

# Social Theories and Old Assyrian Kaneš

## Overview, Comments, Developments\*

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**Abstract:** In earlier literature, terms such as Assyrian "colony" are often used to describe the role of Kaneš and the predominant society in Kaneš. But especially in the last 20 years, this picture has changed: As a result of numerous text finds and their publication, it became increasingly clear that the Assyrians in Kaneš did not play such a dominant role as previously assumed – accordingly, other social models were used to describe the Old Assyrian society in Kaneš. This article is intended to explore the possibilities of using modern social theories to investigate and describe a complex ancient social system, such as that of the Old Assyrian Kaneš. Theories used so far in Assyriological literature and their application will be reviewed: the article is thus intended to reflect current research trends. Furthermore, the article will ask what is the purpose of "comparative studies" and whether it is in any case useful to use a comparative example to describe or whether it is not sometimes better to investigate and describe a society with the available means (archaeological and philological sources).

“[...] the essential task of theory building there is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize within them.”<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction: Old Assyrian Period

The so-called Old Assyrian period, which lasted approximately from 1972 until 1718 BC (Barjamovic – Hertel – Larsen 2012, 91–97),<sup>2</sup> is characterized by long-distance trade between Aššur, the modern Qal’at Šerqat in northern

Iraq, and Kaneš, the modern Kültepe in Anatolia, in the middle of Turkey. During this period, Assyrian merchants settled in Kaneš and lived among the native Anatolians, in a special quarter called *kārum* (literally “harbour, quay” in Akkadian),<sup>3</sup> a commercial district in the lower town of the city of Kaneš.

The trade between the two cities was based on the exchange of tin and textiles, which the Assyrian merchants brought via donkey caravans from Aššur to Kaneš. In Kaneš these were sold for silver and gold, which the

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discussing various questions. Many thanks also to the two reviewers for their helpful comments. None of them, of course, is responsible for any remaining mistakes. Abbreviations follow the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* (Berlin etc., 1928–2018).

<sup>1</sup> Geertz 1973, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Following the so-called Middle Chronology. For up-to-date information concerning the Old Assyrian chronology see Barjamovic – Hertel – Larsen 2012.

<sup>3</sup> CAD K (1971) 231. For a discussion of the term *kārum* see Michel 2014, 70–71.

Assyrians brought back to Aššur. The distance between the two commercial centres was around 775 kilometres as the crow flies, while the main caravan route was about 1250 kilometres and was probably completed in about 40 days.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the ca. 22 500 cuneiform tablets found in the lower town of Kültepe come from the private archives of Assyrian and some Anatolian<sup>5</sup> merchants and are written in Old Assyrian, a dialect of the Akkadian language. Until today only some 7000 of them have been published (Kouwenberg 2019, 21 [March 2017]). These tablets come from 80–100 different archives. Most of them belong to a 30-year time-span between 1893–1863 BC, which arguably represents the heyday of the Old Assyrian long-distance trade (Barjamovic – Hertel – Larsen 2012, 55).

From the archaeological point of view, the ruins of the city of Kaneš consisted of a main mound and a lower town.<sup>6</sup> The commercial district was situated in an area of the lower town of Kaneš, where hundreds of houses have been excavated since the beginning of the official Turkish excavations in 1948. During the period covered by the documentation ca. 3000–3500 people – mostly merchants with their households – are estimated to have lived here (Hertel 2014, 43). C. Michel (2014, 72) argues that 500–800 of these people were of Assyrian origin.

In fact, the houses and their inventories – except the tablets – do not reveal much about the origins of their inhabitants. Houses were

built in an Anatolian style and the objects found such as ceramics mainly show Anatolian characteristics (see e.g. Stein 2008, 34; Larsen – Lassen 2014, 172). The information concerning the long-distance trade, the merchants and their living conditions is thus mostly provided by the cuneiform records.

The special situation described here has fascinated scholars from a variety of research areas, and several papers have appeared in recent years discussing how different social theories can be applied to the society of the Old Assyrian period, or help understanding it.<sup>7</sup> This article presents a short overview of a number of these theories, focusing on their initial context and how they have been adapted to the circumstances of the Old Assyrian period. Pros and contras will be outlined, and an attempt will be made to trace possible developments.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, this paper intends to offer an interim report on the current state of research.

