

PETR CHARVÁT

SIGNS FROM SILENCE

UR OF THE FIRST
SUMERIANS

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Ur of the First Sumerians

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To Elena Charvátová, my mother

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FOREWORD

This is a book on the early history of ancient Mesopotamia, describing the story of the Sumerian city of Ur before the well-known “Royal graves” of the 27th pre-Christian century (c. 3000–2700 B.C.).

All through my career in Assyriology and Oriental Archaeology I have been fascinated by the phenomenon of the “Royal graves” of Ur. It goes without saying that I was not alone in this; such distinguished names as Leonard (later Sir Leonard) Woolley, Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie, Sidney Smith, Hans-Jörg Nissen, Susan Pollock, Roger Moorey, Richard Zettler, Holly Pittman or Gianni Marchesi all belong to personages that were, in one way or another, involved in the excavation and interpretation of this unique source for the early history of Sumer, and at the same time fascinated by the light that these treasures of the past shed on the early history of mankind.

Only very recently did I realize with some amazement that my investigations of Early Dynastic Ur have begun more than thirty years ago (*Charvát 1979; Charvát 1982; Charvát 1993; Charvát 2002; Charvát 2011b*). However, good fortune showered mercy on me, and brought me the chance to obtain deeper knowledge of all the problems of early Ur, only after the year 2000 A.D.

My stay in the U.S., where I worked in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia precisely on the Ur materials in 2003–2004 as a John William Fulbright fellow, opened me the door to a closer study of the Ur finds, including a firsthand experience with items from the “Royal graves” and some of the household articles that Her Majesty, Lady Puabi (or Puabum, as my learned friend and colleague Gianni Marchesi would have it) took with her on her voyage to eternity. In Philadelphia, I had the occasion to profit from the friendliness and kind help of Richard Zettler and Shannon White, of the Near Eastern Section of the abovementioned Museum. My daily *pied-à-terre*, however, was the Tablet Room of the Babylonian Section of the said Museum, and here I must with gratefulness acknowledge the amity and heartfelt assistance of Barry Eichler, then Director of the Babylonian Section, Steve Tinney, its present Director, Philip Jones, Fumi Karahashi, Richard Palmer, Ann Guinan and especially my very dear colleague and friend Erle Leichty.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to Holly Pittman, who spared no effort to be of assistance to me at Philadelphia, and who put me in contact with Sara Jarmer Scott, another personage to which I feel bound by gratitude. Sara has put very generously at my disposal her doctoral dissertation on the SIS sealings of Ur, in which she treated all the currently accesible materials from Ur in Philadelphia and London.

I feel deeply convinced that the key to the unravelling the mystery of the “Royal graves” phenomenon lies in our understanding of the society that produced them, and that in its historical dimension. What was this society like? Did it enjoy an assured subsistence level, or were its members living on the brink of starvation? What social structures did this society build? How did it make its decisions, who were the persons and/or institutions of authority? Did the Ur kingdom (for at that time I conceived of it as of such) merit the designation of “Oriental despotism”? What role did religion play in the public life of archaic Ur? Not until we know more about all this can an attempt to solve the mysteries guarded so well by those who went down into the “Royal graves” of Ur be succesful.

In the endeavour undertaken in this book, my attention focuses particularly on the mass of seal impressions found in what Leonard Woolley called the “Seal Impression Strata” (henceforth abbreviated as SIS) of Ur, comprised between the so-called “Jamdat Nasr cemetery” as a lower chronological margin and the extensive burial ground containing the “Royal graves” as the upper chronological margin. These sealings constitute historical sources of unique character. Their reverses supply much precious archaeological information. Bearing inscriptions, they also give historical evidence, and the images carved in them present a priceless source material of iconographic character.

