

Symbols of Fertility and Abundance in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, Iraq

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Abstract

Fertility and abundance are important themes of ancient Mesopotamian texts and images. The goddess Inanna and her consort Dumuzi personify these ideas in texts of the second millennium B.C.E. Excavated by Leonard Woolley in the 1920s, the Royal Cemetery at Ur dates to the mid third millennium B.C.E. Among the tombs, that of Queen Puabi yielded many ornaments of gold, carnelian, and lapis. Some of the pendants realistically depict identifiable animals. Others are more stylized depictions of clusters of apples, dates, and date inflorescences. Apples and dates are both associated with the goddess Inanna, who is associated with love and fertility. Twisted wire pendants in the same group of objects are not so readily identified. I propose here that the twisted wire pendants in the Puabi assemblage may literally represent rope, symbolically reference sheep, and narratively evoke the flocks of the shepherd Dumuzi. Pairing symbols of Inanna and Dumuzi evokes life in a place of death.*

INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity is inherent in the visual and verbal expression of ideas, and imagery on objects and in texts often embodies multiple levels of meaning. To understand a representation, it can be useful to start with its most literal aspect before investigating potentially richer associations. For example, a photograph of Rembrandt's *Supper at Emmaus* represents the painting; the figure in the painting represents the artist's model; the model represents Jesus; and insofar as Jesus is a theological abstraction, the only way to read the culturally specific meaning of the painting is through language. For the artifacts of an ancient civilization, the accuracy of each successive layer of inference may depend on that of the preceding one. However, we

can use known archaeological and historical context to inform interpretations of ancient symbolism. For example, fertility and abundance are major themes in the iconography of the ancient Near East in general¹ and the Ur cemetery in particular.² This preexisting understanding narrows the range of plausible referents for the twisted wire ornaments found in the grave of Queen Puabi of Ur.

Ancient Ur was one of the most important cities of Mesopotamia during the third millennium B.C.E. The site was excavated under the direction of Leonard Woolley in the late 1920s and early 1930s by a joint team from the University Museum (University of Pennsylvania) and the British Museum. The remains of royalty, sacrificed retainers, and sumptuous ornaments and furnishings were found in its cemetery.³ Queen Puabi's tomb chamber (Tomb PG 800), which dates to the mid third millennium B.C.E., contained many precious objects.⁴ The primary occupant was cloaked in strings of carnelian, gold, and lapis lazuli beads. She wore a complex headdress of gold rings, bands, and leaf-shaped and rosette forms. Her attendants had simpler versions of these ornaments, and the tomb held many other items of jewelry; vessels of silver, gold, and carved stone; and other artifacts.⁵ For about 70 years, an object called Puabi's Diadem was displayed in the University Museum (renamed the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 1994) in Philadelphia. It was fabricated from lapis lazuli beads and small gold pendants, which were assembled by Woolley based on his considered assessment that the items came from a single object (fig. 1).⁶ In addition to the twisted wires, which are the focus

*I would like to thank Katherine M. Moore for her insightful comments on sheep, Holly Pittman for some suggested comparanda, and the anonymous reviewer for the *AJA* for helpful comments. Figures are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹Winter 2006.

²Miller 1999, 2000.

³Woolley 1934, 1:89.

⁴At the time of excavation, the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, the British Museum, and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad shared the finds from the excavation. The tripartite division gave most of the Tomb PG 800 material to the University Museum and the British Museum.

⁵Woolley 1934, 1:89.

⁶Woolley 1934, 1:89, 2:pl. 140.

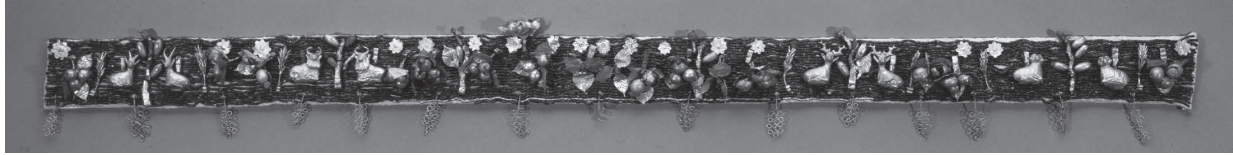


Fig. 1. Puabi's Diadem (courtesy Penn Museum, image no. 152101).

of this contribution, the group of objects that compose the so-called diadem includes representations of flowering and fruiting date palm inflorescences, apples, bulls, stags, gazelles, rams, and rosettes.⁷ No food offerings are reported from the tomb itself, but the remains found elsewhere in the cemetery include charred dates, dried crab apples that had been threaded on a string, and sheep and fish bones.⁸

