

الشرق

Ash-sharq

Bulletin of the Ancient Near East
Archaeological, Historical and Societal Studies

Vol 3 No 1 2019



ISSN 2513-8529

Archaeopress Journals

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Bulletin of the Ancient Near East
Archaeological, Historical and Societal Studies

Vol 3 No 1 2019

ISSN 2513-8529
eISSN 2514-1732

ISBN 978-1-78969-200-6
eISBN 978-1-78969-201-3

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Ash-sharq is a peer-reviewed Bulletin devoted to short articles on the archaeology and history of the Ancient Near East. It is published twice a year. Submissions are welcome from academics and researchers at all levels. Submissions should be sent to Laura Battini
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Published by Archaeopress Publishing Ltd

Subscriptions to the **Bulletin of the Ancient Near East** should be sent to
Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, Summertown Pavilion, 18-24 Middle Way, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7LG
Tel +44-(0)1865-311914 Fax +44(0)1865-512231
e-mail info@archaeopress.com
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Unequal in Life but Equal in Death? The Mortuary Evidence for Social Stratification in the Ubaid Polities

Konstantinos Kopanias and Giota Barlagianni

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Abstract The archaeological evidence is inconclusive as to whether the Ubaid society was egalitarian or not. The almost complete absence of prestige goods and the rarity of imported raw materials in the Ubaid settlements appear to indicate the existence of an unstratified society. On the other hand, it is possible that an elite did indeed exist, but left almost no trace in the material culture. A re-evaluation of the mortuary practices in the Ubaid period offers some insight on this subject. A closer look at the archaeological evidence shows little variation concerning the quantity and quality of grave offerings. This means that the mortuary evidence too offers no direct clues for the existence of a stratified society in the Ubaid polities. Rather, the funerary practices indicate that in the Ubaid period there was no symbiotic relation between the living and the dead, as was witnessed in both previous and later periods in Mesopotamia. After the completion of the funerary rites, a deceased person was no longer considered to be a threat to or an asset for the community.

Introduction (GB)

The defining characteristic of the Ubaid material culture is its black on buff pottery, which was in use throughout the 6th and 5th millennia BC in Mesopotamia, northern Syria, southern Anatolia, western Iran, in some parts of the southwestern coasts of the Persian Gulf, and maybe also in the Caucasus.¹ The archaeological assemblage in most Ubaid sites within this vast geographical area shows that they had a similar socio-economic organisation. Other than pottery, the Ubaid material culture is characterised by the use of ophidian clay figurines, clay ‘nails’ and disks, tripartite houses and niched-buttressed architecture, the use of the slow pottery wheel, as well as the burial of the dead in extramural cemeteries.² Another important feature of the Ubaid society was the intentional deformation of the cranium of the infants, in order to give them a particular and characteristic shape; as will be mentioned below, this was a form of an embodied identity.

During the last three decades, several scholars have focused on the social and political organisation of the Ubaid communities: there are two main theories, which cannot be easily reconciled to one another. According to the first theory, the Ubaid society was ranked as one with an elite, which controlled the surplus of the agricultural

¹ Carter and Philip 2010: 1–2; Stein and Özbal 2007: 330.

² Carter and Philip 2010: 4; Stein and Özbal 2007: 331.

production;³ according to the foremost rival theory, however, the Ubaid society was mainly egalitarian, and its social organisation was largely based on kinships and symbolic roles within families.⁴ Nevertheless, there is a consensus that during the Ubaid Period some social changes gradually took place, which eventually led to the formation of the ranked society and the urbanisation that characterised the following Uruk Period.

In this paper we examine the mortuary practices at several sites of the Ubaid period, with the aim of examining whether there was a social diversification or not. During the Ubaid period, the intramural burials are very few and also in many cases hard to recognise, as for example at Tell Kurdu. In general, adults were no longer buried under the floor or in the walls of houses, but in extramural cemeteries. Few of these cemeteries have been located and even fewer have been excavated, so the available data is very limited. To date cemeteries have been investigated in Susa, Eridu, Ur, Tell Arpachiyah, Hakalan and Parchineh. At the last two sites, no traces of settlements have been identified and, accordingly, they were associated with itinerant populations.⁵

Multiple or secondary burials – characteristic of earlier periods – are limited in number; the predominant form are pit graves with single burials.⁶ There are a very few graves built of mudbrick walls,⁷ as well as the ones with multiple burials, as for example in Eridu.⁸ In Parchineh and Hakalan, the graves were lined with stone slabs: some contained multiple burials and others had no skeletal remains.⁹ During this particular period, burials with grave offerings were significantly more frequent than burials without any offerings. The grave goods consisted mainly of pottery, but, occasionally, stone vessels, adornments, beads, blades and figurines accompanying the body were also found.¹⁰ In the Ubaid cemetery in Susa burials extraordinarily rich in offerings, which also included copper artefacts, were discovered.¹¹ Stone vessels, obsidian ornaments and one macehead were recorded in Eridu;¹² seals, clay figurines, stone blades and vessels, maceheads and various copper and stone artefacts have been unearthed in Parchineh and Hakalan.¹³ Ritual pigmentation has also been observed: for example, all the skeletal remains in Eridu were covered with red ochre.¹⁴ Similarly,

³ Stein 1994.

⁴ Frangipane 2007; Pollock 1999.

⁵ Alizadeh 2008: 17; Hole 1989: 170.

⁶ Croucher 2010: 116; Hole 1989: 176.

⁷ Hole 1989: 166.

⁸ Charvát 2002: 56; Lloyd 1978: 46.

⁹ Alizadeh 2008: 17-18; Hole 1989: 170.

¹⁰ Croucher 2010: 117-18; Hole 1989: 176.

