Indeed belong to the buried skeleton, which may have been that of a female Sumerian ruler. That claim has sparked fierce debate, however, especially because Woolley disposed of the bones shortly after discovering them.

Woolley himself suggested that the seal and weapons were gifts from the woman’s husband. Another theory is that the true owner of the seal, a male, was buried in a mud-brick shaft above the stone tomb. But McCaffrey notes that the materials in that shaft are low quality and lack weapons, and that no other royal tomb is constructed of mud brick. In fact, the remains in the mud-brick shaft, identified by Woolley as male, were wrapped in women’s clothing with feminine jewelry. Unfortunately, those bones also were discarded.

The principal occupant of 1054 herself reveals some curious gender anomalies, notes McCaffrey. Her skeleton was found wearing a hair ribbon, two golden wreaths, and a gold dress pin, all typical for high-status Sumerian women of the day. But she was not adorned with the usual earrings or elaborate choker, and there were no floral combs or cosmetic containers. And a gold headpiece and a dagger and whetstone at her waist were typical for Sumerian men; a gold headdress near the skeleton has a brim, a style that Woolley believed was worn mostly by men.

Also in the stone chamber were a bronze ax, dagger, and hatchet—very atypical for a woman’s tomb. Other researchers attribute those weapons to the male attendants in the room, but McCaffrey notes that the attendants lack rings, weapons on their bodies, or any other sign of elite materials, suggesting that they were servants.

McCaffrey maintains that the root of the problem is translation: Sumerian grammar does not include gender distinctions, but “lugal” has always been translated as “king” rather than simply “ruled.” In the case of tomb 1054, she concludes that the woman was in fact a lugal.

But other scholars hotly disagree. University of Chicago archaeologist McGuire Gibson argues that the seal’s location above the stone chamber makes it difficult to tie it to the elite occupant below. He adds that most of the bones had deteriorated so much that identifying gender was difficult. “Woolley couldn’t tell the difference between a man, a woman, or a monkey,” he says. McCaffrey counters that Woolley was competent enough to identify correctly the genders of the dozen skeletons that still exist. Philologists, meanwhile, note that although “lugal” is technically a gender-free term, there is the counterpart term “eresh,” which traditionally is translated as female consort to a male ruler.

Without a skeleton, scholars may never definitively sort out the mysteries of tomb 1054. But the women of ancient Ur may have more to say in the near future: Researchers are now examining Queen Puabi’s remains for clues to her genetic identity.

Looted Tablets Pose Scholar’s Dilemma

Few societies before our own were as obsessed with recording data as ancient Mesopotamia. After inventing the first script in the 4th millennium B.C.E., the Sumerian scribes used clay tablets to keep track of the most minute economic transactions as well as great myths such as The Epic of Gilgamesh that stir readers even today. The tablets have proved invaluable in understanding the hearts and minds of that lost world.

But the artifacts also have attracted collectors and antiquities dealers. Today, as many as 100,000 tablets a year are being ripped out of archaeological sites in war-torn Iraq and put on the international market, according to U.S. government estimates. By comparison, only some 300,000 to 400,000 likely existed in libraries and private collections prior to 1990, say scholars. So far, the number of stolen tablets confiscated or returned is minuscule: An FBI official said at the conference that fewer than 40 had been recovered recently by U.S. agents.

Stolen. Looted cuneiform tablets, like these recovered in Jordan, are pouring out of Iraq.

Should academics publish texts from cuneiform tablets that may have been looted? This thorny ethical question sparked the fiercest debate at the meeting and revealed a bitter split within the community. Some philologists say that given the scale of the looting, they are eager to salvage what data they can by translating and publishing texts. “You have an obligation to your science, to your data,” says Jerrold Cooper, a philologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, who says he would work with collectors who own tablets. “It makes no sense at all to condemn all publication” of potentially looted items.

But many archaeologists see the widespread looting in Iraq as an unalloyed nightmare and any involvement with potentially stolen tablets as aiding and abetting the destruction. At the meeting, a faction led by Michael Mueller-Karpe, a specialist in ancient metals at the Roman-German Central Museum of Mainz, Germany, proposed a resolution opposing scholarly involvement with tablets that may have been looted. “Scholars ... are urged to refrain from providing expertise to the antiquities market and to private collectors, unless the artifacts in question can be proved to be neither excavated illegally nor exported without permission,” states the resolution, which was signed by 130 academics at a meeting after the conference officially ended. A number of scholars, primarily philologists like Cooper, refused to sign.

The different opinions do not always track disciplinary lines. Robert Adams, a retired archaeologist and former head of the Smithsonian Institution, surprised many participants at the opening session by allowing that no discipline should be expected to ignore vast amounts of new data, however it might have been obtained. (After taking fire from colleagues, Adams later clarified that he did not mean to condone the publishing of looted material but wanted to emphasize the complexity of the problem.)

Meanwhile, several philologists draw a distinction between working on existing collections and trafficking with dealers seeking to boost the value of tablets. Cooper, for example, says he would “not be comfortable” examining tablets owned by dealers.

But a few at the meeting do read recently acquired tablets for dealers, for free or for pay—an act that archaeologists maintain can boost the tablets’ value and reinforce the cycle of looting. Cooper says he hopes participants at the next conference will come up with a common ethical stance to guide scholarly actions.

—ANDREW LAWLER