

**LUGALZAGESI IN THE SHUSHGAL NET: EARLY DYNASTIC
ICONOGRAPHY OF KINGSHIP IN THE SARGONIC PERIOD**

Despite the radically different art of some Classical Sargonic (spanning the reigns of Naram-Sin and Sharkalisharri) artifacts, the Sargonic period retained significant amounts of Early Dynastic (ED) iconography. Some of the most enduring aspects of the civilization of Ancient Mesopotamia are its symbolic expressions of kingship and royal authority. From the semi-legendary Gilgamesh to Hammurabi, the kings of Mesopotamia provided their subjects (and occasionally their political neighbors) with ideals of authority that other rulers sought to emulate and, in many cases, surpass. Many motifs that were utilized consistently can clearly be visualized from textual sources, especially royal inscriptions from stela, temple offerings and ceremonial plaques. However, they can also be traced through the artistic depictions of kings and their actions. One of the symbols that signaled royal authority was the Shushgal Net, first appearing (as far as we know) in Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures.¹ One way that Sargon maintained ED traditions of kingship was by utilizing motifs that were well known in the region.

The Vulture Stele of Eannatum, king of Lagash, one of the most striking ED royal monuments, is echoed heavily in one of Sargon's most important artifacts - the remnants of his own stele found at Susa. The parallels between these two stela highlight Sargon's (and his successors) heavy ED influence. By examining the Sargonic monuments utilizing this motif, as well as the texts accompanying the usage of these images, a consistent yet evolving tradition of symbolizing royal authority can be traced in Mesopotamia from the Early Dynastic through Sargonic periods.

Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures is an excellent example of royal

¹ For a bibliography of this artifact and its inscription, see Frayne D., *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Early Periods Volume I: Presargonic Period (2700-2350 BC)*, Toronto, 2008, pp. 126-140.

dominance in the ED period.² In the 25th century BCE, a series of border disputes between the city-states of Umma and Lagash saw the brief rise of the Lagashite ruler, Eannatum, to become a regional potentate in approximately 2450.³ After defeating Umma soundly, Eannatum repelled several attacks and pushed into territories of other city-states that opposed him, even going so far as to campaign in Elam and style himself a “king of Kish” in one inscription.⁴ It was during this period when Eannatum set up the “Stele of the Vultures” to commemorate his initial victory over his greatest rival, Umma, during the prolonged Umma versus Lagash border dispute⁵.

The Vulture Stele contains the first use of the Shushgal Net motif, both in the text and in the depiction. The king can be seen leading his army into battle. In the upper register, Eannatum is on foot, while in the second register he is in a chariot. In this depiction, the Lagashite army is arrayed in a shield-wall-like formation behind the king. Eannatum’s head is clean shaven, as are all the other troops. On the other side of the stele, vultures are picking at the corpses of the Ummaite soldiers – a display of what happens to those who oppose the king. Also pictured is the patron deity of Lagash, Ningirsu, holding the captured Ummaite forces in a “Shushgal Net,” bashing the king of Umma (also clean shaven) on the head with a mace (Figure 1). The Ummaite king is indistinguishable from the rest of his soldiers here. Though much of the stele is missing, it is clear from what



Figure 1. The Shushgal Net on the Vulture Stele, showing Ningirsu smiting the king of Umma. Image courtesy of http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4d/Stele_of_Vulture_s_2.jpg

² Magid G., Sumerian Early Dynastic Royal Inscriptions, in *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation*, edited by Chavalas M. W., 4-16. Oxford, 2006, p. 7.

³ Van de Mieroop M., *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323*, Oxford, 2007, p. 41.

⁴ Magid G., Sumerian Early Dynastic Royal Inscriptions, p. 8.

⁵ For an in depth look at the importance of the Vulture Stele in the development of Mesopotamian depictions of historical events, see Winter I., *After the Battle is Over: The “Stele of the Vultures” and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East*, Washington, 1985.

remains that Eannatum intended for it to represent his victory over his rival against the odds, since apparently, his victory brought the force of many other Mesopotamian cities to bear on Lagash. Eannatum is shown as a hero, leading troops fearlessly at the front of his army. The Ummaites are shown to be completely powerless in the face of Eannatum since Lagash had the will of their god Ningirsu on their side, as illustrated by the "Shushgal" Net motif. Though Eannatum does show himself to be a great military leader, he gives Ningirsu the credit for the victory, with the god being the one to smite the captured king. Thus the Shushgal Net is not only a powerful image on its own, but it is also associated with Eannatum's more straightforward depictions of his unmatched power. It was important for him to include this scene out of a sense of piety and gratitude to Ningirsu for his divine assistance in the battle.



