Assyrians, Aramaeans and Babylonians: the Syrian Lower Middle Euphrates Valley at the End of the Bronze Age

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Résumé – L'hypothèse historique d’une possible et même probable continuité des traditions amorites de l’âge du Bronze dans les cultures du moyen Euphrate de l’âge du Fer est aujourd’hui mieux étayée par la continuité de l’occupation sédentaire pendant les “crisis years” des xiiie et xiiie siècles, pas seulement autour de Terqa, mais aussi dans la partie sud de la vallée. Les sites appartenant à cette période identifiée récemment dans cette région apparaissent comme clairement marqués par la présence d’une culture essentiellement méridionale ou orientale généralement désignée comme « kassite tardif », indiquant un changement dans l’évolution de la société locale. La présence en elle-même, dès l’âge du Fer I, de structures organisées dans un endroit où une organisation dimorphique de la population et de l’économie est traditionnelle depuis longtemps, donne une nouvelle importance à l’idée que les premiers “États” araméens attestés sur le moyen Euphrate n’étaient pas simplement des groupes de nomades “primitifs” venus de la steppe. Au contraire, ils représentaient une nouvelle structure politique, bien implantée dans la culture locale (et cunéiforme), qu’ils remodelaient en s’opposant à la pression des États et empires mésopotamiens.

Abstract – The historical hypothesis of a possible, or even probable, continuity of the ancient Amorite traditions of the Bronze Age in the Middle Euphrates Iron Age cultures is now better supported by the discovery of the continuity of the sedentary occupation during the “crisis years” in the 13th and 12th centuries, not only in the region around Terqa, but also in the southern part of the valley. The sites belonging to that period recently identified in this area appear clearly to be marked by the presence of a more southern, or more eastern culture, usually classified as “Late Kassite”, a situation indicating a change in the evolution of the local society. But the presence itself, already in Iron I period, of well-organised settlements in an area where a dimorphic organisation of the population and of the economy had been traditional for a very long time, lends new weight to the idea that the first “Aramaean” polities attested in the Middle Euphrates were not simply clans of primitive nomads coming out of the steppe. Instead, they represented a new political structure, well implanted in the local (and cuneiform) culture, reshaping its form against the pressure of the Mesopotamian states and empires.
INTRODUCTION

NATURAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS

Environmental and natural conditions in the southern part of the Syrian Middle Euphrates valley are rather difficult, but they are balanced by three main favourable factors: the first is its position at the crossroads of major highways, linking not only Mesopotamia to Anatolia and eastern Mediterranean regions, but also, especially at the end of the Bronze Age, opening the connexion with Arabia and the African coast. The second is the possible resource of the valley for agriculture, whose profitability depends on the level of technology of the local populations. The third is the steppe itself, on both sides of the valley, which is not desert, and can be used for pastoral activities that, in ancient times, were based on the breeding of sheep. It is important to remember that these three factors can be used in complementary ways, mainly for the agricultural and pastoral activities, but the balance of the three can explain or can be the result of very different political and economic situations. These three factors can also explain the attractiveness of the region to foreign powers and populations. No doubt the flourishing of Mari can be explained because of this geographical position, and Hammurabi of Babylon wanted permanent control of the crossroads when he destroyed the town. We can assume that his successors tried to maintain the situation and to prevent the installation of a new competitor in this area, as we know now from the Hana documents1. Later on, this geographical factor probably remained important, but difficult to evaluate, because of the lack of archaeological and epigraphic documentation for the Late Bronze and the beginning of the Iron Age.

MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE TERQA

The first documents found in Tell Ashara, at the beginning of the 19th century, seemed to show that a kingdom called Hana, probably ruled from the town of Terqa, took control of the area and became more or less independent from the main Mesopotamian power for rather a short period, and then vanished at the end of the Bronze Age. This left the region to the sporadic control of semi-nomadic populations, a situation favourable to the infiltration and installation of new populations, such as the Aramaeans. One of the goals of our work in this area was to obtain information to help understand the situation in the region better, and that would challenge this old historical model.

