

Eannatum the Great

The King of Kish, the king of Sumer and Akkad.

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.)



Eannatum, *ensi* (ruler) of Lagash, from the Vulture Stele.
He reigned from 2454 to 2425 BC.

From the CDLI: Note: the CDLI uses the current spelling for "Eanatum." I have used the old spelling of "Eannatum" throughout these pages because this is the most common spelling. The face on the above image has been [partially restored](#). Click on the picture to enlarge it.

Eanatum was the son of Akurgal, and the most militarily successful ruler of the first dynasty of Lagash. He conducted many campaigns abroad, including ones against the southern cities of Ur, Uruk, and Kiutu, as well as states further afield such as Kish, Mari, Akshak, and Susa. He even reached northeastern Subartu and the eastern regions of Elam, destroying a city called Mishime. His military campaigns were so widespread that he was able to claim the title "King of Kish," a title associated with if not always actually indicating, the unity of the Mesopotamian city-states and their submission to a single ruler.

Like other Lagash rulers, Eanatum had to deal with Umma and the unsettled struggle over the Guedena. From the Enmetena cone we know he was in a strong position to dictate terms

of an agreement. He divided the land with his rival Enakale and established a no-man's land along the agreed border, marking it with his own boundary stele and restoring the previously ruined stele of Mesalim, in addition to building shrines to Enlil, Ningirsu, and Ninhursag near the division. He also imposed a tax on Umma for the use of its share of the Guedena, which grew to huge proportions and in the time of his descendants resulted in another invasion by Umma into Lagash's side. To enforce the agreement he made the ruler of Umma swear an oath to the gods not to violate the borders.

Much information about Eanatum's deeds comes from the famous Stele of the Vultures, a fragmentary inscription that depicts in both verbally and graphically powerful ways the military exploits of the king of Lagash. One fragment shows the god Ningirsu holding a mace in his right hand while his left holds a net that has bagged a number of helpless enemy soldiers. Another section shows Eanatum leading a heavily armed phalanx of soldiers trampling slain enemy underneath. Yet another shows men piling up corpses into a giant heap, an image which is reflected in the text.

The stele also gives testament to developments in the ideology of kingship which are promoted by later Lagash rulers. Eanatum is the first Lagash king to explicitly claim divine birth by a god, in this case Ningirsu. Inheritors of the throne would go on to do likewise, as when Eanatum's son Enanatum I [sic] named the god Lugal-URU¹¹ his father, and when Enmetena names Gatumdug his divine mother (Bauer pg. 462). Along with the divine progenitor comes a divine wet-nurse, that is, a female goddess who suckles the king to make him strong. For Eanatum this figure is the ancient goddess Ninhursag (Ean 01, IV). Other kings, down to the Neo-Assyrian period, would also make use of this motif. The stele also describes how Ningirsu visited Eanatum in a dream where he instructed him to make war on Umma. This motif surfaces again in the cylinder inscriptions of the later king Gudea, where he narrates how Ningirsu explained the plan for the (re)building of his E-ninnu temple.

[Note: Enanatum I was Eanatum's brother, not his son. jjs]

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Eannatum, the Great

It makes sense that Eannatum would first settle accounts with Umma before he set out for conquests further afield. Umma and Lagash were neighboring cities, traditional enemies that had long disputed the ownership of the Guedena, the fertile plain that lay between them.

This land dispute had been a point of contention for many years, since before the days of Eannatum's grandfather, Ur-Nanshe. During that time, Mesalim (mentioned above) the king of Kish, was called upon to arbitrate the dispute. His ruling was very favorable to Lagash. This caused the lingering resentment of Umma, which periodically erupted into warfare. In an attempt to reclaim the territory, the army of Umma would sometimes march into Lagash and "smash to bits" the steles that had been erected to mark the border. This happened during the reign of Akurgal, Eannatum's father, and it would happen again during the reign of Enmetena, Eannatum's nephew. Given the situation, it was imperative that Eannatum first secure his home front before he attempted any other conquests, in the same way that Alexander of Macedon first subdued Greece before he ventured into Asia.

Next, Eannatum moved against Elam, the longtime foreign enemy of the Sumerians (the Elamites would later destroy Sumerian civilization in 2004 B.C.). Elam was part of what today is modern Iran. The capital of Elam was the city of Susa, which Eannatum destroyed, along with several other cities. Eannatum had now secured both his eastern and western flanks (Elam and Umma) against counter invasions (foreign or domestic). He had possession of the fertile fields of the Guedena with which to feed his army, and he was collecting tribute from Umma and Elam. He could now turn his attention toward Sumer.

The conquest of Sumer need not have been particularly bloody. After what happened to Umma, it may have been enough for Eannatum to simply show up with his army outside a Sumerian city in order to secure their surrender. A few Sumerian cities resisted, most notably Ur and Uruk. After these armies were defeated, the other cities fell into line (significantly, Eannatum says he "defeated" Ur and Uruk, not "destroyed" them, as he did with Susa).

