

# The Nature and Importance of Sumerian City States

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## Introduction

Civilisation had existed in the lowlands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from around 5000 BCE, but as the fourth millennium progressed the structure of self-sufficient villages changed, and the population shifted into larger settlements with bigger and more enduring architectural constructions. By 3000 BCE the settlements had become established city-states, providing their inhabitants with economic organisation, irrigation and political leadership. While it was once assumed that leadership came from a clearly defined combination of temples, palaces and assemblies, it is now acknowledged that these three institutions shared responsibility in a more fluid way, without clear delineations of power. The features of these early city-states included pioneering developments in writing, law and education; the use of walls and weapons for protection; and the production of art in the form of pottery, decoration, jewellery, and figural art. The Sumerian city-state was remarkable for its highly developed political and economic management, and the relative uniformity of culture throughout the region. While archaeologists such as Wooley and Moorey have excavated invaluable material evidence, the extant evidence from this period is fragmentary. No cities have been excavated in their entirety.<sup>1</sup> Much of the evidence comes from the two main cities of Uruk and Ur, but this evidence is largely transactional, with some one-dimensional historical accounts.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the evidence does not provide a full picture of the personal lives or human experiences of these first city dwellers.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: society and economy at the dawn of history*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 81.

<sup>2</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, 'A New Look at the Structure of Mesopotamian Society,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (1967), 3.

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## The importance of city-states

One way to judge the importance of the Sumerian city-states is by reference to their proliferation and population. There were probably no more than thirteen cities in the region in the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900-2300 BCE).<sup>3</sup> This may indicate that cities were not important, however, by the later part of the Uruk period (c. 4000-3100 BCE) at least forty per cent of the population lived in cities, and this number was possibly closer to seventy per cent.<sup>4</sup> This figure rose by ten per cent by the Early Dynastic period, indicating that by this time cities already hosted a majority of the Sumerian population.<sup>5</sup> The fact that most people lived in cities supports the notion that city-states were the most important unit of Sumerian civilisation.

The importance of the Sumerian city-states is also evidenced by the role they played in the lives of their ancient dwellers. Firstly, city-states played an essential organisational role in agriculture and economics. By the end of the fourth millennium BCE, the varying geography and environment of the Sumerian lowlands had created unequal distribution of subsistence resources.<sup>6</sup> This meant that food producers began to specialise, focusing on the foodstuffs best suited to their local environment. With specialisation came trade, and quickly thereafter the need for a centralised organisation to control production and redistribution.<sup>7</sup> Baines and Yoffee describe this phenomenon:

...the various aspects of rivalling and cooperating groups, both occupationally specialized and socially distinct; the complex routes of circulation of goods, services, and information from both local and long-distance ventures; and conflict with neighbouring cities and regions all built up a head of sociopolitical and ideological steam manifested in the emergence of new leaders, new forms and symbols of centralised authority, and new demographic shift.<sup>8</sup>

This process of moving from agricultural specialisation to trade and ultimately new forms of social organisation in the form of cities is consistent with Jacobs' model of city development.<sup>9</sup> That model outlines the process whereby trade creates a loop of increasing diversity and job opportunities, and this draws population away from rural settlements and into cities.<sup>10</sup> However, it has been argued that trade was not significant in this area until late in the Uruk period, well after the city-states started to develop.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, other reasons need to be explored to explain the primacy of the city-state as a social and political unit.

The organisation of irrigation appears as another key element in the importance of the Sumerian city-state. It should be understood in this context that the city-state encompassed the agricultural

3 Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1966), 121.

4 While Adams makes a conservative estimate, Pollock suggests that 69-77 per cent is the best estimate. Guillermo Algaze, 'Initial Social Complexity in Southwestern Asia: The Mesopotamian Advantage,' *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (2001), 209.

5 *Ibid.*, 210.

6 Frank Hole, 'Investigating the Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' *Science*, Vol. 153, No. 3736, (1966), 608.

7 *Ibid.*

8 John Baines and Norman Yoffee, 'Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' in Gary Feinman and Joyce Marcus (eds), *Archaic States*, (New York: School of American Research Press, 1988), 219.

