



ZIYARET TEPE

Digging the frontier of the Assyrian Empire

In the early 1st millennium BC, the Assyrians gathered force from their Mesopotamian heartland and began on a massive expansionist campaign. On the northern frontier of their realm, their colonial city of Tushan at the site of Ziyaret Tepe is providing crucial insights on their empire. **John MacGinnis** and **Timothy Matney** explain.

From their heartland in Upper Mesopotamia, an area akin to the northern part of modern Iraq, the Assyrians had built up a rich and relatively powerful empire. However, they wanted more; so, in the 9th century BC, they set forth on a mission of unprecedented expansion – to the north, south, east and west. Their might reached dizzying heights, as they created an empire on a scale hitherto unimaginable.

But how did the Assyrians manage to expand

and take so many new areas? Did they simply come “down like the wolf on the fold... gleaming in purple and gold” as Lord Byron famously wrote? Or were other, more complex, processes at work? What do the contemporary texts say? And what does the archaeology reveal about the nature of their domination? For the past 12 years, we have been examining a site at the very northern edge of the Empire: Ziyaret Tepe, in the Upper Tigris region of southeast Turkey. The results are illuminating, as we reveal in the following pages.



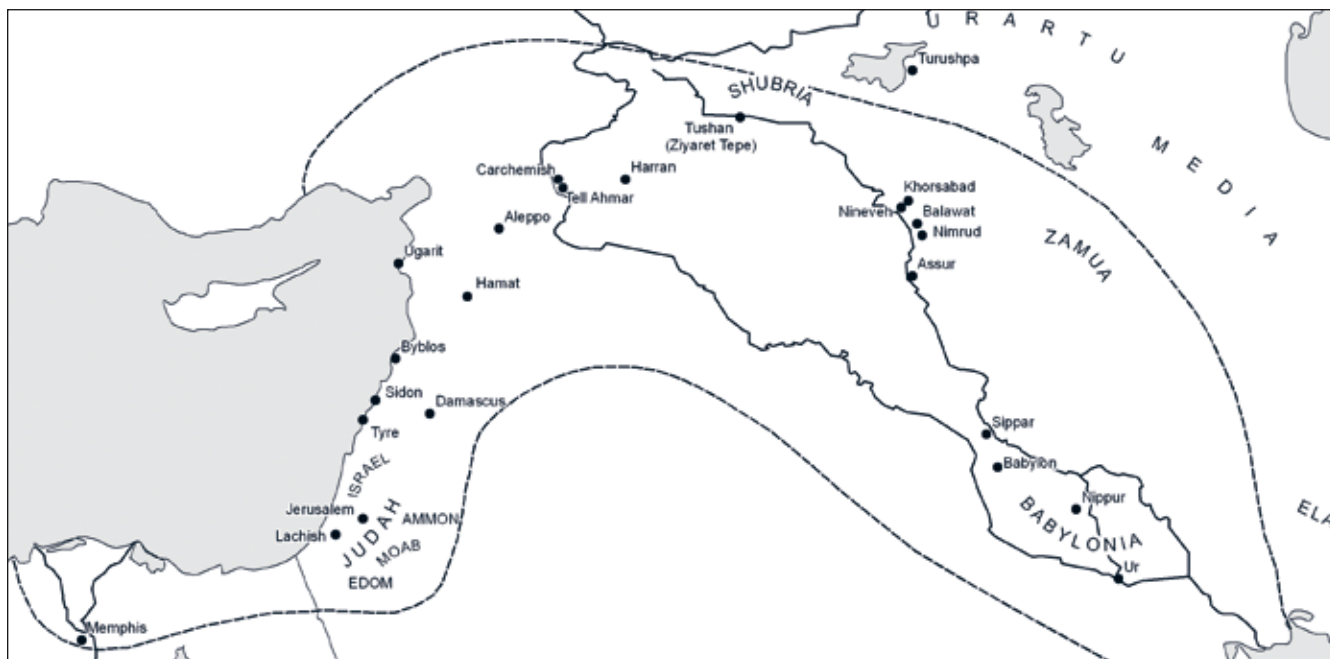
LEFT Excavations in progress at Ziyaret Tepe: work in the lower town (Operation G), with the high mound in the background.

Challenges and conquest

When, in the 9th century BC, Assyria set itself once more on a programme of outward expansion (see Box on p.32), it ran up against new challenges in every direction that, in every direction, were different. The widely varying topography of the regions surrounding the Assyrian heartland had dictated distinct patterns of state formation which, combined with the equally diverse patterns of indigenous peoples and languages, led to alignments of polities and cultures unique to each area.

