

Sumerian civilization

Beginnings of the first civilizations

Three earliest civilizations: in Egypt, Sumer (known as Mesopotamia, modern Iraq) and in the Indus valley (modern Pakistan) came into existence in the fourth millennium BC. It is surprising that all three originated in very similar climatic and geographical conditions. These are practically semi desert areas, across which flow big rivers - the Nile in Egypt, the Euphrates and Tigris in the Sumer and the Indus in Pakistan. These areas, having high yearly average air temperature and small rainfall¹, were not suitable for efficient agriculture. Nonetheless in the run-up to the development of these civilizations the local population was occupied with farming and fishery, and lived in very modest, primitive conditions. As a result of the development of new civilizations, in a very short span of time, in these areas cities come into existence with wonderful temples, with developed trade, with humanitarian laws, and most importantly with a very productive agriculture providing everyone with sufficient amount of food.

The arising of civilizations just on large rivers could be linked to drastic climatic changes² which occurred in the fourth millennium BC. On the account of a constantly reducing amount of rain many areas, lying on certain latitudes such as Sahara, changed into deserts. About 3500 years BC a great drop of rainfall was also recorded in Egypt. So the big rivers ensured constant and reliable water supply, without which obviously no civilization could come into existence and could grow.

Archaeological discoveries show that in Mesopotamia, probably about 5500 years ago, Sumerians appeared, however it was not possible to establish where they arrived from. We learn about their language from the tablets covered with cuneiform writing which originated about 3000 years BC. The Sumerian language had entirely different vocabulary, grammar and syntax than the languages of the local Semitic tribes. It is related to the Ural-Altai languages, including the Finno-Ugrian family

¹ Rainfall in these regions of Pakistan and Iraq is below 250 mm, and in Egypt is below 100 mm per year..

² The latest climate and archaeological research results show that the climate in the northern hemisphere changed rapidly as a result of the change of the inclination of the Earth axis from 24.14° at 9000 years ago to 23.45° at present, and the changes to the Earth orbit around the Sun. This caused significant reduction in the rainfall in the region of Sahara and the Arab Peninsula changing them into deserts.

among others (Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian), as well as the Turkish tongues.

It is difficult to answer a question, why the founders of these civilizations chose to settle in these semi desert areas. In Sumer there were no forests and little vegetation, but it would be enough to move six hundred miles to the north in order to find fertile lands, covered by forest, with sufficient rainfall. However these territories were already inhabited and in order to take possession of them one should remove or enslave the previous owners. Sumerians belonged, for contemporary times, to an exceptionally peacefully inclined people and probably did not want to conquer new lands. Analysing the beginnings of their civilization we can state that it was not introduced by force. It came into existence as a result of the settling in Mesopotamia of small groups of unknown travellers, choosing places, in which the life of the local residents seemed particularly difficult and uncertain. The strangers preferred to settle there, where they could show the superiority of their civilization, creating a better standard of living, e.g. due to the new technique of cultivation of soil based on the irrigation of fields, and in this way to become benefactors of the local population.

Outline of the Sumerian history

The Sumerian civilization was probably established about 3500 years BC³ on the area of about 30 000 square kilometres, in the lower valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which thousands of years earlier were a part of the seabed, and then was filled up with silt and sediments brought by the rivers. In the delta of the rivers the alluvial areas were covered mainly by marshes and bogs, whereas outside them dominated an arid landscape. These sparse in vegetation and mineral resources lands were inhabited by a population known as the Ubaid people earning a living by farming, fishing and animal breeding, although also existed larger clusters of the population⁴ with developed craft and trade. In spite of such difficult geographical and climatic conditions, the arrival of the Sumerians in a very short time led to the extraordinary development of farming, trade, crafts, architecture, religion and sciences.

We do not know how many strangers arrived, but we know that they established

³ Uruk archaeological discoveries shows that from this period originate its first temples. Also first pictorial writing was used in this times.

⁴ The Ubaidians found a number of villages and towns such as Eridu and Uruk

twelve independent city-states: Eridu, Ur, Akshak, Adab, Larsa, Umma, Erech, Sippar, Lagash, Nippur, Shuruppak and Kish⁵. So probably twelve groups or patriarchal clans arrived. The Sumerians, as we mentioned, differed very much from the local population, but also it is not possible to include them to any ethnic group existing at present. They constituted a small percentage of the society, and the Sumerian language had not become the mother tongue of the local population. It was mainly used by the priests, administration and the ruling and middle classes. It is supported by the fact that when the Sumer was finally conquered by the Semitic king of Akkad in the 24th century BC, the Sumerian language vanished quickly without a trace and the cuneiform writing only remained.

