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978-1-107-11956-7 - Ancient Kanesh: A Merchant Colony in Bronze Age Anatolia

Mogens Trolle Larsen

Excerpt

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I

INTRODUCTION

IN THE YEAR 1880 BC, LET US SAY, AN OLD MAN WAS SITTING IN THE shade of an olive tree in the courtyard of his house in a city called Assur, busily composing a letter. He was writing on a small clay tablet, holding it in the palm of his hand and pressing a stylus into the moist and soft surface, making complex signs in a writing system we now call cuneiform – because the individual elements in the script look like wedges, *cunes* in Latin (see Figure 1). The man's name was Assur-idi, and he was writing to his son Assur-nada, who at the time was conducting his own affairs some 1,000 kilometres away, in central Anatolia in a town called Kanesh in present-day Turkey. Assur, where Assur-idi himself lived, was a relatively small city perched on a cliff overlooking the river Tigris in the north of modern Iraq.

His letter said

Thus speaks Assur-idi; say to Assur-nada:

After you came here, you broke your promises five or six times!

Even though the weapons of the god Assur and the goddess Assuritum have fallen on you, you still break your word.

You say: "Let them care about the one who sets the words of the gods above those of mankind!"

So far you have not budged. Your children have been chased into destitution. You bother me with your own sorrow, while I suffer out of pity for the children.

The gods Assur and Assuritum are giving you urgent warnings. They say to me: "He speaks wickedness in his heart, his thoughts are not kind towards you, his hand is turned away."

All those words which the gods spoke to you, words about our family – heaven forbid that you should have forgotten them!

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1. The obverse of Assur-idi's letter in the Louvre, 7.4 cm tall; published by Julius Lewy in cuneiform copy in 1936. © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN / Thierry Ollivier.

The gods said to me: "He has refused to obey our commands!"

It is vital that you obey the commands of the gods! If you don't, you are lost.

At first my anger was great, as you well know. But I said to myself: "He has delayed until now, but he must have heard the words of the gods. He cannot have made you angry."¹

When he had finished his letter, he let the clay tablet lie for a few hours to dry in the sun; he then wrapped it carefully in a thin, gauze-like piece of textile and placed it in an envelope of clay; finally he rolled his seal over the surface to prevent anyone from tampering with or reading the text of the letter. Early the next morning he went to the city gate, where a number of donkey caravans were getting ready to leave, and he handed the letter to one of the donkey drivers, asking him to see it safely delivered. The letter was then shipped from Assur across the Syrian steppe, up through the passes of the high Taurus Mountains, and after a few weeks on the road it was finally handed over to Assur-nada in his house in the town called Kanesh, where he made his living as a merchant.

It is not very likely that he would have been happy to receive this letter, but whether he simply felt irritation and annoyance, or maybe experienced a pang of remorse, we do not know. Undoubtedly he would have written an answer to send back to Assur, and it may still lie there in the unexcavated ruins of his father's house, waiting to be found by a lucky archaeologist, if it still exists.

THE TABLET WITH ASSUR-IDI'S LETTER WAS FOUND AROUND 1900 AD BY people who dug into the ruins of Assur-nada's house in Kanesh in central Anatolia; it was sold on the antiquities market and eventually ended up in the Louvre in Paris together with hundreds of other tablets from the same city in Anatolia.

The first time I held Assur-idi's letter in my hand, one of many I had to get through that week, picking it up and beginning to read it, I felt as if the millennia fell away and a mysterious direct contact with Assur-idi became real in the dusty office overlooking the Seine. This old man who had long conversations with the gods and who was so unhappy and disappointed by his son, whom he even accused of outright blasphemy, seemed to be more than just a shadow on a sun-drenched grey wall; he was almost within reach. I felt I knew him and understood him, the cantankerous, sour old man. I cannot say now, knowing so much about him after years of study, that I would have liked the man if I had met him; nor do I think his son loved him very much, and maybe he appreciated the long distance between them.

We know quite a lot about these men, for this was not the only bitter and reproachful letter the father wrote to Assur-nada, reminding him of promises to gods and men and vigorously, in fact slightly hysterically, complaining about the wayward son's unacceptable behaviour. The old man lived in a

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world of drama and fury. Another letter begins with the cry: “As if hit by the foot of the storm god Adad in full rush my house is devastated! But you, you are gone!”²

One of the complaints in the letter can be elucidated by other texts. The brief reference to Assur-nada’s children, who are supposedly neglected by their father and are the source of their grandfather’s pity, connects the text with another letter from the old man in which we hear more about these children. This text begins with a long passage about debts and investments, and then Assur-idi ends his letter as follows, almost as an afterthought:

I have raised your son, but he said to me: “You are not my father!”

