

# The Effect of Neo-Assyrian Non-Interference Policy on the Southern Levant: An Archaeological Investigation

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## ABSTRACT

*The socio-political scene and economic structure of the Neo-Assyrian Empire influenced the Ancient Near East in many ways. An overview of the interpretation of Neo-Assyrian records<sup>1</sup> in the light of archaeological evidence, mainly from seventh century Ekron (Tell Miqne), may contribute to understand why this city seemed to flourish during the seventh century B.C.E.. The article is an attempt to demonstrate that archaeological data dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. in Israel/Palestine opens new perspectives when interpreted keeping the socio-political and economic structures of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in mind.*

## A INTRODUCTION

Historians have been fascinated with material remains and written records from Mesopotamian civilizations since at least the middle nineteenth century. Systematic organized excavations from 1850 onwards at Khorsabad, Nineveh, Calah and Dur-Sharrukin, to name but a few, began to give brilliant results.<sup>2</sup> The early pioneers who excavated these cities couldn't hide their conviction that the material remains they uncovered from these ruins were not only awe-inspiring but also crucial to understanding the past.<sup>3</sup> With the advances made in the decipherment of the Akkadian cuneiform script, documentary remains from royal libraries could be translated and understood. Suddenly a world previously only known through the Bible and classic sources was illuminated by texts, art and architecture. The fairly limited historical and linguistic scope of the Hebrew Bible expanded through the Assyrian materials that offered additional insights into the religious and social matrix of the Ancient Near East and

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<sup>1</sup> This overview is based on the contributions made by Assyriologists at a symposium held under the auspices of the Institute of Assyriology at the University of Copenhagen in September 1977. The theme of the symposium was "Empires in the Ancient World. Papers presented at the symposium on the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which will be referred to later in this article, were made by J. Nicholas Postgate, Benedikt Otzen and Susan Frankenstein.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of 19<sup>th</sup> century expeditions see the publication of Hermann V. Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands during the 19<sup>th</sup> century* (Philadelphia: Holman) 1903.

<sup>3</sup> Sabatino Moscati, *Ancient Semitic Civilizations* (London: Elek Books, 1957), 54.

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Biblical chronology.<sup>4</sup>

It is not only biblical scholars that benefited greatly from the Assyrian written record, art and architectural monuments. Scholars in the field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology and historiography who had to rely on Biblical and a few Classical sources reflecting on Assyria and Babylonia, were overwhelmed with primary data in the form of lengthy documents, royal treaties and loyalty oaths, sculptures, reliefs from royal palaces, architecture of cities, to name but a few. This wide range of material is today indispensable when interpreting archaeological data from Israel/Palestine. This is especially true when archaeological results from Palestinian cities dating from the Conquest and Imperial phases of the Assyrian Empire are interpreted.

In order to demonstrate how written records and material remains from the Neo-Assyrian period impact on the interpretation of archaeological data from historical sites in Palestine, the excavation results from Ekron dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. will be used. Papers on the Neo-Assyrian Empire, presented by Assyriologists during a symposium held under the auspices of the Institute of Assyriology at the University of Copenhagen in Copenhagen in 1977 will serve as basis for the discussion.<sup>5</sup>

## **B SOCIO-POLITICAL SCENE AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE**

### **1 A definition of “Empire”**

The Mesopotamian imperial tradition can be traced back as far as the Akkadian period, around 2300 B.C.E., when Sargon of Akade and Naram-Sin entered the scene as towering, nearly superhuman figures. Most of these rulers, if not all of them, were in fact concerned with military expansion and conquest of peripheral areas. A number of these kings from the third millennium B.C.E. proudly proclaim that they have “expanded the frontiers of Assyria,” and in doing so, they have simply acknowledged the duty laid on them as

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<sup>4</sup> Niels P. Lemche, *The Israelites in history and tradition*, (London: SPCK, 1998), 35-64.

