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# The Old Assyrian Trade in the light of Recent Kültepe Archives\*

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## Abstract

*At the beginning of the II<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, inhabitants from the Aššur city-state, on the Tigris, organized large scale commercial exchange with Anatolia: they exported tin and textiles in Central Anatolia and brought back gold and silver. They settled down in forty Anatolian localities, in kārūm and wabartum; their main settlement being at Kültepe, near Kayseri, in Turkey, the place of the ancient Kaniš. This regular trade is very well-documented by the Assyrian merchants archives, mostly dated from the XIX<sup>th</sup> century BCE and discovered at Kaniš. Since fifteen years, an international group of researchers is in charge of the publication of the Kültepe tablets; the decipherment of new important texts and the study of complete private archives allow presenting an up to date view of the Old Assyrian trade.*

## Résumé

*Au début du II<sup>ème</sup> millénaire avant J.-C., les habitants de la cité-État d'Aššur, sur le Tigre, organisèrent des échanges à longue distance avec l'Anatolie : ils exportaient de l'étain et des étoffes en Anatolie centrale et rapportaient chez eux de l'or et de l'argent. Ils se sont installés dans une quarantaine de localités, dans des kārūm et des wabartum ; leur principal comptoir de commerce se trouvait à Kültepe, près de Kayseri, en Turquie, nom de l'ancienne Kaniš. Ce commerce régulier et pendulaire est documenté par les archives des marchands assyriens découvertes à Kaniš et datant principalement du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. Depuis plus d'une quinzaine d'année, un groupe international d'assyriologues est en charge de la publication des tablettes de Kültepe ; le déchiffrement de nouveaux textes importants et l'étude d'archives privées complètes permettent de mettre à jour nos connaissances sur le commerce paléo-assyrien.*

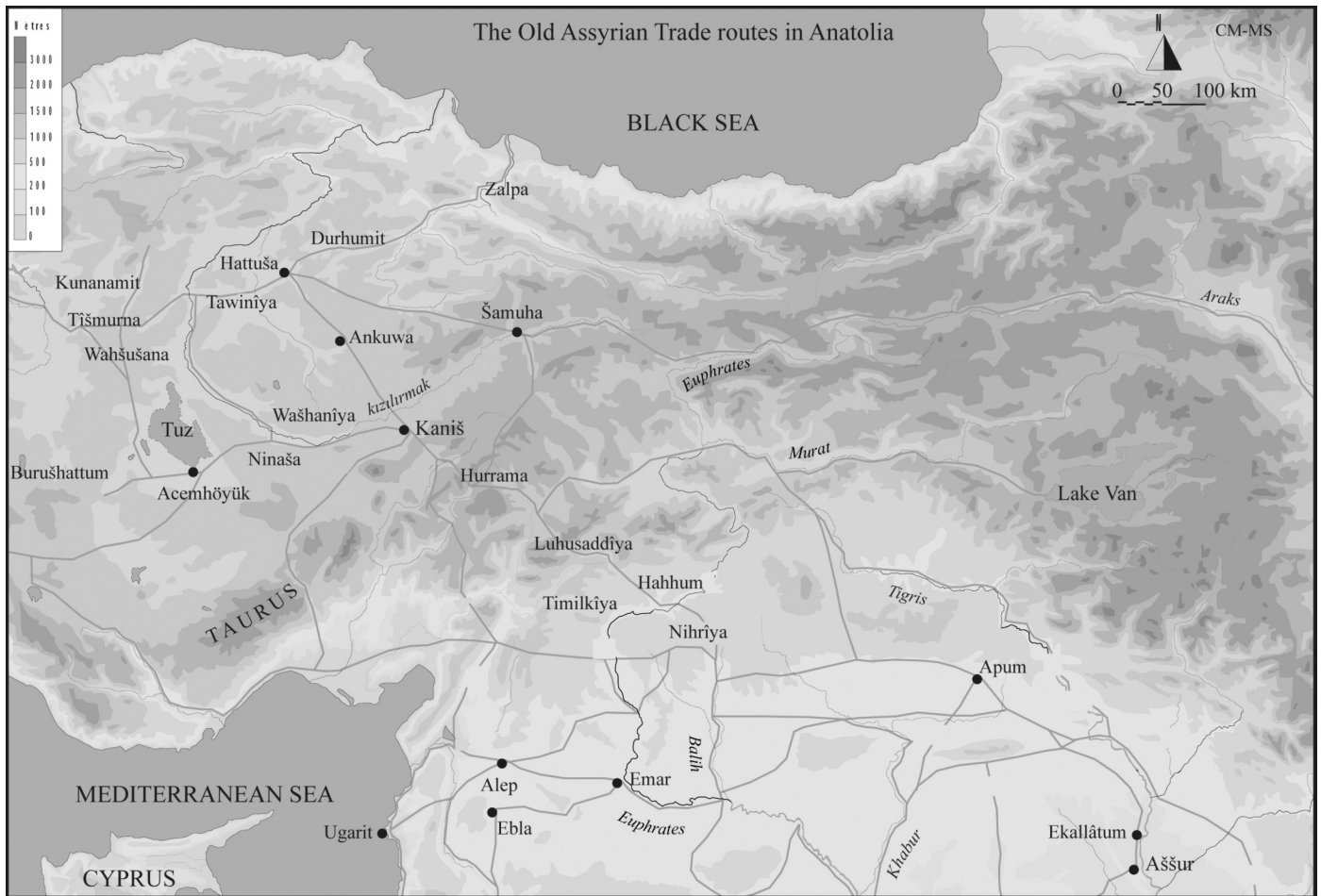
At the beginning of the second millennium BCE, inhabitants from the city-state of Aššur, on the Tigris River, organized large-scale commercial exchanges with Anatolia. Their city lies at a strategic position on the main roads from southern Mesopotamia and Iran to Syria and Turkey. People from Aššur exported tin and textiles to Central Anatolia and brought back gold and silver. They settled down in a foreign country, far away from their home. Their trade was favoured by treaties with local Anatolian rulers. This regular trade is very well-documented by the Assyrian merchants archives, mostly dated from the nineteenth century BCE discovered at Kaniš, near Kayseri, in Turkey.

