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Mesopotamian Early Dynastic Bull-Lyres

Renate Marian VAN DIJK¹

1. Introduction

Among the most famous artefacts from Early Dynastic Mesopotamia are the stringed musical instruments decorated with bull's heads which were excavated at the Royal Cemetery at Ur By Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934. The bull-lyres from Ur are the most famous, but they are not the only examples. Although no other complete bull-lyre has been excavated, bull's head protomes are known from various sites across Mesopotamia. There are also depictions of bull-lyres in glyptic and other art forms. While these instruments are often called harps (e.g. Perry 2013:10), they are actually lyres. The main difference between lyres and harps is that the lyre has two arms rising from the body or soundbox and ending at a crossbar to which the upper ends of the string are attached. In comparison, the harp has an arm which rises from one end of the body in a curve or at an angle. The strings are attached to the body and the arm and are all different lengths (Montagu 2007:128). Although harps are known from Early Dynastic Mesopotamia², all known examples of stringed musical instruments decorated with bovine elements are lyres. The known examples of bull-lyres and bull-lyre imagery will be studied in order to determine their relevance. Further information can be gleaned from texts.

2. Archaeological Examples

2.1 The Royal Cemetery at Ur

A number of bull's head protomes were discovered in the Royal Cemetery at Ur. When Leonard Woolley excavated the lyres, the wood had disintegrated. He poured plaster into the cavity left behind, which, when removed from the earth, revealed the shape of the instrument (Woolley 1934:169). These bulls' heads were attached to the sound boxes of lyres. The sound box formed

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² For example a harp is being played by an equid on a seal impression found at Ur, see Zettler & Horne (1998:57).

the abstract body of the bull, while the bulls' heads were rendered in a more realistic style. The shape of these instruments is confirmed by archaeological and iconographic evidence³.

The most ornate of the Royal Burials bull heads is from the Great Lyre (PG 789 B17694; U.10556), found in the King's Grave. It was made of gold sheet over a wooden core and had eyes of shell and lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli was also used for the tips of the horns⁴, the tufts on its forehead, and for the beard.

The Queen's Lyre (U.10412; BM 1928.1010.1.a), found in the tomb of Queen Puabi, is similar in appearance to the Great Lyre. The bull's head attached to this lyre is made of gold with eyes of lapis lazuli and shell. The hair and beard are also made of lapis lazuli. The horns of this have not survived to present times, but, because this and the bull's head from the Great Lyre are so similar, it is reasonable to suppose that they were made of gold with lapis lazuli tips. The noticeable difference between the two bulls' heads is that hair of the bull's head from the Great Lyre cuts straight across the forehead, while that of the Queen's Lyre curves slightly around the brow bone to form a point in the centre of the forehead.

The Golden Lyre (Great Death-Pit, PG/1237 U.12353; University of Pennsylvania Museum 31-18-10) is so called because the bull's head is made of gold with eyes made of inlaid mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli. With its flowing beard, this bull's head is similar in appearance to those adorning the Great Lyre and the Queen's Lyre. The body of the bull was originally made of wood and has not survived, but Woolley (1934:253), based on analogy with other artefacts, such as the shell inlay on the Great Lyre⁵ believes that this body would originally have had legs.

A fourth bull's head is made of bronze with eyes inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli (PG 1332 30-12-696 (U.12435); University of Pennsylvania Museum 30-12-696). This bull's head has a row of curls on the top of its head, and a lapis lazuli triangular inlay on the forehead. The lyre to which this bull's head was attached would have been "a much smaller version of the Great Lyre and was similar in size to the lyres shown carried by musicians in representations on relief

³ Discussed below.

⁴ It is interesting, although probably coincidental, that the lapis lazuli tips to these horns recall the lapis lazuli horns of the Bull of Heaven in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

⁵ Discussed below.

plaques and on seals” (Zettler & Horne 1998:57). The smaller size of this piece, as well as the more modest materials from which it was made, suggest that the lyre was actually used in ancient times, whereas the more ornate Great Lyre may have been a cultic or votive object.

