

Leaving No Stones Unturned

*Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt
in Honor of
Donald P. Hansen*

Edited by

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Winona Lake, Indiana
EISENBRAUNS
2002

Performativity and the Image: Narrative, Representation, and the Uruk Vase

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Mesopotamian art is often celebrated as the point of origin of pictorial narrative in the world history of art, and cited as the precursor of the developed narrative forms of the Greek and Roman traditions that followed. From Henri Frankfort's classic *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* to the more recent studies by Near Eastern art historians the importance of the beginnings of pictorial narration in Mesopotamian art have been stressed.¹ These discussions of narrative have mostly relied upon a particular definition of narrative forms: an account or a record of a historical or political event repeated in visual representation. Efforts have then focused on finding correspondences between the visual and the verbal text as separate but parallel modes of communicating the same message. This is a straightforward comparative method where content is privileged as the historical kernel to be retrieved. How that content is expressed in visual arts and the similarities to, or differences from, the expression of the same content in literary texts or historical annals is sifted through for reconstructing an account. This has seemed like the way to approach narrative in Mesopotamian studies since it adheres to the philological methodology of reconstructing texts from various fragmentary extant versions. Philologists working on historical texts likewise have treated the work of art as yet another text that can be quarried for the completion of the historical account. But narrativity is potentially a far richer field.² Narrative in art history and historical studies has become an area of rigorous investigation and "representation" is now the focus of a great deal of theoretical and critical discussion in both the humanities and social sciences. While the comparative

1. H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954); A. Perkins, "Narration in Babylonian Art," *AJA* 61 (1957), pp. 54-61; I. Winter, "After the Battle is Over: The Stele of the Vultures and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East," in H. Kessler and M. S. Simpson (eds.), *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Studies in the History of Art* 16 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1985), pp. 11-32; H. Pittman, "The White Obelisk and the Problem of Historical Narrative in the Art of Assyria," *The Art Bulletin* LXXVIII, 2 (June 1996), pp. 334-55.

2. A classic theoretical discussion is R. Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1988; first ed. 1977), pp. 79-124. For historical writing, H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). See also M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

method's collecting of details to fit into a total picture can be useful, it also disregards other relationships and meanings within texts, for example the rhetorical aspects of metaphor and metonymy, non-discursive narrative enactment, and performative narratives. What I am calling for here is the type of close reading of the work of art that Edward Said insists upon for the text.³ Said's call for a commitment to the process of close reading and engagement with the text is equally important for the visual work. Rather than rejecting these theoretical discussions of narrative as irrelevant to the ancient record we might instead consider how the ancient record can contribute to this area of critical thinking. I would like to offer this essay to Donald Hansen firstly because he has provided the inspiration for approaching Mesopotamian art as something more than a secondary record of political history, and also because he has insisted on considering the visual and aesthetic qualities of the visual arts. The incentive to return to the Uruk Vase and reconsider its imagery was a result of a statement he made recently in describing the scene on the uppermost register of the vase: "Whether the female figure is the goddess herself or her representative is unimportant; in an enactment of the drama, the participant becomes the godhead."⁴ In this essay I propose to re-define the Uruk vase as something more than the earliest form of pictorial narrative. While it is surely one of the earliest narrative depictions we know, it is at the same time what W. J. T. Mitchell would call a "hypericon" or a "metapicture."⁵ By these terms Mitchell means a self-referential image that calls attention to the basic structures of referentiality within the context of its representation. In other words, it is a picture about itself.

