

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?)