

MARI

Topic 8

Mari: A Portrait in Art of a Mesopotamian City-State

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To Zimri-Lim communicate this: thus says your brother Hammurabi: The king of Ugarit has written me as follows: "Show me the palace of Zimri-Lim! I wish to see it." With this same courier I am sending on his man.

*(Georges Dossin, cited from Marie-Henriette Gates, "The Palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari," *Biblical Archaeologist* 4 (1984): 70)*

IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BCE, the ruler of a city on the coast of the Mediterranean, nearly 600 kilometers (360 miles) northwest of Mari (modern Tell Harrî), knew of the reputation of a palace in the capital of the middle Euphrates and expressed the desire to see it.

What does such a request reveal? Is it surprising? Certainly at the beginning of the second millennium, the distance between the two cities—about twenty days' journey—was no obstacle to that renown: merchants and soldiers traversed the whole of the Near East, and the known world extended at least from the Mediterranean basin to the Indus Valley and to the western reaches of the Himalayas. Perhaps the king of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) was seeking to evaluate the might of Zimri-Lim of Mari with a view to forming future alliances. Perhaps he had a spying mission in mind. Let us, rather, be persuaded by the notion, even if it is not fully persuasive, that simple curiosity and a desire to admire the works, whose renown had doubtless ex-

ceeded their due, inspired the king of Ugarit and his son, who may have been the man sent along with the courier in the above passage.

By a fortuitous coincidence, the past glory of the palace of Mari rejoins its current renown. It is the best-known, the best-preserved, and the richest not only of all the palaces of the Amorite dynasties, of which approximately a dozen examples have been recovered to date, but also of the entire Bronze Age (including more than twenty monuments of the third and second millennia). Only certain royal residences of the Assyrian period, because they also suffered a tragic end, can rival that of Zimri-Lim. Thus, every approach to the world of the palace, its life, and its realities—the art of the living space—in the Bronze Age, and particularly in the epoch of the Amorite dynasties, must begin with the study of the palace of Mari.

The texts do not inform us about the visit of the king of Ugarit or his son to Mari; in fact, we do not even know if it took place. But let us

argue for the moment that the son of the king of the Mediterranean city continued his travels to the capital on the Euphrates and was received by Zimri-Lim. And let us accompany him in his discovery of the famous palace.

One can easily define the areas where a visitor of high rank would be admitted and where he would have the leisure to admire the works of art that were brought together in the royal residence. First, he would visit the quarters where the king ruled as master, the official rooms that constituted a true royal sanctuary, distinct from a temple devoted to a specific divinity and without connection to the world of simple humanity. The king, who represented men before god and god before men, necessarily occupied an intermediary position, the space dedicated to him could not be confused with either sacred space or human space. Afterward, the visitor perhaps would sacrifice to the gods that inhabited the palace. One of the peculiarities of the royal residence at Mari was that it contained both a great sanctuary devoted to a god whose name is not yet known and a chapel dedicated to the goddess Ishtar. No other near eastern palace possessed such structures, which must certainly have contributed to its renown. If the presence of the gods rendered the dwelling awe-inspiring, it also contributed to its embellishment: nothing was too beautiful for the deity. Finally, the king would honor his guest by hosting a banquet attended by his entourage and their servants. Perhaps he also would invite his guest into his private apartment so that he could admire another type of architectural ornamentation.

ARCHITECTURAL DECOR

Materials

When the visitor approached the administrative station controlled by the first official of the king outside the palace, he would immediately see the palace itself. He might be surprised because, coming from Ugarit, he would be accustomed to an architecture in which rough stone and rubble surrounded a structure of timber framing. At Mari he would find an architecture in which the basic material was earth rather than stone and wood. Although wood played a significant role

in Mari, it was not commonly used as a basic structural element and was less common as a decorative material. The same materials were used in the palace as in all other buildings; but the monumental character of the palace—in particular its thick walls—made it easier to remedy certain weaknesses inherent in baked brick.

Architectural Blocks

The buildings were massive and essentially blocklike because the roofs were formed of terraces; the walls were thick, occasionally up to 4 meters (4.5 yards), so as to resist the pressure of the roof but also to diminish the tendency of erosion that occurred naturally at their base. The fundamental architectural unit was organized on the principle of a square or rectangular central space surrounded by one, or more rarely two, files of rooms of smaller dimensions, accessible most often from the central space. It was not a court but a vast space covered by a flat roof. To ensure the lighting by the use of a clerestory, indispensable in the heart of the structure, it was necessary that the roof of the central zone be higher than that of the surrounding building.

The walls of the palace rose some 4–8 meters (4.5–9 yards), depending on whether there was a second story. When they extended beyond the surrounding terrace by clerestories, they provided daylight in the central space. The palace was thus not a simple volume with pure lines but a complex structure, an expansion of blocks of diverse heights (from 4 meters to more than 12 [from 4 to 13 yards]) with breaks from one unit to another and within the same unit.

Exteriors

While the exterior walls were generally blind for reasons of security and because every habitat constitutes a closed universe that protects itself from the outside, the walls facing onto the courts were not unbroken, as one might think upon seeing the mutilated, truncated walls brought to light by excavation. There were doors at ground level, and rows of small, square openings aligned under the ceiling of the floor above, which functioned more to provide ventilation than to furnish light, and the windows of the upper story, which were a bit more significant, but should not be imagined as broad bays. Fi-

nally, at some corners, there were clerestories overlooking the central spaces. All these openings punctuated and structured the walls of the courts. Occasionally broad galleries ran the length of the upper floor, where they allowed the circulation of people that could not occur through the halls or central spaces. Porticos were built along certain walls of the courts to permit circulation sheltered from the hot sun or from intemperate weather, but ultimately to protect a planned pictorial decoration. They also provided breaks in the strictly horizontal and vertical lines of the walls.

