Public Transcripts Expressed in Theatres of Cruelty: the Royal Graves at Ur in Mesopotamia

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The interpretation of the Royal Graves at Ur, Mesopotamia, by their excavator, Sir Leonard Woolley, has long been accepted. Woolley implies that the people sacrificed along with the dynasts went willingly to their deaths out of loyalty, devotion, and faith in the dead monarchs; but other interpretations are plausible. One is that these graves are the remains of dramas portraying a 'public transcript' played out in a public theatre of cruelty staged by rulers claiming divine status. State power united with supernatural authority can create extraordinarily powerful 'sacred or divine kingdoms'; but 'sacred' or 'divine' kings need continuous contact with the supernatural and affirmation of their divinity. They are obliged to practise acts of public mystification, of which the Royal Graves appear to be examples. Ur's kings may indeed have been strong and their subjects loyal, but it is equally likely that they were weak and vulnerable and that they practised ritual sacrifice to terrorize a restive citizenry and convince themselves and others of their right to rule. Other examples of public transcripts made manifest in state-sponsored theatres of cruelty confirm that the Royal Graves at Ur are not unique but represent a phenomenon of wider historical generality.

'All élites buttress their rule with theatre'
(Colley 1992, 177)

Any roster of the world's most significant archaeological sites invariably includes the 16 'Royal Tombs' and 'Royal Death Pits' dating to *c.* 2500 BC that were found in the great cemetery at Ur, the ancient Sumerian city on the flood plain of the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. There are many reasons for this but chief among them is the rich provisioning of these graves and the large number of human sacrifices that accompanied the interments (Pollock 1991, 171). The number of sacrificial burials in these tombs and death pits is quite extraordinary. In the view of their excavator, Sir Leonard Woolley, human sacrifice is the prerogative of the godhead, and sacrifice on the scale seen at Ur is clear indication of the deification of royalty. It was his view that the royal graves held the remains of 'sacred or divine kings' who were regarded, in the words of the Sumerian King List, as having assumed the kingship that had 'been sent down from on high' (Woolley 1934, 41).

Woolley was both an accomplished field archaeologist and a prolific and talented prose stylist. Not only did he produce a comprehensive multi-volume technical report of the work at Ur, but he also wove his archaeological data into some of the most artful and widely quoted interpretations of ancient life in the literature of archaeology (Woolley 1929; 1953; 1954). His vivid and compelling writing successfully made the case that the royal graves are 'snapshots' of the past as it was lived at ancient Ur. The sense of sheer actuality given these snapshots in his prose leads us readily to the conclusion that the royal graves are witness to a society where people went willingly to their deaths out of loyalty, devotion and faith in their monarch. Of course, this interpretation may be correct. It is the argument of this article, however, that we can by no means be certain. What is certain is that the royal graves are *not* neutral snapshots at all. Rather, they are

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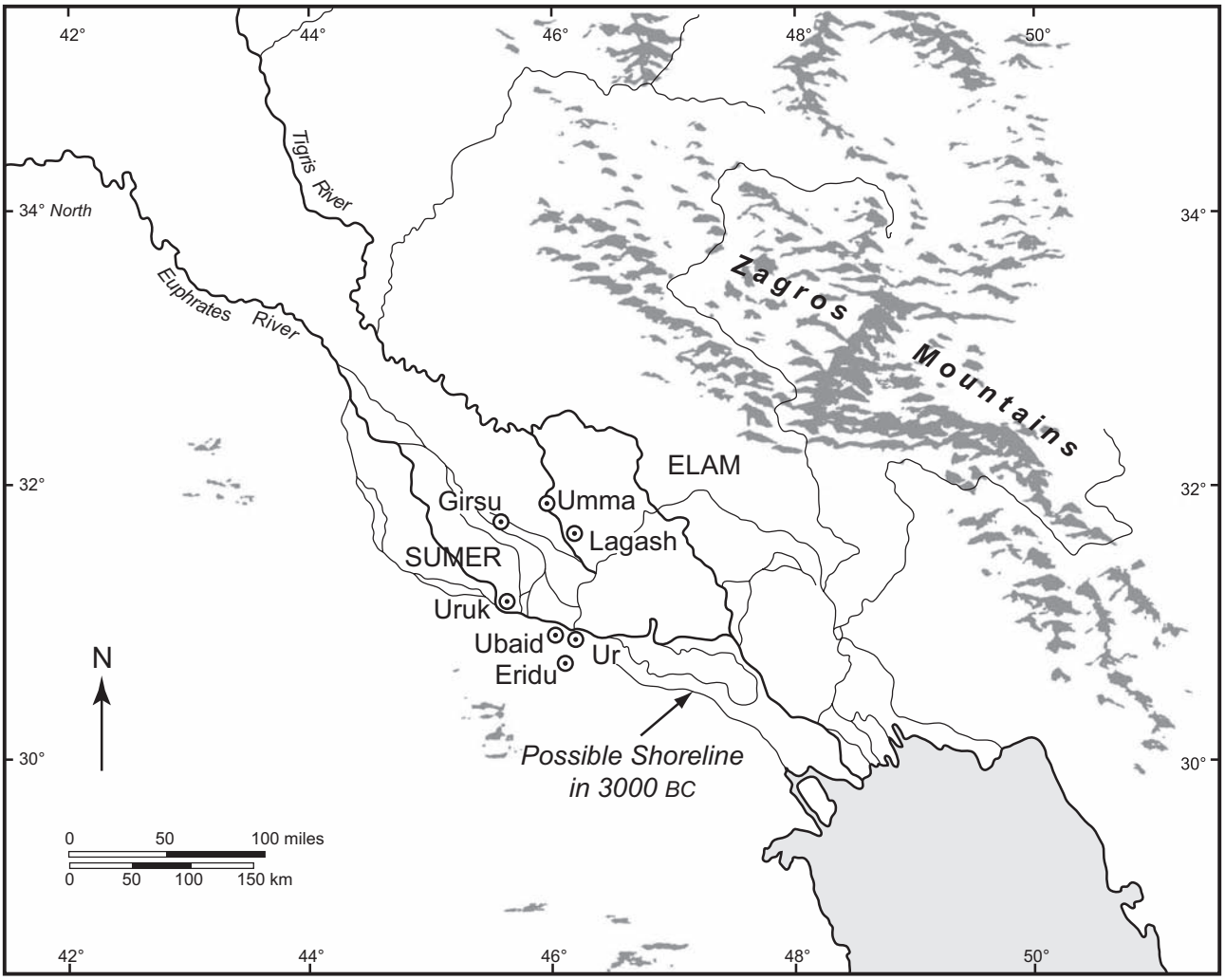

Figure 1. *Map of Mesopotamia showing the location of Ur on the Euphrates River.*

the remains of carefully staged and choreographed political dramas that portray only the official or 'public transcript' of the rulers of that city-state. The graves themselves are part of the effort made by Ur's rulers to establish the legitimacy of their governance by demonstrating their sacred, holy and non-ordinary status. This alliance between state power and supernatural authority created the 'sacred or divine kingdoms' of history, extraordinarily powerful forms of ancient governance that Lewis Mumford (1967) prefers to call 'Mega-machines'. Yet, mighty as they were, sacred or divine kingdoms had deep structural weaknesses or limitations; their god-kings needed both continuous contact with the supernatural and constant affirmation of their divinity. These requirements obliged their rulers ceaselessly to practise theatrical rites of public mystification, including acts of calculated cruelty. History presents us with numerous instances worldwide of such state theatres of cruelty staged in the pursuit of power and legitimacy. The Royal Graves at Ur appear to be but one such example.

We can never know whether or not the rulers of Ur successfully transcended these limitations. Ur's kings may, in fact, have been as strong and stable and their subjects as loyal and devoted as the ordered arrays of bodies in the death pits are meant to suggest. With equal justification, however, we might conclude that Ur's leaders were weak and vulnerable and that their practice of ritual sacrifice on a profligate scale was meant at once to terrorize a restive citizenry and to convince themselves and others of their right to rule.

Ur's Royal Cemetery

Woolley's excavations were undertaken as part of an expedition to Ur sponsored jointly by the British Mu-

Figure 2. *Map of the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Woolley 1934, pl. 273).*

seum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology. Woolley directed this project over fully twelve field seasons (Fig. 1). During five seasons, between 1926 to 1932, he concentrated work in the cemetery (Woolley 1934, 6–8). Although this fieldwork resulted in the excavation of a total of 1850, 16 'royal' graves found in the earliest portion of the cemetery stood out from all the rest (Fig. 2). Woolley (1934, 33) insists that their uniqueness is not simply due to their riches; fourteen of the sixteen had been plundered in antiquity so 'their wealth must be taken on credit'. Rather, it is the peculiarities of their structures and the grim rituals that must have accompanied the burials that distinguishes these graves from all the others. Ten of the sixteen contain large, substantially built stone and, or, brick tombs with one or more chambers. It was these ten that Sir Leonard labelled the 'Royal Tombs.' The six other graves lacked tombs so he referred to these simply as the 'Royal Death Pits' (Fig. 3). Nonetheless, it was his opinion that these six Death Pits had also originally contained tombs that grave robbers had destroyed long ago. He presents little direct evidence, however, to support this view.

The ten remaining tombs each contained — or had once contained — the remains of a central or primary individual who had lain within the tomb chamber. The remains of one or more additional skeletons within most of these tombs indicated that the principal individual had not been interred alone but that sacrificial victims had been placed in the tomb at the same time. Additional individuals were buried in the unroofed, sunken courtyard that either surrounded the tomb or was built adjacent to it.[1] Skeletal remains were also found in the shafts leading down to some of the tombs, suggesting that sacrifices continued to be made as the tomb and death-pit complex was refilled.

