

# A Monumental Puzzle

## Reconstructing the Ur-Nammu Stela

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The puzzle began with bits and pieces of limestone found in the 1920s at ancient Ur. Now part of the Mesopotamian collection of The University Museum, these fragments, derived from a single large slab covered with low relief carving, are still dispersed. The larger blocks together with smaller fragments with recognizable figures and scenes are encased in plaster, restored as a 3-meter-high stela (Fig. 1) that stands between empty exhibit cases and packing crates in a section of the Mesopotamian gallery that is closed pending ceiling repairs and renovations. Other fragments—some with small areas of sculptured surface preserved, others merely flakes with broken edges from the interior of the stela—had been placed in trays in the basement area assigned as storage for the Near East section.

About a year ago, the restored stela began to be the focus of some unusual activities. Scholars stood on tall ladders, examining details on the surface with the aid of a flashlight. Pieces retrieved from storage were compared with the restoration, and sometimes old breaks were made to join. An artist with calipers, drafting tools, and oversized sheets of paper began to make the first accurate scale drawings of the stela fragments. This article presents a preliminary report on the results of this research.

But why all this effort for an object that is so fragmentary and (because of this) so difficult to visualize in its original form, much less to interpret? The answer lies in its importance as both a historical document and a work of art. The stela commemorates the rule of King



1 The "front" of the stela of Ur-Nammu (ca. 2112-2094 B.C.) as restored in the early 1930s. (UM neg. 61926)

Ur-Nammu, who lived ca. 4000 years ago in southern Mesopotamia. Because it provides rare pictorial representations of the king's relations with the divine world, this monument is one of the treasures of the Museum's Mesopotamian collection—on a par with the astounding wealth of precious objects from the tombs of earlier kings of Ur. On the stela the king is seen engaged in various symbolic activities accompanied by his gods; priests are seen performing sacrificial and other ritual acts for which we have virtually no other illustrations.

Very few pieces of sculpture have survived from this period, or from any early period of Mesopotamian history. Most, like Ur-Nammu's stela, were smashed by invading enemies. (A few, such as the stela of Hammurabi, were taken off as booty and fared much better.) Despite its shattered state, some of the meticulously carved scenes on the Museum's stela survived in mint condition and for this reason are frequently pictured in general books on art history, books on ancient Near Eastern art, and even in a fifth grade text book on ancient civilizations!

### Discovery and Acquisition of the Stela

The remains of Ur-Nammu's monument were recovered from the site of Ur by the Joint Expedition of The University



3 Ur-Nammu's name appears on this "floating" fragment of a draped garment suggesting that he is the king garment, represented on the stela. (UM neg. 8881)



2 The courtyard of the shrine E-Dublal-mah at Ur where most of the fragments of the Ur-Nammu stela were found. In the background is the ziggurat. (From Woolley 1965: Pl. 2)

Museum and The British Museum, under the direction of Leonard Woolley. Almost all of the fragments were found in levels of the site dating to the Kassite period, at least 700 years after Ur-Nammu's time. They were scattered over a relatively large area within the complex of the moon god Nanna (patron of the city of Ur) and his wife Ningal. Most of the pieces were from deposits lying above a brick pavement near a lawcourt and shrine (E-Dublal-mah) adjacent to the ziggurat (Fig. 2), but a few were found within the masonry of buildings, including one that formed part of a doorway. A single fragment came from beneath the brick paved floor of a Kassite temple.

The most reasonable explanation



4 Map of Mesopotamia.

of this stratigraphic distribution is that offered by the excavator (Woolley 1974:75). The fragment under the brick pavement provides evidence that the limestone stela had been broken up before Kassite times. Although we cannot be certain about the date of this event, it was probably during the destruction of Ur by the Elamites in 2004 B.C. (see below). During Kassite times, fragments of the stela (as well as bricks from Ur-Nammu's buildings) were found and used as construction material. When the Kassite buildings were destroyed, most of the stela fragments were again scattered, but a few remained in place within the ruined walls.

