



All Things Assyrian

The Assyrian Identity of Turabdin

Posted 2010-01-11 21:52 GMT

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Historical Turabdin has occasionally been described as an Aramean heart land, but a study from 2006 reveals Turabdin to have been more Assyrian than most would guess.

Historian Karen Radner published in 2006 a study of the geographic conditions between the known Assyrian heartland around the city of Nineveh and the Turabdin area, in today's south eastern Turkey. The title of Radners study is: "How to reach the upper Tigris, the route through the Turabdin." In her study Radner suggests the common view regarding Turabdin as an area outside Mesopotamia is no longer valid as new discoveries show the area belonged to the Mesopotamian landscape and that it is far more accessible from the south than what historians were guessing. Karen Radners official title is "Reader in Ancient Near Eastern History" and she is based at the faculty of history at the University College London. At the time of writing this article Radner informs that nothing new has surfaced since the publication of her paper in 2006.

The first time Turabdin is mentioned in Assyrian sources is from the time of King Adad Nirari who lived around 1300 before Christ. The name the Assyrians used for Turabdin was "Kashieri." Radner points to the possibility of the word "Kashieri" to be Hurrian since the area was first dominated by the Hurrians, and the name Kashieri is found in Hurrian texts. The earliest sources on Kashieri from 1300 B.C to 1200 B.C reveal that the Hurrians were the dominant ethnic group in the area. It was also this period which saw the Assyrian takeover of Kashieri as well as the Gozarto area south of Kashieri. In parallel with the Assyrian takeover traces are found of Aramean settlers to the Kashieri area.

The Arameans seem to have settled in small numbers at first and they did not constitute any threat against the Assyrian state during their first century in Kashieri. It's not until the reign of King Assur Bel Kala between the years 1073-1056 B.C Aramean tribes, which had by now grown in numbers, started to rebel against the state. Beginning from King Assur Bel Kalas reign and almost exactly 200 years on battles were fought between different Aramean tribes in Turabdin and the Assyrian state. This is evident from the Assyrian royal archives transcribed by archeologists. Through these archives we learn that the King Assurnasirpal carried out a six day war campaign in the year 879 B.C with the aim of subduing different cities in Turabdin. The king captured the city of "Matiatu," today's Midyat, on the second day of the campaign and erected a victory stele in the town. Radner notes that this stele is still to be found, like many other artifacts which assyriologists suspect are hidden in the soil of Turabdin. The battles between the Assyrian state and its Aramean settlers in Turabdin come to an abrupt end with a final battle campaign by king Shalmaneser III in the year of 855 B.C. "In my fifth regnal year, I ascended to Kashiari and captured eleven fortified cities." There are no more notes on battles in Kashieri in the Assyrian royal archives and Radner draws the conclusion that: "After this, the Assyrian control over the Kashieri region seems to be firmly established."

One conclusion we can draw from the facts Radner supplies us with is that the Arameans, unlike the Hurrians and Assyrians, never took control over Turabdin. Most facts in Radners study point to the possibility of the Arameans being integrated in the Assyrian empire, as the Hurrians before them. This seconds the theory of assyriologist Simo Parpola on the assimilation policy of the Assyrian rulers. Radner remains committed to the main topic of the study and puts effort into explaining how the ancient Mesopotamians could access the Turabdin and reach the settlements and trade colonies along the northern part of the Tigris river. She informs us that the Tigris is

wild with a rapid stream until the town of Gziro (Turkish Cizre), where the Mesopotamian plain starts. The rapid stream hindered people from using the river to get to the Turabdin. The remaining option was to take the country road. The most used road went right across Turabdin. It began at the Sufan Cay plain, an area circa 25 kilometers west of Gziro and continued north towards a settlement called "Basebrina" in the Assyrian sources. That settlement is most likely equal to today's Bsorino village in Turabdin which is also called Basebrin. From here the road continued northwest towards Midyat until it reached the Tigris.

Historians assumed for many years that the mountain range at the southern point of Turabdin defined a cultural and geographic boundary between Turabdin and Mesopotamia. It was also assumed that the Hurrians had this mountain range as their northern border. Recent excavations reveal however that both the Hurrians and Assyrians had a presence in Turabdin already during the second millennium before Christ. Archeologists have unearthed an Assyrian archive from 1100 BC at the northern torrent of the Tigris in a place called Giricano. The archive reveals the area was originally Hurrian but was taken over by Assyrians who gave the settlement an Assyrian name "Dunnu-Sha-Uzibi." Just across the river bank archeologists have unearthed a big Assyrian trade colony with the name "Tushu" or "Tushan." Assyrian tablets reveal the settlement to be the provincial capital in northern Assyria. "Kurkh" is another excavation site in northern Turabdin which confirms the early presence of Assyria in Turabdin. Taken together, these findings have changed the perception of ancient Turabdin in the minds of historians. The area is no longer seen to have been outside Mesopotamia but as a fully integrated part of it, both geographically and culturally.

As stated earlier, King Shalmanessers campaign ended the riots in Turabdin in 855 BC and references to Turabdin in the Assyrian sources becomes scarce hereafter. The name "Kashieri" is however mentioned twice during King Ashur Banipals rein in the 600s.

