

# An Analysis of The Gods and Heroes in Ancient Mesopotamian Art

## Eski Mezopotamya Sanatında Tanrılar ve Kahramanlar Üzerine Bir Analiz

Yasin TOPALOĞLU<sup>1</sup>   
Murat KILIÇ<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Atatürk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of History, Erzurum, Türkiye

<sup>2</sup>Erzurum Technical University, Faculty of Letters, Department of History, Erzurum, Türkiye



Received/Geliş Tarihi: 26.07.2024  
Revision Requested/Revizyon Talebi: 14.08.2024  
Last Revision/Son Revizyon: 28.08.2024  
Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 16.09.2024  
Publication Date/Yayın Tarihi: 25.09.2024

Corresponding Author/Sorumlu Yazar:  
Yasin TOPALOĞLU  
E-mail: tyasin@atauni.edu.tr

Cite this article as: Topaloğlu, Y. & Kılıç, M. (2024). An analysis of the Gods and heroes in ancient Mesopotamian Art. *Art and Interpretation*, 44, 41-49.

### ABSTRACT

Mesopotamia, the region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, was home to many civilizations such as Sumer-Akkadian, Babylonia, and Assyria. Mesopotamian culture is based on a common religious view and consists of theocratic states ruled first by priest-kings. Mesopotamia is one of the crucial geographies where history is illuminated by art. This art reflects the feelings and thoughts of people and provides important clues about their world. The Sumerians' invention of writing was a significant development, but other developments and innovations in Mesopotamia also affected ancient societies such as the Middle East and Anatolia. Art is at the forefront of these developments and innovations. Centers such as Göbeklitepe, Kuruçay, Nevali Çori, Çayönü, Hacılar, and Eriha-Jericho contain early examples of this art. Works of art such as the Vultures Stele, Ur Standard, Uruk Warka Vase, Naram-Sin Victory Stele, and Lion Hunt Stele are essential examples for our subject with their depictions of gods, kings, and heroes. This visual art of Mesopotamia is critical to the history of the Ancient Age as it provides information that thousands of written documents cannot convey.

In Mesopotamian art, where gods and heroes (kings) are seen from the Neolithic Age to the Early Bronze Age, the concepts of gods and kings occupy a central place in art. However, it is also evident that these depictions developed and changed over time. Looking at these depictions, it is understood that while gods represent the spirit world and beliefs, heroes (king or emperor) symbolize earthly power. In these works of art, heroes are usually depicted as hunters, warriors, or kings. This heroism, which extends to the claim of god or godhood, reflects new administrative powers, economic prosperity, and military development.

**Keywords:** Mesopotamia, art, religion, king, hero

### ÖZ

Fırat ile Dicle nehirleri arasındaki bölgenin adı olan Mezopotamya; Sümer-Akad, Babil ve Asur gibi birçok medeniyete ev sahipliği yapmıştır. Mezopotamya kültürü, ortak bir dinî görüşe dayanır ve tanrı-kralın yönettiği teokratik devletlerden oluşur. Mezopotamya, tarihin sanatla aydınlatıldığı önemli coğrafyalardan biridir. Bu sanat, insanların duygularını ve düşüncelerini yansıtarak, onların dünyası hakkında önemli ipuçları sunar. Sümerlerin yazıyı bulmaları çok önemli bir gelişme olmakla birlikte Mezopotamya'da ki diğer gelişme ve yeniliklerle de Ortadoğu ve Anadolu gibi Eski Çağ toplumlarını etkilemiştir. Sanat ise bu gelişim ve yeniliklerin başında gelmektedir. Göbeklitepe, Kuruçay, Nevali Çori, Çayönü, Hacılar ve Eriha- Jericho gibi merkezler bu sanatının erken dönem örneklerini barındırır. Akbalar Steli, Ur Standardı, Uruk Warka Vazosu, Naram-Sin Zafer Steli, Aslan Avı Steli gibi sanat eserleri ise barındırdığı tanrı, kral ve kahraman tasvirleriyle konumuz için önemli örnekleri oluşturmuştur. Mezopotamya'nın bu görsel sanatı, binlerce yazılı belgenin aktarmayacağı bilgileri sunması bakımından Eski Çağ tarihi için ayrı bir önem taşımaktadır.

Neolitik Çağ'dan Eski Tunç Çağı'na kadar tanrı ve kahramanların (kral) görüldüğü Mezopotamya sanatında tanrı ve kral kavramlarının sanatta merkezî bir yer tuttuğu görülür. Ancak bu tasvirlerin zamanla geliştiği ve değiştiği de ortadadır. Bu tasvirlere bakıldığında Tanrılar, ruh dünyasını ve inançları temsil ederken, kahramanlar (kral veya imparator) dünyevi gücü simgelediği anlaşılmaktadır. Bu sanat eserlerinde kahramanlar genellikle avcı, savaşçı veya kral olarak betimlenmiştir. Tanrı ya da tanrılık iddiasına kadar uzanan bu kahramanlık, yeni idari güçlerin, ekonomik refahın ve askerî gelişimin bir yansımasıdır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mezopotamya, sanat, din, kral, kahraman



## Introduction

Mesopotamia is the name given to the geography between the Euphrates and Tigris. This nomenclature formed by the words *Mesos-potamos* (between rivers) has come to have a broad meaning, expressing the cultural accumulation of many civilizations over time. The “Ancient Mesopotamian Culture”, which peaked first with Sumer-Akkad, then Babylon and Assyria, was an achievement of many societies. This culture is the unity of a common religious view. For this reason, it is possible to say that the basis of the culture is the spiritual-ethical aspects of the Sumerian-Akkadian religion and its social, political, and economic characteristics. These societies, which transformed from theocratic and socialist cities into states ruled by priest-kings and later into a world of empires, attributed their existence to metaphysical forces (Moortgat, 1969, p. IX, X; Hrouda, 2015, p. 7; Topaloğlu & Uslu 2022, p. 490).

