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Death in Mesopotamia: The 'Royal Tombs' of Ur Revisited

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Among the many topics of Ancient Near Eastern studies, none gives a more reliable picture of ancient Mesopotamian man, both as an individual and within his group-specific environment, than the study of funeral rites and the cult of the dead. Such a study can draw on both philological and archaeological sources. Here social integration processes, based on religiously determined norms and involving strictly symbolic interactions, become paradigmatically recognisable. These social integration processes are materially evident through grave findings. Until now, only partial examinations of the philological and archaeological sources have been undertaken. This undoubtedly constitutes a research desideratum, as, on their own, neither textual nor archaeological sources suffice to explain all aspects of funeral rites and cults of the dead.

Relevant texts are available on a relatively large scale from the beginning of the second millennium BC. They convey a remarkably unified picture of the religious concepts which prevailed subsequently for almost 2,000 years. They also convey the attitudes towards the dead resulting from these notions, which found their expression in the 'cult of the dead' (Bauer 1968; Bottéro 1982; Groneberg 1990; Kramer 1967; Tsukimoto 1985; cf. also the archaeological approaches in Campbell and Green 1995; Eickhoff 1993; Mayer-Opificius 1989; Selz 1983). On the other hand, 'funeral rites' are only sporadically and insufficiently described in these texts.

For nearly the entire third millennium, we have virtually no primary written sources with information about the beliefs underlying the cult of the dead, although funeral rites are occasionally mentioned. Inferences can be drawn only with reservation from a few lists of gods dating from the middle of the third millennium. More helpful are myths and epics, which are only available in written form from the second millennium. These probably reflect the religious ideas of the previous millennium to a certain degree.

What religious beliefs prevailed during the Uruk Period in the late fourth millennium BC cannot be inferred from the later textual references. Neither can we glean knowledge about the urban, but still illiterate culture of the 'Ubaid Period of the middle of the 5th millennium BC from later sources. If traces of these beliefs exist in the later mythical and epic traditions, they are not evident at present.

Unlike the evidence from later texts, archaeological finds enable us to reconstruct almost completely the formation and development of funeral customs as a material phenomenon from the Neolithic Period to the end of the Ancient Near Eastern epoch. This knowledge from archaeological reports can be compared with textual evidence from the second millennium onwards. Archaeologically, funeral rites are visible as completed acts, recognisable by the choice of location (house, cemetery, necropolis, intra- or extramural), the type of grave (single or collective grave, earth grave, tomb), entombment (body or ossuary burial, or cremation; in mats, coffins, sarcophagi, urns) and the type and number of offerings given to the dead for their last journey (Alster 1980; Ellison 1978; Strommenger *et al.* 1957–71). Thus

(although superficially to begin with) continuity and change in funeral traditions, starting long before the time of writing, can be understood and experimentally interpreted.

The degree to which the attitudes evident in the texts are reflected in the grave findings of the second and first millennia appears problematic at the present time, despite the latest studies (Nasrabadi 1999). These archaeological reports are mainly from excavations from the time before 1930, and many sites have been insufficiently published. The situation is clearly better with regard to the numerous grave findings of the third millennium which were documented and published after 1930. These allow a reconstruction and interpretation of Ancient Mesopotamian funeral traditions, based almost exclusively on archaeological evidence, which can be compared with the inferences from the later texts.

The basic religious consensus, discernible from the texts and valid since the beginning of the second millennium, can be summarised as follows:

Death was unavoidable. A return to life on this side was out of the question and wishes for eternal life (more specifically, for eternal youth) or reincarnation were illusory. Life on this side alone was what counted and the goodwill or retribution of the gods manifested itself in the well-being or difficulties of the people.

Following death, the transition to a new, non-physical, spiritual form of existence, the 'spirit of the dead' (Sumerian gidim, Akkadian *etemmu*) took place. This new existence had its place in the underworld, which was termed 'land of no return', 'underground regions', 'big Earth' or simply 'Earth'. In the Sumerian myth 'Inanna's walk to the underworld', and in the Babylonian epic 'Nergal and Ereškigal', the way to this place is referred to as a street which passed through seven gates with seven gatekeepers, while in the Gilgamesh epic, the river Khubur, also called the 'water of death', had to be crossed with the help of the ferryman Uršanabi. There is an obvious direct parallel here to the Greek underworld river Styx and the ferryman Charon. It is possible that the latter-mentioned version was the earlier, as model boats can be repeatedly observed as offerings in south Babylonian graves since the early fourth millennium (Strommenger *et al.* 1957–71, 607).

According to ancient Mesopotamian ideas, the underworld was a depressing place. The dead led an existence characterised by dust, heat, continuous thirst and increasing 'over-population' (because a balance between the birth and death rates was not possible). Rulers of the underworld were the goddess of death, Ereškigal, the two male gods, Nergal und Ninazu, and a group of gods, the seven Annunaki, as well as a large number of demons.

There was only one way to help relieve the spirits of the dead from the substantial deficits of their existence, namely, their continual care by their surviving dependants from the time of their funeral onwards. The care of the dead focused on five tasks, which were summarised in Babylonian with the inadequately translated concept *kispum* 'care of the dead' (Tsukimoto 1985):

1. equipping the dead individual with his status symbols;
2. supplying provisions for his journey to the underworld;
3. providing gifts for the gods of the underworld;
4. sacrificing to the dead at regular intervals;
5. protection of the grave as a prerequisite for maintaining the peace of the dead.

