

The Temple of Ningirsu from Its Origins to the Present Day

Gudea's Dream and the French Rediscovery

More than 4,000 years ago, Gudea, the ruler of the Sumerian city of Girsu, had a dream in which he was visited by a supernatural being whose awe-inspiring presence, which took the form of a raging deluge, filled the entire cosmos (Fig. 1). The unearthly colossus wore the horned crown of a god and had the wings of the fabled Thunderbird. He was flanked by ferocious lions, who lay on the ground beside him, and he uttered some obscure words about the building of a house. Day seemed to break on the horizon. Then there was a woman, perhaps a high priestess, who placed a stylus of shining silver on a tablet that contained a chart of propitious stars, which she proceeded to consult, while a warrior outlined the plan of a building on a tablet of lapis lazuli. There was a basket and a brick mould, and birds twittered ceaselessly in a poplar tree. A stallion pawed at the ground.

Perplexed by his night vision, which is recorded at the beginning of the long narrative inscribed on the Cylinders of Gudea, the ruler set out on a mystic journey by sacred barge down the ancient canal that connected Girsu with the temple of Nanshe, a goddess known to interpret the dreams that were sent by other deities. She explained what he had seen: the divine being with the eagle-like wings of the Thunderbird and the body of a flood storm was Nanshe's brother Ningirsu, the supreme god of Girsu, who had commanded Gudea to build a magnificent temple in his honour. The dawning of day was a sign that Gudea's personal god, Ningishzida, would offer his assistance in the endeavour. The woman with the divinatory tablet was the goddess Nisaba,

bringing a bright star that augured well for the endeavour, while the mighty warrior was the god Ninduba, who was laying out the temple's design. The basket was ready to hold the first brick that would be made with the holy brick mould, and the noisy birds were a sign that the ruler would not be able to sleep until he had completed the project. Finally, the stallion was Gudea himself, eager to get on with the task. In a second oracular dream that was activated by an incubation ritual the god Ningirsu spoke directly to Gudea (A11):

Laying the foundations of my temple will bring immediate abundance. The great fields will grow rich for you: the levees and ditches will be full to the brim for you, and the water will rise for you to heights never reached by the water before. Under your rule, more oil than ever will be poured and more wool than ever will be weighed in Sumer.

Upon waking, Gudea mobilised the entire populace of Girsu to build Ningirsu's temple, and he dispatched heralds to the four corners of the earth to procure precious materials worthy of the god. While sacred hymns were sung and incantations were being recited, the ruler and a cohort of high priests performed consecration rituals and purifying rites in order to sanctify the sacred ground on which the temple was to stand. Among his numerous preparatory actions, Gudea cleansed the city, banishing ritually unclean and unpleasant-looking people, and he forbade debt collection and the burial of bodies. From far-off places, including Elam, Susa in Iran, Magan in Oman, the cedar mountains of Lebanon,



FIGURE 1. Statue of Gudea.
British Museum 122910.

and Meluhha in the Indus Valley, he procured an impressive array of expensive materials: cedar, ebony, gypsum, carnelian, diorite and alabaster, together with copper, silver and gold. The ruler's reach appeared boundless. When the work began, he consulted the heavens and precisely laid out the walls of the temple with pegs and ropes, as he had been instructed, and he performed the holiest construction rituals, notably the fabrication and consecration of the first brick, imbued with apotropaic properties, for which he solemnly moulded the clay. When the 'good brick' turned out to be the 'most beautiful' that could be imagined, as it is described in the Cylinder Inscriptions (A18), the entire state of Lagash spent the day celebrating. Then, as the construction of the temple proceeded, Gudea worked as a hands-on overseer, enthusiastically assisting the skilled craftsmen who were commissioned to create a building befitting Ningirsu's power and grandeur.

Foremost among the temple's features was the god's inner sanctum, made up of a sleeping chamber and a grand dining hall. Accompanying this inner space was a series of ancillary structures, including a room hung with Ningirsu's godly weapons, a gem storehouse, a wine cellar, a brewery, a chapel for commemorative offerings and a courtyard that echoed constantly with the sounds of prayers and kettle-drums. Bau, Ningirsu's wife, had her own private quarters in the form of a splendid personal shrine. Upon completion, the divine abode appeared both magnificent and formidable, like Imdugud (or Anzu), the radiant Thunderbird himself, as he appeared when he attacked the ill-fated mountain at the end of the world, striking from the sky with his fearsome, outstretched wings. After Gudea had introduced Ningirsu and Bau into the temple, substantially present in their carved representations, he commanded the entire population of Lagash to kneel and prostrate themselves. The Heroic God then made himself manifest, entering the temple complex as a terrible storm thundering into battle and subsequently emerging like the sun god rising over Lagash. The goddess Bau crossed the threshold of her sacred enclave like a respectable woman taking possession of her well-ordered household, and she emerged like the Tigris at high water when it benignly irrigates a verdant, fruitful garden. As a reward for his efforts, Gudea was showered with acclaim, and his land became marvellously fertile.

Four thousand years later, in 1877, Ernest de Sarzec, a French diplomat turned archaeologist, was posted to Basra in the

south-east corner of present-day Iraq, which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire. He had long nurtured an interest in archaeology, and he soon began to excavate at the site of Tello. Over the next half-century, Sarzec and his successors, led by Gaston Cros, Henri de Genouillac and André Parrot, unearthed fabulous hoards of inscribed clay tablets, archaic statues, bas-reliefs, votive artefacts and significant archaeological fragments of buildings, including some almost complete structures, that dated from the very distant past. They had discovered ancient Girsu, one of the major sacred centres of a bygone Mesopotamian civilisation that thrived in the third millennium BCE.

Most of the very early statues unearthed in Tello depicted the ruler Gudea, who reigned from around 2125 to 2100 BCE, and they all show him with his hands interlocked in a gesture of devout prayer. The inscriptions, set down in wedge-shaped cuneiform characters, were entrusted to two French philologists and epigraphers, Arthur Amiaud and François Thureau-Dangin, who soon discovered that the texts were in Sumerian, the world's oldest known written language. It has since been established that the cuneiform system of writing was developed in Sumer around 3200 BCE, but the very existence of Sumerian was first postulated by the Assyriologist Jules Oppert only in 1869, less than a decade before Sarzec first visited Tello.

The recovery of the Sumerian legacy was made possible by a remarkable series of archaeological achievements that produced extraordinary results, notwithstanding the inevitable missteps and regrettable losses. The pioneering explorers who worked among the ruins of crumbled mud-brick architecture were assisted from afar by linguistic scholars and historians, notably the Louvre curator Léon Heuzey, who pored over repositories of evidence, including objects, fragments of clay tablets and stone sculptures engraved with a largely unreadable script, together with the notes, sketches, plans and photos that were sent back from Iraq to Paris by the excavators. With great persistence, they jointly succeeded in shedding light on a forgotten world of archaic temples, palaces and concealed cities that had lain buried beneath the sands and alluvial silt of the Mesopotamian flood plain for thousands of years. Girsu, along with Lagash, its civic sibling and coequal in an overarching statehood that joined the two ancient cities and their associated territories in a single political structure, was one of a number of Sumerian urban centres, including Uruk, Eridu, Nippur and Ur, that were built

on the arid land between the Tigris and the Euphrates, where they prospered thanks to the life-giving waters of those two mighty rivers. In the century and a half since these sites first came to the attention of archaeologists, they have come to be recognised as some of the world's first cities.

Ningirsu and the Thunderbird

From the flourishing of the early proto-urban religious centres, through the more familiar historical cycle of rising and falling imperial powers, to the collapse of Seleucid rule in Babylonia in 150 BCE, Mesopotamia see-sawed dramatically between fragmentation and unification. From the outset, rival Sumerian cities rose to become seats of regional power or provincial satellites of hegemonic authorities (Akkad, Ur III and Babylon I, for example), striving for and sometimes achieving independence, before being subjugated once again. The pattern was repeated many times.

For much of the third millennium BCE, Sumer was a protean mosaic of rival city-states (notably Ur, Uruk, Lagash and Umma), each made up of one or more urban, political and religious centre(s) that were surrounded by a rural area containing a relatively dense network of settlements and a variety of other habitations. Economic and social activities were entirely dependent on the success of artificial irrigation that delivered water from the Tigris and the Euphrates via elaborate systems of canals and waterways. Cities crystallised around immemorial cult centres and charismatic proto-urban sanctuaries—the Ekur of Nippur, the Eanna of Uruk and the Eabzu of Eridu, to name just a few (Fig. 2).

The Sumerians believed that cities and their rural hinterlands were the property of divine overlords. Human rulers acted as the earthly representatives of the gods, stewarding their estates and striving conscientiously to promote the well-being of the land and its inhabitants by following divine instructions that were communicated in signs and portents that could be interpreted by schools of learned priests. The sky god, An, who was the founding ancestor of the celestial ruling dynasty and the ultimate source and guarantor of power both in heaven and on earth, resided at Uruk in the Eanna (or 'temple of heaven'), where he lived with Inanna (the 'lady of heaven'), the goddess of carnal love and warfare. Enki, the water god, who was the creator of all technical know-how and the foremost expert in magic, reigned in

Eridu, where he had his royal seat at the Eabzu (the 'temple of the watery deep', or the 'abyss'). Ur belonged to the moon god, Nanna (a male deity in Sumer), Larsa to Utu, the sun god, and so forth. Established on the basis of cultic allegiance to one or other of the major deities in the pantheon, Sumerian cities formed an amphictyony, or league of neighbouring states, that was centred around the great cult of Enlil at Nippur. Revered as the sovereign god of the cosmos and the pantheon's supreme divinity, Enlil was worshiped in the Ekur (the 'temple of the mountain'), where he presided over the plenary assembly of gods. The sign of his unsurpassed authority was the Tablet of Destinies, a supernatural object that was the emblem and talisman of his cosmic power.

