Cyprus and the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period

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Introduction: defining the Neo-Assyrian Period

The Neo-Assyrian period in Cyprus corresponds roughly to the century between the last quarter of the 8th and the third quarter of the 7th century BC, that is the time of maximum expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire following the crucial reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC).

The label “Neo-Assyrian period” however, even though more neutral than others appearing in scholarly publications (“Neo-Assyrian domination”, “Neo-Assyrian control”), is misleading: far from being a homogeneous phase of consistent and concrete evidence of contacts between Cyprus and the Empire (if not of political submission, as claimed by the Assyrian sources), this period can be hardly described in terms of material civilisation of the island. Its chronological limits, as fixed above, depend on the interpretation of written, almost exclusively Neo-Assyrian sources. The appreciation of its historical relevance largely varies among scholars: some of them even credit the Neo-Assyrian pressure on the Levant and on the island with the birth of the Cypriote kingdoms; others reappraise the historical reality of the Assyrian claims, (rightly) evoking the lack of concrete evidence of political control in material civilisation.

The most suitable way to approach this controversial historical period is not by exclusively focusing on the direct political and/or cultural relationships between Cyprus and Assyria (or on their absence), but by considering the wider Eastern Mediterranean context, particularly the interactions among the Empire, the Levant and the island, since as we shall see, the contacts between Cyprus and Assyria were mostly filtered by the Phoenicians, particularly through Kition.

The sources to be considered are mainly of eastern origin, that is Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, starting from the Sargon stele (the only Assyrian object discovered on the island so far). The evidence can, however, be completed by considering related documents (such as some biblical passages and a fragment of Menander of Ephesus). Contemporary epigraphic sources from Cyprus are almost lacking, with the notable exception of some royal inscriptions of (mostly) Paphian origin and a much-discussed Phoenician inscription of unknown provenance. Without looking for direct material evidence of Assyrian presence in Cyprus (which does not exist so far, as said above), we shall consider the archaeological
framework on the island scale as the main internal source of information for this period.

Alashiya, Iadnana and Kittîm: multiple (eastern) views of Cyprus

As is almost universally accepted today, Cyprus was known in 2nd millennium Near East by the name of Alashiya. Following the cultural and political breakdown that marked the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean, the name of Alashiya disappeared from Near Eastern sources to be replaced in the 1st millennium in the Neo-Assyrian context by the toponym Iadnana, and in the Southern Levant by the ethnonym Kittîm (ktym). Egyptian sources seem to maintain a toponym related to Alashiya /ɪsɪ/ (which is, however, attested only once in the 1st millennium before the Hellenistic period), and a relationship with the toponym Alashiya is commonly proposed also for the Hebrew Elishah (‘lysh), and for the epiclesis ‘lhyts / Ἀλασίώτας (related to the god Ršp / Απόλλων) on a bilingual inscription from Tamassos (ICS 216, 4th century BC).

The existence of multiple names for the same geographical entity is a clear indication of the multiple ways by which the various eastern civilisations (Egypt, Assyria, Southern Levant, Phoenicia, and so on) established their contacts with Cyprus. Survivals and changes, as well as etymology and the analysis of the use of the various toponyms and ethnonyms in context, can provide interesting suggestions about how and when these contacts were established.

The Egyptian documentation, even if scanty and difficult to interprete, seems to suggest that contacts between the two areas were never interrupted, since texts dating from the Hellenistic period still use the name ɪsy, first attested at the time of Thutmosis III (mid-15th century BC), but the unique Iron Age attestation (on a stele of the Taharqa, Kushite Dynasty, 7th century BC) does not allow more precise observations. Most important, the name of Alashiya seems to survive in Cyprus itself, especially in Phoenician-speaking contexts, thus indicating a voluntary reappropriation of the most ancient island’s past at a time (4th century BC) when the island’s name Kypros (Kûnpoç) was widely known and used in Cyprus itself and across the Mediterranean. It has to be observed, however, that surprisingly - we still do not have any attestation/transcription of the toponym Kypros in Phoenician: more precisely, we still do not know how the Phoenicians named the island.

