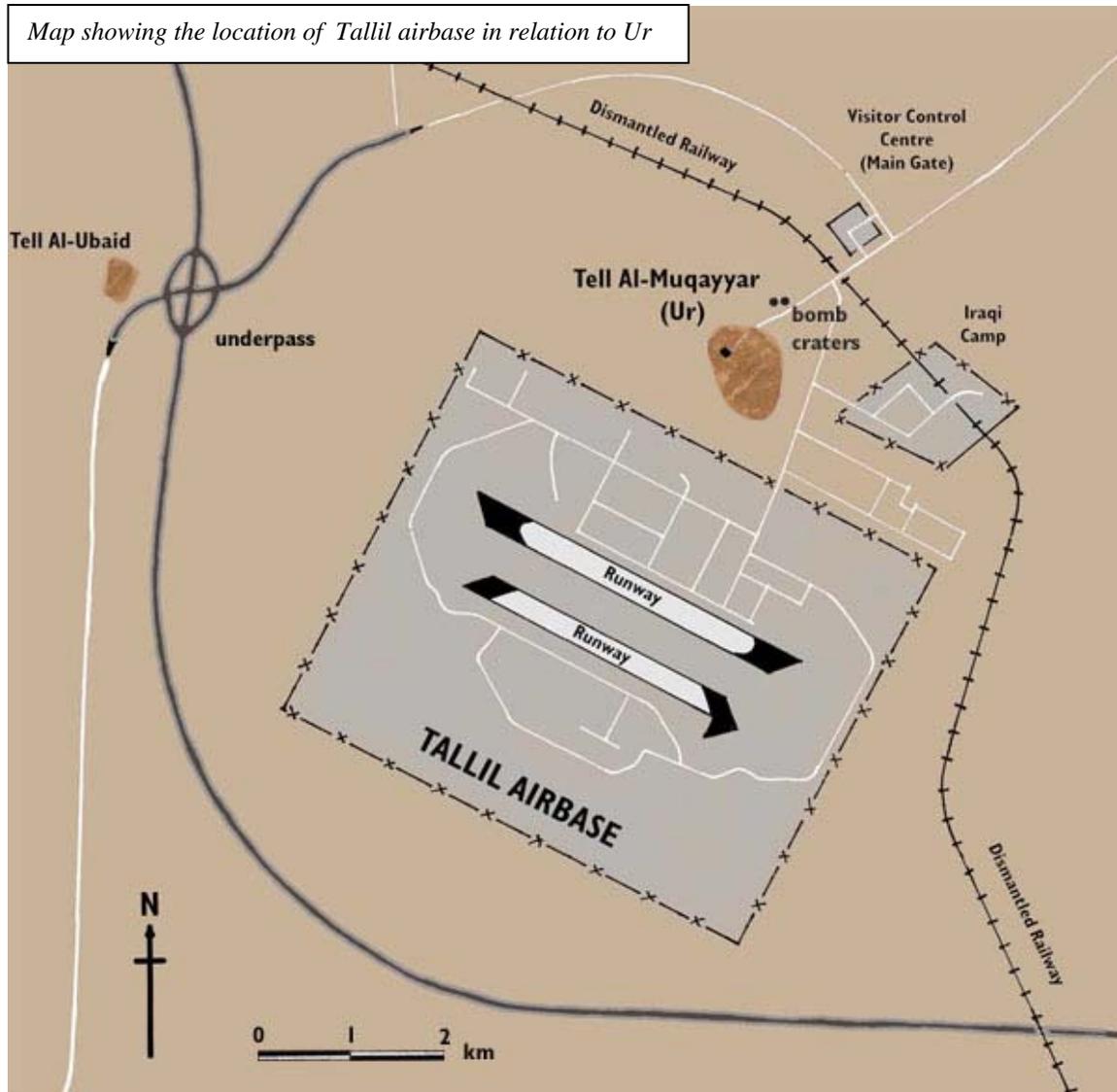


Ur of the Chaldees in February 2007

(i) Introduction

From March 2006 onwards reports began to circulate that archaeologists working with coalition forces had interfered with antiquities at the famous site of Ur of the Chaldees, the legendary birthplace of Abraham. It was also known that Ur had been incorporated within the perimeter fence surrounding Tallil Airbase, thus subjecting the site to the



