

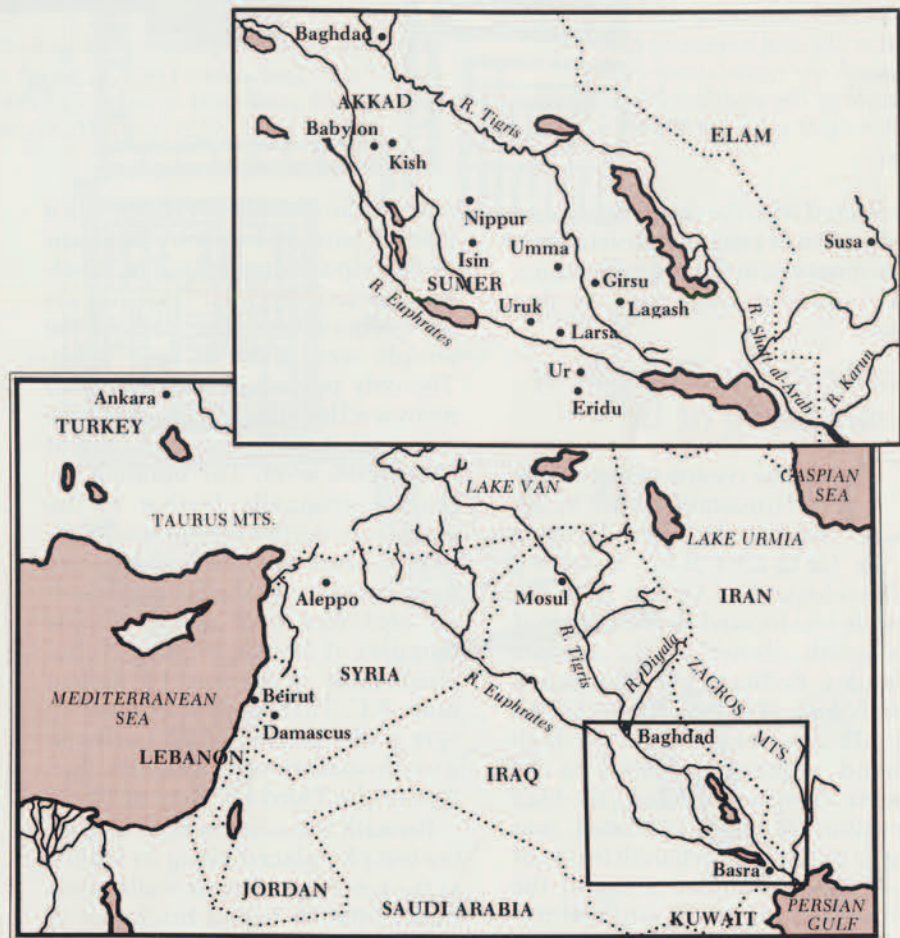
# From Beneath the Temple

## Inscribed Objects from Ur

**RICHARD L. ZETTLER**

Perhaps the most widely known of the objects in The University Museum's Near Eastern collection are those from Tell al-Mugaiyar, ancient Ur, in southern Iraq (Figs. 1, 2). Excavations at that site, carried out between 1922 and 1934, were sponsored jointly by the British Museum and The University Museum and directed by the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley. Among the objects from Ur now in the Museum are many from the Royal Cemetery of the mid to late 3rd millennium B.C. These objects include many remarkable, indeed unique, examples of Sumerian artistry—the so-called ram-in-a-thicket and the headdress of Pu-abi, the queen, for instance—and as a whole provide a tantalizing peek at the material culture of southern Mesopotamia 4500 years ago. The Ur collection also includes many other pieces that, if they are less interesting aesthetically than those from the Royal Cemetery, are no less important in terms of the light they shed on various aspects of Sumerian society and economy. Included in this category are three objects with cuneiform inscriptions found in the temple of the goddess Nimintabba (see box): a copper statuette (Fig. 3), a steatite tablet (Fig. 4), and a ceramic cylinder (Fig. 5). The three objects were at least to all appearances foundation deposits and as a group are of importance for the insight they provide into the ritual

**1** *Aerial photograph of the central portion of Tell al-Mugaiyar (ancient Ur) taken in 1922 prior to large-scale excavation. The area shown is roughly the area of the temple complex of Nanna (the ruins of the ziggurat stand in the left-center of the photograph). Beyond and to the right the ruins of the northwestern stretch of the city's wall are recognizable as a low, curving line. In the background is the floodplain of the Euphrates (a branch of the Euphrates is visible at the top left of the photograph). (UM neg. 134120)*

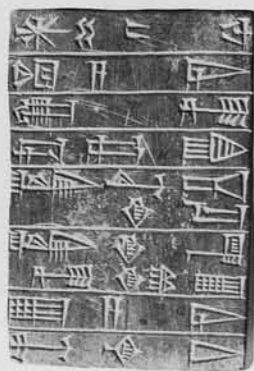


**2** *Map of the modern Middle East. Inset: Southern Mesopotamia, ancient Sumer and Akkad, with major ancient cities located.*





