

FOR THE GODS OF GIRSU
CITY-STATE FORMATION IN
ANCIENT SUMER

Sébastien Rey

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Cover illustration: Archaic bas-relief of the *Figure aux plumes*
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Foreword

It gives me particular pleasure to introduce this volume on the site of Tello, ancient *Girsu*, in southern Iraq. Not only is Tello surely one of the most important ancient Mesopotamian sites in its own right, but it also provides the field focus for an outstanding initiative of the British Museum, designed to build capacity in the Iraq State Board for Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) during a period of conflict in the region. Termed the Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Scheme, the programme, which began in April, 2016, is intended to provide intensive training to Iraqi heritage professionals in all of the retrieval and documentation skills and techniques they will need in order to confront the challenges of severely disrupted and substantially damaged archaeological sites when such sites are liberated from the hands of those who would seek to destroy them and are returned to effective and stable governmental control. The scheme, run partly in the UK, and partly in the field in Iraq at sites agreed in association with the SBAH, necessitated the engagement to the British Museum's staff of two senior field archaeologists, both to lead the training in the UK and to direct the field seasons in Iraq. I was delighted, therefore, when Sebastien Rey, an internationally acknowledged expert on Mesopotamian archaeology and an experienced excavator, was appointed to one of these key positions.

Sebastien has brought to the BM, not only his extensive knowledge and expertise, but also the permit to conduct excavations at Tello, a project he began in 2015 together with his Iraqi colleague, Fatma Husain. One could not wish for a more appropriate site at which to provide field training for our Iraq Scheme participants, but, beyond that, one could not wish for a more significant site at which to further explore the many and varied aspects of Sumerian civilization.

The 2015 season marks a return to Tello for the purposes of excavation after a gap of some 82 years. The first campaign undertaken by the French vice-consul in Basra, Ernest de Sarzec began in 1877 and represented the first ever exploration of a Sumerian site in Iraq. Continuing until 1900, Sarzec's discoveries, particularly of a hitherto totally unknown style of statuary, caused a sensation when presented to Paris audiences in the 1880's. Subsequent campaigns of excavations, all undertaken by eminent French scholars, concluded in 1933, by which time the combined total of field seasons amounted to twenty. From the results of the various investigations, a considerable amount of information had already been obtained about Tello before Sebastien returned to the site in 2015. Its identification as ancient *Girsu* was assured on the basis of epigraphic finds, as too was its role as one of the most important cities of the Sumerian state of Lagash, and for a time, the state capital. The early excavations uncovered a number of impressive religious complexes as well

as thousands of cuneiform tablets which document all aspects of the city-state's social, political, economic and religious institutions. Many of Tello's impressive finds are displayed in museums around the world, including indeed the British Museum. With all that is known, It would not be unreasonable, perhaps, to question the need to resume excavations at such an apparently well-explored site, but in answer, it must be remembered that all of the previous campaigns took place well before the development of appropriate, scientifically-controlled and systematically rigorous excavation techniques, with the result that much of the information recovered is either unrecorded or imprecisely documented, and many of the finds lack contextual precision. None of these failings apply to Sebastien's new excavations which, over the coming years, will undoubtedly set the standard for fieldwork methodology in Iraq.

This book, which summarizes everything that is known of Tello from previous work, and records the results of the initial 2015 season of excavations, sets the scene for the more extensive field seasons to follow. I am indebted to Sebastien for bringing this wonderful site to the British Museum, and for producing this excellent volume to highlight its enormous significance.

Jonathan N. Tubb
Keeper, Middle East Department
The British Museum

Preface

After 20 pre-World War II archaeological seasons and following an interruption of 82 years of fieldwork, I had the honor in 2015, together with co-director Fatma Husain, of initiating a new campaign of excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu). What was, therefore, the 21st field season at the site in November of that year marked the launch of a new research and training program, now hosted at the British Museum. Centered on the religious metropolis of Girsu, it consequently signals a new beginning in the search for the origins of the city and its significance in relation to the birth of the state, the invention of cuneiform writing, and the development of complex societies in Ancient Sumer.

I should like first of all to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Iraq and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage for granting me and Fatma Husain a permit to re-explore this truly exceptional site of Iraqi and world heritage. My heartfelt thanks go to Deputy Tourism and Antiquities Minister Mr. Qais Hussein Rashid and Director of Excavations Dr. Haider Abd al-Wahed al-Mamori. Extended thanks go to the authorities in Baghdad, including Mr. Adil Jabour Diwan, Dr. Ahmad Kamel, Mr. Saleem Khalaf Anaheed, and Mr. Hussain Ali Habib, and, in Nasiriya (Thi Qar province), Mr. Amjad Nahma Shabib, SBAH representatives, and Thi Qar archaeological armed forces. Also, I thank Dr. Abdulmir al-Hamdani and Dr. Jaafar Jotheri for their unfailing help and support.

