

LANDSCAPES of WARFARE

URARTU AND ASSYRIA IN THE
ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST

Tiffany Earley-Spadoni

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABL: Assyrian and Babylonian Letters

ARM: Archives Royales de Mari

BM: British Museum

CAD: Chicago Assyrian Dictionary

CTU: Corpus dei Testi Urartei

ETCSL: Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature

FM: Florilegium Marianum

SAA: State Archives of Assyria

INTRODUCTION

It may, at first glance, seem surprising that a country that has not been at war in more than 500 years exhibits lasting marks of the systematic, total warfare that characterized the twentieth century in Europe. Yet, in the early years of World War II, the Swiss began to quietly fortify their entire country with more than 21,000 structures, including the construction of fifteen elaborate subterranean fortresses north of Lake Geneva, concealing vast underground complexes and artillery installations (Debraine 2014). In addition to the network of fortresses, the Swiss constructed the Toblerone Line (figure 0.1), rather like a miniature version of the Maginot Line in France. The structure consisted of 2,700 9-ton concrete blocks, each shaped like a piece of the eponymous Swiss chocolate, stretching more than 10 km north to south. The Toblerones were meant to prevent a Nazi tank invasion from the west. Thus, the specter of violence structured the Swiss landscape in unexpected ways.

The Toblerones were originally constructed for a practical defense purpose—to block a critical entry point into the mountainous core of the



FIGURE 0.1. The Toblerone Line, Lake Geneva, Switzerland

country. However, considering their place in a broader landscape reveals even more about them. While a Toblerone may be examined as an individual feature, it is only when considering them en masse and in their broader landscape context that one appreciates the role and scope of these structures. Not only were Toblerones part of a regional network, but they also were a part of a national defensive network that included underground forts, fortresses, and artillery installations. One must consider these features holistically to understand how the systematic warfare of the twentieth century is imprinted upon the idyllic Swiss countryside, how individual defensive structures were assembled into fortified regional networks.

In the postwar years, the Toblerones became objects of historical preservation, accompanied by a purpose-built walking trail with educational markers. For Swiss people moving through the landscape—whether hiking, cycling, or riding trains—these concrete monuments have acquired layered meanings, contributing to collective placemaking by reinforcing a narrative of successful resistance. The monuments allow modern people a place to contemplate the horrors of war and the cost of peace and a venue to construct and reconstruct the idea of Switzerland as a fortress-state.

Thus, the Toblerones are an illustration of how the Swiss conceptualized, organized, and altered their landscape as a response to warfare and the ways, in turn, that landscapes alter the people who experience them. While the systematic or total warfare that inspired the Swiss Toblerones is sometimes understood as a relatively modern phenomenon, as the dark culmination of modernism and mechanization, people in the ancient Middle East also practiced war on a remarkably grand, tragic, and transformative scale.

LANDSCAPES OF WARFARE: SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE

This book evaluates historical, archaeological, and art-historical evidence to investigate how the near-constant threat of warfare shaped the ancient state of Urartu in the early first millennium BCE. The synthesized data are evaluated quantitatively in the context of GIS-enabled spatial studies and qualitatively as humanistic interrogation. Specifically, its central question is: How did the systematic warfare practiced by Urartians, Assyrians, and other combatants in the early first millennium BCE alter the constructed landscapes and lived experiences of the ancient people in question?

