



The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character

Samuel Noah Kramer

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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*

The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character Details

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Vinay says

This is undoubtedly a must-read for Ancient Near East enthusiasts, although it can still appeal to a more layman audience. The narrative style keeps the reader's interest piqued throughout. In addition to describing the story of the civilization in an engaging style, the author also delves into archaeological evidence and reasoning behind his reconstruction of Sumerian history and hence caters to those readers that crave detail. Admittedly, the book is a bit dated and hence does not take into account the latest developments in Sumerology (post 1980s), but still remains largely relevant.

Iset says

At over 50 years since this book was published, it should come as no surprise whatsoever that a considerable amount of what Kramer discusses in this book is out of date and has been overturned by later discoveries and research into the ancient Sumerians. For that reason alone, I wouldn't recommend it to newcomers to the subject. However, I myself read it as a kind of background primer, seeing how study of this ancient society began in its infancy and comparing it to what we know today. Recommended with the caveat that the reader should be aware of the age of the text.

UK says

Cool

Best book in my lifetime, author narrated very clearly and anyone can be able to understand easily... One of the best authors Rowling hats off

Mitchell says

After Snow Crash, I wanted to read up on the Sumerians, and so started looking for a good book available on the Kindle. What I found was this book from the 1960's and a bunch of alien-conspiracy books. There didn't seem to be any recent books on Sumerian studies, which seemed odd until I came across this passage from the beginning of the book itself: "But the future of Sumerian excavations in Iraq lies in the hands of the Iraqis themselves, and there is every reason to hope that the Iraqi scholars and archeologists will not abandon or neglect their forefathers of the distant past who did so much not only for Iraq but for man the world over." Yeah, not so much. The Iraqis have been a bit busy. This isn't to say that there aren't any newer paper books available, but Kramer's work seems to still be almost the leading edge of Sumerian knowledge.

This book was very informative. Kramer is careful to show what all of the inferences and assumptions are based on in his summary of Sumerian life. I found the mythology to be the most interesting myself. The

description of their laws and government were also very interesting, especially the Sumerians' concern for the poor, the orphan, and the widow. He also tracked the discovery of the Sumerians and the eventual cracking of their language, an interesting story in and of itself. Kramer also includes several literal translations of various Sumerian documents, many of which he translated himself.

You can tell this was written by a scholar and not a professional author as certain pet phrases tend to pop up a lot, but over all, this book was informative, but not so difficult to read as to make it not enjoyable.

Tim Martin says

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).

Snm says

ilk okudu?um Noah Kramer kitab? benim i?in hayal k?r?kl???yd? umar?m ayn? ?eyi ya?amam. muhtemel
b?y?k atalar?m olan s?merlerden beni so?utmamas? dile?iyle..olmad? kendimi Muazzaz ?lmiye Ç???n

Mary Deacon says

Until the mid-eighteen hundreds, no one knew of the presence of a place named Sumer in the ancient Mesopotamian (Iran and Iraq) area. Finally, the gradual gathering of information and the incredible deciphering of cuneiform lead archeologists to realize that they had discovered a lost civilization -- and a huge, important one that had affected not only the civilizations that succeeded them but still had an influence on the world today. While reading 'The Sumerians' I almost found that I was more excited and interested in the work of finding a new civilization than I was about the civilization itself. The gradual realization that there was a vast network of city-states before the Akkadians came as a true shock, especially since the Sumerians were not Semitic as the later Akkadians were. This was proved by the language they spoke, which is still being deciphered from the thousands of clay tablets found in the area. It is not that the Sumerians are not interesting people. They are fascinating, from laws that allowed women to buy and own their property to the schools for scribes (in which at least one woman's name has was found so far). The Sumerians likely had contacts as far as Egypt and Ethiopia to the west and India to the east. Many elements of their myths found their way into Biblical literature, from The Flood to Job. They had law courts, judges and councils of local men that the King is called upon (but didn't always listen to) when making significant decisions. This was a far more complex civilization than people believed possible 5000 years ago. The Sumerians did seem to be a contentious people who seemed to favor acerbic debate, at least from some of the works were deciphered. Moreover, here is the true glory of the Sumerian civilization and what kept it from being completely lost to the world: they wrote out everything from lists of the natural world to copies of essays, myths, proclamations, and laws. Thousands of these clay tablets have been found in the ruins of palaces, but also sometimes in the ruins of an edubba -- a school. The Sumerians bequeathed their great gifts of civilization to the Akkadians who conquered them but held on to much of what the Sumerians had created, including the complex form of writing called cuneiform. The Sumerian language, through cuneiform, became the 'Latin' of the distant ancient Near East -- a language that continued to be used in written documents that could be read by educated people no matter what their native tongue might be. The Sumerian legacy is considerable and the discovery of the civilization fascinating. This relatively short book is a good overview of both, and good basic work for the personal exploration of these fascinating people.

Müslim says

Kutsal dinlerin, tarih boyunca insanlara anlat?lan en büyük masal oldu?unu ve kutsal kitaplardaki metinlerin de milattan önce 3000-5000 y?llar? aras?nda ya?ayan Sümerler'in efsanelerinden al?nd??n? söyleyerek ba?layan "zeitgeist" adlı belgeseli izledikten sonra sözü edilen kaynaklar? kendim de görebilmek için Sümer uygarl??? konusunda tart??mas?z bir otorite olan Profesör Kramer'in bu kitab?? okumaya karar verdim.

Yarat?l??taki yer ile gökün birbirinden ayr?lmas?, ilk insan?n kilden yarat?lm?? olmas?, Tufan olay? , Habil ile Kabil motifinin ve belki hala ula?al?lamam?? ba?ka benzerliklerin bulunmas? bu konuda iki farklı ihtimal olu?turuyor.

Ortaça?da krallar? bile sorgulayabilecek kadar güçlü olan ve insanlar?n kutsal kitaplar?n metinlerine ula?mas?n? istemeyen kilise veya her dönemde oldu?u gibi insanlar? kontrol alt?nda tutmak için onlar? kutsal duygular? ile kand?rmaya çal??arak güç kazanmaya çal??an yöneticilerin önceki efsaneler ile

kitaplardan uydurdu?u bir kavram ya da ikinci ihtimal olan insanlar?n mutlu bir ?ekilde ya?amas? ve insanlar?n mutlu olmas?n? engelleyenlerin ölmeden önce ve öldükten sonra da cezaland?r?lmas? gerekti?ini söyleyen bir yarat?c?n?n, insanl???n en ba??ndan beri insanlara anlatt?? öneriler.

Ummia Gina says

I don't like most the reviews I am reading here on goodreads for Samuel Noah Kramer's "The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character". Most of the reviews are overly critical and they are always so quick to point out that some of the ideas Kramer had are now considered dated without expanding on what that information is.

"The Sumerians" was published in 1963 by University of Chicago Press. It is an enthusiastic introduction to the Sumerians. I first read it back when I was a child and it was the first book I had come across that specifically focused on the Sumerians.

First off I would like to include a bit about who Samuel Noah Kramer was. Samuel Noah

Kramer(1897–1990)was one of the world's most influential Sumerologists. He played a very key role in the understanding of Sumerian language and in the restoration and translation of numerous cuneiform tablets. Kramer attended the Oriental Studies Department of the University of Pennsylvania and earned his Ph.D. in 1929.He was famous for assembling tablets recounting single stories that had become distributed among different institutions around the world.

Chapter one deals with history of the modern study of the Sumerians. It gives a basic overview of how scholars and archaeologists began excavating in Mesopotamia in search of cultures discussed by greek and hebrew sources such as the Assyrians. It also goes into the history of the decipherment of Sumerian writing. Chapter two was a short overview of Sumerian political history. This is probably the area of the book that most people who are claiming to this book as dated are referring to. Kramer's account of Sumerian history includes all of the more important political events that the academic community uses to organizer Sumerian history. Events such as; the unification of the early dynastic city-states by Lugalzagesi,. Mesopotamia's first real empire under Sargon of Agade, the conquer of Sumer by the Guitans, the glory of the Ur III period and the coming of the Amorites. Since this was all condensed into a single chapter the information is rather brief. There are far more detailed accounts of Sumerian history out there however with the amount of space Kramer uses here he does a satisfactory job of giving readers who are unfamiliar with history a basic outline. Chapter three is one of my favorite chapters. Kramer goes into specific detail about the Sumerian culture. He discusses Sumerian cities, households, professions, standards, calenders, medicine and other cultural practices.

Chapter four deals with Sumerian religion. Kramer discusses the Mesopotamian pantheon. He goes over the theological views of the Sumerians as well as anthropomorphic nature of their deities. This is a chapter where Kramer's passionate enthusiasm really shines and makes the chapter a lot easier to read than most other scholars I have read discussing this topic.

Chapter five examined their literature, which included religious hymns and lamentations, epics, dirges, elegies, collections of proverbs, and the Sumerian debate poems.

