

# Mesopotamia

**A major artistic culture of early antiquity**

**Contemporary to:  
Indus valley civilization and Egyptian art**



# Geographical location

**Region stretching from the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean as far as the frontiers of present Afghanistan.**

**The valley confined to the center on the basins of the two great rivers - Tigris and Euphrates**

**Borders less firmly defined than Egypt caused an unstable political development.**



## **Western Asiatic Art**

**Art nevertheless developed fundamentally along consistent lines, reflecting the concepts of divinity and kingship, closely interlocked.**

**Religion as primary source of inspiration in Mesopotamian art.**

**Often labeled according to the dominant strain under discussion.  
For example – Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian or as Persian.**

## **Process of evolution in the art of Mesopotamia**

**The representation of the forms (human figures etc) starts with geometric shapes and gradually moves towards realism as one endeavored more and more to render visual reality, with life like details, individual characteristics and personal traits.**

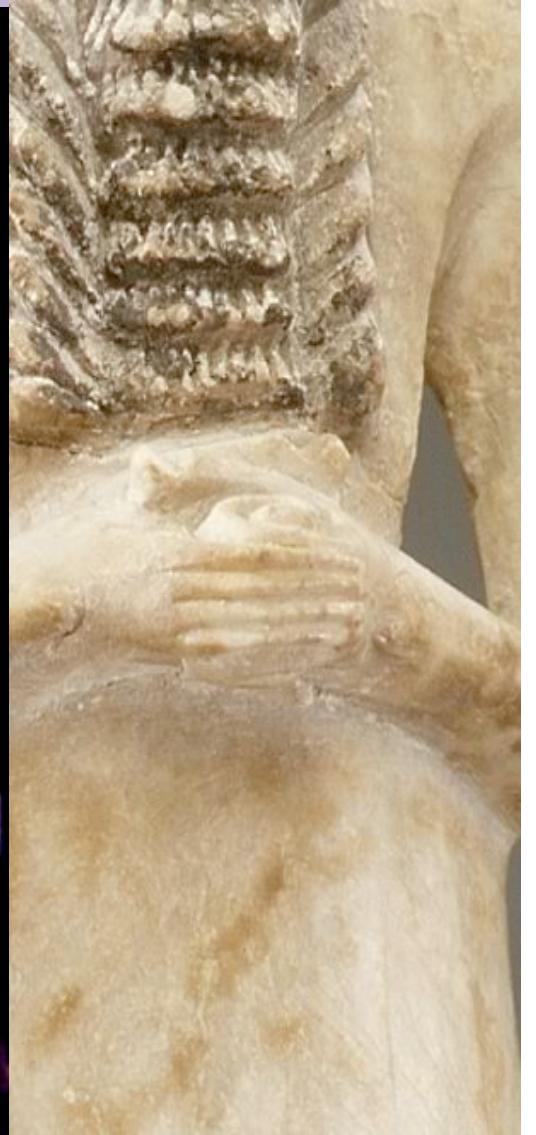
# Artifacts

**Art advanced from semi abstract to semi realistic.**



## Statues from Tell Asmar

A group of twelve statues from the first half 3rd millennium BC discovered together by Henri Frankfort from the Favissa in the temple of Abu at Tell Asmar.



**Individuals portrayed with hands clasped in prayer.**

**The geometric shapes and lines, angular elbows, a trapezoidal trunk and skirt in the shape of a truncated cone indicate primarily the use of suggestive means of expression by the artists.**



**Expressive facial features are credible of appreciation.**

**Inscriptions reveal the identity of two big statues as the King and Queen of Ashnunanak while others, as high dignitaries of the city.**

**Art primarily reveals the message of a theocratic social system**



**There was a decisive change in the next phase when the sculpture reverted from flat – edge carving to modeling.**

**How ever dynamic and interesting the earlier work looks like the geometric effigies in a way jar on our sense of harmony**

**It was quit natural that a new generation of sculptors attempted to get closer to realism.**



**The basic change of attitude is particularly striking when we find the change in conception and execution taking place in the same locality, among one and the same people. This was the case in the cities along the Diyala region in Mesopotamia, where there arose a school of sculptures whose vigour and boldness of forms was noteworthy. The statues are those of worshippers again but the faces now have a smiling composure, an amiability, which proves that the age of abject apprehension of the Gods had definitely ended.**



## Purpose of these statues

Sculptures made out of gypsum, alabaster or pink conglomerate placed at the foot of alter as an offering to perpetuate the suppliants presence and prolong his prayer for they believed that the statues would inherit their spirit once they leave the holy place.