A second lyre found in Puabi’s tomb is made of silver and has eyes inlaid with lapis lazuli and shell (PG 800, Puabi’s Tomb Chamber B17065 (U.10916)). Zettler and Horne (1998:52) note that this bull’s head was found near two shell plaques, but that “other shell plaques or fragments of plaques normally comprising the front of a lyre were not found in the immediate vicinity. The implication is that there is doubt over whether this bull’s head decorated a musical instrument. When the other bull’s heads from the Royal Cemetery are considered, this still seems the most likely function. The lack of plaques in the same context as the bull’s head could point to the musical instrument to which this bull’s head was attached being more minimally decorated. This would suggest that the musical instrument was used in ancient times.

A second lyre with a silver bull’s head (Great Death-Pit, PG/1237 U.12354 BM Registration Number 1929.1017.2) was found in the Great Death Pit⁶ at Ur. Because the decoration on lyre from the Great Death Pit is also relatively simple, it is reasonable to assume that this lyre was played in ancient times. The two silver heads are quite similar, but where the hair of the silver bull’s head from Puabi’s tomb points downwards in a triangular shape on the bull’s forehead, the hair of the bull’s head from the Great Death Pit cuts straight across its forehead. This recalls the difference in the representation of the hair between the bull’s head of the Great Lyre and that of the Queen’s Lyre. It is unclear if the difference in the representation of the hair has any deeper meaning. Because the bulls’ heads from the Great Lyre and Queen’s Lyre are so similar in context and appearance they must represent the same tradition. That the hair of these two bulls’ heads is different is therefore most likely due to the preference of the artist.

⁶ The Great Death Pit is a shaft which led down to a sunken courtyard located adjacent to Puabi’s tomb which contained the bodies of 73 retainers.

2.2 Bull's Heads from Other Sites

Four Early Dynastic bulls' heads, one now housed in the Vorderasiatische Museum in Berlin (VA 3142), two excavated south of the platform of the Temple of Ningursu at Telloh⁷ (Marchesi & Marchetti 2011:44), one of which is now in the Louvre in Paris (AO 2676) and the other of which is now in the Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi in Istanbul (EŞEM 1576), and one found in the Sin Temple at Khafajeh (Frankfort 1939 No. 184 Pl.104), are almost identical.

The bull's head in the Vorderasiatische Museum is of unknown provenance and is made from copper alloy and bone. One eye is lost and all that remains of the other is the white bone inlay. The bulls' heads from Telloh are made of copper and date to the First Dynasty of Lagash. The bull's head in the Louvre still contains both eyes, made of shell and lapis lazuli and has one broken horn. The bull's head in Istanbul is missing an eye, and one ear and one horn are damaged. A copper bull's head found in the Sin Temple at Khafajeh⁸ in central modern-day Iraq has been dated to the same period as those found at Ur, and is stylistically similar to the other Early Dynastic heads (Masson 1988:75), although according to Frankfort (1939:42), it has a "more abstract, less realistic type of design." The eyes were inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli, and there was a triangular mother-of-pearl inlay on its forehead.

The noticeable difference between the heads is the treatment of the foreheads. Where the forehead of the Khafajeh bull's head is decorated with a triangle, the Louvre bull's head contains an inscription, and the Berlin and Turkey bulls' heads are smooth, lacking any inscription or decoration. The inscription on the Louvre bull's head is a dedication to Ningirsu, the patron deity of ancient Girsu, by "Lugalsi, the chief lamentation priest of Uruk" (Marchesi & Marchetti 2011:124: n.244). The inscription also reveals that the bull's head formed part of a musical instrument⁹. It has been suggested that these bulls' heads were "mass-produced" (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:83), and it follows that they would have had the same function. The Louvre bull's head is unique in bearing an inscription which reveals its intended purpose. The triangle

⁷ Telloh is ancient Girsu, the capital of the state of Lagash in southern modern-day Iraq.

