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ISRAEL AND ASSYRIA, JUDAH AND ASSYRIA

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Assyria has a special place in the history of ancient Israel, conventionally known as the vanquisher of the Kingdom of Israel and the subjugator of the Kingdom of Judah, initiating an imperial era that would end only with the rise of the Hasmonean state. The rapid and brutal conquest of the southern Levant during the 730s and 720s BCE brought the destruction of the major southern Levantine polities and the eradication of their local social landscape by large-scale atrocities and the deportation of communities. Imperial administrators and soldiers governed the depleted conquered territories. They monitored the subjugated rulers of the remaining polities, who were forcefully integrated into the empire, obliged to send their best belongings as tribute and their best of men as labor or soldiers.

While this image is justified, it is only one, albeit major, aspect of the multifaceted Assyrian–southern Levantine interaction. In the mid-9th century BCE, indirect Assyrian impact is seen in their expansionist policy that forced the Israelite kings to strengthen their military abilities and form alliances with northern peers. By the early 8th century, the main impact of Assyria was the weakening of Damascus, which allowed Israel to become the leading polity in the southern Levant for several decades even though Israelite kings had to pay tribute to Assyria once or twice. Assyria's conquest of the southern Levant during the late 8th century led to the subjugation of the Kingdom of Judah and its neighbors and their integration within the imperial sphere. In this context, the southern Levantine elites were attracted to the empire (but also resisted it) and were exposed to non-local objects and ideas that they appropriated and entangled with their way of living. In the end, a century of Assyrian colonialism completely altered the southern Levant—politically, demographically, and culturally—and nothing looked the same when the empire rapidly collapsed in the late 7th century BCE.

In what follows, I review the impact the Assyrian conquest had on the inhabitants of Israel and Judah and the significance of the encounters between the locals and the Assyrian courts and the latter's agents. I begin with a short historical synopsis followed by four topics: the structure of the Assyrian Empire in the southern Levant, the impact of the deportations on the local social landscape, the Assyrian economic involvement in subjugated polities, and the colonial encounters and the appropriation of Assyrian ideas by the locals.

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The Assyrian Period in the Southern Levant: A Short Synopsis

The southern Levantine–Assyrian encounters can be artificially divided into several phases: early encounters, conquest, and the colonial period until the collapse of the empire. The first began in the days of Shalmaneser III (reigned 858–824 BCE), following the establishment of firm Assyrian control over the Jazira up to the Euphrates River (Frahm 2017b: 167–70; Younger 2018: 19–20). Shalmaneser III raided the Levant 19 times and reached the Mediterranean (an idyllic achievement of a Mesopotamian king) and south—somewhere in the Carmel ridge, the northwestern edge of the Kingdom of Israel—as no king before him (Yamada 2000). Shalmaneser III previously led his army across the Euphrates and fought against alliances of Levantine kings who were able to stop him, at least once—in the famous battle of Qarqar (853 BCE) that included the forces of Ahab of Israel. This first mention of Israel in Assyrian sources had a remarkable impact on modern scholarship of the Old Testament, considering that the biblical text is unaware of the great status Ahab had in the Levantine politics, hinting at the limited information the authors of the Book of Kings had about such an early period in the history of Israel (Naʾaman 2007: 398).

From this point onwards, Assyrian sources mention Israelite kings from the house of Jehu. The inscriptions of Shalmaneser III record the submission of Jehu, who was called "the son of Omri," legitimizing him as king of Israel (Naʾaman 1998; Hasegawa 2012: 46–50). The visualization of Jehu's submission on the famous Black Obelisk is the only recognizable depiction of an Israelite king to date (Uehlinger 2007: 201–10). Following 30 years without encounters (Frahm 2017b: 172–73), the Assyrian army marched against Damascus during the reign of Adad-Nirari III (reigned 810–783 BCE), Shalmaneser III's grandson, and collected tribute given by the local kings, among them Jehoash of Samaria (Hasegawa 2012: 115–22). The Assyrians concentrated their efforts on weakening Damascus during the following decades, with minimal involvement in the southern Levant (Frahm 2017b: 175–76; Younger 2018: 24) that allowed the astute kings of Israel to lead their kingdom to its most prosperous years (Finkelstein 2013: 127–38). Diplomatic relations were formed between Samaria and Nimrud, thus attesting the importance of Israel at that stage; envoys from Israel and Judah, frequently visited the Assyrian court, brought gifts to the kings, and were hosted as welcome guests (Naʾaman 2019b).

The next phase in the southern Levantine–Assyrian interaction was triggered by the ambitious expansionist policy of Tiglath-Pileser III (reigned 745–727 BCE) (Frahm 2017b: 176–78; Younger 2018: 25–26). By the end of his first decade as king, Tiglath-Pileser III subdued the Levant, reaching as far south as Gaza—facing northern Sinai, a week-long walk from the minor Egyptian states of the Nile Delta. In several campaigns, he conquered Damascus and turned it into an Assyrian stronghold, and defeated the kingdoms of Israel and Gaza, deporting thousands of their people and wreaking havoc in their lands. All local kings acquiesced and raised tribute, including Ahaz of Judah, the first Judahite king mentioned in Assyrian sources. The next Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (reigned 727–722 BCE), conquered Israel, and his successor, Sargon II (reigned 722–705 BCE), turned Samaria into an Assyrian center.[1] Sargon's conquest of Samaria, and Ashdod (the central Philistine city at that time[2]) eight years later, marked the beginning of firm Assyrian rule over the southern Levant, the last phase in the southern Levantine–Assyrian relations. Those years are sometimes termed the "Pax Assyriaca" although there was never peace (Faust 2021: Chapter 9).

Sargon II was killed on the battlefield during a disastrous campaign in Anatolia, and his corpse was left unburied, leading to revolts across the empire, the southern Levant included—namely, the revolt of Hezekiah and his allies (Frahm 2017b: 183–84). Once Sennacherib

(reigned 705–680 BCE), Sargon II's son, consolidated his rulership in Mesopotamia, he mobilized his army to defeat his enemies in the southwest. Assyrian sources, archaeological excavations, and to some extent also the Hebrew Bible all attest the devastating campaign and its impact on the minds of the survivors (Kalimi and Richardson 2014; Matty 2016). Thousands of people were killed or deported while others became refugees. Cities and towns were destroyed, and the Kingdom of Judah lost its greatest assets precisely at the point when its economy reached an unprecedented zenith (Lipschits 2021: 159). However, Jerusalem was saved, and a new Jerusalem-centered ideology emerged during these decades of recovery (Römer 2015: 184–87).

