Early Iron Sites

Kültepe

Advanced

Kültepe was called **Kanesh** (Kanisch, Kaneš) in ancient times, and like all the places covered in this Link Hub, is far younger than the stone-age settlements covered for "first copper". It's claim to fame comes from two related points:

1. It was one of the major places that Assyrian traders cultivated in their quest to make money by establishing trade routes through Anatolia.
2. Some of their archives were perfectly preserved because major fires turned the clay tablets into hard and long lasting ceramics at least twice.

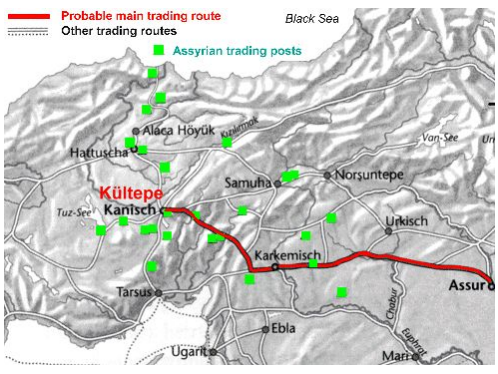
- Kültepe now consist of a large round tell, clearly visible in the picture below, and the ruins of a "lower town".

Kültepe - the tell and the "lower" town (Karum) in the foreground

Source: Turkish Airline Journal; Thanks for sharing. [2)].

The roots of Kültepe go back to 3000 BC or so, meaning it existed before the Hittites took over after about 1800 BC. Before that, Anatolia was the place of the **Hattians**, who lived in the "Land of Hatti" a denomination the Hittites kept - that's why the names are similar. Hattians and Hittities are quite different cultures, however, with unrelated languages, for example.
Kültepe's rise to importance started when **merchants from Assur** in Assyria came to Anatolia early in the *second millennium BC* and chose Kültepe as major base for the their trading network.

- Part of this network is shown below. This picture and much of the information in this module goes back to the wonderful book of **Andreas Schachner**[1)].



Kültepe / Kanish, Assur and trade routes
Large-scale map

Source.

The **Assyrian empire**, to the south-east of Turkey / Anatolia with Assur as capital, has a colorful history of its own. In the early second millennium it was quite powerful - but not nearly as powerful as 1000 years later, when it had "conquered Egypt, Babylonia, Elam, Urartu/Armenia, Media, Persia, Mannea, Gutium, Phoenicia/Canaan, Aramea (Syria), Arabia, Israel, Judah, Edom, Moab, Samarra, Cilicia, Cyprus, Chaldea, Nabatea, Commagene, Dilmun and the Hurrians, Sutu and Neo-Hittites, driven the Ethiopians and Nubians from Egypt, defeated the Cimmerians and Scythians and exacted tribute from Phrygia, Magan and Punt among others" as Wikipedia knows. Those guys were practically British!

Anyway, Assyrians knew how to write cuneiform on clay tablets already in 2000 BC. They also knew how to make money by peaceful trading, even so money hadn't been invented yet. Assyrian, or more correctly, North-Mesopotamian traders, settled near the major towns, typically in the "lower" part, and these settlements became known as "**karums**", the Akkadian word for "port", meaning real ports on river banks or the "safe havens" the caravans aimed for. Later the word "karum" simply meant "market place". The Kültepe / Kanish karum must have had a population of several thousand people including a substantial number of Assyrian "foreigners".
.Like all good business men, the Assyrians recorded their transactions in detail on clay tablets encased in clay envelopes. The link shows an example; below is another one.
The envelopes were sealed with the typical cylinder seals of Mesopotamia; here is an example:

Cylinder seal and imprint

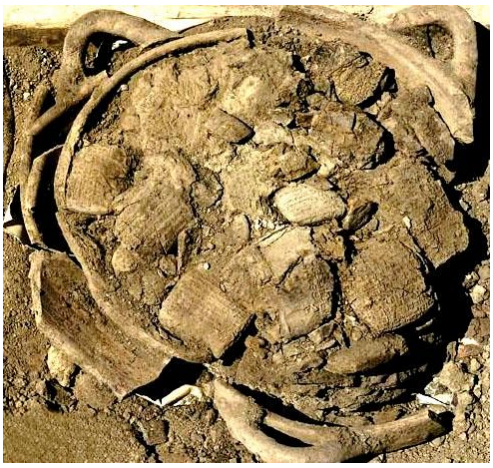
Source: Turkish Airline Journal; Thanks for sharing..

