

Notes from session 4

Sumer

Egypt and Mesopotamia present very different conditions of taphonomy, the term used to describe the way that organic matter decays.

- Egypt has one single river, no tributaries (apart from the Bahr Yussuf to the Fayum oasis), and the fertile irrigated farmed area stands immediately adjacent to arid desert.
- Consequently it was easy and normal for a culture to develop that centred on disposal of the dead in arid desert areas, still relatively close to villages, but not within villages.
- Aridity in Egyptian tomb and cemetery areas undoubtedly led to the practice of embalming bodies.
- Because tombs and cemeteries were placed in the arid zone, a great deal of organic matter has survived from early times, making Egyptology vivid and popular.
- There is no shortage of building stone close around the margins of the floodplain of the Nile.

In contrast, Mesopotamia is not really the land of two rivers, but a land of many rivers.

- There are dried-out wadis to the west of the Euphrates, which can occasionally carry desert flash-floods into the floodplain. On the east, numerous rivers feed into the Tigris from the Zagros Mountains.
- Unlike the Nile, the wide open terrain across which the Tigris and Euphrates pass south of Baghdad means that these huge rivers have changed their courses substantially over the past few thousand years. The ancient paths of the rivers have not yet been mapped exactly.
- Because of the great width of the joint floodplain, there are much greater distances between settlements and full desert. There was consequently no natural impetus to bury the dead in arid marginal land and in any case, if this has happened in antiquity, sites will be likely to have been swept away in floods
- Burials took place in and around settlements
- Settlements were continually being built up with layers of mud-brick structures, so underlying strata are often heavily compacted
- In the past deeper layers inside settlement sites had groundwater percolating through them so organic materials such as wood, fabric or bone have not survived well
- Only in the 20th century did archaeology become 'forensic' enough to bother examining and preserving flattened 'rubbish' - the real focus was statues and treasure to show in state museums. So sites in Mesopotamia were not well known as giving a stunning return for efforts, so less exploration happened
- Mesopotamia has a lack of decent building stone, so buildings tended to be made of mudbrick with stone facings, which were often robbed out in later centuries.

- Mudbrick 'tells' (hills left where settlement debris accumulated) are not pretty or scenic.

Two excavated sites have been ground-breaking in demonstrating the importance of Mesopotamian history, namely Uruk (modern Warka) and Ur (10 miles SW of Nasiriyah)

Uruk's exploration has largely been led by German academics since the 19th century. By the 1920s/30s they were able to demonstrate that the city started to grow in the 4000s BC from a small village site, and careful excavation has traced the complex rebuilding of key structures, mainly temples, on the same site over several thousand years.

Among the highlights from the German excavations are the 'Warka Mask' and the 'Warka Vase', both early examples of stone carving showing great mastery of artistic techniques.

Uruk shows the earliest known example of mosaic in the world. The 'stone cone temple' as well as other sites in Uruk demonstrate that coloured stones were being used to pattern the facades of buildings by 3000 BC.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Sir Leonard Woolley conducted some 14 seasons of excavation, sponsored by the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania. Using great methodology inspired by the likes of William Flinders Petrie, but augmented by his own field methods, he was able to excavate large areas of the city of Ur and also identified a cemetery site. At a great depth in the cemetery, Woolley located 16 tombs that he identified as 'Royal'.

The finds from these tombs are only available to us because of Woolley's meticulous and dogged methods, for example pioneering the practice of consolidating areas of soil in situ, and transporting the blocks to laboratories for excavation.

Woolley's work was extensively covered by the press, with journalist Leonard Cottrell joining the field team. As a result something of a celebrity atmosphere accompanied the discoveries in the late 1920s.

The excavations demonstrated that some form of retainer sacrifice was being practised in Ur around 2700-2600 BC. Up to 74 people were buried alongside high status individuals, all lavishly dressed and apparently dying without a struggle. The bodies were in relaxed 'sleeping' positions. Unfortunately Woolley did not preserve most of the skeletal material he uncovered.

Many of Woolley's finds from Ur are on view in the British Museum, London