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STEPHAN PROCHÁZKA,
LUCIAN REINFANDT
& SVEN TOST



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PAPYROLOGICA VINDOBONENSIA

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FRITZ MITTHOF, BERNHARD PALME
& GERHARD THÜR

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KAREN RADNER

Royal Pen Pals

*The Kings of Assyria in Correspondence with Officials, Clients, and Total Strangers
(8th and 7th Centuries BC)**

The correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian kings has been described as “one of the jewels in the crown of the cuneiform corpus,”¹ and rightly so. It offers highly detailed and often vivid information on the running of the Assyrian Empire and the dealings of the court. The surviving royal correspondence consists of roughly 3,000 letters, c. 2,200 in Assyrian and c.800 in Babylonian, excavated in the palaces of Kalhu (modern Nimrud, c. 230 texts), Dur-Šarruken (modern Khorsabad, only two texts), and Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik, c. 2,800 texts). These letters were received or, in a few instances, written by four rulers of the Assyrian Empire: Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC), Sargon II (721–705 BC), Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), and Assurbanipal (668–c. 630 BC). The chronological pattern of distribution is very uneven, covering only certain periods during the late 8th century and first half of the 7th centuries BC,² providing information on no more than 30 years in total. This alone makes it clear that only a small part of the original correspondence has survived.

1. State letters: the correspondence between the king and his officials

By the second half of the 8th century BC, Assyria was the largest state the world had yet seen, the first true ‘world empire’. It was organised into provinces, of which there were over seventy by the reign of Sargon II.³ Over these provinces the king appointed, at his discretion, officials called “proxy (of the king)” (*pāḥutu* or *bēl pāhete*), a title commonly translated as “governor.” As the king’s chosen representatives, the governors were all-powerful on a local level and the stability of the state depended on their loyalty. Most states neighbouring the regions under direct Assyrian administration were Assyrian allies, bound by treaty and oath. Nominally independent, the allied states had to take Assyrian policy into account and emissaries (*qēpu*, “trusted one”) were dispatched to advise the rulers of these states and report back to their master, the king of Assyria. The governors and emissaries, known as the “great ones” (*rab(b)ûte*) of Assyria, formed the backbone of the Empire, instrumental in its creation and indispensable for its maintenance. This group of about 120 officials was selected by the king from a class of professional and centrally educated administrators. Posts were awarded on merit rather than family ties – a key strategy for securing the king’s position and for stabilising the state.

At least some of the “great ones” were members of the royal clan or of the ancient noble families; but many were eunuchs (*ša rēši*, “he of the head,” a traditional term for personal servant) of deliberately ob-

* This chapter was written as part of my research project “Mechanisms of communication in an ancient empire: the correspondence between the king of Assyria and his magnates in the 8th century BC,” funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2008 to 2012.

¹ Postgate 1984:425.

² See Parpola 1981:136, chart 2, for the Assyrian material, which the chronological distribution of the Babylonian materials generally mirrors. However, see Parpola 2002 on some Babylonian materials from the reign of Sennacherib, for which no Assyrian letters are currently known.

³ Radner 2006.

scure origins. Surgical castration was performed before puberty⁴ to stop the testicles' function, rendering the eunuchs sterile, and they renounced their original family connections to serve the king with undivided loyalty.⁵ The predominance of eunuchs among the "great ones" is clear from the fact that by the 9th century *ša rēši* was habitually used in the king's official documents as an alternative term for "governor."⁶

A wall decoration from the royal palace of Dur-Šarruken⁷ illustrates a personal encounter and conversation between the king and one of the "great ones," as described in letters.⁸ King Sargon II is shown eye-to-eye with an official. The king is without bodyguards, but both he and the official openly wear their swords, symbolizing the trust, companionship, and equality that obtained between the king and the highest officials. More often than not, the "great ones" were far away from the king, representing his interests in a province or an allied state. When this was the case, they still were expected to offer their frank opinions and advise on all matters of government, state policy, and strategy. Some of these communications survive in the form of letters, and they are our best sources for understanding the relationship between the king and the second level of political power in Assyria.

Most numerous is the royal correspondence of Sargon II, of which c. 1,200 tablets survive.⁹ The letters offer a unique glimpse into the empire at work. Their strength is their immediacy and the fact that they were meant for the eyes of a select few. The information found in the letters is very different from the accounts in the royal inscriptions, which were compiled as coherent narratives of the achievements of the ruling king's reign. The theme of the royal inscriptions is *l'État, c'est moi*. The letters, on the other hand, show us that the empire was maintained by many.

