

Ur: Empire, Modernity, and the Visualization of Antiquity Between the Two World Wars

NO ONE COULD HAVE GRASPED the relationship between the discovery of civilizations of the remote past, the visualization of their antiquity, and modernity better than Charles Leonard Woolley. One of the most eminent archaeologists of the first half of the twentieth century, Woolley was a doyen of Near-Eastern ancient history, a manipulator of newly developed media, and a celebrity, who noted that “an appeal to the eye is the best way of awakening interest in a new form of knowledge” (that is, archaeology).¹ His observation about the accessibility to mass audiences of a past that had hitherto been largely known only through texts, that had barely existed as a materiality, and that had to be literally dug up to be envisioned, is to be found in his popular manual, *Digging Up the Past*, which was based on a series of six talks broadcast on the BBC and first published in 1930. By that time Woolley had already written *Ur of the Chaldees*, which aimed at a popular reading public; had begun publishing the multivolume *Excavations at Ur*, for professionals; had regularly contributed to the British and North American press; and had toured Britain. As numerous British and American reviewers of the booklet remarked, it proved that archaeology “concerned everyone. Its subject is modern man.”²

By 1930 Woolley had acquired a public presence and his imperial persona was that of both a discoverer of the material cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and representative of the British Museum working in

ABSTRACT This article explores the multiple visual presences of antiquity in the first half of the twentieth century and connects visual histories to the history of empires. It shows how archaeology mediated between the newly discovered material civilizations of the ancient Mesopotamian empires and experiences of modernity in the British Empire, the world’s largest modern empire. The article demonstrates how the materiality of antiquity enabled its visualization in a variety of forms, from illustrations through black-and-white and color photography to aerial photography, and in three-dimensional reconstructions in museums. The article focuses on the spectacular archaeological discoveries at Ur, Tell Al-Muqayyar, in Southern Iraq, which exposed to mass audiences the unknown Sumerian culture. Ur was represented and constructed as the place of origin of monotheism, a site of a rich material culture, and, at the same time, as barbarous. *REPRESENTATIONS* 145. Winter 2019 © Bilha Melman. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 129–51. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/REP.2019.145.1.129>.

a territory that was now, after the First World War, part of a new Middle-Eastern imperial order. His observation highlights a web that connected modern empires, the visions of the past that had evolved in them, the forms and technologies of the visual, and the era historians have come to designate “late modernity.”³ Of course visual representations and spectacles of antiquity and their consumption evolved before late modernity and the beginning of the twentieth century. As far back as antiquity itself, the Greeks and Romans were displaying ancient Egyptian monuments, which again became popular during the Renaissance, and throughout the eighteenth and long nineteenth centuries Egyptomania has had multiple incarnations. In Britain, North America, and France a craze for the Assyrian Empire followed the discovery of its material civilizations in the 1840s and 1850s.⁴ As Gábor Klaniczay and Michael Werner have observed, “multiple antiquities”—that is, numerous and sometimes contradictory images and representations of the ancient past—have evolved in “multiple modernities” in order to mobilize the ancient world for national and imperial ends.⁵

Between the outbreak of the First World War and the end of the Second, antiquity was reconceived and redefined in substantive and temporal terms; it was experienced and represented in new ways by international organizations, colonial administrators, archaeologists, and travelers. New forms, repertoires, and technologies of visualizing the distant past developed in tandem with new meanings of “the ancient” and particularly of “antiquities,” which at the time acquired unified legal definitions that were articulated in an international complex of agreements, institutions, and practices. The access of experts and varied publics to the remote past embodied in such antiquities was regulated by new colonial administrative apparatuses and mechanisms that monitored the study of ancient history; the circulation of knowledge about it; and the exposure, preservation, and display of its physical remains. Moreover, during this period, representation and display of the ancient past, how it was experienced—not least the manner and conditions under which it was actually *seen*—were dramatically affected by globalized technologies of transport and communication. These ranged from a commercially realigned press to new technologies of transport and documentation that combined speed and surveying capabilities, such as mechanized desert travel and aviation, particularly aerial photography.⁶

This complex of definitions, representations, and displays of the remote past and the technologies implemented to discover it developed in a new world order, an order formulated in the peace treaties and agreements following the First World War whose crux was a new imperial regime based upon the mandates system.⁷ This system, based on hierarchical civilizational notions and the idea of rule as guardianship under international oversight, evolved in the territories that passed from the empires that had lost the war

to its victors, mainly Britain (and its settler territories) and France. Within the mandate empires it was the Near-Eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire, now Class A mandates, ruled by the two victors under the League of Nations' oversight, that became the crucible of what League of Nations' internationalists described as "the new regime of antiquities."⁸

As historians of visual imperial cultures have noted, the study of empires and colonialism is still largely separate from studies of their visualization and display.⁹ To be sure, a number of art and cultural historians have repeatedly noted the imperial aspects of visual cultures, notably of British and French cultures but also of German and Ottoman.¹⁰ But these historians have focused mainly on the long nineteenth century. Moreover, studies of the orientalist recovery of an ancient Near-Eastern past have been somewhat narrowly compartmentalized, usually emphasizing just one aspect, such as literature, painting, cartography, museums, colonial expositions, or the theater. Such studies have been somewhat cut off from research on fields of inquiry that emerged and expanded during the long nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth and produced knowledge about antiquity itself—from Assyriology and Egyptology to physical anthropology, paleontology, and geology, all of which offered historical narratives and analyses that were based on the practice of excavation.¹¹ But most important, the study of new forms of looking at the remote past, despite its increasing attention to colonialism, has been largely shaped by a certain "methodological nationalism," placing imperial visual culture within national frameworks.¹² The nation or national state, whether it was the imperial state controlling colonial territories or the fledgling anticolonial national movements that emerged in India, Egypt, Iraq, and elsewhere, served historians of nationalism and archaeology, as well as art, not only as a thematic and geographical unit but also as an analytical tool to explain continuities and change in attitudes to the past.

