

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Economic History

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Part I : Mesopotamian Innovation

Overview Small scale irrigation was being practiced in Mesopotamia in 6000 B.C.E.; by 5000 B.C.E. Mesopotamians were carrying out major irrigation projects which enabled them to turn ‘the land between the two rivers’ into a fertile plain, a plain able to support a rapidly growing population, which a millennium later will have risen to 100,000. With this fast start, and with a high instinct for cultural development, it is no surprise that Mesopotamia early introduced important innovations into our cultural bloodstream.

Bronze (and subsequently iron) metallurgy The wheel of culture was only to turn when, during the last millennia B.C.E-the highest development of Bronze Age culture intersected with the early stages of the Iron Age, which was being introduced into Mesopotamia by the Hittites. With each of these stages in development of material culture, the Mesopotamians were enabled to introduce innovations which facilitated their cultural development. By the fourth millennium B. C. E., metallurgists had managed to alloy copper with tin, beefing up the strength of copper, and leading into the invention of bronze. Sporadic experiments in iron metallurgy, meanwhile, were on the horizon by 4000 B.C.E., but the early products were too brittle for heavy use. It was not until the fourteenth century B.C.E. that the Hittites introduced iron technologies, into Mesopotamia, which were to serve as the foundations for weaponry, agricultural equipment, and architectural construction which would open the horizons of a new world. Mesopotamians moved stages of cultural development which were major shapers of the future of the human condition.

Writing Arguably the most decisive of Mesopotamian cultural innovations was writing, an act of great importance to the Mesopotamian people--first and foremost the Sumerians--for its service in book keeping and accounting. (The world historical significance of this innovation dwarfs its early record keeping role). The earliest Mesopotamian writing was based on picture-grams, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were a roughly contemporaneous invention, but Sumerians were able, far more rapidly than the Egyptians, to morph this early script into cuneiform--a wide shaped alphabet of some 3300 words, symbols, and phonetic markers, carved into moist clay by a pointed reed called a stylus. Later Mesopotamian Empires, Babylonian, Assyrian, continued to write with cuneiform, which thus became, in addition to a cultural gift, a unifying principle for the cultures ‘between the two rivers.’

The wheel By the middle of the 4th millennium B.C.E. the Sumerians had invented useable wheels, first for plows and other work equipment, later in the millennium for chariots. One can discover, any day while gardening with the wheelbarrow, the huge importance of this innovation for transporting bulky items--like the bricks, grain, and ores which were increasingly to serve as the axis of Mesopotamian development.

Readings

Chiera, Edward, *They Wrote on Clay: The Babylonian Tablets Speak Today*, Chicago, 1956.

Kramer, Samuel Noah, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty nine Firsts in Man's Recorded History*, Philadelphia, 1981.

Discussion questions

Can we add the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 3rd millennium B.C.E., to the greatest innovations of the Mesopotamians--in this case of the Akkadians? The work is often called 'the first great work of Literature.' And what about the Laws of Hammurabi? Were they too an innovation?

What stages of proto writing preceded Sumerian cuneiform? What kind of innovative genius was needed, to conceive of the development of the writing process into cuneiform?

Sumerian seems to have been the first written language. Where did it come from? Who spoke it? Was it spoken first, then written?

Part II : Mesopotamian Trade

Overview From the 4th millennium B.C.E. to the Fall of Babylonia (539 B.C.E), the Land between the Two Rivers, Mesopotamia, developed as a cohort of interrelated kingdoms--Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians--exercising control over parts of today's Iraq, Syria, the Anatolian plateau, and eastward into western India. This Mesopotamian world grew rapidly--by 3000 B.C.E. the population of Sumeria is estimated to have been 100,000--driving culture forward by the creation of the world's first cities, first practicable writing system (cuneiform), and by the invention of such indispensable tools for growth as the wheel and the sail--the ground drive of a vital economy.

The Lay of the Land By natural land endowment, the ancient Mesopotamians had few natural resources. Their cities, while great strides forward in community, were made of mud brick, as were the central structures of their cities, the ziggurat step temples. (These architectural building materials would set the shape of subsequent Mesopotamian civic design.) Thanks to irrigation, however, the Mesopotamians were able to cultivate rich crops, and to export (say out of Babylon) large cargos of wool, cloth, textiles, jewelry, basketry, dates, figs, cloth; in exchange, over the centuries, for a changing selection of the following: wine, donkeys, copper and tin. These transactions took place along the rivers from which Mesopotamia took its name, and eventually out into the Mediterranean or Persian Gulf, from which goods of all sorts could make their way to distant countries, or simply into the network of smaller river tributaries, which small boats could navigate.

Overland traffic Trade by land grew constantly throughout the development of Mesopotamian cultures. This kind of trading typically involved long donkey (or camel) trains, covering sometimes vast distances, and counting on rich end results in badly needed bartered goods, which could be displayed and sold in the rapidly developing city markets that sprinkled the landscape between the two rivers. During the early second millennium B.C.E., according to archeological finds, Assyrian traders regularly travelled 1000 miles, from Assur in northern Mesopotamia to Kanesh in Anatolia. 'Surviving correspondence shows that during the forty five years from 1810-1765 B.C.E., merchants transported at least eighty tons of tin, and one hundred thousand textiles from Assur, and returned from Kanesh with no less than ten tons of silver. ' (Bentley, et. al. *Traditions and Encounters*, p. 36). It is no surprise, nor is it without precedent, that the Assyrian trading community applied for, and received permission to set up a permanent trading community at Kanesh, to maximize the preparation of transit goods between Kanesh and Assur.

Readings

Kuhrt, Amelie, *The Ancient Near East, 3000-330 B.C.E.*, London, 1995.

Snell, Daniel, ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, Malden, 2005.

Discussion questions

What is the relation between trade and the development of the early cities of Mesopotamia? Does the growth of the city depend on trade growth? Or vice versa?

The typical Mesopotamian meal, on the common person level, was composed of bread, beer, and onions. Would those three commodities have been producible on a local level, without recourse to foreign trade?

Were there wealthy Mesopotamian business men (and women) behind large trading operations? Was there family ownership of trading businesses? (There was; can you ferret them out?)