The Uruk Vase (fig. 1) is an alabaster vessel, 1.05 m in height, discovered in a temple treasury hoard of level III of the Eanna precinct in the sanctuary of Inanna at Uruk. Level III is dated to ca. 3000 B.C., but the vase was probably carved at some earlier period as indicated by antique repairs that had already been made on the upper part. The vase is somewhat conical in shape, having a conical foot and increasing in width slightly towards the splayed opening at its top. The surface of the vase is carved in a low relief subdivided into five registers by flat bands of varying height. At the lowest register horizontal wavy lines indicate water. Above this is a register bearing two alternating plants, perhaps indicating wheat and flax.⁶ Directly above the flora, and separated by a narrow fillet, is a register containing a procession of alternating rams and ewes, pairs of animals that are also an indication of the male and female aspects of reproduction. In the middle register, twice as large as the lower registers bearing the flora and fauna, is a scene depicting a procession of nude male figures each carrying a vessel or a basket filled with what is apparently produce. The figures all face the same direction and are depicted in a striding position with right leg forward. Other than the slight difference in the shape of the vessels that they carry, all the figures look remarkably alike in the rendering of their muscular bodies and their facial features. The effect of this similarity is a rhythmic repetition across the body of the vase, and this is reinforced by the repetitive depiction of the rams and ewes, as well as the plants of the lower registers. The figures of the animals and the humans are facing

3. E. W. Said, "Return to Philology," lecture delivered at Columbia University, 17 February 2000.

4. D. P. Hansen "Art of the Royal Tombs of Ur: A Brief Interpretation," in R. Zettler and L. Horne (eds.), *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998), p. 46.

5. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

6. I. J. Winter, "The Warka Vase: Structure of Art and Structure of Society in Early Urban Mesopotamia," paper presented to the American Oriental Society, Baltimore, 1983.

