

CHAPTER 6

THE DEATH OF A SUMERIAN LADY

QUEENS, KINGS, AND RELIGION IN EARLY CITIES

Rows of necklaces covered Queen Puabi's corpse from her neck to her waist, like a cloak. She wore gold earrings, and her headdress was made of gold ribbons and pendants. Treasures filled her burial room: a golden bowl, clay jars for food, silver lamps, two silver tables, the sculpted head of a cow in silver, and shells containing a green paint—most likely a cosmetic. Puabi must have been very, very rich. Her cylinder seal—the clay stamp that she used to sign her name—showed a banquet scene with people holding cups and the words *Puabi, nin. Nin* meant queen in Sumerian.

In 4,500 years, Puabi's tomb had never been looted by grave robbers. It was not until 1927 that the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley and his team of archaeologists excavating the ancient Sumerian city of Ur found her skeleton resting peacefully among her burial gifts. Woolley wrote in his book on the excavation that she had been buried with "a gold cup in her hand; the upper part of [her] body was entirely hidden by a mass of beads of gold, silver, [and brightly colored stones]."

“ ROYAL TOMBS IN IRAQ, THE SUMERIAN KING LIST, A STONE BOWL FROM IRAQ, AND A SUMERIAN KING'S INSCRIPTION

“ Puabi's headdress from Ur, Iraq, 2500 BCE



The weight of earth in a royal tomb crushed this skull, but the body's remains are still adorned with a head-dress, necklace, and earrings.



They found that the ancient queen, who stood less than five feet tall, had good teeth. This probably means that she didn't eat many sweets and that her bread didn't have much sand in it, which was a problem for poorer people whose flour contained stone dust from the grindstones. Her leg bones show that she spent a lot of time squatting on her heels. Was this how she usually sat?

Two female servants were buried with Puabi, and outside the actual tomb were dozens more skeletons, mostly women. Beautifully dressed and



Leonard Woolley—wearing a suit and surrounded by his wife and local workmen—sits on the ground and records his finds during the excavations at Ur. Archaeologists no longer dress so formally. Suits are definitely out these days.

bejeweled, these people seemed to have just slumped down. Small cups lay near their bodies. Archaeologists believe that they all drank poison in order to follow Puabi into the afterlife. Among the dead was a young musician whose fingers still touched the strings of a small harp. Did she die while playing for Puabi's funeral? Were Puabi's attendants willing to die with her? Were they servants and slaves or members of the royal court?

Puabi was probably the wife or mother of a king or she may have been a priestess who was called a "nin" because of her great power and wealth. Women held some of the highest positions in Mesopotamia from around 2600 to 2300 BCE. This was unusual among ancient civilizations and it continued for hundreds of years. Mesopotamian women eventually lost some of their rights and privileges, but no one knows why.

Puabi was not the only person from Ur to have others buried with her. In the century and a half from 2600 to 2450 BCE, 15 royals were accompanied in death by attendants—74 were found in one royal tomb! The things buried with these attendants—such as lyres, chariots, spears, and axes—tell us that the dead included musicians, soldiers, grooms for the animals, and perhaps ministers of the household.

There were no gold or silver mines in Mesopotamia. So the presence of these valuable metals in Puabi's tomb proves that the people of Ur were already linked with trading partners spread across the Near East. Traders must have brought these raw materials—gold, silver, bronze, and gems—from other places so that local artists and craftsmen could create beautiful jewelry, furniture, grand chariots, and sculpture for wealthy people such as Puabi.

Beginning around 2900 BCE, kings had begun to rule in the southern part of Mesopotamia, which is known as Sumer. And by Puabi's time (about 2500 BCE), kings ruled each of Sumer's major cities, including Ur. Some of the kings had the title *lugal*, which means "big man." *Lugal* became the Sumerian word for king. Perhaps, at first, these men served just during wartime and only later began to rule full time. Scholars would love to know for sure.

THE WILD AND WOOLLEY EAST

The phrase "wild and woolly" usually describes a rambunctious person or a place where unexpected excitement is on the menu every day. When the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley was on the scene, it was usually that way. Woolley explored Roman ruins, spied for the British Foreign Office during World War I, and later worked as an archaeologist in the Middle East. When a member of his archaeological team found something important, he rewarded the person with cash and shot off a round of rifle fire to celebrate.

