

TRADE AND TRADERS OF MESOPOTAMIAN UR

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ABSTRACT

Traders from the ancient Sumerian city of Ur traveled by donkey caravan, river barges, and sea-going ships to all parts of the Fertile Crescent, Persia, Tilmun, Magan, and Melukka. They imported copper, precious stones and woods, and ivory and exported woolen clothing and cloth, barley, and locally grown foodstuffs. These Sumerian damkara traded for the palace, temple, other merchants, and on their own account. The activities performed by the Ur traders established a model that spread throughout the civilized world and on into modern times.

INTRODUCTION

The southernmost city in ancient Mesopotamia was Ur, then a sea port on the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Mesopotamia extended north along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, the tributaries flowing into the two rivers, the river valleys and the western hills of the Zagros Mountains. Initially Mesopotamia consisted of two cultures: Sumerian in the south and Akkadian to the north, each with its own language. But the people of Sumer and Akkad shared a lifestyle based upon farming and the raising of sheep and goats. Kuhrt (1995) states that “. . . a fundamental cultural unity prevailed among the contending kingdoms’ (p. 97).

Mesopotamia, the lands west to the Mediterranean Sea coast, and those areas south into Egypt and along the Nile River made up The Fertile Crescent (Schomp, 2004, p. 9). The Fertile Crescent and adjoining areas are commonly referred to as the Ancient Near East (ANE). It encompassed all or part of the modern countries of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt (Snell, 1997, p. ix).

Some information on trade in the ANE comes from such physical evidence as the remains of early dwellings, burial sites, and the unearthed artifacts of everyday living. But much data on trade is found on clay tablets covered with Cuneiform writing, broken pieces of pottery (ostraca) with writing on the surface, and carved stone stele commissioned by ancient kings. Scholars translated many of the no longer extant languages found on “letters, contracts and administrative documents (Leemans, 1968, p. 171)” into modern ones including German, French, Italian, and English (see Bertman, 2003, Chapter 5; Parsons, 2007, Chapter 1). Therefore, some of the material below derives from translations of, for example, tablets inscribed in cuneiform and translated by scholars into English. But much material comes from English translations of other modern language translations of the ancient language. See Leemans (1968, pp. 189-191) for a discussion of some issues involved in translating from translations. While not an ideal source of data, the use of secondary sources—translations from translations—became necessary for this paper.

Records detailing trading activities and the people who engaged in these activities have been unearthed on the site near where the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur stood. Subsequently, they

were translated and published. However, “Archives of thousands of economic cuneiform tablets and similar numbers of artefacts come from excavations, but they represent certain periods only and often illumine some matters but not others (Lambert, 1977, p.i).” Thus an exhaustive description of trade in and around Ur is not possible.

This paper describes trade and traders in Mesopotamian Ur during the third and second millenniums BCE. Moore and Lewis (1999) state, “... we will argue that much of today’s economic structures existed in prototype forms several thousand years ago (p. 17).” A review of trade in ancient Mesopotamian Ur may therefore contribute to an understanding of trade in the 21st century.

Because all the dates we cite are approximate, we do not use circa. And because all the dates are Before the Common Era, we omit BCE.

UR TRADE

Evidence from excavations indicates that farming communities appeared in the northern foothills of the Fertile Crescent as early as 9,000 (Postgate, 1994, pp. 11-14; Schomp, 2004, pp. 6-7). By 5500 farmers had migrated south and established settlements in Sumer. And no later than the early third millennium traders were engaged in long distance commerce between cities in the ANE. They transported gold, silver, copper, tin, precious stones, grain, wool and woolen goods, and a variety of foodstuffs in every direction via donkey caravans, river barges, and sea going ships.

The Ur III Dynasty rose to power and became capital of Sumer and Akkad in the late third millennium when Ur-Nammu (2112-2095) conquered Ur and nearby towns and cities including Lagaš. “To increase agricultural productivity, he dug new irrigation canals and dredged old ones, at the same time promoting foreign trade (Bertman, 2003, p.109).” For the next 100 years Ur III kings subjugated territories in middle and southern Mesopotamia and effected a degree of economic centralization that was unprecedented (Postgate, 1994, pp. 41-42). For example, conquered provinces were required to submit taxes to the Ur III state: often assessed and paid in the form of cattle (Yoffee, 1995, p. 1395).

