

THE RISE OF THE ARAMEAN STATES

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The rise of the Aramean states is shrouded in darkness. The deafening silence in our sources continues to make it difficult to penetrate this darkness. The following essay thus comes as an exercise in groping in through the darkness, trying to find a few touch points to guide by, while trying to move carefully so as not to stumble and fall completely.¹ Because of the situation with the sources, we must rely heavily on political geography and social anthropology to provide a framework for reading the sources. The present study will argue that the Aramean states arose from ethnically diverse, semi-nomadic peoples who lived on the periphery of the Fertile Crescent and encroached on the settled lands in the late-second millennium. The initial impetus for the formation of the Aramean states was provided by the great civilizations of the Late Bronze Age for whom the *aḥlamu*-Arameans was a secondary, and dependent, economy. In the wake of the collapse of the Late Bronze kingdoms, these tribes of the Euphrates steppelands—relying on the infrastructure acquired as a secondary economy—filled the vacuum left by the great Late Bronze Age civilizations. In this, they follow a well-established settlement pattern in the Near East.

The Aramean Homeland—the Steppeland of the Middle and Upper Euphrates

The crux of the present study is the sources, or lack thereof. The main source for the early Aramean states is the offhand references in Assyrian annals, although the first mention of the Arameans is found in the topographical list on a funerary temple of Amenophis III at Thebes (Edel 1966: 28–29, 93 [no. 7, right]). In cuneiform literature the Arameans first

appear in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser I (c. 1112 BCE) who refers to battles against ‘the *aḥlamû* KUR *armāyya*^{MES}’ (Grayson 1976: §§34, 70), that is, against an entity on the western side of Middle and Upper Euphrates. Tiglath-Pileser’s successor, Ashur-bel-kala, claims to have attacked ‘a contingent of Arameans (*ḥarrāna ša* KUR *Arimi*)’, on several occasions.² Tadmor describes a fragmentary part of a Middle Assyrian chronicle which he interprets as a large-scale Aramean invasion during a famine and drought towards the end of Tiglath-Pileser I’s reign. Apparently, the invasion ended with the capture of Ninevah and the flight of Tiglath-Pileser I and his troops (Tadmor 1979). There is little evidence for the Arameans before the late-second millennium BCE. Many have pointed out the similarities between Arameans, Gutians, Sutians, and Amorites and argued on this basis for similar origins.³ Certainly, their geographical ranges are quite similar. Schwartz suggests that ‘Aramean’ was simply the designation for sheep/goat pastoralists who ranged on the steppelands of the Euphrates (Schwartz 1989: 283). The Amorites were the first attested of these groups; later followed the Sutu, and the Alamu. For these reasons it would be foolish to emphasize any ethnic relationship between these groups.

According to Assyrian sources, the Arameans lived on the desert fringes or, more precisely, the steppeland. Tiglath-Pileser I, for example, recounts

I took my chariots and warriors (and) set off for the desert (*mudbara*). I marched against the *aḥlamû* Arameans, enemies of the god Ashur, my lord. I plundered from the edge of the land Suhu to the city Carchemish of the land Hatti in a single day (*ARI*: II, 34).

Tiglath-Pileser’s campaign ranges along the steppeland of the middle and upper Euphrates. Although Grayson translates the Akkadian term *mudbaru* as ‘desert’, it would be better translated as ‘steppeland’—that is, semi-arid

2. Grayson 1976: II, §§235, 236, 239, 240, 241, 242, 244, 245, 247. I follow Grayson’s translation for consistency, although I think that *ḥarrāna* might actually be better understood as a ‘caravan’. In King’s original publication he understood it as ‘an expedition (against the Aramaeans)’; cf. King and Budge 1902: 137 (col. iii, l. 30). King mistakenly attributes the ‘Broken Obelisk’ to Tiglath-Pileser I; see Grayson 1976: II, §227. *CAD* (*ad. loc.*) gives a number of meanings including ‘1) highway, road, path 2) trip, journey, travel 3) business trip 4) caravan 5) business venture 6) business capital 7) military campaign, expedition, raid 8) expeditionary force, army 9) corvée work’. See further the discussions of early references to the Arameans in de Vaux 1979.

