

THE ZIGGURAT OF UR

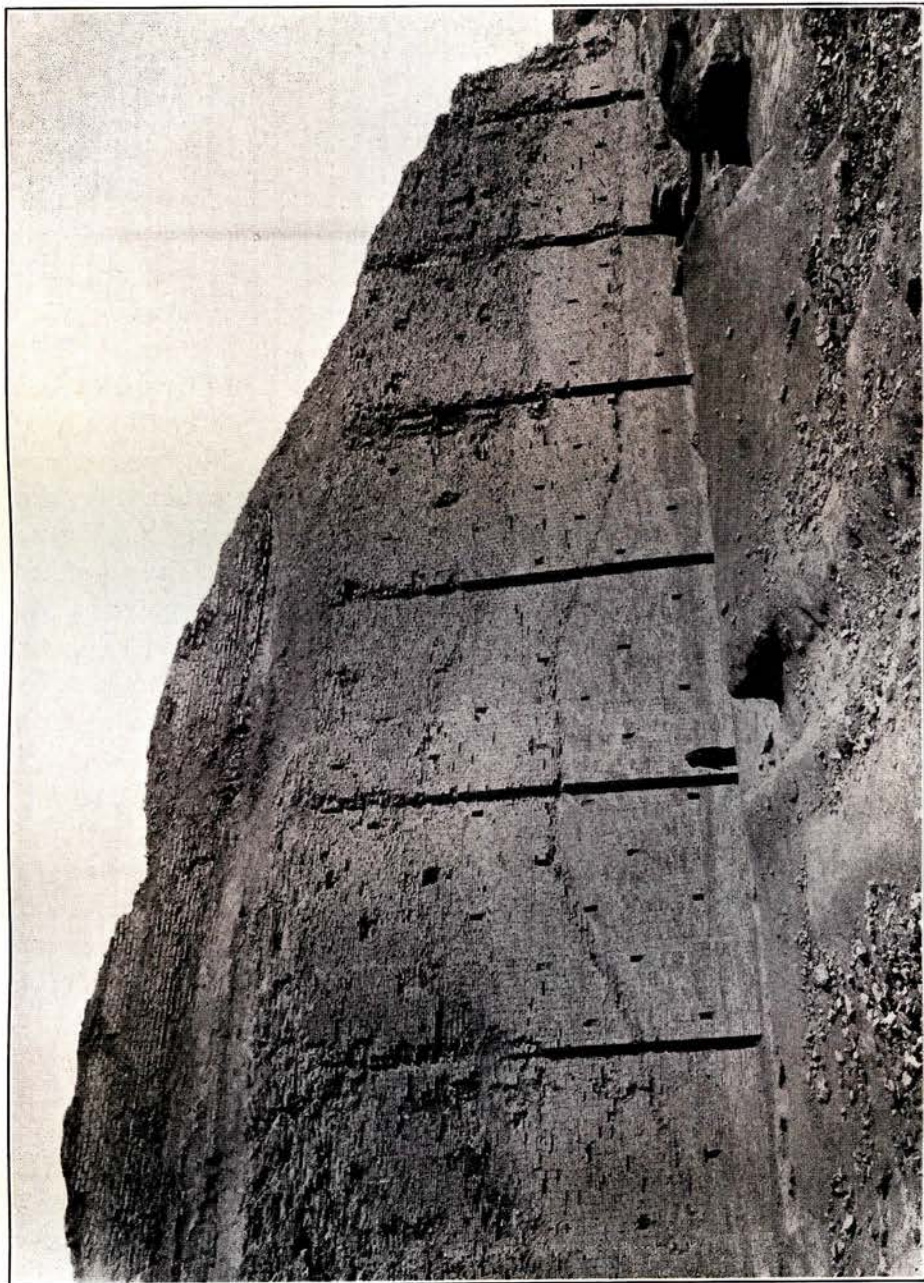
FROM THE REPORT OF THE JOINT EXPEDITION OF THE BRITISH
MUSEUM UNIVERSITY MUSEUM TO MESPOTAMIA.

BY C. L. WOOLLEY

DURING the whole of our digging season (1923-24) the greater number of the workmen have been engaged upon the clearing of the Ziggurat, and before the work closed down this, the most imposing of the monuments of Ur, was fully exposed as it had not been since its destruction in the fifth century B. C.

