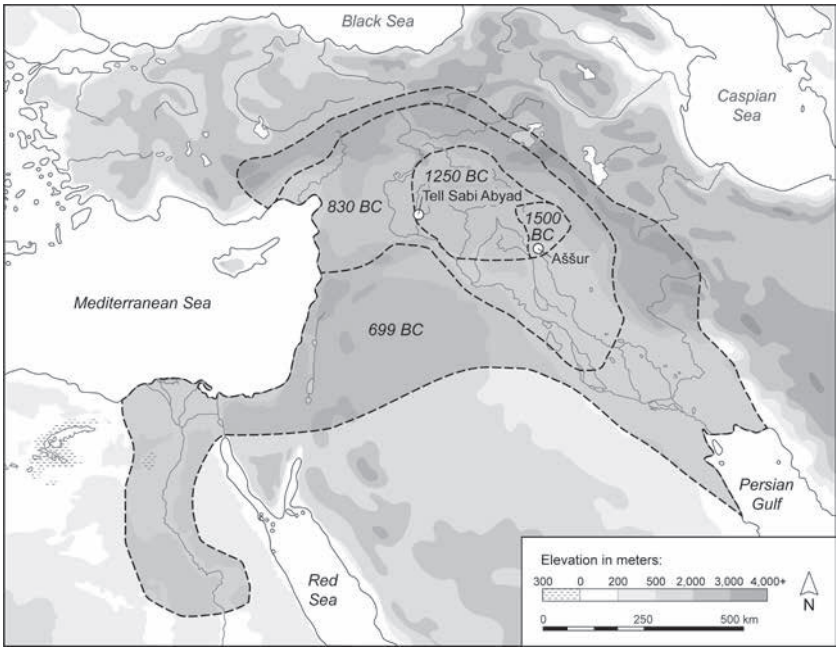

Figure 6.1. Schematic outline of the territorial expansion of the Assyrian Empire through time. Produced by Bleda Düring.

CHAPTER SIX

The Assyrian Threshold

Explaining Imperial Consolidation in the Early Assyrian Empire

BLEDA S. DÜRING

Introduction

From about 1350 BCE, the small city of Assur, a former vassal of the Mittani state, which constituted one of the four great imperial powers of the Amarna Age (along with Kassite Babylonia, New Kingdom Egypt, and the Hittites), started its remarkable transformation into the most enduring and territorially expansive empire of the ancient Near East (Figure 6.1), outcompeting its rivals and emerging as the sole imperial state in the first millennium until its ultimate demise in 612–09 BCE (Postgate 1992; Barjamovic 2013). The Assyrian Empire paved the way for successor empires, such as the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires, and was at the start of a chain of empires.

Some scholars would not agree with this characterization and would be inclined to see the Neo-Assyrian "empire" as something separate and distinct from the Middle Assyrian "state," mainly on the basis of the much larger territorial extent of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the larger numbers of non-Assyrian populations under the imperial yoke (Roaf 1990; Bedford 2009; Cline and Graham 2011). By contrast, I belong to a group of scholars who argue that there is a great deal of continuity in state institutions, territorial control, and imperial repertoires from the final Late Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age. In this perspective, imperialism consists primarily of a form of domination, and the size of the empire is less central. Indeed, the transformation from a small empire to the first world empire arguably took place within the Neo-Assyrian Period during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, from about 744 BCE (D'Agostino 2011; 2015; Kühne 2015, 60; Düring 2018a), and

most of the crucial imperial repertoires that made this expansion possible were already in place from the Middle Assyrian Period onwards.

I argue, therefore, that from a long-term historical perspective, the Assyrian Empire marks a watershed in the history of the ancient Near East. It was the first imperial state that effectively managed to cross what has been called the "Augustan threshold" in studies on the Roman Empire by Doyle (1986, 93–97) and Münkler (2005, 112–17), during which it supposedly transitioned from a system based on networks of allegiance to a more institutional and bureaucratic mode of governance. Disregarding the specifics of the Roman example and how much of the credits should be given to the emperor Augustus, this threshold consisted of the successful management of the transition from a territorial expansion fueled by military successes to a consolidated empire that generates its income from taxation and manages to effectively co-opt at least part of the dominated polities and societies it encompasses. Sinopoli describes the consolidation of empires in very similar terms:

> For an empire to endure beyond the reigns of individual rulers, individual personal relations between rulers and the ruled must be transcended to create an imperial system of structural connections and dependencies among diverse regions and cultural traditions. This process involves a range of constructive and destructive strategies, including the creation of new institutions, administrative structures, and ideological systems, and the disruption of previously autonomous local institutions, as imperial elite seek to strengthen political and ideological allegiances to the center and regulate the flow of resources to imperial coffers. (1994, 163)

Crucially, in this argument, and from my own perspective on empire, the crux of what constitutes an empire is not its scale; they do not need to be subcontinental in their expansion. Instead, an empire is defined by a particular type of power relation in which the imperial polity develops a durable domination of diverse subaltern populations. The earliest empires, whether Mesopotamian, Anatolian, Egyptian, Chinese, Andean, or Mesoamerican, are generally states of relatively limited size of 200,000–700,000 km² (comparable in size to modern medium-size states such as Turkey and Syria; see Taagepera 1978) rather than the subcontinental territories that are attained later. The relatively small Middle Assyrian state (ca. 140,000 km²) qualifies as imperial because from the very outset of its expansion, it developed imperial repertoires that

served to establish a durable domination of non-Assyrian populations. In this paper, I argue that the transition from military expansion to consolidation of imperial power occurred first in the Middle Assyrian Period. This transition is best understood by investigating developments on the ground in provincial and peripheral contexts rather than on the basis of the official propaganda emanating from the palace and its associated elites. In this paper, I reflect on how Assyria managed this transition by focusing on the early Assyrian Empire (ca. 1350–1200 BCE), during which period the foundations of the Assyrian imperial system took shape.

