NO PREP

Ur

Discovering the World's First Great City

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Name: Period: Date:

Ur: Discovering the World's First Great City

A City Rises from the Silt

Ur was one of the oldest cities on Earth. At its peak around 2100 BCE, it may have housed as many as 65,000 people within its walls — more than almost any other city in the ancient world at that time. It sat near the mouth of the Euphrates River in what is now southern Iraq, on what was once the shore of the Persian Gulf before centuries of silt deposition pushed the coastline further south. The city's residents were traders, craftspeople, priests, scribes, and farmers who worked the irrigated fields beyond the city walls. They built in mud brick, organized their streets around a massive ziggurat — a stepped temple tower — and traded with merchants from as far away as the Indus Valley and the eastern Mediterranean. What we know about Ur comes from a combination of written records and archaeological excavation. The city appears in ancient Sumerian texts and in the Book of Genesis as the birthplace of Abraham. But it was systematic archaeology, not scripture, that revealed the true scale and complexity of Ur's civilization. That archaeology was led by

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Leonard Woolley and the Royal Cemetery

Leonard Woolley was a British archaeologist who excavated Ur between 1922 and 1934 as a joint project of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania. He was meticulous, creative, and possessed of a dramatic flair that made his discoveries front-page news. Working in the scorching heat of southern Iraq, Woolley and his team uncovered something no archaeologist had ever seen before: a royal cemetery containing more than 2,000 graves, including sixteen that Woolley labeled the 'Royal Tombs.' What set the Royal Tombs apart was not just the wealth they contained (and there was extraordinary wealth, including gold helmets, lyres inlaid with lapis lazuli and shell, and jewelry of stunning craftsmanship) but the human cost. The

royal burials were accompanied by dozens of attendants. In the Great Death Pit, Woolley found 74 bodies: 68 women and 6 men, lying in neat rows as if they had lain down to sleep. Many were still wearing their court finery, their gold and silver headdresses and beaded necklaces in place. Near each body was a small cup, likely used to drink a lethal liquid as part of a ritual. Woolley's theory was that these attendants had willingly accompanied their ruler to the afterlife, drinking poison as part of a ceremony. More recent analysis has complicated this picture: some skulls show evidence of being struck before burial, suggesting that not all deaths were entirely voluntary. Whatever the exact mechanism, the Royal Tombs reveal a society capable of organizing mass ritual death in service of royal power.

The Standard of Ur: A Window Into Sumerian Life

Among the most famous objects recovered from the Royal Tombs is the Standard of Ur, a hollow wooden box roughly the size of a hardback book, covered on both sides with mosaics made of shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone. The object's function is debated: Woolley believed it was carried on a pole like a standard in battle, but it may have been a musical instrument's soundbox or a decorative piece. What is certain is what it shows. One side depicts war: soldiers in helmets march in formation, chariots roll over fallen enemies, and prisoners are paraded before a seated king who towers above them in scale, indicating his importance. The other side shows peace: a banquet scene in which the king and nobles recline with cups of beer while musicians play and servants bring food. Animals are led to the feast. In just two wooden panels, the Standard of Ur captures the two faces of Sumerian civilization: violence and celebration, conquest and abundance. The Standard is now in the British Museum in London, far from the soil of Iraq where it was created. Its location has become a point of tension between British curators, who argue they provide superior conservation, and Iraqi scholars, who argue that Iraq's cultural heritage belongs in Iraq. This argument, echoed across many of the world's great museums, remains unresolved.

Daily Life and the Ziggurat

Beyond the Royal Cemetery, archaeology at Ur reveals the rhythms of daily urban life. Woolley excavated a residential neighborhood from the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000-1600 BCE) that he fancifully called 'Abraham's House,' imagining the biblical patriarch living there. The houses were two-story mud-brick structures built

around central courtyards, with roof drains and basic plumbing. Cuneiform tablets found in private homes recorded business transactions, school lessons, and personal letters. The Great Ziggurat of Ur still stands today — at least partially. Built by the Third Dynasty king Ur-Nammu around 2100 BCE and restored by Nabonidus of Babylon centuries later, the ziggurat was a massive three-tiered platform topped by a temple to the moon god Nanna. It measured approximately 64 meters long, 45 meters wide, and originally rose to at least 30 meters in height. Workers climbed its massive staircase to bring offerings, and priests administered the temple complex below. The ziggurat was not just a religious center — it was a storage facility, an administrative hub, and a visible symbol of civic power that could be seen from miles across the flat Mesopotamian plain.