In each of the chief cities of Mesopotamia there stood of old one of these ziggurats or staged towers whose ruins today dominate the lower mounds that were temples or palaces. They were great solid structures rising up tier above tier, each stage smaller than the one below, so that the whole had the effect of a stepped platform; stairways or sloping ramps led from the ground level to the summit, and thereon was set a little shrine dedicated to the city's patron god. The amount of labour that went to the building of such a tower was immense, and one wonders why it should have been incurred so regularly in every great town. The explanation seems to be that the Sumerians were originally a hill folk, accustomed, as all hill folk are, to putting up their temples and their altars on "high places" and "on every high hill;" when they moved down into the plain of Mesopotamia, where the flat alluvium stretches unrelieved to the horizon, they felt the need of the "high place" where God could be properly worshipped and so set to and built artificial mountains whereby man might approach nearer to heaven. The tower of Babel was meant to storm the throne of God with prayer at close quarters rather than by force of arms.

The ruins of Khorsabad have given us the remains of one ziggurat fairly well preserved and Herodotus has left us a description of that of Babylon; the Greek's account is none too clear, but he evidently is describing a building very different to that represented by the ruins, and we can only gather that whereas the idea of all the ziggurats was the same, in plan and in ornament they varied much one from another. Therefore the clearing of that at Ur, the best preserved of all the ziggurats in Mesopotamia, was bound to be a work of great interest.

