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*Foundation figure of Ur-Namma*

Mesopotamia, land of Sumer, late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.

Copper alloy, solid-cast

27.6 x 8.8 x 5.2 cm

FGA-ARCH-PO-0024

**Provenance**

Former collection Walter Vahldieck (1902-1992), Berlin, acquired in 1940

Sold in 2001 at Jeschke, Greve & Hauff, Berlin, 05-08.11.2001, lot n° 4108

Then private collection

Acquired at Christie's, New York, 07.12.2006, lot n° 47

**Previous publications**

Jean-Luc CHAPPAZ, *Corps et esprits. Regards croisés sur la Méditerranée antique*, exhibition catalogue [Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire, 30.01-27.04.2014], Milan, 5 Continents Éditions, 2014, p. 119, n° 78.

Frédéric MOUGENOT, Myriame MOREL-DELEDALLE *et al.*, *Migrations divines*, exhibition catalogue [Marseille, MuCEM, 24.06-16.11.2015], Arles, Actes Sud, 2015, p. 17, n° 2.



## The first legislator in history

### A foundation figure of king Ur-Namma

A long time ago, when a king built a palace or a temple, he would seize the opportunity to leave his name and image in the foundations of the structure, as a reminder for all eternity of his outstanding qualities and the strength of the bonds he had tied with gods. The object presented here comes from the remote land of Sumer, and it is one of the most ancient pieces of the collection, as it dates back to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. This oriental king proudly carrying a basket above his head raises two questions: what entices kings to build monuments? Which qualities did Mesopotamians expect from a good king?

#### *Ur-Namma, king of Sumer and Akkad*

Is it a man or a peg? Both! This piece is both the figure of a standing man, depicted bare-chested and with his legs sheathed in a loincloth, and an anchorage tool with its pointed end (*fig. 1 and 2*). Its two raised arms hold above his head a circular basket filled to the top and placed over a small round cushion. With his beardless and clean-shaven head, this basket carrier has defied time. His loincloth is engraved with the following cuneiform inscription in Sumerian language:

“To Inanna the lady of Eanna, his lady, Ur-Namma the mighty king, King of Ur, King of Sumer and Akkad, her temple he built, to its place he restored it”.

All is said in just a few signs: this king is Ur-Namma (or Ur-Nammu, the “man of (the goddess) Namma”), who ruled the land of Sumer and Akkad, which correspond to modern Iraq and Syria, towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC<sup>1</sup>. He built and restored the Eanna, the temple of Inanna in Uruk. Goddess of love and war, Inanna was a prominent deity, also known as Ishtar and later Astarte. She was the main goddess in Mesopotamia.

This solid-cast object, made in a mould, has many twins, notably preserved at the Metropolitan Museum and the British Museum, all coming from the same temple: the Eanna of Uruk<sup>2</sup>. This 27 cm high figure is a masterpiece of dexterity, refinement and balance, a true statement of the king’s power, piety and ambitions.

#### *Favoured by the gods*

<sup>1</sup> Dates of reign: 2112–2095 (middle chronology) or 2047–2030 (lower chronology): for these questions, see AVERBECK, “Temple Building among the Sumerians”, p. 4 with bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 47.49; British Museum, Inv. 113896.



His reign marks the beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur, an era described as a “Sumerian renaissance”. During this brilliant period of 66 years, Sumer and its venerable cities, such as Ur and Uruk, recovered their pre-eminence in Mesopotamia. A peaceful king, Ur-Namma did his best to restore the prosperity of his land while protecting his weakest subjects; Ur-Namma considered himself as favoured by the gods, he was a chosen one.<sup>3</sup> In a royal hymn, he states about himself: “Utu (god of the sun and of justice) has placed the [correct] word in my mouth”<sup>4</sup>.

If he entered history as the very first legislator (with the first legal code of history) and as an administrator (he initiated the first land register), archaeological data bear witness to his tireless building activity. Like other Mesopotamian kings before and after him, Ur-Namma erected a city wall, palaces and the first ziggurats, and excavated irrigation canals, making good use of the naturally wealthy “Fertile Crescent”. Above all, he built temples devoted to several deities, over the entire area of his kingdom, notably in Ur, Uruk, Nippur, Eridu and Larsa (*fig. 3*). In late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia, building was indeed a royal prerogative, a jealously guarded privilege, which the former *ensi* or local governors no longer enjoyed.

### *The joy of being a builder*

Since the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, Near Eastern kings have left many accounts related to the construction of their palaces and temples, as the planning of the territory conquered from the desert was a marker of civilization. Moreover, a builder king, promoting civilization, was a blessed ruler;<sup>5</sup> and above all a king who was in good terms with the divine world, and this harmony was a warrant of prosperity for the people. In Mesopotamia, building a temple was not a royal idea but often an injunction from the gods, received by the king in his dreams<sup>6</sup>. Kings were actually obeying the architectural wishes of the gods.