⁸ According to Masson (1988:75), the bull's head was discovered in the brick foundations of Sin Temple Level VIII, while according to Zettler and Horne (1998:177), it was discovered in Level IX. According to Frankfort (1939:42), it was "built into a wall of Sin Temple IX at Khafajeh and must therefore date at least from Sin Temple VII".

⁹ See translation by Cabrera Pertusatti in Addendum A in Van Dijk 2011.

on the Khafajeh bull's head denotes the sacred nature of the animal, and by extension of the object to which the bull's head was attached¹⁰, and may therefore identify this object as having been dedicated to a deity, a hypothesis which may be supported by it having been excavated in a temple. The triangle on the Khafajeh bull's head would fulfil the same function as the inscription on the Louvre bull's head. The Khafajeh bull's head probably decorated a lyre (Cook 1925:1102) and is therefore similar to the Louvre bull's head in both meaning and purpose. Presumably, if the Berlin and Turkey bulls' heads had also been attached to an instrument which was dedicated to a god, they would also it would also bear such a mark. The bull's head protomes from the Royal Cemetery at Ur were found in a mortuary context, but were used for the enjoyment of the future inhabitants of the graves while they were still alive. It is likely then that the Berlin and Turkey bulls' heads are related in function to those from the Royal Cemetery, and that they adorned musical instruments which were intended for the use and enjoyment of mortals. While the four bulls' heads are nearly exact in appearance, the Louvre bull's head stands alone in definitively being dedicated to a god. It is curious that this bull's head, which is relatively simple and unadorned, was attached to a musical instrument which was dedicated to a god, but the more elaborate bulls' heads of the Royal Cemetery of Ur were attached to musical instruments which were made for use by mortals.

An alabaster bull's head of unknown provenance, now housed in the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad (IM45020), dates from the late Early Dynastic period. The style is realistic, and the face, ears and horns of the bull are carved from a single piece of stone. This bull's head has no holes for attachment, and at about 20 centimetres in height (Strommenger 1962:65) it is too large to have functioned as an amulet. The bulls' heads from the Royal Cemetery at Ur did not have holes for attachment either, so the alabaster bull's head could have been secured, perhaps with bitumen, to a surface, and it may have formed part of a bull-lyre.

Not all bull's head protomes functioned as attachments to musical instruments. A bull's head fitting from the Ishtar Temple in Mari (M 2274; National Museum, Damascus 2057) in eastern modern-day Syria was carved from a single piece of diorite with eyes inlaid with shell and a triangular shell inlay on the forehead. The head and neck are divided from the rest of the stone

¹⁰ See Van Dijk 2011:58-62 for a discussion on the meaning and significance of triangular forehead decorations.

which is shaped like a wedge. There is a hole through this wedge which “may have been used for a dowel that secured the sculpture to a wood support” (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:156), and this bull’s head therefore most likely acted as some kind of temple fitting. A limestone bull’s head from the late Early Dynastic period of unknown provenance is now housed in the Louvre (AO 19703). The bull’s head has a hole through its neck which is similar to the bull’s head from the Ishtar Temple at Mari, suggesting that the two bull’s heads had similar functions.

2.3 Bulls’ Heads from Sites outside Sumer

Bull’s head protomes were also found outside Sumer. A marble bull’s head from the acropolis of Susa¹¹ has been dated to around 2500 BCE “on typological grounds” (Ben-Tor 1972:28) and is therefore contemporary with the Early Dynastic Mesopotamian bull’s head protomes. The eye sockets are concave and would originally have been inlaid, and a triangle is etched on the forehead. There are holes for the attachment of ears and horns. A third pair of holes in the neck suggests that the bull’s head was an attachment of some sort, perhaps to a lyre. A copper alloy bull’s head excavated in Temple II at Barbar in northern-day Bahrain is one of the most famous objects from the Dilmun culture of ancient Bahrain. The context in which it was found dates to the Isin-Larsa period (2025-1887 BCE), but the hoard contained items from earlier times, so the dating of the bull’s head is uncertain (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:311). It differs stylistically from the Sumerian heads, with a flattened muzzle and with the eyes positioned to the front, where those from Sumer are positioned on the side of the face. Because it was found in a temple, the bull’s head most likely had some ritual function, but it is uncertain what this was. It is possible that it formed part of a lyre.

