

# Real Human Bodies, Images of Bodies and the Time Factor in the Early Cultures of Mesopotamia and Syria

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## Introduction

The theme of the memorial volume, the chosen approach and above all the issues it raises invite us to venture along new paths within a highly specific field: the inexorable changes inflicted on human bodies by the passage of biological time and the impact of this phenomenon on the social and cultural system of Mesopotamia.

The field of images and the 'narrative' that each image brings with it, to a differing extent and of a differing weight in the communication that it conveys, nonetheless does not seem a generous resource in this respect despite the ample quantity of documentation available. The reason for this may lie in the logics and intentions that in my opinion preside over visual communication, aimed at fixing a state, an act, a condition of the individual or of the collectivity, rather than at characterizing the real aspects of *physical bodies*<sup>1</sup> resulting from the passage of time. The exception to this are bodies shown in their full vigour, to the point of idealization, as is the case in the Period of Akkad.

My observations concern some of the issues raised by the theme of the colloquium, regarding the extent to which the side effects, so to speak, on the societies and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia of the biological changes to (physical) human bodies can be traced in the images.

Schematically subdividing the evidence into three categories (A, B and C), I would note that in the visual communication images of the same human subjects portrayed at obviously different (biological) ages are rare and in part controversial (Type A); that images of human subjects of evidently different ages and of both genders do exist, though women are less frequent (Type B); and that most of the images, which prevalently depict male subjects, do not suggest an explicit focus on the biological modifications of human bodies except in a few cases to be discussed below (Type C).

In other words, the characterizations of various ages of human life, some of which are marked by so-called 'rites of passage', are not in the majority of cases the object of specific attention in the representation of the subjects. The obvious exceptions are the well-known instances, as mentioned above, concerning the initial phases of biological life such as birth, infancy and childhood. Old age as such, albeit a precious companion to wisdom in the Mesopotamian literary sources, is not on display in the images; nor is the end of life, except naturally in the case of contexts of war or at any rate acts of physical aggression where it is widely represented with the specific intention of communicating values and meanings.

In this context, some food for thought on the questions posed by the topic of this book may come from the research that I have been conducting for some time on the sphere of war and conflict. Here the images of human bodies and body parts, subjected to disfigurements and mutilations and even to the death penalty, aim to trigger different levels of perception among their recipients, depending on the body parts in question, and to convey different meanings within the rationale of annihilating the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

More generally, and bearing in mind the distinctions just listed, it should be noted that in specific contexts and in accordance with the ideological and cognitive framework to be conveyed through the images, the destructive alterations inflicted on physical human bodies are displayed and emphasized, whilst the same is not equally true of the natural alterations resulting from biological time and pathogens. The situation thus appears very different from that of the textual/written sources, which inform us on the alterations of the 'physical body' and its deteriorations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The definition 'physical bodies' may appear pleonastic, but I believe it makes sense in the thought system of ancient Mesopotamia as I will attempt to explain below.

<sup>2</sup> Dolce 2014: passim; a way of deliberately marking bodies, not the result of biological processes, is well documented in the written sources of Mesopotamia over the three millennia and is still very widespread today: tattooing; Ditchey 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from the studies of Heeßel 2000 on diagnostic case histories and the related symptoms between the end of the II and the I mill. BC, and the sourcebook Scurlock 2014, see Parayre 1997 and in Battini and Villard 2006 some papers devoted to typical instances of biological or pathological modifications in individuals based on archaeological or textual data. Specifically, the excursus by Joannès 2006 tells us that Herodotus's claim regarding the absence of medical professions and therapies is unfounded judging from the surviving written

