

Among the numerous illustrations presented in Anton Moortgat's recently published book<sup>1</sup> is one (see opposite page), the so-called Burney relief (now in the Norman Colville Collection), which at one time was the subject of investigation by the writer.<sup>2</sup> From the outset she expressed some doubt concerning the genuineness of the terracotta bas-relief. Interestingly, the earliest published article pertaining to the Burney plaque attempted to disprove its authenticity, citing stylistic features which were divergent from comparable art works.<sup>3</sup> The arguments set forth by Opitz were shortly afterwards disputed by Henri Frankfort, who furnished examples to show that the relief could be paralleled favorably with genuine Mesopotamian art objects.<sup>4</sup> Since then the Burney relief has been generally accepted as a work of the Old Babylonian period. Moortgat describes the clay plaque as "a work

---

<sup>1</sup> The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia (Phaidon, 1969) (hereafter: Moortgat), Fig. 212. Reviewed by Theresa Howard Carter in AJA 74 (1970), pp. 100-103. The plaque is an original work of art, not cast in a mold, and its measurements are 49.5 x 37 cm. It has an average thickness of 2.5-3 cm., and the sculptured forms project 4.5-4.8 cm. from the background.

<sup>2</sup> The main ideas expressed in this article were presented some years ago in a seminar course given by Professor Edith Porada. The writer accepts full responsibility for the statements made here.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Opitz, "Die vogelfüssige Gottin auf dem Löwen," AfO 11 (1936), pp. 350-353.

<sup>4</sup> "The Burney Relief," AfO 12 (1937), pp. 128-135. Further parallels were provided by E. Douglas Van Buren, "A Further Note on the Terra-Cotta Relief," AfO 11 (1936), pp. 354-357.

of the highest quality, [which] employs exactly the same relief technique which, as in the Code of Hammurabi, is really striving towards complete plasticity."<sup>5</sup>

Although the Burney relief does exhibit details comparable to those in works of art of the Old Babylonian period, the over-all design of the plaque is, in the eyes of the writer, quite contrary to the esthetic predilections of the ancient Near East. Particularly disturbing is the crowding of the two animals at the base of the bas-relief, leaving the body of one recumbent lion completely hidden behind its companion.<sup>6</sup> The strange, curiously textured owl-like birds positioned at the extreme ends are disjointed and lack a fundamental comprehension of their anatomy, which is untypical for Mesopotamian art.<sup>7</sup> Such arguments may seem tenuous since a thorough examination into the esthetic criteria underlying the art of the ancient Near East still needs to be undertaken. For this reason one element displayed on the terracotta plaque will be studied to demonstrate that its inclusion is counter to prescribed iconography: that element is the ring and rod held in each hand of the naked winged female goddess.

### Ring and Rod

The earliest known appearance of the ring and rod<sup>8</sup> held in the hand of a deity occurs on the stele of Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2113-2006 B.C.).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Moortgat, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> This relief differs markedly from other plaques in which the filling motifs are arranged symmetrically and with clarity, e.g., the clay plaque of the goddess-of-birth Nintu discussed by E. D. Van Buren, "A Clay Plaque in the Iraq Museum," *AFO* 9 (1934), pp. 165-171, Figs. 1-2, and the large limestone relief from Assur, W. Andrae, *Kultrelief aus dem Brunnen der Assurtempels zu Assur*, *WVDOG* 53 (1931). See also Moortgat, Fig. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Frankfort admitted that this was the only instance known of the depiction of an owl. A frontally rendered bird which can be cited for possible comparison is the Imdugud bird. This hybrid creature makes its appearance several times in art works of the Early Dynastic period, including the silver vase of Entemena. Even a cursory examination reveals that the making of the two types of birds originates from completely divergent concepts.

<sup>8</sup> The objects have been described variously as the circlet and sceptre, or the ring and staff.

<sup>9</sup> Leon Legrain, "The Stela of the Flying Angels," *Museum Journal* 18 (1927), pp. 75-98.

On an upper register of the stele, on the side depicting the building of the temple, the king is shown pouring a libation before the seated deity Nanna, who grips the objects in his clenched right hand, while grasping an adze in the left hand. The emblems are taken to be a measuring stick and line, instruments originally intended for purely practical reasons; now they convey the god's commission to Ur-Nammu for marking out the foundation of the temple. Another preserved fragment belonging to the same relief shows the curls and beard of a god who holds in his right hand a ring and rod which differs from the first by its extreme simplicity of design.<sup>10</sup> The pouring of a libation before the enthroned deity who grips a ring and rod recurs on a limestone stele of the same period, now in the Louvre.<sup>11</sup> Here the objects are slender and the ring is seen in its entirety, touching the rod; both objects are held in the open palm of the sun god. The most notable example of the ring and rod in the hand of a seated deity is found on the upper part of the stele of Hammurabi.<sup>12</sup> There the Babylonian king stands in reverence before the divine figure Shamash, who raises the ring and rod in the traditional manner.<sup>13</sup> Some modification is noticeable since the ring is partially hidden behind the now decreased size of the rod.