## General characteristic features

**Figures seen wearing a kilt made of strips of cloth known as Kaunakes. Men bare-chested and bare-footed, with the kilt drawn tightly at the waist; women wearing a long robe leaving the right shoulder bare. Figures stand or sit in the same characteristic gesture with hands clasped in prayer their gaze engrossed in a thought or meditation**



## The general trend of production

Not all these statues were the works of master sculptors. There was a mass production even then, and we can easily picture what these workshops were like; *very similar to the craftsmen booth we see even today in the bazaar.* The stones were supplied in abundance from the nearby quarries and therefore at a very low cost the craftsmen carved these statuettes for the travelers, pilgrims and the local town folk. These workshops were situated at a close proximity to the temple alter so that the statues could be bought before entering the temple complex.



## Portraits

**Almost all these figures were anonymous but along side this standardized production it seems certain that the expert artists or master-sculptors were called in by the kings and the high ranking officials and it is quite possible that in some instance we have actual portraits.**



**The Semitic type is portrayed with unmistakable fidelity and yet it is well differentiated from one individual to another. Despite of a family likeness the individuals stand out sharply with each of their characteristic features and personality clearly indicated.**

**The portrait head of King Iku Shamagan is well distinguished from the portrait of his army general Idu Narum.**



**Representation of female figures can be observed shown with much of grace and delicate features and well distinguished from each other of their likeness. While the general female figures were represented with their asymmetrical style of dress the queens had a procession of suppliants.**



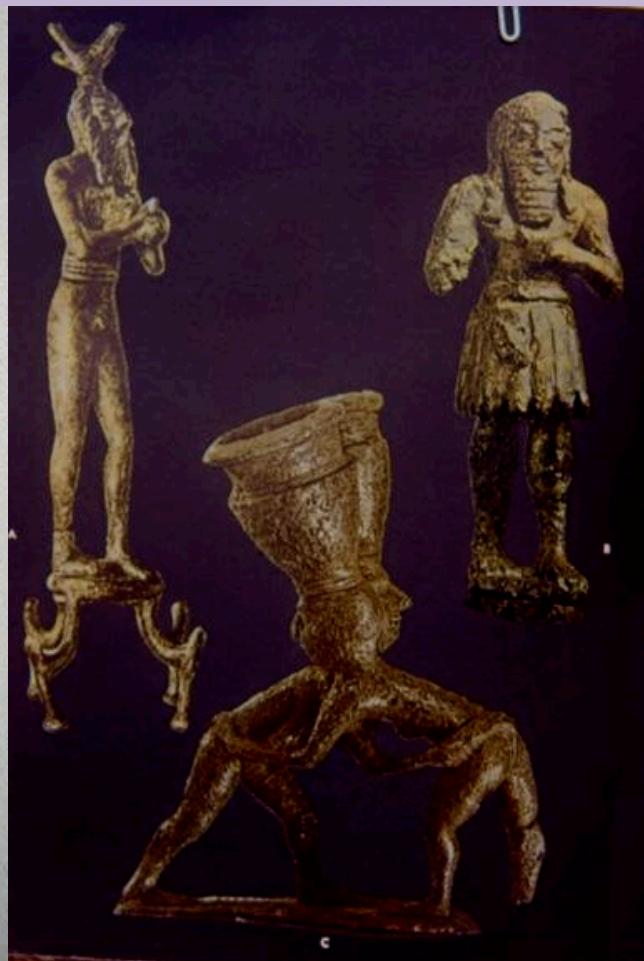
**'Queen of Mari' of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC can seen wearing a high polo's type crown and covered up from the neck to ankle with a designed pattern of fur type fabric.**



