

Title: **The ziggurat of Ur: The Original FLEX**

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Abstract:

The thesis explores the relationship between the Ziggurat of Ur and the origin of power. The meaning and interpretations of power and origin are studied from an architectural point of view. The implications of architecture as a tool used to express specific beliefs are questioned. By blending archaeology, architecture, and anthropology, it examines how the ancient structure communicated divine rule and the will of its ruler. Built in the 21st century BC, the Ziggurat not only served as a physical monument but as a tool of storytelling, reinforcing the power of its creators through its monumental form and celestial symbolism. The thesis investigates how the early stories of the Ziggurat were crafted, why they were so powerful, and how their influence is still visible today. Ultimately, it is questioned whether we are still building "ziggurats"—using storytelling and architecture to flex political power in the modern world.

"The imagined order is not a lie... Rather, it is an inter-subjective reality that exists in the shared imagination of thousands and millions of people. We believe in a particular order not because it is objectively true, but because we believe in it together." Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens

Introduction

How powerful can a story be? Recently, the president Donald Trump announced the increase in tariffs on imports from 60 countries. China is the most affected, because of the drastic change from 34% to 125%¹. On the Liberation Day, 2nd of April, Trump delivered the news in a broadcasted speech. He announced the tariff change as a “declaration of economic independence” along with his intention to reclaim the America’s destiny with the ultimate goal to “Make America Wealthy Again”². His narrative of America’s nationalism is a modern example of how the story itself became the source of power strong enough to shape global policy. The reliance on collective belief over objective truth raises a deeper question: How do stories become power? Can we dare to search for the origin?

The Ziggurat of Ur stands as proof of one of the humankind’s earliest successful stories: height is power. Storytelling actively influences current politics, so for the sake of understanding the present, it is worth it to look into the past searching for the earliest methods. The discussion about the origin of power implies a deep speculative dive into the history of humanity. However, we can dig into the Mesopotamia civilization, the oldest one recorded in the world³. The ziggurat did not just tower above the flat desert, it made real a story about divine and increased the ruler’s power. It reaches toward the heavens—not for practical purposes, but as an unmistakable flex. This thesis is going to speculate the origin of power as related to the Ziggurat or Ur by analyzing its storytelling capacities.

Architecture, archaeology, cosmology, and anthropology tell together the story of the ziggurat. Each tell a different narrative of the same tale. Architecture is a great communicator because uses the monumentality and form to transmit the desired message⁴. Archeology has dated the most extensive records of the Ziggurat site throughout the 12 years Ur excavation in 1900⁵. However, cosmology entail a hypothetical implication as the ziggurat was allegedly an observation point of the stars, as Diodorus mentions⁶. Anthropology seals the deal between social life and physical surroundings⁷. Along with the existing studies this thesis will question the oratory capacity of the ziggurat. Architecture will be used as filter when analyzed the other implied fields.

The historical context is necessary to understand the oratory of the monument. The history is divided in two parts: the ziggurat during his use and its interpretation as symbol in its state of ruination/restauration. Firstly, the monument was initially built during the Bronze Age in the 21st century BC, in the city of Ur, nowadays Dhi Qar Province in Iraq, under the rule of Ur-Nammu to honor Nanna, the Mesopotamian God of the Moon, during the most prosperous times of the area. It had three levels, the top representing the shrine where only the high priest had access.

Secondly, it later rumbled to ruins by the 6th century BC during the Neo-Babylonian period, followed by the restoration of the King Nabonidus. The new form contained seven steps, as shown in the figure 1. Approaching the present times, after a long period of ruin the Ziggurat's facade was once partially restored in 1980 under the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Each restauration cycle illustrates, as in figures 2 and 3, the abrupt differences caused by the change of powers and the suppression of the last identity.

The major problem faced is the lack of sources and research on ziggurats. The mythology is puzzling. The most information noted are from an archeological point of view in Wooley's book series about the Ziggurat excavations. The lack of information will be filled by speculations based on what is already known. As a result, this research studies the gap through interdisciplinary speculation, drawing on what is already known from archaeology, anthropology, and comparative mythology to reconstruct the symbolic framework behind the Ziggurat. The research questions are: How believable was the story of the Ziggurat? How was it told? Was it so successful that it still powerful nowadays?

The thesis proposes the subject: The Ziggurat of Ur is a possible origin of power. During the arguments the known and speculated information are going to be used to make a logical case of the storytelling of the ziggurat. The shorten history of the origin of civilization along with the definitions of power, origin of power will set a context for the theme. Later the deeper implications of architecture along with other fields of philosophy will make light of the implication of the shape. Possible experiences while interacting with the ziggurat are imagined to understand the formal language. Modern examples are going to highlight the problematic of political power implied in the architecture. Overall, the known and unknown will emerge and complete the thesis objective with to the question: Do we still build Ziggurats?

1. Once upon a time

Let's start with the basics of what is known. The historian of the 5th century BC Herodotus and the team of archeologists of the 20th century conducted by L. Wooley have terribly different versions of ziggurats¹. Firstly, Herodotus describes the ziggurat of Babylon as a "solid tower" of eight total steps, as shown in the Figure1. He is the only source that supports the existence of the shrine on top and possible rituals between humans and gods that might happen there². Secondly, the 12-year expedition, as seen in Figure 2 , that took place 100 years ago describes objectively the ruins of the Ziggurat of Ur, the best preserved one in Mesopotamia. Wooley's book notes every restoration and destruction along with lists of artefacts and writings. His goal is only observational³.

Additionally, what we might know is studied. A clarification on what is power and its origin is needed to dive into the presumption of their relationship with the Ziggurat. Either as a hang out place with God or heritage of different kings, the monument of Ur implies control on religion and politics, influence on belief and resources.

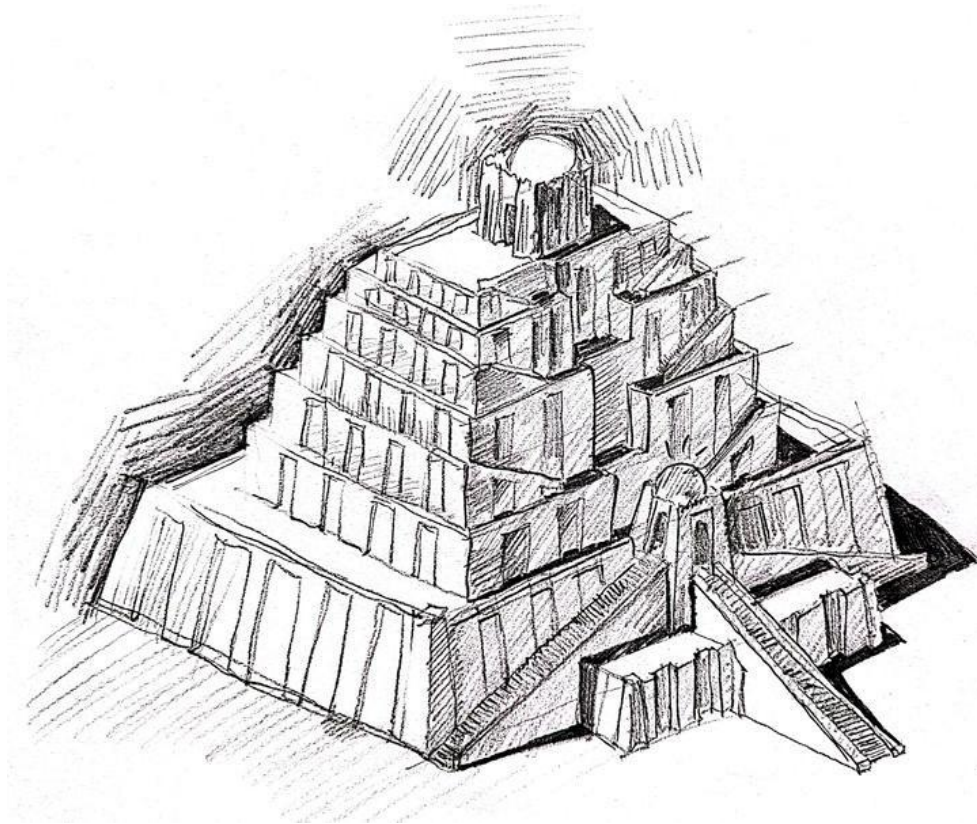


Figure 1 The seven stepped Ziggurat drawing



Figure 2 The ruins of the Ziggurat

a) The context of power

So, what is power? From a lexical point of view, it comes from the Latin word “potere”, which means “to be able”⁴. Generally, it means the ability to produce or prevent change⁵. Moreover, related to the context of the thesis, Max Weber defined power as “the probability that one actor

within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests". Following his theory it legitimizes authority; it is a form of control exerted by a minority group to a majority⁶. Even since it was first build, the ziggurat acted likewise -a building used by the kings and high priests b) The context of origin

Daring to search for the origin of power requires the understanding of one of the most radical changes in the history of humanity: the agricultural revolution. Around 10 millennia ago, humans left their role as hunter-gathers to practice farming and raising herds⁷. The result did not give power to the people. The inverse occurred -it gave power to a new class of elites: priests, kings, soldiers. The first kingdoms were created by priests who controlled both the workshops of gods and the laws of the state. As their power grew, so did the kingdoms and their influence over masses. The success of these kingdoms depended on the ability to support an enduring story believable enough for millions of people, with the goal of binding them together⁸.

Then the urban revolution was triggered. The practice of land irrigation led to urbanization which evolved into distance trading and the ultimate stratification of people because the private property and the state rose. The so-called civilization occurred. It combined three social institutions, the ceremonial center, writing, and the city. The rise of the state, stratification in social groups, and civilization ended the primitive kind of freedom. The human being was now contained in clear, fixed, confined social and territorial boundaries. The civilized cages were built as city states that followed the identifiable social networks "that is customary to call a 'culture' "⁹.

As a result, the civilized cage of Summer emerged. It was triggered along with three insulators of power: against the unknown, the ziggurats stood as ceremonial centers, against time, the first dated written plates were discovered and finally against the outside world, the city walls. Here private ownership by an extended-family group had a crucial role in the rise of power. They generated rank-authority in irrigation management which led to private-property concentrations. The rivers became tools of power because they determine the most strategic locations on the irrigated land⁹. As mentioned, is the city of Ur, placed along Euphrates River. c) The duality of the ziggurat

In the cage of Ur, a Ziggurat which wore a double mask emerged: the myth and the politician. They complete each other and tell the story of power. Firstly, the myth spoke about the pivot of the universe where the earth and heaven meet. The inspiration came from the cosmic mountain Sumeru which is a literal metaphor of greatness, a central home of celestial beings. The city of Ur followed the myth of the celestial mountain because it was architecturally organized, as seen in the figure 3, in the design of a quartered circle, where the ziggurat was placed in the center as a pivotal sanctum¹⁰. Secondly, the mask of a politician declared the greatness of each individual ruler. The archeological data shows the proof about build layers of the ziggurat's terrace from different dynasties³. Every kind from Ur-Nammu either destroyed or added elements, or even both. The monument was a popularity contest where the architecture stood as a political tool.



Figure 3 Plan of the City of Ur

The pyramids of Egypt's can exemplify how the two masks blend into the narrative. Archeologically, there is a direct link between the pyramids and the Ziggurats, because they both appeared during a sudden scientific and philosophical golden age¹⁰. The pyramids house the Tombs of the pharaohs and glorify the life after death¹¹. As a result, it can be speculated that the mask afterlife myth is combined with the mask of politics by placing the graves of the rulers in the structure. Similarly, in the courts around the ziggurat many graves of the high class and rules were discovered after excavations¹². Both masks of the myth of a place visited by God and political monument are supported by the existence of the graves, that increase the connection between the rulers and God. As a result, the graves "aim to produce the effect of permanence" ¹³ in storytelling.

