

## ASSUR

**I**N HIS ANGRY LETTER TO THE WAYWARD SON IN ANATOLIA WHICH I quoted in Chapter 1, Assur-idi wrote about the warnings conveyed to him by the gods Assur and Assuritum, the two main deities in his home city. His direct contact with the gods probably took place at night, in his dreams, but he undoubtedly visited their temples regularly and obviously felt that he was in very close contact with them both. We know something about these temples from the excavations carried out at Assur during the first decade of the twentieth century, although unfortunately not nearly enough to provide us with a clear impression of the buildings that Assur-idi would have seen.

Contrary to what Julius Lewy assumed, there was no Assyria at the time of the settlement at Kanesh, only a relatively small city-state called Assur, but in later centuries it was to give name to the land, the kingdom and eventually the empire of Assyria: *māt Assur*, or “Assur-land”. Its ruins are located at a site called Qala Shergat, on a rocky spur that overlooks the river Tigris some 100 kilometres south of the modern Iraqi city of Mosul. The ruins within the walls and a deep moat measure about 700 by 600 metres plus an extension to the south, the “New Town”, which stretches another ca. 700 metres along the river. When it was most alive and successful, it probably had more than fifteen thousand inhabitants, but in the Old Assyrian period it was presumably somewhat smaller.<sup>1</sup>

Today Assur is a desolate place and it is hard to visualise it as a vibrant, lively city full of activity and noise. In the springtime the waters of two branches of the river join below the tip of the rock on which sat the temple to the god Assur. From here one looks out over the water and the plain that stretches toward the east, where it meets the foothills of the Zagros Mountains. When the water in the river is high, there is a constant rippling murmur as the water rushes past the city, and the fields on the other bank are green and lush. In the fall the river shrinks to a much smaller, slower stream,

and one can see turtles and water snakes lazily investigating crenellations from ancient walls that fell into the water long ago.

Assur was excavated during a decade at the beginning of the twentieth century by one of the finest, most meticulous archaeologists of the time, the German Walter Andrae. He developed sophisticated methods for dealing with and analysing the extremely complex stratigraphy of the site, and he oversaw the publication of a series of reports on the finds. And yet, when it comes to the Old Assyrian period, the time when Assur was the mother city for a number of commercial colonies in Syria and Anatolia, Andrae's excavations provided very little concrete information. There were several reasons for this.

In the later periods of its existence, the ancient city was divided rather clearly into distinct zones, with official buildings – temples, a ziggurat and a palace – in the northern part of the settlement, along a dramatic cliff rising 20 metres vertically from the river; the rest of the urban area seems in all periods to have been taken up by a maze of narrow streets and densely clustered private houses. The extent of the city in the Old Assyrian period cannot be determined. In line with the priorities of the time, Andrae and his team concentrated their efforts on the public buildings, and the rest of the city was investigated by way of a series of search trenches, 10 metres wide and spaced at every 100 metres. The result today is that the modern visitor sees a desolate, dry landscape where once there was a thriving city and where the trenches seem to carry memories of the killing fields in Flanders.

The city had a long and complex history, and over the centuries Assur certainly saw its share of death and disaster. In the Old Assyrian period it was a city-state that was dependent on its place in the network of long-distance trade; later, during the centuries in the middle of the second millennium BC, it seems to have become politically dominated by a large state or empire referred to as Mitanni, which had its centre in northern Syria. How or exactly when Assur was able to free itself is unclear, but around 1350 BC the first mention is made of the land called Assyria, "Assur-land", which indicates that the creation of a territorial state in what is now northern Iraq rested upon political and military initiatives originating in Assur.

This city was where the kings of Assyria resided for centuries – in fact, until the mid-ninth century, when the king Assurnasirpal II moved the political capital to a new city called Kalhu, modern Nimrud, some 50 kilometres north of Assur. Until the final indignity in 614 BC of Assur's capture and sack by the Medes, the city had been the wealthy religious capital of Assyria, full of large and small houses, many of which were occupied, it seems, by families who were in some fashion associated with the main temple to the god Assur.

This long history has left us a vastly complicated field of ruins which present a huge challenge to any excavator. The massive Neo-Assyrian public buildings, palaces and temples constituted a special set of problems. Only very poorly preserved remains of early constructions remained, since in several cases the later builders had seriously damaged or entirely removed the walls of previous buildings in order to establish firm foundations for their own. We therefore have very little knowledge of the main buildings from the earliest periods of the life of the city.

