

The British
Museum



LIFE AFTER DEATH

Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur

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4.30-7pm

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LIFE AFTER DEATH

Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur



The ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur is located in present day Iraq. During the Early Dynastic III period (ca.2600-2350 BC), the ruling families of Ur were buried in tombs filled with treasures made from exotic materials.

One of the tombs belonged to a Queen called Puabi. She wore a gold floral headdress and a beaded cape made from gold, carnelian, and lapis lazuli. Court attendants and guards were sacrificed to accompany their masters in the journey to the afterlife. In one tomb, the bodies of sixty-eight women and six men wearing simpler headdresses were ritually killed and buried. The bodies were accompanied by musical instruments, such as harps and lyres, suggesting they were court musicians.



This burial practice indicates a belief in life after death. The precious objects may have ensured a more prestigious afterlife, either as provisions for the dead or as gifts for the gods. The practice may also be inspired by a Mesopotamian myth called The Descent of Inanna, goddess of love and fertility. The myth recounts her journey to the realm of the dead. Inanna wears a headdress and strands of beads which she removes when passing through each gate to the underworld.

Funerary headdress from 'The Great Death Pit' at Ur

Royal funerals in Mesopotamia were public spectacles involving music, performance and feasting events that took place over several weeks. They marked the transition to the afterlife and reaffirmed traditional power structures in early cities.

This funerary headdress was found on the body of a female court attendant. It is made from two strands of lapis-lazuli beads from Afghanistan and carnelian beads from northwest India. The leaf-shaped pendants are made from imported gold. Ur was a large urban centre located near the Persian Gulf that controlled the trade in exotic goods.

The Great Death Pit, Ur, Iraq
Early Dynastic III, ca. 2550-2400 BC
Gold, lapis-lazuli, carnelian
British Museum 1929,1017.148



Head Ornament

British Museum Collection Online:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1929-1017-148

FRONT



BACK



FRONT



BACK

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HEAD ORNAMENT
From the Death Pit at Ur
Early Dynastic III
British Museum Collection