



# Near Eastern Archaeology

VOLUME 84 • ISSUE 3 • SEPTEMBER 2021

**An Early Bronze Age Incense  
Burner from Dahwa**

**Two Great Households  
of Old Babylonian Ur**

**Severed Hands of Egypt**

**The Bronze Mouse of Maresha**

**The Plant Depicted on  
Hasmonaean Coins**

**Mendesian Perfume  
and Tell Timai**

**A Roman Bronze Bull  
from Sepphoris**

**Corals in the Desert**





In small things remembered.

Sometimes it seems like a primary distinction between archaeology and art history is size. Archaeology is the entire city of Ur, or a ziggurat, or the survey of a field that yields 2,000 years' worth of pottery fragments. Art history is the banquet scene on the cylinder seal, the figurine, a piece of jewelry, or a faience unguent jar. Pottery, at least, seems to go both ways: Transport amphorae are in the realms of archaeology while Greek symposium ware is certainly considered from a more aesthetic, art-historical perspective. It is actually humorous how much energy is sometimes invested in distinguishing between these two disciplines. I had a colleague in graduate school who did, in fact, work on symposium ware, and she took incredible offense if you called her an art historian; she was an *archaeologist*, after all. Another archaeologist colleague was a bit more open-minded and applied for positions in both fields when she was on the job market. She got quite a taste of things to come when an art history hiring committee asked about her approach to classical Greek *korai* sculptures and she began waxing poetic about how pleats could help one determine chronology. Apparently "chronology" was not the correct answer.

This all seems comic in light of the fact that in the ancient world, really, these two fields are so inextricably bound together, with a hefty dose of philology on the side to help pull everything together. This issue of *NEA* highlights this fact, featuring as it does such an interesting array of small objects. Here we have a coin, a mouse, a bull figurine, an incense burner, coral, perfume, and some literal hands. Even the "big" archaeology is focusing in, looking at a pair of houses from Ur. And yet it is the very "liminal" nature of these studies that pulls in such an array of approaches and methodologies. Consider numismatics. Speaking of chronology, few things are quite so useful as coins, especially when doing those aforementioned field surveys. Coins not only let you know "when," but who was spending money where, trade patterns, and, from that art-historical perspective, what was important to self-recognized political groups and how they self-identified. Numismatics runs the gamut from baseline dating to full-blown cognitive archaeology.

Another interesting take on diverse methodologies is the article on Cleopatra's perfume, which deals with "standard" archaeology, experimental archaeology, and philology in an effort to recreate the physical culture and sensuous aesthetics of the past. This is not only where study of the past is at its most multidisciplinary, but also, in my opinion, the most fun. Anyone who has ever enjoyed Ninkasi beer or a lyre-struck Hurrian hymn on YouTube would have to agree with me. The ability to marshal all available resources to experience the scents and tastes and sounds of the ancient world is not only a useful path of research, but is one of the best ways to present that research to the public. Stratigraphy is dry; perfume and beer provide popular lubrication.

And this, of course, is one of the most important things we do as scholars—archaeologists, art historians, or otherwise: We inform the public. It is not just our job to apply all our hard-earned expertise to learning about the past to the best of our ability, but to educate those who want to learn, and to explicate the present by understanding the past. You know: The liberal arts. Often this can be pretty difficult, trying to convey the intricacies of relative dating or the logic behind the seemingly endless debates on the meaning of certain words ("hierodule," anyone?). But these are balanced by the more familiar and appealing: a family house in the corner of a great city or a little mouse with big religious significance. Sometimes it is a really good thing for people to see just how much effort goes into understanding the function of this small item that we think, based on all available data, once served to burn incense to our deities. When life is complicated (and it usually is), sometimes it's a good idea to start small.

Stephanie Lynn Budin, Editor

# Near Eastern Archaeology

Editor: Stephanie L. Budin  
Managing Editor: Billie Jean Collins  
Artwork: Susanne Wilhelm  
Assistant Editor: Julia Hsieh  
Editorial Board:

Class of 2021  
Megan Cifarelli • Shawna Dolansky •  
Jennie Ebeling • Gregory Marouard  
Class of 2022  
Solange Ashby • Trudy Kawami •  
Yorke Rowan • Louise Steele  
Class of 2023  
Lorenzo d'Alfonso • Lesley Gregoricka •  
Alison Gruseke • Kathryn Morgan

*Near Eastern Archaeology* (ISSN 1094-2076) is published quarterly on behalf of the American Society of Overseas Research by The University of Chicago Press, 1427 E. 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637-2902. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Subscription Fulfillment, University of Chicago Press, 1427 E. 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637-2902. Periodicals postage paid in Chicago and additional mailing offices.

**Membership in ASOR:** Membership with ASOR includes a personal subscription (see back cover for more information). To join, visit [asor.org/membership/](http://asor.org/membership/), e-mail [membership@asor.org](mailto:membership@asor.org), or call 703-789-9230.

**Institutional Subscriptions:** Institutions may contact The University of Chicago Press to purchase and renew subscriptions. Print + electronic and e-only institutional subscription rates are tiered according to an institution's type and research output: \$193–\$330 (print + electronic), \$164–\$287 (e-only). For additional rates, including prices for full-run access and single-copy rates, please visit [www.journals.uchicago.edu/NEA](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/NEA). Additional taxes and/or postage for non-US subscriptions may apply. Free or deeply discounted access is available in most developing nations through the Chicago Emerging Nations Initiative ([www.journals.uchicago.edu/ceni](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/ceni)). Please direct subscription inquiries to Subscription Fulfillment, University of Chicago Press, 1427 E. 60th St., Chicago, IL 60637-2902. (773) 753-3347 or tollfree in the United States and Canada (877) 705-1878. E-mail: [subscriptions@press.uchicago.edu](mailto:subscriptions@press.uchicago.edu).

