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Jean M. Evans & Elisa Rossberger (eds.)

in cooperation with Paola Paoletti

Ancient Near Eastern Temple Inventories in the Third and Second Millennia BCE: Integrating Archaeological, Textual, and Visual Sources

Proceedings of a conference held at the LMU Centre for Advanced Studies, November 14–15, 2016

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Umschlagabbildung: Reconstruction of the Kitītum-Temple at Iščali (OIP 98, frontispiece). In the foreground (clockwise): necklace from Iščali (OIM A17006, photo: E. Roßberger), mace head from Tell Agrab (OIM A18008), stone statue head from Bismaya (OIM A173), stone statue from Tell Agrab (OIM A18108), cuneiform tablet with temple inventory from Iščali (FLP 1167 Vs., photo: P. Paoletti), terracotta plaque (OIM A9356, photo: E. Roßberger), stone bowl fragment from Nippur (OIM A29448). Design: E. Roßberger; © Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Free Library of Philadelphia (cuneiform tablet).
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“Private Chapels” in Southern Mesopotamia at the Beginning of the Second Millennium BC

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Abstract: I deal with the evidence for private cults in southern Mesopotamian houses between the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennium BC. The focus will be mainly on Ur, where several features were singled out and named “private chapels.” Other sites will also be taken into account for comparison. The main idea that some sort of cult ceremony was performed in private houses is not questioned. However, discrepancies in the evidence will be analysed, which might have some meaning for the interpretation of the real nature of these private cults.

Key words: Mesopotamia, private cults, beginning of second millennium BC, Ur

Dealing with private architecture has much to do with what we really know — or rather do not know — about daily life in the different societies of the ancient Near East: private houses are a very interesting and particular context, because they are the places where individuals find a kind of refuge free from social constraints. At the same time, however, other social rules apply and govern the relations within the household and among different households within a neighbourhood. Relations within the household may be complicated when dealing with an enlarged family, which also includes people not related by kin relations, like servants and slaves.[1] The first aspect — the house as the place where a person may feel free from social constraints — may lead to an interpretation of private contexts in the light of the personal experience of the researcher, based on the idea of the persistence of human psychology.[2] The second aspect — social relations within a household — is strongly related to the historical moment, namely to the culture and social rules in force when the house was used. But these factors are not always known in detail, although they are crucial for understanding the functioning of a household because they affect the way in which a house is lived and changed over time.[3] As recently maintained by Paul Collins,[4] the application of ethnographic comparisons may also be misleading, because such studies deal with village societies, which are thought to be more similar to the ancient ones, and the results are applied in an automatic and sometimes uncritical way to the latter, not taking into account the fact that we deal mainly with urban realities, albeit very remote in time.[5]

Some major problems may be encountered in the study of domestic architecture in archaeology:

1. Private houses are more difficult to excavate than public buildings: spaces are not codified in their functions and therefore, even when applied, the distribution

1 Starzmann 2008: 205–206.

2 Starzmann 2008: 207.

3 Starzmann 2008: 203–204.

4 Collins 2013: 346.

5 In this sense, I found the analyses by E. Stone (1996) more refined and productive on the Islamic kinship system as related to the Old Babylonian world.

analysis of findings can seldom provide conclusive elements.[6] Generally speaking, and taking also into account the limitations of space in a house, all rooms may be multi-functional and not necessarily hierarchical.[7]

2. Private houses as structures are internally more "mobile" than public buildings: refurbishing and changes may be frequent, in order to adapt the structure to the changing needs of the family, and changes can be difficult to detect when they are very close in time.[8] These changes may concern the individual house, but they can also extend to the urban pattern as a whole: legacies, marriages, and damage to individual parts of the buildings may lead to divisions of the house into smaller units or, on the contrary, to enlargement, which may incorporate units of other houses or even streets.[9]
3. Regarding Mesopotamia, the presence of different typologies of texts connected with houses, from the eventual owners' documents to 'House Omens,' may on the one hand throw some light on aspects of daily life — marriages and dowries, property selling and buying, etc. — but on the other hand, they might lead to an attempt to identify elements inferred from the texts but not evidenced on the ground.[10]
4. Internal circulation is not always analysed and is sometimes difficult or impossible to detect because of the state of preservation of the structures. In this sense, Paolo Brusasco's analysis,[11] mainly about Ur and Nippur, is interesting; yet these kinds of analysis started while Iraq was closed to archaeological exploration, and it is thus necessary to apply the methodology to domestic contexts brought to light in older excavations, and sometimes not adequately documented, while awaiting future excavation.

Based on these considerations, I wish to deal here with an issue that has already been addressed: private chapels in Mesopotamia. I certainly cannot propose a final explanation here, but rather I wish to fine-tune some still overlooked points.[12]

As is well known, the evidence concerns a quite limited area and a well-defined period of time: in fact, the installations I will present are thus far attested only in central-southern Mesopotamia – in particular at Ur, Ešnunna, and Nippur – and are chronologically set at the beginning of the second millennium BC, in the period of the Dynasty of Larsa.

