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Ancient Assur: The City, its Traders, and its Commercial Network

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Abstract

The ancient city of Assur was an important emporium and a central place in the trade between Mesopotamia and Anatolia during the nineteenth-eighteenth centuries BC. Its traders exported to Anatolia large quantities of tin and expensive woolen textiles, which were sold for silver and gold, shipped back to Assur. The traders, traveling with donkey caravans, used a network of colonies and trading stations, where they could live and work on the basis of treaties with the local rulers. After a description of Assur's commercial role, the activities, organization and status of the traders are analyzed. First of those in Anatolia, with reference to the colonial system and the main Anatolian emporia. Next of those in Assur—"merchant-bankers", investors (in joint-stock funds), wholesale dealers, and moneylenders—and their relations to the "City-Hall", the economic and financial heart of Assur, and the "City-Assembly", whose decisions and verdicts reveal elements of a commercial policy and attempts to promote its interests. While the city, whose trade covered a particular circuit of a much wider international network, also had to consider local and international interests, the "colonial" traders were more focused on financial profits, also via the local trade in copper and wool. But the tensions due to diverging interests were restricted and the Assyrians were able to maintain a stable, profitable and highly developed commercial system for more than two centuries.

Durant les dix-neuvième et dix-huitième siècles avant J.-C. la cité-état d'Assur fut un grand centre de commerce. Ses marchands exportaient des quantités d'étain et de laines de prix à l'Anatolie, les y vendaient contre de l'or et de l'argent, et rentraient chez eux la bourse pleine d'argent. Des caravanes d'ânes, qui assuraient le transport, sillonnaient un réseau de colonies et de comptoirs. Les marchands assyriens pouvaient s'installer là-bas et y mener leur négoce grâce aux traités conclus entre les autorités assyriennes et les princes. La description de la fonction commerciale d'Assur est suivie d'une série d'analyses portant sur les activités des marchands, de leur organisation et de leur statut. Ce sujet cohérent nous mène d'abord en Anatolie pour regarder de près son système de colonies et ses principaux comptoirs. Ensuite à la ville d'Assur, avec ses 'banquiers-commerçants', ses investisseurs (des fonds remis aux sociétés commandites), ses commerçants de gros et ses prêteurs. Les relations

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entretenues par ces quatre groupes avec ‘l’hôtel de ville’ – le cœur battant de l’économie et des finances d’Assur –, et ‘l’assemblée municipale’ sont explorées. Les décisions et les verdicts de cette assemblée retiennent notre attention parce qu’on y décèle des traces d’une politique commerciale et des tentatives d’avancer les intérêts commerciaux d’Assur. D’une part il fallait que la ville, dont les opérations commerciales s’étendaient sur un circuit distinct intégré au vaste réseau international, tenait compte aussi des intérêts locaux et internationaux. D’autre part les profits – y inclus ceux provenant du négoce anatolien de la laine et du cuivre – étaient le point de mire des ‘marchands-colons’. Néanmoins, les tensions dues à ces intérêts divergents étant limitées, durant plus de deux siècles les Assyriens surent maintenir un système de commerce stable, productif, et très sophistiqué.

Keywords

markets, trade, commercial networks, city-states, Assur, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, colonial system

1. Trade in Ancient Mesopotamia

As the alluvial plain of southern Iraq, where the Mesopotamian civilization arose, lacked most natural resources (metal, stones, and good wood) essential for the development of a complex society, these had to be obtained from neighboring and more distant regions. Throughout Mesopotamian history we therefore notice a variety of strategies to acquire these from Iran, the Persian Gulf, the northern Levant, and Anatolia.

A very early practice meant to achieve this end, which has been termed an early, perhaps embryonic, colonial system, existed shortly before 3000 BC, on the fringes of northern Mesopotamia, between the Upper course of the Euphrates in the west and the Zagros mountains in the east. It was a network that comprised at least one impressive city on the Upper Euphrates¹ and a number of enclaves in existing towns, clearly recognizable by their purely South-Mesopotamian material remains. This system is thought to have served to secure exchange relations with, and trade routes through, areas from which the highly developing urban South-Mesopotamian “Late-Uruk Culture” obtained metal, lumber, and stones. Because it dates to the centuries immediately preceding the invention of script, we only have archaeological data, which makes its interpretation and function

¹) The city, whose ruins are called Habuba Qabira/Tell Qannas, was submerged by Lake Assad before it could be completely excavated. With its size of 15 ha, its walls, and layout (with temples and an administrative quarter) on a Euphrates terrace, it goes far beyond a mere trading colony and suggests a massive effort to dominate this important region and defend the Mesopotamian economic interests, if necessary, also by force.

somewhat hypothetical. I will not dwell on this, however, and refer those who are interested to a fascinating book on this so-called “Uruk World System.”²

Occasionally military endeavors, such as conquests, campaigns, and raids, were used to obtain essential materials as booty.³ In a few periods (mainly during the last centuries of the third millennium BC) powerful Mesopotamian empires managed to subdue and temporarily control some neighboring cities and lands, and at times they also tried to secure the flow of goods by imposing payment of tribute on vassals or by establishing a more permanent military or commercial presence in vital fringe areas. Susa, in southwestern Iran, during the last centuries of the third millennium BC, was frequently under the rule of Mesopotamian kings and harbored Mesopotamian merchants. The Old Akkadian Empire built the fortress Nagar (Tell Brak) in the north of the Jazira, from where it could monitor southern Anatolia. But before the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in the first millennium BC, most of these areas were rarely conquered and dominated, and several materials originated from regions usually (e.g. Lebanon with its cedars, Cilicia with its silver mines) or always (Oman with its copper, northeastern Afghanistan with its lapis lazuli and tin) beyond Mesopotamian reach or control.

This meant that during most of Mesopotamian history and certainly during the first centuries of the second millennium BC, which is the periods of focus of this contribution, trade was the preferred, most efficient, and presumably also the cheapest way of obtaining the materials essential for its highly developed and urbanized culture. It was practiced in the form

²) G. Algaze, *The Uruk World System. The Dynamics of Early Mesopotamian Civilization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See for an analysis also G. J. Stein, *Rethinking World-Systems. Diasporas, Colonies, and Interaction in Uruk Mesopotamia* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), and G. J. Stein “The Political Economy of Mesopotamian Colonial Encounters.” In *The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters, Comparative Perspectives*, ed. G. J. Stein (Santa Fe and Oxford: School of American Research Press/James Currey, 2002): Ch. 5 in which he compares the “Uruk World System” with the Old Assyrian colonial system.

³) The Old Akkadian king Manishtusu (ca. 2300 BC) boasts of having campaigned in southern Iran, subdued towns on the far side of the Persian Gulf, reached the “silver mines,” and quarried precious “black stones” (diorite?) that were shipped by boat to his capital. Naram-Sin and his son claim to have had cedars cut in the Amanus for the temple of their goddess Ishtar.

of interregional exchange, via entrepreneurs,⁴ who ventured abroad with their donkey caravans and boats, preferably to emporia, market towns, and ports of trade, such as Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, Susa in southwestern Iran, or Emar and Karkemish on the Upper Euphrates, where traders from various regions met. The importance of trade also meant that foreign traders, especially from the area of the Upper Euphrates and from that of the Persian Gulf, were welcomed as sellers and buyers to the cities and quays of Mesopotamia.

In the Babylonia of the early second millennium BC a system emerged which allowed groups of merchants from various trading cities to settle in other cities,⁵ occasionally even—presumably on the basis of political agreements—in those of neighboring territorial states. These merchants were usually⁶ concentrated and often lived together with the local traders in a special area, called *kārum*, “quay, harbor,”⁷ where they conducted their business in the interest of themselves, their mother-city, and their host-city. According to a famous statement in a letter from that period, they

⁴ Rulers occasionally also sent envoys for the sake of exchanging gifts, diplomatic operations of, at times, limited direct economic importance, but nevertheless valuable for establishing and fostering international contacts with strategic foreign states or cities, from which their traders could profit. In the early eighteenth century BC Mari (on the Euphrates) sent envoys with gifts in gold to the ruler of Susa in order to secure the import of tin. See C. Michel, “Le commerce dans les textes de Mari.” In *Amurru* 1, ed. J.-M. Durand (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1996): 385-425, esp. 390-1.

⁵ A royal edict from ca. 1640 BC, edited in F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit* (Leiden: Brill, 1984): 169-83. §10 enumerates the *kāruns* of eleven cities in southern Mesopotamia, which were affected by a measure of a Babylonian king and therefore consisted (in part?) of traders originating from the Babylonian state.

⁶ Not always. Traders from Sippar lived in Susa, for which no reference to a *kārum* has been found, and we meet with traders from Isin who had settled in Sippar in “the street of the men of Isin,” and traders from Assur operating from “quarters” (called *bēt nap̄tarim*, a term denoting a secondary or temporary facility outside one’s home town) bought or rented in that city or in the *kārum*. See for similar observations on Mari, Michel, “Le commerce”: 413-26.

⁷ Because the main Babylonian cities were situated on watercourses and most bulk transport was by water, their “quays” (*kārum*) played a key role in the distribution and transfer of domestic and imported goods. “Quays” became “commercial districts,” with public and private buildings where suppliers and domestic and foreign traders would meet, goods were exchanged, and their exchange values became established (one could speak of “the current *kārum* of barley,” or state that “the *kārum* of date is x *shekels* of silver per *kor*”). In its derived meaning of “commercial district” the term was also used in connection with cities outside Babylonia, not situated on a watercourse, such as the commercial settlements or colonies in Upper Mesopotamia and even Anatolia (see below).

could even travel between areas that were at war, just like pastoral nomads during the transhumance, because their activities were appreciated and they enjoyed a special status that offered protection. This arrangement did not only apply to their trips, but it also protected them from service duties for which a ruler could summon the citizens. The *kārum* of the city of Mari on the Middle Euphrates, e.g. also included traders from Sippar (the main Babylonian trading city on the Euphrates), whose designation as “the *kārum* of Sippar that is in Mari” identifies it as an organized, corporate group, under its own “head,” who stood in contact with the mother-city. Such an arrangement, which probably also existed in other cities and *kāruns*, must have been based on formal agreements,⁸ and there is evidence that the activities of the foreign traders could be monitored by the local “Overseer of the traders,” a government official. Cities that needed imports and wished to convert their own surpluses and products into goods they lacked apparently welcomed foreign traders in their *kāruns*, because commercial exchange was not normally undertaken by “the state” itself. They not only supplied essential goods, but also stimulated economic activity and generated income in the form of import taxes (called *miksum*, usually at a rate of 10%), paid in the towns where their boats or caravans entered a state’s territory.⁹

⁸) The “commercial quarter” of the city of Apum (Tell Leilan), in northern Mesopotamia, comprised merchant communities (*kāruns*) from three neighboring towns and from Assur, and the position of the latter was regulated in a treaty concluded between the local king and the city of Assur; see K. R. Veenhof, “The Old Assyrian Period.” In *Annäherungen 5, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 160/5: Mesopotamia. The Old Assyrian Period*, ed. M. Wäfler (Fribourg and Göttingen: Academic Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008): Ch. V, treaty B. Unfortunately, the few other surviving international Old Babylonian treaties focus on diplomacy and military matters and do not mention trade. A much later, instructive example from a neighboring area is provided by the Biblical story of 1 Kings 20:21ff. (ninth century BC), in which king Barhadad of Aram-Damascus, defeated by Achab of Israel, offers him permission “to set up ‘streets’ (*ḥuṣōt*, the equivalent of a *sug*) in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria,” whereupon Achab lets him go “with a treaty.” Such agreements could of course also be concluded without war, being in the economic interest of both parties.

