# On the Next 'Life' of a Mesopotamian Statue

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## 1. Statue's Biographies

Object biographies have long been theorized, with the aim, as Marian Feldman explains of "(…) *elicit a concern beyond the producers and production of art to consider also consumption, reuse, reception, and disposal* (…)" (Feldman 2009, 41). This notion of biography thus emphasizes recontextualization, essential for understanding the "life", "death" and practices carried out on statues, as well as the reasons for these practices. This concept is also closely interlinked with the social aspect of objects, inseparable from that of individuals (Bonnot 2004, 158-159).

In ancient Mesopotamia, the specific relationship entertained with statues can be illustrated for instance by the efforts made to keep them present in one way or another when they no longer fulfil their initial role (Evans 2012, 140; Highcock 2021, 40). These may be practices internal to the community that originally used it, aimed at bringing a statue whose original use is no longer necessary to a new stage in its 'life' (reattribution, burial, recycling). Or external practices, generally disrespectful of the statue's original function and intended to impose a new identity (usurpation) or a new function (deportation, mutilation). Numerous factors explain these practices, depending on the place, period, purpose and type of the action (material cost, cultual purpose, power shift, memory…) (Achouche 2024, 1).

Since the representations were individualized not by their physiognomy, but by their attributes and inscriptions (Winter 2009, 266–67; Asher-Greve and Westenholz 2013; 159–62; Guichard 2019, 31), the practices mentioned above regularly took the form of adding or changing the name to completely alter the identity of an image; it is on these cases that we will focus.



Fig. 1 Head of Puzur-Eštar's statue (Vorderasiatisches Museum VA 08748 – H: 37 cm) © Olaf M. Teßmer

## 6. Conclusions

Nowadays, installed in museums, stored in reserves or peacefully remained in the ground, these statues continue to 'live' lives often very far from the one initially planned for them (Evans 2012, 76-81). We should not forget that their new context influences our understanding of their previous one!

### Bibliography
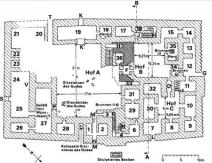
RIME = The Royal Inscriptions Of Mesopotamia
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## 2. Usurpation

Identifying usurpation is usually done by examining the inscription. Orant 1453 (**fig. 2**) (provenance unknown, E.D. period) is one of the best examples, since it bears a Sumerian inscription that has been erased and replaced by an Akkadian one (Hauptmann 1989). Other more complex clues to perceive are the modification of the image itself. The Puzur-Eštar statue (**fig. 1**) (*šakkanakku* of Mari, 20th century BC) exemplifies this second case, since its headdress was change in horns – a divine attribute. Without being a usurpation *per se*, it illustrates the form that adaptation takes (Blocher 1999).

Fig. 2 Erased Sumerian inscription and new Akkadian inscription. Detail of an orant statue (Liebieghaus 1453 – H: 37.5 cm) (after Hauptmann 1989, fig. 1)

## 3. Deportation

Evidence of deportation can be found in both military and mythological texts, e.g. Marduk's deportations (Dalley 1997). Numerous archaeological cases have been documented as well, the most significant being the artifacts transported to Susa by Šutruk-Naḫḫunte I (ruler of Elam, 1185-1155 BC) – of which at least 16 statues (**fig. 3**) (Eppihimer 2010). The strategies used to move them across several hundred kilometers should be considered to understand the value of those statues. Indeed, this practice is an illustration of the power granted to these artifacts, even outside the context of their production and use.

Fig. 3 Inscription added by Šutruk-Naḫḫunte I about his deportation (Louvre Sb 61 – H: 89 cm) © 2016 Musée du Louvre / Philippe Fuzeau

## 4. Reassignment

Reassignment involves continuing the use of an artifact, but with a new purpose. The major difference with the practice of usurpation is a desire to preserve the memory of the original function or context. An attestation are the statues of Gudea (ruler of Lagaš, *ca* 2130-2110 BC) centralized in Girsu by Adad-nādin-aḫḫe (Seleucid ruler, 3rd century BC) (**fig. 4**) (Rey 2020, 56-57). Another example are the statues of Akkadian rulers preserved, according to tablets copied in Paleo-Babylonian times, in the Ekur of Nippur (Buccellati 1993). In both instances, there is a gap of several centuries between the creation of the statues and their reassignment.

Fig. 4 Adad-nadin-ahhe's palace at Tello (after Suter 2012, fig. 3.6; Kose 2000, fig. 21)

## 5. Curse formulas

As can be seen from these few examples, there were many practices affecting statuary. Another clue is the curse formulas designed precisely to prevent such practices. Whether or not they were present and their exact content, which varied from one sentence to hundred lines, are still unclear – e.g. statue Gudea B is composed of 365 lines, 104 of which are dedicated to the curse. On the other hand, the variety of practices they contain are well known (damage the inscription or the statue, move the statue, neglect it and/or its cult).

In addition to the actions targeted, it is also interesting to note that it is the agent behind the decision who is targeted and who must bear responsibility. In view of the twenty or so curse inscriptions on statues that use this reference to the commissioner, it seems to us that decision-making is the crucial stage from the point of view of the 'owner' of the curse. The Sumerian use of the verbs šu zi-zi (to incite) or $a_2$ aĝ$_2$ (to order) reveals the priority given to the order, rather than the act – e.g. RIME4.01.03.03. In Akkadian, the formula is less obvious, but by studying it in context one can grasp the same sense of incitement, with the verbs *kullumu* (to show) combined with the fact of giving instructions – e.g. RIME2.01.04.05 .

One of the aims of creating an anthropomorphic image was to ensure that the memory of the individual depicted would live on, presumably forever. As we have seen, the inscription is most regularly the target, so it is not surprising that it is also the one that is protected first and foremost, given its value (Radner 2005, 252). Many of those curse formulas are structured as follows:



Fig. 5 'Statue Cabane' (Aleppo Museum M 7917/1326 – H: 110cm) (after Moortgat-Correns 1986, pl. 36.1 & pl. 37.6).

:asmaḫ-Addu (ruler of Mari,18th century BC) :

(RIME4.06.11.1 [Old Babylonian Period] – l. 17-25)

"He who removes my inscribed name and has his (own) name ins[cri]bed, [may the god Š... š, my lord, (?)p out [h]is [fo]undation [and] destroy his progeny."

(17. *ša šu-mi* 18. *ša-aṭ-ra-am* 19. *u₃-ša-sa₃-ku-ma* 20. *šum-šu u₃-ša-aš₂-[ṭa]-ru* 21. [.]UTU *be-li₂* [SU].UŠ [š]*u* 22. [*li*]-*su₂-u₁* 23. [u₃] Š[I.NUM.UN]-Š. 25. (ši-d-a₃-ar?)