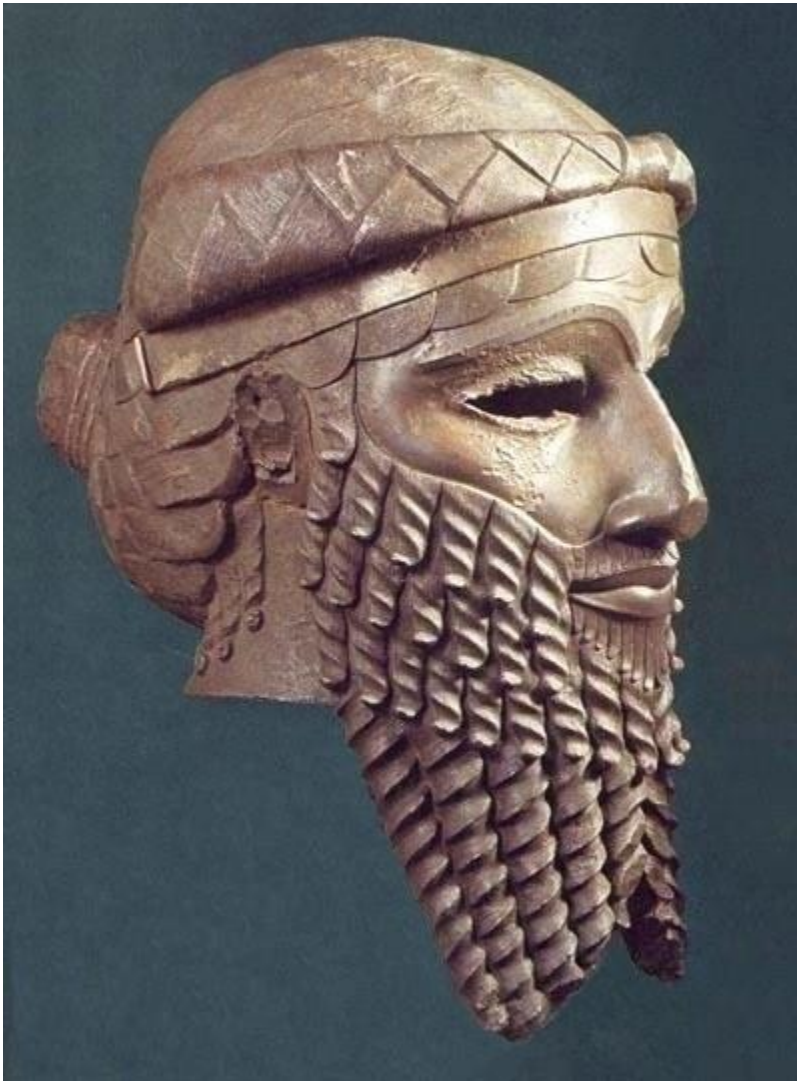


# Sargon's Victory Stele

What battle is depicted on Sargon's Victory Stele?

By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in [SumerianShakespeare.com](http://SumerianShakespeare.com).

(Hint: press the CTRL key when clicking on a link to make it display in a separate window.)



**Sargon, The King of Kish.** Note the ceremonial helmet with the knotted bun on the back.

[ I retouched the picture to repair the damage on his nose. Click [here](#) to see the statue in its original condition. ]

## Who is the defeated enemy on Sargon's Victory Stele?

Sargon lived in the mid 24th century BC. He seized the throne of Ur-Zababa, the king of Kish, and went on to conquer all of Akkad. He conquered Sumer in 2350 B.C. and later conquered the rest of Mesopotamia, thus creating one of the first empires in history. The empire lasted for almost two centuries.

For a number of reasons there has been very little speculation about the identity of the defeated enemy that is portrayed on Sargon's Victory Stele. First of all, it is heavily damaged, so there are just a few images of the enemy remaining on stele. Second, the enemy prisoners are naked, so they can't be identified by their clothing. Third, and perhaps most important, Sargon had a lot of enemies, so it's difficult to pick just one.

I would like to propose a new theory, one that is suggested by the stele itself.

