



FIG. 1. FLUTED GOLD BOWL from Puabi's tomb chamber. Oval gold or silver vessels with lugs for attaching handles were frequent finds in the royal tombs. A chased design of herringbones and zigzags circles the rim of this piece, and a twelve-petaled rosette circled with herringbones and zigzags decorates the bowl's bottom. The dazzling array of gold objects in the Royal Cemetery is even more remarkable given the complete absence of gold deposits in southern Mesopotamia. The most likely sources of the precious material include Afghanistan, Iran, Anatolia, and perhaps Egypt and Nubia.

UPM B 17693, L. 13.1 cm

## Ur and Its Treasures: The Royal Tombs

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**A**ncient Sumer lay in lower Mesopotamia, an arid land broken by belts of green along the banks of its canals and waterways and, to the southeast, the marshes and islands of the Shatt al-Arab delta (see map on p. 3). Sumer was occupied as early as the 7th millennium BC. By 2500 BC it had become a land of remarkable agricultural and material wealth. Over the

millennia, settlements multiplied and grew in size and complexity, from simple agricultural villages to full-fledged cities.

Except for its agricultural and pastoral potential, Sumer was a land of few natural resources and depended on outside sources for many of its goods. A lively international trade connected it with other lands



FIG. 2. TROUGH-SPOUTED CUP OF LAPIS LAZULI. While the royal tombs yielded dozens of gold, silver, and calcite vessels, this small lapis lazuli cup is unique in shape and material. Lapis lazuli, more often used for small objects such as beads and plaques, probably came from far-off Afghanistan.

UPM B 17167, H. 6.7 cm

FIG. 3. GOLD COSMETIC CONTAINER in the shape of a cockleshell. Real cockleshells from Puabi's tomb held mineral pigments of various colors, most often green or black. Shell-shaped containers of gold and silver lay nearby.

UPM B 16710, L. 8 cm



far across the mountains and seas and provided the ingredients for a highly developed commercial, cultural, and artistic life. The inhabitants spoke Sumerian, a language with no known relatives, living or dead. With it, they developed the world's oldest writing system in a script we call cuneiform. For the first time, if still dimly, written records illuminate archaeological remains.

This era of Sumerian ascendancy falls in what we call the Early Dynastic period, comprising the first half of the 3rd millennium BC. It was a period of great importance for the history of all Mesopotamia, which lay at the brink of empire. While times were prosperous they were not always peaceful. Independent, warring city-states rose up and fell from power. One of these was

the great city of Ur, located on the banks of the life-giving Euphrates River.

### UR AND THE ROYAL CEMETERY

Field research by the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum in the 1920s provides an unusually complete archaeological picture of this major center (see box on The Royal Cemetery). It was founded sometime in the 4th millennium BC and occupied for perhaps three thousand years. Its strategic location on the Euphrates, with waterway access to the Persian Gulf, helped it grow by the 3rd millennium into a major, fully urban center. In the Early Dynastic period it was ruled by kings whose



FIG. 4. ELECTRUM TUMBLER. The tumbler that lay at Puabi's side is not of pure gold, but of a gold and silver alloy called electrum. Similar tumblers in silver and in copper alloy were also found in the Royal Cemetery.

UPM B 17691, H. 15.2 cm



FIG. 5. GOLD VESSEL IN THE FORM OF AN OSTRICH EGG. Covered with a mosaic of lapis lazuli, red limestone, and shell bits set in bitumen, this gold version of an ostrich egg was found in PG 779 along with a silver version and a real egg.

UPM B 16692, H. 14.6 cm



FIG. 6. WREATH OF LAPIS LAZULI AND CARNELIAN WITH GOLD POPLAR LEAVES from the "Great Death Pit" (PG 1237). Many of the female attendants who accompanied the royal deceased to the netherworld wore elaborate headdresses of gold ribbon, hair rings, frontlets, and wreaths such as this one.

