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Research Paper

**Background Research for the Ararat Plain Southeast Archaeological Project
in Armenia**

**Dedicatory Statues in Southern Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic Period:
An Examination of Examples from Tell Asmar and Khafajah and
a Discussion on Stylistic Transition**

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Background

In the summer of 2023, I participated in the Ararat Plain Southeast Archeological Project (APSAP), which concentrates on understanding human life and mobility in the Vedi River valley, a tributary valley to the Ararat Plain south of Armenia's capital, Yerevan. The project focuses on the Late Bronze and Iron Ages (ca 1550 BCE – 300 CE) and the Medieval period (ca 1100 – 1400 CE). Our team excavated at the Vedi Fortress, the main site in the center of the Vedi River valley, with fortification walls that currently stand up to five meters tall, along with central defensive towers. These walls are likely dated to the Late Bronze and Iron Ages, but were reused in the Hellenistic and the Medieval periods. The excavation at the site has uncovered 7000 fragments of pottery vessels made during these time periods.

During my time on the project, I gained hands-on archaeological knowledge and skills in excavation, documentation, and conservation. Rotated in three different trenches, I unearthed pottery shreds, bones, and obsidian stones with trowels and brushes, sieved each bucket of spoil to retrieve missed-out findings, recorded the GPS coordinates of each context, helped with photographing the context for future Agisoft model building, and maintained the excavation journal. After heading back to the lab, I participated in washing, photographing, and scanning the findings, which lays the foundation for building an open online database in the future that fosters data analysis and research. Also, I contributed to recovering two sizable pottery jars with excavated pottery shreds from the main trench, engaging in numbering the pottery shreds, cleaning the edges with chemical solvents, determining their original positions on the vessel, and

reassembling them together by applying adhesives.

This research paper examines the dedicatory statues from Tell Asmar and Khafajah of the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900-2350 BCE) within the Neolithic Age (c. 7000-1700 BCE). Serving as background research for the APSAP project, this paper aims to further the understanding of previous archaeological excavation and findings in the Mesopotamia region of a time period earlier than our current project and, in turn, provide insight into the project's research and analysis with excavated pottery shreds.

Introduction

During the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900-2350 BCE), much of life in Southern Mesopotamian cities centered around their patron deities and dedicated temples (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). Since only a few who served the god's unique needs could access the central shrines of these temples, dedicatory statues that embody the essence of the donors gradually grew in abundance during this period (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003; Evans, 2014). Carved in different sizes and stone materials, these statues of both men and women are typically shown frontally, with enormous eyes and hands clasped at the chest or waist, expressing a readiness to communicate with the god and signifying a symbolic gesture sending prayer (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). Some are carved with inscription, stating the god's name and the donor's name and profession, who are usually elites (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003; Evans, 2014). Placed on benches or offering tables inside the cella, they secured the permanent presence of their donors' spirits in front of the resident deity, seeking benevolence and protection (Aruz & Wallenfels,

2003; Evans, 2012). Since these statues acquired sanctity after being dedicated, they would be deposited inside the temple when no longer in use, either buried beneath the temple floor, placed within the offering tables, or built into cultic installations such as altars (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003; Evans, 2012).

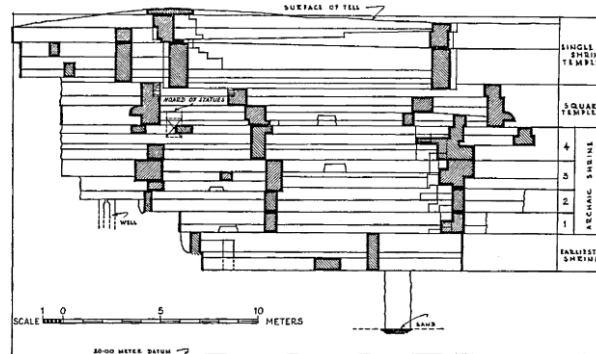
This essay will first examine dedicatory statue examples from two Southern Mesopotamia sites in the Early Dynastic period, including the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar and the Nintu Temple at Khafajah. When delving into each site, detailed analysis will include the archaeology context, formal analysis, and interpretations. Afterward, this essay will explore different scholarly views in the debate on the style of these dedicatory statues in the Early Dynastic period.

