

The Reflection of the Mesopotamia Water Transportations in Figurative Arts

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Abstract

The Euphrates and the Tigris, which were the natural sources for the communities living in Mesopotamia, influenced the culture and the art of this civilization. We see this situation on the reliefs, wall paintings, and especially the cylinder seals, a kind of symbol of Mesopotamia.

Keywords: Archeology, Mesopotamia, water transportation

Mesopotamia is a flat region between the rivers Euphrates, which starts from the Southeastern Anatolia and stretches to the Gulf of Basra, and Tigris with the other branches of the rivers (Great river, Little river, Diyala river, and Khabur river). This region has been an area in which different communities have lived, constantly innovating and developing themselves due to the fertile plains and its irrigation facilities.

It is true that the low lands extending from the level of Baghdad to the Gulf of Basra and constituting Babylon are dependent on these two rivers in terms of economy.¹ The presence of these two rivers in this steppe region is of great importance to the Mesopotamia. The goods carried to the central and southern Mesopotamia were being transferred through the Euphrates River.

The need of the area for timber which lacks trees was met by the rich wood in the mountains of Amanos. In this respect, the city of Carchemish, was of great importance as a place where the goods were constituted.²

Due to the establishment of the cities in this region close to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, irrigation on the arable fields was easier,

cultivated lands started to produce more products, and rafts were made for the plow, wheeled cars and river transportation. These developments forced them to trade with each other to satisfy the needs of the communities. The land of Babylon is defined by the South of Mesopotamia (now Iraq), and it covers the region roughly from Baghdad in the North, to the Gulf of Basra in the South. The land of Babylon is a flat, alluvial plain formed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The region, which was rich in agricultural products, had a very important place in trade. From the very early periods, a broad trade network was created to link the Babylon to the other regions of the Near Eastern countries. Mainly the Euphrates and the other rivers were used as the main trade routes³ (Figure 1).



Fig 1. Mesopotamia Region.

¹ Childe, 1971, s 100

² Gavaz, 2007, s 23

³ Gavaz, 2007, s 216

In Mesopotamian civilizations the materials and the goods were carried by humans and animals with the help of instruments such as sled, cart, and boat. Boat transportation was very convenient and economic; these watercrafts had a capacity of around one hundred shekels. This condition is shown in Figurative descriptions (Figure 2).



Fig 2. Priest king depicted by the head on modern dark blue stone. Mesopotamia Late Uruk B.C. 3300-3000⁴.

There were very large ships made from timber in private shipyards⁵, and these were used for the long sea journeys to the countries such as Melunha and Dilmun.⁶ Water transportation gradually developed to meet the needs of the people in the region. The best example of the raft which is still in use in Mesopotamia, and which was encountered in the 1849 in the territory of Northern Mesopotamia, Anatolia, on the Euphrates is “Kele”. These means of river transportation were made of small ruminants (goat and sheep) skins, were used for centuries in the region. With the conscious production of rafts as a result of geographical conditions, and requirements, and with “Kele”, the first advanced example, the ability to move around on a raft has brought the use of this kind of vessels in various activities such as commercial transportation, fishing and general transportation (Figure 3).

We encounter the firsts of these examples in the Assyrian reliefs in Ninive, Mesopotamia, dating back to the 7th century BC, although we know there was a trade specialized in this type of structural systems already in the 3rd century AD. We see the most important examples on these depictions⁷ (Figure 4).



Fig 3. Example of a raft made of “Kelek”.

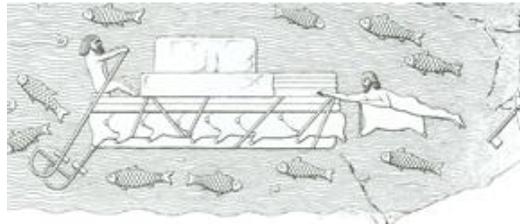


Fig 4. The Assyrians are carrying stones on a raft made of inflated animal skins. Sennaherib Palace (704- 681 BC)⁸.

The Boats, which were made from leather and were possibly able to travel in the seas in addition to the lakes and the rivers, started to be used after this type of raft forms and later canvas was probably mounted into these boats. These are “*Quffa*” that Assyrians used in Mesopotamia in the 7th century BC. The “*Quaffas*” have a round form. Internal skeleton was formed of wooden ribs, and the external parts of these vessels were formed by coverings of sewn, stretched leather. These are basically in the form of a big basket and only used for voyages down the river. When the destination was reached, which was in the lower section of the river, the boat used to be divided into parts and then the wood was sold, and the leather collected and carried up the river for the re-use in the construction of new boats⁹ (Figure 5). Relief from Sennaherib Palace (704-681 BC)¹⁰.

