

# Sumerians

Walter R. Bodine

*Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness  
and who seek the LORD:  
Lock to the rock from which you were cut  
and to the quarry from which you were hewn.  
—Isaiah 51:1*

## Study of the Sumerians

The Sumerians are the only one of the thirteen groups to which a chapter of this volume is devoted who are not mentioned in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Yet

*Author's note:* This essay has benefited from the critical comments of John Huehnergard, Thorkild Jacobsen, Stephen Lieberman, Piotr Steinkeller, and Edwin Yamauchi.

1. Perhaps for this reason the Sumerians were not given separate treatment in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973). Yet my statement must be qualified. Hebrew *šim'ār*, which occurs eight times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Josh. 7:21; Isa. 11:11; Dan. 1:2; Zech. 5:11), appears to represent the Sumerian term for "Sumer-Akkad" and thus refers to the area that includes the homeland of the Sumerians. While the proposal to identify Hebrew *šēm* (the ancestor of Israel via Abraham [Gen. 10:21; 11:10–26]) etymologically with Sumer ("Shumer" in cuneiform) is doubtful (Arno Poebel, "The Name of Elam in Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hebrew," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 48 [1931–32]: 25–26; followed by Samuel N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 297–99, who errantly cites Poebel's article as appearing in vol. 58 [1941] of *AJSL*), Sumerian influence in Israel's backgrounds is a foregone conclusion because of the pervasive influence of Sumerian culture on all of the ancient Near East, as will be stressed below. More pointedly, the biblical text traces Abraham's origins to the city of Ur (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7), a prominent urban center of the Sumerians. It has been argued that the Ur in question (i.e., "Ur of the Chaldeans") is not the Sumerian city, but a northern Ur, perhaps in the vicinity of Haran on the upper Euphrates, e.g., Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958): 28–31; idem, "Abraham of Ur," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver*, ed. D. Winton Thomas and William D. McHardy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 81–83. For a response to the earlier article by Gordon, see Harry W. F. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification," *Iraq* 22 (1960): 200–209.

their influence on ancient Israel, as well as the rest of the ancient Near East, is as fundamental as that of most of the other peoples discussed here.

That the Sumerians have not been as well known is due to several factors. One is the lack of attention given them in the Bible. While virtually every field of ancient Near Eastern studies has by now established its autonomy as a discipline worthy of inquiry in its own right, and this is preeminently true of Assyriology (a term still used for the study of the Sumerian and Semitic peoples of ancient Mesopotamia), it remains true that one of the primary attractions to graduate study in ancient Near Eastern civilizations is the Hebrew Bible. Another factor in the relative obscurity of the Sumerians is the linguistic unrelatedness of their language to any other known language of the ancient world (or of any period). Comparative linguistic work in Semitic, in the broader field of Afroasiatic, and even in Indo-European in the case of Hittite and Old Persian, draws one into the study of the other languages of the ancient Near East, but not of Sumerian, except as it illuminates Akkadian.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most significant is the high degree of uncertainty that yet surrounds the study of the Sumerian language itself. The earliest texts are still largely unintelligible, as are some features of the language throughout its history. Added to all of this, the very existence of the Sumerians as a people was only established toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Great strides have been taken toward the recovery of Sumerian civilization. Through roughly the first half of our century, excavations were carried out at most of the major occupation sites of the Sumerians, and a wealth of clay tablets inscribed in Sumerian were recovered. These texts are still in the process of being copied and published, and pioneering studies continue to clarify the Sumerian language. Especially in the latter part of the century, Assyriologists have produced definitive editions of Sumerian texts.<sup>3</sup>

2. "Akkadian" is a cover term that includes the Semitic languages or, perhaps better, dialects of ancient Mesopotamia: Old Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and various peripheral dialects from outlying areas.

3. Of all the civilizations of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia is the best documented. It has been conservatively estimated that a quarter million clay tablets recovered through excavation are inscribed in Sumerian. Most of these tablets are fragmentary, and they are separated in different museums and private collections around the world. The great majority are business documents recording economic, legal, and other administrative matters. Fortunately, multiple copies of literary works were commonly made, so that lost portions of given compositions can often be filled out by duplicates. Kramer estimates that tablets containing literary compositions amount to about 5,000, making up close to 300 compositions with some 30,000 lines; Samuel N. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer: Creation, Glorification, Adoration*, Una's Lectures 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 11-12. His estimate is probably low, depending on what one means by literature and how compositions are identified. Only a fraction of the Sumerian tablets that lie buried in the Middle East have been dug up, as is evidenced by the com-

In the course of this century's investigations, it has become clear that the other civilizations that developed in the ancient Near East were deeply influenced by that of the Sumerians, the earliest to achieve its apex of cultural development. Some of the many influences that emanated from early Sumer include writing,<sup>4</sup> the city-state, the accumulation of capital, the wheel, the potter's wheel, monumental architecture (including various architectural features such as the arch, dome, and vault), the sexagesimal number system,<sup>5</sup> written legal documents, schools, and the cylinder seal.<sup>6</sup>

The extent of Sumerian influence on the rest of the ancient Near East was highlighted in the mid-1970s by the discovery at Ebla, an ancient Syrian site, of a large archive of clay tablets written in Sumerian and in Semitic (Eblaite, now believed to be either an early dialect of Akkadian or another form of East Semitic alongside Akkadian) and dating from the mid-third millennium. Until the discovery of the Ebla archive, it was assumed that third-millennium Syria was culturally insignificant. The tablets reveal a city-state that rivaled the major centers of Mesopotamia and was deeply influenced by Sumerian culture. The Sumerian language suddenly became indispensable for the study of the early history of Syria-Palestine, and the early diffusion of Sumerian culture was made even more evident.

## Protoliterate Period

Most of the features of civilization mentioned above emerged in Mesopotamia before the beginning of written records. In fact, many aspects of Sumerian civilization appear to have reached their height around the time that writing first appeared and shortly thereafter, during what is often called

positions that are known thus far only in part or from literary catalogs that list numerous compositions not yet recovered; Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer*, 12-13.

4. Writing also arose early in Egypt, and direct links with Mesopotamia cannot be established with certainty. A plausible explanation of how writing developed in Mesopotamia is that of Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "An Archaic Recording System and the Origin of Writing," *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 1/2 (1977): 31-70. Her proposal, however, is disputed by, e.g., Roy Harris, *The Origin of Writing* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 73; and Stephen J. Lieberman, "Of Clay Pebbles, Hollow Clay Balls, and Writing: A Sumerian View," *American Journal of Archaeology* 84 (1980): 339.

5. The Sumerians employed a primarily sexagesimal system, i.e., one having the number sixty as its basic unit. Such a system is reflected today in our measurement of time, circles, and angles.

6. A number of features of civilization that emerged first in Sumer are discussed in the popular book by Samuel N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-nine Firsts in Man's Recorded History*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

the Protoliterate period (ca. 3400–2900).<sup>7</sup> The earliest written tablets come from the sites of ancient Uruk and Jemdet Nasr (with a scattering from other places, especially in the Diyala region) and date from as early as 3100. The language of these texts appears to be Sumerian, suggesting that the Sumerians invented writing. Some scholars argue for a non-Sumerian substratum in the Sumerian language, which would point to another and possibly an earlier ethnic group that was incorporated into the Sumerian population, but cannot be otherwise identified. This posited substratum is usually referred to as Proto-Euphratean or Ubaidian, but the linguistic evidence used to support its existence is still in question.

