

The downfall of the sumerians essay

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



All this administration of agriculture required much more careful planning, since each farmer had to produce a far greater excess of produce than he would actually consume.

And all the bureaucratic record keeping demanded some kind of efficient system of measuring long periods of time. So the Sumerians invented calendars, which they divided into twelve months based on the cycle of the moon. Since a year consisting of twelve lunar months is considerably shorter than a solar year, the Sumerians added a “ leap month” every three years in order to catch up with the sun. This interest in measuring long periods of time led the Sumerians to develop a complicated knowledge of astronomy and the first human invention of the zodiac in order to measure yearly time. Record-keeping pushes the human mind in other directions as well.

In particular, record-keeping demands that humans start doing something all humans love to do: calculating. Numbers have to be added up, subtracted, multiplied, divided, and sundry other fun things. So the Sumerians developed a sophistication with mathematics that had never been seen before on the human landscape. And all that number crunching led the Sumerians to begin crude speculations about the nature of numbers and processes involving numbers—abstract mathematics. We know very little about the early Semitic religions, but the Semites that invaded Mesopotamia seem to have completely abandoned their religion in favor of Sumerian religion.

Sumerian religion was polytheistic, that is, the Sumerians believed in and worshipped many gods. These gods were incredibly powerful and anthropomorphic, that is, they resembled humans. Many of these gods

controlled natural forces and were associated with astronomical bodies, such as the sun. The gods were creator gods; as a group, they had created the world and the people in it. Like humans, they suffered all the ravages of human emotional and spiritual frailties: love, lust, hatred, anger, regret. Among the gods' biggest regrets was the creation of human life; the Sumerians believed that these gods regretted the creation of human life and sent a flood to destroy their faulty creation, but one man survived by building a boat.

While the destruction of the earth in a great flood is nearly universal in all human mythology and religion, we can't be sure if the Semites had a similar story or took it over from the Sumerians. This is, of course, a question of contemporary significance: according to Genesis, the originator of the Hebrew race, the patriarch Abraham, originally came from the city of Ur. Although the gods were unpredictable, the Sumerians sought out ways to discover what the gods held in store for them. Like all human cultures, the Sumerians were struck by the wondrous regularity of the movement of the heavens and speculated that this movement might contain some secret to the intentions of the gods.

So the Sumerians invented astrology, and astrology produced the most sophisticated astronomical knowledge ever seen to that date, and astrology produced even more sophisticated mathematics. They also examined the inner organs of sacrificed animals for secrets to the gods' intentions or to the future. These activities produced a steady increase in the number of priests

and scribes, which further accelerated learning and writing. Sumerian religion was oriented squarely in this world.

The gods did not occupy some world existentially different from this one, and no rewards or punishments accrued to human beings after death. Human beings simply became wisps within a house of dust; these sad ghosts would fade into nothing within a century or so. Among the inventions of the Sumerians, the most persistent and far-reaching was their invention of law. While all cultures have some system of social regulation and conflict resolution, law is a distinct phenomenon. Law is written and administered retribution and conflict resolution. It is distinct from other forms of retribution and conflict resolution by the following characteristics: Administration Law is retribution that is administered by a centralized authority. This way retribution for wrongs does not threaten to escalate into a cycle of mutual revenge.

Sumerian law sits half way between individual revenge and state-administered revenge: it is up to the individual to drag (quite literally) the accused party into the court, but the court actually determines the nature of the retribution to be exacted. Writing Law is written; in this way, law assumes an independent character beyond the centralized authority that administers it. This produces a sociological fiction that the law controls those who administer the law and that the “ law” exacts retribution, not humans. Retribution Law is at its heart revenge; the basic cultural mechanism for dealing with unacceptable behavior is to exact revenge. Unacceptable behavior outside the sphere of revenge initially did not come under the

institution of law: it was only much later that disputes that didn't involve retribution would be included in law.

Although we don't know much about Sumerian law, scholars agree that the Code of Hammurabi, written by a Babylonian monarch, reproduces Sumerian law fairly exactly. Sumerian law, as represented in Hammurabi's code, was a law of exact revenge, which we call *lex talionis*. This is revenge in kind: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life," and reveals to us that human law has as its fundamental basis revenge. Sumerian law was also only partly administered by the state; the victim had to bring the criminal to court.

Once there, the court mediated the dispute, rendered a decision, and most of the time a court official would execute the sentence, but often it fell on the victim or the victim's family to enforce the sentence. Finally, Sumerian law recognized class distinctions; under Sumerian law, everyone was not equal under the law. Harming a priest or noble person was a far more serious crime than harming a slave or poor person; yet, the penalties assessed for a noble person who commits a crime were often far harsher than the penalties assessed for someone from the lower classes that committed the same crime. This great invention, law, would serve as the basis for the institution of law among all the Semitic peoples to follow: Babylonians, Assyrians, and, eventually, the Hebrews.