

The “Death Pits” of Ur: A Tale of Human Sacrifice?

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the social implications of the findings at the Royal Cemetery of Ur, Mesopotamia. The discovery of mass graves in the Royal Cemetery, although initially sensationalized and dramatized by media and academics alike, can provide valuable insights into the social order of ancient societies, and should not be dismissed or written off as senseless acts of violence. An analysis of the remains found in both the death pits and the royal graves shows that the activity markers on the bones of the individuals in the death pits, compared to those of the individuals in the separate, royal tombs, indicate that these mass graves contained physical labourers as opposed to wealthy rulers. These findings are indicative of the class differences present in Mesopotamian society and provide an insight into how such class differences manifested in burial practices. Ultimately, sensationalizing these kinds of archaeological finds distorts our perceptions of ancient civilizations and limits the knowledge that academia, and the public can gain from studying these sites in a thoughtful and analytical way.

Introduction

The discovery of the Royal Cemetery at Ur began in 1922 with primary excavations led by Leonard Woolley in what is now Nasiriyah, Iraq, on behalf of the British Museum. The excavation suffered complications from the start, with little to no discoveries in the initial trenches, and workers pocketing finds to sell. However, Woolley would soon stumble on to what became one of the most sensationalized finds of the 20th century. The Royal Cemetery contained more than grave goods and bodies of possible rulers, but also mass graves where the remains of dozens of unidentified people lay. Woolley was quick to label these mass graves as “death pits”, with his accounts quickly winning media attention. The sudden public fascination with ritual mass sacrifice, and the labeling of events that took place several thousands of years prior in Ur, clouded the findings from the site. Such a shocking find, combined with the uncertainty surrounding the identities of the individuals found in the so-called “death pits”, inspired a wide range of scholarly theories and research on the manner of death of the occupants of the burials.



Figure 1: Forestier’s drawing of the occupants of the death pit before and after their deaths. (Produced in 1938 by A. Forestier, figure retrieved from Baadsgaard et al.)

Early Theories

As an archaeological site, the cemetery has the potential to provide valuable information and insights into ancient Mesopotamian society. In particular, burial practices and rituals, according to Alekshin et al., can identify six aspects of a society (138). Such aspects include cultural ideas about passage to the underworld, the succession of cultures, social positions of individuals (sex and age, degrees of social stratification, family and community formation), and their demographic factors (Alekshin et al. 137-45). The evidence found at the Cemetery, including human remains, ornamental artifacts, and grave goods, can be used to inform our knowledge of Ur society, specifically of their potential class structure, religious order, and traditions. More broadly, this knowledge could generally be applied to further understandings of ancient Mesopotamia. An informed, analytical perspective of the gravesites could counter sensationalized reports and ideas surrounding the practice of human sacrifice, which would in turn allow for a more thoughtful and scientific study of such a controversial subject.

Leonard Woolley’s initial (1922-1934) excavation of the Cemetery found over 2,000 burials dating back to the Early Dynastic Period (Baadsgaard 148). Not all of the burials were the same, with only 16 in particular being of interest to Woolley due to the nature of their contents. These 16 graves were determined to have most likely belonged to various Ur royalty and past rulers, based on the elaborate grave goods and dress of the remains (Baadsgaard 148). Upon finding the burial site known as “the Great Death Pit”, the initial theory was that the individuals were unwilling human sacrifices to accompany royals into the afterlife. This theory changed after a large cauldron was found in the center of the pit. This led Woolley to believe the victims may have committed voluntary mass suicide by ingesting a poison (Woolley 41). However, this theory was later dismissed after blunt force trauma was found on the skulls retrieved from the

site. Nevertheless, the discovery of victims of unknown origins in mass graves created a media sensation that furthered the taboo nature of historical human sacrifice.

Analysis of Findings at Ur

While the findings at Ur were not the first evidence of human sacrifice, the mystery surrounding the identities of the buried occupants prompted many theories on how so many people related to noticeably wealthier and hierarchically important individuals, ended up in mass graves. Amongst those theories included the idea that one of the gravesites, which contained only the remains of women, was a ritual offering to the moon god of Ur, Nanna (Marchesi 163). Another theory suggested the individuals in the burials were not kings at all, but rather substitutes appointed to take the king's place to remove a curse from the real king in the wake of a “bad omen” (Frankfurt qtd in Marchesi 163). The general theory behind the existence of the death pits is that it was a custom in ancient Sumerian society, at least for a century during the Early Dynastic Period, for royals and rulers to be buried along with their consorts, to be taken to the afterlife.

While identifying artifacts is more subjective than the identification process of bones in terms of historical information, Gansell argues in her article that the clothing and jewelry found in burial sites can offer significant insight into an individual's social status during their life (29). One of the more substantial and backed theories identifying the occupants of the Cemetery comes from the identification of one grave belonging to a queen of Ur, Queen Pu-abi. Her grave is labelled as ‘PG 800’ and consists of a separate burial area where her remains were found surrounded by goods. Below this chamber is a “death pit” containing the remains of several individuals and animals, along with more grave goods, including a chariot (see Fig. 2).