Most of the fragments were recovered in March 1925, the third season of excavation by the Ur expedition. The significance of the stela was immediately apparent. Woolley considered it to be so valuable that he urged the two sponsoring museums and the newly formed government of Iraq (represented by Gertrude Bell) to delay the division of objects between Baghdad, London, and Philadelphia. Only by adding all of the artifacts from the next (1925-1926) season to those from 1924-1925 could a suitable balance be found for the stela (see *Expedition* 20[1]:15-23). In the summer of 1926, Philadelphia won the drawing of lots and obtained all known frag-

ments of the stela. These were already in Philadelphia, having been sent to The University Museum in the fall of 1925 for a temporary exhibition. In 1927 the stela was published by Leon Legrain, a French priest who was a member of the Ur Expedition and curator of the Museum's Babylonian collection from 1920 to 1948. Legrain, a somewhat romantic character, named it the "Stela of the Flying Angels" because of the extraordinary female deities in the top register: "graceful girlish figures [that] glide down from heaven," dispensing precious streams of water over the scenes below (Legrain 1927:77; see also Fig. 8).

By 1932, all of the larger fragments had been incorporated into a 3-meter-high restored monument that has stood in the Mesopotamian gallery ever since (Fig. 1). Later, a large piece recovered in the 1932-1933 season (Fig. 18) was added to the restoration, and minor changes were made to accommodate it. In this article, a new study of both the major pieces and the fragments in storage will be used to suggest a new restoration of the stela and some of its scenes.

### Historical Background: Ur-Nammu and the Third Dynasty of Ur

The identity of the king represented on the stela can be tentatively established by a carved fragment that shows a portion of a draped garment inscribed with the name Ur-Nammu (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, this is a "floating" fragment, that is, it does not actually join any other piece on the stela. More secure evidence that the stela belonged to Ur-Nammu comes from a longer inscription restored on its "back" face (see box; Fig. 19). Here the name of the king is not mentioned directly, but canals known to have been dug by Ur-Nammu are listed.

Of Ur-Nammu's early years, little is known with certainty. He apparently began his career as military commander of the city of Ur under Utu-hegal of Uruk, the heroic king who according to Mesopotamian historical tradition drove the barbarous Guti out of the lowlands. (The

Guti, a tribal people from the northern Zagros mountains, are thought to have been responsible for the collapse of the previous dynasty.) Ur-Nammu shortly struck out on his own. He threw off the control of Utu-hegal, took the title "king of Ur," and eventually gained control over all of southern Mesopotamia (Fig. 4).

Ur-Nammu ruled for 18 years (Fig. 5). He apparently devoted himself to massive building projects not only in Ur but throughout Mesopotamia. The many irrigation canals he had constructed and repaired were of vital importance for agriculture in a land that received too little rainfall for dry farming. The canals also served as Ur's "highway to the sea," linking it with the Persian Gulf and beyond. When Ur-Nammu died in battle ca. 2094 B.C., he was succeeded on the throne by his well-educated son Shulgi. Shulgi



5  
*Statuette of Ur-Nammu with basket of materials used to form the first brick of a building (see also Fig. 13). (Photograph courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library)*

ruled for 48 years, and was followed by three other direct descendants (see box on Ur-Nammu's empire).

The powerful dynasty that Ur-Nammu founded lasted barely a century (2112 to 2004 B.C.), but its cultural achievements mark it as a high point of Mesopotamian civilization. It is a period that seems especially tangible today because of the vast number of business documents, contracts, accounts, letters which have survived on clay tablets. At the same time, it is a period for which frustratingly little is known of political history. We do know that the rule of the dynasty ended when the territory under its control was attacked by the Elamites of southwestern Iran in 2004 B.C. Ur was sacked, and it was probably at this time that the stela of Ur-Nammu was shattered (see box).

### Restoration of the Stela: Woolley and Legrain

The initial restoration of the stela was done in Philadelphia under the supervision of Legrain—a loose supervision, it seems, since he as well as Woolley found fault with it. No technical records made by the restorers have been found, but some of the principles by which they worked can be inferred. First, the stela has a smooth edge, curved across the top and then running straight down the two sides. Second, there is a difference in the texture of the two carved faces. One face of the stela is well preserved, exhibiting smooth contours and incised details; the other is worn and pockmarked due to faults in the limestone. The well-preserved face has been traditionally referred to as the "front," while the worn surface became the "back." By defining the stela's edges, and then using surface texture to orient the fragments, a basic structure could be determined. Joins between some of the larger pieces soon showed that the scenes were arranged in a series of horizontal registers (Fig. 1), and that the size of the figures varied between registers, with the largest figures at the top. Smaller pieces could be placed by using surface texture, joins between pieces, and the scale of the figures represented. Assumptions made by

## The Empire of Ur-Nammu under His Descendants

Ur-Nammu established an independent state centered on Ur in 2112 B.C. After Ur-Nammu's death, his son Shulgi expanded the territorial limits of the state, mainly to the east of the Tigris in what is today southwestern Iran or, in ancient times, the land of Elam. He also undertook a series of important political, administrative, and economic reforms, as a result of which Babylonia emerged as a highly centralized bureaucratic state (Steinkeller *In press*). Among the most interesting and important of Shulgi's innovations in terms of the interpretation of the Ur-Nammu stela was Shulgi's deification, which took place no later than his twentieth year. Ur-Nammu was posthumously declared a god, while Shulgi's successors took the title "divine" at their accession.

