Incongruent Corpora: Writing and Art in Ancient Iraq

J. S. Cooper

This paper argues that art and writing in ancient Mesopotamia were, for the most part, separate and only partially overlapping traditions. This is why, more than in some other cultural areas, and certainly more than in the study of our equally ancient Egyptian neighbours, philology and art history are such separate disciplines in ancient Mesopotamian studies, overlapping even less, perhaps, than do the actual materials that are the objects of their respective research. Specifically, I will show that when archaic proto-cuneiform writing was still iconic, it was formally close to the imagery of as yet almost wholly uninscribed monuments and seals. However, several centuries later, when inscribed monuments and seals became the norm, the written signs had become so abstract that they had lost nearly all traces of their iconicity (and, hence, resemblance to the imagery), and the written texts on the monuments often failed to mention prominent elements in the imagery. This failure may sometimes be ascribed to a complementarity of text and image, but other instances suggest that certain motifs in the repertoire of the artisan remained alien to the repertoire of the scribe. If, as other contributors to this volume have shown, iconography without texts is difficult, the instance of Mesopotamia demonstrates that the advent of texts does not necessarily make iconography easy. The following has been written from an unabashedly philological perspective, and I anticipate that my art historical and archeological colleagues will wince more than a few times when I discuss ‘their’ material, as I often do when they discuss writing and language.

Pre-literate Mesopotamia is relatively art poor. This changes with the emergence of urban civilization in Babylonia after the mid-4th millennium, and especially at Uruk, far and away the largest site of the period, with its large-scale monumental architecture and evidence for complex, hierarchical political and social structures. At this time, stamp seals are replaced by cylinder seals, which provide a larger canvas for infinitely repeating designs or scenes. The proto-literate period (late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods) is marked as well by sensitively carved sculpture in the round (Fig. 41), elaborate carved stone ritual vessels (Fig. 42), and

1. E.g. E. Strommenger, 5000 Years of the Art of Mesopotamia, New York, 1964, pl. 1–6, 10–12 (pottery and figurines); P. Amiet, La Glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque, Paris, 1980, pl. 1–2, 8 (glyptic).

Iconography without Texts, Warburg Institute Colloquia 13, 2008
monumental bas-relief stelas (Fig. 43). The pathetic fragments of wall paintings at Tell Uqair remind us of the more fragile arts that will never be recovered.\footnote{4}

The Lion Hunt Stela from Uruk (Fig. 43) introduces us to the ruler figure or ‘priest-king’ who, we believe, stood at the apex of the political hierarchy. On seals, the proto-literate ruler, whose title may well be en,\footnote{5} is represented, in distinctive dress and headgear, performing tasks both sacred and secular (Fig. 44), which, in a sense, justify the old-fashioned sounding ‘priest-king’ moniker.\footnote{6} Scenes such as these – ritual and military activities, the royal hunt – belong to the category of proto-literate glyptic imagery that Henri Frankfort called ‘action’ scenes.\footnote{8} According to Holly Pittman, it is through this kind of representation that ‘images … for the first time … narrate social relations and social behavior;’ indeed, with ‘the appearance of the “state” … we see the representation of ever more elaborate and detailed and differentiated events and relationships.’ Pittman, noting that ‘both writing and visual narration as systems of symbolizing were invented in the same crucible,’ comes to the unavoidable conclusion that ‘both were tools of social control.’\footnote{9} In the same vein, Jenny Ross has recently noted, ‘Art functioned to support societal hierarchies, focusing on an active ruler who served the gods and his community, and maintained the ordered workings of both society and nature.’ But, she continues, ‘artistic expression was just one of a number of mechanisms developed in the Uruk period to support and enhance the emergent bureaucracy. Writing, seal use, monumental architecture, and other visible expressions of control and leadership also justified and affirmed the organization of society.’\footnote{10}

Indeed, writing, the graphic representation of language,\footnote{11} appears in the proto-literate period as the culmination of a series of administrative technologies.

