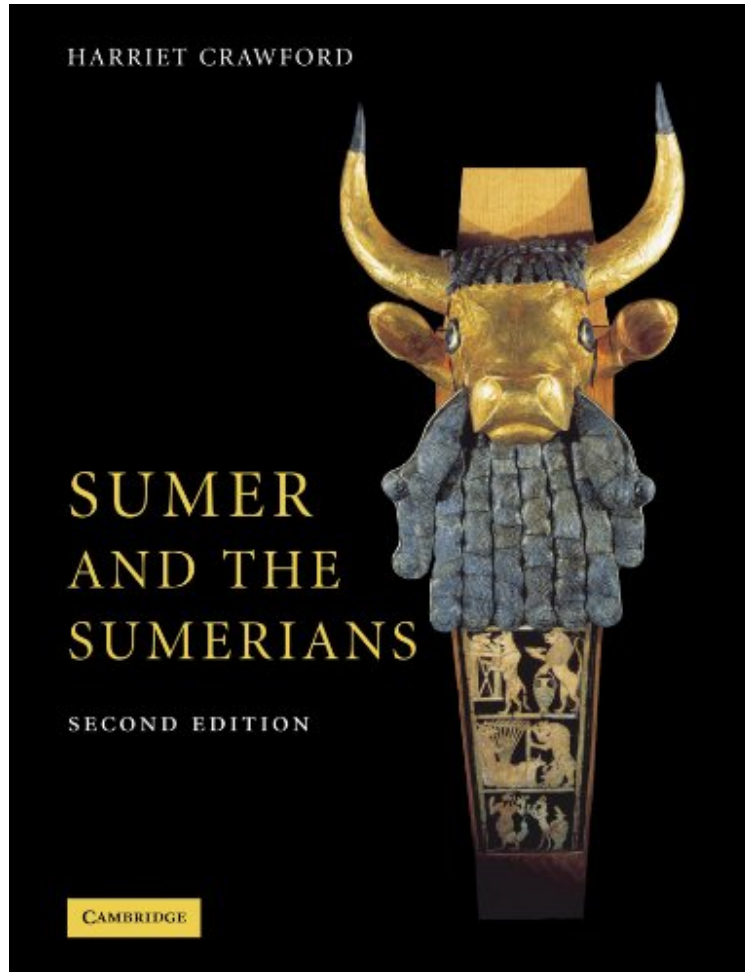


Sumer and the Sumerians

Harriet Crawford

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Harriet Crawford : Sumer and the Sumerians before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sumer and the Sumerians:

24 of 24 people found the following review helpful. A factual description of the Sumerian civilization By David Oldacre This 182 page book is one of several I have read in recent months on ancient Mesopotamia, so I was familiar with many of the topics which are included. Professor Crawford states in the preface that the book is intended for students and especially those beginning to study the archaeology and history of the Ancient Near East. She also states that the book attempts to combine a chronological account with that of a number of major themes, her emphasis being on descriptions rather than explanations. The book covers the development of the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia during the period c 3800BC to 2000BC, with the following themes described in separate chapters: (1) Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East: the physical environment (2) History, chronology, and social organization (3) Patterns of settlement and agriculture (4) Town planning and temple architecture (5) Public building and private

housing(6) Life, death, and the meaning of the universe(7) Manufacturing industry, and trade(8) Writing and the arts(9) Conclusions - the development of Sumerian society

