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Imperial Culture: Some Reflections on Middle Assyrian Settlements

Aline Tenu

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edited by

L. FELIU, J. LLOP, A. MILLET ALBÀ, AND J. SANMARTÍN

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Imperial Culture: Some Reflections on Middle Assyrian Settlements

Aline Tenu

LYON

From an epigraphic point of view, the Middle Assyrian period is the oldest “officially” known in Assyriology because the experiment of 1857, which intended to prove that Akkadian had been deciphered, was based on a prism of Tiglath-pileser I found by Hormuzd Rassam at Aššur. But from an archaeological point of view, the situation is rather different. Even if Aššur has been largely excavated since that time, the material culture and especially the pottery remained ill-defined until the 1970s and the salvage excavations in northern Iraq and in the Syrian Djezirah. A major advance has been made by Peter Pfälzner, who published in 1995 an impressive study of the Mittanian and Middle Assyrian pottery,¹ and this has been completed recently by the analysis of the Tell Sabi Abyad corpus by Kim Duistermaat.² These works now constitute the essential basis for every archaeological study of this topic. Peter Pfälzner not only proposed a typology but also attempted to provide an archaeological response to the question of the political limit of Assyrian power. Due to these contributions, identifying Middle Assyrian pottery in the field has become much easier than before. But one important question now needs to be asked: is Middle Assyrian culture the only culture in Assyria?

To tackle this question, I would like first to briefly recall the main trends revealed by pottery analysis at Middle Assyrian sites, and then I will discuss these trends and perhaps propose an alternative hypothesis; finally, I will present a case study, the fortress of Haradu (modern Khirbet ed-Diniyeh) on the Middle Euphrates.

The Main Trends in Assyrian Settlement Patterns

Archaeological data provided by excavations and surveys allow us to discern three main trends that show where and how Assyrian domination might have been exercised.

To begin with, according to Peter Pfälzner, the area covered by Middle Assyrian pottery is not very extensive. The Euphrates Valley and the Upper Tigris Valley in modern Turkey are thus completely excluded.³ In a footnote, Pfälzner mentions Assyrian material at sites in the Euphrates Valley but he did not take them into account because they were at that time too scanty to be really representative.⁴ Royal

1. Pfälzner 1995.

2. Duistermaat 2008.

3. Pfälzner 1995: 229, abb. 136.

4. Pfälzner 1995: 169 n. 92.

inscriptions, however, indicate a far wider extent of Assyrian domination as far as the Euphrates Valley, as the inscriptions of Adad-nîrâri I show.⁵ In addition, Peter Pfälzner worked on the assumption that the specific corpus he defined⁶ was only produced for administrative purposes. So wherever Assyrian power was exercised, the Assyrian administration produced official pottery there. Conversely, if you find official pottery, you are in an Assyrian administrative area and, therefore, in the Assyrian Empire.⁷ The consequence of this opinion is that the extent of pottery find-spots corresponds exactly to the extent of Assyrian political and administrative power: the map published by Pfälzner showing the spread of Middle Assyrian pottery must also be understood as the map of the extent of the Assyrian Empire.⁸ However, since his book, the multiplication of discoveries both on the Euphrates and in the Upper Tigris Valley⁹ clearly modifies the map he drew and as a result limits the accuracy of this first observation.

The second trend is that Middle Assyrian sites are not numerous. Many scholars underlined the decrease of occupied sites during the second half of the second millennium. In northern Iraq, the survey conducted by T. J. Wilkinson and D. J. Tucker showed that only 47% of sites inhabited during the first half of the second millennium were still occupied during its second half.¹⁰ The survey of B. Geyer and J.-Y. Monchambert between Deir ez-Zor and Abou Kemal leads to the same conclusion: 27 (6 uncertain) sites were occupied during the Middle Bronze Age, only 13 (3 uncertain) in the Late Bronze Age.¹¹ The authors stressed: “On ne peut nier que le Bronze récent correspond à une période de forte recession.”¹² The drop is much clearer between the Mittanian and Middle Assyrian occupations. According to J. D. Lyon, 80% of sites were deserted after the Mitannian period in the Balikh Valley.¹³ In the Habur Valley, small rural sites were abandoned and replaced by larger settlements that were less numerous.¹⁴ R. Bernbeck in the Wadi Agig survey identified only one site dated to the Late Bronze Age, whereas 17 were occupied in the Middle Bronze Age.¹⁵