⁹) My focus on Assur does not allow me to go into details for Babylonia and I refer to the recent documentation and discussion (with bibliographical references) by M. Stol, “Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in altbabylonischer Zeit.” In *Mesopotamien. Die altbabylonische Zeit. Annäherungen 4*, eds P. Attinger, W. Sallaberger, and M. Wäfler (*Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 150/4*: Fribourg and Göttingen, 2004): Ch. 15, “Der Handel,” esp. 893-9. See for the *kārum* of Mari and other *kāruns* mentioned in the texts from Mari, Michel, “Le commerce”: 413-7 and J.-M. Durand, *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari*, III (Paris: Le Cerf, 2000): Ch. 12, “Les activités commerciales.”

This so-called “*kārum*-system” was very important for trade and for exploiting the economic potential of the cities and their countryside and even for trade across some territorial boundaries. But, as far as the evidence now available goes, it never developed, not even in powerful states such as Babylon, Larsa, or Mari, into a real “colonial system,” that is a more or less coherent network of traders settled in market-cities and emporia abroad serving the economic interests of a particular empire. What we are rather dealing with here were in essence commercial arrangements that facilitated regional, inter-city trade, in some cases also across territorial boundaries, by groups of merchants from various cities operating in, and from, other cities, preferably capitals and strategically located emporia and market-towns. While these merchants were thus important for palaces and rulers in supplying them with required goods or converting their mostly agricultural surpluses—tasks also performed by local traders and occasionally by officials of the palace sent out on particular commissions—they were basically private entrepreneurs.

2. The Assyrian Commercial Network and Colonial System

The only well-documented commercial network, consisting of a series of interconnected trading colonies from one single state in strategic towns in a target area, was that of the city of Assur during the first centuries of the second millennium BC. It served the massive import of expensive woolen textiles, tin (essential in the Middle Bronze Period), and also lapis lazuli by donkey caravans into Anatolia, where the Assyrians sold these, directly and indirectly (via their participation in the internal Anatolian trade in copper, wool, and grain) for silver and gold that was shipped back to Assur.¹⁰ In its fully developed form it comprised ca. forty commercial settlements of two kinds. The bigger and presumably more independent and administratively more equipped ones—affiliated with politically and economically important Anatolian cities, frequently capitals of city-states—were called *kārum* or “colony,” of which at least 23 are known. Alongside these there existed

¹⁰ It is impossible to describe the Old Assyrian trade here in detail and I refer the reader to my recent overview in Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a) and the bibliography presented there. Other valuable introductions are M. T. Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1976) and the introduction to C. Michel, *Correspondance des marchands de Kanish au début du deuxième millénaire avant J.-C.* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2001).

ca. 15 so-called *wabartums* or “trading stations,” usually in smaller or economically less important cities and road stations.¹¹

Of the *kārum*s that of Kanesh, an important city in Central Anatolia, northeast of Kayseri, just south of the Halys/Kızılırmak, was the most important (and presumably oldest) one and our knowledge of Old Assyrian trade is due to the fact that it was identified in 1925 and has been continuously excavated by Turkish archeologists since 1948. It was the seat of the corporate administration of the whole colonial system, led by a committee of “big men,” a plenary assembly, and a secretary; it boasted archival, storage, and meeting facilities and featured a shrine of the god Assur, where oaths were sworn. All these facilities must have been concentrated in the so-called “*kārum* house” which, unfortunately, has not yet been found. Other colonies and trading stations were subject to its authority, with the smaller “trading stations” (*wabartums*) being under the administrative control of the nearest “colony” (*kārum*). Although *kārum* Kanesh had a fair measure of autonomy with respect to internal affairs—thanks to extra-territorial rights guaranteed by a treaty with the king of Kanesh—and could issue orders, render verdicts, and make regulations (it had fixed the rate of default interest, for example), it was essentially an extension of the government of the city of Assur. The latter’s city assembly, the highest political and judicial authority, could steer and correct the colonial administration and the behavior of its traders by directives, decisions, formal verdicts, and laws. These usually concerned conflicts and judicial issues related to trade, financial problems, and occasionally involved matters of family law (in particular matters of inheritance, after the death of a trader),¹²

¹¹) The network existed during a period of ca. 240 years, with a small gap (when *kārum* Kanesh was destroyed) in ca. 1837 BC (middle chronology), which separates the older level II (which yielded the bulk of the textual sources) from the younger, still poorly documented (ca. 500 texts) level Ib of *kārum* Kanesh. During the level II period the number of Assyrian settlements grew and a few developed from *wabartums* into *kārum*s. But it seems to have shrunk during level Ib, from which thus far 23 settlements have been attested. In that period changes occurred: 3 settlements known as *wabartums* during level II came to figure as *kārum*s, while two important *kārum*s in the west, Wahshushana and Burushhattum, no longer occur. See Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (note 8): 154–67.

¹²) Important lawsuits, started in the colonies, could end up by being tried by the City Assembly, to which traders could appeal with regard to decisions of *kārum* Kanesh with the words: “Bring my affair before the City and the ruler!” The Old Assyrian sources are very important for ancient legal history and I may refer to my overview of these matters in K. R. Veenhof, “The Old Assyrian Period.” In *History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, ed. R. Westbrook (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 431–84.

but occasionally also matters of commercial policy. They were communicated by means of official letters sent to *kārum* Kanesh, which had to make their contents known to the other colonies (occasionally by “messengers of the *kārum*”) and supervise and enforce their implementation. More direct control by, and contact with, the mother-city was secured by the “Envoys of the City,” regularly present in Anatolia, who were particularly involved in legal matters and in regulating the diplomatic relations with the local Anatolian kings.

The Assyrian colonial system was accordingly rather tightly knit, characterized by a good coherence and much mutual communication. And although the journey from Assur to Kanesh (more than 1000 km) took about six weeks, links with Assur always remained close on all levels. Members of the same trading families regularly lived in one of the colonies and in Assur—with caravans, traders, messengers, and mail regularly traveling both ways—while traders based in the colonies paid occasional visits to Assur to see their family and to pay homage to the god Assur. This regular communication, even though many traders lived in the colonies for many years and some also died there, prevented the rise of a “diaspora situation,” which seems to have been more likely for a commercial community abroad in a system of maritime trade. Only in the later phase of the trade, in the eighteenth century BC, some “diaspora features” may be detected, as the number of Assyrians in Anatolia became smaller and contacts with Assur less regular, but they did not lead to the emergence of politically more autonomous Assyrian trading communities in Anatolia.¹³

Of the Assyrian commercial settlements ten were spread out over northern Mesopotamia (the so-called Jazira, between the upper courses of the Tigris and the Euphrates) and they enabled the Assyrian caravans to traverse that region unharmed on their way to the crossings of the Euphrates.¹⁴ Another thirty were established in Anatolia, ranging from the Black Sea to the Euphrates and from Malatya to at least the line between Konya

¹³) In this case “diasporic features” indicate weakening ties of the Assur traders with the mother city. Although specific cultural, legal and religious features may linger on, this implies that there is an increasing degree of assimilation into the host society e.g. through local economic transactions and marriage.

¹⁴) Whilst en route some Assyrians—as reports about transactions, payment of taxes, and legal conflicts show—also engaged in some commerce, for which they probably could use, apart from the inns in several towns, the facilities and know-how of colleagues who belonged to the commercial settlements there or owned houses in the relevant towns. The above-mentioned treaty between Assur and the ruler of Apum distinguishes between

and Ankara.¹⁵ Their number grew over the years due to the development of trade, a growing turnover, and a wider range of action, made possible by the employment of more people as traveling agents and representatives in more peripheral settlements. These settlements had been established on the basis of treaties (called “oaths”) concluded between the Assyrian authorities and many local rulers, who allowed the Assyrians to settle, travel, and do business in the various Anatolian “countries” in exchange for the right to levy taxes on imported tin (ca. 3%), textiles (5%), and a pre-empt part (10%) of the latter. These treaties in combination with the efficient colonial organization, commercial skills, good transport and information facilities, agency and representation, and the administrative support of the mother-city of Assur stood at the basis of Assyrian commercial success.

This highly developed, coherent, and well-documented commercial system seems to be a good choice for an attempt to shed some ancient Near Eastern light on “Empires and Emporia,” the topic of *JESHO*’s jubilee conference, but there are nevertheless some problems which have to be mentioned at the outset.¹⁶ The first, which applies generally to the study of dead cultures, is a complete dependence on written sources that have survived and therefore have their limitations and biases.¹⁷ In the case of Assur nearly all our extensive written documentation (nearly 25.000 cuneiform texts, less than half of which are accessible) consists of the archives of ca. eighty Assyrian traders who had settled in *kārum* Kanesh (excavated since 1948), while Assur itself has yielded very little data, also archaeologically.

Assyrian traders living in, and members of, the local *kārum* and those visiting the city while traveling back and forth.

¹⁵⁾ See for a list of the cities with Assyrian commercial settlements, Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 153-67.

¹⁶⁾ My choice is of course also conditioned by the fact that ancient Assur and its trade are my main research interest. But the fact remains that data on the emporia linked with and serving some of the well-known ancient Mesopotamian empires (the Empire of Ur III, of the twenty-first century BC; the empires of Larsa and Babylon at the beginning of the second millennium BC) are much more limited and haphazard. Data on and from Mari, a kingdom on the Middle Euphrates from the same period, and its trading connections with the areas and cities north and northwest of it, are richer (see above note 10). But they are less numerous than those on Assur and are mostly from the palace only, so that we merely have limited documentation from and on its traders and *kārum*, which are vital for dealing with the role of emporia.

¹⁷⁾ Archaeological evidence, bearing on material culture, is usually less informative for issues of political and economic history.

The lower town of our period, with the houses and archives of the traders, has not been reached by the German excavators and there are only very few inscriptions from the contemporary palace in the upper town and nothing has remained from the “City Hall,” the financial and economic center of the city.¹⁸ Our data, although we have many letters and official documents sent from Assur to the colonies and traders in Anatolia, therefore have a distinctly “colonial” bias. A second problem is that although ancient Assur was the strategically located (near an important crossing of the Tigris), fortified capital of a prosperous city-state of some size (guesses about the number of its inhabitants usually range between five and eight thousand), with important temples and an efficient administration, it was not the capital of an empire. Assyria as a country did not yet exist; the city-state covered a limited territory of unknown size, just north of the fertile Mesopotamian flood plain, with a restricted subsistence potential (agriculture, husbandry, crafts). Niniveh (near present-day Mosul, 100 km north of Assur) was still an independent city-state with a different ethnic affiliation. Assur’s successful, well-organized, and to some extent, monopolized trade on Anatolia gave the city a substantial amount of economic power—in Anatolia and presumably also in relation to its more immediate neighbors. But Assur was not an “imperial” city, with a strong military and a ruling elite supported and supplied by a large productive territory and with income from subjected fringe areas. Its commercial presence in Anatolia and the trade routes through northern Mesopotamia had not been enforced, and could not be backed, by military power, but were based on mutual commercial interests, sealed by treaties.

