An Introduction to the Foreign Trade of Mesopotamia
In the Light of Cuneiform Documentation
of the Third and Second Millennium BC.

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Introduction

Ancient Iraq is very well known as an agricultural economic country, especially, the middle and the southern parts of Mesopotamia, which was called “the Land of Sumer and Akkad”, it's a very rich agricultural country. Sumer's economy was based on agriculture, fishing, and cattle and sheep breeding. Lived on the products of the fertile, irrigated soil, and this situation was clearly reflected in the cuneiform texts unearthed from many sites from the third and second millennium BC. And due to the young geological composition of Mesopotamia, the alluvial plain of ancient Sumer lacked so much important raw materials, those of materials were needed by the craftsmen of Sumer and Akkad for the industry, works of art and daily life. These raw material were, deferent kinds of stone, timber, and metal, therefore, the need for these materials led to exchange what the people had from the agricultural production and industrial goods and material produced by the workshops of temple or palace, such as: animal hides, leather manufactures, wool, oil, cereals, dates, textile, wild and domesticated animals,…etc., also what not existing in the country (1)

Trade, meant the exchange or transport of all kinds of goods locally, between cities, and with other lands. Foreign trade is understood only that trade which carried out with countries outside the region. The trade of Mesopotamia with other countries was either land transport or water transport. For the land transport only donkeys were available, camels only came into use in later times. The water transport was carried out by boats and ships of various shapes and weights, and they were used much earlier in the country.

Therefore trade has been a very important means of economy ever since the prehistoric times, since we have archaeological objects found in the ancient Iraqi sites, which never existed in the country, especially, obsidian, precious and semi-precious stones, metal and hard wood. These were evidence for trade system even of a small scale. Recent studies of prehistoric trade show that long-exchange is attested throughout the Neolithic, Obsidian (2) was known from well back in Neolithic times, and was widely distributed. The early exchange of Obsidian over long distances in Mesopotamia illustrates the extent to which goods could be circulated throughout relatively
undifferentiated societies. Lapis-lazuli\(^3\), Turquoises and Agate, were found in the excavations of prehistoric sites in ancient Iraq\(^4\). Evidence for specialized trading ventures in the Ubaid period (fifth millennium BC.) coming from Yarim Tepe in Northern Iraq, where a Soviet team record several hundred grindstones.

It is not hard to understand how Mesopotamia became a trading center in early times, in the first place it needed the production of the surrounding countries, whilst its central location of water and land routes in almost all directions, made it the natural center for transit trade. There are some indications that all this trade had reached a high stage of development and rather large proportions by the Old Babylonian period (first half of the second millennium BC).

Two main kinds of trade can be distinguished\(^5\):
1) The long-distance trade.
2) The internal trade.

The internal trade was the local trade by which the articles are brought to the consumers, because it was necessary wherever articles are not produced by the consumers themselves or are not distributed by the government or the temple. There is not yet sufficient evidence to reconstruct the patterns of commercial connections between the various Mesopotamian cities. One may suggest that both geographical position and regional specialties have to be considered. For instance, Tello and Lagash seem to have had a thriving fish trade, Umma may have been a center for production of aromatic oils, and appears to have exported large numbers of sheep and goats\(^6\), while Sippar is mentioned as specializing in paint.

Apparent commercial contacts between Uruk and Eshnunna, Uruk and Umma, Girsu (Tello) and Umma, Eshnunna and Northern Syria (Ebla and Mari) can be documented both of private and commercial nature. Most of the evidence on inter-city trade is well documented from the Sumerian cities Umma and Girsu, which mention trade with the other Sumerian and Babylonian cities in Mesopotamia. The internal trade did not play a role in contacts of different societies. Therefore, we shall speak here only of the long-distance trade, especially, in the third and second millennium BC, this can bring prosperity to a country either by import or export or by transit\(^7\).