⁴ Aruz , Wallenfels, 2003, s 481

⁵ Kramer, 1963, s 142

⁶ Kramer, 1963, s 143

⁷ Özdaş, 2000, s 128

⁸ Casson 2002, s 3

⁹ Özdaş, 2000, s 129

¹⁰ Casson 2002, s 4a



Fig 5. The Assyrians are carrying stones on the "Quffa"(basket-boat).

Rafts were used on the riversides of the Nile in which there were a few trees and plenty of reeds, and in the marshes at the lower parts of the Tigris and the Euphrates. They were made of reeds connected to each other in piles¹¹ (Figure 6).



Fig 6. The Assyrian soldiers are fighting the enemy on a boat-shaped raft made from reeds of the inflow of Tigris and Euphrates. A relief from Sennaherib Palace (704-681 BC).¹²

There was a limited use of rivers as waterways in Mesopotamia. The northern tributaries are rocky and shallow. The dominant wind blows in the downriver direction in line from the north. Until the emergence of steam ships, the vessels were only able to run with the help of the people pulling them¹³ (Figure 7).

Therefore, ordinary rafts were used only in some areas. For example, the upper parts of the Tigris and Euphrates in the Eastern Anatolia are rocky and the flow is very fast. Barriers in the region could destroy the rafts consisted of logs.¹⁴ In addition, these rafts weren't used more for long-distance transportation, for they were

not able to be moved in the reverse direction – against the flow.

"Quffas" which had a portable, detachable structure were used in the trade and transportation to the south in the direction of the flow,¹⁵ (Figure 8).



Fig 7. The Assyrian tows are pulling a boat. A depiction on the Bronze strips on the doors of III. Şalmaneser Palace (858-824 BC).¹⁶

It is not surprising that, since the water transportation in this region, as well as geographical factors, was performed through two limited rivers, no different types of vessels other than inflated skins and wickerwork (boats basketry boats) emerged.¹⁷

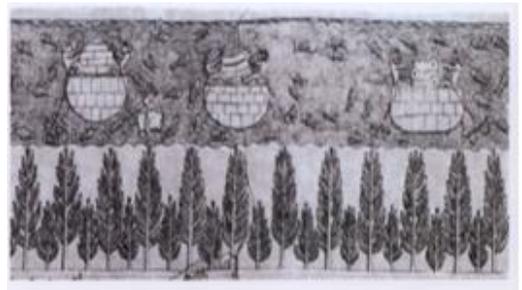


Fig 8. A relief from Sennaherib Palace (704-681 BC). People carrying Stone on Quffas.

We consider that the river transportation on Kızılırmak was done in the direction of the flow of the river up to a certain distance, and then the goods were transferred to the Euphrates on the caravans and exported to the southern Mesopotamia. During this period, the River Tigris was used as a commercial communication way between Assyria and Babylon.

¹¹ Casson 2002, s 1

¹² Oates, 1979, s 12

¹³ Casson 2002, s 8

¹⁴ Casson 2002, s 1

¹⁵ Özdaş, 2000, s 130

¹⁶ Casson 2002, s 8

¹⁷ Casson 2002, s 8

It can be claimed that the exported materials to Southern Mesopotamia were carried out from the Tell-Halaf port by Kültepe. From a port here, the boats reached the south Euphrates from the Habur River and the goods were carried from here towards the south. We can understand the close commercial relations of Kültepe with Mesopotamia, from the tablets uncovered here.¹⁸

In the middle of the 5th century BC Herodotus visited Babylon which was in the Lower Euphrates. He told in his book how the passengers from the north returned to their homes: “*there is one donkey on each raft or there are some on bigger ones. When the passengers arrive in Babylon, they sell the wooden skeleton of the raft; they throw the furs on the donkeys’ back and strike out to Armenia.*”¹⁹ Herodotus transferred this situation in his writing as a writer; this explains the importance of water transportation in this area.

Although there are just two rivers in the region, having laws in history emphasizes the importance of water transportation in this region compared to the use of the water transportation by the coastal civilizations.

The most important of these laws are the Hammurabi laws (1760 BC). Among the laws collected earlier than this period are the laws of the king of Ur Ur-Nammu'nun (2050 BC), Ešnunna laws (1930 BC), and the laws of Ipištar from Isin (1870 BC).²⁰ These laws include regulations on the river and the sea transportation.

The Euphrates and the Tigris, which were the natural sources for the communities living in Mesopotamia, influenced the culture and the art of this civilization. We see this situation on the reliefs, wall paintings, and especially the cylinder seals, a kind of symbol of Mesopotamia²¹ (Figure 9).



Fig 9. The Akkadian seal depicted during the transplantation of the sun god in a raft.²²

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¹⁸ Özdaş, 2000, s 160

¹⁹ Casson 2002, s 3

²⁰ Tosun M, Yalvaç K, 1975, s19-217

²¹ Kramer, 1963, s 138

²² Oates , 1979, s 173