

Royal Art as Political Message in Ancient Mesopotamia
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Catherine Foster described how kingship was portrayed in images produced in five Mesopotamian empires (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian), noting that the images of kings were not produced solely for the sake of their aesthetic qualities, but rather were meant to serve a political function—the propagation of an image of positive royal attributes, such as power, virility, justice, and piety. She used images from each of the five empires in turn to illustrate similarities and differences in the qualities portrayed and the means of portraying them.



Figure 1

As an example of visual portrayals of a Sumerian king, Dr. Foster chose images of an unnamed, cap-wearing figure to whom archaeologists refer as a “priest-king.” They display the king in combat with a lion (*figure 1*: ca. 80 cm granite stele from Warka), signifying his strength, virility, and success in bringing civilization to an undeveloped frontier; as making an offering on a barge (*figure 2*: impression of a cylinder seal) and as a shepherd (*figure 3*), signifying his piety (he is subject to, and protected by, the gods) and his religious and administrative functions.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

By contrast, images of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin deviate somewhat from the royal image of this “priest-king.” A two-meter-high sand-stone “victory stele” (*figure 4*) displays Naram-Sin as a triumphant warrior, wearing horned head-gear normally worn by gods, and uses detailed depictions of a foreign landscape and enemy soldiers’ garments and weapons to create the clear sense that Naram-Sin’s triumph, unlike the priest-king’s lion-hunt, is a genuinely historical event.

The portrayal of kings as markedly god-like, first shown with Naram-Sin, continues with a king from the “Neo-Sumerian Period,” Gudea. The placement of a stone statue of him in temples, seated with his back to the wall, a position characteristic of divine beings, suggests that he was an object of worship. In other typical statues of him, he is portrayed in the posture of a worshipper, upright with his head up, wearing a cap or hairstyle like the priest-king’s, and holding a vase overflowing with water (*figure 5*). These and other images of him suggest his physical strength, his piety, his accomplishments as a builder, and the fertility of the land he governed. In most of the images, as in images from later empires, the large format and the use of heavy and valuable stone as a medium displays royal power by indicating the king’s command of the financial and logistical means of quarrying and transporting the stone.



Figure 6

The portrayal of a fluid connection between kings and gods continued in the Old Babylonian Empire, whose best-known king is Hammurabi. The 2.5-meter stele containing an inscription of Hammurabi's law code (now in the Louvre, in Paris) shows Hammurabi standing before the seated god of justice, Shamash (*figure 6*). Hammurabi, wearing the distinctive kingly hat, holds his arm in a position of reverence and receives from Shamash a rod and ring (the traditional symbols of kingship in ancient Mesopotamia). The degree to which he is equal to the god in status is suggested by his size (Shamash is not significantly larger than he is) and his looking Shamash directly in the eye, which suggests both courage and power. The image confirms the text's description of Hammurabi as a keeper of justice, sanctioned by Shamash.

Royal power is also displayed in images of Neo-Assyrian kings (1000–750 BCE). Images of kings killing lions and other animals on orchestrated, symbolic hunts (*figure 7*) depict the kings' virility. Other images such as kings receiving the surrender of enemies after a successful siege suggests the king's military prowess; and depictions of garden and park landscapes full of a large variety of exotic plant specimens from many places (*figures 8*) suggest the vast expanse of the Assyrian empire and the military conquests responsible for its expansion.



Figure 7- Ashurnasirpal II



Figure 8

Under the Persian Empire (which came to an end with Alexander's victory over Darius in 331 BCE), some of these themes continue, but images of Persian kings tend to emphasize the peaceful coexistence of many lands and peoples under the Persian kings' unifying power. Here, Dr. Foster's key example was the processional scene on the staircase of one of the Persian palaces at Persepolis (*figure 9*): people from all parts of the empire, wearing recognizably foreign costumes, bring gifts from their own lands to the king.



Figure 9

In response to questions during her lecture, Dr. Foster raised several other points:

- (1) There are other sources of information about Mesopotamian kings, in the form of cuneiform texts, but these texts tend not to be accompanied by images unless they have been marked by a cylinder seal. Note also that the tablets on which texts were written may seem too

small to contain the long texts for which they were used, but this is an illusion; every open space on a tablet (i.e., not just the front surface) tended to be used for inscriptions.

(2) In theory, the images displayed here would have been comprehensible to the large number of illiterate people in all five empires; but many images are unlikely to have been seen by a large audience. Neo-Assyrian orthostats could be seen only within the palaces in which they stood, and may have been used for persuasive purposes during negotiations. In the case of statues in temples, it is often unclear who could have approached and seen them. Nor is it always clear where an image was originally displayed (as in the case of Naram-Sin's victory stele), since some have been found in places to which they were clearly moved long after being created.

(3) It is unclear why so little warfare is depicted in Persian art and royal images. One thing characteristic of Persian art is that changes in it reflect a process of cultural "hybridization": new styles and media were adopted from other peoples. The orthostat, for example, was taken over from Assyrian art.

(4) The well-known image of Gilgamesh was created long after the putative reign of Gilgamesh himself. It may have been made by a king who wanted to be identified with Gilgamesh. In any case, the story of Gilgamesh and the mythology surrounding him persisted in Mesopotamia for millennia, long after the putative reign of that king (in Uruk) supposedly came to an end.

(5) A request was voiced for more information about Mesopotamian gods: the pantheons were very intricate, with almost every individual thing of significance being the responsibility of some god or other. The hierarchy of gods was not stable—the identity of the highest god changed from time to time—but several important gods (e.g., Ishtar, Shamash) never diminished in importance.

Summarized by Simon Grote.