Girsu belonged to Ningirsu (literally, the 'lord of Girsu'), Enlil's son and his most intrepid and warlike courtier—known as the Heroic God, he was tasked with combating demonic forces and maintaining cosmic order. His shrine was honoured as the sacred centre of the city-state of Lagash (later an extended consolidated territory) that lay in the south-easternmost part of the Mesopotamian alluvium, overlooking the storied shoreline of the Gulf, which in those days was situated a mere 30 km away from the city. Girsu looked north as well as south, however, for many of the chaos-inducing supernatural creatures that Ningirsu fought were believed to have their origins in the legendary Great Mountain in the northern reaches of the Sumerian world—the Taurus Mountains in present-day Turkey, where the Tigris and Euphrates rise. Overcoming the forces of disorder, the fearsome combatant god of Girsu harnessed the rampaging rivers and their tributaries, allowing the inhabitants of Sumer to create a network of canals that brought irrigation waters into Mesopotamia's agricultural floodplain.

Consequently, Ningirsu acquired a dual aspect: originally envisioned as a thundercloud, he was worshipped as the god of thunderstorms and floods, either fructifying or devastating. Sumerian myths depicted his warlike prowess in extravagant detail, sometimes focusing on his better-known hypostasis, Ninurta of Nippur. In the epic poem *Lugale* ('O king!'), Ningirsu, in his guise as the Heroic God, slays the malevolent archdemon Asag and vanquishes the villain's army of stone warriors with the help of his divine weapon—the magic mace, *Mow-down-a-myriad*, which is Ningirsu's Excalibur. *Lugale* is probably a condensed recasting of an archaic precursor poem, referred to under the title of the 'Myth of the Slain Heroes', which seems to have extolled



FIGURE 2. City-states of Sumer in the third millennium BCE.

Ningirsu's valiant exploits and glorious feasts. No longer extant, this earlier epic is alluded to in the inscriptions preserved on the Cylinders of Gudea, where it is said to describe the supernatural beings that Ningirsu captured as trophies, together with the legendary beasts defeated by the Heroic God, who is there referred to as the God of Wrath.

The most prominent of the fabulous beasts vanquished by Ningirsu—a feat that brought him eternal acclaim—was the demigod Imdugud, the mythical Thunderbird, which was a gigantic lion-headed eagle, with a body that flashed lightning and a roar that sounded like thunder (Fig. 3). Renowned for stealing the Tablet of Destinies—the symbol and guarantor



FIGURE 3. The Thunderbird Mace Head. British Museum 23287.

of Enlil's pre-eminence—this supernatural creature became Ningirsu's avatar and the emblem of Girsu. It was originally visualised as an enormous thundercloud in the shape of a bird, but was also considered to be the personification of the fabled South Wind—still recognised today in Iraq as the harbinger of devastating storms. In the myth entitled 'Anzu-bird and the Tablet of Destinies', the Heroic God—the chosen champion of the divine assembly—takes on the impetuous Thunderbird, who has stolen Enlil's potent tablet. Aided by the resourceful god, Enki, Ningirsu subdues the creature with his cohort of winds, re-establishing Enlil's divine authority and restoring equilibrium to the cosmic order ordained by the gods. Crucially, however, he doesn't slay the hybrid bird, but rather tames it, making it his heraldic symbol, and also his avatar or alter ego, such that the god and the Thunderbird were believed to have been mystically conjoined as one being. That is why Ningirsu is very often pictured with an emblematic Thunderbird, or even symbolised by an image of the supernatural creature, who appears as a representative aspect of his divinity. Invoking the myth that unites the god

and the fabulous bird, Imdugud's outstretched wings and irresistible talons, which are capable of seizing the fiercest predators, act in large part as a metaphor for the god's taming of the Mesopotamian wilderness.

The Meaning of the Temple

The crux of Sumerian polytheism can be described as a twofold response, articulated verbally in myths and hymns, and enacted in the rituals of cultic worship, to the particular experience of immanent confrontation with the supernatural that Rudolf Otto (1917) called a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The sense of terror could range from demonic fear through awe to a terrified awareness of sublime magnificence; fascination extended to an irresistible magnetism that demanded unconditional allegiance to the divine. Accordingly, the temple of the patron god was the most important and prominent landmark in every Sumerian city (Fig. 4). As was first clarified many years ago in the work of Jean

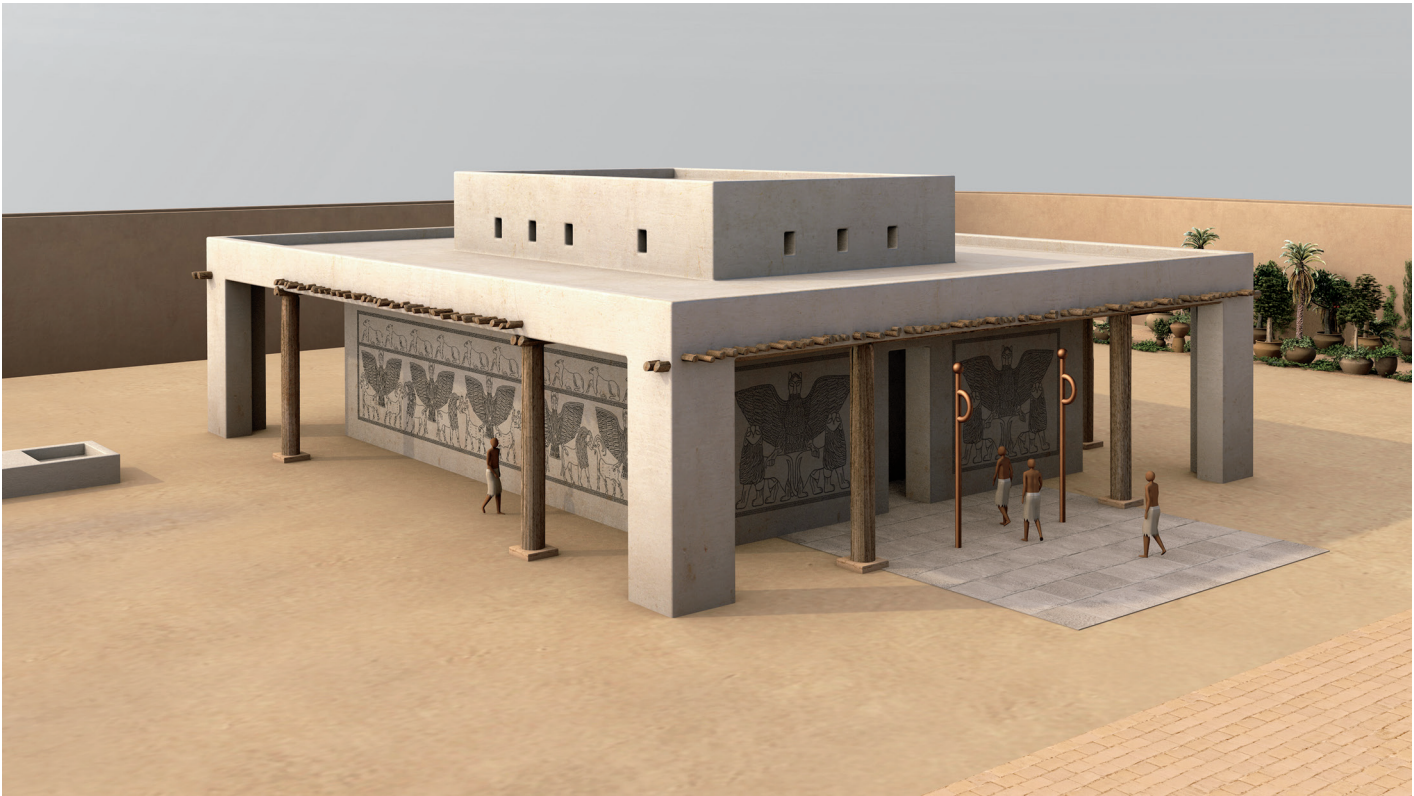


FIGURE 4. Reconstruction of the Early Dynastic Temple of Ningirsu.

Bottéro and Samuel Noah Kramer (1989), the theocentric liturgy in ancient Mesopotamia revolved around serving the gods—providing for their divine needs through sacrifice, libation and ritual, and constructing their magnificent abodes, which represented the pinnacle of sacred art and architecture. Revered as the actual house of the deity to which it was dedicated, the temple was, in the revealing phrase of Titus Burckhardt, a *sacratum*, where humans might experience with the utmost intensity the reality of the pattern that was imbued into the seeming indeterminacy of space and time. For whereas, in the contingent universe of unfolding events, time might take precedence over space, in the construction of the temple, time and space were conceptually intertwined as a continuum that expressed the order that was infused into the cosmos when the world was created. The site of the temple, thought of as a holy space or *locus sanctus*, was divinely ordained and remained sacred in perpetuity, so that any changes to its structure, including the raising of its foundations to a new level, or its removal to another site (an extremely rare occurrence that is perhaps uniquely

represented by the transfer of the Temple of Ningirsu in Girsu from Tell K to Tell A), were matters of the utmost seriousness that had to be duly consecrated and divinely approved. The Sumerians believed that the very idea of the temple, along with the principles of its design and attendant construction rituals, had been instituted by Enki, the most ingenious of the gods, and vouchsafed by him to the first rulers of Sumer.