\footnote{5}{See p. 73 below.}
\footnote{7}{Cf. M. Mode, ‘Siegessfeier oder Fruchtbarkeitsopfer?’ in *Beiträge zur Vorderasiatischen Archäologie Winfried Orthmann gewidmet*, eds J.-W. Meyer et al, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, pp. 332–43, who interprets, not entirely convincingly, the execution of prisoners as fertility ritual rather than post-victory triumph.}
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developed to deal with ever larger and more complex socio-political organization. Sealing was an old technology, even if cylinder seals were new; clay counters were old, but sealing them in clay bullae that bore their impression was new; and entirely new was the impression of counter-like shapes on clay tablets, flattened bullae, as Denise Schmandt-Besserat has shown (Fig. 45). Using as medium these flat clay tablets, writing itself appears nearly full-blown (Fig. 46), representing not only quantity, as did the older system of counters, but, potentially, the entire gamut of linguistic expression.

Giorgio Buccellati put it well a quarter of a century ago when he described the invention of proto-cuneiform as drawing on the pre-existing systems of numerical notation on the one hand, and, on the other, the tradition of pictorial and symbolic representation known especially from glyptic.

The inventors of the thousand or so proto-cuneiform characters used all three of Peirce’s major semiological categories (Fig. 47): icons, i.e. pictures of what is to be represented (head, bull, reed,); indexes, signs that point to what they represent (foot = to go, stand); and symbols, signs that have no other relationship to their referents than the agreement by users of the writing system that they so do (sheep, goat). Note the incipience in Fig. 47: 9–10 of the rebus principal, the use of a pictogram to express a homonym of the word it depicts. The future development of rebus writing was crucial in enabling cuneiform to fully represent language.

The original orientation of the signs was 90° to the right; at some time – which time is a subject of great dispute among Assyriologists – the ancients shifted the direction of writing and orientation of the signs, but we moderns often display archaic tablets in the later orientation that we first learned.

In a sense, the preceding paragraph could be entitled ‘the invention of cuneiform lite’. The archaic signs usually displayed in presentations of this sort are readily recognizable pictograms, but when you actually look at the entire repertoire of early signs, most look indeed as if they are intended to be something very specific, but much of the time it is very difficult to recognize just what that something might be. The sign AK (Fig. 48:1), which later is used for the verb ‘to make, to do’, is thought by Bob Englund to represent ‘a container made of matted reeds’, which may well be the case, but it would be a stretch to...
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see, with Englund, the sign SANGA (Fig. 48:2), standing for an administrator or scribe, as 'a tallying board, with three compartments in an upper, and three in a lower register, and to the lower left a box to store counters'. 18 Thus, the basis of both the pictographic origin and rebus extension of a great many signs remains obscure.

Even though, as Pittman and Ross (above) have asserted, the iconography that represents social relationships and norms, as well as the cuneiform writing system itself, whose purpose was, after all, to expedite the bureaucratic control of production, appropriation and redistribution, were devised in response to the needs of the nascent Sumerian state, there are no inscribed monuments of the proto-literate period. That is, these two tools of statecraft had not yet been joined. 19 But if there is as yet no question of how writing and art are deployed and interact on the same surface, we can compare the forms of the proto-cuneiform signs with the forms of their referents as rendered on proto-literate monuments. The Uruk Vase especially, with its rich iconographic repertoire, lends itself to such a comparison (Figs 42 and 49). The reed bundle representing the goddess Inana (1) appears much as it does on tablets, 20 but the sign for 'person' (2) is far more abstract than the figures on the vase. Signs for various vessels (3, 4, 12) are true to their shapes, but one misses signs corresponding to two pairs of vessels at the upper right, one in the shape of the Vase itself, and the other just to the vases' right beneath the theriomorphic vessels. 21 The signs used to write the ewe and ram that alternate in procession are purely symbolic (5, 6), whereas the wild feline and caprid that give their shapes to the vessels in the far upper right (note the spouts on the backs) are represented by realistic head shapes (10, 11). 22 Water (7) is rendered similarly in proto-cuneiform and on the Vase, whereas the barley and flax 23 (8 and 9) above the

with the KID sign, points to Sumerian as the language of the archaic texts, against Englund's own belief that it was not (ibid., pp. 73–81).