<sup>5</sup> The papers presented at the symposium are: John N. Postgate, “The economic structure of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Power and Propaganda, Symposium on Ancient Empires*, (ed. Morgens T. Larsen. Copenhagen: Stougaard Jensen, 1979), 193-221; Benedikt Otzen, “Israel under the Assyrians,” in *Power and Propaganda, Symposium on Ancient Empires*, (ed. Morgens T. Larsen. Copenhagen: Stougaard Jensen, 1979), 250-61; Susan Frankenstein, “The Phoenicians in the Far West: A function of Neo-Assyrian Imperialism,” in *Power and Propaganda, Symposium on Ancient Empires*, (ed. Morgens T. Larsen. Copenhagen: Stougaard Jensen, 1979), 263-294.

representatives of the national god Assur.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt however, that the Neo-Assyrians from the first millennium B.C.E. were quite aware of the long tradition on which they were building, despite the immense span of time dividing them. They had no word for “Empire” and consequently did not distinguish such a structure from a territorial nation-state. They speak of “countries” or “lands.” However, when imposing the term Empire on Mesopotamian history we usually have a common-sense definition in mind which centres on expansion, domination and exploitation. This then means that Empire is a relationship between a ruling and controlling power on the one hand and one or more subjugated and dominated peoples on the other. Empire can thus be defined as a super-national system of political control, and such a system may either have a city-state or territorial state as its centre. Concerning the structure of such a system, Larsen<sup>7</sup> includes the following three typical features of the fully developed Assyrian Empire of the first millennium in a definition of “Empire:”

- a methodological and permanent occupation of conquered territory,
- implantation of military garrisons, and
- a division of the territory into provinces governed by officials closely submitted to the authority of a central government.

## 2 Phases in the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

### CHRONOLOGICAL CHART OF NEO-ASSYRIAN KINGS

	TIGLATH-PILESER III	745 - 727 B.C.E.
Conquest phase	SHALMANESER V	727 - 722 B.C.E.
	SARGON II	722 - 705 B.C.E.
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	SENNACHERIB	705 - 681 B.C.E.
Imperial phase	ESARHADDON	681 - 669 B.C.E.
	ASHURBANIPAL	669 - 627 B.C.E.

Assyriologists tend to divide the Neo-Assyrian Empire into two phases, a “conquest phase” and an “imperial phase.” The “conquest phase” lasts from the accession of Tiglath-pileser III into the reign of Sargon II, while broadly the “imperial phase” spans the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., under Sennacherib, Esarhaddon

<sup>6</sup> Mogens T. Larsen, “The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia: Mesopotamia 7,” in *Power and Propaganda, Symposium on Ancient Empires*, (ed. Mogens T. Larsen. Copenhagen: Stougaard Jensen, 1979), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Mogens T. Larsen, “The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia,” 92.

and Ashurbanipal. In administrative terms there is no clear break between the reign of Tiglath-pileser III from 745 B.C.E. and the reign of Assurbanipal. It seems accepted that Tiglath-pileser III re-organised the provincial system and it is likely that the framework of the military and civil administrations was laid down in his reign as well.

In *economic* terms, however, a clear distinction can be drawn between the decades during which the empire was regularly pushing its borders outwards and consolidating its conquests with an essentially military administration, and the later years when the main tracts of the Empire had been under Assyrian rule long enough to have acquired a certain stability and to have adjusted their economic and civil life to the new conditions.<sup>8</sup> The discussion in this article focuses mainly on the imperial phase of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal), since it overlaps with the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. occupation at Ekron (Stratum I).

This pushing of boundaries clearly demanded considerable advances in communications, in military logistics and in administrative techniques. The logistics involved in the movement of large armies over stretches of hundreds of kilometres and the transportation and communication apparatus necessary for an effective system of taxation and economic control were apparently first mastered by the Assyrians.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Economic resources for the Empire

Three main resource areas that kept the Empire's economy running were the cultivated plains, the coastal strip and the Taurus-mountains. The cultivated plains were situated in northern Mesopotamia where most of the corn was grown, of which a constant healthy surplus was needed for the armies and to secure the survival of the large cities. Apart from corn, other agricultural products from these plains mentioned in the Assyrian texts were vegetables, fruit nuts, grapes and very important, straw for animal fodder and brick-making, while the production of leather and wool was also important.

The incorporation of the cities along the Levantine seaboard led by the Phoenician towns of Tyre and Sidon, made a great difference to the economic resource structure of the Empire. For the first time Assyria directly controlled the Mediterranean commerce. Although it seems that the Assyrians did not intervene in the traditional trade patterns of the Phoenicians, there must have been a healthy additional income from harbour dues. Nor should we forget the North Syrian, Palestinian, Cilician and at times Cypriote ports who also contributed their share of harbour dues. Luxury goods available from these sources came in handy for the dignity of the Assyrian king who demanded that

<sup>8</sup> Postgate, "The economic structure of the Assyrian Empire," 194.

<sup>9</sup> Mogens T. Larsen, "The Tradition of Empire in Mesopotamia," 93.

his capitals, temples and palaces should display his wealth. The latest luxury items from the west, if not forthcoming as booty or tribute, had to be provided in other ways, and what better avenue can there be than through government controlled ports.

