# imperial bodies: sex and bodily hygiene in the Early Assyrian Empire

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17

# Imperial Bodies

## Sex and Bodily Hygiene in the Early Assyrian Empire

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### Introduction

The archaeology of empire was one of the research fields in which Bradley made some of his greatest contributions to academia. His research opened up tantalizing new possibilities to investigate the variegated and dynamic impacts of empires on the landscapes and societies they came to dominate through conquest or intimidation, and to break free from perspectives centred predominantly on palaces and elites. Bradley's work on the Assyrian Empire in the Upper Tigris region demonstrated beyond any doubt that the study of imperial texts and palace propaganda, however sophisticatedly executed, results in overly schematic reconstructions of ancient empires, and that archaeological datasets have the potential to reveal the heterogeneous, inherently messy, and dynamic nature of empires on the ground (Parker 1997a; 1997b; 1998; 2001; 2002; 2003). Rather than a weakness, this is strength of archaeological data, as it is through archaeological data that we can begin to understand how these ancient empires were created and reproduced on the ground by people of various backgrounds who were participating in or resisting empires.

In Bradley's work on the archaeology of Assyrian empire he effortlessly combined archaeological and textual datasets, drew on parallels from other empires and periods, and was able to link broad scale developments to daily practices, for example by examining the biography of the mid-level Assyrian official Asipa and how that biography sheds light on how the state apparatus operated (Parker 2009), or by examining how loyalty to the king was performed and constructed by imperial elites (Parker 2011). Bradley summarized his view on why such analysis matters as follows (Parker 2009:180):

> "the premise of microhistory is that history, even major events or long-term trends, are grounded in the actions of individuals. Instead of seeing history as a larger process that is imposed upon people from above, microhistory sees the flow of history as propelled by the accumulated actions of individuals and groups."

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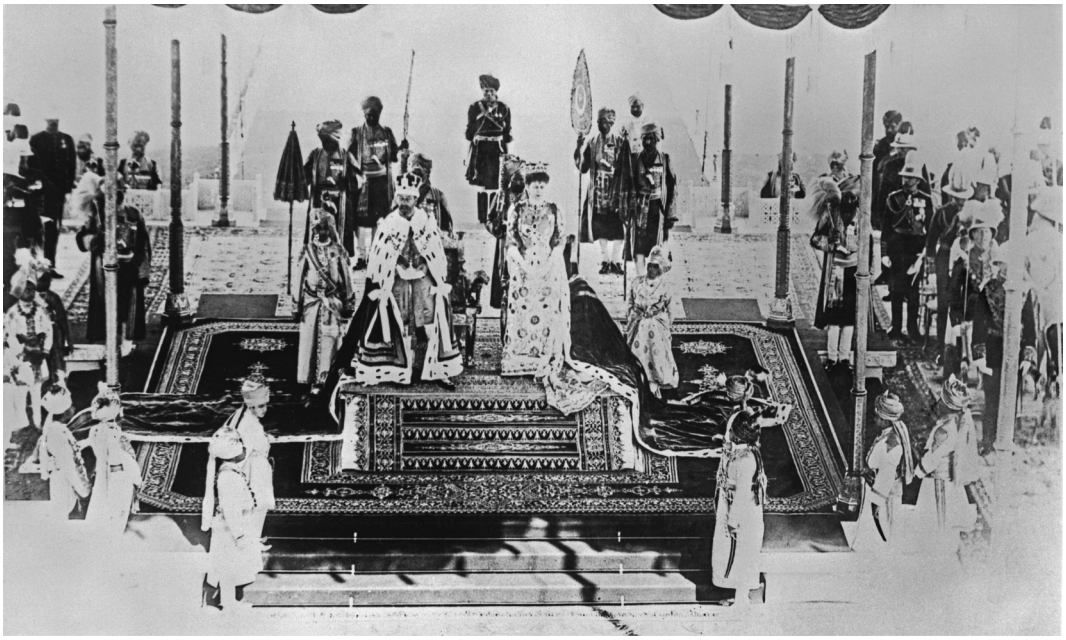

Fig. 17.1. King George V and Queen Mary at the Delhi Dunbar. This is photograph Q 107150 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums., Public Domain.