## Metal Sculptures

**Metal came into general use early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.**

**Copper, bronze, silver, gold etc in all grades from the coarse to the finest, were now available for many purposes and made themselves felt in art also.**

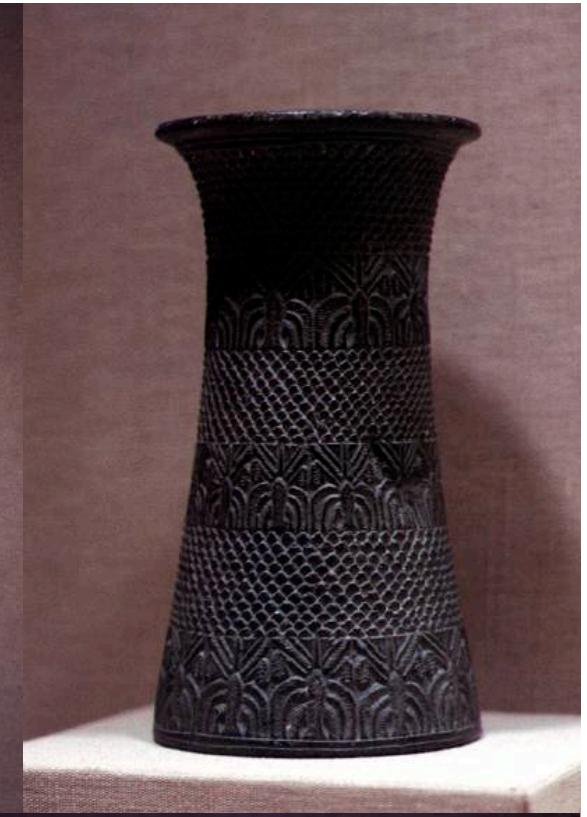


**Innumerable artifacts have been excavated**

**Detailed and finer delineation**

**All these metal castings taken into account, points out a fact that secular, non-religious themes from daily life were also being made which were expressions of pure artistic observation.**





Ceramic

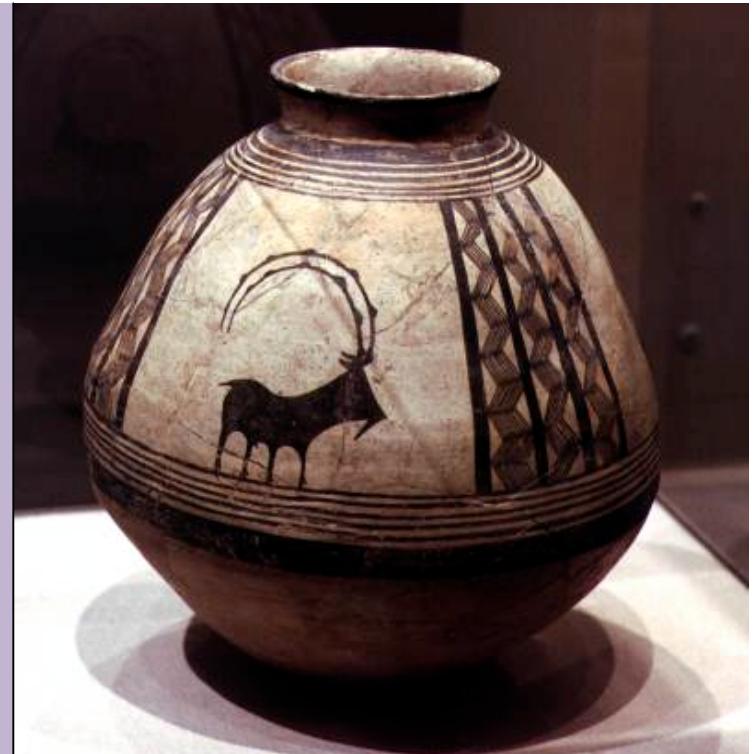


# Ceramics

**Traditions of making painted pottery flourished in agrarian society throughout the Near East by the late seventh millennium B.C.**

**Hand made ceramic in a variety of techniques; coil, mold, and slab construction, and served as cooking, serving, and storage vessels.**

