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Factoids of Assyrian presence in Anatolia: towards a historiography of archaeological interpretation at Kültepe-Kaneš

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Abstract

This article offers a historiographical examination of how 20th century ideas of migration, assimilation, and cultural purity have shaped our understanding of Bronze Age Anatolia, focusing on the canonical narrative of Assyrian presence at the site of Kültepe-Kaneš. According to this narrative, generations of Old Assyrian merchants who lived and conducted business at Kaneš (early 20th – late 18th century BC) left little or no trace in the archaeological record except for cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals, assimilating to local culture to such a degree that Kültepe's archaeological record remained entirely of Anatolian character. The accuracy of this view has met increasing circumspection in recent years. What remains to be articulated, however, is why it remained unchallenged for so long, from its initial formulation in 1948 until the late 2000s, during which time it was widely repeated and reiterated. It is proposed here that the persistence and longevity of what is essentially a misconstrued notion of foreign (in)visibility in Kültepe's material record can be explained by treating it as a 'factoid', namely, 'an item of information accepted as a fact, although not (or not necessarily) true; *spec*[*ifically*] an assumption or speculation reported and repeated so often as to become popularly considered true; a simulated or imagined fact' (*OED*).

The analysis of the factoid begins with historicising its formulation and subsequent development. First to be addressed are the ideological circumstances which made underlying ideas of cultural purity and the Anatolianisation of foreigners a particularly attractive narrative for Turkish archaeology in the late 1940s. It is then demonstrated how the factoid became ensconced in the scholarly canon through broad conventions of citation and reinforcement. This is followed by a critical evaluation of the evidentiary bases of the factoid, which outlines how disciplinary tendencies to privilege certain categories of evidence over others have created artificial gaps in the data. Ultimately, the article seeks to highlight the epistemological implications of how one of the key sites of Bronze Age Anatolia came to represent a perceived rather than an observed case of foreign invisibility and indigenous cultural purity, informing broader debates on cultural assimilation and identity as well as the long-standing contention between textual and material strands of evidence as reliable bases of inference.

Introduction

The wider questions invoked in this article have to do with how archaeological knowledge is created, transmitted, and fixed as canonical narratives, paying close attention to the broader intellectual circumstances under which such narratives are perpetuated, avoiding scrutiny for extended periods. What is presented, therefore, is a historiographical assessment of how archaeological evidence has been presented and received in the scholarly literature rather than an exhaustive or systematic review of any particular body of archaeological evidence. Instead, archaeological publications are treated as primary historical sources in their own right and subjected to a close reading in order to pinpoint the emergence of key formulations; following changing interpretations and vocabularies over time; and identifying any significant contradictions in the overall narrative. As a discrete body of evidence, these sources are examined *not* for the purposes of an archaeological inquiry (e.g. to reconstruct field contexts or reassess stratigraphic sequences or object associations), but for a historical scrutiny seeking to establish a diachronic account of how the overarching discourse for one particular site and its wider regional significance was constructed.

The site in question is Kültepe-Kaneš, the Anatolian headquarters of a complex network of overland trade organised by merchants from the north Mesopotamian city of Aššur between the late 20th to mid-17th century B.C. (Michel 2011a; Larsen 2015). Unsurprisingly, this is a site which is of tremendous significance to the Bronze Age history and archaeology of the ancient Middle East. The long-standing excavations in the residential quarter of Kültepe's Lower Town have revealed an incredibly rich corpus of textual documents from merchants' private archives, and an equally wealthy body of material evidence from well-preserved domestic assemblages. What makes Kültepe-Kaneš unique, however, is not simply the volume of evidence it offers, but also that this evidence 'allow[s] a perspective of the period on a *human* scale, with individuals (not systems) embarking on the long and slow route between Assur and Kanesh, and all for personal gain' (Gates 1996: 296). As such, ancient Kaneš presents a tremendously informative case study for historical and archaeological inquiries into long-distance trade and cross-cultural interactions. Recent scholarship's reformulation of these themes in terms of mobility and

identity has placed a sharper focus on Assyrians as immigrants in Kanešean society (especially Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2015, 2017) as well as a mobile community (Highcock 2018a, 2018b) of expatriates.

Traditionally, Assyrian presence at Kaneš has been expressed in terms of an intriguing discrepancy formulated shortly after the first field season of Turkish excavations in 1948: '[I]f it were not that we find in [Kaneš], the Assyrian cuneiform script, the Assyrian language and cylinder seal impressions, there would not be anything to distinguish it outwardly from a purely Anatolian town' (Özgüç 1950a: 69). This 'epistemological paradox' (Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2015: 40) seemingly arises from a mismatch between archaeological and textual evidence, one showing us a 'purely Anatolian town' while the other reveals the long-term presence of an active expatriate community, was described by Özgüç (1951: 544) as a 'duality […] *characteristic* of […] Kaneš' (emphasis added). For many years, numerous archaeological and historical commentaries on the site have consistently repeated this assertion, reinforcing it as the canonical narrative for foreign presence, cultural influence, and the relative merits of the material evidence and textual sources as seen from Kültepe.

More recently, however, a number of scholars have expressed varying degrees of doubt and uncertainty over Özgüç's claim. Particularly in the last decade, more nuanced approaches to ancient Kaneš have been gathering pace, which have variously taken a community perspective (Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2015, 2017); considered the potential dynamics of a middle ground (Lumsden 2008; Heffron 2017a); identified trends of cultural hybridity (Lumsden 2008 Larsen and Lassen 2014) or compatibility in ritual practices (Heffron 2016, 2020); as well as positioning Assyrians themselves within their own peculiar context of a mercantile community on the move (Highcock 2018a, 2018b). Meanwhile, a whole host of previously uncollected datasets have entered the process of knowledge production with osteological, faunal, archaeobotanical, and metallurgical analyses now being carried out (see Atici *et al.* 2014). The ongoing transformation in Kültepe scholarship not only presents an opportune moment for launching a retrospective analysis of the history of archaeological interpretation at this key site, but in fact necessitates a critical historicization of previously held views on the discrepancy between textual and archaeological evidence recovered from it. As these views are being reassessed, it is particularly important to address the following question: What accounts for the tenacity of Özgüç's view of Anatolian cultural purity at Kaneš, which has demonstrably been the dominant narrative from the late 1940s into the late 2000s?

The answer lies largely in identifying this view not merely as an error or misinterpretation but specifically as a factoid, namely, 'an item of information accepted as a fact, although not (or not necessarily) true; *spec*[*ifically*] an assumption or speculation reported and repeated so often as to become popularly considered true; a simulated or imagined fact' (*OED*). Indeed, '[a]rchaeology, converted from treasure hunting into a historical discipline, is for obvious reasons prone to create a number of factoids' (Maier 1985: 31).

The factoid surrounding one of the fundamental archaeological interpretations at Kültepe is made up of two interdependent claims, both of which have been repeatedly presented as straightforward observations, stripped of the nuances or qualifiers that could otherwise convey the complexity or equivocality underlying the question as well as the evidence. As a result, the factoid exaggerates the extent to which Assyrians are invisible in the archaeological record (this is the first claim) in order to affirm an absolute sense of Anatolian cultural purity (the second claim). An overwhelming sense of Assyrian conformity to local material culture was so firmly accepted as the rule that a substantial body of contradictory evidence, no matter how frequently it turned up, was treated by the excavators as incidental. Yet the demonstrable contradictions in the fundamental line of reasoning behind the factoid have never been raised in over 60 years, let alone resolved. As Maier (1985: 32) notes, 'There is something decidedly unbiological about […] factoids: the tendency to get stronger the longer they live is one of their most insidious qualities.' This has certainly been the case for the factoid of Assyrian invisibility and concomitant Anatolian cultural purity at Kültepe, which remains, to some extent, in circulation even today.