The west, characterised by the open expanse of upper Mesopotamia merging into the piedmont of the Levant, was divided up into a network of Aramean states together with Israel and Judah. To the south lay the vast alluvial plain of Babylonia with the marshes in the furthest extremes. This countryside was difficult. The plain was crisscrossed by canals, the dategroves were

BELOW The Assyrian Empire at its maximum extent.



TIMELINE

c.20th-15th centuries BC	Old Assyrian Period	Assyrian capital, Assur, controlled much of Upper Mesopotamia (northern Iraq)
c.15th-10th centuries BC	Middle Assyrian Period	Growth and then contraction of Assyrian Empire
911-612 BC	Neo Assyrian Period (AKA the Early Iron Age)	Great period of expansion
612 BC	Termination of Neo Assyrian Period	Assyrians succumb to Persians and Babylonians

THE RISE AND FALL OF ASSYRIA

Assyria was a political state centered on the middle stretch of the river Tigris of Mesopotamia (the northern part of modern Iraq). It was named after its original capital, the ancient city of Assur, whose roots go deep in prehistory. Assur was a worthy first capital: benefitting from its strategic position overlooking the Tigris, it could control communication with both the nomads of the Mesopotamian steppes and the rich agricultural land to the north. Assur also served as a nodal point in the trade of tin and bronze with entrepôts in southeastern Anatolia (modern Turkey).

Nevertheless, the origins of the Assyrian state are obscure. Glimpses from cuneiform sources indicate that in the latter part of the 3rd millennium the area fell under the control of the neighbouring Akkadian and then Ur III empires. Assur gained independence following the collapse of the Ur III dynasty. The ensuing period was characterised by the famous trading colonies in Anatolia but we know little of the political history.

This changed dramatically when, in the late 19th century BC, Assur was incorporated into the northern Mesopotamian empire created by the Amorite leader Shamshi-Adad. Assyria then continued as an independent state until it was annexed by Saustatar, the king of Mittanni (a major international power centered around what is now northeastern Syria) some time in the mid 15th century BC. But Assyria only really began to find its role after it threw off Mittanni domination sometime shortly after 1400 BC. This paved the way for the empire of the Middle Assyrian Period (c.14th to 11th centuries BC).

Clay tablets found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt contain diplomatic missives between the Assyrian king and the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten, indicating that Assyria was now part of an

international community. However, the Assyrian empire had far to go and by the end of this period also suffered a number of losses.

Come the so-called Neo-Assyrian period (911 – 612 BC), Assyria gathered pace and mounted a mighty resurgence. A succession of strong Assyrian kings campaigned in Turkey, Iran, southern Iraq (ancient Babylonia) and the Levant (the area of Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Syria). First they filled their coffers by collecting booty and tribute, then they organised their conquests into a network of provinces that stretched across the Near East. Each province was under the control of a governor whose duties included



collection of taxes and conscription of the local population.

Assyria was a deeply complex civilisation. Even its capital city changed three times: Assur was followed by Nimrud, Khorsabad and, finally, Nineveh. Assyria was also highly sophisticated, with each capital characterised by monumental palaces, temples and nobles' mansions, all decorated with sculptures, paintings and textiles. A great deal of our knowledge about Assyria comes thanks to its copious written records. The Assyrian language was written in Mesopotamian cuneiform (meaning 'wedge-shaped') script, using hundreds of characters. The Assyrians mostly wrote on clay tablets, although waxed writing boards were also used for temporary records that needed continual updating, such as lists of soldiers and registers of income and expenditure. From at least the 9th century BC, Aramaic (the language of Jesus) began to be used. It was written in an alphabetic script on parchment, pot sherds, and as epigraphs on clay tablets.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire reached its zenith under Ashurbanipal (c.668 – 627 BC). During that time, it controlled all of the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia, the Levant, and parts of [modern] Turkey), as well as Egypt. Ultimately, the empire's light burned too bright and, like all the great empires, it fell. In 612 BC, the greatest empire that the world had ever known succumbed to a sustained assault from a coalition consisting of forces from Babylonia, Media and the Caucasus.

ABOVE Ivory plaque from Nimrud.

LEFT Human headed winged bulls guarded many monumental buildings.

BELOW Cylinder seal showing worshippers and protective deities around a stylised sacred tree. The figure in the winged disc probably represents the state god Ashur.





LEFT Detail from the bronze gates of Shalmaneser III from Balawat (northeast of Nimrud). In the centre of the lower register a sculptor is shown carving the relief of the king at the 'Tigris Tunnel', which the Assyrians took to be the source of the river Tigris.

impossible for an army to operate in, and the marshes proved an almost inexhaustible refuge for rebels. In the east rose the Zagros mountains and an intricate patchwork of isolated valleys, host to a mosaic of local chieftains and petty kings; Elam was at the southern end, while to the north lay Urartu and Shubria, with the further Anatolian states beyond.

