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A NEW LOOK AT THE MESOPOTAMIAN ROD AND RING: EMBLEMS OF TIME AND ETERNITY

MARY ABRAM

A conjoined rod and ring appeared for millennia on cylinder seals, tablets, and stelae of ancient Mesopotamia. This unit evolved from a solitary depiction on a ca. 3000 B.C.E. cylinder seal to an emblem displayed by deities throughout the early first millennium B.C.E. Gods from the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2100 B.C.E.) held the rod and ring, as did deities of Old Babylon (ca. 1800 B.C.E.) and Neo-Assyria until about 700 B.C.E. Despite a long history and diverse applications throughout a large geographical region, the exact nature of the rod and ring remains a mystery. What did this motif mean to the ancients who sculpted it from stone? This article will review possible meanings presented by scholars and propose a new theory: the rod and ring, separate objects with distinct symbolisms, combine to represent life in its temporal and eternal aspects.

Few scholars have attempted to solve the rod and ring mystery in depth. Kathryn E. Slanski is the most recent exception. Her comprehensive study published in 2007 proposes the rod and ring as “righteous kingship sanctified by the gods, and . . . an aspect of the enduring relationship between the palace and the temple.”¹ A 2003 statement by Slanski credits Elizabeth van Buren with the next most prolific scholarship on this topic.² Van Buren defines the rod and ring unit as a symbol of divinity.³ In 1939, Henri Frankfort articulated

1. Kathryn E. Slanski, “The Mesopotamian ‘Rod and Ring’: Icon of Righteous Kingship and Balance of Power between Palace and Temple,” in *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt*, ed. Harriet Crawford (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 41.

2. Kathryn E. Slanski, *The Babylonian Entitlement Narus (Kudurrus): A Study in Their Form and Function* (Boston, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2003), 262.

3. E. Douglas Van Buren, “The Rod and Ring,” *ArOr* 17.2 (1949): 449.

a theory adopted and adapted by later scholarship: the rod and ring could have metaphorical and literal connotations of measurement.⁴

Not all conclusions about this motif concur. Nor does any one conclusion match all rod and ring occurrences in the visual record. Disagreements exist in the written venue also. “Attempts to link the object [rod and ring] to verbal identifications in the written record have failed to gain universal acceptance.”⁵ These difficulties combine with another challenge, the lack of ancient texts describing the rod and ring motif. Despite the obstacles, a search for the true meaning of the motif may be undertaken through comparison and contrast. The major occurrences of the Mesopotamian rod and ring between the third and first millennia B.C.E. will be presented along with current scholarship and how varied conclusions apply to the examples. The new look at the rod and ring motif, a synthesis of previous scholarship with an added proposal, will also be measured against the examples.

The new proposal consists of three main components. First, as suggested by Van Buren, the rod and ring unit is an insignia of divine, not royal, power.⁶ The second component follows the scholarship of Frankfort and Slanski: the rod and ring are metaphoric measuring devices.⁷ Finally, the rod and ring, while separate units, may unite to visually symbolize mortality and everlasting life. The rod and ring together become emblems of time and eternity.

Defining the Mesopotamian Rod and Ring

The Mesopotamian rod and ring consist of two separate emblems held as one conjoined unit. The rod is generally slender, straight, and blunted at each end with no embellishments. The ring, is usually a thin, continuous circle gripped with the rod (see illustration 1).

The Solitary Ring

The ring is sometimes shown separated from its companion rod, as in the case of an 18th century B.C.E. Syrian cylinder seal where the deity Shamash holds a solitary ring.⁸ In a Neo-Assyrian relief from the time of Sennacherib, ca. 700 B.C.E., an enthroned deity holds a solitary ring while companion deities

4. Henri Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 179.

5. Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 38, 41.

6. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 450.

7. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, 179; Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 41, 51.

8. Hamido Hammade, *Cylinder Seals from the Collections of the Aleppo Museum, Syrian Arab Republic* (BAR International 335; Oxford, England: BAR International, 1987), 76. See Shamash and Ring Cylinder Seal illustration, page 77.

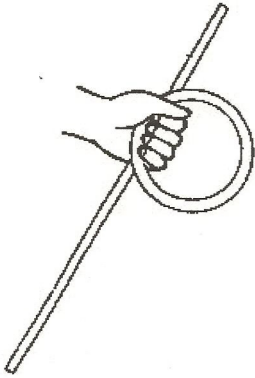


Illustration 1.
Conjoined Rod and Ring.
 As found in James Hall,
Illustrated Dictionary of
Symbols in Eastern and
Western Art (London:
 John Murray, 1994), 79.

hold the conjoined rod and ring.⁹ Does this solitary version of the ring carry the same meaning as the conventional conjoined-with-rod depiction? This question is just one aspect of the rod and ring mystery. Solid answers remain elusive. If the ring signifies eternal existence or continuation of life as proposed, it would retain that meaning when depicted alone while contributing its particular symbolism to a companion rod.

The ring's circular shape is the basis for its parallel with eternal existence, an idea supported by the ancient Egyptian circular *shen* symbol for "eternity."¹⁰ A circle neither begins nor ends. This unique quality leads to thoughts of continuity and eternity. *Continuity* implies a continuation of a current circumstance. *Eternity* is a word more associated with time, specifically endless time. "Babylonian religious speculation derived from the circle the notion of infinite, cyclical and universal time."¹¹ When used in the context of this study, eternity means more than endless time. The ring of eternity also represents endless existence or eternal life.

In some depictions, the ring appears as a beaded circle called a chaplet (see illustration 2). This is accepted as a decorative form of the conventional solid ring.¹² The chaplet with its individual circles connected in one large circle may even expand the symbolism of the conventional ring. In one aspect, it could more clearly delineate the nature of smaller time segments uniting to form a larger whole, in the same way that degrees form minutes. The Babylonians who

9. See Maltai Procession of Deities: Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Austin, Tex.: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), 40.

10. James Hall (*Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* [London: John Murray, 1994], 79–80) notes that the Egyptian *shen* symbol, a ring attached to a short rod, resembles the Mesopotamian rod and ring. The *shen* hieroglyph means "eternity." The *shen* symbol appears in a cylinder seal from Alalakh, Syria in the early 17th century .c.e. See Dominique Collon, *The Seal Impressions from Tell Atchana/Alalakh* (Kevelaer, Germany: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1975), 6. This shows a merging of ideas between Egypt and peripheral Mesopotamia. While a *shen* visual and symbolic parallel is possible, however, the meaning behind the Mesopotamian rod and ring would have already been in place centuries before the existence of the Alalakh seal.

11. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 197.

12. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 51–52.

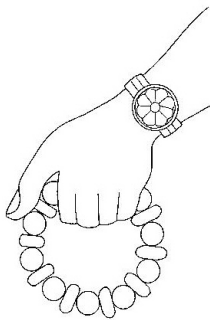


Illustration 2.
Chaplet. As found in Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia (Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), 51.

divided the circle into 360 degrees¹³ would have been familiar with such an ideology. In another aspect, the chaplet could represent the eternal existence of several deities in one universal eternity.

A question connected with this subject is whether or not the deity Marduk received a ring along with scepter and throne from other deities before they commissioned him to battle Tiamat. Tablet IV, lines 20–28 of the *Enuma Elish* describe Marduk speaking to destroy then bring back a constellation.¹⁴ In the next line, the gods bestow upon Marduk a “scepter, throne, and staff.”¹⁵ Robert Rogers adds the transliterated word *palu* to the scepter and throne received by Marduk, with the notation that Leonard King translates the *palu* as “ring.”¹⁶ While King’s translation is not a certainty, a ring given to Marduk after demonstrating restorative powers is an intriguing concept to consider, particularly when a ring could symbolize endless life.

The Solitary Rod

Although not so common a sight, the rod like its ring counterpart may stand alone as depicted in an Assyrian cylinder seal from the time of Esarhaddon, ca. 680 B.C.E.¹⁷ In this scene, the deity Ashur holds the conventional rod and ring while the lightning-bearing storm god Adad extends the solitary rod in his left hand. If the rod symbolizes measurement of time or lifespan, it is no surprise that Adad is depicted without the ring. An emblem associated with eternity in the hands of a storm god could denote endless rain and ruin. Brief periods of storm, compatible with the rod of measurable time, would be beneficial. This idea gains support from

13. Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 197.

14. “Epic of Creation,” Benjamin Foster (*COS* 1.111: 397).

15. “Epic of Creation,” Foster, 397.

16. “The Story of Creation,” *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, trans. Robert William Rogers (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 25. Arthur Whatham cites King’s translation as *patu* rather than the *palu* of Roger’s text. See Arthur E. Whatham, “The Meaning of the Ring and Rod in Babylonian-Assyrian Sculpture,” *The Biblical World* 26.2 (August 1905): 120. Further note: *The Biblical World* was incorporated, 1921, into the University of Chicago’s publication *The Journal of Religion*. Whatham’s article can be accessed electronically through JSTOR.

17. See Esarhaddon Cylinder Seal illustration: Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 161.

the Maltaï Procession of Deities relief where the storm god is the only deity not holding either a solitary ring or conjoined rod and ring.¹⁸

The slender, blunt-edged rod has been called a “staff” by some scholars. Despite the visual similarity, “staff” in the context of this study refers to a longer object that would touch the ground when held in the hand of a standing figure. The rod, however, could touch the ground when held by an enthroned deity.

Could the rod be a scepter, an insignia of power held by both gods and kings? Despite the similar shape and length along with parallel connotations of power, the rod and the scepter differ visually. The rod is plain whereas a decorative unit tops the scepter. Evidence defining these objects as separate in function, even in the ancient mind, can be seen in Neo-Assyrian art. A 705 B.C.E. painting from Dur Sharrukin shows the deity with rod and ring facing the king with his scepter.¹⁹ In another example, the 700 B.C.E. Bavian relief, Sennacherib gripping his scepter stands behind Ashur who rides on his animal while holding the rod and ring.²⁰ These examples seem to indicate that a king may wield a scepter, but the rod and ring unit belongs to deity.

The Rod and Ring, Emblems of Divinity

The earliest visual image of the combined rod and ring may be from a 3500–3000 B.C.E. Uruk Period cylinder seal (see illustration 3). Wiseman and Forman describe this scene as a female worshipper facing a shrine with the free-standing rod and ring “a symbol of divine authority.”²¹ The rod and ring in such a setting shows its sacred nature early in its history.

By the third millennium B.C.E. the rod and ring appeared in the hands of deities. Van Buren first noted this phenomenon, adding that the motif was held “by certain Great Gods only, but never . . . by a mortal or even a deified king.”²² This observation has been approved by later scholars.²³ The proposal of this study—that the rod and ring, either separately or conjoined, are symbols associated with divinity—follows previous scholarship with the addition

18. See Maltaï Procession of Deities: Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 40.

19. See Dur Sharrukin Painting: Andre Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 99.

20. See Bavian Relief, Plate 81: Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, 73.

21. D. J. Wiseman and Werner Forman, *Cylinder Seals of Western Asia* (London: Batchworth Press, 195-), 3. See Uruk Cylinder Seal illustration, page 4.

22. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 449.

23. E. Ascalone and L. Peyronel, “Two Weights from Temple N at Tell Mardikh-Ebla, Syria: A Link between Metrology and Cultic Activities in the Second Millennium BC?” *JCS* 53 (2001): 7; Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 42.

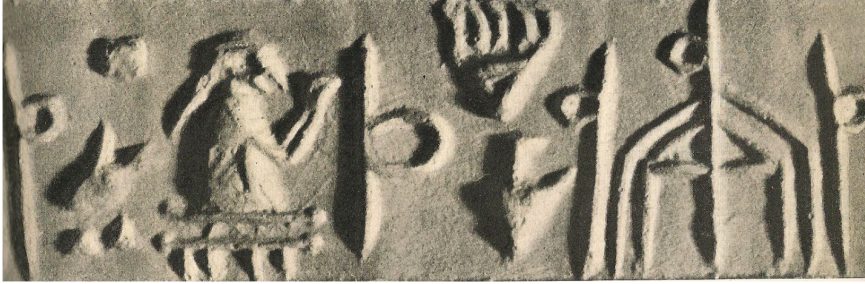


Illustration 3. *Uruk Cylinder Seal, 3500–3000 B.C.E. As found in D. J. Wiseman and Werner Forman, Cylinder Seals of Western Asia (London: Batchworth Press, 195-), 4.*

of one notation. The rod and ring unit is actually one of the readily recognized insignia of deity.