The long-distance or foreign trade was the trade by which goods are exchanged from one country or region to another. It can happen in two ways, either traders travel with their merchandise over long distances from one country or region to another, or it happened by one or more intermediaries, each trading over a short distance. Presuming that in both cases, originally, the traders transported their merchandise themselves and that, consequently, trade and transport coincided\(^8\).
The existence of foreign trade is shown by the occurrence of foreign articles in lower Mesopotamia, this evidence is both archaeological and textual, and this study will deal with the textual evidence, although archaeological evidence will sometimes be adduced in an attempt to support or extend that of the texts. The study will mainly deal with the foreign trade itself and its methods in the third and second millennium BC. However, the archaeological evidence goes back farther. Foreign articles have been found from before writing was invented. Moreover, archaeological evidence also shows the existence of trade between lower Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, by the way of the Arabian Gulf in the third millennium BC. In various places in Mesopotamia, such as, Ur, Kish, and even in Eshnunta, seals of proto-Indian style have been found. Similar seals have been found in Bahrain, indicating the possibility that the trade with India passed by the Arabian Gulf.

In ancient Mesopotamia, the most efficient way of transporting goods was by water, since most places in Mesopotamia could be reached by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and through their network of rivers and canals. Ships sailed down the Arabian Gulf to the east and in the Mediterranean to the west.

One easily tempted to attribute foreign influences in a country to trade relations, for trade is means for people from different places to come into contact with one another, and therefore it is considered as a means for transferring civilization. If cultural influence is transferred, this can of course, more easily and more rapidly happen in direct long-distance trade than by trade through intermediaries.

Over the centuries, both raw materials and products came to Mesopotamia from various areas, for instance, Lapis-lazuli came from the Badakhshan a province in Afghanistan, which was the nearest source for this material of which considerable use was made for cylinder seals and works of art in the temples and palaces in Mesopotamia. Also large quantities of unworked Lapis-Lazuli as well as artifacts were found at Ebla in northern Syria together with Carnelian, which came from India. Further evidence of foreign trade is given by the widespread occurrence in the middle of the bronze millennium made from the alloy of Tin and Copper, since the only available source of the Tin was deposits in Afghanistan, while the Copper mostly come from Oman in the south of the Arabian Gulf. It is worth mentioning that Copper was mentioned in earliest texts from Shurupak in southern Mesopotamia.

Trade indeed can be important in the diffusion of civilization, but it has always to be kept in mind that trade itself is dependent on demand, when obsidian replaced by other materials for making implements, trade necessarily followed the changed places of
production, and deposits of metal came to determine the trade. The Assyrians themselves, carrying on foreign trade without intermediaries, settled in Anatolia as traders, in these settlements as the natives came to trade, several Assyrians entered into the family-relations with them. In both instances, influence came from trade settlements in foreign countries, where the native population learnt the higher civilized way of life. The Sumerians, after realizing the importance of trade, started to arrange several measures to improve the external trade as follows (16):

1- The lack of the raw materials in the southern part of Mesopotamia, and the need for these raw materials for construction and daily life in Mesopotamia, led the Sumerians and the Babylonians to look for these materials, in the neighboring countries.

2- The Sumerians were aware of and paid special attention to the foreign trade between their country and the centers of trade especially the trade centers in the Arabian Gulf lead to the east. This trade led the Sumerians to improve their industries to match with the needs of the foreign countries.

3- Luxury items were important in the political daily life for maintaining the prestige and position of the royal palaces and temples. Because of the expense and risk involved in obtaining these rare materials, their acquisition remained almost exclusively the business of kings and queens, powerful governors, and wealthy temples estates.

4- The political ambitions of Mesopotamian kings and rulers to expand their empire, led them to work hard to find new sources of raw materials, and even controlling these reigns.

5- The responsibility of government in Mesopotamia, towards the temple to prepare what they need for their religious life, and the right practices.

Information about foreign trade came from many sources, first of all, the evidences which came from the excavations of many sites, such as, cylinder seals made of precious and semi-precious stones, manufactured objects made of either metal, shell, gold, silver, and other material which was lacking in Mesopotamia. Models of boats and sketches of ships found on tablets and cylinder seals were also an evidence of trade.

