



THINGS ALSO DIE. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF FUNERARY FURNISHINGS IN MESOPOTAMIA AND SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The study presents some examples of funerary furnishings from Mesopotamia and Syria and aims at explaining the manufacture of funerary goods, the function they have in the rite of burial and the role they play once the tomb has been closed. Goods listed in written sources and funerary goods from archaeological excavations can be compared and epigraphic data seem to show that funerary goods became objects, purposely made on the occasion of death. Recent studies have argued that funerary offerings were first used and involved in the ritual of burial but once deposited, they cease to function. Indeed, objects do effectively die with the dead: however, this paper will argue that the representations they bear act as performative images that subsequently give both the dead and the objects themselves 'life'.

Funerary goods are important archaeological elements. They are useful on one hand for examining and analysing funerary rituals, and on the other for offering the possibility of identifying the buried person. This is particularly evident when burials of people, who can be considered among the elite, if not indeed royal figures, of a society are taken into consideration, given the presence of rich funerary furnishings. The choice and selection of precious materials and the fashioning of elaborate objects, as well as the place where tombs and burials are built, are distinctive aspects in archaeological and historical reasoning about the formation and structure of ancient societies, or at least of that part of society, which those burials and funerary goods seek to represent. Materials found in tombs have been differently studied and interpreted to answer a variety of questions. In particular, questions concerning the content of the tombs, both persons and objects, in a complementary combination of data. In addition to the study of human remains, analyses of funerary goods are often used to identify buried people. Their relative positions can reveal the nature and practical use of the goods and items buried in the tomb.

Who was buried in the tomb? Accordingly, objects found inside burials have been interpreted as personal belongings of the dead, and thus as representing the social

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status of the dead. In particular, wealthy furnishings are usually linked with high ranking people. For that reason, since their discovery, the sixteen richly furnished tombs of the cemetery of Ur have been labelled as royal, and only recently have studies reconsidered their royal nature and destination (Marchesi 2004). Weapons are usually considered clear indicators used in possible identifications of the owner of the tombs and it is often affirmed that the presence of weapons might imply a warrior-burial (Philip 1995). However, not all burials with weapons are burials of warriors; a weapon does not always have a military connotation, and therefore it does not necessarily point to the office and the position previously occupied by the deceased (Laneri 2004: 35).² Some recent archaeological results show that weapons may also be found in burials of women: in that case, the definition of warrior-burial does not seem appropriate to describe such an archaeological context. Thus, weapons cannot be used as an exclusive and univocal marker.³ Among the precious objects buried in the tomb, some pieces may have been intended as gifts for deities and heroes of the Netherworld. They do not personally belong to the dead, but they have been given to the dead to be donated and their physical presence in the burial is temporary, at least conceptually. The recurrent presence of weapons might be explained according to this attitude and practice. Weapons do not belong to the dead, they are not personal belongings and offerings for the dead, but they are gifts intended for the deities and the spirit of the Netherworld. In this way, they do not mark and distinguish the sex and role of the buried person – at least not always. Probably for that reason, weapons can be found at burials of both male and females. The text ‘The Death of Urnamma’ (ll. 84-131) enlists different types of weapons Urnamma gives as gifts to the deities once he arrived in the Netherworld: the king of Ur travels to the Netherworld in his chariot (the tombs of Kish and Ur in the Early Dynastic Period also document the presence of chariots inside the tomb) bringing with him the gifts and, consequently, some of the funerary goods (weapons among them) inside the tomb materially represent those gifts the deceased offers to the deities.