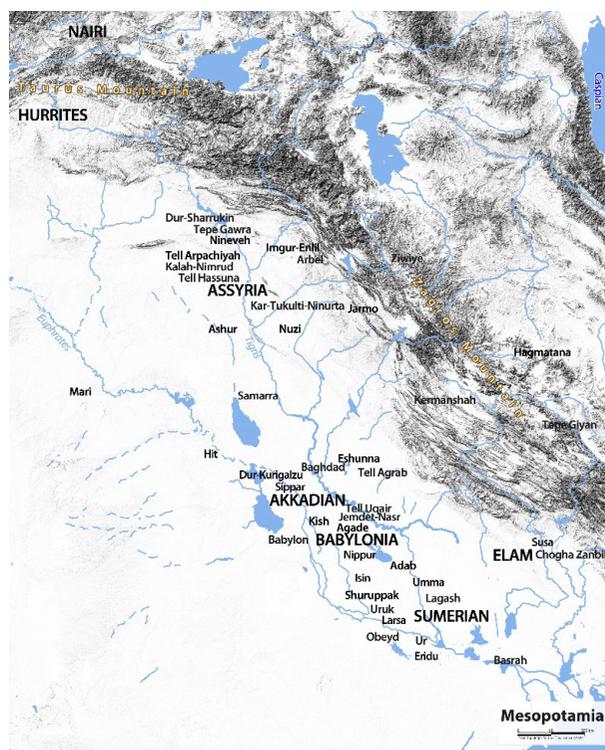
This region, where the foundations of civilization were laid, covers the geography extending from the Taurus Mountains to the Persian Gulf, from the Zagros Mountains to the Amanos Mountains (Köroğlu, 2012, p. 14). The art of this culture is based on the concepts of god and king. Despite the unity of these god-king concepts at the basis of art, the differences seen are due to external influences and the different technical skills and local styles of societies. In the historical process, after Sumer and Akkad, when Babylon and Assyria became the central powers in Mesopotamia, Mesopotamian art necessarily became the heir of Sumer and Akkadian art (Map 1; Moortgat, 1969, p. X; Topaloğlu & Uslu 2022, p. 490)

The Sumerian’s discovery of writing was a significant development, but other developments and innovations in Mesopotamia also affected ancient societies such as the Middle East and Anatolia. Art is at the forefront of these developments and innovations. Mesopotamia is one of the most essential geographies where history is illuminated by art (Parrot, 1970, p. 9).

Art is a creation that expresses emotions, has aesthetic concerns, and appeals to the senses. It has always given meaning to human existence (Bahrani, 2017, p. 8; Stokstad & Cothren, 2018, p. XXVII). Art, which carries essential data on the development of humankind throughout history, has also harbored memories of past lives. In this context, regardless of the type of ancient art (mural, ceramic, sculpture, etc.), it gives crucial clues about the world of the society or the people to whom it belongs (Berkli & Gültepe, 2016; 45; Berkli & Gültepe, 2020, p. 446)

It is seen that the perception of art, which reflects the feelings, thoughts, and lives of human beings, has changed and developed over time in Mesopotamia. The primary purpose of this article is to examine the change in the art of Mesopotamia, home to the most advanced civilizations of the Ancient Age, from a historical perspective regarding gods and heroes and to analyze the change.

Gods represent the spirit world or numinous universe of people, their beliefs, and perceptions. On the contrary, heroes, represent a mundane world an earthly power. In Mesopotamian art, heroes are mostly associated with worldly power. In works of art, heroes first appear as hunters and warriors, such as in Lion Hunt Stele (Thuesen, 2000, p. 59), and then as kings and emperors. This heroism is sometimes taken even further, even claiming god-godhood, such as Naram-Sin (Gates, 2013, p. 54). The transformation process from gods to heroes in Mesopotamia in this context reflects a new administrative power, propaganda, economic prosperity, military power, and a complex administrative structure with the development of weapons. Examining the historical reality behind this change through works of art is essential (Etgü, & Pekşen, 2023, p. 511–525).



**Map 1.**  
*Mesopotamia Cultures Map*

Mesopotamian visual art carries information about history that even thousands of written documents cannot convey. One of the most important of these artistic examples is the Stele of the Vultures. The stele vividly represents the soldiers of the period, the god Ningirsu (Ninurta), the king, and enemies. The stele, dated circa 2500 BC, is the first known depiction of warfare and provides essential data on the relationship between war, religion, and strategy.

Scientific studies on art show that Mesopotamia, is one of the places where art emerged (Hegel, 1975, p. 636; Chi & Azara, 2015, p. 78), but academic studies are quite limited. Since this geography is the birthplace of writing, as well as art, science, and historical studies based on written documents, are more common. However, it is understood that most of the written sources cannot be translated for various reasons and that the classification of the translated ones has not yet been completed despite all efforts. For these reasons, we think that trying to illuminate history via art will support the written documents and enlighten the darker parts. Mesopotamian art has been followed as a trend for centuries, and even repetition not only reinforces the event but also reveals the change. Therefore, these art movements give accurate ideas illuminating the relevant period. In this context, in this study, the artistic change process of Mesopotamian civilizations and states will be evaluated from a historical perspective (Yıldırım, 2023, p. 360-376).

The period from the Neolithic Age to the Early Bronze Age, when heroes and even god-heroes were seen, constitutes the temporal scope of this article. It is known that the climate of the region was not very favorable for settlement before the Neolithic Age, which negatively affected the human population and artistic products. In this context, the period from hunter-gatherer societies to the first cities, in other words, from the beginning of art in the region to the fall of Akkad is discussed. Because the transformation from gods to heroes was completed during the Akkadian period.

The world of meaning that the concepts of “God” and “Hero,” constitute the subject of the study, so expressing this term for Mesopotamia is essential. “God” represents the creator and superhuman beings that people worship. “Hero,” on the other hand, refers to the rulers or administrators who are the product of the class distinction that emerged as a result of the sociological transformations experienced by humanity in the Chalcolithic Age. These rulers were first tribal chiefs, then city rulers, then kings and emperors in the Akkadian period (Yıldırım, 2022, p. 69-73). In this context, this expression refers to the people who ruled society in different periods, and it is mostly seen in artworks and scenes showing their power.