The home of the Sumerians was in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers above the Persian Gulf. Their population was concentrated in the lower part of the alluvial plain that constitutes southern Mesopotamia and is generally referred to as Babylonia. Prominent among their cities were Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Uruk (biblical Erech), Bad-tibira, Lagash, Nina, Girsu, Umma, Shuruppak, Isin, and Nippur. Although walled settlements were known from earlier, Neolithic times in Mesopotamia, it appears that the cities of Sumer were unwallled in the fourth millennium, suggesting a relatively peaceful period.

In search of the earliest detectable form of government in Mesopotamia, Assyriologists have found evidence of an assembly of free adult citizens that convened on an ad hoc basis to make decisions for the good of the community. The assembly was bicameral, consisting of a council of elders and an assembly of all able-bodied men. The gathering of the assembly could be occasioned, for example, by offensive behavior of individuals that called for punitive action, large-scale projects such as canal digging that necessitated communal organization, or the threat of aggression by another city-state and the consequent need of leadership in armed resistance. In order to deal with such emergencies the assembly would choose a leader to carry out its decisions.<sup>8</sup>

7. For Mesopotamian chronology before the Dynasty of Akkad, I follow Edith Porada, "The Relative Chronology of Mesopotamia, part 1: Seals and Trade (6000–1600 B.C.)," in *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology*, ed. Robert W. Ehrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 133–200; for Akkad and thereafter, John A. Brinkman, "Mesopotamian Chronology of the Historical Period," in A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 335–48.

8. This reconstruction derives from the research of Thorikild Jacobsen, especially two essays in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran, Harvard Semitic Series 21 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970): "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia" (pp. 157–70; reprinted from *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 159–72) and "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia" (pp. 132–56; reprinted from *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 52 [1957]: 91–140). Additional references to these essays are cited according to the pagination of *Toward the Image of Tammuz*.

Several Sumerian words are employed for offices of leadership at this early period. While at first the office of *en* may have included political power, it soon came to be primarily associated with the cult; and the term came to mean "high priest" or "high priestess," that is, the spiritual head of the temple, whose residence was within the temple precincts. The *lugal* ("big man") was from the outset more of a political office, though not exclusively so. The *lugal* resided in his own dwelling, separate from the temple, known as the *é-gal* ("big house"), which became the palace, as the *lugal* became the equivalent of the Mesopotamian king. Perhaps from his role as war leader, his position grew in importance until he was the most powerful person in his city-state; and his office became hereditary. A third term, *ensí*, is not entirely clear, but may refer to a more limited position, perhaps that of an administrator of a city under the wider authority of a *lugal* when a larger sphere of authority was operative. Some believe that another term, *nin*, referred at first to the female counterpart of both the *en* and the *lugal*; but, like *en*, it may have originally been used of either sex, since it appears in the names of male gods (e.g., Ningirsu, Ninurta).

If one were to think in terms of the modern distinction between secular and sacred, then the early Sumerian homeland should be viewed as a sacred milieu. The center of the city was the temple, the home of the chief deity of the city, often with smaller temples dedicated to the spouse or children of the city deity. The ruler and the people alike viewed themselves as servants of this deity. Temple property and, indeed, the entire city were seen as the property of the deity; a highly organized bureaucracy administered the temple cult, land, industry, and commerce. In older scholarship a picture was drawn of a temple economy in which in very early times the temple owned all the land.<sup>9</sup> This was an exaggeration, since evidence of private ownership of land appears in Early Dynastic texts.<sup>10</sup> It may be that the larger part of the land was owned by the temples in the early periods in southern Babylonia, where the Sumerians were dominant, while private property was more extensive in northern Babylonia, which was dominated by Semites.<sup>11</sup>

9. For a clear statement see Adam Falkenstein, "The Sumerian Temple City," intro. and trans. by Maria deJ. Ellis, *Monographs of the Ancient Near East* 1/1 (1974): 1–21. The theory was first developed by Anton Deimel in a 1920s series of articles in *Orientalia*. A critique that includes a survey of much of the literature may be found in Benjamin Foster, "A New Look at the Sumerian Temple State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1981): 225–41.

10. A large part of this research is published in Russian. An English summary of some of it may be found in Igor M. Diakonoff, "Structure of Society and State in Early Dynastic Sumer," *Monographs of the Ancient Near East* 1/3 (1974): 1–16.

11. This is the proposal of Dietz O. Edzard, "The Early Dynastic Period," in *The Near East: The Early Civilizations*, ed. Jean Bottéro, Elena Cassin, and Jean Vercoutter (New York: Delacorte, 1967), 74–77.

In the south, with the Sumerian system of city-states, the leading deity of the capital of a city-state held authority over the entire region, while the deities of lesser cities and towns within it were honored locally in their own areas.<sup>12</sup> The religious capital of Sumer was the city of Nippur, the home of Enlil. According to Sumerian texts, the assembly of the gods met at Nippur to receive the nomination of a king by his city deity and to confer upon him the kingship. It may be that an assembly of free citizens of all Sumer met in Nippur to make decisions, perhaps from the late Protoliterate period through the first phase of the Early Dynastic period that followed.<sup>13</sup> Indications of this are found in the observations that Nippur remained aloof when warfare raged among other cities of Sumer, that no ruling dynasty claimed it as their capital, and yet that control of Nippur gave a ruler claim to control over all of Sumer and Akkad.

The Sumerians worshiped a number of important deities. An (or Anu), whose home was at Uruk, was regarded as the highest god of the pantheon, though by the time of the known texts he had receded to a rather inactive role. His name is also the word for "sky." Royal authority was his, and the institution of kingship was first granted by him. The actual ruler of the Sumerian pantheon was Enlil ("lord wind"), who lived in his temple, Ekur, in Nippur. Enlil was viewed both as the powerful provider for his people and the fearful executor of the judgmental decrees of the divine council. Also prestigious among the deities was Enki, the god of wisdom and cunning. He was also the god of the watery deep, the Abzu, and had his home at Eridu. The goddess Ninhursag (also known as Ninmah or Nintur) was more prominent than Enki at first, though her prominence later waned. Sometimes considered the spouse of Enlil, she was viewed as a divine mother by early Sumerian kings, who spoke of themselves as being nourished by her milk. Nanna, the moon god, resided at Ur; and Utu, the sun god, at Larsa (and at Sippar in the north). Enlil's son, Ninurta, god of victorious warfare and plant and animal fertility, had his temple, Eshumesha, at Nippur and was virtually identified with Ningirsu, whose temple, Eninnu, was at Girsu.<sup>14</sup> Nanshe was the goddess of fish and birds and the interpreter of dreams. The goddess Inanna had her temple, Eanna, at Uruk. This multifaceted goddess represented the productivity of the storehouse, thunderstorms, war, and the morn-

12. Piotr Steinkeller, "Mesopotamia, History of (Third Millennium)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:725. I am grateful to Prof. Steinkeller for providing me with a prepublication copy of this essay.

13. Jacobsen, "Early Political Development," 139-41.

14. Jerrold S. Cooper, *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur*, *Analecta Orientalia* 52 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 10-11.

ing and evening stars. Identified early with Akkadian Ishtar, she finally became the most important goddess in all of western Asia.