## 2. Social Theories and Old Assyrian Society

From time to time the term “colony” appears in the context of research on Old Assyrian Kaneš, and some authors adopt labels such as the “Old Assyrian Colony Period”<sup>9</sup> when dealing with Old Assyrian sources – this may cause confusion, especially for those looking at Old Assyrian studies from the outside.

In her 2014 article “Considerations on the Assyrian Settlement in Kanesh”, C. Michel made some important points concerning the terms *kārum* and “colony”. She pointed out that before the 1960s it was assumed by most that

<sup>4</sup> Stratford 2017, 148 with earlier literature. As the latest research by Stratford (2017, 163–178) shows, letters which could be carried by special travellers on mules, could cover the distance in 30 days.

<sup>5</sup> See Michel 2011.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the archaeological remains in Kaneš see recently Palmisano 2018, 19–22.

<sup>7</sup> This paper does not deal with early theories like those of K. Polanyi, as they have been well assessed by Michel 2005 (with earlier literature) and Pálfi 2014. Michel (2014, 70) also offers some further information concerning the history of research on Old Assyrian sources.

Nor does this paper discuss the World-systems theory and the Old Assyrian society, on which see Allen 1992 (for a comment on this see Palmisano 2018, 25).

<sup>8</sup> This overview differs in many points from the one given by Highcock 2018, 18–21. Highcock did not differentiate between Hybridity and Middle Ground, as will be done in this paper (see also Larsen – Lassen 2014, 171–172). Rather, she summarized both as a model of a “hybridized community” (Highcock 2018, 18).

<sup>9</sup> See for example the titles of Lumsden 2008 or Barjamovic 2011.

Kaneš was a colony of an “Assyrian Empire” with its capital (“mothertown”) Aššur and that *kārum* was translated as “colony” (Michel 2014, 70–71).

According to P. van Dommelen, we can speak about a colony when two conditions are fulfilled:

“[...] in the first place, the presence of one or more groups of foreign people (the colonizers) in a region at some distance from their own place of origin and, in the second place, asymmetrical socio-economic relationships between the colonizing and colonized groups—inequality, in a single word” (van Dommelen 2012, 398).

With regard to earlier studies, it can be assumed that the criterion of an “asymmetrical socioeconomic relationship” was considered as fulfilled – Assyrians were considered as colonizers and Anatolians as colonized.<sup>10</sup>

In 1963 P. Garelli was the first who gave a new interpretation of the term *kārum* as a trading centre situated in a city (Larsen 1974, 468–469; Michel 2014, 70 with reference to Garelli 1963, 370–374).<sup>11</sup> Stein (2008, 26–27) and Michel (2014, 71) have most convincingly shown that the term “colony” and also the concept behind this term should not be used to describe the situation in the Old Assyrian period.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the sources reveal that it was the merchants

who paid taxes to the local authorities.<sup>13</sup> In the following, the significance of using the term “colony” when dealing with social theories and Old Assyrian Kaneš will become obvious.

## 2.1 Trade Diaspora

In his article “Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas”, A. Cohen (1971, 267) defined a diaspora as “a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities”.<sup>14</sup> His research focused on the Yorubaland, in the southwestern part of Nigeria, where merchants of the Hausas, a people from northern Nigeria, established their trade diaspora (Cohen 1971, 270–276).

As for the Old Assyrian period, A. Gräff (2005)<sup>15</sup> attempted to interpret the Assyrian presence in Kaneš in the framework of this concept, though his article has been overlooked by other authors discussing the concept of “trade diasporas” in Ancient Near Eastern contexts (see e.g. Stein 2008; Highcock 2018). Nevertheless, Gräff already made some of the main points concerning the usage of this theory (see chart below). In 2008 G. Stein (2008) examined the Old Assyrian merchants in Kaneš in the framework of a “trade diaspora”.<sup>16</sup> Some years later, also C. Michel (2014) discussed Old Assyrian “trade diasporas” and the assertions made by Stein.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the discussion between B. Landsberger and J. Lewy: Landsberger (1924, 223) interpreted *kārum* as “Kolonie” whereas Lewy (1925, 19) preferred an interpretation as “Stadtbehörde”. See further Larsen 1974, 468 and Michel 2014, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Allen (1992, 464) calls this the “Democratic Entrepreneurs School”.