The window and door recesses were visible because the door closure always occurred at the interior of the room, and, because of the thickness of the walls, gave a feeling of real depth to the facades. The interplay of shadow and light, reinforcing these contrasts, accentuated the feeling of power and security inspired by this architecture.

Symmetry and Asymmetry

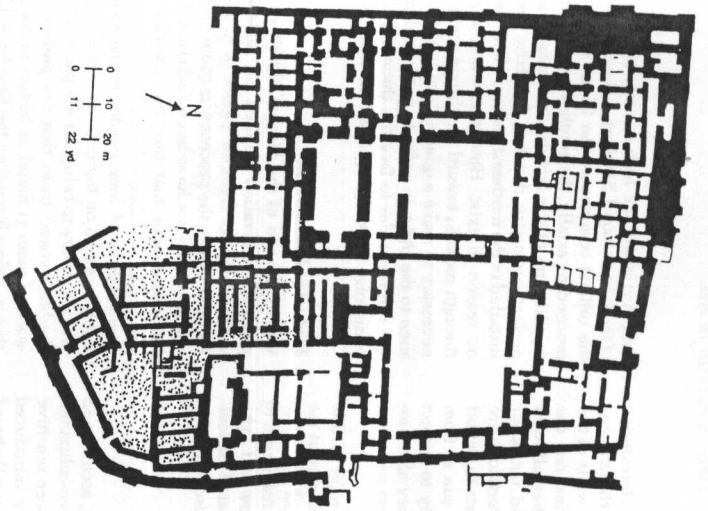
Would the son of the king of Ugarit, accustomed to the symmetry of exteriors with two-columned bays in the palace at Ugarit, have been sensitive to the processes that occasionally introduced asymmetry into an architecture normally based on the principles of axial structuring and of balanced distribution of masses and openings, as the Court of the Palm and the throne room illustrate? Upon entering court 131, he would not face the entrance to the chapel of Ishtar on the axis of his pathway, because it was placed more or less along the western third of the southern wall, while he would enter through a door situated almost in the eastern third of the northern wall. There is no symmetry, then, either in the wall or in the view he would have of the chapel, not even if he entered from the western part of the palace by room 114, at the northwest corner. Thus, the architects of Mari utilized both the axial progression dear to the inhabitants of northern Syria and the asymmetrical progressions whose tradition went back to the southern Sumerians. In the first case, it is doubtless a matter of impressing through the regularity and balance of the masses; in the second, it is either to create an effect of surprise or to conceal the object at the other end from view, for someone who entered

court 131 could not look directly into the heart of the Ishtar chapel. Similarly, when one entered the official complex of the Court of the Palm, proceeding axially, the emphasis on harmonious equilibrium of the architectural masses and on perfect symmetry dictated that false doors be installed in the northeast corner, where they had no reason to exist. However, when one went through room 64 toward the throne room, it was necessary to make a quarter turn to the left and then to the right, in order to enter, and again to the right in order to face the throne. Only then could one see the king in all his majesty.

Pictorial Decoration

Would the son of the king of Ugarit enjoy the pictorial decoration applied to some of the walls? To judge from the palace of Alalakh, not far from Ugarit, the process was common in Syria and he would not have been surprised. Perhaps he would note that the dull earthen plaster needed to be enhanced by color. The craftsmen frequently used lime plaster in the rooms and doubtless also on the exterior walls. The white was necessary to bring out the painted colors. A double twisted band that ran midway on the walls of room 91 found its beauty in the contrast that its colors formed on the lime base: blue and black on the west, north, and east walls, and the same motif with orange, white, and blue-gray on the south. Some plinths were painted to imitate marble. Numerous walls received this sort of decoration, but also often simpler decoration, such as bichrome bands of red and black.

The son of the king of Ugarit would have found true refinement, or perhaps true luxury, in the Court of the Palm: the walls there were covered by a thick layer of plaster that rose to 2.5 meters (almost 3 yards) and doubtless higher; the join with the floor, also plaster, was highlighted by a gray-blue plinth; about 2 meters (2.2 yards) up, a triple bichrome band of red-blue-red ran along the four walls. The main entrance was, according to Syrian practice, framed by a set of horizontal and vertical beams that formed the doorway. To maintain the general harmony of the court, the doorways situated at the corners, which did not have the same treatment, were ornamented with false beams painted on the plaster. The perfect accord between the painted decoration and the



Plan of the Mari Palace as it appeared at the time of Zimri-Lim. Destroyed in 1757 BCE, the site became a graveyard in the Middle Assyrian period. André Parrot first conducted extensive excavations of the palace from 1935 to 1938. Now preserved at the Mesopotamian Bronze Age palaces, J. C. MARGUERON, RECHERCHES SUR LES PALAIS MÉSOPOTAMIENS DE L'ÂGE DU BRONZE (1982)

architecture demonstrates a particularly lively sensitivity to the perception of space and a remarkable concern to establish a correlation between the structure of the building and the perception of it.