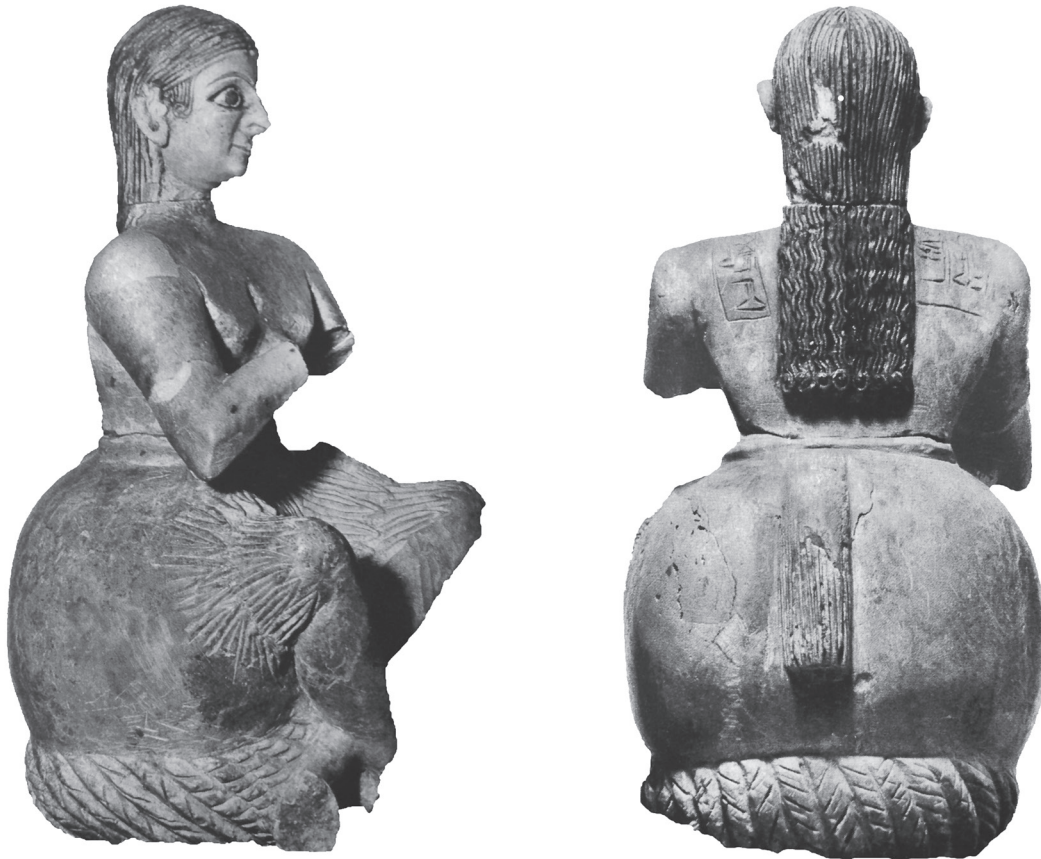


Figure 1. The singer Ur-Nanshe of Mari. Parrot 1967: pls. XLV-XLVI.

It is worth noting that the issue under consideration here, in other words whether the actual biological change undergone by physical (human) bodies is of relevance in the visual communication is a sensitive issue that remains open. I would note that with the exception of Types A and B, which I will illustrate with specific instances, we can presume that in most cases the characterization in the images of the physical alterations caused by time on human bodies is irrelevant in terms of the objectives of the visual message. I think that the Time factor, essential to the structure of Mesopotamian thought, or, more accurately, the cognition of time and its meaning, play

a special role in the visual communication; I will offer some concluding considerations on this.

#### Humans represented in different biological ages

For the human subjects depicted at different (biological) ages (Type A), potential but nonetheless debatable examples of a human being ‘portrayed’ over the course of his lifetime could be identified in the statue of the singer Ur-Nanshe (Figure 1), who certainly played an appreciated and lasting role in the service of king Iblul-il and his court in early dynastic Mari<sup>4</sup> and who may

