

**RELIGION AND POWER**  
**DIVINE KINGSHIP IN THE**  
**ANCIENT WORLD AND BEYOND**

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*Cover Illustration*

King Naram-Sin of Akkad in horned tiara near a mountain summit, with soldiers. Rose limestone stele  
(2230 B.C.E.). Originally from Mesopotamia, found in Susa, Iran. 200 × 105 cm.

Photo credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Louvre, Paris, France

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## DIVINE KINGSHIP IN MESOPOTAMIA, A FLEETING PHENOMENON

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Not long after the middle of the third millennium B.C., Eanatum, ruler<sup>1</sup> of Lagash, whose realm in Sumer extended from Girsu southeastward through Lagash and Nijen (Nina) to Guaba on the Persian Gulf, was portrayed in the text of his famous Stele of the Vultures as sired, suckled, named, and appointed king by the gods, a superman who measured over nine feet at birth.<sup>2</sup> Not long before the middle of the first millennium B.C., Ashurbanipal, king of an Assyrian empire that stretched from Iran to Egypt, was, we are told, suckled at the four breasts of Ishtar of Nineveh.<sup>3</sup> Neither ruler, however, claimed divinity in his own right; both were content, as were the vast majority of Mesopotamian sovereigns, to be mediators between their subjects and the gods. As several contributors have noted, kingship in Mesopotamia was always sacred, but only rarely divine.

The first Mesopotamian ruler to be deified was Naramsin of Akkade, sometime after the middle of the twenty-third century B.C., but the practice sputtered out under his son,<sup>4</sup> only to be revived in the twenty-first century B.C. by the second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III). It continued under his successors, and the successor dynasty of Isin as well as peripheral successor dynasts, sporadically and with diminishing force through the time of Rimsin and Hammurabi (see Michalowski and Reichel, this volume, for details). Three important questions arise with regard to this phenomenon:

1. What impelled Naramsin and Shulgi to break with the traditional model of kingship and become gods?
2. How did divine kingship differ from traditional kingship and traditional divinity?
3. Why was divine kingship such a fleeting phenomenon in the millennia-long history of ancient Mesopotamia?

Addressing the first question, both Michalowski and Winter stress that unlike kings in Egypt, Mesopotamian kings were not inherently divine. Rather, divine kingship in Mesopotamia was a historically contingent phenomenon. So far, so good, but when it comes to defining what the specific contingencies may have been in each case, our results tend to be rather banal or, if more specific, shots in the dark. As Michalowski points out, our sole native explanation of king becoming god comes from Naramsin's Bassetki inscription, where we are told that "his city" requested that the major deities make him a god because "he secured the foundations of his city in times of trouble," and that a temple was built for him in the city Akkade. Scholars assume that the "times of trouble" refers to the Great Rebellion against Naramsin, when armies

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<sup>1</sup> I subscribe fully to Michalowski's assertion above that *en*, *lugal*, and *ensí* are "just different local words for" ruler, used at Uruk, Ur, and Lagash respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Frayne 2007: 129f.

<sup>3</sup> Livingstone 1997: 476.

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<sup>4</sup> Michalowski states that the son "did not aspire to divine status," but immediately provides evidence to the contrary. Our sources' testimony regarding Sharkalisharri's divine kingship is ambivalent, as he himself may have been.

of both southern and northern Babylonia were arrayed against Akkadian forces, and Naramsin emerged victorious only after chasing his foes over the entire Mesopotamian landscape, as far as the Jebel Bishri in Syria.<sup>5</sup> Yet we cannot probe more deeply, since, as Michalowski tells us, the chronology of Naramsin's reign is so uncertain. The most we can do is point to a series of innovations in his reign and count his deification as another.<sup>6</sup> To say that it is historically determined, while certainly the case, is begging the question.

Naramsin is also the only king to be represented with the horned crown of a deity, both on the justly famous stele that bears his name,<sup>7</sup> and on a spectacular — if genuine — unprovenanced stone mold.<sup>8</sup> The former shows Naramsin triumphant over enemies in mountainous terrain, and the latter portrays the king seated with Ishtar, holding a ring retaining nose ropes attached to two tribute-bearing mountain gods, and two bound prisoners, each standing on an architectonic pedestal set against a stylized mountain. Both representations, then, commemorate victories in the eastern mountains, not the defeat of Babylonian rebels. The horned crown is the visual analogue of the divine determinative that precedes the names of gods in Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform,<sup>9</sup> and that determinative is preposed to Naramsin's name on the stele's inscription. But the determinative is absent in the Bassetki inscription,<sup>10</sup> as well as in several other inscriptions that mention the defeat of the Great Rebellion.<sup>11</sup> It has been restored for the inscription on the Pir Hüseyin stele,<sup>12</sup> where, however, Naramsin is not wearing a horned crown. If the restoration is correct, we can reconstruct a process whereby the deification explicitly set forth in the Bassetki inscription was initially not manifest in visual or inscriptional representations, then appeared first in inscriptions with the use of the divine determinative (Pir Hüseyin) and only later in visual imagery (the horned crown on the stele and mold). The horned crown thus is possibly a considerably later component of Naramsin's representation as god, which would explain why our only two examples of its use are on monuments that do not refer to the original motivation for his deification.