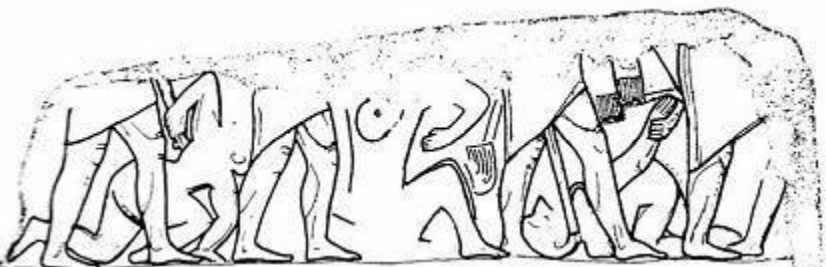


**Part of Sargon's Victory Stele** (Louvre). The pictures on this page are from three fragments. The fragments are parts of two similar steles celebrating the victories of the Akkadian king.



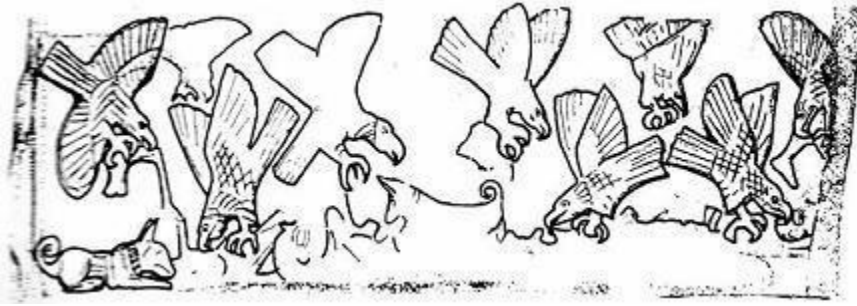
[Enlarge](#)

**Sargon leads the victory procession.** He carries a mace. The man behind him holds a parasol to shade Sargon from the sun and to symbolize his high rank. The other men carry battleaxes. The drawings on this page are by Lorenzo Nigro.



[Enlarge](#)

**Prisoners are bound and placed into neck stocks . . .**



[Enlarge](#)

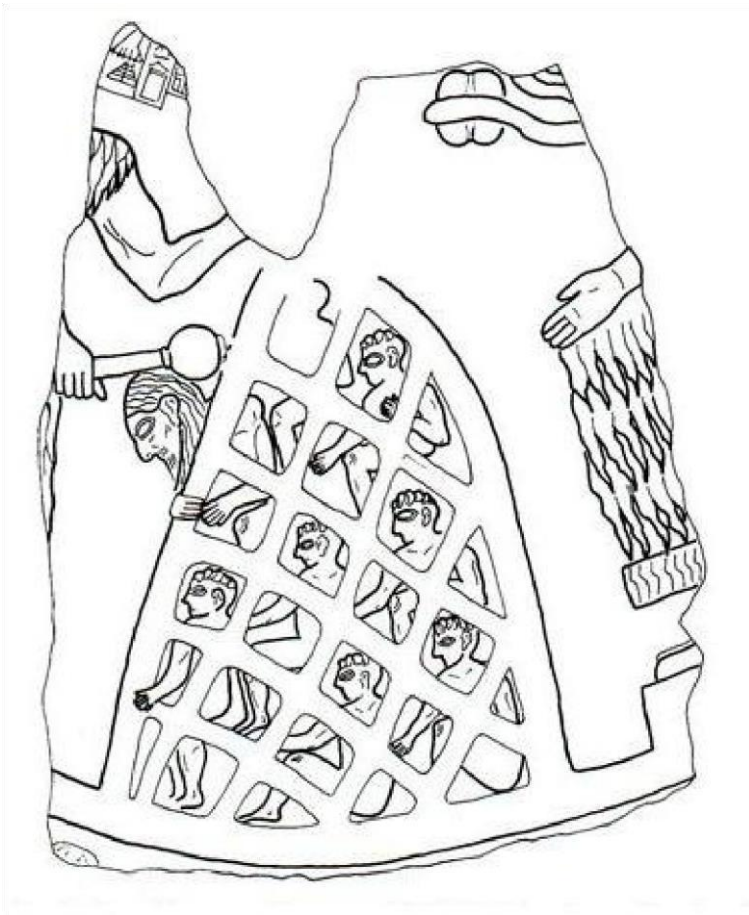
**. . . while vultures and war dogs feed on the dead.** The vulture on the right carries off a human leg. The scene is a grim reminder to everyone that resistance to Sargon is futile.

For the purpose of this discussion, I'll concentrate on the two fragments below that depict the bound prisoners (Louvre **Sb 3**) and Sargon with the net (Louvre **Sb 2**). The other fragment (Louvre **Sb 1**) is discussed on the page about [Sargon's other Victory Stele](#).



