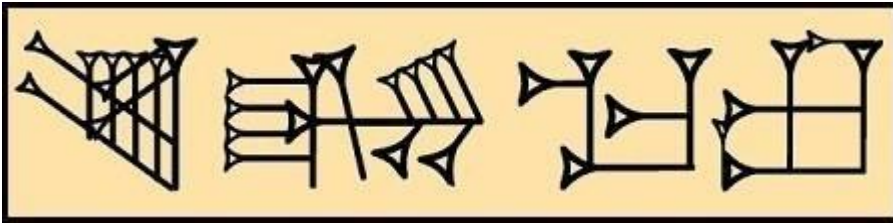


The Battles of Ishqi-Mari

The many battles of Ishqi-Mari, the warrior king of Mari.

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 window.)



This is Ishqi-Mari (c. 2350-2330 BC?). He was previously known as Lamgi-Mari. He was the last king of the Akkadian city of Mari before it was conquered by Sargon the Great

(or perhaps it was conquered by Naram-Sin, the grandson of Sargon. The historic record isn't exactly clear on the subject).

Prior to that time, the kingdoms of Mari, Ebla, and Nagar were fighting for political and economic control of the region. Mari defeated Nagar. Later, Ebla and the kingdom of Kish led a successful attack against Mari. Soon afterwards, Ishqi-Mari destroyed Ebla. Then in turn Mari was destroyed, demonstrating once again that the history of Mesopotamia is an unending saga of constant warfare.

As will later be explained, it is also possible that Ishqi-Mari fought against the Sumerians.



Ishqi-Mari's hair is worn in a knotted bun, the hairstyle of Akkadian royals. He wears a kaunakes, the garment of woolen leaf petals that was worn by royalty during ceremonial occasions.

Ishqi-Mari appears on two different cylinder seals. Both of them have battle scenes.

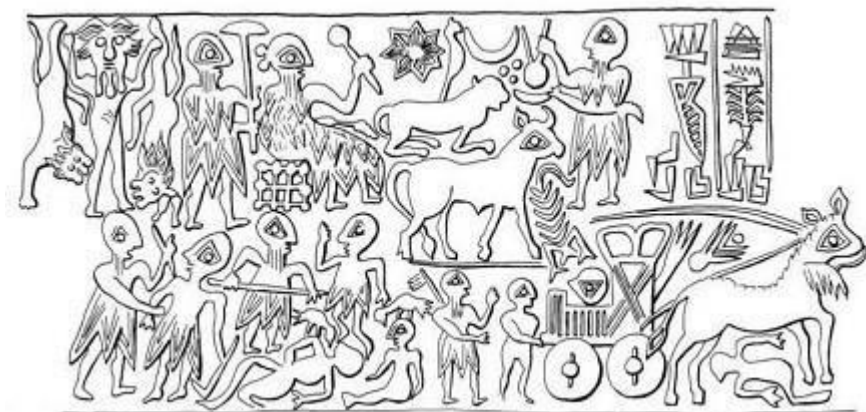
There is a lot of action portrayed on the seals and it is somewhat confusing. There has been some academic debate about the meaning of the iconography. You may want to read "The seals of Mari in the third millennium" by Dominique Beyer, and "War of the lords: The battle of chronology" by Joachim Bretschneider, Anne-Sophie Van Vyve, and Greta Jans. These were the primary sources for the information found on this page.

The cylinder seals of Ishqi-Mari (note: I cleaned up some of the clutter on both seals)



Seal 1. [Enlarge](#).

Ishqi-Mari is on the upper right. He sits on a throne. He is shaded from the sun by a servant holding a parasol. His hair is worn in a knotted bun. Ishqi-Mari wears the royal kaunakes and he holds a royal scepter. He also holds a date cluster, symbolizing his divine right to rule (as described on a [separate page](#) of this website).

