Trade, Economy, and Artisans in Ancient Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia was not an abundant land to begin with. There were few natural resources, that is why people who lived there needed to trade with their neighboring lands to get the resources that they need to live (Spodek, 2005). Most people in Mesopotamia made a living in agriculture, mostly as farmers. Examples would be the trade of grain, oils and textiles (cloth) from Mesopotamia to other countries in exchange for timber, wine, precious metals and stones. Riverboats were used to transport goods for trade. At that time, money was not usually used to pay for goods that were traded. A barter system was created in which goods were directly exchanged for other goods. If money had to be used, it was usually in the form of small silver disks.

As the city-states grew a system of trade, eventually grew. Sumerians had a free economy, and strict records were kept of all business transactions on clay tablets using Cuneiform. These documents were the first written artifacts discovered by archaeologists and helped contribute to Sumer also being known as “the birthplace of economics.”

Temples were the main location for trade. In addition, temples were the chief employer. Artisans, scribes, priests, local administrators, and teachers all were employed by the temple. The temples could afford this because they owned most of the land of a city-state.

Craftsmanship is a very important aspect of the Mesopotamian economy. The most important craftsmen were the copper and bronze workers. “These artisans were responsible for making most of the tools that farmers, shepherds, soldiers, and other workers needed for survival. Shovels, axes, and plows, as well as knives, daggers, and spears were made from copper and bronze which were plentiful and easy to work with.” (Trade, Economy, and Artisans in Ancient Mesopotamia, n.d.)

Carpentry was also extremely important. Wood was imported to make furniture, carts, boats, and chariots. Hides from different animals were used by leather workers to make fashion harnesses, saddles, shoes, and water bags. “Basket weavers were also an important part of Sumerian life. Baskets were used by Sumerians for many purposes including carrying food and goods from one place to another, storing items in houses, and for holding infants as they slept.” (Trade, Economy, and Artisans in Ancient Mesopotamia, n.d.).

There are two basic methods that are used by the people to obtain the important materials that they needed but did not come from Mesopotamia. These are through war or through trade. Military expeditions were performed after the harvest period – often on a yearly basis– when farmers are available as soldiers. Minerals such as copper, tin, silver, etc. were only available in areas too far off for military action. Trade was usually the only way to get these items.