documentation. Despite the paucity of evidence from Babylon in the 1st millennium BC, the A. outlines practices employed on the sick and the specific structures used for the purpose in some temples of Uruk and Nippur. Calduch-Benages 2014: 11 and ff., describes plant and mineral substances used in Mesopotamia to treat the sick and recalls some regulations governing the punishments meted out to doctors in the event of the patient’s death and the payment provided in the event of a cure, both commensurate with the social status of the patient. Enlightening in the creation myth of mankind by Enki and Nimaḥ is that the human species is also made up of imperfect and deformed beings who are however destined by the god Enki for roles that compensate for their state, from servants of the king to singers, or for the healing of their deformities: Bottéro and Kramer 1992: cap. VIII/7, 191-202. Cf. in this volume the article of Mouton. In archaeological research, the ease of identifying old age not just on the basis of the biological alterations of the human bodies found has recently offered new avenues for research; cf. Appleby 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The statue was in the temple of Ninni-Zaza in room 13. Parrot 1967: 89-91, 93, pls XLV-XLVI; Margueron 2004: 281, fig. 267; Margueron 2008: 194, where he is described as a ‘singer’. The detailed re-examination recently conducted by C. Breniquet (Breniquet 2016) reviewed the criticalities of numerous data and the uncertainties over the statue’s original context and the issue of whether or not the head actually belonged. Though on the one hand this study confirmed the male identity of the individual on the sound philological basis of the inscription, it concluded that the representation remains ambiguous in terms of gender and can be described as a eunuch, in agreement with current opinion on the matter. The image was not considered a true portrait of the subject, except in the sense that it conveys the social role of this high-ranking figure, according to other scholars (see her note 56). In this regard, Breniquet recalls the hypothesis advanced some time ago by Boese (Boese 1996) that the headless male bust (Parrot 1967: 92-96, figs. 132-133, M.2272,2376,2384) holding a musical instrument presenting the same inscription in the name of Ur-Nanshe and originating from the same context represents his son,

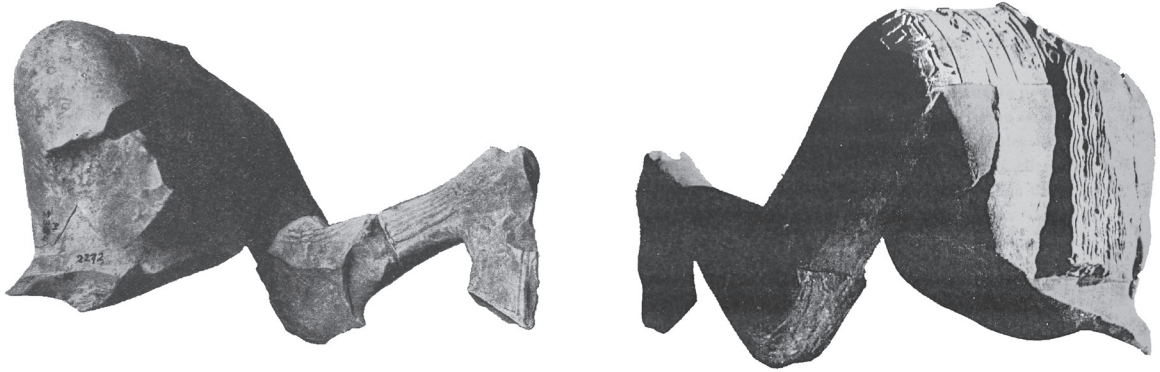


Figure 2. The 'harpist' Ur-Nanshe of Mari. Parrot 1967: figs. 132-133.



Figure 3. Head of Ur-Nanshe of Mari (?) at an advanced age. Parrot 1967: pl. LIII.

appear in some other official sculpture displayed in the temple of Ninni-Zaza (Figures 2, 3).<sup>5</sup>

as proof of the hereditary transmission of the role. Breniquet's study raises numerous important issues that remain open, and it is still possible that it was customary among the privileged classes of the societies of the period to pass their own role to their offspring, as was often the case for scribes and naturally among the ranks closer to the government of the kingdom. However, there are numerous similarities between the two statues found alongside many others in room 13: first of all, the identical name of the singer, Ur-Nanshe, the identical inscription found on both works, without any mention in the second of the subject's important parentage; second, the uniformity of the posture, iconography and details of the hairstyle, without any visible evidence at present to suggest that the headless bust represented a different figure, a distinguishing feature of the sort we might expect of a different singer-musician, heir to an illustrious father occupying a coveted role.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Parrot 1967: 92-96; this is the headless bust of an individual playing a harp, also found in the Temple of Ninni-Zaza and again in room 13 like the preceding artefact; the bust also bears the name of Ur-Nanshe/Ur-Nina on the inscription placed on the back, similar to that on the seated statue found in the same place. According to Parrot, this work presents numerous analogies on the iconographical, antiquarian and stylistic level with the more intact statue. For further considerations about this work by Breniquet 2016 and myself see note 4.