9 Algaze, 'Initial Social Complexity,' 205.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Seton Lloyd, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia from the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 218.

areas outside the walls of the city, and the growth of city-states involved ruralisation as well as urbanisation.<sup>12</sup> Thus water was provided for drinking, cooking, cleaning, industry, and agricultural purposes. Mesopotamia has a dry climate, and the flooding of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers did not coordinate well with the growing seasons for crops.<sup>13</sup> These environmental factors necessitated the building of irrigation systems, and cities became important in the provision of such facilities.<sup>14</sup> Wittfogel noted in *Oriental Despotism* that the need for irrigation gives rise to rulers who control the irrigation, and that analysis would appear to explain the importance of the city-state in ancient Sumeria.<sup>15</sup> However, this analysis has been questioned on the basis that there was no large-scale irrigation in Mesopotamia at the time when the first cities appeared.<sup>16</sup> Even if this is the case, the importance of water provision in Sumerian cities is clear from the archaeological evidence of canals running through the cities and beyond.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to providing a hub for trade, and the organisational structures for irrigation, Sumerian city-states provided other important socio-political benefits. Defence was a key feature in this regard. Cities provided walls and kings to protect the populace.<sup>18</sup> This was attractive at a time when there was no organised military force and when specialisation between competing regions meant warfare was a common occurrence.<sup>19</sup> Physical evidence for this warfare is found in weaponry, a common feature of these cities.<sup>20</sup> Cities became nodal points for people to find physical and military protection from their neighbours.<sup>21</sup> This safety inevitably made the Sumerian city-state an important social unit.

The cultural benefits of living in a city contributed to the importance of these nascent city-states. Early inhabitants moved from the countryside to enjoy the benefits of seasonal leisure.<sup>22</sup> City life, predicated as it was on the division of labour, offered opportunities for rest, which an agricultural existence could not. Additionally, people were attracted by the social opportunities which are afforded by a larger community; a gregariousness which was not present in the pre-existing isolation of small rural communities.<sup>23</sup> The diversity of population and opportunities provided by cities played a large role in making city-states the primary social unit of the Sumerian period.<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that although the city-state was the primary social and political unit of Sumerian civilisation, it was not ideally suited to that position. The irregularity of agriculture

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12 Norman Yoffee, 'Political Economy in Early Mesopotamian States,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, (1985), 284.

13 Charles Gates, *Ancient Cities: the archaeology of urban life in the ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (London: Routledge, 2011), 32.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Wittfogel in Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 606-607.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 607.

17 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 34.

18 Thorkild Jacobsen, 'Ancient Mesopotamian Religion: The Central Concerns,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 1, No. 6, (1963), 479.

19 John Snyder, 'The Ancient City State: Some Reasons for its Durability,' *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 8, (1959), 365.

20 Richard Sterba, 'The Organization and Management of the Temple Corporations in Ancient Mesopotamia,' *The Academy Management Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (1976), 20.

21 Yoffee, 'Political Economy,' 284.

22 Max Mallowan, *Early Mesopotamia and Iran*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 15.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 110.

in this region, and the unreliability of the rains meant that subsistence was precarious. While cities were able to provide for artificial irrigation, there remained a pervading anxiety.<sup>25</sup> Modern scholarship suggests that in fact small villages were better suited to the environmental challenges, since small villages were able to move to new sites as environmental conditions changed.<sup>26</sup> Such vicissitudes may in fact have led to the creation of city-states at the end of the fourth millennium BCE. Agricultural evidence points to a crisis during that time, which led to widespread abandonment of rural settlements.<sup>27</sup> The evidence includes high salination levels in the soil, weeds in the corn, evidence of animal husbandry replacing crops, and long-distance trade.<sup>28</sup> With this demographic shift came social upheaval; those who had access to other sources of wealth were able to acquire land, and thus became the leaders of the new communities.<sup>29</sup>

Religion also played an important role in establishing the importance of city-states. If an agricultural crisis was the impetus for widespread abandonment of rural settlements, then the existence of temples would have drawn people to certain sites and ultimately led to the growth of cities in those places.<sup>30</sup> Farmers leaving their homes under duress were perhaps looking for spiritual comfort and a god's protection in difficult times. Alternatively, it is possible that the markets attached to temple sites were an attraction to these early migrants.<sup>31</sup> In either case, temples were a significant feature of Sumerian city-states and played a large part in their importance in Sumerian civilisation.

