

Colloque  
*L'archéologie de l'empire achéménide*  
 Paris, Collège de France, 21-22 novembre 2003

Draft

**The Achaemenid Period in Northern Iraq**

John Curtis

(i) Introduction

Evidence for the Achaemenid period in Assyria has been gathered together by a number of scholars (Moorey 1980a: 131; 1980b: 186; Oates, J., 1991: 189-93; Kuhrt 1990: 186; 1995a; Simpson 1990: 130-131; Simpson in Baird *et al.* 1995: 142-3; Curtis 1997: 14-16), but the picture is still obscure. No new information has recently come to light, but the present conference has provided the opportunity to attempt an up-to-date assessment of the evidence, which is principally archaeological.

In 612 BC the Assyrian Empire was overthrown by the Medes acting in conjunction with the Babylonians and following up a Median assault two years earlier in 614 BC. What happened thereafter, in the so-called post-Assyrian period (*c.*612-539 BC), is unclear. At a recent conference in Padua I reviewed the evidence, both archaeological and textual, for this period in Northern Iraq (Curtis 2004), and I will not attempt to repeat that here. We may summarise thus.

The chronicles seem to show that for a few years after 612 BC the Babylonians maintained a presence in Assyria. In 612 BC the Babylonian king was at Nineveh, in 611-610 BC the Babylonian army marched around Assyria, and in 608 BC they passed through Assyria on their way to campaign in the north. After that the sources fall silent, and there are tantalising scraps of information. It is possible (but not proven) that Assur had a Babylonian governor, and the Cyrus Cylinder possibly shows that the Babylonians had allowed the shrine at Assur to fall into disrepair while it was in their keeping. Babylonian inscriptions apparently show that Arrapha (Kirkuk) belonged to the Babylonians at least from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar onwards, and Neriglissar returned a cult statue to Arrapha (Dalley 1993: 136). To the west, tablets from Sheikh Hamad and Tell Halaf indicate Babylonian influence along the River Habur.

On the other hand, the Medes were probably controlling Erbil, they seem to have been in the vicinity of Harran at least in 555 BC, it is highly likely they were passing through Assyria in the years 590-585 BC when they were fighting against the Lydians, and when Cyrus attacked Lydia in 547 BC he crossed the Tigris below Erbil, before marching through Assyria, apparently without encountering any Babylonian opposition. The situation, then, is not straightforward. For a few years after 612 BC the Babylonians may have maintained a presence in the Nineveh region, and it could be that they brought some of the southern cities such as Assur and Kirkuk under their control, but how long these arrangements lasted and how effective they were is not clear. At the same time, there is no evidence that the Medes established a permanent presence in the area, with the possible exception of Erbil. However, they almost certainly used Assyria as a thoroughfare. The most probable situation, then, is that neither the Babylonians nor the Medes exercised any meaningful control over the Assyrian heartland, which remained in a backward state during this period.

This situation seems to be borne out by the archaeological record. There is evidence of some re-occupation at most of the main Assyrian centres, including Nimrud, Nineveh, Khorsabad and Assur, but it is of an impoverished nature, represented by so-called “squatter levels” which are characterised by beaten earth floors, flimsy partition walls and makeshift roofs. There is no credible evidence to suggest that the Assyrian palaces went on being used as before, and the presence of occasional later items such as a seated statue of Heracles found by Rassam at Nineveh or a sculptured stone lintel of Parthian date found by George Smith also at Nineveh certainly does not prove that Assyrian buildings were continuously inhabited. Post-Assyrian levels have also been identified at Khirbet Qasrij and Khirbet Khatuniyeh in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project. The pottery from these post-Assyrian levels, particularly at Nimrud, is scarcely distinguishable from pottery of the pre-sack period, but the introduction of a few new forms can be recognised, notably at Khirbet Qasrij. We can say little about other types of material culture.

For the Achaemenid period, the situation is similarly unclear. This is partly because of the lack of reliable historical sources, and partly because of the sparseness and uncertainty of the archaeological record. Nevertheless, some sort of picture is beginning slowly to emerge.

## (ii) The Sources

Unfortunately there are no cuneiform tablets from the Assyrian heartland that are securely dated to the Achaemenid period. A tablet from Tell Fisna in the Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project is thought by Jeremy Black to be Hellenistic (Black 1997), while a tablet

from Yarim Tepe is of uncertain date (Kuhrt 1995a; 250). There are a few tablets from Persepolis that record rations given to Assyrian workers, but they are not particularly informative (Kuhrt 1995a: 242). The same goes for the so-called ‘foundation charter’ in which Darius describes the construction of his palace at Susa. He lists the places which supplied raw materials, the people who helped in their transportation, and the craftsmen who worked them at Susa (Kent 1950: 142-4, DSf; Briant 2002: 172). Although this inscription exists in different versions with minor variations, the information about Assyria and Assyrians is consistent:<sup>1</sup> no raw materials or craftsmen came from Assyria, and the only role of the Assyrians (or Syrians) is to have transported the cedars of Lebanon as far as Babylon. Presumably they were floated down the Euphrates.

Next there is an interesting Aramaic document of c.410 BC issued by Arsames, satrap of Egypt, on behalf of his estate manager Nehtihor who is travelling from Babylonia to Egypt. The document asks officials in centres along the route, which passes through Assyria, to supply provisions to Nehtihor’s party (Kuhrt 1995b: 693; Briant 2002: 364). The following towns are named, all of which may be assumed to have been relatively prosperous administrative centres at this time: Lair (Assyrian Lahiru, probably Eski Kifri in the Diyala Valley)<sup>2</sup>; Arzuhi (Assyrian Arzuhina, perhaps Tell Chemchemal, 40 km east of Kirkuk); Arbela (Erbil); Halsu (location unknown); and Matalubash (Assyrian Ubaše, probably Tell Huwaish, on the River Tigris 20 km north of Assur).

