

Proposal: Sumerian interactions with death, burial, and the afterlife

“I pledge, I hereby declare upon my word of honour that I have neither given nor received unauthorised help on this work” [*Charlotte Niblett*]

The proposed paper is a study into how the Sumerians of the Early Dynastic period interacted with death, burial, and the afterlife. The evidence will be focused on the Royal Tomb at Ur and the archaeological evidence found there as well as translations of historical texts regarding death. Excavations by Sir Leonard Wooley in 1922 provided us with physical evidence from the major archaeological site at Ur. These discoveries were very substantial within the realm of Sumerian burial culture and the historiography of Sumerian study. These burial sites provide insight into how the Sumerians thought of death and the afterlife by showing us the arrangements of tombs, servants, and offerings.

Sumerian culture existed from approximately 4100 to 1750 BCE. As a society, it formulated writing, bureaucracy, religious rule, the wheel, and much more. Primarily located in the southwest of Mesopotamia, its major cities included such marvels as Uruk, Ur, Eridu, Larsa, Nippur, and Shuruppak. Its invention of writing, what the Greeks called cuneiform, is what spurred this great culture of city-states into historical notoriety; square-shaped reeds were used to indent on soft clay and then baked into tablets to keep records of their transactions, religious rites, and more. These clay tablets are the first-hand accounts of the Sumerians and what Assyriologists study as their main primary source. Assyriology, the study of the Ancient Near East or Cuneiform Studies, came to fruition as a field of study in the later half of the nineteenth century as a parallel to Egyptology. The study found itself in the company of many French, German, and British noblemen explorers of the time and would become a historical and archaeological craze in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. The area of focus for the proposed paper is the early dynastic period dating between 2900 and 2350 BCE, in which the culturally bound city-states of Sumer prospered and their influence reigned in the region.

This topic fills a gap in the historiography of Sumerian Assyriology as death and burial are not typically given more than a section in journals or books. While a good amount of secondary sources exist discussing the subject, many include it as a subset to their topics of religion, mythology, or Sumerian cultural practices as a whole. This is where the paper will fill the gap with its specific focus on death, burial, and the afterlife.

The paper will talk about the religious rites in death, queries on the seeming servant suicide at graves, offerings and ornaments, and where the Sumerians believe they're going after death. It will do this by taking reference from primary source translations of clay tablets that reference death and burial, by the excavation notes at found tombs and burials, and by interpreting the myth and legend of Sumerian culture and how it represents their outlook on death.

The proposed paper, regarding the evidence and primary sources, will look into the physical traces left behind as well as direct and contextual evidence from tablet transcriptions. The paper's primary or original sources include *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, *Literature from Ancient Sumer*, *Letters from Early Mesopotamia*, *Excavations at Ur*, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. These are the translations of the aforementioned clay tablets that will provide the paper with evidence regarding the burial customs as well as the archaeological notes from the first-hand encounters at the dig site. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in particular shows a good insight into how Sumerians perceived death through its incarnation in popular literature whereas *Excavations at Ur* recounts the layout and findings at physical digsites.

Though I do not have access to all translations of known cuneiform tablets the ones available will provide more than enough evidence along with the excavation notes. From there the paper will be able to accurately describe and explain the Sumerian burial practices and the culture around death. It will be able to give insight into the religious or mythological aspects of death as well as the physical customs that accompany it regarding mainly wealthier burials.

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