At several points in her study Radner notes the lack of archeological finds in Turabdin due to the limited excavations carried out in the area so far. The few finds include Assyrian cylinder stamps found in the village of Miden (referred to as "Middo" in ancient Assyrian sources) as well as in other places in Turabdin. The cylinder stamps, used in the ancient world to sign clay tablets, are seen by archeologists as an indication of the soil of the area being full of remains. In one of the tablets the words "wine farms in Kashieri" is found on a list of areas to be tax exempted by the king. In another tablet from the same period we learn of a certain Shumma-Ilani who is "town governor of Arkahu which is in Kashieri" to have been involved in a civil case in a court. The name "Arkahu" still lives on today in the Assyrian village of Arkah in Turabdin. Several ancient names for places in Turabdin have remained in use till today. For example the name "Mardiane" today's Mardin and Shura, which is believed to be the modern town of Sawro. Another recognizable place name is "Asihu," which is today spelled "Azekh." Asihu is first mentioned during the reign of King Adad Nerari III (810-738). A clay tablet from that time informs us that "Qarha, son of Adda-Rahimi from Asihu" sold a piece of land to another person. Another interesting find related to this place is a black stone with Assyrian cuneiform from the 800th century BC. The stone, which was bought by the archeological museum of Diyarbakir during the 1960s, is believed to have formed part of the main entrance of a large building. Zazabuha is another ancient place name which lives on till today in the form of the village of Zaz. Likewise the ancient name "Kapar-Tatu" is recognized by Radner in today's Assyrian language as "Kfaruttho." The prefix "Kapar" means village in ancient Assyrian. The word has transformed into "Kfar" in classical Assyrian and is found as a prefix in Assyrian place names such as Kfarburan, Kfarze and Kfarbe.

A great part of Radners study is devoted to a special mountainous area in Turabdin known as Turo d'Izlo. Named "Izalla" or Azalla" in ancient Assyrian documents the area stretches south of Midyat until Nisibin at today's Turkish-Syrian border and until Azekh in the north eastern direction. It is a limestone plateau coated by a layer of basalt stemming from a long extinct volcano. Its designation in the classical Assyrian from the Christian era is "Turo D'malbash," meaning the "Clothed mountain" a clear reference to the layer of basalt. Several kinds of volcanic stones are found in the area, among them pumice stone, often used for polishing. The ancient Assyrians knew very well about the usefulness of this kind of stones and many references are found in clay tablets of "stones from Izalla" brought in for polishing valuable items from the temples.

Izalla is also described as a wine producing area in the Assyrian texts. Radner notes that wild winegrapes are common there and that the volcanic composition of the soil gives the area good conditions for wine agriculture until today. This could explain the popularity of Izalla already in ancient times. Clay tablets reveal that the royal Assyrian chariot driver "Remanni-Adad" bought two wine farms in Izalla in the year 666 BC. Karin Radner shows that name Izalla was in fact synonymous with wine in Assyria, just as the name Bordeaux today is synonymous with wine in France. In an ancient word list known as The practical vocabulary of Nineveh, the section on wine bears the heading "wine from Izalla." Ample proof exists of wine trade between Izalla and the city of Ashbury.

In the end of her study Radner mentions, in passing, a rebellion by the inhabitants of Izalla against the Babylonian king Nabopolassar, who captured the Assyrian capital Nineveh. An ancient chronology reveals the Babylonian king was on his way to aid his troops in the city of Harran against Egyptian troops in the year 609 BC when he was attacked as he was about to pass Izalla. Nabopolassar was forced to halt and crush the rebellion before moving on. Radner does not offer any explanation to the rebellion of Izalla but there is however a logical explanation when we take a look at the political events of that time.

As proven by historians, parts of the Assyrian army regrouped in the city of Harran, west of Turabdin, after the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. Three years later, in 609, it was time for the final battle of the Assyrian empire as the enemy armies approached Harran. The Assyrians teamed up with their Egyptian allies who had rushed to their rescue. It was this battle Nabopolassar was hurrying to when he was forced to crush the rebellion at Turo d'Izlo in Turabdin. The real interesting point in this scenario is the reason for the inhabitants of Izalla to rebellion. The only logical reason, interpreted by the clues we have today, must have been that the inhabitants of Izalla (and thus of the wider Turabdin) knew themselves as Assyrians. Their action gains full logic when we realize that they were simply Assyrians who took the opportunity to rebel against the king which had conquered their capital Nineveh. Had the people of Turabdin not a sense of being Assyrian, and a sense of their area as belonging to Assyria, they would most likely not rebelled against Nabopolassar but welcome him as a liberator from the "Assyrian yoke."

It shouldn't be a surprise that the people of Turabdin rebelled against the conquerer of Nineveh as one takes into account the level of "Assyrianification" in the area. Turabdin was under direct Assyrian rule for 243 years and under indirect Assyrian rule for at least 300 years. Taken together, the facts in Karen Radners study reveal that Turabdin was much more Assyrian in ancient times than was previously assumed.

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