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Inside a Sumerian Temple: The Ekishnugal at Ur

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CHAPTER 11

INSIDE A SUMERIAN TEMPLE:
THE EKISHNUGAL AT UR

E. Jan Wilson

Introduction

In *Temples of the Ancient World*, frequent reference was made to the temple built by Gudea, an ancient Sumerian king in southern Mesopotamia (who began his reign in 2143 B.C.).¹ This was quite appropriate since the oldest known temples in the world were those of the Sumerians, a rather enigmatic ethnic group that inhabited southern Mesopotamia even before the beginning of the First Dynasty in Egypt. It was the Sumerians who developed the first writing system (ca. 3000 B.C.) and also constructed some of the earliest temples.

The first temple, according to Sumerian tradition, was in Eridu on the edge of the Persian Gulf. According to Sumerian legends, it was there that civilization began and there that the first temple was built to Enki (or Ea), the god of underground fresh water. Enki, as the god of wisdom, remained very important in the Sumerian pantheon for many centuries and was “consulted” whenever the Sumerians undertook the construction or reparation of a temple,

perhaps also because of his connection with the earliest temple.

Other gods of the ancient Sumerians included An (the “father” god), Enlil (a son of An, but eventually chief god of the Sumerian pantheon), Inanna (a goddess of war who also had unclear connections to prostitution), Utu (the sun-god), and Nanna (the moon-god). I shall bring up Nanna again when I discuss the great temple in Ur, which was his main cultic site.

Sumerian temples were very central to urban life because each city had its chief god who was thought to be the patron and protector of that city. If calamities befell the city, it was assumed that the local god had deserted his temple and hence his people. Elaborate rituals were then performed to coax the god to return to his temple and reestablish peace and tranquility in the city and its environs.

In the early periods of Mesopotamian history, the temple was more important to the city than the palace.² Indeed, kingship was not even a permanent institution in the earliest Sumerian periods. The secular leader of a particular community (as opposed to the chief priest, or en) was simply the “big man” (lú-gal), who was elected by the citizens for a period of one year. Thus the temple, with its established economic base and respected priestly castes, was permanent, but the lay leader of the community was only temporary. That eventually changed, however, when the growing problem of constant interurban warfare produced the practical necessity of maintaining a strong leader in office for longer periods in order to provide stability and experienced leadership during perilous times. In the course of time, strong men were able to make their office permanent, and the Sumerian word lú-gal came to mean “king” in the sense in which we usually understand it. That finally led to a shift in power and influence from the temple to the

royal house, as was most apparent in the empires of the Akkadians and their heirs (the Babylonians and Assyrians) after they had supplanted the Sumerians as the dominant culture in Mesopotamia.

The Sumerian temples, in their most developed phase, showed structural similarities to later Israelite temples. In fact, at least two of the temples excavated in Israel (Nahariya and Tell Beit Mirsim) seem to be based on Sumerian floor plans.³ This relationship is significant because it is one of the few physical attestations of a movement from southern Mesopotamia westward toward Syria-Palestine (most scholars have thought only in terms of emigration eastward from Syria into Mesopotamia) during a historical period in which the Abraham stories in Genesis and the Book of Abraham report such a journey for Abraham and his family.⁴ For that reason, a closer look at Sumerian temples in general, and the main temple at Ur in particular, will provide valuable additional insights into the subject of temples in antiquity.

General Features of Sumerian Temples

Temples and Towers

The earliest temples in southern Mesopotamia consisted of small, one-room structures, but already during the Early Dynastic Period we see the development of a temple type consisting of an artificial terrace on which a rectangular building (up to 12.5 by 24 meters in size) contains an elongated central cult room and two side tracts of rooms. The similarity of the floor plan of one of these temples to the later Temple of Solomon can be seen in figure 11.

It appears that a transition in function is reflected in the gradually changing architecture of Mesopotamian temples

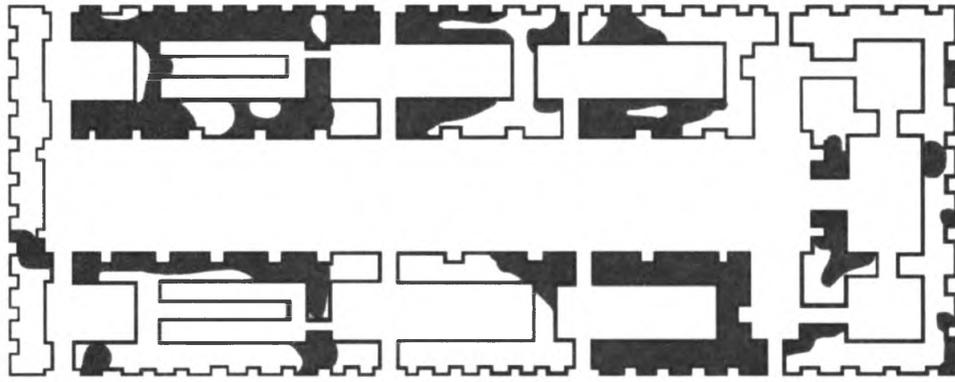
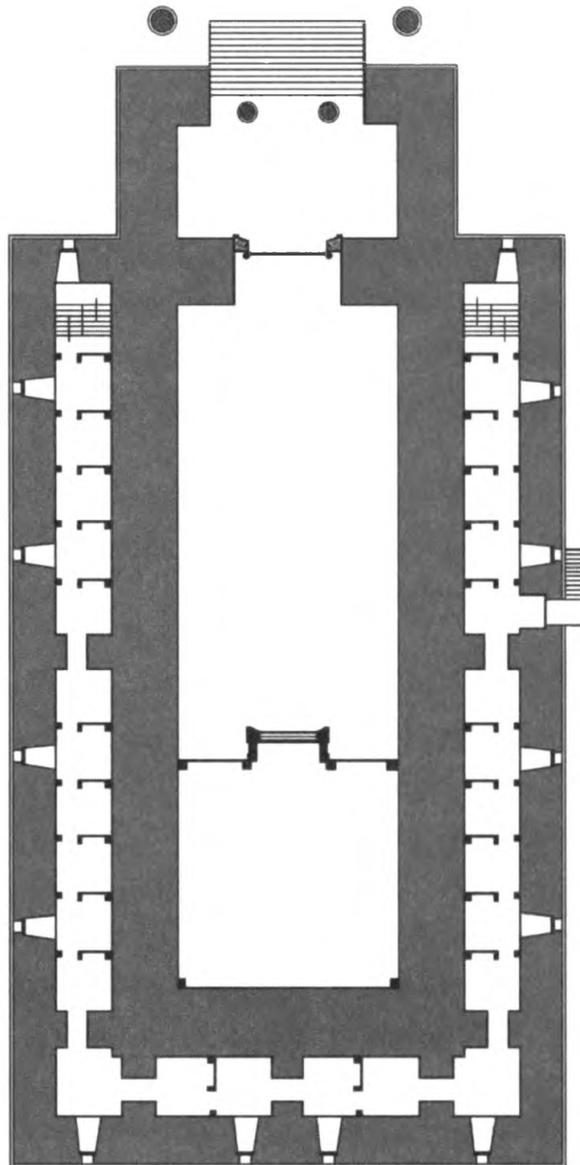


Figure 11. Floor plan of a temple from ancient Uruk (above) and Solomon's Temple (below).