2. How is the ziggurat a symbol of power? -The script of a good story

This chapter is assuming the script of the Ziggurat's story of power. Cosmology, symbolism and philosophy build a solid structure of belief for the monument. It can be explained by how the early humans developed a "thinking and reasoning brain"¹, they started to ask questions about

the environmental factors that restricted their living. As a result, one of the universal forces that dictated over that time and plot for the initial story was the moon. This type of reasoning eventually developed into the belief in divinity, then in the rulers of the city state. The script followed an careful approach of belief while expressing formally in architectural forms, fact that will be analyzed during this chapter.

a) The cosmic narrative

The Ziggurat could have served as an observation celestial tool that told an absolute architectural story. The version of the Ziggurat of Nabonidus had supposedly seven steps². Each level was painted differently to resemble the pattern of the planets³. The Babylonians developed the most accurate system at that time of geocentric perspective and, as a result, they had a vast theoretical context to base the plot of narrative. Moreover, the sever layer structure could have resembled the stratification of cosmos itself where the upper three layers, as showed in the Figure 4 represent the heaven³. The tiers were not just a formal game, but a summary of a complex science combined with religious beliefs.

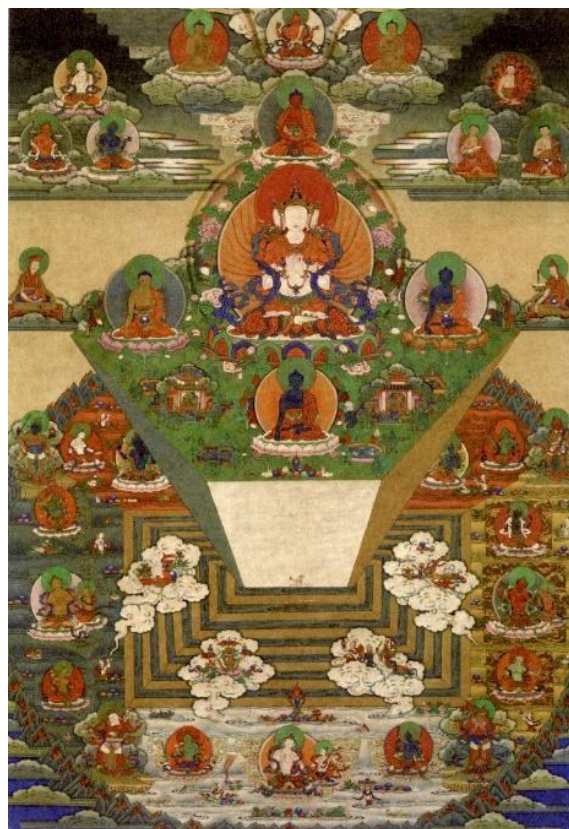


Figure 4 Mythical mountain of Sumer

Furthermore, the cosmic narrative has an important twist: the knowledge and science behind the design meant power. In this context, control can be explained by how practically, the kings and high priests controlled not only the access to the ziggurat, but to the knowledge it might enclose. The initiates are the one in power that must keep the belief alive about the fact that: “knowledge of the contents of the tablet is reserved for the initiated, ‘the one who knows’...and that showing it to an uninitiated person is a crime as bad as destroying the tablet itself “³. The

tablet mentioned can be seen as the theoretical basis on which the ziggurat was design, a way of conserving the knowledge of cosmos over generations.

b) Deeper than philosophy

Along with a strong plot of the past, the scrip of the story is supported philosophy ideas. Philosophy, architecture and power can be seen as different parts of a plot that question the narrative of the Ziggurat's control. Architecture was always used to reproduce political views by formally summarizing power⁴. However, the exact connection between them is unclearly delimited, and as a result "the relationship between the will to power and architecture needs to be questioned"⁵. To explain this relation the connection to philosophy is used: they both "enclose men in shell structure" and interpret the way of life in abstract ways⁶.

Nietzsche method to digest power can clarify how the narrative is so dominant. In the context of Nietzsche's philosophy, Kamaoglu points out "The relation between the will to power and architecture needs to be questioned". The will to power exerts through dominance and demonstration of strength⁵. Despite the several different interpretations that Nietzsche states, the demand of power can be understood as life itself, the will to live. He adds that architecture communicates power as an oratory tool: it is persuasive, flattering and demanding. The exact formal manifestation of power through architecture is not clearly stated. However, architecture illustrates the human will and thought, and the strongest ways to communicate absolute truths or believes can be though monuments which demand attention and persuade the viewer. This can be resumed as follows: architecture communicates life, power as an absolute truth.