3. Assur as an Emporium

Assur was a trading city and in itself an important emporium, inhabited by many trading families, with a market and public and private warehouses. The former was the “City Hall,” where merchandise to be exported to Anatolia (it seems to have had a monopoly on the sale of lapis lazuli and expensive meteoric iron) could be bought by “Kanesht traders,” at times at credit, which could result in substantial debts owed to this institution, with possibly dire consequences in case of default (ultimately the sale of a

¹⁸⁾ See for the last attempt to identify it and to analyze its functions, the first part of J. G. Dercksen, *Old Assyrian Institutions* (Leiden: NINO, 2004).

trader's house) which are mentioned in the texts. In addition, merchandise was bought in the "(ware)houses" of individuals, presumably successful traders, merchants, and investors living in Assur, and we read that silver arriving by caravan from Anatolia for such purposes "entered their houses."

Rather little of what was traded was produced in Assur itself, only part of the woolen textiles, presumably produced in a well-developed home industry, run by women. Each year people also raised a few hundred expensive caravan donkeys (20 shekels of silver apiece) and manufactured their harnesses, for which there was a constant demand, because most of them stayed in Anatolia, where part of them were also sold. The bulk of the merchandise exported to Anatolia was first imported into Assur and by all appearances not by the Assyrians themselves: wool by the nomads to the southwest and perhaps east of Assur, textiles and copper by the Babylonians, and tin and lapis lazuli apparently by Elamites from Susa.¹⁹ This made Assur a trading city and an international market with a large turnover and presumably stocks; a place where foreigners knew they could sell their goods and buy what they required, because there was a constant demand for merchandise for export to Anatolia. Unfortunately, due to the "colonial bias" of our sources, we know very little of these imports in Assur, because texts take their presence for granted. They only mention (rarely) that occasionally no expensive "Akkadian textiles" could be bought, because the Babylonians had not come to Assur, or that the arrival of tin from the "low country" was delayed, but one normally expected the problems to be merely of a temporary nature. Assur was an important port of trade and market town where different streams of goods met and could be exchanged. As such it was part of a much wider commercial network that included Anatolia, Babylonia, and Iran, and operated by means of indirect exchange and relay trade, of which the caravan traffic between Assur and Anatolia was one particular circuit.²⁰ Without the regular import of tin and textiles from elsewhere, Assyrian trade on Anatolia would have been impossible.

¹⁹ The provenance of the copper is a very likely assumption, since no Anatolian copper was imported and we know that traders of southern Mesopotamia (e.g. of the city of Ur) imported it by boat from the Persian Gulf. Tin arrived by caravan from "the low country," the area southeast of Baghdad, via the road that skirted the Zagros mountains, and texts from Mari reveal that it originated from Susa, where it must have been brought (how and by whom is unknown) all the way from northeastern Afghanistan.

²⁰ See M. T. Larsen, "Commercial Networks in the Ancient Near East." In *Centre and Periphery in the Ancient World*, eds M. Rowlands, M. T. Larsen, and K. Kristiansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 47-56.

We do not know for certain what the merchants and warehouses of Assur offered the foreign traders in exchange for what they imported, but it is very likely that they were paid in silver, universally valued as a means of payment, especially in trade. It was imported en masse from Anatolia by the “Kanesh traders,” who used it to buy merchandise in Assur for their next caravan.²¹ Tin imported into Assur, except what the Assyrian metal craftsmen needed to produce bronze tools and weapons, was exported to Anatolia, and was several tons each year. The tin which Babylonia and the regions more to the west (such as Mari on the Euphrates and Qatna, Aleppo, and Ugarit in North-Syria) needed also came from Susa, via caravans that turned westward far south of Assur, to reach Babylonia via Eshnunna (on the Diyala) and across the Tigris, to proceed further to the south or via the Euphrates to the west.

How Assur came to play this strategic role is only partly known. As a city in the northern periphery of the empire of Ur III (twenty-first century BC) it may already have played a role in the commercial contacts with the north. When it became independent, one of its first rulers, Ilushuma (ca. 1980 BC), mentions in an inscription that he “established the freedom of the Akkadians (= Babylonians) and their sons; I washed their copper from the border of the marshes and Ur (in the far south, at the head of the Persian Gulf) until the City.” This probably means that, as stated by Larsen, the ruler “attempted to attract traders from the south to the market of Assur by giving them certain privileges.” The “washing of the copper” seems to mean the removal of obstacles for trade, possibly the cancellation of debts or the abolition of taxes.²² This measure supports the conviction that the city obtained its copper from the south, via Babylonian traders, who by Ilushuma’s measure would have gained easier access to the city, where they could sell it for the silver the Assyrians obtained in Anatolia. Ilushuma’s successor, Erishum I, ca. 1950 BC, went a step further and “established the freedom of silver, gold, copper, tin, barley and wool, down

²¹⁾ The uncertainty stems from the fact that the numerous so-called “caravan reports” only mention the amounts of tin and textiles bought in Assur and the prices paid, but do not state where they came from and from whom they were bought, but data in letters indicate that this happened in the above-mentioned public and private warehouses. Since the latter were in Assyrian hands, they must have been the ones who acquired the goods from those who imported them into Assur.

²²⁾ See the interpretation of this inscription and the one of Ilushuma’s successor in Larsen, *Old Assyrian City-State*: 63-80, and Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 126-30.

to bran and chaff,” where “freedom of” most probably means that he opened the city for the import of, and trade in, the goods mentioned. It reveals the wish to increase the importance of Assur as a trading town and international market, because the first products mentioned are not subsistence goods, but imports, especially metals and wool (necessary for the textile production), which were both essential for the Assyrian overland trade. The institution of a *limum*, an annually appointed official who managed the important City Hall and was responsible for the City’s finances, took place at the beginning of his reign,²³ and thus fits this interpretation of Erishum’s measures. Considering the position of the ruler, it is very likely that these measures were based on decisions taken by him in conjunction with the City Assembly, which implies that important traders in Assur, as members of that Assembly, must have helped to develop its commercial policy.

It is difficult to find out what this policy implied for the foreign traders coming to Assur. It is remarkable that the sources never mention a *kārum* of Assur, where such traders could work and settle down, a facility that many other cities of that period did offer. Considering the mass of textual evidence we may conclude that there was no special commercial district or *kārum*. Assur, being a trading city, may not have needed a special *kārum* because foreign traders could settle inside its walls in houses they rented or bought. But there is no evidence for this and if we are not misled by the “colonial bias” of our sources, we must assume that foreign traders were welcome to supply and buy goods and perhaps stay for a few days (in an inn or *khan*), but were not granted their own facilities and could not operate from Assur. In that case it could be explained as a deliberate attempt to protect and monopolize Assur’s own commercial activities, primarily those of the caravan trade on Anatolia. In support of this conclusion I can point at two official measures meant to restrict or ban competition, especially from other Mesopotamian cities and traders. A treaty concluded with a town near the Euphrates, in the area where one enters Anatolia proper, stipulates that the local ruler is forbidden to let Babylonian traders enter his town and, if they do, has to seize and extradite them to the Assyrians to be killed. And a remarkable verdict of the City Assembly in Assur asserts

²³⁾ The office rotated among the citizens of Assur, presumably members of the main families. It is better known because the dating system of Assur identified years by the name of the officiating *limum*, who thus served as a “(year) eponym.” All the lists of eponyms we have start in the first year of Erishum I.

the validity of a law (inscribed on a stone stele) that forbids Assyrians, on the penalty of death, to sell gold to other traders from the north or south, mentioning Amorrites, Subaraeans, and Akkadians.²⁴ These pieces of evidence reveal the will to protect Assur's commercial interests, even by extreme measures. The act of barring foreign traders from settling in, and working from, Assur could be explained along the same lines, but more evidence is needed to substantiate this conclusion.

The nature of Assyrian trade and especially the massive imports of silver from Anatolia resulted in a rather specific economy, in which the many citizens involved in the trade could buy all they needed with silver, including the very expensive houses of the merchant class, which seem to have been a mark of status. That also barley, oil, wool, and bronze utensils were bought, of course implies the existence of an agricultural sector and of crafts (which also allowed for the production of equipment for the caravan donkeys) and in addition there must have been a militia, city-administrators, temple personnel, and a work force employed in building operations. But all this does not change the picture of a predominantly trading city, with a powerful merchant class that also played an important role in its administration. A rough guess, considering the number of Assyrians traveling to, and working in, Anatolia and of the merchants active in Assur as money-lenders, investors, administrators, and craftsmen, implies that perhaps as much as half of its citizens was directly or indirectly (e.g. those supplying the material needs of the caravans, such as equipment, food, and donkeys) involved in trade.²⁵

The political structure of ancient Assur was remarkable, which was no doubt due to its nature of being an independent trading city in which the families of powerful merchants and bankers played a big role, although calling it "a trading republic" (as a colleague of mine recently did) may go too far. In other trading cities too, the autonomy and political authority of the city, embodied in a City Assembly (its composition, whether it

²⁴) See for the evidence Veenhof, "Old Assyrian Period" (2008a): 211 (on treaty C), and 88-9 (on gold). The reason for asserting the law on gold must have been that active traders would have liked to use it as a means of payment, but that the City authorities wished to reserve the gold for specific purposes (which are not stated).

²⁵) This also involved persons attached to the temples, since the latter invested in trade, by using the numerous votive gifts they received, and we even meet a priest who was the owner of a warehouse and another who officiated as *limum*, that is manager of the City Hall. The ruler of the city too bought merchandise that he gave in commission to agents traveling to Anatolia and some records mention the silver earned for him that was sent back to Assur.

merely consisted of “city elders” or was a popular assembly, is unfortunately unknown) was prominent, presumably at the expense of that of a ruler, e.g. in Emar (on the Middle Euphrates)²⁶ and in Babylonia’s main trading city, ancient Sippar.

The ruler of Assur seems to have played a limited role, which is confirmed by the fact that a palace—and thus by definition a strong palace organization—is completely absent from the documentation. The main administrative powers rested in the “City Assembly,” simply called “the City,” which was ultimately also in charge of the important “City Hall” (*bēt ālim*), the town’s financial and economic center. The latter was managed by an annually appointed official called *limum* (hence its alternative designation as “*Limum*-Office”), whose power may have balanced that of the ruler. He was chosen by casting lots (as we know from later times) from among persons belonging to the main families or lineages, apparently in order to spread power. According to his seal, the ruler called himself the “steward” (*ensi*) of the city-god Assur, the true king of the City, which lent his office a religious and ideological character and implied that he was responsible for the care of the god and the well being of the citizens by securing peace, prosperity, and justice. His prestige must have been buttressed by the fact that his dynasty, which started to reign around 2000 BC, remained in power for two centuries, during nine successive generations. The ruler is usually designated as *rubā’um*, “the great one,” which perhaps identifies him as a *primus inter pares*, but his real power remains rather unclear. We meet him primarily as a chief judge, together with the “City Assembly,” whose verdicts and decisions he communicated by means of official letters, written in his capacity of “Overseer” (*waklum*) of the community. A few inscriptions, usually in the form of inscribed bricks, document his concern for the administration of justice and record that he built (or restored) temples and walls and opened springs. Ambitions, however, were not lacking, since two of Assur’s rulers chose the names of Sargon and Naram-Sîn, the two most powerful and deified kings of the Old Akkadian Empire (of four centuries earlier). And it is probably no coincidence that this happened during the hey-day of trade on Anatolia, between ca. 1900 and 1850 BC, when Assur must have been very prosperous and rich.

²⁶ See J.-M. Durand, “La cité-état d’Imar à l’époque des rois de Mari.” *MARI* 6 (1990): 39-92, especially 55-64, “Le statut politique d’Imar.” In ancient Sippar the oath was sworn by the gods, the ruler, and the city, and the *kārum* played a role in the city administration.

