

## On the Characteristics of Sumerian Civilization

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### Abstract

**Sumerian civilization refers to the civilization that flourished in the middle and lower reaches of the Mesopotamia from about 4000 BC to the mid-18th century BC, which experienced the age of Jemdet Nasr, the age of Uruk, the City-state period, the era of Akkadian Empire, the age of Guti, the era of Ur III dynasty, and the last Isin-Larsa period. During the middle of the 18th century BC when Hammurabi united the Mesopotamia, the Sumerian civilization was inherited by Babylon and the Sumerian era was ended. This paper first expounds the origin of Sumerian civilization, and then discusses the myth of Sumerian civilization and the influence of myth on people's life, thought, city-state and regime change in Mesopotamia.**

### Keywords

**Sumerian civilization, myths and legends, Mesopotamia.**

### 1. Introduction

Sumerian civilization refers to the ancient civilization that originated in the crescent area between the Mesopotamia in history, which is recognized as one of the oldest civilizations since it is the earliest inventor of writing in the world. The Babylonian civilization, which is one of the four ancient civilizations, inherited from the Sumerian civilization. Studies of Sumerian civilization originally belonged to a branch of Assyrian research. However, since the second half of the 19th century, breakthroughs in archaeological excavations have gradually made scholars realized that the wisdom of Sumerian civilization can help reveal the development process of ancient civilization, early human thinking, ideology, etc. Today, a large number of scholars have made major breakthroughs in the study of Sumerian civilization. In *Ancient Salinized Land and Irrigated Agriculture*, Jacobson argued that one of the reasons for the destruction of Sumerian civilization was land salinization and over cultivation. Wu Yuhong introduced in *The Immortal Sumerian Civilization on Clay Tablets* the Sumerian civilization in detail from the eight aspects of geography, cuneiform writing, religion, politics, economy, society, military, and literature and art, believing that the Sumerian civilization possessed trade and commercial characteristics. [1] Paul Kriwaczek proposed in *The Birth of Mesopotamia and Civilization* that Sumerian civilization was the birth of writing and literature, the formation of education and law, the beginning of civil engineering and mathematics, and the origin of urban planning [2]. Scholars have kept exploring Sumerian civilization, everything about which is hidden in historical sites and cultural heritage and waiting to be discovered.

### 2. The Origin of Sumerian Civilization

Sumerian civilization refers to the civilization that flourished in the middle and lower reaches of the Mesopotamia from about 4000 BC to the mid-18th century BC, which experienced the age of Jemdet Nasr, the age of Uruk, the City-state period, the era of Akkadian Empire, the age of Guti, the era of Ur III dynasty, and the last Isin-Larsa period. During the middle of the 18th century BC when Hammurabi united the Mesopotamia, the Sumerian civilization was inherited

by Babylon and the Sumerian era was ended. The two river refer to the Euphrates River and the Tigris River, and the Mesopotamia refers to the large area of land between the middle and lower reaches of the two rivers in West Asia. Scholars call this land Mesopotamia and the civilization on this land Mesopotamia civilization. Sumerian civilization is also part of the Mesopotamia civilization as well as one of the earliest cradles of civilization. Today, countries such as Iraq in the Mesopotamia region of West Asia are still world-renowned for their rich oil storage on their land. Since 4000 BC Sumerian civilization has shown strong vitality and progress, which is a glorious page in the history of human progress. It started from the early City-state Eridu, turned to the more complete City-state system of Uruk, then entered the era when the city-states competed with each other and finally reached the era of the Akkadian Empire—the first real empire. After the Akkad was destroyed by the Kuti, the former Sumerian City-state Ur once again established a dynasty and expelled the Kuti who had ruled for more than 100 years from Mesopotamia. Ur ruled the country with its powerful force, which was finally destroyed by the Amorites in the mountains of northern Syria and the Elamite in the Zagros Mountains of the southwestern Iranian plateau. However, the Sumerians did not withdraw from the stage of history at that time, which co-existed with the Isin dynasty established by the Amorites. In the 18th century when the king of the Quartet Hammurabi unified the two in Mesopotamia, the dynasty established by the Sumerians withdrew from the stage of history. Nevertheless, the culture of the Sumerians continued to influence all the civilizations of the Mesopotamia for 2500 years, from Babylon to Hittite, and from Mitanni to Assyria, to Chaldea and Persia, and even to Greece and Egypt which were close to West Asia. The Sumerian civilization had repeatedly demonstrated its strong heritage and vitality until the Arabs entered the Mesopotamia. Since then the glory of the Sumerian civilization was submerged, which come into sight again in the 19th century and shocked countless scholars.

### 3. Exploration of Sumerian Myth

Mythology is the carrier of people's faith in ancient times, which reveals the basic cognition of people to the world and life, the evolution of civilization and the change of thoughts. Unlike the Chinese mythology possessing local characteristics and lacking a system and Greek myths which are mostly artificially created, the Sumerian myths are free from cultural loss and discontinuous inheritance because they were engraved on the tablets and were used to worship. This chapter reviews the classic part of the Sumerian mythology, discussing the influence of myths on Sumerian civilization from the perspective of people's ideologies, social advancement, economic development, city construction, class struggle and scientific development.

Eridu was the origin of belief, which is located in ABU Shalin (meaning "father of two moons) in Today's Persian gulf coast, 190 km away from the sea. ABU Shalin was a spread of land about 7000 years ago. However, the water from the Persian gulf formed various plains and lakes there. Archaeologists discovered the earliest human temple here, which is only 10 square feet (about 0.93 square meters or so). Composed of a sacrifice and a niche, the temple was used to worship the statue. The discovery of Eridu temple indicated two things. First, the nomadic people began to have a fixed settlements, and the temple represented their worship of nature. The nomadic people believed that the river beside Eridu brought vitality here. Second, the templet reveals the change of human ideology. When the temple was built, people confirmed their own identity and formed tribes. Some archaeological evidence in this area, including fish bones, ashes, small ornaments and so on, also indicate that a large feast ceremony took place here. The remains are in the shape of layer upon layer, indicating that people realized the ownership the land and the sense of belonging and gradually formed social contacts.[3]

When people underwent certain degree of ideological progress, the prototype of the city-state began to appear. After Eridu, Uruk dominated the Mesopotamian. There are a lot of myths

during this period, including Inanna and Enki, Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta, The Epic of Gilgamesh and many other fairy tales engraved on clay tablets. The famous cuneiform was born in late Uruk Era, and previous ideologies can be seen in those myths. Inanna and Enki tells the story of the god of water and civilization Enki, one of the earliest gods. Enki was the master who let everything run in the laws of nature—Me. He ruled Eridu and made Eridu the place of the sacred kingship. This is similar to “Royal power landed in Eridu from heaven” mentioned in the beginning of Sumerian King List. It can be seen that people at that time believed in the divine right of king. Therefore, it was Enki who made Eridu powerful. Inanna and Enki also proves this idea. In order to make Uruk more powerful, Inanna went to Eridu and tempted Enki to get drunk with her beauty. She swindled many ownership of Me from Enki with wisdom and stole them away. Enki regretted when he waked up and sent a monster to chase Inanna. However, Inanna appeased the monster with her wisdom and finally brought Me back to Uruk, including the one representing the power. As a result, Uruk was strong in Mesopotamia while Eridu gradually declined. And the Uruk people used myths to explain the decline of Eridu. The monarchy was subject to religion; and religion and belief became a ruling method. Unlike the myth above, the character of The Epic of Gilgamesh is not the god or “Ensi” (the title for the city-state ruler and chief priest) who is close to the god. Instead, the character is a “common person”, “the son of god”, whose deeds have been unearthed in the library ruins of Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal. His stories were recorded on the clay board much earlier and dated back to 2000 BC. His stories included the battle with the Monster Humbaba, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and Gilgamesh’s search for longevity. Some details of these stories revealed the Sumerian’s basic understanding of the world and their daily life at that time. What’s more commendable is that this epic shows us an important stage in the development of human society, that is, the transition from an equal society to a slavery society. Gilgamesh was a brutal king of Uruk in the beginning, who gradually changed after meeting his friend Enkidu (a slave in some versions). Gilgamesh eliminated the forest fire-breathing monster Humbaba, and rescued the goddess Inanna and refused her marriage proposal. Inanna was annoyed by his refusal and sent the Bull of Heaven to destroy Uruk. However, Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed the Bull of Heaven, which made the gods realize that the majesty was provoked. Therefore, the god sentenced Enkidu to death. Due to the death of his friend, Gilgamesh determined to seek the way to immortality. After untold hardships, Gilgamesh finally found the youth grass in the deep sea—the immortal grass under the guidance of a wise old man. He immediately returned to Uruk to let the people of the whole country share the grass. Unfortunately, the fairy grass was swallowed by a snake on the way back. This made Gilgamesh realize that human beings are destined to age and die of illness, who thus determined to spend the rest life with his subjects. The stories are from the earliest known and most complete epic (in spite of some missing parts), some of which clearly reflect the characteristics of the times. First is the fear of the gods. Although the majesty of the gods was irresistible, there appeared people who dared to challenge the majesty of the gods—city-state rulers who were called “En” by Sumerians. Second is the desire for wise rulers, which may be related to transition from democracy to slavery in the Uruk era when the classes began to be divided and the ruling class was gradually formed. Finally, the writer of those stories expressed his thoughts on life, who made people believe that human beings cannot obtain immortality and can only live their own lives in a limited life. Therefore, people bet on daily life with greater enthusiasm and brought the first peak of rapid technological development and craftsmanship in the history of the Mesopotamia, making Uruk the pioneer.

