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Soldiers and Prisoners in Motion in Mesopotamian Iconography during the Early Bronze Age

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Abstract: Military images of the ancient Near East during the Early Bronze Age are characterized by one of their main features: the serial reproduction of soldiers and prisoners, side by side, the former clearly identifiable by the visual signs of power they bear and the latter by their humiliation. These images are usually and almost naturally conceived as the ideological prerogative of city-states in conflict for territorial domination or as signs of visual identity intended to reinforce the powers that be. However, the end of the Early Bronze Age is marked by the hegemony of the Akkadian dynasty and the iconographic changes that it generated. While strongly maintaining the military iconographic theme in its visual discourse, it broke with the motif of static parades of prisoners and introduced many details intended to clearly identify the protagonists, the enemies, or the environment of the battles. It could represent a transition from a discourse based on evocative repetition in order to present an ideal to one founded on detailed narration in order to assert the authenticity of an event. This paper investigates the phenomenon of repetition through soldiers and prisoners on images. Analyzing the message lying behind the series of hindered prisoners and battalions of soldiers also underlines the way the change of iconographic discourse during the Akkadian period can be understood, particularly given that the power of the Akkadian dynasty mainly rested on its military victories.

Keywords: military images; Mesopotamia; Early Bronze Age; Akkadian dynasty; iconography

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1. Introduction

While it is not possible to date with certainty the appearance of war in the Ancient Near East, the first traces of violence and possibly mass slaughter seem to date back to the Neolithic period. However, it is only by the end of the 4th millennium BC that the first images of war appear, very directly associated with the figure of a man who seems to concentrate temporal and spiritual power. Thus, images of war are not directly associated with the emergence of violence but rather with the expansion of the urban phenomenon in Mesopotamia at the end of the 4th millennium and the emergence of kingship. Initially rather limited, this iconography of war rapidly developed and established, in less than a millennium, the essential norms and iconographic standards that would be used for several millennia to come. Hence, during the Early Bronze Age, roughly between the end of the 4th millennium and the Akkadian period around the 25th and 24th centuries BC (Figure 1), this iconography was set up using, among other things, repetitive scenes of soldiers and prisoners. If the recurrent use of these motifs did not change much, their arrangement enabled the construction of a discourse based on power, using violence to assert unity in an unstable Mesopotamian world and a complex urban system in search of power and legitimacy.

