

## Reviews



### **From Egypt to Mesopotamia: A Study of Predynastic Trade Routes**

(No. 4 in *Studies in Nautical Archaeology*)

SAMUEL MARK

181 pp., 110 figs & maps, 2 tables

Texas A&M University Press and Chatham Publishing, London, N1, 1997, £25, ISBN 0-89096-777-6 and 1-86176-066-3

Urban society began at about the same time in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Samuel Mark's *From Egypt to Mesopotamia: A Study of Predynastic Trade Routes* is the most recent effort to summarise and examine evidence for contact between these ancient civilizations. Mark, like other recent scholars, believes that much of this contact took place along a sea route from northern Mesopotamia (modern Syria, north-west Iran and Lebanon) to the Egyptian Delta.

Scholars have examined artefacts, architectural features, and artistic *motifs* in their efforts to understand and explain Mesopotamian influence on Predynastic Egyptian culture. (Some archaeologists have pointed out that this orientation is in part due to archaeologists having investigated the land between the rivers before studying Egypt and that it would be just as appropriate to study Egyptian influence on Mesopotamia.) This volume attempts to evaluate physical evidence for cultural contact but, more important for *IJNA* readers, also devotes attention to the routes travelled by early sailors.

One of the difficulties of a study like this is that the period considered (c. 5300–2900 BC) in both Egypt and Mesopotamia encompassed several distinct ethnic groups within the geographical regions we may consider monolithic entities. After a brief introduction, Mark moves immediately to an abbreviated summary of the Ubaid through Jamdat Nasr periods (5300–2900 BC) in Mesopotamian archaeology, followed by a general discussion of history and

trade in Predynastic Egypt outlining cultural differences based upon artefacts, reflecting the orientation of early archaeologists in the regions, with high status goods dominant as markers of exchange.

The next section of the book describes possible interaction between Mesopotamia and Egypt through examination of archaeological artefacts, architecture and boat *motifs*. Individual chapters focus on pottery, raw materials, animal figurines and maceheads, cylinder seals, architecture and boat *motifs*. For each of these categories, Mark finds evidence to support his hypothesis that while a land route through Palestine cannot be dismissed, a direct sea route probably existed in the eastern Mediterranean, by Naqada IIc/d or earlier, as the means of introducing Mesopotamian objects, styles and ideas to Egypt. In contrast (he writes) little archaeological evidence can be mustered in support of a southern route from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and across the eastern desert to the Nile until the following period.

Readers with a maritime interest may be disappointed with Mark's Chapter 5 on 'Raw Materials' in which the primary metal for tools (copper) is discussed in a single, general paragraph and the question of timber imports raises but does not adequately treat its implication that certain species from Syro-Palestine (presumably the large conifers) could have grown in Egypt. In his discussion on boat *motifs* in the Predynastic and of the Narmer Palette (a large, stone document thought by many to represent the unification of Egypt), Mark attempts to track down and deconstruct assumptions of earlier scholars about watercraft. The most prominent example is Frankfort's description of the black-hulled boat on the Hierakonpolis tomb painting as a Mesopotamian vessel, which Mark convincingly shows to have far stronger ties to earlier and contemporary Egyptian examples. Mark looks to the Delta as a node for transference of Mesopotamian influence to Upper Egypt and provides strong arguments against interpretations of Upper

Egyptian rock art as proof of Sumerian trade with Egypt through the Red Sea.

Mark concludes by restating his major arguments and outlining his hypothesis regarding a sea route between northern Syria and Egypt, present earlier, but particularly active during the late Predynastic and the First Dynasty (c. 3500–2900 BC). Towards the end of this time, raw materials rather than finished products, ideas or *motifs* are emphasized. At the same time, Persian Gulf sites begin to include more Mesopotamian artefacts and textual references to Dilmun and other sites reflect a new interest in that region suggesting a new expansion into the area. The organization and collapse of Mesopotamian trading colonies affected northern sea routes that relied on millennia of seafaring by other inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean. Mark also addresses the geographical and cultural influence on the development of sea routes at the dawn of urban civilization and international trade.

Most hard evidence for contact and exchange reinforces the hypothesis that trade with Egypt originated in northern Mesopotamia and Syria. Curiously, little Egyptian presence can be identified there, which prompts questions about what was being exchanged other than trinkets and exposure to ideas and design. Cyprian Broodbank's evaluation of later Cycladic trade where a major trade item seems to have been the status gained by completing a voyage may be of particular interest here (C. Broodbank, 1993, *Ulysses without sails; Trade, distance, knowledge and power in the early Cyclades*, *World Archaeology* 24.3, 315–331).

The wide-ranging bibliography makes the book attractive to archaeologically oriented readers, and the distribution maps are particularly helpful in following Mark's arguments. Quantification of finds, particularly because there are so few of them, would have been a valuable addition. The layout and production of the book are excellent, but illustrations as published originally or new drawings are preferable to those redrawn by the author. Because of the limited nature of the work (which began as an M.A. thesis), Mark writes to a targeted audience where readers are assumed to understand the significance of a discussion of a certain type of material or artefact without introductory or contextual information, so this

book may be most suited to those already familiar with the archaeology of the ancient Near East

CHERYL HALDANE WARD

**Communication and Commerce along the Western Sealanes AD 400–800**  
(*BAR International Series 654*)

JONATHAN M. WOODING

125 pp., 17 figs

Tempus Reparatum, Oxford, 1996, £26.00,  
ISBN 0-8054-843-0

The development of the kingdoms of Ireland, Scotland and south-west Britain in the 5th to 8th centuries is clearly bound up with contacts by sea, and the nature of these contacts must be defined if the wider developments are to be understood. The problem, of course, as with the prehistoric period in the same region, is that there are few remains of ships or harbours; finds, especially of exotic objects, on land sites are relatively scarce; even the historical sources are of deeply uncertain reliability or meaning. The author (in his doctoral research on which this book is based) tried to establish a model midway between Crawford's 'grey waters bright with argonauts' on the one hand and the rather widespread view (at least among prehistorians) that the sea is a 'conceptual barrier' on the other. He builds on McGrail's studies of early seafaring, with good use of pilot books and his own experience, to categorise the options available to mariners of the period, observing that (as at other periods) economic or social factors produce a seagoing response, which will normally find the means to achieve the necessary ends. He rightly sees a case-by-case study of voyages and movements of goods as more reliable than vague assumptions such as the growth of 'maritime culture'. In all this, the tone and direction of the book are stimulating, and it should be read by anyone interested in maritime archaeology.

In closer detail, there is much to argue with. The 5th and 6th centuries are seen as a period in which seaborne contacts between the Continent and western Britain were episodic, albeit in some cases these were long-distance