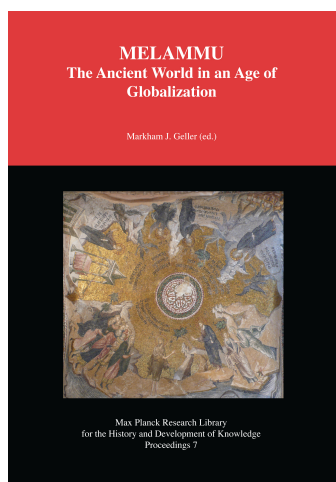


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Chapter 3

Globalization and Imperialism:

Political and Ideological Reactions to the Assyrian Presence in Syria (IXth–VIIIth Century BCE)

Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault

3.1 Introduction

When discussing globalization and imperialism in antiquity and in the Ancient Near East, it is usual to turn to structures, images and quotations from the ideological discourse generated by the elites of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the first half of the first millennium BCE, if one wishes to go beyond the condemnation expressed by classical Greek sources of the model and memory of the Persian Empire, which dared to threaten western democratic Europe. Displayed in European museums since the end of the nineteenth century, the iconography of the sculpted slabs adorning royal Assyrian palaces are not only witnesses to biblical events, but have also made the Neo-Assyrian concepts of power and world domination known even within the popular culture (Matthiae 1996). In comparison with Persia, Assyrian civilization seems far enough from us to avoid the risks of a hasty judgement, retaining at the same time the connotation both of its successful program to control the whole world and of the extreme violence and oppression characterizing its management.

There is a kind of agreement on this point: The formation and the expansion of the Assyrian state constitute a good historical example of a resolute national aristocracy led by a king who has decided to run the rest of the world by means of a straightforward military conquest and, later, with a coherent administration and exploitation.¹ From this point of view, the Assyrian empire can easily be compared with the Roman empire, which is closer to our understanding, but with quite an important difference: While Rome exported everywhere an unsurpassed model of civilization, superior to the local cultures it came to dominate, unifying its contemporary world and determining its evolution—in that way giving something back in exchange for what it took—it was apparently not the case with Assyria, which disappeared shortly after its maximal expansion, leaving nothing—or

¹ See (Oates 1968, 27–66; Liverani 1988, 777–846; Fales 2001).

not much—after its collapse. It evolved from a city to a state, to an Empire, and then to nothing: This seems to be the way to explain the natural path taken by most of the well organized urban based Mesopotamian societies, as described not only in modern research, but also in the texts of the cuneiform tradition (Yoffee 1988a; 1988b). Ancient Mesopotamian languages do not have a word which can be precisely translated as “Empire”, but the imperialistic ideology supporting, or even triggering, this kind of cyclic evolution is expressed through a spatial concept, the domination of the universe, of the four regions of the world (Seux 1967, 305–315; Fales 2001, 20–24).

3.2 Assyrian Imperialism: The Ideology

The Assyrian empire and imperialism are the heirs and one of the latest manifestations, of an ancient Mesopotamian tradition and concept of power, elaborated during—or immediately after—the Akkadian period. From then on, political power—identified as kingship—was considered to exist, have a function and act in history. While, in the far away past, after descending from the heavens, it was supposed to wander from city to city, and from one dynasty to another without any particular reason, in later periods kingship is described as having settled down in one geographical place: Akkad (Cooper 1993). From that moment on, its movements, formerly represented as linear segments, became a succession of concentric waves, expanding in all directions starting from the centre, its effects and final aims being to integrate and to unify the entire world represented as an endless periphery (Michalowski 1993; Mieroop 1999, 59–76). In this system, since there can be only one centre at a time, there can only be one (real) king/emperor in the world, without any rivals, and with whom the gods maintain a special, exclusive relationship. So, when, for the needs of administration and organized exploitation, new authorities must be imposed in lands far from the imperial centre, they can only represent the king’s rule, as lieutenants or governors of their provinces.