Proceeding to the matter of the identification that primarily concerns the life of the buried people, archaeologists dealing with funerary contexts register the position and function funerary goods in the deposition (Figs 1-2), with considerations on the ‘life’ of the objects. Reflections on the position of funerary goods in the tombs have been used to analyze the ritual performed at the time of the entombment, and those rituals that were periodically repeated after the burial. According to these interpretations, the presence as well as the place where items have been archaeologically detected and registered can help in reconstructing the original use of those objects within the

2 Rightly, E. Rehm (2003: 105-109) distinguishes between *Kriegergräber* (warrior-burials) and *Waffengräber* (burials of weapons): the presence of a weapon does not immediately refer to a warrior-burial. Weapons are buried since they probably had secondary meanings that we are not able to fully grasp and understand. A necessary reconsideration and discussion of our category is thus required.

3 In Syria, a bronze blade comes from a woman’s tomb at Terqa (Rouault and Bellucci 2008: 114) and five copper spearheads have been recovered from a woman’s tomb at Tell Qara Qūzāq (Montero Fenollós 1999-2000: 419 and fn. 64).

performance of rituals. In particular, considerations on both the shape and position of the objects inside the tomb can suggest how rituals were performed. We are here dealing with rituals that were performed at the moment of the entombment, on one hand, and on the occasion of scheduled ritual activities, on the other. In both cases, living people are involved and interact with the Netherworld. As a consequence, a group of objects can be differently analyzed as the result of ritual activities directly performed by or in the tomb. In the first instance, rituals are linked with the actions of burying the dead and they refer to ritual activities and acts that are performed once. The objects are signifiers of past rituals, which have already occurred: the detailed archaeological registration of the position and quantity of these objects inside the tomb is the fundamental premise on which to reconstruct the ritual space at the time of the opening of the tomb to bury the bodies. Objects can also ritually act after the accomplishment of the entombment: in this instance, objects are thought to continue their ritual action once the tomb has been closed. The position of the items inside the funerary room, in connection with the buried bodies, is thus functional to the outcome of rituals beyond time and independently, actually deliberately independently, from the space of the living people.

Space and time are thus involved: rituals by and inside the tomb can be distinguished as well as rituals during and after the burial. The former were intended as rituals going on at the moment of placing the body in the tomb, emphasizing the condition of change (from the living world to the Netherworld). The latter were intended as continuous ritual actions, cyclically performed by the living people during the year, after the closing of the tomb to remember their relatives, communicate with them and keep unchanged and unchangeable the passage from the living world to the Netherworld. Consequently, another question follows the one concerning the position and function of funerary goods in the tomb. Precisely after the considerations about how funerary goods are placed in the tomb, one should consider when and which items in the tomb are supposed to act and be used. In the previous reflections, the attention focused on the items that have been thought (according to their archaeological 'original' placement) to be the result of the rituals that went on at the moment of the entombment. In particular the study by I. Winter (1999) debated this possibility taking into consideration two objects: the so-called lamps, according to Woolley's definition, and libation jugs in the tombs of the Royal Cemetery of Ur (Woolley 1934: pls. 171a, 182).

However, as far as the Royal Cemetery of Ur is concerned, there are also objects that are displayed in the tomb aiming at representing what A. Cohen defines as the *tableaux morts* (2005: 150). Here the matter does not only concern the moment of the entombment itself, but the time enfolding after the closing of the tomb. Both bodies and items are in fact displayed as a representation of the act of feasting: in a broader meaning, we can thus speak of a dramatic representation.⁴ People and objects are properly displayed aiming at a mimetic representation. Even if dead, the buried

4 See the considerations by Cohen (2005: 80-93) and his Appendix D giving the typologies of vessels used in a banquet context.

people are supposed to act and, therefore, objects are involved in that action. Such a dramatic representation concerns the time and world of the dead: living people neither see the representation nor do they partake in it.⁵ However, living people created such display and representation at the time of the burial and we can infer that some of the rituals performed at the moment of the entombment had the function of organising the disposition of bodies and objects in the tomb, introducing and preparing for what would have occurred thereafter. Rituals at the moment of the entombment act in the present and in preparation for the future that will be ritually performed in a time and place that properly belong to the dead.

