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From Text to Tell: Governance and the Geography of Political Space according to Middle Assyrian Administrative Documents[1]

"Space is both
the medium and the message
of domination and subordination"[2]

0. Introduction

Understanding the mechanisms of the Assyrian empire of the Late Bronze Age is to a considerable degree dependent on our understanding of the geopolitical landscape. In the course of the 14th century BC, Assyria established an autonomous territorial regime in upper Mesopotamia. The expansionist policy pursued by the Assyrian kings gave rise to an imperial formation of Assyria, reaching its initial apogee in the course of the 13th century. During the centuries to come, the territorial extension of Assyria varied once and again due to alternating processes of concentration and expansion – reaching its absolute maximum during the 7th century BC. From a retrospective (i.e., historiographical) point of view it becomes clear that the making of imperial Assyria actually commences throughly in the middle of the second millennium BC. Indeed, as a result of an increasing amount of historical sources of all kinds, many a feature so prominent in Assyrian governance of the first millennium gradually becomes visible also in the Late Bronze Age. This already leads to a redefinition of 'the nature of the shift' (Michael Roaf) from Middle to Neo-Assyrian in terms of material culture. It also requires a new look at the nature and conditions of Assyrian state formation in terms of historical analysis. This paper will address a prerequisite for said historical analysis of governance patterns, namely the problem of mapping georeferenced information from textual sources of Middle Assyrian state administration using archeological data.

1. Sources, data, and the level of analysis

From its very beginning the configuration of the Assyrian state is based on spatial dominance: ruling a vast, geomorphologically and ethnically diverse territory such as upper Mesopotamia results in various instruments of governance meant to achieve effective control of the territory. The measures taken by the Assyrian kings are documented in textual sources ranging from royal annals to administrative records; they are depicted in different types of visual media; last but not least, they have left physical marks in the

1 The paper benefits from two differing approaches towards the historical landscapes of Late Bronze Age Assyria: Research group B II-1 in EC 264 Topoi examines the interdependency of spatial structures and the organization of authority by means of comparing different imperial formations in the Ancient Near East. The project initiative HIGEOMES funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche and the German Research Foundation *The Historical Geography of Upper Mesopotamia in the 2nd Mill. BC.* is concerned with the archeological identification of attested place names and questions of continuity and discontinuity from Middle Bronze Age to Late Bronze Age settlement structures in Upper Mesopotamia.

2 Keith / Pile 1993, 37.

landscape, i.e., the organization of inhabited space within settlements, settlement patterns, infrastructure ('roads', canals, etc.). Eventually, the negative impact of these measures must also be kept in mind – e.g., the impact of large-scale population movements on the landscape, the extensive use of natural resources on the natural environment.

From a structural point of view, settlements are the most important element in the Assyrian strategy of governance: the organization of the ruled territory relied heavily on the permanent settlements in terms of their economic, political, administrative, cultic, or military functions. In fact, from the very beginning, the kings of Assyria obviously wanted to establish a regular, hierarchically structured network of settlements as a backbone of their imperial program. The imperial landscape is by no means simply the result of a more or less 'natural' evolution; on the contrary, it is to a certain degree shaped by deliberate actions of the Assyrian kings. We largely ignore whether, and to what extent, the art of empire-building was a systematic field in its own right, as treatises comparable to Aristotle's *Politika* or Machiavelli's *Il principe* do not appear among the written sources. However, from a synoptic view of sources it becomes apparent that the Assyrian kings pursued 'a strategy' of state formation. This strategy eventually involved various layers of experience from earlier large-scale-territorial foundations in upper Mesopotamia, preserved in the virtual memory of the landscape as well as in the cultural memory of the population.

The contemporary Assyrian textual record yields a broad variety of data that range from place names to the role of distinct cities within the realm, from patterns of tax collection to border wars, the digging of canals to the movement of dislocated people. However, in order to evaluate these phenomena, the approximate geographical allocation, even concrete localization of the place-names mentioned is desirable. Besides excavation it is especially landscape archaeology that can help to understand large scale territorial structures and thus the imperial strategy of the Assyrian kings.[3] The confrontation between textual materials and archaeological evidence from excavations and surveys is therefore of the utmost importance, albeit not without its own problems.

Topographical allocation and the recording of geographical data was a concern in antiquity, and within the use of writing several means to store and convey these data have been developed. The map – from our view probably a self-evident means of plotting topographic information – is relatively rare in the extant cuneiform record. However, as can be seen from the few *specimena* that have survived, Mesopotamian scribes and scholars were familiar with the techniques and possibilities (function of scale, contextualization) of that specific mode of the symbolic representation of space.[4] A second type of diagrammatic representation, namely field-plans and sketches of buildings and cities, were used in administration as a means for the calculation of labour, income, and taxation. By far the most numerous type are the verbalized landscapes, i.e., descriptive or enumerative accounts of (fictional or real) places, regions, and landscapes with regard to physical features, social functions, and contexts. Some of them exist as autonomous texts, e.g., the famous archaic list of geographical names, the description of Babylon, or the Neo-Assyrian tax-cadastres – to name only a few; others are present as part of a wide variety of different textual genres, from administrative and legal texts to letters, annals, myths, etc.

3 See, e.g., Morandi Bonacossi 1996 or Wilkinson *et al.* 2005.

4 For a comprehensive survey of cartographic traditions in the ancient Near East cf. Millard 1987. They also show up in less mundane contexts as can be seen from the so called Babylonian *mappa mundi* – more of a diagrammatic representation of mythologically founded claims for global hegemony than a map in the cartographic sense.

Middle Assyrian epigraphic sources that provide information on the political geography of the first Assyrian empire are found predominantly within institutional contexts. A good deal of them were produced as part of the state-controlled management of material and human resources – resulting in a complex system of texts from various residues of administrative bureaucracy. Still, the majority of documents from Middle Assyrian state archives published so far stem from Walther Andrae's excavations at the capital Assur in the first decades of the 20th century.[5] Besides that, the findings from the short-lived agricultural center and royal city of Tulul-al-'Aqr (ancient Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta) as well as those from various smaller centers and settlements from the territories add to our still (and always) fragmented view of Middle Assyrian state administration. These documents pertain to an inner perspective, governed particularly by the needs of management and governmental control; they usually do not explain or comment on data, and employ a rather formalized idiom.

A different view is attested by royal inscriptions and official statements issued by the Assyrian kings on various occasions in order to display the proper implementation of sovereignty in the name of the god Ashur. Information and details pertaining to matters of political geography are dependent on the functional context of the individual text – military campaign, building, or infrastructure activities, whereas we have to account for descriptions influenced by genre. So as to provide the grand narrative of the might that was Assyria, these texts make use of rhetorical means such as metaphor, redundancy, hyperbole, and a lexicon that is closer to the literary than to the dry wording of administration. As a rule, the parameters of genre influence the presentation of content in the format of text, and this has in consequence its bearing on our utilization of these texts as 'assemblages of data and information'. This impact must always be kept in mind when exploiting textual sources as, for example, 'how imperial systems penetrated natural and social spaces by means of administrative and institutional control,' the question addressed by the organizers of this conference to the participants.

When evaluating the contributions of survey activities and landscape archeology[6] for a comprehensive analysis of empire, here with regard to the Iron Age formation of Assyria, Tony Wilkinson *et al.* have pointed out that "the record of the archaeological landscape analysis and ancient textual sources complement each other in a remarkable way." (Wilkinson 2005, 23). Whereas we might assume a similar complementarity with regard to Late Bronze Age formation, we are actually far from a similar statement – since we lack a comparable variety and abundance of records. The problems encountered when analyzing geographical information from Middle Assyrian textual sources are rather simple: we just don't know where all those places named in the texts are to be found. Indeed, the most evident feature of spatial allocation is a proper name given to a place as part of its individual identity: toponyms are (a) conceived linguistically, (b) determined culturally, and (c) an enduring as well as short-term phenomenon. Toponyms mirror topographical, geopolitical, and societal conditions and display different layers of no-

5 Apart from single texts published elsewhere, the systematic edition of Middle Assyrian cuneiform texts from Assur started with some tablets integrated in the volumes of KAJ and KAV (at that time labeled *Old Assyrian*) in the 1930s, followed by two volumes of the series *Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, issue XIX (= N.F. III, 1976) and issue XXI (= N.F. V, 1982) from the hand of Helmut Freydank. Since 1994 (starting with the 92. *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*), the edition of Middle Assyrian cuneiform texts from Assur (i.e., the palace archives and the temple) has considerably advanced, thanks to the engagement of Freydank and to the *Assur-Projekt* directed by Johannes Renger and funded by the German Research Foundation.

