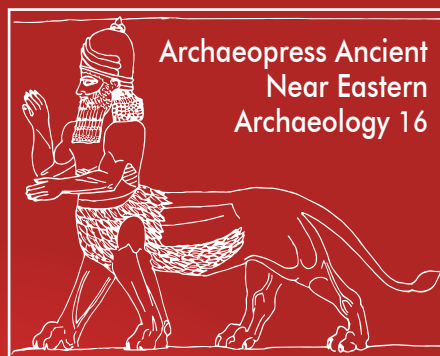


New Research on Old Collections in Southwest Asian Archaeology



Edited by
Mette Bangsborg Thuesen
and Giulia Russo



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New Research on Old Collections in Southwest Asian Archaeology

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**Edited by
Mette Bangsberg Thuesen
and Giulia Russo**

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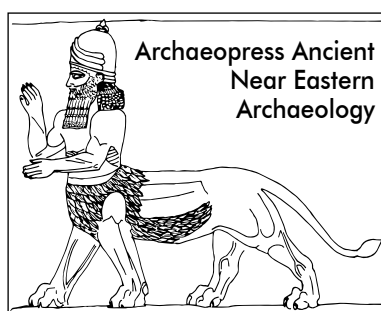
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Chapter 2:

Writing the biography of artefacts retired in museums. A methodological approach to the study of Mesopotamian statuary

Imane Achouche¹

Abstract

This contribution explores the ways in which Mesopotamian statuary and associated ritual practices have been understood by modern research. In this sense, several standard interpretative approaches are explored and subsequently scrutinized in the light of four case studies. Firstly, translation difficulties, sometimes influenced by a certain *a priori* of the message conveyed. This question will be addressed through the treatment of inscriptions added to Mesopotamian artefacts by Šûtrûk-Nahûnte I, in the 12th century BC. Secondly, the difficulties of finding a balance between the symbolic and the concrete aspects, while reading texts describing rituals. This will be analyzed through a set of texts testifying to redistribution of offerings to a wide range of individuals, after having offered the latter to the deities. Third, the primacy of certain hypotheses, such as the deliberate mutilation of statues rather than simple accidental breakage, in situations where the evidence is weak. From the disk of Enĥeduana to the statues of worshippers of the 3rd millennium BC, I shall question what clues are available to us to identify voluntary or accidental destruction. Fourth, the value of studying a corpus as a whole and the risks involved in selecting elements. Here I will return to the case of artefacts moved by Šûtrûk-Nahûnte I. These research questions appeared within the framework of my PhD dissertation and are intended to highlight limits rather than to provide infallible solutions.

Key words: Mesopotamia; Statuary; Methodology; Interdisciplinarity; Recontextualization.

Par ailleurs, les statues parlaient-elles vraiment ou est-ce plutôt un fantasme d'archéologue ?² (Rivière 2016: 479)

The rediscovery³ of Mesopotamia largely involved the valorization of artefacts that left a lasting impression. The unearthing of statues contributed to the development of interest in the study of antiquity in the region, but while building momentum for

¹ Liège University, Aspirante FRS-FNRS, Belgium

² 'Furthermore, did the statues really speak or is this more of an archaeologist's fantasy?' (author's translation).

³ This is not the subject of this article, but in a nutshell, I would like to stress the importance of taking a step back from the notion of 'discovery' in archaeology. Defined as the fact of finding someone or something, in Mesopotamian studies it is generally associated with the end of the 18th century AD and travelers from Western Europe. However, Mesopotamia has never been forgotten, and a great deal of historiographical work has yet to be carried out in Arabic sources. For more on this subject, see Alshehaby 2020; Awad 1949, 1952; Bahrani 2011; Janssen 1995; Tamur 2022.

the study of Mesopotamia, it also brought about many interpretative biases.⁴ Indeed, once it is torn from its context and exhibited in museums, an artefact conveys the message its new host institution assigned to it. Jean Evans explained this process in detail in the second chapter of her book *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture*. Function and installation of these newly discovered statues in the early 1900s are influenced by the conception of statuary at the time of the exhibition, *a fortiori* very tinged with Christianity and Primitivism (Evans 2012: 46–76). In 1926, Eckard Unger already made this critical observation regarding the rooms exhibiting Mesopotamian art, with, for example, his comment on the Louvre Museum in the early 20th century: ‘Auch das Museum des Louvre in Paris ist noch altmodisch, namentlich weil hier assyrische Kolossalreliefs zusammen mit sumerischen Statuen, die 2000 Jahre älter sind, aufgestellt sind, so daß eins das andere beeinträchtigt.’⁵ (1926: 5).

Contemporary museography often strives to recreate exhibition settings as close as possible to those in which the artefacts were originally used. However, regardless of the approach, these artefacts tend to be regarded as inanimate objects, sometimes even defined as ‘works of art’, and combined in assemblages that can obscure their original significance or nature (Bahrani *et al.* 2011; Blocher 2019: 94; Delli Castelli 2023; Evans 2012; Merriman 1993; Pearce 1997). Moreover, the opposite extreme can appear in our analyses: research discusses pagan, polytheistic societies, where worship and politics were one and the same. It is therefore important to avoid interpretations that may overstate the role of ritual and are not sufficiently nuanced.⁶ The development of a monolithic explanation – which would be based on an animist functioning of the antic cult (Delli Castelli 2025: 35, 199) – runs the risk of making the data say more than they can deliver. In addition to the distance in time and the limited quality and quantity of what survives in the archaeological record, we are also influenced by the specific worldview of our own society.