The neglect of these duties had unbearable consequences for the deceased, who would be plagued by hunger and thirst and would have to lead the (shadow) existence of a pariah. It was generally believed that those spirits of the dead which suffered such a fate would take

16 out of 84 house tombs at Aššur, earlier burials were moved to make way for new interments, thus disturbing the peace of the dead (Woolley and Mallowan 1976, 33–39 and 195–213 [LG/4, 17, 32, 61, 82, 84, 116, 125, 131, 133, 141, 145, 153?, 165, 170, 179, 194]; Haller 1953, tomb nos. 16, 30, 32, 35, 37–40, 43, 44, 47–49, 51, 53, 68). In these cases, the remains of the previously deceased, together with their (partly destroyed) offerings, were carelessly pushed together into corners of the tomb. However, it is possible that these graves were in households that had changed hands, so that a transferral of the 'care of the dead' to the new house owner was not obligatory if the new owner belonged to another family. Practices of this kind are already attested from three third-millennium house tombs at Khafajeh (Delougaz *et al.* 1967, 95–97 [Graves 89 and 91 which belong to house 6 = beginning of ED II] and 119–21 [Grave 133 = house 3 = ED IIIa]).

Denying a burial, desecration of dead bodies and the destruction of Royal Family tombs are measures taken by Aššurbanipal in the 7th century BC against his enemies. But here, as in the case of the previously mentioned mass graves of defeated enemies, this was clearly meant as a punishment:

> The graves of their earlier and later deceased kings (*by which the deceased Kings of Elam are meant*), who did not fear my lord and my lady, Aššur and Ištar, and who were such an aggravation to the kings my fathers, I destroyed and ripped them apart and I brought them up to the daylight. I took their remains (with me) to (the town of) Aššur and inflicted restlessness on their spirits. I denied them food and water (translated from Streck 1916, 54–57, incorporating suggestions in translation by Alasdair Livingstone).

Despite the frequent neglect of sacrifices to the dead already noted, the obvious assumption is that in Ancient Mesopotamian society the belief in the individual's right to 'the care of the dead' was invariably supported by a consensus, which was carried by all classes and possessed a normative character for at least two millennia. Furthermore, it may be assumed that the religious beliefs, from which the norms attached to the 'care of the dead' were derived, remained the same from the beginning of the second millennium at the latest. And finally, as has been shown, there are several indications that both of the above were already valid during the third millennium.

What is only now beginning to be recognised is that a further funeral tradition existed in Babylonia, at least during the first half of the third millennium. This tradition was fundamentally different from the previously mentioned 'individualistic' traditions, in that it involved practices which appear to be marked by 'collectivist' conceptions with respect to the identity of the buried individuals. This tradition, which is not at all evident in text sources from later periods, can best be demonstrated by the following three examples: the two extramural village necropolises of Tall Ahmad al Hattu (Sürenhagen 1979, 1981; Eickhoff 1993) and Tall Kheit Qasim (Forest 1983) of ED I date in the East Tigris area and the shaft tombs of the intramural ED IIIa 'Royal Cemetery' of Ur, termed 'Royal Tombs' by C.L. Woolley (Woolley 1934). Below, a comparison of the shaft tombs of Ur with the tombs of Tall Ahmad al Hattu will demonstrate the structural similarity at both sites.

The Ur shaft tombs comprise a total of 16 graves. They were built towards the middle of the third millennium within a large area of the southern part of the Temenos, which had been used as a cemetery for centuries (Fig. 1). The majority contain tombs at the foot of the shaft, which can be one-, two- or four-chambered. The excavator's interpretation of the 'Royal Tombs', which is still widely accepted today, was based almost exclusively on the findings in

the particularly richly equipped, superimposed shaft tombs 789 and 800 (see below, Figs 16, 17). The excavator was of the opinion that there was a close temporal and dynastic relationship between the tombs.

Woolley's explanations were above all widely accepted, because they combined his precise power of observation with a clear ability in suggestive interpretation. This is particularly well illustrated in his reconstruction of the funeral rites in the two previously mentioned shaft tombs (Woolley 1982, 72 ff.):

> The royal body was carried down the sloping passage and laid in the chamber ... Queen Puabi lay upon an open wooden bier ... Three or four of the personal attendants of the dead had their place with him or her in the tomb-chamber; thus, two were crouched by Puabi's bier and one lay a little apart...These attendants must have been killed, or drugged into insensibility, before the door of the tomb-chamber was walled up. The owner of the tomb was decked with all the finery befitting his station...the attendants, on the other hand, while they wear what we may call their court dresses, are not laid out properly as for burial but are in the attitudes of those who serve, and they are unprovided with any grave equipment of their own; they are part of the tomb furniture.
>
> The second phase [i. e. of the funeral] ... was more dramatic. Down into the open pit ... there comes a procession of people, the members of the dead ruler's court, soldiers, men-servants, and women ... and then, driven or backed down the slope, the chariots drawn by oxen ... and all take up their allotted places ... and finally a guard of soldiers forms up the entrance. Each man and woman brought a little cup ... the only equipment needed for the rite that was to follow. There would seem to have been some kind of service down there ... then each of them drank from their cups a potion which they had brought with them or found prepared for them on the spot ... and they lay down and composed themselves for death. Somebody came down and killed the animals...and perhaps saw to it that all was decently in order...and when that was done, earth was flung in from above, over the unconscious victims, and the filling-in of the grave-shaft was begun.This account is based for the most part on the two tombs, RTs 789 and 800 (Puabi), which have been described in detail.

Accordingly, Woolley's basic theses are as follows: shafts and tombs each served for only one funeral ceremony; the primary burial was a deceased city ruler or his wife, who was buried with great pomp; in addition, a larger circle of people were present, termed the 'court' by Woolley. These voluntarily followed the main occupants to their deaths.

