Building Assyrian society: the case of the Tell Sabi Abyad Dunnu

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II. Historical and Geographic Contexts

II.1 Introduction

This chapter is an introduction to the historic and cultural backgrounds, the geographic context and the archaeology of the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad. In the first place it should help the reader to understand the time-period and region of the world. Secondly, the information is relevant for this study in particular as a context for the interaction between people and built environment. As has been emphasized in the introduction, the *Dunnu* was conceived in a specific historical and cultural context and natural environment, which all contributed to its design and physical character and played a role in how it functioned as spatial, social and cultural system.

II.2 What is a *Dunnu*?

As may be read in the introduction, a definition of a *Dunnu* is "a fortified agricultural production centre" (Wiggermann, 2000, p. 172). Although this definition is correct in a general sense, it conceals the complexity of the subject. Textual evidence suggests that not every *Dunnu* was the same, and physical archaeological evidence is extremely limited. Besides, we need to deal with the complicated relation with another concept known from Bronze Age sources, the *Dimtu*, which seems to be earlier in origin but largely overlaps in meaning. A brief excursion into the cultural historical background of the phenomenon should therefore be made first.

II.3 Historic background of the *Dunnu* concept

The earliest textual references to *Dimtu* appear in the records of the Ur III state (2112-2004 BCE). After this, both *Dimtu* and *Dunnu* are found during the earlier half of the second millennium BC (Koliński, 2001, p. 36). They are not attested in the north, despite numerous preserved sources, until we arrive in the 16th century, suggesting that the concept was a southern Mesopotamian invention. In the territory of the kingdom of Arraphe, which also included the city of Nuzi from which many of the texts originate, we have the names of 216 *Dimtu* dating to the 16th and 15th centuries BC (Koliński, 2001, appendix A). Interestingly, while the *Dimtu/Dunnu* gain prominence in the north, they dwindle in the south. The Mitanni kingdom and the Middle Assyrian Empire included respectively *Dimtu* or *Dunnu* in their systems of administration and political and military control. Later, the *Dunnu* hardly occurs in the first millennium apart in some toponyms that may very likely go back to the second millennium. It therefore seems that with the decline of the Bronze Age societies, and the advent of new ones in the Iron Age, the conditions changed and the economic, political, and military need for the *Dunnu/Dimtu* seems to have vanished. No Neo-Assyrian *dunnu's* are known to have existed, which is likely to be related to new

forms of socio-political organization. Moreover, even though *dunnu's* and *dimtu's* of various periods and places share many characteristics (discussed below), its precise functioning in the framework of society or the state may vary depending on place and time.

II.4 The use of *dunnu's* by the Middle Assyrian state

To understand the functioning of the *Dunnu* in the Middle Assyrian state, we have only very little material available (Koliński, 2001; Düring, 2015). Only 29 *Dunnu,* unevenly distributed over the Middle Assyrian territory are known from the textual sources, another six have been proposed based on archaeological evidence alone (Düring, 2015, p. 53; Puljiz and Qasim, 2020). Of most of the recorded instances, we know little more than their names. Almost half of all attested Middle Assyrian *dunnu's* are found in the administration of the town of Sibaniba (Tell Billa), located in the eastern part of the Empire well over a 100 km north of Aššur (Kolinski, 2014a, p. 22). Dating to the 13th century before the reign of Tukulti Ninurta I, they may have been established during the phase of eastern expansion of the Assyrian state prior to the western expansion which resulted in the foundation of the *Dunnu* at Tell Sabi Abyad. However, their exact origins and the context of their foundation remain unclear and they may thus also have been 'indigenous' socio-economic institutions. Other *dunnu's* are found sparsely distributed over the Middle Assyrian Empire. However, there is more abundant evidence for their presence in the Northern Balikh valley, all known from Tell Sabi Abyad's administration. The observed irregular geographic distribution of the *Dunnu's* may simply reflect the scarcity and patchy nature of the textual evidence. On the other hand, we have many texts from the Khabur valley, but *dunnu's* do not feature regularly in them. The impression therefore rises that *dunnu's* may have been founded under specific circumstances, part of the imperial strategic toolset used by the Middle Assyrian empire (Düring, 2015; B. Düring, 2020). Thus, the working hypothesis that is favoured currently is that they functioned as a kind of colonial settlement where previous settlement patterns were an insufficient basis for the organization of an agricultural economy (Radner, 2004; Kolinski, 2014a). At least, in respect to the settlement decline in the Balikh valley (see below) and possibly efforts of repopulation by the Assyrians, it seems to have functioned in such a context. The defensive aspects of such settlements moreover hint at a situation that requires extra security. Border lands or conquered territory with rebellious populations would seem to be likely contexts of use. Moreover, in rural regions the *Dunnu* seems a viable territorial and economic strategy.

Koliński (2014a, p. 24) argued that the fact that instances of named *dunnu's* make up only 5% of the total corpus of known toponyms, implies that *dunnu's* may not have played an important role as has been thought previously. Indeed, the total number of known *Dunnu* from the Middle Assyrian texts (29) contrasts starkly with the total number of *Dimtu* from the much smaller kingdoms of Arraphe (216) or Ugarit (81). Aside from the probability that Arrapheans and Ugariteans had a different concept of what constitutes a *Dimtu* or *Dunnu*, the discrepancy seems to suggest that in these kingdoms, the *Dimtu* fulfilled a dominant role in the organization of the entire territory and were integral part of the settlement

pattern. Apparently, the *Dunnu* did not play the same role in the Middle Assyrian territorial organization. However, its relative numerical insignificance may not necessarily mean that individual *dunnu's* were not of paramount importance to the success of the Middle Assyrian state. All the evidence we have from the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad suggests it was an important stronghold, trade hub and power base for one of the most important figures of the time. It does therefore seem that they may be important for our understanding of the functioning of the Middle Assyrian state and its early hegemony. Moreover, the *Dunnu* may even be considered as one of the defining characteristics of the Middle Assyrian empire, as the *Dunnu* lost all relevance in the Neo-Assyrian empire thereafter.

In view of the present state of knowledge, the conclusion must be that the Assyrians made use of *dunnu's* as a way of organizing and securing territory only sparingly, and only there where the local military, demographic or political situation demanded it. It was a strategic tool, used were necessary. However, considering the relative dearth of information, such a view may easily be challenged or modified by future findings.