It is understood that the appearance of depictions of gods and heroes in Mesopotamian art came at the end of a long artistic development. For this reason, it will be helpful to outline the creative development of god and hero depictions since the Neolithic Age via the prominent artworks in Mesopotamian art.

### God-Hero Phenomenon in Sumerian Art

It is accepted that the artistic activities of human beings started in the Paleolithic Age and the first artistic works were paintings on cave walls (Clottes 2016; Guthrie 2005). However, these artistic works were generally concentrated in Europe, especially in caves in Spain and France along the migration routes (Keeley 1996, 45). In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, examples began to be seen only from the Neolithic Age onwards. In this context, Mesopotamian art, which showed great development in a limited period, is represented by painted ceramics and seals before 3000 BC.

Developments from the Neolithic Age onwards formed the basis of the states and even empires that would emerge in later periods. The development of agriculture, plant cultivation, and domestication of animals enabled people to form societies with permanent settlements in the Neolithic Age.

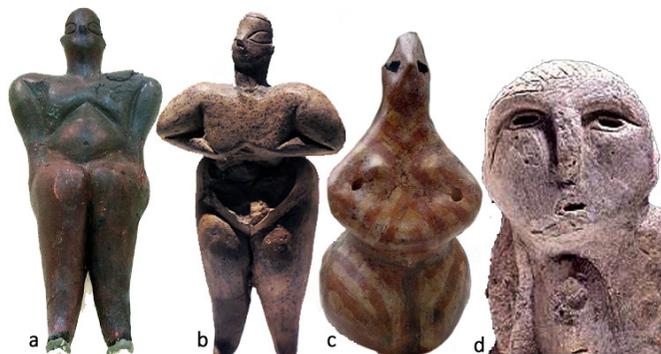
It can be said that Mesopotamian art was generally made for a purpose (Benzel 2010, p.10). For example, the praying position of the votive statues placed in the temples in Sumer symbolizes praying to the gods continuously (Bahrani 2017, p. 83). Decorations for religious or practical purposes were also reflected in artifacts; in addition to human and animal forms, wall paintings also appeared in the houses built, and vessels painted with figurative patterns were offered for the use of the household. This situation ensured that art was not limited to the temple or palace, but reached every segment of society with the tools and equipment people used in their daily lives (Bertman 2003, p. 216).

The first works of Mesopotamian art can be found in *Göbeklitepe* (*Sanliurfa- Türkiye*), which was discovered as a result of new excavations. A place of worship, the animal symbols on the obelisks of *Göbeklitepe* are remarkable in terms of revealing the nature-religion connection (Kurt & Göler, 2017, p. 1109). In this context, the role of religion in Mesopotamian art and its interaction with the environment becomes clearer (Image 1; Bahrani, 2017, p. 28).

One of the first objects that attracted attention in early Mesopotamian art was figurines, which are products of beliefs. This situation is similar in Anatolia. The figurines found at sites such as *Nevali Çori* (8400 and 7540 BC, *Sanliurfa- Türkiye*), *Çayönü* (8200 and 6000 BC, *Diyarbakir-Türkiye*) and *Hacılar* (5250 and 5000 BC, *Burdur-Turkey*) are a very important guide to the art and beliefs of the region (Image 2; Bahrani, 2017, p. 31).



**Image 1.**  
*Göbeklitepe animal figures*



**Image 2.**  
*a. Hacılar, b. Kuruçay, c. Hacılar d. Nevali Çori figures*

Mesopotamian figurines are considered to be the oldest works of sculpture and art. These figurines, which are usually depictions of women made of terracotta, have a very rough workmanship. With the development and change in the Ubaid period, female and male figurines with slender bodies, protruding facial features, arms spread out to the sides and emphasizing the genitals, as well as female figurines of breastfeeding children begin to be seen (Image 3; Campbell & Daems, 2017, p. 570-585).



**Image 3.**  
*Mesopotamian figures (Campbell & Daems, 2017)*

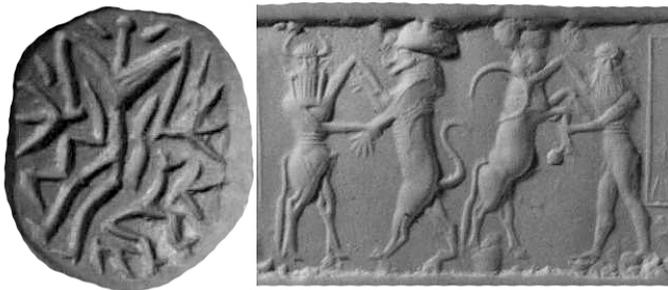
Jericho (Palestine) is one of the important centers of Mesopotamia providing different artistic works. The works at Jericho, in which the human skull with the jaws removed is covered with plaster, are remarkable. For a sense of vitality, the eyes were first made of white plaster and then pupils were made with a black substance similar to bitumen. These artifacts are associated with religious beliefs and the cult of ancestors (Image 4; Honour & Fleming, 2005, p. 43).



**Image 4.**  
*Eriha-Jericho Plastered Skull (BC 9000)*

The pottery of Mesopotamia's Pre-Pottery Neolithic Age, dated between 7000 and 5500 BC, shows geometric shapes, lines, and stylized animal depictions, but no image of gods or heroes. However, depictions of heroes are prevalent on the seals of the period (McMahon, 2022, 234-239). The emergence of seals in Mesopotamia is the first development in the art of painting. It allows us to follow the development of Asia Minor societies (Bahrani, 2017, p. 53). Seals are essential as they symbolize private property, authority, and sometimes wealth (Pitman, 2013, p. 319). These small objects symbolizing private property were later seen as a canvas, and extremely rich themes were depicted. They also provide significant depictions of the emergence of heroes. When seals first appeared, it was known that they had straightforward symbols. However, in later periods, various themes were used to decorate cylinder seals, varying according to the period. The earliest themes were nature or economics, depicting food and textiles' production or display (Kuiper, 2011, p. 134). Even by the time of Ubaid II, a point had been reached where the printing area was seen as a prepared surface for design, with the artist trying to create a suitable image. Sumerian seals of the later period generally depict goats, bulls, mythological creatures, and monsters in single or double rows (Kramer, 1963, p. 100). The remaining parts of these depictions were decorated in the so-called "brocade style" with fish, star, and diamond patterns (Frankfort, 1970, p. 39; Crawford, 2013, p. 327).

