From Ashur to Anatolia: The Merchant Middle-Men of Mesopotamia

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At the beginning of the second millennium BCE the city-state of Ashur prospered under its extensive trade network which included colonies that dotted Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, and the Levant. One such colony is known as karum Kanesh located in the south-east of Anatolia near a site known as Kultepe. During this period (c.1900-1830 BCE) the majority of our information on the city of Ashur and its trade network comes from a corpus of approximately 15,000 cuneiform texts discovered at the site of Kanesh.¹ From the textual sources and what is known about Mesopotamia during this time we can deduce that Ashur was a powerful commercial city and with its merchant colony at Kanesh it flourished under a heavy mercantile influence.

To begin, it is important to understand the city state of Ashur and the importance of trade within it. There are several factors which allowed Ashur to develop into a powerful commercial city state. First and foremost, during this period of time the Ur III dynasty had recently collapsed and city states were the norm of ancient Mesopotamia.² This meant that Ashur was its own autonomous city, allowing the revenue from its far-reaching trade routes to go directly to Ashur and not be divided up into taxes or tributes to some larger ruling empire or government.

Secondly, the geography and location are important factors that must be considered to understand the opulence that Ashur experienced from trade. Although the city itself was never large during this period, it is located on a “nodal point” in the web of trade routes extending in Mesopotamia from south to north and east to west.³ The city sits almost as a gateway between Mesopotamia and the rest of the Near-East as goods can travel north and south along the Tigris river, and both east over the Zagros mountains and west to the Euphrates and beyond to the

¹ Kuhrt 1998: 90
² Kuhrt 1995: 18
³ Kuhrt 1995: 18-19 Interestingly it is estimated that Ashur could not have accommodated more than 15,000 people. Furthermore it did not control a very large area of the surrounding landscape.
Mediterranean sea. Ashur is located on the edge of an area where agricultural production from rainfall is possible, but there was not suitable land in the area for a high yield of grain production (compared to the southern city states of Mesopotamia). In addition, the Tigris is unsuitable for irrigation, contributing to the agricultural unfeasibility. Instead Ashur’s Territories were best used for sheep and goat herding. In several letters there is mention of the need to store up grain for the winter, which appears to have been bought and sold in the market, but there are no references to the actual production of grain in Ashur. Considering these two factors, we can see how Ashur relied heavily on trade with other city states for the food supply necessary to maintain its inhabitants. In addition to this Ashur was able to create a vast profit from its position as ‘middle-man’ on the lattice of trade routes. In the texts of two kings of Ashur (c. 1939-1900 BCE), Ilushuma and his son and successor Erishum I, the kings of Ashur, seem to have been attempting to attract trade caravans from the south to come to Ashur to sell and buy goods. The following two excerpts are taken from the two kings Ilushuma and Erishum I respectively:

“The ‘freedom’ of the Akkadians and their children I established. I ‘purified’ their copper. I established their ‘freedom’ from the border of the marshes and Ur and Nippur, Awal and Kismar, Der of the god Ishtaran, as far as the City (i.e. Ashur).”

“...made tax exempt silver, gold, copper, tin, barley, wool...”

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4 Kuhrt 1998: 19  
5 Larsen 2000: 77  
6 Kuhrt 1998: 19  
7 Larsen 2000: 80  
8 Kuhrt 1995: 87  
9 Kuhrt 1995: 87 This excerpt is taken from a text by king Ilushuma  
10 Kuhrt 1995: 87 This excerpt is taken from a text by king Erishum I
Mogens Larsen has convincingly argued that Ilushuma was attempting to attract traders from the south, and given the excerpt from Erishum I it seems likely that Ashur was attempting to establish itself as a preferred trade centre by making special privileges for traders coming from the south.\textsuperscript{11} Not only was Ashur deliberately intending to maximise its trade profits through these royal decrees, but Ashur had another powerful incentive which attracted traders from all over Mesopotamia; it seems the city had managed to establish a dominant tin trade connection with the east.\textsuperscript{12} Given the combination of such privileges for merchants, the location of the city on an important intersection of trade routes, and the commodities that flowed in and out of the city, it is easy to imagine how Ashur flourished under such an intense commercial industry.