Revolts brought retaliation by successive Assyrian kings, Esarhaddon (reigned 680–669) and Ashurbanipal (reigned 669–627 BCE), but overall, these decades were a time of prosperity among several subjugated kingdoms. The ultimate example is Ekron, Judah's immediate neighbor to the west, where settlement expanded and included an extensive olive-oil extraction industry and a monumental palace incorporating Assyrian architectural elements (Gitin 2003, 2012). Other examples are the kingdoms of Transjordan that flourished through their integration within the empire and the advancement of the transregional trade connecting the northern Levant and Mesopotamia with the Arabian Peninsula (Tyson 2014; Crowell 2021). At the same time, the rulers of the southern Levant as an integral part of the empire had to send labor for building projects at the new capital of Nineveh and soldiers to fight in the Assyrian campaigns in Egypt.

However, the Assyrian state fell into disorder shortly after the death of Ashurbanipal (Frahm 2017b: 191–93). The Egyptian king Psammetichus I soon exploited the weakness of Assyria in the west to expand his hegemony over the Levant and faced Babylonia, led by Nabopolassar, who had joined forces with Cyaxares king of the Medes to destroy the Assyrian heartland and even conquer Harran, the last Assyrian stronghold. Assyria was gone and was soon followed by the remaining Levantine states. Necho II, the new king of Egypt, and Nebuchadnezzar II, the new king of Babylon, fought over the southern Levant in a fierce struggle that concluded with a Babylonian victory at Carchemish. In the following years, constant Egyptian intervention in the local politics against Babylonian interests led to the destruction of all local polities that survived the Assyrian period. A long transition period began, and the southern Levant looked much different once the Persian empire reestablished stability at the end of the 6th century BCE.

The Assyrian Colonial Network: The Provinces of Megiddo and Samaria as a Case Study

An overview of the Assyrian sources and the material record from the southern Levant attests to the devastating results of the conquest on the local landscape. The aggressive strategy of the Assyrian army led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people by war, famine, and plague; cities and towns were destroyed, havoc was wreaked upon the countryside, and thousands of the survivors were deported (Faust 2015: 768–69, 776–78, 2021; Streit 2021: 265, 269).[3] The ultimate goal was to exploit the conquered polity, extract its people and transport them to the imperial heartland (see further below). However, as stated by Liverani (2017b: 541), "destruction was not the end goal of conquest, merely a necessary preliminary action," and where needed, there was reconstruction to respond to the needs of the empire. Written sources refer to a governor installed at the conquered capital soon after the conquest who was responsible for reorganizing and revitalizing the devastated land according to imperial needs (Younger 2015; Liverani 2017a: 149–56, 179–86). These textual references are corroborated

by material remains across the western part of the empire, from provincial centers to their hinterland to fortresses guarding topographic corridors (MacGinnis *et al.* 2016). Assyrian officials headed rebuilt cities populated by deportees brought from the other reaches of the empire. Supply to the colonial installations was sent from neighboring subjugated kingdoms that had to host visiting imperial officials who were involved in their economies.

Narrowing the discussion to the conquered Kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians based their rule on two centers: Samaria and Megiddo. Beginning with the former, Sargon II followed a known Assyrian practice to turn the capital of a conquered polity into a provincial center. Economically, Samaria had little to offer, but as the symbol of the Israelite kingdom, it became a beacon that spread Assyrian imperialism across the conquered land and sent a clear message to other polities: the empire possessed the former capital of the vanquished (Tappy 2019: 186). Only partial material evidence exists, thus preventing the chronicling of detailed settlement history,[4] yet it is accepted that Samaria was not destroyed during the Assyrian conquest and continued to exist for centuries. Textual sources provide valuable (and unparalleled) information on the destination of the people taken from the city, and the origin of the people brought to repopulate it (Radner 2019). Additional sources reveal a snippet of the character of Assyrian Samaria such as its administrative structure, construction efforts led by imperial officials, and the rights and dues of its inhabitants (Zilberg 2018: 67–70).

Megiddo appears in Assyrian records as an imperial possession beginning in the days of Sargon II (Na'aman 2009: 97–98) and as the seat of the eponym of the year 679 BCE.[5] The thorough excavations at Megiddo showed that the former Israelite stable compound (Stratum IVA) was abandoned, and a temporary settlement was established atop it, which was eventually superimposed by the Assyrian town (Stratum III; Finkelstein and Ussishkin 2000: 597–98, 601–02). This well-planned settlement included several large buildings identified as housing the administrative apparatus of the province, while most of the hill was occupied by smaller domestic units clustered into insulae (Peersmann 2000). Assyrian Magiddu was densely populated, far more so than the many earlier towns that existed at the site. While there is no reference to its population in the sources (in contrast to Samaria), there should be little doubt that its inhabitants were newcomers, considering the deportation of thousands of the previous inhabitants of the northern valleys and the size of the new town. The rationale underlying the investment at Megiddo was its strategic location at the southwestern end of the Jezreel Valley, close to the topographic corridors connecting it to the coastal plain. It was joined by forts and settlements established around it.[6]

The Assyrians revived three additional regions of the fallen Kingdom of Israel:

- The Huleh Valley—Tel Dan (Thareani 2016b, 2018, 2019): a new settlement was built on top of the ruins of Israelite Dan (Stratum IIA). The new town (Stratum I) included public buildings and paved streets, with all available space utilized, and became more populous than ever, with the settlement growing to ca. 20 hectares. Housing reached the top of the ridge surrounding the site, with residential neighborhoods occupying most of the mound.[7]
- The Central Coastal Plain—Tel Dor (Gilboa and Sharon 2016): the last Israelite town at Tel Dor was abandoned, and the site was rebuilt during the Assyrian period. The finding of Assyrian-style vessels and the abundance of Phoenician-style vessels in refuse pits demonstrate the town's role in maritime trade.
- The Yarkon–Ayalon basin: farther inland and southwards, the destroyed Israelite administrative center at Gezer (Stratum VI; see Wolf 2021) was rebuilt as well, and while it is difficult to reconstruct its outline, the new town (Stratum V) was associated with