## Features of Sumerian City-States

### City Layout

Space in Sumerian city-states was not formally structured or delineated, but excavations reveal that cities did include a range of differentiated zones, occupied by different family or professional groups, or related to different industries or functions.<sup>32</sup> Outside the walls was the rural area belonging to that city.<sup>33</sup> Within the walls, an area of public buildings would have been set apart from the business area, which was most likely near the harbour or river.<sup>34</sup> Although Gates identifies separate residential and industrial areas, there is evidence that some cottage industry, such as pottery, took place within the homes of the domestic quarter.<sup>35</sup> Streets and walls, as well as water channels, some of which were navigable by boat, separated neighbourhoods.<sup>36</sup>

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25 Jacobsen, 'Mesopotamian Religion,' 474.

26 Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilisation in the Near East*, (London: Benn, 1959), 52.

27 Petr Charvat, 'The Kish Evidence and the Emergence of States in Mesopotamia,' *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 22, No. 6, (1981), 686-687.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 31.

31 Yoffee, 'Political Economy,' 284.

32 Harriet Crawford, *Sumer and the Sumerians*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64.

33 Jacobsen, 'Mesopotamian Religion,' 474.

34 Crawford, *Sumer*, 64.

35 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 33; Crawford, *ibid.*, 60.

36 Gates, *ibid.*, 34.

## Temples, Palaces and Assemblies

Sumerian mythology reflects a belief that the gods created man in order to work the land. Evidence for this belief is found in the *Epic of Creation*, as well as in the myth of Enlil. In the latter, Enlil uses a pickaxe to break the earth's crust, and then men sprout forth like plants. The other gods beg Enlil to allocate them some of these sprouting men, to work as serfs.<sup>37</sup> Cities, then, were perceived as the property of the gods, and the land was merely worked on their behalf by mortals.<sup>38</sup> Temples were built as the personal houses of the gods, and the temple community was considered the god's household.<sup>39</sup> This belief gave rise to two features of Sumerian city-states: the dominance of temple structures in the physical landscape, and the importance of priests in the political landscape.

During the protoliterate period, when writing systems were in the early stages of development, temples were the most striking physical feature of the Sumerian city-state.<sup>40</sup> Since the temples were conceived as houses for the god and his or her household, it took on a form similar to domestic design.<sup>41</sup> Initially there were two standard temple designs; one with a rectangular sanctuary, and another with a t-shaped sanctuary.<sup>42</sup> In the Early Dynastic period, as the non-religious roles of the temple developed, the temple itself changed to become a self-contained unit where offices and facilities shared space with the sanctuary within a perimeter wall.<sup>43</sup> The Temple Oval at Khafajah is the best surviving example of the characteristic temple type of the Early Dynastic period.<sup>44</sup> Here, the inner wall encloses a rectangular court, lined with rooms used as workshops and storage spaces.<sup>45</sup> Initially, with the passing of time, temples such as those at Uruk and Eridu were built, renovated and reconstructed. As this work occurred, a mound grew beneath the constructions, so that the temple itself came to sit on raised ground.<sup>46</sup> At Ur, for example, there are seventeen levels of temples below the final shrine.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the concept of a raised temple became integral to their design, and these constructions were known as ziggurats. The ziggurat style, a noted feature of Sumerian city-states, gained currency at the end of the Early Dynastic period, with many examples surviving at Kish.<sup>48</sup>

The prominence of temple structures in Sumerian cities gave rise to the assumption that the temple itself was the preeminent political unit of the city.<sup>49</sup> Each city-state had a primary god, and the high priest in the temple of that god took on a gubernatorial role, directing the affairs of the several temple corporations within that city.<sup>50</sup> The extent of the power exercised by these priestly governors, or *ensi-gar*, is a matter of debate. Archaic texts, mostly from Shuruppak, suggest

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37 Frankfort, *Birth of Civilisation*, 59.

38 Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 609

39 Sterba, 'Temple Corporations,' 17.

40 Frankfort, *Birth of Civilisation*, 53.

41 Crawford, *Sumer*, 79.

42 *Ibid.*, 68ff.

43 *Ibid.*, 77.

