

THE URUK VASE

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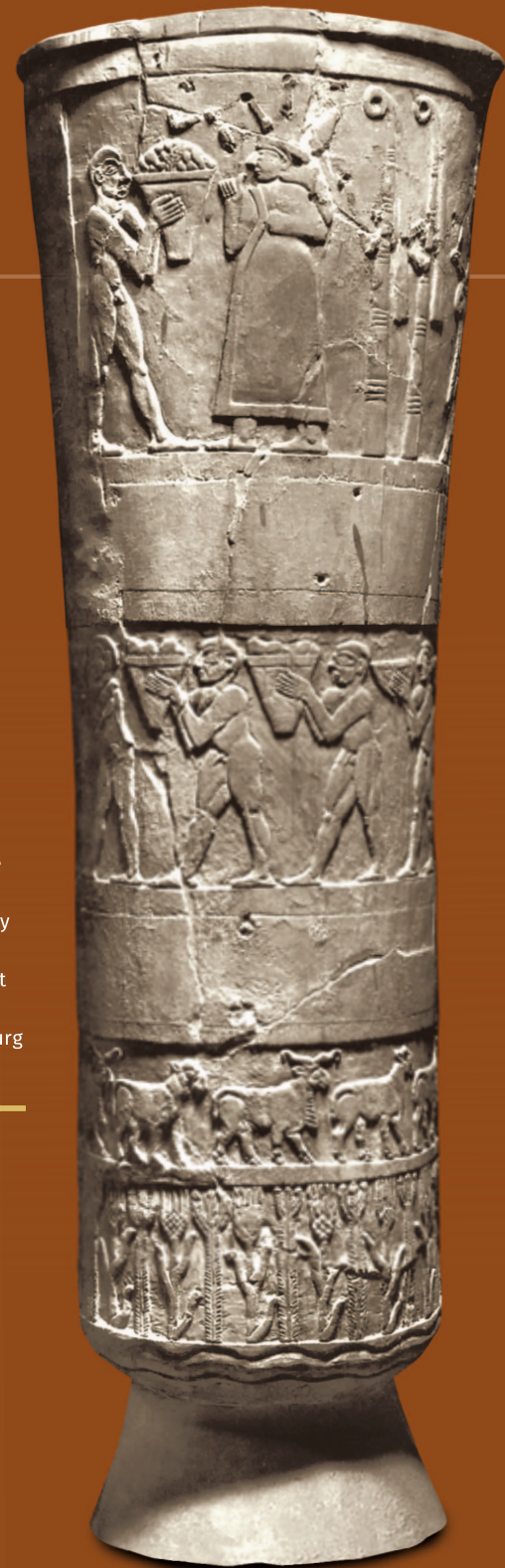
The most iconic object surviving from the earliest cities of Mesopotamia is the Uruk Vase (ca. 3000 BCE), a tall cylindrical container with slightly flaring sides and a high foot (Figs. 3S1.1, 3S1.2). Carved from a single piece of grey alabaster, this remarkable monument stands a bit more than one meter in height. Its fragments, discovered in the Eanna temple precinct of the goddess Inana at the ancient city of Uruk, were excavated in 1933–1934 by German archaeologists. The object is also known as the Warka Vase, named for the modern village of Warka that is the closest settlement to the ancient site of Uruk.

The vase is encircled with four registers of images that depict the fundamental components of early Sumerian urban society, each building one upon the other. While the imagery does not constitute an explicit narrative or story, it conveys something of the Sumerian worldview at the dawn of history. In particular, it emphasizes the prosperity and abundance that ensue when the king of a city possesses the favor of the gods. Some scholars associate the vase's imagery, and especially its uppermost register, with the Sacred Marriage between the human king of a city (here Uruk) and the goddess Inana, here represented by her human priestess.

At the bottom of the vase are four wavy lines representing the waters of the marshy southern alluvium. From these nurturing waters, plants emerge, depicted in a register of alternating date palm offshoots and flax plants (Figs. 3S1.3, 3S1.4). The date palm and flax were foundational resources

Fig. 3S1.1 Right

The Warka Vase (now in the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad) conveys in images the essential structure of early Sumerian society with the god of the city as the single most important resident of the city. © Foto Marburg /Art Resource, NY.