Almost from the outset of the discovery, Woolley appears to have regarded the sixteen tombs and death

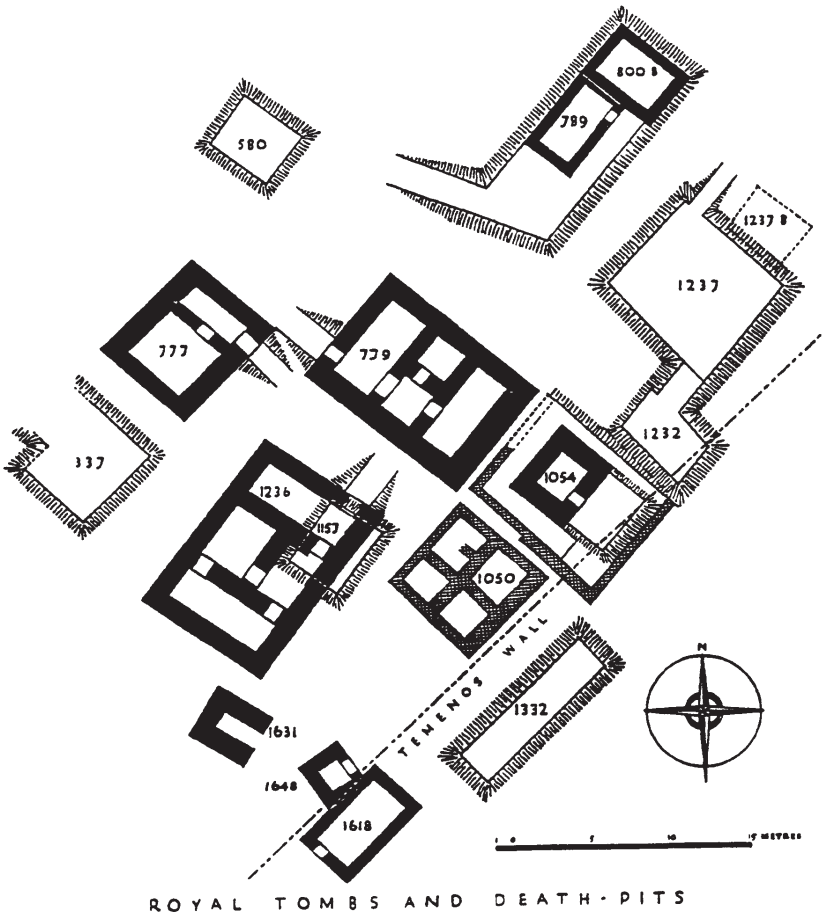

Figure 3. *General plan of the cemetery area at Ur containing the Royal Graves. The Royal Tombs are represented with solid, the Royal Death Pits with hatched lines (Woolley 1934, pl. 274).*

pits as the graves of royalty, and much of what he later wrote of Ur was predicated on this premise. Nonetheless, to this day the identities of the putative dynasts in the so-called royal graves remain an open question.

Interments in graves PG 789 and PG 800

Of all the Royal Graves, Woolley seems to have been particularly impressed by PG 789 and PG 800. The stone and brick tomb in PG 800 was located at one end of a deep, rectangular death pit that measured 4 by 11.75 metres. Beneath this pit was a second death pit and a second tomb, PG 789. The tomb in PG 789 measured 4 by 1.8 metres and was also built of stone and mud brick (Woolley 1934, 62). In spite of the superimposition of the death pits, the tombs in PG 789 and PG 800 were built next to one another on about the same level (Fig. 4). Together, these two burial complexes produced rich grave goods and the skeletal remains of at least 86 human beings.

PG 789

Only fragments of the bones of the principal occupant of the tomb in grave PG 789 were recovered. The bulk of the skeleton was missing. This absence, coupled with the disorder evident inside the tomb, suggests that the body had been removed and the associated grave goods plundered at some time in antiquity. Woolley believes that the robbery most likely took place during construction of the second tomb next to it in grave PG 800. Looted or not, the tomb in grave PG 789 still yielded valuable *objets d'art.* Recovered within the structure was the celebrated 'Silver Boat', a model of a water craft not unlike the modern Iraqi *taradas* (Bahrani 1995, 1637), a wooden statue covered with gold leaf, shell and lapis lazuli which Woolley named 'The Ram in the Thicket' and connected to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, and a number of other, equally extraordinary artefacts. In the huge five-by-ten metre death pit adjacent to the tomb were recovered the skeletal remains of some 63 adults as well as two wheeled vehicles, complete with the bones of the draft animals that had drawn them (Woolley 1934, 62–5). Woolley concludes that all of these individuals had been sacrificed and interred — along with the rich grave goods, vessels, food, clothing and musical instruments — at the time that the primary interment was placed in the tomb (Fig. 5). Were these people killed elsewhere and then brought to the tomb for burial? Probably not: a careful comparative and functional analysis of the stone, metal and ceramic vessels recovered from the royal graves leads Winter (1999) and Cohen (2000, 6) to conclude that participants in the burial ceremony performed a series of formally choreographed rituals and took part in a large feast or banquet at the bottom of the grave shaft just prior to their sacrifice and entombment.

PG 800

Unlike the tomb in PG 789, the burial structure in PG 800 still held its primary occupant and showed no signs of having been looted. This rectangular struc-

ture measured 4.35 by 2.8 metres and was built of limestone slabs and mud bricks. Upon opening it, Woolley found it contained a raised platform, or bier, on which lay a skeleton still wearing an elaborate headdress that included a long band of gold, gold leaves, carnelian rings, lapis lazuli beads and a five-pointed golden barrette decorated with gold and lapis lazuli flowers. A huge pair of crescent-shaped gold earrings once hung from the ears and the entire upper part of the body had been covered with jewellery made of gold and semi-precious stones (Woolley 1934, 84–7).

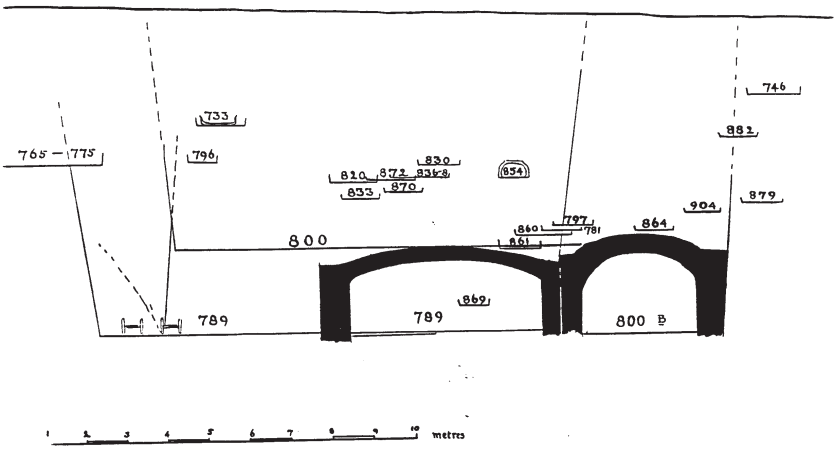

Figure 4. *Section showing the relative position of Royal Tomb PG 789 and PG 800 (Woolley 1934, detail of fig. 10).*

By the right shoulder of this skeleton, excavators found three lapis lazuli cylinder seals. Inscribed on one seal is the name *Pu-abi* and the title *nin* (Woolley 1934, 88). When applied to mortal women, the Sumerian word *nin* is generally translated as 'queen' (Moorey 1977, 27). From this, Woolley infers that *Pu-abi* was the name of the primary interment, that she was queen of Ur at the time of her death and that she was most likely the wife of the primary interment or 'king' buried in the adjacent tomb in PG 789. The second cylinder seal bore the name *A-bara-gi* and Woolley infers that this was the name of that royal husband. Two additional skeletons crouched or lay on the tomb floor at the head and foot of the raised platform. From their elaborate headdresses, Woolley concludes that these were maids or ladies-in-waiting to Pu-abi (Woolley 1934, 84). A third skeleton lay alongside the bier. The small knives and a whetstone associated with this individual leads Woolley to presume the skeleton was male. Skull fragments of a fourth individual were also recovered in the tomb (Woolley 1934, 88).

Although excavated to a depth of seven metres below the modern ground surface, the bottom of the PG 800 courtyard just reached the roof top of the tomb of Pu-abi set within it. The floor of this courtyard had been lined with reed mats, and it was connected to the ground above by a steep earthen ramp (Woolley 1934, 73). A sledge, with the bones of the two onagers that presumably had once pulled it, was found in this courtyard together with the skeletons of 26 people, all of whom appear to be adults. Ten of these skeletons were thought to be females because they were found to be wearing lavish headdresses and jewellery nearly as complex and beautiful as that of Pu-abi herself (Bahrani 1995, 1636). Five others, associated with weapons and wearing helmets, were thought to be

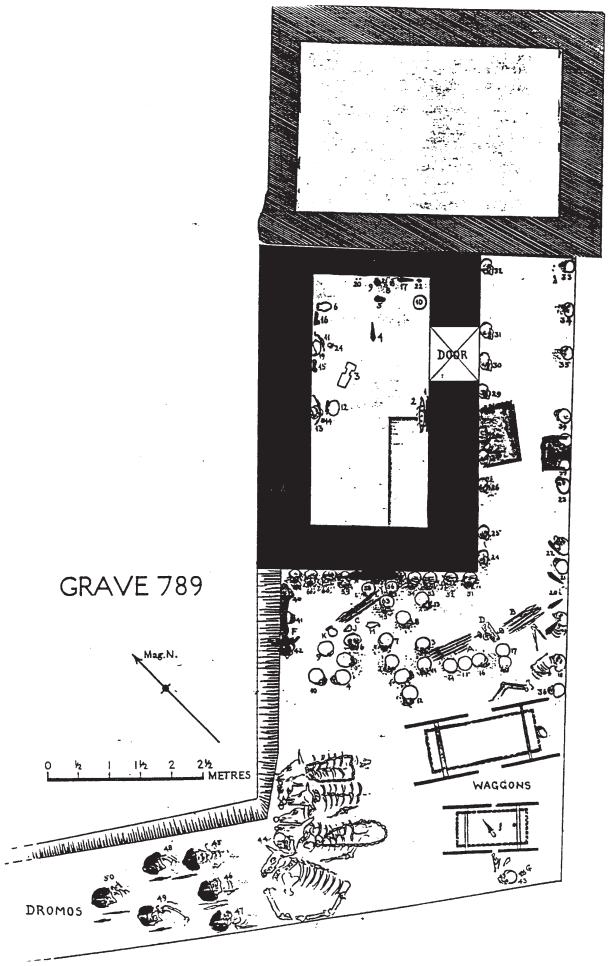

Figure 5. *Plan of Royal Tomb PG 789 showing the relative positions of the tomb and the death pit. The hatched rectangle at the top of the plan shows the location of Pu-abi's tomb chamber (Woolley 1934, pl. 29).*