<sup>12</sup> There are also other possibilities to deal with the term “colony”, see for example the definition preferred by Palmisano (2018, 25). He follows C. Gosden (2004, 153) who defines colonialism as “a process where material culture moves people, both culturally and physically, leading them to expand geographically, to accept new material forms and to set up power structures around a desire for material culture”.

<sup>13</sup> Dercksen 2007a, 198–200.

<sup>14</sup> For the use of the term “diaspora” see Cohen 1971, 267 n. 1.

For a general discussion on the term see Brubaker 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Gräff in his introduction refers to Faist 2001, 239. Faist compares Old and Middle Assyrian trade and describes the Old Assyrian trade as follows: “Der Handel beruhte auf einem hierarchischen Netz von Handelsniederlassungen bzw. “trade diasporas” (*kārum* und *wabartum*) und war durch Verträge mit der jeweiligen lokalen Autorität geregelt” (Faist 2001, 239–240). Faist (2001, 111 n. 13) further points to Curtin (1984, 67–70) who was, as it seems, the first to describe the presence of Assyrian merchants in Anatolia as a “trade diaspora”.

<sup>16</sup> Stein 2008 is based on Stein 1999 where the author tested different world systems, among others “trade diasporas” in third-millennium BC Mesopotamia. In another article (Stein 2002) he gave a detailed overview of the system of “trade diasporas”.

Stein focused on “diaspora autonomy” as the most fitting variant of diaspora for the Old Assyrian period.<sup>17</sup> This concept considers the Assyrian merchants as a “protected autonomy within the host community” (Stein 2008, 31). One of the main points made by Stein is that the Assyrian merchants kept their own cultural identity in Anatolia:

“How does a trade diaspora work? Members of the trading group move into new areas, settle down in market or transport centers

along major trade routes, and specialize in exchange while maintaining a separate cultural identity from their host community” (Stein 2008, 31).<sup>18</sup>

Stein gives a few examples indicating that the Assyrian merchants kept separated from the Anatolians: The following chart may help to illustrate a choice of his major points and the often contrasting opinions of other scholars concerning aspects of “trade diaspora” and the Old Assyrian society in Kaneš:

	Pro (Stein 2008)	Contra
general aspects	Stein argues for a separation between the hosting society (natives of Kaneš) and the Assyrian merchants (p. 31).	(1) Marriage frequently took place between Assyrian merchants and Anatolian women (Kienast 2008). <sup>19</sup> (2) Assyrians and Anatolians were living in the same quarter of the town as neighbours (Gräff 2005, 159–162; Larsen – Lassen 2014, 177 n. 29; with a detailed analysis: Michel 2014, 75). Further, no architectural difference between the houses of Assyrians and Anatolians is perceptible (e.g., Michel 2014, 76).
archaeological evidence	Stein suggests that the zooarchaeological evidence could reveal differences in food preferences and preparation techniques (p. 34).	For the first results see Atici 2014: there seems to be some difference, but the results have to be regarded with caution because more research needs to be done (Atici 2014, 208; see also Michel 2014, 76 with further arguments). <sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Stein (2008, 31–32) differentiates between three types of trading diasporas: (1) Diaspora Marginality, (2) Diaspora Autonomy und (3) Diaspora Dominance.

<sup>18</sup> Nearly the same aspect is highlighted by Gräff 2005, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Cohen gives an opposite example from the history of Nigerian diasporas: “[...] so that a good citizen of the diaspora is one who is born of a Hausa woman and a Hausa man. Hausa men in the

diaspora marry only Hausa women” (Cohen 1971, 272).

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Old Assyrian cylinder seals can be investigated: there is an Assyrian and an Anatolian style and both were used by Assyrians as well as Anatolians (see Gräff 2005, 163–164; Larsen – Lassen 2014). As Michel (2014, 77) points out, glyptic “witnesses a real acculturation phenomenon between both communities”. See also § 2.2 Hybridity.