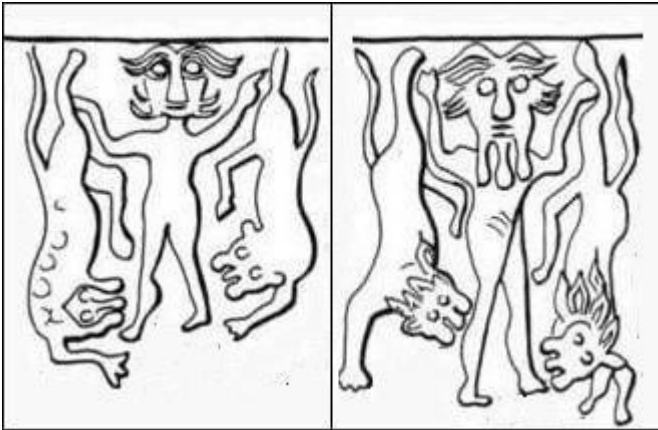


Seal 2. [Enlarge](#).

Ishqi-Mari is on the upper left. The sources say he is sitting on a stool, but I suggest it is actually a throne. It is too ornate to be a stool. He is not idly sitting on a camp stool while he watches the battle. The battle is already over. He is sitting on his throne during a libation ceremony to celebrate his victory.

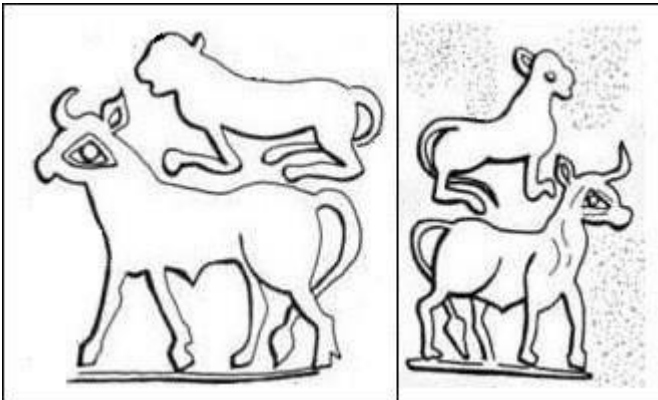
In addition to the battle scenes, both seals have some other themes in common:

The Master of Animals



The Master of Animals is another symbol of the divine right to rule. It indicates that the king, like the Master of Animals, is godlike and superhuman.

The bull and the lion

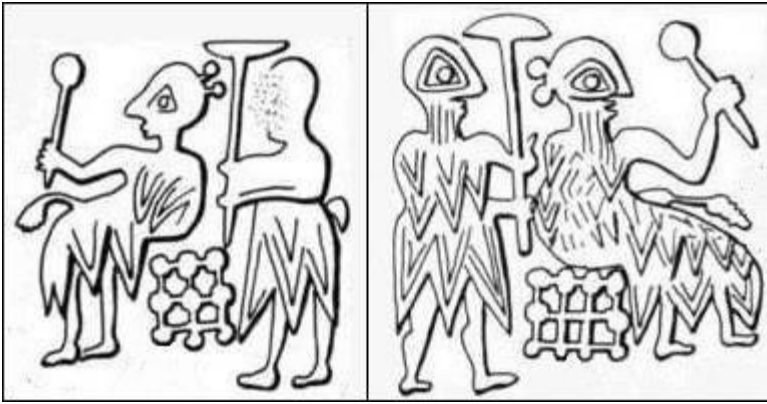


A bull and a lion occur on both seals. It has been suggested that the bull will be sacrificed during the victory celebration. A more likely explanation is that the bull and lion together represent the king's strength and courage.

Ishqi-Mari

The seals are very similar, suggesting they were created in the same workshop and perhaps by the same artist (who had a certain "horror of emptiness" according to Beyer). However, there are some important differences between the two seals.

Starting with Ishqi-Mari himself:



On the first seal, Ishqi-Mari is young and beardless. On the second seal, he is older and he has a beard.

Akkadian kings were usually portrayed with long flowing beards. On the first seal, Ishqi-Mari should be shown with a beard, the way he appears on the second seal and the way he appears on his statue.

