



History of tanning – Mesopotamia

Long before the periods of the greatest splendour of Egypt and Greece, there was a society in Mesopotamia that was far more advanced than all the others. The fertile soil between the Tigris and the Euphrates provided the basis for the Sumerian civilisation at a time when the Egyptians were still living in their own prehistoric times.

Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, is the site of the ancient burial place Mugajjar where not only items made of gold and precious stones but also objects made from leather have been found. A further unspecified description refers to a diadem belonging to Queen Shubad. Thousands of tiny Lapis Lazuli pearls were attached to a leather strip as well as to gold ornaments sewn on with silver thread. This strip had disintegrated into a bright white ("dead white") powder. The same white powder has been found next to wooden wagon wheels and indicates a certain type of tanning. Wet blue and wet white did not exist in that period, and were only employed from the twentieth century onwards.

Swimming aids made from leather

A fair amount is known about leather production, particularly relating to the Babylonian-Assyrian period. The great king and legislator Hammurabi laid down in his code engraved in stone, now in the Louvre Museum, exactly how much a day a shoemaker should earn. The shoemaker, called "askapu", was the person who was also given the hides of donkeys, cattle, sheep and mules for tanning. However, another profession is also mentioned, "susikku", which is likely to have involved only the tanning operation itself, and a "sarip taxse", which probably related to the dyeing. Of the shoemaker we know that apart from shoes

he also assisted in constructing chariots and making saddles. The simplest leather object was the leather bag made from skin whose grain side faced inwards. These bags were used mainly for holding water while travelling, as well as for storing beer and milk. In addition, the bags were inflated and used as a swimming aid or for constructing rafts. The writer Herodotus described a round boat made from willow over which animal hides were stretched. These boats are called "coracles" in English and have been in use all over the world. They are still found in Tibet and are covered with yak hides



Tanning recipes

Footwear was not used for walking on the warm loam soil, but protection was needed for the feet when walking in the mountains, accounting for the fact that the shoemakers mainly came from the northern mountains. The Mittani, in particular, were known for their skills. Their tanning process involved various types of fats, milk, flour and two special ingredients. One was a stone referred to as "ga-bi-ti", which was used as a medicine, for dyeing purple and for tanning. The stone can only have been alum. It is also the only tanning agent able to produce a bright white powder such as has been found in the graves. The other substance was called "pagratu", the oak galls that we find under oak leaves.



A tanning recipe, recorded in cuneiform script:

"The skin of the kid thou shalt feed with the milk of a yellow goat, and with flour; thou shalt anoint (it) with pure oil, ordinary oil, and the fat of a pure cow. Thou shalt dilute alum in pressed grape juice, then fill the surface of the skin with gall nuts of the tree-cultivars of the Hittites"

Tanners as celebrities

The oldest known tanner in history was a great celebrity in his time. Agabtaha was purveyor to the court of King Kastilash III and was royally rewarded for his skills. About him was written:

Agabtaha fugitive from the country of Halibalgat, with the king Kastilash he took refuge. A pagamu (leather article – DvB) for Kastilash he made and ten gurs of grain land evaluated according to the large ell he gave him in the town of Padan; and a tablet, deed to the field, they wrote and this the king gave to Agabtaha, the leather-worker. Whosoever acts against this our claimant, who will take this field or ravish it, the gods of the king will punish".

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