Key Information: Ur

Detail	Information
Peak Population	Approximately 65,000 people (c. 2100 BCE)
Location	Southern Iraq, near the original mouth of the Euphrates
Excavator	Leonard Woolley, 1922-1934 (British Museum / Univ. of Pennsylvania)
Royal Tombs	16 royal burials, including the Great Death Pit with 74 attendants
Standard of Ur	Wooden mosaic box depicting war and peace; now in the British Museum
Great Ziggurat	Built c. 2100 BCE by Ur-Nammu; dedicated to moon god Nanna
Queen Puabi	Most famous royal burial; gold headdress and full court regalia intact
Key Controversy	Location of artifacts (British Museum vs. return to Iraq)

Case Study: A Servant at the Court of Queen Puabi

Ninsun was nineteen years old and had served at the court of the Queen for three years. She had learned to arrange the lapis lazuli headdress without pulling hair, to pour the barley beer from exactly the right height to produce the right amount of foam, and to stand absolutely still during the long ceremonial hours when stillness was required. She was good at her work, and she knew it. The preparations had been going on for a week. Everyone knew what they meant. When the Queen died, the court went with her. That was the way of things. The priests said it was an honor. Ninsun's mother, who lived outside the city walls and grew onions in a small irrigated plot, said nothing when Ninsun sent a message telling her. There was nothing to say. On the morning of the ceremony, Ninsun put on her finest robe and her silver earrings. She descended the ramp into the stone-lined pit along with the other attendants. A musician played a lyre somewhere above. Cups of liquid were passed along the rows. Ninsun looked at the body of the Queen laid out in state on the far side of the chamber, surrounded by golden vessels and the furniture of a royal life, and thought about the onion field, and the sound of water in the irrigation channels in the early morning, and whether the flood this year would be good or bad. Then she drank. About four thousand five hundred years later, a British archaeologist named Woolley would uncover this pit, and wonder what the small cups had contained.

1. The case study describes Ninsun's experience from the inside, without judging whether the practice of ritual burial was right or wrong. How does this perspective challenge or complicate the way historians and archaeologists should interpret evidence of human sacrifice in the Royal Tombs?

2. Ninsun thinks about her mother's onion field and the irrigation channels in her final moments. What does this detail suggest about the gap between the lives of royal court attendants and ordinary Mesopotamian people, and how does archaeology help us understand both?

Multiple Choice

1. What made the Royal Tombs at Ur archaeologically extraordinary compared to other royal burials?

    a) They included dozens of attendants apparently sacrificed to accompany the ruler

    b) They were constructed from large worked stone blocks rather than common mud brick

    c) They were found completely undisturbed by looters

    d) They contained the earliest examples of cuneiform writing

2. The Standard of Ur is significant because it:

    a) Contains the world's earliest written law code

    b) Proves that Ur traded with ancient Egypt

    c) Was hammered from iron, many centuries before iron technology was widely known

    d) Depicts both warfare and peaceful feasting, giving insight into Sumerian life

3. The Great Ziggurat of Ur served which combination of purposes?

    a) Marketplace and burial site for commoners

    b) Religious temple, storage facility, and administrative center

    c) School for scribes and library for cuneiform tablets and writings

    d) Military fortress and royal palace

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Ziggurat	A) Sixteen elaborate burials at Ur containing rulers and dozens of sacrificed attendants
2. ___ Royal Tombs	B) British archaeologist who excavated Ur from 1922 to 1934
3. ___ Standard of Ur	C) The killing of humans or animals as an offering to gods or as part of a burial ceremony
4. ___ Leonard Woolley	D) A massive stepped temple tower, the architectural centerpiece of Sumerian cities
5. ___ Ritual sacrifice	E) A wooden mosaic box depicting war on one face and a royal feast on the other

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Great Ziggurat of Ur was dedicated to Nanna, the Sumerian _____ god.

2. The Standard of Ur is now housed in the _____ in London.

3. Leonard Woolley discovered the Royal Tombs of Ur as part of a joint project between the British Museum and the University of _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why do archaeologists consider the Great Death Pit at Ur one of the most significant and disturbing discoveries in Mesopotamian archaeology?

_____

_____

_____

2. The Standard of Ur is currently in the British Museum rather than in Iraq. What are the strongest arguments on each side of the debate over where it should be located?

3. Based on the reading, what can the residential neighborhood excavated at Ur tell us about daily life in a Sumerian city that the royal tombs cannot?