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The Tell Asmar Hoard and Rituals of Early Dynastic Sculpture¹

Abstract: Current methodologies for approaching the sculpture found in Early Dynastic temples (ca. 2900–2350 BCE) are still entrenched in the ideas formulated around the early reception of these statues as artworks. The primary archeological reconstruction for the installation of statues in the Early Dynastic temple follows a model of the temple as museum vis-à-vis the display of sculpture. Focusing on the sculpture hoard from Tell Asmar, I argue that a consideration of archaeological context and textual evidence allows us to locate the agency of Early Dynastic temple sculpture beyond display before the divine. Statues were created through the act of dedication but they, in turn, assumed agency by shaping the acts of devotion in which temple visitors participated. That is, statues can be understood in relation to those who visited temples rather than solely in relation to the divine inhabitant. The visual culture of Early Dynastic statues is governed by the choice of abstraction, which resulted in a corpus of temple sculpture in a consistently recognizable form. Abstraction was a structuring element that facilitated, and gave direction to, the human encounter with the divine. As a material, physical form, the Early Dynastic temple statue had the potential to mediate social interactions among the realms of living, deceased, and divine.

Keywords: temple sculpture, Early Dynastic period, Tell Asmar sculpture hoard, Abu Temple, rituals, cultic installations

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Introduction

The Tell Asmar sculpture hoard is among the most recognizable Mesopotamian artifacts (Fig. 1). It was excavated in 1934 at the site of Tell Asmar, in the Diyala region east of Baghdad. Comprised of twelve statues buried together underneath a floor of the Abu Temple, the hoard dates to the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BCE) of Mesopotamia (Frankfort 1939). More specifically, the Asmar hoard is the earliest-stratified corpus of

¹ A more comprehensive treatment of the Early Dynastic temple statue is Evans 2012, upon which the present study draws.



Figure 1: Tell Asmar, Abu Temple, Early Dynastic sculpture hoard. The statues in the hoard are now divided among Baghdad, Iraq Museum; Chicago, the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago; and New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From Frankfort 1935a: fig. 63. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Early Dynastic temple sculpture (Evans 2007). Some 550 surviving examples of Early Dynastic temple sculpture belong to a type referred to variously as dedicatory, worshiper, or votive sculpture (Braun-Holzinger 1977, 1991). These statues are with few exceptions only found in temples, and it is only in the Early Dynastic period that they are found in such abundance. Inscribed Early Dynastic statues reveal that sculpture was dedicated by individuals who, although of an elite class, were not royal. Countless other statues are not inscribed. At no other time in the history of the ancient Near East has the sculpture of private individuals survived in such abundance.

Upon its discovery in 1934, the sculpture in the Asmar hoard was proclaimed the oldest monumental stone sculpture in Mesopotamia. Its geometric forms, which abstracted the component parts of the body, were contextualized at the origins of a world art history. The early reception of Early Dynastic sculpture in general emphasized formal analysis. This methodological approach has persisted to present day. Early Dynastic statues consequently are treated in temple reconstructions as artworks on display, divorced from a fuller exploration of their life history in the Early Dynastic temple. I argue here that we must shift our thinking on Early Dynastic statues to a

consideration of the activities surrounding them. In doing so, the visual culture of these statues can be contextualized in the temple contexts from which they were retrieved.

The Early Twentieth-Century Reception of the Asmar Hoard

The Asmar hoard is the subject of a famous photograph, which is also among the most recognizable Mesopotamian artifacts (Fig. 1). In the 2003 exhibition *Art of the First Cities* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,² the photograph was blown up to occupy one wall of a small room in which only Early Dynastic sculpture was displayed. The dimensions of the room approximated that of a Mesopotamian sanctuary, and one entered through the reconstruction of a niched temple façade. The dim lighting of the room required that the photograph of the Asmar hoard be lit in the same manner one would light objects. One of the Asmar hoard statues was in a nearby display case, overshadowed by its own image in the photograph.

The photograph of the Asmar hoard has been reproduced countless times because it represents the only document recording the statues all together. As such, the photograph captures a moment in time before the statues were divided among collecting institutions. Through the division of finds, five of the statues were sent to the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago – which sponsored the Iraq Expedition to the Diyala region – at the end of the 1934 field season.³ The remaining seven statues were sent to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. In 1940, one of the statues entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art by exchange with the Oriental Institute Museum.⁴ The Asmar hoard photograph therefore documents a point in the life of this artifact group just prior to the fragmentation that occurred shortly after excavation. It is one-of-a-kind: it is unlikely there will ever be another Asmar hoard photograph.

The Asmar hoard photograph is an iconic image, but it is not a neutral record of a material assemblage. The photograph is composed differently from the manner in which a photograph of other artifactual assemblages, such as pottery, would be composed. If the statues had been arranged in a single row, for example, one could better gauge their relative size. The grouping also obscures a full view of some of the statues. Instead, the Asmar hoard photograph represents an aesthetic arrangement of

2 I participated in the organization of this exhibition when I was a Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art.