¹¹ Hole 2010: 233.

¹² Charvát 2002: 56.

¹³ Alizadeh 2008: 17-18; Hole 1989: 170.

¹⁴ Lloyd 1978: 47.

pigment was found in four graves in Choga Mish¹⁵ and in two burials in Ur.¹⁶ Despite the great variety in burial arrangement, some common features exist. Hole¹⁷ observed that pottery consisted of at least a bowl, a jar and a cup, but that their numbers differ from tomb to tomb. Grave goods were usually placed at the feet or the head of the deceased, who was placed lying either on his/her back or on their side.¹⁸

Infants continued to be buried inside ceramic vessels within the limits of settlements. A characteristic example is Tell Abada, where a significant number of urn burials was excavated under the floors of buildings.¹⁹ The pottery used in these burials are deep open bowls or jars, with or without painted decoration.²⁰ In some cases, the pots were sealed. According to the excavator, beads were found in some infant burials.²¹ The graves of older children included very few offerings, as can be observed at Yarim Tepe III,²² Tepe Giyan²³ and Değirmentepe.²⁴ Within one infant urn burial in Tell Zeidan, traces of flowers and plants have been found, which indicates that flowers might have customarily been offered also at other sites, but have perished from the archaeological record.²⁵

In this paper we mainly focus on the mortuary evidence from the following four sites:

Ur. Under the Royal Cemetery of Ur, Sir C. L. Woolley excavated approximately 50 graves between 1928 and 1929, which he dated to Ubaid II and III Periods.²⁶ These graves were found in older rubbish-mound at a distance from the settlement.²⁷

Tepe Gawra. This was excavated in the first half of the twentieth century by E. A. Speiser and afterwards by C. Bach. Around 40 – mostly urn – burials have been unearthed under the architectural remains of the settlement.²⁸ The fact that only infants and children were buried within the limits of the site indicates that a further cemetery should exist near the Tell.²⁹

Tell Arpachiyah. In 1932 and 1933 the excavation of this site took place under the direction of M. E. L. Mallowan and J. C. Rose. Fifty burials were dated to the Ubaid Period by the excavator.³⁰ The cemetery consisted of 45 graves; further five were

¹⁵ Graves A, D, L and O: Alizadeh 2008: 46.

¹⁶ PFG/JJ and PFG/KK: Woolley 1955: 97–98.

¹⁷ Hole 1989: 175.

¹⁸ Hole 1989: 175.

¹⁹ Jasim 1983: 183.

²⁰ Jasim 1983: 183.

²¹ Jasim 1983: 183.

²² Merpert and Munchaev 1993: 235.

²³ Hole 1989: 169.

²⁴ Özbek 2001: 240.

²⁵ Stein 2010–2011: 37.

²⁶ Woolley 1955: 2.

²⁷ Woolley 1955: 2.

²⁸ Tobler 1950: 98–125

²⁹ Tobler 1950: 121.

³⁰ Mallowan and Rose 1933.

found on the mound, under the abandoned houses of Halaf Period, or near the cemetery.

Tell Kurdu. R. Braidwood directed the excavations of Tell Kurdu in the 1930s. Between 1995 and 2005, the Oriental Institute of University of Chicago carried out research on Tell Kurdu and in the surrounding area, but the final publication has not been appeared yet. Thus, the available information on the burials is not detailed. Seven burials were dated in Ubaid Period, three of which are only mentioned in reports.³¹ Three additional burials (26:12, 12:12 and 24:16) were not dated with certainty to the Ubaid Period.³²

Analysis (KK)

The four sites in our sample cover a very wide geographical area: Ur in south Mesopotamia, Arpachiyah and Tepe Gawra in north Mesopotamia and Tell Kurdu in Syria. We have included a total of 45 graves from Ur, 49 graves from Arpachiya, 44 graves from Tepe Gawra, and seven graves from Tell Kurdu.

In our sample, infants were always buried in jars or pots with little or no offerings,³³ while adults were buried in rectangular-shaped pit graves. There was only a single exception to this rule: grave G14-15 in Arpachiyah. This particular grave is round, built of mud bricks³⁴ and contained a double burial, i.e. a man (ca. 30 years old) and a woman (aged between 25 and 50).³⁵ The shape of their skulls had been artificially modified during infancy.³⁶ Headshaping was not an uncommon practice in the Ubaid period.³⁷ Parents perpetuated a particular form of headshaping that formed a permanent indicator of group identity for the individual, and over which that individual had no control. This custom hints at the association of the Ubaid material culture with a particular population group.³⁸ The shape and the relatively elaborate construction (at least in contrast to the simple pit graves) of grave G14-15 in Arpachiyah, as well as the headshaping of its two occupants, need not signify a higher social status for its occupants, because there were no offerings in the grave, not even pottery.

The pit graves are always very simple and it appears that, usually, a minimum effort was applied to their construction. Additional embellishment is very rare: in this

³¹ Özbal et al 2004: 70; Yener 1998: 2.

³² Özbal et al 2004: 71.

³³ Hole 1989: 174. A total of 36 graves in our sample from **Tepe Gawra** G 35-165, G 36-101, G 36-107, G 36-119, G 36-124, G 36-126, G 36-131, G 36-141, G 36-154, G 36-156, G 36-157, G 36-23, G 36-25, G 36-29, G 36-59, G 36-61, G 36-63, G 36-65, G 36-66, G 36-69, G 36-70, G 36-71, G 36-94, G 36-99, Locus 287, Locus 291, Locus 294, Locus 301, Locus 307, Locus 308, Locus 310, Locus 317, Locus 321, Locus 36-171, Locus 36-77, Locus 7-38.

³⁴ Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38-39; Molleson and Campell 1995: 47.

³⁵ Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55.