This idea that, ultimately, empires can only be understood as the cumulative outcome of daily practices that act to create, reproduce, transform, or resist and break up empires ~~on the ground~~, is both profound and productive. Here, I would like to take up this idea put forward by Bradley and focus on how bodily practices generated and reproduced empire in Assyria. To contextualize this argument, I will include some parallels from the British Empire, simply because it one of the best investigated imperial systems.

## Empires and Bodies

The body is an important vehicle for the articulation and reproduction of empire. A stark example of this has been eloquently discussed by Stuart Smith (2013; 2018), who describes how during the New Kingdom the thoroughly Egyptianized Nubian prince Hekanefer had to dress up as a Nubian during state ceremonies along with others representing Asians. Such displays of (constructed) cultural differences in state ceremonies have countless parallels in imperial contexts, from Achaemenid capitals to the British Empire (Khatchadourian 2016; Smith 2017).

In such events, costume and hairdo served to artificially construct cultural distinctions of dominated societies (Fig. 17.1). However, imperial societies themselves were likewise transformed in the imperial encounter. Scholars such as Stuart Smith and Peter Wells have drawn attention to the centrality of food practices, burial traditions, and private religion in imperial repertoires (Wells 2001; Smith 2003; 2005; Wells 2005; Smith 2013). Imperial societies typically develop a specific idiom of practices, including how one should dress, eat, have sexual intercourse, bathe and defecate, in which artefacts often play a crucial role.

Probably the best investigated context in which such bodily practices were articulated is that of the British India. A series of institutions and practices existed to maintain the

distinction between the (relatively small) British elite and their colonial subjects. This distinction was most blatantly objectified in the membership of clubs, which were only accessible to British elites (Sinha 2001), but also included a range of bodily practices. British elites were expected to maintain an immaculate appearance in the form of spotless white clothes and highly polished boots, and to maintain a high level of personal hygiene made possible by the use of soap (McClintock 1995; Lester 2010 [2001]:140). Such appearances were of course very impractical in tropical and dusty India and served to underline the distinction between those who did manual labour and those who did not (for a highly similar dress code operating in an analogous manner in present day Oman see Martinez 2017).

Apart from immaculate appearance and bodily hygiene, a key focus of concern in British colonial India were sexual relations (Patterson 2007; Nandy 2010 [1983]; Sramek 2011). British men regularly had intercourse with local women, but the status of any children out of such relations was problematic (Salesa 2011). By contrast, there was great anxiety about the danger of sexual relations between British women and local men, as is so aptly captured in *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster.

We can surmise that in the imperial encounter the British were constructing their own status and identities as much as they were constructing those of the societies they were dominating. This was a creative process, in which a range of practices, consumables, and objects were adopted to underline these constructed differences. Interestingly, many of these practices were recent inventions or appropriations from other cultural contexts. For example, soap is a clear example of a previously obscure product which suddenly became central to civilisation in the Victorian era (McClintock 1995:207). Likewise, tea drinking and tobacco smoking were examples of foreign habits taken up and transformed by British and other western colonial societies (Ferguson 2003:14-16).

Can we reconstruct similar inventions of bodily practices that served to construct cultural differences in the early Assyrian Empire, when it first took shape at the end of the Late Bronze Age, from about 1350 BCE? In this paper I will explore evidence pertaining to hygiene and sex in early Assyria to explore this issue.

## The Politics of Sex in the Middle Assyrian Empire

According to Scheidel (2009), access to sex, and the ability to increase ones offspring, was a major factor in imperialism. For the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan such genetic effects were initially postulated for the ruler, but more recent analysis suggest that Mongol soldiers were the spreaders of Mongolian DNA (which can be traced through Y chromosomes; Wei et al. 2018). Similar effects might have occurred in Assyria, where we know of many Assyrians colonizing newly conquered regions (Düring 2020:96-98). What is clear, however, is that in the imperial encounter men and women of various backgrounds and different social status would have regularly come into contact.