3 For the policies regarding the division of finds in early twentieth-century archaeology in Iraq, see Bernhardsson 2005.

4 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1940 (40.156).

twelve statues. With the largest statues at the center, the composition creates a monument of the group. Consequently, the photograph reinforces the interpretation of the statues as artworks. Even a self-described archaeological museum such as the Oriental Institute Museum touts its Early Dynastic sculpture as “one of the highlights of Mesopotamian artistic achievement” (Oriental Institute Museum 1982: 14).

The predilection to receiving the Asmar hoard as an artwork is reinforced by typology. That is, the hoard is comprised of stone sculpture. Stone sculpture is, traditionally, a fine art. When the statues were first discovered, the medium made a great impression. Henri Frankfort, the director of the Iraq Expedition, assumed the responsibility of publication. Based on what was known at the time about Egyptian sculpture, Frankfort maintained that “the human figure was for the first time sculptured in the round in stone for a monumental purpose” in the third millennium BCE. As the earliest stratified corpus of “monumental stone sculpture” in Mesopotamia, Frankfort believed that the Asmar hoard could provide “an understanding of the phenomenon of art itself” (Frankfort 1939: 1). The Asmar hoard consequently formed the “foundation of all sculptural achievement” (Frankfort 1935b: 121; see also Frankfort 1936: 41; 1939: 18, 39–40; 1943: 1).

The style of the sculpture in the Asmar hoard, in which bodily forms are abstracted, was understood as a geometric style. That a geometric style would stand at the origins of art was well established before the discovery of the Asmar hoard.⁵ Beginning in the nineteenth century, it was a widely-held assumption that art had evolved from its primordial origins in abstract, geometric forms. The abstraction of the Asmar hoard resonated further with an early twentieth-century aesthetic sensibility that had already embraced abstraction in so-called “primitive” art. Fundamental shapes, masses, and forms as well as expressions of power, vigor, and spontaneity comprised the commonly utilized, collective vocabulary of abstraction in art. In the early twentieth century, this same vocabulary was used to describe Early Dynastic sculpture in general and the Asmar hoard specifically.

It is not a matter of whether the sculpture in the Asmar hoard has geometric or abstract forms *per se*. At issue here, rather, is that since its discovery, the primary mode of reception for the sculpture in the Asmar hoard has been aesthetic. As a result, these statues are divorced from a fuller exploration of their use and meaning in the Early Dynastic temple. Inscribed examples indicate that the most common request to accompany the dedication of an Early Dynastic statue was for a long, healthy, and prosperous life for the donor. Through dedication, the donor therefore sought the benevolence and protection of the resident deity of a temple. Early Dynastic statues, it is therefore commonly argued, were displayed in the sanctuary so that as representations of the donor they could perform, with clasped hands, an eternal prayer before the divine.

5 For a full discussion of the reception of the Asmar hoard, see Evans 2012.

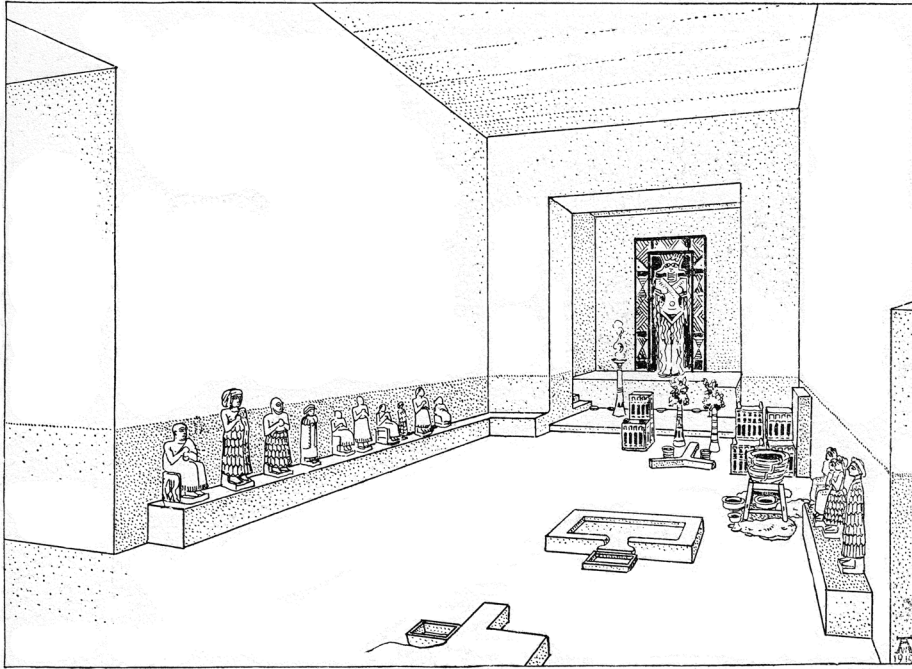


Figure 2: Walter Andrae, 1919 reconstruction of Ashur, Ishtar Temple G sanctuary.
From Andrae 1922: Taf. 11a.