Although the villages in the north-west Taurus mountains had little to contribute to the economic pattern of the Empire, the mines in that region (Urartu) gave Assyria virtually her only direct access to metals. Metals such as copper, iron, lead and silver from these areas were of the utmost importance, especially for the needs of the Assyrian war-machine and building operations. Loss of direct control of these areas may have had a serious disruptive effect on the Empire's economy.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4 Non-interference policy

To simplify the government controlled commodity supplies, Postgate divides the empire into three sectors: a palace sector, a government sector and a private sector. The palace economy included not only the king's various establishments and families in the different cities, but similar households such as the queen mother or the crown prince, and those highly placed officials and courtiers whose remuneration was in the nature of domestic expenditure for the royal purse.

The role of the government sector in the economy was primarily to draw on the private sector to provide resources for the state's civil and especially military organisations. The backbone of the government sector was the provincial system. The governor of a province and his subordinates were responsible for the collection of payments of all kinds from their province and for the conscription and supply of soldiers and civil labourers. It was through the provincial government that the state came into contact with the ordinary person. The chief preoccupation of the provincial governments, in economic terms at least, was to supply the army with any kind of requirement to keep it running, be that may flour, wine, straw for horses and mules, labourers for building defensive walls of cities, etcetera.

In the private sector the movement of commodities is much harder to document because of the scarcity of written evidence. There is of course some evidence for government taxation of the private sector, which mainly concerns the taxes on agriculture and trade. Taxation of the private sector was principally in kind, on agricultural produce, and these taxes probably furnished a large proportion of the reserves of grain required by the civil and especially the military administration. Evidence for the precise rates of tax is scanty, but it was usually if not invariably a fraction of the crop, and the attested rates are 10% for corn and 25 % for straw, which no doubt reflects the relatively high

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<sup>10</sup> Postgate, "The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire," 200.

demand for straw by the government to feed the horses needed in the army. These rates do not seem oppressive, nor is there much evidence for arrears in tax. In fact, evidence suggests rather tax avoidance by the large landowner and not failure by the small farmer.

Nothing is known of the taxation of town-dwellers without any agricultural lands. Evidence exists however from Assyrian documents that the king expected the merchants and industrialists of the Levant and Babylonia to carry on with their mercantile activities *without interference from the government*. They would of course have been liable to customs and other state dues, but there is no hint of government trade monopoly.<sup>11</sup> There are a number of passages that may be interpreted as if the Assyrian kings actively encouraged private trade under their aegis. A few examples from Assyrian records support this fact:

- Tiglath-pileser's official in charge of the Phoenician coast writes to him to say that he was permitting the people of Sidon to "bring down the timber" (from Mt. Lebanon) "and do their work with it, but not to sell it to the Palestinians or Egyptians" - implying that they may trade freely in timber as long as they did not sell to Assyria's potential enemies.
- A decade or two later Sargon II describes how he tried to make the population of Samaria re-open trade with Egypt: "I opened the sealed harbour of Egypt, and I mixed the people of Assyria with the people of Egypt and made them engage in trade together."
- After describing how he restored Babylonia to normality and sent the citizens of Babylon back to their homes, Esarhaddon says that he "opened the roads for them to the four winds".<sup>12</sup> (This claim of Esarhaddon that he opened the roads for the people of Babylon to the four winds might also be considered as ideologically loaded).

Evidence from Assyrian sources is very scanty to reconstruct the actual items traded. Perhaps the most illuminating single source is the pair of Neo-Babylonian texts dating from the reign of Nabonidus, which record luxury and semi-luxury items from the west. The items mentioned there consisted of metals (copper, iron and tin), chemicals (dyes and alum), foodstuffs (whine, honey and olive oil), fibres (dyed wool and linen). Although these texts date from after the downfall of Assyria, the pattern of trade need not have changed much in the meanwhile, and we are justified in expecting that a similar type of consignment would have found its way to the Assyrian capitals and to Babylonia during the reigns of the Neo-Assyrian kings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Postgate, "The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire," 207.

<sup>12</sup> Postgate, "The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire," 206.

<sup>13</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, "Essay on overland trade in the First millennium B.C.," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967): 238.