Shulgi was succeeded on the throne by his sons Amar-Suen and Shu-Suen. The two brothers ruled nine years each. We know little of the reigns of these two kings, but historians generally agree that both essentially held the empire inherited

from their father intact. In written documents from the time of Shu-Suen, however, we begin to find evidence of impending disaster. We read, for example, of the first incursions of the Martu (Amorites), a Semitic-speaking people from the desert to the west, into the core area of the empire. We know in fact from one of the year names of his reign that Shu-Suen built a wall across the floodplain from the Euphrates to the Tigris in an effort to keep the Amorites out.

Shu-Suen's efforts, however, were not successful. In the reign of his son and successor, Ibbi-Suen, Amorite raids increased. These raids, combined with pressure from the Elamites on the southeastern flank, put the king of Ur in an untenable position. In the early years of his reign, first the outlying areas of the empire and then, one by one, the city states of the core area broke away from Ur. Even though he held out for 24 years, Ibbi-Suen controlled little more than Ur itself. We have evidence from that time of economic collapse and famine in the land. The price of grain, for example, skyrocketed to sixty times normal. In the end, even Ur was vulnerable, and it fell to an attack by the Elamites in 2004 B.C. The city was sacked and Ibbi-Suen led captive to Elam. One of the most moving of Sumerian literary works, the so-called Lament over the Destruction of Ur, records the disaster. Some excerpts follow:

*O thou city of name, thou hast been destroyed;  
O thou city of high walls, thy land has perished.  
O my city, like an innocent ewe thy lamb has been torn away from thee;  
O Ur, like an innocent goat thy kid has perished.  
O city, thy parsu [divine rights], the dread and awe of the enemy, Thy decrees—unto inimical decrees they have been transformed.  
Thy lament which is bitter—how long will it grieve thy weeping lord?*

*Woe is me, the city has been destroyed, the house too has been destroyed;  
O Nanna, the shrine Ur has been destroyed, its people are dead.  
Woe is me, where shall I sit me down, where shall I stand up?*

*Ur like the child of a street which has been destroyed seeks a place before thee.  
Thy house like a man who has lost everything stretches out the hands to thee;  
Thy brickwork of the righteous house like a human being cries thy "Where, pray?"  
O my queen, verily thou art one who has departed from the house; thou art one who has departed from the city.*

(Kramer 1940:25, 51, 63)