The representation of the ring and rod held by a female deity is attested on the wall painting at Mari, where the armed goddess Ishtar appears to present the emblems to the king standing before her.<sup>14</sup> The two objects are differently colored in red and white, which tends to confirm the probability that they are separate objects.<sup>15</sup>

As with major art works, cylinder seal impressions furnish examples of the two main types of deities who grip the emblematic objects. The enthroned god occurs more

---

<sup>10</sup> Van Buren considers this the true ring and rod. "The Ring and Rod," *Archiv Orientalni* 17 (1949), p. 438.

<sup>11</sup> Moortgat, Pl. 210.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Pl. 209.

<sup>13</sup> The persistent use of this scene for royal stelae is demonstrated by its occurrence on an Elamite monument from Susa: Andre Parrot, *Sumer: The Dawn of Art* (New York, 1961), p. 321, Pl. 397.

<sup>14</sup> Marie-Thérèse Barrelet, "Une peinture de la cour 106 du palais de Mari," *Studia Mariana* 4 (1950), pp. 17ff., Fig. 4.

<sup>15</sup> However, from the texts dealing with the descent of Inanna into the netherworld, which mention that the rod and ring taken from the goddess were made of lapis lazuli, it remains unclear whether the objects are attached or separate. James B. Pritchard, ed., *ANET* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 54-55.

frequently and he is often identified with Shamash.<sup>16</sup> The warrior-god appears on a seal impression of the Third Dynasty of Ur, which illustrates the god Tishpak standing upon a fallen enemy, armed with a battle ax, and bearing the ring and rod in his right hand.<sup>17</sup>

The continued use of the ring and rod as attributes of divinities into the first millennium B.C. is attested particularly on the Assyrian rock reliefs at Maltai.<sup>18</sup> A procession of gods standing on their emblematic animals hold the ring and rod in the left hand.<sup>19</sup>

The ring alone held in the hand seems to be peculiar to female deities<sup>20</sup> and makes its earliest known appearance on a seal of the Akkad period, held at the side by a winged goddess turned frontally.<sup>21</sup> Statuary and reliefs of the Akkad-Ur III periods include female personages who may represent priestesses<sup>22</sup> and goddesses,<sup>23</sup> and show them wearing a crown consisting of a large solid ring. The shape of the diadem may convey a meaning similar to its counterpart in the hand of the goddess on the seal. The solid ring held in the hand by female deities is seen again much later on the rock reliefs at Maltai.<sup>24</sup> Ishtar holding this object is seen not only at Maltai but also on an Assyrian seal<sup>25</sup> of the late ninth century B.C.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Leon Legrain, The Culture of the Babylonians from Their Seals in the Collection of the Museum, Publications of the Babylonian Section 14 (University of Pennsylvania, 1925), Pl. XXIV, nos. 428 and 430.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Frankfort, et al., The Gimilsin Temple and the Palace of the Rulers of Tell Asmar, OIP 43 (1940), Figs. 100 A and B.

<sup>18</sup> W. Bachmann, Felsreliefs in Assyrien, Bawian, Maltai und Gundük, WVDOG 52 (1927), Tafeln 27, 30.

<sup>19</sup> The divinities are identified as the gods Sin, Anu (?), and Shamash: *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> On a number of decorated limestone plaques of the Early Dynastic period, the second member of a team of servants who bear on their shoulders a long rod to which is attached a large vessel grips in his lowered right hand a large ring identified as a circular stand for the pointed vessel. Frankfort, Gimilsin Temple, Pl. 105, no. 185, and Pl. 108, no. 187.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Frankfort, Cylinder Seals (London, 1939), Pl. XVIII, j.

<sup>22</sup> Moortgat, Pl. 130.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Pl. 131, and Parrot, *op. cit.*, Pl. 287.

<sup>24</sup> Bachmann, *op. cit.*, Tafeln 29, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Eva Strommenger, 5000 Years of the Art of Mesopotamia (New York, 1964), Pl. 190 (bottom) and p. 439. Here the ring appears to be beaded.