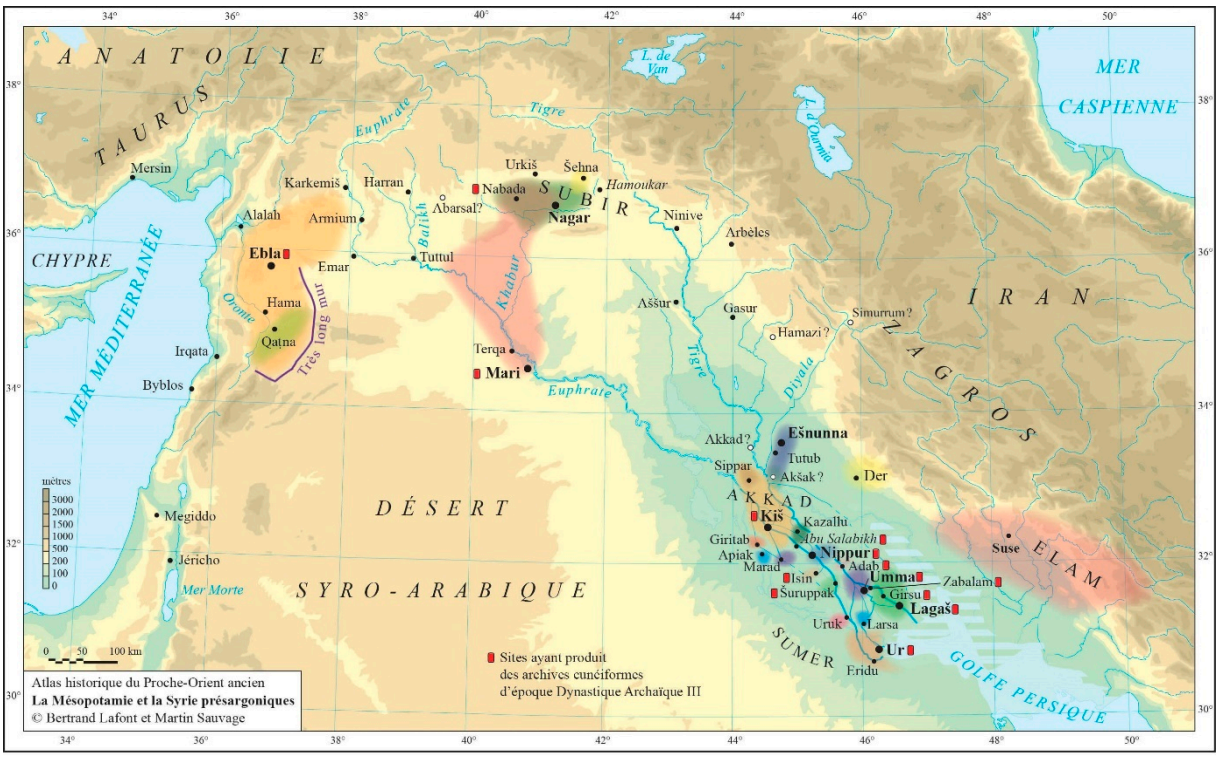


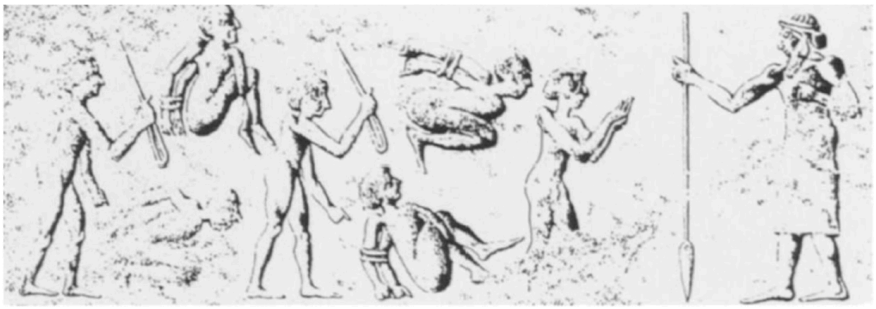
Figure 1. Map of the main Mesopotamian cities in the Early Bronze Age (M. Sauvage).

2. Images of War in the 4th Millennium

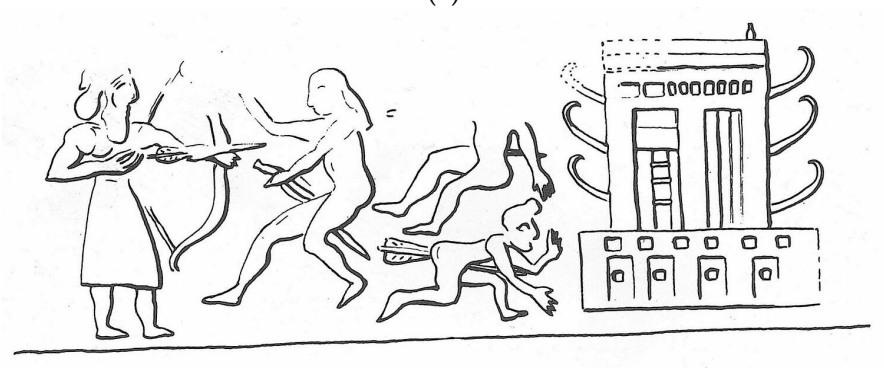
The earliest identifiable images of warfare in Mesopotamia[1] date to the end of the 4th millennium BC and are depicted on cylinder seal impressions found at Uruk, Southern Iraq[2] (Figure 2a). They show a man wearing a distinctive headdress, perhaps the king or the ruler of the city. The notion of king is still highly debated for this period and region of the world (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, pp. 181–210; Butterlin 2003; Van de Mieroop 2007, pp. 19–40; Liverani 2013, pp. 61–92; Butterlin 2018, pp. 396–405). The strength of the ruler's power and the people's perception of it at a time when the first towns and urban centres were emerging remains relatively unclear. Nevertheless, several clues point to the increasing complexity and hierarchical nature of society: at the heart of major Mesopotamian cities, such as Uruk, monumental architecture was born, revealing the ability of a ruling elite to mobilize manpower for the erection of large public buildings. Favoured by strengthening communication routes, this period also witnessed a rise in agricultural production and trade. Metalworking techniques and tools were increasingly mastered, enabling greater production. In the same period, around 3400 BC, writing was invented, and the use of cylinder seals developed, thereby increasing the circulation of iconographic motifs despite the small size of objects.

The first images of the domination of one individual over others precisely appeared on cylinder seals. Recognizable by his headdress, the dominant individual, figured as a general archetype, is often referred to as the priest-king (Falkenstein 1974; Steinkeller 1999; Vogel 2013) and is often associated with the now outdated theory of the Mesopotamian Temple City (Schneider 1920; Deimel 1931; Jacobsen 1943, 1957; Frankfort 1948; Diakonoff 1969; Postgate 1992). This man is represented in different ways, depending on his activity and the medium in which he is depicted. When sculpted as a statue, he is naked, bearded but without a moustache, wears a headdress, and has his hands folded over his torso[3] (Figure 3). This gesture perhaps foreshadows that of the worshippers—holding both hands clasped together on the chest. On other objects, the man is bare-chested and wears a skirt, the pattern of which varies. For instance, when he is hunting, as on the Lion Hunt stele[4] (Figure 4), or mastering lions on the Jebel el-Araq knife[5] (Figure 5), his skirt is plain. On the

stele, he is shown twice: at the top with a javelin and at the bottom drawing a bow, each time about to kill a lion. The composition of this scene already prefigures the organization into registers, one of the main characteristics of Mesopotamian iconography. This character also wears a skirt and uses a bow when killing enemies on an Urukean seal in an obvious parallel between hunting and warfare[6] (Figure 2b). He sometimes wears a skirt with a cross pattern when performing other activities, for example, when feeding a herd on seals[7] (Figure 2c).



(**a**)



(**b**)



(**c**)

Figure 2. The priest-king on cylinder seals: (**a**) VA 10744, Vorderasiatisches Museum (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin); (**b**) AO 6620, Musée du Louvre (after Amiet 1980, Pl. 47); (**c**) Sb 2125, Musée du Louvre (RMN).



Figure 3. Statue of a priest-king, AO 5718, Musée du Louvre (RMN).



Figure 4. The Lion Hunt stele, IM 23477, Iraq Museum (after Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, p. 22).



Figure 5. The Jebel el-Araq knife, E 11517, Musée du Louvre (RMN).

The image of the priest-king disappeared around the beginning of the 3rd millennium, but his figuration with enemies laid the foundations for an iconography of power and domination, as well as the iconographic notion of the order and the legitimization of violence by a ruler. The exercise of war was thus already clearly practised and symbolically powerful enough to be represented and conveyed. On Urukean seals, the armed individual stands in front of naked and hindered individuals (Figure 2a,b). These are the first known images that clearly relate to domination, the use of force against enemies and prisoners, and an event of war resulting in victory and defeat. The visual rhetoric of war and its grammar were consequently already settled by the end of the 4th millennium.