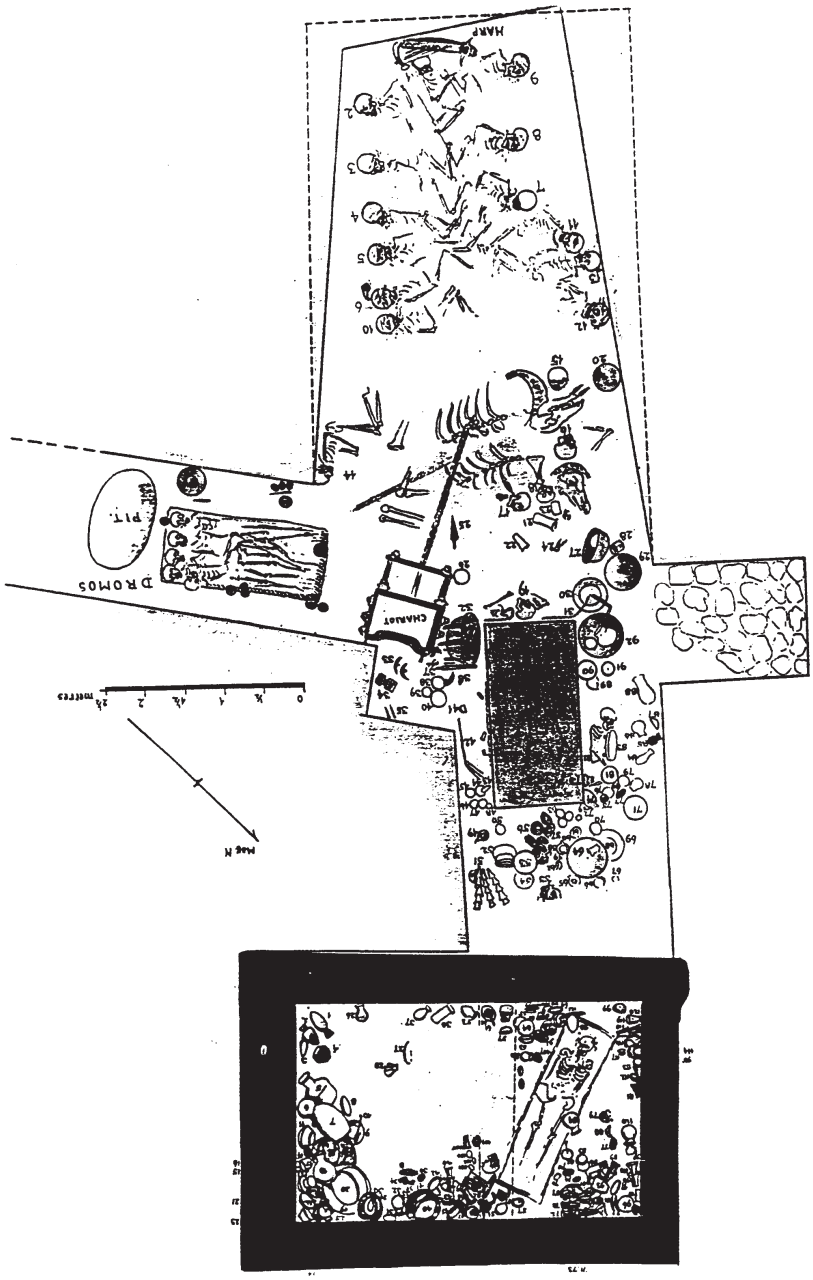

Figure 6. *Plan of Royal Tomb PG 800 showing relative positions of the tomb and the death pit (Woolley 1934, pl. 36).*

male soldiers. The bones of five individuals, mixed with or near those of the onagers, were thought to be male grooms or sledge drivers. Three skeletons, at least one of whom was thought to be male, were found near a large wardrobe chest. Thus Woolley concludes that twelve women, eleven men and three persons of unknown sex were interred along with Queen Pu-abi in PG 800 (Fig. 6).

These gender attributions reveal one of the great defects in Woolley's work: all but a tiny fraction of the skeletal materials excavated from the vast cemetery at Ur were discarded (Molleson & Hodgson 2003, 91–3). Let us set aside our regret for the invaluable genetic and biometric information lost at Ur and simply note that, as a consequence, the reported sexual identities of the skeletons in the royal graves must be regarded as provisional at best. Unfortunately, such uncertainty about the sex of these skeletons materially affects our understanding of the death rituals that took place at the royal graves. Cohen (2000, 6) notes that cuneiform texts mention that *gala*, cross-dressing lamentation singers, were frequently included among the mourners at Sumerian funerals. He suggests, therefore, that some of the putative female skeletons found wearing elaborate headdresses and fine jewellery in the royal graves might, in fact, be male. After all, as Zainab Bahrani (2001, 117–20; cf. Marcus 1994) emphasizes, Mesopotamian gendered identity may have differed in some ways from our own but we have little reason to suppose it was any less nuanced.

Who descended into the death pits?

Woolley sees evidence that these people descended into the pit and died there, if not willingly, at least passively. According to him,

> one could not but remark the peacefulness of the bodies; all were in order, not only set out in neat rows but individually peaceful; there was no sign of violence, not even such disturbance of the delicate head-dresses of the women as was almost bound to result did the wearer merely fall; they died lying or sitting (Woolley 1934, 35–6).

But what was the source of that passivity? The social or occupational roles of the individuals sacrificed and interred in the royal graves holds some clues. These people seem

> to be only the immediate household staff of the buried dignitary. There is no evidence of children and no clear evidence of the self-immolation of wives at

> their husband's funeral. Where men may be securely identified among the human victims they are usually either armed guards, grooms or charioteers (Moorey 1977, 35).

The class asymmetry of this status distribution is obvious. Only members of the 'lower orders', presumably the least powerful members of society, descended into the death pits. Pollock (1991, 177) suggests that many of these people may have been menial labourers who 'belonged' to the public institutions like the temple or the palace and, in return for their labour, received subsistence rations. Molleson & Hodgson's (2003, 91) recent analysis of the entire surviving skeletal sample collected by Woolley at Ur reach conclusions consistent with Pollock's hypothesis. According to them, sixteen skulls or whole skeletons in this sample collection apparently came from the Royal Cemetery. Of these sixteen specimens, two appear to have been soldiers and eight were presumably attendants to various central figures buried in the Royal Graves and death pits. The skeletons of four of the eight attendants, specimens PG 211, PG 1573, PG 1648a and PG 1648d, were found to exhibit extraordinary degrees of shape alteration, robusticity and muscle development rarely observed in skeletal populations anywhere else. Bones are most readily modelled by forces imposed upon them while the individual is still growing. Molleson & Hodgson (2003) consider it likely therefore that the exceptional skeletal alterations observed in these four attendants had resulted from the relentless performance — beginning in childhood — of activities like charioteering (specimen PG 1573) and the carrying of heavy loads on the head or back (specimens PG 211, PG 1648a & PG 1648d). In Molleson & Hodgson's view (2003, 91), evidence of such heavy and intensive labour at such an early age 'implies a role specialization that amounts to child labour, even slavery'.

Yet, whoever these attendants were, it seems clear who they were not. At Ur, neither royal spouse nor royal offspring seems to have accompanied the king or queen in the grave;[2] noble courtiers, high-temple officials, viziers and generals do not appear to have been required to attend the royal personage in the afterlife. Such injustice need come as no surprise. After all,

> the formation and maintenance of elites, and then of elites within elites, lie at the heart of civilizations: inequality is fundamental ... In the most ancient civilization, elites controlled material and symbolic resources but were scarcely subject to cultural requirements to disburse them in fulfillment of social obligations (Baines & Yoffee 1998, 234).

Or, it would seem, were Ur's elite obliged to make ultimate sacrifices or fatal *beaux gestes*.

Did the Royal Graves contain royalty?

After twelve brilliant field seasons, Woolley closed excavations at Ur in 1932. During the years that followed, he and his colleagues produced a multi-volume final report. Further, in his popular writings, Woolley (1929; 1953; 1954) wove the data from PG 789 and PG 800 and other royal graves into one of the finest interpretations of ancient life in the archaeological literature. Nonetheless, neither Woolley's archaeological, nor his cultural, interpretations of the royal graves have remained unchallenged.

In all of this writing, Woolley expresses little doubt that the tombs he had excavated at Ur were the graves of royalty. It was not, however, just the richness and the horror that convinced him of their royal nature. As noted, the seal recovered from PG 800 referred to Pu-abi as *nin* or queen. Woolley also recovered two seals with the names of individuals described as *lugal.* One of these, the seal of *Lugal-sa-pa-da*, was found near one of the grooms in *Pu-abi's* death pit (Moorey 1977, 24). The Sumerian word *lugal* is generally translated as 'king' (Pollock 1985, 140) but, as *lu* means 'man' in Sumerian and *gal* means 'great' or 'big', the literal meaning of the term is 'great man' or 'big man'. In any case, the individual who held such a title probably exercised a compound of powers and responsibilities that, in the modern world, would be assigned separately to priest, judge, war leader and prime minister (Moorey 1977, 37).

Unfortunately, the names of neither of the lugal from these seals appears on the Sumerian King List, the earliest historical record of kingship in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian King List was systematically compiled by Babylonian scholars from ancient traditions and inscriptions preserved in the major city-states of Sumer. It contains the names of all the kings reputed to have ruled in Sumer following the Great Flood when 'kingship was sent down from on high' until the end of the Dynasty of Isin in 1794 BC, and the list has served as a lynch pin in the chronology of Mesopotamia (Jacobsen 1939). However, as Henri Frankfort (1932, 6) notes, the list is 'demonstrably corrupt' and many other scholars have commented on its tendentious, propagandistic, perhaps even fictitious, nature (Michalowski 1983, 240, 243).

Corrupt or not, Woolley recovered archaeological and stylistic evidence that may account for the absence of the names of the two lugal from the Royal Tombs from the Sumerian King List. Seal impressions bearing the names of *Mesanepada* and his wife who, according to the list, were the founders of the first dynasty of Ur, were recovered in a rubbish stratum several metres

above the Royal Tombs. This stratum was labelled 'Seal Impression Strata' or S.I.S 2-1 by Woolley. The designs on these seals appear to be stylistically later than the two recovered from the Royal Tombs. This stratigraphic and formal evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that the occupants of those great tombs preceded the Mesanepada dynasty on the throne of Ur (Pollock 1985, 140).