4  
Inscribed black steatite tablet.  
Found in a baked brick box (the box  
at the east corner of room 1)  
beneath the foundations of the  
temple of Nimintabba at Ur. (UM  
no. CBS 16217. L. 9.5 cm; W. 6.3  
cm; Th. 1.7 cm)



5  
Inscribed ceramic cylinder open at both ends. For inscription, see Figure 11.  
Found with four others (two of which are shown in photograph) beneath  
baked brick pavement in room 2 of the temple of the goddess Nimintabba at  
Ur. (UM no. CBS 16525 [top]. H. 30 cm; outer diam. 19.5 cm; int. diam.  
16.5 cm)

3  
Inscribed copper statuette depicting  
a male carrying a filled basket on his  
head. Found in a baked brick box  
(either the box at the north corner or  
that at the east corner of room 3)  
beneath the foundations of the  
temple of the goddess Nimintabba  
at Ur. (UM no. CBS 16216. H. 23.6  
cm)

associated with the construction and dedication of religious structures in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium B.C. and the king's role in that ritual.

### Context: the Temple of Nimintabba at Ur

Only the version of the temple of Nimintabba built at the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 B.C.) is known archaeologically. At that time the temple was located just southeast of the south corner of the temple complex dedicated to the moon god Nanna (Fig. 6). Nimintabba's temple apparently stood on high ground, at least in relation to the Nanna temple complex. Its high elevation, Woolley indicated, was due to its having been built in one of the longest occupied areas of the site and on top of an artificial terrace of an earlier period.

Very little of the temple of Nimintabba was recovered, only portions of four rooms along the northeastern

side of the building. Figure 7 is a plan of temple drawn on the basis of descriptions and plans in Woolley's preliminary and final reports on its excavation. The walls of the temple were built of mud brick. The only portion of the outer wall recovered lay along the northeastern side, and it was preserved only at foundation level. The building extended originally farther to the southwest, northwest and southeast. On the southwest the building had been cut away by the deeply founded enclosure wall of the temple complex of Nanna, built by Nebuchadnezzar in the mid-1st millennium B.C. That version of the enclosure wall extended much farther in a south-southeasterly direction than that of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

Beneath the northeastern wall of the temple, placed along its length at the junctures of cross walls, were boxes built of baked bricks set in bitumen, and sealed with both baked bricks and bitumen-covered mud bricks (Figs. 8, 9). Each box contained a statuette standing upright

and leaning against the northwestern side of the box, and a steatite tablet on its floor.

The statuettes found in the boxes depict a male figure carrying a filled basket on top of his head. The basket rests on what appears to be a pad. The lower portion of the statuettes is not rendered naturalistically, but in the shape of a peg or nail. Across the front lower portion of the statuettes is an inscription, eight lines long and arranged in two columns. It is in Sumerian and records the construction of a temple by Shulgi, second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2094-2047 B.C.), a ruler known for his building activities, as well as for his military and political accomplishments. The inscription reads "Nimin-tab-ba, nin-a-ni, Šul-gi, nita kalag-ga, lugal úri-ki-ma, lugal ki-en-gi, ki-uri-ke<sub>4</sub>, é-a-ni, mu-na-dù, that is, "(For the goddess) Nimintabba, his lady, Shulgi, mighty man, king of Ur, king of Sumer and Akkad, her house, built."

The inscription on the statuette is of interest not only for what it says,

but equally for what it does not say. On the statuette the name of the king is written without the cuneiform sign qualifying divine names (hereafter, divine determinative) before it. This fact makes it possible to date the statuette to the early years of Shulgi's reign. Shulgi was deified no later than the twentieth year of his forty-eight-year reign, and from that point on his name was written with the determinative for divinity before it (Hallo 1957:60-61; Steinkeller In press). The full implications of the practice of the king's deification are poorly understood, but the written expression is useful as a criterion for dating.