³⁶ Molleson and Campell 1995: 54-5.

³⁷ Lorentz 2010.

³⁸ Kopanias and Fox 2016: 158.

sample, the bottoms of only six graves were layered with pottery sherds,³⁹ the walls of only two graves have been supported by mud bricks,⁴⁰ only one grave had pisè walls,⁴¹ and only one grave had plastered walls.⁴² The bodies were usually placed directly on the soil; in one case the dead seems to have been placed on a cloth,⁴³ and twice there was a simple coffin constructed from reeds.⁴⁴

The majority of the graves contained a single burial.⁴⁵ There are no family graves, being reused by the members of a particular kin group. In the sample, there are only six multiple burials;⁴⁶ in every case the bodies seem to have been buried together at the same time:

Ur PFG/A,B,C: three skeletons were arranged in this grave: a pottery vessel was placed next to the skull B and another one next to skull C.⁴⁷

Ur PFG/M: two skeletons were placed facing each other, with the legs of one placed on top of the legs of the other. The pottery vessels were placed at their feet.⁴⁸

Ur PFG/JJ: two skeletons were placed next to each other.⁴⁹

Arpachiyah G14-15: as already mentioned, it was a circular grave, with skeletons of a man and a woman.⁵⁰

Arpachiyah G23: the skeletons of a man and a woman were facing each other.⁵¹

Arpachiyah G25: contemporary burial of at least three bodies.⁵²

In the case of the grave PFG/T in Ur two skeletons and one extra skull was found. The offerings seem to relate to Skeleton A, since they have been placed near the knees and hands; near Skeleton B there were no offerings and only the skull of Skeleton C was included in the burial.⁵³ The fact that the Skull C was placed near to the knees of Skeleton A, and also that Skeleton B had no offerings, points to a conclusion that Skeleton A had a higher status than the other two.

A significant number of the skeletons were partial, which means that the remains have been submitted to a post mortem excarnation.⁵⁴ Anthropological studies could offer

³⁹ Ur: PFG/CC, PFG/DD, PFG/FF, PFG/Q, PFG/W, PFG/T.

⁴⁰ Tell Kurdu 24: 3, Ur PFG/D.

⁴¹ Tepe Gawra G 36-106.

⁴² Tepe Gawra G 36-148.

⁴³ Arpachiyah G 47.

⁴⁴ Ur PFG/A,B,C and PFG/F.

⁴⁵ Hole 1989: 175.

⁴⁶ Ur: PFG/A,B,C, PFG/M, PFG/JJ, PFG/T. Arpachiyah: G 14-15, G 23.

⁴⁷ Woolley 1955: 20.

⁴⁸ Woolley 1955: 89.

⁴⁹ Woolley 1955: 97.

⁵⁰ See above n. 34.

⁵¹ Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39.

⁵² Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41.

⁵³ Woolley 1955: 91-92.

⁵⁴ 23 in Arpachiyah (G 2, G 5, G 6, G 7, G 9, G 10, G11, G12, G13, G17, G21, G26, G30, G33, G35, G36, G38, G40, G41, G42, G43, G46, G49) and 18 in Ur (PFG/AA bis, PFG/BB, PFG/D, PFG/F, PFG/G, PFG/J, PFG/K, PFG/LL, PFG/NN, PFG/O, PFG/P, PFG/QQ, PFG/R, PFG/S, PFG/UU, PFG/VV, PFG/XX, PFG/Y).

some insight into the methods employed to achieve this. The famous ‘Vulture Scene’ in Çatal Hüyük, where vultures consume headless human corpses, possibly depicts such an excarnation process.⁵⁵ After the vultures or other wild animals had picked clean the flesh from the bones of a deceased person, their relatives or designated people from the community collected and buried them in the cemetery. Since the vultures or wild animals scattered the bones, not all of them were been retrieved for burial. This explains why so many partial skeletons in the Ubaid burials were found. The fact that the human corpses in the ‘Vulture Scene’ are headless indicates that the dead were decapitated before their exposure, in order to assure that the heads would not be carried away by the animals and be lost. In some cases it seems that the rest of the skeleton was not (or could not be) retrieved and so only the skull was buried in the grave.⁵⁶ Occasionally, more than one partial skeleton was buried in the same grave.⁵⁷

There are variations in the way the skeleton was positioned within the grave. Seven skeletons were placed in an extended position⁵⁸ and seven on their sides.⁵⁹ In one case the corpse was placed in a seated position,⁶⁰ but this burial included only two decorated pottery vessels, so it is not possible to assume that the exceptional position of the body signified a more elevated social status. Furthermore, 16 skeletons were placed in a contracted position and on their sides;⁶¹ this so-called foetal position was the most frequent at the time.⁶²

In our sample, the graves and the bodies did not always have the same orientation; nevertheless, they were almost always aligned according to the course of the sun, since they were placed with their feet to the west and head to the east, or vice versa. Such an orientation was definitely dictated by the beliefs about the afterlife of the people who lived in the Ubaid polities. On the other hand, the fact that not all the dead were oriented in the same direction, i.e. with all heads either to the east or to the west, shows that the existing religious beliefs were still fluid. Interestingly, we

⁵⁵ Mellaart 1967: fig. 48-49. Another method of excarnation could have been cannibalism, at least in the case of dead who were not members of the community. Recent finds in Domuz Tepe seem to indicate this: Carter 2012: 101.

⁵⁶ E.g. in the case of the grave PFG/T in **Ur**, see above n. 53. There are also burials with no skeletal remains: **Ur** PFG/DD, PFG/FF, PFG/Q, PFG/W, PFG/EE, PFG/HH, PFG/N, PFG/PP, PFG/SS, PFG/WW. There could be several explanations for this: 1) the skeletal remains have been fully disintegrated, 2) the skeletal remains could not have been retrieved after the excarnation, for whatever reason, 3) the grave was actually a cenotaph, etc.