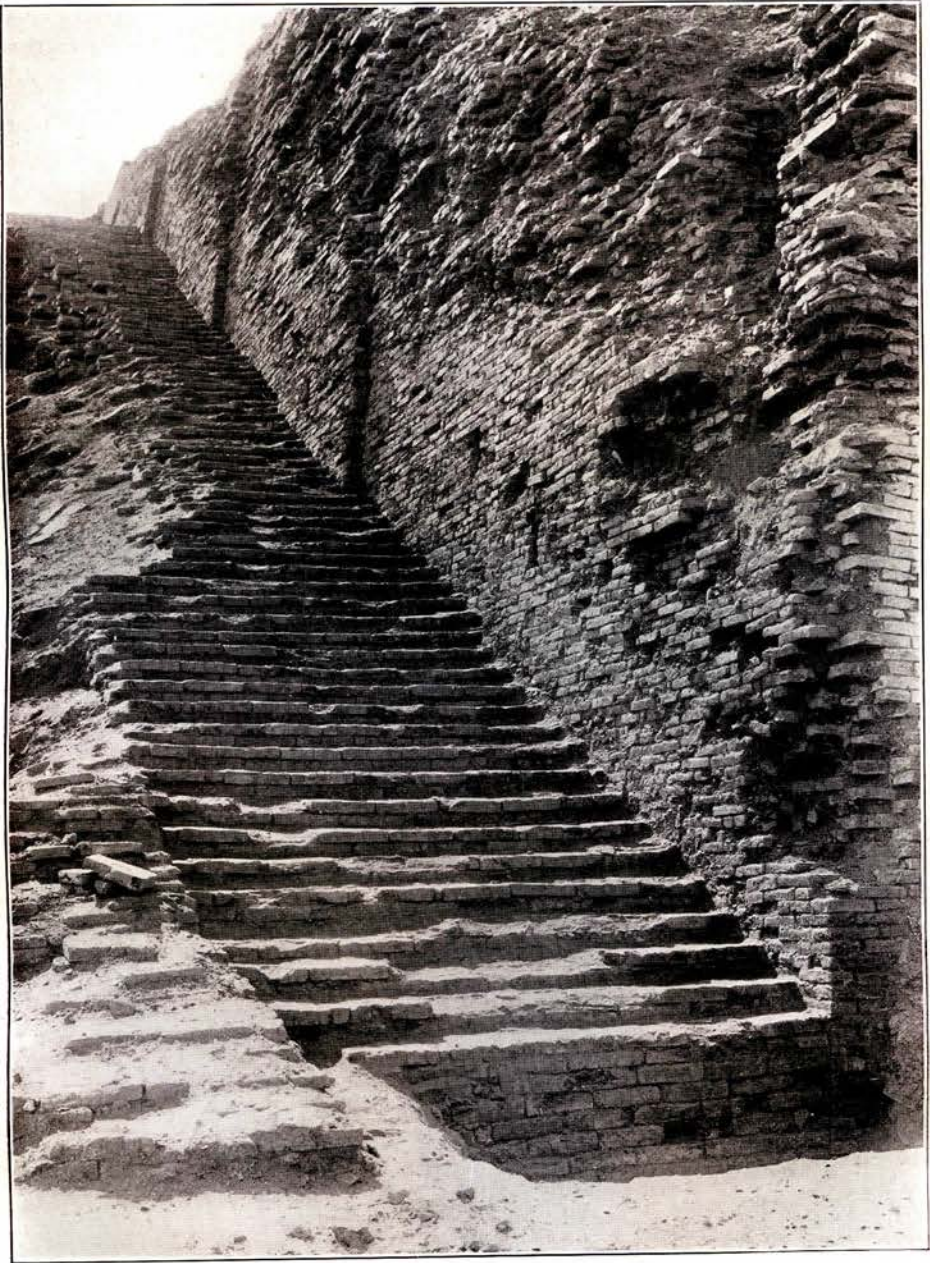


The lower Stage of the Ziggurat of Ur; after excavation.

Much of the history of the monument was already known, for in the middle of last century Mr. Taylor, excavating on behalf of the British Museum, had found the inscribed clay cylinders whereon Nabonidus, last king of Babylon, had recorded how he had repaired and completed the tower begun but left unfinished by Ur-Engur and his son Dungi, kings of Ur about 2300 B. C. We knew therefore that we should have to deal with buildings of that early date and of the sixth century B. C. Actually of Dungi we have found no trace, and we can only conclude that his work was limited to the upper structure which was swept away to make room for the new buildings of Nabonidus; it is safer to assume this than to suppose that Nabonidus was in error, for the king was a keen archaeologist, fond of digging up the foundation-records of his predecessors and basing his statements upon their written evidence; that he did so here is sure, for at the corner of the second stage of Ur-Engur's work, below an unbroken pavement laid down by Nabonidus, we found a hole driven right into the heart of the brickwork, a hole that could only have been made by the later king's workmen searching for the old foundation-deposits.

Even without the later foundation-cylinders (further examples of which were found by us this year) it would have been possible to assign to each king his own part in the building, for the royal stamps on the bricks left no doubt on the subject, except indeed where the later builders re-used some of the material taken from the earlier walls. The whole of the lowest stage is due to Ur-Engur, and everything visible above it to Nabonidus. There is nothing to tell us what the upper part of the original ziggurat was like; that of the sixth century B. C. can be reconstructed in all its essential lines.

The lowest stage is a rectangle, the short ends straight, the longer sides slightly convex, as if to give an appearance of greater strength to the centre, where the building was highest. It is solid throughout, of crude brick inside with a thick facing of baked bricks laid in pitch for mortar; to secure a bond, reed mats dipped in pitch were laid between the brick courses at regular intervals. The quality of the bricks and of the bricklaying is astonishingly good, and much of the wall face is as clean and new looking as when it was first built. The surface is relieved by shallow buttresses; a further variety is afforded by the numerous "weeper-holes" running right through the thickness of the burnt brick wall for the drainage



One of the Stairways on the Ziggurat of Ur.

of the filling which without this precaution would have swelled with the infiltration of the winter rains and burst the casing.

On three sides the ziggurat walls rise straight and unbroken from the ground, but on the NE side are the stairs leading to the summit. There were three flights of a hundred steps each; a central flight, and from either corner of the ziggurat a flight running up against the wall face, the three converging at the top in a broad gateway through the parapet of the second stage; the two angles between the central and the side stairways are filled by solid platform towers whose flat tops were probably decorated with statues. The whole conception is very dignified, and the threefold approach must have lent itself well to such ritual processions as we may imagine to have formed part of the Moon god's worship. That there was a second stage to Ur-Engur's tower is certain, and we have found remains of it *in situ*, but from Nabonidus's account we may perhaps infer that there were no more than two; but though its design may not have satisfied the Babylonian king the building such as it was planned must have been completed in the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur; during the next eighteen hundred years royal builders who did much work in the city carried out minor repairs to the ziggurat and if the top had been left unfinished would certainly have worked there too, but neither we nor Nabonidus found any evidence for their having done so. We must conclude that Ur-Engur's building whose lower part survives today was completed at least during his son's reign, and that when Abraham lived at Ur he looked up daily to a ziggurat which was then a finished monument.