Beyer suggests the first seal “was produced at a time during which Ishqi-Mari was not yet king, but instead he probably still filled the position of a high-ranking officer or ‘minister’ with a military function, during which he was most likely responsible for the downfall of Ebla.”

Ishqi-Mari, the prince

However, if the battle occurred before Ishqi-Mari became the king, I suggest he was a royal prince, and not just a high-ranking official from outside the royal family. As a prince, Ishqi-Mari could lead troops into battle, in the same way that the young prince Alexander led armies on behalf of his father the king.

Besides, this is Ishqi-Mari’s official seal. He would not advertise himself as an “illegitimate” outsider who came to the throne without a clear title and a royal bloodline. If he were truly an outsider, he would disguise the fact by simply portraying himself in the usual manner of Akkadian kings, with a long flowing beard, the way he did on his second seal.

(In a later example, the Egyptian queen Hatshepsut actually wears a false beard to indicate that she is a legitimate pharaoh. [Click here](#) to see a picture.)



I suggest this a beardless young prince who has only recently ascended to the throne. The date cluster symbolizes that he already has the right to rule. This means the battle occurred soon after prince Ishqi-Mari became the king.

He already has the hairstyle of Akkadian royals (the knotted bun), but he has not yet grown the kingly beard. This suggests it was a royal tradition for a prince to grow a long beard only after he assumed the kingship. An alternative explanation is that Ishqi-Mari has just recently come of age and he hasn't yet grown the beard of adult manhood.

The hairstyle by itself, which was worn exclusively by Akkadian royals, is enough to prove that Ishqi-Mari was indeed a prince, a member of the royal family. He was not a high-ranking outsider who somehow managed to become the king.



The knotted bun and elaborate coiffure of Akkadian royals required very long hair.

It took several years to grow the long hair (at an average rate of 1/2 inch per month). It took just as much time to grow the long beard. Prince Ishqi-Mari already has the long hair.

He will grow the beard now that he is the king. If he were an outsider, he would probably have the beard of an adult male but not the long hair of an Akkadian king. In other words, the exact opposite of the way Ishqi-Mari appears on his seal.

A statue of Prince Ishqi-Mari?



Left: These two fragments of statues were found in the Akkadian city of Eshnunna. Nicolò Marchetti has proposed that they belong together. Eshnunna is a neighboring kingdom of Mari. Perhaps young Ishqi-Mari placed this votive statue in the temple to celebrate his recent victory. On the other hand, if it is indeed a prince of Eshnunna, this seems to indicate that *all* Akkadian princes wore the royal knotted bun, but they did not grow the long beard until after they became the king.

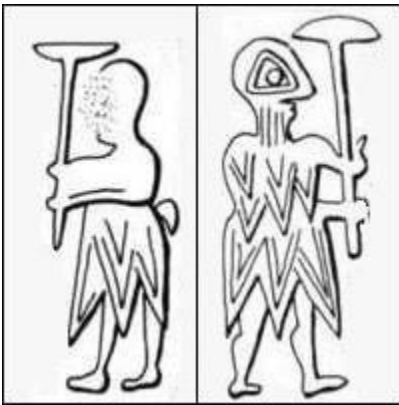
Ishqi-Mari, the king

On Seal 1, Ishqi-Mari is a brand-new king, but he is a king nonetheless. First of all, the seal says *šarru*, “king.” Second, Ishqi-Mari has all the accoutrements of a king – the throne, the kaunakes, the scepter, and the royal hairstyle. Third and most important, he holds the date cluster of Ishtar, signifying his divine right to rule.

The sources say Ishqi-Mari is holding a mace, which is a weapon. This is technically correct, but he is actually holding a royal scepter, a symbol of authority. A scepter evolved from the mace to symbolize a king’s right to rule (with deadly force if necessary). He is sitting on his throne *after* the battle is over, so there’s no reason for him to brandish a weapon (while being shaded from the hot sun by a parasol). As such, the scepter is a symbol of kingship. It is not actually a weapon that was used in combat.