Until recently our knowledge of the Assyrians in the north came almost entirely from cuneiform sources. These texts indicate that a presence had been established at Tushan in the Middle Assyrian period by Shalmaneser I (1274-1245 BC) but also that this did not last. For our purposes, the story really begins with forays by Tukulti-Ninurta II (891-883 BC).

This king campaigned in the area and successfully extracted tribute from Amme-ba'li, the local king of the Anatolian state of Bit Zamani (near the still-living Turkish city of Diyarbakir). This renewed Assyrian involvement in the north, but it was left to the son of Tukulti-Ninurta II, Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC), to establish the Assyrian presence on firm foundations. Ashurnasirpal campaigned here in his second and fifth years (882 and 879 BC), and a revolt of Amme-ba'li was brutally suppressed. This paved the way for Ashurnasirpal to implement a truly imperial agenda. In his own triumphant words:

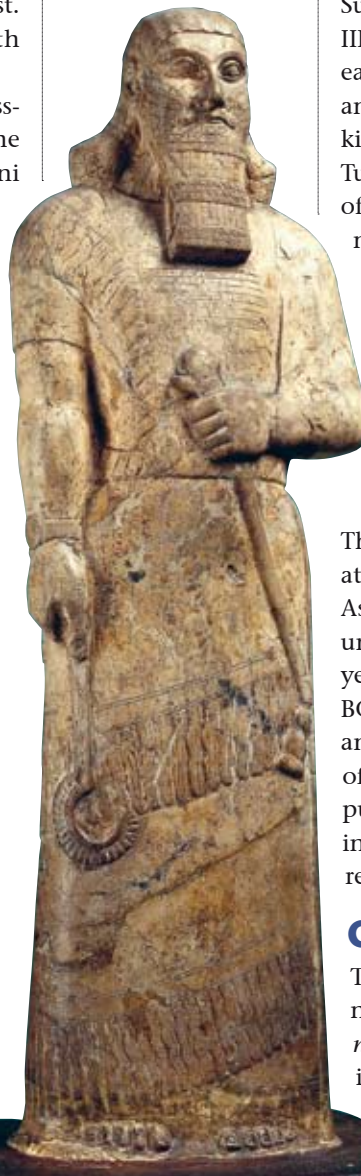
I repossessed the fortified cities of Tidu and Sinabu which Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, a prince who preceded me, had garrisoned on the border of the Nairi lands [evidently the area east of the Turkish city of Diyarbakir in southeast Turkey] and which the Arameans had captured by force. I resettled in their abandoned houses and cities the Assyrians who had held the fortresses of Assyria in the lands of Nairi and whom the Arameans had subdued. I placed them in a peaceful abode. I uprooted 1,500 troops of the ahlamû Arameans belonging to Amme-ba'li, a man of Bit Zamani, and brought them to Assyria. I

RIGHT Shalmaneser's actual relief at the Tigris Tunnel.



reaped the harvest of the Nairi lands and stored it for the sustenance of my land in the cities Tusha, Damdammusa, Sinabu and Tidu [all east of Diyarbakir].

BELOW Ashurnasirpal, founder of the city of Tushan (Ziyaret Tepe). This statue was found in the temple of Ishtar in Nimrud.




Subsequently Ashurnasirpal's son Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) campaigned in Syria and south-eastern Turkey, strengthening Assyrian control and also extracting tribute from Shubria, the kingdom across the Tigris directly north of Tushan. Shalmaneser also continued a tradition of venerating the Tigris at a dramatic location north of modern Lice where the river surges out of a vast tunnel which the Assyrians took to be the source of the river:

In my fifteenth year I marched to the land of Nairi. At the head of the Tigris, where its water comes out in a mountain cliff, I created an image of my royalty.

Thus, from the time of Shalmaneser III the Tigris at Tushan formed the northern border of the Assyrian empire, a situation which continued until 673 BC, a period of over 200 years. In that year the Assyrian King Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) invaded across the Tigris, annexing Shubria and dividing it into the two new provinces of Uppumu and Kullimeri. With the border pushed further north, Tushan became an internal part of the empire and appears to have remained stable until the end.

On the edge of Empire

Turning to the archaeological picture, this northern area was, until recently, *terra incognita*. In the 1860s, J E Taylor, the British consul in Diyarbakir, discovered two Assyrian *stelae* 



ABOVE Neo-Assyrian palace ware from Ziyaret Tepe.

RIGHT Indigenous handmade Iron Age pottery.



at the site of Kurkh (now Uçtepe), and sent these back to the British Museum. However, as archaeological artefacts they remained in isolation. Little attention was paid to this corner of the empire, and such research as there was focused principally on attempts to match data in the cuneiform texts with sites on the ground.