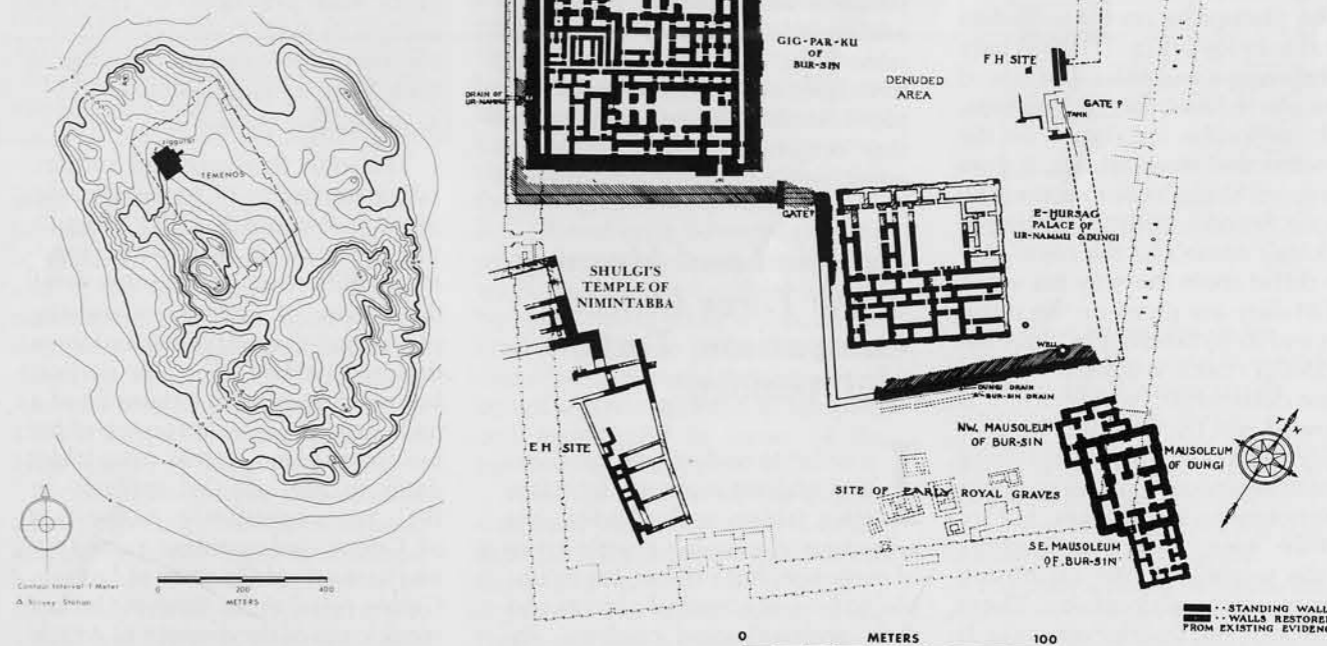
The tablets found in the boxes beneath the northeastern wall of the temple of Nimintabba are plano-convex in shape, that is, flat on one side and curved on the other. On the flat side of the tablets is an inscription identical to that on the statuettes just described.

The inscribed statuettes and tablets make possible not only the identification of the poorly preserved building as the temple of Nimintabba, but also the dating of its construction. As noted, the inscription on the artifacts dates those objects and, by extension, the building of the temple, to sometime in

the first twenty years of the reign of Shulgi.

Of the rooms of the temple, that numbered 2 on the plan (Fig. 7) was relatively well preserved. Room 2 was paved with baked bricks of mixed sizes; most measured 31 by 20 centimeters, but a few were 37 centimeters square. Sealed beneath this pavement were five inscribed ceramic cylinders, among them the one currently in The University Museum (Fig. 5, top). All of the cylinders were located at the southeastern end of the room. Each stood

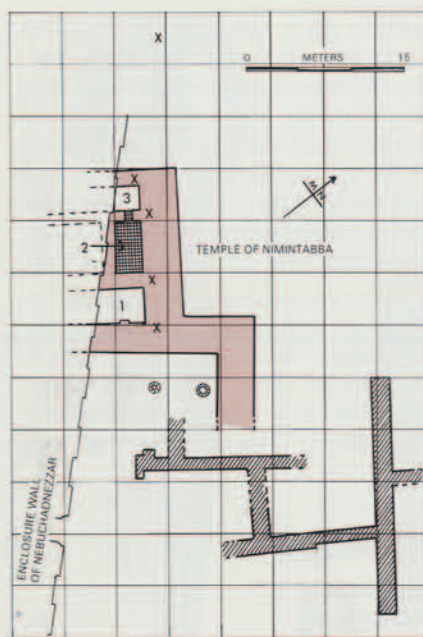
upright on a baked brick or mud brick covered with bitumen (Fig. 10). Woolley's account of what was found inside the cylinders varies from his preliminary to final report. In his preliminary report he noted that each of the five cylinders contained minute pieces of animal bones (1926:392-93). In his final report Woolley stated that only four of the cylinders had very small fragments of animal bones, and he implied that one of those four also had a fragment of a coarse stone quern (1974:40-41). The discrepancies be-



6a, b

(a) Topographic plan of Tell al-Mugaiyar, ancient Ur, showing location of temple complex of Nanna, the moon god.  
(b) Plan of temple complex of Nanna at the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 B.C.), showing location of temple of the goddess Nimintabba at southern corner.





7 Detailed plan of the temple of the goddess Nimintabba built by Shulgi, second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur. X's mark location of baked brick boxes containing Shulgi's foundation deposits. The architectural and stratigraphic relationship of hatched walls to the temple is uncertain.

tween Woolley's accounts are perhaps more apparent than significant. At least the general character of what was found in the cylinders is clear.

