SUMER

AND THE
SUMERIANS

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The Guti dominated Sumer for a period estimated to have lasted anything between forty and ninety years, but the lower figure is now generally preferred. They left few archaeological traces and were finally ejected by a Sumerian coalition led by the governor of Uruk (Hal0 1971). He in his turn was quickly ousted by one of his officers, Ur-Nammu of Ur, who founded what was to be the last of the great Sumerian dynasties, the third dynasty of Ur.

The Ur III period was one of great prosperity, with a booming economy allowing great reconstruction programmes to be initiated at all the major religious sites, most notably at Ur itself. The art of the period is very accomplished, but lacks the fire of the Agade examples. The exception to this generalisation is perhaps to be found in the large numbers of clay plaques and figurines depicting many aspects of everyday life as well as apotropaic figures of gods and demons. There are delightful figures of animals as well as rather stereotyped goddess and guardian-angel types. Even furniture, such as beds and chairs of clay, is found, though its significance is not really known. Archaeologically speaking, the most significant feature of the Ur III period is the magnificent monumental architecture.

By the end of the dynasty, Sumerian political power was virtually exterminated, with only two cities, Isin and Larsa, surviving as independent entities for a few more years. Political power was never to revive again, but the break in the material culture is much less marked.

**Absolute Dating**

We have looked at the relative dating of the periods which interest us and will now try to put them into some kind of framework of absolute dates based largely on figures derived from the technique of carbon-14 analysis. Such dates, especially when they are based on samples from a single archaeological horizon, and not on a stratified sequence, should not be regarded as anything more than an indication of a possible calendar date, especially as real problems still remain in calibrating radiocarbon dates with what might be called real, historical time. Radiocarbon dates can, in some instances, be cross-checked against dates derived from the historical evidence. The Uruk period is conventionally said to have begun about 3500 BC (Cambridge Ancient History 1971) but as new, revised radiocarbon dates become available a strong case can be made for suggesting that this date maybe have to be pushed back four or even five hundred years. This case rests on two new sets of dates, one from late Uruk sites in north Syria and the other from late Predynastic Egypt, a period broadly contemporary with the late Uruk in Mesopotamia (Moorey 1987). On the basis of these dates a timespan of 3400–3200 BC could be suggested for the late Uruk (Nissen 1987). The beginning of the period is difficult to pinpoint, but the excavations at the type-site of Uruk identified eleven major levels, some of them with substantial sub-periods so that a span of 600 to 800
years does not seem ridiculous, especially if we remember how many remarkable innovations are to be attributed to the period. More dates from the early part of the period would be valuable.

Very little direct evidence is available for the date of the Jemdat Nasr period, which, as we have already suggested, seems to have been of relatively short duration. Dates for the beginning of ED I cluster around 2900 BC, which would indicate a maximum of 300 years for the Jemdat Nasr from around 3200 to 2900 BC. On the basis of the archaeology alone, this might seem a rather generous allocation of time and could perhaps be compressed by as much as a hundred years. A number of radiocarbon dates are now becoming available from the later ED, mainly from Nippur and Abu Salabikh. These indicate dates of about 2800 for the end of ED I and of around 2600 for the beginning of ED IIIa (Wright 1980). Radiocarbon dates for the latest ED IIIb and the succeeding Agade periods are not available and we are forced to rely on quasi-historical dates derived from the King Lists and other inscriptions for this timespan. The position in Ur III is slightly better and a date for the beginning of the period from Ur is calculated at 2230 ± 85 BC, and another from Nippur for the end of the dynasty gives 2303 ± 109, which on historical grounds looks much too high and should be discounted.

We have already mentioned that, at least for the Agade and Ur III dynasties, it is possible to crosscheck the radiocarbon dates against the dates derived from the historical sources. Earlier than this the historical records are so incomplete that checking becomes extremely difficult. The most important of the historical sources is the Sumerian King List, a document actually compiled after the fall of the Ur III dynasty and whose interpretation is fraught with difficulty. As our knowledge has increased, its shortcomings as a genuine historical work have become more and more obvious. Some dynasties, such as those of Lagash for which we have incontrovertible evidence in the shape of inscriptions of the actual rulers, are omitted entirely; other dynasties which we know to have been contemporary with each other, again from royal inscriptions which establish the synchronisms, are shown as sequential; the regnal years of the earliest dynasties are fantastic, crediting individual kings with reigns of thousands of years and, finally, there are many lacunae in the record (Jacobsen 1939). A strong case can be made for suggesting that the King List is actually a piece of political polemic, but even so much of the evidence in it is of considerable value (Michalowski 1983).

Additional information can be gained from royal inscriptions, which sometimes provide regnal years as well as the name of the ruler. Occasionally, such inscriptions also include information on momentous events of the time such as victorious campaigns or major building projects. From the Agade period onwards, when the dating system was revised, such information is also to be found in the year-names from which the calendar was compiled. Each year was called after some important event which had taken place in the previous one. The absolute dates derived from these sources for the
Agade and Ur III periods, during which the King List is reasonably complete, are achieved by working backwards from the dates proposed on astronomical grounds for Hammurabi of Babylon, whose dynasty succeeded that of Ur III after an unsettled period of indeterminate length. Five possible dates for Hammurabi’s accession are proposed on the basis of observations of the planet Venus, recorded in the reign of one of Hammurabi’s successors. Most scholars now favour the middle date of 1792 for this event and, by counting backwards from this year, dates of 2112–2006 BC are given for the Ur III dynasty and of 2317–2191 BC for the Agade rulers (Cambridge Ancient History 1971). However, recently, a reassessment of the astronomical evidence favours a date of 1848 BC for the accession of Hammurabi and if this is accepted the dates for the earlier periods will have to be readjusted accordingly (Huber 1982). It has to be said that at a distance of four thousand years, a discrepancy of fifty years does not seem of fundamental importance. Even this modest amount of extrapolation is bedevilled by uncertainties, and attempts to date the ED by similar methods have not proved useful.

In summary, it can be seen that both the scientific and historical methods, neither of them entirely satisfactory, suggest that the period from the early Uruk to the end of the Ur III period covered a span of about 1,800 years. The Uruk period probably began about 3800 BC and the Ur III dynasty came to an end just before 2000 BC.

HISTORY AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Details of the history can be found in a number of textbooks, most of which are somewhat out of date, such as the Cambridge Ancient History and Hallo and Simpson 1971.

This section deals with a period during which Sumerian was one of the languages spoken in the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates, south of the Hit–Samarra line. It was not the only language spoken there; Semitic dialects were also in use. The adjective Sumerian is now loosely used to describe not only the language but also the people and the culture which evolved on the plain of southern Mesopotamia at this time. The southern part of the plain also became known as the land of Sumer. It is not possible to tell how much of this culture should be attributed to the Sumerian speakers and how much to those speaking a Semitic language, but the question hardly matters as it seems to have been the fusion of all the elements in the population which produced the distinctive civilisation which will be described in the rest of this book.

People with both Sumerian and Semitic names were present in the area from the time of the earliest written records at the end of the Uruk period. Initially the people with Semitic names seem to have been concentrated in the north of the plain, in the area which became known as Akkad, in the vicinity of the city of Kish. There is nothing to suggest that either group was a recent arrival at the end of the fourth millennium. The population may well have been mixed from the time of the earliest hunter-gatherers, of whom no archaeological traces remain. From a study of the personal names in the