Review of A. Faust, The Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Southwest: Imperial Domination and Its Consequences

The Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Southwest. Imperial Domination & its Consequences, by Avraham Faust. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiv + 384 pp., 21 figures. $ 86.50.

This book by Avraham Faust represents the latest effort in a strand of recent resurgent academic studies highlighting how imperial strategies were nuanced and varied from region to region, and depending on specific socio-ecological dynamics (Tyson and Herrmann 2018; Düring and Stek 2018; Düring 2020). This is a timely topic given that imperial policies had a remarkable impact on the subjected landscapes and communities, and some scholars argue that the legacy of ancient empires persists in the modern world (Altaweel & Squitieri 2018). In this context, Faust fulfils the work initially commenced in his former edited book *The Southern Levant under Assyrian domination* (Aster and Faust 2018) by integrating an impressive amount of archaeological and textual evidence to provide a review of the political situation in the Southern Levant under the Assyrians. To do so, he makes use of several archaeological excavation reports, textual sources and studies, extracting key data to depict a delineated account of the political situation and the imperial strategies implemented by the Assyrian Empire in the established provinces of the Southern Levant and the neighbouring client states. The book surely represents a key source for both archaeologists and historians and it will stimulate debate about the interpretation of the available evidence, approaches, methods and future lines of research to develop in a frontier zone such as the Southern Levant during the Neo-Assyrian period (c. 900 – 600 BC).

The book begins with an introduction of the political scenario in the Southern Levant during the Iron Age, which anticipates a later detailed account. Then, it provides background information about the development of the Assyrian Empire, its administrative organization and governance policies. The author also introduces the reader to several theoretical models that have been formulated to explain in which ways imperial Assyrian authorities imposed, consolidated and managed the power over landscapes and people put under their sovereignty.

The second chapter lays the ground for the author's narration. Here Faust unveils his biblical scholar theoretical framework which, retaining the detrimental portrayal in the Hebrew Bible of the Assyrian Empire as a destructive entity, supports that the Assyrians brought devastation and reduced the Southern Levantine provinces and in particular the Kingdom of Israel, into a state of underdevelopment, while the other semi-independent regional kingdoms of the area thrived. Here Faust paves the way for his arguments that will follow later in the book and points out that in the 8th century BC, that is before the Assyrian conquest, the Kingdom of Israel was much more developed and prosperous than the neighbouring Kingdom of Judah. After the Assyrian conquest, the situation dramatically reverted. The region where once stood the independent Kingdom of Israel became a deprived area as a consequence of the Assyrian rule, while Judah thrived because of its status as a semi-independent kingdom. At the end of this chapter and precisely in Fig. 2.2, the author makes use of the rank-size analysis in order to support his argument. However, the author fails to depict these patterns properly as the ranks and sizes of the settlements are not correctly plotted on a logarithmic scale and the consequent interpretations are misleading and naively drawn. Faust, in the attempt to demonstrate that Judah was less complex and advanced than Israel, in the 8th century BC, assesses the wealth inequality in the two polities by making use of two plots (Fig. 2.3-2.4) that seem to be two unproperly plotted Lorenz curves. In addition, the author fails to explain which kind of data he used to create a "quality of construction" index of private houses as a proxy to assess the wealth inequality in the 8th century BC. On the basis of this analysis, Faust states that in Judah there were only an upper class of rich people and a lower class encompassing most of the population, while the Kingdom of Israel shows a larger number of social strata typical of more advanced agrarian societies. Given the

small size of the archaeological sample employed in the analysis and the nebulous method used to calculate this "quality of construction index", we strongly doubt that the interpretations drawn by the author are to be considered reliable.

