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The Old Assyrian merchants[1]

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Introduction

It seemed to the organisers of the symposium and the editors of the resulting volume that the topic of trade in the ancient world would benefit from some consideration of commercial practices in the ancient Near East. As I reflected on the request to contribute such a piece, I realised rapidly that this is an almost impossible task. The term 'ancient Near East', as it has come to be conceptualised by scholars over the years and enshrined in the curricula of our universities, embraces an immense time span of *c.* 3,000 years (from the fourth millennium to Alexander the Great) and covers an equally immense territory inhabited by many different peoples and socio-political groups. The very long period of traceable history down to Alexander's conquest of the Persian empire saw great changes on the social, economic, political and cultural planes, which make it meaningless to speak broadly about ancient Near Eastern trade as a definable aspect of that region's life. Given that a particular emphasis of this colloquium is the city,

[1] I must stress that this chapter is a short summary of the work of the many specialists to whom I refer. My own period of research is much later (Achaemenid and Seleucid). It is intended to do no more than draw the attention of Graeco-Roman historians to the potential importance of this material.

I have therefore thought it most useful to concentrate on one period and area where, for the space of about 70–80 years, scholars are in a position to trace in considerable detail an extremely complex trade mechanism run by an ancient Near Eastern city-state, namely the city of Ashur in northern Iraq, between *c.* 1900 and 1830 BC.

The Old Assyrian trade is now a well-studied phenomenon, because some of the leading scholars involved in Assyriological studies have devoted themselves to analysing it (for a recent conspectus, together with a full bibliography, see Veenhof 1995); as a result, students are in the unusual position of having, for once, several excellent monographs and a spate of articles discussing details of the trade. It is the very sophisticated nature of this Old Assyrian mercantile system which served as an important stimulus for Susan Frankenstein's characterisation of Phoenician trade and colonisation (Frankenstein 1979), although the modalities of that, determined as they were by large states and empires, differ in detail. So although the material is a great deal earlier than the general focus of this volume, it has a relevance in breaking down established notions: first, about what kinds of commercial activities were possible in the ancient Near East; second, about the complexity and levels of sophistication that can exist in very early societies.

General background

Before looking at some of the Old Assyrian evidence, the material must be set into a context. Between *c.* 2100 and 2000 BC all of the region of south Iraq formed part of a highly centralised, bureaucratic state centred on the city of Ur ('Third Dynasty of Ur'). The rulers extended their sway northwards and eastwards to dominate territories in the Zagros mountain chain, south-west Iran and parts of northern Iraq and Syria, including the city of Ashur. Around 2000 BC this tightly organised structure fell apart and was succeeded for about two hundred and fifty years by a period of decentralisation. This phase is marked by the development of a pattern of city-states locked in competition with each other under their individual rulers. Any attempts by city kings to extend power beyond their city's immediate environs met

with varying, usually fleeting, success. The one exception was Hammurabi of Babylon (1792–1750) who, at the end of the period, was able to impose control for a time over a region broadly comparable in extent to the earlier Ur state. The time of the Old Assyrian merchants (1900–1830) thus falls right into the middle of a period where the political norm was the city-state.

Although the available documentary evidence is fullest for the Mesopotamian region, the rich documentation preserved from this period (in Akkadian, written in cuneiform on clay tablets) has allowed scholars to deduce that a broadly similar political pattern existed in contemporary Syria-Palestine, central Anatolia and western Iran. The written material also allows one to see that, despite fierce rivalries and intercity wars, the small states of the entire area (and beyond) were linked to each other in a series of wide-ranging trade circuits: the cities of southern Iraq maintained regular maritime trading links with the Arab-Persian Gulf and Indus Valley; Susa, in south-west Iran (Khuzestan), was part of a network that extended into central Asia (Afghanistan and further north) in the east and fed into the cities of south Iraq in the west; the southern Mesopotamian cities in turn linked up to the north-west with states lying along the mid-Euphrates which, in their turn, connected up with neighbours to the west, south-west and north. Another very important nodal point in this dense mesh of routes and relationships was the small city of Ashur on the Tigris in north Iraq, which had close commercial ties with regions to the east (Iran), south Mesopotamia and central Anatolia.

