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The Old Assyrian City-State and Its Colonies.

By MOGENS TROLLE LARSEN. Mesopotamia, Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology, vol. 4. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1976. Pp. 404. Dkr. 160.

The fragmentary, discrepant character of by far the greater part of the corpus of cuneiform texts has generally given encouragement to only two broad strategies of study. The first concentrates upon philological treatment of narratives or generic categories of record-keeping, seeking improved definition and more specific detail but eschewing "contextual" concern for broader patterns of meaning and relationship. The second focusses upon ideal-typical patterns that provide a unifying but probably overgeneralized view of structure and sequence of development, using evidence drawn from very disparate sources and periods. This volume is a distinguished example of a third approach, one that deserves to become steadily more common as the available material increases and is better understood. It seeks to describe in detail the institutions of governance in a particular city on a single temporal horizon, to suggest how and why these departed in at least some respects from what have often been assumed to be the prevailing patterns, and to augment internal analyses of structure and function from a wider comparative perspective.

In pursuit of this objective, Assur of the Old Assyrian period represented in many respects a choice of daunting difficulty. Apart from a handful of royal inscriptions, the relevant levels at Assur itself have not yielded texts. Its institutions, officials, and citizenry are therefore only to be identified as they "appear as shadows on the wall" in the massive archives of the Assyrian mer-

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chant colony at Kanesh. To be sure, most of the 1,500 or so published letters from Kanesh apparently were written in Assur. But the approximately 3,000 texts, including these letters, were available to the author, were almost all the products of early, illicit digging and so cannot be grouped by archival units. Still remaining unpublished after almost thirty years of more modern, controlled excavations, hence giving an "unpleasant provisionality" to all his conclusions, are more than three times as many tablets. Impressive as this bulk is, moreover, it documents a mere three generations in the late nineteenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries B.C. At least for the present, the sequelae of this brief floruit of intensive, long-distance trade remain almost as obscure as its origins. Any significant subdivisions that may exist within it likewise await eventual linkage of large numbers of known texts with successions of stratified loci from scientific excavations. Yet for all of these unavoidable uncertainties and lacunae, a unique and intelligible picture does emerge. We are fortunate that Larsen persevered in spite of A. Leo Oppenheim's reported admonition that such a book could not be written.

While conceding that the available material may give excessive emphasis to Assur's dominant preoccupation with foreign trade and to the role of a few families, the author provides a persuasive picture of a "society dominated by the free flow of private capital." The city assembly, in spite of ambiguities over its composition and mode of functioning, clearly had a major role in formulating broad foreign and especially commercial policies. Not only for Assur itself but for its colonies, Larsen regards it as the "highest authority" in Old Assyrian society. Reference to the Assur palace, on the other hand, is almost completely absent from the texts. The king, while

simultaneously presiding over the assembly and acting as steward to the city-god with presumed cultic functions, accordingly exercised little autonomous control over economic life and the widely extended foreign relations that were closely tied to it. Putatively independent royal acts such as the reforms of Erišum are seen as "likely to have been the result of debates which involved the city-assembly of Assur." An Old Assyrian "Reich" founded by Ilušuma is similarly disavowed, although the possibility that the entirely exclude the possibility that the latter conducted military campaigns east of the Tigris. What seems to emerge is a "delicate equilibrium" between king and assembly, with the independence of the former further counterbalanced by the office of the year-eponym, the "administrative centre of the city," that was rotated among the more important kinship groups. Granting the institutionally amorphous and unstable character of such an arrangement, it is more than a little surprising to find the author describing it in these terms and then characterizing it in summary as a "theocracy."

Somewhat impressionistically, Larsen assigns a place to Assur within a wider spectrum of Mesopotamian trading institutions. It was particularly different from the large scale, roughly contemporary procurement of copper from Makkan and other sources down and beyond the Gulf, for the latter was based only on short-term "venturing contracts" or "Gelegenheitsgeschäften" and generally did not take those who participated in it beyond a "corona of emporia on the fringe of the Mesopotamian area." Greater risks attendant upon overseas shipping than upon overland caravans were surely a factor in the case of the Gulf, as others have argued. Larsen maintains, however, that some responsibility for Assur's contrary pattern of direct, permanent penetration of the Anatolian markets by long-term, family-based "firms" or partnerships must also be assigned to the domination of Old Assyrian society by powerful families.

