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The Assyrian Textile Trade in Anatolia (19th century BCE) From Traded Goods to Prestigious Gifts*

Cécile Michel

During the 3rd millennium BCE, we observe a “wool revolution” in Mesopotamia. Wool became the main woven material and was distributed to male and female workers as subsistence rations. According to cuneiform documentation, in parallel with long established domestic production, large-scale textile production began at that time.¹ Early in the 2nd millennium BCE, international trade in textiles expanded. In southern Mesopotamia, palaces employed merchants to market the wool produced by their herds; at Aššur, private entrepreneurs were engaged in a long distance textile trade.²

During the 19th and 18th centuries BCE – a period called conventionally Old Assyrian –, Assyrians exported large quantities of textiles to Anatolia. This international trade was private, but controlled by the authorities who imposed various taxes and took political decisions which could sometimes affect the textile trade. In Anatolia, the trade was based on treaties and agreements with the local rulers; Anatolian princes and high officials acquired Assyrian and Babylonian textiles. Assyrian woollen products and weaving techniques were considered as of excellent quality and the textiles produced were goods that the Anatolian elite was eager to wear. Thus, in some instances, textiles became prestige goods offered by the Assyrians to the local elite.³

1. The Old Assyrian Trade

At the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, inhabitants from the Aššur city-state, on the Tigris River, organized large scale commercial exchanges with Anatolia. Assyrians exported tin and textiles to Central Anatolia, and brought back gold and silver. They settled down on the Anatolian Plateau, more than a thousand kilometres away from their home. Their archives, mainly dated to the 19th century, were discovered in the lower town at Kültepe, the ancient Kaneš, north-east of Kayseri, in Turkey. Our knowledge of the textile trade they initiated relies almost exclusively on this written documentation.⁴

1.1. Sources

Textile research is based on a variety of sources: data are provided by archaeology, archaeozoology, archaeobotany, epigraphy and iconography. For the ancient Near East, textile remains are extremely rare and fragmentary, because of bad climatic conditions.⁵ Few fragments dating

* I wish to thank Kerstin Droß-Krüpe for her kind invitation to participate to the very stimulating workshop she organized in Marburg, the proceedings of which are published here.

1 Breniquet & Michel 2014.

2 Michel 2014a.

3 This aspect was developed during a lecture given in Munich's Institut für Assyriologie und Hethitologie – Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, in November 2011, within the frame of the programme 'Prestige in Ancient Cultures – Interkulturelles Prestige'; I address my thanks to Walther Sallaberger for his invitation to Munich.

4 For a recent and detailed study on the textile trade and its terminology, see Michel & Veenhof 2010.

5 Barber 1991, 164; Breniquet 2008, 53–62; Andersson Strand et al. 2012, 15.

to the Old Assyrian period have been recovered in the Sarıkaya palace of Acemhöyük (level III), in Central Anatolia; they look like white linen decorated with golden thread and blue faience beads.⁶ But we have much more indirect sources. Textile imprints on unbaked clay allow identification of spinning and weaving techniques, and even, in some instances, identification of fibres; such a study is in train for Kültepe material.⁷ Archaeobotanical and archaeozoological studies are very new at Kültepe and thus cannot be exploited yet.⁸ Textile iconography is quite scarce, except for the hundreds of scenes engraved on cylinder seals for which we have recovered many imprints. They show some details on costumes. The distribution of these in four main styles (Assyrian, Syrian, Babylonian and Anatolian) could have been used as an ethnic indicator. However, a recent work has shown that the Assyrian merchants could own and use seals belonging to all these groups, and that Anatolians could own Assyrian style seals.⁹ Nevertheless, a distinction may be made between garments drawn on Assyrian style seals and those represented on Anatolian style seals. The first use straight lines to depict the type of the textile, while the last make use of zigzag diagonal lines; this would correspond to different weaving techniques, respectively tabby and twill.¹⁰ One seal, used by a man, represents a woman holding a spindle in front of a seated god.¹¹

