

Leonard Woolley: Seeker of Ancient Worlds

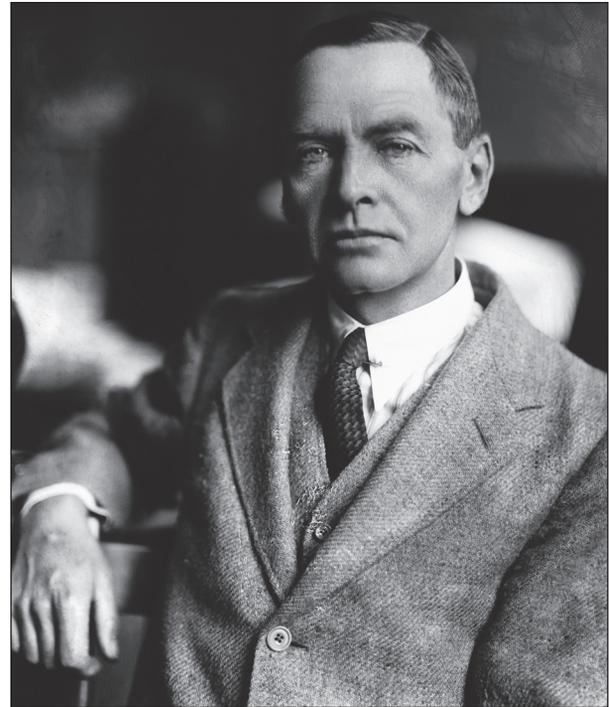
Leonard Woolley (1880–1960) was a British archaeologist. His discoveries of ancient cultures attracted worldwide attention.

Charles Leonard Woolley was born in London, England, on April 17, 1880. His father was a minister. Leonard Woolley (he rarely used his first name) was the middle child in a family of 11 children. When he and his brothers attended school, they were teased about their name. The other boys liked to call them “woolly sheep.” Woolley responded with a made-up explanation of the family name. He claimed that it originally had been “Wolf’s Lea” (Wolf’s Meadow), so they were really “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

A “Chosen” Career Woolley received a scholarship to the University of Oxford. He planned to be a minister like his father, so he majored in theology, the study of religion. While he was at the university, he changed his mind. He thought about being a teacher instead of a minister. Then, near the end of his final year, the head of the college told Woolley, “I have decided that you shall be an archaeologist.” Woolley agreed. He went on to make some brilliant archaeological discoveries.

Leonard Woolley began his career at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. After two years there, he decided to try fieldwork. (Fieldwork is the work of collecting objects at an archaeological site.) One of his early digs was at Carchemish in the Middle East. Carchemish was an ancient city of a people known as the Hittites.

At the start of World War I, Woolley enlisted in the British army. He was soon assigned to intelligence work, which is the gathering of secret information about the enemy. Woolley was stationed in the Middle East. In 1916 he was on board a yacht used by the British for intelligence work. The yacht hit a mine, blew up, and sank in 28 seconds. Rescued by a Turkish vessel, Woolley spent two years in a Turkish prison camp.



In 1922, Woolley was chosen to head up an archaeological team going to Ur, in southern Iraq. The project was a joint venture between the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania. The team made history with its discoveries of Sumerian culture.

The ancient city of Ur is more than 6,000 years old. It is located in a region that was once Mesopotamia. In the Bible, Ur is called “Ur of the Chaldees” after the Chaldeans. They were a people who settled in the region around 900 B.C. Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, was from Ur.

In 1854, another archaeologist had partially uncovered a ziggurat there. A ziggurat is a temple tower that is similar to a pyramid. At the top is a shrine. In Mesopotamia, each large city had a ziggurat. Woolley’s team of archaeologists completed the excavation of the ziggurat at Ur. The shrine on this ziggurat was dedicated to Nannar, god of the moon. In 1924, the archaeologists discovered a limestone slab that showed the ziggurat’s builder. He is shown receiving a measuring reed and a flaxen line

HISTORY MAKERS: LEONARD WOOLLEY CONTINUED

from the moon god. The reed and line were ancient tools used by architects.

Leonard Woolley was an excellent writer. His reports about the discoveries at Ur appeared in many newspapers. Those interesting reports helped archaeology to become more popular. In 1927, people read Woolley's descriptions of gold artifacts created 5,000 years earlier. One of the first objects the archaeologists found was a dagger of solid gold. It had a handle of blue lapis lazuli (a semi-precious stone). The sheath (holder) of the dagger was also of gold, with delicate carving. Woolley described the dagger and sheath as "a marvel of design and workmanship."

Woolley's team also found a headdress, or helmet, of solid gold. The life-sized helmet was more than 4,000 years old. It had been pierced to create tiny holes so that a lining could be sewn into it. According to Woolley, "the workmanship is admirable." Woolley appreciated the beauty of the objects he found, but his main goal "was to get history." He believed the helmet had great historical importance. "This technical skill at so early a date is far more important than the mere richness of the material," he said.

At Ur, Woolley's team of archaeologists uncovered neighborhoods used for commerce and for housing. They also found the royal cemetery. Untouched by looters, the tomb of Queen Pu-Abi held many beautiful items. They included an elaborate headdress of gold, large gold earrings, a gold comb, a crown, and bowls. These objects were made at the height of the Sumerian civilization. They show that Sumerian culture was very advanced.

The royal tombs also yielded priceless information. The excavators had discovered that members of the king's court had joined him in his burial pit. Each carried a small cup from which they drank poison. Oxen and other animals also were led into the tomb and killed. The Sumerians believed that both humans and beasts accompanied the king in his journey to the afterlife.

In 1929, Woolley published the first version of his book *Ur of the Chaldees*. It became one of the most popular books ever written on archaeology. During his career, Woolley wrote more than 25 books.

After *Ur*, Woolley worked at some sites in Syria. His discoveries there included ancient court and temple documents. In 1935, the king of England made him a knight, Sir Charles Leonard Woolley.

During World War II, Woolley again served his country. His main task was to protect works of art and historic treasures. After the war, Woolley continued his fieldwork. He also wrote and lectured widely. One of the world's greatest archaeologists, he once described himself this way: "I am not a scholar, I'm much too impatient for that. I'm just a simple digger-up of relics." Leonard Woolley died in 1960.

Review Questions

1. Who chose Leonard Woolley's career for him?
2. In what geographical region did Woolley do much of his field work?
3. What did Woolley find most interesting about archaeology?

Critical Thinking

4. **Understanding Cause** How did Woolley help to make archaeology popular?
5. **Making Inferences** What shows that archaeology was a good choice of profession for Leonard Woolley?
6. **Evaluating Information** Which of Woolley's discoveries do you find most interesting? Explain.