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Tiny Dancers: An Archaeological View of Hidden Figures on the Mari Plaque

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Abstract

A miniscule figure is incised in the "lashes" around the left eye of a small gypsum plaque from the ancient city of Mari, known as the Stele of Ninhursag. With left leg raised, the figure, no more than six mm tall, would appear to be dancing. The plaque is already visually ambiguous in that it may be read as a human face, a female body, and, variously, a divine landscape or an owl. Is the figure a private joke hidden in a cosmic pun, self-referential, or a profound statement on the nature of existence? What did ancient viewers see and understand when viewing this plaque? And why has the figure not been recognized before now?

Keywords: *Mari; Ninhursag Stele; ritual processions; Warka Vase; oculus.*

Introduction[2]

Nearly a century of excavations at Mari (Tell Hariri) on the Euphrates River in Syria (Figure 1) has revealed the rich cultural and political history of one of the grand cities of the ancient Near East. From its beginnings in the first century of the third millennium BCE to its destruction by

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[2] I wish to thank Glenn Schwartz and Elizabth Knott as well as the anonymous reviewers for suggestions that vastly improved the manuscript; Dominique Beyer, Pascal Butterlin and Michel Fortin for help both in navigating the complexity of Mari stratigraphy (any errors are entirely my own) and in tracking down original photos of the object. I am also grateful to the following for permission to reproduce images: the Musée de la civilisation, Quebec City, Cristoph Uehlinger, Ianir Milevski, Estelle Orrelle and Béatrice Muller.

Hammurabi in 1759 BCE, Mari proved equally aligned with the civilizations of both Southern and Northern Mesopotamia.

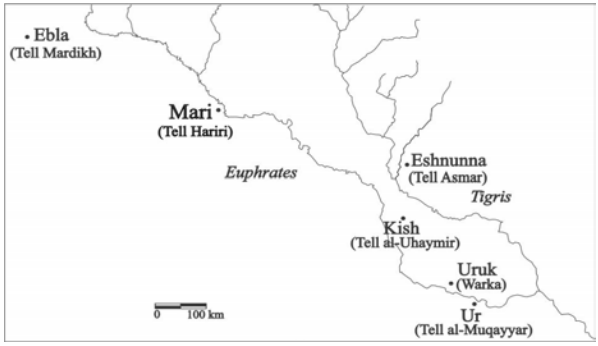

Figure 1. Map with key sites.

Over its lifespan, the city experienced significant destruction and rebuilding events, allowing excavators to divide the archaeological remains into three basic periods: City I (c. 2900-2650 BCE), City II (c. 2550-2300 BCE), and City III (c. 2300-1759 BCE).[3] A focus on the monumental core of the city, comprising a well-preserved palace and a series of temples, led to the recovery of a major archive of cuneiform texts dating primarily to the last phases of City III, and, among a vast collection of statuary and other artefacts, an enigmatic gypsum plaque from City II.[4] This plaque, the so-called Stele of Ninhursag (Figure 2), has occasioned considerable discussion since its discovery in 1997. Of uncertain date and uncertain stratigraphic context in relation to the late third millennium BCE temple that has given the object its name, the image it bears is unique in the corpus of greater Mesopotamia. It in fact embodies three images in one, and while there is general agreement about two, the third has been

[3] Pascal Butterlin, "Religious Life, Urban Fabric, and Regeneration Processes at Mari during the Second Half of the Third Millennium BCE," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Material Religion in the Ancient Near East and Egypt*, ed. Nicola Laneri and Sharon Steadman (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 105.

[4] Jean-Claude Margueron, *Mari: métropole de l'Euphrate au IIIe et au début du IIe millénaire avant Jésus-Christ* (Picard/ERC, 2004).

subject to varied interpretations. The brilliance of the plaque, not just as a "work of art" but as an ancient intellectual exercise, remains underappreciated, in part because discussions have been largely unconstrained by the archaeological complexity of its findspot. This has led to assumptions that all aspects of the image depict a specific divinity. Yet basic archaeological concerns—chronology, context, and contingency—open a wider range of interpretative possibilities.

Figure 2. The Stele of Ninhursag. Photo by Jacques Lessard in Michel Fortin, *Syria, Land of Civilizations* (Éditions de l'Homme, 1999), 234. Reproduced with permission of the Musée de la civilisation, Quebec City.

Both the size of the object and its possible function warrant the term "plaque" rather than "stele." Roughly the size of a large Manila envelope at 35.7cm high and 18.5cm wide at the base, tapering to 13.5cm at the top, the plaque was first incised, then painted over with bitumen.[5] The picture thus resulting consists of three sections. The top and bottom sections are bands formed by a series of triangles infilled with straight lines, although two triangles in the top band are empty. The central section is home to multiple entities, but is dominated by two sets, side-by-side, of seven concentric circles fringed with what appear to be simple dashes. The circles are surmounted by two lines curving downwards from the edges of the plaque until they meet in the center. These lines are also topped with tiny dashes. A straight line then leads to approximately the midpoint of the piece, terminating within a circle. Immediately beneath the circle is a row of animals, cervidae (deer),[6] bovids (oryx, gazelle), or caprovids (ibex, goats),[7] with pairs flanking vegetation on either end of the row. Beneath this is a triangle filled with dots. Two animals face the triangle on either side, between which are four birds, either roosting on land or floating on water.[8] One bird is standing. Although the animals are much fainter than the rest of the incised images, conveying the impression that the top part (and especially the eyes) is more important, more powerful than the rest, remnant traces of black indicate that these figures, too, were coated with bitumen at one point. The difference in preservation between the upper and lower sections may be explained by the fact that the plaque was found

[5] Jean-Claude Margueron, "Une stèle du temple dit de Ninhursag," in *Akh Purratim,* 2 ed., Jean-Claude Margueron, Olivier Rouault, and Pierre Lombard (Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée MOM Éditions, 2007), 123.

[6] Thomas Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections About an Alabaster Stele from Mari (Syria) and its Possible Relations to the Western Mediterranean," *Cuadernos de Prehistoria y Arqueología de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid* 39 (2013): 8; Piotr Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology: An Archaic Plaque from Mari and the Sumerian Birth-Goddess Ninhursag" in *De l'argile au numérique. Mélanges assyriologiques en l'honneur de Dominique Charpin,* ed. Grégory Chambon, Michel Guichard, and A.-I. Langlois (Peeters, 2019), 986.

[7] Fortin, *Syria,* 284; Margueron, "Une stele," 127.

[8] Margueron, "Une stele," 124.

in three fragments.[9] Since soil conditions may vary even centimeters apart, it is likely that the pieces experienced different taphonomies within the pit in which they were found.

The arched lines over the sets of circles immediately read as eyebrows and eyes. But the straight line ending in the small circle in conjunction with the downward direction of the triangle, while certainly feasible as nose and mouth, equally signify the female torso. The downward triangle, often incised with dots, is known from countless representations of the vulva on objects and images over millennia, not least of which is the proto-cuneiform sign SAL (MUNUS)[10] for "female." In this view, the concentric circles become breasts, while the small circle depicts the navel.

Debate over the date of the plaque, the meaning of specific features, and especially the possibility that a third entity is represented in those same features continues.[11] Most writers focus on the search for parallels that might indicate not only when and from whence individual motifs derived, but also their symbolic value. Scholarly focus has been on the eyes and the vulva. The eyes, because of the distinctive treatment of this organ in other images from greater Mesopotamia, such as the statues from Tell Asmar

[9] Margueron, "Une stele," 123.

[10] See Robert Englund, "Non-Numerical Signs," *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative*, accessed February 5, 2025, https://cdli-gh.github.io/proto-cuneiform_signs/; Kathryn Kelley, "More Than a Woman? On Proto-cuneiform SAL and the Archaic "Tribute List," in *Current Research in Early Mesopotamian Studies,* ed. Armando Bramanti, Nicholas L. Kraus, and Palmiro Notizia (Zaphon, 2021), 9.

