

The Settlement of Sumer and the City of Uruk

Within this context of environmental change, Sumer was an attractive area for settlement in the late fourth millennium B.C.E. Those who moved into the area from other parts of West Asia carried with them the heritage of more than 2000 years of experimentation in agriculture and settled communities. In Sumer they joined an already established population which had cultivated the marshes for a thousand years and developed small town settlements scattered along the gulf coast. Together, the new and old settlers used the latest farming techniques, including irrigation, and equipment on fertile soil as it dried out. The result was a greatly increased agricultural production, which in turn attracted more people and created denser settlements.

Uruk was one of several cities that emerged in Sumer following the climatic changes that occurred after 3500 B.C.E. Growing out of two smaller farming communities, Uruk eventually encompassed 9 square kilometers (3.5 square miles), but it served a much wider hinterland as a focus of economic, social, and cultural interchange. Uruk differed from smaller farm communities in the diversity of its economic production and the fact that its large labor force was paid wages in the form of surplus grain, as meticulously recorded by scribes.

Uruk as a Ceremonial Center

The conversion of the small village or domestic shrine into a temple occurred by the first half of the fourth millennium B.C.E.. The White Temple at Uruk, dated to about 3100 B.C.E., is built of mud brick with whitewashed walls and decorated with elaborate buttresses and recesses. Built on a raised platform or ziggurat, this temple incorporates the remains of earlier sanctuaries, which were bricked over to form the successive foundations of new temples; because the god of the temple was believed to be the landowner in perpetuity of the ground that had been consecrated to him, his shrine could not easily be transported to a new site. Both temples and their supporting ziggurats were "mountains" where the natural potency of the earth and therefore all of life was thought to be concentrated. A city's shrine served its inhabitants and attracted worshipers and traders from the hinterland. Priests first appeared at some time prior to 3000 B.C.E., when they are depicted on seals and stone carvings. They were perhaps the first social group to be released from direct subsistence labor, since their role in religious ritual and as spokesmen for gods was related to the exercise of power by kings (see Chapter 4). The term for "king" appears in Sumerian inscriptions by the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E., and the rise of kingship is further attested to by the presence of monumental palaces and royal tombs from this period.

Urbanization and the Invention of Writing in Sumer

It is likely that the complexity of business transactions and administrative and legal needs presented by the challenge of organizing larger urban communities stimulated the writing system developed by the Sumerians around 3000 B.C.E. The centralization of the economy through the integration of urban center and hinterland required the systematic collection and

allocation of goods, aided by a means of recording such transactions. The redistribution of resources administered by the newly centralized Sumerian kingdoms was documented in the earliest written records: lists of the contents of storehouses. Though the earliest script appeared in Sumer and, like the origins of scripts elsewhere in the ancient world, was pictographic in nature, cuneiform, or "wedge-shaped," script, developed by the Sumerians to write on clay tablets, eventually spread throughout West Asia among peoples whose languages were unrelated.

The Urban Diet

Grains supplanted livestock as the local diet of city folk. Barley, wheat, and millet were served with lentils, beans, turnips, onion, garlic, leeks, cucumbers, lettuce, cress, and mustard. The daily diet of barley paste or bread was accompanied by onions or a handful of beans and washed down with beer. More than fifty varieties of fish are mentioned in texts before about 2300 B.C.E. Along the city streets of Uruk, vendors of cooked foods offered customers fried fish and grilled meats. Mutton was common (the Sumerian language contained more than 200 words describing the types and varieties of sheep), along with goat, beef, and pork.

The business of agriculture and food supply was only one of the enterprises on which Uruk was based. The ubiquity of mosaic decoration in the area has led many to believe that a considerable number of the inhabitants did nothing but turn out colored clay tiles. As the lower Iraqi area of ancient Uruk had no source of strong, workable stone at hand, hundreds of people were engaged in importing stone and cutting it for use in building. Ensuring a water supply was another major activity in Uruk. As the years of drying continued, major projects were undertaken to straighten and clean river courses and canals, which were cut away from the rivers to the fields in ever more complex patterns.

Uruk provides an example of the relationship of environment to the emergence of cities. By 2800 B.C.E., the plains of Sumer were no longer profusely dotted with small settlements. Instead, there were lines of cities — Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Kish — each with its hinterland of associated settlements that followed the lines of the rivers and main canals. Because they had developed considerable organizational experience during the earlier centuries of plenty, they were able to use complex irrigation methods to adapt to the increasingly dry conditions and scarcity of food.