Existing Models of Assyrian Imperialism

Ideas about Assyrian imperialism and how this state managed to successfully dominate much of the ancient Near East for some centuries have a long ancestry. We have rich sources from the Iron Age that specifically deal with the manner in which the Assyrian Empire operated (Fales 2010). The first source consists of the Bible, in which Assyria is portrayed as a ruthless oppressor that used its military advantage to root out all opposition and whose repertoire included deportation practices and the execution of prominent opponents. The second source consists of Assyrian state propaganda, displayed on orthostats in Assyrian palaces, on obelisk monuments, and in the royal annals. In these sources, Assyria is presented as legitimate in its aspirations to rule, the king is ascribed heroic characteristics, and resistance is portrayed as futile. The Neo-Assyrian orthostats, in particular, vividly portray the military supremacy of Assyria, the efforts that the Assyrian army will undertake to bring to heel those who resist, how this army executes opponents, and how they destroy towns and orchards (Ataç 2010; Parker 2015).

The topos of Assyria as a state that succeeded because of its military supremacy and its ruthless oppression is one that resonates in scholarship even today. In a bold paper, Liverani 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" (1988, 86). Liverani envisaged the empire as consisting of a series of Assyrian strongholds placed among essentially alien landscapes and peoples, arguing that military campaigns were primarily undertaken to support and expand this network of Assyrian settlements (see also Parker 2001 and this volume). In a very similar vein, Bernbeck (2010) has recently compared the Assyrian Empire to the United States, arguing that both

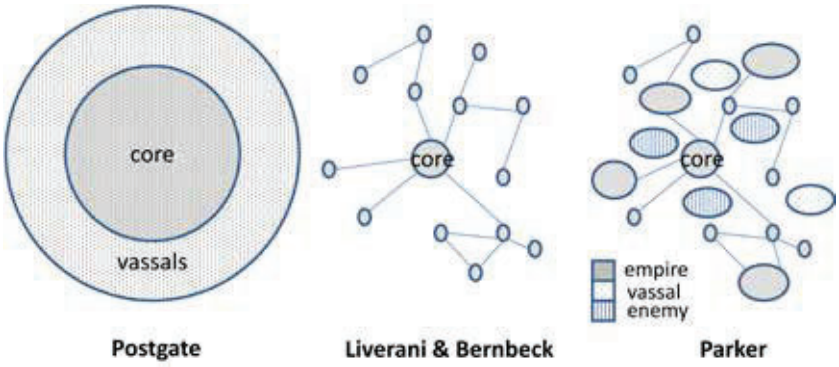

Figure 6.2. Schematic representation of the way in which Postgate (1992), Livera (1988), Bernbeck (2010), and Parker (2001) have conceptualized the Assyrian Empire. Produced by Bleda Düring.

are imperial systems in which military bases were instrumental in controlling alien territories (Figure 6.2).

However, this comparison by Bernbeck begs the question of how it is possible that Assyrian domination over "alien territories" could last for so many centuries, when clearly American military supremacy could not achieve lasting domination in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq in recent history. Moreover, as Fales (2010) has shown, we cannot take Assyrian propaganda at face value. The Assyrian military was not invincible, and it tried as much as possible to avoid pitched battles and long and complex sieges of heavily fortified cities in favor of attacking opponents that were so inferior that many of the Assyrian campaigns can best be described as raiding and extortion missions. This nuance does not necessarily disqualify the idea that Assyrian power was clustered in nodes, possibly separated by large regions in which imperial influence might been limited, but simply suggests that the effects of military supremacy to further imperial domination might have been overstated.

By contrast to these network models, Postgate 1992, now also Cancik-Kirschbaum (2014), has argued for a territorial model of the Assyria Empire in which the core provinces were surrounded by a ring of vassal states. The latter, in Postgate's terminology, were "under the yoke of Assur." By contrast, the area of Hanigalbat (the north Mesopotamian remnants of the Mittani state), was brought under direct territorial control of the Assyrians, according to Postgate, and was considered part of "the land of Assur." Postgate argues that while

Assyrian presence was necessarily concentrated in certain nodes, the provinces were "homogeneously administrated" (1992, 256). His model is essentially a variant of the territorial/hegemonic model first put forward by Luttwak (1976, 22), who envisaged an inner zone of territorial control surrounded by a buffer zone under hegemonic control. In the Roman case, the latter territories were eventually also brought under territorial control, which according to Luttwak was unsustainable, and it would not be difficult to argue that a similar scenario fits the final phase of Assyrian history (Liverani 2001b, 388). The territorial/hegemonic model was subsequently further developed for Andean empires by D'Altroy (1992), who demonstrated that territorial and hegemonic strategies can coexist in complex and dynamic mosaic and that the concentric model was not adequate in many cases.

Postgate bases his concentric model on the analysis of a fairly limited corpus of textual data, and he prioritizes historical and iconographic sources from the capital and court. Further, the Assyrian Empire is typically described as a set of interlinked institutions on the basis of the same sources, and in this characterization, the focus is on matters such as provincial governance, the organization of the military, and taxation regimes (Postgate 1992; Bedford 2009; Barjamovic 2013, 142; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2014). Liverani (2017) recently described Assyria along similar lines. Clearly, this "institutionalist" description of empires, which combines seamlessly with Luttwak's territorial/hegemonic model, is one that fits well within the paradigm of many ancient historians.