A key organising principle of the temple's sacred space was the horizontal plane of the sanctified ground, where its base was established, added to which was the vertical dimension that was brought into being by the architectural structure. Through its design, scale and proportions, and most importantly on account of the way it was laid out, the building spatially encoded key elements of Sumerian cosmology in a material form, and so gave expression to the structured arrangement of nature. The temple was the mooring rope that exhibited and safeguarded the stable order of things, and its architectural principles were an expression of the divine assurance that the earth would remain productive because natural processes were dependable. It was the place

where humans could interact with, and be confronted by, the sublime tethering of nature's three principal realms, governed by their respective deities: An, the god of the celestial heavens; Enlil, the god of the earth and the air (what would now be called the atmosphere); and Enki, the water god. The temple's chief podium, considered as a metaphorical substitute for the sacred mountain, which, as Enlil's estate, was the supreme locus of divinity, symbolised strength and permanence. There was also a set of meanings based on the cardinal directions, because one absolute constant in the construction of a Sumerian temple was that its corners were aligned with the four cardinal points, marking their positions like a sacred compass. The image of the compass should not be misunderstood, however, because (as is discussed in Chapter 14) the presiding concept bears no resemblance to the modern notion of a circular device with a magnetic needle that turns on a central pivot. For ancient Sumerians the earth was laid out as a grid pattern, with a primary, north–south axis (or series of parallel axes, to be more precise), from which the other cardinal points were derived. To a greater or lesser degree the arrangement was reflected in the marking out not only of temples, but also of fields and plots of lands, with surveyors' pegs and ropes. This foundational action is referenced repeatedly in the texts and images that provide the most profound insights into the Sumerian system of the world as it is demonstrated in their temple architecture. The holiest buildings did not therefore reveal the structure of the cosmos in a merely allegorical or symbolic way. Instead, they gave actual physical form to principles that were woven into the texture of reality, rendering them more apparent and allowing them to be more intensely experienced, such that the difference between the sacred space of the temple and the outside world was a matter only of degree, and not one of quality. Consequently, the temple was the real embodiment and confirmation of the universal order that had been established when the heavens and the earth were formed from chaos.

The sacred character of the spaces within Sumerian sanctuaries was graded and differentiated to create a sacral hierarchy, with the innermost sanctum—the meeting point of terrestrial and divine realms—at its core. Moving away from the centre towards the periphery, successive zones became less profoundly sacred. There were certain necessary, permanent features that Sumerian temples had to have (see Chanteau 2017). These included the enclosing temenos wall (whose precise form changed over time) that separated

the holy interior of the sacred precinct from the less sacred or secular exterior, an altar for sacrifices and libations, and a podium on which stood the material incarnation of the deity—the divine cult statue. This holiest of platforms was, in the purest sense, the locus of the divine: the point that anchored the earth amid the billowing cosmic waters, with the immeasurable reservoir of sweet water below and the limitless oceans of salt waves all around. The way in which the sacred walls and installations expressed these beliefs meant that temple architecture was performative, not contemplative, and its sanctity was affirmed in ceremonial events: the rituals of consecration and activation rites.

The temple was a local instantiation of the cosmic order—the place where the ruler and higher clergy could implement awe-inspiring interactions with the god (Fig. 5). This reflected the political realities of the state, but these were inextricably linked to deeply held religious beliefs. In the ground beneath the building, temple guardians in the form of horned deities that supported, held or embodied foundation pegs were solemnly entombed in symbolic deposits, often together with dedicatory tablets that were commissioned by the presiding Sumerian ruler, and in later times they were also inscribed in his name. Inside, the sanctuary paid homage to a panoply of lesser divinities, and it was furnished with a set of occult objects that facilitated the performance of the cosmic offices of its chief god. At certain periods, the council of supernatural beings was enshrined in a series of ancillary chapels and banqueting halls, while sacred objects were at all times housed in treasuries belonging to the deity. The holy building's elaborate construction featured transitional, or locular spaces to support and enhance religious practices. They included ceremonial stairways and gateways, open-air ambulatories, processional routes and sacred courtyards, along with a range of service rooms that contained cultic appurtenances and equipment associated with offering rituals.

The Origins and Evolution of the Ningirsu Temple

In their pioneering excavations of Girsu, Sarzec and his successors exhumed rich archaeological remains in an area that they called the Mound of the House of the Fruits (*La Maison des fruits*), or Tell K. This turned out to be a series of shrines containing abundant religious accessories dedicated



FIGURE 5. Artist's impression of a Sumerian temple, showing the temple façade (right) and the enclosing temenos wall.

to Ningirsu that dated from around 3000 BCE to 2300 BCE. The first explorers had brought to light parts of the earliest temple complex devoted to the tutelary deity of Girsu, who was the divine proprietor of Lagash. Instituted in the Early Dynastic I epoch (3000–2600 BCE), well before the reign of Ur-Nanshe (c.2450 BCE), the founder of the First Dynasty of Lagash, the ancient temple establishment was developed by successive rulers in the course of the entire Early Dynastic period. In essence, it was an expansive religious precinct, which was constructed on a large artificial mound made of mud-bricks that was significantly raised above the surrounding flood plain. It was accessed by ceremonial stairways, as well as by some more utilitarian ascents. From at least

the time of Ur-Nanshe, the elevated sacred summit was surrounded by an oval-shaped temenos, or bounding wall that was fitted with a monumental gatehouse and subsidiary entrances, and throughout its entire history the temple's inner sanctum was made up of an enclosed rectangular shrine that housed two rooms: the cella, where the statue of the divinity was displayed, and the antecella, which was a treasury or trophy room. Fronted by a ceremonial approach that included a gentle slope or stairway, the holiest rooms of the earliest Ningirsu temple were situated underground, but subsequent temples stood on the top of the mound, and at certain periods in its later history the temple building was raised on a podium that elevated it above the rest of the sacred summit.

As was standard in Sumerian sacred architecture, the corners of the temple's bipartite core were meticulously oriented to the cardinal points (although, for reasons that are discussed in Chapter 12, the placement of the Lower Construction, the earliest of the Tell K Ningirsu shrines, was slightly anomalous), and this vitally important fact might have affected the placement of the neighbouring structures. Around the main building were the temple annexes: offices, service apartments and other facilities needed for religious practices.

A wealth of cuneiform inscriptions recovered from in and around the House of the Fruits on Tell K sheds some light on how the early temple developed. Among them are an exceptional archaic plaque known as the Feathered Figure (the *Figure aux plumes*; Fig. 6), a beautifully carved mace head donated to the temple by Mesalim of Kish (Fig. 7), who was a contemporary of Lugalshaengur of Lagash, together with dedicatory and commemorative artefacts commissioned by later rulers, notably Ur-Nanshe, Eanatum, Enmetena and Urukagina. These indicate that, as successive rulers raised

and enlarged the shrine over many generations, the form of the earliest version of the temple gradually evolved to incorporate an expanded area with a network of buildings, including an area known as the 'broad' courtyard (*kisal-daġal*), a sacred well (*pú.šeg₁₂*), a brewery (*é.bappir*) and a coach house for the god (*é.^{ges}gigir.ra*).

The last manifestation of the sequence of Ningirsu temples that were constructed on Tell K between the time of the Lower Construction and the reign of Urukagina was razed to the ground towards the end of the Early Dynastic III period (c.2300 BCE), when Girsu was finally conquered by Lugalzagesi, the ruler of Umma (and Uruk). This catastrophic event left behind an identifiable destruction horizon that included the defaced and smashed remains of highly significant cult objects that were removed from their sacred settings and deliberately desecrated. More generally, the French pioneers unearthed numerous sacred treasures dating from about 3000 BCE to around 2350 BCE on the Mound of the House of the Fruits, but they found no traces there of the later temple



FIGURE 6. The Feathered Figure. Musée du Louvre AO221.



FIGURE 7. The Mace of Mesilim. Musée du Louvre AO2349.

to Ningirsu that was thought to have been built by Gudea sometime between 2125 BCE and 2100 BCE. Consequently, the inferred New Eninnu dating to the time of Gudea, which could not be found on the site of previous temples to Ningirsu, soon became one of the most sought-after archaeological structures in all of Mesopotamia. The history that gradually emerged, and which has now been rewritten in the comprehensive reinterpretation of the archaeology of Tell K outlined in Part 2 of this book, together with the results of the British Museum team's re-excavation of Tell A that are recorded in Part 3, shows that the early quest for the Gudea temple was hindered by some severe misunderstandings. First, because the sequence postulated by Sarzec, Heuzey and their early successors for constructions that are now known to have been built after the time of Ur-Nanshe was disastrously oversimplified and therefore categorically mistaken in some critical respects; and secondly, because the Gudea temple that the early explorers expected to find on Tell K was actually the New Eninnu that Gudea constructed on Tell A.

The sequence of temples that were built on Tell K, followed by Gudea's New Eninnu on Tell A, were known by a succession of different appellations, while particular instantiations were often given more than one name. This was in accord with the practice in ancient Sumer more generally, where temples were regularly known by several names—official and ceremonial, ordinary or popular—as well as by other epithets and by-names that were brought into being for specific reasons (George 1993, pp. 59–63). Not all of the preserved titles for a particular temple were in constant use, and a selection of names was drawn upon at different periods, with the shifting nomenclature reflecting historical changes in the temple's architecture and also in contemporary religious practices, which did not remain static over time. Some names expressed new beliefs (or newly emphasised strands of belief) about the functions and particular powers of the temple's divine occupant, condensing particular aspects of the mythology surrounding the god into compound appellations. Special epithets were sometimes applied to mark

important construction or refurbishment projects that were carried out by named rulers who wished to associate their own pious legacies as caretakers of the temple with the crowning achievement of their reigns. New titles given to temples might also reflect the changing conception of the relationship between the temple and the polis, and the developing sociopolitical order.