Specific to our interests was the observation that three major sites east of Diyarbakir – Pornak, Uçtepe and Ziyaret Tepe – must correspond to the three fortified towns of Sinabu, Tidu and Tushan known from the cuneiform sources. Moreover, post-World War II excavations conducted at Uçtepe (30km west of Ziyaret Tepe) clarified beyond doubt the importance of that site in the Neo-Assyrian period. Overall, however, knowledge of the archaeology of the region remained restricted.

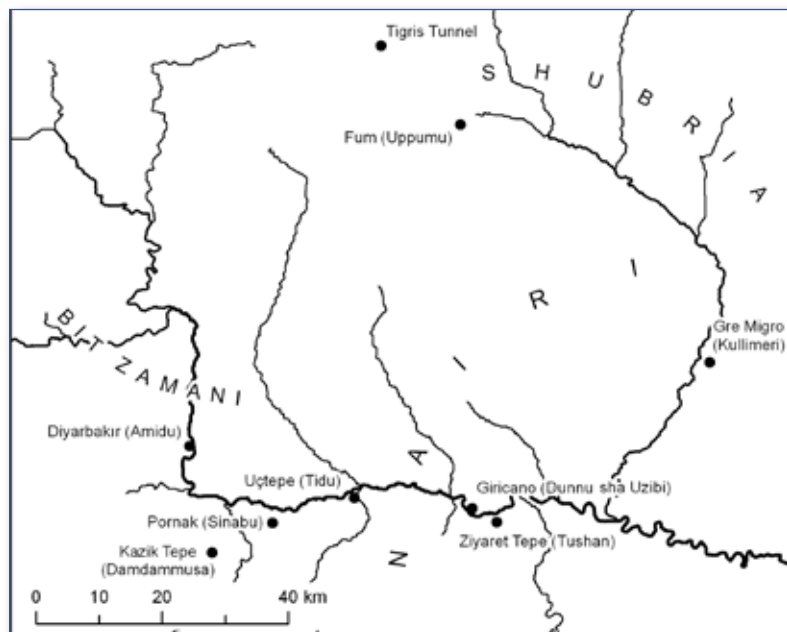
This picture really began to change in the 1990s when the Turkish government announced plans to build a hydroelectric dam on the Tigris at Ilisu, some 50km north of the border with Syria. Archaeologists were invited to explore the

area, with survey starting in 1988. Sites covering every period from the Palaeolithic onwards have been investigated. For present purposes, however, it is the Iron Age that concerns us.

Nearly 40 sites from this period have been identified along the Tigris valley in this area. In the evaluation of this survey data a matter of key importance is distinguishing Assyrian settlements from indigenous sites. But how? The pottery – that great ethnic indicator of past populations – helps. And in this region, there are ceramics diagnostic to Assyrians and to the local population. On this basis, we can distinguish sites that are Assyrian, indigenous sites with some evidence of an Assyrian influence, and sites that appear to be wholly indigenous with no signs of Assyrian contact.

The distribution of these sites is quite distinctive. Prior to the advent of the Assyrians, settlement in the area consisted of small villages without evident settlement hierarchy. Subsequent to their arrival, indigenous sites were confined to the foothills, while all the main Assyrian sites are located in the floodplain in excellent agricultural land. The survey data firmly suggests that the frontier between the Assyrian Empire and the indigenous cultures of the upper Tigris straddled the Tigris-Batman confluence, although to some degree Assyrian ceramics percolated up the valleys of the rivers tributary to the Tigris.

BELOW Map of the Upper Tigris region in the Neo-Assyrian period.



A colony explored

Among the sites that can be attributed to the Assyrian occupation there is one that stands out in terms of both the size of the mound and the extent of the lower town. This is the site of Ziyaret Tepe ('Pilgrimage Mound') located near the modern village of Tepe, some 60km east of Diyarbakir. Ziyaret Tepe was a natural choice for investigation. In 1997, Dr Timothy Matney of the University of Akron, Ohio, initiated fieldwork at Ziyaret Tepe and this has continued

every year since (see end acknowledgements).

Ziyaret Tepe is an impressive site. It consists of a central mound some 30m high and a surrounding lower town of approximately 30ha. The central mound is of some antiquity – to date there is evidence for occupation going back to the early 3rd millennium but there may be earlier levels yet. The lower town is exclusively Assyrian. This site morphology, a central mound with a surrounding lower town, is an established type for Assyrian provincial cities.