Chapter 3 provides a historical account of the political situation in the Southern Levant in the 9th and 8th centuries BC and after the Assyrian conquest occurred in the last third of the 8th century BC.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Faust clearly embraces the Biblical approach and points out once for all that while the provinces under the Assyrian control such as Aram and Samaria experienced demographic collapse and economic deprivation, the semi-autonomous regions of Philistia, Judah, Transjordan and the Phoenician city-states flourished and peaked demographically and economically. In particular, Chapter 4 provides a detailed account of 68 large and medium-sized excavated archaeological sites that were located in the Assyrian provinces. According to the account provided by the author, of the 68 sites, 29 were abandoned and destroyed while 19 exhibit remains of squatting or diminished sizes that have been unconvincingly interpreted as temporary camps before deportation. The continuity of occupation is evident in 20 sites, although in diminished form, with the exception of Tel Dan and Megiddo, which were turned into important Assyrian administrative centres and prospered at the time. In this chapter, the author, eager to corroborate the biblical narrative, provides only a partial truth and seems to have purposely skipped an analytical assessment of the archaeological survey data. In fact, past studies have shown that those regions integrated into the Assyrian provincial system witnessed a dramatic increase in new small rural settlements in areas previously uncultivated and underpopulated (a phenomenon also known as "landscape infilling"), the destruction or abandonment of medium-sized settlements and the establishment of large administrative centres. In this context, a recent work by Palmisano et al. (2019) based on a systematic analysis of thousands of archaeological survey data has shown that the population did not collapse in those regions under the Assyrian rule. Additionally, the results from another analysis we performed by making use of the archaeological survey data from the Digital Atlas of the Archaeology of the Holy Land (DAAHL; Levy and Savage 2014) show no population decline in the Assyrian province of Samaria, which seems to have experienced similar demographic trends of the neighbouring kingdom of Judah. In the following chapter 5, Faust argues, rightly in our view, that the prosperity of the semi-autonomous regions of Philistia, Judah and the Phoenician city-state Tyre has been stimulated by being part of a far-reaching Mediterranean long-distance trade network rather than being favoured by the political stability imposed over the territory by the Assyrian rule (also known as "Pax Assyriaca"). The Mediterranean-wide trade network that emerged during the 7th century BC was surely a complex phenomenon that involved the interplay of several actors such as the Philistines, the Phoenicians, and the Greeks; however, to argue, as the author does, that the Assyrians were totally uninterested in the revenues of this trade seems quite peculiar. Although we agree with the author that there is at the moment no clear archaeological evidence that the products of this trade travelled in great number from the Southern Levant into the Assyrian capital cities, the Assyrians may have still regarded this trade as an important source of wealth for the client states that were due to pay tribute to the empire. One may also argue that the imposition of tributes itself may have been one of the factors stimulating the involvement of Southern Levantine cities into the Mediterranean trade, though surely not the only one. Moreover, Assyrian texts support the economic interest of the Assyrians into the management of the Levantine ports (Yamada 2005). Hence, we suggest a more nuanced picture regarding the involvement of the Assyrians in the 7th century BC Mediterranean trade network that takes into account both the interplay between local developments and imperial interests.

The sixth chapter offers an assessment of the administrative structure of the Assyrian Empire in the Southern Levant in the light of textual and archaeological evidence. The problem in this chapter is that

Faust interprets the evidence of absence (i.e., scarcity of Assyrian administrative source: only 7 texts) to deduce the nonexistence of a proper imperial Assyrian organization. In addition, Faust naively states that the imperial administration was mostly centred in the southern part of the province of Samaria because sixty per cent of administrative texts (4 out of 7) come from the Aphek-Gezer area. This statement looks quite odd on the basis of a so small sample. The second half of the chapter highlights how the scarcity of proper Assyrian artefacts corroborates the view of some scholars arguing that a real process of "Assyrianization" was never fully reached in the Levant as it was a frontier zone of the empire (cf. Bagg 2013). Although we agree with this argument, it is also important to highlight fundamental differences among the Assyrian provinces, which are reflected in the material culture. While the Assyrian provinces of North Mesopotamia and North Syria were included in the empire's orbit quite early at the start of the Assyrian expansion, the Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Levant in general, became part of the imperial provincial and client state systems much later. The relatively shorter period that the Southern Levant was under the Assyrian direct or indirect rule, compared to the other areas of the empire, has given material culture notably less time to transform and reflect the new socioeconomic and political situation. A comparison with the later Persian Empire is instructive. Under this empire's rule, the material culture of the Southern Levant visibly transformed in virtually all aspects, from burial customs to crafts; however, the Persians ruled over the Southern Levant for about 200 years, a much longer period than the Assyrian rule that lasted about 90 years (Bagg 2013). In addition, some of the Assyrian provinces established in North Mesopotamia represented nothing more than a "Reconquista" (Frahm 2017) of the territories that had been under the Assyrian control during the Middle Assyrian period (roughly corresponding to the Late Bronze Age). Hence, before the Iron Age conquests, cultures of North Mesopotamia had already a long tradition of material culture connections with the Assyrians, which was not the case in the Southern Levant". All in all, the dearth of the Assyrian influence on the Southern Levantine material culture can be explained by using arguments based on the duration of rule as well as tradition, rather than the Assyrian neglect.