Expected to accept imperial structures, peoples living in the periphery were bound to be integrated naturally to the civilization developed within the heart of the empire—eventually enriching it with their own culture and diversity. But the programme of annexation being a strictly political one (Postgate 1992), it never demanded, at least in Assyrian times, an assimilation of the Assyrian culture or religion—though obviously within the limits established by the needs of a correct administration. People were expected to become “as Assyrians”, mainly in their position of “taxpayers,” formal providers for the god Assur’s cult, but noth-

ing more.² On the other hand, elites of the Assyrian empire willingly copied and integrated foreign models, for example in art and architecture (Masetti-Rouault 2005), and Assyrian intellectuals and technocrats kept well in mind their dependency on Babylonian culture, to mention only one example (Machinist 1984–1985). The image of the maximal globalization expressed by the Assyrian ideology was not “only one world,” but a system of countries unified within a network of exchanges of information, raw materials and manufactured goods, controlled by a pivotal centre. In another perspective, a metaphysical one, its teleological aim was conceived as a cosmic integration of nature and culture under the authority of the king. He fights and kills not only his barbaric, chaotic enemy when he refuses integration and threatens the borders, but the lion, too—the wild forces of nature (Weissert 1997; Maul 1999).

In a discussion about imperialism it seems relevant to note that, as a specific aspect of Assyrian ideology, the centrifugal force emanating from the king’s residence towards the periphery—war—is presented in the royal inscriptions as well as in state rituals and ceremonies such as coronations. It is also considered to be the consequence of the right, positive answer given by the legitimate king to the command given by the national god Assur, to “enlarge the country.” The order to unify all lands under the Assyrian rule—that is, to conquer them—has in turn to be understood as an actualization of a traditional, Old Babylonian theological concept perhaps elaborated and described in the myth called *Atrahasis*, the story of the Flood. Myths show that the human society was created to work, to organize and to transform the natural world, in order to serve the pantheon, and to provide for the gods’ vital needs. With this background, the vocation of Iron Age II Assyrian kingship to rule the world was explained by the royal chancelleries as the historical way of rationalizing the administration of human societies, in order to improve and amplify the quality and the quantity of the services owed collectively to the gods who happen to dwell in the Assyrian temples. This service is due by all peoples and nations, without exception, even if they do not share this knowledge. Only if Assyrians kings succeed in their mission of globalization of the world’s activities and production, did they do the right thing and save the world. In satisfying the gods’ needs, they would gain their approval and blessing: Rain would fall at the right time, agrarian production would be guaranteed, peace would triumph, everybody would be happy (Liverani 1979).

²With some exceptions, cf. the case of Sargon II, expecting all the nation to speak “in the same language,” see the Cylinder Inscription: “Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountains and lowland made them of one mouth,” (Luckenbill 1926, 64–65; Microop 1999, 74–76).

3.3 Empire and Imperialism in History and Historiography

Well known to us, this “religious”, metaphysical discourse gives a context to the Neo-Assyrian imperial ideology, elaborated explicitly only in the royal Assyrian inscriptions and literature, for the imperial elite’s internal use and consumption. As far as we can say, it never circulated as such in the different parts of the empire and its social strata, for example through the cult of the god Assur, which was never exported or imposed in the periphery. Possibly, the message was transmitted, in a limited and partial way, by the texts and iconography of the steles erected by Assyrian kings “at the borders of the world”, or in the palaces of the newly conquered countries (Morandi 1988), but what neighboring societies actually saw and understood of the Assyrian power was probably something different. However, this explanation of Assyrian imperialism, if ever it circulated, could theoretically have sounded quite familiar to a Syro-Mesopotamian audience because, as already mentioned, it had been developed from an ancient and classic narrative theme. The growing expansion of the original territory of a state under the guidance of charismatic leaders, in order to form a new and better adapted political entity, is described as a totally legitimate political behavior already in the inscriptions of the Akkadian kings, considered by modern historians as the founders of the first real empire in human history, uniting for a short period the urban states of Northern and Southern Mesopotamia, as well as Syria (Larsen 1979).

For once, a modern judgement corresponds to an ancient opinion: The Old Akkadian empire’s political experience has been evaluated and kept as the model of an ideal and perfect rule, by politicians of later Mesopotamian states as well, and the reasons of its crisis have been extensively studied and meditated over. Proposing an administration having as its horizon the whole world, the Old Akkadian imperial project continued to appeal to the political programs of the states formed in Mesopotamia after its collapse. It provided them not only with an ideological and institutional base, but also with a military and strategic agenda. This is true of the Ur III kings and later, for some of the Amorite states, during the Middle Bronze Age II. After the collapse of the Mitannian federation, the Assyrian elites recreated an independent state, and started to build the Middle-Assyrian empire, adding new territories to the City and Land of Assur, mainly in the West. They conquered and then colonized Northern Syria, up to the Middle Euphrates Eastern bank, and finally attacking Babylonia as well.