There is some information, chiefly relating to conditions in rural Assyria, in the classical authors, which is of interest but is to be used with caution. For example, Xenophon in his *Anabasis* describes the journey taken by the 10,000 Greeks up the east bank of the Tigris and through the Assyrian heartland, past Nimrud and Nineveh. From Arrian we get a hint that the Assyrian countryside was prosperous, because he tells us that “he (Alexander) continued inland through the country called Mesopotamia, keeping on his left the Euphrates and the mountains of Armenia. On setting out from the Euphrates he did not take the direct route for Babylon, since by going the other road all supplies were easier to obtain for the army, green fodder for the horses and provisions from the country, and the heat was less intense” (Arrian, *Anabasis*, III.7.3.).

As the country of Assyria (no.VIII) covers an area much greater than the original Assyrian homeland, including the middle and upper Euphrates with much of modern Syria

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kuhrt’s comment that the Babylonian version of the text states that the work was done by ‘ebir nāri’ (Kuhrt 1995a: 242).

<sup>2</sup> Identifications follow Oates 1968: 59. See now Kuhrt 1995a: 244, and in particular for evidence that Matalubash is more plausibly to be identified as Tilbis near ‘Ana on the River Euphrates.

and part of south-east Turkey, it would be unsafe to infer much about Northern Iraq from Achaemenid-period pictorial representations and texts mentioning Assyria.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we should briefly deal with this evidence.

Firstly, there are the tribute bearers at Persepolis. Amongst the delegations shown on the east and north sides of the Apadana, no.VIII is now usually identified as Assyrians (Roaf 1983: 51, 62, 130; Briant 2002: 175).<sup>4</sup> The delegation consists of seven bearded men, two of whom are carrying bowls, one is carrying animal skins, one is carrying a length of cloth and two are leading rams (Walser 1966: pls.15, 51-53).<sup>5</sup> The men are wearing a long tunic that reaches down to the calves of their legs and is accompanied by a ribbed belt which is tied by tucking the fringed end underneath it. Around their heads they have a ridged band evidently made of the same textile material as the belt, similarly with a fringed end tied in the same way. On their feet they wear ankle-length boots with the laces tied in an elaborate bow. The bowls being carried by these men are simple carinated forms that develop from the Assyrian type and are widespread in Achaemenid material culture. Otherwise the association is with sheep – the rams, the animal skins and the ‘ream’ of cloth. This is completely what one might expect as the tribute of Assyria, where the low, undulating hills are ideal for breeding sheep. It is more difficult, however, to reconcile the dress of the figures with what we know from the Assyrian reliefs.

The same figures, wearing similar costume and again identified as Assyrians, are found amongst the throne-bearers in the doorway reliefs in the Central Building and in the Hall of 100 Columns at Persepolis (Schmidt 1953: pls.80/no.8, 111/no.E4; Walser 1966: fig.6/8; Briant 2002: 174, fig.10; Roaf 1983: 130). The throne-bearers at Naqsh-e Rostam that have been identified as Assyrian (Schmidt 1970: fig.49, no.17) are slightly different. They have knee-length tunics accompanied by a broad, flat belt, and in fact look rather more like the Assyrians on Assyrian reliefs than the tributaries.

Any survey of Northern Iraq in the Achaemenid period must take account of what relations there may have been with Iran at this period, and pertinent here is the influence of Assyrian art on Achaemenid sculpture. Of course, it cannot be disputed that there is substantial influence from Lydia and Ionia, as demonstrated by Nylander and others, but there is nevertheless a substantial Assyrian contribution. This is shown by the winged bulls,

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, there is a Minaean (South Arabian) inscription probably of Achaemenid date referring to a merchant caravan that has traded in Egypt, Assyria and trans-Euphrates (Briant 2002: 716), and there is a fortification tablet referring to a business trip to Assyria (Kuhrt 1995a: 242).

<sup>4</sup> But Walser, following Herzfeld and Schmidt, regards them as Cilicians (Walser 1966: 66).

<sup>5</sup> Other delegations of Assyrians at Persepolis occur in Darius’ Palace and in the Palace of Artaxerxes I (Schmidt 1953: pls.153B, 203C; Roaf 1983: 130).

the reliefs at Pasargadae, and the general concept of decorating palaces with sculpted stone reliefs. The Assyrian influence is particularly clear at Pasargadae. In Gate R, the entrance is thought to have been flanked by winged bulls (Stronach 1978: 44), while the 4-winged guardian figure (Stronach 1978: pls.43-46, fig.25) is essentially Assyrian in inspiration, although other influences are also evident, such as the Egyptian crown. In Palace S the entrances are flanked by reliefs, that even though only the bottom parts are preserved, are clearly Assyrian in style (Stronach 1978: pls.58-61, figs.34-36).<sup>6</sup> They show a human figure followed by a figure with bird's talons, probably a lion-demon (NW doorway), a human figure wearing a fish-cloak followed by a bull-man (SE doorway), two human figures accompanied by a hoofed quadruped (SW doorway), and part of a human foot (NE doorway).<sup>7</sup> At Persepolis we have the colossal gateway figures and the scenes of presentation to the king.

The question is, how was this Assyrian influence transmitted? Was there frequent contact between Northern Iraq and Fars, so that Achaemenid architects and stonemasons could visit the former Assyrian capital cities, and even if they could, what was visible? There is no easy answer to this question. There is no doubt that in the years 614-612 nearly all Assyrian palaces and public buildings were comprehensively burnt and destroyed. They certainly would not have been habitable, and in nearly all cases the roofs and the tops of the walls would have fallen into the rooms making it impossible to inspect any reliefs therein. However, there must have been some exceptions and it is likely that gateway figures in particular would have survived and still have been visible. It is possible that Achaemenid artists and planners might have seen the reliefs and gateway figures still in position, and deliberately copied some elements of them. It is also possible that the tradition was transmitted through sites which are not now known or in materials that have not survived.

It is similarly difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions about Assyrian-style objects found in Achaemenid contexts in Iran, particularly at Persepolis. Most probably such objects were brought back to Iran after the sack of the Assyrian centres in 612 BC, and are not evidence of objects being produced in Assyria in Assyrian style during the Achaemenid period. For example, there are Assyrian seals, a stone bowl with an inscription of Ashurbanipal, and beads, eyestones and other objects inscribed with the names of Sargon, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal (Schmidt 1953: 174, 177, 179, 181; Schmidt 1957: 42-45, 56-

---

<sup>6</sup> Boardman suggests (2000: 104) that the human figures have feet that are sculpted in the Greek style, but they are so poorly preserved that it is dangerous to draw such conclusions.

