THE SUMERIAN WORLD

Edited by

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CONCLUSION

Sumerian fashion was varied and differed throughout the Protoliterate, Early Dynastic, Akkadian and Ur III periods. It was the domain of the elite and the ruling classes. They were the first to assign certain styles (uniforms) to particular official positions both military and religious. Dress differentiated between mortals and divinities and between Sumerians and people from neighboring regions. In matters of dress, the Sumerians were the style setters of the ancient world, in the same way as Western dress dominates the world today.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER TWENTY

SUMERIAN AND AKKADIAN INDUSTRIES: CRAFTING TEXTILES

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Roger Moorey’s Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries (1994) and Dan Potts’ Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations (1997) are the basic works on Sumerian craft industries. Moorey provides a comprehensive discussion of crafts throughout the greater Near East from the prehistoric (Archaic Neolithic) to the historic (Early Dynastic to the Achaemenid Persian), detailing stone, bone, ivory, shell, ceramics, glass working, metallurgy and building crafts but not textiles. Potts has a brief section on textiles among many other crafts. The goal of this chapter is to partially restore a place for the textile industry by offering a view restricted to southern Mesopotamia and the third millennium BC with occasional references to textile production in earlier periods.

Agriculture and pastoralism were at the center of the Sumerian economy and critical to the development of the textile industry. Situated on an alluvial plain, the civilization lacked important natural resources such as stone and metal, but was a prime location for cultivating wheat and barley and herding sheep and goats. The Sumerians successfully parlayed these agricultural and pastoral products into a number of productive industries that provided the goods necessary to acquire the resources it needed. Agricultural and craft workers were remunerated with barley and wool, as well as textiles and land in some cases. A system of taxation, referred to as a halāt tax (Sharaf 2004), which may not have been instituted until the Ur III period, brought in additional revenue based on the annual harvest.

In addition to these primary products, Sumerian farmers developed secondary products. Barley, wheat and grapes were brewed into beer and wine and sauerkraut into oil, animals for dairy products and the development of special breeds of woolly sheep and the production of textiles. These two products, wool and textiles, were critical to internal exchange and to foreign trade from which stone and metal were procured. In a later section of this chapter, “Redistribution, commercial exchange and reciprocity,” these exchanges will be discussed in more detail.

An account of the textile industry calls upon a number of sources. Its investigation normally begins with the examination of textiles left behind in excavated contexts in order to determine production techniques and function. Unfortunately, due to poor preservation conditions in southern Mesopotamia, there are very few cloth remains with which to undertake such a study. Our major sources from which to observe textile production are the representations of clothing on humans and gods and goddesses
depicted on statues, engravings on seals and sealings, and art works. For reconstructing the production process, analogies can be drawn from modern practices in which similar technologies are employed and that can be correlated with extant artifactual evidence. Finally, a major source is the texts kept by a number of institutions (royal, temple, private estates, and even a few private letters) in which details of production and function are recorded. I have included a section on household production based on the limited available evidence.

THE CLOTHES THEY WORE

Wool and textiles were essential parts of Sumerian life and touched on virtually all aspects of its social, political, economic, and religious functions and at all levels of society. Specific garments, grades of wool and textiles were reserved for royal and temple personnel and public displays in ceremonies and feasts. People in lower echelons were provided with cloth of coarser varieties and at lower levels of quality. Textiles, therefore, were emblems of status and were not only worn but also displayed in the form of tapestries and rugs that hung on palace walls (Postgate 1992: 133). Among their uses beyond the internal and foreign economy, they cemented marriage agreements, established alliances between governments and cities and rural areas, and were gifted to others on certain occasions.

Lists include an array of types of cloth that were for different functions. Some were hand-loomed, plaited or fleeced. Robes and garments were woven of linen wool; wool was made into saddle cloths, shaggy garments, headbands, headaddresses, linens and man-tning materials, mantling bandages and underwear (for clothes cf. al Gaffani this volume). Pomponius translates terms “rag, sanitary towel,” as a textile in poor condition (200: 153). Other categories into which cloth was graded were sumptuous, best, third and fourth grades and sizes that were small, middle, and large (Kang 1973: 297ff; Wright 1996).

There was a darker side to woven cloth, however, observable in the texts that recorded the circumstances under which it was produced. The term “workshop” is usually applied to the industrial quarters where the textiles were produced, although no place of this kind has been discovered in excavations or surveys. In any event, production took place among teams of workers, some of whom were local citizens, while others were indentured or purchased persons, or prisoners of war. Some were conscripted for seasonal labor at the service of the royal, temple, or private estate, where the textiles were being produced. Although we do not know the precise conditions under which the producers worked, many attempted to run away, suggesting that conditions were not good. More on this will be discussed in the later section “The organization of production.”

BASIC RESOURCES: WOOL AND LINEN

Among the cultures contemporaneous with the Sumerians, other plant fibers were used, such as cotton, hemp, and jute, but outside of reeds and palm, there are no records for the use of any other fibers in Mesopotamia. The two basic ones used for Sumerian textiles were from the wool of sheep and from flax for linen. The uses of plants and animals for these purposes are considered secondary products. Andrew Sherar (1981) hailed the development of special breeds for wool as significant a technological advance as domestication, as they made possible new production technologies and potential reorganizations of labor. In Sumer, the shift to wool catalyzed “the initial development of large textile workshops and the labor class” (McCorriston 1997: 318).

Linen

Linen fiber is produced from the flax plant and is known as early as 9000 bc. The discovery of a linen textile at the site of Nehal Hemar in the Judean desert in Israel was the first evidence for this use (Schatz 1988). From the Neolithic on, flax continued to be processed into fiber at sites in the Levant and in Turkey, but it was not until the Ubaid period, 4500–4000 bc that the use of linen for textiles is attested at the site of Tell al-Ouelli.

By the third millennium, wool had overtaken linen in the production of textiles when only about 10 percent of Sumerian textiles were made of linen. Joy McCorriston (1997) has suggested that the shift to a greater dependence on wool may have been the result of the limitations available agricultural land that needed to be well-watered and labor requirements necessary to process flax into fiber when compared to wool. While the amount of land required to produce flax is lower than wool, it requires prime agricultural land and high labor expenditures. Sheep herds, on the other hand, can be pastured on marginal land, and labor expenditures are lower.

In spite of these economic differences, linen cloth continued to be produced in Sumer. Fabric and garments made of linen were restricted to elite clothing and a variety of accessories to be discussed later (Waeckerle 1983: 2010).