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Anatolian political checkerboard without even a military escort. Perhaps an explanation lies in Assur's monopolistic control of the supply of "tin" (of which more presently), for the high gross profit on this essential resource—"just about 100 percent, to be realized presumably within one year if the transaction went smoothly"—argues that it may not have been in any member of the Assur network's interest to disrupt the routes and routines of this carrying trade. But then we learn that the profit on the shipment of textiles (Larsen posits its volume as about 100,000 pieces over a fifty-year period) was double this level, even though coarser textiles were widely produced within Anatolia itself and were also circulated by the Assyrian traders to meet the demands of that internal market. Some element of control that assisted in the maintenance and articulation of the system thus seems to be still unaccounted for. A similar problem arises when we consider the apparent asymmetry of Assur's external relations. In Anatolia, on the one hand, there is every evidence of vigorous free enterprise within the framework of treaties negotiated with principalities there on the basis of mutual interdependence. Toward suppliers of "tin" and "Akkadian" textiles to the east and south, on the other hand, the relationship is one of inexplicable passivity. No name is ever given of a trader coming to Assur from these directions, nor is there ever a record of an Assur trader traveling even to neighboring Gasur on a purchasing commission. When supplies of wool, "tin," or textiles were cut off, apparently the only recourse for Assur and all of its trading dependencies was to await the action of some other unidentified agency in once again bringing these goods for sale. Nor can this pattern be satisfactorily accounted for by assuming some form of southern military or political overlordship, for that is inconsistent with what is known both of Assur's own dynastic history and of the kaleidoscopic political conditions in the south following the breakup of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Again, an essential piece of the puzzle still seems to be missing.

Whether tin reached Anatolia from Assur, Mari, Larsa, Susa, or the Persian Gulf, the general thrust of the textual evidence is for trade through or near Mesopotamia. North-western Iran usually . . . also figured large in such matters. Yet it is precisely these two areas which also exhibit minimal changes in their use of tin bronze from the EB to the MB. Table 9 shows that tin bronze comprised only about one-tenth of all EB copper-based metal in Mesopotamia, with no increase whatsoever for the MB period. These figures are surely somewhat incompatible with any serious MB tin trade via or around Mesopotamia. (E. R. Eaton and Hugh McKerrall, "Near Eastern Alloying and Some Textual Evidence for the Early Use of Arsenical Copper," *World Archaeology* 8 [1976]: 174 and 181).

As the morass of conflicting radiocarbon dates suggests, however, there is little to be gained by immediate and uncritical acceptance of even such seemingly unequivocal findings of the natural sciences as these. No account is taken in the dichotomized discussion by Eaton and McKerrall, for example, of the fact that alloys containing arsenic alone, with no tin, are rare. This suggests that not all of the variance can be regarded as a product of well-controlled, purposive smelting, alloying and casting processes, and underlines the need for a vastly improved understanding of those processes in all of their regional and temporal variability.

A second basis for scepticism about at least some features of their position, as it contrasts with Larsen's, concerns the differing proportions of tin and arsenic that Eaton and McKerrell have regarded as significant admixtures upon which to base their general conclusions. It obviously affects the relative importance of tin bronze and arsenical copper to set the minimal threshold of the former five times higher than the latter, so that one must ask whether this difference is reasonable. Pursuing that question, I have been informed (by Professor Cyril S. Smith, personal communication) that little quantitative information is yet available on the strength and working properties of alloys of copper with arsenic in proportions above one percent. They are, however, indubitably superior to copper itself and roughly comparable to alloys containing the same atomic fraction of tin. Thus it would appear that either tin or arsenic, or the two together in any ratio, could be regarded as useful additions to copper in amounts of about one percent or above by weight. Such alloys could result either from the selection of an ore containing appropriate proportions of both elements (although this is reportedly rare), from the intentional admixture of ores before smelting, or from the admixture of metals before casting. Rearranging data in Eaton and McKerrell's tables 2-5 into groups containing one percent or more of either tin or arsenic, one obtains the following:

	<i>Mesopotamia</i>	
	Sn	As
Early Bronze (3000-2200)	24	32
Middle Bronze (2200-1600)	21	21
<i>Central Anatolia</i>		
Early Bronze (3000-2200)	Sn	As
	31	31
Middle Bronze (2200-1600)	50	41
<i>N.W. Iran</i>		
Early Bronze (3000-2200)	Sn	As
	43	58
Middle Bronze (2200-1600)	42	29

(taken from tables 2-5, passim)

While assuredly leaving many unanswered questions, these data seem to support several observations. First, only in central Anatolia did the proportion of artifacts using a tin alloy increase materially by Old Assyrian times; it should not escape our notice that this was precisely the region to which the Assyrian merchants were purportedly trading the metal. Elsewhere, including the areas from or through which it was ostensibly shipped, its use remained the same or even slightly declined. The use of an arsenical alloy also increased in Anatolia at the same time, while elsewhere it declined substantially. Slightly less common than arsenic in Early Bronze times, by the Middle Bronze period tin had for this reason become somewhat more frequently used. Finally, even when intentional alloys are identified on the basis of the presence of as little as one percent of tin or arsenic, it is noteworthy that less than half of the Middle Bronze copper-based artifacts that were examined meet this standard.

