

# Insights into early urban life

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Excavations at the foot of the ziggurat of Ur. The temple-tower of the Moon God Nanna is one of the most imposing of Mesopotamian ruins. Credit: Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, LMU

Adelheid Otto's research focuses on the development of urban civilization in ancient Mesopotamia. She is now excavating on the site of Ur, one of the world's first cities. The finds yield fascinating insights into urban life 4000 years ago.

The houses had been flattened, the city's elite were in captivity, and its remaining residents were starving. In about 2000 BCE, the city of Ur in Lower Mesopotamia was destroyed by invaders from the mountains to the East. The city was subsequently rebuilt, but the fate of its predecessor was not forgotten. It forms the subject of the Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur, written several hundred years later. The poem tells us that Enlil, the supreme god in the Sumerian pantheon, had "blown up an evil storm" to punish the citizens of Ur for their transgressions.

The place where Ur once stood, now in Southern Iraq, hosts one of the world's longest-running archaeological excavations and is on UNESCO's [world heritage list](#). "Ur was one of the largest, most important and cosmopolitan cities in the Ancient Near East. We know from the surviving texts how many thousands of people lived in the city and what life was like there – we can read about the din created by the blacksmiths in their workshops and about the shops that lined the city's streets," says Adelheid Otto, who is currently carrying out a research project on the site. Four thousand years ago, Ur lay on the coast and was the most important port on the Persian Gulf. Its prosperity was largely based on its far-reaching political influence and its extensive trading networks. Texts written on thousands of clay tablets refer to intensive commercial contacts ranging throughout the Near East, and reaching as far as the Mediterranean.



Cuneiform tablet bearing the text of the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur”. The city was sacked around 2000 BCE, but was later rebuilt. Credit: Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, LMU

Excavations in Ur – according to the Bible, the birthplace of Abraham – were already making headlines almost a hundred years ago, when a team led by Sir Leonard Woolley uncovered the city's major temples, palaces and royal tombs. The kingdom's central temple, actually a temple-tower or ziggurat, was dedicated to the moon god Nanna. One of Mesopotamia's most impressive ruins, it still dominates the site. Woolley's excavations and, in particular the astonishing troves of jewelry he found in the royal tombs, revealed to the European public for the first time that the history of civilization in the Near East was far older than their own.

## **Everyday life in an ancient society**

"The ancient Near East was literally streets ahead of Europe. Up until the advent of Christianity, the civilization of Mesopotamia was incomparably more advanced than anything in Europe. We are no longer aware of the immense importance of the Near East for our own cultural identity," says Otto, who heads the Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology at LMU. The cultures of Western Asia not only built cities like Ur – a religious and administrative center also known as a "city of bureaucrats". They also invented writing, formulated the first law codes, cultivated the cereals that are a staple part of our diet today, and domesticated cows, sheep and pigs. All of these developments were made possible by the nature of the climate and the character of the landscape. "The crucial factor was that people learned to irrigate their fields and crops. The landscape between the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, was crisscrossed by canals, which transformed the floodplain

into a huge and fertile oasis."





Adelheid Otto excavating cuneiform tablets from a house in Ur, which was erected in the year 1870 BCE. Its owner was a temple administrator and prominent member of Ur's elite. Credit: Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, LMU

Otto is excavating a dwelling which lay on the edge of the city, as part of a larger campaign led by Elisabeth Stone of Stony Brook University in New York State. One of the first finds made last season was a tablet bearing the text of the Lamentations. "Finding a tablet with this wonderful literary text on the destruction of the city lying directly below the ground surface was an unforgettable experience," she says. But the site had other surprises in store. The house was built some 200 years after the events described in the poem took place. The texts discovered so far show that the house belonged to a very important member of society who was the administrator of the city's second most important temple. He had set up a scribal school in the building, and taught students to read and write. It had been thought up that the well-to-do lived close to the temple precincts in the city center. But these finds show that even in second millennium BCE, the upper classes had a penchant for suburban living.

Otto's interests focus on the daily lives of the city's inhabitants. "I want to know how the houses were used, in order to learn more about how people lived. By combining what their dwellings tell us with what we can glean from texts, we can construct a picture of urban society. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, excavators were primarily interested in the monumental buildings and the spectacular finds that now fill the world's museums. However, Woolley excavated approximately 60 houses, displaying an unusually lively interest in urban dwellings and putting

later excavators in his debt. For modern archaeologists set out to document everything that they come across, whether animal bones or pottery shards, and analyze their finds on site. Since the site now attracts many tourists, the ruins are protected by high fences, and continue to guard their secrets. For cities like Ur are far too extensive to be excavated in full. "The trick is to select the short profiles that provide most insight into the whole thing," says Otto.

