

Ur

Ur (Sumerian: *Urim*,^[1] Sumerian Cuneiform: URIM₂^{K1} or URIM₅^{K1},^[2] Akkadian: *Uru*^[3]) was an important Sumerian city-state in ancient Mesopotamia located at the site of modern Tell el-Muqayyar in Iraq's Dhi Qar Governorate.^[4] Once a coastal city near the mouth of the Euphrates on the Persian Gulf, Ur is now well inland, south of the Euphrates on its right bank, 16 kilometres (9.9 mi) from Nasiriyah.^[5]

The city dates from the Ubaid period circa 3800 BC, and is recorded in written history as a City State from the 26th century BC, its first recorded king being Mesh-Ane-pada. The city's patron deity was Nanna (in Akkadian Sin), the Sumerian and Akkadian (Assyrian-Babylonian) moon god, and the name of the city is in origin derived from the god's name, URIM₂^{K1} being the classical Sumerian spelling of LAK-32.UNUG^{K1}, literally "the abode (UNUG) of Nanna (LAK-32)".^[6]

The site is marked by the ruins of the Ziggurat of Ur, which contained the shrine of Nanna, excavated in the 1930s. The temple was built in the 21st century BC (short chronology), during the reign of Ur-Nammu and was reconstructed in the 6th century BC by Nabonidus, (the Assyrian born last king of Babylon) in the 6th century BC. The ruins cover an area of 1,200 metres (3,900 ft) northwest to southeast by 800 metres (2,600 ft) northeast to southwest and rise up to about 20 metres (66 ft) above the present plain level.^[7]

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History

Archaeologists have discovered evidence of an early occupation at Ur during the Ubaid period. These early levels were sealed off with a sterile deposit that was interpreted by excavators of the 1920s as evidence for the Great Flood of the book of Genesis and Epic of Gilgamesh . It is now understood that the South Mesopotamian plain was exposed to regular floods from the Euphrates and the Tigris, with heavy erosion from water and wind, which may have given rise to the Mesopotamian and derivative Biblical Great Flood

beliefs.^[8] The further occupation of Ur only becomes clear during its emergence in the third millennium BC (although it must already have been a growing urban center during the fourth millennium). The third millennium BC is generally described as the Early Bronze Age of Mesopotamia, which ends approximately after the demise of the Third Dynasty of Ur in the 21st century BC.

Third millennium BC (Early Bronze Age)



[Mesopotamia](#) in the 3rd millennium BC.

There are two main sources which inform scholars about the importance of Ur during the Early Bronze Age. The first is a large body of [cuneiform](#) documents, mostly from the empire of the so-called [Third Dynasty of Ur](#) at the very end of the third millennium. This was the most centralized bureaucratic state the world had yet known. Concerning the earlier centuries, the [Sumerian King List](#) provides a tentative political history of ancient [Sumer](#).

The second source of [information](#) is archaeological work in modern [Iraq](#). Although the early centuries (first half of the third millennium and earlier) are still poorly understood, the archaeological discoveries have shown unequivocally that Ur was a major urban center on the Mesopotamian plain. Especially the discovery of the Royal Tombs have confirmed its splendour. These tombs, which date to the Early Dynastic IIIa period (approximately in the 25th or 24th century BC), contained immense amounts of luxury items made out of precious metals, and semi-precious stones all of which would have had to be imported from long distances ([Iran](#), [Afghanistan](#), [India](#), [Asia Minor](#), the [Persian Gulf](#)).^[7] This up to then unparalleled wealth is a testimony of Ur's economic importance during the Early Bronze Age.^[9]

Archaeological research of the region has also contributed greatly to our understanding of the landscape and long-distance interactions that took place during these ancient times. We know that Ur was the most important port on the Persian Gulf, which extended much further inland than it does today. All the wealth which came to Mesopotamia by sea had to pass through Ur.^[citation needed]