The problem with the territorial model of the Assyrian Empire as advocated by Postgate and Cancik-Kirschbaum is that it does not fit the increasingly detailed evidence obtained in recent decades. New textual evidence from sites in the Upper Khabur and along the Lesser Zab has been interpreted as evidence for a much greater variability in governance than the Postgate model would allow for (Pongratz-Leisten 2011; Shibata 2012; van Soldt et al. 2013). Likewise, archaeological evidence increasingly demonstrates a highly variegated Assyrian engagement with conquered territories, some of which are profoundly transformed whereas others are little affected (Parker 2001; Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009; Düring 2015). It is clear from these data—further discussed below—that it is no longer possible to sustain an interpretation of the Assyrian Empire as homogeneously constituted. Since the new millennium, studies have started to appear that attempt to explain the variegated nature of the Assyrian Empire and the idiosyncratic state of affairs in particular regions (Parker 2001, 2011; Pongratz-Leisten 2011). Much work remains

to be done, however, to map out what happened on the ground in Assyrian provinces and peripheries.

Thus, the two main explanations of the Assyrian success have often emphasized either its effective military organization as a means of domination, or its ideology and institutions. Neither type of model adequately explains how the Assyrian threshold was achieved, that is, how Assyria managed to consolidate its hold over the territories it dominated by shifting from exploitative revenues—obtained through plunder, tribute, and the abduction of people to serve as workforce—toward more sustainable revenue sources—agriculture, industries, and trade that could generate a more stable source of income. Several key subsidiary questions emerge: How did Assyria manage to develop an imperial bureaucracy? In what manner did Assyria co-opt at least part of the dominated societies into the imperial system, inducing these people to produce the food, infrastructure, buildings, and craft products that the empire relied on? How did it convince people to accept the legitimacy of its supremacy?

Dealing with Diversity

Bradley Parker (2001, 2003) undertook the first substantial study dealing with the effects of Assyrian imperialism on the ground. To investigate what changed in the Upper Tigris region after it was incorporated into the Assyrian Empire in the Iron Age, Parker assessed textual, survey, and excavation data. His conclusions were that the effects of empire varied greatly from one area to the next and that these differences were influenced by a range of factors, including the agricultural potential of an area, the nature of the preexisting society and economy in a region prior to take over, and the strategic value of a region. In effect, Parker proposed a synthesis between territorial/hegemonic models and network models of empire by arguing that the Assyrian Empire was constituted by colonized areas under territorial control, which were surrounded by areas and landscapes that were either vassals or hostile to Assyria (Parker 2001, 257).

Parker also argued, on the basis of his survey evidence and textual data, that the Upper Tigris region in the Neo-Assyrian Period was an ethnically diverse amalgam in which Assyrians and settlers coexisted with local groups (Parker 2001, 2003, 2006). In subsequent years, much additional research has been done at a range of sites in the Upper Tigris, such as Ziyaret Tepe, Üçtepe, Kavuşan Höyük, Giricano, Boztepe, Salat Tepe, Kenan Tepe, Gre Dimse, Müslümantepe,

Hibemerdon, and Hakemi Use. Building on the earlier work of Parker and the new archaeological and textual data emerging from recent excavations, Timothy Matney (2010, 2016) has assembled a reconstruction of the Assyrian Empire in the Upper Tigris, arguing for a coexistence of an Assyrian-dominated urban settlement with small Assyrian agricultural colonies, probably consisting mostly of (non-Assyrian) deportees, on the one hand, and local farming and pastoral communities that were incorporated into the Assyrian economy, on the other. The reconstructions of Parker and Matney (also Wicke 2013) foreground how this Assyrian province functioned as a multiethnic society, in which the hegemony of the Assyrian state was precarious. Thus, instead of a colonial enclave under homogeneous territorial control, the region around Ziyaret Tepe/Tušhan constituted an accommodation between imperial (deportee and Assyrian) and local farming and pastoral communities, in which Assyrian power was not unequivocal or self-evident and where the local balance of power could easily shift when circumstances changed.

For the Middle Assyrian Period, ca. 1350–1000 BCE, we do not have regional datasets of a comparable resolution to that of the Upper Tigris in the Neo-Assyrian Period. However, a number of systematic investigations in the Balikh (Lyon 2000) and Lower Khabur (Morandi Bonacossi 1996, 2000, 2008), augmented with new survey data from the part of the Assyrian triangle now in Iraqi Kurdistan, various synthetic studies (Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009) and excavation projects (Kühne 2000; D'Agostino 2009, 2011; Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015) have started to shed considerable light on the Middle Assyrian Empire at the aggregate level.

Here I summarize a discussion of various regional trajectories of change in the Middle Assyrian Period that I have presented elsewhere (Düring 2018b). The regional sequences in the Assur region, the Lower Khabur, the Upper Khabur, and the Balikh differ substantially, and it appears that Assyrian imperial repertoires were far from homogeneously applied and that they had variable effects on settlement systems.[1] In some regions, such as the Assur region, there is a clear increase in population (Miglus 2011); in others, such as the Lower and Upper Khabur, the population seems more or less stable (Morandi Bonacossi 2008; Kühne 2009; Kolinski 2015), whereas in the Balikh Valley, there is a clear decrease in the population density (Lyon 2000; Kolinski 2015) (Table 6.1). In most regions, we have clear evidence for "deportees" and settlers being brought into the region, for example in the Assur region (Gilibert 2008), in the Balikh (Wiggermann 2000), and the Lower Khabur (Reculeau 2011; Postgate 2016),

Table 6.1. Overview of the Transformations Occurring in the Four Discussed Regions under Assyrian Control in the Late Bronze Age

		Assur Region	Lower Khabur	Upper Khabur	Balikh
Demography		Increase	Stable	Stable	Decrease
Deportees		+++	+	+	+++
Settlement System	Destructions and Abandonments		++	+	+++
	New Forts				++
	New Cities	++	++	+	
	Concentration		++		
Agriculture	Expansion	++	++		++
	Intensification	++			?
	Dunnu Estates	++		+	++
	Irrigation	++	++		?
Infrastructure	Major Canals	+++	?		?
	Roads	+	++	?	?

