

**Aline TENU:**

***L'expansion médio-assyrienne. Approche archéologique***

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Miguel Valério

The 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE has until recently been neglected or even excluded from discussions on Mesopotamian expansionist phenomena. For that reason, the Middle Assyrian (henceforth MA) period is still poorly known and even its chronological limits are an unsettled issue among Assyriologists. What has been written on the subject was often extrapolated from the more “popular” Neo-Assyrian (NA) period. The present book is the publication (with augmented bibliography and some additional data) of Aline Tenu’s doctoral thesis, defended at the University of Paris 1 in 2003. The challenge embraced by this archaeologist and researcher at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) of France consists of a collection of data from archaeological excavations, namely recent ones, producing a fresh approach to Assyrian expansionism in the MA period, whose limits are here set between the reign of Puzur-Aššur III and *ca.* 1000 BCE, *i.e.* roughly the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE.

In the Introduction, Tenu proposes three axes of analysis of expansionist phenomena: 1) the degree of organization of invading and conquered States; 2) their impact on both sides and relationships established anew; 3) causes or motivations of expansion. At the end of the first chapter, however, the reader will notice that the author has opted to describe Assyrian territorial conquest based on only two aspects: 1) occupation and domination of the territory and 2) border

and limits of the conquest. These two points outline the second and the third chapters of the book, respectively.

The first chapter (“Les enjeux et les perspectives de la recherche sur l’expansion Médio-Assyrienne d’un point de vue archéologique”) is chiefly introductory. It includes an unavoidable discussion on the ever problematic concept of “Empire” and the definition of “Middle Assyrian Empire” (pp. 25-26), whereby Tenu concludes that such term «est satisfaisant pour caractériser la forme politique d’exercice du pouvoir des Assyriens dans la seconde moitié du II<sup>e</sup> millénaire.» Here belongs also the discussion on the triggers of MA expansion, with an entire section of the chapter devoted to the explicative models of the Assyrian expansion: Tenu presents the “old paradigm” (a theorization of the 1920’s), the “new paradigm” of M. Liverani<sup>1</sup>, which opposed the former and, finally, the recent model of J. N. Postgate<sup>2</sup>, a critic of Liverani. The old paradigm defended alternating phases of expansion and decline of the Assyrian Empire and a repeated progression (*tache d’huile*) wherein the defeated territories were looted, paid tribute and, finally, were integrated in the provincial system. Liverani’s system presented the Assyrian “Empire” as a network of communications whose westernmost frontier was the Euphrates. On the contrary, the model of Postgate envisioned two forms of imperial domination. The setting of the first is the “country of Aššur”<sup>3</sup> which from the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE onwards included the Jazirah. It was naturally applied to the provinces that became part of Assyria and were forced to pay tribute (in agricultural commodities) to the temple of Aššur in the capital. The capitals of these provinces are old local settlements governed by members of great Assyrian families who oversaw the economic and political administration of their territories. The second form of imperial domination is that of the “client-kingdoms” whose monarch

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<sup>1</sup> Liverani, Mario, “The Growth of the Assyrian Empire in the Habur/Middle Euphrates Area: a New Paradigm”, *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 2 (1984), pp. 81-98.

<sup>2</sup> Postgate, J. N., “The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur”, *World Archaeology* 23 (1992), pp. 247-263.

<sup>3</sup> The expression *mât* <sup>d</sup>*Aššur* begins to be used in the MA period.

(whether the defeated ruler or a new one installed in the throne by the Assyrians) remains king over his country, which does not become an Assyrian province, and issues a yearly tribute of high-value goods which are directed to the palace rather than to the temple of Aššur. These two most recent models are extrapolated mostly from the state of affairs in the NA period, and are only attested from the reign of Tiglat-Pilešar I onwards, apart from referring only scantily to archaeological data. Hence Tenu sets out to structure a new model to surmount these lacunae. Throughout the book, the Assyrian Empire appears as an “imperial system” with centralized administration and military, but also with well-rooted ideological foundations and expressions that were key-factors for the expansion: Aššur, the eponym god, becomes no more no less than the deified Assyrian capital and it is him that commands the Assyrian king to expand the borders of his kingdom. This is well visible in a text found at the capital (possibly dated to the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta I) and royal titles bore by the monarchs of this period.

