

PARCERE SUBIECTIS ET DEBELLARE SUPERBOS.
THE STELE OF THE VULTURES AS EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE

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The correspondence between text and imagery on the Stele of the Vultures is a long-debated question. Even the meaning and the sequence of the images on the reverse of the Stele, as well as their relationship to the text are still obscure. Given that perfect correspondence was not a priority, this article proposes an overall interpretation of the monument. According to the author, the topic of rebellion, which is alluded to in the text through threats and curses upon anyone who would violate the oaths, and which is just implied (ellipsis) in the visual account, is the key to understanding the message of the monument.

Keywords: the Stele of the Vultures; E-anatum; Lagaš; Sumerian royal inscriptions; burial mounds

1. THE STELE OF THE VULTURES: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

The history of the study and of the interpretation of the Stele of the Vultures goes back almost to the beginning of Sumerology,¹ but some problems concerning this monument are still debated:

- the correspondence between text and imagery;
- the succession of the registers and the reading direction (from the top to the bottom or vice-versa);²
- the identity of some figures (the main figure of the obverse, the alleged king of Kiš on the lowest register from the bottom,³ and the seated figure on the second register from the bottom of the reverse);
- the reconstruction of the missing parts;
- the relationship between the battle scene of the lowest register from the bottom and that depicted on the third and fourth registers of the reverse;
- the identity of the corpses buried on the second register from the bottom (the bodies of the enemies or the fallen soldiers of Lagaš?), the meaning of the burial mounds and their possible link with the destruction of the corpses by the vultures at the upper right;
- the original location of the monument (at the border with Umma or in the temple of Ningirsu at Girsu?).⁴

¹ Thureau-Dangin 1905; Heuzey - Thureau-Dangin 1909. I thank Prof. Marcos Such-Gutiérrez for his suggestions and remarks.

² Winter 1985, 19-20.

³ Winter 1986.

⁴ Winter 1985, 23-25.

This article is concerned with some of these problems (the succession of the registers on the reverse and the reading direction; the correspondence between text and imagery; the meaning of the burial mounds), and, based on comparison with other royal inscriptions of E-anatum and with the mythological literature (especially the *Lugal-e*), aims at an overall interpretation of the monument. Assuming that the sculptor and the author (or the authors) of the text followed the same inspiration (the king himself or his advisors), but worked independently of each other,⁵ it is likely that the priority was not the exact correspondence between text and imagery, but rather the consistency of them both with a common message. The reconstruction of this message is the objective of this article.

2. THE SUCCESSION OF THE REGISTERS ON THE REVERSE (fig. 1, on the right)

The reading of the narrative on the reverse is likely to proceed from bottom to top, based on the following arguments:

- The final episode of the visual account, that is the destruction of the bodies of the enemy by the vultures, is represented on the top of the Stele;
- in the second battle scene (depicted on the 3rd and 4th registers from the bottom) the lower register (the third from the bottom), representing the march of the army, chronologically precedes the upper register (the fourth from the bottom), representing the attack;
- the reading from bottom to top occurs in other Sumerian monuments: e.g. the Warka vase and the Standard of Ur.

On the other hand, based on the parallelism with *Lugal-e* 368-410 (where Ninurta/Ningirsu meets her mother Ninhursaga/Ninmah after his victory over Asag's army), one could read the obverse of the monument from top to bottom.⁶

2.1 *The relationship between the burial mounds and the destruction of the fallen enemies*

The burial mounds in the second register from the bottom and the scene of the vultures devouring the bodies of the fallen enemies at the upper right obviously refer to two different moments of the war account.⁷

From the Sumerian point of view, the burial mound and the destruction of the fallen enemies have two quite distinct meanings. Based on comparison with the letter of Enna-Dagan, the former serves to mark the boundary between the victor and the vanquished after a battle; it is at the same time a warning, as it reminds the vanquished of the defeat, and a threat, a sort of prevention against a possible resumption of hostilities.⁸ For this reason, in the inscriptions of E-anatum, the burial mounds are only necessary as a result of a victorious campaign, never after the destruction of the enemy. In other words, the burial mound is

⁵ Winter 1985, 22-23.

⁶ In this case the monument could be read like a clay tablet (see Alster 2003-2004, 9). This hypothesis is in contrast with the reading direction of the inscription, which proceeds from the top of the obverse and continues from the top of the reverse. The inconsistency between the reading direction of the text and that of the images demonstrates that the sculptor and the stone cutter worked independently of each other (first the former, afterwards the latter).