Of the published Sumerian literary compositions, there are about twenty that feature gods and goddesses and have been classified in modern terms as myths. These compositions are vital for the modern effort to reconstruct the understanding of reality of the ancient Sumerians, for the stories a people tell are a primary avenue to the core concepts of their culture.<sup>15</sup> Yet this avenue, in the case of the Sumerians, is not well lighted for several reasons: the uncertainties that persist about the translation of the texts, the settings in which the stories were delivered, and their sociological function. Above and beyond these difficulties, some of which are gradually being ameliorated, stands the awesome gap that separates our modern Western worldview from that of the ancient Mesopotamians.

For these reasons, caution is needed lest we draw interpretive conclusions too quickly from the Sumerian texts. For example, the myth usually entitled "Enlil and Ninlil" tells of the young goddess Ninlil bathing in a canal of Nippur, against her mother's counsel. Enlil, upon seeing her, propositions her and carries out his intention, overriding her mild demur. Through the union Ninlil is impregnated with the moon god Nanna. Subsequently Enlil is banished from Nippur by the assembly of gods because of his deed. En route to the netherworld, Ninlil follows him and allows him (under the guise of three other individuals) to impregnate her three more times with three netherworld deities. The tale concludes with a declaration of praise to Enlil. How is this myth to be understood? From the section recounting Enlil's banishment, one scholar finds evidence of Sumer's high moral standards;<sup>16</sup> but this stands in tension with the conclusion to the myth where Enlil is extolled as the sovereign one who promotes fertility. In a deeper reading of the text, another scholar perceives a "strange undertone of inevitability."<sup>17</sup> Yet such levels of meaning are still largely elusive. Still another scholar writes more recently of this myth: "It does not yet seem possible to understand the composition's more profound mythological meanings."<sup>18</sup>

One of the myths in which the god Enki is central, "Enki and the World

15. Livia Polanyi, "What Stories Can Tell Us about Their Teller's World," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981): 98-99.

16. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer*, 40.

17. Thorkild Jacobsen, "Sumerian Mythology: A Review Article," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran, Harvard Semitic Series 21 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 127 (reprinted from *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 5 [1946]: 128-52).

18. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Review of Enlil and Ninlil: Ein sumerischer Mythos aus Nippur by Hermann Behrens," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 32 (1980): 180.

Order," opens with praise and self-praise to Enki. Then the god pronounces blessing on Sumer, the city of Ur, and the lands of Meluhha and Dilmun. Elam and Marhashi are dealt with severely, but a gift is given to the Martu. Essential aspects of human life and the natural environment are then set in place. At this point the goddess Inanna comes before Enki to complain that she has been slighted in the distribution of divine prerogatives, in comparison with her sister deities. Enki replies by calling Inanna's attention back to the prerogatives that she has already received. Unfortunately the ending of the text is too fragmentary to allow for a meaningful translation, so that Inanna's response is uncertain.

In one of the myths of Inanna, "Inanna and Enki," the theme of the goddess's desire for increased prerogatives is also central. Such prerogatives are viewed as the possession of divinely ordained decrees covering over one hundred aspects of civilization and human life. The Sumerian term for these is *me*.<sup>19</sup> In order to obtain the *me*, Inanna journeys by boat to the Abzu, the watery dwelling of Enki, who has the decrees in his care. She is received and dined by Enki and, during the banquet, while he is drunk, he gives her all of the divine *me*. She promptly loads them on her boat and sets out for her home, Uruk. Upon regaining his sobriety, Enki realizes what he has done and dispatches his messenger and a group of sea monsters to overtake Inanna and recover the *me*. While they do overtake her at several stops, each time she is successful, with the help of the god Ninshubur, in retaining her prized cargo, which she finally brings safely to Uruk amid celebration.

In "Enki and the World Order," the aspiration of Inanna for a wider dominion seems to be focal to the story. In "Inanna and Enki," the goddess obtains all of the *me* and transports them to Uruk, likely reflecting the elevation of Uruk or Inanna or both at some historical point. In another composition, a hymn known as "The Exaltation of Inanna," the goddess is extolled as the possessor of all of the *me*. She is the "Lady of all the *me*'s . . . the guardian of all the great *me*'s!"<sup>20</sup> In still another hymn, "the holy crown of An has been placed upon (her) head . . . the holy scepter of An has been placed in her hand."<sup>21</sup> In these several myths and hymns there seem to be glimpses into the

19. There have been many studies of the meaning of Sumerian *me*. A recent discussion is Gertrud Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos "Inanna und Enki" unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Liste der me*, *Studia Pohl* 10 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1973), with references to previous literature on p. 116 n. 121, to which should be added William W. Hallo and Johannes J. A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, *Yale Near Eastern Researches* 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 49–50 (Hallo's view).

20. Hallo and van Dijk, *Exaltation of Inanna*, 15 (lines 1, 6).

21. Åke W. Sjöberg, "A Hymn to Inanna and Her Self-Praise," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 40 (1988): 169 (1:6, 8).

rise of Inanna in the Mesopotamian pantheon, a process that can be traced in later texts about her Semitic counterpart, Ishtar.<sup>22</sup>

## Early Dynastic Period

The first period for which written records can be employed to any extent is known as Early Dynastic. By this time the basic shape of Sumerian culture had been determined, and there are indications that its high point had already been reached and decline had set in. The continuity of the civilization of the Early Dynastic age with the earlier period is shown by the persistence of styles in pottery and cylinder-seal manufacturing and the ongoing function of the scribal schools. New departures in government are indicated by the establishment of the institution of kingship and the erection of palaces later in Early Dynastic times (at Kish, Mari, and possibly Eridu). Increased warfare among city-states is attested by the appearance of city walls. While the Sumerians were dominant during this period, at least in the southern area, there is evidence that suggests a strong Semitic influence in northern Babylonia (in the vicinity of Kish and Shuruppak [modern Fara]).<sup>23</sup> As far back as evidence allows one to trace the presence of Semites alongside Sumerians in Mesopotamia, it seems that the military conflicts that occurred between them were not motivated primarily by ethnic differences, but by other factors.<sup>24</sup>

The Early Dynastic period is usually divided into three parts: Early Dynastic I (2900–2750), Early Dynastic II (2750–2600), and Early Dynastic III (subdivided into IIIA [2600–2500] and IIIB [2500–2335]). Textual evidence for centers of political influence during the early phases of the Early Dynastic age comes primarily from the Sumerian King List, which contains a listing of political centers and rulers with incredibly long reigns, followed by a reference to the flood, and then a resumption of political centers and their successive kings, written in a different style, with lengths of reigns that decrease until they are realistic by our standards. In addition to the inflated reigns of earlier kings, the king list pictures a unified Sumer and Akkad with one ruler following another, a picture that is not historical. Even more significant for the use of this text for historical reconstruction is the question

22. Hallo and van Dijk, *Exaltation of Inanna*, 48–49, 60–61.

23. Robert D. Biggs, "Semitic Names in the Fara Period," *Orientalia* 36 (1967): 55–66.

24. Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Assumed Conflict between the Sumerians and Semites in Early Mesopotamian History," in *Toward the Image of Tamimuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran, *Harvard Semitic Series* 21 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 187–92 (reprinted from *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59 [1939]: 485–95).

of its literary genre and especially its purpose.<sup>25</sup> It is a literary text and not a historical one—but, then, neither is any Sumerian text, at least in any sense in which we would use the term. Yet none of these qualifications amounts to saying that the individuals named in the text were not historical persons who did, in fact, occupy a position of authority in their given cities. The opposite can be demonstrated in some cases, apart from the king list. Nevertheless, the Early Dynastic centers of authority and individual rulers known primarily from the Sumerian King List must be viewed with the understanding that the boundary between literary fiction and historical reality is ambiguous.

The first seat of Mesopotamian kingship after the flood was at Kish according to the king list, which may be reflected in the usage of the title “King of Kish” by later Mesopotamian monarchs. Eana, an early king of Kish (many feel the earliest, though he does not occupy the first position in the king list), is described as “the one who consolidated all lands,”<sup>26</sup> seemingly an allusion to a unifying of the country under his rule. He is also spoken of as “the one who to heaven ascended,”<sup>27</sup> a reference to the myth, known from Akkadian sources, of Eana’s flight to heaven with the aid of an eagle to obtain a plant that would remedy his childlessness. The ending of the myth is lost.<sup>28</sup> A later successor of Eana in the king list, Enmebaragesi, is named in two inscriptions that confirm the historicity of his reign.

The city succeeding Kish as the center of power was Uruk, to the south. The second ruler in the First Dynasty of Uruk, Enmerkar, is said in the king list to have built Uruk. Since the capital of his father, the founder of the dynasty, is said to have been located in Eanna, the temple of Inanna, this could suggest a site with a holy place that was later expanded into an urban center, though other interpretations are possible. Enmerkar is the first of four successive kings who are celebrated in later heroic literature. In several tales he is found in conflict with the ruler of Aratta (a power far to the east), emerging victorious and establishing a trade relationship whereby he provides for the needs of his people. Lugalbanda, Enmerkar’s successor, is a brave and swift messenger who assists Enmerkar in confrontations with Aratta and also negotiates his own adventures.

25. Piotr Michalowski, “History as Charter: Some Observations on the Sumerian King List,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983): 237–48.

26. Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, Assyriological Studies 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 81 (2:18).

27. *Ibid.* (2:16–17).

28. Translations of texts referred to in the essay, when such are not cited, can be located through the list of suggested readings appended to this essay, in many cases most conveniently in the volumes by Jacobsen (*Harps*), Kramer (*Sumerians*), and Pritchard (*ANET*).

The next king of Uruk, Dumuzi (Babylonian Tammuz), is elevated to the level of deity as he becomes the husband of the goddess Inanna, their love, courtship, and marriage being extolled in the literature. Their fortunes turn, however, when Inanna is put to death upon her visit to the underworld. Allowed to return and find a substitute, she finally comes upon her husband Dumuzi, who is not lamenting for her. Enraged, she designates him; and, after twice eluding his captors, he is taken off in her place. Alternately, in another myth, Dumuzi is killed by outsiders upon whom Inanna takes revenge. The Dumuzi/Tammuz cult was practiced widely and long throughout the ancient Near East. It is referred to in the Bible in Ezekiel 8:14.

The best known of the kings of the First Dynasty of Uruk was Gilgamesh (originally Bilgamesh in Sumerian), whose exploits were rehearsed in several literary compositions. In “Gilgamesh and Agga,” Gilgamesh and his servant Enkidu, together with the army of Uruk, face a siege against their city by the forces of Kish, led by Agga (or Akka), their king. Uruk triumphs as Agga is captured in the midst of his army by a successful sortie led by Enkidu.<sup>29</sup> Gilgamesh, apparently in response to an earlier kindness of Agga, then releases Agga to return to his own city. “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” tells of Gilgamesh (together with Enkidu, seven spirits appointed by Utu, and fifty chosen men) setting out to the Cedar Forest to establish his enduring fame. Upon arriving after a dangerous journey, Gilgamesh immediately cuts down a cedar, which wakes the monster Huwawa, guardian of the forest. The latter dons his radiance and goes forth to momentarily overwhelm Gilgamesh. Being restored, Gilgamesh tricks Huwawa into giving up his protective auras by a ruse (which varies among the versions of the story). Gilgamesh then pities the creature and would spare him, but Enkidu is opposed and slays Huwawa, an action that incurs Enlil’s disapproval.

Other Sumerian stories of Gilgamesh include the following. The poorly preserved “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven” tells how the Bull of Heaven is sent by Inanna against Uruk after she obtains permission to do so from An by threatening to appeal to the other gods if he refuses. “The Death of Gilgamesh” relates Enlil’s address to Gilgamesh to the effect that he is not destined for immortality (though he has been granted dominion and heroism); it then tells of Gilgamesh’s death, lists Gilgamesh’s family and servants, and recounts how Gilgamesh made offerings to the gods for them. “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld” tells of Inanna bringing a *huluppu* tree to her city and planting it. After it was taken over by three creatures whom she could

29. Jacob Klein, “The Capture of Agga by Gilgameš (GA 81 and 99),” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983): 201–4, amplifying the interpretation of Jacobsen, “Early Political Development,” 381–82 n. 55.

not deal with, Gilgamesh delivered the tree back to her and then had two implements (*pukku* and *mekkû*) made for himself from it. With these he in some way (how is not clear) oppressed the people of Uruk. When the implements fell into the netherworld, Gilgamesh was unable to retrieve them; so Enkidu volunteered to do so. Because he failed to heed Gilgamesh's warnings, he was held fast. Gilgamesh obtained help from Enki and (through Enki) from Utu, so that Enkidu's spirit was permitted to return and converse with Gilgamesh. Enkidu described the netherworld as he had experienced it.

Stories of Gilgamesh are best known from an Akkadian version of twelve tablets with copies dating to the seventh century.<sup>30</sup> The final half of the last Sumerian story mentioned above was the direct source of the twelfth tablet of this Akkadian version, which is a literal translation of the Sumerian that fits only awkwardly with the eleven tablets that precede it in the Akkadian. Those eleven tablets constitute an integrated composition of considerable literary artistry, which has been shown to derive from a creative development of earlier sources tracing back, in part, to some of the Sumerian tales outlined above.<sup>31</sup>

Probably the best known section of the Akkadian epic, because of its similarity to the biblical account in Genesis 6-9, is the flood story in the eleventh tablet. The flood story can be traced back to Sumerian through a fragmentary tablet only one-third of which has been preserved.<sup>32</sup> In this Sumerian text, Gilgamesh is not mentioned, suggesting that the flood story was later combined with the Gilgamesh traditions. The text tells of the creation of humans and animals, the institution of kingship in five antediluvian cities under the care of the tutelary deities, the decision of the divine council to send the flood, communication about the flood to the man Ziusudra, the coming of the flood, Ziusudra's survival in a boat, his offering of sacrifice, and his endowment with eternal life and settlement in the land of Dilmun.<sup>33</sup>

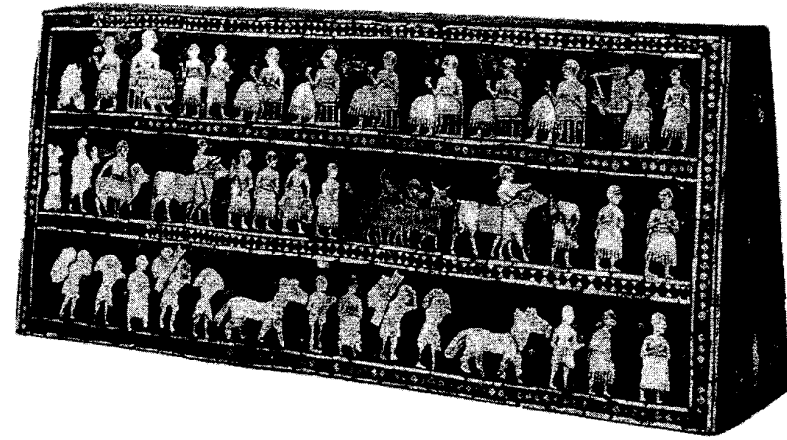
In the king list Uruk was succeeded by Ur, whose kings, unlike those of Uruk and Etana of Kish, are not known from later literary works. The first

30. A recent, accessible translation of the first eleven tablets of this version is Maureen G. Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

31. Samuel N. Kramer, "The Epic of Gilgamesh and Its Sumerian Sources: A Study in Literary Evolution," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 64 (1944): 7-23, 83; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

32. Samuel N. Kramer, "The Sumerian Deluge Myth: Reviewed and Revised," *Anatolian Studies* 33 (1983): 115-21, interacting extensively with Miguel Civil, "The Sumerian Flood Story," in Wilfred G. Lambert and Alan R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 138-45, 167-72; and Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 513-29.

33. Usually identified with the island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, though this is disputed for the period before the late third millennium; Theresa Howard-Carter, "The Tangible Evidence for the Earliest Dilmun," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 33 (1981): 210-23.



"Peace" panel of the sounding box of a harp (the "Standard of Ur"), 2500 b.c. (height: 8"; length: 19")  
*Courtesy of the British Museum*

two, Mesannepada and Annepada, however, have been attested on a marble temple inscription. The names of two other rulers, Akalamdug and Meskalamdug (not known from the Sumerian King List, perhaps because they ruled before Ur gained wide hegemony), have been found in Ur's royal burial ground.

The burial ground, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley, was a remarkable discovery. The finds include a golden replica of a man's hairstyle from King Meskalamdug's grave; the golden head of a bull with eyes, beard, and horn tips made of lapis lazuli attached to the sounding box of a lyre; two male goats standing upright, each with its front legs in a small tree; mosaic inlays of war and celebration scenes in an artifact that has come to be called the "Standard of Ur"; the elaborate headdress of Queen Puabi (earlier read as Shubad); and other magnificent objects.<sup>34</sup> Also stirring, in a gruesome way, is Woolley's discovery of the burial of a retinue of royal servants with the royal family upon the death of their king. Upward of eighty persons were found buried in one chamber. It is uncertain whether this was an authentic Sumerian custom, for it was apparently rare and cannot be attested after this time.

34. Color prints of some of the most noteworthy of these may be found in Peter R. S. Moorey, *Ur "of the Chaldees": A Revised and Updated Edition of Sir Leonard Woolley's Excavations at Ur* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 51-103.

In Early Dynastic III the institution of kingship with dynastic succession was firmly established. Pressure from the Elamites to the east, already reflected in stories of earlier rulers, mounted. Significant for the historian is the increase in contemporary documents that can be relatively well understood and whose contents can be expected to yield more historical information, especially royal inscriptions. The bulk of these documents comes from the city-state of Lagash. In the shifting balance of power, there was a union of Uruk and Ur, which later included Umma, and perhaps an alliance between Kish and Akshak to the north, with Lagash apparently standing alone.<sup>35</sup> The inscriptions repeatedly draw attention to conflict between Lagash and Umma over the territory between them, known as the *guedinna* ("the edge of the plain"), land that was productive for agriculture. The sources indicate that this dispute was arbitrated earlier by Mesalim (often spelled Mesilim), a ruler who bore the title "King of Kish." Rulers of Lagash and Umma entered into the ongoing dispute throughout the remainder of the Early Dynastic age and beyond.

Ur-Nanshe, the founder of the First Dynasty of Lagash, left numerous short inscriptions on stone recounting his temple building and other activities. Eannatum (also spelled Eanatum), his grandson, briefly assumed the title "King of Kish" early in his reign. His best known monument is the "Stele of Vultures," named for the birds of prey that are depicted feasting on his conquered enemies. One side of the sculpture portrays the king and the phalanx of his army, and the other has the king's god, Ningirsu, holding the king's enemies in a net. Eannatum fought the armies of Kish, Akshak, and Mari within his own state of Lagash; thus, his warfare was defensive.

Urukagina<sup>36</sup> followed the last of Ur-Nanshe's dynasty to the rulership of Lagash. The fortunes of Lagash had been in decline since the reign of Eannatum, and it is likely that many social abuses had come in the wake of waning military power. Urukagina moved to counter these abuses and is remembered for his reforms (preserved in two copies). He reversed abuses of royal authority, encroachments on temple lands and personnel, oppression of workers, excessive collection of revenue, mistreatment of the poor and defenseless, and undesirable family practices. All of these reforms he claims he carried out on behalf of Ningirsu, whose prerogatives he was restoring.

The final defeat of Lagash and its ruler, Urukagina, in the Early Dynastic period came at the hands of Lugalzagesi, *ensí* of Umma. Lugalzagesi achieved

further success, to the extent that he proclaimed himself "King of Uruk"<sup>37</sup> and "King of Sumer," identified himself with the chief deities of all of Sumer, and claimed recognition by peoples from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. He expressed imperial aspirations that at least became reality in the following period, though likely not during his reign.

## Kingdom of Akkad

During the next period Semites were politically dominant in Mesopotamia. Their presence is discernible from the earliest documentable times, with greater concentration in the north. Early rulers of Kish were Semitic. Yet in the present period, not only were the rulers Semitic, they installed a network of Semitic authorities under them (though also allowing native rulers to remain); their language was used in official inscriptions alongside Sumerian; and their capital city, Akkad (often spelled Agade, in distinction from the region of Akkad), came to dominate all of Mesopotamia.

The founder of the Dynasty of Akkad was Sargon, also known as Sargon the Great (2334–2279). According to later tradition, he was born in secret and cast adrift on the Euphrates in a reed basket from which he was taken up and reared as a gardener until he was favored by the goddess Ishtar and given a place in the court of King Ur-Zababa of Kish. From this position, he established himself as ruler at a new capital, Akkad, the location of which has not been determined, though it may have been in the vicinity of Babylon. The sequence of his conquests is not clear. Certainly his victory over Lugalzagesi was pivotal. Records entered in Enlil's temple at Nippur and faithfully copied there picture campaigns from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and beyond this to the east and north.

While vigorously pursuing military dominance, Sargon showed respect for Sumerian cultural and religious traditions. For example, he installed his own daughter Enheduanna in the office of high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur. (This practice was subsequently followed by Babylonian rulers to the time of Nabonidus [555–539].) Possessed of extraordinary literary ability, Enheduanna left two collections of hymns that she authored, extolling in one case the goddess Inanna and in the other the temples of Sumer and Akkad. It may be that certain literary features of these hymns reflect a deliberate movement of Sargon carried forth by his daughter to equate Sumerian Inanna and Semitic Ishtar.<sup>38</sup> This syncretism of Sumerian and Semitic traditions was to become characteristic of ancient Mesopotamian civilization to the extent that

35. This follows Jerrold S. Cooper, "Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash-Umma Border Conflict," *Sources from the Ancient Near East 2/1* (1983): 8–9.

