

The Old Assyrian City-State

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In the Copenhagen Polis Centre's original research program written by Mogens Herman Hansen, one finds the claim that "at the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. Assur was hardly a 'city-state' but the capital of an empire which controlled a cluster of dependent colonies around Kanesh in Anatolia" (Hansen [1994] 11). In support of this statement one finds a reference to my book entitled "The Old Assyrian City-State and its Colonies" (Larsen [1976]). Hansen has since changed his mind (see 20 *supra*); but before going into the specifics of the argument in favour of the city-state interpretation, I shall briefly present an outline of the geographical and historical setting.

Assur was a small city located on a cliff that juts out into the Tigris just north of the point where the river breaks through the low mountain chain Jebel Hamrin. It was located as the southernmost of the cities that are found in the north, the area normally referred to as "Assyria"; Assur was therefore on a kind of frontier towards the south, where the Sumerian and later Babylonian regions lay. It was furthermore situated on the border between the steppe to the west, the agricultural lands towards the north where agriculture based on rainfall was possible, and the plain east of the river Tigris where the main roads leading east-west and north-south passed.

The region immediately adjacent to the city cannot count on sufficient rainfall every year to allow for dry farming, and the river Tigris is unsuitable for irrigation. The city itself accordingly appears to have been dependent on more than one type of economic activity from its earliest history, and the relationship to the Bedouin tribes of the steppes was obviously of paramount importance. Oates has pointed out that during recent times the sheikhs of such tribes had their headquarters in the modern village of Shergat that lies close to the ruins of ancient Assur (Oates [1968] 20-21).

The city's earliest history, reaching back presum-

ably to the early third millennium B.C., cannot be described on the basis of the available evidence.¹ Assur was only one of a number of relatively prosperous settlements in the northern region, where one finds such important towns as Arbela and Nineveh. Assur was, however, in part due to its location on the border of the arable lands, a special city—the gateway to the south, i.e. the immensely fertile alluvial plain that later became "Babylonia", and an important point of contact with the roving nomads of the western steppes.

The peculiar religious significance of the city evident from the fact, for instance, that the site and its god had the same name and in some not very clear fashion were seen as aspects of one and the same phenomenon cannot be described in any detail for this early period. It has been suggested that annual religious activities which involved desert Bedouin could have been part of the *raison d'être* of the city (Oppenheim [1964] 98-100, 168).

What we call the Old Assyrian period lasted from about 1920 to 1800 B.C. Surprisingly, our knowledge of the city in this period comes not from Assur itself, but primarily from a site in central Anatolia, Kültepe, a mound that covers the ancient city of Kanesh, located some 30 km east of modern-day Kayseri (see illustration 1). Assur was excavated over more than ten years at the turn of the last century, but very little material concerning the earliest phases of the city's history was uncovered. We have a small selection of brief and terse royal building inscriptions and a scattering of – mostly unpublished – texts which appear to stem from private archives found in the city. Nothing in these texts could even begin to hint at the special character of the city.

However, since about 1885 a very large number of texts from this period have been uncovered at Kültepe; until 1948 these all came from robber diggings, but since that year Turkish archaeologists directed by Professor Tahsin Özgür have conducted annual cam-