In offering a critical account of the lifetime of the factoid, the next three sections follow a chronological order, each contextualising the archaeological interpretations surrounding the factoid in their immediate historical, ideological, and intellectual circumstances of knowledge production and consumption. The first section looks at the initial formulation of the factoid during the early years of Kültepe excavations, considering especially why the idea of Anatolian cultural purity may have been appealing to Özgüç. The following section is a survey of the reception of this idea in the wider field, paying close attention to Maier's (1985: 32) 'linguistic aspect' of a factoid in examining specific examples of how Özgüç's claim has informed numerous key textbooks as well as specialist studies. The widespread repetition of the factoid in Western academia is juxtaposed with Kültepe's publication record which shows that material from the site has historically been inaccessible to anyone but an extremely small circle of Turkish scholars. The final of the chronological sections offers an overview of the most recent phase in Kültepe scholarship, marked by new critical approaches and an ongoing process of collecting new types of data. It is in this current phase that the factoid has finally begun to meet some resistance. As current discourse covers increasingly more ground in rearticulating questions of cultural admixture and identity at Kaneš, Özgüç's original statement can now be fully put to the test both by revisiting old data as well as through the analyses of entirely new strands of evidence. It is therefore crucial at this stage to form a good understanding of precisely what separates fact from factoid.

Having established the historical and intellectual contexts over the lifetime of the factoid, from its very first emergence to a more nuanced treatment in recent scholarship, the article then examines the evidentiary bases and interpretative mechanisms involved in its construction and preservation during the corresponding six to seven decades. This examination has several aims. The first is to make a self-reflexive contribution directly to the specialist research surrounding Kültepe. This is achieved through highlighting those categories of evidence which have either been excluded from discussion altogether or else used highly selectively, only in instances where they 'prove' a certain narrative but never to test it. Revising or rejecting the factoid only deals with the result of a flawed interpretative process but not the process itself. For a fully critical assessment, unresolved contradictions or fallacious lines of reasoning fundamental to the factoid must also be addressed. Secondly, the close historiographical analysis of archaeological interpretations at Kültepe-Kaneš falls under the wider research agenda summarised by Redford and Ergin (2010:1) as "[engaging] critically with the constitution of the field of archaeology in Turkey, addressing such issues as the historical context of the production of knowledge and the roles of individuals and institutions in shaping scholarship." Even more broadly, understanding the mechanisms behind the factoids of Assyrian invisibility and Anatolian cultural purity at Kültepe-Kaneš offers valuable case study for recognising similar patterns of epistemological blind spots in archaeological interpretation elsewhere.

Phase one: early formulations of the factoid

The idea of generations of foreign presence going completely unnoticed in the absence of texts is quite astounding, which has surely contributed to how often it has been repeated both by the excavators as well as external commentators. This section examines the first formulation and early development this claim.

News of Kültepe's first season of excavations in the summer of 1948 were featured the following year in the *Illustrated London News*, in an article entitled 'A Birthplace of the Hittite Empire' (Özgüç and Özgüç 1948). As the title suggests, the emphasis was on launching Kaneš as the source of Hittite culture, a theme which continued also into the next two *ILN* articles on the site (Özgüç 1950a, 1951). The presence of Assyrians at Kültepe was outlined as seen from textual evidence, focusing primarily on the organisation of trade rather than on material culture. The second *ILN* feature (Özgüç 1950a) appeared in the same year as the very first Kültepe excavations volume, published bilingually as *Türk Tarih Kurumu Tarafından Yapılan Kültepe Kazısı Raporu 1948 / Ausgrabungen in Kültepe: Bericht über die im Auftrage der Türkischen historischen Gesellschaft, 1948 durchgeführten Ausgrabungen* (Özgüç 1950b). Both publications – one, a single page piece for the (informed) lay reader and the other a comprehensive excavation report with technical detail, architectural plans, and photographs – made the same claim that the presence of Assyrians at Kaneš would not have been detectable in the archaeological evidence without the help of texts.

In *Kültepe Kazısı Raporu 1948*, Özgüç (1950b: 102) notes the apparent absence of Assyrian material culture as follows: 'Here a point which draws our attention is that the Assyrian merchants have not brought with them items of Assyrian origin and have directly used local quotidian and religious items produced in Anatolia' (author's own translation from the Turkish text). This is followed by a brief consideration of why this should be the case. Özgüç follows Gelb's reasoning for a similarly perceived absence of foreign objects at Alişar, likewise concluding that travelling merchants are unlikely to carry with them a great quantity of belongings, unlike 'migratory groups [who] always bring with them their pots and other utensils' (Özgüç 1950b: 102, n.331 citing Gelb 1935:12). This plausible explanation has been echoed much more recently by Stein (2008) (discussed in following section).

In the *ILN* article of the same year (Özgüç 1950a), however, the paucity of Assyrian material culture receives a markedly different spin, giving a much more loaded view of Assyrians as having been absorbed completely into indigenous Kanešean culture:

> If we ignore the script, the language and an important collection of cylinder-seal impressions, we find that in the "Kārum" of Kanesh, which with its streets, squares and system of offices and archives appears to us as a definite town, the colonists, just like the natives of the locality, used the religious and domestic objects made at the time in Anatolia and brought with them not one single Assyrian object. All the buildings are made in the native technique to suit the Inner Anatolian climate and building materials; and the dead were buried according to the Anatolian customs, about the inner meaning of which, however, we know very little. In fact, if it were not that we find in this colonist town, named Karum in the Assyrian, the Assyrian cuneiform script, the Assyrian language and cylinder seal impressions, there would not be anything to distinguish it outwardly from a purely Anatolian town.

The notion of Assyrians behaving 'just like the natives' certainly implies a high degree of assimilation. This idea is further reinforced by the way Assyrian material culture is categorically stated to be as entirely absent from the archaeological record: '*not a single Assyrian object*.' The emerging picture is one of an expatriate community which has not only adopted local material culture, but also abandoned its own. While the Assyrians

have in this way become thoroughly Anatolianised, Kaneš remained a 'purely Anatolian town', evidently unaffected by its expatriate residents.

The fully indigenous character of Kaneš was also emphasised in the third *ILN* feature on Kültepe: 'The civilisation which is seen in Kanesh is developed from the old Anatolian early Bronze Age civilisation and the people who created this culture are the native, Anatolian people' (Özgüç 1951: 544). Özgüç is very clear that the credit for Kanešean civilisation lies strictly with the indigenous population, which is then positioned in a dichotomous relationship with the Mesopotamian evidence at Kaneš:

> We would emphasise that in the civilisation of Kanesh we could distinguish a duality: (a) all kinds of archaeological material (buildings, pottery, metal, bone and stone objects, burial customs) representing an Anatolian civilisation; (b) language, writing system and most of the cylinder-seal impressions, which are of Assyrian and Old Babylonian origin. This duality was characteristic of the Karum of Kanesh during the period of the Assyrian merchants (Özgüç 1951: 544).

This statement shows how the excavators of Kültepe conceptualised Assyrian presence at Kaneš at the very outset of excavations. It is in this sense the interpretative benchmark against which subsequent reiterations of the Kültepe discourse can be gauged as we follow how this particular narrative of Assyrian invisibility was sustained over the next seven decades of scholarship. Özgüç's dichotomous view of Assyrian presence at Kaneš also has a methodological bearing on the treatment of the evidence, as it reinforces the long-standing fissure between archaeology and philology (Zettler 2003; Lumsden 2008).

Özgüç's view of Kültepe as an intriguing case of archaeologically invisible foreigners was quickly adopted by Anglophone academia. The same year as the initial Kültepe volume and the second of the *ILN* features, Ann Perkins (1950: 62) reported to the readership of the *American Journal of Archaeology* that 'it is interesting to note that, with the exception of [three vessels identified as North Syrian] and the cuneiform tablets with seal impressions, where is no archaeological indication of foreign origin in the material.' A year later, she reiterated the archaeological invisibility of foreign material culture in much more absolute terms, echoing Özgüç's assertions in the 1950 *ILN* so closely to be effectively paraphrasing:

> 'Apart from the cuneiform documents and a great number of cylinder seal impressions, all objects were made in the local techniques and forms; and the houses were constructed with local materials and according to local plans to suit the Anatolian climate. The burial customs, the statuary, the lion and bull rhyta all show the predominance of native traditions. The civilization of the Kārum is in the truest sense of the word an Anatolian civilization, showing the beginnings of the features commonly known as Hittite. It is noticeable that in this trade colony of Assyrians there is not a single Mesopotamian object. Had it not been for the documents, this would have seemed an ordinary Anatolian city' (Perkins 1951: 94-95).