My focus on the mandates era and the new interwar imperial order proposes an "entangled" visual history.¹³ Empires, and particularly modern empires, were characterized by the movement of people, goods, ideas and knowledge—and, we should add, by the circulation of objects, images, and repertoires of recounting and viewing the past.¹⁴ I propose to look at the interwar complex of the modern culture of antiquity from the metropolitan perspective, that of international institutions and organizations regulating excavation and exposure of antiquities to users and consumers throughout the British Empire and, finally, from the ground and even underground level—that is, from beneath the surface of excavation sites, the excavators' point of view.

Four themes will emerge in what follows. First, the power of visual representations of antiquity hinged on the materiality and palpability of its newly discovered objects. The Mesopotamian objects became not only ubiquitous

in the popular imagination but also accessible to British, imperial, and American audiences. And it was archaeology, as a discipline and set of practices devoted to the discovery and study of material culture, that mediated between this materiality and modern peoples. As Julian Thomas has noted, archaeology took shape within the framework of modernity. Archaeology translated practices and techniques of exposing lost material objects and provided potent metaphors for thinking about change and structure in history.¹⁵

Second, the objects of archaeology were represented visually, and the archaeological imagination (Donald MacKenzie's term) was a visual imagination.¹⁶ The archaeological imagination was a way of *seeing* objects and the material past. The variety of modes of presenting and seeing Mesopotamian objects in images was elaborated by archaeologists, artists, the press, readers, museum visitors, and tourists.

Third, modernity and antiquity were connected during the interwar era, each reflecting upon the other. As I have noted elsewhere, the material remains of the Near-Eastern past were often likened to modern lifestyles and aesthetics, and the rise, expansion, and decline of ancient Mesopotamian imperial city-states inspired postwar imperial visions and agendas.¹⁷ The nexus between modernity and antiquity is also apparent in the mediation of the visual experience of Mesopotamia made possible by the new "speed technologies" of transportation and the media.

The fourth theme I consider only in passing: the internationalization of archaeology and of new forms of visualizing the past. Internationalization entailed more than the circulation of Mesopotamian objects across borders and national museums; it was inherent to mandatory archaeology, and was thus, by definition, international. It was overseen by a web of institutions that developed under the auspices of the League of Nations beginning in 1922 and thereafter regulated the division of antiquities between local museums (such as Iraq's museum of antiquities) and the Western excavators. Such a system effectively determined the accessibility of antiquities for display in British and American museums and conditioned the possibilities for their being seen.¹⁸

This essay focuses on the archaeological mound Tell Al-Muqayyar ("mount of pitch" in Arabic) in southern Iraq identified as the site of Ur of the Chaldees. Its spectacular excavation by Woolley, as director of the joint collaborative expedition of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (commonly known as the Penn Museum), released a flow of dazzling finds that circulated between Iraq, Britain, the United States, and the British Dominions. Begun in 1922 and wound down in 1934, the excavation of Ur almost overlaps with the period of the British mandate in Iraq that was brought to an end by Britain in 1932, when the Kingdom of Iraq was granted nominal

independence and admission into the League of Nations.¹⁹ British control of Iraqi archaeology and archaeological institutions lingered, however, until at least 1934. Iraq's antiquities ordinances, initially drafted in 1924, remained in force even after the mandate ended. Iraq's Department of Antiquities—an official ministry—was headed by British directors, then by a German director, before being handed over to the direct supervision of the Iraqi government. The division of archaeological finds, notably the spectacular finds at Ur, had become intensely controversial even before independence and became even more contentious thereafter.²⁰

I

Ur was unlike many other sites. It was not merely a source of knowledge or evidence of the southern Mesopotamian past or a case of international collaboration between archaeological expeditions. According to the mandate government's 1931 report to the League of Nations, there were at least thirteen such sites in Iraq excavated in that year alone.²¹ But Ur was a privileged site of antiquity: it became a sensation and fascinated large audiences across the world and spawned competing narratives of the ancient past. In 1922 Ur lay halfway between Baghdad and the head of the Persian Gulf, about ten miles west of the ever-changing course of the Euphrates, northeast of the mound of Eridu and near the site of Tell Al-'Ubeid. The ancient city had been imagined long before it was dug up and acquired a material life, but, like most Mesopotamian urban civilizations, it had had no visual life based in physical evidence until that time: it was a text, familiar to Western readers who had long closely associated it with Abraham's genealogy in the book of Genesis and with the biblical geography of his travels from the land of the Chaldees to Canaan.

Ur's materialization as a *physical* place took a long time. It had been identified in 1854, when Britain's Consul to Basra, John G. Taylor, was appointed to excavate Tell Al-Muqayyar for the British Museum. Taylor's unearthing of cuneiform cylinders confirmed the identity of the mound as the site of Ur, or Urim.²² Following the First World War, there were also brief spells of excavation at the site by Reginald Campbell-Thompson and H. R. Hall. But it was only after the joint expedition started work on the site that Ur burst upon the expert archaeological and popular imagination and retained its hold on both. Tell Al-Muqayyar consisted of a sequence of settlements covering the period from the Early Bronze Age (c. 3500 BC) to the disappearance of the ancient city-state in the sixth century BC, and it accommodated layers of civilizations that had long disappeared. These included the previously unknown non-Semitic civilization of Sumer; its

successor, the Semitic Akkad; and sequences of habitation that extended to the era of the demise of the late Babylonian kingdom. The staggering wealth of finds proved the existence of a remarkable continuity of habitation. The levels of stratified occupation reached back to a period earlier than the Third Dynasty (now dated 2112 to 2004 BC), extending further to the Early Dynastic era (c. 2900 to 2300 BC) and First Dynasty (c. 2500 BC), and even earlier, to remnants including sequences of the Uruk civilization (c. 4000 to 3000 BC) and Jemdet Nasr periods (c. 3100 to about 2900 BC). The sequence of the settlement's most recent point in time dates to the reign of the last king of Babylon, Nabonidus (555–538 BC), himself a builder and the restorer of the city's archaeology.²³