These images continued to develop during the 3rd millennium, as texts—most often accounts of battles written by kings—began to shed more light on the territorial stakes involved in warfare. In addition, a discourse on war and battle developed, in which the sovereign became the armed hand of his god, who led the battles. In contrast to images of the priest-king, this iconography conveys less the image of the sovereign than that of soldiers and prisoners, motifs repeated and staged within compositions designed to evoke victory. This rhetoric and iconographic motifs associated with it gradually gained strength, culminating in the Neo-Assyrian period. During the Early Bronze Age, they became canonized, notably in the Akkadian period, which brought dramatic changes in the way the world was conceived by encompassing a large territory and developing the art of war, battle and siege, which served as the basis for future territorial empires. At the

same time, the imagery of war was strengthened during this period with the insertion of details, the increasing use of the image of the king, and an attempt at setting up a visual narrative designed to convey other concepts.

3. Images of War during the Early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia

As Mesopotamian city-states developed and competed for territorial control and control of communication routes and raw material supplies (Yoffee 1995; Forest 1996, pp. 207–38; Baines and Yoffee 1998; Van de Mieroop 2007, pp. 41–62; Liverani 2013, pp. 93–114), the image of war began to stabilize and be standardized into iconographic codes and motifs. At the same time, the iconography of war conquered larger media, although it also continued to develop on small cylinder seals. The images of war took shape through three main iconographic subjects:[8] soldiers, prisoners and military equipment. Despite this relatively limited—but amply sufficient—number of subjects able to depict images of war, each one can be defined by a slightly greater number and variety of motifs, which allow for the nuancing of a rather stereotyped evocation.

Soldiers are characterized by their clothing and headdresses. Clothing consists of skirts for the lower part and protection for the chest. This protection can vary from a long studded leather cloak that closes at the base of the neck for the soldiers, on the Standard of Ur,[9] for instance (Figure 6), or a simple leather band that can be studded, as on the inlays of Mari[10] (Figure 7a,b), or not, as on the Stele of the Vultures[11] (Figure 8). Soldiers can also wear a simple cloth, as on the inlay of the Helmeted Warrior with an Axe[12] (Figure 9). Soldiers generally also wear helmets, most probably made of skin. When they are kings, they may also wear helmets adorned with a bun similar to that of Meskalamdug, found in one of the tombs in the cemetery of Ur[13] and worn by the sovereign on the Stele of the Vultures (Figure 8) and the Helmeted Warrior with an Axe (Figure 9). Others wear a form of cap, like the soldiers on the inlays found in the Temple of Ishtar at Mari[14] (Figure 7b). The weapons they carry are most often spears or javelins, sometimes axes. More rarely, they hold bows or shields, as on the inlays of Ebla[15] (Figure 10a) or the Archer plaque found at Mari[16] (Figure 11). Given the current state of textual and iconographic documentation, it remains too complicated to try and connect the images to a reality of battalion or military units (Lafont 2008). Nevertheless, the attention to detail leads us to believe that these garments do reflect a reality, whether geographical—studded capes, for instance, are only attested at Ur—or technical—shorter skirts for soldiers who need to move faster.

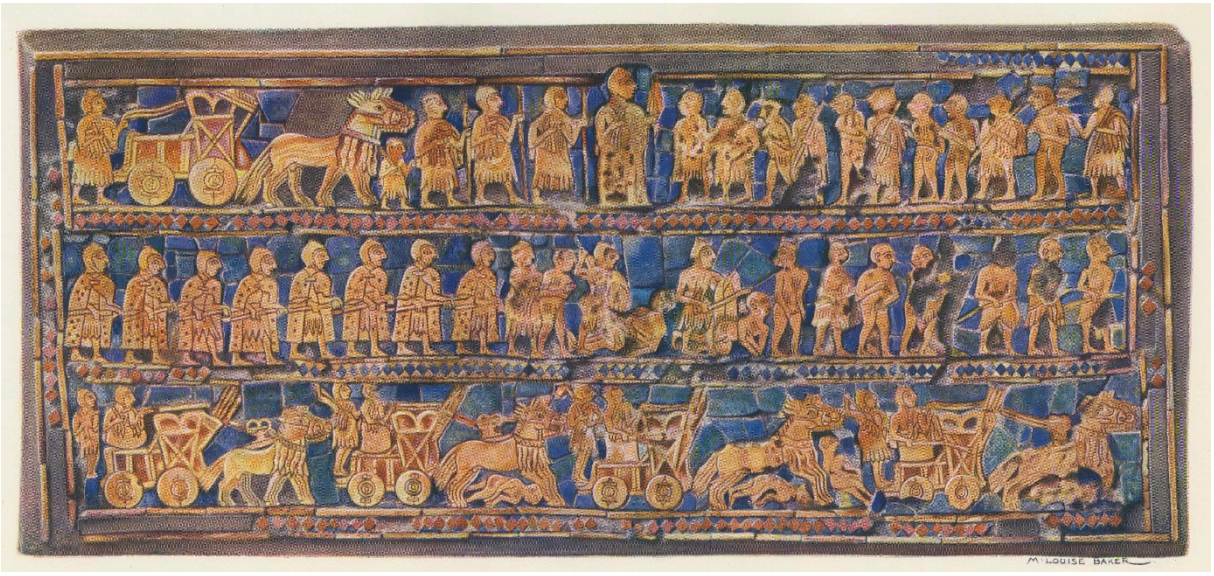


Figure 6. The 'War Side' of the Standard of Ur, BM 121201, British Museum (after Woolley 1934, Pl. 92).