The name of the first Ningirsu temple on Tell K, dating back to the Early Dynastic I period and now known as the Lower Construction (following Sarzec's usage), is preserved on the Feathered Figure—the small, but extraordinarily significant stone monument, carved with words and images, that shows Ningirsu taking possession of his new residence. The temple is there referred to as *é.^dNin.ĝir.su*, which literally means the 'house of Ningirsu', and its elemental signification was doubtless intended to have a specially powerful and immediate impact. With the ascent to the throne of Ur-Nanshe, some 500 years after the epoch of the Lower Construction, the politico-religious landscape of Girsu–Lagash underwent numerous profound changes. In this context, the Tell K temple, in the iteration now referred to as the Ur-Nanshe Building (again following Sarzec), was entirely redesigned and rebuilt on a freshly raised sacred summit (thereby contrasting markedly with its subterranean predecessor), and the entire sacred complex was enlarged and replanned. To reflect these changes in the territory's political and religious organisation, Ur-Nanshe added a new name to the time-honoured epithet (*é.^dNin.ĝir.su*) recorded on the Feathered Figure, and the complex was now also known as *èš.ĝir.sú*, meaning the 'sanctuary of Girsu'. This stressed the role of the god's sacred city (the extensive area of more and less substantial sacred mounds and buildings of which Girsu was formed) as the religious centre of Ur-Nanshe's enlarged and re-established state: the tripolis that united Girsu, Lagash and Ur-Nanshe's native home of Nigin as a single political entity. It is important to note that the earlier and later terms, the 'house of Ningirsu' and the 'sanctuary of Girsu', were alternates that were never used together in a single Ur-Nanshe inscription. Accordingly, although their specific connotations were different, with one epithet stressing the temple's age-old primal sanctity and the other highlighting the new order ushered in by Ur-Nanshe, they were considered to be equivalents, and both could be used to designate the Ur-Nanshe religious complex on Tell K (Falkenstein 1966, p. 117).

After the reign of Ur-Nanshe, these two names were replaced in royal inscriptions by titles that were probably coined to describe the various expansions and reorganisations of the state's cult centre that took place under subsequent rulers, and also to fulfil some of the more general purposes outlined above. The most famous name of the Ningirsu temple, *é.ninnu*, meaning 'house fifty', which was a specially auspicious choice, and its equally illustrious counterpart, *anzu^{mušen}.bábbar*, referring to Imdugud, the White Thunderbird, are relative latecomers in the temple's long history. The seminal term *é.ninnu* is first attested during the reign of Enanatum I (Falkenstein 1966, p. 117) on a superb white mace head dedicated to Ningirsu by one of the king's legates, on which the god Ningirsu is integrated with his avatar—the Thunderbird or lion-headed eagle. The assimilation was by no means new, of course. Indeed, it is attested on the Ningirsu temple's foundational document, the Feathered Figure, where the plumes that adorn the god's crown represent the wings of Imdugud. Similarly, some rare archaic bricks survive that are stamped with images of the Thunderbird with outstretched wings, and these doubtless originate from one of the temple's ancient iterations. Unfortunately, none were found *in situ*, but they testify to the antiquity of the fusion of the god and the mythical hybrid bird. The term *Eninnu* ('house fifty') refers to the fifty divine powers of Enlil, which he granted to his filial champion, Ningirsu. In this context, where 'fifty' stands for an infinite plenitude, the word *Eninnu* is perhaps best translated as the 'house of the almighty'.

Like that of Ur-Nanshe, the reign of Enmetena also saw a consolidation and reshaping of the territory of Ningirsu. Under Enmetena the state of Lagash as a whole was expanded significantly, and this was accompanied by a major renovation of the god's sanctuary on Tell K. To mark these events the ruler furnished the sacred precinct with a new epithet, *èš.gi.^dNin.ĝir.su.ka* (the 'reed sanctuary of Ningirsu'), which was also used in the form of a by-name, *èš.gi.gi.gù.na*, meaning the 'reed sanctuary of the giguna', or the 'multi-coloured reeds'. Crucially, the term *èš.gi.gi.gù.na* did not replace the word *Eninnu*, which was still the undisputed official ceremonial name for the temple in other Enmetena royal inscriptions. As in the time of Ur-Nanshe, when the older and newer titles (the 'house of Ningirsu' and the 'sanctuary of Girsu') were used concurrently, here too 'house fifty' and the 'multi-coloured reeds' were clearly equivalent ways of referring to

the temple in its setting (Falkenstein 1966, p. 135; and Selz 1995, p. 228).

As evidenced by the inscriptions on the Feathered Figure, the relationship between sacred reeds and Ningirsu, like the association between the god and the Thunderbird, was also extremely ancient. The connection is found again in the beautiful Hymn to the Reeds (Fig. 8) from the time of Ur-Nanshe, a paean to the god's potent generative power (RIME 1.9.1.32):

O shining reed!
 O reed of the canebrake of the fresh water source!
 O reed, you whose branches grow luxuriantly.
 After the god Enki set your roots in the (post) hole,
 your branches greet the day (or the sun god).
 Your 'beard' (is made of) of lapis-lazuli.
 O reed that comes forth (from) the shining mountain,
 O reed, may the Earth lords and the Earth princes
 bow down (before you).

May the god Enki pronounce a (favourable) omen
 (for your construction).

Its shining renowned standard(?)

The god Enki cast it (with?) his (magic) loop.

Praise (be to) Ningirsu!

Šul-MUŠ×PA, the personal god of the king,
 carried the shining work basket.

Ur-Nanshe, king of Lagash, son of Gunidu,
 (he was) 'son' of Gursar, built the
 'Shrine-Girsu'.

The fame of the name é.ninnu.anzu^{mušen}.bábbar, meaning 'house fifty: the White Thunderbird', which was known throughout Mesopotamia, was a later phenomenon that can be attributed to Ur-Bau, from whom it was adopted by Gudea. It was used in every Gudea inscription, including the Cylinder Inscriptions, where it was chosen to designate the massively enlarged temple complex built by Gudea on Tell A, which combined the many buildings and



FIGURE 8. Tablet containing the Hymn to the Reeds. Musée du Louvre AO3866.

installations that had been gradually added to the evolving ancient precinct over many centuries into a centrally planned totality. Encapsulating the new sense of grandeur, Gudea's novel term, *é.ninnu.anzu^{mušen}.bábbar*, crystallised numerous meanings associated with the succession of Ningirsu temples on Tells K and A, and also with Sumerian temples at large. In this context it is worth recalling the point made long ago by Thorkild Jacobsen (1976), that the special sanctity of the temple derived from the fact that it was perceived not only as the abode of the god but also as the principal medium through which the deity exercised his or her cosmic functions. The temple and the god could therefore be conceived of almost as one and the same thing. Much more than a theatrical backdrop for religious ceremonies, the sacred space channelled the deity's sublime energy, thereby playing a performative role in the divine offices that were carried out within its walls. Similarly, Ningirsu's power was made vividly manifest in the form of thunderclouds and thunderstorms, and this is one of the several meanings that come together in the Gudea epithet, *é.ninnu.anzu^{mušen}.bábbar*. It was used to express the belief that the almighty power of Ningirsu (invested in him by Enlil) was instilled into the very fabric of the building, with the further addition of the image of the white flashing, or radiant Thunderbird to signify the god in his pre-anthropomorphic shape as a lion-headed eagle, recalling the fact that he tamed the wilderness and therefore invoking Ningirsu in his dual aspect as the god of the storm, and also as the god of irrigation and agricultural abundance. Although the expressive term was used alongside other epithets and by-names, it gradually eclipsed its counterparts, acquiring a charisma that ensured it remained current after the later renovations of the Gudea temple by the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and the further refurbishments that were subsequently carried out in the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian periods.

Gudea the Architect: The New Ningirsu Temple

The design of the temple built by Gudea was revealed to Sarzec and Thureau-Dangin in exquisite detail after the deciphering of two extraordinarily important monuments from ancient Girsu—the Cylinder Inscriptions of Gudea and a statue, known as the Architect with a Plan (Statue B),

that shows Gudea at prayer, supporting a tablet on his lap, on which is drawn the plan of the outer wall of a sacred complex dedicated to Ningirsu. Dating from around 2120 BCE, these two treasures of Sumerian culture were unearthed by Sarzec in 1877 and 1880, soon after he first started work on the site. They came to the attention of an international public when they were shown at the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris and they have never since ceased to inspire a long list of artists and intellectuals. The two masterworks were unearthed along with a plethora of dedicatory artefacts, among which were inscribed cones, ritual tablets, foundation pegs, door sockets, temple plaques, votive steles, mace heads and dedicatory vases, all commemorating in abridged and standardised form Gudea's construction of the magnificent enlarged Ningirsu sanctuary. Like a performative mantra the same formula is repeated on these objects over and over again: 'For the god Ningirsu, Enlil's mighty hero, Gudea, the ruler of Lagash, has made everything function as it should and built for him his Eninnu, house fifty: the White Thunderbird, restoring it to its proper place.'