In the Middle East area east of Egypt known as the Mashriq, the multi-layered man-made mound or “tell” was the typical physical form in which remnants of the ancient past were preserved. And the morphology and stratification of these mounds helped to shape the beholders' spatial and temporal grasp of not just the concept of antiquity but also how it would be seen. Unlike many highly visible ancient Egyptian monuments, the treasures of the Neo-Assyrian or Babylonian empires discovered during the second half of the nineteenth century and the considerably earlier Sumerian civilization unearthed between the wars were not seen on the surface of the land but within the stratified mound. Beginning in the 1890s, the word “tell” itself came to serve as an organizing metaphor in archaeology, historical and anthropological discourses, biblical studies, and travel literature. Adapted from both Arabic and Hebrew and literally denoting a man-made mound protruding above the ground, “tell” signified human urban development. The importance of the tell in Mesopotamia was crucial. It indicated successive settlement in city-states built directly one on top of the other, forming, in the most literal and material senses, sequences of material civilizations whose remains testified to cycles of habitation and destruction. Depth, as against surface—an opposition that recurred in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban imagery—also defined the value of antiquities that challenged ideas about progress. The lower and deeper a layer of excavation, and the lower the provenance of the artifacts, the more valued they were. The “tell” became an overarching metaphor for this in interwar archaeology and popular culture.

The search for age value and civilizational origins depended upon excavation techniques and technologies of sight that were distinctly modern. The development of modern megacities involved urban excavation that, as I have shown elsewhere, was remarkably similar to the archaeological exposure of the ancient Mesopotamian mounds.²⁴ During the second half of the nineteenth century, metropolitan projects to develop underground socio-technological spaces designed to solve urban social and ecological crises

proceeded by tunneling close to the surface and digging along the lines of sewer systems, water pipes, gas pipes, and subterranean railways. For example, London's underground was dug using techniques similar to those practiced by Paul-Émile Botta and Austen Henry Layard in their excavations of Mesopotamian sites.²⁵ Urban modernization in the early twentieth century and interwar period involved a different kind of excavation: laying deep shafts that enabled building a “tube” to a lower depth than was previously possible. Deep cuts or pits, were, of course, used in the modernized archaeology based on stratification. Ur, indeed any tell, revealed a manmade vertical city, which, as David Pike and Lynda Nead have noted, was distinctly modern.²⁶ And both the city and the archaeological site provided a glimpse of surfaces and buildings or their remnants from the underground spaces upward.

The longevity of Sumerian material culture was revealed in the underground strata of remains, the very abundance of the finds, and the wealth they indicated, and these together helped to distinguish Ur in an era of spectacular archeological revelations. Sumer was now deemed comparable to Egypt, not only in the magnificence of the finds but also in their antiquity. Material abundance visually “illustrated further the extraordinary degree of material civilization which Mesopotamia enjoyed in the fourth millennium B.C. showing how much in advance this country was of contemporary Egypt.”²⁷ Ur's seniority in age and civilization (according to Woolley's chronology, which became unacceptable even as he was excavating Ur), contributed to a reconstruction of an established hierarchy of material cultures and their aesthetics in which Greek and later ancient Egyptian cultures had been deemed superior to Mesopotamian cultures. Thus Ur's materiality relativized Egypt in relation to other ancient civilizations, such as archaic (not to mention classical) Greece. As Woolley noted in *Ur of the Chaldees*:

To the Sumerians we can trace much that is at the root not only of Egyptian, but also of Babylonian, Assyrian, Hebrew and Phoenician art and thought, and so see that the Greeks also were in debt to this ancient and for long forgotten people, the pioneers of the progress of Western man.²⁸

His ideas about Ur's material wealth and its place in a chain of civilizations were drummed up on platforms such as the *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, which regularly publicized the excavations at Ur and pictured, in engravings, black-and-white photographs, and occasionally color photographs, its treasures. The *ILN* may seem to represent an older form of visualizing the ancient past. Since its launching in 1842, this weekly documented archaeological discovery and was instrumental in propagating the Victorian cult of antiquity.²⁹ It reported on the earliest Mesopotamian discoveries, followed the flow of antiquities to the British Museum, recorded the construction of its Assyrian art collections and the adoption of Mesopotamian styles in other

venues in what Tony Bennett called the “exhibitionary complex”—such as colonial exhibitions.³⁰ The *ILN* also became the prototype of the graphic middlebrow urban weekly, documenting metropolitan development, and positioned itself as the mouthpiece of urban modernity. By the 1890s its archaeological illustrations were augmented by photography, and by the 1920s photographs predominated but did not replace engravings. Color photographs of prize finds appeared occasionally both on the front cover and inside the magazine. The *ILN*, like *Antiquity*, Britain’s leading popular archaeological journal, founded in 1927 by O. G. S. Crawford—Britain’s foremost expert on archaeological air photography and a great promoter of the excavations at Ur—regularly reproduced aerial photographs of archaeological sites.