3. See, e.g., Moran 1961: 57; Albright 1975: 530.

1. The way through is made somewhat easier by Brinkman 1968: 268–85; and the many studies of Pitard, most importantly, 1987 and 1994. Other important studies include Sader 1987; Dupont-Sommer 1949; Malamet 1973; Schiffer 1911.

land which will not support dry farming but does support grazing. A similar confusion can be observed in translations of the Hebrew term *midbar* as 'desert' (or sometimes 'wilderness') where the term 'steppeland' would be more precise (Smith 1966: 439; Hareuveni 1991: 26-31). In Ugaritic we find a helpful opposition between the *mabr*, 'steppeland', and the *ngr mdr*, 'sown land',—that is, between the pastoral and the agrarian regions (cf. *Birth of the Twin Gods*, KTU 1.23.65-76 [=UT 52.65-76]) This translation underscores the location of the *aḫlamû* Arameans; namely, they are not nomads but rather semi-nomadic pastoralists who lived on the fringes of and sometimes even in settled areas. This interpretation dovetails nicely with the enigmatic term *aḫlamû* which apparently refers to these 'pastoral nomads'. The curious Akkadian expression *iš-tu tar-ši* which Grayson translates 'from the edge', that is, 'from the edge of the land Suhu', should also be understood to reflect the geographical marginality of the Arameans who were on the other side of the Euphrates.⁴

One peculiar aspect of these early cuneiform references is the use of the determinative KUR, that is, *mātu*, 'land, region'. Particularly suggestive are the annals of Ashur-bel-kala who regularly refers to the *ḫarrāna ša KUR Arimi* (cf. *ARI* II: §§235, 236, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 247). Grayson translates this expression as 'a contingent of Arameans'; however, there is no compelling reason to construe KUR *Arimi* as referring to a people rather than the more obvious meaning of a region, that is, 'the land of Aram'. The determinative KUR (= Assyrian *mātu*) invariably means 'land, country, or region'.⁵ To be sure, the annals of Tiglath-pileser I has the curious reading,⁶ *a-na ša aḫ-la-mi-i KUR ar-ma-a-yameš*. Grayson paraphrases this as 'against the *aḫlamû* Arameans' (cf. *ARI*: II, §34). King's original publication translated this rather literally as 'into the midst of the Akhlami, and the men of Aram'. Given the ubiquitous use of parallelism in the literary structure of Tiglath-Pileser I's annals, King's literal translation is closer to the meaning, although perhaps a better translation reflecting the gentilic *aramayya* would be 'into the midst of the *pastoral nomads*, in the land of the Aramaeans'. The very fact that the gentilic *aramayya* is

4. The expression *ana tarši* means 'to the other side'; hence, *ištu tarši* might be legitimately understood as 'from the other side'.

5. Cf. von Soden 633-34. *CAD* M: 414-421 gives one possible meaning of *mātu* as 'people'; however, this is clearly a metaphorical meaning and not a possible meaning for the determinative.

6. Cf. King and Budge 1902: 73 (Cylinder inscription of Tiglath-Pileser I, col. v, l. 46-47).

employed suggests that Aram is first a geographical region which lends its name to the peoples who dwelled there.⁷ In this respect, the later designation 'Arameans' should be understood as arising primarily from a geographic term for the steppelands of the Middle and Upper Euphrates. Hélène Sader comes to a similar conclusion in her study of the Aramean states:

The evidence registered in the Middle Assyrian texts indicates clearly that Aram was a region—a geographic concept extending from the western bank of the Euphrates over to the abur—where the more important part of the population seems to have been formed from nomadic groups that we designate by the term 'Arameans' (editors' translation; Sader 1987: 271).⁸

'Arameans' thus is *not* an ethnic term, but rather comes to refer to diverse tribes living across the Euphrates who had the cultural bond of a way of life, namely, pastoral nomadism.

