Visual Role and Ideological Meaning of the Enemies in the Royal Akkadian Relief[*]

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In the study of the outstanding works of art of the royal Akkadian relief, scholars have focused their attention on royal figures (*Barrelet 1974*). In fact, the intimate purpose of this highly referential art was to celebrate kings' power and to give it a strong religious legitimacy (*Nigro 1992*: 99-100). To achieve this aim, Akkadian kings did not hesitate to use effective visual methods. Royal imagery should exercise on viewers a deep influence in order to educate their political and ideological beliefs. The dominant politic-ideological aim of royal Akkadian relief is revealed by visual analyses (*Winter 1987*: 201; *Nigro 1992*: 61-62), especially if a specific category of personages is taken into account, that is the enemies, who are, together with the king and his army, favorite subjects of royal propaganda. Their figures combine detailed realistic depiction and strong visual impact and seem to be employed for conveying crucial ideological messages.

In respect of those of Early Dynastic official art,[1] Sargonic enemies acquire a distinguished personality. This, of course, was functional to the ideological purposes of the sovereigns. In these highly referential pictorial art, enemy figures achieve a role which overlooks that of run over corpses or bound prisoners in a mere realistic account of the victory (*Cooper 1990*: 46), while, fully accomplishing the Sargonic imperialistic ideology (*Liverani 1988*: 252-253), they epitomize the entire chaotic Barbarian world opposed to the order brought by the Akkadian conquest.

1. Sargon (2335-2279 B.C.)

The formation of a distinguished Akkadian figurative language took place during the long reign of Sargon, when the Akkadian ideology of kingship was first developed as well. Two main steles dating from Sargon's reign are kept in the Louvre, one showing the traditional Early Dynastic celebrative iconography (Louvre Sb2), the other testing the possibilities of a new dynamic and visual narrative (Louvre Sb1).

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[1] See, for instance, the schematic representations of the enemies in the Standards of Ur (*Winter 1985*: 19, fig. 13) compared with the variety of positions of the captives known from the Standard of Ebla (*Matthiae et al. eds. 1995*: 274-275, ns. 20-28).

Stele Sb2

The representation on the first monument (fig. 1) is the same of the symbolic side of the Stele of the Vultures, that is a "culminating scene" of victory (*Winter 1985*: 11-12). The dominating figure of Sargon, bearing the royal cloak, wields in his left hand a net containing seven captured enemies, while, with the right hand, he is smiting the head of a bearded personage protruding from the net. In front of the net there is an enthroned figure, only partially preserved, to whom the victorious king is presenting his human booty. The rays departing from its back, ending in a mace-head, and the flounced skirt allow to identify this figure with the dynastic goddess Ishtar (*Moortgat 1969*: 47).[2]

The adoption of a classic Early Dynastic victory iconography may be interpreted both as a proof of artistic continuity between the Early Dynastic and the Sargonic Period, and as a visual legitimacy of Sargon's accession to the throne (*Winter 1987*: 200). Three main innovations may be detected: 1. the king has taken the place of the god (the identification of this personage is allowed by the flounced royal cloak on the shoulder); 2. the dimensions and the placement of the enthroned Ishtar, while the goddess in the Stele of the Vultures is smaller and appears behind the king (*Winter 1985*: fig. 3); 3. the iconography and attitudes of the captives in the net.

These details reveal peculiar ideological goals: the role attributed to the dynastic goddess by the Akkadian king, also known from royal inscriptions, and the Akkadian victory presented as establishing order, which is shown by the differences between the two representations of the enemies in the net. In the Stele of the Vultures, they form a heap of dead corpses, while in Sargon's stele, they are regularly seated side by side (fig. 1).

The figure of the enemy chief (fig. 2), with long loose hair and plastic muscles, may be connected to the ideology of heroic kingship: defeating a powerful antagonist takes more glory. Nonetheless, his iconography, with missing hairgear,[3] the vertically carved beard, and the stretched surrendering arm, point to a distinguished personage and, especially the hairs and the beard,[4] suggest he is a Southern Mesopotamian ruler, since they correspond to those of a smitten chief appearing on Rimush's Stele from Telloh, convincingly identified with a Southern rebels leader (*Foster 1985*: 26).