Aerial photography came into its own during the First World War, when it was used for military reconnaissance purposes, and it was later employed by the Royal Air Force (RAF), notably in Iraq, where archaeological air photography went hand in hand with inspection and policing from the air.³¹ As scholars who have studied civilian uses of the new technology have noted, during the interwar period British archaeologists appropriated military techniques and introduced new methods of photographing from the air.³² The aerial view made what had been invisible and undetectable from the ground visible. From the air, contemporary features of the land and modern changes to it were far less prominent than ancient (even prehistoric) features such as vanished cities, irrigation systems, river courses, and the morphology of the earth. Surviving aerial photographs of archaeological sites in Iraq, including quite a few of Ur, show them in minute detail. “Ur from the Air” (fig. 1), taken by the RAF’s 84R Squadron, shows the grid of the built city—including its streets, public buildings, cemeteries, and waterways, as well as the surrounding desert. Use of the “shadow-sites” photographic technique, developed in the twenties, reveals layers and disturbances (such as destruction or excavation) in the soil and details that would otherwise be invisible in broad daylight. These details were revealed to the camera by shadows cast when the sun was low. Aerial photos of Ur were circulated by Woolley to the press and presented as part of public archaeological lectures. At one such lecture, in Birmingham on 6 March 1926, Robert J. Ogden, a collector, amateur archaeologist, goldsmith, and one of the excavations’ chief promoters and fundraisers, showed slides of “Ur of the Chaldees from the air,” with “[its] layout . . . with streets of ancient Ur. . . . From the air we have got a perfect plan of the layout of the city and its general contour.”³³

Alongside visual images from the air, which were devoid of human detail, photography at ground level and underground was also developing. Ground-level photographs recorded the excavation work, objects found



FIGURE 1. “Ur from the Air,” aerial photograph of Ur, Royal Air Force, 1927, in *History and Monuments of Ur*, by C. J. Gadd (New York, 1972), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14528110>.



FIGURE 2. Excavation crew arrayed in Pit X at Ur. Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

327. The pit finished after six weeks' work.
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in situ prior to their restoration and ethnographic details representing the workforce at Ur, especially the Iraqi workers. Most ground-level and underground photos are visibly staged, as in the dramatic presentation of the “great shaft” shown in figure 2. In this image the Iraqi laborers at the excavation site are arranged around and along the steps of the big pit or shaft that had been dug to reach Ur’s tombs. Such photographs were solicited by newspapers as details of local color. These complementary forms of seeing, from the air and from ground level, with their respective techniques, educated readers and viewers in the different ways of observing the tell and its many layers. They also highlighted the different forms of production: one mechanized and impersonal, the other manual, labor-intensive, and local. The repertoire of recording the site visually, then, was itself layered, including both earlier forms, such as illustration, and newer methods of visual documentation, such as aerial photographs and photos that showed the archaeological strata of section cuts seen from the ground level.

III

Layering is also apparent in the impact of the textual biblical (and Christian) paradigm on the way Ur was visualized. The Bible of course provided a metanarrative for Near-Eastern archaeology that remained resilient during the interwar period.³⁴ As practically all studies of Woolley emphasize, he, as well as the museums his expedition represented, utilized the story of Abraham to publicize the excavations, mobilize public support, and solicit sponsorship. Undoubtedly the biblical echoes were a major selling point of Ur. A few of Woolley’s contemporaries and biographers emphasized his own religious upbringing, which underlay his drive to corroborate the biblical text with archaeological evidence.³⁵ But alongside the biblical framework, a set of images evolved that gradually became central to representations of Ur’s spectacular riches and public fascination with it. The excavation of its cemeteries, including about two thousand common burials and some sixteen “royal graves,” or pits, released a stream of artifacts whose sheer abundance and craftsmanship, as well as the technologies of production to which they testified, made Ur comparable to Tutankhamun’s tomb in Luxor, discovered in late 1922 and excavated concurrently with the dig at Ur. Moreover, this material abundance created a world of objects that made its Sumerian material culture tangible and connected it to contemporary art and taste. At the same time, the exploration of the splendors of the royal tombs revealed burial customs that proved the existence of human sacrifice practiced in the burials of Sumerian dignitaries. The combination of refined material riches and

ritual live burial, not evidenced in Sumerian civilization of other periods or in Egypt, enhanced an appeal that was drummed up by both the press and the excavators. Ancient burial was sensationalized in the press. At the same time, the sacrificial death resonated with the recent devastation wrought by the war and its dead.

To begin with Sumer's material abundance: contemporaries were struck by the "degree of wealth" apparent in the stupendous profusion of precious metals like silver and gold and quantities of precious or semi-precious stones found strewn around the crumbling remains of humans who had been buried alive. Solid gold, or gold leaf over copper made the greatest impression. "We are turning up," wrote Woolley to George Byron Gordon, Director of the Penn Museum, "gold objects literally every day."³⁶ Gold turned up "even before breakfast."³⁷ The excavators were dazzled by "the carpet" of gold leaf from the ornamented headdresses of the court women buried in the shafts and by a profusion of lapis lazuli and carnelian stones. Material riches were global riches. The metals and stones had been imported to Ur from the Indus Valley and parts of today's Afghanistan. Ur's connections thus expanded not only temporally to the third millennium BC and, according to Woolley, further back in time, but also spatially. The city-state was represented as a thriving maritime and commercial power, the hub of trade between continents and materially and technologically developed cultures. Its material culture was directly connected to the Indus civilizations of Mohenjo-Daro (literally "Mound of the Dead") at Sind and Harappa in the Punjab, which prospered between the twenty-seventh and nineteenth centuries BC and were first excavated by Sir John Marshall during the 1920s and early 1930s.³⁸ The ancient civilizations across the Persian Gulf were set into a global vision of a connected ancient world that fit well with the vision of development at the heart of the mandate system.³⁹ The gold and other objects, now dated between 2400 and 2200 BC, immediately acquired iconic status. There were not only fabulous and extraordinary gold artifacts attributed to royals and dignitaries but also objects for daily use, such as cups, amulets, jewelry, toiletry and make-up containers, musical instruments, and gaming boxes for children and grownups.⁴⁰ It was their everydayness and association with modern uses that most appealed to readers and spectators. The most publicized objects were the headdress of Puabi, a female grandee whose identification (misinterpreted by Woolley at the time as "Queen Shubad") was discovered on cylinders found around her skeleton, and a gold helmet of the king Meskalamdug "rivaling the Gold Mask of Tutankhamen."⁴¹ Puabi's elaborately assembled and reconstructed headdress became international headline material. It was displayed not just as an antiquity whose value lay in its age and rarity but also as a living artifact associated with the woman who had



