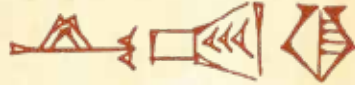


Travel in Sumer!

Excerpt!



Ur, The City That Never Sleeps



Meskalamdug Museum – Trade and technology

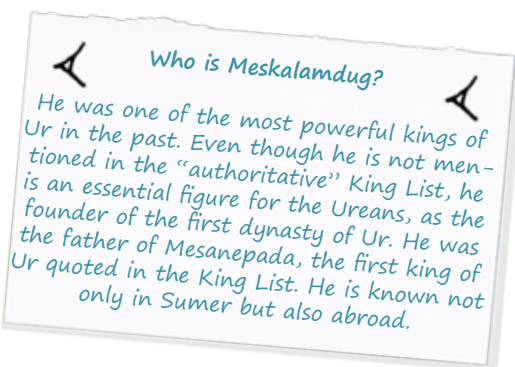
Access: 

Meskalamdug Museum is a small house close to the city walls, between the garrison and Ur-Nammu garden district. It is not expensive; it does not take long to visit it: a nice way to spend the time during a hot afternoon if you are curious about the relationship between Sumer and distant exotic countries. The museum also has few precious artefacts on display, made with imported materials.

Sumer trading partners

The Land of Sumer lacks raw materials: metals (copper, tin, gold and silver), good quality timber, building stones and semi-precious ones like lapis-lazuli and cornelian. Yet, if you have been around in Ur and Sumer for some time before visiting this museum, you must have noticed that Sumerians do not seem to lack those precious materials. While most their buildings are made of mudbricks, they still need good quality timber for temple and palace gates, pillars or roof beams. Stones are also used for statues, cultic installations and many other artefacts.

Very early in their history, Sumerians turn to their neighbours to acquire the goods they needed, firstly for their gods and kings, then for a more and more demanding elite.



War, pillage, tributes and booty were one way to put their hands on rare goods, but long-distance trade soon appeared like a better idea.



Transports

Caravans of merchants come by road from the north, but transport by road is slow. Most merchants transport their goods by boat. Both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers are natural ways to the north and the west: large transport canals run along them. You will find out when travelling in Sumer, the country is crisscrossed with more transport canals that link cities and villages together. Additionally, and especially nowadays, sea trade from the "lower sea" (Persian Gulf) is favoured, because some of the northern routes are not as safe as they used to be.

Working metal – copper and bronze

Sumerians smelted metals such as copper, gold and silver. But most objects are alloys, a mixture of materials. For instance, a mixture of copper and arsenic is easier to cast and harder than pure copper. Sumerians usually prefer bronze to copper for their tools and weapons because it is harder and longer lasting. Bronze is obtained by adding tin to copper. It is easier to cast in different shapes than copper because it can be melted at a lower point.

