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ENGINEERING EMPIRE: A PROVINCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MIDDLE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

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INTRODUCTION

The Assyrian Empire achieved astonishing feats, rising from a minor and peripheral state to a small empire that successfully withstood the crisis years around 1200 BCE. Assyria developed into the most long-lived and largest empire of the ancient Near East, and was the direct predecessor of the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires. In the history of greater Mesopotamia, it was the first state to achieve lasting domination and overcome particularistic tendencies.

The question of how the Assyrian Empire differed from other states in the ancient Near East is therefore of key relevance. Here it is argued that in order to understand how the Assyrian Empire could achieve and maintain its hegemony, we have to shift our focus from the capital and court to the transformations that occurred in the occupied territories. Drawing on data from the western part of the empire, this chapter aims to assess imperial repertoires of rule as a set of flexible strategies that were affected by logistics and local conditions.

THE MESOPOTAMIAN CONTEXT

As has been argued by various scholars (e.g. Marcus 1998; Matthews 2003), the default pattern of political organisation in Mesopotamia was that of political

fragmentation; that is, the region was divided into a series of regional states competing for power and with relatively weakly developed states (Richardson 2012). After the emergence of complex urbanised state societies in the fourth millennium BCE, it is only in the Late Bronze Age (1600–1200 BCE), and in particular with the rise of the Middle Assyrian state, that the efforts towards creating a durable empire were successful.

The pertinent questions, therefore are, first, why Mesopotamian empires arose at *a particular moment in time*; and, second, why some Mesopotamian empires were *more durable* than others.

One way of approaching these questions is to suggest that both questions are intertwined and are to a large degree determined by geographical and logistical considerations. Here, the geographical contrast between Mesopotamia and Egypt is particularly apposite. This statement may appear odd, as both regions can be characterised as riverine landscapes in which agriculture was possible due to the water carried by the Euphrates, the Tigris and the Nile. Indeed, the fundamental importance of these rivers is expressed in the name 'Meso-potamia' (between the rivers), and the well-known adage that 'Egypt is a gift of the Nile'. However, from a logistical point of view, these two riverine landscapes differ greatly. The River Nile served as a major transport artery, with barges carrying people, valuables and bulk goods in both upstream and downstream direction (Graham 2005). The logistical affordances of the Nile Valley are no doubt in part responsible for the early rise of a unified state in Egypt and the remarkable durability of the pharaonic state over the millennia.

The situation in Mesopotamia is remarkably different. One possible answer to the question why the first stable empires emerged relatively late in Mesopotamia (some two millennia after the development of complex societies) is that Mesopotamia lacks a natural transport conduit such as the Nile. In the southern part of Mesopotamia, river-based transport was an option, but this was much more difficult than in Egypt, due to the existence of multiple branches and dams and the silting up of canals (Branting et al. 2014: 144–7). For example, one text from the Ur III period records a boat journey from Girsu to Ur and then to Uruk: a distance of some 120 kilometres that took fifteen days to complete, which is about 8 kilometres a day (Algaze 2008: 61). In northern Mesopotamia, transport of goods took place with donkey or mule caravans, and transport would have been even more costly. These transport costs would have frustrated the economic integration of larger regions. One exception to this consists of the trade in luxury artefacts and valuable materials, such as metals, that could be transported and traded at a profit, and for which we have good evidence throughout Mesopotamian history (Larsen 1987; Veenhof 2010). Mesopotamian economies, therefore, remained predominantly organised around small regions, and this no doubt strengthened political localism.

These considerations suggest why building empires in Mesopotamia might have been challenging. They do not explain, however, why empires in Mesopotamia arose at a particular moment in time, nor why some empires were more long-lived than others. A series of Mesopotamian empires arose and disappeared in the later part of the third and the early part of the second millennium BC, but none of them were durable in the longer term. While some capable and charismatic rulers could temporarily outmatch their competitors and create larger states, the states they created proved to be inherently unstable and short-lived (van de Mieroop 2004; Heinz 2012; Barjamovic 2013). Early imperial states in the Near East did not exist for more than one and a half century, and some, such as those of Hammurabi and Samsi-Adad, are best characterised as 'conquest empires' which barely outlived the death of their founder (Marcus 1998; van de Mieroop 2004; Barjamovic 2013; Eidem 2014).

By contrast, the Assyrian Empire proved much more long-lived, surviving for about seven hundred years. It was also the only one of the Late Bronze Age major states that successfully withstood 'the crisis years' between 1200 and 1180 BCE (Cline 2014; Knapp and Manning 2016). Finally, the Assyrian Empire was the predecessor of the Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid and Seleukid empires, which in turn were succeeded by the Parthian and Sasanian empires (Cline and Graham 2011: 80–1). Thus this chain of empires survived for some two millennia!

Therefore, from an (admittedly teleological) long-term perspective, one could argue that the modest-sized Middle Assyrian Empire marks a watershed in the history of the ancient Near East. Before the rise of Assyria, Mesopotamia was by default fragmented into regional states, and after the Assyrian Empire the region and its populations were transformed into enduring building blocks of empire. How can we best explain the Assyrian success in breaking the political fragmentation of Mesopotamia? How did the Assyrian state, which rose from humble origins, as a small former vassal state of the Mittani, manage to obtain control over much of northern Mesopotamia by around 1250 BCE (van de Mieroop 2004; Barjamovic 2013)? What characteristics of this state explain its longevity and its ability to dominate other societies and regions? Central to these questions is no doubt the manner in which the Assyrian Empire successfully achieved lasting control over conquered territories and societies. What, then, were the Assyrian 'repertoires of rule' (Burbank and Cooper 2010: 6), that is, the practices applied by imperial states in conquered territories to create and maintain their dominance, and how did these differ from those of other preceding and contemporary states? It is to these questions that we now turn.