3. Iconographic Examples

3.1 The Standard of Ur

The upper register of the Peace Side of the Standard of Ur¹² (U.11164; British Museum BM121201) contains a banquet scene. The king, distinguishable by his larger size and more

¹¹ Susa, in western modern-day Iraq, was the capital of the Elamites.

¹² The two sides of the Standard of Ur are distinguished as the War Side and the Peace Side by their subject matter. Each side is divided into three registers. The War Side depicts a battle and its aftermath. The upper register of the

elaborate dress, is shown seated with six other seated male figures facing him and is being served by attendants. On the far right of the scene, behind the last of the six seated men, a bald male musician holds a bull-lyre. This lyre is decorated with a bull's head, but doesn't appear to have had bull's legs, although it is possible that these broke off after the lyre was buried. Behind the lyre player is a second figure, identified by Woolley (1934:273) as "a black-haired woman with her hands crossed on her breast in the conventional attitude of the singer." It is more likely that this figure is male because the figure is wearing only a skirt, which was the typical dress for men during the Early Dynastic period, while women wore a garment which covered one shoulder and covered both breasts¹³ (Frankfort 1939:51-55). This figure recalls the statues of Ur-Nanshe the musician¹⁴ from Mari. The more complete statue (M.2416, M.2365; National Museum, Damascus 2071) depicts Ur-Nanshe wearing a knee-length skirt and sitting cross-legged on a cushion. All that has survived of the second statue (M2272, M.2376, M2384; Museum of Deir ez-Zor 21077) is a fragmentary torso, but this figure holds the remains of a stringed instrument, which Aruz and Wallenfels (2003:152) believe to be a lyre. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the shell inlay from Mari¹⁵ shows that the instrument was played at Mari during the Early Dynastic period.

The depiction of a lyre with a bull's head on the upper register of the Peace Side of the Standard of Ur supports the conclusion that at least some of the musical instruments from Ur were actually used while the deceased with whom they were buried were alive. The lyre on the Standard of Ur is depicted in a banquet scene which according to Aruz and Wallenfels (2003:97) has "distinct religious overtones". This banquet scene probably represents a celebration of the victory of the battle shown on the War Side of the standard, and as such the gods would have been honoured. While this banquet scene therefore did have "religious overtones", it was not a religious feast.

Peace Side depicts a banquet scene and the middle and lower registers depict men leading animals and carrying fish and other goods, perhaps in preparation for the banquet.

¹³ A female statuette from Sin Temple IV at Khafajeh (Frankfort 1943 no 208, plate 1) is shown wearing only a skirt, but dates to the Uruk period. One possible Early Dynastic exception is a headless female statue from Sin Temple VIII at Khafajeh (Frankfort 1943 no 250, plate 26) which wears this garment but has one breast exposed.

¹⁴ Not to be confused with the Early Dynastic ruler of Lagash, famous for his wall plaque now in the Louvre AO2344.

¹⁵ Discussed below.

3.2 The Front Panel of the Great Lyre from Ur

The front panel of the Great Lyre from the King's Grave at Ur (PG/789 U.10556; University of Pennsylvania Object Number B17694A) contains four registers. The upper register depicts a contest scene¹⁶ between a nude hero¹⁷ and two human-headed bulls, while the lower three registers contain scenes of animals behaving as humans in scenes which appear to be related to banquet scenes (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:106). In the middle of these three scenes, a sitting donkey is playing an eight-stringed bull-lyre which is also supported by a bear. The lyre is decorated with a bull's head and the soundbox, forming the body of the bull, shows the bull's legs tucked under its body. An animal, perhaps a fox (Zettler & Horne 1998:56), sits at the bear's feet and plays a sistrum in its right hand while an object rests on its knees. This object has been interpreted as a tablet containing the text of a song which was "performed at this special banquet" (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:106) or as a tabor which the animal is playing (Woolley 1934:280).