If this interpretation is correct, then sacrificial funerals took place in the 'Royal Tombs'. Woolley's statement that 'the attendants ... are unprovided with any grave equipment of their own; they are part of the tomb furniture', would be an additional indication that the norms contained in the texts since the beginning of the second millennium, according to which every man, whether poor or rich, high or low, had a right to 'care of the dead', were not valid here.

We could settle for this declaration and view the 'Royal Tombs' of Ur as a special case within Ancient Mesopotamian funeral traditions, despite P.R.S. Moorey's suggestion, in an astute study, that the main occupants were not city rulers or their wives, but priests and priestesses of the town god of Ur, Nanna, and the remaining people were their temple staff (Moorey

revenge on their surviving dependants (the guilty parties) by returning to the upper world and causing illness (Tropper 1989). Despite these dangers, which were regarded as real, the neglect of sacrifices to the dead appears to have been a frequent offence, as numerous rituals against the spirits of the dead illustrate. This is the religious background against which the funeral rites and the ensuing cult of the dead, as well as several grave inscriptions of the second and first millennia, become intelligible.

A prerequisite for the funeral rites was the acquisition or construction of a burial place. It is assumed that the construction of a grave, particularly in the case of a simple burial, took place following death. This was not the case with house funerals where tombs were especially constructed for family burials; in some house purchase contracts the transfer of the ownership of the tombs was also specified.

The texts differentiate in terms of the location and form of the graves to a remarkably small degree. The Sumerian language uses the term é.ki.sè.ga, which can mean grave, single grave, but also tomb within a house, and ki.mah, which probably referred to a cemetery. The latter assumption is confirmed by an inscription from the late third millennium of the city ruler Gudea, which mentions a municipal ('urban') cemetery (ki.mah.uru) (Gudea Statue B, V 1; see Steible 1991, 160 ff). However, the Akkadian term *kimahhu*, derived from Sumerian ki.mah, refers to a 'tomb', generally in the area of a residential home, while a simple earth grave was mostly termed *qabrum*. In royal grave inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, a stone sarcophagus (*aranu*) inside the tomb is also mentioned.

In contrast to the inadequate differentiation found in the textual evidence, archaeological reports reveal the diversity of grave types in houses and cemeteries. These range from the simple earth grave with mat lining, urn and sarcophagus graves, to bricked tombs of various construction. In the case of cemeteries, a differentiation between (a majority of) intramural places and a few extramural becomes possible, as well as a differentiation between assemblies of single graves and necropolises. This evidence hardly finds mention in the texts.

The actual funeral rites initially involved lamentation of the dead and the funeral service. That the latter could take place with professional support follows from a decree of the Sumerian city ruler Uruinimgina from the middle of the third millennium (Steible 1982, 284 ff). However, this task was primarily given to the heirs, both blood relatives and adopted.

A further part of the funeral rites involved the laying of offerings in the grave. An Old Sumerian text from the middle of the third millennium shows that preparations for this could be made during a person's lifetime (Gelb *et al.* 1991, 100 ff.). From the property of a deceased temple functionary, the governor of the town Adab acquired a field. The seller was the son of the deceased. For the selling price, aside from a large consignment of barley, two lots of objects were agreed upon. These were to serve as grave offerings for the deceased and later also for his widow after her death. These were prestige objects, e.g. instruments and jewellery of silver and lapis lazuli, and, in the case of the deceased, included a chariot.

These details correspond to the archaeological reports of the graves of Ur, Kish and Abu Salabikh from the first half of the third millennium, which are characterised by rich offerings and in some cases contained chariots (Woolley 1934, 1956; Moorey 1978, 104 ff.; Postgate 1985). What cannot be determined from the contract of sale is whether the offerings were exclusively personal or whether gifts for the underworld gods were also included, as mentioned in the epics 'Gilgamesh's Death' and 'The Death of Urnammu'.

According to these texts, it was obligatory to include further offerings to the dead in the form of travel provisions for the journey to the underworld. The archaeological record confirms that this norm was adhered to as far as possible, as pottery containers, which served for the intake of solid and liquid food, were found in almost all graves. Given the often large

number of offerings, it is only rarely possible to suggest which offerings are to be interpreted as personal belongings, travel provisions or gifts for the gods. However, a first attempt to establish a functional separation appears promising in all those cases in which two or more sets of offerings were deposited in different areas of the grave or tomb. A large number of examples of this are present in the graves and tombs of Khafajah and Ur (e.g. Delougaz *et al.* 1967, figs 46, 47, 60, 66, 81; Woolley 1934, figs 31, 35, 42, 44, 48, 50, 52, 53, Woolley 1956, pl. 54 [JNG 42, 90?], 55 [JNG 220]).

How the funeral rites for members of the Royal Family were performed is illustrated by a Nabonidus stele inscription, which records the funeral ceremony for the Queen Mother Adad-Guppi. This was a state funeral with international participation:

> In the ninth year of Nabonidus, the King of Babylon, fate took her away. Nabonidus, the King of Babylon, her own son, the favourite of his mother, prepared her body for the burial. With beautiful garments, pristine linen, beautiful stones, exquisite stones (and) exceedingly precious stones (he adorned her). With sweet oil (he embalmed) her body (and) laid (her) in a secluded place. He slaughtered fat oxen (and) rams. Before him the people of Babylon and Borsippa gathered. In the presence of (representatives) (of peoples) who inhabit remote districts, he (summoned) (the Kings, Princes) and governors of (the border) of the land Egypt, from the high(er) to the lower seas (and) (initiated) the funeral ceremony (translated from Hecker 1986–91, 484).