COMPARING ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN EMPIRES

Did the Assyrian Empire differ from earlier and contemporary empires in the Ancient Near East in its *repertoires of rule*, and if so, in what manner? Here, I should clarify that I do not want to suggest that empires are pursuing a standardised and rigid set of imperial practices across the regions they dominate (Sinopoli 1994: 160–1). Instead, the concept of *repertoires of rule* is attractive precisely because it serves to underline that:

> Empire was a variable political form, and we accent the multiple ways in which incorporation and difference were conjugated. Empires' durability depended to a large extent on their ability to combine and shift strategies, from consolidating territory to planting enclaves, from loose supervision of intermediaries to tight, top-down control. (Burbank and Cooper 2010: 16)

These repertoires of rule can include a wide range of practices, such as deportation, colonisation, fortification, agricultural development, elite cooptation and religious and ideological reforms. At the same time, however, the idea of a repertoire underlines the notion that there is a *specific toolkit of practices and technologies* that are used by a particular empire, some of which might be shared with other empires, whereas other technologies and practices are not. For example, some empires have linked themselves to a particular religion, whereas others have been more inclusive and have explicitly celebrated religious diversity.

How, then, do the repertoires of rule of the Assyrian Empire compare to those of other empires in the Ancient Near East? An obvious point of departure is to compare the Assyrian repertoires of rule with those of the preceding Mittani state, from which as a former vassal state it took over its territories, the provincial structure, the organisation of the army in 'ten-groups' and the *ilku* system. Postgate has gone so far as to qualify the Middle Assyrian state as a 'Nachfolgerstaat' (successor state). Notwithstanding the inheritance of such elements, I argue that the Middle Assyrian state and that of the Mittani differ fundamentally.

First, the Mittani state appears to have preferred to rule through indirect means. Most of its territories consisted of a series of vassals: polities that were ruled either by a king or by a council (Otto 2014). Only in exceptional cases and reluctantly did the Mittani annex territories, for example when a vassal proved unreliable, as was the case with the polity of Aleppo (Von Dassow 2014: 20–2). By contrast, the Middle Assyrian state as a rule incorporated conquered territories into its provincial system, and only in exceptional cases did the state tolerate vassal kingdoms, such as the 'Land of Mari', Katmuhu, and Idu, in its empire (Koliński 2015).

Second, the Mittani state lacks what I would call a 'culture of empire'. With this term, I want to highlight an ideologically charged distinction between

an imperial 'high' culture, on the one hand, and vernacular traditions, on the other. A *culture of empire* is manifested in a set of normatively charged and clearly defined ideas on how imperial subjects should eat, dress, bury and behave in general. These practices are in part constituted and objectified by particular types and styles of material culture. Typically, a *culture of empire* serves as an ideology that legitimates domination of other groups, which are in need of imperial civilisation and orderliness, and justifies a clear distinction between imperial subjects and other groups (e.g. Dietler 2005; Bernbeck 2010; Mattingly 2011; Ristvet, this volume).

The Mittani state is almost completely invisible in material culture and in textual sources. Thus, for example, the Mittani state did not have a standardised bureaucracy. Instead rather different recording procedures were used in Ugarit and Arrapha, located on the western and eastern peripheries respectively (Postgate 2015). Neither did the Mittani state have homogeneous institutions. For example, the *dimtu* denoted a radically different form of agricultural estate across the empire: whereas in the east at Nuzi they were owned by wealthy absentee families, in the west at Ugarit they were royal estates owned by the local dynasty (Koliński 2001). Likewise, we lack a distinctively Mittani *culture of empire*, manifested in a lack of imperial style of monumental architecture, art and clothing, among others. Neither did the Mittani have a distinctive ceramic repertoire, burial traditions or house forms, which can be studied in order to assess the Mittani presence and how this impacted on preexisting situations in particular regions (Otto 2014; Schwartz 2014). This lack of a material culture that can be associated with the Mittani state has puzzled and frustrated generations of archaeologists. In this context, the contrast with the Middle Assyrian state, which can be linked to a standardised ceramic repertoire (Pfälzner 1997; Duistermaat 2015), and particular house types and burial traditions (Sauvage 2005; Düring, Visser and Akkermans 2015), is particularly striking.

The preceding characterisation of the Mittani repertoires of rule is also largely applicable for the manner in which the Hittite and Egyptian empires operated in the Levant. For example, Glatz has discussed the nature of the Hittite presence in the northern Levant (Glatz 2009; 2013) as one in which only Hittite administrative practices occur, in the forms of texts and sealing practices, but in which other aspects of Hittite material culture, such as pottery, building forms and art styles, are almost completely absent. Likewise, the Egyptian Empire in the Levant is nearly invisible on the ground, apart from a few so-called governor residences, which are relatively small structures. Of course, Levantine elites appropriated specific Egyptian artefacts, often valuable ones, for their own agendas (Higginbotham 1996; 2000), but this also occurred in areas that were outside the Egyptian Empire, as in the Hittite vassal state of Ugarit (Glatz 2013). Further, like the Mittani, both the Egyptians and Hittites exerted control over vassal kingdoms in the Levant, rather than annexing the

region and implementing a provincial administration (Moran 1992; Altman 2008; Glatz 2013).

However, unlike the Mittani state, the Hittite and Egyptian empires also applied more intrusive repertoires of rule in other parts of their domains. Egypt implemented a colonisation and acculturation program in Nubia, which finally resulted in the annexation of the region and its conversion into a province of Egypt (Smith 1997; 2013). Likewise, the Hittite Empire applied a diverse set of strategies in various parts of its domains, ranging from territorial integration to intensive hegemony and indirect control, the latter occurring in the Levant (Glatz 2009; 2013). While the idea of concentric zones of decreasing imperial interference works as a general description of the Hittite Empire, a closer look reveals that within these zones the degree of incorporation into the Hittite state and interference with local affairs varied considerably. This is clear, for example, in the creation of a secondary capital at Karkamiš in its Syrian territories (Harmanşah 2011: 77), which survived as a city with Hittite characteristics for centuries after the Hittite collapse. This case can be contrasted with a lack of recognisably Hittite elements in most other cities and landscapes in Hittite Syria during the Late Bronze Age.