It's been speculated on whether or not Eannatum personally led his troops into battle, or if he just depicted himself this way for propaganda purposes. On the Vulture Stele, it states that Eannatum was struck by an enemy arrow during the battle against Umma. Eannatum himself broke off the arrow and continued the attack at the front of his men. This telling detail suggests that Eannatum personally led his troops into battle. This is another way that he resembled Alexander the Great.

All that remained was to conquer Akkad. Given the mutual histories of Sumer and Akkad (described on the [Sumerian History page](#)) it was inevitable that he eventually attack Akkad. He conquered the Akkadian city of Kish, along with Kish's Akkadian allies from the cities of Akshak and Mari. In so doing, he thus became the "King of Kish." This was the traditional title given to anyone (Sumerian or Akkadian) who ruled both Sumer and Akkad. He now ruled all of Mesopotamia, from southeast Ur to northwest Mari, considered to be the extreme outpost of Mesopotamian civilization. Since he also controlled foreign territories, it could be said that he created the first empire known to history. Although small by later standards, it was truly an empire because Eannatum ruled his entire nation (Sumer), the neighboring

city-states of the Akkadians, and the lands of the foreign barbarians, the Elamites. Like Alexander, Eannatum had conquered most of his known world. He was now at the pinnacle of his power.



Votive statue of **Eannatum** in a peaceful pose, his hands folded in prayer. It represents Eannatum in a temple setting.

A period of peace followed these many battles. Like other builders of empire, Eannatum was also a builder of cities (Nigin, for instance) and temples (for Enlil, Ningirsu, and Ninhursag). He also made several attempts to build a coalition of states. In this regard, he was like Alexander the Great, who attempted to unite the Greeks, Persians, and Macedonians. Eannatum was one of the world's first statesmen; he was not just a warrior thug like Attila, who was only in it for the plunder. He was trying to unite the warring states of Sumer and Akkad into a single unified nation. It was a thankless and difficult task trying to rule a region so rife with war, civil or otherwise, where all of the numerous city-states proudly defended their independence and their own self-interests.

The brief interlude of peace soon ended. The Elamites launched a counterattack against Eannatum, which he was barely able to repel. This was quickly followed by another attack by Kish and Akshak, whom Eannatum had only recently subdued, followed by a second attack

from Elam, and then another attack from the combined armies of Kish, Akshak, and Mari (!) Eannatum defeated them all, "in pitched battles fought at the Asuhur, Lagash's eastern boundary, and the Antasurra, its northern boundary." Zuzu, the king of Akshak and the leader of these counterattacks, was particularly vexatious for Eannatum.

In the year that the king of Akshak rose up,
Eanatum, the one nominated by Ningirsu,
from the Antasura of Ningirsu
Zuzu, the king of Akshak,
all the way back to Akshak he smote,
and he obliterated it.

He not just "defeated" Akshak, or "destroyed it," but "obliterated it," which shows some of Eannatum's frustration with the king of Akshak. Interestingly, Eannatum states he obliterated the city of Akshak, but he doesn't say he killed its king, Zuzu, even though he boasts of killing other kings. Perhaps the wily Zuzu once again got away.

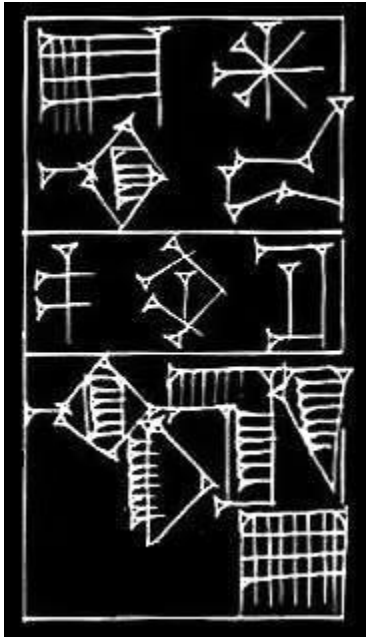
During his lifetime, Eannatum was never defeated in battle.

Another period of peace soon followed; but Eannatum wasn't able to enjoy the fruits of his victories for very long. He died soon after. The suddenness of his death, and the fact he was succeeded by his brother, Enannatum I, rather than by his son, suggests Eannatum was killed in combat. Perhaps he had finally overreached himself in yet another final battle. An alternative explanation is he had worn himself out with the exertions of his thirty-year reign. One thing is certain, Lagash would never again rise to the preeminence it had with Eannatum. There would never again be a king of Lagash quite like Eannatum, the Alexander of his day.



Eannatum **commemorative tablet** dedicating a brick-lined well in the courtyard of the temple of the war god, Ningirsu. CDLI tablet [P222430](#).

Also see a [translation of the Vulture Stele](#).



Eannatum /ruler /of Lagash.