

# The èš-abzu and its Early Conceptualization

**1.0 Introduction:** The rise and progress of Assyriology since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century may be described as one of the great intellectual marvels of the post enlightenment era, if one of the lesser known ones. Through the successive efforts of generations of archaeologists and philologists the material and intellectual treasures of Mesopotamia have been laid bare – and yet, the most determined researcher will admit that there is much about the ancient worldview that remains elusive and mysterious so that even the most fundamental areas of Mesopotamian religion will defy a full description, and key phases of the historical record remain problematic. Why is that?

One good answer to this question has come from R. Zettler who focuses attention not on the material, but on issues with how the material is examined. Concerning the analytical methodologies that have traditionally been employed in the field, Zettler points out that a division of labor between philologists and archaeologists has inhibited any approach toward a “holistic history” of Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of this for the philologist are significant as texts “do not provide readers with the background information needed to comprehend them” and are inherently biased.<sup>2</sup> At the same time it’s obvious that archaeologists working without the benefit of textual data are deprived of a vital window into the culture in question. In Zettler’s view then, and it is a view he is perfectly able to illustrate by allusion to recent studies, neither philologists nor archaeologists can afford any longer “to think or work in rigidly bounded confines.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zettler 2003 pg. 5

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

With a view toward Zettler's suggestions for a more holistic history, this paper will address an old problem in the study of Mesopotamian religion: the abzu, and its religious and material foundations. Using mainly textual sources, Gebhard Selz has made the suggestion that the wide distribution of abzu cult places in Early Dynastic Mesopotamian are an indication of the early supremacy of the god Enki.<sup>4</sup> This suggestion is based on the presence of cult places ("kultplätze") bearing the name abzu/su at Nippur, Ur, Murum, Keš and Eridu as well as up to nine abzu/su places of worship in ED Lagaš alone.<sup>5</sup> This paper will argue with a combined textual/material approach that key archaeological finds help to further elucidate the role of the abzu in Sumerian religious and cosmological thinking. To that end, it will be asked: what is the abzu? An explanation of the environmental versus the cosmological abzu will be given (1.0); What is the temple? The conceptualization of the Sumerian temple both as physical structure and as cosmic mediator will then be discussed (2.0, 2.1, 2.2); finally what is the éš-abzu that Selz has referred to? Consideration to key finds at Ur and Lagash will be given (3.0, 3.1, 3.2).

## **1.0 The Abzu in a Cosmological and Environmental Sense:**

Although this paper is mainly concerned with the cultic significance of the term abzu and its archaeological attestations, some attention should be given to what the term meant to the Mesopotamians – the ones defining its perception in natural, supernatural and manmade terms. The word abzu itself, sometimes spelt zu-ba in the earliest texts, is of an unknown etymology;<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zettler 2003 pg. 35

<sup>4</sup> Selz 1992 pg. 195

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* Selz: "Für die weite Verbreitung dieser wohl sicher mit Enki zu verbindenden Abzu kultstätten könnte man vielleicht auch inner-religiöse, z.B. mythologische Gründe auführen. Diese sind aber von einer hier vermuteten vorgeschichtlichen Suprematie Enkis kaum zu trennen." Note, the author does not specify what is meant here by places of worship with the terms "Kultstätten" or "Kultplätze" whether it may be a temple, shrine, or perhaps, an abzu basin. For the difficulties of these definitions see below.

nonetheless, it was a word imbued with both cultic and cosmological meaning. Several synonyms are attested for abzu as well as the near synonym engur.<sup>7</sup> As a cosmological unit, Wayne Hurowitz has defined the abzu as a sort of “cosmic subterranean lake that maintains a constant surface level,” a subterranean lake from which fresh waters were thought to flow into marshes, swamps and rivers.<sup>8</sup> One indication that this cosmic abzu was thought to have been situated between the netherworld and the terrestrial surface are textual descriptions of the nightly ascent of astral phenomena through the abzu on the way to heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Given the geological makeup of the area of Eridu in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium, it's more than likely that the cosmological significance of the abzu had roots in the actual physical characteristics of the area. Eridu is located in a generally low lying area with a large depression to the southeast. For M. Green, the cosmological concept may have been modeled from “a depression in the plain where water from the water table percolated to the surface to form pools.”<sup>10</sup> For Safar et al., it is more probable that the water was directly from the Euphrates: “the water which filled the depressions forming the great lagoons (Apsu) was fresh from the Euphrates...”<sup>11</sup> Another interesting possibility about the physical basis for the cosmology, although perhaps not entirely different from the idea of lagoon/s, comes from J. Zarins, who surveyed the area around Eridu in 1971. Zarins describes part of the area he examined as a “sabkha” type salt flat, with shell litter and eroding, marsh like deposits. Taken together, he has made the suggestion that the early sites of Eridu along with Usaila were actually located on

