
Domination - The Power Shift from Women to Men Through Ancient Literature

Through history, civilizations and cities have typically put men in positions of authority, showing their dominance in society and giving them all the power. Ancient Sumeria was a refreshing sight in contrast to this. Evidence from literature and myths of the ancient Sumerians heavily support the idea that Sumeria was a matriarchal society. Women, instead of men, were the ruling sex. Ancient hymns praise Inanna—a goddess who ruled over all the humans, animals, and other gods in Sumeria. She can easily be seen as the ultimate god in Sumeria, the one who all look up to. Indeed, she may have helped the matriarchy in Sumeria, as women were revered as being higher than men, and were given more rights than they were. Much as the Ramayana serves as a prime example of what a relationship should be like for couples in India, Inanna could have served as a role model for women in Sumeria. However, as androcratic ideas began to blend into Sumerian society, the matriarchy was slowly overthrown, and ancient Sumeria became as patriarchic as the rest of the world's history. The fall of Inanna in literature showed the drastic shift from a female-dominated society to an androcratic one. The tale of Gilgamesh rose to popularity and remains more well-known than the hymns of Inanna. A great empire ruled by a great goddess, overthrown by influential powers. Sumeria, much like the rest of the world, had its power falling into the hands of men.

Inanna was hailed and worshipped under many titles. She was the “Queen of the Earth Gods, Supreme among the Heaven Gods”, the “First Daughter of the Moon”, and many other titles (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983). The hymns portray her in such a bright light that showcases how much they worshipped her. “The people of Sumer parade[d] before the holy Inanna” and “purif[ied] the Earth for her” (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983). It is hard to identify, based on the hymns, if she was human or not, as the texts make many references to both ideas. Ultimately, Inanna was a savior of all people, someone that all the Sumerians could look up to. To love someone so much and hold them as a symbol of power, love—whether they were human or not—shows how Inanna may have been a model to, not just women in Sumerian society, but all other people as well, as “the male prostitutes comb their hair before” her (Wolkstein and Kramer, 1983). By contrast, ancient India was a strong androcracy, in which males were treated better than their female counterparts. The Ramayana serves as an example, in which Sita, the devoted wife to Rama, speaks multiple times of her place beside her husband, as her duty lies with him. Rama and Sita are hailed as models for couples in India. If the couple is comprised of a male and female, the male takes after Rama, and the female after Sita. It is clear that Sumeria was unique in itself in this right. Inanna was the one major god that everyone could look to for almost anything. Being one of the few matriarchies in the world, however, the female ruled

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society soon began to assimilate to match the rest of the world.

Sumeria began to advance and allow more foreigners into their land. The influence of foreign populations began to change ancient Sumeria. Either willingly or by force, Sumeria was pushed to shift into a patriarchy. Akkadians and Assyrians from the neighboring territories began to ease into Sumer. Both were strong cultures that had spoken Semitic languages and both were very involved with warfare (Wilson, 2013). Sumeria began to develop its own army, as they moved out of their land to find materials they did not have themselves, and the influences of more warlike nations on their territories encouraged the behavior. Militaristic ideas and the leaders of the army slowly became permanent, and democratic ways of governing fell, as the rise of the monarchies led by kings emerged (Wise, 2013). Inanna was pushed back, no longer the goddess that all Sumerians looked up to and worshipped. The goddess Ninlil did not take Inanna's place, but her myths and legends may have contributed to the harsher treatment of women in Sumeria. Ninlil was raped four times by Enlil, once when he was not under a guise, and three times when he had disguised himself as someone else (Black, 1998). The legend may have served as an excuse for men who saw fit to rape women and ultimately hold power over the Sumerian women. The fall of Inanna spelled disaster for the female population of Sumeria, as men began to decrease the value that women held in society and traded them off as slaves and wives for money (Wise, 2013). They were seen as expendable members of society with no other purpose aside from childbearing, cooking, and standing beneath men, much like the rest of the world had come to see women in their societies.

From a position of power to one of ridicule, Inanna's popularity decreased amongst the ancient Sumerians, as even Gilgamesh himself looked down upon her and who she was. Long gone was the highly respected, all-powerful god of Sumeria. Gilgamesh, in which she is known as Ishtar, portrays her as a liar who wants nothing more than to seduce him, then throw him away like she had to all her previous lovers (Mitchell, 2004). She comes off as a spoiled brat and a manipulator, as she convinces her father to give her the Bull of Heaven, then proceeds to use it to kill three hundred innocents—there is no trace of the once highly renowned and loved goddess that used to be known as the Great Lady of Heaven in ancient Sumeria. Gilgamesh is the strongest literary example of how Sumeria had morphed from a matriarchy into a patriarchy. Inanna, who was once seen as the greatest being in all of Sumeria, had been replaced by Gilgamesh, a cruel king who did as he pleased as long as it was for his own benefit. He took sons from their fathers and daughters from their mothers and broke them. He was the sole ruler of Sumeria; there was no queen to rule by his side. There is a stronger sense of monarchy now than there was when Inanna was revered with power. The city now looked up to Gilgamesh, and even after seeing his abuse of power, they did not remove him from where he stood in the social hierarchy. Instead, they saw fit to placate him with another man, Enkidu, who would change Gilgamesh into a better ruler of the people. And so Inanna fell and Gilgamesh rose to power, symbolizing the overthrowing of the matriarchy and introduction of the androcracy.

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One can use ancient Sumerian literature to trace the power shift between men and women in the civilization. Early ancient Sumeria hailed Inanna, either a goddess or an ordinary human, as their queen, the strongest power in Sumeria whom all could look up to for guidance in many things. Hymns would praise her beauty, strength, and abilities, and she had quickly become someone that all the citizens of Sumeria would have liked to look up to. As time passed, however, invading powers began to shift Sumerian ideals, bringing with them their patriarchal claims and beliefs that would forever change Sumeria. Inanna lost popularity amongst her worshippers and men rose to power then. King Gilgamesh, now seen as the strongest being in Sumeria, stole Inanna's thunder and used his own privilege to put her down and cast a dark light on her. From there, the power never did shift back, and along with the rest of the world, Sumeria moved through history, a society dominated by men, their great priestess discarded and forgotten.

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