FIGURE 3. "Queen Shub-ad's 5000-Year-Old Golden Head-Dress: an Ur Treasure," *Illustrated London News*, 11 August 1928, 237. Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library, London.

been buried wearing it. The headdress and the buried Sumerian noblewoman literally materialized as reader-viewers followed the restoration of their fragments; they were reproduced in newspaper photos and in exhibitions at the British and Penn Museums. At the same time that Puabi's headdress was assembled and retrieved, its features, like those of numerous other objects found at Ur, were related to modern taste, style, and even fashion. The *ILN* displayed it in a full-size, black-and-white photograph on the front page, whose caption read: "The Golden Head-dress of Queen Shub-Ad: A Remarkable Reconstruction of a 5,000-year-old Coiffure Found at Ur, on a Head Modeled from a Nearly Contemporary Sumerian Female Skull."⁴² Less than two weeks later, a full-size color photograph appeared inside the magazine with a slight but significant change in the subcaption: "as worn by a queen in Abraham's city 5000 years ago," and specifically indicating that the diadem was made of gold (fig. 3).⁴³ Although the intricate diadem of golden leaves and beads was said to have been found on and around the dead queen's crushed skull, the objects photographed were clearly reconstructions. These were reproductions made for a mass audience in anticipation of the professional excavation reports: the two volumes of *Excavations at Ur* devoted to the cemeteries were to appear only

in 1934, six years after the release of photographs to the press. Far from the actual objects found in situ, these were artifacts reconstructed by the archaeologist Katherine Woolley. They were modeled in wax over a plaster cast made from a female skull of the period and fitted with an outsize black wig, topped with three wreathes of gold leaves. The “ancient” golden comb fixed to the back of the construction seemed reminiscent of a modern “Spanish comb.”⁴⁴ Ancient Puabi’s three-dimensional reconstruction as a modern icon preceded her compression by the camera into two dimensions with a name attached.

Despite their rarity and remoteness, the ancient Sumerian artifacts were rendered familiar and contemporary by repeated analogies with modern materials and objects. Jewels and toiletry were compared to their contemporary counterparts, and one sculpted figure, an electrum figure of an ass, was described as the “Sumerian prototype of the modern motor car mascot.”⁴⁵ Puabi’s head and coiffeur were reproduced and transferred from photography to illustration. Like other objects from the cemeteries, they were copied in watercolor by Mary Louise Baker, house artist of the Penn Museum and one of the world’s top archaeological watercolorists at the time. Her two-dimensional visualization of the head was used interchangeably with photographic reproductions.⁴⁶ The compatibility of the ancient with the contemporary and up-to-date was emphasized by the display of parts—beads, necklaces, make-up, and earrings—alongside the restored whole.⁴⁷ Puabi’s head was rendered authentic by “science.” Sir Arthur Keith, the well-known physical anthropologist, conservator at the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, and eugenicist, described it as a faithful rendition that accurately reproduced the characteristics of the early Sumerians.⁴⁸ But scientific approval did not settle the question of how Puabi really *looked*: less than a year after the display of Katherine Woolley’s reconstruction at the British Museum, Father Leon Legrain, the expedition’s epigraphist and a curator at the Penn Museum, constructed a new mannequin and rearranged the Queen’s accoutrements (fig. 4).⁴⁹ Nor was this the last lookalike of Puabi: further discoveries and controversies about her identity produced more versions of the headdress. The visual biography and history of public display since its discovery clearly demonstrate how an archaeological object could be reconstructed and transformed from a *thing* characterized by its age into a physical *artifact*, and thence to a visual image that derived its iconic status not only from its antiquity but also from an aesthetic compatible with the modern. Puabi’s afterlife indicates that archaeological objects, indeed antiquities, are not absolute, finished things or facts, but things in the making, whose power derives from their translation into images. And Puabi was not only named but also gendered and given a face, complete with make-up, unlike



FIGURE 4. Head of Shubad (Dr. Legrain's reconstruction) and jewelry. Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

Meskalamdug, whose gold helmet, dated 2600 BC, was not attached to a mannequin. He remained faceless.

IV

The public's fascination with the mass of objects uncovered at the Royal Cemetery at Ur also lay in their association with mass killing and burial. Puabi, as the remains exposed in the grave numbered PG800 demonstrated, had been buried with supplies and personal objects to sustain her in the afterlife, along with her female retinue, guards, and livestock. The remnants of human sacrifice, and a mass sacrifice at that, which had no substantiation in written Mesopotamian myth or other written evidence, differentiated Ur from its contemporary Egyptian and other Mesopotamian sites. The Royal Cemetery was cast as the trove of the riches of the source and origin of all civilizations, an Ur-culture, and at the same time as a museum of atrocities. The horror of its splendor, apparently conforming to the orientalist stereotypes of Mesopotamia in nineteenth-century art, was obsessively reproduced in the press coverage of the discovery of the



FIGURE 5. Amédée Forestier, “Awaiting Death in the King’s Tomb,” *Illustrated London News*, 23 June 1928, 1171. Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library, London.