In this case, two interrelated themes of material prosperity and religiosity are reflected in the decoration of early cylinder seals. (Image 4) However, during the Early Dynastic Period, there was a significant shift, and the themes became different. Heroic deeds or heroes begin to appear in seal themes, and mythic battle and banquet scenes come to the fore (Bertman 2003, p. 234). Parallel to this change in themes, Sumerian architecture, economy, state administration, and trade also undergo significant changes. In this context, a strong correlation exists between the rise of Sumerian city-states and the emergence of new themes. (Image 5)



**Image 5.**  
*Stamps and cylinder seals depict a human (right - Ubaid) and a hero fighting a mythological creature (left - Akkadian) (Pittman, 1987)*

The most essential changes in Mesopotamian art occurred with the emergence of the Sumerian city-states. After this period, significant developments occurred in many aspects, such as theme, style, content, and material. Some significant changes have emerged in the themes, which were generally centered on religion and nature before. The most prominent of these changes are the kings and rulers in works of art. With a new understanding of perspective, gods, kings, and rulers are depicted on a larger scale and brought to the forefront. One of the first works in which these developments are seen is depicting a king or ruler hunting a lion. The two people seen in the lion hunt on the stele are different in size compared to each other. Although some sources attribute this difference in size to the understanding of perspective, it is actually due to the understanding of hierarchy, that is, making them important, which was widely used in Mesopotamia and Egypt. For this reason, the larger depiction is of a king or ruler (Image 6; Thuesen 2000, p. 59).

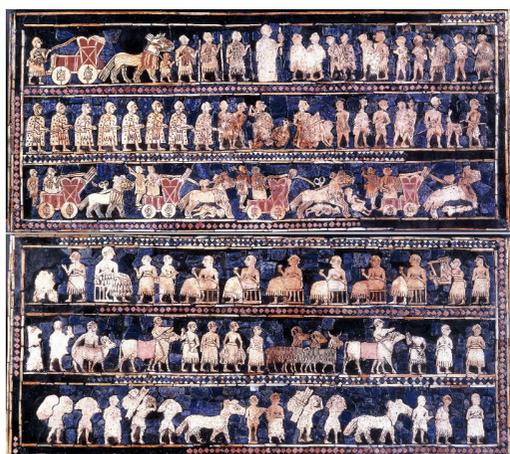


**Image 6.**  
*The Lion Hunt Stele of Uruk-Wark, (Baghdad Museum, [www.worldhistory.org/image/10783/stele-of-lion-hunt-from-Uruk](http://www.worldhistory.org/image/10783/stele-of-lion-hunt-from-Uruk))*

A parallel change is also observed in Sumerian reliefs. While the reliefs were relatively rough in the pre-writing period, it is understood that they became standardized in the Early Dynastic Period. Two works are noteworthy as the subject of reliefs. The first of these is the Ur Standard and the other is the relief of Urnanshe of Lagash.

The Royal Tomb of Ur, one of the most critical discoveries in terms of Mesopotamian art and history, is home to essential works in the art of painting and various arts. In this royal tomb, where even humans were sacrificed and buried, the most remarkable object relat-

ed to painting is the work known as the Ur Standard. The Standard of Ur is made of lapis lazuli, seashell, and red limestone on wood. In the relief, which has survived in fragments, a composition with two scenes, front and back, is spread over three bands. The first band of the obverse depicts a banquet scene with the king, while the lower band shows the animals and goods brought to the palace. On the reverse, soldiers and chariots advance, the army stepping on naked enemy corpses. In the middle band, wounded and victorious Ur soldiers bring enemy prisoners to the king. The lower band shows a battle scene with chariots (Frankfort, 1970, p. 71-75). The relief represents peace and war; the relief shows the king at the head of his nation in peace and war (Bahrani, 2017, p. 97). The focal point of this work is the king and his war-winning, victorious, heroic personality and the order he brought. The absence of gods in the work is an essential example of the transformation from gods to heroes (kings) in this context. (Image 7)



**Image 7.**  
*Standard of Ur, front and back side (British Museum, Collon, 1995)*

The relief of *Urnanshe of Lagash* is a pioneer, depicting gods and heroes and some other features. In addition to the depictions, the relief also narrates the event in writing. As it is understood from the relief, King Urnanshe had a temple built to commemorate his success. It is written that the power of Lagash reached the shores of Dilmun (Bahrain), and timber was brought from the region for the construction of the temple. The relief, which shows the power of Sumerian city-states, also reveals the significant connection between art and state power. In this context, it can be said that art also evolved and changed depending on political and economic power (Image 8; Bahrani 2017, p. 83).



**Image 8.**  
*Urnanshe Relief (Louvre Museum, A. Y. Aydin)*

With the Sumerians' artistic, economic, and social developments, it is seen that more worldly themes are being depicted. One of the most prominent of these works is the Uruk Warka Vase. The Uruk Warka Vase has a three-layered design. At the bottom is water, the source of life in the region, palm trees, and barley ears, symbolizing the foundation and agricultural prosperity of Sumer. Above these are rams and sheep, symbolizing the abundance and wealth of essential food and raw material resources such as meat, milk, wool, and leather. The middle belt of this vase shows naked men carrying various products to the temple. In the uppermost belt, which is partially broken, a clothed person, probably a priest, offers offerings to the goddess, who is identified as Inanna from the symbols in the background, in contrast to the naked men on the vase (Feldman, 2005, p. 284-287). The work has an important place in the transformation from gods to kings. Because both religious and secular phenomena are brought together in one work. While the objects and objects in the lower and middle bands display worldly events, the top band symbolizes the otherworldly. Here we see the goddess and a priest offering offerings to her. In the process of transformation from gods representing the otherworldly realm to heroes, there was never an interruption and the emergence of heroes did not eliminate the use of gods as a theme in artifacts. In this context, the Uruk Warka Vase has an exceptional place in terms of content. (Image 9).