Surprisingly, Ishqi-Mari doesn't portray himself engaged in combat like other kings of this period. Both Eannatum and the king on the Standard of Ur show themselves leading their troops into battle. Whether or not Ishqi-Mari actually fought in the battles he led, he was certainly a military commander. He had to be. Mari was a strategic trading center at the crossroads of Mesopotamia. It was coveted by its neighbors to the south – the Sumerians and the Akkadians, and later by the Babylonians. It seems Mari was always under attack by somebody or another. Being versed in the military arts was a necessary job requirement for any king of Mari. As for Ishqi-Mari, his "on the job training" began when he was still a young prince.

The parasol bearers



Notice the difference in the two men holding the parasols. The man on the left is holding the parasol for the young Ishqi-Mari. The bare shoulders of the man indicate that he is a commoner, either a servant or a low-ranking official. The man shading the older Ishqi-Mari is a royal retainer. He is perhaps a member of Ishqi-Mari's family because he is wearing a royal kaunakes, the kind that is draped over the shoulder. The same is true for the priest performing the libation ceremony.

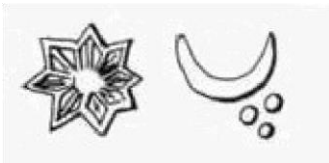
A royal priest



It is said he is serving a drink to Ishqi-Mari, but he holds a ceremonial pitcher and an offering bowl, the type that used in libation rituals as shown in a picture of [a priest from Ur](#)).

The royal kaunakes shows that he is not merely a servant.

Celestial connotations



The seal of king Ishqi-Mari has a celestial motif. It includes three stars, a crescent moon, and the eight-pointed star of Ishtar, the goddess of war. This will be discussed later.

Why a scorpion?



This scorpion is on Seal 2. A scorpion frequently appears in Mesopotamian art. It was clearly a symbol of something, but nobody knows what it means.

(Note: A colleague recently suggested that the scorpion may be a symbol of Ishtar. With its large claws and its venomous sting, a scorpion is the perfect symbol for the goddess of war. This particular scorpion seems ready to strike down the enemies of Ishqi-Mari.)

The battle scenes:



Battle 1 [Enlarge](#).



Battle 2 [Enlarge](#).

Battle Scene 1

On the first seal, the battle moves from right to left.

One enemy soldier is stabbed, another is speared, and yet another lies dead on the ground. On the left, an enemy soldier is run over by a chariot.

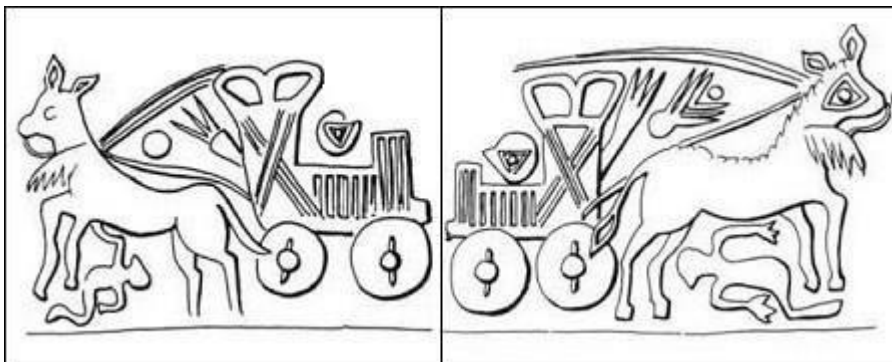
The chariots appear on both seals. The chariots are drawn impressionistically, so it's somewhat difficult to make out their details:



At the top is a Sumerian war chariot from the Standard of Ur.

1) reins 2) spears 3) the sources say this is a “globule,” but it is actually the rein ring(s)
 4) steering shaft 5) a caparison for the horse (it was either leather armor or a decoration).