> Assyrian-style artifacts that might attest to its regional importance (Reich and Brandl 1985; Ornan, Ortiz, and Wolff 2013). North of Gezer was Hadid, where large-scale olive-oil production demonstrates the region's importance to the imperial interests, and in both Gezer and Hadid epigraphic remains attest the presence of newcomers from the Northern Levant and Mesopotamia—ostensibly deportees (Naʾaman and Zadok 2000; Koch and Brand forthcoming; and see further below). North of Hadid and as far as Aphek, small rural settlements appeared on the spurs of the central highland and the eastern edges of the coastal plain, along the assumed north–south main road, either as part of a planned policy or in response to the Assyrian demands of agricultural commodities (Aster and Faust 2015; Itach 2022).[8]

At the same time, there is no doubt that other devastated regions were left desolate (Faust 2015: 767–764). While those regions had previously been dominated by the Levantine courts and their clients and served their interests, the Assyrian interests differed. Since the main aim was to strengthen the imperial system rather than a local elite, some portions of the fallen Levantine polities were left deserted, while others prospered. This duality in the fate of the conquered lands under Assyrian rule, of massive construction in enclaves surrounded by desolation, is better perceived if one rejects the conventional understanding of ancient states as territories with fixed boundaries and embraces the concept of networks.

Recent scholarship tends to emphasize the structural complexity of ancient states, understanding a polity as having complex, sometimes flexible boundaries that might include several noncontiguous territorial islands bound by reciprocal, familial, religious, and additional relations (see overview in Koch 2018: 368–71 with extensive literature). A polity might expand into an overarching system by solidifying its network by establishing new hubs—such as administrative centers, colonies, trading posts, and ritual centers—and incorporating other networks using force or allegiance. Viewing the Assyrian Empire as a network reconstructs its initial expansion and incorporation of neighboring entities into an "imperial heartland," followed by the conquest of remote regions (such as the southern Levant) and establishing hubs to craft a network of topographical corridors leading to the frontiers.

In the context of the Assyrian Empire in the southern Levant, the conquered lands were reorganized to fit the imperial needs, and it is suggested that the primary need was controlling topographic corridors connecting the northern Levant with the region of Gaza. The Assyrian kings were attracted to this region because of its proximity to Egypt and its location on the Mediterranean endpoint of the desert routes connecting the Levant with the Arabian Peninsula (see detailed overview in Naʾaman 2004; Ben-Shlomo 2014). Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, and Esarhaddon led military campaigns to block the Egyptian influence and pacify local resistance in Gaza and its neighbor Arza. At the same time, both Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II documented their investment in the region, which included the establishment of trade stations and the elevation of local tribal leaders as imperial agents, while Sargon II settled people in the region that had been dislocated from the Zagros (Naʾaman and Zadok 1988). Against this background, scholars attributed the founding of new settlements, erection of forts, and rebuilding of towns to the Assyrians and their proxies (Naʾaman 2004; Ben-Shlomo 2014; Thareani 2016a; Fantalkin 2018). Following that, the location of most colonial possessions is telling, suggesting that the strategic and economic importance of the region of Gaza as gleaned from the Assyrian sources might be the reason for building projects and rearranging infrastructure in the lands ruled directly by the empire.

The Assyrian network developed over decades and, remarkably, continued with no apparent interruption when the imperial core crumbled, and Psammetichus I expanded

his hegemony over the Levant. The Egyptians faced some resistance, as might be gleaned from the destruction of several sites in the region of Gaza. However, other parts of the southern Levant continued to develop, be they local polities such as Ashkelon (Stager, Master and Schloen 2011) or the colonial centers—an intriguing endurance considering the collapse of Assyria and the difference between the Assyrian and the Egyptian interests. Given that these centers existed as nodes in the broader colonial network, how did they survive the Assyrian collapse? Officials and soldiers may have been called back home or left without orders or supplies. Furthermore, how long could they have kept the colonial network active while Assyria itself was conquered, and what led them to collaborate with the Egyptians?

Regardless of these circumstances, none of the colonial or local centers survived the Babylonian rule. Bothered with the rehabilitation of their homeland devastated during the wars against the Assyrians, the Babylonians did not maintain the colonial system or rebuild towns following the destruction of the local polities (Levavi 2020). The colonial network eventually fragmented; most of its centers were abandoned, and a demographic depletion hit the land that recovered only a century afterward.

Deportations and Their Impact on the Local Landscape

Upon the conquest of the Levant by Tiglath-Pileser III, the Assyrian imperial system that had been developing for centuries began reorienting people and resources following the needs of the empire. Foremost among the colonial means used to achieve this task—as well as to break local resistance—was the forced movement of conquered populations (Oded 1979; Liverani 2017a: 187–94; Radner 2017, 2019; Sano 2020; Valk 2020; Koch 2022). The chief destination was the Assyrian heartland, with its gigantic cities and their vast agricultural hinterland. At the same time, an unknown number of deportees were sent to remote provinces and settled in frontier strongholds to serve as the demographic backbone supporting the imperial apparatus. Overall, a century of Assyrian colonialism in the Levant forced tens of thousands—and even hundreds of thousands—of men, women, and children to leave their homes and to march interminable routes.

The practice of deporting conquered peoples was a fundamental component of Assyrian royal ideology and policy, following a millennium-old Mesopotamian practice of relocating defeated groups into the victorious society (Liverani 2017a: 187–92). By the days of Tiglath-Pileser III and the Sargonid kings, deportations were a common yet catastrophic punishment that removed local resistance and issued an aggressive warning to rival polities (Liverani 2017a: 192, 2017b: 542; Sano 2020; Valk 2020). At the same time, the resettlement strategy stimulated a complex logistic system. The state valued the deportees for their demographic contribution and skills. The deportees were directed to the imperial core and predominantly to the Assyrian heartland, absorbed into the expanding cities, or deployed to develop their hinterland. In this framework, the state orchestrated the deportations and appointed provincial governors who monitored the routes, supported the deportees, and provided shelter, food, and clothing (Radner 2017: 210–11). A more limited number of marches led deportees to the colonial holdings. These include deportees (comprising defeated enemies from conquered polities, and sometimes also rivals from Assyria) sent to maintain urban centers or fortresses that guarded topographic corridors (Frahm 2022) and, farther away, to support forces protecting the frontiers, such as the western Iranian plateau facing mountainous tribes (Radner *et al.* 2020) or the southern Levant facing Egypt, as detailed below.