Woolley (1934:280-281) argues that the scenes on the front panel of the Great Lyre represent scenes "from a cycle of semi-mythological folk-lore, songs or stories which are deeply implanted in popular imagination but are not admitted into the orthodox religion", and which are therefore not recorded in the extant literature. Zettler and Horne (1998:57), in contrast, state that, "although the scene might appear to illustrate a fable, no literary evidence of such a fable survives." They argue instead that the panel is connected to an underworld banquet, and reflects the lyre's use in accompanying liturgical chants.

3.3 The Plaque of Lumma from Nippur

The Plaque of Lumma (7N133+134) was discovered, broken into five pieces, in two different rooms of Level VIIB of the Inanna Temple at Nippur (Hansen 1963:154), and dates to a century before the lyres found at Ur (Montagu 2007:128). The plaque has three registers. The lowest register is badly worn, rendering the scene almost indiscernible. The middle register is divided

¹⁶ See Van Dijk 2011 for a full discussion on contest scenes.

¹⁷ Generally considered to be the *lahmu* or Hairy One, although see Ellis (1995) for a discussion on the difficulties of identification of the nude hero with the *lahmu*.

into two panels on either side of the hole used to secure the plaque to a wall, both of which depict a man leading a bull. The right panel contains an inscribed dedication by the stone-cutter Lumma to the goddess Ninsar¹⁸. The upper register depicts a banquet scene with a male figure seated on the left and a female figure seated on the right, both being served by an attendant. In the centre of this scene, is a female musician playing a bull-lyre. This lyre has eight strings (Hansen 1963:155) and the soundbox has extended legs, recalling the legs of a bull. Marchesi and Marchetti (2001:205 n.95) suggest that the male figure on the left of the upper register represents Lumma himself and theorize that a “specific, recurring couple” isn’t portrayed in all banquet scenes and that these banquets must therefore represent different occasions.

3.4 Shell Inlay Form Mari

A shell inlay from the Temple of Ninni-zaza in Mari represents a figure facing right and holding a bull-lyre (National Museum, Damascus 2100; M 2459). The lyre has six or seven strings (Parrot 1967:209) and is decorated with a bull’s head. The soundbox appears simple, but has legs extending below its base. These may have recalled the legs of the bull. Aruz and Wallefels (2003:160) identify the figure as male, although the head, the best way of identifying sex, is missing. The figure wears a long pleated dress which covers one shoulder, which rather identifies her as female. According to Parrot (1967:208), the figure could be considered to be ‘praying’, because “la musique est partie intégrante du culte” (music is an integral part of worship).

3.5 The Gudea Stele

A fragment of a stele from Tello dating from the Second Dynasty of Lagash (circa 22nd century BCE)¹⁹ contains a depiction of a bull-lyre in the lower of its two registers (Louvre AO 52). The upper register depicts four men facing the right, apparently walking in a procession towards the throne of a god or to an altar which has not survived to the present day (Parrot 1948:174). In the lower register a musician plays a bull-lyre. This lyre is unusual in that the soundbox is decorated

¹⁸ For a transliteration and translation of the text, see Goetze 1963:42. In Hansen’s original report (1963:155), the deity is read as “Nin-mú”.

¹⁹ See Suter 200:15-17 for problems regarding the dating and chronology of the Second Dynasty of Lagash.

with a bull's head protome, while a second bull is shown standing on the soundbox. The piece is generally attributed to the reign of Gudea (e.g. Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:422). Suter (2000:184-5) argues that the piece rather dates from the Akkadian period (2334-2112 BCE). Whatever the case, it is apparent that bull-lyres continued to be in use after the Early Dynastic period.