+++ = Strong Evidence; ++ = Good Evidence; + = Some Evidence; ? = Evidence Not Clear

whereas in the Upper Khabur, this does not appear to have been important (D'Agostino 2015; Jakob 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 (Tenu 2009, 2015). This can be contrasted to the development of new settlements—and even a capital—in the Assur region (Gilbert 2008; Dittman 2011), the concentration of the population in a limited number of larger, probably fortified, settlements in the Lower Khabur (Morandi Boncasi 2008; Kühne 2009), and the development of a new (mainly agricultural) settlement system in the Balikh Valley (Lyon 2000; Wiggermann 2000).

In terms of agriculture, we again see little change in the Upper Khabur, but ~~rather~~ an expansion of farming into marginal terrain in the Assur region (Mühl 2015; Morandi Bonacossi 2018), the Lower Khabur (Reculeau 2011), and the Balikh Valley (Wiggermann 2000). 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 (Bagg 2000; Mühl 2015; Morandi Bonacossi 2018). The establishment of agricultural *dunnu* estates, which created revenues for absentee owners, occurs in the Assur region and the Balikh Valley (Düring 2015a).

Finally, there is some evidence for infrastructural investments in the form of a road with waystations connecting Assur and Dur-Katlimmu (Pfälzner 1993; Morandi Bonacossi 2000; Faist 2006) and the construction of canals in the Assur region (and possibly in the Lower Khabur and the Balikh) (Bagg 2000).

How can we understand this remarkable diversity in regional trajectories evident in the Middle Assyrian Empire, in which some regions are little affected by the empire and others are completely transformed (Figure 6.3)? I suggest that we should focus on means, incentives, and agents to make sense of such patterns. Means include various types of resources such as social power, manpower, skilled labor, food supplies, animal herds, property, land, water, mineral resources, and valuables that can be used to further imperial aims in any particular region. This is therefore as much about affordances as it is about power. Further, we need to ask which agents were involved as collaborators in the imperial projects, and here we can think, among others, of imperial elites, local elites, imperial or non-local migrants, and local communities. Finally, incentives consist of potential rewards of participants in the imperial agenda and might consist of economic or social benefits. I will argue that these incentives were crucial to the success of the empire.

THE MEANS OF THE EARLY ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

In the investigation of (early) Assyrian imperialism, I think we have overestimated the power and resources available to this state. Even a brief engagement with Neo-Assyrian imagery on the palace orthostats, or the royal annals for that matter, raises the question why the topos of the invincible Assyrian army and the ruthless suppression of revolts is so prominent in the propaganda. Indeed, scholars who have read between the lines, such as, for example, Mario

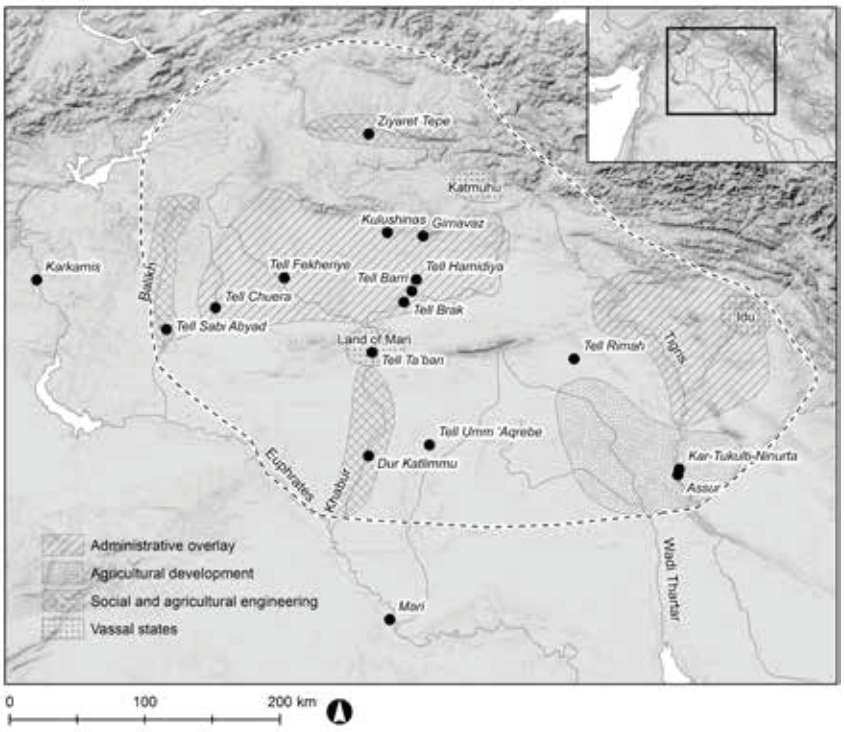

Figure 6.3. Map of the variability in Middle Assyrian repertoires of rule per region. Map produced by Tijm Lanjouw.

Fales (2008, 2010), whose work has already been mentioned, have argued that in practice, the Assyrian army was sometimes defeated, tried to avoid pitched battles and long and complex sieges, and usually selectively engaged with opponents that were much inferior in strength. Therefore, a convincing case can be made that Assyrian propaganda inverted military realities on the ground, deploying psychological warfare where actual military supremacy was fragile (Parker 2011; 2015, 289–90).