The second part of the foreign trade sources, was the textual evidence, the cuneiform inscriptions, business contracts, manifests of goods, trade letters, reference to trade also occurred in the ancient Mesopotamian proverbs, literary texts, royal inscriptions, as well as the administrative and Economic texts, especially the silver balance.
accounts from the third dynasty of Ur\(^{(17)}\), the cuneiform texts in general, are one of the most important sources and evidence for the economic and trade in Mesopotamia, and they are the most plenty evidence ever found in the country.

After the invention of writing by the middle of the fourth millennium BC, we started having so many cuneiform texts dealing with several contents, economical aspects of life among people. Then, we had texts mentioning the trade and exchanging material between the ancient Mesopotamian and their neighboring countries. And these texts led us to understand that the importance of trade grew up in the third and second millennium BC because the need of the material for the political and armed forces and the need of the temples\(^{(18)}\).

In this respect, trade did not stay among individual, but officials were aware of it, and the central government started to take care of the routes and stations of trade and the people trading, and even coming to legal paragraphs including in the laws issued by the government dealing with all the aspects of trade in and outside the country.

The cuneiform texts gave us evidence of foreign trade between ancient Mesopotamian sites and various foreign surrounding countries, the texts which we so far know, came almost from the southern Mesopotamian towns, such as, Girsu, Umma, Drehem (Puzriš-Dagan), Ur and Nippur, where they have brought to light by regular or illegal excavations. there are still so many unpublished texts from Ur III and other periods which are distributed among various museums of the world.

The textual evidence was the best and most important sources for learning about ancient trade in Mesopotamia (both of the long-distance or foreign and the internal trade), it is noteworthy that there is no clear textual evidence during the third and second millennium BC. Other that Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha, that were engaged in the flourishing Arabian Gulf trade, nor are there for that matter cuneiform records which mention directly any sea going boats and ships other than those from these three cultural areas. The existence of trade during the third millennium BC. Between the city- states of Mesopotamia, and between Mesopotamia and the other countries to the east and south\(^{(19)}\) and the use for this purpose of sea-routes passing through the Arabian Gulf is well documented.

The Early Dynastic records are not very specific about the way in which the import goods from Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha entered Sumer; although Ur-Nansha of Lagash by the beginning of the third millennium BC records that “the ships of Dilmun brought a cargo of wood from the mountains“apparently by the way of the Arabian Gulf\(^{(20)}\). He also refers to wood, which he had obtained from the mountain of Magan, in this record we have an early indication that Dilmun was
a transshipping and middleman station for goods brought from places to the east rather than a source\textsuperscript{(21)}.

The Akkadian texts from the mid of the third millennium BC are quite helpful, and seem to imply that the Akkadian kings tried to keep the supremacy over the Gulf trade in their own hand, and consequently all the economic profit and benefits. King Sargon made ships from Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun anchor at the quay of Agade, Naram-sin and Manihtusu seem beyond doubt an attempt to safeguard the regular supplies of over seas products, which had to reach Mesopotamia via the maritime route, and to make the foreign ships from down the “lower sea “come directly to Agade\textsuperscript{(22)}.

After Ur-Nammu (2114-2095 BC) had established the third dynasty of Ur, the Arabian Gulf trade was now concentrated on Ur, the capital of the Neo-Sumerian empire. Once again Magan and Mesopotamia, and this time Ur, had their own direct sea trade, with Magan’s boats coming to Ur\textsuperscript{(23)}. In this time, exports to Magan included textile, wood, leather, sesame, oil and barley. In this time, many messengers from aboard came to the Sumerian cities, from other foreign countries, such as, Susa, Anshan, Kimash and other places in Iran, and left some Elamite names in mesopotamia. From Dilmun and Magan, many messengers and traders came for trading purposes\textsuperscript{(24)}.