3.6 Glyptic Art

3.6.1 Ur Seals

Depictions of bull-lyres are found on several Early Dynastic seals and seal impressions. Two examples come from the Royal Cemetery at Ur. Both seals are divided into two registers, with a banquet scene in the upper register and a group of musicians in the lower register. The first seal (PG. 1237/U.12374; University of Pennsylvania Museum 30-12-2) is inscribed with the name 'Dumu-kisal' (Woolley 1934:338). Amongst the group of female musicians depicted in the lower register of this seal is a lyre-player. The five-stringed lyre is shaped like a bull, with both a head and with bull's legs. Two small figures shown beneath the lyre are interpreted as either dancing dwarfs, as an attempt to show the figures in front of the lyre (Zettler & Horne 1998:79), or as two boys carrying the lyre (Woolley 1934:338). In the second seal (PG. 1054/ U.11904) the lower register a seated man plays a five-stringed bull-lyre which is shaped like that on the seal of Dumu-kisal. Also present are a figure who is clapping, and a with long, curved object in each hand, which, due to their context, can be identified as musical instruments, perhaps castanets (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:91). These instruments are also found on a shell inlay of a female musician from Kish (Ashmolean Museum AN 1924.712). Woolley (1934:338) suggests that they may have originally been bull's horns. Flat, horn-like strips of copper were found at Kish (Mackay 1929:160-162; pl.61), Fara (Martin 1988:63) and Ur (Woolley 1934:126-28), which are thought to be musical instruments (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:91), although Mackay (1929:160-62) concluded that they were part of a sickle-shaped club seen on Early Dynastic monuments.

3.6.2 Fara Seals

A series of fragmentary seals and seal impressions from Fara (Martin catalogue number 529-531; VA8629, VA6665, and VA6598 & VA6639) depicts a seated man playing a bull-lyre. Another

seal from Fara (Amiet 1980 catalogue number 1201) shows a female figure playing a bull-lyre. These lyres are decorated both with bull's heads and with bull's legs. Martin (1988:79) classifies the seals as depicting banquet scenes, although little of the seals remain to make this identification certain.

3.6.3 Seals from other Sites in Mesopotamia

A seal from the Inanna Temple at Nippur (Amiet 1980 Catalogue number 1704) depicts a figure playing a lyre which has a bull's head and with bull's legs tucked beneath the soundbox which forms a bull's body. A seal from Khafajeh (Amiet catalogue number 1200) shows a figure with their hair bound in a chignon playing a bull lyre with legs. While little remains of a seal impression from Uruk (Amiet 1980 catalogue number 1198), a bald male figure is clearly shown playing a six-stringed bull-lyre. The horns and top of the head of a bull's head protome are still clearly visible, but unfortunately the bottom of the lyre has not survived, so it is unknown if this lyre was also decorated with bull's legs. However, the soundbox of the lyre is uniquely decorated with a bull's tail, suggesting that the soundbox of this lyre was more realistic than other known examples, and it can therefore be assumed that the lyre has bull's legs.

3.6.4 Seals from Sites outside Mesopotamia

Depictions of bull-lyres are not restricted to Mesopotamia. A seal from Susa (Amiet catalogue number 1765) shows a figure playing a five-stringed bull-lyre with legs, and a seal from Failaka in the Gulf (Kuwait Nation Museum 881 UK) dating between the end of the third millennium and the early second millennium BCE depicts a seated man playing a three-stringed bull-lyre. The lyre recalls the one on the Gudea stele, with the soundbox having a bull's head attachment, and a second bull above this acting as a strut (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:321).