6 "Today, systematic archaeological surface reconnaissance work is established as a fully developed and accepted research tool in archaeology in general and in Near Eastern archaeology in particular. It is widely recognized as a means of taking stock of the archaeological heritage of an entire region (...)." Nissen 2007, 19.

menclature (religious, political, economic) that were attached to the physical environment, and in doing so they are to be considered the backbone of geographical discourse.

Yet, the identification of toponyms with archaeological sites, or at least a more or less reliable allocation, is still a major task within the historical geography of the ancient Near East. This equally holds true for upper Mesopotamia and the Taurus piedmont region in the later second millennium. An impressive number of sites have been excavated or partly excavated so far.[7] More evidence on the distribution of sites and settlement patterns (chronological as well as functional) has been contributed by several surveys realized during the last decades in different areas (Anastasio 2007; Szuchman 2009). And although recent maps show an increasing number of Late Bronze Age-dots, thus claiming (significant) occupation during the Mittani and Middle Assyrian periods – most of these are still nameless.[8] On the other hand: with the accumulation of textual sources, the repertoire of known toponyms is continually increasing too – but most of them still await localization. Bridging the gap between these two sets of data is a painstaking process that will, we expect, yield only some few resilient hypotheses.

Confronting the different sets of data, namely the textual-based information on places with the archaeological data on settlements, the different 'pace' of the respective historical narratives becomes obvious: We are well aware of the fact that royal inscriptions and a major part of official declarations (not to mention the formulaic iconic depictions) related to the kings' activities represent history from above. The juxtaposition of the administrative texts somewhat mitigates their testimony by adding a component that is not affected by rhetorical frames and the restrictions of ideological modelling. In contrast to royal inscriptions, the archives of economic administration were not meant for eternity, but operated along short timelines; documents no longer needed were destroyed or transformed into summary documents of second or third order (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2012). Posterity was not the concern of the clerks that produced the archival documents of everyday administration – in a certain way very similar to what has been stated by Reinhard Bernbeck on behalf of ceramics: "neither potters nor users of pots had posterity in mind when they produced, broke and discarded them" (Bernbeck 1999, 171). In contrast to the archaeological narrative based on ceramics, however, the information from the textual record usually is much more accurate with regard to chronological issues. Moreover, it eventually furnishes the information as to who made the pots, who used them, why they were discarded, and – this being our major concern here – what was the name of the site where all this happened.

2. Conceptual aspects: range, scale, and meaning

Written documents as such must be considered a rather limited base: writing was primarily meant to operate within institutional contexts and not meant to function as a universal, objective recording medium for the faithful collection and transmission of data. All written documents served the intentions of their authors, namely the instructing party or institutional setting that they were produced for. Hence they are neither objective nor exhaustive in any sense. A major concern of analyzing textual records on geography therefore lies in evaluating the parameters that influenced or governed the presentation of data and information in a given text.[9] The sources mentioned yield not only hundreds of toponyms and geo-

7 The most complete treatment is Tenu 2009.

8 Cf. for instance the relevant map in Anastasio *et al.* 2004.

9 See, e.g., Cancik-Kirschbaum 2009 on sequences of geographical names in administrative texts.

graphical indications, but furnish us also with a web of terms used to designate settlements and the environment within different functional horizons in upper Mesopotamia. However, the evaluation of these sources in terms of scale, range of coverage, and meaning constitutes a major problem in approaching the textual sources.

The phenomenon of meaning, i.e., how not only to understand and interpret (= translate) geographical and geopolitical terms found in the textual sources, but also how to apply language-bound concepts to material matters – is a problem well known to everybody working with textual materials in foreign languages. What conclusions are we to draw for instance from the fact that the Akkadian term *ālu* is used to designate nearly every sort of human settlement, regardless its dimensions, structural, or functional characteristics? To what extent do we determine material evidence and its interpretation by declaring a given settlement a 'city'? Terminology and semantics are by no means trivial matters, and it profoundly affects both the philological as well as the archaeological perspective.