In the early periods of the Sumerian history the power in the city-states belonged to the priests working in the local temples, which were the centres of administration and education. The temple controlled all the arable lands and collected taxes from their users. The political leadership exercised "ensi" - governors which at the beginning were chosen by the elders, but from about 3000 BC Semitic kings seized the power.

At the initial period relationships between the city-states were good and peaceful, therefore there was no need for employing a professional army. The farming based on the irrigation of land supplied plenty of food, therefore every city was economically independent and self-sufficient. According to much later legends, the first kings arrived from the sky and lived for thousands of years. In fact the appearance of the kings was the result, that Sumer being a rich and abundant country attracted belligerent Semitic tribes. The peacefully inclined and without an army Sumerians were not able to defend against their aggression.

The Semitic invaders became assimilated, adopting the Sumerian language, culture, organizations and religion. The new kings which did not have the peaceful nature of the Sumerians, but on the contrary, they were interested in conquests, so they formed large professional armies. Soon quarrels commenced between the kings, ending in bloody fights especially between the cities of Lagash, Ur, Kish and Erech. Sumer also suffered attacks by the eastern barbarian tribes and because of the lack of unity it was unable to defend against them. In the 24th century BC Sargon, the

⁵ These places-names existed before the arrival of the Sumerians

Semitic king of Akkad⁶, conquered the quarrelling Sumerian cities and annexed them to his empire. Sargon continued the legacy of Sumer, so it was not destroyed, but the Sumerian language disappeared from everyday use. Only the establishing of Babylon by Hammurabi in the 18th century BC ultimately destroyed the ancient institutions, and only the Sumerian cuneiform writing remained.

Democratic institutions

In Sumer, one of the most important governing principles was making decisions in a democratic way which were important for the whole of the city-state. Although the executive power belonged to the priests, and later to the king, for the first time in history a system of the representation of the population was created in principle similar to parliamentary democracies. It consisted of two houses: a “senate” or an assembly of elders including noble and rich men, and “a lower house” or an assembly of arms –bearing free male citizens including craftsmen, temple administration, people employed by noblemen and agriculture labourers. The houses made important decisions such as a declaration of war, and the representatives of the lower house had a prevailing vote. A few thousand years will pass before similar systems will be functioning in ancient Greece and republican Rome. We can say that the Sumerian system of representation of citizens was the precursor of the contemporary democracies.

Farming and industry

The main place of employment and the most important source of revenue of the city-states was farming which provided not only food needed for the residents, but also goods for export. It was based on an artificial irrigation of fields. The irrigation system consisted of canals, dams, weirs, dykes and water reservoirs. Its construction required the knowledge of trigonometry, geodesy, drawing maps and plans, calculation of gradients and speeds of water flow in canals. Also needed was the ability of planning and of managing complex engineering projects, the construction of which required coordinating the action of thousands of workers. Many of them had to have high qualifications, because the building of the irrigation system was not limited to digging thousands of kilometres of canals, but also required the knowledge and abilities concerning delivering an appropriate amount of water to individual fields. To

⁶ Located north of Sumer

make sure that the whole system operated correctly, it was necessary to carry out its maintenance conservation works. The irrigation system was not a conglomerate of small private canals feeding individual plots, but constituted the whole integrated structure, covering thousands of square kilometres of fields. Building it was an enterprise on an enormous scale. For example in Lagash was allocated for the cultivation as many as 2000 square kilometres of land that constituted about 2/3 of the areas of the state.

Farming in such conditions required considerable new knowledge and therefore Sumerians prepared a special handbook giving a farmer explicit instructions what and when should be done. It was a compendium, containing detailed information, among others, about the correct usage of the irrigation. Since the farmers were not able to read the instruction prepared for them, a profession of educated agriculture managers was created which supervised the works. The need to write a handbook attests the fact that the original local population did not have the knowledge of modern farming.

Officials of the temple were responsible for the administration of the agricultural lands and the using and functioning of the irrigation system. The farmers did not own the fields, but leased them and paid tax for it.