Let us return to Ur-Namma: on a fragmentary monument from Ur, a very large limestone stela divided in registers, originally more than 3 m high<sup>7</sup>, the king is depicted adoring Nanna, god of the moon and his consort, the goddess Ningal (*fig. 4*). In the third register, a bearded god wearing a horned tiara (presumably Nanna) precedes the king carrying an entire kit of masonry tools on his

<sup>3</sup> Prologue of the code of Ur-Namma: SZLECHTER, “Le code d’Ur-Nammu”, p. 173-174.

<sup>4</sup> Paris, Musée du Louvre, “song of Ur-Nammu”, tablet Inv. AO 5378.

<sup>5</sup> LACKENBACHER, *Le palais sans rival*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> ROUX, *La Mésopotamie*, p. 151-152.

<sup>7</sup> Philadelphie, Penn Museum: PARROT, *Sumer*, p. 238; SPYCKET, *La statuaire*, p. 205; VORYS CANBY, “A Monumental Puzzle”; VORYS CANBY, *The “Ur-Nammu” Stela*.



noble shoulder, including a straw basket<sup>8</sup>. This image suggests that the construction project was actually initiated by the god, and that the king was only a subordinate. During its first building phases, this temple had to be firmly anchored to the ground, and the name of its builder proclaimed for all eternity, hence the term “foundation deposit”<sup>9</sup> used to describe a series of objects such as stamped bricks, pegs and other foundation figures which, engraved in their metal or baked clay flesh, display royal texts giving nearly every detail we need on their history.

### *Bricks and pegs buried in the ground*

Ur-Namma is also known as a peerless builder through epigraphic texts: first, baked bricks stamped with his name (like those preserved at the Metropolitan Museum and British Museum, *fig. 5*), which were meant to be placed in the foundations of the building; then, inscribed door lintels (*fig. 6*) and stone tablets claiming that the temple was devoted to a deity (at the British Museum, notably, *fig. 7*: here again, a dedication to Inanna). All of them were made of solid media so as to endure within structures made of mud-bricks, commemorating for ever – and for any successor who might carry out restoration works – that Ur-Namma had been the first to build or restore a temple, and thereby to serve and look after the gods.

Finally, there are the pegs and other figures: with their pointed end, they are also charged with magical power<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, they were placed in the strategic spots of official buildings, in sealed cases made of baked bricks<sup>11</sup>: foundations (where the building is in direct contact with soil), corners, thresholds and passages, all of them being transition points between two spaces, and therefore potentially dangerous.

### *The magical power of points and of writing*

Symbolically, the pointed end of the foundation pegs was fixing evil forces to the ground. Some of them were very simple, and made of baked clay (like one in our collections, devoted to the temple of the god Ningirsu by Gudea, a governor of the city-state of Lagash in earlier times, *fig. 8*), and others

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/251212>

<sup>9</sup> ELLIS, *Foundation Deposits*, p. 165; see also the additional precisions in ELLIS, “Temple Building in the Ancient Near East”, p. 439-443.

<sup>10</sup> PARROT, *Sumer*, p. 249-250.

<sup>11</sup> AVERBECK, “Temple Building among the Sumerians”, p. 9-10.



were shaped as a god on bended knee driving a large peg (*fig. 9*), or as a lying bull (*fig. 10*)<sup>12</sup>; after Gudea, these two types were abandoned and replaced by figures of the king carrying a basket<sup>13</sup>.

All of these objects were full of magical power, symbolically anchoring the building to the ground with all their strength. The presence of writing, forever uniting the name of the king with that of the deity, must have given some additional magical potency to the object. These artefacts were therefore extremely precious, and a recent research showed that some of them were even wrapped in cloth before being buried in the substructures<sup>14</sup>.

#### *A first brick made of pure clay*

This is why kings did not hesitate to have themselves depicted as foundation figures of builder kings carrying a basket of clay above their head, so as to produce the first brick (even much later, king Assurbanipal still used this kind of iconography, *fig. 11*). This was not just a random brick, it was the “brick of destiny” or “auspicious brick”<sup>15</sup>. The different phases of this process are known: from the dream sent by a deity to the laying of the first brick, including the drawing of the temple layout and the choice of clay. After tracing the temple plan, Gudea also produced the brick mould before looking for fine clay – devoid of pebbles, fine and soft, of a clear regular colour, sweet under the fingers – to make the first foundation brick, with all his heart, faith and royal energy. The king enriched the clay with fine oils, butter, honey and resin, before letting it dry<sup>16</sup>. It was a ceremonial, sacred operation which required the ritual purity of the king, and was performed along with prayers, sacrifices and libations celebrating the deities for whom the temple was built.

Immortalizing the king with a basket of clay above his head, just before he would make the first brick with it, equates *mutatis mutandis* to publishing the image of present day elected representatives laying the first stone of an official building. It was also a way of proclaiming that this king was a great king and that he honoured the gods.