II.5 *Dunnu*'s & dimtu's in comparative perspectve

Kolinski (2001, pp. 126–127) already noted the similarities of the *dimtu/dunnu* with constructions found in neighbouring cultures, such as Egypt, the levant or Elam. Zoomed out far enough we may see the general principle of an estate or agricultural territory, centred by a fortified settlement or farmhouse make an appearance in many later periods and other regions as well. There are clear superficial similarities with the 'fortified farmhouse' (often: 'Qala'), a frequently recurring phenomenon of the rural Middle East and Mediterranean that has quickly fallen out of use during the modernizing 20th century but for a few pockets where older social structures survive. Examples run from Afghanistan to Morocco (see also Table 7).[5] These rural fortresses, as they are sometimes called, are heavily walled constructions with multiple interior structures serving various social and economic functions. They are often run by the head of a certain influential family, in a social organization which included subordinate families residing in the same fortified settlement. Similarly, the owner might be living on site or be an absentee landlord living in town. They universally serve important economic functions as centres of agricultural production and safeguarding harvests. The difference with the Middle Assyrian *Dunnu* regards their institutional status within a state organization, and the effect this may have on possible additional functions - administrative, military strategic, non-agricultural productive, trade - they hence receive. As

[5] This type of rapidly disappearing settlement has attracted surprisingly little academic interest. In general, no more than cursory reference is made to them. Only of the Qala in Afghanistan and the Kasba and Tighremt in Morocco (which are an independent development), detailed descriptions of these structures and their socio-economic and cultural contexts exist. Afganistan: Hallet & Samizay (1980), in Iran: Horne (1993, pp. 50–51), in Iraq: Aurenche (1977, p. 115), in Morocco: Nijst *et al.* (1973, pp. 186–209).

discussed above, in the Bronze Age they formed instruments of the state used for territorial control in a socio-political system which was based on grants to elite members of society.

Considering the frequent recurrence of fortified estates cross-culturally, and the fact that in certain city states or kingdoms *dunnu's/dimtus* were part of the socio-economical organization of these states, the hypothesis may be offered that during the Bronze Age already present social institutions were incorporated in the state and transformed into tools of control (Düring, 2015). However, with attempts of later Assyrian imperial polities to limit the power of families in order to centralise power and increase its operational efficiency, such social institutions became to be regarded inefficient and as liabilities for the survival of the state (Brown, 2013). This in turn may explain their disappearance from the later sources. It may have been that the fortified farm continued to exist as a low-key socio-economic structure. At the same time however, its widespread geographic and temporal occurrence suggests that it is a phenomenon may be easily reinvented after a temporary disappearance. Both aspects may explain the omnipresence of the phenomenon throughout history.

II.6 Geographical setting

In the following section the geographical settings of the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad will be discussed, focussing on finding an explanation for its geographic location, and the natural affordances of the landscape. Apart from giving a general idea of the environment that people had to deal with, these are topics that are also relevant for the discussion of construction materials and methods, and the problem of water supply.

II.6.1 Physical geography and natural resources

The *Dunnu* is found in the Balikh river basin, a 100 kilometre long north-south running valley in the gently undulating to flat Syrian steppe. In the north, the basin is bordered by the foothills of the Anatolian heights, in the south by the Euphrates. It covers an area nowadays dissected by the modern border between Turkey and Syria, but in ancient times formed more or less a geographic unit. The Balikh river is a relatively narrow perennial stream fed by the 'Ain al 'Arus spring, near Tell Abyad just south of the Syrian-Turkish border. The valley continues up further north across the border. A natural boundary with gently sloping land separates the Balikh valley with the Harran plain in the north. Here, running across this higher land the Jullab river is found, a tributary of the Balikh. In the middle of the 20th century it did often not reach its confluence with the Balikh due to tapping of its waters for irrigation (Lloyd and Brice, 1951).

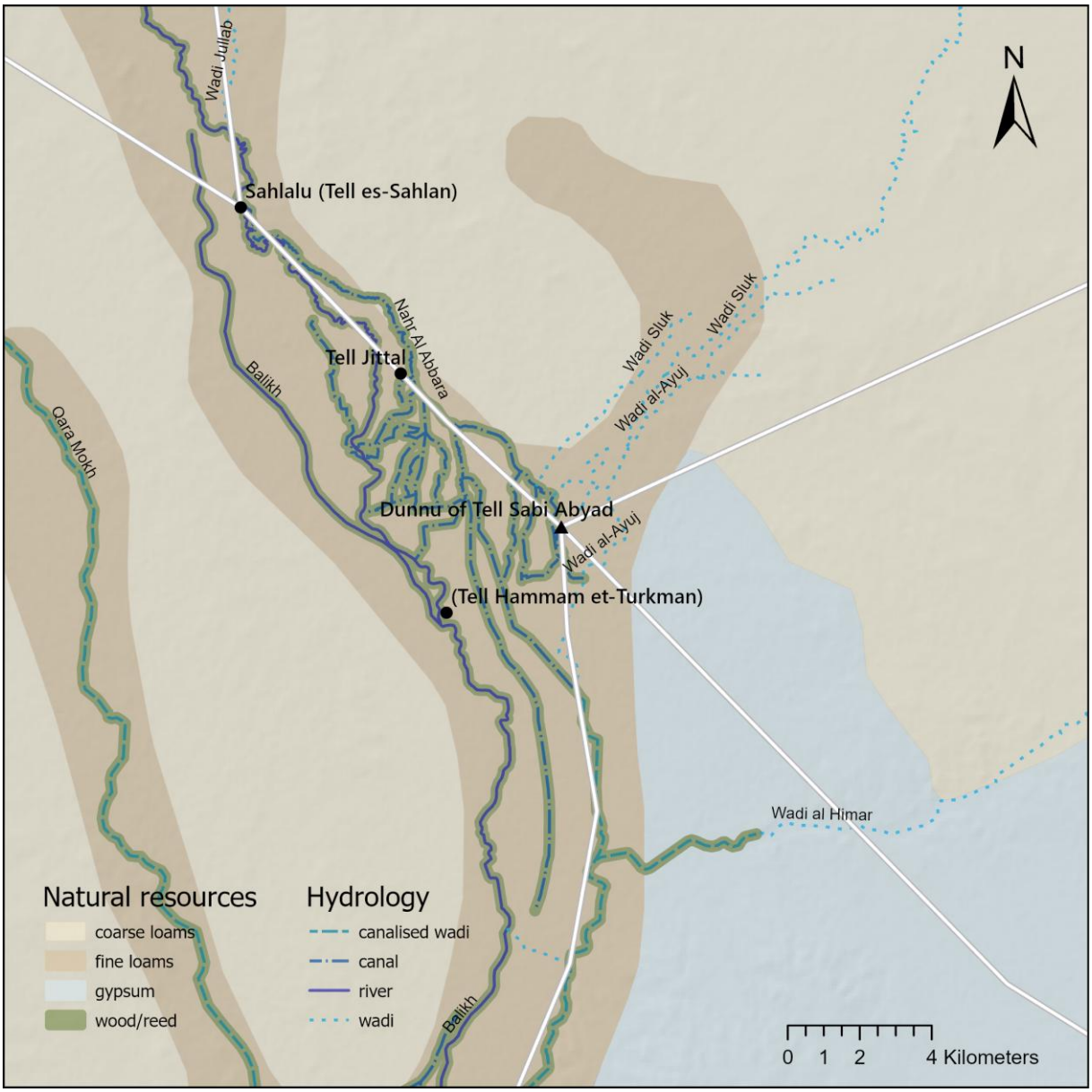


Figure 7. Physical geography and natural resources of the upper Balikh around Tell Sabi Abyad. Derived from the landuse/soil map dataset (Mathys, 2017)*. Note that wood/reed is inferred from the presence of semi-permanent bodies of water. Most likely this distribution was also determined by the presence of marshy conditions, which occurred during large parts of antiquity in the area west of Tell Sabi Abyad.*

The Balikh valley cuts into depositionary rock formed in a lagoonal environment during the Miocene, 23 to 5 million years ago. It is characterised by an interbedded sequence of marls, gypsum, clays, silty sandstones and limestones (Mulders, 1969, p. 36). Especially limestone and gypsum rock are found near the surface over large areas of the desert and steppe landscape bordering the Balikh river. The lower river valley is a flat area constituting the Pleistocene and earlier Holocene flood plains of the Balikh. These are alluvial deposits containing pebbles, sands, sandy loams, and loams. In these older deposits, the current Balikh has cut its course through towards the Euphrates in the south.