⁷ Unlike the second register from the bottom, in the fourth register the corpses of the fallen enemies are first trampled on by the Lagashite soldiers, then stacked at random and without any ceremony, ready to be fed to the vultures.

⁸ Seminara 2014; 2020.

necessary when the defeated city is still standing and therefore still represents a threat to the victors.⁹

On the contrary, in Sumerian literature (especially in the genre “lament for a city”) the destruction of the corpses of the fallen enemies symbolizes, along with the destruction of pens and sheepfolds, the end of a city and its devastation.¹⁰

The second register from the bottom corresponds to the passage E-anatum 1 xi 12-15.¹¹ The episode is announced in the so-called dream of E-anatum (E-anatum 1 obv vi 25-viii 5), where in fact corpses of stacked enemies are mentioned.¹²

Contrary to Winter,¹³ the scene of the vultures devouring the corpses of the fallen enemies does not correspond to the so-called dream of E-anatum, where in fact no destruction of corpses is mentioned.¹⁴ Therefore, the scene of the vultures at the top of the Stele is unparalleled in the text.

2.2 War scenes (registers 1 and 3+4 from the bottom)

Registers 1, 3 and 4 clearly represent military campaigns. Registers 3 and 4 probably refer to the same military campaign: in fact, the third register refers to the march of Lagaš’s army, the fourth one to the actual attack.¹⁵

The relationship between the battle described on register 1 and that on registers 3 and 4 has long been debated and two hypotheses have been proposed, so far: that is, either two different military campaigns¹⁶ or a ritual break during one and the same military campaign.¹⁷

The scene of register 1, featuring E-anatum while striking (or threatening) with the spear the head of the enemy king surrounded by his fleeing men, is likely to be linked with the fragmentary passage obvise xi 5-13, where the victory over the enemy leader was likely to be reported.

The king’s victory, both in the text of the inscription (obv. xi 14-15) and in the visual account (register 2 from the bottom), is followed by the erection of burial mounds.

In the inscription, the erection of burial mounds concludes the account of the campaign against Umma. In fact, it is followed by the six oaths (obv. xvii 21 - rev. v 41), the praise of the king (rev. v 42 - vi 9), the summary of the other campaigns of E-anatum (rev. vi 10 ix 2) and the naming of the stele erected on the place (rev. x 23-29).

⁹ As to the identity of the buried corpses, it is uncertain whether they belonged to the fallen enemies or to the Lagashite soldiers or to both of them. According to Selz 2015, 393, «these are the fallen Lagashite soldiers».

¹⁰ The corpses are generally stacked and left to feed animals (especially dogs): e.g. *The Cursing of Agade* 164-165 and 176-192; *The Lament for Urim* 207-229; *The Lament for Sumer and Urim* 79-92; *The Lament for Nibru* 62-67; *The Lamentation for Unug* E 1-7 and E 51-74; *The death of Ur-Namma* 22-30.

¹¹ [Š^{is}KUŠU₂^{ki}] / G[IN₂]-Š[E₃ bi-se₃] / SA[HAR.DU₆.TAG₄-b]i 20/ bi₂-dub, «[E-anatum] de[feated Umma(?)] (and) erected (on the spot) 20 bu[r]ial mounds]». The texts are quoted on the basis of the most recent complete edition (Frayne 2008).

¹² Adda₂-bi 3600/ ul₄-HE₂ bil-la₂ (E-anatum 1 obv. vii 21-22), «Its (= Umma’s) 3600 (myriad) corpses will reach the base of heaven».

¹³ «...rendered at the far right, the resultant mound of corpses predicted in the temple oracle» (Winter 1985, 20).

¹⁴ See also Selz 2015, 391-392.

¹⁵ Winter 1985, 16.

¹⁶ Cooper 1983, 26 and Selz 2015, 392.

¹⁷ Alster 2003-2004, 4.

Therefore, the second military campaign, that is, the one represented on the registers 3 and 4, is apparently unparalleled in the text of the inscription.

2.3. *The correspondence between text and imagery and the message of the stele*

If registers 1 and 2 (from the bottom) correspond to the account of the war reported in the inscription, the upper registers (3 and 4) are likely to be related to the rest of the text, which continues with the six oaths and with the curses in case of their violation (obv. xvii 6 - rev. v 41).