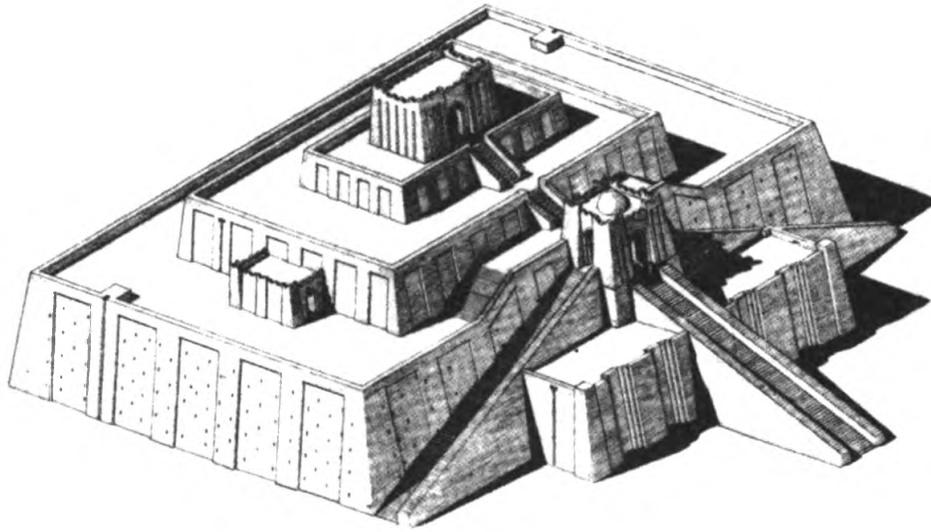


Figure 12. The Ziggurat of Ur Nammu, restored.

during the prehistoric and early historical periods. In the earliest times, the temples were apparently open to everyone, and the altar was located inside the one-room structure. Later, however, there was no longer room for the masses except in the exterior courtyards, and the altar was moved outside.⁵ As population growth continued (and the state became more formally organized), the public had access to the administrative areas, but not to the temple rooms proper—corresponding to the exclusion of the public from the king’s inner chambers, but also mirroring the situation in heaven.⁶ In any case, temple architecture gradually became more complex.

The ziggurat, one of the new major features, was a tower-like structure erected adjacent to a normal temple building. It was sometimes referred to as a “stepped pyramid,” but it was not a pyramid in either form or function. Rather than having flat sides angled toward the pinnacle, the ziggurat consisted of three to five levels of ever-decreasing size; instead of culminating in a pointed pinnacle, the top was a

flat surface with a shrine.⁷ While the pyramids of Egypt may have been used for burials (though this too is disputed), the ziggurats of Mesopotamia were clearly sites of cultic worship.

It would have been one of these ziggurats that was featured in the book of Genesis as the Tower of Babel. Indeed, the fact that the ziggurats were integral components of temple complexes in southern Mesopotamia and were used for cultic rituals corresponds well with the comment by Herodotus (*Histories* 1.181) that the Tower of Babel was actually a temple. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there were no ziggurats in Mesopotamia prior to the Neo-Sumerian period (ca. 2200–2000 B.C.).⁸ This is significant because, if we date Abraham to approximately 2000 B.C. or slightly before (Ur was destroyed by the Elamites and their confederates in 2003 B.C.), then we have an indication that a significant chronological gap between the tower story in Genesis 10 and the beginning of the Abraham narrative immediately thereafter in Genesis 11 does not exist. The two events may indeed have followed each other in close succession, with the tower episode even occurring during the twenty-second century B.C. (at the earliest) and Abraham coming on the scene within decades of that event.

If we consider that the tower in the Genesis story could not have been the ziggurat at Babylon (because Babylon, or “Babel,” was still a small town with no ziggurat), then the ziggurat of that story might even have been the ziggurat at Ur, which was put into its final form by Ur-Nammu, who was king between 2111 and 2094 B.C.⁹ The ziggurat in Ur is, in fact, the earliest example of the multistaged form of ziggurat.¹⁰

The purpose of these towers (in accord with the account in Genesis) is expressed in a Sumerian hymn describing

the ziggurat of the temple in Eridu: “Eunir [name of the ziggurat], which has grown high, (uniting) heaven and earth.”¹¹

Sacred Areas: Approaching Deity

Within the temples in Sumer were three special features, which, taken together, constituted the *sine qua non* of sacred edifices. These were the adytum (called ki-ku₃ or “holy place” as well as ki-nam-ti-la or “place of life”),¹² the abzu (which was also called “holy sanctuary”; Sumerian eš₃-ku₃), and the *duku* (du₆-ku₃) or “holy mound.”¹³

The adytum was the place where the statue of the god was placed. Elaborate meals were prepared there for the chief deity in any temple, and it was assumed, when the food was placed on a table before the statue, that the god himself somehow partook of the meal (it should be noted here that the Sumerians never thought that the statue itself was the god; it was a representation and simultaneously a physical structure that the god might inhabit during those times when he was pleased with the inhabitants of a city). In order to approach the adytum, there were appropriate purification rituals to be observed first.

The abzu and the *duku* are more mysterious areas of the temple, both in terms of function and in terms of their exact locations. The abzu derived its name from the term for the underground sources of fresh water, which were the abode of the god of wisdom, Enki.¹⁴ Just what form the abzu took in Sumerian temples is still debated, but it appears likely that it was some body of water, such as a pool or cistern,¹⁵ and that this body of water represented a communication with the subterranean water and hence with Enki. It also appears from one of the temple hymns that the hand-washing ceremony (šū-luḥ) was performed in the

same room as the abzu, or perhaps even in the abzu itself.¹⁶ If the latter turns out to be the case, then we might be dealing with a form of total washing (perhaps even immersion) in which case the term šu-luḫ (“hand-washing”) is actually a synecdoche (i.e., the part representing the whole). This, however, cannot be confirmed from the existing sources.