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<sup>6</sup> Espak 2006 pg. 13

<sup>7</sup> Green 1975 pg. 158-159 states that synonyms include: engur, é-engur, lál-har/gar, hal-an-kù, šeg<sub>9</sub>-bar, du<sub>6</sub>-kù. Engur seems originally to have had a distinct connotation as there are reeds of the engur but not reeds of the abzu; there is clay of the abzu but not clay of the engur etc. However the original Sumerian distinction between the terms seems lost and Akkadian texts used the terms interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup> Hurowitz 1998 pg. 344

<sup>9</sup> Alster 1976 note 1 (On the Earliest Sumerian Literary Tradition.)

<sup>10</sup> Green 1975 pg. 169

<sup>11</sup> Safar, Mustafa and Lloyd 1981 pg. 33

the shores of a now long gone fresh water lake. This suggestion also has the advantage of explaining why nearby Kuara is described in close relation to the abzu in Sumerian literature (the assumption therefore being that it would have bordered the lake).<sup>12</sup>

## 2.0 The Abzu between Myth and Reality:

When turning to the topic of temple architecture in Sumerian contexts, the cosmological Abzu retains a good degree of relevance. Enki's temple in Eridu has long been noted for its archetypal importance both for the ancient builders and for modern archaeologists.<sup>13</sup> While the earliest building layers of this structure stretch off into the pre-history of the Ubaidians, it was known in Sumerian times as the *é-abzu* or the *é-engur-ra*, more or less synonymous terms which translate in Akkadian as *bīt apsī* "house of the apsu." In Sumerian texts this temple bares a strong metaphoric analogy with the cosmic abzu, to the extent that, in some texts, the temple is simply called "abzu" and no obvious distinction between myth and reality is drawn.<sup>14</sup> This strong connection between the Eridu temple and the abzu may also be indicated by the odd placement of its staircases: while by comparison with the ziggurat at Ur placement on the northwest side may be expected, the temple at Eridu had staircases leading up from the southeast "probably facing the lagoons in the depression, where abzu the sea was the abode of Enki."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zarins 1992 pgs. 61-65. For the point about Kuara the author gives the Sumerian Temple Hymns entry for Asarluhi as an example. A compromise between Safar, Mustafa and Lloyd's "lagoons" and Zarin's "lake" is struck by G. Leick who states that the lagoon based Eridu was "a swampy place that can become a sizable lake in the months of high water." (Espak 2006 pg. 10 citing Leick 2001 *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City* pgs 4-9).

<sup>13</sup> Espak 2006 pg. 17

<sup>14</sup> For example, the text known as *Enki's Journey to Nibru* gives praise to the temple in these words: "Abzu, pure place which fulfills its purpose! E-engura! Your lord has directed his steps toward you. Enki, lord of the abzu, has embellished your foundation pegs with carnelian. (ETCSL c.1.1.4)

<sup>15</sup> Safar et al. 1981 pg, 62

## 2.1 Foundation Pegs and the Abzu

Another physical feature of the Eridu temple which borders with the cosmology were its foundation pegs, which, according to the texts, were “driven into the abzu.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly to the e-engur-ra, the temple at Keš<sup>17</sup> and the é-ninnu temple at Lagaš<sup>18</sup> are reported to have had roots or foundation pegs driven down into the abzu. Interestingly, the archaeological evidence for the practice of driving pegs into temple foundations (ostensibly in the direction of the abzu or at least the water table) may not be wholly unattested in Sumerian contexts: during the excavations at Lagash in the late 1960s work was carried out on the Ibgal temple of Inanna, a temple oval rebuilt by Enannatum in the ED IIIb period.<sup>19</sup> Buried in a series of seven foundation deposits were seven copper figurines with peg-shaped bases (*fig.1*), some were even found submerged *in situ* in the soil of the foundations (*fig.2*). The form given to the pegs used in this temple was that of the personal god of Enannatum, a god named Shulutula.<sup>20</sup> The foundation pegs of the Ibgal temple of Inanna may compare favorably to pegs alluded to in the texts mentioned above, although exact correlation may be an overstatement.<sup>21</sup>

With the use of foundation pegs and their intended religious functions a key aspect of the Sumerian worldview presents itself: the Mesopotamian temple was not just situated between

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<sup>16</sup> *Enki's Journey to Nibru* (ETCSL c.1.1.4) states: “He [Isimud] goes to the brick building and addresses it: Temple, built from precious metal and lapis lazuli, whose foundation pegs are driven into the abzu.”

<sup>17</sup> See *The Keš Temple Hymn* (ETCSL t.4.80.2 lines 10-20)

<sup>18</sup> Gudea Cylinder A lines 602-605 states: “*The ruler built the house, he made it high, high as a great mountain. Its abzu foundation pegs, big mooring stakes, he drove into the ground so deep they could take counsel with Enki in the E-engura.*” The é-engur-ra here would appear to be an allusion to the cosmic abzu rather than the temple, as it appears under to be under the surface in this use.

<sup>19</sup> Hansen 1992 pg. 13

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> The figurines on the foundation pegs from the Ibgal temple are carved to represent the personnel god of Enannatum, Shulutula. The pegs that were sunk into the é-ninnu, and which were to sink to the abzu, were shaped like abgal priests (Gudea Cyl. A l. 610)- just as the abgal priests were to commune with Enki in the abzu, the reasoning for a personnel god-shaped peg was possibly the same.

heaven and earth, but by virtue of its height and high placement it physically reached for the heavens; and by virtue of its foundations and its foundation pegs beneath the surface, it physically reached for the abzu underneath. In this way, the temple was a mediator between the realms, a concept which effects building rationale and (by extension) design and which stands a plausible chance at some archaeological attestations.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.2 Temple Foundations and the Abzu

A related consideration is the ancient claim that the temple foundations themselves were submersed in the abzu somehow. Concerning the Ekišnugal of Nanna at Ur, the Temple Hymns state: “Your foundation is the abzu, fifty in number, and the engur, seven in number, a shrine which looks into the heart of the gods. “ In fact, the association of temple foundations with the abzu is a theme that repeats with some frequency in the literature.<sup>23</sup> In his discussion on the Sumerian term *t e m e n*, “foundations,” A. Falkenstein recognized this reoccurring literary theme, and commented on the Ekišnugal temple hymn: “Die Wendung besagt wohl, dass das Ekišnugal all emit dem Abzu (von Eridu) verbundenen Vorstellungen in sich aufgenommenhat.”<sup>24</sup>

Whether this cosmological principal was inspired by physical features of the Southern Mesopotamian environment, or whether it inspired any genuine building practices is difficult to

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<sup>22</sup> For the Temple as mediator or “Naval of the World” particularly in the context of Nippur and Babylon, see S. Maul “Die altorientalische Hauptstadt -- Abbild und Nabel der Welt,” in *Die Orientalische Stadt: Kontinuität. Wandel. Bruch*. 1 Internationale Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft. 9.-10. Mai 1996 in Halle/Saale. Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag (1997), p.109-124

<sup>23</sup> in a Šulgi hymn, the É-kur is called “the fate good brick embedded in the bottom of the abzu.” (ETCSL c.2.4.2.07). In the Temple Hymns, Tummal is praised: “O Tummal, exceedingly worthy of the princely divine powers, inspiring awe and dread! Foundation, your pure lustration extends over the abzu.” (ETCSL c.4.80.1)

<sup>24</sup> Falkenstein 1966 pg. 236 n. 4

determine. According to Jacobsen's now classic comment on the É-engura: "the 'house of the engur' stretches underground with the water table to Lagash where the substructure of the É – n i n n u reached into it."<sup>25</sup> According to Jacobsen's interpretations than, the abzu was considered to be manifest in the fresh waters of the water table as well. This thinking seems to have been echoed as recently as the writing of Horowitz' *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* as Horowitz states on pg. 336: "Most examples where the Apsu is associated with ground waters come from southern Mesopotamia, where the water table is very close the to earth's surface. These include a number of passages where the foundations of temples reach down to the Apsu.."