On the Sargon's Stele Sb2, over the shoulder of the king, a very small fragment of inscription is preserved (*Gelb, Kienast 1990*: 125-126), quoting a patron deity, Ilaba (Il-a-ba₄: *Roberts 1972*: 12), which occurs two times in Sargon's inscriptions, namely on two copies from monuments (*Gelb, Kienast 1990*: C3, C4, 167-174). Both documents have been ascribed to the initial phase of Sargon's reign (*Liverani 1988*: 234), for they

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[2] A further confirmation of this identification is offered by the comparison with some cylinder seals, where the enthroned warrior Ishtar appears: *Boehmer 1965*, ns. 383-389, pl. XXXII, especially 384.

[3] As a symbol of the defeat probably indicating that his royal chignon had been lost in battle.

[4] The beard may be compared with that of the royal head from Telloh (*Amiet 1976*: 33, no. 30).

celebrate his victory against Lugalzaggesi king of Uruk.[5] One may suggest to identify Stele Sb2 with one of such monuments erected in order to commemorate his hegemony over Southern Mesopotamia. Even the still Early Dynastic iconography of the stele and the specific traits of the enemy chief, described above, fit very well a dating early in Sargon's reign. Combining this visual evidence with the prominent historical and political role attributed by written sources to the victory against the king of Uruk (*Liverani 1966*: 11), it seems not too hazard to identify the vanquished ruler of Stele Sb2 with Lugal-zaggesi himself. The representation of Sargon smiting Lugalzaggesi would have been the most meaningful (and warning) icon of the Akkadian power in the Enlil temple at Nippur (*Nigro 1998*: 7-9).

Stele Sb1

The transition form a static-celebrative to a dynamic-narrative artistic language is shown by the second stele of Sargon (figs. 3-4), the first obelisk-like monument of ancient Mesopotamian art (*Amiet 1976*: 8-10, 71-73, figs. 1-5; pls. 1a-d; *Börker-Klähn 1982*: 127-128, n° 18). Its peculiar shape has to be interpreted as depending on its narrative purpose, which indicates that a certain change in Sargon's media of propaganda had occurred. The stele is carved in superimposed friezes, only two of which are preserved. On one side, the smoothed basement presents an inscription. On the opposite side, a label, telling the name of the king in front of his figure, makes sure the attribution. Sargon appears in the lower register leading a row of dignitaries (fig. 3). He is followed by a servant holding a parasol and by five officers carrying ceremonial axes. In the upper register, seven bound prisoners are carried ahead by an Akkadian infantryman. This soldier, whose legs are only partially preserved, is distinctly higher than the prisoners, according to a visual rule widely exploited by Sargonic artists.

The dignitaries procession starts on the short side of the Stele (fig. 3, right), where in the upper frieze, by contrast, the scene of prisoners conduction is interrupted, and the direction of figures is reversed (towards right). Thus, at a direct examination from this side, the viewer is led to a choice: left-hand static celebration of victory, right-hand victory *in fieri*. The representation on the upper register prosecutes with a series of battle-encounters involving a soldier and an enemy. The scene is right oriented and depicts the capture and slaying of the enemies. Soldiers legs, appearing as polished volumes through the Akkadian skirts, mark, with their firm dynamism, regular intervals occupied by subdued figures. The systematic repetition of the Akkadian soldiers contrasts the varying attitudes of the enemies, generating a flow of continuous movement. Visual media are, thus, skillfully exploited to achieve a narrative effect.

The first enemy is kneeling, as he has been just caught; the second is standing, the third, which is the first of the rear side of the stele, is pushed down to the ground: his body forms a chiastic scheme attested to also in Rimush's Stele from Telloh and in the

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[5] Some doubts may be arisen about the early dating of inscription C4, while C3 belogs surely to Sargon's first phase.

Stele of Naram-Sin.[6] The enemy of the fourth couple is probably hung up by the facing soldier. Only the chest and the legs are visible. The fifth soldier is the best preserved one. It is possible to distinguish his wrapped skirt, a long fringed shawl, and the stock blocking the enemy by his neck. Finally, the attitude of the sixth soldier suggests that he is trampling on another figure.