Several divine insignia are present on an Old Babylonian cylinder seal presentation scene from Tel Harmal. The seal's owner, Tishpak Gamil, calls himself a "servant of Shamshi-Adad," thereby dating the seal to about 1800 B.C.E. and, along with the dragon motif, identifies the main god as Tishpak, patron deity of Eshnunna.²⁴ This seal depicts two deities. A god with a horned head-dress leads a male figure to an enthroned god wearing multiple horns and holding the Old Babylonian spiked version of the rod and ring. The enthroned deity rests his feet upon an animal. Both deities wear flounced garments. There are astral symbols in the background. All these emblems, including the rod and ring, appear to be visual markers of deity.

One of the core debates about the rod and ring motif is whether or not this emblem of divinity also becomes an emblem of kingship. Arthur Whatham suggested in 1905 that the rod and ring are symbolic of royalty, emblems of "world-sovereignty."²⁵ Modern scholar William Hallo proposes that the rod and ring be "treated as royal rather than only divine insignia."²⁶ Such conclusions are likely based on the assumption that the deity offers the emblems to a king who extends his hand to receive them. For instance, in reference to the Hammurabi Law Code Stela, Hallo states, "The king receives from the deity

24. Lamia al-Gailani Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (BMes 23; Malibu, Calif.: 1988), 9–10. See Presentation Scene Illustration, IV.

25. Whatham, "Meaning of Ring and Rod," 120, 122.

26. William H. Hallo, "Sumerian History in Pictures: A New Look at the 'Stele of the Flying Angels'" in *An Experienced Scribe Who Neglects Nothing: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Jacob Klein*, eds. Yitschak Sefati, Pinhas Artzi, Chaim Cohen, Barry L. Eichler, and Victor A. Hurowitz (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 161.

the rod and the ring.²⁷ Yet the king's hand reaches toward his own face, not toward the rod and ring. He does not take nor even touch these emblems. Van Buren, writing decades before Hallo, disputes the theory of the rod and ring as a divine investiture of power motif. She refers specifically to Hammurabi's gesture as "the usual attitude of reverence before a seated god . . . it is incorrect to say that the king accepts the rod and ring which the deity extends to him."²⁸ Indeed, Hammurabi's hand assumes the same position as the Tel Harmal cylinder seal depiction of a supplicant being led to an enthroned deity grasping the rod and ring.²⁹ The difference is, on the cylinder seal, another deity stands between the supplicant and the enthroned deity, making it even more unlikely that the supplicant is reaching for the rod and ring.

Since the hand gesture of the king may be pivotal in this discussion, it would be useful to reference a worshipper using the hand gesture of reverence without involvement of the rod and ring. An Ur III era cylinder seal, ca. 2100 B.C.E., shows a goddess leading a worshipper to an enthroned deity with nothing in his extended hand.³⁰ The worshipper stands behind the leading goddess with his inward-facing right palm in front of his mouth in the same gesture as the Hammurabi depiction. As in the case of the Tel Harmal cylinder seal, a goddess stands between the worshipper and the enthroned deity. While the hand gesture of the Ur III worshipper may suggest reverence or salutation, he does not reach for an object, for the enthroned deity offers



Illustration 4. *Ur Nammu Stele Rod and Rope. As found in Anton Moortgat, The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia (London: Phaidon, 1969), Plate 201.*

27. Hallo, "Sumerian History in Pictures," 150.

28. Van Buren, "Rod and Ring," 438.

29. See Presentation Scene: Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals*, IV.

30. See Ur Worshipers illustration: Wiseman and Forman, *Cylinder Seals of Western Asia*, 41.

none. Reverence, rather than reaching out, is likely the same situation with Hammurabi's gesture.

The Rod and Ring of the Third Millennium B.C.E.

Mesopotamian artifacts depicting the rod and ring, beginning with the third millennium B.C.E., provide opportunity to test old and new theories about this motif. The Stele of Ur-Nammu at Ur plays a vital role in defining the rod in particular as a metaphoric measuring device.

The Stele of Ur-Nummu

Ur-Nammu, founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur about 2100 B.C.E., began construction on the great Ziggurat of Ur and commissioned several canals.³¹ These achievements are inferred in building motifs and water imagery on the stele attributed to Ur-Nammu. The building motifs have received the most attention, particularly in conjunction with the rod and ring. A deity holds a rod and a length of rope extending from a ring. Debates about whether the ring is the conventional ring or coiled rope point to the latter conclusion (see illustration 4).

Scholars identify the rod and rope unit as a "measuring rod and line."³² This literal definition, supported by the building activity evident on the stele, has led scholars to propose that the rod measures more than distance.³³ The measurement of justice has become the primary perspective.³⁴ The metaphoric view of measurement, based on the Ur-Nammu Stele, factors in other explanations of the rod and ring motif, including this paper's focus on the rod as both a literal and metaphoric measuring device.

The Rod and Measuring Line in Construction Imagery

Enough of the Ur-Nammu Stele has been restored to show scenes divided into five registers on both the better preserved "good" face and the "poor"

31. Leon Legrain, "The Stele of the Flying Angels," *The Museum Journal* (March 1927): 75.

32. Henri Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 104; see also Van Buren, "Rod and Ring," 435.

33. Henri Frankfort first proposed the metaphorical theory of measuring instruments in 1939 (Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, 179). Thorkild Jacobsen later equated the rod and rope measuring tools with peace (Jacobsen, "Pictorial Language," 4). A 1992 dictionary of Mesopotamian symbols reiterates the rod-ring measuring instruments as symbolic in nature (Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 156).

34. Henri Frankfort first connected justice in metaphor with measuring tools (Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, 179). Black and Green follow this conclusion in their dictionary (Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 156). In 2001, Ascalone and Peyronel state that the rod and ring represent both literal measuring tools and a metaphor for measuring justice (Ascalone and Peyronel, "Weights from Temple N," 7). Finally, in 2007, Kathryn Slanski names the metaphor for justice theory the most prominent rod and ring definition (Slanski, "Mesopotamian Rod and Ring," 41).

face most exposed to the elements. The enthroned deity holding a rod and length of rope appears in the second register from the top of the “good face.”³⁵ The fourth “good face” register shows a brick wall behind the workers and a ladder. These building scenes have generally been interpreted as representing construction of the ziggurat with the deity supplying the means to measure its dimensions.³⁶ The construction activity is not limited to the ziggurat, however. An inscription on the stele’s fourth register “poor face” lists the canals dug by Ur-Nammu.³⁷ Slanski follows Hallo in proposing that the depicted building activity refers primarily to canal construction rather than commemoration of the ziggurat.³⁸

Whatever his project, the king of the “good face” third register carries tools upon his back. Some interpret this as investiture of divine power to proceed with the construction. Hallo says of the scene in the register above where the deity holds measuring devices in the presence of the king: “He [the king] is clearly receiving the symbols of the royal office from the seated statue of a god.”