The site of Ashur

Ashur lies at a point where it can dominate natural routes moving north to south, as well as east to west. It was not, and never became, an immense city.[2] In the period between 2000 and 1750 it was of modest size, small by comparison with the very large cities of southern Mesopotamia. Population estimates are notoriously difficult and unreliable, but most scholars agree that Ashur

[2] For the site of Ashur and its archaeology, see *RLA* I s.v. Ashur and Andrae 1938. For a useful recent survey of the site and finds in the Old Assyrian and Middle Assyrian periods, see Harper *et al.* 1995.

cannot have accommodated more than 15,000 inhabitants. It controlled some stretches of the surrounding countryside, but again the territory seems not to have been large and it was limited in its agricultural potential. Ashur lies at the edge of the zone where rainfed farming is possible; it did not, therefore, have access to great tracts of land suitable for good grain production with high yields (of the type possible in the south, cf. Powell 1985); the land in its environs was best suited for the herding of sheep and goats (cf. Oates 1968). Not much archaeological or written evidence survives from the city itself in the first half of the second millennium BC. Part of Ashur's city wall can be traced (on which the population estimates are based), the early levels of the Ishtar temple have been explored going back to the proto-historic period at the end of the fourth millennium, and royal building inscriptions show both that the city was ruled by a king and that there was also a temple to the local god Ashur. The dearth of evidence is to be explained in large part by the fact that much of Ashur was extensively developed and built over in the later, much more famous phases of its existence, when it was the centre of a large empire (Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian periods, *c.* 1400–*c.* 1050 and 934–610 respectively).

The evidence

The bulk of the information for understanding Ashur and its economic base comes from documents found about 1,200 km to the north-west near ancient Kanesh, a site in central Anatolia. It lies near the Halys river, about 20 km north-east of the modern city of Kayseri on the Anatolian plateau, where the great circular mound of Kültepe rises about 20 metres above the surrounding plain. Late in the last century explorers recognised Kültepe as the probable source of many of the cuneiform texts, written in the Old Assyrian dialect of Akkadian, which appeared on the antiquities market. Attempts to locate the precise find spot of the tablets remained fruitless until the Czech scholar Bedrich Hrozný discovered, in 1926, that the tablets were actually being dug up at a much smaller site about 90 metres to the north-east of the main mound. This smaller site turned out to be the settlement of merchants from Ashur. Since 1948 the site has been

thoroughly excavated by the Turkish archaeologist Tahsin Özgüç (see Özgüç 1959, 1986) with the result that perhaps 12,000 tablets have been added to the 3,000 or so available earlier, and the stratigraphy of the site has been clarified. It is now plain that the main site of Kültepe consists of a large circular city area with a palace building on the citadel, which was the centre of the important Anatolian principality of Kanesh, while the quarters of the adjacent settlement consisted of sizeable, but not lavish, typically Anatolian houses and were quite separate from the city of Kanesh.

Most of the texts held in museums before the start of the thorough Turkish excavations have been published, but only a tiny handful of the many found more recently have been made available. This means that deductions based on the published material, which probably represents less than a quarter of all the texts, will only be validated when the texts found more recently are studied. Apart from this, at present insuperable, difficulty, other factors complicate the picture. One is that two levels of the merchant settlement at Kanesh have produced tablets: level II, conventionally dated between 1900 and 1830, and Ib, which dates to somewhere around 1800. As matters stand at the moment, the bulk of published written material comes from the earlier level II period, and the later phase of the merchant settlement is very under represented. The political situation in Anatolia presents another problem: it can only be inferred from references in the Assyrian merchant documents themselves. The local Anatolian rulers at this period seem to have used the Old Assyrian dialect and the cuneiform writing system to communicate among themselves, but finds of texts on the city mound have so far been slight.

The chronology of the Kanesh colony has provoked some differences of opinion among scholars in the past. But at present there is a broad agreement: the levels of the city mound extend from the early third millennium right through to *c.* 1200, but the four levels of the colony are generally considered to have flourished in the period between *c.* 2000 and 1600. What we should note is that the quarter existed already well before the Assyrians, as far as we know, became such prominent traders there. It is thus possible that a local Anatolian trading station existed here earlier, of which the Assyrians became the dominant members. But even in the level II phase, the settlement was by no means exclusively

inhabited by Assyrians (as the documents show), and the archaeological material is entirely Anatolian in type. Were it not for the texts, we would have no inkling that any Assyrians were present at all.