The Effect of Lighting

Coming from the Mediterranean coast, where the light is softened by the sea air and by an often luxuriant vegetation, the prince of Ugarit would be struck by the harsh, violent light that prevails on the middle Euphrates nearly all day

long. The desert environment and the dryness of the air meant that soft lighting occurred for only a short moment at the start of the day. The palace shimmered slightly in the softness of the mornings, but when the sun was up and its rays struck the walls with increasing strength, the strong horizontal and vertical breaks and the frames around the doors and windows caused a day/long play of light and shadow, with violent opposition and brutal contrasts. When the sun reached its zenith, the palace was crushed by the light and presented a scene in which narrow

black zones separated broad dazzling expanses. Later, the declining rays lengthened the inclined shadows, and the contrasts attenuated more and more until, in the night air, the nuances reasserted their powers. It was a marvelous play, ceaselessly moving, endlessly renewing, epitomizing the union of individuals with their land when they create an architecture so perfectly integrated with its environment.

VISIT TO THE GODS OF THE PALACE

Having been received by the official, the Ugarite prince would express his wish to honor the gods of the palace. Their presence, exceptional in a royal residence of that period, conferred upon it a very special character. The priests there had an important role because it was necessary to avoid sins and to observe ritual strictly, lest the wrath of the divinity be incurred. Life in the palace could not have been easy because of this requirement, and the king often preferred to stay in his other residences along the Euphrates, where the constraints were not so severe.

The Great Sanctuary

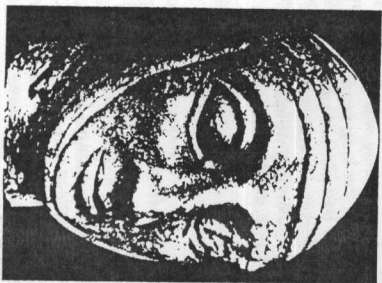
At a designated moment, the prince from Ugarit would be led into the great sanctuary. He would have to follow the purification rituals permitting him to approach the sacred place without fear, rituals that were repeated along the approach to the sanctuary. Upon leaving the southeast corner of court 131, the hub of internal circulation within the palace, he would mount by successive landings to a great room (148) where all access to the temple and to a small side chapel converged.

If he had permission to enter the great sanctuary, he may have been allowed to approach the offering table and to admire the statue of the god, placed on a notched podium facing the table. Darkness in the holy of holies, or perhaps a curtain in front of the god's dais, may have prevented the prince from discerning the god's features. If that was the case, he would not have been able to appreciate fully the art of the sculptor who, assembling diverse materials—precious woods shaped into the body of the statue and gold, silver, ivory, and precious stones ornamenting it—gave a human form to the divinity.

The statue gleamed, sparkled, and glittered, its divine power radiating from within.

On the offering table the envoy would place the foods he had brought for the nourishment of the god: cakes, honey, and doubtless those parts of a sacrificial lamb that were reserved for the god, a lamb that had been sacrificed for this purpose outside the temple. Libations of pure water, wine, or beer would accompany the offering of these foods. Then he would offer a chariot drawn by two horses, mounted by a western divinity, that he had had cast especially for this purpose in his own workshops by masters in the art of bronze. Or he might place in homage before the god the ivory statuette of a worshiper carved in the workshops of Ugarit, famous for their mastery of this art.

The offerings were aligned on the floor, on benches, or on platforms along the walls. The prince would be struck by a nearly life-size statue of a superb warrior, his head covered with a helmet fastened with a chin strap; the nose, long and narrow like a blade, gave the face an arrogant look that was softened by a fine smile. Further on stood the statuette of the *šakkanakku*, or "governor" (really a king), Idi-Itum, who ruled over Mari at the beginning of the twentieth



Head of a soldier wearing a helmet fastened with a chin strap. An almost life-size alabaster statue was once placed in the great sanctuary at the Mari Palace, but excavators were able to locate only the head. The artifact is currently housed in the Aleppo Museum. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ PARROT

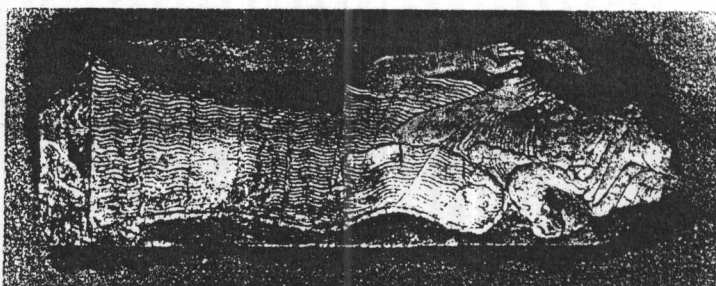
century (illustrated in "Clothing and Grooming in Ancient Western Asia" in Vol. I). Fifty centimeters (20 inches) high, it depicted the sovereign wrapped in a fringed robe with knotted tassels. The garment consisted of a single piece that encircled his body and then passed over his left shoulder and arm; a section returned over the right shoulder and hung in front of the body. A long beard of well-separated ringlets with coiled ends spread over the part of his torso not covered by the robe. The elegance of the garment, the refined quality of the form and of the carving, the beautiful chest proudly jutting from the body, almost effeminate, evoked a delicate individual, lord of a refined court, and he remained so despite the worshipful pose that he adopted when facing his god, hands joined at the level of his waist.

The Antiquity of the Great Sanctuary

With Id-ilum began Mari's long period of glory. The priests who accompanied the prince of Ugarit would certainly not have missed evoking the great antiquity of the sanctuary. Erected, they would say, at the time of the foundation of the city, almost a thousand years earlier, the sanctuary had been maintained and built since then on the same plan so that the city's master deity could always feel at home. It might even be whispered that the statue of Lamgi-Mari, mighty contemporary of the great Sargon (if not earlier), was somewhere under the present temple. If one could bring it to light—undoubtedly a sacrilegious act—one could then compare its style with that of the statuette of a woman with a polos (headgear) installed with the dynastic ancestors in the throne room. But how strange these small figures sculpted in gypsum or alabaster would seem to a contemporary of Zimri-Lim: the head frequently shaven, the face finely modeled, lively and expressive, thanks to eyes inlaid with lapis lazuli and bitumen; and the beard ornamented with semiprecious stones set in the undulating curls. The statuette often had a bare torso and were clad in a skirt whose long ringlets could represent the wool of a sheepskin, a sort of felt, or another material.