(**a**)



(**b**)



(**c**)

Figure 7. *Cont.*



(**d**) (**e**)

Figure 7. Inlays of Mari: (**a**) Panel 1968, Aleppo Museum (after Couturaud 2019, Figure 6b); (**b**) M. 547, Aleppo Museum (after Couturaud 2019, Pl. 18); (**c**) M. 2478, Der-ez-Zor Museum (after Couturaud 2019, Pl. 23); (**d**) M. 2653, Der-ez-Zor Museum (after Couturaud 2019, Pl. 22); (**e**) M. 2324-2402, Damascus National Museum (after Couturaud 2019, Pl. 19).

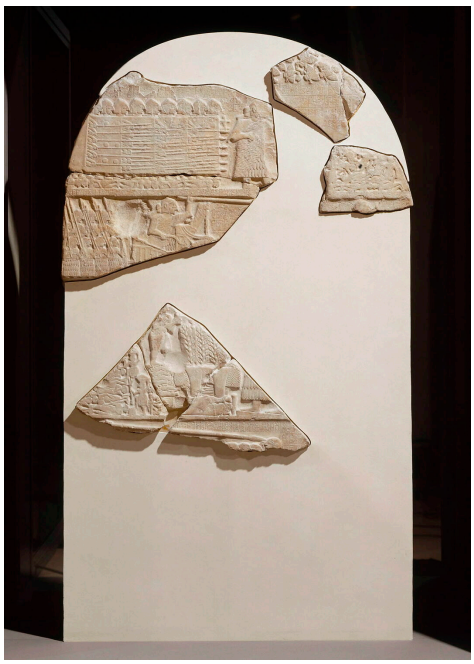


Figure 8. The Stele of the Vultures, AO 50, AO 2346, AO 2347, AO 2348 & AO 16109, Musée du Louvre (RMN).



Figure 9. The inlay of the Helmeted Warrior with an Axe, AO 18215, Musée du Louvre (RMN).

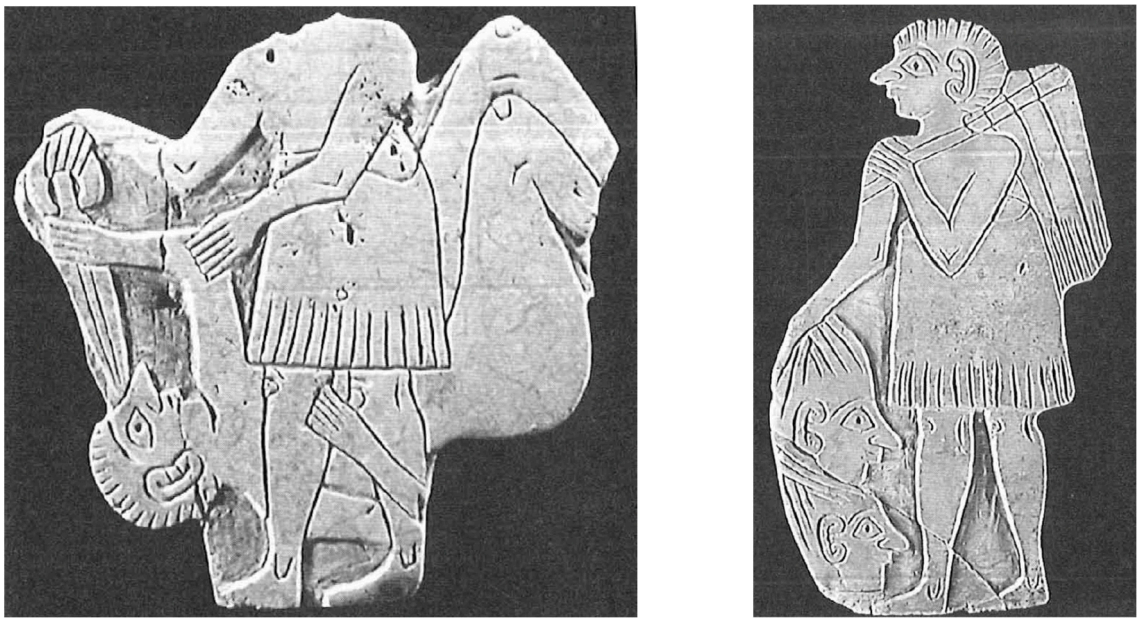


(**a**)



(**b**)

Figure 10. *Cont.*



(**c**) (**d**)

Figure 10. Inlays of Ebla: (**a**) TM.88.G.286; (**b**) TM.88.G.450; (**c**) TM.88.G.244+309; (**d**) TM.88.G.256+257; Idlib Museum (after Matthiae 2017, pp. 76–78).



Figure 11. The Archer plaque, Inv. 3746, Der-ez-Zor Museum (after Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, p. 158).