4. The Old Assyrian Merchants and Traders

While calling the city-state of Assur an “empire” is problematic, focusing on its “merchants and brokers,” the sub-theme of the conference, offers better prospects. The two terms in the heading of this paragraph try to distinguish between two categories of persons, both private entrepreneurs involved in Assyrian trade. First we have the “traders,” men active as leaders of caravans and who had settled in, or were moving between, the colonies abroad, several of whom were also heads of the Anatolian branches of Assyrian firms; the Assyrians called them *tamkārum*, but I also use the designation “Kanesh traders,” and in some Anatolian texts “trader” simply means Assyrian, as distinguished from “native” Anatolians (*nu’āum*).²⁷ Then there are the “merchants,” people commercially active in Assur as investors, moneylenders, and owners of warehouses, some of whom could be the superiors (also as senior relatives) of traders active in Anatolia. Some “merchants” can also be designated as *tamkārum*, especially in their capacity as “creditors” and “moneylenders”; those who had invested in joint-stock funds (*naruqqum*) or had supplied substantial, long-term loans were called *ummiānum*, or “boss.” They were the financial backers of young “Kanesh traders” considered old and experienced enough to start their own business as manager (*tamkārum*) of a fund consisting of capital invested by relatives, Assur based merchants, and other rich citizens (see below note 28).

In Anatolia

Traders working in Anatolia settled down in, and became members of, the various colonial settlements. During the first two generations these were usually married men, whose wives stayed in Assur to manage the house-

²⁷ *Tamkārum* is a notoriously difficult term whose meaning is determined by its context. It is used to designate traveling retail agents, who received lots of merchandise on credit for sale elsewhere, and the manager of a joint-stock fund, in classical terms a *tractator*, who was “the boss” for his agents and personnel. The term is frequently used in caravan texts to denote “the owner” of merchandise, who wishes to remain anonymous. Because traders/merchants were the ones who extended credit and loaned money, the term frequently means “creditor,” especially when there is mention of “borrowing money (at interest) in the house of a *tamkārum*.” In many loan contracts a debt is said to have been owed to a *tamkārum*, “the owner, creditor,” a formulation which allows for their transfer or cession. See the observations in K. R. Veenhof, “‘Modern’ Features in Old Assyrian Trade.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40 (1997): 351-64.

hold and raise the children. Later more wives would accompany or follow their husbands to the colonies, at times with adolescent children (who might marry in Anatolia, occasionally also with native Anatolian girls or traders), and in some cases even two sons of the same family would move to Anatolia, each basically working for his own interests. This gave rise to a real “colonial society,” which also included hired Assyrian caravan personnel, retail agents, and those who acted as messengers and scribes.

The main and probably most successful traders in Kanesh were usually involved in many transactions, at times also together with partners, and many in addition carried out commission sales and purchases for relatives, friends, and women in Assur. Most of these traders had become more independent by having become managers of a “joint-stock fund” (called *naruqqum*, “money bag”), usually set up in Assur. This phenomenon appeared for the first time around 1900 BC and seems to have been an Old Assyrian invention that went beyond individual partnerships and cooperation in a joint caravan. The arrangement, rather similar to that of the early medieval *compagnia*, meant enlisting a number (usually about a dozen) of investors (*ummiānum*, “financiers”), who supplied capital rated in gold, usually in all ca. 30 kilos, ideally consisting of shares of 1 or 2 kilos of gold each. It was entrusted to a trader (the *tractator*), usually for ca. ten years, for the generally formulated purpose of “carrying out trade.”²⁸ The contract contained stipulations on a final settlement of accounts, on paying dividends, on the division of the expected profit, and on fines for premature withdrawal of capital (meant to secure the duration of the business). Investors or shareholders mostly lived in Assur, but successful traders in Anatolia too invested in funds managed by others, perhaps also as a way of sharing commercial risks. In such cases a contract would to be drawn up in Anatolia that obliged the *tractator* “to book in Assur x gold in his joint-stock fund in the investor’s name.” Among the investors we find members of the *tractator*’s family, but also business relations and others, probably a kind of “merchant-bankers,” and other rich citizens, who aimed at fairly safe, long-term investments.²⁹

²⁸) See for the joint-stock funds, M. T. Larsen, “*Naruqqu*-Verträge.” In *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, vol. 9 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999): 181-4. The verb used is *makārum*, from which the noun “trader,” *tamkārum* is derived.

²⁹) A remarkable feature was that the shares invested or bought for silver were calculated in gold at an exchange rate of gold:silver = 4:1, while the real rate was 8:1. This means that after the term stipulated the investor would in any case get 200% of his investment back, augmented, if the business had been successful, by one third of the profit.

Some successful traders, long established in Anatolia and perhaps more independent thanks to their “joint-stock fund,” might be tempted to depend more on their own commercial contacts and network and also pursue, alongside the import trade from Assur, more inner-Anatolian oriented business interests, such as partaking in the trade of local goods, including copper, wool, grain, meteoric iron, and Anatolian textiles. This could result into further integration into the Anatolian host community, at times cemented by marriage links with an Anatolian family, which is not surprising since the Assyrian “quarter” in the lower city of Kanesh (and presumably also in other main cities with a *kārum*) was not isolated and Anatolian business men lived nearby. This process entailed the risk of differences in business interests between the colonial traders and the City of Assur and its establishment, a feature to which I will return later.

In Assur

In Assur other, frequently senior members of trading families, including some “Kanesh traders” who had returned home in their old age, dominated the scene together with the above-mentioned “merchants.” They played an important role in different, at times partly overlapping, aspects of the city’s commercial life. One was to meet the constant need of capital for the expensive and expanding trade on Anatolia, necessary to maintain its infrastructure, for paying contributions and taxes to the *kārum* organization, the financing of the many caravan trips there, and the various gifts made to local rulers and officials to create goodwill or solve problems. A “Kanesh trader” was supposed to invest his own money in his business, but its size and costs made investments, thus financing by others, necessary. This could be achieved in three different ways, perhaps in part by the same persons in different roles. Money could in the first place be obtained in the form of interest bearing long-term loans or commercial credit granted in natura, which for those who supplied them were fairly risk-free and yielded a substantial interest of 30% per year. More important, however, was a second possibility, described in the previous paragraph, the acquisition of capital in the form of a “joint-stock fund” (*naruqqum*, “money bag”) supplied by investors, among whom we meet male (rarely also female) members of the *tractator*’s family, and others, rich and commercially interested citizens who aimed at fairly long-term investments with safe returns and a good chance of a share in the profit. Because many traders managed to create such funds, some investors and traders had “shares” in several of

them, which could be inherited and sold; such investments, to quote Larsen, “crisscrossed the entire community” and made them “a factor in the creation of social cohesion.”³⁰ Finally, there were also merchants who acted (perhaps it was their specialization) as moneylenders, who supplied commercial loans,³¹ when traders experienced temporal shortages of cash, due to delayed caravans, arrears of commission agents, or special expenses (e.g. the purchase of a house). Such loans were in general fairly risk-free, since silver could normally be counted on to arrive in Assur in the foreseeable future and could be protected by securities, while the legal system also offered possibilities to enforce the payment of debts. Such investors and money-lenders could thus be called “merchant bankers.”

To the category of the “merchants,” as defined above, also belonged those persons into whose “houses” the silver that arrived from Anatolia would “enter,” in order to purchase merchandise for equipping a new caravan. This was important, not only because of the profit to be made on the sales, but also because an excise or commission (*nishatum*) had to be paid. These “houses” must have functioned as a kind of warehouses with merchandise in stock and we can consider their owners as “wholesale dealers,” although we know very little of how they functioned and how they acquired their merchandise. Their owners must have been rich citizens, possibly including some of the “merchant bankers” mentioned above. They may have been identical to the owners of the “houses” where the “joint-stock funds” were “established,” because it is unlikely to assume that too many related but different “mercantile groups” were active in a not very big trading city. Unfortunately, it is difficult to prove these suggestions, due to a general lack of informative descriptions of the commercial procedures and the anonymity of many “merchant bankers” and of some of the “investors.” The letters dealing with these matters usually only mention that merchandise was purchased and loans were obtained from a *tamkārūm*,

³⁰ See above note 28 and more in general J. G. Dercksen, “On the Financing of Old Assyrian Merchants.” In *Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (Istanbul: NHAI, 1999): 85-99.

³¹ To obtain them, according to the contracts, a trader “entered the house of a *tamkārūm* to take out silver at interest,” see K. R. Veenhof, “Silver and Credit in Old Assyrian Trade.” In *Trade and Finance in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (Istanbul: NHAI, 1999): 55-83, esp. 66-9. Note that “Kanesh traders” in some letters also ask their representatives in Assur, when a shipment with silver arrived and (due to the season or for other reasons) no purchases could be made, to loan the silver at interest, which again provides proof of the constant demand for “money.”

restricting the information to the bare facts, without mentioning names, which should have been mentioned in the relevant contracts that were apparently usually kept in Assur and therefore have not been found.³²

Relations and cooperation between traders in Kanesh and merchants in Assur were frequently based on family ties, not rarely through several generations, and “Kanesh traders” could enjoy the support and advice of fathers, brothers, or uncles in Assur. They could also figure as their representatives in business and legal matters and in contacts with the city administration, and could provide help to overcome a financial crisis, e.g. by soft loans or acting as guarantors. But Larsen has recently shown that “family firms” as formal institutions did not exist; no “family” occurs as a creditor or debtor and ownership of funds—apart from formal partnerships—was basically individual. After the death of a *pater familias* and the division of the inheritance, his sons carried on independently, even in separate houses in the same colony.³³ This development was perhaps stimulated by the fact that each son acquired his own “joint-stock fund” or inherited part of his father’s shares in one, although we occasionally observe that the sons continued to work with their father’s business relations, partners, or agents.

5. Colonies and Emporia in Anatolia

The main traders were, certainly during the first generations, active in the large *kārum* Kanesh, probably the oldest Assyrian colony and (therefore) the administrative center of the Assyrian colonial system. It was situated in the lower town of what was an important emporium and market town with an imposing palace, which has been revealed by excavations. The importance of the city is also clear from a treaty between the Assyrians and its king, from the younger period of the colonial phase, which mentions trade in tin, textiles (imported and Anatolian ones), lapis lazuli, and iron.³⁴

³²) The few contracts we have of the setting up of a joint-stock fund do mention the names of the investors, some of whom are family and business relations of the trader, but others are unknown and some are registered anonymously as *tamkārum*, probably again in order to enable the transfer of shares, e.g. in cases of disputed ownership or in connection with the division of an inheritance.

³³) M. T. Larsen, “Individual and Family in Old Assyrian Society.” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 59 (2007): 93-106.

³⁴) Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 190-3 (treaty D). It also secured the freedom of movement (even during war) and the protection of the Assyrian traders and their

Kanesh could play this role, even though the main items the Assyrians bought in Anatolia—silver, copper, and wool—did not originate there,³⁵ because it was the capital of a strategically located old city-state, at a road junction just south of the Kızılırmak which counted many native traders among its inhabitants. Its importance was enhanced by the fact that most of the caravans coming from Assur and elsewhere (there is evidence of visits of traders from North-Syria) would arrive there, which in turn must have attracted traders and goods from elsewhere in Anatolia.

In *kārum* Kanesh the resident Assyrian traders organized the sale of goods arriving by caravan, part of which was sold to the local palace, its officials, and to native traders, while the rest was sent on to destinations north and west of the city, or entrusted to retail agents who went into the countryside. From Kanesh also most of the silver and gold collected there or arriving from elsewhere (including items obtained by indirect exchange, via copper and wool) would be shipped to Assur. Several traders in Kanesh also carried out commissions for people in Assur who used their expertise, and by means of their partners and representatives (occasionally their grown-up sons) in other important colonies, they could cover a wide area. The patterns were not uniform, however, and we know of traders who returned to Assur in due time while their sons took over in Anatolia, and of sons who settled in Anatolia, while their fathers remained in Assur.³⁶ As the range of trade expanded and the trade in copper gained importance, some traders decided to settle, temporarily or for good, in other colonies, especially those in the capital cities to the north and west that were at the same time nearer to the main production areas of copper and silver and important Anatolian centers of trade and emporia. This development may have turned *kārum* Kanesh increasingly into an administrative center of the Old Assyrian colonial system.

property (compensation in case of robbery and bloodshed), even against royal measures (summons for service duties and manumission of slaves). During the time of this treaty the importance and political power of Kanesh had increased and its ruler bore the title “the great king,” which meant that he ruled a territorial state of some size and a number of petty kings as vassals.

³⁵) Texts and/or archeological findings yield evidence of local metallurgy (during the excavations quite a number of moulds for ingots, tools, and weapons were found) and testify to the production of textiles and beautiful pottery, products that were also marketed.

³⁶) An example is Aššur-idi in Assur, whose son Aššur-nādā lived and worked in Anatolia. See the edition of the latter’s archive in M. T. Larsen, *The Aššur-nādā Archive* (Leiden: NINO, 2002).

Since thus far none of these Anatolian emporia has been identified and excavated we therefore have to rely on the Assyrian written evidence; it primarily documents the Assyrian mercantile activities there and as a rule tells us rather little about the political and economic structures of these cities. Moreover, because our sources only reflect the fully developed colonial system, we encounter difficulties in reconstructing its development, in particular in finding out when and why colonial settlements were established in particular towns and in several cases also why one particular place became a “trading station” (*wabartum*) and another a “colony” (*kārum*). We can understand that certain towns must have been less important and “interesting” for the Assyrians due their size, location, commercial potential, or the proximity of an important city with a *kārum*, but we cannot give explanations for individual cases. That the system was dynamic is indicated by the fact that during the main period of *kārum* Kanesh level II (but we do not know exactly when) at least four *wabartums* (those of Shaladuwar, Shamuha, Timilkiya, and Tuhpiya) seem to have been “upgraded” to *kāruns*, and three others of this period (Kuburnat, Shup-piluliya, and Washhania) became *kāruns* during the later period of level Ib. These developments may have been due to political developments in Anatolia, but were also influenced by the fact that in the course of time more Assyrian traders moved from Kanesh to the economic centers in the north and west.³⁷

The large number of settlements reflects the concern to “cover” Anatolia well and some *wabartums* may indeed have rather served as road stations for passing caravans or as Assyrian pieds-à-terres which allowed visiting traders to conduct business in the area. In general, Assyrian commercial settlement was of course conditioned by the possibilities to sell and buy what they wished, but the texts show that textiles could be sold (at times in smaller quantities) almost everywhere, and this also seems to have been the case with tin. It was not sold en masse in the areas where copper was mined, as one might expect, because the production of bronze seems to have been a rather local affair, with blacksmiths presumably alloying tin to copper in every city or major town, where tin could accordingly be sold as well.³⁸ Assyrian involvement in the internal Anatolian trade in copper and

³⁷) See also footnote 11.

³⁸) See Dercksen, *Copper Trade*: 151: “There was no commercial demand for ready bronze, only for its two components, copper and tin.” He also notes that the Assyrians did not trade in bronze, although bronze artifacts were valued and turn up in inventories of households.

wool³⁹ (the latter was especially acquired in some cities to the south and southeast of Kanesh, notably Mamma and Luhusaddiya, but for the latter town no Assyrian trading station has been attested) must furthermore have made some towns and routes more important than others. In general, big and important cities, with an interesting countryside and a well-developed palace system and good facilities (a market or *kārum*) for traders must have been attractive and we can indeed single out a few of these that must have been important emporia.

The first is Hahhum, a market town (with a local textile production and wool trade) and important road station in the area where most caravans crossed the Euphrates to enter Anatolia proper. Here they could be split (to travel to Kanesh or via a more easterly route to the north of Hattum) or their final destination could be decided on the basis of information arriving from Kanesh, and in the city itself merchandise was sold, bought, or stored. Many Assyrian records mention the city as a goal or stop for passing caravans and specify travel expenses “until Hahhum,” or report that goods were bought there. A very damaged, large treaty (originally ca. 250 lines) concluded between the administrators of this city (there was no king at that time) and “the *kārum* Hahhum and any Assyrian of a caravan traveling up or down” shows its importance as an emporium and road station. It stipulates the safety of the traders “in your city, in your mountains and in your land” and contains a special paragraph dealing with the local ferryman who might try to harm traders whom he brought across the river.⁴⁰

In northern Anatolia, probably in the area between Tokat and Amasya, the city of Durhumit, the center of the copper trade, was an emporium with an important *kārum*, where many Assyrian traders had a house. The copper was most probably mined in the area between Ankara and Çankırı, often “in small, localized deposits, and smelted in the vicinity of the mine where the supply of fuel was sufficient. The raw copper produced by this primary smelting was cast into ingots and transported out of the mining regions,”⁴¹ in particular to Durhumit. Its market provided the link between the copper producing areas and the Assyrian and native merchants who

³⁹⁾ See for the wool trade in Anatolia, Dercksen, *Institutions*: Ch. 10.

⁴⁰⁾ See for this city, K. R. Veenhof, “Across the Euphrates.” In *Anatolia and the Jazira during the Old Assyrian Period*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (Leiden: NINO, 2008): 3-29, esp. 7-8, and for the treaty, Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 194-200.

⁴¹⁾ Quoting Dercksen, *Copper Trade*: 32.

wished to buy it, usually in exchange for tin and textiles, but at times also for silver and wool. Moreover, poor copper arriving from the mines could be exchanged for or converted there into refined copper that was exported, at times in enormous quantities, to the south and southeast, across the Kızılırmak and also to Kanesh, for which the Assyrians used their donkey caravans. Texts mention “the rate of exchange of copper of Durhumit,” being normally 120:1 against silver at purchase and 60:1 at sale elsewhere (with variations determined by the quality of the metal and the costs of transport). Several Assyrian traders settled down in its *kārum*, because they considered the trade in copper, which they shipped and sold elsewhere in Anatolia, profitable and it was apparently easier (perhaps also more profitable) to sell their imports in northern Anatolia for copper than for silver.⁴²

Important emporia more to the west, again with large Assyrian colonies, were the cities of Wahshushana, probably in the area just north of the Tuz Gölü, and Burushhattum, still further to the southwest.⁴³ The former, the city most frequently mentioned after Kanesh, with a king, a palace, and a large Assyrian trading community, was an important emporium west of the Kızılırmak, strategically located where the road coming from Hattum (inside the bend of the river) and the area of the copper trade crossed the one (skirting the river) coming from Kanesh. It was in a way also the gate to the most western emporium, Burushhattum, and there is evidence that heavy loads (e.g. of copper) could be shipped there from Wahshushana on ox-drawn wagons. But Wahshushana was not only a gate to the west, it was also a place where goods imported by the Assyrians, in particular many expensive textiles and occasionally also wool imported from southwestern Anatolia, were sold for silver. A few texts indicate that in the last phase of the first period of Assyrian colonial activity serious problems arose in this area, perhaps due to a military conflict which caused upheaval in the city and seems to have resulted in the disappearance of the Assyrian traders. City and *kārum* do no longer occur in the Assyrian sources dating from a later period.

Burushhattum, probably southwest of Wahshushana, may have harbored what after Kanesh was the most important Assyrian colony, in a city

⁴² See for this city, C. Michel, “Durhumid, son commerce et ses marchands.” In *Marchands, diplomates et empereurs. Études sur la civilisation mésopotamienne offertes à Paul Garelli*, eds D. Charpin and F. Joannès (Paris: Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991): 253-73.

⁴³ The dissertation of G. Barjamovic, “A Historical Geography of Ancient Anatolia in the Assyrian Colony Period” (defended in 2005) in Copenhagen, discusses these cities and make suggestions for their location.

which was an important market for tin, textiles, and copper, which arrived there from Kanesh and Durhumit. It was in Burushhattum that the Assyrians obtained important quantities of silver, the goal of their trade, which was shipped from there to Kanesh. Again, our knowledge of the city itself is rather limited, but it lived on in the period of the Hittite Empire under the name Parsuhanda, a city in the “Lower Lands” with an important storm-god. A legendary tale tells us how the Old Akkadian king Sargon (twenty-fourth century BC) would have come to the rescue of the Mesopotamian traders in that city, but there is no further evidence for such an early settlement of traders abroad and the tale may have been construed in the context of the role of the city in Old Assyrian times.⁴⁴ That the city was important is confirmed by the so-called “Anitta text” (found in the later Hittite capital), which mentions how the king of Parsuhanda accompanied the victorious Anitta (who ruled a.o. over Kanesh) and offered him a throne and a scepter of iron, gifts that acknowledged his status as a “great king,” a title the ruler of Kanesh also bears in the above-mentioned treaty with the Assyrians.

The mention of these five emporia does not imply that there were not more important market towns and perhaps emporia in Anatolia. That several others also had a *kārum* in which Assyrians had settled, may hint at this possibility, but too little is known of them and, as said earlier, we do not really know why they were chosen as “colonies.”⁴⁵

6. The Economic and Political Scene of Assur

The importance of trade for the city at large

The “Kanesh traders” and the city of Assur had shared interests, because the success of trade meant prosperity for both and commercial failures also

⁴⁴) See for this text, Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 121-2. Note that the cities of Hahhum and Kanesh also occur in tales dealing with the Old Akkadian period, as enemies of king Naram-Sîn of Akkad.

⁴⁵) The later capital of the Hittite Empire, Hattush (Boğazköy) also had a *kārum*, with Assyrian inhabitants, but very little is known about the early city and the excavations in the lower town have only yielded evidence for Assyrian presence in the phase contemporary with *kārum* Kanesh level Ib. See for the evidence, J. G. Dercksen, “‘When we met in Hattush.’ Trade according to the Old Assyrian Texts from Alishar and Boğazköy.” In *Veenhof Anniversary Volume. Studies presented to K. R. Veenhof on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, eds W. H. van Soldt et al. (Leiden: NINO, 2001): 39-66.

affected the city. Not only the families and especially the wives of the “Kanesh traders” were involved in these matters—who could be forced to sell valuable property, even houses, to pay private and institutional creditors—but of course also their commercial partners, creditors, and investors, and the owners of the warehouses suffered if revenues diminished and debt claims mounted. And the gradually developing trade had a much wider impact, because it employed many people who were needed to accompany the caravans, serve as retail agents in Anatolia, and man the growing number of trading stations. The trade also created (as explained above) a constant need for new caravan donkeys, a few hundred of which had to be raised, trained, and provided with harnesses every year, which happened outside Assur in a special paddock (*gigamlum*) and must have created a lot of work and income. The trade was especially important for the Assyrian textile production, a home industry ran by women (wives, daughters, and slave-girls), which supplemented the import from the south but also supplied these women with private income.⁴⁶ Successful traders and merchants apparently bought what they consumed and needed on the local market with the silver earned in Anatolia, which meant income for local farmers, shepherds, and craftsmen. And part of the silver was also invested in jewels, slaves, and sumptuous, expensive houses, which must have created work.