The distinction drawn here between the repertoires of rule of Assyria, on the one hand, and those of the Hittites and the Egyptians, on the other, is therefore not to be regarded in exclusionary terms. All three states resorted to practices such as deportation, colonisation, agricultural development, the destruction of some urban centres and the construction of strongholds if and when necessary (Smith 1997; Glatz and Matthews 2005; Glatz 2009; Smith 2013; Düring 2015b). However, the Assyrian state seems to apply these practices much more regularly and systematically than the Hittites and Egyptians did, although like the latter they are flexible in how they deal with conquered regions, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

An interesting question, therefore, would be whether Assyria was indeed more programmatic in applying its repertoires of rule to conquered territories, or whether other factors (partially) explain the Assyrian case. One factor we could think of is that the Assyrian territories were (much) more marginal and depopulated than the Levantine territories subjected by the Hittites and Egyptians. Survey data suggest a decline in urbanism (larger settlements) and overall population densities (aggregate site areas) in the latter part of the second millennium BCE in northern Mesopotamia (Wilkinson 2000: 243–5; Wossink 2009: 86–7; Wilkinson et al. 2014: 93). Whether or not this trend was related to drier climatic conditions, as is sometimes postulated (e.g. Reculeau 2011: 59–69), remains an unresolved issue (Riehl et al. 2013). It is plausible, therefore, that well-populated and agriculturally productive landscapes had to be actively engineered by the Assyrian state in large parts of its controlled territories. This situation can be contrasted with the more temperate Levantine

territories to the west, controlled by the Hittites and the Egyptians, which did not need such reinvigoration. Indeed, I will argue in this chapter that the scale and nature of Assyrian interventions varied greatly between regions and were relatively limited in well-populated and agriculturally productive areas under their control.

A PROVINCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE MIDDLE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

So far, it has been suggested that the Assyrian state resorted to practices such as deportation, colonisation, agricultural development, the destruction of some urban centres and the construction of strongholds more regularly and systematically than other ancient empires of the Near East. This characterisation, however, glosses over very substantial differences in what happened in various territories conquered by the Assyrians. I argue that these differences tell us far more about the *modus operandi* of the Assyrian state than generalising statements do.

In the study of empires, it has become common practice to interpret imperial states as relatively homogeneous manifestations of a limited number of types. Studies on Assyria exemplify this type of reasoning. In a bold paper, Liverani (1988: 86) has compared the Assyrian Empire to a network, arguing that 'the empire is not a spread of land, but a network of communications over which material goods are carried'. Liverani envisaged the empire as consisting of a series of Assyrian strongholds in essentially alien landscapes and populations, and he argues that military campaigns were primarily undertaken to support and expand this network of Assyrian settlements. In a very similar vein, Bernbeck (2010) has recently compared the Assyrian Empire to that of the United States, arguing that both are systems in which military bases were instrumental in controlling alien territories.

Postgate (1992, now also Cancik-Kirschbaum 2014) responded to Liverani's thesis. According to him, the area of Hanigalbat, that is, the north Mesopotamian remnants of the Mittani state, was brought under direct territorial control of the Assyrians, and considered part of the land of Assur. The regions beyond these provinces were controlled as vassal states, or in Postgate's terminology, they were 'under the yoke of Assur'. Postgate argues that while Assyrian presence was necessarily concentrated in certain nodes, the provinces were homogeneously administrated. This model is essentially a variant of the territorial-hegemonic model first put forward by Luttwak.

While both the network model advocated by Liverani and Bernbeck and the territorial-hegemonic model favoured by Postgate are *good to think with*, they homogenise empires to a more or less standardised system of domination across the subjugated territories. Such reconstructions tend to prioritise historical and iconographic sources from the capital and court. Typically, an

empire such as that of Assyria will be described as a set of interlinked institutions, and the discussion will focus on matters such as provincial governance, the organisation of the military and taxation (Postgate 1992; Bedford 2009; Barjamovic 2013: 142; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2014). Such a perspective is at odds, however, with the available data, which suggest much more diversity than these models would allow for. Here, it should be noted that our knowledge of the Assyrian Empire has increased significantly since the late 1980s to early 1990s, when Liverani and Postgate first formulated their ideas (Parker 2001; Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009; Postgate 2007; 2013; Düring 2015b). These studies make it possible to perceive diversity in Assyria to a degree that was not previously conceivable.

Meanwhile, in the field of empire studies, the idea that empires are homogeneously administrated and were economically integrated entities has come under serious scrutiny (Maier 2006; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Bang and Bayly 2011; Mattingly 2011). The focus in these studies has been on the actual situation on the ground in specific regions and how this situation changed dynamically over time. The outcome of recent research is that empires are increasingly regarded as a patchwork of institutions and personnel that differed greatly from one part of the empire to the next. Further, empires did not form as a result of an overarching grand strategy conceived of by the central government (Kagan 2007), as for example Luttwak has suggested earlier. Rather, these empires came about through a series of historical events in which entrepreneurs played a major role. It has been argued for both the British and the Roman empires that influential nonstate actors managed to 'hijack' imperial agendas to suit their own interests. This could take the form of swaying imperial authorities to annex territories which provided no clear benefits to the empire, but did serve the interests of particular groups (Ludden 2011: 140; Terrenato 2014: 46). Thus, empires might form for reasons that do not necessarily make sense in terms of economic or other benefits for the centre.

