

## Review

**Frederick Mario FALES:**  
*Guerre et paix en Assyrie. Religion et impérialisme*  
(Les conférences de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études 2)  
Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2010.  
256 pp. ISBN: 978-2-204-09237-1

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Frederick Mario Fales' *Guerre et paix en Assyrie. Religion et impérialisme* is the fruit of four lectures organized by the École Pratique des Hautes Études – Section des Sciences Religieuses, during the Spring of 2007. Those who attended them may be considered very fortunate for having enjoyed the privilege of the author's teachings in presence. As for myself, I have to content with the book, which materializes a big part of the author's career, the study of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, a polity that engaged itself in a process of expansion and rule over most of the Near Eastern world, from about the 10<sup>th</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Concerning this subject, the author already presented us in 2001 with *L'impero assiro. Storia e amministrazione (IX-VII secolo a.C.)*<sup>1</sup>, a history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire combined with a critical assessment of its textual sources privileging a view through the glass of documents other than the commemorative official inscriptions and monumental representations: textual categories expressing different dimensions of historical "reality", e.g., the epistolary, prosaic accounting and administrative texts, juridical texts and treaties, etc. The essence of this *Guerre et paix en Assyrie* comprises less than 250 pages which include a selected bibliography containing the most relevant and recent reference studies on the Neo-Assyrian period, con-

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<sup>1</sup> Fales 2001.

veniently organized by various topics. Covering such a vast theme, this small book is an updated synthesis accounting for the latest developments in the field, and thus very useful for all those feeling the need to construct a coherent general picture of the subject, whether as students or experienced scholars. Its clear language and selected critical apparatus makes it also very much accessible to a wider public interested in reading Ancient Near Eastern history written by a scholar with a solid mind.

The postulate that establishes the writing of history as an act anchored in contemporaneity is an important methodological approach reflected in *Guerre et paix en Assyrie*, conferring it with a significant critical facet. This effort to include Ancient Near Eastern studies within the frame of such awareness of a “history of History” is visible on the author’s brief incursion through several phases of Ancient Near Eastern and Assyrian historiography (pp. 27-55)<sup>2</sup>. In this respect, one of the most interesting of them may be the earliest stage of the discovery of Mesopotamian civilizations, when the newborn discipline was named after the first of them to be unearthed, Assyria. The cultural and political framework of 19<sup>th</sup> century European imperialisms in the East and their relation towards the Ottoman Empire is a topic referred to by the author, which introduces the reader to some of the pioneers of Assyriology, such as Paul-Émile Botta, Austen H. Layard or Walter Andrae (pp. 29-44)<sup>3</sup>. Their roles as cultural agents of the European powers’ political interests in the Middle East reflect a late, but also important, stage in the construction of Western identity, as opposed to an “otherness” that mingled knowledge and preconceptions about coetaneous and ancient Orient.

Although a general survey about a Neo-Assyrian history, this book is not dressed in narrative garments, but follows a thematic

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<sup>2</sup> See Holloway 2002, 1-79, chapter I.

<sup>3</sup> Fales 2001, chapter II.1 and 2, where the author develops further the history of Assyriology and presents a general view of later scholarship.

approach made explicit by the very constituents of its title: war and peace, religion and imperialism, two inseparable binomials in politics throughout history. The book is structured by their confrontation with Assyrian history and archaeology, presenting a critical view of some concepts that have entered the popular and mediatic discourse by means of some modern political phenomena. Among those concepts, the most important addressed by the author is perhaps the notion of “holy war”<sup>4</sup>, an idea which integrates both of the binomials mentioned in dynamic ways but, at the same time, over-simplify their relationships. In this book, F. M. Fales calls attention to the dangers of anachronistical attitudes that associate modern religio-political fundamentalisms with ancient cultural contexts. Despite religion and politics were (and somehow, still are) deeply connected elements of human societies, the expression “holy war” applied to the Ancient Near Eastern political cultures should be considered redundant since, as Mario Liverani pointed out, «(t)he war is always a holy war if fought by us, always a wicked one if fought by the enemy.»<sup>5</sup>

In the Assyrian official discourse warfare was presented, as in many other historical contexts, as sanctioned by the gods, and, above all, the god Aššur. Divine sanction was fundamental in war and politics, not least because warfare implies political risks, human suffering, loss of lives and destruction of vital resources. As such, it entails protection, justification and reassurance from a higher instance of power, be it divine or moral.

