**Headline:** Investigating a Bronze Age Mystery: A Cemetery Full of Princes, but No Palaces in Sight

By Brenna R. Hassett

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**[Article Body:]**

Perched on the edge of a river near the city of Siirt, Türkiye, is an archaeological site that offers a chance to completely rethink one of the most complex human stories: the development of the world’s first cities and states. Sitting up in the rugged flanks of the Botan Valley, a series of fingerling rivers run between the hills, eventually joining with the mighty Tigris River as it flows south through what archaeologists once called “the cradle of civilization.”

This cradle is the land between two rivers, Mesopotamia—the starting point for the agricultural villages that would grow in size and complexity until some 5,000 years ago. These villages became cities and then the world’s first empires, [witnessing developments like bureaucracy and giant construction projects that we often label “civilization.”](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/what-makes-civilization-9780199699421?cc=gb&lang=en&)

The answer to why our species should change our ecological niche so radically is one of the most important in anthropological science. Going from foraging to [deified kings](https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/rec3.12031?casa_token) in a few thousand years seems like a revolution, and indeed, it has been called “the urban revolution.” But what happened in Mesopotamia to prompt such revolutionary changes? Arguments rage; was it a result of the environment? Agricultural surplus? Dense populations? Religious ideology or technological innovation? Priests, princes, or plenty?

The only way to answer these questions is to dig deep, and this is what archaeologists have done for hundreds of years in the tall mounds of built-up mudbrick that are the telltale signs of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia. What they have found in the long march up to the development of cities and kings is a confusing story of increasing complexity, and one of the most striking ways to understand this is through the treatment of the dead.

The Royal Cemetery of Ur was discovered in [1922 by renowned archaeologists Sir Leonard Woolley](https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/archival-glimpses-of-the-ur-expedition-in-the-years-1920-to-1926/) and his wife [Katharine](https://trowelblazers.com/2014/11/17/katharine-woolley/). Tomb after tomb of lavishly appointed burials containing prestige objects were uncovered in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur. It was an extraordinary dig, with hundreds of workmen uncovering thousands of bodies. Some of these bodies were richly adorned with jewelry and markers of their status in life—[laid out in elaborate tableaux](https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/what-do-we-know-about-the-people-buried-in-the-royal-cemetery/) with their precious objects and accoutrement like chariots the cattle drew—in 16 of the “royal” graves uncovered by Woolley, bodies of other human beings were found. The finds in the Royal Cemetery were so sensational that the newspapers of the time ran constant stories about the progress of the dig, and celebrities like Agatha Christie [went to visit](https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/murder-in-mesopotamia/) the site (and gain inspiration for her novel *Murder in Mesopotamia*).

What Woolley had uncovered was a strange new burial practice that had become the fashion in Ur just as it became what we might now recognize as a city-state: a dense settlement of people organized around individuals and groups with different abilities to direct the course of their societies; priests and kings. In the hundred years that followed, archaeologists have tried to piece together the answers to the question surrounding the extraordinary burials at Ur, where sacrificed wealth, animals, and people appear just when the entire organization of society shifts toward hierarchy and top-down control.

Valuable objects placed in graves are often one of the clues archaeologists use to work out who had higher status in the past, and when we start to see outrageous differences in the value of the goods buried in the earth with different people, we suspect it reflects some differences in the living society as well. But these valuable deposits are not limited to precious metals and exotic trade goods; at Ur, they also include human bodies. Here, we see a new type of society, one that has the power to discard something as valuable as a human life just to decorate a grave. Many have argued that [human sacrifice is one of the hallmarks of a new type of political control](https://www.nature.com/articles/nature17159)—throughout time, human sacrifice often appears as societies become more stratified and centrally controlled.

What, then, can a mound of earth on the outskirts of this “cradle of civilization” offer to the story of how humans became enmeshed in cities and states? Quite a lot, it turns out. [Başur Höyük](https://ajaonline.org/article/4233/) in Türkiye is a *tell* site, a mound comprised of thousands and thousands of years of the remnants of human activity, stretching from 7,000 years ago into very recent times. It would not have garnered much attention outside of archaeological circles but for the findings of [recent excavations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343567580_Basur_Hoyuk_Arslantepe_The_Role_Of_Metal_Wealth_In_Funerary_Customs_At_The_Beginnings_Of_The_EBA) led by Ege University’s professor Haluk Sağlamtimur.

He and his team began uncovering another early cemetery on the mound, radiocarbon dated to between 3,100-2,800 BC, preceding the extraordinary flourishes of Ur by some 500 years. And while the cemetery at Başur Höyük does not have the wealth of gold that the Royal Cemetery of Ur contained, it does have huge numbers of elaborate objects buried alongside the dead—pots, pins, precious copper alloy metal decorations and weapons, and hundreds of thousands of beads. Not just material wealth was sacrificed—in [many of the graves bodies were placed carefully around the main burials as well](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/radical-royals-burial-practices-at-basur-hoyuk-and-the-emergence-of-early-states-in-mesopotamia/23E69D907B072E3789DC5B4F72108AC6).

What Başur Höyük does not have, however, is [a palace or a kingdom full of people who could be impressed by human sacrifice](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-archaeological-journal/article/inequality-at-the-dawn-of-the-bronze-age-the-case-of-basur-hoyuk-a-royal-cemetery-at-the-margins-of-the-mesopotamian-world/19A5E0FB47541DB5B43BF8C5E93B7533). When the “royal” graves of Başur Höyük were made, the place was almost completely abandoned. It is hard to argue that the “royalty” we see in places like Ur, where we think political power was first concentrated, is anything like the “royalty” we see at Başur Höyük. There are no dense populations settled here to control and manage, so what is the role of individuals who are so special that they require enormous sacrifice upon their deaths?

[Many of the burials contain very young individuals](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/antiquity/article/radical-royals-burial-practices-at-basur-hoyuk-and-the-emergence-of-early-states-in-mesopotamia/23E69D907B072E3789DC5B4F72108AC6), 12 or 13 years old; they could not have acquired the wealth—or the power it represents—in the graves in their own right during their short lives. Finding “princely” burials without a palace in sight at Başur Höyük shows us how an unassuming archaeological find can upend our entire understanding of how our human societies became what they are—and offers us the chance to create new explanations for the social and cultural revolutions of our past.