Hence, the Ziggurat as a monument can be an aphorism. Aphorism is a concise statement of a general well-known truth which: must be brief, definitive, personal, philosophical have a twist⁵. Because of its monumentality and scale the Ziggurat checks the definitive attribute. Its specific stepped shape was reduced as a brief formal game over time and transformed in a symbol. The twist is in the fact that even though it wants to dominate Ur, the construction is hidden from the public eye. Lastly, the ziggurat is philosophical because it is a formal "interpretation of a way of life" of the political views of that time.

c) The show is not over yet

The power is not only shown in belief, but also in practice. Based on the excavations and historian works, we will imagine the point of view of a person, as shown in the Figure 5, that experienced the ziggurat in its prime to formally understand the monument. The true physical and spiritual dimensions of the monument can not be understood only by theory. A dual architectural point of view is going to be used: to look towards and from the Ziggurat. R. Koolhaas uses this comparison to set a profoundly distinction of how architecture positions power and how that position results in political power⁷. he highlights that inevitably, the interaction of an individual with architecture requires an automatic assumption of his place in society.

The two opposite perspectives explain the balance of power on the city of Ur. Looking to the Ziggurat implies a mythic experience. In figure is shown a possible experience of an individual that comes from outside of the city progressively approaches the ziggurat. The passive gaze implies submission and even exclusion because the ziggurat itself is not visible from inside the walls of the city. The architecture becomes a performance of power⁷ by using the scenography of the city. The monument is the place of God that is not accessible to the regular human.

Looking from the ziggurat implies claiming the perspective of God. From the point of view of the priests and rulers that had access to the top shrine of the monument, the horizon and the sky sat before their eyes. The active gaze to the word implies domination, and inclusion in a privileged class of the society⁷. In this context the architecture is just a tool there the occupant can change the narrative as a surveillance function.