Before the beginning of regular excavations in Tell Ashara, the image of the Middle Euphrates at the beginning of the Iron Age was very vague and the result of several surveys seemed to confirm the absence of urban structures during this period. The only important document, found in the middle of the 20th century, was difficult to understand: a basalt stela representing a god killing a snake was found by a peasant in the Terqa area. It was immediately considered to be an Assyrian provincial work because the cuneiform inscription contained the name of the Neo-Assyrian king Tukulti-ninurta II, from the beginning of the 9th century. From the presence of this monument in the region, and from the mention of the Laqê country in the historical inscriptions of Adad-nîrârî II and Tukulti-ninurta II, it was possible to suppose that, even if the site of Ashara-Terqa itself had been abandoned since the Late Bronze, the area itself was still controlled by some important urban centres at the beginning of the 9th century (fig. 1).

Terqa only seriously re-emerged in research during the 1970s, when regular digging began on the site under a joint mission led by the University of California at Los Angeles2. The expedition was directed by Giorgio and Marilyn Buccellati, and I have participated since the beginning as an epigrapher

and archaeologist. After nine American missions, the work has been resumed by the French mission, recently transformed into a Syrian-French excavation\(^3\). As a part of this general project, we have also enlarged the program to include a new survey covering the area 10 km around Terqa, and completed by selected soundings. This project has been developed with the help of the Directorate of the Antiquities of Syria and for several years with the collaboration of the Pavia University (Italy). The research on the left bank has been carried out under the direction of Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault\(^4\).

Thanks to this research operations, we have been able to establish the chronology and stratigraphy of the site of Terqa and discover that the site itself holds rare information about the period we are interested in, namely the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, when Aramaeans appeared and fought against the Assyrians. It is obviously in the highest parts of the tell that we found the most

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\(^3\) For a recent bibliography of the French and Syrian-French works in Tell Ashara-Terqa, see ANONYMUS 2007.

recent levels. There, in Area E, we brought to light the remains of a large building. The archaeological evidence did not provide very precise dating information. The based button jars, diagnostic of this time and culture, are found during several centuries without any visible change, and resemble some aspects of the later Middle Assyrian ceramic. Fortunately, it was possible to fix the date of these levels by the discovery of cuneiform tablets that give the name of kings ruling the region until at least the beginning of the 14th century.

**HANA DYNASTY, BABYLONIAN, ASSYRIANS ANDARAMAEANS**

Thanks to these tablets we got the names of as yet unknown kings, and particularly interesting was the discovery of the king Qiš-Addu, who probably ruled for a long time under the control of several Mitannian kings. But the building was probably destroyed later on and a tablet with the name of another king, Pagiru, already known from the Hana documents, was uncovered on a later floor. We can tentatively date the destruction from the end of the 15th century or the beginning of the 14th century, maybe when, according to a passage in the Babylonian Chronicles, king Kadašman-Harbe I came to the region to fight against the Suteans and Ahlamû in the Djebel Bishri. In order to secure the roads and the exchanges between Babylonia and the Levant, he apparently settled colonies in the Bishri area. These operations could have been responsible for the abandonment of at least a part of the site of Terqa. In most part of Area E, just above the highest walls of the ancient buildings of the late Hana period, we have found a thick layer of pure clay, probably deposited by the wind and standing water: this deep layer sealed the first structures and floors below it, in which were some intrusive tombs.

The most ancient burials found in this context were associated with a well-known kind of ceramics called “Kassite bottles”, known to be very common in the Diyala and Hamrin, at sites such as Imlihiye and Zubeidi, and also in southern Mesopotamia, since the 13th century. This evidence confirmed that the abandonment of the Late Hana building visible in the cut of the cliff had to be dated to one or two centuries before.

Herman Gasche and Nina Pons have written several articles on Late Kassite ceramic found in the Middle Euphrates area and elsewhere. In a first phase of the study, they thought the presence of Kassite bottles in Terqa and Mari could not have any important historical significance and that it was only by chance that they were found in these sites. Nevertheless, thanks to these objects, we know that the ancient urban site of Terqa was at least used for funerary activities during the 13th century. We must also remember that a tablet, found in the Lower Khabur area, showed all the legal and epigraphic characteristics of the Hana documents found in Terqa. However, it was dated with a limmu of the end of Tukultî-ninurta I’s reign. The continuity and the influence of the Terqa-centered Khana culture in the area has been recently confirmed and better understood through the research and epigraphic finds of the Japanese mission in Tell Taban. The texts of the Late Bronze-Iron I period show, for example, that the calendar they used still depended on Hana customs. The almost contemporary archives of Tell Sheikh-Hamed, ancient Dûr Katlimmu, the Middle Assyrian site excavated by Hartmut Kühne for thirty years