44 Donald Hansen, 'Royal Building Activity at Sumerian Lagash in the Early Dynastic Period,' *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 55, No. 4, (1992), 207.

45 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 44.

46 *Ibid.*, 33.

47 Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 68.

48 Lloyd, *Archaeology of Mesopotamia*, 105.

49 Sterba, 'Temple Corporations,' 17.

50 *Ibid.*

that an oligarchy of priests held significant political power during the protohistorical period.<sup>51</sup> However, there does not seem to be a pattern of influence on the city as a body politic.<sup>52</sup> Recent considerations downplay the role of the temple corporation in Sumerian civilisation.<sup>53</sup> The written evidence is skewed towards the participation of the priests, because they had the literacy to keep records. Other groups, organised under trade or industrial auspices for example, did not record their activities in writing, so it has taken longer for archaeologists to recognise their contribution.<sup>54</sup> Irrespective of the contribution of other parts of society, the temple was a significant element in the economy of the city-state.

Temple estates had a religious function, of course, but also included land for a variety of purposes. The temple owned *nigenna* land, which was worked collectively by temple personnel. There were also *kur* estates, which were parcelled out to members of the community, and *urala*. *Urala* lands were allotment fields, sometimes leased to tenants.<sup>55</sup> In addition, excavations such as those conducted by Moorey at Jemdet Nasr reveal temple buildings devoted to administration, workshops and redistribution.<sup>56</sup> The best example of large storage facilities connected to a sanctuary is at Khirbet el-Kerak.<sup>57</sup> Such storage buildings suggest that even if the temple economy was not a large-scale producer, it was certainly involved in redistribution.<sup>58</sup> This evidence supports the conclusion that temples had an economic role in the Sumerian city-state, but their political influence may not have been very far-reaching.<sup>59</sup>

It is most likely that temples shared political power with the palace estates and local assemblies, with the degree of power invested in each institution varying over time and from city to city.<sup>60</sup> Certainly palaces, with their ruling *lugals*, became an important feature of Sumerian city-states during the Early Dynastic period and thereafter.<sup>61</sup> The physical evidence of palaces, in addition to temples, is suggestive of a dual power structure.<sup>62</sup> The two parts of this power structure were the temple, which gave rise to an *ensi*, and the palace, which was led by a *lugal*.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that the position of *lugal* initially developed out of the secular functions of the temple *ensi*. Alternatively, the *lugals* may have begun as elite landowners who capitalised on their power through military success.<sup>64</sup> In any case, the two realms, palace and temple, came to compete for political influence and eventually the *lugal* supplanted the *ensi* as the locus of power.<sup>65</sup> The zenith of stately power

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51 Nels Bailkey, 'Early Mesopotamian Constitutional Development,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 4, (1967), 1218.

52 Oppenheim, 'Structure of Mesopotamian Society,' 13.

53 Sterba, 'Temple Corporations,' 17.

54 *Ibid.*

55 J. Makkay, 'The Origins of the 'Temple-Economy' as Seen in the Light of Prehistoric Evidence,' *Iraq*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (1982), 2.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*, 1.

59 Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 607-608.

60 Oppenheim, 'Structure of Mesopotamian Society,' 8.

61 Frankfort, *Birth of Civilisation*, 70.

62 Crawford, *Sumer*, 66.

63 Charles Maisels, *The Emergence of Civilisation: from hunting and gathering to agriculture, cities and the state in the Near East*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 218.

64 Baines and Yoffee, 'Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' 207.

65 *Ibid.*, 219.

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came during the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100-2000 BCE), when power was highly centralised under state-appointed officials.<sup>66</sup>

