

INTRODUCTION

This study deals with one of the most remarkable developments in the history of the Ancient Near East, which had significant impacts on the long-term development of Eurasia. This development consists of the rise of sustainable forms of empire and imperialism. The emergence of durable empires resulted in a total transformation of interregional power dynamics of the ancient world. These imperial infrastructures eventually gave rise to the global order of the modern world, in which the actions of a few powerful governments have repercussions across the globe. While it would be naive to argue for a direct evolution of imperial traditions from Assyria to the modern world, I will argue that imperial repertoires were transmitted and reworked from one empire to the next, and that imperialism in the modern world has its roots in the deep past.

Empires and imperialism have been the subject of a large amount of scholarship starting in the nineteenth century,¹ and both ancient and colonial empires have re-emerged as important subjects for academic investigation in recent decades.² These studies have predominantly been undertaken by (ancient) historians, however, with the exception of the southern Americas

¹ Dietler 2005.

² For example Maier 2006; Burbank and Cooper 2010; Bang and Bayly eds. 2011; Cline and Graham 2011; Collins and Manning eds. 2016; Lavan, Payne, and Weisweiler eds. 2016.

where archaeology provides the main data source.³ Although many excellent archaeological studies of empires have been executed,⁴ these were often presented as case studies for colleagues, and did not really address the nature of imperialism and how it is to be understood. The few volumes on the archaeology of imperialism likewise can be characterised as collections of case studies, and they did not really attempt to query the nature of imperialism and what archaeology can contribute,⁵ a situation which has begun to change only recently.⁶

So on the level of the broader discourse on the ontology of ancient empires, archaeologists have contributed relatively little in recent decades. Therefore, how ancient empires are traditionally understood and studied has been determined mainly by historical perspectives. A great deal of scholarship has focused on: first, how elites were co-opted by imperial systems; second, how the imperial propaganda functioned and how the king featured in it; and, third, how the court, imperial administration, and the palace functioned. In consequence, in many historical studies it appears as if empires are constituted only or primarily by elites, who extracted tribute, managed the army, and created an imperial ideology. For example, Tilly defines empires as:

concatenating central military organizations, thin regional administrations, trading networks, and organizations of tribute in which local and regional rulers – often maintaining cultural identities distinct from that of the empire’s center – enjoyed great autonomy in return for collaboration in the collection of tribute and support in the empire’s military campaigns.⁷

Such a model, in which dominated societies are little affected by imperial ‘superstructure’, apart from meeting tribute and military demands, may be valid for relatively short-lived conquest empires held together by personal allegiances to the ruling dynasty, but cannot explain more long-lived empires which were rooted in a profound transformation of societies and landscapes that facilitated the consolidation and reproduction of imperial power. It is precisely in the investigation of these latter type of transformations that archaeology can provide an important contribution.⁸

Empires first developed in a relatively limited number of regions of the world, including the Near East, China, the Andes, and Meso-America, and subsequently spread to a large part of the globe.⁹ The earliest empires of the world took shape in the Near East, around 2300 BCE, and these had a decisive impact on the subsequent history of western Eurasia, with China taking on a similar role in the Far East.¹⁰

³ For example D’Altroy and Hastorf 2001; Malpas and Alconini eds. 2010.

⁴ For example Parker 2001; Smith 2003; Alconini 2008; Glatz 2009.

⁵ Alcock et al. eds. 2001; Areshian ed. 2013. ⁶ Düring and Stek eds. 2018.

⁷ Tilly 1994: 7. ⁸ Düring and Stek 2018.

⁹ Taagepera 1978a; Chase-Dunn, Alvarez, and Pasciuti 2005. ¹⁰ Morris 2011.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Near East constitutes one of the few primary cradles of empires that occur globally and that its empires are among the oldest documented, political unification came relatively late in this region. As has been argued by various scholars,¹¹ the default pattern of political organisation in Mesopotamia was that of political fragmentation: that is the region was divided by a series of regional states competing for power and with relatively weakly developed states.¹² After the emergence of complex urbanised state societies in the fourth millennium BC, it is only in the Late Bronze Age (1600–1200 BCE), with the rise of the Middle Assyrian state, that efforts towards creating a durable empire were successful.