Figure 2. Reconstruction of Sargon's Shushgal Net motif, by Nigro. Note Lugalzagesi's (?) hair. Image from <http://sumerianshakespeare.com/media/2bb5ecf2c805583affff820ffeffe415.jpg>

Though Eannatum's political successes were short-lived, his efforts were apparently not forgotten, as shown by the fragments of a victory stele of Sargon. Sargon's stele is heavily damaged and the vast majority is missing, but the little of it that remains is telling of the influence of late Early Dynastic iconography. Sargon is depicted leading his army on foot, just like Eannatum. There are significant differences: first, the soldier directly behind Sargon is holding a parasol above the king, and the soldiers are armed with axes rather than spears (thus in a more loose formation than a shield-wall).⁶ Sargon's alterations to the Shushgal Net motif are also important. Though this fragment is highly damaged, Nigro reconstructs (Figure 2) from the remaining portion that the figure holding the captured enemies in the net is none other than Sargon himself, rather than a specific patron deity (which in the case of Akkad would have been Ilaba).⁷ In this regard, Sargon uses the

⁶ Nigro L., *The Two Steles of Sargon: Iconology and Visual Propaganda at the Beginning of Royal Akkadian Relief*, Iraq, vol. 60, 1998, p. 92.

⁷Ibid., p. 91.

same motif, but alters it to suit his own personal ideology. Rather than granting credit for the smiting of his foes to a god, he takes the martial glory for himself as a sort of offering to the Warlike Ishtar, who is seated in front of this action.⁸ Sargon is thus emulating ED rulers very closely in the stele, with similar scenes of leading his marching army and the Net, but he also injects his own unique concepts into the stele by inserting himself into the role that had been reserved for the city-god. Though Sargon does show his piety by performing this act in front of Ishtar, he wants himself to be the one smiting his mortal opponents rather than delegating credit to divine assistance for his achievements on the battlefield. Also critical is the image of the king in the Net being vanquished by Sargon. This king is probably Lugalzagesi.⁹ He is shown as distinct from his troops, with his long hair hanging down. Thus the Shushgal Net evolved to be even more personal for Sargon than it had been for Eannatum, with the various alterations adding to the Akkadian king's individual prestige.

The case of these monuments to royal achievements is important to seeing the development of iconography and symbolism in the mid-third millennium. Kings were becoming more overt in their depictions of military acts, and this was apparent both in the textual and artistic record. Though the Shushgal Net is not attested after Sargon's Victory Stele, the fact that Sargon would look back to Eannatum for iconography shows how much continuity and conservatism there was in Mesopotamian symbolism and kingship. At its core, the imagery utilized in these depictions convey the same message as in the ED, and shows Sargon's (and perhaps his successors?) indebtedness to past kings rather than an inclination to revolutionize kingship. It is also important for the fact that despite being "forgotten" in the historical literary tradition, ED royal ideology remained very important into the Sargonic period. Though many of their names may have been lost in time, the royal ideology and iconography of ED kings remained strong well into the Sargonic period, illustrating the inseparable nature of the two periods. Rather than being an unprecedented revolutionary dynasty in the history of Mesopotamia, Sargon and his successors may have been more similar ideologically to ED monarchs than previously thought.

⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

⁹ Nigro L., *The Two Steles of Sargon*, p. 87.

**ՆՇԱՆ ԹՈՄԱՍ ՔՍԵՔԵՐ
(ԵՊՀ)**

**ԼՈՒԳԱԼԶԱԳԵՍԻՆ «ՇՈՒՇԳԱԼ» ՑԱՆՅՈՒՄ. ՎԱՂ ԴԻՆԱՍՏԻԱԿԱՆ
ՊԱՏԿԵՐԱԳՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՍԱՐԳՈՆՅԱՆ ՀԱՐՍՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԺԱՄԱՆԱԿԱՇՐՁԱՆՈՒՄ**

Ուսումնասիրողները գտնում են, որ Միջագետքում կայսրության և իմպերիալիզմի հիմքերը դրվել են Սարգոնի ու նրա հետնորդների (Ք.ա. 2350-2250 թթ.) կողմից՝ հիմնվելով վերջիններիս և Վաղ Դինաստիական դարաշրջանի (Early Dynastic Period Ք.ա. 2900-2350 թթ.) տիրակալների գաղափարական և պատկերագրական տարբերությունների վրա: Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրության են ենթարկվում Վաղ դինաստիական դարաշրջանի և Սարգոնյան հարստության ժամանակաշրջաններից մեզ հասած «Շուշգալ» ցանցերի պատկերներն ու գրությունը: Շոշից գտնված Սարգոնի «Շուշգալ» ցանցի պատկերը, թերևս, լավագույն փաստն է, որն ապացուցում է Վաղ դինաստիաների ժամանակաշրջանի և Սարգոնյան դինաստիայի միջև գաղափարական և պատկերագրական ժառանգականությունը: