

## METAL, CLAY, AND IVORY SCULPTURE

## 83 STATUE OF QUEEN NAPIR-ASU

*Bronze and copper*

H. 50¼ in. (129 cm); W. 28¼ in. (73 cm)

*Middle Elamite period, 14th century B.C.**Acropole; Sb 2731**Excavated by Morgan, 1903.*

Discovered in January, 1903 in the so-called Ninhursag temple on the Acropole of Susa, this life-size statue<sup>1</sup> represents Napir-Asu, the wife of Untash-Napirisha, who was one of the most important kings of Anshan and Susa in the Middle Elamite period and was responsible for the construction of Chogha Zanbil. Although the head and left arm of the statue are sadly missing, it remains an exceptional work on account of its size and the technique of its manufacture, which continues to astound modern scholars.

The queen wears a short-sleeved dress decorated with dotted circles; these probably represent embroidery work rather than appliquéd disks of precious metal, because the latter would have been bigger. The bottom of the skirt is flared and consists of long wavy fringes held in place at the top by a thin strip decorated with dots and triangles inside squares. As on almost all contemporary statues, the fringes must have been slightly raised in front to reveal the feet. The skirt seems to have wrapped around the body so that its outer edge, a wide band decorated with a geometrical embroidery pattern and fringed, runs down the front below the queen's hands.

This garment, which is identical to the one seen on a faience figurine excavated in the temple of the goddess Pinikir at Chogha Zanbil,<sup>2</sup> is worn with several more unusual accessories. A close-fitting shawl-like garment, of the same embroidered material as the dress, is wrapped around Napir-Asu's back and hugs her arm down to the elbow. It is held in place by a palmette-shaped clasp on her right shoulder and by a plain fibula at the middle of the upper arm. This curious garment is also worn by the praying queens seen on a glazed brick relief of the twelfth century B.C. that is inscribed with the name of Shilhak-Inshushinak and that apparently depicts the king, his wife, his father, and his brother.<sup>3</sup>

A second overgarment is a long flounce that covers the upper half of Napir-Asu's skirt in back and on the sides. Apparently made of fringes, it is suspended from a thin decorated strip at the waist analogous to the one above the bottom fringes of the

skirt. The flounce has a straight edge on the queen's left side and a rounded contour on the right, and it is partially covered below her hands by a horizontal embroidered band similar to the wide vertical band described above. Protruding from this band on her right side is a triangular patch of long fringes. On the stele of Untash-Napirisha (No. 80), the queen and the priestess who flank the king are depicted wearing plainer flounces of this type that are not open in the front. Several terracotta figurines from Susa and Haft Tepe, which probably predate this statue, also have skirts partially covered by flounces with curved flaps crisscrossed in front. Unlike Napir-Asu's flounce, these are made of the same fabric as the rest of the clothing. The figurines also wear a shawl-like garment held to the dress by pins at the shoulders, although they cover only the figure's back and are not close-fitting.<sup>4</sup>

The queen wears a bracelet consisting of four plain bands on each wrist, and on her left ring finger a wide ring decorated with a chevron pattern on the flat middle part and a double ribbing on both edges. It is conceivable that she also had a necklace like the one that can be seen on her husband's stele, which has several rows of beads and a cruciform pendant of a type found in Kassite Babylonia. The statue's head probably resembled contemporary representations of female heads, which usually have fairly voluminous hairdos (see Nos. 84, 86).

An inscription on the front of the skirt is written in Elamite in the emphatic style typical for this type of text. In it the queen calls on the gods to protect her statue:

I, Napir-Asu, wife of Untash-Napirisha. He who would seize my statue, who would smash it, who would destroy its inscription, who would erase my name, may he be smitten by the curse of Napirisha, of Kiririsha, and of Inshushinak, that his name shall become extinct, that his offspring be barren, that the forces of Beltiya, the great goddess, shall sweep down on him. This is Napir-Asu's offering. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Napir-Asu invokes the titular triad of the empire—Napirisha, the great god of Elam; Kiririsha, the great goddess; and Inshushinak, the god of Susa—as well as a deity referred to as Beltiya, or “My lady,” a title that in Susiana seems to have been reserved for Ishtar, the goddess of love and also of war.<sup>6</sup>





The statue, found in the temple, served to perpetuate the queen's prayer. The queen is represented standing, her right hand over her left in a gesture common to several depictions of high-ranking worshippers: the queen herself and the other female figure flanking the king on Untash-Napirisha's stele; the queens on the glazed brick relief of Shilhak-Inshushinak; the faience figurine from Chogha Zanbil mentioned above; and the king's companion on the Shikaf-i Salman relief that was usurped in the Neo-Elamite period by Hanni.<sup>7</sup> Napir-Asu's fingers are long and well modeled, with incisions to indicate the knuckles; but there is a certain clumsiness in the rendering of the left thumb, which is extremely long and flat.

Few statues of this size have come down to us, and even if a good number more were destroyed by pillage and reuse, it is likely that such works were quite exceptional. Of Untash-Napirisha himself we have only the bottom half of a white limestone statue, much smaller than Napir-Asu's and made of a simpler material (Louvre, Sb 62). We know, however, that this statue of the queen, of which 3,760 pounds (1750 kg) of metal remain, was not unique. It is one of a series of large Middle Elamite bronzes excavated at Susa that bear witness to the skill of the metalworkers of this period and to the might of the kingdom. Among the objects belonging to this series in the Louvre are a sizable bronze table adorned with snakes and busts of deities with flowing vases (fig. 12, p. 10)<sup>8</sup> and two impressive cylindrical objects of unknown use, one of them over 14 feet (4.36 m) in length and bearing an inscription of Shilhak-Inshushinak.

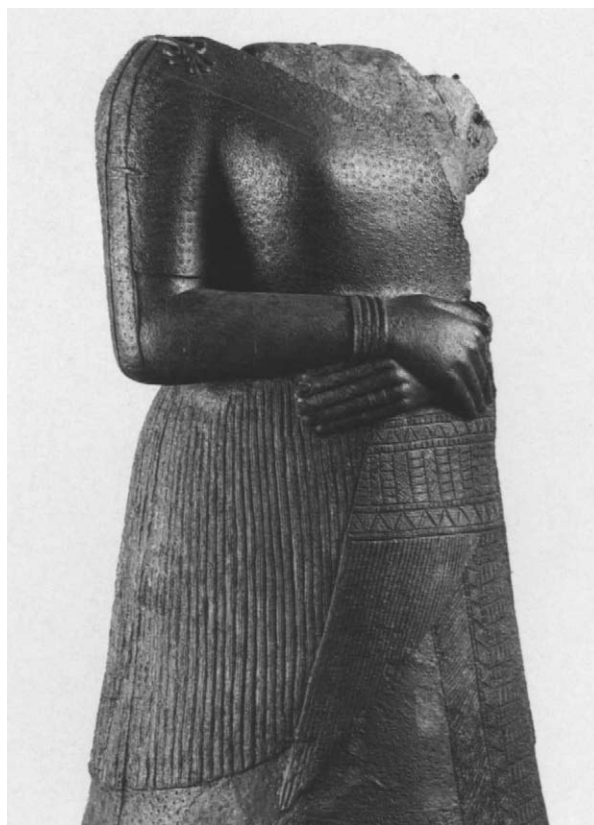
Already in the Akkadian period (2334–2154 B.C.) bronzeworkers of the Near East knew how to cast hollow statues of life-size proportions, and the technique is often seen on small-scale examples found at Susa dating to the Middle Elamite period. The choice of the manufacturing procedure used for this statue, however, is hard to understand. A copper outer shell seems to have been cast in the lost-wax method over a bronze core. Metal analysis shows that the core consists of an average of 11 percent tin and is extremely homogeneous throughout, which means that it was manufactured in a single casting. The outer shell contains about 1 percent tin, and it too is highly homogeneous. The copper here, however, contains higher proportions of lead, iron, silver, nickel, bismuth, and cobalt than the copper in the core. Copper core supports (drift pins) are still

clearly visible both on the uncovered part of the core and between the core and the outer shell.

Gammagraph analysis confirmed the solidity of the core and revealed the presence of a triangular stump under the intact shoulder symmetrical with the one that can be seen at the figure's left shoulder. The arm itself was solid cast with the rest of the outer shell. The head might also have been solid. The core is complete at the spot where the head was attached and contains remnants of a metal core support.

It is not clear why bronze was used for the core instead of the usual clay, but the technique was apparently specific to Susian bronzeworkers.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this procedure was used on a smaller scale for the busts of deities on the serpent table, mentioned above, which is probably contemporary with the Napir-Asu statue.

The surface of the statue is executed with great care. Most of the details of the clothing were delineated in the wax, but the pointed dots, certain parts of the geometrical patterns, and the inscription were chased after casting. A vertical groove runs down the arm from the shoulder and along either side of



83, detail

the skirt from the waist down to the bottom flounce, where it follows the wavy line of the fringe. Grooves such as these were used on smaller sculptures to hold the edge of a sheet of precious metal plating. Here no trace of gold or silver has been detected, but one wonders whether the outer shell was made of a softer metal in order to facilitate the application of gold foil that has since disappeared.