The main sources for reconstructing the Assyrian textile trade in Anatolia during the 19th century, and, to a lesser extent, during the 18th century BCE, are the private archives of the merchants, found in their houses in the lower town of Kaneš. Excavated yearly since 1948, Kültepe was occupied since the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE. It is divided into two major sectors: the citadel and the lower town with the merchant harbour north-east of the citadel. The lower town shows four levels of occupation, but it seems that only level II (c. 1945–1835) and Ib (c. 1832–1700) yielded written documentation.¹² Indeed, Kültepe has provided up to now 22,500 cuneiform tablets. Only 40 texts have been found on the round citadel where the local palace was built. Thus, we do not have official archives of the Anatolian state. In the lower city, north-east of the mount, 22,460 tablets have been excavated, 22,000 dating to level II and about 460 to level Ib.¹³

Aššur, mother city of the Assyrian merchants, has provided less than thirty Old Assyrian documents, mainly royal inscriptions, and school texts discarded in later levels. Indeed, the levels corresponding to the first centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE have not been excavated. Beside Aššur and Kaneš, fewer than 200 Old Assyrian tablets have been found, mainly at Hattuša, the

6 Özgüç 1966, 47.

7 An international team started a systematic research on textile imprints on bullae at Kültepe, ancient Kaneš, in September 2013 within the framework of the *Projet International de Coopération Scientifique CNRS-DNRF Textiles de l'Orient à la Méditerranée (TexOrMed)* headed by C. Michel for the French side and M.-L. Nosch for the Danish Centre for Textile Research (CTR), Copenhagen. The team partners are E. Andersson Strand (CTR), C. Breniquet (Université Blaise-Pascal Clermont-Ferrand), F. Kulakoğlu (dir. Kültepe excavations, Ankara Üniversitesi), and C. Michel (CNRS).

8 These are respectively carried on by A. Fairbairn (University of Queensland, Australia) and L. Atıcı (University of Las Vegas, USA).

9 Lassen 2012, 254.

10 Lassen 2011, 29.

11 Seal on the reverse of KTS 1, 45a, see Michel 2014a.

12 Michel 2011a; Michel 2014b. For a recent reconstruction of the Old Assyrian chronology, see Barjamovic et al. 2012.

13 Michel 2003; Michel 2006b; Michel 2011b.

capital of the later Hittite Empire, and Alişar, ancient Amkuwa; but we know that the Assyrians settled in many more Anatolian towns.

These tablets belong to the private archives of Assyrian merchants settled in Kaneš. They consist of letters, legal texts, memoranda and various lists. Letters represent the correspondence exchanged between the Assyrian merchants in Kaneš, their families and colleagues in Aššur or settled in other Anatolian towns. These letters give precious data about the organization of the trade, but also domestic matters and daily life. The legal texts concern mainly commercial and financial matters.¹⁴

1.2. Textile Exports to Anatolia

Aššur played an important role in the large scale trade from the 3rd millennium. At the beginning of the 2nd millennium, political decisions were taken by its king Ilušumma in order to improve the relations between Aššur and southern Mesopotamia and to attract traders from the South by giving them some privileges. This may have stimulated the import of Babylonian textiles from the South. Another measure taken by his son Erišum was to set up a free traffic in some goods traded by inhabitants of Aššur.¹⁵ Under the reigns of Ikūnum and his son Sargon, the Assyrian merchants developed a long-distance trade to Central Anatolia, and settled there. The Old Assyrian tablets document this regular trade: inhabitants of Aššur exported tin and textiles to Asia Minor and brought back gold and silver. The tin was produced far to the East, and brought to Aššur by Elamites (a people of Iran). Aššur was located on the road of the tin trade and benefited from this situation. In Anatolia, tin was necessary for the local bronze industry.¹⁶

Donkey loads with textiles, however, were more profitable for the Assyrians than donkey loads with only tin. The Old Assyrian texts deal with a great number and variety of textiles.¹⁷ These came both from local production and from imports.¹⁸ The imported textiles were brought to Aššur by Babylonians. Wool from Babylon was well-known for its excellent quality.¹⁹ At Aššur, the local textile production seemed to be mostly private; there is no attested weaving shed at the palace and temples.²⁰ The weaving was done by women at home. Assyrian fashion and techniques were much appreciated in Asia Minor. The textiles produced by the Assyrian women were considered as prestigious goods in Anatolia.²¹