The city of Assur and its institutions also profited from the trade. The City levied an “export tax” (*wašitum*) of 0.85% on all caravans leaving for Anatolia and collected a tithe on the lapis lazuli and iron sold. The “City Hall,” as a kind of public warehouse, probably made a profit on sales, especially on credit sales (at an interest of 10%) of merchandise to “Kanesh traders,” and its activities must have provided work and income for its staff and employees (scribes, accountants, porters, etc.). There is no evidence that the palace—which is absent from our sources—as such was involved in trade, but the rulers nevertheless profited from it by entrusting their own consignments of export goods to their agents and befriended traders for sale in Anatolia.⁴⁷ Temples too were involved, because important lots of merchandise and perhaps capital, designated as *ikribū*—meaning “votive

⁴⁶ See already K. R. Veenhof, *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade and its Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1972): 103-23, and more recently, C. Michel, “Femmes et production textile à Aššur au début du deuxième millénaire avant J.-C.” In *Techniques et Culture*, vol. 46: *Spécialisation des tâches et sociétés*, eds A. Averbough, P. Brun et al. (Paris, 2006): 281-97.

⁴⁷ See Larsen, *Old Assyrian City-State*: 131 and 138.

gifts,” but regularly used to designate goods as “temple property”—were entrusted to traders, often for longer periods and therefore rather functioned as investments than retail goods.⁴⁸ Some priests were also involved in trade: one had a “(ware)house” where merchandise could be bought; another, an administrator of the temple of Assur, even served a term as *līmum*, that is, director of the City Hall, which was a truly financial and commercial occupation. However, they seem to have played these roles rather as rich and commercially minded citizens than as *qualitate qua*, members of the clergy representing their temples.

The City Assembly

Trade was important for, and an issue in, the deliberations and decisions of Assur’s main administrative institution, the City Assembly. It must have counted many important traders and merchant bankers among its members, but we are unable to identify them because “the City” always appears as an anonymous collective. The City Assembly was the highest judicial authority, to which “Kanesh traders” could appeal with regard to verdicts passed by the court of the *kārum*. Such cases and the resulting verdicts passed in commercial conflicts between traders regularly put issues of trade on the agenda of the Assembly.⁴⁹ But there were also decisions that were important for trade as such, which reveal elements of a commercial policy. Apart from the measures of two early rulers of Assur, mentioned above (§3), meant to stimulate the city’s commercial role, we have a few explicit pieces of evidence for this role of the City. In §3, footnote 24, I already mentioned a clearly protectionist stipulation in a treaty that wished to prevent competition by Babylonian traders. We may assume that such treaties with Anatolian rulers, which no doubt reflected the experiences and wishes of *kārum* Kanesh, were also approved by the City, whose Envoys were probably involved in negotiating and drafting them. This explains why the City Assembly in official letters warns against smuggling and the

⁴⁸) See J. G. Dercksen, “The Silver of the Gods. On Old Assyrian *ikribū*.” *Archivum Anatolicum* 3 (1997): 75-100.

⁴⁹) This also resulted in decisions with a more general validity that set down more or less standard rules for frequently occurring issues (e.g. the liquidation of a dead trader’s business, compensation for losses of a collective caravan, modes of collecting certain debts), some of which acquired the status of laws, engraved on a stone monument; see K. R. Veenhof, “‘In Accordance with the Words of the Stele.’ Evidence for Old Assyrian Legislation.” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1995): 1717-44.

dodging of taxes which by treaty were due to the Anatolian rulers, because it would endanger trade relations.⁵⁰

A late treaty (ca. 1750 BC), concluded by Assur with the city-state of Apum in that area (see above, footnote 8) shows that the fostering of good relations with the towns along the route through the North-Mesopotamian Jazira was a concern of the City. This is confirmed by a letter written by a father in Assur to his son traveling with a caravan in the Jazira, in which he advises him to avoid the city of Hahhum and to test whether entering a particular town on the route to Kanesh is safe. He mentions that the City has ordered to split the large caravan he had joined into three parts, which had to cross the area involved one after the other, as soon as the first one had arrived safely.⁵¹ This concern and the knowledge required to give such orders imply that the City was well-informed, probably by official and private letters arriving from Anatolia or by traders who visited Assur. In another letter one trading station tells another that it has received “a letter of the City” ordering it not to collect the tax due to *kārum* Kanesh from passing traders, because the money is needed to ransom colleagues held (and perhaps kidnapped) by Anatolians. Assur must have reacted on information received from the trading station in question and the letter with the City’s decision it received was then used to inform the other trading station. The latter is asked to implement this decision immediately, without waiting for written confirmation by *kārum* Kanesh (which would normally make such decisions known in the colonial network), and was apparently duly informed about the issue, because the letter we have was a duplicate found in Kanesh.⁵²

The City Assembly presumably reached its decisions both in consequence of appeals by individual traders or a *kārum*, or on its own initiative, in order to solve problems it encountered. There must have been deliberations to reach an agreement or a decision by majority vote, if we may assume that the decision making procedures known from the so-called “Statutes of *kārum* Kanesh”⁵³ were also applied in Assur. Deliberations are also implied in an official letter of the ruler of Assur addressed to *kārum*

⁵⁰ See for the evidence, Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period” (2008a): 214-5.

⁵¹ See for this letter, Larsen, *Aššur-nāḏā*: no. 18.

⁵² See for this letter, Michel, *Correspondance des marchands*: no. 58.

⁵³ See for these “Statutes,” Larsen, *Old Assyrian City State*: 283-6. The assembly of the *kārum* was convened by the “secretary” (scribe), and if its committee of “big men” could not decide, the plenary assembly was convened, which could be divided into seven groups to solve an issue by majority vote.

Kanesh, which told them that the City Assembly (reacting to an appeal by traders?) had first decided to change the regulation concerning the sale of gold. But it then reported that it had subsequently changed its mind and now insisted that no new rule had been drafted and that the old one, inscribed on a stone stele, remained in force.⁵⁴ The letter is not only interesting as evidence of decisions on commercial policy, *in casu* on selling gold to other Mesopotamians (already mentioned in §3), but also because it betrays different points of view and probably clashes of interest in the assembly.

The role of the City Hall and its director, the limum

The policy of the City must also have conditioned the commercial role of the City Hall, which, according to Dercksen's recent analysis,⁵⁵ included:

- collecting taxes, notably the export tax paid by caravans leaving for Anatolia;
- checking measures and weights and the purity of metals;
- acting as custodian of the treasury of Assur and of the archive of the City;
- storing, selling (and perhaps distributing) barley stocked in its granaries;
- marketing all kinds of commodities, including textiles and copper, and some luxury items such as lapis lazuli and iron, on which it had a monopoly so that it could control their circulation.

Its tasks, especially the first three, and the monopoly on the sale of lapis lazuli and iron, must have been based on a mandate of the City Assembly. As a market it may have enjoyed more freedom in deciding on quantities, prices, and credit terms. This was important for the trade, since it seems to have served as an entrepôt or warehouse (alongside private ones) to which foreign traders probably also sold what they imported and where or through which “Kanesh traders” could buy, if necessary at credit, what they wished to export.⁵⁶ Its possibility to influence the flow and perhaps prices of

⁵⁴) See Veenhof, “In Accordance with the Words of the Stele”: 1733-5.

⁵⁵) Dercksen, *Institutions, part I*: Ch. 2.

⁵⁶) The considerable amounts, frequently many kilos of silver, for which traders were regularly indebted to the City Hall, are too big to be only arrears in paying the modest export taxes, and therefore rather reflect credit sales. The sale of (imported) copper and the stocking and sale of barley show that the City Hall also served other commercial or domestic

certain goods is important here, but our knowledge is still limited and it is very unclear which role it played in the sale of tin. However, it could also steer the purchases by “Kanesh traders,” as is shown by an interesting verdict of the City;⁵⁷ it prescribed that—at a certain time—they should not spend more than one third of the silver imported on the purchase of tin, which implies that for at least two thirds of it textiles had to be bought, which is more than usual, since in caravan reports we repeatedly meet with a fifty-fifty division. The measure was apparently intended to promote the export of textiles, which had an added importance because of the existence of a local Assyrian textile industry. The City Hall as a main warehouse, where both items could be brought, might have simply implemented such a measure, but it is clear that the traders could and did buy their goods elsewhere as well, at times also “on the market,” so that an order of the City would have been necessary.

Commercial credit granted to traders by the City Hall played an important role, as is shown by the many cases in which they owed it large amounts of silver. Parts of these debts could be the result of arrears in paying the “export tax” (*wašitum*) as shown in a dramatic case, reported in a letter written from Assur to Kanesh. The houses of four traders were seized by city officials because of “the various amounts of export tax of our father/ boss, that amounted to 5 pounds of silver in the City Hall, the payment of which The City had imposed on us.” Three of them paid their share in the debt and when the house of the fourth was put on sale by the officials they quickly borrowed what he owed “and we paid it to the officials who brought it into the City Hall.” This case shows how the City Assembly and City Hall cooperated; for, although the debts are said to have mounted in the City Hall, the City, probably after having evaluated the case, “imposed” the payment, and the silver eventually paid “entered the City Hall.”⁵⁸ This reveals the power of the City and the City Hall, and also that of its director, the *limum*, which is well-documented.⁵⁹ Debts owed to the City (Hall)

interests; the handling of grain was probably a separate “department,” since the texts acquaint us with a special “*limum* of the barley.”

⁵⁷ See K. R. Veenhof, “Trade and Politics in Ancient Assur. Balancing of Public, Colonial and Entrepreneurial Interests.” In *Saggi di Storia Antica, vol. 21: Mercanti e Politica nel Mondo Antico*, ed. C. Zaccagnini (Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2000): 90-4.

⁵⁸ This text was studied in Veenhof, “Trade and Politics”: 98-9.

⁵⁹ His powers—taking pledges, sealing a debtor’s house, and eventually selling it—were probably not basically different from those the legal system granted every creditor. But in the case of liquidations, paying debts to the City Hall seems to have enjoyed priority and

were taken very seriously and the leaders of colonies and trading stations in Anatolia are occasionally also warned by *kārum* Kanesh to collect taxes and debts of traveling traders—in fact their colonial colleagues—“without favoring anybody.”

Who were the *limums* and what was their relationship to the traders, the merchants, and the City administration? Since we do not know the number and names of the members of the City Assembly, it is unknown whether (which is rather likely) and how many of the future, acting, and previous *limums* were among them. As we know the *limums* primarily from the “Eponym List”⁶⁰ or from entries in records (“during the eponymy of PN”), we usually know nothing about their profession or background. In the eponym list a few of them, especially the early ones, are not identified by the name of their father but by their profession. One is designated as a “boatman” and may have been involved in shipping on the Tigris; another, a very late one, is called “the trader” (*tamkārum*). Since such qualifications must have been distinctive, we might conclude that in this late period *limums* were normally not active overland traders, a profession indeed difficult to combine with that of head of the City Hall, which must have required continuous presence in Assur during the year of office. A *limum* must have had experience in commercial, financial, and administrative matters and it is indeed not surprising that during the heyday of the trade at least two of them (nos. 102 and 104 of the list) are known to have spent many years as traders in Anatolia, where they also served in the administration of *kārum* Kanesh, one before and the other after his turn of office in Assur. Various others traveled there and spent some time in the colonies, where they must have engaged in trade, since they occur in financial transactions or figure as witnesses, but not *ex officio*.⁶¹

This means that, apart from the general importance of trade for the city, the interests and problems of the “Kanesh traders” were also well known to the City Assembly and that the city administration counted several members who had close links with the colonial society. Its measures to promote trade and reduce problems and dangers (as pointed out in §6.2) would

their size could make things worse. That a *limum*, who was personally responsible for running the City Hall, had to hand over his task after one year to his successor must have increased his urge to collect arrears in time. But we have to admit that the debt policy of the City Hall is far from clear, see Dercksen, *Institutions*, part 1: Ch. 3.

