


Tracing the Roots and Functions of Cross-Border Travel: The Relationship Between Practices from Assyrian Traders to Modern Travel Today

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

The Assyrian trade network, extending from Mesopotamia to Anatolia and shaped during the second millennium BCE, was not limited to economic benefits but also laid the foundations for cultural and diplomatic interactions. This study aims to examine in detail the travel practices of Assyrian merchants in their commercial activities during the Assyrian Trade Colonies period and to evaluate their impact on modern travel movements. Within the scope of the study, information on the Assyrian trade system, caravan routes, travel practices and the professional occupational groups that provided services to the merchants during their travels were obtained by examining previous studies on the relevant period. The most important feature that distinguishes this study from its counterparts in the literature is that it offers a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that combines historical trade mechanisms with modern concepts of mobility and intercultural interaction. Unlike previous studies in the literature, which usually focus on economic or logistical issues, this study shows that the Assyrian merchants' travels, which started for economic reasons, laid the foundation for modern travel practices over time. The findings of the study reveal that Assyrian trade routes and their supporting infrastructural elements are early examples of modern travel networks. In addition, the interactions of the merchants with local populations laid the foundations for intercultural dialogue and constituted an important turning point in the historical evolution of travel. The study offers a new perspective on travel not only as an economic activity but also as a social and cultural phenomenon, shedding light on the historical roots of tourism.

Keywords: Assyrian merchants, caravan routes, travel practices, cultural interaction, roots of modern travel

Sınır Ötesi Seyahatin Köklerinin ve İşlevlerinin İzini Sürmek: Asurlu Tüccarlardan Günümüz Modern Seyahatine Uygulamalar Arasındaki İlişki

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ÖZ

Mezopotamya'dan Anadolu'ya uzanan ve MÖ. 2. binyılda şekillenen Asur ticaret ağı, yalnızca ekonomik çıkarlarla sınırlı kalmamış, aynı zamanda kültürel ve diplomatik etkileşimlerin de temellerini atmıştır. Bu çalışma, Asur Ticaret Kolonileri döneminde Asurlu tüccarların ticari faaliyetlerindeki seyahat uygulamalarını detaylı bir şekilde inceleyerek, modern seyahat hareketleri üzerindeki etkilerini değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma kapsamında, Asur ticaret sistemi, kervan yolları, seyahat uygulamaları ve tüccarların seyahatleri sırasında hizmet sunan profesyonel meslek gruplarına ilişkin bilgiler, ilgili döneme dair öncül çalışmaların incelenmesiyle elde edilmiştir. Bu çalışmayı literatürdeki benzerlerinden ayıran en önemli özellik, tarihsel ticaret mekanizmalarını, modern hareketlilik ve kültürlerarası etkileşim kavramlarıyla birleştiren bütüncül ve disiplinler arası bir yaklaşım sunmasıdır. Literatürde genellikle ekonomik ya da lojistik odaklı bir çerçevede ele alınan önceki araştırmalardan farklı olarak, bu çalışma, Asurlu tüccarların ekonomik nedenlerle başlayan seyahatlerinin zamanla modern seyahat uygulamalarının temeli attığını göstermektedir. Araştırmanın bulguları, Asur ticaret yollarının ve bu yolların destekleyici altyapısal unsurlarının modern seyahat ağlarının erken örnekleri olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, tüccarların yerel halklarla kurduğu etkileşimlerin, kültürlerarası diyalogun temellerini oluşturduğu ve seyahatin tarihsel evriminde önemli bir dönüm noktası teşkil ettiği görülmüştür. Çalışma, seyahati yalnızca bir ekonomik faaliyet değil, aynı zamanda sosyal ve kültürel bir olgu olarak ele alan yeni bir bakış açısı sunmakta, turizmin tarihsel köklerine ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asurlu tüccarlar, kervan yolları, seyahat pratikleri, kültürel etkileşim, modern seyahatin kökleri

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Introduction

Throughout the history of civilization, travel has always brought extraordinary outcomes for humanity, who has been on the move for various reasons. Particularly, cross-border journeys undertaken to traverse cultural or political boundaries have had significant impacts on the societal structures of communities. Such journeys not only influenced transportation systems but also political organization, trade models, and, at times, religious beliefs. Long-distance travels have, therefore, shaped political and diplomatic approaches while fostering new trade connections since ancient times.¹ Travel, while shaping world history, has also led to new forms of contact among different communities.²

The geography of Anatolia, serving as a natural bridge between Asia and Europe since antiquity, has been one of the most significant points where travel culture developed relations among diverse communities. Located at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Iran, and Mesopotamia, Anatolia became a hub not only for trade routes but also for cultural, social, and religious interactions. This strategic location drew the attention of Semitic-origin Assyrian merchants from the second millennium BCE, enabling them to establish a unique trade system on these lands.³ Particularly, this trade network, extending from the Assyrian capital Aššur to Kültepe in central Anatolia, expanded and influenced a wide region through trade centers called *kārum* established by the Assyrians.⁴ The trade hub and marketplace central to this network was Kāniš, modern-day Kültepe. Smaller trade units known as *wabartum* were also established. Kültepe, located near present-day Kayseri in Turkey, served as the heart of this trade system and became the focal point of commercial and cultural interactions and trade-related travels.⁵