In the sixth century B. C. Nabonidus respected most of what was left of the ancient building. He put down new brick treads for the staircases, but he did not alter their design, and it was only on the top of the structure that he swept away the older ruins altogether to make room for something more suited to his tastes. Three stages set on the old base gave greater height to the platform on which the shrine was to be built; these were not of the same proportions as the lowest stage, but left at either end a platform much wider than along the sides, and on the NE side there was no lowest stage at all, the entrance from the triple stairway giving directly on to the second platform. Entering here one turned to the left and went down a short flight of steps to the lowest platform at the SE end of the ziggurat (like all such, the ziggurat of UR is orientated with its corners, not its sides, to the cardinal points of the compass),

and passing to the centre of this up a broad staircase to the top platform of all, while smaller flights led to the third platform by which one could walk right round the building. Theoretical reconstructions of ziggurats in the past have always aimed at a perfect symmetry such as the groundplan would seem to dictate; the ruins at Ur present to us a structure curiously irregular and almost lopsided. But this irregularity is calculated. The top of the ziggurat is treated as a thing in itself, without reference to the surroundings, which indeed were too far below to matter; everything is subordinated to the effect to be obtained from the lowest platform at the SE end, where the spectator has before him the stepped terraces and the main and side stairways, all the lines centering on the shrine above. From below, the only view that really mattered was that of the NE face, for all the other sides were more or less encumbered and concealed by other buildings; here therefore the lowest stage was carried up higher and the passage from the stairway to the lowest platform was hidden by a parapet which masked the real lack of balance on the two sides; only two upper terraces were visible with the shrine crowning the whole.

In a previous report I described a large courtyard that lay below the ziggurat on the NE side. The floor of this lay at a lower level than the ziggurat, which really stood high on an artificial terrace held up by the boundary wall of the court, and it was from the court that the best view of the ziggurat was obtained. To some extent we can recover at least the main features of this view. The courtyard, with its paving of brick and asphalt, stretched this way and that for a hundred yards and was some sixty yards wide; the bounding wall was decorated with attached half columns fronted by a colonnade; the whole was whitewashed. Above this rose the terrace on which stood the ziggurat isolated and huge. The lower part was all painted black; the three staircases ran up to a great doorway at the top of the main stage which here, in its centre, was higher than at the two ends, so that all the lines, the actual side walls of the ziggurat with their slight batter, the parapet with its sharper break, and the steep-pitched converging stairs, all led the eye upwards and inwards; over the black parapet shewed the upper terrace of bright red brick, and on the top of all the shrine built of glazed bricks of brilliant sky blue. The scheme both of colour and line has been carefully thought out; the vertical lines of the white columns below, the converging lines against the black mass of



A Stairway on the Ziggurat of Ur.

the first stages of the tower, the plain red step leading up to the blue shining cube of the shrine, all contribute to the effect, and make of the ziggurat of Ur an architectural monument worthy of our admiration and of Nabonidus's pride.

The new buildings whereon the king of Babylon relied for the perpetuation of his name did not last long, and today they are a sorry ruin; luckily enough remains to establish their original character (though few but Mr. F. G. Newton, who fortunately was the architect of the Expedition, could have solved all the riddles of the scanty walls and broken floors), and, though the upper part has suffered much, though the shrine has wholly disappeared and of the stepped terraces but little has survived, yet the massive base with its triple staircase that Ur-Engur built more than four thousand years ago is the most imposing of the ancient monuments of Iraq.

NOTE.—Mr. Woolley, in this report, does not give the dimensions of the Ziggurat at Ur. According to plan prepared last year by Mr. Newton, the lower stage measures 130 by 195 feet and the height of the tower is 92 feet.

The Tower of Babel, or the Ziggurat of Babylon, is described on an ancient Babylonian tablet translated by George Smith. According to this document, the Tower of Babel had seven stages. The lowest tower measured 300 feet square and the whole was 300 feet in height. Nothing is left of this tower at the ruins of Babylon. Its sides faced East, West, North and South, whereas the Ziggurat of Ur has its corners towards these points of the compass.

EDITOR.