possibility of damage from military activity. These reports were particularly worrying because the Sumerian city of Ur, some 20km south-west of Nasiriyah, is one of the most iconic sites of ancient Mesopotamia or modern Iraq, alongside Babylon, Warka, Nimrud and Nineveh. It was excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley between 1922 and 1934, who found here a royal cemetery dating from about 2500 BC with graves containing a wealth of treasures such as a gold helmet, musical instruments, and vessels and jewellery in

precious metal. It was also here that Woolley found a band of water-laid silt that he believed to be evidence for the Biblical flood. There is a particular reason for British Museum interest in Ur in that Woolley was working on behalf of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania and the finds from his excavations were divided between the Iraq Museum, London and Philadelphia. It was therefore decided that if possible I should travel out to Ur and together with our Iraqi colleagues conduct a condition assessment, in the same way as was done for Babylon. Although the visit was first mooted in spring 2006, for various reasons including the deteriorating security situation, it was not possible to undertake the visit until the 21st – 23rd February 2007.



The guard at Ur in front of the ziggurat.

The site of Ur is just to the north of the vast Tallil Airbase, now used by the coalition forces, that contains two runways and is one of the largest military airbases in the Middle East. The Airbase itself is rectangular in shape, measuring c.5.9 km x 4.8 km, i.e. about 2832 has. (by comparison, the camp at Babylon covers an area of about 150 has.). The Front Gate complex (the Visitor Control Centre, or VCC), measuring about 400 m square, is situated some 2.7 km to the north of the Airbase, so that Ur is between the Airbase and the Front Gate and is included within the perimeter fence that goes from the Front Gate around the entire Airbase. This means, in effect, that the site of Ur is accessible to troops on the Airbase but not to Iraqi civilians who may wish to visit the site. Coalition troops do in fact



Coalition troops visiting the site of Ur.

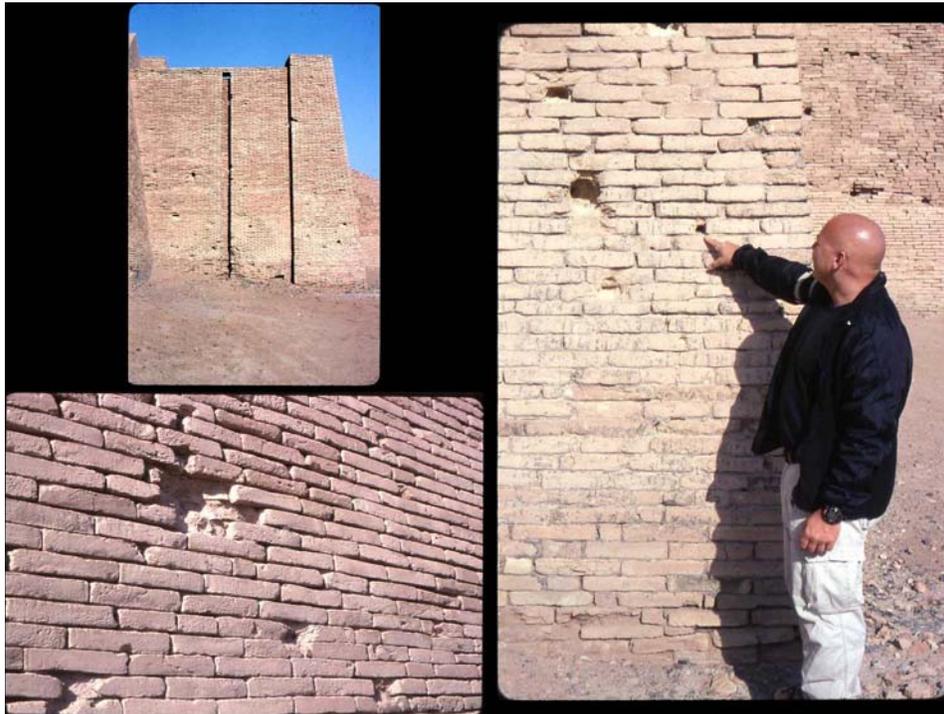
take full advantage of the privileged access that they enjoy, and tours of the site are conducted by the guard, sometimes organised through the chaplain's office on the

Airbase. There is also a shop at the entrance to the site selling souvenirs, mementoes and postcards (but not antiquities so far as I could see) to coalition troops.

