SARGON TO HAMMURABI: TRADE AND TURMOIL IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

EPISODE 003
To briefly summarize what we covered last time, we essentially witnessed the expansion of Sumer from a scattered farming society into the world’s first true civilization. Society became less egalitarian with the emergence of a ruling class, and surplus grain combined with the ambitions of the rulers combined to spur on long distance trade that reached south into the Persian Gulf and beyond.

Today we’re going to cover a larger span of time than we have covered in a single episode to this point, so buckle in as we look at some details about a certain Sumerian moon-god and how his mythical journey can give us a little insight into the boat building materials of pre-Akkadian Sumer. Then, we’ll see how Sargon forged one of the first true empires and we’ll look at some records from Akkad that give us insight into the range and scope of Akkadian trade. We’ll get an overview of the gradual changes in trade that occurred in Mesopotamia and we’ll wrap up at a point that’s essentially the end of ancient Mesopotamia’s connection to maritime history, a point near in time to the appearance of the Hittites, the end of the Bronze age in Mesopotamia, and a sharp decline in Persian Gulf trade.

Let’s start by looking at a few religious texts from ancient Sumer that can shed some light on the materials used to build magur boats and just how important these boats were in Sumer. A small caveat though first: it’s thought that the sacred boats differed from the everyday boats used by the common person, so the magur boats we’re talking about may have been only a small portion of the boats used in Mesopotamia, or they may have simply been idealized depictions of boats that were beautiful enough for the gods to have used. Either way, as with most things from this far back in history, it’s a little difficult to pin down a concrete answer.

The first text involves the Sumerian moon-god, Nanna-Suen and his journey to Nippur. The text falls into a category of Sumerian literature called divine journeys, poems that describe a fictional journey made by a deity. These poems were part of Sumerian religion, and it’s likely that they had some basis in religious rituals that were performed as a devotion to the gods. This first particular divine journey poem describes the moon-god Nanna-Suen as he constructs a magur boat and prepares it for his journey to deliver offerings to his father Enlil, the chief deity of ancient Sumer. Another little warning, Nanna-Suen was also called Ashimbabbar, so the two names within this poem are referring to the same person.
The most relevant portions of the poem are as follows:

Suen set about constructing a magur boat. He set about building a boat and sent for reed matting. Nanna-Suen dispatched people to Tummal for the magur-boat’s reeds. Ashimbabbar dispatched people to Abzu for the magur-boat’s pitch. Nanna-Suen dispatched people to Duashago for its rushes. Ashimbabbar dispatched people to the cypress forests for its strakes. Nanna-Suen dispatched people to the forests of Kug-nuna for its ribbing. Ashimbabbar dispatched people to the forests of Ebla for its planking. Nanna-Suen dispatched people to the fragrant cedar forest for its fir wood. Ashimbabbar dispatched people to the Junipers of Langi….

…and you get the idea. It seems likely that this divine poem is describing the construction of a reed boat with wooden ribbing along the boat’s interior, a type of boat that was fairly common in ancient Sumer.

This second text is a Mesopotamian Royal Hymn called Shulgi and Ninlil’s Boat. Shulgi was the second king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, he ruled for about 40 years with the middle of his reign falling right on 2000 BC. To me, this text is a beautiful description of a boat that was used in religious ceremony, but it also gives us a glimpse at the way Sumerians viewed boats, the water, and their world. Listen to the way the boat is described as it is being prepared for the goddess Ninlil:

Oh barge, Enki assigned the quay of abundance to you as your fate. Father Enlil looked at you with approval. Your lady, Ninlil, commanded your construction. She entrusted it to the faithful provider, king Shulgi; and the shepherd, who is of broad intelligence and who will not rest day and night in thinking deeply about you. He, the wise one, who is proficient in planning, he, the omniscient one, will fell large cedars in the

Possible depiction of the god Nanna, seated on a temple-like throne, on a fragment of the Stele of Ur-Nammu.
huge forests for you. He will make you perfect and you will be breathtaking to look upon. According to your large reed-mats, you are a daylight, spread widely over the pure countryside, According to your timbers you are a sniffing serpent crouching on its paws, According to your punting poles, you are a dragon, sleeping a sweet sleep in its lair, According to your oars, you are a snake, whose belly is pressed against the waves, According to your floor-planks, you are currents of flood, sparkling altogether in the pure Euphrates, According to your side-planks, which are fastened into their fixed places with wooden rings, you are a staircase leading to a mountain spring, According to your panels, you are a persistent and firmly founded abundance, According to your bench, you are a lofty dais, erected in the midst of the Abyss, According to your glittering golden sun-disk, hoisted with leather straps, you are a brilliant moonlight, shining brightly upon all the lands, According to your long side beams, you are a warrior, who is set straight against another warrior...