⁵⁷ **Arpachiyah** (G 45, G 48) and **Ur** (PFG/AA, PFG/L, PFG/OO, PFG/RR, PFG/U).

⁵⁸ **Arpachiyah** (G 21), **Tepe Gawra** (Locus 7-47), **Ur** (PFG/CC, PFG/F, PFG/XX, PFG/Z, PFG/KK).

⁵⁹ **Arpachiyah** (G 23, G 39) **Ur** (PFG/AA, PFG/GG, PFG/JJ, PFG/MM, PFG/TT).

⁶⁰ **Arpachiyah** G 44.

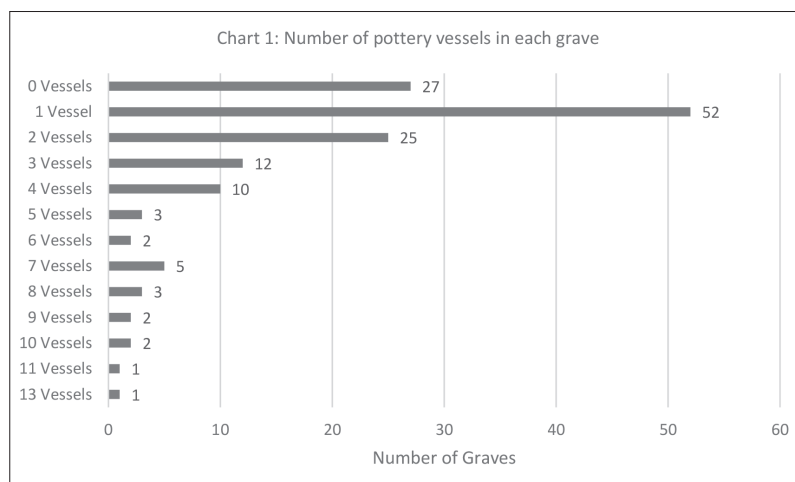
⁶¹ **Tell Kurdu** (26:12), **Arpachiyah** (G 30, G 32, G 33, G 36, G 36-106, G 40), **Tepe Gawra** (Locus 7-69). six in a contracted position with hands on the face: **Arpachiyah** (G 13, G 14-15, G 41, G 47), **Tepe Gawra** (Locus 7-43, Locus 7-53). Two in a contracted position with hands on the pelvis: **Ur**: PFG/M, PFG/T.

⁶² Croucher 2012, 53.

observe minor variations as to the exact orientation: the head was oriented either to the west,⁶³ SW,⁶⁴ NW,⁶⁵ or to the east,⁶⁶ NE,⁶⁷ SE.⁶⁸

The grave offerings consisted mainly of pottery. The body was first placed into the grave and the offerings were arranged around or on it. In 11 cases, the pottery was placed near the head⁶⁹ and in 25 cases near the feet.⁷⁰ Only once was it placed behind the back.⁷¹ The position of the pottery shows that it was intended to be used by the deceased themselves, probably during their journey to the afterlife or as a gift to the deities of the netherworld.⁷² There is no evidence that feasting took place at the cemetery after the conclusion of the burial or that food and other gifts were offered to the dead at any later point.⁷³

The majority of the burials (52) included only one vessel; 25 had only two vessels, while 27 graves had no pottery offerings at all. The following chart shows the total number of pottery vessels in each grave:



⁶³ **Arpachiyah** (G 21, G 23, G 3, G 30), **Tepe Gawra** (G 36-106), **Ur** (PFG/E, PFG/G, PFG/GG, PFG/TT).

⁶⁴ **Ur**: PFG/AA, PFG/CC, PFG/JJ, PFG/T, PGG/KK.

⁶⁵ **Arpachiyah** (G 12, G 37), **Tepe Gawra** (Locus 7-47).

⁶⁶ **Arpachiyah**: G 10, G 13, G 33, G 36, G 39, G 47, G 50.

⁶⁷ **Ur** PFG/Z.

⁶⁸ **Arpachiyah** (G 32, G 34, G 35, G 41), **Tepe Gawra** (Locus 7-43, Locus 7-53, Locus 7-69), **Ur** (PFG/MM, PFG/XX).

⁶⁹ **Arpachiyah** (G 23, G 42, G 43, G 44, G 46, G 47, G 9), **Ur** (PFG/A,B,C, PFG/F, PFG/GG, PFG/V).

⁷⁰ **Arpachiyah** (G 23, G 42, G 43, G 47, G 9), **Ur** (PFG/V, PFG/AA, PFG/G, PFG/M, PFG/TT, PFG/Z, PFG/T, PGG/KK), **Arpachiyah** (G 24, G 27, G 28, G 3, G 33, G 34, G 35, G 36, G 40, G 41, G 7, G 8).