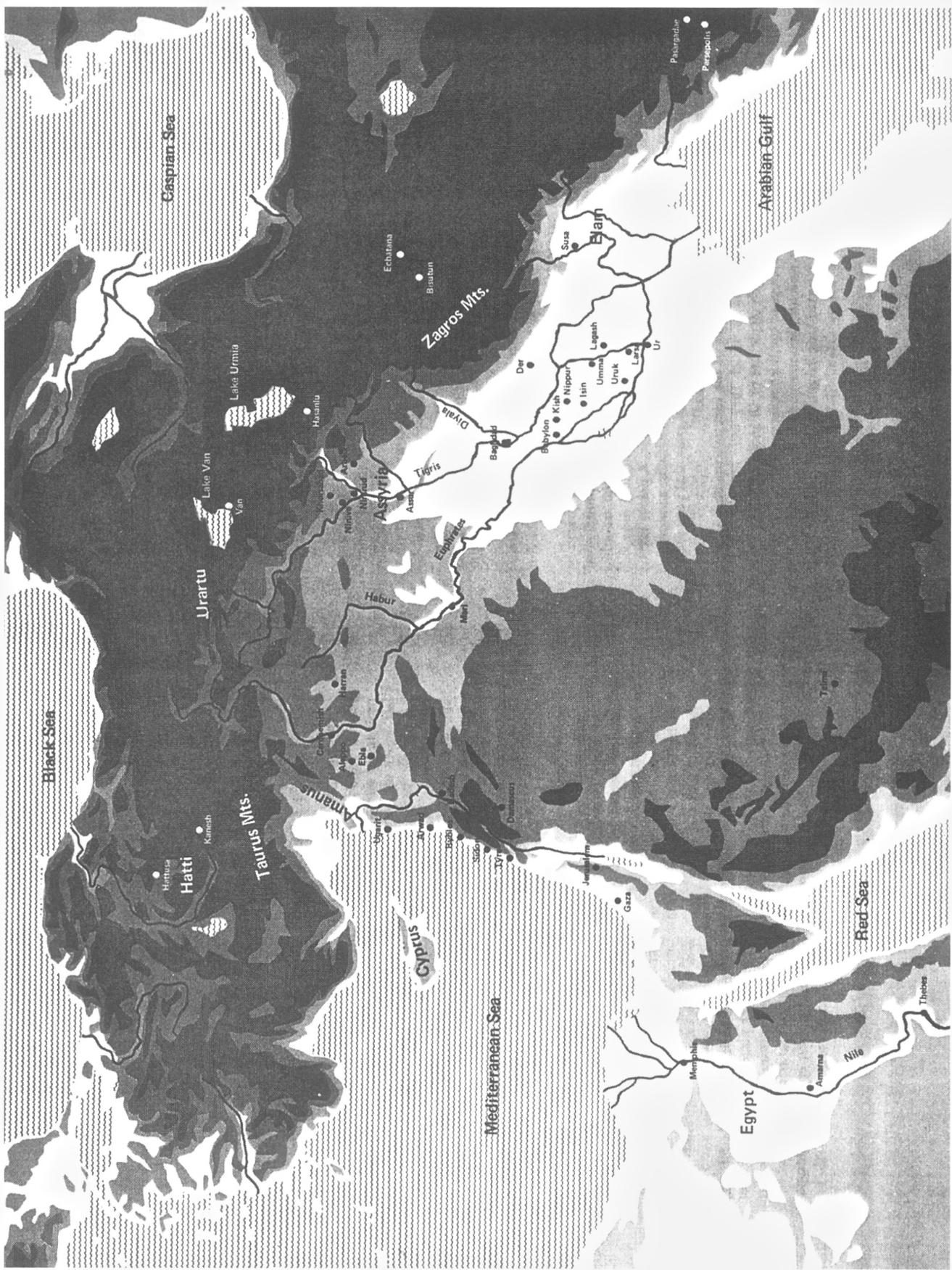


Fig. 1. The Near East in the Second Millennium B.C.

paigns at the site, and these have resulted in the discovery of fifteen to twenty thousand texts;² to this number should then be added the ca. four thousand documents dug up by the villagers and sold to museums and collectors before proper excavations began. About one-fourth of the total number of texts have been published.

The texts are written in the archaic dialect we now call Old Assyrian, and they stem from the archives kept by private commercial firms that had offices at ancient Kanesh, but whose main headquarters were in Assur. The texts therefore describe the functioning of the Old Assyrian society, throwing light not only on the conditions in Anatolia, more than a thousand kilometres away from Assur, but also on those prevailing in Assur itself, from where a large part of the letters discovered were sent. Obviously, the fact that we have practically no texts from Assur itself places some limitations on our analysis; we lack the administrative archives of the government and have to reconstruct its functioning by way of the references found especially in letters written by people who are engaged in interaction of various kinds with officials and political institutions. On the other hand, such references provide a practical, non-ideological description of everyday reality.

The City-State Argument

In the following discussion I shall present the evidence concerning Assur in the Old Assyrian period in terms of the criteria set out by the symposiarch.

Territory. During the period discussed here the city was ruled by a local dynasty, but it clearly did not exert any political or military dominance on more than a small region around it. In that respect Assur fits the model suggested for a city-state. Since our textual material stems from the archives at Kültepe, it is understandable that affairs in the homeland around Assur are referred to quite rarely, and only in cases where the addressee in distant Anatolia would have a special reason for taking an interest. There is one, unpublished reference in the known material to the main city of the northern region, Nineveh; it is a casual note about the cost of transportation for a caravan that went via this town, but at least it tells us that the other main urban centres in the region were inhabited at this time, and that they may be assumed to have taken part in contemporary commercial life.³

The idea of a kind of Old Assyrian empire stretching all the way to central Anatolia was in fact

suggested some decades ago by Julius and Hildegard Lewy,⁴ but it has been abandoned by all scholars working in the field in favour of the model of a commercial penetration that was not in any way linked to military expansion. One should realise that the available textual material from such sites as Mari and Shubat-Enlil/Shehna clearly shows that the lands between Assur and Anatolia, hundreds of kilometres of steppe-land in northern Syria with a large number of independent political units, mainly small territorial states, were certainly not under any kind of political control from Assur. In an imperial scenario these regions would have had to be traversed regularly not only by commercial caravans, but by armies as well. A treaty set up between the ruler of ancient Shehna in northern Syria and Assur – unfortunately so heavily damaged that its stipulations are quite uncertain – coupled with scattered references to merchants from Assur in the roughly contemporary texts from Mari, indicates that this city was a commercial, not a military power (Eidem [1991]).