In Middle Assyrian writing, it is the sign URU that is used by the clerks to denote as semantic marker any kind of settlement. As a prefixed element, it marks the following term as a toponym as in ^{URU}*Naḫur*, ^{URU}*Dūr-katlimu* or $^{URU\ D}$*Aššur*. This convention follows Old Assyrian practice and contrasts with Old Babylonian usage where place names are usually marked by the postponed determinative GN^{KI}. But the semantic marker URU does not itself tell us about the character, the extension, or the function of the habitat. Although there are other terms in use, even more specific ones, they are not widely employed in Middle Assyrian administrative texts. A specific problem that still deserves further investigation is the usage of double-marked-toponyms in place-names like Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, where the element *Kār-* usually is interpreted as referring to a harbor as a specific feature of that city. Another example are place-names that integrate the element *dunnu* (Biagov 1976; Luciani 2001; Radner 2004). The term *dunnu* is generally understood as referring to a type of small-scale fortified settlement as indicated by (a) its semantic field based on the root **dnn* 'to be strong' and (b) the descriptions connected to the more or less synonymous term *dimtu*, which is preponderant in the Nuzi-texts (Koliński 2001).

With regard to the archaeological evidence, we may note a similar phenomenon related to 'meaning', namely the necessity of a classification of sites: instead of concise designations, as for instance 'city' frequently more general terms like 'settlement' or 'site' tend to be used. Though understandable from a systematic point of view, the vagueness of these terms adds to the problem of identification. To begin with, general terms such as 'settlement' are meant to postpone interpretation. As a consequence of the extensively discussed problems caused by cultural heteronomies, we wish to prevent the (eventually misleading) inscription of etic conceptions into the body of evidence, thus avoiding its contamination. But this also means renouncing an available matrix of defined parameters linked to specific designations as a heuristic instrument. Secondly, the (superficial) universality of general terms helps to put into practice a seemingly impartial classification of sites according to measurable facts e.g., extension, attested/unattested periods, topographical position. Especially with regard to survey, this seems the only way to cover the sort of data to be gained from this type of investigation, which – by its layout – aims at large-scale (local, regional, supraregional) data assemblages. But then, in a certain way, this type of data is only of limited use for concrete matters of identification: apart from general statements as to settlement density and perhaps settlement hierarchies – usually the information provided by this method is sufficient, at best, to allow for educated guesses.

And finally, the term 'settlement' draws attention to the socio-historical phenomenon of different types of sedentariness and occupation: the textual sources attest to a broad typological variety in the use of defined places. Apart from general modes linked to nomadic, semi-nomadic, and bedouin on the one

hand and sedentary in the strict sense of city-dwellers, we have to account for functional diversity. To raise only a few questions: where do we meet the countless numbers of *ḫupšu, ḫāpiru* and other displaced persons, en route in upper Mesopotamia during the Late Bronze Age? What about seasonal installations in the rural landscape? What about regional stations along traffic routes?[10]

Thus, the vocabulary applied by historians – philologist or archaeologist – to the textual or material evidence is, so to say, the servant of two masters: the original term rooted in a given indigenous language and its concepts, and its translation into a particular contemporary language links it to a differing set of conceptions. The dichotomy of emic and etic settings is probably an irresolvable problem, especially in confrontation with extinct languages. On the other hand, conceptual heteronomy is an intrinsic feature of our main epistemic device, i.e., language.

With regard to range and scale, often the frequency or intensity of evidence is taken as an indicator – both in archaeological as well as in textual data. Thus for instance – how should we deal with sites on the fringes of the empire such as Tell Shiukh Fawqani (Capet 2005), Tell Fray, or Terqa? They present only very few tokens that can be linked to Assyrian Late Bronze Age culture – were they Assyrian or not (Tenu 2006; 2007)? From the texts we understand that towards the end of the 13th century at least temporarily, Assyrian sovereignty included the eastern bank of the Euphrates (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2009) – perhaps for a decade, or even less. Which type of traces might have been left by that type of 'presence'? As regards Late Bronze Age-Assyria, the so called Middle Assyrian palatial pottery (Pfälzner 1995) is always thought to be a reliable indicator of the fact, that the site was part of the Assyrian provincial system and its palatial economy. However, we must account for the possibility that not all settlements dominated by Assyrian sovereignty yield this type of pottery. Even more so, dating pottery to time-spans less than half a century seems rather dangerous.