The *duku* has some special but unclear relationship to the abzu. Its name means “holy mound” or “holy hill.” From what we know about temples in general, it would be tempting to assume that perhaps the *duku* is the primeval hillock that emerges from the waters during creation, but this cannot be confirmed from currently available texts. What we can say with certainty about the *duku* is that two functions are associated with it. The first (and best-known) function of the *duku* is as a place of divine judgment. This is demonstrated in a bilingual text known as VR50+51:

Incantation. Shamash, when you come out of the great
mountain,
When you come out of the great mountain,
the mountain of the springs (of water),
When you come out of the *duku* where fates are
determined,
When you come out of the (place) where heaven and
earth are connected,
from the foundation of heaven, to (this) place,
The great gods will present themselves before you for
judgment;
The Anunnaki will present themselves to you for
decisions.¹⁷

The important points to be noted here are that (1) Shamash (the sun-god) was the god of judgment and therefore presided over the divine court; (2) the *duku* is called “a great mountain”; and (3) even the other gods are subjected to judgment there.

A lesser-known function of the *duku* is that of the location of some sort of cultic meal. In one temple hymn it is called the “House, holy mound, where pure food is eaten.”¹⁸ What is unclear here is the connection between the cultic meal and judgment. It is conceivable that the meal was spread out in the *duku* room to invite and entice Shamash to be present so that the human supplicants could then submit their requests.

Priestly Castes and Administration

The priestly personnel in Mesopotamian temples were essentially in three categories: cultic, divination, and incantation priests. The first two categories included women as well as men. In fact, the “chief” priest (Sumerian *en*) was male if the deity at the shrine in question was female, but if the deity at that temple was male (as in the case of the moon-god, Nanna, in Ur), then the *en* was female.

Since this was the highest, most prestigious priestly office in any given city, it was also subject to becoming a political gift. In Ur that office was traditionally the prerogative of sisters and daughters of the reigning monarch (beginning at least with the installation of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad shortly after 2350 B.C.) and continued so throughout Babylonian records. If inscriptions from Neo-Babylonian times can be considered indicative of much earlier practices, then it seems apparent that as part of the installation ceremonies of the *en*-priestess in Ur, the candidate received a new name. Of the eighteen names of *en*-priestesses at Ur that were known to Nabonidus,¹⁹ at least fourteen of them contained the theophoric element “an” (the name of the supreme Sumerian god).

The *en*-priestesses were not supposed to marry (except for the *en*-priestess in Nippur), but they nonetheless had

children from time to time. J. Renger thinks such offspring may have been the result of the annual *hieros gamos*, in which the king would ritually marry the en-priestess in a cultic ceremony that was supposed to guarantee fertility and abundant produce at harvest time.²⁰

The en-priests and priestesses were associated only with the major gods. They functioned as the appointed spouse of the main deity of a given city, performed sacrifices, and performed purification rites (e.g., *šu-luḥ* ceremonies). They lived in a building on the temple grounds known as the *gipar*.

Another high-ranking priest was the *sanga*-priest. This office combined cultic and administrative responsibilities. The education required was that of a scribe, and it appears that the *sanga*-priest also functioned as a member of a panel of judges. The office was not hereditary, but rather was appointed by the king. In fact, there were kings who were also *sanga*-priests.²¹

One type of priest is the *gudu*-priest (Sumerian *gudu₄*), one who made bloodless offerings, took care of offerings for the dead, and also had musical chores. Of particular interest to Latter-day Saints is the fact that the Akkadian designation for this type of priest was *pašišu*, which means “anointed” and is probably the origin of the Hebrew word *passim* in the expression *kutonet passim*—the garment associated with Joseph in the Genesis account and translated in the KJV as “coat of many colors.” If *passim* is from the Akkadian word *pašišu*, then the “coat of many colors” becomes the “garment of anointing,” which is more acceptable both linguistically and theologically. Interestingly, the

gudu-priest also had special clothing associated with his office.

The issue of special clothing for certain priestly offices appears in many texts, but one may generalize that all those who participated in the presentation of temple rituals (the *MES*) had to wear special garments. The garment in question was known as the *ma* (Sumerian *túg-ma₆*) and was apparently made of linen.²²

Other types of priests, which will not be discussed here, included singers, exorcists, and those who practiced extispicy (examining entrails).

Economic Organization

The Sumerian temples were, perhaps first and foremost, economic centers in their respective communities. Any temple of even moderate size had to maintain a full-time staff. This required regular and reliable sources of income. There were, of course, the offerings of animals and other substances made by worshipers, but the temple economies did not rely on offerings alone. Temples of any significant size also controlled lands (varying in extent during different time periods) that produced crops. These lands might be leased out to tenant farmers, who would pay a percentage of the increase to the temple as a form of rent on the land.

These economic activities required a system of book-keeping, and the ancient Sumerians developed a rather impressive system of accounting. Many inscriptions recovered from the Ur III period (ca. 2100–2000 B.C.) are actually economic texts listing transactions involving animals, produce from farmland, and even banking records of deposits and withdrawals from “silver” accounts.²³

Sumerian Temples and Creation

Of the various rituals that took place in Mesopotamian temples, perhaps the best-known was the creation ritual associated with the beginning of the new year. In later times, the Babylonians would recite a creation myth known by its incipit as the *Enuma Elish*.²⁴ But it is very likely that something of the sort already existed in Sumerian times. Creation motifs appear in numerous texts that may have been associated with temple rituals.²⁵ For example, the Sumerian story of Enki and Ninmah deals with the creation of mankind. In it, the goddess Nammu asks her son, Enki, to create man to do the work of the gods, who are complaining of their work loads (the usual reason for creating man, according to Mesopotamian tradition). Enki instructs Nammu on how to pinch off clay above the abzu and create man. During a feast that ensues, Ninmah (Nammu's assistant) gets drunk and tries to create men, but since she is drunk, all her creations are defective. The account then lists the various defects.