**Editor's office:** All articles must follow *NEA*'s instructions for contributors, available at <https://www.asor.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Near-Eastern-Archaeology-Style-Guidelines-2021.pdf> and must be submitted through *NEA*'s manuscript management system: [www.editorialmanager.com/nea/](http://www.editorialmanager.com/nea/).

**Advertising:** Space in *Near Eastern Archaeology* is available for advertising, as is rental of its subscriber list. For information and rates, please contact the advertising sales staff. Advertising and list rental are limited to material of scholarly interest to our subscribers. E-mail: [j-advertising@press.uchicago.edu](mailto:j-advertising@press.uchicago.edu).

Articles may be copied or otherwise reused without permission only to the extent permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the US Copyright Law. Permission to copy articles for personal, internal, classroom, or library use may be obtained from the Copyright Clearance Center (<http://www.copyright.com>). For all other uses, please contact [journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu](mailto:journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu).

Printed by The Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA  
Copyright © 2021 by the  
American Society of Overseas Research  
[www.asor.org](http://www.asor.org)





## 172 An Early Bronze Age Incense Burner from Dahwa (DH1), Northern al-Batinah, Oman

*Nasser Said Al-Jahwari and Khaled Ahmed Douglas*

More than fifty years of archaeological investigations in the Oman Peninsula have yielded only four Early Bronze Age (Umm an-Nar period, 2500–2000 BCE) incense burners: three from the coastal settlement at Ras al-Jinz-2 and one from the hinterland settlement of Dahwa in the northern al-Batinah plain. The latter was found by the authors and is the oldest incense burner to be found so far in the Oman Peninsula, with C14 analysis and pottery confirming that it dates to 2450–2200 BCE.

## 182 Two Great Households of Old Babylonian Ur

*Elizabeth Stone, Adelheid Otto, Dominique Charpin, Berthold Einwag, and Paul Zimansky*

Two substantial houses dating to the early second millennium BCE have recently been unearthed at separate, previously unexplored locations in Ur. Their respective owners occupied important positions of power in different spheres. One flourished ca 1840 BCE and was the chief administrator of the second most important temple in Ur. His house lay near the southern city wall, well removed from the institution with which he was associated. The second was a general named Abisum, who resided

near the center of the city. Abisum was closely tied to the monarchy in Babylon and disappeared when the city was abandoned in 1739 BCE, not long after a rebellion had been put down. Small cuneiform archives were left behind in both of these households, demonstrating that literacy was an important mechanism by which they exercised power. The new excavations indicate that much remains to be explored in the urban landscape of Ur.

## 192 Grisly Trophies: Severed Hands and the Egyptian Military Reward System

*Danielle Candelora*

The seemingly macabre practice of severing the hands of defeated enemies on the battlefield was a hallmark of the Egyptian New Kingdom military. Soldiers would present these grisly trophies to the king as a record of their kills and would be rewarded proportionally—often with the “gold of valor.” Yet this tradition appears fully-realized during the wars between the Thebans, specifically Ahmose, and the Hyksos, with few clues as to its origins. The discovery of several pits of severed human hands at the Hyksos capital Avaris (modern Tell el-Dab’a) has been described as the only archaeological evidence of this practice and may shed light on its enigmatic roots—not as military procedure, but rather as a foreign kingly act of retribution or criminal punishment. (Please note: This article contains images of human skeletal remains.)

## 200 The Bronze Mouse of Maresha

*Ian Stern*

A molded bronze ornament of a mouse was discovered within one of the thousands of subterranean chambers in the Hellenistic-period city of Maresha. Excavations in this city, located in the Judean lowlands, have revealed a material culture that reflects a multicultural population with a high standard of living and a keen sense of aesthetics. The artifact under discussion was found within the excavated debris of Subterranean Complex 97. The function of this small statuette may have been simply ornamental, but cultic associations with mice in the Hellenistic world abound. This paper will explore archaeological parallels as well as contemporary literary sources in order to understand better the potential functions of this discovery.





## 206 Pomegranate or Poppy: What Lies between the Cornucopias on Hasmonaean Coins?

David M. Jacobson and David B. Hendin

The long-debated question of the plant species between the splayed cornucopias on most Hasmonaean coins is revisited. The earliest descriptions in the numismatic literature describe this object as a poppyhead, but more recently opinion has shifted in favor of a pomegranate fruit. The arguments in favor of either identification are examined and the criteria resorted to by their respective proponents explained. At the same time a comparative evaluation is made of these species in Greco-Roman iconography along with their symbolic meaning. It is shown that both alternative identifications—a poppyhead and a pomegranate fruit—sit squarely with the message that the Hasmonaean authors of the composite motif wished to convey.