The area of the ancient river terraces formed by the Balikh and its tributaries is a strip of land just one to five kilometres in width. This area roughly constitutes the limits of arable land. Beyond this area,

soils in sufficient thickness for agriculture are often not present. When they are, in wadis for example, lack of water forms a challenge. Significantly, the *Dunnu* is located in one of the wider parts of the valley, near the confluence of various wadis, where more arable soils are available.

The current Balikh meanders in a flood plain of about 150 wide, 4 to 5 meters below the most recent terrace (Mulders, 1969, p. 49). The valley is not drained by just a single stream, the Nahr Balikh. Over a large part of its length, the Wadi al-Keder is found running parallel to the Balikh. A number of other wadis feed into one of these streams. The Qara Mokh drains a large part of the western valley, while the Wadi Sluk and Wadi Al Ayuj drain a part of the upper eastern valley. The Qara Mokh is almost devoid of ancient sites, while the area of the wadis Sluk and Al Ayui still have attracted settlement in the past. Possibly this is related to a better water supply due to the presence of a small spring fed stream running parallel to the wadi Sluk (Rayne, 2015, p. 431). Although this stream is never given much heed in other studies about Balikh valley, it must have had an important auxiliary function in the water supply of the area. Irrigation and drainage activities by people have altered the hydrology of the area (Wilkinson, 1998; Rayne, 2015). Examples are the Sahlan-Hammam canal, and the Nahr al-Abbara, both branching from the Balikh near Tell es-Sahlan. The visible remains of these, and other canal systems mostly date to the Hellenistic and Islamic periods. However, since earlier sites line up with the Nahr al-Abbara, it is possible that it may have had a Bronze Age forerunner (Rayne, 2015, p. 423).

At present, the Balikh valley is nearly completely deforested and entirely exploited agriculturally. In the past, landscape and vegetation had a different character. The difference is mainly the result of human activities, since the climate has not changed significantly. The area between Tell Sabi Abyad and the Balikh is a badly drained shallow basin, which is conducive to the development of marshes. Less than a century ago, marshland was common in the upper Balikh valley, noted amongst other by archaeologist Max Mallowan (Mallowan, 1946) who described the difficulties to cross the landscape in the 1930s due to marshland and flooding near Tell es-Sahlan. Still today the remains of former water collection areas are visible from the sky as geomorphological scars in the landscape (Hritz, 2013; Rayne, 2015). One of the main challenges of this area has therefore always been drainage, which explains the multitude channels crisscrossing the basin. This extensive drainage system is as far as we know mediaeval in date (Rayne, 2015), which may indicate that during most of antiquity, a considerable area remained marshland. Based on the presence of a few sites lining the edges of these former marshlands Hritz (2013, p. 154) argues that during the Bronze Age, some populations targeted the exploitation of these marshes specifically. Marshes could have sustained quite some useful resources close to Tell Sabi Abyad, such as wood and reeds for construction, and fish, fowl and other wild animals for food. The analysis of carbonised wood samples from Neolithic (Akkermans, 1993, p. 213) as well as Late Bronze Age (Fantone, pers. comm. 2014) contexts shows that Poplar, Ash and Willow were used in both periods. Although river transport of timber from upstream forest resources is not out of the question, it is quite likely that these trees had a local origin.

Above and beyond the river terraces and the lower wadi valleys, the steppe stretches. This is arid land with only spread-out bushy vegetation able to root deep to access water. Grasses and flowers may grow during spring, but most wither during the soaring heat of the summer. This ecological niche is extensively used for grazing and in the past for hunting, and is home to pastoralists with herds, and nomads. The importance of these people and this ecological niche is considerable for the agriculturalists living in the Balikh valley, judging from the numerous bones of herded animals found in excavations of settlements. Hunting on species like Gazelle has also been attested for both the Neolithic as the Bronze Age (Cavallo, 2002; Russell and Buitenhuis, 2008). Together with local marshland exploitation and agriculture steppe exploitation, the hunt may be considered one of the three pillars of subsistence of the Balikh society (Hritz, 2013).

II.6.2 Climate

The climate in the Balikh valley is characterised by dry hot summers, and relatively cold winters with rainfall. Data from Raqqa give an indication of the range of temperatures (Mulders, 1969, table 3). On average temperatures ranges from 6 degrees Celsius in January to 30 degrees in July. It may freeze up to minus 8 degrees in winter, while the maximum daily temperature in summer may rise to 46 degrees. Differences between night and day temperatures are significant, especially during summer when the air humidity is low and heat radiation easily escapes. This also means that temperature differences between sun and shade, outside and inside are considerable and offer some human comfort in the generally harsh climate.

Rain occurs from October to May, with January being the wettest month. The months June to September are practically dry. Most rainfall occurs in very short periods, falling from the clouds in bursts. From north to south precipitation in the valley decreases significantly (Mulders, 1969, table 1; Hole and Zaitchik, 2007, fig. 2). Tell Abyad on the Syrian-Turkish border, receives on average 250 to 300 mm yearly while at Raqqa this is 150 to 200 mm. Fluctuations of yearly rainfall are significant, with exceptionally dry and wet years during which rainfall will surpass the average ranges. Although it is possible to perform rainfed agriculture between 200 and 250 mm, this zone yields a high risk of crop failure. A minimum of 250 mm rainfall is required if rainfed agriculture is to be performed with an acceptable reliability and predictability (Hole and Zaitchik, 2007, p. 140). Barley and some legumes are best grown in these ranges, and where precipitation fluctuates less between the years, also wheat. But wheat is best grown when rainfall is over 300 mm on average. Of course, the reliability and predictability of harvests is greatly improved with irrigation. Considering the great yearly fluctuations in rainfall and regular draughts, it comes as no surprise that irrigation has been employed during long periods of human history (Rayne, 2015).

An important aspect of the climate are the sand-dust storms, which hinder any human activity outside. They occur most frequently from March to July, when wind velocity is highest (Mulders, 1969, p. 24).

During these months, 2 to 3 days on average are hit by such storms. They may last from anything between a few hours and 2 days. Visibility during these storms is about 1000 meter, but in especially dense dust clouds it may happen that a person sees no further than 25 meter (Mulders, 1969, p. 24).