Having resolved to find as comprehensive answers to these questions as can be put forward, I managed to obtain materials in Philadelphia with the help of which I intended to tackle the whole complex of problems. As I proceeded with the study, it became clearer and clearer that an important source group will have to be addressed – namely the inscriptions on the SIS sealings. This necessitated one more trip to Philadelphia, where I spent the summer of the year 2005 thanks to a grant from the American Philosophical Society, working in the Tablet Room to see through the skeleton information supplied by the inscriptions on SIS seals.

All the necessary materials being then at my disposal, I looked forward to sit down to work on them. The fate, alas, decided otherwise. Turbulences of practical life induced me to leave the Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic at Prague, where I had been working until the end of 2005, and to seek employment in a new and dynamic University of West Bohemia at Pilsen, which offered me a post thanks to the obligingness

of the then Head of the Department of Anthropology, Ivo Budil. After 2005, Prague reserved for me a half-post at the Faculty of Education of Charles University, and a fraction of a post in my research base of yore where I had spent my formative years as a scholar, the Archaeological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, v. v. i. I am sorry to say that this link with the “cradle” of my academic career came to an end in 2011. Putting into operation a new series of university courses, and settling down to new tasks and routines, commanded more of my time and energy than I had thought previously. Nevertheless, I could at least initiate, and bring to an end, two research projects focusing on ancient Mesopotamian history after 2005. In these we concentrated on the relations between rulers and deities of ancient Mesopotamia (Šašková-Pecha-Charvát 2010), and on connections between the rulers and the ruled in the antiquity of the Land of Two Rivers (Charvát-Maříková Vlčková 2010). At this point I have to render deeply felt thanks to my learned colleagues and friends who made all this possible by exercising themselves, often to the utmost: Lukáš Pecha, Kateřina Šašková, Petra Maříková Vlčková, and Jana Mynářová.

At a point where I nearly despaired over the heap of Ur materials lying still on my shelves, the *Internationales Kolleg MORPHOMATA* of the University of Cologne, Germany, appeared on the scene as if prompted by a superior force. Having been asked whether I would have anything to contribute to the MORPHOMATA research programme – *Genese, Dynamik und Medialität kultureller Figurationen* – I suddenly realized that here was a fair chance to rescue my Ur evidence from oblivion, and to bring my efforts, which had by then extended over eight years, finally to fruition. The project which I submitted was kindly approved by the *Beirat* of MORPHOMATA, and so I could happily dedicate myself to research on Ur in the hospitable and friendly ambience of the *Kolleg*, situated in a quiet neighbourhood abounding in greenery within the justly famous city of Köln am Rhein. Having seen the tombstones of Roman soldiers of African and Indian origin in the *Römisch-Germanischen Museum* of Köln, I feel sure that I have been preceded by other Oriental or Orientalist personages at Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippina. Yet, I must say that during the year 2011–2012, support extended to me by the MORPHOMATA helped me to write this book in which I render account of my efforts aimed at deepening our knowledge of the emergence, and stabilization, of statehood in human history. Again, I have to declare my debt of gratitude both to MORPHOMATA, especially in the persons of its both Directors, Dietrich Boschung and Günther Blamberger, as well as to my friends at home who kindly took it upon themselves to bear the burden of extra work due to my absence from Pilsen. This goes especially for *Spectabilis* Pavel Vařeka, Dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of West Bohemia at Pilsen, and to Daniel Křížek, my faithful Deputy Head at the Department of Near Eastern Studies

of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of West Bohemia at Pilsen; I must not forget Eva Fürbachová and especially Iveta Nocarová, the indefatigable Secretaries of our Department.

I feel obliged to thank at least three of my *confratribus consorioribusque pro Oriente Antiquo militantibus*, though I owe much to many of these. Walther Salaberger of the Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München was always ready to help myself and all the Pilsen team by going to Pilsen to lecture our students, by giving expert advice and, most obligingly, by admitting us to study in the perfectly furnished Library of his Institute at München. Jean-Marie Durand of the Collège de France has kindly consented to my study visits to the Library of the Cabinet d'Assyriologie upon the venerable Mont-Sainte-Geneviève in the Quartier Latin, where so many wise men and women made their contributions to the world of learning. Giacomo Benati of the University of Turin has been kind enough to read the archaeological part of this book and add a number of valuable comments, for which I am most grateful to him.