Two main visual aspects must be stressed: 1. the opposition between the regularity of the parallel oblique lines of the Akkadian soldiers and the chiastic patterns of the enemies; 2. again, soldiers height greater than that of the enemies (size showing visual rank). Both features, though suggesting an ideological message — that is the strong supremacy of Sargonic army — enhance the narrative attainement of the scene.

In the lower register of the rear side (fig. 4) the representation of the vultures injuring enemy corpses displays how deep the artistic transformation carried out by Sargonic masters was. The birds of prey are depicted with realistic accuracy in manifold, but specific, flying attitudes. The schematic, though precisely descriptive, iconography of the Stele of the Vultures is taken over and the wild flock of vultures devouring the naked corpses is accurately portrayed. The realistic impact of the scene is further improved by cruel details, such as the two domestic dogs on the left taking part to the disgusting banquet.

Each subject carved on this stele presents some innovations in respect of the Early Dynastic relief. The representation of the Akkadian victory subdivided in fighting couples is a distinctive creation of Sargonic masters. The victory is portrayed in its happening (*Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951*: 161-162). Akkadian skill for movement enhance the narrative character of the representation, while repetition of triumphing subjects, like the strophes of a celebrative written account, is aimed to influence and educate the political belief of the public.

Three different destinies are conceived and illustrated for the enemies of the Akkadian king: 1. to be captured; 2. to be killed and 3. to be abandoned to dogs and vultures injury. The vanquished figures are arrayed in a tragic series, that clearly shows there are no possibilities of resisting to the Akkadian victory.

In respect of the first stele (Sb2), this one exhibits a change of visual language and iconography that can be ascribed to a slight chronological shift, or to a somewhat different ideological program. Actually, both aspects reflect a unique ideological and artistic change, which might have occurred in the second phase of Sargon's reign, when, after having consolidated his power, he directed major military efforts outside Mesopotamia, towards West (*Liverani 1988*: 234-235). Taking into consideration this historical context, one may surmise that artistic propaganda was then addressed to the military class, which was emerging at the core of the Akkadian political system (*Foster 1993*: 26-28).

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[6] It is the same model to which is inspired the Basetki statue (*Al-Fouadi, Madhloom 1976*).

Stele Sb3

A third stele fragment (*Amiet 1976*: 10-12, fig. 6, n° 5; *Börker-Klähn 1982*: 129-130, n° 20) testifies to the serial production of these monuments by royal workshops, since it displays the same iconography and style of Sb1, with which it is contemporary. Albeit fragmentary, this piece should have belonged to a real masterpiece, perhaps slightly larger than the former. The illustrated subjects are the same, though placed in a different arrangement.

The good preservation permits to appreciate the plastic quality and the drawing accuracy of Sargonic relief. Also in this case, visual messages are addressed to the observers, by contrasting the force displayed by soldiers' smoothed muscles and prisoners' flabby chests.

The upper frieze is illustrated with battle-encounters, of which only a part of a kneeling enemy is preserved (fig. 4). He shows the same attitude of the first figure on the rear side of Sargon's Stele Sb1. This confirms that there existed prototypes, which served as models for sculptures. On the right two legs of a soldier are also visible. Sargon's artists connect each figure with the subsequent one, by overlapping parts of their bodies, thus stressing the *impetus* of movement. Continuity and rhythm are balanced by the alternation of soldiers and enemies, showing the enduring influx of the Early Dynastic glyptic.[7]

2. Rimush's phase (2278-2270 B.C.)

Official art during the kingdom of Sargon's first successor, his son Rimush, is illustrated by the Stele from Telloh, now in the Louvre, belonging to the initial phase of his reign (*Amiet 1976*: 25-27, no. 25; *Börker-Klähn 1982*: 130-131, no. 21). B. Foster has examined with cogent arguments the relationship between the inscribed text and the victory imagery on this stele, identifying the subject with the suppression of the revolt of the Southern city-states of Ur, Umma, Uruk, Kazallu and, especially, Lagash. Having defeated the rebels in the latter province, Rimush erected the stele in the temple of Girsu (*Foster 1985*: 27-28).

