

RICHES OF UR

Leonard Woolley's excavation of Ur yielded an archaeologist's dream discovery: a series of intact tombs filled with a trove of golden treasures and untouched artifacts from one of Mesopotamia's most important ancient cities.

The 1920s marked a golden age in high-profile archaeological discoveries. Beginning with Howard Carter's landmark 1922 discovery of the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamun, the decade would end with another stunning find: Leonard Woolley's discovery of intact Mesopotamian royal tombs dating back more than 4,000 years in the ancient city of Ur, located 140 miles southeast of Babylon in modern-day Iraq. The tombs were the work of the ancient culture of Sumer that had flourished at the dawn of civilization.

The discovery of the tombs dominated headlines on both sides of the Atlantic, not only for the quantity and craftsmanship of the objects found but also for the light they shed on the grisly nature of Sumerian burial practices. The finds included exquisitely crafted jewelry and musical instruments, as well as large numbers of bodies: servants and soldiers entombed alongside their dead sovereigns.



GRAVE MUSIC

Dating from 2600–2300 B.C., this decorative bull's head of gold and lapis lazuli adorned a lyre discovered in the tomb of Queen Puabi in Ur.

PENN MUSEUM



BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

LEONARD WOOLLEY CAREFULLY REMOVES THE EARTH FROM A VOTIVE FIGURINE DISCOVERED DURING THE EXCAVATIONS AT UR.

A DOZEN YEARS OF PATIENCE

British archaeologist Leonard Woolley was charged with excavating the Sumerian city of Ur (in modern-day Iraq) from 1922 to 1934. The 12 years spent meticulously digging down through the strata were rewarded by the discovery of a royal necropolis from the third millennium B.C.



HAMMERED GOLD HELMET OF KING MESKALAMDUG
SCALA, FLORENCE

SCEPTER OF GOLD AND LAPIS LAZULI
ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

1922–23

Leonard Woolley arrives in Ur to begin excavations, focusing on the area around the ziggurat. The remains of streets and buildings are uncovered.

1925

As well as excavating the ziggurat, Woolley unearths the temple of the moon god Nanna and other structures from the reigns of Shulgi and Ur-Nammu.

Epic Exploration

Scholarly and public fascination with the ancient culture of Mesopotamia had been steadily growing since the latter part of the 19th century. It was in December 1872 that an Assyriologist, George Smith, presented a paper to a packed session of the Society of Biblical Archaeology, attended by the British prime minister, William Gladstone. What he unveiled in his lecture caused an international sensation.

Smith had been deciphering a series of clay tablets from the Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, a text today known as the Epic of Gilgamesh, regarded as the world's oldest known literary work. In this saga, he came

upon an account of a flood that was strikingly similar to that of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is thought to have been written around 2100 B.C., predating the Hebrew Scriptures. Newspapers were quick to take up the story of Smith's work, fueling public interest in the Mesopotamian era. Museums and universities in France, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States launched archaeological expeditions to seek the vestiges of the civilizations of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, the regions where the first cities in history developed. Among the sites picked for detailed exploration was Tell al Muqayyar—better known today as Ur.

Ur had already been identified some years earlier, thanks to basic excavations carried out in 1853 by the British diplomat J. E. Taylor. Nearly another 70 years passed before a major project was launched to more fully excavate the ancient city. The Penn Museum and the British Museum jointly organized an expedition and chose veteran Leonard Woolley to supervise the dig.

After having led a dig in Turkey that included the future Lawrence of Arabia, Woolley worked as a British spy in World War I.



▲ **CHOKER** OF GOLD, LAPIS LAZULI, AND CARNELIAN FOUND IN THE TOMB OF QUEEN PUABI
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

◀ **NECKLACE** OF CARNELIAN AND LAPIS LAZULI WITH GOLD PENDANTS
DEA/SCALA, FLORENCE

▶ **RAM** FASHIONED FROM GOLD AND LAPIS LAZULI
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

▲ **FEMALE HEAD** FOUND IN THE HOUSE OF THE PRIESTS OF NANNA
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

1926

Beyond the temple area the team discovers a huge cemetery with more than 600 tombs. One of these is believed to belong to King Meskalamdug.