Concerning the evidence taken into consideration here, an equation was proposed between chapels and ancestor cults, based most of all on the evidence from Ur and also supported by textual sources.[13] The tradition of burying members of the family under the floors is well known in other parts of southern and northern Mesopotamia.[14] Moreover, it has been recently analysed also

6 When dealing with contexts excavated in the past, it is more common in domestic contexts that findings were not registered with their precise location, as more frequently happened in public contexts. Anyhow, within a domestic context, objects may be very mobile, and even a very accurate registration of findspots, while giving a precise picture of the use of rooms at the time of their dismissal, may be inconclusive as to the real function of the individual rooms.

7 Also the identification of gender-characterized spaces is sometimes based on assumptions which cannot be verified, like the connection between more than one "living-room" and female segregation (Brusasco 2007: 35), when we do not really know how the largest rooms of the house were used, and the identification of uses is based on modern ethnographic comparisons or on circular reasoning, namely that the presence of more than one living area meant their use by different components of the household and therefore gender-separation.

8 In the detailed description of the houses at Ur, Woolley frequently mentions different phases of use, but he does not publish detailed plans with the indication of these phases, and his descriptions are mingled with his interpretations, making understanding of the development of the houses quite difficult.

9 The study of the cuneiform documents found in the houses may reveal unexpected elements of the urban pattern: at Nuzi, in a totally different milieu and period than the one taken into account here, also the re-use of ruins is probably documented in the economic transactions concerning real estate: Mori 2008: 113, 118.

10 Brusasco 2007: 51–52. In this way, an ideal model of a house is proposed, and the effort to identify it on the ground may lead to serious misunderstandings. Otto's proposal as to the use of an ideal model of a house, in order to verify and interpret anomalies, on the contrary, is a very interesting and productive way to deal with the problem (Otto 2015).

11 Brusasco 1999–2000; 2007. One major flaw of Brusasco's work is that he relies too much on Woolley's identification of the functions of the individual spaces.

12 My analysis is based on published material, and it therefore meets all the problems I have just outlined. Nevertheless, the interpretation I propose deals with the relationship between vaults and chapels, not with the circulation, or its relation with the use of these rooms which might be an interesting issue, too. Thus, the problems of the published documentation should not hinder my interpretation.

13 In his general interpretation of the domestic contexts, Woolley maintained that there was a constant correlation between family chapel and family vault (Woolley 1976: 30). See also Brusasco 2007: 25; McCown/Haines 1967: 146–147.

14 Collins 2013: 355; but see e.g. Mari, and Margueron's perplexities about the real extent of our knowledge about burial rites and rules: Margueron 2004: 401, 405–406. Mari cannot be used as a comparison for a number of reasons: the tombs were not registered correctly, and there is no sure connection with private houses (Margueron 2004: 403); built tombs are known only for the *šakkanakku*

in terms of “reinforcement of the household lineage in moments of dramatic socioeconomic transformation,”[15] whereas in other regions it is not attested.[16] At first, I wish to present the relevant facts.

First of all, in light of the well-known Mesopotamian custom to bury the dead — or rather a part of them — below the house floors, I would, starting with the evidence from Ur,[17] set burials in general apart from those which Woolley defined as “vault” and “corbeled” tombs, namely underground chambers of large size, built with some attention to their architecture, which I will simply call “built tombs.” Woolley related these tombs to the presence of large rooms with special features, identified as cult installations, leading to the proposal that funerary cults were practiced at Ur in chapels under whose floors were the “family vaults.” In Woolley’s interpretation, these chapels were also closely connected with the largest covered space of the house,[18] which he identified as a reception room, thus leading to a peculiar interpretation of the social life of Ur in the Larsa period.[19] If we go into detail in the descriptions of individual houses, though, we can observe the following:[20]

1. In fifteen houses, there are chapels not connected with a built tomb, and in one of them, there are two chapels (**Fig. 1**).[21]
2. In fifteen houses, the chapel is connected with a built tomb (**Fig. 2**).[22]
3. In seventeen houses, there are built tombs but no chapels, and in one of them there are three tombs under one room (**Fig. 3**).[23]

period (Jean-Marie 1999: 75), whereas in Middle Bronze Age I and II there is evidence for burials in sarcophagi (Jean-Marie 1999: 33–4, 36); the furniture of these tombs is usually very rich and should have belonged to members of the elite (Margueron 2004: 406).

15 Laneri 2011: 121.

16 If, for instance, we compare this evidence with another one, quite close in time, of a relevant extension, and whose excavation is reliable, namely the private quarters of Ebla of the Early and Mature Old Syrian period, we face a totally different reality. At Ebla, two quarters of private houses were brought to light, a smaller one, near Damascus Gate, and a large one near Rešef’s Cult Area, in Area B, besides a residence in the Lower Town West, Area Z. All the houses of the two quarters are usually smaller and simpler than those brought to light in the Mesopotamian sites mentioned before, whereas the region of Residence Z includes one or more units of large size, and with several rooms. The state of preservation is quite good everywhere, sometimes excellent, but we could never single out cult furniture or cult structures. This situation seems thus far specific to Ebla, as in the Euphrates Valley the burying of family members under the house floors is attested since the second half of the third millennium BC (see Laneri 2011: 124–125).