**The bound prisoners are led away.** [Enlarge](#)





**Sargon holds a net full of prisoners.** Using his mace, he bangs the head of the prisoner who has long hair. The nationality of the prisoners in the net wasn't known. To the right is the partial figure of a deity. It has tentatively been identified as Inanna/Ishtar, the goddess of war, but it is actually a male god. His fringed robe is typical of male attire, and Sargon is standing right beside him wearing the same kind of robe. As can be seen on an Akkadian cylinder seal of the same period, the garment is unlike the flounced dress that is typically worn by [Ishtar](#) and other goddesses. He is actually Ilaba (il-a-ba), a warrior god. Part of his name is shown in the fragmentary inscription above Sargon's shoulder. To the side of Ilaba is a mace with a curved handle. It's the same mace that Sargon carries in the victory procession.



**The long-haired prisoner struggles to escape from the net.**



Eannatum's **Vulture Stele**. The Sumerian war god Ningirsu holds a net full of prisoners and he clubs one of them who is trying to escape. Eannatum's stele also has an image of [vultures](#) feeding on the enemy dead, for which it was named. It seems Sargon made a deliberate effort to copy Eannatum's stele, which had been constructed about 70 years earlier. Eannatum's stele commemorates his victory over the Sumerian city of Umma.

On Eannatum's stele, the net of prisoners is held by the war god Ningirsu. Eannatum thus attributes his victory to the gods. On Sargon's stele, he himself holds the net of prisoners, leaving no doubt about who won the victory. It also sends the subtle propaganda message that people should fear Sargon more than they fear the gods themselves.

Lorenzo Nigro, in his excellent article “The Two Steles of Sargon: The Iconology and Visual Propaganda at the Beginning of Royal Akkadian Relief,” has an interesting theory. He proposes that the vanquished enemies on Sargon’s victory stele are Sumerians. This makes perfect sense because Sargon’s victory over the Sumerians was a very important milestone during his reign. It was the beginning of his empire. Nigro proposes that the figure of the long-haired man struggling to escape from the net is none other than Lugalzagesi. He is the Sumerian king who led an army of fifty *ensis* (rulers, governors) in the battle against Sargon. Nigro also suggests that the man's long hair and beard are meant to differentiate him from the other prisoners. The loose hair means he had lost his royal bun while fighting (unlike Sargon) and it symbolizes his loss of kingship. Nigro then points out that the figure is drawn larger than the other prisoners, almost as large as Sargon, in conformance with the ancient tradition of drawing kings larger than other men. Therefore, if the captive enemies on the victory stele are Sumerians and the long-haired man is their king, it can only be Lugalzagesi, the leader of the Sumerian army. It’s a known fact that Lugalzagesi was captured by Sargon after the battle.

It’s a persuasive argument, and I was reasonably convinced. I was about to use it on a new webpage I was writing about [Lugalzagesi](#). I knew Sargon forced the captured Lugalzagesi to watch the construction of a stele commemorating his own defeat, then executed him. I realized that it must have been heartrending for Lugalzagesi, the former king of Umma, to see a victory stele that exactly mirrored the victory stele of Eannatum. It commemorated the humiliating defeat of Lugalzagesi’s Ummaite forefathers with the same images of captured prisoners in a net and vultures feeding on the dead. Now to see himself as the one in the net and clubbed with a mace, foretelling his own death, must have been completely devastating.

It’s a very compelling story, but something about the premise of the story kept bothering me. It was the hair. The hair bothered me.





**Sargon profile.** His long hair is knotted in a bun. Above his shoulder is a damaged inscription that reads, "Sargon, king."

It all started about a month ago, when Trevor Eccles emailed me about one of my webpages. I had stated that Sargon on his Victory Stele was wearing the ceremonial helmet with a knotted bun in the back, the kind worn by the King of Kish (see [Helmet: King of Kish](#)). Trevor wrote that he wasn't entirely convinced that it was actually a helmet; he thought it was just Sargon's hair, worn in a chignon. Trevor is an amateur Assyriologist who lives in Paris, so he is very familiar with the Mesopotamian section at the Louvre where the stele is kept. During our correspondence he made several trips to the Louvre to take a close look at the stele. He still wasn't convinced that Sargon was wearing a helmet, so I deferred to his better judgment and deleted the statement from my webpage. He also corrected another error on this website, but we won't go into that now. Trevor also sent me Nigro's article about the victory stele, which has several pictures that I had never seen before.