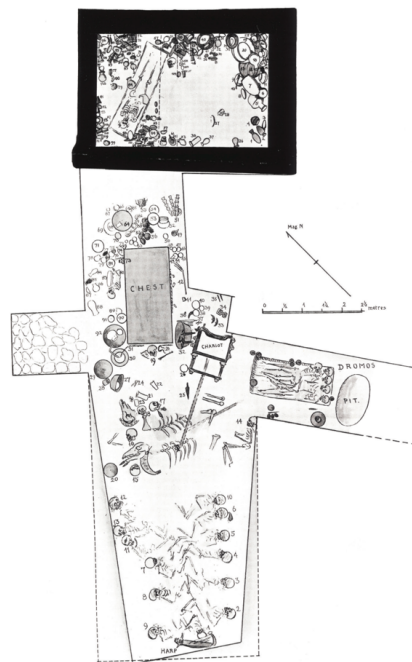


Figure 2: A drawing of Pu-abi’s grave. (Retrieved from Baadsgaard)

Queen Pu-abi was identified as more important socially than the individuals found in her death pit, as well as from the nearly 2,000 other burials at the site, by the quality of the jewelry and grave goods she was adorned with. A commonality found between female remains identified as possible royalty was the intricate headdresses worn by the women. In addition, the headdresses were only found on remains buried separately, and were not noted in the general grave areas of the Cemetery. The headdress found on Queen Pu-abi's remains was significantly more decorated than the headdress found on other female remains in the Cemetery, showing that one manifestation of class difference in Ur society between royal and non-royals came in the form of intricacies in clothing (Baadsgaard 150).

Such inferences about the structure of Ur society fall under the category of 'social positions' in the information that burial sites can provide, as stated by Alekshin et al. The clothing differences, even in burial practices, denote a clear difference between an upper and lower class, which continues after death. Additionally, the presence of numerous items of elaborate gold jewelry, including rings, pins, and wreaths, on the (possibly) royal women shows the immense wealth held by these individuals during their lives. In contrast, the remains in the death pits of these women wore only a few pieces of simple jewelry made of copper or stone rather than gold (Gansell 30). According to Gansell and Vidale, the adornment patterns of individuals in death pits with only certain styles of jewelry could have been a way to tie those individuals to the royal figure they were buried in association with, possibly as a way of identifying them in the afterlife (39; 431). The authors also argue that jewelry could have been used as a way to mark the wearer's age and gender, both of which provide additional contextual clues as to the intentions behind each death pit and the significance of its occupants.

Discussion

The artifacts found buried alongside the individuals in the Royal Cemetery have been instrumental in demystifying the conditions under which the mass grave appeared and the identities of the individuals found in them. However, I argue that the remains themselves can provide much greater insight into the individual figures, including the manner in which they died. Woolley's original theory of how the attendants in the death pits died — poisoned, possibly willingly — was disproved when blunt force trauma was identified on the skulls he had preserved and sent to be studied further at the Royal College of Surgeons in London (Molleson 91). The current standing theory is that the individuals found in the pits had been killed violently by a blow to the head with a blunt object, rather than the willing mass-suicide Woolley had initially envisioned (Porter 260).

By using another one of Alekshin et al.'s six informational categories obtained from burial sites and demographic features, we can study the remains found in the Cemetery by looking into the physical characteristics of its individuals. A key finding from the analysis of remains found in the death pits was that many of the individuals had impressions and markings on the bones that are consistent with repetitive, strenuous activities, implying that the individuals found in the pits were familiar with manual labour during their lifetimes, and therefore belonged

to a working-class rather than royal background (Molleson 96). In particular, some individuals were found to have activity markers such as overdeveloped thigh and back muscles, as well as signs of repeated strain to the knee and ankle joints. In this historical context, such indicators of repetitive action most likely resulted from chariot riding (Molleson 99). This finding falls in line with the theory that the occupants of the death pits were part of a 'consort' belonging to the ruler or important figure with whom they were buried. The evidence that the consorts were a working-class group of people, possibly the servants in life of their respective royal figures, further supports the idea that any individuals buried on their own were wealthy and of a separate social class.

An analysis of how the individuals died helps to understand the actual burial practice that the individuals in the Cemetery endured. The revelation that the consorts were killed by blunt force trauma, rather than willing or unwilling suicide by poison, changed the perceptions of the burials entirely. There are many theories as to how this was done, including whether the occupants of the tombs were killed prior or after being positioned in the pits. According to Baadsgaard et al., the damage done to the two preserved skulls happened perimortem, meaning the individuals were killed by the blow to the head. Both skulls, and many other remains found in the death pits, also showed evidence of heat postmortem, indicating that there may have been a practice of heating or smoking the bodies after death but before burial (145). This is consistent with known burial practices in the surrounding area, as a means of offering the deceased to their respective gods (Baadsgaard et al. 146). This implies that the postmortem treatment of the bodies in the Cemetery at Ur may have had religious connotations, further indicating that in Sumerian society, the belief in life after death may have been a feature of their religious beliefs.

Conclusion

There is often a tendency to instantly jump to the most dramatic conclusion upon finding a site like Ur, which, regardless of what theory you apply to it, is quite a gruesome one. The presence of thousands of graves, with bodies piled up in pits at the feet of intricately dressed rulers, can spark the wildest parts of one's imagination. But it is important, particularly when dealing with topics like human sacrifice, to take an analytical approach and step back to examine the historical context in which the events may have taken place. Woolley and the media at the time fell victim to this, and so a shadow was cast for quite some time over the findings at Ur. However, much valuable information can be derived from the findings at Ur, as burial sites can be incredibly helpful in providing clues as to how a society operated and how it progressed. The conclusions derived from the forensic evidence and artifacts found at the Cemetery at Ur can help us form more educated opinions and ideas about ancient Sumerian society and their way of life, not only at Ur, but in the surrounding Near East as well.

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Edited by: Johnnie Wentzel, Mary Kelly, & Laura Derby