Population. It is notoriously difficult to reconstruct population figures for ancient cities. Assur in this period covered about 35 hectares, and a certain part of this area must have been taken up by temples. The most ancient defensive works of the city were not investigated by the excavators, but it seems that the area of the city itself was being expanded during this phase of its life, with new walls being constructed. There is no estimate of the number of people known from the Kültepe texts so far published who were citizens of Assur, but it seems safe to assume that between 2 and 4,000 individuals are known to have been actively engaged in the trade conducted from Assur during a period of some 50-60 years. A considerable number of these spent the larger part of their lives abroad. Assur must have had 7-10,000 inhabitants.

Urbanisation. Although the statement of the symposiarch with respect to the possibility of more than one urban centre in a city-state is debatable on the basis of earlier Mesopotamian (Sumerian) evidence, there is no question that Assur in the Old Assyrian period was *the city*, referred to in nearly all texts simply as “the City”, *alum*. For the Assyrians there was clearly only one “city”, despite the fact that they were in daily contact with urban populations in Anatolia, Syria and Babylonia. Occasionally Assur was referred to as *alum Assur*, “the City Assur”, though never simply as *Assur* (Larsen [1976] 116-117). We do not even have references to secondary settlements

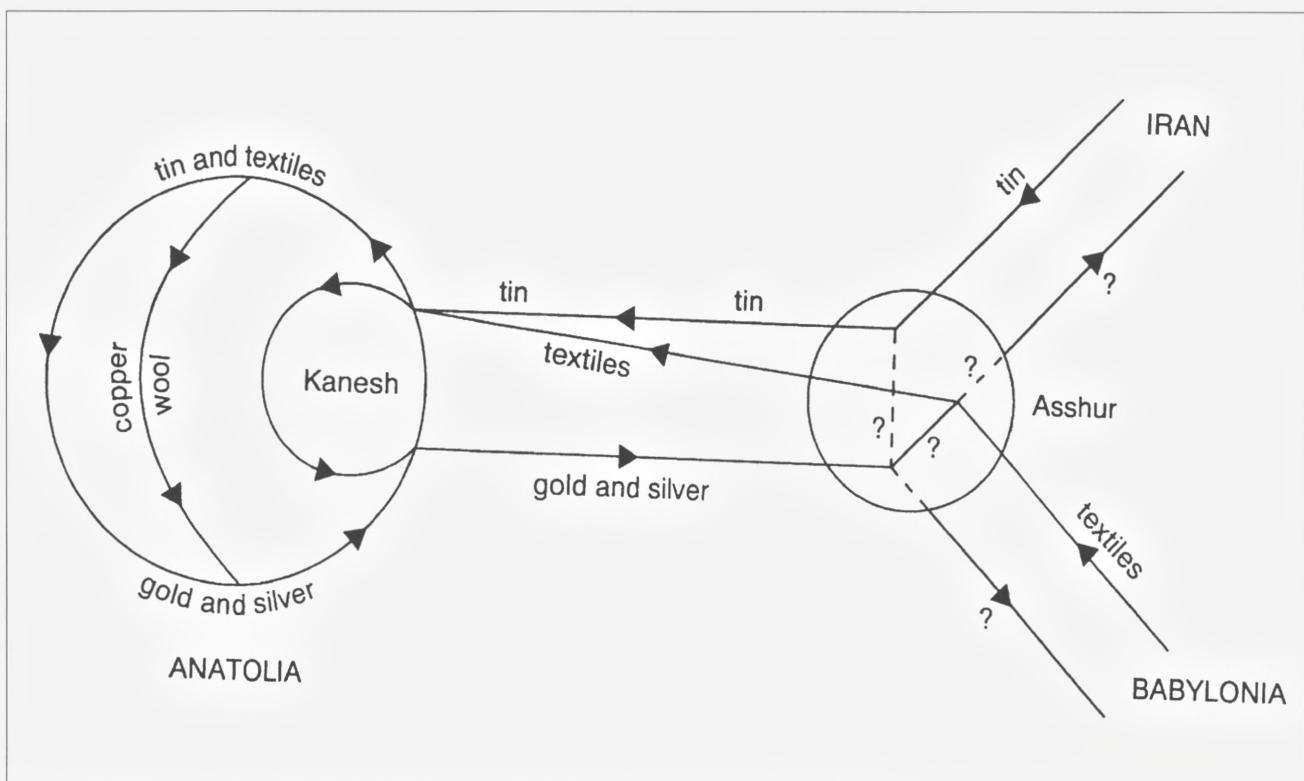


Fig. 2. Diagram showing the pattern of the Old Assyrian trading network. Courtesy K.R. Veenhof.

such as villages around Assur, although these must surely have existed.⁵

In contrast, the commercial establishments in Anatolia were referred to with the word *karum*, meaning something like “port” and often rendered as “colony”; the original Sumerian term denoted a quay or an embankment at a city, the logical place for commercial transactions, and this developed into river ports; the word was used both for the physical reality and for the community of traders whose work was linked to the port. In Old Assyrian usage the term became completely divorced from the physical aspect of a river-port and came to mean any commercial establishment of a certain size and importance; the Kanesh Port, for instance, was not located on a river.