Yet, determining whether the occupants of the royal graves were Ur's royalty may hinge on establishing a proper chronology for the tombs themselves (Nissen 1966, 107–18). Most commonly, these archaeological features are dated to *c.* 2500 BC and placed in the Early Dynastic IIIA or 'Fara' period (Porada *et al*. 1992, 100). Radiocarbon assays of materials from the tombs returned dates between 2600 and 2500 BC. Based on these dates, Moorey (1977, 24; 1994, 177) concludes that the various graves were constructed between 2650 and 2500 BC. However, after a recent re-analysis of the entire question, Reade (2001, 18) uses the recently constructed 'Ultra-Low Chronology' of southwest Asia to propose that the oldest of the Ur royal graves is no earlier than *c.* 2390 BC and that the last and youngest of them is in place by *c.* 2280 BC. It is his view that some of occupants of these tombs are in fact kings listed in the Sumerian King List. For example, Reade proposes that the building of the PG 789/800 complex took place late enough in the sequence of tomb construction to allow the occupant of tomb PG 789 to be Mesanepada himself or perhaps *Meskalamdug*, another early king on the Sumerian King List whose cylinder seal was found in the shaft of PG 1054. Reade's re-analysis of the data leads him to reject Woolley's view that A-bara-gi or some other unknown, unrecorded royal predecessor occupies PG 789 (Reade 2001, 21–2). If he is correct, Reade answers the objection that the occupants of the royal graves can not be kings of Ur because their names do not appear on the Sumerian King List.

The difficulty of connecting the occupants of the royal graves with the Sumerian King List is not the only source of disagreement between Woolley and his critics. A number of scholars, most notably Anton Moortgat and Henri Frankfort, reject the royal designation for the tombs altogether.

Moortgat (1945) suggests that the tombs contain not the kings and queens of Ur but 'actors' sacrificed in a dramatic religious ceremony like the New Year ceremony (*Akitu* in Akkadian, *Zagmuk* in Sumerian) known to have been practised in Babylon in historic times. In the Akitu ceremony, the god Dumuzi rose from the tomb, thereby guaranteeing the harvest and insuring the fertility of humans and their animals. However, at least as regards the burial identified as Pu-abi in PG 800, this interpretation seems unlikely. The bones of Pu-abi were collected during the excavation. Subsequent osteological analysis revealed them to be that of a woman in her 40s, surely an odd choice as a surrogate for a fertility goddess as Moortgat suggests. More telling still, human sacrifice was not a part of the *Akitu* ceremony and 1500 years or more separates its practice in Babylon from the events in the Early Dynastic cemetery at Ur.

Henri Frankfort (1948, 400) dismisses Woolley's interpretation with a single footnote. Wedded to the theory that kingship in Egypt and Mesopotamia were profoundly different, largely because primitive democracy preceded the emergence of monarchy in the latter region, Frankfort is apparently unprepared to accept evidence of the presence of sacred or divine kings in Sumer as early as 2500 BC. In his view, the primary interments in the Royal Graves at Ur were not true royalty but merely 'substitute' kings and queens. He arrives at this interpretation using the historically documented Mesopotamian practice of temporarily withdrawing a king from service when disaster threatened and instead exposing a substitute to the danger or even sacrificing such a person to the gods in place of the real king (Frankfort 1948, 264; cf. Scurlock 1995).

Moortgat and Frankfort place greater reliance on the texts than on the archaeological evidence, but the Ur burials predate the texts used by these two scholars by more than a millennium and a half. Thus, their interpretations begin with the assumption that these historically known religious and cultural practices had endured essentially unchanged for an immense period of time. Woolley's — and Reade's — interpretation makes no such assumption and is bolstered by the stratigraphic and stylistic data from the cemetery discussed above.

More recently, a revaluation of excavation records at the site suggests that tombs PG 789 and PG 800 may, in fact, contain the superimposed evidence of three great interment dramas. Zimmerman (1998, 39) provides a number of compelling reasons to suppose that this third death pit lay beneath the two that Woolley excavated and is probably the one actually associated with the PG 800 tomb (but Reade 2001, 22). If this reading of the archaeological record is correct, we must reject certain of Woolley's archaeological interpretations. For example, if the death pit actually associated with PG 800 was beneath the two death pits excavated by Woolley, then the interment of Pu-abi predates that of the individual in PG 789 and Woolley's interpretation of the relationship between the burial of Pu-abi and her putative husband, A-bara-gi,

must be revised. However, Zimmerman's work does not falsify or even effect Woolley's hypothesis that the tombs contained the remains of Ur's royalty.

Unfortunately, we will probably never be entirely certain of the construction chronology of the royal graves, never know how many great burial ceremonies were held at the PG 789/800 location and never fully divine the original motives behind these burial rites. What is significant for the argument of this article, however, is that such rites took place at all when they did and where they did. Whatever their order, number or motive, sacrificial burials on the scale practised at Ur are certain evidence that, by the middle of the third millennium BC, social formations in lower Mesopotamia were highly stratified and possessed of extraordinary coercive power. These remains sharply reflect, and eloquently testify to, the emergence and institutionalization of a new and distinctly sinister form of human action. Given this reflection and testimony — coupled with the riches of the site and the drama attendant on its creation — it is small wonder that the royal graves at Ur have found their way onto every 'World's Greatest Sites' list from C.W. Ceram to Brian Fagan.

Site resolution

Riches, drama and sacrifice are not the only reasons the site is considered significant. The royal graves at Ur also conform to the popular — and generally erroneous — conception of an archaeological site. For the public, archaeological sites can be examined as one would a fly preserved in amber. That is, sites are imagined to appear as coherent remnants presenting clear, readily interpretable pictures of ancient times and places. Pompeii fits this conception, for example, as does Tutankhamun's tomb or the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde or the great Pueblos at Chaco Canyon. Unfortunately, few other archaeological sites are like those places at all. Most are more like grab bags than flies in amber, more like grandmother's attic than frozen pictures of the past. Most are admixtures, interfusions or composites because the great majority of sites represent the accumulated remains of many acts or events over time. Their contents have usually been disturbed and altered by natural processes or later human activity or both, and the archaeological material they contain is often in secondary, rather than primary, context. That is, the material is not in its original location or associated with the objects with which it had formerly been used (Schiffer 1987).

The phrase 'site resolution' refers to the degree to which the remains at a site reflect the ancient human behaviour and cultural life that once took place on it. In the ground, order becomes disorder, and disorder diminishes site resolution. As a site's resolution declines over time, it becomes increasingly difficult to 'read' the archaeological remains and understand how they were formed. To understand the structure of the past, the archaeologist must rediscover the order that has been distorted by the forces of disorder or entropy. At most sites, this is difficult. At some sites, it is impossible. In the Royal graves, it seems almost easy.

If Woolley (rather than Zimmerman) is correct, the interments PG 789 and PG 800 followed one another in fairly rapid succession. Initially, the earlier PG 789 tomb, identified by its excavator as that of a king, was constructed at the base of a deep shaft. The area around this tomb was enlarged to accommodate a series of rituals and sacrifices. The tomb was then sealed and the shaft and death pit were backfilled with earth. Some time later, this first tomb shaft was re-excavated and enlarged to form a second rectangular pit with a sloping ramp. This excavation revealed the king's tomb, which was then broken open and looted. A second tomb was then built adjacent to the first at the far end of the rectangular pit opposite the ramp. Some of the contents removed from the first tomb appear to have been re-used in the second interment. Following the second interment — and the sacrifices that accompanied it — the second tomb was sealed and the pit was backfilled. Organic and inorganic decay began degrading the contents immediately. Fortunately, the grave robbers who were active in other graves in the cemetery apparently missed PG 800. Thereafter, the royal graves lay undisturbed — like flies in amber — until archaeological excavations began at Ur in the early twentieth century.

The high site resolution of the Royal Graves seems to reflect ancient life in a clear and dramatic manner. First of all, the materials in them constitute 'grave lots,' that is, groups of objects that were all buried together allowing us to infer that the jewellery, weapons, musical instruments, costumes, and other elaborate artefacts were all in use among members of Ur's elite *c.* 2500 BC. Further, it is clear from these remains that Ur was socially stratified, occupationally specialized and possessed of a political organization powerful enough to compel — or convincing enough to induce — people to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the collective.

Snapshots of the past?

Given the high resolution in the Royal Graves, it is indeed tempting to conclude that they are 'snapshots' of life as it was lived at ancient Ur. As noted earlier, we

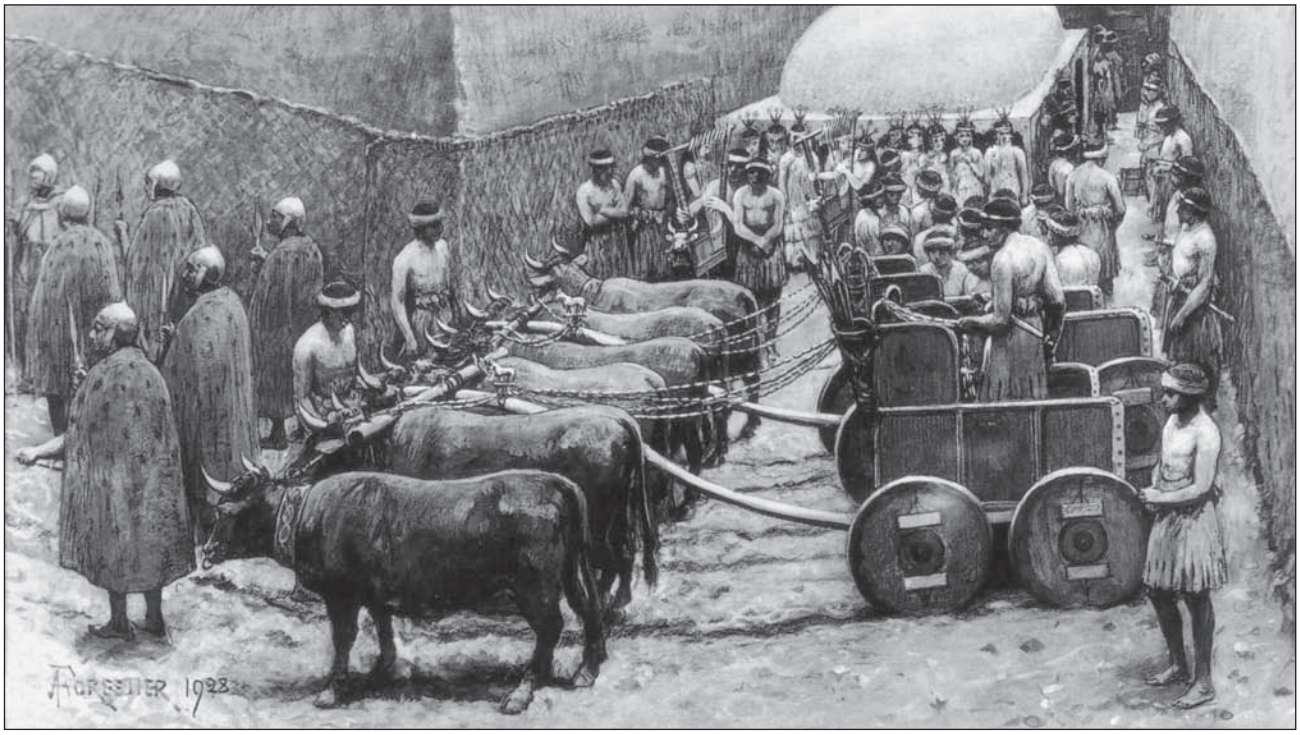

Figure 7. *This moving and imaginative depiction of the mise-en-scène in Royal Grave PG 789 just prior to the mass death of the royal retainers was published by* The Illustrated London News *on June 23, 1928. It was part of that paper's detailed coverage of Woolley's discoveries at Ur. Note that wailing and gnashing of teeth have no place on this canvas. Resignation, not fear, is evident in the serried ranks of those about to accompany the divine queen into the afterlife. Thus does the twentieth-century British artist portray the public transcript of Ur in a fashion that would surely have pleased and satisfied its ancient rulers.*