For nonspecialists, Urartu is quite possibly the most important empire that you have never heard of. It was a formidable enemy of the famed Neo-Assyrian empire of the early first millennium BCE. Urartu was located in the mountains of modern-day eastern Turkey, Armenia, and northwest Iran, while the Neo-Assyrian empire encompassed much of the remainder of the ancient Middle East (see figure 0.2). It was the Carthage to the Neo-Assyrian empire's Rome. These twin empires were similar in their objectives but diverged dramatically in their form. This book will argue that Urartu was an aggressively non-urban, highland state typified by hundreds of forts and fortresses distributed, somewhat unevenly, over an area roughly five times the size the mountainous country of Switzerland. While Urartu was non-urban, this does not imply a lack of social complexity. Urartu was an empire that employed various technologies of administration to manage an ethnically diverse populace and the colonial interests of an expansionary state. It developed its own ideologies and recorded them in hundreds of examples of monumental writing throughout their



FIGURE 0.2. Map of Assyria and Urartu in the first millennium BCE

territory. It successfully mobilized its own defense and managed to evade the formidable Neo-Assyrian empire for centuries. While the rise, expansion, and ultimate fall of the Urartian empire was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, spanning at most a few hundred years, the memory of the state is preserved as Ararat in the Hebrew Bible.¹ The ancient state of Urartu cannot be understood in isolation from its meaningful cultural context, since its models of statecraft and methods of warfare pertain to broader regional traditions (Harmansah 2009, 2013). Therefore, this book considers Urartu's developments within a deep historical context that includes its important neighbor, the Neo-Assyrian empire.

¹ 2 Kings 19:37 and Isaiah 37:38.

Beyond meeting the minimum requirements of complexity associated with states, it has been argued that Urartu functions as an empire in all the ways that matter (Zimansky 1985, 2012). Urartu's sustained sovereignty for more than two centuries across its difficult geography is a clear statement about the empire's political and administrative efficacy. For those who define empires by the presence of cities, Urartu's status as an "empire" could be questioned, although recent scholarship has sought to decouple notions of urbanism and complexity (Hämäläinen 2009; Honeychurch 2014, 2015).

In addition to meeting functional definitions of empire, Urartu managed to administer an empire populated by people who represented a wealth of linguistic and ethnic diversity. Empires are commonly defined, in part, by an ability to integrate heterogeneous ethnic and cultural compositions, widely considered a paradigmatic trait of these states (Sinopoli 2001a, 444; Matthews 2003; Zimansky 2012). Empires like Assyria are characterized by ideologies supporting world domination, class inequality, and the subjugation of people, which is also true of Urartu (chapter 8). Thus, Urartu's inclusion in the category of empire is based upon its ability to execute state functions at scale, and its belief that it was its destiny to do so.

A large-scale, multiregional approach reveals new insights about Urartian fortified landscapes and imperial processes. To understand the spatial development of the state, temporally sensitive GIS studies of landscape archaeological data are undertaken, derived from recent fieldwork directed by the author as well as decades of archaeological survey performed by German, Italian, and Armenian-Italian expeditions to Iranian Azerbaijan and the Lake Sevan region in Armenia (Kleiss and Kroll 1977; Pecorella and Salvini 1984; Biscione, Hmayakyan, and Parmegiani 2002; Earley-Spadoni, Petrosyan, and Gasparyan 2019). The selected regions—northwest Iran and southern Armenia—represent distinct episodes of major Urartian imperial expansion.

This study is germane to specialists of ancient western Asia as well as a broader comparative audience of historians and anthropologists. The book contributes to the subfield of spatial history by undertaking an in-depth analysis of the empire of Urartu, providing a close examination of the spatial context of the historical development and expansion

of an ancient Middle Eastern empire. Spatial history entails a critical engagement with spatial theory and promotes the use of tools such as a geographic information system (GIS) to better appreciate the interplay of space and time in historical developments (Knowles 2008; White 2010; Gregory and Geddes 2014). The GIS studies presented in this book were designed to systematically test certain scholarly suppositions about Urartu, while the findings are contextualized within a humanistic framework.

The book also engages anthropological debates concerning the role of warfare in state dynamics and expansionary state development. The organization of this resourceful highland empire forces one to reexamine the traditional links drawn between urbanism and complexity, a case that parallels other examples such as the Mongol empire. Historical and ethnoarchaeological contextualization, rather than an exclusive reliance upon archaeological remains observed in the landscape, allows for a better account of how warfare shaped collective placemaking in ancient western Asia.

