

Section 5 – The Advent of Agriculture

The Sumerians

We do not know much about the Sumerians before they appeared in southern Mesopotamia. We think they spoke a language that suggests they came from the area around Anatolia to the northeast, where Çatal Hoyuk had been. However, exactly where they originated or why they had wandered so far remains unknown. Again, there is no evidence that their association with the pre-existing Ubaid-Semitic culture was a warlike invasion. There are no burned settlements, a common indicator of warfare, nor are there warlike references in the early art or mythology.

So we are left with a mystery. However, there are other examples we may draw on to give us clues. One such was in Europe, thousands of years later, when Celtic culture spread in waves emanating from the centre of the continent. For many years, it was thought that these waves were actual migrations of people. Now, thanks to exhaustive DNA sampling, we know that this did not occur. Celtic culture spread through technology, in particular, metallurgy. Small numbers of Celts travelled far and wide, taking their art, technology and culture with them. People became Celtic because the culture was useful and attractive, not because of war and imperial conquest.

In all the Celtic cultures there existed a shadowy caste of people called Druids, who were shamans, priests, doctors, lawyers, musicians and poets. Although it is often thought that their role was principally religious, this is an oversimplification. Druids were the intelligentsia of the culture. They played the same role as a modern educated class plays. It is likely that the metal-smiths were also Druids and their techniques were amongst the closely-guarded secrets that formed the core of druidic learning.

This group carried their intellectual, religious and artistic culture with them, and spread it through Europe. And yet, to this day we do not know where druidic culture originated. The Celts may have invented it, or it may be much older. It is possible that the Druids came from a long line that stretched deep into the past, conserving the mystical knowledge of the ancestors and carrying it forward. This would have made them extremely useful in a world without writing.

Were the Sumerians like this? A group that moved from place to place, perhaps trading and entertaining, offering advice and religious teaching, ministering to the sick, offering judgement in disputes? Were they warriors or teachers or perhaps even both? Mercenaries

or doctors and lawyers? Poets and bards? Builders or engineers? Or all of these? Did they support themselves by force of arms or by the knowledge and expertise they brought? At present, we may only speculate.

Whatever their history, and whatever brought the Sumerians into the Ubaid/Semitic milieu in southern Mesopotamia, soon after their arrival a cultural revolution occurred. From scattered, small villages of subsistence farmers, a civilisation full of art, poetry, science, literature and philosophy burst into being in a way that has astonished researchers ever since. Before long, the economic power of Sumerian settlements became strategically important. Large-scale agriculture was established and soon, city-based civilisation began.¹

The Sumerians saw beyond their immediate needs. They realised that if they could harness the natural world to their will they would not only be fed, but also become rich. They built miles of huge canals that linked the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, irrigating the land and turning it green. This was civil engineering on a grand scale that would continue for thousands of years. Along with their language and culture, the Sumerians probably brought to the Ubaidian milieu their mythology and pantheon of deities.

¹ We cannot be absolutely certain that these were the very first cities but if there were earlier ones they vanished without leaving any trace, whereas Sumer and its culture can trace a line of descent via the Middle-East, throughout Europe and across the world. Sumerian culture is still with us.