might, therefore, conclude that the graves are witness to a society where people went willingly to their deaths out of loyalty, devotion or faith in their monarch (Fig. 7). Woolley was certainly persuaded that this was the case and suggests that reference to the 'sacrifice' of these people is misleading. As he puts it (1934, 41–2),

> it appears more likely that they were not killed in honour of the dead king nor because their term of service must end with his life, but were going with their divine master to continue their service under new conditions, possibly even assuring themselves thereby of a less nebulous and miserable existence in the after world than was the lot of men dying in the ordinary way: the degree of faith which would make death the gateway of life has not been unknown in primitive ages. If it be true that the members of the king's court who went down with music into the grave did so more or less voluntarily, that it was a privilege rather than a doom pronounced on them, then it is a fact most important for our view of early Sumerian religion and culture.

Of course, Woolley might be correct. To adopt this view, however, we must take the ancient Sumerians at their word. And, to do so, in my opinion would be a mistake. The images we see are neither complete nor neutral. The intentional nature of the site formation of the Royal Graves guarantees that we have received highly selective pictures indeed. The grave sites contain the remains of political dramas or spectacles. They display only those aspects of society favourable to the powers that orchestrated the dramas. The tensions, ambiguities and social conflicts that must surely have existed in the city are not apparent. Thus, the remains at Ur constitute 'official documents' whose message must, like any other historical texts, be scrutinized with scepticism. In the royal graves, we are not looking at Ur as it was in sheer actuality. Rather, what we see are the tangible remains of the way the ruling powers at the site wanted Ur to be. The Royal Graves at Ur are 'public transcripts'.

Transcripts, public and hidden

State societies contain many conceptions or versions of their social reality. James Scott (1990) calls these versions 'transcripts' and classes them as either 'public' or 'hidden'.

According to Scott, a public transcript is the official version expressed or acted out publicly on ritual occasions or in parades and performances. Such public rituals are commonly meant to convey the impression of the unanimity and loyalty of the members of the society and the strength and resolve of its rulers. The overt message of the public transcript is generally: 'This is a great system!'. However, such transcripts also carry the covert message: 'Like it or not, this system is here to stay!'. Or, more menacingly, 'Accept our power and we will protect you from worse violence — of which we can give you a sample, if you don't believe us' (Mann 1986, 100).

In repressive political settings, official public transcripts have shadow others — hidden versions of social reality expressed only secretly among peers. When expressed publicly at all, hidden transcripts appear in disguised or anonymous form in graffiti, rumour, songs, jokes, gestures, folktales or gossip. These modes of expression allow the powerless to insinuate a critique of the powerful in a manner that does not cross into outright insubordination. The overt message of the hidden transcript is 'See, understand, but remain silent or cautious'. The covert message is 'We are not fooled!'. In the frontispiece of his book, Scott (1990) cites an old Ethiopian proverb that illustrates the spirit of hidden transcripts everywhere: 'When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts'.

States, public transcripts and legitimacy

States first appear in history during the Uruk period sometime between *c.* 3800 and 3200 BC on the flood plain of the Euphrates River in southern Mesopotamia. There is a good deal of scholarly debate regarding the nature of these polities. However, it seems likely that they were 'city-states', small, autonomous urban centres where key economic, political and religious functions were folded together in a powerful ceremonial centre that ruled the hinterlands from which it drew its sustenance (Yoffee 1995, 284–5). Although by no means the earliest, Ur was apparently such a city-state.

As these city-states took shape in Sumer, they began to found colonies in Syria and Anatolia, apparently to obtain certain key raw materials that were absent on the southern alluvium of Mesopotamia. The establishment and administration of these long-distance colonial trading networks appear at first to have stimulated the development of social and economic complexity in Sumer (Algaze 1989; 1993a,b; Oates 1993; Pollock 1992) and later to have stretched these institutions to the breaking point and contributed to their collapse at the end of the fourth millennium and their reconstitution on a smaller scale early in the third millennium BC (Yoffee 1995, 288).

In any case, these early Mesopotamian polities were the first to combine the attributes that characterize all later state organizations. They tried to monopolize force within their territories; they drafted men for work and war; they taxed their subjects; and they redistributed some of the tax for public purposes (Carneiro 1970; Dickson 1987). All states, ancient and modern, do these things. However, in the eyes of their citizens, they do them either legitimately or illegitimately.

Theoretically, at least, political formations may be ruled by pure force. In practical fact, however, 'just how dominant and durable a ruling order can be depends on how far it convinces others — and itself — of its right to rule and its ability to rule' (Colley 1992, 193). That is to say, permanence of rule is achieved only when rulers and citizens alike consider their governance to be legitimate (Weber 1947; 1962). In order to be legitimate, a form of governance must not simply be considered legal, although that is a part of it. In addition, its rule must be recognized as right, natural and capable. Governments and rulers establish the legitimacy of their rule by civil or numinous means or both. Civil legitimacy is based upon assertions of royal descent, tradition or public service; numinous legitimacy is based upon the sacred, the holy and the non-ordinary. The loss or disestablishment of legitimacy in a polity is called a 'legitimation crisis' by Habermas (1975).

God-kings

Habermas (1975) reminds us that, even in a stable, modern, industrialized nation-state, questions of legitimacy can render governance precarious. That being so, it is easy to imagine how deeply challenging the first rulers of the Sumerian city-states must have found the problem of establishing and maintaining legitimacy. The city-state, after all, was a new form of socio-political organization in the fourth millennium BC. Being such, its first rulers had to 'make it all up' as they went along. Consensus on just how those early rulers solved the problem of governance has thus far eluded scholars of Mesopotamia. Nonetheless, although disagreeing on details, most consider it likely that some form of theocratic rule characterized the early polities in Sumer. Adams (1966) sees the political evolution of urban civilization in southern Mesopotamia as beginning during the Protoliterate

period with towns and nascent city-states governed by religious functionaries or 'priests' heading temple estates or institutions. In the course of power struggles during the third millennium BC, he sees the rulership of priests and temples based on numinous legitimacy replaced by that of lugal (war leaders-cum-big men-cum-kings) and by palace estates or institutions legitimized, one supposes, largely by civil means (cf. Jacobsen 1957, 91–140; 1976, 77–81; Gelb 1968). Nissen (1988, 141), who rejects this formulation as simplistic, nonetheless concedes that texts from the later Early Dynastic period do suggest 'that there must have been different forms of political leadership, of which at least one can be designated as "theocratic", whereas the others cannot be characterized so unambiguously'. Nissen's cautious formulation seems plausible, as it is unlikely that these early kings were entirely secular monarchs. Rather, they should be seen as retaining elements of priestly authority and sacerdotal duty but augmenting these with greater civil and military power. In any event, although the power of temple estate and palace estate within the Sumerian city-states must have waxed and waned relative to one another, the consolidation of power in the hands of the lugal and the palace institutions appears to be well under way at Ur during the Early Dynastic period. This consolidation of royal power may have been spurred by the rising level of competition and warfare over agricultural land and trade routes. Yet, whatever the source of the changing landscape of power in the city-states, the early lugal in those polities must have faced constant legitimation crises.

The legitimation problem in southwestern Asia was creatively solved — partially, at least — by the development of a curious new form of governance that claimed both civil and numinous legitimacy: the sacred or divine kingship. At various times and places in southwestern Asia, kings came to be regarded as outright gods on earth, as descendants or offspring of the gods, as men uniquely protected by the gods or divinely inspired by them, or as extraordinary men chosen by the gods to rule and therefore possessed of a divine right to be king. As divine agents, such kings were commonly regarded as receptacles of supernatural power, insurers of the land's fertility, guarantors of the state's security, ultimate fonts of its law and interpreters of the will of the gods. As Baines & Yoffee (1998, 206) note, such monarchs, in relation to and in combination with the gods, offered 'a central legitimation that overrode the 'moral economies' of smaller social organizations' within the state such as kinship groups, tribes or other traditional social formations. In sum, the sacred or divine kingship was a theoretical claim of inviolable sovereignty for the apparatus of the state and a practical coalition of royal military power and religious authority. This is a powerful political formula, and it seems to have worked at Ur. Perhaps a proxy measure of the success of the idea of the divine kinship may be the fact that, after a scant three generations, the practice of provisioning royal burials with human sacrificial victims no longer proved necessary at Ur.