36. The earlier reading of this ruler's name, Urukagina, has been revised to Urukagina; but the revision is in dispute. The transcription employed here acknowledges this difference of opinion.

37. Lugalzagesi may have ruled Uruk by virtue of its close ties with Umma, rather than by conquest; Cooper, "Reconstructing History," 34.

38. Hallo and var. Dijk, *Exaltation of Inanna*, 11.



in later times, when the Sumerians had ceased to exist as a distinct people and their language had passed from living usage, the two streams are virtually impossible to separate, so that Assyriologists are accustomed to speaking of the symbiosis of the two.

Sargon's successors had to deal with repeated revolts, which are attested already in the later years of his own reign. The third ruler to follow Sargon, Naram-Sin (2254–2218), was compared to his forebear in greatness. In addition to the titles of Sargon ("King of Akkad," "King of Kish," "King of the Land" [i.e., Sumer]), Naram-Sin styled himself "King of the Four Quarters" (i.e., universal ruler); and then, most significantly, he placed before his name the cuneiform sign for divinity. This practice was continued by a few later rulers in Mesopotamia, but a concept of divine kingship never developed in any full sense of the term, as it did, for example, in Egypt. Nor is its significance well understood. While Naram-Sin campaigned in all directions and could boast of many triumphs, his dominion was an uneasy one. Extensive traditions grew up around his reign, as with Sargon, that treated his success with ambivalence. His successor, Shar-kali-sharri, saw the kingdom of Akkad disintegrating.

After several decades during which general anarchy seems to have prevailed, the final destruction came in the reign of Naram-Sin according to a Sumerian composition known as the "Curse of Akkad." This text describes the earlier favor of Enlil and the prosperity of Akkad, and then sacrilege on the part of Naram-Sin in invading Nippur and desecrating Enlil's sanctuary, the Ekur. In his rage Enlil is said to have brought in the foreign Gutians as his instrument of judgment. (In actual fact, in addition to the Gutian invasion, internal disruption and the opposition of the Elamites, Hurrians, and Lullubi were also involved in the fall of Akkad.) The devastation the Gutians effected is portrayed in the "Curse of Akkad." In order to calm Enlil, eight of the leading deities pronounced a curse on Akkad, which was immediately carried out. In the worldview of the ancient Mesopotamian, the events of history were understood to be a playing out on the human level of the decisions made on the divine plane. Noteworthy in this composition is the attribution of the fall of Akkad to the act of Naram-Sin. The direct linking of human action with divine action as cause and consequence is not without parallel in Mesopotamian literature, especially later in the first millennium; but such a connection is not typical earlier, for example, in the Sumerian King List, in city laments (to be discussed below), or in Ur III royal correspondence.<sup>39</sup> There, divine action, as when gods or goddesses pronounce destruction, appears to be unre-

39. Jerrold S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 29–30.

lated to human responsibility and arbitrary, perhaps inevitable.<sup>40</sup>

The Gutians continued to make periodic raids into Mesopotamia from the Zagros Mountains for about half a century and exerted their power primarily in northern Babylonia. Continuity with the Sumerian past was maintained in the south, for example, in the Lagash region, where a succession of governors (*ensí*) retained autonomy.<sup>41</sup> The best known of these is Gudea, who engaged in many building activities at home and far-reaching foreign trade. Gudea's inscriptions include two large clay cylinders that have preserved the most extensive Sumerian literary composition recovered to date, containing close to fourteen hundred lines. The text commemorates Gudea's rebuilding of the Eninnu temple of Ningirsu at Girsu, which was at that time the capital of the city-state of La-

40. Cf. n. 17 above for Jacobsen's observation of the notion of inevitability in a mythological text.

41. It is generally believed that these rulers, the Second Dynasty of Lagash, were defeated and their dynasty brought to an end by the new Third Dynasty of Ur, which will be discussed shortly. There is evidence, however, that suggests that two of these governors, Gudea and Nammahni (also spelled Nammahani and Namhani), were contemporaries of the first king of the new Ur Dynasty, Ur-Nammu, indicating that Lagash lost its independence only during Ur-Nammu's reign; Piotr Steinkeller, "The Date of Gudea and His Dynasty," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 40 (1988): 47–53.



Statue of Gudea, ca. 2150 B.C. (height: 17.25")  
 Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1959

gash.<sup>42</sup> Having been commissioned by Ningirsu in two dreams to build his temple, Gudea goes about his task carefully: he unites his people, obtains necessary materials and workers, completes the temple, and introduces the god and his consort to their new home.

The expulsion of the Gutians was accomplished by Uruhegal of Uruk. Their defeat opened the way for the resumption of Sumerian rule. It was not Uruhegal or his city-state of Uruk that was to exercise this rule, however. After seven years Uruhegal was overcome by one of his subordinates, Ur-Nammu (sometimes spelled Ur-Namma) of Ur.

### Ur III Dynasty

The dominance of the city-state of Ur under the dynasty (2112–2004) founded by Ur-Nammu was a period of Sumerian renaissance. Ur's dominion encompassed southern and central Mesopotamia as far north as Sippar, extended further northward along the Tigris to a point slightly beyond Ashur and eastward into Elam (apparently at one point well beyond the capital of Susa), and included vassal states even further removed whose degree of dependence varied from one reign to another.<sup>43</sup> The kingdom was administered from Ur and, secondarily, from Uruk and Nippur. A highly organized bureaucracy made for a tight and effective administration that produced prosperity and security throughout a good two-thirds of the century-long reign of the dynasty. Building programs were extensive, and arts, literature, and education flourished.

The kingship of Ur-Nammu was acknowledged by the priesthood of Enlil at Nippur, and he took the new title of "King of Sumer and Akkad," indicating his rule over southern and central Mesopotamia as far as the Lower Diyala region. His coronation was celebrated in a literary genre, the royal hymn, which extolled the choice of the king by the gods.

Ur-Nammu has been credited with a collection of laws, but the author may have been his son Shulgi.<sup>44</sup> Several collections such as this have been

42. Earlier scholarship identified Tello as Lagash (which is modern al-Hiba); rather, Girsu is to be identified with the site of Tello; see Vaughn E. Crawford, "Lagash," *Iraq* 36 (1974): 29–35.

43. Piotr Steinkeller, "The Administrative and Economic Organization of the Ur III State: The Core and the Periphery," in *The Organization of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. McGuire Gibson and Robert D. Biggs, 2d ed., Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 46 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1991), 30–41.

44. Johannes J. A. van Dijk, *apud* Fatma Yildiz, "A Tablet of Codex Ur-Nammu from Sippar," *Orientalia* 50 (1981): 93–94 n. 20a; Samuel N. Kramer, "The Ur-Nammu Law Code: Who Was Its Author?" *Orientalia* 52 (1983): 453–56; Steinkeller, "Administrative and Economic Organization," 21 n. 10.

recovered from Mesopotamia. They are usually called "codes," though they do not appear to have been documents that were referred to in the courts while actual cases were being decided. They were more likely what we would call scientific treatises on the law, which originated in the schools.<sup>45</sup> This is the earliest of these collections, of which the most famous is that of Hammurabi (often spelled Hammurabi) of Babylon. The "Ur-Nammu" laws, preserved only in small part, deal with situations similar to those of later times, but differ in that they impose financial penalties for bodily harm against other people, in contrast to death or mutilation comparable to the crime (the "eye for an eye" principle of talion) known from later Semitic collections.