Even if the available data are neither exhaustive nor precise enough to be wholly comparable, in particular because Mittanian and Middle Assyrian pottery are often treated together, urban concentration seems to be the rule under Middle Assyrian domination, and one good explanation for that phenomenon may lie in the Assyrian will to impose close control upon populations gathered under the surveillance of Assyrian administration.

5. Grayson 1987: 131.

6. Pfälzner 1995: 1997 and 2007: 250–57. To sum up, the Middle Assyrian pottery is plain, utilitarian, wheeled without care, mass-produced with a limited range of shapes. According to Peter Pfälzner, the “*Standard-Knickwandschalen*,” the “*Standard-Knickwandnäpfe*,” and the “*Standard-Flaschen*” represent two-thirds of the complete assemblage (Pfälzner 1997: 337). For the distinction between an “official” and a “domestic” pottery corpus, see Pfälzner 1995: 260, Duistermaat 2008: 469–70 and Tenu 2009: 133–34.

7. For the use of the word “Empire,” see Tenu 2009: 25–27; otherwise, see Postgate 2010: 20–21.

8. Pfälzner 1995: 231–32.

9. Tenu 2009: 182–224.

10. Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 59.

11. Geyer and Monchambert 2003: 256 and 259.

12. Geyer and Monchambert 2003: 257.

13. Lyon 2000: 224–25.

14. Pfälzner 1995: 225.

15. Bernbeck 1994: 67.

The last significant trend is the reduction of size of sites. Settlements were not only less numerous but also smaller. Assyrians preferred to settle on the top of the tell: it is the case in northern Iraq for instance at Kharab Tibn, where in the Middle Assyrian period the occupation covered only 4 ha of the 18 ha of the Middle Bronze Age.¹⁶ J. D. Lyon came to the same conclusion for the Balih area: "Middle Assyrian settlements were newly built, smaller and more concentrated than previous settlements."¹⁷ One example is provided by Tell Jittal, 7 km north of Tell Hammam et-Turkman. The site was in Middle Assyrian times half the size it had been in the Mittanian period. This reduction of the inhabited space does not preclude, however, important urban programs. At Tell al-Hawa for instance, the site is not large, but archaeologists identified there an administrative complex, a ziggurat, or at least a wide and imposing mud-brick platform, and a temple dedicated to Adad.¹⁸

Newly created sites such as Kâr-Tukultî-Ninurta,¹⁹ Tell Amuda,²⁰ and Tell Umm Aqrebe²¹ to a lesser degree slightly made up for this important decrease of settlements, which may betray a population decline. D. Morandi Bonacossi, however, showed that even if the number of sites declined between the Mittanian and Middle Assyrian periods (from 24 to 9), the population in the Habur Valley increased.²² Population became mainly urban, abandoning small villages.²³ Northern Mesopotamia was thus less densely occupied. According to J. D. Lyon, the settlement decline precedes the Middle Assyrian colonization of the Balih Valley. The hiatus attested between Mittanian and Middle Assyrian levels at Tell Sabi Abyad, Hammam et-Turkman, Tell Hammam Ibn esh-Shenef, and Tell Jidle may confirm this proposition.²⁴

Putting aside the difficulties of identifying Middle Assyrian and, more generally, Late Bronze Age pottery, as stressed by many scholars,²⁵ one good explanation for the population drain is the violence and cruelty of Assyrian wars. In addition to war victims, deportations may have deeply damaged the social and economic fabric, again deepening the human deficit.

