

SUMERIAN CULTURE

LOCATION

Sumerians were an ancient population that lived in the south of a region called Mesopotamia, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia means 'land between two rivers'). What was once Sumeria is now southern Iraq and Kuwait.

HISTORY

The Sumerians probably came from the area of Anatolia, and arrived in Mesopotamia about 3300 BC. As successful trade developed with the surrounding areas, the Sumerian villages and settlements grew into prosperous city-states, such as Ur, Eridu, Lagash, Nippur and Uruk.

By the third millennium BC the Sumerians had founded about 12 separate city-states (Kish, Erech, Ur, Sippar, Akshak, Larak, Nippur, Adab, Umma, Lagash, Bad-tibira, and Larsa). Each of these states had a walled city with surrounding villages and land, and each worshipped its own deity, whose temple was at the center of the city.

The Sumerian language became the major language of the region. Political power originally belonged to all the citizens, but as settlements grew into city-states and rivalry between the various city-states increased, each adopted a system of kings.

Various city-states and their dynasties of kings temporarily gained power at different times. The first king to unite the separate city-states was Etana, ruler of Kish (c. 2800 BC). After this, the cities of Kish, Erech, Ur, and Lagash started to fight with each other in order to gain power. These struggles lasted for hundreds of years and weakened the Sumerian nation, making it vulnerable to conquerors from abroad. First Sumeria was invaded by the Elamites (c. 2530-2450 BC) and later by the Akkadians (2334-2279 BC). Although Akkadian's dynasty lasted only about 100 years, it united the city-states and created a model of government that influenced all of Middle Eastern civilization.

After Akkadian's dynasty ended and Sumeria recovered from a devastating invasion by the Gutians, the city-states once again became independent. The high point of this final era of Sumerian civilization was the reign of the Third Dynasty of Ur, whose first king, Ur-Nammu, published the earliest law code yet discovered in Mesopotamia. After 1900 BC, when another population, the Amorites, conquered all of Mesopotamia, the Sumerians lost their separate identity, but their culture was adopted by their invaders.

RELIGION

The Sumerian gods personified local elements and natural forces. Anu (the supreme god of heaven), Enlil (god of water), and Ea (god of magic) were among the gods most worshipped by the Sumerians. The Sumerians held the belief that a sacred ritual marriage between the ruler and Inanna, goddess of love and fertility, brought rich harvests.

Religion was a central aspect of ancient Sumerian society. The city-states were believed to be under the rule of a local god or goddess. Each city had a temple that was the seat of a major god in the Sumerian pantheon. The temples were large and were staffed by priests and priestesses.

The rulers of the city had a duty to please the town's patron god. The clergy, helped by musicians and singers, carried out the complex rituals of Sumerian religion that involved public religious ceremonies with food sacrifices, monthly feasts and annual New Year celebrations (in springtime). The drinking of beer was part of the religious ritual carried out by priests. However, the consumption of beer was also common among the population. Sumeria also had a minor goddess, Ninkasi, who was the protector of brewing.

High priests played a very important role in Sumerian society. They were believed to be the only people who could interpret a variety of signs in order to understand the will of the gods and goddesses who dictated human destiny. One of the most common methods of divination was reading sheep or goat intestines.

SOCIETY ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Sumerians developed a thriving agriculture and trade industry. They sailed up and down the rivers and the Persian Gulf with their ships. The ships carried pottery and other goods and brought back fruits and various raw materials from other regions. They were also the earliest known society in which people could read and write. Writing probably developed to keep track of property. However, later on it developed further and became a means of recording all aspects of life.

Sumerians are the first population known to have founded city-states. Each of these city-states had an individual king who ruled over a town and the surrounding villages. Because religion was so important to Sumeria, kings were also high priests and judges. Even when the country was unified, the local rulers kept some powers.

Sumeria had strong armies. Thanks to the invention of the wheel they were able to build chariots that they also used for military purposes.

CULTURE

Sumerians were skilled engineers. They developed systems for draining the swamps and controlling the river waters. This allowed them to develop an agricultural system that allowed them to take advantage of the soil and the water resources in the region in the best possible way. They also invented the wheel, and left the world a number of technological and cultural contributions, including the first wheeled vehicles and potter's wheels, the first system of writing (cuneiform), the first known codes of law and the first city-states.

Sumerians established schools where children were taught to write and to read. The recording of literature, science, society, aspects of everyday life and history is a lasting legacy of the Sumerians. Tens of thousands of cuneiform texts have given us a great deal of information about their poetry, codes of law, administration system, and lists of astronomical occurrences, animals and medicinal plants.