With the assistance of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and with the help of Controlled Risks Group, I was able to spend nearly two days at Tallil Airbase (21st-23rd February). Access was by military aircraft from Kuwait, flying into Tallil. It had been previously arranged that I should meet at the site Dr Abbas Ali Abbas al-Hussainy, the Chairman of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, and we would jointly undertake a condition assessment. Unfortunately, this did not take place according to plan. Dr al-Hussainy travelled down from Baghdad especially for the meeting, and arrived at the Front Gate (Visitor Control Centre) of the Airbase at 11.30 am on 22nd February. He was accompanied by some 20 staff in 5 vehicles in all. Unfortunately, for various reasons, he was not able to pass through the Front Gate, so our projected meeting at Ur did not take place.

(ii) Report

In the circumstances it would not have been appropriate for me to undertake the detailed condition assessment that had been envisaged, and there were many parts of the site and environs that I did not visit. However, in the relatively brief time that I spent at the site and in advance of Dr al-Hussainy's arrival I did make the following observations:



Bullet-holes in the façade of the ziggurat at Ur.

1. The Iraqi SBOAH had previously drawn attention to the fact that the ziggurat had been damaged in Operation Desert Storm in 1991. I found that on the north-east face of the ziggurat and on the south-east side of the ziggurat staircase there are many holes and areas of damage that have been caused by bullets and shells of various calibre. There is

damage to both original and reconstructed brickwork. I was not able to inspect the other sides of the ziggurat.

2. It was reported by the guard that a rocket landed on Saturday 3rd February 2007 about 100 m to the south-west of the Flood Pit. The rocket has made a hole about 1m across and 1m deep. There are no ancient remains visible on the surface at this spot.

3. Otherwise, the buildings within the city wall seem to be in reasonably good condition with no obvious signs of having been damaged as a result of military activity. However, the ceilings of the two chambers in the mausoleum of Amar-Sin are in bad condition, with one of them having partly collapsed 16 years ago. Access to these chambers is blocked by barbed wire.

4. The most serious incidence of damage is around the new Front Gate (Visitor Control Centre) of the Airbase that has been established about 1.5 km to the north of the old main gate. This is a very elaborate and extensive construction, with processing area, passages for pedestrians between HESCO containers, and a waiting area for vehicles with a compacted gravel surface. The HESCO containers have been filled with earth from the immediate location, including potsherds, and there is at least one trench, about 15-20m long, and 1m deep, dug through deposits with archaeological material. There are many potsherds in the sections and in the spoil tips to the sides. In order to construct the gate, many underground cables and pipes must also have been laid. This gate has been established in the area known as Diqdiqqa. Although it has never been properly excavated, it is known to be an archaeological site (in fact a suburb of Ur) from which Woolley obtained a great deal of material.

5. The two features that appear on Google Earth satellite images and are labelled as 'bombing craters' can no longer be seen to the right of the road leading up to the site, and have presumably been filled in. Instead, visible in this area are a number of Iraqi gun emplacements that would have been for the protection of the airbase. These are horseshoe-shaped berms with narrow entrances. It seems likely that the craters were caused by bombs dropped in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 aimed at the gun emplacements.

(iii) Conclusions

1. There is no obvious evidence of looting or illegal digging on the main mound of Ur, which is gratifying, but concerns have been expressed about modern roads and a car park on the site (see booklet entitled *Iraq Heritage Program* published by the Global Heritage Fund, or visit www.globalheritagefund.org).



A small crater caused by a missile explosion, Ur.

2. The coalition forces have a clear obligation to make sure that no looting occurs at Ur or in the environs of Ur while they are occupying the area. This will be particularly important later in 2007 when, so I was informed, there is a plan to demolish the existing VCC and withdraw to the original boundary of Tallil Airbase. If this happens, Ur might not then be included within the perimeter fence. This would be welcome, but the site would be at risk from looting and vandalism. In this case, it is essential that proper arrangements should be made to provide Ur with the sort of protection that it so clearly merits.

3. If the coalition forces undertake any kind of building work in the vicinity of Ur they *must* be prepared to consult with archaeologists or others involved in heritage management. Anybody with some expertise in cultural heritage could have warned against building the new Front Gate on the Diqdiqqa site. This was an avoidable mistake.

4. The officials of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage must have unrestricted access to sites of heritage interest, particularly as they are responsible for them. It is not acceptable that coalition troops are granted free access to the site of Ur while even the Director of Antiquities is not allowed to visit the site on demand. It is recommended that the coalition authorities should take steps to rectify this problem.

J.E. Curtis,
Department of the Middle East,
The British Museum.