Establishments of lesser importance, and probably size, were called *wabartum*, a word which is related to the Assyrian term for “a guest” and which we usually translate as “station”. The entire system seems to have comprised some ten “ports” and a similar number of “stations”.⁶

These commercial establishments were not colonies in the same sense as, e.g., the ones established in the Mediterranean region by Phoenicians and Greeks. They were not new settlements founded by

colonists, and consequently should not be understood as independent in some sense of the local towns; instead, they formed part of the urban spaces already in existence. A recently published text shows that the Assyrian Port authorities in a discussion with the local king and queen referred to the *karum*, where an Assyrian trader had his house, as “your city”.⁷ Accordingly, the network of Ports and Stations did not represent any kind of conquest, but existed on the basis of a set of rules contained in sworn treaties entered into by the Assyrian authorities and by the local, Anatolian rulers. Their nature will be further discussed under the heading “settlement pattern”.

Economy. As mentioned, agriculture in the immediate environs of Assur was always a somewhat risky affair due to the chance of drought, and it seems that foodstuffs, primarily grain, were regularly brought to the city and sold on the market. There are numerous references in letters to the need to store quantities of grain for the winter, but not one reference to agricultural production.

On the other hand, the textual documentation from Kültepe/Kanesh shows Assur to have been a commercial city. It was a transit centre for the trade in tin and

textiles, goods that came from the east and from the alluvial plain in the south respectively. We do not know exactly where the tin came from, but as things stand we have to reckon with the possibility of a source in Afghanistan; a less distant, now exhausted tin-source, for instance in the mountain ranges surrounding the Iranian plateau, remains a perhaps more likely possibility. As to the textiles, some of these were clearly produced in Assur itself, but most of them presumably came from the cities in the south, where there was a long tradition of producing woollen products of very high quality (see figure 2) (Veenhof [1972]).

These commodities were exported from Assur to Anatolia, where they were sold for silver; the best available – highly cautious – estimate for the quantities involved in the trade over a period of about 40-50 years is 100,000 textiles and 100 tons of tin. Since the latter commodity was destined for the production of bronze (we are in what the archaeologists term the Middle Bronze Age in this region of the world), it goes without saying that the trade in copper – which took place within Anatolia itself, where large deposits were available for mining – must have involved quantities of at least 1,000 tons. We are accordingly speaking of quantities that would account for the production of, for instance, 1-1.5 million bronze swords (Dercksen [1996]).

It is very difficult to establish fair estimates of the quantities of silver that went in the other direction, from Anatolia to Assur, in exchange for the tin and the textiles, but it cannot have been less than between 20 and 25 tons.

Woollen textiles could of course be produced anywhere in the Near Eastern region, and we must assume that every area had its own special tradition with respect to patterns, colours, size etc. The textiles involved in the Old Assyrian trade fall into a number of different categories, some of which were named after towns or regions. The fact that such products, based on a technology available everywhere, could form the basis for a lucrative trade, should probably be understood on the basis of two considerations: 1) some textiles, such as those produced in the Babylonian cities, must have been seen as highly prestigious luxury commodities, whose quality and characteristics could not be matched by local producers; and 2) although the trade in textiles was even more profitable to the traders than that in tin, it was the latter commodity that formed the strategic basis for the exchange, and the textile trade in a sense depended on the tin.

Furthermore, the commercial circuit and the elaborate system of caravan procedures rested on a complex set of legal and economic structures which had been built by the Old Assyrian merchants, and which gave them a considerable advantage over local producers and traders in those regions where they operated. An individual piece of textile bought in a city in Babylonia for around 3 shekels of silver would be sold on the market in Assur for around 6 shekels; after the long trip to Anatolia it would fetch between 12 and 20 shekels of silver, depending on the precise procedure chosen for the sale. It is worth considering that a piece of cloth produced in a city not far from the Persian Gulf could end up in a town on the Black Sea coast in modern Turkey (Larsen [1987]).

This commerce was in the hands of private family firms whose main offices naturally were in Assur itself. Following the classic pattern of long-distance trade known for instance from Renaissance Europe, the distant markets in Anatolia, some 1,000-1,200 km away, were monitored by agents who spent most of their time in one of the branch offices that had been established in the vicinity of, or in some cases presumably within, the major towns of Anatolia. These agents were sons, brothers, nephews etc. of the head of the family and firm, and our sole documentation for the trade – indeed for the Old Assyrian society – consists of their archives. As luck would have it, the Kanesh Port was also the administrative and commercial centre for the merchants operating throughout the Anatolian and north Syrian region. About half of the texts found here are letters, many of which were sent from Assur, and the rest consist of contracts, juridical documents, accounts, notes etc. A mere handful of other types of documents have been found, such as literary texts, incantations to protect against the terrors of the caravan trail and other calamities.