Thus, the primary context of Early Dynastic sculpture has been reconstructed as a display set against the long walls of the temple sanctuary (Fig. 2).⁶ The practice of isolating objects for attentive looking, however, resonates more with methods of museum display rather than with archaeological evidence.⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dominant display model for sculpture was its installation against the long walls of museums (Jenkins 1992: figures 46, 47, 90; Moser 2006: 79). Displayed in static rows against the long walls of the most important part of the temple and set in isolation from other temple objects, Early Dynastic statues were reconstructed as *objets d'art*, performing the exhibitionary setting of the museums for which they ultimately were destined.

⁶ Walter Andrae, the excavator of Ashur who produced the reconstruction of sculpture display in Ishtar Temple G at Ashur, would have been well acquainted with standard practice in museum display. When the final report for the early levels of the Ishtar Temple was published, Andrae already had been appointed Curator of the Near Eastern Department of the State Museums in Berlin. He later became director of the Near Eastern Department of the National Museums and oversaw the installation of the collections. See Andrae and Boehmer 1989.

⁷ For what has been dubbed a museum “way of seeing,” see Alpers 1991.

These archaeological reconstructions have remained a part of our modern scholarship, even though Early Dynastic statues were never actually found set up for display as such. Like the Asmar hoard, many Early Dynastic statues were hoarded and buried in temples. Other statues were built into the mud brick architecture and cultic installations of temples. Still other Early Dynastic statues were found in various locations throughout the temple rather than in the sanctuary. If we dismantle the exhibitionary context of Early Dynastic sculpture, a fuller consideration can be given to the textual and archaeological evidence for rituals of sculpture.

Dedicating Sculpture in the Early Dynastic Temple

Why was sculpture dedicated in such abundance during the Early Dynastic period? Mesopotamian temples, in general, were not places of communal worship (Oppenheim 1944: 56, 60; Jacobsen 1976: 16; Lambert 1990: 118; Meijer 2002). Although it was the focal point of the temple, the sanctuary was often positioned at the back of a building architecturally subdivided into a sequence of small spaces. The bent-axis plan typical of the Early Dynastic period required a 90-degree turn in order to approach the altar, the focal point of the sanctuary, thus obscuring a view from outside of the room. The sanctuary itself was accessible probably only to a limited few who catered to the special needs of the god. As a small space filled with mud-brick furniture, such as altars, benches, and tables, in practical terms large numbers of visitors could not have been accommodated in the sanctuary (Crawford 2002: 48–49; Hansen 2003: 29). Therefore, one theory why so many people dedicated statues to temples in the Early Dynastic period has to do with overcoming this restricted access.

A small number of Early Dynastic temple statues have inscriptions in which the name for sculpture is written in Sumerian as *al an* and in Akkadian inscriptions with the logogram *ḏUL* or more rarely *AN.ḏUL*; all are equated with the Akkadian *šalmu* in later lexical lists (CAD *š*, s.v. *šalmu*). According to the ideology of Mesopotamian image-making, the *šalmu*, as a representation, bore some quality or essence of the individual represented.⁸ A Mesopotamian image, however, was not the represented *per se*. Here, the concept of the Early Dynastic temple statue as a physical, material object distinct from the donor is important. The act of dedication permitted entry to the statue. That is, dedication allowed the statue to do that which the donor could not do. Symptomatic of this quality of separateness, the temple statue participated in cultic activities after dedication to the temple had occurred.

⁸ A large body of literature grapples with the ideological and semiotic significance of the Mesopotamian image; for example, see Morandi 1988: 105–106; Beran 1989; Winter 1992: 15; 1997: 364–69; Bonatz 2002; Bahrani 2003: 121–48; Feldman 2009: 46–48.

For example, textual evidence from the late Early Dynastic e2-mi2 (“house of the women”) archive of the city-state of Lagash indicates that Early Dynastic temple statues were the recipients of offerings when the queens of Lagash visited temples on the occasions of festivals (Genouillac 1909: TSA 1; Förtsch 1914: DP 53, DP 54, DP 66, Ni. 23; see also Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: Appendix B). Dates and oil were the most frequent offerings to statues. Thus during the malt-eating festival of Nanshe, the late Early Dynastic queen Baranamtara of Lagash made offerings of dates and oil to an alan of Urnanshe, the earliest-attested ruler of Early Dynastic Lagash, as well as to “the alan of the inner room, of which there are eight” (Förtsch 1914: DP 53). Later, Sasa, another late Early Dynastic queen of Lagash, made offerings to an alan of Baranamtara as well as to her own alan during the festival in the courtyard of the temple of the goddess Bau (Förtsch 1914: DP 54).

In the latter example, one can assume that the statues were present in the courtyard since the festival was located there. More generally, archaeological evidence demonstrates that entrances, courts, and small rooms are archaeological contexts that reveal aspects of the life of Early Dynastic temple statues. Thus, both textual and archaeological sources indicate that statues were not always sequestered in the most sacred part of the temple – the sanctuary – where access was limited to the few who catered to the needs of the god. Rather, statues were available to receive offerings in more accessible parts of the temple where they were encountered by an audience larger than that of solely the divine. Statues therefore represented more than the eternal prayer encoded by the donor in the dedication of a statue to a temple. The act of dedication, which constitutes a social relationship between the donor and the statue, thus did not necessarily encompass the entire functional range of the statue itself.