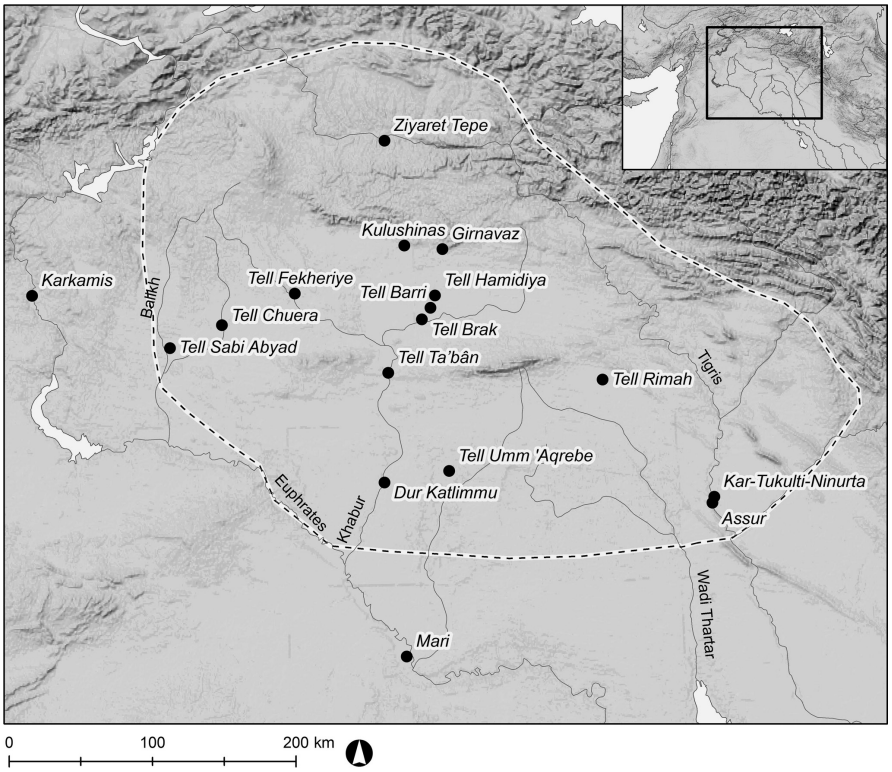
These perspectives from empire studies resonate with a number of recent studies on ancient Assyria. Archaeologists such as Parker (2001; 2003; 2012), Morandi Bonacossi (2000; 2008; this volume) and Matney (2010; 2016) have been investigating the effects of the Neo-Assyrian Empire on conquered societies and landscapes on the ground, rather than making inferences from a handful of texts. They have concluded that while some regions show significant changes, others were less affected. Bradley Parker has suggested a modified network model as a better description of the Assyrian Empire, arguing, for example, that the Assyrians imposed direct territorial control over the Upper Tigris and the northern Khabur and Balikh, but that the intervening Tur Abdin Mountains remained outside the effective control of the Assyrians, for reasons that were in part strategic, in part logistic and in part economic.

Likewise, on the basis of cuneiform sources, Pongratz-Leisten (2011) has argued that there was no homogeneous religious system across the Assyrian provinces and that local religious practices remained dominant in most places in the conquered regions of Hanigalbat (the rump state of the Mittani). In her view, there was a significant degree of accommodation to local religious systems by the Assyrians, an accommodation which is not evident from the official state propaganda.

Finally, the idea that the Assyrians had a grand strategy for the annexation of the territories in Upper Mesopotamia, as sometimes suggested (Kühne 2015), can be problematised. Jakob (2015) describes how Assyria was at first reluctant to annex Hanigalbat. Annexation occurred only after some decades during which the strategy of creating a vassal state kept under control by periodic military campaigns had failed to produce the desired results (also Pongratz-Leisten 2011: 115–16). This reluctance of Assyria to annex the regions to the west seems to have been rooted in three factors. First, the region apparently was difficult to control militarily for the Assyrians. Second, Assyria was forced into a protracted war with the Kassites to the south, which absorbed most of its military means (Llop 2011). Third, the Assyrian centre stood to gain relatively little from the annexation of the western territories. The only resource that this region could offer, apart from manpower, was agricultural produce, mainly barley and sheep. Such agricultural products could not be transported overland to the Assyrian core region in an cost-effective manner (Clark and Haswell 1967; Bairoch 1990; Düring 2015a).

Indeed, one might ask why Hanigalbat was annexed at all, and who benefitted from this annexation. One reason, obviously, might have been the need to pacify a troublesome region. However, if we focus on the outcome of this annexation, it is clear that one important group of beneficiaries was the powerful Assyrian elites (Postgate 2007) who took up the governance of the new territories (Harrak 1987: 195–205). It is, therefore, not inconceivable that the annexation was undertaken in part to placate these Assyrian elites. Another group who might have benefitted are Assyrian farmers-colonists, who are in evidence, for example, at Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Chuera (Wiggermann 2000; Postgate 2016: 36–7).

Do our archaeological data support the view that the Assyrian expansion was not following a grand strategy, occurred in a rather haphazard fashion and benefitted primarily specific groups of Assyrian society ready to migrate? To investigate this matter, in the following sections I would like to map out the variability in the repertoires of rule of the Middle Assyrian period by considering in sequence a number of regions that were part of this empire (Figure 2.1). Drawing on data generated by surface surveys, excavations and texts, I will focus the discussion on the following issues. First, are there any clear changes in the density of occupation of an area (indexed by the number of sites and the



2.1. Map of the Middle Assyrian Empire with key sites discussed in the text. Produced by Tijm Lanjouw.

aggregate site area detected in surveys), and do we have textual evidence for people being brought into or taken out of the region? Second, what changes can we observe in the settlement system of a region? Is there evidence for site destruction and abandonment, the construction of new forts or cities or the concentration of populations in fewer settlements? Third, do we see changes in the farming, for example an expansion of farm lands, an intensification of farming or the establishment of *dunnu* (farming) estates? Fourth, can we document infrastructural investments? Is there evidence for the construction of road or canal systems?

The Assur Region in Middle Assyrian Times

We know far too little about the Assur region and how it was transformed in the second half of the Late Bronze Age, in the formative period of the Assyrian state. The main reason for this is that research in this region has been impeded by politics and war episodes, which means that this area is one of the few regions in Mesopotamia in which systematic survey projects have not been undertaken. Nevertheless, drawing on the work of the Makhul Dam project

directed by Sulaiman (2010), scholars such as Miglus and Mühl have been able to discuss changes in the hinterlands of Assur. From about 1500 BCE, an increase in settlements numbers appears to occur in the area south of Assur, where at least eight new settlements were created (Miglus 2011; Mühl 2015). Postgate (1982) discusses a number of *dunnu* settlements (agricultural estates) located in the Wadi Tharthar/Šiššar region, due west of Assur.

Further, we can mention the creation of the new capital of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta in the late thirteenth century BCE, located some 4 kilometres upstream from Assur and estimated to have measured ca. 480 hectares (Gilibert 2008; Dittmann 2011). Associated with this new capital was the construction of large canals for agricultural development of its surroundings (Bagg 2000; Wilkinson et al. 2005; Mühl 2015). The construction of this monumental size capital involved an enormous labour force, mostly consisting of deportees, who had to be fed and provided with construction materials, many of which would not have been locally available.

