

The Ram Caught in a Thicket...

Sir Leonard Wooley first excavated the Royal Tombs of Ur in the 1926-27 season. The two sculptures known as *Ram Caught in a Thicket* were found crushed in the "Great Death Pit" (PG 1237) along with many other extravagant objects and 73 human sacrifices. Woolley originally named the statuettes after the biblical story of Abraham finding a ram caught in a thicket to sacrifice instead of his son Issac (Gen 22:13). The imagery is now understood to be a male goat standing on his hind legs with his front legs resting on the branches of a small tree.



Fig 1: Statuette in-situ

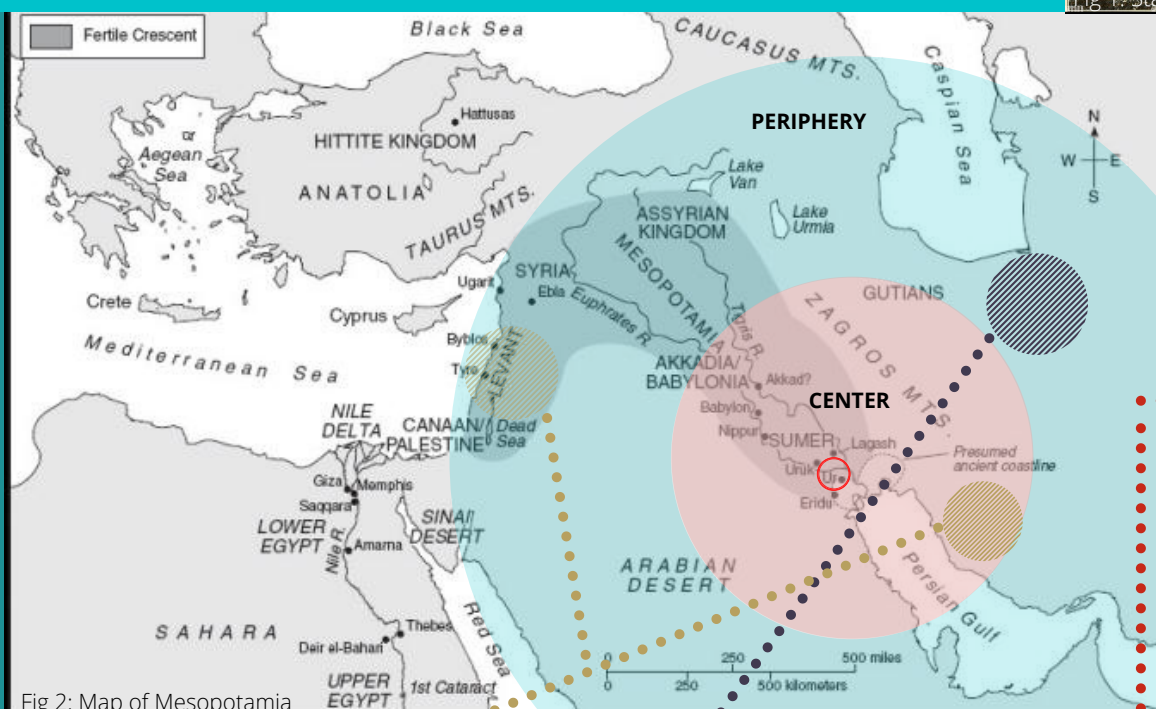
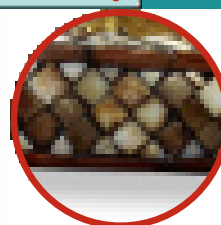
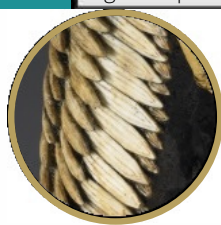


Fig 2: Map of Mesopotamia

The Indus Valley



The city of Ur would have imported shells from all over the Mediterranean, Near East and Arabia. Shell was used in Mesopotamian art as a contrast to the dark blue lapis lazuli and glittering precious metals.