The figuration of enemies is characterized by a submissive attitude. In most cases, this is conveyed by their nudity, which suggests a bestial state, and by their posture, lying down, kneeling or hindered. Nudity, which refers to animality and savagery (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006), could also refer to a reality, a factual stripping down after the battle, where the enemy's weapons and clothes are taken. This visual effect, characterized by the absence of hair or beard, also serves to anonymize the enemy. Behind this apparent monotony of the image of the prisoner are many details that allow the tortured figure of the prisoner to be individualized. For example, while they are most often naked and hairless with shaven heads, we also know of representations of enemies with very particular haircuts on some inlays from Mari[17] (Figure 7c), only seen worn by figures on these objects or of enemies still clothed and armed even though captured and marched in the final parade after the battle, as on the Standard of Ur (Figure 6). Other details relating to their restraints are also curious: while most of them are generally tied up at the elbows, behind the back, and bound at the waist so as to form an unbroken file, others are sometimes held and guided by a soldier positioned behind them, as on some inlays from Mari, where they may be held at the back of the neck (Figure 7a) or by the ear[18] (Figure 7d). Finally, enemies are sometimes depicted dead or about to be killed, as on the lower register of the so-called War side of the Standard of Ur (Figure 6), where victims are shown lying under the wheels of chariots. There are also a few scenes of killing, such as in the central part of the middle register of the Standard of Ur or on some inlays from Ebla[19] (Figure 10b,c). The representation of dead enemies by severed heads is also well known, as on the Stele of the Vultures (Figure 8) or the seal impression of King Ishgi Mari, found at Mari, showing a severed head on a chariot[20] (Figure 12).

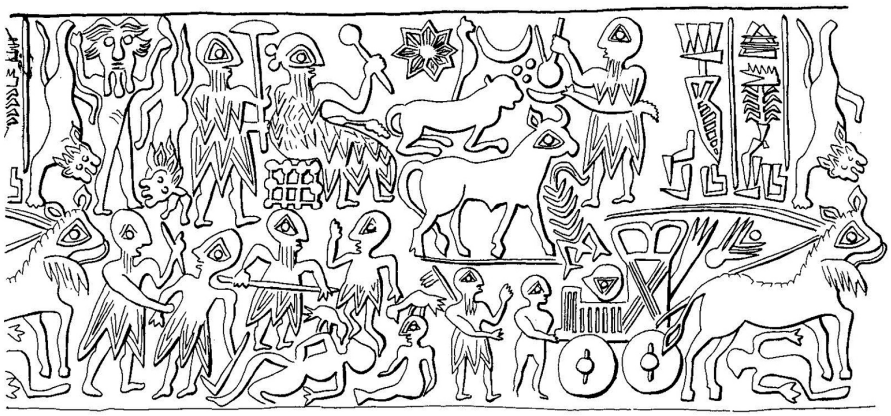


Figure 12. Drawing of the impression of a seal belonging to King Ishgi Mari, TH00.162.1-42, Der-ez-Zor Museum (after Beyer 2007, p. 198).

Chariots are the third element in military-themed scenes. War chariots have four wheels (Littauer and Crouwel 1979, pp. 15–36; 1983). They can be depicted empty, as on the Standard of Ur (Figure 6), mounted by the king during a victory parade, as on the Stele of the Vultures (Figure 8), or by soldiers in battle, as on the lower register of the alleged War side of the Standard of Ur (Figure 6). Textual documentation tends to show that chariots were rarely used in battle and more frequently for transporting units or weapons alongside the battles (Abrahami 2008). Although less prominently represented than soldiers and prisoners, chariots are nonetheless an integral part of Early Bronze Age war imagery and must be considered as prestige objects associated with victory, as very clearly shown in the upper register of the so-called War side of the Standard of Ur (Figure 6).

These three iconographic subjects allow us to compose a limited number of scenes organized in registers: the evocation of triumphal parades, as on the Stele of the Vultures (Figure 8) or the Standard of Ur (Figure 6), are the most common ones. Battle scenes are more limited but nevertheless present. The posture of a few soldiers on some inlays from Mari evokes battle and, more specifically, as mentioned above, the killing of the enemy[21]

(Figure 7e), as can also be seen on the seal impression of Ishgi Mari (Figure 12), and more frequently on the inlays from Ebla, with a developed visual grammar of mutilation (Dolce 2018) (Figure 10b–d). Siege scenes are not depicted, except perhaps for the Archer plaque found at Mari (Figure 11), which might show one with the body of an enemy who might be falling from the ramparts, again depicted naked and unarmed. Despite a few variants which, in the end, give a more realistic tone to these scenes, most of them show equipped, armed soldiers, depicted side by side and in an upright posture, facing hindered, submissive, cowering enemies.

4. Objects, Images, Composition and Visual Narration

While iconographic subjects are not numerous, and despite their more varied forms, the most distinctive feature of military scenes in the first half of the Early Bronze Age lies in their composition in overlaid registers, where each subject is placed rigorously side by side, giving the appearance of an uninterrupted, almost repetitive parade. This register composition can be adapted to most media,[22] almost all of which are used to broadcast the image of war. However, there is a clear difference between large media, such as steles, and smaller objects, such as cylinder seals, which do not allow for quite the same profusion of iconographic subjects and details and most often show on only one or two registers.

On the largest objects, such as steles, war and its victorious outcome are amply developed. This lengthy expansion allows for the repetition of certain motifs, particularly those of soldiers and prisoners, clearly representing the multitude of valiant warriors ready to defend the city and the mass of vanquished enemies, evoking—and the term evocation must be emphasized—an infinite succession, an endless procession, making the image a kind of snapshot. The organization into registers specifically creates this impression. While it might be said that the Standard of Ur is organized in a boustrophedon (Dolce 1978, p. 188), the middle register of the so-called War side evokes a parade and, more particularly, a snapshot in that parade. In this respect, the registers are the nearly perfect extension of cylinder seals, enabling a motif to be unrolled ad infinitum. This lengthy sequence, once again, serves the concept of evocation rather than narration. While the notion of a parade seems obvious enough, with soldiers depicted in the same, strictly rigorous profile, side by side, torso in front, limbs and face in profile, and even if the prisoners are in positions that are less rigorously similar but just as much side by side, we cannot help noticing that these parades or processions take place in a total absence of context. No elements give depth or volume to the environment or landscape (Kantor 1966). These scenes cannot be directly associated with a specific place, period or, more generally, clearly identified individuals. As such, they are unable to convey a tangible reality, a historical fact, and thus cannot be the manifestation of a narrative of their own; rather, they convey a timeless representation.

