

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



THE STORY OF THE ROYAL TOMB OF UR

Resource for 'A Sumerian mystery': a story to tell to the children

In 1927, archaeologists uncovered the entrance to a tomb in the royal city of Ur for the first time in at least 4,000 years. Beyond this entrance, among other things, were found several copper spear tips, daggers, chisels and other tools, and a set of arrows. In the centre of the grave chamber was a coffin containing the body of a man. Behind his back were many objects: bracelets, rings and amulets. Most impressive of all was a gold helmet, made into the form of a wig, with a knot of hair and headband clearly beaten into the golden form. Inscribed on two gold dishes and a lamp found nearby was the man's name *Mes-kalam-dug* 'Hero of the Good Land'. The inscriptions went on to state that he had found his 'eternal dwelling' inside the tomb. He was probably a high ranking prince, placed there to guard the tomb complex.

As the archaeologists went further into the tomb they uncovered more bodies. There were 63 bodies altogether, but the impression was one of complete calm. In the next chamber the archaeologists found the remains of five more guards. They each had copper daggers around their waists, and small clay cups by their side.

Still further into the tomb there were more bodies of guards, and then, at last, the resting place of the queen. The queen's name was *Shub-ad*, according to a lapis lazuli seal. Near her coffin were the bodies of more guards, together with the remains of several women. They had clearly been dressed in fine clothes with much gold jewellery. The remains of fine head-dresses were everywhere, while gold and silver flowers lay strewn over the floor. As in the other chambers, there were small cups amongst the debris, some made of clay, but here in the chamber of the queen were also gold and silver vessels of intricate design. There were also cockle-shells with different-coloured paints dried in them, make-up for the women who were accompanying their queen on her last journey.

Despite the destruction caused by the passage of time, all was peaceful. The interpretation was simple, clear and beautiful. All had voluntarily gone to their deaths, passing from this life to the next in the certainty that they would live forever with their queen.

The Sumerians had possibly the most beautiful way of explaining day and night. Not for them the dull, but accurate, explanation of the Earth revolving around the Sun and spinning on its own axis.

The Sumerians' myth tells of the Sun-god who shone in his radiance, celebrating each day his marriage to the Earth. Each day, at the end of his journey, he was locked into a stone cell by the god of darkness, and imprisoned. Each night the sun-god slowly sawed his way through the rock with a golden saw. And each morning he celebrated his escape by filling the world again with light.

As the archaeologists went about their work in the chamber of the queen, they found things they could not explain easily. On the inscriptions both on the walls and on some of the objects were references to the king. His name was *A-bar-gi*, but he was nowhere to be found. They did find the small body of a richly dressed young girl, about seven years of age. She wore a head-dress similar to that found on the queen, only it was a fraction of the size. Rings, bracelets, even a tiny gold cup, two inches tall, were all miniature versions of objects found on the queen. Might this princess have been the queen's daughter, or was she the child of one of the court?

Among the grave gifts found scattered around, one seemed to be very significant. A small golden saw lay on the ground near the coffin of the queen. At first no one had any idea what its purpose was. No-one is exactly sure even now, but there is a possible explanation. This was discovered soon after the tomb was cleared.

In the chamber before that of the queen were found many bodies, and the name of the king repeated many times. But there was no sign of any coffin or body. The archaeologist Leonard Woolley had discovered when he opened the tomb that in this chamber there was a hole in the roof just about big enough for a man to climb through. Clearly, he thought, this was where tomb robbers got in and out when robbing the tomb. Yet, once inside, the sheer amount of gold and silver suggested that the tomb, once closed, had remained untouched. If tomb robbers had visited the tomb, why had so little been taken?

The myth tells its own story. Perhaps, some years before, the king had died and had been buried in great splendour in his chamber. Some years passed, and upon the death of the queen the final preparations were complete. Either before, or more probably after, the ceremonies surrounding the entombment of the queen, a hole was made in the roof of the king's chamber and his body was taken out to complete his journey. His unification with the sun-god was complete. The king and queen reunited in the after-life, symbolising again the union between man and the gods, the Earth and the Sun.

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