In any case, the Mesopotamian creation accounts differ from the biblical account in the relationship of man to deity. In Mesopotamia man is the slave of the gods, not the offspring of deity as in our own tradition. One notable exception to that is a bilingual story of the creation by the chief Babylonian god, Marduk, in which man is the offspring of the gods. Because of this unusual twist, it is worth reproducing here in toto.²⁶

CT 13, PLATES 35–37

1. Incantation: a holy house, a house of Gods, in a holy place was not yet made.
2. No reed had sprung up, no tree had been created.
3. No brick had been laid, no brick structure had been built.

4. A house had not been made, a city had not been built.
5. A city had not been made, people (or settlement) had not been established.
6. Nippur had not been made, Ekur had not been built.
7. Uruk had not been made, Eanna had not been built.
8. The ocean (the *apsu*) had not been made, Eridu had not been built.
9. A holy house, a house of Gods their habitation had not been made.
10. All lands were sea.
11. When in the midst of the sea there was a channel.²⁷
12. Then (one day) Eridu was made and Esagil was built.
13. Esagil whose foundation Lugaldulkuga laid in the midst of the *apsu*
14. The city of Babylon was made, and Esagil was completed.
15. The gods, the Anunnaki he created together.
16. The holy city, the dwelling of their heart's delight, they proclaimed supreme.
17. Marduk constructed a raft upon the face of the water.
18. He formed the dust and poured it out with the raft.
19. In order to settle the gods in the dwelling of their heart's delight
20. He formed mankind.
21. The goddess Aruru together with him created the seed of mankind.
22. The beasts in the field and the living creatures in the steppe he formed.
23. The Tigris and the Euphrates he created, he set them in place.
24. Their names he named well.
25. The grass, the rush of the marsh, the reed, and the forest he created.
26. The green herb of the field he created.
27. The lands, and the marshes, and the swamps.
28. The cow and her young, the calf, the ewe and her young, the lamb of the fold.

29. Orchards and forests.
30. wild sheep (and) mountain rams he. . . ?
31. The lord Marduk placed a dam by the side of the sea.
32. a marsh, a channel he made.
33. [. . .] he caused to be.
34. [reeds he form]ed, trees he created.

We note here that Marduk creates a city (Babylon) even *before* he creates man, and then he creates the animals *after* creating man. The point of interest, however, is the fact that man was created by a union of Marduk with his spouse, Aruru. This should be compared with the words of Parley P. Pratt concerning the creation of mankind:

Earth, its mineral, vegetable and animal wealth, its Paradise prepared, down comes from yonder world on high, a Son of God with his beloved spouse. And thus a colony from heaven, it may be from the sun, is transplanted on our soil. The blessings of their Father are upon them, and the first great law of heaven and earth is again repeated, "Be fruitful and multiply."²⁸

One final note on creation myths concerns the breath of life, which according to one Sumerian text, was given to many by the god, Ningirsu, the chief deity of the ancient city of Lagash.²⁹

Other Rituals in Sumerian Temples

We might also find the purification rituals interesting. The Sumerians, like the Hebrews but unlike the Akkadian population, had a religion with a well-developed concept of holiness (a hallmark of hierocentric religions as opposed to nonhierocentric religions, which are generally concerned almost exclusively with purity).³⁰ In Sumerian (as in Hebrew) religious thinking, holiness was associated with the temple and the potential presence of deity there; purity,

however, was possible anywhere but was also a prerequisite for entrance to that sacred area. Therefore, purification rituals were a necessary preliminary step to approaching deity in the temple.

One such purification ritual performed by the king is described in the text known as VAS 17 no. 28 (=VAT 8395); it appears to deal with a ritual designed to remove an evil spell or fate that has been determined for the king. The text is damaged, and the first several lines do not contribute greatly to our understanding of what is taking place, even though references to Enki and the abzu are made. The last 17 lines, however, are more informative.³¹

16. Its body is cedar, its sides (are) *hašhur*-wood.
17. Holy water, water of the abzu, in its water the *naga*-plant . . .
18. The sustenance of the gods, the branch of the holy *naga*-plant . . .
19. The branch of the holy *naga*-plant.
20. His body, the knowledge(?) of the gods . . .
21. In pure water, pure water.
22. the king of the city, son of.
23. Holy water, his head.
24. Pure [water], his body.
25. Clear water.
26. Water of purity.
27. Holy water, on his body.
28. Pure water on his body, pure.
29. Clear water on his body, clear.
30. The darkness, the evil of his body has been. . . .
31. The darkness, its swine(?).
32. An incantation to render ineffective the (malevolent) fate of the king.

This text, referring as it does to the bathing ritual of a king, may indeed be related to the later *bīt rimki* rituals,

which were important purification rituals involving three actors: the king, a priest, and a *mašmašu*-priest. This would seem especially likely in view of the purpose given in line 32. In any case, bathing rituals for purposes of purification are well attested in the ancient Near East, especially for kings.³²

Another ceremony that may have taken place in Sumerian temples—in which the supplicant took the hand of the god who was thought to dwell in that particular temple—is not well understood. Whether the hand he took was that of a statue or of someone playing the role of the god is not clear. One such text is the Great Hymn to Nabu,³³ in which the supplicant asks the god Nabu to take his hand and raise him out of the mire and to exalt him so that he may gain life powers. Unfortunately, that text was written in Akkadian and is therefore significantly later than the Ur III period under discussion, but it may well preserve an earlier Sumerian ritual.

The Great Temple at Ur

A Brief History of Ur

The ancient Sumerian city of Ur (modern al-Muqqayer) is located in southern Iraq, approximately one hundred km southeast of Baghdad. The first dynasty of Ur was founded by Mesanepada. He was a contemporary of Mebaragesi, the eighth ruler of Kish (ca. 2490 B.C.). Mesanepada apparently conquered Kish from Aka, the son of Mebaragesi, for he eventually used the title *king of Kish*.

During the early days of Ur, that is, during the Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2700–2370 B.C.), some peculiar burials included the interment of great wealth as well as of nu-

merous attendants. These burials were examined by Leonard Woolley, who excavated Ur during the 1920s and 1930s. He also excavated the ziggurat of Ur-Nammu.³⁴

The city of Ur was conquered by Sargon—who had founded the first great Semitic empire in Mesopotamia around 2340 B.C.—and did not regain independence or prominence until after the fall of the Akkadian empire and the expulsion of the Gutians, who had succeeded the Sargonic dynasty. That expulsion was accomplished by Utuhegal of Uruk around 2116 B.C. Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur, had been a deputy of Utuhegal but broke away from him over a border dispute and founded his own dynasty in Ur around 2111 B.C. Ur-Nammu rebuilt the temple in Ur and constructed the great ziggurat that still stands there.