Even though the state provided the deportees with food and shelter, they still faced loss and suffering that accompanied the horrifying events of the war, expulsion, and long marches—events that must have contributed to the psychological breakdown of many and the disintegration of social bonds (Battini 2022). Upon arrival at their new locale, the deportees were dislocated. They faced an unfamiliar landscape and language(s) they did not understand. They had to preserve (yet modify) some of their traditional practices while abandoning others, especially those related to the homeland and its landscape, and had to adopt new practices appropriated from the hosting society (Berlejung 2022). These shared components in the experience of suffering deportation materialized based on changing social positions and reactions to encounters with the locals (continuous exposure vs. segregation).

The fate of the Israelite deportees in the imperial heartland is shrouded in obscurity due to the limited information at our disposal. A handful of written sources from the Assyrian heartland refer to individuals labeled "Samarians" or individuals bearing Yahwistic names; these demonstrate the complexity of integration in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the gap between the royal language of assimilation and the reality of daily affairs. The earlier sources deal with chariot troops integrated into the Assyrian army and artisans participating in the construction of Dur-Sharruken; they thus point to the presence of the first generation of deportees in the Assyrian heartland. Later sources, from Guzana (Tell Halaf) during the days of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, and Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Sheikh Hamad) following the collapse of Assyria, are mainly concerned with economic transactions (Zadok 2015: 163–76; Radner 2019: 113–22; Berlejung 2022). The individuals mentioned in these sources identified themselves or were identified by others as associated with Samaria even though they were third-, fourth-, or even fifth-generation deportees.

Moving to the southern Levant, only Sargon II details explicitly the settlement of conquered people in Samaria (as well as in Ashdod and Gaza). Additional deportations to Samaria might be embedded in the biblical texts, such as Ezra 4:10 on the people brought to Samaria by king Asnapar (Naʾaman and Zadok 2000: 178–79; Levin 2022). Nothing is known about the large cities the Assyrians built at Megiddo and Dan that must have had a large population that partly came from afar. The knowledge gap is somewhat completed by material remains, mostly inscribed objects and pottery. However, one should be cautious about using them as indicators of the presence of deportees, as there is a risk of oversimplifying the material record into a Pots-equal-People scenario.

An established point of departure is inscribed objects such as the ones found in Samaria (Horowitz and Oshima 2006: 112–15) that are commonly considered to attest to the presence of people from Mesopotamia. Of these, a bulla stamped by a royal seal, a stele fragment, and a judicial document attest to colonial involvement in the city. Only a single object, a votive cylinder mentioning Babylonian deities and individuals with Babylonian theophoric elements in their names, can be reliably connected to people from Babylonia. However, one question remains: were they deportees or other agents that served the colonial administration?[9]

Another group of inscribed objects includes clay tablets documenting economic transactions unearthed at Tel Gezer, Tel Hadid, and Kh. Kusia.[10] The tablet from Kh. Kusia (Horowitz and Oshima 2006: 100–01) records a land sale with only one preserved name, possibly Elamite; it was stamped by a seal that might have been imported from Babylonia (Ornan 1997: 333 No. 93). Of the two tablets from Hadid (Naʾaman and Zadok 2000),[11] one records a land sale deed from 698 or 697 BCE and mentions several names, all Akkadian but one, which may be Aramean. The other tablet documents a debt note with a pledge

from 664 or 663 BCE. It mentions a creditor and a debtor, the latter's name is Canaanite–Hebrew, and so are the names of his sister and wife, and four witnesses: two with Akkadian names, one is identified as an Egyptian, and one with a West-Semitic name. A similar mixed community is illustrated in the two tablets from Gezer that document land sales, one from 651 or 650 BCE and the other from 649 or 648 BCE (Horowitz and Oshima 2006: 55–60). The former tablet mentions Akkadian, Aramean, and Egyptian names, while the latter has a similar composition of names alongside another individual—the seller, named Netanyahu.

These mixed communities represent the essence of the Assyrian colonialism in the southern Levant and its complexity. The individuals bearing Canaanite–Hebrew, Akkadian, Aramaic, and Egyptian names might have been locals and newcomers who mingled in their daily activities. The newcomers could have been deportees, officials in the service of the empire, merchants, other agents. The Assyrian network was diversely interrelated and staffed by various kinds of agents since there were constant movements of soldiers and deportees from other parts of the empire, alongside traffic of merchants, immigrants, and other individuals and groups—each with their own personality, past, status, and aim. The multiplicity of options hinders any generalized assumption. Moreover, the situation might have been even more complex, considering the possibility that some of the individuals with local names were members of the newcomer community who, after several decades in their new homes, began to give their children local names—a reflection of their integration into the local landscape.

The tablets from Hadid pose a further complexity. While Gezer features various Assyrian-style seals and high-quality architectural elements, some in Assyrian style, which points to the integration of the settlement within the colonial network, no such remains are documented from Tel Hadid. One of the two tablets from Tel Hadid was found on the floor of a structure built in local techniques according to a local ground plan, among local-style artifacts, such as pottery and stone objects. The question is: had no tablets been found at Hadid, would scholars have even considered its inhabitants to be deportees?

Another category of objects is pottery.[12] Typical of the 7th century BCE in the central highlands, mainly in rural sites located around Shechem, is a deep bowl in a local form that combines a specific surface treatment originating in southern Mesopotamia—wedge-shaped impressions on their interior (Itach, Aster and Ben-Shlomo 2017). Following previous suggestions, the surface treatment might suggest a utilitarian purpose associated with food production. In their words (ibid.: 89), "the wedge impressions are indeed effective in grating vegetables such as onions and other root vegetables, producing a thin paste that could then facilitate food preparation." This bowl type might serve as a vivid example of newcomers' adaptation: there was a need to replace something they used to have that was needed to cook a meal that would remind them of home by taste and aroma. Thus, the adaptation included the appropriation of a local vessel by adding the wedge impression, presumably by a simple request of a newcomer client from a local potter.