17 The private houses of Ur are extensively published and therefore provide a large amount of evidence. Yet they also present many problems, partly due to the bias in interpretation we have mentioned before and partly due to the difficulty of understanding the relative stratigraphy of some of the features identified. Among the biases, we may mention the fact that Woolley largely used the ‘House Omens’ (Woolley 1976: 23–24) to explain the features he identified on the ground, and that he had as a model of the functions of individual rooms, as he himself maintains, “the town house of a middle-class Arab of today” (Woolley 1976: 26). In his interpretation, moreover, several houses had a second floor, an idea nowadays dismissed.

18 Woolley 1976: 29–30.

19 Woolley 1976: 24–25. As Woolley considered this large room a *liwan* for guests, where they were received and slept at night, he was obliged to propose that the sleeping quarters of the family were on the second floor (Woolley 1976: 25–26).

20 In this analysis only the relation between chapels and vaulted tombs is taken into account: different kinds of graves and inhumations were present in the chapels and in other rooms of the houses.

21 Woolley 1976: 110–112 (Site EM, Quiet Street 7, Room 5); 118–120 (Site AH, Boundary Street 1, Room 11); 121 (Site AH, Niche Lane 2, Room1, in a two-rooms house); 123 (Site AH, Niche Lane 5, Room 3); 123–124 (Site AH, Old Street 1, Room 6.); 128–29 (Site AH, Church Lane 2, Room 9); 130–131 (Site AH, Church Lane 7, Room 6); 143–144 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 3, Room 6); 144–145 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 4, Rooms 4 and 5, two chapels); 149 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 8 and 10, Room 3); 153 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 12, Room 3); 153–54 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 14, Room 5); 157–58 (Site AH, Baker’s Square 1B, room number not given); 165 (Site AH, Straight Street 10, Room 5); 166–67 (Houses over Mausoleums Site 30/A, Room 7).

22 Woolley 1976: 100–101 (Site EM, Gay Street 6, Room 2); 104–106 (Site EM, Quiet Street 2, Room 11); 113–114 (Site AH, New Street 1, Room 5, not sure); 114–16 (Site AH, New Street 2 and 3, Room 6); 123–124 (Site AH, Old Street 1, Room 5); 130 (Site AH, Church Lane 5, Room 10); 131–132 (Site AH, Church Lane 9, Room 8); 135–36 (Site AH, Church Lane 15, Room 6, with two tombs); 136–137 (Site AH, Broad Street 1, Room 8); 137–139 (Site AH, Store Street 1, Room 9); 150–153 (Site AH, Paternoster Row 11, 11A, 11B, Room 11); 157 (Site AH, Baker’s Square 1, Room 5); 159–61 (Site AH, Straight Street 3, Room 10; 161–163 (Site AH, Straight Street 4, Room 6); 167–168 (Houses over Mausoleums Site 30/B, Room 3).

23 Woolley 1976: 95 (Site EM, Gay Street 1); 86–97 (Site EM, Gay Street 3, Room 6); 99–100 (Site EM, Gay Street 5, Room 1); 103–104 (Site EM, Quiet Street 1, Room 6); 106–8 (Site EM, Quiet Street 3, Room 4, which may be older than the house); 108–110 (Site EM, Quiet Street 5, Room 6); 110–12 (Site EM, Quiet Street 7, Room 4); 118–120 (Site AH, Boundary Street 1, Room 8); 121–1122 (Site AH, Niche Lane 3, Room 1); 122–23 (Site AH, Niche Lane 4, Room 8); 131–132 (Site AH, Church Lane 9, Room 8, with three tombs and badly preserved remains attributed to a chapel, but probably from a previous phase of use); 137–139 (Site AH, Store Street 1, Room 8); 140–141 (Site AH, Store Street 4, Room 3); 157 (Site AH, Baker’s Square 1, Room 1, which Woolley identified as a courtyard); 161–163 (Site AH, Straight Street 4, Room 9); 163–164 (Site AH, Straight Street 6, Room 4); 164–165 (Site AH, Straight Street 8, Room 5).

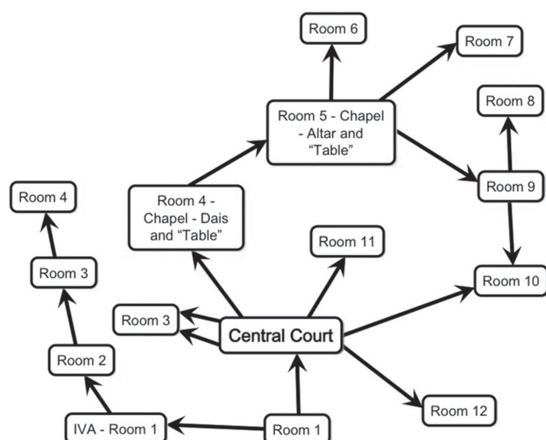

Fig. 1: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit Paternoster Row 4 at Ur. This is a house where the chapel is not related to a "vaulted tomb" (by author).