By contributing to this volume, I would like to address some of the biases that arise in the study of the cult of divine statues. As ritual practices have attracted interest

⁴ One of the problematic analyses was the study of statuary in relation to physical anthropology and the search for similarities between populations and three-dimensional representations, in a context of human hierarchization (Evans 2012: 31–41).

⁵ ‘The Louvre Museum in Paris is also outmoded particularly because Assyrian colossal reliefs are exhibited together with Sumerian statues which are 2000 years older so that the one compromises the other.’ [translation from Tamur 2022: 177].

⁶ Certainly, Mesopotamia, like most ancient societies, had cultic practices at the heart of its organization. However, it is the understanding of the nuances of this functioning that appears to be difficult, because it is very far from our current habits. Herman Vanstiphout (Porter 2009b: 202–203), for example, insists on the difference between what is currently considered ‘sacred or divine’ and what was in antiquity. Kim Benzel gives an example with her analysis of the materials used to represent the divine, which are both considered to have an inherent value that she qualifies as ‘magical’, while stressing that their economic and practical value should not be overlooked (2015: 89–90). Claudia Suter, through the observation of regalia, evokes the deliberately blurred boundary in certain contexts, between the royal and divine spheres (2007: 140–141). Finally, Jean Bottéro’s (1987: 246–270; 1998) works always insisted on the earthly world as the terrain of the divine, which sums up this dichotomy well.

since the origins of our disciplines, they are also among the very topics that need to be carefully reconsidered.

Theory meets practice

In the name of the rituality of ancient societies, there can be an excessive reading of everything through the prism of ritual. In this respect, the case of divine representations is very telling. In Mesopotamia, it was possible to make the invisible present, to make the gods 'alive', the images serving as a medium of connection between people and their divinities (Aruz 2009: 69; Boden 1998: 95; Bottéro *et al.* 1989; Walker *et al.* 2001). Even if this value attributed to divine images is well-documented, one should still refrain from venturing into too far-fetched interpretative speculations. It is important to focus on the data and to try to limit the influence of our preconceptions (Levi-Strauss 1958: 307–308; Linstead 1993: 102; Winter 1999: 250–251).

What made the divine statues 'alive', was the vitality that was given to them by imbuing them with 'life' through rites, by maintaining their special status, by integrating them into the 'life' of society, and so on (Chaniotis 2017: 97). Nevertheless, we must be wary of an overly literal reading of the idea of 'lives of statues'. In order to better understand this concept, it is useful to consider the practices related to the production and maintenance of said statues. For example, according to a text⁷ unearthed in the house of a member of the Aššur (Iraq) cult elite, which contained instructions for irreparable divine images, the damaged statue had to be returned to the god Ea⁸ by throwing it into a river. However, it is difficult to imagine an object of precious material value thrown into the water. Furthermore, at present, for the majority of us, these concepts are extremely difficult to apprehend (Delli Castelli 2023: 33). As Ghislain Casas points out in relation to Western anthropological theories about the diversity of beliefs:

‘L'idée qu'un objet puisse être animé ne nous est plus familière et nous ne pouvons que l'envisager comme une croyance superstitieuse. C'est pourquoi l'anthropologie moderne ne peut que se heurter à des questions insolubles concernant le rapport de la croyance et de l'efficacité des rites.’ (Casas 2014: 678).

Considering our documentation as a whole and applying an interdisciplinary practice in our field is one way of overcoming these limitations. This is a term that

⁷ TuL 27 [on A.418], Neo-Assyrian inscription (c. 934–609), on a clay tablet (12×25 cm), discovered in 1908 in Aššur (Ebeling 1931: 108–120; Walker and Dick 2001: 227–246).

⁸ One of the great Mesopotamian gods, organizer of the Universe and the Earth. God of water, fertility of the fields, wisdom, purification, medicine and magic.

⁹ ‘The idea that an object can be animated is no longer familiar to us, and we can only regard it as a superstitious belief. This is why modern anthropology is inevitably confronted with insoluble questions concerning the relationship between belief and the efficacy of rites.’ (author's translation).

is often used but appears to be laborious to implement.¹⁰ In the sense given here, the point of an interdisciplinary methodology is not to give more value to one source at the expense of another. This does not mean that no distinction should be made between the sources, but rather that each has an equal place in our field (Bahrani 1995: 373; Bottéro 1987: 60–70). Therefore, without denying our inheritance from specific disciplines and schools of thought, it seems important to smooth out the boundaries between the stages of the *chaîne opératoire scientifique*.¹¹ This implies that archaeologists benefit from familiarizing themselves with the texts, and philologists benefit from familiarizing themselves with the context and medium of the texts. The underlying aim is therefore to overcome a dynamic of reliance and move towards a dynamic of exchange. We concur with Cory D. Crawford's conclusion that the subdivision in teaching between disciplines¹² leads to limited views:

‘(...) the very division into categories of image and/or/versus text runs the risk of reifying ontological boundaries not necessarily operative or impermeable in ancient Mesopotamia.’ (Crawford 2014: 242).