4. Words Denoting Lyre

According to Black, Cunningham, Robson and Zóloyomi(2006:xxiv), “about a fifth of known Sumerian literary compositions have native genre designations.” Some of these were named after the musical instruments to which they were recited or sung. One of these genres is the **balag**. The Sumerian word **balag** probably means “stringed instrument” and appears to have

been used to designate both “harp” and “lyre” (De Schauensee 2002:72), although **balag** may have been used for ‘harp’ and **zà-mí**, which probably had the meaning “praise”, denoted “lyre” (Zettler & Horne 1998:55). Some scholars believe that **balag** refers instead to a type of drum (e.g. Black et al 2006:48; Suter 2000:193). While this may be true for later periods, there are problems with this hypothesis for the Early Dynastic period, the period when these terms first arose. The simplest argument is that the earliest cuneiform sign for **balag** (Labat 1976:160-161 sign 352), dating from the Early Dynastic period, clearly looks like a stringed instrument.

Sjöberg (1984:76) references UET 3. 298:5-rev., which records “(gold) for decorating Nanna’s lyre.” The term translated here as “lyre” is **balag**. Gold was used in the decoration of the Great Lyre, Queen’s Lyre and the Golden Lyre from Ur. No known drums from third millennium Mesopotamia remain. The reason for this may be that drums were made of perishable materials such as wood and cowhide²⁰. If drums had been made of gold, at least one would presumably have been excavated. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that the instrument being decorated with gold was a lyre.

Not only are there no extant drums from the Early Dynastic period, but depictions of drums from this period are also very rare. While drums appear quite prominently on the stelae of Gudea (AO 4578; AO 4579 & EŞEM 5805) and the Ur-Nammu Stele (U.3265, University of Pennsylvania Museum B16676,28A), few examples are known from the Early Dynastic period. A fragment of a chlorite vessel from Adab, modern Bismaya, and now in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (A195A, B, C) shows a group of musicians. This includes two harpists, a trumpeter, and a drummer who carries a small drum under his arm (Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:333). Suter (2000:192-3) mentions two artefacts, a stele from Bedra and a seal, which depict large framed drums. To these can be added a stele acquired by the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in 2004 which is broken and worn and which shows a group of musicians, one of which is a drummer (al Gailani Werr 2013:392-393). Other instruments, such as castanets and harps, are found in both the archaeological and iconographic records much more frequently than are drums.

²⁰ A text from Uruk dating to the Seleucid Period (ca. 300 BCE) describes the ritual preparation of a cowhide to be stretched over a drum (Thureau-Dangin 1921:1-21), and presumably this was also the chosen material for the drumhead during earlier periods.

Other words for drum are known, for example **ub**, **meze** and **lilis** (Black et al 2006:122). Because so few depictions of drums are known, and only two different types of drum are represented, and because so many other instruments are known to have existed at the time, it seems more likely that **balag** refers not to a drum, but to a stringed instrument, most likely a lyre. Similarly, the Sumerian word **tigi**, because it is made from the cuneiform signs **balag.nar**, should be translated as a stringed instrument, and not a drum as it often is (e.g. Black et al 2006:xxiv). It is possible that **balag**, **tigi** or **zà-mí** originally referred to the bull-lyre.

5. Texts

In Gudea Cylinder A 28:17, the sound of the lyre is likened to the sound of a bull. Edzard (1997:87) translates this line as, “its harp chamber is (like) a roaring bull”, while Sjöberg (1984:76) translates it as, “its (of the) lyre (was) a softly lowing bull.” This comparison is also found in CT 36, 46:7, “my lyre chamber, lowing (?) like a wild bull” (translated by Sjöberg (1984:77)). A dedicatory inscription to Nanna is frequently quoted as also likening the sound of the lyre with that of the bull (e.g. Aruz & Wallenfels 2003:322 n.16), but this comes from misquoting Woolley (1934:258), where he mentions such a dedication, but the reference he gives is for Gudea Cylinder A 28:17.