Indeed, epigraphic evidence shows that a sort of relationship between the world of the living and the dead existed, and persisted after the moment of the entombment.⁶ I principally refer to the epigraphic data from Ebla. The texts of Ebla list goods prepared for this purpose, collected and, I would suggest, fashioned on the occasion of the deaths of both a member of the royal family and of other important people (kings and queens) of allied cities. I principally refer to the texts collected by Archi (2002: 165-166, 174-178) and most recently by Biga (2007-2008). When dealing with funerary gifts, the texts of Ebla record the delivery of raw materials (metals and textiles), the preparation and the fashioning of objects (metal items and clothes) and the shipment, specifying they are made on occasion of the death of a member of the Eblaite royal family or one of the important member of an allied kingdom of Ebla and sent to the ÉXPAP. The formula used is coded and sometimes records the name of the Eblaite messengers that travelled to bring the gifts to the deceased people (Biga 2007-2008: 251).⁷ Indeed, the texts of Ebla are a rich and important source of objects that can be profitably compared with the archaeological findings from Early Bronze Age tombs of Syria. Consider the rich findings from the Early Bronze Age tombs of Tell Umm el-Marra (Schwartz *et al.* 2003; Schwartz 2007). In particular, they enlist textiles, some of them richly worked and embellished, gold and silver objects (jewels and different kinds of vessels). It is interesting to notice that many objects recorded for the funerary ceremonies are also enlisted in other kinds of texts that do not deal with funerals and death of people. It seems that there were objects specifically used on funerary occasions and objects that were also used in daily life. Ladies and queens for example, received the same type of gifts on death as they had on the day of marriage; of the same type, but not the same object (Archi 2002: 178). Objects designated for

5 At least not always. But living people are supposed to take part in the banquet of the dead at the time of the burying ritual and each time they ritually perform a funerary banquet (*kispum*) on fixed and recurrent occasions either by the tomb or even inside the tomb. The Royal Hypogeum, recently excavated at Qatna, shows that the main chamber (Chamber 1) was provided with fixed stone banks and tables that were probably used on the occasion of the *kispum* performed by the living people inside the hypogeum itself, by and 'with' the dead (al-Maqdissi *et al.* 2003).

6 On the social function of burials and funerary monuments in the ancient landscape, see the considerations by Peltenburg (1999); Porter (2002) and Schwartz (2007) for 3rd millennium Syria, and Katz (2007) and Pollock (2007) for the Mesopotamian context.

7 On the meaning of the debated term ÉXPAP as 'tomb, burial', see most recently Biga (2007-2008).

the funerary ceremony were thus new objects, purposely fashioned for the occasion.⁸ Often, texts specify the total amount of gold and silver used in making the objects (Archi 2002: 179). Therefore, texts register a double datum: the usage of metals (gold and silver) and the purpose of that usage; the fashioning of funerary objects.

Among the pieces listed in the texts of Ebla, two kinds of vessels and particular types of cloths that are associated with funerary offerings can be singled out. Eblaite words *giš-šu₄* and *nig-bànda* identify the vessels: the former is probably a bowl; the latter a small goblet. They are often associated together; they can be made of precious materials (gold or silver) and they are referred to in the texts as vessels used for drinking. They occur in a text (ARET II 4 [17])⁹ giving the list of funerary gifts prepared on the occasion of the death of Paba, queen of Mari (Pasquali 2005b: 35). Typologies of metal vessels, such as silver bowls and goblets, can be found in the rich furnishing of Tomb 4, excavated at Umm el-Marra in Syria and dated to the 3rd millennium BC (Schwartz 2007: 51, fig. 3.9).