The idea that Kültepe could easily have been mistaken for a city untouched by foreign contact is reinforced again when Özgüç (1953a: 106) describes Kaneš as an '*unadulterated* Hittite city in keeping with the nature of Central Anatolia' (author's own translation from Turkish, with emphasis added). A decade later, in a generously illustrated article in the *Scientific American* showcasing a selection of striking objects as evidence of a highly sophisticated indigenous Anatolian culture, Kültepe was presented to a wider readership again in terms of cultural purity: 'Although most of the houses were inhabited by Assyrian merchants, they show a *purely Anatolian* native system of construction and continue the indigenous traditions of the plateau' (Özgüç 1963: 35, reprinted in Lamberg-Karlovsky 1979; emphasis added).

Özgüç's *Scientific American* article reiterated ideas of Assyrian cultural assimilation and subsequent archaeological invisibility:

> The artifacts found in Levels II and Ib reflect the remarkable degree to which the Assyrian colonists adopted the culture of their Hatti neighbors. Except for the clay tablets, with their cuneiform script and distinctly Mesopotamian cylinder-seal impressions, all the artifacts of these levels are in the native style. If the tablets and their sealed envelopes had not been found, in fact, we might never have suspected the existence of the merchant colony (Özgüç 1963b:101-2).

Other contemporary articles suggest that Özgüç (1963a:4) subscribed to an idea of Anatolian cultural superiority in a much broader context than that of Assyrians in Kaneš:

> Basically, the Hittites, apart from their language and some not too well understood customs, did not bring a civilization to Anatolia as an ethnic group. Their greatest achievement is to have adopted the

> local culture and to have assimilated it, making it function as their own culture and art, which in itself is a mark of considerable talent.

Also in the same article that Özgüç asserts Hittite invisibility in the material record, using the familiar phrase '*a single object* or weapon […] characteristic of the barbaric Hittites or their region of origin' (Özgüç 1963a: 3-4; emphasis added) could be identified in archaeological levels associated with this group. Admittedly, he is harsher towards the Hittites, whom he describes as 'invaders who were of a lower level of civilization' (Özgüç 1963a: 3) and who were 'apparently unable to add anything new or preserve the high technical standards, which led to a ceramic decline' (Özgüç 1964b:41) after the end of the *kārum* period. This is in sharp contrast to his commentary on the positive influence of Cilicia, Syria, and, Mesopotamia on the art, culture, and institutions of the Anatolian Bronze Age (Özgüç 1963a: 2), which of course stands in some contradiction to statements that credit for Kanešean civilisation rests solely with indigenous Anatolians. The idea that the Hittites 'assimilated the distinctive local culture' survives into Özgüç's (2000: 1251) later commentaries.

Clearly, the common denominator driving both interpretations is the idea of Anatolian cultural superiority. Whether they are barbarian invaders or literate merchants, foreigners adopt Anatolian culture *in toto.* The role of the Hittites in Anatolia is of course now known to be in dramatically different terms from what Özgüç was claiming in the mid 1960s. The general understanding of the nature of Assyrian presence, on the other hand, seems to have changed little over the next 40 years, as the following section demonstrates.

Phase two: reception and reiteration of the factoid beyond Kültepe scholarship

Repeated unfailingly in archaeological or historical discussions of Kaneš in all major source books by some of the most reliable scholars of the ancient Middle East, Assyrian invisibility in Kültepe's archaeological record had become the canonical view. In reviewing the reception and reiteration of the factoid in Western scholarship, the following discussion pays close attention to what Maier (1985: 32) describes as the 'linguistic aspect' of a factoid:

> The process by which mere hypotheses attain the apparent rank of established fact, without even having been proved, presents a linguistic […] aspect [as well as a psychological one; discussed above]. Linguistically, words or particles indicating the hypothetical character of a statement are dropped one by one in a process of constant repetition. The subjunctive is exchanged for the indicative, and in the end the factoid is formulated as a straightforward factual sentence.

The linguistic aspect of the factoid here is reflected not only in expressions of unequivocality in framing Assyrian invisibility in the material record, but also in a subtle language of sensationalism in reporting Özgüç's statement. The two notions reinforce one another: the extent to which Assyrians are hidden behind local material culture is reported to be so extreme that it is, at the very least 'an interesting archaeological fact' (Van de Mieroop 1999: 96), which has variously been described as 'startling' (Postgate 1992: 215), 'disconcerting' (Aubet 2013: 321), and even a 'warning to archaeologists' (Sagona and Zimansky 2009:229).

This is especially evident in books written for a more mainstream audience and reference books. In his *Early Mesopotamia*, Postgate (1992: 215) writes that 'One of the startling aspects of the Assyrian colonies is that, were it not for the cuneiform tablets which turn up in such large numbers, archaeologists could not have guessed that they were excavating the houses of a sizeable foreign community.' Likewise, Kuhrt's (1994: 91) classic *The Ancient Near East c.3000-300 BC* reiterates, with a clear sense of absolutism that 'The archaeological material is *entirely* Anatolian in type. Were it not for the texts, we would have no inkling that any Assyrians were present *at all*' (emphases added). In *A History of the Ancient Near East*, Van de Mieroop (1999: 96) takes up a similar vein, claiming that material remains from Kültepe's residential quarter simply 'do not show evidence' of foreign presence. There are no qualifiers, nuances, or exceptions in relating what seems to be a complete absence of evidence:

> An interesting archaeological fact regarding the Kanesh colony is that the material remains excavated in the houses of the Assyrian merchants do not show evidence that these are foreigners. Their houses cannot be distinguished from those of local Anatolians save for the tablets found in them. It is thus conceivable that many of the sites in the Mesopotamian periphery housed natives of Assyria or Babylonia without this showing any trace in the archaeological record.

What is particularly significant in the above commentary is that the archaeological evidence – or the lack thereof – from Kültepe is not presented as an idiosyncrasy of this site, but as an example of a much wider phenomenon of archaeologically invisible foreigners across the ancient Middle East. Moreover, given the wider context of Van de Mieroop's discussion of writing history from cuneiform texts, Kültepe – and by extension archaeological evidence – is inevitably positioned as a counterpoint for the (higher) evidentiary value of documentary sources.

While we might expect such broad-brush characterisations in textbooks and popular books, which of necessity can only deal with each case briefly, we might expect a different picture in more specialist literature. Yet this is often not the case. For example, Aubet (2013: 321) frames Old Assyrian presence at Kanesh again centres in terms of total archaeological invisibility that all house contents are '*wholly* Anatolian' and the material culture is '*in no way* different' from other contemporary towns:

> One specific aspect of the *kārum* has proved disconcerting to the archaeologists: both the architecture and the domestic chattels and pottery found inside the Assyrian houses are wholly Anatolian. The material culture reflected in the residential area of the Assyrian *kārum* in no way differs from that of any Anatolian centre of the day, whether in Kanesh itself or in Alishar or Bogazköy. This means that, but for the finding of the archives, it would have been difficult to guess that there was a commercial district inhabited by foreign merchants in Kanesh […] Obviously in Kanesh, the Assyrians adopted local styles and an Anatolian way of life, clearly visible in their houses and in their domestic chattels.

This seeming discrepancy between a textually documented but archaeologically undetectable Assyrian presence has led other scholars to cite Kaneš as a cautionary tale for the limitations of archaeological evidence. Sagona and Zimansky (2009: 229), in their survey of *Ancient Anatolia*, call attention to just that:

> The tablets these Assyrian merchants left behind […] give warning to archaeologists studying trade in other complex societies not to overestimate how much one can understand from material evidence alone. The commodities traded at Kanesh are for the most part invisible in the inventory of excavated objects, and without the tablets […] there would be little indication that the Assyrians were here at all.

The issue is not confined to archaeological evidence of trade or traders. The assumed discrepancy between textual and archaeological evidence for foreign presence at Kaneš has informed a range of studies on the social history of this ancient city. For instance, Taracha (2009: 25) opens his discussion on Anatolian religion during the *kārum* period by asserting that 'Most of the information come from written sources, much less from archaeological evidence.' This bewildering statement which overlooks Kültepe's extraordinarily rich repertoire of cultic paraphernalia (Heffron 2014, 2016, 2017b, 2020), graves and grave goods (Patrier 2013), is surely a by-product of the view that archaeological evidence is a limited source for understanding Kanešean society.