The search trenches, on the other hand, were filled with remains of houses, but only in very few cases did the excavators uncover more than isolated rooms which happened to be located within a trench, and they chose not to penetrate below the Middle and Neo-Assyrian levels. We are accordingly in the dark with respect to the residential quarters of the city in the earliest period, and we cannot even say where the walls encircling the urban area were.<sup>2</sup>

Not a single Old Assyrian private house was excavated, and there are accordingly no extensive archives that could match the ones from Kanesh. We have only a small collection of texts (twenty-four) from Assur that can be said with certainty to belong to the period of the colonies in Anatolia. Almost half of these are school texts, showing how the value of various commodities was to be computed in silver, and they seem to prove the existence of a school in Assur at the time, where young persons learnt elements of the practicalities of the merchant's craft.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the texts are scattered fragments of little interest.<sup>4</sup>

From the extensive archives found at Kültepe we have hundreds of letters written by men and women who lived in Assur, but their houses are still waiting to be excavated. A single important grave from the Old Assyrian period was found during the excavations at Assur. Many tombs in the city were located under the floors of buildings, often in a kind of crypt which was reused many times during the life of the building, but this particular grave seems to have been a simple rectangular hole. The skeleton had almost entirely disappeared, but the grave was particularly interesting because of the rich grave goods given to the dead person. A dagger and a spear of bronze indicate that the deceased was male, but in view of the poor preservation of the bones this could have to do with a double or even multiple burial, which could perhaps explain the presence of several items of jewellery usually associated with women. Of special interest are four so-called diadems, thin strips of gold which had been placed over the eyes, mouth and ears of the dead, for precisely similar practices are known from the graves found under the houses of the lower town at Kanesh (Figure 18). Jewellery in the



18. Skull from Kültepe with the characteristic gold covers also known from the Old Assyrian grave at Assur. Kültepe Excavation Archives.

form of necklaces made of gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli and rock crystal, earrings of gold and lapis, no less than twenty-six golden small rings and beads of various kinds were distributed on the upper body of the corpse, and at the feet were several metal bowls, beakers and buckets, apparently an elaborate drinking service for two persons. Finally, three cylinder seals were in the grave, all made of lapis lazuli.<sup>5</sup>

It seems likely that the grave was that of a wealthy Assyrian businessman who had close relations with the colonies in Anatolia, and the elaborate and rich find gives us a hint about the wealth and luxury that developed there as a result of the lucrative role Assur played in the international trade. This could for all we know be the grave of the old Assur-idi, buried with a sample of his riches.

The textual evidence that could throw light on the history of the city and the religious and political institutions is almost as poor as that concerned with the lives of private citizens. Hidden in the foundations of some of the later official buildings the excavators found a few Old Assyrian royal

inscriptions commemorating the completion of a building project. They give us the names of kings with their genealogies, and they tell us which buildings were being erected for the greater glory of the gods, the king and the community. Nearly all these inscriptions are brief and provide only glimpses of the life of the city. Moreover, as we know from the documentation from Kanesh, they tend to give us a stereotyped, skewed image of the political structure of the community. On the basis of these texts alone we would have had to conclude that Assur was a small, rather insignificant town which played no particular role in the political or commercial history of the time. We see the kings as the builders of temples and fortifications, and Assur in no way appears to distinguish itself from the well-known patterns of urbanism in Mesopotamia. Remarkably, not only do the texts from Kanesh not fit this picture at all, they contradict it in several respects. And since there is so little information to be gleaned from the excavations of Assur, we are in the extraordinary situation of having to rely on the texts from a commercial colony to inform us about conditions in the capital and home city. To some extent we are studying the shadows on the wall.