## 216 Eau de Cleopatra: Mendesian Perfume and Tell Timai

Robert J. Littman, Jay Silverstein, Dora Goldsmith, Sean Coughlin, and Hamedy Mashaly

A combination of Classics, Egyptology, and experimental archaeology were utilized to recreate the (in)famous perfume used by Queen Cleopatra VII. Especially important was the use of classical sources and paleobotany to determine the identity of the Egyptian sacred oils such as camphor and *balanos*. Excavations at the site of Tell Timai revealed a perfumery that contributed to our ability to recreate the process of perfume manufacture. This ancient “Mendesian” perfume has since been recreated in the lab, exhibited at the Smithsonian, and worn again for the first time in millennia.



## 230 A Roman Bronze Bull from the Floor of the Mashhad Pool in Sepphoris in the Galilee

Adi Erlich, Tsvika Tsuk, Iosi Bordowicz, and Dror Ben-Yosef

The Mashhad Pool is situated east of ancient Sepphoris, receiving its water from an aqueduct that supplied water to the Roman and Byzantine city. During its excavation, a small bronze figurine of a bull was pulled out of the plastered floor of the pool. The bull is dated to the Roman period. This paper deals with the iconography, function, and possible meaning of the bronze figurine, and the circumstances of its deposit in the pool's floor. We argue that the figurine served as a foundation deposit in order to guarantee abundant water and fecundity, perhaps during a water festival (Maioumas) in the city. The bull image fits such a purpose, as bulls are associated with rain and storm gods.

## 238 Corals in the Desert: Recent Discoveries of Red Sea Corals in Byzantine and Early Islamic Sites in the Negev Desert

Guy Bar-Oz, Yotam Tepper, and Roe Shafir

Corals comprised valuable resources throughout human history and were used as remedies for multiple diseases and as amulets. Despite their traditional, historical uses, corals are not frequently encountered in the archaeological record. Recent archaeological excavations in the Negev Desert have yielded an unprecedented number of Red Sea coral remains, found in the landfills of Byzantine and Early Islamic sites located more than 200 km from the Red Sea. The bulk of the assemblage comprises primarily the tree-like branching *Stylophora pistillata*. Other species found include the columnar coral *Favites abdita*. Both are among the most common shallow water corals in the Red Sea. Their remains attest to the importance of corals for Negev society, as well as to the cultural trajectory of goods and their trade and commerce that facilitated the supply of Red Sea products to distant inland locations.





## Two Great Households of Old Babylonian Ur

*Elizabeth Stone, Adelheid Otto, Dominique Charpin, Berthold Einwag, and Paul Zimansky*

Excavations in the House of Abisum, March 2017. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

Visitors to the ruins of Ur venturing into the residential area south of the ziggurat and royal cemetery are confronted with a reconstructed “House of Abraham” (fig. 1), named after the city’s most famous putative resident. It is not clear who decided that this particular structure was the ancestral home of the patriarch, but it was certainly not Sir Leonard Woolley, who closed his celebrated excavations here in 1934. While he was convinced that this city was indeed the Ur of the Chaldees of the Bible—a claim that has not gone unchallenged—and even wrote a book postulating that the Old Babylonian houses here shed light on the origins of Yahwistic religion (Woolley 1936), he doubted that archaeology could ever link Abraham to a specific artifact or building. The massive brick structure one sees today was actually erected only two decades ago to promote tourism in anticipation of a papal visit that was delayed until March 2021. It was built on the ruins of half a dozen individual houses that Woolley had excavated in the area he called AH, generally following their ground plans but connecting the units with doorways to create a single edifice many times larger than any private residence of the early second millennium BCE (fig. 2). If the idea of naming this new creation after Abraham was to promote tourism, it has been a success: Among the thousands who visit Ur every spring, some even come to pray in these rooms, ignoring all warnings that the association with the family of Abraham is suspect.

This dubious attribution and imprecise reconstruction, however, should not obscure the fact that there really were great households in Old Babylonian Ur, and that modern archaeological excavation can tell us much about the people who lived in them. Two new examples, which we have named the House of Abisum and the House of Sin-nada and his wife Nuttuptum after their owners, have recently been uncovered in the course of a project initiated by Stony Brook University (Stone and Zimansky 2016) and joined by a team from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU). The two houses were located in areas where Woolley never excavated, in different parts of the city. The House of Abisum lies a little to the north of area AH and work there was supervised by Elizabeth Stone and Paul Zimansky of Stony Brook. The House of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum, in the southern part of the site near the city wall, was excavated by the Munich team led by Adelheid Otto and Berthold Einwag (fig. 3). Dominique Charpin of the Collège de France was the expedition epigrapher for all three field seasons, conducted from the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2019, and was joined by Walther Sallaberger of LMU in 2019.

We named these elite residences after the most prominent individuals known to have dwelt in them. They lived about a century apart and both their houses had long histories and doubtless other important owners. Sin-nada (fl. ca. 1840 BCE) was the chief administrator of the Ningal Temple, a massive structure located in the Giparu near the ziggurat. Ningal was the consort of the moon god Nanna, and the Giparu also contained a palatial residence for the most important priestess in the city, who was the human embodiment of Nanna’s consort. Abisum (fl. ca. 1740