Certain scholars have argued that the first system of durable warfare originated in the ancient Middle East, forming along the trade corridors of Anatolia during the Chalcolithic (Ferguson 2013b), an influential claim by a nonspecialist of the region. Furthermore, discussions of warfare in the ancient Middle East feature in grand historical narratives, celebrated in “big histories” of warfare or of human civilization more generally. Some of these studies are influential monographs, primarily by nonspecialists, which compress the warfare practiced by ancient Middle Eastern peoples for millenia, from the Neolithic through the Persian empire, into a few paragraphs or a single chapter (Keegan 1994; Gat 2008; Pagden 2008). Some have argued, problematically, that modern people adopted more diplomatic strategies than ancient people (Keegan 1994) or that East versus West conflicts have a deep antiquity (Pagden 2008). The origins and development of warfare in the ancient Middle East are relevant to *longue durée* historical arguments (Scott 2017). Thus, it is imperative that specialists use their command of the sources and archaeological materials to elucidate wider scholarly debates, applying findings from the ancient past to understanding cycles of warfare that afflict modern societies. Thus, the book illuminates warfare’s historical and ideological origins.

LANDSCAPES: DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

This book examines warfare in a landscape context, and it is, therefore, valuable to define what is meant by landscape. Landscape studies are, like so many historical and archaeological pursuits, largely problems of representation. To reconstruct and model the past human world, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Before defining the term “landscape,” some disambiguation is necessary. Spatial archaeologists sometimes view landscapes as an analytical domain primarily accessible through techniques such as settlement pattern analysis or least cost path studies, which can be evaluated within the context of a GIS. This kind of landscape approach attempts to describe and interpret the cultural features that occur on the face of the earth, including human settlements as well as the land between or beyond them (Wilkinson 2003, 4).

Yet, one should not conflate techniques sometimes used to study landscapes, such as archaeological surveys or settlement pattern analysis, with studies of landscape (Earley-Spadoni and Harrower 2020). While analytical techniques may provide an overall framework for understanding ancient landscapes, they can never, alone, reanimate them (Liverani 1996). Therefore, analytical techniques serve as points of departure for understanding landscape, but these data and analyses require the deep context of culture provided by historical context and anthropological theory.

For the purposes of this study, landscapes are defined as an assemblage of socially experienced and constructed places and their interstices. They are dynamic, ever-changing constructs that require historical reasoning for interpretation. While the term *landscape* is sometimes conflated in the archaeological scholarship with the physical environment, regional phenomena, or otherwise understood as an analytical unit larger than the “site,” scholars have begun to embrace smaller units of analysis and more fluid interpretation (Denham 2017). Since a landscape is defined as an assemblage of meaningfully constructed places, it may be as small as a garden or as large as an empire (Branton 2009). Therefore, a single cemetery could be a mortuary landscape or a single city an urban landscape. The emphasis is on the study of assembled, socially constructed places, whether at the household or imperial scale. Landscape archaeology is,

therefore, a framework for modeling the ways that people in the past conceptualized, organized, and altered their environments, and the ways, in turn, that their environments altered them.

Certainly, the question, “What is a landscape of warfare?” is important to consider. In Tony Wilkinson’s *Archeological Landscapes of the Ancient Near East* (2003), he employs signature landscapes to organize comparative investigations. According to him, certain landscapes recur throughout the long expanse of the region’s histories and across its varied geographical zones. Some categories are inspired by human-environment interaction such as “Landscapes of the Highlands” or “Landscapes of Irrigation,” perceived as being persistent features of the ancient Middle East. Wilkinson’s signature landscapes are not exclusive concepts that preclude other kinds of landscapes or even the idea of superimposed landscapes. Jason Ur (2017) has also suggested that the imperial project reflected in Neo-Assyrian regional organization can be considered a signature landscape. In this context, landscapes of warfare are proposed as a signature landscape of the ancient Middle East, a concept that may also apply to other times and places.