## 5 Treatment of citizens from conquered regions

During the conquest phase the policy of deportation was used by Sargon II, whereby dissident elements from conquered towns and cities were deported across the Empire, a purely political rather than an economic move. During the imperial phase ordinary citizens were either deported, but more often left to till their fields, in which case they were liable to “render service like the people of Assyria.”<sup>14</sup>

If deported during the imperial phase, prisoners-of-war were either employed directly on public works, such as the construction of the king’s cities, Sennacherib’s irrigation schemes or distributed among the population to apply their skills. In one of the texts, Assurbanipal states that “the remainder (of war-prisoners) I distributed like sheep between the cities, residences of the great gods, among my governors, my nobles and all my camps.” These and other texts show that it was a regular and accepted procedure to assign war-prisoners to the palace and private sectors where they could apply their skills to benefit the economy of the Empire.

People with specialised skills like scribes, weavers, shepherds, oil-pressers and leather-workers operated in groups or cohorts. Cohorts that were formed of craftsmen were given raw material like wool, metal or olives and they had to convert it into textiles, weapons and oil. Once the finished products (*iskaru*) were produced or manufactured from the raw material, they fulfilled their service (*ilky*) to the Empire.<sup>15</sup> These cohorts were not only formed in or close to the capital cities, but also operated in smaller towns and villages across the empire, as will be illustrated later on.

It is important to take note that the Neo-Assyrian kings were *not overly interested in manipulating the economy of either the central or annexed regions of their empire*, except in the crude sense of extracting wealth. For wealth to flow from the provinces to the kings’ palaces, successful harvests were important. It is thus not surprising to find that the kings were intensely interested in the state of the crops. Already in the earliest years of the Neo Assyrian kingdom the rulers boasted about ploughs set to land that was not cultivated before. Letters from distant parts have fairly routine reports on the state of the harvest; correspondents mention heavy rains, sometimes with precise detail, evidence that the kings were concerned about the health of the empire’s economy.

## 6 Neo-Assyrian political and economic policy in Syria/Palestine

Trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia had to pass through Palestine and Syria. It is thus understandable that super powers of the Ancient Near East

<sup>14</sup> Oppenheim, “Essay on overland trade,” 240.

<sup>15</sup> Postgate, “The Economic Structure of the Assyrian Empire,” 212.

would have made great effort to have power over this region in order to control the caravan routes passing through and seaports serving it. This was the case in the Bronze Age with Egypt and the Hittites and later in the Iron Age when Esarhaddon entrusted the ports of trade and trade routes to Baal, King of Tyre.<sup>16</sup>

There is still no consensus amongst scholars as to why Tiglath-pileser led his first campaign to Palestine in 734 B.C.E. In an article about the Philistines under Assyrian rule, Tadmor,<sup>17</sup> argues that 'the first campaign to Philistia in 734 B.C.E. was largely motivated by the Assyrian aim of dominating the Mediterranean seaports and gaining control over their commerce'. Otzen agrees with him that Tiglath-pileser did not go down to Philistia in 734 B.C.E. to quell rebellions or to collect tribute, but to secure commercial interests, as was the case with his successors during the following decades<sup>18</sup>

On the whole it is characteristic that the Assyrians tried by all means to avoid establishing provinces in this corner of Syria/Palestine. Instead, they maintained the vassal city-state system despite what happened. The normal Assyrian procedure was to establish a puppet state or province, once a revolt occurred against Assyrian supremacy (the fate of the Israelite Northern Kingdom in 732-33 and in 722 serves as an example). But when Hanun, the king of Gaza, fled from Tiglath-pileser in 734 B.C.E. and apparently sought help from Egypt, he was reinstated on his throne in Gaza when he returned from Egypt and became an Assyrian vassal. It may be asked: Why was he not deported as the rest of his family and why was Gaza not turned into a province? There seems to be two reasons:

- Alt,<sup>19</sup> pointed out that the Assyrians always wanted to keep the Philistine states as vassal states, so they could continue using them as buffer states against Egypt.
- The other reason may be that the commercial interests of Tiglath-pileser (Gaza being the most important market city of the Arabian tribes in the south) forced him to preserve Gaza as an independent state, just as he had done with Tyre and Sidon.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Simo Parpola & Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki: Helsinki Press, 1988), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Hayim Tadmor, "Philistia Under Assyrian Rule," *Biblical Archaeologist* 29 (1966), 90

<sup>18</sup> Benedikt Otzen, "Israel under the Assyrians," 255.

<sup>19</sup> Albrecht Alt, "Neue Assyrische Nachrichten über Palästina," *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* 2 (1959): 240.