Visual analysis offers many suggestions. 1. the stele was subdivided at least in four registers. Subjects are repeated in corresponding bands on both sides, but their orientation is divergent, so that all figures direct towards the same flank of the stele, where presumably an important section of the inscription was. In the uppermost frieze, there were marching soldiers of various military corps. The second and the third band from the top present battle-encounters. Therefore, the logic sequence of registers seems to be from top to bottom.

Formal analysis reveals striking differences in respect of Sargon's Stele Sb1, which can be partly attributed to the different functions and typologies of these monuments. Compositive and visual features testify to a new development of royal

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[7] In glyptik as well, it is difficult to distinguish the early Akkadian production from the late Early Dynastic one (Boehmer's "Sumerisch Gruppe"; *Boehmer 1965*: 7), because of the strict artistic continuity between these two periods in the realm of official art.

Akkadian relief. Fighting couples are here clearly separated and their round volumes come out from the plain smoothed background. Narrative purposes are no more achieved by means of an oriented rhythmed movement, but with a paratactic placement of free figures. However, dynamism is vigorously expressed in each dual group, without being communicated to the subsequent — geometric patterns designed by arms are in fact closed —, and realism is reached by means of an accurate description of human attitudes and bodies.

Fallen and captured enemies again convey a great part of the visual and ideological significance. The rigid geometric grid which underlies figures displacement improves the dynamic tension, which flows from each soldier to his victim passing through a single point of contact. A strong influence of Sargonic glyptic is evident (compare *Boehmer 1965*: pls. IX-X; Boehmer's "Akkadian II").

What seems a significant innovation is the appearance of the royal figure in what will become a classic iconography (*Amiet 1976*: 26). The king is smiting a rebel ruler, trampling on him with his advancing foot (fig. 5). This is the only Akkadian representation of a king engaged in battle, since Naram-Sin, in his Victory Stele, will prefer a symbolic portraiture (see below). Behind the king, a naked prisoner is looking at the terrifying spectacle. Foster suggested to identify him with a young son of the slain ruler (*Foster 1985*: 23). From a visual perspective, he represents an anomaly, being the smallest figure of the relief. His small size contrasts and highlights the height of the Akkadian king, while his attitude (the head is unfortunately missing) recalls that of an enemy in Naram-Sin's Stele.[8]

Turning back to the trampling king, this iconography is also attested in glyptic (*Boehmer 1965*: pls. XXVIII: 327, 332, 343, 351), where, however, the Sun-God occupies the place taken by the royal figure in monumental relief. The king is, thus, visually compared with Shamash and his victorious act is paralleled with the victory of the Sun-God in the never-ending strife between the cosmic and chaotic powers. Myth, ideology and reality come to a synthesis in this highly referential art.

At a closer examination, also the vanquished figure delivers its own ideological message, since the ruler is slain in front of his enslaved son. This should have looked as a not too concealed warning.

The representations of subjugated rulers undergoes a wide diffusion in this period, being attested to on stone basins and vases. They appear also in the form of tributaries and their foreign origin is usually indicated by the hair dress and the beard (*Amiet 1976*: 24-25, fig. 17, ns. 22-24).

The Stele of Rimush is of basic importance to ensue the artistic development of royal Akkadian relief. It testifies to a phase when narrative purposes were fully accomplished, though abandoning the continuous movement of Sargon's masters, which had been the favorite media of Akkadian pictorial narration. In this monument, dynamism is indeed confined to each single group, so that a fragmented representation turns out.

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[8] That is a watching enemy in front of Naram-Sin, who may be interpreted as the icon of the surrendering enemy (*Nigro 1992*: 87-88, n. 47, fig. 13, here fig. 12 left).

This feature points to a narrative account conceived as the aggregation of separated exemplary events. On the other hand, as depicted events and portrayed personages were presumably largely known to the public, the smart distinction among figures was functional to the sake of readability. Anyway, the abandonment of continuous movement did not imply a renounce to "historical narrative", but only a different way to depict exemplary events, the ideological significance of which exceeded the realm of a mere realistic narration.