The early history of the city, from its founding until the Old Assyrian period, that is, around 2000 BC, is shrouded in darkness. It is unclear exactly when Assur was first settled, but the German excavations found no traces going back before the so-called Early Dynastic III period, roughly 2600–2350 BC.<sup>6</sup> This designation refers to the political developments that took place in the many cities on the southern alluvium, urban centres that had already existed for hundreds or thousands of years. Assur was a latecomer by comparison, and it seems clear that its own cultural and religious life was heavily influenced from the south. This was the time when the oldest known temple in the city, dedicated to the goddess Ishtar, was built.<sup>7</sup> The second, rebuilt version of this temple is well preserved and shows an inventory of cult objects that resembles finds from Sumerian temples in southern Mesopotamia. The cult room was 10 metres long and 6 metres wide, and at the northern end was a raised cella with a painted gypsum plaque showing the goddess. Along the walls were benches and on these were placed a series of votive statues of both men and women. On the floor stood several clay altars in the shape of a house in two stories. All of these objects have close parallels in Sumerian temples from the Early Dynastic period, but a single object, a fragmentary stone vessel, must be dated to at least 3000 BC, perhaps earlier, so it must have been an heirloom already when the earliest Ishtar temple was built.<sup>8</sup> There are a few finds from other contexts that can be dated to the Early Dynastic period, but the evidence outside the Ishtar temple is scant indeed.

Although Assur may therefore be seen as a late northern version of the cities in the south, it was in certain ways peculiarly its own. The fact that the main god of the city, Assur, shares his name with the settlement or city sets the site and its religious traditions apart from everything else we know about Mesopotamian or Near Eastern religion. The earliest references indicate that divinity and site were seen as so inextricably connected that it is more correct to see them as aspects of a single phenomenon. The god was the site and the site was the god.<sup>9</sup> A further distinguishing feature is the god Assur's lack of a family – he has no parents, no wife and no children, which makes him unique in the Mesopotamian pantheon. In later periods he was in fact associated with other divinities, but those speculations are clearly secondary and have their roots in political and ideological considerations. The goddess of the city Assur was known as Ishtar Assuritum, “the Ishtar of Assur”, but it is not clear to me how we are to understand this; most probably the epithet refers to the place, not to the god Assur. The importance of Ishtar Assuritum in the history of the city should perhaps be understood in light of the fact that the other large cities in the north, Nineveh and Arbela, both had goddesses as their main divinity: the Hurrian Shaushka, later equated with Ishtar, at Nineveh, and the oracular goddess known from later texts as Ishtar of Arbela.

The Old Assyrian temple to Ishtar, built by King Ilushuma, was constructed on top of a series of buildings, reaching back to the Early Dynastic period of the third millennium. The temple of the level called “E” was apparently erected during the Ur III period at the very end of the third millennium, and it was replaced by a much larger one, the so-called level D. The stratigraphy was incredibly complex in this area, and some of Andrae's interpretations were drastically revised by Bär in 2003.<sup>10</sup> Andrae was not impressed by the building in this phase, pointing out that it was poorly constructed with walls that did not meet at right angles, but as noted by Bär this was, in fact, the largest Ishtar temple ever built at Assur, and it had a very long life, lasting into the Middle Assyrian period. The temple itself appears to have consisted of only one very large room, 34 by 8 metres. The preservation was so poor, however, that nothing can be said about the way the cult was organised here.

Very few finds can be associated with the building, but we do have a triangular bronze plate with an inscription that links it to this period. It carries a private votive inscription:

When Sargon was the steward of Assur, Haditum, wife of Belum-nada, dedicated this to Ishtar of Assur, her lady. She brought in the *urum* for the life of her husband, her own life and the life of her children.<sup>11</sup>

The temple to the god Assur was located at the tip of the rock overhanging the river, most probably the very rock that was Assur. A remarkable seal from the Old Assyrian period that had been attached to a shipment of some sort, and which was found in a palatial context at the site Acemhöyük in central Anatolia, carries an inscription indicating that this was the seal of the god Assur. It shows a peculiar figure which is presumably meant to depict the god himself: it is a rock standing on four legs and with a bull's head projecting from its middle.<sup>12</sup> A cult relief which perhaps also dates from the Old Assyrian period and which was discovered in a well where it had been thrown, presumably when the city was sacked in 614 BC, shows Assur as a mountain god; this again points to the god's close relationship with the rock on which his temple stood.<sup>13</sup>

The original Assur temple was, according to traditions encapsulated in a royal inscription from the late thirteenth century, said to have been originally built by a certain Ushpiya, about whom nothing further is known. We cannot even offer a reasonable guess about his date, but it has recently been established that the first Assur temple was also from the late Early Dynastic period.<sup>14</sup> Both the temple to Ishtar and the Assur temple appear to have been destroyed by fire shortly before 2000 BC.