<sup>7</sup> Kawami has argued that the closest parallels for these figures are in the Palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh (Kawami 1972).

61, 81-84). I am less convinced that a massive bronze stand with three prowling lions (Schmidt 1957: pl.33) is Assyrian as suggested by Boardman (2000: 00).

### (iii) The Archaeological Evidence

Before reviewing the archaeological evidence it would be appropriate to draw attention to the difficulty of identifying Achaemenid pottery, particularly in areas such as Northern Iraq. It is now realised that ceramic forms that were in the past considered to be typical for the Achaemenid period in Southern Mesopotamia are not appropriate type fossils for Northern Mesopotamia (Simpson 1990: 130). But the position is not hopeless. The problem is that it is difficult to date an occupation level or a grave on the basis of a few pieces of pottery. Most large assemblages of pottery will contain a mixture of forms that are current, forms that existed in the previous period, and forms that continue into the next period. It is the *whole* assemblage that will be characteristic of a particular period. It is for this reason that it is important to publish large groups of pottery, particularly if they are homogeneous, and it is dangerous to draw conclusions on the basis of a limited number of specimens. Nevertheless the position is improving, and with the publication of more post-Assyrian assemblages, progress is being made. It is also becoming easier to recognise distinctive types of Achaemenid artefact, such as metal bowls, earrings, kohl pins, horse bits and ‘eye of Horus’ amulets.

### **Nimrud**

At Nimrud all the major buildings seem to have been destroyed in the sacks of 614 and 612 BC, which were of particular ferocity. After 612 BC there was some reoccupation characterised by beaten earth floors on top of the levelled-off destruction debris, flimsily built partition walls and graves. The pottery forms are said to be indistinguishable from those pre-dating the sack of 612 BC, leading to the assumption that the reoccupation did not last for very long. However that may be, traces of reoccupation in this so-called post-Assyrian period can be noted in the North-West Palace, the Burnt Palace and Nabu Temple complex, the Town-Wall Houses, Fort Shalmaneser, and the Palace of Adad-nirari III in the north-west corner of the outer town (Curtis 2004: 96-98).

For the following Achaemenid period we have the testimony of Xenophon who passed by here with the 10,000 Greek mercenaries in 401 BC. He describes Nimrud, which he calls Larissa, as “a large deserted city... Its wall was twenty-five feet in breadth and a hundred in height, and the whole circuit of the wall was two parasangs. It was built of clay

bricks, and rested upon a stone foundation twenty feet high... Near by this city was a pyramid of stone, a plethrum in breadth and two plethra in height; and upon this pyramid were many barbarians who had fled away from the neighbouring villages” (*Anabasis* III.IV.7-9).

Xenophon’s description of the city as being completely abandoned is interesting but not quite borne out by the archaeological evidence which seems to show that there was some Achaemenid-period occupation mainly in the central and southern parts of the acropolis mound, albeit occupation of a limited and impoverished nature. First, it is important to stress that it is inconceivable that any of the major Assyrian buildings could have somehow survived the sack and could have continued to be occupied into the Achaemenid period and even later. There are, however, traces of Achaemenid *reoccupation* in the Burnt Palace and Nabu Temple complex, the South-East Palace, the South-West Palace, the Town Wall Houses, and possibly the Central Palace, as Julian Reade has suggested (pers.comm.) that a large post-Assyrian building in this area could be Achaemenid.

In the Burnt Palace and Nabu Temple complex what is probably Achaemenid occupation has been labelled as phase H or phase 3 (Mallowan 1966: I, 286-7; Oates J. and D., 2001: 125). Of particular interest are traces of kilns on the south side of Room 47 in the Burnt Palace, together with red glass ingots<sup>8</sup> and slag. Mallowan originally dated these kilns to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (1954: 77, 82-83), but later ascribed them to c.200 BC (Mallowan 1966: I, 209-210). At the request of Professor D. Barag, however, a radiocarbon analysis of charcoal found together with the glass ingots was carried out in the British Museum Research Laboratory and yielded a date of 425 ± 50 BC (Barag 1985: 108-9). Therefore, Barag dates this glassmakers’ workshop to the Achaemenid period, and points to the fact that a lump of opaque red glass was found at Persepolis. A stamp seal also from the same level in Room 47 of the Burnt Palace may similarly be Achaemenid: it shows a stick-like figure seated on a chair and has ladder pattern decoration at the bottom (Mallowan 1966: I, 160-161, fig.95, 210, 33b, note; Parker 1955: 107, pl. 18/4). Mallowan dated this seal to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, but it has parallels with a group of bronze stamp seals of Achaemenid date.

In the Nimrud excavation registers, a number of metal objects are tentatively attributed to phase H (3) in the Burnt Palace, and could be of Achaemenid date. They come from Room 39, and comprise some bronze hinge elements, a bronze tripartite arrowhead, a bronze bead and a bronze strainer.

---

<sup>8</sup> One of these is now in the British Museum (BM 132163/1957-2-9, 10; Barag 1985: no.166).

From the Nabu Temple we should take note of a pipe lamp and a group of 7 pottery vessels<sup>9</sup> that were found beneath the floor of a Hellenistic house in the western courtyard NTS 15 (Oates, D & J., 1958: pl.XXVIII/17-24; Mallowan 1966: 298, figs.278-9). Oates and Oates say this group “may be tentatively ascribed to the Achaemenid period” (1958: 150). The beaker clearly derives from an Assyrian palace ware prototype, but is larger and heavier.

There was also some Achaemenid occupation in the South-East Palace (also called the Akropolis Palace or AB) to the south of the Nabu Temple. In the words of the excavators: “The first occupation level in the AB Palace after its destruction in 612 BC occurs about 1.00m above the Assyrian floor, and re-uses the walls of the throne-room and the hall AB 6. Vestiges of mud brick partition walls... can be seen dividing the Assyrian chambers into smaller rooms... Unfortunately very little material was recovered in direct association with this phase” (Oates and Oates 1958: 119). However, three pottery vessels were identified as Achaemenian, a deep footed bowl, a hemispherical bowl and a plate not very dissimilar in shape to the later Hellenistic fish-plates, but here lacking any paint or glaze (Oates and Oates 1958: pl.XXVIII/12-14; Mallowan 1966: I, fig.277). The hemispherical bowl is compared with pottery from the Achaemenid village at Susa (Ghirshman 1954: pl.25/1). Also from the same level in the South-East Palace were two ‘eye of Horus’ amulets (ND 6031, 6036), often regarded as hallmarks of Achaemenid period material culture.

