A SPECTACULAR DISCOVERY

BURIALS SIMPLE AND SPLENDID

The excavation of the Royal Cemetery at Ur begun in 1926 resulted in the discovery of some of the most spectacular personal objects ever found in Mesopotamia. The cemetery is often discussed for its amazing artifacts and what they might mean for societal organization at the time of their burial in the mid-3rd millennium BCE, but the cemetery is much more than the few apparently royal tombs uncovered there.

BY WILLIAM B. HAFFORD
ABOVE: A modern photograph of one of Queen Puabi’s gold wreaths, superimposed over an archival photograph of the discovery of Puabi’s headdress, ca. 1928. PM object B17710, PM image 191051.

OPPOSITE: Gold bowl from Puabi’s tomb in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, Iraq. PM object B17693.
These 16 overshadowed all the others, however, solidifying the name “Royal Cemetery” in the minds of scholars and the general public. Newspaper articles hailed many of the Mesopotamian tombs as rivaling the splendor of Tutankhamun’s tomb, found by Howard Carter in Egypt only a few years earlier.

**Simple and Royal Graves at Ur**

The vast majority of the graves were simple rectangular pits with few offerings. Some of them infringed upon or cut into the elaborate royal graves. Woolley proposed that the grandiose tombs had formed the core of the cemetery and that the common graves interfered with them because the people desperately wished to be buried near their kings and queens. Yet, the overall area of the cemetery was in use for around 1,000 years and many of the graves predate the royal tombs themselves.

So the name Royal Cemetery does not precisely apply, since far more than royalty were buried here and the people in the royal graves come from no historically identifiable dynasty. But a few royal personages were apparently entombed here, in one period around 2450 BCE at least, as indicated by the titles **lugal** (king) and **eresh** (queen) found on some objects.

The only clearly identified royal body was found in a largely intact grave, numbered PG 800B. The vaulted roof of the mud brick chamber had partly collapsed, filling the interior with soil and brick. But when the dirt was finally cleared, the finds astonished the excavators.

**Queen Puabi and the Death Pits**

The skeleton of a woman lay outstretched at one end of the chamber, raised off the floor on what possibly had been a wooden bier. Surrounding her were offerings of gold, silver, shell, stone, and clay. These included a silver bull’s head and shell inlay (probably part of a decayed wooden lyre), decorated ostrich egg shell cups, alabaster jars, fluted silver tumblers, gold and silver bowls, and even gold and silver drinking tubes. But more impressive still were the objects that decorated her body. Thousands of beads covered her torso, forming lines above and below her body as if worn as a cape or sewn onto a cloak.

As Woolley described it in his 1934 publication: “The whole of the upper part of the queen’s body was covered with beads of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, carnelian, and agate; they were astonishingly numerous and of exceptionally fine quality.” She wore gold rings on each of her fingers and at her waist was a belt (possibly two) made of beads and golden rings. At her right shoulder were three gold pins that once fastened her garment. From each of these pins hung a lapis cylinder seal. One of them bore her name and title, translated as: Puabi, Queen. The name Puabi is not

**LEFT:** Gold fluted tumbler from Puabi’s tomb in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, Iraq. PM object B17691. **OPPOSITE:** Newspapers around the world wrote about Leonard Woolley’s great discoveries at Ur. PM images 151271, 151275, and 151273.
Grim Tragedy of Wicked Queen Shubad’s 100 Poisoned Slaves

Science at Last Reveals How the Greatest Suicide Pact in History Was Carried Out at the Tomb of the Beautiful Oriental Ruler Who Died 5500 Years Ago

Science Unearths the Flapper of 6,000 Years Ago
Rouged Her Cheeks Red and Her Eyes Green, Used the Lipstick, Bobbed Her Hair and Danced at the Jazz Parties at the Temple in the Patriarch Abraham’s Ancient City of Ur and Was Mourned

Sunday ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH Magazine

A PRINCESS of 3000 B.C.

Science Has Discovered About the Personal Attire of Chaldean Ladies.
A Queen’s Beauty Revealed

Puabi’s wealthy array was truly astonishing. She wore a belt of heavy gold rings as well as carnelian and lapis beads. More impressive were the thousands of beads on her body. There were so many that they are now strung on more than 80 individual strands. The beads and gold on her upper body weighed nearly 3.5 kilograms (7.5 pounds).

Perhaps the most impressive of Puabi’s accoutrements was her headdress. Consisting of wreaths of gold, beads of lapis and carnelian, a gold support comb, and more than 12 meters (30 feet) of gold ribbon wrapped in tiers around what must have been a large hairdo or wig, it weighed around 2.5 kilograms (five pounds). The imagery of the headdress derived from the natural world: the four wreaths held willow and poplar leaves made of sheets of gold, and the support comb was topped with seven gold flowers with lapis centers. Beads or amulets of calves, bulls, and even fish were also found on and near her body. The imagery may suggest an ancient myth of Inana and Dumuzi, a divine couple who in some stories represented the cycle of life and death, the growing and fallow seasons.