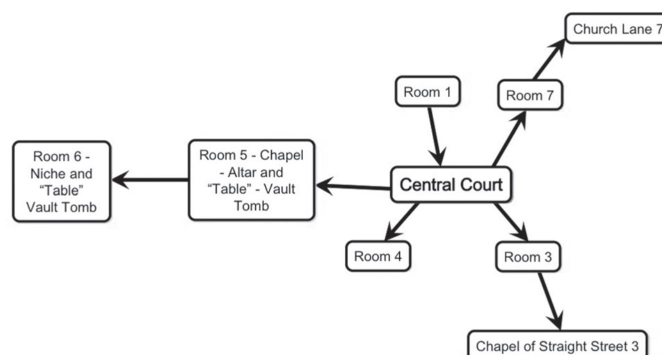

Fig. 2: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit Old Street 1 at Ur. This is a house where the chapel is related to a "vaulted tomb" (by author).

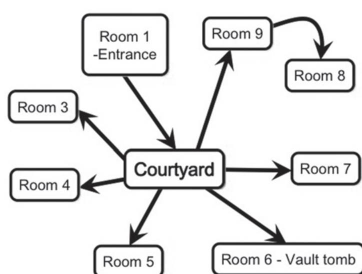

Fig. 3: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit Gay Street 3 at Ur. This is a house where the "vault tomb" is not related to a chapel (by author).

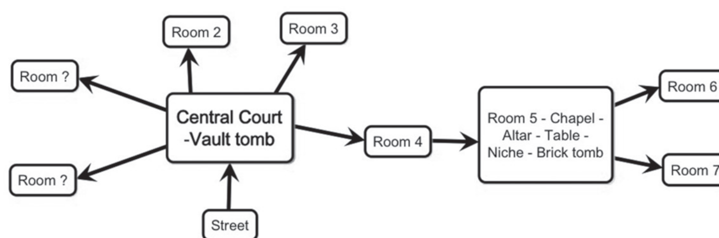

Fig. 4: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit Baker's Square 1 at Ur. This is a house where the "vaulted tomb" and the chapel are not related, and where the tomb is under the floor of the central room (by author).

Summing up, out of approximately 72 excavated architectural units, three of which were identified as public chapels, thirty feature fittings related to cult and, among them, fifteen feature a close connection between chapel and tomb. It is not easy to find a correspondence between the detailed description of the houses and Woolley's "tabular analysis of graves."[24] The few sure correspondences show that in LG/33, Straight Street 6, Room 4, there was no body, but only a few vases and objects;[25] in LG/41, Baker's Square 1, there was no body, but only a few pottery vases (**Fig. 4**);[26] in LG/58, Church Lane 9, there were three bodies, a pair of gold ear-rings, weights, and beads;[27] LG/59, Church Lane 9 yielded only some vases, beads, and a copper bowl.[28]

Based on these observations, it seems evident that, if we wish to call these tombs family vaults, this would not be in the sense of burial place for all the members of the family, because, when they contain human remains, they belong to a very limited number of individuals, and the built tomb does not exclude the presence, sometimes quite numerous, of other inhumations in the same room, or in other rooms of the same house. Lastly, the funerary furniture, also in sealed chambers, is never important and usually includes a few objects, seldom precious, like the gold earrings in the vault LG/58 of Church Lane 9. These tombs, therefore, were meant to host selected per-

24 Woolley 1976: 195–213.

25 A duck-shaped weight, a pendant, a hematite cylinder seal, a copper amulet, a bronze bowl, a shell finger-ring, beads, and a copper bracelet: Woolley 1976: 197.

26 Woolley 1976: 198; in Baker's Square 1 there were two tombs, and from the tabular analysis it is not possible to identify which one is LG/41.

27 Woolley 1976: 200; in Church Lane 9, tombs were found under two rooms: in Room 3 there were three tombs and in Room 8 there was a corbelled tomb below a chapel. In the tabular analysis LG/58 is attributed to Room 7, and a total of five vaulted tombs is attributed to this house, but no room number is given to the other four.

28 Woolley 1976: 200.

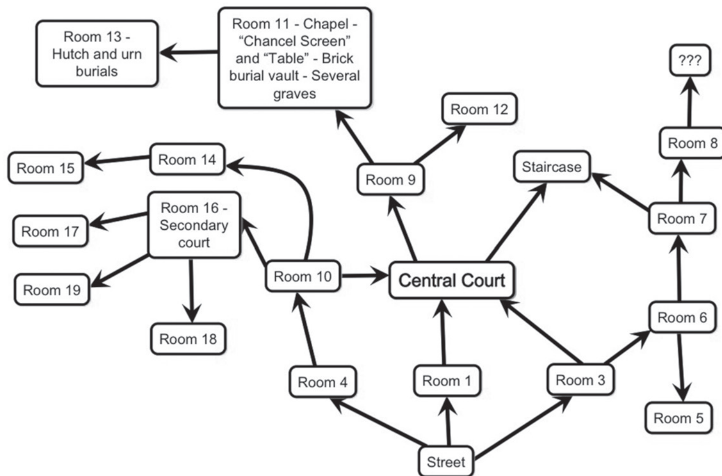

Fig. 5: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit Paternoster Row 11, 11A and 11B at Ur (the *Khan*). This is a house with a very articulated internal circulation (by author).