However, besides war and politics, many other aspects of life in Antiquity, and much beyond, merged the religious sphere with an earthly sphere. But there was a dialectics between what we today may consider to be secular or sacred that ranged from a deep intertwine-ment to a pragmatic separation, difficult to be understood completely by positivist approaches.

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<sup>4</sup> See especially pp. 16-17 for a clear explanation of the author’s position.

<sup>5</sup> Liverani 1979, 301. See also Liverani 2002, 639-659 and Oded 1992, 121-137.

In this respect, F. M. Fales establishes the ideological and religious framework of the Assyrian expansionism as instruments to justify and to explain rulership, war and conquest (pp. 69-94). Such warlike political culture, in many aspects, was most notoriously expressed in the texts and monuments left by the Assyrian kings, which contributed to form about the Assyrian imperial process the idea of a militaristic state concerned with plunder and with the imposition of the rule of the god Aššur. That was actually the Assyrians' intention, as Fales says: «... c'est bien l'effet que les Assyriens cherchaient à produire dans leurs écrits et leurs représentations iconographiques à caractère officiel...» (p. 17).

In line with previous reflections by the author the book introduces some nuances on the perceptions about the cruelty and violence of Assyrian imperialism as transmitted by the Biblical and Classical traditions. That perception was somehow revalidated during several decades after the dawn of Assyriology. In this respect, very pertinent is Fales' remark about the historiographical interpretation concerning that period of scholarship, about the Ottoman deportations of Armenians during the Great War, which was seen as a terrible parallel to the Assyrians' own practices (p. 45)<sup>6</sup>. However, reinforcing other refutations of Assyrian religious proselytism (pp. 19-21)<sup>7</sup>, F. M. Fales underscores the multiplicity of deities whose cults were respected and promoted within the Neo-Assyrian Empire. He thus makes good use of some important studies concerning, for example, the New Year's festivals in cities throughout the Empire, which served as cultic centres of different gods, e.g., Ḥarrān as the seat of the god Šîn, Dēr of the god Anu, Kilizi and Kurba'il of Adad, etc. (see pp. 91-93)<sup>8</sup>. The role of non-Assyrian deities is also mentioned as important elements that helped to validate treaties which Assyria celebrated with foreign countries (pp. 22-23). As an example of this, Fales refers to the treaty celebrated

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<sup>6</sup> Fales cites A. T. Olmstead's interpretation of these events in light of the Assyrian practices in the latter's article of 1918, "Oriental Imperialism", *The American Historical Review* 23/4: 759.

<sup>7</sup> Cogan 1974 and Holloway 2002.

<sup>8</sup> About this topic, see Pongratz-Leisten 1997.

between Asarhaddon and Ba'al, king of Tyre, sanctioned not only by Assyrian gods but also by Phoenician and North-Syrian gods, such as Melqarth, Ešmun, Ba'al Šamaim, Bethel, Anat-Bethel, etc.<sup>9</sup>

The cult of the Assyrians' eponym god Aššur, central element of their particular identity, can thus be understood better in imperial times as a focus for a new multi-ethnic identity connected to the figure of the king as the link between the divine and the earthly. Though its cult was a "state cult", the adherence to which was demanded as sign of political loyalty both from client-states and subjects, it was not a "religion" to be spread and imposed to supposed "infidels". The establishment of the supremacy of the god Aššur as *primus inter pares* among all other deities suits best Antiquity's polytheist religions, not the monism and proselytism of later conceptions<sup>10</sup>.