The Assyrians exported large quantities of woollen textiles to Anatolia; they were also engaged there in the trade in local textiles. Their records mention the purchase of textiles, packing, transport and sale, but there are very few hints about textile production. As they were selling the textiles on the Anatolian markets, Assyrians knew very well which types could be sold with great profit. They sent advice to their spouses in order to improve their production; a woman complains to her husband about his contradictory orders:

14 Veenhof 2003a.

15 Michel 2008a.

16 Veenhof 2010.

17 The terminology of these textiles has been studied in details by Michel & Veenhof 2010.

18 For previous studies on textile trade in the Old Assyrian documentation, see Garelli 1963, 284–293; Larsen 1967; Veenhof 1972, 79–216, 254–257; Michel 2001 (chapter 3 & 7); and in Anatolia, see Lassen 2010; Lassen 2014.

19 Durand 2009.

20 Michel 2014a.

21 Michel 2006a.

“As to the textiles about which you wrote to me in the following words: ‘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”.²²

Textiles were, for the great majority, made of wool; this is implied not only by the terminology, but also by references to moth attacks on textile bales.²³ They consisted of large-size cloth units: ready-to-wear garments did not exist much at that time.²⁴ The textiles exported by the Assyrians were predominantly *kutānum* textiles, a woollen fabric produced in Aššur of more or less standardized size (c. 4.5 by 4 m). Each year, about a thousand of *kutānum*-textiles were exported to Anatolia.

Textiles and tin travelled to Anatolia, under seal, on donkey loads. The textiles were either packed in bags or bales which could contain five to twelve units,²⁵ or wrapped in a textile “for wrapping” (*ša liwītim*) which could also contain tin.²⁶ The journey to Anatolia took about six weeks.

Once in Kaneš, textiles and tin could be sold for cash or on credit to agents travelling in central Anatolia. The significant amounts of gold and silver brought back to Aššur attracted Babylonian and Elamite merchants selling respectively textiles and tin. Some merchants made big fortunes with their investments:²⁷ according to its quality the tin was sold for twice its price in Anatolia, and the *kutānum*-textile was sold for three times its price in Kaneš. The significant profits made by the Assyrians were, however, reduced by the many taxes imposed on merchandise by Assyrian and Anatolian authorities, in both directions and en route.

2. Textile Trade and Institutions

The Assyrians settled in some thirty-five or forty towns in Anatolia, destinations of their merchandise.²⁸ The central Assyrian administration lay in Kaneš. The trading post assembly levied taxes on caravans, fixed the rate of loan interest, managed the credit invested by its members, supervised the deposits made at the office and organized a periodical settlement of accounts. It was in charge of diplomatic contacts and treaties with the local rulers.

2.1. Textiles in the Commercial Treaties with Anatolian Rulers

The Old Assyrian trade in Anatolia was made possible because of peaceful relationships with the local people based on mutual commercial interests. The revenues of the local palace came from its land production and copper mines. For tin and luxurious textiles it depended on the Assyrian trade. The local ruler was surrounded by many officials in charge of the different sectors of the administration.²⁹

The long distance trade was based on treaties signed with the local kings. Assyrians and Anatolians concluded sworn agreements recognizing the mutual and complementary interests of the two parties. The content of these treaties was mainly commercial. The Anatolian rulers

22 Michel in preparation, no. 164.

23 See Michel 1998, 325–331, and for more data Michel & Veenhof 2010, 213, 252–253.

24 Michel & Veenhof 2010, 261–267.

25 LB 1268 cited by Veenhof 1972, 38 mentions 4 *naruqqum*-bags containing various types of textiles.

26 Michel & Veenhof 2010, 241.

27 Michel 2008b.

28 Veenhof 2008a, 147–179. For proposed localization of some of these towns, see Barjamovic 2011.

29 Veenhof 2008a; Michel 2011a.

granted to the Assyrian merchants crossing rights, protection of caravans against robbery, with compensation for losses and payment of blood money within the ruler's territory. The merchants had extraterritorial rights, locally exercised by the administration of the trading post. For their part, they had to pay to the local authorities taxes on caravans at the customs or to Anatolian palaces; they had to respect the local king's right of pre-emption on the imported textiles.³⁰ Smuggling existed, and some merchants' letters give details about various methods of avoiding paying taxes.³¹