The hypothesis of a narrative ellipsis could on the one hand explain the succession of the registers, on the other hand create a parallelism between the upper registers (3 and 4 from the bottom) and the textual section of the oaths.

In fact, assuming that between the lower registers from the bottom (first and second) of the reverse and the upper two (third and fourth) the uprising of the defeated enemy has to be integrated, the visual account of the war would prove to be divided into two symmetrical parts: on the first and second registers from the bottom the victory followed by the erection of burial mounds, on the third and fourth ones the repression of the revolt and the destruction of the enemy (upper right). The same symmetry applies to the written account, where the report of the victory is followed by threats to the defeated enemy in case of violation of the oaths.

That way the lower registers of the reverse refer to the past, the upper registers on the contrary to the (possible, future) consequences of the violation of the oaths and should therefore sound like a threat.

THE REGISTERS ON THE REVERSE OF THE STELE	INTERPRETATION
The upper right registers 3+4	The destruction of the defeated rebel
ellipsis	The consequences of the uprising: war
register 2	The uprising of the defeated enemy
register 1	The erection of burial mounds
	The victory of E-anatum over his enemy

The revolt and its consequences, which are just alluded to in the text of the Stele through oaths and curses, are paralleled in other inscriptions of E-anatum (E-anatum 5 and E-anatum 6).

In the inscription E-anatum 5, the most detailed of the two, the account of the wars of E-anatum is divided into two parts by the episode of the revolt (mu ... i₃-zi-ga-a, iv 25-26) of Zuzu (iv 25 - vi 5). The first part (iii 12 - iv 24) reports the victorious campaigns of the king, ending with the erection of 20 burial mounds (SAHAR.DU₆.TAG₄-bi 20/ [mu-d]ub, iii 25 - iv 1). The details and consequences of the repression of Zuzu's revolt occur in the second part of the war account (vi 6 - vii 2).

The difference between the two parts (the one before, the other after Zuzu's revolt) is marked at both narrative and lexical levels. In the first place, compared with the first part of the war account, the repression of the revolt is enriched with details, such as the route of the

campaign of E-anatum and the name of the rebel ruler.¹⁸ Moreover, while in the first part the only enemy leader mentioned (that of Arawa) is simply defeated (iii 17-20), in the second one Zuzu is killed (mu-gaz, v 7) and his city (Akšak) probably destroyed (mu-ha-lam, v 8). The fate of Zuzu, as the leader of the revolt, is worse than that of his allies, who are simply “driven back” (kur-ra-na bi-gi₄, E-anatum 5 vi 8 and 11) or “defeated” (GIN₂.ŠE₃ bi-se₃, vi 19, vii 2).¹⁹ It cannot be an accident that the verb mu-ha-lam, describing the fate of Zuzu and of his city, occurs in this inscription only in connection with the victory over a non-Sumerian city (Arua, iv 19). Finally, after the victory over the coalition set up by Zuzu, no burial mound, but rather (and with great emphasis) the excavation of a canal (the Lummagimdu) is mentioned (v 9-17 and vii 3-13).

To sum up, the message of the texts (especially of E-anatum 1 and 5) and that of the images (the Stele of the Vultures) agree on the following points: the enemy is qualitatively different from the rebel, that is, the one who violated an oath and crossed a boundary. Therefore, their fates after the defeat are different: the king spares the life of the defeated enemy and a burial mound is raised on the place of the battle to remind him of the defeat and to mark the boundary; on the contrary, the fate of the rebel is death and destruction. As the defeated rebel ideally ceases to exist, no burial mound is necessary.