Beyond these two sets of sources, evidence is limited to the point of being non-existent. No cuneiform writing or wedged-impressed bowls were found thus far at Megiddo or Dan, where Assyrian-style architecture served the imperial administration—probably due to the usage of Aramaic as the colonial language in the Levant (Zilberg 2018: 76–77 with literature). In this regard, the large assemblages of Mesopotamian-style seals in the provincial capitals and other administrative centers are illuminating. In her seminal study, Ornan pointed to the concentration of imported seals from Mesopotamia at a few significant sites: Samaria, Megiddo, and Gezer (1997: 287, 292). Moreover, only at Samaria have Neo-Babylonian stamp seals been uncovered, indicating the city's continued importance in the days of the

Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires. Alas, it is impossible to determine who the seals' owners were during the Neo-Assyrian period: administrators installed at these centers or deportees who carried their valuable personal belongings with them.

The scarcity of material remains of the deportees might have stemmed from a travel restriction—their limited baggage (Koch 2022). The deportees depicted marching in the Assyrian reliefs are seen with only the very few belongings they could have carried. Some were fortunate enough to use their animal-driven cart, but in either case, they carried small bags, probably holding their most personal belongings. Minor artifacts such as seals could have arrived by such a mechanism (although these might have belonged to officials, as part of their job), but larger objects would have been left behind. In other words, the limited number of remains associated with the deportees might be understood because very few large artifacts traveled with them. Such a situation requires scholars to augment the classification of objects with the study of their function. Given the organized character of the deportations, the forced settlement of deportees while maintaining their social structure, and the common tendency in migrant communities to preserve domestic practices, it is hypothesized that meticulous archaeological analyses of domestic behavioral patterns such as cooking, crafts such as pottery production, and animal exploitation trends would identify the behavioral patterns of migrants and pinpoint their transformation.

As detailed above, the end of the settlement pattern imposed by the Assyrians came decades after the collapse of Assyria, and multiple questions related to these eventful years remain unresolved. In the context of the deportations, questions arise regarding the fate of the deportee communities. Would they mingle with the locals, and would the locals accept them and forget or diminish their previous role as collaborators of the empire (Levin 2013)? Only future inquiries into the archaeology of the 6th century might provide clues to this enigma.[13]

Involvement in Subjugated Polities

As early as the days of Shalmaneser III, tribute was a common demand in the Assyrian interaction with the Levantine kings. Metals, ivory, furniture, and textiles were among the commodities sent to the Assyrian court.[14] Another mechanism that brought the riches of the Levant to Assyria was the looting of conquered cities that brought the treasures of palaces and temples to be displayed, consumed, and hoarded at the court. There is no wonder why the image of a vandal-like empire is still present in scholarship, illustrating the Assyrians as solely interested in collecting tribute while leaving the conquered lands to decline. However, such a view overlooks the investment in the reestablishing of the colonial centers in the provinces of Samaria and Megiddo (as detailed above) and in other conquered polities, such as a large structure built in Assyrian style northeast of Ashdod—most probably after the conquest of the city by Sargon II (Kogan-Zehavi 2018). Moreover, the view of the Assyrians as no more than looters negates textual information in hand directly describing Assyrian economic involvement in the southern Levant as early as the days of Tiglath-Pileser III. But unlike local polities that developed their economies in environmental and social peculiarities, the Assyrian economic policy was motivated by the interests of the empire, which had a different view of the land and its resources. Textual sources even attest to the presence of Assyrian officials in local politics and the intervention of Assyrian officials in the local economies to shift income to Assyrian hands (Yamada 2008; Naʾaman 2018b).

No boundary blocked the Assyrian kings and their agents from intervening in local polities' economies. Even though no provinces were established south of Samaria and Ashdod, the Assyrian Empire's involvement was felt far beyond any imagined line supposed to

demarcate its provinces. The best example of that is the region of Gaza, as detailed above. All kingdoms in the southern Levant had to comply with the Assyrian demands, and if they did, they were left unharmed (on the Assyrian diplomacy with subjugated polities, see Fales 2009); but the demands imposed by the imperial court that the rulers had to fulfill were enormous, including tributes, *corvée*, and human resources support for military campaigns. Furthermore, the local elites were exposed to imperial practices, and the expansion of interregional trade led to increased consumption of luxury products (see contributions in Tyson and Herrmann 2019). At the same time, new connections with production centers and markets near and far, in addition to the forced migration of artisans and craftsmen, would have exposed the locals to new ideas and technologies (further below). This complex meshwork of interactions resulted in the development of local economies by the rulers and other prominent groups, aimed and increasing their capital (see Sinopoli 2003; Zori 2011: 30–37).

In agricultural-based societies, this process materialized in intensified and specialized crop production and animal exploitation to create surplus needed for obtaining finished products such as metals and luxury commodities. A fine example comes from the Kingdom of Judah. Sometime during the last third of the 8th century BCE, the Jerusalemite court developed a new administrative system based on storage jars containing oil and wine (see detailed discussion in Lipschits 2021: 35–48). The jars were marked by seals declaring their belonging to the king (Hebrew: *lmlk*), featuring an emblem (a beetle or a winged disc) and a place name—probably of a royal estate. Considering the time of its introduction, when Judah was subjugated to Assyria, the new administrative system exemplifies the empire's indirect economic impact. Related to that is the emergence of Ekron as a chief olive-oil producer that was briefly mentioned above. Significant parts of the city were occupied by oil press compounds, featuring sophisticated technology that allowed the large-scale processing of olives brought from the entire region. Indeed, and contrary to the preliminary interpretation of the finds, there is no evidence of Assyrian direct involvement (Faust 2011). Still, it is impossible to understand the rise of Ekron without the empire's impact on the southern Levant: Sennacherib's arrangements following his 701 BCE campaign (the transfer of the Judahite possessions in the Shephelah—the hub of olive horticulture in this part of the southern Levant—to the hands of the Philistine cities), and the new economic opportunities created by the empire (Na'aman 2003).