The ideal example is that of the *ensi* Gudea of Lagash, who had himself celebrated in countless statues and other official monuments accompanied by inscriptions, the most ample documentation of its kind currently to survive for a long-lived sovereign<sup>6</sup> and was likely portrayed at different moments during his reign. Gudea was a significant figure in the history of the last century of the III millennium BC, to a greater extent than was believed by the scholars of the past century<sup>7</sup> (Figure 4).

The close relationship between the settings of images of the *ensi* and the 'houses of the gods' of his kingdom (Suter 2012: 64) suggests to me that the 'living statue' of Gudea, once positioned in the sacred place for which it was destined, must have marked the final accomplishment of this work, in accordance with a specific political strategy. Again thanks to the written sources, we can be certain that the *ensi* of Lagash aimed directly not only at cultivating and prolonging his personality cult but also at projecting it into the extratemporal/extreme dimension of eternity; this dimension in effect translates into a 'continuous present' of his 'persona'.<sup>8</sup>

The other image, reduced to its head alone, comes from the same temple and bears evident marks of advanced age; it has been identified as an image of Ur-Nanshe as an old man: Parrot 1967: 99-100, pl. LIII.

Moortgat 1969: 35 describes both the complete statue and the headless fragment as being of the female sex.

<sup>6</sup> Suter 2012: 59, 63 notes the vast number of monuments dedicated to him and surviving until today compared to other early Mesopotamian sovereigns; they may have amounted to as many as 500, according to data from the written sources.

<sup>7</sup> On the revision and up-dating of the data on this cf. Suter 2012: 59-63 who draws an incisive profile of the reign of Gudea, the status he enjoyed under Ur III and his posthumous fortunes, well after his death; for the prominent position of Lagash in the kingdom of Ur III see the publication by Sallaberger 1999: 192, 286 and ff. and more recently the analysis by Michalowski 2011: 64-81.

<sup>8</sup> As noted by Suter 2012: 66-67; Winter 2010: 152, 161-162 especially, has investigated the personality and intentions of the *ensi* of Lagash through his statues and the inscriptions that accompany them, seen as an expression of a positive political action on behalf of his subjects but also as a synthesis of the king in person and the idealized king in an extra-temporal archetype.





Figure 4. The ensi Gudea of Lagash. Orthmann 1975a: fig. 53; Moortgat 1969: pl. 170.

A final and more general remark on Type A with respect to the only two instances discussed here is that the representation of the same individual at different ages identifiable in the images and/or deducible from inscriptions accompanying the image, is explained – alongside motivations such as the celebration of the figure for his ‘arts’, ‘capacities’/‘abilities’ or deeds – by specific conditions such as the type of sponsorship, the desire to have oneself portrayed at different phases of one’s life and activity. However, it also concerns *other things* that we do not know or perceive through our vision, from what appears to our gaze. I think that between looking and seeing there is still much to grasp of the multiple meanings generated by visual language.

### Humans of different biological ages

For those images where several subjects of evidently different ages appear (Type B), sometimes of both genders, we can note that the biological act of birth is represented on various classes of artefacts already exhaustively analysed years ago by L. Battini,<sup>9</sup> and is focused principally on the act accomplished by the woman, in a crouching pose. The combination on a seal impression from protohistorical Uruk of the theme of childbirth in the upper register and the execution of defeated enemies in the lower register (Boehmer 1999: 54, fig. 65), which I have recently reconsidered (Dolce 2014: 29, note 2; Dolce 2019: 192-193), was rightly interpreted by Battini as a symbolic expression of prosperity thanks to war, flocks and women (Figure 5).

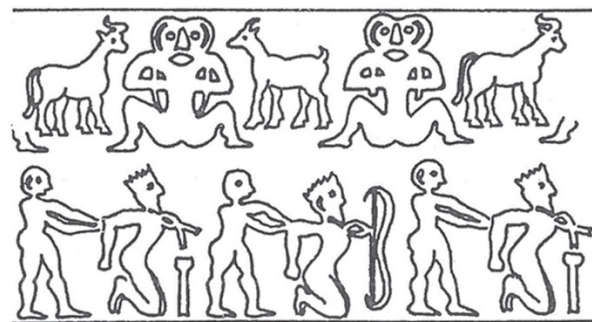


Figure 5. Cylinder seal impression from Uruk with a scene of childbirth. Boehmer 1999: fig. 65.