This doesn’t seem to be the case. The deity grips his emblems with a closed fist. A potted date palm separates the deity and the king who doesn’t lift his hand either in salutation or any attempt to receive the measuring devices. As Van Buren points out, the king “is wholly engrossed in pouring water from the tumbler-like vessel he holds into the vase.”³⁹ This doesn’t support an investiture of power scene. Van Buren makes another observation regarding the king carrying building tools in the third register. “The measuring rod and line . . . are not among [the tools] as might have been expected if they had really been handed over to him.”⁴⁰

Elizabeth van Buren separates the objects held by the Ur-Nammu Stele deity from the conventional rod and ring. “What the god there holds are really a measuring rod and line, but not the true rod and ring.”⁴¹

Jeanny Canby concurs that the “short staff and coil” in the deity’s hand “is not the familiar rod-and-ring symbol.”⁴² Canby’s statement certainly applies to the ring. The rod, however, appears to be the same rod of other depictions. Does its association with a questionable ring enhance or diminish

35. See Ur-Nammu Stele Restoration, good face illustration: Hallo, “Sumerian History in Pictures: A New Look at the Stele of the Flying Angels,” 145.

36. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 435.

37. Jeanny Vorys Canby, “Fragment of ‘Ur-Namma’ Stele,” *Art of the First Cities*, ed Joan Aruz (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 446.

38. Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 45; Hallo, “Sumerian History in Pictures,” 158.

39. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 435–36.

40. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 436.

41. Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 438.

42. Canby, “Fragment of ‘Ur-Namma’ Stele,” 445.

the rod's literal and metaphoric measuring attributes? William Hallo removes the conventional ring altogether from measurement imagery: "The ring is not remotely associated with measurements."⁴³ If the rod, not the ring, is the measuring tool, why would measuring and non-measuring imagery appear in the same motif? What is the connection? These inquiries may be addressed by a closer look at the so-called ring of the Ur-Nammu Stele.

A detailed view of the ring-shaped object held by the Ur-Nammu Stele deity shows grooves indicative of a fibrous rope. Slanski states several times in her 2007 work that this depiction is "clearly" a coiled rope or cord.⁴⁴ This fits other observations that this particular "ring" is not the conventional Mesopotamian ring. Thorkild Jacobsen keeps this perspective while maintaining the rod as a measuring tool. "The ring actually is no ring at all but a coil of rope, apparently a measuring-cord for measuring longer distances, while the accompanying 'rod' is a yardstick for details."⁴⁵

The conventional solid ring may also appear in relief on the Ur-Nammu Stele, although its presence is a debated issue. According to Canby, fragments of the Ur-Nammu stele were pieced together in 1927, resulting in a "reconstruction . . . somewhat hasty and in some cases inaccurate."⁴⁶ The fragment entitled "God with Rod and Ring" inserted into the third register of the "good face" was removed from its former place.⁴⁷ This fragment and others were taken for mineralogical examination in 1991 with no results yet released by the time of Canby's 2001 publication.⁴⁸ However, a 2008 article by Irene Winter at Harvard includes a drawing of the Ur-Nammu Stele "poor face" showing the "God with Rod and Ring" fragment in place on the third register.⁴⁹

The presence of both the conventional rod and ring along with the rod in connection with a coiled rope in the same stele presents a question. Is the rod the same device in both cases? There is no difficulty in considering it so if the rod is defined as a measuring tool. When linked with the rope, possibly a measuring line, the concept of literal measurement is reinforced. If the idea of

43. Hallo, "Sumerian History in Pictures," 160.

44. Slanski, "Mesopotamian Rod and Ring," 41–42, 44, 51–52.

45. Jacobsen, "Pictorial Language," 4.

46. Canby, "Fragment of 'Ur-Namma' Stele," 443.

47. Jeanny Vorys Canby, *The "Ur-Nammu" Stela* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Museum, 2001), 56.

48. Canby, *The "Ur-Nammu" Stela*, 55.

49. Irene Winter, "Touched by the Gods: Visual Evidence for the Divine Status of Rulers in the Ancient Near East," in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (ed. Nicole Brisch; Chicago, Ill.: The Oriental Institute, 2008), 90. For illustrative purposes, compare the detail of Register 2, poor face (Winter, 90) with the graphic provided by Legrain's "The Stele of the Flying Angels" (Legrain 96). The two pieces appear to be the same illustration of the conventional solid ring.

metaphoric measurement is valid, as generally accepted, the rod would add its particular symbolism to its companion conventional ring. If the rod and ring together represent measurable time and eternity as proposed, the companion-ship is a compatible one.

An Alternate Theory for the Coiled Rope

Slanski names two “leading interpretations” for the rod and ring, the first being the measuring tool theory already discussed with the second theory by William Hallo: “they are a staff and nose-rope, royal attributes representing the king’s ability to lead the people.”⁵⁰

Hallo proposes that the conventional ring was a later addition to the iconography and associated only with deities, whereas the staff and nose-rope were royal insignia bestowed upon the king to direct his people.⁵¹ “The clinching argument” for his theory, Hallo claims, “comes from the iconography,” especially the Akkadian mould showing the king holding his enemies by nose-ropes.⁵² The king, likely Naram-Sin, is enthroned next to the goddess Ishtar in her warrior regalia. Naram-Sin holds a ring-like object still in contact with Ishtar.

If Naram-Sin holds the conventional ring, a question arises in conflict with one premise of this study: how could a mortal hold an emblem reserved only for deity? The self-deification of Naram-Sin could answer this concern. He already wears the horned headdress. Holding the ring would not be a problem for him. But does he hold the conventional ring? A close examination of the object in his hand reveals a gap, indicating that this is not a solid ring or even the chaplet.

The nose-rope is likely a device separate from the measuring line of the Ur-Nammu Stele. This deduction is supported by Jacobsen’s observation that building takes place during a time of peace.⁵³ The Ur-Nammu Stele features building scenes rather than captive motifs in conjunction with nose-ropes.

The Rod, Ring, and Measuring Line in Mesopotamian Literature

In the Sumerian tale, *Descent of Inanna*, the goddess Inanna equipped herself with several items before her journey to the underworld. Inanna “slipped

50. Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 41.

51. Hallo, “Sumerian History in Pictures,” 151–52, 161.

52. Hallo, “Sumerian History in Pictures,” 153. The Naram-Sin with Ishtar iconography noted by Hallo is illustrated in another book: Donald P. Hansen, “Mould Fragment with a Deified Ruler and the Goddess Ishtar,” in *Art of the First Cities*, ed. Joan Aruz (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 206–07.

