The expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire throughout a large part of the Near Eastern world in the ninth to seventh centuries BCE is widely considered to have been a transformative epoch in the history of the region, profoundly altering its political and cultural landscape and ushering in an “Age of Empires.” The contrasting images of the *pax Assyriaca*, providing stability and enabling exchange, and of the destructions, deaths, and deportations vividly portrayed in Assyrian royal inscriptions and in the Hebrew Bible both contribute to this picture of sweeping change. In the past few decades, studies of regional settlement patterns in imperial provinces have succeeded in documenting the major demographic shifts brought about by the Assyrian Empire, and the excavation of Assyrian period sites throughout the region has increased dramatically. From the extant archaeological evidence, however, one would still be hard pressed to answer the question of whether and in what ways incorporation into the Assyrian Empire was transformative on the level of provincial subjects’ daily social and economic lives, and whether such transformations were imposed from above or emerged from below, despite the fact that this is a crucial element of the prevailing macromodels of imperial rule. Progress toward the resolution of this question will require the contextual and chronological detail offered by household archaeology, as has been demonstrated by several investigations of New World empires. This paper thus advocates a new emphasis on the careful investigation and analysis of ordinary domestic structures in Assyrian imperial provinces, aiming to identify changes and continuities in the domestic economies and social organization of its subjects. Such a program of household archaeology is planned for the new excavations of the University of Chicago at Sam’al (Zincirli Höyük), the capital of a small Syro-Hittite Kingdom that became an Assyrian province in the late eighth century BCE.
The Nature of Assyrian Rule

One of the major issues in the study of ancient empires has long been the question of the fundamental motivation for their expansion into and consolidation of new territories. The “basic philosophical differences” regarding this topic identified by Robert McC. Adams at a late 1907s symposium on ancient empires (1979: 400) still persist today.

On the one hand, there is a basically materialist viewpoint, according to which the motivation of resource acquisition underlies all imperial ideology and action, and imperialism is but one mechanism of interregional economic exploitation. This perspective has been articulated frequently as the core-center-periphery or world-systems model (derived from Wallerstein 1974), which predicts simultaneous economic development of the core polity and underdevelopment of peripheral areas (e.g., Ekholm and Friedman 1979; Smith 1995). On the other side, are those who grant imperial ideology and social structure primacy over the principle of economic maximization in determining ancient imperial activities, and see economic transfers as means to political ends, rather than ends in themselves (e.g., Kemp 1978, 1997; Finley 1978; Eisenstadt 1979; Schloen 2001). This viewpoint is skeptical of the notion of a systematic, long-term drain of wealth from the periphery to the imperial center and points to the often hefty debit side of the “imperial balance sheet” as evidence for economically “irrational” behavior. The most systematic expression of this more Weberian approach that emphasizes the culturally mediated motivations of different types of social actors is, perhaps, the “patrimonial/bureaucratic” imperial typology of the sociologist Eisenstadt (1979). Recently, core-periphery and world-systems models have also been criticized from a post-colonial perspective for their centrist bias, whereby all change is initiated by the empire and “all power and control emanat[e] from the imperial core,” denying imperial subjects any agency to shape events (Sinopoli 2001: 465; cf. Webster 1996; Alcock 1997; Schreiber 2006).

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1 Eisenstadt makes a fundamental distinction between “patrimonial kingdoms,” which had “few symbolic and institutional differences between the center and periphery,” and “Imperial” bureaucratic regimes, such as China or Byzantium, which were characterized by “a high level of distinctiveness of the center” and a self-conscious “Great Tradition” (1979: 22–25).