The very earliest architectural remains found underneath the later temple to Assur, called simply "prehistoric" by Andrae, were probably part of a sacred building, but we cannot say anything definite about it. Underneath the later cella he found a buried treasure consisting of a number of copper and bronze objects, probably votive figurines,<sup>15</sup> and those can be dated to the late third millennium (between 2300 and 2000 BC). They do not tell us a great deal about the beginning of the Assur temple. It cannot be ruled out that the rock itself was a sanctuary with only scanty architecture during its earliest centuries; the excavations found firepits here dug into the rock, perhaps hinting at rituals being performed on this spot before a proper temple was built.

Andrae had a hard time excavating the Assur temple, and not only because of the massive Neo-Assyrian remains on top, for the dig was hindered by the existence of a ruined nineteenth-century Ottoman garrison building erected over the remains of the temple (Figure 19). That is probably one reason the results of Andrae's exertions were so unsatisfactory with respect to unravelling the earliest history of the temple. He had to dig within the confines of the courtyard of the later structure, which unfortunately could not be removed. In fact, it is still there, now restored and used as a local site museum.

Ushpiya's temple remains unknown, and the first real building found by Andrae was securely dated to the Old Assyrian period. It was a massive and



19. The Ottoman building sitting on top of the ruins of the Assur temple, seen from the summit of the ziggurat. Photo MTL.

substantial edifice judging from the fragments of walls recovered, but a plan cannot be established. Inscriptions found in situ inform us that it was built by the Old Assyrian king Erishum I. In a text found in a private house in Kanesh, Erishum tells us that the name of the temple was “Wild Bull”; its main door was called “Guardian Angel”, the name of the lock was “Be Strong!” and the name of the threshold was “Be Alert!” He gives no other details about the building, saying only that he built the entire complex of the Assur temple, the Stepgate, a huge mud brick installation behind the temple, leading down to the river 20 metres below, the courtyard and the cella for the god (Figure 20). We also hear of the erection of two large beer vats called “The Twins” which were placed flanking a major doorway and associated with two duck figures, each weighing 30 kilos, and two moons covered with bronze. None of these building elements or objects were found.<sup>16</sup>

A later king of Assur, the conqueror and usurper Shamshi-Adad I, tore down Erishum’s temple and built a massive new sanctuary on top of the ruins, and that building could be completely recovered by Andrae. I shall return to this man and his temple later in this chapter.

Andrae found several palatial buildings from later periods, but he discovered no ruins of an Old Assyrian palace. That is in harmony with the evidence from Kültepe, for a royal palace is never directly referred to in the





20. The ravaged face of the Stepgate seen from the riverbank. The ziggurat is on top. Photo MTL.

texts. Obviously, the king must have lived in a large house somewhere in the city, but it appears to have been simply his house, not a central governmental or administrative building.

Under the floors of the later palace erected in the northern sector, Andrae discovered what may have been the remains of an early administrative building that can be dated to the Old Assyrian period. We know from the texts from Kanesh that the main bureau in the city, where, for example, taxes were paid, was known as the City Hall (*bēt ālim*) or the Office of the Eponym (*bēt limmim*), and it has been suggested that the structure under the later palace, the so-called Schotterhofbau (the building with a courtyard paved with pebbles), could have been the City Hall. However, very little was uncovered there.<sup>17</sup> All in all, the excavations therefore contribute very little to a plausible reconstruction of life in Assur during the period of the commercial colonies in Anatolia.

The texts that are available to us from the city itself do not contain much reliable information about the early history either. It seems clear, however, that it was always a kind of border town, between the steppe to the west and the rich agricultural lands east of the Tigris, and between north and south. Although Assur came to give its name to the country called Assyria (Assur-land) and was its religious capital, it was in fact located at the extreme

southern end of the Assyrian heartland. During the earliest phases of its history, it seems to have been closely connected with the civilisation that developed in the south on the great Mesopotamian plain – perhaps to a greater degree than the other urban centres in the north. The main cities here were Nineveh on the Tigris, ca. 100 kilometres north of Assur, and the city known throughout its long history as Urbillum, Arbela and now Erbil, the present-day capital of the Kurdish region in Iraq. How and why it was Assur that came to dominate the north politically and culturally is not known and is in fact a little mysterious.