The most impressive ruler of the Ur III period, however, was Ur-Nammu's son, Shulgi, who reigned for half a century (2094–2045 B.C.). In fact, his very name should be of some interest to Latter-day Saints because it consists of the Sumerian words *šul* and *gi*. The word *šul* means something like "hero," and *gi* is multivalent, but in this case may mean "firm, reliable." The *šul* component is important, because it is also attested as the name of a king in the Book of Mormon (see Ether 1:31).

In addition, Shulgi was a remarkable ruler in other regards. He is perhaps the first musician-king (David would later have that role in Israel) and is reported to have mastered as many as eight different instruments. He also introduced a number of changes by creating a standing army, reorganizing the temple economies, creating a unified administrative system for both northern and southern Babylonia, overhauling the system of state revenues and taxation, creating an enormous bureaucratic apparatus and a

system of scribal schools, reforming the writing system, introducing new accounting and recording procedures, reorganizing the system of weights and measures, and introducing the imperial calendar.³⁵

Although the Ur III period lasted only a single century (ca. 2111–2003 B.C.), it is significant for two reasons. First, the influence of Ur during that time stretched from the Persian Gulf almost to the Mediterranean and was maintained by economic factors rather than by military power. Second, it is quite possible that Abraham lived in or near that city during that time.

After the city was destroyed by a combination of Elamites and Subarians in 2003 B.C., it never again recovered its former stature and eventually became absorbed in the later Semitic empires of Babylonia.

As in other Sumerian city-states (as noted above), the political organization of the city had originally consisted of a town council (*ukkin*) and a political leader called the “big man” (*lú-gal*). The religious life centered around the temple, and the chief clerical figure was the *en*-priestess. The main deity of Ur was the moon-god, Nanna (Semitic name: *Sin*). The worship of this god was carried out in the main temple in Ur, which was called the *Ekishnugal*. This temple was also the center point of the economic life in Ur during the early days, but that role shifted to the royal household during the later periods when the secular bureaucracy grew to keep pace with the expanding empire.

Abraham’s Connection to Ur

Before the 1920s, scholars tended to locate the city of Abraham somewhere in northern Mesopotamia. Since the excavations of Woolley in the 1920s and 1930s, however, the majority opinion has swung toward accepting the Ur

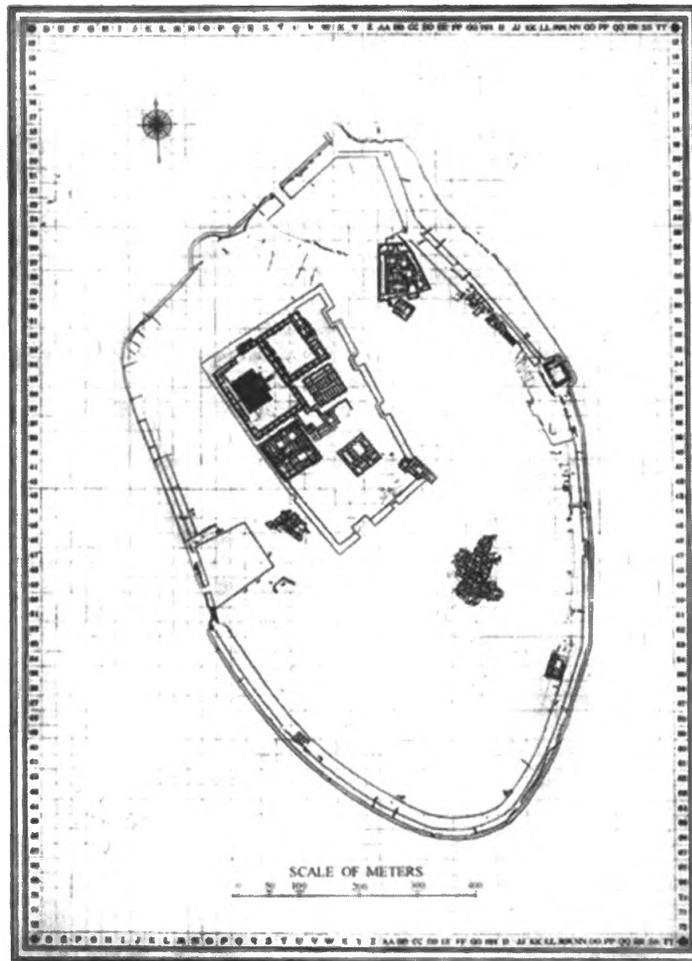


Figure 13. Layout of Ur.

excavated by him in southern Mesopotamia as the one mentioned in Genesis in connection with Abraham. During the 1950s and 1960s, an exchange appeared in the journal *Iraq* between Cyrus Gordon and H. W. F. Saggs; the former argued for a northern site for Ur and the latter responded to his arguments and established a case for accepting the southern location. That controversy continues, especially among Latter-day Saint scholars, who tend to favor the northern theory (partly influenced by Gordon). I favor the southern location for reasons too involved to discuss here. Therefore, let us recognize that the subject is not yet closed

and that if the Ur excavated by Woolley was the Ur of Abraham, then Abraham must have lived there before its destruction in 2003 B.C.

Indeed, two tantalizing notes in the Book of Abraham fit in well with what we know of the southern Ur. The first is the mention of a famine in Abraham 1:30 and 2:1. In the days of the Ibbi-Sin, the last king of Ur, a terrible famine occurred. One of his officers, Ishbierra, was asked to send grain up the canal to Ur to save the city from the ripening rebellion. Ishbierra knew that if he stalled, the city, and therefore also the king, would be overthrown (from within if not from without), and he would be able to set himself up as king in a nearby city, which he did.

The other fact that surfaces in the Book of Abraham is long known from Jewish legends: Abraham's father, Terah, worshiped idols in Ur and returned to that practice in Haran (see Abraham 2:5). The fascinating feature here is that the moon-god Nanna was worshiped in two cities in Mesopotamia: Ur and Haran. It therefore seems possible that Terah might have been the one who took the idolatrous god of Ur (namely Nanna) to Haran and introduced the worship of him there.