Until the outbreak of the ongoing war in 2011, she had spent decades working on sites in Syria. In 1993, she began to explore a 4400-year-old settlement buried under Tell Bazi in the north of the country. This campaign continued until the construction of a new dam led to the inundation of the site. Her excavations there were funded by the German Archaeological Institute and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and yielded insights into the social history of a community in Late Bronze Age Mesopotamia. The catastrophic war in Syria has not only prevented archaeologists like Otto from continuing their excavations. The suffering inflicted by the conflict on the people with whom they had worked and whose hospitality they had enjoyed has not left Western researchers unmoved. Moreover, the wanton destruction of archaeological sites – whether with malicious intent by Islamic State or as so-called collateral damage resulting from military action – presents researchers in the field with daunting challenges. The preservation of the region's cultural heritage and the current political situation in the area will therefore be among the topics on the agenda of an international conference on Near Eastern Archaeology organized by Adelheid Otto, which takes place next month at LMU. She yearns for the day when she can once again travel to Syria. "I would try to help the people there, and to return to our excavation site, even though I have no idea how much of it is left. There are photos on the Internet which show that the top of the citadel has been destroyed by the construction of tank positions. But we know that the palace lies below the temple and I would love to uncover it "





This shot shows the excavation at the House of the Administrator in Ur. Credit: Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, LMU

## Surprising insights

Meanwhile, Otto will continue to work on her current projects in Iraq. Not long ago she and her team carried out a thorough survey at a mound that covers an area of some 200 hectares in the Fara region, which lies further inland to the north of Ur. The mound conceals the ruins of a Sumerian settlement. According to the original Sumerian version of the Flood, a king of Fara by the name of Ziusudra built an ark that saved

humankind – "a story that found its way into the Bible, although the hero's name has changed," as Otto points out. Only last month, the LMU team located the long-sought temple and the walls of the city with the help of geophysical techniques. Here too, the researchers were confronted with the uncertain security situation in the region. They were accompanied on the trip to Fara by several Iraqi policemen – "the only people, apart from ourselves, who were to be seen in this otherwise deserted part of the world." Nevertheless, for Iraqis in the region, the fact that Western archaeologists are once again venturing on new investigations in the country is a sign that life is slowly returning to normal.

Otto plans to return to Ur next year to continue her work on the House of the Administrator, focusing this time on the vault beneath it, in which the inhabitants interred their dead. She hopes to discover human remains in the accessible burial chambers. "It would be fantastic to encounter physical traces of the people whom we have come to know on the basis of texts and objects." Using modern scientific techniques, the bones of the dead can be persuaded to reveal much information relating to diet, mobility and genetic relationships.





The owner of the house also ran a scribal school, as revealed by the tablets bearing school texts that were found there. Credit: Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, LMU

The finds in the house itself and the letters inscribed in cuneiform script on excavated tablets have already shed light on the owner's habits. They reveal that he was often away from home on business, and regularly sent letters containing instructions for his wife. "Women were often entrusted with looking after their husbands' business interests at home." Indeed, the status enjoyed by upper-class women in Ur in 2000 BCE can still surprise us in the 21st century CE. For example, the daughters of the better-off classes could lead independent and socially prestigious lives as

priestesses in the city's many temples. Indeed, the first female poet we know of lived in Ur. Her name was Encheduana, and she was High Priestess in the Temple of the Moon God Nanna in the city in around 2300 BCE.

Adelheid Otto's research is detective work: "We try to reconstruct a long-gone mode of social life from the material that we recover from the sands and the soil," she says. Her goal is to complement the top-down view that emerges from the surviving documentary evidence, which focuses the reigns of kings, in order to illuminate normal daily life. Each piece of the puzzle wrested from the ground can contribute to our picture of how people in ancient Sumer lived, before Enlil raised an evil storm, as the Lamentations tell us, "and silence lay upon the [city](#)."

**More information:** For more information, see [www.vorderas-archaeologie.uni- ... kt.syrien/index.html](http://www.vorderas-archaeologie.uni-kt.syrien/index.html)

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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