As already mentioned, the connection with the south is visible in the cultic implements found in the early temple to Ishtar from the Early Dynastic period, and the small treasure from the Assur temple points in the same direction. We know that Assur was under the direct political authority of rulers from the south during the Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2200 BC) and the Ur III period (ca. 2100–2000 BC). When the empire centred on the city Ur in the extreme south of the alluvial plain crumbled around 2025 BC, it seems likely that Assur as one of the distant provincial cities was able to free itself, and this is where the history of the city becomes dimly visible.

That history must be reconstructed on the basis of a few sources, some of which are of somewhat questionable validity. In copies from the first millennium we have a text that purports to provide us with an unbroken list of the kings of Assur and later Assyria, but with respect to the very earliest period it has serious flaws. It can in some cases be connected with original inscriptions that name the builders of various temples and structures in Assur, but not all of the rulers who have left such texts appear in the list of kings. We also have references in later, sometimes much later, inscriptions in which a king alludes to a previous constructor of the building he himself is restoring or rebuilding. In such instances we may assume that the information was based on the discovery of earlier inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> A case in point is the reference to Ushpiya as the first king to build a temple for Assur, and a text from ca. 1400 BC tells us that the first king to construct fortifications around the city was a certain Kikkiya. Both of these names do in fact appear in the king list, but nothing is known about either of them.

Assur was in intimate ways connected to the Ur III Empire, which had its centre in the south of Mesopotamia but which was involved in military campaigns in the north, especially against Urbillum, the later Arbela. We cannot say which name in the Assyrian king list represents the first independent ruler of Assur after the collapse of the Ur III Empire in the northern region, but it is probable that the section beginning with the name Sulili,

king number 27 in the list, marks a significant break in the history of the city, probably the independence from Ur. The list continues as follows:

- (27) Sulili
  - (28) Kikkiya
  - (29) Akiya
  - (30) Puzur-Assur I
  - (31) Shalim-ahum
  - (32) Ilushuma
- Total: 6 kings [who are found] on bricks, whose eponymies are unknown.
- (33) Erishum I, son of Ilushuma, who [instituted the eponymy]. He ruled as king for 40 years.
  - (34) Ikunum, son of Erishum I. He ruled as king for [15] years.
  - (35) Sargon I, son of Ikunum. He ruled as king for [40] years.
  - (36) Puzur-Assur II, son of Sargon I. He ruled as king for [8] years.
  - (37) Naram-Suen, son of Puzur-Assur II. He ruled as king for [ $x + 4$ ] years.
  - (38) Erishum II, son of Naram-Suen. He ruled as king for [ $x$ ] years.
  - (39) Shamshi-Adad I, son of Ilu-kabkabu. During the time of Naram-Suen he went to Kardunyash (= Babylonia). In the eponymy Ibni-Adad, Shamshi-Adad came up from Kardunyash. He seized the town Ekallate. He stayed in Ekallate for three years. In the eponymy Atamar-Ishtar, Shamshi-Adad came up from Ekallate. He removed Erishum (II), son of Naram-Suen, from the throne. He seized the throne. He ruled as king for 33 years.

This sequence of rulers in Assur covers a long stretch of time, from ca. 2025 to 1776 BC, the year of Shamshi-Adad's death, or 249 years. If the first king in this section, Sulili,<sup>19</sup> represents the break with the authority of the Ur Empire, and Kikkiya marks the new independence with the construction of fortifications, it seems that the ruler Puzur-Assur I was the founder of the dynasty we call the Old Assyrian. He was recognised by the later kings in the line as their first ancestor, and his descendants were kings in Assur until the dynasty was removed by the usurper Shamshi-Adad I. The first version of the king list was constructed during the reign of this king in an attempt to integrate himself and his lineage into the traditions of the city, and the first twenty-six names in his list have really nothing to do with Assur. They represent the tribal ancestors and the direct family ancestors of Shamshi-Adad I.

One of the most remarkable features of the Old Assyrian dynastic tradition is the use of the royal names Sargon and Naram-Suen, for they reveal a deliberate desire to reach back to the great Akkadian kings who were the

first to have had these names. They ruled a vast empire from their capital city, Akkade, some four hundred years before their namesakes in Assur. Tales concerning Sargon preserved from later periods connect this ruler with a military campaign in central Anatolia, where he is supposed to have vanquished the king of Purushaddum. This connection with Anatolia, whose precise historical relevance we cannot evaluate now, although it seems highly dubious, may be an important element in the Old Assyrian interest in Sargon of Akkade and his successor Naram-Suen. It is illustrated in a dramatic way by the one literary text so far identified in a private archive in the lower town at Kanesh, a legend that tells the story of Sargon. It may very well have been composed during the reign of his later namesake.<sup>20</sup>

The text itself does not directly mention military feats in Anatolia and contains no reference to Purushaddum, but Sargon refers to a series of humiliating punishments imposed on defeated foes, among them the men of Alashiya (Cyprus) whose heads he covered as if they were women, the men of Hattum whose scalps he shaved and the men of Lullubum (in the Zagros) and Hahhum whose clothes he slit open. There are clear memories in the composition to legends from especially the Ur III period, but these punishments appear to have been invented by the Old Assyrian author.

Dercksen sees the text as connected to an ancestral cult that would have provided a powerful link between the Old Assyrian dynasty and the rulers of Akkade. That such ideas were alive in Assur is certainly quite possible, but as will appear from the discussion of the royal family's position in the governmental structure of Old Assyrian Assur, there were very real differences between the Akkadian rulers and the kings of Assur. It remains possible that a change in royal ideology and power happened at the end of the Old Assyrian period, but we lack any direct evidence for such developments.

At the start of the reign of King Erishum I, the peculiar Assyrian dating system normally referred to as the eponymate was introduced in the city. This meant that the years from now on were named after a high official in the city's administration, the *limmum*, who served for one year. We have a few lists of the eponymies throughout the Old Assyrian period, and one of them mentions also the kings and gives the dates of their reigns. This is why we can provide the figures for the lengths of the reigns of the Old Assyrian kings from the beginning of Erishum I's reign until roughly the end of the Old Assyrian period. The most elaborate version of this eponym list, the one that also gives the names and reigns of the kings, ends during the reign of Naram-Suen and shows that he ruled for at least twenty-six years. Since the king list shows that his reign lasted  $x + 4$  years, we must conclude that he

was on the throne for at least thirty-four years, perhaps forty-four or even fifty-four. How long his son and successor was allowed to reign before he was removed by Shamshi-Adad I is not clear.<sup>21</sup> Complex calculations involving figures mentioned in texts a thousand years later lead us to suggest the following chronological scheme:

Puzur-Assur I	?
Shalim-ahum	?
Ilushuma	?–1973
Erishum I	1972–1933
Ikunum	1932–1918
Sargon I	1917–1878
Puzur-Assur II	1877–1870
Naram-Suen	1869–1827
Erishum II	1826–1809
Shamshi-Adad I	1808–1776 <sup>22</sup>

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WHAT DID THESE KINGS DO? WHAT HAPPENED DURING ALL THESE YEARS? The royal inscriptions from Assur tell us next to nothing, and the thousands of texts from the private archives in Kanesh are simply not interested in politics or history, so we have no evidence that can throw light on the events during this long period. The inscriptions referring to the kings' building projects are mostly brief and uninformative, although they do allow us to enumerate the main construction activities:

Ilushuma built the temple for Ishtar and began work on the walls;  
 his successor Erishum I continued the construction of fortifications, built  
 a temple for Assur and began work on a temple for the storm god Adad;  
 his successor Ikunum concluded the Adad temple and worked on the walls;  
 Sargon I was also active with the Ishtar temple and the walls,  
 and his son and successor Puzur-Assur II concluded the construction of  
 the walls.

All these projects indicate a furious building activity by the new dynasty, and the repeated construction of fortifications shows both that the newly independent city needed to be able to protect itself and that it was expanding rapidly. It seems that the building boom was not restricted to the public sphere, but that the residential areas grew, and this necessitated an enlargement of the urban area and the extension of the fortifications. Already Ilushuma explains in his building inscriptions that he “constructed a new

wall and distributed building lots to my city”,<sup>23</sup> and Erishum I mentions the clearing of land in connection with the building of walls, but despite the reference to named city gates it is unfortunately not possible to say where Erishum’s activities were located.

Presumably as a result of the crowded conditions, private buildings in the city were very expensive indeed, as we deduce from a few references in letters from Kanesh. In one case a house which appears to have covered three lots was sold for no less than 16 pounds of silver, but otherwise we find that houses cost between 2 and 6½ pounds of silver.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of excavated houses from the period, it is difficult to form a clear picture of the residential areas of the city, but it seems that the great merchant families had large establishments, houses with storage facilities, stables and living quarters. We know that these were places with a lot of activity, where caravans arrived from Anatolia while others were being sent off and where deals involving large quantities of tin, textiles and donkeys were struck.