As far as textiles are concerned, two kinds are referred to in a text giving the list of funerary gifts for the sister of the queen of Ebla, *TÚG-NI.NI* and *GID^{úg}* (Archi 2002: 165-166, 182, Sallaberger 2009: 267-269). In particular, one material is noted as being coloured in red, *TÚG-NI.NI Ú.HÁB* (= red). In the royal tombs of Qatna, dated to the Late Bronze Age, a fragment of a red fabric is recorded (Reifarth and Baccelli 2009: 218),¹⁰ while both kinds are associated with another textile that is probably a type of stole. The stole *du-ru₁₂-ru₁₂* (Pasquali 1997: 224-229; 2005a 172-174), was a very important ornament of the most notable ladies of the court of Ebla. They received this garment on both their marriage and their death. This is an example of how the same kind of object was given on both occasions. It is particularly interesting that it is in fact given on the two moments of change in the life of a courtly lady, both marking the passage to a new condition.

The same texts listing the funerary gifts on the occasion of the death of an important male or female member usually conclude the list with the gifts designated for the already dead kings of Ebla and for other long-deceased members of the royal family. The text TM.75.G.1923+ for example, registers the death of the vizier Ibrium and the list of gifts for his burial, including a chariot and the harness of an equid *IGI.NITA*. At the end, the text also enlists the gifts for other deceased members of Ibrium's family and the royal family (Biga 2010: 46). The same can be seen in the texts dealing with the death of Dusigu, the queen-mother, mother of Išar-damu, the last king of Ebla (Biga 2010: 54). This seems to be a conventional custom of the court of Ebla and presumably also of other Syrian urban centres. The outcome and fashioning of

8 On the occasion of the death of the vizier Ibrium, it is clear that objects for the burial of Ibrium are distinguished from the objects given as purification gifts to the members of his family (his two wives) and to members of the royal family (Biga 2010: 46-47).

9 ARET = *Archivi Reali di Ebla. Testi*, Roma.

10 On the use of red-coloured garments in funerary contexts and as gift for the statue of the god ⁴*Ra-sa-ab* in the texts of Ebla, see the considerations by Pasquali (2005a: 170-171), with interesting references to the same use of red garments in ancient Greece.

the gifts for a recently deceased member of the royal family was also the occasion for remembering those who had died in the past by preparing and fashioning additional gifts. Ebla texts thus show that death was an important moment linking the present with the past, the newly departed with the ancestors. The Eblaite royal family was conceived as a unit. In particular, the two previous kings (Igrish-Khalab and Irkab-Damu) are usually recorded as recipients of garments and in one text (TM.75.G.2334), recording the death of the princess Tarib-Damu, six women receive clothes.

This peculiarity shows that death momentarily fractured life in the present. Consequently, it was necessary to recall the memory of the past kings and royal members who had already died, to fill the spatial and temporal gap caused by a death. In that way, the memory of the dead ancestors was still alive. The clothes given to the illustrious ancestors were probably used to dress their statues that were exposed during the funeral. The Eblaite royal ritual (ARET XI) describe the visit of the king and queen of Ebla to the mausoleum, literally the 'house of the dead', that was located in the city of Nenash, nearby (Matthiae 2008: 151-153).¹¹ It is thus possible that the effigies of the dead ancestors stood there, at the mausoleum, and the gifts of new clothes were thus used to change and renew the garments of the statues (Archi 2002: 183-184). This occurred periodically, whenever a member of the royal family died and when the royal couple visited the mausoleum on occasions defined by the calendar.

With regard to the function of the items in the tomb, the objects bearing representations of images and figurative scenes require separate considerations. Indeed some of the vessels listed in the texts of Ebla are sometimes denoted by the presence of applied images in the shape of animals such as stags or falcons. The presence of animal figures probably has secondary implications and meanings related to the Netherworld and religion. Such references and symbols are not always clear to us, but surely they can not merely be explained as decorations from an iconographic point of view (see Pasquali 2005b: 39-37). Taking into account the findings of the Royal Cemetery of Ur, I refer specifically to objects such as the Standard of Ur, the musical instruments bearing inlays of figurative scenes, and cylinder seals. Continuing our earlier reasoning regarding the fashioning of new objects, purposely as part of funerary furnishings and resembling those ones used in life, it can thus be suggested that the Standard of Ur, the lyres and cylinder seals were also suitably fashioned to be part of the funerary goods of the tombs of the cemetery of Ur. They are not the personal belongings of the deceased when he was alive: they now belong to him since they are part of the furnishings of his burial. Indeed, it must be stressed that the operation of preparing and making new clothes is much easier than the fashioning of objects, especially complex and articulated pieces such as the Standard of Ur, and for that reason it is much more reasonable and plausible to think of a last moment manufacture. In the case of more complex and articulated artefacts, such as the Standard of Ur, a quick production, on the occasion of a death, is nearly impossible. One can thus conclude