Reconsideration and reanalysis of many aspects of the cemetery deposits were prompted by the traveling exhibition *Treasures from the Royal Tombs at Ur* (1998–2006) and the updated exhibit *Iraq's Ancient Past: Rediscovering Ur's Royal Cemetery* at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.⁹ In preparation for the traveling exhibition, the so-called diadem was reexamined, and it became clear that the ornaments and beads were not components of a single item but rather were from as many as six separate pieces of jewelry that had been deposited together, perhaps in a since-disintegrated container.¹⁰ In the exhibit in Philadelphia, the beads and pendants have been arranged to reflect this new interpretation. Even though the artifact known as Puabi's Diadem was not an ancient treasure, the contextual association reported by Woolley suggests its constituent items were symbolically associated.

In Mesopotamia, the use of text and visual imagery to create narratives developed in tandem. Schmandt-Besserat explains how conventions that organized writing came to organize images in the first half of the third millennium B.C.E.¹¹ Metaphors were basic to Sumerian poetic expression.¹² Thanks to the multiple possible phonetic readings of signs, puns are common. Images, too, can have multiple levels of meaning. They tend to

represent things, sometimes literally (a sheep, a person, a monster), sometimes through abstraction (water as two parallel wavy lines, mountains as a scalelike pile). Even decorative elements, such as the colored clay wall cones set into temples, are thought to represent palm trees.¹³ Visual metonymy and synecdoche are common; for example, a reed bundle can stand for the goddess Inanna, who is associated with love and fertility,¹⁴ and an image of two sheep might represent an entire flock. Following Schmandt-Besserat's argument, third-millennium imagery may be nonnarrative but nevertheless may evoke traditional stories and characters.

The theme of abundance can be traced in visual expression from protoliterate times onward, as suggested by files of cultivated plants and domesticated animals in a variety of media.¹⁵ In the written narratives of the second millennium, fertility and abundance remain important themes. A major corpus of literary texts dating to this time¹⁶ celebrates the courtship, love, and marriage of Inanna, "Queen of Heaven," and Dumuzi, "the Shepherd." There are also texts that lament the death of Dumuzi. These Inanna-Dumuzi stories stem from an oral tradition that is alluded to in earlier inscriptions and texts of the third millennium B.C.E.¹⁷ Applying these specific literary traditions to protoliterate symbolic expression could introduce a circular argument. Nevertheless, very early examples of syllabic writing, which is a prerequisite for written syntax and storytelling, appear as names of the deceased in the funerary context of the Ur Royal Cemetery, which dates to ca. 2500 B.C.E.¹⁸ It is reasonable to think that the Inanna-Dumuzi stories developed out of a much earlier tradition. They may therefore shed light on the Royal Cemetery finds.

⁷ Woolley 1934, 1:89; Miller 2000.

⁸ Ellison et al. 1978.

⁹ Zettler and Horne 1998; Baadsgaard et al. 2011.

¹⁰ Pittman 1998a, 92.

¹¹ Schmandt-Besserat 2007.

¹² Black (1998, 10) comments that the "richness of metaphorical language is a characteristic [of Sumerian] which seems to find no exact echo in the sister literature in

Akkadian."

¹³ Giovino 2007, 184–85.

¹⁴ Sefati 1998, 17. Inanna is the most important goddess in the Mesopotamian pantheon.

¹⁵ Winter 2006.

¹⁶ Sefati 1998.

¹⁷ Sefati 1998, 32.

¹⁸ Schmandt-Besserat 2007, 70.

Plant imagery in the ornaments of the diadem group shows clusters of apples¹⁹ and the flowering male branches and fruiting female branches (i.e., spadices) of the date palm. A hymn to Inanna in praise of the goddess says, “You are she who creates apples in their clusters(?). . . . You are she who creates the date spadices in their beauty.”²⁰ Though the hymn postdates the Royal Cemetery by several centuries, it provides support for the view that the date and apple representations refer to the Inanna traditions.²¹ Up to now, the twisted wire pendants in the diadem group have remained mysterious. I propose here that they literally represent rope, symbolically reference sheep, and narratively evoke the flocks of the shepherd Dumuzi, Inanna’s consort.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TWISTED WIRES

Like most of the other ornaments of the diadem group, the wire pendants are made of gold (fig. 2). There are 14 complete ones and one broken one. They are up to about 2 cm long and about 1 cm wide. The wire lies flat and is twisted. Nine pendants have nine loops and three have 11 loops arranged along a vertical axis. One has four pairs of loops and one has six pairs. The twisting does not create a tight central line. The shape does not occur elsewhere in the visual media of ancient Mesopotamia, in either two or three dimensions. Woolley describes them as inverted “palmettes.”²²

POSSIBLE REFERENTS FOR THE TWISTED WIRE PENDANTS

We may never know exactly what these pendants represent or why they were buried with Queen Puabi, but it is possible to evaluate the plausibility of different identifications. I consider three broad categories: mere decoration, references to plants, and representations of a linear object or phenomenon.

