UR

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SUMERIAN CITY-STATES IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

CAPTIVATING HISTORY

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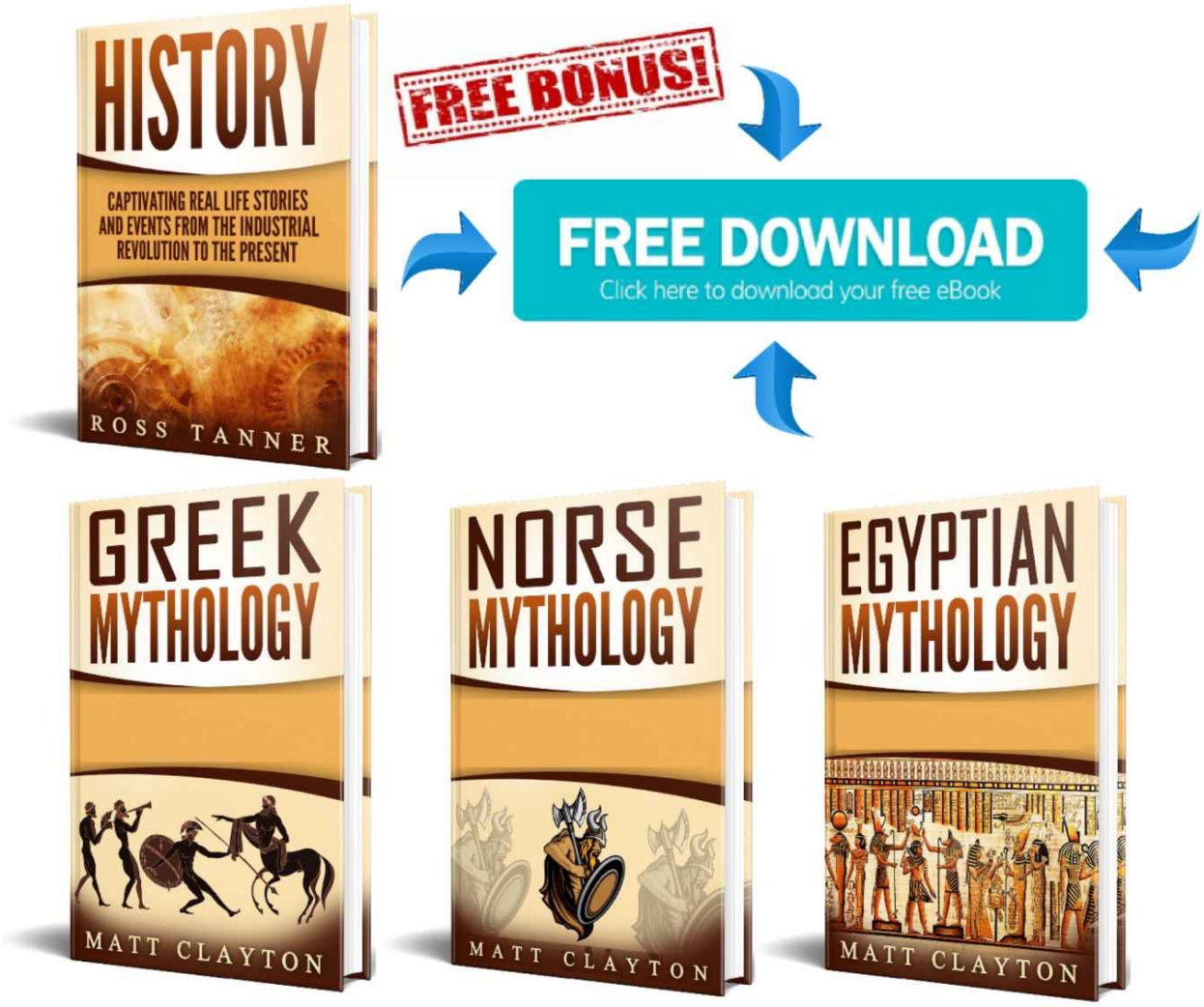

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Introduction

If you were to visit Iraq and go to the Dhi Qar Governorate to the south, right there next to the Persian Gulf, some 16 km/9.4 miles from the city of Nasiriyah, you will run into the site called Tell el-Muqayyar. At first it doesn't look like much, but then you spot that mountain-like structure in the distance. The closer you get, you see what looks like city remains. Torn bases of walls, foundations of houses, something that's a bit too big to be a regular house, yet you can't tell what it is.

The building reminds you of something. Probably a pyramid, but more Mayan or Incan, with more terraces, more layers. No, that's not right. This one is different. It gives you the vibe of Babylon, but not quite. The bricks are odd, not quite straight, yet not quite circular. You can spot an odd bone here or there, several modern-day markers, largely in Arabic, and maybe, just maybe, a few people digging around and talking about what they pull out. You're definitely at an ancient site, but which one?

You might even spot a few priests there, at the site, discussing things and, if you're lucky enough to see it, making the sign of the cross or the crescent. You're now sure this is an important site but can't quite place it. You see traces of what seems like a canal. Then you note a large area which somewhat feels like death, and you recognize it as a cemetery. A big one at that. One that might look like it contains the remains of people of high social standing. Now you KNOW this site isn't any old site. And soon enough, you connect the dots the moment you spot a Sumerian statue and cuneiform writing, the minute you take note of several different scripts next to that, some in Arabic, some in Greek, some in Hebrew.

Yes. This place, here, where you are, that's the ancient city of Ur.

The city which houses the mighty Ziggurat. The Biblical "Ur of the Chaldees" where Abraham was supposedly born. The site near which the earliest human cultures were found. The site which held the most glorious Sumerian Dynasty in ancient history. That Ur is right here before you. Much in the same way it was before Sir Leonard Woolley in the early twenties of the last century attempted and succeeded to open it up to the world again. The city that was destined to die and be reborn every millennium or so, a city full of intrigue, magnificence, tragedy, and glory.

Reading this book, you will get a sense of how Ur came to existence, how it grew, reached its zenith, fell, re-rose, and ultimately perished until it reemerged a

little over a century and a half ago. You will learn of its history, laden with wars, trade, divine worship, political corruption, and entertainment. You will know why people of Abrahamic faiths in particular hold this city in high regard. And, hopefully, you'll wish that the visit to this spectacular city described in this introduction was real and that you could visit it immediately.

Chapter 1 – The Brief History of Ur: Founding of the City, Rise, Fall, Rediscovery

Ur is known as one of the post-diluvian cities of ancient Sumer, i.e., it came to prominence after the mythical Deluge. The first human settlement can be dated as far back as 3800 BC and was part of the so-called Ubaid culture, which will be discussed in the following chapter. The city itself was historically mentioned in writing back in 26th century BC. According to the document known as the Sumerian King's List, which was written much later, during the so-called Isin-Larsa period, a certain Mesannepada or Mesh-Ane-Pada was the first ruler of the First Dynasty of Ur. Inscriptions and insignia of several kings not mentioned in the King's List were found in the royal cemetery of Ur, indicating that Mesannepada was an actual historical king of the city proper.

Little is known of the city during the period of both the First and Second Dynasties of Ur, but roughly around 2270 BC (or even a couple of decades later), Sargon the Great conquered most of the Sumerian city-states, establishing Akkadian dominion over them. Ur itself doesn't offer a lot of evidence dating to this period, but from what the archeologists could make out based on the remains found in graves dating back to this time period, Ur played an important role back then as well, with Sargon and his successors seeing the city as an important religious and cultural place at the time.

After the Akkadians fell under the nomadic Gutians, Ur regained de facto sovereignty, and it wasn't until Utu-hengal of Uruk that the city would see itself rise again, namely due to Utu-hengal appointing Ur-nammu as the governor of Ur, which would prove disastrous for him. Ur-nammu, in turn, became a powerful ruler, and the control of most of Sumer fell to Ur again. With this king starts the famed Third Dynasty of Ur and the prosperous Ur III Period, possibly the highest point of this city-state's long existence. During the reign of the five kings from this dynasty, especially Ur-nammu and his son Shulgi, Ur became a cultural and economic powerhouse, rivaling that of older, more highly-respected cities, such as Kish or Nippur.

After the last ruler of this dynasty, Ibi-sin (or Ibi-suen) suffered a devastating and humiliating defeat under the nomadic Elamites, as well as other tribes, Ur began its rapid decline. Later rulers of both Isin and Larsa Dynasties would incorporate the city within their own vastly smaller empires, until its control would ultimately fall to Hammurabi of Babylon. Babylonians held their dominion over Ur with two rulers, Hammurabi and Samsu-iluna. After the latter left the city, it went under the control of the nomadic Kassites, who took control

and ruled over the city until the early rise of the Assyrians in the north. The so-called Sealand Dynasty of kings followed, yet Assyrians reclaimed the lands soon after. The so-called Chaldean, or Neo-Babylonian, kings seized control of the city not long after, earning the city its biblical title “Ur of the Chaldees.” The Neo-Babylonian kings would be the last known rulers to undertake major reconstructions and reparations of the city, and the last known people to live there were early Persians. Roughly around 500 BC, when the entire Mesopotamian region was dominated by Persia, Ur had already been abandoned, largely due to river pattern changes and the subsequent drought that followed.

However, Ur would not remain abandoned for long. As far back as 1625, the Italian composer and author Pietro della Valle visited the ancient site of Ur. He identified a few inscribed bricks and took them with him to Italy, making this the first ever time in recorded history that post-ancient Europe came into contact with Sumerian culture in any way, shape, or form. The first proper expeditions to excavate and explore Mesopotamian sites came in the early 19th century, with Ur proper being visited by several important explorers such as Colonel Cheney, J.E. Taylor, H. R. Hall, and, most famously, Sir Leonard Woolley in the early 20th century. It was during Woolley’s expeditions that most major excavations took place and when most notable sites were identified. Despite his own biases due to his highly-held religious beliefs, as well as notable errors in judgment when it came to dating and describing the elements of the city, Woolley’s contribution remains a major one, and he has thus far set the highest possible standards in modern archeology when it comes to ancient sites. He was also an incredible “promoter,” in a sense. During his time at the site, he would proudly describe his finds to curious onlookers as if he were describing a neighbor’s house, with some saying that he spoke of the long-passed inhabitants of the ruins as if he were telling a story or a legend. Numerous tourists, including the famed author Agatha Christie, came flocking to Iraq to see the place where biblical Abraham was supposedly born and to bask in the old glory of the long-dead Sumerians.

Even today, Ur continues to fascinate both Biblical scholars and archeologists alike. Academic papers, studies, and books still appear on a near-yearly basis, and constant new finds and improvements in dating and excavation techniques give the general public a far clearer picture of what life was like in Ur more than five thousand years ago. The following chapters will deal with Ur in depth, from its earliest Ubaid era to the fall and eventual rediscovery of the city.

Chapter 2 – Ur in Depth: The Ubaid, Uruk, and Jemdat Nasr Periods, the First and Second Dynasty, Akkadian Dominion

Picking the Right Chronology

Before we take a look at Ur throughout the years of its existence, it's important to discuss chronology used throughout the book. Two widely accepted ways of dating events in early Mesopotamia are the so-called short and middle chronology. Naturally, there are others, such as the high, the ultra-high, and the ultra-short chronology, however those aren't that widely accepted in academic circles.

The middle chronology puts the date of the Babylonian king Hammurabi at 1792-1750 BC and the sack of Babylon at 1595 BC. The short chronology, on the other hand, places those dates at 1728-1686 BC for Hammurabi and 1531 BC for Babylon's demise. The "rule of thumb" is to merely add 64 years to a short chronology date and you'll get its middle chronology equivalent. This doesn't apply to any period after the Third Babylon Dynasty, however.

In this book, we opted for the scientifically more accepted middle chronology. It is backed by dendrochronological data, or data based on dating of tree rings, and is at the moment the most reliable chronology that historians use for this period.

Ubaid Period

Archeologists speculate, as stated in the earlier chapter, that the first permanent settlement at Ur was somewhere around 3800 BC. This would place it directly within the last phase of what is called the Ubaid Period.

Before moving on, the name "Ubaid" should be explained. Namely, ancient peoples of Mesopotamia would normally take their refuse and accumulate it in one big pile. These piles are what we know today as "tells." One such tell, Tell al-`Ubaid, which lies west of Ur, has become an important site for exploring ancient Mesopotamian life. This tell was first worked by British archeologist and Egyptologist Dr. Henry Hall back in 1919, though most of the important work on it would come later, under Sir Charles Leonard Woolley in the early twenties, and end in the early thirties. Since then, this place has remained a key research spot and numerous other excavations and work followed, and still occur to this day.

Extensive dating and excavations of numerous objects took place at Tell al-`Ubaid, and archeologists turned their attention to the various pottery found at the site. Thus, the overarching Ubaid Period was divided into four successive

styles of pot making. They are largely known as Ubaid 0, Ubaid 1, Ubaid 2, and Ubaid 3/4. Some experts add another period, Ubaid 5, to this list, while splitting the fourth period into Ubaid 3 and Ubaid 4. This newest level would prove to be transitional, as all subsequent pottery goes into the so-called Uruk Period.

Ubaid pottery is distinctive for its coloration and design. At the time, most pottery smiths made pots by hand. However, there is some evidence of using a slow wheel, meaning that the site, as well as Ur, which is not far from the tell, had early forms of "industrialized" clay pot manufacturing. Earlier pots were made of greenish clay with decoration added in black or purple. Later, the smiths opted for a simpler, bolder form of decoration. Most of the pottery found is open, i.e., had no lids to speak of. At both Tell al-`Ubaid and at Eridu, archeologists found numerous bowls, cups, storage jars, and other similar containers. Dating all of this earthenware was difficult, and even with modern carbon-14 dating, the margin of error is as high as two millennia. It also doesn't help that some of these pots were found quite far from where they were originally buried or left.

However, Ubaid finds aren't limited to just pottery. As early as Woolley's excavations, archeologists found primitive tools made of baked clay or light stone, such as hoes, serrated flints, sickles, and stone axes. While they wouldn't cut sturdy wood, such as a metal ax would, these clay or stone tools were perfect for cutting reeds and softer wood that grew in this region, which was more than likely used for both housing and kindling.

We move from tools to clothing and personal adornments. Clothing is notoriously difficult to stay preserved for any number of years, so no real examples of clothing were located at Ubaid. However, there are clay spindle whorls, so there must have been an early form of clothing production there. One potential theory is that both linen and wool became important for clothing, but that wool came into prominence far later because, according to both records and archeological finds, more sheep were being herded as the years progressed in the area. There are also not a lot of examples of "jewelry" at the site, suggesting that the Ubaid people weren't particularly into adorning themselves. A few beads and small disks were found, implying that there were ancient pre-Sumerians who wore these, and there has even been a discussion of possible tattooing or scarification rituals performed, but nothing about it is conclusive.

