



Animals & Mythical Beasts: The Near East

AHAR7007

Depictions of the Animal World

- Very ancient tradition: at least back to PPNB
- Real animals & hybrid mythical beasts
- Variety of media:
 - Carved stone monumental art
 - Glyptic
 - Ivories
 - Ivory, shell, bone, stone inlay
 - Precious metals (especially vases)
 - Pottery & faience
 - Wall paintings, painted tiles etc.
- From historical period we can assess meanings / symbolic content of animal imagery



Pillar carving, Göbekli Tepe



Tell Brak Sealings

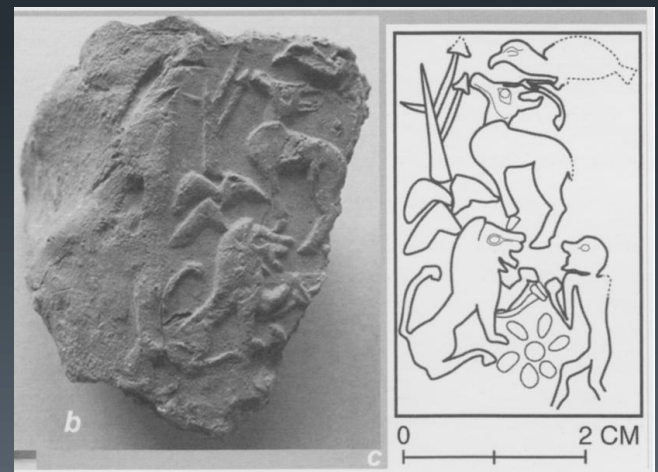
- 4th millennium stamp seal impressions found in rubbish dump
- Diverse imagery:
 - Animal combat: lions attacking gazelle, goats or deer
 - Copulating snakes
 - Hybrid human-animal figures,
 - Animals shown singly or in groups (e.g., turtles, hedgehogs),
 - Geometric or floral designs
 - Complex images of lions alone or in combat with human figures



Clay sealing

Tell Brak: Lion Sealings

- Development of Mesopotamian iconography & ideology of leadership
 - Lion in close combat with a human
 - Caged lion
- Lions: the equal & opposite of kings
 - Only creatures powerful enough to be worthy opponents
 - Also wild & vicious in contrast protective abilities of king
- Caged lion: victory over power of the beast. But image does not persist



Human Mastery Over Animals

- Uruk period: development of many Near Eastern canons of art:
 - Organisation in registers
 - Powerful musculature of animals
- Typical Near Eastern iconography:
 - Master of the animals
 - Lion hunt motif
 - Symbolism of bull & lion as symbols of royal power
 - Hybrid mythical animals (serpopard)
- Influence over Early Dynastic art, Egypt



Cylinder seal



Relief bowl



Gebel el -Arak knife

Mesopotamian Pandemonium

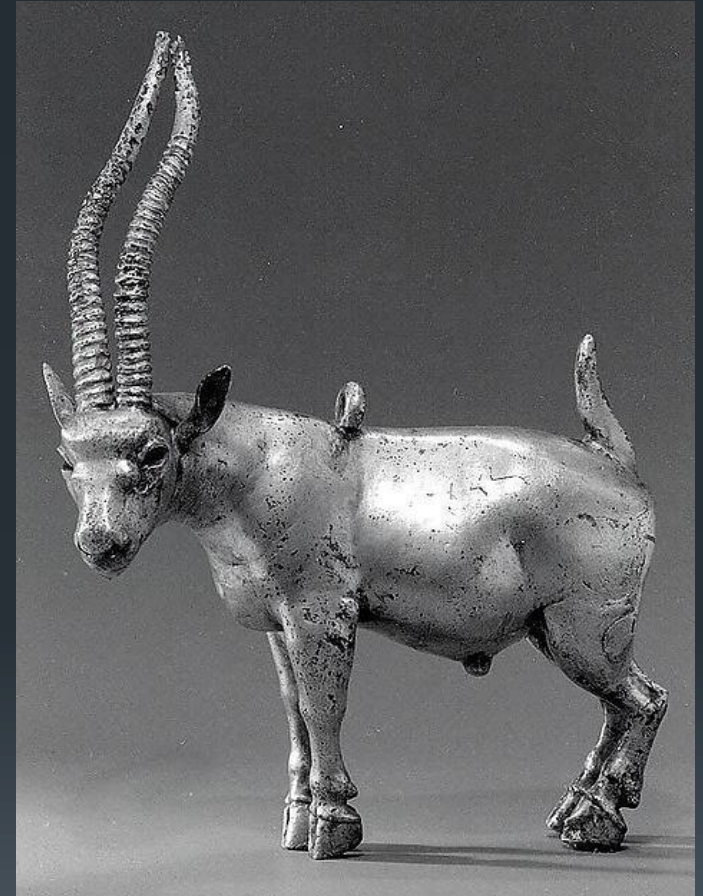
- Pantheon of 3000+ gods:
 - Small & table core pantheon of some ten to twenty deities of nature
 - Typically the 7-12 Great Gods (anthropomorphic)
 - Lesser deities represented by animals & hybrids