Wool

The use of sheep for meat and wool has a long history in the Near East. Zoological and genetic evidence indicate that sheep were domesticated sometime around 9000 bc (11,000 and 10,000 cal. BP) throughout a region that stretched from Iran to Turkey (Zeder 2008, 2009: 37). When and where specific breeds of sheep for wool were developed is less certain. Although spindle whorls were discovered in contexts dating to around 7000 bc (9,000 cal. BP), it is unclear whether they were for spinning linen fiber or wool. The overall size of the wool, the perforation at its center, and its weight differ depending on the fiber being processed (Parsons and Parsons 1995; Kimbrough 2006). Studies of this kind have not been done on the whorls, so it remains uncertain as to whether they were for spinning wool or linen. The methods used to determine these differences will be discussed later in the section "Tools of the trade."

In Sumer, references to sheep herds in the Archaic texts that date to the Late Uruk period (Green 1982) suggest that by the fourth millennium sheep herds were a major focus of the Sumerian economy. There is no direct evidence for the presence of wool-bearing sheep in the south during the Uruk period, although they are present in the upper Euphrates (Al'agaz 2008). Certainly, by the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, the presence of wool-bearing sheep in large herds had come into its own.

By Uruk III, textile production had become an industrial activity. Standardized qualities for wool were established, earmarked for specific fabrics, and recorded by
weight sufficient for certain types of garments (Pomponio 2010; Waetzoldt 1972, 2010). The wool standards and others for finished cloth were essential in order to produce textiles that were suitable for garments with which to honor its gods, to adorn royalty and other elites, to bring together large teams of laborers, and to establish networks of inter-city and foreign exchange.

In one Ur III text, 2,259 sheep were recorded as having been brought in for what today would be sheep shearing, but in Sumerian times amounted to plucking. Until shearing implements were invented, the wool was hand plucked from the animal. Based on a text from Girsu (in Lagash province) in Ur III, Dan Potts notes that on a single day 2,259 sheep were plucked (Potts 1997; Waetzoldt 1972: 24). He calculated that over a three-month period 203,310 sheep would have been plucked in Girsu alone. This amount accords well with other Ur III texts in which 375,000 kg of wool from fat-tailed sheep were recorded. "Based on the average yield per animal of 0.7 kg (1.4 minas in Mesopotamian weight calculations), this would come to "roughly 535,714 animals" (Potts 1997: 93).

Most of what we know about shepherds and herding of sheep is from records of animals brought into the city of Umma. Different breeds of sheep were recorded and sorted by quality. In a fifty-seven-year span at Umma, there were 380 individuals identified as shepherds. Fat-tailed sheep were the highest quality and ranked as first and second class, while highland mountain sheep were ranked third, fourth and fifth class. An additional grade was referred to as common, the coarsest wool. Pomponio, however, refers to a text from Umma in which "wool of mountain sheep" were considered the "most prized wool" (2001: 104). All of these matters and others were subject to strict accounting, especially in the texts in question, where the herds were being monitored by the central administration. As animals were brought into the city, they were fed on grass and in fattening pens where they were provisioned with grain and reeds. Robert Adams suggests that about twenty-five shepherds operated at any one time (2006: 150). Based on the numbers of animals recorded and the estimated herding ability of a single shepherd, Adams calculates that the number of state administered herds may have ranged as high as 10,000 in Umma province. In distinction, in nearby Lagash, the much higher number of 66,095 for fat-tailed sheep (Adams 2006: 151) attests to its larger textile industry.

**FABRICS AND THEIR USES**

As noted, most textiles were produced from wool, rarely flax, with the exception of the fabrics for royalty and the gods. Our knowledge of the fabrics and garments produced during Sumerian times is based principally on depictions of humans and gods on seals, statues, plaques, and textual sources. In the following, the kinds of garments worn are traced over time inasmuch as this is possible.

In the Early Dynastic period, women and men depicted on statuary wore similar garments to which embellishments were added depending on the sex of the wearer. These garments were either a plain weave in which long fringes of fleece were woven into the fabric or a sheepskin worn with the fleece side shown. It probably is the garment most representative of rank and status, as it is shown most often on gods and goddesses and priests and priestesses (Winter 1987). For women the cloth was draped over the left shoulder. It could be covered with robes or capes that had fringes or hems (Baadsgaard 2008: 293). Women wore them ankle length while men wore kilts that extended to the knee. Men sometimes wore a sash over one shoulder.

These basic styles were embellished with decorative elements and patterns. Military uniforms which are visible on the "standard of Ur" (Postgate 1992: 246, fig. 13.1), a plaque discovered in a burial at the Royal Cemetery at Ur, depicts a military scene showing rank-and-file soldiers in distinctive uniforms. Men wear kilts with a long wool fringe. Over the kilt they wear a cape of either cloth or sheepskin and a helmet of similar materials. The cape has a neck clasp and holes perforating the cloth at intervals, either to serve as decorative elements or an unknown function. Other military personnel, car drivers, also wore a fringed kilt and helmet but instead of a cape, sashes were thrown over their left shoulders. Finally, Audrey Baadsgaard (2008) refers to the most distinctive fashion as "Unclothing," the nudity, depicted on priests, male workers and prisoners of war.

Our view of the production of fabric and garments from this period comes on the heels of a major transition in Sumerian society, when southern Mesopotamia was centralized under the Akkadian dynasty and additional changes in the control of wool, garments, and cloth production took place. In this period, many of the garments worn in the Early Dynastic period continued to be depicted in imagery but new forms were added. Benjamin Foster has identified four different types of garments. One is the "flounced, fleecy, tiered, ruched, ruffled, striped, plisse or tussacite" (2006: 123) garment worn by gods and goddesses and already known in the Early Dynastic period. A change, however, is the depiction of King Naram-Sin (Foster 2010: fig. 7.2; Winter 1996) wearing this garment, signaling its apparent desire to be considered a god. Alternatively, wearing the garment could signal his participation in a festival in which he impersonated a god; for example, in the sacred marriage of the god Dumuzi to the goddess Inanna.

A second type of garment was a skirt worn by women and a kilt: by men, again similar to the dress of the Early Dynastic but with added details. The garment was made into a single rectangular piece of cloth (or a sheepskin) and finished either with a rolled edge or a long fringe of fleece. Rolled cloth or ribbons may have helped to secure the garment. This was accomplished either by rolling the upper edge or securing the garment with a girdle or sash-like waist piece with a fringe that hung at the back (Foster 2010: 123, figs. 7.3, 7.4). This garment was worn by elites and non-elites. In texts it is referred to as "worn at the middle/waist" (ibid.: 129) and weighed 1.5 kg. It also could be worn with an additional garment made of linen that was wrapped over the skirt or kilt. At religious festivals, women of high status wore this skirt with a linen outer wrap. Men who wore the kilt also appear to have worn an outside cloak, referred to as bar-dul (see below) in the Ur III period.

