

STELE OF THE VULTURES

The subject of my interest is the so-called Stele of the Vultures - a freestanding relief executed by king Eannatum during the Early Dynastic Period III, around 2460 BCE. It was raised to memorialize a victory of the city-state of Lagash over its rival Umma, thus revealing much about their long-lasting dispute over the fertile region of Gu'eden and a water source between the two southern Mesopotamian city-states. Unfortunately, only a few fractions have been preserved - therefore, we face a problematic task of resolving the whole nature of this object in its primarily intended form. Six fragments were excavated in the 1880s by the French archaeologist Ernest de Sarzec at the archaeological site of ancient Girsu (modern Tello), a satellite town of Lagash. In 1898, the British Museum acquired a seventh fragment, which was later given to the Louvre Museum, where it is currently exposed.

The object presents itself as a large rectangular plaque of white limestone with a rounded top, carved in high relief on both sides, inscribed with text filling the negative space, measured 1.80 meters in height, 1.30 meters in width, and 0.11 meters in thickness. Based on the relief carvings depicted and the different pictorial modes used on either side, the obverse represents the mythological or iconic and the reverse historical or narrative face of the stele. The obverse side is divided into two registers and depicts the action of the deities after the conflict. Represented is, for example, a giant male figure of a god with a large net packed with several naked captives, a head of female divinity, or a lion-headed bird-like creature. The reverse side is divided into four registers and shows us scenes from the battle and probably also the king Eannatum himself. In the second register from the bottom appears a libation process, and in the upper right corner is a flock of vultures having heads of enemies in their beaks, which gave the stele its name.

Numerous studies, considering both visual and textual evidence, have been carried out on the reconstruction and possible interpretation of the Stele of the Vultures, describing the iconography and the narrative style in the context of Sumerian art and the political significance of this ancient artifact being the earliest known war monument (Bahrani 2008, p. 147). Such interpretations, in some cases differing, were proposed, for instance, by Marie-Thérèse Barrelet (1970), Irene J. Winter (1985), Bendt Alster (2004), and Licia Romano (2007). A study from 2014 by Davide Nadali applies to the analysis of the arrangement of the mass of soldiers recorded in the first and second register on the reverse side while clarifying the composition employed by the Sumerian artists. Another recent study from 2016 by Daniel Lau examines the functions as a visualization of the generalized communication medium of power, which perpetuates the political system of Lagash. The third study I mention here is from 2017 and was conducted by Renate Marian van Dijk-Coombes, focusing on the obverse side, particularly on the identification of an emblem, a lion heading towards the left on the far right of the lower register.

As part of my work, I aim to determine the characteristics of pictorial narrativity at its birth, taking into account imagery, text, and the relationship between the obverse and reverse. For that purpose, I investigate the possible interpretations of the stele. As the second part of my work, I intend to focus on the evolution of king representation using the comparison between the Stele of the Vultures and another stele from a more recent period - the Stele of Sargon of Akkad (SB 2), considering political agenda within the historical context. To conclude, I want to point out the significance of the Stele of the Vultures, standing at the beginning of storytelling through imagery and representing an ancient battle on a monumental scale, therefore falling within my area of interest.

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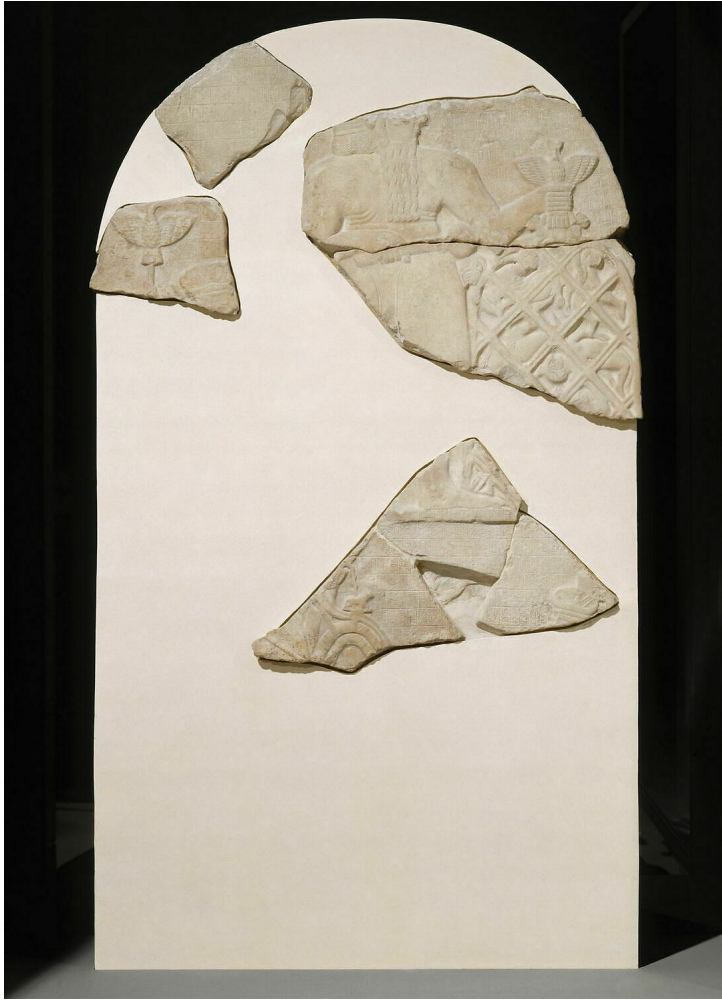


Fig. 1. Stele of the Vultures (obverse), RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski



Fig. 2. Stele of the Vultures (reverse), RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski



Fig. 3. Stele of the Vultures (reverse, 2nd register from the bottom), RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski