

Daily Life in Ancient Sumer

Ancient Sumer was a bustling place. The cities were built along the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. Long docks were built along the sides of the rivers so that ships could easily dock and unload the goods they had to trade. Ships brought food, drinks, clothes, jewelry, wine, and other goods up and down the rivers. In the cities, banquets were held with music and dancing. Poets would recite verses about great kingly deeds from the past. Golden cups filled with sweet delicious date wine would be lifted in toasts to their host.

Art:

The Sumerians were wonderful craftsmen. They made jewelry of precious gold and lapis lazuli. They created fancy chairs and unglazed vases that kept water cool. They were not very good at sculptures because their artists did not have stone with which to work. But they made beautiful things with the materials on they had hand. One of the things they did very well was to create colorful mosaics in detailed and beautiful patterns using little pieces of painted clay. Archaeologists have found remains of their mosaics, helmets, harps, jewelry, pottery, decorated tablets and cylinder seals all throughout Sumer.

Religion:

The ancient Sumerians believed in many, many gods. They believed that everything that happened to them—good and bad—was the result of a god's pleasure or displeasure. They spent their days seeking ways to please and appease their gods.

Ziggurats:

Ziggurats were large temples. They were the biggest and most important buildings in each city-state. The Sumerians believed that powerful gods lived in the sky. They built huge structures, called Ziggurats, with steps climbing up to the top. Religious ceremonies were often held at the very top. People left offerings of food and wine. The priests enjoyed these offerings, as the gods could not eat for themselves.

The Ziggurat was almost always built in the center of town. It was also the center of daily life. The Ziggurat courtyard was usually happy and lively. You might see an artist painting, a boy racing by on his way to school, someone milking a cow, or making a basket. From the top of the Ziggurat, you could see the protective wall built around the entire town, and over the wall to the farmlands beyond.

Education:

The ancient Sumerians believed in education. Record keeping was very important to them. They wrote everything down. They wanted their sons to learn how to read and write. Public education probably began with the Sumerians.

Schools were attached to the temples. Only boys went to school. Teachers were very strict. Students had to do a perfect job, or they were punished. Most students wanted to go to school. Someone who could read and write could always find a good job.

Classes of People:

There were four main classes of people in ancient Sumer—the priests, the upper class, the lower class, and the slaves.

The Priests:

The priests were powerful. They were in charge of making sure everyone behaved in a way that would make the gods happy. They were the doctors of the time. If you were sick, you called for a priest. There is a written record of two priests, by the bed of a sick boy, dressed to look like fish to better speak with the water god. (This author does not know why the priests wanted to talk to the water god. Perhaps the boy became sick in the water or from drinking the water.)

The Upper Class:

Men and women wore jewelry, especially rings. Men wore skirts and had long hair, curly moustaches, and long beards. Women wore dresses, off one shoulder. They had long hair, which they braided or wore up in fancy arrangements. It was easy to tell who the priests were. The priests shaved their heads. Everyone wore cloaks made from sheep wool to keep warm in winter.

The Lower Class:

In ancient Sumer, people were paid for their work. If they ran a shop or worked in the fields, they were paid for their goods or labor. Stealing was a serious crime and punishment was severe. Everybody was paid, even the king. Although the lower class did not have the luxurious lifestyle of the rich, they were comfortable. They worked very hard and they lived in modest homes. They wore jewelry, although perhaps it was not made of gold. They followed the clothing fashions of the time as much as possible. There was no law that said they could not move up the social scale, or more likely, have their children move up the social scale by becoming a scribe, or a priest or priestess.

The Slaves:

When the Sumerians conquered another town, they brought prisoners back with them to act as slaves. Slaves worked for the king, the temple and the wealthy. Slaves were bought and sold. Records have been found recording the amount paid for a slave. Typically, a slave bought at auction cost less than a donkey but more than a cow.

Women:

Women could freely go to the marketplace, buy and sell goods, handle legal issues, own property, and start their own business. Upper class women, like members of the royal family and those who gave their life to the temple as priestesses, could learn how to read and write. Some women even had jobs running parts of the town or jobs in city government. There were many female goddesses. Some cities selected a goddess rather than a god as their patron. Women may not have been equal to men, but they did have rights.

Homes:

The rich lived in large homes, and the poor lived in small homes. Most homes were clustered around the Ziggurat. Most houses shared walls, like townhouses do today. There was little wood and stone available for building materials.

People built their homes out of sun-dried brick. Doors led into a small family courtyard. Stairs led up to the second floor, and then to the roof. The roofs were flat. People cooked and slept on their roofs, when weather permitted. As the cities grew, there were rich sections of town and poorer sections of town, but all families had a home of their own.