in the Khabur valley, does not give any information either on Terqa or on Hana in the Euphrates valley, but they mention the presence in the region of people with Kassite Babylonian names\textsuperscript{12}. This could be a collateral effect of the fight between Tukulti-ninurta I and Kaštiliaš IV, king of Babylon, but it also fits with the presence of our Kassite bottles in the region.

For this period of the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, the available evidence is scarce and difficult to understand. It seemed to corroborate, indirectly, the model of the abandonment of the area to semi-nomadic and non-urban populations. For this reason, we decided to look outside of urban settlement of Terqa for the information we could not get from this site.

**Mashtale and the Babylonian-Late Kassite influence**

The site of Mashtale\textsuperscript{13} is about 4 km south of Terqa, on the opposite bank of the river. It had already been recognised in the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century by Alois Musil, during his travels along the Euphrates. Remarkably on its square shape, Musil proposed to interpret it as an Assyrian camp\textsuperscript{14}. This opinion had then been accepted by several scholars, even if the surface surveys of Kay Simpson\textsuperscript{15} and of Geyer and Monchambert\textsuperscript{16} focus mainly on the Late Bronze and Iron I levels. With a preserved surface of around 10 ha, the site, on a middle Holocene terrace, is close to a paleo-meander of the river, in an area that probably flooded during serious floods. It is only just above the plain: no more than 4 m high. Part of the site is covered by a modern cemetery and a large school, and it is regularly encroached upon by the extension of the surrounding fields. It is considered important by the local population, who remember it as a place where, during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, a major battle between several Agedat tribes occurred. A canal crossing the tell had been previously identified as possibly being connected with the ancient Nahr Dawrin canal, but now, according to the stratigraphy of the ancient levels explored in our soundings, it seems to be a much more recent canal, probably dug well after Partho-Roman times. Its bed is currently under cultivation. Characteristic of the site is the presence of a salt crust, that covers a large part of its surface, which has probably increased the erosion of the architectural remains.

During two seasons\textsuperscript{17}, we had the opportunity to carry out some soundings and a magnetometry survey on the site. In the limited area that we were able to expose, we found very few architectural remains, but it has been possible to recognise at least two, maybe even three, different construction phases, modifying the structure of the domestic and rural units. Both phases provided an important collection of ceramics, with a high proportion of Kassite bottles, and associated material. Hundreds of ceramics, complete and fragmented, were recovered in very limited soundings and in some parts of the tell they were visible on the surface.

The ceramic assemblage is very close to that found in the Hamrin Diyala region, on the sites of Imlahiye and Zubeidi\textsuperscript{18}, dated to the 13\textsuperscript{th}–12\textsuperscript{th} century. This village, or even small town, given its possible original dimensions, was probably established during a rather dry period, at a time where high water levels in the river were rare, a situation that corresponds well with the end of the Late Bronze Age. The

\textsuperscript{12} C. ANCIRI & KIRSCHBAUM 1996.
\textsuperscript{13} ROUAULT 1998a.
\textsuperscript{14} MUSIL 1927.
\textsuperscript{15} SIMPSON 1984.
\textsuperscript{16} GEYER & MONCHAMBERT 2003.
\textsuperscript{17} ROUAULT 1998a, MASETTI-ROUAULT 2006 et 2007b.
\textsuperscript{18} BOEHMER & DAMMER 1985.
settlement was probably linked to an economic strategy based on agricultural production, possibly in connection with pastoralism in the steppe, following the traditional pattern.

We can imagine that the same populations left the oriental Jazirah and the Hamrin area, or a more southern, Babylonian region, in order to try to find better conditions in the lower Middle Euphrates, in a context where irrigation was possible. Settling there was probably easy, thanks to the local political weakness after the collapse of the Hana kingdom. This could be the cultural context in which local “Aramaean” culture later rose, in conflict with the ancient, but by then very weak urban elite, in a period when the extension of Assyrian power seems to have been limited to the Khabur valley. Later, when the dry episode was finished, the Mashtale settlement, probably endangered by flooding of the river, had to be abandoned, even after some efforts to reinforce it against the waters of the river had been made. The results of our soundings and of the magnetometry survey have shown a strong erosion of the structures in the area close to the river and better preservation in the northern part of the site.

