CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HOW TALL WAS NARAM-SĪN’S VICTORY STELE?
SPECULATION ON THE BROKEN BOTTOM

The Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn of Agade (ca. 2254–2218 B.C.E.) is surely one of the major monuments preserved from the ancient Near East (fig. 1). Unfortunately, it is partially broken at the top, making the curve of the upper portion of the Stele difficult to reconstruct with surety. Even more difficult is to assess just what and how much is missing from the bottom (see detail, fig. 3).

From what is visible, it is clear that at least three lines of soldiers were represented following Naram-Sîn diagonally from left to right. They move visually upward through space, into the mountainous territory indicated by a wavy groundline and landscape elements of at least two trees; and they move through time, into battle against the Lullubi, mentioned in the partially eroded inscription in the upper field, above the head of the victorious ruler.1

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1 See the reconstruction in J. Börker-Klähn, Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Feisreliefs (BaF 4; Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1982), fig. 26k (our fig. 4), where the curve is gradual, more like that of the better-preserved Stele of Eannatum of Lagash of the preceding Early Dynastic Period (ca. 2460 B.C.E.; = fig. 2). Börker-Klähn then expands the three extant astral elements preserved in the upper field to seven, which is not convincing. See also the reconstruction in L. Nigro, “Per una analisi formale dello schema compositivo della stele di Naram-Sîn,” Contributi e materiali di Archeologia Orientale 4 (1992), fig. 15 (our fig. 5), where the sides tapers more acutely, and the top is more pointed (what Holly Pittman, personal communication, suggests is most appropriate, as it echoes the shape of the “mountain” before which the ruler stands in the relief below).

2 I. J. Gelb and B. Kienast, Die altakkadischen Königsinschriften des dritten Jahrtausends v. Chr. FAOS 7 (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1990), 90f. (= NSin4).
The figures of the first two lines of march are well-preserved, heads tilted upward toward their leader, weapons and/or standards in hand. One leg of each soldier is firmly planted on the ground, the other bent at the knee and raised to illustrate most graphically the rising terrain. For the third row of figures, however, only the head of one and the upper half of a second Akkadian soldier are visible, along with most of a tree and the upper torso of a defeated enemy at the right hand margin, his arms bent, fists clasped at the brow of his upturned head.

As it is presently preserved, the Stele measures some 2 m in height. To complete just these bottom figures; at least 30 cm more must be added to the overall height of the monument, to make room for the lower bodies and legs of the humans and the base of the tree (see, for example, fig. 4). Some reconstructions of the Stele have simply completed the obviously missing portions, indicating the outline of the lower edges of the monolith with dotted lines not closed at the bottom (e.g., fig. 5). By modern conventions, this is sufficient to imply uncertainty whether there might have been (a) immediate closure at the horizontal below the feet of the figures, (b) a blank or inscribed dado of uncertain height below, or even (c) some further continuation of the relief imagery.

Before we engage in any speculation as to the missing portions, it is useful to consider the particular stone from which the Stele is carved. It is a pinkish sandstone that has been argued to come from Miocene/Pliocene deposits above Kirkuk, in the very same area as the Lullubī campaign. The sandstone is grainy, and like all sedimentary rocks, especially sandstone, it is water-absorbent and friable, eroding or flaking easily. It is possible, therefore, that if the monument had been embedded in the ground at some point, rather than standing on a more protective base, it could have taken in moisture, such that either at its original site in Lower Mesopotamia or when moved to the Susa acropolis by Šutruk Nahunte to be displayed in the Inšušínak temple complex where the Stele was found, it would simply have disintegrated up to the point of present preservation.


4 The history of discovery is outlined in Börker-Klähn, Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen, pp. 134–35, and in Harper et al., The Royal City of Susa, pp. 159–62.