The best documented northwest Semitic name for Cyprus is ktym, Kittim, attested both in the Bible and on Hebrew ostraca from the Arad fortress, dating from the end of the 7th century BC. Ktym is, morphologically, the plural form of the ethnonym related to the
toponym $Kt(\nu)$, that is Kition. The study of the occurrences of this name in the Bible\textsuperscript{14} clearly shows a shift in its meaning, from a limited, more precise signification (probably denoting Kition alone, or possibly the whole island of Cyprus) in the most ancient texts ($\text{Isaiah}$, $\text{Genesis}$, $\text{Ezekiel}$ and the Arad ostraca) to a wider, more general meaning of “Westerners”, which corresponds sometimes to the Macedonians ($\text{Maccabees}$), and other times to the Romans ($\text{Daniel}$).\textsuperscript{15} The use of a precise ethnonym, “the Kitians”, to denote a largely wider group of people (the Cypriotes, later the Westerners) strongly suggests the importance of Kition as a privileged gateway to the West for the Southern Levant. It is anyway not surprising that the relations between Cyprus and the Levant passed through the most dynamic Phoenician harbour of the island. A concrete pin between East (the Levant) and West (Cyprus itself, Greece and even further), Kittîm is classified, in the symbolic genealogy of the Table of Nations ($\text{Genesis}$ 10), among the sons of Yawan (eponymous of the Ionians). His brothers and sisters are all Westerners of problematic identification: Elishah (maybe Cyprus?), the Rhodians (or the Danunians from Cilicia, depending on the lecture adopted) and Tarshish (a toponym of much-discussed location associated with Phoenician western expansion).\textsuperscript{16}

The Akkadian name for Cyprus, $\text{laddnana}$, has nothing to do either with Alashiya or with Kition, thus suggesting that the knowledge of the island arrived to the Assyrians through different channels than the ones we have just examined (Egypt, the Levant). The etymology is not clear: most probably the name has Phoenician origin, and it can be broken into $\nu$, island, and $\text{dnym}$, Danunians, inhabitants of a Neo-Hittite state known to the Assyrians as Quwê, around the city of Adana and in the Cilician plain, documented by some bilingual and trilingual inscriptions from Cilicia.\textsuperscript{17} Even if the Danunians have been put in relation with the Ahhiyawa and the Homeric Danaans, 8th century BC Cilicia can be hardly defined as a Greek region;\textsuperscript{18} then the name $\text{laddnana}$ most probably means “island of the Danunians” (in the sense: geographically related to the land of Danunians) than “island of the Danaeans”.\textsuperscript{19} Since the Assyrians were active in Cilicia as early as the 9th century BC (during the reign of Salmanazar III),\textsuperscript{20} and repeated actions against $\text{lamanaya}$ pirates (that is Ionians) are reported in the Cilician gulf during the second half of the 8th century BC,\textsuperscript{21} it is not surprising that Cyprus first appeared to Assyrians’ eyes as a Cilician offshore dependency – at least in geographical terms.

The nature of the Assyrian control on Cyprus

The first evidence of the establishment of some kind of Assyrian control on Cyprus is the
Sargon stele [Fig. 1].

It was discovered in Larnaca in 1845, close to the Phaneromeni church (as appears in a recent study), but we ignore where it originally stood within the ancient town of Kition. Of Assyrian manufacture, it portrays the king facing divine symbols, and it carries a cuneiform inscription starting on the front and continuing on the right and on the left sides. The inscription relates the deeds of the Assyrian king Sargon II (722-705 BC), among which the conquest of Cyprus, dating from 707 BC. Even if the inscription is incomplete (the back of the stone has been cut for facilitating the transport to Berlin, where the stele is now exposed), we can easily reconstruct almost the entire text thanks to several parallel passages from the reliefs of Sargon’s palace at Khorsabad. The submission of Cyprus to the empire is described as a voluntary act (link side, lines 28-42):

[And seven kings] of the land of Ia’, [a district of the land of (Ia)]dnana […] [the deeds that in the mid]dle of the land of Chaldea and in the land of Hatti [I achieved], in the middle of the sea [from afar they hea]rd: their hearts throbbed; [the terror seiz]ed them; gold, silver, [objects made of] ebony and boxwood, treasures of their land, [to B]abylon, in front of me [they brought, and] they kissed my feet.

Even if a very difficult and incomplete passage of the Annals of Sargon seems to include the conquest of Cyprus into a context of military operations, that we are unable to understand fully, any other evidence agrees to present the inclusion of Cyprus into the Assyrian empire as a voluntary initiative, sealed by the presentation of gifts to the Great King.

What Assyrian inscriptions conventionally present as the offering of a tribute, is in fact the integration of Cyprus into a system of “(forced) circulation dynamics” that guaranteed a continuous flux of goods from the periphery towards the core of the empire. The voluntary offering of some of the island’s products to Sargon by the Cypriote kings, and the way this is alluded to into the Assyrian official sources, evoke a two-thousand-five-hundred-years more recent and famous episode. At the end of the 18th century AD the viscount George Macartney, ambassador of King George III, offered the Chinese emperor Ch’ien-lung some British products, intended as diplomatic gifts aiming at developing economic relations between the British and the Chinese empires. What is described as “diplomatic gift” in the British sources, appears in the contemporary Chinese documents as “tribute”, offered by a far away, foreign land as a token of respect and obeisance to the Celestial Emperor.