	Pro (Stein 2008)	Contra
Ethnological aspects	Clothing could have served as a marker of social identity (p. 34).	We know that Assyrians and Anatolians produced different kinds of garments, and surely these may have marked social status or ethnic identity. But there is no archaeological or textual evidence attesting that Assyrians only wore textiles produced by Assyrians which Anatolians were not allowed to wear or the other way around. <sup>21</sup> Therefore a separation in this context is hard to prove.
Linguistic aspects	Concerning the textual evidence Stein stated that there are almost no loanwords or other linguistic borrowings in the Old Assyrian dialect from the local culture (p. 34).	Michel (2014, 77) notes that this assumption is based on outdated research and refers in this respect to Dercksen's research (2007b).

Surely the Assyrians will have kept their own traditions, at least in parts of the cultic domains,<sup>22</sup> but it was – as both material and textual evidence shows – not their primary aim to keep separated from native Anatolians and other Non-Assyrians.

Nonetheless, there is an ongoing consideration of the “trade diaspora model”, especially by N. Highcock. She laments the fact that the archaeological evidence is not sufficiently considered (Highcock 2018, 19–20; see also below), though both Gräff and Stein have given it due place. As the chart above shows, however, the corresponding arguments by Stein could be invalidated. It certainly cannot be ruled out that future archaeological or philological investigations can change the currently existing picture. As already pointed out by Lumsden (2008, 29), this concept is not adequate to describe the complex situation in Old Assyrian Kaneš. Indeed, according to the current state of research, caution is urged when

using the concept of “trade diaspora” for Old Assyrian society.

## 2.2 Hybridity

The concept of “hybridity” – in one of its most influential uses in contemporary cultural studies – was formulated by the post-colonial critic H. K. Bhabha, in a number of contributions published in his famous book “The Location of Culture” (Bhabha 1994). For Bhabha, cultural hybridity describes a ‘third space’ in which different cultures encounter each other and negotiate on meanings and differences (Bhabha 1994, 7). Within the framework of hybridity, regulated and essentialist political discourses are rejected. The concept was developed for the postcolonial situation with reference to the Indian subcontinent.

For the Old Assyrian period, M. T. Larsen and A. W. Lassen tested the concept of hybridity with a particular focus on the interpretation of material culture (Larsen – Lassen 2014, 172).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See also Michel 2014, 76.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Michel 2014, 71–72 and Heffron 2016. However, Michel points out that Assyrians at the same time also worshipped Annā, the goddess of Kaneš (Michel 2014, 78). Again, Cohen (1971, 277) highlights that religion can play an important role in establishing a trade diaspora: “[...] that is why most of the large-scale diasporas about which we know are

associated with a ‘universal’ civilization or religion: Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism and, in West Africa, Islam”.

<sup>23</sup> Still, in the beginning it remains unclear which concept of hybridity they use: “In our view there are clear similarities between White’s theory [viz. ‘Middle Ground’, see below §2.3. (S.P.S.)] and the hybridity models developed in recent years, and Homi

The main subject of their investigation are the cylinder seals of the Old Assyrian period (Larsen – Lassen 2014, 179–187). Before the Assyrian merchants came to Kaneš, stamp seals prevailed in Anatolia. The cylinder seals introduced by the Assyrian merchants were quickly adapted, as can be seen in particular from those cylinder seals which were made in the Anatolian style – in Anatolia – and which were used besides the seals in the Old Assyrian style by Assyrians as well as Anatolians.

Using the term “hybridity”<sup>24</sup> in Bhabha’s sense leads to several problems, as P. W. Stockhammer has shown:

“Whereas Bhabha (2007) defined hybridity as a strategy of the suppressed and subaltern against their suppressors in a colonial context, archaeologists particularly perceive those objects as ‘hybrid’ which seem to resist classification with predefined taxonomies” (Stockhammer 2013, 11).

This quotation clarifies the problem of using a term belonging to a different discipline without being explicit about its contextual application. Besides the postcolonial concept with its political dimension, the biological implication of ‘hybridity’ should also be considered. Given these problems, Stockhammer – among others – (re-)introduced a different term to characterize the concept of hybridity in archaeological research: “entanglement”<sup>25</sup>, which describes certain creative processes resulting from cultural encounters (Stockhammer 2013, 16). A further theoretical entailment is his concept of “cultural entanglement”:

“This entangled object is produced at some place (which does not have to be the place where the object is found), but its materiality shows that it is not the result of local continuities, but of changes triggered by encounters with otherness. It is more than just a sum of the entities from which it originated. It is an indissoluble combination of all of them – a cultural “Geflecht” – and might be seen as a new entity” (Stockhammer 2012, 50–51).

