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(HPAH7016) Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East

Assessment 1 Part 1: A theoretically informed analysis of your chosen representation/art object/image (2000 words): The Royal Standard of Ur.

Only selected elements regarding the chosen object (the 'Royal Standard of Ur') will be the focus of this exercise, due to the exercise's restrictions. These elements are deemed most important in beginning to understand the object, its 'life' or itinerary (past and present) [this will be placed in greater focus in the Presentation (Part 2)], and its maker. Certain ideas below are expressed as 'definitive' answers, but in no way are they to be considered such, in an attempt to form a coherent piece of work.

On seeing the object in the British Museum, in a room teeming with people of numerous nations, the small (comfortably lifted with both hands) intricately made trapezoidal box-like item in its protective glass house (shared only with the '*Ram [though a goat] in a Thicket*', one of a pair) looked light and shone brightly as nothing other than a glorious homage on behalf of the craftsman to his patron (the deceased?), people, their own culture and politics.

Zainab Bahrani highlights that the 'avant-garde artists and thinkers' of Europe in the late 1920's were seemingly 'inspired... by what they saw as the oddly abstract aesthetic form in Sumerian art, and by a vital presence in that form, than by its historical context'.¹ Evidence, offered by Bahrani, of this interest is to be found in the inclusion of an essay on Sumerian sculpture by Georges Contenau ('at the time chief curator of Oriental antiquities at the Louvre museum') in the Georges Bataille edited Surrealist journal, *Documents*, in 1929.² The product of this inspiration is revealed in the works of contemporaneous (to Bataille) practitioners of poetry and sculpture: 'Laurence Josephs, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore and other early twentieth-century artists permitted themselves to look at these artifacts in a way that was not sanctioned by the scientific archaeology of their own time', a practice emotionally driven and, as Bahrani suggests, without use for the historian's context.³ This reception of Sumerian artefacts was perhaps inevitable given that the historical context was yet to be fully fathomed. Contra to this Modernist practice is the academically faithful, disciplined, approach. As Irina Costache in the '*The Art of Understanding*' points out, '... historical context can determine the position of artists, the role of patrons, the demand for projects, and the value of [said] art within [a certain] society'.⁴

Ur stood in the desert of today's southern Iraq [see maps] 'inhabited from the Ubaid period, ca. 5900 – 4300 BCE, until the fourth century BCE when it appears to have been abandoned after the river Euphrates changed its course'.⁵ Between 1926 – 1928 archaeologist Leonard Woolley, leading the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania, completely excavated the Royal Cemetery at Ur. The 'general pattern' of 'royal'

¹ Bahrani, 2014, pp.15-16.

² Bahrani, 2014, p.15; Stoekl, 1985, p.xi.

³ Bahrani, 2014, p.25.

⁴ Costache, 2012, p.43.

⁵ Irving and Ambers, 2002, p.206.

burial consists of the 'principal occupant[s]' interment within a 'vaulted stone chamber set into a deep pit accessed by a ramp', the body surrounded 'with significant quantities of high value grave goods, and in some cases, with a group of human attendants'.⁶ Outside the tombs were found 'mass inhumations'.⁷ Reasoning for the accompanying burials is speculative and ranges from, sacrifices 'to ensure the fertility of the land', following heads of households to an afterlife, to that they (the burials) 'represent a suicide cult connected with the worship of Inanna', amongst other theories.⁸ Whether this supply of bodies came via voluntary acts, prisoners of war, some other source, is debated.⁹ The exact method of death is unconfirmed, Alexandra Irving and Janet Ambers state 'it is possibl[e] that the attendants participated in the rituals of death willingly, but it cannot be discounted that they were forced to imbibe poison'.¹⁰ As Irving and Ambers suggest '... the rich royal tombs may be as closely associated with religious power as secular power and their unique character may be linked to ritual practices specific to the city state of Ur'.¹¹ Harry Reginald Hall, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian at the British Museum between 1924-1930, offers a brief summary in *The British Museum Quarterly* (1928) of some of the most important objects discovered by Woolley at the recently excavated Royal Cemetery at Ur. Hall singles out the Standard, which the British Museum was to receive, stating 'what from all considerations except that of mere intrinsic value is by far the most important object discovered, the lapis and shell inlaid 'standard' with its scenes of the court of the king or chief with his retainers in peace and war, the 'Bayeux Tapestry' of Sumer, as it has been called'.¹² Hall adds 'it is an outstanding object of Sumerian art, and from the cultural – historical point of view one of inestimable value'.¹³ This observation of Hall's is an example of the objects modern reception. Hall explains the tag, 'it is called a 'standard' because apparently something of the kind was mounted on a staff and borne before great personages'.¹⁴ This portability of an object was common and perhaps an important aspect, as Ann Perkins states that 'the Babylonian [a term used loosely in this instance] artists thought always on a small scale, and the vehicles of artistic expression were portable objects: vases, plaques, stelae, cylinder seals'.¹⁵