On the basis of the data given by the Old Assyrian archives from Kaniš, I would like to explain the mechanisms and structures of the trade within its geographical and political context. The decipherment of new important texts and the study of complete private archives allow us to present an up-to-date view of the Old Assyrian trade.

## 1. Aššur and Kaniš at the beginning of the second millennium BCE

Aššur was built on a rocky headland on the western bank of the Tigris, about one hundred kms south of Mosul, in the north of Iraq. The excavations of ancient Aššur started more than a century ago, and lasted more than 30 years. In 1903, a German architect, Walter Andrae, inaugurated a new archaeological method and drew a precise topographic map of the town. At the end of the 1970s, some restoration work was done by the Iraqis on the surrounding walls of the city, the ziggurat and the temple of the god Aššur. Germans and Iraqis worked together on a salvage project in 2000 and 2001 because the site was threatened by a large dam project located at modern Makhoul. In June 2003, Aššur was classified by UNESCO among the World Heritage Sites of Humanity and added to the list of the World Heritage Sites in peril. Since March 2003, the site has been well protected and does not seem to have suffered from the looting that took place in other places in the south.

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The first occupation of Aššur dates from the beginning of the third millennium BCE. The town is mentioned in written documents from the mid-third millennium and successively submitted to come under the control of the Akkad and Ur III dynasties. With the fall of Ur III, Aššur became an independent city-state dominated by an oligarchy of merchants. This period, which covers the three first centuries of the second millennium, is conventionally called “Old Assyrian.” The town then covered about forty hectares and its population amounted to a few thousand. The archaeological discoveries of this period remain rare and scattered. In general, the Old Assyrian levels have not been excavated since they are located under later levels. The main constructions dated from the Old Assyrian period (or earlier) are official and religious buildings; the surrounding walls, the old palace foundations, temple of the god Aššur, and the ziggurat. The Old Assyrian harbour has not been identified. It could be located under the modern cemetery.

Aššur played an important role in large-scale trade from the third millennium, because of its strategic position. At the beginning of the second millennium, political decisions were taken by the rulers of Aššur in order to increase trade. Ilušumma took some economic measures to improve the relations between Aššur and southern Mesopotamia (RIMA 1: 18): “I established the *addurārum* of the Akkadians and their sons, I washed their copper, from the border of the

marshes (?), Ur, Nippur, Awal, Kismar, Dēr of the god Ištaran until the City (of Aššur). I established their *addurārum*.” With such measures, the king wanted to attract traders from the South to Aššur, by giving them some privileges: cancellation of debts or abolition of taxes; *addurārum* usually means return to the original situation. This may have stimulated the import of copper and Akkadian textiles from the south. His successor, Erišum I (1974–1935 BCE), set up a free traffic of some goods traded by inhabitants of Aššur (RIMA 1: 22): “I established the *addurārum* of silver, gold, copper, tin, barley, and wool, down to bran and chaff”; references to gold and tin indicates a link with the overland trade.

At the end of twentieth and beginning of nineteenth century BCE, under the reigns of Ikūnum (1934–1921 BCE) and his son Sargon I (1920–1881 BCE), the Assyrian merchants developed long-scale trade to central Anatolia, settled there and organized colonies. The two last kings of this first period, Puzur-Aššur II (1880–1873 BCE) and Narām-Sîn (1872–1829/1819 BCE) at the middle of the nineteenth century are not well attested, but during their reign the Assyrian merchants of the colonies were asked to participate financially in the repairs of walls of the town of Aššur.

During the second half of the nineteenth century BCE, trade with Anatolia slowed down and then started up again a few years later, around 1832 BCE, according to the Middle Chronology. Šamšī-Addu, king of Ekallātum, dominated the

whole of northern Mesopotamia from Šubat-Enlil, in the Habur triangle. He shared his kingdom with his two sons: Išme-Dagān, at Ekallātum on the Tigris, and Yasmah-Addu at Mari, on the Middle Euphrates. Aššur did not hold the status of a capital city but still played a pre-eminent economic role. According to a recently discovered list of Aššur eponyms covering most of the second part of the Assyrian merchants' activities in Anatolia, the Old Assyrian period ended after Išme-Dagān disappeared. The town passed under the authority of a local dynasty, then to the kings of the Mittani. At the middle of the fourteenth century BCE, Aššur became the capital of a territorial state, which, under Šalmaneser I and Tukultī-Ninurta I extended from the Euphrates to the Zagros.

For the Old Assyrian period, Aššur has yielded very few tablets, only 24 pieces, scattered in later-level archives and some royal inscriptions, around 30, mostly from temples. It is thus not possible with the only documents found in this place to reconstruct the history of Aššur at the beginning of the second millennium BCE nor the commercial activities of its inhabitants.

This gap of documentation from Aššur is happily filled with the numerous private archives of merchants settled in Asia Minor, mostly in Kaniš. In fact, the great majority of the written documentation comes from Kaniš. Among the 22,700 Old Assyrian texts enumerated up to now, 99% come from Kaniš. All that we can reconstruct today about the history of Aššur as far as its institutions and its trade results from this documentation found more than a thousand kms away from Aššur.

Kaniš was discovered in the second half of the nineteenth century BCE and its tablets first appeared on the antiquities market in 1881. The texts, dated from the beginning of the second millennium BCE, written in Assyrian dialect, were found in a place called Kültepe, 21 kms north east of modern Kayseri. Some French and Czech explorations were undertaken at the site before the official excavations started in 1948, with the support of the Turkish Historical Society under the scientific direction of Tahsin Özgüç from Ankara University. After the death of T. Özgüç in October 2005, the excavations continued under the direction of Fikri Kulakoğlu. Each year

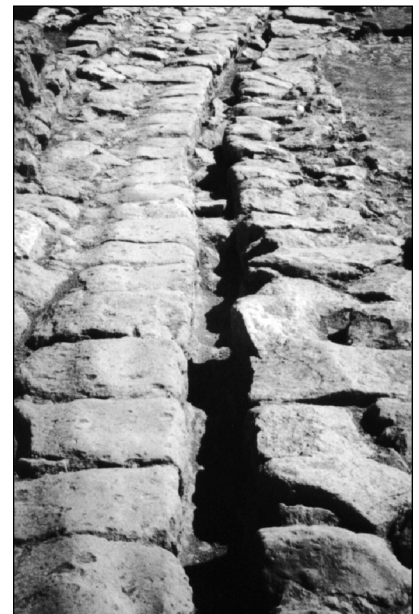
the archaeologists have found new Old Assyrian tablets. The total number of texts discovered in Kaniš, 22,460 (in 2006) places this site among the richest source of cuneiform texts from the whole Near East, and the source continues!

