

Imagine that you came upon a massive platform made of mud bricks half the size of a football field. What would you think about the purpose of the structure?

In Mesopotamia, most city-states had large structures called ziggurats. Although the exact purpose of these structures is not known, historians agree that they probably served a religious purpose. The platforms held large stepped buildings that were probably temples. Some experts suggest they they were considered homes for the gods. You may have heard of the Tower of Babel, which has been cited throughout history as a enormous ziggurat. Even though the tower may be mythical, or made up, it has still aroused the curiosity of historians of Mesopotamia.

One of the most impressive ruins of a ziggurat is in a place called Ur (in modern-day Iraq). Ur was once the largest city in Mesopotamia and was controlled by a king called Ur-Nammu. While he built many ziggurats, one in particular was strikingly large and complex. The Great Ziggurat of Ur was a temple that stood atop many steps leading high above the sand. The rooms within the temple were probably only for priests. Ordinary citizens occupied the many shops, homes, and shrines at the base.

It was around 2047 BCE that Ur-Nammu began construction of the great temple. The purpose of the temple might have been to honor the god of the moon, Nannar. Such a gift would have made the Mesopotamians within the city feel protected. King Ur-Nammu died before the construction on the great temple was finished, but his son Shulgi supervised its completion. During Shulgi's 48-year reign, Ur became the capital of most of Mesopotamia. The ziggurat, in addition to functioning as a temple, was most likely its center of government. Because of its size and significance, thousands of enslaved laborers were likely needed during the construction of the ziggurat.

In this area of Iraq, the temperature is extremely hot, and the land is mostly covered in sand flats. The oldest Mesopotamian temples were constructed of only bricks and mud. As technology improved, the people were able to build larger structures. The materials for the Ur ziggurat were bricks of mud and a material called bitumen. If the bricks were stacked with only mud between

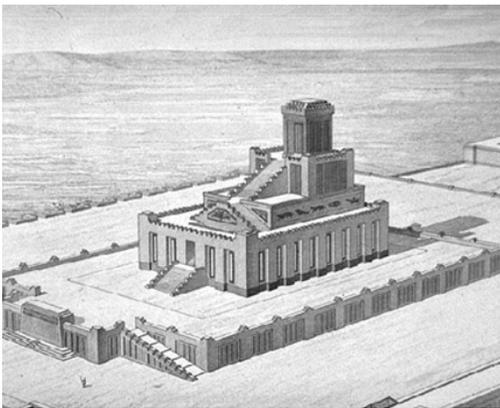


This photograph shows the ruins of a ziggurat in Ur.

them, they would not have lasted long. Bitumen was similar to a waterproofing glue that helped ensure the structures would last. It was the first petroleum product used by humans, similar to what we call asphalt today. Bits of straw and grass were also added to the mud bricks before they were heated in great kilns. The bitumen would seep into the bricks, creating a harder brick that was also resistant to decay.

How did historians learn about ziggurats? Through archaeology! Unfortunately, no ziggurats exist in their original state. Over thousands of years, the bricks decayed or were taken away for other purposes. Historians and archaeologists have been able to examine evidence found under the ground for clues about ziggurats and their meaning.

In 1922, The British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania funded an archaeological dig at the site of Ur. A famous scholar, Leonard Woolley, led the expedition. Between 1922 and 1934, his team cleared away the rubble and dug



An illustrated reconstruction of a ziggurat that was once in Chaldea.

around the site. What they found was evidence of a great civilization and city. During his research, Dr. Woolley discovered ancient descriptions of the ziggurat. He used his research to recreate the upper portions of the structure. The Iraqi government later recreated the lower portions and surrounding buildings. The structures that have been recreated or partially restored over time were homes, shops, and shrines.

If you visited the site of Ur in southern Iraq today, you would see a large temple with a lot of steps and ramps. While modern visitors can walk around the ruins, in Mesopotamia only the holiest of people could enter the massive structure. Most people were probably amazed and humbled by the ziggurat.

During his excavations, Dr. Woolley also found many graves surrounding the ziggurat. One was a large pit with 68 women and six men. Within the pit were the items that they would take with them into the afterlife. These items, such as instruments and jewels, have been preserved and are in museums. Religious artifacts that would have been placed in the ziggurat were also found at the site.

Archaeologists or, unfortunately, grave robbers, removed most artifacts and remains long ago. Sadly, Dr. Woolley was the last to do any excavations at Ur. Other artifacts may still be waiting to be found.

Ziggurats continue to fascinate and amaze historians and archaeologists. Continued research and excavations will lead to more information about their creation and purpose.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What material was used to make the ziggurats tall and weatherproof?
  - A.** cement
  - B.** bitumen
  - C.** straw
  - D.** glue
  
- 2.** Who was allowed inside the ziggurats in ancient Mesopotamia?
  - A.** visiting travelers
  - B.** women and children
  - C.** priests
  - D.** everyone
  
- 3.** What did the ruins of Ur suggest to archaeologists?
  - A.** The area around the ziggurat was a thriving community with businesses and homes.
  - B.** Priests built the ziggurat outside of the city, where few people could reach it.
  - C.** The ziggurats were entirely plated in gold, which has since been stolen by looters.
  - D.** Like the Egyptian pyramids, the ziggurats were tombs for the kings.
  
- 4.** Think about what you have learned about ziggurats. What role did the ziggurats play in the lives of ordinary citizens? Use examples from the reading passage to help you develop your answer.