The celebrated Cylinder Inscriptions, which form the longest literary work that survives from ancient Sumer, were inscribed on the Cylinders of Gudea: two hollow terracotta cylinders that were filled with a substance described by Sarzec as 'plaster' and finished at each end with specially made conical plugs (Fig. 9). Remarkably, despite their inherent fragility, the two preserved cylinders were found intact at the base of Tell K on a low hillock or monticule labelled by Sarzec as Tell I' (also known as the Mound of the Turning Path). The text they contain is made up of a hymn to the god and a royal chronicle that celebrates Gudea's huge building project, the crowning event of his reign. The preserved cylinders, A and B, were originally two parts of a trilogy, entitled 'Ningirsu's House Having Been Built', that was completed with an inferred Lost Cylinder. Cylinder A narrates the epiphany described above, when Ningirsu appears to Gudea in a dream and gives enigmatic instructions for the building of his new dwelling. This is followed by Gudea's visit to the goddess Nanshe, who interprets the dream narrative, and then comes the description of the long series of events that culminate in the construction of the glorious new place of worship. Cylinder B describes the introduction into the sanctuary of the Heroic God and his consort, the goddess Bau, together with Ningirsu's divine household—the company of lesser divinities that attend the divine couple. It also records the rituals



FIGURE 9. The Cylinders of Gudea: Cylinder A (left) and B (right). Musée du Louvre MNB1512 and MNB1511.

of consecration and inauguration that were carried out in order to make the holy buildings ready to accommodate the divinities. The Lost Cylinder, which is known only from a few cuneiform fragments, probably contained the prologue to the temple hymn, and a narrative of Ningirsu's famous exploits, most importantly his subduing of the Thunderbird. Acting as an *imago mundi*, the Cylinder Inscriptions encapsulate all the essential particulars of the sacred world of the Sumerians, dividing them thematically into two principal components: metaphors of power, expressing authority (the assembly of the gods and kingship), productivity and righteousness; and ideograms of the cosmos, expressing order and chaos, primordial combat and the divine temple.

The portrait of Gudea as the Architect with a Plan (Statue B; Fig. 10), which was found on the Mound of the Palace (Tell A), is a miracle of archaic statuary. Carved in the round from a large piece of diorite, which is a hard and durable stone that is not easy to work, but which is capable of expressing fine details and taking a high polish, the statue's material substance was intended as a symbol of permanence. On his lap the seated ruler holds a tablet that features the precisely incised blueprint of a religious precinct, together with a surveyor's measuring rod and peg (used to establish the ground plans of buildings), and a symbolic altar displaying the divine horns that are in this case probably an attribute of Ningirsu. The plan itself is a clear orthogonal projection



FIGURE 10. Gudea as the Architect with a Plan (Statue B). Musée du Louvre AO2.

that depicts the outlines of the extremely thick containing wall that demarcates the boundary between areas that were held to be merely, or ordinarily sacred and the holiest inner sanctum. The *enceinte* or main enclosure of the entire complex is reinforced by external buttresses and pierced by monumental gates that are decorated with recesses and pilasters, and flanked by large towers (Fig. 11).

Some of the incised marks on Statue B encode what is apparently the world's first scientific measuring system, based on a standard unit that is divided into fractions. In this context, it should be recalled that metrology, or the art of measurement, was believed by the Sumerians to be the mother of all languages—the language of the gods—and when, in the

Cylinder Inscriptions, Gudea lays out the temple walls he is compared to the goddess Nisaba, who knows and safeguards the 'inmost secrets of numbers' (A19). The dream narrative recorded on the Cylinder Inscriptions includes the designing of Ningirsu's temple by the god Ninduba, who draws on a tablet of lapis lazuli, and the plan that rests on Gudea's lap has therefore tentatively been thought to be a carved representation of that divinely ordained and inspired blueprint. This can now be confirmed because the British Museum team's excavations show that the design documented on the statue does indeed represent the actual layout of Gudea's New Eninnu, the latest iteration of the shrine to Ningirsu, which came to be regarded in Sumerian times as one of the most sacred places in all of Mesopotamia. The sanctuary was praised from the earliest times for its splendour and magnificence, and as the Cylinder Inscriptions relate, its construction required social organisation, human and economic resources, on a previously unheard-of scale.

The performative role of the temple was expressed through the careful placement in its walls of ritual cones, the display of votive artefacts and the formation of liminal spaces that were marked by the symbolic thresholds and exceptionally thick walls that are shown on the blueprint on Statue B. Combined with incantations, prayers and offerings, these emblematic features were intended to capture, contain and channel the awesome, impetuous aura of the Heroic God, conceived of as an imposing radiance—a 'numinous power', to use Rudolf Otto's phrase. The belief that divine forces could be harnessed by means of the temple lies at the heart of Sumerian religion, and it is against this doctrinal background that Gudea's architectural programme should be understood. In accordance with the god's own plan, he not only built a dramatically updated version of the original temple and its successors that had stood on Tell K for centuries, he also consciously reshaped the newly instituted sacred space as a conduit for the god's energy and functions. These beliefs were enacted in every detail of the building's construction. Horned deities holding ritual foundation pegs delineated the hallowed ground and symbolically stabilised the religious complex between the earth and the sky, like a huge ship at anchor. Temple cones, or clay nails, acted like lightning rods, channelling the god's sublime aura, which was then contained inside the massive walls. As they brought offerings, passing through a portal embellished with inscribed stones, worshippers and the clergy entered the temple's *sanctum*



FIGURE 11. Reconstruction of Gudea's New Eninnu on the summit of Tell A, showing the enormous temenos walls (in grey) and the massive ascending platforms on which the complex was built. The model gives visual form to the text of the Cylinder Inscriptions and the information recorded on Statue B.

sanctorum at right angles to the divine cult statue so that they could avoid facing it directly, shielding their eyes, as it were, to protect themselves from the formidable power of the god's gaze and radiance.

The Big Move and the Hellenistic Complex

The Architect with a Plan is part of an abundant set of stunning finds made by Sarzec on the Mound of the Palace (Tell A) that included other Lagash II inscribed sculptures portraying Gudea and his immediate predecessor, Ur-Bau, in similarly devout attitudes that are signalled by their interlocked hands (Fig. 12). Of extreme significance, however, is the fact that the Lagash II statuary from Tell A was found not in a Sumerian setting, but among Hellenistic archaeological remains dating from the late fourth to the third century BCE—the epoch of Alexandrian and Seleucid Babylonia

that was inaugurated after the arrival in Babylon of Alexander the Great, some 2,000 years after Girsu flourished under Gudea. Accordingly, the first architectural structures that the French pioneers unearthed on the Mound of the Palace turned out to be the ruins of a Hellenistic complex that was constructed by an enigmatic figure named Adadnadinakhe, who was long thought to have been the local ruler of a principality in the fading Seleucid kingdom. It was conjectured that this provincial governor, who seemingly cultivated a taste for antiquities, must have collected ancient statues as relics to display in his palatine complex. The palace, it was further supposed, was intended to be the epicentre of an emerging regional power until Adadnadinakhe's ambitions were crushed by the arrival of the Parthians, sometime around the middle of the second century BCE. Partly contradicting this narrative, it has subsequently been thought more likely that Adadnadinakhe was a local dignitary, possibly a high priest or a chief scribe, who operated under Seleucid tutelage, and that