The establishment of the trading centres

How did the small city of Ashur, with its modest resources but strategic location, come to play such a dominant role in the economic activities of a region many hundreds of miles away to the north-west?

Texts of two Old Assyrian kings, Ilushuma and his son Erishum I, who reigned in the fifty years before 1900 (i.e. the inception of the Old Assyrian presence at Kanesh, as far as we can tell), give a hint as to how Ashur established itself in this position. The longer one (that of Ilushuma) is extant in numerous copies on bricks from Ashur itself and runs as follows:

> Ilushuma, vice-gerent of Ashur, beloved of the god Ashur and the goddess Ishtar, son of Shallim-ahhe, vice-gerent of Ashur, son of Puzur-Ashur, vice-gerent of Ashur: Ilu-shuma, vice-gerent of Ashur, built the temple for the goddess Ishtar, his mistress, for his life. A new wall . . . I constructed and subdivided for my city house plots. The god Ashur opened for me two springs in Mount Ebih and I made bricks for the wall by the two springs. The water of one spring flowed down to the Aushum Gate, the water of the other spring flowed down to the Wertum Gate.
>
> The 'freedom' (*addurāru*) of the Akkadians and their children I established. I 'purified' their copper. I established their 'freedom' from the border of the marshes and Ur and Nippur, Awal and Kismar, Der of the god Ishtaran, as far as the City [i.e. Ashur].
>
> (Grayson 1987, A.0. 32. 2)

Contrary to an older view, according to which this related to a campaign of conquest in the south by Ilushuma (*CAH* i, ch. 25), Larsen (1976) has argued persuasively that the text reflects an attempt by Ilushuma to attract traders from south Mesopotamia to the Ashur market by giving them certain privileges. Ashur had managed to seize a controlling position in the tin trade with the east, and so served as an entrepôt where south Mesopotamian traders could go to buy tin and probably also to sell some of their

copper (which came mainly from the Gulf). Following Ilushuma's decree, they preferred to do this as they could now get a much better deal in Ashur than in other centres. The places mentioned in the text, it is argued, may refer to the three major caravan routes from the south: one ran from Ur (the point of entry for copper from the Gulf) to Nippur then up to Ashur; the second ran perhaps along the Tigris; and the third went from Elam through Der, east of the Tigris, and then across to Ashur. If this proposition is accepted and added to the statement by Erishum, Ilushuma's successor (1939–1900), that he: 'made tax-exempt silver, gold, copper, tin, barley, wool . . .' (Grayson 1972, §62), it is possible to argue that the Assyrian kings deliberately introduced a policy intended to maximise the potential profits of their nodal position in trade.

The city-state of Ashur

Is it possible to define any of the institutions of the city of Ashur? The material from the Old Assyrian trading quarter at Kanesh provides some insights. The king was entitled simply 'vice-gerent' (*iššiʾakum*) of the god Ashur', which probably relates to his role in a cult, where he was conceived as acting on behalf of the god, as illustrated by the statement, found in some inscriptions, that 'the god Ashur is king, X (= royal name) is his vice-gerent'. The title is only used in the formal royal inscriptions, which shows its ceremonial nature. The usage in day-to-day documents is quite distinct: here the ruler was always called simply *rubāʾum* or *bēlum* meaning, respectively, 'prince' and 'lord'. These terms seem to define his position within the community as head of the royal family and so occupying a pre-eminent position *vis-à-vis* other families. They do not depict the king as an autocratic, all-powerful ruler.

The Old Assyrian documents also reveal the working at Ashur of 'the City' (*alum*), which appears to designate a kind of city assembly, probably made up by the heads of the great merchant families there (Larsen 1976). All important matters of policy seem to have been in the hands of 'the City': it was the city that took decisions binding on the community (*awat ālim* = 'the word/ command of the city') and passed legal decisions (*dīn alim* = 'the

judgement of the city'). It controlled the diplomatic relations with the Anatolian principalities on, or near, whose territories the Assyrian merchant settlements were located. Through the agency of the city herald (*šipru ša ālim*), it enforced general commercial policy; it also fixed the general export tax, which was levied on all trade caravans by the city at a specified rate, and their bales were sealed by the city. It is possible, though not certain, that this important body met in a specially designated building called the 'house of the city' (*bīt ālim*).