Layout of the Ekishnugal

The Ekishnugal comprised a complex of buildings located on a surface of close to seventy thousand square meters. As was common in ancient Mesopotamia, the corners of the buildings, not the sides, faced the four cardinal directions. The main shrine of Nanna was on the west-facing corner of the complex, and the great ziggurat was just to the southeast (see fig. 14). Surrounding the ziggurat was a large courtyard called in Sumerian the *kisal-maḥ* or *é-temen-nì-gur*.³⁶ Northeast of that was another courtyard—

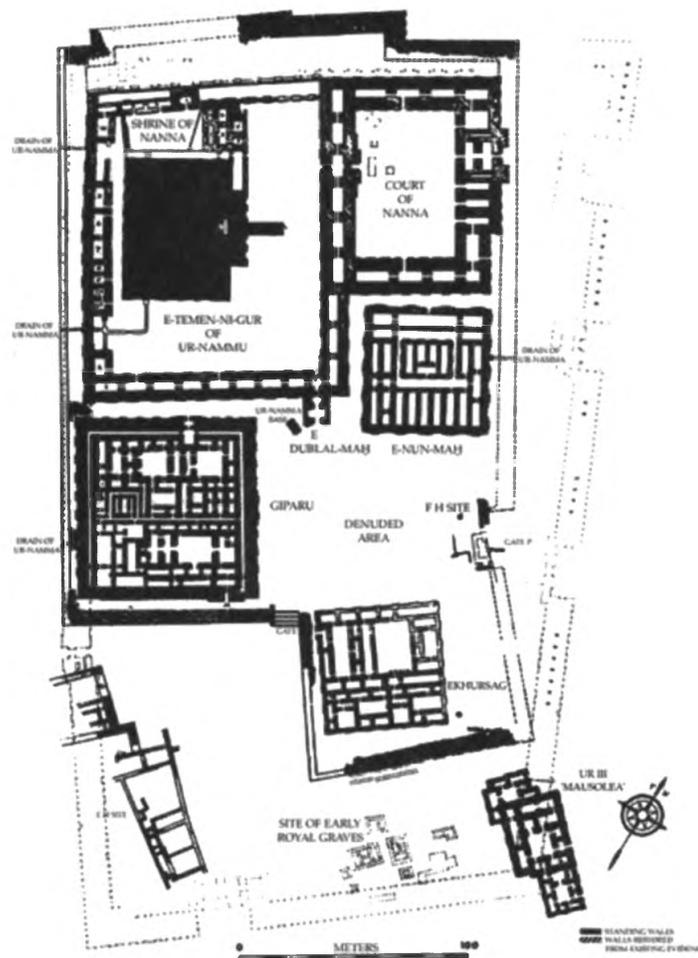


Figure 14. A floor plan of the temple of Nanna (Ekishnugal) in Ur.

the court of Nanna, or *kisal-sag-an-na*, which Levine and Hallo translate as “upper court.”³⁷ The excavator, Woolley, thought the main entrance to the complex was near the eastern corner through a building called the *é-dub-la-mah* in later periods, but originally known as the *dá-gal-mah*.³⁸

In order to appreciate the layout of the temple better, it is helpful to follow the footsteps of a king who visited the temple complex on an official visit to pay homage to the god, Nanna.³⁹ The king, Rim-Sin, first stopped at the main gate with his entourage, where he was obliged to propitiate the divine guardians of the temple. It was assumed that

those lesser deities would then advise the chief inhabitants of the temple, Nanna and his consort, Ningal, of Rim-Sin's visit. After a hymn had been recited, the party then entered the temple complex and proceeded to the next stop, which was the abzu—represented as a body of water bordered by reeds.⁴⁰ Finally the entourage passed to the adytum, but they had to pass by additional gods before they could be admitted into the presence of Nanna and Ningal. Once they arrived at the adytum, however, food and drink offerings may have represented a communal meal in the presence of the gods.

Rituals in the Ekishnugal

One very informative text about rituals in the Ekishnugal is a hymn to Nanna, known as *UET VI/1 67*. This text is remarkable in that it describes Enki as the author of all purity in the temple and also mentions the washing and anointing of the statue of Nanna in the abzu room. Although the text was already treated by Charpin,⁴¹ it has not, to my knowledge, been made available in English. I will therefore present the text here with my own translation from the Sumerian.

- Oh son of a prince! When you come out of the holy sea,
you are resplendent, . . .
- 2 The "mountain" of the pure MES,⁴² the sanctuary of the
abzu, the interior . . . broad, the "mountain" . . .
The exalted "base" . . .
- 4 From the "underground water" (= abzu), carrying a
terrifying splendor, . . . a luster,
You raise your head toward your happy destiny, toward
your greatness and exaltation,
- 6 You march exaltedly toward the destiny that will be de-
clared for you,

- The great An⁴³ has lavishly provided for your sovereignty
 over the universe,
- 8 Enlil⁴⁴ has perfected regality for your great status as son
 of the Prince,
 Enlil has manifested the exalted (status of a) deity for you.
- 10/11 For your exalted path from the lower sea,
 Has Enki, from sea of the holy interior, placed a sweet
 earth, the sweet mother, as (your daily) destiny be-
 neath your feet.
- 12 Enlil has engendered you in magnificence and in the high
 priesthood.
 Oh Nanna! Your crescent is called “the crescent of the sev-
 enth day.”
- 14 Enlil has called your name for you in the universe, your
 name, your holy name!
 Oh son of a prince, he has made your greatness pre-eminent
 in the universe!
- 16 The great assembly has granted you the office/status of
 Enlil
 Enki has decreed your regality and exaltation from the
 sanctuary of Eridu.
- 18 From the exalted abzu, the sanctuary of Eridu, for your
 great high priesthood,
 Oh king of the universe . . . for your greatness.
- 20 Oh Nanna, he has chosen (as your) portion, the elevation of
 your head among the Anuna-gods,
 You dwell in a holy dwelling, among the pure MES of joy.
- 22 He has called the great gods to the great sacrifice,
 They have taken (their) seats in the shrine, (their) hearts
 filled with tremendous delight.
- 24 He gives the great gods the drink offerings of joy.
 In the place of exaltation, in the holy place, you dwell.
- 26 Oh Nanna! In the holy place, your holy residence, you dwell.
 Enki, who purified the dwelling place for you, who
 cleansed the dwelling place for you,
- 28 He has sanctified heaven for you, he . . . earth for you.