#### *Tireless maintenance and restorations*

Mesopotamian architecture, which was made of modest media such as clay and reed from the shores of the Tigris and the Euphrates, was rather flimsy. Once removed from the mould, mud-bricks were simply dried in the sun and as a consequence, structures built with it required constant

<sup>12</sup> Musée du Louvre, from Girsu (Tello): PARROT, *Sumer*, p. 248, fig. 236; AVERBECK, “Temple Building among the Sumerians”, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> SPYCKET, *La statuaire*, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> THOMAS, “Restes textiles”, *pass*.

<sup>15</sup> AVERBECK, “Temple Building among the Sumerians”, p. 20-23 (with bibliography).

<sup>16</sup> AVERBECK, “Temple Building among the Sumerians”, p. 23.



maintenance and restoration works: plugging breaches and lifting up walls collapsing due to wind erosion. Since gods may desert a ruined temple and abandon their believers, royal restoration activities were also commemorated in the inscriptions placed on foundation bricks, figures and terra cotta pegs.

*Abandoned on the battlefield like a broken pitcher*

Of course, one should not consider this figure as a faithful portrait of Ur-Namma: the statuette was mostly conventional, as his successors Shulgi and Amar-Sin were depicted in the same way, with the same physical features, shaven head, bare-chested and legs wrapped in a loincloth, all of which recall the ritual purity required by the production of the first brick. It is an idealized image of the king: a pure king who built for his gods, his people and himself.

Ur-Namma passed away prematurely, after 18 years of reign, during an unidentified battle; he died and was abandoned on the battlefield “like a broken pitcher”<sup>17</sup>, as stated in a funerary song composed for him: going down to the Netherworld and bringing gifts for the gods welcoming him, he is then lamenting before these gods, who all seem to have forgotten the gifts he had given them in life<sup>18</sup>. All of them? Not quite! The goddess Inanna, whose temple at Uruk had been enriched by Ur-Namma, remembers him and, true to her hugely irascible tempers, destroys everything in her wrath,<sup>19</sup> probably angry to have lost her best mortal support. However, the legacy of Ur-Namma as a legislator enabled him to become a judge in the Netherworld, like the hero Gilgamesh. A kind token of appreciation, however posthumous!

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Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, September 2020

Translation Dr Pierre Meyrat

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<sup>17</sup> ROUX, *La Mésopotamie*, p. 153; KRAMER, “The Death of Ur-Nammu”, p. 118, l. 59.

<sup>18</sup> KRAMER, “The Death of Ur-Nammu”, p. 104 et p. 119, l. 155-164.

<sup>19</sup> KRAMER, “The Death of Ur-Nammu”, p. 111-112 et p. 120, l. 203-205.



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Les principales cités de l'Orient ancien au IIIe Millénaire avant J.-C.



Fig. 2

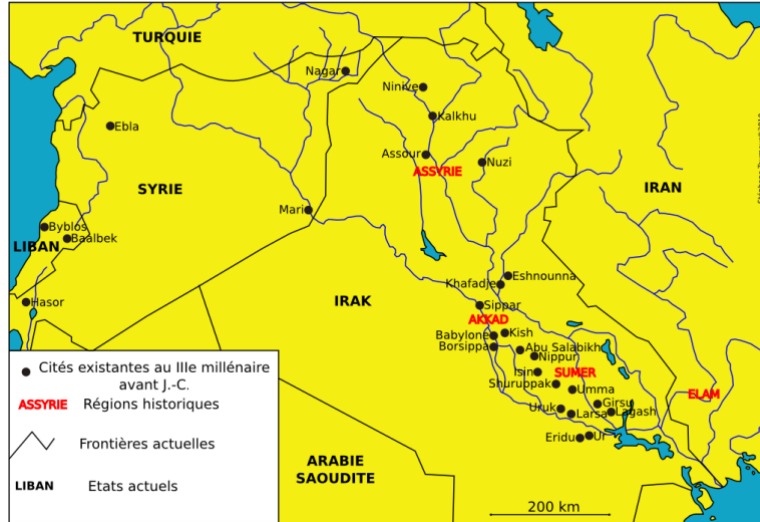


Fig. 3

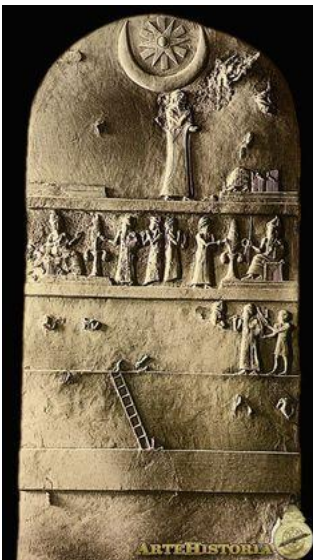


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8





Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11