3. Manishtusu's phase (2269-2255 B.C.)

Although statues represent a quite different realm, which is beyond the scope of this paper, one of them, found in Susa and now kept in the Louvre (Sb 48) must be taken into account since on its basement several enemy corpses are carved. Albeit attributed to the reign of Manishtusu, basing on the comparison with the famous statue of this king (Louvre Sb 47, *Amiet 1972*), it cannot be considered a work of royal Akkadian masters. Enemies are schematically represented, without the typical Sargonic volumetric descriptivism. The stone used and the artistic quality thus point to a provincial production, dating from Ur III period (*Tallon 1993*: 108). On the contrary, during the reign of Manishtusu, realism and drawing accuracy are pursued in order to provide imagery of a direct communicativity. From this perspective, enemies representations turn out to be more suitable than that of Akkadian soldiers, since their hair dress and attitudes vary considerably. The stele fragments from Nasiriyah (*Börker-Klähn 1982*: 131-133, no. 22), kept in Baghdad and in Boston (*Basmachi 1954*; *1957*; *McKeon 1970*), offer a good example of detailed representation of ethnological traits in this period (*Mellink 1963*). The stele reproduces the final scenes of a victory. Prisoners are bound with long wooden poles. They are characterized by fluent hair-tails; their hands are shown superimposed, according to the visual rule of representing as much as possible of the human body. In the lower register Akkadian officers are carrying pieces of booty. Since carved fragments with analogous figures were retrieved in Susa (*Amiet 1976*: 27-28, fig. 19) and in Khafajah (*Frankfort 1939*: pl. 113A; *Hauptmann 1991*), this again confirms that a series of similar monuments was carved by royal workshops to be sent in the various centers of the empire.

4. Naram-Sin's Stele (2254-2218 B.C.)

The royal relief examined so far display the outstanding pictorial and narrative achievements of official Akkadian art. Geometric schemes and formal patterns underlay the imagery without hampering its narrative aspiration. Akkadian masters skillfully used visual devices for enhancing the clarity of the ideological messages they intend to convey. From this perspective, the finest synthesis of ideological significance and visual media is offered by the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin: though set on a precise geometric grid, the composition looks free and unrestricted (fig. 6).

A basic geometric scheme, of direct intelligibility, determines the displacement of figures. In the upper half of the scene, two major triangles are placed side by side, confronting the unusual smoothed surface of the mountain and the volumetric figure of Naram-Sin (*Nigro 1992*: figs. 1-2). The king is trampling on the dead enemies, climbing

the mountain. His attitude is comparable with that of the Sun-God, as appearing in a well-known iconography (see above). A number of Akkadian cylinder-seals illustrate this symbolic sun-rising, and the fact that Naram-Sin adopted it reminds the transformation of the Early Dynastic royal iconography performed by Sargon in his first stele (Sb2). However, the symbolic shift from a divine to a royal iconography is here taken over, by divining the sovereign himself, as the horns added to his helmet explicitly indicate.[9]

If a horizontal volumetric contrast is established between the king and the mountain, a vertical opposition is set up between the king and a precipitating corpse of an enemy (fig. 7). The latter is inscribed in a up side down triangle opposite to that of the culminating scene of the victory.

This figure leads us to introduce another layer of visual analysis, that of dynamic beams (fig. 8). Whether movement is apparently constrained (upper part of the stele) or it is represented in act (lower part), many dynamic beams appear, directing viewer's attention towards the culminating central scene.

Visual acme is focused on the trampling foot of the king. By attraction or repulsion it is the real source of the movements depicted below. The dominating portraiture of Naram-Sin, carrying the weapons of each military corps of his army (this was also a distinguished feature of some warrior deities known from glyptic: *Boehmer 1965*: pl. XXXIII, no. 390), is composed by a series of geometric shapes and lines which result in a balanced dynamic power, concentrated in his foreleg (fig. 9). Actually, the formal pattern is the same of the other Akkadian soldiers, but a slight rotation downwards of the right hand holding the arrow suffices to originate the extraordinary force which causes the enemies to be pushed down.