- He has prepared the Ekishnugal, the temple of the cedar
forest, (pointing) toward heaven.
- 30 Your exalted residence, the holy place, he has made for you
For the illumination of heaven and earth.
The patterns for your exalted šu-luḥ⁴⁵ ceremony he has
prepared for you.
- 32 For . . . your . . . brightness(?), he has cleaned a table for
you in a holy place.
. . . your evening meal, and morning (meal),
- 34 . . . he prepared for you.
The šu-luḥ ceremony he has sanctified for you, he has
made brilliant(?) for you.
- 36 . . . he has made beautiful.
. . . he has called.
- 38 Enki, having created them in his abzu, has instituted for you
the šu-luḥ ceremony,
(The god) Kusu has brought the šu-luḥ ceremony, which
was created in its own temple.
- 40 Beside the nether sea: an oven, oxen, sheep, bread; beside
the sea: that šu-luḥ ceremony.
For the temple the oil is purified, and held in readiness,
and the arms, hands and feet are touched(?),
- 42 Toward the sacred šu-luḥ ceremony which is not to be
cast aside, from the exalted lake,
From the broad, holy sea, that fate goes forth.
- 44 The Ekishnugal, on the sacred, exalted throne, perfected
in the exalted great MES of the universe,
When you have bathed at the exalted bank of the holy sea,
- 46 When you have sprinkled the mountain oil on your holy
body,
Oh Nanna, (when) you have been placed on your exalted
throne,
- 48 Girded with a fine linen garment, Oh (thou with) raised
head and the shining horn, girded with a lordly
headdress.
The exalted oil, the oil of regality, the oil of your great
storehouse, on the holy body and sides.

- 50 At the shining quay, the exalted quay, his holy quay,
 Ningublaga⁴⁶ has sanctified the hands of the high priest.
- 52 Dara-abzu⁴⁷ of Eridu has purified those hands with oil.
 In order that you may place pure hands upon the provi-
 sions of the table of your great banquet hall,
- 54 Kusu sanctifies the hand—the pure hand, the shining hand.
 Dara-abzu of Eridu has purified those hands with oil.
- 56 The sanctuary of the abzu, being the exalted throne of Ur,
 according to the good and great destiny decreed,
 The Ekishnugal, being the good and holy dwelling place of
 Ningal, that exalted Lady,
- 58 The holy dwelling place where you are queen to Nanna,
 your king.
 The Ekishnugal, and the holy Enun⁴⁸ (are) the temples of
 your royalty.
- 60 Nanna and Ningal rejoice in the dwelling place.
 Oh Su'en,⁴⁹ the lord of the exalted wisdom of the universe,
 Your crown is an exalted crown!
- 62 The glory . . . of the universe . . . Ashimbabbar,⁵⁰ may he
 sanctify (his) hand!
 May it be holy like heaven, may it be brilliant(?) like the
 earth,
- 64 May it shine like the heart of heaven!
 The crown of the universe, the holy crown, may he ele-
 vate it!
- 66 Su'en, the lord of the exalted wisdom of the universe,
 perfected on the pure throne,
 Ashimbabbar, on (his) head the true crown, the exalted
 horns . . .
- 68 He shall raise his head!
- Left edge: holy oil, purified oil, shining oil!

We thus see from this text alone that such concepts as priesthood, communal meals with deity, sanctification rituals involving bathing followed by anointing of the limbs with oil, and then dressing in special temple clothing were found.

Perhaps other rituals may be inferred from later sources, such as a *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage rite)—which may have involved the concept of Nanna descending from heaven to a bedroom located atop the ziggurat, but these are still somewhat controversial for the period under consideration.

Summary and Conclusions

The study of religious material from cuneiform sources is of great interest and importance for the history of religion in general, but also specifically to Latter-day Saints because Sumerian religion was also hierocentric (temple-centered). The material presented here will suffice to indicate that many of the practices we recognize today as integral to temple worship were indeed present in one form or another for thousands of years.

Notes

1. For example, see Stephen D. Ricks and Michael A. Carter, "Temple-Building Motifs: Mesopotamia, Ancient Israel, Ugarit, and Kirtland," as well as John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 152–76, 83–117, respectively.

2. See John M. Lundquist, "The Legitimizing Role of the Temple in the Origin of the State," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 179–235.

3. See J. Kaplan, "Mesopotamian Elements in the Middle Bronze II Culture of Palestine," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 30/4 (1971): 293–307.

4. Kaplan's summary in "Mesopotamian Elements," 305–6, includes the following statements:

As was seen earlier, the pottery of group B points to an association with Ur III; and it appears plausible that this

association originated at the end of Ur III, at which period the West Semites who over the centuries had become assimilated to Mesopotamian civilization were beginning to fan out all over the Near East and also reached Palestine. Very likely the biblical tradition of Abraham's family migration from Mesopotamia to Harran and south-westward to Palestine distantly recalls this migratory movement of the West Semites. It thus emerges that the end of Ur III is the only date possible at which the first indications of Mesopotamian culture could have appeared in Palestine; and the material adduced in this article furnishes the archeological evidence to substantiate this date; i.e. *ca.* 2000 B.C.

5. See Heinrich J. Lenzen, "Mesopotamische Tempelanlagen von der Frühzeit bis zum zweiten Jahrtausend," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 51, NF 17 (1955): 21–22.

6. See F. R. Kraus, "Le rôle des temples depuis la troisième dynastie d'Ur jusqu'à la première dynastie de Babylone," *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 1 (1954): 521.

7. In this respect, the so-called "pyramids" of Mesoamerica are really not pyramids either, but ziggurat-like structures, because they are also stepped buildings with sanctuaries or shrines on top.

8. See Lenzen, "Mesopotamische Tempelanlagen," 26.

9. We should note here that the Book of Mormon account of this event does not mention the name of the city at all, but only refers to a "great tower" (Ether 1:33). Hence, it is possible that the name of the city "Babel" (=Babylon) in the Genesis account is a later gloss.

10. See Michael Roaf, "Palaces and Temples in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1:429–31.

11. Åke W. Sjöberg and E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the*

Sumerian Temple Hymns (Locust Valley, N.Y.: Augustin, 1969), 17 (no. 1, line 1).

12. *Ur Excavations, Texts (UET)* VI/1 103:33.

13. As is customary in the field, all Akkadian words appear in italics and all Sumerian words in roman font.

14. The term is presumably Sumerian, although Eric Burrows, "Problems of the Abzu," *Orientalia* 1 (1932): 235, mentions a theory of A. T. Clay that abzu comes from Amorite ʾfs meaning "end of the earth, denoting the land on which Eridu was built."

