

Ancient Society and Economy

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As I glance through my reports for the past seven years, I notice that all of them deal with two topics: the work on my project on the "Earliest Land Tenure Systems in the Near East" (ancient kudurru's) and the preparation of this huge manuscript for publication; and the work on the "Source Book for the Social and Economic History of the Ancient Near East." With the first one safely in the hands of the Editorial Department and the work on the second continuing slowly it has occurred to me that I should explain to the enlightened reader what I mean by "The Concept of the Kish Civilization," a topic very dear to my heart and on which I have often written in obscure learned journals.

Before 1960, the picture of most ancient Babylonia, and the Near East in general, was simple and consistent: Since the Sumerian sources are the oldest, the Sumerian civilization is the oldest and everything everywhere was borrowed from Sumer. The consequence of this was that the Sumerians, surrounded on all sides by the nomadic Semites, were seen to have culturally dominated Babylonia as well as a vast area extending from the Persian/Arabic Gulf in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. This viewpoint was the basis for the well-known book *History Begins at Sumer*.

The concept of what I had dubbed "The Kish Tradition" arose in a reac-

tion to the "Pan-Sumerianism" of the times. In an article published in Switzerland in 1960 I stressed, on the basis of very early and largely neglected sources, the important role of the city and the state of Kish and of the Semitic people living in northern Babylonia. The sources utilized in the reconstruction of the "Kish Tradition" are of three kinds: the allusions to the mysterious "King of Kish" who intervened in the border disputes among the Sumerians; votive offerings to gods by officials who wrote in Akkadian or a Semitic language related to Akkadian; and, above all, the ancient kudurru's of northern Babylonia, dated to the Pre-Sargonic and early Old Akkadian periods and written in "Akkadian" by large land owners who bore "Akkadian" names and worshipped "Akkadian" gods.

The great discoveries at Ebla in Syria from 1974 on have enabled us to view what I had once called the "Kish Tradition" in a much clearer light and, at the same time, to extend its horizons considerably in space from Kish and other sites in northern Babylonia via Mari and Terqa on the Euphrates to Ebla in northern Syria. This involved a change from the narrow and rather misty confines of the Kish Tradition to the broad and concrete concept of the Kish Civilization.

Ebla created a revolution in our thinking. It added immeasurably to our knowledge of the most ancient

Near East, as the written sources recovered at Ebla completely overshadow in number and quality those available to us in Babylonia; and, above all, it has shown that the Semitic (and non-Sumerian) features derived from Kish were also at home at Ebla.

Contrary to the earlier highly exaggerated notions of the Sumerian cultural superiority, there was a highly developed cultural entity in the vast area encompassed under the concept of the Kish Civilization—with its own cities, language or languages, writing conventions, religious beliefs and deities, cultural traditions, monthly calendar and year dates, and systems of measures. Contrary to the earlier common beliefs, the names that the people bore, the gods they worshipped, the cities they founded, and the month names they used in their calendar were all Semitic, not Sumerian.

This is all “The Concept of the Kish Civilization” says. It does not claim

the superiority of the North versus the South or of the Semites over the Sumerians. It simply asks for recognition of the fact that there was a full-blown Semitic cultural entity in the vast area between Kish and Ebla, which was different from that of the Sumerians in southern Babylonia, and which gave as much to the Sumerians as it borrowed.

Bibliography

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