The end of the funeral rites could be marked by the mounting of a grave inscription, but this does not appear to have been obligatory. Here the requirement to respect the peace of the dead is most clear. A standard inscription from the second millennium, found in several specimens, was mounted on private graves and read as follows:

> For always, for a long duration of days, for distant days, for the days which remain: (He who) sees this grave, should not remove it, but restore it! The person, who sees this and does not disrespect, but says the following: 'I want to restore this grave', let the good deed, which he performed, be rewarded! In the upper (world) let his name be good, in the underworld let his spirit drink pure water! (translated from Hecker 1986–91, 479).

Deviations from the previously noted long-lived norms of the 'care of the dead' appear to have been the exception. There is evidence for the heaping up of the bodies of defeated enemies. This was a war tradition, already attested iconographically in the middle of the third millennium ('Stela of the Vultures', see Moortgat 1967, pl. 121) and later also in the texts (Westenholz 1970), which condemned the dead to the existence of a restless spirit. There is no doubt that exactly this was intended on the part of the victors and meant as a punishment for the defeated side.

Some texts from Mari refer to orders from King Zimrilim for the murder and subsequent secret burial of (political?) opponents (Dossin 1950, 36 [ARM 1, 8, l. 11 ff]; Dossin *et al.* 1964, 114 ff. [ARM 13, 107, l. 11]). This undoubtedly constituted a deliberate violation of accepted norms, which, under the beliefs of the time, would have merited punishment from the gods.

At first glance, a deviation from the norm is also evident in Old Babylonian Ur and Neo-Assyrian Aššur. In at least 16 out of a total of 47 brick-built vaults at Ur and, similarly, in

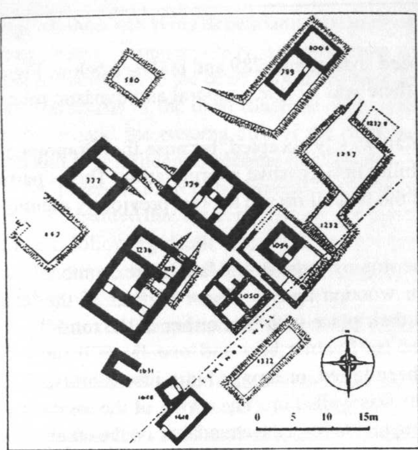

Fig. 1. Ur, plan of the 'Royal Tombs' (Woolley 1982).

1977; cf. also Moorey 1982).

However, several contradictions would have to be accepted in Woolley's presentation. One of these is his assertion that the servants were allegedly positioned according to 'the attitudes of those who serve'. As the report from RT 800 shows, this refers in one sense to the flexed position of bodies common in ancient Mesopotamian burials. Further findings from the same tomb make it clear that, contrary to Woolley's assumption, the extended position cannot be a reliable indicator of the highest-ranking corpse, for at the foot of the dromos, five bodies were found together in this position on a bier, without any offerings. In contrast, in RT 1054 (see below, Fig. 14), the presumed main person and a further four bodies were found in a flexed position.

Furthermore, there were several peculiar skeletal finds which were not satisfactorily explained by Woolley. Where these are incomplete skeletons, as evident in several shaft tombs, the excavator's assumption that grave plundering had taken place cannot be immediately rejected. However, in RT 789, as in several other tombs, numerous skulls were found – in RT 789 arranged in an orderly row outside the tomb chamber – but there was no trace of the corresponding bones of the bodies. Woolley concluded that this was generally a result of the chemical aggressiveness of the shaft filling (Woolley 1934, 48). However, he failed to provide an explanation of why, in the immediate vicinity of these skulls, intact skeletons were found.

In view of the above contradictions, a re-examination of Woolley's basic thesis appears justified. Were these actually the burials of high ranking people with 'servants'? Were all of the burials simultaneous? Is it possible that these are multiple burials, i.e. collective graves with individual burials which took place at different times, whereby the older burials, together with their offerings, were pushed to the side or transferred to another grave, sometimes no longer intact or even simply as skull deposits?

Examples of extramural burial sites with collective graves from the greater Mesopotamian area were already known at the time of the excavations of Ur. Only in Mesopotamia itself was such evidence missing, which is obviously why Woolley did not take this possibility into consideration. However, excavations in the East Tigridian ED I necropolises of Tall Ahmad al Hattu and Tall Kheit Qasim, which took place 20 years ago, have now shown that multiple burials in collective graves were customary in the Babylonian hinterland as early as the beginning of the third millennium. Both necropolises are extramural burial sites which belonged to a small village settlement. For this reason alone, it is very unlikely that they contained rulers' graves. The offerings found in the graves suggest far more an acephalous social structure based on extended family groups.

In the following, the necropolis of Tall Ahmad al Hattu (Fig. 2) will be used to provide a comparison with Ur. (The necropolis of Tall Kheit Qasim is similar, but not included in this discussion.) It comprised several rows of tombs, which were constructed during a period of

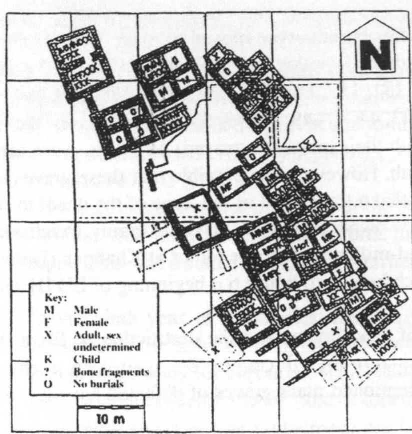

Fig. 2. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, plan of the necropolis (Eickhoff 1993, fig. 27).

80–120 years. The oldest tombs are situated in the west and were later joined by further rows of tombs to the east, towards the settlement. All of these are underground constructions, erected in shallow pits less than one metre in depth. Against the inner sides of the pits mud-brick walls were built. These must have originally stood about 1–1.5 m above the ground and were flat roofed. The time span indicated here is based on reliable palaeo-demographic calculations, because the necropolis could be completely excavated.