In the palace of Adad-nirari III in the north-west corner of the outer town (PD5) there is evidence for Achaemenid occupation in the form of three distinctive bronze kohl sticks with castellated heads. Two of them (ND 3502, 3504) were found in the topsoil, but the third (ND 3392) was found in a grave<sup>10</sup> which also contained two triangular bronze fibulae and two stamp-seals in Late Babylonian style (Mallowan 1954: 162; Parker 1955: pl.XIX/1,8). Such kohl sticks are known from Deve Hüyük, Kamid el-Loz, Tell Jigan and Pasargadae. The occurrence of these ‘Babylonian’ seals in Achaemenid levels at Nimrud ties in with Moorey’s comment (1980a: 131) that in glyptic art so-called ‘Neo-Babylonian’ motifs long persisted.

There may also be some Achaemenid occupation in the upper levels of the Town Wall Houses on the north-east side of the Acropolis where eight levels of occupation were identified (Oates, J and D., 2001: 135).

During the course of his excavations at Nimrud in 1854 W.K. Loftus found a few items of undoubted Achaemenid date in the South-West Palace. These are illustrated in a

<sup>9</sup> ND 5018, 5020-2, 5024, 5026-8.

<sup>10</sup> Previously I identified this grave as post-Assyrian (2004: 97-98), but because of the kohl sticks this grave should be re-assigned to the Achaemenid period.



contemporary drawing by William Buntcher, the artist accompanying Loftus, which shows a bronze strainer and an ‘eye of Horus’ amulet (Curtis 1983: pl.VIII; 1997: pl.4). The strainer<sup>11</sup> (Moorey 1980: 186, pl.Ia) consists of a bowl with an elaborate handle terminating in a calf’s head. At the bottom of the handle is a lotus flower where the handle joins the bowl. This bronze strainer is very similar to another in the British Museum collection (Moorey 1980: 187, pl.Ib) obtained by C.L. Woolley in Aleppo. Moorey classifies these strainers as ‘western Achaemenid’.

Lastly, there is a gold cylinder seal in the British Museum collection showing a lion *en passant* in the Achaemenid style (Merrillees forthcoming: no.83)<sup>12</sup>. It was acquired from the Spencer-Churchill collection in 1966 and is alleged to be from Nimrud, but this provenance cannot be considered as reliable.

## Nineveh

The evidence for Achaemenid-period occupation at Nineveh is disappointingly meagre if not non-existent. The tone is set by Xenophon, who records:-

“From this place [Larisa/Nimrud] they marched one stage, six parsangs, to a great stronghold, deserted and lying in ruins. The name of this city was Mespila, and it was once inhabited by the Medes. The foundation of its wall was made of polished stone full of shells, and was fifty feet in breadth and fifty in height. Upon this foundation was built a wall of brick, fifty feet in breadth and a hundred in height; and the circuit of the wall was six parsangs”. (*Anabasis* III.IV.10-11).

There is very little other textual evidence on which we can call. It used to be thought that Nineveh was mentioned in the Cyrus Cylinder as one of those places to which cult statues were returned, but Irving Finkel has demonstrated that the reading ‘Nineveh’ in the text is impossible. Stephanie Dalley has suggested (1993) that a group of Neo-Elamite tablets now in the British Museum should post-date 612 BC, but this is disputed by Reade (1992).

As is to be expected, Nineveh was extensively sacked in 612 BC, and may indeed have been the chief target of the invaders. There is widespread evidence of a destruction at this time in the palaces, in the temples, in the gates and in the outer town. There is some evidence for reoccupation in the post-Assyrian period in the form of repairs to the Nabu Temple and later structures in the South-West Palace (Curtis 2004: 98; Reade 2000: 428). Also, in Area KG in the outer town to the east of the Kuyunjik mound, the team from the

---

<sup>11</sup> BM 118462

<sup>12</sup> BM 134772/1966-2-18, 33

University of Berkeley identified 3 levels (4-6) which were thought “to represent squatter occupations of probable sixth century date” (Stronach 1989-90: 108). The pottery from Level 3 is said (*ibid*) to “suggest an occupation in the post-Assyrian period which may not have been recorded previously at Nineveh”, but tantalisingly we learn no more about this level from the reports. Level 2 is thought to be Parthian.

From Nineveh there are two cylinder seals in the British Museum collection that we must consider. The first was acquired in 1854 from Captain Felix Jones who is said to have found it at Nineveh. It shows a robed figure facing a pair of antithetical goats on either side of a tree. Merrillees (forthcoming: no.71) believes this seal to be proto-Achaemenid or Achaemenid, but Collon (2001: no.192) identifies it as Neo-Babylonian. The second seal was excavated at Nineveh by R.Campbell Thompson in 1930-31 (Thompson and Hamilton 1932: pl.LXIII/2). It is fragmentary, but shows a rampant sphinx and tree and part of a Late Elamite cuneiform inscription<sup>13</sup>. The seal was found in a level above the courtyard of the Late Assyrian Ishtar Temple, and because of the inscription is included by Merrillees in her catalogue of pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid cylinder seals (Merrillees forthcoming: no.78). She concludes, however, that the style of the sphinx is Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian, and the seal could of course pre-date the Achaemenid period.

Thus, improbable as it may seem, no Achaemenid period occupation has yet been certainly attested at Nineveh.