royal pits. These quickly earned the epithet “death pits.” The stages of their excavation were recorded in exhaustive visual detail, as was the process of death by sacrifice and burial. The death processions, killing, and entombment were reenacted for reader-viewers in realistic illustrations and in apparently “neutral” archaeological ground plans of the pits. Woolley’s ground plan of PG1237, the tomb that became world famous as the “Great Death-Pit at Ur,” showed seventy-four skeletons numbered according to the position in which they were found. Death was made authentic in painterly reconstructions, notably those by Amédée Forestier who depicted the last minutes of the victims’ lives. The reconstructions, originally in color, were published in black and white, with captions such as, “Awaiting Death in the King’s Tomb: Victims of Human Sacrifice—an Authentic reconstruction,” “as faithful as may be” of the scene in the shaft of the grave just before the sacrifice took place, “based on the ground plan” (fig. 5). Forestier followed with another reconstruction of the moment after, showing the slain bodyguards, servants, harem women, and oxen: “Victims of Human Sacrifice.”⁵⁰

The grave plans and reconstructions were more than just reiterations of an orientalist pictorial archive. True, as literary, cultural, and art historians have demonstrated, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries an interest in ancient death cults, mourning practices, and varieties of belief in the afterlife spread far beyond the circles of aesthetes and experts and into the popular imagination. One need hardly mention the mania for mummies and the huge interest in Egyptian burial practices that was fueled by the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun.⁵¹ What was special about the Ur cemeteries was their perceived connection to changes in burial practices and rituals of commemoration that had evolved during and after the Great War. Unprecedented mass killing during the war on the Western and Eastern Fronts (for example at Gallipoli) took place in trenches, which could be associated with underground digs, or in arid desert areas in Mesopotamia during the disastrous and failed Anglo-Indian campaign of 1915–16, most notably at Kut el Amara. War monuments that displayed the dead in trenches, or in ossuaries that exposed masses of bones, became pilgrim spots. But mass burial was neither the typical nor the desired practice: the war revolutionized burial and the military cemetery by democratizing and personalizing them.⁵² For the first time in the history of war, dead soldiers were buried in individual graves regardless of rank or class. Individuality in the Ur cemeteries is apparent only in the graves of dignitaries, and these are designated by the prefix “PG” (Private Graves) before the identifying numbers assigned to them by Woolley. These dead are named, and their naming manifests not only commemoration but also individualization. The massive presence of the war dead across Europe and the Middle East at the time created a new language of death and bereavement.⁵³ The popular preoccupation with forms of sacrificial death in antiquity reminded contemporaries of the sacrifice of millions of young men. The association between ancient burial and modern death and commemoration is apparent in the organized tourism to Mesopotamia that combined visits to archaeological sites and pilgrimages to battlefields around Kut and elsewhere, such as the excursions organized by the Barnabas Society, which was founded in 1919 to aid the hundreds of thousands of bereaved families in visiting the graves of their loved ones.⁵⁴ Grave visiting was intensely ritualized: it included commemoration ceremonies and was topped with sightseeing at Ur and Babylon. The package included wreathes and photography. Wreath laying as part of the newly ritualized commemoration of the war dead echoed the motif of the wreath in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian burials and funerary arts.⁵⁵

The integration of Ur into postwar commemoration was made possible by the development of modern imperial speed technologies which themselves shaped ways of seeing. Ur, and indeed, Iraq itself, was connected to the metropole through the expansion of transport systems in the Mashriq and across Eurasia. Railway travel, via the Simplon Orient and Tauris Express,

brought Damascus within reach of European travelers, and motorized desert transport took off with the establishment in 1923 of the (New Zealand) Nairn Transport Company (known since 1926 as the Nairn Eastern Transport Company Ltd.), operating the route from Beirut and Damascus to Baghdad. Travel in Nairn's specially made buses became a symbol of modern sightseeing, connectivity, and desert development. Moreover, overland mechanized travel (like aviation) condensed desert travel time and space and changed the experience of viewing remnants of the ancient past, while also connecting the ancient sites to modern technologies.⁵⁶ Ur became a railway junction. A March 1920 letter from the eminent Egyptologist Henry Breasted (of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago) to his family delivers some of the sense of speed, place, and wonder at antiquity of travelers to Ur: "Ur Junction! Ur Junction! What do you think Abraham would say to that!"⁵⁷ But the feel of connectivity is best pronounced by Agatha Christie who, between 1928 and the outbreak of the Second World War, traveled annually to archaeological sites in Iraq (including Ur) and Syria where she worked alongside archaeologist Max Mallowan, whom she married in 1930.⁵⁸

V

Ur's visibility and apparent proximity in distance and association to contemporary life and modernity extended to the metropolitan centers. To the array of images circulating in print were added displays of objects in the chief venues of the imperial "exhibitionary complex": museums, like the British and Penn Museums, and public lectures with slide shows. Ur's entry into this complex went hand in hand with its commercialization. Ur became an easily marketable commodity whose promotion in turn enhanced its value and further commodification. This coupling of display and finance is apparent in the economy of archaeology drawing on a network of national and academic museums, big capital, and the small capital of antiquities buffs. Aside from the two museums, the Ur expedition was supported by the Carnegie Foundation, John D. Rockefeller Jr., and occasional donors such as Bible billionaire John Marston, owner-director of the corporate Sunbeam Motorcycle Company, and numerous other donors. The list of small metropolitan and Home Counties middle-class donors on the records of the British Museum's board of trustees is dominated by the names of men and women of modestly comfortable means who subscribed to the Ur Fund, such as Mrs. Martely, at the Little Bonnington Hotel on 27 Bloomsbury Square, London, who quite expected to get in return for her guinea a personal letter from Woolley.⁵⁹ The Ur enthusiasts themselves

became part of the effort to visualize the expedition's findings and engaged in collecting money on their own as they publicized the excavations. As noted earlier, Ogden made massive use of slides and, like Woolley, turned the archaeological lecture into a visual experience. Crawford, a pioneer of aerial photography, mobilized public support for the excavation in his massive campaign for the fund.⁶⁰