The presumed total undetectability of 'Assyrian-ness' at Kültepe has also been brought to bear on the complex issue of ethnicity and the archaeological record. Viewed as a mercantile enclave inhabited by a thriving foreign community which apparently left no trace in the material record of their host culture, Kaneš makes a fascinating case study with serious implications for shaping hypotheses, assumptions, and premises regarding how (or indeed if) material culture can be a reliable proxy for ethnic identity. In his influential article exploring the possibilities and limits of archaeological evidence for understanding ethnicity in ancient societies, Geoff Emberling cites Kaneš as an example of conscious cultural emulation on the part of the foreigners: '[M]erchants clearly pursued a strategy of cultural assimilation; were it not for their account tablets and letters, it is claimed, we would not recognize them as foreigners' (Emberling 1997: 306). A similar inference is again made by Schwartz and Akkermans (2003: 204) who describe Kaneš as 'characterized by an almost wholesale adoption of local styles of architectural and domestic artifacts.'

Clearly, Özgüç's assertion did not simply remain the standard tagline for referring to Kültepe-Kaneš, but has come to influence a range of discussions on the social and religious history of Anatolia itself, as well as broader issues of ethnic identity in cross-cultural encounters in complex societies, and even big questions such as epistemological concerns over the limits of archaeological evidence. External commentators unquestioningly repeated the factoid of Assyrian invisibility as this was the authoritative narrative presented, consistently, by the excavator himself. This inherent (and unavoidable) trust in authority constitutes what Maier (1985: 32) has described as the 'psychological aspect' of a factoid:

> Psychologically, the repetition of unproved hypotheses is facilitated by an attitude which is as indispensable in research as it is ambivalent: a certain amount of implicit trust in the results of other scholars' research. No scholar is able to check all statements in a book or long article against the original sources. This would be tantamount to doing all the work again. Leading authorities in a certain field of research are usually accorded a special measure of trust. Thys the quality of their statements is – subconsciously – improved, the process of creating a factoid accelerated. Trust in other scholars' reliability, trust in authorities: none of us can work without them, and yet this attitude sometimes blunts the critical appraisal of results of research. None of us is free from such proclivities at times.'

This particular aspect was no doubt exacerbated by Kültepe's own scholarly context in which both the production as well as the consumption of knowledge took place within the staunchly traditional praxis of Ankara University's Faculty of Languages and History-Geography (Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, henceforth *DTCF*), which promotes a strictly hierarchical deferentialism (Emre 2013, 2015; see also Özgünel 2010), inevitably discouraging open critique. The extent to which Kültepe excavations have maintained a tightly closed circuit of a very small number of Turkish scholars – all exclusively affiliated with the *DTCF* – who have been granted access to archaeological material recovered from excavations during the Özgüç era (1948-2005) cannot be underestimated. Within this circuit, the overwhelming majority of Kültepe publications were authored by Özgüç himself.

Özgüç's overwhelming dominance over Kültepe scholarship is evident even from a cursory survey of Michel's *Old Assyrian Bibliographies* (*OAB*) which list 67 individual articles and monographs by the excavation director from 1948 to 2005 (*OA*: 195-203; *OAB 1*: 449). In fact, for the first 15 years of excavations at Kültepe, Tahsin Özgüç was effectively the sole authority on all archaeological studies based on direct access to excavated material (except for glyptics, which were published by Nimet Özgüç). The only exceptions to this are an *ILN* feature, two early excavation volumes, and a preliminary report in *Belleten,* which are co-authored by both Tahsin and Nimet Özgüç (Özgüç and Özgüç 1948, 1949, 1953a, 1953b). Even then, at least in the excavation volumes, the division of labour seems to have been that Nimet Özgüç mainly reported on seals and sealings and Tahsin Özgüç on the archaeology. Nimet Özgüç, whose archaeological efforts focus on the site of Acemhöyük from the 1960s, only has two articles on Kültepe finds unrelated to glyptics: a stratigraphic comparison with Acemhöyük (Özgüç 1968); and a general overview of the site (Özgüç 1969). Kutlu Emre, former doctoral student of Tahsin Özgüç and eventual field director at the site, enters Kültepe's publication record in 1963, going on to produce the next highest output, with 13 articles and one monograph, until the end of the Özgüç era of excavations in 2005 (*OAB*: 198-99). Before taking over as director of excavations in 2006, Fikri Kulakoğlu (himself a former student of Kutlu Emre's) had published three articles in the late 1990s (*OAB*: 199). Tunç Sipahi and Tayfun Yıldırım (also former *DTCF* students) have published one short article each (*OAB*: 203). While of course non-Turkish scholars have gone into print with commentaries on the archaeology of Kaneš, these are few and far in between, and certainly not produced as focussed specialist studies (*OAB*: 198-203; *OAB 1*: 449). In short, no studies based on direct access to excavated material were ever published by anyone outside a handful of *DTCF* scholars. Effectively, the academic community relied principally on Tahsin Özgüç and Kutlu Emre for information.

Phase Three: Recent Noises

A turning point for Kültepe scholarship is discernible in the late 2000s, when Lumsden (2008) and Stein (2008) went into print with explicit calls for revisiting the long-held claim that Assyrians in Kültepe would have been unknown to us without the evidence of tablets and seals. In his critique of the prioritisation of textual accounts over archaeological inferences at Kültepe, Lumsden aptly describes it as a 'mantra' of Old Assyrian archaeology, that 'with the exception of the cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals, the Assyrians are invisible in the archaeological record' (Lumsden 2008:37, citing Özgüç 1963 and Veenhof 1995). Criticising the habit of relying on texts as the principal – if not the only – means of understanding Assyrian presence in Anatolia, he calls for a theoretically informed framework for examining Assyro-Anatolian relations (Lumsden 2008: 21-22, 32ff; Larsen and Lassen 2014: 173-78; Heffron 2017a).

Stein's (2008) likewise influential article from the same year similarly advocated a greater theoretical awareness and methodological refinement for Old Assyrian archaeology. In revisiting the observation that the ceramics and architecture of Kültepe reveal nothing discernibly Assyrian, he questioned the extent to which these two categories are even meaningful proxies for identity expression in the particular historical context that brought Assyrians to Anatolia. Rather than ceramics and architecture, Assyrians are more likely to have displayed and further cultivated a distinct identity through clothing or hairstyles (Stein 2008: 34; repeated in Barjamovic 2018: 45). While such categories are not detectable in the archaeological record, Stein also highlights other strands of material evidence, such as faunal data and cooking wares pertaining to foodways.

Lumsden and Stein's articles correspond to the beginning of a new phase of excavations at Kültepe, which began in 2006 when Fikri Kulakoğlu took over directorship, shifting the principal focus of excavations from the Lower Town to the Upper Mound. More importantly, new datasets entered the sphere of activity at the site, as faunal and botanical remains began to be collected for the first time (Atici 2014; Fairbairn 2014); metallurgical investigations have been initiated (Lehner 2014); and the analysis of human remains resumed after half a century (Üstündağ 2014) allowing ground-breaking isotopic studies to take place (Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2015, 2017). Meanwhile a conscious effort towards integrative scholarship and greater international visibility gave rise to an energetic boost in publications involving a considerably more diverse community of scholars than had previously been allowed access to material. In short, the scholarship surrounding Kültepe is in the process of a significant transformation, as the culture-historical focus of the previous generation is gradually being replaced by a more critical and varied set of research agendas drawing on a wider range of data.

Following Lumsden (2008) and Stein (2008), several other scholars have also expressed varying degrees of doubt and uncertainty over the extent to which the material record, as claimed, gives nothing away of Assyrian presence. Michel (2014: 73), for instance, has hinted that Özgüç's model needs to be 'checked,' to which end she suggests first identifying, on the basis of archives, the owners of individual houses. Her point of departure, however, still relies principally on texts as a body of evidence, bypassing Lumsden's and Stein's calls to engage with the issue by developing an independent material culture perspective and examine the archaeological evidence on its own terms. Furthermore, identifying house owners on the basis of archives present is itself a risky premise. (Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2015: 385). In a later article, however, Michel (2014: 127) does shift her focus to the artefactual record of Kültepe by pointing out that the site's funerary assemblages reflect Assyrian traits:

> At Kaniš, the Assyrians settled in the lower city; they purchased houses built in the local style and used the pottery produced by local craftspeople for their everyday needs. Nevertheless, certain traces bear witness to their foreign origins. Artifacts discovered in their tombs and houses indicate cultural practices that were typical for the Assyrians.