I was studying the article in preparation for the new web page about Lugalzagesi. I had read the article several times before. Then I saw footnote 14, which I had missed during my previous readings: "The hair-style [of the prisoners on Sargon's stele] is comparable with that of Sumerian soldiers carrying pieces of booty [in the victory procession] on the lower register of the Standard of Ur, thus confirming the south Mesopotamian provenance of the prisoners in the net." Southern Mesopotamia means Sumer, which is south of Akkad.

"Hmmm," I thought to myself. During my research I had already identified the men in the victory procession. They aren't Sumerian soldiers carrying booty. They aren't even the allies of

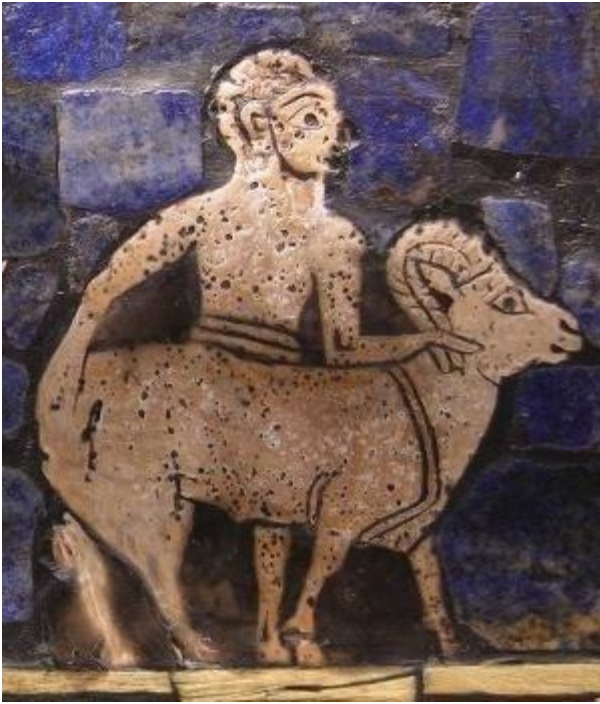
the Sumerians bearing gifts to celebrate the Sumerian victory. They're actually the defeated enemies, bearing tribute to the conquering Sumerian king.

They are Akkadians.



This man in the victory procession on the Standard of Ur bears tribute to the Sumerian king. He wears the distinctive angled-skirt of the Akkadians. Note the hairstyle. His short hair can be seen beneath his headdress. All of the defeated enemies in the victory procession have the same hairstyle. The hair is curly and full on top but short on the sides. By contrast, all of the Sumerians on the Standard of Ur have clean-shaven heads. Some other examples of the enemy's hairstyle are shown below:





A defeated enemy herds a ram that is garlanded for the sacrifice during the victory celebration of the Sumerian king.



The enemy on the War end panel of the Standard of Ur.

Notice how this hairstyle matches that of the bound prisoner on Sargon's victory stele.



**The bound prisoner.**

So, to put it simply, the enemies defeated by the Akkadian king Sargon were Akkadians.

