

The Face of Ur-Ningirsu

A realistic portrait of Ur-Ningirsu, the son of Gudea.

By Jerald Jack Starr. This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

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



This is a statue in the Louvre Museum (**AO 4351**). It's described simply as a "man with a shaven head." It was found in the Sumerian city of Girsu (modern Telloh). Girsu was the holy city of the kingdom of Lagash, home of the E-ninnu, the temple of the war god Ningirsu. The statue is dated "in the period of Gudea," circa 2100 B.C. I believe the statue is not just "some guy" with a shaven head. I would suggest that it is actually a portrait of Ur-Ningirsu, the son of Gudea.



A statue of Ur-Ningirsu. See the [complete statue](#).

Notice the similarity of the eyes and the shape of the nose. The shape of the mouth on both statues is the same, with one side of the upper lip being higher than the other side. Although the asymmetry of the mouth is obscured by the different colors of the stone on this statue, it is the same asymmetry that is shown on AO 4351. See an [enlargement](#) where the reflection of light on the rim of the upper lip shows its asymmetric shape, despite variations in the color of the stone. Also see a [damaged statue](#) with asymmetric lips. Once you start looking, [asymmetric lips](#) are not as uncommon as you suppose.

The profile view is what first led me to believe that AO 4351 is a portrait of the son of Gudea:



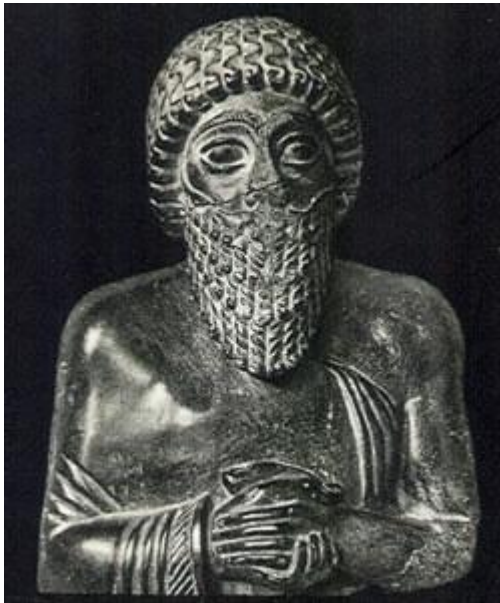
Notice how the tip of the nose, which appears to be rounded when viewed from the front, is slightly squared off when viewed from the side. The statues of Gudea have the same feature:



Gudea's nose likewise appears to be rounded when it is viewed from the [front](#) and slightly squared off when viewed from the side. AO 4351 also has the same flat cheek bones as Gudea. The similarity of the profiles suggests that AO 4351 is Gudea's direct descendent.



AO 4351, when viewed in profile, has the same kind of nose as Gudea. Notice how the profile also matches the statue of Ur-Ningirsu:



Believe it or not, this is also Ur-Ningirsu, as attested by the [inscriptions](#) on the back. It is described as being done in the "Akkadian style" because a ruler of Lagash is not usually shown with a beard and a

full head of hair. I would suggest that it is not an Akkadian style because the same figure, probably Ur-Ningirsu himself, also shows up on [Gudea's stele](#). It is seen on the [Rimush stele](#), which mentions Lagash, and is worn by the soldiers being killed by the Akkadians. So it is Sumerian, not Akkadian. I would further suggest that his "hair" is actually a helmet. It is quite thick, covering the ears, back of the neck, and most of the forehead. It would be impossible to duplicate this hairstyle in a modern beauty salon, and it's doubtful that soldiers would go into combat with such a perfectly coiffed hairdo. Since it looks like a helmet when viewed from [the side](#) and it's worn by a [soldier](#) escorting a prisoner on Gudea's stele, it is most likely a helmet rather than a hairstyle.



I believe this heavily damaged figure is also Ur-Ningirsu, even though it was found in the city of Nippur, and not in Ur-Ningirsu's home town of Lagash. The eyes and nose match, and the shepherd's crown, with the stylized curls of lamb's wool, is the kind worn by Gudea and Ur-Ningirsu. Many Sumerian statues were vandalized or destroyed in the many wars that occurred in the region.

