

## CHAPTER 13

# UR-UTU'S STORY

## THE MESOPOTAMIAN FAMILY

Ur-Utu hadn't seen the disaster coming. Now foreign tribes were attacking the city. Panic flew through the streets of Sippar. Everyone had to pack up and get out of town. Even though he was a wealthy man and a priest, Ur-Utu had no protection against the invaders. He must have alerted his relatives while his servants wrapped the family's treasures in rugs or cloth bags, ready to run. But before Ur-Utu abandoned his home, he rushed into his study where thousands of written records were kept. How frantic he must have been when he realized how little he could take with him!

Over the years, Ur-Utu had kept letters, contracts for the sale of houses and fields, loan agreements, lists, prayers, and even old school exercise tablets. He probably wanted to take them all, but they were written on clay tablets, most of which were about half an inch thick and about the size of a grown man's hand—too heavy and bulky for him to carry them all. Ur-Utu had to choose.

Because he could read, Ur-Utu was able to glance at each document and quickly decide if it was important enough to save. He tossed many on the floor and picked 49 to take with him. Most were records that proved his ownership of large fields, the main source of his family's wealth. In addition to these receipts, he also chose some loan contracts showing who owed him silver and barley.

Now Ur-Utu *really* had to leave. Probably his house was already on fire. Imagine him choking and coughing as the smoke and flames spread, gathering the chosen documents in his arms . . . stumbling toward the door. And then disaster struck. In his haste, Ur-Utu tripped on two steps between rooms, and the tablets fell to the floor. Ur-Utu gave up. He left the documents where they lay and ran for his life.

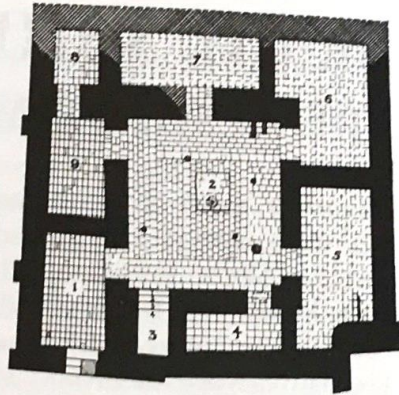
The story of Ur-Utu's escape is not a made-up scene from a Hollywood script. Twentieth-century archaeologists pieced it together when they excavated the Mesopotamian

“ A DOWRY LIST, A MARRIAGE CONTRACT, A PERSONAL LETTER, AND LAWS

People today keep the deed when they buy a house and save the receipts from big purchases, such as laptop computers. These documents are a lot like Mesopotamian records, except that ours are not written on clay.



The rooms in ancient Near Eastern houses opened onto a central courtyard (number 2 in this drawing by archaeologist Leonard Woolley). A windowless wall faced the street to protect the family's privacy and to guard against outside noise and smells.



city of Sippar. They found that the whole city was abandoned after foreign invaders attacked around 1650 BCE. No one ever lived in Ur-Utu's house after he left it, and no one ever came back for the documents. No bones were found, so everyone must have gotten out safely. Ur-Utu's treasured records remained untouched—covered by the broken walls of his house—for thousands of years, until archaeologists began to investigate.

They discovered evidence that the house had been burned. The priest's study was a mess, with records tossed on the floor. They found the most important documents right where Ur-Utu abandoned them: on the floor of a room at the top of two steps.

To find so much about one man and his family is rare, but Ur-Utu's house even had records from his parents' time. From them, we're able to get a glimpse of family life in ancient Mesopotamia. Ur-Utu's father, who also served as a priest, was named Inanna-mansum, and it is his life that the documents tell us most about.

After his parents died, Inanna-mansum came into his inheritance and decided to choose a wife. Marriage in Mesopotamia was an arrangement between families, not a romantic relationship. A man might have met the girl he wanted to marry, but the two of them wouldn't have gone places together. That would have caused a scandal. So when Inanna-mansum chose a young woman named Ilsha-hegalli, he would have visited her father and asked permission to marry her. If the father agreed, the two men would have sat down together to work out an arrangement. We don't know whether Ilsha-hegalli had a choice or not. Like most Meso-

potamian brides, she was probably still a teenager.