Keeping this parallel in mind, and considering that in the Assyria-Cyprus relations, we only have the Assyrian (that is, the Chinese) view of the events, we should not underestimate, on the other hand, the political significance of having an Assyrian monument erected within
Cyprus (wherever it may have stood). Even if the concrete significance of the integration of Cyprus into the Neo-Assyrian empire was essentially economic, its validity in terms of politics cannot be denied because of the Sargon stele, and this is what distinguishes our case from the parallel mentioned. By entering the Neo-Assyrian economic and trading network, the Cypriote kings accepted to be formally submitted to the Assyrian king. Whether this implied the offering of a tribute (either regularly, or occasionally), we cannot say with certainty. We know, however, that Cypriote and Levantine products were sent to Nineveh for the construction of the new royal palace of Esarhaddon (680-669 BC), and a precise list of tributary kings is registered on this occasion (673-672 BC: Fig. 2). Assurbanipal (668-626 BC) claimed to have had Cypriote forces on his side during his war against Egypt (664 BC), and listed exactly the same kings and kingdoms that supported the building activities of his father Esarhaddon in Nineveh nine years before. Sennacherib (705-681 BC) probably had at his disposal Cypriote as well as Phoenician (Tyrian and Sidonian) sailors, and we have at least a source, dating from the reign of Esarhaddon, which mentions (in an incomplete passage) a man with an Assyrian name from Cyprus (Zeruiddina from Iadnana: Fig. 3).

However scanty the documentation may be, there is a small number of indications suggesting that, when focusing on possible real contacts between the Assyrians and Cyprus, we should give particular consideration to Kition. Kition is the only place in Cyprus having provided concrete Assyrian evidence (the Sargon stele). Whether or not it should be identified with the mysterious Cypriote Qarthadasht, it is reported to be under Tyrian influence sometime around the last quarter of the 8th century BC (Menander of Ephesus by Flavius Joseph, Jewish Antiquities, 9, 284). When Sennacherib attacked Tyre, in 701 BC, it is in Cyprus that Luli, the king of Tyre, took refuge - most probably in Kition, as Isaiah (Isaiah 23) seems to suggest. The sources are desperately reticent, and interpretation is crucial, but the assumption that the Assyrians relied, for their communications with the island, on the efficient Tyrian fleet is more than hypothetical. When considering the importance of the Phoenician element for the Assyrian politics in the Levant, it seems reasonable to take Kition as the preferred gateway to the island - in this respect, the Assyrians seem to follow the same channel already identified with the Southern Levant (see above).

Neo-Assyrian pressure and internal political dynamics

When shifting the focus from the external, imperial view of the island as a tributary land, to an internal, local perception of the events, we are forced to face a complete lack of written
sources. The archaeological record can, however, supply relevant information for contextualising the elements mentioned above.

As firmly established by recent studies, state formation in Iron-Age Cyprus is not a consequence of the Assyrian pressure and the Phoenician expansion toward the West, but largely predates the events we are dealing with. The Assyrian impact had, however, a real influence on the political configuration of the island. By stimulating a trading network centered on the exploitation of metals and raw materials, it promoted a process of territorial consolidation that is archaeologically visible in the multiplication of extra-urban sanctuaries and in the development of a warrior-based elitist material culture. The negotiation of boundaries, essential for the control of the inland mining regions, possibly passed through the annexation of the inland kingdoms – Ledra, Chythroi, Tamassos, Idalion – by the coastal ones – Salamis, Kition. This is a slow evolution, which culminated in the conquest of Idalion by Kition towards the mid-5th century BC, and can be interpreted as a consequence of the reorientation of Cypriote economy towards the great eastern markets initiated during the Assyrian period. This process has been defined as the “consolidation horizon” of Cypriote kingdoms. The aforementioned royal inscriptions from Paphos, that constitute the first written internal evidence of the existence of a royal power on the island, date from this period.

The status of Kition within this context is much discussed. The still widely adopted “Phoenician colonisation narrative” is certainly to be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced and complex view of Kition’s pre-classical history. This does not mean, however, that any concrete Phoenician (specifically, Tyrian) presence and eventually political influence on the town has to be systematically rejected, since at least one source (the aforementioned passage by Menander of Ephesus) evokes it without any reasonable doubt. The material civilisation of Kition in the Early Iron Age and Archaic period shows a progressive “phoenicisation”, and the powerful Cypriote Phoenician kingdom of Kition in the Classical period cannot be an extemporaneous by-product of the Persian Wars. On the other hand, Kition’s stylistic and cultural originality in the Archaic period, which seems to be a sign of political identity, cannot be associated with a firm territorial expansion and consolidation process, as is the case for the other Cypriote kingdoms that have developed similar characteristics. In order to explain the specificity of the Kition case, several historical reconstructions can be proposed. Among them, one possibility is to reconsider the (old) identification between Kition and the Cypriote Qarthadasht, a Phoenician settlement evoked only in a dedication of unknown provenance from Cyprus dating from 740-730 BC, as a dependency of Tyre [Fig. 4], and in the later Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal...
lists, as an independent Cypriote kingdom. The transformation from a Tyrian controlled trading post into a Cypriote Phoenician kingdom can be linked to the Assyrian presence and activity in the Levant, especially regarding Tyre. This is a far complex and unsafe issue that points, however, to the special role played by Kition into the Assyria - Phoenicia - Cyprus triangle.
List of illustrations