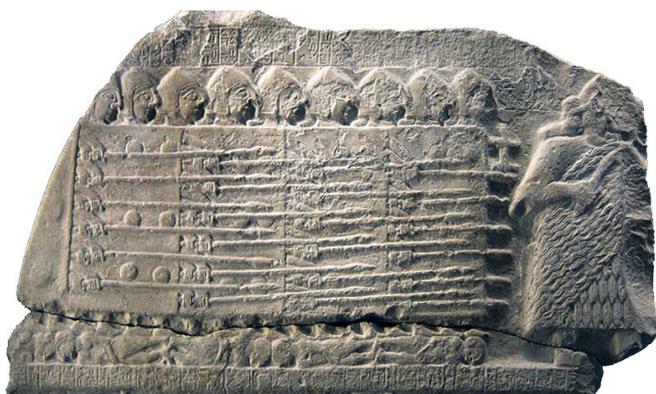


**Image 9.**  
*Uruk Warka Vase (Feldman, 2005)*

The Stele of the Vultures is one of the most essential works of the Sumerian period. The stele provides critical artistic, religious, administrative, military, and political data. It is one of the most essential works where the relationship between gods and heroes can be analyzed. It is also a pioneer of the battlefield depictions seen in other states in the region, including Akkad and even Neo-Assyria. It is the first work that features a composition of a victorious king winning a battle. This work establishes a connection between the God Ningirsu and the heroic Lagash King Eannatum. King Eannatum of Lagash, one of the Sumerian city-states, had this stele erected after his victory against Umma (Winter, 1985, p. 11-32.)

On the first side of the two-sided work, the king is at the head of his army arranged in phalanxes and on his chariot at the bottom. The other side of the stele depicts the king stepping on enemy corpses and inflicting great losses on the enemy, while the soldiers who died in battle are buried in a mass grave. The "vultures", which give

this stele its name, tear apart the bodies of the exposed enemy soldiers. As seen in this section, the heroic Lagash King Eannatum has won a great victory against Umma and inflicted a heavy defeat on the enemy on the battlefield. The front side of the stele depicts the hero and the back side depicts the god. Following Sumerian religious beliefs, the implication that the god granted the victory can be easily observed on the stele. In addition, the god Ningirsu is depicted holding the enemy prisoners in a net, perhaps showing the propaganda that the king is supported by the god (Kleiner, 2014, p. 36.) This work is important in terms of showing both the god and the hero. How art sheds light on the history of the Stele of the Vultures is also very important. This artifact is also the official document of the first known war in history and is considered the first war in history (Mieroop, 2015, p. 54). On the other hand, as mentioned before, it is the first victory stele and a pioneer. When the work details are analyzed, it is seen that it also provides essential information in terms of strategy and tactics. The phalanx arrangement of the soldiers is remarkable in terms of war strategy. In summary, although this work has an exceptional place in history, it is so detailed that it requires to be handled separately in many aspects such as art, history, strategy, tactics and war (Image 10; Alster 2003; Winter 1985; Yıldırım, 2017; Gökçek, 2020, p. 26; Çiğdem & Kılıç, 2022, p. 429, Ürkmez, 2022, p. 477; Etgü, & Pekşen, 2023, p. 511–525).



**Image 10.**  
*Stele of the Vultures (Alster, 2003)*

### God-Hero Phenomenon in Akkadian Art

After the Sumerian city-states, the dominant power in Mesopotamia was the Akkadians. This regnant power dominated a significant part of Asia Minor, was militarily powerful, had the world's first standing army, and had a well-developed bureaucracy and economic structure. The Akkadians were founded during the reign of Sargon (2334-2279 c. BC) and reached their peak during the reign of his grandson Naram-Sin. These characteristics enabled them to produce the most distinguished works of their time in art, while at the same time being a society that provided innovations in terms of themes. Akkadian artists succeeded in creating a highly effective style of symbolic and visual expression with stone steles. One of the most important of these innovations is the depictions of god-kings.

Perhaps the most remarkable Akkadian work is the Naram-Sin Victory Stele. In the stele of the Akkadian King Naram-Sin, the stone on which the image is carved is treated as a part of the composition, and a mountain is added to the stone tapering upwards by the composition. The mountain depicted on the stele and the upward tapering structure made Naram-Sin stand out more. In addition, Naram-Sin's posture was carefully selected and transferred to the stele, resulting in a more majestic composition (Dijk, 2016, 38-42). Naram-Sin is the largest person in the stele. This hierarchical sizing of Naram-Sin

emphasizes both his importance in the composition and his power (Stokstad & Cothren, 2018, p. 27). The armed soldiers behind the king are Naram-Sin's soldiers, while those standing opposite him, killed by spears, are enemy soldiers. With the inclusion of the trees in the area, a realistic battlefield and battle scene has been achieved. By depicting in detail, the defeated enemy king standing behind the dying soldier speared through the neck and begging for mercy from Naram-Sin, the artist(s) have succeeded in showing Naram-Sin's victory in a single scene (Image 11).



**Image 11.**  
*Naram-Sin Victory Stele (Louvre Museum- A. Y. Aydın)*

The most striking point in the work for our subject is the horns on the helmet of Naram-Sin, who is depicted armed and holding a spear in his hand. Horns represent divinity in Mesopotamian iconography and are seen as an attribute of the gods. In this context, the artifact is proof of Naram-Sin's claim to God-kinghood (Gates, 2013, p. 54).

The victory stele of Naram-Sin shows that the symbols of gods, which were previously seen in Mesopotamia and represented an otherworldly realm, were gradually replaced by earthly themes. Heroes or kings became increasingly important. The Naram-Sin Stele takes this to another level, combining both otherworldly and earthly attributes.

### Evaluation and Conclusion

This study attempts to analyze which or what kind of developments brought about changes in Mesopotamian art, and heroes began to come to the forefront of iconography. For Mesopotamia, gods first appeared in art in line with people's beliefs. In Sumer, one of the best examples of this, the temple is at the center of everything. The temple is under the control of priests who have this "divine" power. Therefore, priests played a significant role in the organization of cities. In the following stages, the influence of worldly power began to be felt more and more, and now kings used the gods as a propaganda tool to consolidate their position and motivate people to rule towards a goal.