It is right and proper that an Orientalist publication should render homage to those next-of-kin to the author. My thanks go to all my family, my sons Jan and Ondřej, daughters-in-law Lenka and Eva, grandsons Antonín, Kryštof, Václav and granddaughters Nora and Markéta. Before all, however, I am obliged to Kateřina, my wife, who had so often patiently suffered the absences of my mind from her side due to the voyages of my imagination into the third pre-Christian millennium.

I wrote this book with help from many who have shown goodwill and amity. All the errors and inconsistencies are, of course, mine.

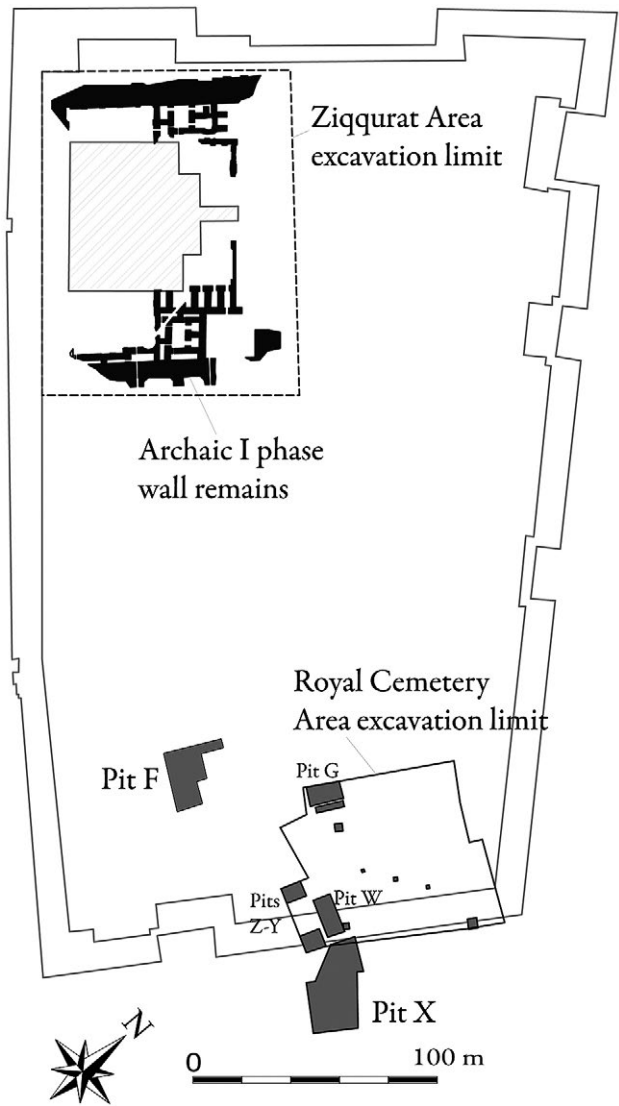
Acknowledgements

I was fortunate enough to be able to inspect the collections of the Near Eastern Section of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, U.S.) in 2003–2004 during my study stay in the USA, financed by a grant from the Prague establishment of the John William Fulbright Foundation (No. 2003–28-02, Fulbright No. ME659), and in 2005 thanks to a Franklin grant conferred on me by the American Philosophical Society, as well as to that of the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (grant No. A8021401). For permission to study in the collections and to refer to the materials discussed above, as well as for manifold help and support, I am deeply obliged to Richard Zettler and Shannon White of the Near Eastern Section of the said University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, as well as to Holly Pittman, Curator of the Near Eastern Section of the said University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

This contribution could not have been written without the generous support which I received in the academic year 2011–2012 as a Fellow of the Internationales Kolleg MORPHOMATA (Universität zu Köln, Germany). I am profoundly grateful to MORPHOMATA, to their Directors Dietrich Boschung and Günther Blamberger, and to the capable and friendly staff of this major institution of interdisciplinary research.