On the basis of the Tell Chuera (Ḥarbe) archives, Stefan Jakob (2015) provides a striking illustration of the fragile power of the Assyrian state apparatus during the Middle Assyrian Empire. Several texts deal with the need to protect trading caravans on the route along which Tell Chuera was located. This major route appears to have been far from secure. Furthermore, these same texts mention hostile raiding expeditions that include as many as 1,500 men, probably

originating from the Tek Tek Dağları (Mount Ḥasumu; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Hess 2016, 128–29), who raided up to the town of Tell Chuera itself (Jakob 2015, 181). On the basis of these texts, the situation seems to have been very unsettled in the Chuera region.

However, as has been mentioned, in other parts of the Assyrian Empire, such as the Balikh Valley and the Lower Khabur, we have substantial evidence for what is best described as landscape and social engineering. This engineering involved the development of new farming and settlement systems, often in previously little cultivated or settled landscapes. Such developments were made possible by the investment of substantial resources and the (re)settling of thousands of non-local people, who had to be taken care of during their migration and the first year of settlement when no harvests from previous years could be consumed (Wiggermann 2000, 174–75; for the Neo-Assyrian Period, see Parker 2001, 263; Radner 2017; see also Yao, this volume).

How are we to make sense of such marked differences between an administration clearly lacking resources to control the hinterland at Tell Chuera, whereas the nearby Balikh Valley was completely redeveloped? One idea would be to consider the Assyrian situation from an instrumentalist point of view: that the degree of investment was a function of a cost/benefit analysis, in which investment was largely determined by the potential rewards (Parker 2001, 252–53). For example, it would be possible to interpret the agricultural development of the Balikh Valley along these lines. Given that the region seems to have been largely abandoned by farmers, as evidenced by a hiatus in occupation at a number of excavated sites (Lyon 2000), which was most likely caused by the ravages of earlier Assyrian war expeditions, the region constituted a potentially lucrative opportunity for agricultural development and investments. In other regions, such as around Tell Chuera and in the Upper Khabur, there was no need for similar investments, given that ~~their~~ agricultural hinterlands were already highly productive and well populated, and these populations and their labor, craft products, and agricultural produce could simply be taxed by the new Assyrian overlords.

Such a characterization of the diversity in the level of Assyrian engagement in various parts of the empire has some merits, but it falls short of adequately explaining the diversity witnessed. For example, the development of and investment in the Lower Khabur around Dur-Katlimmu, which unlike the Balikh is an extremely marginal region, would make little sense as lucrative investment. Likewise, there is good evidence that agricultural development of the east bank

of the Tigris, around the new capital of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, was a failure from an agricultural point of view (Reculeau 2011, 131–33, 151; Jakob 2015, 183–84). Given the marginal nature of these regions, which could only be developed through considerable investments, Kühne (2015) has argued that Assyria was engaged in a "grand project" of developing marginal regions like the Lower Khabur into urbanized regions with farming and that these cannot be understood from a cost/benefit perspective.

While I agree with Kühne that a cost/benefit perspective is inadequate for understanding some of the regional developments in the Assyrian Empire, I am not convinced about his grand project perspective, which would equate to a very systematic and long-term type of development aid. I think the Assyrians were not primarily driven by ideological motives, such as "making the desert bloom," and that their actions need to be explained in terms of short-term incentives rather than long-term grand projects (see also Boozer, this volume). Two points are especially relevant here. First, it is likely that the expectations of the productivity of agriculture at Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Dur-Katlimmu were more positive than the real yields. This difference could in part be the result of a dry spell at the end of the twelfth century BCE, an event that has recently been both reinstated and critiqued (Kaniewski et al. 2010; Drake 2012; Langgut, Finkelstein, and Lutz 2013; Mühl 2015; Knapp and Manning 2016).

Second, I think it is too simplistic to consider the developments of regions such as those of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Dur-Katlimmu only in terms of agricultural production. Both of these regions could be supplied whenever necessary with agricultural produce from the agriculturally rich bread baskets situated to their north, using cost-effective river-based transportation. It may be surmised that these geographical circumstances mitigated the impacts of bad harvests occurring every few years, as food supplies could be augmented without much trouble. Instead, it could be argued that the primary aim in both regions was to create relatively densely populated regions that were loyal to the Assyrian state, if only because all residents in the region had been given the opportunity to better their private circumstances (see also Rosenzweig 2016, 310). Such a mechanism, in which previously uncultivated regions adjacent to agriculturally rich and densely populated regions were developed, is something that can be seen in many empires (e.g., Covey 2013; Colburn 2018; Parker 2018b; Boozer this volume), and may be understood as an effort to create footholds from which the empire could dominate regions which were too densely populated or culturally distinct to fully control. Thus, the strategy would amount

to creating parallel imperial landscapes, in which substantial resources were invested, which coexisted with older densely populated agricultural regions in which relatively little change occurred.

The argument so far could be construed as a sort of "grand strategy" of the Assyrian Empire. However, there are many indications that such a grand strategy never existed and that the empire was the outcome of the cumulative actions of various groups and agents in the empire, rather than the imperial core (see also Boozer, this volume). It is to this issue—of who made empires possible—that we turn in the next section.

To summarize this discussion on means: I argue that while ancient empires could not have survived if the balance sheets did not add up, the reasons for developing certain agricultural regions or building fortresses and roads, among other investments, cannot be reduced only to a cost/benefit analysis. Ideological, military, and social factors are of great importance, and in many early empires, the means available to effect changes on the ground appear to have been in limited supply and often had to be generated locally over time and under difficult conditions.

