CHAPTER THREE

SOCIETY, INSTITUTIONS, LAW, AND ECONOMY

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1. Society

1.1 Semi-Nomadic Origins

We still have little knowledge about the origin of the Aramaean tribes in Syria or their political rise and social organization. We can obtain some information from Old Aramaic inscriptions and from the annals of the Assyrian kings. In addition, archaeological excavations in the last decades at different sites in Syria have contributed to a better understanding of these beginnings. Meanwhile, we know that the Aramaeans had already lived as different semi-nomadic groups in Syria and its peripheral zones. As M.-G. Masetti-Rouault has noted, “while, during Iron I, Aramaean populations could be identified with the semi-nomadic sector of these social structures, they shared the same cultural, religious identity of the sedentary and urban components, which, during Iron II, as a social class, they eventually came to control and manage, within the states they had thus founded. In any case, they can no longer be considered as ‘primitives’, as far as their mentality, art or religion is concerned, quite the contrary: they appear now to have been the most active and creative part of the society, ready to resist the Assyrian occupation.”

The first textual evidence of Aramaeans in Syria is found in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser I. Tiglath-Pileser clashed with Aramaean groups (ahlamû aramāyya) as far as Carchemish and to the borders of Lebanon. He

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1 I am much obliged to Jessica Baldwin, who kindly corrected my English.
2 The heartland of these groups might have been the region between the Euphrates and the Khabur. The first hints of possible Aramaeans refer to the 13th century B.C.; Schwartz 1989; Dion 1997: 16f; Sader 2000; Lipiński 2000a: 45–50; Masetti-Rouault 2009: 143; Niehr 2010a: 201–206. Cf. also H. Sader’s contribution in this volume.
3 Masetti-Rouault 2009: 143.
4 Cf. H. Sader’s contribution in this volume.
crossed the Euphrates 28 times to defeat them. Unfortunately, Tiglath-Pileser gives no names of chiefs or tribes. Aside from their description as Aramaean aḫlamû, their extreme mobility, which made pursuit difficult, and the absence of references to chariots and fortified villages in the Assyrian annals speak to a nomadic or semi-nomadic organization of these early tribes. There are also indications that they may trace back to the Amorite tribes of the Mari letters. Nevertheless, the general term aḫlamû aramāyya does not allow for any conclusion as to the ethnicity of these tribes. Therefore, there is an ongoing debate about whether there was a direct connection between these early aḫlamû and the later Aramaic-speaking people in Syria. The great variety of Aramaic dialects in the different kingdoms of the 9th and 8th centuries B.C. as well as the lack of archaeological proof of a common Aramaean culture speaks in favor of ethnic diversity among the Aramaeans.

1.2 Tribal Society and the Formation of Kingdoms

In the course of the complex political changes of the so-called Dark Ages and especially during the decline of the Middle-Assyrian Empire, several Aramaean tribes succeeded in founding or taking over settlements, or

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5 RIMA 2, text A.0.87.1, p. 23, ll. 46–47; A.0.87.2, p. 34, l. [28]; A.0.87.3, pp. 37–38, ll. 29–35; and A.0.87.4, p. 43, ll. 34–36.
6 Nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes called aḫlamû are already mentioned in southern Babylonia in the 18th century B.C. For the etymology of the appellation aḫlamû, see Dion 1997: 16 with n. 7 and Lipiński 2000a: 36f. He concludes that “Aḫlamû was no proper name of a particular ethnic or linguistic group, but a nomadic designation of the raiding forces that were making forays or razzias for the capture of flocks, slaves, food supplies, etc.”; similar Herles 2007 and Bunnens 2009: 72.
9 Bunnens 2009: 72: “No specific ethnic affiliation can be recognized for such groups and no specific material culture can thus be expected for them. They must have shared most of the cultural features of the other population groups and should thus be unrecognizable in the archaeological record.”
11 The awareness of the Aramaeans as “relatively uniform social reality” was kept alive in the neighboring states, especially in Israel; cf. Lipiński 2000a: 497. He makes the cultural and linguistic resemblance among the Aramaean tribes responsible for this phenomenon. The awareness of the Aramaeans as a homogenous group in the Old Testament has had a long influence, especially in older research.
12 McClellan 1992 for the beginning of the settled existence of the Aramaeans.