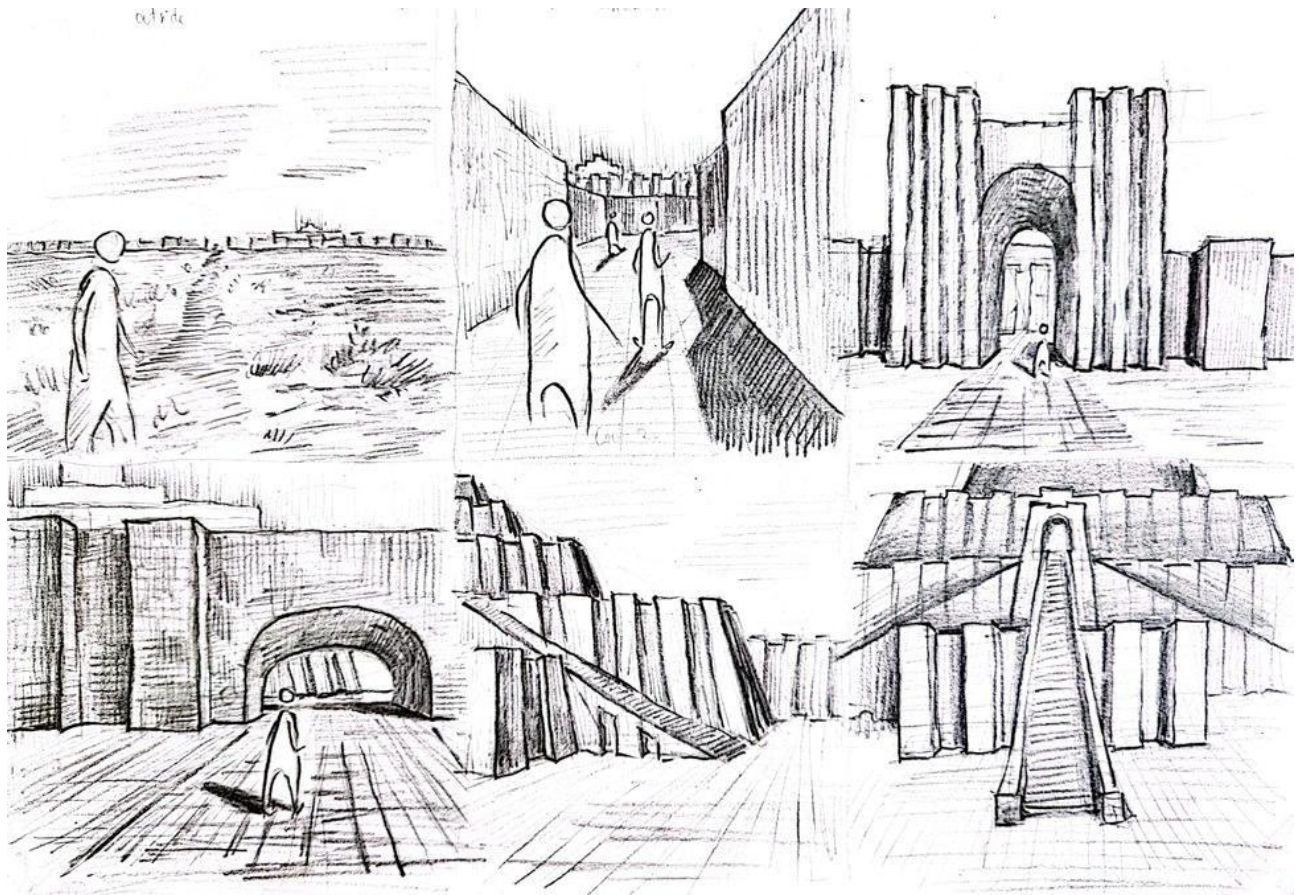


Figure 5 Drawing while approaching the Ziggurat

3. Why the origin of power?

It is not an exaggeration to place the Ziggurat of Ur as related to the origin of power because it has such a strong story that continues to live until the present day. The narrative nowadays is focused on the symbolic form that expresses absolute control and domination. The memorable shape was reinterpreted by the post-war interpretation in the mid of 20th century, as shown in Figure 6 , by Mitchell-Innes & Nash in their "general Idea" project¹. They visually simplify the monument to much their complex socio-political image that “always dominates. It is an image of power [...] the ziggurat came to represent the future, the strength of progress and technological change and the male power of construction”¹. The ziggurat became more than symbol of power: it was a symbol that gave power, an original state of control that can still be applied in the present.

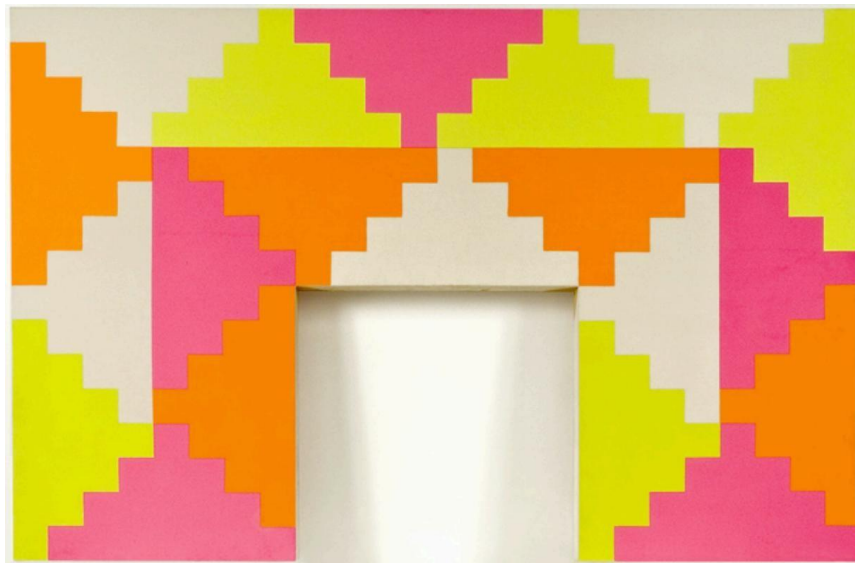


Figure 6 General Idea painting

a) The pedestal that still stands

The pedestal is still used in the narrative of the ziggurat gives power because it imitates the political ideals. It can be seen as the architecture itself because the building design cause or prevent certain human behaviors, they both have a greater social purpose². The pedestal is implemented in both macro- at the scale of the city of Ur, and micro- at the scale of the ziggurat's plan. The basic shape of the ziggurat terrace is shown in the Figure 7 for clarification. Both parts communicate different assumption about the legal power by formal hierarchy, unique positions and size. By continuing the tradition, in the modern world the monumental shapes require access to wealth resources that demonstrates the leader's power. To understand both scale levels, the comparison between the Sumerian structure and the High court is used.