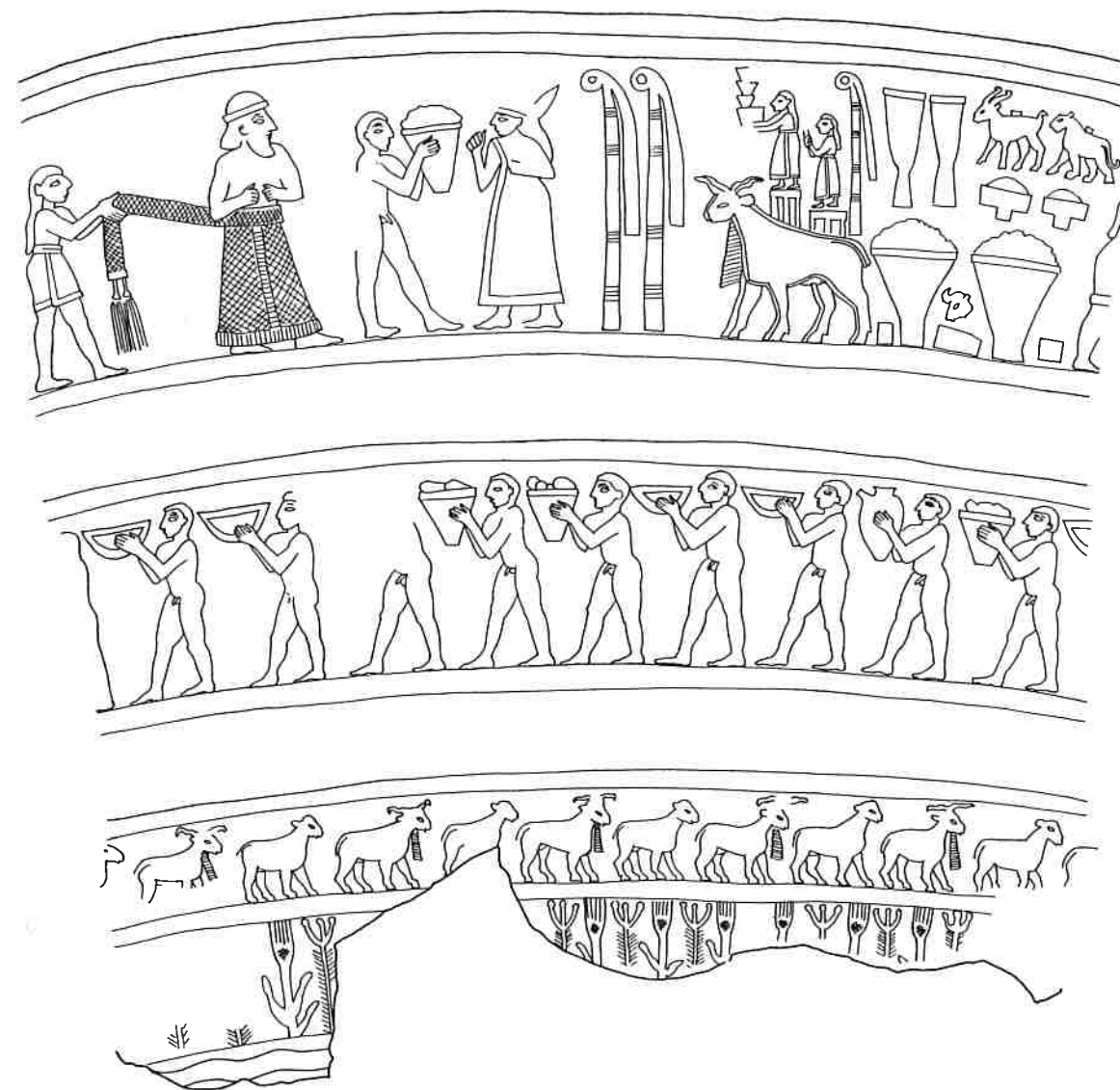


Fig. 1. The Uruk Vase, carved Alabaster, late fourth millennium B.C., Iraq Museum, Baghdad. Drawing by Jo Wood, New York, after M. Roaf, *The Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Facts on File/Equinox, 1990) p. 61.

opposite directions in each register thus giving an effect of circular movement across the body of the vessel.

At the uppermost level, an even larger register contains a scene which has been taken as the key to the meaning of the sequence of reliefs. Here a female figure wearing a long gown stands facing to her right side. The area above her head had been broken and repaired in antiquity which leaves uncertain the identification of the headdress that she wears as the divine "horned crown." In front of her, a nude male, similar to the figures in the middle register, seems to be offering a container of fruit to her. This figure was apparently a less prominent worshiper who appeared in front of the main male figure. The latter has been destroyed, but

enough remains to identify the lower portion of a netted skirt, usually worn by the "priest king," and he is followed by another male figure with long hair who wears a short kilt that ends above the knees, and carries an article of clothing.

Behind the female figure are two objects placed next to one another. They appear to be large poles topped by a ring and having some kind of a streamer attached at the back. These poles are known to be the reed door posts associated with the temple of the goddess Inanna, because they are the signs used in the earliest pictographic script to indicate Inanna. Behind the reed poles, which we might read as an entrance into the temple store-house of the goddess, a number of objects appear in pairs including small figures of a goats and a lion, a pair of vessels resembling the one carried by the offering bearer, and a pair of vessels resembling the Uruk vase itself in outline, as well as smaller enigmatic objects. Directly behind the doorposts is a large figure of a ram. On top of this ram's back stand a pair of figures on small platforms, one slightly higher than the other. In the forefront is a male figure upon the higher platform, behind is a female figure. Another, smaller version of the reed pole stands behind this couple. The uppermost register is relatively still in comparison to the repetitive movement of the lower bands. However, the doubling of the objects behind the reed poles, and the echoing of the reed pole itself at a smaller scale, seems to carry through the theme of repetition into the top register. In terms of composition, the registers seem to underscore the hierarchy of nature since they organize the levels of water, flora and fauna in a vertical succession superseded by human and divine realms.