II.7 Settlement pattern and population trend during the Late Bronze Age

The north-southerly orientation of the valley has dictated the general shape of the settlement pattern in all periods of human (pre)history. The largest settlements are found in the northern part of the Balikh valley, while the size of settlements and population density clearly decreases towards the south (Lyon, 2000; Kolinski, 2014b). This pattern may largely be attributed to the climate, increasingly arid, and the physical geography, an increasingly narrow valley. It has been argued that a fully-fledged urban landscape, like that in the valleys of the Euphrates and Habur, never developed in the Balikh (Hritz, 2013), but settlements such as Sahlalu and Hammam et Turkman are nonetheless substantial towns. Although the general geographic pattern of settlement distribution is largely stable, significant demographic fluctuations occurred impacting the settlement density. Archaeological surveys have shown that during the Middle Bronze Age, the river basin was relatively densely populated (Curvers, 1991; Lyon, 2000). A settlement system was present with evenly distributed larger sites that may be regarded as local centres that divided the territory of the valley in various units with corresponding secondary and tertiary settlements. Population levels went down in Mitanni times and seems to decline further during Assyrian rule while at the same time a few new settlements appear.[6] The significant decline in settlement numbers from the Mittani to the Middle Assyrian period has been connected to historically attested Assyrian raids of the area during its initial conquest (Lyon 2000; Düring, 2021, p. 88). Evidence for episodes of conflagration or abandonment on a number of sites and textual descriptions that suggest the area was dominated by pastoral groups such as the Suteans support Düring's hypothesis.[7]

[6] The surveys of Curvers and Lyon seem to disagree about the magnitude of this decline, which has been attributed to Curvers's inability to recognize a certain sub-period (Kolinski, 2014b).

[7] It is possible however that the picture of demographic decline has been exaggerated by a binary distinction between pottery styles used as chronological diagnostics. According to Duistermaat (2014, p. 133) Mitanni and Middle Assyrian pottery traditions in the Balikh are show much continuation, and have considerable overlap both stylistically and chronologically. If correct, this would blur the Mitanni to Middle Assyrian transition and make a demographic collapse less pronounced.

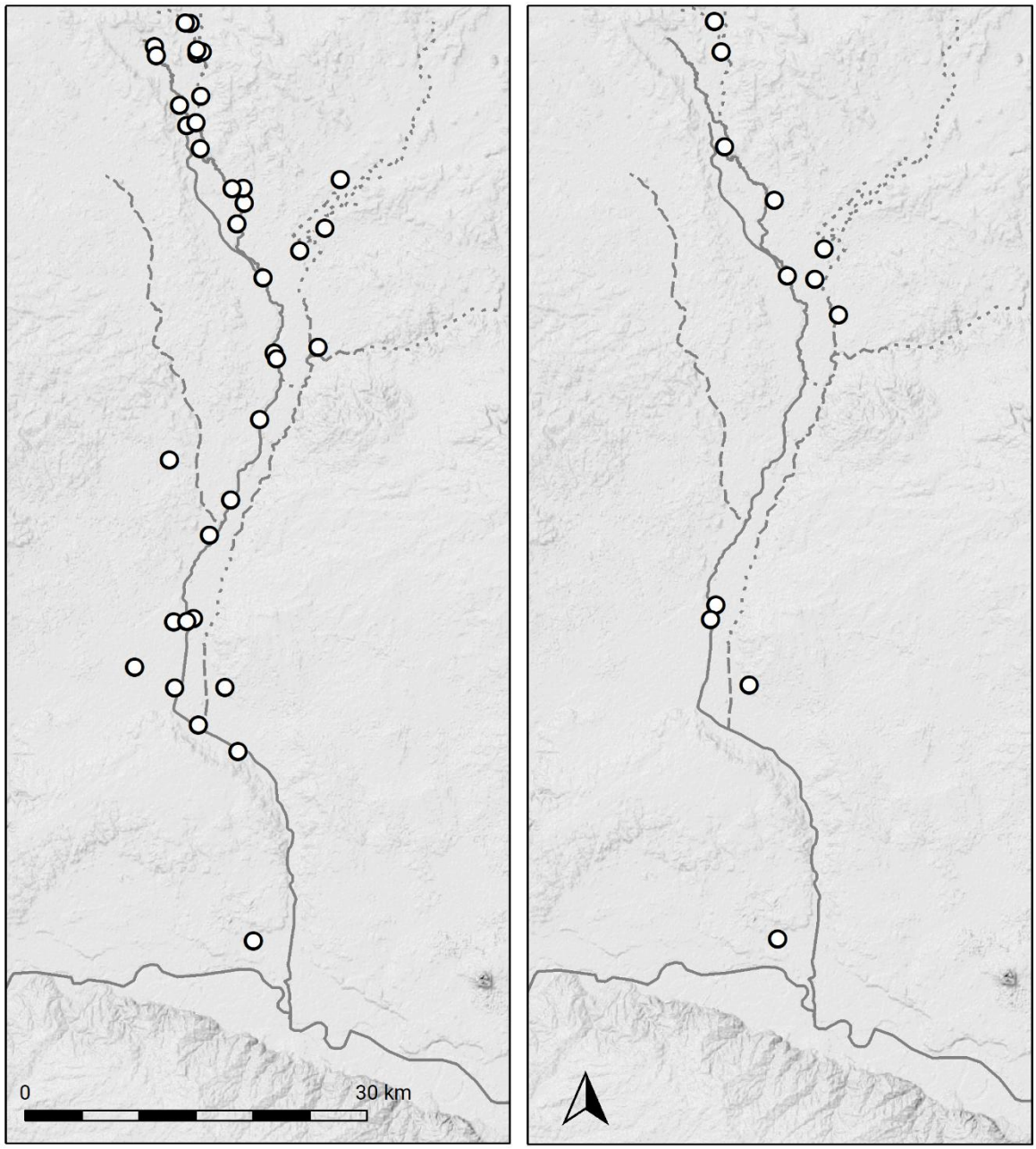


Figure 8. Mittani and Middle Assyrian period settlements in the Balikh valle. Redrawn by author after Lyon 2000, figures 4 and 7.