Although the time difference between both sites amounts to several centuries, the architectural correspondence between Tall Ahmad al Hattu and the tomb chambers of the 'Royal Tombs' of Ur cannot be overlooked. Both contain one-, two- and four-chambered tombs with practically identical ground plans and measurements. However, this correspondence extends even further if the findings in the tombs of the older necropolis are compared individually with the Ur shaft tombs. Already the layout plan of Tall Ahmad al Hattu shows that, just as at Ur, the number and type of burials could strongly fluctuate. In both cases, intact individual burials can be observed alongside mostly fragmentary multiple burials, skull deposits and nearly completely emptied tombs. The latter belong to the oldest constructions in Tall Ahmad al Hattu.

In Tall Ahmad al Hattu, intact individual burials exist only within the most recent tomb rows on the east edge of the necropolis (Fig. 3). They can be compared to shaft tomb 1631 in Ur (Fig. 4). At Ur individual burials were also exposed in the topmost area of the shaft of RT 1054, more than 5 m above the tomb chamber with its multiple burials. These individual burials were more recent than RT 1054 itself (Fig. 5).

Intact multiple burials within single-chambered tombs, for example a double burial (Fig. 3, tomb 56/17:VI), belong, in the case of Tall Ahmad al Hattu to the most recent period of occupation. In Ur, RT 1648 can be shown as a parallel (Fig. 6).

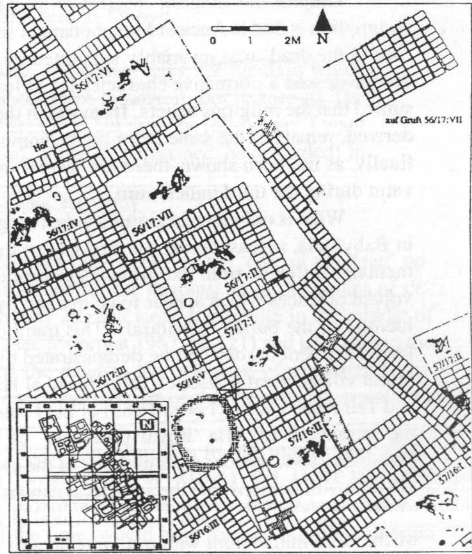

Fig. 3. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, latest burials (Eickhoff 1993, fig. 20).

The four-chambered tombs of Tall Ahmad al Hattu revealed for the most part only fragmentary findings, as was the case in most of the two-chamber tombs. The original skeletons and offerings had been largely or entirely removed (Figs 7 and 8). The findings from the four-chamber tomb 779 in Ur provide a parallel to this (Fig. 9). On the other hand, its ground plan, which is not attested at Tall Ahmad al Hattu, only recently found its equivalent in Tall Bi'a on the mid-Syrian Euphrates (Strommenger 1994, fig. 2). There, also, very little has been retained of the original tomb contents, but a few pottery remains suggest contemporaneity with the shaft tombs of Ur. Similarly in RT 789 (see below, Fig. 16) the assumed main burial is missing.

An extreme case with respect to fragmentary burials is provided by a one-chamber tomb at Tall Ahmad al Hattu, in which no offerings, but 11 deposited skulls and numerous long bones were found (Fig. 10). These must be parts of skeletons which were originally buried intact in other tombs. In Ur a parallel may be found in the topmost content of RT 1050, which largely comprises skulls and a few long bones (Fig. 11). Offerings were not registered. A clear parallel exists in the so-called 'death pit' 1332, in which were found only two offerings but at least 6 deposited skulls and 13 skeletons heaped on top of each other (Fig. 12).

The last example from Tall Ahmad al Hattu (tomb 53/20:I–II) is also the most informative, as it attests a number of activities which obviously took place in the tomb over a long period of time (Fig. 13). This is a two-chambered tomb with an inner connecting door. In the south-west corner of the north chamber, an intact female skeleton in a flexed position was found, surrounded by numerous offerings. Older burials had evidently been pushed together to the side to make room for the new burial. It is plainly evident that still earlier burials from the north chamber were taken to the south chamber, where the skulls were deposited separately while long bones and the remains of offerings were carelessly scattered over the floor. In the west part of the south chamber are bones and ceramic remains, not belonging to these burials. This suggests that they were placed there at a still earlier date, but then were almost completely removed, perhaps in connection with the previously mentioned activities.

On the basis of this report, we are evidently coming as close as possible to the basic thought behind the funeral tradition in Tall Ahmad al Hattu. In each individual case, funeral rites were performed according to fixed rules. These included the deposition of a large number of prestigious offerings (alabaster containers, copper containers and instruments, carnelian and lapis lazuli beads, polychrome-painted luxury pottery), which clearly exceeded the standard house inventory in the respective settlement. However, the preservation of the peace of the dead and the regular bringing of sacrifices for the dead did not fall within these rules.

If we take these observations into account in a reconsideration of the findings from the shaft graves of Ur, then an interpretation which fundamentally departs from Woolley's thesis can be offered. As a first example, the tomb chamber and the forecourt of RT 1054 will be referred to (Fig. 14). According to Woolley, the intact skeletons and skulls found in the forecourt were the attendants of the assumed main funeral in the chamber, as were the skeletons lying along the tomb walls. Making a comparison with the findings from Tall Ahmad al Hattu, a much more plausible assumption is that the so-called main funeral is only that of the most recently buried person and that the skeletal remains in the forecourt (perhaps also the offerings) represent earlier burials in the chamber. A corresponding interpretation also appears viable for the two-chambered tomb RT 777, the smaller chamber of which contains skull deposits (Fig. 15).