In concert, these data suggest two things. First, there was a substantial increase in population in the Assur region in the second half of the second millennium BC. While this must have been in part the result of settling populations from elsewhere in this area, the earliest foundation of new settlements, from about 1500 BCE, predates the expansion of the Assyrian state and can be interpreted as evidence for an internal population boom in the Assyrian core region. It is conceivable that such a boom provided both the means and the need for Assyrian expansion. Second, many of the new settlements of the Middle Assyrian period in the core region were in marginal locations. Even if we postulate a better climate in the period, these settlements would have required irrigation technologies to facilitate farming (Mühl 2012: 89). Most of these settlements were subsequently abandoned in the Iron Age, after Assyria conquered more fertile regions to the east and north (Miglus 2011: 225; Mühl 2013). In conclusion, the core region of the empire witnessed a significant increase in population that was made possible by the development of new irrigation systems and subsequently saw the construction of a monumental new capital.

The Lower Khabur in Middle Assyrian Times

The Lower Khabur is without doubt one of the best investigated parts of the Middle Assyrian Empire. A long-term systematic project was undertaken under the direction of Hartmut Kühne that involved both excavations at the site of Dur Katlimmu and a survey of the broader landscape of the Lower Khabur (Kühne 2013). While the survey awaits full publication, important studies of the landscape transformations occurring in Assyrian times have been published (Morandi Bonacossi 1996; 2008; Kühne 2009; Kuleman-Ossen 2009;

Koliński 2015). In the Mittani period, a total of sixteen sites were recorded which included both small villages and hamlets, as well as towns. The settlements were clustered in the northern part of the region, and in the south only a few modest-sized villages existed. This system changes significantly in the Middle Assyrian period, for which only nine sites have been documented. These nine sites are mostly towns, and villages appear to have been largely abandoned at this point, while the aggregate site area is similar to that of the preceding Mittani period. The concentration of the population into fewer, possibly fortified, towns has been interpreted as a defensive measure (Morandi Bonacossi 2008: 199).

Apart from these changes in the overall settlement system, three further important developments occurred in the Lower Balikh in the Middle Assyrian period. The first consists of the 'foundation' of the city of Dur Katlimmu by Adad-Nirari I (1295–1264 BC) (Kühne 2015), on the location of an older town called Dur-Iggid-Lim (Reculeau 2015), and the development of this city into the capital of the viceroy of Assyria ruling the western provinces. Relatively little is known about the Middle Assyrian settlement at the site: the evidence consists of a partially excavated storage complex/administrative building only.

It has been argued that a major canal system was developed along the east bank of the Khabur leading up to Dur Katlimmu in the Middle Assyrian period (Ergenzinger and Kühne 1991; Kühne 2012), and that this was part of a broader effort to cultivate the steppe by means of irrigation. Other scholars have contested the existence of this canal in the Middle Assyrian period, however, and argue that it should be linked to the significant increase in settlements in the Neo-Assyrian period (Morandi Bonacossi 2008: 199, this volume; Koliński 2015). Whatever the case, it is clear that substantial areas were farmed around Dur Katlimmu in the Middle Assyrian period, that much of the work was done by deportees and that this farming was not very productive (Reculeau 2011; Postgate 2016).

Finally, there is consensus among scholars that a desert road was set up between Dur Katlimmu and Assur, with way stations along its trajectory (Pfälzner 1993; Morandi Bonacossi 2000; Faist 2006), of which Tell Umm Aqrebe, located some 30 kilometres east of Dur Katlimmu, probably is the best example. In Assyria, the road system mainly took the form of creating facilities along existing routes and actual road construction was probably very limited, given our lack of data for this. Clearly for any empire the existence of such a road system facilitating fast sharing of information over large distances and the swift transport of military personnel is essential to maintain control over large territories (Taagepera 1978; Colburn 2013).

In conclusion, the landscapes and settlements in the Lower Khabur were profoundly transformed in the Middle Assyrian period, with the concentration

of population in a few towns, the construction of a new regional capital and the building of a road system that linked this region directly to that of the capital. The decision to create the secondary capital of the empire in such a marginal and remote location has been linked to the difficulty to control the more densely populated Khabur triangle to the north (Kühne 2013: 475). Thus, the investment in this region can be understood as an effort to bypass existing power centres and to create a reliable and safe basis for the Assyrian administration from which more populous areas to the north could be controlled. The configuration created in this manner is not that different from that at Assur itself, which was also in a marginal location and was established in an attempt to control a densely populated rich agricultural territory to the north.

The Upper Khabur in Middle Assyrian Times

The Upper Khabur triangle was a densely populated region that constituted the agricultural heartland of the Mittani state. The region has annual precipitation ranging from 200 to 600 millimetres and constitutes a major agricultural production zone.

How did the Assyrians deal with this region? Various scholars have assessed the composite data from this region (Szuchman 2007; D'Agostino 2008; Tenu 2009; 2015) and have concluded that the Assyrian impact was relatively limited. Assyrian material culture is concentrated mainly in administrative centres, and local populations in all probability continued to use 'vernacular' material culture (Tenu 2013; D'Agostino 2015; Jakob 2015). It appears, then, that the Assyrian state largely accommodated its administration upon the existing settlements and agricultural practices (Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009; 2015), something that has emerged very clearly from excavations at sites such as Tell Barri, Tell Fekheriye and Tell Brak (D'Agostino 2008; Tenu 2009; Bonatz 2013).

Some settlements in the Khabur area, such as Tell Brak, seem to have lost their previous importance, but others, such as Tell Barri, Tell al Hamidiye, Girnavaz, Tell Chuera and Tell Fekheriye were maintained as important cities (D'Agostino 2008; Bonatz 2013; Tenu 2015). Remarkably, the Assyrian state even incorporated previously independent polities in their state, such as 'the Land of Mari', centring on Tell Ta'ban, with a local dynasty now serving under the Assyrian king (Shibata 2015). For the region of the Khabur triangle, Pongratz-Leisten (2011) has argued for a significant degree of accommodation to local religious systems by the Assyrians. There was at least one newly established settlement in the Khabur triangle as well: this is Kulushinas, probably to be located at Tell Amuda (Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2015). The site is located on the northern edge of the Khabur triangle, and might have been located in an area that lacked a suitable preexisting urban centre. Likewise, agricultural *dunnu* estates appear very rare in the Khabur triangle, whereas they are common for

example in Balikh, Wadi Thartar, upper Tigris and around Tell Billa (Düring 2015a: 58; Tenu 2015: 80–2).

