

## **SUMERIAN SOCIETY & STATUS PERSPECTIVES**

**Perspective** – the way that people see things based on their own beliefs and life experiences. In ancient times, the societal perspectives were drastically different due to the differences in the lives people lived. What one saw as a great benefit in society, another might have seen as a burden.

First, we must identify Sumer as a civilization to be able to evaluate its citizenry and social organization. A civilization must meet certain criteria.

### **Characteristics of a Civilization**

- Sedentary living with a reliable food supply (usually from farming)
- A societal structure with various levels in society based on societal values, levels based on status, heredity and jobs
- An organized system of government which provides order to the society
- A religious system with a set standard of beliefs and worship practices
- Advancements in technology which allowed increased use of tools
- A developed system of written language and mathematical processing
- A developed culture, including music, art, architecture, literature, etc.

In the early civilizations, the status (or importance) of groups typically identified their social standing and life opportunities. In Sumer, there were various levels of the social structure from the upper classes of landowners, government officials and priests to the very lowest class of the slaves.

Much of the structure of Sumerian city-states was established as a result of their government and their system of belief. The basis of their entire society rested on the belief that their gods chose the kings, and that the kings were powerful as they were serving for the gods on Earth. This prevented objection to the kings by the people and established social order.

In addition to the kings being the representatives of their gods, they were also in all control of the armies. The kings often called the armies to action to defend their territories. This meant that commoners of any job or role in society could be called up to fight. Some soldiers remained full time in the armies and were trained to drive the chariots, making the Sumer armies very strong and superior.

One exception to the class structure was that of Scribes. With the Sumerians being the first to develop a system of written laws, those with the ability to read and write became very important. Those who became educated in writing had a special skill that protected their status and role in society.