II.8 Historical setting

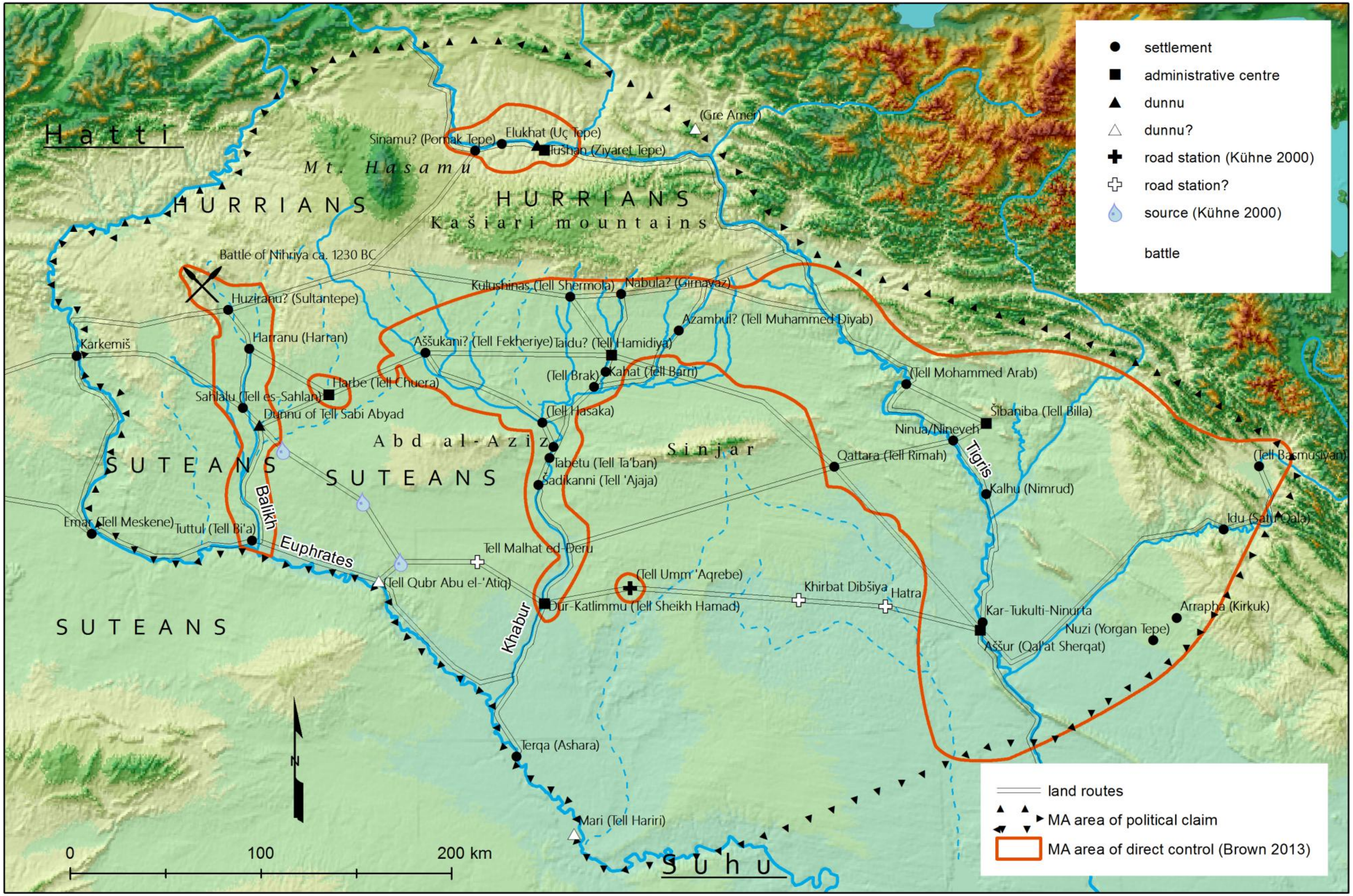
The *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad was built in tumultuous times. A time during which the political and military balances in Northern Mesopotamia had come to shift (Postgate, 1992, p. 247). The Assyrian state had just started to assert its position as a regional power, and played an important role in the destruction of the kingdom of Mitanni, which was called Hanigalbat by the Assyrians. For about a century (approximately 1440 to 1340) Aššur was a vassal state of Mitanni (Kolinski, 2014a, p. 9). During the reign of Assyrian king Aššur-uballiţ I this changed, although his activities were initially directed at conquering Babylon and Mitanni territory in the east. Under Adad-nīrari I (1295-1264 BC) it is clear

that the roles were reversed: Mitanni/Hanigalbat was now itself a vassal state of Assyria. During the reign of this king and that of his son Salmanessar I (1263-34 BC) Hanigalbat rebelled a number of times, each time met with forceful response by Assyria. Both kings lead campaigns far westward from Aššur, and reached the banks of the Euphrates nearly 500 km away from the city. It was Salmanessar I who put a definite end to the semi-independent status of Hanigalbat, and started to incorporate it into the Assyrian state, a process that was completed during the long reign of his successor Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BC) (Kolinski, 2014a, p. 10). Tukulti-Ninurta I is widely considered to be one of the most successful kings of the Middle Assyrian phase, during which an Assyrian empire took shape.

It is therefore no coincidence that the earliest texts found at Tell Sabi Abyad date to the first decade of Tukulti-Ninurta's reign, the 1230s BC. It places the foundation of the *Dunnu* just after a phase of military conquest, in an effort to control an area and make it profitable for the Assyrian state. Although the Assyrians settled on more locations in the Balikh basin, and definitely built more than one fortified settlement, the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad stands out because its owner was nobody less than a person who bore the title 'King of Hanigalbat'. In other contexts, this person is referred to as grand vizier, or governor of the western province. But it is significant that the title king was maintained. Although Hanigalbat/Mitanni had ceased to exist as an independent state, the title of king associated with this territory, had not. The fate of the *Dunnu* must therefore be seen in the light of the political and military successes and failures of this powerful individual. This is in fact one of the distinctive characteristics of the Middle Assyrian empire, its reliance on high ranking individuals or families to which power and control were outsourced (Brown, 2013, pp. 106–112). Since there was no centralised state apparatus in place, this was initially the most practical and fastest way to organise territorial control for the king at Aššur. However, it also created a weakness, that would play out soon.

There were three kings of Hanigalbat, owners of the *Dunnu,* that lived and died during the period that the *Dunnu* was in use. The first is Aššur-Idin, followed by Shulmanu-Musabsi, and then Ilī-Padâ. As an effect of the considerable amount of power instilled in this individual, the house of Ilī-Padâ became a threat to the throne. Although we are not in the possession of explicit evidence, it is quite likely that Ilī-Padâ was one of the 'magnates' who conspired with Aššur-nadin-apli to assassinate his father, the old king Tukulti-Ninurta I (Wiggermann, 2006, p. 95). That Ilī-Padâ was involved seems to be implied by the fact that a few years later, the king of Babylonia addressed Ilī-Padâ and Aššur-nirari III, as 'the two kings of Assyria', suggesting that Ilī-Padâ had profited from the change of power (Wiggermann, 2006, p. 95). It was eventually a son of Ilī-Padâ, Ninurta-apil-Ekur, who usurped the Assyrian crown after a return from Babylon, where he had spent a brief period in exile. We may imagine that henceforth, cynically understanding the risk, no-one else was to be given the opportunities that finally put the kin of Ilī-Padâ in supreme power. This may have been an important motivation for Ninurta-apil-Ekur to put an end to the kingship of Hanigalbat. This spectacle of political intrigue will have had direct repercussions on the status of the *Dunnu*, and its importance as part the power base of its owner (Düring, 2015, p. 62).

