CHAPTER NINETEEN

SEX, RHETORIC, AND THE PUBLIC MONUMENT:
THE ALLURING BODY OF NARAM-SIN OF AGADE

Sex

What, the modern viewer may ask, is Naram-Sin of Agade doing on his Victory Stela (cf. figs. 1–3), displaying for us not only his victory in battle but his well-rounded buttocks, his muscled calves, his elegantly arched back, his luxuriant beard? More Baryshnikov than Stallone, he is nonetheless, within our cultural lexicon of value, well proportioned, lithe, fit, and simply “divine”!

That the Stela of Naram-Sin has found a responsive audience in the West since its discovery in 1898 is clear from its inclusion in virtually every survey of art, from Gardner to Janson. However, if we are to pursue what this particular mode of representing the body of Naram-Sin might have meant in his own time (c. 2254–2218 B.C.E.), it must be viewed, insofar as we are able to reconstruct it, within a Mesopotamian lexicon of value. At issue is whether those values include sexuality, along with other positive qualities of form and substance. By virtue of the title of this chapter, my position is clear. The problem posed for the modern viewer by the eroticized body of the political leader was not a problem for the ancient Mesopotamians; rather, I shall argue, sexuality was inextricably linked to potency, potency to male vigor, and male vigor to authority and dominance, hence rule. Indeed, for the royal body, a rather unusual set of ideal attributes emerges in the Mesopotamian


1 See the most recent publication of the stela, in P. O. Harper et al., The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), #109, for bibliography from discovery to date. General surveys include H. W. Janson, History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), Fig. 76, and H. Gardner, Art Through the Ages, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), Figs. 2–17.
lexicon: an accumulation of good form or breeding, auspiciousness, vigor/vitality, and, specifically, sexual allure or charm—all of which are not only ascribed in text, but equally to be read in imagery.

The first attribute, from the Akkadian verb, *banû*, meaning “to build,” also “to generate”—hence “form plus breeding”—yields as an adjective one who is well built, well-formed. The term is applied to women, especially goddesses, and also to men. Of the epic hero, Gilgamesh, for example, his companion-to-be, Enkidu, is exhorted: “Look at him…well-formed in young manhood.” Good conformation, therefore, a term used in modern times with reference to show animals, is conveyed by the physically positive to indicate both form and breeding.

The second quality, from the Akkadian term *damqu*, is used in descriptions of persons and things and may be rendered as “auspicious/good.” That Naram-Sin is himself both auspicious and protected by the auspicious is marked in two ways on his body. First, there is archaeological evidence to confirm that his neck bead (see detail, Figure 3) was not only ornamental but also protective. Examples have actually been found, inscribed with the name of the ruler and his favored status with respect to a particular deity, thereby becoming wish-fulfilling markers. The beads are auspicious insofar as they offer the protection of the deity named and thereby keep away the equivalent of the “evil eye.” Further, Naram-Sin’s inherent auspiciousness is manifest in the king’s perfect body itself. Note that he stands in such a way that his right side is entirely visible to us. From Mesopotamian omen texts, we know the right is the side that, if deformed in any way, portends ill for the country and the ruler. If no right ear, “the days of the prince will be at an end;” if no right forearm or hand, “the outlying districts will become wasteland.” In other words, the king NEEDED to show, the

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3 Cited *CAD*, B:142, *baštu*.

4 *CAD, D*68–74, *damqu*, gives “good, gracious, propitious.” I prefer “auspicious.”

5 For example, an inscribed turquoise pendant, literally called a “neck stone” (written in Sumerian logograms as *NA₄GU₂*), belonging to a Middle Assyrian ruler, which identifies the king as the “Favorite of (the gods) Enil and Ninurta”: see B. K. Ismail and M. Tosi, “A Turquoise Neck-Stone of King Ninurta-apal-Ekur,” *Sumer, 32* (1976), 105–12.