Diplomacy is an art associated mainly with peace. Extant documents and surviving textual references to Assyria's diplomatic activities reflect a strong sense of pragmatism of its foreign relations (pp. 219-228). This is notorious even in most of the treaties concluded by the Assyrians (*adē*). Although Assyria, in the person of its king, was a superior part in those treaties imposing subordination over client states, they express, nevertheless, a bilateral relationship contractually acknowledged. Technically, treaties should be considered as "political contracts" which, despite many of them could be forced by the threat of war, conceded the subordinate parts a political and juridical identity. Regarding this issue, F. M. Fales supports that the imposition of rule by peaceful and diplomatic means came, in Assyrian policies, before the sheer and not yet justified use of military force, not least because of the advantages that could be obtained in many contexts by a more "sensible" approach. He mentions the cases of the city of Ekron (pp. 222-224) and the kingdoms of Tyre (pp. 221-222) and Sam'al

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<sup>9</sup> *SAA* II, no. 8. Cf. the treaty of Aššur-narāri V with Mati'-ilu, king of Arpad (*SAA* II, no. 2), where the gods Hadad of Aleppo and Dagan also serve as witnesses and guarantors of the treaty.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning this subject, see Itamar Singer's introduction to I. Alon, I. Gruenwald and I. Singer (eds.) 1994, 19-22 and, in the same volume, concerning Mesopotamia, the article by J. Bottéro (*ibid.*, 23-38).

(p. 224) as examples of the flexibility of Assyrian imperial system which acknowledged political autonomies while exerting an indirect rule.

F. M. Fales emphasizes, however, other aspects of Assyrian politics which contribute to deconstruct the image of Assyria as a purely militaristic «rogue empire»<sup>11</sup>. One of them, perhaps the most meaningful, was the diversity of subordination statuses of political communities within the Assyrian imperial system<sup>12</sup>, which ranged from nominal suzerainty imposed by treaty, to annexation and forced displacement of populations (pp. 212-219). The special position of Babylonia within the Assyrian imperial system is not deeply addressed by the author. However, that position may be considered as exceptional, owing to the strong influence of Babylonian religion and culture in Assyria, which was included in the same cultural Sumero-akkadian matrix<sup>13</sup>.

This plurality of situations within the Assyrian's unified polity allows one to infer that if the conquest of territories abided by an established system or *praxis*, it may not be considered as *systematically* applied. In this respect, Sennacherib's destruction of the city of Babylon in 689 BC should be considered as a desperate act not unanimously accepted within Assyria itself<sup>14</sup>. That significant event happened in a peculiar moment when the long and wearingly conflict between Assyria and Babylonia reached a climax: the capture and death of Sennacherib's king's own heir to the throne, Aššur-nadin-šumi, by Babylonian rebels and Elamites.

An informal and more durable characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian Empire is the great expansion of Aramaic, a language spoken by “the ruled”, and the retraction of Akkadian, the language of “the rulers”<sup>15</sup>. This process of cultural integration is observed in the latter phases of

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<sup>11</sup> Expression used by the author in Fales 2008, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Postgate 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Brinkman 1984. More recently, see Frame 2008.

<sup>14</sup> About the influence of Babylonia as focus for political internal conflicts in the Assyrian imperial establishment, see the discussion by Garelli 1973, 189-213.

<sup>15</sup> I am paraphrasing here Simo Parpola after his introduction in *SAA I*, p. xvi.

Assyrian power and is yet another sign of the flexibility of the Assyrian imperial establishment. This topic was much and well studied by the author in other works<sup>16</sup>, but to which he only refers briefly in this book (pp. 59-62).

All the above mentioned aspects form a set of critical instruments which F. M. Fales uses to problematize popular views of a “sadistic” and “despotic” image of the Assyrian Empire. Contrarily to an “essentialist” predisposition of the Assyrians to warfare (p. 13), Fales characterizes Assyrian military expansionism as an «offensive realism»<sup>17</sup>, a notion which he reinforces in this book by characterizing Assyrian rule as marked by a «‘réalisme politique’ (expression qui contient l’idée que la politique doit se fonder sur des rapports de forces réels) de nature ‘théocentrique’» (p. 17).

