

THE DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN IRAQ



Edited by
Peter G. Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly

Foreword by Robert Fisk

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The Damage Sustained to the Ancient City of Ur

ABDULAMIR HAMDANI

IMPORTANCE AND GLOBAL VALUE

The Sumerian City of Ur is considered by many to hold a central position in the development of human history, playing a crucial role in consolidating the emergence and components of civilisation resulting from the interaction between nature and humankind. Arab historians and geographers also refer to it as Qamrinah (city of the Moon), and Thi-Qar, a reference to the extensive use of tar in its buildings (Fig 1).

The results of Leonard Woolley's excavations consolidated Ur's claim to fame by demonstrating the grandeur of Sumerian achievements in the field of construction, examples of which can be seen in the ziggurat and the building of temples and palaces, as well as the standard attained in sculpture and ceramic manufacture, and also the clay tablets which show the degree of progress and development of Sumerian thought in literature, science, astrology and mathematics.

Ur was considered a regional religious centre, where important gods such as Nannar (god of the moon), Anu (god of the heavens), En-ki (god of earth) and the goddess Nin-Gal (wife of Nannar) were worshipped. It was in the early period of occupation, c 4000 BC that the early Sumerians established the principles of irrigation, developed agriculture and made use of metals, particularly copper. Later, in the second, or pre-dynastic or flood period, that of Jamdat-Nasr c 2900 BC, achievements included the emergence of writing, and a heightened understanding of architecture. After a period of decline, the final period of Ur's history was the dynastic period (2800–2400 BC) which started with the first Dynasty of Ur which ruled for 177 years, with five kings, the most famous of whom was Miss-Ani-Padda.

The second Ur Dynasty ruled for 108 years and saw the reign of four kings. Ur regained its position among the cities of the region with the rise of the third Ur Dynasty (2113–2006 BC), under the leadership of its founder Ur-Nammu (2113–2096 BC), who is famous for strengthening Ur as a regional power. Four kings succeeded him; his son Shulgi (2096–2048 BC), his son Amar-Sin (2047–2039 BC), his brother Shu-Sin



FIG 1: AERIAL PHOTO OF UR ZIGGURAT AND TEMPLES QUARTER

(2038–2030 BC) and his son Abbi-Sin (2029–2006 BC). This is considered the golden age in which Ur reached the height of its splendour in every aspect of art and technology – such as the architectural developments of the arch and vault (which are evident in the temple of E-Dub-lal-makh– and the Royal tomb of King Shulgi) as well as in sculpture, gold work, marquetry and the production of intricately designed cylindrical seals. The Sumerian language was considered the language of governance and literature. Its authority spread to include southern and middle Iraq, the country of Elam and the shores of the Arab Gulf. Finally the city fell into the hands of the Elamites who took Abbi-Sin, last king of the third dynasty, as a prisoner to Elam. This ended the regional influence of Ur.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

The city of Ur is situated 380km south-east of Baghdad near the main highway linking Kuwait, Iraq and Jordan. It has several notable landmarks, amongst which is a three-floor decorated ziggurat built by King Ur-Nammu and completed by his son Shulgi for the worship of god Nannar (Sin), god of the moon. At present, two floors remain at a height of 17.25m. There are also several temples scattered across the site, the largest of which, measuring 95 x 50m, is the Gig-Par-Ku temple which dates back to King Amarsen. The E-Dub-Lal-Makh is another temple which holds above one of its doors the oldest example of a brick-built arch in Mesopotamia. Other temples at the city of Ur built during the third dynasty are the Temple of E-En-Ki and the Temple of E-Nun-Makh. The latter was dedicated to the worship of the god Nannar during the Assyrian period.

In addition to temples, the city of Ur contains royal palaces, such as the Palace of Shulgi E-Kur-Sag and the Palace of Nabunaid. Ur also has the royal burial site in which the tombs of the two kings Shulgi and Amar-Sen have been uncovered.

Dwellings from the period of Isin-Larsa and the Babylonian period are another significant feature found in Ur. Evidence of a unique Mesopotamian urban design is notable in the arrangement of these dwellings separated by alleyways that lead to a central point. Babylonian dwellings were built using tiles while the foundations of the Isin-Larsa houses were built out of adobe and clay and the upper part out of bricks, tiles and clay.

CONSERVATION OF THE REMAINS

These startling remains have been neglected for the past four decades. The last major maintenance work was carried out in 1961 and the extant ruins are in desperate need of conservation and restoration. This is especially true of the royal tombs which may collapse at any time. Much of this maintenance is required to deal with natural phenomena, such as rainwater run-off and wind. Other problems have been caused by conservation work carried out in the 1920s where, for example, concrete laid by the excavation expedition on top of the walls to protect them from the rain, has exerted pressure on the walls and foundations that has led to the formation of cavities inside the walls which, in turn, have caused them to buckle and tilt (Fig 2). The site is in dire need of a temporary protective roof to mitigate the worst of these problems.

While the Saddam regime neglected the conservation of the archaeological site, a number of intrusive asphalt roads were built in and around the ancient city. These appear to have been constructed for political reasons – for example a road that led to a building controversially attributed to the prophet Abraham, that was built for a Papal visit that never took place.

