

The Standard of Ur



The Standard of Ur stands as one of the most extraordinary archaeological discoveries relating to Sumerian society during the **Early Dynastic Period III**. It is a wooden box-like structure that was excavated from the Royal Cemetery by Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934.

Note:

Ur is the name of a Sumerian city-state of Mesopotamia



Fig. 1. GENERAL VIEW OF THE CEMETERY EXCAVATION LOOKING SE.
A = grave of Mes-kalam-dag, PG/723 B = the royal tomb, PG/779 C = the royal tomb, PG/1094 D = the 'Great Death-pit', PG/1037



Physical Characteristics

Dimensions:

- **21.70-22 cm** high
- **50.40 cm** long
- **11.60 cm** wide at base, **5.60 cm** wide at top

Materials:

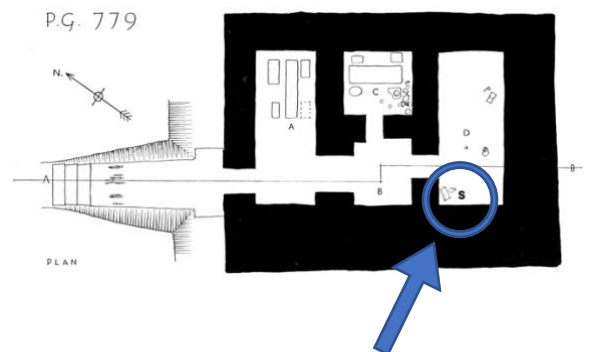
- **Primary structure:** Originally wood (now reconstructed)
- **Mosaics:** Lapis lazuli, shell, red limestone
- Set in bitumen



The Standard of Ur uses a mosaic technique called **"inlay"**:

- Each figure is cut from separate pieces of shell or stone
- Details are very precisely carved
- Pieces are set in bitumen, an early natural adhesive
- Different materials create color contrasts: white shell for flesh, blue lapis for clothing, red limestone for blood

The Standard was found positioned near the shoulder of a man believed to potentially have used the object as a symbol of the state in battle. Despite being produced in 2500BC, the Standard's remarkable preservation can be attributed to the careful burial practices of ancient Sumerians and the dry climate of southern Mesopotamia. The original wooden frame had decomposed, but the shell, limestone, and lapis lazuli inlays remained largely intact, which allowed for accurate reconstruction.



FOUND/DISCOVERED HERE

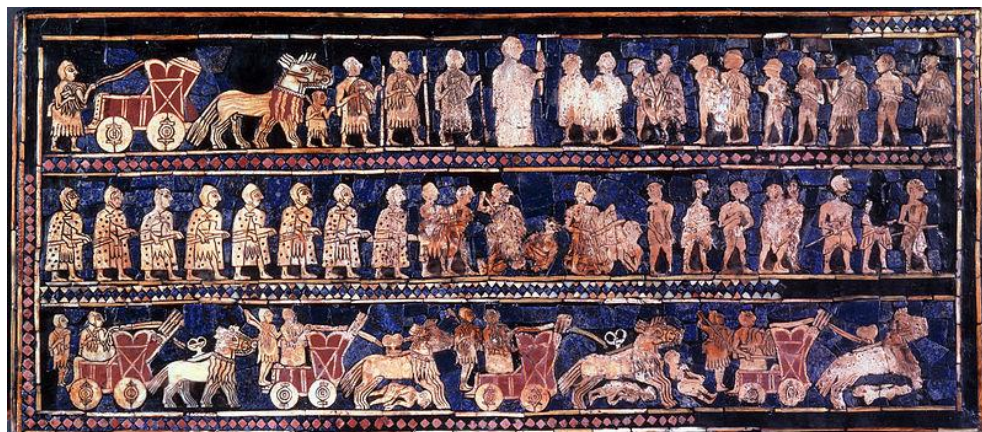
Artistic Content

The Peace Panel



- Contains three horizontal sections.
- The top row contains a central figure, likely the king, sitting on a stool and facing six individuals that are each holding a cup. This depiction suggests some type of celebratory feast or a banquet. On the far right, there is a man playing the lyre, and a singer.
- The middle row depicts attendants bringing animals, fish, and other goods.
- The bottom register shows figures carrying produce in bags or leading horses, indicating the gathering of resources.

The War Panel



- Like the Peace Panel, contains three horizontal sections.
- The top row shows a central figure that is larger than others. Again, this is likely the authoritative king. Prisoners are being held before him and are accompanied by guards.
- The middle row shows soldiers, marching towards prisoners of war. These captives are stripped of clothing, which is likely done to symbolize humiliation and defeat.
- The bottom row illustrates war chariots pulled by horses ending with the trampling of enemy soldiers. This is likely to show the destructive force of the army.

Cultural Significance

The Standard provides lots of valuable information about Sumerian society:

- **Period:** Early Dynastic III Period (approximately 2600-2350 BCE)
- **Location:** City-state of Ur, southern Mesopotamia
- **Social Organization:** Based on the contents of this artifact, it is evident that during this period there was increasing social complexity and a very clear social hierarchy. There was likely a development of formal kingship and the establishment of armies and growth of trade. The Standard of Ur also shows that labour was specialized and accordingly distributed among individuals.

It is important to note that the use of lapis lazuli, a vivid blue stone referred to as "blue gold," shows how the cities had access to rare and prestigious materials. Lapis lazuli was sourced from regions like Afghanistan (over 1500 miles away), which might imply that the Sumerians had far-reaching trade connections and ability to communicate with distant civilizations. This trade facilitated the flow of luxury items, which became symbols of royalty and status in Ur. Mining and acquiring such resources also involved lots of labor and complex tools as the rock is very hard to shape. Not only does this reflect craftsmanship and skill but also immense wealth from the abundance of the stone in the Standard of Ur.

Currently, the Standard of Ur is housed in the British Museum.

ERA IMPORTANCE

Early Dynastic III Period (Standard of Ur Era)

The Early Dynastic III Period shows the first complete urban civilization systems, with concrete evidence from the Standard of Ur. The artifact's war panel shows a formal military with standardized equipment - soldiers wore identical helmets and cloaks, and carried the same spears, proving organized production and distribution of military gear. The peace panel demonstrates complex economic organization - we see different social classes dressed distinctively, specialized workers (musicians, servants, farmers) performing specific jobs, and evidence of surplus wealth in the banquet scene where attendants bring luxury goods. The Standard proves writing existed through accompanying cuneiform inscriptions, and its very construction demonstrates sophisticated craft specialization - artisans working with lapis lazuli and different stones. This era fundamentally changed human history by establishing patterns we still use: the division of labor (shown by the different workers in the Standard), formal laws (proven by surviving legal codes like Ur-Nammu's law code from this period), and organized state power (demonstrated by the king figure who appears larger than others in both panels). These weren't just abstract developments - the Standard shows they had practical effects, creating the first societies where people could specialize in specific trades, where rulers could organize large groups for common goals, and where technological knowledge could be preserved and built upon through writing.

Sources

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