If any work of art can be said to have the status of an “icon” in our field, comparable to the Last Supper of Leonardo da Vinci, it is the Stele of Naram-Sin of Agade—commemorating that ruler’s victory over the confederation of mountain peoples identified as Lullubi in what remains of the stele’s own inscription (fig. 1). The special status accorded to this monument is not entirely inherent in the work itself; rather, we come predisposed to appreciate it by our own “habits of viewing” in the West—habits that privilege a correlation between rank and size, symmetry or balance disposed on either side of a vertical axis, and culmination of action in the upper field: not unlike what we find in religious paintings such as Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin, where Mary seems to float in the air amid a heavenly host, larger than and observed by the faithful below.

But then, scholars have gone a step further, in finding in the Stele—as did Henrietta Groenewegen Frankfort in what is the best art historical description of the Stele to date—evidence for the Akkadian ruler’s personal striving against the mountain of his fate: “Man alone before


1 Discovered in 1898; originally published by J. de Morgan et al., Recherches Archéologiques, première série: Fouilles de Suse en 1897–1898 et 1898–1899 (Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse I), Paris 1900. For the most recent publication of the monument, see P. O. Harper et al. (eds.), The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre, New York 1992, No. 109, which includes bibliography; also the recent dissertation by Dana Bänder, Die Siegestele des Naramsin und ihre Stellung in Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte (Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte, 103), Idstein 1995. The inscription was in the field directly above the head of the king; it is badly eroded, with only a few cases preserved, which has led to the frequent misapprehension that the monument was uninscribed in its original form (published now in I. J. Gelb – B. Kienast, Die altakkadischen Königsinschriften des dritten Jahrtausends v. Chr. [FAOS 7], Stuttgart 1990, 90f., NSin 4).
his destiny." Here, I fear, the paradigm has been determined by a particularly 19th century Romantic vision—whether that of Thomas Cole, whose *Voyage of Life: Manhood* of 1840 shows the mature individual riding the rapids of life in his rudderless boat, or that of Caspar David Friedrich, whose *Wanderer* of 1818 depicts the individual, male, having scaled a mountain peak to stand alone before the sublime power of nature.

Neither of these constructs maps particularly well over Naram-Sîn, however. He is certainly the victorious ruler and the focus of the work, occupying a privileged place in the upper field. But in the end, he is not alone. Naram-Sîn’s own “deification” notwithstanding, he has arrived at his destination accompanied by an Akkadian cohort; while the protective amulet around his neck, the symbols that accompany him as standards into battle, and the celestial elements at the top all attest to the ruler’s embeddedness within a system of divine power and patronage. Also, his victory is political and military, over a physical enemy, as distinct from personal triumph or religious ascendance.

Nor can the natural elements of mountain, upward-sloping ground-lines and trees that provide the setting for the scene be said to represent the genre of “landscape” as we know it—this despite the apparent resemblance to Western and even Chinese images of trees in mountainous landscapes. Such images were especially popular in Europe in the 19th century, conforming to then-current *Principles of Landscape Painting*, and serve, like the familiarity of the formal composition, to connect modern audiences to the ancient monument. In many European landscape paintings—e.g., John Constable’s *Haywain* of 1821—the land itself becomes the “subject” of the work. In such cases, our own cultural

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3 The degree to which “trees” were important in the genre is reflected in the volume devoted to them by Alexander Cozens, drawing master at Eton and the author of “Principles of Landskip” (sic), when he wrote a book in 1771 entitled *The Shape, Skeleton and Foliage of 32 Species of Tree*. His own paintings generally include at least one