The Chapel of Ishtar

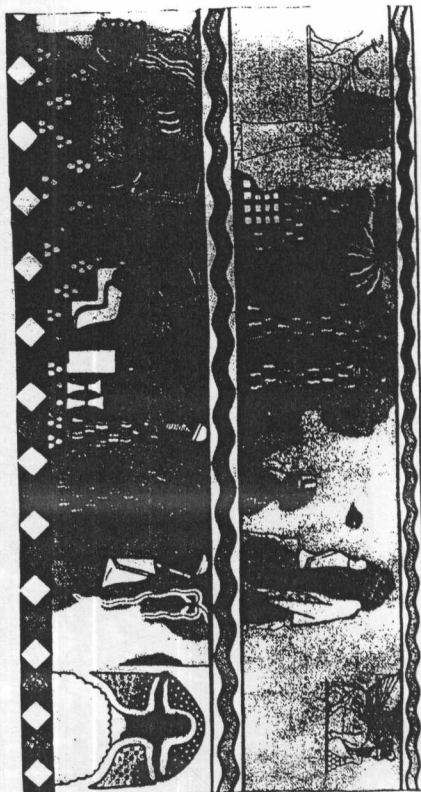
Leaving the great sanctuary once the rituals were completed, the prince of Ugarit would be



Small gypsum relief of a goddess holding a flower. Mari, LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

directed to the chapel of the goddess Ishtar (room 132), which opened onto court 131. He could not miss visiting the divinity Ishtar, who, under the name Astarte, was widely venerated along the Mediterranean coast. He would place offerings on the table before the statue of the goddess and pour libations, and he would leave a valuable object created in his workshops, perhaps a coffer encrusted with precious stones.

After visiting the chapel of Ishtar, a further journey into the past of the palace would await the visitor. Now he would find himself in the presence of a mural on a grand scale, painted above an obstructed doorway in the southwest



Reconstruction of part of a mural from the chapel of Ishtar, room 132 of the Mari Palace showing offering scenes. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ PARROT

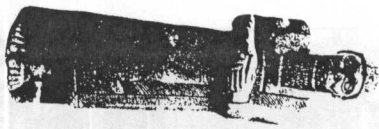
corner of the sanctuary. As he made his offerings, his attention would be drawn to the five superimposed registers; the first emphasized two scenes of libation and offering, the first to Sin, the moon-god, the second to the goddess Ishtar: classical scenes from the iconographical repertoire found on reliefs and stelae and on hundreds or thousands of the cylinder seals. That the other registers showed a soldier in action or a fisherman burdened by his catch removed nothing of the fundamentally religious character of the two central scenes. Would the envoy realize that this was an ancient composition, undoubtedly two centuries old? Would he have understood that if the mural dated back to the dynasty of the *sakkanakkus* (about the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur), then the chapel as a whole dated from that period, since the painting had been applied directly on the earthen plaster of the wall? Perhaps not, but his guides would doubtless be pressed to tell him so. He would certainly have been filled with respect while viewing so ancient a work of religious art.

Why not imagine that our envoy would also have seen, on an offering table or bench, the small gypsum plaque covered with silver foil representing a goddess—of high rank, since she wore a crown with four pairs of horns—absorbed

by a flower she held to her face to inhale its perfume? With her hair gathered behind her neck, except for one curl that fell sinuously at her breast with her soft flounced robe, and despite her rigid collar of eleven superposed rings, the goddess represented a sensitivity very different from the hieratic character of the painted mural. He certainly would have admired a work that showed a divinity in a human form, sensitive to the pleasure that the delicate perfume of the flower offers. But was that the purpose of its artisan when he crafted it? Might the scene have evoked, rather, a mythological anecdote that the prince of Ugarit would have understood?

The Royal Official Quarter

The moment would come for the king to receive his guest. To honor him, he had sent elaborate robes to the prince and to some members of his entourage for them to don before reaching his presence. The delegation would have left the first court (131) and turned toward the gate at the northwest corner, called the Gate of the Palace because it alone gave access to the official and royal quarters of the king and of the harem—an intersection well protected and well controlled because nothing must trouble the order in the royal sanctuary. The delegation would enter a



Basalt statue of Išup-Ilum, a governor of Mari during the early second millennium, from room 65 of the Mari Palace. The figure was identified by the inscription on its shoulder, and the statue is currently located in the Aleppo Museum. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ PARROT

rather dark corridor that wound around the northeast corner of the celebrated Court of the Palm, the first stage of its progress. The group would come upon the court suddenly, to the left.

through a large opening whose frame of red-painted wood recalled Syrian structures.

The Court of the Palm

Coming upon the Court of the Palm would be a veritable shock, made even stronger by the half-light in the corridor. The walls and the floor blazed with whiteness under the sun, which was already high in the sky; at the base of the court, the shaded southern wall was like a summons to the visitors: this was their destination, as the organization and decoration of the court suggested. The upper wall remained very bright; contrast was furnished by the dark square cuts of its openings, aligned in two rows. It darkened under the porch roof, clothing itself in a mystery that the imposing central door, reduced to a black rectangle, deepened even more.