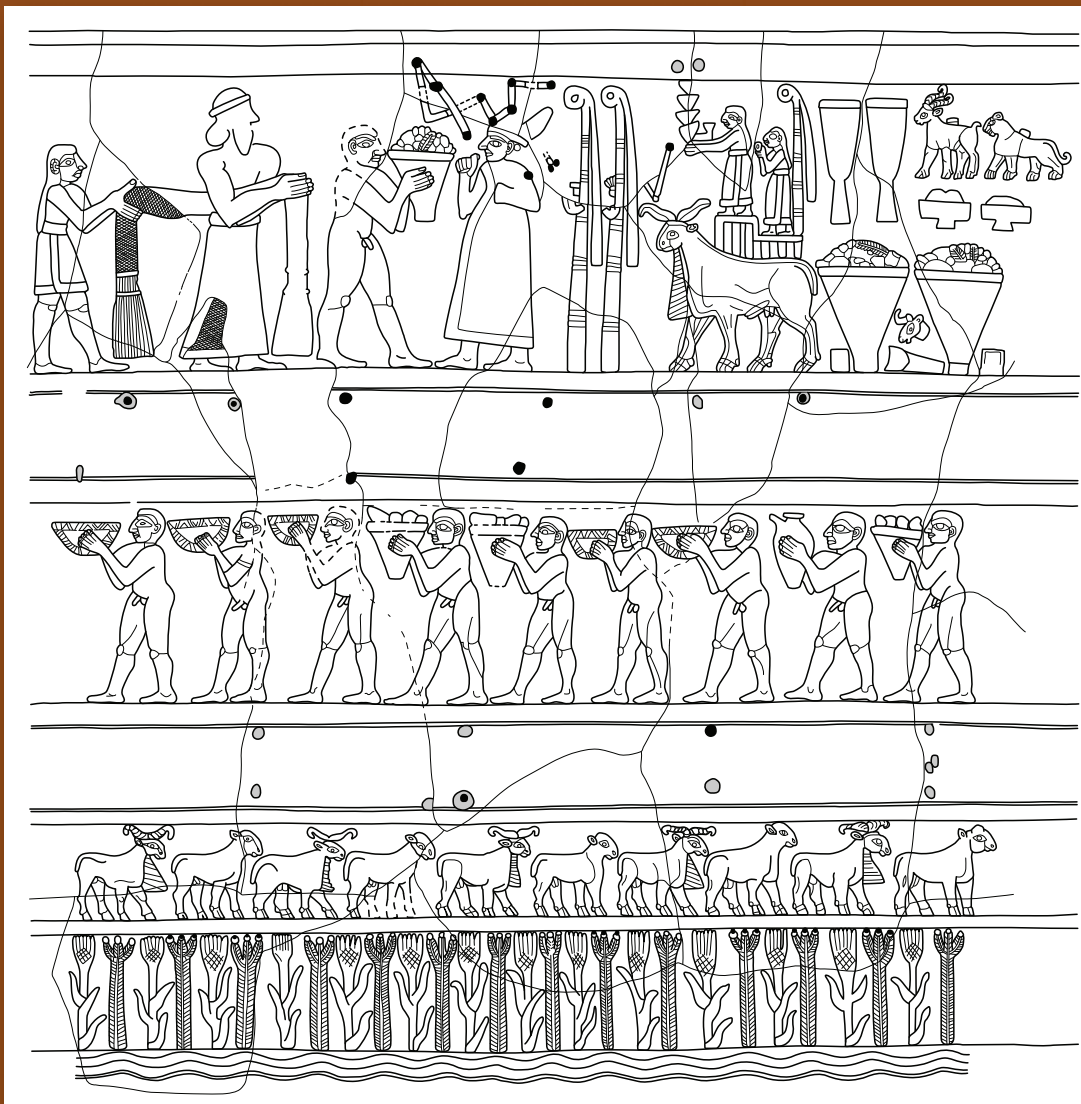


Fig. 3S1.2 Left

This line drawing of the registers on the Warka Vase provides a probable reconstruction of the scene on the upper register. Here the priest king is reconstructed as holding a long fabric belt which he will present to the priestess for the goddess. After Suter 2014: fig. 1. Redrawn by Ardeth Anderson.

Fig. 3S1.3 Below

On the bottom register of the Warka Vase two plants alternate above water. The plant with the offshoots can clearly be identified as an offshoot of a date palm, pictured here. The other is often interpreted as flax. Together these plants represent the orchard horticulture typical of Sumerian cities.



for Mesopotamia. The offshoot propagated the date palm, assuring abundant harvests, while the flax was the plant from which the goddess Inana wove the wedding sheets for her marriage to the shepherd Dumuzi. This marriage, re-enacted through the Sacred Marriage Ceremony, with the king in the role of Dumuzi, assured the continuation of mankind.

The register immediately above the plants depicts another major element of Mesopotamian prosperity: alternating (domesticated) rams and ewes. These animals, in addition to providing milk and meat, also provided wool, which was transformed by human labor and ingenuity into the textiles that were Mesopotamia's single most important manufactured commodity. Textiles were traded across the

ancient Middle East for raw materials and processed goods through to medieval times.

Above the row of animals, separated by a wide band, is a row of nude males carrying baskets, spouted jars, and bowls overflowing with food. This register depicts an endless procession of foodstuffs delivered daily to the divine household shown in the uppermost register. The nudity of the male figures in the procession signals their purity.

The uppermost register depicts the figure of the priest-king, the paramount male figure of the city of Uruk, greeting the priestess of Inana. The priest-king is clad in a distinctive net skirt and accompanied front and back by acolytes bearing offerings of food and textiles. The priestess wears a headdress with two prominent projections and a long plain robe, and gestures to the man in the net skirt with her raised thumb. She stands in front of the gateposts of Inana, which take the form of reed bundles with streamers attached to the upper ring. The form of the reed bundles is identical to that of the proto-cuneiform sign for Inana's name.

Behind the gateposts are depicted a number of cult objects that include, remarkably, two vases identical in form to the Uruk Vase itself. Fruits and baskets full to overflowing with date bunches stand on the floor. In the field above are small stands with loaves of bread or cheese and the head of a bovid.

Fig. 3S1.4 Right

Date palms were at the center of Sumerian myth and religion. On the Ur-Namma Stele (B16676), the king pours a libation into the date palm altar that separates him from Nanna, the city god of Ur. Detail from the second register of the Ur-Namma stele.