To understand which changes in Mesopotamia led to such a transformation, the subject should be analyzed from various angles. As mentioned in the introduction, in the Neolithic Age of Mesopotamia, settlements were called “villages” regardless of their population. That because these villages did not have functions such as a ruling class, merchant class, soldier class division of labor, and fortifications etc. In this context, some developments are essential for transforming art and, thus, perception. The first of these developments is population growth and the emergence of class distinction. Because in this period, manpower is required to fulfill many activities. This manpower is not only numerically sufficient but also labor segregation and class differentiation are a sine qua non. Because for a person to become a soldier, someone else must fulfill his/her compulsory needs. In this context, it is not possible to see great progress in art without the emergence of artisans a rich class that can buy these works, or a ruling class that can sponsor them.

The construction of fortifications and the emergence of cities is another important element. Because thanks to the city walls, not all people in the city have to be warriors or fight. Since the walls provided a certain level of security, some segments must have been able to focus on works of art.

Trade is one of the most critical factors in the development of art in Mesopotamia. As it is known, metals and minerals are scarce in Mesopotamia and trade is essential for the supply of these raw materials. Thanks to trade, Mesopotamia had the opportunity to communicate with other societies and enriched both materially and culturally by transferring the knowledge and material assets it acquired to its cities, and this situation was reflected in art.

Technological development is another important condition for change. For example, the emergence and processing of metal artifacts are directly linked to technology. Thanks to this development, both the materials used in stone carving paved the way for finer workmanship, and new methods such as the “Lost Wax Method” emerged in some works, such as the Akkadian King’s Head. This technological development was also reflected in weapons.

Weapons became the most important tool of the states and empires of the period, and their spheres of dominance were able to spread over large regions thanks to them. This expansion brought great political and economic power, and weapons had a very distinguished place in art. In works of art, weapons were used as symbols of heroes and were always a part of the composition. Especially in New Assyrian reliefs, they became much more dominant. Trade, technology, and the weapons that developed in connection with them created a great change in Mesopotamia and the region evolved from a community of villages to an empire in a few thousand years.

Another important factor that triggered artistic change was new ideologies and new ideas. The most prominent of these new ideas emerged during the Akkadian period, and kings such as Sargon of Akkad or Naram-Sin endeavored to unite all known geographies under their banner. These kings influenced both art and literature. As a result, artists reflected this trend in their works, and works such as Shar-Tamhari (King of War) in literature or Naram-Sin Victory Stele in art emerged.

Another factor that triggered the change in art in Mesopotamia was the prosperity and wealth brought by centralized economies. Thanks to this wealth, works of aesthetic value were produced, and artists were patronized by the palace and encouraged to propagandize for the state.

The last point to be emphasized in this study is that there was a great change in art thanks to the above-mentioned developments. This change is reflected in almost every field of art and is closely linked to the development of the community or the state. As a result of

this interconnectedness, the religious or natural themes first seen in Mesopotamian art gradually faded into the background, and heroes came to the fore. These heroes (kings-emperors) were sometimes produced to show piety and influence society, and sometimes, as in the case of the stele of Codex of Hammurabi, they were created as propaganda by showing the god and the king together. In the end, the dominant understanding of art based on religion was replaced by a movement dominated by a more worldly understanding.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Yazar Katkıları:** Fikir-Y.T., M.K.; Tasarım- Y.T.; Materyaller-Y. T., M.K.; Denetleme- Y.T., M.K.; Kaynaklar- Y.T., M.K.; Veri Toplanması ve/veya İşlemesi- Y.T., M.K.; Analiz ve/veya Yorum- Y.T., M.K.; Literatür Taraması- M.K.; Yazıyı Yazan-Y.T., M.K.; Eleştirel İnceleme- Y.T., M.K.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazarlar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir. **Finansal Destek:** Yazarlar, bu çalışma için finansal destek olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Author Contributions,** Concept - Y.T., M.K.; Design- Y.T.; Materyaller-Y. T., M.K.; Supervision- Y.T., M.K.; Resources- Y.T., M.K.; Data Collection and/or Processing- Y.T., M.K.; Analysis and/or Interpretation- Y.T., M.K.; Literature Search-M.K.; Writing Manuscript- Y.T., M.K.; Critical Review- Y.T., M.K.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Financial Disclosure:** The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

## References

- Alster, B. (2003). Images and text on the “Stele of the Vultures.” *Archiv Für Orientforschung*, 50, 1-10.
- Bahrani, Z. (2017). *Mesopotamia ancient art and architecture*. Thames-Hudson.
- Berkli, Y. & Gültepe, G. (2016). Sanat metafor ve dönüşüm. *Sanat Dergisi* (30), 44-51.
- Berkli, Y. & Gültepe, G. (2020). Eski Türk inançlarında tabiat kültü: Erzurum Kazancı Örneği. *Journal of Turkish Researches Institute*. 67. 443-454
- Benzel, K. (2010). *Art of the Ancient Near East*. Metropolitan Museum of Art New York.
- Bertman, S. (2003). *Handbook to life in ancient Mesopotamia*. Facts on File.
- Campbell, S., & Daems, A. (2017). Figurines in Prehistoric Mesopotamia. In *the Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines*. Oxford.
- Chi, J., & Azara, P. (2015). *From ancient to modern, Archaeology and Aesthetics*. Institute for The Study of The Ancient World, New York University; Princeton, NJ.
- Çiğdem, S & Kılıç, M. (2022). Resim sanatı. In L. G. Gökçek, E. Yıldırım, O. Pekşen (Ed.), *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Kültür Tarihi*. (pp. 419-453). Değişim Publishing.
- Clottes, J. (2016). *What Is Paleolithic Art?* University of Chicago Press.
- Collon, D. (1995). *Ancient Near Eastern Art*. University of California Press.
- Crawford, H. (2013). *The Sumerian World*. Routledge.
- Etgü, Y. T., & Pekşen, O. (2023). Religious understanding and concept of God in Sumerians. *Institute of Social Sciences Journal*, 22 (2), 511-525. doi.org/10.21547/jss.1237944
- Feldman, M. H. (2005). Mesopotamian Art. In D. C. Snell (Ed.), *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Foster, B. R. (2016). *The Age of Agade, inventing empire in ancient Mesopotamia*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Frankfort, H. (1970). *The art of architecture of the Ancient Orient*. Penguin Books.
- Gates, C. (2013). *Ancient cities*. Taylor & Francis.

