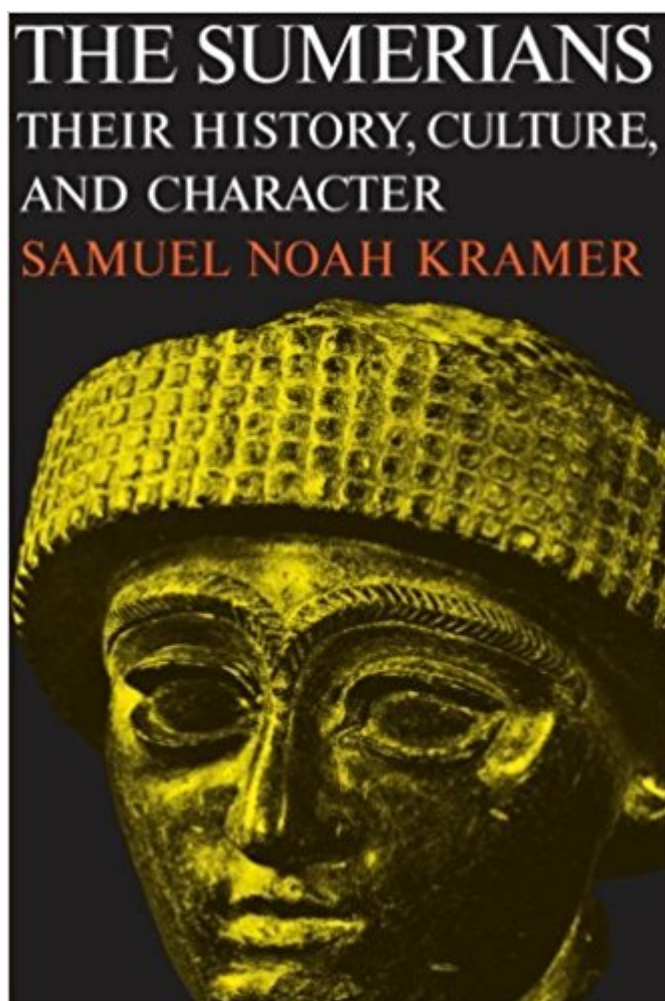


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The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, And Character (Phoenix Books)



Synopsis

The Sumerians, the pragmatic and gifted people who preceded the Semites in the land first known as Sumer and later as Babylonia, created what was probably the first high civilization in the history of man, spanning the fifth to the second millenniums B.C. This book is an unparalleled compendium of what is known about them. Professor Kramer communicates his enthusiasm for his subject as he outlines the history of the Sumerian civilization and describes their cities, religion, literature, education, scientific achievements, social structure, and psychology. Finally, he considers the legacy of Sumer to the ancient and modern world. "There are few scholars in the world qualified to write such a book, and certainly Kramer is one of them. . . . One of the most valuable features of this book is the quantity of texts and fragments which are published for the first time in a form available to the general reader. For the layman the book provides a readable and up-to-date introduction to a most fascinating culture. For the specialist it presents a synthesis with which he may not agree but from which he will nonetheless derive stimulation." "American Journal of Archaeology" "An uncontested authority on the civilization of Sumer, Professor Kramer writes with grace and urbanity." "Library Journal

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Customer Reviews

Samuel Noah Kramer's "The Sumerians" is very detailed account of a significant period of human cultural and societal development with some remarkable surprises (at least for this reader). The first seven chapters offer perspectives of different aspects of the Sumerian society, government and

