

Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

Eridu to Uruk

The first truly Sumerian settlement we know of was called Eridu. It followed the developmental profile that we saw in Çatal Hoyuk and Ain Ghazal. It had no great public spaces or monumental buildings. This absence is typical of Goddess cultures and, as we have already seen, a powerful indicator of a matriarchy.

Eridu was eventually supplanted as the premier settlement of the area by another, which would be called Uruk. This would become the world's first 'true' city, and the birthplace of a cultural tradition that remains with us and has become globally dominant.

Eridu was the cult centre of the god Enki. Mythically, he was the son of a union between Nammu, the eternal Mother, the Sea, and her first-born, An, the Sky-god. Ki, in Sumerian, means the Earth and is the name of the Sumerian Earth Mother, and En can mean 'lord' or 'priest'.¹ Enki, throughout Sumerian mythology, is the closest of the deities to the Goddess and repeatedly comes to her aid. He also is more sympathetic to humans than the other male deities.²

Uruk became the cult centre for the most iconic anthropomorphic goddess in the history of the culture. She was called Inanna. She was beautiful, sophisticated and mercurial yet fickle and wilful. She was a goddess of women, love and sex, fertility and war and, at least in her earliest forms, was completely independent of male control.

In some versions, Inanna is Enki's niece but in all their interactions, throughout the mythology, she is stronger than he. Enki's role in relation to her is of a loving (if sometimes tested) benefactor. He is Inanna's first hero and protector, and at the same time he is the Goddess' son, a prior deity, powerful in his own right.

Enki's mythological relationship to Inanna reflects the relationship between Eridu and Uruk. Uruk became far more powerful and wealthy, yet Eridu 'gave' civilisation to it. This is reflected in

¹ Scholars such as Samuel Noah Kramer suggest that the element 'ki' is a corruption of 'kur' which would mean 'lord of the underworld'. Others interpret it as 'Lord of Sweet (i.e. fresh) Water'. All three have roughly the same significance, since the Earth, water and the Underworld are all representations of the Goddess.

² In the *Myth of Atrahasis*, the model for the Biblical story of Noah, it is Enki who forewarns Atrahasis that the other gods are planning a mighty flood to kill the humans.

verses from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.³ The English historian Michael Wood has translated part of it thus:

‘The goddess Inanna brought the arts of civilization from the god of wisdom, Enki of Eridu, but it was like a Pandora’s box. Here were the delights of society, exquisite craftsmanship, beautiful clothes, the arts of sex and music. But civilization has a darker side, which has to be accepted along with the good. The art of being mighty, the art of being kind, the art of straightforwardness, the art of deceit; the art of kingship, justice and the enduring crown; the resounding note of a musical instrument, the rejoicing of the heart; the kindling of the strife, the plundering of cities, the setting up of lamentation, fear, pity, terror – all this is civilization and you must take it all, you cannot refuse any of it. And once taken, you cannot give it back.’⁴

This relationship is interesting. It is repeatedly made clear in the mythology that Enki is the protector of the Goddess, yet she is far more powerful than he. Enki may represent an ideal of the early male hero, who does not seek reward in his own name, but in service of the Goddess. Alternatively, his avuncular relationship to Inanna may directly reflect the society that invented this myth. We have seen that in many matriarchal cultures, the male parental role is performed not by fathers but by maternal uncles. This is compellingly similar to Enki’s relationship to Inanna.

After it was established, Uruk rapidly outstripped Eridu. All that was beautiful, all that was rich, was poured into it over the thousands of years of its existence. It was a city of arts and crafts, of beauty and the good life. Its buildings sparkled with blue-glazed tiles, and it was the original ‘City of Light’. All around her city, Inanna caused the fertile earth to bring forth crops, the animals to reproduce and be healthy, the rivers to be full of fish and the countryside to be full of game.

When the Sumerian civilisation of Uruk reached its peak, in the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, the people built the first monumental structure, a stepped pyramid called a ziggurat, in the centre of the city. On top, they built a beautiful home for the great goddess who had brought them so much: the Eanna Temple, the House of Heaven. It rose high above the rooftops, so that it could be seen from afar. This was not only the home of the Goddess, but the centre of the religious life of the city, the seat of political power and the courts. It was where laws were made, and justice dispensed. It was also where business was conducted. This was the greatest era of Uruk’s history, long before it was ravaged by war and became subject to the violence of men.

³ The *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself is a later work which appeared in the third millennium BCE. However it was syncretised from earlier traditions.

⁴ Wood, Michael. *Legacy*. An Island World Presentation Central Independent Television. 1991.