Ur-Nammu's reign was filled with building activities. Royal residences, wharves, irrigation works, and temples that had fallen into disrepair under the Gutian domination were renewed. It was the prerogative of the king to rebuild the temples of the land, and this would customarily be done on the site of the previous temple complex, producing a layered structure as destruction levels were built upon. By the reign of Ur-Nammu, if not before (earlier evidence is lacking), renovation levels were deliberately constructed in this manner; and the ziggurat was born, a layered tower with a shrine presumed to have been on the top level. The ziggurat of the temple complex of Nanna at Ur is the best preserved, but Ur-Nammu also constructed ziggurats at Nippur, Uruk, Eridu, and other cities.

The reign of Ur-Nammu's son Shulgi was an illustrious one. That there were military campaigns is shown by year-date formulas,<sup>46</sup> and it appears that these were largely successful. Trade routes were reopened, and trade and industry prospered; so did literature and the scribal schools. Although most copies of Sumerian literature come from the later Old Babylonian period, it is clear that much of it was created at this time. The schools of Nippur and Ur are accredited to Shulgi, and the king claimed to have been trained as a scribe, a rare boast even for a Mesopotamian king. Shulgi resumed the title "King of the Four Quarters" alongside his father's "King of Sumer and

45. Fritz R. Kraus, "Ein zentrales Problem des altmesopotamischen Rechtes: Was ist der Codex Hammu-rabi?" *Genava* 8 (1960): 283–96; Jean Bottéro, "Le 'Code' de Hammurabi," *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa* 12 (1982): 409–44 (now available in English as "The 'Code' of Hammurabi," in *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 156–84); Raymond Westbrook, "Cuneiform Law Codes and the Origins of Legislation," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 79 (1989): 200–222.

46. In Sumer from the Akkad period through the Old Babylonian period, years, instead of being numbered as in our modern designations, derived their names from noteworthy events that took place in the preceding years, a practice that Sumerologists refer to as "year-date formula" or "year-name."

Akkad” and had himself treated as divine, like Naram-Sin. Shrines were established for him, and more royal hymns were written in his honor than for any other Mesopotamian monarch.

Two of Shulgi’s sons, Amar-Sin and Shu-Sin, succeeded him to the throne; and both were deified. Little is known of Amar-Sin’s reign; he died of a “shoe-bite,” presumably a foot disease. A people who had been mentioned in earlier periods appear during the reign of Shu-Sin as a serious threat. They are the Semites from west of the Euphrates, known generally as the Amorites (*Martu* in Sumerian, *Amurru* in Akkadian). Shu-Sin’s inscriptions tell of his building an extensive wall somewhere between Ur and Mari, “which keeps away the Tidnum” (one of the Amorite tribes). His efforts were less than effective, so much so that his successor, Ibbi-Sin, was forced to build walls and fortifications around even the districts of Ur and Nippur. Gradually one after another of Ur’s provinces withdrew their loyalty, and the kingdom was lost. It was an army from the east, from Elam and Shimashki,<sup>47</sup> that sacked Ur and led Ibbi-Sin away as a captive.

### Isin-Larsa Period

The fall of the Ur III kingdom was not yet the end of Sumerian dominance, at least in the south; but it was the beginning of the end. With the fall of Ur, northern and central Mesopotamia were fragmented into competing kingdoms. In the south, where Sumerian culture was most deeply entrenched, a unity of sorts was maintained for about the next century by the city of Isin. Its first king, Ishbi-Erra (often spelled Ishbi-Irra) from Mari, had been a subordinate of Ibbi-Sin until he proclaimed himself ruler of Isin. Gaining control of Nippur, Uruk, Eridu, and, later in his reign, Ur itself, Ishbi-Erra took over the administrative system of Ur. He and his successors employed the Sumerian language in their official correspondence, though they themselves were Semites. Some of the Sumerian literature composed during this period has been recovered in excavations at Nippur, though there was undoubtedly much more than has been retrieved.

There are several compositions that can be classified as “city laments” that come from this period. One of these, the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur,” most clearly appears to have been written to legitimize the

47. The allies of the Elamites in the overthrow of Ur are generally referred to in the literature as the “Su people” (which has been understood in several different ways). For their identification as the people of Shimashki (a state that arose in southwestern Iran about the time of the Ur III Dynasty), see Piotr Steinkeller, “On the Identity of the Toponym LÚ.SU(.A),” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988): 197–202.

Isin Dynasty by establishing its continuity with the Ur III kings.<sup>48</sup> Another that also has the city of Ur as its subject and likely had the same general purpose is the “Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur.” It depicts devastation overtaking the cities of Sumer, including Ur itself; the goddess Ningal (consort of Nanna) poignantly lamenting her inability to turn An, Enlil, and the divine council from their decree of destruction; the judgment falling like a mighty storm; Ur lying in ruins in the aftermath; Ningal bewailing her loss; and an appeal to Ningal and Nanna to return to their city and let it be rebuilt. Two other city laments can be precisely dated during the First Isin Dynasty, for they both contain a reference to a later ruler of that dynasty, Ishme-Dagan. These are the “Uruk Lament” and the “Nippur Lament.”<sup>49</sup> The “Eridu Lament” may also date to the same reign, though this is not demonstrable.<sup>50</sup> Each of the city laments concludes with a prayer for the return of the city deity or deities and, thus, for restored favor on the city. Since they all probably date to the First Isin Dynasty, it would seem that they all had the same underlying purpose. As the restoration of the cities of Sumer was called for and the deities of these cities invoked, the rulers of the city of Isin who were promoting this restoration would be affirmed as the legitimate successors to kingship over Sumer.

Under Ishme-Dagan, the fourth ruler in the Dynasty of Ishbi-Erra, there appear again the efforts of the king to abolish social grievances, as with Urukagina of Lagash in earlier times. That this should be necessary may speak of growing unrest in the kingdom of Isin; this is supported by references in texts from the reign of Ishme-Dagan to the raids of the Amorites and to a defeat of that king at the gates of Kish.

Lipit-Ishtar (sometimes spelled Lipit-Eshtar), son of Ishme-Dagan and last member of the Dynasty of Ishbi-Erra, left a collection of laws set between a prologue and an epilogue, a pattern seen in the later and better known laws of Hammurapi. Lipit-Ishtar is presented in the prologue as “the wise shepherd” (a common figure for Mesopotamian kings) who is commissioned “to establish justice in the land” (a phrase that may refer to debt and

48. Piotr Michalowski, *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 1 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 6–8; idem, “History as Charter,” 242.

49. M. W. Green, “The Uruk Lament,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984): 275–76 (12:9, 14); an edition of the “Nippur Lament” is being prepared by H. L. J. Vanstiphout. I know of the mention of Ishme-Dagan in the latter through Michalowski, *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*, 6.

50. M. W. Green, “The Eridu Lament,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 30 (1978): 127–67. Other, more fragmentary compositions may also belong to this category; but these are the main extant city laments.

nulment). As with the earlier laws of Ur-Nammu, financial penalties are imposed for damages.