¹⁸ Oddly, the “rebel” ruler of Akšak is the only enemy leader to be mentioned by name in E-anatum’s inscriptions. Even his name is very peculiar: in fact, Zu-zu (a typical reduplicated name) means more or less “he who has learnt/knows well”. The inscription E-anatum 11 could provide a clue for understanding the singularity of this name. The final section of this inscription (side 4 = face A I 9’ - V 7’), which is engraved upon a mortar of black diorite consecrated to the goddess Nanše, curses anyone who damages the mortar and its inscription. The “king of Kiš” (lugal-Kiš^{ki}, III 3’) is especially threatened. The final passage of the curse reads as follows (IV 1’ - V 7’): na[m ur] za₃-be₂ pa₃-d[a]/ ġeštu₂-ni/ al-zu-zu-a/ mu-sar-ra-bi/ ab-ta-ul₄-a/ ġeštu₂-ni/ al-zu-zu-a/ izi ba-sum-mu/ ġeštu₂-ni// [...] m[u ...]/ ġešt[u₂-ni]/ al-zu-zu-a/ igi-^dNanše-še₃/ diġir-ra-ne₂/ na-dib-be₂/ a-ne na-dib-be₂. The translation of ġeštu₂-ni al-zu-zu-a remains disputed: Steible (1982a, 175) translates it as «(Wer...) wird ihrer (= Nanše’s (?)) Aufmerksamkeit gewiß sein» (based on his translation of the verbal form al-zu-zu as «bekannt machen», see Steible 1982b, 80); Frayne (2008, 159-160), who interprets the form zu-zu as a causative, translates «to make someone learn, instruct, incite» («since he incited a stranger to ...») (Frayne 2008, 161). Here the following translation of the whole passage is proposed: «The one who damages (?) ... (and) whose ear knows well (the consequences of his own act), the one who cancels the inscription (and) whose ear knows well (the consequences of his own act), the one who sets fire to it (and) whose ear [knows well (the consequences of his own act)], the one who [...] (and) [whose] ear knows well (the consequences of his own act), neither he nor his personal god will pass in front of the goddess Nanše!». In any case, ġeštu₂-ni al-zu-zu-a refers to anyone who desecrates the sacred object, even knowing the consequences of this act. The affinity between Zuzu, the name of the rebel king of Akšak, and the verbal form al-zu-zu-a could be no coincidence, in which case Zu-zu would be a sort of speaking name (*nomen omen*), that is, “the one who has known well (the consequences of his own act)” or “the instigator” (accepting Frayne’s interpretation). Therefore, even the name of the defeated ruler contributes to the exemplary nature of the text: those who do not submit to the order imposed by E-anatum on behalf of his god Ningirsu face a destiny of death and destruction.

¹⁹ The different treatment applied to the defeated enemies is paralleled by the passage *Lugal-e* (Lugal-e 411-644): Ninurta spares the life of the stones that have defected from the army of Asag on the battlefield, so that they can find their place and their function in the universe, whereas the stones who followed the rebellious Asag until the last moment are simply doomed to destruction.

2. THE OBVERSE OF THE STELE: THE DIVINE WORLD (fig. 1, on the left)

As seen above, in E-anatum 5, both non-Sumerian cities and the rebels share the same fate, that is, destruction (which is described by the verb *mu-ha-lam* or its synonym *mu-hul*, iv 13 and 17, respectively in connection with the victories over Uruaz and over Mišime). In fact, rebelling means opposing the cosmos ordered by the gods and therefore exposing oneself to a destiny of death.

This is the main topics on the obverse of the stele, that is, the divine face,²⁰ which is related to the second part of the inscription, especially the oaths sworn by the defeated enemy. Assuming that Anzu represents the supreme god Enlil,²¹ it is likely that the latter and Ninhursaga summarize the six deities invoked as witnesses to the oaths. The message is clear: anyone who violates the oaths and crosses the border placed under the protection of the highest gods of the pantheon will suffer the worst of pains, that is death and destruction. The “executioner” is the god Ningirsu, champion of Enlil (as well as his hypostasis Ninurta in the *Lugal-e*). Ningirsu’s weapon is the net (mentioned in the text as “the great battle net”, *sa-šuš-gal*), which symbolically emphasizes the connection between rebel and animal world. The importance of the goddess Ninhursaga/Ninmah in the iconography of this face is perhaps to be related to the passage *Lugal-e* 368-410, where Ninurta/Ningirsu, following his victory over Asag, thanks his mother Ninmah for following him up to the KUR and renames her as “Lady of the Mountain Range” (Nin-hursaga). Probably, the connection between Ninmah/Ninhursaga and the KUR served to emphasize the epithet of “Ningirsu’s subjugator-of(-foreign)-lands” (*kur-gu₂-ĝar-ĝar-^dNin-ĝir₂-su₂-ka*) claimed by E-anatum.²²

3. CONCLUSION: THE STELE AS SUMMA OF THE WORLD AND OF THE WORLD HISTORY

From the narrative and communicative point of view, in the Stele of the Vultures the historical content of the reported events takes second place to their exemplary meaning.