Lewis Mumford (1967) called this form of governance a 'Mega-machine' because, by combining coercive power and supernatural authority, kingships were able to assemble and organize manpower on a scale far larger than anything seen before them. The alliance that forged the Mega-machine enabled early sacred or divine kingdoms to successfully undertake and complete huge public irrigation works and engineering projects on the scale of the great ziggurats and even greater pyramids. It also heightened levels of violence and warfare among the early states. The innovative fusing of royal power with the pretension of divinity is evident also in the widespread adoption or repeated re-invention of this form of governance. Sacred or divine kings came to rule not only in the pristine or primary civilizations on the flood plains of Mesopotamia and Egypt but also in the secondary civilizations that surrounded them. Various forms of sacred or divine kingship are to be found throughout the world (Claessen 1978, 556; Feeley-Harnik 1985; Firth 1981, 586–90; Muller 1981; Skalník 1978, 606–7). They are particularly common in Sub-Saharan Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1964; Fagg 1970; Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940; Pemberton 1996) but also emerged in China (Rawson 2002), Japan (Martin 1997), Southeast Asia (Mesick 1983; Tambiah 1976), and Andean South America (Zuidema 1990). Europe knew the institution well and found sanctity for it in scripture. Verses 1 and 4 of *Romans* 13, for example, tell us that 'the powers that be are ordained by God' and that the ruler 'beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil'. English and French kings healed certain illness with but the miraculous touch of the royal hand (Bloch 1983) and were considered to rule their states literally by 'the grace of God' as late as the eighteenth century (Edmunds 2002; McCoy 2002; Carpenter 1966, 407–8).

However, while the extraordinary claims of divine power, divine favour or outright divinity strengthened the legitimacy of the kingship, it also laid it open to two profound weaknesses. First, because of the extreme social distance that separated the divine king from his subjects, consultation with and advice to him had to

be indirect or disguised (Gose 1996) while, at the same time, the logic of the sacred or divine kingship made constant intercourse with Heaven necessary. Rulers were led, therefore, both to obtain counsel and to learn the will of the gods through the trances or divinations of priests, oracles and spiritualists. Using as an example the diplomatic correspondence between the king and his agents found in the celebrated cuneiform letters from the city state of Mari in Syria, Mumford (1967, 176–7) points out that,

> Again and again dependence upon unverifiable data from Heaven vitiated the ability to make rational decisions in battle, for instance, on the basis of the locally visible circumstances. Too often the soothsayer's addled counsels counted more heavily than the soldier's professional knowledge.

In addition to predisposing him to non-rational counsel, the monarch's claim of divinity made it necessary for him to obtain what, in another context, Max Weber (1963, 47) calls 'charismatic authentication'. That is, he had to prove that he was what he claimed to be. Validation of the claim to godhead can take many forms, all of them tricky. Using the testimony of folklore, Sir James Frazer (1890; Heusch 1997) tells us, in *The Golden Bough,* that the sexual potency of the divine kings was continually on trial. This was so on the grounds that only a king whose personal bedroom performance was intact could insure the fertility of the land at large. Battles, droughts or pestilence also provided a king's subjects with a public metric against which to gauge his divine favour or status. Curiously, the historical record — at least of the sovereigns of Europe and of the Papacy — seems to indicate that people tended to have a high threshold of tolerance of weakness, error, and failure in their divine rulers (Firth 1981, 586). Nonetheless, emergent events always represented potential tests of the legitimacy of the god-king's rule. Since they are generally beyond control, such tests are risky.

A less hazardous means of achieving legitimacy and authentication is through public spectacle and ritual. Cohen (2001) asserts that the early kings of Sumer made particular use of 'death rituals', that is, 'the entire cycle of activities undertaken in response to death', as a means of 'giving physical form to ideology' and thereby legitimizing their claim to rulership. Even this ritual approach to the establishment of legitimacy could not have been easy. It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet. How much more difficult for a mortal man to convince both his subordinates and himself that he is a god. Between valet and master, familiarity and intimacy breeds scepticism and, sometimes, contempt. Therefore, distance must be maintained. If the claim to godhead is to be believed, it has to stick in the minds of subjects and subordinates. Scepticism and contempt cannot be allowed to intervene. The stakes in this game are too high for it to be otherwise.

Achieving such an end calls for effort that is continuous and, at the same time, extraordinary, improvident with treasure, extravagant in blood. Mere repetition grows stale. As a key means of making the case for the king's divinity, rituals and spectacle, whatever their particular overt purpose, must always convey the covert message: 'I am a god: witness the godlike way that I am treated!'. Robert Drennan (1976, 348) calls such ceremonies 'rituals of sanctification' whose message is invested with the sacred in order to ensure its acceptance. A Marxist would call this the promotion of 'false consciousness'. Elizabeth Stone (1991, 186), a less politically charged analyst, refers to it as 'experiments in representation of a new political reality'. I prefer to label it state-sponsored mystification presented in a manner intended to give it the legitimacy of a religious authority that is ultimate, absolute and unchallengeable. Raymond Firth (1981, 584) tells us that religion is really a form of art and therefore like any art, 'a symbolic product of human anxiety, desire, and imagination expressed in a social milieu'. In Firth's sense, then, the institution of the sacred or divine kingship can be viewed as the 'art of religion' applied to camouflage hard reality in the social milieu of politics.

Whatever one chooses to call it, the sacred or divine kingship turns the polity into a combination of 'theatre state', organized around rituals of mystical self-portrayal (Geertz 1980), and terror-machine, capable of inflicting very real pain. It is Cohen's (2000, 2) view that the Royal Cemetery served as a stage for such rituals; upon it, 'the deposition of the corpse became a spectacle for a vast and varied audience'. He bases this conclusion on two sources of evidence: first, the prominent location of the cemetery within Ur and, second, his reading of the nature of its topography. According to Cohen, the cemetery,

> had no above-ground structures and its gentle slopes would easily have accommodated crowds numbering in the hundreds. Moreover, this area was visible not only from the terrace and roofs of the adjacent buildings but also from the residential area below. With this kind of visibility, people from all levels of society — from high ranking public officials to the lowest ranking slaves — could have viewed the activity (Cohen 2000, 1–2).

In the course of that viewing, citizens of Ur would have seen the public transcript of their state expressed in its most awe-inspiring ritual formulation.

State theatres of cruelty and terror

Extraordinary as is the archaeological record of Ur's Royal Graves and Death Pits, we must set aside the notion that these burials represent something exceptional in history. The use of state theatre and state terror to foster legitimacy is by no means limited to the royalty at Ur. 'The prevailing reality of world history', asserts Randall Collins (1974, 416), 'is violence'. In fact, the ubiquitousness of public rituals of pain, ferocity, wilfulness and dread as tools of governance makes Collins's bleak point admirably. Therefore, a brief examination of the historical and ethnographic record of public cruelty in chiefdoms and nascent states throughout the world is necessary if we are fully to appreciate and properly contextualize the case of Ur.

Ancient China

Theatrical use of human sacrifice as an accompaniment to the interment of royalty was part of Chinese civilization from its first beginnings along the Huang Ho valley on the North China Plain during the Shang period (traditionally dated to between 1766 and 1122 BC) as well as during the subsequent Zhou period and Warring States period (*c.* 1100 to 221 BC). However, such practice appears to have reached a sordid nadir following the death of the first Chinese emperor, *Shih-huang-ti*. Shih-huang-ti founded the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–207 BC) after successfully, if brutally, ending the chaos of the Warring States period and unifying the country. The emperor expanded the irrigation system, allowed peasants to buy, sell and own their own land, standardized weights and measures, rationalized the provincial divisions of the empire and appointed professional bureaucrats to govern them instead of hereditary nobles (Garraty & Gay 1981, 121). However, he also established a brutal totalizing regime that disarmed its citizens, rigidly limited their speech, burned their unapproved books and sought even to control their thought.

Then, at the height of his power, Shih-huang-ti suddenly died and was entombed in 210 BC in a huge tumulus within a vast double-walled funeral complex. Although the tomb has yet to be opened, contemporary chronicles assert that its interior contains a huge palace designed as a subterranean version or model of the emperor's domain on earth. Stars and constellations graced the ceilings of the palace and liquid mercury was pumped through it to represent the great rivers of the North China Plain (Debaine-Franckfort 1999, 93). The most celebrated element of this tomb complex, a vast army of full-scale terracotta soldiers, was discovered and disinterred by Chinese archaeologists as recently as 1974. More grimly, the outer complex also contains the remains of numerous flesh-and-blood men, women and horses. Apparently these are the remains of victims sacrificed and buried near the emperor's tumulus at the time of his interment. The tumulus appears to be intact. It may still contain the remains of Shih-huang-ti together with the prodigious treasures that most surely accompanied him into the grave. It may also contain other remains. According to the chronicles, when the emperor's funeral was finished, all the workers and artisans who had worked on the tomb were sealed inside it along with the emperor's body.

The entrance to the tomb was then blocked and hidden and grasses and shrubs were planted on the mound to give it the appearance of a natural hillside (Debaine-Franckfort 1999, 135). Even in its disguise as a mountain, one can imagine the fear that the Shih-huang-ti's vast tomb complex must have inspired in both the enemies and the cowed citizens of the former Qin state.

Native America

Theatricality, terror and human sacrifice were also staples of governance among the civilizations of Andean South America as well as highland and lowland Mesoamerica. Even the chiefdoms of the Mississippian tradition in the southeastern United States seem to have employed them. However, the theatre of cruelty was brought to its *apogée* in scale and in loathsomeness by the Aztecs, or Mexica, of Mexico. Tenochtitlán, the great capital of the Aztec state and its largest and most powerful urban centre, was located on an island in the middle of a shallow lake in the Valley of Mexico. The island-city was such a marvel that the *conquistador* Bernal Diaz del Castillo (1632) could only compare it to the fanciful cities found in the chivalric romance. The most striking feature of Tenochtitlán was the ceremonial plaza compound or precinct erected at the centre where the four quarters of the city met (Brundage 1972, 93). The palaces of the Aztec emperors were built adjacent to this precinct and within its walls were located a sacred ball court, eight medium-sized pyramids dedicated to lesser deities, and a huge rack on which were displayed the skulls of thousands of victims sacrificed there — Bernal Diaz del Castillo reports counting more than 136,000. Yet the central feature in the plaza was the Tlacateco, a truncated pyramid with twin temples at its top. An enormous flight of steps led up the pyramid to the two sanctuaries (Bernal 1963, 81–3). Although the Aztecs made human sacrifice a central part of the worship throughout their empire,

nowhere was the scale or the horror greater than on the vast and centrally public stage of the Tlacateco in the heart of their largest city.

Aztec eschatology was based on the premise that the world was doomed to end in destruction as the gods who governed it weakened and died. But, as these gods were nourished on human hearts and human blood, keeping them strong with such ambrosia was a way to ensure that the end of the world came later rather than sooner. In fact, staving off the end of the world by feeding the gods was regarded by the Aztecs as the unique and noble responsibility of their state. Correspondingly, they made provisioning the gods with fresh human hearts a key activity of the state and the principal function of the 5000 priests living in the capital.