**Marwaniye and the Babylonian-Kassite Political and Military Organisation**

We have, therefore, got enough evidence to prove that the Babylonian Kassite presence in the area was not simply casual or fleeting — just people crossing the area; on the contrary, it corresponded to a real program of settlement, with the construction of specific towns or big villages. However, the Mashtale information was not sufficient to evaluate the real meaning and importance of the cultural, and maybe also ethnic change connected to the appearance of the Late Kassite material.

This question was raised again during our work in Marwaniye, another tell site in the region, important for our topic. The site is also on the left bank of the river, about 10 km south of Terqa. Its name is a reference to the Omayyad caliph Marwan II, who ruled at the end of the 8th century AD, and it is one of the toponyms of the area mentioned by the classical Arabic historians. The surface surveys carried out in the region by Simpson, by Berthier and by Geyer and Monchambert, recognised an important Islamic occupation: Omayyad (6th–9th century), Abbasid and Fatimid (10th–12th century). But the site was clearly founded earlier, as there were some Late Bronze Age and Iron Age II ceramics. The small nearby site of el-Jurdi Sharqi also has an Iron Age II level. These two sites have a peculiar position in the valley, in respect of the river bank; they are far from it and not related to any paleo-meander. Moreover, they are also quite far from the long canal called Nahr Dawrin.

The tell of Marwaniye is not very high, standing on the holocene terrace, no more than six metres above the level of the fields around it. It is difficult to evaluate its original extent: recent work in the fields has probably removed part of it, and it is not impossible that it was originally linked with the small tell of el-Jurdi Sharqi, corresponding maybe to its lower town. The space between the two sites was apparently cut later by the construction of a canal, enlarged by erosion and again by the agricultural work.

Several soundings, established with the help of a magnetometry survey, showed us that the Islamic levels were not the most important construction phase, as previously thought. As in Mashtale, at Marwaniye we found an important Late Kassite level, with the characteristic ceramic assemblage. After its abandonment, an Iron II occupation is attested, but it is not possible, for the moment, to determine the time elapsed between the two settlements. And the site already existed before the Late Kassite

occupation, which was established on the remains of an earlier Middle Bronze II level. In one of the soundings of Marwaniye we were lucky enough to find a well preserved administrative tablet, with a date quoting the name of the king: Kadašman-Enlil, king of Babylon. As in the Hamrin, this kind of ceramic is associated with documents dated to Kudur-Enlil; our Kadašman-Enlil is probably the second one with this name, the father of Kudur-Enlil. Therefore, it now appears that the Late Kassite/Babylonian presence in the Syrian lower Middle Euphrates was a well organised movement, with an administrative structure controlled by the Babylonian king, or at least recognising Babylonian authority.

**A S A C O N C L U S I O N: A T L A S T, T H E A S S Y R I A N S...**

We must also stress another important aspect of Marwaniye: it is not linked to the Nahr Dawrin, and apparently it did not belong to the system of small hamlets built along the Iron II-III canal irrigating the left bank of the river that were revealed by our recent survey. This rural settlement system was connected to the new exploitation program probably centred in the Assyrian colony built at tell Masaïkh, 5 km north of Terqa.

Marwaniye reflects an earlier moment in the organisation of the valley and could be the witness of a more local system, protected by Babylonian power and also involving local populations. It is probably in this kind of context that Aramaean culture developed and evolved, in a protected and reserved area, between the Assyrian influence in the northern Jazirah and the Babylonian power that was strong enough to keep the political control of this part of the Middle Euphrates valley. Even if, at the end of the reign of Tukulti-ninurta I, the region passed under formal Assyrian control, the general balance remained the same, until the Neo-Assyrian expansion, so well illustrated in the region by the site of Tell Masaïkh\(^{21}\). But that is another history.

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\(^{21}\) See the excavation reports published every year since 2001 by M. G. Masetti-Rouault, director of the project, in MASETTI-ROUAULT 2001b.