So far evidence for the earliest periods of the Early Bronze Age in Mesopotamia is very limited. [Mesh-Anepada](#) is the first king mentioned in the Sumerian King List, and appears to have lived in the 26th century BC. That Ur was an important urban centre already then seems to be indicated by a type of [cylinder seal](#) called the City Seals. These seals contain a set of [proto-cuneiform](#) signs which appear to be writings or symbols of the name of city-states in ancient Sumer. Many of these seals were found in Ur, and the name of Ur is prominent on them.^[10]



Empire of the Third Dynasty of Ur

The third dynasty was established when the king [Ur-Nammu](#) came to power, ruling between ca. 2047 BC and 2030 BC. During his rule, temples, including the ziggurat, were built, and agriculture was improved through [irrigation](#). His code of laws, the [Code of Ur-Nammu](#) (a fragment was identified in [Istanbul](#) in 1952) is one of the oldest such documents known, preceding the [code of Hammurabi](#) by 300 years. He and his successor [Shulgi](#) were both deified during their reigns, and after his death he continued as a hero-figure: one of the surviving works of Sumerian literature describes the death of Ur-Nammu and his journey to the underworld.^[11] About that time, the houses in the city were two-storied villas with 13 or 14 rooms, with plastered interior walls.^{[12][dubious – discuss]}

Ur-Nammu was succeeded by Shulgi, the greatest king of the Third Dynasty of Ur who solidified the hegemony of Ur and reformed the empire into a highly centralized bureaucratic state. Shulgi ruled for a long time (at least 42 years) and deified himself halfway through his rule.^[citation needed]

The Ur empire continued through the reigns of three more kings with [Semitic Akkadian](#) names,^[8] [Amar-Sin](#), [Shu-Sin](#), and [Ibbi-Sin](#). It fell around 1940 BC to the [Elamites](#) in the 24th [regnal year](#) of Ibbi-Sin, an event commemorated by the [Lament for Ur](#).^{[13][14]}

According to one estimate, Ur was the largest city in the world from c. 2030 to 1980 BC. Its population was approximately 65,000.^[15]

2011 research indicates that the area was struck by drought conditions from 2200-2000 BCE. The population dropped by 93%. Ur was sacked twice by nomads during this time. At the end of this drought use of the Sumerian language died out.^[16]

Later Bronze Age

The city of Ur lost its political power after the demise of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Nevertheless its important position which kept on providing access to the Persian Gulf ensured the ongoing economical importance of the city during the second millennium BC. The splendour of the city, the might of the empire, the greatness of king Shulgi, and undoubtedly the efficient propaganda of the state endured throughout Mesopotamian history. Shulgi was a well known historical figure for at least another two thousand years, while historical narratives of the Mesopotamian societies of [Assyria](#) and [Babylonia](#) kept names, events, and mythologies in remembrance. The city came to be ruled by [Babylon](#) which rose to prominence in southern Mesopotamia in

the 18th century BC. It later became a part of the *Dynasty of the Sealand* after the death of the Babylonian emperor [Hammurabi](#), and was reconquered into Babylonia by the [Kassites](#) in the 16th century BC.

Iron Age

The city, along with the rest of southern Mesopotamia and much of the [Near East](#), [Asia Minor](#), [North Africa](#) and southern [Caucasus](#), fell to the north Mesopotamian [Assyrian Empire](#) from the 10th to late 7th centuries BC. From the end of the 7th century BC Ur was ruled by the so-called [Chaldean](#) Dynasty of [Babylon](#). In the 6th century BC there was new construction in Ur under the rule of [Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon](#). The last Babylonian king, [Nabonidus](#) (who was Assyrian born, and not a Chaldean), improved the ziggurat. However the city started to decline from around 550 BC and was no longer inhabited after about 500 BC by which time Babylonia had fallen to the [Persian Achaemenid Empire](#).^[6] The demise of Ur was perhaps owing to drought, changing river patterns, and the silting of the outlet to the [Persian Gulf](#).