The narrative concerns the larger central (both literally and figuratively) figure displayed in the registers [see images], the figure's comparative size symbolic of someone in particular and the narrative a representation of his life events. As well as a reaffirming narrative of its society's (cultural and political) structure and reality, accredited to this particular figure. The two types of narrative highlighted by Perkins are 'cumulative' which is a representation of a specific event or moment (the culmination of off-stage happenings) sometimes to be taken as a symbol, and the 'episodic method' which is a series of events, something akin to a

⁶ Irving and Ambers, 2002, p.207.

⁷ Irving and Ambers, 2002, p.207.

⁸ Irving and Ambers, 2002, pp.208-209.

⁹ Irving and Ambers, 2002, pp.208-209.

¹⁰ Irving and Ambers, 2002, p.209.

¹¹ Irving and Amber, 2002, p.209.

¹² Hall, 1928, p.66.

¹³ Hall, 1928, p.67.

¹⁴ Hall, 1928, p.67.

¹⁵ Perkins, 1957, p.54.

modern comic strip, 'registers', ('encourag[ing] concrete realism').¹⁶ The Standard seemingly utilises both methods.¹⁷

With population increase came the emergence of writing, shifts in architectural ability and practice, and works such as the Standard and works with similar depictions.¹⁸ Certain of these practices were only possible with the acquisition and use of imported materials given the geographical location of the Sumerian civilisation and its lack of certain natural resources.¹⁹ During the earlier 'Ubaid period' there was seemingly, within Mesopotamia, a geographical and administrative divide in the use of lapis lazuli; as Georgina Herrmann states 'the north must have enjoyed a monopoly of the lapis trade at this time, for no lapis lazuli has been found on contemporary southern sites'.²⁰ The use and control of lapis lazuli seemingly shifts, as 'lapis lazuli appears on southern sites for the first time in the Jemdat Nasr period and it is significant that by this time supplies in the north... are minimal'.²¹ Herrmann states that during this Jemdat Nasr period Mesopotamians had a 'sufficient surplus' of imported lapis lazuli that they were able to export the stone to the Egyptians.²² Herrmann states that whilst lapis lazuli was 'relatively plentiful' during this period (Jemdat Nasr) 'occurring in the Sammelfund at Uruk, in the Jemdat Nasr cemetery at Ur, at Khafajah, Telloh and also at Brak, there is a marked decline of lapis artifacts in Early Dynastic I'.²³ The control of the lapis lazuli trade highlights the shifts in administrative power within Mesopotamia, their relationships with outside parties (significant World powers and civilisations), as well as holding great cultural significance. Comparative analysis (between sources and object) determined that 'the varying shades of the pieces of veneer on the "Standard" of Ur... can be exactly paralleled by modern specimens from Badakhshan' located in modern Afghanistan.²⁴

Lapis lazuli is formed due to 'contact metamorphism', '(often called thermal metamorphism) [which] happens when rock is heated up by an intrusion of hot magma'.²⁵ This chaotic process creates 'a contact metamorphic rock with variable composition and varying physical properties', meaning that the selection of suitable material is a key skill on behalf of the craftsman in its use in the fabrication of particular items as practicality over aesthetic choices need to be considered.²⁶ Some lapis mined from Badakhshan can seemingly have a shale-like layered quality in its raw form. With force the raw material can be crushed, creating the foundation of the Holy imperial blue of the Renaissance's veiled Virgin Mary, for

¹⁶ Perkins, 1957, pp.54-61.