Ebla, bull with human face & beard

Proto-Elamite Art: Enchantment

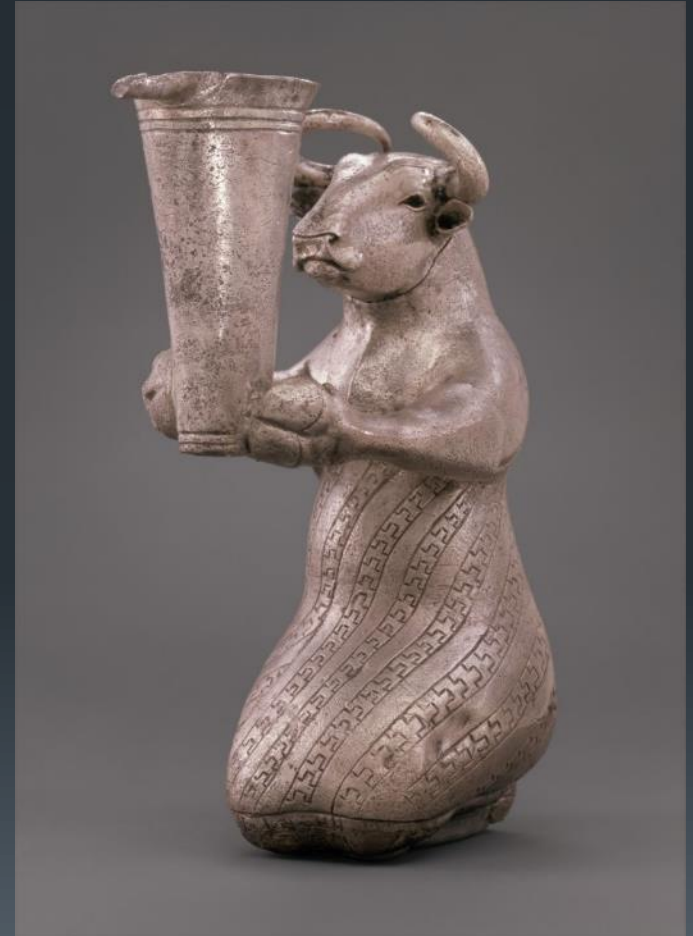
- Production of silver animal vessel
- Characterized by complexity of manufacture & apparent realism/naturalism



Susa mountain goat

Proto-Elamite Art: Enchantment

- Hybrid human animals
- Enchantment?
 - “beautifully made or made beautiful” (Gell 1992: 43)
 - “one of the technical means whereby individuals are persuaded of the necessity & desirability of the social order which encompasses them” (Gell 1992: 44)



Hybrid human bull vase

Royal Tombs of Ur

- Imagery refers to canonical Near Eastern animals:
 - Bull, sheep & goats, lions
 - Mythical hybrid beasts
- Animals acting as humans are unusual
- Three dimensional art & detailed inlay
- Stylistic rather than realism