Since this material is in the process of being published, it is impossible to gain any reliable idea about the number of families involved in the trade. At this moment we have direct knowledge of perhaps as many as ten such firms, some of which were intimately linked with each other by way of partnerships and investment contracts.

Settlement pattern. The only Assyrian settlement in Anatolia that is known in some detail was the one at Kanesh, which has been partly excavated by the Turkish archaeologists under Tahsin Özgüç for more than fifty years now.⁸ The entire site consists of a city-mound, some five hundred metres in diameter, on which the excavators appear to have found nearly

exclusively official buildings inhabited and used by the local political élite. In a crescent-shaped arc about 100 metres east of the mound itself was a lower city or suburb consisting as far as we can tell entirely of private houses; many, perhaps most of these were inhabited by Assyrians, as can be established on the basis of the archives found in them, but a considerable number of the buildings belonged to, and were inhabited by, local Anatolians. These, too, often contain archives, although they are generally much smaller than the Assyrian ones.

At ancient Hattusha, the later capital of the Hittite empire, a number of houses containing small Assyrian archives have also been discovered. Here it seems possible that the traders lived as part of the local community, i.e. there was no special commercial quarter set aside from the town itself. However, it seems likely that in most instances (cf. for instance the site Acemhüyük in the Konya Plain) a settlement consisted of a high mound partly surrounded by a lower city, and it was in this area that the merchants would naturally establish their residences.

It is important to realise that the Assyrian references to the Kanesh Port point to two different aspects: 1) the physical reality of the township where the traders lived, and 2) the community of Assyrian traders, and more specifically the organisational structure regulating the functioning of the port. The many Anatolians who lived in the area we refer to as the *karum* were not part of the *karum* community, which consisted entirely of individuals who regarded themselves as *mera Assur*, “sons of Assur” – or more simply as *tamkaru*, “merchants”. No Anatolian could gain access to this community, because its existence was based on the presence of the family firm back in Assur and on the constantly flowing overland trade that connected Anatolia with Assur. We should therefore be aware that the settlement beneath the walls of the city of Kanesh was not the “Kanesh Port” as such, it was a township in which the Assyrian *karum* was located.

There is no reason to believe that this settlement was founded by the men from Assur,⁹ and despite the fact that they owned a large number of houses here, these did not constitute a distinct, separate physical entity. Although the Assyrians appear to have lived mostly in certain sectors of the settlement as such, buildings belonging to Assyrians and Anatolians were scattered among each other.

In view of these observations it should be clear that the term “colony” is unsuitable because of the confusion with the well-established phenomena in the Mediterranean region that are usually referred to

using this term. I shall therefore refer to the Old Assyrian *karum* with the term “port” instead. Historical comparisons may be found in the Renaissance world, where similar commercial establishments were found all over the eastern Mediterranean region, the *funduq* of the Muslim world, *fondaco* among the Latins, and even with the English commercial community in, e.g., the Great Khan of Aleppo in the eighteenth century A.D. (Davis [1967]).

Ethnic and political identity. A citizen of Assur was a “son of Assur” in contrast to other groups of people. The main terms used for non-Assyrians were: “Akkadians”, a term denoting southerners, i.e. people from the Babylonian region; “Subarians”, presumably Hurrian-speaking groups in northern Syria and the Taurus area; “Amorites”, Semitic-speaking groups in Syria-Palestine; and *nu'a'u*, a term that denoted the inhabitants of Anatolia, peoples who fell into several linguistic groups, some of which were Indo-European. When distinctions were made concerning specific individuals in the Anatolian community, they would be phrased in terms of the city or country they came from: “a man from Kanesh”, “from Timelkiya” etc.

Many merchants from Assur married local Anatolian women, and there was clearly a lively interaction between the traders and the local communities with which they traded. It seems clear, however, that there was at no time any possibility for crossing the lines defined by ethnic background, and the fundamental economic and political interests attached to the community of “sons of Assur” are clearly seen in many contexts; one example is the decision taken by the City assembly in Assur and communicated to the Kanesh Port in a letter from the king:

The rule concerning gold is as previously: brothers [=Assyrians] may sell it to each other; but in accordance with the rule on the stela [recording the city's commercial regulations] no Assyrian, whoever he is, may sell gold to any Akkadian, Amorite or Subariean. The one who does sell any will not live (Dercksen [1996] 162).

This harsh regulation was based on the best interests of the city as a whole, and might presumably often go against the interests of individual merchants; it was clear, however, who fell into any of these three categories of competitor.

An indication of the relevance of the concept of ethnic identity may be found in the slightly later text from Assur that was written to commemorate the

overthrow of the Shamshi-Adad dynasty in Assur; Shamshi-Adad was an Amorite king who had ousted the Old Assyrian dynasty around 1800 B.C., and a couple of generations after his death his descendants were thrown out of Assur. The new ruler, who appears to have represented a return to the old patterns, described Shamshi-Adad and his short-lived dynasty as being “of foreign extraction, not of the flesh of the city of Assur” (Grayson [1987] text pp. 77-78).

Defence. Assur was in fact surrounded by walls, but we have no knowledge about military affairs at all.

Self-government. The political structure of the Old Assyrian period as visible through the lens of the private archives found at Kanesh, obviously an incomplete although not necessarily a distorted one, is dominated by three basic institutions: kingship, city-assembly and year-eponymy.¹⁰

The king himself used two titles that refer to clearly separate functions and aspects of his societal role. As *isshiaik Assur*, “divine Assur’s steward”, he appears in the royal inscriptions, where the emphasis is on his divinely sanctioned role as head of the community and as chief priest. This remained a unique feature of Assyrian kingship to the very end, and may be contrasted with the Babylonian practices where the king was never a priest. The second title used by the king was *waklum*, “leader” or “foreman”, and this is found in letters written by him to the authorities in the Kanesh Port as well as in the few extant private royal letters. The official letters indicate that he was the one who was charged with the practical implementation of the – mostly judicial – decisions taken by the city-assembly. It would seem that he functioned as leader of, and executive officer for, this body.

When others referred to the king, they also made use of two different titles, but, unfortunately, these cannot be distinguished from each other with the same degree of precision. The common reference to a king, whether the one in Assur or one of the rulers in the Anatolian kingdoms, was the word *ruba’um*, commonly translated “prince”. Contemporary usage in Babylonian texts applies this word to a nobleman, while the Akkadian word *šarrum* (generally used for “king” in Mesopotamian texts outside of the Old Assyrian corpus) was restricted in use in our texts to a reference to the god Assur. A phrase first met in the Old Assyrian period but which became part of the coronation ritual in Assyria in later periods, shouted by the priests in a procession in Assur, was: “The god Assur is king! NN is his steward!”

The term *ruba’um* was typically used to define the king in his relationship to the City: letters from the authorities in Assur are referred to as “letter from the City” or “letter from the City and the king”, and oaths are sworn by “the life of the City” or “the life of the City and the king.”

The last title to be discussed appears in a special context, namely appeals from the court in Kanesh to the one in Assur, where we find people making use of the term *belum*, the common word for “lord”; in case a matter could not be satisfactorily dealt with by the legal authorities at Kanesh, a plaintiff would declare in court that his case must be placed “before the City and my lord”.

Coming as they do from private commercial archives, the Kültepe references are naturally concerned primarily with legal matters involving disputes among the merchants, and they provide us with a relatively clear picture: city-assembly and king functioned together, interestingly with the City invariably mentioned before the king. The assembly, presided over by the king, takes decisions, and the king carries them out.

The king was the main priest of the city’s god and accordingly the community’s overseer, as may be seen from the royal use of titles; the other set of titles represent the socio-political sphere where the king is defined as *the nobleman* and as the lord to whom the subjects were bound in personal allegiance.

That this picture, although heavily leaning on the references to legal problems, has relevance also for what we would call the political sphere may be seen from a letter to the Kanesh Port from its own special envoy in the capital:

The City has imposed a payment of ten minas [about five kg] of silver on you, expenses for the construction of the fortifications ...

Urgent! Take care to place the ten minas of silver under seal and send it as soon as possible, so that the Elders will not turn to us with angry words! Take care to write to the other ports in accordance with the letter from the City to make them pay the money: Have every single port hear the letter from the king and let them pay!¹¹

Here we find the authorities involved in a political (or at least administrative) rather than a judicial matter. The text informs us that expenses incurred for the construction of the new fortifications of Assur had to be paid, at least in part, by the commercial establishments in Anatolia, and that the Kanesh Port as the

main administrative centre abroad had to see to it that all settlements paid their share; this was a decision taken by the City-assembly, as we hear. City-assembly and Elders are obviously references to the same institution, and the “letter from the City” was clearly the same one as the “letter from the king”.

This leads to the question of the City-assembly, the central political and judicial institution of the community. We must assume that it was composed of the men regarded as “elders”, that is, the heads of the leading families in the city. We have no idea of how large a group this was, and when we hear that it would meet in the sacred area behind the Assur-temple, this does not really give us a meaningful clue, since we do not have adequate archaeological evidence to allow us to estimate the space available. The assembly could be divided, or rather, special committees were set up regularly to look into especially complex cases, such as for instance the highly involved audits and financial transactions that resulted from the death of a major merchant.

Since we lack adequate documentation from Assur itself, we have to a certain extent to turn to the much better illuminated, similar bodies operating at Kanesh for clues to an understanding of the Assur assembly. At Kanesh the entire community would meet regularly to consider judicial matters, convening as *karum Kanesh saher rabi*, “the plenary assembly of the Kanesh Port” (literally: “the Kanesh Port, small and great”), but we know that at other times only the Council consisting of the most important (“great”) men would meet. Such a distinction is not known from Assur, where we simply hear of “the City”. This seems to indicate that it was always the group of elders who functioned here, and that there was no plenary assembly at all. One can understand why it would be deemed reasonable to have such an institution in the much smaller Assyrian community at Kanesh, where the plenary assembly would never become an unmanageably large group of people.