The envoy would first have noticed the artificial palm that rose almost in the center of the court, set between the southern wall and himself. It was this central feature that gave the court its name. Made largely of bronze and silver plating on an armature of wood, the "palm" glissended in the light and reminded all that the land's wealth—the abundance of food, vitality, and fecundity—were guaranteed by the king, who was at the same time their dispenser and

protector. The envoy of Ugarit would certainly have appreciated the symbol, more Mesopotamian than Syrian but perfectly obvious to a Near Easterner, and he would have admitted the richness of the work.

How could he not also have noticed the live palm trees in pots that threw speckles of colors into the flood of light and formed an alley leading him across the court up to the extraordinary wall. Covered with murals, it was protected by a porch roof supported by four strong columns of wood, probably cedar from the coastal mountains, the Lebanon or Amanus range.

The Great Pictorial Compositions

Would the prince have taken time to examine the development of the scenes that covered most of the southern wall, from above the southeast door opening into a large oil storage magazine to above the southwest door opening into the western quarters? Or would he have preferred to return later to admire them at greater leisure and perhaps have them explained?

The Scenes of Sacrifice There were no decorative motifs on the south wall, but a variety of scenes that repeated the great themes of the iconographical repertoire of the Near East. On the eastern side were scenes of victory, heraldic scenes with superb goats facing each other on a mountain, the whole placed above the great central doorway. To the west were religious processions with bulls being led for sacrifice. At the head of the procession was the king, distinguished from the other sacrificers by his enormous size (1.60 meters [1.75 yards]), double that of the other participants (80 centimeters [32 inches]). Iconographically the difference is clearly managed: behind the royal figure the procession splits into two superposed registers that bring together the priests, the sacrificers, the diviners, the great dignitaries, all clad in robes with festooning or, more simply, stylized knotted fringes, as well as animals adorned for sacrifice.

The vigor of the painting owes much to its design, clear and precise, with a black line that delimits the fields, the people, and the motifs. The bold colors—red and yellow ochre, blue, black, white, and gray—contribute to the vivid quality. Drawing and painting were completed

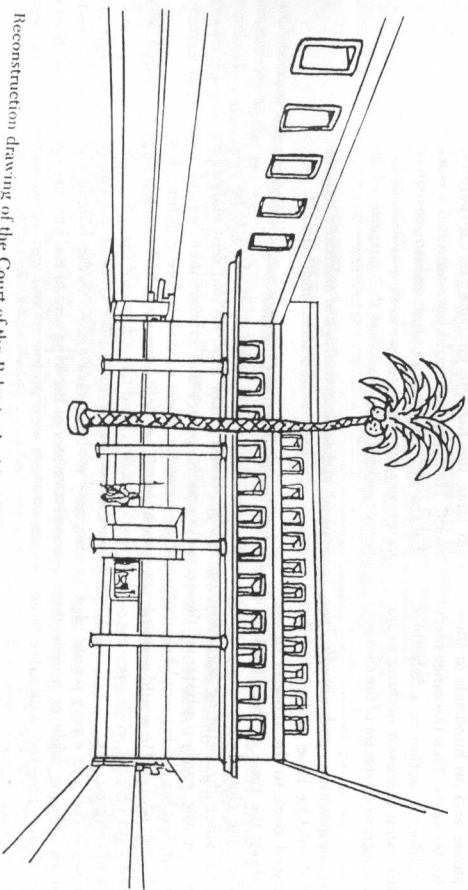
on the layer of plaster that covered the walls once it was completely dry, perhaps even long after its installation, thus, it is not a fresco.

If Ugarit's prince had no reason to be amazed at such a technique, on the whole simple and common, would he have been struck by the systematic use of compositions where figures were arranged in lines? It is not certain, because even if the whole of the area covered were composed in that manner, thus instilling great monotony, that type of composition had been dominant in the Near East for three millennia, with very few exceptions. Moreover, the great number of scenes, the variety of the subjects, and the differences in register heights that depended on six average sizes for the represented figures (the king 1.60 meters, then 1 meter, 80 centimeters, 40 centimeters, and 30 centimeters [1.75 yards, 1.1 yards, 32 inches, 16 inches, and 12 inches, respectively]) introduced sufficient variety into this arrangement to break the monotony.

When the prince turned to the palace major-domo to ask him which king of Mari had commissioned this work, he would have been told that the painting had adorned the wall for a while. Had he puzzled over the vagueness of this response, less an admission of ignorance than an evasive reply, he would no doubt have recalled that at the court of Zimri-Lim, no one would readily remember when Shamsi-Adad, then ruling Upper Mesopotamia, also controlled Mari. (See "Shamsi-Adad and Sons: The Rise and Fall of an Upper Mesopotamian Empire" earlier in this volume.)

The Investiture Painting Upon arriving under the portico in the Court of the Palm and approaching the great doorway in the middle of the southern wall, the prince would have been drawn by a composition, at eye level, immediately to his right, apparently duller and on a smaller scale than those he had just admired. The motifs and its unconventional composition would have frozen him in place: never had he seen such a work!