After Ilī-Padâ's death and his son's ascension to the throne, evidence for administration drops sharply on Tell Sabi Abyad.



settlement
administrative centre
dunnu
dunnu?
road station (Kühne 2000)
road station?
source (Kühne 2000)
battle
land routes
MA area of political claim
MA area of direct control (Brown 2013)
Hatti
HURRIANS
HURRIANS
Mt. Hasamu
Kašiari mountains
SUTEANS
SUTEANS
SUTEANS
Abd al-Aziz
Sinjār
Suhu
Battle of Nihriya ca. 1230 BC
Sinamu? (Pornak Tepe)
Elukhat (Uç Tepe)
Tushan (Ziyaret Tepe)
(Gre Amer)
Kulushinas (Tell Shermola)
Nabula? (Girnavaz)
Azamhul? (Tell Muhammed Diyab)
Huziranu? (Sultantepe)
Harranu (Harran)
Karkemiš
Aššukani? (Tell Fekheriye)
Taidu? (Tell Hamidiya)
(Tell Brak)
Kahat (Tell Barri)
Harbe (Tell Chuera)
Sahlalu (Tell es-Sahlan)
Dunnu of Tell Sabi Abyad
(Tell Hasaka)
Tabetu (Tell Ta'ban)
Šadikanni (Tell 'Ajaja)
(Tell Mohammed Arab)
Šibaniba (Tell Billa)
Ninua/Nineveh
Tigris
Qattara (Tell Rimah)
Kalhu (Nimrud)
(Tell Basmusiyan)
Idu (Satu Qala)
Emar (Tell Meskene)
Tuttul (Tell Bi'a)
Balikh
Euphrates
Tell Malhat ed-Deru
(Tell Qubr Abu el-'Atiq)
(Tell Umm 'Aqrebe)
Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Sheikh Hamad)
Khabur
Khirbat Dibšiya
Hatra
Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta
Aššur (Qal'at Sherqat)
Arrapha (Kirkuk)
Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe)
Terqa (Ashara)
Mari (Tell Hariri)
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Figure 9 (previous page). Late Bronze Age Northern Mesopotamia and the Middle Assyrian state. Sources used: Cancik-Kirschbaum (Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996)*, Brown* (Brown, 2014)*, with adaptations, Cancik-Kirschbaum (toponyms 2012), Kühne* (Kühne, 2000)*, Radner* (Radner, 2004)*. Otto 2014*

However, we must consider also larger regional and supra-regional developments that may have caused Assyria to pull back from its western territories. The end of the *Dunnu* coincides with the crisis years of the 'Late Bronze Age collapse' of various complex societies in the Western Asia (Van de Mieroop, 2007; Cline, 2014). By the time of the Late Bronze Age Western Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean were part of a tightly connected and globalized world. Due to a complex of – heatedly debated – causes, the system was brought to a grinding halt, and the movement of people, war and destruction of cities that is seen in this era must be viewed as symptoms of this collapse (Cline, 2014). It also affected northern Syria and southern Turkey, the world with which the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad was in close contact. In the period around 1190-1170 BC various large and important cities were destroyed, including Ugarit on the coast and Emar on the Euphrates. Both these cities were important polities as well as trade centres through which goods were funnelled towards the Assyrian empire. In the same period one of the most powerful states of the Bronze Age, the Hittite empire, ceased to exist as well. Karkamiš, a city of which we know that the *Dunnu* received some trade from, was controlled by the Hittites. It continued to exist independently, and its king declared himself the heir of the Hittite kingship, but it must have suffered severely from the collapsing polities around it. Inside Assyrian territory, the case of nearby Tell Chuera, ancient Ḫarbe, about 50 km east from the *Dunnu* seems illustrative of the fate of this region. Ḫarbe suffered problems with attacks as well (Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996), and although it may not have been destroyed by it, it was in the end simply abandoned during the 12th century. More similar cases can be pointed out (Brown, 2014). Although this seems to suggest an Assyrian abandonment of these territories, there was not yet a definitive retreat. Historical sources indicate that after the dead of Tukulti-Ninurta I, there was a period of turmoil, corresponding also to the abandonment of aforementioned sites. However, during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) Assyria seems to have regained some of its control of the western territories (Postgate, 1992, p. 249). This is corroborated by the archaeological evidence. New discoveries gradually start to reveal to us a fortified border along the upper and middle Euphrates (Tenu, 2023). These fortifications with Assyrian material culture and administration indicates a defensive stance and an attempt to regain and preserve territorial control in the 12th and 11th centuries. However sites like the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad, that were abandoned in the period of Assyrian political crisis and wider regional turmoil, did not recover their former status. Although Assyrian presence is continued on a lower level, it generally seems that the Balikh was abandoned by the high-ranking political elite responsible for developing the area (Brown, 2013).

II.9 The situation in Western Assyria

Even before the Assyrian abandonment of the Balikh, the impression given by various sources, from Tell Sheikh Hamad to Tell Sabi Abyad, is that the western part of the empire was never entirely stable. Texts from Tell Sheikh Hamad refer to problems with *nakru*, or 'enemies', probably Hurrians,

remainders of Mitanni supporters (Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996). They occupy the area of the Kasiari mountains in the north, and attack convoys and cities, like Tell Chuera, 50 km east of Tell Sabi Abyad (Jakob, 2014). Moreover, these sources frequently allude to the danger of the looming presence of the Hittites. Large military operations by Sîn-Mudammeq (a general serving under Ilī-Padâ) extending over the entire Balikh and further west to round up prisoners (of war?) trying to flee back to Karkamiš is illustrative of the tense situation. On other times however, Ilī-Padâ comes in support of Karkamiš with an army to Emar to help suppress a rebellion there. Emar was under the control of the king of Karkamiš. Even though at times enemies, there is probably a shared interest by the Assyrian and Hittite state to collaborate on this level. Cities such as Emar were important trade hubs, connecting both states. More generally one can suppose this was a shared enemy that was more effectively combatted together.

Another group that offered some challenges to the Assyrian state were Suteans, a nomadic people that inhabited the steppe in between Balikh and Habur, and south of the Euphrates. They were not unfavourable towards the Assyrians, as Assyrian state officials relied on their knowledge of steppe and desert routes (Wiggermann, 2010, p. 37), used them for intelligence about enemy movements (T93-2, T04-13), and even invited them to official dinners (T93-3). However, a treaty with the Suteans found at Tell Sabi Abyad (T04-37) lists them as enemies but for one group or tribe, so-called Nihsānu Suteans (Wiggermann, 2010, pp. 55–56). The agreement stipulates that the Nihsānu Suteans are not allowed to shelter enemies of the state, e.g. Kassites, Suheans, Subareans, Hittites, and other Suteans. Another article provided for the reimbursement of possessions taken by Assyrians from Suteans and taken by Suteans from Assyrians. This alludes to previous injustices enacted by both sides against the other, and the treaty was probably a way to resolve such tensions. Apparently, the Assyrians saw the friendship of these Suteans as beneficial. Or at the least acted out of pragmatic motives in absence of military capacity to expel or supress them. Quite interestingly, the last two articles – out of six – are arrangements regarding beer consumption. The treaty states that beer bought by Suteans from the *Dunnu* is only allowed to be consumed in their own camp. Moreover, it requires that Suteans should leave a deposit when beer could not be paid for directly, and ensured fair treatment of Suteans by Assyrians collecting open beer bills. The last were apparently picking random Suteans for the settlement of debts made by others. In conclusion, the treaty gives us valuable insight in the conditions of the western Empire, as it reflects a situation where the Assyrian state is looking for allies in a potentially hostile environment.