In front of the king is a dying enemy, who epitomizes the tragedy of the defeat. Its closed regular shape, which incorporates the zig-zag scheme of the arms, a common representation of movement in Akkadian art (see note 6), here is employed to fix a figure in its ultimate tragedy (fig. 10). The arrow he has in the throat indicates Naram-Sin as the author and the origin of his death. His constrained dynamism is concentrated on the foot again trampled on by the king.

A third figure is watching this tragic scene, in an imploring attitude. It depicts the act of submission (*Winter 1987*: 192, n. 19), imitated by at least four surrendering enemies on the right side of the stele (fig. 11). They are watching the victorious king, as indicated by raised heads and arms, soliciting the viewer to share their feelings. These are the enemies which escaped death, submitting themselves to Naram-Sin. They are opposed to the vanquished corpses depicted in various attitudes of increasing dramaticity. An accelerating sequence may in fact be recognized from the dying enemy wounded to death to the collapsed figure below (fig. 8, ns. 1-4). Sargon's continuous movement is here resumed, though vertically oriented, but also geometrically closed figures, like those of Rimush's Stele are part of the scene (fig. 10).

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[9] I. J. Winter has recently shown the visual role of the body of the king in this respect too (*Winter 1996*).

The corpses the king tramples on are intermingled exactly like those in the net of Ningirsu in the Stele of the Vultures. However, an interesting difference is that the heads are here turned up looking at the culminating scene.

R. Arnheim and I. Panowsky have fruitfully applied principles of visual perception to pictorial art. One of their discoveries, is that some parts of the human body have a particular capacity of focusing attention. This is especially valid for human faces and naked parts of the human body (fig. 12). Their placement and contacts in the present work of art point to the king's foot and to the group of corpses as visual centers of the representation. The latter group prosecutes with the long stumbling figure (fig. 13). It not only interrupts the rows of the soldiers, but also narrative coherency, by falling down beyond the limits of the natural steps of the mountain. This composite break may be interpreted as hinting at a symbolic damnation (fig. 14, no. 7).

On the left side of the representation, the multiple parallel and oblique lines formed by the Akkadian troops signify, by means of rhythm and verticalism, the systematic advance of the Akkadian army (fig. 15).

A significant difference in respect of Sargon's Stele is the variation of the geometric scheme of the soldiers. The foreleg is bent for climbing and the direction of the march is indicated by the skirt fringe and the raised heads. Though belonging to different corps of the army, soldiers are all formed from the same scheme (this is indeed a difference in respect of Rimush's Stele).

Specific details, such as the emblems carried on by leading soldiers, which could be considered symbols of the squadrons taking part to the battle, show a highly realistic attainement. Therefore, the most detailed pictorial description is joined with the most fixed formal setting. The result is an impressive celebration of the Akkadian military imperialism.

The representation of the natural landscape of the mountain on one hand may be ascribed to a realistic narrative conception (*Rutten 1941*: 143, pl. IX), on the other, it is used to enhance verticalism (the two superimposed trees or to the stepped profiles of the terrain) and to symbolize netherworld forces (*Mieroop 1979*). It also serves to maintain a frieze-like displacement of figures.

A quite different layer of representation is shown by the three divine symbols on the top of the stele (fig. 14, no. 6). They adequately explain the strong verticalism of the monument, which appears as a distinct innovation of Naram-Sin's artists. On their left in a comparable prestigious position lies the written account of the victory (fig. 14, no. 5).

Dimensional differences are exploited for visual aims as well. Three ranks are reflected in height: the king, the soldiers (note that the king is equivalent to a spear bearer) and the enemies (fig. 16). Among the latter there are two exceptions. The stumbling down personage, perhaps in order to stress the speed of his fall, and the praying enemy in front of the king. Being the smaller personage on the background and lying in a crucial spot of the representation, this key figure determines a spatial orientation from bottom left to top-right (fig. 17), which is exactly the opposite of what we have seen in the Stele of Rimush. He seems to suggest the direction of a "correct reading": the viewer, after passing through the entire representation of the victory, should have totally accepted the ideological messages of submission which he epitomizes.

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Fig. 7 The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin (Louvre Sb 4).

Fig. 9 Stele of Naram-Sin: dynamic beams of movement.

Fig. 8 Stele of Naram-Sin: geometric grid.

Fig. 10 Stele of Naram-Sin: formal rendering of Naram-Sin's figure.