53. Jacobsen, “Pictorial Language,” 4.

the gold ring over her wrist, and took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.”⁵⁴ The gold ring worn on the wrist instead of clutched in the hand is probably not the ring of this study. The measuring rod and line, however, may be the same implements held by the Ur-Nammu Stele deity.

As the tale unfolds, the chief gatekeeper of the underworld, Neti, reports to Ereshkigal, the underworld queen, that another queen demands entry. Neti describes Inanna by her regalia, including the fact that “in her hand she carries the lapis measuring rod and line.”⁵⁵ Ereshkigal, though angry at this invasion of her territory, allows Inanna to enter with the stipulation that she remove portions of her regalia as she approaches each gate. When Inanna enters the sixth of seven gates, “from her hand the lapis measuring rod and line was removed.”⁵⁶ The final step, the removal of Inanna’s robe, is followed by Ereshkigal turning Inanna into a corpse.⁵⁷

In a variant version of this same story, the rod and line are taken from Inanna at the second door with “the golden ring gripped in her hand” taken away at the fifth door followed by her corpse being hung on a spike at her death.⁵⁸ The ring of this version, since it is held in the hand rather than worn, more closely resembles the conventional Mesopotamian ring.

The ring and measuring rod of this tale may not be the same objects as the rod and ring under discussion. If they are, the underworld activity supports the idea that the rod measures life span. Inanna cannot be killed by Ereshkigal until she relinquishes the symbols of temporal and eternal life. The Ur-Nammu Stele rod, while also measuring temporal existence, may combine with the ring of eternity to represent the preservation of life.

Life-Sustaining Imagery of the Ur-Nammu Stele

Life-sustaining imagery is a main component of the Ur-Nammu Stele. In 1927, Leon Legrain suggested an alternate name for this monument, “Stele of the Flying Angels.”⁵⁹ He based his proposal on the heavenly beings depicted in the first registers, both faces of the stele, who pour life-giving water upon the scene. The first-register beings are about twice the size of lower-register figures, indicating primacy of importance. Life-sustaining imagery, particu-

54. Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1983), 53.

55. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 56.

56. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 59.

57. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 59–60.

58. “Inanna’s Journey to Hell,” in N.K. Sandars, *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1971), 140–42.

59. Legrain, “Stela of the Flying Angels,” 75.

larly of water, continues in the lower registers. The inscription below the drum of register four, “poor face,” references canals built by Ur-Nammu.⁶⁰ Without canals in this region, life fades.

Legrain proposes that the deity holding the rod and line is not the moon god Nanna as commonly accepted, but “Ea, the great builder.”⁶¹ Ea, a creator deity and god of the waters, both “the deep sea and . . . all waters surrounding the earth,” was also “author of the arts of life.”⁶² Water and life are again emphasized.

A palm tree receiving libations is another motif of the Ur-Nammu Stele. Legrain notes that “watering of the palm is a . . . sacred rite and takes its full meaning in a land where dates are one of the staple foods.”⁶³ The Ur-Nammu Stele rod and ring, if representative of time and eternity, harmonize with the monument’s life-giving depictions. But the Ur-Nammu Stele is not the only example of such imagery. An Ur III cylinder seal, ca. 2040 B.C.E., shows a date palm receiving a libation from a male figure while a frontal-facing goddess displays rod and ring. The male, defined by Buchanan as “either a king or some other major figure,”⁶⁴ seems focused on sustaining life in his own stewardship.⁶⁵ These depictions indicate the date palm’s importance. Could it be a tree of life? Could the rod and ring integrated into such scenes highlight life imagery? These questions merit further exploration.

Third Millennium B.C.E. Summary

The Ur-Nammu Stele lays a foundation in rod and ring scholarship. Most concur that the rod, a literal measuring tool, became viewed as a metaphorical measuring device. Also, the coiled rope is not the conventional ring. The rod as symbolic of measurable time and the ring indicating continuation of life or eternity is compatible with third millennium B.C.E. life-imagery depictions.

The Rod and Ring of the Second Millennium B.C.E.

Rod and ring imagery of the second millennium appears in three main contexts.

60. Legrain, “Stela of the Flying Angels,” 88.

61. Legrain, “Stela of the Flying Angels,” 80.

62. Charles Russell Coulter and Patricia Turner, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2000), 161.

63. Legrain, “Stela of the Flying Angels,” 83.

64. Briggs Buchanan, “An Extraordinary Seal Impression of the Third Dynasty of Ur,” *JNES* 31.2 (April 1972): 98. See Ur III Libation Scene illustration, page 96.

65. Another libation scene from Elamite Susa (ca. 2050 B.C.E) shows a figure watering a palm in the presence of a seated deity who grasps the rod and ring. See Anton Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Phaidon, 1969), Plate 210.

The Hammurabi Law Code Stele

Hammurabi's Law Code Stele of the Old Babylonian Period, ca. 1780 B.C.E., is the primary reason for the rod and ring being equated with justice. The sun god Shamash holding the rod and ring is considered the father of "truth" and "justice."⁶⁶ The text of the Law Code Stele reinforces the concept of justice. In addition to delineating laws, this text praises the piety and just rule of Hammurabi.⁶⁷ Using the measuring imagery of the Ur-Nammu Stele, Hammurabi apparently measures justice under divine direction.

This theory fits the Law Code Stele, but does not explain other depictions of the rod and ring. Other deities besides Shamash also carry the rod and ring. Does this motif imply justice when held by them? Do the rod and ring amplify divine characteristics? If so, the connotations would change according to the deity involved. Certainly, justice is emphasized in the Law Code Stele text and iconography, but it is the presence of Shamash alone rather than any of his divine regalia which underscores justice. The addition of the rod and ring imply something more.

The rod, if viewed as a measurement of mortality, may combine with the Law Code text to show how the life experience should be conducted. The Code's epilogue supports this idea: "These are the just decisions which Hammurabi, the able king, has established and thereby has directed the land along the course of truth and the correct way of life."⁶⁸ Hammurabi concludes with an appeal to several deities that he be always remembered and that those who erase his name be destroyed along with their posterity.⁶⁹ These allusions to eternal remembrance and end-of-time destruction parallel the rod and ring imagery.