In the Larsa period (2025-1763 BC.) in southern Mesopotamia, Ur retained its importance as a center for the Copper trader with Dilmun, which had now become the main enter port for Mesopotamia, regular supplies of Gulf products, both Mesopotamian merchants that were referred to as "alik dilmun" (the once that go to Dilmun) and the Dilmunianes carried on this trade\textsuperscript{(25)}. The trade of the dynasty of Larsa with the north was important in the time of its last king, Rim-sin (1822-1763 BC.), the trade on the Arabian Gulf, for which Ur was the port, was still important at the same time. This trade went back for several centuries, it is again from a number of letters, those from Ur and other cities, written to seafaring merchants by their principals mentioned the situation of trade between the two centers. The palace of Larsa had a good role in the trade to the north, but it still had large-scale interests in the Arabian Gulf, especially, the copper trade. Other textual evidence from the Old Babylonian period (the first half of the second millennium BC.), show this interest of the kings in the Arabian Gulf trade. Some additional evidence with regard to this trade mentioned the imports of metal\textsuperscript{(26)}.

At the end of the dynasty of Larsa and the first dynasty of Babylon (1894-1595 BC.), the importance of Ur as a trading center finished considerably, and while this may have been partly due to political situations, moreover, by this time, Sumer had lost political and commercial contact with Dilmun, most probably as a result of
Hammurabi’s strong centralization and taxation, which had left little room for private enterprises. Thus from the early dynastic period to Old Babylonian period, the Mesopotamian mercantile documents refer to imports from over sea, i.e. Arabian Gulf goods coming from Dilmun, Magan, Meluhha, of these three only Dilmun is clearly pictured as a transshipping or depot center.

The Old Babylonian list of exports is similar to that of Ur III period. The earlier Larsa texts, mostly dating to Sumu-abum (1894-1881 BC.), are records of gifts or tithes (27) to the city’s main temple from the luxury goods brought back by traders who had gone to Dilmun on their own. Other texts from the reign of Rim-sin mentioned silver, textile, oil and sesame as material exported to Dilmun (28), it is noteworthy that, whereas the rulers of Pre- Sargonic Lagash and of Akkad talk of direct trade with Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun.

From places like Ebla, Mari, and Emar other trades came to the region of Isin and Eshnunna in Babylonia in the beginning of the second millennium BC., on the other hand, evidence of Babylonian merchants traveling aboard. Places like Ur, Isin Umma, Akkad, Sippar, Babylon, Magan, Dilmun, Meluhha, Elam, Mari, Ebla, Emar and Ugarit correspond to the definition of “ports of trade”.

We knew about the routes of trade which lead to the north of the country, to Anatolia and the Levant, and about the routs of trade to the east through Iran lead to India and Afghanistan, and again through the Arabian Gulf and its very well known stations, Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha, to the east. The existence of trade during the third millennium BC. Between the city-states of Mesopotamia and countries to the south and east, and the use for this purpose of sea-routes passing the Arabian Gulf, is well documented.

In historical, geographical as well as in economical texts of the third millennium BC. (29), three names are mentioned which are repeatedly connected with the Arabian Gulf trade, they denoted the three apparently separate areas of Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. They are referred to both separately and together, according to context, but when jointly; usually Dilmun is named first, followed by Magan and then Meluhha. These areas were apparently situated on or reached by way of the Lower Sea (the Arabian Gulf), since their ships are often referred to in the cuneiform texts, and acted as independent sea trade centers, with which the Sumerian cities traded and from where they obtained various raw materials in exchange for their own export products (30). Ur III and Old Babylonian cuneiform texts mentioned account of materials for building ships and boats, such as, reed, wood, oil, bitumen, etc., moreover, these texts recorded salaries and ration for workers who are making the ships, towing and floating, loading and unloading (31).
Therefore, the Gulf had the leading role in the trade between ancient Mesopotamia, especially in the fourth and third millennium BC., that was for the very early time, and the quantity, and quality of the material brought from the mentioned centers, such as, metal, stone, hard wood, ivory, and shells, this included not only raw material but manufactured ones, with exchange to the agricultural products of Mesopotamia which were needed in the Gulf and the eastern countries (32).

