UR III: CONTINUITY AND ERASURE

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Abstract

This module discusses the Ur III dynasty, their continuities and breaks with previous political entities, and the memory of this period in later Mesopotamian periods. Written by M. Lewis, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Johns Hopkins University, and Dr. M. Feldman, professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

1 The Akkadian Empire, its Fall, and the Gutians

It is necessary to provide a small introduction to the period directly preceding the Ur III Empire to fully understand both the innovations of the Ur III rulers, and their borrowings from previous political entities. The Akkadian Empire (2334-2004 BCE) was the first ‘territorial state’ of the Ancient Near East - the first time that a number of city-states were brought under the control of a single ruler (fig. 1, fig. 2). This remarkable new achievement of the first Akkadian ruler Sargon may have led to the development of royal self-deification, starting with Sargon’s grandson Naram-Sin. The kings were not viewed exactly like gods, but worship of them was initiated in their lifetime instead of after their death (Van de Mieroop 2007: 68, 69).

This new territorial control was created through the military power of the Akkadian kings, who conducted campaigns into Syria and western Iran. The empire is characterized by their attempts at centralization and unification, the use of Akkadian as the official language, and the appointment of Akkadian princesses to prominent religious positions of local city temples. The most notable example of this last practice is Enheudanna, daughter of Sargon, who was made high priestess of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur. Enheduanna is also the first known female author and appears to have wielded considerable influence (Feldman 2008: 178).

The Akkadian Empire fell due to a variety of factors, including internal and external conflict (Van de Mieroop 2007: 64). After the fall, a nomadic people known as the Gutians became a major power in the region. The Gutians probably originated in the mountains to the east and migrated into Babylonia. After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, many city-states reverted to native rulers and the Gutians seem to have taken over others, presenting themselves as heirs to the Akkadian dynasty. They were expelled maybe 40 years after the end of the Akkadian Dynasty by Utu-hegal, king of Uruk. It appears that Ur-Namma, possibly Utu-hegal’s brother, succeeded him as king and founded the Ur III Dynasty.

We have an archaeological void for the Akkadian Empire, with only a few known archaeological remains from the periphery of the empire and almost nothing from the heartland of Babylonia. The capital city,
Akkad is still undiscovered, and the Akkadian remains of other Babylonian sites were effectively obliterated by the building activities of later rulers.

Figure 1: List of the kings of the Akkadian Empire.
2 The City of Ur and The Ur III Dynasty

The city of Ur (modern-day Tell el-Muqayyar), was the capital city of the Ur III Empire and is located in southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). It is best known as a result of the excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley, who excavated the site during the 1920s and 30s on behalf of the British Museum\(^2\) and the University of Pennsylvania\(^3\) (fig. 3). Woolley’s most famous discovery was the so-called ‘Royal Cemetery’\(^4\) of the Early Dynastic IIIA period (c. 2600 BCE), which contained extensive evidence of human sacrifice and the richly-adorned bodies of the rulers of the city (fig. 4). During the Ur III period, the city of Ur was dominated by the ziggurat\(^5\), a temple to the moon god, Nanna, in the shape of a step-pyramid. The sacred precinct of Ur also included other temples and the residence of the high-priestess of Nanna (the giparu), as well as three tombs (Crawford 2015: 84, 90-94). The city itself included canals, industrial and residential areas (Crawford 2015: 99, 100).

The Ur III Dynasty was founded in c. 2100 BCE by Ur-Namma, and was made up of five rulers from the same family (fig. 5). The end of the empire in around 2004 BCE was due to a number of military factors, including foreign invasions and an Ur III general who rebelled against the king and founded his own dynasty.

The Ur III kings implemented a new administrative system in their kingdom, dividing it into two regions: the Babylonian heartland, and the periphery (fig. 6). Babylonia was then split into roughly twenty provinces which were ruled by governors, often drawn from local elite families. A military administration ran alongside the civil bureaucracy, with generals stationed in each province. In contrast to the governors, the generals

\(^2\)http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/ur_project.aspx
\(^3\)http://www.penn.museum/sites/iraq/?page_id=24
\(^4\)http://www.penn.museum/sites/iraq/?page_id=26
\(^5\)http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/zigg/hd_zigg.htm
were appointed by the king from among his own military supporters, which may have decreased the power
in the hands of the local elites. The provinces were taxed under the *bala* system, in which each province
provided agricultural produce to the central administration that was then redistributed within the empire.
The periphery was governed through purely military means. Generals and soldiers were stationed in the
peripheral areas and were required to deliver livestock for the *gun ma-da* tax. These two taxation systems
produced large numbers of administrative documents, making the textual record for the Ur III period one
of the most copious in the history of Mesopotamia.