If we wish to understand the Early Dynastic phenomenon of dedicating sculpture to temples, then we must shift our thinking to a consideration of the activities surrounding temple statues. The offerings discussed above made by the Early Dynastic queens of Lagash highlight the extent to which temple statues were tended by individuals who were not the donor. The example of queen Sasa cited above is the only time in the Lagash texts when a queen of Lagash made an offering to her own statue. The queens of Lagash instead made offerings to statues of donors who were still alive and to donors who were deceased. Offerings to statues therefore formed a social practice that existed beyond the donor. Outside of the sanctuary, temple statues became available to, and were encountered by, a wider audience. Rather than simply being installed in the sanctuary, where temple visitors could not go, statues instead negotiated the very terrain of access.

Offerings to statues representing both living and deceased individuals can be related conceptually. Temple statues acted as intermediaries between the human donor and the divine because they communicated a dedicatory request (Gelb 1956: 69). In a similar manner, temple statues also acted as intermediaries between the temple visitor and the divine. As the Lagash texts indicate, the social practice of

tending to alan was one instance in which visitors – in the examples here, royal visitors – were present in the temple. The tending of statues thus created a focal point for offerings that mediated between the visitor and the divine. The tending of statues of deceased individuals would suggest that statues also created a focal point for offerings that mediated between the living and the deceased. In all these instances, this was something that only the temple statue – and not the individual represented by the statue – could do.

The offerings in the Lagash texts to statues simply described as alan without mention of the individuals represented would seem here also to be significant. These references indicate that temple visitors tended statues even when the identity of the represented individual was unknown. In these instances, the alan was the focus of cultic activities *because* it was recognizable as a specific type of dedicatory object. That is, the visual image of a frontal human figure with clasped hands denoted a category of temple object that was significant regardless of whether or not it was inscribed and regardless of whether or not the identity of its donor was known. Following this line of reasoning, the temple statue would have been the focus of cultic activities because of its visual appearance. The appearance of the Early Dynastic temple alan specifically as a statue of a frontal human figure with clasped hands therefore was critical for its life inside the temple.

When it is recognized that Early Dynastic temple statues in fact could be placed outside of the sanctuary, they become available to, and encounter, a wider audience. This brings us back to the quality of abstraction that is characteristic of the corpus. Abstraction created consistency. Consistency facilitated the generation of the social bonds through time and space that were mediated by the material presence of the alan. One significant factor underlying the abstraction of Early Dynastic sculpture therefore was likely the desire for a consistently recognizable form that signified a temple statue to a greater degree than it signified a specific human donor. The Early Dynastic temple alan as a physical object therefore is fundamental for understanding its life inside the temple.

Rituals of the Asmar Hoard

Taking into consideration the observations made thus far, what can we say about the emergence of the temple sculpture tradition vis-à-vis the Asmar hoard, the earliest stratified corpus? The agency of the Asmar hoard statues can be localized relative to the archaeological record, which suggests that the cultic need for a depiction of the human form was stimulated by a shift in temple rituals. The statues therefore can be contextualized within a sphere of cultic activities in a manner analogous to those surrounding the sculpture recorded in the Lagash texts discussed above.

Some of the statues in the Asmar hoard depict figures holding vessels. The iconography of a standing figure holding a vessel is rare in the Early Dynastic sculpture



Figure 3: Tell Asmar, Abu Temple, Early Dynastic sculpture hoard, statue of a kneeling belted hero with clasped hands. Baghdad, Iraq Museum IM 19767. Frankfort 1939: pl. 26, no. 16 (As. 33:443). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

corpus.⁹ The vessel type held by these figures resembles a ceramic type known as the solid-footed goblet.¹⁰ In a level of the Abu Temple preceding the burial of the Asmar hoard, solid-footed goblets were deposited by the hundreds in a small room adjacent to the sanctuary (Delougaz and Lloyd 1942: 165–66). The appearance of solid-footed goblets in mass quantities coincided with the first appearance of provisions for liquid offerings on the sanctuary altar. Solid-footed goblets therefore likely were used for pouring libations on the altar (Wilson 1994: 68).

In the Diyala region, a small number of ritual containers in the form of three-dimensional sculptures of kneeling and crouching figures are contemporary with solid-footed goblets (Frankfort 1939: nos. 11, 92; 1943: no. 269).¹¹ The most important example is the kneeling figure from the Asmar hoard (Fig. 3). Nude but for a belt of four strands encircling the waist, the figure functions as a support, literally wearing a hollowed-out headdress in the shape of a small vessel, the rim of which is not preserved (Frankfort 1939: 12). Although the hands are clasped, the kneeling figure is different from the other figures in the Asmar hoard not only because it functions to support a vessel but also because it is carved entirely in the round with the underside articulated. The fleshy forms of the modeled legs are also incongruous with the Asmar

⁹ Only one other example is known outside of the Asmar hoard: a fragmentary female figure from the Shara Temple (Frankfort 1943: no. 265).