Southern Mesopotamia was a land dominated not only by the Euphrates and its branches, but by a substantial number of artificial canals, therefore, a great deal of travel, transport and communication was water-borne, indeed, the facilitation of trade and transport by Mesopotamian's canals has an important role as irrigation. River traffic in Mesopotamia (33) was always heavy, the water routes acquired an over helming importance in the long-distance trade and commerce, a monopoly on the transport of heavy goods, such as, long tree trunks and huge stones blocks. In the alluvial plain region, great canals supplemented extensive system of rivers. Economic, and administrative texts, as well as, Letters and Literature texts from Ur III dynasty and Old Babylonian periods records the transportation of several goods, such as, grain, cattle, fish, milk, vegetables, oil, wool, stone, leather, and reeds. Grain, with which Mesopotamia especially was able to pay for part of raw materials, which it lacked, stood in the foreground of the trade in foodstuffs (34).

At the end of the third millennium BC, the Akkadian king Shar-kali-shari (2217-2193 BC.) sent a naval force to conquer the islands and coasts of the Arabian Gulf, in which Mesopotamia was dependent for essential materials. In the early second millennium BC., trade was very much royal supervised, there were checkpoint along the Euphrates, which merchants going by ships, and the temples with the central government controlled the standard system of weight and measures used in Mesopotamia (35).

Dilmun, or Tilmun, (The Land of Paradise), is mentioned in several categories of cuneiform texts, through the long Mesopotamian history, it is known as an important trade center, and served as a port of exchange through which goods such as gold, copper, lapis-lazuli, ivory, timber, date, and onions were traded. Dilmunian onion, Dilmunian dates, were even mentioned in the economic texts dated to the third millennium BC., timber was transported to Lagash, Umma and other cities in southern Mesopotamia, it is clear from this list that Dilmun was regarded as an important commercial center in the area of the Arabian Gulf around the beginning of the second millennium BC., differing from that of the time of Ur III, it makes another appearance in a list of geographical locations, where it is named among some of
the most famous Sumerian cities, these are, Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Adab, Shurupak, and Umma. Dilmun also has been identified with the islands Failaka, Bahrain and Tarut, except for the early periods of late Uruk through early dynastic, about 3400-2350 BC., it was noticed among the early texts of Urnanšē, the Sumerian prince of Lagash, who had transported wood to Mesopotamia from Dilmun. From the same period Copper is known to have been transported from Dilmun to Sumer. The Dilmun trade flourished in the Larsa period (2000-1763 BC.).

A study of the location of Magan and Mneluhha, is based on evidence which can be classified mainly as historical-political or economic-commercial texts. For approximately two thousand years, beginning in the mid-third millennium BC. Ancient Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform sources frequently mention two foreign lands, Magan and Meluhha. As for Magan should identified with Oman, in a collection of literature texts; Magan was called "The Land of Copper", or "The Home of Copper", Magan was also the sources of diorite (used for sculpturing in Mesopotamia), semi-precious stones, and ivory were also acquired in Magan on behalf of the temple of Nanna (the moon god) in Ur.

Meluhha, the third trade center mentioned in the Mesopotamian cuneiform texts, it was mentioned in the Akkadian, Ur III, and Old Babylonian periods, it was the sources of a kind of black wood (perhaps ebony), gold, ivory and carnelian, the goods were either native to Meluhha or were merely shipped there from more distant places, other references came from the Old Babylonian period.

During the Akkadian and the Ur III periods, Meluhha traded with Mesopotamia, it was the source of a kind of black wood (perhaps ebony), gold, ivory, and carnelian. These goods were either native to Meluhha or were merely shipped there from more distant places.

The foreign trade was carried on by individuals bearing the title of merchant in the various periods of Mesopotamian history, however, the merchant is designated by the word tamkarum, it has been difficult to realize the activities of merchants, especially in the earliest periods, and we are not exactly sure if the merchants worked for the city rulers only or if they also could execute private purchase orders. The function of a merchant, like that of a shepherd, takes him away from the town and the direct supervision of its administrators; this is most obviously true for foreign trade.