He then got up and left.

Also your daughters I have raised, but they too said: “You are not our father!”

Three days later they got up and left in order to go to you, so let me know what you think.³

These cool words in fact hide a very serious situation, and Assur-nada in far-away Anatolia must have been extremely upset by this news. We can conclude that his children had been raised in Assur in the house of their grandfather, surely in order to get an education in the case of the son, and perhaps in the hope of good marriage prospects for the daughters. But apparently the old man, with his vehemence, had become too much for the children, who took a desperate decision to renounce him and try to find a way to go to their father in Anatolia.

We do not know how old the children were when they broke their ties to the grandfather, but they were clearly too young to stand on their own feet, and it is quite uncertain how they would have managed to scrape together the money to pay for the long trip to Anatolia. In fact, things seem to have gone badly wrong. We have a letter to Assur-nada sent from a friend of his in Assur, in which we read that the writer had been forced to take care of the children. Together with another man he had taken a loan at interest (200 percent per annum!) in order to feed the children, and not surprisingly they want the father to send an express messenger with money to pay back the loan and the accrued interest, plus some extra money so that his son and daughters will not starve.⁴ Clearly, the break with the grandfather was so absolute that there was no way he could be approached for help. It seems likely, though, that things must have calmed down. The son did move to Anatolia to work under his father, but that probably happened a few years later. We do not know what became of the girls.

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Of the forty-three letters we have preserved from Assur-idi, only a handful express the religious fervour we find in the one quoted here, but even when he writes about mundane matters concerned with the running of the family's business, his tone is mostly accusatory. "Why is it that ...?" is a common preamble in his letters, always in an irritated or reproachful tone. In other respects his business letters are characteristic of the vast majority of the nearly ten thousand letters found at ancient Kanesh in Anatolia, letters which revolve endlessly around the problems of money, debt and profit. However, few other letter writers come across as such forceful characters as Assur-idi, so he holds a special place for me because of the immediacy of his religious letters. How should we deal with them, what can they tell us beyond what they reveal about a perhaps somewhat strange individual living four thousand years ago?

When I was introduced to the Old Assyrian texts some fifty years ago in Ankara, where I studied with Professor Kemal Balkan, we looked at one of the angry letters from Assur-idi. Being a rank beginner I could read the signs, find some words in the dictionaries, but I simply could not understand the text, so I asked Kemal Balkan for an explanation. He studied the text carefully, and when he had read it once he looked up at me and smiled. Then he returned to his reading, and when he was done the second time, he put down the book, shook his head and said with a sad smile: "This letter was written by a madman – or it could have been a woman."

This was not as bad as it sounds, for Kemal Bey was referring to the fact that the relatively rare letters written by women are often extremely difficult to understand. It is deeply interesting to see that where men write about business and only rarely touch upon matters of family affairs or emotional problems, those topics are characteristic of women's letters. Not only are they often written in such agitation that the grammar suffers, they are full of words which belong to a very special sphere of life, one that is rarely attested in the entire cuneiform tradition, and they are therefore often very hard to understand. What Kemal Balkan saw was that Assur-idi was one of the very few men in the correspondence who sometimes composed emotional letters similar to those written by women.

TRANSLATING AND EXPLAINING SUCH TEXTS IS NOT A SIMPLE TASK. WHEN HE was presenting a selection of cuneiform letters from all periods in the ancient Near East, the great Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim began by asking the necessary question "Can these bones live?" It is in fact not self-evident, for it is no uncomplicated matter to establish familiarity with

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a language and culture of the past or to communicate this understanding to a modern reader.

A text like Assur-idi's letter can give us a sense of a simple, uncomplicated bond between us and the past when read in translation. My own experience with the Old Assyrian texts obviously informs the version in English, and it cannot be ruled out that other interpretations of details will seem possible, perhaps preferable, to another scholar. My rendering is as good as I can make it, and I am convinced that it offers a very reasonable portrait of a special moment in an old, long-dead man's life.

If we are to achieve any real insight into the minds of men and women of the past, we have to accept the possibility of locating them in a reconstructed social, physical and mental world that can be analysed and described. The great question is how we get from the holes in the ground and the lumps of clay to the society and the people of the distant past – a presumptuous journey, it would seem.

Working on Assyriological evidence is in some respects quite different from historical research in general, first of all because all of our evidence has been found as the result of archaeological excavations. Most historians work on texts, books and manuscripts which are found in archives and libraries, preserved and copied over centuries or even millennia, but Assyriologists have almost no evidence of that nature on which to build.⁵ This is, of course, a result of the sad fact that Mesopotamian civilisation can be said to be "dead" – as pointed out by Oppenheim. The lines of tradition linking our world to the ancient Near East are so tenuous as to be almost non-existent, and in certain respects – think of the Hebrew Bible – often directly misleading. The persistence of the sexagesimal system of counting, for instance, invented in ancient Mesopotamia and still alive in our world in fossilised form as the 360 degrees of the circle or the sixty seconds and minutes in our reckoning of time, does not provide us with a meaningful tool in our attempt to reconstruct the ancient world where these ideas originated.