Both text and imagery of the Stele contribute to an exemplary narrative, based on a template common to the longest E-anatum’s inscriptions (including E-anatum 1, the text of the Stele) and conveying the ideology of the State of Lagaš under the reign of E-anatum: the underlying message of the whole narrative is that the defeated enemy must submit to the new order created by E-anatum, the rebel on the contrary meets a fate of death and destruction.

In terms of content, the Stele is a summa of the whole universe and of the whole world history, summarizing on the one hand the relationships between heaven and earth, divine and human world, local and great gods, past and present-future, on the other, the network of relations that links the king to his god, to his subjects and even to his enemies, and finally illustrating the ideology on which the State is based.

For the first time in Mesopotamian history, revolt becomes one of the founding principles of Sumerian ideology and its repression serves to justify the war of conquest and the destruction of the defeated enemy.

Even death finds its place and its justification in the Stele of the Vultures: whether it is used to mark the geopolitical boundary between victor and vanquished or it is devoured by

²⁰ On the identification of the divine figures on the obverse of the Stele, see Romano 2007.

²¹ Wiggermann 1992, 161.

²² E-anatum 1 rev. V 56-VI 1, cartouche A, cartouche B; E-anatum 2 IV 11-12; E-anatum 4 I 9-10; E-anatum 5 VI 15-16; E-anatum 7a I 5-II 1; E-anatum 10 II 4-5; E-anatum 14 I’ 1’-2’.

vultures to symbolize annulment, the enemy's body plays a central role in the Stele. Perhaps to counterbalance the importance of death, the name of the Stele, at the end of the text, is a promise of life,²³ obviously only for those who submit to the power of E-anatum.

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²³ na-ru₂-a/ mu-bi/ lu₂-a nu-mu-bi ši-e/ ⁴Nin-gir₂-su₂/ en men-LUM-ma/ nam-ti-¹⁷Pirig-edena-na, «(E-anatum) proclaimed the name of the stele, this name being not (that) of a human being: "Lord Ningirsu, the crown of LUMma (is) the life of the Pirig-edena canal!"» (E-anatum 1 rev. X 23-29).

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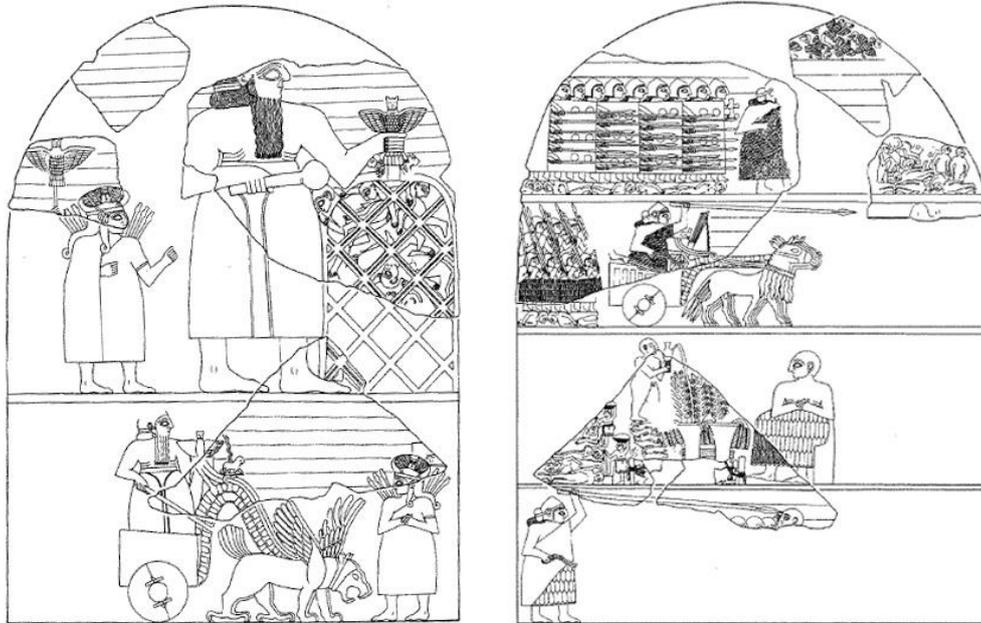


Fig. 1 - Reconstruction drawing of the Stele of the Vultures (Winter 1985, 13, 16). Obverse on the left, reverse on the right.