The identification of this small relief of a deity standing on the back of a lion poses an interesting problem in ancient Near Eastern style and iconography. The figure’s appearance and attributes, which will be fully discussed below, indicate that she is Ishtar, the most popular goddess of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon.

Ishtar, the great goddess of love and war, was one of the most important Mesopotamian deities. She was a violent and powerful goddess who struck terror to the hearts of gods and men alike. She was worshipped in many places under either or both of her aspects. The Assyrians venerated her as a war goddess and made her the consort of their national god Assur. She is identified with the Phoenician Astarte, or Ash-toreth as she is called in the Bible. As goddess of love and fertility, she is the Near Eastern predecessor and equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite.

The figures of goddess and lion are carved in extremely low relief on a block of soft gray limestone which is now in a bad state of decay. The edges and back of the block have been irregularly broken, and a long break runs down the stone in front of the figures, cutting through the goddess’s left arm. The sculpture is obviously unfinished. The background, which shows many marks of the sculptor’s chisel, is rough and pitted, and only the general outline of the lion has been indicated. The sketch lines which served to block in the area the figures were to occupy can be seen behind the waist and under the dress of the goddess, and beneath the paws of the lion. The absence of detail on hat, hair, and tunic also indicates that the relief was left unfinished. In spite of this sketchy quality, the skillful modeling of more finished areas, such as the face and right arm, proves that our relief was carved by an accomplished sculptor.

The heavy proportions of the figure are typically Mesopotamian. This physical type, which has been represented in the art of Babylonia and Assyria in both early and late antiquity, persists to this day, as anyone who goes to Baghdad may see. The stocky body, thick arms and neck, full face and hands, and the heavy mass of hair bring to mind the figures in the reliefs of the late Assyrian empire. Similar tunics are worn by the musicians and attendants on a relief from the palace of Assurbanipal (about 669-626 B.C.), at Nineveh (Koujundjik) (see p. 214). The tall, cylindrical headdress, usually

ABOVE: A procession of mounted deities carved on the cliffs at Maltai. Assyrian, viii century B.C.
worn by a deity in Near Eastern iconography, closely resembles the tiaras worn by some of the gods and goddesses on the great rock-cut reliefs at Bavian and Maltai in the mountainous region north of Nineveh, near modern Mosul (see p. 211). These divine processions were carved during the reign of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.). Our deity’s tiara is higher, less flaring, and has no surmounting disk or cone.

The attributes carried by the goddess can be traced in Near Eastern art from the third millennium down to the sixth century B.C., as symbols of power and divinity. The staff in her right hand is probably a harpe, although this symbol is usually shown with the curve at the end rather than two thirds of the way down its length as here. The harpe was originally a weapon, but in later times, it came to be used generally as a symbol of command. It is found in a variety of forms, many of them quite far removed from any practical shape. There are representations of heroes using the harpe in combat on several Mesopotamian cylinder seals. It is held as an emblem of power by rulers and gods, as, for example, by the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal in the well-known statue in the British Museum, in which the curve of the harpe is reduced to almost a ring.

The ring and rod, grasped in our figure’s left hand, is a common symbol of divinity which could be held by any of the Near Eastern deities. The origin of the symbol is thought by some to lie in actual land-measuring implements—a ruler and a coil of rope—which came to denote sovereignty over the land. The first, third, and fifth deities on the relief at Maltai carry these symbols. The lion is associated with several divinities in ancient Near Eastern art. The goddess Ishtar is represented with lions from the third millennium onward. She is sometimes shown standing on the back of her animal attribute, as in the procession at Maltai (seventh deity). The figure on our relief without doubt represents Ishtar.

In style our relief belongs to the sphere of Neo-Babylonian art. But it is interesting to note that during the century preceding the Neo-Babylonian empire, namely from 745 to 625 B.C., Babylonia was a subject province of the powerful Assyrian empire. This connection explains the great similarities that exist between late Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian sculpture. By the reigns of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal, in the late eighth and early seventh centuries, Assyrian art had lost much of its vitality. The sharp outlines, vigorous forms, and elaborate stylization of details present in the great period of Assyrian sculpture, when the empire was at its height under Assurnasirpal and Sargon II, had been softened. In the decorations of the palace of a later king, Assurbanipal, a new elegance replaced the brutal vigor of earlier work.
Female attendants and musicians at a royal banquet, from a relief on the walls of King Assurbanipal's palace at Nineveh (Koujundjik). Assyrian, vii century B.C. In the British Museum

The relatively small size of our relief gives a clue to the type of monument from which it came. Small-scale figures were introduced into Assyrian sculpture in the great narrative reliefs that decorated the walls of the late Assyrian palaces. Our goddess, however, could not have come from this source, as there seem to have been no representations of deities, except the familiar winged genii, on palace walls. It is only in the large reliefs cut into the bare rock on hillsides, at Bavian and Maltai, that one finds Assyrian portrayals of deities mounted on animals similar in type to ours. There are, however, a number of small late Assyrian reliefs that show great similarity to our piece. Two of these are shown on page 215: a sculptor's model from Assur and a votive stele (partly restored), both showing Sennacherib before the gods Assur and Ishtar standing on their animal attributes. The stele, as we know from its inscription, was made to commemorate the founding of a temple dedicated to the god Assur. Our relief may have been made for a similar purpose, although the work was abandoned before its completion.

There is in the Museum another Near Eastern sculpture that is similar in subject to the Ishtar relief, a small statuette of a god standing on the back of a bull (p. 216). This small Urartean bronze comes from the region near Lake Van in Armenia, where the ancient kingdom of Urartu was a powerful rival of Assyria in its later days. The upper part of the god is missing, but his garment and the bull show the elaborately stylized surface detail so obviously lacking in the Babylonian relief. This statuette, dated in the eighth century B.C., illustrates the influence of earlier Assyrian art on the distant regions beyond the borders of the empire.

The similarity between the late Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian styles in sculpture allows some divergence of opinion on the date of our relief,
Sennacherib before mounted gods: above, votive stele, Istambul Museum; below, sculptor’s model (H. 9 in.), Berlin Museum (?), Assyrian, VII century B.C.
but comparison with a few examples of Neo-Babylonian sculpture makes the later dating more convincing. In proportions, soft contours, and surface modeling, a figure of Ishtar on the Neo-Babylonian stele of Shamash-resh-usur, a relief dating from the seventh century (found at Babylon and now in the Istanbul Museum) has a certain kinship with our goddess. A small terracotta statuette from Warka, dated around 510 B.C. and representing a Babylonian god, Papsukal, is very close in style to our relief (p. 213). Similarities in proportions and in the skillful treatment of modeled forms suggest that our relief might well have come from that northern Babylonian site, where, indeed, it is said to have been found. Warka, best known for its early monuments, survived into the Neo-Babylonian period, although at that time it was a quiet, provincial town producing modest works of art.

Internal evidence and comparison with known monuments thus indicate that our relief is a fragment of a small unfinished votive stele representing the Mesopotamian goddess of war, Ishtar, standing on her lion. In time and place the sculpture can be located within the confines of the Neo-Babylonian empire (625–538 B.C.). Together with its little Urartean companion it is an important addition to the known representations of gods standing on animals. Both add interest and variety to the Museum’s growing collection of ancient Near Eastern art.

Bronze statuette of a god standing on a bull. The head is restored. From the region of Lake Van in Armenia. VIII century B.C. Height about 7 inches. Dodge Fund, 1950