We know that in the Middle Assyrian Empire sexual relations were strictly regulated, in ways that appear very familiar to those of us who have worked in traditional Islamic societies in the Near East. According to Middle Assyrian laws, respectable women, including wives and widows, had to wear a veil in public, to indicate their married status and avoid sexual harassment (Wiggermann 2000:46; Jakob 2017:157-158). By contrast, prostitutes were explicitly barred from wearing a veil. The latter group might even have been obliged to wear necklaces with penis pendants, which have been found at various

locations in the Assyrian Empire, to further underline their status of women of pleasure (Wiggermann 2010:49-52).

It is not clear to what degree such status differences were co-determined by ethnic identities, and whether for example Assyrian men married non-Assyrian women. It is clear that Assyrian men could have concubines in addition to their proper wives, and these were most likely of other ethnic backgrounds. 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 (Wiggermann 2000:174; Jakob 2009:98; Postgate 2013:12-27; Fales 2015; Valk 2018:271). Children from concubines had a lower rank than those from wives but could inherit if no other children existed (Jakob 2017:157-158). Such distinctions suggest that social statuses were actively maintained and reproduced in Middle Assyrian society, and probably determined the kinds of sexual relations one could have with others.

## Personal Hygiene in the Middle Assyrian Empire

In the work of Elias, it was famously asserted that in early modern Europe elites distinguished themselves by increasingly controlling their bodily practices. This included conventions on how to eat civilly, avoid farting and belching in company, and rules about personal hygiene, and that these norms were emulated by the rest of society over the course of centuries (Elias 1997 [1939]:420-423; Paulle and Emirbayer 2016:49).

This slow trajectory of emulation of bodily practices in early modern Europe may be contrasted to the rapid transformations in bodily hygiene in imperial contexts, such as that of the British Empire that has already been introduced. Likewise, in Assyria we can reconstruct a remarkably rapid development of new ideas on personal hygiene in the archaeological data. Across the newly acquired western territories of the Middle Assyrian Empire we see an abundance of elaborate toilet facilities that is truly remarkable.

Toilet facilities are of course well known from a number of sites in the Ancient Near East and are by no means an Assyrian invention. Well preserved examples are known from a range of sites including Early Bronze Age Tell Asmar and Tell Beydar, Middle Bronze Age Mari and Ur, and Late Bronze Age Alalakh and Nuzi (Starr 1937-1939; Parrot 1958; Delougaz et al. 1967; Wooley and Mallowan 1976; Van der Stede 2003:189-192; Margueron 2004;353; Fink 2008). In most cases these toilet facilities were located in monumental buildings, such as palaces and temples. If and when toilets occur in houses, as at Alalakh, Nuzi, Tell Asmar, and Ur, they are in urban settlements of some size. In the Middle Assyrian capital of Assur, toilet facilities are likewise attested (Miglus 1996: 58; 1999: 106, Abbildung 250).

Thus, the existence of toilet facilities in itself is not really a novelty. However, the Middle Assyrian toilet facilities and bathrooms in the western territories do stand out for two reasons. First, these toilets are found in considerable numbers in what are in part very small and decidedly non-urban settlements, such as Tell Sabi Abyad. Second, these toilet facilities often occur in a remarkably standardized form, that suggests strongly articulated ideas on practices related to bodily hygiene.

Elaborate toilet facilities are known from Middle Assyrian strata at Tell Barri (level AY / stratum 33C), at Tell Fekheriye, and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (Eickhoff 1985:46-47; Pecorella and Pierobon Benoit 2008a:56; 2008b:71; Bonatz 2014:66; D'Agostino 2014:191). An especially, remarkable set of toilets has been found at the small, fortified estate of Tell Sabi Abyad, measuring only about one hectare in size (Migchelsen 2013; Akkermans and

Fig. 17.2. Toilet G at Tell Sabi Abyad. By permission of the Tell Sabi Abyad Project.

Wiggermann 2015; Klinkenberg 2016:211-214). Here, no less than seven well-built toilets were constructed in the main occupation phase of the settlement. These were elaborate restrooms, which had waterproof floors and wall plinths made of backed tiles and bitumen, squat toilets with a sewage pipe leading to a cesspit, and a jar used for flushing the toilet (Fig. 17.2). These cesspits were open pits with upstanding ledges along their perimeter, and presumably had a cover of wood or wickerwork, suggesting they were emptied at times, although this cannot be ascertained (personal comment Tijm Lanjouw 26 February 2021).