1927

Woolley's team discovers 16 royal tombs. Among them is the tomb of Queen Puabi, and below that, the tomb of her husband, an unidentified king of Ur.

1928

Leonard Woolley locates another tomb, dubbed the Great Death Pit. It contains the remains of 74 people, sacrificed to be buried next to their monarchs.

1934

The University of Pennsylvania is forced to bring the excavation to an end, partly as a result of the Great Depression. Woolley publishes a study of the site.

Having trained at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford as assistant to Arthur Evans—who had made his name excavating the Cretan city of Knossos—one of Woolley's first major digs was in 1912 at the ancient Hittite site of Carchemish, located in Turkey along the Syrian border. There, he was assisted by Thomas Edward Lawrence—later known as Lawrence of Arabia—until the outbreak of World War I stalled their work.

During hostilities, Woolley was employed by British intelligence in the Middle East when Turkish forces captured and held him prisoner for two years. After the war, he directed a dig in Egypt at Tell el Armana, site of the pharaoh Akhenaten's capital city. It was there, in 1922, that he received the commission to direct the excavation at Ur.

A Golden Mystery

For the first four seasons at Ur, Woolley concentrated on the area around the ziggurat, or temple tower. This structure was a stepped pyramid, erected during the third dynasty of

WORSHIPPING THE MOON

This votive plaque (below) shows acolytes paying homage to Nanna, the Mesopotamian god of the moon. Woolley's team discovered this tablet in the giparu, the building in Ur where Nanna's priests lived.

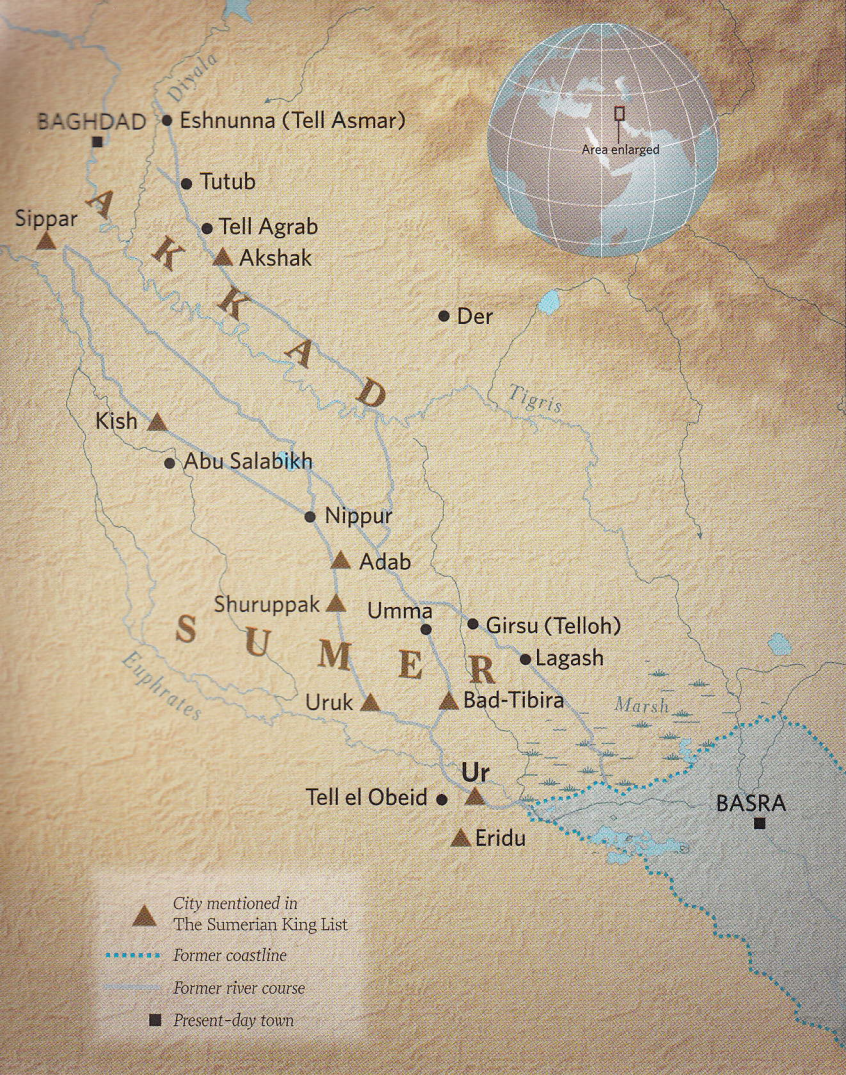
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE



Ur, around 2000 B.C. Archaeologists have linked this ziggurat to the ruler Ur-Nammu, who built many ziggurats at other Mesopotamian sites.

As the team excavated around the temple, small pieces of gold were surfacing. Even though Woolley realized that tombs full of more riches must be located nearby, he refused to let the expedition descend into a mere treasure hunt. In line with good archaeological practice, he continued systematically studying the different strata at the site in order to establish a definitive time line.

Woolley had another reason to be circumspect: Since the dig had started, artifacts, especially golden ones, were going missing, presumably stolen by members of the team. Before any attempt to unearth the tombs could be made, Woolley needed to be sure their contents would be safe, both from theft and inexperience. Woolley knew his team was still too green to be trusted with the delicate artifacts they might find in these undisturbed sites. Finally,



HIDDEN IDENTITIES

THE MYSTERY MONARCHS OF UR

Leonard Woolley excavated 16 tombs that he identified as royal because of the lavish grave goods found there as well as evidence of mass human sacrifice. The exact nature of the relationship between the main occupant of the chambers and their entourage is, however, not entirely clear.

In most cases, the “royal” figures have not been identified. In fact, only two royal bodies can be identified with any certainty. One is Queen Puabi in tomb PG800, who was identified by the seal found near her body. The excavations in the necropolis did bring to light various inscriptions, although they have not been matched to specific tombs.

These writings identify Ur-Pabilsag who reigned around the period 2600–2450 B.C., Meskalamdug, his son Mesanepadda, and his sons A’anepada Puabi in tomb PG800, and Meski’ag-Nanna, who ruled sometime between the years 2450 and 2300 B.C. During this period the city-state model was consolidated in Sumer. Ur, its capital, imposed its dominance over the region.

THE RISE OF CITY-STATES

In the third millennium B.C. clusters of city-states sprung up in the river valleys of Mesopotamia. Sumer, of which Ur was the capital, later fell under the sway of neighboring Akkad.

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in 1926, Woolley believed he and his staff were ready. The excavation could begin.

Stranger Than Fiction

By the time the hunt for the tombs began, Woolley had been joined by the young archaeologist Max Mallowan, whose future wife—the best-selling author Agatha Christie—met him on the dig in Ur. Christie often traveled to the Middle East to visit Mallowan, whom she would marry in 1930. In the course of these visits, she got to know Woolley. Her exposure to archaeology influenced her; several of her whodunits take place on and around archaeology sites—most notably her 1936 thriller, *Murder in Mesopotamia*.

During the digging season of 1926–27, Woolley and Mallowan had uncovered hundreds of tombs from the city’s necropolis. At first only human remains and a few grave goods were unearthed, certainly not the riches they had been anticipating. But then, toward the end of the season, they made a spectacular find. Hidden among some bronze weapons was a magnificent gold dagger with a lapis lazuli handle. Next to it, a gold sack contained a set of musical instruments also made of gold. Never before had objects of such value and artistic quality been found at a Sumerian site.

Cuneiform inscriptions found on some artifacts established that they had unearthed the tomb of one Meskalamdug, who was certainly a rich noble, some believe even a king. The discovery caused a frenzy among the workers, who seemed to dig up valuable new artifacts everywhere they excavated. To Woolley’s alarm, rumors started to circulate of fabulous hidden riches.

In his reports, Woolley recounts how he went immediately to see the region’s tribal chief,

The royal tombs were all given names beginning with the letters “PG,” which stands for “private grave.”

REMAINS OF THE CAPITAL

The main religious buildings and the royal necropolis of the Sumerian capital, Ur, excavated by Leonard Woolley, are shown in this aerial photograph.