High as a standing man (1.75 meters) and approximately 5 cubits (2.5 meters) long, the panel delimited a rectangular field that was not divided into registers: the motif of the right and the left thirds filled the field from bottom to top, and the lower part of the middle third was occu-



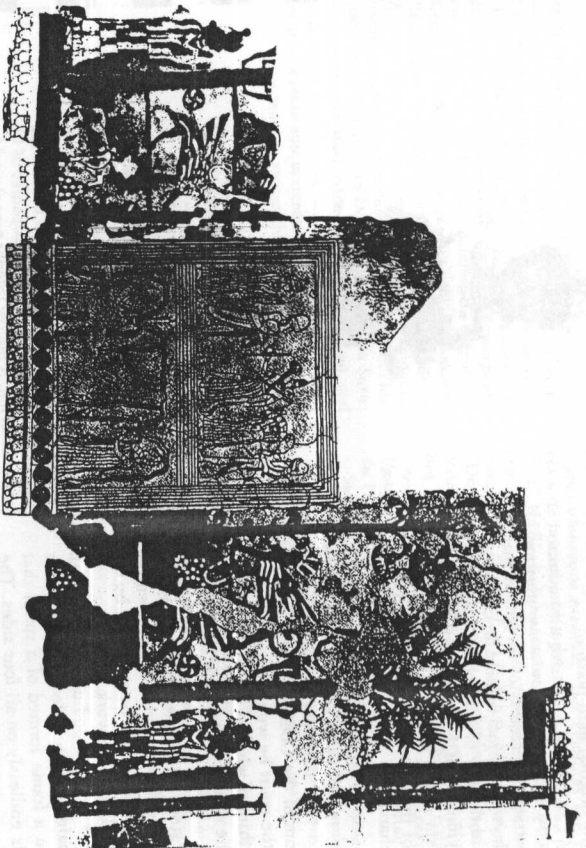
Reconstruction drawing of the Court of the Palm in the Mari Palace.

priced by a frame divided into two horizontal superposed registers. The eye of the prince would have been drawn inexorably to the small central scene, which was exactly at eye level, and thereafter to each of the other scenes inside the general frame. The frame itself would hold his attention for a moment. Formed by a dark band on which an endless spiral motif unrolled, it was ornamented with side-by-side festo on the long sides. On the short sides, bey a hand without motif and perpendicular to it, small parallel strokes mark the outer edge of the scene: fringe of the warp here, knotted fringe of the weft there, as if one had hung a carpet on the wall. Why this trompe l'oeil? Was a painting more prized than a carpet, or did one wish to make permanent the memory of a carpet that had an exceptional value and, for unknown reasons, had disappeared?

From the borders of the painting the eyes of the prince would have returned to the central scene. At the center of the upper register is the goddess Ishtar, decidedly present in this palace, shown with a frontal upper torso but with the head, hips, and legs in profile. She is clad in a robe with scallops and several panels of different colors that descends to the ankles but permits the right leg to protrude, its foot resting on a recumbent lion. From her shoulders spring weapons: her left hand, behind her body, holds the sickle-shaped sword; her right hand, brought to waist level, extends a vertical rod and a ring toward the person she faces. Behind her stands a female divinity with her arms raised in an attitude of respect and adoration and then a male divinity of lesser rank. Facing the goddess stands a king in profile, coiffed with a polos bound around the forehead with a turban, clad in a robe with scallops open in front where his left leg emerges. His right hand is raised in a sign of respect and his left is held in front, as if to touch the rod and ring held by the goddess. Behind him stands a goddess identical to the one behind Ishtar, her hands also raised. This is a scene of meeting, then, between a divinity and a mortal, but a mortal who, being a king, derives his power from the gods, whom he can approach under certain circumstances, especially when he receives from them the capacity to exercise power.

The lower register is much simpler, and the prince of Ugarit would not have had to look long to decipher it. Standing to the left and right of the delimited rectangle and facing each other are two divinities of middle rank (evidenced by a crown with two rows of horns) clad in long robes with vertical panels. Each holds at chest level a vase from which emerge a plant and four streams of water. The streams, filled with fish, reach the floor by several routes: three streams descend in front of each deity, one rises above each deity's head and descends behind her. The third stream of each deity joins in an intermediate flow above the scene. The center of the composition is free of any motif. The meaning of that scene was perfectly clear, even for a man of the Mediterranean coast who suffered less from the scarcity of water than did the inhabitants of Mari who dwelt in full desert and depended totally upon the Euphrates: water is the source of all life. To dispense water is a gift of the gods, who arrange it through the agreement that can take place between king and deity when they meet, as is portrayed in the upper register.

The gaze of the prince would then leave the central part of the composition to examine the scenes that frame it symmetrically on the right and the left. His surprise would increase, for he would certainly never have seen such a representation: the whole of the composition is set under the protection of a divinity of high rank (wearing a crown with four tiers of horns) with arms upraised. Before her stands a palm tree that occupies the full height of the panel, treated with extraordinary realism, with fan-shaped fronds and clusters of dates hanging here and there high on a trunk that two men have scaled in order to harvest the fruits. Perched on the palm, or already in flight, a superb blue bird with spread wings occupies the free field between the top of the palm and that of a second tree, to the left. As large as the first, this tree has a symbolic character and resembles no known species. Between the trunks, three mythical animals are superposed: first a humped bull with one hoof poised on a mountain; then a griffin with spread wings, a curiously helical tail, and one paw resting on the trunk of the symbolic tree; and, finally, a sphinx with a crown of multicolored



Copy and reconstruction drawing of a wall painting of an investiture scene from court 106 in which the goddess Ishtar empowers the king of Mari—shown in a tasseled garment with fringe. The lower scene portrays goddesses with vases of flowing water. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ PARROT

plumes. In regard to the palm the symbolism is easy to understand, but the meaning of the second tree and of the animals, likely dependent upon mythological stories, is not clear.