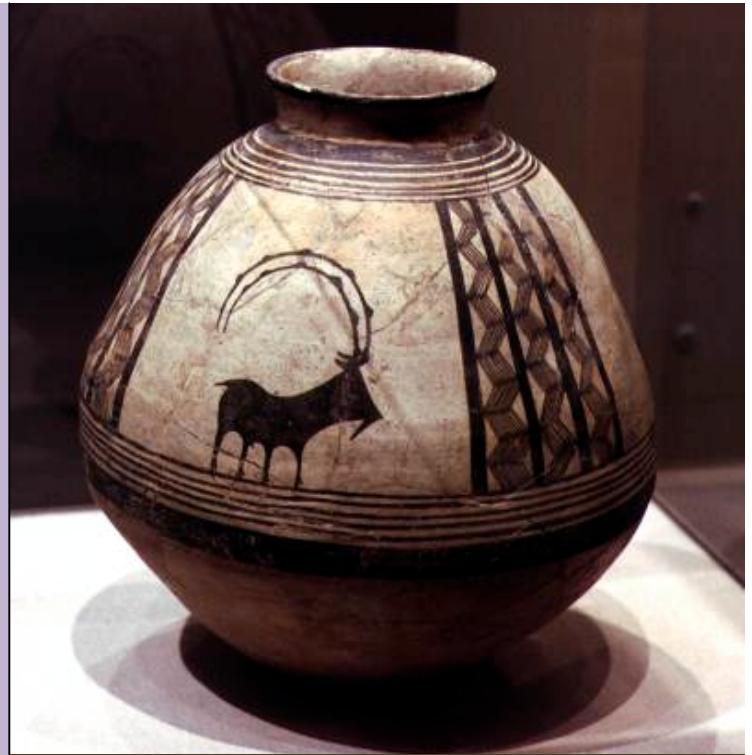
**The large buff-colored jar painted with dark brown designs is a masterpiece of early pottery making.**



**The geometric decoration on the upper portion divides the vessel into three panels. A stylized image of an ibex in each of these