GEORGE GERSTER/PANOS PICTURES

Munshid ibn Hubaiyib, to ask for his word that none of the workers would touch the site in Woolley's absence. The pact seems to have held fast during that dig. In the three seasons that followed, not one of the sites was entered without authorization from Woolley, and none of the magnificent finds were taken.

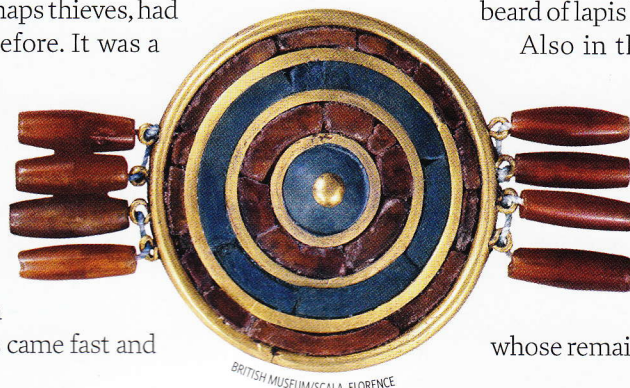
On finding an underground chamber made of stone, expectations ran high. Woolley suspected it could be the tomb of a royal figure. As they continued to excavate, the team uncovered a tunnel dating to a later time. The tunnel ran almost from surface level down to the ceiling. It was a sign that someone, perhaps thieves, had entered the tomb centuries before. It was a major disappointment to the team, which had hoped to find the grave unmolested.

The Queen's Grave

Work continued, and Woolley's efforts would be rewarded with the discovery of PG800, a pristine burial. The discoveries came fast and

A CROWN FOR THE DEAD

Among the many human remains in the royal cemetery, Woolley uncovered the bones of a boy at the bottom of a funerary shaft. This headpiece (below), made of gold, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, was still resting on the child's forehead.



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furious. Digging in the so-called Death Pit area of the tomb, the archaeologists discovered five bodies, adorned with grave goods, lying together on rush matting. A few yards away, they found ten more bodies. These were women wearing ornaments of gold and precious stones.

These carefully arranged cadavers also held musical instruments. Beside them were the remains of a musician who held a stunning lyre. The sound box of the instrument was incrustated with carnelian, lapis lazuli, and mother-of-pearl. On its wooden frontpiece was mounted the stunning golden head of a bull with eyes and beard of lapis lazuli.

Also in the tomb were the remains of a wooden carriage decorated with gold, precious stones, and mother-of-pearl, and sculpted heads of lions and bulls. Beside it were the skeletons of two men who had presumably accompanied the vehicle and the two oxen, whose remains lay on the floor nearby.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Built around 2000 B.C., when Ur was the capital of a Mesopotamian empire, the ziggurat housed a shrine to the moon god Nanna on its summit. A three-tier mass of mud bricks, the structure has been restored several times during its long history.

STEVE McCURRY





TENSIONS ON THE DIG

A WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD

Woolley was assisted at Ur by Katharine Keeling, who later became his wife. Her presence at the site was regarded as unseemly by Woolley's superiors. In 1926 the director of the Penn Museum, C. B. Gordon, wrote to Woolley:

"Tourists and others returning from Iraq and Palestine make [the expedition at Ur] an important part of their recollections . . . Perhaps the presence of a lone woman with four men in camp makes a more interesting figure for some of them than the outline of ziggurats. In any case I should be a little apprehensive that a woman in that situation might incur the risk of becoming the subject of inconsiderate remarks . . . Perhaps you will wish to give the matter your best consideration with a view to removing that risk." Despite this shot across the bow, Woolley ensured that Keeling continued working at Ur. In the course of the project, she fulfilled an essential role as an archaeologist and restorer.

PENN MUSEUM

FAITHFUL TO THE END

Woolley and his team (above) pose in one of the last of the Ur tombs, excavated during the 1933–34 season. In just two months the workers removed some 140,000 square feet of earth and dug down nearly 60 feet.