2. The 'Land' of the Arameans and Socioanthropological Analogy

There are two theories which have been advanced to explain the rise of the Aramean states. The more recent approach has emphasized the symbiotic relationship between pastoral nomadism and sedentary agriculture.⁹ The realities of northern Mesopotamian pastoralism and agriculture required a certain interaction. Pastoral nomadism and sedentary agriculture existed along a continuum with a constant give-and-take and movement to-and-fro. Glenn Schwartz emphasizes that 'the nomads, rather than keeping to the fringes of sedentary society, moved well within the borders of the settled zone, where nomad and sedentist existed in a mutually dependent symbiotic relationship' (Schwartz 1989: 281).

7. Note that the gentilic ending *-ajjum* appears first primarily at Mari. This suggests that it may have come into Akkadian through West Semitic influence; cf. von Soden 1969 §§56p-q.

8. L'évidence livrée par les textes médio-assyriens montre clairement qu'Aram était une région, un concept géographique s'étendant de la rive occidentale de l'Euphrate jusqu'au Ḫabūr où le groupe le plus important de la population semble avoir été formé de groupes nomades que nous désignons par le terme Araméens (Sader 1987: 271).

9. E.g. Schwartz 1989: 275-91; Pitard 1994: 207-30. Most of the research, however, has focused on the Mari kingdom which has more abundant documentation; see Matthews 1978; Kupper 1957; Luke 1965. More generally see Adams 1974; Briant 1982; Pitard 1996; Oren and Yekutieli 1990; Rowton 1974; Zarins 1990.

The older model saw the origins of the Arameans (as well as other groups like the Amorites) in 'waves' of desert nomads invading and overwhelming the agricultural zones. The collapse of empires were sometimes associated with these invading hordes.¹⁰ Perhaps the most influential supporter of this hypothesis was William F. Albright who proposed that the Arameans were 'camel nomads' whose use of the camel was an integral part of their mercantile and military success.¹¹ It is apparent now that the camel was not domesticated until the end of the second millennium BCE and does not become an important factor until the eighth century.¹² For example, we do not encounter camels in military annals until the battle of Qarqar (c. 853 BCE) in the days of Shalmaneser III (cf. *ARAB* 1:161). This older model of the desert nomads is undoubtedly too influenced by nineteenth-century notions of the Islamic conquests of the seventh century CE.¹³ Although this theory as articulated must be relegated to the dustbin of scholarship, it was not completely misguided. The symbiotic relationship between the desert and the sown begins with an ongoing sedenization from the desert to the sown. However, the 'desert nomads', or more accurately, the sedenization of semi-nomadic pastoralists are not so much the *cause* of the collapse, but rather the *wake* of the collapse of the Late Bronze economies swells the tides of this sedenization process. With the collapse of the primary economy, the secondary economies disappear and the pastoral nomads must either fade back into obscurity or press into the settled areas.

The historical process reflected with the Arameans may be illuminated by socioanthropological analogy. Although a prevalent analogy is with the enigmatic Amorites, it is better to begin with a more well known case. The early history of the Arameans may be compared with the Edomites and the Nabateans in the southern Levant. The Edomites were a semi-nomadic people whose sedentarization was entirely dependent on larger states, namely Judah and Assyria. Edom was a secondary state created in the wake of the Assyrian Empire. Axel Knauf writes:

10. See the essays in the volume edited by Yoffee and Cowgill 1988.

11. Albright 1975: 532.

12. See Ripinski 1975; Zarins 1978; Eph'al 1984: 4-5; Schwartz 1989: 282-83.

13. See Donner 1981: 3-4. I would suggest that the Arab conquests actually follow a pattern similar to the Arameans. Namely, the initial cohesiveness of the Arab tribes was created by their relationship to the economy of the Byzantine and Parthian Empires. The disruption of this economy meant either the dissolution of this secondary economy or their advancement into the mainstream economy; cf. Shaban 1971.

Under Assyrian suzerainty Edom experienced the heyday of its political, cultural and economic development. Technicians and techniques from the wider Assyrian empire contributed to its urban culture... The massive increase of agricultural settlements on the Edomite plateau which is attested for the 7th century... presupposes a massive influx of capital into Edom which was provided by the Assyrian-dominated world economy (Knauf 1992: 50; Knauf-Belleri 1995).