At Ziyaret Tepe we believe we have the remains of ancient Tushan. In addition to the sheer size of the site, there are arguments arising from the occurrence of the governor in one of the texts excavated at Ziyaret Tepe, the mention of Tushan in a text excavated at the nearby site of Giricano, and from orthographic stylistics occurring both in texts found at Ziyaret Tepe and in letters from Tushan found at Nineveh. Accepting this identification allows us to make a direct comparison between the evidence of archaeology and the evidence from cuneiform texts. When Ashurnasirpal decided to set about refounding the city of Tushan, he recorded what this entailed in some detail:

Moving on from the land Nirbu I approached the city of Tushan. I took Tushan in hand for renovation. I cleared away its old wall, delineated its area, reached its foundation pit and built, completed and decorated in splendid fashion a new wall from top to bottom. A palace for my royal residence I founded inside. I made doors and hung them in its doorways. The palace I built and completed from top to bottom. I made an image of myself of white limestone and wrote thereon praise of the extraordinary power and heroic deeds which had been accomplished in the lands of Nairi. I erected it in the city of Tushan. I inscribed my monumental inscription and deposited it in its wall. I brought back the enfeebled Assyrians who because of hunger and famine had gone up into the mountains to the land of Shubria. I settled them in the city Tushan. I took over this city for myself and stored therein barley and straw from the land of Nirbu.

The programme outlined here of the construction of a walled city with palace and *stela* was

part of the model formula for the planting of settlements in newly acquired territories. Compare, for example, a letter from Liphur-Bel, governor of Amidi:

The king my lord knows that [...] years ago I built a town on the king's fields. Under the aegis of the king my lord I have bought and added to it 400 hectares of field from the subjects of Ashipâ. I have erected a fort there. The perimeter of the town is [...] cubits. I have built a royal palace and drawn the king's likeness. I have placed 200 stone slabs there and settled the king's subjects there.

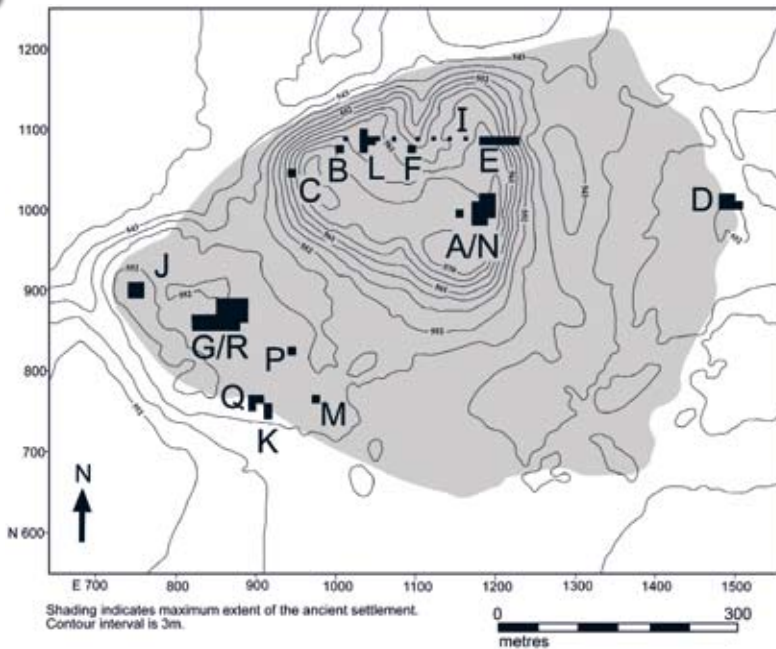
The importation of settlers who were given grants of land in the surrounding area was also an important part of the formula – more on this below. And another element was the introduction of Assyrian gods.

Life at Ziyaret Tepe

How does this programme, gleaned from the texts, match what we find on the ground at Ziyaret Tepe? Firstly, the site is indeed

BELOW The 'Kurkh Monolith', a *stela* of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II found by the British Consul J.E. Taylor at the site of Kurkh (now Uçtepe) in 1861.





ABOVE Location of excavation areas at Ziyaret Tepe.

surrounded by a city wall. This was revealed clearly by both magnetometry and resistivity and is also visible as a low rise visible in certain parts of the site. The erstwhile wall measures 3m across at the base (thus suggesting quite a substantial fortification, but we have no direct data on how tall it would have been) and was protected by a moat. There were at least three gates. The palace mentioned by Ashurnasirpal certainly corresponds to the remains of the monumental building on the high mound. From texts excavated at Ziyaret Tepe we know the site was also home to a temple of Ishtar – the goddess of love and war worshipped by the Assyrians, among others.

Our understanding of the layout of the lower town is still in its early stages. According to the great Cambridge archaeologist David Oates, the outer towns of the major Assyrian cities

BELOW Unbaked clay tokens from Building 2, a clear indicator of its administrative function.



were occupied by the mansions of the nobility. Oates based this chiefly on Nimrud, but the same appears to hold for Nineveh, at least to the degree that it has been explored. We are not yet in a position to say to what extent this may have been true at Ziyaret Tepe. If you look at the plan, Building 1 in Area G, with its monumental walls and mosaic courtyard, does indeed appear to have been a high-status residence but our knowledge of the rest of the lower town is not yet sufficiently extensive to be sure. Oates then remarks “no representative quarter containing smaller private houses, with a higher population density, has ever been excavated, though they must obviously have existed”.