Iconographically, the representation encompassing all five registers has been interpreted as a narration of events related to the Sacred Marriage ritual.⁷ During the annual festival in spring heralding the start of a new year, a marriage between a divine female and human male took place. This ritual has been described in scholarship as a means of assuring the fertility of the land and its cyclical renewal.⁸ The divine or mythological marriage is a recurring marriage, as is the ritual enactment of the event. In the ritual, the high priestess seemingly participated in the marriage with the EN or the king. Rather, in the texts, the king is described as marrying the goddess. We might understand this as a purely symbolic event in which the roles are played

7. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*; T. Jacobsen, *Towards the Image of Tammuz* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 16ff; 375ff. There is no inscription on the vase itself referring to the Sacred Marriage. The identification of the scene is based on iconographic readings of the relief in comparison with textual evidence of the practice. Whether or not the reliefs indicate the Sacred Marriage ceremony is not so important here. What is clear from the gate post signs of her name is that this is a depiction of an event related to Inanna. Thus it can be read as a religious narrative even if some will argue, based on the lack of written evidence on the vase, that it is not the sacred marriage. That a "Sacred Marriage" ceremony existed in Mesopotamian antiquity is clear from textual evidence. See J. Renger, "Heilige Hochzeit," *RLA* 4 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972-75), pp. 251-59 who also details the abuse of the concept and the influences of nineteenth century ethnological works such as the classic studies of J. G. Frazer and his followers, and who discusses the ancient textual record. The problem with the Sacred Marriage and its relation to art is that when a scene of sexual intercourse is found in the visual arts it is usually immediately interpreted as visual evidence of the Sacred Marriage. Although this type of interpretation is clearly simplistic there is no reason to conclude from such mistaken approaches that the Sacred Marriage ceremony never took place. That argument is simply the former taken to the other end of the interpretive scale.

8. S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

by the specified actors, but the sacred marriage is an epiphany. It is a ritual of substitution where the priestess becomes the goddess and the priest king becomes the god.

Of course, there is no written evidence for the Sacred Marriage ritual dating to the Uruk period. Although writing existed, there was no such descriptive text of either a religious, political, or literary nature. The earliest written evidence for the ritual is from the Early Dynastic period. During the Ur III and Isin kingdom the evidence for an actual copulation between the king and the representative of the goddess is fairly certain.⁹ Johannes Renger believes that the Early Dynastic evidence might be simply a retrojection of Ur III customs into the past. Others, such as F.R. Kraus, reject the very explicit evidence of the texts because they cannot believe that the ancient Mesopotamians could have been so crude as to have a religious ritual involving a live sex-act.¹⁰ Most recently, R.F.G. Sweet argued that the texts that describe the act of copulation should be read as mythological tales, and cautioned that the interpretations of the Sacred Marriage ritual were most likely influenced by James Frazer's work, a warning that had also been made by Renger earlier.¹¹ Such warnings should be heeded, yet as J. S. Cooper has argued, contemporary scholarship sometimes goes to the opposite extreme of representing Sumer as a place with sexual morals similar to those of the modern Judeo-Christian West. In any case, while there is no text on the vase confirming its association with the sacred marriage, the lack of written label is not enough to dismiss the interpretation of its scene as the depiction of a ritual associated with Inanna. That kind of insistence on the primacy of text as the most truthful and transparent source of historical information, in opposition to the visual image which is compromised as a form of representation involving artistic mediation, is rejected by historical criticism. Be that as it may, the evidence from the latter part of the third millennium B.C. indicates that a sexual act indeed took place, even if that idea might be offensive to contemporary sensibilities.

William Hallo, who accepts the interpretation of an actual copulation taking place between king and goddess, proposes that the divine parentage of the king was achieved in this cultic rite of the Sacred Marriage.¹² He argues that at least one object of the rite was to produce a royal heir, thus establishing divine descent for the ruler. Seen in ideological terms, such a ritual underscores the relationship between kingship and the natural order of things as decreed by the gods. The production of an heir as the son of a deity would insure that divine authority of kingship. Of course female reproductive cycles are not clockwork, and the fertile ovulation days of the high priestess who represented the goddess could not have been calculated to coincide with the New Year's festival every year. If Hallo's argument is correct, the connection between

9. J. S. Cooper, "Sacred Marriage and Popular Cult in Early Mesopotamia," in E. Matsushima (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993), pp. 81-96.