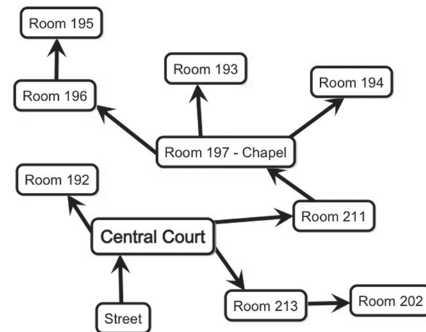

Fig. 6: Permeability scheme for the domestic unit House I, level IV, at Nippur. This is a house where the chapel functions as a second circulation node within the house (by author).

sons, and they were not meant to be representations of the family wealth by means of the funerary furniture.[29]

One last observation concerns the permeability of the rooms with cult fittings and of those with built tombs. The analysis undertaken here does not result in a clear pattern: in two instances, the tomb is below the central room of the house,[30] usually interpreted as a court and therefore the place with the highest permeability in the house. Gay Street 1 is a very small house of only two rooms, the entrance and a room, below whose floor there is the vaulted tomb. In several instances, the tomb or the chapel is in a room opening directly into the central room, and this pattern seems to apply more frequently to rooms featuring only the tomb.[31] In one of the largest houses, the so-called *Khan* (Paternoster Row 11, 11A and 11B, **Fig. 5**), there is no connection between the presumed guests' room (Room 10) and the chapel (Room 11).

On the contrary, Woolley identified a pattern where the family vault and the chapel were located in the remotest part of the house, separated from the central court by the largest room, which, in his interpretation, was the guests' room. The situation is more articulated, in reality, because, as just mentioned, more than one pattern can be singled out.

In addition to the evident differences in the plans which can be singled out, the definition of "vestries" for the rooms frequently opening onto the chapels on the opposite side of the main entrance does not seem appropriate, because in several instances they contained cuneiform tablets. In fact, only Church Lane 2 and Church Lane 15 follow Woolley's presumed rule, with the "guest room" 8 of the former opening directly into the central room and the chapel 9 behind and with Room 5 (the "guests' room") of the latter leading to the chapel 6, although Room 5 has a peculiar L-shaped plan, and the chapel opens into Room 9, which is only slightly smaller than Room 5.

Comparing the main sites where domestic cults are attested between the Ur III and the Old Babylonian periods — Tell Brak,[32] Ur, Nippur (**Fig. 6**),[33] and Tell Asmar[34] — we may note that only at Ur built tombs may be con-

29 According to N. Laneri (2011: 121), selected dead were incorporated in the family's house and were thus transformed into the family's ancestors, but this hypothesis contrasts, in my opinion, with the evidence from Ur as analysed here. In the first place, it does not explain the presence of several other burials of different kinds — inhumations, *larnax* burials, jar burials — in the same house; in the second place, it does not explain why new bodies could be added to the tomb in different periods. Brusasco (2007: 26) inferred that there was a hierarchy in inhumations, with the most powerful members of the family buried in the vault and the lesser members in the other residential units, but there is no trace of a pattern of this kind in the archaeological evidence.

30 Baker's Square 1; Straight Street 12. In Baker'Street 1 there is another tomb, below the floor of the chapel.

31 Broad Street 1 (chapel with tomb); Gay Street 3 (tomb); House 30/A (tomb); Niche Lane 5 (chapel); Old Street 1 (chapel with tomb); Paternoster Row 4 (chapel); Paternoster Row 8 and 10 (chapel); Quiet Street 5 (tomb); Quiet Street 7 (tomb); Store Street 1 (two rooms with one tomb each).

32 This is a very simple room, with only one semi-circular altar: Mallowan 1947: 196.

33 McCown/Haines 1967: 146–147.

34 Delougaz/Hill/Lloyd 1967: Pl. 72, four altars from Larsa houses, similar to those from Ur.

nected with chapels,[35] with the exceptions we mentioned, so that we cannot consider this a meaningful pattern.