Today, Tello-Girsu is the southern site of the British Museum Iraq Emergency Heritage Management Training Program. I feel particularly fortunate and honored to be part of this venerable institution and, in particular this truly exceptional scheme, and to work amongst a remarkable staff including the IEHMTP team and the Middle East department. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Keeper Jonathan Tubb for his powerful encouragement and guidance. I extend my appreciation to St John Simpson, John MacGinnis, Irving Finkel, Sarah Collins, Jonathan Taylor, Alexandra Fletcher, the Ur Project team, and the entire department for their contributions to my inspiration and knowledge and other help in creating this book. It has been made possible by the Museum Scholarly Publications Support Fund, and in this respect, my sincere thanks go to Jeremy Hill and Sarah Faulks for their support. Extended thanks go to David Davison and Rajka Makjanic from Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, and to Simone Rotella who managed to capture in his art my vision of Sumerian sacredness and religious landscapes.

The present book is a compilation of expanded or enhanced papers read over the past few years in various conferences or workshops, most of them prepared in close

collaboration with Camille Lecompte to whom, I fear, I have contracted a staggering debt: I acknowledge that debt to him here.

Important contributions to the final form of this book have stemmed from fruitful exchanges with a number of colleagues, including especially the late Tony Wilkinson, Haider al-Mamori, Abdulamir al-Hamdani, Stephanie Rost, and Jaafar Jotheri: to all I offer my warmest thanks.

I am greatly indebted to Julien Chanteau for a number of illuminating comments or suggestions as to how some of the archaeological materials utilized in this book might be more solidly, by which I mean, aesthetically, symbolically, and structurally interpreted.

The Tello-Ancient Girsu project would never have seen the light of day without the wholehearted support of Julien Chanteau and Joyce Nassar, and, above all, the willpower of Fatma Husain to whom my debt of gratitude is unfathomable.

*

As evidenced by the title *For the Gods of Girsu: City-State Formation in Ancient Sumer*, I acknowledge from the outset that cult played a paramount role in the complex development of the Sumerian city-states. I believe in Arthur Hocart's masterly thesis that kingship and government originated in, and developed from, ritual organization. Critics will argue that I take religion too seriously. I do, because, to paraphrase Aage Westenholz, 'there is ample documentation that the Sumerians also did' (2002, p. 24).

I have envisaged the plan of the book to follow the route of a centrifugal ritual procession in honor of the tutelary god of Girsu: from the Sacred City (Chapter 2), across the Countryside (Chapter 3), to the Border of the city-state (Chapter 4). Chapter 1 corresponds to the *status quaestionis* and a homage to the archaeologist pioneers of Tello. My methodology relies entirely on the combination of various sources of information, and therefore attempts to develop a 'total history' – an approach dear to the heart of the historian Marc Bloch (*The Royal Touch*).

The Sumerian anthroponyms, theonyms, and toponyms are rendered in Roman characters either in their current transcription (Urukagina, Enki, Nippur, Eanna) or in their component parts ($\tilde{G}ir_2$ -su^{ki}, E₂-ninnu). Most vowels and consonants retain their usual value in English. Yet:

- u is always pronounced oo (Uruk = Oorook)
- š denotes sh (Gilgameš = Gilgamesh)
- ḥ corresponds to kh or ch like Loch Ness (Ninḥursag = Ninkhursag)

- \tilde{g} is pronounced ng (sa $\tilde{g}\tilde{g}$ a = sanga)
- all the consonants are articulated (ziqqurrat is pronounced ziqqoorratt)
- and they are voiced, or hard (Ningirsu is pronounced Nin-gir-soo)

Subscript Arabic numerals that accompany certain terms (e_2 , bad_3 , $ensi_2$) have no phonetic significance and refer to different cuneiform signs. Superscript Roman letters or terms placed before or after other words reflect the use in the cuneiform writing system of determinatives (pre- or post-) which indicate the semantic category to which the words belong: the superscript [d] in d Enlil is used to indicate that Enlil is the name of a god (d is the abbreviation for dingir, the Sumerian term for deity); the post-determinative [ki] in $Laga\check{s}^{ki}$ indicates that Lagaš is a city.