The measure of centralization in the Sumerian south that Isin had been able to maintain ended when Gungunum, an Amorite ruler of Larsa, took control of Ur and then Uruk. Later, Nippur, which had passed back and forth between Isin and Larsa, came under the control of Larsa; and finally Isin itself fell to Rim-Sin, the third of a series of Elamite rulers and the last king of Larsa. Rim-Sin attached great importance to the event, dating documents from the last thirty years of his reign by it. It did not prove to be so significant, however. The end of Isin's dominance, actually signaled by the transfer of Ur to Larsa under Gungunum, inaugurated a period of fragmentation among competing cities that would end only with the ascendancy of Babylon under Hammurapi (1792–1750).

### Sumer's Legacy

Although the Sumerians no longer existed as a distinct political entity after the conquest of Mesopotamia by Hammurapi of Babylon, their influence lived on. The vast bulk of literature composed in Sumerian that has been excavated so far derives from the Old Babylonian period. The Sumerian language, although it died out as a living language at least by this time, if not earlier, continued in use as a religious and literary language for more than a millennium. The civilization of the Semites who succeeded the Sumerians as the rulers of Mesopotamia was indelibly marked by that which was Sumerian. As it is put in an analysis of the Semitic side of ancient Mesopotamia: "The Sumerians left their imprint in varying degrees on all things Mesopotamian."<sup>51</sup>

In the introduction to this essay, I listed some of the specific items in world civilization that probably derive from Sumerian origins. Yet such a listing can in no way adequately portray the debt of later civilizations to the Sumerians, for "to reckon only with those Mesopotamian relics that have survived up to now is like counting the pieces of furniture inherited from remote ancestors, forgetting that the ancestors have shaped the lives of our forefathers and, indirectly, our own life."<sup>52</sup>

The Western world owes a debt to the Sumerians that has not yet been calculated. The classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, out of which Western civilization sprang most directly, were engaged in cultural interaction with the ancient Near East from their beginnings; and all of the ancient Near East was

51. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 4.

52. Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 3d ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1992), 425.

influenced, in varying degrees, by the Sumerians.<sup>53</sup> Although the Sumerians were conquered by the Semites, in a deeper sense, "the conquered conquered the conquerors," for the Babylonians "took over Sumerian culture and civilization lock, stock, and barrel," "exercised no little influence on their less cultured neighbors," and "as much as the Sumerians themselves, helped to plant the Sumerian cultural seed everywhere in the ancient Near East."<sup>54</sup>

One line for the influence of the Sumerians on the West is through the Bible, which was produced in the ancient Near East and which has had such a formative role in the development of Western civilization. In a time, at least in the United States, when emphasis is being placed on multiculturalism, that is, on the varied sources of an increasingly pluralistic society, it is urgent, for the sake of an informed historical perspective, that the origins of Western civilization be traced backward beyond Greece and Rome, where the search usually ends, to the ancient Near East and, in this process, that the Sumerians be given their due.<sup>55</sup>

### Recommended Reading

For the student who wants to read more about the Sumerians, I recommend the following, limited to sources in English. The liveliest and most current research most often appears in technical journals, and the following books (especially Hallo, Oppenheim, Postgate, and Roux) cite relevant journals up to the time of their writing. I have arranged the titles in a preferred order of reading for the ambitious student who will undertake them all, and I have annotated them for the student who must be selective.

Hallo, William W., and William K. Simpson. *The Ancient Near East: A History*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. One of the two best books to begin with. Hallo's part through page 97 treats the Sumerians.

Roux, Georges. *Ancient Iraq*. 3d edition. Baltimore: Penguin, 1992. One of the two best books to begin with. Chapters 5–11 are especially relevant for the Sumerians.

Bottéro, Jean, Elena Cassin, and Jean Vercoutter (eds.). *The Near East: The Early Civilizations*. Translated by R. F. Tannenbaum. New York: Dela-

53. Because of this influence, even though the Sumerians are not mentioned explicitly in the Hebrew Bible, the reference from Isa. 51:1, cited at the beginning of this essay, can be read as a call to ponder the legacy of ancient Sumer.

54. Kramer, *Sumerians*, 288–89.

55. If this is done well, I believe that it will result in an appreciation of aspects of the Bible that have been lost to our Western perspective and a discovery of continuities that we share with peoples of the East.

- corte, 1967. The chapters on Mesopotamia by Falkenstein, Edzard, and Bottéro are a sensitively written history.
- Kramer, Samuel N. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963. A classic study.
- Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. An empathetic synthesis of Mesopotamian religion.
- Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Harps That Once . . . : Sumerian Poetry in Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. A nuanced rendering of a large selection of Sumerian literary texts.
- Pritchard, James B. (ed.). *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3d edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. Though the Sumerian selections are limited, they include a wide sampling of the kinds of texts available.
- Saggs, Harry W. F. *The Greatness That Was Babylon: A Survey of the Ancient Civilization of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley*. 2d edition. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1988. Helpful topical organization.
- Jones, Tom B. (ed.). *The Sumerian Problem*. Major Issues in History. New York: Wiley, 1969. Offers a feel for the struggle that accompanied the resurrection of the Sumerians to historical study.
- Lloyd, Seton. *Foundations in the Dust: The Story of Mesopotamian Exploration*. Revised edition. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1980. An interesting account of archeological work in Mesopotamia.
- Nissen, Hans J. *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000–2000 B.C.* Translated by Elizabeth Lutzeier and Kenneth J. Northcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. A history based primarily on archeological data.
- Kramer, Samuel N. *In the World of Sumer: An Autobiography*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986. The life story of one of the leading Sumerologists.
- Oppenheim, A. Leo. *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Revised edition completed by Erica Reiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. Although dealing only with the Semites, it is recommended for study of the Sumerians because of the author's grasp of Mesopotamian cultural history.
- Postgate, J. Nicholas. *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*. London: Routledge, 1992. Although it appeared after this essay had been submitted and, thus, could not be cited, this work is mandatory for all who study the Sumerians. I have placed it last so that the reader who works through the entire corpus will have the benefit of that wider exposure when undertaking it, though it could be read earlier and should not be omitted from any partial selection.

# Babylonians

Bill T. Arnold

*Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, . . . Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army.*

—2 Kings 24:20–25:1

The Babylonians were a notable people during the Old Testament period for two reasons. First, from a purely historical perspective, they were God's instrument of destruction against Jerusalem late in the story of his people. Second and perhaps more importantly, they transmitted and in some cases even originated most of the cultural and religious foundations for the Old Testament world. They and their predecessors the Sumerians established the philosophical and social infrastructure for Israel's neighbors. So, in addition to the historical contacts between the Babylonians and Israelites, it is important to understand the Babylonian contributions to Old Testament culture and society.

## Name and Origin

The earliest form of the name "Babylon" appears to have been *Babil*, the origin and meaning of which are lost to antiquity. The word may have been of Sumerian origin, since the city's existence may be traced to just before the Akkadian Empire (2334–2193).<sup>1</sup> The first Akkadian form of the name,

1. Potsherds have been reported from the surface of the site from the latter part of the Early Dynastic period; see McGuire Gibson, *The City and Area of Kish* (Miami: Field Research, 1972), 37 n. 49; and André Parrot, *Babylon and the Old Testament*, trans. B. E. Hooke (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), 69. For the most part excavations have extended only to the Neo-Babylonian levels. It has not been possible to do much with deeper and earlier strata, due to the problem of ground water. The dates in this paper follow John A. Brinkman, "Mesopotamian Chronology of the Historical Period," in A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*: