

J.J. de Ridder. *Descriptive Grammar of Middle Assyrian.* (Leipziger Altorientalistische Studien 8) Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018. ISBN 978-3-447-10979-6. xxvii, 628 pp.

Reviewed by Salvatore Gaspa (University of Padua)

Since the appearance of Walter Mayer's *Untersuchungen zur Grammatik des Mittelassyrischen* in 1971, studies on Middle Assyrian texts and language have increased enormously. In addition to the publication of new editions of cuneiform texts from the archives of Assur (Qal'at Šerqāt) and Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta (Tulūl al-'Aqir), new Middle Assyrian tablets have been unearthed at sites such as Tell Šēḫ Ḥamad, Giricano, Tell Ḥuwēra, Tell Šabī Abyaḍ, and Tell Ṭābān in the last decades, enriching the textual evidence for this second-millennium BCE Akkadian dialect. Although a number of tablets still await publication, the present-day corpus of Middle Assyrian texts represents a mine of information for Assyrian dialectology and Akkadian linguistics. With the publication of this *Descriptive Grammar of Middle Assyrian*, which follows the publication of Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila's *A Sketch of Neo-Assyrian Grammar* (2000) and N.J.C. Kouwenberg's *Grammar of Old Assyrian* (2017), the study of the Assyrian dialect can now profit by an important new tool. A new grammatical treatment of Middle Assyrian has been needed for a long time, and we therefore welcome de Ridder's new linguistic study of Middle Assyrian as an important step in consolidating Assyrian dialectology within the field of Assyrian studies and Akkadian linguistics.

After an introductory chapter, de Ridder's *Grammar* focuses on orthography, phonology, noun morphology, enclitic particles, prepositions and adverbs, verb morphology, and syntax of Middle Assyrian. The book also includes paradigms, a sign list, and a list of concordances. De Ridder touches on many interesting aspects of Middle Assyrian language in the introduction to his work. First, he discusses the status of Assyrian as a dialect or language, reminding the reader of the criteria that generally distinguish a language from a dialect (pp. 3–4). The semantic definition of a dialect is a controversial subject among linguists, since for some the label of dialect seems generally applicable to certain idioms, as opposed to being a language in its own right (Telmon 1989: 219). Others see dialect as a localized form of a given language, as a variant of one standard idiom that shares a number of grammatical elements with the standard language (Telmon 1989: 219). We can also add that generally a language can develop from a foundation of dialectal fragmentation. In other words, before it achieved such status in a given historical situation, every language was a dialect. This means that we can only safely define differences between dialects and languages from a socio-linguistic perspective. Beyond the socio-linguistic approach, the labels of dialect and language can be considered as synonyms. Cultural factors also play a significant role in separating dialect from language, including the social and geographical spread of an idiom, the level of use of the entire stylistic potential of a language in connection with the historically available text genres, the presence or absence of an autonomous literary