<sup>20</sup> Hayim Tadmor, "Philistia Under Assyrian Rule." *Biblical Archaeologist* 29 (1966): 88-97

The two main economic activities of Assyria in the vassal states surrounding Judah were trade in exotic luxury goods and incense from Arabia and the mass production and distribution of olive oil. There is hardly a doubt that from the late eighth century onwards the Arabian trade provided the Assyrian Empire with significant revenues. Securing the desert roads leading northward from the Arabian peninsula to the Assyrian controlled Phoenician harbours, was thus of paramount importance for the Assyrian kings<sup>21</sup>

The idea of Alt that the Assyrians needed to keep the Philistine states as vassal states to serve as buffer against Egypt explains Neo-Assyrian economic policy in Philistia during the time they maintained power. They maintained with this policy until the decline of the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the last third of the seventh century. This special relationship with Ekron, capital of the vassal state of Ekron, is also evident in the motion of Assyria to appoint two local kings, Padi and Ikausu, on the throne at Ekron.

The policy to use Philistine states as buffer states against Egypt, also explains the Assyrian treatment of Judah as vassal state. Its northern neighbour Israel was turned into a system of provinces already in the 730's and 720's B.C.E. Judah never became a province, not even after its participation in several rebellions. Similar to the Philistine states, Judah needed to remain a buffer state against Egypt. The same explanation is valid for the south-eastern Jordanian states, Ammon, Moab and Edom which never became provinces.<sup>22</sup> "It is remarkable that, even though the Assyrians were provoked by a long series of rebellions in South Palestine, they never departed from the fundamental and strategic idea of Tiglath-pileser, the idea of the buffer states."<sup>23</sup> The states in South Palestine remained in principle vassal states with only minor alterations in their political status. A rebellion might reduce a state to a puppet state for a short period. The king who had revolted would be dethroned by the Assyrians but another more loyal king from the same state would then be enthroned, as was the case with Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza.

Although the relations of conquered cities to Assyria were ideologically represented in terms of submission and tribute, it is unclear to what extend the empire formation represented a real reorganisation of economic functions rather than to facilitate it, if not to extend traditional exchange relations and regional specializations. (The instance of the olive oil industry at Ekron, to be discussed later on in this article, is a perfect example of regional specialisation in a specific economic sector).

<sup>21</sup> Israel Finkelstein, & Niel A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 267.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Donner, "Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des Staates Moab in der zweiten Hälfte des 8 Jahrh.V.Chr.," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 5 (1957): 166.

<sup>23</sup> Otzen, "Israel under the Assyrians," 257.

The fact that the provinces and especially the vassal states retained a measure of economic self-sufficiency and freedom to accumulate wealth in traditional ways as long as the tribute demands were met is reflected in the almost inevitable rebellion that greeted each Assyrian king on his accession.<sup>24</sup> This in turn underlines the idea that the control over the inter-regional trading network was an important motive behind Assyrian imperialism.<sup>25</sup>

From the above it became clear that the Neo-Assyrian kings were not much interested in manipulating the economy of either the central or annexed regions of their empire. This economic policy of the Neo Assyrian kings, dramatically influenced the living conditions and economy of especially the Southern Levant provinces and vassal states.

In support of this conclusion of mine, we need to investigate and interpret the excavation results from the Philistine city of Ekron, in particular the occupation phase dating from the beginning to last quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. After that, I intend to show that the economic and industrial growth during this period at Ekron is a direct result of its inhabitants who took advantage of this non interference policy of the Neo-Assyrian kings. By taking advantage of this situation, the city and surrounding region prospered.

## **C ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND NEO-ASSYRIAN ECONOMIC POLICY.**

Recent archaeological evidence from Tel Miqne (Ekron), interpreted within the broader context of Neo-Assyrian economic policy during the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., opens a complete new appreciation of their impact on the newly acquired provinces and vassal states.

### **1 Excavation results from Tel Miqne, Ekron**

Tel Miqne is situated in Philistia on the western edge of the Inner Coastal Plain. This region was the natural and historical frontier zone that separated Philistia and Judah. Ancient Ekron was strategically situated near major highways. The Via Maris, connecting Egypt to the south with trade centres further north-east along its extent, passed close by. Ekron was one of the five major cities often referred to as the *Pentapolis* of the Philistines. It is well known from biblical texts, where its political status as a Philistine capital city is clearly delineated in the book of Joshua.<sup>26</sup> Tel Miqne is one of the largest Iron Age sites in Israel and is composed of two parts: a 10 acre upper tell (the Upper City) and a 40 acre lower tell (Lower City). The Lower City is flat, almost square-shaped with

<sup>24</sup> William W. Hallow, "From Qarqar to Carchemish. Assyria and Israel in the light of new Discoveries," *Biblical Archaeologist* XXIII/ 2 (1960): 34-51.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Frankenstein, "The Phoenicians in the Far West," 269.