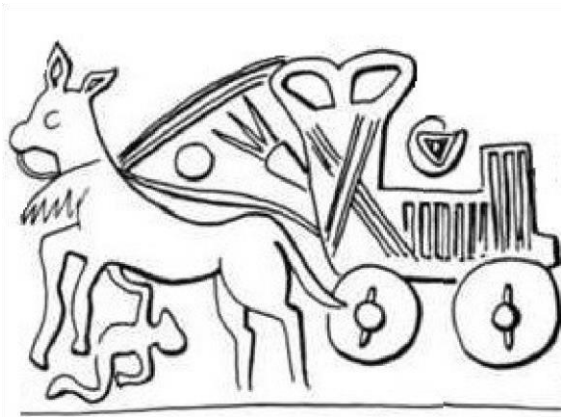
The chariots



The sources try to make a case that these are the king’s chariots. This is a reasonable assumption because the chariots are very prominent in the battle scenes and because the horses are trampling over the bodies of enemy soldiers (like on the [Standard of Ur](#)).

However, there aren’t any indications that they are indeed the king’s chariots. There are no royal occupants, “probably due to the lack of space” and neither chariot has any insignia or identifying markings. Nonetheless, both sources insist the chariots belong to the king and that the chariots are “symbolic of victory.”

They must surely be the king's chariots, right? They cannot be enemy chariots. No king would show his own soldiers being trampled to death beneath enemy chariots.



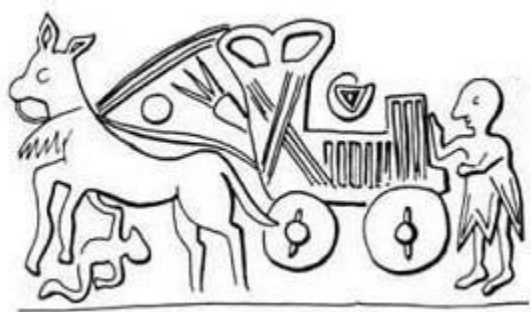
The solution to this dilemma is found in the “circular objects in the otherwise empty wagons, which are interpreted as severed heads and could be the confirmation of the aforementioned victory interpretation.” Although the severed head (shown upside down) supposedly represents the enemy casualties, “it remains an iconographic mystery. Never has it been identified on a royal wagon.”

I suggest a different interpretation. The head is not severed. The head is shown upside down to indicate that the chariot driver is dead.

In other words, the enemy charioteer was killed (while he was in headlong retreat) and his runaway horses are trampling over the bodies of his own men.

Thus is symbolized Ishqi-Mari's total victory.

This is the only scenario that makes any sense. It is confirmed by the fact that the chariot is not rushing toward the battle, but away from it.



The runaway chariot is eventually captured (one of Ishqi-Mari's soldiers is grabbing it). Presumably, many other chariots were captured as well.

The Sumerians

You might have already noticed the chariot's resemblance to the Sumerian war chariots. It looks like it was copied from the Standard of Ur. In addition, images of bodies being trampled by the chariot horses also appear on the standard.



During the battle an enemy soldier is stabbed with a javelin. He is holding a narrow-bladed battleaxe (or adze), the kind favored by the Sumerians.



Sumerian battleaxes and adzes.



The Akkadians, on the other hand, preferred a broad-bladed axe.



What's most noticeable about the enemy is the fact that he is wearing a Sumerian skirt with a leaf-like fringe. He is beardless and he has a shaven head, which is typically Sumerian.



Sumerian soldiers on the Standard of Ur. They wear different skirts depending on which city-state they are from, but all of the skirts have a leaf-like fringe.

The chariot, the battleaxe, the shaven head, and especially the skirt, all seem to indicate that the enemies defeated by Ishqi-Mari were Sumerians.

There's just one problem...



The enemy, magnified 3x.

In the [photograph of Seal 1](#), the fringe of skirt does not seem as “leaf-like” as it appears in the drawing. It may be a variation of the three-prong skirt that is worn by everybody else on both of the seals. Then again, the interplay of light and shadows in the photograph may have distorted the shape of the skirt. Apparently, Beyer saw something on the seal that caused him to draw the skirt the way he did.