tradition, the sociological opposition between urban and extra-urban contexts, and the presence or lack of socio-cultural prestige attached to a language or a pattern of use. As a written form of communication used by a state, Assyrian can safely be defined as a language. The foundation and consolidation of a state inevitably promotes the written use of an idiom for administrative purposes, and this plays a significant role in the transformation process of a dialect into a language. We can therefore speculate that the Assyrian linguistic norm that is witnessed by the extant texts (which was spread throughout the country thanks to written documentation, the role of the Assyrian scribal school, and the state administration) represents just one local dialectal variant of spoken Assyrian. Assyrian and Babylonian had a parallel and autonomous development, which explains specific traits of the two vernaculars (and that is probably the reason why the ancients considered them as distinct languages, not as “dialects” or “variants”) of the East Semitic language that Assyriologists conventionally call “Akkadian” (see Luukko & Van Buylaere 2017: 313–314). At the same time, Assyrian and Babylonian were spoken and used in contiguous areas, which were open to a high degree of social mobility and intercommunication. This could explain the numerous common traits of the two vernaculars and the mutual intelligibility between them. A literary form of Babylonian was the language currently used by Middle Assyrian scribes to write literary compositions and royal inscriptions. I would therefore add that given the spread of Babylonian in Assyrian scribal training and its use as a scholarly and literary language in Assyria, the role played by the southern Akkadian vernacular in shaping the written competence of Assyrian scribes and as a factor of standardization for written Assyrian cannot be underestimated. Dialectal differences within Assyrian that can be detected in texts can be ascribed to the specific linguistic background of the scribe, to the degree of mastery of written Assyrian, and, last but not least, to the scribe’s specific idiolect. To judge from the existing Middle Assyrian written evidence – and taking into account the fact that tablets from some Middle Assyrian archives still await publication – regional differences within the Middle Assyrian state territory, including the western peripheral areas where a number of new administrative centres flourished, seem to be less relevant. One reason could be that scribes who operated in the western peripheral centres were trained in Assur, as de Ridder observes, or that Assyrians living in these enclaves had limited direct interaction with indigenous people (p. 31). However, the author cites a few interesting examples of mixed scribal traditions that can be found in the documentation from Middle Assyrian archives, although conclusive statements on this question cannot be made until all the archival evidence is published. In defining the criteria adopted for his study (pp. 15–16), de Ridder observes that the grammatical investigation conducted on Neo-Assyrian was largely facilitated by limiting it to the restricted but rich linguistic material of the Neo-Assyrian letter corpus and that, on the contrary, the Middle Assyrian letter corpus does enable scholars to afford an analogous and in-depth grammatical analysis. However, Middle Assyrian is documented by a corpus of around 3,000–4,000 texts, only a small percentage of which are letters and literary texts.

The book under review is clearly the result of a long, accurate, and in-depth investigation into the archival materials of the Middle Assyrian period. With its numerous citations from Middle Assyrian texts, it provides scholars with a tool for investigating this second-millennium idiom and its documentation for the first time. My remarks will therefore focus on a limited number of aspects that this grammar addresses, which are of particular interest for Assyrian dialectology.

In terms of orthography, the author observes that Middle Assyrian cuneiform was influenced by Babylonian, Old Assyrian, and Mittani scribal traditions (pp. 37–42), although the degree

to which the Old Assyrian scribal tradition was inherited by Middle Assyrian scribes is still debated. As the author demonstrates, Middle Assyrian cuneiform shares a remarkable number of traits with contemporary “Western Peripheral Akkadian”, namely, the scribal language used in various north-western cities where the native idiom was Hurrian, Hittite, or a form of Northwest Semitic (p. 40). Middle Assyrian shows a tendency to use new values for emphatic consonants, an element it has in common with idioms de Ridder refers to as “Western Peripheral Akkadian” (p. 41). Among the different traditions, it seems that the Babylonian ones – both the Old Babylonian scribal tradition that spread in northern Mesopotamia and the one that formed the basis of the Mittani scribal tradition – had a strong influence on Middle Assyrian cuneiform.

In the field of spelling peculiarities of Middle Assyrian, the author observes that the morpheme *-utt* (the Assyrian form for standard Akkadian *-ūt*) is not limited to Middle Assyrian but also spread into “Western Peripheral Akkadian” (p. 73). Its use probably decreased in Neo-Assyrian. De Ridder also touches on the question of the existence of /o/ in Akkadian and Assyrian. He correctly reminds us that two further arguments can be used to corroborate the idea that that sound existed, namely, the environment given by a vowel between a labial/emphatic and liquid /r/ and the perfect of the D-stem I/weak. The author concludes that the alternation /a/ ~ /u/ could well indicate variant speech in Assyrian, but an independent /o/ phoneme is not attested (p. 88). Regarding Middle Assyrian consonants, the author offers interesting examples where and <P> stand for /p/ and /b/ respectively (pp. 127–128), confirming that the process we see at work in the later stages of the dialect was already operative in the second millennium BCE. The phenomenon of interchangeability between /s/ and /š/ that characterizes Neo-Assyrian was not yet complete in the Middle Assyrian dialect, as de Ridder notes (p. 142). He takes the sound change /št/ > /lt/ into consideration and agrees with other scholars that /š/ could not have been pronounced as [s], but that it may have had a lateral pronunciation, more precisely as [ʃ] (p. 143). According to the author’s analysis, the use of the signs ÁŠ/EŠ/UŠ for /s/ could indicate that the sibilant in question was deaffricated (pp. 144ff.). Also of particular interest is the phenomenon of nasalization, which is seen as a Babylonian influence; the appearance of /n/ before a consonant instead of the expected gemination is documented by the examples of the verbs *madādu*, *magāru*, and *mazā’u* (p. 154).