Again, this text gives us practical insight into the parts used to build a Sumerian boat, but it also gives us a sense of just how majestic these boats could be when they were outfitted with the gold and decor of the time, and it’s a shame that we lose some of that beauty by only having relics and remains to look at.
I hope that taking the time to look at those two religious texts was beneficial, but let’s now get back into the flow of history. When we left off, Sumer’s dynastic period had just about run its course and we looked at some evidence of maritime exploits as taken from the Royal Graves at Ur. The next major figure in our history supposedly had his start in a baby-sized reed boat, and no, I’m not talking about Moses of biblical fame. Rather, I’m talking about Sargon of Akkad, a Semitic ruler who emerged to forge an empire and conquer Sumer somewhere around 2300 BC.

If you’ll allow me to drastically condense this empire builder’s half-century reign into a bite-sized chunk, it’s sufficient to say that he led a conquest of the major Sumerian cities and created an empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf in the south to, possibly the Mediterranean, but for sure to the northwest of Akkad all the way to the Taurus mountains and the Semitic peoples there. Sargon foisted a unified political entity upon the subjugated cities and he entrusted the administration of his empire to Akkadian men. In fact, he made Akkadian the official language of his empire, forcing the southern Sumerian cities to relegate their native tongue to the background. The practical result of Sargon’s empire is that he controlled the world’s first large multi-ethnic empire. This allowed him to take advantage of the situation and order the riches of the empire brought to his capital city of Akkad, a capital city that, surprisingly, has not yet been discovered. We do at least have a general idea of the area where it is suspected to have stood, but the physical location is yet to be found. Sargon’s connection to maritime history is quite significant, as we see in an inscription that survives. It reveals to us the extent of his empire’s influence and shows us just how far trade extended in the ancient world. The inscription reads like this:

Sargon, the king of Kish, triumphed in thirty-four battles over the cities up to the edge of the sea and destroyed their walls. He made the ships from Meluhha, the ships from Magan, and the ships from Dilmun tie up alongside the quay of Akkad. Sargon, the king, prostrated himself before Dagan and made supplication to him; and Dagan gave him the upper land, namely Mari, Yarmuti, and Ibla, up to the Cedar Forest and up to the Silver Mountain. Sargon, the king, to whom Enlil permitted no rival—5,400 warriors ate bread daily before him. Whoever destroys this inscription—may An destroy his name; may Enlil exterminate his seed…
Dilmun, as we saw last time, is likely a reference to a culture that prospered as a Persian Gulf trade center in modern-day Kuwait. Magan has come to be identified with a culture that was based at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, near the current-day country of Oman. Magan is described in Sumerian and Akkadian texts as a source of copper, stone, and boatbuilding timber, and it’s likely that goods from Magan were processed in Dilmun as they made their way up to Mesopotamia. The last place mentioned, Meluhha, is the most mysterious, and it’s for that reason that we assume it was also the furthest away from Mesopotamia. Other than its description as a source of raw materials, little detail is given about Meluhha, but semi-precious stones and etched beads that seem to be from the Indus Valley region have also been unearthed in Mesopotamia. Generally then, Meluhha has been equated with the Indus Valley Civilization, and some indicators to that effect have been found at Mesopotamian sites.

Even after the founder of the Akkadian Empire passed off the scene, trade remained strong and wealth continued to flow into Mesopotamia. A beautiful murex shell bearing the name ‘Rimush, King of Kish,’ attests to this wealth, wealth that flowed in even as Rimush fought to keep his father Sargon’s empire intact. Rimush was succeeded by his brother Manishtu, who actually extended Akkadian control to the east and into the Iranian Plateau. Manishtu was in turn succeeded by his son, Naram-Sin, the ruler who saw the Akkadian Empire at its apex. If doubt exists whether Sargon’s empire extended to the Mediterranean, it
is more likely that Naram-Sin’s empire did reach the Mediterranean, stretching from there back to the Persian Gulf. It’s also during this reign that we find what is quite possibly the first mention of a military fleet. Inscriptions naming Naram-Sin claim that he assembled a fleet and sailed against a confederation of Magan cities. Although he failed to add Magan to his empire, he returned with much spoil, a result shown by the inscription on a vase that was lost during an 1855 French archaeological expedition. Though the vase was lost, a pressing of the inscription that once appeared on the vase says: “Naram-Sin, king of the four corners of the world, a vase, the spoil of Magan.”