At the beginning of the first millennium BCE, following the crises associated with the formation of Aramean and Syro-Hittite states in the same area, the construction of a Neo-Assyrian empire was launched in Assyria, as if there were no other political alternatives. It followed the same ideological and geographical direction as the Middle Assyrian empire, but on its way it now found as oppo-

nents new autonomous political formations, like the “Aramean” states. Since the ninth century, Neo-Assyrian kingship had carried out its program to unify progressively almost the totality of the Syrian and Mesopotamian territories, including Egypt. These countries constituted the largest ancient Near Eastern Empire, until the Achaemenid period.

3.4 History, Archaeology and Geography

In the course of time, after the first Akkad episode, the real extension, the social composition, the administrative and economic structure of all these Mesopotamian states has obviously largely varied, and often quite quickly. However, these kingdoms have been coherently interpreted and historically recognized as “empires”, partially because of their own identification as such in the discourse developed by their leaders and in official communications—texts and art. A successful management of centripetal and centrifugal forces in the economic exchange system was definitely not enough, as they could depend, for example, on well developed commercial structures connecting markets. To have an empire, you need a conscious “imperial” project: This is the case with Assyrian kingship, supported by a well documented imperial archives administration, from the eighth century on (Postgate 1979; Fales 2001, 96–178).

While specialists of the texts have often been easily satisfied with the rhetoric of Akkadian ideology, archaeologists in general seem to be more circumspect about the criteria with which to recognize an empire on the ground, for example on the basis of the diffusion and distribution of different typologies of material culture or technology. However, through the analysis of the natural landscapes of ancient Mesopotamia, archaeologists have often helped to find historical justifications for the appearance and evolution of empires and imperialism, explaining the political behavior of these first empires from an economic point of view, and as natural and logic phenomena, under the circumstances. In this perspective, need is the trigger: The limited production and productivity of a land, determined by its geography and climate, is often presented as the reason why a community or a nation, determined to survive—and then to expand and improve its quality of life—organizes the conquest of other countries, other peoples and of their production.³ If modern historical critic has highlighted and even denounced the real functions and meaning of Assyrian imperial ideology, ancient imperial phenomena can still be explained mainly as “regular” dynamics of power, imposed by an active centre on a passive periphery, which, in a way, deserved to be conquered and exploited, as it never managed to organize itself and resist.

³See, for example, (Oates 1968, 52–58; Grayson 1976).

Following this line of reasoning—almost parallel to the development of the ideological discourse of the Neo-Assyrian royal chancelleries itself—archaeological research should be able to find, anywhere in the countries and regions controlled by the imperial administration, signs and structures corresponding to this endless exploitation project, following the military conquest. It is not clear to what extent the growth of the areas under imperial rule was associated with a real program of colonization (Postgate 1995). However, the presence in the different provinces of the empire of a military and bureaucratic system—connected with the extraction of riches, the control of local production, its transportation towards the centre, the management of the work forces—should be perceptible, visible in some way, having left its marks on the landscapes as well as on the culture and the societies submitted, that is, beyond the destruction levels created by conquest. At least since the end of the eighth century, the Assyrian texts and archives—but also specific archaeological materials—found in the ruins of the Assyrian capitals seem to document and describe the expansion and the articulation of the empire in all the Near Eastern countries, with administrative structures capable of concentrating the world's production inside the Assyrian capitals, but at the same time, it is less easy to recognize the reality of this system in the archaeological data and materials known from the same areas (Parker 2001). It is obviously true that the role and the interest of Assyrian elites were not the distribution and the selling of Assyrian production abroad, on foreign markets. However, the paradigm of imperial rule and of a military and administrative presence supposes a certain diffusion of the Assyrian material, intellectual and artistic culture, eventually producing a reaction in the impact, the encounter with local mentalities.

When investigating the remains of a Neo-Assyrian administrative system in a given area, the historical patterns connecting the imperial centre with the exploitation and economic and social control of the periphery, apparently satisfying from a heuristic point of view, does not seem to be useful or precise enough to understand the complexity of the evidence found in the conquered areas, or to define the reality of the formation of the imperial structure. To give an example of the problems encountered while trying to follow the evolution of the Assyrian provincial administration, but also of its ideological aspects, I will now present and discuss the situation of the Syrian Lower Middle Euphrates Valley during Iron Age II (Masetti-Rouault 1999).