Moreover, there are good reasons to consider a new interpretation for the two Ur shaft tombs, 789 and 800, from which Woolley drew his main arguments for his thesis of the courtier funerals. To begin with let us consider the findings from RT 789 (Fig. 16). Evidently,

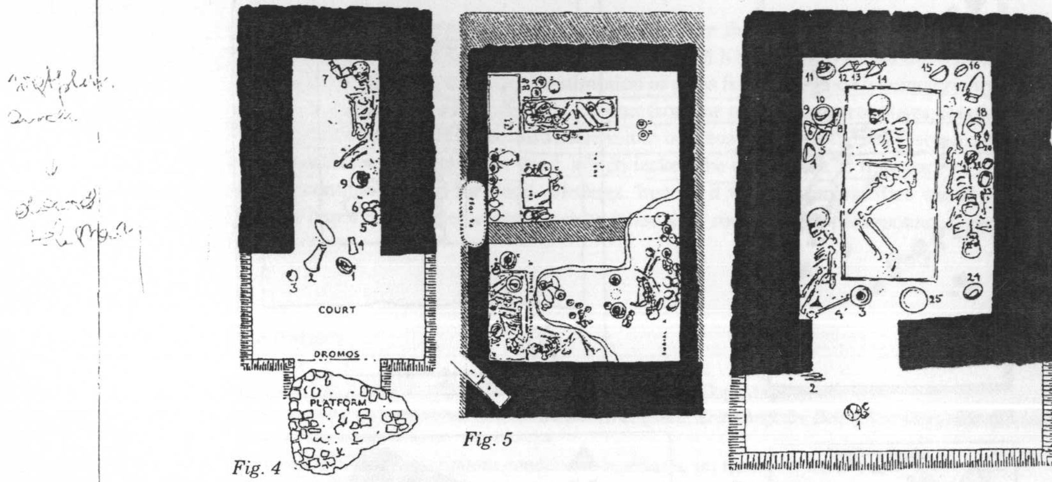

Fig. 4 Fig. 5 Fig. 6

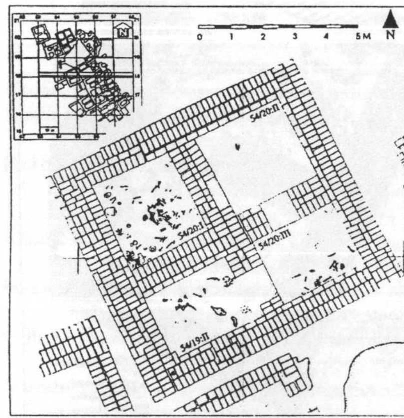

Fig. 7

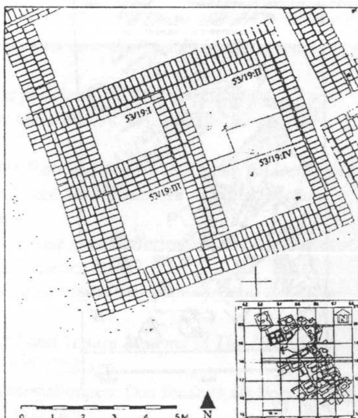

Fig. 8

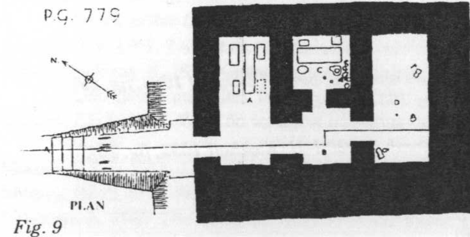

Fig. 9

Fig. 4. Ur, RT 1631 (Woolley 1934, fig. 25).
Fig. 5. Ur, RT 1054, upper level (Woolley 1934, fig. 15).
Fig. 6. Ur, RT 1648 (Woolley 1934, 133 fig. 26).
Fig. 7. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, disturbed burials in a four-chamber tomb (Eichhoff 1993, fig. 8).
Fig. 8. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, emptied four-chamber tomb (Eichhoff 1993, fig. 9).
Fig. 9. Ur, RT 779 (Woolley 1934, pl. 24).