[11] Margueron, "Une stele;" Irit Ziffer, "Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses," *Ägypten und Levante* 20 (2010): 411; Patrick Michel, "De dieux pierres levees a Mari au IIIe millénaire: attestations archéologiques et pratiques religieuses (Syrie)," in *Pierres levées, stèles anthropomorphes et dolmens/Standing Stones, Anthropomorphic Stelae and Dolmens*, ed. Tara Steimer-Herbet (Archaeopress, 2011), 103; Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections;" Christoph Uehlinger, "Ninḫursaĝa oder 'Große Mutter?' Eine ikonographisch-ikonologische Skizze zu einem Phänomen der longue durée," in '*Vom Leben umfangen.' Ägypten, das Alte Testament und das Gespräch der Religionen,* ed. Jakob Wimmer and Georg Gafus, Ägypten und Altes Testament 80 (Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 407; Estelle Orrelle and Liora Kolska Horwitz, "The Pre-Iconography, Iconography and Iconology of a Sixth to Fifth millennium BC Near Eastern Incised Bone," *Time and Mind* 9, no. 1 (2016): 3; Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology."

and the 'eye idols' from Tell Brak (Figure 3). The vulva, because of the deep history of gendered discussions of female imagery and fertility.

a

b

Figures 3a-b. Eyes: a) Statue from Tell Asmar, photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons; b) "Eye Idol" from Tell Brak. Metropolitan Museum public domain, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/324145.

On the basis of comparanda from the Late Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age, from the Iberian Peninsula to Anatolia, and from Northern Syria to the Southern Levant, the image has variously been interpreted as a tree goddess, due to the two miniscule depictions of vegetation;[12] the sun, on the basis of the dashes around the eyes;[13] a deity with beard and horns, if the top and bottom bands of triangles represent hair;[14] Mistress of Animals;[15] the sun god and mother goddess together because of a phallic understanding of circles[16] or, specifically, the Mesopotamian gods Enki

[12] Ziffer, "Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses."
[13] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections," 13-15.
[14] Margueron, "Une stele," 127-8.
[15] Jean-Marie Durand, *Le culte des pierres et les monuments commémoratifs en Syrie amorrite*, Florilegium marianum, 8 (SEPOA, 2005).
[16] Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography," 22

and Ninhursag;[17] and finally, Ninhursag (or birth goddesses more generally), and her incarnation as a "natural landscape."[18]

The point of this summation is, in part, to recognize that if this is what the viewer, ancient or modern, sees, this is what the plaque signifies, at the same time as there are many other possible receptions and experiences of the image. It is also to point out how little consensus underpins this discussion, and how much modern academic concerns do. Despite being well-versed in various aspects of the cultural context to which the plaque belongs, these writers are undoubtedly presenting an etic rather than an emic view. Each author breaks down individual elements of the image in order to present that view, ultimately privileging one element above the others. Would ancient viewers approach an image in this way? They might be mystified by the image, they might be privy to "insider" knowledge that would make all clear, but in either case, they might abduct the multitudes encompassed in the plaque as a coherent whole, even if they did not understand all the component parts. With the exception of Piotr Steinkeller's analysis, none of the interpretations to date consider all the individual elements of the image and all the possible pictures they create, as not just of equal value, but as presenting a *single* concept. And none have identified the presence of an additional anthropomorphic figure buried within the details.

[17] Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography," 32-4.
[18] Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology," 985-6.

The Tiny Dancer

Figure 4. Left eye of the Mari Plaque with anthropomorphic figures. My photo of the original photo by Jacques Lessard in Fortin, *Syria*, 234, with enhanced exposure and contrast.

This hitherto unrecognized figure, that I shall call Figure A, came to my attention when I was studying a photograph of the plaque in preparation for another paper. It is an anthropomorph (Figure 4). Its head, turned to the left, features an enlarged proboscis as is common in Late Uruk and Early Dynastic[19] Sumerian images of humans, well-known examples of which include the Warka Vase (Figure 5), the Standard of Ur (Figure 6), and cylinder seals of Puabi that feature a banquet scene (Figure 7).

[19] "Late Uruk" and "Early Dynastic" are terms in Mesopotamian periodization corresponding to "Late Chalcolithic" and "Early Bronze" in more general frameworks. These periods date approximately to 3300-3000 BCE and 3000-2350 BCE, respectively.

Figure 5. The Warka Vase. National Museum of Iraq. Photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 6. Photo by Geni, license GFDL CC-BY-SA via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 7. Seal with modern sealing, from Puabi's tomb, Ur; photo by Nic McPhee Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic.

The arms of Figure A extend straight out from the shoulders, bending at the elbow (Figure 4). The left arm turns in towards the body while the right hangs straight down. The torso appears triangular. The left leg is bent so that the foot does not quite touch the line of the outermost circle of the eye as the right foot does. It is likely Figure A has an erect penis. A curved horizontal line extends from the groin to join the incision to the left. Figure A's left leg is incised, or painted, over this curved line, beginning at the knee. However, it is possible that this second incision is another, less well-defined, human figure and that the curved line extends from it, forming an elongated leg bent towards the right.

Several of these dashes appear markedly irregular when the primary photographs[20] are enlarged, indicating that, unlike the lines of the rest of the image, they were not formed by a single stroke. If they were, both sides of the line would be more or less parallel, depending on the angle at which the point was held. And they are not. At least, not in every case. Magnification of the image (Figure 8) also reveals that, in comparison,

[20] Fortin, *Syria,* 234; Joan Aruz and Ronald Wallenfels, eds., *Art of the First Cities: the Third Millennium BC from the Mediterranean to the Indus* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 163.

certain lines forming the animals of the lower section are wobbly—for example, the front left leg of the first horned animal on the left.

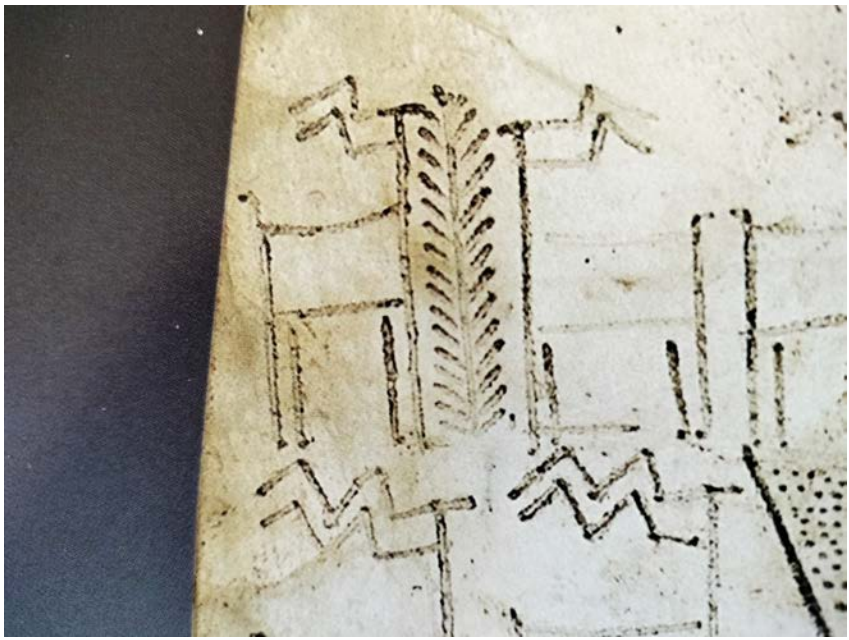

Figure 8. My photo of the original photo by Jacques Lessard in Fortin, *Syria*, 234, with enhanced exposure and contrast.

But in contrast to the dashes, both sides of the lines here are perfectly parallel. Some dashes in eyes and eyebrows would seem to have been formed, if not by a different tool, then certainly differently from the rest of the image. All other lines are gouged with a single stroke of a tool with a point one to two mm wide. The Mari plaque is made of gypsum alabaster,[21] an exceptionally soft material with a Moh's hardness rating of less than 2—so soft, a fingernail is enough to cut a shallow incision.[22] The squiggly, uneven lines of the dashes are unlikely to be explained, then, by

[21] Other statues from Mari are made of this stone as are many of the "eye idols" from Tell Brak, another factor in the propensity to associate this piece with Uruk period amulets.

[22] National Park Service, "Mohs Hardness Scale," April 12, 2023, https://www.nps.gov/articles/mohs-hardness-scale.htm.

the material, especially when compared with the leaves of the plants below. Here the same basic shape is highly regular, the lines appropriately parallel.

The clearest of these irregular dashes are at the top of the eye (Figure 4). Counting clockwise from Figure A (or 0), the sides of dashes 54 to 63 were incised as individual lines. In fact, these dashes are sufficiently resolved to also warrant identification as anthropomorphic figures. A rectangular head tops dash number 55, while number 56 appears to be holding a conical cup of the kind seen on cylinder seals (for example, Figure 7). Dash number 57 is bent forward, to the right, with an arm extended behind, while number 58 is kicking up its right leg. Number 62 is extending its right arm forward. Number 63 has a thickened nose and bent legs. Several irregular incisions are also evident on the bottom of the left eye, though they are clearer when the plaque is inverted as in the image below (Figure 9).