At the same time, text, image, and artefact will often taunt us by providing us with information that cannot be reconciled, or even contradicts itself. Through four case studies, I will try to illustrate these difficulties. First, the importance of using precise vocabulary, translations, and term equivalences. Secondly, the benefits of taking a step back from overly literal readings of ritual texts within the framework of research and of placing them in a more concrete context. Thirdly, the importance of moving away from overly specific analyses of one aspect of objects so as to gain a more wholesome understanding of their context. Fourth, the value of studying corpuses as sets and of systematically studying the elements of which they are composed. All of this is done in the awareness that these are considerations whose aim is to limit the pitfalls of interpretation, while being aware that they are not entirely avoidable and that absolute truth cannot be achieved (Linstead 1993: 99–100).

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of the aspects outlined above, I should point out that these proposals are based on my ongoing PhD. Every time I noticed biases in the study of the ‘life and death’ of Mesopotamian statues (e.g., state of

¹⁰ Interdisciplinarity can be complex to define, especially in its nuances with multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, etc. The definition adopted here is that of Lionel Dupuy (2021:2): ‘(...) L’interdisciplinarité croise les démarches scientifiques de chaque discipline en vue d’étudier le même objet, mais dans une perspective plus globale. Certes, le chercheur demeure centré sur un objet d’étude en particulier et en partant d’une discipline bien précise, mais sa distance critique est bien plus pertinente, ayant intégré initialement les problématiques des autres disciplines mises à contribution.’ Author’s translation: ‘(...) Interdisciplinarity combines the scientific approaches of each discipline to study the same topic, but from a more global perspective. Admittedly, the researcher remains focused on a particular object of study, using a specific discipline as a starting point, but his or her critical distance is much more relevant, having initially integrated the issues of the other disciplines involved.’

¹¹ With this expression, we want to refer to the incremental process of knowledge creation and mobilization.

¹² Certainly, also a reality in other disciplines, but here it is expressed in the light of the fact that the societies we study are particularly concerned with producing images and text combined.

conservation, quality of archaeological documentation, etc.), I questioned my own method of analyzing this class of objects. What follows is my attempt at addressing these points.

Play on words

The value of using a precise vocabulary in our translations is primary and one knows how a single mistranslated word can change the whole meaning of a text. A good example is that of the inscription related to the well-known case of Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I's¹³ artefacts displacement to Susa (Iran). He had at least 15 statues (Achouche 2024: 11) and probably 40 *kudurrus/narûs* (Seidl 1998) transported from Babylonia to Susa and added his inscription on some¹⁴ of them. One of these Elamite (= Hatamtite)¹⁵ inscriptions,¹⁶ added on the stela of Narām-Sîn,¹⁷ provides details of great importance. It states that Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I moved the stela, which is something that appears in all the inscriptions he added. The difference is that this specific inscription also contains a term which could mean that he 'protected' the stela.¹⁸ Because of this, hypotheses can be made about the value and function of the objects that have been removed. It can also be assumed that the removal of these objects was a response to a need and not simply a desire to harm an enemy (Amiet 1976: 128; Harper *et al.* 1992: 161; Thomason 2005: 107; Westenholz 2012: 98). However, an alternative translation suggests 'to take away' rather than 'to protect' (Bahrani 1995: 14; König 1965: 76). It appears that the use, in some research, of the translation 'protected' may be intended to support a narrative that absolves the sovereign of practices considered controversial (Bahrani

¹³ Ruler of Elam (= Hatamti), 12th century BC.

¹⁴ As for the statues, it is roughly one in two. One explanation for this absence may be the state of preservation of the artefacts. Indeed, most of the statues are not complete and may have displayed an Elamite (= Hatamtite) inscription in an area that has now been lost. As for the other types of artefacts, a comprehensive study remains to be carried out to identify who transported them and what actions were carried out on them. In a previous paper (Achouche 2024), I tried to initiate this study by listing the statues deported by Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I, as well as the presence or absence of one of his inscription and/or an earlier inscription. Thanks to a research mission carried out in the storerooms of the Louvre Museum, I am now able to complete this study: the remains of a deliberately erased inscription – which to my knowledge has not been previously identified – can be seen on Sb 59 and Sb 163, while Sb 60 may be in the same situation, but no cuneiform signs are still legible. I would like to thank Mahmoud Alassi, François Bridey, and the team at the Liévin's storerooms for giving me this opportunity.

¹⁵ Hatamtite is the name proposed to replace Elamite. Elamite is *etic*, as it is derived from Mesopotamian terminology, while Hatamtite is likely to be closer to an *emic* conception (Desset 2017; 2021: 2).

¹⁶ EKI 22 [on Sb 4; CDLI = P215544] (König 1965: 76).

¹⁷ Sb 4; Limestone stela (200×105 cm) from Sippar (Iraq) bearing a very fragmentary Akkadian inscription by Narām-Sîn (Akkadian ruler, 23rd century BC), discovered in 1898 in Susa (de Morgan *et al.* 1900: 144–158).