A moment ago I mentioned that the Akkadian Empire was at its apex under Naram-Sin, but not long after his death most of Mesopotamia entered a period known as the Gutian Interlude. A mountain-dwelling people known as the Guti had existed on the outskirts of the Akkadian Empire for centuries, carrying out sporadic raids on outer-lying Akkadian holdings. Shortly after Naram-Sin’s reign came to an end, Akkadian dominance began to wane. This decline was perhaps a result of Akkadian over-extension combined with the reality that many of the city-states under Akkadian control had once been independent and grew to resent foreign rule. A combination of unrest in southern cities and an increase in the frequency of Gutian raids in the northwest led to the fall of the Akkadian Empire and with it, a sharp decline in the amount of trade that occurred in the Persian Gulf. The Gutian dynasty was marked by inefficient administration, poor leadership, and overall declines in trade, agriculture, and general prosperity across the board. The Gutian period lasted from around 2150 BC down though the next century to about 2050 BCE, and some historians refer to the Gutian period as being a “Sumerian Dark Age.” Within that darkness, though, there was at least one light that continued to shine in southern Mesopotamia.

That light was shone by the ensi of Lagash, a ruler named Gudea, spelled with a ‘d’ even though his name sounds quite similar to the people who had taken over Akkad. Gudea ruled in Lagash and even though the Guti could probably have toppled his city along with all the others, they chose to let Lagash alone since its leaders were more accepting of Gutian control within the region. Gudea gained a reputation for rebuilding many of the
temples in Lagash, and he is well known to us today because many inscriptions and likenesses bearing his name and image have been found. A famous statue with his name contains an inscription that details the temples he built or renovated in Lagash. The statue itself says that is dedicated to, "Gudea, the man who built the temple; may his life be long." Gudea’s temple building campaign bears a resemblance to that of Ur-Nanshe whom we met in Episode 2, and it tells us that at least in Lagash, Persian Gulf trade was still alive and well.

In fact, other inscriptions reveal to us that Gudea had trade with practically the entire “civilized” world. A particularly striking inscription is contained on a statue known as "Statue B," but more appropriately nicknamed "Architect with plans." This statue of a seated Gudea shows him holding the plans for the temple at Eninnu on his knees, while the inscription around the rest of the statue, one of the longest Sumerian inscriptions in existence, tells of the offerings made at the temple and lists the numerous cities where Gudea obtained materials for the temple’s construction. The beautiful inscription tells how he obtained gold
from Anatolia and Egypt, silver from the Taurus Mountains, cedar from Amanus in Lebanon, copper from the Zagros mountains, diorite from Egypt, carnelian from Ethiopia, and timber from Dilmun. It’s also likely that Gudea’s trade routes may have continued to reach south to Magan and Meluhha, places we have already seen, but the inclusion of these two places is more debatable since they had begun to decline in power by the end of the third millennium BC, the timeframe when Gudea ruled Lagash.

Several decades after Gudea’s death, a ruler named Utu-hengal of Uruk arose to drive out the Gutians and begin what is seen as a Sumerian Renaissance. Utu-hengal did not last long in power, but Ur-Nammu took his place and is remembered as an able ruler and a rebuilders of temples and infrastructure in Sumer. He became the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the first Sumerian rule since the rise of the Akkadian Empire and its displacement by the Gutian invasion. During the Third Dynasty of Ur, things in Sumer began to resemble their pre-Akkadian ancestors. Irrigation canals were repaired and improved in order to promote agricultural development; the economy again became more centralized in the city-states, particularly Ur; and Sumerian ships made trips to Dilmun where they traded for goods that originated in Magan and Meluhha. Trade even traveled the opposite direction, north and west up the Euphrates and then overland to the Mediterranean. The scope and quality of trade was as good during Ur’s Third Dynasty as at any time previous in Sumerian history. The particular dynamics of trade as it was carried out by merchants and their relationship with the state and with the temples is a fascinating topic and contributes much to our examination of trade in ancient Mesopotamia, so if you want to tune in next time, we’ll take a closer look at Mesopotamian merchants in our next episode.

Before that, though, we need to wrap up our look at the chronology in Sumer. While the Third Dynasty of Ur experienced what would turn out to be a brief revival, Assyria was becoming more solidified in the north of the region. Dilmun featured heavily as the transit point where trade occurred in the Persian Gulf, but the Sumerians didn’t well control the northern regions where Assyria had reestablished its independence following the Gutian Interlude. In addition to the Assyrian growth, Sumer also had to deal with problems caused by both the Amorites and the Elamites, two peoples that had been brought within the control of Sumer but who both began to fight for their independence as the Third Dynasty of Ur collapsed. Much of the Sumerian collapse was brought on by a drought that lasted for years and caused the agricultural base of their entire society to literally dry up. As Sumerian cities
dwindled both in size and in power, the conquered peoples, who had no problem maintaining their allegiance during times of plenty, began to question their subservience to Sumer. As the drought wore on, a Semitic-speaking people from Syria called the Amorites, began a mass migration into Sumer that further exacerbated the effects of the drought. As the collapse gathered speed, the Elamites then launched an invasion against the last Sumerian king, Ibbi-Sin.