In fact, at Ziyaret Tepe we do have some evidence for private housing in the form of some small architecture built up against the city wall (Operation K) and a city gate (Operation Q). Nevertheless, documenting and exploring domestic architecture in the lower town through remote sensing and targeted excavation remains a major aim for future fieldwork. Resistivity has indeed already shown that there is a complex of buildings arranged around the main south gate. It seems most likely that these were barracks or storehouses. Excavation in this area is also an aim for future fieldwork. In addition to this there must also have been stables and an arsenal.

So, who would have controlled the town on behalf of the Assyrian king? The senior official resident at Tushan was the provincial governor. His primary responsibilities were taxes and the army. These were matters pivotal to the operation of the city, and indeed of the empire as a whole. When a new settlement was created, the surrounding land was allocated to imported population who thereby generated the agricultural basis of the settlement while at the same time forming a military reserve.

Wives, vegetables, and archers

In order for the governor to perform his duties effectively he must have had access to updated records of land holdings. An insight into this is given by the collection of tablets known as the Harran Census. This was first published a century ago by one of the pioneers of Assyriology, C W H Johns, who went on to become Master of St Catherine’s College, Cambridge.



The census has since been dated to the reign of the Assyrian King Sargon II or Sennacherib (late 8th or early 7th century BC) and comprised six to eight eight-columned tablets in two series. Johns dubbed the series “An Assyrian Domsday Book” and the title is apt – it is, indeed, a list of farmsteads and estates with their associated chattels. Typical entries read:

Rahimâ, goatherd; Nashuh-sama’ni his son, adolescent; 1 woman, 1 three-year old daughter: a total of 4 people

2 houses, 50 hectares of arable land, of which 10 hectares are under cultivation; 1 ox, 1 threshing floor, 1 cistern: Nashuh-qatari son of Nadi-[...]-Issar

Overall the census records details of family (man, wife, children, sometimes mother), landholdings (arable land, vineyards, orchards, vegetable gardens, poplar and willow groves), animals (sheep, goats, cattle, oxen, donkeys, horses, camels) and structures (house, threshing floors, cisterns, wells). The professions of the key individuals are often given, most commonly farmers, gardeners and shepherds, though a scattering of other professions also occur. The average size of a family is four. Although the Johns census relates to the province of Harran, we would have to predict that similar lists were generated by the administration in Tushan and, indeed, in many parts of the empire. It is therefore of no little interest that the excavations at Ziyaret Tepe have produced a number of fragments of a census of just this nature.

Closely associated with the instruments of land tenure were the registers of individuals liable for military call-up kept on wooden writing boards. The entire population was subordinated to the military structure. We do

ABOVE The Harran Census, a Neo-Assyrian ‘Domsday Book’.

not so far have exemplars of these registers from Ziyaret Tepe and we cannot give a precise figure for either the number of standing troops stationed in the city or for the levies that could be called up from the population of the surrounding countryside. However, we can form a rough idea of the scale involved by comparison with a letter reporting back to the king on a review of the troops of the province of Zamua (in the eastern part of the empire). That text produced the following breakdown:

chariot wing: 106 men (supporting 10 chariots)

cavalry wing: 343 men (supporting 161 horsemen)

Qurrean auxiliaries (spearmen): 360


Itu’ean auxiliaries (archers): 440

Assyrian infantry: 80

ancillaries: 101

The ancillaries included grooms, donkey drivers, tailors, cupbearers, bakers, cooks, confectioners, scribes, dispatch riders and an intelligence officer. The full muster comes to 1,430. In the absence of other data, we have to guess that the forces at Tushan were constituted on a similar scale.

A new found land

It is certain that Tushan was built and settled by deportees. The use of deported populations was indeed central to the operation of the empire. As put by David Oates, “mass deportation was initially an ingenious and, for the time, successful solution of two problems, the maintenance of 

BELOW The Assyrian army on campaign. Relief from Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh.





ABOVE Relief from the time of Tiglath-Pileser III showing the population of a city being deported.

control over territories large than Assyria itself, and the provision, for the construction of the great cities, of labour forces greater than Assyria alone could furnish”.

We have no information on the origin of the first deportees transported to Tushan by either Ashurnasirpal or Shalmaneser, but we do know that the prominent king of Assyria, Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC), deported 83,000 people from Hamath (on the Orontes in western Syria north of Damascus) and its environs and settled them in the province.