THE AGENTS OF EMPIRE

A good starting point for understanding any empire is to ask the questions, Who benefited from imperial expansion? and, Who bore the burden? In the case of the Assyrian Empire, these questions have not been given much consideration.

Scholars such as Postgate, Allen, and Tenu (Postgate 1979; 1992, 254; Allen 2005, 79; Tenu 2009, 227–30) have argued that the provincialized regions of Upper Mesopotamia served to secure agricultural staples for the Assyrian heartland. A second often-encountered economic explanation for Assyrian imperialism is that it served to secure and control long distance trade routes for valuable commodities (such as metals, gemstones, and textiles) (Tenu 2009, 230–31; Dodd 2013, 57).

Both explanations start from the premise that the Assyrian core region stood to directly benefit from the imperial expansion, and both are problematic. First, the main economic resource of the North Mesopotamian steppe, over which Assyria expanded at this time, was agricultural produce, consisting mainly of barley and sheep. These resources could only be transported overland to the Assyrian core region at huge transportation costs, which would consume more than half of the volume transported (Clark and Haswell 1967; Bairoch 1990;

Düring 2015a). It is clear that the staple-based finance of the Assyrian Empire, in which agricultural staples served to uphold imperial institutions, could only have worked in small regions (D'Altroy and Earle 1985). Therefore, the benefits of agricultural resources of Upper Mesopotamia, as in many other regions where transportation was land based, would have been of use mainly at the local level (the same argument applies, of course, to manpower) and over time would have promoted political fragmentation. Of course, these agricultural surpluses could be converted into valuables through industries (e.g., production of textiles), but there is relatively little evidence for such industries in the Middle Assyrian Empire.

Second, the idea that Assyrian expansion served to secure long-distance trade routes is equally problematic. The Middle Assyrian Empire only controlled a small portion of long-distance routes (unlike, for example, the later Achaemenid Empire), and the historical knowledge we have of the ancient Near East clearly shows that trade flourished even at times of pronounced political fragmentation, such as the first half of the Middle Bronze Age (Larsen 1987; Stein 2005).

Thus, from a point of view that privileges the economic interests of the imperial core, it is difficult to see how the annexation of Upper Mesopotamia would have been beneficial. The pertinent question therefore is, Who benefited from the annexation of Upper Mesopotamia? Or to rephrase, Which groups and agents were involved in the expansion and consolidation of Assyrian power, and how were some members of these various groups and agents co-opted into the imperial project? For the sake of simplicity, I distinguish four types of groups in this brief discussion: Assyrian elites and commoners on the one side, and non-Assyrian elites and commoners on the other. An extra dimension in this classification consisted of migration policies (both forced and voluntary), which created a local versus non-local dimension to the equation. Finally, the boundaries between these categories of people were not fixed; we have significant evidence for non-Assyrians achieving high posts in the Assyrian administration, and we have evidence for non-Assyrian groups acquiring Assyrian status over a few generations (Parker 2011; Postgate 2013, 38; Fales 2015, 199; Rosenzweig 2016, 310; Liverani 2017, 203–8).

What can we say about the role of these various groups in the Assyrian imperial project? The Assyrian elite were one clear group of beneficiaries of the Assyrian expansion. Members of the elite took up the governance of the new territories (Harrak 1987, 195–205). The Assyrian expansion created tremendous

possibilities for (junior) members of powerful elite families to develop new resources and estates and to obtain lucrative posts (see Alconini, this volume, for parallel developments in the Inka Empire). Terrenato (2014, 46) has recently described the early Roman expansion as driven by the ambitions of powerful families, who hijacked the Roman state for their own interests. While this perspective might be too extreme for the Assyrian case, one can easily see that the Assyrian expansion suited the interests of the Assyrian elites very well and would have rid the king of a lot of trouble at his court. As an example, it is remarkable that the western part of Assyrian Empire was "farmed out" to a branch of the Assyrian royal family, who set up court at Dur-Katlimmu and were addressed as kings in their own right even if nominally under the suzerainty of the Assyrian king (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996; Wiggermann 2000).

Assyrian farmers-colonists, who are in evidence at Tell Sabi Abyad and at Tell Chuera (among other sites), are another group of state expansion beneficiaries (Wiggermann 2000; Jakob 2009, 98; Postgate 2013, 38). These Assyrians, who settled with their families, had Assyrian names and a legal position that differed quite substantially from non-Assyrians. While they were free to decide where and how they wanted to live and had more legal protection in courts, they had to fulfill more substantial duties toward the state, such as serving in the army when requested (Postgate 1982). These settlers might have included poorer members of Assyrian society and groups that had gradually opted into an Assyrian identity (Postgate 2013, 38). In any case, given that they were free, it is plausible that they migrated to new colonies because they thought that they would benefit from doing so, either with respect to their livelihood or their social status.

Among the non-Assyrians, the elites often chose to partake in the Assyrian project in order to further their own aspirations and to maintain their own positions (see also Alconini, this volume, for a parallel in the Inka Empire). A prominent case in the Middle Assyrian Period is the local dynasty of the Land of Mari centered on Tell Taban and Tell Bderi, where a minor local princely family pledged allegiance to the Assyrian crown at an opportune moment, and became an Assyrian vassal that was eventually surrounded by Assyrian provinces. Interestingly, within a few generations, the dynasty of the Land of Mari had adopted Assyrian names and funerary practices and was intermarried with the Assyrian royal family (Tenu 2009; Shibata 2015). Very similar cases existed in the Neo-Assyrian Period, during which local dynasties in Upper Mesopotamia of Aramaic or Luwian descent increasingly opted in Assyrian identities (Parker 2001, 89–94; Dodd 2013).