What are we to make of this? It hardly supports Larsen's identification of *annaku* as tin alone, but neither does it lend material support to the contrary proposition that *annaku* is to be identified solely as arsenical copper. Perhaps the most reasonable interpretation is that the alloying material of Old Assyrian times was itself a poorly controlled mixture that might contain varying proportions of tin and/or arsenic. That it was in any case quite impure is suggested by the fact that only ten percent or less of the tested specimens from each of the areas had more than ten percent of tin (arsenic percentages were generally much smaller) although the textual recipes call for a uniform alloying admixture of something on the order of fifteen percent. One net effect is to suggest a long, irregular transition from preponderant use of arsenic to preponderant use of tin, perhaps dependent upon the gradual introduction of improvements in refining techniques. Another, more pertinent here, is further to underline what Larsen properly speaks of as "the fragility of our statistical evidence." What remains reason-

ably certain is that some eighty tons of alloying metal were shipped into Anatolia during a single half-century period and that this substance probably included some tin. But why was the demand for tin, or at any rate the use of it, apparently greater in Anatolia than on the part of those like the Assyrians who brought it thither?

Still another possibility that perhaps should be considered is that artifacts normally subjected to metallurgical testing do not fully represent the metal implements in daily use. Grave goods, for example, often may have been made up especially for that purpose, permitting the omission of expensive tin as an alloying material since strength was not an important consideration. Utilitarian objects, on the other hand, could have been melted down and reworked repeatedly. What appears to be necessary to control for this possibility are improved standards of documentation of materials that are analyzed, so that at least a provisional separation can be made between utilitarian and nonutilitarian categories. If a case can be developed for the significance of such a separation, incidentally, it implies that substantially greater quantities of metal were in daily employment in Old Assyrian times than even the considerable bulk of newly smelted ingots to which the existing archives devote their attention.

While we can acknowledge with Larsen the "coherence" of the present evidence, in other words, this should not lead us to overlook many remaining uncertainties as to relationships at the root of the wider international trade of the Old Assyrian period. Although copper was traded in bulk within Anatolia (the largest known shipment was of fifteen tons), for example, nothing is said in the Kanesh archives of its shipment back to Assur. Caravans to Assur from known ancient copper mines like Ergani in southeastern Anatolia would have had no occasion to pass through Kanesh and so be recorded there, and Larsen also notes that Assur could have depended on supplies traded from the south. The latter seems the more likely since prices for copper were prevailing lower in

Babylonia than in the north, surely reflecting the lesser costs (in spite of greater losses) of long distance movement by ship. But if southern copper came to Assur along with the "Akkadian" textiles, were both paid for in the silver received from Anatolia or in "tin"? And what became of the "Akkadian" textiles anyhow, since Larsen is of the opinion that these never constituted more than a few percent of the textiles produced or assembled in Assur for export to Anatolia? (In subsequent correspondence, Larsen has indicated that he now thinks it possible that a much larger part of the export ultimately came from the south.)

It may seem premature if not unrealistic to ask questions like these, for which neither the available Assyriological nor archaeological sources yet provide a ready answer. But the author's work both exemplifies and encourages a "contextual" approach expressly seeking patterns of significance or meaning well in advance of the known, incontrovertible facts. To at least my satisfaction, he admirably demonstrates the case for leaving the seemingly safe refuge of literal but unintelligible translations and seeks instead to deepen our understanding of material that will always be opaque and fragmentary, by continually re-examining it from new, more general, and comparative perspectives.

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The Instructions of Suruppak: A Sumerian Proverb Collection. By BENDT ALSTER. Mesopotamia, Studies in Assyriology, vol. 2. *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs.* By BENDT ALSTER. Mesopotamia, Studies in Assyriology, vol. 3. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1974 and 1975. Vol. 2, pp. 167. Dkr. 80. Vol. 3, pp. 157. Dkr. 75.

Bendt Alster has burst onto the Sumerological firmament like a nova. Inaugurating a series of identifications of Sumerian literary fragments in 1970 (*RA* 64:190; continued