### **Khorsabad**

At Khorsabad, occupation continued until the end of the Late Assyrian period, as shown for example by the eponym lists which refer to two Assyrian governors of Khorsabad in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Probably the traces of destruction noted in various parts of the site date from a sack in 612 BC and not at the end of Sargon’s reign as suggested by Loud. Secondary occupation after the destruction as evidenced by later pavements, blocked doorways and crude rebuildings was noted in Sargon’s Palace, the Sin Temple, the Nabu Temple, Residences K and Z and Palace F (Curtis 2004: 99). As most of this late occupation seems to follow on from the destruction, the probability is that it should mostly be dated to the post-Assyrian period (i.e. 612-539 BC), and this seems to be borne out by the nature of the associated material. There is evidence, however, in the form of some diagnostic small finds, that this occupation sometimes extended into the Achaemenid period.

---

<sup>13</sup> Professor Rudiger Schmitt has studied this inscription and found it incomprehensible.

First, there is a silver disc-shaped earring (Loud and Altman 1938: pl.60/166; Rehm 1992: 147, 169, no. F90). This is a well-known Achaemenid type that has flowers, sometimes stylised, around the edge and a hollow part in the top centre (e.g. Rehm 1992: figs.118-120). There is sometimes decoration on the flat central part of the earring. It looks as if this is the case with the Khorsabad example, but the form of the decoration is not clear from the published photograph.

Then, there are two bracelets both of silver. The first has ends that now overlap (it is probably distorted from its original shape) and terminals in the form of ram's heads with elaborately curled horns (Loud and Altman 1938: pl.59/123; Rehm 1992: 22, 59-60, no.A51). Similar terminals can be found amongst the Oxus Treasure jewellery (Dalton 1964: nos.132-133). The second Khorsabad bracelet has terminals in the form of animal heads that are probably ibex or goat's heads as suggested by the excavators (Loud and Altman 1938: pl.59/127; Rehm 1992: 40, 69, no.A111). An Achaemenid date for this bracelet is suggested by what Moorey refers to (1980: 77) as the "inswing" of the hoop opposite the terminals, and is thought to be a diagnostic feature of Achaemenid period bracelets. It may be noted, for example, in the famous griffin-headed bracelets of the Oxus Treasure (Dalton 1964: pl.I), and is certainly missing from Assyrian period bracelets (cf. e.g., the Nimrud Treasure).

The disc-shaped earring comes together with other material from "pockets hollowed in (the) southwest wall of (the) Nabu Temple forecourt" (Loud and Altman 1938: 58, 98). It is quite unclear whether this material was found together and whether it is contemporary. The material in question is a square "silver ornament", a silver fibula, 5 cylindrical silver beads with circular pendants, about 20 miscellaneous silver beads, and 9 silver coins of Alexander the Great (Loud and Altman 1938: pl.60/167-170). Apart from the coins of Alexander and the silver earring none of this material is particularly distinctive, and an Achaemenid date cannot be excluded for the remaining silver jewellery. If the material *was* all found together, and this is far from clear, it would seem to be a small silver hoard collected together and buried probably in the Hellenistic period but possibly even later. By this time, the disc-shaped earring at least would have been an antique.

The two silver bracelets come from "(the) latest occupation over (the) Nabu Temple" (Loud and Altman 1938: 98); there is no material obviously associated with them.

## Assur

In common with the other main Assyrian centres, Assur was comprehensively sacked at the end of the Late Assyrian period (Andrae 1977: 237-248). What happened thereafter is obscure. Post-canonical tablets mentioning the eponym Pašî do not necessarily date from post-612 BC, and neither do tablets from the goldsmiths' archive written in an as yet unidentified language. The possible mention of a Babylonian governor of Assur in a Sippar tablet is unproven.<sup>14</sup> After the sack there was extensive reoccupation at Assur, of the same type as noted at other Assyrian sites, and some new building, but the date of this is generally unclear. Two small shrines built in the forecourt of the Assur Temple (Andrae 1977: 237-9, fig.216) could be Late Babylonian, but they might be as late as Parthian in date (Roaf, pers.comm.). The Nabû Temple was restored (Reade 2000: 428), but exactly when is unclear. There are, then, no buildings that can be attributed to the Achaemenid period. However, there are some indications that Assur was occupied at this period.

Firstly, Assur is listed in the Cyrus Cylinder as one of the places to which cult statues were returned after Cyrus' conquest of Babylon (Berger 1975, 198f., line 30). The inference here is that at least at the beginning of the Achaemenid period, Assur had a shrine or shrines and was still a place worthy of note. The next reference is more uncertain. In his description of the march of the 10,000 through Assyria in 401 BC, Xenophon refers to "a large and prosperous city named Caenae" which was seen on the opposite (west) bank of the River Tigris (*Anabasis* II. IV. 28). From this city "the barbarians brought over loaves, cheeses and wine, crossing upon rafts made of skins."<sup>15</sup> Following Andrae, David Oates makes a convincing case for the identification of Caenae with Assur (Oates 1968: 60, n.2), but this is not universally accepted<sup>16</sup>. All that we may conclude is that Assur was *possibly* a flourishing city at this time, but this remains uncertain.

Although there are no building remains at Assur that can certainly be ascribed to the Achaemenid period, there are traces of Achaemenid occupation. These are in the form of a few graves that may belong to the Achaemenid period. The problem here is that the graves at Assur are notoriously badly dated in the excavation report (Haller 1954), and few of the objects from the graves are published in either photographs or drawings. Only when a full and proper study of the graves has been undertaken will we be in a position to assess how many of them may belong to the Achaemenid period. In the meantime, we may note that a

<sup>14</sup> For references to these textual sources, see Curtis forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> Loeb Classical Library

<sup>16</sup> Thus Hrouda (in Andrae 1977: 318, n.218) expresses reservations and refers to R.D. Barnett's identification of Caenae with Tikrit. See also Joannès 1995: 194, 197.

pair of silver earrings from grave 715 are clearly Achaemenid (Haller 1954: 59, pl.16d). Although Haller only refers to one earring, it is clear from the published photograph that there are parts of two. One of them has been restored and is now in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin (Jakob-Rost 1962: no.7). It is circular, with globules (stylised flowers?) around the outside, a hollow centre and a hinged clasp at the top. A very similar earring is known from the German excavations at Babylon (Reuther 1926: pl.76/138). The fragment of the second earring (Haller 1954: pl.16d) appears to have globules on the inside as well as the outside edges, similar to the earring from the silver hoard found by Hormuzd Rassam at Babylon (Reade 1986: pl.IIIa; Rehm 1992: fig.116, no.F.85). Both earrings may be compared with the silver earring found at Khorsabad, but they lack the central decorated part. These earrings were found in an oval, bath-shaped clay coffin with a base (Haller 1954: 58, fig.71), on the outside edge of the inner wall, together with a pottery bowl, a pointed pottery bottle, a copper finger-ring and beads of silver, agate and glass. Unfortunately, these items are not published. On the basis of the form of the coffin and the pottery bottle Haller dates the grave to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, demonstrating the wild inaccuracy of some of his dating.