The inscription on the cylinders found in room 2 (Fig. 11) gives only Shulgi's name and titles, but it is of particular interest for two reasons. First, unlike the inscription on the statuettes and stone tablets, it does not record Shulgi's construction of a temple. Second, both the writing of the king's name and the royal titular differ from the way his name and titular are given on the statuettes and stone tablets. On the cylinder Shulgi's name is written with the divine determinative before it; it is followed not by the title "king of Sumer and Akkad," a title expressing claim to hegemony over the southern Mesopotamian flood plain, but by the title "king of the four quarters (of the world)," a title expressing claim to universal dominion. These features of the inscription make it possible to assign the cylinders (and their placement beneath the pavement in room 2) to the second half of Shulgi's reign. As indicated, Shulgi



8 Baked brick box in situ beneath the foundations of the temple of the goddess Nimintabba. Capping bricks still in place.

was deified not later than his twentieth year; he adopted the title "king of the four quarters" (in place of the title "king of Sumer and Akkad") even later in his reign (Hallo 1957: 52-53; 60-61).

The area immediately northwest of the temple of Nimintabba was badly eroded. However, a baked brick box similar to those beneath the foundations of the northeastern wall was found roughly on line with that wall, approximately 12.5 meters to the northwest (Woolley 1974:40-41 and pl. 59). Like the other foundation boxes, it contained a copper statuette and a steatite tablet, but neither was inscribed. Woolley assumed the foundation deposit to have been connected with the temple of Nimintabba, and he suggested that originally there had been a courtyard to the northwest of room 3.

### Function and Meaning of the Three Objects: Comparison, Texts, and Analogy

In order to understand the function and meaning of the statuettes, tablets, and cylinders, it is necessary to examine a wide array of evidence. It is critical, for example, to look at identical objects and their archaeological contexts. By doing so, we can determine whether or not Nimintabba's temple deposits are typical or atypical; we can also shed light on the general significance



9 Baked brick box beneath foundations of Nimintabba's temple with capping bricks removed. Impressions of reed matting in layer of bitumen on top of box indicate that reed mat was placed over cavity (in which would have been placed a copper statuette and stone tablet) before capping bricks were put in place.

of the contexts in which such artifacts occur. It is equally important to review relevant written sources from ancient Mesopotamia. Written sources permit archaeologists to move beyond description to explanation. Along the same lines, it is important to look at analogous artifacts and practices in relevant ancient or even contemporary cultures in order to delimit the range of their function and meaning.

#### Statuette and Tablet

The most thorough and authoritative discussion of foundation deposits is Richard S. Ellis's *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Ellis discussed in some detail the history of deposits containing peg- or nail-shaped objects and stone tablets (1968:46-71). The earliest known deposit with a statuette of a male carrying a basket on top of his head and a plano-convex stone tablet dates to the late 3rd millennium B.C., more specifically, to the time of Gudea, independent ruler (Sumerian *ensi*) of the state of Lagash. Gudea ruled at the time of the last weak kings of the dynasty of Agade and just prior to Ur-Nammu, founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur. From Gudea's time such statuettes and tablets, inscribed or uninscribed,

## The Goddess Nimintabba

The goddess Nimintabba, in whose temple at Ur the artifacts featured in this article were found, is not among the major deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and her name occurs infrequently in written sources. What is known of the goddess derives largely from a lexical text listing the various deities of the pantheon (Charpin 1986:146). According to that text Nimintabba had two slightly different aspects. At Nippur she was apparently wife of the god KAL.KAL, gatekeeper of the temple of Enlil. (Enlil was god of the wind, chief deity of Nippur, and preeminent deity of the early Mesopotamian pantheon.) At Ur, Nimintabba was one of four servant deities of the moon god Nanna; the Sumerian term characterizing her, *dingir gub-ba*, means literally "god(dess) who stands by."

Nimintabba's temple at Ur was located just outside the south corner of the temple complex of Nanna. In view of the goddess's role as servant deity of Nanna, that location is perhaps significant.

Samuel Noah Kramer has discussed early Mesopotamian religion and described the character of the major (and many of the lesser) deities of the pantheon in his book *The Sumerians* (1963). Readers wishing detailed information are encouraged to consult his work.

were standard features of deposits beneath the foundations of temples in southern Mesopotamia until the end of the first quarter of the 2nd millennium B.C. The latest known deposit with peg-shaped statuettes dates to the time of Rim-Suen, Amorite king of Larsa from 1822 to 1763 B.C. and a contemporary of Hammurabi of Babylon (Fig.13).

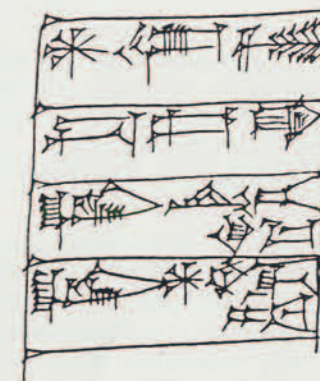
Deposits containing statuettes of a male carrying a basket on his head and plano-convex stone tablets have been found in situ at a number of sites. Only the deposits found at Ur, Uruk, and Nippur, however, have well-documented archaeological contexts. In every case where deposits of statuettes and tablets have been found in temples at those three



10 Two of five ceramic cylinders found beneath the pavement of room 2 of the temple of the goddess Nimintabba in situ. Although the pavement that had sealed the cylinders had been removed when the photograph was taken, a brick is still in place over the cylinder on the right.

sites, the deposits have been found in baked brick boxes like those beneath the foundations of the temple of Nimintabba. The distribution of boxes beneath the temples follows a non-random, rational pattern, although that pattern is occasionally obscured by the fact that only bits and pieces of structures have been preserved and/or excavated. The findspots of boxes (and deposits) in buildings at Ur, Uruk, and Nippur are described in an accompanying box. From the information summarized there it should be clear that in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia B.C., baked brick boxes marked the perimeter of temples and their doorways, and outlined critical circulation patterns. In other words, baked brick boxes were located at points important in terms of the engineered layout and construction of temples, and meaningful in terms of the functioning of temples.