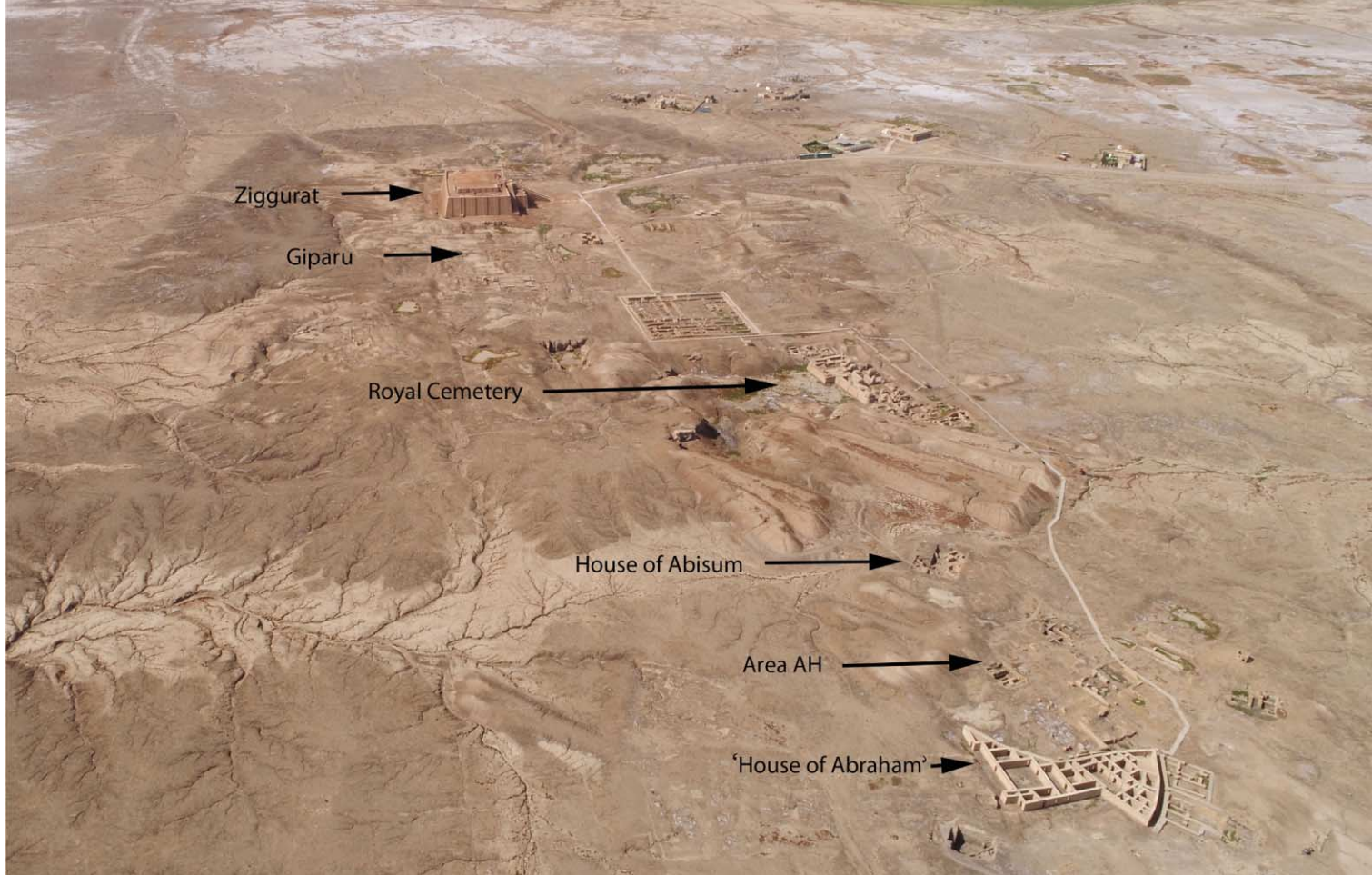


Figure 1. Drone image of Ur facing northward, House of Abraham in foreground and ziggurat in the background. Photograph by Berthold Einwag.



Figure 2. Woolley plan (in red) on drone image of modern reconstruction of "House of Abraham." In the reconstruction internal doors were used to join separate houses into one large structure. The geometry does not match precisely. Drone photograph by Berthold Einwag.

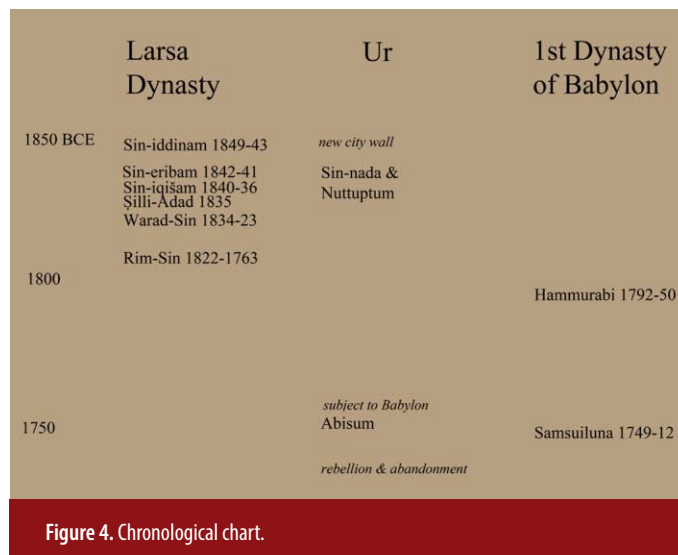
BCE) was an important general whose power appeared to stem from a close connection to the king of Babylon (Charpin 2019).