The temple builders of the Early Dynastic period often followed elaborate procedures when establishing the foundations of a temple, to include the excavation of up to 6 or 7 meters of soil below ground level. Pure soil was then brought in forming a mound on which the temple foundations were laid.<sup>26</sup> How close these foundations were to the ancient water table is hard to estimate due to fluctuations in the ground level, but it would make sense if the actual building remained at least a few meters above water table - a building could hardly be structurally stable with its foundations in wet clay. Given the probable metaphoric nature of the foundations in the abzu, the importance of the foundation pegs in completing the cosmological and religious goals of the Sumerian builders seems likely.<sup>27</sup>

### **3.0 What is an Abzu Kultplatz?**

As discussed above, Selz' theory about the god Enki relies on the distribution of cult

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<sup>25</sup> Jacobsen 1947 pg. 145 n. 28

<sup>26</sup> Frankfort 1996 pg. 43

<sup>27</sup> Further study of the Sumerian temple foundations and their possible cosmic associations may suggest a closer connection with the holy mound, or dú-kù, which in any case, is conceptually connected with the abzu. For such a study Sally Dunham's PhD dissertation for Columbia entitled *A Study of Ancient Mesopotamian Foundations* (1980) would be invaluable.

places or places of worship bearing the name Abzu, mainly in the ED cities of Lagaš, Nippur, Ur, Murum, Keš as well as Eridu. His use of the somewhat vague term “cult place” is perhaps a concession to the misleading nature of the textual evidence on this point. As M. Green has noted, the Sumerian *èš abzu* (often translated “abzu shrine”) cannot be restricted to this particular value as *èš* may also be used to designate a city (as in *èš nibru<sup>ki</sup>*). Since *èš* may actually designate a shrine, a building or temple, or even a city, the safest option to simply translate “holy place.”<sup>28</sup>

It would seem important in those times when the nuances of the native terminology cannot really be fully fathomed (such as in the case of *èš abzu*), to seek higher clarity in a combined textual/archaeological dataset.

### 3.1 The Ekišnugal at Ur

As indicated above, the ideology of the Ekišnugal was closely affiliated with that of Eridu. One particularly appreciable example of the way that the cultic abzu may have been manifested in a Sumerian temple unsurprisingly comes from the site of the Ekišnugal. On the textual side of things the cultic hymns and prayers of the great king of Larsa, Rim-sin, provide a rare description of the cultic layout of a Sumerian temple.<sup>29</sup> The description of the king’s visit to the Ekišnugal states that he “first stopped at the main gate with his entourage”; after singing a hymn, they “entered the temple complex and proceeded to the next stop, which was the abzu”; finally, they entered into the inner temple.<sup>30</sup> According to this the abzu was located

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<sup>28</sup> Green 1975 pg. 157

<sup>29</sup> The reason for this king’s devotions to Nanna and to his temple is likely that, similarly to the Isin kings, Rim-sin sought to transfer some of the prestige and success of formerly great Ur III empire onto himself and his own reign.

<sup>30</sup> As summarized by E. Jan Wilson in *Inside a Sumerian Temple: The Ekishnugal at Ur* and with reference to *A prayer to Nanna for Rīm-Sîn* (Rīm-Sîn G) (ETCSL c.2.6.9.7)



within the temple complex then, somewhere between the main gate and the inner temple.

In another prayer hymn from the same king, a striking description of the abzu situated in the Ekišnugal temple complex is given. First a passage describes its general location:

“The abzu is the august holy shrine of the E-kiš-nu-ĝal, a great vastness in depth and breadth, the foundation of the innermost holy pure buildings, with a pleasant odour like a forest of aromatic cedars and ḥ ašḥ ur trees. It forms the foundations (?) of the temple, within the temple, a protection for the temple; the terrifying splendour of the temple, a great corner, a holy corner within the solid interior.”<sup>31</sup>

A second passage from this same text describes the reed decorations of many parts of the temple, which seem to correspond with the reed decoration of the abzu of the temple:

“The door frame, the architrave, the lock, the fence (?) around the threshold, the door-leaves, the bolt, the bar of the temple, the supporting wall of the temple terrace, foundation of the innermost holy pure buildings -- all these are of very holy reeds, golden yellow or silver white. Beside the marsh of the abzu of the E-kiš-nu-ĝal, in the holy enclosure where cattle mill about, for the many lustrous ..... calves to receive their presents, the ..... with their calves stand before you in the sacred ..... You see the old reeds, the old reeds in the water meadows ....., the old lying reeds, the upright reeds ..... well-established in these fields. Within the marsh of the abzu of the E-kiš-nu-ĝal, the holy lagoon, the reedbeds in the holy water, you see the ..... reeds growing.”<sup>32</sup>

Excavations were carried out on the Ur ziggurat throughout the 1920s under an expedition lead by Leonard Woolley, with the work on the ziggurat supervised specifically by C. J. Gadd and G.M. Fitzgerald.<sup>33</sup> In the southeast corner of the ziggurat terrace was found a well, the upper bricks of which were put in place under Nabonidas, below this sections built by Kassite and Larsa period kings were attested; but the foundation of the well was evidently put in place by Ur-Nammu (*figs. 3,4,5*).<sup>34</sup> Close to the well was found “a cistern of Ur-Nammu, a

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<sup>31</sup> A prayer to Nanna for Rīm-Sîn (Rīm-Sîn F) ETCSL c.2.6.9.6 lines 2-8

<sup>32</sup> ETCSL t.2.6.9.6 lines 14-17

<sup>33</sup> Woolley 1939 pg. xi

small building in four compartments, of burnt brick and bitumen, sunk below the courtyard level.”(figs. 3,4)<sup>35</sup> What makes this “cistern” interesting in the context of the above Rim-Sin passages is Charpin’s suggestion that this was in fact the temple abzu, as he puts it, ‘this position would be the appropriate placement of the temple abzu given available data.’<sup>36</sup> The location also seems to correspond with a description of the placement of the abzu in the above quoted text, which called the abzu “a great corner, a holy corner within the solid interior.”

This rare alignment of text and ancient architecture which makes an identification of an abzu holy place suggestible is unfortunately not always available. Scholars have in some cases applied a very broad interpretative lens to early architectural data in order to suggest the presence of an abzu – for example, H.J. Lenzen who directed German excavations in Uruk before WWII and between 1953-1963 suggested that the use of bitumen to seal the limestone block foundation of the Stone Cone Temple was to facilitate a pool which he referred to as an “abzu.”<sup>37</sup> Taking a slightly different tact, Boehmer has softened this line of interpretation, preferring instead to state that this structure was home to an early “water cult.”<sup>38</sup>

The connection between the abzu and the use of bitumen may warrant further investigation: both springs and seepages of bitumen are associated with the abzu in literary texts, and the magur boats were said to be caulked with bitumen from the abzu.<sup>39</sup> According to Leick in her entry on bitumen from *The Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Architecture* bitumen was

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<sup>34</sup> ibid pg.32

<sup>35</sup> ibid pg.33

<sup>36</sup> Charpin 1985 pg. 335 states: “Woolley veut voir en cet emplacement dès l'époque d'Ur iii un temple de Ningal, ce qui a été contesté à juste titre par E. Douglas van Buren dans son compte-rendu de UE V . Toutefois, la centre-proposition de cet auteur, qui localise l'abzu dans la pièce enterrée au SE de la "cour de nanna" est invraisemblable . La citerne attenante au puits d'Ur-Nammy constituerait en revanche un emplacement tout-à-fait approprié.”

<sup>37</sup> Lenzen 1974 pg. 115: “Da in dem erhaltenen Teil dieses Raumes Reste der Zerstörung des Tempels gefunden wurden, so ist es sicher, daß es sich bei diesem Raum um ein Becken gehandelt hat, um das man auf einem 60 cm breiten Umgang herumgehen konnte. Ich glaube nicht falsch zu gehen, wenn ich in diesem Becken ein Abzu sehe, und wenn ich aus diesem Grunde in der Anlage einen Tempel des Schopfergottes Ea-Enki zu sehen glaube. “

<sup>38</sup> Boehmer 1991 pg. 469

<sup>39</sup> Green 1975 pg. 168. This is evident in the text Nanna-Sin’s Journey to Nibru (ETCSL c.1.5.1) which states: “Ašimabbar despatched people to the abzu for the barge's pitch.”

occasionally used as a mortar (for example at Eridu and Ur in the ED III period where the plano-convex bricks were laid in bitumen), however, “generally its use was restricted to the purpose of water proofing. Burnt bricks in bitumen form an effective barrier against dampness.”<sup>40</sup>

That said, it's clear that the use of bitumen in the Stone Cone Temple (to seal a limestone slab foundation) is much different than at the Ekišnugal (burnt bricks sealed with bitumen in a “well” and “cistern” structure.) Further, no textual evidence from this period exists to prove the existence of Enki or a water cult for that matter. The altogether atypical features of this particular structure may be considered another obstacle to aligning its use of bitumen with the somewhat less obscure traditions of later Mesopotamian temple building.

### 3.2 The “Abzu Basin” at É-ninnu

No discussion on this topic can neglect the fact that a ritual basin from the É-ninnu temple of Gudea era Lagash has been recovered, an item that seems at first to have every possibility of being an abzu manifestation or holy place. This large limestone basin, designated SV 7 (*fig.6*), now stands in the Istanbul Museum; it was originally discovered by Unger, who reconstructed it from 26 pieces.<sup>41</sup> An inscription on the piece itself designates the object as a ŠIM, a type of basin or vessel the connotations of which remain poorly understood.<sup>42</sup> While SV 7 is the first (in fact the only) archaeological example extant from the Sumerian period, textual evidence attests to the presence of abzu basins elsewhere in the Ur III period.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Leick 1988 pg. 35

<sup>41</sup> Suter 2000 pg. 62

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* The full translation reads: “He transported ... from ... and fashioned a lofty basin from it for him. ... For Ninĝirsu, the powerful warrior of Enlil, his master, Gudea, ruler of Lagaš, dedicated this (basin) for his well-being.” (translation from the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Royal Inscriptions* (Zoloymi – Budapest. <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/etcsri>) (ETCSRL Gudea 058).

<sup>43</sup> According to Green 1975 pg. 178: “At Nippur, an Ur III text mentions offerings to the abzu of Enlil and the abzu of Ninlil. From context it can be determined that these were located within the gods’ shrines and probably stood

Interestingly, in the Gudea Cylinders, the fashioning of the ritual basin has been tied to the building of the temple itself, and the text mentions that the ritual basins (plural!) of the temple were fashioned from the trimmings of the same great limestone building slabs used to construct the temple itself.<sup>44</sup> Evidently, there were originally multiple basins, seven would be a reasonable guess given the significance of this magical number in the text.<sup>45</sup> Later in the same text, the basins are associated with the (gudu) lustration priest: “The stone basins set up in the house are like the holy room of the lustration priest where water never ceases to flow.”<sup>46</sup> This association is at least suggestive because of the connection of both the gudu priests and of lustration rites in general with Enki and the abzu.<sup>47</sup>

The central analysis of the function of SV 7 must be its iconography. In a repeating pattern around the outside of the basin is a series of identical goddesses wearing a pleated dress, single horned crown, each grasping and supporting a flowing vase. Ever since van Buren’s classic and still unsurpassed studying of the flowing vase iconography of Mesopotamia, its association with Enki and his circle has been generally accepted.<sup>48</sup> However, proving that nothing in the world of ancient iconography is really all that simple, Claudia Suter’s careful examinations of Gudea period iconography may surprise many readers with another possibility: the flowing vase may belong to Ningirsu here. A key piece of data examined by the author is the Gudea Seal, CS.1 (*fig. 7*) which depicts ‘the same goddess in pleated dress and single crown as the ones which hold flowing vases..’; it depicts further Gudea himself, who is led by a god Ningishzida – they approach an enthroned god who extends his hand which holds the flowing vase.<sup>49</sup> Based on the context of the scene, and by comparison with other seals from the Gudea

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in front of the statues of the gods. This is the earliest example of abzu used to mean a vessel or basin within a temple.”

<sup>44</sup> Gudea Cyl. A (ETCSL c.2.1.7 lines 617-623)

<sup>45</sup> following Suter 2000 pg. 62

<sup>46</sup> Gudea Cyl. A (ETCSL c.2.1.7 lines 783-786)

<sup>47</sup> This is fairly well established in, for example, Emelianov’s brief paper *The Ritual of Water Consecration in Sumerian Texts. Analysis of its Materials and Structure*. (Emelianov 2003).

<sup>48</sup> c.f. Suter 2000 pg. 9, pg. 63

era which show a god with flowing vases over a lion, or seated on throne with a lion nearby (an animal associated with Ningirsu in this period but never with Enki) Suter states that this evidence “suggests to me that at Lagaš during the Lagaš II and Ur III periods, the overflowing vase was appropriated from the water god of earlier images, and used by the city god Ningirsu instead.”<sup>50</sup> This evidence, when combined with the fact that the inscription on the basin is a dedication to Ningirsu, severely complicates the basin’s contribution to the abzu question, if that contribution is not in fact deemed to be entirely misleading at this point.

#### **4.0 Conclusions**

In the above discussions an attempt was made to contextualize the abzu in its cosmological sense, its connection to the mediating role of the temple, and its proposed physical manifestations (the problem of the èš-abzu). Throughout this examination it has been assumed that the ideology of temple building which is discernable in the texts was translatable into real world architecture and into temple features by the religiously motivated temple builders; and by this token, an archaeological embellishment to Selz’ theory on the distribution of the èš-abzu (and its greater claim about the dominance of Enki in the early religion) may be hoped for. Of the two key dataset considered, the ‘well and cistern’ of the Ekišnugal and the beautifully descript passage about the abzu from Rim-sin’s hymn give the hope that combined textual/material studies will continue to provide intriguing possibilities; while the second dataset, the “abzu basin” of é-ninnu and the Gudea Cylinder A provide, perhaps, a cautionary tale about the danger of assumption (even learned assumption!) when interpreting a highly complex culture of long periods of time.