Slanski observes that the rod of Hammurabi's stele tapers to a point indicative of "a peg suitable for driving into the ground and tying off a rope."⁷⁰ This spike-like depiction seems typical of the Old Babylonian style and could be an additional reference to measurement imagery. It might also denote the finality of measurement. After her death in the underworld, the corpse of Inanna was "hung on a spike."⁷¹

Another continuing debate is whether or not the deity invests the king with power. Investiture of power is possible in the Law Code Stele with

66. Coulter and Turner, *Ancient Deities*, 423.

67. "The Laws of Hammurabi," translated by Martha Roth (*COS* 2.131:337).

68. "The Laws of Hammurabi," Roth (*COS* 2.131:351).

69. "The Laws of Hammurabi," Roth (*COS* 2.131:351-53).

70. Slanski, "Mesopotamian Rod and Ring," 53.

71. "Inanna's Journey to Hell," 142.

Hammurabi and Shamash depicted nearly as equals. As Winter observes, “The compositional balance suggests a relationship born not of subservience but of almost parity.”⁷² Even so, Hammurabi does not actually receive the rod and ring. Slanski follows Van Buren in saying these emblems are merely being shown to the king.⁷³ Hammurabi does not reach for the ring. His hand gesture is one of reverence. There are exceptions to the norm, however, cases when a king touches the rod and ring. The most famous example comes from Mari.⁷⁴

The Painting of Zimri-Lim

Zimri-Lim, a contemporary of Hammurabi, ruled the city-state Mari for about twenty years. The 1770 B.C.E. wall painting from the royal palace, called “The Investiture of Zimri-Lim,” shows Zimri-Lim in the company of Ishtar who extends the rod and ring.⁷⁵ The king touches this divine unit. How is this possible if the rod and ring motif signifies the powers of divinity rather than that of kings?

This concern may be investigated by a glimpse into Ishtar’s characteristics. This Babylonian deity was both a fertility goddess and a goddess of war.⁷⁶ Ishtar stands before Zimri-Lim in her warrior regalia, but her fertility persona should not be dismissed. Beverly Moon suggests a valid aspect of the ring’s perpetual life symbolism: “The ring may represent the powers of fertility, the unending cycle of life and death that is governed by the feminine principle. It may also signify union with the goddess.”⁷⁷ The “Sacred Marriage,” an occurrence in Mesopotamian history from the Ur Third Dynasty onward, featured either the literal or symbolic union of the king with a priestess representative

72. Winter, “Touched by the Gods,” 83.

73. Slanski, “Mesopotamian Rod and Ring,” 53; Van Buren, “Rod and Ring,” 438.

74. Another example, the Seal of Suliya, predates the more famous palace painting from Mari. The seal depicts Suliya, a self-deified king of Eshnunna ca. 2025 B.C.E., who touches the rod and ring held by warrior deity Tishpak. [See Clemens Reichel, “The King is Dead, Long Live the King: The Last Days of the Su-Sin Cult at Eshnunna and its Aftermath” in *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond* (ed. Nicole Brisch; Chicago, Ill.: The Oriental Institute, 2008), 136–37; Suliya Seal illustration: page 148]. This presents a question. Do deities associated with war, such as Tishpak more commonly let kings touch the emblems associated with life? Does this depiction imbue the king with extra powers? If the rod and ring unit represents life in its temporal and eternal aspects, the contact with such forces during wartime may be readily explained. The king may need an extra mantle to preserve his life or be given additional power to take life from enemies.

75. See Investiture of Zimri-Lim illustration: Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 216.

76. Coulter and Turner, *Ancient Deities*, 242.

77. Beverly Moon, *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 1991), 209.

of Inanna/Ishtar to ensure fertility.⁷⁸ The king's touch of Ishtar's ring could indicate that union.

A recurrent question is whether or not the king actually receives the divine emblems. In the case of Zimri-Lim, Ishtar extends but does not release the rod and ring. Her hand is gripped, closed-fist, around the unit. Zimri-Lim touches it with the open palm of his left hand while his right hand is raised in the gesture of reverence. Ishtar, however, does give sacred items to kings.

Tablet XII of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, likely an addition to the original text, parallels the older Sumerian poem "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World."⁷⁹ In the poem, Inanna (the Sumerian version of Ishtar) plants a *huluppu* tree in her holy garden. It is subsequently infested by "the serpent who could not be charmed, an *Anzu*-bird, and the dark maid Lilith."⁸⁰ Gilgamesh divests the *huluppu* of these creatures. In gratitude, Inanna fashions for him a *pukku* from the tree's trunk and a *mikku* from its crown.⁸¹ Samuel Kramer defines the *pukku* and *mikku* as "probably a drum and drumstick."⁸² In another publication on the subject, Kramer acknowledges the uncertainty of this translation.⁸³ In yet another publication, Kramer and Wolkstein note that the *pukku* and *mikku* may be the rod and ring.⁸⁴ Jordan parallels these devices with the drum, but asks if they "possess . . . an intrinsic power of life."⁸⁵

78. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 157–58.

79. John Gardner and John Maier, *Gilgamesh* (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 255–256; Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 194.

80. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 8.

81. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 9.

82. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 34.

83. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, 196. The difficulty in translating the precise meaning of *pukku* and *mikku* is apparent in the varied proposed definitions. Thorkild Jacobsen calls the objects "hockey puck and stick" Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 212. Benjamin Foster, Douglas Frayne, and Gary Beckman define *pukku* and *mikku* as "ball and stick." Benjamin Foster, Douglas Frayne, and Gary M. Beckman, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 134.

84. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 143. Further research may indicate a possible connection between the word *pukku* and the word *palu* or *patu* translated by Leonard King as "ring" as previously noted by Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels*, 25 and Whatham, "Meaning of Ring and Rod," 120.

85. Michael Jordan, *Gods of the Earth* (London: Bantam Press, 1992), 84. Jordan proposes the "power of life" parallel of the *pukku* and *mikku* with the "plant of life" nearly obtained then lost by Gilgamesh. The correlation of life powers with drum and drumstick is explained by the statement that these objects were "The old guardians of home and hearth against the spirits of misfortune and death." Jordan, *Gods of the Earth*, 84. This "power of life" observation regarding the *pukku* and *mikku* finds a stronger case for validity if these objects are the divine rod and ring rather than drum and drumstick, particularly if these emblems signify life powers as proposed.