3.5 The Lower Middle Euphrates Valley

Since 1997, the French archaeological mission working in the Syrian site of Terqa, modern Ashara, on the western bank of the Lower Middle Euphrates valley, directed by O. Rouault, began a survey in the region (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1: The Terqa-Ashara Area (Rouault 1998)

We were trying to find remains of the Iron I–II Aramean occupation in the region, called the Laqê country, but instead we found evidence, for the first time, of an Assyrian presence during the ninth to eighth century. This part of the valley used to correspond to the Mari Amorite state—Terqa is 60 kilometres upstream

of Mari—and, after its destruction, it became the centre of the Khana kingdom, during the Late Bronze Age, with Terqa as its capital (Rouault 2001). While no Iron I–II sites had ever been identified there (Geyer and Monchambert 2003, 260–266), descriptions of this part of the valley found in the royal inscriptions of ninth century Assyrian kings, such as Adad-nirari II and Tukulti-Ninurta II, list a series of towns and palaces visited by these kings, among which Terqa, now written Sirqu (Geyer and Monchambert 2003, 140–144). The Assyrian kings crossed quite peacefully the Khabur and Lower Middle Euphrates valley, trying to establish a political relationship with the Aramean sheikhs ruling the area—which, by the way, at least downstream the mouth of the Khabur river, had never yet been a part of the Middle Assyrian Empire, even if Khana is quoted among the lands annexed to the Middle-Assyrian empire after the conquest of Babylon, at the very end of the late Bronze Age.

At the beginning of Iron II age, the Assyrians tried to enter the Laqê political organization in a natural way, perhaps offering military help to the lords of the cities of the valley engaged in permanent conflicts with partially settled tribes in the steppe. This category of the local population could have interfered, as was usually the case, with the circulation of goods along the Euphrates and on the tracks connecting not only Southern and Northern Mesopotamia, but also, on an East-West axis, connecting Arabia with Eastern Syria, the Jazireh and the Tigris valley (Deblauwe 1991; Liverani 1992a). This information derives from the interpretation of a monument, a basalt stele, found some fifty years ago in Terqa (Masetti-Rouault 2001, 89–114). It is for the moment, the best but also the only evidence which documents the presence of a non-Assyrian, complex local culture in the region—at the same time quoting Assyrian kings' names, Tukulti-Ninurta and Adad-nirari. The iconography is slightly earlier, classic tenth century Syrian, North-Aramean style (Figure 3.2), and it represents a version of the ancient Syrian Storm God Addu, possibly in its local epiciclesis Mer/Wer, fighting against the primeval, chaotic Snake in the presence of a king—or maybe it is the ancient city god Dagan? The inscription concocted and later added to the stele by the Sirqu palace chancellery as a diplomatic message of submission, gives a fantastic new interpretation of the scene, “Assyrianizing” it. The cuneiform text understands it as a representation of the Assyrian king, choking the treacherous people of the steppe, with the assistance of his dead father and of an *apkallu* priest, whose representation was surely added on the stele at the same time as the cuneiform inscription. Admittedly, the *bricolage* was not perfect, as the local knowledge of Assyrian royal ideology and mentality was limited, but it was a good try. It could have been an attempt to establish good feelings with the Assyrians, if Tukulti-Ninurta had not died shortly after his Middle Euphrates expedition. He left his son and successor, Assurnasirpal II, to organize the control of this area, probably



Figure 3.2: The Terqa Stela

not important and useful for its crops but for trade and business, connecting Arabian markets with the North Syrian and Levantine ones, and from then on with the Assyrian one.