The Lapis Lazuli used in the statue came from the Badakhshan mines in Afghanistan. These mines are believed to be the main sources of Lapis Lazuli for the entire Ancient Near East. In particular, Mesopotamia and the City of Ur were obsessed with Lapis Lazuli. In fact, Ur did not just use the precious Lapis Lazuli they imported themselves, but they also exported it to Egypt.

The red limestone used in the base of the statuette most likely came from the Indus Valley, far to the East of Ur and outside the "periphery" of Ur's trade influence. During the Dynastic III period in Mesopotamia, a complex urban culture appeared in the Indus Valley and became its own centre.

Depicting a goat on its hind legs is not unique to Mesopotamia. Many cultures worldwide depict goats in this way as it is typical behaviour, even today!



Fig 4: Minoan, 15th C. bce



Fig 5: Anatolian, 6th C. bce



Fig 6: Sassy, 2022



Fig 3: Ram Caught in a Thicket, Penn Meuseum

45.70cm

Mesopotamia and the city of Ur were part of a centre-periphery world system that drew mineral resources from the "periphery" (Afghanistan, Anatolia, the Near East and beyond) into the mineral poor centre. As a result, the Royal Tombs of Ur contain an extravagant amount of Lapis Lazuli. However, the Akkadian tombs constructed just a few centuries later are almost entirely devoid of the precious material. This is not because the Akkadians were not as interested in Lapis Lazuli as the Sumerians but because the political power had moved to the city of Agade on the North bank of the Euphrates. This would have impacted trade routes and diplomatic connections, sending ripples of change through the periphery regions.

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...A Goat of the Eastern Mediterranean

Fig 7: Cylinder Seal VA 3878, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.



"Art" as we understand it today did not exist in Bronze Age Mesopotamia, and it is that the Ram Caught in a Thicket was purely decorative. However, certain construction elements uncovered during restoration and the column protruding from the goat's back have led scholars to believe the statuette was the base of a small table. This theory is supported by seal stones depicting similar small serving tables from the Early Dynastic III period, such as the one shown here.

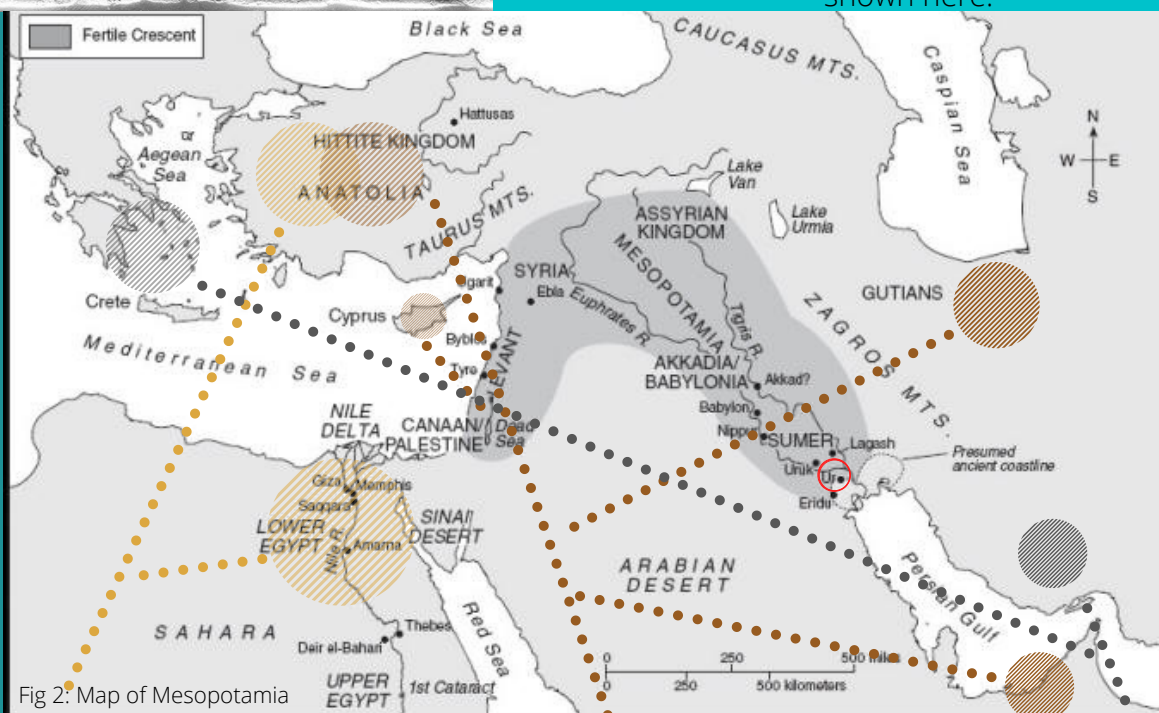
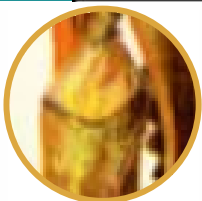