A couple of heavily damaged statute texts present us with certain rules for the functioning of these bodies at Kanesh. They show at the very least that the entire system functioned on the basis of a kind of written statute or constitution. The best understood part of the Kanesh statute is concerned with the rules for the calling up of a meeting of the plenary assembly, and we hear of a procedure that reminds us strongly of the *probouleuma* known from Greece: the council retained the right to decide when and for what purpose the plenary assembly should be called up.

... [they investigate] their case and if it is a matter of convening the primary assembly, they so order the secretary in their Council, and the secretary convenes the primary assembly.

Without [the consent of] a majority of the great men one single “man with an account” cannot order the secretary to convene the primary assembly. If the secretary has convened the primary assembly without [the consent of] the great men, at the request of a single person, the secretary will have to pay [a fine of] 10 shekels of silver.¹²

Other sections in the texts speak of procedures for voting, where the assembly is to be divided into voting blocks in order to reach a majority decision. All of these activities were supervised by the scribe or secretary of the Port, clearly a salaried official.

Much more evidence concerning the actual functioning of the Kanesh Port in its relationship with other Assyrian Ports will emerge from the unpublished archive of a certain Kulliya, who was the official envoy of the Kanesh authorities.¹³

Part of the work carried out by these bodies was concerned with complex matters of accounting involving individual merchants’ relations with the authorities or with the financial investors whose funds they managed.

It seems likely that these texts give us at least hints of the procedures followed also in Assur, and they indicate the central role played by the heads of the major families in the Old Assyrian society. It should be clear that the king was not simply a figurehead with ritual obligations, for he certainly possessed real power, but his political and judicial functions were encompassed within the framework of a civic system of government, where the assembly played a vital role.

The last part of this system to be mentioned here was the institution of the *limmum*. This was an annual office whose holder gave his name to the year in the same way as the archons or the consuls, i.e. a year-eponymy. This institution, linked in a unique but still somewhat obscure way to the city Assur and its god, survived until the end of the Assyrian empire in the first millennium, where it had become an ceremonial honour bestowed on royal officials, but in the Old Assyrian period the *limmum* had genuine power. He appears to have been chosen by lot, presumably from the group of elders making up the city-assembly, and he functioned for one year as the head of the main administrative office of Assur, the “City Hall”. In this capacity he was responsible for the economic admin-

istration of the city, such as the collection of dues and taxes, as we hear in several letters, and there is no doubt that his office was the central economic and bureaucratic institution of Assur; in this respect the city constitutes a sharp contrast to, for instance, the contemporary kingdoms in Babylonia where these functions were always the prerogative of the royal palace. The eponym was not in any way directly associated with the judicial apparatus, but he had the power to detain people, take slaves and other property as security, and his power was greatly feared by the persons who became entangled in affairs with him.

When combining these three central institutions, one can see that the system of government in Assur was a kind of balancing act, designed to safeguard the interests of the community and especially of the great commercial families: the divinely appointed and sanctioned king, recognised as the first among equals, the assembly where the families were all represented to defend their interests, and the constantly changing *limmum* who held the real economic power.

This was what the Assyrians called *alum*, “the City”, to which they opposed *eqlum*, literally “the field”, by which they meant “abroad”, i.e. the system of commercial establishments in northern Syria and Anatolia. The hierarchy was clear: the City was paramount, the Kanesh Port was responsible to the City for the affairs of “abroad”, and the various ports and stations answered to the Assyrian authorities at Kanesh. This hierarchical structure can be found both in the private sphere and in government: the bosses were in Assur, the second level in Kanesh, the third was constituted by the other ports and stations.¹⁴

At Kanesh there seems at all times to have been a direct representation from the city-assembly in Assur, two men referred to as “envoys of the City.” They were involved primarily in the relationships between the Assyrians and the local rulers throughout the Anatolian region, which was split up into a number of territorial states; they therefore had responsibility for the treaties that were the necessary foundation for the trade, and thus the very presence of the merchants. Recently one such treaty has been illuminated by a text which contains the draft for an oath sworn by a minor Anatolian ruler. We are informed in this document that he guarantees the safe passage of all Assyrian caravans, which means that he accepts direct responsibility for losses within his jurisdiction due to brigandry etc. In return he receives certain taxes on the shipments that pass through his country; it is even stipulated that in case of unrest, where the caravans could not travel, he would receive a minimum amount

of tin nevertheless. The Assyrians were granted extra-territorial rights, forming their own social, political and legal system independent of the local palace. And the king finally promised to allow no competition from Babylonian (“Akkadian”) merchants in his kingdom; should such traders turn up, they were to be turned over to the Assyrian authorities, who would kill them (Çeçen & Hecker, 1995).

