Ancient Sumeria: The History of Ancient Sumeria including its cities, kings and religions

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***Now, I swear by the sun god Utu on this very day -- and my younger brothers shall be witness of it in foreign lands where the sons of Sumer are not known, where people do not have the use of paved roads, where they have no access to the written word -- that I, the firstborn son, am a fashioner of words, a composer of songs, a composer of words, and that they will recite my songs as heavenly writings, and that they will bow down before my words……*- King Shulgi (c. 2100 BC) on the future of Sumerian literature.**

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Mesopotamia: The First Civilization: Ancient Sumeria: The History of Ancient Sumeria including its cities, kings and religions

Authorities do not all agree about the definition of civilization. Most accept the view that "a civilization is a culture which has attained a degree of complexity usually characterized by urban life." In other words, a civilization is a culture capable of sustaining a substantial number of specialists to cope with the economic, social, political, and religious needs of a populous society. Other characteristics usually present in a civilization include a system of writing to keep records, monumental architecture in place of simple buildings, and an art that is no longer merely decorative, like that on Neolithic pottery, but representative of people and their activities. All these characteristics of civilization first appeared in Mesopotamia**.** [i]

The Geography Of Mesopotamia

Around 6000 B.C., after the agricultural revolution had begun to spread from its place of origin on the northern fringes of the Fertile Crescent, Neolithic farmers started filtering into the Fertile Crescent itself. Although this broad plain received insufficient rainfall to support agriculture, the eastern section was watered by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Known in ancient days as Mesopotamia (Greek for "between the rivers"), the lower reaches of this plain, beginning near the point where the two rivers nearly converge, was called Babylonia. Babylonia in turn encompassed two geographical areas - Akkad in the north and Sumer, the delta of this river system, in the south.

Broken by river channels teeming with fish and re-fertilized frequently by alluvial silt laid down by uncontrolled floods, Sumer had a splendid agricultural potential if the environmental problems could be solved. "Arable land had literally to be created out of a chaos of swamps and sand banks by a 'separation' of land from water; the swamps ... drained;

the floods controlled; and lifegiving waters led to the rainless desert by artificial canals." ^4 In the course of the several successive cultural phases that followed the arrival of the first Neolithic farmers, these and other related problems were solved by cooperative effort. Between 3500 B.C. and 3100 B.C. the foundations were laid for a type of economy and social order markedly different from anything previously known. This far more complex culture, based on large urban centers rather than simple villages, is what we associate with civilization. i

[Footnote 4: V. Gordon Childe, New Light on the Most Ancient East (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 114.]

Prelude To Civilization

By discovering how to use metals to make tools and weapons, late Neolithic people effected a revolution nearly as far-reaching as that wrought in agriculture. Neolithic artisans discovered how to extract copper from oxide ores by heating them with charcoal. Then about 3100 B.C., metal workers discovered that copper was improved by the addition of tin. The resulting alloy, bronze, was harder than copper and provided a sharper cutting edge.

Thus the advent of civilization in Sumer is associated with the beginning of the Bronze Age in the West, which in time spread to Egypt, Europe, and Asia. The Bronze age lasted until about 1200 B.C., when iron weapons and tools began to replace those made of bronze.

The first plow was probably a stick pulled through the soil with a rope. In time, however, domesticated cattle were harnessed to drag the plow in place of the farmer. Yoked, harnessed animals pulled plows in the Mesopotamian alluvium by 3000 B.C. As a result, farming advanced from the cultivation of small plots to the tilling of extensive fields. "By harnessing the ox man began to control and use a motive power other than that

furnished by his own muscular energy. The ox was the first step to the steam engine and gasoline motor." ^5

[Footnote 5: V. Gordon Childe, What Happened in History (New York: Pelican Books, 1946), p. 74.]

Since the Mesopotamian plain had no stone, no metals, and no timber except its soft palm trees, these materials had to be transported from Syria and Asia Minor. Water transport down the Tigris and Euphrates solved the problem. The oldest sailing boat known is represented by a model found in a Sumerian grave of about 3500 B.C. Soon after this date wheeled vehicles appear in the form of ass-drawn war chariots. For the transport of goods overland, however, people continued to rely on the pack ass.

Another important invention was the potter's wheel, first used in Sumer soon after 3500 B.C. Earlier, people had fashioned pots by molding or coiling clay by hand, but now a symmetrical product could be produced in a much shorter time. A pivoted clay disk heavy enough to revolve of its own momentum, the potter's wheel has been called "the first really mechanical device." i

The Land of the Two Rivers

The word Mesopotamia , derived from the Greek, means literally "between the rivers," but it is generally used to denote the whole plain between and on either side of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The plain was bordered to the north and east by mountain ranges, in whose foothills, as we have seen, agriculture was first practiced. To the southwest lay the forbidding deserts of Syria and Arabia . Each year the two great rivers were swollen with the winter snows of the northern mountains, and each year at flood stage they spread a thick layer of immensely fertile silt across the flood plain where they approached the Persian Gulf . This delta, a land of swamp rich in fish, wildlife, and date palms, was the most challenging and

rewarding of the three natural units into which the river valleys were divided; and it was here, between 3500 and 3000 B. c., that agricultural settlers created the rich city-states of Sumer , of which the best known is Ur . The delta could only be made habitable by large-scale irrigation and flood control, which was managed first by a priestly class and then by godlike kings. Except for the period 2370-2230 B. c., when the Sumerian city-states were subdued by the rulers of Akkad , the region immediately to the north, the Sumerians remained prosperous and powerful until the beginning of the second millennium B. C.