This point is not anecdotal given that most of the images belonging to the ancient Near East have been interpreted as narrative and related to the glorious achievements of kings, the earliest known one being the Standard of Ur (Woolley 1934; Dolce 1978; Hansen 1998; Nadali 2007). If they were indeed intended to be narrative, one could expect that the protagonists would be more clearly identified as kings by symbols or obvious attributes of royalty. On the Standard of Ur, for instance, the main character is not identified as a king, for he does not wear any royal symbol. The same goes for the inlays from Mari and Ebla. Symbols associated with the representation of a king are already in use at this time, though, if one considers, for instance, King Ishgi Mari, whether on his statue[23] (Figure 13) or the impression of his seal (Figure 12). He wears a mace, a helmet with a bun—the prerogative of kings—and sits on a throne. The text engraved on his shoulder on the statue or next to his image on his cylinder seal also supports the iconography, anchoring the character's identity in reality in the absence of details relating to the context. Writing thus becomes an additional iconographic code, anchoring the image in reality. The issue here is not so much the ability to read and thus understand the inscription but rather to enable an image to be superimposed on reality. Two inlays vividly illustrate this phenomenon: the presence of text engraved on the image of an individual without any other symbol,

bare-chested and dressed in a simple skirt, hands clasped over his chest like any other worshipper, clearly indicates that these images are representations of a king[24] (Figure 14). The Stele of the Vultures, in this respect, is unique in the corpus of war images from this period (Winter 1985). While this stele clearly depicts a king with all the attributes of his function—the helmet adorned with a bun, the mace, his position on his individual chariot—the visual codes used on the rest of the stele fail to anchor him in a context. Rather than recounting the various stages of a battle one after the other, the scenes evoke victory based on repetition and the contiguity of iconographic subjects; unlike the text, they do not narrate a historical fact.



Figure 13. The statue of King Ishgi Mari, M. 1486, Aleppo Museum (after Parrot 1956, Pl. XXV–XXVI).



Figure 14. Inlays depicting King Akurgal and King Ur Nanshe, AO 11249 and AO 4109, Musée du Louvre (RMN).

The first interpretations of ancient Near Eastern visual narrative iconography were developed and based on the Standard of Ur by Anne Perkins (Perkins 1957). Through the representation of a battle and, on the other side of the object, of a banquet, it seemed obvious that this artefact was primarily intended to represent a reality: in this case, a war in which a king of the city of Ur had been victorious, and a banquet organized to celebrate the triumph. The problem lay in her definition of the concept of visual narrative because without providing a clear definition of what she meant, she nevertheless proposed a binary vision of the images that she called narrative: on the one hand, the choice of one single scene to tell the whole; on the other, the selection of a sequence of different scenes in order to relate an event. If this distinction is relevant, it might seem wrong to consider the first definition as narrative; it might be better defined as allusive or evocative, as opposed to the second definition. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify what is meant by 'narration' or 'narrative images': either a matter of telling or relating a specific story or event by means of images (Bahrani 2002) or a question of implying a meaning through selected images. While the second definition seems evident, visual narration undeniably corresponds to the first definition since it is based on the translation of a historical event into an image. This problem of the definition of narrative also derives from a methodological bias, still very present in iconographic studies, which leads to the scrutiny of an image for the representation of a historical event or a specific fact, perhaps in order to compensate for the lack of textual data (Winter 1985). The image must not be seen only as an illustration: one should see the difference between narration and figuration. As far as the Standard of Ur is concerned, there is nothing in the different scenes that supports the reality of any event: the main character does not bear any clear evidence of his identity, and the enemies are not characterized. In other words, while it is incontestably the evocation of a victory, nothing indicates that it shows a historical event. In order for a composition to be fully considered narrative, it has to be related to a specific event and must also contain sufficient details that might help identify the protagonists, subject, and context to constitute the transcription of a real event. This has already been proposed for the Neo-Assyrian images, among others, for instance, explaining how the insertion of details relating to the environmental context fully contributes to the ideological message by assimilating action to reality (Marcus 1995). The Stele of the Vultures, on the other hand, clearly commemorates a historical event, which is indicated by the text associated with the images and, according to some scholars, constitutes the earliest known iconographic program that was intended to be read (Winter 1985). Still, even if the text were not present, one could easily identify a king but not the enemies or the cities involved in the conflict. It is important to point out that it is not the battle nor the causes of the battle that are visually shown but the victory—as if the aim was not so much the history of the conflict and, therefore, the authenticity of the facts but the image of victory. In this case, just as on the Standard of Ur, repetition of iconographic motifs is used.

It has already been established that the repetition of motifs helps in communicating its performativity and effectiveness (Bahrani 2014, pp. 115–44). Repetition allows 'being in the image' and the presence: 'Multiplicity is indeed what underscores that desire for a production of presence, a presence that for the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians is a continuous process of becoming that has no end.' (Bahrani 2014, pp. 118–19). As such, the repetition of motifs does not express a lack of creativity but does serve as a tool to enhance the presence of what is represented. In the same way, composition in registers and the absence of details that could render a landscape are not linked with an intended simplification of the image but could be meant to intentionally anchor the image into a powerful, evocative metaphor of victory: 'The images repeat (. . .) but they also resonate into an infinite recursive specularity of image within image, as in the dizzying vortex of deep time (. . .).' (Bahrani 2014, p. 128).

