

Assyrian Collective Identity in the Second Millennium BCE:
A Social Categories Approach

By

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Abstract

Assyrians are attested as a social category throughout the second millennium BCE. Although this category is often regarded as ethnic and unchanging, a closer examination of the evidence indicates that what it meant to be Assyrian underwent a radical transformation in this time. Interpreting the Assyrian social category through the modern paradigm of ethnicity obscures much more than it enlightens. To understand the changing form and function of the Assyrian social category in the second millennium, the present dissertation instead develops a broad theoretical framework for the study of collective identity that focuses on the role of categories in structuring the social landscape. This framework – termed the social categories approach – builds on current research from various fields of inquiry, outlining how and why collective identities develop out of categories. It also elucidates how and why such categories and their attendant identities are inseparable from the creation and perpetuation of inequalities in the social world. The application of the social categories approach to the Assyrian evidence from the second millennium illuminates the dynamic character of the Assyrian social category and its relationship to the social worlds in which it operated. It also enables a more profound understanding of how Assyrians conceived of themselves that is unburdened by the conceptual baggage of the modern ethnic paradigm, and thus more sensitive to the construction of idiosyncratic social boundaries and their relationship to prevailing conditions.