The seventh chapter, in the light of the archaeological and textual evidence discussed in the former chapters, illustrates the policies adopted in the Southern Levant by the Assyrian authorities in terms of provincial organization, deportation of local people and settlement of deportees from other parts of the empire. In this chapter, Faust highlights that the engineered imperial landscape typical of the other regions of the Assyrian empire has been shaped in the Aphek-Gezer area: many new dispersed farmsteads and hamlets were established in former underpopulated and under cultivated areas. According to Faust, the Assyrian authorities exercised a major effort in this area as it played an important strategic role as a gateway to Egypt, as a production centre for generating agricultural surplus (grain and fodder for the Assyrian army), and as a pivotal centre to collect tribute from the neighbouring client states. The author here makes a good point that, unfortunately, is still biased by his biblical approach: it is quite odd thinking that the Assyrian authorities put so much effort in a so tiny area and neglected the rest of the new provinces that instead "were devastated during the conquests, and were mostly left in desolation". In fact, in the second half of the chapter, the author points out that the Empire concentrates its activities in small pockets of territory or "islands" such as Megiddo, Samaria, Tel Dan, Dor and Aphek-Gezer region by supporting the network model of Liverani (1988). Hence, following Liverani's model, we argue that the creation of "pockets" or "islands", where the Assyrian control focused the most, was part of the Assyrian *modus operandi* and not necessarily an indicator of their neglect and lack of economic interest in a specific area. Moreover, the establishment of the major administrative centres of Tel Dan, Megiddo and Samaria aiming at ruling over a "deserted area" seems quite unplausible. Why did Assyrians make the effort of installing these centres only to rule over areas destined to be neglected? In this regard, it should also be borne in mind that the

excavations of the Assyrian levels at both Megiddo and Samaria were not conducted according to modern investigation methods, hence much information concerning the Assyrian presence in these cities was surely lost. To give one example, we completely lack information on plant and animal remains from these Assyrian centres, which could have given us precious information on changes in food production dynamics under the Assyrian rule (see Shapir-Hen 2017). On the other hand, results from the recent excavations at Tel Dan concerning the Assyrian levels await publication and surely will bring fresh light to the debate. The chapter ends with a reflection about the nuanced imperial policies adopted by the Assyrians in the different regions of the empire and how they vary in the territories directly annexed and then turned into provinces and in semi-autonomous client states.

Chapter 8 provides a good overview of all different possible responses enabled by the local communities to the Assyrian imperial rule. The communities of the Southern Levant adopted a wide spectrum of reactions ranging from armed or subtler forms of resistance to cooperation, co-optation, collaboration and integration. In the analysis of the author, the response to the imperial domination appears a little too dichotomic between the imperial provinces and the semi-autonomous client states. While the first ones would have experienced devastation and could have been more prone to cultural assimilation, the latter ones would have expressed more friction to the imperial rule and would have been more reluctant to emulate and bolster the Assyrian authorities.

Chapter 9 reviews the concept of "pax Assyriaca" drawn from "pax Romana" that became popular among several scholars as a theoretical framework for explaining the flourishing economy and prosperity that occurred in those regions once they were part of the Assyrian Empire. Here, the author challenges a strand of past studies that too enthusiastically depicted the Assyrians as the main stimulus to the local economies of the subjected polities because of a period of political stabilization, unity and peace. Here Faust correctly highlights that the local semi-autonomous kingdoms and the Phoenician city-states thrived also before the arrival of the Assyrians in the area, and their economic development during the time of the Assyrian rule was not only dependent on the latter. However, concluding that the Assyrians completely neglected the Southern Levant, leaving the provinces in a state of disarray and ignoring the reach revenues of the Mediterranean trade, seems far-fetched. Once again, a more nuanced perspective in which the Assyrian rule was one of the factors that contributed to reshaping the economic landscape of the Southern Levantine societies seems more favourable. Surely, we agree with the author that the term "pax Assyriaca" may be misleading for its connections to Roman imperialism as the two forms of imperialisms were very different. The caveat of this chapter is that the author overinterprets the data in the light of the Biblical narrative by arguing that the empire brought only desolation in the subjected territories and that the "southwestern provinces remained mostly a forgotten backwater".