The prince might wonder: Is it necessary to understand each scene independently? Do the two framed segments represent separate scenes, or details of a single composition? Or do they give different moments in the same action? Could disparate elements have found collective placement when brought into the same cultic ceremony? He would have been told that it is indeed the same place that is rendered here, and curiously, it is this same official enclave of the palace of Mari where the painting is placed. The great frame, then, represents the Court of the Palm, and this is why they put the superb

palm there. The two superposed registers represent the throne room, where the meeting between the king and Ishtar took place (the upper register), and the antechamber with the Goddess of the Flowing Vase, which the prince had not yet seen (the lower register).

Is it Zimri-Lim who stood before the goddess Ishtar as she presented him with the insignia of power—the ring and the rod—during his investiture? No, the prince is told, the scene is primarily a symbolic depiction and is not meant to illustrate a particular event. In addition, it was completed long before the coming to power of the current sovereign. When they plastered the Court of the Palm and painted the great scenes of the southern wall, the artists had, because of its religious and artistic importance, meticu-

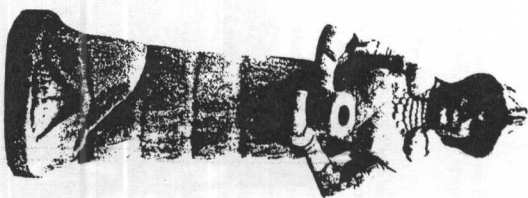
lously guarded this remnant of the earlier decoration set in the original mud plaster.

The prince would not know what to admire most in this exceptional tableau: a composition that demonstrates a richness of invention that hardly displays the normal respect for canonical forms, the subtle play of a pinpoint asymmetry within the symmetry of the whole, or the surprising naturalism of the palms in contrast to the symbolism of the rest of the design and to its allegorical character?

The Goddess of the Flowing Vase The prince would then continue his progress and enter the room of the Goddess of the Flowing Vase. From the court he would have been able to discern nothing of what lay beyond. But under the portico, the weak light would have permitted him to catch a glimpse of a white form on a podium, and since he had seen the investiture painting, he would know what it represented. Nevertheless, he might still be surprised by the remarkable quality of the work.

This statue is set on a podium covered with plaster and painted with a decoration of false marble within a frame formed of a spiral that winds its coils endlessly on all four sides. The goddess is of a modest rank, since a single pair of horns adorn her crown, but the sculptor nevertheless succeeded in creating a masterpiece of sculpture. Upright and intent on her own actions, she holds her vase in a very natural way, without rigidity, both by the neck and the bottom. At the same time, she tips it slightly, so that the flow of water forms a pretty curve as it runs out. Her hair is gathered in a knot that covers the back of her neck, and large curls spread over her shoulders. The weight of her imposing necklace of several tiers of large beads is compensated by a counterweight that descends the length of her back. Her flounced robe falls to her feet but leaves the tips of them visible and is incised with vertical undulating lines that imitate water as they run the length of her body and in which incised fish swim.

A great gentleness emanates from this work as a result of the smile of the goddess, discreet and restrained, perhaps because the sculptor took care to soften all the angles and crevices. She really seems to be a divine dispenser of life and well-being. How astonished would the



White stone statue of the goddess of the flowing vase who appears to be a divine dispenser of life and well-being. A hollow interior tunnel enabled water to pour out of the vase in a pretty curve. Found at Mari, the statue is now in the Aleppo Museum. See the investiture scene illustrated above for another view of goddesses with flowing vases. PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ PARROT

prince have been when his hosts informed him that the body of the statue was perforated from its base to the bottom of the vase, so that with a hydraulic installation (not available where it is now standing), water could actually spout from the vase, thus melding reality to allegory.

The prince would certainly have been impressed by the progress of the symbolism at each of the stops along his way: in the Court of the Palm, the palm itself being the best representative of vegetal luxuriance, since every part of it was used and since it was the king tree of Mesopotamia; then in the antechamber of the throne room, the evocation of the water as sustainer of all life; and, finally, the royal sanctuary, where the king manifested his power as the agent of the gods and the source of the prosperity of his country.

The Throne Room

Upon entering the throne room, the prince would have caught his breath. Where should he rest his gaze? What should he admire most: the depth of the room or its height; the hangings that covered the walls or the carpets on the floor; the light, dispersed through the clerestories, spreading in a thousand moving shafts along the walls; the brightness emanating from the end of the room where the king, installed under a glistening canopy, was seated majestically on a throne of ivory and gold?

He would have made his way toward the king, guided by the palace's majordomo and followed by his own attendants, passing the incense burners that diffused their aromatic odors into the walls of smoke that played in the light. After the majordomo presented him to the king, the prince proceeded with the salutation rituals, proclaiming himself the humble "son" of Zimri-Lim. He would have transmitted the message of his father, the king of Ugart, and offered sumptuous gifts he had brought: ivory cosmetic boxes, vases in gold and silver. Zimri-Lim, after having thanked him, would invite him to occupy a bench near the throne, a high honor.

From there the prince would see the other end of the room, with its raised rostrum reached by a flight of stairs. At the top were statues of ancestors of the dynasty. He could distinguish only the two placed at the front of the group: Puzur-Ishtar and Ishup-Ilum, two kings of the *sakkanaku* period who certainly were no kin to the ruling family. By including them among his ancestors, however, Zimri-Lim placed himself in a chain of rulers that went back several centuries, to the epoch of the glorious rulers of Akkad (Agade). The prince of Ugart would have been particularly struck by Ishup-Ilum, whose statue, as large as that of the Goddess with the Flowing Vase but slightly smaller than an adult man (1.52 meters [1.65 yards]), was worked in a harder stone using the same techniques. The statue was well adapted to the sobriety and purity of the lines that were characteristic of statuary at the beginning of the second millennium; but a certain massiveness of the head, a mouth with tightened lips, and a way beard confer a severity on this king who may well have been one of the architects of Mari power under the dynasty of the *sakkanaku*.

