

## The Divine Steles of Mesopotamian Rulers

In history, one of the major components that has motivated all forms of rule is competition for power and authority. Early Mesopotamia is no exception to this trend as this specific area was in a constant shift of power during 3500 to 636 BCE. Furthermore, the new rulers that gained power over Mesopotamia throughout this time had a desire to exemplify their power in a tenacious manner. They wanted it to be known that their rule was superior to all others in terms of mortal and divine levels of power. These forms of superiority are seen in the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* and “Stele with the laws of Hammurabi.” Both works exemplify a divine rule of power and authority; however, they express this concept in vastly different ways in terms of the steles overall demeanor. Furthermore, through these work’s style and message, they both exemplify aspects that entail similar, different, and unique components that are solely seen in these two pieces of art in early Mesopotamia.

The *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* was composed of pink sandstone in 2254 to 2218 BCE during the Akkadian period. Standing at 6’7” high this work exemplifies the Akkadian ruler, Naram-Sin, leading his army up a mountain after their victory over the Lullubis.<sup>1</sup> At the bottom portion of the stele, there are multiple figures that stand as Naram-Sin’s army. This gives the stele a busy and overwhelming sensation as there are a multitude of different events occurring at one time. Naram-Sin is seen as a divine figure in a variety of manners throughout the stele. One of which includes his voyage up the mountain that signifies his path to heaven. He also appears

---

<sup>1</sup> Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages Fourteenth Edition* (USA: Clark Baxter, 2014), 40-41.

to be looking up at the stars in the sky, these stars at the top of the stele represent the gods.<sup>2</sup> This can be seen as a symbol for how Naram-Sin depicts himself as a god. Through this he believes he is glancing at his future that entails him becoming a respected and worshiped god. As he currently appears to be trapped in between being a mortal and god due to the fact that he is depicted in the middle of the work between his army and the stars (gods) portrayed above. Furthermore, he identifies himself as a god shown through his headwear that is dressed with horns, a symbol of divine power. This was the first instance in early Mesopotamia where a king expressed himself in a divine manner. His power and authority is seen in the expression of his size as he appears to be significantly larger than all other figures depicted, including his foes who appear to be in despair. This larger proportion of size also extends to the three stars (gods) that are honoring his rule.<sup>3</sup> This expresses the idea that he believes that he is far more powerful than the gods, making him the highest level of being. His army treats him as a higher being as they all appear to be looking up to him in a godly manner. Furthermore, this is also shown through Naram-Sin's actions of stepping over the heads of his army up the mountain which represents his superiority. In the stele, Naram-Sin is not only trying to communicate with his people, but also to the rest of the world. He does this to convey the message that he is the supreme authoritative figure to ever live. Furthermore, the Victory Stele's style is portrayed in a very staggered manner with commotion and chaos. This form of design was very non-traditional in Mesopotamia as most other works exemplified order and structure throughout the artwork. For example, unlike

---

<sup>2</sup> "Victory Stele of Naram-Sin," *American Historical Association*, NA, 1 October 2017, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/images-of-power-art-as-an-historiographic-tool/stele-with-law-code-of-hammurabi>.

<sup>3</sup> *American Historical Association*, *Ibid*.

the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* the *Standard of Ur* exemplifies a division of meaning by using a horizontal design where each level represents a different sense of rule in the kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the “Stele with the laws of Hammurabi” expresses its overall demeanor in a different manner that allows the observer to identify the work with a different attitude and perspective than the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin*.

The “Stele with the laws of Hammurabi” was composed in 1780 BCE during the Babylonian period. At 7’4”, this stele is made of Basalt, which has kept it very well preserved. This structure depicts a scene with the Babylonian King, Hammurabi (on the left), in the presence of Shamash, the sun god (on the right). Written on the stele are Hammurabi’s laws that are 3500 lines of cuneiform in the Akkadian language. Through the design, one can identify that the artist that constructed this stele favored the use of an arrangement of lines. This is shown in Shamash’s clothing and beard that is covered in linear design. Shamash’s divinity and power is expressed through his headdress that portrays a set of horns. However, in this depiction, even with Shamash’s divine nature, the two appear to be addressing each other in respect. As Hammurabi appears to be accepting the rod and ring of authority in a humble manner.<sup>5</sup> This entails the concept that they both see themselves as divine figures and that they are in the presence of sacred ground. Exemplifying that they are both of equal authority. One example of this is seen in their depiction of similar size that represents equal authority. This is also seen in Shamash’s actions as he gives Hammurabi the power to govern and judge through the rod and

---

<sup>4</sup> Kleiner, *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> “Stele with the Law Code of Hammurabi,” *American Historical Association*, NA, 1 October 2017, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/images-of-power-art-as-an-historiographic-tool/stele-with-law-code-of-hammurabi>

ring. Hammurabi is communicating this message to his people to increase their respect for him and express the concept of his divine nature.<sup>6</sup> The meaning conveyed in this stele is for Hammurabi's sense of authority in the kingdom, where he states the consequences of people's actions. For example, "If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out." This sense of power symbolizes that Hammurabi is a dominant figure in his kingdom and is of equal power to the gods. Through the explanation and analyzation of these two works one can identify the similarities that intertwine them, but also their differences that keep them unique.

The *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* and the "Stele with Hammurabi's Laws" are similar and different in numerous ways. In terms of being similar, they are both developed in Susa, Iran. Iran lies in Mesopotamia which potentially could have contributed to the fact that these works are constructed in a vertical manner. Additionally, these two works are constructed of different material as the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* is created out of pink sandstone, while the "Stele with Hammurabi's Laws" is created out of basalt. Their materials have made a significant contribution keeping the works preserved. As basalt is a material that can preserve well, while pink sandstone is not. This is shown through "Hammurabi's Stele," as it is depicted with superb detail, while *The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* has less detail; perhaps due to the fact that the detail has faded over-time. Furthermore, these figures both stand above 6 feet tall, exemplifying their importance to their kingdom. This also expresses Naram-Sin's and Hammurabi's grand power that symbolizes their equality to the gods.<sup>7</sup> In terms of differences, the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* (from the Akkadian period) is composed in a staggered manner where there is an immense

---

<sup>6</sup> Kleiner, *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Kleiner, *Ibid*, 40, 44.

amount of commotion, while in the “Stele with the laws of Hammurabi” (from the Babylonian period) solely represents Shamash and Hammurabi in a calmer, less aggressive state. This also contributes to the overall feeling of each work. After analyzation of the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* one can identify that this structure was meant to implement power as well as violence, fear, and death in an uncivilized manner. Naram-Sin is also portrayed in a dominant manner over all individuals, including the gods. However, the “Stele with the laws of Hammurabi” takes on a similar overall meaning but expresses it in a calm manner. Hammurabi and Shamash treat each other with respect in each other’s vicinity as each are depicted in same size, a representation of equality. Unlike Naram-Sin who perceived himself as more powerful than the gods, Hammurabi portrayed himself as equal.

The Akkadian and Babylonia periods are two spans of time that overall power and authority were extraordinarily important to kings and overall rule. Two works that exemplified this sense of power and authority are *The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin* and the “Stele with Hammurabi’s Laws.” Both of which demonstrate a sense of divine figuration as their goal is to gain more respect from their kingdom. In these works, a significant amount of meaning is conveyed that not only lies in the design and actions of the artwork; but it speaks to the observer through the materials, the composition, the body language, and especially the size of the figures. Furthermore, at first glance these two artworks are perceived as drastically different; however, in terms of meaning and overall message, these steles vastly similar in context.