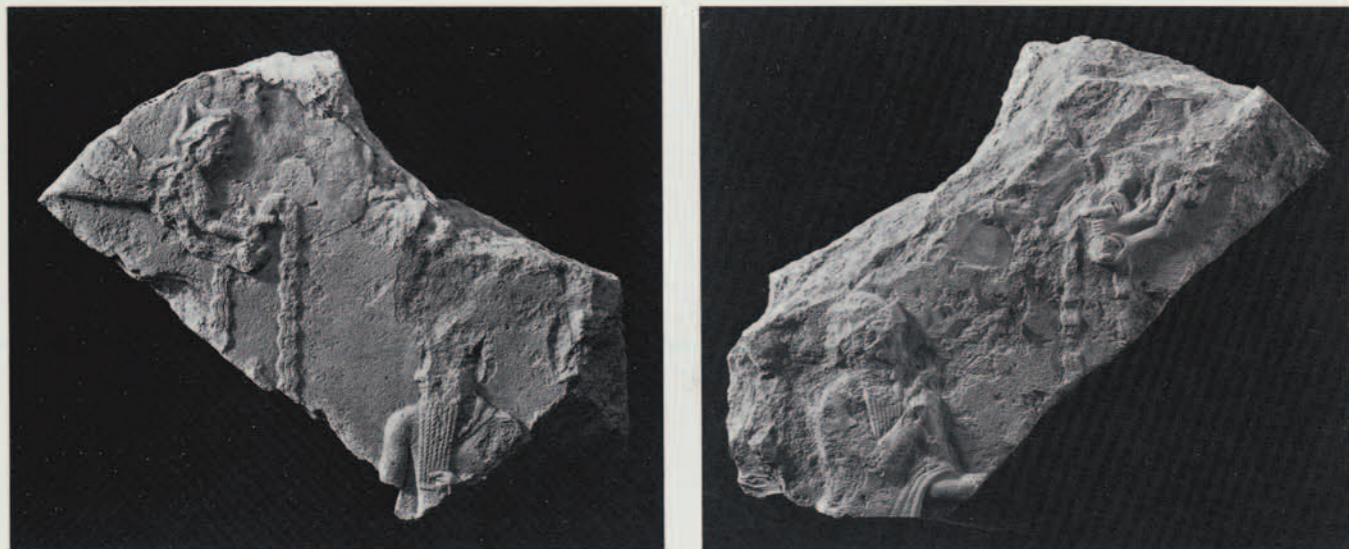
Richard Zettler



6a-c  
*Stela fragments from storage: a) head of a god (top left); b) arm of a god (bottom); c) head of a king. (UM neg. 138730)*

Legrain, Woolley, and/or the restorer about the nature of the scenes represented must also have played a role. In the end, even basic characteristics of the stela sometimes remained unknown. For example, both Woolley and Legrain agreed that the restored height of the stela is approximate "at best" (Woolley 1974:76).

Woolley's early opinion of the stela was enthusiastic, almost ecstatic. In 1925 he wrote: "broken as it is and in parts much damaged, this stela ranks as one of the two great works of Sumerian art known and in dramatic interest is surpassed by none" (University Museum Archives, March 8, 1925). Within a decade, his views had radically changed. In the final publication of



7a, b  
Both faces of a large fragment from the curved top edge of the stela. The upper body of the king appears on each side, with a female deity overhead pouring out streams of water. 8b is the side appearing on the "front" in the current reconstruction. (UM negs. 8428-29)

the piece, written in 1935, he said: ". . . when the Stela of Ur-Nammu was first discovered it was only too easy to exaggerate its originality. In point of fact it is in originality that the stela is most lacking. . . . Admirable as the Ur stela is, it strikes no new note, but is the last of a series wherein every detail, it would seem, had become stereotyped and every bit of symbolism had been consecrated by custom; for all its perfection of technique it is emphatically a work of the decadence" (Woolley 1974:81).

From the well-preserved scene in the second register (Fig. 1), in which the king pours a libation to a god on the right and to a goddess on the left, Woolley was convinced that "It is quite certain that . . . there was a strict parallelism and that the subject was repeated on either side of the center of the relief" (1974:76). Even the penetrating eye of the great ancient Near Eastern art historian Henri Frankfort was so influenced by Woolley's insistence on the strict and tiresome repetition in each register that he described the composition as "static" (1954:51).

Woolley's jaded view of the stela was in part caused by his admirable zest for prompt publication. He reported to the directors of both museums on a regular basis and in great detail from the field, while the material was still fresh in his mind. Often, as in the case of the stela, these lengthy clear descriptions were

### Work on the stela has the fascination of a jigsaw puzzle.

taken almost verbatim into his preliminary reports in various journals, and ultimately into the final publication. Woolley probably did not see the Ur-Nammu stela after it was sent to Philadelphia in 1925 for the temporary exhibition, from which, of course, it never returned. In one urgent letter to Legrain preserved in the University Museum Archives, Woolley asks for better photographs and any of Legrain's new ideas on the stela. Some of his descriptions show that he must have been working from misleading photographs. And he was very busy elsewhere. After he published the final report on his excavations at Tell al-Ubaid (a site near Ur that contained an elaborate temple complex dating to the 3rd millennium as well as earlier prehistoric remains; Woolley 1927), he returned to Ur to excavate the famous Royal Cemetery. This Woolley describes as some of the most difficult excavation he had ever done; still, he was able to present the full publication of the tombs by 1935. Father Legrain, in the meantime, was busy copying cuneiform texts for the publication of the first

volume of the Royal Inscriptions of Ur in 1928. He then sat down to the even more difficult task of copying and analyzing the seal impressions on archaic tablets from the site for publication in 1936.

A reexamination of the reconstructed stela and of fragments in storage shows that it is Woolley's earlier opinion that is correct. The scenes are not static or unoriginal, and the repertoire of motifs is richer than Woolley had thought. Much of the subject matter does go back to the earlier part of the 3rd millennium B.C., but these subjects are made into entirely new compositions. No sculpture has been discovered in the last 60 years of excavation to lessen Woolley's original claims. Interpretation of the scenes is, in fact, hampered by the lack of comparative material.