The origin of the early inhabitants at Tell al-`Ubaid is still debatable, though some researchers suggest that they came from Neolithic and Bronze Age sites such as Gonur Tepe or Anau in modern-day Turkmenistan. Most scientists agree that this early culture wasn't one of social stratification. The people that would later call themselves "black heads," i.e. Sumerians, living in the area were

largely fishermen, hunters, agrarians, or craftsmen. The lack of imported materials (with some minor exceptions) suggests that people of Tell al-`Ubaid were pretty self-sufficient, that they didn't rely on foreign trade for survival. When excavating graves, Woolley and his successors came to the conclusion that the society as a whole didn't have classes, that they were mostly buried modestly with not a lot of pomp. However, the discovery of these graves definitely confirms one important detail. Even in this early stage of Mesopotamia, the inhabitants of the southern part of the Two Rivers Valley (or rather, of the area as a whole) had at least some idea of what the afterlife was like. In other words, they had a belief system, of which we know very little in terms of concrete details.

There are very few details of buildings and architecture of the early Ubaid Period. The later Ubaid Period, though, in different sites in South Mesopotamia, yielded a few interesting finds, largely of simple yet large houses with either rectangle or T-shaped central halls. With the square central hall houses, there were also additional rooms on the side, possible second floors, and roofs supported by two rows of square pillars. Houses with the T-shaped central hall contained two more sections, one being a smaller T-shaped chamber and another being rectangular. These types of houses were common for that period throughout Mesopotamia.

Houses weren't the only buildings of this period that were found. Eridu, an ancient city subservient to Ur at key points in its history, as well as Uruk, another important Sumerian city, both show traces of massive temples from the later Ubaid Period. Excavators found traces of these temples, and even with the little evidence they had available, they managed to sketch up a plan of these fascinating buildings.

This would be a good point to compare the Ubaid Period of North Mesopotamia to its Southern counterpart, where Ur used to be. Scientists of the field used to argue which region was more advanced. Based on what evidence we have, each region excelled in different things. Northern cities had more hard wood and could therefore build better boats or better temporary housing and/or shelters. In addition, they were using cylinder seals far earlier than the South as a means of marking property or general administration. The South, however, made more elaborate pottery and were experts when it came to fishing and making baked brick houses. As such, the items from the Ubaid Period native to the South, yet found in the North, might have just been a result of trade between the two. Some have suggested conquest, though this isn't as likely since we don't have any concrete evidence of a standing army for any of these early settlements.

Naturally, ordinary migrations or even marriages could have contributed to either craftsmen moving up North and continuing their craft or citizens simply bringing their pottery with them.

Tell al-`Ubaid, Iraq[i]

The Uruk and Jemdat Nasr Periods

Judging Ur when it comes to these two periods is difficult, as there isn't much evidence within the city itself that would tell us anything of that era. We're talking about the era that comes right after the Ubaid Period, yet one that predates what is commonly known as the Early Dynastic Period. This time is divided into two periods, both named after the locations where the evidence was excavated from. The first is the so-called Uruk Period, which immediately followed the Ubaid Period, or rather partially overlapped its last two centuries, starting circa 4000 BC and ending circa 3100 BC. As such, the best evidence of this culture can be found at Uruk itself. This is evident in every aspect of life; for instance, pottery was now being made more quickly and in larger quantities using a fast wheel. The so-called beveled rim bowls became the signature feature of the Uruk Period. But more than that, Uruk showed signs of more elaborate buildings, a harbor, numerous cylinder seals, imported raw materials, early prototypes of terraced temples which would eventually lead to larger, also terraced structures known as ziggurats, stone vessels, and, most importantly, the initial evidence of early writing. This writing, largely done in pictograms, was the predecessor to the cuneiform alphabet, which would become the gold standard of writing for many Mesopotamian civilizations.

The Jemdat Nasr Period followed, lasting from circa 3100 BC to circa 2900 BC, and this was when writing was beginning to take hold far more. Scribes were largely busy taking official notes on everyday business, such as trade and administration. Another major aspect of the Jemdat Nasr Period included painted pottery. This type of pottery was far more elaborate in terms of design and beauty when compared to its Uruk predecessors. However, it is important to note that this style of pottery was only found at places which appeared to belong to either wealthier people or temples or similar official buildings. This would mean that the everyday people probably still used simpler, less ornate earthenware.

The only thing that we can guess happened in Ur during the Uruk and the Jemdat Nasr periods is the importation of non-native raw materials, such as different metals, precious stones, etc. In addition, based on the burials that took place in Ur during that time, we can ascertain that they put substantial emphasis on burial customs as early as these two pre-dynastic periods. Most other information has to be speculated upon, based on the evidence found at other, nearby locations such as Uruk and Jemdat Nasr.

Early Dynastic Ur – The First and Second Dynasty, and All in Between

Archeologically speaking, Ur has been in a state of historical obscurity and, possibly, political non-importance. However, by around 2700 BC, roughly a century before archeologists speculate the First Dynasty of Ur reigned; it had grown into a full-fledged city-state with an important role among other more “famous” city-states. During his digs at Jemdat Nasr, Woolley uncovered numerous cylinder seals from this era, of which his team managed to decipher four as belonging to Ur, Nippur, Larsa, and Uruk (two additional seals are speculated to be those of Kesh and Zabalam though this is not certain). Nippur was already known as the sacred place of ancient Sumer, even though it didn’t have any particular political supremacy over other cities throughout its long existence. As such, locating these cylinders in the same area would either imply that the cities had some sort of political alliance between themselves, or, more plausibly, that they brought small offerings to Nippur during major religious events.

One major shift in the culture of Ur, but also of South Mesopotamia in general, is the advent of writing. What started as pictograms during the Jemdat Nasr Period quickly gave way to the early cuneiform script, and an abundance of bureaucratic documents from that time gives us an idea to what extent the people of Ur actually used it. However, inscriptions were also used for other purposes. A ruler, for example, would want to propagandize his (rarely her) successes and

achievements by having his name ingrained into an object, usually a brick or a stela. And, as it normally goes with ancient propaganda, it would be full of mythical, supernatural elements, as well as some good, old-fashioned self-aggrandizing. This practice was not going to go away for many millennia to follow, but it found its roots in the Early Dynastic South, Ur included. One such document that illustrates this “toying with the truth” by those of royal blood is the much-later composed Sumerian King List, which proved to be a useful tool for us to look at these periods, including this one. Examples of the Sumerian King List not being a particularly trustworthy document are numerous. There are kings in that list whose reigns go into tens of thousands of years, which is just impossible for normal human beings. In fact, even the more “plausible” reigns of 80 years of some kings are a stretch. Furthermore, entire lists of kings from certain cities were omitted from the list for political reasons, such as two entire dynasties of Lagash, which were contemporaries of some of the more famous dynasties that did make the list. On top of all of that, archeological evidence suggests that there were kings in nearly all cities of this time period that didn’t make it on the list, again for unknown reasons, but likely because of negligence or political malice on the part of those who commissioned the list to begin with.

It is this part, the part of certain kings not being on the list,that we turn to looking at Early Dynastic Ur. The Diyala Valley excavation site served archeologists in dividing up the period into four separate sub-phases: ED I, ED II, ED IIIa, and ED IIIb. These last two were roughly around 2600 BC, when Ur was starting its ascent to political dominance. The first kings of Ur that were listed on the King List, Mesannepadda and his son Aannepadda, are also the first rulers of Ur whose archeological data we have (to some extent) at the so-called Royal Cemetery. However, other people of noble birth, such as Meskalamdug, his possible wife Ninbanda, his son Akalamdug, along with two others suspected to be a queen and her consort or even a king, Puabi and Abargi, were found close to the two King List rulers. This find suggests that these men were either kings themselves who didn’t make the list or just nobles that were outranked solely by a king. There were, of course, literally thousands of other graves, however it was difficult to date those particular graves with any kind of precision, let alone say with any certainty who the buried people were or even what particular caste of citizen they belonged to.

However, there was some evidence of ritual human sacrifice at some major burial sites. For instance, an entire row of soldiers and attendants was found at Abargi’s grave, possibly to guard him and tend to him in the afterlife. These men were lined in an open rectangular shaft in front of the tomb, with a ramp that led

down to them. Interestingly, a good deal of them show signs of non-natural, incited death. The same goes for buried priestesses located at similar graves. There were even people who were shown to be dressed by someone else after they had died hinting further that a ritual sacrifice took place at some point. A few of them might have even resisted this practice.

Interestingly enough, with all of the graves excavated, they seldom had corpses of children within them. Furthermore, not all bodies were buried the same way. A few were laid in wicker coffins, a few in clay coffins, and some were wrapped in what looked like matting. Each body showed evidence of being partially burned, possibly as part of a burial ritual, and there were even hints that people would leave their dead tributes in form of either food or crafted gifts. Thus far, no buildings were uncovered close to these graves that would imply that there was something similar to a chapel where the burial would go through the necessary rites, though the reason behind this can be twofold. First, erosion could have done away with any structure easily. Second, most rulers made it a point to build religious structures on top of other torn down sacred places that existed there before. In fact, this can be seen at the famous ziggurat of Ur, which we will cover in a few chapters below.

Sargon of Akkad and the Akkadian Dominion of Ur

If we exclude Eannatum, who might have ruled over the first real Sumerian-only empire, which he claimed encompassed all of the region, it was the mighty Sargon of Akkad who became history's first-known emperor in the real sense of that word. His reign over Sumerian cities lasted from 2334 BC to 2284 BC. Having been "found in the reed basket in a canal" like Moses (both of these stories are more legend than fact), this Semitic man grew up to become a cup-bearer of Ur-Zababa, a king who, according to the King List, belonged to the 4th Dynasty of Kish. After breaking away from his Sumerian lord, he took hold of Agade, or Akkad, a city whose real location is still somewhat disputed by archeologists. Very soon after, he would begin his conquest of the cities between the two rivers and would actually boast dominion from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. This included all the cities close to the Persian Gulf in the south of Mesopotamia, where Ur was.

Sadly, not much is known of Ur during this period of its existence. However, what is known tells us just how important Ur must have been to the new Semitic conquerors of the Sumerian lands. Sargon, at some point, managed to appoint his own daughter Enheduanna as the En of the city, a title meaning either high priest or high priestess, depending on the gender of the person chosen for the position. She was well known for her abundance of written works, making her possibly

the world's first named author. Clay disks with her name which depict her doing priestly duties were found at the ruins of Giparu, a temple which at the time was an economic powerhouse in and of itself, meant to hold rich material goods of various kinds. Enheduanna actually remained in this position, with some minor turmoil, even after Sargon's death, when his sons Rimush and Manishtushu, and later his grandson Naram-sin, took control of the empire. Having a native Semitic high priestess in a Sumerian temple was a stroke of genius on Sargon's part, because it meant that he would win favor with the local believers more easily and it would give him access to the temple's wealth to use at his disposal.

Buildings of this period are virtually non-existent, considering that they were all largely leveled by the succeeding Ur III rulers to make way for their own building projects. The same can be said of material finds, most of which were located in cemeteries by Woolley during his digs in the early twenties of the 20th century. The few graves that corresponded with the Akkadian Period don't show a lot of difference in terms of structure or burial rites, but there is one particular distinction. When compared to their First or Second Ur Dynasty counterparts, these graves are far less richly furnished and with less evidence of wealthy offerings. Naturally, this is also difficult to ascertain, since the vast majority of graves in general were robbed early on in ancient Mesopotamia, but based on inscriptions and the very makeup of the graves—a distinct lack of precious stones, wealthy materials, etc.—speaks volumes about Ur's economic status at the time. Due to constant wars, trade must have taken a nosedive, leaving the people of Ur with fewer raw materials to make headdresses, clothing, jewelry, figurines, and pottery. This actually affected even the tools buried with the bodies, as the alloys used to craft them are not as fine as the earlier weapons found in Ur's graves. Another notable change was the different cylinder seal styles. These new seals started depicting scenes from stories and mythology, including gods, demigods, and heroes wrestling dangers such as wild animals or other demigods. Statues and stelas from this period also show how frequent these motifs were in art, a notable change from the earlier periods.

Gutian Rule and the Restoration of Sumerian Rulers

Shu-turul would prove to be the last Akkadian emperor before the empire inevitably collapsed under the invasion of the Gutian hordes from the Zagroz Mountains in circa 2154 BC. Gutians would soon establish their own dominion over Sumer, but this proved to be an unstable one, considering their own nature. Namely, it is speculated that the Gutians couldn't maintain dominion over all of the Sumerian cities since their entire culture was nomadic and not used to the highly urban, highly bureaucratic way of life already well-established in nearly

every urban center in Sumer, which included all Semitic cities such as Akkad. As such, every governor in various cities would effectively act as an independent ruler, which actually gave rise to such important rulers like Gudea of Lagash and one of his predecessors, his father-in-law Ur-Bau. Ur-Bau actually managed to appoint his daughter as a high priestess of Ur at the time, giving her the name of Enannepadda, a position famously held by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna many years before her. Gudea did not exert much influence over Ur, but another ruler soon would, a ruler credited for defeating the Gutians and again giving Sumer back to the Sumerians, the first and only ruler of the Fifth Dynasty of Uruk, Utu-hengal.

Utu-hengal would go on to defeat the final Gutian king, Tirigan, whom the King List mentions as having ruled only 40 days. In doing this, Utu-hengal had effectively deposed all Gutians from places of prominence, though at the time this might have been an easy task due to their already diminished influence over the cities. During his seven-year reign, Utu-hengal would take control of several southern cities, Ur included; in fact, he became so influential in these cities that he had the ability to appoint governors himself. One of these governors, Ur-nammu, held dominion over Ur, though in all likelihood he wasn't born there. This wouldn't matter much, for Ur-nammu would go on to depose Utu-hengal and transfer all of the power from Uruk to Ur, starting the most prosperous legendary period in the city's history. Utu-hengal's legacy would continue to live on though, since one of his daughters would become Ur-nammu's wife, giving birth to his son and subsequent emperor of Ur, Shulgi.

Chapter 3 – The Third Dynasty of Ur

There is no debate when it comes to what the high point of Ur's existence was. In fact, a case can be made that this same period could very well be the high point of Sumerian culture in general. A rough estimate of when Ur's dominion over nearly all of Sumer takes place is between 2112 and 2004 BC.

The famed Third Dynasty of Ur spanned five rulers. During the hundred odd years of their collective reign, the city became the capital of the entire Sumerian Mesopotamia. In fact, just under Shulgi, Ur held dominion over many prominent cities, at least 21 to be precise. Uruk, Nippur, Babylon, Lagash, and Shuruppak are just a few examples of prominent cities under Shulgi's direct rule (though it should be noted that these cities still had local governors and not all of them were directly under Ur; they could merely have been vassal states of sorts). His successors Amar-sin and Shu-sin would submit five more cities to Ur's control later. At least 215 governors from these cities pledged loyalty to the rulers, though the true number is more likely way higher than this, considering there is evidence of governors pledging their services to a ruler whose name is lost to us.