The activities of Assyrian merchants in Anatolia were not solely driven by economic interests; they also directly influenced the sociocultural transformation of the region. Archaeological excavations in Kültepe have uncovered cuneiform clay tablets that demonstrate the magnitude and complexity of this trade network, proving the lasting impact of the Assyrians in Anatolia.⁶ These tablets reveal that Assyrian merchants were not only involved in trade but also deeply influenced the social life and cultural interactions in Anatolia. In addition to documenting trade transactions, the Kültepe tablets recorded diplomatic relations with local rulers and events occurring along trade routes.⁷ These records also detailed challenges faced by merchants, such as the closure of passes or local conflicts.⁸ Beyond commerce, the merchants established relationships with local populations, facilitating the transfer of knowledge, beliefs, and traditions. The *kārum*, or trade colonies, functioned as hubs

¹ Sathees Aradhyula and Russell Tronstad, "Does tourism promote cross-border trade?", *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 85, no. 3 (2003): 569-579, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8276.00456>

² Stephen Gosh and Peter Stearns, *Premodern Travel in World History*. (London: Routledge, 2007) 2.

³ Emin Bilgiç, "Anadolu'nun İlk Tarihi Çağının Anahatları ile Rekonstrüksiyonu", *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih Coğrafya Dergisi* 6, no. 5 (1948): 496

⁴ Veli Sevin, "Anadolu Arkeolojisi". (İstanbul: Der Yayınları, 2015) 152.

⁵ Salih Çeçen and Gürkan Gökçek, "Asur Ticaret Kolonileri Çağında Bir Zenginlik Alameti: Lapis Lazuli Taşından Mühür", *Atatürk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 72, (2021): 84, <https://doi.org/10.14222/Turkiyat4551>

⁶ Mogens Trolle Larsen, "Ancient Kanesh. The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies (Mesopotamia 4)". (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1976) 85.

⁷ Two treaty texts found in Kültepe are important in terms of giving an idea about the relations between Assyrian merchants and local administrations (see Günbattı, 2005).

⁸ Betina Faist, "Itineraries and Travellers in The Middle Assyrian Period", *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 15, (2006): 157

of not only commerce but also cultural exchange. In these colonies, marriages between Assyrians and locals fostered social and cultural partnerships, laying the groundwork for a lasting cultural legacy in Anatolia.⁹

The trade network established by Assyrian merchants strengthened the Assyrian state's influence in Anatolia and encouraged the state to support commerce through legal regulations. With this support, roads, bridges, lodging points, and security systems were built to facilitate merchants' travels and ensure the safety of trade. The state maintained the continuity of this trade system by establishing military garrisons along trade routes and providing the legal assurances merchants needed.¹⁰ Travel permits granted to Assyrian merchants and the security measures implemented along the routes reflect how the state ensured the sustainability of trade and influenced the region's political structure.¹¹

The purpose of this study is to examine how the trade networks and travel practices of Assyrian merchants shaped the social, economic, and cultural structures of the period and to reveal how these cross-border travel practices served as a precursor to the fundamental elements of today's modern travel and tourism industry. This research aims to offer a new perspective on the motivations, logistical infrastructure, and cultural interactions of modern travel through a historical lens. By analyzing the long-term impact of Assyrian merchants' travel practices on world history, the study also sheds light on the historical roots of the modern tourism and travel industry. To this end, the Assyrian trade system is first summarized, and then the travel routes utilized by the Assyrians for their commercial activities are examined, revealing their impact on the culture of modern travel.

1. The Assyrian Commercial Network

One of the reasons Assyrian merchants ventured into Anatolia was the transition from the Sumerian system of state ownership to the dominance of private ownership in Assyria. This shift prompted rapid development and a need for outward expansion, making Anatolia the most suitable market due to its geographical location.¹² Furthermore, Anatolia's safe trading environment at the time and its rich underground and surface resources motivated Assyrian merchants to move their commercial activities there.¹³ To transport Anatolia's abundant mineral resources to Assyria, the Assyrians established trade organizations called *karum* and

⁹ Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, "Introduction: On the Road in Anatolia, and Beyond", *Studies in Travel Writing* 16, no.4 (2012): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645145.2012.727228>

¹⁰ The fact that cross-border commercial activities between the Assyrians and Anatolian indigenous peoples yielded positive results for both sides made it necessary to maintain commercial relations in a safe environment (See Albayrak and Zoroğlu, 2023).

¹¹ Thomas Klitgaard Hertel, "The Lower Town at Kültepe/Kanesh: The Urban Layout and the Population", *Current Research in Kültepe/Kanesh: An Interdisciplinary and Integrative Approach to Trade Networks, Internationalism, and Identity during the Middle Bronze Age* In, Eds: Levent Atıcı, Fikri Kulakoğlu, Gojko Barjamovic, Andrew Fairbairn, (Bristol: Journal of Cuneiform Studies, Supplemental Series 4, 2014), 25-54.