Now the festivities ordered by Zimri-Lim in honor of the prince were about to begin. The servants would still be busy bringing roast meats and pouring the beer and the wine. Then would come honey-soaked cakes, baked in molds of unexpected shapes (fish, women) and of diverse decorative themes (the hunt, animal husbandry, roundels of men or animals, mythological or heraldic scenes).

The Private Apartments

Afterward Zimri-Lim would have received the prince in his private apartments. These were located above a series of storerooms to the east of the throne room and were accessible from there by an imposing stairway that rose from a room in the southeast corner. The large living room appears to have been an agreeable place, adorned with a painting that took up the length of the south wall. Two registers contained scenes that glorified royal functions: the hunt, homage giving, war. Like the large religious scenes of the Court of the Palm, these depictions were not more than twenty years old. They charmed the prince all the more because they were part of a near eastern repertoire that he would readily appreciate. After the official ceremonies, performances by singers and dancers from the House of the Women, situated in the northwest corner, would have given the prince proof that the pleasures of life were not lacking in the Mari palace.

Terraces to the north and south of the royal apartments, shaded by trellises and climbing plants, would have given the prince a taste of the fresh evening air that relaxes the harsh heat of the day. There were other shaded terraces in the more remote parts of the palace—in the House of the Women, for example—that were probably even broader. But the prince would not have been permitted to visit them.

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW

At the end of his stay with Zimri-Lim, even if the prince had not been admitted to the stores, the House of the Women, or the offices, he doubtless would have returned to Ugart with a report that the palace deserved its reputation. Archaeological reality, exceptionally rich though it may

be nevertheless imperfectly revealed in ancient times. The richness of the palace may mean little when compared to the actual condition of the kingdom, as Zimri-Lim's fall from power a few years later, brought about by Hammurabi, shows. (See "King Hammurabi of Babylon" later in this volume.)

There is also the perception that the palace is an exception in the archaeological documentation. When Hammurabi of Babylon wished to remove Mari as a threat, he destroyed it; but he first effectively and methodically emptied it of its treasures, leaving behind only a few objects. The recovery of the statue of Mari's Puzur-Ishtar at Babylon is proof of the sack. The three statues found in the palace do not represent great wealth, even if that is more statuary than other palaces have generally yielded. The reputation for wealth came, in the main, from the epigraphic textual testimony left in the palace because it did not interest Hammurabi, and in part from the painted murals or what remains of them. In this, however, the discovery is exceptional because the abandonment of a palace and its exposure to the elements invariably result in the disappearance of its pictorial decoration; but at Mari, because the king of Babylon knocked down the walls of the palace immediately after having set it on fire, the paintings were protected when the collapse of the upper parts quickly buried them, giving rain and wind little opportunity to ruin them. Mari is thus practically the only palace that gives us a true image of the architecture of a palace of that period and of the nature of its decoration.

If we read the inventories of treasure that palace officials kept, we realize that we are still far from seeing the true wealth of the ancient palaces. Coffers, doubtless by the dozens, contained votive chariots in precious materials, objects of bronze or of precious metal, and gems. There also were beds of rare woods.

THE PALACE AS A REFLECTION OF ITS TIME

At the end of this evocation, it is necessary to recognize that the palace is the expression of the political system that it magnifies: it shapes the space for the benefit and for the glory of the king.

It establishes an environment dedicated to glorifying him. It is also the expression of a way of life.

If it expresses the art and thought of a precise moment, it also places itself on a continuum. The palace reflects a great conservatism. A number of ancient features, sometimes several centuries old, are inscribed on its walls or floors. It cannot extricate itself from its past. The sanctuaries of Mari remain such a peculiarity. No other palace is comparable in this respect.

Even without the temples and the chapel within its walls, the palace's art remains fundamentally religious: paintings and statues were not made in a hurry of artistic creation, even if the artists concentrated all their skills in these works, and not simply out of concern to decorate the palace but because the edifice and the institution that it sheltered belonged to the sphere of the divine, and it was fitting to consecrate all their efforts to exalting the divinity and, consequently, his representative on earth.

The palace was, then, a sort of museum that permitted the inhabitants of the city to situate themselves in time, to perpetuate the memory of their past. In fact, the palace visited by the prince of Ugart was in many ways more representative of the period of the *sakkankaku* than of that of Zimri-Lim. The palace also evolved. The great works of Shanshi-Adad (the private apartments of the king, the rearrangement of the Court of the Palm, and its paintings) show that the palace was never a frozen organism.

The temples and palace show that since the time of the archaic dynasties, Mari had attained an exceptional level in art, a level that never declined up to the end of its history. The ample archaeological harvest certainly has contributed to that image of richness and perfection; but it also seems that, beyond the multiple cultural tendencies and artistic influences that it gained, Mari's contact with Mesopotamia, Syria, and the edge of the Taurus, and its control of commercial routes, permitted it to acquire the wealth necessary for its workshops to flourish with uncommon distinction. Mari could evoke an art that belonged securely in the tradition of the ancient Near East, and it did so with beguiling originality.

Translated from the French by Ulla Kasten and J. M. Sasson

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See also Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia (Part 4, Vol. I); The History of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Overview and the accompanying map (Part 5, Vol. II); Shanshi-Adad and Sons: The Rise and Fall of an Upper Mesopotamian Empire (Part 5, Vol. II); King Hammurabi of Babylon (Part 5, Vol. II); and Reliefs, Statuary, and Monumental Paintings in Ancient Mesopotamia (Part 10, Vol. IV).