The toilets of Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Fekheriye are all situated in rooms that could only be reached via corridors and could be closed off with a door, ensuring that one could relieve oneself in private. In all cases these toilets were at the rear of another room with a floor of baked tiles and/or bitumen. This room was presumably used for washing oneself with a tub without disturbing smells from the sewage. These bathroom complexes of the Assyrian western provinces consisting of an ante room attached to a toilet, resemble the bathrooms / toilets at Alalakh, where they likewise occur in pairs (Fink 2008). However, this particular form has no known antecedents in Assur. Thus, it is possible, if not proven, that the bathroom / toilet arrangements were adopted by Assyrian elites from pre-existing Mittani prototypes rather than representing an older Assyrian tradition. Perhaps, then, ideas about personal hygiene were invented and elaborated as part of the imperial encounter occurring at this time.

In this respect, it also relevant to discuss the precise location of the toilets at these sites and who might have had access. At both Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Fekheriye toilets were found in elite residences, with a more or less standard lay out of rooms (Bartl and Bonatz 2013; Bonatz 2013; 2014; Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015; Klinkenberg 2016). These had main rooms, rectangular rooms that might well have been bedrooms, and a corridor leading to the already discussed bathrooms and toilets. Adjacent to these apartments there invariably was a large hall that might have been used for receptions or feasts. At Tell Sabi Abyad, a double set of

Fig. 17.3. Aerial photograph of the double set of residential suites at Tell Sabi Abyad. By permission of the Tell Sabi Abyad Project.

two residential suites was excavated, both with its own reception hall in a complex measuring about 20 by 25 metres (Fig. 17.3).

At Tell Sabi Abyad we have good evidence that these fancy apartments stood empty much of the time. This is suggested by the find of various sealings in front of this residential building. These sealings were found in association with a doorknob and bronze hooks, suggesting that this building was often literally sealed off, and probably was used only when a high-ranking official came to site (Klinkenberg 2016:52-53, 102). For example, the owner of the Tell Sabi Abyad *dunnu*, who was the viceroy of the Assyrian Empire and was rarely at this estate, might have used this building on occasion, or have allowed other important officials to use it when travelling (Wiggermann 2000; Düring 2015).

The toilets and bathrooms in these apartments were thus probably only used on certain occasions, and probably only by members of the elite. Likewise, the other toilets at Tell Sabi Abyad were in specific locations and all located within the fortified compound rather than in surrounding structures: behind 'the office of Tammite', a suite of rooms

were records were kept of taxes and transactions at the entrance node of the fortified estate; adjacent to the eastern apartment (following a renovation phase when the old toilet in the south was no longer in use); and associated with two other apartments in the fortified estate (Klinkenberg 2016:211-214). These facilities were most likely used by the resident management staff of this institution.

Thus, while the resident population of Tell Sabi Abyad can be estimated at about sixty people, it would appear that most of these people would have used the surrounding open farmlands to defecate and urinate, and that only elite staff had access to the elaborate bathrooms and toilets available in the apartments and offices in the settlement. Thus, it is possible to argue that bodily hygiene and privacy were of great importance to elite members in Assyrian society, given the amount of investment in bathroom and toilet facilities, and the measures taken to restrict access to these by others. I would therefore argue that bodily hygiene was of key importance in the articulation of cultural differences between Assyrian elites (not all of whom were of Assyrian descent) and the population at large.

## Conclusion

In his work Bradley has eloquently argued that empires need elites to be run and that these elites are produced and reproduced through daily practices. In this paper I have followed Bradley's lead – like I have done so often when working on the archaeology of empires – and have asked how bodily practices were important in the articulation and reproduction of the early Assyrian empire. Starting with the case of British imperial India, I have illustrated how bodily practices were central to the construction of cultural differences between members of imperial society and its elites in particular on the one hand, and sub-altern societies on the other. Taking this perspective to the archaeology of the early Assyrian Empire, I have illustrated how in this empire sexual relations and bodily hygiene were clearly important for constructing cultural differences that were central to the production and reproduction of empire. Much more work on such bodily practices can and should be done, and this but a first exploration inspired by the legacy of Bradley's scholarship.

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