¹² Hüseyin Sever, "Yeni Belgelerin Işığında Koloni Çağı'nda (M.Ö 1970-1750) Yerli Halk ile Asurlu Tüccarlar Arasındaki İlişkiler," *Belleten* 59, no. 224 (1995): 2, <https://doi.org/10.37879/belleten.1995.1>

¹³ The exchange between the Assyrian merchants and the Anatolian people took place in the form of exchange of goods. The Assyrians were buying minerals, especially copper, from Anatolia because they were cheap, and giving tin and cloth in return. Gold and silver were accepted as the basis for exchanges. Retail accounts were based on silver and wholesale trade was based on gold. Gold was 8 times more valuable than silver. 70 kilos of a quality copper was equivalent to one kilo of silver (See Akurgal, 2002: 40).

wabartum,¹⁴ transforming Anatolia into a marketplace while making the city of Assur in southern Mesopotamia a trade hub.¹⁵ Besides trade, these activities also introduced Anatolia to written records through clay tablets, marking the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age.¹⁶

The Old Assyrian trade system is likely the most well-documented long-distance trade network of the ancient world. Its documentation has been largely due to the private archives of Assyrian merchants living in Kāniš, the heart of Anatolia. Over 23,000 cuneiform clay tablets discovered at Kültepe (Kāniš) provide crucial insights into the structure of this remarkable trade network.¹⁷ The Assyrian colony in Kāniš represents the pinnacle of centuries-long trade development. The scarcity of mineral resources in the Tigris and Euphrates plains necessitated metal imports for Mesopotamian cities. By as early as 3500 BCE, there is evidence of trading expeditions from Sumer's southern cities traveling over 1,000 miles to obtain copper from the Urartu mountains and central Anatolia. A semi-legendary text from a later period recalls Akkadian King Sargon the Great leading a punitive expedition against the city of Purushhanda (Purušhattum, modern Achemhöyük) in Anatolia's Taurus Mountains, where locals had harassed Akkadian traders.¹⁸ From the early second millennium BCE, external trade became a defining characteristic of Mesopotamian culture, spearheaded by Assyrian merchants.

Assyrian trade was conducted overland and relied on permanently appointed agents. In some regions, city councils negotiated transit and trade agreements, while in others, local princes, dependent on different political and trade systems, denied Assyrian merchants access. These arrangements minimized risks and served as a form of insurance.¹⁹ Assyrian merchants typically used caravans of approximately 200 animals, including donkeys and mules, to transport loads of tin and textiles, such as wool and linen, to Anatolian trade centers. The challenging mountainous terrain meant that the journey from Assur to Kāniš often took at least a month. While Kāniš was home to numerous palaces and temples, the merchants' primary destination was the *karum*, the city's designated trade quarter. This area housed accommodations, stables, warehouses, and markets for merchants who often belonged to companies based in distant cities. Agreements negotiated with Kāniš officials provided merchants protection from violence and limited self-governance, in exchange for taxes. Thousands of cuneiform records found in Kāniš include agreements outlining tax rates, such as 5% on textiles and 4% per donkey load of tin.²⁰ These records reveal that most businesses operating along the Assur-Kāniš route were family enterprises. While older men likely oversaw headquarters in Assur, younger family members managed branch operations in Kāniš. The youngest male members, best suited for the hardships of travel, likely accompanied caravans on their journeys.²¹

¹⁴ While *karum*, which was called a market place, meant 'harbour', *wabartum* meant 'guest' (Sevin, 2015: 152-153). From this point of view, while *karums* are similar to today's shopping centres, *wabartums* can be considered as small accommodation establishments.

¹⁵ Bilgiç, "Anadolu'nun İlk Tarihi Çağı'nın Ana Hatları ile Rekonstrüksiyonu" 496.

¹⁶ Sevin, "Anadolu Arkeolojisi" 151.

¹⁷ Norman Yoffee and Gojko Barjamovic, "Old Assyrian Trade and Economic History", *Grenzüberschreitungen. Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des Alten Orients* in, Eds. Susanne Paulus, Kristin Kleber, Georg Neumann (Festschrift für Hans Neumann Anlässlich Seines 65, Münster: Zaphon, 2018), 815

¹⁸ Tahsin Özgüç, "An Assyrian Trading Outpost", *Scientific American* 208, no. 2 (1963): 97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24936468>

¹⁹ Yoffee and Barjamovic, "Old Assyrian Trade and Economic History" 816

²⁰ For the taxes mentioned in the Kültepe tablets and their characteristics, see Bayram, 1993

²¹ Gosch and Stearns, "Premodern Travel in World History" 14

During the Assyrian Trade Colonies period, Anatolia's kings and rulers granted commercial privileges to Assyrian merchants to obtain tin, textiles, and other essential goods for their palaces. In return, merchants committed to supplying these goods, paying taxes, and avoiding smuggling while entrusting their safety to local rulers. This arrangement allowed merchants to establish their commercial systems while retaining the right to use their calendars, measurement systems, and traditions.²² Additionally, merchants meticulously documented all commercial activities. This practice served two primary purposes: accurately calculating profits or losses and reporting to the investors funding their trade ventures. The merchants' records, including invoices, delivery receipts, balance sheets, guarantees, and payment notes, resemble modern accounting practices.²³

2. Trade Routes of Assyrian Merchants

Rather than conducting occasional expeditions, the Assyrians established permanent trade colonies in key mineral-producing regions of central and eastern Anatolia. This approach secured a reliable and sufficient source of raw materials. Donkey and mule caravans moving regularly along fixed trade routes connected these colonies to the Assyrian capital. Between 1950 BCE and 1750 BCE, nine colonies or *karum* were known to have been established in the cities of local Hatti populations. While the exact locations of eight of these colonies remain unidentified, Kāniš, the only excavated site, served as the largest and the central hub of this extensive trade network.²⁴ The main caravan routes are shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Assyrian Trade Routes, Trevor Bryce-Jessie Birkett Rees, *Atlas of the Ancient Near East*, Routledge Publishing

Excavations at Kültepe have unearthed cuneiform tablets documenting caravan expenditures, including the routes followed and associated expenses at various points. While these records allow for the identification of trade routes, a consensus on the exact locations

²² Hasan Ali Şahin, *Anadolu'da Asur Ticaret Kolonileri Devri (MÖ 1975-1725)*. (Kayseri: Erciyes Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2004) 85

²³ Hakan Erkuş and Arif Gümüş, "Anadolu'da Yazılı Tarihin Başlamasından Sonraki İlk Muhasebe Belge Sistemi," *Birey ve Toplum Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 9, no. 2 (2019): 130

²⁴ Özgüç, "An Assyrian Trading Outpost" 97

corresponding to the names in the tablets has yet to be achieved. This uncertainty has led to differing interpretations of the caravan routes.²⁵

Assyrian merchants faced significant geographical challenges while determining caravan routes, particularly due to the rugged terrain of the Taurus Mountains. Despite these difficulties, the primary reason for choosing this mountain range was the presence of protected mountain passes. Consequently, researchers have concentrated on the Taurus region due to its geographical, historical, archaeological, strategic, and geological features.²⁶ Caravan transportation between Assur and Anatolia was carried out along two main routes: the southern and northern routes. The southern route began at the Tigris River and passed through the Habur region, Şanlıurfa, Birecik, Kahramanmaraş, Göksun, Sarız, and Pınarbaşı before reaching Kāniš. Merchants following this route sometimes used alternative paths before reaching Kahramanmaraş, such as the Pazarcık–Gölbaşı–Sürgü–Darende–Gürün line or the Pazarcık–Gölbaşı–Doğanşehir–Darende–Gürün line. The northern route connected Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Malatya, Darende, and Gürün to Kāniš. An alternative path connected Diyarbakır, Samsat, Malatya, Darende, and Gürün to Kāniš.²⁷

The caravan routes used by Assyrian merchants were strategically chosen based on geographical features and security considerations. This selection not only optimized commercial activities but also created a network where economic and sociocultural exchanges flourished. Today, similar criteria are fundamental in planning transportation and tourism networks, demonstrating the lasting influence of these ancient practices on modern systems.²⁸ The Assyrian caravan routes were designed to pass through regions with natural advantages such as mountain passes, river valleys, and plains. These geographical features facilitated the transport of goods and provided suitable locations for rest stops and trade centers. Similarly, modern transportation networks and tourist routes are planned with geographical factors in mind. For instance, tourist destinations prioritize attractive geographical features such as coastlines, mountain slopes, or natural parks.²⁹

The Assyrian caravan routes served as important centers not only for trade but also for social and cultural interactions. Historical structures, market areas, and religious centers along these routes attracted both merchants and local populations. Similarly, modern travel routes are influenced by factors such as natural beauty, cultural heritage, and recreational opportunities. The strategic planning of Assyrian caravan routes offers a model that continues to inspire modern travel and transportation planning.

3. Travel Practices of Assyrian Merchants

The Assyrians established an advanced trade network in Anatolia for their time, documenting many aspects of their commercial activities in writing. Letters exchanged by

²⁵ Cahit Günbattı, "Kültepe'den Kervan Güzergâhlarına Işık Tutan İki Yeni Belge", *Archivum Anatolicum/ Anadolu Arşivleri* V (2002): 81-82

²⁶ U. Bahadır Alkım, "Güneybatı Antitoros Bölgesinde Eski Bir Yol Şebekesi", *Belleten* 23, (1959): 59

²⁷ Tahsin Özgüç, *Kültepe*. (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları 2005) 24

²⁸ Bernd F. Reitsamer and Alexandra Brunner-Spendin, "Tourist Destination Perception and Well-Being: What Makes a Destination Attractive?", *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 23, no. 1 (2017): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766715615914>

²⁹ Laerte Gil Nicaretta Oliani, George Bedinelli Rossi and Viviane Chunques Gervasoni, "What Are the Attractiveness Factors That Influence The Choice of A Tourist Destination-A study of Brazilian Tourist Consumer", *Chinese Business Review* 10, no. 4 (2011): 287.

Assyrian merchants with their families, partners, and business associates, left behind in Assur, provide significant insights into their trade operations. These documents detail various topics, including trade practices, business relationships, brokerage services, marriage, wills, and powers of attorney.³⁰ These records serve as a reference point for the economic and legal practices of modern societies. Moreover, the systematic travel habits developed by Assyrian merchants during their trade activities stand out. The extensive mobility of Assyrian merchants in Anatolia supported both economic and cultural exchanges, laying the foundations of the concept of travel. These practices offer valuable guidance for understanding modern travel practices and organizations. The trade and travel systems established by the Assyrians emerge as a significant area of study for their influence on contemporary cultural and economic life.

Throughout the Assur-Kültepe Kāniš caravan route, numerous inns (*hans*) served during the Assyrian Trade Colonies period. These structures played a vital logistical role by addressing the needs of merchants, caravan staff, and pack animals. At these inns, guides and drivers provided services to caravans along the route. Merchants stored their goods in depots located within these inns, which were also used as trading points for exchanges before reaching local kingdoms. Regarding the needs of both the traveling humans and the load-bearing animals, the inns functioned as essential logistical infrastructure.³¹ Guides and caravan drivers were employed in the inns to serve the caravans along the route. Merchants stored their goods in warehouses located in these inns. At the same time, these inns could also be used as shopping centres before the caravans reached the local kingdoms. In the context of meeting the needs of the donkeys carrying the caravans and the travelling people, the *hans* stood out as important logistic infrastructure elements. The inhabitants living around these inns made preparations to meet the needs of the caravans and provided animal feed and human food. As a result, inns made significant contributions to the local economy in the regions where they were located.³² This approach finds its modern equivalent in the strategic positioning of hotels, rest areas, and service centers along highways and transport corridors, which today provide accommodation and logistical support for both tourists and commercial travelers.