Citizenship. The evidence available does not allow for any meaningful comment on this point.

Conclusion

Assur was not, in my opinion, the capital of an empire, and the “colonies” in Anatolia must be understood as elements in a primarily commercial rather than political structure. It is becoming clear with the publication of new texts that Assur was only one of several commercial centres during this period, and it operated a highly specialised trading network centered on northern Syria and Anatolia. In between Assur and the first “port” in the system they called “abroad” was a stretch of several hundreds of kilometres in northern Iraq and Syria, an area where we find other cities that operated networks of the same kind, for instance the important *entrepôt* on the Euphrates River at ancient Emar. In northern Babylonia we find the city of Sippar, which was in close contact with Assur, but which also controlled a different commercial circuit, one that probably reached along the Euphrates into the Habur area in Syria.¹⁵

It is unclear (or perhaps a matter of definition) whether we can locate Assur in what is called a “city-state culture”, for our knowledge of the northern Mesopotamian region is slight. It is a fact that there were other cities in the wider Mesopotamian area which functioned like Assur in a commercial network, and the political set-up at Emar as described on the basis of texts from Mari bears a strong resemblance to what was found at Assur; at Emar there was not even a king, and the affairs of the city were run by a council of elders. However, geographically Emar and Assur are separated by a great distance, and it is unclear to me in just what respects we can regard them as part of a cultural unity. The cities in northern Mesopotamia which should be the logical candidates for participation in a city-state culture, Nineveh and Arbela, are hardly known at all from this period.

The wider international system of commercial exchange cannot be described in detail yet, but its main features are relatively clear: it was based on

cities which specialised in a certain section of the overall network, and all of these individual sections overlapped and fed into each other. For unknown reasons the Assyrians had managed to build up a kind of monopoly on the Anatolian trade, but it is also clear that they were entirely dependent on other similar circuits functioning in such a way that the market at Assur was always well supplied with tin and textiles. Cities close to the Persian Gulf conducted trade overseas with Bahrain and Oman; others had close contacts with Susa, the capital of the state Elam in southwestern Iran, through which a great deal of the tin from the east was channeled; and Sippar seems to have had a particularly intense exchange with Assur itself.

This city constitutes in my view a very clear example of the commercial city-state whose entire governmental structure was pervaded by the power and interests of the great merchant dynasties. The power-sharing between king, assembly and *limmum* is surely a model that may be compared with such political systems elsewhere. It seems to me that there is a recurring pattern of long-distance trade conducted by family firms within a socio-political framework of a basically oligarchic city-state structure. It would accordingly be a pity if it was not taken into account in the great comparative sweep of this conference.

Notes

1. Andrae (1977) gives a survey of the results of the excavations. See also Harper, Klengel-Brandt, Aruz, & Benzeli (1995) for a discussion of the objects found in the lowest levels of the temples.
2. Veenhof (1995) is a recent, accessible overview of the evidence available. For the number of texts see Bilgiç & Bayram (1995) 2, mentioning 18,000, a number that has reportedly grown since.
3. See Bayram (1997) 57, text kt n/k 931.
4. See discussion in Garelli (1960).
5. See perhaps TC 3:112, 5.
6. For a discussion of the terminology and parallels to such institutions as *fondaco*, *funduq*, *portus* etc. see Larsen (1976) 230-241. The latest list of names from unpublished texts adds a number of settlements of both types, and it seems clear that in the course of the development of the trade during its main phase, new and more distant areas in Anatolia became directly involved in the Assyrian network. See Bayram (1997).
7. Michel & Garelli (1996). Read ll. 5-9 with C. Günbatti (communication at the conference on the 50th anniversary of the Kültepe excavations, Ankara, May-June 1999): "Release PN! He has committed no crime against you! In fact, together with us he has a house in your town...."
8. Özgürç (1950); Özgürç (1959); Özgürç (1986); Özgürç (1999); Özgürç & Özgürç (1953) plus numerous articles in the journal *Belleten* provide information about the archaeological investigations.
9. The archaeological level from which the Old Assyrian evidence comes was labelled "2"; underneath were two older levels that cannot, unfortunately, be adequately dated, but which could reach back into the third millennium B.C., i.e. they were presumably not inhabited by men from Assur.
10. This is analysed in detail in Larsen (1976).
11. Larsen (1976) 163; the text is TC 1:1.
12. Larsen (1976) 284. The "man with an account" appears to have been one of the designations for a trader who had established a special position in the *karum*-community, presumably as one of the "great men".
13. Information kindly provided by K.R. Veenhof.
14. It may be that at the end of the level 2 period, Kanesh was primarily an administrative centre for the Assyrians, whereas the main branch offices had moved to other cities in Anatolia, such as Purushaddum, the main market in silver, and Durhumit, the main market in copper.
15. The texts published in ABB 12, numbers 52-60.

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