Ilsha-hegalli's dad would have wanted to know if Inanna-mansum could support his daughter. And what gift, he would have asked, had Inanna-mansum brought to show that he was serious about his offer of marriage? Inanna-mansum would have asked about the bride's dowry—what wealth would she bring to the marriage? This could be furniture, household goods, land, livestock, or other valuables.

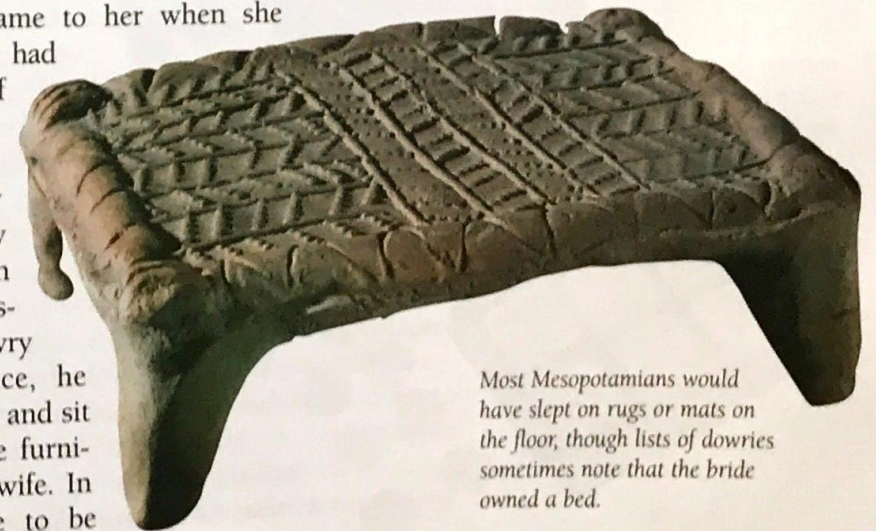
Ilsha-hegalli's dowry was probably similar to one that was described in a document found in Ur-Utu's house. This dowry included:

- 1 slave girl
- 1 bed
- 5 chairs
- 1 . . . grindstone of black basalt [for grinding grain] . . .
- copper cauldrons . . .
- chests . . . [and]
- a splendid garment

“” Dowry list, Iraq, 17th century BCE

Each of these things was expensive. The furnishings were handmade from imported materials, such as fine wood, copper, and basalt.

A Mesopotamian woman's dowry was actually her inheritance, and it came to her when she married. Her brothers had to wait for their share of the property until the deaths of their parents. A woman's dowry remained her property until she passed it on to her children. A husband could use the dowry property. For instance, he could sleep in the bed and sit on the chairs, but the furniture belonged to the wife. In order for a marriage to be



Most Mesopotamians would have slept on rugs or mats on the floor, though lists of dowries sometimes note that the bride owned a bed.

### THE LONGEST NAMES

Mesopotamian names were actually phrases or sentences. Inanna-mansum's name, for instance, meant, "Inanna [goddess of love] has given [this child]." Shulgi meant, "noble young man" and Hammurabi meant, "[the god] Hammu is great" or perhaps "[the god] Hammu heals." Two sons of King Sargon the Great must have been twins because the second one's name meant, "Who is with him?" Perhaps that's what his mother said, in surprise, when the second baby was born. A girl's name might include the name of a god's wife, such as Shamash's wife Aya—"Gift-from-Aya," for example. Many names could be used for either boys or girls.



66 Laws of Hammurabi, around 1755 BCE

66 Marriage contract, Iraq, 17th century BCE

legal, there had to be a contract. Hammurabi's law 128 says: "If a man marries a wife but does not draw up a formal contract for her, that woman is not a wife." In other words, a marriage wasn't legal without a contract. Often the terms of divorce were written right into the marriage document. One contract, written during Ur-Utu's lifetime, decreed: "If [the groom] says to [the bride],... 'You are not my wife,' he must pay half a pound of silver. If [the bride] says to her husband... 'You are not my husband,' they [the authorities] shall tie her up and throw her into the water." Half a pound of silver was 30 shekels—more than two years' salary for a worker. But this was nothing compared to the woman's punishment: she would be killed!

Not all marriage contracts favored the husband this much. Occasionally, a wife could get a divorce by paying her husband a certain amount of silver. Hammurabi's laws made an exception for a good woman who was married to a cruel, wandering husband or one who said bad things about her. Such a woman could take her dowry and go back to her father's house.