The other extremely important political institution (for the whole of Assyrian history) was the *limmum*. This was the title of an official, chosen annually by lot, after whom each year was named and, at this period, the office seems never to have been held by the king (in contrast to the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods). Those eligible for the *limmu*-ship probably came from a select group, perhaps constituted by the heads of the major families of Ashur. It is possible that the chairman of the city assembly was the current *limmum*; so the office rotated annually among a small, but powerful, group of citizens who effectively counterbalanced the powers of the king (Larsen 1976). The picture of the Ashur community that emerges from this piecemeal evidence is that of a highly complex civic structure, largely run by a powerful group of businessmen, representing their family interests. The position of the ruler was largely restricted to that of acting for the community within the cultic and ceremonial spheres, undertaking public building projects and overseeing the exercise of justice. That is the picture of the city of Ashur as it can be gleaned from the Kanesh documents and the royal inscriptions.

The trading network in Anatolia

The Kanesh texts further show that two distinct types of trading establishment existed in Anatolia. The main one, and the best known, is the *kārum*, a term that in origin means merely a quay, but, because most trade in Mesopotamia was waterborne, it came by extension to mean the harbour and trading quarter of a city, where merchants gathered to transact business. When the Assyrians established permanent trading quarters far from home they simply applied the term to such settlements although they were now, of

course, no longer located necessarily on river banks. The other type of trading centre was called *wabartum*, a term unique to the Old Assyrian merchants in Anatolia. The word seems to be linked to a term for 'guest'; it is therefore suggested that it may originally have designated a caravanserai, which eventually expanded into a more permanent residential and trading centre, although smaller and less autonomous than a *kārum*. Some evidence exists to suggest that *wabartum* settlements were usually located adjacent to cities either less economically important or more difficult of access and so off the beaten track. The residents of a *wabartum* seem to have come under the administrative authority of the nearest *kārum*. But it must be admitted that some uncertainty exists in understanding fully this type of commercial settlement.

The numbers and the density of the trading centres can be recovered, more or less, from the documents. The situation in the *kārum* II period is more certain than in the Ib phase. In the earlier period there was probably a total of eleven *kārum*s and ten *wabartum*s; in level Ib the number of *kārum* establishments increased to fourteen, and there is evidence that some of the settlements that earlier on had been smaller *wabartum* stations developed at this time into fully organised *kārum* centres. The most important *kārum* was the one at Kanesh (at least in level II), which formed the hub of the network of trading settlements, with routes radiating northwards as far as the Halys mouth on the Black Sea, north-east to the region of modern Sivas and south-west to the important Anatolian political centres of Purushhattum and Wahshushana. A further group of colonies was located in the area to the south-east, along the routes leading into north Syria and Mesopotamia, and some were set at the northerly crossing points of the Euphrates. These were the routes along which goods coming from the Arab-Persian Gulf, Carchemish and Mari were transmitted to Anatolia.

Ashur's relations with Anatolia

Two important questions that need to be answered before describing the Old Assyrian trading network are: how did the Assyrian colonies relate to the Anatolian principalities in which they were located, and whose agreement did they need in order to carry on their profitable business? In order to answer these

central questions, it is necessary to try to reconstruct a picture of the political structure of Anatolia, which can only be done by using incidental references in the Old Assyrian texts (cf. Garelli 1963; Liverani 1988, 366–71). Independent city-states seem to have been the norm. They controlled the surrounding stretches of countryside and, in some instances, smaller urban centres. The majority of the population seems to have been 'Hattian' (the term used to describe the indigenous non-Indo-European population of Anatolia). Three political units, Purushhattum, Kanesh and Wahshushana, were much more powerful, and controlled quite extensive areas defined in each case as a 'country' (*mātum*). The rulers of both the smaller states and the 'countries' were (as far as the evidence goes) all called *rubā'um* (= 'prince'), except for the ruler of Purushhattum who was called 'great prince'. This suggests that this westerly state may have been recognised as wielding some kind of greater power than the others.

It has been argued in the past (see, for example, *CAH* i, ch. 24) that the whole region where Old Assyrian colonies are found was politically subject to Ashur. This view was based on the fact that a few texts demonstrate that the Anatolian states were linked to the city of Ashur by oaths, administered by envoys from there. But recent reconsiderations of this hypothesis make it much more plausible that the city of Ashur simply regulated its diplomatic relations with the Anatolian rulers through the city envoys, and that the oaths almost certainly related to the precise agreements under which the Assyrian traders could operate within the territory of the Anatolian centres. This conclusion is strengthened by other evidence, which shows that Assyrians could be clapped into prison by the Anatolian princes for smuggling restricted goods, that all Assyrian caravans were subject to a tax from the local ruler, that he may have had first pick of the goods and could impose restrictions on the trade in certain materials. The idea that Ashur wielded political control over Anatolia has now become untenable and is to be rejected (Orlin 1970; Larsen 1976).

The trading mechanism

The organisation of this astonishingly complex and far-flung Assyrian commercial system has been painstakingly recovered

from the texts (at least for level II: Larsen 1976), although a certain number of uncertainties persist. It seems that the smaller *wabartum* settlement came under the authority of the nearest *kārum*, which deferred to *kārum* Kanesh, which in turn came under the direct supervision of Ashur with its city-assembly. Kanesh was thus of central importance in the system, and some documents reveal that its own institutions were modelled on those of Ashur, with an assembly and officials, mirroring those of 'the City'.

The most striking feature of the Assyrian trade in Anatolia is the fact of permanence: merchant families (*bītum*: lit. 'house', hence also 'family') in Ashur sent some of their male relatives to settle in one of the Anatolian colonies, where they directed and promoted the family trading business by selling consignments of goods, sending the profits back home and also adding to them by engaging in trade internal to the Anatolian principalities. Sometimes a merchant in Ashur might make use of someone outside his family for a time in order to complete a particular transaction. In spite of the fact that business was basically a family matter, some of the capital funding for the trade came from shared, long-term investments which financed a particular trader over a period of several years; at the end of the time specified the investors received equal shares of the profit; the trader also gained a share, and provisions were made for cases of early withdrawal. These agreements were called 'sacks' (*naruqqu*), which derives from the original practice of placing actual goods in a trader's carrying sack (Veenhof 1987). Only one of these important contracts has been published so far (Landsberger 1940, 20–6; cf. Larsen 1976), but it seems likely that it represents a regular practice, which cut across the normal family ties and united the interests of the great merchant houses of Ashur.

The caravans of donkeys by which the goods were actually transported on the five- to six-week journey (cf. Hecker 1980) were generally fairly small. Each donkey usually carried a load of textiles and a small amount of tin. The donkey loads were standardised: a regular full load of tin consisted of 130 minas (*c.* 65 kilos) of tin; a donkey load of textiles consisted of 30 pieces plus accessories. Goods were loaded in standardised half-packs – two half-packs either side and a whole pack on top. The rate at which the caravans were taxed in Anatolia was computed on the basis of two minas per half-pack. Crucial at this time for the local Anato-

lian rulers was the Assyrian import of tin, which was needed to produce bronze. Ashur played a major role at this time in the acquisition and distribution of this metal from the east (probably central Asia). On arrival in Anatolia everything, including the donkeys, was sold, and the main import back to Ashur was silver and some gold. Within Anatolia itself the Assyrians, given their sophisticated and developed system of trading stations, were able to increase their profits by playing the dominant role in the internal carrying trade. They probably also organised the Anatolian inter-state trade in copper (Larsen 1967), which may have been mined at the rich deposits of Ergani Maden (near Elaziğ, Turkey). The tin was, bulk for bulk, more valuable than the textiles, but it was the textiles which provided the main volume of the trade (Veenhof 1972; cf. Larsen 1987), and the documents show that they were centrally important to Assyrian commerce and highly valued in Anatolia. The texts refer to special kinds of garments and certain types of cloth as being more popular at this or that moment, and the merchants were careful to watch the market and work out where their best chances for profit lay. Some, though not the majority, of the textiles were produced in Ashur itself by the female members of the merchant houses, as shown by this letter written to a woman in Ashur by her merchant husband in Kanesh:

