

Sumer and the Sumerians

Mesopotamia produced one of the best-known ancient civilisations, with a literate, urban culture and highly developed political institutions. In this fully revised and expanded edition of her classic text, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Harriet Crawford reviews the extraordinary social and technological developments in the region from 3800 to 2000 BC. Drawing on the most up-to-date historical and archaeological sources, she provides a thematic exploration of this ancient civilisation, examining its physical and historical background, changing settlement patterns, public and private architecture, and cultural developments of the period. In this new edition, the chapter on manufacturing industries and trade has been enlarged and divided into two chapters. In addition, a new chapter on the contemporary developments in Upper Mesopotamia is included. The final chapter reflects on the future of the heritage of Iraq in the aftermath of the second Gulf war.

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Preface

This book is intended for students, and especially for students beginning to study the archaeology and history of the ancient Near East. The changes which took place on the Mesopotamian plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the fourth and third millennia BC are of crucial importance in understanding subsequent developments in western Asia and beyond. A range of major innovations in both technology and social development is attributed to this period and it is these innovations which will be described in the following chapters. Many of them have their roots in much older periods. Where evidence which complements or extends that from Mesopotamia is available from adjacent geographic areas, it too will be included. Since 1991 it has not been possible to dig in Iraq itself and, as a direct result of this, there has been an explosion of archaeological activity in neighbouring countries such as Syria and the Gulf states. This new evidence has brought important new insights and has led to a reappraisal of the Sumerian world.

There are several ways of approaching such a study. One is the straightforward chronological account traditionally favoured by historians and archaeologists, which tries to describe a society in its entirety from genesis to extinction. More recently, authors have begun to isolate specific aspects of a society, taking one stimulus such as trade, or one theme such as the ecological background. The role of that specific factor in the development of the society is then explored.

This book attempts to combine these approaches and looks at a number of major themes, each of which will be explored chronologically, beginning with the physical environment and the historical background. There follows a description of how the environment was used, with sections on agriculture, irrigation and settlement pattern. Next is a chapter on the built environment and the use of space within the settlements; this includes a section on public buildings and on domestic housing. An important new chapter summarises the new evidence from Upper Mesopotamia. In all areas the best evidence for the reconstruction of everyday life comes, ironically, from the funerary remains. The industries which underpinned the Mesopotamian economy and provided the goods for the essential export trade are also examined, together with the trade itself. The penultimate chapter traces the development of writing, which was intimately linked to the economic development, and then there is a summary of the changes in the fine arts.

Each of these topics is followed throughout the two thousand years covered by the book. An attempt is then made in the concluding chapter to bring all these different themes together, and to isolate a number of major trends which can be seen in most, if not all, of the areas described. The most important thread, which links many of the topics discussed, seems to be the change which took place on the southern plain of Mesopotamia from a temple-dominated, politically fragmented pattern of city-states, to one of tight centralised control in which power was in the hands of a single divine ruler backed by a massive bureaucracy. The effects of this political transformation can be traced in almost every aspect of the material culture, as well as in the social system.

The emphasis in this book is on description rather than on explanations, because more accurate description of the archaeological phenomena is the essential basis for any attempt at understanding or explanation. Our evidence is still fragmentary, but the quantity is increasing at a rapid rate, largely as a result of rescue work ahead of major development schemes such as the Saddam dam in northern Iraq. The first task must be to try and incorporate this mass of often rather inchoate new information into our existing framework. The framework itself may have to be modified to accommodate the new facts, but, once this has been done, attempts at explanation can begin.

It is hoped that the thematic approach adopted in this book may throw new light on the period from about 3800 to 2000 BC by providing a different perspective. By assembling the evidence in this slightly different way, it may, perhaps, delineate more sharply some characteristics of the civilisation which is often loosely described as Sumerian. It is also hoped that this approach will provide easily accessible comparative data for people interested in particular aspects of the cultures of other archaeological areas.

Many people have helped me to write this book, colleagues and students have helped me with advice, and I am extraordinarily grateful to all of them for their generous help. It has been particularly stimulating to work with scholars in the adjacent disciplines of ancient history and ancient language and it is perhaps to Mark Geller, Amelie Kuhrt and Roger Matthews, all at UCL, that I owe the greatest debt. I am also most grateful to Dr Uwe Finkbeiner, the University of Chicago Press, Dr Julian Reade, and the Trustees of the British Museum for permission to use illustrations of which they hold the copyright. Kate Morton, Neville Parker and Tessa Rickards drew the illustrations for me with endless patience and great skill and Georgina Herrmann allowed me to use two of her excellent photographs. My husband has been the kindest and most meticulous of unofficial sub-editors. Finally, the idea of presenting the material in a thematic way came from Peter Richards at Cambridge University Press and made the writing of the book stimulating and exciting for me. I hope it may do the same for the reader.