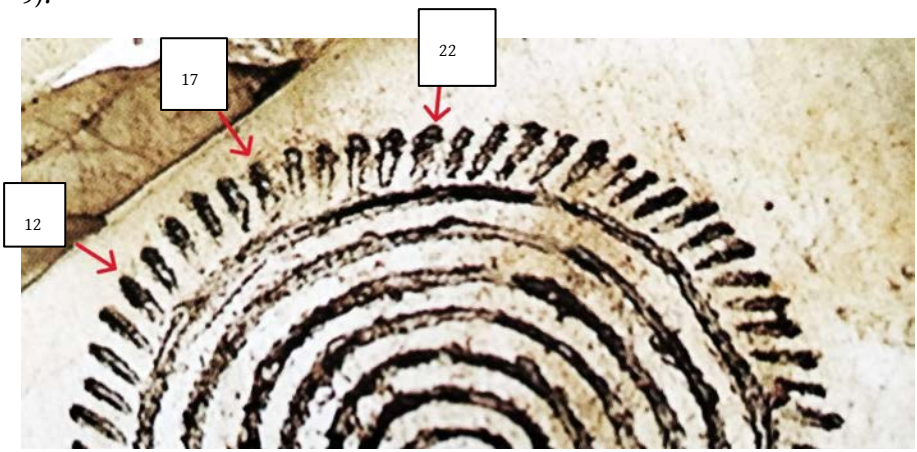

Figure 9. Left eye, inverted, showing anthropomorphic figures at the bottom of the eye. My photo of the original photo by Jacques Lessard in Fortin, *Syria*, 234, with enhanced exposure and contrast.

For example, the legs of dash number 12 are set apart, with the right leg bent at the knee, and the left short. Dash number 17 appears to be striding

forward, again with a bent right leg, while number 22, with rounded head and thickened nose, is leaning forward. The angle of the dashes, anthropomorphic or otherwise, suggests movement, swaying, marching even, towards the right, an impression potentially enhanced by the flickering flames of lamp light, the heightened emotion of religious fervor, or even psychotropic substances.[23] Most importantly, they are all oriented to Figure A, with the apparent exception of number 67, Figure B. This supports the idea that rather than the leg of Figure B, the curved line linking it to Figure A is indeed the latter's penis.

Similarly to the left eye, the top of the right eye also manifests some thickened, shaped dashes (Figure 10) with bent or extended extremities, facing clockwise. Unfortunately, the place where there may have been a parallel figure to A is broken.

Figure 10. Details of the right eye. My photo of the original photo by Jacques Lessard in Fortin, *Syria*, 234, with enhanced exposure and contrast.

[23] For discussions of both situations see the various entries in Diana Stein, Sarah Kielt Costello, and Karen Polinger Foster, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* (Routledge, 2022); for sensory experiences, contributions in Kiersten Neumann and Allison Thomason, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Senses in the Ancient Near East* (Routledge, 2022).

Irregular shapes are also evident among the dashes adorning the eyebrows, primarily at the left edge and where the curved lines come together in the middle. It is a critical question whether the remaining dashes were intended to be completely filled in with bitumen, thus obscuring any identification as individuals, or whether a less proficient painter completed this task.

Skeptics might well explain away most of these dashes as a product of the vicissitudes of carving such minute strokes plus the taphonomic trials of the plaque, whereby the bitumen has worn haphazardly. I cannot assert unreservedly that this is not the case for most. Without examination of the actual object at high magnification, currently proscribed because of Syria's civil war, it is impossible to be definitive. But to *assume* this is the case is to risk implying that ancient makers would not be capable. Figure A certainly cannot be explained in this manner. It cannot be mere happenstance that the bitumen pooled in such a way as to resemble a style of figure well known in other media. Admittedly, at six mm long, Figure A seems impossibly small to be executed with ancient carving technologies, but we know from far more elaborate cylinder seals that it was not. The seal shown in Figure 7, for example, is 4.4 cm tall and 2.3cm in diameter. Divided into two bands, the figures on it are, by my calculations, approximately 14 mm tall, yet details of clothing, furniture, hands, and feet are quite evident. The figures on a seal 1.55cm high from the cemetery at Ur[24] are 9 mm tall.[25]

With the exception of Figure A, indeed, *because* of Figure A, the differentiation in dashes rimming both eyes and eyebrows is, if not intentional, then certainly significant in the effect thus created. It would

[24] "Cylinder Seal, Object Number 120558," The British Museum, accessed December 11, 2025, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1928-1009-41.

[25] Measurements are taken from photographs enlarged or reduced to life-size, so they may be inaccurate by a millimeter or two.

evoke the idea of a ritual procession to anyone in the third millennium BCE familiar with such events. The specificity of Figure A, though, indicates it is intentional. The dashes may represent generic humans in an idealized ritual performance oriented to Figure A. Some participants fulfill specific roles, others represent the faceless mass of humanity. Or, this may be a depiction of a particular event. Depending on whether the interaction between object and viewer is static or dynamic, fleeting or continuing, the image with its concentric circles and dancing dashes (easily animated in ceremonial conditions) may induce a certain state of mind, heighten engagement with the otherworldly,[26] or captivate the viewer in a bid to communicate or control.[27] One (but not the only) way these effects may be engendered is by drawing on the familiar yet mysterious experiences of collective ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings, and religious festivals, so that the viewer may readily inscribe their own emotional memories onto the image. This kind of response would enhance the image's ability to work on the viewer. How, then, was the object used? Who is Figure A? And why has he been overlooked to date? This last question is perhaps the simplest to answer.

Practices of Transmission

Figure A would certainly be visible to the eye on the actual object, just as, if one looks closely, it is in fact quite evident in the earliest (and best) photograph published at slightly less than life-size (26cm x 13.5cm [base]): that of Michel Fortin's catalogue to the exhibition *Syria: Land of Civilizations* (Figure 1 here). It is also discernible in the Metropolitan Museum's

[26] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting a deeper dive into these issues, which are further developed in a forthcoming paper called Death and the Mari Maidens.

[27] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

catalogue to the exhibition *Art of the First Cities* and Jean-Claude Margueron's publication *Mari: Métropole l'Euphrate*. The issue is twofold: one, how we look at images and our assumptions about what we should see; and two, our practices of transmission. Most authors republish Anne Horrenberger's drawing of the plaque,[28] where some attempt to reproduce the open-ended lines of the individual dashes around the eye and eyebrow has been largely reduced to thin, straight strokes, only in part because of the small scale of the original published line illustration. The variation in thickness in the concentric circles within the eye, and places where the lines overlap as the circle is finished, are omitted. The circle that ends the straight line bisecting the piece is, for some reason, drawn as a horizontal sickle moon (Figure 11). It may be that the piece was not completely conserved at the time of drawing, but these small discrepancies matter. For one thing, variations in thickness of the lines filling in the triangles are informative as to the execution of the image, potential tools used, and attitudes to perfection. For another, they are carried through to the next iteration of discussion.

[28] Margueron, *Mari*, fig. 92; Margueron, "Une stele," fig. 2.

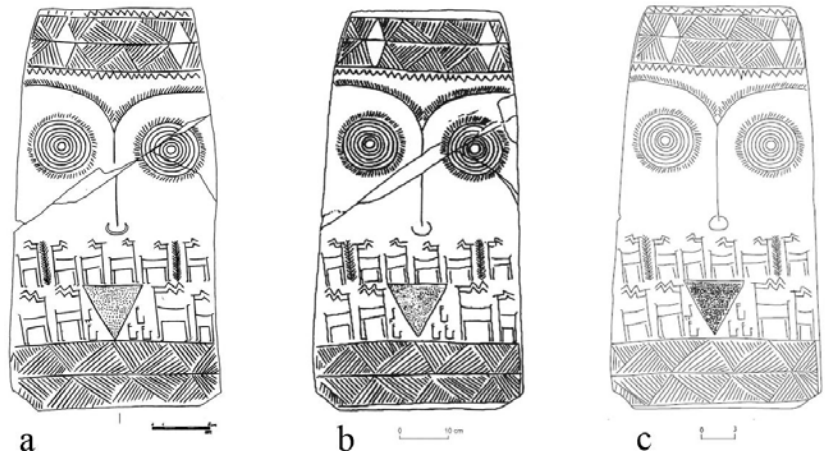

Figure 11. Three examples of secondary use of Horrenberger's line drawing for the Archaeological Mission of Mari published first in Margueron, *Mari*, fig. 29. Here a) is reproduced via screen shot with permission by Cristoph Uehlinger from "Ninḫursaĝa oder 'Große Mutter,'" fig. 1; b) reproduced via screen shot with permission from Ianir Milevski, Nimod Getzov, Ehud Galili, Alla Yaroshevich, and Liora Kolska Horwitz, "Iconographic Motifs from the 6th-5th Millennia BC in the Levant and Mesopotamia: Clues for Cultural Connections and Existence of an Interaction Sphere," *Paléorient* 42, no. 2 (2016): fig. 10; c) reproduced via screenshot with permission from Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography," fig. 6.