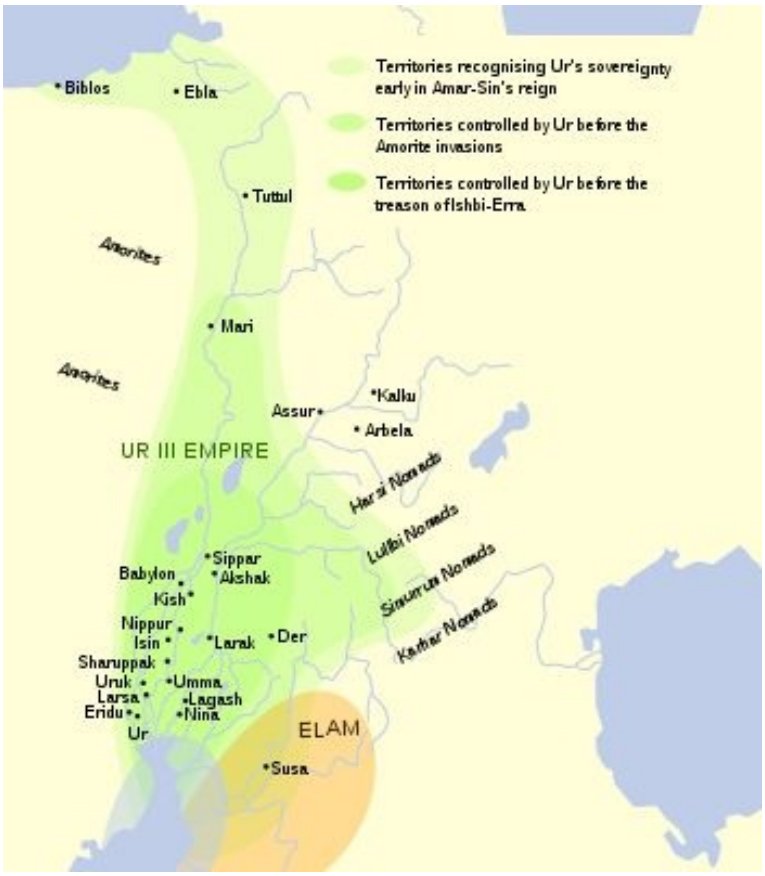
Trade increased immensely with other areas on all four sides of the empire. Furthermore, it was a time of great building and rebuilding, where entire temple complexes (with individual temples), walls, and official houses came one after the other, both in Ur and in its subservient neighboring cities. Nippur, the holiest place of Sumer, came under direct control of the city, and nearly all of the rulers self-stylized their names as "rulers of all Sumer and Akkad, kings of all four corners of the world," even if that supposed "four corners of the world" reign did significantly go down with the final ruler of the dynasty.

Conquest and building weren't the only achievements of Ur III. Numerous canals were dug throughout the empire, providing water to the temples and the citizens, as well as the agricultural areas surrounding the city walls. Agriculture itself became more centralized, and the economy was booming. Literature and arts were also on the rise.

Naturally, this dynasty, like all others, faced problems. Most of these were related to outside nomadic tribes, such as the Amorites and Elamites constantly invading and sacking the citizenry. Eventually, it is these tribes that would put this dynasty to rest, but for the duration of the empire, each ruler managed to stave them off and even subdue a substantial number of them. The bigger the empire got though, the more difficult it became to defend, and ultimately it was the combination of these invasions and local infighting that terminated the greatest ruling dynasty Ur had ever had.

The five rulers that make up the Third Dynasty are as follows: Ur-nammu, Shulgi, Amar-sin, Shu-sin, and Ibbi-sin. From the very names of these rulers, i.e. from adding the Akkadian “sin” at the end of their names (the word being an Akkadian equivalent to the moon god’s name, Nanna), we can see that they were no longer “pure-bred” Sumerians, but were rather mixed as a result of many years of Akkadian rule. This will be true even of the following two dynasties, Isin and Larsa, who styled themselves as inheritors of the Sumerian dominion, though they would never control anywhere near the same area as the dynasty they inherited did.

Each year a king of the Third Dynasty ruled had a specific name, based on whatever the major event was, or even what the major event was a year or two before that year. These so-called “named years” give us a little inside look at the inner workings of each individual ruler of this dynasty.



Map of Ur III at the height of its power[ii]

Ur-nammu

Possibly originating from Uruk, Ur-nammu became the governor of Ur while Utu-hengal held power over Sumer, defeating the Gutians and restoring territories fully to the Sumerians (though cities such as Lagash were already de

facto independent during this period). After his short reign, Utu-hengal was rather abruptly replaced by his successor, Ur- Nammu; popular opinion, even back then, was that Utu-hengal died in battle. Based on the aforementioned middle chronology, Ur-nammu ruled Sumer from 2112 to 2095 BC, a total of 18 years. However, he still didn't style himself "king of Sumer and Akkad" until roughly the sixth year of his rule, when he made his famous trip to Nippur. But even before he did that, he achieved some major successes worth mentioning. He installed one of his daughters as a high priestess of the god Nanna, the titular deity at Ur. This was not unusual, as Sargon had done this before with his own daughter. Moreover, Ur-nammu possibly raided Lagash of its grain, staved off the Gutians, and began major constructions and reconstructions, such as the "wall of Ur" and numerous temples—one at Ur, one at Eridu, and one at Ku'ar. This would suggest strongly that these cities were under his direct rule as early as the fifth year of his reign.

It is important to note, before we move on to the future events of his reign, that whenever a source states that a ruler "built walls," it wasn't necessarily the outer city walls that the inscription is talking about. They could have been merely temenos (temple complex) walls, as evidence exists in form of bricks and stones which the builders marked as being commissioned by the kings themselves.

Five years in, and Ur-Nammu was already declared "king of the four quarters." Yet, he did not sit idly when he acquired his dominion of Nippur. In fact, the very next year he began massive rebuilding projects including the temple complex of Ur called Etemenniguru. This included building the now-iconic Ziggurat of Ur, which his son Shulgi would finish years later. There will be more discussions of this ziggurat in a later chapter.

Ur-nammu's next year was an even busier one. Besides reestablishing trade with Magan, he also promulgated his code of law, as rulers such as Urukagina had done before him. After this, he went about incorporating numerous territories into his nation, largely by conquest, but at times merely by trade or negotiations. After all, there were a lot of city-states that would welcome a ruler who had not been of a Gutian origin and each area that was under Ur-nammu at the time was going through a period of rebuilding and prosperity.

Uruk gaining Ur-nammu's daughter as a high-priestess of its Inanna temple further proves his dominion over the city, but it also provides more evidence that he might have been a native of this city. This would not be the only thing he did for Uruk during his reign, though it is a notable gesture that would give Uruk stronger legitimacy, even as a vassal city of Ur.

Ur-nammu was well known for his rebuilding endeavors. After having

constructed a ritualistic chariot for Ninlil, he constructed a few temples, such as one for the goddess Ninsuna in Ur, the foundations of a temple for Ningublaga whose location is still unknown, and the great wall of Ur. He was likely the ruler who first built the Giparku, or the residence of the high priestess, in Ur, as well as the Enunmah, the so-called “House of Plenty,” a treasury and a storehouse of sorts for the grain. Iturungal and A-Nintu were two canals he also dug, irrigating more land in the process. On top of that, he also appointed another high priestess, one for the god Ishkur. Before his death, Ur-nammu waged a few dangerous war campaigns in the Diyala region, most likely against the remaining Gutians and the growing Elamite threat. Sumerian folklore and tradition speaks of his son avenging his father who fell in battle against an Elamite king. Whatever the case, the first ruler of Ur III perished, and his son was to take up the throne.

Foundation figure of Ur-nammu holding a basket, Metropolitan Museum of Art[iii]

Shulgi

The son of Ur-nammu, Shulgi took the throne in 2094 and died around 2047 BC, giving him the longest reign of the five rulers at 46 years. Inheriting the empire from his mighty and capable father was no small feat, and it would be a far

grander task to actually “fill his shoes,” if not surpass him entirely. However, Shulgi was arguably even more successful than his father, having himself finished the great ziggurat and continuing the great tradition of successful trade and abundant agricultural work.

His first few years were modest, and he was known to have made a lapis lazuli throne for the wind god Enlil at his temple at Nippur and moved on to constructing a temple kitchen building in the temple of the goddess Ninshubur. After a year of activity which archeology has yet to uncover, Shulgi dedicated at least three years to construct a temple of the god Ninurta, restoring the city of Der in the meantime. The following years were of even vaster importance for Shulgi, as he commissioned the building of a Nippur road, after which he took a notable trip from Ur to Nippur and back, thus earning him the title of the monarch of all Sumer and Akkad. Soon after, he constructed a large boat dedicated to the goddess Ninlil, meant to transport statues of Enlil and Ninlil during their cult festivals. Their statues would not be the only ones transported. In fact, during Shulgi’s reign alone, at least eight statues found their way back to their respective temples in different cities. Shulgi did his own fair share of building and rebuilding after his own trip to Nippur. It started with his “Mountain House,” the Ehursag, his royal palace and personal place of residence at Ur. Some scientists speculate that this particular house was first commissioned by Ur-nammu and merely finished by Shulgi, but with no conclusive evidence for this. A few years later, an “ice house” or “frost house” followed, a building where ice was stored. Next came the commissioning of the bed of Ninlil. And then, many years later, Shulgi built the wall of Ur and the temple of the god Nergal. His reign also included rebuilding entire cities, such as Ezen-Kaskal and Puzrish-Dagan. Infrastructure flourished under him, as he had built and rebuilt numerous roads across his domain. Interestingly, he was probably the first ruler to appoint the construction of an inn.

Much like Ur-nammu, his son also appointed several high priestesses. Archeologists managed to uncover that he personally appointed three, two of which resided in Ur. One of his daughters, Liwwir-Mittashu or Nialimmidashu, was even elevated into a “queen” of a local polity called Marhashi by way of marriage.

But Shulgi’s domain would see a lot more wars than Ur-nammu’s did. After appointing his daughter the queen of Marhashi, Shulgi began conscripting local men into lancers. Most of the years that followed had Shulgi fighting various opponents, destroying Der (which he had rebuilt mere two years prior), Karahar, Simurrum, Harshi, and Anshan. Some of these cities were destroyed more than

once, indicating multiple campaigns and shaky periods of peace, and it was two years after the destruction of Der that Shulgi proclaimed himself a god. Wars continued after a few years of relative peace, and soon enough Shulgi would sack Shasru, wage wars against tribes such as Urbillum, Simurrum, and Lullubu, then sack Karahar, followed by destroying Kimash and Hurti and their surrounding lands. Despite not being listed as one of the “named” years, there was also a notable period when Shulgi waged war against the Shimashki Dynasty of Elam. It was probably during these attacks that Shulgi eventually lost his life, making room for his son to take his place.

Amar-sin

Erroneously called Bur-Sin originally and sometimes called Amar-Suena, Amar-sin ruled from 2046 to 2038 BC, for a total of nine years. During those nine years, Amar-sin managed to appoint numerous high priestesses throughout his territory, and he would further increase said territory with successful military campaigns to the north. In total, five women were appointed high priestesses during Amar-sin’s rule. One of them was elevated to this position the same year the king issued the creation of an elaborate throne for the god Enlil.

Yet none of this happened before Amar-sin’s first successful military campaign where he eliminated the Urbillum tribe. This would not be his last successful battle, as he would wage war against the cities of Shashrum and Shuruthum several years later, destroying the former at least twice. The sacking of Huhnuri also followed, marking his last major campaign, although he did also suppress several attempts at an uprising.

In terms of construction, we know that Amar-sin started construction of a ziggurat at Eridu which remains unfinished. Beyond that, he also constructed the Edublalmah at Ur, a gateway to the eastern corner of the Ur ziggurat terrace. A much larger undertaking was the digging and maintenance of the vast Amar-sin Canal. It connected the Euphrates and the Iturungal rivers. The canal was one of the three main watercourses. The other two were a channel from Bad-tibira to Nippur and a separate Iturungal canal.

Sadly, Amar-sin’s agricultural efforts weren’t that successful. One of the reasons why Eridu’s ziggurat remained unbuilt was the massive salinity of the area. The salty soil made it impossible to maintain crops properly throughout the year, which is why Amar-sin opted to leave Eridu unirrigated and its soil “dead”.

And speaking of death, Amar-sin’s death has an interesting tale to it. Apparently, according to Sumerian legend, Amar-sin’s death was prophesied as him being gutted by a bull. However, he died from a foot infection after a snake bit him. It’s interesting to note that Amar-sin was the first ruler to immediately assume

the title “king of all Sumer and Akkad” and “king of the four quarters” without specifically having to travel to Nippur. This might go to show how powerful and influential Ur had become in and of itself during Ur-nammu and Shulgi.

Foundation figure of Amar-sin holding a basket, Louvre[iv]

Shu-sin

The son of Amar-sin, Shu-sin, also ruled for nine years, from 2037 to 2029 BC. These nine years contained a more or less even divide between the monarch’s military campaigns and his construction work, with surprisingly no high priestess appointments to speak of.

Unlike Amar-sin, Shu-sin largely led defensive wars, though not all of them were of that nature. Early in his reign, Shu-sin would sack Simanum in a momentous military campaign. He would go on to wage war against several Amorite lands, such as Tidnum and Iamadium. Close to the end of his reign, he would wage war against the land of Zabshali and destroy it.

These constant battles against the Amorite tribes must have been exhausting to the fourth ruler of the Ur III Dynasty which is why he commissioned the building of a massive wall around the city. We know for a fact that this wall had a specific purpose to prevent Amorite tribes from plundering the city because it specifically had that name, “It keeps Tidnum at a distance.” However, he did commission other building projects as well, including a boat for the god Enki

prior to his campaign against Simanum, a statue at Nippur likely dedicated to Inanna, a holy stele for Enlil and Ninlil, as well as a “magur boat” for the same divine pair, and, during his final year, a temple at Umma dedicated to their local deity Sara. Soon after he would die and, according to some sources, get buried in Uruk rather than Ur, with his son Ibbi-sin attending the funeral with his wife.

Ibbi-sin

The last monarch of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ibbi-sin, ruled from 2028 to 2004 BC, for a grand total of 24 years. Despite likely being more Akkadian than Sumerian, he would be the last “native” ruler of Sumer. While the following Isin and Larsa Dynasties technically carried on ruling as “natives” themselves, declaring themselves “kings of the four corners”, their territory and reach was nowhere near as significant as the one this last Ur dynasty had, and this region would not see any form of unification until Hammurabi’s conquest of it many years later.