> Human sacrifice was made at almost all Aztec state and religious ceremonies and at the death of emperors and other important persons. Frequently the emperor was a participant in the ritual which often involved hundreds — sometimes thousands — of victims (Kurtz 1978, 184).

In Tenochtitlán, the drama of this sacrificial feeding was carried out on the platform in front of the twin temples atop the Tlacateco. At least once a day victims climbed the huge double staircase of the main pyramid. At the summit, priests seized the victims by the limbs and laid them on their backs over the stone altar. Wielding an obsidian knife, a priest would then cut open the victim's chest, pull out the heart, smear the bloody organ over the statue of the god and then burn it. The victim's body was then rolled back down the staircase to the plaza, where, Bernal Diaz asserts, butchers waited to cut off the victim's limbs for later consumption with 'sauce of peppers and tomatoes'. It appears that on average, some 4000 individuals were sacrificed on the Tlacateco annually. On particularly significant occasions, this number was dramatically increased. The Aztec emperor himself served as a kind of grim *metteur-en-scène* in some of the grander public sacrificial rites. Although the Aztecs sacrificed their own youths, the gods were thought to favour hearts drawn from enemy war captives. Their many wars and raids enabled the Aztecs fully to oblige the gods in this preference.

Many explanations have been adduced to explain the Aztec institutionalization of human sacrifice and cannibalism on such a vast scale. Whatever the ultimate cause, their theatrical cruelty most surely terrorized conquered foes and active enemies — as well, perhaps, as the restive or disaffected among the Aztecs themselves. Upon the arrival of the Spanish, it was undoubtedly their fear and hatred of this public terror that induced the Aztec's subject peoples to embrace Cortés, a devil they did not know, in the hope that he would destroy one they knew only too well.

Early modern Europe

Where does one start an examination of the theatres of cruelty of the states and empires of early modern Europe? With their brutal military discipline and its attendant drum-head courts, frog marches and public floggings? With the agony and stench of their fiery *autos-da-fé* overseen by men like the sixteenth-century inquisitor-general of the Low Countries, Ruwart Tapper, who is said to have remarked: 'It doesn't matter whether those we execute are really guilty or not. What matters is that the people are terrified by our trials' (Bobrick 2001, 134). Or perhaps we should begin with the public hangings or even more harrowing executions that broke people on the wheel or kept them alive in torment while they were drawn and quartered before the clamouring mob. After all, such spectacles were evidently commonplace. On his journey from Dresden to Prague in 1620, the English traveller John Taylor counted 'above seven score gallows and wheels, where thieves were hanged, some fresh and some half rotten, and the carcasses of murderers broken limb after limb on the wheels' (Wedgewood 1938, 14).

Whether broken, drawn and quartered or simply hung, people did not go quietly; rather they 'urinated, defecated, screamed, kicked, fainted, and choked as they died' all under the gaze of thousands of willing and excited spectators (Gatrell 1994, vii). Such public cruelty was carried out with particularly exquisite theatricality during the eighteenth century at London's infamous Tyburn gallows. Those convicted of murder in the City of London and the County of Middlesex,

> were drawn in open carts, pinioned ropes dangling necklace-like from their necks, a distance of two miles ... A procession lead by the City marshal on horseback, the undersheriff, a group of peace officers and a body of constables with staves accompanied the convict and his executioner who rode in the open cart. A number of javelin-men brought up the rear. If the criminal was well known, the entourage had two sheriffs in their coaches, each holding his sceptre of office. A halt was made before St. Sepulchre's Church where a sexton, with bell in hand, delivered a solemn admonition to the condemned. Then the great bell of St. Sepulchre's boomed forth ... The gallows stood between Hyde Park and the end of Edgeware Road, where Marble Arch now stands. The gallows was a permanent triangular structure called 'The Triple Tree'. The open cart was placed underneath the gallows ... After the final prayers were finished, the

> noose was adjusted, the cap drawn over the convict's head and face, the hangman and his helpers lashed the horse, set the cart in motion and left the criminal dangling in air. (Cooper 1974, 5)

Huge crowds invariably attended. On many of these occasions, the murderer's death did not end the spectacle of his public execution. A royal edict of 1752 gave the judge the authority to order either that a murderer's body be turned over to surgeons for public dissection after his execution or that the prisoner be hanged in chains so that the body might remain suspended on the gibbet whilst it decayed (Cooper 1974, 1).

All of these institutions and behaviours qualify as theatres of cruelty, of course, yet all pale in comparison to the public staging of pain that accompanied the Great Witch Hunt that gripped Europe roughly between 1550 and 1750. During that hunt, tens of thousands of people, mostly female, were tortured for confessions, tried in secular and ecclesiastical courts, and publically executed — usually by burning — for the crime of witchcraft. What led to public cruelty on such a scale? Surely there were many causes but foremost among them was the continent-wide religious warfare of the sixteenth century and the long-term inflationary spiral that was war's accompaniment (Rowland & Grafton 2002, 68). Warfare, inflation and the resulting impoverishment created profound problems in governance and social control. The witch-hunts — with their unremitting torture, their trials and their executions — appear to have been one response to this turmoil made by the forces of social and political order (Kunze 1987; Larner 1981, 193, 198–9; Muchembled 1985, 235–78). In part, at least, witch-hunts were used by state and church to curb local disorder and rebellion, to discipline the populace through fear, and, most importantly, to legitimize their own rule by claiming leadership in the fight against the Demonic (Harris 1974). In the European witch hunts and trials, we have a clear expression of state-sponsored public theatre, public transcripts and public pain.

West Africa

Theatres of pain centring on human sacrifice were also widespread among the indigenous early kingdoms and states of West Africa. Detailed accounts of royal funerals involving the live burial of servants, concubines and family members along with kings are found in early chronicles of the region written both by Arab and European merchant travellers (Law 1985, 61–2). However, the practice apparently disappeared over much of northern West Africa following the spread of Islam. By the nineteenth century, human sacrifices at royal funerals and other public occasions were largely limited to the indigenous African polities located along the Gulf of Guinea (referred to by European traders from northwest to southeast, respectively, as the Ivory, Gold and Slave Coasts). From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, these coastal regions served as the African terminus of that infamous traffic in human misery known as the Atlantic Slave Trade. By the nineteenth century, they were dominated by great African trading kingdoms, most notably Dahomey, Ojo, Abeokuta, Benin and Asante. It is important to recall, however, that these indigenous kingdoms were not self-sustaining political entities. Rather, they were part of an international economic order centred on the New World slave plantations engaged in producing tropical staple crops for commercial exchange. The indigenous kingdoms were enriched by an international trade that was ultimately controlled from Europe.

Late in the history of the trade, the Slave Coast fell largely under the sway of the Kingdom of Dahomey, a highly stratified and bureaucratic absolute monarchy that, by virtue of its strategic location and large, well-armed army, had grown rich through the traffic in human beings. The army successfully guarded and expanded the borders of Dahomey while gathering war captives as slaves. These slaves were either exchanged for such European trade goods as firearms, liquor and cloth, or put to work on the royal plantations to raise food for army and court. The Dahomean army also had a large corps of female warriors, celebrated by the Europeans as 'Amazons', who served as soldiers and as bodyguards and wives of the king.

The king of Dahomey was head of the bureaucracy and, backed by the force of his army, governed the kingdom largely by means of this institution. In addition, the king had a huge retinue of advisors, servants, guards, entertainers, cooks and slaves. He was also the key figure in the state religious and ceremonial cycle and served as the chief priest of the elaborate cult of his royal ancestors.

At Dahomey, the state theatre of cruelty was perhaps never in greater evidence than during the so-called 'Annual Custom' or 'Watering of the Graves' at the royal tombs in the capital city of Abomey. In this commemorative annual event, large numbers of male war captives and criminals were publically sacrificed to the king's ancestors, ostensibly to augment the retinues of these dead personages in the after life. Large numbers of female victims were sacrificed in private at the same time. An eye witness to the ceremony of 1864 was none other than the redoubtable Victorian explorer and writer, Captain Sir Richard F. Burton.

According to Burton (1893, 15), between 78 and 80 men and women were sacrificed by King Galele during the Custom he attended. Public sacrifice was not limited to the Annual Custom, however. The necessity of appraising the ancestors of the actions of their descendants on Earth extracted an even greater annual toll in human life. According to Burton,

> However trivial an action is done by the King, such as inventing a new drum, being visited by a white man, or even removing from one palace to another, it must be dutifully reported by some male or female messenger to the paternal ghost (Burton 1893, 16–17).

Based on his inquiries about this practice while in Abomey, Burton estimated that every year upwards of 500 people in the city were sacrificed to the ancestors or sent as messengers to them. In the years when the extraordinary 'Grand Custom' was held, the number of victims probably reached 1000 (Burton 1893, 17). These numbers leapt dramatically with the death of a king, as his burial ceremonies would entail the sacrifice of large numbers of wives and retainers. Similar practices and similar numbers are reported from Asante, Benin and the other slave trading kingdoms on the Guinea Coast (Law 1985; Williams 1988; Wilks 1988).

Interlacustrine East Africa

In the late nineteenth century, the highland region of East Africa between the Great Rift Valley lakes, in what is today Uganda, was under the domination of the three major Bantu-speaking kingdoms of Buganda, Nkore (or Ankole) and Bunyoro. Buganda, located along the northern shore of Lake Victoria was, at European contact in the late nineteenth century, the largest and most powerful of the three. Founded in the late fourteenth century by the Ganda people, Buganda was located in some of the most fertile and productive land in East Africa (Wrigley 1957, 71). It was a centralized, bureaucratic state with a large and well-organized army. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the army appears to have been used as a predatory force to enrich the state by generating a

> constant influx of looted livestock, captured women (valued both as consumer goods and as factors of production) and male slaves. Warfare was the activity which dominated the lives of most male Ganda and the distribution of its proceeds did much to strengthen the nexus of society (Wrigley 1957, 72).

The state was ruled by a powerful, autocratic king called the Kabaka. Located at the apex of this system of military predation and civil taxation, the Kabaka was immensely rich and immensely powerful. Local chiefs were appointed by the Kabaka and owed their position and allegiance strictly to him. Conversely, likely village boys were brought to the capital and enlisted in a *corps d'élite* that surrounded the Kabaka and served him as a kind of Pretorian Guard. The Kabaka had complete power of life and death over his subjects and appears to have used his *corps d'élite* to exercise this power arbitrarily and often. The Bugandan state was thus a kind of ironic meritocracy where the merit needed to succeed appears largely to have been a willingness to do the Kabaka's dirty work, no questions asked.