### A New Restoration

Work on the stela has the fascination of a jigsaw puzzle with the added enticement of finding scenes that have not been seen since the destruction of the monument four thousand years ago. The first step in our new attempt to solve this puzzle was to retrieve the fragments from storage, and to sort the pieces into two categories: those with a well-preserved worked (carved) area, i.e., "front" pieces; and those with a poorly preserved carved surface,

i.e., "back" pieces. They were then sorted by subject matter. Most important here were fragments showing heads, arms, legs, or bits of costume, and those showing bricks or elements that could be identified as parts of a building. Next came the search for joins, either between loose fragments, or between a loose fragment and those incorporated in the present restored stela. The puzzle is not yet fully solved, and in fact cannot be solved until the stela is taken apart. At present, the plaster restorations sometimes cover crucial details, and prevent the joining of broken edges. Only when the restorations have been removed can the pieces be reassembled, with important additions from the fragments which have lain so long in storage.

The additional elements recognized so far include part of at least seven human figures (Fig. 6a-c): a king, two gods, a floating goddess, and three "priests." Fragments also depict a wheel from a chariot, a drum fragment, part of a cow with her calf, two goats, and some connected fragments that have so far defied interpretation. Few of these isolated elements can as yet be grouped into scenes but the listing of actors, actions, and settings already enlarges our impression of the original subject matter. Two architectural elements are very important for the reconstruction suggested below.

Once joins had been made, figures and other motifs were organized into scenes, initially using rough

sketches of the carving, and later using scale drawings of both the carved elements and broken edges. The re-creation of these scenes depends heavily on our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern iconography or pictorial symbols and symbol systems, a knowledge which has grown since the time of Woolley and Legrain. One obvious source for such images would be other stelae, but as already noted, these are unfortunately rare and often fragmentary. The most useful for comparative purposes are fragments of several stelae found at ancient Girsu (modern Tello). On the other hand, a great deal of information is provided by a very different type of artifact, the cylinder seal. These are small cylindrical devices that are carved in intaglio. By rolling these cylinders over a prepared clay surface, items such as documents, bales or containers of goods, and storeroom doors could be "sealed"—secured or authenticated by an individual or an official. Cylinder seals were similar to contemporary monumental works of art in both style and subject matter, and therefore can be used to provide information on sculptures that are now lost to us.

### The Top Register: Realm of the Gods and King

The most important scenes on the stela for the ancient artist as well as for the modern scholar are those in the top register. Their significance is indicated not only by their position relative to the other scenes, but also by their size: the figures are larger than those in



8  
Artist's rendition of the proposed restoration of the "front" of the Ur-Nammu stela. (Drawn by Kathleen Galligan)



9  
Scene from a cylinder seal of the king Gudea from ancient Girsu (modern Tello), showing mixing of waters. (From de Sarzec 1884-1912: Pl. 24:4)



10  
Cylinder seal impression showing a seated figure at right with a child precariously perched on her lap. (British Museum seal no. 89 343 reproduced courtesy of the British Museum; from Boehmer 1965: Pl. 48:556)

the other registers, one and one-half times the size of those in the register immediately beneath (Fig. 1).

At the very top of the stela on both faces are fragments that Woolley thought represented a crescent and star, a motif also found in a better state of preservation on another stela dedicated by Ur-Nammu. Nothing can be seen of this design at present, since it has been obscured on both sides of the stela by plaster; according to Woolley, however, these motifs as restored are both clumsy and too large.

Below are a series of figures that can be recognized as either gods or humans, depending on their costume. Gods and goddesses wear a horned headdress, and either a long flounced gown or, in the case of subsidiary goddesses, a long pleated gown that exposes one shoulder. The king wears a turban and a long plain gown, also with one shoulder exposed. The costume of the other figures varies.

As noted above, Woolley believed that in the top register, a single scene was repeated four times, twice on each face of the stela. My restudy of the stela suggests that there were at least three different scenes. There are, however, still four symmetrically placed floating goddesses, and it may be that each is placed above an image of a seated or standing divinity.