From textual records it becomes clear that the time-spans of functional activity of a given settlement within a larger period may have been rather limited. Thus mapping all sites that have some minimal indications to Middle Assyrian 'occupation' creates a blended image merging contemporaneous sites and non-contemporaneous ones. Since we know from historical records that the extension of the empire was fluid, expanding and shrinking at differing velocities, the information to be gained from written and archaeological data may not match at all. This phenomenon, i.e., the fact that typically "components assigned to each phase or period are treated as contemporaneous" (Dewar 1991, 604) has been labeled elsewhere as the contemporaneity problem. On the other hand, indications for a certain period may not show up at all, due to massive layers of younger periods covering older periods, or due to massive erosion – though textual evidence positively indicates a major settlement.

The interpretation of data according to scale and range (both chronological and spatial) are thus massively affected by the disparity and non-homogeneity of the evidence. Thus it is difficult to weigh evidence from archaeological research and administrative record against the scripted history of an abundantly controlled empire created by the royal annals. The border-regions show the persistence of partly autonomous structures – small kingdoms with a more or less explicit connection to the center. Whereas to the west the existence of small kingdoms is proven by complementary archaeological and textual evidence (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007; Shibata / Yamada 2009), the eastern fringes of the empire may have experienced similar structures – although we have only little information about that, see for instance the case of Idu (van Soldt 2008; Ahmed 2010).

10 An exemplary study of the evidence of such temporary stations is presented in Bernbeck 1993.

Our historical understanding of the layout of the Middle Assyrian state is that the shifting nature of its extension leads to borders that are not clearly delineated,[11] while the degree of Assyrian governance remained vague, especially as regards the periphery. From recent research at the peripheries it becomes clear that the situation was much more complex.

3. Two examples

To illustrate some of these problems, we will take a closer look at two configurations that are typical of actual discussion about mapping geopolitical structures obtained from the analysis of textual records to archaeological evidence.

Our first case-study concerns the city of Tuttul on the Balikh. Late Bronze Age textual references to the site as fully active can be found in two texts from Emar dating to the 13th century BC.[12] In Middle Assyrian administrative texts from higher centers of state administration, Tuttul is only rarely mentioned. Though the range of textual evidence at our disposal is limited, the 'quasi-negative' result is probably due to the fact that the Euphrates region came under Assyrian dominion only after the middle of the 13th century. It has to be considered part of the most western border of the Assyrian empire. In a letter from Tell Sheikh Hamad, ancient Dūr-Katlimmu, we learn of a razzia along the River Balikh, comprising the region of Tuttul in search of people that escaped from Carchemish.[13] A receipt from the same archive mentions a cow to be led to Tuttul by a certain Katmuḫāju.[14] Both texts date to the second half of the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta I – and they show the proper integration of the city within the network of the Western provinces. A document from Tell Sabi Abyad shows that the city was the seat of a *bēl pāḫete*, a district governor.[15] The text is dated to the eponymate of Etel-pî-Aššur during the last tier of the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta, i.e., towards the end of the 13th century. We don't know exactly when the city acquired the state and function of provincial center (*āl pāḫete*), but the installation of such a center would call for some kind of major Assyrian presence. On the other hand, it has to be pointed out that the city is never mentioned in any of the lists of regular deliveries from the provinces to the royal palace in Assur or the regular offering to the Ashur-temple. Yet, the contributions from the Tuttul region might well be included within the lot from the *paḫutu* KI.TA, the lower province: that seems to have encompassed more or less the region between the lower Balīḫ and the Euphrates with its eastern border extending to the Khabur provincial system. But its absence from the record might also – as has been argued above – be due to its rather short-lived period of activity within the Assyrian provincial system, since we may assume that this stronghold didn't last more than two to three decades as the region became increasingly unstable towards the end of Tukultī-Ninurta's I reign.