Biblical Ur

Main article: [Ur Kasdim](#)

Ur is considered by many to be the city of [Ur Kasdim](#) mentioned in the [Book of Genesis](#) ([Biblical Hebrew](#) אור) as the birthplace of the [Hebrew](#) patriarch Abram ([Abraham](#); [Aramaic](#): Oraham, [Arabic](#): Ibrahim), traditionally believed to be sometime in the 2nd millennium BC.

Ur is mentioned four times in the [Torah](#) or [Old Testament](#), with the distinction "of the Kasdim/Kasdin"—traditionally rendered in English as "Ur of the Chaldees". The [Chaldeans](#) were already settled in the vicinity by around 850 BC, but were not the rulers of Ur until the late 7th century BC. The name is found in [Genesis 11:28](#), [Genesis 11:31](#), and [Genesis 15:7](#). In [Nehemiah](#) 9:7, a single passage mentioning Ur is a paraphrase of [Genesis](#). ([Nehemiah 9:7](#))

The [Book of Jubilees](#) states that Ur was founded in 1688 *Anno Mundi* (year of the world) by 'Ur son of Kesed, presumably the offspring of [Arphaxad](#), adding that in this same year wars began on Earth.

"And 'Ur, the son of Kesed, built the city of 'Ara of the Chaldees, and called its name after his own name and the name of his father." (i.e., *Ur Kasdim*) ([Jubilees 11:3](#)).

Ur in Islamic tradition

According to Islamic texts, the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) was thrown into the fire here. In the story, the temperature of the fire of [Nimrod](#) was reduced by God, saving the life of Ibrahim. While the [Qur'an](#) does not mention the king's name, Muslim commentators have assigned Nimrod as the king based on Jewish sources, namely the [Book of Jasher](#) (11:1 and 12:6).^[17]

Archaeology





Archeological excavations at [Tell el-Mukayyar, Iraq](#)

In 1625, the site was visited by [Pietro della Valle](#), who recorded the presence of ancient bricks stamped with strange symbols, cemented together with [bitumen](#), as well as inscribed pieces of black marble that appeared to be [seals](#).

The site was first excavated in 1853 and 1854 by John George Taylor, British [vice consul](#) at Basra from 1851-1859.^{[18][19][20]} He worked on behalf of the [British Museum](#). He had been instructed to do so by the Foreign Office. Taylor found clay cylinders in the four corners of the top stage of the ziggurat which bore an inscription of [Nabonidus](#) (*Nabuna`id*), the last king of Babylon (539 BC), closing with a prayer for his son Belshar-uzur (Bel-šarra-Uzur), the [Belshazzar](#) of the [Book of Daniel](#). Evidence was found of prior restorations of the ziggurat by [Ishme-Dagan](#) of Isin and [Shu-Sin](#) of Ur, and by [Kurigalzu](#), a [Kassite](#) king of Babylon in the 14th century BCE. [Nebuchadnezzar](#) also claims to have rebuilt the temple. Taylor further excavated an interesting Babylonian building, not far from the temple, part of an ancient Babylonian [necropolis](#). All about the city he found abundant remains of burials of later periods. Apparently, in later times, owing to its sanctity, Ur became a favorite place of [sepulchres](#), so that even after it had ceased to be inhabited, it continued to be used as a necropolis.

Typical of the era, his excavations destroyed information and exposed the tell. Natives used the now loosened 4000 year old bricks and tile for construction for the next 75 years while the site lay unexplored.^{[21][dubious - discuss]}

After Taylor's time the site was visited by numerous travelers, almost all of whom have found ancient Babylonian remains, inscribed stones and the like, lying upon the surface. The site was considered rich in remains, and relatively easy to explore. After some soundings were made in 1918 by [Reginald Campbell Thompson](#), H. R. Hill worked the site for one season for the British Museum in 1919, laying the groundwork for more extensive efforts to follow.^{[22][23]}