Even if the skirt is the same as all the others, the enemy may still be a Sumerian, based on the shaven head, the chariot, and the battleaxe. The artist on both seals made little effort to distinguish friend from foe based on their clothing.

The Sumerians may have been the allies of Ishqi-Mari's enemy, Ebla. Sumerians were always meddling in Akkadian affairs.

As a matter of fact, it would be difficult for Ishqi-Mari *not* to have a run-in with the Sumerians during this period of history. Many ambitious Sumerian kings tried to conquer Akkadian cities so they could claim to be the King of Kish, the "King of Kings," the ruler of Sumer and Akkad (see the [Standard of Ur narratives: War side](#) on SumerianShakespeare.com).

If Ishqi-Mari had indeed won a battle against the Sumerians, it would certainly warrant a commemoration on his official seal.

A city in flames



The sources didn't speculate on the meaning of this image. I believe it shows the sun (which cleverly resets the scale in contrast to the larger images surrounding it). Beneath the sun, a building is on fire, symbolizing a whole city in flames. It is probably Ebla. This scene could be subtitled, "The day Ebla was destroyed."

Battle Scene 2



The battle moves from left to right. Enemies are stabbed and speared. An enemy chariot flees from the battlefield.

Vultures



Vultures are shown feeding on the enemy dead. This kind of scene appears on Eannatum's [Vulture Stele](#) and it will later appear on [Sargon's Victory Stele](#).

Prisoners



A guard escorts a nude prisoner. The prisoner's clothes are carried on the spear of the guard. In ancient battles, prisoners were stripped of their clothes to humiliate them.



A Mariote soldier carries his prisoner's skirt draped over his spear. Ironically, the soldier is part of a coalition army of a Sumerian King of Kish who conquered Mari (and other

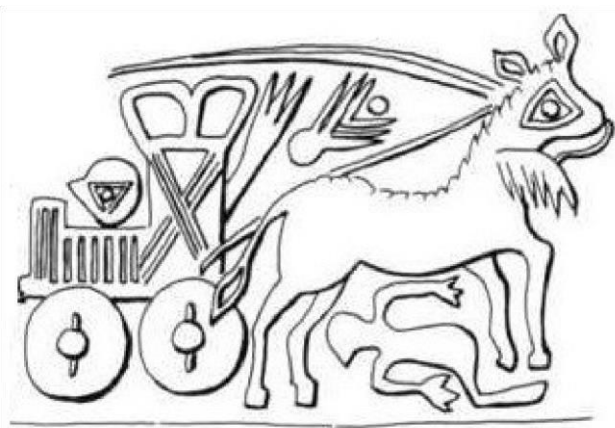
Akkadian cities). The soldier has a Mariote beard. His uniform is a blend of Sumerian and Akkadian styles. He wears an Akkadian sash. He also wears a Sumerian skirt and helmet (see [The Standard of Mari](#)). His prisoner is a fellow Akkadian, judging by the clothes. The prisoner originally wore an angled-skirt with a fine fringe that was split on the sides. This kind of skirt was worn throughout much of Akkad.

The Sumerians, again?



The king's men have beards. The enemies are clean-shaven. They carry narrow-bladed battleaxes. There is an apparent reference to Eannatum's Vulture Stele. The chariot looks like it is Sumerian. Once again it is possible that the defeated enemies are Sumerians.

A bad omen for Ishqi-Mari's enemies



The sources say the object above the horse is a "fly-like(?) unidentified object"; i.e., "the symbol of these creatures which hasten on the flesh of corpses?" The two question marks indicate that neither source really believes this interpretation.

I suggest the circle within the object is a star, just like the ones next to the crescent moon. It resets the scale in the same way as the sun in the scene of the burning city. Remove the circle and the object becomes identifiable as a comet. It fits perfectly within the celestial context that was mentioned earlier.



The star of Ishtar, a crescent moon, three more stars, and a comet.

