye is thought to be intentional as a way of destroying the power of the image.

6. Palace Reliefs

The rooms in two palaces of ancient Akkad and Assyria were decorated with reliefs depicting manly scenes, such as hunting and battle. These reliefs had two jobs:

- Impressing guests to the palace
- Displaying the ruler's authority

Here is a famous relief, titled *The Dying Lioness*:



The Dying Lioness

Ashurbanipal Palace, Nineveh

~645 BCE

Relief carving on alabaster (stone)

The lioness is shown pierced with three arrows, dragging her legs and moaning in pain. Not only would the slaughter of dangerous and powerful animals raise credibility in the eyes of others, but the activity of hunting was limited to the king himself and therefore an expression of his complete dominance over nature and people. This particular relief is from the palace of Ashurbanipal, the last king of the Assyrian Empire in ancient Nineveh in northern Iraq.

Scenes of battle with the home team winning, of course, were another popular subject for palace reliefs. Powerful rulers had powerful armies, after all. Rulers wanted to ensure that this was ingrained in the hearts and minds of their subjects and opponents.

Take a look at this particular scene from the palace of Ashurbanipal in the ancient city of Nimrud, near the ancient city of Nineveh, and more north of the modern-day city of Baghdad. It depicts archers firing upon enemies from behind the protective shield of another soldier.



Assyrian Archers

Relief carving from Central Palace in Nimrud

~883–859 BCE



SUMMARY

Rulers from the Akkadian and Assyrian Empires often used art to express an element of authority. In this lesson, you looked at the **time period and location of Akkad and Assyria**.

Not only did art from this period have elements of authority, but religious aspects were relevant as well. **The lamassu and the hieratic scale** were explored in this lesson. Remember, the lamassu was a deity of Sumerian origin, depicted with a bull's or lion's body, eagle's wings, and a human head. The hieratic

scale was a system representing sizes of things according to importance and based on fixed religious traditions—the larger the figure, the more important it was.

Finally, you explored **the stele**, and more specifically, **the Stele of Naram-Sin**, as well as **palace reliefs** that decorated the palace walls. Steles were used as a tool for communication, as well as a commemoration of an important event, such as the victory in an important battle. Palace reliefs, often depicting war scenes, were meant to impress guests and display authority.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Hieratic Scale

A system that represents sizes of things according to importance and based on fixed religious traditions.

Lamassu

A deity of Sumerian origin, usually depicted with a bull's or lion's body, eagle's wings, and a human head.

Stele

A slab of stone or terracotta, usually oblong and carved.