The characteristics of the age of Uruk are as follows. First, city states were gradually formed. In the age of Uruk, people gradually gathered to form the prototype of city-states, which required a large number of labor force. As the construction of temples provided many job opportunities, more workers brought more chances to make breakthroughs in the production technology. Second is about the development of technology. There was a man-made Lapis lazuli pigment in

The Epic of Gilgamesh, indicating that the Uruk people at that time had mastered the advanced pigment production technology, ware making technology (the invention of bronze), construction technique (the use of concrete), etc. which promoted the prosperity and development of Uruk. Third is about class division and the rich-poor gap. The poor used mass-produced goods, while the rich employed craftsmen to make refinements. Fourth is about the establishment of foreign trade. During this period trade was flourishing, which is known as the Uruk colonial era. Trade stations were built and for merchants to exported goods, Uruk ideology, social life through intermediary agencies. Fifth is about the emergence of cultural blending. The combination of Uruk civilization and local Aboriginal civilization showed the posture of cultural compatibility. Sixth is about the prosperity and development of hieron economy. All aspects of Uruk's life depended on the operation of hiera. The priests controlled everything in the city, including presiding over the "God marriage", establishing the legitimacy of the rule, ensuring the operation of city trade, etc. The hieron economy and temple management were the basis for the operation of the earliest civilization. Seventh is about the birth of cuneiform characters. People at that time demanded for identity with unique signs. The characters in the later period of the Uruk era were engraved on the clay boards and roll stamps to prove one's identity and keep accounts. A "vocabulary list" in the Uruk era was unearthed, which recorded the objects and their symbols in order to educate people to use cuneiform characters. They shifted from recording objects to recording language since recording words with meaning were obviously more effective. In addition to the advantage of simplicity, the list could also be used to record words such as conjunctions that were difficult to be recorded by recording objects. Throughout the development of human beings, this simple recording system enabled people to record the events of the time. Since then, human beings have had history [4]. In the late period of Uruk, there appeared the uprising of the colony, and the reduction of crop output caused by bad climates and soil salinization. According to ancient books Genesis and Atra-Hasis, the destruction of Uruk resulted from the floods. The Uruk era has far-reaching significance in that it distinguishes the era with words from the era without words and it proves the fragility of a society with theocratic ideology.