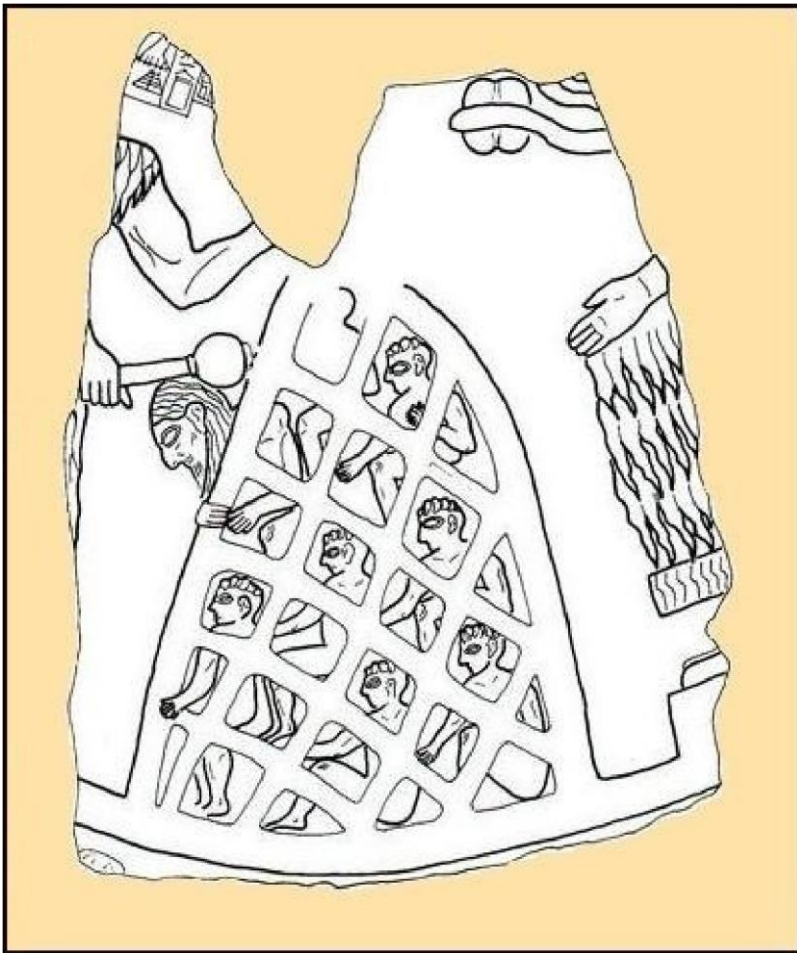


The bound prisoner is escorted by an armed guard. The guard's hair is covered by a helmet but he is identifiable as an Akkadian by his distinctive angled-skirt. The irony of this picture is that the Akkadians are both the victors and the vanquished.



All the prisoners in Ningirsu's net on Eannatum's Vulture Stele have shaven heads. That's because they're Sumerians, from the city of Umma.





On the other hand, all of these captured enemies (except for one) in the net held by Sargon have the Akkadian hairstyle. The hair is curly and full on top but short on the sides, the same hairstyle worn by the Akkadians on the Standard of Ur.



Left: Akkadian man on the Standard of Ur.

Right: Akkadian prisoner with a half-shaven head on Sargon's Victory Stele (Louvre Sb 2).

There is a slight difference in the hairstyles. On the Standard of Ur, the hair goes all the way down the back of the head, but the heads of the prisoners in the net are shaven in the back. The explanation for



this is found in the *Sumerian Lexicon*. *Kiši4...aka* refers to the Akkadian practice of shaving half the head as punishment or a sign of slavery ('forelock; half' + 'to do'; Akk., *muttata gullubu(m) II*). The prisoners have half of their heads shaven to signify that they were on the losing side in the civil war. This would distinguish them from the other Akkadians that were on the winning side, who presumably still had all of their hair. I believe the half-shaven head is a sign of punishment, not of slavery, because Akkadians did not enslave their own countrymen, and because I agree with Nigro's assessment that Sargon intends to be merciful to his captives.

Proof that the prisoners in the net are Akkadian is seen in the way they are portrayed. In the words of Nigro, "Thus captives in Sargon's net are not represented as a heaped-up mound of corpses as in the Stele of Vultures, but as regularly seated figures stretching their right hands to Sargon in a gesture of submission." Nigro says, "the king does not want to slay those enemies who are ready to accept his sovereignty" and that Sargon's conquest brings order to the conquered people. It shows that he doesn't want to kill his own subjects (foreign barbarians might not be so lucky). As commoners, the prisoners in the net will be spared if they accept Sargon as their ruler. The same cannot be said for the captive king. Sargon's smiting him with a mace is symbolic of the act of killing him.

Now on to what was bugging me most about the hair. It was the long hair of captive king. Sumerian kings in this period of history are never shown with long hair. Gudea, Ur-Namma, and Eannatum, all have shaven heads. That's why I had difficulty accepting the premise that the longhaired man was Lugalzagesi. There must be another reason for the long hair of the captive king, other than the fact that his loosened hair symbolizes his loss of kingship.

I suggest the reason for his long hair is to make him recognizable to the viewer. He has now been clearly identified as an Akkadian king, but Sargon conquered many Akkadian kings, so the question still remains: which king is he? Since the captive king must be someone important enough to warrant Sargon's construction of a major victory stele, there is only one real possibility for his true identity.



Notice how the captured king most closely resembles Sargon. They are the only two people on the stele with long hair and beards. Who is Sargon? Sargon is the king of Kish. So the captive king in the net is the former king of Kish. Specifically, he is Ur-Zababa. Sargon had previously been his cupbearer.