As the second successful attempt to unify Mesopotamia under a single ruler, the Ur III Empire has both
significant points of continuity and notable differences with the Akkadian Empire. It is unclear to what
extent the Ur III kings were trying to distance themselves from the previous dynasty, but it is possible that
some of the differences were a deliberate act. Possibly serving a political purpose, the continuities appear
to be concentrated in the creation of an imperial ideology and the administrative functioning of the state,
whereas the breaks seem more cultural in nature (Cooper 1993: 14). The nature of the continuities are
structural, while the breaks are more rhetorical. For example, royal deification is a structural solution to
the problem of unifying disparate city-states. The different ways in which the Akkadian and Ur III empires
justified the deification – warrior vs pious builder – is a matter of presentation or “rhetorical overlay”.
Figure 3: Map of Ur in the Ur III Period. Created by M. Lewis, after Woolley 1974.
Figure 4: Reconstruction of the burial attire of Queen Pu’abi, uncovered in the Royal Tombs of Ur by Sir Leonard Woolley. Image courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
Figure 5: List of the Ur III kings.

http://www.penn.museum/collections/object/1138
3 Continuity

Despite the apparent distancing of the Ur III rulers from the previous Akkadian Empire, they did retain several key aspects of the earlier dynasty. An important continuity is the deification of the kings. This practice, started by Naram-Sin of the Akkadian Empire, continued to be central to royal ideology during the Ur III period from the reign of Shulgi onwards. In both cases, the kings waited until the new political system was firmly established before introducing royal deification. Royal Hymns, an innovation of the Ur III kings, appear to be part of this ideology. This continuity could be a result of the structural similarities between the two empires – namely, that they were both large-scale, territorial states which had been created out of individual city-states. The ‘empire’ was not Mesopotamia’s natural political unit, despite many modern portrayals to the contrary, and a new political focus may have been required to counteract the ‘localizing’ tendencies of the former city-states. Piotr Michalowski argues that the deified king of the Akkadian and Ur III empires was intended to be that focal point, creating an ‘ideology of empire’ to replace the ‘ideology of the city-state’ (Michalowski 1991: 56).

As the kings of the Akkadian Empire had done, the Ur III kings made their children high priests and priestesses (Michalowski 1991: 48). Ur-Nammu made his daughter the high-priestess of Nanna at Ur, and his son the high-priest of Inanna at Uruk. These placements of royal individuals in the temple hierarchy can be viewed as both acts of piety and as a method of keeping power in the hands of the royal family.

There were also continuities of administration, though the Ur III kings modified the structure used in the Akkadian Empire. Both empires were divided into core and peripheral areas. In both cases, the governors of the core areas were drawn from the local elites who had previously ruled the city states, and the Akkadian kings established local administrative centers which are paralleled by the distribution centers of the Ur III
state (Westenholz 1999: 49, 50; Van de Mieroop 2007: 77). The peripheries of both empires were under the care of military officials (Westenholz 1999: 50; Van de Mieroop 2007: 79).

4 Breaks

Following the expulsion of the Gutians from Babylonia, the Sumerian city-states seem to have largely returned to the traditions of the pre-Akkadian Empire. This can be seen in the use of Sumerian as the official language, although Akkadian continued to be spoken. As well as providing a link to the pre-Akkadian past of the Early Dynastic period (2900-2350 BCE), the creation of a Sumerian scribal tradition generated a new elite to run the empire. Sumerian was probably a dead language by the start of the Ur III Empire, and its use would have been restricted to the few who were trained by the state, likely making it prestigious (Michalowski 1991: 50, 51). The status gained by the elites from the use of this language would have depended on the Ur III dynasty to whose administration it was tied, giving the scribal elite a strong stake in the continuation of the empire.

In connection with the creation of the new scribal elite, Piotr Michalowski suggests that the Ur III kings deliberately discarded all previous literature and had it replaced with compositions of these scribes in order to create the ideology of the new empire (Michalowski 2003: 195). He proposes that there are so few compositions from the Akkadian Empire because they were eradicated by the Ur III kings (Michalowski 2003: 195). The new compositions focused on the heroic actions of three legendary kings of Uruk, the city from which the Ur III kings originated - Gilgamesh, Lugalbanda and Enmerkar - providing mythological origins for the Ur III Empire through association with these semi-divine figures (Michalowski 2003: 196). The overwriting of the old literary tradition is analogous to the overbuilding of Akkadian architecture by later kings, including those of the Ur III dynasty.