The Twisted Wires as Decoration

At a basic representational level, much of Sumerian visual expression seems fairly literal: it tends to represent things. The naturalism with which the diadem

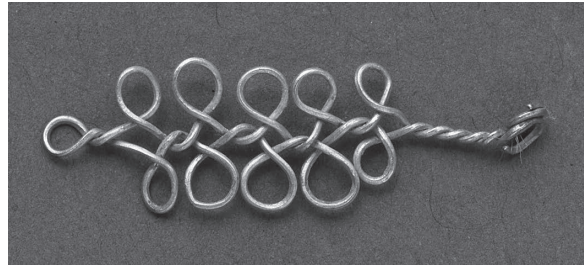


Fig. 2. Twisted wire pendant (courtesy Penn Museum, image no. 227158).

group animals are portrayed is striking—the facial expression of the gazelle and the curvature of its horns, the fleece of the ram. The associated plant images are more stylized, but their salient characteristics make them recognizable as dates and apples. The twisted wire pendants are more enigmatic, at least in part because they are unique to Puabi’s jewelry assemblage; there are no obvious comparanda from later imagery. That they are found in the same archaeological context as the animal and plant pendants suggests that they, too, are meant to portray something tangible.

The Twisted Wires as Plant Forms

The wires might directly represent the growth of the date palm; perhaps they are even a precursor to the Assyrian sacred tree.²³ The date palm, so important in Mesopotamian subsistence, text, and image, produces basal suckers that may form a ring around the parent tree.²⁴ The Assyrian Ashurnasirpal relief, which features a palmette-topped trunk ringed by baby palmettes, is a first-millennium example (fig. 3). Analogous images appear on cylinder seals that also date to the first millennium. There are chronological and symbolic reasons for thinking the twisted wires are not related to those images, however. First, there is a gap of more than 1,500 years between the wire ornaments and the later imagery, and no comparanda connect the two. Second, the wire objects clearly do not have a central stalk, a critical omission for a representation

¹⁹Tengberg et al. (2008, 925–26) dispute the identification of these forms as apples. They correctly observe that “several other sub-globular fruits with adhering floral pieces exist in the Middle East,” but they do not acknowledge that the suggested identification of the Ur forms as apples is based on more than just shape; the fruit imagery evokes the way apples grow in clusters and the way the apple leaves are distributed relative to the fruit (Miller 2000).

²⁰Black et al. 1998–2006, translation t.4.07.a, lines 23–9 (parentheses in translation). Sjöberg (1988) dates the text to the Ur III or Isin period (late third to early second millen-

nium B.C.E.).

²¹Miller 2000. Alternatively, one might make the argument that the apple references Dumuzi. According to Sefati (1998, 89), many metaphors in the Dumuzi-Inanna corpus “describe Dumuzi as a garden or a particular plant in the garden” (e.g., “my blossoming garden of apple trees” [no. B 28]).

²²Woolley 1934, 1:89, 2:pls. 140, 141.

²³Porter 2003; Giovino 2007. That may be the reason Woolley (1934, 1:89) called them “palmettes.”

²⁴Townsend and Guest 1985, 263.



Fig. 3. Detail of the Ashurnasirpal II relief from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud (883–859 B.C.E.). London, British Museum, inv. no. ME 124531 (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

of a tree²⁵ or for a cult object that represents a tree.²⁶ Third, the items are pendent rather than upright.

One might argue that the pendants bring to mind a pinnate leaf, with each loop standing in for a leaflet. In this interpretation, each leaf would have 9, 11, or 12 leaflets. Although some plants that grow in Mesopotamia have compound leaves of this form (e.g.,

vetch, acacia), actual pinnate leaves have a midrib, unlike these pendants. Furthermore, other leaves represented among the ornaments in the Royal Cemetery are all simple in outline and are manufactured in thin, solid sheets of gold (e.g., the apple among the pendants, the willow and poplar in Puabi's headdress).²⁷

Perhaps the loops represent grapes. Here, too, one must consider how other fruit forms are made. Both dates and apples "in their clusters" are quite three-dimensional and are not depicted in outline. Unlike dates, grapes and grapevines do not appear in the imagery of mid third-millennium Mesopotamia. It should be noted that recognizable grapes and grapevines, unlike apples, do occur in later Assyrian imagery.