As political power shifted from temple to palace, the palace precinct itself developed as an important physical feature of the city, so that by the third phase of the Early Dynastic period palaces had come to dominate architecture.<sup>67</sup> The ancient cities of Eridu, Ubad, Kish and Mari host examples of such palaces, which operated as the residence of the *lugal*, but also as the administrative and bureaucratic centre of the city.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, local assemblies were a feature of the Sumerian power structure. During the protoliterate period, the leader of the city-state answered to the assembly.<sup>69</sup> Later, during the Akkadian period, the assembly had the power to choose a king, and to withdraw his power.<sup>70</sup> The story of Gilgamesh reveals the role of assemblies in ancient city-states. Gilgamesh, king of Erech, was concerned that Agga, king of the foreign city Kish, had threatened to invade. Gilgamesh took the problem to the elders, who advised that war was not the answer. Displeased with this response, the bellicose Gilgamesh approached the assembly of commoners with his quandary. Here he found the answer he was hoping for, and was given permission to resist.<sup>71</sup> This tale reveals how even a king was not able to act until he had received permission from the assembly.<sup>72</sup> Citizens' assemblies probably evolved from the belief in an assembly of gods. The Sumerian pantheon was believed to have met at the city of Nippur, and decided through an assembly which Sumerian city should have hegemony.<sup>73</sup> This divine assembly was thus the prototype for the earthly assemblies that were a feature of the Sumerian city-state.

Temple estates, palace estates and assemblies have thus been identified as the main players in ancient Sumerian politics. There were early attempts to delineate the roles of these three institutions, however, it proved difficult to separate their individual spheres of influence.<sup>74</sup> Current historians now acknowledge that all three were interlinked in a web of changing relationships that defy strict definition. By the Ur III period, palaces were creeping closer to the physical boundaries of temples, and this may be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the way political boundaries were being blurred.<sup>75</sup> Yoffee has concluded:

... the neat picture of separate lines of authority is being broken down in order to demonstrate how royal officials manipulated temple property, how temples profited from royal largesse, and how community members often contracted with both temples and palaces. Although it is still useful to consider the temple's lands as existing because of the need to care for and feed the gods, and the palace-estates to have arisen from a

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66 Bailkey, 'Constitutional Development,' 1228.

67 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 33.

68 *Ibid.*, 43.

69 Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 608.

70 Thorkild Jacobsen, 'Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia,' *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (1943), 165; 170-171.

71 Julian Reade, *Mesopotamia*, (London: British Museum Press, 1991), 36.

72 Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia*, 81.

73 Reade, *Mesopotamia*, 35-36.

74 viz. Diakonoff and Gelb, in Yoffee, 'Political Economy,' 289.

75 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 62.

combination of land purchases and seizures, it is equally apparent that social institutions were permeable and that individuals played multiple and varied roles...<sup>76</sup>

### Society, Law and Education

There is no consensus among historians about the degree of social stratification in ancient Sumeria. There was certainly occupational differentiation, with occupants of the city working as priests, merchants, craftsmen, shepherds, brewers and weavers among other things.<sup>77</sup> Hole argues that occupational differentiation leads inevitably to social stratification, especially as the concepts of comparative land values result in a wealthy land-owning class.<sup>78</sup> Oppenheim disagrees, however, and notes a lack of status stratification among Sumerian city dwellers.<sup>79</sup> Frankfort supports this view, noting that every citizen worked as a practical farmer to support his family, no matter what his profession may have been.<sup>80</sup> The archaeological evidence supports the latter view, as domestic architecture and grave goods seem consistent across examples, at least until very late in the period.<sup>81</sup>

Further evidence about social stratification can be found in wage records and ration lists. Rations were paid to semi-free workers, who accounted for the bulk of the labour in these societies.<sup>82</sup> Wages, on the other hand, were paid to free workers, who offered their services for hire.<sup>83</sup> A final class of slaves also existed, although they generally worked in the household and did not play a productive role in Sumerian society.<sup>84</sup>

A further feature of the Sumerian city-state is the clear engagement with equity and justice.<sup>85</sup> Laws were written by the king, with an emphasis on social control, although with very little consideration of compassion or forgiveness.<sup>86</sup> Collections of laws have survived the millennia, and indicate a pronounced legalistic order.<sup>87</sup> Punishments show an emphasis on personal responsibility and a medieval-style focus on finding punishments to fit the crime.<sup>88</sup> For example, the Code of Hammurabi stated that if a house collapsed, the builder was required to rebuild it; if the head of the household died in the collapse, the life of the builder should also be taken.<sup>89</sup> This strict concept of law and equity is a striking feature of the time.

Education was also an important feature of these societies. Education was key to the efficient running of the growing bureaucracy, the recording of wages, rations, and land agreements, and

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76 Yoffee, 'Political Economy,' 300-301.