There is also a problem with Haller's dating of grave 811, which he erroneously dates to the Achaemenid period. Amongst the distinctive objects from this grave, which contained three bodies, is a chalcedony stamp-seal showing a goddess, probably Ishtar, standing on the back of a lion, of Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian date<sup>17</sup>, but not Achaemenid as mentioned by Haller. Then there are a chalcedony stamp seal showing a gazelle and a jasper stamp seal with a crude representation of a 4-winged genie, neither of them particularly Achaemenid in style. Other objects from this grave include an inlaid silver finger-ring with rosette-decorated bezel; a bronze fibula; a frit seal with linear decoration; a gold earring; two silver earrings; beads of silver, agate, frit and glass;<sup>18</sup> an alabastron; a copper bowl; a very small pottery bottle; and a glazed pottery bottle. There is no particular reason to think that any of this material is Achaemenid in date, and a Late Babylonian date is probably to be preferred for this grave.

Some time ago I suggested (Curtis 1997: 15) that the hoard of silver jewellery found by the Iraq Department of Antiquities in a jar in Room 63 of the New Palace at Assur (Gullini

<sup>17</sup> My colleague Dominique Collon suggests it is more likely to be Late Babylonian.

<sup>18</sup> It is unclear why Rehm has included beads from this grave in her study of Achaemenid jewellery (Rehm 1992: 101/D.1; 103/D.3.b; 105/D.8.b). It is also unclear why she has included two earrings from Assur now in the Vorderasiatisches Museum and published by Jakob-Rost (1962: nos.5, 12). One has a simple lunate shape and the other has a vase-shaped pendant beneath the holder (Rehm 1992: nos.F.26, F.61). Neither is obviously Achaemenid.

*et al.* 1985: nos.214-221) might be of post-Assyrian or Achaemenid date, on the grounds that the two silver bracelets with lotus flower terminals are paralleled by an example at al Mina, dated by Woolley to c.520-430 BC (Woolley 1938: 145, 167, fig.23). However, bracelets of this type occur amongst the jewellery from the recently discovered royal tombs at Nimrud (Hussein and Suleiman 2000: 321, pl.112), definitely of Neo-Assyrian date, so I am now inclined to date the Assur hoard to the Late Assyrian period.

### **Erbil**

Unfortunately, the lack of proper excavations at Erbil means that we have no archaeological information about this large and important site, either in the Late Assyrian period or in the post-Assyrian and Achaemenid periods. There are a few scattered references, however, that indicate Erbil was an important centre in the Achaemenid period. Thus, we know from the Bisitun inscription that the rebel Çissantakhma, a Sagartian, was put to death at Erbil (Kent 1950: 124, S33). Erbil is also mentioned as one of the centres where Nehtihor was to obtain provisions (see above), and according to the Nabonidus Chronicle, Cyrus “mustered his army and crossed the Tigris below Arbail (Erbil)” when marching to Lydia in 547 BC (Grayson 1975: 107, lines 15-16). Then there is the testimony of Arrian, who refers to Erbil as a famous and well-known place (*Anabasis* VI.11.6), and he and the other Alexander historians describe the great riches that were found there by Alexander after the Battle of Gaugamela (for refs., see Kuhrt 1995a: 246-7).

### **Tell ed-Daim**

Significant evidence for the Achaemenid period comes from the multi-period site of Tell ed-Daim on the Lesser Zab to the north-east of Kirkuk (al-Tekriti 1960). On top of an important prehistoric mound was a substantial and well-constructed building of Achaemenid date that may have been a fortified palace, perhaps for a local governor. Associated with this building are bronze wall-plaques with embossed floral decoration, more elaborate than their Assyrian counterparts; a bronze snaffle-bit of a type well-known from Achaemenid contexts at Persepolis, Deve Hüyük and elsewhere (Moorey 1980: nos.227-229, with commentary); and kohl tubes with ribbed decoration tapering towards the top. The pottery (al-Tekriti 1960: pl.5, centre) has obvious parallels with the pottery from Nimrud that we have identified as Achaemenid, and there are in addition two pottery scoops that can be compared with silver examples of Achaemenid date from the Erzincan area of eastern Turkey, perhaps Altin Tepe (Dalton 1964: pl.XXIII).

### **Eski Mosul Dam Salvage Project**

Remains of the Achaemenid period have been identified at several of the sites excavated in this project, in the upper Tigris valley to the north-west of Mosul but still within the Assyrian heartland. The most significant of these is Kharabeh Shattani. Following a 2m x 2m sondage conducted there by myself in 1983, the University of Edinburgh excavated in 1983 and 1984 (Baird, Campbell and Watkins 1995). The site is principally of the Halaf period, but from disturbed surface deposits and pits dug into the Halaf levels a collection of pottery was recovered that has been identified as belonging to the Achaemenid period (J. Goodwin and St J. Simpson in Baird *et al.* 1995: 91-146). The case remains unproven. The problem is that the pottery is very fragmentary, with only two complete profiles amongst all the published pieces. Also, we do not know if all the pottery is contemporary. There is certainly no assurance that it is a homogeneous group, so we should be cautious about drawing conclusions. The most convincing case for an Achaemenid date can be made, to my mind, for 4 bowls or beakers (*ibid* figs.36/9-10, 37/1,5), which, as St John Simpson has pointed out (*ibid*:143), find parallels in Achaemenid levels at sites such as Susa and Pasargadae. They are a development of the Assyrian carinated form, and although with flared rims the shoulders are gently rounded. On the other hand, as recognised by Jacqui Goodwin (*ibid*:102), the pottery from Kharabeh Shattani has many parallels with the assemblage from Khirbet Qasrij which I have argued is post-Assyrian, i.e. 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Curtis 1989). Possibly the Kharabeh Shattani assemblage is mixed, with at least both periods (i.e. post-Assyrian and Achaemenid) represented. The small finds from the so-called Achaemenid level at Kharabeh Shattani are not particularly informative and include clay spindle whorls, two fragmentary iron sickle blades, and a bronze plate optimistically identified as a horse's forehead plaque. Of more interest from the present point of view is a bronze finger-ring with a crouching animal engraved on the bezel (*ibid*: fig.59/2). Such rings in the Greek style are widespread in the Achaemenid empire, as pointed out by Dianne Rowan (*ibid*: 163).

Elsewhere in the Eski Mosul project, one of the graves excavated by the Japanese expedition at Tell Jigan (Grave 22) appears to be Achaemenid in date. Accompanying the body were a conical kohl pot with ribbed decoration and a bronze pin with a castellated top (Ii and Kawamata 1984-85: fig.18, pl.36/220-221). Both of these objects are of a distinctive Achaemenid type. Unfortunately, none of the published pottery appears to come from this grave. Then, the Polish mission identified a post-Assyrian level (DI) at Tell Rijim

Omar Dalle (Bieliński 1987: 17), but the pottery and finds from this site are not yet published. Graves post-dating the latest levels on the site had no grave-goods.

At the site of Khirbet Qasrij a British Museum team excavated in 1983-84 part of an industrial complex with a large assemblage of pottery which was dated to the post-Assyrian period (Curtis 1989). Pottery of similar type occurring immediately after the Assyrian destruction level and thus supporting the original identification, was found in level 3 at the nearby site of Khirbet Khatuniyeh (Curtis and Green 1997: 91). At neither site does occupation seem to continue into the Achaemenid period.

### **Other Centres**

Xenophon records that after passing Nimrud and Nineveh, the Ten Thousand turned to the north-west, following the east bank of the River Tigris. Here they found “there was an abundance of corn in the villages” (*Anabasis* III.IV.18) and after about five days of marching “they caught sight of a palace of some sort, with many villages round about it ... In these villages they remained for three days, not only for the sake of the wounded, but likewise because they had provisions in abundance – flour, wine, and great stores of barley that had been collected for horses, all these supplies having been gathered together by the acting satrap of the district” (*Anabasis* III.IV.24-32). Unfortunately we do not know where this palace was, but Layard assumes it must have been near modern Zakho (Layard 1853: 61, and map opp. p.686).<sup>19</sup> In any event, it testifies to the rich agricultural resources of this region and the existence of a satrap’s palace.

### **(iv) Conclusions**

On the face of it, the available evidence appears to be conflicting. There is evidence only for sporadic occupation at the former Assyrian centres of Nimrud, Nineveh, Khorsabad and Assur, and outside these centres only a few Achaemenid period sites have been identified with confidence: Tell ed-Daim, Tell Jigan and perhaps Kharabeh Shattani. By contrast, the classical authors imply that the countryside was prosperous. We must certainly move away from the idea that Assyria was a wasteland: Northern Iraq is potentially rich agriculturally, and even though the quality of the harvest is dependent on the spring rainfall, in a good year (e.g. 2003) it can be excellent. It is unlikely that this rich agricultural potential was not exploited. However, it is clear that occupation at the former major Assyrian centres was

---

<sup>19</sup> Joannès (1995) does not discuss the route of the Ten Thousand between Mosul and Cizre.



sparse and patchy. The likelihood is that settlement was mainly in villages at plain level or on small, sometimes prehistoric mounds such as Tell ed-Darim and Kharabeh Shattani. Graves on larger mounds such as Nimrud, Assur and Tell Jigan are not evidence of occupation *on* those sites, as graves are often dug into prominent local landmarks, for example at Balawat (Curtis 2002). Settlements on the plain are notoriously difficult to find, and are often discovered by chance. Even then, we are not yet confident in our ability to identify Achaemenid pottery. However, the situation is slowly improving and some type fossils are starting to emerge, and in due course it is likely that we will see an increasing number of Achaemenid village settlements being identified.

The picture of a flourishing rural economy is borne out by the itinerary of Nehtihor, by the testimony of the classical authors, and by the tribute of the ‘Assyrian’ delegation at Persepolis. There seems also to have been stability, to judge from the fact that the ‘royal road’ ran across Assyria. It is sometimes supposed that Assyria was an economic backwater because the road ran from Susa to Erbil via Mandali, and then turns westwards, thus avoiding the southern part of Assyria (Roux 1964: 343-4) but until very recent times the main road from Baghdad to Mosul ran up the east side of the Tigris via Kirkuk. It is likely, then, that the Assyrian countryside was stable and prosperous. At the same time, there is no evidence for *major* urban centres, with the possible exception of Erbil, and it is doubtful whether they existed.

## **Bibliography**

al-Tekriti, A.Q., 1960. ‘The excavations at Tell ed-Daim (Dokan)’, *Sumer* XVI: 93-109 (Arabic section).

Andrae, W., 1977. *Das wiedererstandene Assur*, new impression edited by B.Hrouda, München.

Baird, D., Campbell, S., and Watkins, T. (eds.), 1995. *Excavations at Kharabeh Shattani II*, University of Edinburgh, Department of Archaeology, Occasional Paper no.18.

Barag, D., 1985. *Catalogue of Western Asiatic Glass in the British Museum I*, London.

Bieliński, P., 1987. ‘Tell Raffaana and Tell Rijim 1984-85’, *Researches on the Antiquities of the Saddam Dam Salvage Project and Other Researches*, Baghdad: 13-19.

Black, J.A., 1997. ‘Hellenistic cuneiform writing from Assyria: the tablet from Tell Fisna’, *Al-Rāfidān* 18: 229-238.

Boardman, J., 2000. *Persia and the West: an Archaeological Investigation of the Genesis of Achaemenid Art*, London.

- Briant, P., 2002. *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, Winona Lake, Indiana.
- Collon, D., 2001. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum V: Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Periods*, London.
- Curtis, J.E., 1983. 'Some axe-heads from Chagar Bazar and Nimrud', *Iraq* 45: 73-81.
- Curtis, J.E., 1989. *Excavations at Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij*, Saddam Dam Report 10, London.
- Curtis, J.E., 1997 (ed.). *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Persian Period: Conquest and Imperialism 539-331 BC*, London.
- Curtis, J.E., and Green, A.R., 1997. *Excavations at Khirbet Khatuniyeh*, Saddam Dam Report 11, London.
- Curtis, J.E., 2002. 'Reflections on Balawat', *Of Pots and Plans: Papers ... presented to David Oates*, London: 54-66.
- Curtis, J.E., 2004. 'The Assyrian heartland in the period 612-539 BC', in G.B. Lianfranchi, R. Rollinger and M.D. Roaf (eds.), *Continuity of Empire: Assyria, Media, Persia*, proceedings of a conference at Padua 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> April 2001, Padua: 95-109.
- Dalley, S., 1993. 'Nimrud after 612', *Altorientalische Forschungen* 20: 134-147.
- Dalton, O.M., 1964. *The Treasure of the Oxus with Other Examples of Early Oriental Metal-Work*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London.
- Finkel, I.L., 1997. 'No Nineveh in the Cyrus Cylinder', *NABU*: 23, note 24.
- Ghirshman, R., 1954. *Village Perse-Achéménide*, MDAI XXXVI, Paris.
- Grayson, A.K., 1975. *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Texts from Cuneiform Sources 5, Locust Valley.
- Gullini, G., et al. (eds.), 1985. *The Land Between Two Rivers*, exhibition catalogue, Turin.
- Haller, A., 1954. *Die Gräber und Gräfte von Assur*, WVDO-G 65, Berlin.
- Hussein, M.M., and Suleiman, A., 2000. *Nimrud: a City of Golden Treasures*, Baghdad.
- Jakob-Rost, L., 1962. 'Zum Ohrschmuck der Assyrer', *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Forschungen und Berichte* 5: 34-39.
- Ii, H., and Kawamata, M., 1984-85. 'The excavations at Tell Jigān by the Japanese archaeological expedition: a preliminary report on the first season of work', *Al-Rāfidān* V-VI: 151-214.

- Joannès, F., 1995. 'L'itinéraire des Dix-Mille en Mésopotamie et l'apport des sources cunéiformes', in P.Briant (ed.), *Dans les pas de Dix-Mille*, PALLAS 43: 173-199.
- Kawami, T.S., 1972. 'A possible source for the sculptures of the Audience Hall, Pasargadae', *Iran X*: 146-148.
- Kent, R.G., 1953. *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, New Haven, Connecticut.
- Kuhrt, A., 1990. 'Achaemenid Babylonia: sources and problems', *Achaemenid History IV*: 177-194.
- Kuhrt, A. 1995a. 'The Assyrian heartland in the Achaemenid period', in P.Briant (ed.), *Dans les pas de Dix-Mille*, PALLAS 43: 239-254.
- Kuhrt, A. 1995b. *The Ancient Near East*, 2 vols., London and New York.
- Layard, A.H., 1853. *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, London.
- Loud, G., and Altman, C.B., 1938. *Khorsabad II: The Citadel and the Town*, OIP 40, Chicago.
- Mallowan, M.E.L., 1954. 'The excavations at Nimrud (Kalhu), 1953', *Iraq XVI*: 59-163.
- Mallowan, M.E.L., 1966. *Nimrud and its Remains*, 2 vols., London.
- Merrillees, P.H., forthcoming. *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum VI: Pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid Periods*, London.
- Moorey, P.R.S., 1980a. *Cemeteries of the First Millennium B.C. at Deve Hüyük*, BAR-S87, Oxford.
- Moorey, P.R.S., 1980b. 'Metal wine-sets in the Ancient Near East', *Iranica Antiqua* 15: 181-197.
- Oates, D., 1968. *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq*, London.
- Oates, J., 1991. 'The fall of Assyria (635-609 B.C.)', *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 162-193.
- Oates, D. and J., 2001. *Nimrud: an Assyrian Imperial City Revealed*, London.
- Oates, D. and J., 1958. 'Nimrud 1957: the Hellenistic settlement', *Iraq* 20: 114-157.
- Parker, B., 1955. 'Excavations at Nimrud, 1949-1953; seals and seal impressions', *Iraq XVII*: 93-125.
- Reade, J.E., 1986. 'A hoard of silver currency from Achaemenid Babylonia', *Iran XXIV*: 79-89.
- Reade, J.E., 1992. 'The Elamite tablets from Nineveh', *NABU*: 87-88, note 119.

- Reade, J.E., 2000. 'Ninive (Nineveh)', *RIA* 9: 388-433.
- Rehm, E., 1992. *Der Schmuck der Achämeniden*, AVO 2, Münster.
- Reuther, O., 1926. *Die Innenstadt von Babylon*, WVDO-G 47, Leipzig.
- Roaf, M.D., 1983. *Sculptures and Sculptors at Persepolis*, Iran XXI, London.
- Roux, G., 1964. *Ancient Iraq*, London.
- Schmidt, E.F., 1953. *Persepolis I*, OIP LXVIII, Chicago.
- Schmidt, E.F., 1957. *Persepolis II*, OIP LXIX, Chicago.
- Schmidt, E.F., 1970. *Persepolis III*, OIP LXX, Chicago.
- Simpson, St.J., 1990. 'Iron Age crop storage and ceramic manufacture in rural Mesopotamia: a review of the British Museum excavations at Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij in Northern Iraq', *Institute of Archaeology Bulletin* 27: 119-140.
- Stronach, D.B., 1989-90. 'Excavations at Nineveh, 1987', *Sumer* 46: 107-108.
- Stronach, D.B., 1978. *Pasargadae*, Oxford.
- Thompson, R.C., and Hamilton, R.W., 1932. 'The British Museum excavations on the Temple of Ishtar at Nineveh, 1930-31', *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* XIX: 55-116.
- Walser, G., *Die Völkerschaften auf der Reliefs von Persepolis*, Teheraner Forschungen 2, Berlin.
- Woolley, C.L., 1938. 'The excavations at al Mina, Sueidia, II', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* LVIII: 133-170.