With the context of the copper statuettes and stone tablets established, it is legitimate to turn back to those objects and ask what they depicted. The identification of the figure carrying a basket on his head is reasonably certain. The statuette from the temple of Nimintabba and others identical to it depict the king. The posture was already an estab-



11 Copy of the inscription on the ceramic cylinders found in room 2 of Nimintabba's temple (from Edmond Sollberger, *Royal Inscriptions Part II, Ur Excavations Texts*, vol. 8 [London: Trustees of the British Museum and The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1965], no. 23).

The inscription is in Sumerian, and records Shulgi's name and title. It reads, "Sul-gi, nita kalag-ga, lugal úri<sup>ki</sup>-ma, lugal an-ub-ba limmu-ba, that is, "(Divine) Shulgi, mighty man, king of Ur, king of the four quarters (of the world)."





**12**  
**13a, b**  
 (a) Inscribed copper statuette from time of Rim-Suen, Amorite king of Larsa from 1822 to 1763 B.C. (UM no. 31-17-8. H. 32.5 cm), in situ in baked brick box beneath the foundations of the temple of Enki (god of sweet water) at Ur.  
 (b) Inscribed stone tablet (UM no. 31-17-7. L. 13 cm; W. 7.5 cm) found with copper statuette in baked brick box beneath the foundations of the temple of Enki.

Inscribed diorite statue found in room 3 of the temple of the goddess *Nimintabba*. Except for foundation figures, the statue is one of the few preserved from the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Iraq Museum, Baghdad (IM 1173. H. 26 cm).

lished feature of Mesopotamian royal iconography by the mid-3rd millennium B.C., and it remained so through the mid-1st millennium B.C. Inscribed, relief-carved plaques, dated to the early 25th century B.C., for example, show a figure specifically identified as Ur-Nanshe, king of the state of Lagash, carrying a basket filled with what looks like bricks on his head (Moortgat 1969: 42 and pls. 109, 111). At the other end of the chronological spectrum, inscribed, relief-carved stelae now in the British Museum show the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668-627 B.C.)—the Assyrian king is unmistakably identified as such by his headdress—carrying a basket on top of his head (Moortgat 1969: 155 and pl. 282). The inscriptions on these plaques and stelae connect the king holding or carrying a filled basket on his head with temple building.

The king's role in temple building is documented in the longest and most important literary work in Sumerian from the 3rd millennium B.C. That work, inscribed on two clay cylinders (Cylinders A and B) found in the French excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu, one of the major cities in the state of Lagash), commemorates Gudea's rebuilding and dedication of the temple of Ningirsu (the main deity of the state of Lagash and a form of Ninurta, god of the south wind).

The text of Cylinder A (and that of Cylinder B) has been outlined by Samuel Noah Kramer in his book *The Sumerians* (1963:137-140). The story apparently began soon after the fates had been decreed and Lagash blessed with the use of the waters of the Tigris. At that time Ningirsu decided to have Gudea rebuild his temple. He appeared to Gudea in a dream. Gudea apparently did not understand the dream and decided to consult the goddess Nanshe, who interpreted dreams for the gods. Nanshe explained the dream to Gudea point by point. Nanshe, then, advised Gudea to

construct a new chariot for Ningirsu and to present it to the god, along with its span of donkeys and the god's emblem and weapons. Gudea did so and in a second dream Ningirsu gave Gudea detailed instructions for the building of the temple. Gudea proceeded to carry out Ningirsu's instructions. He purified the city, gathered materials for the construction and decoration of the temple, and most importantly took part in the ritualized initial stages of the construction of the temple.

Cylinder A describes Gudea's participation in the ceremonies of the first stages of construction in some detail. The cylinder describes, for example, Gudea's ritual molding of the first bricks for the temple. After spending the night in a shrine and making sacrifices, Gudea

...entered the temple and prayed; the holy basket and the effective brick mold of destiny in the temple [...] he carried; with head high he went. (The god) Lugalkurdub went in front of him, (the god) Igalim went with him. Ningishzida, his god, took him by the hand. He put propitious (?) water

on the case (?) of the brick mold. Copper kettle drums and aldrums were played for the ensi [Gudea]; the stamp (?) and the brick he prepared (?). He put together honey, ghee, and precious oil (?); (with) essences, aromatic plants, and (different kinds of) wood he made it into a paste. He carried the holy basket, he put together (?) the brick mold. Gudea put clay into the brick mold; he carried out the operation perfectly. He made the brick for the temple splendid. He sprinkled the stacks (of bricks) with oil, he sprinkled them with cedar-(oil).... He broke the mold and let the brick dry.... Aromatic plants, hashur-perfume, essences he prepared (?). With the (way) he had put the brick in the mold (the sun god) Utu was pleased.... He lifted the brick from the case (?) of the mold. Like a holy tiara, held toward heaven, he raised the brick and carried it to his people. (After Ellis 1968:21-22; 170-72)