Shulgi became a god by the middle of his long reign, but no explicit justification of this transformation has survived. As with Naramsin, his deification is just one of many innovations associated with his rule, and specifically with its midpoint.<sup>13</sup> As Michalowski tells us, the year names of Shulgi's first twenty years are primarily concerned with cultic matters, but from his twenty-first year on, we hear mainly about military expeditions. This suggests that after two relatively peaceful decades, Shulgi had to mount a vigorous two-decade long response to external threats. If his deification was one response to these threats, then, like Naramsin, and as Michalowski suggests, Shulgi was proclaimed divine not as the culmination of a successful reign, but in the wake of near fatal collapse. In both cases, what may have been portrayed as a reward for valiant defense of the homeland might really have been part of an attempt to reconstitute a more robust notion of kingship, or, in Michalowski's terms, a reinvention of the state. Unfortunately, we have no preserved commemorative monuments of Shulgi or of his deified

<sup>5</sup> Wilcke 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Westenholz 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See the references given by Winter, and her fig. 1.

<sup>8</sup> That the stele is a masterpiece should not blind us to the fact that other Naramsin monuments may have been more ordinary, as is his fragmentary monument from Pir Hüseyin. The mold (Hansen 2002) reminds us of the great difficulties in authenticating unique unprovenanced

works, and how much information is lost when objects are looted rather than properly excavated.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Winter, above.

<sup>10</sup> Frayne 1993: E2.1.4.10.

<sup>11</sup> Frayne 1993: 116.

<sup>12</sup> Frayne 1993: E2.1.4.24.

<sup>13</sup> Sallaberger 1999; Michalowski, above.

successors, so we can't say if divine kingship was expressed visually in the Ur III period by portraying the ruler wearing a horned crown.<sup>14</sup>

What were the perks of divine kings? What difference did it make in how the ruler perceived his role vis-à-vis his subjects, and how those subjects perceived and behaved toward the ruler? Here, on the one hand, we can cite the evidence for an actual royal cult, complete with temple, discussed most thoroughly by Reichel, or the effusive hymns written to deified kings, or Shulgi's ascent to heaven following his death, or the possibility — joining danger to pleasure — of bedding the goddess Inana/Ishtar in the sacred marriage. On the other hand, Selz's discussion of the category "god" in ancient Mesopotamia is most useful. Within that category, the divine king is hardly the prototype that springs to mind. Rather, and despite our great distance from the ancients in every respect, it is safe to say that a Babylonian would sooner think of one of the great gods or perhaps a personal god as the prototypical member of the category. In that category's hierarchy, the divine king would probably rank higher than most of the deified objects and offices mentioned by Selz, but it is not certain where among the lesser deities he might rank, or even if he would rank above, say, the emblem of an important god.

The changes wrought by deification of the ruler seem purely ideological, designed to bolster the notion of king as god, but changing the practice of kingship little if at all. The strong ruler gained no additional power from his godship, so it seems, nor was a weak ruler like Ibbisin protected by it. After the middle of the second millennium, there were great and mighty kings in Mesopotamia whose power was in no way constrained by their ordinary mortality. The two examples in the first paragraph of this response bracket the enormous chronological range of the Mesopotamian rulers who claimed participation in some aspect of the divine without actually proclaiming themselves god. Here we must invoke Selz's fuzzy category boundaries: the king is not god but partakes of the divine, and is human, but without many of the limitations of the prototypical human being.

Winter has pointed out that even the Stele of Naramsin expresses a certain ambivalence toward royal divinity,<sup>15</sup> and we might say that the ascription of near-divine qualities and abilities to kings who are not deified expresses a certain ambivalence toward royal mortality. Yet despite this latter ambivalence, none of the great and powerful rulers of Mesopotamia after the time of Hammurabi of Babylon became god. Ashurbanipal and Nebuchadnezzar ruled empires of roughly comparable size, yet, as Ehrenberg emphasizes, both the written and visual manifestations of their kingship could not be more different. If we can understand that Neo-Babylonian monarchs, who portray themselves as humble servants of the gods, would be very unlikely to consider self-deification, the resistance of the Neo-Assyrian kings, who styled themselves both visually and in writing as mighty warriors and deputies of the gods, is more difficult to comprehend.

<sup>14</sup> Canephore figurines of Ur III rulers would not be appropriate vehicles for displaying the horned crown, and other statuettes are acephalous. That large Ur III narrative commemorative monuments once existed is certain from the descriptions accompanying the Old Babylonian copies of inscriptions on the monuments of Shusin (Frayne 1997: E3/2.1.4.1–9). The statue of the Ur III contemporary Puzur-Ishtar of Mari seems to show him wearing a horned crown, but the inscription on the statue does not prepose the divine determinative to his name (Frayne 1997: E3/2.4.5). If this practice — horned crown without divine determinative — is modeled on the practice of the rulers of Ur, they, too, must have been portrayed

horned. But unlike the rulers of Ur, Puzur-Ishtar does not use the divine determinative, so that the practice on this statue is opposite to that on Naramsin's Pir Hüseyin monument, described above (but cf. Blocher 1999, who argues that Puzur-Ishtar's horns were added only in the Neo-Babylonian period).

<sup>15</sup> Similar ambivalence appears on the stone mold, where, facing the goddess Ishtar, Naramsin in horned crown sits holding a ring to which are tethered defeated enemies and their gods. Ishtar holds the wrist of the hand in which Naramsin holds the ring, and the ropes pass from the ring through the goddess's other hand before reaching the captives.

Resistance to transgressing the fuzzy boundary between human and divine is not a marker of first-millennium kingship only. It had been there from the beginning — so, Eanatum, super-sized divine progeny, remained a mortal — was responsible for the detectable ambivalence toward divine kingship during the relatively short period of experimentation with the idea, and led to its permanent demise thereafter, persisting through regimes and dynasties with varied conceptions of kingship. We can't say much more, except that since divine kingship cross-culturally seems to be the exception rather than the rule, there could well be some basic human cognitive resistance to pushing any living mortal fully into the category of the divine.

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