The inscriptions of Tukulti-Ninurta II tell how willingly Laqê leaders accepted to assist the Assyrian expedition. They gave sheep, grain, bread, beer, straw and fodder for the use of the army, but, as a present and a tribute to the king, they gave quantities of silver, gold, tin, bronze, oil, purple wool, antimony and myrrh. These goods had been amassed in their palaces not only through local production, but above all thanks to the strong commercial trade crossing this area, well detailed in the lists of their tributes in the royal inscriptions. No political integration in the Assyrian state is mentioned in these contexts for Sirqu and Laqê. The situation changed during Assurnasirpal II's reign. As a regular tribute was clearly expected in the Assyrian capital from Laqê rulers, it could be a first sign that a kind of "imperial" structure had already appeared and taken form. To establish and to verify his authority, the king went on a campaign in the Khabur and in the Euphrates valley, collecting the tributes himself. He stopped his march in Anat, in the Suhu region, downstream of Laqê, where he clashed with Babylonian-"Kassite" troops. But this simple manifestation of power, detailed in his inscription and recorded by one of the decorated reliefs of his throne room in his palace in the new capital Calah (Matthiae 1996, 61–74), was not enough to affirm the new "world" order. The heavy economic pressure imposed on populations and markets by the Laqê kings in order to extract the tribute due to the Assyrians, triggered a series of upheavals and revolts, aimed at organizing a resistance against the new Assyrian expansion tendency, with the support of other Northern Syrian Aramean countries, eager to maintain the freedom of circulation along the Euphrates. The result was yet another military intervention of the Assyrian king in the Lower Khabur and Middle Euphrates valleys, bringing havoc and destroying towns and fields.

Even if local powers did not seem to be able to properly serve the Assyrian interests in the area and some Aramean leaders were actually chased and deported by the king, there is no evidence that Laqê, at that time, had been transformed into a province. However, we do not have any evidence, archaeological or epigraphic, to document the situation and the culture of local societies which resisted to the Assyrian pressure. A further step was then taken to settle the Assyrian presence in the region: The inscription declares that before going home, the king founded two new towns, calling them Kar-Assurnasirpal and Nebarti-Assur—to mark in some way the "new border" of Assyria in the West (Grayson 1991, 216, III, ll. 49b–50a). The chosen toponym (Pongratz-Leisten 1997), "Port of Assurnasirpal" and "Place where Assur crosses (the river)" clearly underlines the king's intention of checking traffic on the Euphrates—maybe establishing a toll system—and also of creating a crossing point connecting the Jazireh and the Khabur valley, now considered to be on the Assyrian side, whereas the West bank was possibly still "Aramean" country. Traditionally, assyriologists have identified these founda-

tions as the Halabiye and Zenobiye late Roman period sites overlooking the narrows of the Euphrates, upstream of modern Deir-er-Zor (Liverani 1992b, 71–72, and no.238). Our survey and our works in Tell Masaikh, on the eastern bank, opposite Tell Graya, five kilometers upstream from Sirqu, have shown that the twin towns were in the heart of Laqê itself, midway between the Khabur mouth and the border of the Babylonian influence area which started around Hindanu where caravans arrived from Arabia. Not only archaeological but also epigraphic evidence supports our identification, but it must be remarked that all this area, important enough for the growth of Assyrian business, is completely absent from the official and military records of the royal inscriptions after Assurnasirpal II's time, and only appear again later, and only marginally, in other Neo-Assyrian texts.

Kar-Assurnasirpal was founded on an ancient tell, today called Masaikh, which is formed by the remains of Halafian, Obeid-Transitional, Middle Bronze II and III Amorite and Khana period levels,⁴ while Nebarti-Assur should be found at Greya, a village just facing it, on the West bank of the Euphrates. Tell Masaikh, with a surface covering more than 20 hectares, is formed on the West side toward the river bank, by a small hill, an acropolis where we have found the remains of a typical Assyrian royal palace, and in its Eastern part, by a rectangular lower town, both of which are encircled by a huge urban wall (Figure 3.3). Apparently, the site was abandoned when the first colony was founded. Excavations have shown that the Assyrian occupation level which includes the palace does not correspond to Assurnasirpal's foundation, but that the town is later. In fact, after having cut and leveled out the first colony buildings of the mid-ninth century, the Assyrian settlement was completely reorganized at the very beginning of the eighth century, during the reign of king Adad-nirari III, and probably under the orders of Nergal-eresh, the governor of the Rasappa/Western Jazireh province.

He chose the site of the Assyrian harbor on the Euphrates to serve as his own "almost royal" residence, a symbol of his personal power, signaled by a palace closely imitating the one in Calah, implicitly defying in this way the imperial ideology (Figure 3.4). Under Nergal-eresh's authority, the new Kar-Assurnasirpal seems to have changed its function in the area. It became a political and economic centre, from which the Assyrian administration developed and controlled a new project of exploitation of this part of the valley. The project was based on the construction of a very long canal on the left bank, parallel to the river and taking its water from the Khabur river. Nowadays, it corresponds more or less to the layout of an early Islamic time irrigation structure called *Nahr Dawrin*. This canal, over

⁴See (Masetti-Rouault 2010). Preliminary reports about the archaeological excavations in Tell Masaikh are regularly published, annually since 2001, by M.G. Masetti-Rouault, in *Athenaeum. Studi di Letteratura e di Storia dell'Antichità*, Pavia.