Hoard of dedicatory statues in Abu Temple, Tell Asmar (Early Dynastic I-II)

During the 1933-34 excavation season of the Iraq Expedition, the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago discovered a hoard of twelve statues in the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar in the Diyala region (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003; Evans, 2007). Since the temple was continuously in use and experienced constant rebuilding on top of previous debris, the excavators categorized four distinct building periods (Figure 1): Earliest Shrine, Archaic Shrine, Square Temple, and Single Shrine Temple (Frankfort, 1939; Evans, 2012). During Early Dynastic I-II, the Abu Temple was reconstructed following a square plan (Figure 2) with three sanctuaries, and the name “Square Temple” was given (Frankfort, 1939). Beneath the third floor level of Shrine II, the statues were found neatly piled in an oblong cavity and buried beside the altar, suggesting that they

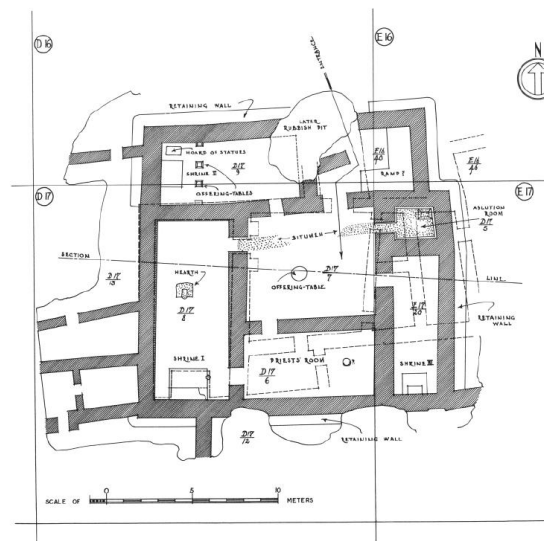
were placed with care and intention (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003; Frankfort, 1939).

Figure 1
West-East Section through the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar



Note. Source: (Frankfort, 1939)

Figure 2
Plan of the Square Temple building period of Abu Temple at Tell Asmar



Note. Source: (Evans, 2012)

Among the twelve statues in the Tell Asmar Hoard (Figure 3), ten are males, and two are females (Frankfort, 1939). These statues vary in size, with height spanning from 21 cm to 72 cm (Frankfort, 1939). They are also made from different stones, with eight from gypsum, two from limestone, and the smallest from alabaster (Frankfort, 1939). All statues are positioned frontally, which provides the gods and goddesses with a sense

of accessibility and communication (Evans, 2012). Except for the smallest kneeling figure, all the others are standing, with both hands clasped at their waists (Frankfort, 1939). Some hold a cup, while some grasp a branch or a flower, restoring a scene from the greatest feast (Frankfort, 1970). The most prominent facial features are their enormous eyes, with eyeballs of shells and irises of black limestones (except one with the iris of lapis lazuli) set in bitumen (Frankfort, 1939). Most male figures are shown with their long curly hair rendered in two symmetrical halves that fall on either side of a rectangular layered beard, while one figure is depicted as bald and clean-shaven. Both the hair and beard retain black pigment that shows traces of the original bitumen coloring (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). With their upper bodies lying bare, these male figures are sculpted with broad shoulders connecting rectangular arms, which contrast with the triangular torsos that taper to the waist. They are wearing cone-shaped skirts with a single row of fringe at the hem in the lower half of the body. The female statues are framed in oval faces, with their hair in a coil that wraps around the back of the heads. Although their bodies are shaped similarly to the male figures, they lack the expression of masculine strength nor the indication of feminine characteristics (Frankfort, 1939). With their right shoulder exposed, they wear double-folded garments that drape over their left shoulder and the loose end coming forward over the left wrist, hanging in front. Frankfort (1939) categorized the sculpting style of the hoard as the “abstract style.”