This Assyrian *realpolitik* is though obscured by the tone of the official royal inscriptions and the monumental visual arts, which present Assyrian imperialism more as unilaterally engaged military operations and conquests justified and legitimized by the gods, than a dynamic process that included intimidation and war, as much as it implied negotiation, concessions, grants and alliances. In fact, there was some distance between the Assyrian overt ideology of expansion and its concrete practices. The former is expressed often in royal inscriptions and palace reliefs through the representation of violence and terror against unsubmitive enemies or rebels. Though violence was not the only facet of Assyrian ideological expressions, it should be considered as an important rhetorical element that highlighted the military function of kingship and the ability of the ruler to conserve the territory and expand it.

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<sup>16</sup> About this subject, cf. F. M. Fales 1986, *Aramaic Epigraphs on Clay Tablets in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, Roma (Studi Semitici, N. S. 2); 1991. “West Semitic Names in the Assyrian Empire: Diffusion and Social Relevance”, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 8: 99-117; *id.*, 1995, “Assyro-Aramaica: The Assyrian Lion-Weights” in K. Van Lerberghe and A. Schoors (eds.), *Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East. Festschrift E. Lipiński*, Leuven, Peeters; Department Oriëntalistiek Leuven: 33-55; 2007. “Multilingualism on Multiple Media in the Neo-Assyrian Period: A Review of the Evidence”, *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 16: 95-122.

<sup>17</sup> Fales 2008.

Concerning this issue, I must cite here a very interesting remark made by F. M. Fales in his former *L'impero assiro. Storia e amministrazione*, about the necessity of confronting these ideologically oriented texts and monuments with other every-day, prosaic and utilitarian textual categories:

«Questa doppia documentazione [monuments and commemorative texts] presenta grandi pregi agli occhi dello storico, per gli innumerevoli dettagli puntuali che la costellano; va tuttavia considerato che si tratta di materiali concepiti per una narrazione ufficiale, e dunque fatalmente di taglio propagandistico, dei successi dell'impero. Troppo spesso, e acriticamente, la storiografia è dunque cascata nella «trappola» tesa da tale documentazione: rievocando, cioè, un quadro dell'Assiria modellato essenzialmente sulle immagini che i re assiri stessi volevano tramandare ai posteri.»<sup>18</sup>

In *Guerre et paix en Assyrie*, F. M. Fales insists that one should escape these “traps” presented by such biased accounts, which can fool the unwary, by incorporating in our studies the importance of evaluating different kinds of sources (see pp. 55-69). Otherwise, the reputation which the Assyrian kings themselves wanted to convey to posterity would prevail, and so accomplish their objectives.

The emphasis on reconstructing Assyrian history resorting to textual categories that can balance the commemorative sources is particularly well exemplified in the presentation of military organization and tactics in chapters II and III. Besides the representation of war in texts and images staged by the political power to fit its apologetic-propagandistic intentions, the mass of administrative “archival” documents and letters exchanged between the king and his officials allows us to accede to more concrete circumstances of military issues<sup>19</sup>. These sources have the potential to reveal aspects concerning two

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<sup>18</sup> Fales 2001: v.

<sup>19</sup> See the very recent work by Fuchs 2011.



dimensions of Assyrian warfare: on the one hand, as presented in the book, a *static* (p. 95) perspective of the armies in their composition (pp. 95-100, 104-139, 145-151), organization and hierarchy (pp. 140-145), logistics and technology (pp. 100-104), etc.; on the other, a dynamic view of the behaviour of the Assyrian armies *en route* and engaged in combat, adapting their march, tactics and techniques to different topographical realities (pp. 161-168). The author makes an overview of these two dimensions of Neo-Assyrian war machine, resorting to both official and non-official discourses, making good use of several important scholarly works on the subject<sup>20</sup>.

