



Paul Collins, 2021 *The Sumerians: Lost Civilizations*, London: Reaktion Books, ISBN 978-1789144154, pp. 214, illus. A\$35.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

The history and archaeology of ancient Mesopotamia has changed direction several times during the last two hundred years, and it continues to do so. Students during the latter part of last century struggled without up-to-date textbooks as the field had moved rapidly on from earlier concepts and theories. Books by Susan Pollock, Amélie Kuhrt, Nicholas Postgate, Marc Van De Mieroop, and Morgens T. Larsen in the last twenty-five years have addressed the more recent evidence. Whether Paul Collins' book joins these tomes, will depend on the acceptance of its controversial conclusions.

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After a brief reference to the city of Eridu, the opening chapter of *The Sumerians* focuses on the history of Mesopotamian archaeology and historiography. It moves

comfortably through descriptions of the discovery, exploration and geography of Sumer while addressing issues such as Orientalism and the ideas of civilization. Collins includes a remarkable amount of detail to give character and authority to the narrative, and passes over matters that may distract from the story. Claudius Rich's Quakerism and Henry Layard's Unitarianism go unmentioned, but Major-General Henry Rawlinson's exploits at Behistun are described in some detail, as are their irrelevance to the decipherment of cuneiform and the discovery of the Sumerian language, both of which were accomplished by the Reverend Edward Hincks.

The problematic identification of the Sumerians is discussed in chapter two beginning with the context of nineteenth century European academic concepts of 'race'. These scholarly prejudices were applied to many of the world's peoples at that time, including Australia's indigenous population. Collins describes how the Sumerian language and physical appearance led to an alignment with 'Aryans' from the East, who were to be distinguished from the bearded Semitic Akkadians from the Arabian deserts. The 'Aryan' Sumerians were deemed to be the origin of Western civilization, an idea that went out of favour after World War II. The question of Sumerian identity is not answered at this stage and it becomes the book's main theme.

The progress of Sumerian archaeology in the twentieth century is described in the context of the politics, nationalism and heritage of Iraq and the accumulation of knowledge of their material culture from archaeology. There are many references to names of people and places that will challenge newcomers to the subject. The chronology at the beginning of the book will assist with some of the details, but it is the knowledge of and attitude to the Sumerians that is important. The French excavation of Tello (Girsu) and the finds from it in the Louvre are mentioned, but it is the British activity that is focussed upon. Hall's excavations at Tell al-'Ubaid found significant material culture deemed to be Sumerian, but as Collins points out, the history of Sumer was reconstructed from cuneiform texts using a 'rise and fall' of civilisation motif, which he deems to have been unhelpful (p. 66).

Fifteen pages are devoted to the excavations at Ur, most of which deal with the Royal Tombs and the finds from them, including the Standard of Ur. Collins discusses the interpretation of the tombs concluding with more recent hypotheses and a comment that based on her name-form, Queen Pu-abi 'the most famous Sumerian queen turns out to be Akkadian!' (p. 79). The discussion of the discovery of flood levels at Ur leads to a description of the still largely unpublished excavations at Kish and the king lists found there distinguishing kings that ruled before the Flood from those who ruled after it. Collins alludes to the excavation director, Professor Langdon, and his preference for inscribed tablets over other excavated material. However the presence at Kish of stamp seals known from excavations in the Indus Valley

was considered important. Collins discusses how this bolstered the idea of the Sumerian's possible Eastern origins, which he links to extremist fascist beliefs (p. 91).

After a brief description of the German excavations at Uruk, Thorkild Jacobsen's rejection of the Sumerian-Akkadian conflict hypothesis and the concept of Sumer's 'primitive democracy' are discussed; neither remained popular after the 1930s. The proposition that Sumerian governments associated with temple complexes and irrigation organisation also failed to enthuse scholars. Collins' discussion of these hypotheses in parallel with Iraq's political and cultural development makes interesting reading. The ideas of Samuel Kramer, Ignace Gelb, Benno Landsberger and popularists, such as Erich von Däniken, are mentioned even though none of them have endured.