Immediately to the north of Sumer , where the two rivers came most closely together, the plain was less subject to flooding but made fertile by rainfall and irrigation. This area, known first as Akkad , was inhabited by Semitic peoples who subdued the Sumerians in the middle of the third millennium; but when a new Semitic people called the Amorites conquered the area about 2000 B. c. and founded a great new capital city of Babylon ; the area henceforth came to be known as Babylonia . Except for invasions of Hittites and Kassites, who were Indo-European peoples from Asia , Babylonia continued to dominate Mesopotamia for a thousand years.

The third natural region, called Assyria , stretched from the north of Babylonia to the Taurus range. Its rolling hills were watered by a large number of streams flowing from the surrounding mountains as well as by the headwaters of the two great rivers themselves. The Assyrians, a viciously warlike Semitic people, were able to conquer the whole of Mesopotamia in the eighth and seventh centuries B. c. Thus the history of Mesopotamia can be envisaged as a shift of the center of power northwards, from Sumer to Babylonia and then to Assyria. [i]

An Introduction To Sumerian History

During the 5th millennium BC a people known as the Ubaidians established settlements in the region known later as Sumer;

these settlements gradually developed into the chief Sumerian cities, namely Adab, Eridu, Isin, Kish, Kullab, Lagash, Larsa, Nippur, and Ur. Several centuries later, as the Ubaidian settlers prospered, Semites from Syrian and Arabian deserts began to infiltrate, both as peaceful immigrants and as raiders in quest of booty. After about 3250 BC, another people migrated from its homeland, located probably northeast of Mesopotamia, and began to intermarry with the native population. The newcomers, who became known as Sumerians, spoke an agglutinative language unrelated apparently to any other known language.

In the centuries that followed the immigration of the Sumerians, the country grew rich and powerful. Art and architecture, crafts, and religious and ethical thought flourished. The Sumerian language became the prevailing speech of the land, and the people here developed the cuneiform script, a system of writing on clay. This script was to become the basic means of written communication throughout the Middle East for about 2000 years.

The first Sumerian ruler of historical record, Etana, king of Kish (flourished about 2800 BC), was described in a document written centuries later as the "man who stabilized all the lands." Shortly after his reign ended, a king named Meskiaggasher founded a rival dynasty at Erech (Uruk), far to the south of Kish. Meskiaggasher, who won control of the region extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Zagros Mountains, was succeeded by his son Enmerkar (flourished about 2750 BC). The latter’s reign was notable for an expedition against Aratta, a city-state far to the northeast of Mesopotamia. Enmerkar was succeeded by Lugalbanda, one of his military leaders. The exploits and conquests of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda form the subject of a cycle of epic tales constituting the most important source of information on early Sumerian history.

At the end of Lugalbanda's reign, Enmebaragesi (flourished about 2700 BC), a king of the Etana dynasty at Kish, became the leading ruler of Sumer. His outstanding achievements included a victory over the country of Elam and the construction at Nippur of the Temple of Enlil, the leading deity of the Sumerian pantheon. Nippur gradually became the spiritual and cultural center of Sumer.

Enmebaragesi's son Agga (probably died before 2650 BC), the last ruler of the Etana dynasty, was defeated by Mesanepada, king of Ur (fl. about 2670 BC), who founded the so-called 1st Dynasty of Ur and made Ur the capital of Sumer. Soon after the death of Mesanepada, the city of Erech achieved a position of political prominence under the leadership of Gilgamesh (flourished about 2700-2650 BC), whose deeds are celebrated in stories and legends.

Sometime before the 25th century bc the Sumerian Empire, under the leadership of Lugalanemundu of Adab (flourished about 2525-2500 BC), was extended from the Zagros to the Taurus mountains and from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. Subsequently the empire was ruled by Mesilim (fl. about 2500 BC), king of Kish. By the end of his reign, Sumer had begun to decline. The Sumerian city-states engaged in constant internecine struggle, exhausting their military resources. Eannatum (fl. about 2425 BC), one of the rulers of Lagash, succeeded in extending his rule throughout Sumer and some of the neighboring lands. His success, however, was short-lived. The last of his successors, Uruinimgina (fl. about 2365 BC), who was noteworthy for instituting many social reforms, was defeated by Lugalzagesi (reigned about 2370-2347 BC), the governor of the neighboring city-state of Umma. Thereafter, for about 20 years, Lugalzagesi was the most powerful ruler in the Middle East.

By the 23rd century bc the power of the Sumerians had declined to such an extent that they could no longer defend themselves against foreign invasion. The Semitic ruler Sargon I (reigned about 2335-2279 BC), called The Great, succeeded in conquering the entire country. Sargon founded a new capital, called Agade, in the far north of Sumer and made it the richest and most powerful city in the world. The people of northern Sumer and the conquering invaders, fusing gradually, became known ethnically and linguistically as Akkadians. The land of Sumer acquired the composite name Sumer and Akkad.