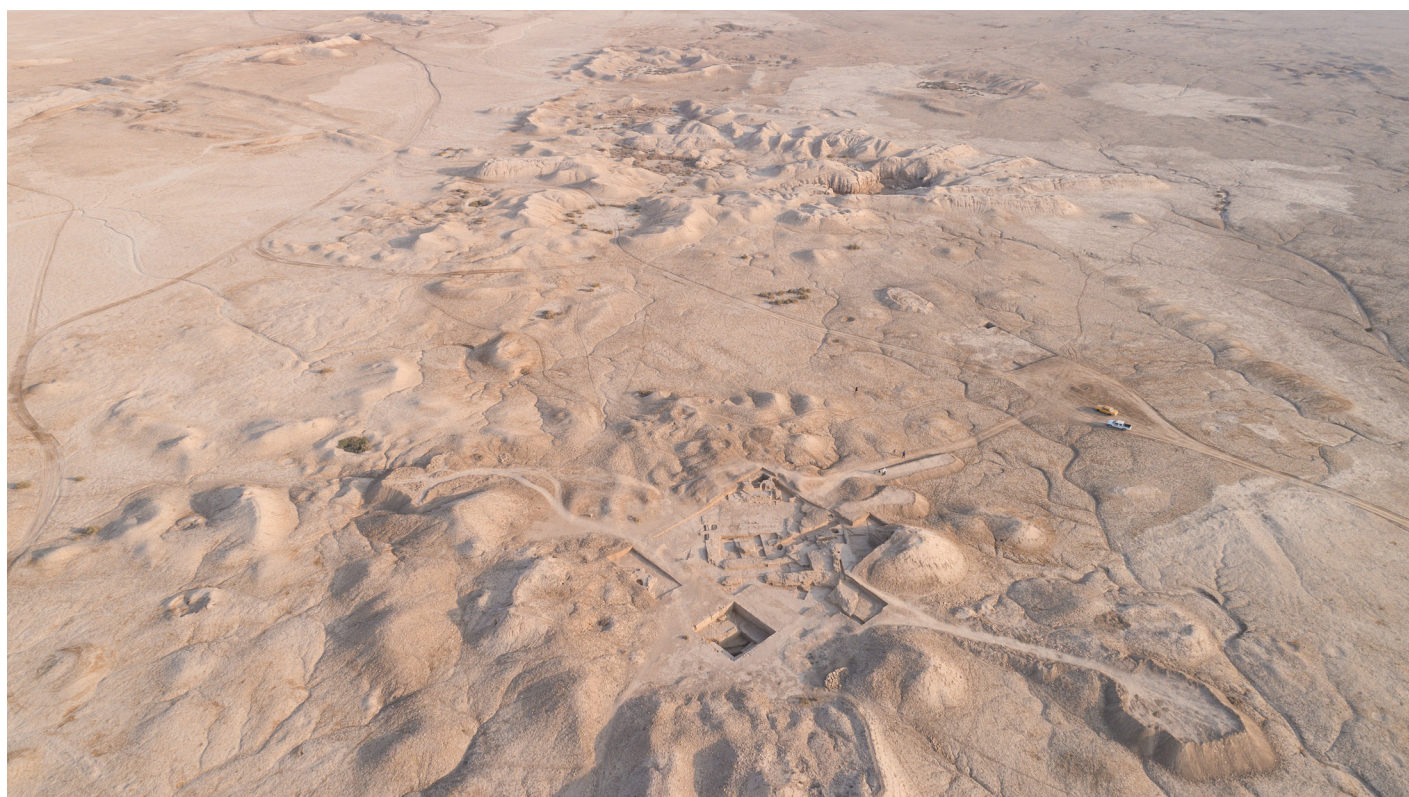


FIGURE 12. South-facing view of the sacred precinct of Girsu (the Urukug) in 2017, showing Tell A in the foreground and Tell K in the distance. The British Museum team's main excavation area can be seen in the centre of Tell A; the irregular mounds dotted around Tells A and K are the spoil heaps left by the French excavators.

he built and furnished a memorial shrine in honour of the ancestral rulers of Mesopotamia. The ancient artefacts that he collected were therefore displayed not in a working palace or administrative centre but in a temple or place of remembrance and worship that was erected by Adadnadinakhe above the ravaged remains of the sacred metropolis of Girsu on Tell A, probably with the consent of the Seleucids.

As is detailed in Part 4 below, the findings of the British Museum team mean that both of these narratives can be superseded by a much more complete historical account of the origins and development of the Hellenistic shrine. Adadnadinakhe perpetuated the immemorial Sumerian rituals of burying foundation deposits and stamping bricks with his theophoric name in both Aramaic and Greek characters, and he unearthed the famous statues of Gudea, which were displayed alongside a range of other ancient and contemporary artefacts in a temple that combined aspects of Mesopotamian and Hellenistic worship. The updated shrine was

purposefully and carefully built on the fragmentary remains of the Sumerian religious platforms that were buried in the Mound of the Palace. Thanks to his diligence, Adadnadinakhe's archaising Babylonian name (literally meaning 'Adad the god, the giver of brothers'), which was recorded on the Hellenistic-era bricks that were laid under his authority on Tell A, became inextricably connected with what is now known to be the final flowering of the extended series of temples devoted to Ningirsu that date back to the time of the Lower Construction on Tell K.

Two thousand years later, when the French pioneers of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century CE explored Tell A, they found an array of disconnected items, including Hellenistic remains, that were all thought at first to have formed parts of the structure of the new sanctuary that was believed to have been built by Gudea. Gradually, the Sumerian archaeology was disentangled from the much later strata. The former included ritual deposits that took

the form of stone tablets inscribed in the names of Gudea and his immediate forerunner, Ur-Bau, together with copper figurines of deities shaped into (or holding) inscribed foundation pegs (Fig. 13). Additional confusion was caused by the fact that quantities of Sumerian inscribed and stamped bricks, dedicated to Ningirsu and deriving from Tell A, were later used by the French archaeologists to build dig houses on the site. Considered in conjunction with the history of the early shrines found on the Mound of the House of the Fruits, however, the rich assemblage of deposits found on Tell A suggested that the sacred nucleus on Tell K, around which the sacred city of Girsu developed over centuries, was transferred to the Mound of the Palace in the Lagash II period. The relocation, which was carried out by Ur-Bau, profoundly contradicted the timeless Sumerian tradition of constructing temple after temple to a particular god on the same spot. It therefore represented a radical disruption of the spatio-temporal continuity that was believed by the Sumerians to be absolutely fundamental to the maintenance of social and cosmic order. Such an extraordinary break with a pattern of belief that had, in effect, the force of a sacred natural law had to be justified by a complex apparatus of theological reasoning and explanation, and broader ideological discourse. Above all, it had to be authorised by a command issuing from the god Ningirsu himself. No explanatory documents from the reign of Ur-Bau have survived, but with regard to the New Eninnu of Gudea, these conditions were fulfilled by the cumulative effect of the fabulous objects previously described. More explicitly, the Cylinder Inscriptions, which chronicle the god's theophany and his command that Gudea should build a new temple, were publicly displayed in a purpose-built shrine on Tell K, while the divine blueprint was carved in hard diorite for all time on the tablet on Statue B. In addition, a myriad votive objects were commissioned that restate the Gudea mantra, largely borrowed from his predecessor, Ur-Bau, that echoes *ad infinitum* the status of the god, the power of the temple and the legacy of the ruler.

The proclamations provide the theological grounds for the grand reconstruction of the temple on its new site on Tell A, following the epoch-making transfer of the locus of worship by Gudea's father-in-law, Ur-Bau—a change that was crowned by the construction of Gudea's New Eninnu. The audacious development was perhaps partly caused and made easier by the series of tumultuous upheavals that had taken place in Lagash over the preceding century. They began

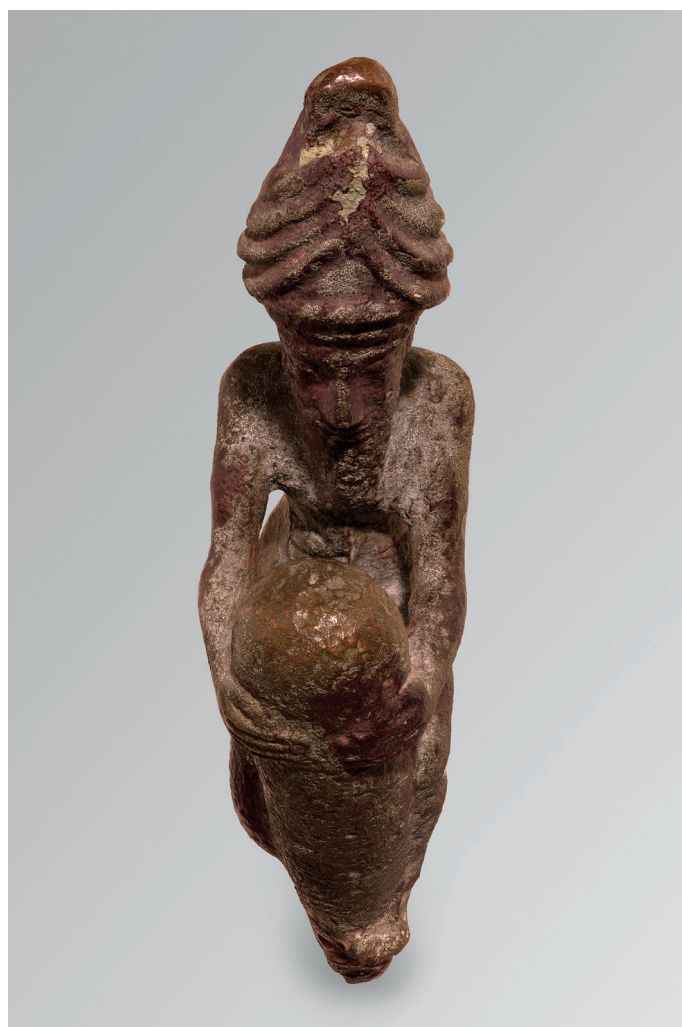


FIGURE 13. A copper foundation peg from Gudea's New Eninnu; the object is shaped as a kneeling horned deity supporting an oversized peg (here seen from above). British Museum 96566.

around 2300 BCE with the devastating invasion led by Lugalzagesi, who conducted a widespread campaign of destruction that laid waste to urban and rural places of worship, obliterating the state's most important sanctuary on Tell K. The disruption continued with the advent of the Akkad conquerors, led by Sargon of Akkad, who took control of the entire region, including Lagash, from about 2300 BCE to 2250 BCE. With the liberation of Lagash after the downfall of the Akkad regime, the state of Lagash enjoyed a new lease of life, but the ancient shrine to its tutelary god on Tell K in the sacred city of Girsu was undoubtedly little more than a grotesque shadow of its former self. Ur-Bau and Gudea therefore ushered in a new era—a social, cultural and economic

renaissance—that was expressed first in Ur-Bau’s renewal of the territory’s principal temple in its changed location on Tell A, and subsequently by Gudea’s construction of the New Eninnu.

