The Geography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire
By Ariel M. Bagg

The Neo-Assyrian Empire was constructed over a period of about 300 years from the late 10th to the late 7th centuries BCE by powerful kings. It comprised a great part of the Middle East from the Taurus Mountains in the North to the fringes of the Arabian desert and the Persian Gulf in the South, from the Mediterranean in the West to the Zagros Mountains in the East. This wide region, administrated from a capital in the Assyrian heartland, subsequently Assur, Kalhu, Dur-Sharrukin and Nineveh, comprises nowadays Iraq, Syria, the Levant, South-Eastern Turkey, Western Iran, as well as the Northern and North-Eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The number of Neo-Assyrian geographical names is enormous, approximately 3500! Can these places be localized? How can ancient places be localized in the first place?

An Assyrian king, probably Sargon. Detail of an enamelled wall from Sargon’s palace in Dur-Sharrukin/Khorsabad. (Source: V. Place, Ninive et l’Assyrie III, Paris, 1867, pl. 27)
The Assyrian kings campaigned almost every year in all directions and the accounts of their military achievements were recorded in long and detailed cuneiform inscriptions. These royal inscriptions, in some cases hidden under the foundation of palaces and temples, in other cases visible on the palace walls, mention a great number of cities, countries, rivers and mountains traversed or conquered by the Assyrian army. Furthermore, place, river and mountain names are also attested in a great number of written sources from the daily life, such as royal letters, legal and economic documents, and administrative texts. In addition, wall reliefs that decorated the Assyrian palaces are the visual version of the royal inscriptions. They show conquered cities placed in different geographical settings, in some cases with captions identifying them, as well as different landscapes.
Historical geography is the discipline dedicated to the study of ancient geographical names. Its main goal is the identification of the ancient toponyms, and, in the best case, to put them on a map. The method of the historical geographer combines three different approaches: the philological, the archaeological and the geographical approach. Starting with the information of the original written sources, he must consider the results of archaeological excavations and regional surveys and know the modern physical geography of the involved region.

The roots of the historical geography from the Ancient Near East go back to the very beginnings of Assyriology and even earlier, as scholars and adventurers travelled to the Middle East at the beginning of the 19th century searching for places mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The discovery and decipherment of Assyrian royal inscriptions in the middle of the same century boosted even more the interest of scholars. One of the first scientific works concerning the Assyrian and Babylonian place names was published in
1881 by one of the founders of Assyriology, the German scholar Friedrich Delitzsch, with the suggestive title *Wo lag das Paradies?* (Where Did the Paradise Lay?). When the amount of discovered and published texts (mainly from Nineveh) rose, Emil Forrer, another German scholar, published the first geographical study of the Neo-Assyrian empire in 1920, his seminal *Die Provinzeinteilung des assyrischen Reiches*, on the provincial division of the Assyrian Empire, which remained a reference work for many decades.

Map of Babylonia in the Neo-Assyrian period, detail. (Source: F. Delitzsch, *Wo lag das Paradies?*, Leipzig, 1881)
Considering the importance of identifications for the reconstruction of historical processes and the increased number of published cuneiform texts (from all periods and cuneiform languages), French scholars decided in 1951 to start a project called Répertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes (Geographical Register of Cuneiform Texts, abbreviated RGTC) with the aim to collect all cuneiform place and river names with their correspondent attestations. This colossal task was carried out in Tübingen (Germany) under the direction of Wolfgang Röllig in the framework called the Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients (TAVO) from 1971 on. Up to the end of the century 13 volumes were published in the series by different scholars, the last in 2001 (RGTC 12/2). Furthermore, historical maps of the Assyrian empire were published by K. Kessler in 1987 and 1991. However, the most ambitious volume of the series concerning the Neo-Assyrian geographical names, was repeatedly postponed, due to the great number of names and attestations, and to the state of publication of the sources at that time. Simo Parpola’s pioneering
Neo-Assyrian Toponyms, a computer-aided collection of attestations published in 1970, remained the reference work for many decades.

As great projects concerning the publication of the Neo-Assyrian text corpus in specific series were highly advanced at the end of the past century (The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Assyrian Periods [Toronto], State Archives of Assyria [Helsinki], Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud [London], Studien zu den Assur-Texten), and an atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian period was in preparation (S. Parpola and M. Porter, The Helsinki Atlas, 2001), the time arrived to handle the last volume of the RGTC-Series. The project was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Society, DFG) and the task entrusted to the author in 1999. In 2020 – with some interruptions – work was completed. The work comprising three parts in five volumes, all in all about 2400 pages and four maps, was progressively published by regions: RGTC 7/1 (2011) concerns the Levant, RGTC 7/2 (2017) Assyria proper, the neighbouring regions, and Egypt, and RGTC 7/3 (2020) Babylonia, Urartu, and the Eastern regions.

RGTC 7/3-1.
Example of an entry from RGTC 7/3-1 showing catalogue and background information. Courtesy of Ariel Bagg.
Example of a map showing the location of sites in the Levant according to Neo-Assyrian sources. Courtesy of Ariel Bagg.
Following the concept of the series, but with more detailed commentaries, the work presents all the geographical names attested in non-literary, published Neo-Assyrian sources, with the corresponding attestations arranged first by spelling, then by reign and text genre. The first part of the commentary contains references to attestations in other historical periods and cuneiform, as well as West-Semitic languages. In the second part of the commentary, proposed identifications are critically treated with references to archaeological excavations, surveys, depictions on wall reliefs, and historical maps. Furthermore, the names are classified according to their linguistic affiliation and the corresponding etymologies are briefly commented on. Another important feature is that all the names of the known towns and villages in particular countries or provinces are listed, a further step in the detailed reconstruction of the imperial geography.

Leaving aside the difficulties resulting from managing an enormous amount of information, the time-consuming task of checking the attestations and the spellings with the cuneiform copies or photographs of the texts, and the equally time-consuming collecting and reading of the secondary literature, the historical geographer encounters many methodological problems. For instance, it is his task to distinguish if the same name corresponds to two different places, as the case of the land Bit-Adini in North-Western Syria at the Upper Euphrates, and the homonymous land in Southern Babylonia. Another central point is to give a normalized form of the name according to its etymology, which conventionally encloses all the different spellings and can be quoted in the literature in a consequent way. Even as important is to follow a consistent convention to quote modern toponyms and to give their coordinates, in order that the reader can find them in a map.

The crucial point, after having collected all the references and information about a place, river or mountain, is to try to locate it. First, it must be located in relation with other names in the same region, second, and more difficult, identified with a modern place or region. This can be done only considering the information of the texts in relation with the archaeological data (if available) and with the physical geography. In many cases, no identification is possible. Some geographical names can be located certainly, while in most cases only proposals with different degrees of certitude, from certain to speculative, can be offer. In this last case, it is very important, that the difference between “certain or highly probable” and “probable or conjectural” is clearly shown in a map, for instance with a full and hollow dots. A common trap for scholars is to propose identifications based only in the similarity between a Neo-Assyrian and a later (Latin, Greek, Medieval, Islamic) or modern toponyms. If no continuity can be proved, and both names are separated by centuries or even millennia, no plausible identification can be guaranteed.

The historical geography of the Neo-Assyrian period is a fascinating field of research. The Assyrian kings claimed to rule over the world. A century after the pioneering work of Emil Forrer, this world is now available as a reference work for future research. Now the ball is on the field for the next generation of Assyriologists, archaeologists, and Biblical scholars.

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