Kültepe was occupied from the middle of the third millennium BCE. The city was divided into two major sectors: the citadel and the *kārum*. The latter word means "merchant harbour" as well as the organization of these merchants with its administrative building. This *kārum* shows four levels of occupation, but it seems that only level II (ca. 1945–1835) and Ib (ca. 1832–1700) yielded written documentation. The Citadel, on the top, has been much destroyed by illicit diggers. A huge palace of 60 rooms has been recovered, its last period being dated to level Ib of the *Kārum*. Today, one can see only the stone foundations of this palace. This building had been emptied before being destroyed by fire, which means that almost no tablets were found in it. On the whole, only 41 cuneiform tablets were found in the Citadel, dated from both levels II and Ib. We did not recover the official archives of the local ruler.

The *kārum* where the merchants lived is located north-east of the Citadel. Its main level, level II, corresponds to the occupation by the Assyrian merchants mainly during the nineteenth century BCE. The *kārum* was divided into quarters separated



View of the *kārum* and a paved street (1994)



by large streets and open spaces. The houses show mainly three parts: the "office," the residence and the warehouse where the tablets were found. They were stored in groups of 20 to 30 units in baskets, boxes or clay jars with sealed clay labels. Only the tablets discovered in the houses allowed identification of the ethnic origin of their owners.





*Rhytons and metal tools from the k̄arum.*



One can see that Anatolians lived south of the *k̄arum*; they were involved in the trade, but did not play a role in the administration of the colony. The Assyrians settled in the north. In the houses the excavators found domestic furniture, mainly pottery of a purely Anatolian style. Many rhytons, with geometrical designs and original animal shapes, had cultic uses. Weapons, metal vases, statuettes and jewels were found in graves, under the floors of some houses. The Assyrians used local products. If tablets had not been discovered, it would have been almost impossible to detect the presence of the Assyrians in Kaniš. At the end of *K̄arum* level II many houses were burned, which baked the tablets, helping to preserve them.

*K̄arum* level Ib is a little smaller, but seems to have had as many inhabitants as during the previous period; this level did not yield as many archives as level II. *K̄arum* level Ib was also destroyed by fire.

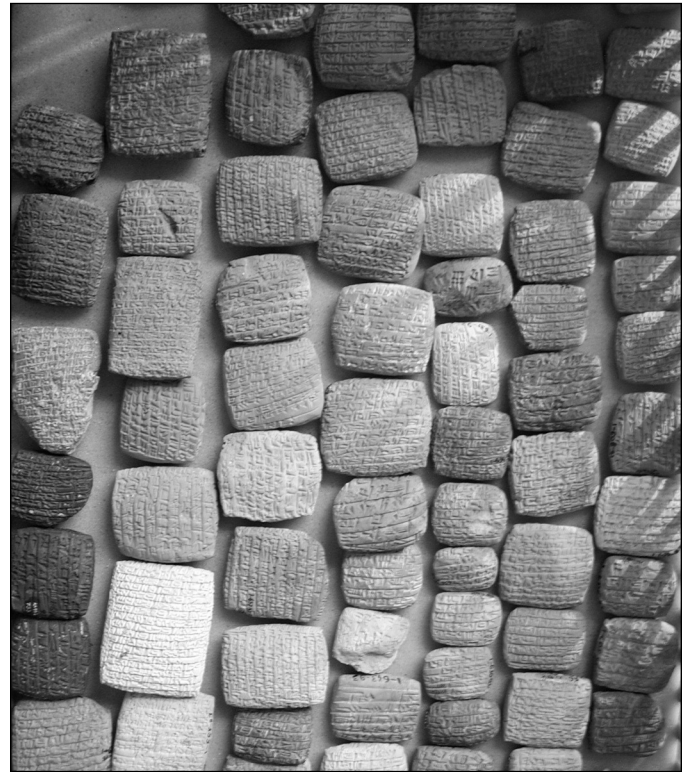
## 2. The Old Assyrian archives

Besides Aššur, where 24 Old Assyrian tablets have been found, and Kaniš, which yielded 22,460 tablets, other Near Eastern sites also produced some texts: Hattuša, the capital of the later Hittite Empire, Ališar, another Old Assyrian colony,

Yorghana Tepe, ancient Gasur (later Nuzi) and Sippar. In all, about 200 Old Assyrian texts were found outside Aššur and Kaniš.

From Kültepe, the old town of Kaniš, among the 22,460 tablets found up to now, about 22,000 came from level II of the *k̄arum* and 420 from level Ib; only 41 tablets were discovered in the Citadel. All these tablets are still being deciphered by fewer than a dozen specialists from Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey. Only 23% of the tablets discovered have been published up to now.

These tablets constitute the private archives of Assyrian merchants settled in Kaniš. Between one third and two fifths of an archive consists of private letters exchanged between the Assyrian merchants in Kaniš, their families and colleagues in Aššur or settled in other Assyrian colonies in Anatolia. These letters were protected during their transport by clay envelopes; they give precious information about the organization of the trade but also domestic matters and daily life. A second group of texts consists of loan contracts, judicial documents, trial verdicts, proceedings, various contracts concerning mainly commercial and financial matters. The last category, about 20-30%, includes all the tablets that are not letters or legal documents: lists, private notices, memoranda, etc. One has to add to these three categories the bullae or clay labels and seal and sealings, some of them bearing inscriptions.



*Old Assyrian tablets discovered during the 1993 excavations in the house of an Assyrian merchant family.*

### 3. The Old Assyrian trade in Anatolia.

The Old Assyrian tablets document the regular trade established by Assyrian merchants between Aššur and Kaniš between the twentieth and the eighteenth centuries BCE. Inhabitants of Aššur exported tin and textiles to Asia Minor and brought back gold and silver. The tin was produced in Uzbekistan, far to the east, and was clearly brought to Aššur by Elamites. The tin exported to Anatolia was used for the local bronze industry. In fact, some workshops have been found in Kaniš with dozens of moulds for bronze weapons and tools.

Textiles came both from local production and from imports. The local textile production seems to be mostly private; there is no attested weaving establishment in the palace or temples. The weaving was done by women at home. The Assyrian fashion was especially appreciated in Minor Asia. In fact, merchants gave a lot of advice to their spouses how to improve their production, as, for example, explained in a letter addressed by Lamassī to Pūšu-kēn (BIN 4 10 = LAPO 19 303): “As to the textiles about which you wrote to me in the following terms: ‘they are (too) small, they are not good’; was it not on your own request that I reduced the size? And now you write (again), saying: ‘process half a mina (of wool) more in your textiles’. Well, I have done it.”

Textiles imported from Southern Mesopotamia were brought to Aššur by Babylonians. Some of the textiles were used to wrap the tin and the other textiles.

The regular trade in tin and textiles was sometimes complemented by rare products like lapis-lazuli and iron. The merchandise travelled to Anatolia, under seal, on donkey loads. The donkeys were bought near Aššur and chosen for their robustness; each donkey could carry up to 75 kilos. Thus Aššur does not produce much except textiles and donkey harnesses, but works as a port of trade in an international trading system.

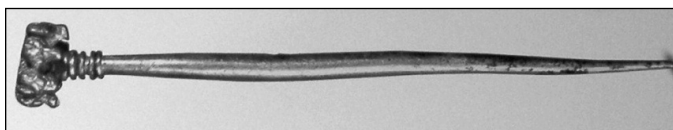
When coming back from Kaniš, Assyrians brought with them gold and silver. The gold came from the Mardin area. In Aššur the metal was usually hoarded but could be used to buy the tin from the Elamites. The silver extracted in the Taurus Mountains was refined and controlled both in Kaniš and Aššur. It constituted the privileged means of payment. The sil-

ver was immediately reinvested in new caravans. The Assyrian vocabulary uses the expression “hungry silver” for capital which does not grow. The important amounts of silver in Aššur attracted the foreign merchants selling tin and textiles.

A merchant often owned three donkeys carrying some 5 talents of tin and more than a hundred textiles. Small groups travelled together to form huge caravans containing dozens or even hundreds of donkeys. The merchant responsible for the whole caravan hired some harnessers and donkey drivers to take care of animals and goods. The harnesser received working capital, while the donkey driver was paid a salary. The value of the merchandise was converted into tin. A small amount of tin remained unsealed and was entrusted to the conveyor; it was used for all the expenses during the travel: fodder for the animals, the salary of the donkey drivers and taxes (BIN 4 24): “2 talents 10 minas of sealed tin, 10 minas of hand-tin, 4 black textiles: the packing, 1 black donkey, and its harness – all this, Ušur-ša-Aššur, son of Aššur-bēl-awātim, is bringing to you... Give the tin and the textiles to Ušur-ša-Aššur, let him bring it to Burušhattum, exchange it for silver, and let him bring the silver to me with his caravan.”

From Aššur, caravans went along the Tigris to the north and passed through the towns of Qaṭṭarā, Razamā and Apum. From there, they reached Eluhhut and Nihriya and then went across the Euphrates in the area of Hahhum. They then reached Timilkīya, the first Anatolian stopover, before arriving in Kaniš where merchandise was unloaded. The distance covered by Assyrian caravans between Aššur and Kaniš reached more than 1,200 kms, across steppe lands and mountains, and lasted about six weeks. At the intervening different kingdoms on the route, the caravans had to pay taxes on both the merchandise and staff. In exchange, the local rulers protected the roads. Travel was not possible during the winter; roads were closed for four months and traffic stopped. So the caravans could make two round trips each year.

Before leaving Aššur, the head of the caravan paid the Town Hall an export tax. During the travel, he had to pay custom duties in each kingdom on the goods and people travelling with the caravan. In Kaniš, the merchandise was cleared in the palace by the payment of an import tax, and this institu-



*Gold and lapis lazuli objects from Kültepe*

Which tax?	Where?	To which institution?	How much?
<i>wašitum</i> export tax	Aššur	<i>bēt ālim</i> / Town Hall	1/120 of the <i>awītum</i> of the caravan
<i>dātum</i> caravan tax	En route	local authorities	10 % of the <i>awītum</i> of the caravan
<i>qaqqadātum</i> personal tax	En route	local authorities	10-15 shekels of tin by person
<i>nishatum</i> import tax	Kaniš	local palace	3% of the tin and 5% of the textiles
<i>išrātum</i> tithe	Kaniš	local palace	purchase of 10% of textiles at reduced price
<i>šaddu'atum</i> transport tax	Kaniš	<i>kārum</i> authorities	1/60 of the value of gold + silver going to Aššur
<i>nishatum</i> import tax	Aššur	<i>bēt ālim</i> / Town Hall	4% of the imported precious metal

tion was allowed to buy a percentage of the textiles at a reduced price. Taxes were also paid to the *kārum* authorities and to the Town Hall on the silver and gold brought back to Aššur.

After having been cleared at the local palace, tin and textiles could be sold. Assyrians then had two possibilities: either they could sell their merchandise for cash in Kaniš or sell it on credit to agents for a fixed period. These agents travelled to other Anatolian colonies in order to sell the goods at the highest possible price. The exchange of the merchandise for gold and silver was either immediate or indirect, by transactions of wool and copper. According to its quality, the tin was sold at twice its price in Anatolia with the most common textile being sold three times its price in Kaniš. Many donkeys were also sold, as only a few animals travelled back to Aššur with the precious metals the merchants had acquired. Each year, about one hundred kilos of silver and gold were thus imported into Aššur; some merchants made huge fortunes with their investments. Part of the precious metals were used to buy tin, textiles and donkeys and thus to finance new caravans. The remainder was used for repayments and gifts or converted into real estate.

#### 4. Partnerships

The main activities of the Assyrians were commercial, based on exchange, and financial, by means of loans with interest.

As it was impossible for a merchant to cover the whole trade operations from Aššur to Kaniš, the Assyrians organized a complex network of mutual and contractual representatives with each participant having a specific task.

The contractual relationships are of different kinds. Some, like the loans, are very well attested by the cuneiform tablets whatever the period. Others, in contrast, are more known through association, being specific to merchant societies. All obey rules which delineate the responsibility of each party, both their duties and rights.

Most of the loan contracts discovered in Kaniš concern commercial loans; they deal with goods put at the disposal of a merchant. Instead of selling their goods for cash, the Assyrians preferred to entrust them on credit to agents and retailers who contracted to pay them later. Merchandise was then exchanged for a credit certified with the sealing of the debtor. The value of the debt was estimated in silver, and a date of payment was fixed. Naturally, this operation implied a risk for the owner of the merchandise; tablets sometimes mention that an agent disappeared with the entrusted goods, and there are many occurrences of outstanding claims. In such loan contracts, there was interest only on overdue payments, while current interest was normally fixed on the other loans. The current interest, fixed by the *kārum* at Kaniš, amounted to 30% per year. This high rate can be explained by the commercial nature of the loans and the high value-added of the silver between Anatolia and Aššur.

Beside the simple hiring contract of employees, Kaniš documentation shows different types of partnerships or collective enterprises in which one or more creditors provided the necessary capital for any operation. There were mainly two kinds of investors. The shareholders of Aššur, called *ummi'ānum*, corresponded to the heads of the rich families of Aššur. They acted as a lending bank and invested important amounts of silver in the caravans leaving Aššur. The word *tamkārum*, translated as “merchant,” corresponds to various realities — head of the Anatolian branch of the firm, retailer of the exported goods in Anatolia, commercial agent — they also often appear as creditors. Tablets refer to people going to a *tamkārum* house in order to borrow money. The Old Assyrian *tamkārum* is well documented and clearly independent of the Assyrian government.

Law protected the creditors in special circumstances. For example, when an agent died in Anatolia, all his belongings were brought to Aššur and first the creditors got back their investments before the family could inherit anything (RA 88, 1994, 121): “The moment Hurāšānum died, his creditors (*tamkārū*) entered (his house) and sealed (his) strong-room. This is the reason we did not write to you when he died. We thought: ‘Let his creditors settle the accounts. Then we shall write them our detailed report.’ His creditors have remitted the (default) interest and have been fully paid with the silver due to them. They ‘devoured’ both tablets and debtors and have been fully satisfied.”

There were many different types of contractual relations that dealt with commercial cooperations. These collective

enterprises might be distinguished by their length; beside long-term associations, we find agreements concluded for specific operations on a limited-time basis for one journey there and back. Among short-term enterprises, the *tappā'ūtum* partnership is well known from Old Babylonian sources. In this kind of partnership one of the associate put capital at the disposal of his partners to start a specific commercial operation. When finished, the partners made up the accounts, paid their debts and shared the profits in equal parts. Thus, the *tappā'ūtum* was punctual, and the aim was well defined (ICK 1 1 = Innāya 125): “Innāya, representative of the creditor, you for yourself, Kaluwa, son of Puzur-Adad, for Hanunu, son of Šilli-Ištar and Alahīya, son of Nunu, for Alābum, son of Aššur-malik, the four of you have created a *tappā'ūtum* partnership. Nobody among you has invested money, but Innāya, representative of the creditor gave you 20 minas of silver, silver of the capital, to buy meteoric iron.” But this specific partnership came to nothing: very few iron was bought, and the capital was wasted by one of the partners. Some associates were jailed because of conflict with local authorities.

Another short-term enterprise is called *ellātum*, which also means “caravan.” Several investors joined their goods for a single journey to Kaniš and back. Equipment, salaries and expenses were proportional to the different owners. At the end of the travel they shared the gain according to their investments.

6 minas of gold investments, 1 1/2 mina : Irišum,  
2 minas : Iddin-Aššur, 2 1/2 minas : Alāhum,  
2 minas : Šū-Labān, 2 minas : Ikuppī-Ištar,  
2 minas : Ilī-dān, 1 1/2 mina : Aššur-malik,  
1 1/2 mina : Aššur-idī, 1 1/2 mina : the creditor,  
1 mina : Abu-šalim, 1 mina : Hinnāya,  
4 minas : Amur-Ištar, thus in all 30 minas of gold (in) the  
bag-*naruqqum* of Amur-Ištar.

Since the eponym Susāya, he will trade for 12 years.

On the profits, he will enjoy one third and he will guarantee one third.

The one (among the investors) who would take the money before the term of the contract will take only the 4 invested minas of silver, he will get no profit.

(Kayseri 313 = *ArOr* 67, p. 557 – 565)

A different kind of partnership, very common in the Kaniš documentation, was the long-term *naruqqum-contract*. It was a kind of mixed-liability company always created in Aššur where the contract was written. Several creditors entrusted to an agent the bag, called *naruqqum*, in which they gathered substantial capital amounting to a number of gold minas. In the example shown, 30 minas of gold are entrusted to an agent by 15 individuals for a period of 12 years. The tablet dealing with the inception of this partnership gives the list of the investors, the investments in gold, the name of the agent and the term of the contract. The agent was hired for many years