A Summary of the British Museum Team’s Research

Once a radiant centre that was renowned throughout Mesopotamia, Girsu was forgotten for millennia, when it lay buried in the life-sustaining flood plain of the Fertile Crescent. Released from the interred ruins, but weathered beyond recognition by centuries of wind and rain, some votive artefacts dedicated to the Sumerian deities Ningirsu, Bau, Nanshe and the rest of the pantheon occasionally surfaced to provide an

obscure glimpse of the antique sacredness of Girsu, a city that was shaped for the gods from its inception. In the late third millennium BCE, when Gudea built his new temple, Girsu was a bustling megapolis that covered hundreds of hectares. As the sacred civic hub of the state of Lagash, it was serviced (together with Girsu’s political and more overtly secular counterpart, the city of Lagash itself) by a network of waterways and irrigation canals. The splendid Sumerian urban centre was long ago reduced to a vast area of weathered hillocks that are now pockmarked with large excavation pits and the many holes dug by looters, and further disfigured by giant spoil heaps and the parched lines of ancient watercourses. Any remaining exposed fragments of sacred and quasi-sacred architecture from the series of magnificent buildings that were constructed between the earliest times and the much later Hellenistic era of Adadnadinakhe have



FIGURE 14. The Temple of Ningirsu on Tell A: a view of the British Museum team’s excavations in 2017.

been so eroded by the remorseless march of time that they are featureless and nondescript. In addition, the central area of Tell K in particular was dramatically reduced by the successive efforts of the French pioneers from its original height of about 14 m above the surrounding flood plain almost down to sea level, leaving nothing of note behind except for a series of spoil heaps and the remnants of excavation trenches. The situation on Tell A, where the French pioneers did not attempt to dig below the level of the Gudea walls, was fortunately somewhat less catastrophic.

Returning to Tello after a period of some eighty years during which no systematic fieldwork was carried out on the site, the British Museum team initially observed very little of immediate import on the Mound of the Palace—a few inscribed and stamped pieces of broken bricks, produced under Gudea, Ur-Bau and Adadnadinakhe, that lay scattered around on the heaps of spolia that form the sad legacy of the French expeditions. Yet, in this desecrated landscape, which was little more than a wasteland of rubble, the team's salvage excavations soon uncovered extensive mud-brick walls—some ornamented with inscribed clay cones—that belonged to the long-lost Ningirsu temple that lay at the heart of the Gudea's New Eninnu complex, which was renovated several times in the Ur III, Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian periods (Fig. 14). The wealth of momentous discoveries, which are laid out in detail in Part 3 of this book, followed long periods of conflict in the region in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries CE. They represent a significant milestone in the renewed archaeological research that is a feature of modern Iraq.

The first aim of the British Museum team's new fieldwork on Tell A was to try to resolve the pandemonium that was caused by the digs that were carried out before the Second World War. Matching ancient inscriptions with physical remains, the team was able to offer new insights into the principles that underlay the sanctuary's design and to describe the functions of its main parts (Fig. 15). As the work progressed, the renowned sanctuary emerged in ever-increasing detail. The retrieval works showed that Gudea's Temple of Ningirsu, which was situated at the heart of the vast complex, was organised on the indirect-approach principle, such that supplicants did not immediately face the god as they entered his chapel, and that the entrance portals to the *sanctum sanctorum* were marked with inscribed stones. The temple itself was made up of a cella (or sanctuary chamber)

that housed the sacrificial altar and the podium on which Ningirsu's statue was displayed. This was the focal point of the cult, and it was accompanied by a vestibule or antecella that contained ritual basins for ablutions, together with a libation well and a wide, low display platform that was used to exhibit votive artefacts and (presumably) the statues of worshipping rulers. A lengthy stairwell chamber gave access to the roof. The inner area was surrounded by a network of peripheral open-air ambulatories (all enclosed within the sanctuary's massive walls) that were studded with numerous inscribed cones, while in front of the Ningirsu temple was a forecourt that housed the earlier religious platform created by Ur-Bau. Also identified was a large ceremonial court that separated the shrine presumed to be dedicated to the goddess Bau from the Ningirsu temple, which was fronted by a gated inner wall that was built on a stepped support decorated with recessed niche panelling. The entire religious complex, which was built on a series of enormous ascending terraces, was enclosed by an impressive temenos wall that was strengthened with buttresses and pierced with monumental towered gateways. Significant remains of the enclosing wall were exposed during the British Museum team's work.

Ever since Sarzec discovered the divine blueprint carved on the statue of Gudea as the Architect with a Plan, scholars have debated whether the inscribed design represented the generic layout of a temple complex or the actual footprint of Gudea's New Eninnu. One key reason for this was that the accompanying numerical signs that were also included on the statue could not be deciphered with any degree of certainty. The British Museum team's decoding of the vitally important measuring system that was used by Gudea when the New Eninnu was conceived sheds light on the procedures that were followed by the ruler and his attendants as they planned the large-scale structure, and this in turn helped to clarify the phases of construction. Remarkably, when the carved blueprint was compared with the sacred complex itself, it was discovered that the massive walls of the temenos that are carved on Statue B overlap perfectly with parts of the enclosure wall and gateways that were exposed during the British Museum team's excavations on Tell A. The extremely attractive assumption that the plan recorded on the statue was in fact an exact copy of the actual blueprint for the sanctuary could therefore be confirmed.

Further excavations were carried out on Tell A beneath the Lagash II Ningirsu temple to probe the deepest layers in

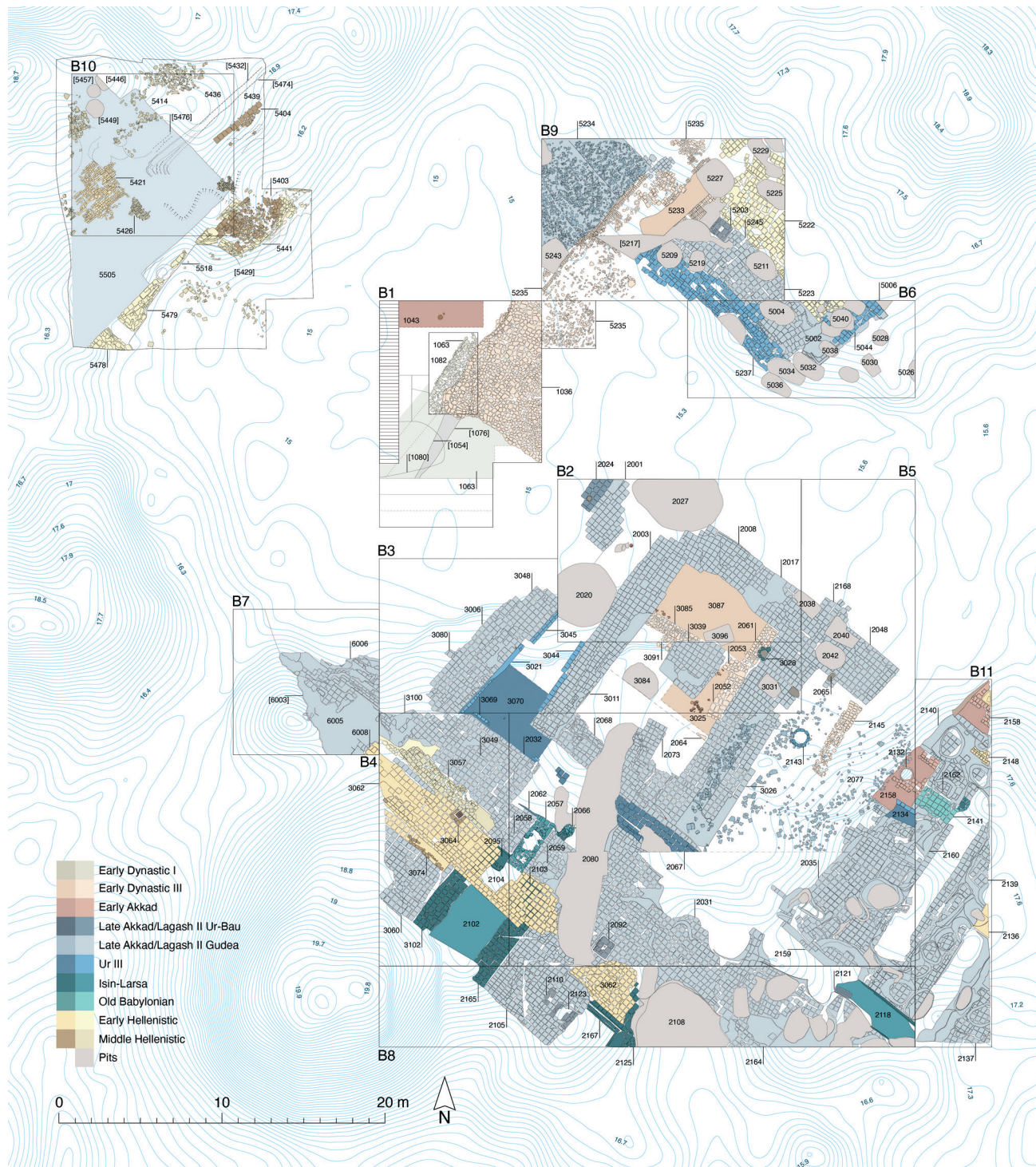


FIGURE 15. Plan of the British Museum team's excavation trenches on Tell A.

the archaeological history of Tell A, dating back to the origins of the sacred mound. This work led to the discovery of an archaic sanctuary that was in use during the Early Dynastic I–III and Sargonic periods (3000–2250 BCE), prior to the era of Ur-Bau and Gudea. The exposed remains include a number of lower-lying superimposed religious platforms and an associated series of temple rooms and annexes that were dedicated, as is argued in Chapter 32, to the great goddess Bau, the consort of Ningirsu. The structural layout, architectural design and accompanying ceremonial altar, together with some of the accessories used for offerings and sacrifices, that have so far been found in the layers belonging to the earlier sequence of shrines recall features seen at other major temple sites in Presargonic Sumer, above all the Lagash I Ningirsu temples on Tell K, which the Bau shrine found below the New Eninnu on Tell A mirrored in scale and orientation. These potent indicators of the structure’s religious significance dovetailed with the results of the team’s concurrent research into the religious landscape of the expansive sacred precinct of Girsu, the Urukug (Irikug or iri.kù in Sumerian), in particular the identification and excavation of a substantial section of the Early Dynastic temenos wall to the north-west of Tell A (Fig. 16). In consequence, it became increasingly clear that the early cult platforms on Tell A, which were built and redeveloped in the site’s second most commanding location from at least the beginning of the third millennium BCE, were devoted to Bau. The further fascinating conclusion is that the Ningirsu temple at the heart of Gudea’s New Eninnu was built on top of earlier temple buildings that were dedicated to Ningirsu’s wife, Bau, the ‘beloved lady of Girsu’.