In the ancient world, a comet was generally considered to be a bad omen, a harbinger of disaster. This is certainly the case here. Ishqi-Mari is victorious beneath the Star of Ishtar, while his enemies, under a bad sign, suffer calamity and defeat.

The message is clear: Ishqi-Mari has the mandate of heaven, his enemies do not.



Even as late as 1066 AD, a comet spelled disaster for king Harold of England (see [Halley's Comet on the Bayeux Tapestry](#)). Halley's Comet is the only comet that is regularly visible to the naked eye. It appears once every 75 years. So it is entirely possible that Ishqi-Mari's battle occurred during an appearance by Halley's Comet. I'm just saying.

One battle or two?

The battle scenes are very similar but there are some subtle differences between them. Do they represent two separate battles, or just one battle shown twice?

I believe they show two different battles. There is a chronological difference between the young prince and the older king. The vultures, the comet, the burning city, the prisoners, the captured chariots, and other scenes, appear on one seal but not the other. It seems

that during Ishqi-Mari's twenty-year reign in war-torn Mesopotamia he would have several victories to celebrate. He didn't need to harp on the same one twice.

The death of Ishqi-Mari

As previously stated, many scholars believe Mari was sacked (and Ishqi-Mari was killed) by either Sargon the Great (reign c. 2334–2284 BC) or by his grandson Naram-Sin (c. 2254 – 2218 BC).

I personally don't believe either of them defeated Ishqi-Mari. I base this conclusion on the known history of the region and on the artistic conventions of the time.

The reign of Sargon marks the end of the Early Dynastic III period and the beginning of the Akkadian period. The statue of Ishqi-Mari is typical for the ED III period, which is to say it is somewhat crude. The artistry of the Akkadian period was much more refined and naturalistic, as seen on Sargon's [Victory Stele](#) and the [stele of Naram-Sin](#).

The reign of Naram-Sin began about 80 years after the end of the ED III period, so he cannot be a contemporary of Ishqi-Mari.

As for Sargon, early in his reign he defeated king Lugalzagesi. At the time, Lugalzagesi was a Sumerian King of Kish. He called himself "the king of all the lands from the Upper Sea (the Mediterranean) to the Lower Sea (the Persian Gulf)," which of course included Mari. This means Lugalzagesi had already conquered Mari before Sargon ever got around to it. Therefore it's far more likely that Lugalzagesi is the one who defeated Ishqi-Mari, not Sargon.

Sargon later called himself "king of the lands between the Upper Sea and the Lower Sea," possibly as a dig to Lugalzagesi, so he eventually conquered Mari, but we don't know when this happened.

The problem is the uncertainty of the dates during this period of history. We don't even know when Sargon became the king – and he was one of the most important kings in all of Mesopotamian history.

The date usually given for Ishqi-Mari's reign (c. 2350-2330 BC) makes it seem as though he was a contemporary of Sargon and Lugalzagesi, but I think he predates both of them. The [CDLI](#) also gives an early date for "Iški-Mari," circa 2480 BC, more than 140 years before Sargon.

This was the time of Eannatum, Meskalamdug, Mesanepada, and the king on the Standard of Ur – along with some other Sumerian Kings of Kish. They sought to conquer all of Sumer and Akkad so they could be the "King of Kings," the king who ruled all other kings.

This is also the time that matches the artistic style of the ED III period in Mari.

A Sumerian King of Kish conquers Mari



The Standard of Mari (ca. 2500 – 2400 BC, note the date).

The Sumerians placed it in the Mari temple of Ishtar after they conquered the city. It shows a Sumerian king holding a battle standard. Standing with him are the soldiers of his new coalition army. It is composed of Sumerian and Akkadian soldiers. The king considered himself to be the legitimate ruler of both Sumer and Akkad, so when he conquered an Akkadian city he drafted its soldiers into his army. The soldiers of his coalition army wear uniforms that represent both nations. See the page about [The Standard of Mari](http://Sumeriansshakespeare.com) on Sumeriansshakespeare.com.