10. Cooper, "Sacred Marriage and Popular Cult," p. 89.

11. R. F. G. Sweet, "A New Look at the 'Sacred Marriage' in E. Robbins and S. Sandahl (eds.), *Ancient Mesopotamia*," in *Corolla Torontensis: Studies in Honour of Ronald Morton Smith* (Toronto: Tsar, 1994), pp. 85-104; and J. Renger, "Heilige Hochzeit," pp. 251-59, refer to James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, part I: *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings* (London: MacMillan, 1913), pp. 120-21, 129. Frazer, who looked for ancient evidence for a modern May Day or Whitsuntide celebration, believed that such cults promoted the fruitfulness of the earth, animals, and people.

12. W. W. Hallo, "The Birth of Kings," in J. H. Marks and R. M. Good (eds.), *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guildford, Conn.: Four Quarters Publishing Co. 1987), pp. 46-52.

the processes of sacred marriage and the eventual birth of an heir was surely theatrical rather than actual.

It is well known from ritual texts that performative acts and performative utterances were central to Mesopotamian religious practices. Jacques Derrida defines the performative as a "communication which does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content."¹³ It is a communication that goes beyond indicating a pre-existing referent because while it seems to effectuate something at the moment of its utterance, it depends on citationality. Citationality is a requirement of all incantations and performative utterances. In order for an incantation to work, it depends on the fact that the utterance is a citation, even if the injunction becomes unique at the performative moment. We might not be too far off course then in describing this Sacred Marriage ritual as a performative narrative, a theatrical enactment the effects of which are magical transformation or epiphany. Performativity in which discourse produces the effects it utters, in this case did not involve a single speech act, but a reiterative performance in which priestess and king transformed into deities.¹⁴ But this was not all. Since the texts explicitly refer to the act of copulation as real, not symbolic, that act can therefore be described as an act of performative sex. The performative effectuates something. Performative sex might then effectuate divine birth.

If the pictorial representation on the vase indeed depicts the sacred marriage, then it is a depiction of a ritual of substitution. Such substitution required that the priestess did not simply signify the goddess or the king signify the god. Through the performative enactment they were to become substitutes. In other words, the ritual was much more than a play. It was a ritual process of transformation that depended on representation. Such substitution is well known from other Mesopotamian rituals, the most obvious being that of the Substitute King.¹⁵ If the relief carvings on the surface of the vase are considered beyond the level of iconography where each image has a specific referent, then we might begin to consider motifs beyond the iconographic content. We might consider, for example, the insistence on repetitive forms of the middle registers, and on the doubling of forms in the upper register. Such repetition and doubling have the effect of infinite circular movement in the middle registers and mirroring quality above.

13. J. Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 322.

14. For performative speech acts, see: J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), and *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); M. L. Pratt, *A Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, part 1 (New York: MacMillan, 1958). For a critical reformulation of Austin's work, see J. Derrida "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 307-30. For performance studies, see H. Blau, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); E. Diamond (ed.), *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

15. Similar arguments appeared in scholarship regarding the reality of the ritual of the Substitute King. Since the texts indicate that the substitute king could die in the place of the king, some have been reluctant to believe that such acts of barbarism could actually take place in a society that stands at the origins of western civilization and suggest that all of these texts refer to symbolic acts. Both the rejection of the actuality of the Substitute King ritual, as well as the symbolic reading of the ritual marriage of king and goddess indicate a desire to make the Mesopotamians more similar to ourselves. In opposition to this view see Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning and the Gods*, trans. Z. Bahrani and M. Van De Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 138-55, who insists on the actuality of the substitute king ritual.

There are at least three levels of representation on the vase. The reliefs depict the ritual of the Sacred Marriage as enacted by priestess and king, and other mortal participants in what was surely a spectacle. The ritual represents the divine marriage in a performative enactment of the event in which subsequently the priestess and the king represent the gods. Rather, the priestess and the king become doubles of the gods. Finally, the ceremonial vase itself is represented twice in the uppermost register among the objects of the ceremony. The latter may seem an insignificant coincidence but an image that represents itself has the effect of creating a referential circle. Conceptually, the vase itself and the vases represented on it in relief refer to each other.