Cologne on Rhine and Prague, in 2012–2014.
Petr Charvát

The central precinct of the Sumerian city of Ur,
with excavation pits of the Leonard Woolley expedition



Benati 2015, Fig. 2 p. 4.

I. ARCHAEOLOGY: LIGHT OUT OF THE SHADOWS OF PAST AGES?

The formation of “primary states” during the 4th millennium BC (or Late Uruk period) is a key time for societal change in southern Mesopotamia. The onset of the 3rd millennium BC offers evidence of different socio-economic dynamics that, however, remain largely unknown.

The site of Tell al-Muqayyar, ancient Ur, in southern Iraq, is best known for its late Early Dynastic “Royal Cemetery” (ca. 2500–2350 B.C.) but it had already been a political center at the onset of the 3rd millennium (Early Dynastic I period, ca. 2900–2700 BC). Due to the rich archaeological evidence at our disposal, Ur is an ideal test case for analysis of the stabilization of the freshly formed Mesopotamian statehood for this specific time period. This book addresses the internal economic and political organization, as well as spiritual orientation and achievement, of archaic Ur. Emphasis is placed here upon the interplay between economic and socio-cultural actions, analyzed on the basis of three main lines of evidence: archaeology, written sources and iconographic data.

Excavating within the central sacred precinct of the city, the Leonard Woolley expedition (1922–1934) explored also the archaeological strata below the famous “Royal Cemetery”, but above the so-called “Jemdet Nasr cemetery” (see below). These strata have yielded alternate layers of both domestic and administrative refuse including numerous find groups of seal impressions on clay, referred to as “Seal-impression strata” (SIS).

The seal-impression bearing strata constitute an ideal source category for the investigation of economic, administrative, social and spiritual structures streamlining the life of one of the major successor states of the Uruk-age culture. The analysis of the inscriptions borne by the sealed surfaces will give fairly instructive data for the use and socio-economic context of the relevant seals. On the other hand, impressions which the sealed objects left behind on the reverses of the clay sealings will reveal the type of seal carrier, and thus provide first-rate evidence of social and administrative practices of the relevant period. Inscribed seal impressions excavated from reasonably well-dated contexts will thus offer a historian the best possible material for studies of the socially engineered goods-exchange practices available.

Any qualified assessment of the find context of the early Ur sealings (published as *UE III*, on the find context see Woolley, in *UE III* pp. 1–2, and Woolley

1955, *passim*; for recent revisions of the situation see Sørenhagen 1999 and Dittmann 2006) must begin with the review of their stratigraphic situation. This is what must be examined at first.

The best-informed source is, of course, the author of the excavation himself, Leonard Woolley. Let us hear what he has to say:

The upper levels containing graves of the Royal Cemetery age had been dug away by us in 1926; in them there was no stratification¹, owing to the disturbance of the soil by the grave-diggers, and our work has always stopped short at a stratum – the first recognisable as such – of red burnt brick earth and broken brick, pottery, etc. This is SIS 4-5, the stratum rich in clay jar-stoppers with archaic seal-impressions (Ur Excavations, Vol. III) which underlies much of the cemetery and is invaluable as giving a terminus post quem for the graves (v. Ur Excavations, Vol. II p. 222).

Below this the strata, sloping sharply down with the fall of the rubbish as dumped here from the town, are remarkable well defined.

A band of light earth,

one of dark soil,

a grey belt containing much lime,

light earth,

dark again and

light succeed one another;

then comes a belt of red burnt earth containing seal impressions and pottery, and

a lime belt also rich in seal-impressions and broken sherds, labelled on the section as SIS 6;

a heavy bed of black mixed rubbish in the upper part especially of which there were more seal-impressions is SIS 7.