<sup>26</sup> Seymour Gitin & Trude K. Dothan, "The rise and fall of Ekron of the Philistines," *Biblical Archaeologist*. 50 (1993): 199-221.

a 2,5 acre mound-shaped acropolis at its northern end. The upper 10 acre tell is a rectangular-shaped ridge and juts out northward into the wadi Timnah.<sup>27</sup>

Excavations at the site have already identified nine distinct strata. The lowest stratum thus far, stratum IX, dates from the early part of the Late Bronze Age (15<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.). It was a prosperous city and many pottery remains found were imports from Cyprus. Fire apparently destroyed this city sometime in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The following Late Bronze Age city, stratum VIII, ceased to exist by the end of the Late Bronze Age (end 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.). It contained much evidence of Late Bronze Canaanite culture. In the next stratum VII, the first Iron Age I city (first third of 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), a complete new culture is evident on the site, generally believed to be Philistine, one of a number of groups from the Aegean that settled along the Eastern Mediterranean coast at that time. Although the pottery and other finds at the site signify the presence of a new group of settlers, the Canaanite ceramic tradition did not disappear completely,<sup>28</sup> an indication that the dominant Philistines practiced a policy of peaceful co-existence, with the Canaanites whose land and city they took from them.

Findings from the following two strata, V and IV (11<sup>th</sup> -early 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), including ivories and faience pieces, reflect a growing influence of Egyptian and Phoenician material culture.<sup>29</sup> This progress went hand in hand with a loss of distinctiveness of the Philistines' material culture. The once large urban center with its distinctive material culture was destroyed and came to its end during the early 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., which also marked the end of the Iron Age I occupation of Ekron. The once great Philistine city, that covered the entire 50 acre tell, was reduced to a small fortified town. By the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the Philistines had withdrawn from the 40 acre Lower City and continued to occupy only the upper 10 acres of the Upper City, represented in strata III and II.

What or who was responsible for the dramatic collapse of this once

<sup>27</sup> Trude Dothan & Seymour Gitin, "Ekron of the Philistines. How they lived, worked and worshiped for five hundred years," *Biblical Archaeology Review*. XVI/1 (1990): 21-25.

<sup>28</sup> Ann E. Killebrew, "Ceramic typology and Technology of Late Bronze II and Iron I Assemblages from Tel Miqne-Ekron: the Transition from Canaanite to Philistine Culture", in *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition. Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries B.C.E.* (eds. Seymour Gitin, Amihai Mazar, & Ephraim Stern. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998), 379-402.

<sup>29</sup> James M Weinstein, in "Egyptian relations with the Eastern Mediterranean World at the End of the Second Millennium BCE", in *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition. Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries B.C.E.* (eds. Seymour Gitin, Amihai Mazar, & Ephraim Stern. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998), 188-194.

flourishing city of Ekron early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.? Contemporaneous strata at other Philistine cities (stratum X at Ashdod and stratum X at Tell Qasile) were also destroyed. Could it be King David,<sup>30</sup> or was it the Egyptian Pharaoh Siamun?<sup>31</sup> In short, the Philistines were no longer able to control the land and the cities they occupied for two hundred years. The domination of southern Palestine by the Philistines was coming to an end or possibly was already over.<sup>32</sup> With the Lower City abandoned, occupation of the site continued only in the Upper City, the remaining 10 acres in the north-east of the tel. By the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Ekron was destroyed during a campaign led by the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E., who at that time also conquered several cities in Judah.<sup>33</sup> Control of the city then passed from Judah to the expanding Neo-Assyrian Empire. “It was then, under Neo-Assyrian hegemony, that Ekron expanded physically, enjoyed a period of renewed prosperity and once again became an important city-state.”<sup>34</sup> The excavation results from stratum I, the occupation level following the 701 B.C.E. conquest by Sennacherib, exposed a prosperous city covering 75 acres, much larger than the earlier Iron Age I city. This dramatic growth and expansion occurred at all four remaining Philistine capital cities - Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza and Gath. They were now Neo-Assyrian vassal city-states and an integral part of the new international economic system, serving a block of buffer states against Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

## 2 Major olive oil industry at Ekron, stratum I (7-6th century B.C.E.)

At the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. a fortified industrial urban center was founded directly on the early 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. fortifications and buildings of the last phase of Iron Age I (stratum IV). Seymour Gitin describes the new Ekron as “a model of a well-designed city, with four clearly defined occupation zones for fortifications, industry and ordinary domestic areas and upper class elite districts.”<sup>36</sup> The most impressive was the olive oil industrial zone. It formed a belt of factory buildings along the interior face of the new city wall,

<sup>30</sup> Seymour Gitin, “Ekron of the Philistines. Part II: Olive oil suppliers to the world,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* XVI/2 (1990): 34.