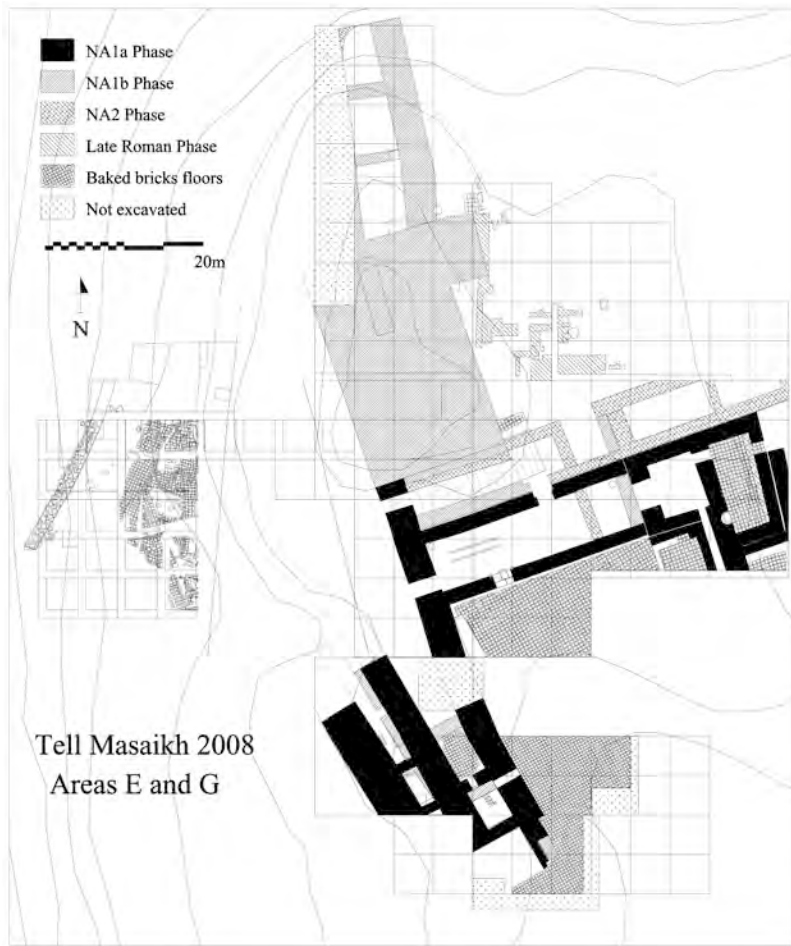


Figure 3.3: Plan of Tell Masaikh

120 kilometers in length, was undoubtedly used to irrigate fields on the Jazireh side of the valley, but it also allowed easy communication and trade transportation (Geyer and Monchambert 2003, 199–217) from the borders of the Hindanu area to the Khabur valley Assyrian towns and from there directly to Assyria itself, through the steppe and along the wadi al-Agig tracks (Kühne 1995).



Figure 3.4: Western part of the palace

The palace and the town were built in a location close to the point where the layout of the canal had been cut into the rocks of the Pleistocene terrace, to avoid destruction because of the meander formation of the Euphrates. Our survey has revealed a string of very small Iron II hamlets along the canal banks, close to Tell Masaikh, where the Assyrian administration had settled the local semi-nomadic population, or deportees from other conquered countries, to work in the new fields obtained by irrigation, and to take care of the canal itself. Now the empire seems to show up: The valley has a new colonial landscape, created by a brilliant exploitation project, bound to make the Assyrian elite and maybe also the king, richer—even if it forever destroyed the traditional dimorphic, local ways of managing the river valley, sharing equally land and water between agricultural and pastoral activities (Masetti-Rouault 2008). It would not be surprising if the material culture of the colony followed, in its general lines, the contemporary Assyrian pattern, not only in the urban architectural organization of the settlement, but also in its ceramic technology, in the glyptic and writing traditions. A close analysis of these materials, still in progress, is also beginning to reveal different,

foreign elements, for example in the style of the iconography of some cylinder seals, or in certain ceramic forms. This situation could confirm the function of the site as a central point in a commercial trading system, but it can also show both the resistance and the resilience of the local Aramean society, or the presence of deportees coming from different parts of the empire. The Assyrian town had apparently accepted, absorbed and integrated all these influences from different, sometimes unknown, origins, without formal criteria of exclusion.