The representation of the staff alone, mentioned in the texts as an emblem of sovereignty,<sup>26</sup> is to be associated with male figures only. This object is held by one of a row of deities who present Gudea to an enthroned god on a fragmentary stele belonging to that king.<sup>27</sup> The headless statue of a male figure, probably datable to the Third Dynasty of Ur, portrays a personage gripping a staff in his clasped hands.<sup>28</sup> A seal impression dated to the reign of Shulgi illustrates a male figure, perhaps a priest, holding a staff in one hand while leading a worshipper by the wrist with the other.<sup>29</sup> The staff as a symbol of authority persists into late Assyrian times, where it is found held by the king.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas the staff as shown is exceedingly long, the size of the rod held in the hand of the enthroned deity indicates that it could be more suitably interpreted as the measuring rule, or even the stylus. The former object, delineated with many subdivisions of measurement, is found on a seated statue of Gudea.<sup>31</sup> Associated with the rule on this statue is a stylus carved in low relief. The earliest appearance of the latter implement in the hand of an enthroned deity who is portrayed in the act of writing upon a tablet occurs on a fragmentary stele of perhaps the Ur III period.<sup>32</sup>

#### Interpretation of the Ring and Rod

Several possibilities have been presented to elucidate the meaning conveyed by the ring and rod. The interpretation of the ring and rod as the symbol of "Justice"

---

<sup>26</sup> Cyril J. Gadd, Ideas of Divine Rule in the Near East, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1945 (London, 1948), p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> André Parrot, Tello: Vingt campagnes de Fouilles (1877-1933), (Paris, 1948), Pl. XX B.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Fig. 46 B.

<sup>29</sup> Gaston Cros, Nouvelles fouilles de Tello II (Paris, 1912), p. 143.

<sup>30</sup> Discussed in the writer's unpublished dissertation, The Representation of the Human Figure on the Assyrian Wall Reliefs (Columbia University, 1969), pp. 130ff.

<sup>31</sup> Parrot, Tello, Pl. XIV a, b, c. The measuring tool is eleven inches long and is divided into sixteen spaces, each of which represents a "finger" (about 2/3 inch). The first six "fingers" are shown as whole units, while the seventh, ninth, eleventh, thirteenth, and fifteenth "fingers" are subdivided respectively into halves, thirds, quarters, fifths, and sixths. A further subdivision is indicated in the fifteenth "finger" where two one-sixth subdivisions are again subdivided into halves and thirds respectively on the opposite side.

<sup>32</sup> Dietrich Opitz, "Studien zur altorientalischen Kunst," AfO 6 (1930-31), p. 63, Tafel III, 1.

is derived from its appearance on the stele of Hammurabi where, however, the carved texts place importance upon the god Marduk rather than upon Shamash, who is represented on the relief.<sup>33</sup> The Mari painting has initiated the suggestion that the emblems symbolize the investiture of the king by the goddess. Yet the earliest representation of the ring and rod makes it clear that these emblems must have been associated originally with the activity of temple building undertaken by the king, an occupation which played an important role in the affairs of kingship.<sup>34</sup> In this respect it is noteworthy that Gudea, unlike Ur-Nammu, who is shown as a builder, presents himself on his statuary as an architect bearing on his lap the stylus, rule, and plan of a building,<sup>35</sup> an architect who receives the divine sanction and plan for the construction of the temple from the goddess Nisaba and the god Nindub.<sup>36</sup>

From this we may conjecture that the important function of temple building, originating from divine authority, became formalized in the art medium in the motif of ring and rod. The ring may be equated with the most perfect of shapes, the circle, which forms the basis for the main celestial symbols (sun, moon, and star). The rod is perhaps to be regarded as likened to the rule and stylus, objects denoting the importance of mathematics and writing. Eventually the ring and rod motif was transformed into a purely abstract symbol designed to show divine authority assigned to the king for the care and maintenance of the temples. Accordingly, actual depictions of the king's activities relating to temple building, such as we find on the Ur-Nammu stele and in the statuary of Gudea, could be eliminated and simply inferred.

### Conclusions

The available evidence indicates that the ring and rod emblem is to be associated with important male deities and with the goddess Ishtar, but never with a figure of the type represented on the Burney plaque. We have observed that

---

<sup>33</sup> Mentioned by Gadd, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> Two aspects of temple building are discernible: one is associated with the works of divinities and the other involves the participation of kings. For a discussion of the subject, see Albenda, op. cit., pp. 26-28.

<sup>35</sup> Parrot, Tello, Pl. XIV a, b, and c.

<sup>36</sup> George A. Barton, The Royal Inscriptions of Sumer and Akkad, I (New Haven, 1929), pp. 181ff. Also Henri Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago, 1948), pp. 252ff.

the deities always grip the emblems in one hand only, and never do we find the objects held in both hands, as is the case with the figure on the Burney relief. Moreover, the ring and rod are always grasped with the arm held in a forward position, unlike the manner in which the winged goddess on the Burney plaque holds the objects, for which we can find no parallels. On the terracotta relief the ring is clearly attached to the irregularly formed rod, revealing an uncertainty with regard to its intended form.<sup>37</sup> In every instance, the motif depicted on the terracotta plaque conflicts with known iconography and, accordingly, we must conclude that the Burney relief is not genuine.

---

<sup>37</sup> Frankfort tried to explain this by suggesting that it might be a continuous coil of rope, "The Burney Relief," p. 129.