¹⁰ Hrouda 1971: 112; Behm-Blancke 1979: 57; Porada *et al.* 1992: 105. Braun-Holzinger (1977: 44) maintains that a solid-footed goblet is depicted only with the Shara Temple sculpture fragment, where the vessel has the characteristically narrow foot and string-cut base clearly articulated.

¹¹ The fragmentary state of the kneeling figure in the Asmar hoard might indicate that it is older than the other temple statues with which it was buried. However, it is the stratigraphic context of a crouching figure from Sin Temple VI–VII at Khafajah that definitively dates these statues of kneeling and crouching figures (Frankfort 1939: no. 92); the Sin Temple VI–VII figure is roughly contemporary with the large quantities of solid-footed goblets deposited in levels V and VI and is earlier than the first corpus of temple sculpture in Sin Temple VIII.

hoard, as is the medium of semi-translucent, amber-hued alabaster from which the kneeling figure is carved (Frankfort 1939: 25). Most importantly, the kneeling figure is not a human figure. Rather, it is a semi-divine, mythological “belted hero” (Wiggermann 1983; 1992: 164–66).

The function of the kneeling and crouching figures from the Diyala temples might be related to the cultic activities associated with solid-footed goblets. Like solid-footed goblets, the statues of belted heroes are containers. The articulated undersides of these figures suggest that, as containers, they were meant to be held in the hand like solid-footed goblets. The articulated underside of sculpture in general is associated with its potential handling in rituals (Porada 1981: 499).¹² A statue carved fully in the round would be visible from many viewpoints. When tipped to pour a liquid, the underside in particular would become visible. Perhaps the belted heroes are elaborate versions of solid-footed goblets, to be held by certain temple visitors or personnel in the performance of libations.

Regardless of how we ultimately understand their function, the kneeling and crouching figures discussed here are important because they indicate that a different style of sculpture was in circulation just before the temple sculpture tradition sees its beginnings with the Asmar hoard. These kneeling and crouching figures then drop out of the material assemblage. The representation of the donor as a frontal human figure with clasped hands becomes the norm. When representation shifted in favor of the donor image, temple sculpture became defined in contrast to the cultic equipment that had preceded it. Instead of the modeled forms associated with kneeling and crouching figures, abstraction was adopted. Instead of being articulated fully in the round, the sculpture figure is set upon a base, a discrete platform on which the figure stands. Represented frontally, the figure is no longer a piece of ritual equipment to be viewed entirely in the round. These shifts, understood here as deliberate, subsequently characterized the Early Dynastic temple sculpture tradition for hundreds of years.

Locating the Asmar Sculpture Hoard

If we are correct in understanding that the location of hoards suggests something of the original location of the objects they contain, then the rituals associated with the Asmar hoard are further suggested by its location in the Abu Temple. As is often observed, the statues were buried so far below the Square Temple floor level with which they were initially associated that they should probably be associated with an earlier level (Hrouda 1971: 112; Behm-Blancke 1979: 57; Tunça 1984: 192; Marchetti

¹² With the kneeling figure in the Asmar hoard, two small copper loops on the belt in the back might have facilitated its handling; see Frankfort 1939: 25.

2006: 26–27; Evans 2007: 621–25). The precise stratigraphic location of the Asmar hoard, however, is difficult to determine. In earlier levels, the space in which the hoard was buried comprised the entrance to the Abu Temple. Were the statues in the Asmar hoard originally set up at the temple's entrance? There, the statues conceivably would have functioned not only as objects of dedication, but as the agents for potentially countless offerings from visitors who encountered the statues at the temple entrance.

The archaeological record supports statues being positioned at the entrances of Early Dynastic temples. In Ishtar Temple G at Ashur, for example, the largest quantities of sculpture are concentrated near or on the stone threshold of the sanctuary entrance and at the two entrances to the temple proper (Andrae 1922: 62). At Tello, what is most likely a fragmentary statue base was found on the stone pavement at the entrance to the so-called Construction Inférieure, identified as an Early Dynastic temple (Crawford 1987: 71). At Nippur, to cite a final example, Early Dynastic sculpture was found on the bitumen-coated brick pavement beside an installation for liquids just inside the secondary entrance to level VIIB of the Inanna Temple.¹³

At Nippur, the association of sculpture with an installation for liquids recalls in concept the standing figures holding cups in the Asmar hoard, which are associated here with libation. That an association with liquids remains a tangible aspect of the Early Dynastic temple sculpture corpus in general can be supported by other contexts as well. At Khafajah, for example, almost half of the Sin Temple VIII sculpture was retrieved from room R 42:2, which contained additional objects as well as a large vat. The excavators associated the vat with liquid storage for libations because in the subsequent Sin Temple IX the room yielded three vats as well as a spouted copper vessel of the type depicted in Early Dynastic libation scenes (Delougaz and Lloyd 1942: 58, 69–70).