By using the term “entanglement” – developed mainly for use in archaeological contexts – instead of “hybridity”, and thereby leaving Bhabha’s concern with a conflictual political dimension aside, we end up with a concept which is entirely adequate for archaeological investigations.<sup>26</sup> Larsen – Lassen came to a similar result concerning the Old Assyrian cylinder seals:

“The production of cylinder seals in Anatolia was undoubtedly caused by the presence of the Assyrian merchants, and it is likely that seals of this type were manufactured with the Assyrians in mind as consumers. The hybridized imagery on these seals reflects the negotiated and entangled nature of society in Kaneš in the Old Assyrian period. At the same time, the elements do not seem to be randomly compiled, but rather deliberately so by the seal carvers to please specific groups of consumers” (Larsen – Lassen 2014, 186).

Thus, the term “hybridity” described, for Bhabha, the effects and dynamics of a colonial encounter displaying unequal power relations – but this was not the case for Kaneš. Therefore, this term should not be used to describe the

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Bhabha’s notion of a ‘third space of enunciation’ (Larsen – Lassen 2014, 172). They provide no specific bibliographical references to clarify whose views they are following when using the term “hybridity”. At a later point, they introduce a definition of hybridization given by P. van Dommelen (see Larsen – Lassen 2014, 179 n. 40 with further references).

<sup>24</sup> Hybridity has been discussed with reference to different types of ancient societies and situations under different perspectives. For an overview of archaeological studies using the term “hybridity” see Stockhammer 2012, 52–54.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Stockhammer 2012, 46–47 and Stockhammer 2013, 16 with further literature.

<sup>26</sup> See also Stockhammer 2012, 47.

material evidence of the Old Assyrian period without detailed qualification. The term “entanglement” – as currently used by Larsen and Lassen as well as in other archaeological research<sup>27</sup> – may be more appropriate to the contextual realities of archaeology.

### 2.3 Middle Ground

The concept of the “Middle Ground” was developed by R. White in his work “The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815” (White 2011<sup>2</sup> [1991]). This book focuses on fur trade in the area of the Great Lakes (*pays d'en haut*) between 1650–1815 AD. The protagonists are French fur traders on the one side and the native inhabitants of this area, the Algonquian Indians, on the other side. The Middle Ground represents a third space between two societies which White describes as the context of “a process of mutual and creative misunderstandings” and “the ways that new meanings are derived from them” (White 2006, 9). Here we find ourselves, as already with Bhabha, in a colonial situation. Especially the similarities between Bhabha’s and White’s views are interesting to note: both create a new “third space” in-between the societies under investigation.<sup>28</sup> A special interest of White is gaining an understanding of the view of the colonized.<sup>29</sup>

St. Lumsden (2008) was the first who tried to adapt the Middle Ground theory to the Old Assyrian period. His article was partially reviewed by Larsen – Lassen (2014, 174–178) and recently also Y. Heffron (2017) tested this approach.

In a detailed investigation, Lumsden examined different aspects of the Old Assyrian material

culture. He saw the special value of the Middle Ground in the fact that this theory is not only focused on trade, which is always in the foreground in Old Assyrian studies and in theories like the “trade diaspora” (Lumsden 2008, 29). As basic prerequisites for the Middle Ground, according to White, Lumsden sees a balance in power relations, a relationship based on a mutual need and the inability of one party to convince the other that it “can change sides”. He saw mediation as an essential element (Lumsden 2008, 31). During his investigations, however, Lumsden could not find appropriate evidence for the Middle Ground in the material record. This led him to suspect that texts may be more helpful. In conclusion, he advocated the importance of combining archaeological and written evidence if one is to apply Middle Ground framework (Lumsden 2008, 43).