- Gökçek, L. G. (2020). Kent devletlerinin ortaya çıkışı ve erken sülaleler dönemi. In L. G. Gökçek, E. Yıldırım, O. Pekşen (Ed.), *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Siyasi Tarihi*. (pp. 9-32). Değişim Publishing.
- Guthrie, R. D. (2005). *The nature of Paleolithic art*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1975). *Aesthetics, p. Lectures on Fine Art*. Clarendon Press.
- Honour, H., & Fleming, J. (2005). *A world history of art*. Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Hrouda, B., (2016). *Mezopotamya*, Trans. Z. Aksu Yılmaz, Alfa Publishing.
- Keeley, L. (1996). *War before civilization*. Oxford University Press.
- Kleiner, F. (2014). *Gardner's art through the ages*. backpack edition, Cengage Learning Inc.
- Köroğlu, K., (2012). *Eski Mezopotamya Tarihi*, İletişim Publishing.
- Kramer, S. N. (1963). *The Sumerians*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kuiper, K. (2011). *Mesopotamia, the World's Earliest Civilization*. Britannica.
- Kurt, A., & Göler, M. (2017). The First Temple in Minor Asia: Göbeklitepe. *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi*, 21 (2), 1107-1138. doi.org/10.18505/cuid.334942.
- McMahon, A. (2022). Composite Human-Animal Figures in Early Urban Northern Mesopotamia: Shamans or Images of Resistance? *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 41 (3), 230-251. doi.org/10.1111/ojoa.12251
- Mieroop, M. V. D. (2015). *A History of the Ancient Near East*. Malden, Wiley Blackwell.
- Moortgat, A. (1969). *The art of ancient Mesopotamia; the classical art of the Near East*. London, New York, Phaidon.
- Moortgat, A., (1969). *The art of Ancient Mesopotamia; the classical art of the Near East*, Phaidon Press.
- Parrot, A., (1970). *Sumerian Art*, The New American Library.
- Pittman, H. (1987). *Ancient art in miniature: Near Eastern seals in the collection of Martin and Sarah Cherkasy*. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Pittman, H. (2013). Seals and sealings in the Sumerian World. In H. Crawford (Ed.), *The Sumerian World* (pp. 319-344). Routledge.
- Stokstad, M., & Cothren, M. (2018). *Art history. Vol. 1*. Pearson.
- Thuesen, I. (2000). The city-states in Ancient Western Syria. In M. H. Hansen (Ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-state Cultures*. Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab.
- Topaloğlu, Y. & Uslu, S. (2022). Mimari. In L. G. Gökçek, E. Yıldırım, O. Pekşen (Ed.) *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Kültür Tarihi*. (pp. 489-521). Değişim Publishing.
- Ürkmez, Ö. (2022). Heykeltıraşlık. In L. G. Gökçek, E. Yıldırım, O. Pekşen (Ed.), *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Kültür Tarihi*. (pp. 455-487). Değişim Publishing.
- Van Dijk, R. M. (2016). The standards on the victory stele of Naram Sin. *Journal for Semitics*, 25(1), 33-50.
- Winter, I. (1985). After the battle Is Over The "Stele of the Vultures" and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East. *Studies in the History of Art*, 16. 11-32.
- Yıldırım, E. (2017). *Eski Mezopotamya'sında liderler krallar kahramanlar*, Arkeoloji & Sanat Publishing.
- Yıldırım, E. (2022). Yönetim sisteminin oluşumu ve gelişimi. In L. G. Gökçek, E. Yıldırım, & O. Pekşen (Eds.), *Eski Mezopotamya'nın Kültür Tarihi*. Değişim Publishing.
- Yıldırım, E. (2023). Eski Mezopotamya'da mektupların bir yönetim aracı olarak kullanımı. In L. G. Gökçek, N. Yıldırım, & K. Toptaş (Eds.), *Prof. Dr. Salih Çeçen'e Armağan* (pp. 365-381). Bilgin Kültür Sanat Publishing.

#### Image Reference- Thanks

Louvre Museum artifacts photos belong to my student Ahmet Yasin Aydın. We thank him for the photos.

## Yapılandırılmış Özet

Tarih boyunca birçok uygarlığa ev sahipliği yapan, tarihin sanatla aydınlatıldığı Mezopotamya, Toroslardan Basra Körfezi'ne uzanan geniş bir coğrafyada yer almaktadır. Sümer-Akkad, Babil ve Asur gibi medeniyetlerin birikimiyle şekillenen Mezopotamya kültürü, teokratik ve sosyalist bir yapıdan tanrı kralların yönettiği devletlere ve ardından dünya imparatorluklarına dönüşen sosyal ve politik bir yapıyı oluşturmuştur. Bu medeniyetlerden Sümerlerin yazıyı icat etmeleri, Mezopotamya başta olmak üzere Eski Çağ dünyasında birçok yeniliği ve gelişmeyi tetiklemiştir. Bu durum, özellikle sanat alanında kendini göstermiştir. Sanat, tarih boyunca Mezopotamya'nın toplumsal, dinî ve politik yapısını anlamamıza yardımcı olan bir araç olmuştur. Sanat, insan duygularını estetik bir biçimde ifade eder ve geçmiş yaşamlara dair önemli ipuçları taşır. Mezopotamya'nın sürekli değişen siyasi durumu, kültür ve sanata da etki etmiş, zamanla değişmiş ve gelişmiştir. Mezopotamya'nın bu zengin kültürü içerisinde gelişen sanatının temelinde tanrı ve krallar var olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Sanatsal tasvirlerin çoğu bu iki kavramın birlikteliğine dayanır. Bu nedenle tanrılar ve kahramanlar arasındaki ilişki tarihsel perspektiften incelenmelidir. Mezopotamya sanatında ve dolayısıyla inanç sisteminde tanrılar, uhrevi dünyayı temsil ederken kahramanlar, dünyevi gücü simgelemiştir. Sanatsal tasvirlerde kahramanlar genellikle avcı, savaşçı, kral ve imparator olarak betimlenir. Mezopotamya sanatındaki bu dönüşüm, yeni idari güçleri, ekonomik refahı, askerî gücü ve teknolojik gelişimi yansıtır.