The book includes 8 maps and 80 illustrations most of which I have seen in the other books I have read on the subject, although I do believe them to be representative of the period. The reference section lists the works of some 150 authors, which includes some of the works of the early archaeologists, as well as more recent works of the 1970s and 1980s, and there is also a short index. For me the first three chapters are the most useful part of the book and provide a very good introduction to the subject. Chapter 1 is an overview of the archaeological work done to about 1990 since the 19th century rediscovery of the major sites of the Sumerian civilization, and a general description of the nature of the land, the climate and ecological zones, and the trade routes. Chapter 2 is a review of the basic periods of the development of the Sumerian civilization based on archaeological records, scientific methods of dating, and the historical record from tablets and inscriptions. Professor Crawford points out that while many of these are quite problematic and inconsistent with each other, they still provide much useful solid information. Chapter 3 is a very interesting summarization of the results of a number of geographical surveys performed by Robert Adams in the 1960s, which is covered in considerably more detail in the "The Early History of the Ancient Near East" by Hans J Nissen. Chapters 4 - 8 provide detailed descriptions of the archaeological findings from the most significant Sumerian sites, with the concluding chapter discussing the outstanding characteristics which may have contributed to the development of the Sumerian civilization. I liked the fact that Professor Crawford concentrates on the facts "on the ground" and is careful to explain why some proposals put forward by earlier and eminent archaeologists are difficult to accept due to inconsistent or insufficient evidence from which to draw sound conclusions. The book is well written and easy to read, but I must confess that I had to read it a second time in order to prepare this review, which shows that on the first time around I did not absorb as much of the material as I would have hoped. For me, the weakest part is the chapter on "Writing and the arts" which concentrates more on the arts than on the development of writing which must be the most significant achievement and legacy of the Sumerian civilization. I was also surprised at her statement that there have been no drastic or fundamental changes in the weather patterns. It was my understanding that one of the major driving forces in the development of Sumerian civilization was the requirement to organize the development and maintenance of the irrigation channels as a result of the gradual drying up of the lower part of Mesopotamia during much of the 4th and 3rd millennia. I found that the maps were somewhat vague since they generally only included most important sites, and geographical features such as the Diyala and Hamrin valleys had to be deduced from the descriptions in the text. I also wonder if there have been any major new findings in the 15 years since 1991 when the book was first published. In summary, I think that this is a solid introduction to the study of the Sumerian civilization, but I prefer "The Ancient Orient - An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East" by Wolfram von Soden as an introduction to the subject. I also prefer "The Early History of the Ancient Near East: 9000 - 2000BC" by Hans J Nissen, since that provides the background of the earlier period leading up to the development of the Sumerian civilization.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Muddled By Flash Sheridan I agree with some of the other reviewers that it's not clear who, if anyone, this book is intended for. I've only gotten through the first two chapters, but the poor organization means that the book is only fully comprehensible by those who don't need it. A crucial point in expository writing is to define your terms when you first use them, especially in a book for "students beginning to study the archeology and history of the ancient Near East." The author introduces the discussion of the crucial Uruk archeological period at the beginning of chapter 2 by saying that it "was a long one..." without either saying what its evidentiary meaning is, or (until much later) what its likely timeframe was. Admittedly there are very large error bars on the chronology; presenting those along with the various plausible dates is precisely the duty of the author of a book for beginning students. Even the relative chronology of the various archeological periods is poorly presented; even a simple introductory sentence along the lines of "The chief archeological periods, in approximate order, are..." would have been better than presenting them piecemeal. The author's evidence-based presentation isn't even a consistent privileging of epistemology over comprehensibility. When we come to politics ("It is clear that the priesthood too could exercise considerable control..." on page 31), it seems clear that this has to be based on written evidence, but there has been no preceding mention of this, much less a discussion of the evidence and its limitations. (For a book on a people most notable for the invention of writing and a civilization relying on it, this seems an astonishing choice.) Another key duty of an author, though I admit that this one is less often honored, is to ensure that a map being discussed actually labels all the place names mentioned. This is particularly painful for map 2, where most of the discussion is of places not labelled, e.g., the Taurus and Zagros mountains, Jezirah ("the former" is too ambiguous to be helpful), and Samarra, among many others.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

It Took Me Eight Months to Finish This By Muldoon I was expecting an overview of Sumerian society with this, as it was implied that this was a beginners text. Instead, what we got was a 220 page piece of literature that seems to be aimed more for one who is well versed in the knowledge of Sumer. There is several ways in which this occurs. The first is through a thematic approach, not chronological. While this in itself is never a bad thing, here we see the author delve into something without properly explaining the history (or at the most giving us a cursory knowledge) of the area. As a result, I find myself scratching my head at (for example) "Jemdat Nasr"... and trying to remember just when that took place. Crawford also fails to explain many of the terms she uses. We see

the mathematical unit "h.a." but in my reading I never came across it. Different "levels" are described, for example: "Children were predominantly buried in vessels or loose in the soil, while in level XIA/B only adults were found..." (pp. 141), or "...the house in H5 seems to be a wing of a larger unit" (pp.90). There is little explanation as to why the Ur III period sometimes has an a or b added to the end of it. The Ninevah V period just pops up out of nowhere when addressing types of pottery. Where is Ninevah I-IV? Why is it called Ninevah at all, and why is it important that we know this pottery is from that period? When one writes a study on something engineered for "students, and especially for students beginning [key word, there] to study the archeology and history of the ancient Near East" (pp. IX) it is important to operationally define all, or even most of, one's terms. To do otherwise leads to confusion and sometimes frustration. Lastly, the writing style is honestly the driest I've ever seen. The only reason I finished the text was so I could remind myself in the future when I read a dry book that it could never be as dry as Sumer and the Sumerians-- and somehow I finished that. All in all, Crawford put in a lot of effort. She thoroughly cites all of her sources throughout the book, and the amount of research done for this must have been astounding. The book suffers from too dry a writing style and lack of background both historically and in regards to the terms she uses. I think that many of these issues could be cleared up in her third edition. Better definitions, and maybe even a rough timeline at the beginning of the work (seeing as this is a thematic, not chronological approach) would help immensely for reference later on in the book. The book really does have a lot of potential, it just stumbled a bit in the execution; as aforementioned, I have hope for these issues to be addressed in a future edition.

Mesopotamia produced one of the best-known ancient civilizations, with a literate, urban culture and highly-developed political institutions. Harriet Crawford reviews the extraordinary social and technological developments in the region over a period of two millennia (from 3800 to 2000 BC) in this fully revised and expanded edition of her classic text. Drawing on the most up-to-date historical and archaeological sources, she describes the physical environment and covers architecture, trade and industry, the development of writing, and changes in social and political structures. First Edition Hb (1991): 0-521-38175-4 First Edition Pb (1991): 0-521-38850-3

'the real achievement of this slim book is that Crawford does not over-generalise, but leaves the reader with an understanding of both the broad patterns as well as the differences between regions in Mesopotamia and through time.'

Bibliotheca Orientalis

About the Author Harriet Crawford is an Honorary Visiting Professor in the Institute of Archaeology, University College London and Research Fellow at the McDonald Institute, Cambridge. She has excavated extensively in Iraq and the Gulf. Her previous publications include *The Architecture of Iraq in the Third Millennium BC* (1977) and *Dilmun and its Gulf Neighbours* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).