UPM 30-12-714, L. 42.7 cm

names and successions we can only partially reconstruct from spotty and inconsistent written records. We do know that, like other Mesopotamian city-states, it had a deity—the moon-god Nanna—upon which its prosperity depended; religion and the state were closely enmeshed.

After only a short period of archaeological exploration, Ur offered up a most spectacular find: the vast cemetery in use at the peak of its early prosperity, around 2650 BC. Some 1850 burials were excavated, most of them simple inhumations. Sixteen, however, stood out for their distinctive construction, the wealth of their contents, and the fact that they included the remains of attendants who were buried with their masters to serve them in the Beyond as they had in the Here and Now. Leonard Woolley, the Director, deemed these extravagant tombs "royal." We still call them royal although few have been unambigu-

ously identified as such by written evidence. The deceased may have indeed been royal, or they may have been important personages in the temple hierarchy. Or perhaps they were both, a combined role known from cuneiform texts and a reasonable assumption in a society in which the temple and the palace were so closely linked.

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The royal burials contained riches almost beyond imagining—gold, electrum, and silver; lapis lazuli, carnelian, agate, and chalcedony; carved and decorated vessels of precious metal and semiprecious stone; tools and weapons in precious metals; jewelry and personal belongings, even cosmetics. And, to the wonderment of both scholars and the public, each tomb contained from a half dozen

to several score of retainers' bodies, dead apparently by their own hands.

Unfortunately, most of the tombs were looted of their contents in antiquity or disturbed by later buri-



FIG. 7. ELECTRUM ADZE from PG 580. Most of the weapons and tools found in the Royal Cemetery were not functional in a technical sense. However, they would have served well as symbols of authority and competence.

UPM B 16691, L. 15 cm



FIG. 8. GOLD BULL AMULET. This tiny bull is crafted of gold over a bitumen core and was found loose in the soil near one of the tombs. The false beard indicates divinity.

UPM B 16685, L. 1.5 cm



FIG. 9. WHITE CALCITE BOX. This box from PG 1100 has four round-bottomed compartments. It was originally lidded, which explains the holes near the top and the lip on the rim.

UPM 30-12-697, H. 9 cm



FIG. 10. STRING OF GOLD, LAPIS LAZULI, AND ETCHED CARNELIAN BEADS. Beads, in a wide range of precious and semiprecious materials, sizes, and shapes, were everywhere in the royal tombs. The opaque white lines on five of the beads shown here were created by a technique characteristic of contemporary Indus Valley bead production, which suggests they were imported.

UPM 30-12-573, L. 10.5 cm

als cut down through them. However, one of the most lavish and intact examples—PG 800, that of “Queen” Puabi—is the centerpiece of the University of Pennsylvania’s holdings. Puabi, identified by a lapis lazuli cylinder seal bearing her name, was clearly a woman of extraordinary importance in her day. Her tomb contains not only a wealth of material but a wealth of information about the time and place.

Woolley vividly reconstructed the elaborate funeral ceremony on the basis of her tomb and one that lay below it. In the first phase, the royal body was carried down a sloping passage and laid to rest in the burial

chamber, usually on a wooden bier or in a wooden coffin and always with all the finery at his or her command. Three or four of the deceased’s personal attendants lay nearby. This phase of the ceremony finished, the chamber door was blocked and plastered over. Then, in the words of the excavator,

Down into the open pit, with its mat-covered floor and mat-lined walls, empty and unfurnished, there comes a procession of people, the members of the dead ruler’s court, soldiers, men-servants, and women, the latter in all their



FIG. 11A. BRONZE HEAD OF A BULL from a wooden lyre found in PG 1332. The head was cast by the lost wax process; the eyes are inset with lapis lazuli and shell.

UPM 30-12-696, H. 12 cm



FIG. 11B. MOSAIC PANEL OF LAPIS LAZULI AND SHELL from the same lyre. Seated on a stool, a banqueter (top right) raises a cup before a line of standing attendants. The banquet scene is a frequent theme in Mesopotamian art. This panel is a simple variant; more elaborate examples appear on cylinder seals and on the great bull-headed lyre from PG 789.

