

Art and Imperialism in the Ancient Near East
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Art in the form of figurative imagery and architectural and monumental construction has long played a central role in imperialism. Some of the earliest known empires of the ancient world – namely, the Akkadian, Old Babylonian, Neo-Assyrian, and Achaemenid Persian – communicated a harmonious, hierarchic worldview of authority and order in which the present power structure was portrayed as proper, natural, and beneficial. An imperial vision was shaped by monuments and architecture of each period: the [Warka Vase](#) from the Late Uruk period, the [Victory Stele of Naram-Sin](#), the [Law Code Stele of Hammurabi](#), the [lion hunt reliefs of Ashurbanipal](#), and the wall reliefs of the [audience hall in the city of Persepolis](#).

The region's environment constrained the development of power. The Fertile Crescent's richness allowed civilization in the area, since the transition to agriculture (starting about 10,000 BC) was a difficult process and could only have worked in areas wherein alternatives were available should agriculture fail, such as the nuts, berries, and fish found in the foothills of the Fertile Crescent. But where the rivers squeeze together, near modern Baghdad, is Babylon, and it defines the break between Northern and Southern Mesopotamia. It is Southern Mesopotamia with its large alluvial plain that is considered more typically Mesopotamian. Since there is practically no rainfall in Southern Mesopotamia, rivers are crucial for life. Unlike the Nile, the rivers do not flood in any predictable way or time. Flooding thus can be quite destructive. Very elaborate hydraulic systems were needed. Similar to the Sacramento delta, much of the lands are below the level of the water. However, once hydraulic systems have been made effective, crops grow very well: people enjoyed great agricultural surplus, permitting the massive urban centers and hierarchy that developed there. Tens of thousands could be housed in these urban centers. Wool also was abundantly produced, and between 4,000 and 3,000 BC the "fiber revolution" occurred: sheep began to be bred to produce wool rather than for slaughter, and wool became a major foundation of the economy.

The twin pillars of civilization in this place became its agricultural yield, and fibers for textiles, mainly wool. The many great cities in Southern Mesopotamia included Eridu, which began around 5500 BC, and Nippur, which was a religious center. The city-state became the political unit here. As these city-states expanded, they bumped up against other states, and territorial conflict resulted. Subsequently, multiple city-states started to be brought together under a single ruler to resolve this conflict. Grand territorial aspirations only started around 1300 BC with the Assyrian Empire located on the Tigris.

The **Late Uruk Period of ca. 3500 – 3000 BC** featured the flourishing of the Fiber Revolution. The institutions necessary to exert control in these periods were based around temples which owned massive herds of sheep. They had huge numbers of dependents who looked after the sheep and did the weaving. The temple received the profit from selling these, and redistributed the profit. Writing started in this period. City-states were pantheistic but each possessed a primary patron god or goddess. Uruk's was Ishtar, for example. After this is The **Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3000 – 2350 BC)** featuring the palace as an

institution rivalling the temples in power and ambition. Toward the end of this period, some city-states such as Uruk and Ur began taking control of other cities.

From the former period there is the [Warka Vase](#) is composed of limestone, 36 inches high. It is from ancient Uruk, ca. 3200 BC. (“Warka” is simply a modern name for Uruk.) This is temple paraphernalia for Inanna whose name will be Ishtar later. This famous work of art presents the world in a natural hierarchy. The bottom shows water giving life to grain. Above this are animals. The next level, separated by a blank band, shows the human world, but specifically naked temple priests. Nakedness is a sign here of ritual purity. They carry the bounty of the land in large containers. These persons carry the upper field, which is separated by another blank band. The top band shows a priest-king and either the goddess Inanna or her high priestess. The presentation of figures is hierarchical. The goddess bestows life-giving water upon the land. This is the way the land is watered and the society is fed.

The **Old Akkadian Period (ca. 2350 – 2100 BC)** began when the usurper Sargon the Great managed to unify all of Southern Mesopotamia or Sumer. He was from Akkad, a city that we have not yet excavated. The [Victory Stele of Naram-Sin](#) comes from Sargon’s grandson Naram-Sin, circa 2250 BC. It is sandstone, 78 inches tall, and was set up in a temple courtyard. It is presently at the Louvre. It is incomplete and missing one register. It depicts Naram-Sin trampling his defeated enemies. Above his head is a text describing his victory over tribes in the Zagros Mountain region. Significantly, it is made of stone quarried from the region he conquered: thus, a physical display of the acquisition of resources. Naram-Sin and his stele shows the need to constantly acquire territory ranging from the lower sea (the Gulf) to the upper sea. This attitude is very important for the thing that will be called imperialism. Very significantly, Naram-Sin presents himself as divine. Kingship had previously in the Near East been *given* to kings *by* divine figures, but Naram-Sin is different: he actually *is* (presented as) divine. The horns on his head indicate this. This is a great change. This act of divinizing himself was not done only out of hubris, but for purposes practical, economic, political, and strategic: to centralize the authority in the body of the king. The only way to acquire temple resources for his administration was to be a god. At the top are abstract astronomic symbols instead of gods in humanesque form: thus, Naram-Sin occupies the central, highest position.