An unopened letter then looked like this; note the two different seal imprints:

Kültepe letter in its envelope. Note that two different seals have been used.

Source: Turkish Airline Journal; Thanks for sharing.

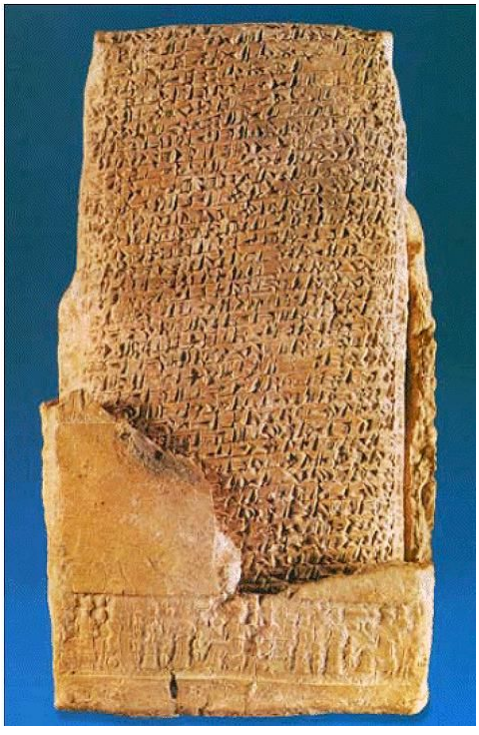
The letters were preserved because the "Karum" of Kültepe burnt down at least once, firing the clay tablets and their envelopes to hard and durable ceramics. The traders and the other folk came back, however, and raised a new karum on the rubble of the old one. That's why we can dig up whole libraries today:



Business letters filed in Kültepe 4000 years ago.

Source: Turkish Airline Journal; Thanks for sharing.

Some 20.000 tablets have been found so far, and far more are waiting for becoming unearthed since only a small part of Kültepe has been dug up so far. They reveal much that could not have been deduced from what else was unearthed. Here is a well preserved letter with parts of its envelope:



Kültepe letter with remnants of envelope.

Source: Turkish Airline Journal; Thanks for sharing.

What we learn, for example, is:

- The Kültepe texts are the oldest documents from Anatolia. They are written in Old Assyrian but contain Hittite loanwords and names.
- "Raw" materials like gold, silver, tin and wool (but not copper) went to Assyria (that had no mineral resources of its own) and luxury goods like special foodstuff, spices, and textiles came to Kültepe. For tin it seems to be a bit unclear if it was exported or imported.
- Payments were made in units of silver (small rings or bars) with standardized weight and value. This was

thus a forerunner of the monetary coin system that would emerge 1300 years later in the Lydian Kingdom.

- A donkey carried about 65 kg of tin and 25 pieces of textiles. A typical caravan consisted of around fifteen donkeys; covering the thousand kilometers from Assyria to Kültepe took six or seven weeks.
- The kings of Kültepe / Kanesh guaranteed the security of the Assyrian caravans and their precious cargo. In return for these commercial privileges granted to foreigners they could impose taxes and had the right to pick first from the goods whatever they wanted .
- The Assyrian traders had no political power in Anatolia but employed Assyrian law for their internal affairs.
- The long-distance trade system only worked as long as political stability reigned in Anatolia and Northern Mesopotamia. Rough times in both Upper Mesopotamia and Central Anatolia around 1730 BC wiped out the trading system for good.

What we also learn, and that was the reason for this module, are a few things about early iron as recounted in the heading "Kültepe letters" in this module.

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1) Andreas Schachner, "Hattuscha", C.H.Beck Verlag 2011.

2) "Skylife"; Turkish Airline magazine, Unknon year and month. Good article and pictures!