These interpretations of Middle Assyrian demographic trends are finally based on a tacit, implicit idea: all the pottery in the Middle Assyrian Empire is Assyrian, with the exception of possible imported wares. Assyrian material culture became, with the Assyrian conquest, not only the dominant culture but the only one, completely replacing older material.

The Middle Assyrian Pottery Assemblage

This assumption certainly deserves discussion. To begin with, it is important to recall that the typology laid out by Peter Pfälzner is based on sherds and shapes found at Tell Sheikh Hamad and, to a lesser extent, at Tell Bderi in specific and

16. Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 60.

17. Lyon 2000: 103.

18. Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 60; Ball 1990: 86.

19. Eickhoff 1985.

20. See Tenu 2009: 104–6, with previous bibliography.

21. Bernbeck 1994: 179. The first-attested occupation on the site is Late Bronze Age (SBZ).

22. Morandi Bonacossi 2008: 198.

23. Morandi Bonacossi 2008: 199. See also Abb. 12:6 and Abb 12:7.

24. Lyon 2000: 103 and 105.

25. See, for instance, Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 80 and Geyer and Monchambert 1987: 318.

limited contexts, respectively, the western part of Building P in a storage unit and in a pit. In building P's rooms, vessels were reserved for administrative use.²⁶ The Middle Assyrian pottery of Tell Sabi Abyad also stem from an administrative cadre: a *dunnu* an agricultural production center held by the "grand vizier" "king of Hanigalbat,"²⁷ who, however, had his residence elsewhere, at Dûr-katlimmu or Aššur.²⁸ It explains in large part why the Assyrian pottery is so plain, wheeled usually without care. Painted pottery or fine wares do not appear in this context and, as a result, in the reference corpus. The complete absence of luxury products is noticeable, whereas finely decorated pots (mainly glazed and painted goblets) have been discovered at Tell ar-Rimah²⁹ and at Tell Brak,³⁰ for instance. Even if metal or fine glass vessels may have been used at court, the corpus we refer to may not represent the complete assemblage. The vessels we are able to identify are those from the administrative context,³¹ utilitarian pottery that we have difficulty imagining as prestige items used by governors or high ranking people at their table.

In addition, we must recall that administrative pottery made by state potters is the only ceramic material we have found and identify as Middle Assyrian: Kim Duistermaat stressed that "Indeed until now all excavated Middle Assyrian sites have proved to be state-organized."³²

The uniform and rather limited corpus we consider to be Middle Assyrian is characterized by its close association with state organization and, more precisely, with the provincial state system.

We may then wonder why local populations would have adopted specific utilitarian administrative material, especially at the beginning of Assyrian domination, whereas it does not correspond to their own habits and to their own use. Moreover, if local elites adopted Assyrian wares, we may suppose that they would choose luxury Assyrian pottery to show their integration or their submission to Assyrian power (for example), but we are not really able to identify in the field these sorts of products, which perhaps were not very different from earlier Mittanian wares.

As a result, we certainly may take into account the idea that we know that Assyrian pottery did not replace at every site and in every context the material previously used. The implication is that we may imagine that different material cultures existed at the same time, and local traditions continued to be developed.³³ We may then propose that the human decline revealed by pottery analysis was not that severe. At small sites, Assyrian pottery may have been lacking because these settlements were not integrated to the administrative network. As F. Wiggermann suggests, the "*dunnu* of the Subaraeans," which depends on Tell Sabi Abyad authorities, probably continued producing its own pottery,³⁴ which is likely much closer to Mittanian than to the Middle Assyrian corpus. As a consequence, the site would be dated to the Mittanian period and considered to be abandoned during the

26. Pfälzner 1995: 106–14.

27. Wiggermann 2000: 172.

28. Wiggermann 2000: 173.

29. Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: 57.