In contrast to the Akkadian Empire which favored the image of the king as a warrior, the prime factors in the ideology of kingship seem to have been the piety of the king and his role as builder and provider. This is reflected in the differing ways the two empires dealt with royal deification. The Akkadian kings emphasized the heroic nature of the ruler, in keeping with the greater emphasis they placed on war and military success (Liverani 2014: 168). The Ur III kings, however, emphasized more the connection of the king to the cultic sphere. Kings are presented in close personal relationship with the gods, providing justification for their divine status (Ur-Namma C: 43-49, Shulgi C: 85-112). One of the ways this ideology was created was through presenting the king as a pious builder.

The 'king as builder' can be seen in foundation figures. These figurines were made of bronze and could be in the shape of the king or a peg (fig. 7). They often show the ruler carrying a basket of building materials on his head and were buried with other foundation items in boxes underneath buildings. The motif of kings carrying building materials is one already known in the Early Dynastic period. The Ur III kings also publicized their building activity in inscriptions and literature. When combined with the burial of foundation figures underneath public buildings, this appears to show the Ur III king's desire to be viewed as a pious ruler who cares for the people and the land (Ur-Nammu E3/2.1.4 trans. Frayne 1997: 26; Ur-Nammu E3/2.1.19, trans. Frayne 1997: 43). Extensive building remains found in all major cities of southern Mesopotamia also attest to the enthusiasm of Ur III kings for building projects. The bricks used in these buildings were often inscribed with the name of the king and a short dedication, allowing us to track the building practices of individual kings (fig. 8). Perhaps the most famous structure is the Ziggurat of Nanna at Ur, built by Ur-Namma and completed by his son, Shulgi (fig. 9). The ziggurat measured 190 x 130 feet at the base, and its exterior was faced with mud-bricks and reeds. Two levels survived in the archaeological record and it has been extensively restored by the Iraqi government. The Akkadian-period temple on top of which the ziggurat was built has not been excavated, but the walls of the

\[8\] http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etscl.cgi?text=c.1.8.1.1#

\[9\] http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etscl.cgi?text=c.1.8.2.2#

\[10\] http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etscl.cgi?text=c.1.8.1.3#

\[11\] http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etscl.cgi?text=t.2.4.1.2#

\[12\] http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etscl.cgi?text=t.2.4.1.3#
Akkadian terrace were heavily cut into by the builders of Ur-Namma’s ziggurat (Woolley 1939: 7).

The idea of the king as pious builder can also be seen clearly in the Stele of Ur-Namma, the only piece of monumental artwork from this empire (fig. 11). Despite challenges in assigning the stele to the reign of a specific king, it dates to the Ur III dynasty and probably to the reign of Ur-Namma. The stele was found at Ur in a fragmentary state, outside the gateway into the sacred precinct and may have originally been set up in the courtyard. Parts of it had been reused in antiquity with two pieces serving as door-post sockets in Kassite Period constructions (1475-1155 BCE, Vorys Canby 2001: 3). The stele does not seem to have been deliberately defaced, though one side (the ‘bad’ face) was significantly damaged through weathering. The original reconstruction of the stele, seen in fig. 10, has been challenged in recent years, and an alternative reconstruction can be seen in Vorys-Canby 2001. It was originally a rectangular slab with a rounded top and scenes carved in relief on both sides, a form which was already known in the Early Dynastic Period (fig. 12.). Both sides are divided into sets of registers, as in Early Dynastic art. Though fragmentary, the scenes on these registers depict ritual and building activity. In registers I, II and III of the ‘good’ face of the monument the king is depicted interacting with deities. The deities can be identified by their horned headdresses, a common feature of Mesopotamian art. Registers III and IV of the ‘good’ face show the king and workers engaged in a building project, overseen by a deity. Registers II and IV of the ‘poor’ face seem to show ritual activities being carried out - register II appears to depict an animal sacrifice, and register IV shows a large drum being beaten while a wrestling match occurs on the right side of the scene. Water and libation are recurring motifs, and the top register of both faces includes depictions of an air-born being holding a vessel overflowing with water before the king. The association of the king with water can also be seen in the inscription on the stele. Confined to a space in between registers IV and V on the ‘poor’ face, it commemorates the digging of two canals by the king (Tinney in Vorys Canby 2001: 49-51). This association with water suggests a connection between the king and the agricultural fertility of the land in a similar manner to royal hymns commemorating the building of canals.\(^\text{13}\).

\(^{13}\)http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.1.4#
Figure 7: Foundation figure in the shape of Ur-Namma carrying building materials. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 8: Inscribed brick from the Ur III period. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art\textsuperscript{14,15}.

\textsuperscript{14}http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/329067
\textsuperscript{15}http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/324915
Figure 9: The restored remains of Ur-Namma's ziggurat at Ur. Image courtesy of user "Tla2006" via Wikimedia Commons.