In the final chapters 10 and 11, the author focuses on the policies adopted by the Assyrians in the Southern Levant and analyses them in comparison with the ones implemented in the other provinces of the empire. The general picture is that the Assyrians relied on a wide repertoire of governance strategies that were used interchangeably in the different parts of the empire to impose, maintain and consolidate the power. Here Faust stresses that the conquest of the Southern Levant is not to be interpreted necessarily as a result of a pre-planned grand strategy but was rather a short-term enterprise due to the need to pacify a troubled region. He points out that the southern Levant, unlike other provinces of the Empire, could not be conquered to provide additional sources of agricultural surplus to be sent to the empire's core as the transportation costs would have been too high as the area did not benefit of a proper riverine system. This is surely true and it is supported by the lack of evidence for the movement of non-luxury and perishable goods, such as foodstuffs, from the Southern Levant into the imperial core in Assyria, as the benefits of trading such goods would have not compensated for the

costs of transportation via land. However, the author does not consider the local needs of the Assyrian provinces. The agricultural surplus would have been needed in order to feed the administrative centres that the Assyrians built in their provinces as well as the army which, in the course of 90 years, was in the Southern Levant every six years (Bagg 2013). The author also draws a comparison with the Persian period, when the use of coins spread, which transformed the provinces into sources of wealth and therefore helped their economic growth. This is true, although it should be noted that coins spread quite slowly during the Persian period in the Levant, and their use for tax collection only became predominant under the Seleucid period (Aperghis 2004). Finally, Faust argues that the impact of the Assyrian empire in the Southern Levant was more limited if compared with other provinces. Southern Levant was a frontier zone that played as a sort of buffer zone to insulate important provinces from external enemies but also a pivotal gateway for the later expansion in Egypt. The book ends by providing a comparison between the governance strategies adopted in the Neo-Assyrians, Neo-Babylonian, and the Persian empires in their remote provinces and more ambitiously discusses the implications of this kind of research for understanding the dynamics underlying the development of large empires across space and time.

Whatever criticism one may have in merit of the theoretical approach, the methods and data enabled, there is no doubt that Avraham Faust's latest book has made a great service for those scholars dealing with the archaeology of imperialism. This major review and reassessment of the archaeological and textual sources raises crucial points about the imperial policies not only in the Southern Levant but in general and provide us with a starting platform from which developing future lines of research.

Alessio Palmisano
University of Turin, Department of Historical Studies, Turin
a.palmisano@lmu.de

Andrea Squitieri
University of Heidelberg, Department of Prehistory, Protohistory and Near Eastern Archaeology, Heidelberg
a.squitieri@lmu.de

REFERENCES

Altaweel, M., and Squitieri, A., 2018. *Revolutionizing a World: From Small States to Universalism in the Pre-Islamic Near East*. London: UCL Press.

Aperghis, G. G. 2004. *The Seleukid Royal Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aster, S. Z., and Faust, A., 2018. The southern Levant under Assyrian domination. University Park, Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns.

Bagg, A. M. 2013. “Palestine under Assyrian Rule a New Look at the Assyrian Imperial Policy in the West.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133 (1): 119–44. https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.133.1.0119.

Düring, and T. D. Stek, eds., 2018. *The Archaeology of Imperial Landscapes. A Comparative Study of Empires in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Düring, B.S., 2020. *The imperialisation of Assyria: an archaeological approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frahm, E. 2017. *A Companion to Assyria*. London: Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325216.

Liverani, M., 1988. The Growth of the Assyrian Empire in the Habur/Middle Euphrates Area: A New Paradigm. *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin 2*, 81-98.

Palmisano, A., Woodbridge, J., Roberts, N., Bevan, A., Fyfe, R., Shennan, S., Cheddadi, R., Greenberg, R., Kaniewski, D., Langgut, D., Leroy, S., Litt, T., and Miebach, A., 2019. Holocene Landscape Dynamics and Long-term Population Trends in the Levant. *The Holocene, 29*(5), 708-727.

Sapir-Hen, L. 2017. Pax Assyriaca and the Animal Economy in the Southern Levant: Regional and Local-Scale Imperial Contacts. In: O. Lipschits, Y. Gadot and M. J. Adams (eds.), *Rethinking Israel: Studies in the History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns: 341-354.

Savage, S. H., and Levy, T. E., 2014. DAAHL – The digital archaeological atlas of the holy land: A model for Mediterranean and world archaeology. *Near Eastern Archaeology*, *77*(3), 243–247.

Tyson, C.W. and Herrmann, V.R., eds., 2018. *Imperial peripheries in the Neo-Assyrian period*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado.

Yamada, S. 2005. Karus On the Frontiers of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. *Orient*, 40, 56–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0090-2616(98)90017-1.