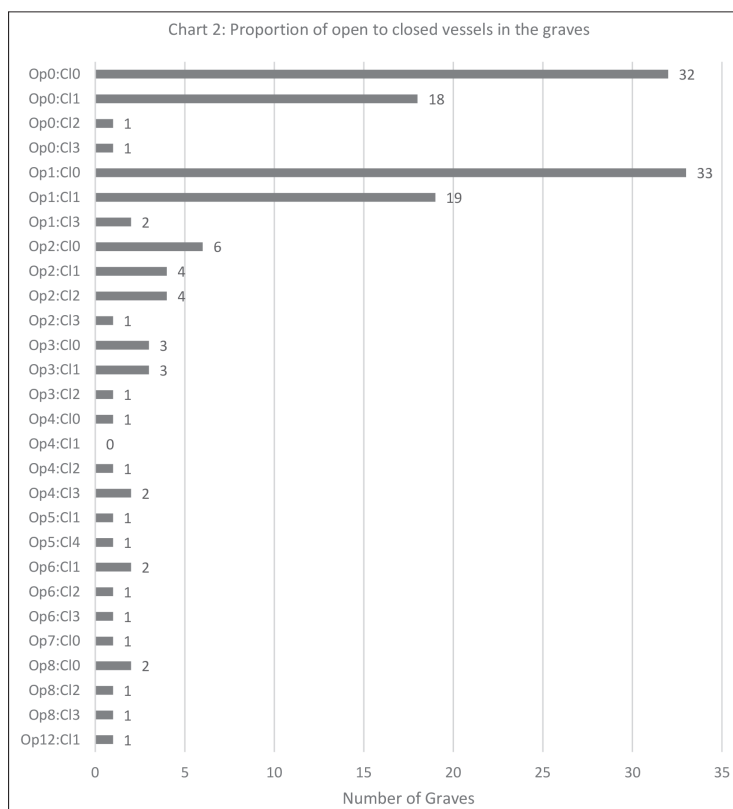
⁷¹ **Ur** PFG/E.

⁷² At least that was the case in Mesopotamia during the 3rd millennium: Katz 2003 and 2007; Kopanias 2012.

⁷³ In nine cases animal bones have been found in the graves: **Tell Kurdu** (23:10, 24:27), **Arpachiyah** (G 21, G 3, G 34, G 45, G 47), **Ur** (PFG/M, PFG/Q). Nevertheless, they are usually isolated finds.

The majority of pottery in the graves were open vessels: 210 open in contrast to 95 closed vessels – roughly two to one. This reflects the general trend in the Ubaid period, where the open vessels constituted the majority of vessel forms.⁷⁴ The following chart shows the proportion of open to closed vessels within every grave.

In 18 cases there was only one closed vessel in the grave, and in 33 cases only one open vessel. In another 19 cases, just one piece was included.



Op(no.) = Number of Open Vessels, e.g. Op3 equals 3 Open

Cl(no.) = Number of Closed Vessels, e.g. Cl2 equals 2 Closed

In our sample the decorated pottery offerings are slightly more numerous than the undecorated ones: 178 and 147 respectively. The following chart shows the proportion of decorated and undecorated vessels within every single grave (Chart 3).

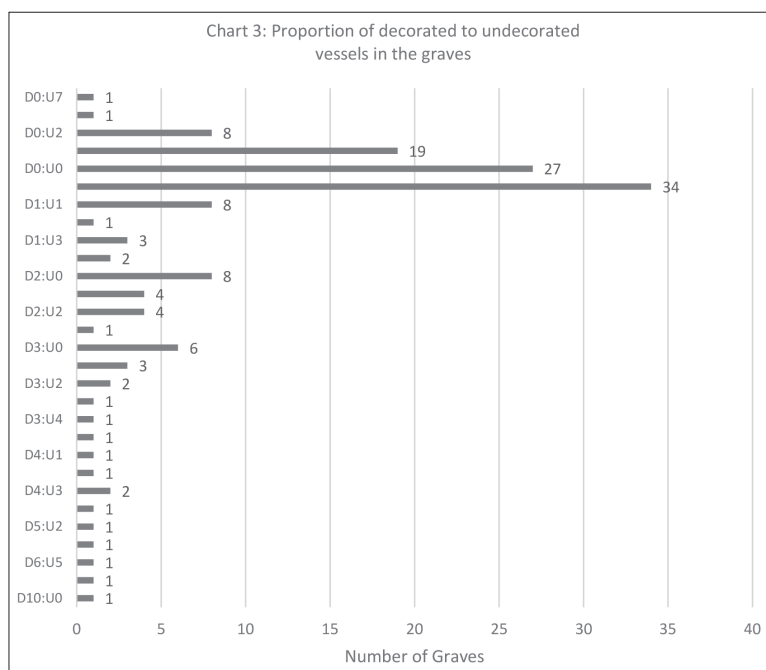
Occasionally other objects were also offered to the dead: (shell, steatite or stone) beads in nine cases,⁷⁵ various small clay objects in six cases,⁷⁶ a human figurine in six

⁷⁴ Jauß 2015: 28.

⁷⁵ **Arpachiyah** (G 4, G 23, G 25, G 27, G 31), **Tepe Gawra** (G36-106), **Ur** (PFG/E, PFG/M, PFG/T).

⁷⁶ A clay box (Arpachiyah G 42), a clay cone (Ur PFG/NN), a clay disk (Ur PFG/E, PFG/EE), a grooved ornamental

cases,⁷⁷ a stone vessel in two cases,⁷⁸ and fragments of flint tools in two cases.⁷⁹ Apart from animal bones in eight cases,⁸⁰ all other goods appear but the once: a clay animal figurine,⁸¹ and a spatula,⁸² a bone pin,⁸³ a polished stone axe-head,⁸⁴ a steatite mace-head,⁸⁵ a copper spear-head,⁸⁶ a spindle whorl,⁸⁷ and a bone playing pipe.⁸⁸



D(no.) = Number of Decorated Vessels

U(no.) = Number of Undecorated Vessels

Some of the above mentioned objects could be interpreted as status symbols: e.g. the steatite mace-head, the stone vessels, the stone axe-head, and the copper spear-head. Nevertheless, if we examine them in relation to the other finds in each grave, then it becomes evident that not a single burial offers evidence that it belonged to a person with an elevated social status. In the case of the steatite mace-head (Ur PFG/E) only

stud (Tepe Gawra G 36-141), a clay rattle (Tepe Gawra Locus 7-37) and a clay lid (Arpachiyah G 47).