⁶⁰ Published in K. R. Veenhof, *The Old Assyrian List of Year Eponyms from Kārum Kanish* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2003).

⁶¹ See Dercksen, *Institutions*: 58-9, and Veenhof, “Trade and Politics”: 80-2.

have taken these interests into account, but other measures concerned the traders as well. Remarkable in this respect was the one taken in order to alleviate the consequences of financial problems at a time when “many Assyrians” had been forced to pledge and sell their family houses (under which their ancestors were buried). This danger must have threatened the families of “Kanesh traders” particularly, who had run into serious financial problems, which is also the reason why the story is told in a letter sent from Assur to relatives in Anatolia. The use of the words “many Assyrians” indicates that it must have been due to a more general, unfortunately unknown and undated crisis. In this situation “the God Assur had mercy with his city,” which meant that debtors could redeem and recover their family houses by paying half of their sale prices, while the rest could be paid in three annual installments. This decision, no doubt taken by the City Assembly, is presented as an act of mercy on the part of the god Assur. But since care for the citizens was a traditional duty of the ruler of the city-state, who was considered to be the steward of the god Assur, the measure must have been taken by its ruler in conjunction with the City Assembly.⁶²

7. Diverging Interests in Assur and the Colonies

There are also some indications that the interests of the “Kanesh traders” did not always coincide with those of the City or the administrative establishment. However, this does not apply to the colonial *kārum* organization as such, which was ultimately under the authority of the City and always took care to implement its decisions and instructions, also in the other colonies and in relation to its members.

Problems could arise with individual “Kanesh traders,” who, as private entrepreneurs, were very focused on the financial success of their own business in the Anatolian circuit. Some traders, though rather dependent on the *kārum* organization in commercial and legal matters and for help in conflicts with local rulers, occasionally ignored its instructions and policy. This could concern an injunction not to smuggle, to avoid a particular area or town, to boycott an important defaulting Anatolian creditor, to pay arrears in taxes, or to appear in court without delay. Some “Kanesh traders”

⁶² See for an analysis of this case, K. R. Veenhof, “Redemption of Houses in Assur and Sippar.” In *Munuscula Mesopotamica. Festschrift für Johannes Renger*, eds B. Böck et al. (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1999): 599-607.

might also act in a way that harmed the interests of the City, both local concerns of Assur and its interests as part of a much wider commercial network, in which it also served as a market for traders from Babylonia and Iran and perhaps visiting Bedouins. A few decisions of the City reveal such clashes of interest.

Two of them were taken to protect and stimulate the sale of woolen textiles imported in Assur or produced by the Assyrian home industry. In the first verdict the City imposed heavy fines on “many merchants” in Anatolia who had been trading in various types of locally produced woolen textiles, especially a type called *pirikannum*.⁶³ The second one, already mentioned in §6.3, stipulated that in a particular period two-thirds of the silver arriving from Anatolia should be used to purchase textiles, which was more than usual according to the “caravan accounts,” and its purpose must have been to boost their export. A quite different and rather surprising decision, important enough to have been made a rule of law, inscribed on a stone monument, also already mentioned above (§3, with note 24), was that Assyrians, on the penalty of death, were forbidden to sell gold imported from Anatolia to the various non-Assyrian population groups of Mesopotamia. Its motive is not stated, but it must have reflected the importance of this metal for (the god or the city of) Assur, perhaps for the benefit of the treasury of Assur or in the interest of the City Hall, because gold may have been a preferred means of payment for certain highly desirable imports in Assur, such as tin from Susa.⁶⁴ This rule must have restricted its use by Assyrian traders, either on the way back from Anatolia or in Assur itself, and we can understand that it was not welcome to the “colonial traders.”

Another, minor clash of interests is mentioned in a unique letter that gives insight into the relation between Assur and the colonial society. It reveals that the city had told the colonies to contribute ten pounds of silver in the costs of the upkeep or repair of the city-wall. This decision had apparently been accepted without protest (it may not have been the first time such a contribution had been asked). The letter reports the City’s decision to send a special messenger to Kanesh, at the expense of the colonies, to collect this sum and bring it to Assur, apparently because the *kārum* had been lax in doing so. *Kārum* Kanesh must have decided to prevent this and asked persons in Assur to plead with the City Assembly to that effect.

⁶³ See Veenhof, “Trade and Politics”: 89-90.

⁶⁴ Suggested by the fact that the king of Mari sent an emissary with an amount of gold to Susa to acquire tin; see above note 4.

These are called *nibum* and in their letter they report how they had pleaded with “the Elders”⁶⁵ not to do so and urged the *kārum* to send the silver without delay.

This appeal to “the Elders” may imply that the *nibum* had not been present in (or were no members of) the Assembly when the decision was taken and now tried to counter the measure by means of a special appeal. The issue is fairly trivial, but it is interesting to learn that in Assur there was an otherwise unknown group of persons (the verb of which *nibum* is the subject is in the plural) that looked after the interests of the colonial society and of which we know almost nothing; it might have acted in other situations too. We do not know who its members were and even its very name is unclear; a tentative translation “the appointed” (from the verb *nabā’um*, “to name”) suggests a formal body, with appointed members, but further evidence is needed.⁶⁶

Divergences of interests between “colonial traders” and the city are understandable. The former, getting more integrated into the host community—by business contacts and intermarriage—might have focused more on the internal Anatolian trade in copper, textiles, wool, and grain, or the trade in the highly desirable and expensive Anatolian meteoric iron, which was difficult for the Assyrian authorities to monitor. Successful traders there could become rich and might start to operate more independently as heads of an Anatolian trading firm, by, for example, setting up, or investing in, joint-stock funds so that financial successes in Anatolia could become at least as important for them as the benefits of the merchants and institutions of their mother-city, which could cause frictions. We also observe that some traders in Anatolia took risks that might have brought them into conflict with local rulers, who might put them in jail, which would cost ransom and kept them out of business, at times for many months, as some dramatic letters written in such circumstances show. Others might run into financial problems by acquiring or granting too much credit, by employing unreliable retail agents, by suspension of commercial traffic due to local political unrest, and by commercial failures. This would make it impossible to pay their (interest bearing) debts to the Assyrian

⁶⁵ Either a synonym for the City Assembly or a reference to a committee of seniors. In the latter case, we would have a bicameral system, similar to the functioning of the assembly of *kārum* Kanesh. There is, in fact, one reference to “the city, small and big” (i.e. its executive board and plenary assembly) and several texts mention verdicts by “the Elders” in Assur.

⁶⁶ The letter was edited and commented upon in Dercksen, *Institutions*, part 1: §4.2.

financiers and to the City Hall, and even prevented them from giving the gods in Assur the votive gifts promised, which must have alarmed their family, creditors, and investors there. It is therefore not surprising to find among the decisions of the City regulations for liquidations, for the proportional sharing of losses of a joint caravan, and for the collection of debts, interest, and compound interest, whereby a clear distinction was made between transactions concluded in Anatolia and in Assur. But regardless of how annoying such individual problems might have been, they nevertheless need to be distinguished from more general ones that affected the trade as such and were more often due to strained relations with certain local rulers and cities, than to problems between the city of Assur and the colonial society. But the “colonial traders” knew how much they depended on maintaining good relations with their *kārum* organization and their city and how essential it was to stick to the rules laid down in treaties, laws, and verdicts, because Assur could not intervene militarily in Anatolia to help its traders, as the great Sargon of Akkad would have done in the past according to a legendary tale.⁶⁷

8. Assyrian Traders as Brokers?

The role of Assur’s traders in Anatolia as cultural brokers is a fascinating, but difficult topic, which requires a monograph, but some remarks can nevertheless be made here. The civilization of the Assyrians living in Anatolia was in various ways more complex than that of the native Anatolian kingdom, although we should not underestimate the latter, as its developed palace organization shows.⁶⁸ Assyrian cultural superiority cannot be observed in the remains of their houses, which exhibit the Anatolian material culture. The use of donkey caravans for contact with Assur—which was quite different from maritime trade—only allowed for the transfer of small personal possessions, some of which have been found in graves. The traders, judging from requests to send them, may have dressed in Assyrian

⁶⁷) See above, note 44. Illustrative is a recently discovered, but not yet published, official letter from the late Old Assyrian period in which the ruler of an Anatolian city via *kārum* Kanesh asks for military support from Assur in its conflict with a rival. But the request was refused.

⁶⁸) J. G. Dercksen presented a fascinating study: “Some Elements of Old Anatolian Society in Kaniš.” In *Assyria and Beyond. Studies presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen*, ed. J. G. Dercksen (Leiden: NINO, 2004): 137-77, but many questions of course remain.

style garments, but no remains of them have survived. Contact with the Anatolian elites introduced the use of a number of loanwords in Assyrian society, including titles and a few terms referring to social and political institutions that were apparently difficult to translate.⁶⁹

The main and best observable Assyrian cultural impact was the introduction of the cuneiform script and language, which is the earliest written language attested in Anatolia. Assyrians and Anatolians spoke radically different languages, but were able to communicate thanks to interpreters (called *targumannum*)⁷⁰ and by gradually picking up elements of each other's language, especially in the *kārum*s, where both Assyrian and Anatolian traders lived and contacts became more intensive through mixed marriages. Fairly soon records of legal transactions between Anatolians appeared, especially contracts about debts and family law, written in Assyrian, whose structure and formulae seem to have been inspired by Assyrian examples. In many cases we have to assume that Assyrians—not necessarily scribes, but also traders, some of whom had mastered the art of writing—wrote texts for Anatolians, probably at times also for Anatolian rulers.⁷¹ But some were apparently also written by Anatolian scribes who had mastered the cuneiform script, since they betray their origin by a number of typical mistakes. The use of seals for validating records and as “signatures” of parties and witnesses must also have been inspired by the Assyrian example, especially the use of cylinder seals in Anatolian style, produced locally, and those exhibiting a mixture of Mesopotamian and Anatolian iconographic motifs and styles. Use of the Assyrian script and seals by local palaces and rulers (evidence is very restricted, due to the utter destruction of the palace of Kanesh) comes only later and the best examples are a few personnel lists from the palace of Kanesh and a famous letter sent to its king by a king of Mamma.⁷²

⁶⁹ See J. G. Dercksen, “On Anatolian Loanwords in Akkadian Texts from Kültepe.” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 97 (2007): 26-46.

⁷⁰ We have to assume that the treaties between the Assyrians and the local rulers, written in Assyrian and formulated as an address (in the second person singular) to the latter, were read to them in translation, so that they knew what was expected from them and could propose changes in their own interest.

⁷¹ A still unpublished record mentions an Assyrian “who had taken up the position of scribe in the town of Mamma,” apparently a trader who had mastered the art of writing and was probably employed by the local palace; see Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period”: 48.