For the 19th century BCE, only a draft of a treaty with a town passed en route was found.³² By this treaty, the Anatolian ruler, in exchange for taxes levied on the Assyrian caravans both ways, promised to protect individuals and goods. The important protecting clause, which could cover both tin and textile, was meant to prevent competition by Babylonian traders. There was no specific extra rule concerning the textile trade. But we know from the merchants' private archives that the Assyrians merchants had to pay an import tax (*nishatum*) to the local palace which amounted to 5% of the textiles. The palace could buy another 10% (*tithe, išrātum*) of the imported textiles at a low price.³³ Anatolian rulers were eager to sign these treaties in order to get some profit out of the trade.

During the 18th century BCE, two treaties discovered in 2000 in a large building in the Kaneš lower city were concluded with the rulers of Kaneš and Hahhum.³⁴ Both concern bilateral issues. It is quite interesting to note that the treaty with Kaneš deals first with imported textiles and starts with those which the ruler was entitled to "take", both as import tax and pre-emption right, for his personal wear. He was forbidden to appropriate these textiles by force, or below the price concerning the pre-empted textiles. He could buy a few *makūhum* and two *kutānum* textiles at a fixed amount of silver.³⁵ The *kutānum* textiles correspond to the main textile type imported from Aššur, but the nature of the *makūhum* textile is less clear. It was not transported from Aššur, but clearly traded in Anatolia.³⁶ Then the treaty dealt with murder and losses, including losses of textiles. The ruler had to return the textiles that had been lost in his land or he had to compensate their owner. After clauses meant to protect the Assyrian properties, three lines concern the Anatolian textiles. The local prince was allowed to levy an import tax of 10% on the *pirikannum*-textiles which were clearly made in Anatolia, but often traded by the Assyrians; this import tax was double the one levied on imported textiles during the previous century.³⁷

The treaty with Hahhum, a town located on a crossing point on the Euphrates, concerned also various topics, among which the acquisition of tin and textiles from a caravan, which arrived from Aššur, by the three magnates of the city according to their rank. Once the import tax had been deducted, the minister of export (*mūšium*), the most important of the three magnates, was allowed to buy 5 *kutānum*-textiles at 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ shekels of silver a piece, the son-in-law (of the ruler?, *hatunum*) could buy 2 textiles for 9 $\frac{1}{3}$ shekels of silver a piece, and the second in command

30 Veenhof 2008b.

31 Veenhof 1972; Michel 2001.

32 Bilgiç 1992; Çeçen & Hecker 1995; Michel 2001, no. 87.

33 Larsen 1976, 245–246.

34 Günbattı 2004. There is also one treaty badly preserved found in Tell Leilan, Eidem 1991; Eidem 2011, LT 5.

35 Veenhof 2008a, 191.

36 Michel & Veenhof 2010, 235–236.

37 L. 69–72, Günbattı 2004, 252 and Veenhof 2008a, 193.

(*šinabilum*) had the right to buy 1 textile for perhaps [12] shekels a piece, when the normal price of a *kutānum*-textile was around 15 shekels of silver a piece (in the 19th century BCE).³⁸

These treaties show that the textile trade, concerning both Assyrian and Anatolian productions, was one of the main issues of Assyrian trade in Anatolia.

2.2. Rules Imposed by the Old Assyrian Institutions Concerning Textiles

Besides the long distance tin and textile trade to Anatolia, the Assyrian merchants were also involved in the exchanges of local goods inside Anatolia: copper, wool and textiles. The huge amounts of wool transported between different Anatolian cities and sold to Anatolian palaces and private households imply a well-developed local textile industry.³⁹ Besides a perhaps centralized textile production suggested by official titles linked to this activity, texts refer to the private production of Anatolian *pirikannum* textiles by both Anatolian and Assyrian women in Kaneš.⁴⁰ In parallel with what can be observed for Aššur, the production of Anatolian textiles had exceeded the family needs, and the surplus was sold on market.