A third type is a plain cloth with finished bands or fringes along its edges (ibid.:126, fig. 7.5). On statuary it appears as a smooth fabric (therefore, woven in a plain weave), but this could be deceptive, since the undraped surface may be an artistic convention. What distinguishes this garment is its large size and the finishing work of tassels, fringes, rolled fabrics or ribbons and possible embroidered edges. The fabric was produced in the form of a rectangle and worn with the long end draped across the left breast and shoulder and wrapped around to the right hip, perhaps twice. The waist was secured with rolled material, possibly ribbons, and could be worn knee or floor length (for women).
A fourth type was a simple toga style that Foster believes was an innovation that enjoyed "a vogue at court." It most likely was brought about based upon garments seen during conquests. In Sumer, it was worn by local notables (ibid.: 128, 134, fig. 7.11) for a more cosmopolitan look. Like the garment just described, it was a large full-body cloth worn exclusively by men, draped over the left shoulder with a fringe running vertically from top to bottom. The word used to describe this garment is translated as "over the heart" (ibid.: 133).

The Akkadians wore a number of different accessories with these garments and some kept large quantities of cloth for their wardrobes. The sashes known from the Early Dynastic period became more elaborate. For men, they were worn at the hip, loins, and waist, as shawls, and as a kind of undergarment. They were fringed, folded, and possibly embroidered (Foster 2010: figs. 7.12–7.14). It too could be worn with a wraparound cloak. One official left a sizable number of garments at his death. These included eighteen pieces of cloth or clothing, "twenty bolts of woolen cloth and thirty bolts of linen cloth" (ibid.) a sizable cache of luxury goods.

In the Ur III period, the texts take over and provide details regarding the quality standards applied to wool and to finished cloth. During this period, and most likely these standards differed in specific cities and from one period to the other, there were five qualities that ranged from first to fifth and an unclassified wool (Watzold 1972). What did not change was the relationship between quality terminology and the status or roles of the individual who wore them. Garments made from the two or three best-quality wool were restricted to the royal family and other elites (Watzold 2010: 201), for example.

There is a correlation between the value accorded the cloth, the status of its owner and the different terms used for fabrics. Most fabrics were produced in a balanced weave in which the ratio of warp (vertical threads) to weft (horizontal threads) was equal. This type of plain weave is the most common. Other factors included wool weight and size of the garment. The six fabrics listed in Table 20.1 define specific types of cloth. Rather than use the Sumerian names (also listed), they are designated as Types 1 through 6. These fabrics were used for several different types of apparel that included caps or shawls that wrapped around the shoulders (%ngi-la), loincloths, skirts or kilts (%mg-ga-dil), a coat or a long cloak (%bar-dili), and a heavy coat or a long cloak (%mgab). The most "highly regarded cloth was from Type 1 (%ba-ni-dil). The high weft to warp ratio suggests that several weft threads were woven at once, perhaps creating a twill-like pattern. Type 3 (%hi-ka-dil) may have been the next best for opposite reasons. This cloth has a ratio of warp to weft that is just about equal, thus producing a finer cloth but one that was not very thick, since it weighed in at 333g. Although size is rarely given, they were between 5.5 and 4.5 meters and as much as 4 meters wide, even up to 6.8 meters that could be used as a wraparound garment. Type 2 (%gu-za) cloth has a high warp to weft ratio, possibly the type of shaggy cloth referred to as "flounced and fleecy" earlier. Type 5 (%bar-dili) has a warp to weft ratio that is just about even, a plain woven fabric of light weight that could be produced from the finest or coarsest wool. Type 4 (%ti-ni-ri-dil) appears to have been a specialized cloth produced at Ur and in Garshana that may have been for deities. Finally, (%ri-mug) Type 6 was a thick welted face cloth and of a lower quality.

Colors were recorded for different garments along with the cloth and wool quality as noted in Table 20.2. The table is based on the colors, uses, and recipients of garments.
The uses for felt are described in some detail in connection with the production of different objects (ibid.). Among them were mattresses, which had been brought to a location where some were assembled and others cleaned (with an alkali). The fibers used were (ordinary) combed wool, goat hair and, more rarely, palm. Felted cloth also was used to produce clothing, including sandals and pedaling or lining of shoes. A special pair of shoes was made from fourth-class (the highest) combed wool and third-class linen for "royal white sandals" (ibid.: 88). Other clothing included belts, caps, ropes, and rage. Several different types of accessories for furniture also were listed, including upholstery such as an armchair and cushions for chairs, lining boxes, bronze objects, and other containers; mats and tablecloths and household needs. They included felt pieces for a bathroom, floor coverings, and ropes. Outdoor uses were for caulking boats and a lining for the "king's wagon" (ibid.: 87).

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The production of cloth was a major industry. The extensive agricultural and pastoral economy provided the basic resources for a large-scale industry. In this section, the processes of production are outlined as much as possible given our sources. Some methods are introduced in order to further advance the study of production processes. Since most textile products were produced from wool, this chapter deals only peripherally with the processing of linen. The following main stages in textile production are based on modern studies of weaving artifacts extant from excavations, and imagery on seals. Additionally, the textual sources outline aspects of the production process (Waetzoldt 1972), such as the following description from a workshop at Umma in the Ur III period (Waetzoldt 2010: 203):

1 gus-āa fabric from fourth-class wool,
the mixed wool for it [weighs] 4 kg,
1 woman cleans and combs 135 g in a day [and]
1 woman 'mingles' 1 kg in a day
the warp threads for it weighs 333 g [and]
1 woman spins 8.3 g strongly twisted threads [for the warp]
the weft threads for it weigh 1.66 kg [and]
1 woman produces 61 g [of them] in a day [for the weft]
the length of the gus-āa fabric is 3.5 m [and]
the width [is] 3.5 m;
3 women warp in 3 days [and]
2 women weave 50 cm in a day.