The rise of Assyrian and along with it the Judean state supplied the Edomites with the economic impetus to organize and develop a secondary state beginning in the eighth century. With the waning of the Assyrian empire and particularly the Judean kingdom in the late-seventh century, the Edomites expanded their activity in sedentary agriculture and trade, settling in southern Judah (in the biblical Negeb) and the Judean foothills (Beit-Arieh 1995). Ironically, this further encroachment brought them into direct contact with the Babylonians, the heirs of the Assyrian Empire; and ultimately, the Edomites were subjugated and Idumea eventually became a Persian province. Further the Nabateans arise in the Edomites' place to emerge as a secondary state in service of first the Persian Empire and later the Roman Empire. It is worth noting that the Greek geographer Strabo considered the Idumeans (i.e. Edomites) and the Nabateans to be ethnically related suggesting a sense of continuity between the Idumeans and their former homeland. And, this pattern spans the history of the southern Levant. Israel Finkelstein notes,

Looking at the history of the southern desert in the third and second millennia BCE from a '*longue durée*' approach, one notices two interconnected cyclic processes which were strongly influenced by processes in the nearby sedentary lands. The first is the... alternating sedentarization and nomadization, and the second is the emergence and collapse of desert polity (Finkelstein 1995: 155).¹⁴

In the case of the Edomites, the rise of the Assyrian empire especially in the eighth century alongside the urbanization of the southern Levantine state of Judah furthered the organization of the Edomite polity. The collapse of the Judean state in the wake of the Babylonian invasions brought both further sedentarization as the Edomites migrated north as far as the foothills of Judah and a nomadization of the remaining Edomite population.

The analogy with the Edomites sheds some light on the close relationship between Aramean tribes and the Sutians, semi-nomadic peoples

14. The cyclic processes of civilizations are discussed in volume IV of Arnold Toynbee's classic work (1956). Also see Finkelstein 1994.

whose 'distribution in time and place roughly match the distribution of the contemporary Arameans' (Brinkman 1968: 285). The Sutians are called 'country folk (*šābē šēri*)' and 'tent-dwellers (*āšibūte kultārē*)' in the later Assyrian annals of Sargon II and Esarhaddon.¹⁵ Brinkman reflects,

It is a striking coincidence that in the late second and early first millennia, wherever Sutians are mentioned, Arameans are usually in some way connected with the same time and place. It is not inconceivable that reference to Sutians in this period may designate a more mobile type of semi-nomad (especially among Aramean-related groups) rather than a specific ethno-linguistic entity (tribe or tribes) (1968: 286-87).

The Sutians, however, are not mentioned in Assyrian royal inscriptions from Adad-nirari I until Sargon II, that is, from around 1300 until almost 700 BCE. Rather, the Sutians are referred to in Babylonian texts. Brinkman concludes that 'in Babylonian parlance the terms "Sutian" and "Aramean" may not always have designated distinguishable groups' (1968: 285).

The rise of the Aramean states is probably also analogous to the early Israelite states. The silence of the Near Eastern sources for early history of Aram or Edom is not unlike the silence which biblical scholars faced when reconstructing the early history of Israel. For early Edom and Israel, however, the archeological sources have contributed immensely.¹⁶ The archeological spade has provided the historian with a plethora of new evidence even while the Near Eastern literary sources have remained almost completely silent. The Late Bronze Age witnessed a general decline in the population in the Palestinian hill country. It is difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for this decline, but perhaps it may be attributed to the Egyptian domination of the region.¹⁷ At the same time there was a gradual increase in settlement in Transjordan during the Late Bronze Age.¹⁸ Settlement patterns in Palestine also indicate a gradual movement from east to west (Finkelstein 1988). This movement was apparently facilitated by the power vacuum left in Palestine by the waning of the New Kingdom which had begun already in the late-thirteenth century BCE.

