A Monumental Puzzle
Reconstructing the Ur-Nammu Stela

JEANNY VORYS CANBY

The puzzle began with bits and pieces of limestone found in the 1960s at ancient Ur. New 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 The answer lies in its importance as both a historical document and a work of art.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 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 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 in 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-Dubli-it-mah) adjacent to the zigurat (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 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]: 15-25). In the summer of 1926, Philadelphia won the drawing of lots and obtained all known frag-
ment of the stela. These were already in Philadelphia, having been sent to the University Museum in the fall of 1921 for an exhibition. In 1927 the stela was published by Leon Lagrain, a French priest who was a member of the Ur Expedition and curator of the Museum’s Babylonian collection from 1920 to 1948. Lagrain, a great romantic character, named it the “Stela of the Flying Angels” because of the extraordinary picture or tableau in the top register: “graceful girlish figures [that] glide down from heaven,” dispensing precious objects to the faithful below them. At the same time, it is a period for which frustratingly little is known about the religious life of the people. We do not 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 Lagrain**

The initial restoration of the stela was done in Philadelphia under the supervision of Lagrain—a loose supervision, since he had left. Woolley found fault with it. No technical records made by the restorers have been preserved, but Woolley’s criticisms by what they worked on 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 much more deeply carved, perhaps due to faults in the limestone. The well-preserved face has been traditionally referred to as the “front,” while the other side became the “back.” By defining the stela’s edges, and then using surface texture to orient the fragments, a basic structure could be determined. Joints between some of the larger pieces soon showed that the scenes were arranged in a series of horizontal registers (Fig. 11), and that the height of the figures varied between registers, with the larger figures at the top. Smaller figures are shown by using surface texture, joins between pieces, and the scale of the figures represented. Assumptions made by Lagrain, 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 Lagrain agreed that the restored height of the stela is an 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, which is one of the great works of Sumerian art known and in dramatic interest is surpassed by none” (Woolley 1925:6). (Archives, March 8, 1925). Within a decade, his views had radically changed. In the final publication of
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A New Restoration

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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 dream fragment, part of a cow with her calf, two goats, and some connected fragments that have so far defied interpretation. Few of those 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 joints had been made, figures and other cylinders 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 Giru (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" by 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

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the other registers, one and one-half
times the size of those in the register im mediately beneath (Fig. 1).
At the very top of the stela on
both faces are fragments that Wool-
ley thought represented a crescent
and star, a motif also found in a
better state of preservation on an-
other 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
chummy and too large.
Below are a series of figures that
can be recognized as either gods or
humans, depending on their cos-
tume. Gods and goddesses wear a
horned headdress, and either a long
draped gown or, in the case of
sacred death, 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 the 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 symmetrical-
ly placed floating goddesses, and it
may be that each is placed above
an image of a seated or standing divin-
it.
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 pair is preserved. The
throne facing left in both the top
register and the second register. A
single large fragment of 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 is a woman, a de-
piction 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 frag-
ment. Based on surface condition, it
should be reversed, so that the scene
just described falls on the poorer,
poorly preserved back of the stela (see
box). This moves the front to a
different image of the king, whose
stela-like head dress has been
found in storage (Figs. 6e, 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 heav-
en (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
front, but space dictates that it must
have been standing rather than sit-
ing.
For over half a century the portion
of the scene at the right edge of
the top register on the front face
had 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
known only by its hair or headdress—
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 composition 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 and the
Great goddess as a god, and the chief
priestess of the city in the guise of a
goddess (see T. Hempel 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 slipping
out of the lap (Fig. 10). Finally, the
two 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 proposed here by placing the
fragment of approximately the same period
from ancient Giru (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 over his shoulder. All this
can be read from the worn inscrip-
tion is the name of the goddess
Baba, who is known to be the wife
of the chief deity of Giru.
A series of small fragments from
storage provide more positive evi-
dence for a new identification of
the seated figure. At the proper
large scale for the well-preserved top
register are a pair of strips showing
the back of a head and the draped
tent of a figure facing left (Fig. 8a,
b). Haidro and robe serve to identify
it as a large head 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
typical scene from the Southwest
is familiar in Mesopotamian art.
Literary texts of the period can be
quite graphic, and the inscriptions
of the sexual relationship between
gods, but scenes of love-making are
only known on precisely carved
seals, clay plaques, and in later
times, lead plaques.
While the size of the hand on the
downward of the god intimates a
child from this scene, it is possible
that the intimacy of the two deities
may have existed at a still earlier
stage of the age. Unfortunately, we
cannot be sure of the identities of
the two deities. A fragment carved
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
figure may belong to a god to be
placed opposite the king on the
front, or on the other side of this register. The ques-
tion as to whether it is Ur-Nammu's
or Shulgi's divine parentage that is
symbolized also remains open.
Figures of the goddess who
hover 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 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.

The building scene on the front
of the stela provides an even
ergayer glimpse into Mesopota-
mian life. Fortunately, some of the
most inconspicuous fragments saved
by Woolley provide rich architect-
ural details. Before we consider
them, however, the previously rec-
ognized 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 quick-
ly retrieved 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

Louter Registers: Construction of the
Home of the Gods

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11 Plaque fragment from ancient Giru (Tell el-saab) on which a
goddess is shown sitting in a god's lap. (Louvre no. A.O.
55; photograph courtesy of the Louvre Museum.)

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 the lap. (Reproduced courtesy of the British
Museum, neg. PS04078.)

13 Drawing of the proposed reconstruction of the building scene. (Drawn by Kathlyn Galligan)
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 strings of water will 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 1935): . . . 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 appears 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 Bercker-Kähn 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[4]:7-8). 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-sinqu-gal "Canal (the moon god) Namma is the canal inspector"; another is the I-ge-bi-erid-zi-gi "Canal...of (the city of) Eridu." The digging of canals by Ur-Nammu is also reported in an old Babylonian hymn from Ninpur. 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 Amur-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" (Amur-Suen inscription 3, col. 2) (Hermann Behrens, pers. comm.).
propriate, 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 the 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-Namnu'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-Namnu stela realism is add-

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