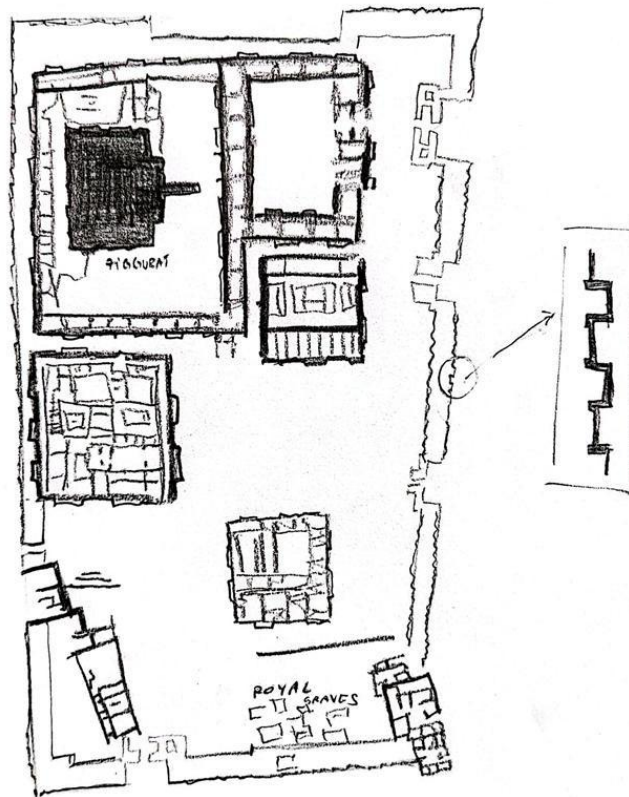


Figure 7 Drawing of the surrounding s of the Ziggurat

On both macro and micro analysis, the ziggurat hides itself, highlighting the belief that God is not met directly. Firstly, the macro level shows the placement of the ziggurat in the middle of the city, but not really directly visible from any street or neighborhood³. Secondly, on the micro scale, the Ziggurat follows an “non-axial”³ architecture because even from the inner courts it is not aligned to the entrance or directly visible, the 90 degrees turn rule being used as filter to god’s presence. In contrast with the power discussion from last chapter, the “non-axial” architecture can denote equality and choice in approaching the monument. Open points and circular or spiral pathways are used. The fictional Temple of Jedi has a similar organization; however, it transmits a possible message of equality, opposite to the narrative of the absolute ziggurat. In this context, it can be speculated that the Ziggurat creates a personal, nonauthoritarian experience of God... the sacred being almost secret.

b) The origin until today

The secret of reality is still manipulated. The belief of the past about triumphal forces against time a death changed but, however, still “aim to produce the effect of performance”⁴. In the today’s context of capitalist power, the beliefs changed, but the symbol of the ziggurat is still used as a statement of power and privileged. "The Ziggurat of Ur allegedly open only to the elite, can be compared to the exclusive rooftop of the Jinmao Tower's Club Jin Mao in Shanghai. At the top of the tower, the restrictive access to the space highlights the dramatic discrepancy between upper-class indulgence and regulars⁵. As the ancient ziggurat lifted the priestess to greet the god, the Jinmao Tower, as shown in the Figure 8, lifts the elite to a rarified perspective

from the sky of the world, one of superiority and status. To engage of the power status implied, even the shape of the crown of the tower resembles the stepped ziggurat, as illustrated in the Figure 9. It can be seen as a foolish attempt to reach heaven if we look into the tower of Babylon myth. The shape persists—tiered, monumental, ascending—but its purpose is altered. The architecture continues to play with perception, continues to create a cosmos, now a capitalist one."