On the contrary, the recurring features of the chapels follow a clear pattern, including as main elements a large dais, or altar, up to 0.40/0.50 m high, and a quadrangular structure, sometimes represented by two specimens in the same room, which looks like a miniature temple, and which Woolley described as a "table." An accurate analysis of these fittings was done only for Ur, and not for the other sites, but if we compare the published pictures (**Figs. 7–9**), it seems that they are similar in all three sites where they are attested, namely in Ur, Nippur, and Larsa: on a mud-brick core, a thick layer of plaster was placed, modelled in niches and pilasters, imitating the walls of a temple, while the top, when it is preserved, is covered by a course of baked bricks. There is a possibility that some of them were decorated with wood, as can be inferred at least for the *Khan*, where there was evidence for brick structures covered by what Woolley calls "chancels" made of wood.[36]

The size of these fittings is quite imposing, when compared with the rooms where they are placed, particularly with regard to their height. In fact, the platforms/altars reach up to 0.50 m, whereas the "tables," when they are completely preserved, may reach from 1.05 m up to 1.40 m in height. It was only on the platforms/altars that vessels, mainly bowls, were found still *in situ*, while apparently nothing was placed on the "tables." Platforms/altars and "tables" are always present in these chapels, also at Nippur (**Fig. 6**) and Ešnunna,[37] whereas a peculiarity of Ur is the frequent presence of a structure Woolley defined as an "incense hearth," usually placed on the platform/altar (**Figs. 10–12**), which is sometimes quite large, taking up nearly the entire length of the wall.

Fig. 7: Detail of the "altar" and pedestals in the chapel of Boundary Street 1 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 43b).

Fig. 8: Detail of the pedestal in the chapel of Paternoster Row 4 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 44b).

In the published photos, it is not possible to identify the very evident traces that burning incense would have left during combustion: when used frequently, substances like incense — in the form of the long sticks we are accustomed to using today —leave thick deposits of very thin ashes, which need very refined excavation techniques to be identified. It is probable that resins which might have been employed in Mesopotamia during the Larsa period were used as lumps, not as sticks, which leave a thick tar-like residue. Also, the shape of the incense hearths, judging from the photos, would need fur-

35 As stated at the beginning, we do not consider here the presence of inhumations in relation to chapels, well attested at Ur and elsewhere; at Larsa there is a situation which may be compared with Ur, with vaults and other inhumations under the same room, or under different rooms: Calvet 1996: 201 (House B 27, with a vault and another inhumation under Room 3), 203 (House B 59, with several infants' burials under Room 18, and a vault under Room 17). The evidence mentioned for Tell ed-Der/Sippar (Gasche 1978: 81–83) by Brusasco (1999–2000: 77, fn. 39) is not relevant in this discussion, because there is not a vault but only inhumations.

36 Woolley 1976: 152.

37 At Nippur, the private sanctuary is apparently located in the main room of the house: McCown/Haines 1967: 44–45, TB, lev. IX, House J, L.281, which kept its functions into lev. VII (ibidem: 47–48); 50–1, TB lev. IV, House I, L.197; 53, TB, lev. IV, House G, L.222. At Nippur, the presence of private sanctuaries is limited to the Ur III period, and they are no more attested in the Isin–Larsa period: ibidem: 146. Ešnunna: Delougaz/Hill/Lloyd (1967): pl. 72.

Fig. 9: Detail of the pedestal in the chapel of Boundary Street 1 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 45b).

Fig. 10: Detail of the "incense-hearth" in the chapel of Broad Street 1 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 41b).

Fig. 11: Detail of the "incense-hearth" in the chapel of Straight Street 3 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 43a).

Fig. 12: Detail of the "incense-hearth" in the chapel of Paternoster Row 4 at Ur (after Woolley 1976: pl. 44a).

ther discussion: they have a large square lower part and an elongated chimney, which seems to be very regularly cut in the front. This might be a result of the excavation, but the openings are too even, and they seem to belong to the structure, which thus does not have the typical shape of a fire-place.[38]

Apparently, offerings, quite likely of food and drink,[39] were placed on the platforms/altars; in Woolley's proposal, the hearth was used to burn a substance such as incense. It is more difficult to understand the function of

38 Woolley 1976: Pls 41b (Broad Street 1); 43a (Straight Street 3); 44a (Paternoster Row 4). The average measures of these "hearths" are 0.60 x 0.40 x 0.30, whereas the chimney is usually 0.30 cm wide. In fact, Woolley (1976: 29) acknowledged these regular cuts and proposed that they were used to allow incense smoke to spread into the rooms, which does not make much sense, because if this were the reason, there would have been no need at all to build the chimneys. An interesting suggestion was proposed by A. Otto during the discussion at the Conference: these features might be openings made to let air circulate. This is a traditional technique, still attested in the region, and I think it might explain the peculiarities observed, namely the cut in the front and the missing ashes.

39 According to Woolley, bowls were found in the chapels, and they were sometimes placed on the platform/altars and were identified as traces of ritual feasting for the deceased, see Woolley 1976: 119 (Boundary Street 1, where on the platform three clay "saucers" were found piled up one inside the other and two other standing on an edge); 132 (Church Lane 9, a jar and two beakers). The published evidence is scanty, and it is not possible to ascertain if the situation presented by Woolley is based only on this published evidence or on his recollections.

the "tables," also interpreted as bases for unidentified objects.[40] These objects did not leave any trace on the upper face of the "tables," like hollows made by the presence of an object for some time, or traces of the materials of which they were made, like remains of decayed organic substances or marks of oxidised metals.