Three letters from the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur give us a glimpse into state of affairs as Ur met with its end. The first is most relevant to maritime history and tells us how Ibbi-Sin had sent one of his right hand men, Ishbi-Erra, on a grain-buying expedition. Ishbi-Erra’s report details how he had obtained 72,000 gur of grain, and having heard that the Amorites were marching into Sumer he brought the grain not to the capital city of Ur but to Isin instead. He then asked the king to send 600 boats of 120 gur each so he could distribute the grain to the various cities of Sumer. Now, a gur is a unit of measurement for grain and the carrying capacity of a 120 gur boat would be in the region of 10 tons of grain, so 600 boats carrying 10 tons of grain each is a substantial amount of grain.

Even on its last legs, we can see how Sumerian civilization still managed to carry out large-scale trade in the Persian Gulf. Be that as it may, the last two letters from the trio give a good synopsis of why the Third Dynasty of Ur fell. In exchange for distributing grain to the Sumerian cities, Ishbi-Erra managed to coerce the king into giving him control of Nippur and Isin. He turned that gain to his advantage and eventually took the throne himself, contributing to Ur’s demise and establishing a smaller dynasty that ruled in Isin even as the Amorites and Elamites fought for everything else. With the end of Ibbi-Sin’s reign, the Third Dynasty of Ur and the whole of Sumerian dominance was over. The year was 2004 BC.

For the next two hundred years, ambitions in Mesopotamia seem to have been focused on maintaining order and control of the cities. The previous focus on expansion and trade had been had been shattered when the Amorites and Elamites burst on the scene, but things in Mesopotamia were a bit more complicated than is worth going into, considering the focus of this podcast. The Old Assyrian Kingdom grew steadily to the north of where Sumer once lay, but Assyria was landlocked for the most part, so maritime exploits are almost nonexistent in ancient Assyria. Instead, their focus was on overland trade with the Hittites and the Mitani who resided in Asia Minor to the west. The dark horse of this time period was certainly
Babylonia, an independent state that didn’t emerge until 1894 BC. With the city of Babylon as its capital, Babylonia was a thorn in the side of Assyria until an Amorite named Hammurabi took the throne in around 1790 BC.

Hammurabi is well remembered as the man who united the disparate kingdoms of his time into the first Babylonian Empire of history and pronounced his law code to the empire. In our next episode we’ll consider the impact of Hammurabi’s law code upon the life and trade of Babylonian merchants. Just as quickly as he unified the empire, though, it began to fragment once again and the death of Hammurabi around 1750 BC marked the start of a decline in maritime trade throughout the Persian Gulf. The once-powerful Indus Valley Civilization had, for other reasons, also begun to decline by this point, cutting off a main source of goods that had long been imported into Mesopotamia. Hammurabi’s death, then, began a trend that continued for at least two hundred years, but in reality, Persian Gulf trade never again reached the level it had once held. When the Hittites overran Babylonia, the door slammed closed on maritime trade in the Persian Gulf and would stay closed for almost a thousand years.

I hope you’ll join us next time as we look at the lives of merchants in ancient Mesopotamia up through the rise of Babylonia. The Code of Hammurabi contains a surprising number of provisions related to shipbuilding and the regulation of commerce, so that should be an interested episode. I also thought it important to mention that even though we’ve virtually reached 500 BC in our look at Persian Gulf trade, there are several other civilizations and peoples that we’re going to meet before we move into the classical period. As Mesopotamia flourished, so did Egypt. The Phoenicians held a practical monopoly on trade in the Mediterranean, and the Indus Valley Civilization existed on a scale that is often forgotten. There were also the Myceneans, the Minoans, and the mysterious Sea People, so we’ve just begun our look at the maritime history of the ancient world.

Until next time, fair winds and following seas. Thanks for listening to the Maritime History Podcast.
Sources

- Headless Statue of Gudea, prince of Lagash, Louvre. [link]
• Rawlinson, George, *The Seven Great Monarchies Of The Ancient Eastern World*; Or, The History, Geography, And Antiquities Of Chaldaea, Assyria, Babylon, Media, Persia, Parthia, And Sassanian or New Persian Empire; With Maps and Illustrations. (1876).
• Statue of Gudea, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [link]
• Ur-Namu Stele, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. [link 1] [link 2]

**Maps**

A map depicting possible routes between and among Near East cities and regions including *Ur, Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha/Harappa.*
The approximate extent and expansion of the Akkadian Empire during the reign of Naram-Sin.

The cities that comprised the main bulk of the Third Dynasty of Ur, along with the extent of its influence to the east.
A map depicting the major people groups in control of the Near East around 1450 B.C.

A map depicting the growth of the Babylonian empire between Hammurabi’s ascension and death.