Since Ashur had established itself as a powerful trade city in Mesopotamia it extended its commercial potency through the establishment of ‘colonies’ or ‘ports’ among the various centers within their network. The word used to describe one of these settlements was \textit{karum} in the Old Assyrian dialect of Akkadian. Originally the word was a Sumerian term for a river port or quay in southern Mesopotamia since the majority of their commercial transactions were done on harbours with merchants coming from the Persian Gulf or elsewhere along the rivers.\textsuperscript{13} In the Old Assyrian dialect the word became completely separated from its original reference to a water port and was simply used to denote a commercial establishment and the people inhabiting it.\textsuperscript{14} Similar to a \textit{karum} was a ‘station’ which was known as a \textit{wabartum} and referred to a similar but much smaller establishment. The word \textit{wabartum} is postulated to be linked to a word for ‘guest’, which suggests how it came to be used for ‘pit stops’ or ‘stations’ along a trade route.\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Kuhrt 1995: 87
\item Kuhrt 1995: 87
\item Larsen 2000: 80
\item Larsen 2000: 80
\item Kuhrt 1995: 92
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\end{footnotesize}
Furthermore a *wabartum* would be under the administrative power of its nearest or a very important *karum* and in turn the *karum* was under the control of its mother city Ashur.\(^{16}\)

The colony set up at Kanesh was not actually established by the Assyrians; rather it was already a part of the town and became inhabited by the Assyrian merchants trading with the Anatolians.\(^{17}\) Archaeologists have roughly estimated the number of Assyrians living at Kanesh to be around 2,000 – 4,000 people.\(^{18}\) The process of getting to Kanesh was quite arduous, and a caravan took on average five to six weeks to get from Ashur to Kanesh.\(^{19}\) It seems that Assyrians and Anatolians lived among one another, with no separate area designated specifically for the merchants.\(^{20}\) However, the Assyrians had a separate ethnic and political identity from the local Anatolians.\(^{21}\) This identity existed not just at Kanesh but also extended to the rest of Mesopotamia as Assyrian citizens only referred to themselves as ‘sons of Ashur’ while the southerners of Mesopotamia were designated as ‘Akkadians’; there were also ‘Subarians’ denoting the peoples between Anatolia and Ashur (most likely the Hurrians), the ‘Amorites’ who were the Semitic speakers from Syria-Palestine, and finally the term “*nu’a’u*” which was used to refer to the inhabitants of Anatolia.\(^{22}\) This ethnic community of Assyrians at Kanesh was strictly reserved for Assyrian merchants, and no Anatolian could become a member.\(^{23}\) The reason for this was that the merchants living in Kanesh already had an established family firm back in Ashur through which they supplied and were supplied with the commodities that traveled to and fro Anatolia and Ashur.\(^{24}\)

\(^{16}\) Larsen 2000: 80  
\(^{17}\) Larsen 2000: 80  
\(^{18}\) Larsen 2000: 79  
\(^{19}\) Kuhrt 1998: 26  
\(^{20}\) Larsen 2000: 82  
\(^{21}\) Larsen 2000: 82  
\(^{22}\) Larsen 2000: 82  
\(^{23}\) Larsen 2000: 82  
\(^{24}\) Larsen 2000: 82
In particular it was tin and textiles which were being brought into Anatolia – almost exclusively these two materials – and in return the Assyrians were receiving silver and gold.²⁵ The Assyrians in this network of trade were virtually ‘middle-men’ who were exploiting the strategic position of Ashur in order to create revenue for themselves by buying and selling goods that came to Ashur from other areas of Mesopotamia and beyond. In fact the tin which was being taken to Anatolia and elsewhere was being imported into Ashur from Iran (or farther) through Elam.²⁶ Furthermore the majority of the textiles were coming from Babylonia in southern Mesopotamia, supplemented by family industries in Ashur.²⁷ Thus the Assyrians were exporting little of their own, but instead were acting as another pair of hands between buyer and seller. The importation and exportation of tin and textiles between the two sites was almost exclusively, on the side of the Assyrians, for turning a profit, as silver and gold were not a basic necessity for Ashur.²⁸