A more explicit expression of the increasing wariness of the received wisdom of Assyrian invisibility in the archaeological record comes from Larsen and Lassen (2014: 172-3) who likewise recognise the frequent repetition of Özgüç's statement:

> '[…] it has become commonplace to say that without the texts and the associated cylinder seals it would have been impossible to determine the true nature of the site—it would have been seen simply as an Anatolian town. Undoubtedly, more precise and detailed excavation techniques will lead to an adjustment of this statement but it seems clear that the Assyrian visitors did adopt vital elements of material culture from the local community.'

More precise excavation and recording at Kültepe remain a high priority not only for recalibrating established narratives but also for opening new lines of investigation. Recent efforts to gauge the archaeological visibility of ancient identities outside the artefactual record via faunal, botanical, and isotope analyses, however, still require contextually rigorous excavation. Although the recent spate of publications has expanded Kültepe's archaeological horizon, it has produced primarily thematic, interpretative studies whose analytical scope is different from that of exhaustive excavation reports; more importantly, they do not make primary datasets available to the same extent. Atici *et al.* (2013) have recently demonstrated how different analysts can draw markedly different conclusions from the same dataset, which highlights the significance of primary data being made accessible. While the recent spate of Kültepe-related publications is promising, excavation reports providing detailed information on household and/or grave assemblages, contextual associations or internal phasing are still conspicuously absent. Descriptive summaries of latest finds (e.g. Kulakoğlu 2014) are hardly accompanied by primary data such as architectural plans, catalogued finds, or stratigraphic information.

Kültepe's ongoing transformation also requires a substantial programme of retrospective analyses, especially considering that the most recent excavation volume for the site was released in 1986, and the results of more than three decades of excavation are still to be accounted for! Published results of previous excavations from the first phase under Tahsin Özgüç (1948 to 2005) constitute a body of evidence collected and analysed by the standards of an early 20th century style of culture-historical archaeology, and are therefore of limited use for the kinds of questions archaeologists have been formulating since the 1960s. In particular, the chronic decontextualization of finds from their original findspots is a serious impediment for any attempt to use the material published in excavation reports. A similar problem has long plagued philologists' attempts to reconstruct archives (Veenhof 2013:58). For a site with such phenomenal preservation of discrete *in situ* assemblages, this is deeply lamentable.

This is not to say that old data cannot be used for new analyses. The reuse of data despite poor contexts is a regular undertaking among archaeologists (Faniel *et al* 2013:5). For old data to be meaningful, however, the original contexts in which the data was gathered, recorded, and interpreted would need to be understood adequately. To date, Highcock (2018a) has carried out the most detailed review of published portable objects from Kültepe as components of a material culture of mercantile activity, peculiar in this case to the social and historical circumstances of Assyrians operating in Anatolia (Highcock 2018b). Her results are highly significant for discussing the relative in/visibility of Assyrians at Kaneš. The following section should be read in the context of how such a discussion can benefit from the notion of a factoid, and how/why the interpretative mechanisms upholding the factoid need to be examined closely.

Dissecting the factoid

The factoid of Assyrian (in)visibility as originally formulated by Özgüç was not a nuanced observation; it did not suggest that recognisably Assyrian material culture seems oddly undetectable at a settlement in which Assyrians lived for generations. It was very much a blunt assertion that archaeological evidence of resident foreigners is entirely absent from Kültepe, *and* a concomitant insistence that Kaneš had preserved its cultural purity despite decades of foreign contact. As outlined above, critical attention has so far focused principally on the first part which highlights the absence of identifiable Assyrian material culture. As renewed examinations of archaeological evidence test this assertion and confirm its broad validity, Özgüç's original observation does in fact stand. Merchants from Aššur, who were principally responsible for generating the immense volume of textual documentation at Kültepe and therefore hyper-visible in historical evidence, seem to have left astonishingly little in the archaeological record by which to recognise them *specifically as* merchants from Aššur. From this perspective, it is certainly tempting to see the factoid as a salvageable view, which can then be refined and ultimately absorbed into contemporary discourse. However, such a tendency is to be resisted as it prioritises revisionism over reflexivity and leaves the second part of the factoid, namely the idea of an uninterrupted body of Anatolian material culture, unchallenged. Even if Assyrians prove elusive to pinpoint in extant material assemblages, the idea that Kaneš was a purely Anatolian settlement is demonstrably a fallacy. Addressing this fallacy requires a historiography of archaeological interpretation *in addition to* a critical reassessment of archaeological material itself.

This section examines the mechanisms by which the fallacy of Anatolian cultural purity was constructed and maintained, and how it continues to circulate despite the recent disillusionment with the first part of Özgüç's original premise.

First of all, the idea that Kültepe's material culture bears no trace of Assyrian presence relies on a grossly oversimplified view of the nature of the available evidence. This oversimplification begins with the treatment of tablets and cylinder seals not as artefacts in their own right, but exclusively on the merit of their textual and iconographic content, i.e. as sources of historical but not archaeological evidence. Emberling and Yoffee (1999: 277) have pointed out this flaw in Özgüç's much repeated statement, formulating in no uncertain terms that '[w]ithout reading a single line of a text one can say, from the style of the artifact, that hundreds of Old Assyrians lived in Kültepe.' It is only in recent years that ancient Middle Eastern scholarship has begun to pay closer attention to clay tablets as material culture (Matthews 2013; Taylor 2011). The adoption of this view into Old Assyrian scholarship is reflected in Larsen's (2015: 7) reminder that 'it is essential that the texts be understood as archaeological artefacts, because only then can they be placed in meaningful contexts and interact with the other elements of material culture.' Challenging the 'duality' of the evidence Özgüç claimed for Kültepe is therefore significant in the broader intellectual context of the material turn.

A greater problem with this implicit dichotomy between tablets and seals as sources of 'readable' historical evidence on the one hand, and 'mute' archaeological evidence on the other, is that the latter is cited almost exclusively in relation architecture and pottery, bypassing other types of material evidence. This is another oversimplification, which effectively reduces a much larger body of artefactual evidence down to two categories, which at any rate may not be the most suitable proxies for deliberate or even incidental displays of Assyrian mercantile identity. In revisiting the observation that the ceramics and architecture of Kültepe reveal nothing discernibly Assyrian, Stein (2008: 34) has duly questioned the extent to which ceramics are a reasonable index of foreign presence at Kültepe in the particular historical circumstances that brought Assyrians to Anatolia:

> Given the extremely high transportation costs involved in the donkey caravan trade between Assur and Anatolia, there was little reason to import bulky, fragile items such as utilitarian ceramics, when these could be obtained easily and inexpensively from local Anatolian merchants. In addition, since relatively few Assyrian women were physically present in the karum […], we would not expect to see Assyrian styles of those craft items that were normally made by women in the household. Under such circumstances, we would not expect to see Assyrian styles of ceramics and other items in the colonies.

This being said, certain types of pottery, namely cooking wares, are widely accepted as potentially viable signifiers of ethno-cultural habits and preferences surrounding food preparation and consumption which Stein (2008: 34) identifies as a more meaningful area of material evidence in which to seek out identity markers within Kanešean society. Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about cooking wares at Kültepe, as this particular class of vessels is conspicuously absent from excavation reports and dedicated pottery studies. Given the nature of the remains uncovered in the Lower Town, namely, extremely well-preserved domestic units, this is patently due to collection, recording, and publication strategies rather than accidents of discovery. The longstanding approach to publishing pottery from the site has been descriptive and classificatory, placed fundamentally at the service of establishing basic typologies. Types and/or categories are defined by appearance and decoration rather than function and therefore defined by whether they are monochrome or polychrome, rather than whether they are serving or storage vessels. Moreover, publication preferences have clearly favoured fine wares, elaborate cult

vessels and other 'novelty' pieces. As a result, cooking pots, which tend to be plain coarse wares generally considered to be unattractive owing to their high concentrations of temper, seldom show up in excavation records. Given the ubiquity of domestic kitchen areas excavated in the Lower Town, the conspicuous absence of cooking ware is surely the result of collection, recording, and publication choices rather than an accident of archaeological discovery.

The lack of information on cooking wares therefore highlights a serious problem characterising the published repertoire of ceramics from Kültepe, namely, that it is incomplete. Therefore, any conclusive statement made on the overall characteristics of Kültepe's pottery tradition, such as the claim that it is wholly Anatolian, is by default flawed. This constitutes yet another oversimplification of the complexities of the evidence available. It is extremely important not to mistake an absence of evidence (in this case more a case of missing evidence due to the excavators' choices) as evidence of absence.

