Since its discovery in 1927, the series of graves designated the “Royal Cemetery” at Ur have been recognized as among the richest and most important finds of the ancient Near East, occasioning studies on topics ranging from chronology and iconography to wealth and social status. The graves were found at the southeastern end of the later temenos enclosure that marked the sacred precinct of the moon god, Nanna/Su’en, not far from the palace of Ur-Namma (ca. 2110 B.C.), first ruler of the Third Dynasty of Ur (Woolley 1934: 5). The excavator, Sir Leonard Woolley, recognized early that there were burials of more than a single period in the area (Woolley 1934: 20ff); subsequently confirmed by H. J. Nissen’s study of the typology and relative chronology of the graves (Nissen 1966).

The “Royal Cemetery” includes over 500 graves with significant assemblages (Schwartz 1986: 54). The vast majority, both those designated “royal” and the so-called “private graves,” have been identified as belonging to the later part of the Early Dynastic Period, ED IIIA, dated to ca. 2600 B.C. There are also a number of later burials belonging to the Akkadian period that generally, but not consistently, lie higher in the fill. The ceramics of the Early Dynastic burials have served as type-markers for other assemblages (e.g., Kish: Moorey 1970, 1978). Internal to Ur, the studies of Susan Pollock have tested Nissen’s chronology, and attempted further to measure a variety of social factors, such as relative economic status and embedded attitudes toward gender and the provisioning of the dead (Pollock 1983, 1991). One of the questions asked by Pollock, as had been previously asked by Rathje (1977) and Moorey (1977), was whether the artifactual assemblage could

be used to ascertain the specific social roles of the individuals buried in the individual graves? Other approaches have recently been taken by Michelle Bonogofsky (1994) and Silvia Maria Chiodi (1994b), who, in preliminary studies of the grave goods accompanying burials, have used literary evidence to suggest that at least some of the material could have represented not just the provisioning of the deceased, but gifts intended for identifiable inhabitants of the Underworld;\(^1\) and by Luc Bachelot (1992), who has suggested that grave goods provision the deceased to keep the otherwise-potentially malevolent spirit fixed in its proper domain (see also on this, Cooper 1991: 28). Presently, Andrew Cohen is pursuing the broad cultural context of mortuary ritual in the Early Dynastic Period, particularly that associated with elite graves and the political process of state formation (Cohen, forthcoming).

In many ways, the present paper dovetails closely with the work of Cohen. It is my suggestion that there may be untapped sources of evidence in the grave goods—not only in presence:absence (as Beate Salje (1996) has suggested for a class of late Babylonian beakers/drinking sets she believes to have been uniquely associated with burial cults), but in the actual depositional patterns of the grave goods. I argue that such patterns may in fact reflect ritual acts connected with the moment of burial itself. I should like to present this study as an inquiry into the potential of such evidence, in keeping with the nature of the present volume as a series of reflections on scholarly activities, raising questions of methodology as well as the interpretation of data.

To date, most reconstructions of ritual activity in the ancient Near East have been grounded in either textual evidence or iconographic analysis: the reading of explicit narrative or explicitly illustrative imagery. One can, however, begin from a different set of propositions more relevant to archaeologists. First, following the arguments of Michael Schiffer and others (e.g., Schiffer 1996/1987) that identifiable factors account for the make-up of the archaeological record in general, when it is possible to demonstrate patterns in the archaeological record, some sort of meaningful behavior has gone into producing that pattern. And

---

\(^1\) In this, Bonogofsky has relied heavily on literary texts such as the account of the “Death of Ur-Nammu,” in which the king is described as presenting a wide array of gifts, including artifacts not unlike those found in the Royal Cemetery graves, to notables upon his arrival in the Underworld. It is assumed, therefore, that the text of the end of the third or early second millennium B.C. would be applied to the social and cultural situation some 600 years earlier.