

AP World History

Freedom in the Ancient World: Civilization in Sumer

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Historians generally see the development of cities as a sign of transformation into a civilized state and indeed an essential component of being civilized. Some of the earliest cities were formed by the Sumerians in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where settlers had already developed irrigation systems. In the following selection, Herber Muller analyzes the social and political significance of cities and irrigation systems for the Sumerians, and focuses on the problems that civilization brought.

CONSIDER: *Why cities and irrigation systems require new systems of legal and political control, why Muller believes that the increased wealth and opportunity created by civilization was not an unmitigated benefit to the Sumerians.*

We must now consider the problems that came with civilization—problems due not so much to the sinful nature of man as to the nature of the city. “Friendship lasts a day” ran a Sumerian proverb; “kinship endures forever.” The heterogeneous city was no longer held together by the bonds of kinship. Even the family was unstable. “For his pleasure: marriage,” ran another proverb; “on his thinking it over: divorce.” Hence the Sumerians could no longer depend on the informal controls of custom or common understanding that had sufficed to maintain order in the village. They had to supplement custom by political controls, a system of laws, backed by both force and moral persuasion. In this sense the city created the problem of evil. Here, not in Eden, occurred the Fall.

More specifically, the rise of civilization forced the social question that is still with us. By their great drainage and irrigation system the Sumerians were able to produce an increasing surplus of material wealth. The question is: Who was to possess and enjoy this wealth? The answer in Sumer was to be the invariable one: Chiefly a privileged few. The god who in theory owned it all in fact required the services of priestly bailiffs, and before long these were doing more than their share in assisting him to enjoy it, at the expense of the many menials beneath them. Class divisions grew more pronounced in the divine household, as in the city at large. The skilled artisans of Sumer, whose work in metals and gems has hardly ever been surpassed, became a proletariat, unable to afford their own products And outside its walls the city created still another type of man—the peasant. The

villager had been preliterate, on a cultural par with his fellows; the peasant was illiterate, aware of the writing he did not know, aware of his dependence on the powers of the city, and liable to exploitation by them. Altogether, the urban revolution produced the anomaly that would become more glaring with the Industrial Revolution. As the collective wealth increased, many men were worse off, and many more felt worse off, than the neolithic villager had been.

Similarly the great irrigation system posed a political problem: Who would control the organization it required, exercise the power it gave? The answer was the same—a privileged few. As the temple estate grew into a city, the priesthood needed more secular help, especially in time of war. Sumerian legend retained memories of some sort of democratic assembly in the early cities, but it emphasized that after the Flood “kingship descended from heaven.” The gods had sent kings to maintain order and to assure the proper service of them upon which the city’s welfare depended. This was not a pure heavenly boon, judging by the Sumerian myth of a Golden Age before the Flood: an Eden of peace and plenty in which there was no snake, scorpion, hyena, lion, wild dog, wolf—“There was no fear, no terror. Man had no rival.” At any rate, the divinely appointed king ruled as an absolute monarch, and might be a terror. With him descended a plague of locusts—the tax collectors. Again civilization meant an anomaly: as the collective achieved much more effective freedom, many individuals enjoyed less freedom than prehistoric villagers had.