In Aššur and Kaneš, merchants acted privately and independently of the institutions, but their commercial activities were controlled by the authorities who imposed various taxes. Aššur was then a city-state governed by the king, the “divinely appointed governor of the city-god Aššur”, who participated in trade personally but did not seem to have had an official role in trade. In legal and administrative matters, the king shared his power with the city assembly (*ālum*) which functioned as a court of law and took political decisions.⁴¹ The orders of the assembly became laws that could affect trade. For example, Aššur authorities imposed rules to protect the Assyrian textile trade. Two merchants sent from Aššur a letter to a colleague living in Kaneš saying as follows:

“Here a court case arose concerning *sapdinnum*- and *pirikannum*-textiles, woollen blankets, and many people have been fined. You too have been ordered to pay 10 minas of silver! (...) Please do not get involved in (the trade in) *sapdinnum*- and *pirikannum*-textiles and do not buy them! (...) the ruling of the City (assembly) is severe.”⁴²

The *sapdinnum* and *pirikannum* textiles were common Anatolian textiles, quite cheap, from 1 to 3 shekels a piece while a *kutānum* bought for 3.5 to 5 shekels a piece in Aššur could be sold up to 15 shekels a piece in Kaneš. The trade in these Anatolian textiles by the Assyrians was made to the detriment of the normal Assyrian imported textiles, the *kutānum*. The previous letter mentions a protectionist rule to favour the Assyrian import of woollen textiles into Anatolia, but it was perhaps decreed some time in a difficult context. In fact, we know that during the 18th century BCE, this was no longer a problem and the *pirikannum* textiles became more prominent in Anatolia.⁴³

38 Günbattı 2004, 257–260; Veenhof 2008a, 197.

39 For the wool trade inside Anatolia, see Dercksen 2004, 181–190; Lassen 2010; Michel & Veenhof 2010, 211–216.

40 Lassen 2014.

41 For the Old Assyrian institutions, see Dercksen 2004.

42 VS 26, 9:4–11, 20–23, 25–26; Veenhof 1972, 126–127; Veenhof 2003b, 90–94 and Michel 2001, no. 199.

43 The treaty with the ruler of Kaneš (lines 69–70) even stipulated an import tax of 10% on the *pirikannum*-textiles imported into Kaneš (see above).



Fig. 1: Anatolia during the kârum period.

3. Textiles as Prestige Goods

From the commercial treaties and from the Aššur assembly decrees limiting the trade of Anatolian textiles, one can see the importance of the Assyrian imports of textiles. Assyrian and Babylonian textiles were always in demand in Anatolia and could be sold wherever there was a local elite able to pay for them. The Assyrian woollen products and weaving techniques were considered as excellent quality and the textiles produced, *kutānum*, were goods that the Anatolian upper class were eager to have and to wear. They also appreciated the expensive *kusitum* – 7 shekels a unit at Aššur –, a woollen cloth, often white and fine, which was made either in Aššur or in Babylonia.⁴⁴

As already stated, the Anatolian palaces regularly acquired Assyrian and Babylonian textiles by collecting the 5% import tax on them and by using their right to pre-empt another 10%. With many caravans arriving each year the total quantity of imported textiles could become important and we just wonder how the Assyrians could sell off to Anatolians thousands of expensive woollen textiles. A letter sent by two Assyrians confirms the textile needs of the king:

“(We learned that) the gentleman (local ruler) needs many textiles for his country, so that the people are constantly worried about entering the (town)”.⁴⁵

The king of Wahšušana concerned in this letter may have needed textiles to distribute to his officials and servants as royal gifts; this is already well attested by the royal archives of Ebla.⁴⁶ We know at least the titles of fifty officials working for the Kaneš prince during level II who would have appreciated receiving such a gift from their ruler.⁴⁷