The appropriateness of the anthropological analogy between Aram and Israel may be first of all justified by the fact that the early Israelites saw

15. Cf. Brinkman 1968: 286; Lie 1929: 266; Borger 1956: 58.15.

16. For recent summaries of the archaeology of the early Iron Age in the southern Levant, see Bienkowski 1992; Finkelstein and Na'aman 1994.

17. See Gonen 1992: 211-57, and the literature cited there.

18. See essays by Bienkowski 1992; 1995; LaBianca and Younker 1995.

themselves as 'Arameans', as we learn from the classic statement of Deuteronomy, '*rmy 'bd 'by*' (Deut. 26.5)—usually translated as 'my father was a wandering Aramean' (NRSV). To be sure, this confession is something of an enigma. To begin with, the verb \sqrt{bd} is employed in a rather unusual way. The traditional translation suggesting ancient Israel's nomadic origins, that is, 'wandering Arameans', appears occasionally with reference to animals (e.g. 1 Sam. 9.3, 20; *Sabbath Ostrakon*, 1. 3). This translation, while based on genuine semantic arguments, seems wrapped up with rather romantic ideas about the origins of early Israel. So, for example, Otzen defends the traditional translation saying that 'it encompasses the entire patriarchal history and in this way emphasizes the relationship of the early Israelite tribes with the Arameans, who lived a nomadic life' (Otzen 1977: I, 20). In point of fact, however, the characterization of the early Arameans as 'nomads' is dubious. Rather, the early Arameans were semi-nomadic pastoralists. Moreover, the verb \sqrt{bd} itself appears more regularly in other northwest Semitic languages and perhaps even in Ugaritic with reference to men (Otzen 1977: I, 19). More generally it means 'to run away' and not 'to roam'—from hence the NJPS translators derive, 'My father was a *fugitive* Aramean'.¹⁹

It is rather odd that the patriarch of the ancient Israelites should be identified with one of their arch-enemies—the Arameans. If however, we follow the primarily geographic meaning of the term 'Aramean' which is found in the early cuneiform sources, then the confession makes more sense. Certainly, the gentilic nominal formation of 'Aramean (*rmy*)' allows such an interpretation. It might then reflect the region of Abraham's origin, that is Harran on the Middle Euphrates, as well as the semi-nomadic pastoralist setting that we see in the patriarchal narratives.²⁰ The confession thus underscores again the fact that the Arameans were not so much an ethnic group as a social group.

The often-posed question of ethnicity of the Arameans must now be dismissed.²¹ The fact, for example, that the early rulers of the Bit-Adini

19. Albright 1957: 238. This meaning derives from the Akkadian *abātu* II.

20. This socioanthropological background, unfortunately, does not aid in dating the origins of the Patriarchal narratives since seminomadic pastoralism was and is a staple of these regions even until the present day; cf. Thompson 1974. On the other hand, the use of the term Aramean in Abraham's confession might suggest that the confession, 'My father was a wandering/fugitive Aramean', arose *before* the crystallization of the Arameans states as the arch-enemies of Israel.

21. Some recent studies on ethnicity include Kamp and Yoffee 1980; Lemche 1985: 80-163; Yoffee 1988; Matthews 1978.

state had Hittite personal names and later took Aramean personal names speaks little about ethnicity (Ussishkin 1971). Likewise, the Arameans are often thought to be related with the Amorites.²² To begin with, the Amorites and Arameans are found occupying a similar geographic range along the Euphrates River. The similarities, however, do not speak to the question of ethnicity (Grosby 1997). And, they point more to the cultural similarities of pastoral nomads than to ethnicity. It is no accident that the so-called Aramean states (Bit-Adini, Bit-Agusi, Guzana, Sam'al, Hamath, Damascus) were never unified in anything more than a loose alliance based on political imperative. The geographic and social bounds were not strong enough to hold the pastoral nomads of the Euphrates steppeland together.

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22. Buccellati, for example, points out the formal linguistic relationship between MAR.TU (*Ammurru*) with Aramean Aḥlamu, Aram Šoba, and Aram Rehob. He understands these as 'individual tribes of the Amorite group' (Buccellati 1966: 333).

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