5. The Akkadian Hegemony and the Iconographic Narrativity

The earliest known strictly narrative composition is most probably the Victory Stele of Naram Sin, named after the king depicted on it[25] (Figure 15). He can be seen climbing a mountain planted with trees, such as those that can be found in Northern Mesopotamia, in the foothills of the Zagros (Kantor 1966; Winter 1999). The sovereign is clearly identifiable by numerous symbols, the most obvious being the horned helmet, a divine symbol of which Naram Sin took possession for the first time in the history of Mesopotamian kingship. He is armed with a bow, arrows and a pick. He is followed by his troops who, although they are all in the same attitude climbing the mountain, are not all the same—some are bearded, others not—and do not hold the same weapons, wear the same type of helmet or wear the same type of skirt. In this way, the iconography tends towards the individualization of the soldiers, unlike the rigorous repetition of anonymous soldiers on Stele of the Vultures. In front of the king and his army, the enemies die. Some are naked, while others are dressed in what could be animal skins. They wear distinctive headdresses, typical of the people of Northern Mesopotamia; in other words, they are identified. Some are armed. Their defeat is evident in their posture, sometimes pleading, sometimes dying at the king's feet or falling from the mountaintop. None of these attitudes and codes are new since they are clearly rooted in pre-Akkadian iconography, but their arrangement, staging and profusion of details allow us to anchor this scene in reality. This is confirmed by the inscription, which specifies that this stele represents the victory of the Akkadian ruler Naram Sin over the Lullubis and their king Satuni, a people living in the foothills of the Zagros in Northern Mesopotamia. This stele clearly inaugurates a visual narrative.

The timing of the introduction of this new type of iconography is no coincidence. The Akkadian period, which opened around 2350 BC with the reign of King Sargon, marks a turning point that is commonly referred to as the arrival of the First Empire and, thus, the pseudo-collapse of the city-state system (Glassner 1986; Liverani 1993; Westenholz 1997; Foster 2016). Sargon achieved the first de facto unification of the Mesopotamian basin, uniting under his control a territory stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. The speed and relative ease with which he succeeded in unifying this territory is still largely debated; some say he was the first to 'flout existing norms' ('*La force de Sargon provient moins d'une supériorité objective (. . .) que d'une étonnante capacité à faire fi des normes en vigueur*'; Forest 1996, p. 241). He probably took advantage of weaknesses within the city-states, perhaps inherent in a system largely controlled by too many competing elites within cities. In any case, Sargon achieved two important shifts: he put war at the centre of his power, and he centralized power on his own person. Images of the king multiplied, while several types of objects that had carried images of the elites gradually disappeared. Likewise, the very concept of war was transformed: it was no longer the consequence of a divine decision but a very concrete expression of the sovereign's heroism and worth, notably through the sovereign's warrior-like appearance (Winter 1996).

War is at the heart of many images from the Akkadian period. A limestone stele attributed to Rimush, son of Sargon, also features a clearly warlike composition in several registers[26] (Figure 16). The iconographic subjects are engraved in high relief, and the transition between the Stele of the Vultures and the Victory Stele of Naram Sin is clear. The register composition is the same, but the sense of detail and the break with the strict juxtaposition of rigorously similar figures is no longer present. On another stele, attributed to Sargon and made of diorite, the motif of birds of prey circling the severed heads of enemies is also figured[27] (Figure 17). Some birds are smaller, perhaps reflecting a desire to convey a notion of volume, depth and perspective. In this way, the Akkadian rulers brought about a real iconographic revolution through the complexification of iconographic compositions, the diversification of accessories and postures, and new renderings of bodies and details, authorized using a new material, diorite, a hard stone brought from the Persian Gulf, whose high density allows for a profusion of details. As far as images of war are concerned, the Akkadian rulers brought to a climax the iconographic grammar of domination, power, submission and humiliation of the 'others', reflected in the gradual

disappearance of the strict repetition of soldiers and prisoners, in order to anchor the reality of war into the iconographic discourse.



Figure 15. The Victory Stele of Naram Sin, Sb 4, Musée du Louvre (RMN).



Figure 16. A fragment of a stele attributed to King Rimush, AO 2678, Musée du Louvre (RMN).

