A NEW LOOK AT THE END OF THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE*

SARAH C. MELVILLE

Clarkson University

I. Introduction

The collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C.E. has been a source of controversy and fascination since ancient times as the sequence of events is far from clear and the lacunae in our sources inhibit historical analysis. Modern interpreters of Assyria’s demise have proposed various causes including decreasing returns on production, external and internal dissention, population decline in the heartland, resource depletion, and fundamental military weakness. While each of these may have contributed to Assyria’s decline, none is sufficient by itself to explain the empire’s abrupt end. The purpose of this paper is to shed further light on the problem by using a new approach. Applying some of the tenets of military and strategic theory, I argue that Assyria’s own cultural assumptions about warfare, coupled with its long history of military success and a failure of strategic imagination, played a vital role in rendering the heartland vulnerable to the type of bilateral attack which destroyed it.

Since the sources are few, fragmentary and often cryptic, much of the scholarship concerning the end of the Assyrian Empire naturally concentrates on reconstructing the course of events and sorting out chronological problems.¹ Other works focus on the analysis of

---

* It is an honor to dedicate this paper to Professor Bustenay Oded, whose work has been such an inspiration.

ancient sources, or investigate the archaeological evidence of the fall of Assyrian cities. On the theoretical side, several publications that explore different paradigms for the rise and fall of empires consider the case of Assyria, albeit briefly. The most thorough recent assessment is Liverani’s contribution to a cross-disciplinary book on empires, in which he points out one of the key suppositions behind modern scholarship, “...namely that a state or empire cannot fall down unless it contains within itself the terms of its own ruin.” So far this doctrine has been interpreted in an entirely negative way; yet the extent to which the heartland of Assyria suffered from severe economic decline, that royal power was seriously undermined by internecine strife, or that Assyria’s succession wars had compromised its military readiness remain to be fully demonstrated. In fact, the empire did contain “the terms of its own ruin”: the innate belief that there was one right way to wage war and a persistent blindness to its own vulnerability.

Because of the utility and appeal of a paradigmatic explanation for imperial decline, scholars now tend to treat the problem of Assyria’s

---


6 For the purposes of this paper, I follow Altaweel who demarcates the heartland as the 150 × 79 km area having a N/S axis from the Lower Zab to Eski Mosul and a E/W axis from Wadi Tharthar and Jebel Sheikh Ibrahim to Wadi Fadha, Qara Chaquaq and the Khazir River. M. Altaweel, *The Land of Ashur: A Study of Landscape and Settlement in the Assyrian Heartland*, 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss. University of Chicago, 2004), p. 4. This area formed the nucleus of the Assyrian empire and included the capital cities. It was at the core of the Assyrian concept of “the land of Assur”, although in practice (and over time) this concept was quite elastic. See also, J. N. Postgate, “The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur”, *World Archaeology* 23 (1992), pp. 247–263.