

Trade, Economy, and Artisans in Ancient Mesopotamia

One of the major reasons Sumer became an important city was trade. Sumer did not have many natural resources aside from fish, reeds, and mud bricks. However, the people who lived in the mountains and traveling merchants had many resources that Sumerians desperately needed including stone, wood, and metals such as copper. Thus, a complex system of trade developed.

People who lived in the Zagros and Taurus mountains needed wheat and barley from the city-state of Sumer. In exchange for these products, the mountain people would give Sumerians timber, limestone, gold, silver, and copper. Riverboats were used to transport goods for trade. Many of these boats were referred to as turnips because they resembled an upside down turnip. These boats were round and made from woven reeds. Money was not usually used to pay for goods that were traded. A barter system in which goods were directly exchanged for other goods developed. If money had to be used, it was usually in the form of small silver disks.

As Sumer developed a more significant system of trade, the economy simultaneously grew. Sumerians had the privilege of a free economy, and strict records were kept of all business transactions. These documents were the first written artifacts recovered by archaeologists and helped contribute to Sumer also being known as “the birthplace of economics”.

Temples were the key location for most commercial activity. In addition, temples were the chief employer. Artisans, scribes, priests, local administrators, and teachers all were employed by the temple. Temples gained their economic strength based on their vast real estate holdings. Temples were the largest single land owner in the city-state. The ownership of land was so valued that even kings had to buy land. People of all classes had the opportunity to own land however. Many of the people who were considered poor by Sumerian standards owned houses, gardens, and fishery ponds.

Craftsmanship was an important skill in Sumer and was developed for survival on a day-to-day basis. The most important craftsmen were the copper and bronze workers. These artisans were responsible for making most of the tools that farmers, shepherds, soldiers, and other workers needed for survival. Hoes, axes, and plows, as well as knives, daggers, and spears were made from copper and bronze which were plentiful and easy to work with.

Carpentry was also extremely important. Furniture was made from imported wood. Carts, boats, and chariots were also made from wood. Leather workers used hides from different animals to fashion harnesses, saddles, shoes, and water bags. Basket weavers were also an important part of Sumerian life. Baskets were used by Sumerians for many purposes including carrying food and goods from one place to another, storing items in houses, and for holding infants as they slept.

Name _____

Date _____

Period _____

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- 1.) What resources did Sumer have? _____
- 2.) Who did Sumer trade with and what did they trade for? _____

- 3.) What did the people in the Zagros and Taurus Mountains trade and receive from Sumer?

- 4.) How were trade goods transported? _____
- 5.) How did people obtain goods in ancient Mesopotamia? _____

- 6.) Why is Sumer referred to as “the birthplace of economics”? _____

- 7.) Where did most commercial activity take place? _____
- 8.) Who was employed by the temples? _____
- 10.) Even if you were poor, what could you own in ancient Mesopotamia? _____

- 11.) Who were the most important craftworkers? _____
- 12.) What were the copper and bronze workers responsible for? _____

- 13.) What tools and weapons were made by the craftworkers of Mesopotamia? _____

- 14.) What goods were made by the carpenters? _____

- 15.) What goods were made by the leather workers? _____

- 16.) What were baskets used for? _____