culture based on extensive scholarly analyses and reconstruction. Some fascinating insights gleaned from the almost overwhelming detail are: - the shifting between graphics (glyphs) representing an image and symbols/letters for actual words as the written word presumably began to be a recorded expression for the corresponding development of articulated speech; - the evolution of writing both as an adornment for personal and public objects such as inscriptions or invocations on pottery and the need for public scribes to keep records of events such as the list of kings and transactions between individuals, be they public or royal figures or between merchants - clearly these records and the need for writing them were likely the equivalent of today's electronic communication which has shortened language and communication even further; - the development of government and certain religious rituals that had earlier roots in local practice and evolved into customs and practices that continue today in different religions such as Judaism, Christianity as well as possibly Buddhism and Islam. What is so remarkable is the evolution of this culture and institutions some 7,000 years ago and continuing until eventually the Babylonians would replace this culture with their version and its memorable laws. However, this book with its extraordinarily documented original research and use of secondary sources makes it of particular interest for students and scholars of the period. The early chapters can be somewhat overwhelming in the level of detail for the average reader (with which I include myself). There are some wonderful characters such as Gilgamesh and Sargon, the latter name I seem to recollect being used in some 1950's Hollywood production with Basil Rathbone leaping around in a supposed costume from the period with a hat looking peculiarly like a ziggurat and proclaiming himself Sargon The Great. And discoveries in the translations of events such as the Great Flood, the latter which seems consistent with not just Noah in the Old Testament but other cultures as well (two recent views theorize the Flood may have been caused by a break in a land dam near the present day Bosphorus based on submerged cities discovered in the Black Sea near Bulgaria and Turkey, or unusual flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates River systems, a periodic event that an agricultural society relied on). However, the last chapter provides a neat summary of the key events in Sumerian history and culture that have been carried on in later cultures, including Western beliefs starting before the New Testament and continuing to the present day. Written in the mid 1960s, Kramer's well documented observations and detail findings have most likely been expanded and updated. In hindsight, for me, this chapter provides an excellent summary of what "The Sumerians" treatise has to offer - and is well worth it.

"There are few scholars in the world qualified to write such a book, and certainly Kramer is one of

them. . . . One of the most valuable features of this book is the quantity of texts and fragments which are published for the first time in a form available to the general reader. For the layman the book provides a readable and up-to-date introduction to a most fascinating culture. For the specialist it presents a synthesis with which he may not agree but from which he will nonetheless derive stimulation." "American Journal of Archaeology

I've always been interested in the Sumerian culture, and this book contains a wealth of information about the Sumerians. It provides a detailed account of the discovery of the Sumerian culture, as well as details of the archaeological digs in which Sumerian artifacts have been found. Luckily for us, the Sumerians left quite a bit of writing behind, which leaves evidence of their religion, culture, daily practices, and knowledge of the world. The author is obviously a very intelligent man who has personal experience in Sumerian archaeology, so his accounts are from his own knowledge and not just random research. His writing is somewhat academic, and while I (as a lay reader) have found the book interesting and understandable, it may turn some casual readers off.

A great book, not just about the history of ancient Sumer, but also chronicling the early days of Sumerology. However, the book was written over 50 years ago now, so it is quite dated and incomplete compared to some more contemporary books on the subject.

The Sumerians by Samuel Noah Kramer is a very readable overview of the ancient Sumerians, those ancient, non-Semitic peoples who produced the world's "first high civilization" and were the world's first urban culture. This ancient culture spanned the fifth to the second millennium BC though its scientific and literary achievements would have lasting influence throughout the ancient world and down through today. The first chapter reviewed the history of the modern study of the Sumerians. As late as the 19th century the Sumerian culture was completely unknown. When scholars and archaeologists began excavating in Mesopotamia they were looking for Assyrians, not Sumerians. The Assyrians were discussed in Greek and Hebrew sources, but of the Sumerians, there was "no recognizable trace of the land, or its people and language, in the entire available Biblical, classical, and postclassical literature" (though some experts now think that Sumer is mentioned in the Bible with a variant name). Sumer had "been erased from the mind and memory of man for more than two thousand years." This chapter revealed the history of the decipherment of Sumerian writing (the name cuneiform dates from 1700 when Thomas Hyde coined the word to describe Old Persian writing that he believed was decoration, not actual speech) and the naming