Woolley was firmly convinced that the "tables" were meant to support something, also based on the observation that one of them, and only one, featured at the base a regular hollow, at whose ends near the walls there were two bitumen stops, while the remains of a third one were still visible at the point of junction between the two hollows.[41] In his opinion, they were meant to block a tent at the bottom, covering the "table," and the eventual object standing on it.[42] It is not clear, anyhow, what happened at the top because, though the wall is well preserved behind the "table" and reaches to a good height, there is no trace of the upper stops of the presumed tent, which, therefore, had to be hanging from the ceiling. On several occasions, however, Woolley maintained that the chapels did not have a ceiling running over the whole room,[43] but rather light canopies, covering only the area with cult furniture.

Comparing Ur with Nippur, we may notice that, besides the absence of the built tombs, in the few chapels singled out at Nippur the incense hearths are absent, whereas platforms/altars and "tables" are always present, as well as normal hearths.[44] Moreover, one of the Nippur "tables," clearly looks like an imitation of a temple model (**Figs. 13–14**), as if it contained rather than supported something.[45]

Overall, the private chapels do not reproduce, as is quite natural, the plan of the main temples, but they are also different from the small urban sanctuaries, well-known at Ur. It seems evident that they had to appear as autonomous and clearly different from real temples, which were the houses of gods. At Ur, where the rooms in private houses are often of different sizes, the chapels are usually the largest and may be connected to the largest covered room, not to be mistaken with the main circulation junction, which was frequently an open court: as we have seen, this pattern is not the rule and we can thus also dismiss the reconstruction of southern Mesopotamian sociality proposed by Woolley and followed by others, where the largest covered room of the house was a living room, used also for guests, and whose relation to the chapels and eventually the vaulted tombs was never clearly explained.[46] The first proposal, based on the cor-

Fig. 13: Detail of the altar in TB, level IV, 2, Room 222 at Nippur (after McCown/Haines 1967: pl. 40C).

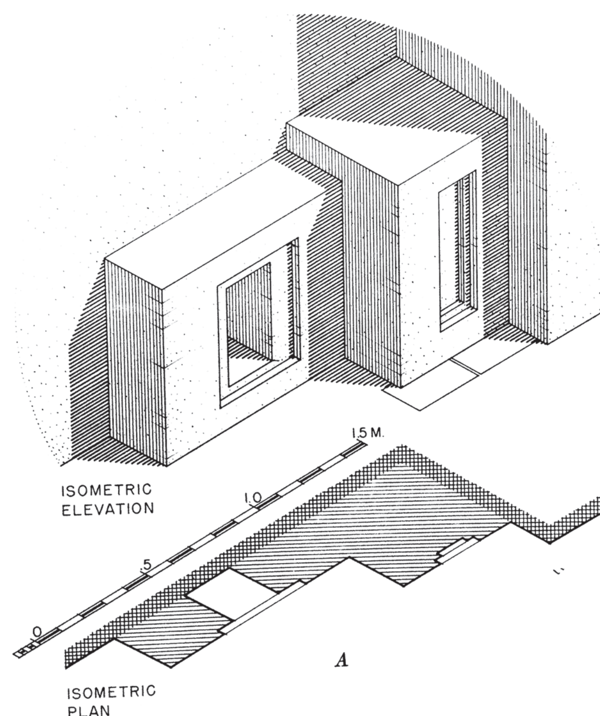

Fig. 14: Reconstruction of the altar in TB, level IV, 2, Room 222 at Nippur (after McCown/Haines 1967: pl. 69A).

40 Woolley calls them "tables" based on the textual evidence, which mentions the fact that the first-born child was in charge of the funerary cults and of the "table" to perform them (Brusasco 1999–2000: 134), but in describing the individual features he sometimes uses the term "pedestals" and seems to prefer their identification as bases or supports.

41 Woolley 1976: 146, fig. 40B, pl. 44.

42 Following his typical attitude, Woolley (1976: 145) accepted a suggestion by his workmen who referred to what happened in mosques.

43 Woolley (1976: 30) also maintains that he found the remains of light ceilings made of reeds; see also Stone 1987: 29.

44 McCown/Haines 1967: 146–147.

45 McCown/Haines 1967: Pls 40C, 69A.

46 Woolley 1976: 24–25; Brusasco 2007: 25–6; Brusasco 1999–2000: 66. At Nippur, where it was not possible to identify a "living room," it was proposed that the chapel was also used as a gathering place (McCown/Haines 1967: 146–147; Stone 1987: 86).

relation between vaulted tomb and chapel, was that in private houses some form of ancestor cult was practised: in my opinion, this is possible, because it is documented by the written evidence,[47] but not because of the flimsy correlation between tomb and chapel . A second proposal was based only on the presence of the chapels and connected it with the cult for "family gods": the presence of family gods is well attested in the Mesopotamian written evidence, though their nature is debated.[48] What seems certain, however, is that their cults were performed in temples, outside the houses.[49]