Fig 2: Map of Mesopotamia



Gold was an important status symbol throughout the Ancient World and was often used for religious objects. Evidence from texts give many different sources for gold, and analysis by the Penn Museum on the gold from the Royal Tombs suggest the source to be alluvial deposits in Turkey and Iran.

Copper was widely used in Mesopotamian "art", and there are many different routes for the copper trade. Archaeological evidence suggests a disruption in the copper trade to Northern Mesopotamia during the early Akkadian period, but this was not the case for the Southern cities, such as Ur.

Silver was used to decorate objects and as a form of "standard currency" around Mesopotamia and the surrounding societies. Because of its dual value as a commodity itself and as a unit of trade, it is not easy to trace the life of a particular piece of silver. For example, a silver ingot may travel from the Persian Gulf to Ur, where it is bartered for textiles from an Egyptian, who exchanges it with an Anatolian for copper who trades it for grain in Ur.

45.70cm

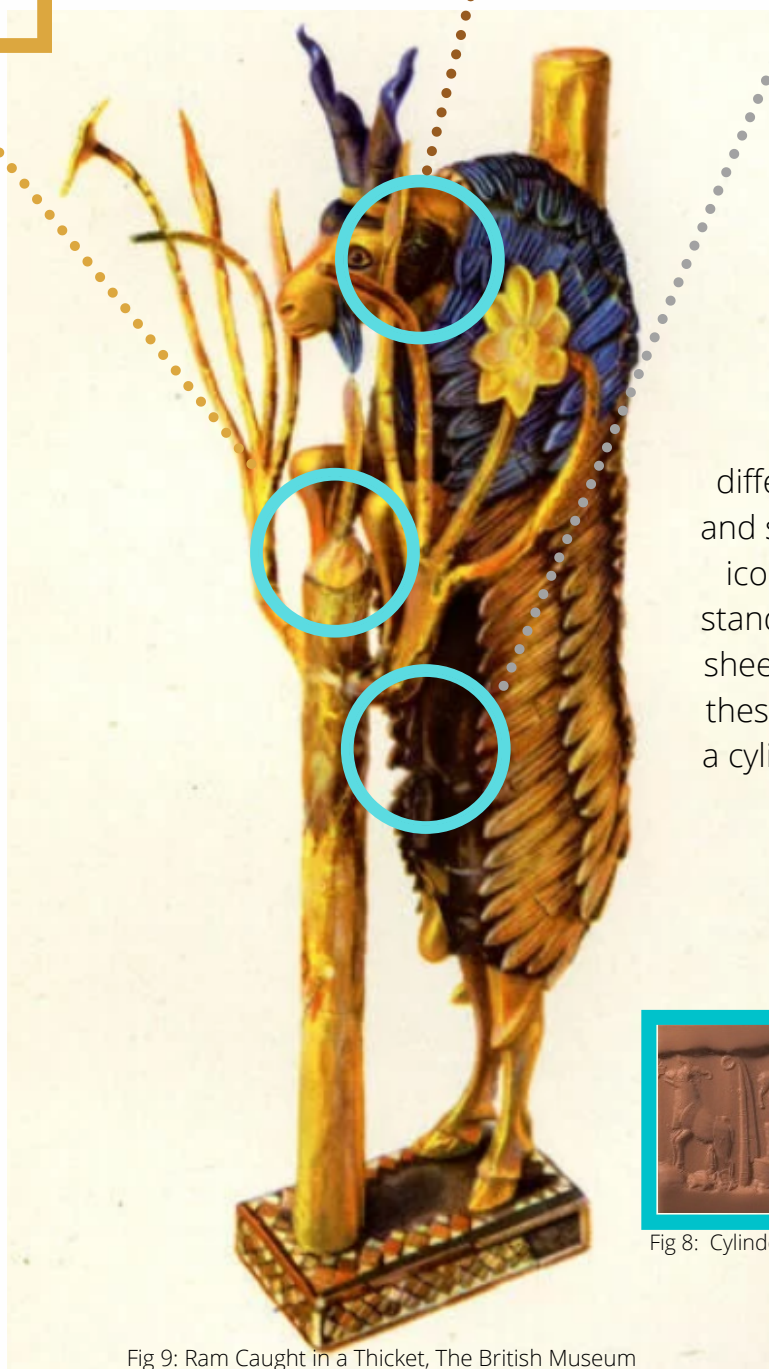


Fig 9: Ram Caught in a Thicket, The British Museum

One of the critical differences between goats and sheep in Mesopotamian iconography is that goats stand on their hind legs, and sheep are sat down. Both of these forms can be seen on a cylinder seal from Uruk ca.

3000 BCE

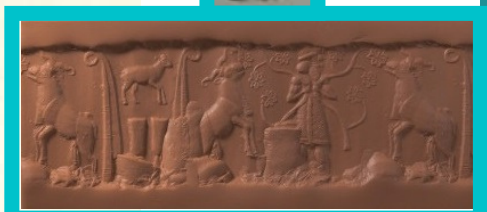


Fig 8: Cylinder Seal VA 10537, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.