Because Sumer lacked natural resources such as metals and stone, building materials, precious stones and woods, and metal for tools were imported in trade for local goods grown or produced. For example, Ur traders brought copper in from the south on seagoing ships. These merchants shipped copper in from Magan (Oman, on the Persian/Arabian gulf) and precious stones from Tilmun (Bahrain). For the most part, the goods did not originate in these ports but were brought in from other sources such as Melukka (Indus Valley) which sent ivory and precious woods as well (Leemans, 1960, pp. 18, 33-34). Indeed, so close was the relationship between traders of Tilmun and Melukka that Tilmun used the same system of weights and measures as that found in the Indus Valley (Muhly, 1995, p. 1506).

Evidence of trade to the east between Mesopotamian cities and cities in what is now southeastern Iran comes from cylinder seals found throughout the ANE. They were carved with impressions that identified the owner. A seal was rolled over wet clay to indicate that the contents of, for example, a jar were intact. And seals were used to close storage rooms in ancient Persia. These “. . . are of a specific Mesopotamian type common in the major Iraqi port of Ur (Lawler, 2011, p. 31).” The cylinder seals were manufactured from bronze, stone (lapis lazuli imported from Iran), and bone in and around Ur. Early seals have also been found in the Elamite city of Susa east of Sumerian Ur. See Pittman (1995) for a more comprehensive discussion.

Traders traveling to the north and west shipped merchandise on river boats from Ur up the Euphrates River, through Mari and on to Emar. At Emar they bought and sold what they could then turned west. The merchants transferred their goods to donkeys and drove caravans west to Ebla for more trading and then on to Ugarit on the Mediterranean Sea, or south to Qatna.

Money in the form of standardized coins had yet to be minted by governments. However, silver and grain had been continuously in use as mediums of exchange during the fourth to second millennia. Thus silver was used by individuals to purchase household goods and commodities. Silver also served as a unit of value so that “. . . commodities were often priced in silver for the purposes of commercial record-keeping (Foster, 1977, p. 35).” In their role as money-lender, traders make loans in silver. And traders might have silver on deposit with merchants in the cities where they bought and sold goods. Grain, most often barley, also could be used for buying and selling, loaned at interest, or exchanged for other commodities (p. 36).

UR MERCHANTS (DAMKARA)

The temple was heavily involved in manufacturing and trading activities. For example, the temple manufactured a large volume of wool clothing and cloth. Most of the production of woolen cloth and garments was done with female weavers. Records indicate that around six thousand women worked at nearby Girsu and thirteen thousand worked in and around Ur weaving woolen textiles (Robertson, 1995, p. 447).

Textile production supplied the temple’s own need for cloth and garments. Textiles produced in the temple’s workshops were also exported to distant lands in exchange for metals, precious stones, leather goods, sesame oil, barley, and other natural resources (Robertson, 1995, p. 447; Postgate, 1994, p. 218). For example, Lu-Enlilla, a damkara (trader), “. . . worked on behalf of the powerful Nanna-Ningal temple complex at Ur (Potts, 1995, p. 1456).” He received leather skins, finished garments, and raw wool from the storehouse of the temple of Nanna and with it bought copper, ochre, semi-precious stones, and ivory from Magan for the temple. He also delivered some aromatic substances (records not clear what type) and Magan onions to the Nanna temple, most likely as a tithe (Leemans, 1960, p.21). And he traveled to Tilmun and Melukka to trade. Note, though, that Lu-Enlilla probably traded for his own accounts as well as for the temple. Otherwise there would be no reason for a tithe to the temple (p. 34).

Ur damkara most always tithed to the goddess Ningal after an expedition to Tilmun. It seems that a tithe was due the temple in thanks for a successful expedition. Unsuccessful missions required a contribution to insure that the next one would be successful. And it may not have mattered whether the trader was a citizen of Tilmun or Ur, a tithe was expected and given (p. 31).