⁷⁷Ur: PFG/AA bis, PFG/JJ, PFG/O, PFG/Q, PFG/QQ, PFG/T.

⁷⁸Tepe Gawra (G 36-156), Ur (PFG/E).

⁷⁹Arpachiyah G 47, G 48.

⁸⁰Arpachiyah (G 3, G 21, G 34, G 45, G 47), T. Kurdu (24: 27), Ur (PFG/M, PFG/Q).

⁸¹Tepe Gawra Locus 7-37.

⁸²Arpachiyah G 24.

⁸³Ur PFG/Q.

⁸⁴Ur PFG/F.

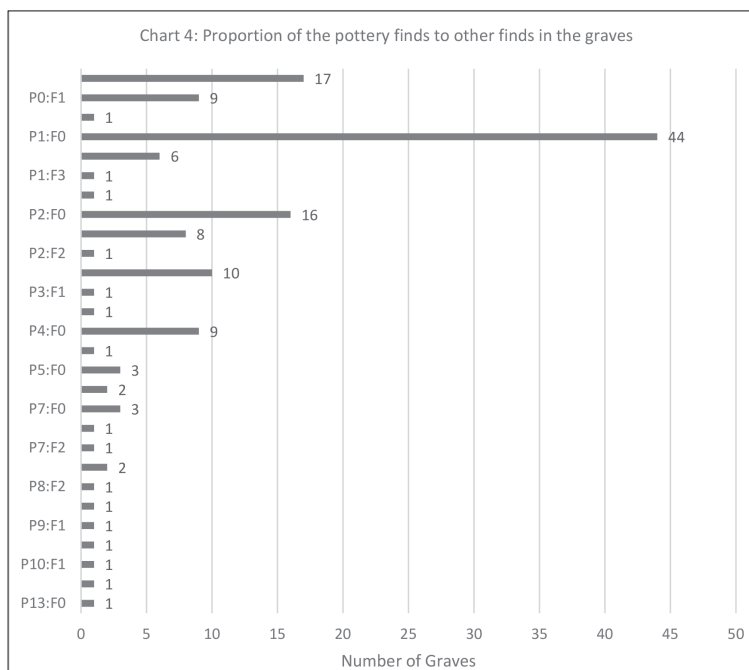
⁸⁵Ur PFG/E.

⁸⁶Ur PFG/G.

⁸⁷Tepe Gawra Locus 7-43.

⁸⁸Tepe Gawra Locus 36-171.

one pottery vessel was found, the marble jar was found in a grave with no pottery at all (Tepe Gawra G36-156) and the other stone vessel came from a grave with one undecorated pottery vessel (Ur PFG/E). The stone axe-head was unearthed in a grave with only two undecorated pottery vessels (Ur PFG/F), and the copper spear-head was with only one decorated vessel (Ur PFG/G).



P(no.) = Total Number of Vessels

F(no.) = Total Number of Other Finds

In our sample, graves with large numbers of pottery and some other find are uncommon: of the best endowed, one has ten pottery vessels and one find of a different type, another instance nine pottery vessels and one find of a different type, a third had eight pottery vessels and two finds of a different type and lastly one came with seven pottery vessels and one find of a different type. In six further cases there is a just a single pottery vessel in the grave, but still one offering of a different type; in eight cases there are two pottery vessels in the grave and one find of a different type. Finally, in nine cases the grave included a find of a different type, but no pottery whatsoever. Therefore, we can conclude that even the 'poorest' graves, ceramically speaking, could often enough receive an offering of some sort.

Conclusions (KK)

The archaeological evidence indicates that the Ubaid settlements had a complex social organisation.⁸⁹ It is possible that it was a hierarchical one, but that its elite left almost no identifiable traces in the archaeological record. There are no architectural finds which could clearly be connected with a single ruling person or a group and the prestige or 'exotic' goods in the Ubaid settlements are scarce;⁹⁰ copper remains a very rare commodity until the Uruk period, and even obsidian was used frugally.⁹¹ If there was indeed an elite present in the Ubaid settlements, then it seems that its members did not base their authority on the accumulation and distribution of material commodities and prestige goods, but rather on something immaterial or perishable. Perhaps, as Stein suggested, that the Ubaid 'elite' was supported by staple finance, i.e. the mobilisation of surplus staples such as cereals.⁹² As expounded above, the funerary offerings in the Ubaid burials are very poor and include no truly prestigious objects (Chart 4).⁹³ Various types of objects were sporadically also buried together with the dead. Nevertheless, the offering of such objects was not restricted to the burials with more vessels, but are also to be found in burials with a few or no ceramics. It seems that the family intermittently decided to include in the burial an object which had a particular meaning to the deceased or to themselves.

Not one grave in our sample could be attributed to a member of an elite; the mortuary evidence seems to reflect an egalitarian society. If Stein's theory is correct, i.e. that the elite controlled the surplus staples of perishable goods, then we would expect to find at least a few graves with more pottery in them. Nevertheless, no burial in our sample includes more than 13 pottery vessels (Chart 1). Even in the case of the graves with more than six vessels, only very few of them were closed vessels, i.e. suitable for containing food (Chart 2). Even if we assume that all the vessels in a grave contained food, no deceased received beyond very small quantity of nourishment; the existing evidence does not argue that any relatives had at their disposal significant quantities of food. Even if there existed families with a surplus, apparently they did not think it necessary to supply their own dead with extra food beyond the norm.

An elevated social position could have been expressed by other means in the cemeteries: members of the elite could have received better constructed graves or ones placed in a more prominent location. But again, as shown above, this was not the case. Furthermore, no family graves were created, i.e. graves used by the same kin group for more than one generation, and there is nothing to suggest that some parts of the cemeteries were restricted only for the burials of members of the same family.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Stein 1994: 37–9.