16 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ziggurat_of_Ur_001.jpg
17 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
Figure 10: Original reconstruction of the Stele of Ur-Namma. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.
18 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stela_of_Ur-Nammu.jpg
Figure 11: Fragment of the Stele of Ur-Namma. Image courtesy of The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
5 Conclusion – Forming Memories

While there were continuities between the Akkadian and Ur III empires, these were mainly of a practical structure, aimed at consolidating the control of the ruling kings and administering the newly-created territorial states. The ways in which the Ur III kings chose to present their rule suggest an attempt to be viewed as ‘different’ from their Akkadian predecessors. Rather than portraying themselves as heirs to the Akkadian Empire, as the Gutians appear to have done, the Ur III kings seem to have attempted to distance themselves and create an ideology focused around piety and the king’s care of the land, rather than military success. That is not to say that the Ur III kings did not boast of their military victories, but it was not presented as a central concern as it had been for the Akkadian kings. Whether the Ur III kings were actively attempting to remove the memory of the Akkadian Empire is unclear. Modern scholars have argued both

http://www.penn.museum/collections/object/251212
for and against that conclusion, often using the same evidence (Cooper 1993: 15, Michalowski 2003: 202). The problem in answering this question lies in the lack of architectural evidence for the Akkadian Empire. It is unclear whether this is simply an accident of excavation, or a deliberate program of the Ur III kings. What is clear is that the Ur III kings chose to create their own royal ideology through forging a connection with mythological kings of Ur, claiming brotherhood with Gilgamesh and emphasizing the Early Dynastic precedent for their kingdom, rather than the chronological proximity to the Akkadian Empire (Shulgi C: 85-112).

But were the Ur III kings successful in projecting their own political legacy into the future? The answer appears to be a resounding ‘no’. While there are a few later references to the kings of the Ur III dynasty, it was the Akkadian kings who were viewed as models of both good and bad kingship by later rulers. The one place where the Ur III kings appear to have been remembered was in scribal training, as some of their royal hymns have been found on school tablets (Michalowski 2003: 455). In contrast, the memory of Akkadian kings appear to have been perpetuated for centuries. Literary works such as ‘The Cuthean Legend of Sargon’ and ‘The Cuhean Legend of Naram-Sin’ show how these two rulers were used as models of ideal and problematic kings (Liverani 1993: 48; Foster 2005: 348-356, 912-913). Shamshi-Adad, ruler of the kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia (c. 1808-1776 BCE), recorded his restoration of a temple built by Manishtushu, a king of the Akkadian Empire (Shamshi-Adad I A.0.39.2 17-25, trans. Grayson 1987: 53, Michalowski 1993: 86). The popularity of Sargon can be attested into the Neo-Assyrian Empire by the presence of Sargon II in 721 BCE (Liverani 2014: 488). Some archaeological evidence also displays the continuing interest in the kings of the Akkadian Empire. An example of this is the Disk of Enheduanna, an alabaster disk carved with a relief showing Enheduanna participating in a ritual scene, with an inscription on the back of the disc naming her as a priestess of Nanna and daughter of Sargon (fig. 13., Winter 1987: 191, 192). The disk dates to the Akkadian Empire, but was uncovered in the Isin-Larsa level (2017-1763 BCE) of the giparu (the residence of the high priestess of Nanna) in the city of Ur, indicating that it was being used some 200 years after the fall of the Akkadian Empire (McHale-Moore 2000: 70, 71). The continued use of the disk is further attested by an Old Babylonian tablet (c. 1894-1595 BCE) on which the inscription was copied.

While the Ur III kings do not appear to be reflected in later Mesopotamian literature, their building endeavors left an undeniable mark on the landscape. Ur-Namma built ziggurats at Ur, Eridu, Uruk and Nippur, completely transforming the landscape of southern Mesopotamia. The monumentality of these structures overshadowed anything built by previous rulers and became a building tradition of future kings. While the Ur III rulers don’t appear to have successfully perpetuated a dynastic legacy or the memory of their names and deeds, they strongly influenced later ideologies of kingship and the remains of their building activities can still be seen today.

Despite the energy spent on creating a new ideology of kingship and empire by the Ur III kings, there seems to be very little memory of them, their activities, or their dynasty in later periods. In contrast, the kings of the Akkadian Empire – especially Sargon and Naram-Sin – feature prominently in the minds of later kings. This may be due to the status of the Akkadian Empire as ‘the first empire’, possibly making it the forerunner to all later territorial states in the minds of the Mesopotamian rulers.

21http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.03#
22http://www.penn.museum/collections/object/293415
Figure 13: The Disk of Enheduanna. Image courtesy of The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology."
6 Bibliography


23http://www.penn.museum/collections/object/293415
http://cnx.org/content/m57829/1.1/