panels is shown in right profile highlighting the great arch of its exaggerated horns.**

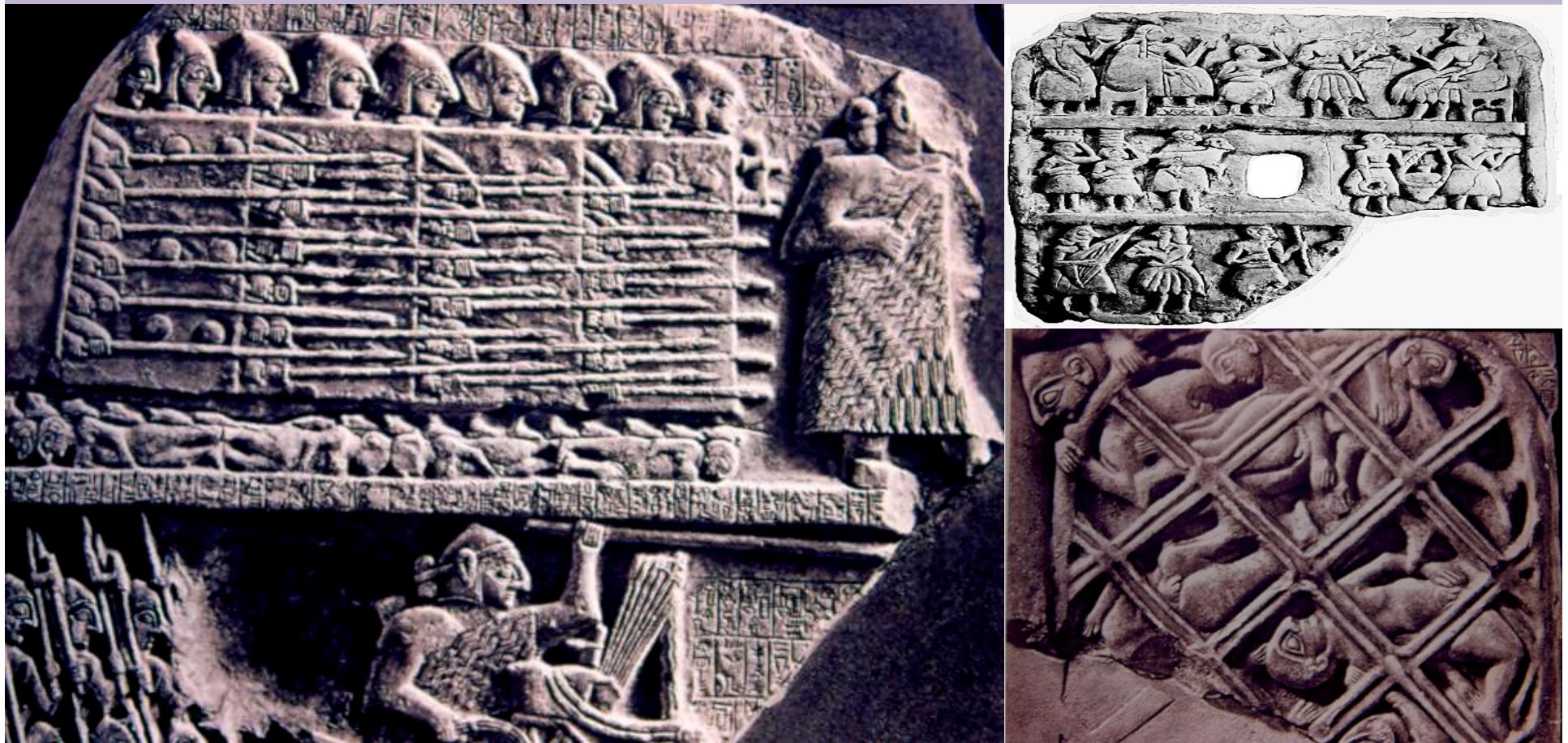
**The ibex was the most common motif in prehistoric ceramics of highland Iran, perhaps because of its symbolic significance as a prey to hunters.**

