

## Trade

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Wide-ranging and intensive trade, especially foreign trade, was absolutely essential to the prosperity and success of the ancient Mesopotamian cultures. This was because Mesopotamia was—and still is—deficient in many important natural resources. In particular, the region lacks metals, including copper and tin, the ingredients of bronze, which the ancients used for a wide variety of everyday objects; it also lacks forests for wood products and large deposits of stone for building projects. These deficiencies were already troublesome to the natives well before the rise of cities in Mesopotamia. But with the rapid urbanization of the region under the Sumerians in the late fourth and early third millennia B.C., existing crafts became more specialized, and this increased the demand for imported raw materials, especially metals, wood, and stone. In addition, the rise of cities stimulated an increase in wealth among a hard core of aristocrats, who wanted and demanded more and more luxury goods; many of these goods, or at least the raw materials needed to make them, had to be imported. Thus, for example, early Sumerian sources mention the importation of gold and lapis lazuli from Eastern Iran and Afghanistan.

**Imperial Governments Encourage Trade** Subsequently, the rise of empires in Mesopotamia, beginning with the Akkadian realm and the Third Dynasty of Ur in the late third millennium B.C., further increased the demand for foreign goods and raw materials. The governments of these empires saw the need to encourage trade and both to regulate it and to provide merchants with financial help and incentives.

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This government aid included financing for the building of ships, warehouses, roads, and rest houses for merchants. In the Old Babylonian period, the early second millennium B.C., the Babylonian government created a high official called the chief trader, perhaps equivalent to the secretary of commerce in many modern nations. However, it appears that his job was mostly to regulate and support international, and maybe also domestic, trade. Most of the major financing for trading ventures appears to have come from private parties, including wealthy nobles or merchants or loans from rich temple estates.=religions

**Kinds of Merchants** The merchants who facilitated these ventures were of three basic kinds. First, there were the traders who took part in caravans and expeditions to foreign

lands, where they exchanged **Mesopotamian** goods for foreign goods. A second group of merchants were those who ran the import-export businesses inside Mesopotamia. The third group of merchants were the shopkeepers who bought the imported goods from the merchants in the second group and sold them in the towns and cities. **Mesopotamian** merchants eventually formed their own **guildlike organizations**, each called a **karum**. These groups provided mutual aid for merchants, including added security to **guard caravans from bandits**; helped to find sources of financing for trading expeditions; and dealt with state officials in matters such as **trade regulation and taxation of merchants and trade goods**.

Evidence suggests that at least some merchants existed before the rise of the Sumerian city-states. However, major mercantile activity, including vigorous foreign trade, became large-scale only with the **urbanization** of the region and the large demand for imported goods it created. **Mesopotamian** traders were sailing cargo ships in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea as early as 3000 B.C., in the initial stages of the city-building era. Because of its close proximity to the Persian Gulf, the city of Ur took the lead and long remained the most active trading city in Sumeria. Traders from **Ur** and other city-states sailed out of the gulf and reached the delta of the Indus River in India, the coasts of the **Arabian Peninsula**, and the eastern coast of **Africa. Eastern Africa, including Egypt**, was also accessed via the Red Sea. Over time Sumerian and later other Mesopotamian traders also exchanged goods with towns and cities in **Syria**, which became a major crossroads of commerce by the mid-second millennium B.C.; Anatolia; the Mediterranean island of **Cyprus; Greece**; and other areas. Some of this trade was conducted by sea, but much of it was done by land. The land journeys were long and arduous. For instance, it could take a trader two to three months to transport his goods via a donkey train from Anatolia to **Babylon**. Meanwhile, internal trade within Mesopotamia was conducted, whenever possible, using boats on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their tributaries.

***A Wide Range of Goods Traded*** The goods exchanged with these foreign lands were diverse and show what both the Mesopotamians and the peoples they traded with viewed as essential or important. **From Anatolia** came **tin and later iron. Tin also came from Iran.** From Arabia and lands along the **eastern African coast**, the Mesopotamians got **copper, gold, ivory, pearls, diorite (a very hard stone), and various semi-precious stones.** The **African coast** also provided **ebony wood for building fine furniture**. From **Syria-Palestine** came

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**timber, especially cedar, and aromatic oils.** The **Indus Valley** was a source of semi-precious stones, as **Afghanistan** was for **lapis lazuli**, which was always highly popular in Mesopotamia. And **Cyprus and Greece** were important **sources of wine and fine pottery**. In exchange for these and other foreign goods, the peoples of **Mesopotamia** traded their own domestic products, chief among them **grain, sesame**

seeds, dates, textiles , embroidered garments, leather goods, bronze weapons , and jewelry. Bronze weapons and jewelry were major examples of Mesopotamian commercial enterprise. Local craftsmen imported foreign copper and tin, used it to create bronze, fashioned the bronze into weapons, and then exported the weapons in exchange for valuable imports . Similarly, they imported gold, lapis lazuli, and other valuable metals and semi-precious stones, turned them into jewelry, and then exported the finished products.