The Akkadian dynasty lasted about a century. During the reign of Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (r. about 2255-2218 BC), the Gutians, a belligerent people from the Zagros Mountains, sacked and destroyed the city of Agade. They then subjugated and laid waste the whole of Sumer. After several generations the Sumerians threw off the Gutian yoke. The city of Lagash again achieved prominence, particularly during the reign of Gudea (circa 2144-2124 BC), an extraordinarily pious and capable governor. Because numerous statues of Gudea have been recovered, he has become the Sumerian best known to the modern world. The Sumerians achieved complete independence from the Gutians when Utuhegal, king of Erech (reigned about 2120-2112 BC), won a decisive victory later celebrated in Sumerian literature.

One of Utuhegal's generals, Ur-Nammu (r. 2113-2095 BC), founded the 3rd Dynasty of Ur. In addition to being a successful military leader, he was also a social reformer and the originator of a law code that antedates that of the Babylonian king Hammurabi by about three centuries (see Hammurabi, Code of). Ur-Nammu's son Shulgi (r. 2095-2047 BC) was a successful soldier, a skillful diplomat, and a patron of literature. During his reign the schools and academies of the kingdom flourished.

Before the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC the Amorites, Semitic nomads from the desert to the west of Sumer and Akkad, invaded the kingdom. They gradually became masters of such important cities as Isin and Larsa. The resultant widespread political disorder and confusion encouraged the Elamites to attack (circa 2004 BC) Ur and to take into captivity its last ruler, Ibbi-Sin (r. 2029-2004 BC).

During the centuries following the fall of Ur bitter intercity struggle for the control of Sumer and Akkad occurred, first between Isin and Larsa and later between Larsa and Babylon. Hammurabi of Babylon defeated Rim-Sin of Larsa (r. about 1823-1763 BC) and became the sole ruler of Sumer and Akkad. This date probably marks the end of the Sumerian state. Sumerian civilization, however, was adopted almost in its entirety by Babylonia. **i**

The Emergence Of Civilization In Sumer, c. 3100-2800 B.C.

By 3100 B.C. the population of Sumer had increased to the point where people were living in cities and had developed a preponderance of those elements previously noted as constituting civilization. Since these included the first evidence of writing, this first phase of Sumerian civilization, to about 28 B.C., is called the Protoliterate period.

The original homeland of the Sumerians is unknown. It is believed that they came from the east, but whether by sea or from the highlands is unknown. Their language is not related to those major language families that later appear in the Near East - Semites and Indo-Europeans. (The original home of the Semitic-speaking peoples is thought to have been the Arabian peninsula, while the Indo-Europeans seem to be migrated from the region north of the Black and Caspian seas. A third, much smaller language family is the Hamitic, which included the Egyptians and other peoples of northeastern Africa.)

How would life in Protoliterate Sumer have appeared to visitors seeing it for the first time? As they approached Ur, one of about a dozen Sumerian cities, they would pass farmers working in their fields with ox-drawn plows. They might see some of the workers using bronze sickles. The river would be dotted by boats carrying produce to and from the city. Dominating the flat countryside would be a ziggurat, a platform (later a lofty terrace, built in the shape of a pyramid) crowned by a sanctuary, or "high place." This was the "holy of holies," sacred to the local god. Upon entering the city, visitors would see a large number of specialists pursuing their appointed tasks as agents of the community and not as private entrepreneurs - some craftsmen casting bronze tools and weapons, others fashioning their wares on the potter's wheel, and merchants arranging to trade grain and manufactures for the metals, stone, lumber, and other essentials not available in Sumer.

Scribes would be at work incising clay tablets with picture signs. Some tablets might bear the impression of cylinder seals, small stone cylinders engraved with a design. Examining the clay tablets, the visitors would find that they were memoranda used in administering a temple, which was also a warehouse and workshop. Some of the scribes might be making an inventory of the goats and sheep received that day for sacrificial use; others might be drawing up wage lists. They would be using a system of counting based on the unit 60 - the sexagismal system rather than the decimal system which is based on the unit 10. It is still used today in computing divisions of time and angles.

Certain technical inventions of Protoliterate Sumer eventually made their way to both the Nile and the Indus valleys. Chief among these were the wheeled vehicle and the potter's wheel. The discovery in Egypt of cylinder seals similar in shape to those used in Sumer attests to contact between the two areas

toward the end of the fourth millennium B.C. Certain early Egyptian art motifs and architectural forms are also thought to be of Sumerian origin. And it is probable that the example of Sumerian writing stimulated the Egyptians to develop a script of their own. i

The Rise of the Sumerian City States

Little is known about the origins of the Sumerian people, who spoke a language totally distinct from that of the Semitic inhabitants of the valleys to the north. The Sumerians probably moved down into the swamps of the delta under pressure of over-population of the foothills after 3900 B. c. Al- though at first they formed small agricultural villages, they soon found not only that the richness of the alluvial land permitted greater density of settlement but also that the vast engineering works in canals and dikes necessary to harness the annual floods required work forces of hundreds of men. Moreover, the layout and clearing of the canals required expert planning, while the division of the irrigated land, the water, and the crops demanded political control. By 3000 B. c. the Sumerians had solved this problem by forming "temple-communities," in which a class of priest-bureaucrats con- trolled the political and economic life of the city in the name of the city gods.

All Sumerian cities recognized a number of gods in common, including Anu the sky god, Enlil the lord of storms, and Ishtar the morning and evening star. The gods seemed hopelessly violent and unpredictable, and one's life a period of slavery to their whims. The epic poem, The Creation, emphasizes that mortals were created to enable the gods to give up working. Each city moreover had its own god, who was considered literally to inhabit the temple and who was in theory the owner of all property within the city. Hence the priests who interpreted the will of the god and controlled the distribution of the economic produce of the city were venerated for their supernatural and material functions alike. When, after 3000 B.

c., the growing warfare among the cities made military leadership vital, the head of the army who became king assumed an intermediate position between the god, whose agent he was, and the priestly class, whom he had both to use and to conciliate. Thus, king and priests represented the upper class in a hierarchical society. Below them were the scribes, the secular attendants of the temple, who supervised every aspect of the city's economic life and who developed a rough judicial system. Outside the temple officials, society was divided between an elite or noble group of large landowners and military leaders; a heterogeneous group of merchants, artisans, and craftsmen; free peasants who composed the majority of the population; and slaves. [i]

The Sumerian Achievement

The priests and scribes of the temples must be credited with the great advances made by the Sumerians in both arts and science. Following the invention of cuneiform writing, a rich epic literature was created, of which the three most impressive survivals are the story of the creation, an epic of the flood which parallels in many details the Biblical story of Noah, and the Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, is the classic hero of Mesopotamian literature, a majestic, almost overly powerful figure pressing the gods in vain for the secret of immortality. He is also a great lover of his city Uruk; and throughout the poem we find, perhaps for the first time in literature, the celebration of the appeal of the civilized life of a great city. Gilgamesh, we are told at the start of the poem, has built the great rampart which still today runs seven miles around the ruins of his city:

Of ramparted Uruk the wall he built. Of hallowed Eanna, the pure sanctuary. Behold its outer wall, whose cornice is like copper. Peer at the inner wall, which none can equal. Seize upon the threshold which is of old. Draw near to Eanna the dwelling of Ishtar Which no future kin, no man, can equal. Go

up and walk on the walls of Uruk, Inspect the base terrace, examine the brickwork: Is it not the brickwork of burnt brick? Did not the Seven Sages lay its foundation?

Sculpture, too, advanced to serve the needs of the temples and then of the kings. The earliest statues surviving show bearded figures with wide staring eyes and piously clasped hands who represent some form of fertility cult. Later work in limestone or alabaster shows the female goddess bringing water, once again the symbol of fertility, while the achievements of the Akkadian rulers during their brief hegemony are recorded on enormous sandstone tablets. Few portrait busts cast in antiquity rival the expressive dignity of the head of Sargon of Akkad. Even more demanding in artistic technique were the small cylinder seals used to roll one's signature into the wet clay of a tablet recording a commercial transaction. Thousands of these tablets have been found in the temple compounds, proving that the bureaucrats of Sumer had developed a complex commercial system, including con- tracts, grants of credit, loans with interest, and business partnerships. Moreover, the planning of the vast public works under their control led the priests to develop a useful mathematical notation, including both a decimal notation and a system based upon 60, which has given us our sixty-second minute, our sixty-minute hour and our division of the circle into 360 degrees. They invented mathematical tables and used quadratic equations. Both for religious and agricultural purposes, they studied the heavens, and they created a lunar calendar with a day of 24 hours and a week of seven days. Much of this science was transmitted to the West by the Greeks and later by the Arabs. It is not surprising, however, that the achievement which the Sumerians themselves admired most was the city itself. [i]

The Sumerian Writing System

Whether the Sumerians were the first to develop writing is uncertain, but theirs is the oldest known writing system. The

clay tablets on which they wrote were very durable when baked. Archaeologists have dug up many thousands of them--some dated earlier than 3000 BC.

The earliest writing of the Sumerians was picture writing similar in some ways to Egyptian hieroglyphs. They began to develop their special style when they found that on soft, wet clay it was easier to impress a line than to scratch it. To draw the pictures they used a stylus--probably a straight piece of reed with a three-cornered end.

An unexpected result came about: the stylus could best produce triangular forms (wedges) and straight lines. Curved lines therefore had to be broken up into a series of straight strokes. Pictures lost their form and became stylized symbols. This kind of writing on clay is called cuneiform, from the Latin cuneus, meaning "wedge."

A tremendous step forward was accomplished when the symbols came to be associated with the sound of the thing shown rather than with the idea of the thing itself. Each sign then represented a syllable. Although cuneiform writing was still used long after the alphabet appeared, it never fully developed an alphabet.

As we have noted, the symbols on the oldest Sumerian clay tablets, the world's first writing, were pictures of concrete things such as a person, a sheep, a star, or a measure of grain. Some of these pictographs also represented ideas; for example, the picture of a foot was used to represent the idea of walking, and a picture of a mouth joined to that for water meant "to drink." This early pictograph writing gave way to phonetic (or syllabic) writing when the scribes realized that a sign could represent a sound as well as an object or idea. Thus, the personal name "Kuraka" could be written by combining the pictographs for mountain (pronounced kur), water (pronounced a), and mouth (pronounced ka). By 2800 B.C., the use of

syllabic writing had reduced the number of signs from nearly two thousand to six hundred.

In writing, a scribe used a reed stylus to make impressions in soft clay tablets. The impressions took on a wedge shape, hence the term cuneiform (Latin cuneus, "wedge"). The cuneiform system of writing was adopted by many other peoples of the Near East, including the Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, and Persians. [i]

Sumerian Schools

Cuneiform was difficult to learn. To master it children usually went to a temple school. Using a clay tablet as a textbook, the teacher wrote on the left-hand side, and the pupil copied the model on the right. Any mistakes could be smoothed out. The pupil began by making single wedges in various positions and then went on to groups of wedges. Thousands of groups had to be mastered. Finally the pupil was assigned a book to copy, but the work was slow and laborious. Many first chapters of all the important Sumerian works have been handed down from students' tablets, but only fragments of the rest of the books survive.

The pupils also studied arithmetic. The Sumerians based their number system on 10, but they multiplied 10 by 6 to get the next unit. They multiplied 60 by 10, then multiplied 600 by 6, and so on. (The number 60 has the advantage of being divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 15, 20, and 30.) The Sumerians also divided the circle into 360 degrees. From these early people came the word dozen (a fifth of 60) and the division of the clock to measure hours, minutes, and seconds.

The Sumerians had standard measures, with units of length, area, and capacity. Their standard weight was the mina, made up of 60 shekels--about the same weight as a pound. There was no coined money. Standard weights of silver served as measures of value and as a means of exchange.

From the earliest times the Sumerians had a strong sense of private property. After they learned to write and figure, they kept documents about every acquired object, including such small items as shoes. Every business transaction had to be recorded. Near the gates of the cities, scribes would sit ready to sell their services. Their hands would move fast over a lump of clay, turning the stylus. Then the contracting parties added their signatures by means of seals. The usual seal was an engraved cylinder of stone or metal that could be rolled over wet clay.

In the course of time cuneiform was used for every purpose, just as writing is today--for letters, narratives, prayers and incantations, dictionaries, even mathematical and astronomical treatises. The Babylonians and Assyrians adapted cuneiform for their own Semitic languages and spread its use to neighboring Syria, Anatolia, Armenia, and Iran. [i]

Sumerian Cities

Sumerian towns and cities included Eridu, Nippur, Lagash, Kish, and Ur. The cities differed from primitive farming settlements. They were not composed of family-owned farms, but were ringed by large tracts of land. These tracts were thought to be "owned" by a local god. A priest organized work groups of farmers to tend the land and provide barley, beans, wheat, olives, grapes, and flax for the community.

These early cities, which existed by 3500 BC, were called temple towns because they were built around the temple of the local god. The temples were eventually built up on towers called ziggurats (holy mountains), which had ramps or staircases winding up around the exterior. Public buildings and marketplaces were built around these shrines.

The temple towns grew into city-states, which are considered the basis of the first true civilizations. At a time when only the most rudimentary forms of transportation and communication

were available, the city-state was the most governable type of human settlement. City-states were ruled by leaders, called ensis, who were probably authorized to control the local irrigation systems. The food surplus provided by the farmers supported these leaders, as well as priests, artists, craftsmen, and others.

The Sumerians contributed to the development of metalworking, wheeled carts, and potter's wheels. They may have invented the first form of writing. They engraved pictures on clay tablets in a form of writing known as cuneiform (wedge-shaped). The tablets were used to keep the accounts of the temple food storehouses. By about 2500 BC these picture-signs were being refined into an alphabet.

The Sumerians developed the first calendar, which they adjusted to the phases of the moon. The lunar calendar was adopted by the Semites, Egyptians, and Greeks. An increase in trade between Sumerian cities and between Sumeria and other, more distant regions led to the growth of a merchant class.

The Sumerians organized a complex mythology based on the relationships among the various local gods of the temple towns. In Sumerian religion, the most important gods were seen as human forms of natural forces--sky, sun, earth, water, and storm. These gods, each originally associated with a particular city, were worshiped not only in the great temples but also in small shrines in family homes.

Warfare between cities eventually led to the rise of kings, called lugals, whose authority replaced that of city-state rulers. Sumeria became a more unified state, with a common culture and a centralized government. This led to the establishment of a bureaucracy and an army. By 2375 BC, most of Sumer was united under one king, Lugalzaggisi of Umma. **i**

Architecture

The Sumerian temple was a small brick house that the god was supposed to visit periodically. It was ornamented so as to recall the reed houses built by the earliest Sumerians in the valley. This house, however, was set on a brick platform, which became larger and taller as time progressed until the platform at Ur (built around 2100 BC) was 150 by 200 feet (45 by 60 meters) and 75 feet (23 meters) high. These Mesopotamian temple platforms are called ziggurats, a word derived from the Assyrian ziqquratu, meaning "high." They were symbols in themselves; the ziggurat at Ur was planted with trees to make it represent a mountain. There the god visited Earth, and the priests climbed to its top to worship.

The ziggurat continued as the essential temple form of Mesopotamia during the later Assyrian and Babylonian eras. In these later times it became taller and more tower-like, perhaps with a spiral path leading up to the temple at the top. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that the main temple of Babylon, the famous Tower of Babel, was such a tower divided into seven diminishing stages, each a different color: white, black, purple, blue, orange, silver, and gold.

Each Sumerian city rose up around the shrine of a local god. As a reflection of a city's wealth, its temple became an elaborate structure. The temple buildings stood on a spacious raised platform reached by staircases and ramps. From the platform rose the temple tower, called a ziggurat (holy mountain), with a circular staircase or ramp around the outside. On the temple grounds were quarters for priests, officials, accountants, musicians, and singers; treasure chambers; storehouses for grain, tools, and weapons; and workshops for bakers, pottery makers, brewers, leatherworkers, spinners and weavers, and jewelers. There were also pens for keeping the sheep and goats that were destined for sacrifice to the temple god.

Horses and camels were still unknown, but sheep, goats, oxen, donkeys, and dogs had been domesticated. The plow had been

invented, and the wheel, made from a solid piece of wood, was used for carts and for shaping pottery. Oxen pulled the carts and plows; donkeys served as pack animals. Bulky goods were moved by boat on the rivers and canals. The boats were usually hauled from the banks, but sails also were in use. Before 3000 BC the Sumerians had learned to make tools and weapons by smelting copper with tin to make bronze, a much harder metal than copper alone.

Mud, clay, and reeds were the only materials the Sumerians had in abundance. Trade was therefore necessary to supply the city workers with materials. Merchants went out in overland caravans or in ships to exchange the products of Sumerian industry for wood, stone, and metals. There are indications that Sumerian sailing vessels even reached the valley of the Indus River in India. The chief route, however, was around the Fertile Crescent, between the Arabian Desert and the northern mountains. This route led up the valley of the two rivers, westward to Syria, and down the Mediterranean coast.

The Physical Appearance of the Sumerian City

All of the Sumerian cities were built beside rivers, either on the Tigris or Euphrates or on one of their tributaries. The city rose, inside its brown brick walls, amid well-watered gardens and pastures won from the swamps. In all directions, the high levees of the irrigation canals led to grain and vegetable fields. The trading class lived and worked in the harbor area, where the river boats brought such goods as stone, copper, and timber from the north. Most citizens lived within the walls in small, one-story houses constructed along narrow alleyways, although the more elaborate homes were colonnaded and built around an inner courtyard. By far the most impressive section of the city was the temple compound, which was surrounded by its own wall. Here were the workshops and homes of large numbers of temple craftsmen, such as gwiers, jewelers, carpenters, and weavers, the offices and schoolrooms of the

scribes, and the commercial and legal offices of the bureaucrat-priests. The king's palace and graveyard was located near the temple; and, as Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur proved, an increasingly lavish form of ceremonial life was organized here as the kings gained greater control over the city's surplus. Woolley himself de- scribed the growing horror his archaeological party felt as they slowly un- covered the royal graves, because they discovered not only elaborate golden daggers, headdresses of gold, lapis lazuli and camelian, fantastically worked heads of bulls, harps and lyres, sledges and chariots, but also lines of elegantly costumed skeletons laid carefully in rows. In a gigantic mass suicide, probably through the drinking of a drug, the king's courtiers and some of his soldiers had gone to their deaths with their master.

The most elaborate of the Sumerian buildings was the temple or ziggurat. Normally a huge platform or terrace was first constructed, upon which the temple could be built; but in later times, as the terraces grew to be like artificial mountains, they were built in huge steps or levels mounted by an elaborate stairway clearly symbolizing the ascent toward heaven. The purpose of these ziggurats is still unclear. We do know that they were not burial chambers like the pyramids of Egypt , nor were they for human sacrifice like the pyramids of Aztec Mexico. It has been suggested that they were a nostalgic re-creation of the mountains the original settlers had left, or an at- tempt to raise the city's god above the material life of the streets below, or an attempt to reach closer to heaven. We do know that the creation of a temple was regarded as a god-imposed task for every ruler of any ambition. Gudea, ruler of Lagash about 2000 B. c., built fifteen large temples with the aid of the gods: "Inscrutable as the sky, the wisdom of the Lord, of Ningirsu, the son of Enlil, will soothe thee," he was told. "He will reveal to thee the plan of His temple, and the Warrior whose decrees are great will build it for thee." The task proved enormous.

[Gudea purified the holy city and encircled it with fires .... He collected clay in a very pure place; in a pure place he made with it the brick and put the brick into the mold. He followed the rites in all their splendor: he purified the foundations of the temple, surrounded it with fires, anointed the platform with an aromatic balm...

Gudea, the great en-priest of Ningirsu, made a path in the Cedar mountains which nobody had entered before; he cut its cedars with great axes. . . . Like giant snakes, cedars were floating down the water....

In the quarries which nobody had entered before, Gudea, the great en- priest of Ningirsu, made a path, and then the stones were delivered in large blocks.... Many other precious metals were carried to the ensi. From the Copper mountain of Kimash ... its copper was mined in clusters; gold was delivered from its mountains as dust .... For Gudea, they mined silver from its mountains, delivered red stone from Aeluhha in great amount ....

Finally, when the temple was finished, Gudea declared proudly: "Respect for the temple pervades the country; the fear of it fills the strangers; the brilliance of the Eninnu enfolds the universe like a mantle. [i]

Stories of Gods and Heroes

As the people in a city-state became familiar with the gods of other cities, they worked out relationships between them, just as the Greeks and Romans did in their myths centuries later. Sometimes two or more gods came to be viewed as one. Eventually a ranking order developed among the gods. Anu, a sky god who originally had been the city god of Uruk, came to be regarded as the greatest of them all--the god of the heavens. His closest rival was the storm god of the air, Enlil of Nippur. The great gods were worshiped in the temples. Each

family had little clay figures of its own household gods and small houses or wall niches for them.

The Sumerians believed that their ancestors had created the ground they lived on by separating it from the water. According to their creation myth, the world was once watery chaos. The mother of Chaos was Tiamat, an immense dragon. When the gods appeared to bring order out of Chaos, Tiamat created an army of dragons. Enlil called the winds to his aid. Tiamat came forward, her mouth wide open. Enlil pushed the winds inside her and she swelled up so that she could not move. Then Enlil split her body open. He laid half of the body flat to form the Earth, with the other half arched over it to form the sky. The gods then beheaded Tiamat's husband and created mankind from his blood, mixed with clay.

The longest story is the Gilgamesh epic, one of the outstanding works of ancient literature. The superhero Gilgamesh originally appeared in Sumerian mythology as a legendary king of Uruk. A long Babylonian poem includes an account of his journey to the bottom of the sea to obtain the plant of life. As he stopped to bathe at a spring on the way home, a hungry snake snatched the plant. When Gilgamesh saw the creature cast off its old skin to become young again, it seemed to him a sign that old age was the fate of humans.

Another searcher for eternal life was Adapa, a fisherman who gained wisdom from Ea, the god of water. The other gods were jealous of his knowledge and called him to heaven. Ea warned him not to drink or eat while there. Anu offered him the water of life and the bread of life because he thought that, since Adapa already knew too much, he might as well be a god. Adapa, however, refused and went back to Earth to die, thus losing for himself and for mankind the gift of immortal life. These legends somewhat resemble the Bible story of Adam and Eve. It is highly probable, in fact, that the ancient legends and

myths of Mesopotamia supplied material that was reworked by the biblical authors.

It was during the Sumerian era that a great flood overwhelmed Mesopotamia. So great was this flood that stories about it worked their way into several ancient literatures. The Sumerian counterpart of Noah was Ziusudra, and from him was developed the Babylonian figure Utnapishtim, whose story of the flood was related in the 'Epic of Gilgamesh'. Immortal after his escape from the flood, Utnapishtim was also the wise man who told Gilgamesh where to find the youth-restoring plant. **i**

The Old Sumerian Period, c. 2800-2300 B.C.
By 2800 B.C., the Sumerian cities had emerged into the light of history. This first historical age, called the Old Sumerian (or Early Dynastic) period, was characterized by incessant warfare as each city sought to protect or enlarge its land and water rights. Each city-state was a theocracy, for the chief local god was believed to be the real sovereign. The god's earthly representative was the ensi, the high priest and city governor, who acted as the god's steward in both religious and secular functions. Though endowed with divine right by virtue of being the human agent of the god, the ensi was not considered divine.

Early Sumerian society was highly collectivized, with the temples of the city god and subordinate deities assuming a central role. "Each temple owned lands which formed the estate of its divine owners. Each citizen belonged to one of the temples, and the whole of a temple community - the officials and priests, herdsmen and fishermen, gardeners, craftsmen, stonecutters, merchants, and even slaves - was referred to as 'the people of the god X.'" ^6 That part of the temple land called 'common' was worked by all members of the community, while the remaining land was divided among the citizens for their support at a rental of from one third to one sixth of the

crop. Priests and temple administrators, however, held rent-free lands.

[Footnote 6: H. Frankfort, The Birth of Civilization in the Near East (London: Williams and Norgate, 1951), p. 60.]

In addition to the temples lands, a considerable part of a city's territory originally consisted of land collectively owned by clans, kinship groups comprising a number of extended families. By 2600 B.C., these clan lands were becoming the private property of great landowners called lugals (literally "great men"). Deeds of sale record the transfer of clan lands to private owners in return for substantial payments in copper to a few clan leaders and insignificant grants of food to the remaining clan members. These private estates were worked by "clients" whose status resembled that of the dependents of the temples.

In time, priests, administrators, and ensis became venal, usurping property and oppressing the common people. This frequently led to the rise of despots who came to power on a wave of popular discontent. Since these despots were usually lugals, lugal became a political title and is generally translated as "king."

The Sumerian lugals made the general welfare their major concern. Best known is Urukagina, who declared himself lugal of Lagash near the end of the Old Sumerian period and ended the rule of priests and "powerful men," each of whom, he claimed, was guilty of acting "for his own benefit." Urukagina's inscriptions describe his many reforms and conclude: "He freed the inhabitants of Lagash from usury, burdensome controls, hunger, theft, murder, and seizure (of their property and persons). He established freedom. The widow and the orphan were no longer at the mercy of the powerful man." ^7

[Footnote 7: "The Reforms of Urukagina" in Nels M. Bailkey, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Thought and Experience from

Gilgamesh to St. Augustine, 4th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), p. 21.] i

The Fall of the Sumerian Cities

Around 2000 B. c. both Sumer and Akkad were attacked by barbarian invaders. The Amorites from Syria seized control in Akkad , and built a powerful new state around the city of Babylon . The Elamites from Iran took the city of Ur , sacked it, and burnt it down. When Ur was later rebuilt under Babylonian rule, its inhabitants remembered with terror the Elamite destruction of their beloved city:

0 Father Nanna, that city into ruins was made ...Its people, not potsherds, filled its sides; Its walls were breached; the people groan. In its lofty gates, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about; in its boulevards, where the feasts were celebrated, scattered they lay. In all its streets, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about; In its places, where the festivities of the land took place, the people lay in heaps ... Ur -its weak and its strong perished through hunger; Mothers and fathers who did not leave their houses were overcome by fire; The young, lying on their mothers' laps, like fish were carried off by the waters; In the city the wife was abandoned, the son was abandoned, the possessions were scattered about...0 Nanna, Ur has been destroyed, its people have been dispersed. i

The Last of the Sumerians

Within a few centuries the Sumerians had built up a society based in 12 city-states: Kish, Uruk (in the Bible, Erech), Ur, Sippar, Akshak, Larak, Nippur, Adab, Umma, Lagash, Bad-tibira, and Larsa. According to one of the earliest historical documents, the Sumerian King List, eight kings of Sumer reigned before the famous flood. Afterwards various city-states by turns became the temporary seat of power until about 2800 BC, when they were united under the rule of one king--Etana of Kish. After Etana, the city-states vied for domination; this

weakened the Sumerians, and they were ripe for conquest--first by Elamites, then by Akkadians.

The Sumerians had never been very warlike, and they had only a citizen army, called to arms in time of danger. In about 2340 BC King Sargon of Akkad conquered them and went on to build an empire that stretched westward to the Mediterranean Sea. The empire, though short-lived, fostered art and literature.

Led by Ur, the Sumerians again spread their rule far westward. During Ur's supremacy (about 2150 to 2050 BC) Sumerian culture reached its highest development. Shortly thereafter the cities lost their independence forever, and gradually the Sumerians completely disappeared as a people. Their language, however, lived on as the language of culture. Their writing, their business organization, their scientific knowledge, and their mythology and law were spread westward by the Babylonians and Assyrians **i**

Archaeology

Before the mid-19th century AD, the existence of the Sumerian people and language was not suspected. The first major excavations leading to the discovery of Sumer were conducted (1842-1854) at Assyrian sites such as Nineveh, Dur Sharrukin, and Calah by the French archaeologists Paul Émile Botta and Victor Place; the British archaeologists Sir Austen Henry Layard and Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson; and the Iraqi archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam. Thousands of tablets and inscriptions dating from the 1st millennium bc, the vast majority written in Akkadian, were uncovered. Thus, scholars assumed at first that all Mesopotamian cuneiform inscriptions were in the Akkadian language. Rawlinson and the Irish clergyman Edward Hincks made a study of the inscriptions, however, and discovered that some were in a non-Semitic language. In 1869 the French archaeologist Jules Oppert suggested that the name Sumerian, from the royal title King of Sumer and Akkad appearing in numerous inscriptions, be applied to the language.

In the late 19th century, a series of excavations was undertaken at Lagash by French archaeologists working under the direction of the Louvre and at Nippur by Americans under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania. The French excavations at Lagash were conducted from 1877 to 1900 by Ernest de Sarzec; from 1903 to 1909 by Gaston Cros; from 1929 to 1931 by Henri de Genouillac; and from 1931 to 1933 by André Parrot. The excavations at Nippur were conducted (1889-1900) by John Punnett Peters, John Henry Haynes, and Hermann Vollrat Hilprecht. Since 1948, excavations have been conducted by archaeologists working under the direction of the University of Pennsylvania, the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and the American Schools of Oriental Research (after 1957 under the sole direction of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago). Other Sumerian excavations have been conducted at Kish, Adab, Erech, Eridu, Eshnunna, Jemdet Nasr, Shuruppak, Tell al-Ubaid, Tutub, and Ur. The canalled city of Kish, which was situated 13 km (8 mi) east of Babylon on the Euphrates River, is known to have been one of the most important cities of Sumer. Extensive excavations since 1922 have uncovered an invaluable sequence of pottery. Archaeologists also unearthed a temple of Nebuchadnezzar II and Nabonidus (r. 556-539 BC) and the palace of Sargon of Akkad, ruins that date from the 3rd millennium BC to about 550 BC.

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