15. See Burrows, "Problems of the Abzu," 238.

16. The line in question is line 40 of hymn no. 3, in Sjöberg and Bergmann, *Sumerian Temple Hymns*, 19: temen šu-luḥ-sikil-zu abzu-a lá-a, "Foundation, your pure laving rite spreads over the Abzu."

17. For the Sumerian transcription of the text, compare R. Borger, "Das dritte 'Haus' der Serie *bit rimki*," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967): 1–17, or else E. Jan Wilson, "Holiness" and "Purity" in Mesopotamia, *Alter Orient und altes Testament*, vol. 237 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994), 19–24.

18. é du₆-kù ú-sikil-la rig₇-ga, in Sjöberg and Bergmann, *Sumerian Temple Hymns*, 17 (no. 1, line 4).

19. See *Yale Oriental Series (YOS)* I 45.

20. See J. Renger, "Untersuchungen zum Priestertum in der altbabylonischen Zeit," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 58 (1967): 131. The actual practice of the *hieros gamos* during early times is still a matter of discussion.

21. During the Isin-Larsa period, Lipit-Ištar and his son, Warad-Sin, were *sanga*-priests of Šamaš in Sippar. J. Renger, "Untersuchungen zum Priestertum der altbabylonischen Zeit: 2. Teil," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 59 (1969): 119.

22. For an example of the use of this garment in a ceremony, compare *UET* VI/I 101, line 18: dḥa-ià lú-šu-luḥ-sikil-la-engur-ra-ke₄ túg₆ma₆ túg lá-lá, "Haya, the man of the pure šu-luḥ ceremony of the Engur (temple), who is clothed in the *ma*-garment" (my translation). The transliteration can also be found in Dominique

Charpin, *Le clergé d'Ur au siècle d'Hammurabi* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1986), 344.

On the connection between this garment and access to the MES, see Horst Steible, "Ein Lied an den Gott Haja" (Ph.D. diss., Freiburg University, 1967), 87, where he notes that all those people who have access to the ME are permitted to wear the *ma*-garment.

23. For an example and discussion of one such silver account, see John B. Curtis and William W. Hallo, "Money and Merchants in Ur III," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 30 (1959): 103–39.

24. This was already mentioned by Stephen D. Ricks in his article, "Liturgy and Cosmogony: The Ritual Use of Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 119.

25. As Samuel N. Kramer, "Mythology of Sumer and Akkad," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel N. Kramer (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), 102–3, has pointed out, some of the creation material almost makes more sense in Sumerian than in Hebrew. For example, in the Sumerian accounts, one of the figures involved in the creation of man is the goddess Ninti, whose name is a wordplay because it can be translated either as "the Lady of the Rib" or "the Lady of Life."

26. The text is in Sumerian with an Akkadian translation. Because the Akkadian is somewhat less ambiguous, I will offer my translation from the Akkadian rather than from the Sumerian. The differences are negligible. I should also mention that although this is from a later period than Ur III, it nevertheless shows an important variation on the creation theme which may have had earlier roots, and because of its obvious interest to a Latter-day Saint audience, I have included it here.

27. Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), 963–64, *rāṭu(m)*, point 1b mentions this text and translates it "Rinne." This might be clarified when one accepts Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of the Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 62 nn. 7–8.

28. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to Theology*, 8th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 54–55. I am not aware that this was ever accepted as doctrine, but it is worth noting because of the similarity to parts of the bilingual creation myth quoted; in both cases mankind is the offspring of divine parents, not only spiritually, but also physically. The obvious difference, of course, is that in the Mesopotamian version, the original parents remain divine, while in Parley Pratt's version, the original parents apparently become Adam and Eve.

29. Compare Samuel N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 32.

30. For a discussion of the relationship of holiness to purity among the Sumerians, see Wilson, "*Holiness*" and "*Purity*," esp. pp. 40–46 and 64–65.

31. The translations of the Sumerian texts in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.

32. Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite*, 128, notes that baptismal rituals may have been performed by kings as early as the time of Dumuzi, especially in Eridu, the seat of the water-god Enki.

33. For a full treatment of that hymn, compare Wolfram von Soden, "Der große Hymnus an Nabû," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 61 (1971): 44–71.

34. For an interesting account of Woolley's excavations, see Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*, revised and updated by P. R. S. Moorey (London: Herbert, 1982).

35. For a full discussion of Shulgi's reign, see Piotr Steinkeller, "The Administrative and Economic Organization of the Ur III State: The Core and the Periphery," in *The Organization of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. McGuire Gibson and Robert D. Biggs (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1987), 19–41.

36. Baruch A. Levine and William W. Hallo, "Offerings to the Temple Gates at Ur," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 38 (1967): 47, say that the *kisal-maḥ* was just the court of the *ziggurat*, but Charpin, *Le clergé d'Ur*, 333, argues that *kisal-maḥ* was the term

for the whole of the two courts: the ziggurat court plus the court of Nanna.

37. Levine and Hallo, "Offerings," 47.

38. See *UET V*, 28.

39. This visit of Rim-Sin is recorded in *UET VI/I* 103, 105–6, and these texts are treated by Charpin, *Le clergé d'Ur*, 280–301.

40. Charpin, *Le clergé d'Ur*, 335, suggests that the abzu of the Ekishnugal may have been located southeast of the ziggurat on the ziggurat terrace where Woolley found a cistern of four compartments beside a well. Charpin himself compares the imagery of the abzu with that of baptismal fonts.

41. See *ibid.*, 366–70.

42. The Sumerian word ME is often translated as "offices," but it seems that the word really refers to rituals, and should therefore probably be translated as "rituals."

43. The father of the gods.

44. A son of An (and the father of Nanna) who essentially became the chief deity in Sumer. His main city was Nippur.

45. The šu-luḫ ceremony appears to have been some sort of special hand-washing ceremony of great importance as a means of preparing to enter the presence of deity.

46. This is a son of Nanna who aids in the ceremony, and who had his own sanctuary in Ur.

47. This name, which means "stag of the abzu" is another name for Enki.

48. The Enun was the temple of the goddess Ningal, the wife of Nanna. It was located just southeast of the Court of Nanna (see fig. 14).

49. This is another name for Nanna, and the Sumerogram means "lord of knowledge."

50. Ashimbabbar is a form of Nanna as the god of the new moon.