Epigrapher Simo Parpola has suggested that one of the names in the texts excavated at Ziyaret Tepe may also have belonged to the descendant of a Babylonian deportee. Others will have come from Assyria itself. An important issue is the nature of relations between the transported settlers and the indigenous population. The latter may have comprised both Shubrians (who may have spoken Hurrian, a language whose only other known relative is Urartian) and Arameans (whose language was in the process of becoming the *lingua franca* of the ancient near east); and possibly other elements about which we know nothing at all, all with their own religion, language and cultural traditions. One small indication of cultural exchange and perhaps religious syncretism is the presence of a Shubrian holy man (specifically an interpreter of bird omens) at the site.

We are somewhat better informed about how the settlers were distributed. In general, an area was first secured with the construction of forts, preparing the way for the establishment of small agrarian communities. In the case of Tushan, this picture is illustrated both by survey data and by data in the texts from the site itself in which there is evidence for farmsteads identified by name.

Though we are able to distinguish Assyrian ceramics from local pottery, we have still not yet recovered (or reconstructed) a solid 1st millennium ceramic sequence. This is one of our long-term ambitions: such a sequence would help us to identify and interpret social changes over time. For

example, we could then study the development of settlement patterns; currently we are unable to do this even on a century by century basis, let alone anything shorter-term.

The march of Empire

So where does all this leave us? Analysis of the archaeological and textual data from Ziyaret Tepe provides a case-study insight into the construction and operation of the expansionist Assyrian Empire. The process began with the early 9th century BC exploratory campaigns (of King Tukulti-Ninurta II) followed by the mid 9th century founding of cities (under Ashurnasirpal II). Once a province was securely under Assyrian government, the process of infilling at the local level could begin. At this stage, settlements were frequently sited on former territorial boundaries or on marginal land.

Although the Assyrian expansion can be regarded simply as rampant imperialism, it had a structure and a certain logic. A fully functioning province channelled back resources in terms of materials, animals and manpower. The precise nature of what was fed back to the Assyrian heartland varied geographically. From our area in the northern provinces we know that metal, wood and horses were particularly sought after – indeed, the acquisition of raw materials may have been one of the motivating factors behind the Assyrian effort to control Syria and Anatolia (essentially modern Turkey).

This is not surprising. Assyria was caught in the classic spiral of imperial expansion whereby the empire could only be maintained by continuous growth. Consciously or not, Assyria was coming face to face with the reality that the continued existence of the empire required a flow of materials which could not be sustained.

There were also wider political situations. Having taken the province of Tushan it must have seemed that Assyria had reached its natural limit, at least in this part of the empire. And for a long while, the Tigris did, indeed, serve as the northern border. But a knock-on effect was to create a new set of problems



ABOVE Ziyaret Tepe Text number 22. An extraordinary and poignant letter written while the empire was in the process of collapse.



– relations with adjacent chief powers in the region, particularly Shubria in the north and Urartu to the north east. This created a tense environment. As one scholar has aptly put it, “The ‘Great Game’ of Assyrian times – complete with spies, assassinations and fugitives – was played out in the north”. Other things being equal, Assyria would probably have been quite happy to leave Shubria as a buffer zone between Assyria and Urartu, but a problem with this was that there could be no guarantee that Urartu would not itself invade Shubria; this was even the subject of an oracular query to the sungod by Esarhaddon.

Furthermore, the king of Shubria appears to have taken a somewhat foolish stance in refusing to co-operate with Assyria in dealing with political asylum seekers. When, in 680 BC, this was taken to the extent of refusing to extradite the Assyrians who had fled to Shubria following the murder of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, it was a defiance too far and provoked Esarhaddon into invading the country, annexing it and splitting it into two new provinces. The entire Shubrian army was incorporated into the Assyrian army and captives from Shubria were dispersed among the citizens of Nimrud. For a few decades the status quo in Tushan remained apparently stable. However, the final collapse of Assyria was not far off.

From boom to bust

Following the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 BC the empire began to quickly unravel. Widely hated, with the population of the heartland diluted by deportees and the influx of Aramean tribes, with pressure on resources, and factionalised by civil war, the disintegration of Assyria was to be predicted. The actual military overthrow was brought about by a coalition of Babylonians, Medes and Cimmerians. From the death of Ashurbanipal



TOP LEFT Logs being floated down the Tigris: control of natural resources was a key element in the Assyrians control of southeastern Turkey.

MIDDLE Tablet from the Babylonian Chronicle, one of the most important historical sources to survive from ancient Mesopotamia. This tablet records the tumultuous years leading up to and following the Fall of Nineveh.

RIGHT Cuneiform texts found at Ziyaret Tepe, mostly of an administrative nature.

to freefall collapse took just 15 years.

The iconic event was the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. A major source for this is the Babylonian Chronicle – damaged and incomplete, to be sure, but nevertheless an extraordinary witness to these events. According to the Chronicle, in the 14th year of Nabopolassar (the first king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire), the king mustered his army and joined forces with Cyaxeres (the Mede, from Iran) and the Umman-mandu (Cimmerians, from around the Caucasus).

