

Daily Life in Sumer

Look now at everything on earth,"
Rejoiced Ninurta, king of the land. "The
fields produce abundant grain. They
make happy the spirit of the gods."

This poem is part of a Sumerian "farmers' almanac" which served as a guide to successful farming. The land was very important to the people of Sumer. It was the source of most of the nation's wealth. In a bad year, a drought or a flood could bring famine.

Herding was as important as growing grain. Shepherds were responsible for the wool, milk, and cheese that almost everyone used. They too were affected by drought or flood.

The Sumerians prayed to many gods and goddesses, or *deities* (DEE-ih-teez), to ensure a good harvest and healthy animals. As shown in the poem, they believed that the gods and goddesses took a personal interest in the food supply. According to a myth, Inanna, goddess of love, could not decide whether to marry a farmer or a shepherd. She finally decided on the shepherd, perhaps because she liked cream. The farmer was luckier, though, because Inanna had a sharp tongue and a temper to match.

Some people in Sumer had little to do with the land. They lived in cities and worked at other jobs, such as making pottery. Because people lived close together, they needed laws and government.

How did the Sumerians govern themselves? They divided the land into different city-states. Unfortunately, this kind of organization did not, in the end, create a unified nation. The city-states of Sumer were seldom at peace. They fought each other almost constantly. They fought over property rights, water rights, or to gain control over another city-state.

God-Kings. In times of war, a Sumerian city chose a king to lead it. When the war was over, the king was supposed to give back his power. After a while, though, the kings kept their power and handed it down to their sons. They called themselves gods, and eventually the Sumerians believed that they were gods.

Once in a while, a great king would defeat the other city-states and set up a small empire. But these empires did not last long. One or more city-states would overthrow them. Then the city-states would start fighting again.

The people of Sumer were divided into three classes, or groups of people. The kings, nobles, priests, and rich landowners made up the highest class. The next class included farmers, tradespeople, soldiers, and artisans. Slaves made up the lowest class.

Slaves were sometimes bought and sold for their entire lifetimes, or they could be hired for a certain period of time. Although masters owned their slaves, no one considered slaves less than human. Anyone could become a slave by having bad luck or by being captured in a war. Slaves had some rights. They could own property and trade goods. They could even save money to buy their freedom.

In a Sumerian family, men were the heads of the households. They could own property and trade goods. They arranged their daughters' marriages and their sons' educations. If a man had debts, he was allowed to hire or sell his wife and children as slaves.

However, women had some power, too. When a woman married, her father usually gave a dowry, which was a gift of money or goods. A wife was permitted to use her dowry as she pleased. Sometimes she would use it to start her own business. Women in Sumer could be merchants, tavern owners, and landowners.

From what has been found in the ruins of Sumer, we can piece together some facts about life there. The rest can only be imagined. Suppose, for instance, that we are in a busy market street in the city of Lagash. Booths with all kinds of goods for sale line the mud-brick buildings. Cloth awnings cover the booths to shade them from the hot sun.

Two Sumerian women, Ninti and Shubad, are walking down the street. Ninti is a weaver who weaves linen from flax. Shubad and her husband are farmers who grow flax and millet, a kind of grain. Both women wear simple, linen tunics that reach to their knees. Because they are not slaves, each wears a thin veil draped about her face. Ninti is wealthy, so she also wears rings and bracelets.

SHUBAD: How is business lately, Ninti? That cloth that you have been making looks very fine.

NINTI: Oh, business couldn't be better. The soldiers who have been fighting in the war against Umma tear their clothes to shreds all the time. They buy a lot of cloth from me. The only problem is that the flax I use to weave linen costs too much.

SHUBAD: Yes, our crops were short this year because of the floods. That's why the price is so high. But the new crop will be ready in two weeks.

NINTI: Business aside, how are your children, Shubad?

SHUBAD: Oh, they're fine. But I'm worried about my oldest son, Dumuzi. His father says that we have so many debts to pay that he might have to hire Dumuzi out as a slave for a few years.

NINTI: Dumuzi is too young to leave home, Shubad. Maybe I could help you out.

SHUBAD: How?

NINTI: Well, you know my cousin, Shara?

She's a very good weaver and has decided to go into business for herself. She will be needing a lot of flax to work with, and she wants to be assured of a good supply. I think she would buy all the flax that you and your husband grow.

SHUBAD: This is just what we need, the assurance that we can sell everything we grow. My entire dowry was used to buy the flax field, and I sometimes wonder if I made the right decision. We have nothing to spare. Is it possible that your cousin would pay in advance?

NINTI: Flax has been in short supply lately, and I know she's anxious to secure enough to get her company started. I'll ask her right away.

Quick Check

1. What were some of the ways that Sumerians made a living?

2. Would you describe Sumer as a unified nation? Why, or why not? How did the need for a ruler or king arise? How did these rulers keep their power and pass it on?

3. What kind of religion did Sumer have? What did most of their prayers concern?

4. How many classes were there in Sumerian society? In what class were soldiers? Priests? Farmers? Rich landowners? Kings?

5. How might a person become a slave? What rights did slaves have? How was it possible to get out of slavery?

6. What was the role of the husband in the Sumerian family? What powers did women have?