Detail of lyre



Royal Tombs of Ur



International Style

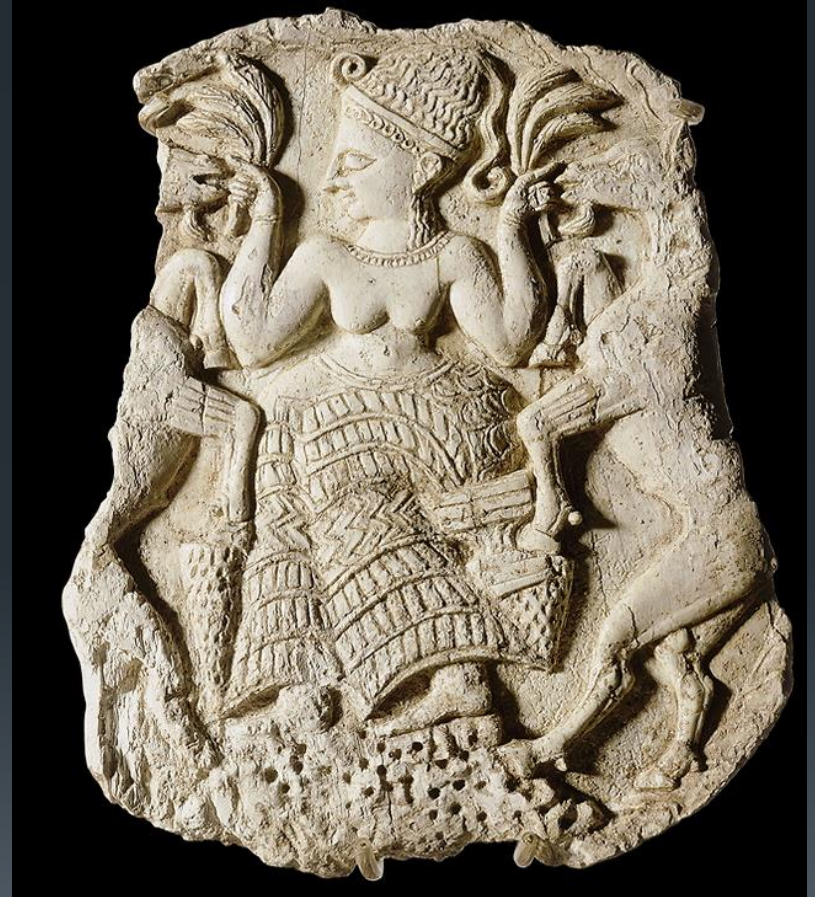
- 14th-13th century BC
- Easily portable luxury objects made of valued materials:
 - Ivory, gold, alabaster, faience
- Decoration: complete hybridism of forms, motifs, materials:
 - Not just borrowing artistic vocabulary from other styles
 - Sophisticated melding of motifs, forms & techniques from a variety of influences



Megiddo ivory

International Style

- Two main types of imagery:
 - Martial & hunting scenes (human & animal)
 - Pastoral scenes: goats & vegetation, recumbent bulls & lions, supernatural animals (sphinxes & griffins)
- Apparent lack of narrative
- Typically organised in registers



Ivory lid, Minet el Beidha

Melding of Influences

- Egyptian & Near Eastern iconography of kingship:
 - Martial prowess & royal victory, fertility & prosperity
- Mesopotamian art:
 - Lion hunt
- Minoan art:
 - Gambolling animals & bucrania



Kition, faience rhyton



Enkomi, silver bowl

Assyrian Animals

- Royal texts & monumental art:
 - Rich variety of wildlife encountered in distant landscapes especially in royal hunts
- Species include fallow & red deer, wild mountain goat (ibex) & gazelle
- Hunted in the wild & kept in herds for royal sporting events & cult practices
- Symbolic content, referencing distant lands
- Frequently species identified by landscape



Hunting scene, Ninevah

Goats

- Wild mountain goat
- Typically within a hilly landscape or symmetrical arrangement with a associated with a tree or plant common in Middle & Neo Assyrian art
- Also in scene with archer on foot attacking an ibex:
- Two species of wild goat identified by different horns:
 - one long horn curving back over the body: Asiatic ibex (*Capra ibex*),
 - two horns, one curving forward, the other back: Kuban tur (*Capra caucasica*)



Genie with ibex, Khorsabad

Gazelle

- Ringed horns of the gazelle curve back & up in an elongated S-curve:
 - Albenda identifies 3 possible species in Near East
- Animal well represented in second millennium Near Eastern art
- Represent the mountainous regions of the Near East
- Assyrians: represented in hunting scenes:
 - Minor quarry for feasting & sacrifice
 - Displaying the skilfulness of Assyrian soldiers hunting non-aggressive but fleet animals