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<sup>49</sup> ibid pg.66

<sup>50</sup> ibid pg.67

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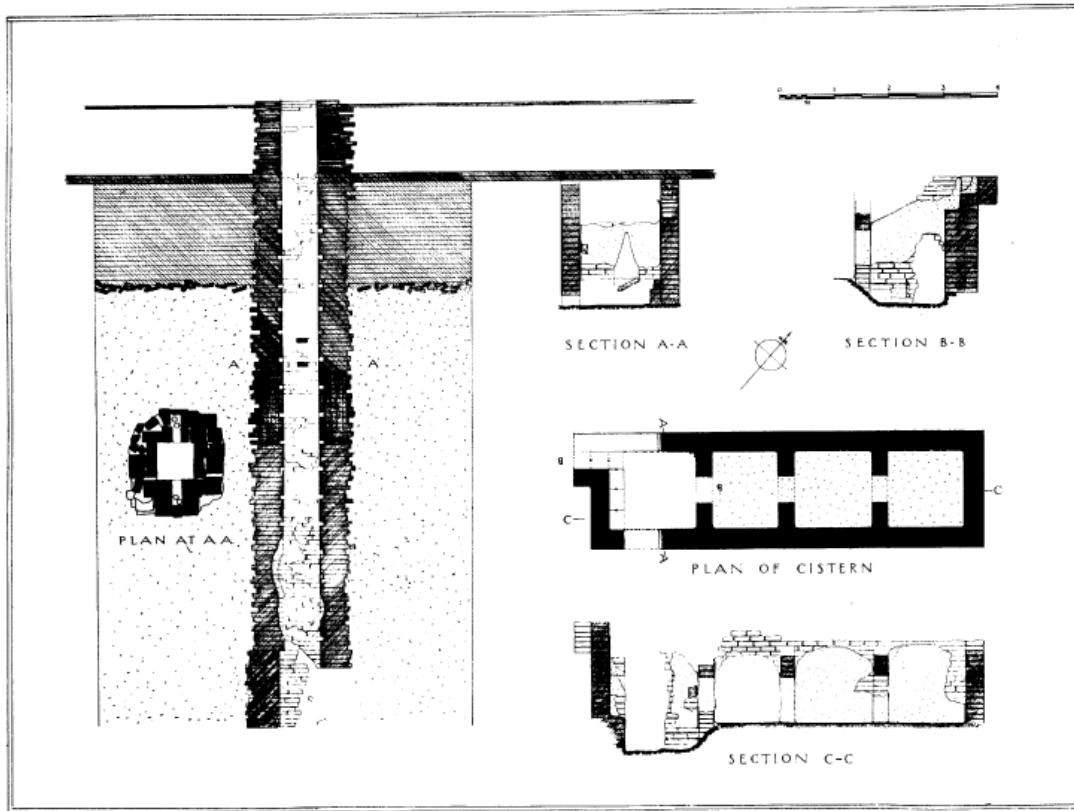


*fig. 1* Seven copper figurine foundation pegs from Lagash (form: the god Shulutula)





*fig. 2* example *in situ* buried in foundation 1. (images adapted from D. Hanson 1970).



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# UR NAMMU'S WELL AND CISTERN

(See pp. 32, 34)

PLATE 69

(fig. 3 - Wooley 1939 plate 61)