Records of votive donations from Lagash dating to the end of the Early Dynastic Period record different cult objects including musical instruments among the recipients of such offerings. By the Neo-Sumerian period cult objects, including musical instruments, had names to identify themselves as independent entities and were considered divine in their own right. Harps and lyres were amongst these musical instruments (Selz 1997:173-178). In *A Hymn to Nanshe*, Nanshe’s lyre was called **ab-he-nun**, meaning “Cow Abundance” (Nanše A 40; etcs1 c.4.14.1). According to Heimpel’s reading of *The Hendersaga Hymn*, this instrument is also referred to in lines 21 and 22 of the hymn, where “the Innin, mother Nanshe, sails to you (Hendersaga) the sacred boat. In it Cow Abundance plays before her” (1981:103). Edzard and Wilcke (1976), whom Heimple quotes, translate these lines as “Als die Herrin, die Mutter Nanše, dir das helle Boot dahinsegeln ließ, sind ihr darin süße, helle...erklungen” (As the mistress, the mother

Nanshe, lets you sail the bright boat there, it is sweet, bright...sounded) (Edzard & Wilcke 1976:145), and don't understand the piece to refer to Nanshe's lyre. However, according to Heimpel (1981:103), who uses Edzard's copy of the cuneiform tablet and not their transliteration for his translation, Edzard and Wilcke make a mistake in their transliteration. Because lyres were often shaped as bovines, the name "Cow Abundance" may reflect the lyre's appearance. It should be noted, however, that the names of lyres of other deities weren't also named after bovines. For example, in the Gudea Cylinders, two of Ningirsu's lyres are named **ušumgal-kalam-ma** (B XV:21), meaning "Dragon-of-the-Land" (Edzard 1997:94) and **lugal-igi-huš** (B XI:1), meaning or "Red-eyed Lord" (Selz 1997:178) or "King-with-the-fierce-face" (Edzard 1997:94).

6. Conclusions

Ancient texts inform us that the sound produced by the lyre was likened to the lowing of the bull. While this is no doubt one reason why the instrument was produced to resemble the bull, the elaborateness of the instruments points to their having a more importance function.

Bull-lyres, bull's head protomes which were attached to lyres and depictions of bull-lyres dating to the Early Dynastic period are known from sites across Mesopotamia. The bulls' heads from Dilmun and Susa, and the seals from Susa and Failaka show that they were produced even outside Mesopotamia. The depiction of a bull-lyre on the Gudea Stele also proves that their use did not end with the end of the Early Dynastic period and the rise of the Akkadian Empire. The bull-lyre was therefore not local or limited to any one site, but its use was an established practice across Mesopotamia.

The surviving bull-lyres all come from Ur. Bull's head protomes were found at a number of sites, but some of these, such as that from the Ishtar Temple at Mari, did not function as attachments to bull-lyres. The bull-lyres and bull's head protomes which can be argued were attached to lyres for which we know the provenance were found either in the Royal Cemetery at Ur or in temples. This suggests that the bull-lyre was associated with the elite. However, the Plaque of Lumma from Nippur depicts a banquet which is attended by Lumma himself, which shows that the enjoyment of the bull-lyre was not restricted to royalty or the priesthood.

In depictions of the bull-lyre, when it is found in an iconographic context, such as the Standard of Ur, the Lumma Plaque and the cylinder seals from Ur, the bull-lyre is always shown as musical accompaniment to a banquet scene. Both males and females are depicted playing them. From their prevalence in iconographic depictions, it is clear that bull-lyres were played and weren't purely decorative or votive objects, although there were exceptions, such as the bull's head from Lagash now in the Louvre, which served this latter purpose. They were played at banquets, at special celebrations, until they were buried with the elite or dedicated in temples.

Few instruments are depicted as frequently in Early Dynastic art as the bull-lyre, and none are as elaborately or richly decorated. Nanna's lyre was decorated with gold, which suggests that the musical instruments of the gods were made of special materials. Some divine lyres, particularly Nanshe's "Cow Abundance", may have been decorated with bull's heads. Some bull-lyres therefore appear to have been divine instruments.

The bull-lyres were therefore of profound importance in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia. They were used by the elite in special celebrations, they were dedicated to deities, and they even served as divine instruments. It is even possible that a literary genre, **balag** or **tigi**, refers to a composition originally accompanied by bull-lyre.

7. Bibliography

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