⁷² K. Balkan, *Letter of King Anum-Hirbi of Mamma to King Warshama of Kanish* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1957).

It is difficult to decide which legal, commercial, and administrative features documented in records in which only Anatolians figure, are of Assyrian inspiration, because there are no Anatolian precursors. Some must have been of Assyrian origin, e.g. joint liability for debts, forms of surety, and cancellation of consumptive debts by the ruler. But others—especially in the area of family law, such as rules of divorce, brotherhood contracts, death penalties for eviction—are probably of native origin. In all cases native legal customs are formulated in a different language and thus appear “under Assyrian linguistic garb” which makes it difficult to discover them. Many titles of palace dignitaries and professional designations are furthermore problematic as most of them must be Assyrian translations of Anatolian terms, for which underlying local designations are not attested. The same applies to references to some deities by means of Mesopotamian cuneiform logograms, such as those for the sun-god and the storm-god, which may have been read as Akkadian ones by Assyrians, but as Anatolian ones by the local people.

Anatolia, unfortunately, did not take over the Assyrian system of dating records (by year eponym and month) and used its own weights and measures (called “of the land”) and some Assyrian texts reveal how they related to each other. In loan contracts between Assyrians and Anatolians or in those where both parties were Anatolian, payment clauses occur that mention as due dates the phases of the local agricultural year (plowing, the picking of the grapes, the spring, the ripening of the grain, the seizing of the sickle, etc.) and the festivals of the main local deities, which were also related to the seasons, and this custom was unknown in Assur.⁷³ Although the impact of the Assyrian traders and their culture was important, Dercksen⁷⁴ concludes, perhaps a little too defensively, that Anatolia took over only those cultural elements that it lacked itself and which did not affect the essence of its native culture.

This Assyrian impact, however, did not last, although we cannot exclude that certain elements survived in the legal sphere and perhaps also in commercial procedures, but this is difficult to document due to a lack of later written sources. When in the last quarter of the eighteenth century BC the

⁷³) See for the titles, professions, and payment terms, Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period”: Ch. VI; see for more general information about the relations between Assyrians and Anatolians, K. R. Veenhof, “The Old Assyrian Merchants and their Relations with the Native Population of Anatolia.” In *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn*, eds H. J. Nissen and J. Renger (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1982): 147-55.

⁷⁴) Dercksen, “Loanwords”: 43 with note 81.

Assyrian colonial system and presence broke down, visible traces of Assyrian influence, including the use of their script, language, and cylinder seals, disappeared. And when, about a century later, during the Hittite Old Empire, the cuneiform script was again introduced, it was of Syrian/Babylonian inspiration.

Conclusion

Many questions remain, as is usual when dealing with an ancient culture on the basis of written sources, and the situation in Assur for lack of sources from the administrative institutions of the city, can only be described in rather general terms. Over the years new texts have repeatedly led to adaptations of current ideas⁷⁵ and have surprised us with information and data we had not expected. The fact that some interesting features (e.g. the actions of the *nibum*, the measure allowing for the redemption of sold houses) have thus far only been documented in one or two sources, allows room for new ones and several of the interpretative suggestions put forward in recent literature are still in need of confirmation.⁷⁶

That the role of Assur as an emporium and interregional market town, focused on a particular circuit in a much wider commercial network, is clear, but we would like to know more about the situation in the city. In particular the role and facilities of the foreign traders who supplied it with tin and textiles and the questions as to what they obtained in exchange, and the nature of their dealings with the local warehouses remain areas of speculation. The role of the City Hall also needs more clarification, as does the relationship between the warehouses and “the market,” where one could buy textiles (the local production), but which is never mentioned in connection with tin. We also lack information on commercial activities outside Anatolia and the routes leading there and I find it difficult to assume that Assyrian traders were so focused on Anatolia that they did not engage in trade with Babylonia. A few pieces of evidence from a later period, the first half of the eighteenth century BC, show that Assyrian traders were active in the Babylonian city of Sippar and had contacts with

⁷⁵) The best example is the now refuted idea about the existence of an Old Assyrian Empire in Anatolia, called “Halys Assyria.”

⁷⁶) See especially some of the highly interesting interpretations suggested in Dercksen, *Institutions*, for administrative and financial procedures.

Mari on the Middle Euphrates and one wonders whether this had not also been the case a century earlier.⁷⁷

There can be no doubt that “mercantile groups” played an important role in Old Assyrian society, not only in the colonial community but also at home, in Assur, both on a private and on an institutional level. In the sources we meet different “groups,” identified by their specific tasks, competence, and interests—“Kanesh traders,” caravan leaders, retail agents, merchant-bankers, investors in joint-stock funds, owners of warehouses, and even priests—but we cannot describe their distinctive roles in the administration because the texts always refer to the actions and decisions of collectives (“the big men” and “the (plenary) *kārum*” in Kanesh; “the Elders” and “the City Assembly” in Assur). It is clear that the main traders, investors, and merchants were important and rich citizens, many of whom must have qualified as members of the City Assembly and, considering the restricted role of the ruler, we might qualify them as a kind of “mercantile oligarchy” that played a prominent role in the administration of the city; that is in the decisions of the City Assembly and via the policy of the City Hall, many of whose directors must have been recruited from their ranks. But the colonial bias of our sources may hide that the City Assembly was also involved in other issues and may have counted among its members landowners, members of the militia, priests, and leaders of guilds, etc. They may well have profited from the trade and invested in it, but probably also had other interests. The lack of sources from Assur must be responsible for the fact that verdicts and decisions reflecting issues regarding them are unknown, because there was not any reason to send such documents to Kanesh.

Among the directors of the City Hall we also find a few experienced Kanesh traders, but their relatively small number shows that many prominent and rich Assyrians, though somehow involved in the trade or its financing, were not active (colonial) traders. They too may have harbored other interests, either local Assyrian ones or those related to the imports from the south. It may have induced them and the City Assembly to foster good relations with foreign traders visiting Assur and perhaps with the

⁷⁷) See K. R. Veenhof, “Assyrian Commercial Activities in Old Babylonian Sippar.” In *Marchands, diplomates et empereurs*, Charpin and Joannès: 287-301, and J.-M. Durand, “Une alliance matrimoniale entre un marchand assyrien de Kanesh et un marchand mariote.” In *Veenhof Anniversary Volume. Studies presented to K. R. Veenhof on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, eds W. H. van Soldt et al. (Leiden: NINO, 2001): 119-32.

cities from which the latter originated, but we lack evidence to prove this. Even a city like Eshnunna, the capital of a territorial state ca. 250 km south of Assur and important as an emporium for the provision of Babylonia with tin, is never mentioned in our texts and this is also the case with Susa, from where the tin caravans came to Assur. We also know very little of the institutional fabric and economic role of the temples of Assur that invested in the trade and provided facilities for storing silver and gold,⁷⁸ and where many oldest daughters of “Kanesh traders” served as priestesses of the god Assur.

That the interests of “Kanesh traders” could and did diverge from those of the City, is therefore not surprising, but notwithstanding evidence for a few painful decisions and clashes, we should not overestimate these problems. Under the guidance of the *kārum* organization, which faithfully followed the regulations and decisions of the City, the colonial mercantile groups on the whole abided by the rules set by the City and embodied in the treaties. As traders had to declare in lawsuits, “they subjected themselves to the City and its ruler,” which was probably also the best way of becoming successful as a member of the colonial society.

Assur and its colonies, without political power in Anatolia, could not ignore developments there, in particular during the later period of the trade, when the number and influence of the Assyrian traders diminished and more powerful territorial states started to emerge in Anatolia. This becomes clear from the treaties of the later period, mentioned above, in which the Assyrians tried hard to protect themselves against misuse of power by the Anatolians and in doing so *de facto* admitted changes in the situation. The system of import taxes and pre-emption, from which the local rulers profited, had been adapted by that time and the rulers could now also collect the tithe on Anatolian woolen *pirikannu* textiles traded by the Assyrians, the very same textiles whose trade by the Assyrians had been forbidden in the past and had been heavily fined by the City! The Assyrian authorities, no doubt on the basis of experiences and information of the “colonial traders,” were willing and able to adapt their policies to new realities.

How successful these adaptations were remains unknown due to a lack of written data. My impression is that in the later period some traders gradually came to figure less as Assyrian merchants in Anatolia and more

⁷⁸⁾ See the interesting observations on “the treasury of divine Assur” in Dercksen, *Institutions*: 77-81, on which we need more evidence.

as Anatolian merchants with Assyrian roots. Their smaller number and reduced importance and economic power inevitably led to more integration in the host communities.⁷⁹ Less frequent contacts with Assur and a less clear presence of the City in the colonial community—during the later period “Envoys of the City” no longer appear—made the Assyrian trading communities in Anatolia acquire some traits of a “trade diaspora,” with features of intermarriage, more local business contacts, and a measure of mutual acculturation. Closer contacts with the host community provided opportunities for more cooperation and the setting up of partnerships with Anatolians (not attested for the earlier period),⁸⁰ but also entailed certain risks, because Assyrians now came to figure more frequently as debtors of Anatolian traders. It is revealing that two treaties of this later period, with the cities of Hahhum and Kanesh, contain so many detailed stipulations to guarantee the freedom of action of the Assyrian traders and to protect them in legal conflicts and against high-handed Anatolian creditors. They also want to safeguard them from legal measures by Anatolian rulers, such as manumission of slaves and recruitment for service duties, dangers that seem to have been absent and were difficult to envisage during the well-documented main period of the trade, one century earlier,⁸¹ and may thus reveal that the position of the Assyrians was less secure than before. But the existence of these treaties nevertheless shows that the Assyrians still believed they had sufficient influence and that their commercial presence was attractive enough to secure their trading system by mutual arrangements, accepted under oath by the Anatolian parties. And this was also the case in the probably slightly younger treaty with Apum, in the Jazira, much closer to Assur.

Although the colonies by then had become less numerous, were becoming smaller, and had lost some of their economic power, the links with the

⁷⁹) See for an impression of the situation during the later period J. G. Dercksen, “When we met in Hattush”: 39-66, and K. R. Veenhof, “Old Assyrian Period”: 32-5 and 140-6.

⁸⁰) See for (the termination of) a partnership between an Assyrian trader in Kanesh and an Anatolian one in Mamma the text kt n/k 32, edited in Dercksen, “Some Element of Old Anatolian Society in Kaniš”: 166-7.

⁸¹) This assumption is based on the general idea of the economic power and influence of the Assyrians; the administrators of *kārum* Kanesh were actually called “our fathers” by some Anatolian rulers. But I admit that we do not have the text of one single treaty with an important city during the main period of *kārum* Kanesh level II, which leaves the possibility open that similar stipulations had already existed earlier—and worked well, so that letters did not have to report on problems encountered in this respect.

mother-city remained too important to allow them to become independent “diaspora settlements.” What really happened during the last generations remains unclear, because we can neither follow the fates of individual traders nor discover how the City of Assur reacted to these developments. Trade eventually collapsed, possibly due to the breakdown of the caravan system under a different political constellation in northern Mesopotamia, the disruption (or perhaps shift) of the import of tin from Elam, the increasing struggle for political power between a few expanding Anatolian territorial states, and (perhaps in consequence of all this) the decline of Assur itself, which by that time had entered a “dark period,” from which we have almost no written sources. Thus a unique, structurally, and legally highly advanced system of commercial colonization came to an end.

Abbreviations

NHAI Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, Istanbul.
 NINO Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, Leiden.

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