The disappearance of ritual containers such as solid-footed goblets and kneeling and crouching figures in the Early Dynastic temples in the Diyala region suggests a shift in cultic activity: an individual who participated in cultic activities like pouring libations is replaced by a statue of such an individual. Solid-footed goblets are ritual containers, but statues of standing figures either holding cups or clasping the hands are the actors in ritual. During the time of the e2-mi2 archive at Lagash, temple statues are the recipients of offerings of dates and oil. Perhaps we can imagine similar offerings that would have allowed the Asmar hoard statues to become the agents of cultic activities performed on behalf of the visitors who encountered these statues at the entrance to the Abu Temple. The standing figures in the Asmar hoard holding cups are rather unusual, and the dedicatory guise of a frontal figure with clasped

13 Full publication of the Inanna Temple excavations is being prepared by Karen Wilson, Richard L. Zettler, Robert D. Biggs, and the present author under the aegis of the Nippur Publication Project directed by McGuire Gibson. The field numbers assigned to the statues during excavation will allow these objects to be identified in the forthcoming publication: 7 N 82, 7 N 83, 7 N 84, 7 N 85.

hands subsequently became the norm. Certain contexts, such as those discussed above, demonstrate that temple sculpture nevertheless retains an association with cultic activities involving liquids.

Sculpture as Ritual: Donor Identity in the Asmar Hoard

When first excavated, the largest figures in the Asmar hoard (Fig. 4) were identified as deities principally on the basis of size, enlarged eyes, and identifying elements on the base (Frankfort 1939: 22). Although missing the head, the relief-carved image on the base of the male figure preserves a bird grasping quadrupeds. Frankfort reconstructed the bird as the mythical lion-headed Imdugud and proposed that the largest male figure was a cult statue of the god Abu complemented by the symbolic form of the deity on the base (Frankfort 1939: 13–16).¹⁴ Similarly, the fragmentary feet and base of a small figure set into the base of the largest female figure were understood as an identifying feature. The feet and base were reconstructed as a long-haired and beardless standing male figure, which is how the excavators imagined a child would be depicted. The combination of a large female figure with a child seemingly confirmed the purely conjectural identification of a mother goddess. The smaller statue set into the base of the standing female figure is indeed unusual. There are no examples of children represented in Early Dynastic temple sculpture, however, thus making this reconstruction dubious. It is likely that the exposed breast of the largest female figure also suggested the mother goddess identification prevalent among prehistoric clay figurines of nude females. The concept of a universal “mother goddess” is no longer considered viable. The identification of the largest male and female figures in the Asmar hoard as deities is no longer accepted.¹⁵

One difficulty in determining the identity of these figures is that they stand at the beginning of the Early Dynastic temple sculpture tradition. The largest male figure, for example, still bears vestiges of the kneeling belted hero in the hoard. Although now clothed, an unusual double-stranded belt encircles the waist. The hair is loose, rather than falling forward on either shoulder as is customary among other male figures in the temple sculpture tradition. Nor is the largest male figure a precisely frontal representation. Rather, a slight twist in the upper body shifts the right shoulder forward, evoking the sense of movement represented among the earlier statues of kneeling and crouching figures (Frankfort 1939: 22). Regarding this figure, the debate

¹⁴ For the Imdugud, see Jacobsen 1976: 7, 128–29; Black and Green 1992: 107–108; Wiggermann 1993: 243.

¹⁵ Jacobsen 1989 provides relevant bibliography for this debate.



Figure 4: Tell Asmar, Abu Temple, Early Dynastic sculpture hoard, statues of standing male and female figures holding cups. Baghdad, Iraq Museum IM 19752, IM 19751. Frankfort 1935a: frontispiece. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

has centered on whether the individual represented is human or divine. But it may be that the figure is neither.¹⁶ Semi-divine, mythological beings, such as belted heroes, stand outside the binary division of human and divine.

That the image on the base of the statue nevertheless is closely related to the male figure itself is suggested by the fact that the heads of both have been mutilated. The nose of the male figure had been broken off before the burial of the hoard; the head of the bird is missing altogether. Although mutilation of the nose, specifically, has been associated with royal sculpture, the numerous examples of temple sculpture in general that are missing the nose indicate that these practices should not be associated exclusively with the royal realm.¹⁷ It is further unlikely that the largest male figure in the Asmar hoard is a royal representation. While the heroic quality of the belted hero has been associated with kingship, royal iconography does not literally draw on the belted hero (Asher-Greve 1997: 443–44; Costello 2010: 33). Rather than a nude belted individual with the hair worn loose, what we accept as the Late Uruk

¹⁶ See also Selz (1997: 181), who suggested that the statues embodied both god and worshiper.

¹⁷ For the mutilation of royal statues, see Brandes 1980; Bahrani 2003: 149–84; Feldman 2009: 45–46; Woods 2012. For examples of statues in the Diyala region that are missing the nose, see Frankfort 1939, 1943. According to Frankfort (1939: 38), nos. 23, 54, and 169 either had been prepared to receive or had received a “new nose.”