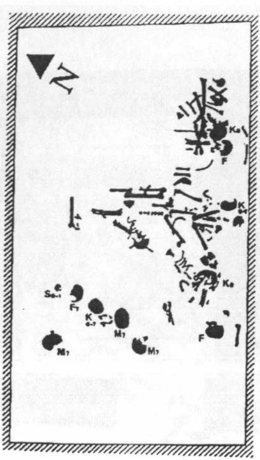
Fig. 10

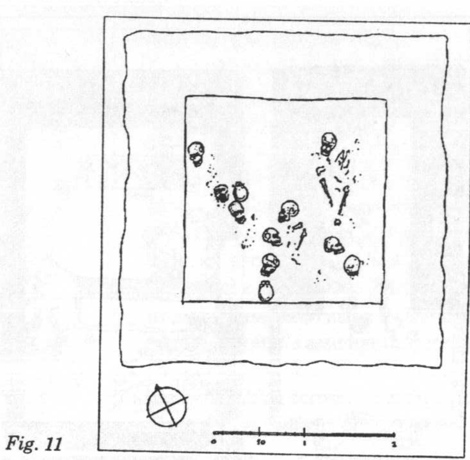
Fig. 11

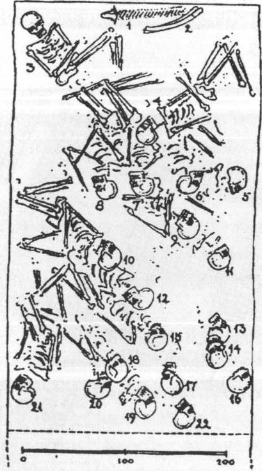
Fig. 12

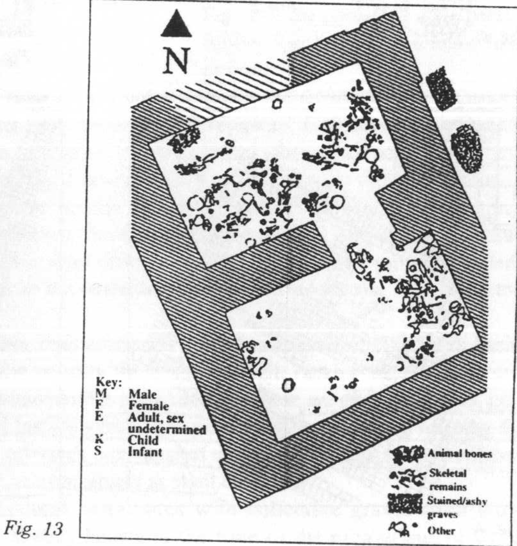

Fig. 13

Fig. 10. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, deposit of skulls and long bones (Eickhoff 1993, fig. 29).
Fig. 11 Ur, uppermost fill of RT 1050 (Woolley 1934, fig. 13).
Fig. 12. Ur, 'death pit' 1332 (Woolley 1934, fig. 120).
Fig. 13. Tall Ahmad al Hattu, two-chamber tomb 53/20:I–II (Eickhoff 1993, fig. 28).
Fig. 14. Ur, court and chamber of RT 1054 (Woolley 1934, fig. 17).
Fig. 15. Ur, RT 777 (Woolley 1934, fig. 6).
Fig. 16. Ur, RT 789 (Woolley 1934, pl. 29).
Fig. 17. Ur, RT 800 (Woolley 1934, pl. 36).

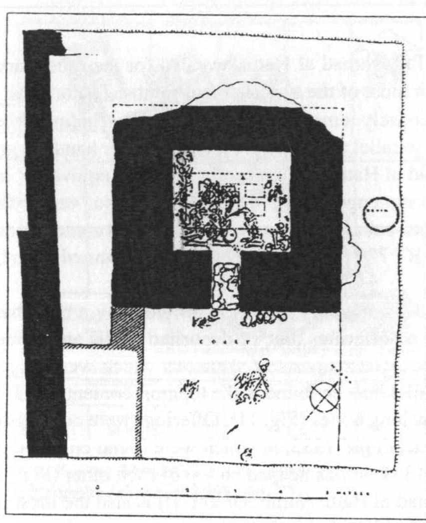
Fig. 14

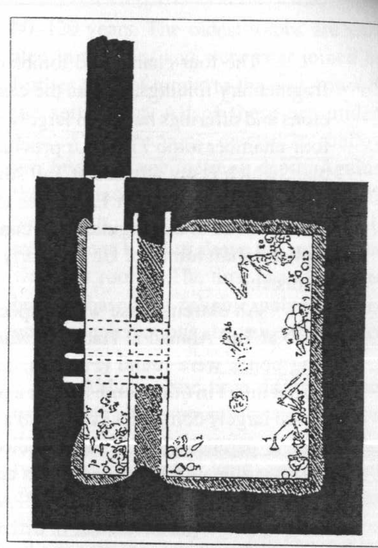
Fig. 15

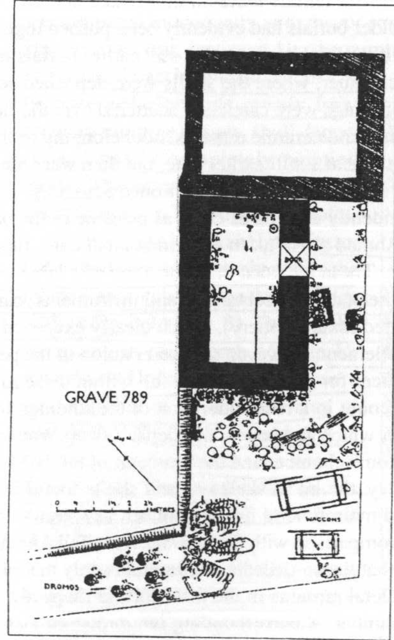

Fig. 16

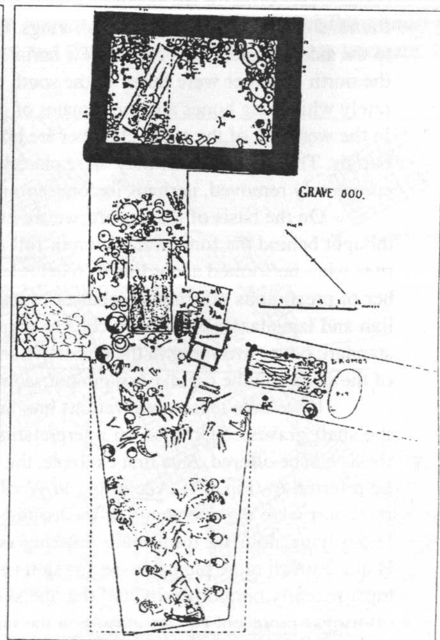

Fig. 17

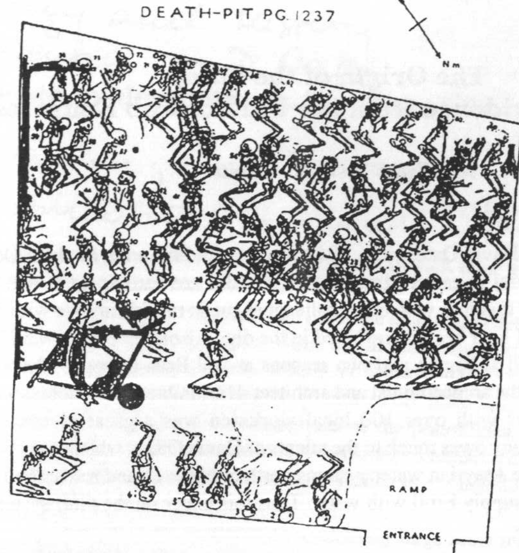

Fig. 18. Ur, 'death pit' 1237 (Woolley 1934, pl. 71).