18. Ibid., p. 112 n. 245.
19. See below for the single exception of an inscribed seal.
20. The reed bundle is possibly topped by a cloth banner; see P. Steinkeller, 'Inanna's Archaic Symbol', in Written on Clay and Stone, eds J. Braun et al., Warsaw, 1998, pp. 87–100. It is one of a number of reed-bundle based emblems that occur in the sign repertoire much as they look in the iconography, and have been studied in detail by K. Szarzyńska, Sumerica, Warsaw, 1997, pp. 58–107.
22. For the bull's head between the produce-filled vessels behind the ram, similar to Green and Nissen, Zeichenliste (n. 16 above), no. 219, see below.
water are more realistic on the Vase than the fairly schematic renderings in the sign repertoire. The two-tiered architectonic pedestal atop the ram, on which two figures stand, resembles the sign for city (13), and might symbolize the city here and in similar scenes on seals.  

A final comparison must be made between the enigmatic pile of crockery held by the figure on the upper tier of the pedestal and the sign EN (14). The en is considered to be ‘the highest official in archaic administration’, and commonly identified with the image of the ‘priest-king’, who is the mostly broken figure in the elaborate costume on the upper left of the Vase. From the initial publication of the Vase, it has been assumed that what the figure on the upper tier of the pedestal was carrying represented the EN sign, emblematic of the broken ruler figure, just as the Inana emblem behind the figure on the lower pedestal represents the female figure to whom offerings are being presented. The EN sign itself clearly depicts something at least in part vegetal, but its counterpart on the Vase is not at all plant-like, nor does it resemble any readily identifiable bit of realia. Do we have a case here of art imitating writing, that is, an imaginary object created to resemble the form of the EN sign, without regard for the sign’s original referent (whatever that may have been)?

In sum, we can say that except for the human figures, and the domestic animals represented by symbols rather than pictograms, the proto-cuneiform signs and the Vase belong to the same esthetic-representational tradition. Of course, even the most pictorial signs are more linear than the images on the Vase or on seals, and the relief of both the Vase and seals suggests real volume as pictographic signs never do. The only co-occurrence of proto-literate glyptic imagery and writing is found on an upprovenanced seal formerly in the Erlenmeyer collection (Fig. 50). A large bull en passant, similar to many others found on proto-literate seals and sealings, confronts the reed bundle symbolizing the goddess Inana. Between them is a round

26. E.g., D. Schmandt-Besserat, ‘Images of Enship’ (n. 9 above).
28. Scholars are divided over whether the female is the goddess Inana or her representative. Her headgear is disrupted by an ancient repair, but it was certainly the same as that worn by the female figure who figures opposite or alongside the ‘priest-king’ on seals (Amiet, ibid., pl. 45, and note that in most cases she holds or is accompanied by the Inana emblem). If what seem like small anthropomorphic arms on the large Inana emblems behind the female figure on the Vase mean that the emblems are the goddess (in her aspects as morning and evening star?), then the female figure should be her human representative.
29. See Amiet, *Glyptique* (n. 1 above), Nos. 185, 208, 230, 397–9, 412, 612, 628f., 632, 640, 653, 655; photos in Strommenger, *5000 Years* (n. 1 above), pls. 16f.
vessel with handles (?), plausibly interpreted as the sign for festival (EZEN),\(^{30}\) and to the left of the Inana symbol there is the proto-cuneiform sign for god (AN)\(^{31}\) surmounted by the sign for sun or day (UD)\(^{32}\) above that same sign flipped downward (SIG).\(^{33}\) Three additional AN-signs are deployed in a horizontal row above the bull. The seal ‘inscription’ has been translated as ‘The festival of the evening/morning Inanna (=Venus),’\(^{34}\) and indeed what can reasonably be considered festivals of both the evening and morning star, written (in normal Sumerological transliteration) EZEN SIG AN INANA and EZEN UD AN INANA respectively, appear in the archaic texts from Uruk.\(^{35}\)