Besides the farming other industries contributed to the economy. Well advanced was craft and working with metals: gold, silver, tin, lead, copper, bronze and other. The metallurgy industry included not only metal casting but such techniques as cold hammering, annealing and hardening were mastered. Craftsmen made of copper and bronze many products such as agricultural tools, vessels, containers, hooks, nails and weapons. Such techniques as spinning and weaving were known, and the textile industry was based mainly on the processing of wool and linen.

Medicine in Sumer was very advanced and the ancient physician was a highly educated person and had a relatively high social status. Prescriptions found on clay tablets attest to the knowledge of the healing efficacy of many minerals and plants. Preparation of medicine required conducting a complex sequence of chemical processes. Similar medicines are still used in India and Egypt.

Law and justice

Advanced Sumerian society needed a sophisticated justice system. The introduced

provisions of law controlled all aspects of life in Sumer. It was the first place in the world where written law arose⁷. However the legal code was not based on the in general common then principle: “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth”. The lawgivers realised that it would not be possible to reverse certain effects of the committed crime, and the offender must be useful to the society. It was a very humane approach in which, for smaller offences, a money fine was substituted as a penalty which very often was more biting and better educating than corporal punishments. Relevant provisions of the law regulated behaviour of people in all spheres of their life, like marriages, divorces, inheritance, conducting business etc. and concerned women as well as slaves.

Slavery was a recognised institution, but slaves were not only prisoners of war, but also once free citizens which fell into debt or committed despicable acts. Parents who had difficulty to pay creditors, could sell them their children or even their entire family. However the position of the Sumerian slaves differed considerably from the situation of persons enslaved in other countries, because they had greater legal rights. They could e.g. engage in businesses, borrow money, and most important, they could buy their freedom.

Marriages were arranged by the parents, and were confirmed by a wedding contract. This was done by a notary who also certified divorce settlements, maintenance payments and business agreements. A married woman could own property and engage in businesses⁸. The law protected orphans and widows from exploitation, and therefore performed important social functions which were not limited to exclusively representing interests of the powerful and the rich.

Religion and philosophy

Religious life in the early period of the history of Sumer concentrated mainly around the temple, however it does not mean that it was a place accessible to the public. All ritual functions connected with the worship of gods were performed exclusively by priests. Each Sumerian city-state had its own protective god to which everything

⁷ Written on a stone stele about 2000 BC or possible earlier. The Hammurabi code was based on the Sumerian Law.

⁸ In the ancient Greece and Rome women did not have these rights. This type of rights were introduced in England in 1870, but in the USA even in 1913 in the 20 states married women did not have the rights to own property.

belonged, and the temple dealt only with administration of these assets. Since in each of the 12 cities only one god was worshipped, it is possible to regard the religion of Sumer as monotheistic.

In the early period of Sumer history it was believed that the king had been of divine origin, arrived from the heaven and will there return after his death. Nobody apart from him had the right to the afterlife, but his courtiers and the closest dignitaries could serve him in his afterlife. Since the common people were cut off from the religion of their masters, probably in the third millennium BC, Sumerian thinkers and philosophers created religious doctrines explaining the functioning of the world. The Sumerian pantheon reflected the system of the royal power with a king at its head. Of all these hundreds of deities the four most important were the heaven-god, An, the air-god, Enlil, the water-god, Enki, and the great mother-goddess Ninhursag. Enki was the god of wisdom responsible for arranging the life on earth and creating culture and civilization. The Sumerians did not try to find out how their civilization came into existence. They assumed that its designer and builder was Enki and such an explanation completely satisfied them. The Sumerian gods were entirely anthropomorphic and even the most powerful among them acted and behaved like people. They ate, drank, married, raised families, and often became slaves to human passions and weaknesses.

The above gods were not involved in the management and control of the universe. This task was entrusted to fifty minor deities, superhuman beings in the human form, regarded as children of An, however their names remained unknown. They were invisible and were responsible for keeping the natural order on the earth and in the cosmos according to the laws and the designs established beforehand. And so the sky, the earth, the sea, the heavenly bodies, the rivers and cities, and even individual estates were under their control.

The religious beliefs of the Sumer residents were written up during much later periods and therefore did not disappear into total oblivion. Many fragments of these beliefs, after some changes, had been included in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And so the story of the Creation described in the Bible was entirely borrowed from the Sumerians. In the Sumerian mythology we will find an explanation of the most puzzling story in the Bible: why Eve was created from the Adam's rib. The Sumerian god Enki had a sick rib and in order to heal it a goddess was created who in

Sumerian was called Nin-ti, “the Lady of the rib” , but it also means “the Lady who makes live”, which in Hebrew means Eve. This Sumerian literary double entendre was transformed in the Bible as “the woman created from the rib”.