There are a couple of differences between AO 4351 and the statue of Ur-Ningirsu:



Ur-Ningiru's nose is slightly sharper than AO 4351. Another difference between the statues becomes apparent when they are placed side by side:



It seems that Ur-Ningirsu has a rounder face than AO 4351. That's because the shape of the chin is different. On AO 4351 there is a lot more distance between the bottom of the lower lip and the top of the chin, which makes the face look longer (bear in mind that the two pictures are not shown at the same scale.) Note, however, the over-all resemblance of the statues except for a minor difference in the shape of the chin. Just for the fun of it, I photographically altered the two pictures, shortening the chin on AO 4351 while slightly increasing the chin on the statue of Ur-Ningirsu, in order to emphasize the similarities between the [two statues](#).

Of the two, AO 4351 and the statue of Ur-Ningirsu, I would suggest that AO 4351 is the more accurate and realistic portrait. This leads to an additional reason to support the idea that AO 4351 is Ur-Ningirsu: It is done in the same realistic style as another statue of Gudea.

There was an artistic renaissance in the kingdom of Lagash during the reign of Gudea. This artistic development is most evident in the portraits of the human face. Until then, Sumerian portraits had been very simple, even crude, compared to modern standards. At the time of Gudea, human portraits became more artistic, more stylized, and more realistic. The full range of this artistic renaissance can be found in the statues of Gudea:



This statue is a generic depiction of Gudea's facial features, typical of ancient royal portraiture. Even so, it is more realistic than most other royal statues.



This statue of Gudea is highly stylized, very abstract and artistic.



This statue is a "photo-realistic" portrait of the face of Gudea. It is from the Barakat Galleries.

As explained in [The Face of Gudea](#), this alabaster statue is the first realistic, recognizable portrait of any man or king in all of history. This kind of realism was unprecedented in royal statuary. Part of this realism is based on the slight asymmetry of the facial features. It seems that the artisans of Lagash were the first to realize that people's facial features are seldom completely symmetrical. The left and right eyes are not exactly the same size. The nose has an irregular shape.



Notice the slight asymmetry of the eyes, nose, and mouth, making this portrait more realistic and therefore more recognizable as a distinct individual. It is done in the same realistic style as the statue of Gudea shown above. The other statue of Ur-Ningirsu is a generic portrait of "The King." AO 4351 is a realistic portrait of Ur-Ningirsu, the man. It appears to be a younger version of Ur-Ningirsu, so perhaps it was commissioned when Gudea was still alive, as a portrait of the heir apparent. Then again, it might have been created when Ur-Ningirsu became a king in his own right, making a realistic statue of himself like his father had done.

If AO 4351 and the statue of Ur-Ningirsu do not exactly match in all their details, it's because one statue is generic and the other is realistic.

I would suggest that AO 4351 is the true face of Ur-Ningirsu, as opposed to the generic representation of him as "The King," in the same way that the realistic Barakat Gudea is the true face of Gudea behind the other more generalized portraits of him.

There is yet another Sumerian statue that was done in this same realistic style. It is the statue of Ur-Namma in the Met Museum. Ur-Namma's facial features were *very* asymmetric. See [The Face of Ur-Namma](#).



Ur-Namma.

The reign of Ur-Ningirsu (circa 2120 - 2113 B.C.) is bracketed squarely in the middle between the reign of Gudea (2140 - 2120 BC) and the reign of Ur-Namma (2112 - 2094 BC). This realistic style began during the reign of Gudea and it ended soon afterwards. This realism wouldn't be seen again until more than fifteen centuries later, at the time of the Greeks and the Romans.

Additional proof that AO 4351 is the son of Gudea is the fact that it is carved in diorite stone. Diorite was very expensive because it had to be imported from a great distance and because the hard stone was difficult and time-consuming to carve. It was therefore most often used for portraits of royalty.



Here is a summary of the reasons indicating that AO 4351 is the portrait of Ur-Ningirsu:

- 1) It was found in the city of Girsu.
- 2) It is in the right time period, "the period of Gudea." This is a very narrow window of time.
- 3) The nose matches that of Gudea, which is rounded when viewed from the front but slightly squared off when view from the side. The flat cheek bones also match. This would suggest a direct descendant of Gudea.
- 4) The eyes, nose, and mouth are similar to the statue of Ur-Ningirsu. They match in both the front and profile views. The only exception is a minor difference in the shape of the chin.
- 5) It is done in the same realistic style as the statue of Gudea in the Barakat Gallery.
- 6) It is carved in diorite stone, usually reserved only for royalty.
- 7) The high artistic quality of AO 4351 means it is a portrait of the king or the heir apparent.

For the identity of a royal portrait in the period of Gudea, done in the realistic style of Gudea, the best available choice is:

Ur-Ningirsu, the son of Gudea.



[Enlarge.](#)

See a [brief biography of Ur-Ningirsu.](#)

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