As to the full circle versus half circle, this difference has quite an impact on the reception of the image, not only as a face, but also as a body. The circle is the pivot point of the double entendre that is the image. Viewing the piece from the bottom up, the circle is obviously the navel above the pudendum, bringing into focus the circles as breasts. Viewing the image from the top down, it is the nose, allowing, therefore, the triangle to appear as the mouth. Which representation would be received first would depend on the functional context of the image—about which, more below.

In the drawing, however, one has the sense that the sickle moon is a smiling mouth; thus, the pudendum stands on its own as a separate entity from the face, and this indeed is how it is read by some. I would suggest

that it is this element, consciously or not, that underpins some of the emphasis on a bi-gendered interpretation of the plaque, problematic in light of Figure A.

Not only Margueron, but also Reinhard Dittman,[29] Catherine Breniquet,[30] Christoph Uehlinger, Patrick Michel,[31] and Julia Asher-Greve and Joan Westernholz[32] reproduce Horrenberger's drawing (Figure 11a). Margueron,[33] however, describes the nose/navel as a circle, as does Thomas Schuhmacher.[34] Schuhmacher credits a redrawing of the photograph in the Metropolitan's catalogue,[35] yet his picture also has the sickle moon instead of the circle. One rendering (Figure 11b) is much more accurate than Horrenberger's in regard to the concentric circles and dashes. Nevertheless, it still fails to reproduce a complete circle around the line bisecting the plaque; this version is a jaunty, lopsided semicircle in the manner of a wry smile. Estelle Orrelle and Liora Horwitz (Figure 11c) provide one of the few line drawings with a complete circle, but render the dashes as thin, straight lines and omit the break lines. Like Steinkeller,[36] Gebhard Selz reproduces Aruz's picture,[37] while Irit Ziffer's

[29] Reinhard Dittman, "ina ištarāte ul ibašši kīma šāšu," in *Von Göttern und Menschen: Beiträge zu Literatur und Geschichte des Alten Orients. Festschrift für Brigitte Groneberg,* ed. Dahlia Shehata, Frauke Weiershäuser, and Kamran Zand, Cuneiform Monographs 41 (Brill, 2010), fig. 2.

[30] Catherine Breniquet, "Membra disjecta? Réflexions sur la matérialité des coiffes divines de Mésopotamie archaïque," *Cahiers «Mondes anciens»* 15 (2022): fig. 3d.

[31] Patrick Michel, "De dieux pierres levees a Mari au IIIe millénaire: attestations archéologiques et pratiques religieuses (Syrie)," in *Pierres levées, stèles anthropomorphes et dolmens/Standing Stones, Anthropomorphic Stelae and Dolmens*, ed. Tara Steimer-Herbet (Archaeopress, 2011), fig. 3.

[32] Julia Asher-Greve and Joan Westenholz, *Goddesses in Context: on Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources* (Academic Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), fig. 1.

[33] Margueron, "Une stele," 124.

[34] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections," 7.

[35] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections," fig. 1; Aruz and Wallenfels, *Art of the First Cities*, 106.

[36] Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology," fig. 1.

[37] Gebhard Selz, "To See and to be Seen. A Contribution Towards a Concept of Visual Representation in the 3rd Millennium," in *Orientalische Kunstgeschichte (n): Festschrift für Erika Bleibtreu*, ed. Gebhard Selz and Klaus Wagensonner (Ugarit-Verlag, 2022), fig. 2.

drawing by Rodika Penhas,[38] the most accurate of all, provides no attribution to an original image.

There are practical reasons for this situation, no doubt, primarily the difficulty of finding, let alone getting permission to reprint, an original photograph or drawing. It can take a long time. Sometimes it is simply hard to track down the original owner. Sometimes copyright holders are willing but unable to share original images. Sometimes the length of time from original photography to request for reuse is such that the image is no longer in good condition. In the case of the Middle East, access is not infrequently curtailed by war. Some sources may charge for the use of their images, and not all authors have access to subventions to cover these costs. Using the line drawing obviates these difficulties as it is acceptable to "redraw" this kind of image. Nevertheless, in the case of the Mari Plaque, since 1999 at least (shortly after the plaque's discovery), the relevant details have been observable in readily available photographs.

Simplification in the line drawings may have been intended to make the separate elements of the image clearer, but it precludes the possibility that the "fringe" around the eye might be more complex than it first appears. Simplification does serve to render each component of the image homogeneous in execution, which may be either a positive or negative effect. Just as potentially misleading contrasts between the appearance of upper and lower pieces disappear, so, too, do potentially informative ones, such as the possibility that different makers worked on the one piece, or that some effects were intentional, others not. Simplification is a result of, and reinforces, academic ideas about the limited intellectual and technical abilities of ancient makers that have long clouded the

[38] Ziffer, "Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses," fig. 1.

discipline.[39] It was a standard mantra,[40] for example, that it was not until the Akkadian period that a technical and/or conceptual revolution enabled artists to produce naturalistic images. This position fails to recognize that pre-Akkadian makers executed animals in both two and three dimensions with stunning naturalism,[41] while the humans next to them were uniformly presented with flat, exaggerated features. The maker's focus is always, in this period, on the eyes and nose of anthropomorphic figures, whatever the medium of expression. Consequently, the contrast between human and animal representations indicates something about pre-Akkadian conceptions of what it is to be, indeed, human or animal. But even then, the faces of the people carrying goods to the temple on the pre-Akkadian Warka Vase are quite distinct from one another, and the musculature of their bodies, especially on the legs, prefigured what has been seen as a revolutionary change manifest in the "beauty" of Naram-Sin's body on his Victory stele.[42]

It is also generally unexamined that those who produced seals, stelae, and statues not only worked entirely under the auspices of temple or palace but also executed without thought or innovation the design demands of those institutions.[43] Because we know these things, we tend not to dig deeply into what appears to be quite straightforward. We do not expect

[39] As explicated in Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). See also Jean Evans, *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture: an Archaeology of the Early Dynastic Temple* (Cambridge 2012).

[40] And remains so in many university art history classes today.

[41] See for example multiple entries in Aruz and Wallenfels, *Art of the First Cities*, especially cat. nos. 64 and 65.

[42] Irene Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy*, ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen, Bettina Bergmann, Ada Cohen, Page duBois, Barbara Kellum, and Eva Stehle (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-26.

[43] As argued by Jerrold Cooper, "Mesopotamian Historical Consciousness and the Production of Monumental Art in the Third Millennium BC," in *Investigating Artistic Environments in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Ann Gunter (Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 39; Karen Sonik, "Pictorial Mythology and Narrative in the Ancient Near East," in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, ed. Brian Brown and Marian Feldman (de Gruyter, 2014), 265.

makers to have a mind of their own, to question, and even subvert, the intent of their patrons. So how does Figure A change the picture, so to speak? Subversion is certainly one possibility. A male maker may not have subscribed to the sheer femaleness of the image he was producing, or he may have been disaffected from those who commissioned it, thus secretly inserting himself, or another male figure, into the image. Or, the presence of Figure A may have been entirely sanctioned. Just what may have been the case will depend at least in part on the function and context of the piece, as well as possible interpretations of the image as a whole.

Archaeological Context

The find-spot of the plaque presents the most problematic issue of all. It was recovered from a pit "beneath" a bench/altar located in the corner of a room in a structure belonging to Mari City II. This room is nicknamed by the excavators "Lieu Très Saint," a term denoting the inner sanctuary of a number of religious structures at Mari. On occasion, the Mari publications specify the space where the plaque was found as the "Lieu Très Saint de le Temple de Ninhursag." However, this attribution is also questionable and will not be followed here. I refer to the find-spot simply as the LTS (of Building X, City II).