Figure 3

Hoard of dedicatory statues from Abu Temple, Tell Asmar



Note. Source: (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003)

According to Frankfort (1970), two statues represent divinities in the Tell Asmar Hoard, while others are the effigy of their human worshippers. He identified the tallest figure (Figure 4) as Abu, the god of fertility that resided in this temple, and the second tallest (Figure 5) as the mother goddess (Frankfort, 1970). They are distinguished from their worshippers in three aspects: by their larger sizes, by their unnaturally large eyes, and by the identifying emblems on the bases that they stand upon (Frankfort, 1970). Frankfort (1970) claimed that the carved image on the base of the god Abu is the lion-headed Imdugud, which attests to its divinity. Similarly, the mother goddess was determined through a tiny standing figure set into the base, which was understood as her son (Frankfort, 1970). However, later research from Evans (2012) argued that the two tallest statues represent neither divinities nor worshippers, but semi-divine, mythological beings, with affinities to those copper belted heroes with clasped hands from the Shara Temple at Tell Agrab or the copper nude female figure from Sin Temple V at Khafajah. He further proposed that the two figures resist a single fixed identity,

demonstrating a temple sculpture tradition that is newly emerging (Evans, 2012).

Figure 4

Tallest statue among Tell Asmar Hoard



Note. Source: (Frankfort, 1939)

Figure 5

Second tallest statue among Tell Asmar Hoard



Note. Source: (Frankfort, 1939)

Following his differentiation between the divinities and human worshippers, Frankfort (1970) thus interpreted the Tell Asmar Hoard as the crystallization of the most auspicious moment when man felt himself closest to the deities he served. After

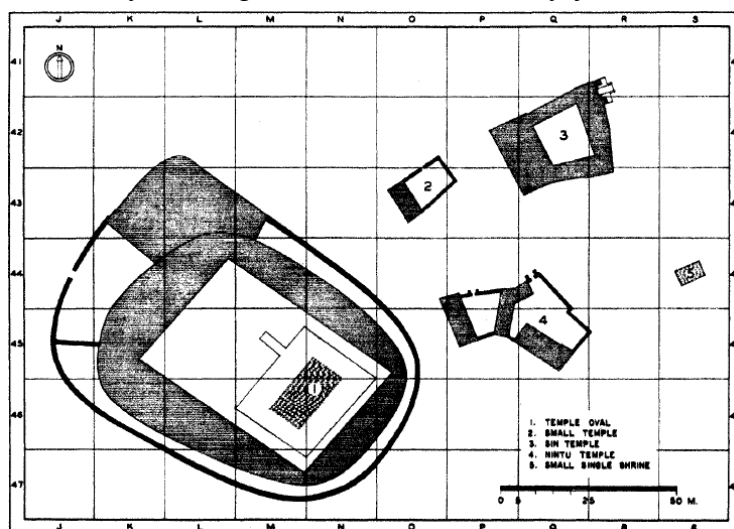
examining the position of the temple sculptures in relation to accesses in the Abu Temple, Evans (2012), nevertheless, argued that the statues are not only created through the act of dedication, but also mediate the encounter between the temple visitor and the divine by delineating the terrain of access.

Dedicatory statues from Nintu Temple V and VI at Khafajah (Early Dynasy II)

Khafajah is an archaeological site south of Tell Asmar in the Diayala region, which was also primarily excavated by the Oriental Institute team (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). The site contains four mounds, with Mound A (Figure 6) as the main one (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942). On the Mound, archaeologists discovered architectural remains of a pre-Sargonid town near the surface, which includes five temple ruins varying in scale and shape (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942). Locating east of the largest Temple Oval is Nintu Temple, with seven building periods (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942).