⁹⁰ Stein 1994: 40.

⁹¹ Healey 2010; Kopanias 2017.

⁹² Stein 1994: 40.

⁹³ Wright and Pollock 1987: 324–8; Charvát 2002: 98.

⁹⁴ Hole 1989: 179.

At least in death, everybody seemed to have been (or become) equal, no matter the size and wealth of their family.

The mortuary evidence, then, offers no support for Stein's theory. Nevertheless, it is possible that this evidence did not reflect the social structure of the Ubaid polities, but merely the beliefs of their inhabitants about the afterlife. During the Ubaid period the mortuary practices changed noticeably: the dead were no longer buried within the settlements or under the floors of their houses; they were buried in cemeteries, i.e. secluded from the realm of the living. There is also no evidence that their descendants offered them food or gifts at any point after the conclusion of the burial rites. The dead seem to have become less significant for the living:⁹⁵ it was apparently believed that once the dead entered the realm of the netherworld, they could no longer affect their living relatives or their community. It was maybe because of this reason that the mortuary offerings were kept at a minimum: just to cover the initial phase of their journey into that realm of oblivion.

A different scenario is also possible. During the Neolithic era, the dead were buried within the settlement and often under the floor of their own houses; the funerary rites took place in a domestic context. In the Ubaid and later periods, the dead were usually buried in a secluded space outside of the boundaries of the settlements. Nevertheless, it is possible that the funerary rites continued to take place in a domestic context. It is also possible that, prior to the burial, funerary feasting took place within the settlement. The number of the guests, the quality and quantity of the feasting in honor of the dead could have signified their social position and wealth. After an extravagant feast, especially one witnessed by all the members of the community, it was not necessary (at least during the Ubaid period) to further underline the high social status of the dead by building an elaborate tomb and including numerous and expensive offerings in it. Of course, such feastings in a domestic context leave no archaeological traces: so it is impossible to know whether this was indeed the case during the Ubaid period or not.

The current archaeological evidence, both from the settlements and the cemeteries, does not allow any room for speculating on the social structure of the Ubaid polities. It is possible that one or several people had a higher social position than the rest of the community members. It is also possible that this person or group of persons controlled a surplus of perishable goods. Nevertheless, they left almost no identifiable archaeological traces and, even more surprisingly, after they died, they did not receive any special treatment. The Ubaid elites, if they ever existed, still remain elusive.

⁹⁵ Croucher 2010: 117.

Catalogue (GB)

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
Arpach.	G1	2	1	1	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G10	3	3	0	2	0		Molleson and Campbell 1995: 55; Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G11	4	2	2	2	2		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G12	2	1	1	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G13	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G14-15	0	0	0	0	0		Molleson and Campbell 1995: 47, 55; Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38-9
Arpach.	G16	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G17	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G18	2	2	0	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G19	2	0	2	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G2	3	2	1	1	1		Molleson and Campbell 1995: 55; Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G20	0	0	0	0	0		Molleson and Campbell 1995: 55; Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G21	2	2	0	0	2	Animal bones	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G22	1	0	1	1	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G23	4	2	2	3	1	Bead	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G24	2	0	1	0	1	Spatula	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G25	0	0	0	0	0	Steatite bead	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39
Arpach.	G26	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 39-40
Arpach.	G27	2	2	0	1	1	Steatite beads	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G28	2	0	2	1	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
Arpach.	G29	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G3	1	0	1	0	0	Skull of a ram/goat	Molleson and Campbell 1995: 55; Mallowan and Linford 1969: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G30	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G31	0	0	0	0	0	Steatite bead	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G32	1	0	1	0	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G33	2	0	2	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G34	2	1	1	1	1	Ibex horn	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G35	2	0	2	1	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G36	2	1	1	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G37	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G38	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G39	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G4	0	0	0	0	0	Steatite beads	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G40	2	0	2	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G41	2	2	0	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40
Arpach.	G42	1	0	1	0	0	Clay box	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 40-1
Arpach.	G43	2	1	1	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G44	2	2	0	2	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G45	10	10	0	0	1	Animal bones	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G46	1	0	1	1	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G47	1	0	1	1	0	2 frgs of flint blades, clay lid, object in the shape of sheep's jaw	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G48	1	0	1	0	0	Flint fragments	Mallowan and Rose 1935: 41
Arpach.	G49	2	2	0	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 42
Arpach.	G5	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G50	1	1	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 42
Arpach.	G6	0	0	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
Arpach.	G7	1	1	0	0	0		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G8	3	3	0	1	1		Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
Arpach.	G9	3	2	1	1	1		Molleson and Campell 1995: 54; Mallowan and Linford 1995: 55; Mallowan and Rose 1935: 38
T. Kurdu	12:12	0	0	0	0	0		Özbal 2010: Table 18.1; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Kurdu	23:10	0	0	0	0	0		Özbal 2010: Table 18.1; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Kurdu	23:11	3	3	0	2	1		Özbal 2010: Table 18.1; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71.
T. Kurdu	24:16	0	0	0	0	0		Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Kurdu	24:27	0	0	0	0	0	Part of a horn	Özbal 2010: 303; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Kurdu	24:3	0	0	0	0	0		Özbal 2010, Table 18.1; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Kurdu	26:12	1	0	1	0	1		Özbal 2010: Table 18.1; Özbal <i>et al.</i> 2004: 71
T. Gawra	G35-165	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 104, 119
T. Gawra	G36-101	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-106	0	0	0	0	0	Bead	Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-107	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-119	1	0	1	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-124	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-126	1	0	1	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-131	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-141	0	0	0	0	0	Grooved ornamental stud	Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-148	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-154	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-156	0	0	0	0	0	Marble jar	Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-157	1	0	1	1	0		Tobler 1950: 104, 119
T. Gawra	G36-23	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
T. Gawra	G36-25	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	G36-29	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	G36-59	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-61	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-63	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-65	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-66	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-69	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-70	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-71	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-94	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	G36-99	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 119
T. Gawra	Locus 287	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 291	1	0	1	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 294	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 301	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 307	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 308	1	0	1	0	1		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 310	1	0	1	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 317	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 321	1	0	1	1	0		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 36-171	0	0	0	0	0	Bone playing pipe	Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 36-77	1	1	0	0	1		Tobler 1950: 118
T. Gawra	Locus 7-37	0	0	0	0	0	Animal figurine, a rattle	Tobler 1950: 105, 119
T. Gawra	Locus 7-38	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 105, 119
T. Gawra	Locus 7-43	1	1	0	0	1	Spindle whorl	Tobler 1950: 105, 119
T. Gawra	Locus 7-47	3	0	3	0	3		Tobler 1950: 105, 119
T. Gawra	Locus 7-53	1	1	0	1	0		Tobler 1950: 120