These two houses are by no means unique or even exceptional, given that they belonged to important people. The period between roughly 1900 and 1739 BCE is one in which domestic structures are widespread and well known in southern Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> Although parts of residential neighborhoods have been excavated at Nippur, Larsa, and Isin, the most extensive evidence for daily life comes from two areas that Woolley investigated at Ur: AH and EM. In AH, the size of houses varies considerably, and the mixing of large and small residences suggests that rich and poor were living in close proximity. With division of houses through inheritance quite common and crowding increasing over time, many of the original buildings were broken up into smaller units of irregular shape. Area EM, which appears to have been inhabited by temple administrators, has somewhat larger houses, but is still crowded. Although smaller than the giant merchant houses at Larsa (Charpin 2015: 210–11), our two new residences are larger than any previously found at Ur, and conform to the basic plan that architects of the period executed when not constrained by crowding: a row of rooms around a square central courtyard with an additional row on one side to create a rectangular ground plan. What distinguishes the houses of Abisum and Sin-nada is not merely that they retained their original size until Ur was abandoned in 1739 BCE, but that quite precise information about the historical context in which they prospered was found within their ruins. One of the few shortcomings of





Figure 3. Satellite image of Ur with city wall and areas of excavated houses marked. Annotations by Paul Zimansky.



### The House of Sin-Nada and Nuttuptum

We can date Sin-nada rather precisely by linking seal impressions of two of his own seals found on letter envelopes in his house (fig. 6) to the well-established chronology of the Kingdom of Larsa, which enjoyed hegemony over Ur in his day. An important figure in the Larsa Dynasty was Sin-iddinam (1849–1843 BCE), who built quite extensively there, refurbishing the city wall among other projects. Sin-nada may well have come to prominence under him and was certainly linked to his successors. The caption on one of his seals reads “Sin-nada, servant of Sin-eribam.” The latter was the successor of Sin-iddinam with regnal dates of 1842–1840 BCE. Other envelopes were impressed with his second seal, showing a completely different scene. On this he bears a variant title: “Sin-nada, Priest-Administrator of the Temple of Ningal, servant of Šilli-Adad” (Charpin 2019: 32). Šilli-Adad ruled for less than a single year, in 1835 BCE, before another important individual, Warad-Sin, the first ruler of a new Amorite dynasty, replaced him on the throne of Larsa in circumstances that look very much like a coup d’état.

As the temple of Ningal was probably the second most important temple in the city, its chief administrator (UGULA É) was no minor figure. He stood at the head of an impressive economic organization with a large bureaucracy. It is interesting that Sin-nada chose to live where he did, still within the city, but well removed from the sacred quarter. The captions of these seals give a firm date for when Sin-nada was at the peak of his power. The timing also suggests the circumstances under which he might have lost it. Warad-Sin lavished attention on the temples of Ur, and doubtless replaced their administrators with his own people.

While we cannot be absolutely certain that Sin-nada was the creator and head of the first family to occupy this house, this seems very likely. The house plan was laid out in the middle of the nineteenth century on terrain that seems to have been hitherto uncluttered. Although the south mound was already a substantial tell by that time, the earlier structures lay below a weathered surface dating to the time when Sin-iddinam rebuilt the city wall, whose traces can still be seen south of the house. The new

Woolley’s great excavations and publications was that he could rarely relate, to his own regret, the archaeological remains, substantial as they were, to the cuneiform texts found among them and thus could not realize the full potential of filling the houses with life.

The circumstances under which Ur ceased to function as a city in the Old Babylonian period were doubtless traumatic for its inhabitants, but a blessing for archaeologists (fig. 4). Hammurabi of Babylon, who ruled 1792–1750 BCE by the conventional middle chronology, had subdued most of Mesopotamia, including Ur, in the course of his long career. His son and successor Samsuiluna struggled to maintain control of his father’s empire and had to put down a major rebellion in Ur in his tenth regnal year (1740 BCE). Whether due to a deliberate act on his part or an accidental result of the war, this resulted in a failure of the irrigation system so crucial in this desert environment. Ur became a ghost town, with residents leaving cuneiform letters, real estate contracts, receipts, accounts, school texts, and even literary compositions behind in the ruins as they departed. It was reoccupied at a much more impoverished level later in the second millennium when Babylonia was under the control of the Kassite Dynasty. Although it became a prosperous city once again in the middle of the first millennium before it was finally abandoned, over much of the site, and particularly on the poorly known south mound, Old Babylonian remains are found almost immediately below the modern surface (fig. 5). We owe the discovery of these two houses to their accessibility.



Figure 5. LMU team at work in the House of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.



Figure 6. Envelopes sealed by Sin-nada: top, as servant of Sin-eribam; bottom as servant of Šilli-Adad. Photographs by Paul Zimansky.

wall may have opened up space for development. At any rate, the architect of the Sin-nada house laid it out as a free-standing, augmented courtyard house, the largest type of residential building of the period. Since there were no earlier buildings to be respected, the architect could erect quite the ideal Old Babylonian house, the east and south side measuring exactly 32 cubits (16 m; fig. 7). The ground plan covers 236 m<sup>2</sup>, exceeding by some

margin the 170 m<sup>2</sup> of the largest house previously excavated at Ur, No. 14 Gay Street in EM (Charpin 2015: 198). All the rooms were spacious, the walls and floors were carefully built, and the sanitary conditions were excellent, with large paved bathrooms and drains more than 8 m deep.