Moving forwards in the rationale of visual communication, I think that in this case the focus of the message lies precisely in ‘generating to prosper’: the prosperity ‘generated’ by victorious war, as an economic and social resource; generated by women as an instrument of reproduction and thus of regeneration, as in the animal world, also evoked alongside the woman giving birth.<sup>10</sup> In the supine position, too, childbirth is centred on its female protagonist, except in some exemplary instances that deserve a mention, such as the scene on a well-known plaque from Tell Asmar (Eshnunna) whose interpretation is controversial and is generally considered to be a sex act; the proposal advanced very recently of this depiction by C. Suter

<sup>9</sup> Battini 2006. The topic was tackled by Matoian 2014 in relation to the albeit scarce and elusive iconographical documentation from the excavations at Ugarit.

<sup>10</sup> For Battini’s interpretation see Battini 2006: 18, fig. 25; I report that a recent study of the symbology of the omega sign in Near Eastern iconography in relation to the data from the written sources has led to the hypothesis that this sign represents the uterus and that it is connected to human birth and to the female sex, human, animal and even divine, noting that the association between a woman giving birth and a cow is often attested in Mesopotamia: Steinert 2017.



Figure 6. 'Votive' plaque from Eshnunna with a scene of childbirth. Suter 2017: fig. 6.

sees it instead as the completed act of birth with the newborn placed on the mother's belly<sup>11</sup> (Figure 6).

This plausible hypothesis seems to me correct based on my identification of parallels with an image from a very different chronological and cultural moment, at the base of a stele of the Roman imperial period<sup>12</sup> (Figure 7).

The image in the lower register of the stele completes and clarifies the worn parts of the Sumerian early dynastic plaque, in a surprisingly similar composition (Figure 8).

Accomplished and preserved maternity with the feeding of the newborn is developed in breast-feeding scenes, which appear frequently in the figurative documentation<sup>13</sup> as proof of the attention paid in the visual communication to the earliest (and most intimate) phases and actions of biological life.

The filial relationship between mother and son/daughter, and father and son, and thus between



Figure 7. Roman stele from Hauterive. Coulon 2004: fig. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Suter 2017: 350-351, fig. 6, according to Otto 2016: 136-138; the plaque comes from the temple of the god Abu, from level I of the 'Single Shrine', at Eshnunna, and has been dated to the E.D.III by Boese 1971: 171. For an exhaustive and renewed critical study of the sacred areas at this site see Evans 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Coulon 2004, especially: 212-214, figs. 3-6; the stele is in the Musée d'Auxerre and is of modest workmanship; it is mentioned by Battini 2006: 23, fig. 33 for the attestation in the Greco-Roman world of the supine position of the woman in labour.

<sup>13</sup> I refer again to Battini 2006: 24, for the documentary data and preceding bibliographies.