The site of ancient Tuttul *ša Balīḫa* is well-known at least as early as the Mari-correspondence, and its location at Tell Bi'ā has been confirmed by an archive found there during the excavations. Apart from

11 In fact, the modern concept of linear boundary is anachronistic, if applied to ancient empires or territories – border-regions are fuzzy spaces with differing intensity of governmental impact.

12 Arnaud 1986, 268–269; Tskukimoto 1988, 166–167. It does not seem likely that the city of Tuttul mentioned in the famous letter from Hattušili III (*ca.* 1267–1237 BC) of Hatti to Kadašman-Enlil II (1263–1255 BC) of Babylon (KBo I, 10:43 URU *Du-du-ul*) is to be identified with *Tuttul ša Balīḫa*, but rather with the homonymous site on the Euphrates further south. The argument of the charioteers can only be understood with regard to the region on the western bank of the Euphrates.

13 Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996, 96 – letter no. 2:9 (Sîn-mudammeq to the grand vizier Aššur-iddin).

14 Röllig 2008, 72, no. 39:14.

15 T97–3, unpublished, mentioned in Wiggermann 2000, 172 and reported in Jakob 2009, 117.

an impressive Middle Bronze Age settlement, a Late Bronze Age occupation is attested, but limited to the 14th century at the latest according to the excavators. Thus more recent periods have not been captured – and not a single piece of evidence can be attributed to Assyrian presence there (Tenu 2009, 210). If only based on archeological evidence, Tuttul would not appear on a map dedicated to the extension of the Assyrian empire.

This configuration is perhaps not so untypical: archaelogical evidence and textual evidence often do not match – at least as it concerns evidence regarded by archeologists as characteristic of Middle Assyrian culture. And though the presence of a palace might lead us to infer a certain importance for the place, the period of Assyrian influence was probably rather short and might not have resulted in major residues – or they are lost as a consequence of erosion processes that affected the site (Lyonnet 2000).[16]

A contrary situation is given at the site of Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq, where a survey reports a dense presence of Middle Assyrian ceramics all over the site was reported.[17] Recent excavations have not only revealed a most elaborate specimen of Middle Assyrian Palatial Ware, but also yielded two Middle Assyrian tablets that date to the later 13th century.[18] Strategically, this site occupies an important position, being the last station on the trans-regional connection that runs from Assur via Dūr-Katlimmu on the Khabur to the Euphrates. Thus we would expect, here at least, a fortified city with a palace and a local governor: we are still looking, however, for the center of the 'lower provinces' – a geographical term mentioned often enough in the Dūr-Katlimmu-texts, but so vague, it is divvicult to associate it with a concrete place name.

From the example of Tuttul, it becomes clear that geographical information stemming from administrative and legal documents and pertaining to Middle Assyrian state administration can generally be relied upon – though it may seem 'weak' in terms of quantity. The case of Tell Qubr Abu al-'Atiq on the other hand shows that even 'short-term-presence' at the utmost fringes of the empire may result in a rather intensive amount of evidence and thus contrast heavily with other sites in the western border region.

Still, our evidence is very fragmentary, yielding a chronologically distorted patchwork rather than a continuous picture. But even so the discernible variation with respect to absolute expansion and shifting degrees of Assyrian hegemonial impact are to some extent typical features of large-scale imperial formations, as Anne Laure Stoler and Carole McGranahan point out in their reassessment of historical analysis on early modern empires: "Gradations of sovereignty and sliding scales of differentiation are hallmark features of imperial formations (...)".[19] Taking into account the pitfalls and peculiarities in our efforts to link the archeological and textual data, it is to be hoped that the intensified research in Late Bronze Age upper Mesopotamia soon will able to more clearly delineate the mechanisms of the early stages of the Assyrian empire.

16 See however Otto (in print) 54 who points to the fact that after the destruction of the palace on the main mound, several houses were erected there. Otto sees this evidence as a possible reaction to the reinstallation of local or regional models of governance.

17 Tenu 2009, 210 referring to the report given by Einwag *et al.* 1995, 102.

18 Aline Tenu, pers. comm.

19 Stoler / McGranahan 2007, 9.

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