The Bugandan public transcript promulgated the view that, as death strengthened the state, state-ordered killing was done for the public good. It was this public transcript that lay behind the institution known as the Kiwendo. When, from time to time, the Kabaka ordered a Kiwendo,

> several score, probably hundreds, of people were seized on the roads and clubbed, strangled, burned, drowned or hacked to pieces for the health of the kingdom. There is no suggestion of all or most of the victims having committed an offence, other than that of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Typically, they were peasants bringing supplies into the capital; and *kiwendo* means simply 'making the number up' (Wrigley 1996, 244).

Sometimes the cruelty was more focused. According to John Roscoe (1965, 334–5), men suspected of planning rebellion against the Kabaka were taken to a location thought sacred to the Nile crocodiles on the island of Damba. There they were presented to a medium who entered an altered state of consciousness in order to determine their guilt. Whether rebels in fact or fancy, the prisoners were inevitably found guilty. Their legs and arms were then broken, and they were laid out in a row on the beach for the convenience of the resident crocodiles. All of this is terror pure and simple, and it is hard to imagine how the ordinary subjects of the Kabaka could fail to grasp its meaning.

Public killing was also used as a tool in foreign relations. For example, when the American adventurer and Egyptian officer, Charles Chaillé-Long, visited the Buganda court in 1874, the Kabaka Mutessa had thirty men seized in the capital and publicly executed in the envoy's presence (Chaillé-Long 1876, 106–7). This Kiwendo was no random act of public cruelty. The Kabaka knew full well that Chaillé-Long was on a mission from General Gordon, the newly appointed governor-general of the Egyptian Sudan and a man with political designs on his kingdom. Kabaka Mutessa no doubt meant for the public killing he staged for Chaillé-Long to demonstrate that his power in Buganda was complete and unchecked (Wrigley 1996, 241, 243). And, for a time, it was.

It is important to note that the Kabaka was not a divine king. Rather, he was a secular ruler at the head of a system of bureaucratic rule that had grown out of and replaced a more traditional kin-dominated system of governance familiar throughout most of East Africa. According to Basil Davidson (1969, 226), Buganda's earliest kings:

> had emerged as elected leaders of councils of chiefs who were each other's peers. Not until the 15th king, according to Ganda traditions, was royal authority able to stand outside of and above the lineage network. But then, by a continued taking of new powers, these kings became strong enough to make and change law and custom which, at least in theory, the ancestors had laid down as immutable. By the 19th century, the Ganda kings could even be despotic.

In this sense, the Buganda state was an innovation and an experiment in government. It is plausible, therefore, that the cruelty dealt out by the Ganda rulers to their own subjects and the theft and enslavement they inflicted on surrounding peoples were symptoms of the vulnerability and potential illegitimacy of their autocracy. If so, it may be still another example of the use of public terror and theatre by a state's rulers to buttress their shaky hold on power.

Hawaii

Hawaii first became known to Europeans when Captain James Cook landed there in 1778. Cook was a latecomer, of course. Polynesian voyagers perhaps arrived there as early as AD 400. Although these voyagers came without writing, metallurgy, ceramics or domesticated animals beyond the pig and the chicken, the achievements of their descendants on these islands were impressive indeed. Cook and later visitors found in Hawaii what Marshall Sahlins (1958, 13–19) classed as a Group I Polynesian society, that is, a series of strong and competitive polities with large populations, extreme social stratification marked by sumptuary laws and behaviour restrictions, full-time priests and craftsmen and a rigid political hierarchy under the powerful hereditary leadership of 'paramount chiefs'. These paramount chiefs deeply impressed observers with their well-armed and vigorous bands of retainers, their despotic behaviour and the life and death powers they possessed over those of lower rank. If not a kingdom, then Hawaii was surely the largest and most complex chiefdom in all of Oceania (Kirch 2000, 246–50). Certainly for his part, Captain Cook had no doubt that he was in the presence of royalty upon meeting the great paramount chief Kealakekua. Kealakekua, after all, was a divine ruler regarded as holding sway by virtue of being the temporal descendant of gods and demi-gods. As such, he was the supreme mediator between the gods and the people under his rule. Only the paramount chief and his priests could contact the most important gods directly. It was also both the privilege and the duty of the paramount chief to consecrate the supreme sacrifice, the sacrifice of human beings (Valeri 1985, 140–42). Human sacrifices on behalf of — and sometimes at the hands of — the paramount chief were central features of the most important rituals in public life. Such ritual killing was the deeply expressive emblem of the power and vigour of the rulers of those islands.

Ferocity as governance

As the foregoing examples suggest, the public ritual sacrifice of people as an act of governance — what I have called state-sponsored theatres of cruelty and terror — can be found in complex chiefdoms and early states throughout the world. Of course, it is possible to interpret these acts in the manner of Woolley at Ur, to suggest that they involved people who went more-or-less voluntarily to their deaths. It is also possible to claim that these sacrifices were expressions of genuine religious or filial piety or were relatively rare activities that consumed only limited numbers of victims or were actually executions of criminals or could have been worse and so on (for example, cf. Davidson 1961; Isichei 1977; Wilks 1988; Wrigley 1996, 242).[3] However, to do so is to particularize the phenomenon and neglect its widespread and near universal nature (Cronk 1999, 126–9). Worse still, such interpretations prevent us from recognizing such behaviour for what it is and coming to an understanding of it. Martin Amis (2002, 92) tells us that the histories of the holocaust and the Soviet gulag 'are full of terrible news about what it is to be human. They arouse shame as well as outrage'. Something similar could be said of the foregoing examples of state-sponsored public cruelty. But, if it is any consolation, Felipe Fernández-Armesto (2001, 220) assures us that such rituals of terror — together with oracles and war — are 'all gamblers' means of power, vulnerable to the lurches of luck', and therefore reliance on them renders the foundations of states shaky indeed. And so — eventually — they prove to be. But let us return to Ur.

The nature of the sacred or divine kingship at Ur is evident in the 'public transcript' found in the Royal Graves there. This transcript makes it clear that, despite its advanced development and high culture, the Ur kingship was steeped in blood, sanctified by violence and capable of bottomless barbarity.[4] In company with the examples from China, the Americas,

Europe, Africa and the Pacific, the Ur Death Pits tell us that, as a tool of governance, public ritual cruelty is ancient, ubiquitous and revered. These examples nicely illustrate Charles Tilly's (1984, 12) mordant observation that, the more closely we study social history, 'the more coercion by officials resembles coercion by criminals, state violence resembles private violence, authorized expropriation resembles theft'. This is not something that we really want to hear but we are stuck with it and that, for Ernest Renan, is precisely the problem with historical (and archaeological) investigation. Inevitably such research

> digs up the acts of violence that occur at the beginning of any political unit, even those which have had the most beneficial consequences. Unity is always achieved brutally (Renan 1882, cited in Forrest 1991, 34, author's translation).

And, lest we imagine that contemporary nations are built and governed more humanely, let us recall that the former domain of Ur's kings was, until yesterday, ruled with unremitting cruelty by the regime of Saddam Hussein. The murderous legacy of this regime includes the judicial murders of tens of thousands of people beginning in 1979 and the genocidal massacres of Kurds in the 1980s followed by that of Marsh Arabs and other Iraqi Shiites in the 1990s (Galbraith 2004, 42). The Death Pits of ancient Ur pale into insignificance when compared to the more than 30,000 bodies uncovered in a single mass grave near Hilla in southern Iraq. Of course, the Ur sacrifices entered the Death Pits in what we may presume to have been public view, while the filling of the grave at Hilla was cloaked in secrecy. Ferocious cruelty is still a tool of state formation and state governance in the contemporary world; it is simply no longer part of what Randall Collins (1974, 436) calls 'the dominant ceremonial order'.

Mega-machine unmasked

Comparative and contextual issues aside, two questions particular to Ur remain. First, do the Royal Graves and Death Pits present us with an archaeological 'snapshot' of a strong, rich, and stable society, as is often presumed? Or, rather, do the ritualized sacrifices in them reflect a vulnerable leadership reduced to affirming its divine status by terrorizing and killing its citizens? If the latter interpretation is correct, Ur's rulers had seized on the gambler's means of power. But then, why should not they have chanced to use it? After all, as Steve Biko (1978) assures us, 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'.

Second, did the citizens of Ur — like so many who have come after them — yield before this weapon? Were they convinced or cowed and made docile by it? The hidden transcript of Ur's common people is not recorded. The scale of the robbery evident in the royal graves is suggestive, of course (Woolley 1934, 18–19; but cf. Pollock 1991, 183; 1999, 215; Sürenhagen 2002, 330), but we will never know whether or not the ordinary citizens of Ur had penetrated their state's fierce mystifications. No doubt, even if they had, standing in the shadow of the Royal Graves, they could only maintain a cautious silence. We, however, are not so obliged. We can recognize that the ghastly obsequies staged in the Royal Graves neither conveyed the whole story nor provided a neutral 'snapshot' of it. Rather, they were but expressions of a sad and repellent public transcript acted out in a theatre of public cruelty. At Ur, the full truth rested elsewhere. And elsewhere and elsewhere and again and again.

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Notes

1. Dietrich Sürenhagen (2002) raises the possibility that not all of the bodies found in the Royal Graves and Death Pits were buried together and that some of the material, most notably the skulls found without associated post-cranial skeletons, were secondary burials.
2. Gilgamesh, that most famous of kings in the Sumerian literary canon, was accompanied in his grave by 'his beloved spouses, his beloved children, his beloved first wife and (his) young concubine' as well as members of his palace staff (Jacobsen 1991, 185; but cf. Moorey 1977, 39).
3. The apparent willingness of so many scholars to 'forgive' or explain away the public cruelty found in prehistory, early history or among non-Western peoples is deeply troubling. Encountering such expressions, one is reminded of George Santayana's observation that, 'since barbarism has its pleasures it naturally has its apologists'. In fairness, however, we must recognize that this willing forgiveness stems from the recognition that prehistoric and barbarian horrors fade into insignificance when placed besides those perpetrated by modern, purportedly civilized, people at places like Verdun, Bergen-Belsen, Nanking, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Srebrenica or on the many islands of the gulag archipelago.
4. The phrase, a 'combination of advanced development, high culture and bottomless barbarity' is Martin Amis's (2002, 92) characterization of Nazi Germany.

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