¹⁷ Perkins, 1957, p.57.

¹⁸ Kuhrt, 1997, p.25.

¹⁹ Kuhrt, 1997, p.25; 'South Mesopotamia has no source of metals, no trees that produce suitable timber for large constructions and only insignificant amounts of stone. The focus of much documented Mesopotamian commercial and imperial activity is the acquisition of these items.' Kuhrt, 1997, p.21.

²⁰ Herrmann, 1968, p.29.

²¹ Herrmann, 1968, p.31.

²² Herrmann, 1968, p.36.

²³ Herrmann, 1968, p.37.

²⁴ Herrmann, 1968. p.28.

²⁵ geolsoc.org.uk

²⁶ nature.berkeley.edu

example.²⁷ This layered quality lends itself to creating a levelled mosaic face as with the Standard of Ur.

In 'Colour Symbolism in Ancient Mesopotamia', Andrea Sinclair offers an explanation of the Mesopotamian language of colour. A case is made that descriptions of colour in language by definition, implication, and/or allusion etc. correlate with the use of said same colours in visual representations i.e., the meanings are transferable and the meanings remain the same. For example, certain hues of blue were synonymous with the precious imported stone lapis lazuli ('**ZA.GÌN**') [Sinclair uses this 'in bold' Latin script/code to represent the pronunciation of Sumerian cuneiform characters].²⁸ Both the stone and colour 'were... symbols of opulence and holiness for both gods and kings'.²⁹ Given the geological composition of lapis lazuli it is often bound with other minerals such as pyrite and calcite which, as Sinclair suggests, gives 'the mineral [lapis lazuli] a shimmering quality perhaps reminiscent of the night sky', suggestive of the god-like ethereal surround and the mysteries of the night contained within.³⁰

The Standard is evidence of a belief in life after death. As with any mythic elements from any culture there was a fluidity to the record which shifted over time and evolved along with the various cultures that resided, at different times, in the region.³¹ For example, Thorkild Jacobsen states 'the Sumerians considered the mountains to be the realm of Death and the abode of the dead'.³² Whilst M. Choksi states that death, to the Sumerians, was 'a shadowy version of life on earth... physically, located only a short distance from the earth's surface'.³³ Caitlín Barrett, basing her argument largely on the cross referencing of extant textual evidence to produce an inclusive 'Mesopotamian' (an extended time-frame of the particular region) ideal of death and the afterlife, so it is an evolution of ideas/traditions regarding death and the dead of which the Sumerians were the antecedents, confirms Choksi's statement. Using '*Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*' as evidence, Barrett highlights the 'pessimistic' nature of the Sumerian's underworld that the poem 'portrays the land of the dead as little more than a euphemism for the grave itself', that 'can be reached merely by digging into the earth'.³⁴ The body most definitely decays, according to this particular source, though the situation can be improved upon by behaviour in life for example, 'number of children' sired/produced, and social 'rank', as well as the offering of grave goods.³⁵ The Standard, in its Sumerian context, should therefore be considered a gift (possibly to Ereshkigal or Inana/Ishtar) and a deliberate act of intent (including its burial) on behalf of the crafts[wo]man (under the orders of the patron).

From a modern context or reading, from the gathering of materials (an expression of the political machinations required) to the finished product, the Standard is a statement (a cultural flag). The crafts[wo]man's composition is made up of landscape, symbols, and

²⁷ Emerson, 2015, p.66.

²⁸ Sinclair, 2012, p.9.

²⁹ Sinclair, 2012, p.9.

³⁰ Sinclair, 2012, p.9.

³¹ Choksi, 2014, online.

³² Jacobsen, 1987, p.47.

³³ Choksi, 2014, online.

³⁴ Barrett, 2007, p.8.