Figure 6

Plan showing location of the temples on Mound A at Khafajah



Note. Source: (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942)

Archaeologists excavated a hoard of dedicatory statues in front of the altar in Nintu V in the Early Dynastic II period (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942). According to Frankfort (1943), the bald and clear-shaven statue exhibits a “transitional style,” which allows it to stand out among others carved in the abstract style similar to that of the Tell Asmar Hoard. The shape of this male figure is rendered with more softness and smoothness (Frankfort, 1943). His nose turns up with a curve, and his chin is polished without an edge. Rather than a straight-angled connection between the neck, shoulder, and upper arms, he has slanted shoulders and rounded arms. Since his clasped hands are set higher on the chest, the upper arms are pressed against the torso, making it less square. Rather than a single fringe, his half skirt is covered with tiers of tufts, which became the convention until the end of the Early Dynastic period (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). In profile, the figure is comparatively curvier, with the forehead, chin, chest, upper arm, front of the skirt, and hip slightly bulging outward.

Figure 7

Male statue carved in the “transitional style” from hoard in Nintu Temple V at Khafajah



Note. Source: (Frankfort, 1943)

In Nintu Temple VI of the Early Dynastic II period, archaeologists discovered one of the finest examples (Figure 8) of the “mature realistic style,” which should appear during Early Dynastic III according to Frankfort (1943)’s theory. Shattered in pieces, the statue was found in a small room (Figure 9, Q44:15), rather than in the cella (Q45:4) (Frankfort, 1943). Compared to the earlier Nintu V statue, both male figures are bold, with large in-laid eyes, clear-shaven, half nude, and wearing a half-skirt articulated with registers of tufts. However, the Nintu VI statue reflects more fluid transitions, more accurate proportions, and more realistic details (Frankfort, 1970). The facial features of this male figure are more softly articulated, with deep-set eyes, an aquiline nose, and delicately curved lips, which replace the flat, ridgelike lips of the earlier figure of Nintu V. The distance between the top of the head and the eyebrows are elongated, reflecting a more accurate proportion between the face and the skull. Details of the double chin are articulated, with rings of flesh carved at the neck, indicating an impression of material well-being (Frankfort, 1970). His upper body is well-proportioned, and nipples are now being added. The tufts of the skirt are carved in higher relief than the earlier figure, protruding from the surface and weakening the stark geometric outline. Under the lower edge of the skirt, his left foot steps forward.

Figure 8

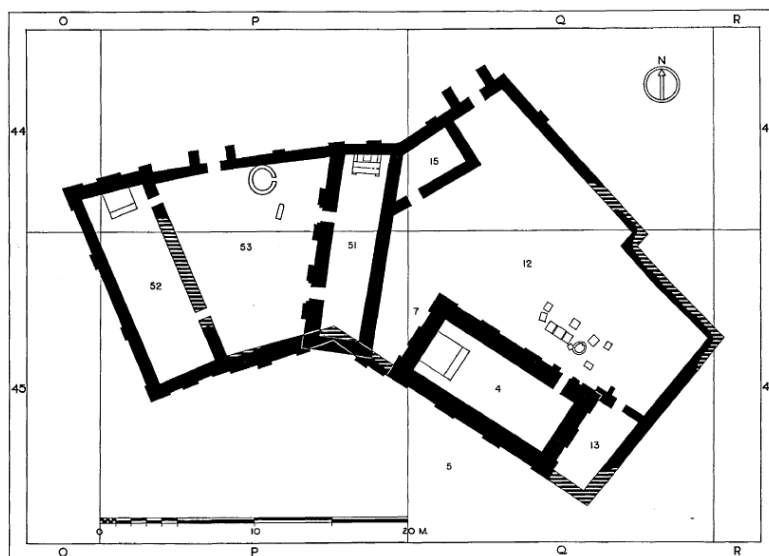
Male Statue carved in the “mature realistic style” from Nintu Temple VI at Khafajah



Note. Source: (Frankfort, 1943)

Figure 9

Plan of Nintu Temple VI at Khafajah



Note. Source: (Delougaz & Lloyd, 1942)

The debate on style

After examining three examples from Tell Asmar and Khafajah that belong to what Frankfort (1939) categorized as the “abstract style,” “transitional style,” and “realistic

style,” respectively, this essay will proceed to the debate between different scholarly views on the issue of style, providing the earlier argument from Frankfort (1939, 1943, 1970) and the more recent critique from Evans (2012, 2014).