> Thus Puzur-Ashur, speak to Waqqurtum:
> With 1 pound of silver – levy separately added, pay over completed – sealed by me, Ashur-idi is on his way to you. [Concerning] the fine cloth that you sent me: you must make cloth like that and send it to me via Ashur-idi, then I will send you [as payment] half pound of silver [per piece]. Have one side of the cloth combed, but not shaved smooth: it should be close-textured. Compared to the textiles you sent me earlier, you must work in 1 pound of wool more per piece of cloth, but they must still be fine! The other side [of the cloth] must be just lightly combed: if it still looks hairy, it will have to be closeshaved, like *kutānu*-cloth [a very common textile, possibly a kind of sheet]. As for the *abarnê*-cloth [originally named after the place, Abarne, which became the name of a type of cloth, cf. 'tweed'] which you sent me, you must not send me that sort of thing again. If you do want to do so, then make it the way I used to wear it. But if you don't want to make fine textiles as I have heard it they can be bought in quantity over there [i.e. where you are]; buy [them] and send them to me. One finished [piece of] cloth, when you make it, should be nine ells long and eight ells wide [4.5 × 4 m].

(*TCL* 19: 17; cf. Veenhof 1972, 103v)

Conclusion

This has of necessity been little more than a rough sketch of some of the salient points of the Old Assyrian trade; many more details of this richly documented trade network exist and are emerging more clearly as Assyriologists analyse more texts. It is possible, for example, to estimate the quantities of tin imported over a 40–50 year period (at least 80 tons, sufficient to produce 800 tons of bronze over the same period). A conservative assessment of the number of pieces of textile imported in this period comes to at least 100,000. These must have been highly specific, high status types of cloth, as indicated in the quoted letter. The profit for the Assyrians (well-attested) on tin was 100 per cent, on textiles 200 per cent. Control of the continuing profitability of this trade was paramount: when the merchant-bosses in Ashur heard that some Assyrians in Anatolia were trading in locally made, cheap imitation cloth, they issued strong warnings against this practice through the city-assembly in Ashur and fined those proven to have been involved in it heavily. The trade bore such rich fruits that it is quite feasible to call some of the participants that surface in the documentation 'millionaires'. There is even an interesting hint of the kind of tensions the unswerving pursuit of profit could provoke occasionally within families: a letter written to a millionaire merchant in *kārum* Kanesh (probably) by his wife and his sister in Ashur contains the following statement:

> Here we ask the women who interpret oracles, the women who interpret omens from entrails, and the ancestral spirits and the god Ashur sends you a serious warning: 'You love money! You hate life!' Can't you satisfy Ashur here in the city? Please when you have heard the letter then come, see Ashur's eye and save your life!
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> (*TC* I: 5; Larsen 1982, 214)

This, as has been suggested by Larsen (1982), sounds very much like a heartfelt plea to the merchant to stop devoting himself to money and return to the bosom of his family.

The Old Assyrian material is unbelievably rich and deserves to

be better known among Graeco-Roman historians in their endless battles about the 'ancient economy'. This debate seems to me to have run its course and it has not got a lot more to offer. Instead it might be more profitable if scholars of the ancient world looked more carefully at *all* the available evidence (including non-Graeco-Roman texts), in which the Old Assyrian material should by rights hold pride of place, as an example of the kinds of sophisticated trade structures that could and did exist, and which would never have been suspected from the purely material remains. It might be fitting to end this brief presentation with a particularly thought-provoking quote from one of the scholars who has worked intensively on the Old Assyrian material:

> The expertise built up (in Ashur) in the field of commerce formed one of the basic elements in the trade towards the west. The construction of elaborate systems of accounting, of investment and partnership structures, and of an administrative system of great elegance and efficiency led to a commercial organisation which in its complex details is paralleled only millennia later by the traders of the Mediterranean cities. The famous 'commercial revolution of the thirteenth century' in Western Europe, which was characterised by a major shift in business organisation away from the travelling, itinerant trader towards the sedentary businessman seated behind his desk is paralleled in many details by the material from Kanesh.
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> (Larsen 1987, 54)

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