**A glaze is a layer of glass over a ceramic body. The first objects with a glazed surface were small beads dating to the Ubaid, mid-sixth millennium B.C.**

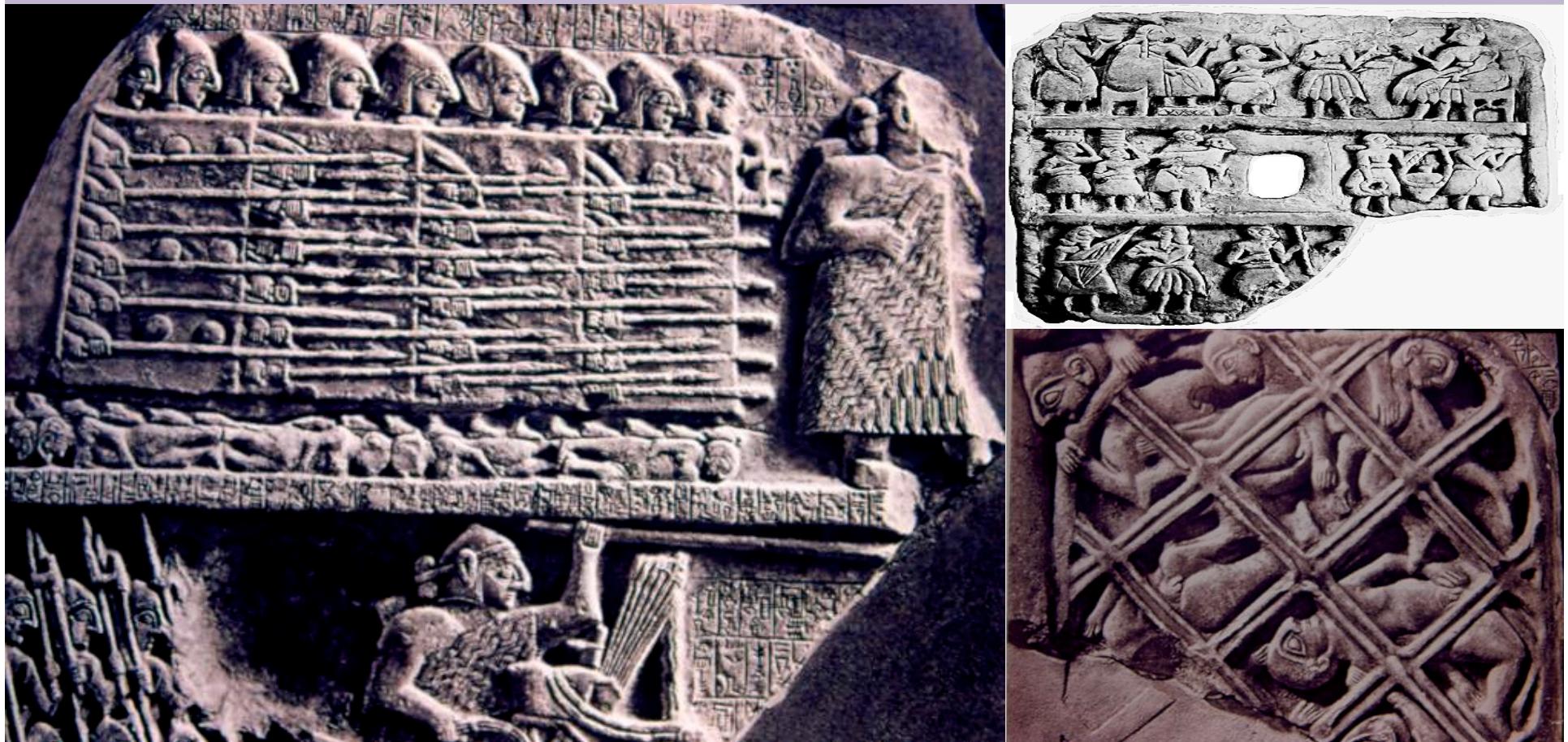


### Relief Sculptures:

The tradition of depicting war scenes and important events as such that comes down to us as documentation will be seen from here on in almost all the early civilizations and ancient traditions; These relief-sculptures are narrative in nature and give us a vivid visual description of events. One can also observe certain hieroglyphic scriptures descriptive of the incidents and characters represented.



- King wanted his and his soldier's heroic deeds to be documented
- Placing them for public display would mean that the purpose lied in the glorification and greater awareness of such events
- To narrate the story of the incident, for them who were not part of the event
- Common people to have faith and fear in the capabilities of their powerful rulers
- To inspire the next generation to be warriors.





*Above Left.* Reign of Naramsin, 2254-2193BC; *Above Right*, Flat Mould

*Bottom Left.* Worshiper approaching bearded god; *Bottom Right*, Cylindrical Mould





2250–2150 B.C.; Late Akkadian period

Presence of secular themes.