77 Rosemary Ellison, 'The Evidence of the Barley Ration Texts (c. 3000-1400 B.C.),' *Iraq*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (1981), 37.

78 Hole, 'Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,' 609.

79 Oppenheim, 'Structure of Mesopotamian Cities,' 11.

80 Frankfort, *Birth of Civilisation*, 70.

81 Baines and Yoffee, 'Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' 66.

82 Timothy Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: the material foundations*, (London: Athone Press, 1997), 208.

83 Ignace Gelb, 'The Ancient Mesopotamian Ration System,' *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (1965), 230.

84 Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization*, 208.

85 Sterba, 'Temple Corporations,' 24.

86 Oppenheim, 'Structure of Mesopotamian Society,' 9; Sterba, *ibid.*, 25.

87 E. A. Speiser, 'The Beginnings of Civilization in Mesopotamia,' in Tom Jones, (ed.), *The Sumerian Problem*, (New York: John Wiley, 1969), 87.

88 Sterba, 'Temple Corporations,' 25.

89 *Ibid.*



the conduct of inter-state affairs.<sup>90</sup> These needs were fulfilled with the invention of schools, which trained young men in skills such as writing, mathematics, surveying and management.<sup>91</sup> The Sumerian school, or *edubba*, was led by a headmaster known as an *adda edubba* or an *umma*.<sup>92</sup> Evidence of schools and their function is found, among other indications, in a hymnal narrative which includes the lines 'Since I was a child (I was in) the *edubba*, and on the tablets of Sumer and Akkad I learned the scribal art; of the young, no one could write a tablet like me... I am perfectly able to subtract and add, (skilled in) counting and accounting...'<sup>93</sup>

## Writing and Art

Sumerian writing was invented in the late Uruk period, but was not standardised until the middle of the third millennium BCE.<sup>94</sup> Over half a million written documents have been excavated from this period, which attest to the widespread use of writing throughout the region.<sup>95</sup> Initially writing was used only for listing commodities or people, taking over from cylinder seals, which had previously served this purpose.<sup>96</sup> Over time the purpose of writing extended to recording religious dedications and records of personal achievement.<sup>97</sup> It was also eventually used for historical and literary compositions.<sup>98</sup> The widespread use of writing is a significant feature of early Sumerian culture.

Sumerian art was well developed by the Ubaid period. This particular period was noted for its painted pottery, and indeed decorative pottery continued to be a cultural feature for millennia.<sup>99</sup> Another notable feature of Sumerian art is the cone mosaic decorations that adorned monumental architecture.<sup>100</sup> Wooley's excavations at Ur uncovered a wide range of decorative and artistic items, such as jewellery, vessels of gold and silver, and musical instruments.<sup>101</sup> The Royal Standard, part of Wooley's extraordinary find in the Royal Tombs of Ur, is a striking example of the figural art of Sumeria, incorporating the common elements of royal and religious imagery but also depicting wheeled chariots and thereby revealing another feature of the period: the wheel.

## Conclusion

From the end of the fourth millennium BCE, the city-state arose as the most important unit of Sumerian civilisation, providing safety within its walls, and all-important irrigation to farmers beyond those walls. The organisation of the economy allowed for specialisation, offering citizens the advantages of occupational differentiation and concomitant leisure time. Although these city-states were geographically disparate, a pervading culture is clearly discernable. It features

90 Christopher Lucas, 'The Scribal Tablet-House in Ancient Mesopotamia,' *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3, (1979), 306-307.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

93 *Ibid.*, 309.

94 Baines and Yoffee, 'Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' 246.

95 Jean Bottero, 'The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia,' *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 48, No. 1, (1985), 36.

96 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 38.

97 Lloyd, *Archaeology of Mesopotamia*, 90-91.

98 Speiser, 'Mesopotamia,' 86.

99 Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 68; Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization*, 208; Jonathan Ziskind, 'The Sumerian Problem,' *The History Teacher*, Vol. 5, No. 5, (1972), 36.

100 Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 76-77.

101 Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 47.

monumental buildings from both temple and palace precincts, the use of the wheel, weaponry and similar, if not identical, artistic developments. It was perhaps the development of writing, more than any other factor, which helped to standardise Mesopotamian culture across the region.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Baines and Yoffee, 'Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' p. 246.

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