Ibbi-sin’s reign is probably the single most turbulent one of any post-Gutian rule monarch. Wars had been waged far long before he ascended the throne, but it was during his reign that Ur’s opponents finally started getting the upper hand on Ur. Both the Elamites and the Amorites would regularly attack Ur, causing Ibbi-sin to commission the building of two great walls at Nippur and Ur, though these were likely just reinforcements or reconstructions of already existing walls at both cities. No direct evidence, such as inscriptions or seal impressions, exists of Ibbi-sin either building or rebuilding either wall, though this lack of data during this particular period is not uncommon, especially if the cities he had rebuilt suffered from a massive invasion. Ibbi-sin underwent military campaigns as well, attacking and sacking Simurrum in the early years of his reign, then fighting the Huhnuri of Anshan, and later going after the cities of Susa, Adamdun, and the Awan region (though none of these last three claimed campaigns is covered by any archeological evidence we have). Evidently, at least according to Ibbi-sin, the Amorites succumbed to him during the eighteenth year of his reign, but considering how frequently both tribes attacked him in the coming years, this was likely just propaganda at the time.

Ibbi-sin did some minor construction and reconstruction, like a storehouse for two goddesses, Ninlil and Inanna, though most of his achievements commission-wise were related to objects. He is noted for having fashioned a throne for Nanna at Ur, followed by a lyre or drum for Inanna. He also commonly installed high priestesses in various cities, such as Eridu, Urum, Ur, and Nippur, as well as marrying off his daughter to a governor of Zabshali. These installments stop, however, roughly halfway through his reign, with the other half consumed with

wars and sorties.

It’s fascinating to learn just how early in Ibbi-sin’s reign the other cities started to secede and act independently. Eshnunna, which was an Ur protectorate since at least Shulgi, stopped dating their years based on Ibbi-sin’s reign during his second year in power. Susa was next to go the following year, and then Lagash, Umma, and even Nippur, all of them gone by the seventh year of Ibbi-sin’s reign. Judging by the frequent uprisings in largely Amorite and Elamite southern cities, it’s safe to say that they were declaring their own independence a bit more openly than the cities before them. Due to constant wars, wall reconstruction, and conscription, trade all but ceased in Ur. No merchant would dare venture into Elamite-infested lands, and Ibbi-sin kept raising taxes on his constituents. By the end of his rule, Ur was a mere shell of its former self.

However, constant intrusions by the barbarians on all sides and the lack of viable trade weren’t the only problems Ibbi-sin had to face. More and more governors were pledging fealty to either separatist local rulers or the invading forces. Based on research, the fall of Ur can be divided into no less than three phases. The first phase included the rise of an upstart governor called Ishbi-erra of Isin. In correspondence with him, Ibbi-sin showed open concern over how the governor of Isin acted. Large portions of what he imported Ishbi-erra kept in Isin, sending the king whatever remained, all under the guise of safekeeping and defending the goods from the invading tribes. It’s more than likely that Ishbi-erra actually conspired with the Elamites in order to dispose of Ibbi-sin and take control of Sumer.

This particular way of thinking is supported by the so-called second phase of Ur’s fall. Another correspondence occurred, this time between Ibbi-sin and his Kazallu-based governor, Puzur-shulgi, where the governor begs the king to help him against Ishbi-erra’s advances. In yet another bit of correspondence, the king begs probably the same governor, under the new name Puzur-numushda, not to join Ishbi-erra, but to remain loyal. Within this phase, we can see that there’s utter anarchy in the waning Sumerian Empire, where local governors claimed independence, pledged allegiance to Ishbi-erra, or died in battle against the unrelenting Elamites, now joined by the resurfacing Gutians. It’s safe to say that Ur’s territorial reach now only went as far as the city limits themselves.

The third and final phase saw two events occur. The first was the sacking of Ur by Elamites and Gutians, with Ibbi-sin’s unceremonious capture. The deposed king was most likely taken to Anshan and executed, while his city was destroyed to such an extent that it went on to be recorded in a now-famous Sumerian poem “The Lamentation over the City of Ur.” So vast was the ruination of this city that

the poet likened it to the gods themselves deciding to abandon the place, deeming it fit to end when it did. The second event was the eventual rise of Isin as a moderately dominant force in the region. Whatever the case, the Third Dynasty of Ur died with Ibbi-sin, and Ur never recovered the glory it had during its long, prosperous reign.

Chapter 4 – Post-Ur III: The Isin-Larsa Period, Babylonian Rule, Kassite Rule, Abandonment of the City

Isin-Larsa Period in Ur

As stated, the last years of Ibbi-sin would prove to be disastrous for the city of Ur. This emperor had to deal with at least four separate threats at once. The first two were the constant advances by nomadic Elamite and Amorite tribes, later joined by the Gutians. Elamites in particular would eventually dethrone Ibbi-sin and take him captive. The fourth threat, more than likely linked to the first three, was the usurpation of Ishbi-erra, the founder of the Isin Dynasty. Possibly an Elamite himself, Ishbi-erra lived and acted in the lesser-known town of Isin and established dominion there. He then added a few other cities to his domain by means of diplomacy and claimed kingship over a territory roughly the size of Sargon's, even though this was more than likely not the case. Ur, of course, fell under the Isin dominion shortly after its sacking, but would not stay there for long. Soon after Isin's expansion, another city, Larsa, began to rise in power, very soon eclipsing the rulers of Isin. Considering how influential these two dynasties were and considering how they were the only "Sumerian" dynasties that remained in power before Hammurabi's conquest of the region, this period in history is rightfully called the Isin-Larsa Period.

The "Sumerian" adjective is not in quotation marks for nothing; after many years of Akkadian rule, most people adopted Akkadian as their second official language. Namely, most laws, administrative papers, and public announcements were now being written bilingually in both Sumerian and Akkadian. As early as even Utu-hengal, most officials spoke Akkadian and Sumerian was merely there as the lingua franca of the region, a language of fine arts, culture, and religion, much like Latin would become for the Catholics a few millennia later. As such, the Isin and Larsa Dynasties are Sumerian in name only. The entire area would soon give way to Semitic peoples with similar languages; also, genetically and culturally speaking, most "pure" Sumerians would have largely died out at this point. With that in mind, we can rightfully say that this particular period in history was the last one to see Sumerians as a distinct ethnic group before they inevitably assimilated with the upcoming largely Semitic peoples that controlled the area centuries and millennia after.

Both Isin and Larsa rulers attempted to do some rebuilding in the city once the Elamite threat had subsided. Sin-Iddinam, for instance, had done some building within the site known as Diqdiqqah during his reign over Larsa. Within this space is the so-called Treasury of Sin-Iddinam. This huge and spacious building was probably used to store grain and other riches under the Larsa dominion within Ur. However, the very suburb itself, Diqdiqqah, most likely dates to Ur-nammu's reign, and judging on the brickwork and what little evidence there is, it was rebuilt and restructured even by Sin-Iddinam's successors.

And speaking of his successors, Warad-Sin, the second-to-last Larsa king, built a massive defense bastion, as well as a gateway, to the ziggurat palace in Ur. His successor, as well as the last "Sumerian" king before Hammurabi's conquest, Rim-Sin, had restored no less than two temples, one dedicated to Enki and the other probably to Ningizida.

Despite Ur's destruction and the deposition of its titular dynasty, the kings of both Isin and Larsa realized the importance of the city itself, largely due to its piers and access to sea routes, which in turn meant that it was capable of massive trade. In fact, there is evidence of a slight revival at Ur, evidence that largely consists of reinforced and rebuilt houses and public buildings, such as shops, ancient equivalents of fast-food stores, and even a brothel. In addition, there was an odd emergence of neighborhood chapels, with areas for statues of presumably gods or deified kings. A few of those include the Nin-Shubur Chapel, the Hendursag Chapel, and the Ram Chapel. These chapels often had family tombs directly beneath them, housing corpses of family members that had passed on. A clear sign of the lack of progress after the fall of Ur is in these graves—rarely any of them had rich furnishings and offerings, suggesting that the people didn't have the means to get the raw materials to make tributary burial goods. This, of course, contrasts with what came immediately after, i.e. the booming trade that came out of the city under both Isin and Larsa, even more so than it was under Ur III. There is even a possibility that traders from other places, notably a polity called Dilmun whose location still eludes archeologists (though they think it might be in modern-day Bahrain), would find permanent residence at Ur. And considering how often Ur and Dilmun did business, this is not that surprising.

Other than merchants, other craftsmen and businessmen lived in Ur during the Isin-Larsa Period. Evidence tells us of landowners, financiers, potters, bakers, etc. Based on the housing most of these people had, it's safe to say that the local economy consisted of somewhat self-sufficient actors. In other words, merchants could very well get wealthy or poor on their own accord, without much obligation to the central court or the temple.

Most of these findings were located in the so-called AH neighborhood during Woolley's excavations, and evidence shows us that this particular neighborhood had a vibrant, socially mixed community that didn't want for too many things. The neighborhood is located in the south-east part of Ur, outside of the temple complex, close to a different neighborhood which dates later, from the Neo-Babylonian era. Interestingly, Woolley named the site AH, which is short for "Abraham's Housing."

While not as rich as the Ur III neighborhood might have been, it definitely shows some sign of progress after the sacking by the Elamites. Materials such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, ivory, tin, and most of all copper were imported regularly for housing and other projects and later traded within the city itself. Coupled with the rebuilding projects that were popping up every now and again, this surge in trade would signal the first proper revival of the city in an attempt to restore it to its former glory. An attempt that would be thwarted with the coming of the Babylonians.

As stated earlier, Rulers of both Isin and Larsa incorporated Ur into their own lands, though they most likely did it through diplomacy. Each governor of the city was appointed by the central ruler and he had to pay an annual tax. Other than that, the rulers of these two dynasties didn't really have a lot of negative impact on the city itself. In fact, they went out of their way to treat it with the reverence it had during its celebrated Ur III era. This will be something that nearly none of the subsequent rulers would attempt to repeat within the city itself.

Early Babylonian Ur

Rim-Sin, the last of the Larsa kings, fell in battle against Hammurabi in 1763 BC, according to the middle chronology. In turn, Hammurabi became the ruler of nearly the whole of South Mesopotamia, which very much included Ur. While the city suffered harsh devastation, Hammurabi still ruled over a moderately inhabited city where he set up a victory stele of his success in the city and built a canal to irrigate Ur a few years later. There are even records of Hammurabi praying in the temple to the moon god Nanna, a practice no ruler after him will repeat. His son, on the other hand, called Samsu-Iluna, wasn't as accommodating with the city. During a rebellion by one Rim-Sin II, Samsu-Iluna sacked the whole city, burning entire houses and neighborhoods and killing nearly every opponent. The canal was also destroyed, leaving the city virtually dead for at least a century after his attack.

Babylon held control over most of the Mesopotamian cities, and just like nearly every ruler before them, they had problems with the nomadic tribes that would

descend from the mountainous regions and perform regular raids. Samsu-Iluna, in particular, had to deal with the threat of the Kassites, raiders from the east. But Kassites were not the worst threat to Babylon in the coming decades. In fact, the threat that would eventually end the First Babylonian Dynasty was a different tribe, the Hittites. During the reign of the last Babylonian king in this dynasty, Samsu-Ditana, the Hittites had been regularly attacking the city. It was in 1595 BC that the Hittite king Murshilis raided Babylon, leaving it in ruins, but he did not conquer it. This was the year Samsu-Ditana presumably died and the year of ultimate humiliation for his dying empire—in his raid, Murshilis took the statues of Marduk, the titular city deity, along with Samsu-Ditana's consort Sarpatinum, to his own capital. This effectively ended any influence Babylon had over Mesopotamia, including Ur which was far from all of this and likely deteriorating during its century of archeological silence.

Kassite Ur

A tribe probably from the Zagros Mountains, the Kassites became a major player on the Mesopotamian political stage roughly around the time of Hammurabi's reign. Both he and his son Samsu-Iluna deflected their attacks successfully, as did some of their successors. However, the Kassites kept growing stronger, eventually establishing themselves as the conquerors of Mesopotamia and defenders against the Hittites. The Hittite dominion over Babylon did destroy the central power of the city, but some Babylonian governors made their way to the south, around Ur, and established their own Sealand Dynasty. This wouldn't last, as the Kassites grew so powerful they eventually claimed Babylon and declared it their capital. Decades later, they would build a different city, Dur-Kurigalsu, and declare it their new capital in lieu of Babylon, which still retained its importance with the invaders. Soon enough, the Kassites would engage in military campaigns in the south against the Sealand kings and eventually reached Ur, adding it to their list of conquered territories.

Dur-Kurigalsu got his name from a prominent king of the Kassites, Kurigalsu the 1st. This king in particular is important to Ur because it was only during his reign, somewhere before 1439 BC, that the city was once again undergoing renovation. Unfortunately, the evidence of his work in the city is minor, but it exists as a testament to Ur as a city surviving its original Sumerian inhabitants well after their demise.

Kurigalsu namely worked within the temenos, or the temple area of the city, though it's unsure if he actually did any work on the famed ziggurat. He managed to rebuild an important temple of the goddess Ningal, the spouse of Nanna, the titular Ur deity. In the same manner he rebuilt the temenos walls,

reinforcing them. The home of the high priestess, the famed Giparku from the Ur III period, was also rebuilt under Kurigalsu's commission. However, his restoration of Edublalmah, a monumental gate whose purpose was to dispense justice to citizens, built under Amar-sin centuries before, proved to be some of his most impressive work. He expanded it, reinforced its walls, added T-shaped grooves on the outside of it, and to top it off, he added a staircase to access it. Next to the Edublalmah, Kurigalsu also restored the treasury, or the Enunmah, and further restored a temple which was dedicated to Ningizzida. All of these restoration projects tell us that Ur had been an important religious and administrative center at this time, despite its centuries of waning political influence. Of course, Ur never did recover its commercial and administrative force, even under Kurigalsu's meticulous rebuilding projects.

Another period of mediocrity followed after the end of Kurigalsu's reign. The Kassites were slowly losing power to the Assyrians, and while they kept having numerous kings in their waning years, these kings didn't hold a lot of sway over the land. A possible interpretation is that Ur fell under the Sealand Dynasty in the meantime, a dynasty of rulers who were also known as Chaldeans. The region itself would gain the name Chaldea between the tenth and the sixth century BC, and it is probably where the name "Ur of the Chaldees" originated from in the Hebrew Bible. All in all, with the Assyrian dominance of the region, Ur began crumbling financially and administratively again. The Assyrians held sway over both the Tigris and the Euphrates valleys, effectively controlling all water routes. This meant that they could more easily import raw materials from places further from the Persian Gulf. Ur's major selling point, the fact that it had always been a busy port with lots of trading traffic, was diminished, and the city began its long, arduous decline yet again.

During Ashurbanipal, the most famed Assyrian ruler, the empire held sway over nearly the entire region, with their main centers being in the north. However, Assyrians had the ability to install governors in the southern cities as well, which is when Ur became somewhat prominent again. One local governor, Sinbalasu-iqbi, decided to work on rebuilding the entire city. Sadly, he chose poor materials, and as such, his efforts did not result in much. However, they did leave rather notable marks for archeological research. We know that he did major restoration work at the Edublalmah courtyard by cleaning it up and adding a whole new building to it. He bragged about installing a large door at the shrine, which is of course gone with no real trace other than a reused Kassite boundary marker that served as a pivot.

The Giparku also saw major restoration under Sinbalasu-iqbi. Numerous

Assyrian figurines, largely used for burial ceremonies, were found buried under the rubble of the building material he used to restore the high priestess' home. Other work of Sinbalasu-iqbi included revetment and restoration of the temenos wall and building of a temple dedicated to the goddess Ningal, the consort of the moon god Nanna.

As was the case with Kurigalsu and the Kassite rule of the city, this new era of Ur rebuilding under Sinbalasu-iqbi would come to a halt. Ashurbanipal would soon die, leaving his empire without a proper heir. Nobody could take his place, and so the power over the Mesopotamian cities again returned to Babylon. This shift would soon have Ur go through its possibly last major period of restoration before its ultimate demise.

Neo-Babylonian Ur

Late seventh and early sixth century BC was the time of Neo-Babylonian "Renaissance," in a sense. In 605 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar II, the second ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty, took the throne and, until his death in 562, brought Babylon to new heights which his successors couldn't match. Like many great rulers before him, he was more than just a conqueror. During his reign, he restored many temples, walls, and official buildings throughout his empire, and it just so happens that some of that restoration took place at Ur. Now "officially" Chaldean in name, Ur was a shadow of its former glory. The Early Babylonian, Kassite, and Assyrian times were long gone, and its former glory was just part of myths and legends now. This was evident in the poor state of the temenos and its surrounding wall. Nebuchadnezzar took to repairing the wall as fast as possible with some notable changes, like allowing it to enclose a far larger area and giving it a total thickness of roughly 11 meters, or a little over 36 feet (however, there was an empty room in between, meaning the wall itself was sectioned on the inside and was, to an extent, hollow). The king also commissioned for the total repaving and reflooring of the Nanna Court, which he made level with the ziggurat upper terrace. There are even scholarly hypotheses that Nebuchadnezzar did some repairs on the ziggurat itself, though not enough evidence was found to support that.

Yet, it wasn't Nebuchadnezzar that brought about the biggest repairs and restorations to Ur. That honor belongs to a later ruler, the sixth and final king of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty, Nabonidus. During his reign, he more or less left all political affairs to his son, Belshazzar, while he either went on war campaigns or restored temples where he regularly prayed. He was originally from Harran, a city where the belief in the moon god, Sin (in Sumerian, Nanna) was strong. Harran was, in fact, like a "sister city" of Ur in that regard. It is precisely

because of his strong beliefs that Nabonidus opted to leave the capital for no less than a decade, leaving his son in charge, so he could restore numerous temples and deal with the religious aspect of his empire.

One of his most prominent acts is raising the cult of Nanna-Sin to a higher rank with those of other gods. Once that was over with, he set about restoring Ur, which he personally held in as high a regard as Harran. The ziggurat underwent a major overhaul to the point where Nabonidus cleared up everything done by prior kings, Nebuchadnezzar included, so he could build the canonical, “proper” ziggurat. He kept the base originally commissioned by Ur-nammu as well as its stairways. All of these features were already over a thousand years old at this point. The entire ground level, as well as the stair level, was raised by about one meter up, and the stairs were repaired. There was also a major reconstruction of the first-floor gatehouse, which included the pylons erected all the way back when Ur-nammu was first building the structure. During his reconstruction, Nabonidus was looking for Ur III inscriptions on the brickwork, partly to quote them for his own foundation cylinders in the ziggurat and partly because he had developed a bit of a habit of excavating relics of the past. In a sense, Nabonidus was becoming the first ever archeologist.

Nabonidus added two more structures to the ziggurat. The first of the two was most likely a shrine to the moon god. The other one had the odd name “Boat shrine,” and its purpose is still unknown today to scholars. Aside from these two structures, Nabonidus also repaired the temple dedicated to Ningal, which was apparently built originally by Sinbalasu-iqbi. Not only did Nabonidus rebuild this temple, but he also embellished it further without changing the design a whole lot. Moving away from the ziggurat, but still staying within the temenos, Nabonidus also restored the three buildings important to the temple complex, namely the Enunmah, the Edublalmah, and the Giparku. An important detail to note here is that Nabonidus appointed his daughter, Belshaltinannar, as a high priestess of Ur and though she had the restored Giparku to live in, she got a different temple built to live in per her father’s commission. The Giparku itself was sub-sectioned into several rooms, likely used as a scribe school for boys, yet it’s what’s under two of these rooms that fascinated archeologists. Hidden away were objects from various periods of Ur’s history, most likely collected by Belshaltinannar, making her the second proto-archeologist in known history, right after Nabonidus, insofar that they both loved collecting object from former rulers of Ur. Her own palace was across from an unnamed north harbor temple, which was outside of the temenos walls and likely first built by Sinbalasu-iqbi and retooled by Nebuchadnezzar, though the former claim cannot be proven with

certainty. The temple still baffles archeologists because we don’t know what its purpose was, nor why it was built there. Belshatinannar’s own house that stood across from this temple was called Egigpar.

Not a lot of the houses excavated can tell us about private life in Ur during the Neo-Babylonian reign. One particular house that was found had an excess of forty rooms with at least two courtyards. This might have been a public building, like a school, since it’s far too big to be a private residence for the time. Other houses in its vicinity, whose remains indicate that it was an entire street, were far more modest in size. Much like the houses, not a lot of graves survived from this period, and the ones that did are in poor condition and cannot properly be examined.

Cylinder of king Nabonidus found in the temple of the moon god at Ur, British Museum in London[v]

The End of Ur – Persians, Drought, Abandonment

Nabonidus was the last monarch of the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty. Due to his habits of not ruling the empire directly, Babylon quickly crumbled and gave way to a foreign power, the Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great. He sacked Babylon in 539 BC, and it is likely that he started some minor work in Ur the same year, as tablets with his name were found in the city. Sadly, he died roughly a decade later, so whatever work he started must have been finished by his successor, Cambyses II, who still used the bricks inscribed with Cyrus’ name. Ur was already diminished in prominence by this point, but for the following three decades of Persian rule, it would see very minor prosperity.

The final nail in the coffin of Ur’s demise was near the end of the sixth century BC. It was at this point when Euphrates shifted its course more eastward. This would have effectively left the city waterless and unfit for life. Naturally, the shift was happening gradually, as archeologists did uncover two Persian burials in the bed of the grand canal which went around Ur’s eastern side. This indicates that the people of Ur were still fighting to stay in the city, despite the shift in the river’s course. By the year 500 BC, the city was abandoned in its entirety. And

considering the harsh weather conditions that ensued, nobody visited the site for centuries and the only people that would have even went past it were the Bedu nomads. However, these conditions made it the perfect ground for preservation, giving future archeologists plenty of material to study the ancient past of this magnificent city.

Chapter 5 – Important Finds at Ur: Architecture and the City Layout, Notable Buildings, and Artistic Objects

Architecture of Ur and the City Layout

It is difficult to speak of architecture within Ur during any period prior to the Akkadian invasion. As best as we can make out, the houses of early Ubaid Ur were most likely mud and reed houses, similar to how modern-day Marsh Arabs build their huts in this area. The best-preserved structures of these early periods are the various cemeteries and burial sites, but more on that later.

In terms of the Third Dynasty and onward, the plan of Ur was more or less similar to any major city in Sumer. During the Third Dynasty, Ur had a temenos enclosed by a wall, which housed the ziggurat, the Giparku, the Edublalmah, the Enunmah, the Eghursag, the royal graves, and the Nanna Court. Later additions by Neo-Babylonians would expand the wall, giving the temenos more area. Outside of the temenos wall were two harbors, the north and the west one, directly linked to the outer wall. There were also two “suburbs” of houses, one directly southwest of the temenos wall and the other more southeast. The latter of the two included houses built during the Neo-Babylonian times. Further south was the Enki temple, and moving north, past a remaining Kassite fort and a row of houses on the wall, we find the unnamed harbor temple and the house of Nabonidus’ high priestess daughter, Belshaltinannar. At its peak, Ur was possibly the largest city in the world, as it had an estimated 65,000 inhabitants.

Most of the houses in this period were made of plano-convex mud bricks and mud plaster. For sturdier buildings, they used bitumen and reeds. The walls were made up of sloping ramparts. These would be as high as eight meters or 26 feet tall. Each house, as stated in earlier chapters, normally had a family tomb directly below the floor, and in later periods, there were even remains of house chapels. It wasn’t uncommon for invading cultures to build atop of used houses. Also, because of the presence of dead bodies directly underneath the building, which must have produced a pungent odor, the inhabitants themselves would eventually move, leaving the house for a different family to inhabit.

Other buildings existed within Ur, most notably scribe schools, shops, kilns, offices for various smiths and artisans, as well as forts and watchtowers. The latter two would normally be away from the living areas, usually as a part of the outer wall.

Notable Buildings and Artistic Objects

The Ziggurat of Ur

It is impossible to talk about Ur without mentioning its most magnificent architectural achievement. Located northwest within the temple complex, it was encompassed by the Etemenniguru, the Nanna temple and its courtyard, the Boat shrine, and the Ningal temple. In terms of size, it was 200 by 150 feet or 61 by 46.7 meters, however, we do not know how tall it was due to the top, which contained a shrine, being leveled a long time ago. The ziggurat was made of a solid mass of brickwork. In its center it was constructed of sun-dried brick, whereas kiln-burnt brick was used for its revetment laid in rather tough bitumen. Each wall consisted of shallow buttresses and recesses. Its foundation is a wide terrace level, and roofs of the temple courtyard chambers surrounded the great temple which stood before it. You would get to the upper levels of the ziggurat by one of the three massive staircases that count a hundred steps each. One goes axially from the main façade, whereas the other two come at its side at right angles. Receding terraces gave the ziggurat its signature look, and on the very top, which is now flat, stood a shrine where you might have direct contact with the gods.

Considering how many times it has been rebuilt and restored, it’s no surprise to say that the ziggurat was the single most important building in the city. It was so massive for its time that it ultimately achieved what its purpose was in the first place–to appear as a mountain reaching for the heavens to any traveler looking from afar. There were, of course, many ziggurats built throughout the ages in Mesopotamia, but none retained the splendor and glory of the one at Ur.

The Ziggurat of Ur, partially reconstructed[vi]

The Royal Cemetery

Many who work in archeology would agree that discovering this site was Woolley's greatest discovery, and considering everything else he did at Ur, that's quite the statement. However, the royal tombs provided archeologists with the best possible look into the lives and statuses of the people of Ur, spanning thousands of years.

The cemetery site is within today's Dhi Qar Governorate, near Ur's own site, in Iraq. Woolley excavated and identified more than 2,000 graves overall, with even more being uncovered and studied later. Interestingly, he didn't begin excavation the exact moment he came across them. Instead, he moved his entire team onto a different site and then returned to the tombs roughly four years later, after his crew gained significantly more experience in excavating.

Sixteen particular tombs caught Woolley's eye, and he declared them "royal" based on the number of offerings (and the contents thereof) which were found in them as opposed to other, non-royal graves. It's more likely that only a few of these were royal graves insofar as they contain the remains of actual kings and queens. The others, while bearing inscriptions like "ensi," "en," or "lugal" (roughly translated as "governor", "high priest/priestess" and "king") were probably graves of princes and princesses, high priests, or even minor nobles. Nevertheless, a few of these graves actually were of royal personages, one being King Meskalamdug who isn't in the Sumerian King's List. Judging by the estimated date of his burial, he was likely a son, or at the very least a contemporary, of Mesannepada, the progenitor of the First Dynasty of Ur. Another more famous ruler found buried in the Royal Cemetery was the queen Puabi. It's important to note, however, that her royal title is still disputed by modern archeology. She might have been a high priestess or an important consort to a king. Whatever her title was, there's no denying that she was important enough to have a rich, ceremonious funeral that any king at the time would have.

She was buried with no less than 52 separate attendants, which included both men and women, among which were guards, a choir, servants, and several different types of animals. The number of items made of gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, silver, and shells speak volumes of her affluence.

The number of attendants she was buried with, however, is not a surprising one, considering that other nobles, Meskalamdug included, were also buried with a massive amount of bodies in their close vicinity, most often right under the king or queen's grave. Examining these corpses, among which were men and women but surprisingly few children, archeologists, even during Woolley's time, came to a conclusion that some form of ritual human sacrifice followed the burial of

kings. It’s likely that they weren’t all voluntary sacrifices, as some corpses show evident signs of struggle prior to losing their life. When other graves at other sites are taken into consideration, it’s highly likely that Meskalamdug commissioned these types of funerals or were even put into place before he assumed the throne.

During excavation of these graves, a problem arose which comes up whenever archeologists excavate tombs, that of grave robbers. Most of the graves were looted nearly the same day the bodies were buried, so not a lot of evidence of valuable items remains. Queen Puabi’s tomb was almost the sole exception to this, considering just how many valuable items were uncovered from it alone. However, other tombs did provide more mundane objects and inscriptions which tell us a lot about the customs and social statuses of the citizens of Ur during its First and Second Dynasty.

One of the royal tombs at Ur[vii]

The “Standard” of Ur

There’s a reason there are quotation marks around the word “standard,” mainly because this piece of archeological splendor is not a standard at all. A standard is typically a small military banner worn by high-ranking military officials when going into battle. Considering what it’s depicting, there’s little wonder as to why the people who first found it dubbed it a standard. Based on its small size and coloration, it was most likely a part of a musical instrument. It was excavated by Woolley’s team from a grave belonging to an unknown man; it isn’t known what class the man belonged to, as only his skull was found. The Standard was likely constructed during the First Dynasty of Ur, under a king named Ur-pabilsag, who isn’t on the King’s List, but of whose reign we have some minor evidence. The Standard itself was next to the unknown man’s skull in the corner of the

tomb. After being excavated and partially restored, it is now on display in the British Museum.

This so-called Standard is 47 by 27 centimeters or 18.5 by 10.6 inches in size. It’s inlaid with sea and river shells, which include mother-of-pearl, as well as lapis lazuli and red limestone. It’s important to us because of the mosaic imprinted onto it. Two sides of this Standard show what are commonly called the two Mosaic Scenes, one depicting War, and the other Peace.

The War side shows what looks like a battle and its aftermath. The king stands in the middle of its top register and is, of course, standing taller than all others. Before him and his mighty chariot, likely dragged by donkeys, are naked prisoners of war. These prisoners are severely hurt and shackled, emphasizing victory on the side of the monarch. The middle register has eight soldiers going to war, as well as a scene of captured enemies. We know that the Standard was contemporary to the First Dynasty because helmets similar to the ones the soldiers are wearing were found in the tombs at the royal cemetery. Once again, we see enemies naked during their defeat, which was likely more of a symbolic than a literal depiction. The lower register has chariots, four in total, with charioteers and warriors in them. Both the animals and the chariots are extremely detailed and are shown in motion, depicting a battle scene which clearly involved these early vehicles. Beaten foes are under the hooves of the animals pulling the chariots, again likely being donkeys as horses weren’t domesticated in this region yet. The quantity and number of beaten foes clearly shows how powerful an attack by chariots was back then.

The Peace side is somewhat more intriguing, as it shows what is most likely a banquet or a celebration of sorts. Again, we see the ruler in the top register, this time almost entirely to the left, taller and larger than anyone else. There are at least four servants surrounding him, two in front and two in the back, and before him, right behind two of the servants, are six cup-holding individuals sitting, probably raising their glasses in the monarch’s honor. A lyrist and a possible singer are at the very right side of the top register. Beneath this scene, in the middle register, there are people parading animals around, as well as carrying fish. This would most likely be a preparation for the banquet with the people taking cows and rams to be slaughtered and prepared for a feast. The bottom register shows slightly different-looking men either pulling animals by their nose rings or carrying produce, again likely to be consumed during a feast.

The Standard was an important find for several reasons. First, it gave archeologists a small window into the rites and rituals of the ancient Sumerians. Next, it provided some probable information regarding the clothing and

grooming styles of the period, at least in terms of everyday clothes that the masses would wear. Furthermore, we could finally learn of the technological level of this culture, especially when it came to vehicles and their varying uses. On top of that, it gave a glimpse of how the Sumerians treated their foes, not to mention how they chose to depict them in everyday art. Finally, we learned a little bit about what the Sumerians did for entertainment. This doesn't just relate to the banquet in and of itself. The presence of a lyrist and a singer tells us that music played a major part in Sumerian social circles, even ones as high as the royal court.

The Standard of Ur, British Museum in London[viii]

The Rams in the Thicket

Another masterpiece of Sumerian art, this pair of statues was uncovered by Woolley from a major section of the Royal Cemetery at Ur called the Great Death Pit, where large numbers of armed men were buried. One of these statues is slightly taller than the other, but both are roughly a little over 45 cm or 17.7 inches tall. Their name was given by Woolley himself, a devout Christian, and it is a reference to a passage in the Bible where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac before God prevents him from doing so. Instead of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham chooses to sacrifice a ram, whose horns were stuck in a thicket, to the Lord.

Both ram statues were crafted in roughly the same way. The core of the body of one such figure was wooden, with the body being more roughly shaped and the

head and legs crafted with significantly more detail. This body was held together with wax when Woolley decided to excavate it, which he poured specifically for that purpose. That way all of the elements would remain as they are and not fall apart, with little harm done to them. Gold leaf layers covered the head and legs of the ram which the craftsman hammered against the wood and stuck them together with bitumen. The ears of the ram are made of copper and have gone green throughout the millennia. The fleece isn't the same material everywhere; the shoulder fleece, along with the horns, is entirely lapis lazuli-made, whereas the fleece of the body is made of shells and once again stuck onto it with bitumen. Under its silver belly were golden genitals, and gold also adorned the tree, making up its leaves and flowers. This entire figure stood on a rectangular base which had a mosaic on it made of the same materials as the Standard of Ur (red limestone, lapis lazuli, and shells). Silver chains, now corroded away, used to link the figure to the flowering shrub.

Considering the similarity of both rams, it's speculated that they stood facing each other propped up a bigger object, such as a bowl or a pot. There were also hypotheses that the rams were used as decorations for musical instruments, similar to the bodies of the instruments found at Ur which had animal motifs, as you'll read below.

One of the ram figurines, British Museum in London[ix]

The Lyres of Ur

Technically speaking, the instruments covered in this text are three lyres and one harp; however, they are collectively called the Lyres of Ur for convenience, and we shall refer to them all as lyres here for that same reason. Woolley uncovered them within a tomb containing ten women, reportedly with one corpse laying a

hand on an instrument, mimicking playing it. Woolley had the brilliant insight to pour plaster into the holes which he assumed bore instruments, thus preserving the perished wooden core and excavating the instruments fairly well-restored. Naturally, there were elements of the lyres which were made of non-perishable materials such as silver and gold.

All four lyres differed to an extent. The best preserved was the so-called Golden Lyre of Ur, or the Bull's Lyre. Most of its reconstructed wooden body was damaged during the second Iraqi war because of a local flooding near the museum where it was held. The reason it's called the Golden Lyre is because of the bull-head attached to it. It's largely made of gold, with the eyes being inlaid mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli was also used for the beard, as it was with other lyres with bull's heads. Woolley suspected that the body of the Bull's Lyre probably even had legs, but that they perished alongside the rest of the original wooden body.

Queen Puabi makes a comeback with the second lyre, called aptly the Queen's Lyre. It was found in her tomb, after all, and stands 110 centimeters or 43 inches tall. Much like the Golden Lyre, the Queen's Lyre has a bull's head made of gold, with the rest of the face being lapis lazuli and the horns a modern reconstruction by. The forehead of the Queen's Lyre is a bit curved around the brow of the bull, whereas the Great Lyre has a perfectly straight forehead.

Next is the Great Lyre which stands 33 cm tall and 11 cm or 13 and 4.3 inches wide. Once more we have a bull's head and a lyre whose body represents the body of a bull, such as it is with the Queen's Lyre. Gold makes up the head, face, and horns of the bull, whereas lapis lazuli hair, eyes, and beard adorn it. This lyre also has a front panel made of the same materials as the Standard of Ur and the bases of the Rams in the Thicket. This panel has a depiction of a hero holding onto a bull's horns and below it are animals which act as humans. In terms of iconography, the bull's head he's wrestling with represents Shamash, or Utu, the sun god.

The last of these great instruments is the Silver Lyre, also 110 cm or 43 inches tall and roughly just as wide. Another, not as well-preserved silver lyre was found next to it in the Great Death Pit, and both were made of wood originally then coated in silver sheets that were, surprisingly, not stuck there with bitumen, but rather attached with tiny nails also made of silver. The eyes of the bull were, unsurprisingly, made of lapis lazuli, which also made up the narrow borders of the whole lyre. The bull of this lyre has no beard, like the other three, but then again, it might not depict a bull at all but a cow instead.

Finding these instruments was monumental for Woolley and archeology in

general, as well as musicology. It gave us a direct glimpse into the customs and the craftwork of an ancient Sumerian. Considering their location within the tombs, these lyres were more than likely used to chant burial hymns or incantations and then buried with their players. It's not unlikely to think that the graves where they were located, Queen Puabi aside, contained sacrificed court musicians.

The Golden Lyre and the Silver Lyre, British Museum in London[x]

Minor Finds

The section title is a bit misleading, as these finds are by no means minor in and of themselves, but rather minor when compared to the ones described above. One such find was the magnificent golden headdress of Queen Puabi. It was spectacularly crafted, with light leaves of gold, strings made of lapis lazuli and carnelian, as well as a large golden comb. Next to that, other bits of jewelry and even makeup kits were located within her tomb, showing us just how wealthy she was.

Within the graves, a vast amount of pottery was located. As stated in an earlier chapter, archeologists could largely base the period of the site based on the style of the pots themselves. In addition, these pots could tell us about the social status of the buried person, their role in the city, and what the pot was used for.

Lots of cylinder seals were excavated at Ur, which is possibly the most important find when it comes to historically dating the rulers. These small seals were used for inscriptions and were more than likely worn around the neck like a pendant. It wasn't just rulers that had them either. In fact, lots of cylinder seals belonging to vassal rulers, priests both high and low, craftsmen, artisans, artists, scribes, merchants, and even everyday citizens resurfaced during the numerous excavations of the graves within the Royal Cemetery. This just goes to show

how seriously the ancient Sumerians took writing as a new skill. It was more than just a neat way of noting trade details and temple grain. It was now a way of legitimizing oneself within society. Naturally, not all of these cylinders were deciphered; as a lot of them are inscribed either in an older variant of Sumerian which isn't that well known to us or in the very rudimentary pictographic script which doesn't provide much detail about the owner. This script would most often show rough images depicting scenes of animals and humans performing various activities.

Naturally, there were more items in these graves. Some of them include ancient board games, chisels, saws and other tools, vessels and cutlery made of various metals, earrings and discs made of electrum, various animal heads, and tiny statues of humans. Weapons and agricultural tools also took up significant room within certain tombs, as did primitive armor. Nearly all of these give us one clear picture of Ur during the first two dynasties—it was a wealthy, prosperous place with vivid burial rituals and nobility that wasn't afraid of excess.

Chapter 6 – Social Makeup of Ur from Period to Period

Knowing what we have excavated and learned from the Royal Cemetery, the written records, the traces in archeology, and even popular literature in and around the city, we can more or less reconstruct what the ancient society was like in Ur.

During its earliest age (the Ubaid, Uruk, and Jemdat Nasr periods), Ur was more than likely a simple society made up of fishermen, hunters, craftsmen, and farmers. Religion was slowly coming into shape, so this society must have had some type of official religious figures. If we were to further speculate, these hypothetical priests would be the predecessors of the en, or high priests, which would later evolve into lugals, or kings. But that was still many millennia after the Ubaid Ur. Ubaid Ur people practiced a more primitive religion that likely included some form of human sacrifice. On a lighter side, Ubaid Ur Sumerians were very successful craftsmen. They produced pottery by hand at first, but soon enough, the slow wheel became prominent and the pottery "business" would boom. They were also primitive tradesmen, as evidence of materials not native to this region are found in their tombs. Trade was by no means expansive, but it most likely did exist in some minor form. In terms of architecture, we cannot be sure, but we can posit that their houses were simple and made of local materials, which included clay, mud, and reeds. Tools for working these materials were simple and were almost always made of either stone or clay. With the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates River being close, regularly traveling by boat was common as early as back then.

However, this simple life would soon give way to a more vibrant, more urban, and more dangerous culture of the first royal dynasties. During this time, Ur, much like other cities, started developing castes. The priestly class was at the top, and oftentimes a high priest would declare himself king, but there was still an assembly made up of two "houses," the Upper and the Lower House. The first was made up of elders, most likely priests and noblemen, whereas the second house contained common folk and maybe nobles of lesser status. Most of the citizens were either farmers or artisans of some kind, and slavery was a common practice. Rulers and high priests normally lived and worked in temples, which would soon develop into what we know as ziggurats. City walls were being erected, largely as a means of protecting the city inhabitants, and stronger, taller houses began to pop up. Writing became a huge part of the culture everywhere in Mesopotamia, and Ur wasn't behind on this front as scribes started becoming

more prominent. But scribes weren't the only people of whose exploits we have archeological evidence. Potters, smiths, gardeners, builders, shopkeepers, accountants, soldiers—all of these and many more, made up the working lifeline of Ur. Another "lifeline" of the city would be the irrigation canals. They slowly started to pop up, irrigating the area and providing more farmland, which was largely treated as private property of the farmers themselves, or rather anyone who had enough wealth to maintain ownership of one. Even temples had their own farmland, which was worked by either some of the massive temple staff or by hired help from the people around the city. As stated, slavery was also vibrant, though not nearly as harsh or hostile as it would become in the following empires that would shake Asia Minor (as well as Northern Africa and the Balkans in Europe). A person would become a slave in early Ur by either losing in a war against the city (this is where the majority of non-Sumerian, not Ur-born slaves came from), failing to pay the taxes to the temple, or being sold by their own family into it as a child. Interestingly, anyone could either work off or pay off their slavery and effectively buy their freedom, and the children of slaves were treated as free citizens.

The religion in Ur also became more defined during this period. The pantheon of Sumerian gods was already established. People worshiped various gods, such as the supreme god An, the wind god Enlil, the mother goddess Ninhursag, the sun god Utu, the goddess of fertility Innana, and so on. Each city had their own titular deity which would govern over it, so it was not uncommon for the biggest temples in cities to be dedicated to them. It was evident that Ur was the sacred site of the moon god which the Sumerians called Nanna and the Akkadians called Sin, resulting in both names being fused at some point. And speaking of Akkadians, even in these early days, Ur had a substantial Akkadian minority, one that was capable of reaching the highest positions of power, as evidenced by queen Puabi, whose name ("word of my father" in Akkadian) and high position tell us that she was most likely Semitic by birth. With the emergence of kings and queens of this time, royal tombs began to pop up more and more. This also led to some new burial customs, which included ritual sacrifice of numerous servants and soldiers alongside the ruler, as was the case with Puabi and Meskalamdug, for example.

With Sargon's conquest, Ur's society would see its first major shift. For the first time, there was an outside ruler that outranked the local governor, and for the first time it was a non-Sumerian king who was giving orders. However, the social makeup of the city remained largely the same. Tradesmen and craftsmen continued their work as usual, and the temple didn't lose its legitimacy, as

evidenced by the fact that Sargon appointed his own daughter to be the high priestess at Ur. With the fall of the Akkadians and the subsequent Gutian rule, however, things changed. The citizenry of Ur no longer had the same luxury items as it did before the Akkadians. On the other hand, much like in all other Sumerian cities at the time, the priests and the governors were slowly, but surely reclaiming the city's independence. They were still vassals to the Gutians, but it was largely nominal and effectively a non-issue for the city.

The best period in Ur's history, during its Third Dynasty, came after the Gutians fell. All five rulers held the title "king of the four quarters," which was used only by conquerors such as Sargon. A king of Ur now held sway over important centers such as Uruk and Nippur, making him the most powerful figure in the region. He could now appoint his own governors and high priests in both Ur and other cities, directly affecting their own social lives. To an extent, a person living in Ur would be treated with more reverence than someone from a different city. People became wealthier and more prosperous. Houses of the local populace grew bigger, sturdier, and more opulent. Artisans and craftsmen boasted magnificent trade, often trading with people as far as Anatolia, North Mesopotamia, and probably even the Indus Valley. Canals were springing up everywhere, and farmers as well as fishermen now had an abundance of water, water that was also available to important city landmarks such as the ziggurat itself. The farmers used the water for their fields, where they would grow date trees, wheat, lentils, onions, chickpeas, garlic, lettuce, leek, or mustard. They would have already domesticated sheep, oxen, donkeys, and pigs, either herding them for meat and other products such as wool, or using them for transportation or as beasts of burden. Hunters were also prominent in Ur, hunting gazelles and fowl. Some farmers were employed to work the fields of the temple, but most were independent and owned their own property, offering produce as tribute to the gods during ceremonies.

The arts and literature flourished in Third Dynasty Ur, with veritable libraries popping up within the temples and more and more children learning how to write cuneiform in scribe schools known as the Eduba, predominantly boys, though there were scarce examples of female scribes. Poems of various genres would be written, mostly dealing with the religion of Sumerians and the many myths surrounding their gods, heroes, and even animals and inanimate objects. Most of the scribes came from wealthy families, and there are even recorded examples of children misbehaving and acting spoiled within the Eduba. Children who misbehaved in school would be "caned," or beaten with a stick, whereas parents would merely berate them for taking their privilege of learning for

granted. There was also some early written evidence of military conscription of everyday citizens, meaning that the city might have even had a standing army to its name.

It’s interesting to note that a number of written records provide inscriptions where local governors swore loyalty to the noblemen of Ur, and this wasn’t limited to swearing loyalty to just kings. In fact, a person could swear loyalty to an Ur governor, a high priestess, a princess, a queen, a high priest, or even a person of significant influence who wasn’t employed by the temple. These pledges of loyalty by outsiders are undeniable evidence of Ur’s power in the region. More evidence to this is how the trade went in the city. The merchants maintained trade with any area that wasn’t willing to go to war with Ur, and furthermore, merchants from other areas even made Ur their permanent home, meaning that the city was, in a sense, multinational and diverse. And with a city that at its peak had 65,000 inhabitants at the very least, making it the largest city at the time, this would hardly be a surprise.

However, Third Dynasty Ur had its own problems. Its citizens would probably be painfully used to constant raids by nomadic tribes, the most frequent perpetrators being the Amorites and the Elamites. The walls offered minor protection, but farmers working outside of the temple walls would still suffer raids, so much so that later rulers of the Third Dynasty would have to fashion an outside wall, which gave the city its relative borders and archeologists, several millennia later, an idea of just how big Ur was in and of itself.

But outside threats weren’t the only problem. Rebellions weren’t that frequent in Ur, but political intrigue was, another somewhat modern invention at the time which grew and expanded with the Third Dynasty and was perfectly evident in how Ishbi-erra acted during the reign of Ibbi-sin. In its waning years, Third Dynasty Ur would see cities abandon its rule, leaving it and its citizens to their destiny.

The first sack of Ur was a devastating event, so much so that the contemporary high priests wrote a long lamentation poem called the Lament for Ur, wherein the gods themselves decree that Ur must fall and that they are abandoning it. The people were probably left to their devices, as the Elamites were still a largely nomadic culture with no interest of taking control of cities, but all immediate production in Ur ceased. There was no ruler, and it’s possible that some prominent families in the city took control of all trade, or what remained of it.

The situation changed when first Isin and then Larsa took control of the city, being the first of many foreign kingdoms to claim dominion over Ur. People were still living under the same social structure of priests, farmers, craftsmen,

scribes, and slaves, but the city itself had to pay an annual tax to the outside rulers. Trade started flourishing again, and the people would stay stable and unhindered even during the reign of the first Babylonian ruler, Hammurabi.

Hammurabi's successor Samsu-iluna sacked Ur again during a rebellion. Until the coming of the Kassites, the citizens of Ur would not see any progress. The trade would stagnate, as would all other aspects of life such as art, agriculture, and religion in particular. Old temples, walls, and other buildings would be deteriorating or repurposed for a different use. Two more important periods would see minor surges in Ur's history, one under Assyrians, or more precisely the local governors who were loyal to the Assyrian crown, and the other under the Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus.

During this last period of Ur's growth, the priests of Ur gained prominence again. With major reconstructions around the temples and the city walls, as well as entire neighborhoods of new houses rising, such as the one in the southeast of Ur mentioned in the previous chapter, the city life flourished. Priests were performing their duties regularly, and farmers and fishermen did their job outside the temenos walls. Naturally, trade resumed and the local economy rose again. All of this was helped by the fact that Nabonidus came from a town that worshiped the same deity as the people of Ur did, that being Nanna-Sin.

Not much is known about the social makeup of Ur after Nabonidus and during the Persian rule over the city. Trade was slowly shifting to the north, so it's highly probable that Ur saw fewer and fewer people willing to trade for a living. There were still some vestiges of farming in the city, but considering the climate change in the area discussed in a previous chapter, the change which came after the Euphrates shifted its course. No trade meant no raw materials for artisans and craftsmen, so production of their goods slowed down immensely. By the year 500, there really wasn't any society to speak of in Ur. An interesting question remains regarding what happened to all of the people living in Ur. Whether they died off unceremoniously in the growing desert or just moved to different, still-vibrant cities is a matter of debate with little evidence to support either side.

Chapter 7 – Notable Historical Events in Ur

Considering its influence, it is no surprise that Ur was the setting of several notable events that shaped the history of Sumer as a whole. Most of these events occurred during the Ur III period and most of them were already described in earlier chapters. However, this chapter will deal with them in a bit more depth, delving into why these particular events were worthy of earning a historical footnote.

Ur-nammu's Ascension to Kingship

As noted, Ur-nammu was already a governor of Ur during Utu-hengal's dominion over the area. However, in 2112 BC, he would singlehandedly dethrone Uruk and place Ur as the ultimate power over the region.

This event was, of course, notable because of what Ur-nammu would represent to the people of Ur. While not a local, he decided not to rule over the region from his native Uruk, which he would conquer and annex soon after his coronation, but instead remained in Ur and declared it a center of his kingdom. Because of this alone, he is arguably the most important Ur III ruler, though some would argue, even rightfully to an extent, that this title should belong to his son, Shulgi.

This event would also be the one which skyrocketed the Ur III Period, so it's relevant as an important stepping stone towards the glorious rise of the city on the political stage.

Ur-nammu's Run to Nippur

Earlier in this book, this was referred to as the "trip to Nippur," but according to Sumerian writings (and likely not factually accurate), this trip was, in fact, a run. If this story is to be believed, Ur-nammu, just like Shulgi would do after him, literally ran from Ur to Nippur and back. This was to show their skill and prowess as both a ruler and a man, and naturally, the destination had to be none other than the most sacred city in Sumer.

This run, fictional as it may have been, is an important event for purely political reasons. It was after this momentous run that Nippur acknowledged the primacy of Ur-nammu, as well as Ur in general. Ur-nammu effectively secured himself the coveted title held by Sargon of Akkad many centuries earlier, the title of "king of the four quarters". Naturally, Nippur would accept this as legitimate, and Ur-nammu would later do major construction and reconstruction projects at this sacred city to further cement his position..

The people of both Ur and Nippur must have welcomed Ur-nammu as their new overlord. Years of Gutian dominion left their mark, and any domestic ruler with

the desire to maintain Sumerian cultural heritage was welcome. There would be one more reason why Ur-nammu would be welcomed as the overlord of Sumer, though. Specifically to the citizens of Ur, it would bolster their own social ranks among other cities. Ur was no longer just a harbor city at the south with some decent trade. It was now an imperial city, which brings with it a certain air of elitism. Being more important than Nippur, and especially more than their former master, Uruk, was just that significant to citizens of Ur.

Construction of the Ziggurat

This event spans two great rulers, Ur-nammu and Shulgi. It doesn't take much to consider this a historic moment in early human history in general, but as an event to its contemporaries, it bears importance for several reasons.

First, it cemented the dominion of Ur over other cities. True, other cities had palaces and temples similar to a ziggurat, but none were as expensive, expansive, or massive as this one. This was a miracle of ancient engineering, and it had to be located in the city which ruled over all others. Size mattered even back in Ancient Mesopotamia, especially if you wanted to make a point of your rule.

The second reason why this event is important is because of what it initiated. Other ziggurats began to be built after this one. Soon enough, other cultures adopted and adapted this concept, and ziggurats became more grandiose, more striking, and more monumental. The ziggurat was, no pun intended, the first step towards megalithic architecture in Asia Minor.

The third reason, possibly one not intended by the original rulers, was the fact that the ziggurat remains one of the most striking monuments of the ancient world, owing this to the simple fact that it's so huge and sturdy. For centuries, people would pass this lone desert mound and think of it as a massive rock or hill, yet one somehow built by human hands. In effect, the ziggurat reached immortality, extending the story of imperial Ur well beyond its demise and well beyond its borders.

There are more reasons why building the ziggurat was important, but they're largely a variation of the three noted above. Any way you take it, the mighty Ziggurat of Ur rightfully earns its place in history.

Ur-nammu's Code of Law

While older law codes existed, this was the first extant legal text in the world. It would set the standard for all other law codes to follow in the region and it predated the Code of Hammurabi by at least three centuries.

Naturally, this event is important for world history. However, the event would be

no less important at the time when Ur-nammu actually codified it. Much like Urukagina centuries before him, Ur-nammu did this to earn favor with both the gods and the men of Ur. Ur-nammu drawing up a law code was a continuation of a long-standing tradition of reputable rulers that stressed how they "brought law to the land," how they effectively ended chaos and established peace, an example of which would be king Urukagina's code in the city of Lagash. This would make them equal to gods, in a sense, as they would use their power for benevolence, or to put it differently, they would bring about habitable order for everyone using their "divine" ability to discern what is just and what is not. Previous events, like the run to Nippur and the building of the Ziggurat, were there to elevate Ur-nammu into a semi-divine status, but this one would have kept him there, providing far more legitimacy.

Ur-nammu Law-Code, Istanbul Archeology Museums[xi]

Shulgi's Run to Nippur

While Shulgi's ascension to the throne and his punitive wars against the nomads

who killed his father proved his aptitude to rule, it was this event that cemented Shulgi as the king of Ur. Just like his father, he boasted that he could run to Nippur and back in a day which is what he did (again, much like with Ur-nammu, this might not have been factual). The difference is that Shulgi's run would result in all subsequent rulers automatically gaining dominion over Nippur, as well as the title "king of the four quarters."

This event is also notable for establishing Shulgi as more capable and more powerful than his father. He aimed to surpass Ur-nammu, and this was definitely the best way to start.

Shulgi Finishes the Ziggurat of Ur

Admittedly, this is merely part of a bigger event, the very building of the ziggurat, but it was important nonetheless. The major reason it was important concerns Shulgi's legitimacy and position when compared to Ur-nammu. Having his own name inscribed on the walls of the ziggurat would have cemented him as the legitimate successor to his father. He would become part of history instantly, and it would provide him with even more legitimacy when he eventually proclaimed himself a god.

Amar-sin's Conquest

This isn't really a single event. During Amar-sin's rule, Ur would wage war with numerous cities in the north, either against the nomadic Semitic, as well as non-Semitic tribes, or against established cities that refused to bow to Ur. Numerous tribes were crushed by Amar-sin's army, and he expanded his territory to include the northern areas, effectively controlling almost all trade done via the major rivers.

Amar-sin's wars are important because this was Ur at its territorial peak. He singlehandedly controlled vast swathes of Sumer and had thus literally justified the "king of the four quarters" title. These wars would cement Ur's position as a military superpower, letting other cities know that their best bet was either to give in to them completely or to avoid waging wars, lest they be crushed.

Digging of the Amar-sin Canal

The reason why this was an important event is rather evident. With this canal, Amar-sin connected important river waterways and promoted land irrigation throughout his empire. Waterways would be used to transport goods, statues of gods, and even serve as "roads" for both fishermen and regular folk. This canal, in effect, did the same for Ur and its empire what Shulgi's roads did for the city itself—it vastly improved infrastructure for everyone.

Shu-sin Builds the Outer Wall

Shu-sin's efforts to build a wall to prevent the Amorites have historical significance. This was the event where the area of Ur finally received "physical" borders. But more importantly, this was the event that cemented how powerful a threat the Amorite tribes were that kept advancing on the mighty city. Shu-sin already had military campaigns against other tribes to the north, such as the campaign against Simanum, where he married off one of his daughters, but none of those made him pull such a monumental defensive move such as building a wall like the Amorite advances.

The First Sack of Ur

The worst thing to happen to a ruler is for an event marking the end of his reign to be more remembered than he himself. Ibbi-sin underwent this, being the ruler who was largely responsible for the total loss of the city's glory. This event would mark the complete death of Sumer and would pave way for Semitic dominance of the region, in one form or another, for many millennia to come. It was also an important event because it gave rise to two new, albeit minor, powers in the region, one at lesser-known Isin and one at moderately-known Larsa. Power finally shifted from Ur to two different cities, though in reality, most other cities were effectively independent.

However, the most critical event within this period that would overshadow the ones in the paragraph above was the destruction of the city under the Elamites. This event produced an entirely new genre of Sumerian art known as lamentation poetry, where it was written that the gods themselves decided to abandon the city. So powerful was the destruction of Ur and so humiliating the defeat of Ibbi-sin by the Elamites (which also included the rise of his former upstart governor Ishbi-erra and his eventual kingship) that it would echo for many, many years in the future. It was the perfect antithesis to the might that Ur had maintained for literally centuries, which made the utter ruination of the city all the more painful.

The Second Sack of Ur

Samsu-Iluna is responsible for the second most painful event in Ur's pre-abandonment history. However, Ur wasn't the only city to suffer this fate. Rim-Sin II, an upstart, led a rebellion against the Babylonian emperor from Larsa. Pushed back by Samsu-Iluna's army, Rim-Sin moved more southward, which in effect made Samsu-Iluna lay waste to all cities there, even ones he personally somewhat rebuilt, such as Ur. He leveled most of the residential areas, set fires to them, tore the canal, and looted as much as possible, leaving Ur in ruins. This was important because it left Ur in the clutches of historical irrelevance until the Kassites took control, which was quite the blow considering it was slowly

getting back on its feet during the Old Babylonian rule.

The Minor Nabonidus Renaissance

Many rulers did various work in the city, but none underwent as many massive rebuilding projects as Nabonidus. The significance of his activity at Ur is huge. It was more than just a ruler fortifying a territory. Ur was coming back to prominence because of Nabonidus' religious beliefs. It was the first time in centuries that a ruler would treat Ur on an equal footing with a different major city. As such, it was a time when the citizens could again enjoy proper trade and economic prosperity. It was quite literally the last time there was any activity of this sort in the city, as the following years would mark one decline after the other.

Rediscovery

Moving into the early 19th century, we see the first efforts of Colonel Cheney and J. Baillie Fraser to visit Ur and plan out possible excavations in the future. In other words, 1835 would be the first year where a major interest in Ur got rekindled. Sure, Pietro della Valle visited it in 1625 very shortly, doing nothing more than taking a few souvenirs with him to Italy, but it was the 19th century that sparked an archeological curiosity for the ancient city. And soon enough, people would swarm back to it, of many nations and backgrounds. It was alive and important again, but in an entirely different way. However, it was during the excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley from 1922 onwards that Ur really "came back to life," initiating a massive wave of scholarly interest, which would inevitably lead to publications continuously asking questions about Ur, such as the book you have in your hands right now.

Chapter 8 – Abraham of Ur: The Importance of the Biblical Figure

Let’s depart from the city for a bit and discuss possibly the most famous non-royal figure to come from it, a figure that would be influential in no less than three major worldwide religions—Abraham.

There is a good reason that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are collectively called the Abrahamic religions. The figure of Abraham plays a prominent role in them, as well as two more religions that spawned from it, Bábism and the Bahá'í Faith.[1]As the father of monotheism and one of the early Messengers of God, Abraham would almost singlehandedly usher in a new era of belief in the Old World, whose traditions remain to this day across the globe.

According to tradition, Abraham, or Abram, was born as the son of Terah, himself a descendant of Noah; in the city the Bible would call “Ur of the Chaldees.” Scholars largely disagree that the area was actually Ur. Some have suggested Urum, a different Sumerian city; whereas others focus more on the region itself which merely bore the name of Ur due to its prominence. Terah had a small shop where he made idols, which young Abraham must have been just as efficient at but had ultimately declined to make because of his changed beliefs. Tradition also tells us of a certain Nimrod, who was king at the time and who had a dream wherein Abraham would overshadow him as the new rising star. This ultimately resulted in Abraham being exiled to Harran, from which he would be additionally exiled to Canaan, the land which now comprises modern Israel.

However, no ruler called Nimrod is known to exist in Sumer at the time Abraham was presumably born, near the end of the third millennium BC. It was, in fact, the time when the Third Dynasty of Ur was still active and booming. Parallels were drawn between the biblical Nimrod and nearly every ruler of the Ur III Dynasty, most believing it to be Ur-nammu (who commissioned the building of the great ziggurat, popularly believed to have inspired the biblical story of the Tower of Babel) or Amar-sin. It’s tempting to think that Abraham, had he really existed at the time, was indeed of Ur origin, this thought being further emphasized by him having extended family in Harran, another place where the moon god Nanna was worshiped. These “sister cities” in this religious regard would likely have had families that moved to and fro between them, especially at the height of Ur’s power.

Yet, historical evidence doesn’t mention anyone in Ur that preached monotheistic views at the time, or at least there isn’t any evidence discovered so

far. In addition, Nimrod was recorded to worship fire, yet every ruler of Ur, some even thousands of years after the Sumerians were long gone, worshiped the god of the moon. Moreover, Nimrod's lineage is given in the Hebrew Bible, which doesn't correspond to any of the Sumerian kings of Ur based on the evidence.

However, biblical stories, at least when it comes to real-life events, ought to be taken as allegories or semi-mythical in nature. Abraham, much like the older kings of Sumer, was given an abnormally long lifespan, at least according to the lunar calendar. But even with the regular solar calendar, he would have had to be an exceptional human being to father no less than eight children by three separate wives in his later years.

Nevertheless, discrepancies aside, Abraham's figure was one of vast influence in the Abrahamic religions. He is represented as one of the founders of Judaism, the first real Hebrew, and the father of their people. In Christianity, though not as prominent, Abraham still holds an important place as a man of pure faith and not blind devotion. Muslims also treat Abraham, or Ibrahim, as their spiritual father, a concept somewhat continued by Bábism. The Bahá'í, on the other hand, see Abraham as one of the many Messengers of God, much like the Báb, Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses were after him. He is seen as one of the people who have the divine right to preach the word of God while not being a representation of God himself. All five of these religions claim that their holy men have direct descendants from Abraham, either by his first son Ishmael, his second son Isaac, or his other six sons. In a sense, Abraham is that link which makes all of these religions intertwined and related to one another.

But Abraham was important to early archeologists as well. Woolley, a devout Christian, was absolutely sure that he had found the city of Ur as described in the Bible. In 2011, archeologists unearthed a structure which they dubbed "Abraham's house" in honor of him, but which was likely just an administrative building of sorts. Abraham's importance to archeology is actually directly linked to the discovery of Ur. The city would probably have remained unearthed and unexcavated had Woolley, along with other largely Christian or Muslim excavators, had not been as religious and, by extent, as respectful of biblical Abraham as they were. It's thanks to their faith that modern-day archeologists can look at this Ur, which might not be "of the Chaldees," but certainly is of Sumerian antiquity.

Conclusion

Life began in Ur almost 6,000 years ago. It shifted from a modest culture to one of kings and priests, and during its time, it went from a capital of a massive, highly-developed empire to a shell of its former self. Before the last natives left, Ur had endless ups and downs, ebbs and flows, and then, at one point, it just stopped.

But curiosity of the human mind prevailed and Ur resurfaced in the most magnificent way. Both religious and scientific-minded people were craving to penetrate its many secrets. The latter wanted to know everything they could about early man—how he behaved, what he built, how he lived, how he died, how he treated his fellow man, how he treated his God or gods, how he formed a family, earned a living, and even how he had fun. The former group didn't care too much for the "black heads" of Sumer, but rather for one individual who influenced their own faith, one who happened to come from this city "of the Chaldees." And soon enough, even regular everyday people wanted a piece of this fascinating city.

And fascinating it was. Not many cities in the world can boast the first inn, the first "long runner," the earliest proper code of law, the best trade, the best crafts, and the tallest, most massive religious building their immediate neighbors knew and many tried to imitate. Nor can many cities boast that they singlehandedly started a veritable renaissance of the ancient world, nor can they lament their loss in a way as Ur did. Not many cities could claim their biblical significance which runs parallel to its archeological, scientific one. Ur is but one of scant few which can.

Even today, Ur inspires people of various interests. Linguists approach it to see how written language evolved throughout the ages, considering how prominent early cuneiform was within it. Lawmakers study its laws, and politicians look to its legal history to see what worked and what didn't. Architects study the mighty Ziggurat and other associated temples to see what were the simple solutions the ancient Sumerians applied to complicated problems. Tool experts look at the saws, daggers, and associated artifacts to note the changes, to spot where the tools moved from "useful" to "good." Artists observe the pottery, the statues, the steles, the instruments, and other works of art to see where all other art comes from, how it developed with time, and where it was going. Writers delve into the many tales and poems the city has to offer, inspecting them and looking for that "original" work of literature that jump-started all other literature. And, of course,

tourists look to learn a little history, to have an enjoyable visit, and, ultimately, to have a fascinating story to tell their progeny. Because, ultimately, that’s what makes Ur just as prominent now as it was today—the fact that its story is immortal and that it will go on living for at least 6,000 years more.

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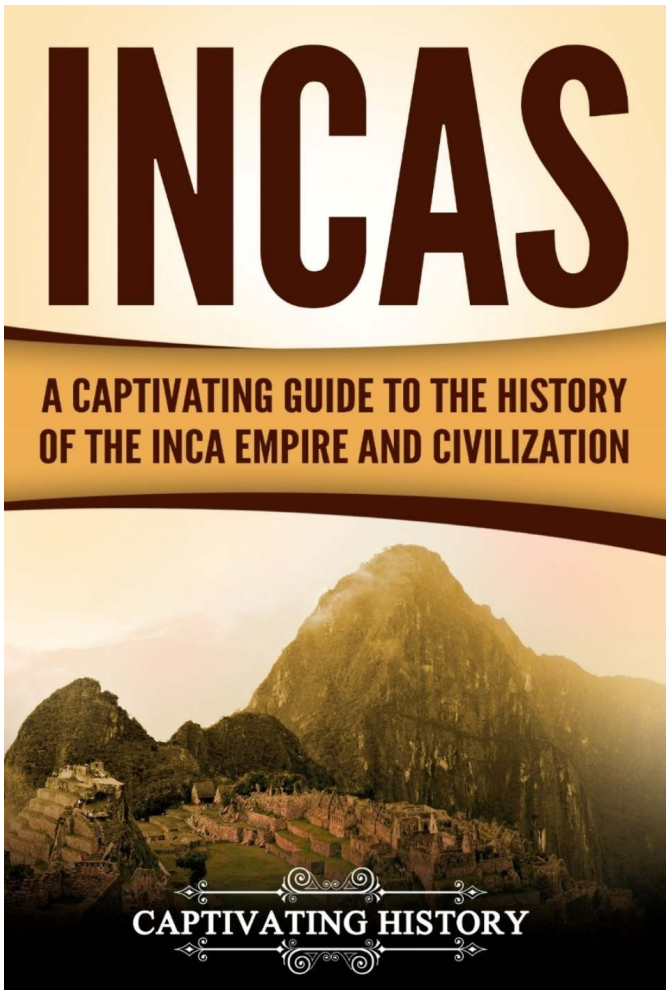

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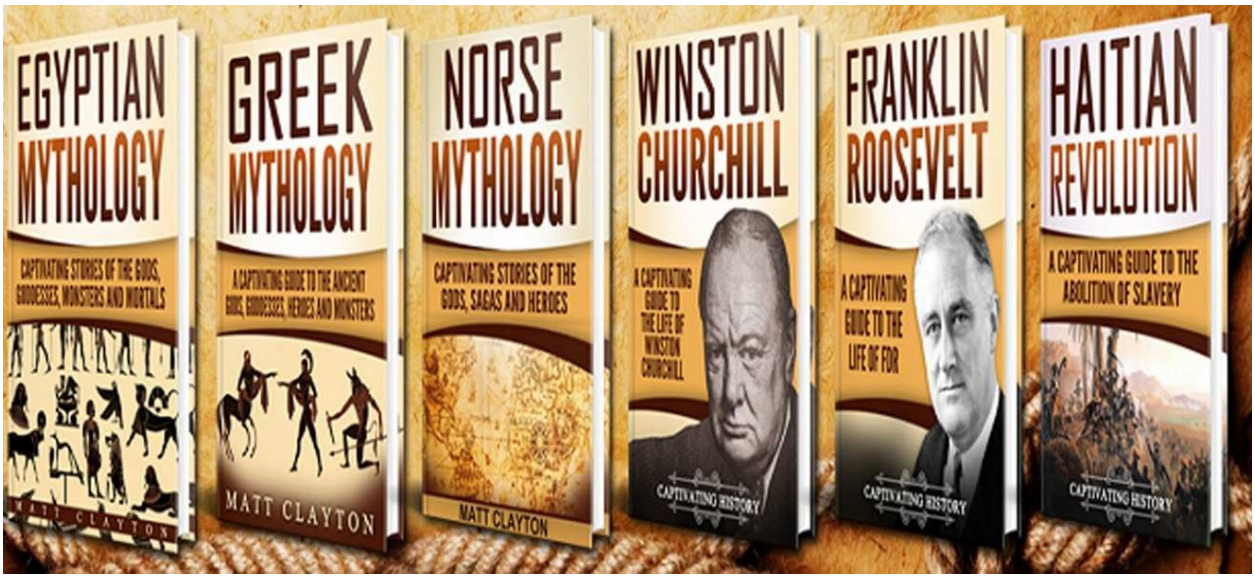

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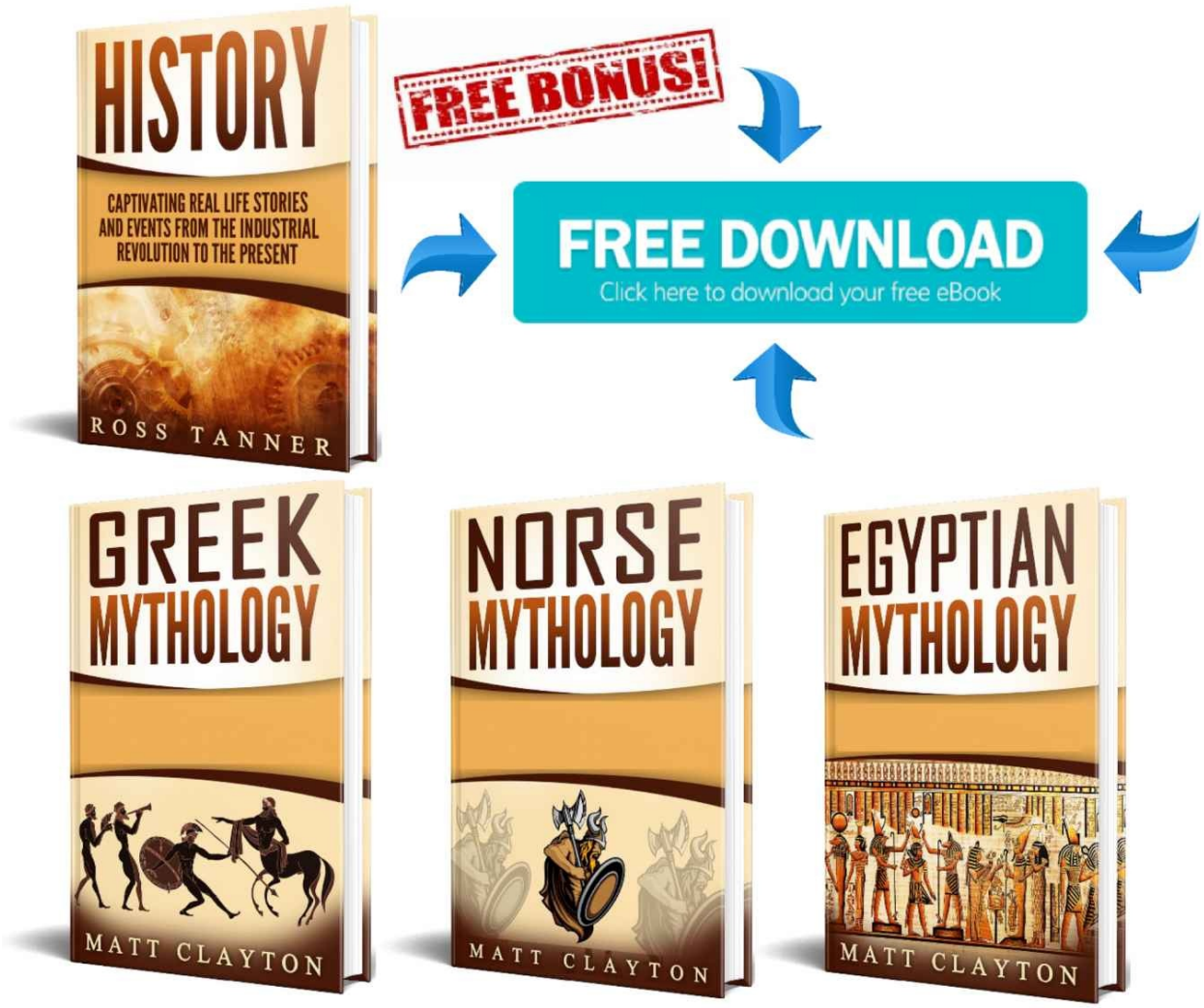

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Notes on Images

[1] It should be noted that the research regarding this aspect of Abraham came from a source which is largely biased towards the Bahá'í way of life, due to the author herself being Bahá'í. It is highly advised to take her words with a grain of salt in light of this information.

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