Furthermore, the fact that our texts have been dug up in excavations has a number of consequences. On the immediately positive side, it means that as long as excavations are going on we can expect that our database will expand, that new archives will appear and eventually be published. We are accordingly not – as some scholars working in other areas of the ancient world are – faced with a closed textual archive, but can reckon with new discoveries being made continually, hopefully for many generations to come. On the other hand, the texts we find have not been filtered through a selection process, where works considered to have been of special value or interest were copied and recopied and kept in libraries, even after the civilisation

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of Mesopotamia had withered away. The most exciting and important compositions may never be discovered, and instead we find ourselves faced with a random sample of mostly everyday practical texts of no literary, historical or philosophical importance. Instead of treatises on great questions of life and death, we have texts which reflect and regulate the daily experience of life in the ancient world.

Accordingly, it is essential that the texts be understood as archaeological artefacts, because only then can they be placed in meaningful contexts and interact with the other elements of material culture. Together, texts and objects represent the reality that once existed. This intimate relationship has not always been fully exploited, since the documents have been dealt with by philologists in isolation from the study of the archaeological contexts in which they were found. We should attempt not just to establish the exact find spots of the texts – and even this has not been done in all excavations in the Near East – it is a matter of making texts and material culture throw light on each other. For instance, the information that can be gleaned from the texts can help us to better understand the spatial arrangement of a settlement (who lived where) and the social relationships (such as how two brothers lived next door to each other). An integrated analysis of the total content of a house – texts, household implements, graves – can be realised and will show how texts and material culture can illuminate each other and be united in a richer and more complex understanding.

It may be hoped that the combination of archaeological and textual evidence will eventually enable us to offer a minutely detailed description of the physical world in which these people lived, but we are far from attaining such a goal. Compare our situation with that of the British historian Simon Schama, who in a book on Rembrandt presents the city of Amsterdam around 1600 AD “in five senses”: smell, sound, taste, touch and sight. He can walk us through the streets, describe the smells from the harbour and the sounds of the bells from the many churches. Such a presentation can rely not only on the still existing city, but also on a wealth of information from texts and images. Precise renderings of the clothes worn in the street and at home, of furniture in the rooms where people lived and the interior of churches are available to us in the form of hundreds or even thousands of paintings. Nothing similar is at hand for the student of the Old Assyrian world. Although the modern scholar can visit the ancient sites of Assur and Kanesh, even walk along the old streets and alleys that were once busy, noisy and smelly, we are only at the beginning of an effort to reconstruct the physical reality of the past.

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The texts dug out of the ground at Kanesh (modern Kültepe) are generally practical documents which owe their existence to a concrete social act, a marriage contract, a debt note, a memo or a letter, and they can be made to yield information only on the basis of an analysis of their context. In this endeavour we are helped by the fact that the texts were part of the archives of families of merchants, and therefore reflect the many activities of a specific group of people. The same persons will appear time and time again in different situations – lending or borrowing, sending or receiving a letter and so on. There is a long tradition of studying such texts as contracts, debt notes and documents referring to family law as the basis for a taxonomic investigation, concentrating much interest on specific formulae and the like, and that is clearly part of the foundation on which further analysis must rest. Transactions and relationships were then as now typically formulated in very similar terms, which is, of course, the reason we can classify texts as contracts, judicial texts and other documents. However, in a situation where we have the archive of an individual or a family, we can go one step further and link the texts to individuals and their activities. That is the great opportunity offered by the archives from Kanesh – and the challenge.

To a certain extent the Old Assyrian archives can be compared to some of the commercial archives found from much later contexts, especially the archives from Renaissance Italy. However, we should not forget that these later periods are much better documented; not only do the cities still exist and the houses and palazzos still stand, we have a living heritage of a material world in which to locate the archives. And the facts that can be gathered from the public archives of a city like Florence or Venice provide a wealth of information that is not at all matched even by the 23,000 texts from Kanesh/Kültepe. In the archive of one Italian merchant, Francesco Datini, we have more than 120,000 letters, over 500 account books and ledgers, some 300 deeds of partnership, about 400 insurance policies and many thousands of other business documents – all discovered in sacks under the stairs of his still existing house in 1870, some 300 years after Datini's death.⁶ Compared with these riches the material from Kanesh may seem puny.