A Sumerian king on the Standard of Mari. In front of him is a Mariote soldier who is wearing an Akkadian sash with a Sumerian skirt and helmet.

Their clothes are depicted in the Mariote style for the ED III period, with a large “bustle” in the back. This feature does not appear on later representations of Mariote clothing.



Note the bustle in the back.

It is possible that Ishqi-Mari was defeated by another Akkadian king, but it is far more likely that he was conquered by a Sumerian King of Kish. We don't know which one, but there were plenty to choose from during this turbulent period of history.



Two **Sumerian Kings of Kish**. They hold narrow-bladed battleaxes. Their helmets feature the knotted bun of Akkadian royals. It symbolizes that they are "legitimate" Akkadian kings. The king on the left was found in Mari.



See [The Gold Helmet of the King of Kish](#).

Whether or not the Sumerians were the enemies portrayed on Ishqi-Mari's cylinder seals, he surely encountered them eventually, with fatal results.

To summarize:

On both seals Ishqi-Mari sits on a throne, not a stool. He holds a royal scepter, not a mace. He also holds the date cluster of Ishtar, symbolizing his divine right to rule.

On the first seal, Ishqi-Mari's royal hairstyle indicates that he was a prince. He was not just a high-ranking official from outside the royal family. Ishqi-Mari had only recently ascended to the throne. He did not yet have time to grow the long beard of an Akkadian king.

The statue of a man with the royal hairstyle but no beard suggests that all Akkadian princes wore the royal knotted bun but they did not grow the long beard until after they assumed the kingship.

The battle portrayed on Seal 1 was fought just after Ishqi-Mari became the king.

The “globule” above the chariot horses is actually a rein ring.

The chariot is an enemy chariot. The driver has been killed and the runaway horses are trampling over the bodies of his own men. This symbolizes Ishqi-Mari's victory.

It is possible that the Sumerians are the enemies portrayed on one of the seals, but this cannot be proven.

In the middle of Seal 1 there is an image of a city in flames. It is probably Ebla.

The unidentified object above the chariot on Seal 2 is a comet. It is a bad omen for the enemies of Ishqi-Mari. It may be Halley’s Comet.

The difference in Ishqi-Mari’s age on the two seals means they depict two separate battles. Many scenes occur on one seal but not the other, indicating two different battles.

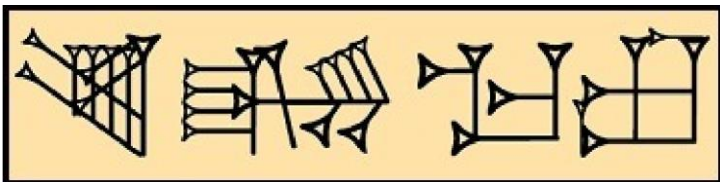
I suggest Ishqi-Mari predates both Sargon and Naram-Sin. However, if Ishqi-Mari reigned at the end of the ED III period, he was defeated by Lugalzagesi, not Sargon.

If Ishqi-Mari reigned earlier in the ED III period, he was probably defeated (and killed) by a Sumerian King of Kish. This may be the event commemorated on the Standard of Mari.

In conclusion:

We know very little about Ishqi-Mari.

We don't know when he lived or even how he pronounced his name.



Ishqi-Mari? Lamgi-Mari? Yišqīmari? Iški-Mari?

circa 2340 BC? circa 2480 BC?

Most of what we know about him comes from his cylinder seals. The seals, not the statue, show us Ishqi-Mari the way he saw himself.



The statue of Ishqi-Mari makes him look rather simpy. He wasn't.

He was a warrior. This is how he portrayed himself on his official cylinder seals.

He was a warrior prince who became a warrior king. He was ordained by Ishtar, the goddess of war, with the divine right to rule. He destroyed at least one city. He fought against three different enemies, probably more. Two of the enemies are shown on his cylinder seals. Another enemy finally defeated him.

Thus the regime of Ishqi-Mari, which began in war, ended in war, illustrating yet again the unending saga of constant warfare in ancient Mesopotamia.

October 1, 2020