11 The text has been edited by Fronzaroli (1993).

that pieces like the Standard of Ur, or sophisticated cylinder seals, already existed and were then subsequently put in the tomb as part of the funerary goods. However, it can not totally be excluded that those items were put in the tombs after the first act of burying the dead: they were purposely fashioned as part of funerary furnishings and added as gifts and offerings when tombs were reopened on special occasions such as ritual banquets. After this addition, the new objects lie beside both the bodies of the dead and the already present items which had been placed in a ritual act at the moment of entombment.

Coming back to the previous questions, for these types of objects one might also question the function these items have in the tombs, and when they are used. As far as the musical instruments are concerned, we can suggest that they were played during the burial ritual and then placed inside the tomb. In which case, musical instruments were part of the primary act of burial together with the body and the other objects related to the ritual of entombment. However, I think that items such as the Standard of Ur, cylinder seals and musical instruments were also supposed to function and be used once the tomb was closed. They belong to the dead and are supposed to serve a purpose in the Netherworld. In particular, since they bear images and representations, they are purposely marked by agency. They serve the dead and are both timeless and outside time. The preparation itself is an operation strongly marked by agency. Objects pass from a passive agency, ascribed and affected by the producer by means of ritual acts and by the fact they are purposely manufactured on the occasion of a death, to an active agency; objects act by themselves independently from an agent. Indeed, their final position in the tomb might be considered the origin of their agentive properties (see Winter 2007).

The images used refer to the dead when they were alive. The Standard of Ur for example, depicts and fosters the military ability and quality of the person buried in the tomb (Woolley 1934: pl. 92). The images also refer to the dead in their current condition of death. So if one accepts the idea that the bodies in the tombs of the Royal Cemetery of Ur are displayed as dramatic representations of people feasting (Cohen 2005: 150), the banquet scenes carved on the seals actually refer to a situation that is going on inside the tomb and also alludes to a situation occurred during the life of the deceased. Banquet is thus a strongly significant figurative theme, whose meaning does not depend on the direct and physical vision of the artefacts bearing the image of feasting (Marchetti 2010: 161). The funerary context actually shows an opposite condition. Banquets on the cylinder seals from the Royal Cemetery of Ur are not supposed to be seen except by the 'inhabitants' of the tomb. If the buried person is represented banqueting on the seals, the link with the occupants of the tomb is even more pronounced. An example is the cylinder seal U.10939 from tomb PG.800 belonging to the queen Puabi (Woolley 1934: 88, pl. 193.16). Also one side of the Standard of Ur shows a banquet scene (Woolley 1934: 91). This is usually interpreted as the feasting occurring after the victory of the battle represented on the Standard's other side. Indeed, it might be suggested that the banquet scene can also represent the

moment that precedes the battle, when the king and his allies organise in a military coalition against a common enemy (see Selz 2002: 168-169). At the same time, as for the seals, the banquet on the Standard of Ur can refer to the situation occurring inside the tomb with the arrangement of the bodies in a kind of feast. The Standard of Ur thus involves two moments of the buried person. The first refers to his life, remembering his deeds of the past; the second refers to his being dead in the present and future.