The approximately 1,200-kilometer journey between Assur and Kültepe Kāniš took an average of six weeks for each leg of the trip, totaling twelve weeks for a round trip. However, during winter, the route remained closed for about four months, significantly affecting the continuity of travel. Caravans leaving Assur transported hundreds of pack animals, primarily donkeys, loaded with goods secured with seals. Once these goods were unloaded in Anatolia, a significant portion of the donkeys were sold in local markets, while a small fraction returned to Assur carrying precious metals obtained in exchange for the traded goods.³³ A typical merchant would possess five talents of tin and over 100 textile items, using an average of three donkeys for transport. Each donkey carried approximately 75 kilograms of Cargo.³⁴ Small groups of merchants would combine their efforts, forming large caravans of hundreds of

³⁰ Klaas R. Veenhof, "The archives of Old Assyrian Traders: Their Nature, Functions and Use", in Archives and archival documents in ancient societies: Legal documents in ancient societies IV, Ed. Michele Faraguna (Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2013), 28

³¹ Erkuş and Gümüş, "Anadolu'da Yazılı Tarihin Başlamasından Sonraki İlk Muhasebe Belge Sistemi," 128

³² Gojko Barjamovic, "M.Ö. 1865'de Bir Anadolu Seyahati", in *Anadolu'nun Önsözü: Kültepe Kanış-Karumu* Eds.: Fikri Kulakoğlu, Selmin Kangal, (İstanbul: Kayseri Büyükşehir Belediyesi Yayınları, 2010), 163

³³ Jan Gerrit Dercksen, *The Old Assyrian Copper Trade in Anatolia*, (İstanbul: PIHANS 75, 1996) 61-67

animals. The management of such a sizable caravan was entrusted to a different merchant, who supervised the caravan with the help of assistants. To cover expenses during the journey, such as the wages of these supervisors, a portion of the traded tin was allocated.³⁵ The organization of these caravans resembles modern group tours or freight convoys, where travel managers, tour leaders, and logistics staff ensure the safe and efficient movement of large groups or shipments, highlighting the roots of group travel management and cargo transportation services.

The donkeys used in the caravans were likely bred around Assur. Considering that these animals were prepped in designated areas known as "paddocks," donkey breeding and care represented significant employment areas of the time.³⁶ The donkeys typically carried two-pocket saddlebags balanced on either side, with additional loads placed on top. Animals used for transport were selected for their physical endurance to withstand long and challenging journeys; however, some inevitably perished along the way. Drivers were hired to manage the pack animals for transportation purposes.³⁷ To meet the logistical needs of caravans, not only were local settlements established along trade routes, but inns specifically designed to cater to the caravans were constructed. Taxes were paid to local kingdoms along the trade route to ensure the safety of caravans and goods. In return, these kingdoms provided security and covered damages if incurred, functioning as a primitive insurance system. Security checkpoints operated by local authorities along the route were financed by the taxes collected.³⁸³⁹

Caravan routes were guarded under military supervision, and secure passage points were established to protect both merchants and their goods.⁴⁰ Similarly, in modern travel, security remains a key determinant in destination choice. Destinations with stable political structures and secure travel conditions are often preferred. In addition, digital security and insurance play roles analogous to the physical protection systems of ancient caravan routes.

The accessibility of roads was critical for ensuring the continuity of trade for Assyrian merchants. Lodging centers along the route (*karum* and *wabartum*) met the resting and storage needs of merchants and kept the trade network active. Today, modern transportation systems such as highways, railways, airways, and seaways require significant investments to improve accessibility. Airports, train stations, and highways are modern equivalents of the infrastructure that supported ancient trade routes.⁴¹ The caravan routes were not only essential

³⁴ Cecile Michel, "The Old Assyrian Trade in The Light of Recent Kültepe Archives", *Journal of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 3, (2007): 75

³⁵ Emin Bilgiç, "Asurca Vesikalara Göre Etilerden Önce Anadolu'da Maden Ekonomisi", *Sümeroloji Araştırmaları*, (1941): 923

³⁶ Klaas R. Veenhof, "Eski Asur Kara Ticaretinin Yapısı", in, *Anadolu'nun Önsözü: Kültepe Kaniş-Karumu*, Eds.: Fikri Kulakoğlu, Selmin Kangal (İstanbul: Kayseri Büyükşehir Belediyesi Yayınları, 2010), 60.

³⁷ Cecile Michel, *The Perdu-Mule, a Mount for Distinguished Persons in Mesopotamia During The First Half of The Second Millennium BC. Man and Animal in Antiquity*. (Rome: Swedish Institute in Rome, 2004) 191

³⁸ Sebahattin Bayram, 1993. "Kültepe Tabletlerinde Geçen Vergiler ve Özellikleri". *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi* 36, no. 1-2 (1993): 6

³⁹ Michel, "The Old Assyrian Trade in The Light of Recent Kültepe Archives" 75

⁴⁰ The ability of Assyrian merchants to carry out their commercial activities safely was also important for the local people in Anatolia. Therefore, many measures were taken for road safety, legalised and written records were created. For the details of Assyrian documents showing road and trade security in Anatolia, see Albayrak and Zoroğlu, 2023.

