

THE LAND OF MAGAN

During the Early Bronze Age, the Oman peninsula was known in Mesopotamia with the name of Magan. In the cuneiform sources Magan frequently appears in connection with two other important toponyms: Dilmun and Meluhha, identified by the scholars respectively with the Bahrain islands and adjacent coasts, and the coasts of the Indus valley (civilisation of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa). Moreover, some Mesopotamian documents designate the countries facing the Arabian Gulf with the more generic expression of 'Lower Sea'.

We know that the rulers of Sumer and Akkad entertained commercial relations with these political entities. As a matter of fact, the Mesopotamian civilization depended for the raw materials – such as metals, wood, hard and semi-precious stones – from other countries, among which Magan is certainly very important.

The most ancient mention of Magan is found in an inscription of the king Sargon (2335-2279 BC), the founder of the Akkad dynasty:

«Sargon, king of Kish [traditional title of the Mesopotamian rulers] fought 34 battles victoriously. He destroyed city walls as far as the edge of the sea. Ships from Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun docked at the quay of Akkad.»

The direct trade relations between Mesopotamia and Magan are well documented during the Early Bronze Age (second half of the 3rd millennium), corresponding to the Empire of Akkad and the Neo-Sumerian period in Mesopotamian context, and the Umm an-Nar culture in North East Arabia. However, it is uncertain whether this datum depends on the haphazardness of the documentation or corresponds to historical reality. It is not excluded that the Land of Magan might have been known in Mesopotamia much earlier.

We know that there were commercial reciprocal exchanges between Magan and Mesopotamia: Magan was supplier of copper, stones (diorite, gabbro and soft stones), wood, marine products and also specialised workers (miners, metalsmiths, stone cutters and ship builders) in exchange for bitumen, food products (especially barley and sesame oil), wool and textiles, reeds, palm-fibres and skins from Mesopotamia.

In the cuneiform Mesopotamian texts, while Meluhha is remembered for exotic and luxury goods (semi-precious stones, like carnelian and lapis lazuli, ivory, valuable timber, exotic animals), Magan was especially mentioned as supplier of copper, the primary element in the bronze metallurgy, for the manufacture of weapons, furniture and splendid royal statues. There are many administrative documents from Mesopotamia, in this period, recording the supply of copper from Magan.

These textual data are confirmed by the discovering of numerous copper ores in the Oman peninsula. Archaeological investigations have found evidence of copper mining and smelting in many Omani sites dating back to the 3rd millennium. The people of Oman, at this date, were able to produce a large amount of copper ingots to be exported.

The land of Magan is also mentioned as supplier of 'black stone' (diorite or other magmatic rocks), a material used for royal and prestigious sculptures.

We have information about the provenance of the 'black stone' from various texts of Akkadian kings, as Manishtusu (2269-2255 BC), son of Sargon the Great, and Naram-Sin (2254-2218 BC), grand-son of Sargon. The provenance of the stone is recorded in the cuneiform inscriptions carved on some statues of these kings.

We know that two Akkadian rulers, Manishtusu and the great Naram-Sin, made conquest expeditions directly in the land of Magan.

During the campaign of Naram-Sin, Magan was despoiled, and the Akkadian king brought precious objects back home. Some alabaster and soft stone vessels, attributable to the Umm an-Nar culture, have been discovered in Mesopotamia and some of these objects show a carved cuneiform inscription which relates:

«Naram-Sin, king of the four quarters, bowl from the booty of Magan».

The land of Magan appears also in various inscriptions of Gudea (22nd century BC), the great *ensi* (governor) of the second Dynasty of Lagash, who ruled during the Sumerian renaissance, after the collapse of the Akkadian Empire. In the texts inscribed on several statues of diorite Gudea claimed that the stone had been carried from the Land of Magan.

After a break, the trade relations between Magan and Mesopotamia received a new impulse under the Third Dynasty of Ur, during which Magan appears to have been more important than Dilmun.

Some documents of this period are very detailed in listing the commercial exchanges between Mesopotamian cities and the land of Magan. A cuneiform tablet from Ur, dated to the second year of Ibbi-Sin (2028-2004 BC) – the last king of this Dynasty – relates a transaction with Magan, made by a merchant from Ur named Lu-Enlilla. The text lists various products supplied by this merchant in exchange for copper from Magan.

During the Bronze Age, Magan was known in Mesopotamia for its ships. The ‘black Magan-boats’ were commonly sailing around the Gulf region. The numerous mentions of Magan boats in cuneiform texts probably indicate that they constituted also a model for the southern Mesopotamian shipyards, where the boats were built probably with the help of specialised workers from Magan.

The repute of boats of Magan was so widespread that we find a reference to them also in the Sumerian cycle of Gilgamesh, in the Poem *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living*. These boats were built with reeds and coated with bitumen, as shown by several boat models found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur. The bitumen, a waterproof material indispensable in the construction of ships, came from Mesopotamia, whose main source was located at Hit in central Iraq. Even if the export of this material is never mentioned in Mesopotamian texts, we have archaeological evidence that the bitumen found in Oman is originating from Hit.

During the 2nd millennium BC the mentions of this country in Mesopotamian sources disappear. The commercial relations seem not to survive the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2004 BC), which coincides with the disappearance of the Umm an-Nar culture in Oman. Afterwards, we can speak of a partial ‘eclipse’ of Magan, although it is generally assumed that the Dilmun copper, which then reached the Mesopotamian cities, was in fact mined in Magan. Dilmun maintained, as usual, its function of intermediary in the trade exchanges. (AL)