The bodies inside the tomb are displayed as if they are banqueting, and seals represent people banqueting. Banquet itself is a strongly affective theme, having a double agency effect. An agency caused and ascribed by the artificial disposition of the bodies, on one hand, and an agency marked by the cultural value of the image of feasting carved on the seals, on the other. The first derives from an external ritual act deliberately performed during the entombment, whereas the second is properly activated by the images. The disposition of the bodies and the image of feasting on the artefacts inside the tomb share the same context and have a recurrent and deliberate correspondence. The banquet goes on while music is played, as depicted on the seals (Fig. 3); harps are part of the funerary goods (Woolley 1934: 114); lyres themselves are also marked by agency, and agency is activated by the allegorical representations of animals (spirits of the Netherworld) that play the instruments, directly carved on the instrument itself, as a 'self-portrait of the object' (Fig. 4).¹²

People buried in the tomb were thus arranged as if feasting, and provided with the necessary objects to perform the actions of banqueting and playing music. Those items replicate the ones used in the real life, but they belong to the house of the dead and are used in a kind of *kispum* among the dead. Borrowing the definition of A. Testart (2004), the dramatic representation was displayed and built by *les morts et les objets d'accompagnement*. In fact, differently from what J. Cheng (2007: 444) recently suggested, I do not believe that 'self-portraits of the object' were made for future viewers. Those represented on the objects buried in the tombs were made for the dead; they died together with the dead. Archaeology brought them back to life by removing them from where they had been placed. The ritual offerings of objects to dead ancestors, as shown by the gifts enlisted in the texts of Ebla, have the function of keeping the memory of the dead present and visible among the living. Statues were ritually renewed and dressed: the artificial images of the deceased give them life, they make present an absence. At the same time, the ritual of *kispum* performed by the living people and the offerings made are thus thought to interact with the virtual banquet going on inside the tomb (Pollock 2003).

To conclude these short reflections on the study of funerary artefacts through the questions previously analysed, a last question concerning the function of funerary goods can be posed. What do pictures and objects in the tombs want? The answer, in my opinion, is: nothing (Mitchell 2005: 50). However, ancient people as well as ourselves want something from them. We want to believe they act and perform that

12 On banqueting scenes in Early Dynastic art, see also Selz (2004: 191). On 'self-portraits of objects' in Mesopotamian art, see Cheng (2007).

dramatic display in the Netherworld that has repercussions on the social drama of existence in a continuous and unavoidable exchange on the border of two realms, namely life and death.

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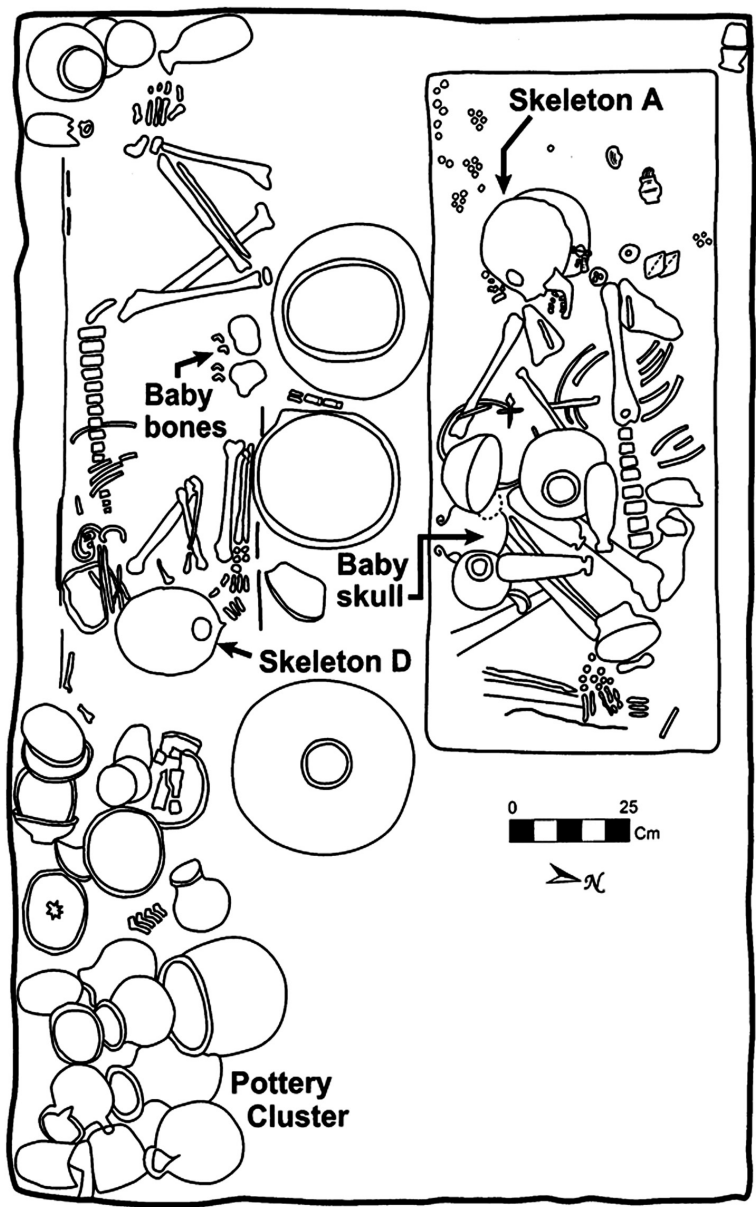