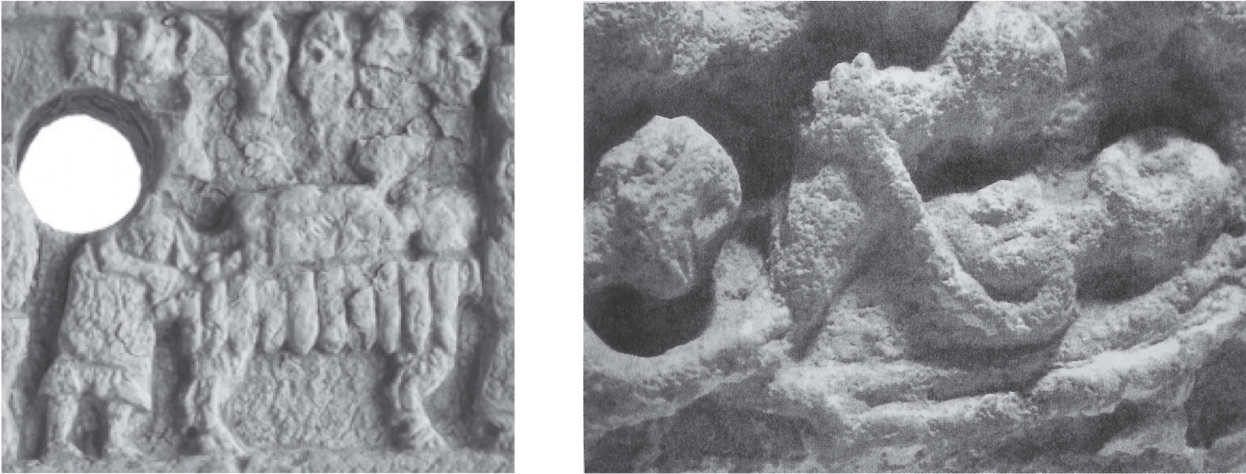


Figure 8. Scenes of childbirth. Details. Suter 2017: fig. 6; Coulon 2004: fig. 6.



Figure 9. Cylinder seal impressions with the sovereigns of Urkesh and their offspring. Kelly Buccellati 2016: figs. 4.5, 4.8, 4.7.

members of the same lineage of different ages, is presumably represented in similar tones of care for children, again with respect to infancy and childhood, in the well-known scenes showing the deportation of subjected peoples on the Neo-Assyrian relief.<sup>14</sup>

Though still focused on the relationship between mother and child, a different tone characterizes the attention paid to offspring in the images, mainly from the glyptics, that move from the more intimate level, so to speak, of the natural relations between these two subjects as in the cases described above, to the

exhibition of offspring in a family context amplified by the official nature of the visual message; this condition is already explicit in the documentation of the III millennium BC.<sup>15</sup> A mention of the scenes on the royal glyptics of Urkesh is obligatory in this context, with the exhibition of two dynastic generations, that of the present and that of the future, in the presence of both parents and the court staff in charge of caring for the children (Kelly Buccellati 2016: 53, 56-57, figs. 4.8, 4.5, 4.7; Buccellati and Kelly Buccellati 1998: Plts. III-IV) (Figure 9), in accordance with a compositional and thematic programme present in the royal glyptics of

<sup>14</sup> E.g. in Ashurnasirpal II, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal: Dolce 2016: fig. 2; Orthmann 1975b: fig. 233a; Dolce 2012: fig.15.

<sup>15</sup> I consider the works of the III mill. BC collected by Nadali 2014 in the treatment of this topic to belong to this other context.



Figure 10. The 'family' plaques of the ensi Ur-Nanshe of Lagash. Moortgat 1969: pls. 109-112.

early dynastic Ur (Woolley 1934: 183, 357, 561, PG 871, pl. 211, n. 291), already noted some time ago by Asher-Greve<sup>16</sup> and by Crawford.<sup>17</sup>

Belonging to the same category of images is the series of plaques usually termed 'family plaques' in which we see the founder of the I dynasty of Lagash, Ur-Nanshe, the male line of sons of different ages, and the acolytes. This series is a unique historical-genealogical and political document on the dynastic family and its first descendants, without parallels in what is currently

known of the visual communication of archaic Mesopotamia (Figure 10).

The compositional arrangement of all the plaques has the sons and acolytes positioned in two registers whilst the founder, always larger in size, occupies a preeminent space; the dimensions of the sons and acolytes, always smaller than those of Ur-Nanshe, vary, as does the sequence of their position in the images which does not respond to a single criterion, as has rightly been observed (Romano 2014: 185 and ff.), but rather to variations, over time, in the *temporary visibility* of some of the sons in the race to succeed their father.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Asher-Greve 2006: 65, for the proposed identification of the wet nurse among the subjects of the scene.

<sup>17</sup> Crawford 2014: 17. The depiction of the seal from Ur has also been considered by Nadali 2014: 230-231, fig. 5 and by Dolce 2016: 219-220 for the variety of information it provides on aspects connected to the definition of archaic female society.

<sup>18</sup> Romano 2014: 188 and ff.; the succession to the kingdom into the hands of Akurgal is nonetheless little understood and only a single inscription placed on a lion-headed artefact is known, as recalled by





Figure 11. Plaque of the *ensi* Ur-Nanshe of Lagash. Moortgat 1969: pl. 109.