Whereas Assur’s role in the international political system of the time is completely obscure, its position in the international trade is abundantly clear, as can be seen in the archives found in the private houses at Kültepe. The best information coming from the city of Assur itself is contained in two royal inscriptions that provide tantalising glimpses of at least part of the background of Assur’s special position in international commerce at the time, since they refer to economic measures taken to attract merchants and their goods to the market in the city.

Under Ilushuma, Assur established its place in the wider regional commercial network by giving special privileges to merchants from Babylonia. The text says that the king established freedom from taxation for the Akkadians – that is, the people living in the northern part of the alluvial plain – and it enumerates three main routes that would lead them to Assur: the first one runs from the edge of the Persian Gulf via Ur and Nippur – that is, connecting up with the commercial system that we know operated over the Gulf to Bahrain and Oman, bringing copper to the cities in Babylonia through the port at Ur.<sup>25</sup> The second route mentions two cities in the Diyala plain, Awal and Kismar, and it seems logical, therefore, to assume that the connections to Iran via the later famous Great Khorasan Road were being referred to. And the last route goes via the city Der in the area east of the Tigris, the gateway to the other important road to and across Iran which was associated with the city Susa in Khuzestan.<sup>26</sup>

The men in Assur clearly knew how the commercial system of the time operated and which connections should be developed. It is likely that the measure described in Ilushuma’s text laid the foundation for the later rapid

growth of Assur's role in the international system, presumably building on existing contacts which were developed and exploited.

A text from the reign of Erishum I, the following king in Assur, indicates that these measures were further expanded. We now hear that freedom from taxation was established on "silver, gold, copper, tin, barley, wool, (everything) down to *eta*, bran and chaff."<sup>27</sup> This was then the basis for Assur's position as a major transit centre, where merchants from the south arrived to sell tin and textiles on the market, commodities which were afterwards exported from Assur to their colonies in Anatolia. This was the system that sustained the commercial presence abroad, and it will form the backbone for the further description of the economic, social and political structures of the Old Assyrian period. Unexplained is the fact that textiles are not mentioned in the royal inscription.

The economic and political rationality that must lie behind these policies should not surprise anyone. The daily practices that can be reconstructed on the basis of the private archives are founded on economic priorities rooted in rational and logical considerations. Caravans roamed over the entire Near East in a complex pattern of commercial circuits, and everywhere the motivation on the part of the traders was the pursuit of profit. The Old Assyrian network connecting Assur with Anatolia and parts of northern Syria can be understood as only one link in a much wider and much more extensive network, and the decisions referred to in the two royal inscriptions mentioned laid the ground for the immensely successful merchant activities reflected in the texts from Kültepe by placing Assur firmly in a position as a vital transit centre. It should also be kept in mind that Assur was far from the only such commercial hub at the time. We know of the existence of others, such as Sippar in the north-western end of the alluvium, directly placed as the gateway to the important route along the river Euphrates. Farther along this road, in what is now Syria, another such commercial centre was located at ancient Emar, and in the Levant itself we have the city Ebla, which played a powerful role in the trade, also centred on Anatolia, where the merchants from Ebla must have competed directly with those from Assur.

The wider network with which Assur was linked reached the large cities on the Babylonian plain, all the way over the Persian Gulf to Bahrain and deep onto the Iranian plateau, most probably all the way to ancient tin mines in Afghanistan and beyond. The traders from Assur concentrated their efforts on the Anatolian markets, however, and only a few Assyrians are known to have visited and perhaps stayed for long periods in the cities of northern Babylonia, notably at Sippar.<sup>28</sup> The supply routes to Assur for the larger number of textiles and all the tin were exploited by traders from the south.

At some point during the reign of Erishum II, the Old Assyrian dynasty ended with the usurpation of Shamshi-Adad I, as recounted in the note about him in the Assyrian king list. He ruled for thirty-three years during the later part of the Old Assyrian period, corresponding to part of level 1b at Kültepe. He was an Amorite king or tribal chieftain whose real capital was Shubat-Enlil in the Habur region in present-day Syria, and he rose to power at a time when dynasties of Amorite descent were installed in several city-states and kingdoms throughout Mesopotamia. He conquered the regions east of the Tigris and eventually the entire north, including Assur and the major city Nineveh, and proceeded to create a short-lived territorial state that controlled a vast region in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. Assur was just one of several cities in this kingdom, although it did have a special status since the dating system based on annual officials, the *limmu* or eponyms, in Assur was used throughout Shamshi-Adad's state.