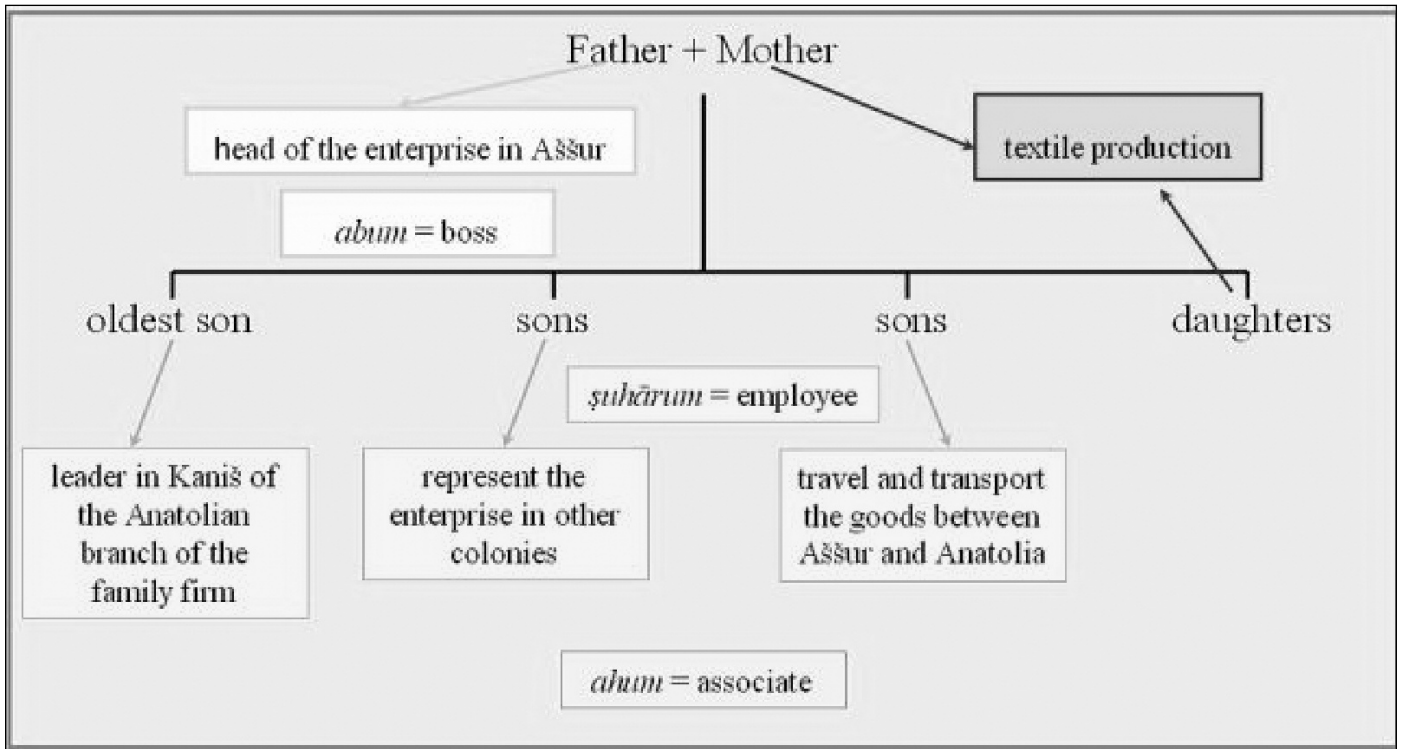
to participate in trade and make as much profit as he could. He might not have the authorization to manage several *naruqqum*-contracts simultaneously, but his own contract might be renewed several times, and could last his whole life. The agent always had to be able to guarantee his creditor one third of the profits. Reliable relationships were very important, and investors preferred to use the services of agents with a good reputation. According to the advice given by Aššur-idī to his son, carrying a *naruqqum* bag was a kind of social recognition (CCT 4 2a = LAPO 19 221): “Come here to (Aššur). People less important than you administer a *naruqqum* bag, and people less important than me have invested 10 minas of gold (in such partnerships). Come and take over a *naruqqum* bag and only then leave again.” The creditors regularly received dividends on the selling of goods in Anatolia. At the end of the partnership, the agent kept one-third of the profits and gave the other two thirds to the creditors, who shared them according to their investments. These contracts, which governed the relationships between the creditor in Aššur and the merchants in Anatolia, represented the main funding mode of Assyrian trade in Minor Asia.

Most of the inhabitants of Aššur were involved in this trade. Better than contracts in which merchants were looking for trusted associates, family links gave the bases for professional relationships — it was harder to rob a family member than a foreigner! The large merchant families were organized into firms in which each member in Aššur or Anatolia played a precise role. The father or the older brother ran the enterprise from Aššur; he invested capital in merchandise and organized the caravans to Kaniš. The eldest son, an inhabitant of Kaniš, led the Anatolian branch of the family firm. He received the caravans and organized the selling of the goods. The other sons were settled in different colonies to represent the enterprise, and the youngest son travelled and transported the goods between Aššur and Anatolia. They were the link between the different members of the family. When the father died, the eldest son took over the direction of the firm. The women participated in the family trade by their textile production. In exchange, they received precious metal and jewels that they used to manage their household and bring up their children. Thus, the family vocabulary was used for professional links: *abum*, “the father,” was also the boss, *ahum*, “the brother,” was the associate, *šuhārum*, “the youngster”, was the employee. But one must keep in mind that even if the family in the Old Assyrian commercial system was very important, we should notice that all capital was individually owned.

## 5. Trade and Institutions

The merchants acted privately and independently of the institutions, but their commercial activities were controlled by the authorities by means of taxes and perhaps restrictions on some products. At the beginning of the second millennium BCE, Aššur was a city-state governed mainly by three institutions: the ruler, the city and the eponym (*līmum*). The ruler had several titles: *rubā'um* “the big one”, *waklum* “overseer” and





*iššiak* <sup>4</sup>Aššur, the “divinely appointed governor of the city-god Aššur.” I already mentioned the economic measures taken by some of these kings to improve commercial relationships with the south, the east and Asia Minor. The palace did not seem to play a specific role in the trade.

In judicial and other administrative matters, the king shared his power with the assembly, usually called “the City” (*ālum*). The assembly functioned as a court of law and made political decisions. The orders of the assembly became laws that might affect trade. For example, the policy of Aššur favoured the accumulation of gold. A letter by the ruler of the city informed the colonial authorities of Kaniš that the sale of gold to non-Assyrian people of greater Mesopotamia was prohibited (Kt 79/k 101 = LAPO 19 2): “The tablet with the verdict of the City, which we sent you, that tablet is cancelled. We have not fixed any rule concerning gold. The earlier ruling concerning gold still obtains: Assyrians can sell gold among each other but, in accordance with the words of the stele, no Assyrian whosoever shall not give gold to an Akkadian, Amorite or Subarean. Who does so will not stay alive!”