So, as far as empire and imperialism go, things are not quite clear and linear in Kar-Assurnasirpal. First of all, from the very beginning, Assyrian kingship is strangely absent from this project. Even if Assurnasirpal II gave his name to the colony on the river, the inscriptions do not mention the foundation of a palace, or of any other kind of military or administrative structure. Moreover, after his short passage, no more involvement on behalf of the Assyrian administration or of the Crown in this area of the Euphrates valley is ever mentioned in the royal texts. Nergal-eresh, on his part, is adamant, insisting, in his own inscriptions—but attributed to his king—of the fact that he worked under the command of Adad-nirari III (Grayson 1996, 211, ll.13–20). He describes his mission as a new organization of the previous settlement system in his province, including old towns like Dur-katlimmu, and, to be sure, no canal work is alluded to in these contexts. A pale reference to the hydraulic project might be found in a decree Adad-nirari III wrote to establish the control of the governor of Rasappa on the Hindanu area, which was to be added to his province (Grayson 1996, 214–216). That would have been useful to Nergal-eresh, if indeed the great canal's southern terminal was there. While Assurnasirpal II had certainly built a canal to irrigate the area surrounding his new capital Calah (Oates 1968, 45–47), no Assyrian king had yet carried out such an important and ambitious building and hydraulic project as the Iron II *Nahr Dawrin*. Like other powerful governors of that period, Nergal-eresh wrote his own inscriptions on steles in his province, just as kings do, but later his texts were erased, considered to be a crime of “*lèse majesty*” (Grayson 1996, 209–210). Beyond an obvious “hubris” ideological sin, it is not evident where exactly the problem resided. In what concerns his relation with state and kingship, Nergal-eresh's projects radically changed the aspect of a long term depressed area of the East bank of the Lower Middle-Euphrates. Measuring it through usual archaeological indicators, such as the sum of built surfaces, that period was one of the best ever attested in the region, since it lasted quite a long time, witnessing a real economic “boom,” with a important demographic growth.

The study of the stratigraphic sequence and of the changes in the architecture of the palace of Kar-Assurnasirpal has shown an unexpected—but maybe parallel—turn in the story of the local elite as well. Quite soon after its foundation, the structure of the building was greatly modified, erasing its most evident



Figure 3.5: Terrace over the palace

Assyrian layout and decoration, as a manifestation of Nergal-eresh's own culture and personal project. For example, the monumental "throne room" north of the *babānu* courtyard was cut in two, while the private apartments corresponding to the northern part of the palace were filled up and sealed by the construction of a mud brick platform, higher than the original roofs (Figure 3.5). Completely eroded nowadays, another building, maybe a tower, was founded on this terrace, accessible from the main courtyard and the throne room through an elegant ramp. It is not impossible that at that point the acropolis looked a lot like one of the Aramean Middle Euphrates fortified settlements. This was the palace which was destroyed by the Assyrian army, probably in the era of Tiglat-Pileser III. Ritually buried in the filling covering the original floor of the throne room of Nergal-eresh's time palace, and sealed by a new but very poor earth floor, built after the destruction, we have found a large fragment of an aniconic stele, with a cuneiform inscription, which can prove useful to understand the meaning of the structural changes we have identified not only in the acropolis area, but also downtown in the Lower town. The text, still unpublished, starts as a dedication and a hymn to the god Nabu, extolled not in the usual Neo-Assyrian manner, as the Great Administrator, divine scribe or heir to the celestial throne, but as a merciful, sav-

ing god, much more like the Babylonian Marduk. The donor is a Mr. Adad-bel, who must have been, at a certain point, the lord of the town. The inscription, just before an intentional break, where the narrative historical section starts, mentions “Kar-Assurnasirpal, on the bank of the Euphrates,” as well as Adad-nirari III and Nergal-eresh” names, situating the stratigraphic sequence of the palace in the chronology of the Assyrian empire.