This is not to diminish the significance of earlier imperial states in Mesopotamia and the Near East, such as those of Akkad, Ur III, and the Hittites. However, many of these existed for no more than one and a half century, and some, such as those of Hammurabi and Samsi-Adad, are best understood as short-lived ‘conquest empires’, which barely outlived the death of their founder,¹³ and were highly dependent on the diplomatic, charismatic, organisational, and military qualities of specific rulers. By contrast, the Assyrian Empire proved much more durable, lasting for about 700 years. Further, it was the only one of the Late Bronze Age powers that withstood ‘the crisis years’ between 1200 and 1180 BC.¹⁴ In addition, the Assyrian Empire was the ancestor of the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Empires, whose imperial legacies were subsequently appropriated by the Alexander the Great, the Seleukids, the Parthians, and the Sasanians. So from a long-term perspective, one could argue that the modest-sized Middle Assyrian Empire marks a watershed in the history of the Ancient Near East, from a situation in which Mesopotamia was by default fragmented into regional states, to a situation where the region and its populations were transformed into enduring building blocks of empire.

This characterisation of the data can be challenged, and many scholars would argue that Assyria only became a truly imperial state in the Iron Age.¹⁵ Yet, as I will argue in this volume, ongoing research has increasingly demonstrated cultural and political continuity between the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, something also stressed by the Assyrians themselves, and this continuity is also clearly manifested in their techniques of imperial domination in both periods.¹⁶ In this study, the focus is squarely on the Middle Assyrian

¹¹ Marcus 1998; Matthews 2003. ¹² Richardson 2012.

¹³ Larsen 1979; Marcus 1998; van de Mieroop 2004; Barjamovic 2013; Eidem 2014.

¹⁴ Cline 2014; Knapp and Manning 2016, of course Egypt was another survivor, but it did not regain its former imperial status in the Iron Age.

¹⁵ Roaf 1990; M. Allen 2005; Bedford 2009; Cline and Graham 2011; Richardson 2016.

¹⁶ Liverani 1988; Postgate 1992; D’Agostino 2009; Fales 2012; D’Agostino 2015; Kühne 2015; Düring 2018.

period, however, and it will be argued that the foundation of Assyrian imperial power can be traced to this relatively understudied period.

Therefore, the central question of this study is: how can we explain the success of the (Middle) Assyrian Empire? This will be done along three lines of inquiry. First, what were the historical circumstances and conditions in which the Assyrian Empire took shape and was reproduced? Obviously, Assyria, like any other state in history, was determined to a significant extent by broader historical developments on the one hand, and key events, on the other, and we need to chart this historical context to understand the Assyrian Empire. Second, what set of cultural traditions were present in Assyria that help to explain its success as an imperial state? How did Assyria develop its imperial repertoires, that is the techniques and strategies used to achieve and maintain domination, and to what degree were these imperial repertoires particularly Assyrian, or vice versa, do we see borrowings of institution and technologies of imperial domination from predecessor empires, such as the Mittani, and contemporary empires, such as New Kingdom Egypt, the Hittites, and the Kassites. Third, to understand the Assyrian Empire we need to ask what was in it for the various categories of people who were part of it. In the end, even the most powerful imperial states can be undone through the actions of ordinary people, and imperial prowess depends on the balance of participation of the population at large. Thus, to understand the Assyrian imperial achievement, it is essential to map the various types of actors involved, and why people of diverse social backgrounds and social statuses would have opted into partaking into the Assyrian imperial project.

To explore these questions I will start by discussing the Mesopotamian context and its history of political fragmentation, and discuss why this region was difficult to unify in an empire for a substantial period of time (Chapter 1). Then I will introduce the early history of Assur, how it became the nucleus of the Assyrian empire, and will discuss an emergent distinctiveness that would become one of the building block of empire in later times (Chapter 2). Subsequently, I will discuss the historical and geographical circumstances that made the rise of Assyria possible (Chapter 3). Next, I will discuss the variegated impact of Assyria in conquered territories, and what the heterogeneous Assyrian archaeological footprint tells us about the nature of imperialism (Chapter 4). Following that, I will discuss the imperial repertoires, resources available to create and maintain the empire, and why diverse people opted into the Assyrian imperial project (Chapter 5). Lastly, I will discuss how Assyria became the predominant Near Eastern empire in the Iron Age, and how this unprecedented achievement was based on the Middle Assyrian legacy (Chapter 6); the final chapter (Conclusions) will summarise the main conclusions of this study.