Plucking

The first step, not recorded in the above, obviously is in the collection of the basic raw materials, a matter discussed earlier in connection with the herding industry in the section "Basic resources." Plucking wool from sheep occurred twice a year, judging by the notation of "sheep-plucking shed" on the Mesopotamian calendar (Potts 1997). We have very little visual evidence in the form of artifacts or imagery for this process but based on analogy with current practices, the finest fleece would have come from the
outer coat of the animal where "springy wool" is found. This wool is the most easily spun. Two less fine types of wool are a medium-thick coarse hair that can be spun if mixed with wool (Barber 1991: 25; Kimbrough 2006: 29) and a type referred to as highly coarse. Without examples of Sumerian fibers, it is not possible to determine whether the highest qualities of wool described in Table 20.1 corresponded to springy wool and the lower grades to the medium-thick and coarse types at the lower end.

Cleaning, rolling, stretching the fiber

After plucking the wool from the sheep, additional steps were taken before it was ready for weaving. Although there are no images that show this step, based on current practices where it is carried out manually without the benefit of mechanized equipment as it is done in modern factories, this process involves cleaning the wool, combing it, and teasing it by hand (Ochsenschlager 1993), rolling and stretching the fiber (Breniquet 2010: 59, fig. 4.3). This is the "cleaning and combing" referred to in the records from Umma. Wool can also be carded by brushing it between tooth-lined boards (Kimbrough 2006: 37). Carding boards most likely would have been made of wood, and not preserved, if in fact they did exist in these early periods. This entire process is much more difficult with flux because the plant needs to be soaked, beaten, and scraped, then combed out (Forbes 1987: 132) and may explain why it was produced exclusively for cloth worn by higher status persons, gods, and goddesses.

Spinning

After preparing and cleaning the wool, the next step is to spin it into a yarn suitable for weaving. The purpose of spinning is to "convert a massive quantity of fiber into a stable yarn" (Wild and Rogers 2002: 11). This usually is done with a spindle consisting of a shaft and a whorl with a perforation near its center. The use of spindle whorls in the Near East stretches back to the Neolithic. In Sumer, there are images on cylinder seals from the Urk period of women seated and standing while spinning (Breniquet 2010: fig. 4.3a-d). They are holding a stick that has rounded ends on both sides. The rounded end at the top holds the wool and at the lower end, the whorl provides the weight (Kimbrough 2006: fig. 2.3). The spinner holds the spindle with one hand while drawing and twisting the fibers with the other. This twisting process presses the fiber together and strengthens the thread, as in the "8.3 g of strongly twisted threads" for the warp and the 61 g for the weft for the gur-ra fabric referred to above.

Round disc-shaped objects of clay and stone are often present in small quantities at archaeological sites. Many of them are misidentified as beads, when in reality they are spindle whorls (Liu 1978; Kimbrough 2006). Beads can be easily differentiated from whorls by their size. Beads usually are less than 2 cm in diameter and although some beads may be larger, they are rare. Therefore, a round object with a centrally pierced hole is more likely to be a whorl than a bead (Barber 1991; Forbes 1987).

Although whorls are an excellent source for determining the types of fiber spun, its fineness, and the quality of the yarn, they are rarely studied by Near Eastern archaeologists (but see Keith 1988; Kimbrough 2006). Archaeologists working in Mesopotamia have developed whorl typologies based on the weight of the whorl, the external diameter, and the perforation at its center. Finer yarns are spun with lighter weights (Barber 1991; Breunfeld 1991; Costin 1993; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991; Parsons and Parsons 1990; Ryder 1983). Whorl diameter determines the quality of the yarn spun since a whorl with a smaller diameter spins faster and produces a tightly spun yarn (Kimbrough 2006).

Christine Kimbrough (2006) developed a typology based on spindle whorls from two archaeological sites in northern Mesopotamia. Three functionally related criteria were used. The overall shape of the whorl, whether it is round, discoid, bicone, etc., is the first criterion. The second and third are its overall diameter and weight ranges. For example, a disk-shaped whorl, with a diameter range of 2-6 cm and weight of from 25 to 35 g is best for producing a medium fiber or coarse thread. A bicone-shaped whorl with a diameter of 1-3 cm and weight of 4-17 g is best for fine medium fiber and fine thread (Kimbrough 2006: 122). The ratio of whorl weights and diameters can be expressed on plots (ibid.: 134) in order to identify different types.

At the archaeological site of al-Hiba, Edward Ochsenschlager identified a number of hemispherical, flat-bottomed spindle whorls. Many of the whorls had minor imperfections, such as the skewed placement of the central perforation. He noticed that several village women were using whorls that they had picked up from the surface at al-Hiba. In spite of the somewhat random location of the perforation, the whorls functioned properly. He also observed a local woman spinning with a disk that was hand formed of sun-dried mud which she managed very well.

He established other evidence with respect to spun wool from cord impressions on the sealings of jars that he identified as two-ply and four-ply yarns at al-Hiba. The two-ply yarns also were found on fabric impressions observed on sealings and copper objects. There was an absence of loom weights that probably rules out warp-weighted looms at al-Hiba (Ochsenschlager 1993: 55).

Whorls, loom weights, heddles, and needles are found widely throughout Mesopotamia from earliest times and are an under-studied resource waiting for analyses with which to achieve a better understanding of the textile industry.

Dyeing

Dyeing usually takes place before the fiber is brought to the loom. In a village near al-Hiba, Ochsenschlager observed women dying wool by first soaking it in a warm solution of potash, a substance used as a mordant (1993). Mordants are necessary when plant dyes are used in order to fix the color in the yarn. In Sumer, there is very little evidence for the dyeing of fiber. Of the colors listed in Table 20.1, the white, black and red/browns most likely were naturally colored wools straight from sheep or possibly goat hairs, which could be mixed with wool. The multi-colored fabrics listed in the Umma texts during the Ur III period and also at a royal estate near Nippur could be a combination of the naturally colored yarns. The only exceptions are the yellow and green colors recorded during the Urk period (Breniquet 2010) and the shiny yellow listed in Table 20.2. Although there are no references to materials used to dye fabric, the shiny yellow cloth produced especially for the king indicates that dying may have occurred in exceptional cases (Wietzoldt 2010: 202).
Warping the loom

The warping process prepares the yarn for threading it onto the loom. This process is depicted on a cylinder seal in which a person stands at a warping board (Wright 1996: fig. 3.2; Breniquet 2010: fig. 4.6a). Warping boards are rectangular with pegs on each side around which the warp is wound in order to keep threads in order. The warped yarn can then be moved to the loom without the risk of tangling its threads. The importance of this step is clear from the production of the gaz-at cloth noted earlier. Imagine loose yarn threads that together are 3.5 meters wide and 3.5 meters long.