II.10 The role of the *Dunnu* in networks of trade, supply and communication

In the previous it was shown that the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad was located near the western frontier of the Middle Assyrian state. This is a fact that cannot be emphasized enough, as it explains a lot about the role and fate of the *Dunnu.* Here, the Assyrian state was bordered by Hittite vassal states and prosperous cities Karkamiš and Emar, trade hubs receiving goods from Canaan, Turkey and Egypt

(Faist, 2006). Trade from the west must have accessed the Assyrian empire on at least three points. A northern route ran from Karkamiš to Huziranu and is attested for instance in a letter from Dur-Katlimmu listing the stops of a caravan that was attacked after the town of Ḫarbe (Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996). A southern route ran from Emar to Tuttul. For this route, there is little direct evidence, but it is implied by geographic logic and the fact that both places were important centres during the Late Bronze Age. However, the evidence seems to suggest that during Middle Assyrian times at least, the trade balance tilted towards the northern routes. A central route must have led from Karkamiš towards the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad. As identified by Kühne (Kühne, 2000), from the *Dunnu* eastwards the route continued through the steppe following springs and probably had road stations at regular distances, passing Dur-Katlimmu and finally reaching Aššur. The importance of keeping this route open for travel and trade is implied by the attestation of policing activities, which is how Wiggermann (2010, p. 39) interprets the supplying of passing groups of chariot teams at the *Dunnu*.[8] As far as we can tell, the international trade goods administrated in the *Dunnu* came from Karkamiš. At the *Dunnu* such trade had to be cleared before travelling on to Aššur, and it has thus been characterised as a custom post (Akkermans, 2006, p. 201; Akkermans and Wiggermann, 2015, p. 109). It must be emphasised however, that the evidence for these statements is just a single letter (T 93-20)[9], in which a trades representative of the house of Ilī-Padâ demands all trade from Karkamiš to be checked and sealed before transported further east.

It is interesting to linger briefly on the question of why the *Dunnu* was chosen as place for a custom post, and what this essentially meant. From the perspective of lines of communication, the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad is located on a strategic point. It is on a nearly straight line between Karkamiš, Dur-Katlimmu, the capital of the western half of the Middle Assyrian Empire, and finally Aššur. Any trade or message with a direct destination to either Dur-Katlimmu or Aššur without delay, would thus take this route. However, trade caravans generally trade along a series of towns, not necessarily taking the most direct route from one point to another: they went were the commerce was at.[10] Perhaps excluded to this mercantile logic are the trade interests of the palaces and the kings, who controlled a large part of the trade and the merchants. From the point of view of the central authority in Aššur a fast and direct line with the west would be preferred, both from the perspective of internal communications, as well as fast supply route for goods. It is possible to see the location of the *Dunnu* in this light, since through Ilī-Padâ, it was connected to the trade interests of the central authorities. Another observation supporting the idea of a specific and special role of the *Dunnu* in the trade of the Middle Assyrian empire, is its relative position on the Assyrian frontier. Although the *Dunnu* has been characterised as a frontier

[8] As found in T 93-4 and T 98-12.
[9] Part of the content is published in Wiggermann & Akkermans (2015).
[10] See Faist (2006, p. 157) for the suggestion that the Middle Assyrian state gave much room to independent entrepreneurialism, as opposed to the palace economies of Ugarit and Nuzi.

settlement (Akkermans, Limpens and Spoor, 1993) and a place where goods were cleared, it was not necessarily always the first Assyrian locality on the way from Karkamiš to the Middle Assyrian empire. Depending on which route one took, this was in many cases the much larger town of Saḫlalu, modern tell Sahlan, just a short day walk from the *Dunnu,* and possibly other places under Assyrian control further west. These settlements will have attracted caravans. It is therefore possible that the *Dunnu* was just one of the various locations where goods were cleared, and probably not all goods coming from the west and heading for Aššur went past the *Dunnu.* Trading caravans often took detours, following the chain of settlements. The *Dunnu* however is located on the crossing of a steppe route that went to the Habur and Aššur in a straight line. Hence, for a specific category of goods, the *Dunnu* may have been used as a station and a reliable line of communication in general with the capital.

A north-south route following the Balikh river valley also passed the *Dunnu*. This route was the main line of communication between the settlements of the Balikh valley, and was more of intraregional importance than the east-west route, which, as discussed, functioned as an artery for international trade and communication between the different regions of the empire. But also on the north-south route, the *Dunnu* seems to be located on a strategic position: about half-way the Balikh valley basin. This position would make it a practical central place or a base of operation in the valley. Also, it made the *Dunnu* easily reachable for people needing business with Ilī-Padâ or his representatives. That communication along this line was important is abundantly reflected by the texts of *Dunnu*. Towns such as Ḫuzirānu and Ḫarrān in the northern half of the valley, as well as Tuttul at the southern end, are mentioned relatively frequently in the texts. How easily communications and flow of goods went along this line is reflected for instance by tablet 98-77. The text records a debt of 6 doves, 4 turtle doves and one *mesukku*-bird of the governor of Ḫuziranu to Buria, the chief steward of the *Dunnu* before Tammitte (Wiggermann, 2010, p. 38). The north-south route will also have connected the various *dunnu's* that are attested in the texts of Tell Sabi Abyad. A total of six other *dunnu's* are known from the texts of Tell Sabi Abyad[11], some of which also occur in texts from Dur-Katlimmu. Although of none of them we know the precise spot, they were certainly located in the ambit of the Balikh valley.

Other connections that appear important based on the relative times that they are mentioned in the texts are Aššukani and Šuadikanni (both three times). Aššukani is often identified with Tell Fekheriye on the upper Khabur. Its reference in the texts of the *Dunnu* makes sense, as it is the closest connection to the Khabur river valley and most certainly the route of caravans not heading for Aššur right away. Surprising absentees from the *Dunnu's* texts are Ḫarbe (modern Tell Chuera), not far from the *Dunnu* on route to Aššukani, and Dur-Katlimmu, supposedly the western capital and the important intermediary stop

[11] Dunni-Aššur (possession of Sin-Mudammeq, the second most important in command), Dunni-Dagal, *Dunnu*-ša-Buria, *Dunnu*-ša-Kidin-ilāni, Dunni-ša-Šubrê, *Dunnu*-ša-Urdi.

between Aššur and the *Dunnu*. We can only explain their absence as a result of the rather small sample the texts represent. Texts from Ḫarbe (Jakob, 2009) do also not explicitly mention the *Dunnu*, but they do regularly refer to messengers being send to and from aforementioned Saḫlalu/Tell Sahlan, the largest Middle Assyrian site in the middle Balikh.[12] With 10 references, Saḫlalu is also the most frequently mentioned toponym in the *Dunnu* texts, which may be attributed to its vicinity to the town. In the context of messages from Saḫlalu to Ḫarbe, a certain Mannukîja is mentioned, who is supposed to supply horses and chariots to the elite soldiers of general Sîn-Mudammeq (Jakob, 2009, letter 11). It is quite likely that in fact Mannu-kî-Adad is meant, the earlier steward of the *Dunnu*, in this instance referred to with his common nickname (Jakob, 2009, p. 51). It fits in well with the picture we get from a few of the texts of the *Dunnu*, which indicate that the *Dunnu* supplied Assyrian soldiers with food, horses and chariots (Wiggermann, 2010, p. 39).[13,14]