Gazelle hunt, Ninevah

Assyrian Lion Hunt

- Ashurnasirpal II (Nimrud): some of the most spectacular lion hunts:
 - King hunting lions & wild bulls from his chariot
 - Ritual scene where the king poured an offering of wine over the dead animal
- Ashurbanipal (Ninevah): portrayed as “the complete action hero”
 - Slays lions on horseback, on foot or from the back of a chariot
 - Depicted as a heroic warrior
 - Kingly role of maintaining order



Ashurbanipal lion hunt

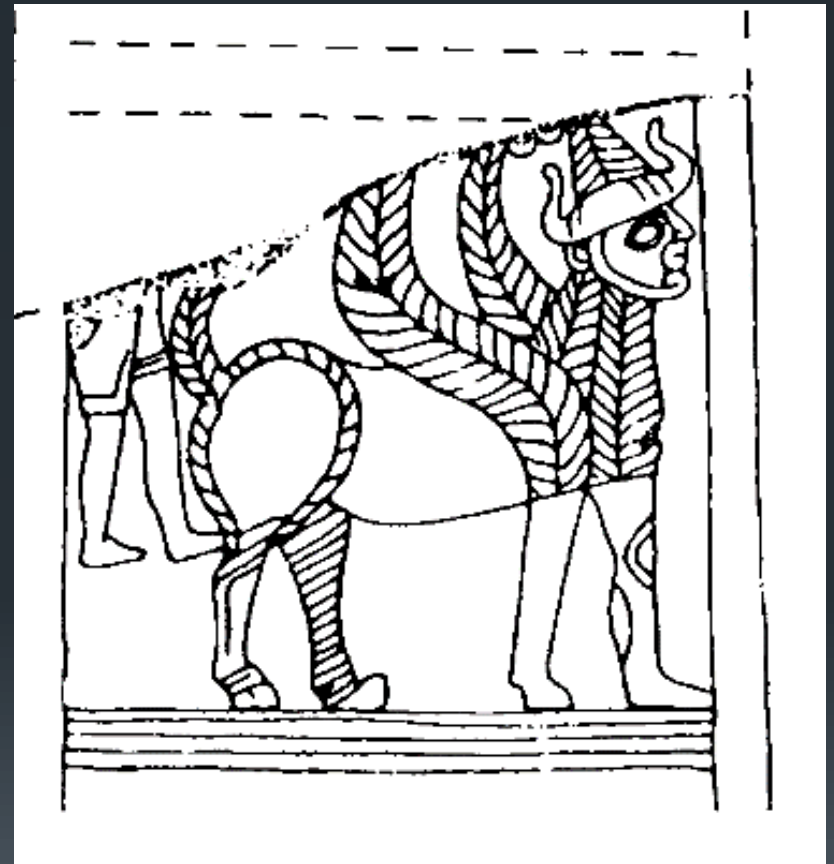


Assyrian Lion Hunt



Lamassu

- Protective winged human headed deity, typically with body of bull or lion
- Engraved in clay tablets & buried under to protect house threshold
- Typical representation in Near Eastern art
 - But most commonly associated with Assyrians



Detail of Ishtar Stele (c. 1800 BC),
Temple N, Ebla

Lamassu

- More 100 sculptures from Neo-Assyrian sites (c. 40 from Nineveh)
- Pairs of colossal statues guarding entrance to city & palace:
 - oriented & escorted visitor from gate to gate until he reached the throne room
 - Apotropaic function
 - Agency: designed to impress
- Assyrian “invention” of first millennium & disappear after reign of Ashurbanipal



Human-headed winged bull (lamassu), Nimrud

Winged Demon

- Griffin-demons/genii with human or bird head
- Displayed prominently in palaces or places:
 - Ashurnasipal, Nimrud
 - Sargon II, Khorsdabad
- Typically associated with king & dressed in identical clothes
 - Sprinkles water over king: purification
- Also associated with pine cone & pail:
 - Associated with tree of life



Winged demon, Khorsabad

Winged Demons



Summary

- Very long tradition of repeated imagery in Near East & Mesopotamia
- Importance of certain animals:
 - Lions, gazelle, ibex, goats, bull
 - Lions (& bulls) typically associated with royal power & virility
 - Hybridity invokes divinity, otherworldliness
 - Animals doing human things is very rare (Ur, Early Dynastic)
- Art as symbolic communication, enchantment & agency