Fig. 1: Ground-plan of Tomb 1 (top level) from Umm el-Marra.
(After Schwartz 2003: fig. 6)

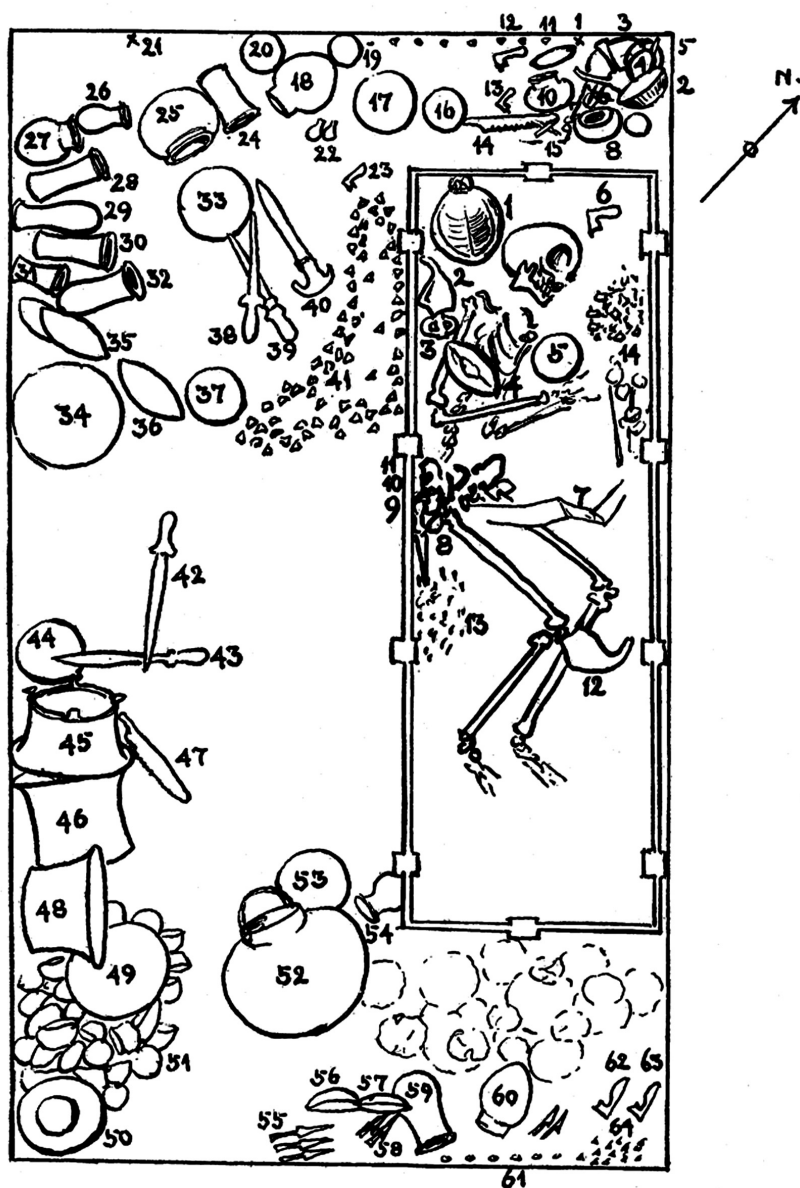


Fig. 2: Ground-plan of tomb PG. 755 of the Royal Cemetery of Ur.
(After Woolley 1934: fig. 35)