The response of local non-elites to the Assyrian expansion is, of course, more difficult to assess. It is to be expected that there was a continuum from outright resistance and guerilla war tactics to collaboration and compliance. Resistance occurred ~~at~~ the previously discussed case of the raiders in the surroundings of Tell Chuera and is also pertinent for Aramean groups that increasingly posed a threat to Assyrian interests from about 1200 BCE onward (Szuchman 2007). By contrast, collaboration appears to occur in the Khabur Triangle, where populations continued to live largely "pre-Assyrian" lives in the Middle Assyrian Period, with little changing other than the beneficiary of their taxes (D'Agostino 2015; Jakob 2015). A treaty between the Suteans and local authorities at Tell Sabi Abyad provides us with an intriguing glimpse into the interactions between Assyrians and "natives." This treaty stipulates that if a Sutean buys beer he should pay in cash and consume it at his tent, not at the Assyrian settlement. Further on in the same treaty, the Suteans are reminded of their allegiance to the Assyrians, even against other groups of Suteans (Wiggermann 2010, 28).

A special group of non-Assyrian commoners consisted of the so-called deportees (Oded 1979). These were people of non-Assyrian descent who were resettled in another part of the empire. This happened on a scale without precedent from the Middle Assyrian Period onward (Jakob 2003; Postgate 2013). The practice of deporting people across the empire has been celebrated as a hallmark of Assyrian empire building, an effective means of breaking up potentially coherent societies that could resist Assyrian domination, creating mixed imperial societies that were dependent on Assyrian institutions for their survival, and ~~as a~~ resource, that could be used in the development of occupied regions and imperial projects such as the construction of a new capital (Oded 1979; Wiggermann 2000).

While all these ideas are undoubtedly valid, I have some doubts about the way that the people concerned are often conceptualized. At times, deportees are portrayed as if they were slaves. I do not think we should conceive of non-Assyrian migrants in such terms. While these people are often described as unfree, it might be better to describe them as dependents who had pledged their labor to a particular person or institute but were entitled to food and care in return. There are many examples of cases in which Assyrian authorities were at pains to take care of the so-called deportees, such as after a bad harvest (Parker 2001, 88). From a practical point of view, it is difficult to see how the Assyrians could have managed to effectively police and control the large numbers of deportees during their migration to their destination and during their

agricultural work in rural settings. For example, at Tell Sabi Abyad, the approximately four hundred *siluhlu* (dependent) workers, mostly bearing Hurrian names and probably coming from the Upper Khabur or even further east, were mostly living in small hamlets in the countryside (Wiggermann 2000). Given that they were living on the edge of the area controlled by the Assyrians, it would have been relatively easy to walk away from the colony, especially if they would have done so collectively. While some incidents of workers escaping did occur at Tell Sabi Abyad (Wiggermann, personal comment 2015), it does not appear to have been as great a problem as elsewhere in the ancient Near East (Liverani 1987; Heimpel 2009, 60–63; Tenney 2011, 104–18). The logical conclusion, as far as I am concerned, is that whereas the siluhlu were not free, they were treated in a manner that was more or less satisfactory to them, and some of them might even have entered into their dependent status voluntarily. Postgate (2013, 21) even mentions siluhlu as serving in the army, which indicates that they were trusted and relatively free. In any case, the deportee system would not have worked if only force was used and no benefits provided to the people in question, however meager these benefits might have been.

INCENTIVES IN THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

What motivated the various agents and groups that opted into the imperial project? While it is to be expected that the incentives were diverse, I think we can distinguish two main categories of incentives: economic and social.

Economic incentives would have consisted of (perceived) opportunities to better one's life in one way or another. For Assyrian elites, multiple opportunities would have arisen in the wake of the Assyrian expansion for obtaining lucrative estates and posts, and local elites could equally have benefited from opting into the Assyrian system, as they would have been able to reap at least part of the benefits of local administration and taxation as part of the Assyrian state apparatus. For non-elite Assyrian settlers, it is likely that colonization would have significantly boosted their opportunities for obtaining a good livelihood—for example through grants of land, or the ability to set up workshops or trade in new markets—in a system that was stacked in their favor. For non-Assyrian dependent migrants, or deportees, being part of a colonization would probably have provided opportunities to a better life, in which hard work was rewarded with sufficient food and basic resources and the opportunity to start a family. Finally, for the local non-elite population, the benefits of opting into

the Assyrian system would have varied considerably, with some paying taxes and pledging their allegiance, while others resisted and plundered farms and villages. That this latter aspect should be taken seriously is suggested not only by the Tell Chuera texts, but also by the fact that living in fortified centers or keeping one's agricultural surpluses there, was the norm in the Lower Khabur and probably in the Balikh (Morandi Bonacossi 2000, 2008; Klinkenberg and Lanjouw 2015)

Social incentives would have consisted of the opportunity to increase one's position in society. From the beginning of the Middle Assyrian there appears to be what I would like to call a "culture of empire" in Assyria, in which the conquest, domination, and reengineering of conquered territories and societies was regarded as justified and even natural (also Parker 2011). This culture of empire is something different from state propaganda and its ideological justification. It manifests itself as a cultural framework that would have operated at a less discursive (or subconscious) level, and it structured social interaction between Assyrians and others. At the core of this culture of empire is a distinction between an Assyrian "high" culture on the one hand and vernacular traditions on the other, which was culturally elaborated. This normative distinction contributed enormously to the legitimation of the empire and was a powerful propagandistic tool. The association between an empire, a cultural idiom, and concepts of civilization, is, of course, well known from many empires, such as, for example, Urartu, Rome, and the Inka (Zimansky 1995; Mattingly 2011; Alconini, this volume).

In administrative and legal documents, being Assyrian was a clearly demarcated status that entitled the person in question to certain rights and entailed obligations that set them apart from non-Assyrians (Postgate 2013, 12–27). In the newly conquered territories in the west, Assyrians were usually free men, and non-Assyrians were often serfs (Wiggermann 2000, 174). As has already been mentioned, the Assyrian status included both elites and commoners, and the latter included both poorer members of Assyrian society and groups that had gradually opted into an Assyrian identity. The fact that this opting in occurs suggests that being Assyrian was considered a desirable status in contemporary imperial society. Thus, by taking part in a colonization, marginal members of Assyrian society in the heartland could have bettered not simply their economic situation but also their social standing.

With the emergence of the Middle Assyrian Empire, we can also document the spread of a particular type of material culture. This includes Middle

Assyrian pottery (Pfälzner 1997; D'Agostino 2008; Tenu 2013; D'Agostino 2015; Duistermaat 2015), house forms (Bartl and Bonatz 2013; Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015), and burial traditions (Sauvage 2005; D'Agostino 2008; Tenu 2009; Bonatz 2013; Düring, Visser, and Akkermans 2015). These "Assyrian" types co-occur with vernacular ceramic repertoires, burial traditions, and house forms (Sauvage 2005; Tenu 2013; Düring, Visser, and Akkermans 2015; D'Agostino 2015; Jakob 2015). The spread of Assyrian artifacts and traditions can be most convincingly linked to the presence of Assyrian colonists across the Middle Assyrian Empire. In part, the spread of Assyrian artifacts and customs was a function of necessity, especially where empty landscapes were colonized, but it should also be explained in part by the desire of Assyrians to distinguish themselves—in how they lived, cooked, ate, buried their dead, and through the style of the artifacts that they used—and by non-Assyrians to emulate some of these practices (see S. T. Smith, this volume, for a similar dynamic in Egypt-dominated Nubia).

Assyrian-style artifacts and practices might have been associated with and important to Assyrian elites in particular, who occupied the key positions in the conquered lands of Hanigalbat (Harrak 1987, 195–205). Indeed, typical Assyrian material culture seems to concentrate mainly in administrative centers where the elite tended to settle (Tenu 2013; D'Agostino 2015; Jakob 2015).

This does not mean that the entire elite of the Assyrian Empire consisted of people from Assyrian stock, but it does suggest that in their official capacity, they would have needed to present themselves as Assyrians. Interestingly, we have some evidence for non-Assyrian elites taking up Assyrian names and practices (Shibata 2015) and for Assyrian elites who buried themselves in decidedly non-Assyrian fashion (Wicke 2013; Düring, Visser, and Akkermans 2015). On the other hand, non-elite Assyrians demonstrably adhered to Assyrian ways in how they ate, dressed, and buried their dead (Wicke 2013; Düring, Visser, and Akkermans 2015). I think that these Assyrian practices, and the cultural ideals they embodied, would have motivated both Assyrian people, and those opting into Assyria, to contribute to the Assyrian expansion and consolidation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the ways in which the Assyrian Empire has been conceptualized by previous scholars. Focusing on the Middle Assyrian Period, I have suggested that these interpretations of the empire, which describe it

as consisting of either a concentric arrangement of a provincialized region surrounded by vassal states, or a network model, do not fit the degree of diversity in the empire that research over the past few decades has laid bare. I have briefly illustrated the diverse trajectories of change by discussing a variety of regions and how they were impacted by the expansion of Assyria in the Late Bronze Age.

Faced with the large amount of diversity encountered, I have tried to address how we can best understand this variability. I have done so by discussing the *means* at the disposal of the Assyrian Empire; *agents*, or who was part of the Assyrian expansion and in what capacity; and *incentives*, or what motivated various actors and groups to opt into the dynamic and experimental Assyrian imperial project. To some this might seem an overly positive perspective on how the Assyrian Empire operated. I do not intend to either downplay the brutality of the Assyrian state ~~in~~ many occasions or the structural violence that accompanied it. For example, in the modern world, there are many (illegal) labor migrants who fulfill an important role in the economies of prosperous economies and are being badly exploited. However, for the people concerned, (illegal) labor migration is a choice made to improve their own prospects in life. Many participants in the Assyrian project might have been in a similar situation.

The benefit of focusing on means, agents, and incentives, I think, is that we can start to ask how elites and commoners of various origins contributed to the (re)production of the Assyrian Empire. If we want to understand how empires were possible, I think we need to start from the bottom up and to move away from classifications that idealize the structure of empires instead of their constitution in daily life.

Only in this way can we explain how this imperial system managed to cross its own Assyrian threshold. Thus, the creation of an imperial bureaucracy can only be understood as something that was facilitated by the opportunities that the consolidation of Assyrian power afforded to Assyrian elites who could obtain lucrative estates or posts in exchange for their service. The co-optation of subaltern populations can best be explained by focusing on the incentives provided by Assyria for those collaborating with Assyria. Finally, how did Assyria convince people to accept the legitimacy of its supremacy? I have argued that the possibilities for both Assyrians and non-Assyrians to improve their situation in life, and the possibility for non-Assyrians to opt into the Assyrian status,

were instrumental, as was the creation of an Assyrian cultural idiom that naturalized and legitimized the empire.

While I have only opened up a research agenda that requires a great deal of empirical research to test its validity, I would argue that the Assyrian imperial expansion probably provided attractive incentives, consisting of economic and social opportunities to people of various social classes and social backgrounds, and that this is key to understanding the Assyrian success.

Note

1. Additional regional trajectories occur along the Middle Euphrates, for example, 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 2018).