Figure 5: Ur, Seal Impression Strata, drawing of the design from an Early Dynastic cylinder seal impressed on sealings. After Legrain 1936: pl. 20, no. 387 (U.14790, U.15019, U.18404).

royal image bears clear signifiers of royal status comprised of a garment referred to in scholarship as the net skirt and a headdress with a rolled or bulging brim. These attributes may continue into the Early Dynastic period, although the identification of the royal image initially is difficult to discern. By the end of the Early Dynastic period, royal iconography includes the hair bound into a chignon and a tufted garment that leaves one shoulder free.

Accepting nevertheless that the image on the base of the statue is closely related to the male figure, it is worth noting that Early Dynastic seal impressions from the Seal Impression Strata (SIS) at Ur also depict a bird with outstretched wings grasping quadrupeds (Fig. 5). In the SIS examples, which are roughly contemporary with the Asmar hoard, the composition of the bird grasping quadrupeds is placed over an architectural structure. The architectural structure in the cylinder seal reconstructed here is framed by the symbols of the goddess Inanna, thus orienting the composition at a sacred entrance.¹⁸ The identification of the bird as the Imdugud is an open question here, too, since the crucial identifying feature of a lion head is absent. Regardless of the precise subject being depicted, the association of the bird grasping animals with entrances to temples nevertheless is significant given the association of the burial of the Asmar hoard with the entrance to the Abu Temple. Perhaps the image on the base of the statue is meant to indicate possession rather than identity. The Imdugud bird on the drinking vessel of the god Ningirsu, for example, signifies that the vessel is the possession of Ningirsu (Sarzec 1884–1912: plate 43bis). Similarly, the Imdugud bird on the base of the Asmar hoard statue could signify that the statue is the possession of the resident deity of the Abu Temple. The parallel mutilation of the nose of the standing figure and of the head of the bird on the base then could be interpreted in relation to the

¹⁸ See also the reconstruction of the Temple of Ninhursag at Tell al-'Ubaid, in which the Early Dynastic copper-alloy Imdugud relief is reconstructed over the entrance (Hall and Woolley 1927: 116 and plate 38).

temple. The mutilation of the largest male figure, which holds a cup, then is a symbolic removal of an image associated with the performative representation of the cultic activities discussed above. Perhaps the mutilation of this image occurred at a time when representation was shifting to the human donor as a frontal human figure with clasped hands.

As noted above, the largest male figure in the Asmar hoard bears affinities with the sculpture of belted heroes that preceded it. These affinities create a type of hybrid iconography, which perhaps argues against a single fixed identity for the statues in the Asmar hoard. We therefore might look to a sort of collective identity for the correct identification. That is, the statues in the Asmar hoard might not have a link to any one single donor because they stand at the beginning, before the codification of the temple statue tradition. Following this line of reasoning, they demonstrate a temple sculpture tradition just emerging and in the process of becoming a consistent representational mode. In the guise of the cultic performance of libation, they do not assume any one identity, and they are not the product of any one donor.

Statues that are aligned with a temple and its deity rather than with a specific donor could challenge ideas about the immutability of the donor image. The large quantity of temple sculpture surviving from the Early Dynastic period, moreover, should not be equated with the autonomous motivations of the donor. Rather, the dedication of Early Dynastic sculpture cannot be separated from our understanding of the temple institution as an operative force behind the authority of the Early Dynastic city-state. Correspondingly, one plausible theory is that the donor had to do something for – or offer something to – the temple to be able to dedicate a statue to the resident deity.

Hansen (2003: 29–30) suggested that a small number of statues on which land transactions are inscribed may have been dedicated to temples on the occasion of the transactions they record. Among royal sculpture, there is also a correlation between the completion of a temple building project and the dedication of a statue to the resident deity of that temple.¹⁹ And by the end of the third millennium BCE, the dedication of royal statues was regularly connected to donations of continuous offerings for those statues (Zettler and Sallaberger 2011: 14; see also Winter 1992: 29–30). We therefore might infer further that the land transactions inscribed on a small number of Early Dynastic statues were in some manner connected to the maintenance of those statues. Gelb described this as a *quid pro quo* arrangement, in which the continued benevolence of the deity was in proportion to the continued maintenance of the statue. Behind the façade of dedication, the temple benefitted through the income gained in offerings and land donations (Gelb 1987: 138). In all likelihood, the temple therefore controlled the access to, and production of, an image that was probably manufactured in the temple; certainly dedicated to the temple; and always disposed of exclusively within the temple.

¹⁹ For examples, see the Early Dynastic statue of Enmetena of Lagash (Steible 1982: Ent. 1; Cooper 1986: La 5.17); see also the statues of Gudea of Lagash (RIME 3/1).