The Akkadians were the Babylonians, the Amorrites lived on the Euphrates bend and the Subareans were the Hurrians north of Aššur along the Tigris. This protectionist law was intended to prevent possible competition. In fact, the gold was usually not used to buy goods in Aššur apart from tin and lapis lazuli from the Elamites who are not mentioned in this letter. It was hoarded by the town and the temples. Another decision of the city assembly was intended to protect the textile trade. In a letter addressed to Pūšu-kēn, two colleagues in Aššur write (VS 26 9 = LAPO 19 199): “Here (in Aššur) it has come to a lawsuit concerning *saptinum*- and *pirikannum*-tex-

tiles, woolen products, and many people have been fined. You too have been obliged to pay 10 minas of silver; you must pay one mina each year... Please do not get involved in (the trade in) *saptinum* – and *pirikannum*-textiles, don’t buy them... the ruling of the City is severe.”

These textiles are in fact traded by Assyrians only inside Anatolia; their price is low — from 1 to 3 shekels for a *pirikannum*. Their trade was made to the detriment of the normal imported textiles, the *kutānum*. Once again it was a protectionist law to favour Assyrian textile production, but was perhaps issued as an edict for difficult times.

The third institution, the *līmum*, involved a sorting by lot among the major families of Aššur; the eponym gave its name to the year. The *līmum* governed the “Town Hall” or “House of the Eponym” for one year. This institution was the main administrative and financial institution of the city. It was involved in trade: it sold merchandise to the traders, collected taxes, controlled the caravans and also played a role as a public warehouse. Most of the references concern debts of merchants due to this institution, some of whom received penalties.

The Assyrians settled in about forty colonies in Anatolia, which were destinations of their goods and production or transformation centres of metals. The central colony administration lay in Kaniš, but the official building, the *bēt kārīm*, has not yet been found. The colony-assembly prerogatives were economic, judicial and political. This institution levied taxes on caravans, fixed the rate of interest on loans, managed the credit invested by its members and the deposit made at the office, as well as organizing a periodical settlement of accounts two or three times a year. The colonial assembly

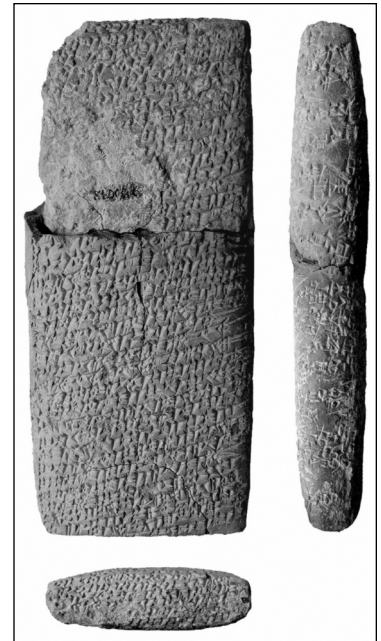
worked as a court of law, even for disputes in other colonies, and rendered verdicts. The office of the *kārum* colony, a kind of extension of the government of Aššur, protected the interests of its merchants against Anatolian officials and was in charge of diplomatic contacts and treaties with the local rulers. The main merchants of the colony (*šāqil dātīm*) subscribed by paying important amounts of silver to the *kārum*, which gave them some privileges. There were about 20 other Assyrian *kārum* in Anatolia and the same number of smaller colonies called *wabartum*; all these colonies received orders from the *kārum* Kaniš.

## 6. Commercial Treaties

Assyrian trade in Anatolia was made possible because peaceful relationships with the local people were based on mutual commercial interests. The resources of the local palace came from its land production and metallurgical copper centres. For tin and textiles it depended on the Assyrian trade. The structure of the Anatolian kingdoms and their administration was visible only through the contacts they had with the Assyrian merchants. The prince was surrounded by many officials in charge of the different administrative sectors.

Since Anatolia was far away from Aššur, the trade was based on treaties and conventions with the local rulers made in order to limit risks. Assyrians and Anatolians concluded sworn agreements recognizing the mutual and complementary interest of the two parts. The content of the treaties was mainly commercial. The Anatolian rulers granted to the Assyrians the rights of crossing, protection of the caravans against robbery and brigandage, with compensation of losses and payment of blood money within a king's territory. The merchants had extra-territorial rights, locally exercised by the administration of the colonies. In exchange, the merchants granted to the local authorities the payment of taxes on caravans at customs or in the Anatolian palaces. They had to respect the right of pre-emption of ten percent of the textiles and to observe the restrictions on some luxury products. We have very few treaties. One, badly preserved and dated to level Ib, was found in Tell Leilan. Another one is a draft of a treaty with a town encountered *en route* and dated to level II (Kt n/k 794 = LAPO 19 87): "In your country, 'rope (and) peg', no losses of an Assyrian shall occur. If they occur you shall search and return them to us. If bloodshed occurs in your country, you shall hand over to us the killers so that we can kill them. You shall not let Akkadians come up (to you); if they come up to your land, you shall hand them over to us so that we can kill them. You shall not ask anything (extra) from us. Just like your father, from every caravan which goes up you shall receive 12 shekels of tin and from the one going down you will obtain 1¼ shekels of silver per donkey. You will not take anything extra. If there are hostilities and hence no caravans can come, one will send you from Hahhum 5 minas of tin ... If we violate the oath to you, our blood may be poured out like (the contents of this) cup!" The expression "rope (and) peg" simply refers to "not even the loss of a peg or rope". With this treaty, the Anatolian ruler, in exchange for taxes

received from the Assyrian caravans in both directions, promised to protect individuals and goods. In case of murder he would deliver the murderer, and if goods were lost he had to replace them. If traffic was stopped, then he received the promise to get some tin. An important provision was the protectionist clause meant to prevent competition by Babylonian traders (named Akkadians). Anatolian rulers were eager to sign these treaties in order to get some profit out of the trade. The systems worked pretty well for more than a century.