Another layer of burnt earth separated this from the next rubbish-mass which thanks to the presence of liberal admixture of burnt matter was itself rather red in colour; it contained very few seal-impressions (SIS 8) but was really distinguished by the common occurrence of clay goblets of the peculiar type JN.25 which were not normally found above this stratum of below it; at the same level were found (in a black streak running through the red) part of a “mixing bowl” of rough clay, Type RC.1, a clay disk with a hole towards one edge, a rough clay figurine of an animal,

1 Here my learned friend and colleague Giacomo Benati of the University of Turin, who had been kind enough to read the manuscript version of this publication, adds a note of caution. In his opinion, the excavators fully understood the stratification of the cemetery only during the 1930–1931 field campaign, looking at the exposed sections (see Woolley 1934, Pl. 9a). This must have been due to the excavation methods of the time. However, the examination of the original records allows the observation that strata were often recognized and distinguished even during the excavation of the tombs. Giacomo Benati is now working on these details with the aim of building a better stratigraphy of the cemetery.

part of a limestone bowl, Type JN.11, and a rubbing-stone,; at 7.50 m was a clay goblet of Type JN.25 (Woolley 1955, 79–80).

Leonard Woolley obviously included the SIS 8-4 into the earlier stage of his *Planoconvex Brick Period* and ascribed the accumulation of SIS 5-4 to the time of building layer E in his Pit F, assigning the underlying building layer F to his *Jamdat Nasr Period*. In general, he seems to have supposed that this whole band of strata came into being over a relatively short time (Sürenhagen 1999, 180), a proposition to which Dietrich Sürenhagen agrees (Sürenhagen 1999, 207).

Dietrich Sürenhagen observes, probably with reason, that the SIS 4-5 stratum probably represents rubbish layers dumped from a higher-lying settlement, and that from NW to SE and to NE. He has also noticed that SIS 7 is directly overlying SIS 8, the latter documented only in Pit Z where it tapers off (Sürenhagen 1999, 180).

Except the above-cited publications and comments, several other authors have recently commented on the finds of the sealings of archaic Ur of the incipient third millennium B. C. and their archaeological context. These include Richard Zettler (1989), Reinhard Dittman (2006, 38–39), and Nicolò Marchetti (2006, 71–83, esp. pp. 72–76; the book is now available in English as *Marchesi-Marchetti* 2011, as Giacomo Benati tells me). Their assessments bring arguments for dating the SIS 8, (and possibly also SIS 7?), layers into the early ED-I; indeed, all the SIS 8-4 strata have been recently dated into ED-I (Marchesi-Marchetti 2011, 54, reference courtesy Giacomo Benati). Layer(s) SIS 7 and 6 are supposed to relate to the latest graves of the “Jemdet Nasr cemetery”, still within the ED-I age. Dietrich Sürenhagen argues that the SIS 7 underlies these interments (Sürenhagen 1999, 186), and that the SIS 6 accumulated over them (Sürenhagen 1999, 236, and Conclusions, 242–243). The SIS 6 may thus possibly belong to the early ED-II period (Sürenhagen 1999, summarizing table on p. 250). It is then proposed that after an interval, comprising obviously a prolonged period of time, the SIS 5-4 strata were deposited (expressedly Sürenhagen 1999, table on p. 208). Dietrich Sürenhagen has dated these into the ED-II-ED-IIIa transition period (Sürenhagen 1999, summarizing table on p. 250).

On the other hand, Richard Zettler, who has investigated the pottery profiles impressed into the jar sealings of the SIS 8-4 layers, suggests a date in ED-I and/or ED-I-II (Zettler 1989, esp. p. 379).

The question is obviously a tricky one, and poses a challenge to anyone wishing to obtain more information on the archaeological context of the SIS strata². Let us see what can be done to elucidate the problems concerned.

2 Again, Giacomo Benati observes that large quantities of pottery fragments from the SIS strata were not properly registered and therefore never published and discussed.