The resort to the visual in the campaign to publicize the site, and the public's response to it, testifies to an active popular interest and participation in the economics and culture of antiquity. What triggered the interest of donors, readers, and viewers was the accessibility and constant presence of material evidence in museum displays, which also became part of a repertoire of popular education in viewing archaeology. The fact that the metropolitan public in London, Philadelphia, and the British dominions could *see* the Sumerian objects—which had been turned into artifacts and removed from their original site—enhanced public funding. Moreover, display and seeing had temporal and crucially political imperial dynamics. Museum display was conditioned by mandate ordinances according to which the distribution and circulation of Mesopotamian antiquities were (until about 1934) considerably more lenient than under Egyptian antiquities laws. The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb triggered a global mania, but its objects remained outside the West and could be viewed only through the mediation of the frenzied media. Ur's lucrative objects, by contrast, were there to be seen: the immanence of Sumer's antiquity was far more visible in metropolitan exhibition landscapes. Museum exhibitions and viewing were seasonal and followed the annual cycle of excavations. Thus the pace and regularity of display and looking were set by these cycles, as well as by international archaeological regulation. The exhibition at the British Museum in 1928, visited by Queen Mary, Princess Beatrice, and European royalty including the King of Spain, attracted about fifteen hundred visitors daily. A year later, the summer display was declared a tourist attraction of the highest interest, and ten thousand copies of the pamphlet "Antiquities on Ur" sold out before the exhibition closed.⁶¹ Ur traveled to Britain's provinces, the United States, and the empire; some dominion museums purchased, rather on the cheap, series of items from Ur.⁶² The archaeologists themselves became a part of the exhibition experience: crowds flocked to Woolley's slide-accompanied lectures, as well as to Ogden's. Woolley's exhausting schedule for the last days of September and first half of October 1930 included sixteen lectures in England and Wales. His American tours were even more tightly scheduled, including lectures in museums, lecture halls, and hotels on the east coast.⁶³

Ur's high profile made antiquity not only present and eminently visible but also comprehensible and "simple," "on seemingly level terms with the

ordinary man.”⁶⁴ Moreover, exchange of knowledge, and public interest were dialogical and flowed between Ur’s fans and experts. Viewers and spectators responded to the exhibits and popular talks in a variety of ways that included archaeological sightseeing, written queries to newspaper editors and archaeologists, and creative interpretations. These interpretations make it clear that the materiality of Ur became integrated in the correspondents’ beliefs, Bible readings, museum visits, and everyday lives. Four or five years after reading *Ur of the Chaldees*, Mrs. E. E. Jackson of “The Brambles,” Burgess Hill, Sussex, was inspired to pen a long poem, *Jehovah Jireh* (Jehovah shall see), which interpreted the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, referring specifically to the Ur statuette of the Ram in the Thicket at the British Museum. It was the visual experience at the museum that inspired her poem, a comment on the biblical text, which she enclosed in a letter to Woolley.⁶⁵

Ur was not merely the visual archive of an exotic antiquity, nor a source of evidence or knowledge about it. The myriad visual representations of its remote past offered competing narratives of antiquity: narratives of the origins of civilization and its rich material culture, of death and war commemoration, and of aesthetics. The power of Ur’s “historiophoty” lay in the immediacy of its archaeology and the accessibility of its materials.⁶⁶ These were transmitted in and through technologies of *seeing* Ur: in situ, from the air, in museum spaces, and in illustrated and photographic reproductions. Sumer’s past became present in brick, metal, precious stone, and textile, as well as in everyday objects like weapons, inscribed cylinders, cups, jewelry, and cosmetics extracted from their place of origin and resituated in museums and the media. The massive exposure of experts, artists, readers, viewers, and travelers to ancient Mesopotamian things detextualized and visualized an ancient past, pushed back in time. The newly discovered ancient objects required assembly and reconstruction for their narration and display to different audiences as visual images. Puabi was one such “authentic reconstruction,” the death pit another. These reconstructions were powerful because they offered the possibility of integrating the remote past in a variety of experiences of modern life and death. Ur and, more broadly, Sumerian culture and archaic Mesopotamia engendered a Mesopotamian modernity that could be related to late modernity: they presented a past that was interpretable as *new*. That newness was not only a matter of aesthetics or style or speed. It was also integral to the international discourse on antiquities and mandates that arose within a distinct political context and accrued meanings that studies of the visual in empires cannot disregard. Indeed, the interwar visual history of Ur may not be historicized outside this context. Like the tell, that image of a stratified past, Ur and its many presences in postwar culture were sites of material

layering made relevant to contemporaries through visual technologies and forms of looking that evolved in an imperial order and were connected to senses of a modern antiquity.

Notes

1. Leonard Woolley, *Digging Up the Past* (1930; reprint, London, 1937), 32.
2. *Weekend Review*, 3 January 1931, 19.
3. For late modernity, see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991); Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1994).
4. Bob Brier, *Egyptomania: Our Three Thousand Year Obsession with the Land of the Pharaohs* (London, 2013); James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester, 1994); Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, 2007); Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *Egyptomania: L'Égypte dans l'art occidental, 1730–1930* (Paris, 1994).
5. Gábor Klaniczay, Michael Werner, and Ottó Gecser, eds., *Multiple Antiquities-Multiple Modernities: Ancient Histories in Nineteenth Century European Cultures* (Frankfurt, 2011). The term “multiple modernities” is taken from Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt’s important characterization of modernity in his essay “Multiple Modernities,” in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002).
6. On aerial photography, see Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape* (Oxford, 2007).
7. The template for most mandatory definitions of the new legislation was clause 421 of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), between the Ottoman Empire and the victors, which was never ratified by Turkey but determined the mandatory antiquities regulation. For Iraq, see *Treaty of Alliance between Great Britain and Irak, October 10, 1922 Signed at Baghdad April 30, 1923*. For the history of the legislation, see Ana Filipa Vrdoljak, *International Law, Museums and the Return of Cultural Objects* (Cambridge, 2006), 85–88.
8. “Note Concernant la Régime Internationale des Fouilles,” May 1929, O.I.M. VI/29, UNESCO Archives, Paris.
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10. Frederick Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, 2003); Shawn Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain: The Case of Assyria, 1845–1854* (Farnham, 2012); Stephanie Moser, *Ancient Egypt and the British Museum* (Chicago, 2006); Çelik, *Displaying the Orient and About Antiquities Politics of Archaeology in The Ottoman Empire* (Austin, 2016); Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley, 2003).