It is often asked if cuneiform documents found in a given house really belonged to the people who lived there. In this case the associated stratified deposits of small sealing fragments would argue against the idea that the tablets were just thrown in as trash. One might also ask, why would letters *from* Sin-nada be found in his own house? Here there is a clear answer. He traveled frequently and his wife, Nuttuptum, was an important player in his business affairs. She had her own seal (fig. 8) and was empowered to act in his absence. In one fragmentary letter, Sin-nada reassures Nuttuptum, “Do not worry, I am well.” All of these sealings and documents were found within the house and reveal a great deal about the private and professional lives of this couple.

It is also apparent that there was a good deal of scribal activity in the house, as there was in elite houses at Larsa and other Old Babylonian cities (Charpin 2015: 212–16; fig. 9). In addition to school texts, which had the instructor’s cuneiform signs on one side and the student’s attempt to render them on the other, there were fragments of literary compositions. Ironically, one of the latter is a copy of part of the celebrated Lament over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur (Charpin 2019:33), describing the devastation of the city at the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur, at this point only two centuries in the past. It is worth noting that no destruction layer associated with this event has been found below this house, or anywhere else at Ur.

If the arrival of the new Amorite king Warad-Sin brought the end of the Sin-nada household, it was by no means the end of the house. There were two additional phases of early second millennium occupation and modification of the structure, taking us to the time of Ur’s abandonment. The small finds in these later levels indicate that the house continued to be a place of importance.





Figure 7. Drone image of the house of Sin-nada. Photograph by Berthold Einwag.

Half a dozen discarded cylinder seals were found, badly worn and of mediocre quality. Seal impressions, on the other hand, were made by some absolutely exquisite seals (Otto 2019). The original cylinders must have been some of the finest Old Babylonian seals of the time of King Rim-Sin (fig. 10).

In an open area outside the residence there was a vaulted tomb containing multiple burials and pottery of the Old Babylonian period (fig. 11). This is a fairly elaborate version of a tomb type normally found inside houses under what Woolley called “chapels.” It had two chambers, a smaller one in which the long bones of 16 individuals were arranged in rows, and a larger one in which remains of another 8 individuals were placed along with pottery. Analysis of the bones revealed that the individuals had been astonishingly healthy and showed no signs of hard labor. Some had reached the considerable age of more than 70 years—no doubt also due to the excellent hygienic conditions in this lavishly equipped house with sophisticated bathrooms and drainage systems.

### The House of Abisum

Our second elite house was discovered to the north of the AH residential area, not far from where a canal once cut through the city (fig. 12). The association with Abisum is suggested, but by no means proven, by a small but somewhat scattered archive of



Figure 8. Impression of Nuttuptum seal. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.





**Figure 9.** Evidence of scribal training in the house of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum: school tablet on left and copy part of the literary composition Lament over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur on right. Photographs by Paul Zimansky.



**Figure 10.** Two tiny joining fragments of a seal impression from the house of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum. Note size of fingernail. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

cuneiform tablets found in the area, certainly near, but not necessarily in, the house. In many ways it is better preserved than Sin-nada's house, as most of its living floors lay roughly two meters below the modern surface. However, its plan is not as well defined because it was not possible to excavate it completely, and parts of it were disturbed after it ceased to be a residence. Whole walls have been removed, presumably by people mining the ruins for baked bricks, although ghosts of these can be traced along gaps left in the pavements. One can clearly make out the square courtyard around which the house was organized. It measures approximately five by five meters and is completely paved in baked brick. This is comparable to the main courtyard of the Sin-nada house, which was roughly four and a half by six and a half meters, but a case for greater opulence can be made here on the basis of the thickness of the surrounding walls, the large number of courses of baked brick in them, and the presence of two staircases rather than a single one as is otherwise the rule at Ur. In places the walls still reach the modern surface with burnt mud bricks on top of the fully preserved baked brick foundations, which run to as many as 19 courses.



**Figure 11.** Vaulted tomb outside the house of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum. Photograph by Berthold Einwag.

Much of the brickwork on the southwestern side of the house was apparently stolen after it was abandoned, and it is very uncertain as to how far the house extended in that direction. This is unfortunate, since it is in this area that the most significant artifactual finds relating to the Old Babylonian period were made. Whenever we excavated beneath the baked brick pavement of the house we encountered burials ranging in age from infants to adults, some of which were quite well appointed (fig. 13). Gifts associated with the individual burials included the usual inventory of ceramic and bronze vessels, and items of adornment including anklets and beads. There are also indications that the owners of this house had ties to the wider world: One group of offering jars included an exotic red pot of a type associated with Bahrain (fig. 14), and a balance weight from the Indus Valley civilization, unique among the finds at Ur (fig. 15).

The most important of the tombs, however, was a family vault lying beneath a pavement. One would expect a tomb of this type, in which numerous individuals were buried over generations, to have been in one of the principal rooms of the house, but as we have seen in the case of the Sin-nada house, it could lie immediately outside. It had been looted in antiquity with a hole clearly visible in the top center of the vault. When they finished their efforts in the burial chamber, the robbers closed the hole with a large fragment of a pithos (fig. 16) leaving behind bones of several individuals but no valuables.





Figure 12. House of Abisum, with robbed and removed walls marked. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.



