Early forms of social technology, clever political moves and elements of absolutism are some of the themes in Karen Radner’s story of the birth of the world’s first empire on the banks of the Tigris – nearly 3000 years ago.

The tour through Munich’s Museum of Egyptian Art ends in a room with five strikingly lit, meter-high reliefs that portray the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 BC) watched over by magnificent winged gods. These huge stone panels were part of the Palace of Kalhu (at Nimrud in Iraq). Ashurnasirpal ruled over a kingdom which later, in the years after 710 BC, would encompass the Eastern Mediterranean and large areas of the Middle East. So these reliefs make an appropriate setting for a meeting with Karen Radner to learn more about the origins of the idea of empire. For the Neo-Assyrian Kingdom can be seen as the first empire in world history. In this setting, Radner warms to her theme and talks of the role of social technologies, power politics and absolutist kingship in the empire’s rise.

“‘Empire’ does not refer to the size of a political unit; here, the German term ‘Großreich’ is rather misleading,” she tells me. “The focus lies on dominance of a small group of people who govern and exploit a mass of diverse populations to their own end. Modern multinational businesses provide a useful analogy.” As one of the world’s leading experts on the history of the ancient Middle East, Radner comes to LMU as a Humboldt Professor, having won this most highly endowed German award for research achievement. Her interests focus on the history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. This state serves as a paradigm for how, over the course of several centuries, one kingdom among many succeeded in creating the world’s first empire, almost a millennium before the Roman Empire reached its zenith.

Well defended

The prehistory of the Assyrian Empire begins in the 14th century BC, when the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East were becoming more and more arid. The changing climate put many of Assyria’s contemporaries under severe pressure. Powerful states like Egypt and the realm of the Hittites in Anatolia decayed and disintegrated. In Babylonia, drought led to a drastic fall in agricultural productivity. Decline, upheaval and collapse were the order of the day.

But Assyria managed to come through the dark days at the end of the Bronze Age relatively unscathed, largely thanks to its geopolitical position. The area between the foothills of the Zagros and the Taurus ranges continued to receive enough rainfall to maintain agriculture and food supplies. Assyria’s heartland was also well protected from attack by the mighty River Tigris, at a time when unprooted population groups were looking for new horizons. And from this position of relative security, in the 10th century BC, its leaders began to reconquer territories that had been under Assyrian control in earlier times. Their ambition was to make the kingdom as powerful as it had once been. Indeed, its rulers justified their strategy of territorial expansion with the need to rescue the Assyrian living in enclaves scattered beyond the boundaries of the realm. The victims of this policy were the new neighbouring states that had emerged during the preceding period of disruption.

A series of campaigns

Despite publicly focusing on restoration, the Assyrian kings realized that they in order to create lasting impact they needed to overhaul the older administrative structures. And in the 9th century BC, they succeeded in converting the traditional kingdom they had inherited into a new beast, that we today can describe as the world’s first empire. This state not only controlled the reclaimed territories but continued to grow; by the 7th century BC, the Assyrian rulers had incorporated what is now Syria, portions of Lebanon, Israel and Jordan and regions in Western Iran and Eastern Anatolia into their realm and, finally even conquered Egypt.
The 9th century BC kings Ashurnasirpal II and his son Shalmaneser III played a crucial role in this process. They moved the seat of power from the ancient capital of Ashur to Kalhu. “This was a decisive step,” Radner remarks. The new capital gave them the scope to build up new power structures and publicize them on a grand scale. They also reorganized the administrative apparatus and found new ways to ensure that all important posts throughout the realm went to trustworthy allies.

This last reform amounted to a transformation of the Assyrian elite. Perhaps the key problem that faces any absolutist ruler is deciding how to delegate power. The Assyrian solution was to create an administrative caste dominated by eunuchs. Castrated males had been part of the royal household long before this – but in the new system they took on a wholly new role, as the backbone of state administration. The state paid for their education and training and separated them from their families in early childhood to grow up as wards and wardens of the state.

**Royal iconography as political propaganda**

“This system provided a highly qualified government elite that was easy to control,” Radner stresses. “Eunuchs, after all, cannot have families.” To the modern mind, this may have been a pretty drastic way of going about it, but it ensured that the ruler could concentrate power in his own hands and those of a carefully selected group of officials. “The kings created a class of imperial state servants to whom they could delegate power without risking to threaten their own dominance,” Radner explains.

The Assyrian rulers took pains to cultivate their public image, as can be seen on many of the surviving palace reliefs and other works of art. Some portray the king as a mighty warrior who shows his enemies no mercy. Others depict the king as a caring guardian, who communicates with his people and is attentive to their needs – and who enjoys divine protection, as the reliefs in Munich clearly show. The political import of this royal imagery is palpable even today and convince as public relations efforts.

In order to extend royal power and to maintain close contact with the governors of even the most distant provinces, further innovations were introduced, which demonstrate the farsightedness of the political elite and turned out to be of enormous importance for the history of communications: Under Shalmaneser III, a relay courier service was set up that allowed the center to keep in touch with the extensive domain under its control. Messengers mounted on mules conveyed the state correspondence via a network of dedicated staging posts. “This was a revolutionary measure,” says Radner. “Up until the introduction of railways and the invention of telegraphy, no other innovation had such an impact on the speed of long-distance communications.” Staging posts were located 35 to 40 km apart. “That corresponds to the distance a mule can cover without difficulty,” Radner explains. And the mules, the hybrid offspring of a male donkey and a female horse, were specially bred for the task. Reliable and sturdy, mules are less sensitive and far more frugal than horses, and can cope with rugged terrain. For, unlike the Roman Empire, the Assyrian state did not invest in paved interregional roads.

**Letters encased in clay**

Maintenance of the state-run post network was extremely costly, which underlines the system’s political importance. “It was a very deliberate investment,” says Radner. The letters delivered by the couriers were inscribed in cuneiform script on small clay tablets enclosed in clay envelopes. Although the relay system along which mail travelled was a novelty, the principle of the confidentiality of correspondence had been established a thousand years earlier. Unopened letters are, as one expects, rare in the archaeological record and one of the few examples, a petition, makes it perfectly clear why the letter was still sealed: “This is the third time I’ve written to you,” writes the plaintiff to an official, who obviously had no intention of responding anyway. Official correspondence was embossed with the state’s seal. Beginning in the reign of Shalmaneser, every senior official was issued, as a mark of his rank, with a gold
ring bearing the royal emblem. It shows the king killing a lion, emphasizing his role as the guardian of the state, who protects his people from all dangers that might threaten it.

Karen Radner delights in pointing out details like this. Her research is based on combining diverse approaches. When discussing the Assyrian imperial mail, the material basis is provided by the surviving letters of the state correspondence. These and other types of texts elucidate how the postal system operated, and environmental data highlight the advantages of using mules in the mountainous terrain of northern Assyria and the arid regions to the West. This is history as careful analysis of all available clues.

And her deductions are convincing. For, taken together, these innovations constitute a clear strategy which, over the course of time, helped the Assyrian kings to consolidate and progressively extend their power. The implementation of such measures required substantial financial resources, so the rulers had to rely on an increase of the overall prosperity of the state. They were very aware, says Radner, that the state's most valuable assets were its people – in particular those with special training and abilities. They set out to attract such people to the new capital and did not shy away from compelling suitable families from conquered areas to settle in Kalhu and the later imperial capitals like Nineveh. Wary of the dangers of parallel societies, they favored and enforced integration and the creation of new social structures instead.

Loss of identity

The bigger the empire became, the more its rulers needed to worry about possible opposition. A series of measures was introduced to promote the integration of new population groups. Aramaic, the vernacular spoken by the peoples of many of the conquered regions in the West, was raised to the status of an official language, on a par with Assyrian, a dialect of Akkadian and written in the cuneiform script. In fact, Aramaic, which was recorded in a rather more simple alphabetic script, would subsequently become the lingua franca in much of the Middle East. Furthermore, the imperial art that adorned the temples and public buildings incorporated more and more elements drawn from the iconography of the subject peoples. New arrivals were also provided with land and housing.

“There was even a state-financed program designed to promote intermarriage between the natives and the immigrants.” Initiatives such as this shed a revealing light on the Assyrian concept of empire: “Its raison d’être was not the propagation of an ideology, its purpose was an economic advantage to the state that wished to control as many people as possible so as to exploit them for its own benefit.” The dominant feature of all later empires is already clearly recognizable in the Assyrian case, Radner asserts.

As a result of these integrative policies, society in the Assyrian heartland was dramatically transformed within a few centuries. “This loss of identity at the core occurred in almost all empires. One only has to look at contemporary London, the capital of the British Empire. Here too, over the centuries, English traditions gave way to a much broader British identity,” says Radner. She herself has lived in London for the past 10 years. “The current
political debate on independence for Scotland has come as something of a shock for the English, many of whom have suddenly become aware that the Empire has profoundly changed England and that it has become difficult to define what is English, rather than British.” Observations, which relate the history of the ancient Middle East not only to that of the wider world of its own time but to more recent epochs, are quite typical for Karen Radner.

Pragmatism even in religious issues

And she has an eye for the surprising but revealing detail. Talking of the temple rituals held in honor of the main god in the Assyrian pantheon, she uses the phrase “cooking for Ashur” as a shorthand for describing what held the Assyrian Empire together. Every day a large team of culinary specialists prepared the offerings to the god. “Prior to the 10th century, nary specialists prepared the offerings together. Every day a large team of culinary specialists prepared the offerings to the god. “Prior to the 10th century, nary specialists prepared the offerings together. Every day a large team of culinary specialists prepared the offerings to the god. “Prior to the 10th century, nary specialists prepared the offerings together. Every day a large team of culinary specialists prepared the offerings to the god.

Handbooks for diviners

The Assyrian clay tablets that have come to light in excavations allow us to reconstruct everyday life in rich detail. In addition to letters and legal documents, more than 25,000 fragments of clay tablets from a huge library assembled by King Ashurbanipal in Nineveh (modern-day Mosul in Iraq) in the 7th century BC have survived. This represents the largest single collection of literary and scientific texts we have from the ancient world – even though the wax tablets, leather scrolls and papyri that constituted a significant part of the texts kept in the library were lost when Nineveh went up in flames in 612 BC.

Most of the clay tablets from Nineveh are now in the British Museum in London, but much of the library remains to be analyzed. The texts testify to the efforts of the kings to assemble knowledge and to control its dissemination. Besides literary texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, songs and prayers, the library possessed enormous quantities of scholarly texts. Many of these have survived in multiple copies, and most are devoted to astronomy, medicine in the broad sense and divination, which was primarily based on the inspection of the inner organs of animals, usually the livers of sacrificial sheep. This method of forecasting future events required complex procedures and the rigorous interpretation of the findings, and thus produced wealth of literature in the form of manuals and data collections for its practitioners.

One of the aims of Radner’s work is to correct a widespread misconception of Assyria’s place in world history. “The Assyrians are frequently depicted as an exclusively military power,” she says. But the army was a means to an end, even for rulers like Ashurnasirpal, who in his monuments very often appears in the role of a mighty military leader and ruthless warrior, she asserts. “The rulers were fully aware that an army can also cause problems, as a factor in the power game that is difficult to control.”

No longer loyal

The Assyrian state invested heavily in military technology, building up large cavalry units from the 9th century onwards. The chariot was developed into a type of heavy-armored tank with a crew of four. Professional soldiers captured from the armies of conquered states were integrated into the Assyrian forces. At the same time, the Assyrian kings made strenuous efforts to ensure that the army did not become the nucleus of a parallel power structure. For instance, armies were configured anew for individual campaign and disbanded into individual units in between.

Despite the degree of control and domination that the kings exercised over the
empire’s populations, direct contact with their subjects was indispensable for imperial cohesion. However, the 7th-century kings, unlike their predecessors, began to neglect this element of governance and the Assyrian royal house gradually lost the loyalty of its subjects – after over 1000 years of rule by the same dynasty. Ultimately, the king’s authority was insufficient to hold the increasingly fragile structure together and the Assyrian Empire did not survive the onslaught of the Babylonians and the Medes on their heartland in the late 7th century BC. The final assault on Nineveh in 612 BC and the fire blaze consuming the imperial palace had the fortunate side effect of assuring the survival of the now burned and even more durable clay tablets in the state archives and the royal library as an extraordinarily rich historical source for later scholars. The fall of Nineveh marked the end of the first world empire but the idea of Empire survived.

Translation: Paul Hardy