the tomb chamber was opened from the top and the skeleton inside was removed, while the majority of the offerings were left behind. Woolley assumed the tomb had been plundered. Comparable occurrences are to be observed in the tombs of Tall Ahmad al Hattu, although there plundering was not assumed to have occurred. The transfer of the body to another grave is just as conceivable. It follows that the numerous skulls outside the tomb chamber are more likely to be evidence of skull deposits than of the remains, originally intact, of in situ burials.

If this interpretation, based on the report from Tall Ahmad al Hattu, holds true, then the multiple burials at Ur cannot be viewed as the remains of courtiers or royal servants, who went to their death together with their master or mistress, but rather as secondary burials of corpses which possibly had been originally buried in a completely different place. If this interpretation is correct, then the present attribution to the main funeral of the soldiers and the two chariots buried at the end of the dromos is invalid.

With respect to the findings from the tomb chamber of RT 800 (Fig. 17), it can only be said for certain that the female body on a bier, which can be compared to the above-mentioned female body in a two-chambered tomb at Tall Ahmad al Hattu, was the last to be buried. Attributing all the offerings in the chamber which had been pushed together into a heap to this body would be unwarranted. The remains of other skeletons were also present and some of the objects may have originally belonged to them. The situation in the forecourt and in the lower part of the dromos – individual skulls, an intact skeleton in a flexed position, five bodies in a stretched out position on a bier, two rows of bodies in a flexed position, crossing over each other, a larger number of offerings irregularly scattered around a box, a single sledge – speaks against rather than for the simultaneous burying of all the bodies and deposition of all the offerings.

There is only one remaining shaft tomb, the so-called 'death pit' 1237 (Fig. 18), which does not permit the immediate dismissal of a simultaneous mass burial. However, there is no incontrovertible proof of such burials.

In sum, the degree of correspondence between the findings in the shaft tombs of Ur and in the necropolis of Tall Ahmad al Hattu (as in Tall Kheit Qasim) seems too significant to allow us to maintain the traditional assumption of mass funerals in the Ur cemetery involving servants or courtiers. On the basis of the report from the two older necropolises, it is far more likely that in the first half of the third millennium in Mesopotamia there were isolated cases of burial practices and cults of the dead, which lacked the conception of the peace of the dead and the continuing need for ritual offerings. Instead it was the funeral rites which were of decisive importance. Whether these customs had their roots outside Mesopotamia remains to be examined.

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The Origin of the *Falaj*: Further evidence from the United Arab Emirates

Walid Yasin Al Tikriti

I have known Professor David Oates since 1968 when he and his wife, Dr Joan Oates, were excavating at Choga Mami in eastern Iraq. Although I did not participate in that project, a visit to their excavations together with other colleagues made me fall in love with prehistory in Mesopotamia, where I later became involved in the digging of Tell es Sawwan. Through a short study season at Tell al Rimah and two seasons at Tell Brak in upper Mesopotamia, I discovered David Oates the archaeologist and architect. His kindness and successful policy in running the excavations with over 100 local workmen was a great pleasure. Indeed, Mesopotamian archaeology owes much to the talents of David Oates, who among other interests has investigated Late Assyrian water systems north of Nineveh and researched the *qanat* built by Sennacherib to supply Erbil with water. Thus this paper on the *falaj* system reflects one of his many interests.

The irrigation system of ancient Persia has been a subject of interest among scholars for many decades. The so-called *qanats*, subterranean tunnels for carrying water, have traditionally been associated with that country. Thus the Arabian *falaj* (plural *aflaj*), the equivalent of the *qanat* system of Iran, has always been considered to be of Persian origin. However, recent excavations, carried out by the Department of Antiquities and Tourism in Al Ain (UAE), in and around the city, show that this system has been in use in Arabia for some 3,000 years, i.e. at least three to five centuries before the known *qanats* of Persia. This paper will comment on current views and present the evidence from these recent excavations.

The earliest record that may refer to this type of irrigation system is the reference by the Assyrian king Sargon, in the records of his campaign in 714 BC to Urartu in the Lake Urmia region. The term used is *palgu*, generally assumed to refer to a *qanat* system (Læssøe 1951), though these ditches are described simply as water barriers crossed by Sargon's army. This early record, together with the writings of Polybius, the Greek historian of the third/second century BC, has led scholars to consider a Persian origin for this system to be indisputable. In this paper, however, we shall try to throw further light on the subject through the most recent discoveries in Arabia. We turn first, however, to the geography of South-east Arabia and comment on the underground water in the region, which before some 5,000 years ago was very close to the surface. Water is of course essential to human survival, and archaeological evidence shows that at least some Stone Age sites were originally located near lakes and/or had easy access to ground water (Gebel *et al.* 1989). Recently discovered sites of the same date to the west of Jebel Hafit and west of the city of Al Ain support the already established evidence. During the Bronze Age, life in South-east Arabia became increasingly settled. Several settlement sites of this date have been discovered, of which Hili 8 is the earliest known (Cleuziou 1989). Most of these settlements belong to the Umm an-Nar period dated to the second half of the third millennium BC. Further sites of second millennium BC date, from a period which was once considered to be represented by a gap in the history of settlement in