After the flood, people established some new cities. Compared with the era of the Akkadian Empire when the monarch had a slightly higher status than the Priest class, the City-state era was characterized by the separation of power between the Priest class and the ruler. While the temple economy still occupied the dominant position, the relationship between the gods and the monarchy was close. The City-state era was also the time when the Sumerian Pantheon was basically formed. Due to the equal status of city states, the protection gods of each city state were recognized. The war or trade disputes between the city states evolved into the opposition or union between the protection gods of city-states. There are many different versions of the mythological records in this period. As for the formation of the world, there are Song of Hoe, Animal Husbandry and Grain, The Goddess Nammu, and Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Song of Hoe tells that the God Enlil invented the pickaxe to create the world and separate the heaven from the earth. The Goddess Nammu holds that before the heaven and earth appeared the world was a primitive ocean called Nammu. Animal Husbandry and Grain tells that the God Anu caused the birth of Anunnaki, which was a mountain with the top being the sky and the foot being the earth. In Enkidu and Gilgamesh, heaven and earth were integrated. While the God Anu took the sky, Enlil took the earth. To sum up, the formation of the world in Sumerian culture is similar to Pangu separating sky from earth in Chinese mythology and Kronos separating his parents in Greek mythology. The three tales believe that the world was created from one blurred entity of sky and earth, which is a kind of consciousness out of chaos and opens the cognitive coding mode of binary opposition [5]. As for the birth of man, Song of Hoe and Enki and Ninmah tells that the gods created human beings and human beings should serve the gods. It was based on this view that Sumerian religious belief could maintain social stability, which reflects the social

form of primitive slavery society. Although the various beliefs in gods in the City-state era has brought abundant mythological texts, the core content is still the spiritual source of Sumerian people—believing in gods.

The most important feature of the City-state era is the emergence of the relationship between supply and demand. The market began to flourish, and private ownership contracts appeared. Market competition led to the widening gap between the rich and the poor. In the late period of the city-state era, the class system was formed. Meanwhile, because of the needs of the war and resisting wild animals, the rich class with military ability gradually mastered the military power originally belonging to the Priest class, indicating that the military commander and the Priest were in almost the same position. Besides the dispute of gods, the war in the City-state era was also caused by the question of legitimacy of the city-state rule. The occurrence of the war promoted the complexity of tools and weapons, which made the military commander have more power. With the increase of power, the commander began to seek political power and held a ceremony about divine rights of military commanders [6].

Sargon I was a legendary king in the history of Mesopotamia, who was also the founder of the first empire. Since then, Mesopotamia entered the age of Akkadian Empire for more than 100 years. Sargon I was said to come from a single parent family in mythology, who became the ruler because he got favored by Ishtar (Inanna). The purpose of the myth was to consolidate the legal status of Sargon as a ruler—being granted by God. After unifying the southern part of the Mesopotamia, Sargon established a ruling center with ethnic groups—Akkadian Empire, which marked the formation of a unified multi-ethnic territorial state. In order to effectively govern the country, the following measures were taken. First was Akkadian language replacing Sumerian to become the common language. Second was establishing a strong central government that advocated military force and possessed strong military strength. Third was setting up administrative agencies. The Empire sent officials to manage the land belonging to the central government. As a result, the land of temples was reduced, and private ownership transactions appeared. Fourth was forming a strict hierarchy concept, the supremacy of royal power and the order of social hierarchy. The royal family and the upper class in the Akkadian Empire wore costumes with distinct characteristics, who hairstyles and badges showed their identity. It can be seen that slavery society entered a more perfect stage with distinct class characteristics at that time.[7]

In the age of Akkadian Empire, the monarchy power surpassed that of the City-state era. On a stone tablet in the City-state era, the biggest image is the God Ningirsu and the image of the king is very small. In contrast, on a stone tablet built under the order of NaramSuen, the grandson of Sargon, NaramSuen wears a helmet symbolizing the gods but the gods are only two stars. The cuneiform name of NaramSuen was also added the stars representing the gods to show that NaramSuen was a demigod, indicating the power of the monarchy. The Akkadian Empire also retained its faith in gods. During this period, there appeared another important God—Nanna or Sin. Sin wore a crescent shaped crown and held a crescent shaped symbol. In one myth, God Nanna went to Nippur to meet his father Enlil and ask him to bring the article that would make Ur (the city of Nanna) prosperous. Enlil gave him fertile fields of grain, wonderful plants and animals in the forest, etc. This myth indicates that during the Akkadian period, the trading system between the north and the south of the Empire was functioning smoothly, and the cities exchanged the items they needed. Meanwhile, people named as gods also ensured the legality of trade. As Sargon's power gradually expanded, his daughter Enheduanna became the priestess of the Moon God, which meant that the power of the priest class began to be under the control of the king. The priestess was in charge of the land of temples, indicating that she became an agent of the temple economy. Part of the priest texts she compiled were still used in modern religious ceremonies. Sumerian Temple Hymns extols all the gods believed in the

Akkadian Empire. The output of this culture further strengthened the rule of the Akkadian Empire [8].