They marched along the bank of the Tigris. They encamped against Nineveh. From the month of Sivan until the month of Ab, for three months, they subjected the city to a heavy siege. [On day x] of the month of Abu they inflicted a major defeat upon a great people. At that time Sin-shar-ishkun king of Assyria died.

Thus is recorded one of the cataclysmic events of world history. Nevertheless, it was not quite the final end. For a few more years Assyria staggered on as a political entity, contracting into the northwest sector of the former empire, centred on a capital at Harran. In the process, the front line drew back across this region. Then, in 611 BC, it was the turn of Tushan.

In the 15th year, in the month of Tammuz, the king of Babylon [mustered his troops] and went to Assyria. [He marched about] imperiously [in Ass]yria and conquered the [citie]s of T[u]sha[n, ...] and Shu[br]ia. They took [their people] as captives and [carried away] a hea[vy] booty from them. 🚫



At Ziyaret Tepe there is evidence for these events. On the archaeological side, it is clear that the monumental buildings in ‘Operation G’ were abandoned with sufficient time to remove any valuables. There is also evidence for burning, though it has not yet been possible to establish whether or not this was deliberate.

The evidence from the texts is more dramatic. The c.30 tablets so far excavated from Ziyaret Tepe date to the very end of the empire, i.e. just before and just after the fall of Nineveh. The occurrence of the *limmu* (eponym) Ashur-sharrani, whom Parpola dates to 611 BC, is unique. Many of the texts appear to be of a routine nature, perhaps suggesting that the Assyrians were at this stage still expecting to regain control of their empire. But other texts clearly relate to the struggle at hand. One example is the issue of armour, as recorded in ZTT 8 (Ziyaret Tepe Text 8). But most dramatic is the ZTT 22 text, a letter written by a certain Mannu-ki-libbali to a senior official, perhaps the city treasurer. Evidently Mannu-ki-libbali had been asked to muster a unit of chariots. However, the entire structure to support such an order had collapsed:

Concerning the horses, Assyrian and Aramean scribes, cohort commanders, officials, copper-smiths, blacksmiths, those who clean the tools and equipment, carpenters, bow-makers, arrow-makers, weavers, tailors and repairers, to whom should I turn?.....Not one of them is there. How can I command?.....The lists are not at my disposal. According to what can they collect them? Death will come out of it. No one [will escape]. I am done!

This letter is unparalleled. It can only have been written as the front line drew close to Tushan and the infrastructure of the empire collapsed. As a first-hand account of Assyria in its death-throes it is unique.

The story from Tushan

What happened to Tushan, and indeed to the region as a whole, in the years following the disappearance of Assyrian government, is still not yet clear. It was once thought that Assyria was entirely wasted – as put by historian Amélie Kuhrt, “the image is that of a virtually empty landscape, made yet more desolate by the presence of deserted cities with the odd village dotted here and there”.



ABOVE A Hand of Ishtar, an Assyrian architectural ornament. The discovery of such artefacts during preliminary field walking in the lower town was one of the first indicators to modern archaeologists that Ziyaret Tepe might be the remains of a major Assyrian settlement.

However, recent studies have instead shown that the level of devastation was not so total, and that many of the major cities continued in at least a reduced manner. The empire was carved up between the victors. The Medes (from Iran) took the Zagros territories, but the degree to which they were able to administer them is far from clear.

The Babylonians, on the other hand, were the mainstream successors to the Assyrian Empire, taking over direct rule in Mesopotamia as far north as Assur, the provinces to the east and in what is now modern Syria, reasserting control of Palestine and campaigning in the north. In the case of Ziyaret Tepe, it appears that there was squatter occupation for a limited period, after which the site was abandoned. This is very much in accord with the picture elsewhere, such as at the nearby site of Tell Ahmar. But why was our once-thriving provincial town of Ziyaret Tepe abandoned?

It seems that, with the disappearance of Assyrian power, the infrastructure that supported the prosperity of the region simply disintegrated. Regional agricultural collapse followed. So what happened to the Assyrian colonists? Some must have fled back to their homeland. Those who dared to remain might have been enslaved as prisoners of war by the Medes or the Babylonians. Perhaps others still were subsumed into local society, through marriage or companionship.

As with all great empires, domination of other peoples may appear to be total but is never sustainable. It is a lesson never far from our minds, for the changing fortunes of this great city Ziyaret Tepe tell their own story in the epic tale of the rise and fall of the Assyrian Empire. **WA**

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Recommended reading:

G Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, Penguin (1993), £11.99

B Foster & K Polinger Foster, *Civilisations in Ancient Iraq*, Princeton (2009), £18.99

For donations towards the work at Ziyaret Tepe, please contact: info@ztat.org.uk