

Section 7 – the Emerging Patriarchy

Sumer to Akkad

At its peak, Uruk grew to have more than 50,000 inhabitants, a metropolis by ancient standards, and was the dominant city in Sumer. Huge volumes of trade flowed in and out of the area and many settlements grew to populations of more than 10,000, becoming city-states in their own right. There is remarkably little evidence of a warlike culture anywhere in Sumer in its first millennium, and the cities were not walled.

The first period of truly Sumerian culture was named after Uruk. The condition of women in this era was far better than came to be the case later, and the society prospered. For peace to last so long was a great triumph for the Goddess and her culture. It was not force of arms or the greed of men that finally brought ruin, but an enemy that no wall or army could defend against: climate change.

The end of the Uruk era was brought about by a dry period called the Piora Oscillation that lasted for 300 years, from 3200 BCE to 2900 BCE. The city's wealth, built upon the agriculture of the fertile plain around it, diminished, and its population went hungry. Had their beautiful but fickle Goddess Inanna turned against them? Though the times were hard, Uruk somehow survived, but it was much changed. After this time, in what is called the Early Dynastic Period, Uruk became much more like the city-state model with which we are familiar. This is the time of the epic hero-king Gilgamesh. He was said to have built the great city walls that still encircle the remains of the city. According to the *Sumerian King List*, Gilgamesh, the hero, was the fifth king of Uruk and lived around 2,500 BCE.

This period may have been glorious for Uruk, but it was less so for her goddess. Inanna had ignored the city's pleas for an end to the drought for hundreds of years, and this brought about a shift in the mythology.

Most telling is the replacement of a peaceful, biddable shepherd- boy, Dumuzi, as the consort of the Goddess, with Gilgamesh, a warrior-king and adventurer who bedazzled his subjects and took whichever woman he fancied, by rape if she resisted. He glorified the city and built huge battlements as well as high ziggurats. He was part god, part man: bombastic, vainglorious, in short a bully. His best friend was a wild man called Enkidu, who lived and mated with animals, until Gilgamesh sent a priestess to seduce and tame him.

In sending a priestess to have sex with a wild man who practised bestiality, the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu demonstrates a seachange in the status of women. Instead of being able to choose with whom they would have sex they must now submit to the will of men, even if that means mating with a beast-lover. The balance between men and women in Uruk had been fatefully shifted.

After the end of the Piora Oscillation, the climate was drier than it had been, and this, among other things, brought greater change. The *Sumerian King List* now includes references to two other cities within southern Mesopotamia, Ur and Kish.¹ Uruk had become but one of many rival cities and it seems probable that a great deal of its economic power evaporated during the long period of drought.

This period is increasingly characterised by evidence of war and the dominance of warrior culture. We see this in the Epic of Gilgamesh and in the practice of building walls around cities while smaller, undefended villages were abandoned. The original culture of Sumer was absorbed into an Akkadian warrior culture, which lessened the influence of the Goddess and the status of women, especially once the Akkadian supreme god Marduk was put at the head of the pantheon.

From the middle of the third millennium BCE, war persisted with hardly a break throughout Mesopotamia. The Goddess cultures, which were characterised by their peaceful nature, gave way to a new world order dominated by uncompromisingly aggressive men such as were idealised in Gilgamesh. Battle and glory were set above the gentle, sensual pleasures of early Uruk.

The tumult of war broke out with a vengeance when Eannatum, king of the city-state of Lagash, annexed most of Sumer, including Uruk, Ur, Umma and many other cities. He was violent and bloody and deliberately tortured and abused his defeated enemies, perhaps the first recorded use of terrorism in human history. After Eannatum's death, his empire collapsed. Lugal-Zage-Si, the priest-king of Umma, destroyed the remnants of Lagashi power, then conquered Uruk and made it his capital. He proclaimed his Empire from the Gulf to the Mediterranean but eventually was defeated by an Akkadian king, Sargon, in 2270 BCE.² War raged periodically after the time of Sargon, as succeeding waves of conquerors swept through, and lasting peace was never to return to the area.

¹ Ur is perhaps better known in its much later guise of Ur of the Chaldeans, when it became an empire in its own right.

² Sargon is interesting not only because he marks the shift in political balance away from the Sumerian south-east to the Akkadian north-west but also because, according to legend, he was placed in a basket made of rushes by his mother and allowed to float onto the river Euphrates, where he was found by a woman drawing water and taken to the home of Ishtar, as Inanna had become, who raised him and trained him in the skills of kingship. The motif of the future king being placed in a basket in a river, rescued and raised by a deity or ruler was used in the story of Moses, who was mythically raised in the house of the Egyptian king.

It is not surprising that the cities that were the targets for violence soon developed the arts of defence and war for themselves. Before long, the first thing people would do when laying out a city would be to build a wall. Soon they too would be raiding, recovering that which was theirs and punishing aggressors, nipping potential threats in the bud. They would soon have realised that force of arms could win great wealth. We know that Uruk prospered for a thousand years without any wall; the decision to build one for protection, a massive undertaking, was not made lightly.

There was Uruk before its wall, so the Goddess was there before the violence began. Her city was peaceful, a wonderful place of art and music, with traders bringing goods, lovely and precious things, from hundreds of miles away. This was truly the Goddess in her happiest role, at least in civilisation. Loving creatrix, benefactrix, goddess of fertility, of sex, of love, and patroness of the arts, she brought her people such largesse.

Then, strange men came to Uruk, not to trade or spend their wealth on the pleasures of the city, but to rape and kill and steal everything they could. The young Inanna, so beautiful, so charming, so innocent yet so mischievous, so full of love and delight in life, so replete with joy at her own fecundity, turned into a screaming she-devil of war. She killed with utter savagery and bloodlust any who stood before her, cutting a swathe through the enemy ranks and leaving only death behind. What force could make a woman do that? The menace to her children, the killing of her beloved, the destruction of her home. She was the lioness who turns on the hyenas who threaten her cubs, and she was just as ferocious.

The advent of warrior culture brought about not only the rise of warrior kings, but also changes in the Goddess herself. She became a warrior too. As gentle as she was in love would she become violent in her unleashed destruction; magnificent, awe-inspiring, utterly terrifying. Because war became such a prevalent part of human history, this is a familiar face of the Goddess. We see her again and again, as Boudicca, as Zenobia, as Tamara and Jeanne d'Arc. She is Liberté, her breasts exposed and hair flying, bearing the tricolour flag in one hand and a musket in the other as she leads the French Revolutionaries' charge in Delacroix' epic painting.³

As warrior culture took hold, protection from attack became so important that it soon overshadowed all other concerns. There is little point in growing food, making children and building cities if these cannot be defended, if enemies can just come in and take everything. This was when the patriarchy became absolutely dominant. Within it, war was as important as agriculture and trade; killing, plunder and destruction had become an economic model.

³ Delacroix, Eugène. *Liberty Leading the People*. Oil on canvas. 1830.

We would soon see the development of the conventional, pyramidal hierarchy which built the Roman Empire and which exists today. Power flows downwards from one divine and absolute ruler, through layers of individuals less divine and powerful, to the common citizen- soldier, who must only obey and pray. Within this rigidly structured society, there was no place for women. They lost all political voice and their role of ensuring the survival of the culture through motherhood became increasingly less valued than that of men enriching it through war.