FIG 2: DAMAGE DUE TO UNSCIENTIFIC MAINTENANCE, AND USING EXTRANEOUS MATERIAL IN MAINTENANCE SUCH AS CEMENT, GRAVEL, AND MODERN BRICKS



THE IMPACT OF THE MILITARY

Significant damage has occurred at Ur over the last few decades as a result of military activity. The first major problem has been caused by the establishment, under the Saddam regime, of a military air base with army barracks and the deployment of military units in the vicinity of the archaeological site. The air base, still in use by Coalition forces, is approximately 3km south west of Ur, where, for the last three decades, the continuous activity of military fighters, helicopters and freight aircraft whose activities and noise produce vibrations, have caused fissions and cracking in the walls and roofs of the archaeological remains.

Such damage has occurred in the walls of the ziggurat, in the remaining parts of its third floor, and in the E-Dub-lal-makh temple nearby, as well as in the walls and roofs of the royal tomb. Saddam's Iraqi army had constructed its military barracks from bricks and roofed them with reinforced concrete, inside and around the archaeological city where it deployed a battalion for anti-aircraft air defence at a distance of only 400m to the north-east of the ziggurat in places not previously excavated.

The city became an area for military training in which was built a garage and a workshop for the repair of tyres and military equipment. In addition to the above, another vast building was constructed to store chemicals, with a room for chemical decontamination. Heavy and medium armour such as cannons, anti-aircraft batteries, radar units, Russian SAM missiles and self-propelled missiles were deployed around the ziggurat and in the vicinity of the Temple quarter, in order to attack the US/UK Alliance's aircraft during their raids and sorties in the period between 1991 and 2003. The city was damaged in February 1991 during a night-time air raid by American planes in response to one of them being hit by Iraqi anti-aircraft fire. The damage from this incident can still be seen on the southern side of the ziggurat, on the middle staircase, and on the two side towers. The American fire also hit and damaged the Temple quarter and the royal palace.

Since 2003, the presence of the multinational Coalition forces (American, Italian, Romanian and others) deployed in both the former Iraqi bases and newly constructed bases near the archaeological remains has caused further damage. Coalition troops frequently visit the archaeological remains without any restraint and their presence, driving heavy military vehicles across the site and wearing heavy boots as they trespass on the buildings, has actually changed parts of the landscape and has, almost certainly, destroyed or damaged yet unexcavated artefacts and buildings – usually, lest we forget, made only of baked or unbaked clay, and still buried under the soil (see Plate 7).

Damage can be seen on the ziggurat stairs and on the remains of its third floor, as well as on the stairs of the royal tomb and some of its walls made from tiles or clay blocks. In addition, American forces continued the construction of significant new facilities between the archaeological remains of the city and Daqdaqa Hill, which being only 1500m to its south is practically a part of it, and which may have been the old river bed of the Euphrates. The remains of this part of the old city and its immediate environs have

been lost forever as the construction of inspection points, road blocks and watch towers has damaged and changed the land irretrievably.

It should also be noted that the presence of Coalition forces leaves the airbase open to constant exposure of attack by mortar shells, which are usually fired from the northern side of the archaeological city. This undoubtedly causes further damage. In many instances, these shells stray or may have a shorter range than expected and fall in the proximity or actually inside the archaeological city or near the houses of the guards employed to protect the site. For example, on 1 September 2006, when I was at the site collecting information for this chapter, the site was hit by several shells, two of which fell between the ziggurat and the site guard's house.

The presence of military units, whatever their nationality, and their associated buildings in the vicinity of, or actually within, archaeological sites impacts negatively on these sites and is not commensurate with the sites' status as educational cultural sites that ought to be protected, respected and cared for. Such care is precisely what the military does not deliver, as its agenda simply does not cater for such considerations. If military aims and objectives, during and after wars, fail to take into consideration the protection of archaeological sites, then the military will ignore and sacrifice the latter with nonchalance and without a second thought.

In addition, the deployment of military units near to and within archaeological sites deprives the local population, and those with a specialist interest in the archaeology of the area, of the chance to visit, view and work with the culture of past ages. Such military presence also makes it impossible to excavate at the site or to engage with the preservation or restoration of the sites, let alone denying the opportunity to develop the sites as tourist venues. Under these circumstances, given the significant military deployment in the area, it could be understandable that UNESCO's World Heritage Committee hesitate to inscribe Ur on the World Heritage List.

RECENT EVENTS OF 2007

The bombardment on the Tallil air base, located behind the ziggurat at Ur, by armed groups, has intensified from about one attack per month to one per week, and the number of mortar shells launched every attack has increased from two to six. Some of these mortar shells hit the ancient city, as happened in January 2007, when shelling damaged an excavated area within the site, 100m south east of the ziggurat, affecting an area of around 50m², in the area surrounding the temples. There are fears that shelling will hit the royal cemetery – already in a precarious state and close to collapse due to natural phenomena and the lack of protective conservation – which is very susceptible to damage because of its fragile nature.

There is now an official and popular campaign in place, calling for Coalition forces to be redeployed away from the archaeologically sensitive areas of the Ur site, to facilitate the arrival of archaeological and other specialist staff to provide the desperately needed archaeological and architectural conservation required.