⁴¹ Krzysztof Borodako and Michal Rudnicki, "Transport Accessibility in Business Travel—A Case Study of Central and East European Cities", *International Journal of Tourism Research* 16, no. 2 (2014): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.1908>

for trade but also served as focal points for social and cultural interactions. Historical structures, marketplaces, and religious centers along these routes attracted both merchants and local communities. Similarly, factors such as natural beauty, cultural heritage, and recreational opportunities influence the planning of modern travel routes. In this context, the strategic selection of routes during the Assyrian period offers an inspiring model for modern travel and transportation planning.

The trade carried out by Assyrian merchants with Anatolia constituted an important source of income for various institutions and professional groups. Thanks to this trade, high-ranking administrators, kings and their families, religious and administrative authorities such as priests and temples, textile and leather craftsmen, and artisans such as donkey breeders also benefited economically. In addition, the Assyrian State directly gained financial profit from commercial activities by collecting taxes from caravans both coming to and leaving Assyria.⁴² In trade activities in Anatolia, vehicles pulled by a pair of animals were generally used, and these vehicles had a load carrying capacity between 300 and 600 kg depending on road and weather conditions.⁴³ Merchants either bought or rented these transport vehicles and it is assumed that these vehicles were wheeled and pulled by horses.⁴⁴

These practices reveal not only the operational aspects of Assyrian trade but also the functional dynamics that resemble modern supply chain and transport systems. Route optimization, risk mitigation, warehousing, and coordinated workforce structures were integral to these ancient travel practices. Furthermore, these elements contributed to the establishment of a cross-border commercial infrastructure, which fostered long-distance cultural exchange and economic integration.

3.1. The Service Class Providing Travel and Trade Functions

The structured service network that supported Assyrian merchants during their long-distance travels reflects a highly organized labor system that parallels modern tourism and logistics sectors. Far from being informal or incidental, these professional roles fulfilled essential operational and logistical needs, ensuring the continuity and success of cross-border trade expeditions. This specialization of labor (ranging from caravan managers and guides to innkeepers and interpreters) demonstrates the early development of a travel-related service industry.

In modern travel and tourism, the division of labor into specialized roles such as tour guides, logistics coordinators, security escorts, and hospitality staff forms the backbone of the industry's service delivery model. The Assyrian system mirrors this structure by institutionalizing roles that addressed key functions like route management, cargo handling, customer service, and risk mitigation. Importantly, these ancient practices reveal an early prototype of what would evolve into today's global travel infrastructure, where multi-skilled service providers ensure smooth mobility and enhance traveler experience.

⁴² Cecile Michel, "Economic and Social Aspects of the Old Assyrian Loan Contract. F. D'Agostino (a cura di), *L'economia dell'antica Mesopotamia (III-I millennio aC). Per un dialogo interdisciplinare*", *La Sapienza Orientale*, 9 (2013): 48.

⁴³ Barjamovic, "M.Ö. 1865'de Bir Anadolu Seyahati" 163

⁴⁴ Kemal Balkan, "Makriš and Ašiš, Component-Parts of Wagons and Ploughs Respectively, in a Cappadocian Tablet From Kültepe", *Florilegium Anatolicum. Mélanges offerts à Emmanuel Laroche*, (1979):150

In the following section, these parallels will be demonstrated through specific examples of occupational roles in the Assyrian Trade Colonies period and their modern counterparts.

3.1.1. Kaššarum

The term *kaššarum* referred to individuals responsible for managing caravans, particularly those composed of donkeys, which were essential for long-distance trade. These workers ensured the orderly progress of the caravan, overseeing the movement of animals and addressing logistical needs along arduous routes. Their duties likely included loading and balancing goods, caring for animals at rest stops, and resolving logistical issues during travel.⁴⁵⁴⁶

Kaššarums can be compared to travel managers, guides and logistics coordinators in the modern tourism and logistics sector. Today, the responsibilities of the teams that manage the operations of transport vehicles such as aircraft, buses or ships and ensure comfort and safety during the journey are similar to those of ancient caravan managers. Moreover, processes such as planning touristic tours, organising transport services and meeting the needs of passengers can be considered as a modern reflection of this historical example. Just as the care of animals and the organisation of loads were important for the caravans, in today's travel industry, it is of great importance to manage many details, from vehicle maintenance to logistics planning, in the right way.

3.1.2. Saridum

The term *saridum*, meaning "packer" or "donkey loader," likely referred to individuals who specialized in unloading and reloading donkeys during stopovers along trade routes. Given the repetitive nature of this task, performed two or three times daily, caravans likely hired temporary *saridum* workers at certain cities or waypoints. These individuals may have been both Assyrians and local Anatolians, reflecting the regional integration of labor practices.⁴⁷ Some records show payments made for both the *saridum* and the food (*ukultum*) provided to them, indicating that caravan leaders covered the living expenses of these workers during their employment.⁴⁸

The role of *saridums* in transport and logistics services can be likened to the loading and unloading personnel and temporary labour involved in modern cargo transport. Today, especially in air cargo terminals, ports or large bus terminals, there are specialised personnel who manage loading and unloading processes in a similar way. The fact that *saridums* serve on a specific route is reminiscent of the regional service providers used in logistics and supply chain management today. Moreover, the fact that costs such as food and accommodation are covered by employers is similar to the logistical support provided by tour guides or temporary workers in the modern travel industry. This type of temporary labour is still preferred to ensure continuity of service in areas requiring economic efficiency and expertise, as caravan leaders did.