Woolley based his reconstruction of the top register on "edge pieces." One of these, preserving the right-hand edge of the front face, forms the largest intact section of the stela. Here a divine person is seated on a throne facing left in both the top register and the second register. A single large fragment from the curved top edge of the stela is very important since both front and back faces are preserved (Fig. 7a, b). On each face the upper body of the king is shown, but he assumes two different poses. Above the king on both faces hovers a female deity with hair streaming along her back. She holds out a globular vessel with a long neck that dispenses streams of water which fall gracefully downward in front of the king.

On the Legrain restoration, a depiction of the king with one arm raised to his lips and the second extended forward has been placed

on the front of the stela. The first alteration of the Woolley-Legrain restoration suggested here is a change in the position of this fragment. Based on surface condition, it should be reversed, so that the scene just described falls on the poorly preserved back of the stela (see box). This moves to the front a different image of the king, whose turban-like headdress has been found in storage (Figs. 6c, 8). Here the king holds his left hand to his chest while his right is extended to pour a libation over a sacred tree, the tip of which is preserved (Fig. 7a). Over his head a goddess holds her head far back from the streams that she too pours over the sacred tree. Scenes with waters from heaven (dispensed by the goddess) mixed with terrestrial waters (dispensed by the king) in elegant patterns are well attested in this period (Fig. 9). There is nothing left of the figure which stood on the other side of the tree, but space dictates that it must have been standing rather than sitting.

For over half a century the portion of the scene at the right edge of the top register on the front face has been the subject of argument. A seated deity holds on its lap some figure, represented today only by the elongated toes of one foot and the toes and sole of the second (Fig. 1). The upper part of the seated figure was missing, so that its gender—which would have been made clear only by his or her hairdo—was unknown, but the feet were thought to belong to a child.

Some scholars believed that the scene portrayed a child seated on his mother's lap; others, that the father had taken a child on his lap in a ceremony that acknowledged the child as his own. In either case, the composition would have referred to the divine parentage of the king, a pictorial statement of the concept of divine kingship. The Sumerians, according to some scholars, believed in the divine origin of kings as a literal fact, the result of the union between the father of the king in the guise of a god, and the chief priestess of the city in the guise of a goddess (see Kramer 1969, 1974). Whether the child was Ur-Nammu or his son Shulgi was a matter of dispute.

The scene of a child sitting on

someone's lap is very rare in ancient Near Eastern art. Moreover, on seals, such small seated figures are shown precariously perched, nearly sliding out of the lap (Fig. 10). Finally, the toes themselves as seen on a photo before restoration seem too large for a child, and very close in size to those of the seated figure (Fig. 12). Given all of this evidence, it seems unlikely that this fragment had been properly interpreted. An alternative is provided by a small worn plaque of approximately the same period from ancient Girsu (Fig. 11). Here a goddess is seated on the lap of a god. Although the figures are too poorly preserved to be certain about some aspects of their positions, it does appear that the god encircles her with his arm, and her left arm reaches around his neck. All that can be read from the worn inscription is the name of the goddess Baba, who is known to be the wife of the chief deity of Girsu.

A series of small fragments from storage provide more positive evidence for a new identification of the seated figure. At the proper large scale for the well-preserved top register are pieces showing the back of a head and the draped bent arm of a figure facing left (Fig. 6a, b). Hairdo and robe serve to identify the individual as a male divinity, thus meeting all the requirements for the missing portion of the seated god. When five ridges on the left shoulder of the god were identified as a large hand with the thumb clearly indicated, there seemed little doubt that it was indeed a grown-up goddess seated on a god's lap, her arm around his shoulder in a gesture of affection (Fig. 8). This intimate scene occurs nowhere else in monumental Mesopotamian art. Literary texts of the period can be quite graphic in their descriptions of the sexual relationship between gods, but scenes of love-making are only known on a few crudely carved seals, clay plaques, and in later times, lead plaques.

While the size of the hand on the shoulder of the god eliminates a child from this scene, it is possible that the intimacy of the two deities may still refer to the divine parentage of the king. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure of the identities of the two deities. A fragment carved



11 Plaque fragment from ancient Girsu (Tello) on which a goddess is shown sitting in a god's lap. (Louvre no. A.O. 58; photograph courtesy of the Louvre Museum)

with a large crown surmounted by a crescent, symbol of the moon god Nanna or his wife Ningal, cannot be fitted on either the seated god or the reconstructed goddess. This floating fragment may belong to a god to be placed opposite the king on the other side of this register. The question as to whether it is Ur-Nammu's or Shulgi's divine parentage that is symbolized also remains open.