Two treaties discovered in 2000 have been published in 2004; they both belong to the *kārum* level Ib and were concluded with the rulers of Kaniš and Hahhum. Both concern mainly bilateral issues. The stipulations in the treaty with Kaniš deal with imported textiles, lapis lazuli and iron, murder and losses (among which textiles), handing over of indebted people and appropriation of possessions, fugitive debtors, administrative and legal measures, trade during war, and oath procedures. The treaty with Hahhum, a town located on the border of the Euphrates, is badly preserved. It concerns confiscation and seizure, administration of justice, losses due to the sinking of ferries, acquisition of textiles from a caravan which arrives from Aššur, acquisition of imported tin by the local elite, consequences of war between Hahhum and the cities of Timilkiya and Badna, prerogatives to acquire goods from caravans travelling to Anatolia, and bloodshed and losses in Hahhum's territory...

Despite these treaties, there are numerous disputes between Anatolian rulers and Assyrian merchants. The first delayed their payments for merchandise they bought, while the others smuggled goods in order to increase their profits. In fact, the heavy tax system imposed on caravans reduced the profits realized by the merchants. Not without risk, they took narrow roads to avoid customs or registered only part of the merchandise in order to reduce the import tax; the surplus was then transported secretly (BIN 4 48 = LAPO 19 176): "If the narrow track is safe, my tin and textiles of good quality, as much as he had brought across the country, should indeed come to me with a caravan by way of the 'narrow track'. If however the 'narrow track' is not appropriate, they should ship the tin to Hurrāma and then either the native inhabitants of Hurrāma bring all the tin in quantities of 1 talent each into the town, or let one make packets of 10 to 15 minas each, and let the personnel (of the caravan) bring them into the town under their

loincloths. Only after they have safely delivered 1 talent are they allowed to bring another 1 talent into the town. As soon as some of the tin has safely arrived in town you should send it on to me each time with the first caravan leaving.” Thus some merchants did not hesitate to leave written proof of the different methods they used to smuggle goods. Other merchants, jealous of their neighbours, wrote letters of denunciation. To deal with such incriminations, the authorities organized repressive measures such as fines, warnings or even jail.

### 7. The chronology of the trade

The Old Assyrian trade in Anatolia started and expanded in a relative peaceful context between the Anatolian kingdoms. It prospered because of a balance between the Anatolian administrative and military strength and Assyrian commercial and economic power. The Assyrians were perfectly adapted to their new environment, and Anatolian participation in the trade steadily increased. Some of them became agents or retailers and even creditors. They grew richer and integrated into Assyrian firms by mixed marriages. The mixing of the Kaniš population is a proof of the successful integration of the Assyrians. The Assyrian rulers proclaimed protectionist laws in order to block competition. Such measures seem to have been very effective and explain, at least in part, the monopoly retained by the Assyrians in Asia Minor.

Recently, new data has come from Kaniš which sheds some light on Old Assyrian chronology. In 1998, Klaas Veenhof deciphered a *līmū* list covering the period of *kārum* level II and called Kültepe Eponym List (KEL A). This list contains the succession of 129 *līmū* names and the reigns of the kings to which they belong. Since then, five more fragmentary tablets containing part of this list have been found (KEL B-F). KEL allows comparisons with Old Babylonian archives using the Old Assyrian system of eponyms from Chagar Bazar, Mari, Tell Bi'a, Tell Rimah and Tell Leilan. Most of the tablets from these towns belong to the reign of Šamši-Addu and his son Išme-Dagān who are contemporaries of the Kaniš *kārum* Ib archives. The 2001 season at Kültepe yielded many tablets of this level and another *līmū* list comprising almost the whole level Ib period. This last list, KEL G, was deciphered by Cahit Günbattu. It comprises 143 names and overlaps the other lists with only twenty names missing; this means that we now have a sequence of more than 250 eponym names of Aššur! This new list for example fills up some gaps of the Mari Eponym Chronicle.

Another important text was excavated in 2001, a letter addressed by the messengers of Aššur authorities to a local ruler in Anatolia, who previously wrote to ask for military help: the ruler of Harsamna was at war with the ruler of Zalpa (Kt 01/k 217). The Assyrians explained that the great king Šamši-Addu had recently died and had been succeeded by his son Išme-Dagān. Thus they were not able, and perhaps did not wish, to give military help but proposed instead to send many textiles. When this tablet is published it will shed new light on the political situation of the beginning of Išme-Dagān's reign partly known from the Mari tablets.

Thanks to the *līmū* lists, it is now possible to arrange the tablets of *kārum* Kaniš according to a relative chronology, and to reconstruct the careers of many individuals and the history of their family firms. The length of the level II of the *kārum* is nowadays estimated to have been a little more than a century. Most of the archives discovered in Kaniš are dated to the first half of the nineteenth century, from the middle of Sargon's reign until the middle of of Narām-Sîn's rule, and the last twenty years are not well documented. The actual reconstruction of three generations of a family firm whose tablets were discovered in 1993 confirms this remark. There could be several explanations for this phenomenon. Assyrian merchants left Kaniš taking with them their valuables (metals and precious stones) and their most important documents — loan contracts, still valid, proofs of property, claims, etc. The most famous merchants known from the tablets had died before this last stage or had retired in Aššur and the next generation settled in other western Assyrian colonies stimulated by an increase in exchanges. Archaeology confirms the fact of the desertion of Kaniš *kārum* houses several years before its destruction by fire.

Another and last point is to stress how the Assyrian trade passed away, perhaps first in Kaniš, and then in the other colonies. There is no proof that problems arose from Mesopotamia, but it is clear that inside Anatolia the political situation was deteriorating with a progressive fragmentation of the administrative structures of Central Anatolia during the second half of the eighteenth century BCE. In fact, in spite of the increasing number of commercial conventions with the different Anatolian states, there are increasing disputes between these — some of them wanted to extend their territory in order to control more and more roads. It might be that this political situation inside Anatolia put an end to the flourishing Assyrian trade in this region. With the end of the exchanges and the departure of the Assyrian merchants, writing disappears from Anatolia for a century.

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