Sargon had a dream:

"The sleeping Sargon groaned and gnawed the ground. When King Ur-Zababa heard about this groaning, he was brought into the king's holy presence. Sargon was brought into the presence of Ur-Zababa (who said:) 'Cupbearer, was a dream revealed to you in the night?' Sargon answered his king: 'My king, this is my dream, which I will tell you about: There was a young woman [the war goddess Ishtar] who was as high as the heavens and as broad as the earth. She was as firmly set as the base of a wall. For me, she drowned you in a great river, a river of blood.'" (ETCSL, [Sargon and Ur-Zababa](#), lines 12 -24)

Apparently it all came to pass. Sargon usurped the kingdom of Kish from Ur-Zababa after a bloody battle.

The defeat of Ur-Zababa is the specific battle that is depicted on the Victory Stele. Ur-Zababa is the only king whose defeat was important enough to warrant a major monument like the Victory Stele. This is especially true because Sargon had rebelled against his rightful king, so he needed the Victory

Stele for propaganda purposes, to justify his actions, as can be seen on the stele itself. The symbology of the stele is all about Sargon legitimizing his overthrow of Ur-Zababa. Like all usurpers, Sargon was self-conscious about how he came to power. Even his name, which translates as "rightful (or legitimate) king," is an attempt to justify his reign. The same is true for the stele.

For more on Sargon's motives, see [Princess Ku-Baba](#), the grandmother of Ur-Zababa.

### **The battle of the personal gods:**

Additional proof that Ur-Zababa is the captive king is a fragmentary inscription on the stele about Ilaba, the warrior god. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ilaba was the personal god of Sargon. According to Nigro, Ilaba occurs only in the earliest inscriptions of Sargon's reign. The battle with Ur-Zababa occurred right at the very beginning of it, so the stele fits perfectly within the given time frame. Ur-Zababa was named for his own personal god, Zababa, who was the god of the city of Kish. "Ur-Zababa" literally means "man of Zababa." Sargon equated his personal god Ilaba to the god Zababa after becoming the king of Kish. "Ilaba is identified with Zababa, the patron deity of Kish, when Sargon assumed the kingship of his hometown and he was later to be closely associated with Enlil." Sargon's identification with the god Zababa early in his reign is therefore completely self-serving. In identifying himself with Zababa, Sargon implies he has the blessing of the city's patron deity as he seizes power from the king who was actually named for the god. In this way, the usurper clothes himself with the mantle of legitimacy. Later, after he conquered Sumer and was building an empire, when no one would dare question his legitimacy, he would drop his identification with this minor god of a single city-state and start to associate himself with more important gods like Enlil and Ishtar. Thus the supreme leader of the empire aligned himself with the supreme gods of the Sumerian/Akkadian pantheon, assuring greater importance for himself while also increasing his appeal to many more of his subjects.

For his own reasons, Sargon identifies his personal god Ilaba with Zababa (the personal god of Ur-Zababa and patron deity of Kish) when he usurps the throne of Kish from Ur-Zababa, and then he identifies Zababa with Enlil when he conquers Sumer and Akkad.



Mace

In the victory procession, Sargon carries the “divine mace” of the god Ilaba, but he uses a different mace to strike and kill Ur-Zababa. This mace has a round head. It is similar to the mace used by the Sumerian war god Ningirsu on Eannatum’s Vulture Stele. The mace that Sargon uses may actually belong to the god Zababa, because there’s a good possibility that Zababa was originally on the reverse side of the stele, which is now missing due to damage. In this way, the gods Ilaba and Zababa would both appear to be giving Sargon their blessings. If he is using the mace of Zababa, it means that Sargon is using the weapon of Ur-Zababa’s own personal god against him. There's some ironic symbolism in that. An alternative explanation is that Sargon uses his own mace to strike Ur-Zababa, thus making the killing much more personal, both literally and figuratively. There's some ironic symbolism in that as well.

As previously stated, the battle with the Sumerians was an important victory for Sargon, setting him on the road to empire. It would certainly warrant its own victory stele, which has been lost to the ravages of time or it's still buried somewhere waiting to be discovered. In a real sense, however, the victory over Ur-Zababa was even more important. If he had not first become the king of Kish, the king of one single city-state, he never would become the “King of Kish,” with a capital “K”, the traditional title given to any king who ruled all of Sumer and Akkad. Only after he defeated Ur-Zababa could he go on to conquer the rest of Akkad and then conquer the Sumerians, to thus become the King of Kish, the King of Kings.



Lugal Kish

Also see "[Sargon's Other Victory Stele](#)".

May 10, 2012