In Ashur, and most of Mesopotamia for that matter, silver was the universally accepted and even preferred mode of exchange and payment.²⁹ Because of the different economic systems existing in Anatolia and Ashur, silver could be easily and cheaply obtained in Anatolia.³⁰ Thus an Assyrian merchant was maximizing the profits of his investments (in tin and textiles) by selling his goods in Anatolia where silver was obtained easily, and subsequently the silver could be re-invested by the merchant into more tin and textiles to be sent up from Ashur to Kanesh.³¹

In addition to the silver being brought back from Anatolia, gold was another (although less

²⁵ Veenhof 1997: 339
²⁶ Veenhof 1997: 339
²⁷ Veenhof 1997: 339
²⁸ Veenhof 1997: 340
²⁹ Veenhof 1997: 339
³⁰ Veenhof 1997: 340 Silver is a metal which was readily found and mined in Anatolia, as such its value was significantly less in Anatolia and was essentially the preferred means of exchange in that area. Ashur however was not rich in silver and used different commodities for exchange, so when Assyrian merchants traded in Anatolia they obtained silver, and took it back to Ashur where it had a significantly higher value.
³¹ Veenhof 1997: 340
common) metal being brought back to Ashur.\textsuperscript{32} The reason it was less commonly used was that laws in Ashur prevented gold from being commercially circulated, as it seems there was a ban on doing so.\textsuperscript{33} For example, a letter from the king of Ashur sent to \textit{karum} Kanesh reads as follows:

\begin{quote}
“The rule concerning gold is as previously: brothers (Assyrians) may sell it to each other; but in accordance with the rule on the stela no Assyrian, whoever he is, may sell gold to any Akkadian, Amorite, or Subariean. The one who does sell any will not live...”\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

As far as explaining why there was such a ban is a little unclear and the gold was potentially being horded in Ashur.\textsuperscript{35} It seems more likely that since silver was universally accepted in trade, then the gold was used either to fashion a variety of objects and ornaments (probably for palace and temple use), or was re-invested into the trade network to purchase tin and textiles which could be sold for silver.

While tin and textiles were in high demand in Anatolia, wool and copper were also being circulated for profit, within Anatolia especially. Wool was found in abundance in Anatolia and could be bought cheaply in some areas and sold for profit in another.\textsuperscript{36} The purpose of the wool trade was not to buy and export the wool to Ashur, but rather the wool was used as a medium by which tin/textiles could be exchanged for silver.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, wool was not always converted directly into silver but instead traded for copper, and then silver.\textsuperscript{38} Rarely is there any reference to wool being sent to Ashur, the wool trade rather is almost strictly an intra-Anatolian market.\textsuperscript{39} Nonetheless, if wool was expensive in Ashur then women would ask their male relatives to send

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\textsuperscript{32} Veenhof 1997: 339
\textsuperscript{33} Veenhof 1997:339
\textsuperscript{34} Larsen 2000:82
\textsuperscript{35} Veenhof 1997:339
\textsuperscript{36} Veenhof 1972: 130
\textsuperscript{37} Veenhof 1972: 137
\textsuperscript{38} Veenhof 1972: 137
\textsuperscript{39} Veenhof 1972: 130
\end{flushright}
some from Kanesh, but always small amounts. Yet usually local wool would have been used in
Ashur, except very little is known about wool production and circulation in Ashur. Finally,
while wool and copper were among some of the materials being traded in Anatolia, the goal for
Assyrian merchants was always to obtain silver.

In conclusion, the city of Ashur and its karum at Kanesh were able to prosper during the
eyearly second millennium BCE through the vast lattice of trade routes in which Ashur was a focal
point. The Assyrians themselves served as middle-men who turned a profit by purchasing goods
from one and selling them to another. The colony at Kanesh is just one example of the karum’s
that existed throughout the ancient Near-East. Furthermore, without the discovery of the
cuneiform texts at Kanesh it is unlikely that archaeologists would ever have known that
Assyrians had permanent residence at the site. Thus it is easy to imagine an entire network of
karum’s and wabartum’s scattered throughout the Near-East, Iran, the Sinai Peninsula, and even
as far east as the Indus Valley.

40 Veenhof 1972: 130
Bibliography