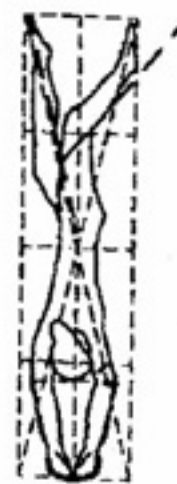Fig. 11   Stele of Naram-Sin: formal rendering of the dying enemy.

Fig. 14 Stele of Naram-Sin: the tumbling down enemy.

Fig. 12 Stele of Naram-Sin: the enemies watching at the culminating scene.

Fig. 13 Stele of Naram-Sin: contact points focusing viewer's attention.

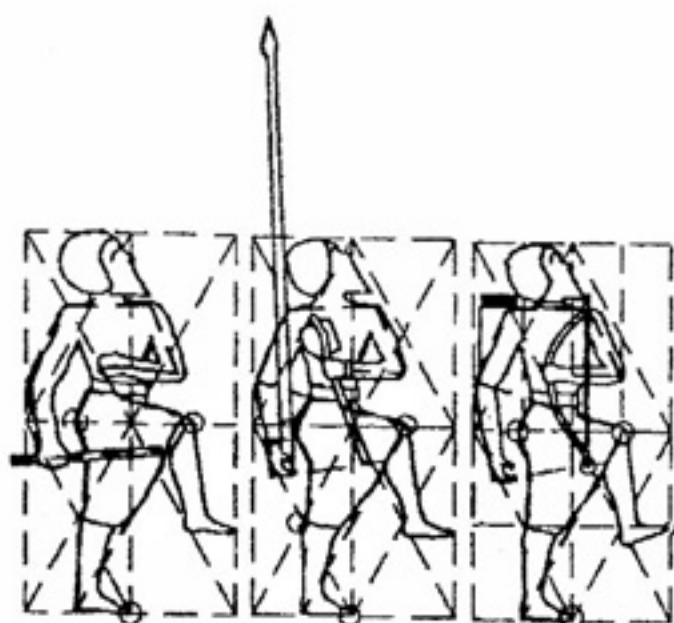Fig. 15 Stele of Naram-Sin: layers of representation.

Fig. 16 Stele of Naram-Sin: formal rendering of the Akkadian soldiers.
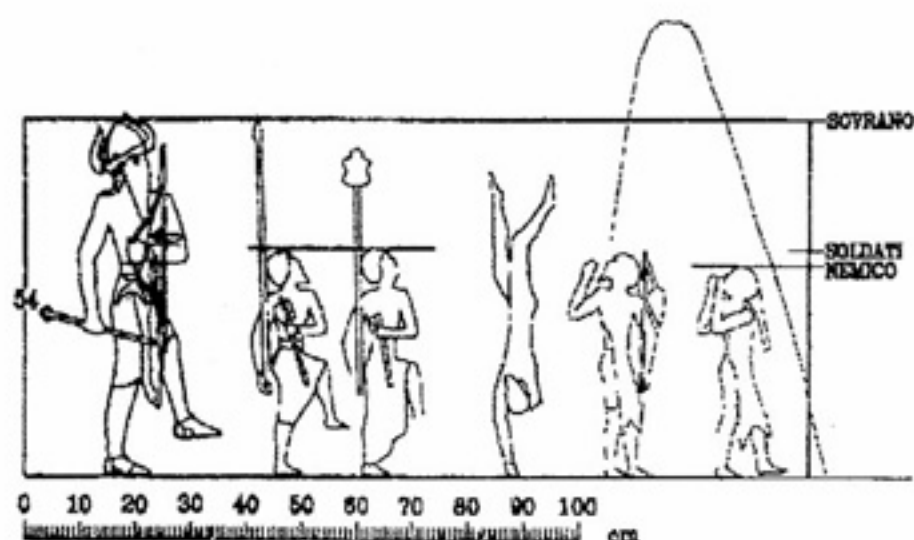

Fig. 17 Stele of Naram-Sin: dimensional classes of figures.

Fig. 18 Stele of Naram-Sin: spatial orientation and direction of reading from the bottom left to the top right.