Wilkinson’s approach, while incredibly useful, relies upon grouping visible, observable features revealed through archaeological survey or scientific testing. It is the toolkit of the landscape investigator or GIS specialist who engages in scientifically oriented studies, providing little guidance for investigating the experiences that construct ancient landscapes or the ideologies that underlie and replicate them over time. Wilkinson’s categories tend to focus on geography and land use while the proposed signature landscape, that of warfare, is almost entirely culturally produced and socially constructed. Thus, it was necessary to identify a mediating theory that centers human ideologies and experience in addition to Wilkinson’s venerable signature landscapes framework.

The theoretical foci of landscape studies in archaeology have shifted in recent decades, and the approach to landscapes adopted here reflects those critical transformations. In particular, the cultural ecological approaches that were common in the mid-twentieth century have been challenged by a variety of postmodern, postpositivist philosophies (Llobera 1996; Knapp and Ashmore 1999; Wilkinson 2003; Ashmore 2004; David and Thomas 2008).

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In the late twentieth century, theorists from a variety of disciplines converged on materialist interpretations of socially produced space (Harvey 1973, 1989, 2001; Soja 1989; Massey 1994, 2005), largely inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991). Subsequently, space as a social construct has become influential in landscape archaeology (Bender 2002; A. T. Smith 2003). Meanwhile, concepts of landscape deriving from humanistic domains of study are informed by notions such as Martin Heidegger's concept of dwelling (1972), emphasizing the generative role of lived experiences in landscape production (Ingold 1993; Desjarlais and Throop 2011). Space and place have sometimes been differentiated in the scholarly literature, with places being understood as having been created through meaningful human experiences (Tuan 1977, 1979; Hayden 1997; Cresswell 2004, 2008).

To accommodate shifting understandings of archaeological landscapes, A. Bernard Knapp and Wendy Ashmore's watershed paper (1999) proposed three analytical categories for landscapes: constructed, conceptualized, and ideational, understood as representing variation along a continuum of human intervention in natural and socially constructed environments. Constructed landscapes are modified human landscapes built over time, reflecting social belief systems. The fortress landscapes of Urartu are examples of constructed landscapes, inspired by regional insecurity and built by human hands. The second kind of landscape defined by the authors is conceptual, suggesting natural landscapes imbued with important social significance. The mountains of Urartu, perceived as the instantiation of deities, represent a conceptual landscape that framed both daily life and ritual practices (Salvini 1994, 2006). The final category, ideational, refers to landscape imaginaries. An example of an ideational landscape might be the heavens where certain Urartian gods like Haldi (alt. Khadi) were thought to dwell. In turn, Urartian imaginaries shaped the world in tangible ways as demonstrated by the creation of open-air sanctuaries designed for elaborate sacrificial ceremonies.

Both landscape theorizations present strengths and weaknesses. The Knapp and Ashmore approach is well suited to account for socially constructed and experienced landscapes, but it provides relatively less guidance about the many material correlates of human behavior. On the other hand, one remarkable strength of Wilkinson's approach is the recognition

that certain kinds of constructed landscapes exhibit remarkable durability, enduring for millennia as historically specific incarnations. For example, the landscapes of warfare known from the ancient Middle East display regional variations of certain traits that appear and reappear for centuries. Consequently, the book's narrative layers an analysis of traits, like those defined by Wilkinson, with the more experiential and ideological approach employed by Ashmore and Knapp, toward providing a humanistic context for the GIS studies presented in this book.

The landscape of warfare approach is, therefore, a framework for modeling how people in the past conceptualized and transformed their environments as a response to warfare, and the ways, in turn, that these socially constructed places transformed the ancient people in question. This line of attack entails both quantitative and qualitative studies of space and contextualizes them within historical developments and site-level archaeological data to understand how warfare shaped ancient landscapes.