II.11 *Dunnu*'s in the Balikh valley

The Assyrians established various *dunnu's* in Balikh valley and brought in people deported from elsewhere. This could be taken to imply a deliberate strategy of control and even 'colonization', unheard of in preceding periods of history and unique to Middle Assyrian territory (Düring, 2015). We know the names of six other *dunnu's* in the Balikh valley: Dunni-Aššur, Dunni-Dagal, *Dunnu*-ša-Buria, *Dunnu*-ša-Kidin-ilāni, Dunni-ša-Šubrê and *Dunnu*-ša-Urdi. Where exactly they were located, we do not know, although some approximations are possible. As may be expected, their distribution would have followed the general orientation of the river.

Unfortunately, we know very little about how they related to the already present settlement pattern: did they take over administrative and economical functions from existing sites and centres? Already noted above was their exceptional number in respect of the total number of *dunnu's* known from Middle Assyrian sources, which points at the unique conditions in the Balikh. As discussed, in the absence of a well-organized and centralized 'urban' landscape characterised by towns and hinterlands, a *dunnu* system may have been an appropriate approach. The largest part of the resettled rural population will not have lived in these *dunnu's*. This is at least the impression we get, on the basis of population estimates of the dependents of Tell Sabi Abyad's *Dunnu*, who can never have all lived at the *Dunnu* (Wiggermann, 2000). But the number of known sites within the catchment of the *Dunnu* is too small to accommodate all these people. Some kind of dispersed settlement pattern with small isolated farmsteads

[12] 12 times the town of Saḫlalu is mentioned in the texts from Ḫarbe, which makes it the second most frequently mentioned toponym after Ḫarbe itself (Jakob, 2009, p. 163).
[13] Evidence for chariot production and provisioning chariot teams is found in tablets T98-7, T98-12, T98-41 and T98-56.
[14] Mannukîja is mentioned one other time in Ḫarbe when he stops by for provisions, interestingly accompanying Hittite envoys to the town of Aššukanni (Jakob, 2009, letter 54).

outside the major tells may explain this absence. These are harder to pick up using the extensive survey methods focussed on tells employed by the surveyors. However, small villages are explicitly mentioned in T 96-36:

> "Give out the seed corn of the chief farmers of the villages which they did not yet receive, and give out seed corn to Kurbānu, so that he can cultivate the field (in the district) of Sahlalu, which Sin-mudammeq himself showed him."

These villages do not necessarily have to be searched for in the direct vicinity of the *Dunnu* as one of the receivers of seed corn is located in the district of Sahlalu, which is 12 kilometres away. The seed corn that is talked about may not even have been stored at the *Dunnu.* It simply confirms the administrative influence of the *Dunnu,* which seems to have reached beyond its local catchment, set as a circle with a radius of 5 km. The *dunnu's* will thus definitely have influenced the pattern of settlement in the valley, but the manner in which remains unclear until other *dunnu's* and associated settlements are found.

As proper *dunnu's,* they will mostly have focussed on the agricultural exploitation of the river valley and on managing the pastoral economy. This is at least the focus that is revealed by the texts found at Tell Sabi Abyad. It is not clear how similar or different the various *dunnu's* in the Balikh valley were from each other. But it is unlikely that they were all exactly the same. For instance, not all *dunnu's* would have acted the same as the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad in being a border post through which goods heading to Aššur were cleared. Nor might all of them have produced chariots. Perhaps they all specialised in a certain manufacturing industry, or perhaps others functioned purely as large state-run farms and had no other functions added, although the last seems unlikely. At least for two of them, Dunni-Aššur and Dunni-Dagal, there are clear indications that they were more than large, defended farms with some administrative functions. Both can be considered proper fortresses with a military function since, according to letter 2 from Dur-Katlimmu, they housed contingents of soldiers (Cancik-Kirschbaum, 1996). In this letter, Dunni-Aššur is referred to as the stronghold of Sîn-mudammeq, a general serving under the grand-vizier Aššur-iddin. Important to our understanding of the role of *dunnu's* in the Balikh valley is that both Dunni-Aššur and Dunni-Dagal are places from which Sîn-mudammeq can draw soldiers for a large-scale military action in the Balikh chasing run-aways. Although the *Dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad on occasion supplied a passing army with food (T 98-119) there is no evidence that it housed soldiers permanently. Several buildings in the northern part of the settlement have been tentatively suggested by the excavators to be barracks. We will return to this issue in the synthesis (VII.6.7).

II.12 Conclusion

In this chapter the physical and historical conditions of the foundation and functioning of the *Dunnu* have been discussed. These conditions would have had repercussions on the architectural forms, spatial

organisation and building activities at the *Dunnu*. Hence, we may interpret the form of the architecture in the light of the insecure political and military situation, but at the same time as a result of a longer tradition in '*dunnu* construction'. However, as we have few incomplete examples of *dunnu's* and potential *dunnu's*, we cannot identify how much was borrowed from this tradition, or to what degree it was innovated in order to suit the local conditions with all encountered problems. Settlement foundation is often a combination of ideal form and pragmatic decisions adjusting to local circumstances. The Assyrians are likely to have worked with some basic understanding or even a theory – be it implicit or explicit - about what constitutes a good *dunnu.* Surveyors and engineers involved with its construction must have had some frame of reference. Considering the diversity of the functions *dunnu's* would have combined, it is likely that they used a modular concept. Functional modules could be added or removed at wish. This is not different from other examples of multi-functional settlements in history, which probably were all a combination of planned action and ad-hoc adaptation.

Considering the historical and geographic context discussed in this chapter, the most important functions that the architecture should fulfil in the case of the *Dunnu* are to produce and secure grain harvests, offer a central place for administration and jurisdiction on occasion, and manage trade. It had also an important function in managing and controlling people. Goods had to come in, go out, be stored, given out as rations, etc. Above all, in some way it needed to convince people that their live was managed, and that the ones in power did that for you. In order to do this, a *dunnu* needs to be looking outwards, as well as looking inwards. That means that the interior needs to be secure enough that people do not easily enter, steal or take possession of the *Dunnu*, while at the same time allow people to come inside to do their daily business: stowing away harvests, producing bread, pottery etc. In the final chapter (VII), we will return to this topic and discuss how these deductions tie in with the archaeological evidence and analysis of the reconstructed built environment.

However, first we need to concern ourselves with the nature of the archaeological evidence. The current chapter formed the deductive framework: we tried to hypothesise what *dunnu's* generally are and what they were in this particular historical and geographic context. In the next chapters we shall focus on the archaeological data.