30. Oates, Oates, and McDonald 1997: 78.

31. See also Postgate 2007: 145.

32. Duistermaat 2008: 470.

33. See also Duistermaat 2008: 27. This kind of production has not been clearly identified at Tell Sabi Abyad.

34. Wiggermann 2000: 192.

Middle Assyrian period. The reduced area of Assyrian pottery on the top of the tell perhaps corresponds to the area actually occupied by Assyrians, local populations remaining on the outskirts of the site and continuing to use their own production. Their presence is not visible to archaeologists, who would attribute it to the period before Assyrian installation. The coexistence of two different traditions is all the more difficult to identify, because pottery dated to the beginning of the Middle Assyrian control is not known. The typology drawn up by Peter Pfälzner begins with Shalmaneser I's reign,³⁵ and the oldest Middle Assyrian level at Tell Sabi Abyad dates back to the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I.³⁶ More generally, the sites where the transition from Mittani to Assyria is attested are not numerous.³⁷ In addition, the very impressive work done by Kim Duistermaat on the Tell Sabi Abyad data shows that shapes traditionally considered as diagnostic for Middle Assyrian pottery, such as the "carinated bowl," for instance, are used as early as the Mittanian period.³⁸

Moreover, Pfälzner stressed that the term "Mittanian" is to be understood as a geochronological designation, unlike the term "Middle Assyrian," which has a political—but I would say an *administrative*—meaning.³⁹ Both designations are then rather different and do not exactly cover similar considerations.

As a consequence, we recognize Assyrian administration, which does not completely overlap Assyrian political power. The same situation clearly occurs on the margins of Assyrian domination, where, since Pfälzner's work, Middle Assyrian materials have been found in the Euphrates Valley at Tell Shiukh Fawqâni,⁴⁰ Tell Ahmar,⁴¹ Qabar abu el-Atiq,⁴² and on the Tigris river at Giricano⁴³ and Ziyaret Tepe,⁴⁴ for instance. On neighboring sites, Assyrian sherds have been identified, but not the complete standard corpus, thus betraying the fact that indigenous occupations, supporting local traditions, were still alive, even though they were formally under Assyrian rule.⁴⁵

A Case Study: Haradu (Modern Khirbet ed-Diniyeh)

I would like now to present in more detail a case study: the fortress excavated at Khirbet ed-Diniyeh by a French team led by Christine Kepinski between 1981 and 1985. The ancient name of the site was Haradu. The toponym Haradu was until quite recently not attested in the Middle Assyrian record, but a text dated to the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I and published in 2011 now fills the gap (Frame 2011). The rectangular fortress of Haradu was erected on the remains of the previous Old Babylonian city, which was deserted around 1629 B.C. The enclosure wall underwent three main stages of construction. In a first stage, a wall with large and regular casemates was built. Later, a second wall doubled it. This second wall was also built

35. Pfälzner 1995: 235.

36. Akkermans 2006: 209.

37. Tenu 2009: 253–55.

38. Duistermaat 2008: 469.

39. Pfälzner 1995: 232.

40. Capet 2005: 379–88.

41. Bunnens 2009: 68–71.

42. Einwag, Kohlmeyer, and Otto 1995: 102; Montero Fenollós, al-Shbib, Márquez Rowe, and Carameo 2009: 192–94.

43. Schachner 2002 and 2004.

44. Matney et al., 2002.

45. Tenu 2009: 218–19.

with casemates, though smaller and more irregular. Then a third wall was erected, reinforced with buttresses, so that by this time the fortress was 150 m square. The ramparts were more than 30 m thick and in places already stood 4 m high. Graves surrounded the fort.⁴⁶

What is very puzzling is that, in the space delimited by the fortress, archaeologists could not find even the smallest building or walls of any kind. Not a single structure was excavated inside the enclosure wall, except a well. The best explanation for this truly unusual site is that it was a military camp similar to those depicted on the Balawat Gates.⁴⁷ The fortress belongs to a net of military sites, that was in use during the first centuries of the 1st millennium but which dated back to the end of the 2nd millennium.⁴⁸