3.1.3. Muqarribum

⁴⁵ Mogens Trolle Larsen, "Old Assyrian Caravan Procedures," (İstanbul: PIHANS 22, İstanbul, 1967) 41

⁴⁶ Jan Gerrit Dercksen, "Some Elements of Old Anatolian Society in Kaniš, Assyria and Beyond Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen", Leiden, (2004): 283

⁴⁷ Michel, "Transporteurs, Responsables et Propriétaires de Convois dans les Tablettes Paléo-Assyriennes", CRRAI 38, Paris (1992): 140

⁴⁸ Mogens Trolle Larsen, "Old Assyrian Caravan Procedures, (İstanbul: PIHANS 22, 1967) 79

The *muqarribum* served as aides or escorts to emissaries, known as *šiprum*, in the Assyrian trade network. For instance, a letter from the Kāniš *karum* to the Tuhpia *karum* requested the accompaniment of two *muqarribum* to ensure the secure and timely delivery of a message.⁴⁹ These individuals played a critical role in maintaining communication and coordination within the trade network, safeguarding emissaries and assisting with the delivery of messages.

The tasks of *muqarribum*s are similar to the roles played by security guards, logistics coordinators and guides in modern diplomatic and business travel. Today, in international business travel or diplomatic missions, escort teams and security experts are deployed to ensure the safe and timely transmission of messages. Likewise, the critical role of *muqarribum*s in the communication network mirrors the coordinating roles of courier services or international logistics firms today. Moreover, their responsibility for the security of ambassadors and the transport of messages is reminiscent of the escort security teams of diplomats or business people travelling in particularly risky areas in the modern era. Despite technological advances, physical escort services still play an important role in diplomacy and trade.

3.1.4. Radi'um

Radi'um, derived from *Redû*, is a term used in the Assyrian Trade Colonies period to mean 'caravan guide'. These individuals operated to ensure the safe and orderly progress of trade caravans on the designated routes. In the texts, *radi'um* are frequently mentioned especially in the context of the shipment of goods. It seems that the knowledge and experience of these guides were utilised to overcome the geographical and logistical difficulties faced by the caravans. In return for their work, they were usually paid with valuable materials such as silver, copper or cloth. There are also records indicating that *radi'um* were persons who could be hired for a certain period of time. M.T. Larsen has noted that *radi'um*, although they did not have a definite institutional position among caravan personnel, represented a professional group that provided guidance and direction on trade routes.⁵⁰ In this context, it can be argued that *radi'um* played a vital role in the successful execution of both commercial and logistical processes.

The role of *radi'um* is very similar to that of modern travel and tourism guides. While today's tourist guides help visitors explore a destination safely and efficiently, *radi'um* helped trade caravans navigate safely along designated routes. The *radi'um*, who provided guidance through their geographical knowledge and cultural awareness, can be considered an early example of today's guiding services. Moreover, the temporary working model of the *radi'um* resembles the functioning of today's self-employed guides or professionals employed for private tours. In this context, it can be said that the guiding profession, despite the changing conditions throughout history, has been continuous in terms of meeting the need for information and guidance.

3.1.5. Sabi'um

⁴⁹ Salih Çeçen, "Kaniš Karum'unun Diğer Karum ve Wabartumlar'a KÜ.AN (*amutum*) ile ilgili Önemli Talimatları. *Belleten* 61, no. 231 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.37879/belleten.1997.219>

⁵⁰ Mogens Trolle Larsen, "Old Assyrian Caravan Procedures," (İstanbul: PIHANS 22, 1967) 46.

The term, whose masculine form is *sabi'um* and feminine form is *sabitum* in Kültepe texts, is used in the sense of 'innkeeper' or 'brewer'. It shows that this occupational group was an important economic activity during the Assyrian Trade Colonies, both meeting the accommodation needs of trade caravans and taking part in local production and supply processes. The title *Sabitum* is explicitly mentioned as the occupation of a local woman in a loan contract found at Boğazköy.⁵¹ This suggests that activities such as brewing and inn management were not only economic activities, but also occupations in which women were actively involved in the social structure. Furthermore, this occupational group appears to have played a critical role in providing accommodation⁵² and basic necessities along trade routes.

The role of *sabi'ums* can be associated with the modern hotel industry and catering services. Today, hotels, motels and guesthouses cater to the accommodation needs of travellers, while restaurants and local food producers are indispensable parts of the travel experience. The economic and logistical contribution of the *sabi'ums* on the trade routes is very similar to the support provided to the travel industry by hotel operators and food service providers today. Moreover, the importance of the *sabitums* in the accommodation and supply chain on trade routes is comparable to the rest facilities, airport lounges and roadside service points found along today's travel corridors.

3.1.6. Targumannum

In the early stages of the Assyrian Trade Colonies period, it is highly probable that there were difficulties in communication between the Assyrian merchants and the local population. However, it is understood that this problem was overcome in a short time thanks to intensive commercial relations and individuals who could speak both Assyrian and the local language or languages emerged. In time, these bilingual individuals formed an organised professional group, as evidenced by the existence of the title *rabi targumanim*. Individuals with the profession of *targumannum* ('interpreter') bear Assyrian names, but no local names are found. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the founders of this profession were individuals of Anatolian origin.⁵³

The roles of *targumannums* are similar to the functions of translators, local guides and intercultural communication specialists in the modern travel and tourism industry. Today, in international trade and tourism activities, professional translators and linguists play a vital role in overcoming communication barriers between parties speaking different languages. Especially in the global travel industry, the provision of multilingual services in many areas, from hotels to airports, guided tours to international event organisations, can be considered as a modern continuation of these Assyrian practices. Moreover, the fact that *targumannums* had an organised structure as a profession is parallel to today's professional translator associations and international translation services organisations. The role played by these individuals in facilitating cultural and economic interactions on trade routes is similar to the work of tourism companies and travel organisers who develop intercultural communication strategies today.