Horizontal and vertical looms

Sumerian weavers worked on a horizontal loom and possibly a vertical loom both of which are depicted on cylinder seals. The horizontal loom is shown on the same image as the warping board (Wright 1996: fig. 3.2; Breniquet 2010: figs. 4.6a and 4.9d). The horizontal loom depicted on the seal is similar to the one observed by Ochenschlager at the village near al-Hiba (1993). It contained a beam at the upper and lower end (referred to as the breast and warp beams, or “weaver’s beam and cloth beam” Waelkold 2002: n. 60). Posts driven into the ground secure the loom. In the village, cords were stretched along the length of the beams and used to hold the vertical warp threads. Creating a plain or tabby weave, the weavers pass the weft yarn back and forth over and under the warp threads, beating it back after each addition with a comb. When complete, the warp threads are bound with fringes or hems in order to prevent the cloth from becoming unwoven. A recently published text indicates that looms could be “more than 3 meters wide,” which is not surprising considering the sizes of cloths listed in Table 21.5. Based on lists of wooden parts of a loom, some may have been more than 6 meters wide (Waelkold 2002: 208). The beams, which constituted the main part of the loom, were up to 6 meters long and were fixed with ropes or woven ribbons (ibid: 208, n.60). This size is comparable to many modern-day mechanized looms.

Although vertical looms are not referred to in the texts during this period, there are images on sealings that Breniquet has identified as vertical looms (2010). The vertical looms are represented in unusual contexts. The seals were engraved in two registers and in one case there is a combat scene in the upper register and the loom and weavers in the lower one (Breniquet 2010: fig. 4.7e). In another, there is a banquet scene in the upper register (fig. 4.7d) and in the lower, men are depicted either working on or standing near what may be looms.

Filling

Fullers were responsible for the finishing process. This occurs after the cloth is removed from the loom and involves “washing, bleaching, raising nap, trimming the surface” (Barber 1991: 216). The process is similar to felting but of a prepared cloth rather than raw wool or hair and is totally different from weaving. In Sumer fulling took place in separate locations from loom weaving. The work of fullers was labor intensive. In one record in a text from Umma, 5,800 pieces weighing 4,650 kg were brought for finishing. Potts estimates that it took 7.7 work days to treat 1 kg of finished cloth (1997: 59).

THE ORGANIZATION OF PRODUCTION: PALACE, TEMPLE, AND PRIVATE ESTATE

One of our best sources for the late Early Dynastic (ED IIIb) period is from the administrative records of the household of a ruler in Inshushinak during a twenty-year period (Prentice 2010: 5). This house was referred to as the ʿe-MAŠ.GI, translated as the “house of the woman.” Later in the period, there were reforms in which such households were renamed for the patron saint of the deity of the city (e-AB.DU). In spite of this change, queens were the chief administrators of these houses and controlled substantial resources. Temples, such as the households of gods and goddesses, were powerful institutions and integral parts of the community (Postgate 1992). Prentice considers the “house” in Inshushinak as a physical entity based on references to specific locations in which projects were carried out (2010). Records from the archive provide us with an early view of the manner in which wool was processed into fabrics and garments, making its way through a complex bureaucracy. Beginning with this archive, we can trace the expansion of a tightly managed textile industry over the several hundred years discussed in this chapter.

From texts in the Early Dynastic period, records document an economy in which essential items were produced, stored, and redistributed (Prentice 2010: 14). A large number of occupations were listed that not only include craft workers but also boatmen, carriers, and food and drink processors (ibid. 31). Among the textile-related crafts, there were fullers (three teams of 9 to 21 workers), felt makers (two listed), and weavers (one person). Weavers were employed in the production of fabric or garments (unspecified) and included women and children. They also worked as spinners and in food-related activities.

The production of woven textiles expanded during the twenty-year period documented in the archive. This growth is apparent when comparisons are made between the total numbers of individuals recorded (male and female) and the growth in the number of textile producers compared to the reduction of workers in other occupations. During the twenty-year period, the total number of workers increased from 599 to 259. Of these, the number of weavers increased from one-third to two-thirds of the total number of adults that were employed throughout the year (Prentice 2010). These percentages are based on following the names of individual workers and are slightly different from previous interpretations (Maekawa 1980, 1987). Weavers were organized in teams of ten to twenty, but the number and the composition of the weaving groups changed. The earliest documents recorded two teams, each of which was led by a male leader. In later documents four teams were listed, three of which were led by men and one by a woman, while the latest documents listed six groups, five of which were led by women and one by a man who had served as a leader when the first two teams were formed. Finally, some of the women were listed as “from former times” while others (about half) were listed as “purchased,” that is, sara inšu (Maekawa 1987: 53; Prentice 2010: 56). Purchased refers to the buying and selling of people, most of whom were local, though smaller numbers came from outside of Inshushinak. The increased number of women weavers was principally due to the addition of purchased workers.

A second group of women were spinners. Like the weavers their numbers increased over an eight-year period, reaching twenty-one (from an original five), consisting of
women from earlier times and ten that were purchased. Of the original number of spinners, one became a leader of the purchased women weavers (Prentice 2010).

The allotments provided for the weavers and spinners provide some measure of the value accorded the work of individual workers, their level of skill, and their craft. Compensation was in the form of barley rations in which the highest amounts were given to team leaders while team members received less but in differing amounts depending upon the amount of time an individual had spent in the craft; for example, weavers from former times may have been judged based upon their experience. Women workers in the teams who were purchased women received appreciably less than any others, with the exception of children and women described as assistants, who received the lowest amounts. The leader of the spinning teams received compensation comparable to their counterparts in the weaving teams. The remaining spinners received the same low amounts as the purchased women weavers.

Finally, some workers were compensated with allotments of wool. Most women were employed on an annual basis and received the lowest amounts of wool rations, while male seasonal workers (who typically worked for three or four months) received the same compensation as the women. A small number of individuals in specific occupations, men and women, received finished garments produced from the lowest amount of wool. There is a general correspondence between the relative amounts of barley allocated by sex, age, and occupation and the amount of wool received.