The Biblical Flood-story is also described in the Sumerian literature. According to the legend Ziusudra, the Sumerian counterpart of the Biblical Noah, learns from the god Enki that the decision was taken by the assembly of the gods to send a deluge and destroy the human kind. Ziusudra obtained instructions on how to build a giant boat and save himself from destruction. The flood was raging for seven days and nights and at the end of that time the sun-god, Utu warmed the land. Ziusudra had prostrated himself before An and Enlil and was admitted to the paradise of gods.

The Sumerians believed in personal gods, that is beings resembling guardian angels who looked after them and to whom they opened their hearts during prayer. They tried also to find a solution to the oldest problem which is never ending, human suffering. We learned about it from the Sumerian precursor of the Biblical Book of Job which is the first recorded attempt to deal with the age-old problem. The advice given then was similar to the help given to the believers of contemporary religions, that is that one should beg his god until he gave heed to his prayer and delivers him from his misfortune.

The Sumerians achieved very high ethical and moral standards thanks to the commandments of the gods which they obediently followed. They cherished goodness, truth, law and order, justice, freedom, honesty, directness, mercy and charity. They abhorred their opposites such as evil and falsehood, lawless and anarchy, injustice, oppression, sinfulness and perversity, cruelty and pitilessness. Kings and rulers reminded their subjects of the fact that they had established law and order, protected the weak from the strong and the poor from the rich and wiped out evil and violence. The ethical and moral principles were not created by the local, primitive population, but were imposed by the rulers and in a certain sense they were ahead of the development of man by a few thousand years. Therefore the early Sumer was an island of peace and humanitarianism in a sea of brutality, aggression and atrocities. Only nowadays do we start appreciating the fact, that the Sumerian’s moral code was based on the values which became universally accepted several thousand years after the disappearance of their civilization. This code charted the direction of the development of mankind and to this day remains relevant.

Education, literature and sciences

Owing to the information recorded on the clay tablets, we know today quite a lot about the ancient Sumer. The writing in Sumer originated about 3000 BC and became an instrument in helping to manage temples and city administrations.

With the economic development and increasing numbers of residents arose a need for preparation of managers and administrators who would be able to write and read. In the second half of the third millennium BC, thousands of scribes specializing in various fields were already employed.

Schools employed teachers specializing in different subjects. The teachers were paid out of the tuition fees, collected from the students, who came mainly from the richer social strata, and after leaving school enjoyed well paid jobs.

Schools gradually became centres of learning and culture. Scientific subjects included botany, zoology, geography and mathematics. The Sumerians believed that there was no need to investigate the world and the nature, because these matters were controlled by the gods, who provided man with the knowledge adequate to have a decent life. Therefore the scientific development did not originate from the need of finding the truth about the world, but from the desire for learning practical skills. For example, mathematics included learning of the multiplication and division tables, calculating volume and weight measurements.

The Sumerian school performed not only essential social functions, but provided significant contribution to the development to the human thought. For the first time in the history of humanity came into existence text books which contributed to the development of the learning during the next millennia, and were compiled first in the world catalogues of literary works. Prof. Noah Samuel Kramer, an outstanding researcher of the Sumerian civilization stated: "It is no exaggeration to say, that had it not been for the inventiveness and perseverance of the anonymous, practically oriented Sumerian pundits and teachers who lived in the early third millennium BC, it is hardly likely that the intellectual and scientific achievements of modern days would have been possible"⁹.

Comments

⁹ S.N. Kramer, The Sumerians, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 229

The Sumerian civilization, created by the unknown travellers, existed less than 1000 years, and as a result of the harmful influences of the Semitic masters underwent slow negative transformations. Although the original laws were not officially replaced, the Sumerian society, as a result of suffering of never ending wars and the despotism of the new kings, had been changing and the traditional values and standards underwent gradual devaluation. To this fact contributed the loss of the position and fall of the authority of the temple which ruled the lives of the residents. A large majority of the found documents were written in the later periods, during the reign of the Semitic masters. Therefore our knowledge about the beginnings and the early development of the city-states is very limited, but the periods of strife and wars are much better immortalised.