In the first chapter one finds also an enjoyable outline of the research on MA pottery (pp. 45-46) with a summary of the work of P. Pfälzner, whose doctoral thesis (*Mittanische und mittelassyrische Keramik – Eine chronologische, funktionale und produktionsökonomische Analyse*) was published in 1995 and remains the main reference on the subject. Emphasis is laid on the so-called “administrative” or *Standard* MA pottery, whose typological homogeneity and technical features point to a mass-production system. Although Tenu already includes in her bibliography K. Duistermaat’s doctoral thesis – *The Pots and Potters of Assyria: Technology and organization of production, ceramic sequence, and vessel function at Late Bronze Age Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria* – in its unpublished version (2007), she did not discuss the important new input of this work (published in 2008) to our knowledge of several aspects MA “official” pottery. The question is raised: did this pottery represent an Empire culture? Current investigation indicates so: the presence of this class of this very homogeneous pottery in a given site is intrinsically associated with MA administration, as proved by findings of official texts.

The second chapter, on the occupation and dominance of the territory, contains an initial section on the organization of the Empire: it consists of a synthesis of the Assyrian administrative territorial divisions (based on the 2003 work of S. Jakob, *Mittelassyrische Verwaltung un Sozialstruktur: Untersuchungen*), the provincial administrative personnel, and the State officials, and culminates on a discussion of the role of the great families and high-officials in the central power. Here the private ambitions of the former appear further stimulus for the expansion. One could say this is yet another groundwork chapter of the book, presenting but also discussing concepts and evidence that are essential to the general subject. In I.II.3 (p. 52) the office of *hassihlu* is addressed (one instance of “*hassihlu*” in the book is to be amended). Apart from Tell Billa, Alalakh and the el-Amarna letters, which Tenu mentions, the word is also attested at Nuzi and has been identified in the recently published letter Kt 90/k 360 from Old Assyrian Kültepe/Kaneš in Anatolia, possibly sent from the Upper Tigris<sup>4</sup>. The word was created by adding the Hurrian *nomina agentis* suffix *-uhlu* to Akkadian *halšu* “fortified district”, thus meaning “commander of the *h.*” (see CAD, vol. H: 57)<sup>5</sup>. The appearance of this word in an early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE document now assures its early genesis within the Hurrian language, adding even more substance to P. Machinist’s hypothesis: this scholar, cited by Tenu<sup>6</sup>, argued that *hassihlu* was a local Hurrian office adopted by Assyrians after the take-over of Mitanni, a scenario which then explains its absence from records of Aššur. That, as suggested by S. Jakob, *hassihlu* was synonymous with *bēl pāhete* (“governor of the district/province”) and was gradually replaced by the latter in MA administration is, in my opinion, not immediately clear and requires further investigation. Textual evidence ambiguously

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<sup>4</sup> See Michel, Cécile, “Deux textes atypiques découverts à Kültepe”, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 62 (2010), pp. 71-72, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Other variant spellings of this word are *hassuhlu*, *halzuhlu*, *halzuhuli* (gen.).

<sup>6</sup> See Machinist, P., “Provincial Governance in Middle Assyrian and Some New Texts from Yale”, in M. A. Morrison; D. I. Owen (eds.), *Studies on the Civilization and Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians I*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1982, p. 24.

suggests a military officer responsible for a fortress or a functionary in charge of measuring the limits of immobile properties, whose duties sometimes overlapped those of a judge.

The second section of this chapter (“La documentation archéologique”) compiles the archaeological evidence on which research on the MA expansion is based, hence occupying nearly one hundred pages of the book. It begins at the heart of Assyria, discussing the so-called Assyrian “renewal”, and concludes with a settlement-by-settlement presentation of the panorama outside the Assyrian core (with special emphasis on Tell Šēḫ Ḥamad, on whose pottery Pfälzner’s typology was based). The outcome is an overview of MA archaeological sites which undoubtedly will in the near future become a reference for anyone taking the first steps in learning about this period. The first take is on the two capitals of Assyria during the historical period in question, Aššur and Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta. On p. 57 one comes across another minor typographical error: «...des niveeaux médio-assyriennes...» where one should read «niveaux». Tenu addresses the architectural changes in Aššur during this period: citing J. M. Munn-Rankin, she suitably points out (p. 73) that the construction of a new palace in the city of Aššur by Tukultī-Ninurta I (who also erected the new capital of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta in his reign) was a direct consequence of the Assyrian territorial expansion. The assimilation of new provinces by the Empire led to the construction of a new facility, larger than the old palace, which could not accommodate all the services related to the new administration.