The vagueness of the term "beneath" reflects the complex history of this particular section of the religious quarter of Mari, where ancient building activities, mid-20th-century excavations, and their subsequent taphonomies obscured the levels from which the pit was cut. Considered

tantamount to a *favissa* by the excavator, Dominique Beyer,[44] it is generally assumed that the objects in the pit were associated with religious practices in Building X. Because in later levels belonging to Mari City III Building X is covered by the dedicated Temple of Ninhursag, it is also assumed by many that Building X must be dedicated to Ninhursag too.[45] Employing the appellation "the Stele of Ninhursag," Margueron[46] acknowledges there is no necessary continuity of identity between the structures of the two levels, but nevertheless maintains the use of this title for convenience. This does the discussion a disservice, since it reinforces a widespread assumption that the image *must* represent the goddess.[47] Yet it is not entirely clear as to which earlier phase the plaque should be attributed—that of City II or City I—since it had been broken, repaired, and then buried. However, just as there is no necessary connection to the temple of Ninhursag in Mari City III, there is no persuasive evidence that the plaque belongs to a much earlier period either. It is entirely possible, given the state of our knowledge, that the object was made in the time of City II, was in use in City II, and was discarded in City II.

Building X of City II, in which the LTS of the plaque was located, is architecturally distinct from that which overlaid it in City III,[48] the only structure reliably identified as the Temple of Ninhursag by the discovery of four separate, but identical, foundation deposits of bronze found in

[44] Dominique Beyer and Marylou Jean-Marie, "Le temple du DA III de la déesse Ninhursag à Mari: Les dépôts votifs du Lieu Très Saint," in *Akh Purattim 2*, ed. Jean-Claude Margueron, Olivier Rouault, and Pierre Lombard (Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, MOM Éditions, 2007), 75.

[45] Margueron, "Une stele," 123.

[46] Margueron, *Mari*, 238; Margueron, "Une stele," 123.

[47] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections," 7; Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology," 979. But cf. Beyer and Jean-Marie, "Le temple du DA III."

[48] Jean-Claude Margueron, *Mari: Capital of Northern Mesopotamia in the Third Millennium: The archaeology of Tell Hariri on the Euphrates* (Oxbow, 2014), 95. Compare Beyer, "Les temples de Mari," fig. 6 for City II structure and Butterlin, "Religious Life," fig. 8.6 for that of City III.

each corner. These objects read "Niwar Mer, *Šakkanaku*[49] of Mari built the temple of Ninhursag."[50] Nothing similar has been found for the earlier building. While there is a tendency to presume that a sacred space must have exactly the same identity across its lifespan, as does Margueron, who claims this "on the basis of experience,"[51] the very history of Mari undermines any assumption of continuity between the two structures. After its destruction at c. 2300 BCE, widely accepted now as at the hands of the Akkadians and not the Third Dynasty of Ur,[52] Mari City II was abandoned for some indeterminate period of time.[53] The reconstruction of Mari City III began under a new and externally imposed system of rule by local governors, and Niwar Mer's construction of the Ninhursag temple was quite late in a very complicated process, both in construction and cultural terms.[54]

Butterlin accepts that the two structures are dedicated to one and the same deity on the grounds that it is established by the presence of the plaque itself: "Si Ninhursag est bien la divinité vénérée là dès la ville II (ce qui n'est pas formellement assuré mais très plausible au vu de la stèle qu'on y a trouvée), elle fut peut-être la parèdre du seigneur du pays."[55]

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[49] Commonly translated as "governor."

[50] Georges Dossin, "Inscriptions de fondation provenant de Mari," *Syria* 12, no. 2 (1940): 153.

[51] Margueron, *Mari*, 238. But cf. Margueron, *Capital*, 95, where the architectural differences between the building of City II and III represents "an exceptional theological mutation."

[52] Butterlin, "Religious Life," 114.

[53] Pascal Butterlin "Mari, les Shakkanakkû et la crise de la fin du III e millénaire," in *Sociétés humaines et changement climatique à la fin du III e millénaire: une crise a t'elle eu lie en Haute* Catherine *Mésopotamie?,* ed. Catherine Kuzugluoglu and Catherine Marro (de Boccard, 2007), 232; Dominique Beyer, "Les temples de Mari: Bilan de 20 ans de travaux au chantier G (1990-2010)," in *Mari, Ni Est, Ni Ouest,* ed. Pascal Butterlin, Jean-Claude Margueron, Beatrice Muller, Michel Al-Maqdissi, Dominique Beyer, and Antoine Cavigneaux (*Syria Supplément 2*. Presses de l'Ifpo, 2014), 519.

[54] Butterlin "Mari, les Shakkanakkû."

[55] Pascal Butterlin, "Recherches au massif rouge, données nouvelles sur le centre monumental de Mari et son histoire," in *Mari, Ni Est, Ni Ouest,* ed. Pascal Butterlin, Jean-Claude Margueron, Beatrice Muller, Michel Al-Maqdissi, Dominique Beyer, and Antoine Cavigneaux (*Syria Supplément 2*. Presses de l'Ifpo, 2014), 107. Translation: "If Ninhursag is indeed the deity worshipped there as early as City II (which is not formally assured, but very plausible in view of

Asher-Greve[56] identifies Ninhursag as an early presence at Mari because Margueron assumes the temple of City II must be dedicated to her.[57] While it is not unreasonable to assume a *general* continuity of religious beliefs and practices into Mari City III, these arguments certainly do not establish a *specific* continuity in either worship of the goddess or identity of the temple. There is therefore no evidence, and perhaps little likelihood, that the building dedicated to Ninhursag in City III had any connection to its predecessor, the LTS of Building X, City II.

Moreover, any chronological attributions of the plaque are necessarily based on stylistic comparisons, primarily with what most writers consider the most distinctive feature of the image: the concentric circles with surrounding dashes, itself found across a very broad chronological/geographic range. The oculus (eye-like), as this motif has been termed,[58] is known from as far afield as the southern Levant in the late Neolithic to the early Chalcolithic,[59] and the Iberian Peninsula in the late Chalcolithic (dated to the third millennium according to Schuhmacher).[60] The closest parallels, geographically at least, are found in small, uncontextualized fragments from ancient Assur. The temptation to accept a continuity between these iterations, even a direct line of transmission,[61] is compounded by the co-occurrence on some objects of

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the stele found there), she may well have been the goddess of the Lord of the Land." The Lord of the Land is tentatively identified as Dagan.

[56] Asher-Greve and Westenholz, *Goddesses in Context,* 138.

[57] Margueron, "Une stele."

[58] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections."

[59] Ziffer, "Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses;" Milevski et al. "Iconographic Motifs;" Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography."

[60] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections."

[61] For example, Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography," 13: "several of the motifs of the incised bone from Neve-Yam and Hagosherim have been preserved over some thousands of years in different forms." They continue (page 34) that "This suggests that elements of Sumerian mythology, recognizable from their iconography, were present in sites in Israel some 2000 years earlier than the written records."

the oculus with one or more of the following: the pubic triangle, animal, plant, and even, in one case, a bird.[62] The incised bone tube from Hagosherim is particularly striking.[63] Yet the iconographic elements so identified have such a long life that even if there is a direct association to be discerned, their meaning is hardly going to remain constant over time and space. Instead, I suggest that something else is at work, something that has been obscured by the focus on all these objects as representations of deities of one kind or another. Something that Figure A helps bring into focus.

Who is Figure A?

Perhaps for many readers, the readily assimilable answer, given the current state of the discussion, is that Figure A is a male partner to the female entity portrayed in the stele—a god to the goddess. Such has been proposed for the concentric circles themselves—that they are a phallic symbol representing the Sun God.[64] Rather, though, than rely on convoluted arguments drawn from external cultural contexts such as Egypt or Iberia, it is possible that the female deity's partner is actually represented in concrete, rather than abstract, form. In the same vein, it has been proposed that the circles, read as male, stand for Enki,[65] who is known to be the partner of Ninhursag in later texts. But Enki is not a sun god, and I am not aware of any instance in which he is associated with circles/eyes.

[62] Milevski et al. "Iconographic Motifs," fig. 7.
[63] Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography," fig. 3.
[64] Schuhmacher, "Some Reflections."
[65] Orrelle and Horwitz, "Pre-Iconography;" Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology."

