

13 ELEPHANT IN STONE

Mesopotamia, late Uruk/Jemdet Nasr period, 3,400–3,000 BC

Size: 15 cm high, 20 cm long

Veined limestone



The rear of this Elephant is quite as expected, with sturdy legs and a tail. Further forward, however, his aspect changes. Instead of ears there are carved spirals, as if his tusks have been conveniently folded back. And then his pillar-like forelegs combine with his trunk to become an architectural feature. The trunk is pierced laterally, perhaps for a ring. How was it, one can't help wondering, that an elephant could be so successfully transformed into architecture? Was it a sculptor 5,000 years ago translating a traveller's tale; or had he seen one on his own travels, and forgetting its details remembered only the impression it made? Strangely, there are elephant figures in stone from an even earlier period from the same general area, so far unpublished, which are more lifelike, with big flappy ears, seemingly observed from a real creature. So what happened to make an elephant architectural? (A miniature version in reddish limestone exists, exhibiting the same architectural features. See:

D. Adams, E. Bunker, T. Kawami, R. Morkot, D. Tawil, *When Orpheus Sang, An Ancient Bestiary*, Les Livres d'Art, 2004, no. 26.)

The reconstruction of the temple of the god An at Uruk, the religious shrine to which this elephant was most probably dedicated, provides an unexpected correspondence. It is like looking at him once he had completed his transformation into a building. We are used to the 'total work of art' concept in the 20th century, for example with Bauhaus, Art Deco or Dalcroze, but less used to uncovering a manifestation of it 5,000 years ago.