He does not appear to have taken a great deal of interest in the trade, although he probably benefitted from it economically, but even though he did not reside in Assur he did have a major impact on the city. He raised two mighty religious buildings there, and both are in a somewhat ambiguous way related to what appears to have been a major religious reform. He was the first to erect a ziggurat in Assur, the colossal temple tower that still dominates the skyline, and it has been claimed that he dedicated it to the Babylonian god Enlil. This assumption goes back to Andrae, but there is in fact no hard evidence for it, and it is possible that the ziggurat was from the start dedicated to the god of the city, Assur. However, Enlil does appear in references to Shamshi-Adad's activities in the city, for when the king built a new temple for Assur, his inscriptions concerning this project surprisingly link the new sanctuary with Enlil as well:

The temple for Enlil which Erishum son of Ilushuma had built had become dilapidated and I abandoned it. In the midst of my city Assur I constructed the temple of divine Enlil, my lord, the fearful dais, the large chapel, the abode of the god Enlil, my lord, which was solidly constructed with the skilled workmanship of the builders. I roofed the temple with cedar beams. In the chapels I installed cedar doors with silver and gold stars... I constructed the temple of divine Enlil, my lord, and called it Eamkurkurra, "The temple which is The Wild Bull of the Lands", the temple of divine Enlil, my lord, within my city Assur.<sup>29</sup>

This text was found inscribed on stone tablets, most of which were discovered in the ruins of the Assur temple, so it is obviously this building that is



being referred to as the temple for Enlil. Within the same temple Andrae also found numerous stamped bricks which stated simply that Shamshi-Adad was the builder of the temple for Assur.<sup>30</sup>

The most radical interpretation of this puzzling state of affairs would be that Shamshi-Adad tried to fuse the two divinities, equating Assur with the Babylonian god. Enlil was in fact the head of the Sumerian and Babylonian pantheon, and his cult based on the city Nippur played a central role in the religious life of all the cities in the south. Equating the two gods would secure Assur a dominating position in Mesopotamian religion, not just in his city. However, the less drastic interpretation seems more probable, namely that Shamshi-Adad was intent on introducing the Babylonian god into the cultic world of Assur, where he was placed on an equal footing with the ancient god of the city. This may receive some support from a suggestion made by Miglus<sup>31</sup> that Shamshi-Adad's version of the Assur temple was in fact a double one with two cellas, one for each of the two gods.

On the other hand, the erection of the colossal ziggurat was a massive undertaking, and the tower must have dominated the town, not unlike the large Gothic cathedrals in towns like Cologne and Rheims, places that were probably about the same size as ancient Assur. If it was really dedicated to Enlil, nobody could be in any doubt that this Babylonian god had made his entrance into the city.

What was behind these ideas in terms of personal religious preferences cannot be ascertained now, but it is clear that Shamshi-Adad did have a special relationship to the god Enlil.<sup>32</sup> A sign of this is the name he gave to his own capital city, Shubat-Enlil, "Enlil's Abode".

Shamshi-Adad constructed a kind of empire that controlled large areas in northern Syria and Iraq, including the city Mari on the Euphrates, but it was not a stable political structure, and it collapsed rapidly after his death. His son and further successors became known simply as kings of Assur. The dynasty continued to rule the city for a couple of generations, but was eventually thrown out. A curious inscription from Assur left by a king Puzur-Suen (about whom nothing is known and who does not appear in the Assyrian king list) tells us that Shamshi-Adad's grandson, a certain Asinum, was removed in a revolt that was meant to restore the traditions of the Old Assyrian period. The Amorite kings are said to be "a foreign plague, not of the flesh of the city Assur", and Shamshi-Adad is accused of having destroyed the shrines of the city and built a palace for himself. This could be a reference to the so-called Old Palace that was built next to the ziggurat. These were obviously reprehensible acts which overturned the ancient

religious and political traditions, and Puzur-Suen proudly announces that he has destroyed the palace and brought back the old order.<sup>33</sup>

After those events darkness falls on Assur, and it is only after a couple of centuries that we are able to follow the life of the city, but that lies outside the scope of this book.