¹⁸ In fact, in the inscription, three verbs refer to the relocation of the stela: *hu-ma-h* = ich nahm an mich (Hinz *et al.* 1987: 693); *ku-ut-hi* = ich habe mitgeführt (Hinz *et al.* 1987: 568); *te-en-gi-h* = ich sandte, verbrachte, holte (Hinz *et al.* 1987: 305). In the translations, it is the second 'ku-ut-hi' that has been transformed into protect from a Pierre Amiet's suggestion (1976) as identified by Zainab Bahrani (1995: 371, n. 14). Indeed, Vincent Scheil, who proposed the first translation, suggested 'find' (French: 'trouver'), a formula slightly different from the one currently accepted, but which has nothing to do with 'protect' (Scheil 1901: 40–42). This word is interpreted as a verb, although its meaning is complex to determine, and it is difficult to say whether it simply implies a movement or whether it actually refers to an idea of preservation (Personal communication with Laurent Colonna d'Istria and François Desset [December 2024]).

1995: 371–372). Additionally, the Elamite (= Hatamtite) language, isolated and extinct, remains difficult to access. Indeed, even the transliterations vary (Hinz *et al.* 1987: 549, 569; König 1965: 76). This also explains the difficulties that surround this particular translation. Finally, the meaning is still unclear, as we will see later.

Regarding the value of vocabulary, it is also pertinent to note that its significance in modern research is enormous. Indeed, using the word ‘deportation’ already implies a negative connotation. In this example, we know that whatever value one wishes to give to the actions of Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I, he carried them out and wanted to offer his god these testimonies of his military victories. However, in other attestations of the movement of artefacts, the use of the term ‘deportation’ influences our reading, just as if, conversely, the word ‘rescue’ was used – e.g., the many comings and goings of Marduk who, depending on the circumstances, is considered to have been ‘kidnapped’ or ‘rescued’.¹⁹ In another example, Susanne Paulus has demonstrated that Ontaš-Napireša’s²⁰ practice of moving artefacts is interpreted differently depending on the translation adopted.²¹ This earlier ruler also moved at least one statue and the translation of the inscription he added in Akkadian is translated with the verb²² ‘stole’ or ‘take’, the second one having a much less negative connotation (Paulus 2013: 440). The interpretation is therefore diametrically opposed between a transported present (Vallat 1999) and a deported booty (Paulus 2013). It is undoubtedly important to emphasize nuances, such as when François Bridey refers to two very different practices when he writes of ‘Making Susa “the museum” of the repatriated masterpieces of Choga Zanbil’ as opposed to ‘those looted from Mesopotamia’ (Bridey 2018: 559). One is a repatriation, a collector’s will, the other is a booty, it has a warlike vocation. It is therefore important to remain attentive to our lexicons, as well as to those of the sources we are studying.

Knowing the rite

As we know, texts can be misleading, because they can be intended to fool the reader or because they can be misunderstood. A mixture of these two factors may be recognized in the example of ritual texts where codes are blurred (Crawford 2014: 241–242; Suter 2014: 547). Therefore, in studying these texts, we might fall into two pitfalls: to take everything literally, or to question everything. This type of trap can also be found in contexts other than those of ritual sources; for example, the numbers

¹⁹ On the ‘Prophecy of Marduk’ and the movement of (the statue of) the god Marduk, see Dalley (1997) and accompanying bibliography.

²⁰ Ruler of Elam (= Hatamti), 14th century BC.

²¹ MDP 10 (Scheil 1908: 85–86, pl. 10); Lower part of diorite statue (31 cm) bearing an Akkadian inscription by Ontaš-Napireša (formerly read as Untaš-Napiriša), discovered in 1908 in Susa (Sb 63).

²² *ḥabātum* = to rob, to take away by force (Oppenheim 1956: 9). Antoine Cavigneaux considers that the translation ‘to steal’ is imprecise, among other things because *ḥabātum* implies a violence which is not necessarily present in the concept of stealing. He proposes ‘to plunder’, ‘to capture’ (French: ‘piller’, ‘capturer’) (Cavigneaux 2017: 13).

used in texts could be questioned. In an Assyrian source citing 32 statues,²³ it is questionable whether this is a numerical symbolic value rather than a number to be taken literally. This issue has already been raised for the Pharaonic Era in Egypt with the conclusion that there is no good solution to apprehend these numerical values (Langer 2021: 97–98).

In connection with divine statuary, many texts evoking ritual practices inform us about divine meals, without hiding the fact that those meals were redistributed to humans, after having been theoretically consumed by the gods. Examples of redistribution texts²⁴ are clearly attested between the end of the 2nd millennium BC and the first half of the 1st millennium BC (McEwan 1983: 187). A very telling tablet²⁵ describes that the offerings of Ištar and Nanna at Uruk were redistributed to the elite of the cult personnel (Beaulieu 2003: 26–27, 167, 250; Joannès 2000: 335–336; Langdon 1923: 25–27; McEwan 1983: 187).²⁶ Moreover, this case even highlights that persons out of the cultic personnel could benefit from these redistributions (baker, boatman, singer). While it can be considered that those professions were also related to the temples, ritual texts from Emar (Syria) are very explicit about the fact that the general population had access to some of these distributions.²⁷ This same city has yielded texts testifying to the fact that members of the elite or cult personnel consumed some food offerings during worship and in front of the deities.²⁸ All of this provides a relatively complex picture, and Emar's examples arguably provide more questions than obvious answers about how this feeding of the gods was set in general. However, this panorama makes it possible to nuance a hypothesis based on what is documented in ancient Greece, where texts testify to the fact that it was from the smells of food that the gods fed themselves (Vernant 2002: 18). In fact, in the Mesopotamian context, while the textual documentation provides information

²³ RINAP Ashurbanipal 9 [on AO 19939] (Novotny *et al.* 2018: 179–209); 'Prism F', the most complete (33×17 cm), bearing an Akkadian inscription by Aššurbanipal (ruler of Assyria, 7th century BC), was acquired by the Louvre Museum in 1948 and is likely from Nineveh (Iraq).