The Twisted Wires as a Linear Phenomenon

Since the other ornaments depict plants and animals with some literalness, the linearity of wire could be key to the interpretation. From direct representation to increasing abstraction, I suggest wire itself, twined fiber, snakes, roads, water. Wire is not an important item in Sumerian material culture, text, or imagery, so it seems unlikely that the twisted pendants represent wire. Twined fiber includes rope, string, yarn, and thread. It is round in cross-section, linear, and capable of looping back on itself. Cordage and yarn as raw materials for weaving were important in Sumerian material culture. Rope is sometimes depicted in the context of animal control. For example, the Peace Panel on the Standard of Ur, another object found in the Royal Cemetery, shows men leading a bull and an equid with ropes.²⁸ Rope can also have emotional resonance, as when depicting bound prisoners. It is most likely that the twisted wire ornaments represent an ordinary use of rope, as is discussed more fully below.

Snakes and snake forms appear in Sumerian words and images and are more symbolically significant than wire and rope (fig. 4, left). When depicted in glyptic

²⁵ Porter 2003.

²⁶ Giovino 2007.

²⁷ Miller 2000. Tengberg et al. (2008) critique the consensus view that considers the broader leaf on the headdresses to be poplar (*Populus euphratica*). They propose an Indus Valley tree, sissoo (*Dalbergia sissoo*). This seems unlikely. The most salient characteristic of a leaf is its shape. Many sissoo leaves are widest in the central third of their length, but poplar leaves tend to be widest in the lower third, like the gold leaf forms under consideration here. The acuminate points resemble those of sissoo leaves, but Tengberg et al. (2008) cannot refute the view that the attenuated tip was a practical solution for attaching the carnelian beads to the leaves (Miller 2000). They also put great store by venation. The vein pattern of the long gold leaves ("willow") is identical to that of the broad ones ("poplar"), with parallel incised lines meeting along a

central incised axis. Actual willow and poplar are in the same plant family (Salicaceae) and have a similar venation pattern: a central midrib with gently curving side veins. Mass production easily accounts for the schematic result. If, as Tengberg et al. (2008, 926) admit, the willow is "convincingly identified" in Miller (2000), the same criteria apply to poplar.

²⁸ Zettler and Horne 1998, fig. 36b. Ryan Gardner-Cook (pers. comm. 2011) alerted me to the Egyptian hieroglyph "za," which bears some resemblance to the wire ornaments. Za represents "a subdivision of a work gang" and depicts a cattle hobble (Lehner 2004). Though similar to the Ur ornaments (a series of paired loops along a central axis), za has a central spine. The similarity between the two looping forms is most likely based on independent observations and use of rope in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

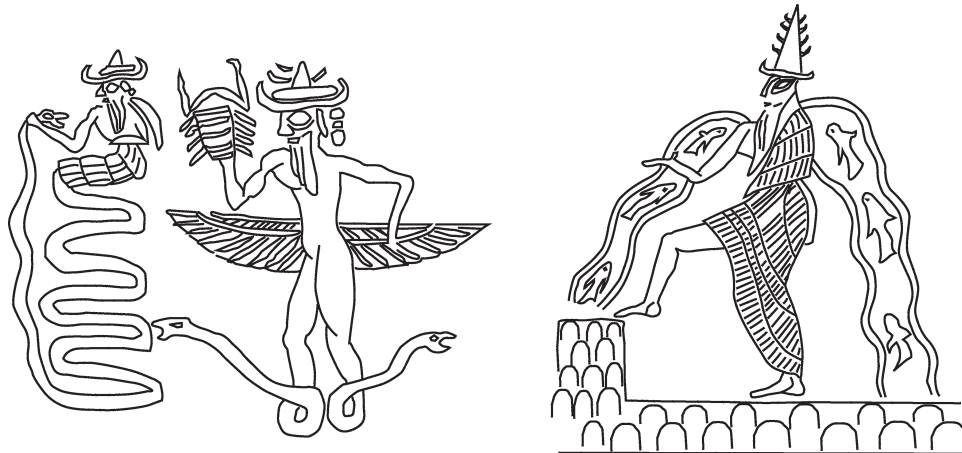


Fig. 4. Drawings of images from glyptic: *left*, snake (modified from Black and Green 1992, fig. 137); *right*, flowing water (adapted from Moortgat 1967, pl. F, no. 5).