To reconstitute the dynamics of battles (pp. 182-205) as conveyed by Neo-Assyrian visual and written sources is a spiny task, though, that may frustrate a public interested in a more superficial and popular mainstream military history. Fales points out the difficulties to reconstitute battles because of the biased nature of the information provided by the royal inscriptions and visual sources, which only represent Assyrian victories, not defeats (pp. 194-195). Since there were no Assyrian texts resembling, with an apparent “journalistic” language, Julius Caesar’s *De bello Gallico*, describing in detail the raw factuality of military campaigns, battles or skirmishes, nor anything comparable to Vegetius’ *Epitoma de rei militaris* concerning military doctrine<sup>21</sup>, the only way by which we can try to draw a broad scheme of the dynamic of combat is to cross as much types of sources as we can. The author presents the schemes of a few open field clashes, such as the combat between Sargon II and Marduk-apla-iddina II’s forces at the gates of Dūr-Yakin (fig. 46, p. 198); the battle of Halulê between Sennacherib and Mušezib-Marduk and his Elamite allies (fig. 47, p. 200); and the battle of Til Tuba, on the margins of the Ulay river (figs. 48-49, pp. 203-204), which opposed Ashurbanipal and the Elamite king, Teumman<sup>22</sup>. Fales shows the research potential offered to the study on the dynamics of battles by pointing out the importance

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. Malbran-Labat 1982 and Dezsó 2006.

<sup>21</sup> See remark by Fuchs 2011, 395.

<sup>22</sup> The battle of Dūr-Yakin: 709 BC; Halulê: 691 BC; and Til Tuba: 653 BC.

of topographical elements that framed these battle events, the placement of units in the field and the use of different weapons (cavalry, chariots, infantry, ballistics) in different moments of armed clashes (pp. 192-205). All these aspects can, not without many difficulties, though, be developed by the scholarship beyond the ideological and literary bias of royal inscriptions and official monuments, and resorting to all kinds of sources.

However, one must remind Israel Eph'al's observation that during the Neo-Assyrian period, open field battles were the exception, not the norm<sup>23</sup>. Poliorcetics, the art of siege warfare, a topic well presented by Fales (pp. 182-192), was predominant during the Neo-Assyrian period because of the superiority of Assyrian armed forces *en rase campagne* but especially because of its advanced organization<sup>24</sup>, which could be disencouraging to *mano a mano* challenges posed by inferior armies of fragmented polities.

One might say that behind the *pathos* of the Assyrian celebrative discourse there was a *logos* that directed rational choices in political and military matters. The *ethos* in this Aristotelian equation is made explicit, however, in the official representations: war was justified and explained through an ideology or political culture that attributed the Assyrian kingship with a divinely-ordained mission to construct and maintain a social, political and cosmic order. According to that "ethical" principle, general prosperity and peace could only be born through warfare and violence directed to hostile polities that surrounded the land of Aššur and threatened its existence. That warfare, and its consequences over the defeated, had always to be supported by the gods. Thus, war may not have been considered (or presented by the official discourse) as a goal *per se*, but as a means necessary to impose that order, whose benefits would befall over the core of the empire but

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<sup>23</sup> Eph'al 1997. Cf. also Eph'al 2009.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the Neo-Assyrian armies were probably the first to engage campaigns and sieges all-year round, breaking the constraints of season: Saggs 1963. See also Fuchs 2011, who has more doubts in attributing an overwhelming technical and tactical superiority of the Assyrian army over its foes.

were also said to be delivered over the rest of the “Four Regions” of the world. This “world” was understood as a vast and idealized territory that included both the centres of Assyro-Babylonian civilization and peripheries considered hostile. Since there were always new enemies beyond every new conquest, all the world was liable to be controlled by Assyria and to be turned into peaceful dwellings of the *oikoumenè*. This can be considered as the substance of the concept of *Pax Assyriaca* defended by F. M. Fales (pp. 219-228).

Making justice to the scholarly background of this Italian scholar, very influenced by the critical approaches to the language of political discourse, an interesting interpretation can be extracted from many of his works, and from this *Guerre et Paix en Assyrie* in particular: that the Neo-Assyrian official discourses translated somehow a more violent and cruel representation of the Empire than its concrete practices during war and the political management of their domination. This reflection can be surprising, since we are all used to see the opposite, i.e., discourses that invoke peaceful and humanitarian values to justify war and violence, but hiding its much grimmer reality.

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