Systematic survey data that can be used to assess what happened on the ground in the Middle Assyrian period in the Khabur triangle are scarce. Although the region has been well investigated, only a few survey projects have specifically distinguished Middle Assyrian sites from general Late Bronze Age assemblages. Two surveys that do provide this type of data are the North Jazira Survey (Wilkinson and Tucker 1995) and the Hamoukar Survey (Ur 2002; 2010).[1] In the North Jazira Survey, there is decline in settlement numbers, from forty-seven in the preceding 'Khabur period' (Middle Bronze Age; the Mitanni period could be separated out for three sites only) to twenty-eight in the Middle Assyrian period, and this is accompanied by a decline in the aggregate site area. It is possible, however, that the absence of painted pottery has resulted in the underrepresentation of Middle Assyrian sites (Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 59–60). The overall picture in the Hamoukar Survey is very different: from a total of nine sites in the Middle Bronze Age, there is an increase to twenty-one sites in the Late Bronze Age. As was the case in North Jazira Survey, relatively few sites could be distinguished for the Mittani period, and the distinction between Mittani and Middle Assyrian was dropped in the final publication (Ur 2002: 74; 2010: 267).

Thus both surveys provide limited data on the situation preceding the Middle Assyrian 'takeover' and are of limited use to assess whether or not there were significant changes in settlement systems or agricultural systems. While this is no doubt due in part to methodological problems – the problem of how to distinguish Mittani and Middle Assyrian period sites (in fact, assemblages of both periods might have coexisted (D'Agostino 2015)), the contrast with the Lower Khabur and the Balikh (next section), where a clear transformation of the regional landscape is documented, is striking and suggests that Assyrian rule was indeed largely 'hands-off' in the Khabur triangle.

In this respect, it is of interest to note that Jakob (2015: 180–2) has classified imperial control at nearby Harbe (Tell Chuera) as very tenuous, and that Assyrian officials had very little power to stop bands of raiders who were harassing caravans and small settlements, or even to find sheep herds to destroy locust eggs. Thus, Assyrian repertoires of rule in the Upper Khabur are probably best understood as the imposition of a – not always successful – administrative Assyrian system over an area otherwise largely unaffected by the new powers that be.

The Balikh in Middle Assyrian Times

Like in the Lower Khabur region, the transition to Middle Assyrian control in the Balikh is relatively well investigated. The research has centred on the

extraordinarily rich dataset from the site of Tell Sabi Abyad, excavated between 1986 and 2010, where a Middle Assyrian *dunnu* settlement was almost completely excavated and survey evidence gathered by Akkemans prior to the start of the excavations.

In the Balikh Valley, there are significant changes in the settlement pattern that have been analysed in some detail by Jerry Lyon (2000; also Koliński 2015). In the Mittani period, there were a substantial number of settlements (n = 41) in the valley, including in its southern half. Halfway through the Late Bronze Age, most of the sites in the Balikh Valley appear to have been abandoned, given that in a number of excavated sites, such as Tell Jidle, Ibn es Sehab, Hammam et Turkman and Tell Sabi Abyad, there appear to be abandonment episodes (Lyon 2000: 92). It seems that pastoral groups, and in particular the Suteans, now dominated the area (Brown 2013). Whatever the case, when the Middle Assyrian state finally took control of the area, many of the sites in the southern Balikh were not reoccupied. One possible explanation is that the southern Balikh might have functioned as a buffer zone, with the Hittites entrenched along the Euphrates farther west (Lyon 2000; Luciani 1999–2001).

The Middle Assyrian focus in the Balikh Valley was in the northern part of the valley, where rain-fed agriculture is possible. In this area, there are some clear shifts in the settlement system: many large 'urban' sites were abandoned, and new settlements were mostly small rural places, resulting in a substantial decrease in the aggregate site area. Only six sites have definitive evidence for Middle Assyrian period occupation, and a further six are tentatively dated to this period.

One of these new settlements is the agricultural estate, or *dunnu*, of Tell Sabi Abyad. The architecture of this relatively small settlement, which comprises about 1 hectare, was well preserved. At the end of its level 5, to be dated to about 1160 BCE (Klinkenberg 2016: 10), the settlement was abandoned or destroyed and fires occurred in parts of the settlement. These circumstances have contributed to the preservation of an enormous amount of artefacts: some ten thousand objects have been retrieved which can be used to reconstruct the zoning of activities in this settlement. These objects include four hundred cuneiform tablets which inform us about the administration of this farming estate and how it functioned within the Middle Assyrian Empire (Wiggermann 2000). Thus we have a very high-resolution archive to inform us on this fortified estate and its role in the empire and in local society.

For example, we have numerous archives at Tell Sabi Abyad that inform us about various activities that took place in *dunnu*, such as bread, beer and pottery production, and these can be linked to artefacts that were found in the estate. As an example of how texts shed light on the functioning of the *dunnu,* we can discuss T04–37 (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015: 119). This text is a treaty between the Assyrians and the Suteans, stipulating that the local

Suteans should refrain from aiding the enemies of the Assyrians, also if they be other Suteans, and then goes on to stipulate how Suteans wanting to obtain beer from the *dunnu* should behave – they should pay immediately or leave a deposit, and they should drink in their own camps rather than at the *dunnu*. Clearly, there had been a few incidents concerning beer consumption that necessitated such stipulations! It is intriguing that the availability of beer at the site would have impacted upon local society and its relation to the Assyrian settlement in significant ways.

The Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu* was a large farming estate for which, according to Frans Wiggermann (2000), about nine hundred people worked, only a few of whom lived in the central settlement. Both in the central settlements and in the outlying villages, we find free Assyrians and unfree serfs of other ethnicities (predominantly Hurrians). From the *dunnu,* a large estate was farmed, measuring about 36 square kilometres and producing about 300 tonnes of barley per annum (200 tonnes surplus). At the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu,* large-scale farming took place for surplus production in a landscape previously little cultivated through the deployment of a large labour force, the investment of substantial resources and probably the introduction of new agricultural technologies such as irrigation.

It is clear, then, that the cultural landscape in the Tell Sabi Abyad area was altered in profound ways: first, the existing settlement system was reshuffled; second, large numbers of people were brought into the area, both free people from the Assyrian heartland and deportees, thereby creating a new demographic reality; and, third, large-scale farming estates were established. Especially if one considers that Tell Sabi Abyad was only one of a series of *dunnu* estates, although probably the largest, established in the northern Balikh, it is clear that what happened in the Middle Assyrian period in the Balikh Valley can best be described as a project of profound social and landscape engineering.

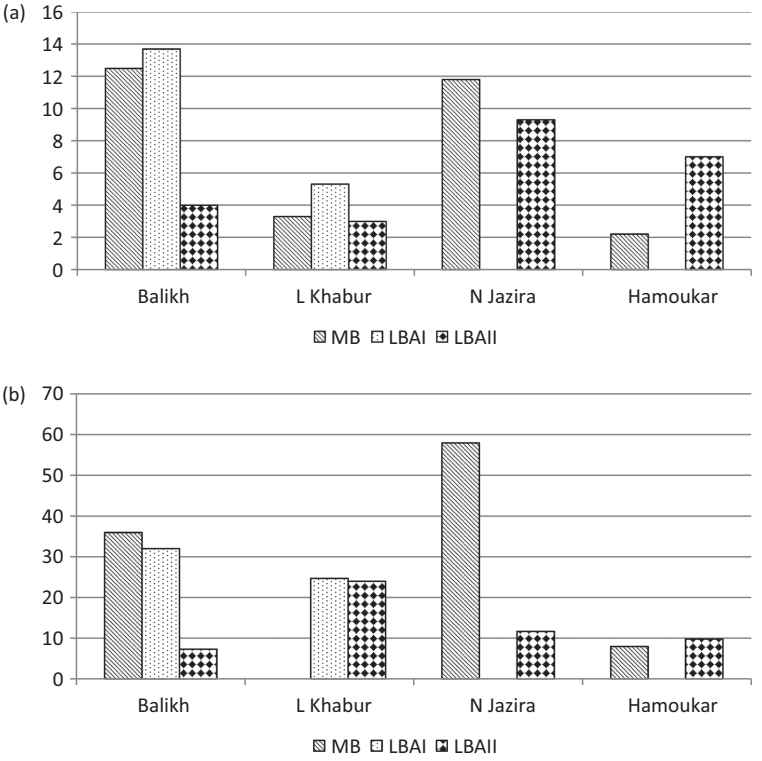
ASSYRIAN REPERTOIRES OF RULE RECONSIDERED

From the discussion of regional sequences in the Assur region, the Lower Khabur, the Upper Khabur and the Balikh, it has become apparent that Assyrian repertoires of rule were far from homogeneously applied and have variable effects on settlement systems (Table 2.1).

In some regions, such as the Assur region, there is a clear increase in population. In others, such as the Lower and Upper Khabur, the population seems more or less stable, whereas in the Balikh Valley there is a clear decrease in the population density (Figure 2.2). In most regions, we have clear evidence for 'deportees' and settlers being brought into the region, for example in the Assur region, in the Balikh and the Lower Khabur, whereas in the Upper Khabur this does not appear to have been important.

TABLE 2.1. *Overview of the Transformations Occurring in the Four Discussed Regions under Assyrian Control*

Demography		Assur region	Lower Khabur	Upper Khabur	Balikh
		Increase	Stable	Stable	Decrease
Deportees		+++	+	+	+++
Settlement system	Destructions and abandonments		++	+	+++
	New forts				++
	New cities	++	++	+	
	Concentration		++		
Agriculture	Expansion	++	++		++
	Intensification	++			?
	Dunnu estates	++		+	++
	Canal building	++	++		?
Infrastructure	Canals	+++	?		?
	Roads	+	++	?	?



2.2. Number of sites per century (a) and aggregate site area per century (b) for the Balikh, Lower Khabur, North Jazira and Hamoukar surveys (based on Wilkinson and Tucker 1995; Lyon 2000; Morandi Bonacossi 2008; Kühne 2009; Ur 2010; Koliński 2015).

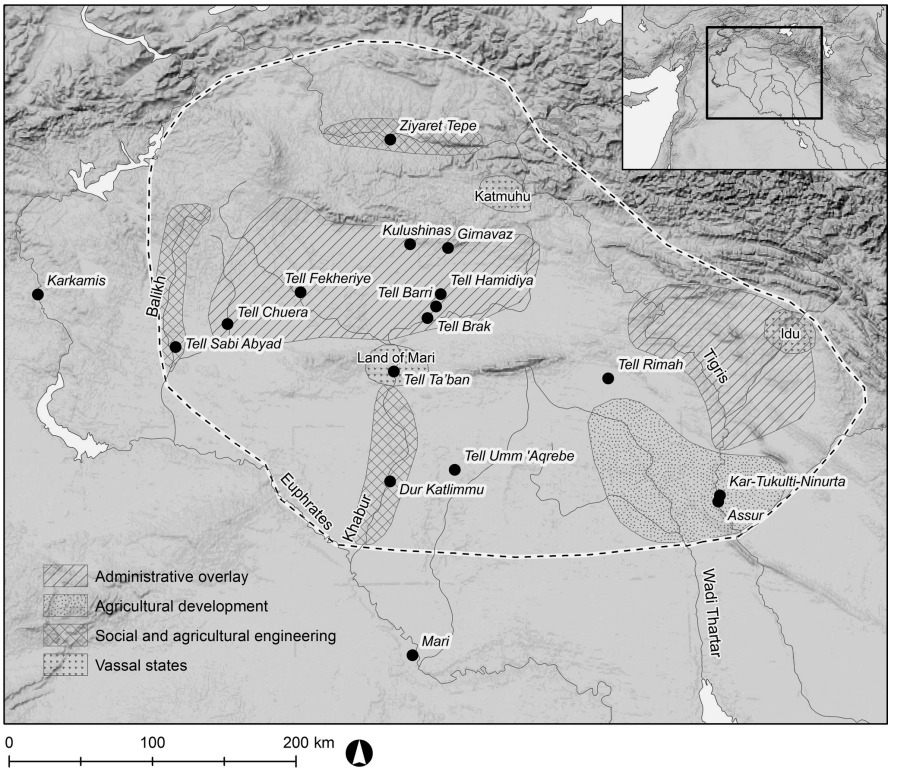
Likewise, the changes in *settlement systems* are the least pronounced in the Upper Khabur. Some settlements were abandoned or destroyed, and new foundations occur, but the overwhelming pattern in this region is of continuity in settlement systems. This can be contrasted to the development of new settlements, and even a capital, in the Assur region. The concentration of the population in a limited number of larger, probably fortified, settlements in the Lower Khabur, and the development of a new (mainly agricultural) settlement system in the Balikh Valley.