From 1922 to 1934, Woolley excavated the Sumerian city of Ur with the unusual combination of great patience and boundless energy. He and his team uncovered many of the city's secrets, from its earliest reed huts to its great ziggurat—a temple tower built around 2000 BCE.

64 Sumerian King List, Iraq, around 2100 BCE

A Mesopotamian scribe, writing about 2100 BCE, named some of the early kings on a cuneiform tablet known as the Sumerian King List. He wrote that the idea of kingship was a gift from the gods: “When kingship was lowered from heaven, kingship was first in Eridu,” one of the earliest inhabited cities in Mesopotamia.

According to the King List, the first rulers had unbelievably long reigns: “A-lulim [became] king and ruled 28,800 years. Alagar ruled 36,000 years.” By the time the list was written, the first kings had been dead for centuries. In people’s minds, these kings had become superheroes who had lived almost forever. (They hadn’t, of course. Almost no one on Earth has ever lived to be more than about 120.) The King List describes each king as having ruled the whole land from a particular city, though in fact no king really controlled more than the land around his capital at this time.

The earliest known royal inscription—a king’s proclamation of his greatness—written about 2600 BCE, was by a king who had his name etched on a stone bowl. It read, simply: “Mebaragesi, King of Kish,” an early Mesopotamian city. Mebaragesi was the first king that we know of to use *writing* to mark his existence and his place in the world. The Sumerian King List records his name, but adds *en*, a title of respect that meant “lord”: “En-mebaragesi, the one who carried away as spoil the weapons of the land of Elam, became king, and reigned 900 years.” Elam was a land to the east of Mesopotamia and a long-time enemy of the Mesopotamians.

Kish and Ur were not the only powerful cities in Sumer from 2900 to 2300 BCE. Many small kingdoms dotted the region (modern Iraq), each with a king and his government. Excavations in a city-state called Lagash have uncovered cuneiform texts and inscriptions that tell us more about current events there than any other Sumerian city.

Several inscriptions describe the adventures of Eannatum, a king of Lagash who bragged that “Eannatum, ruler of Lagash, [was] granted strength by Enlil, nourished with special milk by [the goddess] Ninhursag, [and] given a fine name by [the

64 Stone bowl from Khafaje, Iraq, around 2600 BCE

64 Royal Inscription of Eannatum, Iraq, around 2400 BCE

FUZZY DATES

Scholars are not certain about the dates of events in ancient Near Eastern history until about 1000 BCE. Ancient kings used lots of different ways of dating the years in their reigns, and historians try to pin down these dates by connecting them to our modern way of numbering the years. There are several ways to do this: by comparing the histories of two different peoples and by comparing written documents with the evidence found by archaeologists, geologists, astronomers, and chemists. The dates given in this book are the ones that historians have decided to use for now, but they might be wrong, perhaps by as much as one hundred or even two hundred years in some places. The order of events and kings is right, though.