²⁴ For the most part, these are administrative and accounting documents listing the individuals concerned during the redistribution and the details of the shares allocated to each: OECT 1 [CDLI = P384832] (Beaulieu 2003: 26–27, 167, 250; Langdon 1923: 25–27); GCCI 1 238 [CDLI = P294367] (Beaulieu 1990); NBC 11 205 [CDLI = P301890] (Sigrist 1977); 4 NT 230 [CDLI = P512090] (Farber *et al.* 2018). There are also documents related to the cult: Msk 731027+ [CDLI = P271297] (Arnaud 1986: 326–337); Msk 731031 [CDLI = P271302] (Arnaud 1986: 395–397); Msk 74280a+ [CDLI = P272026] (Arnaud 1986: 420–425). A particular case, which informs us indirectly about these redistributions, is a text concerning a disagreement around the said partition: YBC 9280 [CDLI = P310002] (Beaulieu 2003: 27, 251).

²⁵ OECT 1 [on Ash. 1922.256; CDLI = P384832] (Beaulieu 2003: 26–27, 167, 250; Langdon 1923: 25–27; McEwan 1983). Inscription from the time of Nabu-apla-idina (c. 890–855), attested by a Neo-Babylonian (c. 626–539) copy on a clay tablet (16,2×8,6 cm), acquired by the Ashmolean Museum in 1922 and likely from Uruk (Iraq).

²⁶ Based on the organization of this tablet, Beaulieu (1990) proposes that GCCI 1 238, which has a similar order of offerings, deals with the same subject of redistribution to the temple staff.

²⁷ Msk 74292a+ [CDLI = P272058] (Arnaud 1986: 350–366); Msk 74297c [CDLI = P272089] (Arnaud 1986: 371); Msk? (Arnaud 1986: 387–390).

²⁸ Msk 74298b+ [CDLI = P272095] (Arnaud 1986: 426–428); Msk 74280a [CDLI = P272026] (Arnaud 1986: 420–425); Msk? (Arnaud 1986: 387–390); Msk 74287a+ (Arnaud 1986: 379–384); Msk 74292a+ [CDLI = P272042] (Arnaud 1986: 350–370); Msk 74303a [CDLI = P272106] (Arnaud 1986: 338–346); Msk 731027 [CDLI = P271297] (Arnaud 1986: 326–337).

about the concept of feeding the gods through eating and drinking, there seems to be no evidence that these practices were specifically combined with the sense of smell.

Beware of mutilations

‘Un des problèmes fondamentaux est donc de trouver et de définir des critères infaillibles pour distinguer une mutilation fortuite d’une destruction faite intentionnellement. À ce propos, il faudrait réétudier toute la statuaire de l’Ancienne Mésopotamie pour y observer des traces incontestables, pour en extraire des preuves concluantes, par exemple des hachures, des fentes, des érafllements et autres dommages indiquant quelque instrument de destruction.’²⁹ (Brandes 1980: 29).

Nearly half a century ago, Mark Brandes suggested that the study of traces of breakage on statues deserved more attention. At present, although technologies have greatly evolved, no concrete protocol applied to Mesopotamian materials has been put into practice in this regard. However, particularly in excavation reports, descriptions of mutilated objects, including many statues, continue to flourish; there is no shortage of synonyms to describe the alleged iconoclastic actions observed. What is missing, however, are the reasonings behind such an interpretation. On the one hand, the archaeological context can sometimes provide sufficient evidence for an interpretation in terms of iconoclasm before we carefully examine the objects themselves. For example, let us consider the hundreds of fragments of statuettes unearthed in Mari (Syria) between the 1930s and the 1950s in the temples of Ištar (Parrot 1956), Nini-Zaza and Ištarat (Parrot 1967), or the more recent – and therefore better documented – discovery of 14 fragments of mutilated statuettes at the same site (Figure 1; see Butterlin *et al.* 2014).

On the other hand, in many other cases, it is much more difficult to immediately distinguish between deliberate destruction and accidental breakage.³⁰ This is especially true of small objects, such as the many worshippers’ statues known from Mesopotamia, which measure less than fifty centimeters. They are both fragile and easily destroyed by the slightest accident. It is, therefore, impossible, from observation of the fractures alone, to tell whether the marks are those of an accidental or intentional push. In the case of larger statues, the elements that are most likely to have been deliberately targeted for symbolic reasons (nose, head, headdress, accessories held in the hands, *etc.*) (May 2012: 18; Nylander 1980: 330–331; Porter 2009a: 214–215; Potts 2024: 278–282) are also the most protruding features and

²⁹ ‘One of the fundamental problems is therefore to find and define reliable criteria for distinguishing accidental mutilation from intentional destruction. In this respect, it would be necessary to re-examine all the statuary of Ancient Mesopotamia in order to observe indisputable traces, to extract conclusive evidence, for example hatches, cracks, scratches and other damage indicating some instrument of destruction.’ (author’s translation).