Following two enigmatic sections, the first of which describes Gudea's steadfastness and dedication to the task of temple building (Gudea is described, for example, as "like a cow who keeps her eyes constantly on her calf") and the second the participation of various deities in the program, the text continues: "Gudea, the builder of the temple, in the temple put the basket on his head like a holy crown; he laid the foundation, erecting walls on the ground" (Ellis 1968:22, 172).

Both of the passages from Gudea's Cylinder A quoted here are clear and explicit in describing the use of baskets in building. Gudea is described first as carrying on his head a basket which contained clay for the brick mold and later a basket which contained either bricks or mortar for laying the bricks. Statuettes depicting a male carrying on his head a filled basket, therefore, must represent the king either in the ritual molding of bricks for the temple or in the ceremonial laying of the temple's foundations.

If the text of Cylinder A provides an explanation for the upper portion of foundation figures like those from the temple of *Nimintabba*, it equally suggests an understanding of the nail-shaped, lower portion of such

statuettes, one correlative with the theme of the king's participation in the foundation of temples. This understanding is closely tied to the Sumerian term *temen* and its use with the verb *si-(ga)* in Cylinder A. In a recent study of Sumerian terms for "foundations," Sally Dunham examined the meaning of *temen* (1986:31-64). She pointed out that that word, as used on tablets showing plans of fields, designated an area marked off on the ground by a set of pegs attached by cords, and that it could refer to both the area marked off and the boundaries of that area. She further pointed out that *temen* could characterize the surveying points or pegs that marked the corners of that area and foundation deposits, which resembled each other (in their pointed shapes and in the fact that the peg-shaped objects or statuettes in deposits were invariably placed upright) and functioned in much the same way.

Dunham further argued that the term *temen* compounded with the

verb *si-(ga)* meant "to nail in the surveying or foundation pegs," and she cited and translated several passages from Cylinder A in which Gudea is described as "driving in the surveying or foundation pegs." In the course of Gudea's second dream, for example, Ningirsu tells Gudea of all of the good things that will happen when Gudea builds his temple, among them what will happen "on the day when you [Gudea] nail in my *temen* or surveying/ foundation pegs." As a second example, in the final hymn of praise for the temple of Ningirsu is a passage intended as a summary of the way in which the temple was built. A section of that summary reads "the temple its king has built with abundance; Ningishzida on the platform has built it. Gudea, ensi of Lagash, has nailed in its *temen* or surveying/ foundation pegs."

I would suggest that the nailing in of surveying pegs (or the placing of foundation deposits) to mark the boundaries or to lay out parts of a

## The Location of Foundation Boxes (and Deposits) in Temples at Ur, Uruk, and Nippur

Baked brick boxes containing deposits of copper statuettes and stone tablets (or which once contained such deposits) have been found in situ beneath the foundations of temples at a number of sites in southern Mesopotamia. Only those from Ur, Uruk, and Nippur, however, have well-documented archaeological contexts.

At Ur baked brick boxes and deposits were found beneath the temple of the goddess *Nimintabba*, as well as beneath a building generally referred to by its Sumerian name *Ehursag*, "Mountain House." Woolley originally called the latter a palace, but it was located within the temple complex of Nanna. In addition, a single baked brick box (with deposit) was found beneath the temple of Enki (Figs. 12, 13). The boxes beneath the temple of *Nimintabba* were located along the length of its outer, northeastern wall. The deposits found beneath *Ehursag* were located under the southern and eastern corners (the other two corners of the building were not preserved) and on one side of a doorway leading from the entry

room into the main courtyard (Subhi Anwar Rashid 1983:31). The deposit beneath the temple of Enki was found under the front wall, roughly 4 meters from the western corner.

At Uruk a number of foundation boxes were found in the temple complex of Inanna, goddess of love and war. All of them apparently flanked doorways.

At Nippur foundation boxes were found in the temple complex of Enlil and in the temple of Inanna. The baked brick boxes in the temple of Enlil were located under one corner of that building and on the sides of a doorway leading from an outer courtyard into the courtyard in which the ziggurat was located. The deposits recovered from the temple of Inanna were found under the western corner (the northern, eastern, and southern corners were not preserved) and on each side of the doorways leading from the main entrance in the northwestern wall of the temple through major courtyards to the sanctuary and, in all probability, to the reception suite of the chief administrator of the temple (Zettler *In press*).



temple was one of the tasks that the ruler performed as part of the ritual foundation of a temple. The nail-shaped lower portion of statuettes in foundation deposits might then be taken as a surveying peg. In that sense it would be closely integrated with the upper portion of the statuettes and like the upper portion would be intended to attest to royal participation in the foundation of the building.

The tasks Gudea is described as performing in the ritualized initial stages of temple construction, specifically his molding of bricks, suggest a plausible interpretation of the plano-convex tablet in foundation deposits, as well as the statuettes. The tablet can be interpreted as the brick, which Gudea lifted from the mold, raised to heaven like a holy tiara, and carried to the people. The plano-convex shape of the stone tablet was the standard shape of bricks throughout the first half of the 3rd millennium B.C. Plano-convex bricks continued to be used at least into the early years of the Third Dynasty of Ur, although square or rectangular bricks were more common at that time (Gibson 1975:72).

In sum, the tasks which Gudea performed in the ritual foundation of the temple of Ningirsu, as described in Cylinder A, make it possible to argue that statuettes and plano-convex tablets were put in deposits beneath temple foundations specifically to commemorate the proper foundation of the temples and the ruler's participation in that foundation. In a sense, then, the statuettes and stone tablets from the temple of Nimintabba might be described as complementing or reinforcing the words which Shulgi had inscribed on them, that is, roughly paraphrased, "I built the temple." Alternatively, the inscription might be thought of as literally describing what the statuette and stone tablet alluded to.

What can be established of the ritualized foundation of temples in ancient Mesopotamia and the king's role in that ritual is closely analogous to the ritual for the foundation of temples in ancient Egypt. As documented in texts and reliefs, the Egyptian king's role in the foundation ritual for temples involved a

number of activities (Weinstein 1973: 5-16). The king participated first in the "stretching of the cord," in other words, in fixing astronomically, with the aid of the goddess Seshat, the four corners of the temple and in marking those corners by driving long poles into the ground at the points determined. The king perhaps also laid out the various parts of the temple, for example, the hypostyle hall, inner sanctuary, and courts. The "stretching of the cord" calls to mind sections of Cylinder A in which Gudea is described as nailing in the temen or surveying pegs. Second, the Egyptian king began the digging of the foundation trench. Third, he

the foundation deposits  
... were intended to link  
the ruler with the gods  
and with future rulers  
who might unearth the  
deposits

molded the first brick; in actual fact he molded a brick for each of the four corners of the temple. The act clearly recalls Gudea's molding of the first brick for the temple of Ningirsu. Fourth, the king poured sand into the foundation trench, the purpose of the sand, apparently, to provide a compact, level surface on which to build. Fifth, he placed metal and stone plaques at the temple's four corners. Finally, the king initiated the actual construction of the temple, much as Gudea is described as having done in Cylinder A. The Egyptian king was also involved in purifying the completed temple and in presenting it to the deity. Interestingly, Gudea's Cylinder B describes his participation in both the cleansing of the temple and the preparations for the entry of Ningirsu and his wife, Bau, into the temple.

Although not documented in texts or reliefs (the exception may be the reliefs of a Fifth Dynasty sun temple), archaeological evidence shows that foundation deposits also were used in Egypt. Elaborate deposits were put down at strategic locations (corners of buildings and on the

sides of doorways, for example) beneath the foundations of temples. Their contents reproduced physically the events of the foundation ceremony and included, among other things, many of the objects used in it, for example, surveying equipment, hoes, mud bricks, and sand (Weinstein 1973:416-426).

The close similarity that exists between temple foundation rituals in Mesopotamia and Egypt argues strongly that the deposits put beneath the foundations of temples in those two areas of the ancient Near Eastern world were closely analogous. This analogy strengthens the characterization of Mesopotamian deposits as intended to document or reproduce the foundation ritual and the kings' participation.

The motivation behind the elaborate commemoration of the foundation of a temple and the ruler's participation was, doubtless, complex, and analyzing it in detail is beyond the scope of this article. I will only point to one obvious aspect of the motivation. Since the foundation deposits were buried, they were never intended as a public record of the ruler's building activities. They were intended to link the ruler with the gods and with future rulers who might unearth the deposits in the course of their own building activities. The deposits were perhaps intended to be a permanent reminder of one of the responsibilities of a model ruler and to testify to the fact that the ruler who put the deposits in place, who built the temple, adhered strictly to that model. Along with establishing justice, for example, building and provisioning houses for the gods was intrinsic to kingship in ancient Mesopotamia, and doing so conferred benefits on the king and on the land as a whole. This is attested by a hymn to the god Enlil, celebrating Ur-Nammu's rebuilding of Enlil's temple at Nippur. The initial lines of that hymn record Enlil's request that Ur-Nammu rebuild his temple and Ur-Nammu's assent. It continues with Ur-Nammu's participation in the foundation and Enlil's favorable reaction: "(Ur-Nammu) knowing the (prescriptions) of right and being lord of wide understanding, he prepared the brick mold. Enlil reduced into order for shepherd Ur-Nammu

his hostile enemy bearing land; for Sumer days of prosperity he made; triumphs he heaped there for him" (Castellino 1959:106-110).

The motivation just described for foundation deposits was the same motivation which lay behind one of the most famous monuments of ancient Mesopotamia, the stela inscribed with the Laws of Hammurabi. As the prologue to the text suggests, the Laws of Hammurabi were addressed largely to the gods and were intended to be a record of Hammurabi's accomplishments, specifically, his establishment of justice in the land (Oates 1979:75). And Hammurabi recognized this as a duty incumbent on him as king, when he noted "...An and Enlil for the prosperity of the people called me by name Hammurabi, the reverent God-fearing prince, to make justice to appear in the land, to destroy the evil and the wicked that the strong might not oppress the weak, to rise indeed like Shamash [the sun god] over the black-headed (people) to give light to the land"

(Driver and Miles 1955: 6-7).

*Ceramic Cylinder*

While something of the function and meaning of the statuettes and stone tablets from the temple of Nimintabba can be determined, no cogent explanation for the ceramic cylinders and their contents found beneath the pavement of room 2 can be put forward. In large part that is because of the almost complete lack of comparative material and references to such practices in written sources.

The only known examples of similar cylinders were found in the outer courtyard of the contemporary temple of Nanna at Ur (Woolley 1939:77-78). Only bits and pieces of the building were preserved and the context of the associated cylinders is consequently not clear. Some of the cylinders were apparently 15-18 centimeters high, others 30 centimeters high. All had diameters of 10 centimeters. They were smeared with bitumen on the outside and filled with white lime. Unlike the



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Photograph taken on the mound of Hasanlu showing the making of mud bricks in modern-day Iran. The process of making bricks has remained largely unchanged from ancient times to the present, and Gudea's description can be readily understood by referring to such photographs. The workman standing in the pit at the far left is mixing the raw material for the bricks: dirt, water, and straw. The mixture is shown on the ground in front of the figure second from the left. That workman is holding a wooden frame in which the mixture will be put. The workman second from the right is dipping an identical wooden frame into water, so that it will release from the molded brick more easily. The molded bricks (frame taken off) lie on the ground around the workmen. (Hasanlu Project slide; 1959)

cylinders from the Nimintabba temple, they were not inscribed. Written sources offer even fewer clues to the cylinders' function. No contemporary or even later written sources refer to such cylinders, to the practice of putting them beneath the floors of buildings, or to putting portions of small animals or querns in them. In such circumstances it is possible only to suggest something of the range of viable interpretations.

In his book Ellis described the cylinders from the Nimintabba temple and their contents under the heading "food and drink offerings." Written sources make it clear that various types of food and drink offerings were associated with the foundation and dedication of temples, and Ellis described the archaeological evidence for such offerings in detail (1968:126-131). However, as noted above, the inscription on the cylinders is not a building inscription, and the writing of the king's name and the titulary used suggest that the cylinders were put in place sometime subsequent to the foundation of the building. It is possible that the cylinders and their contents were connected with the dedication of the temple of Nimintabba, which would have taken place sometime after the building was completed (and necessarily after Shulgi had been deified and changed the royal titulary). Interestingly, portions of animals such as bulls and geese and grinding stones were common in deposits beneath Egyptian temples. They were apparently related to the consecration of those buildings (Weinstein 1973: 424-426).

It is equally possible that the cylinders were associated with a repair or rebuilding of the temple by Shulgi late in his reign, or perhaps more specifically with the laying (or relaying) of the baked brick pavement in room 2. The poor state of preservation of the building unfortunately makes it impossible to determine the character of room 2, and why that room should have had such deposits beneath the floor.

As an alternative explanation, it is possible that the cylinders and their contents had a more specifically apotropaic or prophylactic function.



They might, for example, be considered as analogous to sets of bowls—plain bowls, one inverted over the other—found beneath floors along walls of rooms and flanking doorways. Many such bowls have been found in a private house of the time of Hammurabi at Nippur. McGuire Gibson, excavator of Nippur, suggested that such bowl deposits were related to the so-called incantation bowls of the Sassanian era (3rd to 7th centuries A.D.). These bowls had elaborate Aramaic incantations intended to banish evil spirits or, more rarely, to enlist the aid of spirits in obtaining wishes. Unfortunately, the context of the incantation bowls is not wholly clear. Most have been found buried in the ground upside down; sometimes two were found together, one inverted over the other. At Nippur many examples were found in the ruins of houses, although it is not clear whether they had been buried in walls or simply lying on the floor. Passages from texts on some bowls imply that they were placed in the four corners of houses (Ellis 1968: 124-25).

## Summary

The purpose of this article has been to present objects from The University Museum's holdings in their archaeological, cultural, and historical contexts. Beyond elucidating the function and meaning of three objects from late 3rd and early 2nd millennia B.C. Ur in southern Mesopotamia, this article has also demonstrated the unique character of inscribed objects and the value of integrating consideration of object and inscription. Moreover, it has shown the importance of written sources generally for the understanding of material culture remains. Written sources are for archaeologists working in historical periods what informants are for ethnographers studying existing societies. Like informants, written sources may be difficult to translate and to interpret, and it may not always be easy to spot and/or take account of their biases. Making use of written sources perhaps risks misinterpreting the past, but ignoring them guarantees misinterpretation of it.

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