Even if one accepts arguments based on the debatable understandings that religious notions were in existence long before they were written down, that they are unchanging over time, and that literary texts, that is, stories, reflect actual religious beliefs, that Figure A would be Enki is simply not compelling on other grounds. First and foremost is the difficulty of understanding the stratigraphy of this part of the city of Mari.[66] Since the plaque has to be disassociated from Ninhursag on this account alone, the conflation of Figure A with Enki is extremely dubious. I propose three other potential identifications of Figure A, none of which are, in fact, mutually exclusive.

In no particular order, the first is that the figure is a sly, and unsanctioned, commentary by the maker of the plaque—a joke or an act of subversion. In favor of a joke is the fact that Mesopotamians certainly had a sense of humor.[67] The entire piece is a visual pun. Punning was a popular literary practice in Mesopotamia,[68] although, perhaps because of our preconceived notions of religious sanctity and elite control of art, not often recognized in images. However, humorous elisions of animals and humans, primarily in the form of animals acting as humans,[69] are also commonplace in the Late Uruk/Early Dynastic periods, and, as will be discussed below, forms the third aspect of the Mari Plaque. The likelihood of this reading would depend on two factors: whether other dashes, such

[66] Butterlin "Mari, les Shakkanakkû;" Butterlin, "Religious Life."

[67] Sara Milstein, "Teaching with a Dose of Humor in the Mesopotamian Unica," in *"A Community of Peoples": Studies on Society and Politics in the Bible and Ancient Near East in Honor of Daniel E. Fleming,* ed. Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, Lauren AS Monroe, Michael J. Stahl, and Dylan R. Johnson (Brill, 2022), 253.

[68] Bendt Alster, "ilu awilum: we-e i-la, 'Gods: Men' versus 'Man: God.' Punning and the Reversal of Patterns in the Atrahasis Epic," in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. T. Abusch (Penn State University Press, 2002), 35; Jerrold Cooper, "Puns and Prebends: The Tale of Enlil and Namzitara," in *Strings and Threads. A Celebration of the Work of Anne Draffkorn Kilmer*, ed. Ann Gunter (Eisenbrauns, 2011), 39.

[69] Donald Hansen, "'Great Lyre' with Bull's Head and Inlaid Front Panel" in Aruz and Wallenfels, *Art of the First Cities,* 106, and for example cat. nos. 23 and 58.

as those listed above, were also accepted as anthropomorphic figures, and whether Figure A would be visible to the powers-that-were. The question of visibility will be discussed below. The recognition of multiple figures, though, detracts from the impact of the single figure as a joke. As for subversion, multiple figures in poses indicative of dancing would seem instead to evoke the idea of ritual performance. Ritual performance is most likely to occur in approved contexts.

Ritual performance, therefore, is the second possible context for our tiny dancer. Although several writers favor the idea that the concentric circles represent the sun, and the dashes its rays, there is little reason to sustain this interpretation. For if dashes around the eyes are the sun's rays, what then are the dashes along the eyebrows? As with the strokes lining both left and right eyes, moving, and possibly anthropomorphic, figures are also discernible in the strokes lining the eyebrows, clearest at the left edge. Here, two figures, at least, have parted legs and curved lines extending from the groin. Figure A, if he is but one of many anthropomorphic figures represented in the dashes of both eyes and eyebrows, appears to be the lead performer in a dance/ritual to whom the other participants are oriented. The figure's deportment, with leg bent, one arm akimbo, the other hanging straight down, is in keeping with the many images of dancers collected by Yosef Garfinkel, particularly the naturalistic style of the Early Chalcolithic.[70] Yet the head's profile is exactly that of innumerable Late Uruk and Early Dynastic representations of humans in greater Mesopotamia. Is Figure A the master of ceremonies, such as a priest, or is he himself the object of worship?

[70] Yosef Garfinkel, *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture* (University of Texas Press, 2003), figs. 2.3 and 8.8.

Unlike the painted representations of dance pervasive throughout prehistoric contexts, the figures here are not identical, nor are they all joined to each other. They are each in a slightly different pose. What appear to be erect penises (even if just the effect of the tool gliding from one figure to the next) on more than one figure conveys the impression that they are naked. That, combined with the left-facing position of Figure A, not unlike that of the female figure at the top of the Warka Vase (Figure 5), is resonant of a procession as seen on that vessel and also on the "Standard of Ur." Based again on parallels with the images from the Late Uruk/Early Dynastic period, perhaps while all are meant to be understood as anthropomorphic, only certain figures were required to have an individual identity, or rather, function. The figures on the top register of the Warka Vase, for example, are not only distinct from each other, they also have identifiable roles—priestess, ruler, cup-bearer for instance[71]—while the humans on the lower registers are both stylized, in contrast to the naturalistic rendering of the animals below them, and, at first glance, indistinguishable one from the other.

Unlike both those examples, though, none of the figures are carrying something in offering, with the possible exception of the figure that appears to hold a cup, dash number 56. Cups are highly charged in imagery of the Early Dynastic period, with archaeological correlates indicating significant functions in worship, burials, and banquets. Among other uses, cups feature prominently in libations to both deities and the dead,[72] the libations themselves constitutive of a range of social and

[71] It should be noted that there is little agreement on exactly what position each of the upper figures held, but they are certainly distinguished not just from the common run of humans, but from each other.

[72] Evans, *Sumerian Sculpture*.

political relationships, based upon the concepts of "commemoration" and "life."

Intriguingly, either case, dance or procession, raises yet another parallel with the Warka Vase—the possibility that this image is, as is widely understood for that vessel, self-referential.[73] That is, the image represents the context in which the object was used, and in so doing, intensifies the experience of the situation in which the object functions. As Bahrani writes: "The image itself has performative qualities. It does not only represent a performative act but reiterates it."[74] One might think of it like a hall of mirrors where the image is ever repeating as it recedes further and further into the distance, enhanced by the minute size of the figures in the face. It draws the viewer ever deeper into the performance.

The third possibility, also potentially related to the Warka Vase, is that Figure A stands for the masculine element critical to existence, not only biologically but perhaps also politically. Considering that the dancers surmount the circles as breasts just as much as they do the circles as eyes, we must ask: is this a ritual related to sex? Although I do not subscribe to this position, it has been argued that the Warka Vase depicts the ritual of "sacred marriage."[75] In this light, we might have on the Mari Plaque the divine female's perspective of that institution, whereas the Warka Vase presents the royal male's view. More likely, though, to my mind, would be a generalized acknowledgement of the necessity of semen for reproduction. Despite modern scholarship's historical emphasis on the

[73] Discussed in detail in Zainab Bahrani, "Performativity and the Image: Narrative, Representation, and the Uruk Vase," in *Leaving no Stones Unturned: Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt in Honor of Donald P. Hansen*, ed. Erica Ehrenberg (Penn State University Press, 2002), 15.

[74] Bahrani, "Performativity and the Image," 22.

[75] Bahrani, "Performativity and the Image."

female as the source of fertility, later literary texts indicate that Mesopotamians considered procreation to come about only through semen. Women provide the womb that sustains the baby and are essential to the birthing process, but it is the male who actually creates offspring.[76] Figure A may be a (sneaky?) reminder that none of it happens without the male.

There is one more possibility to be broached here, but developed in full elsewhere.[77] Given various threads of evidence that suggest a mortuary association for this object (see below), Figure A may be the subject of a funeral. As the object's original use context is unknown, and it may never have been part of temple equipment, this is quite feasible. In the same vein, Figure A may have been an ancestor.

Functional Context

Since Figure A, the most incontrovertible of the possible anthropomorphs, has been overlooked by scholars who presumably gave the Mari Plaque close scrutiny, we must ask who would have been close enough to the object in antiquity to see such detail. If no one, then the idea that it is a joke or an act of resistance becomes more pertinent. If a very few chosen ones, such as temple functionaries, then perhaps Figure A conveys secret knowledge. Just how the image on the Mari Plaque would have been perceived and understood is contingent on how the plaque was deployed during its active life. It is small and could not have stood upright

[76] Stephanie L. Budin, "Phallic Fertility in the Ancient Near East and Egypt," in *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Flemming, and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 25.
[77] Porter, "Death and the Mari Maidens."

without some form of support.[78] It seems rather thick to have been inserted in a wall or standard, especially when compared to the many pieces of inlay retrieved from Mari. It may have been propped on a table or bench, and its close proximity to such in the LTS invites this assumption. However, it was not found *on* the bench, but rather, in a pit beneath it.