or other art forms, they sometimes wind around one another. One cylinder seal from the Royal Cemetery has an “elaborate snake interlace,”²⁹ but the design is woven (i.e., over-under), not looped. Similarly, roads were clearly important to ancient Sumerians, but actual roads do not twist and turn on themselves. Depictions of roads have not been recognized in third-millennium art, and even the later, maplike representation of Nippur inscribed on a clay tablet from that site (ca. 1300 B.C.E.) focuses on buildings and canals, not roads.³⁰

Water is not inherently linear, but rivers, streams, and irrigation canals were very important to the Sumerians. The use of wavy lines to depict water dates back to the earliest sign for water—that is, to the Uruk period. By the mid third millennium, water was represented on glyptic and other three-dimensional media with parallel wavy lines, which emphasize its flow (see fig. 4, right). Porter comments, “Edith Porada argued plausibly that the network of wavy lines linking the trunk [of the Assyrian sacred tree in the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II] to the surrounding palmettes represents a network of irrigation canals, and the image as a whole, a well ordered date palm orchard.”³¹ There is no traceable connection between the Ur tombs of the third millennium B.C.E. and this linear compo-

nent of the Assyrian sacred tree motif. From a formal perspective, the intertwined, twisted wires of the pendants bear at best a weak visual evocation of water.

FOCUS ON TWINED FIBER

The strongest argument can be made for twined fiber as the literal referent of the twisted wire pendants. Ethnographic analogy suggests this fiber is rope: in rural Syria and Turkey, I have observed sheep tied together head to head with their rumps facing outward, an arrangement that facilitates milking. Being sheep, they docilely stand as the milker goes up and down the line with a pail (fig. 5).

Based on the form of the twisted wires and this plausible ethnographic analogy, I think it likely that the wire pendants depict the rope that tethers sheep as they are milked (fig. 6). Thanks to the existence of literary texts, it is possible to apply this metaphor of daily practice to ancient symbolic references and associations. In particular, if these ornaments represent flocks, they complement the date ornaments. The dates represent the male flowering branches and female fruiting branches of the palm, and the date is associated in texts with Inanna.³² This new interpretation of the wire forms provides a symbolic presence for the shepherd Dumuzi, Inanna’s consort.³³ It should

²⁹ Pittman 1998b, 80

³⁰ Unger 1935.

³¹ Porter 2003, 23.

³² Miller 2000.

³³ Cohen (2005, 130) proposes that “the ornaments were associated with procreation, abundance, and, most likely, the mythological cycle of Dumuzi and Inanna.” Although I

do not agree with some of his specific identifications (e.g., the eight-“petaled” gold rosettes of the diadem group as five-petaled apple blossoms and the small statue of a goat known as “Ram Caught in a Thicket” [Zettler and Horne 1998, pl. 8] as a member of Dumuzi’s flock), I acknowledge Cohen’s prior argument that Dumuzi is conceptually represented in this assemblage.



Fig. 5. Sheep roped together to be milked, Syria (C. Roffey; www.flickr.com/photos/charlesfred/2482781212).



Fig. 6. Visualization of the proposed interpretation of the wire ornaments.

the twisted wire pendants with rope, flocks, and Dumuzi fills a gap in the symbolic repertoire of Puabi's funerary assemblage, thereby confirming the value that the Sumerians placed on fertility and abundance, even in the face of death.

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be remembered that the Inanna-Dumuzi stories not only celebrate life but also address death through their lamentations. In myth, both Inanna and Dumuzi travel to the underworld; Inanna visits temporarily, but Dumuzi dies for good. Given the funerary context, it could be that the absence of sheep in the underworld is represented. Yet the other imagery in the ornaments, especially that of the dates and apples, evokes fecundity. Therefore, the rope is more likely a symbol for a productive flock, even if the former interpretation cannot be ruled out unequivocally.

WHERE IS DUMUZI?

The Royal Cemetery of Ur has fascinated archaeologists and the public for almost a century. Although we may never know exactly how all the symbolic elements of Sumerian funerary ritual worked together, we know that the ancient Sumerians incorporated their own lived experience in a world structured by nature and culture. The Inanna and Dumuzi stories link the world of the living with that of the dead. The association of

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