Pertinent to this discussion, Gilgamesh loses these objects due to misusing their powers. "His vainglorious use of the *pukku* brings bitterness, lamentation, and tears to the mothers, sisters, and young maidens of Uruk, so that the wet earth opens and the *pukku* and *mikku* are lost in the underworld."⁸⁶ Kramer suggests that the women cried because Gilgamesh used the *pukku* and *mikku* (drum and drumstick) to summon their men to war.⁸⁷ If, however, the *pukku* and *mikku* are the ring and rod associated with life forces abused by Gilgamesh, the lamentation of the women takes on a different context.⁸⁸

Zimri-Lim touches the rod and ring in the first register of the Mari Palace painting. The second register below emphasizes life-sustaining water and plant imagery. As with the Ur-Nammu Stele, water seems an important connection with the rod and ring.

The Queen of the Night Plaque

A unique depiction of the conjoined rod and ring appears on the ca. 1750 B.C.E. Queen of the Night Plaque, also known as the "Burney Relief" after Sydney Burney, an art dealer who acquired the artifact in 1935.⁸⁹ Slanski mentions this artifact as one of the "significant pieces . . . that make deep and lasting impressions."⁹⁰ Otherwise, she does not include the plaque with other rod and ring motifs in her 2007 treatise on the subject.

Some doubt this plaque's authenticity. D. Opitz questioned authenticity in 1937 then withdrew those objections in 1939.⁹¹ In 2005, Pauline Albenda re-

86. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 143.

87. Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 199.

88. Women lamenting over Gilgamesh's misuse of the *pukku* and *mikku* opens another avenue of study beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, however, why would women cry over misuse of a ball and stick or hockey puck and stick unless that activity took attention away from them? In the case of Gilgamesh who forced his attention on women, a sporting-event diversion would have been welcomed by his victims. The drum call to war has merit because this would upset women. If the *pukku* and *mikku* are the rod and ring representative of life powers, the lamentation of the women over Gilgamesh's misuse of these also makes sense. The literature documents the sorrow of maidens, affianced husbands, and their families when Gilgamesh misuses procreative powers associated with life.

89. Dominique Collon, *The Queen of the Night Plaque* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 7. For Queen of Night Plaque illustration, see page 6.

90. Slanski, "Mesopotamian Rod and Ring," 38. Slanski does not explain why the Burney Relief makes a "deep and lasting impression." Any attempt to analyze her statement or determine her reasons for not including the Burney Relief in her study would be mere conjecture. It is likely, however, that the question of authenticity was not a factor in Slanski's decision to mention this relief only in passing. On page 38 of her article, Slanski said the acquisition of the Burney Relief by the British Museum was "justly celebrated." This implies approval of the artifact as a valuable part of the museum's collection.

91. Collon, *Queen of the Night*, 9. Collon rehearses the early authenticity debate between scholars. In volume XI of *Archiv für Orientforschung*, Opitz challenges the plaque's

iterated her 1970 challenge of forgery based on the lack of precise provenance, the uniqueness of the iconography, and the need for a more thorough chemical analysis of the artifact.⁹² It is not the scope of this study to define the plaque as genuine or not. The possibility of authenticity warrants its inclusion here.

A greater controversy than the plaque's authenticity seems to be the identity of the female figure holding a rod and ring set in each hand. Three conclusions have emerged. She could be the demon Lilith, the queen of the underworld Ereshkigal, or Ishtar in another persona. Why would any of these beings hold the rod and ring? Also, what is the significance of the bent rod? Could it indicate a twist on the powers associated with temporal life?

Lilith

H. W. Janson defines the Queen of Night as "Lilith, goddess of death."⁹³ Lilith is also the "dark maid of desolation" who inhabited Inanna's *huluppu*-tree before Gilgamesh expelled her.⁹⁴ Lilith is associated with the maiden demon, *ardat-lili* who cannot be a mother so takes out her frustration by causing "impotence in men and sterility in women."⁹⁵ Lilith, goddess or demon, could not hold the emblems associated with justice or righteous kingship. If the rod and ring represent life, however, she could be depicted as not just holding but also withholding these powers.

Ereshkigal

The Burney relief highlights bird imagery. The female figure wears a winged cape. Her feet are talons, and owls accompany her. An Akkadian text, "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," describes the inhabitants of that realm as "clothed like birds, with feathers."⁹⁶ While relating his dream about the underworld to Gilgamesh, Enkidu confirms this description of bird-like beings.⁹⁷ Gilgamesh himself exhibits surprise when finally meeting Utnapishtim, the one mortal granted eternal life by the gods: "Thy appearance is not changed."⁹⁸

authenticity. In volume xii of this same journal, Henri Frankfort argues that the plaque is genuine. In the same issue of the journal, Opitz "accepted Frankfort's conclusions and withdrew his objections" Collon, *Queen of the Night*, 9.

92. Pauline Albenda, "The 'Queen of the Night Plaque'—A Revisit," *JAOS* 125.2 (April–June 2005): 171, 186–87.

93. H. W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 85.

94. Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 6, 142; Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 33.

95. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, 118.

96. "The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld," Stephanie Dalley, (*COS* I.108:381).

97. "The Gilgamesh Epic," *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, trans. Robert William Rogers (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 83

98. "The Gilgamesh Epic," Rogers, 90. The observation of Gilgamesh about Utnapishtim's "unchanged appearance" may refer to the idea that, unlike the bird-like

Apparently, existence in the netherworld is not the same as the eternal life enjoyed by the gods and Utnapishtim. The pair of rings and bent rods held by the bird-like female, possibly Ereshkigal, of the Burney Relief could signify a continued eternal existence unlike both former mortality and Utnapishtim's existence sought by Gilgamesh.

Ishtar

Van Buren proposes that the female figure could be Ishtar in her "chthonic," underworld role.⁹⁹ This is not likely. When Inanna/Ishtar visited the underworld, she lost her powers there. She became a "corpse that hung on a spike."¹⁰⁰ Jacobsen suggests that the Burney Relief hung in an "ancient bordello" and depicts Inanna/Ishtar as "goddess of harlots."¹⁰¹ If this is the case, Ishtar could display the bent rod to suggest the warping nature of harlotry on both the quality and perpetuation of life. At his pending death, Enkidu cursed the harlot who had civilized him. When Shamash rebuked Enkidu for berating the woman, Enkidu called back the personal curse yet left consequences for the harlot's victims: men would lose treasure to her; wives with children would lose husbands to her.¹⁰²

As in the case of Lilith, emblems representing justice or righteousness do not work in the hands of a harlot goddess. Such a being, however, would hold certain powers over life.