³⁵ Barrett, 2007, p.8-9.

allusion. In a discussion on film Roland Barthes suggests the film maker/director '... can only be guided, more or less consciously, by his profound ideology, the attitude he takes toward the world'.³⁶ Then in turn, this succession of symbols created and used by the director affirms his view/vision/version of his present reality (do the use of these ideas suggest something of the objects modern reception that its narrative compositional traits are likened to those of a film?). Anne Whiston Spirn states allusion '... can remind one of collective identity, traditions, values, or heritage, establish authority or instruct, evoke mood or create a setting'.³⁷ Though there is nothing unnatural, on the sides of 'war' and 'peace' in terms of the deeds of Man, the natural landscape does not feature. The Animal is either harnessed or caught and offered, Man is governed by his politics. If 'allusion communicates shared understanding and relies upon common knowledge', then the crafts[wo]man's reality, in this particular case, is also that of the people to which he/she belongs.

word count 2181

³⁶ Barthes, 2010, p.18.

³⁷ Spirn, 1998, p.77.

Images



Fig.1

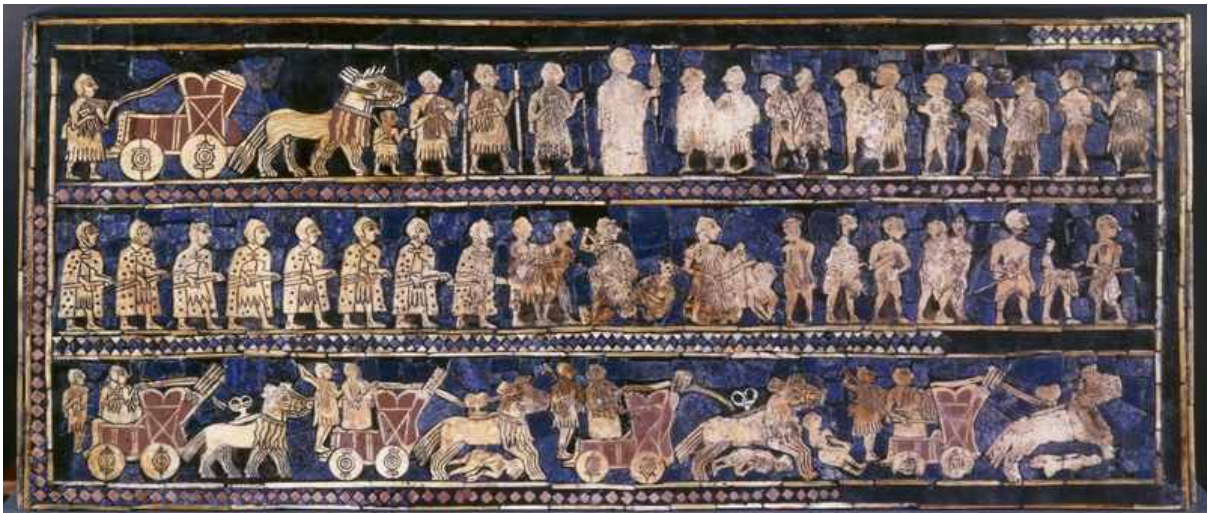


Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

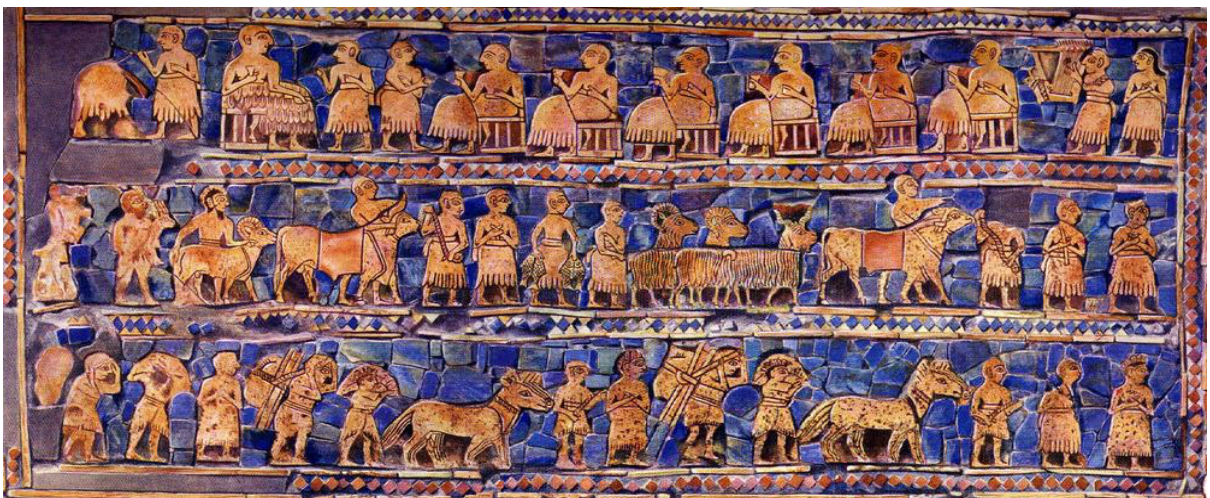


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

All images taken from the British Museum (online).

Fig. 1 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/12550001>

Fig. 2 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/8057006>

Fig. 3 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/12575001>

Fig. 4 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/12582001>

Fig. 5 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/12549001>

Fig. 6 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/8056001>

Fig. 7 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/12556001>

Fig. 8 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/309858001>

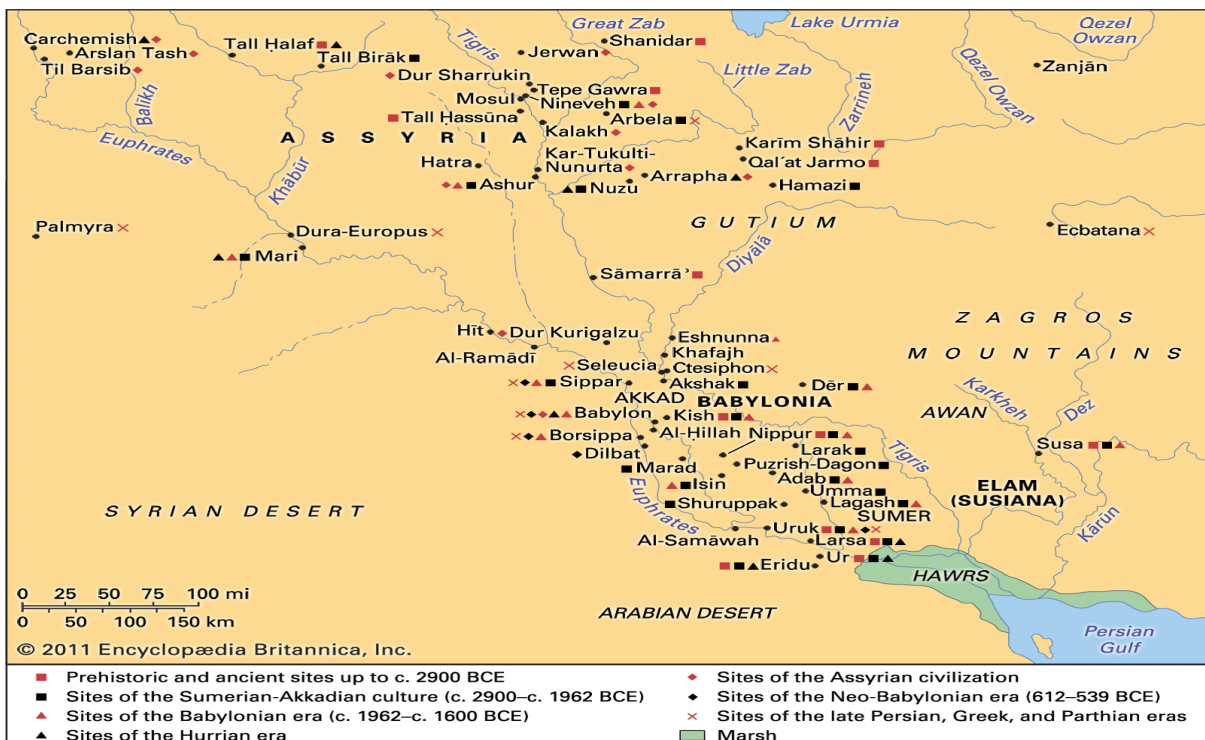
Fig. 9 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/811995001>

Fig. 10 - <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1546346001>

Maps



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamia#/media/File:N-Mesopotamia_and_Syria_english.svg



<https://cdn.britannica.com/50/2550-050-993C719C/Sites-Mesopotamian-history.jpg>

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