

NOT TO WELL KNOWN BIBLE FACTS

Ur Of The Chaldees (HOME OF ABRAHAM)

Under a dull red mound on the plains of Mesopotamia...

In A.D. 1927, after a night that had lasted more than a million days, the sun of Mesopotamia again touched the gold of Ur. Through the dust-heavy sky of southern Iraq its rays slanted down on a massive mound of crumbling brick and on across fresh trenches and pits on the barren plain to the south. And there again—or still—was Ur of the Chaldees.

Ur. Even today, 40 years later, the name evokes echoes of the excitement that flickered through the world when Charles Leonard Woolley and his expedition began to uncover not only the Biblically famous city itself, but also the treasures of the Sumerian royal cemetery.

Before the 20th century, written history had told the world very little about Ur. Beyond the Bible's brief references to it as the home of the patriarchs, almost nothing was known. But in the early 1920's the British Museum and the University Museum of Pennsylvania sent a combined expedition to Iraq under Woolley's leadership to investigate a certain massive mound of brick about 230 miles south of Baghdad. And there was Ur.

It doesn't seem possible now that Ur was ever the site of the great civilization that Woolley was later to describe: a city surrounded by bounteous gardens with groves of figs and dates and tall palms standing by mathematically straight irrigation canals, a city of temples and warehouses, workshops and schools, spacious villas and the towers they called ziggurats, all within a great wall overlooking the waters of the Euphrates.

For now, despite the excavations and restorations that followed the initial discoveries, Ur squats unimpressively on a flat plain about halfway between Baghdad and the present head of the Arabian Gulf near a railway station prosaically called Ur Junction. That plain, called a "waste of unprofitable sand" by Woolley, played an essential part in the story of Ur. Once covered by the waters of the Arabian Gulf as far north as modern Baghdad, scholars theorize, the plain emerged from the water primarily as a result of an accumulation of silt carried into the Gulf by two rivers. One was the Korun River pouring out of the mountains in what is now Iran and the other, now dry, flowing from the high Arabian Desert in what is now Saudi Arabia.

The silt from these two streams built up a bar across the ancient Gulf like a belt at its middle. Combined with the water and silt of the Tigris and Euphrates flowing down from the north, it filled the upper half of the Gulf, first converting it into a shallow, brackish lagoon, later into a marsh and finally, probably about 7000 years ago, into a fertile plain. This theory explains why the area around Ur supported human life earlier

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than the northern area where one would have expected the Tigris and Euphrates delta to have begun its push into the Gulf. As soon as the land emerged, still unidentified non-Semitic peoples, whose successors would one day build Ur, came and settled the south first.

One of Woolley's more exciting discoveries came out of the 1927 excavation of the royal cemeteries. In the spring of that year, the sixth season in the field, the expedition began to find the astonishing, sunless kingdom of Ur—a kingdom of the grave into which deceased Sumerian kings had been followed by their servants, soldiers, courtiers and whole teams of oxen. In the graves the retinue took a soothing narcotic and lay down to die still bearing graceful lyres and harps, gaming boards, jewelry of lapis lazuli and carnelian, daggers, finely wrought helmets and golden bowls, all to be crushed by the debris of succeeding civilizations and layers of fertile silt left bone dry when the great Euphrates changed its course.

The oldest of the royal graves revealed by Woolley's team at Ur has been dated at about 2800 B.C. Although there has been much controversy about the occupants of the tombs (some authorities believe them to be symbolic kings and queens, married and sacrificed with their splendid retinues of up to 80 persons in mystic fertility rites; others believe them authentic temporal rulers buried in state) there is no dispute about the richness of the tomb furnishings and provisions for the dead, or the skill with which they were executed. One writer points out that although the graves are as beautiful as the famous tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Tut Ankh Amon, they are more than 1,000 years older.

Of one helmet with locks of hair in beaten gold Woolley wrote: "If there were nothing else by which the art of these ancient Sumerians could be judged we should still, on the strength of it alone, accord them high rank in the roll of civilized races." Of a set of golden toilet instruments he adds, "A recognized expert took them to be Arab work of the 13th century A.D., and no one could blame him for the error, for no one could have suspected such art in the third millennium before Christ."

Written records of the Sumerian culture in the form of baked clay tablets inscribed with Sumerian cuneiform writing, date from as early as 2600 B.C. The so-called First Dynasty of Ur dates from circa 2500 B.C. and it was about that time, scholars generally agree, that the first ziggurat was built at Ur, probably on the foundations of an earlier structure.

Almost nothing is known of Ur's Second Dynasty, but from about 2112-2015 B.C. the Third Dynasty flourished and Ur was the capital of an empire. During the reign of King Ur-Nammu, who established the dynasty, the ziggurat that Woolley explored was built, probably on the rubble of the first one.

By the time the archeologists got to it, of course, the ziggurat had been so altered by decay and by succeeding restorations that a precise reconstruction was difficult.

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Woolley believed that it had three irregular stages, each with broad terraces on two sides, the topmost surmounted by a small shrine dedicated to the moon-god Nannar. The lowest stage, about 50 feet high (since restored by the Iraq Government in the early 1960's) measured approximately 150 by 200 feet, with the four corners lined up on the cardinal points of the compass.

The ziggurat was constructed of unbaked bricks faced with baked bricks bound together with tar and colored to represent the zones of heaven. At the base the courtyard was whitewashed; the lower stage was brushed with black bitumen; the top was of red brick and the highest shrine painted brilliant blue. On the northeast side were the three stairways giving access to the shrine, a feature setting it apart from the stone tomb pyramids of Egypt and more akin to the pyramids of Mexico.

Most of the cities on the Mesopotamian plains had ziggurats of some kind, apparently, according to one writer, "...the work of people investing mountains with religious meaning." This offers one clue to the origins of the immigrants. The Sumerians gave the towers names such as "The House of the Mountain" or "The Holy Hill." The ziggurat at Ur is the best preserved although the tower in Babylon is more famous because of the references to it in Genesis and Herodotus.

About 1800 B.C. the Babylonian power was growing in the north and, eventually, conquered Ur and reigned over it until about the 6th century B.C. At the end of this period Nabonidus, a king of Babylon who was also an ardent archeologist and in his own words "venerator of the past," restored the ziggurat at Ur and even added two or three stories. It is from his clay records that the name of King Ur-Nammu the Third Dynasty builder was discovered. In the mid-19th century there were tentative efforts by the British Museum to investigate the lonely red hill on the southern Mesopotamian plain, the hill the nomads called "Tell al-Mugayyar." Complete excavation, however, was delayed until after World War I. Then came Woolley, to let the sunlight shine on ancient Ur once again.

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