The binary structure of inside/outside, essence/appearance, signifier/signified is a structure of first and second order representation, or of a content and a form. In the Uruk vase these distinctions are blurred. Each level of representation is an external reference point for the other levels of representation in a system of reference that effectively becomes circular. The signifier 'sacred marriage' as an originary event is not clearly defined. In other words, whether the events depict the mythological marriage of the divine realm involving Inanna and Dumuzi, or the performance of the ritual between the king and the high priestess can never be determined. This is why there has been a great deal of discussion surrounding this vase with regard to the identities of the figures in the uppermost register. What I am arguing here is that the identities of these figures are difficult to determine precisely because the representation required this ambiguity. The performative enactment necessitates the blurring of priestess into goddess and god into king. Without this uncertainty of identities the ritual would be useless.

Central to the theme of the vase is therefore representation itself. The *hieros gamos* as play is a mimetic performative enactment in one of its guises, and this is the subject or the "content" of the representation depicted on the vase. It is an image that refers to its own imageness or its own status as image of an event, but at the same time blurs boundaries of the first order and second order of representation: the ritual, its pictorial record, the recurring divine event, and perhaps also an oral narrative recited during the performance. The Uruk Vase encapsulates the cyclical nature of fertility and the Sacred Marriage ritual through the repetition of forms in an infinite circling of the vase. It calls attention to the multiple orders of reference or representation that are not limited to the binary division of the real and its representation. It calls attention to itself in its vase form. The assembly of relations of vessel shape, narrative content and composition of the reliefs work together in a circular referentiality.

At this point one might ask who was all of this for? If the vase was not publicly displayed, how was this complex set of relations to impress its audience? Perhaps here performativity is also relevant. If the performative act enabled a magical transformation through depiction, the visual depiction of that act might also have had qualities beyond iconographic representation.

The Uruk Vase was made at the end of the fourth millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia when both pictorial narrative and writing were referential modes that were new. Both are media through which things refer to other things. Performative narrative-spectacle is similar, but it requires the suspension of a reference point. The power of illusion is effected in this way through the suspension of the place of the signified. In the Sacred Marriage, representation through various media worked together to achieve performative communication. The performative cannot be regarded within the binaries of true/false communication because it has no single referent in the form of an exterior or signified thing. A performative utterance depends on citationality, and therefore on repetition itself.

The Triumphal Arch of the Emperor Titus at the Roman Forum is perhaps the work of art closest to the Uruk vase. The depiction of the event of the Triumph on the interior of the arch

is twice removed from the victory in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The ritual of the Triumph consisted of the theatrical re-enactments of historical events such as those depicted on the reliefs inside the arch.¹⁶ The famous relief illustrating the procession of soldiers carrying booty from the temple in Jerusalem depicts the procession moving towards, and walking through, an arch similar to the arch itself upon which the reliefs are depicted. This triumphal arch then, unlike other Roman triumphal arches, is a self-referential monument. It depicts itself within its own representation, and it represents a ritual triumph that is in itself a representation of another event removed in space and time. Of course, other such self-referential images were made at other times and places, and for Mesopotamia itself we can cite the example of the Altar of Tukulti-Ninurta.¹⁷ The carved altar bears a relief of Tukulti-Ninurta shown twice approaching an altar that is exactly the shape of the altar upon which it is depicted. What such images indicate is a concern with the processes of representation, or the status of representation and its relation to the real. They also seem to indicate the power of the performative as an aspect of the visual image. The Uruk Vase, the Altar of Tukulti-Ninurta and the Arch of Titus are all self-referential works that would fall under Mitchell's definition of "hypericon" but they are more than a hypericon or metapicture. What I am arguing here is that these are much more than early examples of narrative; they are performative images in that the image itself has performative qualities. It does not only represent a performative act but reiterates it via representation in a similar way to the speech act. I have also argued, following Derrida, that performative statements themselves depend on iterability. They repeat a coded expression that conforms to an iterable mode so that they are identifiable as "citation."¹⁸ The circular referentiality in these works cannot be explained in the limited understanding of narrative as a form of communication of a singular meaning via different but parallel codes of reference. They cannot be understood as the vehicle or the site of the passage of meaning because they are performative images. In conclusion, I would like to stress that we need to consider the Mesopotamian work of art as something more than a vehicle for historical documentation, or a window onto a past event. We should attend to the image as image, giving serious consideration to its visual and aesthetic aspects. Only then will we be able to approach an understanding of Mesopotamian visual art that is not simply in the service of illustrating political history but is worthy of intellectual inquiry in its own right.