11. On the new fields of knowledge, see David Gange, *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion* (Oxford, 2015) and William Carruthers, ed., *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures* (London, 2015).
12. On methodological nationalism, see Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Condition: Why Methodological Nationalism Fails," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (2007).
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14. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1997): 735–62.
15. Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity* (Abingdon, 2006), 1–51.
16. Donald MacKenzie quoted in Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, 31.
17. Billie Melman, "The Power of the Past: Empires, Modernity, and the Rediscovery of Antiquity" [in Hebrew], *Egeret: The Israel Academy of Science and Humanities Journal* (December 2017): 24–31.
18. Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford, 2015), see particularly 17–107. On the internationalization of antiquity and its relationship to the concept of mandates, see Melman, "The Power of the Past: Empires, Modernity, and the Rediscovery of Antiquity."
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20. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin, 2005).
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22. J. E.[sic] Taylor, "Notes on the Ruins of Muqeyer," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 15 (1855): 260–76; J. E.[sic] Taylor, "Notes on Abu Shahrein and Tel-el-Lahm," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 15 (1855): 404–15.
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27. "Sumerian Secrets," *Times* (London), 13 March 1928, 17.
28. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees, A Record of Seven Years of Excavation* (London, 1927), 63–64.

29. On the *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*) and the rediscovery of Mesopotamia, see Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain*, and Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*. On the *ILN* and urban modernity, see Nead, *Victorian Babylon*.
30. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995; reprint, London, 1999).
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32. Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, 151–200; Osbert Guy Stanhope Crawford, *Said and Done, The Autobiography of an Archaeologist* (London, 1955); O. G. S. Crawford, "Air-Photography for Archaeologists," *Ordnance Survey Professional Papers*, n.s., 12 (1929).
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37. *Ibid.*
38. Leonard Woolley, "A Fresh Link Between Ur and Mohenjo-Daro," *ILN*, 13 February 1932, 274; John Marshall, ed., *Mohenjo Daro and the Indus Civilization: Being an Official Report of Archaeological Excavations Carried out by the Government of India between the Years 1922 and 1927* (London, 1931); 1–2, John Marshall, "A New Chapter in Archaeology: The Prehistoric Civilization of the Indus," *ILN*, 7 January 1928.
39. Priya Satia, "Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire in the First World War," *Past & Present* 197, no. 1 (2007): 211–55.
40. *Times* (London), 15 February 1927, 11; Woolley to unclear addressee, 30 January 1928, BMA, WY1/4/72b.
41. "A Great Discovery at Ur: A Royal Tomb of 3500 BC. Contents.," *ILN*, 17 December 1928, 1.
42. *ILN*, 30 June 1928, 11 August 1928.
43. "Queen Shub-ad's 5000-Year-Old Golden Head-Dress: an Ur Treasure," *ILN*, 11 August 1928.
44. "The Oldest Harp in the World: Music at War 5000 Years Ago," *ILN*, 24 February 1928.
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46. For biographical details on Mary Louise Baker's art, see M. Louise Baker Papers, Philadelphia Area Archives Research Portal (PAARP), [http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/pacscl/ead.html?fq=subject_person_facet%3A%22Gordon%2C%20G.%20B.%20\(George%20Byron\)%2C%201870-1927%22&id=PACSCL_UPENN_MUSEUM_PUMu1107&](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/pacscl/ead.html?fq=subject_person_facet%3A%22Gordon%2C%20G.%20B.%20(George%20Byron)%2C%201870-1927%22&id=PACSCL_UPENN_MUSEUM_PUMu1107&).

47. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*, 41–42; Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of Twelve Years' Work*, 3rd ed. (London, 1955), 66–67.
48. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*, 41–42; Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, 66–67.
49. For a discussion of Puabi as an aesthetic object, see Jennifer Chi and Pedro Azara, *The Art of Archaeology and Aesthetics* (Princeton, 2011).
50. “Wholesale Human Sacrifice at Ur: A Revelation of Unrecorded Barbarities Practiced at Royal Burials 5000 Years Ago,” *ILN*, 23 June 1928, 1171.
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58. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London, 1993), 401–2.
59. Sir Fredrick Kenyon to Woolley, 17 December 1925, BMA, Box 3, WY1/6/16.
60. Charles Ogden to Woolley, 3 January 1928, BMA, Box 3, WY1/12/37.
61. *Times* (London), 9 July 1928, 14 and 27 March 1929, 10; Standing Committee, 9 November 1929, 4605, Minutes of the Trustees, British Museum Central Archives (BMCA), 17.
62. For two donations of 15 and 5 pounds each to the British Museum excavation funds, the Nicholson Museum in Sydney received two consignments of archaeological finds in 1933 and 1935, altogether some 150 items.
63. See itinerary for the spring of 1929, BMA Middle East Department, WY1/281, Woolley Archives.
64. C. B. M., “The Man with the Spade,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), 12 December 1930; “Lessons of Antiquity,” *Bristol Times*, 22 December 1930.
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