<sup>31</sup> James M Weinstein, “Egyptian relations with the Eastern Mediterranean World at the End of the Second Millennium BCE”, 192.

<sup>32</sup> James M Weinstein, “Egyptian relations with the Eastern Mediterranean World at the End of the Second Millennium BCE”, 193.

<sup>33</sup> David Ussishkin, “Notes on Megiddo, Gezer, Ashdod and tel Batash in the tenth to ninth centuries B.C.”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 277/278 (1990): 75.

<sup>34</sup> Hayim Tadmor, “Philistia Under Assyrian Rule,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 29, (1966): 88.

<sup>35</sup> Moshe Eilat, “The Economic Relations of the Neo-Assyrian Empire with Egypt”, *JAOS*, 98/1 (1978): 20-34. Otzen, “Israel under the Assyrians,” 256.

<sup>36</sup> Seymour, Gitin, “Ekron of the Philistines. Part II: Olive oil suppliers to the world,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*. XVI/2 (1990): 36.

each consisting of three rooms. The main feature of each building was the olive oil production room, furthest from the street, with its olive oil installation. Each installation consisted of a rectangular crushing basin, a cylindrical stone crushing roller, two pressing vats with central collection, a wooden beam, several pressing weights and a number of straw baskets for containing the pulp.

The adjacent storage/workrooms contained vessels which signify that it was used for oil storage and oil separation. Huge craters with eleven handles and two holes midway down its sides were used to separate water from oil. Freshly crushed olives were washed in water before they were placed in the straw baskets and staked on top of one another above the pressing vats. The first oil mixed with water was then poured into these huge craters and left standing until the oil separated from the water. When unplugged, the holes would allow first the water and then the pure oil to drain into smaller vessels. This oil was the finest or virgin oil which was regarded as more precious than the oil that was acquired from the pulp after the pressing process was completed.

The excavation team identified 115 olive oil installations in stratum I. If his number is compared to the number of oil installations found at other Iron Age II sites, it is understood why Eitam stated that “the oil industry at Tel Miqne, .... at the peak of its development, was at a scale previously unknown in the ancient world”.<sup>37</sup> The installations at Ekron were also more advanced and efficient compared with other installations from the Iron Age. Compared to other sites from the same period and region such as Tel Beit Shemesh (3 complexes), Tel Beit Mirshim (6 complexes) Tel en-Nasheh (7 installations), the 115 installations at Ekron from the Iron Age II are impressive.

Apart from the fact that it seems that the Neo-Assyrians did not interfere in the day to day activities at Ekron, they were also responsible for the stability in the Empire, traditionally known as the Pax Assyrca that stretched over approximately 70 years (700-630 B.C.E.). This also contributed to a large extend to the establishment of this mammoth industry, which can be regarded as the largest olive oil producing centres in the Ancient Near East.<sup>38</sup>

### 3 Prosperity under Neo-Assyrian domination

The economic and industrial growth at Ekron under Neo-Assyrian domination, indicate that its inhabitants took full advantage of this ‘non interference’ approach. The city’s geographical location on a major trade route and close to established harbours from where goods were shipped to Egypt and the Aegean,

<sup>37</sup> David Eitam, “Selected oil and wine installations in Ancient Israel” in *Olive oil in Antiquity, Israel and Neighbouring Countries from Neolithic to Early Arab Period* (eds. Michael Heltzer & David Eitam. Haifa: University of Haifa, 1987), 91.

<sup>38</sup> Gitin, “Ekron of the Philistines. Part II: Olive oil suppliers to the world,” 40.

contributed to the success of its olive oil industry. Furthermore, its close proximity to the Central Hill Country of Judah and Samaria, where climatic and soil conditions were ideal for growing olives, was ideal for the supply of olives needed in the oil installations.