In terms of *agriculture*, we again see little change in the Upper Khabur, but an expansion of farming into marginal terrain in the Assur region, the Lower Khabur and the Balikh Valley. In the Assur hinterlands, we have evidence of intensification through the construction of irrigation systems, and the same probably occurred at some level in the Lower Khabur and the Balikh, although the evidence for this is controversial in some cases. The establishment of *dunnu* estates occurs in the Assur region and the Balikh Valley. Finally, there is some evidence for infrastructural investments, in the form of a road with way stations connecting Assur and Dur-Katlimmu and the construction of canals in the Assur region (and possibly in the Lower Khabur and the Balikh).

How can we best model the variable nature of the Assyrian repertoires of rule across the territories which they controlled? Figure 2.3 represents my best attempt at a visualisation of the different processes occurring in various parts of the empire. Of course, I have discussed only some of the regions of the Middle Assyrian state.[2] Additional regional trajectories occur along the Middle Euphrates, such as the Mari region, where a series of fortifications were apparently constructed (Tenu, Montero Fenollós and Caramelo 2012); on the Upper Tigris region, where we see processes similar to those in the Balikh (Radner 2004); and the region between Erbil and Mosul, which might be comparable to the Upper Khabur, in that there is little disruption to existing settlements and a dense network of small rural settlements (Morandi Bonacossi, this volume).

Thus, asserting that Assyria practised large-scale deportations, constructed strongholds in occupied territories and built a road infrastructure only captures part of the picture. It is becoming increasingly clear that arrangement and strategies in Assyrian-controlled territories varied per region and over time. The idea that the marginal territories of the Assyrians had suffered from a decline in urbanism, population and agricultural revenues (Wilkinson 2000: 243–5; Wossink 2009: 86–7; Wilkinson et al. 2014: 93), and that Assyria therefore had to reengineer populated and agriculturally productive regions (Kühne 2015), does appear to partially explain the diversity of practices observed.

One could also postulate that the diverse Assyrian repertoires of rule represent an experimental stage in the early development of the Assyrian Empire. However, hints of a similar situation in the later Assyrian Empire (Parker 2001; 2003), and in other empires (e.g. Malpass and Alconini 2010; Ludden 2011), suggest that this type of diversity is the norm rather than the exception. The



2.3. Map of the variability in Middle Assyrian repertoires of rule per region. Map produced by Tijm Lanjouw.

agents of empires, then, did not roll out a standard set of practices when conquering a new territory, but had to improvise given the local circumstances and the means available to them.

The repertoires of rule used by Assyrian imperial agents were of course part of their cultural repertoire, and in that sense they did form a set. At the same time, this repertoire of rule would have been quite dynamic, in that new elements could be adopted and existing practices could be transformed. Take, for example, the novel use of orthostats to communicate the power of Assyria in the Iron Age (Düring 2015b: 304–6). Further, there is a logic to *which elements of the repertoires of rule* were applied by the Assyrians in a particular region. For example, the complete redevelopment of settlement and agricultural systems, which occurred both in the Balikh and the Upper Tigris, took place only in regions of rich agricultural potential that lacked a suitable settlement and agricultural system when the Assyrians annexed these territories. Elsewhere, as in the Upper Khabur and in the Erbil–Mosul region, the Assyrian policy largely seems one of accommodation, rather than social or landscape engineering. While we could interpret these differences in purely practical terms, it would appear equally plausible that the Assyrians lacked the power and the resources to effectively control these densely populated regions and were forced to

develop alternative regions to achieve their domination. Perhaps, therefore, we have overestimated the power and the resources of the Middle Assyrian Empire. While the Assyrian state did on many occasions act brutally when it was possible and necessary, in the core regions of the empire negotiation would probably have been more important than imposition.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued three interrelated points. First, in Mesopotamia creating and maintaining an empire was primarily a logistical problem. In an agricultural economy in which transport mostly took the form of caravans, the benefits of empire were low and the costs high. Creating an empire under such conditions could only succeed by adopting local rather than global strategies, in which both the benefits and costs of the state were regionally organised rather than benefitting the capital region.

Second, the Assyrian state was more imperial than its competitors, in that it created a 'culture of empire' that would have appealed to participants, and that legitimated its policies of social and agricultural engineering which were applied when necessary and feasible. In these respects, the Assyrians differed markedly from their competitors, and it is argued that the Assyrian success was at least in part a result of this component in their repertoires of rule.

Third, within the region controlled by Assyria, the application of their repertoires of rule was far from standardised and their power was often remarkably weak. The Assyrian Empire was patched together by imperial agents improvising with the limited means and possibilities at their disposal and initial successes were often undone later when power balances shifted, as exemplified for example by the gradual abandonment of the Balikh and Upper Tigris regions at the end of the Middle Assyrian period.

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NOTES

1 The survey undertaken by Lyonnet was extensive in nature and of relatively little use to address changes in settlement systems, although the Assyrian data have been well investigated (Anastasio 2007).

2 A more complete discussion is in preparation (Düring forthcoming).

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