Such international trade existed throughout ancient times in Mesopotamia. Sometimes it was more intense and lucrative than other times, however; and from one age to another certain peoples or groups temporarily dominated international trade in the Near East. In the third millennium B.C. , for example, foreign and domestic trade flourished in the region. With the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur around 2000 B.C. , however, the volume of trade decreased briefly. It then increased significantly during the Old Babylonian period. For several centuries the Babylonians dominated trade in the Near East and were probably the most vigorous traders in the world. They were nearly matched by the Hittites , whose kingdom was in Anatolia, who were very active traders in Syria, Palestine, Cyprus, and elsewhere. A major reduction in foreign trade occurred after the disruptions caused by the invasions of the Sea Peoples in the early twelfth century B.C. But by the early ninth century B.C. , with the third and final rise of the Assyrian realm and the concurrent rise of the Phoenician cities on the Syrian coast, the volume of trade expanded again. The Phoenicians became the most prolific traders in the known world. Following the fall of Assyria in the late seventh century B.C. , they became both subjects of the Persian Empire and the chief middlemen in trade between Persian-controlled Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean-European sphere.

**Trade During the Seleucid and Parthian Periods** Following the conquest of Persia by the Greeks in the fourth century B.C., Mesopotamian trade continued to flourish and even expanded. This was partly because both the Persians and Alexander the Great had opened or expanded markets in the Far East, especially trade routes coming out of India; it was also due to the high emphasis placed on international trade by the Greek rulers of the Seleucid Empire. As noted classical scholar Michael Grant explains:

Although agriculture was important to the Seleucids, it was not as important as international trade, which they elevated to unprecedented dimensions. Every Seleucid king was a tycoon on an enormous scale, making millions from the great trade routes from the Mediterranean to central Asia, India, and Arabia, routes which passed through their empire and were served by a network of good roads. Trading was also facilitated by the creation of an impressive unified coinage, which the rulers issued themselves and made the basic currency of the whole of their huge territories, speeding up the process, begun by the Persians, of transforming an economy of kind [bartered goods] onto a monetary basis. ( *From Alexander to Cleopatra* , p. 56)

Among the trade routes Grant mentions, one of the most lucrative for the Seleucids was the one running along the western shores of the Persian Gulf. There, in the mid-to-late first millennium B.C. , thrived a well-organized Arab state known as Gerrha. The rich Gerrhaean sheiks enjoyed commercial relations with the tribes of southern and western Arabia as well as with western and southern India and southern Mesopotamia. To keep the Gerrhaeans from capturing and looting their own merchant ships , the Seleucids maintained a small fleet of warships in the Persian Gulf. The Seleucid monarchs also used diplomacy , as well as threats of military intervention when necessary, to maintain trade relations with Gerrha. This was vital because a large proportion of the valuable goods (especially spices) that the Seleucids got from India and Arabia came from the Gerrhaean middlemen. Some of these goods made it all the way to Syria, Greece, and beyond.

After the Parthians supplanted the Seleucids in Mesopotamia and surrounding areas, they avidly tried to maintain the existing trade routes. One difference, however, was that the Parthians placed a higher degree of importance on the land routes running through the region, particularly the so-called Silk Road that connected India and other Far Eastern lands to the Mediterranean world via the Near East. Conversely, unlike the Greeks and those who preceded them in Mesopotamia, the Parthians showed little interest in and actually neglected the sea trade that utilized the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This was a major reason that the prosperous Arab state of Gerrha went into major decline in the Parthian period.

The most important **Mesopotamian** outpost on the Silk Road in Parthian times was **Hatra, a fortified town in what is now northwestern Iraq** . A cosmopolitan city, Hatra hosted traders from far and wide and supported local communities of Greek, Persian, Arab, and other merchants and craftsmen as well as Parthians. This important city became a frequent target of Roman armies that invaded Parthia and was finally sacked and then abandoned by the Sassanians following their takeover of the Parthian Empire. However, the old Silk Road remained open under the Sassanians, as well as under the Arab Muslims who controlled Mesopotamia during the early medieval period.

SEE ALSO: money and banking; Phoenicians; Seleucid Empire; transportation and travel

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