

■ Proverbs from Sumer

Date: c. 2000 BCE

Geographic Region: Sumer (present-day Iraq)

Summary Overview

The Third Dynasty of Ur is sometimes called the Sumerian Renaissance because of its advances in art, literature, and architecture. Prior to its rise, the Sumerian cities between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers had been conquered by a series of culturally distinct Akkadian and Gutian rulers. The later Gutian rulers were warlords from the Zagros Mountains whose rule was marked by weak central administration, failing infrastructure, famine, and declining literacy. Sometime around 2100 BCE, the city of Lagash, which had maintained some autonomy and a higher standard of learning, was conquered by the ruler of the city of Ur, and this union ushered in a new Sumerian empire, known as the Third Dynasty of Ur. The Third Dynasty of Ur saw the ascendancy of the Sumerian language in literature and written documents, though the Akkadian language continued to be spoken. Sumerian texts survive in quantity from this period, most on fragments of clay tablets. In addition to economic and legal documents, poems and proverbs were written down, often as educational texts for children. The present document shows some of those proverbs.

Defining Moment

The ancient Sumerians occupied the southern part of present-day Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The region that would later be known as **Mesopotamia** was settled by agrarian people long before they appear in the historical record, but it was the **Sumerians** who irrigated this fertile land using river water and a complex series of canals, and agricultural settlements turned into large cities. Large-scale centralization produced the need for trade and communication across distances, and the **Sumerians** are believed to be responsible for the first written language. They expressed this language through **cuneiform**, symbols and images carved into clay tablets.

It is not known exactly when the Sumerians first settled in the region, but archeology has found evidence of

writing and the use of wheeled vehicles, wind-powered boats, and irrigation by the fourth millennium BCE. By this time, they had begun to settle into cities, with the city of Uruk the largest of this early period. The period when Uruk was most prominent is known as the Uruk Period, which lasted from approximately 4100 to 2900 BCE. Cities were well established during this period, and agriculture and trade flourished. The city of Eridu also held cultural prominence among the Sumerians, as they believed that this is where civilization was first established. During this time, Sumer, formerly a collection of city-states, came to be ruled by a single monarch, a priest-king assisted by a council of elders. Merchants of Sumer traded with foreign lands and other cities, and this seems to have hastened the development of cuneiform writing, as a means of codified, long-distance communication was needed.

During the Early Dynastic Period, from approximately 2900–2334 BCE, priest-kings gave way to more secular rulers. The city-states of Sumer went to war with each other to gain territory and for control of water. Near the end of the period, the city-state of Lagash gained control of most of Sumer, until the king of Lagash was overthrown by his servant, Sargon of Akkad, who founded the Akkadian Empire. The Akkadians lost control of Sumer when the Gutians began invading around 2200 BCE. The Gutians were not capable administrators however, and the period of Gutian rule saw Sumerian culture in precipitous decline. Around 2112 BCE, evidence suggests that the ruler of Uruk, a native Sumerian named Utu-hegal, led a revolt against the Gutian king and successfully founded the Third Dynasty of Ur.

During the Third Dynasty, southern Mesopotamia was ruled by five generations of Sumerian kings. The territory controlled from the city of Ur was a smaller size than the Akkadian Empire had been. Cities were socially stratified, containing both freemen and slaves, and the stability and complexity of urban life led to improvements in infrastructure, literacy, and record-keep-

ing. Massive architecture projects, such as the Ziggurat at Ur, were completed. During this period, nearly forty thousand texts were produced, many of them adminis-

trative documents, though some, like these proverbs, were intended to educate and entertain.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

1. Whoever has walked with truth generates life.
2. Do not cut off the neck of that which has had its neck cut off.
3. That which is given in submission becomes a medium of defiance.
4. The destruction is from his own personal god; he knows no savior.
5. Wealth is hard to come by, but poverty is always at hand.
6. He acquires many things, he must keep close watch over them.
7. A boat bent on honest pursuits sailed downstream with the wind; Utu has sought out honest ports for it.
8. He who drinks too much beer must drink water.
9. He who eats too much will not be able to sleep.
10. Since my wife is at the outdoor shrine, and further-

more since my mother is at the river, I shall die of hunger, he says.

11. May the goddess Inanna cause a hot-limbed wife to lie down for you; May she bestow upon you broad-armed sons; May she seek out for you a place of Happiness.
12. The fox could not build his own house, and so he came to the house of his friend as a conqueror.
13. The fox, having urinated into the sea, said "The whole of the sea is my urine."
14. The poor man nibbles at his silver.
15. The poor are the silent ones of the land.
16. All the households of the poor are not equally submissive.
17. A poor man does not strike his son a single blow; he treasures him forever.

GLOSSARY

Inanna: Sumerian goddess of love and fertility

Utu: Sumerian sun god

Document Analysis

The proverbs in this collection are from a variety of sources, and are representative of traditional Sumerian wisdom. Many of these proverbs fall into the broad category of wisdom texts—philosophical statements about how to live. Some, like the first, are so general as to invite a variety of interpretations. "Whoever has walked with truth generates life" can be taken to mean that if a person seeks truth then they will have a positive impact on the world, or that speaking the truth can make a person live longer. Interpretations of these texts cause additional complications. Several other proverbs in this selection fall into this general category as well, including, "Do not cut off the neck of that which has had its neck cut off," which means that one should not pursue an issue after it is settled (a modern version

might be, "Do not beat a dead horse"). Some of these proverbs use animal imagery, with the animal standing in for certain sets of human qualities and traits. For example, foxes overestimate their own importance ("The fox, having urinated into the sea, said 'The whole of the sea is my urine'"), and turn on their friends when they fail ("The fox could not build his own house, and so he came to the house of his friend as a conqueror"). The riparian life of Sumerians is also illustrated in a proverb comparing an honest life to sailing easily downstream.

The Sumerians were obsessed with wealth and poverty, and many of these proverbs have to do with the poor. Poverty was both dangerous and noble. The poor cherished their children and were silent and careful with their meager resources. Poverty should not be mistaken for obedience, however, as "all the households of

the poor are not equally submissive.” The wealthy are not without their problems, either, since once wealth is gained, it must be protected: “He acquires many things, he must keep close watch over them.” Wealth is fleeting, and poverty “is always at hand.”

Other proverbs illustrate advice for everyday life. Alcohol should be tempered with water, and a person should not eat too much before sleeping. One saying is a lament that without his mother or wife, a man will go hungry. Clearly preparing food was the role of women in Sumer. Another proverb states that a good wife is a blessing from the goddess Inanna and will bless her husband with strong sons.

Essential Themes

The themes of these proverbs vary with their topic, but there is particular emphasis given to poverty and wealth in this selection, along with indications of the joys and expectations of family life. The poor cherished their children, and any man would be blessed to have a good

wife and strong sons. Men suffered when women were too much occupied with religion or other pursuits. The poor were careful with their resources, loving to their children, but could be dangerous. The wealthy needed to guard what they had acquired, and poverty was just around the corner for everyone. Another general theme of these sayings is that living a truthful life will pay off. The ship engaged in “honest pursuits” will have smooth sailing.

—Bethany Groff, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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