Raw materials and crafted objects can have agency and work as "actants" within a network of trade, cultural hybridity and economy. As the metal is mined, processed and crafted into the final object, it interacts with more and more people, or "actors". As the material is transformed, its economic value and social meaning change, as does the way it interacts with the "actors". The miners and merchants dealt with the raw material, with all the potential it contained; the master artisans listened to the material as they worked it, interacting with the matter as it transformed from potential to reality; the people who lined the streets of Ur gaze upon the symbolically alive and innate statuette as it is taken into the cemetery, bridging the gulf between life and death with ritual.

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Image References

Figure 1: https://c8.alamy.com/comp/2Aj8893/annual-report-of-the-board-of-regents-of-the-smithsonian-institution-smithsonian-report-l929-woolley-plate-13-the-ram-caught-in-a-thicket-front-view-composite-figure-in-theround-of-gold-silver-and-shell-smithsonian-report-1929woolley-plate-14-2Aj8893.jpg

Figure 2: https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum213/Maps/M6_1.jpg

Figure 3: https://i0.wp.com/www.world-archaeology.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DK-Books-AL1153265.jpg?resize=369%2C515&ssl=1

Figure 4: https://www.antike-repliken.de/shop/product_info.php?language=en&info=p354_minoische-hochfuss-schale-mit-wildziegen--handbemalt--9-2-cm-hoch--11-7-cm-breit--150-g.html&=

Figure 5:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goats_near_the_tree_of_life,_tile,_Pazatli,_6th_century_BC,_MA_CA,_3089.jpg

Figure 6: Mercer, D. 2022.

Figure 7: https://www.themorgan.org/sites/default/files/images/blog/Fig_3_seal_VA_03878.jpg

Figure 8: www.scalararchives.com/web/dettaglio_immagine.asp?idImmagine=B186624&posizione=3&inCarrello=False&numImmagini=148&

Figure 9: https://www.prints-online.com/p/164/ram-caught-thicket-ur-23099076.jpg.webp