

Sumerian Mythology

Sumer was a prosperous city-state in ancient Mesopotamia, present-day Middle East. It was one of the first city-states to emerge in Mesopotamia and was its most prosperous one. It was the world's first ever civilization. Mesopotamia was a region in the Fertile Crescent in which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers were. Although these two rivers were unpredictable and could easily flood, whenever they flooded, a valuable material known as silt was produced. Silt was a good substance to help fertilize land and made the land better for farming. Sometimes if the rivers flooded too much, though, they could destroy a farmer's crops entirely. Around 4000 B.C., Mesopotamians started creating irrigation systems to counteract the negative effects of the rivers. These improvements allowed for farming to be more successful. With this productivity in agriculture, there was a surplus of food. Sometimes there was enough food to last the city-state for a whole year. Since farmers were not needed as much as they were prior to this food surplus, people could pursue more jobs and take on hobbies as well. One of these extra hobbies happened to be religion. Additionally, with the growth of complex institutions religion in Sumer became a more widespread practice throughout all of the region.

The Sumerians were polytheistic meaning they prayed to and worshipped many gods. Similar to the Greeks and Romans, the Sumerians had a group of seven deities who ruled over the others and were more valued. These deities were An, Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag, Nanna, Utu, and Inanna. In general though, each city within Sumer was dedicated to a certain deity. They believed that the specific god or goddess would watch over their city. Their gods including the head deities had multiple human attributes such as mischief and desire. Their main reason for believing in their gods was because they knew that they did not have the ability to control things such as rain, fire, and other natural elements. In their minds, if it wasn't them who had control over those things, then higher beings who have control of those elements must exist. These higher beings were believed to have qualities like humans but they were different from humans, because they were immortal and had supernatural powers. They sometimes took advantage of their powers and used them to inflict hurt and pain on human beings through natural disasters and diseases. This led Sumerians and other Mesopotamians to believe that their afterlife was a reality of eternal suffering.

Hence, the Sumerians grew to fear their gods yet respect them. The gods were supernatural beings who had the power to do things that regular humans could not do. This caused the Sumerians to be frightened of their gods because they had no power compared to them. Titles and money meant nothing in the eyes of the gods. The

Sumerians tried to constantly stay in a harmonious relationship with their gods by constantly giving them offerings and praying to them in temples known as ziggurats. The government, mainly under the influence of priests, taxed people and regularly used the money to get supplies to build bigger and better ziggurats. Some Sumerians even had shrines in their homes so that they could worship on a daily basis. This belief of an imbalance in power led religion to become a big part of Sumerian life. Mesopotamia was a very tight-knit region. The city-states were usually at war with each other in early Mesopotamia and were constantly under the rule of different kings. Then Sargon of Akkad defeated the region's previous king and formed the first Empire: the Akkadian Empire. This was the first time that all of the city-states were actually uniting so I assume that during this era, cultural diffusion occurred. Since Sumer was the first civilization and was more magnificent than the other city-states, their religion and gods spread throughout Mesopotamia. As the empire expanded, their polytheistic beliefs also spread to others who then took on Sumerian beliefs and religion. The emperors who ruled over the empire also were subject to religion because they allowed for priests to have almost as much power as them. Whatever the priests said was considered valuable and highly important.

Because Sumer was the world's first ever civilization and was a major city-state, many other civilizations were influenced by the Sumerians choice of religion. There is a common theme of polytheism with various early major civilizations such as Egypt, Rome, Greece, and the Indus Valley. Various religions within these civilizations all embraced the idea of having multiple gods who looked like humans and sometimes acted like them but had indefinite power of them during their time on Earth and even in their afterlife. These gods also usually had control over elements of nature. They also copied the same theme of temples to worship their gods. Egyptians built pyramids which were similar to the ziggurats built in early Mesopotamia. Additionally, just like the Mesopotamians displayed the actions and characteristic of their gods in pieces of literature such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Greek historian, Homer, wrote the epic poems of the Odyssey and the Iliad which best displayed how their Greeks viewed their gods at the time. These civilization's views of their gods was usually a reason for living good, moral lives and making a habit of worshiping their gods. This fear, or in some cases love for the gods, helped to produce safer and better formed communities. It has been proven that when people are occupied with something to do, they have been less prone to committing crimes. In the already dangerous ancient world, this made a big impact. Religion also helped to connect people within a city or state. Religion was most likely one of the only things that everyone in a certain region had in common. The common beliefs that these groups of people shared helped to pull them closer to

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March 8th, 2023

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each other and create bonds between them. These connections can all be traced back to the beginning with the world's first civilization, Sumer.

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