In any event, study of the statue shows that every effort was made to produce an extraordinary monument. First, the use of such a large quantity of metal, especially bronze, is unusual. Analyses of small copper statuary from second-millennium Susa have demonstrated that tin was generally used sparingly.<sup>10</sup> The innovative technique and technical prowess of manufacture are also utterly exceptional. The metalworkers used a bronze alloyed with 10 percent tin, which permitted a practically flawless casting for an enormous amount of metal. Their second feat was casting the copper shell over this bronze core; nonalloyed copper is in fact extremely difficult to cast, but it is less brittle than bronze.

Thus the skill of the metalworkers reinforced the protection of the gods over this statue, a monument that both by its weight and by the type of metal used for its shell was made to last.<sup>11</sup>

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1. See Lampre, 1905, pp. 245–50, pls. 15–16; Frankfort, 1954, pl. 175; Porada, 1965, p. 61, fig. 37; Amiet, 1966, fig. 280; Spycket, 1981, pp. 313–14, pl. 204; Amiet, 1988b, p. 99, fig. 57.
2. Ghirshman, 1968, pl. 7, 1–3.
3. Amiet, 1988b, p. 105, fig. 63.
4. Amiet, 1966, fig. 245, A–B; Negahban, 1991, pl. 26, no. 184.
5. Translation based on that in König, 1965, pp. 69–71.
6. Steve, 1987, p. 33.
7. Louis Vanden Berghe, “Les reliefs élamites de Malamir,” *IA* 3 (1963), pl. 24.
8. Amiet, 1966, fig. 291.
9. An alternate method has been suggested to me in which the original statue would have been cast in wax over a clay block core. Later the clay core would have been removed and the central cavity filled with bronze, which has a lower melting point than copper.
10. Tallon, Hurtel, and Drillhon, 1989.
11. The metal analyses were made at the Research Laboratory of the Musées de France by Loïc Hurtel, who helped me write the technical part of this entry. The surface decoration was studied by François Lemaire and Angélique Laurent, who restored the statue under the auspices of the Metal Archaeology Laboratory in Nancy.

## FUNERARY HEADS

In a funerary practice peculiar to Susa, painted heads of unbaked clay were deposited in certain tombs, generally vaulted tombs containing collective burials. The first such heads were discovered by Roland de Mecquenem, who unearthed more than twenty of them between 1912 and 1939. The material was so fragile that adequate conservation was not always possible. Most of the heads that could be preserved were published by Pierre Amiet in *Elam*.<sup>1</sup> The one in the best condition and also the best known is a head of a bearded man with hair coiffed over his forehead in the Elamite style (Louvre, Sb 2836).

The heads are almost life-size. They were modeled in clay, probably at the time of death, and then painted; the eyes were made of terracotta or bitumen and set into the head. Sometimes all that remains of an otherwise ruined head is the eyes. At the bottom of the cylindrical neck there is frequently a hole that allowed the head to be set on a pole, perhaps to support it during the modeling process. A female head over eleven inches high was found on a skeleton buried directly in the earth. The head had been modeled around a terracotta vessel, the neck of which, encased in clay, served as a neck for the head.<sup>2</sup> The cheeks were painted yellow and the hair black.

We do not know why, among as many as twenty bodies buried in a collective tomb, only a few, male and female, had a painted head next to the skull. Roman Ghirshman found about a dozen such heads in several burial vaults.<sup>3</sup> The head of a woman catalogued here was discovered in a tomb containing fourteen skeletons and six clay heads. Only two heads could be saved; the other is male.<sup>4</sup>

Heads of polychromed unbaked clay were also found at the Middle Elamite site of Haft Tepe, situated midway between Susa and Chogha Zanbil, which was partially excavated between 1966 and 1968 by an Iranian mission under Ezat O. Negahban.<sup>5</sup> Two female heads and a mask, probably male, were discovered, not in tombs but in a workshop near the ziggurat. The elaborate female coiffures were held in place by painted headbands, yellow in imitation of gold and decorated with painted cabochons: white and black on one and white and yellow on the other. The eyes, circled with white, are inlaid. Negahban dated these heads, which are probably royal, to the middle of the second millennium B.C.

# *The Royal City of Susa*

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TREASURES IN THE LOUVRE

*Edited by*

PRUDENCE O. HARPER, JOAN ARUZ, AND FRANÇOISE TALLON

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