UPM 30-12-484, H. 19 cm

finery of brightly coloured garments and head-dresses of carnelian and lapis lazuli, silver and gold, officers with the insignia of their rank, musicians bearing harps or lyres, and then, driven or backed down the slope, the chariots drawn by oxen, the drivers in the cars, the grooms holding the heads of the draught animals, and all take up their allotted places at the bottom of the shaft and finally a guard of soldiers forms up at the entrance. Each man and woman brought a little cup of clay or stone or metal . . . (Moorey 1982:74–75)

The little cups held the poison that promised their bearers safe journey into the Underworld where we suppose they would continue to serve in the court of their masters, but it is also possible that they and the other contents of the tomb were intended as gifts to various Underworld deities. In any case, such collective burials are unknown anywhere else in Mesopotamia (excepting a possible reference in a text from Lagash) either before or after. Much about them remains puzzling. What remains brings clearly to view the material brilliance of Sumerian culture and society.



FIG. 12. OVAL STONE BOWL. The unusual material for this polished, translucent green calcite bowl was certainly imported. The oval shape and the double tube lugs are identical to the gold version also found in Puabi's tomb (see Fig. 1).

UPM B 17166, H. 8.7 cm



FIG. 13. GOLD DAGGER. The pattern of small gold nails on the handle and the hilt guard imitates granulation. The wooden pommel is restored.

UPM 30-12-550, L. 33 cm (restored)

#### AFTERMATH

In the second half of the 3rd millennium, Ur's ascendancy was eclipsed by the rising power of a rival center, Lagash. Shortly thereafter, Sumer and its city-states fell to Sargon I, the conqueror who unified Mesopotamia for the first time by creating the Akkadian Empire. The city celebrated a brief resurgence of power at the very end of the millennium under the Third Dynasty, founded by Ur-Namma; during this period, the massive ziggurat of Ur was raised. After being

sacked by the Elamites, Ur was rebuilt under the dynastic rule of the cities of Isin and Larsa. But it was never to regain the prominence it once had, even under the relative prosperity of Babylonian (18th century BC) and Neo-Babylonian (6th century BC) rule. By the time of the Persian Empire, the collapsing city had little to show for its past. No doubt the shifting course of the Euphrates contributed to Ur's demise, for the abandoned site now lies some 10 miles away from the riverbed. The river that gave it life may have also dealt the final blow. **2**

## The Royal Cemetery: Excavation and Exhibition

The site of ancient Ur has been part of the archaeological map of Iraq since the mid-19th century. It was explored first by the British Museum and then, late in the century, by the University of Pennsylvania Museum. The site continued to hold the interest of both institutions through the disturbances of World War I and its aftermath. When Iraq reopened to archaeological exploration in the 1920s, the Joint Expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum quickly stepped in, with British archaeologist C. Leonard Woolley as Director.

In spite of general enthusiasm for the site, no one, not even the Director, was prepared for the unparalleled splendors that were to be unearthed. In fact, so unprepared was Woolley that when he started turning up quantities of gold beads in the Cemetery area in 1922, he wisely decided to delay excavating until his workmen had cut their teeth on less demanding areas of the site. As a result, his carefully excavated and well-recorded findings, and his skill at reconstructing his finds, stand as a technical achievement that continues to provide, seventy years later, material for analysis and reanalysis.

Soon after excavation, the finds from Ur were divided among the three interested parties: Iraq, the British Museum, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Objects from the Royal Cemetery have been on display in the University of Pennsylvania Museum since their arrival in Philadelphia in the 1930s. Now, for the first time, the finest of these will be displayed together outside the Museum in an exhibition entitled "Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur." This article provides a preview of the exhibition's Treasures.



Workers excavating graves in the Royal Cemetery in the 1920s.

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