In the time of the third dynasty of Ur, we can trace the trend away from state control in documents relating to the foreign trade of the city of Ur. In the reign of king Ibbi-sin (2028-2004 BC.), the temple of Nanna was central, merchants drew garments, wool, oil, leather and barley from the temple for their sea voyages to Magan at
the far end of the Arabian Gulf to buy copper, semi-precious stones, here clearly they were acting not independently but as agents for the temple or the palace, and were under state control\(^{(42)}\). In the Old Babylonian period the merchant worked as an agent for the temple and palace, and as an individual enterprise and also as a money lender. Two categories of cuneiform texts were well known:

(1) The merchants balance accounts\(^{(43)}\).

(2) The merchants' receipts and expenditure.

These two categories demonstrate that the merchants were habitually concerned with the goods listed under balance accounts. The silver balance accounts have made possibility to Analyze in some detail the activities of a small group of merchants in the Sumerian city of Umma during the Ur III period (2112-2004 BC), moreover these cuneiform texts provide us with a list of some of the merchants' names\(^{(44)}\).

The rulers of the third dynasty of Ur opened many new possibilities for trade between Mesopotamia and its neighbors, commercial contacts of Mesopotamian cities with points outside of the country are best documented at the city of Umma (southern Mesopotamia), Umma had good connections with the east (Susa and southern Iran) for most of the pre-Sargonic period, Umma also appear to have direct connections with Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha\(^{(45)}\).

Now away from the goods and the routs for trade mentioned above, we have another, but very important element that was exchanged, the cultural traits, were also exchanged by these distant travelers, the language, the inscription, the religious rites, arts and many other cultural traits. This appears clearly by the archaeological material found in Mesopotamia and all the centers mentioned above.

**Abbreviation:**

AOAT Alter Orient und Altes Teatemen.
AOF Altorientalische Forschungen.
BBVO Berliner Beitrger zum Vorderen Orient.
CAD Cambridge Assyrian Dictionary.
JESHO Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient.
JOS Journal of Oman Studies.
RA Revue D’Assyriologie.
RLA Reallexikon der Assyriologie.
WA World Archaeology.
Notes

4- Agate, Lapis-Lazuli, Turquoise, Carnelian, and Diorite were among other precious stones reached Mesopotamia, and these stones are frequently used for beads and amulet making. Elisabeth, L., et-al, op-cit, p. 32f, for more archaeological evidences ,Youkhana, D.G., Stone Industries in the sixth Millennium BC. In tell Es-Sawwan, (1995), (unpublished Diss); Saggs, H., The Greatness that was Babylon, Translate by Amer Suleman, (1979), p. 31.
7- Leemans, (1960), p. 159f; Crawford, WA-5, p. 238.
16- Vhiera, E. Selected Temple Accounts from Tello, Yokha, and Drehem, Philadelphia, (1922); Crawford, V.E., Sumerian Economic Texts from the First Dynasty of Isin, New Haven, (1954), (BIN-IX); Johns, T.B., et-al,
24- For the role of the city at Larsa, see: Leemans, op.cit, (1950), p. 114ff.
26- Oppenheim, L., "The Sea-faring Merchants of Ur", HAOS-74, (1954), p. 13; Moreover, the cuneiform texts from Ur mentioned that the merchants must pay the tithe to the temple of the god Nanna and the goddess Ningal at Ur, this tithe includes , metal, lapis-lazuli, ivory, oil, date, flour, onion, fish, and other goods, see: Van-de Mieroop, M., "Gifts and Tithes to the Temple in Ur", Festschrift Ake S. Sjoberg, (1989).
30- Oppenheim, AOS-32, E-27; KK-25; D-20; G-20; 26.; Salonen, A., (Stor-8/IV), (1939).
35- Rice, op-cit, p. 268.
36- See notes 20-21
39- Leemans, op-cit, (1960), p. 8f; 124

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