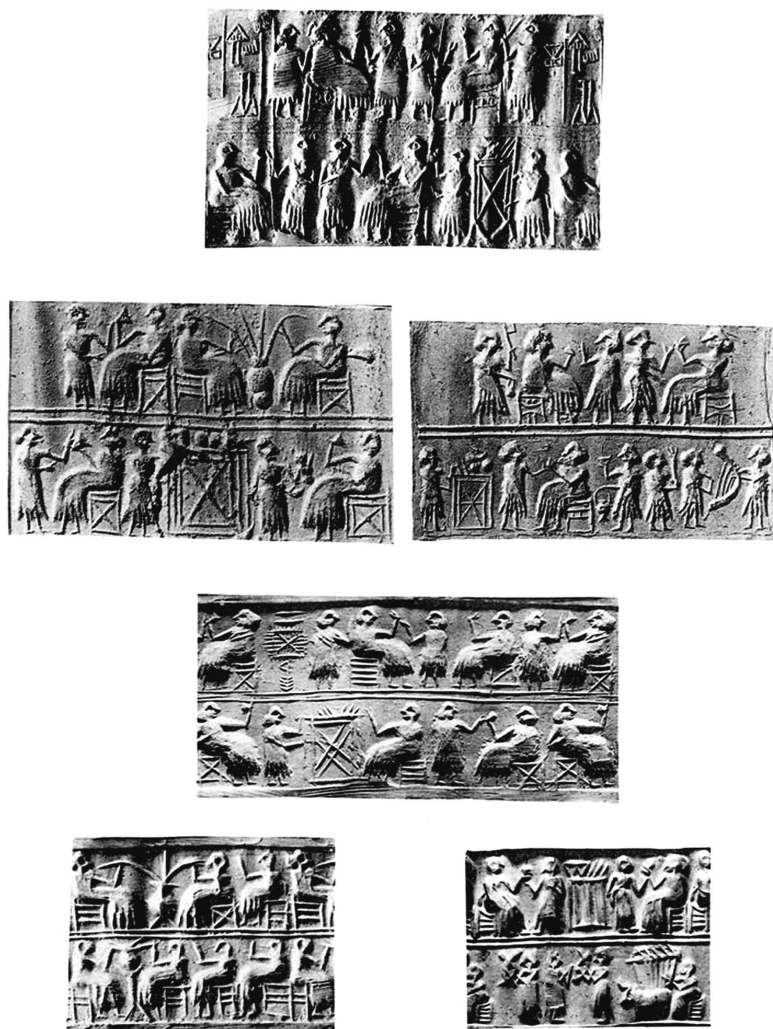


Fig. 3: Cylinder seals with banquet scene from the Royal Cemetery of Ur.
(After Woolley 1934: pl. 193:16-21)



Fig. 4: Inlay decoration of the lyre from PG. 789
of the Royal Cemetery of Ur.
(After Woolley 1934: pl. 105)