Besides the temple, the palace was involved in long distance trade. For example, in the eighth year of Šu-Sîn (2030), Ur-gepar, son of Šuna, exported 70 kur of palace owned barley to Magan (p. 22). Some of the barley would have been kept by the palace to feed the workers but the excess over current need was used to acquire imported goods including copper. Kings always desired quantities of tin and copper it seemed, for they were the main ingredients of bronze.

The question of whether merchants of the Ur III period represented the state in all their trading activities arises because of the extensive nature of trade for the government. Even trade for the temple occurred often at the behest of the palace. But, “There is little . . . to suggest that the merchants of the Ur III period were agents of the state (Powell, 1977, p. 27).” For the merchant, the state was an important customer. And the state provided protection at times. For the state, the trader served as a source of needed and desired goods which would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The trader also served as a source of liquid capital when the palace needed capital. But

the key economic principle operating here is profit. Traders served the state, and temple, when it was to their advantage to do so (pp. 28-29).

TRADE FROM TILMUN DURING THE REIGN OF KING RIM-SIN

After Rim-Sin (1822-1763) of Larsa invaded Ur, he may have anticipated a need for more weapons. Copper and tin are the main elements in bronze and bronze was used to manufacture tools and weapons. Perhaps he wanted to stock his armory in preparation for additional conquests. In any event he ordered a large amount of copper.

Ur trade with Tilmun took two forms: Tilmunite traders sailed in their loaded ships to Ur bringing goods with them, and natives of Ur sailed back and forth to trade with Tilmun (Leemans, 1960, p. 31). Ea-nāšir was of the latter. He imported copper on a wholesale basis during Rim-Sin's reign (pp.48-56). He was a "big businessman" in copper," an *alik Tilmun*—one who went to Tilmun (p. 51). Ea-nāšir apparently kept a home in Ur but lived for months or years at a time in Tilmun. To fill Rim-Sin's order, Ea-nāšir shipped large quantities of copper from Tilmun to the palace. One delivery weighed 18,000 kilograms (p. 50).

Ea-nāšir also acted as a private trader, buying copper for his own account and for private merchants. For example, Ur merchants Nannī and Arbituram gave Ea-nāšir trading capital, most likely silver, to buy copper in Tilmun for them. They might also have provided trading capital in the form of textiles, clothing, aromatics, and oils; the record is unclear. Several other dealers also gave Ea-nāšir trading capital for the purchase of copper on their accounts

Ea-nāšir bought the copper in Tilmun, loaded it on ships, and sent all of it to the palace at Ur. However, the dealers in Ur who were waiting for their copper sent word of their displeasure that their orders had not been delivered. But Ea-nāšir's dealings with the palace were much larger than those with private merchants. And so, his smaller business with the private accounts probably seemed of less concern to him and he neglected them. The result was a number of urgent messages from the private traders (pp. 51-52).

Rim-Sin ruled the area around Larsa and Ur for about 60 years. But the importance of Ur declined during the latter part of Rim-Sin's rule and especially after the conquest by the Babylonian king Hammurapi (1792-1750) in 1763 and under the rule of the Babylon dynasty (Postgate, 1994, p. 39).

CONCLUSION

Whether trading for the palace, temple, other merchants, or on one's own account, Ur traders traveled to distant cities in the search for profitable dealings. Transporting goods by donkey caravan, river boat, and sea-going ship, merchants reached Tilmun in the Persian Gulf, Magan in present day Oman, Melukka in the Indus Valley, Emar and Ebla far to the north, and Ugarit on the Mediterranean Sea. Ur traders imported large quantities of copper, precious stones, edible oils, and ivory. They exported woolen garments and cloth, barley and other grains grown by local farmers. Thus the palace acquired necessary tools of war and food for its citizens. The temple obtained the goods needed to conduct both sacred rites and secular commercial operations. The activities performed by traders in Ur followed a model that spread throughout the civilized world and on into modern times. Today populations are fed, governments acquire the weapons of war, religious organizations construct buildings and purchase the items needed for their rituals, and everyone with the resources can purchase desired consumer goods, all due to the efforts of modern equivalents of ancient traders.

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