Also Larsen – Lassen (2014, 178) argue against the use of the Middle Ground. In their opinion, this model is not suitable for understanding how material culture can shape or reflect the interaction of groups when they encounter each other. They recognize the value of this model in the analysis of social and political relations. Another problem pointed out by Lumsden is that he was unable to find clear cases of misunderstandings – a main element of White’s theory – between the Assyrian merchants and the natives of Kaneš (Lumsden 2008, 31 n. 11; see also Larsen – Lassen 2014, 175). Nevertheless, Y. Heffron made a second attempt. She focused only on textual evidence and investigated “bigamie autorisée”, a term already introduced by Michel (2006, 161–163), and the *amtum*-wife practice, where she hoped to find the required misunderstandings constituting the Middle Ground (Heffron 2017, 79).<sup>30</sup> These *amtum*-wives were the secondary

<sup>27</sup> In this context, particular reference must be made to Ian Hodder (2012) and his work.

<sup>28</sup> Stockhammer – Athanassov (2018, 100–102) also notice this and further add the work of M. Pratt who introduced a related concept of “contact zones” in the context of colonial encounter.

<sup>29</sup> White 2011<sup>2</sup>, XXVII. The author also criticized that these groups had been marginalized in earlier periods and studies (White 2011<sup>2</sup>, XXX).

<sup>30</sup> Besides Heffron, also Lumsden (2008, 35) and Larsen – Lassen (2014, 177–178) thought that these mixed marriages were comparable to the marriages

wives of the Assyrian merchants who lived in Kaneš, the merchants' principal wives (*aššatum*) lived in Assyria.<sup>31</sup> But the only example of a possible misunderstanding derives from the marriage contract TPAK 161a/b. The document consists, as usual, of a tablet and an envelope that repeats the tablet's text. In the "travel clause"<sup>32</sup> of the tablet we read *a-ma-sú* (l. 15) "his (i.e. the merchant's) *amtum*-wife", while the envelope shows *a-ša-sú* (l. 17) "his (principal) wife". One could take this as evidence of confusion between the status of "principal" (*aššatum*), and "secondary" (*amtum*) wife. However, this is a unique piece of evidence, which should most likely be seen as a mistake by the scribe.<sup>33</sup>

Concerning the "bigamy clause"<sup>34</sup> of this contract, one notices further differences between the tablet and its envelope: the scribe changed also the order of the cities in which the husband is not allowed to marry another wife (TPAK 161a: ll. 10–14; 161b: ll. 13–16).<sup>35</sup> A closer comparison between tablet and envelope reveals even more deviations, particularly in the first lines which Kienast (2015, 136) calls receipt of purchase price ("Kaufpreisquittung"). This can also be observed in other marriage (and divorce) contracts, where the order of the clauses can be changed or elements of the clauses are omitted, for instance, kt v/k 147a/b<sup>36</sup> where the tablet lacks a part of the clause mentioned on the envelope. This could be convincingly regarded as cases of scribal carelessness. Altogether this is a doubtful piece

of evidence for Heffron's "genuine confusion" (Heffron 2017, 79).

It is possible that the concept of Middle Ground can prove useful once more details about the excavations in Kültepe will be published or further work is conducted on the views of the "colonised" Anatolians (see also below). This is one of the main elements of White's concept which does seem very promising, even if, once again, the framework of an encounter between colonisers and colonised has proved inapplicable to the Kaneš context.

#### 2.4 Concept of Mobile Identities / Mobility

The origin of this theoretical framework can be found in the "Time-Space-Distanciation" (TSD) concept of the sociologist A. Giddens (1984, 110–226). The TSD theory deals with the extension – or in Giddens's words "stretching" (Giddens 1984, 181) – of systems across space and time as a basic feature of human societies, and especially with the interaction of people absent in space and time, such as between the ancient Assyrian merchants in Kaneš and their families in Aššur. This concept was used by A. Porter in her work on mobile pastoralism, in which she examined the emergence of ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia with a view on nomadism (Porter 2012). Porter further adopts the concept of "Toponymie en miroir" introduced by D. Charpin and J.-M. Durand (Charpin – Durand 1986, 157–158; Charpin 2003; Porter 2009, 203–205 and 2012, 312–313). "Toponymie en

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described by White (2011<sup>2</sup>, 68–69.) White gives an example for an "intermarriage" between a Frenchman and a native woman where it becomes clear that his sources present both sides of the Middle Ground. This differs significantly from the Kaneš sources, where the Assyrian perspective prevails (White 2011<sup>2</sup>, 71–75 and 2006, 11–12).