In terms of the “abstract style,” Frankfort (1939) defined it as reducing the everchanging facial features and body parts into abstract, almost geometrical forms, which are then connected by abrupt transitions. According to existing archaeological evidence by then, he stated that this style had already emerged during Early Dynastic I-II, yet never reappeared after Early Dynastic II (Frankfort, 1939). Touching upon several common characteristics of statues from the Tell Asmar Hoard, their hair is separated in two strictly symmetrical locks, and their edges flank the beard that appears in a rectangular block. Both serve as foils that frame the face as the center of vitality and highlight the eyes as the vessel for power (Frankfort, 1939). The nude upper body is angular, with chest muscles articulated by tilted planes, while the skirts are reduced to cones that taper sharply to the top. By unifying different body parts into a homogeneous and self-contained formal scheme, these statues convey the artists’ strong desire for clarity of form. Since Frankfort (1939) assumed it was based on observation of natural form, he claimed that this stylization is an intuitive and spontaneous act, rather than an intellectual and critical achievement. Emerging from Early Dynastic II and prevailing across Early Dynastic III, the “realistic style” stands in stark contrast to the “abstract style” (Frankfort, 1939). Rather than simplifying natural forms to abstract shapes, the realistic style incorporates detailed articulation of physical features, such as collarbones and nipples (Frankfort, 1939). Texture contrast is also evident, with

variations between the bony forehead and the soft flesh that accumulates around the chin. Moreover, the forms are more fluid, with more gradual transitions between different body parts, as opposed to a clear and contrasting composition of sharply articulated masses (Frankfort, 1939). Statues that exhibit characteristics from both styles are categorized into the “transitional style” in Early Dynastic II (Frankfort, 1939). For example, the traces of geometrical shapes are still recognizable in the depiction of the Nintu V statue, but it only serves as a framework underneath the more smooth and more fluid surface.

Based on his differentiation between the abstract and realistic styles emerging from earlier and later Early Dynastic phases, respectively, Frankfort (1939) argued that these two styles belong to the same development trajectory. The abstract style gradually evolved into the more realistic style, with the transitional style connecting in between (Frankfort, 1939). To explain the possible reason behind this, he proposed that sculptors of the Early Dynastic periods, having followed abstraction to its utmost limits, began to explore the possibilities provided by the opposite approach (Frankfort, 1939).

As mentioned above, Frankfort’s (1939) argument is based on the chronology of the excavated statues and their formal features that lead to their categorization into one of the three styles. However, later discoveries, such as the Nintu VI statue, proved that the realistic style was already fully developed in Early Dynastic II and contradicted what Frankfort dated as after Early Dynastic III (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003). To reconcile this discrepancy, Frankfort initially proposed that the statue might be buried under the floor of Nintu VII, which was superimposed above the floor of Nintu VI (Frankfort,

1943). Thus, its actual date should be in the Early Dynastic III (Frankfort, 1943). However, in his 1970 report, Frankfort remedied his development theory by admitting that the abstract and realistic style coexisted for a considerable time in the Early Dynastic II (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003).

Recent scholarships express different opinions on Frankfort's argument. Evans (2012) argued that Frankfort's evolution idea was based on early twentieth-century theories on the origins of art and the aesthetic judgment of the "primitive," which should be scrutinized through reflexive methodologies in Near Eastern art history. Since Frankfort's examination of Early Dynastic statues emphasized formal analysis, Evans (2012) criticized that he claimed the abstract style as a spontaneous stylization isolates the Tell Asmar hoard from its archaeological context and cultic practices (Evans, 2012). By the Tell Asmar hoard within its original stratigraphic sequence and revealing its cultic practice, Evans (2012) suggests that temple statues evolved from a need to depict the donor from a divine vessel to human form. This need was driven by a transition in cultic practices, evident in the equipment, installations, and architectural arrangement of the Abu Temple (Evans, 2012).

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