The Assyrian traders, moreover, in order to show respect, to maintain good relationships and to obtain some favours from the Anatolian rulers and their officials, offered regularly some of their textiles as presents. When commercial treaties were renewed, the Assyrians would come with textile gifts to honour the Anatolian king and his family.⁴⁸ The “gift”, *erbum*, most of the time consisting of textiles, was even sometimes demanded by local rulers and their relatives.⁴⁹ A merchant, as he negotiated to recover lost merchandise, asked his correspondents to send him textiles required by the royal family:

“The gentleman (ruler) is waiting for an *erbum*-gift. The queen asked me for a white garment and a fine *kutānum*-textile; send them to me.”⁵⁰

Such gifts could help to find a solution in a conflict setting at odds Assyrian merchants and Anatolian kings. But it could also open commercial transactions:

“I entered Tuhpiya and later on, following your instructions, I brought the ruler a thin (textile) and a garment. Also, separately, I brought up ten textiles and iron. He returned the iron and the

44 Michel & Veenhof 2010, 234.

45 Kt 89/k 207 cited by Veenhof 2008a, 150.

46 Biga 2010; Michel 2014a.

47 Veenhof 2008a, 219–233.

48 KTK 7 translated by Michel 2001, no. 35.

49 Veenhof 1989, 523 considers the *erbum* as a “free gift in silver or goods which accrued to the palace”; see also Michel 2001, 155. Günbattı 1996, 30 prefers to consider the *erbum* as a “collective name for the goods that have been ordered by the palace, and their price (that) has to be paid.” This proposal does not match with most of the references to *erbum*.

50 Kt n/k 388 translated by Michel 2001, no. 101.

textiles, but accepted the *erbum*-gift, saying as follows: ‘I shall not take (the merchandise)’. For the *erbum*-gift which I brought him, they took down (from the palace) ... minas of copper.”⁵¹

Here, the gift came with a proposed transaction which was rejected by the king. The Anatolian ruler could decide to return a gift to the merchant as we read in this letter sent by the ruler of Tuhpiya to a merchant called Itûr-ilî:

“Ennum-Aššur brought me a *kusitum*-garment as *erbum*-gift. I gave 50 minas of good quality copper to Ennum-Aššur (...) You too, you sent me an *erbum*-gift. For the *erbum*-gift that you sent me, Amunani is bringing you 2 skins of wine.”⁵²

4. Synopsis

During the 19th century BCE, textiles imported by Assyrians in Asia Minor, originating from southern Babylonia or from a local domestic production, were at the heart of the commercial transactions on the Anatolia Plateau. These textiles were prized for the high quality of their material – Babylonian wool – and the excellent technical know-how of the Assyrian women who thus contributed to the private entrepreneurs’ family trade. As merchandise, they were sold with much profit for the Assyrian merchants. Local rulers, who used them as diplomatic gifts or for their court and high officials, could acquire them by taxation, pre-emption rights and purchase. These imported textiles could also be taken out of the trade process to become prestige goods offered by the Assyrians to the local elite.

During the 18th century BCE, the local *pirikannum* textiles became part of Assyrian mercantile trade in Anatolia and were subject to taxation by the local palace. They were still made of local wool, but it is possible that their quality increased: women producing these textiles in Anatolia might have learned new techniques from the Assyrians, allowing them to improve their production.

Abbreviations

Kt n/k = Inventory number of tablets discovered at Kültepe (lower town) during the 1962 season.
 Kt 89/k = Inventory number of tablets discovered at Kültepe (lower town) during the 1989 season.
 KTK = Jankowskaja, N. B., *Klinopisnye Teksty iz Kjul’Tepe v Sobranijach SSSR*, Moscou 1968.
 KTS = Keilschrifttexte in den Antiken Museen zu Stambul, Istanbul.
 LB = Unpublished Böhl collection, Leiden.
 TC = Tablettes cappado-ciennes du Louvre, Paris.
 VS = Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler der (Königl.) Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.

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⁵¹ TC 1 39 = Michel 2001, no. 92.

⁵² Kt 85/k 27 translated by Michel 2001, no. 93.

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