Finally, one might reasonably ask, "Why not simply study the impact of warfare in a particular place rather than as a part of a landscape?" The archaeological correlates of warfare manifest as large-scale spatial footprints. Warfare encompasses regions rather than single villages; it encompasses communities and not merely single individuals. Thus, a spatiotemporal approach to warfare is critical for understanding its broad impacts.

ORGANIZATION OF BOOK

The book is organized into eight chapters. Chapter 1, "Landscapes of Warfare: A Historiography," discusses philosophical and anthropological theories relating to the origins of human violence and scholarly critiques of them. The chapter argues that landscape studies in the ancient Middle East have focused primarily on economic and ecological explanations for historical development, thereby pacifying the past. Since organized conflict is a human experience with social implications and archaeological correlates, anthropologies of warfare should be incorporated into explanations of past change along with other socially transformative institutions, particularly when abundant evidence supports the impact of

warfare. The chapter concludes with a justification of why warfare should be examined from regional and landscape perspectives.

Chapter 2, “Age of Empires: An Introduction to the Early First Millennium BCE,” provides an overview of the textual and art-historical evidence available to study these two very different empires, arguing that a diachronically phased study of expansion is necessary to appreciate Urartu as a phenomenon. Specifically, generalizations derived from the unconventional reign of a late king, Rusa, son of Argišti, have distorted scholarly interpretations of the empire.

Chapter 3, “View from the Fortress: Examining Site Placement,” is an in-depth examination of the spatial footprint of the Urartian empire. A chronologically phased spatial study of archaeological remains reveals that Rusa, son of Argišti’s Urartu, with its vast *ex novo* fortress cities, represents an anomalous, late stage of the empire. Earlier phases of Urartu reveal a decentralized state comprising hundreds of relatively small forts and fortresses dispersed over vast geographical expanses, administered from newly founded as well as improvised and co-opted seats of power. An analysis of regional settlement and GIS viewsheds reveals that Urartians pragmatically built upon existing assets in their co-opted territories rather than dramatically restructuring them as has sometimes been argued.

Chapter 4, “Reframing Urartu as a Non-Urban Empire,” critically examines an entrenched scholarly position. Archaeological and historical data, particularly from seventh-century sites like Ayanis, highlight the fragmentary and often inconclusive data supporting Urartian urbanism. Excavations of lower towns, when present, reveal loose assemblages of large official buildings and a relatively small number of informally constructed dwellings. Given the available evidence, it would be valuable to question whether urbanism is a useful concept for describing the socio-political organization of Urartu. Reframing the narrative allows landscape interpretive methods to contribute to scholarly debates.

Chapter 5, “Fortified Regional Networks: Building Blocks of Empire,” analyzes the features that characterize fortified Urartian landscapes. By the Middle Bronze Age (MBA), two general styles of fortified landscapes emerged in the ancient Middle East. The first is the fortified city, a landscape of warfare typified by exaggerated, fortress-like defenses in grand

urban complexes. The second, investigated intensively in this chapter, is a regional, rural system consisting of fortresses, forts, and towers, organized along roads and at river crossings; it is the “fortified regional network” (FRN). The urban and rural fortification systems were not mutually exclusive and could be employed in tandem. Suggesting that the threat of violent conflict structured the Urartian empire in specific, definable ways, spatial studies demonstrate that Urartian forts, fortresses, fortified settlements, and watchtowers were placed for defensive communication and the surveillance of roads. Intervisibility analysis reveals, furthermore, a high level of regional coordination in the construction of elaborate and powerful fire beacon networks.

Chapter 6, “Movement and Mobility: The Space of Empire,” investigates the regional networks of roads constructed by Urartu and Assyria. By comparing Urartu’s spatial organization with that of Assyria, one finds that the latter empire’s settlement patterns provide useful analogs for interpreting certain aspects of spatial organization as evidence for social control rather than defense. Least cost path (LCP) investigations of the inscriptional practices of Urartian kings allow for a detailed analysis of the expansion of the state, demonstrating that Urartu spread out of Anatolia using a phased, network approach like the one that has been described for Assyria (Liverani 1988). Urartians, like Assyrians, sought to maximize agricultural potential and subdue unruly conquered districts through deportation policies.

Chapter 7, “Traumascape: War and Society Writ Large,” provides an overview of ethical and representational factors that necessitate a further investigation of how suffering and human trauma were components of socially constructed landscapes of warfare. The growing subfield of archaeologies of destruction is highly informative, and the chapter builds upon this foundation by discussing the psychosocial impacts of tragedy. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argued (1979, 388), Urartian landscapes may yield to spatial analysis techniques, but they require a humanistic perspective to contextualize them as culturally significant places. The work of Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) adds additional nuance by theorizing placemaking as embodied experience shaped by historical and geographical narratives. An exegesis of the Assyrian text, “The Eighth Campaign of Sargon II,” delineates the social impacts of systematic, siege warfare.

Site-level evidence, such as osteological and destruction remains, reveals how practices of warfare, deportation, and involuntary servitude shaped the material remains and experiences of a largely silenced subaltern, at times resulting in landscapes of forgetting.

Chapter 8, “Unraveling the Why: Ideologies That Perpetuate Landscapes of Warfare,” examines the importance of ideologies—namely, notions of alterity, agonistic masculinities, and universalizing notions of world domination—as possible explanatory factors for the remarkable durability of landscapes of warfare in the ancient Middle East. The period under investigation is the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, which coordinates with the apogee of Urartu’s imperial system and the apex of its interactions with Assyria. Archaeological accounts of ideologies of warfare tend to be speculative, owing to the difficulties of making the past speak in this way through skeletal trauma and pottery sherds. Yet, an interdisciplinary study of historical evidence and archaeological contexts reveals that some broad domains of ideological motivation may be identified.

The conclusion synthesizes the book’s main arguments and highlights significant implications, suggesting that regional landscape fortification was one of the innovations enabling the growth of increasingly large territorial states in the second millennium BCE. Finally, the volume takes a long-term view of the histories discussed, considering the durability of warfare in the ancient Middle East across millennia and proposing that its basis is largely ideological.

UNIVERSAL THEMES

Finally, a return to the beginning is warranted, to the placid shores of Lake Geneva, where the dull gray megaliths of the Toblerone Line jut out among tidy rows of sunflowers. The enduring landscapes exemplify how the specter of systematic warfare shaped a nation’s territory, identity, and collective memory, as was the case in the ancient empires of Urartu and Assyria. These parallels demonstrate the universality of warfare’s impact on society and its landscapes.

In Switzerland, the comprehensive defensive measures—from elaborate subterranean fortresses to the iconic Toblerone Line—reveal a strategic and ideological response to the threat of invasion. The elaborate

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regional fortification underscores the role of military architecture in shaping the physical and psychological landscapes of a nation. The Swiss effort to fortify their country against potential invaders echoes the ancient practices of constructing fortified regional networks (FRNs) and underscores the strategic importance of controlling and defending territorial expanses through landscape transformation. Like the Urartian and Assyrian empires—which utilized fortifications, roads, and communication systems for military and administrative control—Switzerland’s defensive systems reflect a network approach to safeguarding the territory through landscape organization and modification.

The transformation of Toblerones from pragmatic military architecture to symbols of cultural identity mirrors processes of placemaking in the early first millennium BCE. While originally created for the purpose of defense, the Toblerones, memorials to a war never fought, have become central to philosophies of Swiss exceptionalism. Equally, fortified landscapes, both past and present, serve as a materialization of underlying social anxiety and bellicose ideologies. The Swiss example, therefore, highlights the enduring legacy of systematic warfare, providing a contemporary connection to the transformational nature of warfare imprinted upon landscapes in the ancient past.