³⁰ Personal communication with Jean-Claude Bessac (June 2022).



Figure 1. Examples of sets of mutilated statuettes unearthed at Mari. Top left: Temple of Ishtar (1934) © Mission Archéologique de Mari – Archives André Parrot. Top right: Temple of Ninizaza (1952) © Mission Archéologique de Mari – Archives André Parrot. Middle and bottom: Temple « Seigneur du Pays » (2009); TH 09.05; TH 9.10 © Mission Archéologique de Mari – Pascal Butterlin.

the first to break by accident. Therefore, it is important to keep the interpretative doors open rather than trying to decide definitively in such cases where the data is ambivalent.

Let us take the case of the disk of Enheduana.^{31,32} As to the origin of the traces that it bears and as to the reason for its very fragmentary state, the levels of caution vary widely (Mzali 2026: RIME 2.1.1.16). The substantial and invasive nature of the restoration is nearly always remarked, and it was even suggested that its round reconstruction is doubtful (Suter 2007: 324). However, the approach to the causes of its poor state of preservation is less homogeneous. In the first publications, it was claimed that the destruction was deliberate since the traces of pick were very visible, according to the authors (Legrain 1944: 52; Woolley 1955: 49). In recent studies, when it is considered to be a deliberate defacement, the interpretation goes a step further by considering that the destruction in question must have been subsequent to the Old Babylonian period, since a copy³³ of the text on this disk was made at that time (Aruz 2003: 200–201; Frayne 1993: 35–36). Others question this idea, considering that the inscription on the disk is not sufficiently preserved to ensure that the Old Babylonian tablet is indeed a copy³⁴ (Winter 1987: 192). In some cases, it is argued that survival of Enheduana's figure is to be considered detrimental to the idea of mutilation (McHale-Moore 2000: 70). However, one could also draw the opposite conclusion, considering that this figure and its name in the text may have been deliberately preserved, while the rest was targeted.

Regardless of the different interpretations, a common point of these theories is the lack of focus on the archaeological and historical context, which prevents us from asking questions such as who, when, how and why? Finally, concluding whether or not there is intentional damage is perhaps the least important information that can be obtained from the analysis of traces on an artefact. Obviously, it can be useful in providing information about the nature of the damage and the type of representation that was targeted, if we are able to identify it (e.g., deliberate removal of parts of inscriptions, visible traces of intentional mutilations, spreading of fragments over several rooms). However, what remains essential is to determine whether there would have been any reason for the destruction, whether it was deliberate, and if the context³⁵ of the findings suggests so. If this is the case, this data can be part of an informed solution to the question of the origin of the breaks.

³¹ I am grateful to Sonia Mzali for giving me the lead on this case and for the bibliographical references.

³² CBS 16665; Limestone disk (ø 25 cm) from Ur (Iraq) bearing a very fragmentary Sumerian inscription (RIME 2.1.1.16; CDLI = P226450) of Enheduana (priestess, 23rd century BC) and a ritual scene depicting four individuals, of whom Enheduana is considered to be the biggest one. It was discovered in 1926 in Ur (Woolley *et al.* 1976: 55–56).

³³ IM 85457 (RIME 3/2.1.5.3; CDLI = P226450); Clay tablet (9.5×6 cm) bearing an Akkadian inscription from the time of Ibī-Sin (Ur III ruler, 21st century BC), discovered in 1926 in Ur.

³⁴ Unlike many tablets, copies of inscriptions on objects during the Old Babylonian period, this copy does not have a colophon indicating where the inscription was copied from.

³⁵ Contextual studies also provide information about the period of the damages, whether accidental or deliberate. This dating obviously considers modern damage, such as that caused by excavation

One swallow doesn't make a summer

Another important element is to study sets of artefacts. Returning to our bias towards the symbolic and the concrete, there is a risk of looking more closely at cases that best support our reading of statues and their function in a given context. As St John Simpson (2020: 141, 144) wrote about the destroyed Assyrian bas-reliefs, only specific cases are studied but there is a lack of interest in their general state of preservation and the implications of the latter. The objective is, with statuary, to understand practices at the scale of corpus and not of isolated objects that, as such, can provide a biased version.

‘We should therefore take the approach of crime scene investigators and reconstruct the sequence of events which caused the damage and created the evidence before us, keeping in mind what we are missing, and try to explain what we see.’ (Simpson 2020: 141).

Returning to Šuṭrūk-Nahūnte I's actions, the fact that the stela of Narām-Sîn, the code of Hammurabi and the statue of Maništušu are cited overwhelmingly among the removed artefacts, paints a distorted picture. Indeed, it gives the impression that this ensemble was unique to the inhabitants of Susa. However, a vast quantity of artefacts was displaced at the same time, most probably in the same context (Achouche 2024: 122, table 1; Eppihimer 2010; Potts 2016: 226, table 7.9). In addition to the number these varied according to types (stelas, statues – and maybe *kudurrus/narûs*³⁶), provenience (Sippar,³⁷ Ešnunna,³⁸ Akkad,³⁹ Karintaš⁴⁰) and period (c. 23rd to 12th century BC).