In all its parts (the four plaques), then, the document is a reflection, by flashes, of a formidable cross-section of the history of father and sons in the dynamics of power; and the plots woven on both sides, perhaps over a long period, for the choice of the heir to the kingdom. It is precisely on this ‘time factor’ that I wish to propose a final remark: the preeminent position of Akurgal and the distinctive feature of the chignon on the head are found only in the most intact plaque<sup>19</sup> (Figure 11).

In my opinion this suggests that the power plays for control over the kingdom are *almost* over but not yet complete, on the basis of a variable in the image: a person of intermediate size between the *ensi* and his sons, who precedes Akurgal, ‘external’ to the dynastic line, and perhaps from the high ranks of the military as has recently been proposed.<sup>20</sup> Here I give in to the temptation of considering this ‘page’, so to speak, of the historical-genealogical and political document of Ur-Nanshe as probably the penultimate one in the whole story, when Akurgal’s investiture is presumable/

implicit but not yet definitively official. Might we be at a critical juncture in the government of the state of Lagash? Was there ever a figurative document of the same genre officially attesting for Akurgal’s succession to his father?

### Some final remarks

Returning to the opening questions, the analysis of the data proposed here appears to suggest that the characterization of the different biological ages of (physical) human bodies is present in subjects with familial relations of various types. On the contrary, it is identifiable or debatable in subjects represented several times over the course of their life. And lastly, it is elusive, we might say, in the majority of the available documents, perhaps because this was not perceived as a effective means for the transmission of select, though multiple, pieces of information within the visual communication.

Indeed, it is the subject(s) that count, as the author(s) of actions or participant(s) in them, in conditions, events and other contexts, regardless of the ‘realistic’ visibility of biological age, a condition that to our eyes and in our perception marks time into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. Here an essential aspect of Mesopotamian

Romano 2014: 183.

<sup>19</sup> Both pieces of information have also been mentioned recently by Romano 2014: 188-190, Fig. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Romano 2014: 190-191 and references. The suggested readings of the name of this individual are Abda, Abda dumu (son of...), and Abshu-tur.



thought comes into play: the notion of Time. The notion and cognition of Time<sup>21</sup> have also recently been at the centre of research and reflection by specialists in different domains of Oriental studies (L. Feliu, J. Llop, A. Millet Albà and J. Sanmartín eds 2013). From the outcome of these studies, I briefly recall some points that have emerged on the concept of Time in Early Mesopotamia on the basis of the literary textual sources. On the one hand, Rubio's essay states that the texts of the III millennium BC examined by him concern tales preceding the creation, when in the absence of the creation time itself does not exist.<sup>22</sup> On the other, D. Katz notes in her considerations, among other things, on the basis of the various literary instances, that in Early Mesopotamia mythological reality was perceived as contemporary and therefore asks what the perception of time was in Mesopotamia and to what extent it counted.<sup>23</sup> Finally, as regards the idea of Time it is worth noting that G. Rubio recalls the meaning of the temporal sequence in the Mesopotamian conception, where the past is 'before us', in other words *prior to us* and the future is 'behind us' in other words *after us* (Rubio 2013: 11-12).

As regards the issue of interest to us here, in other words the visual communication, the human subjects and their physical semblances (physical bodies) are certainly fixed in the images at a specific point, culturally and politically definable within broad time periods or more circumscribed chronological phases even though the biological signs of time and its alterations on human bodies are not necessarily shown. Indeed, in the system of visual communication and for the purposes recalled above, these subjects exist instead in a 'continuous present', which is a category transcending the 'physical human body' and a tool with which to store and pass on the collective memory.

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<sup>21</sup> Complex issues that variously affect the 'thought system' of any archaic society; cf. L. Feliu *et alii* eds 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Rubio 2013: 5-8, 10-11. On the other hand, see Ulanowski 2013: 341-343, 353-354 especially, on the beginning of the time with the creation of the mankind.

<sup>23</sup> Katz 2013: 118-119; in this regard D. Katz again notes, on the basis of the mythical-literary textual sources and by paradigmatic instances, that there seem to be two distinct systems of Time perception, one for human beings and the other for deities and ghosts, characterized by a 'cross-temporal reality'. It should be noted that the viewpoint chosen by the A. for analysing the perception of time in ancient Mesopotamia is circumscribed to the final moment of human life, in other words the transition to death, applying philosophical theories to the interpretation of the textual documentation.

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