A reconstruction of Queen Puabi’s headdress, from The Illustrated London News, August 11, 1928.
A Closer Look: Puabi’s Burial Adornment

Queen Puabi, recovered in situ, was adorned with ornaments made from gold, silver, and semi-precious stones. The raw materials used to make this jewelry came from a great distance, and represented Ur’s far-reaching trade connections. From skeletal remains, the excavators determined that Puabi was about five feet tall and 40 years old. They described her as “stout.”

1 Hair Comb
A large gold comb, similar to a Spanish comb, rose up behind her head and curved forward. Star-like flowers were cut out of sheet gold. PM object B16693.

2 Wreaths
Puabi wore several wreaths around her head that included golden willow and popular leaves as well as flowers and beads made from lapis lazuli, carnelian, and agate. PM objects B17709, B17710-11.

3 Hair Ribbons
Gold hair ribbons were worn in her hair or on what may have been a wig. Puabi’s attendants also wore gold and silver ribbons. One ribbon was 12 meters, or about 36 feet long. PM object B17711A.

4 Earrings
Puabi’s earrings were quite large and lunate-shaped. They were made of very thin gold and were probably stuck through her ears. PM object B17712A-B.

5 Rosette Necklace
At Puabi’s throat was a necklace made with an open-wire flower set into a gold ring, and three strands of gold and lapis beads. PM object 16694.

6 Necklace and Cloak
The necklace at the top of the cloak was made of large triangular beads. The cloak contained over 50 strands of beads made from carnelian, agate, lapis, gold, and silver. Multiple PM object numbers, including 83-7-1.9.

7 Belt
The last piece shown here is Puabi’s belt. It was made from ten strands of alternating lapis, carnelian, and gold beads. The perfectly formed gold wire rings on the bottom may have been worn lower on her hips. PM object B17063.
The Bull-headed Lyre

ABOVE: This bearded bull’s head and shell plaque adorned the front of a lyre found in PG 789, a royal grave adjacent to Puabi’s. The bull is thought to represent the god Shamash and the might of the king. Large lyres were said to have a tone that was like the baying of a bull. CIRCLE INSET: Detail of the carved lapis lazuli in the bull’s beard.

RIGHT: Detail view of the shell inlay plaques found on the front of the lyre, depicting animals and humans in narrative scenes. Note the animal playing a bull-headed lyre in the second-to-bottom tier, on the left. PM objects B17694A-B.
attested in any historical lists but the fact that she held
the title erekh and that her seal does not mention a king
as her husband suggests that she may have ruled in her
own right. Woolley originally read her name in Sumerian
as Shub-ad and the world was fascinated by her discovery.

The remains of three other people were also found in
the chamber, presumably Puabi’s personal servants who
were buried with her to continue serving in the afterlife.
They had minor personal adornments: a few beads and,
in one case, a whetstone and two daggers. Such evidence
of human sacrifice was fundamental to Woolley’s inter-
pretation of a royal funerary ceremony. Who but kings
and queens could rally so much support that servants
would be willing to die alongside them? Of course,
whether they died willingly is not truly known.

Outside a few of the elaborate chambers were large
spaces with numerous additional skeletons, presumably
also servants of the royal court. These “death-pits,” as
described by Woolley, contained many spectacular finds.
The bodies were typically dressed in finery and some
were found with musical instruments and other indica-
tions of a funerary ceremony or feast. Apparently this
was an eternal celebration of the deceased king or queen,
played out by the living and continued by the dead.

A death-pit above the roof of Puabi’s chamber was
interpreted as belonging to her grave. Its position calls
the attribution into doubt, but its finds are nonethe-
less fascinating. Along with the bodies of 21 attendants
found here, excavators discovered an elaborate harp or
lyre, a chariot or cart drawn by oxen, and the remains of
a large wooden chest containing personal items, includ-
ing elaborate tools for personal grooming. The chest was,
thus, interpreted as holding the private items of the queen
placed in the grave to go with her into the afterlife.

Whether or not the death-pit belonged with her
chamber, Queen Puabi was certainly an important and
powerful figure in the Early Dynastic IIIa world around
2450 BCE. Her extravagant body adornment and per-
sonal items, as well as the title inscribed on her cylinder
seal, shed intriguing light on the Mesopotamian world of
4,500 years ago. Nevertheless, she and the larger cemetery
in which she was buried still possess many mysteries
that are not yet fully understood.

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