Gudea’s New Eninnu, which in scale and splendour eclipsed its forebears, remained in use as the centre of worship in Girsu for about 400 years, down to the Old Babylonian period. Restored on several occasions, first by Shulgi in Ur III times, then far more extensively in the Isin-Larsa period, it was finally deconsecrated and ritually buried, probably at the time of the abandonment of Girsu around 1750 BCE. That was not the end of the sanctuary’s history, however. At the more recent end of the time spectrum, in several areas of Tell A the British Museum team also uncovered significant traces of the Hellenistic complex that was commissioned by Adadnadinakhe. A careful reappraisal of the French excavations carried out before the Second World War, combined with the results of the new fieldwork, enabled a redating of Girsu’s Graeco-Babylonian resurgence, represented by the

work of Adadnadinakhe, to the late fourth century BCE. The Hellenistic shrine flourished when the Seleucids were at the height of their power in Babylonia, rather than in the dying days of the empire—a revised time frame that necessitates a complete reinterpretation of Adadnadinakhe’s ideological programme as a syncretising endeavour that fused Mesopotamian and Hellenistic modes of worship. Adadnadinakhe’s shrine, together with all its contents, including the Sumerian statues that he unearthed, was desecrated and destroyed in the mid-second century BCE, but the revised chronology sheds a great deal of light on Hellenistic Girsu in the hoary heartland of the long-dead Sumerian civilisation.

The British Museum team’s renewed fieldwork on Tell A revealed a palimpsest of archaeological layers that encompasses a period of some 3,000 years—a vertiginous *mise en abîme* or infinite regress that articulates the superimposed destinies of gods, idols and ancestors, all of whom were interlinked parts of the powerful sacred nexus that found its fullest Sumerian expression in the New Eninnu of Gudea. As is also now clear, that history was by no means self-contained. It evolved from—and was in many ways the fulfilment of—the earlier sequence of shrines to Ningirsu that were built on Tell K. Part 2 of this book re-examines the published French results to reassess the archaeological remains that were found on Tell K by Sarzec and his successors, using a wealth of innovative clarifications and a vividly reconceived theoretical framework to present an exhaustive revised interpretation of the series of temples to Ningirsu that were built on Tell K from around 3000 BCE to about 2250 BCE. Part 3, which is devoted to Tell A, also reviews the results that were published by the French explorers before laying out the pivotal findings of the British Museum team’s fieldwork, which was carried out between 2016 and 2022. This includes analyses of the Early Dynastic I–III and Sargonic sacred complexes—the cultic counterparts of the Ningirsu temple on Tell K—that were dedicated in all likelihood to the goddess Bau. It goes on to present an extended reassessment of the history of the shrine after the principal sacred building was transferred to Tell A by Ur-Bau, followed by the construction of Gudea’s New Eninnu. Part 3 also includes an account of the shrine’s later refurbishments in Ur III and Isin-Larsa times, and its deconsecration in the Old Babylonian period. Finally, Part 4 examines the temple’s reincarnation in Hellenistic Girsu from the late fourth century BCE, when Adadnadinakhe rebuilt the Eninnu and unearthed numerous

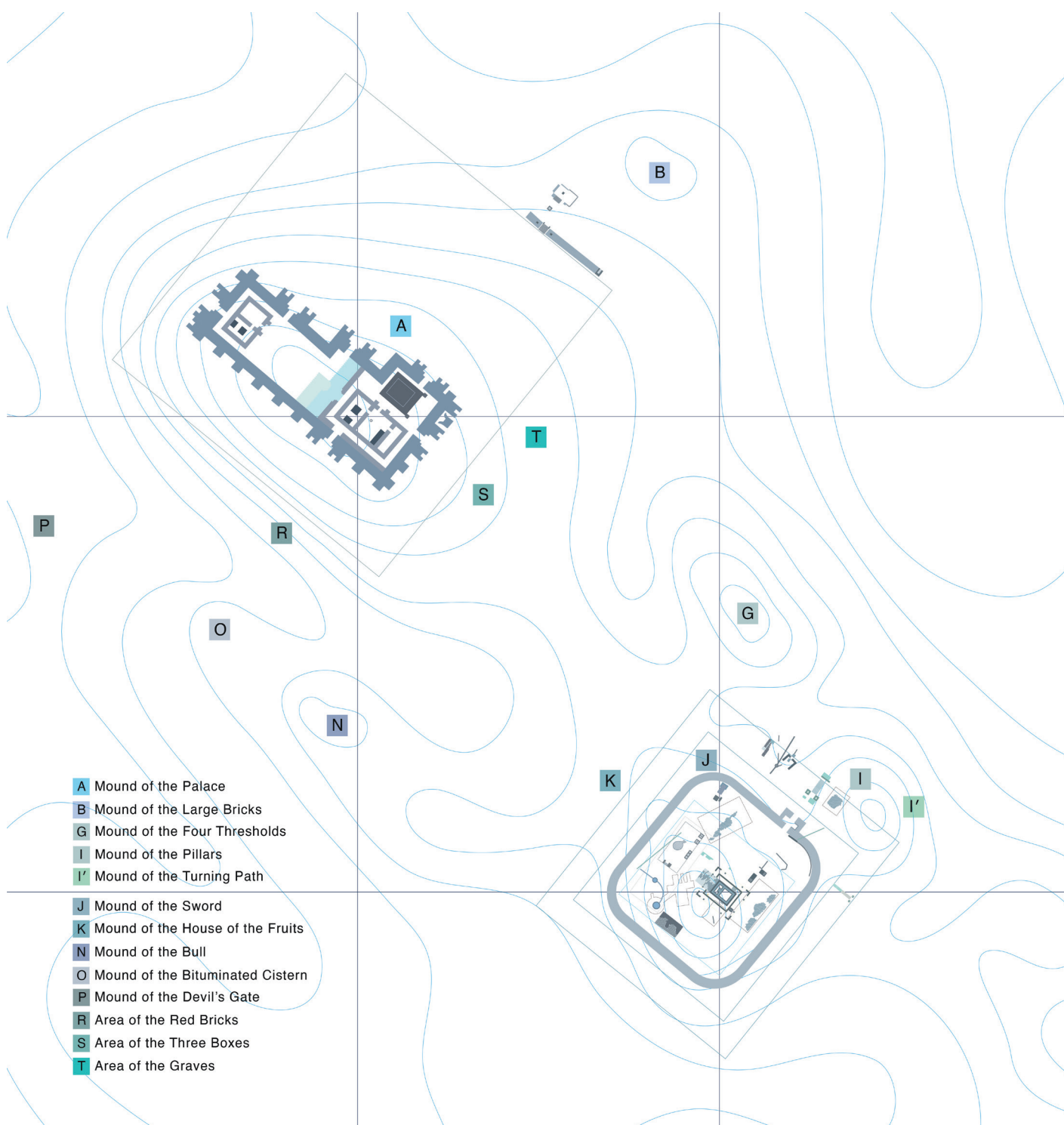


FIGURE 16. Plan of the sacred precinct of Girsu (the Urukug), showing the reconstructed Lagash II and Early Dynastic shrines on Tells A and K, respectively. The contour lines, taken from Sarzec's Plan B, show the site as it was before the French excavations began; the letters A to T indicate mounds and areas named by Sarzec. The N–S axes extend through the N corners of the earlier and later Ningirsu temples.

artefacts deriving from the time of Ur-Bau and Gudea. The Babylonian–Hellenistic temple (as it is described below), which thrived under the Seleucids, was destroyed in the mid-second century BCE, when the last chapter in the long history of Girsu as an active centre of worship was finally closed.

For clarity's sake, the methodology of the British Museum team's procedures, including the painstaking reanalysis of the French results, the salvage excavations and the subsequent reinterpretations, can be expressed in the following schedule of work:

1. Systematically analyse and reorganise historic data sets (Tells K and A). Where new excavations are undertaken (Tell A), continue to stage 2; in the absence of new excavations, proceed to stage 6 (Tell K).
2. Correlate existing data sets with key features of the site.
3. Define one or more fixed points of reference in order to establish the most potentially fruitful targets.
4. Excavate and record the new findings, plotting them on a stratigraphic grid and noting archaeological contexts.
5. Organise, tabulate and interpret the new findings.
6. Re-examine historic data sets, applying modern stratigraphic methods and noting any conspicuous absences (for example, pottery, fired-brick rubble and other small finds that are not mentioned). Scrutinise recorded find heights and related information to produce a revised stratigraphy for the site (Tells A and K).
7. Where new fieldwork has been carried out, incorporate the new finds and adjust the stratigraphic interpretations from stage 6 accordingly (Tell A); cross-reference the stratigraphy with reanalysed data from the whole site, including areas where no new fieldwork has been carried out (Tells A and K).
8. Present consolidated new interpretations (Tells A and K).
9. In the context of the updated understanding of the site, develop and present any arising conceptual interpretations—historical, religious and social, for example (Tells A and K).