In order to propose an interpretation for the functions of these pieces of furniture, it might be necessary to really know how the people of Ur, Nippur, and Ešnunna spent their days, how they articulated spaces, and which activities really did take place within the domestic units.[50] We do not say anything new if we maintain that food processing and part of the textile production took place in the house and were mainly, but perhaps not exclusively, entrusted to the female members of the family. Archaeologically, these activities are documented by the presence of fixed and mobile hearths, by grinding stones and pestles, by loom weights and spindle whorls.[51] Male activities are related to the presence of tablets, tools, and weapons, which at Ur seem to concentrate in the main "living" areas, the courtyards, workshops, and stores.[52] Yet, in performing these activities, was the family self-referential, or was it in some measure open to contacts with the exterior? Is it possible that seasonal operations — especially the processing and storage of food — were collective, certainly involving groups connected by kin relations, but possibly also by neighbourhood relations, in an explicitly urban context? When we find in a house — often in relation with the chapels — cuneiform documents of an administrative nature, does this mean that the operations recorded were made inside that house, or were the documents only preserved in that context?

One problematic aspect was highlighted by E. Stone in her consideration of Nippur, which might, at least in part, be extended also to Ur albeit in a context which, based on textual analysis, seems quite different. In a phase of profound transformation of societies, there might have been some reshuffling of the population, which made the relations between more urbanised and less urbanised elements of the society more complicated.[53] At Ur, the context is apparently more homogeneously urban, but it is not static: families changed, and their fortunes and properties changed as well. In both towns, they might have felt the need for a strengthening of the traditional family bonds or for forging new relationships. In these instances, the house chapel might have played a role, providing a ritual space related to family traditions more than to official religion. Families had their family deity, who usually was one of the gods of the official pantheon, and thus had his/her own house, the temple, where

47 Castel/Charpin 1997: 250–51; Van der Toorn 1996. See also Charpin 1996: 224, where the youngest son becomes responsible for the safeguard of family traditions.

48 Jacobsen 1976: 160; Van der Toorn 1996: 70–2, 77; Selz 2004: 40–1; Hruša 2015: 31.

49 Van der Toorn 1996: 72–3. Ur seems to be a key-site for the study of the different typologies and functions of these three categories of cult places in an urban context. In a general way, according to the analysis I propose here, the private chapels were not real cult places, but rather places where individual households met for private ceremonies of different nature, related with the household's life. The small urban sanctuaries were probably not a deity's house – though a deity was certainly the owner of the place – but rather cult places of reference for all the households living in the region of the town where the sanctuary was: they were probably used to face the everyday needs of the peoples. The temples proper – the real houses of the gods – dominated visually the urban pattern and were the foci of the most important periodical ceremonies of the town's life. For this differentiation among the three kinds of cult places I refer to Dittmann's definition (2015: 71-2).

50 We can rule out some of the activities listed by Matthews (2003: 170) as typical of domestic contexts, like crop growing, care of domestic animals, hunt and food collection and also in part artefacts production, because they belong to country households, rather than to urban societies, as already noted by Collins 2013: 350.

51 In reality, at Ur the objects which may be considered as gender-related do not define fixed spaces in the house. For instance, benches and hearths may be found in the presumed "living" and also in "kitchens" (Brusasco 2007: 26), leading to the proposal that the kitchen could be also used as a living room; loom weights and spindle whorls are usually found with grindstones, pestles and bread ovens in spaces interpreted as courtyards (Bursasco 2007: 27), which are therefore considered female places: this is in contrast with the presumed segregation of women (*ibidem*: 35), because these open spaces are usually the main circulation nodes of the house.

52 Brusasco 2007: 28. In the light of these considerations, the identification of spaces in the textual evidence does not seem to find a perfect correlation in archaeology.

53 Stone 1987: 18. This is a peculiar moment in the history of ancient Mesopotamia: it witnessed the sedentarization of semi-nomadic tribes and the final affirmation of the Semitic part of the population (Liverani 2011: 266). It is a phase of great changes (Liverani 2011: 270 on the changes in agricultural patterns) and, as a consequence, of great uncertainty; at the same time, it is also the phase of the development of private enterprise and of the codification of the family in a definitely patrilinear way (Liverani 2011: 277–279). Economic and social factors led to profound changes in household organization between the end of the third and the beginning of the second millennium BC (Renger 2007: 191).

they received cult, and it is mentioned that members of the family went out of the house in order to honour the family god in the temple.[54] The house chapel, on the other hand, might represent family traditions and might be related to ancestor cults, hinting at the lineage of the family, whereas the built tomb should represent the same lineage in a physical sense, but not necessarily in relation to cult performance.

Somehow, the built tombs, and the eventual secondary burials, are a private matter of the family, whereas the chapel might be functional to external relations: in a restricted sense, these relations were with the enlarged family and probably even with distant segments of the same family, like the collateral members living outside the town; it might be possible that what was performed in the chapels might also help in enhancing relations with other social groups not related by kin, like neighbours, possibly as a complement to local sanctuaries, creating and reinforcing social bonds in an urban context in evolution.

54 Van der Toorn 1996: 72–73.

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