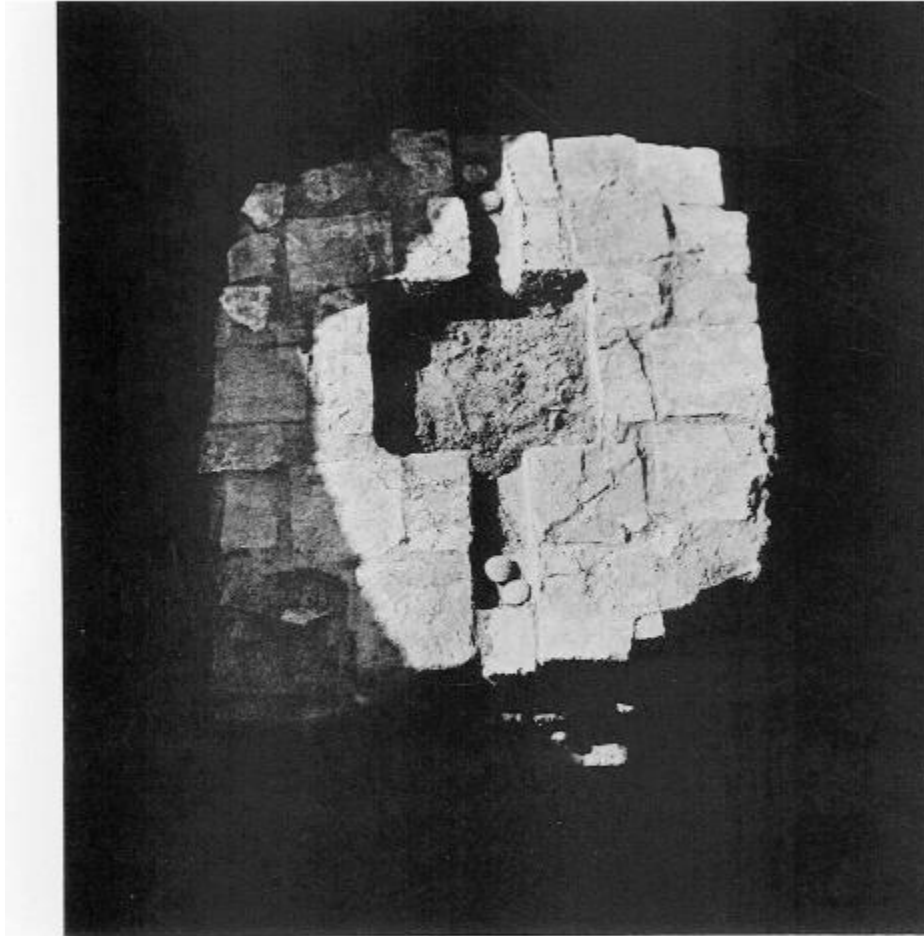
*a.* Ur-Nammu's cistern. (See p. 34)



*b.* The well in the Nin-gal Temple court. (See p. 32)

THE ZIGGURAT TERRACE

(fig. 4 – Woolley 1939 pl. 21)



*a.* The Nin-gal well: upper courses of brickwork removed, showing foundation-tablets. (See *b.* 22)

(*fig. 5* - Woolley 1939 pl. 6)

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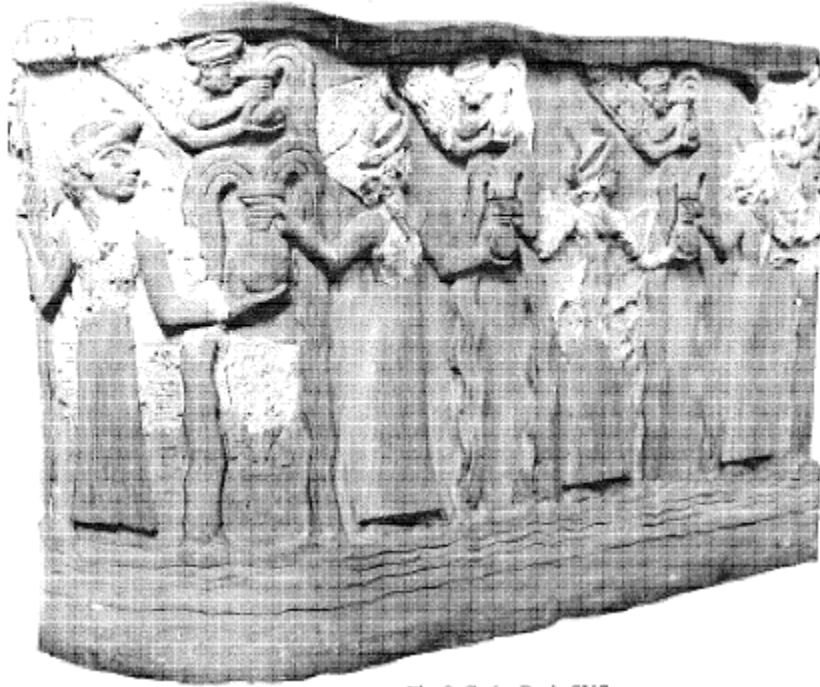


Fig.6 SV 6 – the “Abzu Basin” from É-ninnu



*fig. 7* The Gudea Seal

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**3.0** What is an Abzu Kultplatz?

**3.1** The Ekišnugal at Ur

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**4.0** Conclusions

# The èš-abzu and its Early Conceptualization

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