Excavations from 1922 to 1934 were funded by the [British Museum](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and led by the [archaeologist](#) Sir [Charles Leonard Woolley](#).^{[24][25][26]} A total of about 1,850 burials were uncovered, including 16 that were described as "royal tombs" containing many valuable artifacts, including the [Standard of Ur](#). Most of the royal tombs were dated to about 2600 BC. The finds included the unlooted tomb of a queen thought to be Queen [Puabi](#)^[27]—the name is known from a cylinder [seal](#) found in the tomb, although there were two other different and unnamed seals found in the tomb. Many other people had been buried with her, in a form of human sacrifice. Near the [ziggurat](#) were uncovered the temple E-nun-mah and buildings E-dub-lal-mah (built for a king), E-gi-par (residence of the high priestess) and E-hur-sag (a temple building). Outside the temple area, many houses used in everyday life were found. Excavations were also made below the royal tombs layer: a 3.5-metre (11 ft)-thick layer of alluvial clay covered the remains of earlier habitation, including [pottery](#) from the [Ubaid period](#), the first stage of settlement in southern Mesopotamia. Woolley later wrote many articles and books about the discoveries.^[28] One of Woolley's assistants on the site was the archaeologist [Max Mallowan](#). The discoveries at the site reached the headlines in mainstream media in the world with the discoveries of the Royal Tombs. As a result the ruins of the ancient city attracted many visitors. One of these visitors was the already famous [Agatha Christie](#) who as a result of this visit became the wife of Max Mallowan.

Most of the treasures excavated at Ur are in the British Museum and the [University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology](#). At the UPenn Museum the exhibition Iraq's Ancient

Past,^[29] which includes many of the most famous pieces from the Royal Tombs, opened to visitors in late Spring 2011. Previously, the Penn Museum had sent many of its best pieces from Ur on tour in an exhibition called "Treasures From the Royal Tombs of Ur." It traveled to eight American museums, including those in Cleveland, Washington and Dallas, ending the tour at the Detroit Institute of Art in May 2011.

In 2009, an agreement was reached for a joint University of Pennsylvania and Iraqi team to resume archaeological work at the site of Ur.^[30]

Archaeological remains

Though some of the areas that were cleared during modern excavations have sanded over again, the [Great Ziggurat](#) is fully cleared and stands as the best-preserved and most visible landmark at the site.^[31] The famous Royal tombs, also called the Neo-[Sumerian](#) Mausolea, located about 250 metres (820 ft) south-east of the Great Ziggurat in the corner of the wall that surrounds the city, are nearly totally cleared. Parts of the tomb area appear to be in need of structural consolidation or stabilization.

There are [cuneiform](#) (Sumerian writing) on many walls, some entirely covered in script stamped into the mud-bricks. The text is sometimes difficult to read, but it covers most surfaces. Modern [graffiti](#) has also found its way to the graves, usually in the form of names made with coloured pens (sometimes they are carved). The Great Ziggurat itself has far more graffiti, mostly lightly carved into the bricks. The graves are completely empty. A small number of the tombs are accessible. Most of them have been cordoned off. The whole site is covered with pottery debris, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to set foot anywhere without stepping on some. Some have colours and paintings on them. Some of the "mountains" of broken pottery are debris that has been removed from excavations. Pottery debris and human remains form many of the walls of the royal tombs area. It can only be speculated whether this is of ancient making or modern restoration, but it is a fact that they are, literally, filled up with pottery debris.^[citation needed]

In May 2009, the [United States Army](#) returned the Ur site to the Iraqi authorities, who hope to develop it as a tourist destination.^[32]

Preservation

Since 2009, [non-profit organization Global Heritage Fund](#) (GHF) has been working to protect and preserve Ur against problems of erosion, neglect, inappropriate restoration, and war and conflict. GHF's stated goal for the project is to create an informed and scientifically-grounded Master Plan to guide the site's long-term conservation and management, which will enable sustainability and can serve as a model for other sites' stewardship.^[33]