Our task and our results are therefore burdened by a degree of uncertainty and ignorance unknown to a historian of one of the great families of Renaissance Florence, to take an example. Where the overall understanding of this later society can rely on a multitude of evidence of all kinds, we have to establish a general model for an analysis of Old Assyrian society through a detailed reconstruction of the structures and procedures that are revealed in the practical documents from everyday life. We have no treatises on the

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proper conduct of trade and commerce, and even the most fundamental features of social and economic life have to be rebuilt and placed in a reconstituted context on the basis of our understanding of letters, contracts, debt notes and memos. In a way we are like casual passers-by overhearing snippets of conversation.

In this endeavour, philology, history and archaeology unite. The exact technical meaning of words, even the simplest ones such as “buy”, “sell”, “lend”, “debt”, “taxes”, “donkey saddle” and “profit” must be carefully examined. Fundamental concepts in Old Assyrian may not have any counterpart in modern English, and our own often vaguely grasped central socio-economic ideas and features cannot without infinite care be transferred to the evidence from the past.

In the millennia-long tradition of Mesopotamian civilization, the texts from Kültepe in many respects stand out as unique, a rich and dense record of a commercial society during a brief span of time. Similar bodies of evidence, showing a comparable depth and richness, do not exist, a fact that tempts scholars to regard Old Assyrian society as truly unique, truly different from traditional Near Eastern societies. The absence of similar material from other sites of the same period in the region could easily lead us to the conclusion that the Old Assyrians had created a new and different kind of socio-economic system. In other words, it is tempting to isolate the evidence from Kültepe from its contemporary world, simply because we know so little about it, but it would be foolish to assume that because we do not have such evidence, it did not ever exist. It is essential that we accept the utterly fortuitous nature of the material we have and that we avoid the delicious trap of believing that the texts and the archaeology must offer us a coherent, typical and representative picture of the past. It is accordingly difficult to determine the degree of uniqueness of the Old Assyrian material on the basis of ancient evidence from the region. It may have been completely typical, or it could have exhibited features that set it apart. Comparative analyses are therefore difficult to establish, and it demands great care and caution to engage in such investigations that transcend the historical and geographical borders and attempt to introduce evidence from much later societies that engaged in similar commercial undertakings.

Another set of restrictions on our analyses are imposed by the fact that we do not have archives from the mother city Assur, where the old Assur-idi lived, which means that we have to reconstruct Old Assyrian society on the basis of the texts found in a commercial colony hundreds of kilometres away. An acute awareness of this giant hole in our evidence must necessarily inform our attempts to make sense of the material that we do have. We have

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to realise that many, perhaps most of our assessments and conclusions must of necessity be preliminary.

The special nature of the Old Assyrian evidence allows us to establish a very detailed analysis, but at the same time it is complicated, sometimes impossible, to determine how Old Assyrian society was linked to the wider world with which it interacted. And yet our evidence becomes understandable only when we locate it in a wider framework of contacts, caravans and commercial operations that reached much further than the world we can reconstruct strictly on the basis of the evidence from Kültepe.

THIS BOOK IS ADDRESSED TO BOTH SCHOLARS AND INTERESTED NON-SPECIALISTS, to Assyriologists like myself, ancient historians, archaeologists and anyone interested in these fields. It attempts to present in a straightforward manner and with a minimum of technical jargon an up-to-date synthesis of our knowledge and current understanding of an ancient society that has left us an enormous amount of textual evidence, albeit in the form of documents of a special kind. The texts give us a surprisingly detailed and dense understanding of the first attested commercial society in world history. A similar picture cannot be drawn for any other society in antiquity, and we have to wait for the appearance of the texts from the Jewish community in Fustat, Old Cairo, from the tenth to the thirteenth century AD, and of course the rich documentation from the cities of the Italian Renaissance, before we encounter a comparably extensive documentation concerning long-distance trade.

It is not easy for the uninitiated, or even trained Assyriologists, to get a secure grasp of the details of the scholarly work carried out in this small field, where only a dozen specialists in the world write books and articles that are in general fiercely technical and often virtually impenetrable to an outsider. This is a function of the youth of the discipline, where so much has to be established from the bottom up and where new interpretations and translations have to be underpinned by elaborately constructed arguments. It also means that a synthetic treatment like the present book necessarily will have to offer discussions of sometimes poorly analysed or understood elements and that new interpretations of several features will have to be included.

The Old Assyrian evidence is concerned almost exclusively with the conduct of long-distance trade, which is embedded in a very specific social, political and cultural reality. The titles of the chapters in this book will give an impression of the degree to which this world can be reconstructed. Several questions central to our understanding of ancient Mesopotamian society and its relationship to the surrounding world, including social, commercial,