

Sumer (Mesopotamia)

Practices

The kings of Sumer were buried alongside of treasure and scores of other richly dressed people. Those buried with the king ranged from musicians, soldiers to ox cart drivers. Those accompanying the king were first sacrificed most likely using a blunt icepick like weapon. The bodies were then heated to 200 degrees centigrade and finally dressed in finery.¹

The harp or lyre was one of the most common features in the royal graves.²

Other people were buried according to what a family could afford. However many practices were common:

- The body was wrapped in reed matting, or occasionally placed in a coffin. However in some city states (Surghal, El-Hibba, pre-Sargonic Nippur) cremations were common.
- The corpse was laid on its side with a bowl of water between the hands near the mouth.
- Some treasured belongings might go in the grave.
- Vessels filled with food and water were placed near the body so the spirit wouldn't be hungry and return for food.
- The tombs were furnished according to what the family could afford...so the royal tombs were filled with treasures.³

Deities and Important Concepts

- An-ki
Universe. The combination of the god AN and the goddess KI.
- Ninhursag
Universe. The combination of the god AN and the goddess KI.
- Dumuzi
Shepherd god. Consort of Inanna. Life-death-rebirth deity.
- Life was lived to serve the gods who gave you everything.

Modern Adaptations

- Body can be cremated.
- Dress the deceased in their finest clothes and place in a coffin, laying the body on its side. Place a small bowl of water near its mouth
- Bury items that were treasured by the person.
- Bury favorite foods / drinks with the person.
- Hold a feast using the favorite foods / drinks of the person in their honor.
- The use of a tombstone can be likened to the chapels that were often placed on top of the burial chambers when they were completed.
- Bury pictures of loved ones and friends or statues to represent these people.
- Have someone play a harp at the burial ceremony.

Sample Readings

Gilgamesh praying to the gods of the Netherworld as names the gifts he is burying with Enkidu⁴

He displayed to the Sun God a flask of lapis lazuli
for Ereshkigal, the queen of the Netherworld:

¹ <http://suite101.com/article/farout-revelations-on-the-great-deathpit-at-ur-a86021>

² <http://gallery.sjsu.edu/sacrifice/sumerians.html>

³ <http://www.dl.ket.org/humanities/connections/class/ancient/mesopreligion.htm>

⁴ [George-AR 1999] Andrew R. George. "What's new in the Gilgamesh Epic?", Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies, Volume 34, 1999, pages 51-58.

"May Ereshkigal, the queen of the teeming Netherworld, accept this, may she welcome my friend and walk by his side!"

He displayed to the Sun God a flute of carnelian for Dumuzi, the shepherd beloved of Ishtar:

"May Dumuzi, the shepherd beloved of Ishtar, accept this, may he welcome my friend and walk by his side!"

Sumerian tablet from Nippur (Ni 4486)⁵

She can make the lament for you, my Dumuzid, the lament for you, the lament, the lamentation, reach the desert — she can make it reach the house Arali; she can make it reach Bad-tibira; she can make it reach Dul-šuba; she can make it reach the shepherding country, the sheepfold of Dumuzid

"O Dumuzid of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes," she sobs tearfully, "O you of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes," she sobs tearfully. "Lad, husband, lord, sweet as the date, [...] O Dumuzid!" she sobs, she sobs tearfully

From The Messenger and the Maiden⁶

I placed bread and rubbed it; from a bowl whose strap had not been opened, from a dish of which the rim had not been soiled I poured water, I poured to the ground and he drunk it. With my good oil I anointed the figure. With my new garment I dressed the chair. The spirit has entered, the spirit has departed. My messenger in the Mountain; in the midst of the Mountain he was whirling; he is lying (now in rest).

Resources

- Sumerian FAQ
<http://home.comcast.net/~chris.s/sumer-faq.html#A1.4>
- Mesopotamian Tombs, Burials, Superstitions and Festivals
<http://factsanddetails.com/world.php?itemid=1523&catid=56&subcatid=363>

⁵ Inana and Bilulu: an ulila to Inana, from Black, J.A., Cunningham, G., Robson, E., and Zólyomi, G., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (Oxford)

⁶ "Performing Death : Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean." Ed. Nicola Laneri. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2013. <<http://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/ois3.pdf>>.