Figure 8 Jinmao Tower's Club Jin Mao in Shanghai

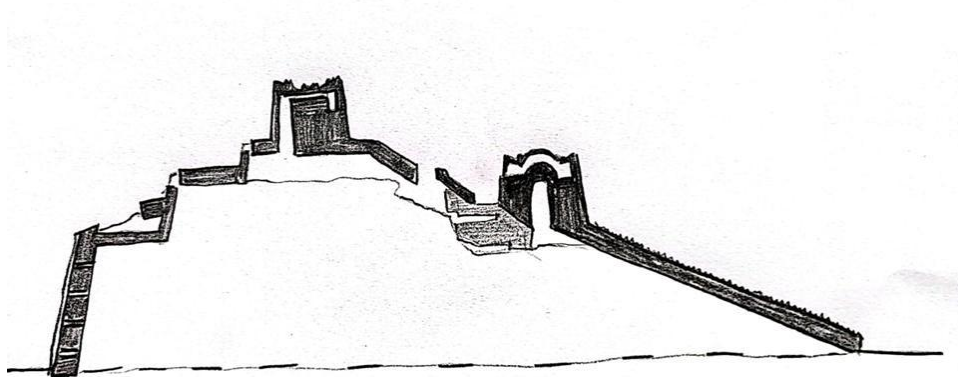


Figure 9 Drawing section of the ziggurat

c) Every masterpiece has its cheap copy

Nowadays the media is full of ziggurats. From video games, to public building architecture, the iconic stepped shape is still kept in the continuous mess of the public. The ziggurat might be seen as a symbol of power more because of its massiveness and specific stepped shape than its historical and evolutionary implication. An example of the failure of the understanding behind its power icon is the Ziggurat Building in California, United States that tried to place the exact

shape of the ziggurat in the modern context⁶. It attempts to imitate literally the ziggurat, but not its absolute power storytelling: the building is transparent enough to not evoke the deep involvement of power and authority.

Conclusion

The ziggurat of Ur has a long history and symbolic implications, however it can be associated with some origin of power. A long development of storytelling, architecture and the art of performance stay behind the today's success of the monument. It was never just a structure—it was a story told through brick, stretching from earth to sky. With its scale, symbolism, and controlled access, it convinced civilizations of the power of God and of the King. This study proposes the ziggurat as one of the earliest physical expressions of humanity's greed and desire to ritualize power—architecture as a convincing speech in stepped form.

It can be speculated that the human greed for control, but for today's society it is as relevant as ever. Eminem says the whole origin of power philosophy in a single verse: "Why be a king... when you can be a god?". The Ziggurat is the continues wish for more political, social and economic power status. This thesis is not an attempt of understanding the original meanings of its design and rituals. The focus is to see the ziggurat more than just a stepped shaped by contouring a clear context and possible interpretation in fields like cosmology, philosophy and architecture.

Many gaps are encounter in this thesis. The exact significant or even existence of elements of the ziggurat will never be confirmed. However, the reinterpretations of historians and modern perspectives from different fields draws a clearer image of the possibility of the ziggurat. Digital models of the monument and city of Ur can already use the imaginary to fill the reach gaps. The history of the Ziggurat is not clear but its implication in nowadays public mentality is obvious. Even not intentionally, we still build ziggurats: the intention of power and control is generally still associated with massiveness, high rise, and restricted access, all wrapped up by a catchy story of religion or politics.

Finally, the story told by the ziggurat ever for 4 millennia ago is just a performance. Once we zoom in enough into the study of the monument, we see that the supposed mystic mountain is nothing else than a tower made of regular bricks. The effort of highlighting the rulers and giving belief power to the elites is shattered in a closer look when it is observed that: "the houses of Gods and of people still shared a basic feature"¹. The reason why the ziggurat tries to be so inaccessible and invisible to the regular eye might be that all this time it was afraid to be seen as what it really is: regular sun-dried bricks placed in a curious manner.

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Additional: ChatGPT was used to connect the references