Next, the **Old Babylonian Period, ca. 2000 – 1595 BC** saw power shifts from the far South to the center, and Babylon came to the fore. Hammurabi ruled ca. 1792 – 1750 and produced his famous law code, and was a successful military leader and legislative innovator. Erected near the end of his reign, the [Law Code stele of Hammurabi](#) ideologically opposes Naram-Sin’s stele, emphasizing a very different role for the ruler. It is 7 feet tall, highly polished diorite, an impressive monument. The stone itself comes from outside the Near East altogether, possibly from ancient India. There are 290+ laws that Hammurabi inscribed, after a long prologue and then all followed by a long epilogue. In one of them, Hammurabi talks about all the cities he has brought into his territory: the monument expresses justice and lawgiving, but also empire. Above the text are images of Hammurabi and Shamash, a sun-god who has sun rays coming from his shoulders. He is also the god of justice. Hammurabi presents himself here as a wise king who receives knowledge and understanding from the god of justice in order to rule his kingdom fairly. The stele has a note for the oppressed that they should come before the stele and have it read to them (they are

illiterate). The monument of statehood and rulership shows a normative world where justice prevails.

After the Old Babylonian Period came the **Neo-Assyrian Empire (1000 – 612 BC)**. It was the first true “Empire” of the area, having administrative and bureaucratic structures. Before 850 BC, conquests had been done in an ad hoc manner; conquerors put a puppet ruler in place when he conquered an area. But Tiglath-Pileser was much more systematic about administration in his conquered territories, and this may be considered the first true empire. Late in this period is a carved limestone wall **relief of Ashurbanipal hunting lions**. It is 62 inches high, from the North Palace at Nineveh, c. 650 BC, thus shortly before the 612 fall of Assyria. Nearby reliefs showed scenes of conquest, and some had a more ritual character. With Ashurbanipal there appears a series of lion hunting scenes. Ashurbanipal, in his chariot with bow and arrows, wears a conical royal Assyrian headdress. Dead lions impaled by spears lie on the ground; another lion, charging the chariot fearsomely, is impaled on a javelin. The imagery conveys royal power. We can contrast what Ashurbanipal was doing with the activities and images of Naram-Sin and Hammurabi. Here the lion is king of the animals and the king is hunting it.

The **Neo-Babylonian Empire (626 – 539)** featured Babylon, regarded as the greatest city of the ancient world. In this period was the reconstruction of Ishtar Gate and Processional Way. We have glazed baked bricks Babylon ca. 600 BC. Although taking over many Assyrian forms, the Neo-Babylonian royally commissioned art spurned the programmatic art the Assyrians had used. Rather than hunting and military scenes, we see a harkening back to Hammurabi’s imagery. They promoted the idea of a king who rebuilds temples and canals, making the city prosperous, well-ordered, and clean, thus rejecting the violent aspect of empire.

Finally, the **Achaemenid Persian Empire (539 – 330 BC)** boasts of Darius I building Persepolis in this period. It was described by Herodotus in the fifth century BC and overcome by Alexander the Great in 330 BC. The Achaemenid Empire gives us **Darius I’s apadana or audience hall** in his marvelous new city of Persepolis, in about 515 BC. The *apadana* has tens of columns, making a forest of columns. The exterior of it is carved in a series of reliefs, half of which are Achaemenid courtiers, and the other half are all the people of the nations under the Achaemenid sway, shown in their distinctive ethnic garb. It is a harmonious image of social cohesion. The visual is an incredibly effective way of communicating these norms: if you are surrounded by these images, they become the norm.

Did the subjects and others “buy into” the messages of conquest, justice, and harmony depicted in these pieces? These kinds of images were replicated later, so we know that they made an impact on many people both of their society and later.

Can this material legitimately be called art? Professor Feldman sometimes calls it “complex visual representation.” It *is* art in the sense that someone paid artisans to make these pieces with precious materials and skillful attention to detail and form. It is *not* art in the sense that it was not *primarily* made for disinterested and abstract aesthetic appreciation; but this latter definition has begun to define art only in recent centuries.