The differences described among individuals and members of the weaving and spinning teams suggest that the allotment was a form of remuneration in which compensation was based on skill or experience and level of responsibility (Prentice 2010). The movement of a spinner to the weaving team as supervisor is suggestive of a valued skill. A weaver who moved into a supervisory role also received higher compensation. Prentice argues that the lower compensation of women weavers when compared to others that worked in menial, non-weaving tasks such as carriers who received more, was reflective of “performance of a service” (2010: 95), plain and simple. In that view, differences in amounts of compensation reflect the value assigned to the craft or activity, while differences in compensation within a craft appear to be related to skill or administrative capacity within a given profession. Finally, the status, sex, and ages of the workers ought to be considered. Clearly the association of the weaving groups, even given that many of them may have been “free” local citizens, worked side by side with purchased workers, reflecting the overall status of women and children within the workshop.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to follow the textile industry into the succeeding Akkadian period, as there are few references to workshops specific to weaving. One exception is a document from the Northern Palace at Tell Asmar that records rations for a team of 105 male and 35 female workers. Some of them are identified as tugs-ni, a possible reference to textiles (Foster 2010: 139). Even in the absence of textual sources, we know that political unification of Sumer during this period brought about major changes in the organization of society. Most likely, state-organized workshops would have taken precedence over other institutions, although textiles continued to be produced on a smaller scale in temples and possibly at “private” estates. These changes also brought about visible ones in elite dress and in clothing styles, discussed in the section “Fabrics and their uses.” The increased “international contacts, the influx of wealth, and the growth of a new class of notables and administrators directly

subservient to the king,” also affected styles of dress that ultimately resulted in shifts in the organization of craft production and distribution (ibid.: 110). Rearranged hierarchies in leadership positions in individual city states based on the appointment of governors, newly acquired lands by the state and their distribution to an “entourage of followers” (ibid.: 116) would have increased the demand for textiles. With the influx of new technologies, it is reasonable to assume that the booty acquired from Akkadian conquests and the increasingly diverse population, new religious offices, and cultic practices would have required woven cloth and garments for political and ritual purposes. Finally, the influx of people with foreign names, many of whom were purchased or prisoners of war, provided a ready workforce for an increase in productive crafts and may have influenced new styles.

The lack of texts with references to textile production in the Akkadian is in stark contrast to its visibility in the following Ur III period, when virtually all aspects of life appear to have been touched by the production and consumption of cloth and garments. Francesco Pomponio estimates that there currently exist an estimated 4,550 texts from Ur alone (2010), where wool was issued to slaves (some of whom were women) and rations enough to provide 40,000 persons (Watzlaf 1987: 118). The number of texts on other cities and on Sumerian industries includes 50,000 from the provincial capitals of Umma (1,537 of which are from Garshana, named in texts but its whereabouts unknown), 24,000 from Girsu/Lagash, 3,000 from Nippur, and the 13,800 from Puziris-Dagan (Drehem) (Pomponio 2010: 186), not to mention unpublished collections in museums or held by private individuals. Although most of the texts lack a specific locus, they do identify their city of origin, making it possible to compare the textile industry in different locations (Verdame 2008). There was a similar mindset with respect to the composition of weaving and spinning in all locations. With rare exceptions, women and children were employed as the weavers and spinners.

At Nippur, there are records of several weaving establishments. The temple of Inanna during Ur III owned lands, gardens, and orchards as well as potters, reed workers, carpenters, and leather workers. It also owned animal herds of sheep, goats (Zettler 1992), and possibly cattle. Wool from the herds was woven into cloth by women and children working in teams in the weaving workshops using similar standards to those applied elsewhere. They were supplied with barley rations, wool, and oil. Another archive from Nippur was owned by SinSin, the daughter of the king. The number of garments produced in the workshop was smaller than in the Temple of Inanna. Wool brought into the workshop was graded by type, for example, noted as standard, combed, northern black. The items produced were described as “expensive,” including a fabric listed as “summer cloth” (Hattori 2002: 211). Weavers and fullerers were compensated with amounts comparable to the workers at the Temple of Inanna. Along with the rank-and-file weavers, several women were named as chief administrators, a significant difference from the organization of other known workshops. They performed at a middle level of responsibility (Wright 2008). Umma-tabat held a position as a chief administrator, used her own seal to authenticate records, and carried out duties on a par with her counterpart who was a man (Hattori 2002: 218). An administrator at her level of responsibility may have had scribal training in Sumerian, the language authorized for public records by the king during this period. Another “estate” workshop was at Garshana in Umma province, though its exact location is unknown. It belonged to a princess and appears to have been royally initiated and financed, though solely managed
by the princess and her non-royal consort (Adams 2006). Some women workers appear to have been citizens of the town, while others were slaves.

These workshops can be contrasted with those at Lagash/Girsu and Umma. At Lagash, workers included prisoners of war, slaves, debtors, and other individuals (Studenski-Frickman 2000: 125). The numbers of those employed in weaving and spinning are indicative of an escalation in the productive capacity of the industry at Lagash. There were 6,621 adult weavers employed, including 198 “elderly” and 3,141 children (ibid: 126), totaling 9,762. They were permanently attached to work teams on an annual or seasonal basis and compensation was hierarchically ordered based on age, supervisory capacity, quality of finished work, and sex, as in other workshops discussed. Women supervisors managed teams comprising between twenty and thirty people and received monthly allotments higher than rank-and-file workers (Dahl 2003). Men also led teams of weavers but were in supervisory capacities and did not weave cloth. In Umma, there were between 151 and 153 full-time workers and nine half-time. Thirty-nine of the full-time adult workers and ten children were described as “plunder, booty, captives, prisoners of war” (Dahl 2003: 59ff), people who were “escorted from the eastern provinces” (ibid.: 61).

HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION

In Sumer, weaving was a women’s craft as is attested by mythology and poetry. The goddess of weaving was Utua, and as far as we know, she did not have a male counterpart. Other allusions to women and the craft (Wright 1996, 2008) are from a royal love song in which a king referred to his queen’s fertility as the warp on the loom; in another, the author compares the mother of a large family to “the cloth beam with its finished cloth” (Jacobson 1987: 93). These metaphors support the view that a strong gender ideology linked Sumerian women to weaving (Wright 1996). The bulk of our evidence for weaving and spinning based on textual sources is from palace, temple, and estate archives. These records were kept in order to monitor the input and output of goods in their industries and were silent when it came to non-institutional production. Whether or not the major institutions held sway over individuals not employed in workshops and controlled all textile production is less well known. We know, for example, that although potters served periods of time in corps service in institutional workshops, they also were able to produce their wares independently and exchanged them for other products (Steinkekk 1996). Focusing on weaving, evidence for the exclusive employment of women in the textile industry throughout the year, in distinction to potting and other crafts, raises questions about conflicting evidence for production discovered outside of the institutional workshops. This evidence comes in the form of a few texts and archaeological evidence from households in cities and in rural areas. In the texts, there are references to cloth brought to temples as tribute for resident gods (Kang 1973). Conceivably, these textiles were produced outside of palace, temple, or estate workshops. There is more direct evidence from archaeological remains. It includes weaving and spinning implements discovered in household contexts (Pollock 1993: 125 and elsewhere), spindle whorls spatially dispersed throughout residential areas, production debris, and implements from a variety of crafts at Abu Duhur (Stone and Zimansky 2004), and spindle whorls from surveyed sites (Adams and Nissen 1972).