In the treatment of nouns and nominal formation, the author admits that an etymological investigation of the lexicon of Middle Assyrian lies beyond the scope of the book (p. 161). From the reviewer’s point of view, this would have further enriched his *Descriptive Grammar*. The few compound nouns cited on p. 162 and the lexicalized *ša*-constructions on p. 213 offer an idea of the richness of the Middle Assyrian vocabulary. Loanwords represent an interesting field of study in any investigation of the Assyrian lexicon. Possible Northwest Semitic loans, in all likelihood linked to the presence of Sutean/West Semitic tribes in the Ḫanigalbat area, emerge from peripheral archival texts, such as those stemming from Tell Šēḫ Ḫamad; these are *ḫabāqu*, *yābilu(?)* and *našbu* (pp. 177–178). While Babylonian and Sumerian loans are considerably greater in number, many loans come from Hurrian. As the author states, a number of Hurrian loans have entered Assyrian dialect thanks to longstanding interaction with Hurrian-speaking communities dating back to the Old Assyrian period. Others resulted from the Assyrian conquest of the Ḫanigalbat region and the subsequent incorporation of part of the Mittani administrative system into the Assyrian state. The few loans that are enumerated on p. 181 (such as *ḫawiluhḫu*, *išḫanabe*, *šiluḫlu*, *taḫapšu*, and *turēzu*) can probably be assigned to the Mittanian influence. It is worth noting with de Ridder that beyond the field of nouns (predominantly substantives),

no traces of Hurrian influence can be detected in Middle Assyrian grammar. When it comes to case endings, we can see from the selection of occurrences given in the book (pp. 187ff.) that the decline of case morphemes and the confusion in their correct use (a well-documented fact in later dialects of Akkadian) was already at work in Middle Assyrian.

Concerning Middle Assyrian adverbs – “one of the more neglected parts of Akkadian grammar”, to use the author’s words (p. 323) – we can see how Middle Assyrian diverges from other Akkadian dialects. Studying this part of Middle Assyrian grammar also explains the forerunners of the adverbial forms that we find in Neo-Assyrian. A peculiarity of the second-millennium Assyrian dialect that continues in Neo-Assyrian is represented by quantifying adverbs based on ordinal number nouns with the ending *-utt* and an additional morpheme *-išu*, such as *šanûttēšu*, “for the second time, once more”, *rabuttēšu*, “for the fourth time”, and *šašuttēšu*, “for the sixth time” (pp. 328–329). The process of grammaticalizing adverbial phrases and their transformation into compound adverbs is already at work in Middle Assyrian, as can be seen in the case of adverbs such as *kannamāre*, “in the early morning” (p. 332; cf. NA *kalamāri*), *kal(a) ūme*, “all day” (p. 334; cf. NA *kalūmu*), *ūmakkal*, “for one day” (p. 334), and *ḥaramma*, “afterwards” (p. 338; cf. NA *ḥarammāma*). In other compound adverbs, we see that a change occurs from Middle Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian, such as in the temporal adverb *šaddaḡda*, “last year”, which will be substituted by the form with the terminative-adverbial morpheme *-iš* in Neo-Assyrian (p. 335), an ending that is no longer productive in the latter dialect (Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 54).

Verbal morphology represents another important part of the Assyrian grammar through which we can study the peculiarities of the dialect, as well as its developments and divergences from Babylonian. The verbal forms with the *-tan-* infix usually express frequency in Middle Assyrian, as they do in general in Akkadian. In some of the examples cited, de Ridder shows that the *-tan-* stem is also used in Middle Assyrian to indicate that an action is carried out several times as the result of multiple subjects (p. 368). However, very few attestations can be found regarding the iterative function of this infix in second-millennium Assyrian. The use of the *-ta-* infix to expand the main stems becomes rare in Middle Assyrian. From a diachronic point of view, the progressive weakening of this infix can be observed from Old Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian. In Neo-Assyrian, the process comes to an end with the disappearance of all the *-ta-*expanded stems and the creation of new derived stems with the double *-ta-* infix (on Gtt- and Dtt-stems, see Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 88–89; Luukko 2004: 145–146). The paradigms of verbs occurring in the Middle Assyrian *-ta-* stems (Gt, Dt and Št) and Neo-Assyrian double *-ta-* stems (Gtt, Dtt) are in any case defective. As observed by the author, it is possible that the Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian development of the perfect tense at the expense of the preterite to express the past tense makes the distinction between the perfect and the Gt-stem extremely difficult. In such situations, the creation of newly derived stems would be motivated by the necessity to distinguish them from the perfect (p. 371). The verb *alāku* underwent this transition and shows a *-tt-* infix in the precativ and the perfect, as proved by its occurrences in Middle Assyrian (p. 371). De Ridder also remarks on irregular verbs attested in Middle Assyrian texts. The verbs *ibašši* and *laššu*, which do not have a complete paradigm, are peculiar to the Assyrian dialect. De Ridder classifies them as existential verbs or semi-verbs, not as copula verbs (pp. 414–415; for the interpretation of these verbs as copulas in Neo-Assyrian, see Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 103). As the author notes, the verb *laššu* is also attested in the

substantivized plural form *laššuttu* in the Middle Assyrian epistolary language. Here it occurs in construction with *apālu*, and is used to refer to the content of the answer (p. 416).

After Chapters 15–16, which are devoted to a treatment of regular and weak verbs, Chapter 17 discusses the function of verbal categories in Middle Assyrian. This discussion helps us understand the usage of verbs in connection with specific text genres. In terms of the expression of events in the past tense, the author follows Hans Hirsch (1969: 130–131), agreeing that the preterite was in the process of being replaced by the perfect in most functions. He is able to show that this also happened in the epistolary corpus. The use of the preterite in main clauses is exceptional; this is the case of the “zero preterite” and it can be considered formulaic (pp. 436–442). The author explains the occurrence of preterite forms in administrative documents as being due to the formulaic character of this category of texts. In line with what the author explains on p. 29 regarding the corpus of Middle Assyrian tablets with legal and administrative content, here he does not distinguish legal texts from administrative texts and, consequently, he applies the category of “administrative” to both types of documents (pp. 439ff.). The examples cited on p. 441 to confirm that the preterite also occurs in main clauses of Neo-Assyrian are all taken from the legal corpus. From de Ridder’s observations, the replacement of the zero preterite by the perfect appears to be systematically applied in the palace decrees (pp. 448–449). Examples from the ritual text corpus cited by the author show that the preterite is rare in these texts (p. 449). The perfect is also preferred to the preterite in Middle Assyrian to express the *futurum exactum* (p. 443). In the letter corpus, the *future exactum* is documented in the protasis of conditional clauses (p. 450). If we look at the Neo-Assyrian situation, we see that the perfect is seldom used as *futurum exactum* (see Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 110). The preterite can also be employed in Middle Assyrian to indicate the *future exactum*, as can be seen from relative clauses (p. 451). The book also gives interesting examples of how the Middle Assyrian stative was used by scribes to refer to a future event (p. 455), invalidating Eva Christiane Cancik-Kirschbaum’s claim (1996: 65) that in the case of future tense, the present is used instead of the stative.

As far as the syntax of Middle Assyrian is concerned, word order in this dialect follows the general rule for Akkadian, namely, the SOV word order. In the light of OSV order in Old Assyrian and the dialect in the Middle Assyrian/Neo-Assyrian period, de Ridder concludes that word order may have been comparatively free in Old Assyrian, and that it was probably the decay of case morphemes in Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian that formed the basis of a strict use of the SOV order in these later phases of the language (p. 479). As noted by Luukko (2004: 153), in Neo-Assyrian the clause-initial position of the object is generally used to emphasize or stress a topic. Cases of deviations from the SOV norm in Middle Assyrian are explained by de Ridder as possibly resulting from adding parts to a complete clause as an afterthought (pp. 479–480). However, these additional parts following the verb are usually adverbs and adverbial constructions, two elements whose positions are less strictly regulated than those of the main constituent elements of a sentence (see Luukko 2004: 153). Cases of sentences with initial verbs are attested in Middle Assyrian, although they occur very rarely (p. 480).

De Ridder’s book is not limited to a grammatical treatment of Middle Assyrian. It also provides scholars with useful resources in its appendices. The tables in the appendix provide a full list of Middle Assyrian signs and concordances. The function of the sign list is to show the attestations of the signs – particularly CvC-signs, logograms, and determinatives – in the Middle Assyrian text corpus. Apart from a few exceptions, attestations in lexical lists and literary texts are not included in the list. Concordances concern not only the Middle Assyrian

texts kept in the museums of Berlin and Istanbul, but also those originating from the sites of Tell ar-Rimāḥ, Tell Ṣabī Abyaḍ, Tell Ṭābān, and Deir ez-Zawr. For each text, the tables (which also cite unpublished texts) specify the genre and the eponymate.

In light of the significant contribution represented by this work to the study of Middle Assyrian grammar and Assyrian dialectology in general, it is a pity that so many misprints can be found throughout the book. However, this remark does not detract in any way from the value of de Ridder's conclusions, and the author deserves our appreciation for equipping scholars with a fundamental tool for the study of Middle Assyrian language.

REFERENCES

- CANCIK-KIRSCHBAUM, Eva Christiane 1996. *Die mittlassyrischen Briefe aus Tall Šēḥ Ḥamad*. (BATSH 4/1) Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- HÄMEEN-ANTTILA, Jaakko 2000. *A Sketch of Neo-Assyrian Grammar*. (SAAS 13) Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.
- HIRSCH, Hans 1969. Zur Fragen der *t*-Formen in den Keilschriftlichen Gesetztexten. In: W. RÖLLIG & M. DIETRICH (eds), *Lišān mithurti: Festschrift Wolfram Freiherr von Soden zum 19. VI. 1968 gewidmet von Schülern und Mitarbeitern* (AOAT 1): 119–131. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener.
- KOUWENBERG, Norbertus Johannes Cornelis 2017. *Grammar of Old Assyrian*. Leiden: Brill.
- LUUKKO, Mikko & Greta VAN BUYLAERE 2017. Languages and Writing Systems in Assyria. In: E. FRAHM (ed.), *A Companion to Assyria*: 313–335. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- LUUKKO, Mikko 2004. *Grammatical Variation in Neo-Assyrian*. (SAAS 16) Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.
- MAYER, Walter 1971. *Untersuchungen zur Grammatik des Mittlassyrischen*. (Alter Orient und Altes Testament. Sonderreihe 2) Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon u. Bercker.
- TELMON, Tullio 1989. Dialecto. In: G.L. BECCARIA (ed.), *Dizionario di linguistica*: 219. Turin: Einaudi.