Figure 13. Burials with grave goods below pavement of Abisum house. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

The tablets of Abisum's archive appear to have been scattered in the process of this looting. Most were discovered on the pavement and in the disturbed fill above the vault, but we found some in the tomb itself. Woolley thought it peculiar that he sometimes discovered quite ordinary tablets in graves, but our case makes it clear that these were not grave goods put there intentionally. This is almost certainly not Abisum's tomb, but probably belonged to the family who had dwelt in this house before he arrived on the scene. His archives were abandoned on the floor above the tomb and were of no interest to the looters who dug through them.

The tablets make clear Abisum's high status. His title, UGULA MAR.TU (literally, leader of the Amorites) is a very high military rank, probably



Figure 14. Pot from Bahrain found with burial goods associated with Abisum house. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.



Figure 15. Harappan balance weight from disturbed fill in Abisum house. Dimensions: 24 x 23 x 17 mm. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

meaning something like "general." This was introduced into southern Mesopotamia in the reign of Hammurabi and hints that Abisum might have been a "new man" on the scene, brought to Ur with the fall of the Larsa Dynasty and thus residing here 19 years before it was abandoned. He certainly had close ties to Babylon. A receipt recording that he provided fish for a meal for Samsuiluna dates to the king's fifth year, and shows that the king of Babylon went in person to Ur to offer a throne to the moon-god Nanna (fig. 17).

Abisum's last years in Ur must have been catastrophic. Samsuiluna was notoriously unsuccessful, contending with rebellions all over Mesopotamia as he tried to hold his father's empire together. In his tenth year, the date of the last of the Abisum tablets,



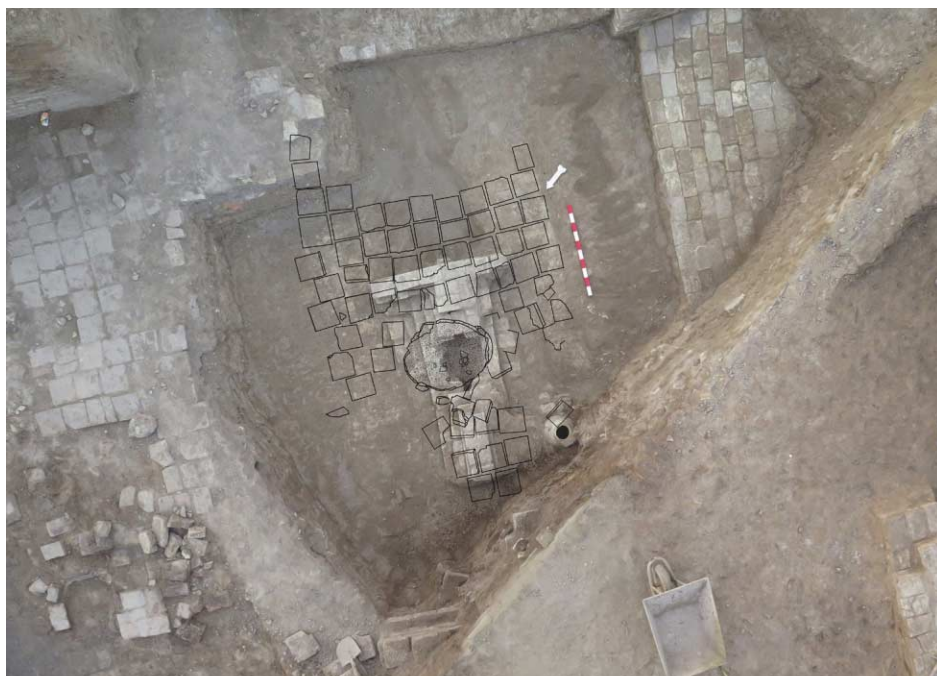
he put down a rebellion by attacking Ur, and shortly afterward the city was abandoned. Abisum's departure was abrupt enough that his tablets were left in the ruins.

We have noted that much of the house still stands with its walls and stairs reaching the modern surface (fig 18). Few artifacts were actually found on the Old Babylonian pavements that are more or less intact, and the lower parts of reed doors stand ajar, buried by dust that must have blown into the deserted building. Elsewhere, burnt debris indicating

a conflagration of some sort lies directly on top of the abandonment level. We do not know precisely when the looters came to plunder the family tomb, but their efforts appear to have been tightly focused. They do not appear to have disturbed any of the rich individual burials nearby. In the upper levels of fill in this area there were interments of various types, most dating to the early first millennium BCE. A few fine Old Babylonian artifacts were brought up to near the surface by these later excavations (fig. 19).

### Prospects

These two newly excavated houses have changed our understanding of where elites lived in the Old Babylonian city of Ur. While the newly excavated tablets, tablet fragments, and sealings only shed light on a few moments of transition, they frame a century of great prosperity in a world dominated by shifting hegemonies of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon. They certainly indicate how precarious high status was in the city. Despite the coming and goings of individual masters, however, the houses themselves continued to prosper until



**Figure 16.** Robbed family vault associated with Abisum house. The Abisum archive was found among the outlined bricks and both above and below the pithos sherd that the looters used to reseal the burial. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.



**Figure 17.** Two tablets of the Abisum archive. Photographs by Paul Zimansky.





**Figure 18.** Staircase in House of Abisum. Note courses of unbaked mud bricks on top of fully preserved back brick courses. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.



**Figure 20.** Excavating sealing fragments in the house of Sin-nada and Nuttuptum, March, 2019. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

the eleventh year of Samsuiluna, with family tombs attesting a certain stability and other grave goods demonstrating prosperity.

