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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 Ningalinnabba (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.
Expedition
Vol. 28, No. 3

3 Inscribed copper statue 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 16235; 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 on one of the highest 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-southeastern 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 statue standing upright and leaning against the northeastern side of the box, and a steatite tablet on its floor.

The statues 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 pole. The lower portion of the statues is not rendered naturalistically, but in the shape of a peg or nail. Across the front lower portion of the statues it 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 (2044–2027 B.C.), a ruler known for his building activity, as well as for his military and political accomplishments. The inscription reads

"Nim-in-tab-šu, nim-šu, šul-gi, nita kalaq-ag, lugal ber-ni, mutu ki-si-ni, kī ur-ti-te, es-ša-mū-mu-dā, ti, 'For the goddess' Nimintabba, his lady, Shulgi, mighty man, king of Ur, King of Sumer and Akkad, her house, built.'"

The inscription on the statues is of interest not only for what it says, but equally for what it does not say. On the steatite 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 statue 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; Steinacher 1936). 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 statues just described.

The inscribed statues 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 one currently in The University Museum (Fig. 8, 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 (1947:40–41). The discrepancies be-
The Goddess Nimintatba

The goddess Nimintatba, 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 (Chaplin 1964:146). According to that text Nimintatba 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, Nimintatba was one of four servant deities of the moon god Nanna; the Sumerian term characterizing her, dingir.xib-ba, means literally "god(dess) who stands by." Nimintatba's temple at Ur was located just outside the south corner of the temple complex of Nanna. In view of the godess's role as servant deity of Nanna, that location is perhaps significant.

Samuel Noah Kramer has discussed early Mesopotamian religious beliefs 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.

**Function and Meaning of the Three Objects:**

In order to understand the function, meaning and 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 Nimintatba's temple deposits are typical or atypical; we can also shed light on the general significance 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 delineate 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. (1962:169ff.) The earliest known deposit with a statuette of a male carrying a basket on top of his head and a plaster 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-Namnun, founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur. From Gudea's time such statuettes and tablets, inscribed or uninscribed, 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 Amurrite king of Larsa from 1822 to 1763 B.C. and a contemporary of Hammurabi of Babylon (Fig. 15). 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 depositions and tablets have been found in temples at those three sites, the deposits have been found in baked brick boxes like those beneath the foundations of temples in southern Mesopotamia. 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 function of the temple.

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 Nimintatba and others identical to it depict the king. The posture was already an estab-
on the case (?) of the brick mold. Copper kettle drums and ala-
drums were played for the ensi (Gudea); the stamp (?) and the
brick he prepared (?). He put
together honey, ghee, and pre-
cious oils, and poured the holy budah oil into them. He put together (?) the brick mold. Gudea put clay into the brick mold and let it harden out of the operation perfectly. He made the brick for the temple splendid. He sprinkled the bricks (of brick with oil, they sprinkled them with cedar-oil). He broke the mold and let the brick dry. — Aromatic plants, hashur-persume, essences he prepared (?). With (the way) he had put brick in (the brick, 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 Elkins and Headrick 1982:22, 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 the job"), there is an account of the participation of various deities in the program, the text continues: "Gudea, while he was building the temple in the temple he put the basket on his head like a holy crown; he laid the foundations of the temple on the ground." (Elkins and Headrick 1982:22, 172). Both of the passages from Gudea's Cylinder A quoted here are clear and explicit about the use of baskets in building. Gudea is described first as carrying on his head a basket of bricks. This basket contained either bricks or mortar for laying the bricks. Statu-
ettes depicting a man carrying on his head a filled basket, therefore, mortars on the king either in the ritual molding of bricks for the temple or in the ceremonial laying of the temple. Gudea in a dream. After spending the night in a shrine and making sacrifices, Gudea

_...entered the temple and prayed;_ the holy brick and the ejection brick mold of destiny in the tem-
ple [?] he carried; with head high he went. (The god) Lugandoobu went in front of him, (the god) Ilgaling went with him. Ningish-
zida, his god, took him by the hand. He put propitiations (?) water in

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

Baked brick boxes containing deposits of copper statuettes and tablets (or which once contained such deposits) have been found in situ beneath the founda-
tions of temples located in the region of 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 Ninlilah, as well as beneath a building gener-
ally referred to by its Sumerian name El-Ima. "Mountain House." Woolley originally called the latter a palace, but it was located within the temple complex of Ninna. In addition, a single baked brick box (with deposit) was found beneath the temple of the goddess Ninsubilla (Elkins and Headrick 1982:22). The boxes beneath the temple of Ninlilah were located along the western corridor of its outer leading; northeastern wall. The deposits found beneath El-Ima were located under the southern eastern core walls (the southern 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 deposits located beneath the temple of Ninlilah was found under the front wall, roughly 4 meters from the western corner. At Nippur six baked boxes were found in the temple complex of Inanna, goddess of love and weaving, and they in turn apparently flanked doorways.

At Nippur foundation boxes were found beneath the temple of Iskun and in the temple of Inanna. The baked brick boxes in the temple of Iskun were located under the northeastern 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 northeastern, eastern, and southern corners were not preserved) and on each side of the doorways leading to the temple; 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 null-shaped lower portion of statues that had been in foundation deposits might then be taken as a surveying peg. In that sense it was the case that the upper portion with the upper portion of the statues and like the upper portion would be involved in the participation in the foundation of the building. The tall Cudea is described as performing in the ritualized initial stages of temple construction, specifically his laying the foundation of a temple, for a plausible interpretation of the plano-convex tableau in foundation deposits, as well as the statues. The tableau can be interpreted as the brick, which Cudea forged from the mud, laid like bricks, li-sara, 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. Flano-convex bricks were 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 1973:72). In sum, the tasks which Cudea performed in the ritual foundation of the temple of Ninisga, as described in Cylinder A, make it possible to argue that statues 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 statues and stone tablets from the temple of Ninisga might be described as complementing or reinforcing the force with which Shalih had inscribed them, that is, roughly paraphrased, “Built the temple of Ninisga. Alternatively, the inscription might be thought of as literally describing what the statues and stone tablets alluded to. What can be established of the ritualized foundation of the ancient Mesopotamia and the king’s role in that ritual is closely analogous to the more general archaeological evidence showing that foundation deposits also were used in 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, fixing astronomers’ positions in the sky and the aid of the goddess Sebat, the four corners of the temple and in setting those corners by the use of 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” belongs to the mind sections of Cylinder A in which Cudea is described as nailing in the posts for surveying purposes. To 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 unearthe 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 reflects Cudea’s molding of the first brick for the temple of Ninisga. 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 Cudea 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 gods. Interestingly, Cudea’s Cylinder B describes his participation in both the cleansing of the temple and the preparations for the entry of Ninisga 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 physical and ritual activity found in temple ceremonies and included, among other things, many of the objects found in temple deposits, equipment, hoes, mud bricks, and sand (Weinstein 1973:416-428). It seems clear that points between temple foundation rituals in Mesopotamia and Egypt argue the character of the building and the devotion of the building to the Egyptian king referred to the building of temples in those two areas of the ancient Near East. Similarly, the worship that is spoken of in the Cudea’s cylinder, 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 call me by name Hammurabi, the ever great, loving king, for 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: 67-7). Ceramic Cylinder While something of the function and meaning of the statues and stone tablets from the temple of Ninisga could be determined, no cogent explanation for the ceramic cylinders and stone tablets found beneath the pavement of room 2 could be put forward. In large part that is because was preserved and 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 Nannu 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 stamped with bitumen on the outside and filled with white lime. Unlike the cylinders from the Ninisga temple, they were not inscribed. Written sources make it clear that the cylinders’ function. No contemporary or even later written sources refer to the practice of putting them beneath the floors of buildings, or to putting glasses of water in them. In such circumstances it is possible only to suggest something of the range of viable interpretations. In his book Ellis described the cylinder as “a seemingly unimportant object 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 deposits and structures, and Ellis described the archaeological evidence for such offerings in detail (1969:136-141). However, as noted above, the inscription on the cylinders is not a building inscription, and the writing of the king’s name and the titular used suggest that the cylinders were put in place sometime subsequent to the completion of the building. It is possible that the cylinders and their contents were connected with the consecration of the temple of Ninisga, which would have taken place sometime after the building was completed. Another possi bility is that Shalih had been deified and changed the royal titular. Interestingly, portions of animals, bulls and grease and grinding stones were common in deposits beneath Egyptian temples, perhaps properly related to the consecration of those buildings (Weinstein 1973:75). It is equally possible that the cylinders were associated with a representation of the dead Shalih 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 an unfortunately makes it impossible to determine the character of room 2, and why that room should have had such a thick layer of bricks. As an alternative explanation, it is possible that the cylinders and their contents were not related to the ritual, but rather to some 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. 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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