The Akkad Empire ruled Mesopotamia for more than 100 years, which was always facing the resistance of city-states. Finally, the Akkad Empire was destroyed by the Gutians due to climate change and other factors. Since the Gutians had no written language, there were few historical records in the 100 years of Gutian ruling. Later, the Sumerian city-state Ur became strong and drove out the Gutians to establish the Ur III dynasty, marking that Sumerian entered the last glorious period.

The Ur III dynasty not only inherited the regime of the City-state era, but also adopted the bureaucratic system and the means of central rule left by the Akkad Empire. In the Ur III dynasty, the bureaucratic system was established, including the bureaucrats operating economy such as agricultural economic experts, animal husbandry experts, irrigation engineers, writing clerks in charge of education and recording mythological texts, judges in charge of law, and even diplomats and envoys stationed in the border areas of Ur territory. This close to perfect bureaucratic system made the Ur III dynasty prosper in all aspects. The most notable feature of this period was that the center area radiated to and interacted with the surrounding areas [9]. While the state dispatched officials to manage land sales and economic operations in the capital area, the capital area dispatched officials to manage the peripheral areas. Therefore, in the development of the three districts of the Ur III dynasty, population and goods gathered in the central area and culture and ideas spread to the border areas. The two flow accelerated not only the development of the central government but the cultural output and the rule of the periphery. The sound taxation system established by the Ur III dynasty ensured that taxation institutions from the central area to the remote areas of the state operated smoothly and a lot of wealth gathered in the most prosperous city of Ur. Meanwhile, many mythological texts were revised and created by bookkeepers during this period. For example, both the Sumerian version and the Akkad version of The Epic of Gilgamesh were created during this period. At the same time, the traditional beliefs left behind by the previous generations were inherited. Under the influence of the world system, Sumerians established broader beliefs and values of gods and formed the concepts of the birth of mankind and the universe [10].

In the late Ur III dynasty, its border areas was war-torn due to the continuous invasion of the Amori from the mountainous areas of northern Syria and the Elamites from the southwest of the Iranian plateau who crossed the Zagros Mountains. In 2006 BC, the Ur III dynasty collapsed, marking that Sumerian dynasties officially withdrew from the stage of history and the Amorites entered the southern part of the Mesopotamia. However, the city-state form appeared again. Among them, the Sumerian successor Babylon was gradually developing, and the descendants of Sumerian established the city of Larsa in the northern Mesopotamia facing the Isin Dynasty of the Amorites. Around 1750 BC, Larsa was officially destroyed by Hammurabi, and Babylon entered the stage of history. Hammurabi loved Sumerian civilization and admired the great talents of Sargon, who was shocked by the glorious legacy left by the Sumerians and thus determined to inherit Sumerian civilization. Therefore, the Mesopotamia inherited Sumerian civilization. It was not until the middle of the 6th century BC when Persia rose that Sumerian slowly lost its influence.

#### 4. Summary

Throughout the history of ancient Mesopotamian civilization, Sumerian civilization established its incomparable historical position with its strong inheritance, diversity and inclusiveness. Unfortunately, Sumerian civilization did not receive attention again until the 19th century when the ancient Greek civilization had already occupied powerful historical domination and leading position. In the 21st century, an increase of world-wide historical studies have enabled people

to understand the glory of Sumerian civilization. However, the research on Sumerian civilization has developed for only about 200 years with a unsatisfying system. Besides, the discovery of Sumerian civilization was hindered by the war in the Middle East. Therefore, more efforts and explorations should be made to reveal the charm and significance of Sumerian civilization.

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