Two Middle Assyrian tablets were found at the site; they are dated by eponyms of the 12th century: Aššur-iddin and Dayyan-Ninurta, who were *limu* between the reigns of Ninurta-apil-Ekur (1181–1169) and Aššur-rêš-iši I (1132–1115).⁴⁹ This period is particularly poorly known, but textual evidence indicates Aššur-dân I (1168–1133) may have conquered the Suhu and perhaps the land of Mâri. A very badly preserved inscription attributed to him mentions the land of Suhu,⁵⁰ probably in the context of the Babylonian campaign better known by the account in the *Synchronistic History*.⁵¹ In Chronicle 25,⁵² someone “attacked and removed the king of the Land of Mari in a rebellion” and as a result “controlled Mari.” In my opinion,⁵³ this sentence pertains to the Middle Euphrates Valley and not to the area near Tell Taban that also bears the name “Land of Mari.”⁵⁴ Haradu may have been created on the ruins of the Old Babylonian city at that time and became the first step in military occupation of the area. However, the material culture is not completely Assyrian and instead belongs to the continuity of local traditions in which Babylonian influence is still very strong. More precisely, standard shapes of Assyrian pottery are rare; some standard bottles were found, but carinated bowls and cups were almost completely absent.⁵⁵ If we follow Pfälzner’s proposition, it is tempting to conclude that Assyria did not really control the region, despite the textual data,⁵⁶ because Assyrian standard pottery was far from dominant. Nevertheless, a large range of Assyrian nipple-based goblets were discovered at the site, and Assyrian goblets are far more numerous than “kassite” ones. The presence of Assyrian goblets—which by the way are not practical at all, as Kim Duistermaat recalls,⁵⁷ because they must be held continuously—may lead to another conclusion: even if Assyrian administration seems really loose, Assyrian social behavior, revealed by the use of this specific kind of drinking vessel, may have been widely adopted. In this quite remote area of the Assyrian Empire, which is close to Babylonia and to the steppe, the best way to

46. Kepinski 2009 and 2012.

47. Schachner 2007: 132.

48. Tenu 2008.

49. Clancier 2012 with references.

50. Grayson 1987: 306.

51. Grayson 1975: 162.

52. Walker 1982: 401.

53. For the complete argumentation, see Tenu and Clancier 2012.

54. Maul 2005.

55. Tenu 2012.

56. For a general presentation of the Middle Assyrian occupation in the Middle Euphrates area, see Tenu 2006 and Tenu 2009: 182–94.

57. Duistermaat 2008: 471–72.

rule was maybe not to create a province with all the associated bureaucratic administration but to allow a less strict organization, controlled by local rulers who swore loyalty to the Assyrian king and became his vassals. As a result, administrative pottery is not used because it does not correspond to local needs; but this does not mean that Assyrian rule was not effective.

* * *

In this paper, I have stressed how difficult it remains to integrate archaeological results in a way that results in broader historical perspectives.⁵⁸ In the Assyrian Empire, a large part of population was not Assyrian, and as Duistermaat underlines, it is meaningful when non-Assyrian people adopt Assyrian pottery.⁵⁹ At Tell Sabi Abyad, which is the *dunnu* of the Great Vizir, King of Hanigalbat himself, it is not really surprising that pottery was so Assyrian, because the site was completely embedded in a rigid Assyrian administration. Even there, however, ancient and local traditions are still perceptible.⁶⁰ We should thus keep in mind that the first administrative production is in all likelihood not the only one used in Assyria; and, second, it certainly does not replace all the other ones. The Assyrian form of domination we can recognize in the field is administrative in the provincial system, but it may not represent the only form. On the margins or at small sites, Assyrian administration was perhaps too distant to be archaeologically visible, local rule remaining precisely local, not Assyrian. The place of local population in Assyrian imperial system is very hard to perceive, but gradually we are gaining a better image of their weight and, above all, of their real importance in the shaping of the Empire itself. It is still quite difficult to have a clear overall picture, but the vision that is emerging from all these new data is very stimulating for future work and for a better understanding of Assyrian power.

58. See also Tenu 2007 and Postgate 2010.

59. Duistermaat 2008: 472.

60. Duistermaat 2008: 469.

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