After the marriage ceremony, the new bride moved into her husband's home. Often the groom's parents still lived in the same house, and perhaps a brother and his family did, too. Sometimes family members—brothers, uncles, cousins—filled up a whole city block, living in neighboring or connected homes.

A married woman stayed in touch with her parents, brothers, and sisters. She was expected to help them out if they were having trouble of some kind. This was probably true of Ilsha-hegalli, because she had married into a wealthy family. Most likely, she sent gifts to her brothers and sisters as a sign of her love for them. One woman wrote a complaining letter to her married

This board game, found in a royal tomb, looks a lot like checkers—and it was. Players moved the round counters around the squares. (You wouldn't want the dead person to get bored, would you?)



sister: "Send me one hundred locusts and food worth one-sixth of a shekel of silver. In this, I will see your sisterly feelings toward me." Locusts—crunchy insects with wings, related to grasshoppers—were considered to be an especially tasty treat.

The house into which Ilsha-hegalli moved with Inanna-mansum was the same house that later burned down. Visitors would have entered the quiet of the house through a wooden door that led into a central courtyard. In summer, the air was hot and still in the courtyard, even in the shade. There, Ilsha-hegalli would have kept her loom for making the family's clothes. The brick oven where she cooked bread was in the courtyard, too.

Doorways opened from the courtyard to the other rooms, which were relatively cool inside because of the thick, mud-brick walls. These rooms did not have much furniture. Most Mesopotamian houses were decorated with rugs, cushions, and wall hangings, rather than tables and chairs. One room of the house was tiled with baked bricks and probably served as a bathroom. The water would have been brought in from outdoor wells in pottery tubs.

When their family began to grow, Ilsha-hegalli and Inanna-mansum would have worried when their children became ill. Many infants and toddlers died from diseases that are no longer dangerous today. These deaths must have been heartbreaking, and Mesopotamian parents tried to protect their children with chants, prayers, and magical charms that the children wore around their necks. Mothers sang lullabies to try to keep their little ones from crying,

66 Letter, Iraq, 19th to 16th century BCE



When archaeologists excavated Ur-Utu's house, they found the bottoms of walls of the rooms. They figured out how each room had been used by studying the objects found inside.



### ATTACK OF THE KILLER BOO-BOOS

Fifty was old in ancient Mesopotamia. A simple cut or a tooth abscess could become infected and cause death in those days. Child-birth took the lives of many young women, and war ended the lives of many men. There were no vaccines against childhood diseases, and terrible epidemics killed thousands. Still, a few people lived to be old. Hammurabi reigned for 43 years, so he must have been at least 60 when he died. And very, very occasionally, people lived into their 80s or 90s. Someone that old might have been tempted to exaggerate his or her age. After all, there were no birth certificates then—and few others could remember the person's birth. Perhaps this is where the myths came from of people in ancient times living to be hundreds of years old.

because they believed that loud noises made the gods angry.

Unfortunately, the Mesopotamian scribes don't tell us much about childhood. We can guess that, when they were young, Ur-Utu and his brothers and sisters played with toys, such as the balls and clay wagons that archaeologists have found in the tells. Later, Ur-Utu went to a scribal school so that he could follow in his father's footsteps, serving as a priest. Less privileged boys would have learned from their fathers how to manage a farm or a business. Mesopotamian mothers taught their daughters how to grind grain, cook, wash, spin wool, weave cloth, and take care of children.

Few women held jobs outside the home in ancient Mesopotamia, probably because they married as teenagers and usually had big families. Managing the household was a full-time job. But women had more rights than in many other ancient cultures. Unlike Greek women, for example, Mesopotamian women could go out in public, and could even own businesses, such as taverns. Women from wealthy families could become priestesses and could own and control fields and orchards.

When Ur-Utu grew to manhood, he married a woman named Ra'imum, and she came to live in the house with her husband, his parents, his sister, and one of his brothers. Over time, Ur-Utu, as a landowner, became one of the richest men in the city. But then the invaders came. . . . We don't know what happened to Ur-Utu. After his city was abandoned, he may have moved to another town. Did he make a new start somewhere else? Did he live to be old—old enough to tell his grandchildren the story of his dramatic escape?

*A child would have pulled this toy wagon around the house with a string. Archaeologists have also found animal-shaped pull-toys made of clay.*