The third chapter is entitled “Frontières et étendue de l’Empire”. Tenu stresses that frontiers of this period were perceived not as well-defined dividing lines that established the limits of political dominion – one can hardly disagree with the author’s opinion that doing so would be an anachronism – but as regions of strategic importance and political influence, if not transitional areas (pp. 151-153). In any case, there are examples of materialized Assyrian frontiers, such as a line of fortresses that stretched from the foot of the Kašiyari Mountains to Harran in the 13<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE, as Tenu rightly points out. The Euphrates

is presented as an important physical and psychological frontier for the Assyrians, who evoked its crossing by Sargon of Akkad. Here, the role of massive water-bodies (*i.e.* seas and lakes) as frontiers is discussed, as well as evidence from administrative texts on the limits of the Assyrian authority. It becomes clear once more how blurry our knowledge of provincial organization and taxation still is, namely which provinces paid taxes to the temple of Aššur in the capital (p. 162). On p. 163 one should read «son absence» and not «ison absence». A propos of the Middle Euphrates area (pp. 182-195), Tenu concludes that «apparemment, la région du moyen Euphrate passa sous le contrôle au moins formel des Assyriens sous le règne de Tukultī-Ninurta I<sup>er</sup>...» (p. 194). At the site of Tall Qabr Abū al-‘Atīq (Qabar Abu al-‘Atiq in the book), in the gorge of Khānūqah (Deir ez-Zor)<sup>7</sup>, archaeological excavations were recently conducted (2008-2010). These have unearthed pottery typologically comparable to – at least – Pfälzner’s MA I phase (*i.e.* the reigns of Šalmānašar I and Tukultī-Ninurta I) from the layers marking the building’s destruction<sup>8</sup>. Although the Middle Euphrates may have been under Assyrian influence already under Šalmānašar I or even Adad-nērārī I, it is Tukultī-Ninurta I who states his dominion over a number of countries in this area: Māri, Hana, Rapiqu and the «mountains of the *Ahlamu*» (*RIMA* 1, A.0.78.23, 69-84).

The fourth and final chapter (“Un point de vue sur l’expansion médio-assyrienne”) contains the conclusive points and remarks. Tenu revisits two aprioristic economic explications put forward by previous authors as causes of the MA expansion: a tradition of long-distance trade and the constant farming preoccupations. The former is based on the suggestion that the Old Assyrian trading tradition – which in the 20<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE saw the establishment of *kārū* (commercial emporia) in Anatolia – survived throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium till the MA period. This idea is maintained by the author.

<sup>7</sup> See chart n.° 2 on p. 348.

<sup>8</sup> Montero Fenollós, J. L. *et al.*, “Informe de la quinta campaña del Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio (2009). Tall Qabr Abu al-‘Atiq: de ciudad circular protodinástica a bastión asirio”, *Aula Orientalis* 28 (2010), pp. 73-84.

She reiterates that Postgate's two-phase model (according to which the chief purpose of military conquest was initially the attainment of farming areas and, in a second phase, the take-over of regions meant to supply high-value raw materials) is simplistic and falls before the archaeological and epigraphic data. Providing individual examples, she rather sees the MA expansion as a more complex phenomenon which combined the two aforementioned causes plus other factors. She finally comes to underline the role of the "great" Assyrian families: the expansionist process meant their enrichment but this simultaneously generated new needs. The interest of the great families in the conquest of new land justified their investment on the imperial enterprise and assured its success, though one may perhaps find Tenu's assertion that these investments allowed relaunching the "économie nationale" in the years after Mitannian domination anachronistic to some extent.

This last chapter also discusses the role of the nomads in the Assyrian expansion and their integration in the Empire, as well as the presence of foreign populations/cultures in the latter. Tenu returns to the issue of frontiers and presents a series of recent proposals on the extension of the Assyrian Empire by other scholars, each accompanied by a map. These maps are collected at the end of the book which, incidentally, also includes a valuable appendix of figures. Both greatly facilitate the task of the reader, who is confronted with a massive but priceless amount of geographical (both ancient and modern toponyms) and archaeological data.

The endeavor of Aline Tenu is to be praised, as it is not an easy task to treat and expose such a complex and intricate topic the way she has. Necessarily, several issues had to be revisited throughout the book, which may sometimes give the impression of repeated narrative. But this should not in any manner discourage potential readers. As emphasized along these lines, the outcome of Tenu's work is not only an invaluable contribution for research on the MA expansion, but also a very welcome overview for anyone with an interest on any topic in some way connected to the Syro-Mesopotamian region in that particular period.