Lost-wax process

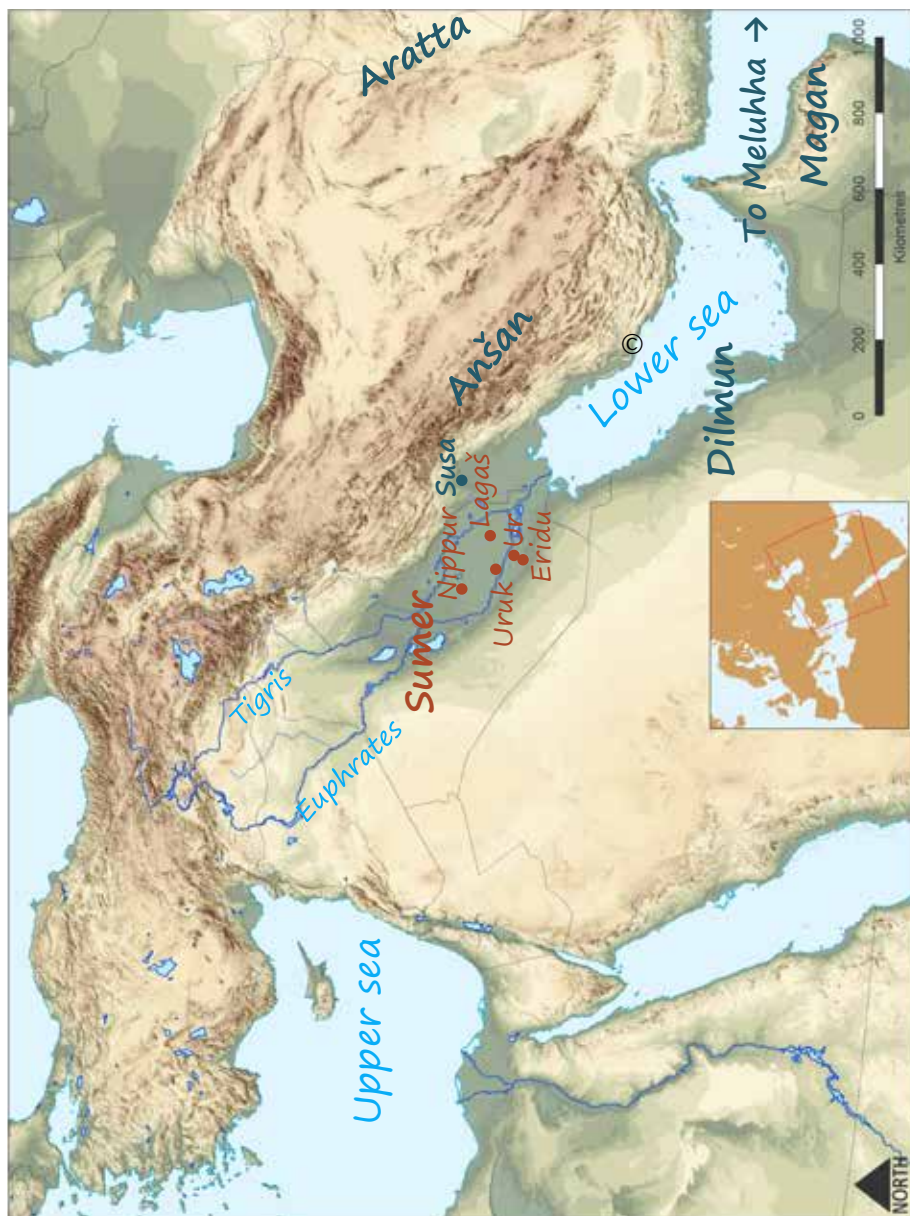
Sumerians used "lost-wax" process to create beautiful objects. A model of the object is made of wax and packed in clay to make a mould. The mould is heated up to the wax melts and is drained through holes. Molten metal is poured into the mould, filling the space left by the 'lost' wax. It is left to cool and harden. The clay is broken up to reveal the new object.

Many objects from the royal cemetery, on display at the Puabi museum, are made of electrum, an alloy of silver and gold. Jewellery also exhibits remarkable expertise of the Sumerian goldsmiths, in joining techniques for instance.

Coming with the caravans

Caravans and boats transport both raw materials (copper and bronze ingots for instance) and finished artefacts (calcite and steatite vessels), or both (some carnelian beads are both imported and made in Sumer). While Sumerians themselves are talented craftsmen, some foreign ones from Magan and Meluhha also travel with the merchants and settle down in Sumer. There are few villages here and there in the countryside inhabited only by foreign craftsmen and their family. Other are on their own and prefer travelling from city to city to offer their services here and there.





Distant wealthy neighbours

According to Sumerian legends, Enmerkar, the king of Uruk was the first to open trade routes with the Land of Aratta, where Sumerians could get gold and lapis-lazuli, in exchange of food and... writing! Nowadays, goods are still coming from Aratta but most transit via Susa, Magan or Dilmun.

Susa and Anshan:

The mountainous Sumerian neighbouring country would appear like the natural place to get metal, stone and timber. Susa also is a natural transit point for lapis lazuli, precious metals and stones such as chlorite (a dark green stone) or calcite (white or colourless stone). But the relationship between Sumer and Susa is often troublesome, and trade routes with Susa and Anshan are not always reliable. Despite the rich mines in Luristan, Sumerians rather import copper and tin from the “Lower Sea” routes.

Magan:

Located a bit further south to Dilmun, Magan is an essential trade market for the Sumerians. It looks as if the relationship was always good with the country (despite the brutal policy of the Akkadian kings, now forgotten). Amongst others, the country is rich in copper and diorite (a black, hard stone much appreciated for royal statues). It also is a natural trade station with further countries like Meluhha, from where merchants get carnelian, lapis lazuli or ivory. Those precious goods are stored in vast warehouses in Magan harbours.

Dilmun:

Trade with the southern countries around the “Lower Sea” was always flourishing. Funnily, Sumerians are not too sure which country is the one they call Dilmun... The name seems to refer to any country in the geographical area, from where they acquire a specific range of product. But as long as merchants know their way back and forth, find trading partners around there, and bring back the much sought-after timber, copper, tin, and semi-precious stones, Sumerians are satisfied.

Meluhha:

This country is so far away that most Sumerians have no idea where it precisely is. It has become a name to refer to an exotic, distant land in the East, even though there is a big chance that it is located in the Indus Valley. Many costly products come from there or from even more distant regions, as Meluhha is a transit place like Susa in the East: carnelian, ivory, spices, shells, lapis-lazuli and a much-appreciated hard black wood, probably ebony.