As the dig progressed, Woolley came upon yet more treasures in the tomb: weapons, tools, numerous vessels of bronze, silver, gold, lapis lazuli, and alabaster—even a gaming table. In the center of the space lay an enormous wooden chest, several yards long, which had probably been used to store garments and other offerings that had long since rotted away.

Inside the burial chamber itself lay the body of a woman on top of a funeral bier. She was covered with amulets and jewelry made of gold and precious stones. Her elaborate headdress was made of 20 gold leaves, lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, as well as a large golden comb. Near the body lay a cylinder seal that bore an

inscription from which the archaeologists were able to identify the woman: Queen Puabi (in his notes, Woolley referred to her as Shubad because of a mistranslation). The seal made no mention of her husband, which led some to believe she could have been a queen in her own right. Alongside Puabi lay the bodies of two of her servants. In addition to her treasures and servants, Puabi was interred with her makeup, including a silver box that contained kohl, a black pigment used as eyeliner.

When the archaeologists pulled back the heavy wooden chest inside the tomb, they found a large hole. Amid huge anticipation they climbed through and dropped down into a large chamber below. On excavation, the patterns of burial and ritual in this tomb appeared to be similar to that of the queen's above.

On the ramp leading into the chamber, they passed the bodies of six soldiers, laid out in two rows. Inside the chamber itself were two carriages, each pulled by three oxen, and beside them the bodies of the carriage drivers. At the back of the chamber the bodies of nine women

Archaeologists believe spears and axes, not daggers, were Sumerian soldiers' primary weapons.

GOLD DAGGER WITH LAPIS LAZULI HANDLE AND SHEATH, FOUND IN UR

SCALA, FLORENCE





BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

lay, all richly ornamented, with their heads resting against the wall. In a gallery running parallel to the burial chamber were more women, along with numerous armed soldiers arranged in rows.

Woolley deduced that PG800 and the tomb below it, which he called PG-789, housed the bodies of Queen Puabi and her husband, respectively. The man must have died first and been buried in the lower chamber. Then, when his consort Puabi died, it seems that the workers who constructed her tomb robbed the one below, concealing the hole they had made with the heavy chest. The quantity of treasure uncovered in these tombs was so great that when Woolley informed his colleagues of the finds by telegram, he did so in Latin, hoping that his erudite encryption would keep the secret safe.

Gruesome Rituals

The archaeologists' discoveries revealed much about royal Sumerian burial rituals. There could be no doubt that the Sumerians practiced human sacrifice: Twenty-five sacrificed bodies were found in the tomb of Queen Puabi and 75 in the

tomb of her husband. Another chamber dubbed the Great Death Pit, tomb PG1237, contained 74 bodies. Many theorize that these people poisoned themselves before burial, but some bodies bear evidence of trauma. By the end of the dig Woolley had enough evidence to describe in some detail the macabre funeral rites of the kings and queens of ancient Ur.

In addition to the 16 royal tombs, Woolley excavated about 600 minor graves, which enabled scholars to date the tombs to as early as 2600–2300 B.C. In contrast with earlier digs in which irreversible damage was often done to sites on the whim of the director, Woolley's excavations were meticulous. His discoveries had profound repercussions for the way that ancient Mesopotamia was, and is, regarded. The complexity of the site, presence of royal figures, and evidence of human sacrifice pointed to a complex political and religious culture, giving rise to a passionate debate about life in that remote era. ■

WAR, PEACE, AND SACRIFICE

Known as the Standard of Ur, this box is held at the British Museum. It depicts scenes of peace on one side (above) and war on the other. It was found in a royal tomb near the body of a sacrificed man.

MANUEL MOLINA MARTOS
AN EXPERIENCED ASSYRIOLOGIST, MOLINA IS A RESEARCH PROFESSOR AT THE COUNCIL FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH (CSIC), MADRID, SPAIN.