Fragments of the goddess who hovers over the loving couple have also been identified; like the others she was dispensing water, for a stream falls down and bathes the god's foot. An outstretched arm with water falling behind it is of a size intermediate between the figures of the top register and those in the lower registers. It has been restored to the seated goddess, who may have held another flowing vase. Scenes of multiple waterings, as noted above, are well attested in this period.



12 Fragment of the upper right side of the "front" of the stela before restoration, showing the seated god and the foot of the figure on his lap. (Reproduced courtesy of the British Museum, neg. PS044076)



13 The proposed reconstruction of the building scene. (Drawn by Kathleen Galligan)

### Lower Registers: Construction of the Home of the Gods

The building scene on the front of the stela provides an even rarer glimpse into Mesopotamian life. Fortunately, some of the most inconspicuous fragments saved by Woolley provide new architectural details. Before we consider them, however, the previously recognized fragments of the scene need to be fleshed out.

Bits of stone showing a ladder and figures against a brick back-

ground were the first pieces of the stela to turn up during excavation in 1923. There was no reason to suppose that more of the stela would be found, and so the pieces were quickly restored with plaster and paint. The fragment at left, showing a foot on top of a brick structure against which the top of a ladder rested, proved that here two registers had been combined into one large scene. The foot of a second figure who has begun to mount the ladder gave the lower border of the scene. On the right edge of the stela, the upper part of a figure carrying a basket was preserved against the brick



14 Impression of a cylinder seal of the Akkadian Period showing a building scene. The kneeling figure on the raised structure holds a plumb bob(?). (Photograph courtesy of Elie Borowski and the Lands of the Bible Foundation, Jerusalem)

structure. When additional fragments of the stela were found in 1925, the position of these interesting pieces could be fixed on the stela. The broad band beneath the feet of the ladder-climber corresponded to the band of inscription on the back face, which was just above the lowest register. This meant that the building was the bottom half of a scene in the third register, in which the king carries building tools over his shoulder (pick, compass, adze, and spreading tool, as well as a basket in which the materials for the first brick would be mixed). He is followed by a priest who reaches forth as if to lighten the king's load. Before the king, and facing the same direction, is a god with right hand up in greeting. Since he should be taller than the king, the slightly lower position of the god's head and shoulder suggest that he is seated, as in the register above.

In 1925 a second tiny scrap of a ladder top was found, this time slanting in the opposite direction from the first. Another fragment, used in the earlier reconstruction, showed the hand and foot of a person at the top of the building, presumably in a kneeling position. To accommodate this second ladder in our new reconstruction, the first has been moved farther to the left than in the old reconstruction. The position of the kneeling figure has also been shifted. The old restoration shows this individual to the right of the (only) ladder; this seems inap-



15 a, b Two more pieces of the building scene from storage: a) pole or ladder resting against a battered surface (top); b) fragment of a double recessed doorway. (UM neg. 138731)



16 Cylinder seal impression from the Third Dynasty of Ur, portraying a king being led before a god by another deity. (Photograph courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library)



17 The sacrifice scene from the "back" face of the stela. (UM neg. 8426)



18 Scene from the "back" of the stela. (UM neg. 8430)



19 The inscription on the "back" face of the stela reports the digging of canals by Ur-Nammu. (From Gadd and Legrain 1928: Pl. H:44)

## The Worn "Back" Face: Isolated Scenes

In the new reconstruction, the top register shows the king in a common position of adoration, with one hand raised to his lips. He must therefore be facing a divinity. A problem of interpretation is, however, posed by his extended left arm. One possibility is that the king is being led before the god by an interceding deity—one of the most common scenes on the cylinder seals of this period (Fig. 16). On the stela, however, there is a smooth surface in front of the king, and no room for such an interceding figure. It therefore seems more likely that the king is offering something with his left hand to the deity. No trace of the offering remains, but the preserved length of the king's left arm indicates that the offering would have to have been quite small, and could not be the usual goat or kid. Above the king, the angel bends her head low over the vessel she holds so that the streams of water well up and bathe her chin. These "heavenly" waters presumably fell over the king's offering, in front of the god.

Two long-known scenes on the back face of the stela remain to this day unique. One shows a scene of sacrifice (Fig. 17). No better description can be made than that in one of Woolley's lively reports from

the field (University Museum Archives, March 1925):

... a male figure, either a statue or a ministrant on a raised base (only the lower limbs remain) holds a flail or whip; facing him is a man holding in his arms a he-goat; he has cut off the head of the animal and pours the blood from the neck in front of the raised base. Behind him are two men engaged in sacrificing a bull; the beast lies on its back, one man holds its fore legs and sets his foot on the muzzle, the other bending down seems to be cutting open the body perhaps to examine the liver for omens.