⁵¹ Jan Gerrit Dercksen, "When We Met in Hattuš, Trade according to Old Assyrian text from Alishar and Bogazköy", *Studies Veenhof*, (2001)

⁵² Ekrem Akurgal states that in an Assyrian text found in Kültepe, the word *ispatalu*, meaning 'hotel, place to stay for the night' was found (see Akurgal, 2002: 36). This historical record is an important evidence of the first traces of today's accommodation and travel industry.

⁵³ Emin Bilgiç, "Kapadokya Metinlerinde Geçen Yerli Appellatifler ve Bunların Eski Anadolu Dilleri İçerisindeki Yeri," (Ankara: TTK Basımevi, 1953) 52

This fundamental role of Assyrian interpreters demonstrates that language and cross-cultural communication were always a critical element in the origins of the travel industry.

Conclusion

This study outlines the trade and travel practices of Assyrian merchants and analyses how these practices formed the basis for the modern understanding of travel and tourism. During the Assyrian Trade Colonies, the travel practices of the merchants not only supported economic activities, but also influenced the social, cultural and administrative structures of the period. The introduction of writing to Anatolia, the formation of a commercial culture, border security and the effort to protect all these with laws are examples of this. Beyond economic interests, the travels of Assyrian merchants created a space for intense social interactions between different communities. The inns and karums established along the trade routes functioned not only as accommodation and trade points, but also as social spaces where merchants established cultural ties with the local population. These places enabled merchants to develop diplomatic relations with local rulers, to establish social ties through marriage and to exchange information. Kaniš, the centre of the Karums, has an important position in this context. Because the practices and exchanges such as shopping, eating and drinking, entertainment and cultural interaction in this centre are very similar to those offered by modern shopping centres today. Such practices can be considered as early examples of the practice called 'cultural tourism', which strengthens the ties between different cultures in the modern travel industry. The goods carried by merchants during their travels were not only the objects of trade, but also the means of cultural exchange. While carrying the beliefs, traditions and language of their own societies to new regions, merchants were also influenced by local cultures.

The Assyrian Trade Colonies also led to significant changes in the administrative systems of the period. Security points established along the trade routes, agreements with local rulers and tax arrangements can be considered as early examples of modern border crossing systems and travel security policies. Moreover, the travel permits obtained by merchants in return for taxes can be considered as the forerunner of today's visa and passport practices. These findings show that the travel practices of Assyrian merchants not only regulated the economic relations of the period, but also laid the cornerstones of modern travel systems. From this perspective, the travels of Assyrian merchants present a multifaceted model in which economic, social and cultural dynamics are evaluated together. The historical roots of areas such as transport, accommodation, cultural experience and security, which are the basic elements of today's tourism and travel industry, can be clearly seen in this model.

Assyrian merchants used the inns on their travelling routes as logistic centres. These inns were built to meet the needs of caravans and merchants and functioned as the historical forerunner of today's hotel industry. While the inns provided services such as accommodation, storage and animal care, they also became centres of social interaction where commercial negotiations took place. As in the modern hospitality sector, these inns have been among the critical infrastructural elements that ensure the sustainability of travel.

Guides called *radi'um* played an important role in the travels of Assyrian merchants. These guides ensured the safe progress of the caravans on the designated routes and helped overcome the difficulties encountered during the journey. Similarly, interpreters, known as *targumannum*, acted as a bridge for communication between traders and locals who spoke

different languages. In today's tourism industry, professional guiding and interpreting services are an integral part of the travel experience and are a continuation of these historical practices. The transport of merchants by donkey caravans can be considered as one of the first examples of modern transport and logistics systems. The drivers, known as *kaššarum*, were responsible for the management of the animals in the caravans, and performed operational tasks such as transporting and organising the cargo. Today, logistics specialists and drivers operating in the transport sector can be considered as the modern equivalents of these historical professions. The inns and local markets along the caravan routes provided the food and supplies needed by merchants and livestock. In particular, people called *sabi'um* contributed to the continuity of caravans by providing services such as beverage production and food preparation. Restaurants and catering services in modern tourism function as an extension of these historical practices to meet the food needs that are part of travelling. The large amount of goods exchanged by Assyrian merchants travelling for commercial purposes necessitated systematic transportation. The functions of the people known as *saridum*, who fulfilled this task, are very similar to the activities of logistics and operations employees in today's travel industry. On the other hand, employees known as *muqarribum* were involved in the travelling of important people and played a role in meeting needs such as security and communication. In this respect, they provided services to special guests in the same way as concierge employees in the modern travel industry.

This study differs from existing economic or logistics-oriented approaches in the literature by taking a plausible approach to the travel practices of Assyrian merchants. By highlighting the historical role of travel practices during the Assyrian Trade Colonies in shaping modern travel habits, this research provides an original framework for understanding the links between historical and contemporary travel. Future studies can further deepen these connections and examine the similarities between ancient and modern travel practices from a broader perspective.

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