So, Kar-Assurnasirpal, founded for the second time by Nergal-eresh as the centre of his domain, was later transformed by his local successors, maybe Assyrians who had become natives. They started a process of decolonization and developed a “creolized” culture, showing through their choices in architecture and their religious and literary tastes, their difference (maybe their pro-Babylonian feelings) and their respectful dissociation from the imperial civilization. The corresponding local dynasty’s policy must have been understood as a political and economic affirmation of autonomy by the central government of the empire, which reacted and stroke back, probably under the rule of Tiglat-pilezer III. Kar-Assurnasirpal was then attacked, the palace destroyed, all the symbols of local lords’ authority condemned to an evident *damnatio memoriae*. A new, monumental official residence, replacing the old one, was built in a close location on the acropolis, displaying all the signs of the imperial *reconquista*. The material associated with this new occupation is possibly even more Assyrian than before, and the painted decoration of the walls of the new residence, abandoning the local fashion of contrasting black and white lines and surfaces, became largely polychromous, as in the other Assyrian palaces (Poli 2008). We do not yet know exactly when the town was abandoned, maybe with the fall of Assyria or during the Neo-Babylonian period. The tell was only reoccupied over half a millennium later, when a late Roman village covered the last remains of the palaces.

3.6 Conclusions

The reappearance of a society in Kar-Assurnasirpal in the realm of the Assyrian province system, documented by archaeological evidence and confirmed by scanty mentions of the Laqê land in Sargon II’s archives (Parpola 1987, 176–177), should not be considered too hastily as the triumph of the empire in the area. On the contrary, some almost contemporary texts from the Suhu and Anat region, downstream Hindanu—royal inscriptions, once again imitations of Assyrian models but composed by a local dynasty ruling the area in the second half of the eighth century—describe Laqê as a weak unorganized region under Assyrian rule (Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990; Frame 1995, 275–329). These inscriptions tell how after being exposed to the attacks of Aramean troops coming from Northern Syria, the Laqê country would have been abandoned to its fate by the miserable

Assyrian officer in station there, who was not at all supported by the army of the more powerful and upgraded Rasappa governor, if the noble Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur, lord of Suhu and Mari, had not graciously accepted to intervene and save the Assyrian property, chasing away the barbarians. The text continues with telling the glorious story of the same ruler's attack of a caravan coming from Arabia, showing that traffic and exchanges worked well in that period. Some letters found in a Nippur archive, dated to the same period, once again give an image of the Lower Khabur and Middle Euphrates region as a marketplace for iron probably coming from Anatolia, and independent from the Assyrian monopoly control—a smugglers' connection in the heart of the empire (Cole 1996).

The reconstruction of the organization of the Syrian Lower Euphrates Valley during Iron Age obviously needs more evidence and still a lot of work, in order to improve our understanding of the contacts and reciprocal influences between the Assyrian civilization and the local Syrian Aramean cultures. Beyond the mechanisms described by the Neo-Assyrian imperial ideology—and also by some modern economic models of ancient imperialism—which seem to present the ancient near Eastern world as unified under the Assyrian cultural paradigm, it is evident that the reality and the evolution of the Assyrian empire, and its impact on local cultures, are complex phenomena to study and to represent. Differently accepted and understood in the various countries controlled by imperial power and pressure, and obviously also depending on the level of the social structures documented and analyzed in every case, the Assyrian patterns carried by colonization, or simply shown around by the military and administrative presence, generated new responses, new solutions and new cultural reactions. Some of them stemmed from an internal evolution of the colonies themselves, as it is the case in Tell Masaikh, and others from the resistance of local societies that were able to reorganize and reshape themselves after the impact, adapting themselves to the situation and generating creolized cultures.

Also, the nature of the final aim and meaning of the Assyrian occupation—straight exploitation of local materials and production—can be questioned. In the case of Kar-Assurnasirpal, the Assyrian elite with their colonist attitude, had to make important investments, like building the canal system, in order to get profit either from a specialized and very intensive agriculture, or through commercial long-distance trade, or both. For the moment, it is not clear in which way, and up to what point, these activities, production and profits were related to, or controlled by, the royal administration, and by it alone. The cultural and material evidence seems to show, at least for a time, the importance and the role of the colonial elite in the management of the region, which balanced its inner tendency towards autonomy from the empire possibly improving its level of integration in the local society of the Lower Middle Euphrates. One cannot but admit the un-

bearable nature of the imperial structures and the degree of exploitation imposed in countries submitted through violence. However, we also have to consider and take into account the resilience of these new local societies and the coherence of their own economic and business projects, for which we often only have indirect documentation, if we want to understand Mesopotamian history in its continuity.

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