Storytelling concepts

Vertical development of compositions

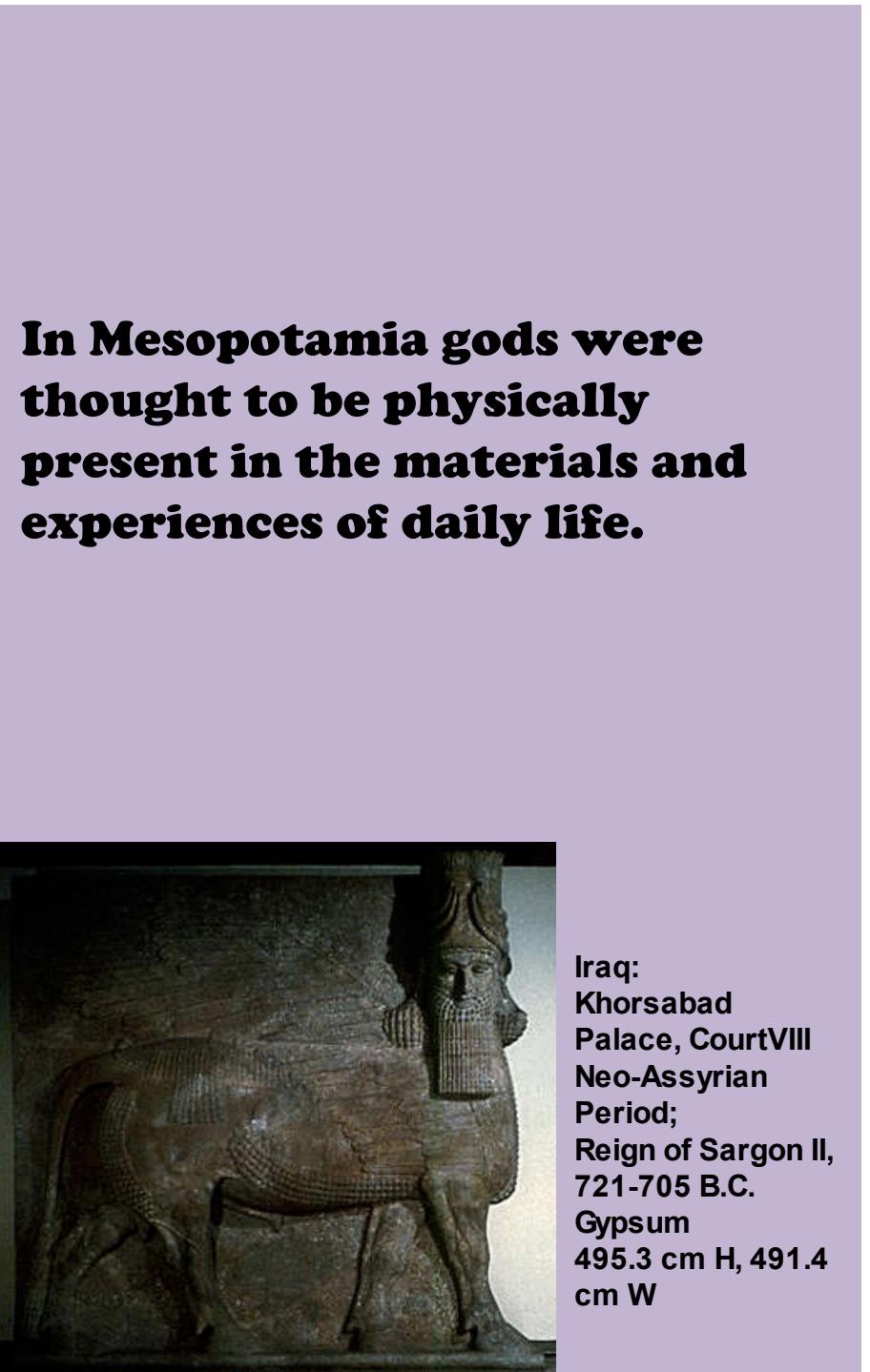


*Left, Wounded Lion.*  
Assyrian bas-relief  
sculpture, Palace at  
Nineveh, 668-630BC



*Bottom Left, Persian  
guard in head dress.*  
Assyrian bas- relief  
sculpture, Palace at  
Nineveh, 668-630BC

*Bottom, War horse.*  
Assyrian bas- relief  
sculpture, Palace at  
Nineveh, 668-630BC



**In Mesopotamia gods were thought to be physically present in the materials and experiences of daily life.**

Iraq:  
Khorsabad  
Palace, Court VIII  
Neo-Assyrian  
Period;  
Reign of Sargon II,  
721-705 B.C.  
Gypsum  
495.3 cm H, 491.4  
cm W



**Mesopotamians believed that Deities literally inhabited their cult statues after they had been animated by the proper rituals**

**Fragments of worn statues were preserved within the walls of the temple.**



**This colossal sculpture was one of a pair that guarded the entrance to the throne room of King Sargon II.**

**A protective spirit known as a "lamassu".**

**Shown as a composite being with the head of a human, the body of a bull & the wings of a bird.**

**In a profile view the creature appears to be walking; when viewed from the front, to be standing still. Thus it is actually represented with five, rather than four, legs.**



**Pair of Lamassu figures flanking a gateway of the  
Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, 713-706BC**





Demon Pazuzu



Four headed God

**Gilgamesh; Mastering a Lion. 713-706BC;**



**Lion hunt of Ashurbanipal; 668-667BC**



Lion hunt of Ashurbanipal; 668-667BC