Another major commodity in the southern Levant was wool. Previous studies (Sapir-Hen, Gadot, and Finkelstein 2014; Sapir-Hen 2017) have shown that animal exploitation during the Iron IIC focused on prime-aged sheep. By examining relative livestock frequencies, Sapir-Hen and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that the dominance of sheep over other livestock prevailed in all southern Levantine sites during Iron IIC, a dominance that emerged in Judah already during the Iron IIB. As the dominance of sheep was not typical of earlier periods, Sapir-Hen and colleagues (2014: 735) attributed it to the imposition of central government control over the economy and the promotion of raising sheep for their wool to be used as tax exported to Assyria (and see also Sapir-Hen 2017: 344–45). The picture of an intensified sheep herding for secondary products during the Iron IIB and IIC is corroborated by the large number of textile production tools found across the southern Levant (Koch and Sapir-Hen 2018). The Assyrian court demanded wool and its final products, especially blue and red-purple wool garments. At the same time, the value of finished wool products also meant that surpluses were traded for the exotic commodities brought to the southern Levant by the desert fringe network, and hence the dense evidence of economic activity that included weaving and trade.

Such economic development alters social structure since redistribution of capital leads to the emergence of new focal points in society, and specifically, it leads to the expansion of the elite. In turn, the elite used some of these surpluses to legitimize their status by commending monumental building projects that conveyed their own ideology (see below regarding the visual language). Moreover, the elite used surpluses to participate in interregional networks that were continuously expanded to supply the demands of luxury commodities (such as spices) by the growing Assyrian state, which dictated the ever-expanding imperial involvement—as exemplified in the region of Gaza. With the subjugation to Assyria, boundaries between kingdoms were removed as they became nodes of an interregional trade network that allowed the acquisition of valuable commodities that the Assyrians sometimes demanded. Enjoying the surpluses gained from the prospering economic initiatives, the southern Levantine elite acquired luxury commodities, sent some as a tribute to the Assyrian court, and kept some for their consumption. These triggered the mind of the southern Levantines, who changed their practices and ideas to accommodate the new way of living. This change is discussed in the following and last section.

Colonial Encounters

The integration of a society into an empire forces its members to encounter non-local people, artifacts, and ideas. Under specific circumstances, mostly of the long colonial experience, the encounters shape the involved parties, both the empire and its subjects (Herrmann 2018; Tyson and Herrmann 2019; Koch 2021: 3–4 and 67–70 with literature). It is, therefore, illuminating to see the immediate impact of the encounters with Assyria and its agents on the local southern Levantine societies, despite the relatively short period of Assyrian rule compared to other colonial periods.[15]

In fact, the encounters might have started long before the conquest of the Levant. One can only imagine what spectacular experience it was for the Israelite messengers visiting the Assyrian court in the early 8th century: the magnitude of Nimrud, the monumentality of its palaces and temples, and the unfamiliar appearance, language, and behavior of its people. Upon their return, they told stories and might have brought with them souvenirs that expressed somewhat of their understanding of Assyria. Back then, Assyria was a faraway place that only a few visited, and still, some Israelite pictorial conventions were possibly borrowed from Assyrian royal imagery (Ornan 2016: 21).

The conquest of the Levant by Tiglath-Pileser III forced the local kings to send their representatives to Assyria (Naʾaman 2019b: 13) and by that, the exposure to Assyrian ideology intensified. At the same time, the establishment of colonial holdings at Samaria, Megiddo, and elsewhere placed Assyria in the heart of the southern Levant. Being governed by Assyrian officials and populated by newcomers, these settlements were the hubs from which the Assyrian cultural impact spread to neighboring kingdoms.

Both types of colonial arenas triggered multifaceted encounters that changed the local societies. As described above, one medium of interaction was stamp seals. Imported Assyrian, Babylonian, and north Levantine seals were distributed in and from the colonial centers, where one finds a variety of styles and icons as well as the most substantial evidence for their localization. These artifacts were spread and appropriated within the framework of intense interaction between the many nodes of the Assyrian network. The variability of encounters precludes the formulation of any generalized reconstruction as to why and how a specific artifact was brought to its final deposition and why some icons and scenes were accepted and entangled into the local repertoire, while others were not (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 286–87; Koch forthcoming).

The most prominent pictorial assemblage spread and localized in the southern Levant beyond the Assyrian provinces involved lunar imagery—specifically, the iconography of the moon deity of Ḥarran (Figure 43.1). The temple at Ḥarran was embraced by Assyrian kings as early as Adad-Nirari III, and its cult was employed in the service of imperial ideology during the days of the Sargonids (Holloway 1995; Groß 2014). Considering the diffusion of Assyrian and Aramean practices in the imperial heartland and the service of Aramean-speaking individuals in the imperial administration, scholars consider the spread of lunar imagery to reflect an intensification of Assyrian activity during the 7th century BCE across the southern Levant. Furthermore, scholarly discussion of the relationships between images depicted on seals/amulets and biblical texts has embraced this specific pictorial assemblage and its imperial association to argue for Assyrian influence on Judahite religion (e.g., Keel 1998: 60–109), yet not without criticism (Cooley 2011: 286–87 with literature). Indeed, when the *context of the finds* typically employed in this discourse is scrutinized (Koch forthcoming), it becomes clear that the many exemplars mentioned in the scholarly literature come primarily from the northern valleys and Transjordan. At the same time, only three items featuring the lunar imagery are known from stratified Iron IIC assemblages in Judah. All other items from Jerusalem and its vicinity were found in mixed, later, or unstratified contexts; thus, the timespan of their use cannot be determined.[16] Such limited evidence should deter scholars from suggesting a widespread Assyrian impact on Judahite religion—at least on this point.

Contrary to that, the Assyrian impact on Judah is visible the most in the royal sphere: the appropriation of imperial textual language manifested in the Hebrew Bible and the pictorial language as attested in the material records. Regarding the former, several passages in the Hebrew Bible attest to the incorporation of Assyrian royal ideology (Van Der Kooij 2012; Aster 2017; Frahm 2017a; Dubovský 2021). Another impact is the appropriation of Assyrian oaths of loyalty embedded in Deuteronomy; the Assyrian kings were preoccupied with the danger of revolts (Radner 2016) and imposed loyalty oaths on members of the state and its subordinates (Frahm 2016: 84). Such oath documents are known from the Assyrian capitals and a 7th-century BCE temple at Tell Tayinat, and it has been suggested that a similar treaty was perhaps accessible to the authors of the early version of the covenant between YHWH and his people (see Edenburg and Müller 2019 with further literature). Lastly, the magnificent Assyrian court and its eventful history inspired scribes in describing their petty kingdoms and their past. Scholars long ago saw the figure of glorious Solomon (or significant components of it) as a composite construct made of accomplishments achieved by Assyrian kings (Naʾaman 2019a). A recent study even claimed remarkable accords between the "Succession Narrative" and the events leading to Esarhaddon's accession to the throne (Naʾaman 2018a)

Material remains also attest to the appropriation of the Assyrian royal pictorial language by the local courts. The rosette was a meaningful Assyrian icon—a symbol of Ištar that adorned the crowns and clothes of the king and the heir apparent and that also decorated royal monuments (Albenda 2020). Appropriated rosettes are known from two southern Levantine contexts (see discussion in Koch and Lipschits 2021): the Judahite administrative system based on storage jars replaced its icons and adopted the rosette (Figure 43.2), which, although previously known in the Levantine pictorial repertoire, rarely appeared in Levantine stamp seals and is yet to be found on seals from Jerusalem prior to the Iron IIC (Koch forthcoming). The second context is at Ekron, in the palace mentioned above that was influenced by Assyrian architecture. The central room of the complex featured the famous inscription placed by Achish, dedicating the shrine to his patron goddess. The excavators associated a large stone slab from that room engraved with a rosette icon with the city patron goddess and interpreted as reflecting Assyrian influence (Gitin 2012: 233 and pl. 252A).

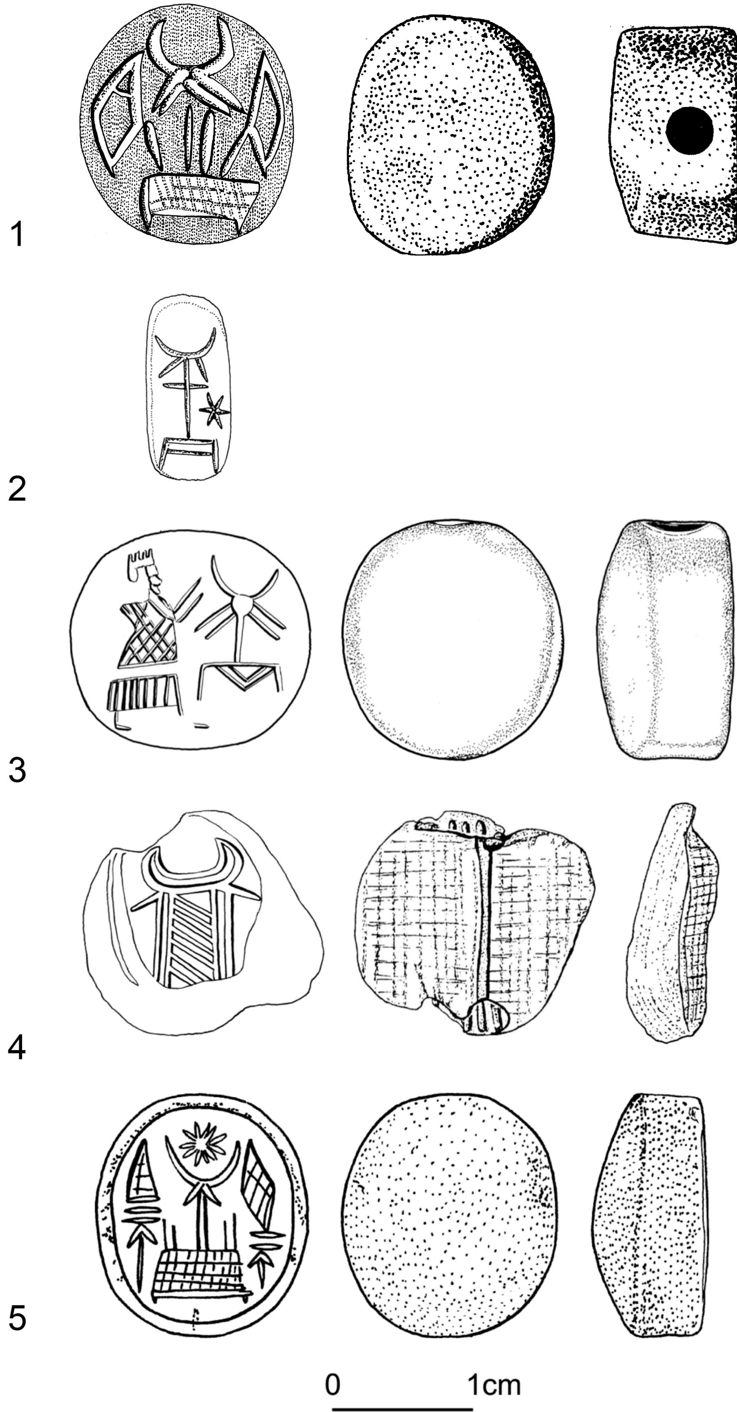

Figure 43.1 Stamp seals and sealings depicting lunar imagery: 1. Tell Keisan (after Keel 2017: 589 No. 14); 2. Tel Gezer (after Keel 2013: 167 No. 3); 3. Tell Jemmeh (after Keel 2013: 23 No. 49); 4. Jerusalem (after Keel 2017: 323 No. 100); 5. Tawilan (after Eggler and Keel 2006: 447 No. 2)

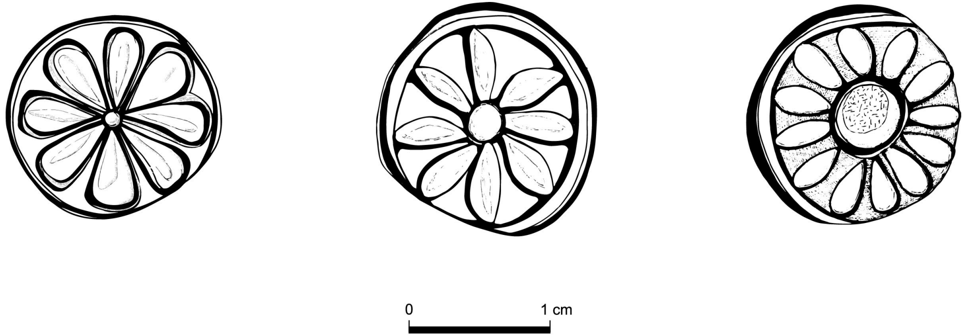

Figure 43.2 Main types of rosette seal impressions on jar handles

These innovations in southern Levantine royal ideology appeared during the zenith of Assyrian power or the chaotic decades of its rapid downfall. It was an act of usurpation—the localization of the ruler's language by the colonized as a means of resistance to colonial domination and its cultural influence. A prime example of such localization is the appropriation of the ruler's language by the colonized, coupled with its manipulation to promote a message, usually subversive, regarding the colonial arena. Looking back at 7th-century BCE Judah, scholars have long ago considered the appropriation of the imperial language by the Jerusalemite court as an act of resistance, in a manner that involved the *removal* of the Assyrian king and his replacement by YHWH.

Epilogue

Assyria collapsed in the late 7th century BCE, replaced by the Babylonians who, shortly afterward, destroyed the remaining southern Levantine polities, Judah included. Remarkably, little of Assyria is remembered in the collective memory of the Judahites in the Persian and the Hellenistic periods—a faded memory of Assyria and the deportations from the Levant, perhaps overshadowed by the trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem (Levin 2022). As for the Assyrian deportations to the Levant, the texts describing the Persian period in the southern Levant provide limited information on the residents of Samaria, restricted to their Babylonian background and their Yahwistic orientation.

Overall, Assyria lost, and therefore its memory was (mis)represented in outside writings: Biblical, Aramaic, and Greek sources. These sources commemorate the aggressiveness of the Assyrian Empire, its great cities, and the many revolts resisting its expansions, yet they differ in the memories of specific events or figures (e.g., Richardson 2014; Rollinger 2017). An illuminating example of a memory of Assyria relates to the conflict between Ashurbanipal and his brother, Šamaš-šumu-ukin (Frahm 2003), which evolved into orientalist narratives of Sardanapalus—a feminine, corrupted, and voluptuous last king of the Assyrian Empire, who decided before the fall of Nineveh to die in a great pyre together with his entourage and treasures. This image continued in Greek, Latin, and eventually, western European literature, fascinated with its connotations of decadence along with the tragic ending of its life. It is only with the discoveries at the ruins of the Assyrian capitals and the deciphering of cuneiform writings that the imagined Sardanapalus and other "Assyrian" figures like Ninus and Semiramis began to fade and the real importance of Assyria in world history has been acknowledged (Frahm 2006).

Notes

1 Much ink has been spilled over the exact order of events leading to the conquest of Samaria in the late 720s. See, most recently, Becking 2019; Fales 2019; Frahm 2019; Kahn 2019; Novotny 2019.
2 On Ashdod during the Assyrian period see Fantalkin 2018: 170–77 and Aster 2021.
3 For a more general overview on the collateral impact of wars on civilians, see Nadali and Vidal 2014.
4 The absence of a stratigraphic sequence and the partial nature of the finds prevent any comprehensive reconstruction of post-Israelite Samaria until the Roman period (Tappy 2019). Having said that, dozens of dateable artifacts permit object-oriented studies of the inhabitants of Samaria and their relations with the empires.
5 Various historical reconstructions attribute the establishment of Megiddo as a colonial center to Tigalth-pileser III, although his inscriptions do not mention the city or the installation of a governor at any Israelite locale.
6 Including the late Iron Age fortress at En-Tut, dominating a corridor connecting the Jezreel Plain with the Coastal Plain just east of Tel Dor (Finkielsztejn and Gorzalczany 2010).
7 See also the building unearthed at Ayyelet HaShahar, east of Tel Hazor (Kletter and Zwickel 2006).
8 And see a fortress at the mouth of Yarkon River that might also be associated with the Assyrian network (Fantalkin and Tal 2015).
9 Horowitz (2018) suggested that the inclusion of individual cuneiform signs on 4th-century BCE coins from Samaria are evidence that the inhabitants of the city during the Late Persian period preserved their Mesopotamian heritage as part of their collective belonging.
10 Another cuneiform tablet from the Assyrian period is known from Tel Keisan (Zilberg 2015), possibly documenting a delivery of grain by the imperial administration (Berlejung 2012: 43).
11 For an updated study of the tablets from Tel Hadid see Zadok forthcoming.
12 One group of pottery vessels is the so-called Assyrian Palace Ware, or Assyrian-style pottery, a stylistic group of serving vessels found throughout the southern Levant and predominantly at Tell Jemmeh and Tel Dor. Several studies consider these vessels to have been produced to supply the needs of Assyrian officials or to reflect the presence of potters deported from northern Mesopotamia, although, as stated by Na'aman, "the problem of the origin of the vessels classified as 'Assyrian-style pottery' is even more complicated, as some of them were discovered in strata that antedated the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel" (2016: 279). Moreover, Hunt (2015, 2016), who conducted the most detailed study of these vessels thus far, concluded that these vessels reflect the embracement of feasting practices associated with Assyria by local elite members.
13 Archaeologically speaking, the Babylonian period and the early Persian period in the southern Levant are largely unknown, and most studies on this period have been dedicated to the material remains from the central highlands (see most recently Lipschits *et al.* 2021).
14 As detailed in royal inscriptions and archival notes, and is evident by findings such as bullae used to seal commodities sent from subjugated polities (e.g., Zilberg 2018: Table 3.2)
15 This is the place to underline that scholarship of the previous decade rejected terms employing models of acculturation and favoured more nuanced understanding of attraction (and rejection) to imperial influence (see discussions in Berlejung 2012; Bagg 2013; Koch 2018: 377–81 with literature; Faust 2021: Chapter 8).
16 The various possible scenarios for reconstructing the biography of each artifact should be entertained, just like the possible circumstances that led to their appearance in the southern Levant. After all, even if manufactured in Sargonid Assyria, the continuous Levantine–Mesopotamian interaction that characterizes the post-Assyrian era under the Neo-Babylonian empire and Achaemenid empires provides ample paths for such importation.

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