Mezopotamya sanatında dinin rolü büyüktür. Dinî semboller ve figürler, sanat eserlerinin temel kaynağını oluşturur. Sümerlerden itibaren tüm Mezopotamya toplumlarında özellikle heykel ve duvar tasvirleri dinsel içeriklerle doludur. Kuzey Mezopotamya sınırlarındaki Göbeklitepe'deki (Şanlıurfa-Türkiye) hayvan tasvirleri doğa ve din bağlantısını ortaya koyan ilk sanatsal örneklerdir. Sümer tasvirleri, Ur Kral Mezarı ve Ur Standardı gibi eserler, tanrı ve kahraman anlayışını yansıtan en iyi sanatsal tasvirlerdir.

Tanrılar ilk olarak insanların inançları doğrultusunda Mezopotamya sanatında ortaya çıktığı anlaşılmaktadır. Bunun en güzel örneklerinden biri olan Sümerlerde, tapınak her şeyin merkezindedir. Tapınaklar ise bu "ilahî" güce sahip rahiplerin kontrolindedir. Dolayısıyla şehirlerin organizasyonunda rahipler en büyük aktörlerdir. İlerleyen aşamalarda dünyevi gücün etkisi daha fazla hissedilmeye başlamasıyla krallar artık yerlerini sağlamlaştırmak için tanrılar bir propaganda aracı olarak kullanmış ve insanları bu hedef doğrultusunda yönetmek için motive etmiştir.

Mezopotamya'da yaşanan hangi değişimlerin böyle bir dönüşüme yol açtığını anlamak için, konu çeşitli açılardan ele alınmalıdır. Mezopotamya Neolitik Çağ'ında köy yerleşimlerinde yönetici, tüccar, asker gibi sınıflar veya iş bölümü ile savunma yapıları olmayan basit bir yaşantı görülür. Ancak algı ve sanatta dönüşüm için bazı önemli toplumsal değişimlerin ve gelişimlerin olması gerekmektedir. Bu gelişmelerden en önemlileri arasında nüfus artışı, şehirleşme, ticaret, teknolojik gelişim ve sınıf ayrımı gösterilebilir. Korunaklı şehirlerin ortaya çıkması ile iş bölümü belirlenmiş, herkesin savaşmak veya kendini savunmak zorunda olmamasıyla birçok faaliyeti yerine getirebilmek için farklı türde insan gücü oluşmuş ve buna göre toplumsal sınıflar meydana çıkmıştır. Bu insan gücünün bir kısmını da sanat erbapları oluşturmuştur. Sanatın yapılabilmesi için bu sınıf gerekliken devamı için de sanatsal ürünleri alan veya destekleyen zengin bir sınıf olmalıdır. Bu destek bazen yönetici sınıf tarafından sağlanmış ve bu dönemde sanat siyasi iktidarın isteği yönünde ilerlemiştir.

Mezopotamya için sanatın gelişimindeki ticarete oldukça önemlidir. Bilindiği üzere Mezopotamya'da maden oldukça nadirdir ve bu madenlerin temini için ticaret zorunludur. Bu ticaret sayesinde Mezopotamya diğer toplumlarla iletişim kurma fırsatını yakalamış ve elde ettiği bilgileri ve maddi varlıkları kendi şehirlerine aktararak hem maddi hem de kültürel anlamda zenginleşmiş ve bu durum sanata da yansımıştır. Teknolojik gelişim ise değişimin bir diğer önemli koşuludur. Örneğin metal eserlerin ortaya çıkması ve bu eserlerin işlenmesi doğrudan teknoloji ile bağlantılıdır. Bu gelişim sayesinde hem taş oymacılığında kullanılan materyaller daha ince işçiliğin yolunu açmış, hem de yeni metotlar ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu teknolojik gelişim aynı zamanda silahlara da yansımıştır. Silahlar dönemin devlet ve imparatorluklarının en önemli aracı olmuş ve hakimiyet alanları onlar sayesinde genişlemiştir. Bu yayılım siyasi ve ekonomik olarak büyük bir güç getirmiş ve sanatta da silahlar son derece seçkin bir yere sahip olmuştur. Sanat eserlerinde, kahramanların sembolü olarak silahlar kullanılmış ve her daim kompozisyonun bir parçası olmuşlardır. Özellikle Yeni Asur rölyeflerinde çok daha baskın bir hâle gelmiştir. Ticaret, teknoloji ve bunlarla bağlı olarak gelişen silahlar Mezopotamya'da büyük bir değişim yaratmış bölge, birkaç bin yıl içerisinde köyler topluluğundan imparatorluklara doğru evrilmiştir. Sanatsal değişimi ise yeni ideolojiler ve yeni fikirler geliştirmiş ve değiştirmiştir. Yeni fikirlerin en belirginini Akkad döneminde ortaya çıkmış ve bilinen bütün coğrafyaları kendi bayrağı altında toplamak için çaba harcayan Akkad Kralı Sargon veya Kral Naram-Sin hem sanatı hem de edebiyatı etkilemiştir. Sanatçılar bu krallar döneminde yaşanan değişim akımını eserlerine yansıtmış edebiyatta Şar-Tamhari (Savaşın Kralı) veya resimde Naram-Sin Zafer Steli gibi oldukça önemli ve tanrılardan krallara dönüşümü anlatan tasvirler ortaya çıkmıştır. Merkezi ekonomilerin getirdiği refah ve zenginlik sanatın ve sanatçının artmasına, gelişmesine neden olmuştur. Bu zenginlik sayesinde estetik kaygısı taşıdığı görülen eserler üretilmiş, sanatçılar saray tarafından himaye edilmiş ve devletin propagandasını yapması için teşvik edilmiştir.