<sup>31</sup> On the topic of the second wife in the Old Assyrian period see Kienast 2008; Kienast 2015, 93–96 and Veenhof 2018, 30–32. For the "secondary wife" in the Ancient Near East with further literature see now Földi – Schlüter 2019.

<sup>32</sup> The "travel clause" includes the husband's right to take his wife with him on his business trips. This right

could be guaranteed to the husband in marriage contracts. For further information see Veenhof 2018, 23–25.

<sup>33</sup> See also Veenhof 2018, 10.

<sup>34</sup> The "bigamy clause" is an important part of Old Assyrian marriage contracts and contains information on which other women the husband may or may not marry. This clause also regulates where the husband may marry which woman. Michel 2006 provides detailed information on bigamy in the Old Assyrian period.

<sup>35</sup> See also Kienast 2015, 138.

<sup>36</sup> See Kienast 2015, 132–134 with reference to earlier literature.



miroir” is the naming of new settlements based on names already known to the founders from their region of origin. Often the founders of such named settlements are expatriates (Charpin 2003, 15–18) or – as first millennium BC examples show – deportees (Tolini 2015, 64–66). Porter uses the two concepts to demonstrate that in this way kinship relations could be maintained between the pastoralists – despite great distances.

N. Highcock (2018) has looked at these concepts and their applicability to the Old Assyrian society. In her view, Porter’s work on pastoralist societies can be seen as a “springboard” (Highcock 2018, 21) for new research on Old Assyrian society. One of her major aims is to analyse how mobility shaped the structure of the Old Assyrian society (Highcock 2018, 6).<sup>37</sup> She regards the Assyrians in Kaneš as akin to pastoralist societies:

“Though the pastoral component of Assur’s population is not highly visible in the available data, the majority of textual evidence for the Old Assyrian period was produced by merchants, another category of mobile community. A significant proportion of Assur’s population participated in the long-distance trade network and thus the “sons of Assur” also represent a people dispersed across time and space” (Highcock 2018, 24–25).

Based on the idea of “Toponymie en miroir”, Highcock develops a new concept for the Old Assyrian period which she calls “mirrored institutions” (Highcock 2018, 25–26). The main difference is that the pastoralists, such as nomads, re-used the names of settlements, while the Assyrians of the Old Assyrian period encountered already established settlement

pattern, to which they “translated” their administrative structures as known to them from Aššur. For this concept, she is able to present a range of examples like the *kārum* office (*bēt kārim*) in Kaneš and the city office in Aššur. She concludes that:

“[...] the Assyrians were able to project their homeland onto a foreign landscape. This model does not negate the hybridization that occurred at Kanesh and the other Assyrian settlements, but instead explores how Assyrians shaped to their own cultural and political borders when living beyond them” (Highcock 2018, 28).

This approach thus again focuses only on Assyrian traders and attempts to show what strategies mobile groups could apply when they met other – in this case settled – ‘cultures’. “Mirrored institutions” can explain how Assyrian merchants were organized, but it is not necessarily a useful way to explain the peculiarities and phenomena that make up Old Assyrian society in Kaneš, as it risks showing one side of the coin only – the more conservative one.

Yet we may think that the Old Assyrian concept of “intermarriage” can be understood within this framework: in the absence of their wives, the Assyrian merchants married a secondary wife, whom they could not call *aššatum* “wife” because of the legal implications of the term and because they already had one in Aššur.<sup>38</sup> As they lacked a neutral term for “secondary wife”, they used *amtum* “female slave, maid”, which was the common term for female slaves.<sup>39</sup> We could thus interpret this phenomenon by positing that Assyrian merchants at the beginning of trade relations abroad also tried to “mirror” their households in Aššur – having a “wife” at home, caring for

<sup>37</sup> Highcock’s article offers an overview of the Middle Bronze age societies and the role that mobility played in this period (Highcock 2018, 5–11).

<sup>38</sup> But we also know some exceptions, there were some wives who lived in Kaneš (see note 41).