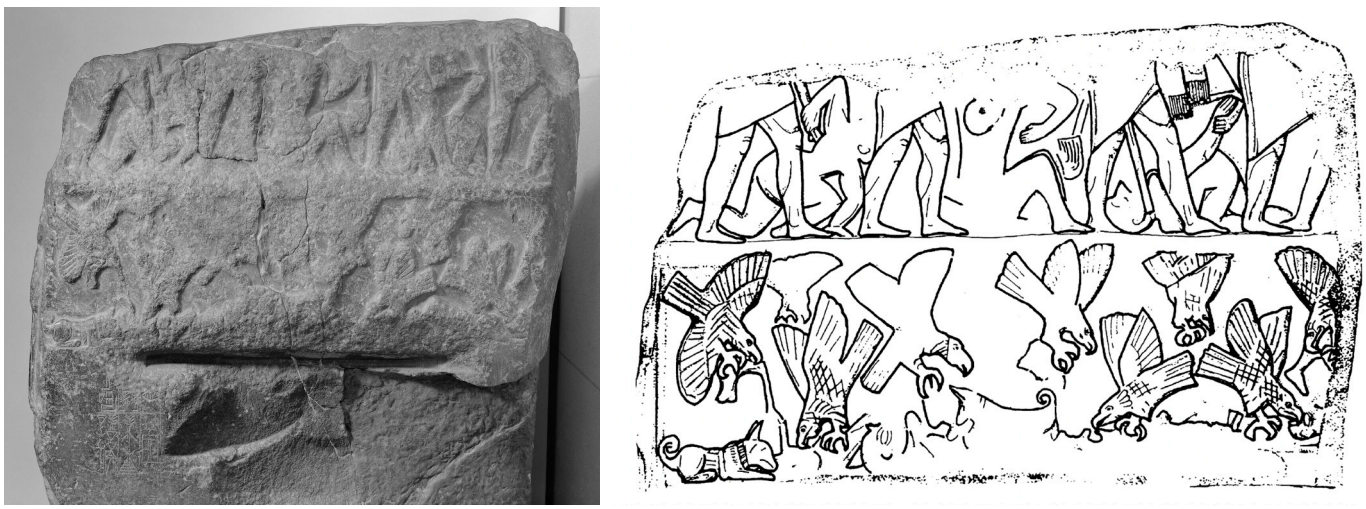


Figure 17. A stele of King Sargon, Sb 1, Musée du Louvre (RMN, and after Nigro 1998, Figure 12).

6. Conclusions

The expansion of the Akkadians caused both political and ideological shifts. Previous iconographic frameworks were also upturned, particularly for the iconography of war. From a period in which war was represented in a restrictive way, with three iconographic subjects affixed side by side on superimposed registers, devoid of context, these stereotypes

gradually broke down and the canonical figurations tended to diminish in favour of better-characterized individuals and identified contexts. Nevertheless, this restrictive way of representing war should not be understood as a lack of creativity from pre-Akkadian societies but rather as communicating with a different objective, with the aim of evoking war as a logical order in a society governed above all by the deities and not their representative on earth.

The change catalyzed by the Akkadian kings is undoubtedly attributable to ideological shifts, the very concrete transcription of which in the iconography involves visual narrative, moving from an ideal of triumph to the figuration of real victories, putting the king in the centre. It remains clear, however, that this was by no means an exclusive scheme, as we have seen that objects such as the Stele of the Vultures represent an exception and that we must also take into account the media of the images, which do not convey a discourse in the same way, nor under the same conditions and environments. We must also bear in mind that only a handful of images have survived, most of them in a very fragmentary state. Nevertheless, almost a millennium after the depictions of a priest-king, the Akkadians again channelled the iconography of war, violence and domination into the image of the king, thereby reinforcing the discourse of authority in Near Eastern iconography.

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Notes

1 Mesopotamia is understood here as the territory irrigated by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, corresponding roughly to present-day Iraq and north-eastern Syria. This paper is the result of ongoing research into the iconography of warfare in the Early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia, which began as part of a contract at the University of Liège and continues today at the Musée du Louvre. I would like to thank Alisée Devillers and Kathlyn M. Cooney for inviting me to present a few thoughts on this subject.

2 VA 10744, Vorderasiatisches Museum; (Amiet 1980, Pl. 47).

3 IM 61986, Iraq Museum; AO 5718 & AO 5719, Musée du Louvre; Inv. 1942, Archaologische Sammlung der Universitat Zurich; (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, p. 38; Gambino and Rova 2005).

4 IM 23477, Iraq Museum; (Benoit 2003, pp. 196–97).

5 E 11517, Musée du Louvre; (Pittman 1996).

6 Sb 2125, Musée du Louvre; (Amiet 1980, p. 659, Pl. A3).

7 AO 6620, Musée du Louvre; (Thomas 2016, p. 276).

8 We are talking here about iconographic subjects, understood as an association of iconographic motifs—these representing the smallest element of the image. For example, the iconographic subject of the soldier is made up of several motifs, such as the weapon, the military garment, the helmet and so on.

9 BM 121201, British Museum; (Woolley 1934, pp. 266–74, Pl. 91–93).

10 Panel 15572, Aleppo Museum; Panel AO 19820, Musée du Louvre; (Couturaud 2019, pp. 65–66, 207–25).

11 AO 50, AO 2346, AO 2347, AO 2348 & AO 16109, Musée du Louvre; (Winter 1985).

12 AO 18215, Musée du Louvre; (Parrot 1956, pp. 135–36).

13 C 278, British Museum; (Woolley 1934, Pl. 150).

14 Panel AO 19820, Musée du Louvre; (Couturaud 2019, pp. 64–65, 207–8).

15 TM.88.G.286, Idlib Museum; (Matthiae 2017, Figure 10).

16 Inv. 3746, Der-ez-Zor Museum; (Yadin 1972).

17 Panel 1913, Der-ez-Zor Museum; (Couturaud 2019, pp. 67–68, 234–35).

18 Panel 1968 and Panel 5113, Aleppo Museum; Inv. 2104, Damascus National Museum; (Couturaud 2019, pp. 65–66, 227–30).

19 Inv. 3297 and 3269, Idlib Museum; (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, pp. 175–77, Pl. 115c, 115f).

20 TH00.162.1-42, Der-ez-Zor Museum; (Beyer 2007, pp. 193–97).

21 Panel 1916 and Panel 1923, Damascus National Museum; (Couturaud 2019, pp. 66–67, 209–16).

[22] Here, we are considering mainly the media that enable group scenes and not statues, for example, which can also evoke war, as on the statue of King Ishgi Mari represented as a warrior but in individuality.

[23] M. 1486, Aleppo Museum; (Parrot 1956, pp. 68–70).

[24] AO 4109 and AO 11249, Musée du Louvre; (Thomas 2016, pp. 284–85).

[25] Sb 4, Musée du Louvre; (Winter 1996, 1999; Eppihimer 2019, pp. 36–89; Couturaud 2024, pp. 193–97).

[26] AO 2678, Musée du Louvre; (Amiet 1976, pp. 90–91).

[27] Sb 1, Musée du Louvre; (Amiet 1976, p. 1250).

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