Chapter Six focuses on the Sumerian education system. It goes into detail about Sumerian schools (called Edubba in Sumerian) and the training that was involved in becoming a scribe back then.

Chapter seven discusses the Sumerian's character. Kramer writes of what moral values they had and what was the basis of the motivation.

Finally Chapter eight is on "the legacy of Sumer" which is the topic of one of Kramer's other books and is also the underlying theme of this book. Kramer goes into detail on the many way the Sumerian have left their cultural mark on the world today.

Overall despite being written fifty years ago, I would recommend this book to anyone who is looking for a

basic introduction to the Sumerians. It is true that some of the information in it is dated though. In specific example would include that it is the generally accepted view of the academic community that the identity of the Sumerians trading partners "Dilmun", "Magan" and "Meluha" as Bahrain, Oman and the Indus River Valley civilization accordingly.

Fatih A. says

Neredeyse 5000 y?l önceki bir ilkokul ö?rencisinin tabletlerini (?imdiki fi?lerini diyelim) okumak insana buruk ve dü?ünceli bir mutluluk veriyor..

Jer Wilcoxon says

Four stars for ease of read and summarizing of inscriptions so that those who aren't full blown scholars can understand what they mean, while including the inscription for those of us who are more than casually interested and want to make our own inferences of the texts. It lost one star for the dated nature of SOME of the material and analysis. What you need to know is that by reading this volume you WILL have a strong understanding of Sumerian culture. Certainly there have been advances in our understanding of this culture in the last 40-50 years; but most of it is academic and little of it is available in popular, non-scholarly format. The casually interested will still benefit, while only those already expert in the subject may not.

Also realize that if you are looking for information on the day-to-day lives of the average "Sumerian", you probably won't find it here; but that's is due to the nature of the historical material we have. Inscriptions in stone and baked clay were made for mainly political and financial purposes, and not for chronicling the lives of Bob the Shoemaker or Ashesef the Baker. At the time of print, there was a great volume of material (clay tablets, inscribed stones and pottery) that had been discovered though not translated and studied yet. Even now there are boxes and boxes of material in dusty archaeology department storerooms that have yet to be examined. Kramer has included as many deductions concerning joe-blow Sumerian as had been made at the time of his writing, based on the limited judicial documentation found and interpreted up to that point.

Aaron Meyer says

An awesome book! I have had this book for a very long time and mainly used it for reference, so this was the first time I actually read the whole thing through. My only regret is that I had not read it much sooner. Kramer writes in a way which gets you interested and wanting to continue through and doesn't needlessly weigh it down with to much academia. There is source material used throughout the book to great advantage and I would say that the material used in the chapter on Education was the best, which is odd because one would think that it would be a boring chapter, it literally had me nearly falling out of the chair laughing because I am old enough to be able to identify with the students situtation, i.e., being beat in school for wrongdoings. He does have a few ideas which seem to be out of favor in these days, but I guess it still hasn't been solidly proven i.e., the identities of Dilmun and Meluhha, but it doesn't take away at all from this book at all. Still an important book even after nearly 50 years in print so make sure you have it!

Cera says

I'm glad I read this, and I really did learn a lot about the Sumerians -- or at least what we knew about the Sumerians in the 60s. But I was annoyed by the author, who seemed awfully full of himself, always smugly announcing that he was about to include a translation which had never been published before, or that this was the first time one of his ideas had been shared with the public. I couldn't escape the feeling that research which he hadn't published might have been research he _couldn't_ get published in a peer-reviewed journal, which did not increase my confidence in the book! Nor did I appreciate his habit of summarising a Sumerian text in incredible detail, and then including the actual text after the summary -- one or the other would surely have been enough? But in spite of all of that, I now know things I didn't know before, so it wasn't a waste of time. I plan to read a more recent book on Sumerian civilisation to see how things have changed in 40+ years.

Berber says

First I wanted to give this 5 stars, because it is a very interesting book, and not dry or academical at all. But I felt the author relied heavily on quotation (of Sumerian literature), I feel the matter could have been much more lively if he had theorized more. Still, a hugely entertaining, good book on Sumer. I recommend it to my fellow amateur historians here on GR. You know who you are. ;)

Arno Mosikyan says

Let's do our best not to notice the elephant in the room, because we must do all our best not to notice the elephant!

When overwhelming data points at numerous similarities between Aratta and Ararat [?????, Kingdom of Ararat, Mount Ararat], we should disregard this with "academic eloquence" and search Aratta in "Alaska or French Polynesia".