of these people (Sumerian was proposed as a term in 1869 by Jules Oppert, who used the name from the title "King of Sumer and Akkad" found in some royal inscriptions, believing that Sumer referred to the non-Semitic inhabitants of Mesopotamia while Akkad referred to the Semitic people of Mesopotamia). Chapter two dealt with political history. The Sumerians didn't really produce what we would call histories; they were rather more archivist than historian, chroniclers more than interpreters of history. The first real record of Sumerian events was essentially to preserve for posterity what great building projects (particularly of temples) Sumerian rulers had accomplished. Not all historical source material is "curt and lifeless" though, as one source of information is the royal correspondence between rulers and officials, letters that can reveal motives, rivalries, and intrigue. As far as history itself the reader learns that two of the truly ancient Sumerian rulers were deified (Dumuzi, a deity whose worship would have profound influences in Judaism and in Greek mythology, and Gilgamesh, the "supreme hero of Sumerian myth and legend," his deeds written and rewritten not only in Sumerian but also in other languages), and that Sargon the Great was the conqueror that finally brought about the end of the Sumerian people as "an identifiable political and ethnic entity" and began the "Semitization of Sumer." Chapter three looked at life in the Sumerian city. In the third millennium B.C. Sumer consisted of a dozen or so city-states surrounded by a few villages, each city's main feature being the main temple situated on a high terrace, one that gradually evolved into a staged tower or ziggurat, "Sumer's most characteristic contribution to religious architecture." The temple was the largest and most important building in a Sumerian city, reflecting the importance of religion in Sumerian life (though scholars have debated for decades whether Sumer was a "totalitarian theocracy dominated by the temple" or whether there was some relative freedom and private property; opinion now leans towards the notion that while the temple was the major economic player, private individuals could buy and sell property and own businesses). An important chapter, Kramer looked at such things as the average Sumerian house (a small, single story, mud-brick building with several rooms arranged around an open courtyard), the Sumerian calendar (they divided the year into two seasons, emesh, "summer", and enten, "winter," with the new year falling between April-May), even Sumerian medicine (providing translations of several ancient prescriptions). Chapter four looked at religion and mythology. The Sumerians recognized a very large number of gods, some of which had some very specific areas of interest (such as a deity in charge of the pickaxe) but recognized seven gods who "decree the fates" and fifty deities known as "the great gods." Sumerian gods were entirely anthropomorphic, appearing human in form and could eat, drink, marry, raise families, and even die. Sumerians believed that rite and ritual were more important than either personal devotion or piety, and that man

was "created for no other purpose than to serve the gods." They also believed in something called me, essentially a set of rules and regulations that were meant to be followed in order to keep the universe running smoothly. These me's included both positive concepts, like "truth" and but also negative ones like "strife." The parallels between Sumerian and Greek and Biblical stories were quite striking and Kramer discussed several examples (the Sumerian underworld looked a lot like the later Greek version, complete with a "Charon," for instance and the Sumerians had a Flood myth as well). Chapter five examined their literature, which included religious hymns and lamentations, epics, dirges, elegies, collections of proverbs, and a favorite Sumerian form of literature, the "wisdom" compositions or disputations in which two opposing protagonists debate back and forth (even if the two protagonists might be say personified animals or tools). Chapter six looked at the Sumerian edubba or school. Chapter seven examined Sumerian "drives, motives, and values." The author looked at the role of hatred and aggression in the Sumerian character, their drive for prestige, preeminence, and superiority, though they also valued goodness, truth, even mercy and compassion. Kramer noted though that their ambitious drive for preeminence produced many of the advances for which the Sumerians are noted, such as the development of writing and irrigation but also carried with it the "seeds of self-destruction," which triggered bloody wars between the Sumerian city-states and impeded unification which ultimately proved the downfall of Sumer. Chapter eight examined the legacy of Sumer, its tremendous influences on other ancient cultures and religions, its numerous technological inventions, even its political advances (they invented the city-state which was in marked contrast to the state of affairs in Ancient Egypt).

This was state of the art Middle East History in the 1960s. There are many new findings and upgrades to the information now. However, this volume is reliable for much about ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, and points inbetween.

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