Chapter Five is where substantive matters are considered. It begins with a discussion of the Jemdet Nasr period (c 3,100 BC) administrative system at Uruk as evidenced by seals and tablets, which are generally thought to have been written in the Sumerian language. Collins queries this because there are no Sumerian name-forms in them (p. 131). After briefly mentioning the marsh environment of the 'Ubaid period, Collins then focuses on the end of that period when there were large Uruk style cities and settlements at Tell Brak, Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda in northern Syria and he questions the primacy of urban development in southern Mesopotamian. Some large cities in southern Iraq are also mentioned as are domestic architecture and lifestyle at Tell Asmar in the Diyala region. The origins of warfare and the establishment of empires are considered, before the chapter finishes with the Old Babylonian period when, according to Collins, Sumerian was no longer spoken but scribes continued to learn the language as is indicated by the many 'practice tablets' of Sumerian literature that have been found.

The final chapter describes how later Mesopotamian kings, Kassite, Elamite and Assyrian, often sought legitimacy by identifying themselves with the traditions of early Mesopotamian society and its religion. The Sumerian language was retained until the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire as a link with the past. Ashurbanipal, for example, claimed to read Sumerian demonstrating his 'wide knowledge and broad perception' (p. 177).

Collins concludes that the Sumerians may never have been lost because they never actually existed as a distinct ethno-linguistic population (p. 181). He suggests that they are the creation of modern Assyriologists who assumed that the Sumerian language must have been spoken by an ethnic group, when in fact it was a language devised by a scribe probably in the Late Uruk period.

Interestingly, when introducing another recent study of the Sumerians, *The Sumerian World* (London: Routledge 2016), Harriet Crawford acknowledged that 'there is no physical anthropological evidence to support' the

existence of the Sumerian people and that therefore only Sumerian culture and language would be discussed in that book. Apparently, until the Sumerian's DNA is discovered, they are considered not to have existed.

This reviewer is far from convinced. It may well be the case that modern descriptions of Sumerian culture and identity have uncritically included Akkadian and early Mesopotamian characteristics, but it is not clear that all aspects of the descriptions of Sumer derive from these cultures. The world that Collins studies is post-3,500 BC. At Eridu there is a well-known temple sequence, not mentioned by Collins, that began in about 5,000 BC and continued until the Late Uruk period (3,500–3,100 BC). Recent surveys confirm that Eridu and the other towns and cities of southern Mesopotamia began in a maritime environment. Collins' proposition assumes that it was the farmers from northern Mesopotamia or the Semitic speaking people from the desert who became boat builders and sailors. This is unlikely. The idea that the Sumerian language was created by a scribe is also implausible in the absence of a credible linguistic explanation for such a process.

The final chapter also describes how in 2016 the sites of Uruk, Ur and Eridu and four wetland marsh areas were inscribed on the World Heritage List. Collins sees this as the land of Sumer. If the book began by exploring the early world of the marsh environment and the marsh-dwellers and their interactions with neighbouring peoples at sites such as Eridu, Uruk and Ur, it may not have concluded as it does. It certainly would not have left the fundamental question of Sumerian existence to last three pages of the book.

The book's illustrations are of high quality and directly relevant to the content. Those wanting to research a particular topic will find endnotes, a bibliography, and an index to begin the analysis. The early chapters include concise explanations so that no specialist knowledge is required, but the last two chapters do not flow in a coherent sequence. The relationship between the history of modern Iraq, the progress of archaeology and the development of Assyriology is interesting. But the contention that the inhabitants of Sumer derived from ancient farmers and desert dwellers only appears credible because the book starts with the Late Uruk period, at least 2000 years after archaeological evidence for Sumer, at sites such as Eridu, first appears.