Breniquet[79] has a far more intriguing proposal. She suggests the plaque was part of a headdress, noting its resemblance to composite headdresses depicted in various images. I note that the corners at the bottom of the plaque are angled, perhaps to facilitate the object's insertion into a supporting frame, perhaps one provided by horns.[80] This is a particularly compelling idea given that a headdress is perhaps represented on the object itself, where the empty diamond shapes surrounded by hatched triangles may possibly invoke the horns[81] traditionally understood as indicative of deity, wrapped around with hair.[82] Equally, those empty diamonds may represent some other component of head adornment. While one might automatically assume that this statue would be a deity, this is not necessarily the case, given both the wealth of sculptures of "ordinary" humans at Mari and, more particularly, evidence for the embodiment in stone of deceased kings.

The size of the plaque indicates that such a headdress would belong to a larger-than-life statue.[83] Breniquet's proposal reinforces the notion of self-representation. In this light, I would suggest that the minuteness of

[78] Uehlinger, "Ninḫursaĝa oder 'Große Mutter?'" 407.
[79] Catherine Breniquet, "Membra disjecta?"
[80] Breniquet, "Membra disjecta?" 3a.
[81] Margueron, "Une stele."
[82] Breniquet, "Membra disjecta?" 7.
[83] Breniquet, "Membra disjecta?" 11.

the figures around the eyes may reflect what the wearer sees, looking down from on high at followers performing a ritual before them. At the same time, if the plaque was attached to a statue placed on a plinth, its details would have been viewed by ordinary humans from the bottom up, a reception that beholds the structure of the cosmos itself. Whatever the context in which the plaque was first deployed, on statue or on bench, only those who scrutinized it closely would have knowledge of the tiny dancers. There is another possibility, however. Evidence for larger-than-life statues is rare at this time. The plaque's unusual shape and size allow for it to have been *carried* in ceremonial and ritual performances, bringing to life all its anthropo- and zoo-morphic imagery. This has ramifications for participant experience of both the core figures and of the tiny dancers. It is possible that, moving in tremulous light, the picture would shimmer and shift as one gazed; one moment the face appears, the next the body. The figures around the eyes and eyebrows would not only be evident in a close encounter, but they would also move in their own right, an effect something like the Zoetropes that began the history of modern moving pictures.[84] It would also broaden the range of original contexts and functions for the object from a purely temple setting. If the plaque were carried, its self-referential aspect would be both multiplied and intensified—it would "not only represent a performative act,"[85] it would *be* one.

Cultural Context

[84] My thanks to Ulrike Guthrie for this suggestion.
[85] Bahrani, "Performativity and the Image," 22.

The time and place the Mari Plaque was made are both currently unknown to us and cannot be established on the basis of fragmentary comparisons of dubious provenance. Whatever the intent of the original makers, we can only consider how the object, and the image on it, may have been received in the time and place it was in use prior to its disposal. This cannot be later than the time of Mari City II, and it cannot be earlier than the time of Mari City I—that is, between 3000 and 2300 BCE, or from the end of the Uruk period to the end of the Early Bronze. This is a broad time span during which major changes occurred, including the expansion of urbanism, the emergence of kings, and the growth of northern territorial states. Audiences abduct from images certain understandings contingent on their cognizance of the world at large and their life experiences in it. At the same time, objects go through life stages as they are curated over time and space. The reception and interpretation of those objects, therefore, may differ widely from one point in time and space to another. They may be a product of change and uncertainty; they may be a bulwark against it. What, therefore, the object meant to those who used it, and those who disposed of it, may have been markedly different.

Nevertheless, certain overarching ideas are in play across this broad time span. One archaeologically very visible aspect along the Euphrates in particular is a focus on the dead. A range of extraordinary tombs[86] show interwoven relationships between religion, politics, and society. The third entity embodied in the plaque may reference such relationships. Dittmann, Breniquet, and myself all recognize the owl as another facet of the image. Here the arced line above the circles plays a prominent part as

[86] At, for example, Jerablus Tahtani, Tell Ahmar, Tell Banat, Tell Bi'a, and at Mari itself. Nearby, but not strictly in the Euphrates region, is the mortuary complex of Umm al Marra.

indicative of the "ruff" which surrounds the owl's face. The round circles and the featherlike dashes equate with that bird's front-facing eyes and piercing gaze. The sharpness of the triangle's nadir is a virtual match for the owl's beak. And once these features are recognized, the empty diamonds above (Figure 2) immediately become the tufted ears characteristic of many owl species. The Pharaoh eagle owl, native to Syria, is an especially good fit with the Mari image, but the Western barn owl (Figure 12), also at home there,[87] is an equally appropriate match.

a

b

Figure 12. a) Pharaoh Eagle Owl. Stock photo ID:876924312. Photo by Billy_Fam 2017 istock standard license, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/pharaoh-eagle-owl-face-gm876924312-244732965?clarity=false; b) Barn Owl. Stock photo ID:511316934. Photo by anankkml 2016 istock standard license, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/common-barn-owl-close-up-gm511316934-86601789?clarity=false.

An owl might seem anomalous at first, alien to the symbolisms proposed for the rest of the piece, but I suggest it may be a crucial element that helps make sense not just of Figure A, but of the plaque as a whole. It immediately brings to mind another famous plaque (Figure 13), the so-called "Queen of the Night,"[88] dated to the beginning of the second

[87] Omar F. Al-Sheikhly and Ahmed E. Aidek, "Queens of the Night, the Owls of Iraq and Syria – Species, Current Distribution, and Conservation Status," in *Owls-Clever Survivors*, ed. H. Mikkola (IntechOpen, 2023). https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/85703.

[88] "The Burney Plaque," The British Museum, object no. W_2003-0718-1, accessed January 29, 2025, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2003-0718-1.

millennium BCE.[89] The plaque depicts a taloned, naked, female deity with a lion under each claw, flanked on either side by an owl. Often associated with Ishtar because of the lions, the figure is more appropriately assigned to the Netherworld on the basis of two attributes. One is the position of her wings. On cylinder seals, Inana/Ishtar's wings are unfurled upwards. Here the wings are closed and directed downwards.[90] The second association with the Netherworld is provided by the owls, the paradigmatic night bird[91] personified in the hybrid body of the deity herself.[92] The figure, therefore, is more appropriately identified as Ereshkigal, by the first half of the second millennium BCE known as Ishtar's sister.[93]

[89] Pauline Albenda, "The 'Queen of the Night' Plaque: a Revisit," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125, no. 2 (2005): 171.

[90] "The Burney Plaque, Curator's Comments," The British Museum, accessed January 29, 2025, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2003-0718-1.

[91] Omar F. Al-Sheikhly and Ahmad E. Aidek, "Queens of the Night."

[92] "Curator's comments," British Museum.

[93] As Asher-Greve notes (2013, 162), there is a great deal of fluidity in both imagery and attributes of Mesopotamian deities, where even their gender may change over time. See, for example, Alfonso Archi, "Šamagan and the Mules of Ebla. Syrian Gods in Sumerian Disguise," in *Between Syria and the Highlands: Studies in Honor of Giorgio Buccellati &Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati,* ed. Stefano Valentini and Guido Guarducci (Sapientiae Editore, 2019), 40, n: "the Sun...female in Syria... became male in Akkadian Mesopotamia under Sumerian influence." That sisters may share attributes is not surprising.

Figure 13. Queen of the Night. Stock photo ID:96778619. Photo by Tony Baggett, 2010, iStock standard license, https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/ancient-babylonian-figure-queen-of-the-night-gm96778619-11881858?clarity=false.

This parallel, while bringing together the naked deity and the owl in conjunction with death, is hardly probative, however, dating as it does to a much later period. I can find no clear evidence of an association between the owl and the underworld before the Third Dynasty of Ur (2100-2000 BCE). The owl and death, though, are both related to darkness. Darkness, of course, describes the Netherworld in many literary texts, where feathers form the clothing of the dead. Beyond that, though, textual references to the owl are obscure. Various Sumerian words have been

translated as such, but none are unambiguous.[94] One,[95] **gi$_6$^{mušen}**, "literally… means 'night bird,'"[96] and is associated with dark forces. The **ukuku** bird is related to death and destruction according to two second millennium texts: *The Curse of Agade*, and *The Lament for Eridu*. **ukuku** is included in the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary entry[97] for *qadu*, owl.[98]

Speculative as the above might be, the link to death is quite explicit in the hatched triangles at the bottom of the Mari plaque. I concur with Steinkeller[99] that these should be interpreted as mountains, although this should not be taken as precluding other associations. Mountains themselves, and the words for them, **kur** and **hursag**, are unquestionably polysemic.[100] The term **kur** is also the word for Netherworld, and at the same time, mountains are associated with the Sun God. This is an obvious connection to make, because the sun disappears into the mountains, bringing darkness to all the land. Both terms may also refer to temple buildings,[101] again a reasonable association given the layered nature of Mesopotamian religious structures. There is a cultural logic to the connections in all these meanings. Mountains, as symbolic of the world outside Mesopotamia, have long been misinterpreted as only hated, hostile spaces. Yet they are equally essential places, intrinsic to the nature

[94] Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature, and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition of Nanše and the Birds, with a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names* (Brill, 2004), 209.