What is striking about the seal inscription is that whereas the AN, UD and SIG are quite linear, the INANA is very figurative, showing sculpted volume and the cords tying the reed bundle, looking very much like the INANA symbols on the Uruk Vase. The EZEN as well has volume, and looks much more like a vessel (if that is indeed what the EZEN sign is supposed to represent) than it does on tablets. It may be that the UD and SIG signs were already so schematic (assuming that they represent the rising and setting sun respectively) that making them more figurative would have rendered them illegible. The AN-sign, though very linear, also is a very effective image of a star. This hitherto unique seal, unfortunately bereft of any context, is our only example of writing so close to its pictographic origins that the inscription, in part, has been drawn into the seal’s figural representation. If we did not know better, we could have interpreted the EZEN as a vessel holding water or nourishment for the bull, and the INANA as a real standard, much like the INANA standard in front of the ram on the Uruk Vase as well as many proto-literate seal designs.

Returning to the Uruk Vase, the scene at the top right (Fig. 51) is of special interest for the subject of this paper. It is neither a procession of similar and repeating human, animal or plant figures as in the lower registers, nor is it a ritual scene as portrayed at the top left. Rather, it seems to be a symbolic juxtaposition of figures and objects, often in pairs: a pair of worshippers atop a symbolic temple or city identified with Inana, itself atop a ram;\(^{36}\) a pair of vases shaped like the Uruk

31. Ibid., no. 31.
32. Ibid., no. 566.
33. Ibid., no. 451.
35. See the preceding note.
36. See n. 23 above.
Vase itself, two theriomorphic vessels, and two smaller and two larger vessels filled with commodities. Also, and perhaps especially, note the bull’s head and the objects between and on either side of the larger vessels. Similar scenes appear in glyptic, and it may be that these juxtapositions are attempts to encode a message, a kind of alternative proto-writing that never developed further, or an alternative semiotic system, like the suggested function of ‘fill’ motifs in glyptic. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of the Narmer Palette (Fig. 52) and similar early Egyptian artifacts, with their scattered glyphs and symbolic juxtapositions, as has recently been noted by L. Morenz.

Yet despite these early similarities, cuneiform writing in Mesopotamia never maintained the intimate relationship with imagery that was to characterize Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. When actual writing finally begins to regularly appear together with imagery on stone monuments around 2900 BC in Babylonia, documenting the transfer of real property, the schematic, incised, linear, matter-of-fact appearance of the writing has seemingly little to do with the relatively nicely rendered bas-relief figures (Figs 53 and 54). The name and title of Ushumgal in Fig. 54 may be written right on his skirt, but the writing is neither part of the image, nor does it interact in any pictorial way with the image.

If early writing drew on pre-existent traditions of iconographic representation, yet so radically diverged in appearance from figurative art, did the invention of writing at all affect art and artistic possibilities? It has been suggested that the development of registers on monuments was inspired by the arrangement of writing on tablets. But note that the horizontal columns of archaic tablets (when properly oriented) are read from top to bottom, and, in the late proto-literate period, there were often sub-columns (Fig. 55) that have no counterpart in the registers on monuments. Unlike the tablets, the Uruk Vase (above) is read from bottom to top: the water at bottom nourishes the plant life above it, which in turn nourishes the domestic animals in the next register, both of which nourish the bearers in the

37. The profiled bull’s head resembles the head of the bull on the Erlenmeyer seal discussed just above as well as those in n. 29 above, all of which are very similar to sign no. 219 in Green and Nissen, Zeichenliste (n. 16 above), supposedly ALIM ‘aurochs’ (C. Mittermeyer, Die Entwicklung der Tierkopfzeichen, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 319, Münster, 2005, pp. 46f.), but the animal on the seals should be domestic.

38. Especially Amiet, Glyptique (n. 1 above), No. 643, but see also his Nos. 652–4.


40. Morenz, Bild-Buchstaben (n. 34 above), Chap. IV.1.2, with a more adventurous interpretation than the one offered here.


42. D. Schmandt-Besserat, ‘Birth of Narrative Art: How Writing Led to Picture Painting’, Odyssey, Sept./Oct. 2004, pp. 34–43, 54f. Schmandt-Besserat specifically refers only to painted pottery, but the implication is that registers or space division in other media derive from tablets as well. See now her When Writing Met Art, Austin, 2007.
middle register and supply the food products being carried and, in the upper
register, presented as offerings.\textsuperscript{43} And again, unlike the archaic tablets, whose
individual horizontal columns are read from right to left, movement on the vase is
both sinistrograde and dextrograde.

Cuneiform signs became abstract rapidly because of the medium of clay. As is
apparent from Fig. 47, early scribes soon realised that impressing a series of strokes
with the stylus was, because of clay’s resistance, more efficient than drawing the
stylus through the clay. As the shapes of the cuneiform signs evolved over time, each
sign became an abstract configuration of strokes, quickly losing whatever
pictorialness the archaic ancestor retained. Impression limits flexibility of line, and,
in any case, writing in clay does not readily lend itself to the detail and flourish of
writing with brush or pen. When signs were chiselled into stone, they remained
linear and even conserved some vestigial iconicity – as, for example, the bird-like
signs in the upper right of the Blau Plaque (Fig. 53) – until about 2400 B.C., when
there was some imitation of cuneiform wedges (the head of each stroke, formed by
the wedge-shaped head of the stylus).\textsuperscript{44} It is only after about 2200 B.C. that wedges
are consistently translated into stone,\textsuperscript{45} and this convention of simulating the
wedges made by the stylus on clay when inscribing stone or metal persisted as long
as cuneiform inscriptions were produced; even when inscriptions were painted with
a brush, the cuneiform appearance of signs impressed in clay was slavishly
imitated.\textsuperscript{46}

There was one moment, however, when writing, still relatively young, departed from
its path toward ever more abstract and austere form, and joined art in a wild and rather
bizarre fling. In the proto-literate period, the only evidence for writing on seals, with the
exception of the unique seal discussed above (Fig. 50), is from a sealing found on a
number of archaic tablets from Jemdet Nasr (Fig. 56a).\textsuperscript{47} It contains the names of a
group of Babylonian cities which correspond to the same cities that head the contemporary Cities List, one of the archaic lexical lists from Uruk (Fig. 56b). Compared to the written forms of the cities’ names, the glyptic forms on the Jemdet Nasr sealings are more curvaceous and pictorial, with the same sculpted volume as two of the signs on the seal in Fig. 50 discussed earlier, but, with the cities neatly lined up, and excluding other imagery, the sealing has little to do with other glyptic art of the period.

However, a few centuries later at Ur, around 2800 BC, there is a series of sealings with city names in a font that can only be described as zany (Fig. 57). The city names are cheek by jowl with abstract designs as well as figurative elements such as tessellated human and animal heads, tessellated haunches, birds and rosettes. For the first and only time, writing is in play with other elements as part of the seal design. Many of these same elements, and certainly the same esthetic spirit, are found in contemporary seals without writing. Henri Frankfort wrote that with this style, ‘glyptic art in Mesopotamian had discovered the means to realise its peculiar potentialities’ by creating ‘a decoration . . . [that] depends for its effect entirely upon the harmony of its constituents, a harmony which becomes equally manifest in a long frieze as in a short fragment.” 50 The other great mid-twentieth century glyptic authority, Anton Moortgat, was less enthusiastic: ‘Here a degree of decline has been reached from which there was only one possible step left, a turning back, if all art in the real meaning of the word was not to come to an end.” 51

One might disagree with Moortgat’s esthetic judgement, but, in fact, the experiment with art and writing was never repeated. When inscriptions appear on seals thereafter, usually to identify the owner, they are neatly set off, and in form and line are very different from the seals’ images, 52 much the same as the way writing and image appear on the Early Dynastic stone monuments discussed earlier (Figs 53 and 54) or on Eanatum’s well known Stela of the Vultures (Fig. 58), and, in fact, on all subsequent inscribed monuments for the next two millennia of Mesopotamian history. 53 This is radically different from the case in ancient Egypt or Mesoamerica, where iconography and glyphs remain intimately close, but similar to the relationship of writing and image in the Chinese tradition, where, however

49. There are also some sealings with the same font from Ur that seem to have inscriptions (which remain undecipherable) arranged in cases and columns like tablets; see Matthews, Cities (n. 43 above), figs 24f. For a few similar sealings from Uruk, see ibid., pp. 38f. On the significance of the sealings, see P. Steinkeller, ‘More on the Archaic City Seals’, in N.A.R.U. 2002, pp. 29–31.
50. Frankfort, Cylinder Seals (n. 8 above), p. 43.


56. Steinkeller, ibid., pp. 238–41; Wilcke, ibid., pp. 87–89.

57. P. Amiet, _L’Art d’Agadé au Musée du Louvre_ , Paris, pp. 8, 73.


61. D. Frayne, _Ur III Period_ , Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods 3/2, Toronto, 1997, 1.4.3 iv 15–31. This inscription, like almost all lengthy historical inscriptions of the Akkad and Ur III periods, is known from a later copy of an inscribed monument. It may well be that if more Ur III inscriptions of this kind were known, this passage would not seem so isolated. Blinding as a punishment...
by a limestone inlay from Ebla, and by the scene on the lowest register of the Stela of the Vultures (Fig. 58), a monument from Early Dynastic Girsu, where we know that a class of menial workers was called ‘blind’, and worked in temple orchards.

It is only in first millennium Assyria that writing consistently matches the brutality displayed by the art. The Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BC) campaigned in Palestine in 701 BC, and the reliefs depicting the siege and conquest of Lachish on this campaign in room XXXVI of his palace at Nineveh portray prisoners being tortured, impaled and executed. The Assyrian scribes normally write about these practices with gusto, but in this particular case, they were silent. For them, the capture of Lachish was seemingly too insignificant to warrant mention in the written account of the campaign in Sennacherib’s annals, yet his interior decorators considered it so important that they dedicated an entire room of his palace to reliefs illustrating just this event. What value Sennacherib himself attached to this particular victory we shall never know.

A final example, among many more, of the disjunction between the written and the figural, this time on the same surface, is provided by the ceremonial representation (Fig. 59) from the throne room of the great ninth-century Assyrian ruler Aššurnasirpal II (883–859), whose palace at Kalkhu – modern Nimrud – was the mother of all Assyrian bas-relief decoration. Note first the disposition of the inscription, which appears as a vague band superimposed on the relief, actually cutting into it, as if the relief were a blank surface that existed for no other purpose. The only compromise the inscription makes with the images is that it spares their faces. The content of the inscription is equally indifferent to the images. It recites Aššurnasirpal’s titles and epithets, summarizes his conquests and recounts his settlement of Kalkhu and the building of his palace there. But there is no mention of the tree, or the winged disk, or the winged men, or what those winged men are doing, or what the king, doubled, might be doing here. The complete image is repeated once again in the throne room, but elements of it occur over and over

is also attested in the so-called Royal Correspondence of Ur (P. Michalowski, forthcoming; see, for now, http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.3.1.02#).

63. Some scholars deny that the term should be taken literally (see J. Bauer in Attinger and Wäfler, Mesopotamia (n. 13 above), p. 537), but the imagery and the Shusin inscription are compelling evidence that it should be.
65. J. Russell, Sennacherib's Palace without Rival at Nineveh, Chicago, 1991, pp. 252–7; at first attributes the discrepancy to the fact ‘that Sennacherib has taken advantage of the strengths of two greatly different narrative media’, but in the subsequent discussion shifts from the king himself to artists’ strategies and ways of telling. The complete absence of Lachish in the annals, however, remains unexplained.
66. A. Grayson, Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC, I, Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Period 2, Toronto, 1991, A.0.101.23. In the words of J. Russell, The Writing on the Wall, Winona Lake, 1999, p. 213: ‘Even though this text is carved beside or across every sculptured slab in the palace, its content has nothing to do with the visual imagery.’
throughout the palace, as does the inscription, but having gone through the entire palace and even through an entire library of Assyrian texts, with few exceptions, we will not find answers to our questions about this scene, most of which remain the subject of current scholarly controversy.\textsuperscript{67}

The finest flowering of both art and writing in Mesopotamia arguably occurred in the late Assyrian Empire of the 9th–7th centuries BC, but the two seemingly have little to do with one another.\textsuperscript{68} There is an odd exception, however, when Mesopotamians once again attempted to represent language pictographically, as did their forebears over two millennia earlier. On prisms recounting his rebuilding of Babylon, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) tells us that he made foundation documents of various metals, stones and clay, and, he continues, ‘I incised upon them constellations equivalent to the writing of my name.’\textsuperscript{69} And indeed, on the ends of the clay prisms and on the top of a black stone with a shorter version of the inscription, are a series of images (Fig. 60) that have been taken to represent logograms composing Esarhaddon’s name and a title or epithet, just as a similar series of images on glazed bricks from the capital of Sargon II (721–705 BC) at Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad) have been taken to represent that king’s name.\textsuperscript{70}

I will not discuss the various proposed readings of these pictographs. My guess is that in using the word \textit{lamāšu}, ‘just onstellation’, to describe them,\textsuperscript{71} Esarhaddon


\textsuperscript{68} For a coming together of written account and image in the longer epigraphs of Ashurbanipal, see Russell, \textit{Writing} (n. 66 above), p. 216.


\textsuperscript{71} I do not follow Finkel and Reade, ‘Hieroglyphs’ (n. 69 above), p. 258, who understand the word as ‘counterpart’, following an argument of Landsberger and Kinnier Wilson, an argument belied by the
meant that just as a lion or a bull represents a configuration of stars in a way that is not immediately obvious but can be learned and then seen, so these images represent the elements of his name and titles in ways that are neither obvious nor entirely arbitrary. Finkel and Reade were certainly correct to link this pictography to increasing Assyrian contact with Egypt, but these images are neither Egyptian hieroglyphs nor are they a reversion to the pictographic origins of cuneiform signs, which had been largely forgotten. This Assyrian pictography seems to be based on a complete misunderstanding of how Egyptian writing works. The Assyrians, misled by the pictographic appearance of hieroglyphs, thought the Egyptians used pictures to represent words and concepts, when, in reality, the Egyptian writing system was mainly phonetic, as was the Assyrian’s own cuneiform. Thus, the Assyrians provide the first example of that fundamental misunderstanding of Egyptian writing that persisted and proliferated in classical and later European sources until it was finally dispelled by Champollion’s decipherment in the 19th century AD.

Leaving aside this Assyrian hieroglyphic aberration, we can say that in Mesopotamia, writing and narrative art were siblings born of the first urban complex society, but developed separately almost from the beginning, even if serving the same powers and promoting the same ideology. Each develops its own corpus of representations, corpora that can sometimes overlap, but remain nevertheless incongruent.
Fig. 39. Ancient Mesopotamia: Chronology

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<tr>
<th>Date BC</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3400</td>
<td>Proto-literate</td>
<td>Cylinder seals, clay bullae with tokens; numerical tablets; Uruk Vase</td>
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<tr>
<td>3200</td>
<td>(= Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr)</td>
<td>Earliest archaic texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>3000</td>
<td>Early Dynastic A</td>
<td>Mature archaic texts</td>
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<td>2800</td>
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<td>Ushumgal Stela; archaic texts and sealings from Ur</td>
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<tr>
<td>2600</td>
<td>Early Dynastic B</td>
<td>Texts from Fara and Abu Salabikh</td>
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<td>2400</td>
<td>Sargonic</td>
<td>Stela of the Vultures; Ebla tablets</td>
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<tr>
<td>2200</td>
<td>(= Old Akkadian)</td>
<td>Sargonic of Akkade</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Ur III</td>
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<td>1800</td>
<td>Old Babylonian</td>
<td>Dadusha of Eshnuna</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hammurabi of Babylon</td>
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<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>Middle Babylonian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>Middle Assyrian (Amarna Period)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>Neo-Assyrian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 40. Greater Mesopotamia (by K. Wagensoner, based on cartography by M. Sauvage).
Fig. 42. Uruk Vase, partially restored. Proto-literate period. Iraq Museum, Baghdad. After E. Heinrich, *Kleinfunde aus den archaischen Tempelschichten in Uruk*, Berlin, 1936, pl. 3.

Fig. 41. Uruk Mask. Proto-literate period. Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

Fig. 43. Uruk Lion Hunt Stela. Proto-literate period. Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

a) b)

Fig. 45. a) Bulla with enclosed tokens, and b) impressed numerical tablet. Both Proto-literate period. Copyright: Musée du Louvre/Chuzeville.

![Figure 46. Early archaic tablet.](image)

Fig. 48. The archaic forms of the signs a) AK and b) SANGA. Courtesy Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (cdli.ucla.edu).

![Figure 48. The archaic forms of the signs](image)

Fig. 47. The Development of Cuneiform Writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Archaic Uruk ca. 3000 BC</th>
<th>Lagash ca. 2400 BC</th>
<th>Neo-Assyrian ca. 700 BC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SAC</td>
<td>“head, person”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>KA</td>
<td>“mouth”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>GI,</td>
<td>“to eat, feed,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>provide radiation”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>EME</td>
<td>“tongue”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>DU</td>
<td>“to go”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UDU</td>
<td>“sheep (and goats)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>UD,</td>
<td>“sheep (and goats)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>GUD</td>
<td>“bull”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>GI</td>
<td>“reed, to render,”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“deliver”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>SAR</td>
<td>“plant, to write”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 47. The Development of Cuneiform Writing.
Fig. 49. Uruk Vase (Fig. 42 above) rollout with archaic signs (see p. 72). Composed by V. Hall.


Fig. 51. The Uruk Vase (Fig. 42 above), detail. After E. Heinrich, *Kleinfunde aus den archaischen Tempelschichten in Uruk*, Berlin, 1936, pl. 38.
Fig. 52. The Narmer palette, ca 3000 BC. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo: Henri Frankfort Bequest, Warburg Institute.

Fig. 53. Blau 'plaque' or 'scraper' (ca. 2900 BC). Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum.
Fig. 54. Ushumgal Stela (ca 2750 BC). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, funds from various donors, 1958 (58.29). Copyright: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 56. Jemdet Nasr Cities Sealing: a) photo and b) drawing of sealing (above) and beginning of archaic Cities List (below). Photo courtesy The Ashmolean Museum; drawing with Cities List courtesy R. Englund (see R. Englund, Archaic Administrative Texts from Uruk, The Early Campaigns, Archaische Texte aus Uruk 5, Berlin, 1994, p. 93).
Fig. 57. Sealings from Ur with city names (ca. 2800 BC). After L. Legrain, *Archaic Seal Impressions*, Ur Excavations 3, London and Philadelphia, 1936, pl. 21.
Fig. 58. Stela of the Vultures. Girsu, ca. 2400 BC. Copyright: Musée du Louvre.
Fig. 59. Throne room relief from Kalkhu palace of Aššurnasirpal II (883–859 BC). Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum London.

Fig. 60. ‘Black Stone’ of Esarhaddon, from Babylon (680–669 BC). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.