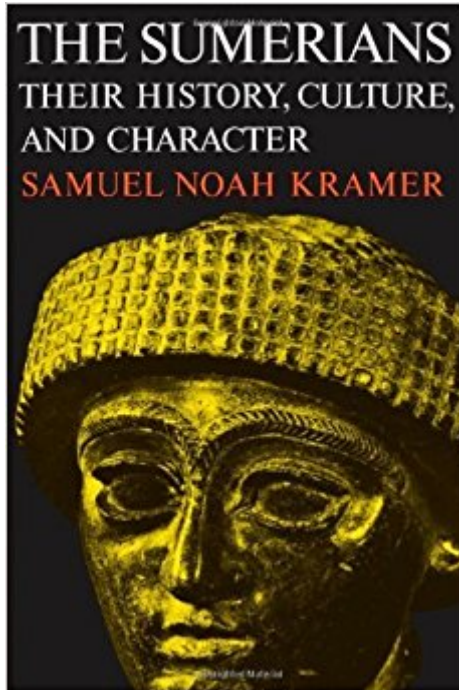


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The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, And Character (Phoenix Books)



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

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.

Samuel Noah Kramer's "The Sumerians" is a 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.

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