Perhaps the greatest oversimplification of the nature of the material evidence available has to do with the extent to which a varied range of clearly non-Anatolian artefacts, all associable with a broadly North Mesopotamian/Syrian cultural sphere, have been repeatedly glossed over or explained away by the excavators. Within the published pottery repertoire alone, a number of Syrian vessel types are easily identifiable (Emre 1992; 1995; 1999). While the relative proportion of these types in no way challenges the clear dominance of the local Anatolian tradition, it is nonetheless conspicuous enough to cast some doubt on the notion that Kültepe ceramics look nothing but wholly Anatolian. Other classes of artefacts which also demonstrably originate from a Syro-Mesopotamian sphere include balance weights (Dercksen 2016; Kulakoğlu 2017), weapons (Özgüç 2003: 217-22; Yıldırım 2011), jewellery (Özgüç 2003: 222-333) toggle pins (Highcock 2019), and even game-boards (Michel 2011c; Highcock and Heffron in preparation).

The idiosyncrasies of each type of artefact in terms of production, circulation, and use have a different bearing on the extent to which they may be relevant to discussing foreign presence. Syrian bottles are a particularly good case in point. Originating in production centres in North Syria and the Middle Euphrates basin (Alp 2018: 58, with citations), these small portable vessels are often associated with long-distance trade. They certainly have a long history of circulating across Anatolia already during the Early Bronze Age, well before the *kārum* period. Locally produced imitations suggest that the primary commodity in circulation was probably the contents rather than the bottle itself, although the vessel's particular form must have been an important signifier to be closely imitated (Alp 2018: 64). At any rate, Syrian bottles represent an originally foreign type of artefact which has eventually become part of Anatolia's own ceramics repertoire. As such, they are potentially strong indicators of long-standing foreign contact and cultural transmission but relatively weak indicators of actual foreign presence.

Mesopotamian weights, on the other hand, as veritable 'hardwares' of trade (Postgate 1992: 208) and therefore highly suggestive of the presence of merchants themselves. Noting their ubiquity in the archaeological record of Kültepe's lower town, Michel (2014: 76-77) has recently proposed taking a closer look at 'weights, which are necessary tools for the merchant in his professional activities' as evidence of Assyrian presence at Kaneš. According to Kulakoğlu (2017: 343) Özgüç had also recognised weights as having been brought to Kaneš by merchants, although this observation does not seem to have led him to consider these objects towards the visibility of Assyrians in Kültepe's archaeological record (see further discussion below).

In her detailed examination of Assyrian merchants as a mobile community, Highcock (2018a) expands on the idea of a material culture of mercantile activity, namely a 'merchant assemblage' or 'tool-kit' as described by Hafford (2001). Being integral to the professional activities of a merchant in 'assessing value' (Hafford 2001: 79), weights constitute a key element of such a tool-kit, but weights alone are not conclusive evidence for a merchant's presence: 'weights do not equal merchants any more than pots equal people' (Highcock 2018a: 298 citing Hafford 2001: 88). The archaeological correlates of mercantile presence are much more securely identified in *assemblages* comprising a particular grouping of particular artefacts (such as weights) closely associated to the professional activities as well as the specific modes in which these activities are carried out by a socially distinct class of merchants (Hafford 2001). The particular circumstances of Assyrian merchants operating via donkey caravans between Aššur and Anatolia places great emphasis on the portability of objects. Surely it is no coincidence that almost all object categories with demonstrable Syro-Mesopotamian attributes at Kültepe are also 'all *portable:* the types of item one could carry or wear' (Highcock 2018a: 297-98).

Another common feature of such portable objects is that they lend themselves extremely well to identity expression, as they are 'associated with individual ownership that can be carried on the body' (Highcock 2018a: 318; see especially Highcock 2019). The frequent deposition of these items in grave contexts further reinforces their significance as markers of social identity as may be drawn from wealth, status, profession, gender, religious or ethnic affiliation. Needless to say, balance weights would be highly suitable for marking a merchant's social identity through profession, as already proposed by Hockmann (2010: 45, 87, cited in Highcock 2018a: 306-7). Akyurt (1998: 75) has similarly proposed inferring the professional identity of a jeweller (but equally applicable to that of a merchant) from the bronze scale pans and pair of touchstones bearing gold marks (Özgüç1950: 89) deposited in a Level Ib pithos grave (Özgüç and Özgüç 1953:2 9).

In considering the archaeological visibility of ethnic differentiation, funerary evidence from Kültepe presents a highly complex landscape where grave construction itself is generally in keeping with contemporary Anatolian practices, yet the placement of adult burials below living floors points to suspiciously Mesopotamian habits closely aligned with *kispum* rites of ancestor veneration for which the family home plays a central role (Patrier 2013: 61; Michel). Similarly, grave goods comprise a veritable admixture of Syro-Mesopotamian objects (such as those listed above) and unmistakably Anatolian items, particularly vessels. Other elements of ritual activity set within domestic houses likewise reflect a combination of indigenous and foreign traditions (Heffron 2014, 2016, 2017b, 2020, forthcoming).

In short, Kültepe's artefactual evidence includes a far greater and more varied repertoire of Syro-Mesopotamian origins than is suggested by the much-repeated exception of tablets and seals as the only two artefact types interrupting an otherwise wholly indigenous repertoire of material culture. In reality, the exceptions to the Anatolian character of Kültepe's material record include not only tablets and seals, but also several distinct vessel types, balance weights, weapons, jewellery and pins, game-boards, and likely also the practice of intramural burial itself which consistently point to a Syro-Mesopotamian cultural sphere.

Strictly speaking, none of this *proves* Assyrian (or other foreign) presence at Kaneš, simply because no archaeological evidence on its own can achieve this. Nor should we expect it to do so, given that archaeological discourse has long moved beyond equating style with ethnicity. Indeed, if Kültepe had been an entirely atextual site without explicit textual records detailing beyond all doubt the extended presence and activities of Assyrian merchants in Anatolia (a level of proof only texts can provide), we would most certainly equivocate. Working solely from artefactual evidence, it is always possible to explain – in fact, necessary to consider – the presence of foreign items or foreign styles without assuming a settled presence of foreigners themselves. In that sense, postulating foreign presence can at best be one of several alternative (but not mutually exclusive) narratives for explaining the presence of foreign elements in otherwise local material culture. This has to do with broader epistemological issues concerning the nature of material evidence. Archaeological discourse on ethnic (and other) identities have long moved beyond culture-historical associations between artefact types and ethnicities. Indeed, even where we *do* have the benefit of extensive textual proof for the existence of expatriate communities such as Assyrians in Anatolia, we must still acknowledge that close parallels in material culture such as 'the mirroring of dress styles and burial practice at both [Aššur and Kaneš] […] does not necessarily reflect ethnicity in that it demonstrates Assyrians were buried in Anatolia, but rather points toward a shared material culture that travelled along the routes between the two places' (Highcock 2019:32-33). In terms of dismantling Özgüç's factoid, then, the question is not whether material culture (or which strands of material culture) constitutes conclusive proof of Assyrian presence (this would be a misunderstanding of the nature of archaeological evidence), but whether identifiably foreign elements, when seen holistically as a repertoire of their own, can uphold reasonable doubt against the notion of cultural purity as proposed by Özgüç. The following discussion demonstrates how the substantial body of archaeological evidence pointing to extensive foreign contact was glossed over so as not to interfere with the notion of Anatolian cultural purity at Kaneš.

The roots of this view are best explained against the ideological background of early Turkish archaeology. As discussed in detail in a number of critical studies (Atakuman 2008; Erimtan 2008; Tanyeri-Erdemir 2006; Yazıcıoğlu-Santamaria 2007), academic disciplines such as archaeology, ancient history, and philology were consciously promoted in the service of identity formation for the new nation state of the Turkish Republic, founded in 1923 . Consciously detached from previous Ottoman, Islamist, or pan-Turkist notions, the new national identity was instead drawn from a unifying sense of 'Anatolianness.' Research into the Anatolian past was therefore explicitly promoted as a direct means of substantiating this new identity. Equally significant was the agenda "to disprove the image of Turks as a secondary [non-white] race" (Atakuman 2008: 221, citing İnan 1930, 1932) by demonstrating a long history of Anatolian cultural achievement on par with European civilisations (Özyar 2005). Doing so through archaeological research would further show that the Turkish Republic was not a backward Oriental entity but had its rightful place among modern Western nations which shared similar intellectual pursuits.