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
T. Gawra	Locus 7-6	3	3	0	3	0		Tobler 1950: 104, 119
T. Gawra	Locus 7-69	2	1	1	1	1		Tobler 1950: 120
Ur	PFG/A,B,C	2	0	2	2	0		Woolley 1955: 87
Ur	PFG/AA	10	6	4	8	2		Woolley 1955: 94
Ur	PFG/AA bis	1	0	1	1	0	Female figurine	Woolley 1955: 95
Ur	PFG/BB	3	1	2	2	1		Woolley 1955: 95
Ur	PFG/CC	9	4	5	6	3		Woolley 1955: 95
Ur	PFG/D	0	0	0	0	0		Woolley 1955: 87
Ur	PFG/DD	1	0	1	0	1		Woolley 1955: 96
Ur	PFG/E	1	0	1	1	0	Limestone bowl, a steatite mace-head, clay disk, shell beads	Woolley 1955: 87
Ur	PFG/EE	2	0	2	1	1	2 clay disks	Woolley 1955: 96
Ur	PFG/F	2	0	2	2	0	Polished stone axe-head	Woolley 1955: 87
Ur	PFG/FF	3	2	1	2	1		Woolley 1955: 96
Ur	PFG/G	1	1	0	1	0	Copper spear-head	Woolley 1955: 88
Ur	PFG/GG	8	2	6	6	2		Woolley 1955: 96-97
Ur	PFG/HH	1	1	0	1	0		Woolley 1955: 96-97
Ur	PFG/J	4	1	3	4	0		Woolley 1955: 88
Ur	PFG/JJ	9	7	2	5	4	Female figurine	Woolley 1955: 97
Ur	PFG/K	8	1	7	8	0		Woolley 1955: 88
Ur	PFG/L	7	0	7	7	0		Woolley 1955: 88
Ur	PFG/LL	2	1	1	1	1		Woolley 1955: 98
Ur	PFG/M	8	1	7	8	0	Shell beads, animal bones	Woolley 1955: 89
Ur	PFG/MM	6	3	3	4	2		Woolley 1955: 98
Ur	PFG/N	13	3	10	12	1		Woolley 1955: 89
Ur	PFG/NN	1	1	0	1	0	Clay cone	Woolley 1955: 99
Ur	PFG/O	7	3	4	4	3	Female figurine	Woolley 1955: 89-90

Site	Grave	Pottery (total)	Pottery Decoration		Pottery Shapes		Other Finds	Bibliography
			Decorated	Undecorated	Open	Closed		
Ur	PFG/OO	4	1	3	1	3		Woolley 1955: 99
Ur	PFG/P	5	4	1	4	1		Woolley 1955: 90
Ur	PFG/PP	2	2	0	1	1	Polished bone pin	Woolley 1955: 100
Ur	PFG/Q	7	4	3	4	3	Female figurine, bird bone	Woolley 1955: 90-91
Ur	PFG/QQ	3	3	0	2	1	Female figurine	Woolley 1955: 99
Ur	PFG/R	7	5	2	6	1		Woolley 1955: 91
Ur	PFG/RR	4	2	2	3	1		Woolley 1955: 100
Ur	PFG/S	2	2	0	2	0		Woolley 1955: 91
Ur	PFG/SS	4	3	1	3	1		Woolley 1955: 100
Ur	PFG/TT	5	3	2	2	3		Woolley 1955: 100
Ur	PFG/U	7	4	3	6	1		Woolley 1955: 92
Ur	PFG/UU	5	3	2	3	2		Woolley 1955: 101
Ur	PFG/V	6	4	2	5	1		Woolley 1955: 93
Ur	PFG/VV	4	1	3	1	3		Woolley 1955: 101
Ur	PFG/W	3	2	1	3	0		Woolley 1955: 93
Ur	PFG/WW	4	3	1	2	2		Woolley 1955: 101
Ur	PFG/XX	4	2	2	2	2		Woolley 1955: 102
Ur	PFG/Y	2	1	1	2	0		Woolley 1955: 93
Ur	PFG/Z	11	6	5	8	3		Woolley 1955: 93-94
Ur	PFG/T	3	3	0	3	0	Shell beads, steatite beads, human figurine	Woolley 1955: 91-92
Ur	PGG/KK	4	3	1	2	2		Woolley 1955: 98
TOTALS		326	178	147	210	95	41	

Note: The total sum of the pottery in our sample is 326 vessels. However the total of the open (210) and closed (95) vessels in the above table is 305. The remaining 21 vessels are not described as open or closed in the publication and so they were omitted from the table. The same applies also in the case of the decorated and undecorated pottery.

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