Second Millennium B.C.E. Summary

Traditional theories of a righteous king measuring justice do not fit all depictions of this millennium, particularly in the absence of Shamash. The rod and ring as aspects of temporal and eternal life explain problematic pieces like the Burney Relief and Mari painting. While a king may touch these emblems in a warrior or fertility context, the deity keeps them. The god Enlil told Gilgamesh that kingship, not everlasting life, was his destiny.¹⁰³ This parameter between divinity and even a deified king changes with the first millennium B.C.E. Neo-Assyrians.

inhabitants of the underworld, Utnapishtim looks and moves like a normal mortal.

99. Van Buren, "Rod and Ring," 431.

100. "Inanna's Journey to Hell," Sandars, 140-42.

101. Jacobsen, "Pictures and Pictorial Language," 5-6.

102. N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 90-91.

103. Sandars, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 118.

The Rod and Ring of the First Millennium B.C.E.

Most rod and ring depictions of the first millennium B.C.E. appear in Neo-Assyrian art. The 870 B.C.E. tablet from Sippar, predating most of these, depicts a trio approaching a relatively large Shamash who holds the rod and ring. The priest in an intercessory role leads the king to Shamash while a worshipping goddess follows.¹⁰⁴ Shamash does not give the rod and ring emblems to the king. This seems, rather, more a case of Shamash showing emblems of perpetuity to the foremost figure, the priest.

According to the tablet's inscription, Shamash's "appearance and his attributes had vanished beyond grasp" of kings who sought him, resulting in the sun disk image rather than Shamash himself shown for worship.¹⁰⁵ The priest Nabu-nadin-sumi discovered a model of Shamash's anthropomorphic form, allowing for a cult statue to be made and thus pleasing both the deity and the Babylonian king.¹⁰⁶ The king granted goods to his priest, "and, to prevent any future claims (against this endowment) he placed it under seal and thereby granted it for perpetuity."¹⁰⁷ Slanski emphasizes that the "entitlement for all time" to the priest and his heirs was "the main purpose of the monument."¹⁰⁸

Neo-Assyrian Art: A Change of Iconography

Some rod and ring representations maintain the traditional form under Neo-Assyria, such as the Maltai Procession of Deities, the Sennacherib Relief at Bavian, and the ca. 680 B.C.E. Seal of Esarhaddon. Changes also occur. According to Van Buren, "Seals of the 9th-7th centuries B.C. almost invariably represent divinities who hold the ring without the rod."¹⁰⁹ The solitary ring is often depicted as a beaded chaplet, as in the 9th-7th century painting of the Assyrian national deity Ashur holding a scepter along with the chaplet.¹¹⁰ A reconstructed painting from Dur Sharrukin, the capital of Sargon II who ruled ca. 705 B.C.E., shows the god Ashur holding the traditional-style rod and ring.¹¹¹ A small deity figure resides inside the ring.

The most startling change occurs in context with a monument known as the "Broken Obelisk." This structure, erected by a successor of Tiglath-pileser I

104. Frankfort, *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 202.

105. Christopher E. Woods, "The Sun-God Tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina Revisited," *JCS* 56 (2004): 83.

106. Woods, "Sun-God Tablet," 49, 85.

107. Woods, "Sun-God Tablet," 87-88.

108. Slanski, "Mesopotamian Rod and Ring," 57.

109. Van Buren, "Rod and Ring," 447.

110. See Assyrian King with Chaplet illustration: Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, 71.

111. See Dur Sharrukin Painting illustration: Parrot, *Nineveh and Babylon*, 99.

who ruled 1110 B.C.E., shows a deity extending a bow from a cloud while vassals honor the king.¹¹² The king holds both a scepter and a beaded chaplet in his hand. How could a king hold the ring formerly displayed only by deities?

The Akkadian king Naram-Sin set a precedent in Mesopotamia for assuming divine regalia. Sargon II indicated respect for this particular empire by taking on the same name as the first Akkadian ruler, Sargon. The best answer, however, comes from within the concepts of Neo-Assyrian kingship. During this era, kings were more than representatives of the gods. Peter Machinist points out that while the divine determinative was never placed before the king's name, it was placed before the phrase "image of the king" because the king was considered "the image of a particular god . . . an exalted man . . . someone with a place in the divine world."¹¹³ The deity of the "Broken Obelisk" has been deanthropomorphized and related to the sky with other astral symbols while the Assyrian king has taken on the emblems of divine power.

The assumption of power over life is demonstrated by the challenge of the Rabshakeh, Assyrian emissary, to the Jews prior to the 701 B.C.E. siege of Jerusalem: "Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered its land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?" (2 Kgs 18:33). The Rabshakeh does not credit the Assyrian state deity Ashur with victory. Rather, he credits the king with power formerly attributed to deity.

First Millennium B.C.E. Summary

Both traditional and changing forms of the rod and ring occur during this millennium. The Sippar Tablet shows increasing distance between king and deity with the priest as mediator and beneficiary of goods in perpetuity. The Assyrians distance deity further, and kings take on divine power. Not only do they spill the blood of life, they change lifestyles through their deportation and assimilation policies. In the first millennium B.C.E. examples, the rod and ring maintain associations with life for both time and eternity.

Conclusion

The rod and ring are separate objects with unique characteristics that complement each other when combined. Whether conjoined or in solitary form, the rod and ring are emblems of divinity. Deities occasionally allow kings to touch the powers associated with the rod and ring.

112. Frankfort, *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 134.

113. Peter Machinist, "Kingship and Divinity in Imperial Assyria," in *Text, Artifact, and Image* (ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; Providence, R.I.: 2006), 184-85.

Unlike other definitions, the rod and ring motif as explained in this article has remained consistent throughout the presentation of a variety of artifacts. Life-sustaining imagery is especially apparent in the 3rd millennium Ur-Nammu Stele and the Mari palace painting of the 2nd millennium. The “measurement of justice” theory fits the Hammurabi Stele but does not coincide with other 2nd millennium artifacts that exclude Shamash, especially the Queen of Night Plaque. The 1st millennium Sippar Shamash Tablet lends itself to multiple theories, including the new time and eternity proposal. Neo-Assyrian art, depicting both tradition and change in ideas of kingship, supports the interpretation of life powers in the hands of deities and, in that era, kings.

The rod represents the temporal measurement of life that begins and ends. The ring represents the eternal aspect of life, a concept familiar to Mesopotamians as indicated by the story of eternal life bestowed by deity upon the mortal Utnapishtim.

The conjoined rod and ring signify the power to create, maintain, and end life. Together, they are emblems of time and eternity.