<sup>39</sup> This term was, for example also used to describe those women taken as substitutes when the first wife was unable to bear children. That a female slave could be bought as such a substitute is shown by the marriage contract ICK 1, 3: 7b–16.

their needs.<sup>40</sup> A wife undoubtedly gave far stronger economic and legal security for business management than a mere slave. And Assyrian merchants needed someone they could trust to act in their interests in Anatolia – in many cases we know of *amtum*-wives who did that job, like the case of Šišaḥšušar, the *amtum*-wife of Aššur-nādā demonstrates. She had to collect outstanding debts (OAA 1, 51, ll. 19–22) and as the letter OAA 1, 52 shows, she was updated by her husband about incoming merchandise and had to give instructions to the staff to sell copper or to buy oxen.

### 3. Why Compare? And How?

Why compare? One of the most frequent answers to this question is that, by making comparisons we try to close gaps in our knowledge. Of course, cross-cultural approaches are particularly suitable for this, but they rarely lead to the desired results. Societies vary widely, they can have parallels in general, but they can also be fundamentally different. The same phenomenon can result from very different reasons, so the question that arises is: how should societies be compared? Can we only compare parts of societies or do we have to compare the society as a whole to get the information we desire? Can we mix different theories to find the appropriate answer to our question?

As the survey above has shown, none of the theories is able to explain both textual evidence *and* material remains. Already Highcock addressed that problem and argued for a mixing of theories:

“I would argue that an analytical framework which 1) borrows elements from the trade diaspora model as applied by Stein to the texts and 2) incorporates the phenomenon of hybridization as seen in the material culture, best suits a synthesis of the textual and archaeological data, the latter which unfortunately is not within the purview of this discussion” (Highcock 2018, 21).<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps we should consider describing Old Assyrian society in its own terms without importing theoretical terminology from other contexts, as White did for the society in northern America of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. For the Old Assyrian society this was in part already done by P. Garelli (1963). Still, comparative work for closing the gaps will continue to be necessary.

Unfortunately, the available textual material is one-sided in many ways: first, it mainly represents the mercantile class and secondly, we know only the Assyrian side. There is not much research done about the “Anatolians” or, better said, the native inhabitants of Kaneš – except for, e.g. C. Michel’s (2011) paper on the private archives of “Anatolian” merchants or an article by J. G. Dercksen (2004) on the elements of the Old Anatolian society in Kaneš. This substantially differs from the elaborated picture that White presents of the Algonquians in his work, not to mention Bhabha’s work on India.

Another fundamental problem that we have been encountering is that many of the theories presented here require a colonial situation, which is clearly not given in the Old Assyrian period – not, at least, in the terms of power unbalances that have necessarily shaped post-

<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this thought was in the foreground at the beginning of the trade relations, but we also know of *amtum*-wives in Aššur and vice versa also of *aššatum*-wives in Kaneš. For example, Istar-ummī, *amtum*-wife of Aššur-taklāku, who apparently lived in Aššur and not in Kaneš. The *aššatum* of Aššur-taklāku, however, lived in Kaneš. As Michel (2001, 506, also Larsen 2002, 185) remarks, this is an example of “contrairement à la tradition”. It is likely that the initial

concept dissolved or rather loosened up over time and *amtum*-wives were no longer found only in Kaneš and other cities in Anatolia, but also in Aššur. On the other hand, we know at least of several *aššatum*-wives that they lived in Kaneš.

<sup>41</sup> For the “trade diaspora” model, already Michel (2014, 72) mentioned that it can be applied only in parts to investigate the Old Assyrian society.

colonial theory. We should possibly look at other concepts or theories which may describe the process when two different societies meet. Other forms of acculturation can be described and analysed: especially integration concepts, which include a retention of initial cultural aspects but also admit interaction.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding the second phase of the Old Assyrian period (ca. 1835–1760 BC), concepts of migration may provide a way to analyse this society but until today there are not enough published texts to do so.<sup>43</sup>

This article has shown that there are several possibilities as to how we can deal with theories and models. One of the major issues is to describe a theory which fits both the material and the written sources. Perhaps, the most valuable answer lies in Geertz's view quoted at the beginning of this article: theories are not abstract models that we should forcibly map onto the societies we analyse, but they can sharpen our senses when we look at them.

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<sup>42</sup> For aspects and different models of acculturation see Attoura 2002.

<sup>43</sup> See Larsen – Lassen 2014, 187.

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