Figure 6: Tell Asmar, Abu Temple, Early Dynastic sculpture hoard, statue of a standing male figure with head and body carved separately. Baghdad, Iraq Museum IM 19759. Frankfort 1939: no. 11 (As. 33:439). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

If we therefore accept that the donor did not necessarily have autonomy over his or her own statue, then we have to consider that the life of an Early Dynastic temple statue – as a physical object – could also extend beyond a one-to-one correspondence with a single donor. Many Early Dynastic statues are constructed by joining various body parts – most commonly, the head, torso, and feet. The frequent presence of drilled holes and the frequent use of bitumen as an adhesive on Early Dynastic temple statues suggest a distinct pattern that cannot be satisfied by the usual explanations of accidental breakage and subsequent repair. An alternative to interpreting drilled holes and bitumen as evidence of ancient repair is that these statues represent composite sculpture assembled from various pieces of stone. The head, including the hair and beard, of the smallest standing male figure in the Asmar hoard, for example, was carved from a different piece of stone than that of the body and was attached by means of a drilled hole (Fig. 6).²⁰

²⁰ Frankfort 1939: 24. The feet are missing but likewise would have been secured by pegs inserted into drilled holes on the underside of the skirt.

As would be expected, many more sculpture fragments than complete statues are retrieved in excavation. In some instances, however, these fragments form a consistent pattern in the archaeological record. Concentrations of sculpted heads in fact are often left behind in the occupation levels of temples. This might suggest that the addition of a new head was sufficient for creating a new statue for a new donor.

Was composite construction, by which temple statues were assembled from component parts, practiced in order to facilitate the use, disassembly, and then reuse of temple sculpture? We accept similar practices for metal statues. The Ur III administrative archive, for example, attests to the practice in the Innana Temple at Nippur of recycling temple objects made of metal, which could be melted down for re-use; in one instance these objects were melted down for placement on the cult statue of Inanna (Zettler 1992: 146; Zettler and Sallaberger 2011: 23). The Palace G texts at Ebla document the annual receipt of silver for the head of Kura, the city god, likely for the ritual renewal of the cult statue (Archi 2005: 81).

How did assembling and disassembling affect the sense of the *alan* as an essential presence of the donor in the statue? Cult statues, for example, were an impermanent abode of the divine. When a cult statue was damaged, the divine presence could be withdrawn (Walker and Dick 1999). Late third millennium texts refer to provisions for performing the mouth-opening ritual annually on the statues of Gudea (Sallaberger 1993: 281 and *tabelle* 101). These references would suggest that this ritual was not performed just once when the statue was initially consecrated. Rather, the ritual was repeated at intervals. The renewal of the statue potentially was an iterative practice in which an aspect of the represented entered the statue repeatedly. Perhaps a reuse of the temple statue for multiple donors similarly could be obtained.

The desire for a stable, recognizable form that resembled an *alan* more than it resembled any given human donor was one important reason for abstraction in Early Dynastic temple statues. In addition to potentially mediating social interactions through time and space and among the realms of living, deceased, and divine, the consistent use of abstraction in the Early Dynastic sculpture corpus potentially had a practical aspect in facilitating the steady supply of statues to the donor sphere. While this hypothesis can be problematized vis-à-vis the ideological aspect of the *alan*, the reality is that we already accept such practices as they occur among cult statues as well as other temple statues in metal and metal objects in general. Rather than a singular definitive death of a statue, a plausible alternative is that Early Dynastic temple statues were continually remade, thus prolonging the life of the statue beyond the representation claimed by any one single donor.

Conclusion

An examination of the circumstances under which the Asmar sculpture hoard appeared is informative regarding temple practices in the Diyala region. As the earliest

stratified corpus of temple sculpture, the Asmar hoard belongs to a specific time and place. The dedication of statues to temples nevertheless is a widespread practice. It therefore is possible to take a similar approach in the examination of other contexts in which temple statues first appear. Such an examination suggests that temple statues evolved from a need to depict the donor in human form. This need was stimulated by a shift in cultic practices, discernible in the equipment, installations, and architectural layout of the Abu Temple. How and why exactly this shift was effected likely varied from temple to temple.

In leaving aside the Early Dynastic statue as an aesthetic object intended solely for viewing, the ritual life of temple sculpture can be examined. The status of Early Dynastic temple sculpture was likely inherent in the very existence of the statue itself, in the privilege of access to dedication. As a possession of the temple, statues formed a distinct artifactual category within the visual culture of dedication. Abstraction therefore was a response to the need for a statue to have a consistent and recognizable visual form: identifiable by appearance, the alān resembled a distinct category of temple object more than it resembled any given human donor. By achieving a degree of consistency, abstraction was a structuring element for the encounter with the temple statue. The extended life of the statue beyond any one single donor is another significant reason for the persistence of abstraction in temple sculpture. Abstraction therefore was appropriate for statues dedicated to temples. When representation shifted in favor of the donor image, abstraction thus became the principal quality of temple sculpture.

When the Asmar hoard was first excavated, emphasis was placed on the relatively well preserved condition of the sculpture and its stylistic unity. Yet in terms of iconography there are many anomalies within the hoard itself. They include the bases of both the largest male and female figures, the presence of standing figures holding cups, and the kneeling belted hero. The temple sculpture tradition of a frontal figure with clasped hands is also present among the hoard, but the human figure is just emerging, and these iconographies have not yet become separate and distinct. In reality, the Asmar hoard therefore is an eclectic ensemble of sculpture.

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