THE GOLDEN TREASURES OF QUEEN PUABI



BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

▲ **PRINT TAKEN FROM A CYLINDER SEAL** FOUND ALONGSIDE THE BODY OF PUABI, SHOWING A BANQUET SCENE

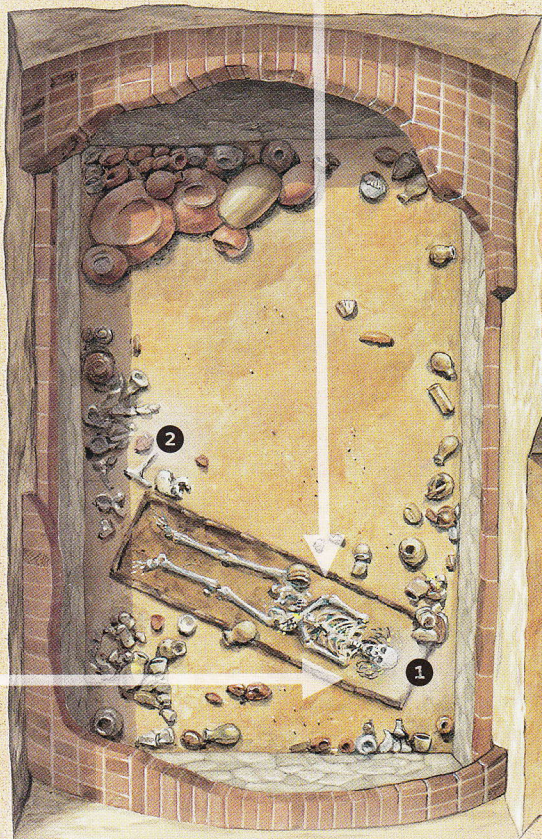


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▲ **TWO RAMS** CARVED ON A SHELL PLAQUE FROM QUEEN PUABI'S TOMB

The queen's tomb—a rectangular chamber measuring 38 feet by 13 feet—was buried 26 feet down. A diagram of it, drawn by Woolley, shows a central shaft and the funeral chamber with the body still inside. Woolley interprets the presence of human and animal remains as evidence of collective sacrifice made at the moment of burial. With the

tomb crammed with objects of enormous value and exquisite craftsmanship, Woolley and his team could count themselves extremely lucky. Unlike the others at Ur, Puabi's tomb had lain for well over 4,000 years unmolested by grave robbers.



Gold rosettes



Flowers made from lapis lazuli and carnelian

Gold beech and willow leaves

Gold hoop earrings

BRIDGEMAN/ACI

THE BODY OF PUABI was covered with a cape fastened over her right shoulder and lavishly adorned with jewelry made of gold, carnelian, and lapis lazuli. On her head was a spectacular headdress decorated with golden flowers, leaves, and rings.

◀ **HEADDRESS OF QUEEN PUABI**

GOLDEN GOBLETS were found in the antechamber near a wooden chest that may have contained the queen's garments. Many other precious objects were discovered here too: amulets shaped like lions' heads, and goblets made of silver, soapstone, and electrum.

▶ **GOLD GOBLET** FOUND BESIDE THE SACRIFICED BODIES



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THE CARRIAGE in Puabi's tomb was decorated with precious mosaic inlays and adorned with the golden heads of lions and bulls. It was found along with the remains of two oxen and their attendants.

◀ **SILVER RINGS** FROM THE REINS OF THE OXEN, FOUND WITH THE CARRIAGE OF PUABI
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

TWO LYRES DECORATED with elaborate bulls' heads were discovered in the tomb of Queen Puabi. One of the young servants sacrificed beside the queen still had two fingers in place on one of the instruments.

▼ **GOLD LYRE** FROM THE TOMB OF QUEEN PUABI IN UR

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THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

1 Puabi's body rested on a bier inside the burial chamber alongside 2 the bodies of servants and an array of grave goods. 3 The exterior chamber contained a massive entourage of servants and soldiers who, Woolley theorized, had willingly poisoned themselves. 4 A team of oxen and remains of a carriage sat on the floor, while 5 their grooms rest nearby. 6 A group of soldiers armed with daggers guard the tomb, and 7 ten female attendants with elaborate headdresses lay here. 8 Dominating the center of the room was a chest that may have contained textiles and clothing.



▲ **GOLD CHALICE** BELONGING TO QUEEN PUABI

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