The most extraordinary scene of the whole stela was found in 1932 (Fig. 18). At right a divine figure seated on a high dais is attended by a nude youth. The youth holds a fly whisk to the deity's head and a towel. He may be helping the god to wash after one of his daily meals. Beneath the dais a bald, shaven priest dressed in a long robe also carries a towel over his arm, which is extended as if to support a heavily bearded figure who appears to be bent over. The distorted arm seen under the beard of this figure, and the trace of another head and body along the broken left edge of this fragment are difficult to interpret. Woolley, following Legrain, tentatively suggested that the bearded

figure may have been carrying a dead body. Recently, Jutta Borker-Klähn has proposed that a royal bath may be represented (1982), but this does not account for the contortion of the figures. The latter might be better explained if what is represented is a wrestling scene, an activity known to accompany rituals in earlier periods (see also *Expedition* 27[2]:7-9). Here again, two small scraps in storage which have been joined may be of importance. They show a leg pressed tight against a large raised surface which could well be the thigh of one wrestler.

The badly broken inscription on the back of the stela (Fig. 19) reports in column 1 the digging of several canals by Ur-Nammu. One, a border canal, is the I-nanna-gu-gal "Canal: (the moon god) Nanna is the canal inspector"; another is the I-gu-bi-eridu-ga "Canal: . . . of (the city of) Eridu." The digging of canals by Ur-Nammu is also reported in an old Babylonian hymn from Nippur. In column 2, the preserved traces indicate a curse warning future kings to leave the stela intact and in place, the wrongdoer being cursed in words similar to those used by Amar-Suen, the second successor of Ur-Nammu: "May Nanna, the Lord of Ur, and Ningal, the Mother of Ur, curse him. May they terminate his offspring" (Amar-Suen inscription 3, col. 2) (Hermann Behrens, pers. comm.).

appropriate, since he would be immediately adjacent to the deity, with his back turned. The figure standing at the top of the ladder seemed a better candidate for this location. He has been restored presenting the god with a jar of water, essential to the manufacture of both bricks and plaster, to be blessed (Fig. 13). The kneeling figure may have been holding a plumb bob as does a figure in a building scene of the preceding Akkadian period (Fig. 14).

There are at least six more scraps of the building scene in storage, one of which shows another figure, arm bent to the top of the head as if carrying something. Two other very small pieces (each made up of several fragments) are of great interest (Fig. 15). On one a pole or yet another ladder rests against a smooth surface, probably a wall with its bricks already covered with plaster. This wall(?) is slanted or battered, and it is tempting to identify it with the sloped wall of the ziggurat or of the *temenos* (enclosure wall) around it. A curved element at the top of the pole to the right may be a streamer (again known from the stela fragments from Girsu). Alternatively, we might interpret the pole as part of yet another ladder, with the curved element representing the ball of a foot on the top rung.

On another tiny fragment, bricks about a smooth (i.e., plastered?) surface that has several vertical planes. This may represent a double recessed doorway to a building under construction (Figs. 13, 15b). The building is probably a temple; it is certainly not a ziggurat since such structures did not have recessed doorways. From these tiny scraps we can suggest that there were two different buildings represented in this famous scene. Previous arguments over the identity of the building in this register (as ziggurat or great temple) would thus be resolved, with both sides triumphing.

## Conclusion

Slowly but surely some of the fragments so carefully collected by Woolley half a century ago are falling into place. Our next task is to take the restored stela apart, removing the excess plaster

and mistaken reconstructions. We can then assemble it with the newly recognized fragments in a way that accurately allows us to appreciate the rich and often unique repertoire of scenes which were once present. But it is not only in subject matter that Ur-Nammu's sculptors appear to have made innovations. The handling of the human form is much advanced over that on the fragments from Girsu, where squat proportions and heavy extremities look thick and awkward by comparison. On the Ur-Nammu stela realism is add-

ed by small touches, such as the carving of eyeballs to catch the light and suggest the iris. The high relief and modeled surfaces of this monument actually come closer to the great sculpture of the early works of the Akkadian period a quarter of a millennium earlier, than to contemporary works or those which were to come. Thus the fame of the Museum's stela is merited not only by its historical importance, but also by its standing as a significant work within the art of ancient Mesopotamia. **Z**



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