16. For the Roman ritual of the triumph, see R. Payne, *The Roman Triumph* (London: Abelard Schuman, 1962); H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus: An Inquiry into the Origins, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970); E. Künzel, *Der römische Triumph: Siegesfeiern im antiken Rom* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988).

17. For the self-referentiality of the Altar of Tukulti-Ninurta, see Z. Bahrani, *Word, Image, and Portrayal: The Ontology of Representation in Babylon and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, in press). In literature, self-referentiality also appears in, for example, Joseph Conrad's setting of the telling of a story within his narrative (Edward W. Said, lecture of February 17, 2000).

18. Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," p. 326.

Early Late Cypriot Ceramic Exports to Canaan: White Slip I

CELIA J. BERGOFFEN

When I arrived at the Institute of Fine Arts in the fall of 1980, I chose Donald Hansen's lecture course on the art of ancient Mesopotamia and Iran to fulfill a distribution requirement. I had been admitted to specialize in the art of the 19th century A.D. but instead spent most of that first semester steeped in the art of the 19th century B.C. By Christmas, we changed my major to the ancient Near East. In the happy years that followed, Donald's lectures and seminars, especially on trade and interconnections in the second millennium B.C., inspired me to specialize in Middle/Late Bronze Age trade in the eastern Mediterranean. I hope he finds this offering for his Festschrift of interest.¹

The transition from the Middle to the Late Cypriot period in Cyprus was marked by a shift in settlement toward the coast and the establishment of large urban centers which developed

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the 1999 conference of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Cambridge, MA. The research was funded by a grant from the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, for which I am very grateful. It includes material from Alalakh studied for the Cyprus Project component of "The Synchronization of Civilizations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2nd Millennium B.C. (SCIEM)," Special Research Programme (SFB) of the Austrian Academy at the Austrian Science Fund and under Patronage of UNESCO, directed by Prof. Manfred Bietak, University of Vienna. I am indebted to Amihai Mazar, Bob Mullins and Navah Panitz-Cohen; Jacqueline Balensi; Sy Gitin and Barry Gittlen; Eli Yannai; Manfred Bietak and Irmgard Hein, and Eric Meyers and J. P. Dessel, for providing information and allowing me to mention unpublished material from Tel Batash and Beth Shan; Tell Abu Hawam; Tel Mique; Tell Jatt; Tell el-Dab'a, and Tell Zippori, respectively. The material in the Israel Antiquities Authority is included courtesy of that body, and I am grateful to Baruch Brandl, Curator of State Collections, and to Alegre Savariego, Curator of the Rockefeller Storerooms, for many favors and assistance in accessing the collection. The sherds at the Institute of Archaeology, London, are published by kind permission of the Director of the Institute, Peter Ucko; my special thanks to Collections Manager Ian Carroll for his kind assistance on my many visits to the Institute, and to Rachel Sparks, Curator of the Petrie Palestinian Collection. I am indebted to Roger Moorey, Keeper of Antiquities and Keeper of Near Eastern material at the Ashmolean Museum for showing me the Cypriot pottery from Alalakh in that collection. That material is mentioned by kind permission of the Ashmolean Museum. Sturt Manning and Malcolm Weiner read a draft of this paper and I wish to thank them both for their insightful comments.