While modern researchers cannot match the pace of excavators like Woolley, who employed hundreds of workmen and exposed scores of houses in a single field season, we do have the capacity to analyze smaller trenches with more care and make use of such techniques as sieving and flotation to reveal details that eluded those early pioneers (fig. 20). In recent years Ur has been well protected from the looting and deliberate destruction that have visited so many other Mesopotamian sites. Fenced and guarded, it is looked after by



**Figure 19.** Old Babylonian cylinder seal found out of context in upper levels of fill from the Abisum house. Photograph by Paul Zimansky.

families descended from the caretaker originally appointed to the site almost a century ago in the time of Woolley. Old Babylonian houses in this condition, and the kinds of materials we excavated in them, are becoming increasingly hard to find elsewhere. Few of the materials that we have found so informative would ever make it to the market had they been dug up by the clandestine actors who are feeding the world's demand for portable antiquities. Looters would probably not even notice the seal impressions, and even if they did, removing them from the architecture and other associations would vitiate any historical contribution they might make. Ur's status as a World Heritage site has recently been recognized by UNESCO. It is to be hoped that it will continue to inform us of its past.

### Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Qais Rashid and the employees of Iraq's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage who made their work at Ur possible. The recent excavations were funded by grants from the National Geographic Society, the National Science Foundation, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the late P. E. MacAllister. The LMU project, which uncovered the Sin-Nada house, received support from the Gerda Henkel Foundation and



Prof. Charpin's epigraphic work at the site was funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche. For this support we are most grateful. Abdulmir Hamdani was the intellectual and practical force behind the Ur project. He encouraged its inception while a graduate student at Stony Brook, and oversaw it though 2019 as Iraq's Minister of Culture.

## Notes

1. Woolley and Mallowan 1976 is the comprehensive final report of the British Museum/University of Pennsylvania expedition to Ur. For a general overview of relevant history of southern Mesopotamia see Charpin, Edzard, and Stol 1992. Van de Mierop 1992 offers an important modern evaluation of the Old Babylonian settlement at Ur.

## References

- Charpin, Dominique. 1986. *Le clergé d'Ur au siècle d'Hammurabi (XIXe–XVIIIe siècles av. J.-C.)*. École Pratique des Hautes Études IVe Section, Sciences historiques et philologiques II Hautes Études Orientales 22. Paris: Droz.
- . 2015. *Gods, Kings, and Merchants in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*. Publications de l'Institut du Proche-Orient Ancien du Collège de France 2. Leuven: Peeters.
- . 2019. The Priests of Ur in the Old Babylonian Period: A Reappraisal in Light of the 2017 Discoveries at Ur/Tell Muqayyar. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 19:18–34.
- Charpin, Dominique, Dietz Otto Edzard, and Marten Stol. 2004. *Mesopotamien: Die altbabylonische Zeit*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 160.4. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Otto, Adelheid. 2019. "Official Seal Motifs at Larsa and Ur in the 19th Century BC." Pp. 764–76 in *De l'argile au numérique: Mélanges assyriologiques en l'honneur de Dominique Charpin*, ed. Publication de l'Institut du Proche-Orient Ancien du Collège de France 3. Leuven: Peeters.
- Stone, Elizabeth C., and Paul Zimansky. 2016. Archaeology Returns to Ur: A New Dialog with Old Houses. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79:246–59.
- Van de Mierop, Marc. 1992. *Society and Enterprise in Old Babylonian Ur*. Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 12. Berlin: Reimer.
- Woolley, Sir Leonard. 1936. *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Woolley, Sir Leonard, and Sir Max Mallowan. 1976. *The Old Babylonian Period*. Ur Excavations 7. London: Trustees of the British Museum.



**Elizabeth Stone** is professor emerita of Anthropology at Stony Brook University. She specializes in ancient Mesopotamian urbanism. In addition to work on field projects in Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Turkey she has directed excavations in southern Iraq at Maskan-shapir and, since 2015, Ur. She has also worked to help preserve Mesopotamian antiquities in the aftermath of war by means of remote sensing and programs in higher education.

**Adelheid Otto** is professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany. Her primary research interest is the archaeology of Mesopotamia and Syria centered on households and temples, and Near Eastern art and iconography with a focus on cylinder seals. Further research concerns metrology, historical geography, and—working in Bavaria—ancient brewing. Together with Iraqi and Italian colleagues, she has developed programs for the improvement of archaeological studies at Iraqi universities.

**Dominique Charpin** is professor at the Collège de France, Paris, where he holds the chair for Mesopotamian Civilization. He specializes in cuneiform texts of the Old Babylonian Period and has worked as field epigrapher at Mari and Larsa as well as at Ur. Among his publications available in English are *Writing, Law, and Kingship in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (University of Chicago Press, 2010) and *Reading and Writing in Babylon* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

**Berthold Einwag** is a Near Eastern archaeologist at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich. Together with Adelheid Otto, he has directed several survey and excavation projects in Syria, including excavations at the Bronze Age site Tell Bazi, and a survey of the West Jazira. In Iraq he is codirector of the ongoing Fara Regional Survey project and of the LMU component of the excavations at Ur.

**Paul Zimansky** is professor emeritus of Archaeology and Ancient History at Stony Brook University. His primary research and publications concern the Iron Age kingdom of Urartu in eastern Anatolia, most recently focused on its domestic architecture. He has excavated in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, as well as serving as codirector of Elizabeth Stone's projects in Iraq.