The economic prosperity evident at Ekron during the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. thus affected the neighbouring Judah (and Samaria) directly. Without the long-term supply of olives from the Hill Country of Judah, the olive oil industry at Ekron could not have functioned and flourished as it obviously did. The hostility that existed between Judah and the Philistine cities during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries seemed not to be an issue anymore. Both regions shared the same political and economic status; vassal states of Assyria, with extensive interregional contact. Numerous archaeological findings from Ekron and Timnah<sup>39</sup> bear testimony to that.<sup>40</sup>

#### **D POSITIVE LEGACIES OF NEO-ASSYRIAN NON INTERFERENCE POLICY.**

The general impression of the Assyrians in biblical literature is not very pleasing. This is not difficult to understand, for material finds and records of the Assyrians confirm that they were formidable, brutal warriors. Assyrian royal inscriptions attest not only the army's facility with iron weapons and siege technology but also its systematic brutal treatment of captives: the slaughter of tens of thousands, the deportation of large population groups (some to slave labour camps), and the selective blinding, flaying and impalement of enemies – both alive and dead.<sup>41</sup> Multiple cuneiform tablets exist that furnish appalling testimony to the calculated cruelty inflicted by the armies mustered in Nineveh.<sup>42</sup> Though these and other evidence can't be denied, the kings of the Neo-Assyrian period left a legacy of many positives, not always recognised by most authors of the Hebrew Bible.

- The incorporation of major Phoenician harbour cities along the Levantine seaboard opened numerous possibilities for trade with countries from the Mediterranean Sea that never existed before. With Assyria now in control of these harbours, trade between cities in Assyria and Greece flourished. The Assyrians were seemingly clever enough not

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<sup>39</sup> For evidence of Assyrian presence at Timnah see the article and publication of Kelm, George L & Mazar, Amihai. Excavating in Samson country, *Biblical Archaeology Review*. XV(1) 36-49, 1989 and *Timnah, A biblical City in the Sorek valley*, Indiana: Eisenbrauns.

<sup>40</sup> Coenraad L. Scheepers, "Ethnicity, cultural diversity and Poverty in South Africa: Archaeological Perspectives from Iron Age Palestine," *OTE23/1* (2010): 174-175.

<sup>41</sup> Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>42</sup> Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum* (Michigan: Baker Book house, 1980), 27.

to interfere with the trade patterns of the Phoenicians, who were at that stage already renowned for their seafaring abilities

- The Assyrian kings didn't interfere with the merchants and industrialists of the Levant and Babylonia. They were allowed to carry on with their mercantile activities. With the kings in control of such a vast area, merchants now had access to many new cities and towns that were previously not accessible to them. The period of stability experienced during the Pax Assyrica presented opportunities to merchants and traders to travel and do business unhindered. This state of affairs that can be traced back to policies implemented by the Neo-Assyrian kings, not only allowed more customs and other state dues to flow to the kings' coffers, it stimulated the economies of cities and regions in the provinces and vassal states.
- Though the Assyrian kings were not much interested in manipulating the economy of either the central or annexed regions of their empire, evidence exist that they kept themselves informed about progress and conditions in the different provinces. They were thus not just interested in the wealth they could gain from the annexed regions. The health of the Empire's economy seemed to be of great concern to them.
- The fact that the Assyrians treated Judah always as a vassal state and never forced to be governed by an Assyrian official, favoured them in the long run.<sup>43</sup> Judah and neighbouring vassal states retained a measure of economic self-sufficiency and freedom to accumulate wealth in traditional ways. This gentle treatment of vassal states in the Southern Levant may be linked with the importance the Assyrians attached to safe trade through these states from the Arabian peninsula to the Phoenician harbours further north.<sup>44</sup>
- The best example of a positive legacy left by the Neo-Assyrians can be found in the archaeological results from Ekron, as explained in detail above. Once control of the city passed from Judah to the expanding Neo-Assyrian Empire, the city flourished and prospered.<sup>45</sup> There can be no doubt that the non-interference policy practiced by the Neo-Assyrians stimulated the city to make full advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves.

<sup>43</sup> For an in depth discussion of the status of Judah as an autonomous vassal state of Assyrian, see: Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula: Scholars Press, University of Montana, 1974).

<sup>44</sup> Israel Finkelstein, & Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: The Free Press, 2001)

<sup>45</sup> Hayim Tadmor, "Philistia under Assyrian Rule." *Biblical Archaeologist* 29 (1966): 88-97.

## E CONCLUSION

In this article I tried to give different perspectives on the Assyrians and their role in the economy and trade of the Ancient Near East during the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. than the traditional perceptions found in biblical literature. I used the interpretations of Assyrian records by scholars in the past and applied it to recent excavation results from the ancient city of Ekron. The result, I believe, shows the importance of interpreting archaeological data from Israel/Palestine in the broader socio-political context of the Greater Ancient Near East. It further demonstrates that if archaeological results are interpreted in such way, it may influence long standing perceptions about Assyria and in particular the Kings from the Neo-Assyrian period who had contact with Palestine.

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