[95] Sumerian is conventionally written in bold, Akkadian in italics.

[96] Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature,* 249.

[97] Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, Vol. 13 (Oriental Institute, University of Chicago 1995 [1982]), 51.

[98] Something to ponder further: Shuhmacher notes that the mortuary contexts of the Iberian oculus plaques that he also associates with the owl.

[99] Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology."

[100] Toshikazu Kuwabara, "A Study of Terminology of the Netherworld in Sumero-Akkadian Literature," *Studies in Culture* 11 (1998): 271; Piotr Steinkeller, "On Sand Dunes, Mountain Ranges, and Mountain Peaks," in *Studies Presented to Robert D. Biggs,* ed. Martha Roth, Walter Farber, Matthew W. Stolper, and Paula von Bechtolsheim, Assyriological Studies 27 (Oriental Institute, 2007), 219.

[101] Laura Feldt, "Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mountain Wilderness in Old Babylonian Religious Narratives," *Numen* 63, no. 4 (2016): 356.

of existence.[102] The depiction of mountains (and also water) in the form of triangles at the bottom of an image or beneath plants and animals occurs frequently. It should also be noted that the direction of the hatching on the bottom is in the reverse direction to that of the top triangles, suggesting that, in addition to connotations of hair/headdress/feathers, the band on top of the head might indicate the opposite realm to the land of the dead—that is, the land of the divine. Or, at least, the temples in which deities live.

It is perhaps not coincidental that many of the objects in all the pits within the LTS of Building X have specific parallels with materials found in tombs across the Euphrates region.[103] This concurrence warrants much more detailed discussion than can be undertaken here.[104] For now, I would note that statues, among which category the Mari plaque may belong, also have mortuary connections.[105] Libations to statues appear to be part of the ritual performances associated with the LTS of Building X and other temples,[106] and it has been argued that statues of royal ancestors received libations in level P2 of the Mari City II palace.[107]

We have then, on this plaque, intimations of birth (body),[108] being (face), and death (owl) placed within the cosmological structure of existence—the divine world (upper band), human world (figurative section),[109] and netherworld (lower band). In the middle are all the entities, all the aspects

[102] Feldt, "Religion, Nature."

[103] Beyer and Jean-Marie, "Le temple du DA III."

[104] See note 25.

[105] Jean Evans, *The Lives of Sumerian Sculpture: An Archaeology of the Early Dynastic Temple* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 147.

[106] Beyer, "Les temples de Mari," 522.

[107] Butterlin, "Religious Life," 111.

[108] And while this may indeed relate to a birth goddess, it is certainly not necessarily so, as birth, like death, is a definitive human experience.

[109] In contrast to Uehlinger, "Ninḫursaĝa oder 'Große Mutter?'" 408, who divides the middle section into two.

of life, that humans experience. Surprisingly, it is in the inclusion of the elements that seem to be most inconsequential, and indeed to some, incongruous, that the key lies. Those elements are the animals, plants, and birds that surround the pubic triangle. They might be dismissed as no more than a way to fill in space, asymmetrical and incoherent,[110] but this fails to ask a critical question: why are these images deemed appropriate for that purpose? After all, space may be filled by an infinite number of motifs, so the maker has made a choice, and where there is choice, there is meaning. In particular, the proximity of such prosaic forms to the pudendum has led to various attempts to reconcile mundane realities with ideas of divinity. Ziffer, for example,[111] finds in the connection a tree goddess that she identifies across a span of some five thousand years, from the Levant to Egypt. Margueron[112] suggests that this might be a bearded deity devouring nature. Steinkeller[113] argues that the wildlife signals the third facet of the image: Ninhursag's embodiment as a landscape. The central section of the image, flanked by mountains, is a plateau with lake (the pudendum) and tree (eyebrows to nose), surmounted by stars (the breasts). While maintaining the play presented by other aspects of the image, this view presents as rather disjunctive compared to the seamless confluence of face and female torso. It requires a cognitive shift to extract and reassemble all the individual motifs, and detracts from Steinkeller's own insight in comprehending all the visual elements holistically. In contrast, face, torso, and owl all appear the same way, at the same time.

[110] Margueron, "Une stele," 126.
[111] Ziffer, "Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses."
[112] Margueron, "Une stele."
[113] Steinkeller, "Texts, Art, and Archaeology."

Commonly overlooked in discussions of the Mari plaque is the ubiquity of these motifs in larger Mesopotamian iconography, especially in conjunction with hatched triangles or wavy lines at the bottom. These are not empty artistic groundings. They are tropes that generate in their audience a comprehensive understanding of the object, and I have little doubt that every element of the plaque's imagery was intended for this purpose. Recognition of both Figure A and the owl changes our perception of what that understanding would have been. The plaque is no longer simply a clever representation of a birth or mother goddess, let alone *the* birth goddess, Ninhursag. Nor is it a random assemblage of artistic motifs. *Nature*—mountains, animals, vegetation—*humanity*—tiny dancers, face and body—*deity*—upper band of triangles—and *death*—owl and lower band of triangles. There are many possible understandings of all the individual elements of this image, but there are limited possibilities for understanding what all those elements mean in totality. Taken as a whole, they present a single concept: *this is the sum of existence*. Mountains, plants, horned animals, and even birds represent three core relationships among all the elements of existence. In its simplest terms, land sustains the plants that sustain the animals that sustain humans who sustain the gods who sustain humans. One way humans sustain the gods is to perform rituals before them. When these elements and the dependencies they represent are considered in conjunction with Figure A, the ithyphallic nature of this individual emerges as significant. God, priest, chief dancer, *agent provocateur*, whichever the case, in this light, Figure A is an essential aspect of the whole. He is the enabling male principle.

Conclusion

Methodologically, several issues have constrained work on the Mari plaque thus far. Calling it the Stele of Ninhursag, even though it may have nothing to do with that temple, has reinforced assumptions that representation of a divinity is its *raison d'être*. Calling it an oculus focuses on the eyes at the expense of all other parts. Paying insufficient attention to the stratigraphic issues; conflating texts from much later periods with earlier images on the assumption that the texts—or at least the ideas in them—must have existed at that time, and that religious systems are essentialist and unchanging; and, most importantly, not examining photographs of the image carefully; all these factors have had a role to play. There are theoretical issues too. Discussions to date have not, by and large, embraced the experiential possibilities of this object, seeking to situate the image within very modern concerns of origin and connection. Instead, the focus should be on possible understandings of the concatenation of features *as a unity,* within the cultural context of its audience.

Addressing these issues results in the disentanglement of the Mari Plaque from the deity Ninhursag. It has revealed new figures that of necessity change interpretive parameters. It shifts attention from individual motifs, privileging some over others, and gives all equal weight in comprising the whole. It situates the single idea encapsulated in the multifaceted image within a relevant chronological and cultural context. The comparisons to the Warka Vase made throughout this discussion are not arbitrary. Here too, all the elements of life are present, although death is absent. It may be suggested that death was not viewed in the same way in the Uruk period when the vase was used—it was certainly not as visible a component of social life, given the absence of burials recovered from the fourth millennium BCE and their profusion in the third millennium BCE,

especially in the Middle Euphrates region. Figure A and associated tiny dancers explicitly connect the two objects, though, as expressions of ritual performance in a cosmological context, performances that actively reproduce that cosmology. Divergences in detail do not detract from the fact that the two hold within them the same idea. While made within a shared general cultural context, those details are contingent on the specific times and places in which they originated.

Most people in the past probably would not have seen Figure A, let alone the other anthropomorphic figures, just as most viewers in the present have not. The object may have worked on them simply through the power of its mystery. For those who did, the agency of the Mari plaque lay in its revelation of the cosmological construct and humanity's role in it.