
Winter, Irene J.


This article is about the Victory Stela of Naram-Sin of Agade. Naram-Sin (c. 2254-2218 B.C.E.) was the first Mesopotamian ruler to assert the divinity of the king. As such, Winter argues, the image of the king would have needed to make unambiguously discernible and legible this connection to divinity. The eroticized body of the king in the Victory Stela was a form of visual, monumental rhetoric, intended to link “sexuality . . . to potency, potency to male vigor, and male vigor to authority and dominance, hence rule” (Winter 1996: 11). The image would have situated the king in relation to a constellation of idealized attributes: banû (“form plus breeding”; Winter 1996: 11); damqu (“auspicious/good”; Winter 1996: 12); bastu (“vigor/vitality”; Winter 1996: 13); and kuzbu (“attractiveness”; Winter 1996: 13). The image would, as well, have intertextually situated Naram-Sin with relation to Gilgamesh, as a sort of citation of the hero-king precedent. As Gramsci has argued, emergent forms of hegemony must make use of, establish themselves in relation to, already existing social and cultural elements. The visual discourses of the stela, then, “had to exist within a lexicon of cultural value before they could be deployed as part of a politicized aesthetic. They could be deployed precisely because they had a prior value” (Winter 1996: 22).

The Victory Stela is a cultural form used to legitimate new forms of political power and control.

Winter then situates the stela within discourses of publicness and monumentality and analyses the role of the viewer’s engagement with it. She creates a potentially problematic and heteronormative bipartition of the gaze, asserting that a woman would have engaged “libidinally in relation to the ruler as today before a cinema idol” (Winter 1996: 21), while a man would have felt simultaneously awed by and united with the image of the king. This engagement, however, is not merely aesthetic or pleasurable. The physical, sexualized qualities of the image map onto “political as well as social coordinates” (Winter 1996: 22). The image of Naram-Sin works as a form of visual rhetoric, as a way of reproducing and legitimising a social formation—that of the king as divine, as “not just any male, but the dominant male within the state hierarchy” (Winter 1996: 15). It interpellates its subject and constitutes it as such, and simultaneously engages and subordinates its viewer. Seduction, aesthetic pleasure, and sexuality, in these ways, play a “socializing function” (Winter 1996: 21).

The depicted body of the king also functions metonymically. It creates a dynamic in which the royal body stands in for the body politic, in which the “‘self-fashioning’ of king and viewer [is also] the fashioning of the social body” (Winter 1996: 22). The normative male engagement with the image, Winter argues, would have put the viewer in relation to a larger collective, “in the sum larger than the total of its individuals” (Winter 1996: 21).

Where the modern viewer is confronted, in the Victory Stela, with a problematic correlation between sexuality/eroticism and political power, Winter concludes that this correlation “was not a problem for the ancient Mesopotamians” (Winter 1996: 11). Situated within a certain cultural poetics, “within a Mesopotamian lexicon of value” (Winter 1996: 11), the sexualized and eroticized royal image would have been linked with the ability and legitimacy of the king himself. Nicely written with some critical analysis.
Figure 1: Stele of Naram-Sîn (Winter 1996: Fig. 1).

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