In household production in ethnographic contexts, weaving, spinning, and other craft skills are often acquired through apprenticeships among family members (Wright 1991). In that sense, the organization of the Sumerian textile industry was modeled after the structure of household production and its divisions of labor (Wright 1996). Women weavers and spinners in the workshops had acquired skills over a lifetime. In the Sumerian case, they would have included female members of families and other real or fictive female kin living within households. On analogy with other cultures, females would have developed their technical skills in stages and gradually took on more tasks as they moved from youth to adulthood (Goody 1982; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). What differed in the Sumerian textile industry was the introduction of a hierarchical reward system based on skill and "seniority" documented in many present-day industries (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Many of the weavers and spinners that came to the workshops were captured in battle and were purchased slaves. Some were indebted or free local women but they all came possessing well-honed weaving skills. Their skills would have included ideas about forms of dress, styles, and techniques brought from their places of origin. Clearly, many changes in styles observable in Sumer were based on elite desires, but there is no reason to discount the possibility that some innovations in the technology and styles of production were based on the knowledge brought to the industry by the weavers. Might not the introduction of new styles during the Akkadian period have been the result of inputs from textiles produced in households by the captured weavers. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that textile "engineers" or bureaucrats recording the input and output of cloth had more than a rudimentary knowledge of weaving (Wright 1996: 93). The categories they used to assess quality were cultural and non-technical, such as sumptuous and ordinary, instead of thread counts by unit of measure with which a weaver would have been familiar.

REDISTRIBUTION, COMMERCIAL EXCHANGE AND RECIPROCITY

Harriet Crawford was one of the first archaeologists to identify the internal and external exchanges of wool and woven products as one of the invisible products that circulated in the Sumerian world (1973, 1974). A significant redistributive system of exchanges was internal to the society and included inter-city trade in fish, raw and processed agricultural and pastoral products, as well as wool, cloth, and garments that moved from "one city to another" (Crawford 1973: 238). Textiles also were important in commercial exchanges based on export items that travelled outside of the southern alluvium along land and sea routes to the east possibly as far distant as Babylonia and the Indus and to the north and west to Ebla in northwestern Syria. The Sumerians followed overland and maritime routes to procure lapis lazuli, carnelian, wood, stone vessels, copper, tin, and gold (Crawford, this vol.).

Guillermo Algaze (2008) has made a persuasive argument for foreign and local trade as a key factor in the "takeoff" of the Sumerian civilization in the third quarter of the fourth millennium (Ur II period). At the center of this takeoff was the shift from linen to a textile industry dominated by wool which Algaze refers to as "a propulsive industry." He calculates that if textile production during the Ur II period amounted to 10 per cent of later periods when the industry was at its height, labor requirements may
have reached, on average, 135.240 workdays devoted to textile production (Algage 2008: 91). This massive scale was the basic resource for the exchanges of copper and other precious commodities from abroad. Other evidence for the textile industry during this period are drawn from the images of pig-tailed women weaving on horizontal ground looms that are referred to in the section "Tools of the trade," the emergence of colonies in the Upper Euphrates, and Archaic texts that refer to textile manufacture (Nissen 1986: 310). References to foreign policies at Dilmun and Aratta, though legendary, attest to the desire for elaborately crafted textiles produced in Mesopotamia (Godd 2008).

Evidence from a pre-Sargonic archive at Girsu supports Crawford's proposal concerning textiles (Crawford 1973). Records from the archive speak of wool and textiles as an important medium of internal exchange and Prentice writes of references to the distribution of textiles to several individuals, including a chief "merchant," overseers or elders (Prentice 2010: 179). The term geš or guras for foreign trader is found in pre-Sargonic texts in documents from Lagash and lists of professions even earlier (Postgate 1992: 211).

The pre-Sargonic Girsu texts document the import and export of a range of goods. Among the imports was a type of wool from Elam (present-day Iran) that was not available in Sumer. Curiously, wool was exported to Elam as well (Prentice 2010: 114). Along with their own herds of sheep, the Sumerians had sufficient quantities of wool and wool products to establish exchange networks beyond the alluvial plain itself and to provide the textile industry. Although listed in relatively small quantities, wool garments were exported in exchange for copper and tin-bronze (ibid.: 118) that was consumed in Lagash or trans-shipped to other cities. Three woollen garments (ber-ta) were among textiles taken from Girsu to Dilmun (ibid.: 115). Other products destined for Dilmun were quantities of wool, silver, and scented oils.

In addition to the internal and external trade, Prentice documents a form of exchange not previously discussed in great detail. The evidence is principally from personal letters concerning a reciprocal system of exchange based on gifting (ibid.: 131ff.). Following the anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1923/24), Prentice identifies a number of transactions that reflect a form of exchange referred to as reciprocity. These gifts establish relationships between givers and receivers that extend beyond the moment in which a material gift is passed on to another. As Prentice states:

the exchange of gifts is not an act which may be divorced from its social context, it is embedded within the fabric of the society since the action itself carries meaning beyond the material value of the exchanges.

(2010: 157)

Numerous examples are documented but few discussed here convey the significance of cloth and garments in the giving and receiving of gifts between the wives of rulers abroad and in city-states, possibly a form of diplomacy conducted by individuals that was practiced in later periods (Feldman 2006). The first is a letter from the "Lady of the land of Dilmun" to the "Lady of Lagash." From Dilmun the lady has sent baskets of dates, pitted dates, three linen garments, one of which is referred to as bar-diš, possibly a coat or cloak of very good quality such as the one produced in 1,080 days (see Table 20.1 above). A note that was included in the letter states that the garment was of high quality, as the lady cautions the lady in Lagash to note "the quality or nature of the goods being sent and send appropriate goods in return" (Prentice 2010: 163). In another document, the wife of the ruler of Adab sends a gift to the wife of the ruler of Lagash. The women exchanged craft goods and copper, but included in the package were garments for the agent who was carrying them from one city state to another (ibid.: 163). Finally, two linen garments and dates were sent by the chief scribe of the Lady of Dilmun to the wife of the ruler of Lagash. The brother of either the scribe or the wife of the ruler accompanies the textiles, suggesting a family connection (ibid.: 166). We must consider why a Lady in Lagash, seat of a major textile industry where luxurious textiles are being produced, would value a textile from Dilmun. Clearly, this exchange of a culturally distinct cloth provided value-added status to the Lady of Lagash. We can also speculate that the garment did not go unnoticed and led to new styles that enlivened the textile industry.

Other forms of gifting involve the recurring exchanges between the "house" and temples on festival occasions in which gods were honored or in other celebratory events during the agricultural year. These meetings occurred at holy places where sanctuaries were located, when gifts were given to the public and important persons. Orders for specific garments were recorded from seventeen individuals identified as overseers and elders. Additionally, an individual described as a chief merchant provides a large amount of wool in a request for other finished garments. Lesser amounts were provided for other garments requests from individuals at lower levels of authority (Prentice 2010: 180). Other persons (between seven and twelve in various occupations who are temple personnel but not weavers) received "fleece" without the hide (ibid.) so clearly not destined for a sheepskin garment. The fleeces were given at festivals in the household of the goddess Ninshe, while others were given to individuals in another household, that of the husband of the goddess. Whether these fleeces were to be used for garments is unclear. There is no indication that the wool was spun and their weights are not given, which is the normal way wool is recorded. Either the fleeces were given as pure wool in exchange for acquiring other products or the weaving of the wool into cloth took place in non-institutional settings, such as in residential households, among individuals that were not attached to the temple or palace "houses."

Records from the Akkadian period include documents and letters that describe different conditions under which trading occurred. The activities of one private businessman, Qaradum, kept personal accounts of his trade in "copper, silver, livestock, oils, garments and fruit" (Pfister 1977: 32). These were business transactions that appear to have been conducted for his own profit, a practice engaged in by some state officials. Another individual involved in trade was a woman (Ama-ê) who financed agents that conducted business for her (ibid.: 59), while a professional merchant, dam-ê-si, did some business for the state and for private individuals who capitalized his ventures.

While silver and grain were the major mediums of exchange, garments and wool also are recorded in shipments abroad to Magan for the trade in copper (Snell 1977: 47). The massive production of textiles in Ur III in Lagash attests to the presence of an industry in wool and cloth that ably served internal and external exchanges. They were high-value products produced on an industrial scale that were light enough for transport (Adams 2006: 156) and Lagash was strategically located to move materials internally and abroad. The extensive canal system and boat and barges travel is
documented to have accommodated 35 to 40 ton shipments between Ur and Lagash (Watzoldt 1972: 65) through which textiles were redistributed among city-states. In other shipments, 65,350 bundles of reeds were shipped from Umma to Nippur (Sharlach 2004), suggesting that sizable quantities of materials were transported.

CONCLUSIONS

The organization of the Sumerian textile industry raises questions with respect to long-held conceptions about craft specialization. In the post-Neolithic Near East, Childe (1956) believed that the surpluses derived from cultivated crops and pastoral production would engender a new class of specialist producers and provide opportunities for elites to control their production. In many ways, the textile workshops and status of weavers fulfilled Childe’s expectations. Missing from this view of the economy, however, is probing beneath the Sumerian’s tightly organized bureaucracy to investigate what Robert Adams has referred to as the “full range of networks, institutions, and relationships in which the whole population was implicated” (Adams 2004: 48).

This review of the social, political, economic, and religious significance of textiles partially fills in some of the gaps in the underside of the specifics of the Sumerian’s management of production, distribution, and exchange. Using texts, imagery, analogies with modern textile production, and archaeological evidence, this chapter offers a more comprehensive view based on existing evidence for the internal workings of the industry, the impact of its restrictions on the day-to-day lives of its producers, the divisions it reproduced within the society, and its importance in the Sumerian economy.

There is still so much more waiting to be discovered. The texts stand at center stage in representing the voices of the elites and bureaucrats that managed the industry. They come from a limited number of places and as more and more and more surface, there is the potential to establish regional differences in the organization of production and divisions of labor. The previously homogeneous flow of information about the industry is already beginning to show regional differences at the smaller estates at Nippur (Hatton 2002; Wright 2008) and Garshana (Adams 2010). With respect to archaeological evidence, a brief survey of excavation reports indicates that there are many heddles, needles, weights, and whorls that await study. These common implements not only offer the potential for new understandings of the technical aspects of the craft but also more details regarding the organization of production and skills that workers brought to the industry (Wright 1996: 94).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to the following: Christine Kimbrough for reading an earlier draft of this chapter and providing me with suggestions; Abigail Buffington, my research assistant and a graduate student in the Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian Studies program at NYU, assisted me in library research and helped me with some language issues; many thanks to Harriet Crawford for inviting me to participate in The Sumerian World, for her patience, and for reading over an earlier draft of this chapter.


— forthcoming. City and Countryside in Third Millennium Babylonia.


CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DEATH AND BURIAL

Helga Vagel

The archaeological remains and the written records from the third millennium BC provide us with fascinating insights into the thoughts and practices of the people who lived in what is today Southern Iraq, specifically when they faced the death of a person close to them. Despite a large degree of variation, both archaeological and written sources indicate that in Mesopotamia the deceased were usually buried, either in the house or in a cemetery. In the following, I would like to summarize the most important elements of a burial. These include the preparation of the corpse, the mourning of the dead, and the construction of the grave, followed by the actual interment and the journey of the dead into the netherworld. In addition, I will briefly discuss the central aspects of the cult of the dead as attested in texts from the Early Dynastic period (c.2900–2350 BC).

SOURCES

We still lack evidence for burials from the Uruk period (fourth millennium BC). It has been suggested that during the Uruk period funerals were held outside settlements or that mortuary practices were such that they did not leave any traces in the archaeological record (Pollock 1999: 204–205). We have extensive documentation for the Early Dynastic period for both house burials and burials in cemeteries (literature in Pollock 1999: see Sources tabs. 8.3, 8.4). The finds and findings from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s (Woolley 1934), shall serve as an example here for one of the best studied and best preserved cemeteries of the Early Dynastic period. The Royal Cemetery contained 660 burials that can be dated with certainty to the Early Dynastic period. In addition, the excavators found sixteen large shaft tombs, the Royal Tombs, which were located in a rubbish mound on the southwestern edge of the temenos of the city; these tombs contained a main interment, several "co-interments," and rich grave goods.

Despite the wealth of information that can be gained from the archaeological remains, we depend on the written record when we study funerary customs and other aspects surrounding death—such as coping with death, events happening outside the grave, or metaphysical concepts relating to the dead and the afterlife. Unfortunately, the archaeological findings and the written sources only correspond to a limited extent. The textual sources that are relevant to the topic discussed here mainly consist of tablets...