For instance, the value of the stela of Narām-Sîn is often discussed from Šuṭrūk-Nahūnte I's point of view. Those analyses offer interesting insights regarding the importance of the Akkadian sovereign, who was mentioned many times in the millennium following his reign – a similar situation to that of his ancestor Sargon of Akkad (Eppihimer 2014). However, bearing in mind the much larger collection of artefacts that Šuṭrūk-Nahūnte I carried away, it may be worth expanding on these conclusions. One of the arguments in favor of the value given to the stela would be that the name of the Akkadian ruler was not erased unlike others (Feldman 2009: 44). However, the fact that Šuṭrūk-Nahūnte I was the one who had the inscriptions erased on the other monuments is not certain (Harper *et al.* 1992: 161). Secondly, Narām-Sîn's inscription is in poor condition and it is doubtful whether the parts of the inscription

techniques.

³⁶ Many Babylonian *kudurrus/narûs* have been found in Susa. Their presence there has been the subject of several theories. What stands out is that they bear no Šuṭrūk-Nahūnte I's inscription, except Sb 14 in the name of Meli-Šipak. This is the reason for the theory that it is maybe not a *kudurrus/narûs*, despite its iconography (Seidl 1989: 31–32).

³⁷ EKI 22 [on Sb 4; CDLI = P215544] (König 1965: 76).

³⁸ EKI 24b [on Sb 49] (König 1965: 77; Scheil 1908: 1–3); EKI 24c [on Sb 56, 57, 58, 59 and 60] (König 1965: 77–78).

³⁹ EKI 24a [on Sb 47] (König 1965: 77; Scheil 1908: 3).

⁴⁰ EKI 23 [on Sb 14] (König 1965: 77; Scheil 1902: 163–165; Seidl 1989: 31–32).

that have been preserved were preserved voluntarily (Kupper 1971: 100). I would argue that it could just as easily be an unmeticulous erasure, since the remaining text cells are the ones at the extremities. In the end, the stela underwent a similar treatment to that of the majority of artefacts, namely erasing the original inscription and adding the Elamite (= Hatamtite) one. Attributing the stela to its original owner is the norm in all the inscriptions added in Elamite (= Hatamtite) by Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I. Even when the name was not known, a space was left blank (a *vacat*) to add the name later or to insist on its absence, in inscriptions with a structure very similar from one artefact to the next. Likewise, the dedication to the god Inšušinak is found on most objects displaced by Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I. A peculiarity of the stela, however, is the presence of a variation in the inscription with a term hard to translate (see *supra*). The other inscriptions added by Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I, although quite repetitive from one object to another, do not include it. This difference may be, indeed, related to a particular value attached to the stela, with the desire to stress its ‘preservation’. However, it could also be a variation of the inscription, based on the type of artefact. Indeed, the stela’s inscription is compared to those on other objects, which are statues. It means that they differ in type, rareness and size. To sum up, the main conclusions regarding the stela of Narām-Sîn may be broadly applied to the whole corpus relocated to Susa.⁴¹ First, the owner’s identity was valued, perhaps as a symbol of ancient rulers’ glory. Second, the symbolic value of offering the Akkadian artefacts to the Susian god allowed Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I to insist on his victory. Nevertheless, the stela is indeed a unique object and may have been considered as such⁴² – but this could be unrelated to its Akkadian origins, as Maništušu’s statue bears an inscription similar to the most common ones.

Finally, it seems that two contradictory positions emerge.⁴³ The first will opt that Šūtrūk-Nahūnte I took good care of the artefacts and protected them. Even without the uncertain translation about the artefacts’ protection, it is possible to consider that these abductions were intended to emphasize the value of the ancient rulers and to appropriate their power. The second option sees the treatment of these artefacts in line with those of the enemies deported, abused, deprived of all agency, taken away to be annihilated and to emphasize their defeat. Is it possible to find a middle ground – a conclusion that addresses the survival of the name alongside the erasure of the inscription? Such a conclusion would show that deportation, while affirming the object’s value, coexists with damage, which serves as a means of imposing control

⁴¹ This is generally done with Akkadian deported objects. It is related to the fact that we ourselves put Akkad on a pedestal and probably attribute a certain uniqueness to this period. It has indeed been proven that the first empire and ‘glorious’ past was often remembered (Eppihimer 2014), but that does not mean that the rest of the productions were not considered.

⁴² The fact that this stela may have set the codes for other representations – or, at least, part of a group of compositions that established standards for later periods – is one of the things that makes it valuable. These would include the rock-reliefs with which the inhabitants of Susa may already have been familiar (Strommenger 1963; Suter 2010: 335).

⁴³ Very visible in the proceedings published by Natalie May (2012), in which Joan G. Westenholz (2012) evokes protection and studies these artefacts according to this theory, while Nathaniel Levto (2012) speaks of violence and hypothesizes in the light of this theory.

over it. In this reading, the dedication to the god Inšušinak can function both as a way of preserving these objects and as a method of appropriating them. It is to be reckoned that at the time, several views came together, and the value attached to a practice was more complex than the single motivation that current research is likely to define.

Conclusions

Getting to the end of this overview, it is relevant to dwell a little on the term ‘retired’ used in the title of this paper. By this, I meant to make the parallel with human existence, and the same applies to the use of words such as ‘life’ and ‘death’ in the bibliography of artefacts paradigm.⁴⁴ These references to human existence allow us to propose a useful segmentation. Object biographies have been theorized for a long time. It emerged concurrently with the development of theories on the agency and power of art in anthropology, leading to the study of objects’ consumption, re-use, reception and so on.⁴⁵ The notion of biography thus emphasizes recontextualization. In 2009, in *Knowledge as Cultural Biography: Lives of Mesopotamian Monuments*, Marian Feldman stressed the importance of recontextualization in the process of understanding an artefact. In 2004, in *Itinéraire biographique d’une bouteille de cidre* Thierry Bonnot evoked the social life of objects, which is inseparable from that of individuals. In the case of Mesopotamian statues, I consider them to have been ‘retired’ to museums, because there they experience a ‘life’ completely outside the main characteristics of their original context. They take on a whole new function: aesthetic, educational, etc. Once again, an illustration from the work of Jean Evans (2012) provides a vivid demonstration of this singular function of the museum. Museography is inspired by what is familiar and already documented, and what is seen in museums inevitably affects our mental reconstruction. But this does not only affect the artefacts exhibited in museums, but also – perhaps in a subtler way – the conceptions on which a society is based, the precise dynamics of groups, the complexity of interactions, and so on. However, this theory can serve to remind us that the ‘life’ we attribute to the objects we study today is only what we are able to reconstruct for them because of our biases and expectations, and that their ancient ‘life’ will always be somewhat elusive.

⁴⁴ To convey an idea, a methodology and a precise approach to artefacts, this vocabulary of ‘lives’ and ‘deaths’ is very effective. But I realize how dangerous the analogy with human existence is, the more I mobilize it. Words are important, no doubt about that, and so are analogies. And sometimes, by giving more consideration to the ‘lives’ of those statues than to real lives, the audience or the readership reacts to my thesis’ subject in a problematic way. Without questioning the value of heritage and the violence of culturocide, I want to insist on the distance to be taken with the ‘biography’ terminology of my study. To explore this further, see Terrasse 2015.

⁴⁵ The concept of object biography was first proposed by Igor Kopytoff (1986). However, the primary parallel drawn with the slave as a commodity – limiting the scope of slavery implications – makes its application to objects unfortunate. The editor of the book in which he published, Arjun Appadurai (1986), also fuels reflections on the life of objects. Ten years later, Alfred Gell (1998) definitively established the habit of observing objects as social agents, through the concept of agency.

The best way to progress despite this observation is certainly to first accept those limits and embrace them for what they are. This means keeping in mind that our methodologies are heirs to decades of changing discourses within our disciplines and that they need to be both completed and deconstructed at the same time (Hamilakis 1999; Hamilakis *et al.* 1999). First, some of the theories at the origin of our disciplines are extremely problematic and have inevitably left their mark on our current practices.⁴⁶ Secondly, our technical vocabulary, typologies, and classifications do not necessarily have any reality in the societies we study but are only tools useful for our own understanding.⁴⁷ Third, the subdivision into subdisciplines itself is a construction aimed at making research more structured, but our conclusions should strive to be interdisciplinary.⁴⁸ Indeed, the simplest artefact comes from a context studied by archaeology, bears an inscription studied by philology and has a form studied by art history, as well as a place in society studied by anthropology, *etc.* Finally, keeping in mind that adaptations, changes, solutions, appear through exchanges and trial and error, it is therefore crucial to remain attentive to proposals and ideas across disciplines.⁴⁹

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List of abbreviations

Museums:

- A. Istanbul Museum
- AO Antiquités Orientales (Louvre collections)

⁴⁶ To explore this further, see Antonaccio 2005; Bahrani 2006; Bahrani *et al.* 2011; Hicks 2020; Tamur 2023.

⁴⁷ To explore this further, see Evans 2012; Grataloup 2011: 69; Langin-Hooper 2014: 460.

⁴⁸ To explore this further, see Crawford 2014; Demoule 2012.

⁴⁹ To explore this further, see Brown *et al.* 2014; Jotheri 2021; Tamur 2023.

Ash. Ashmolean Museum
 IM Iraq Museum
 Sb Suse (Louvre collections)

Collections of inscriptions:

CDLI Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (<http://cdli.ucla.edu/>)
 EKI König, F.W. 1965. *Die elamischen Königsinschriften*
 GCCI Dougherty, R. 1923-1933. *Archives from Erech: Time of Nebuchadrezzar and Nabonidus*. Vol. 1
 Msk Texts from Meskene
 NBC Nies Babylonian Collection (Yale)
 NT Texts from Nippur
 OECT/OECI Langdon, S. 1923. Oxford Editions of Cuneiform Text/Inscription
 TuL Ebeling, E. 1931. *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier*. Vol. 1
 YBC Yale Babylonian Collection

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