The images that follow are available in the digital version of the present article in the website Kyprios Character. You can view the images by following the link: kyprioscharacter.eie.gr/en/t/AL

Fig. 1: The Sargon stele from Larnaca, with a detail of the passage concerning Cyprus (link side, lines 26-56). Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, VA968 (© the author).

Fig. 2: The Esarhaddon prism from Nineveh. London, British Museum, 121.005 (© British Museum).

Fig. 3: Oracle of the Sungod Shamash, recto. London, British Museum, Kouyunjik collection 4269 (© British Museum / CDLI).

Fig. 4: Phoenician dedication to Baal of Lebanon, from Cyprus. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, BB 2291 (after CIS I, 5, pl. IV).
Endnotes

2 Reyes 1994, 49-68.
4 With the exception of one seal of unknown provenance in the Pierides collection: Reyes 1994, 61. A. Hermary has drawn to my attention a kudurru-stele of Marduk-apla-iddina II in Berlin (VA 2663, dating from 715 BC), which is said to have been found in Cyprus (André-Salvini 2008, 136 no. 93 and bibliography), but I did not find any precise or supplementary information about this claim.
5 With very few exceptions, for example Merrillees 1987 and Merrillees (forthcoming).
7 Cannavò 2010.
9 See e.g. Heltzer 1988, 167; Cannavò 2010, 182-183.
10 The survival of the toponym Alashiya in Cyprus now seems to have been confirmed by a still unpublished Phoenician ostracon from the archives of the Idalion palace, dating from “the year 1 of Antigonos and Demetrios, in the year 1 of Alashiya” (that is, at the very beginning of the Hellenistic period): the ostracon has been presented by M.G. Amadasi (who is in charge of the publication of the Idalion Phoenician archives) at a lecture presented at the Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, 2nd June 2014.
11 Leclant 1980.
12 Kitchen 2009, 5.
14 Ten attestations: Genesis 10.4; Numbers 24.24; 1 Chronicles 1.7; 1 Maccabees 1.1 and 8.5; Isaiah 23.1 and 23.12; Jeremiah 2.10; Ezekiel 27.6; Daniel 11.30. To these may be added several occurrences in the Qumran scrolls: Yon 2004, 44-45 no. 30.
15 Cannavò 2010, 180-188.
17 Muhly 2009.
19 Muhly 2009, 28.
20 Desideri, Jasink 1990, 114-120.
The hypothesis (the most plausible up to now) that the stele was erected in the sanctuary of Bamboula (Yon, Malbran-Labat 1995) has now to be reanalysed according to the new indications on the circumstances of the discovery (Merrillees, forthcoming).

Fuchs 1993, 175-177 and 337.

See the very hypothetical reading of Na’aman 1998, which I find unconvincing (Cannavò, forthcoming), contra Smith 2008 and Radner 2010.


Frahm 1997, 116-118 (T29, l. 60). But the Cypriote (kurla-ad-na-na-a) sailors could have been, in fact, Ionians (kur ia-am-na-a-a): Frahm 1997, 117.

Oracle of the Sungod Shamash: Starr 1990, 108-109, no. 92, recto l. 7 (mnumun-(mu ta * šà-bi kur ia-da-na-nil)).

Cannavò (forthcoming).


Iacovou 2013 and previous studies.


Iacovou 2013, 29.

Iacovou 2013, 30-31.

Iacovou 2002.

ICS² 180a (bowl of the Paphian king Akestor), ICS² 176 (bracelets of the Paphian king Etewandros), ICS² 179 (bowl of the “Kypromedousa”) and ICS² 178 (bowl of the prince Diweithemis), the last two originating possibly from Kourion.

Iacovou 2014.

Fourrier 2013, 113-117.

46 Hermary 1996; Iacovou 2014.

47 Sources: Phoenician dedication from Cyprus (CIS I, 5: Yon 2004, 51-52, no. 34); Esarhaddon list (Leichty 2011, 23-24, no. 1, V.54 – VI.1); Assurbanipal list (Borger 1996, 18-20 and 212, C§14).

48 Cannavò (forthcoming).
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