Consequently, Anatolian archaeology was hailed both as a patriotic quest as well as an index of modernity – a view that is especially characteristic of (but by no means exclusive to) Tahsin and Nimet Özgüç's generation of scholars. The Özgüçes 'were among the first students of the Faculty of Languages, History and Geography, established on Atatürk's instructions in the context of modern education campaign of the Republic' (Emre 2011a: 21) and continue to be celebrated as pioneers in this capacity (Duruel 2011). It is important to understand that the excavations at Kültepe, like many others, were viewed as a direct expression of commitment to the ideals of the early Republic (Özgüç 1982: ix-xx). The manner in which ancient Kaneš was presented to the scholarly community echoes the core ideas promoted by the early republican agenda. In particular, Özgüç's conscious aim to 'show that this region had been an active participant in the high civilizations of the Near East, even before the time of the Hittite Empire' (Larsen 2015: 25) is a clear parallel to the contemporary desire to prove modern Turkey should likewise be a participant in Western civilisation.

Interpretative mechanisms used in maintaining the factoid

Even outside Turkish scholarship, the broader idea of uninterrupted cultural purity at Kaneš also remains in circulation, despite the critical realignment evident in Kültepe scholarship. In her detailed synthesis chapter on the *kārum* period in the *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Anatolia,* Michel (2011a: 319; emphasis added) has described Kültepe's material culture using phrases similar to those of Özgüç decades earlier: 'Most of the archaeological material found in the houses was of a *purely Anatolian* style. The Assyrians used local products, and thus the tablets are the main artifacts allowing an identification of their owner's ethnic origin.' As recently as 2018, the idea recurs in *The Assyrians: Kingdom of the God Assur from Tigris to Taurus*, a comprehensive bilingual volume on Assyrian history and culture, in which Barjamovic (2018: 45; emphasis added) states: 'Apart from the cuneiform tablets and the seals they used on them, local culture dominates the archaeological record of the houses *entirely*.' While specialist knowledge-production is more visibly mindful of the nuances surrounding the factoid, knowledge consumption by a more general (but informed) readerships such as those targeted by the two volumes cited above, continue to be framed by the idea of Anatolian cultural purity. Surely revising a demonstrably inaccurate (and ideologically charged) narrative ought to take place at both the production as well as the consumption ends of scholarly knowledge.

Factoids most easily flourish in the absence of contradictory evidence, but this was not the case for Kültepe. Evidence contradicting the notion of Kaneš as a purely Anatolian city, that is, the conspicuous repertoire of artefacts of Syro-Mesopotamian origin as well as local imitations, had been encountered from the very beginning of excavations. This material was not misidentified or dismissed. To the contrary, it received substantial attention in publications and was discussed extensively (Emre 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999; Kontani 2011). This is where an interpretative blind-spot emerges: When evidence not entirely reconcilable with the fundamental premise of a wholly Anatolian material record enters discussion, it is glossed over and/or diverted into a separate framework of inference. On the one hand, the excavators cite non-Anatolian artefacts as evidence of foreign contact and even foreign presence but maintain, on the other hand, that the site's material record is so thoroughly Anatolian that it completely hides the existence of expatriate communities who lived here for generations. It is not uncommon, in fact, to find both assertions in close proximity to one another in a single text, sometimes expressed back-to-back. Yet the contradiction remains unresolved.

Already in the publications of the early 1950s, non-local material was noted as an indicator of foreign contact and influence but does not appear to have interfered with the idea of a culturally pure Anatolian city (Özgüç 1950a: 68; 1951: 544). One might argue that during the early years of excavation, the quantity of non-local artefacts recovered was perhaps too small to be seen as anything but minor exceptions to the rule: 'Three painted vases are imports from North Syria and Cilicia; it is interesting to note that, with the exception of these and the cuneiform tablets with seal impressions, there is no archaeological indication of foreign origin in the material' (Perkins 1950: 62).

At least from the mid 1950s, however, it was abundantly clear that such imports were not occasional oddities, but very much part of Kültepe's standard repertoire. Syrian vessels and local imitations discovered at the site are mentioned regularly both in Özgüç's publications as well as in the *AJA*'s annual reports on ongoing archaeological work in Turkey from 1955 to 1995 (Mellink 1955: 232, 1960: 59, 1961: 39, 1963: 176, 1965: 135, 1966: 144, 1971: 164, 1975: 203, 1977: 293 1983: 430, 1985: 550, 1990:129, 1991:129, 1992: 127; Gates 1995: 219; see also Young *et al.* 19556: 26). The standard formula used by the excavators when commenting on north Syrian elements at Kültepe was to describe this as evidence of 'influence' and 'close relations' between Anatolia and north Syria. In the same article in which he asserts 'except for clay tablets […] all artifacts of these levels are in the native style', Özgüç (1963b: 104) also lists a whole array of other finds of non-local origin:

> 'Although the resident Assyrians apparently had little effect on Anatolian art forms aside from the cylinder seals, we have found a strong North Syrian influence, particularly in metal objects, pottery and small statues. Evidence of this influence is found in both imports and imitative native products. One of the most interesting imports is a hollow-shafted adze that is distinctly foreign to Anatolia and must have been brought in from the area of the Habor River. This tool and many other metal objects found in specific strata at Kanesh and at Syrian sites are useful for establishing archaeological synchronism. In both levels of the *kārum* we have found clothing pins, axes, daggers and spearheads fashioned in bronze, silver or gold. None of these objects has been excavated at levels dating from either before or after the Assyrian colonization. The fact that they are not Assyrian but North Syrian indicates that the Kanesh *kārum* maintained close relations not only with Aššur but also with other neighboring lands. Some of them may not have been important items of trade but merely the personal effects of itinerant merchants passing through Kaneš.'

Özgüç makes a conscious distinction between Assyrian and North Syrian material culture, attributing the latter to Assyrian commercial presence ('None of these objects has been excavated at levels dating from either before or after the Assyrian colonization') which implicitly qualifies North Syrian finds as material proxies for

Assyrian visibility. A similar inference is more explicitly made when he proposes, rightly, that some of the North Syrian finds may have been personal belongings of itinerant merchants at Kaneš. This line of reasoning produces the (unresolved) contradiction that Kaneš was inhabited by a distinct group of expatriate merchants, who on the one hand left no trace in the material record except for tablets, but whose presence, on the other hand, can be inferred from a range of foreign goods which they introduced to Anatolia both as items of trade as well as personal effects.

A similar interpretative blind spot emerges in Emre's 'The Pottery of the Assyrian Colony Period according to the Building Levels of the Kaniş Kārum' (1963) published the same year as Özgüç's *Scientific American* feature quoted above. For both Levels II and Ib, Emre (1963: 89) lists a variety of vessel types 'imitating North Syrian and North Mesopotamian examples in shape but manufactured in native techniques.' Her comment on the conspicuous increase of north Syrian influence from Level II to Ib is telling: 'new shapes [...] can only be explained by the influence of the merchants' (Emre 1963: 88). This explicit inference of foreign presence at Kaneš from foreign pottery (or local imitations) contradicts Özgüç's (1963b: 100) assertion that pottery from Kültepe was wholly 'in the native style.' One might speculate a difference of scholarly opinion between Özgüç and Emre, but this is extremely unlikely to have been the case. As a former student of Tahsin Özgüç and field director at Kültepe for several decades, Emre (2015: 2) has maintained unwavering support for 'his astute and accurate interpretations':

> '[Tahsin Özgüç] interpreted the data recovered from his excavations aptly and in the most correct fashion […] These interpretations are so sound and on point that finds from new sites are still being evaluated in the light of his commentary' (Emre 2013)

At any rate, in an article published only a year after the *Scientific American* piece, Özgüç (1964b) himself undermines his own maxim in a lengthy discussion on the repertoire of Syro-Mesopotamian imports at Kültepe and the overall influence of the region on Anatolian art and material culture. Foreign merchants, previously portrayed as having adopted Anatolian material culture and behaved like the locals, are now said to have 'used concurrently imports from North Mesopotamia and Syria and local goods. The imports are in the minority and easily distinguishable from the local products' (Özgüç 1964b:36). This time, the emphasis is not so much on presenting Kültepe as a site of exceptional local character but one with a cosmopolitan repertoire of foreign imports and local imitations 'exactly [as] what one would expect in a big commercial center' (Özgüç 1964b: 41-2; see also Özgüç 1969: 255).

Özgüç also discusses Syro-Mesopotamian influence on small finds. Weapons, in particular, are singled out not as trade goods but as personal items belonging to merchants. Merchants' presence is also inferred from figurines stylistically 'foreign to Anatolia […] brought to Kanish by an Assyrian trader.' Noting also the 'increase of cylinder-seals of Syrian origin and pottery in Level Ib,' Özgüç (1964b: 43) presents a compelling picture of conspicuous Syro-Mesopotamian presence at Kaneš *directly inferred from* at least three different categories of artefacts outside pottery and architecture. This leaves us, yet again, with the inexplicably unresolved contradiction whereby the excavator *would* acknowledge the presence of foreign material culture, link it explicitly to the presence of foreigners but also continue to reiterate that the archaeological record of Kültepe is fully Anatolian.

In the excavation volume *Kültepe Kaniş II*, a different explanation is proposed for the presence of Syro-Mesopotamian 'cylinder seals, jewellery, certain weapon types and metal objects, game-boards, weights, and counterbalances' (Özgüç 1986a: XVII). This time, such objects are not attributed to the foreigners living at Kaneš but instead to the local population, who 'tried to follow Mesopotamian fashions' (Özgüç 1986a: XVII). Foreign merchants, on the other hand, with the exception of language, writing, and the use of cylinder seals, are associated with local (material) culture, 'living in native houses different from their own, using Anatolian pottery and quotidian objects. This made it easier for the foreigners to adapt to the new culture' (Özgüç 1986a: XV-XVI). The idea that Assyrians were thoroughly Anatolianised is again reinforced: 'They all [i.e. the Assyrians] have conformed to local Anatolian customs' (Özgüç 1986a: 49).

Local and foreign groups borrowing from one another is only to be expected within a mixed community such as Kaneš. It is certainly a valid point that foreign fashions would have been attractive to local Anatolians wishing to display wealth and worldliness; likewise adopting local material culture would have offered a variety of benefits to the foreign community, ranging from simple convenience to calculated assimilation. Özgüç's formulation, however, compartmentalizes foreign and local material culture in such a way that the former is removed from consideration as a proxy for inferring foreign presence. As a result, foreign imports are entirely disassociated from the expatriate communities and instead viewed solely as props used by the local population to display cosmopolitanism. Consequently, two separate inferences are made from each group's use of the other's material culture, without any accompanying discussion as to why we should expect the local and foreign communities to have made these mutually exclusive choices. For Assyrians, the adoption of local material culture translates into a wholesale assimilation to an Anatolian lifestyle to the extent that this group becomes undetectable in the archaeological record. Whereas the Anatolians' use of foreign material culture is a display of fashionable

cosmopolitanism but does not interfere with the fundamentally local character of the site. In fact, where Özgüç (Özgüç 1986a: 78; 2000: 1250-51) explicitly refers to the adoption of Mesopotamian customs by Anatolians, he places this very narrowly in the context of an elite sphere of activity.

When considered as a whole, the excavators' comments on the evident admixture of local and foreign material culture at Kültepe are indisputably contradictory. While initial interpretations are often revised or entirely changed over the course of a project with such longevity, a diachronic examination of the official narrative of foreign presence at Kültepe reveals no discernible effort to do so. What is observable instead is a series of interpretative blind spots perpetuating a confirmation bias variously implying Anatolian cultural superiority over foreigners or reinforcing Anatolia's position (through Kaneš) at the centre of international relevance and cosmopolitanism. The former premise relies on viewing Kültepe's repertoire as entirely indigenous; while the latter showcases foreign imports goods. Kültepe appears at once singularly Anatolian and unquestionably cosmopolitan.

The idea of a purely Anatolian town, which boasted its own sophisticated indigenous culture, and which was by no means peripheral to but on a par with the complex urban civilisations of Mesopotamia surely stood out as a tremendously attractive model. Indeed, reiterations of the core idea that Anatolia (as represented by Kaneš) made a unique contribution to, and was certainly just as good as, its Mesopotamian neighbours, are still detectable in contemporary Kültepe-centric narratives: 'Anatolian craftsmen produced fashionable and perfect weapons with these moulds that were able to compete with other regions of high cultural levels' (Yıldırım 2011: 117). Similarly, 'Kültepe was a prominent center not just in Anatolia but in the greater near East, comparable to such significant centres as Mari and Ugarit' (Emre 2015: 3).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the factoid of Assyrian in/visibility ought to be recognised in terms of deeper epistemological issues surrounding archaeological as well as historical interpretations as shaped by the ideological and intellectual circumstances within which they are formulated. In other words, the interpretative history of how foreign presence at Kültepe-Kaneš has been understood must be situated within the broader context of the production and consumption of scholarly knowledge, to which it lends itself extremely well as a case study.

As confronting legacy data becomes an increasingly widespread concern for archaeological research agendas (Allison 2008), situating Kültepe's published material within its immediate context of archaeological praxis takes on further significance. Ideally, 'the methodological and interpretative contexts in which the original research took place' (Faniel *et al.* 2013: 5) can be reconstructed from primary records such as field notes, sketches, initial finds inventories and the like. This is not possible for Kültepe, as such records from the site are either unavailable or inaccessible. Another way by which to reconstruct Kültepe's interpretative contexts would be to take a historiographical approach. A historiography of archaeological interpretation at Kültepe also addresses issues beyond rehabilitating legacy data. It offers, in its own right, an intriguing case study for a wider phenomenon of a misleading narrative which has defined decades of scholarly thinking. A similar case in Assyriological scholarship has been identified by Maidman (2010: 10-11), who rightly highlights as a 'cautionary tale […] of general relevance':

> 'The twin mistaken notions that land is formally inalienable and that the *ilku*-tax is likewise inalienable were articulated seven decades ago and taken hold and been repeated since, largely as 'received knowledge.' Some scholars long ago recognised and demonstrated the falsity of this claim. Yet old truths do indeed die hard. Tradition, inertia, even ideology, as well as the notion that 'everybody knows that *x* is the case,' conspire to mislead even careful scholars […] No one is immune from this sort of error. We all rely on authorities for knowledge outside our own areas of expertise.'

A detailed examination of such cautionary tales is not only useful, but highly necessary for developing greater critical self-awareness in our scholarly practices. After all, academic communities easily lend themselves to power dynamics fuelled by personality cults, hierarchies, and territorialism which can make critical challenges to authority seem unnecessary, unachievable, or even undesirable. Notions of scholarly infallibility have certainly played a role in leaving Özgüç's narrative of Assyrian invisibility and Anatolian cultural purity untested. A veritable absence of external criticism has played a role in these ideas being securely blackboxed, while mechanisms of scholarly citation further strengthened them through constant reassertion. As a result, factoids were sustained well beyond the original intellectual and ideological circumstances of their creation.

As this article has sought to demonstrate, Özgüç's narrative did not develop into a factoid through a lack of data; it was sustained through interpretative blind spots which were crucial in maintaining the initial narrative of Assyrian invisibility and cultural purity at Kaneš whilst also allowing the site to be showcased as a cosmopolitan hub. Once seen in this way, it becomes quite apparent that the long-standing misrepresentation of Kültepe's

material culture as a proxy for cultural contact was the result of an ideologically charged cognitive dissonance, which must be understood in its own historical and intellectual context if it is to be meaningfully deconstructed.

It is remarkable in itself that a flawed narrative has had such tenacity and avoided critical scrutiny for so long. This must be accounted for. A particularly useful way of doing so, as this article has sought to demonstrate, would be through a purposive historiography. By tracking the key stages in the formulation and development of a factoid over time, a historiographical examination contextualises processes of knowledge production in order to interrogate how and why selective approaches to evidence and fallacious arguments have fed into one another. The gathering pace of critical research agendas for exploring notions of ethnicity, identity, cultural encounters, and hybridity at Kültepe-Kaneš presents an opportune moment for unflinching self-reflexivity in *kārum* period scholarship. This in turn holds significant potential for formulating better informed and more nuanced models for Anatolia's Middle Bronze Age interactions. Just as Kültepe-Kaneš holds a place of prominence for the history of ancient Anatolia, the site's own history of research can likewise serve as a valuable case study for understanding how archaeological factoids develop and persevere over generations.

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