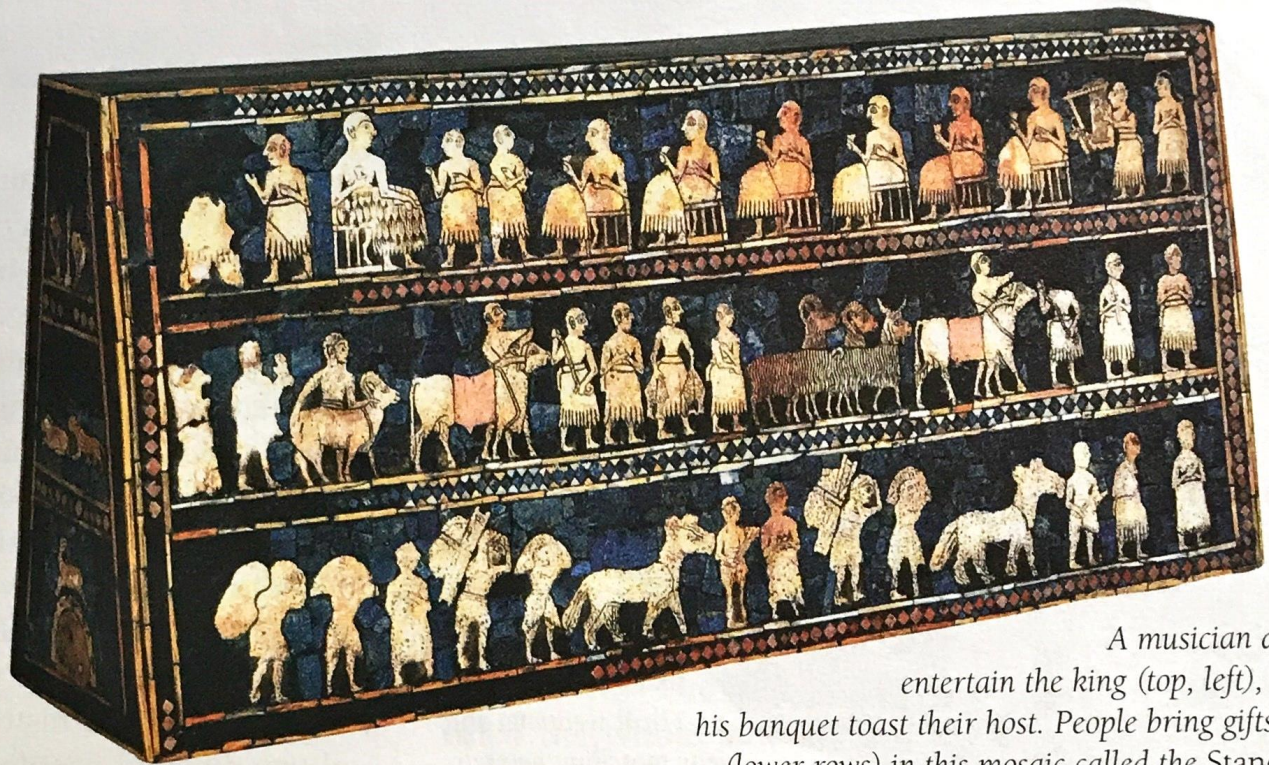


Eannatum's soldiers carry identical weapons and wear matching helmets. Marching in formation, with their shields overlapping and spears ready for battle, they would have terrified their enemies.

god] Nanshe.” He claimed that the gods had always been on his side. The clay tablets found in his cities also tell us a lot about the wars that he fought and the way he organized his kingdom. The scribes kept track of everything.

As the Sumerian cities of southern Mesopotamia became richer, better organized, and more warlike, they also became better protected. Their leaders built high walls around the cities and fortified the city gates. In order to build walls, palaces, and temples and to dig canals, the kings almost certainly called upon the residents for their labor. Men were probably drafted to work for a given time on community projects. The royal household used cuneiform tablets to list the workers’ names, the days of their service, and the amount of barley that each one was given.

Some of the first organized governments in the world were born in these early Sumerian city-states, and this is one of ancient Mesopotamia’s great legacies. The Mesopotamian kings were among the first leaders who tried to convince their people that they really *needed* kings and that the gods



A musician and a singer entertain the king (top, left), as guests at his banquet toast their host. People bring gifts to the king (lower rows) in this mosaic called the Standard of Ur.

CHANGE ALL THE HISTORY BOOKS!

Until late in the 20th century, historians of the Near East writing about the third millennium BCE (the 2000s) focused mostly on Mesopotamia. They believed that the rest of the region had only small farming villages at that time. Recently, though, excavations in Syria have shown that small kingdoms flourished there at the same time as the city-states in Mesopotamia. They, too, had local kings, trading networks, and armies.

liked the idea, too. Kings were especially useful when foreign enemies attacked. Sometimes cities in southern Mesopotamia joined together to fight a common enemy, but it would be many years before any city became strong enough to force the others into forming a single kingdom under a single ruling power.

Although the governments of these cities were independent of one another at this time, their people had a lot in common. They shared the same religion. They spoke the same languages: Sumerian in the south and Akkadian farther north. (In many cities, people spoke both languages.) What's more, they built their houses and temples in the same ways, they ate from the same types of pottery, they used the same writing system, and they even wore the same styles of jewelry. Did ancient traveling salesmen market their wares by inviting the wealthy Mesopotamians to buy necklaces—just like the ones that Queen Puabi wore?