The king's correspondents routinely refer to themselves only by name, not by office:¹⁰ they were of course all personally known to the king, who had appointed every one of them, and therefore there was no need for them to identify themselves by title. Their offices were indispensable for the existence of the state and consequently, despite their close personal acquaintance with the king, their bond with him was essentially bureaucratic, a formal relationship based on rules meant to ensure fair treatment. A letter from Sargon's governor at Dur-Šarruken to his king provides a good example of this:

As to the houses of the recruitment officers, about which the king, my lord, wrote to me: 'The houses are already built, you are deceiving me in order to give them to your servants!' – as if I did not tell the truth to the king, my lord! Let a royal eunuch who will tell the truth to the king, my lord, come and have a look at these houses of the recruitment officers! If they are already built, let him go and tell it to the king, my lord, and let the king, my lord, hold his report to my discredit and say: 'Why do you not tell me the truth?' (SAA 1 124:4–17)

The governor found himself accused of embezzlement, a very serious offence which carried the death penalty.¹¹ In his letter to the king, he denied these accusations and demanded an official inquiry, clearly knowing that he and his interests would be well protected by the rules governing his appointment. It was not just the king who would make a decision in such a case. The letter of another of Sargon's governors who found himself confronted with a subordinate's accusations shows that he expected a group of high-ranking state officials that included the king to hear the case: "The king's magnates are assembled; let us settle (the dispute) in the presence of the treasurer"¹² (SAA 1 236: r. 11–12).

⁴ This is clear from the fact that they are always depicted as beardless, in contrast to the other adult Assyrian men shown, who wear a moustache and a full beard.

⁵ Often taking a new name in the process; see Deller 1999:306.

⁶ For some references see CAD R 293 *s.v.* *ša rēši* A 1.a.3'.

⁷ Albenda 1986:fig. 61.

⁸ "As I said in the presence of the king my lord": SAA 1 75; similarly SAA 1 240 and SAA 15 121; from the king's perspective: SAA 17 3.

⁹ Edited by Parpola 1987, Lanfranchi/Parpola 1990, Fuchs/Parpola 2001, and Dietrich 2003.

¹⁰ It is fortunately possible to identify their titles because many of them served as "eponyms" (*limmu*, by which years were dated) and therefore are listed by name and title in the Assyrian Eponym Lists and Chronicles (edited in Millard 1994).

¹¹ Radner 2003:905–06.

¹² The treasurer (*masennu*) was probably singled out because his office qualified him best to give a ruling in the disagreement, which concerned the levy of taxes.

Because of the great security and confidence with which their offices provided the “great ones,” the tone of royal letters, particularly those issuing commands, could be exceedingly authoritarian, as in this short letter of Sargon:

The king’s word (*abat šarri*) to the governor (of Assur). 700 bales of straw and 700 bundles of reeds, each bundle more than a donkey can carry, must be at hand in Dur-Šarruken by the first day of the ninth month (November/December). Should even one day pass by, you will die. (SAA 1 26)

The last sentence should be understood not as an actual death threat but as a figure of speech routinely used in royal letters to emphasise urgency.¹³ But of course it was also a reminder that the king’s word, no matter whether spoken or written, was binding. Officials sometimes did find themselves in fundamental disagreement with the king’s orders. What then? The key strategy was constructive criticism: after questioning the factual basis of the royal order, an alternative solution to the problem would be presented. A good example is SAA 1 82 (= text A in the appendix), in which the governor of Assur counters the royal order to move plundering Arabs to the southern Jezirah by suggesting that they be instead relocated to the north in the harvested agricultural zone between the confluence of the Tigris and the Upper Zab. The governor, with studiously careful politeness, deconstructs every detail of the king’s order, suggesting an alternative that he believes is vital to the state’s interests. Because it would be exceedingly indiscreet to give the king a direct order, the governor addresses an unidentified, nebulous collective, saying “Let them order” what the governor proposes.

In less urgent matters, officials tended to suggest two options and ask the king to choose – as in this letter of crown prince Sennacherib to the king:

The emissaries have come, bringing tribute and with it seven teams of mules (...) Should they be picked up and brought to Babylon, or should they be received here? Let them immediately write to me what the king, my lord, commands. (SAA 1 33:8–11; 15–18).

Sennacherib could clearly live with both alternatives. It is my impression that the second option given in such letters was normally the preferred one; but this hypothesis would have to be tested with a broader sample. For our present purposes, we can conclude that offering a choice between two suggestions (never more, as far as I am aware) was favoured over simply asking the king for instructions because it involved the officials in the imperial decision-making process.

2. *The imperial communication network*

All Assyrian governors had to maintain road stations in strategic positions within their province that served as stages and often as intersections in the imperial communication system known as the “King’s Road” (*hūl šarri*). These road stations were either situated within existing settlements (such as in Nippur; see SAA 18 192) or constituted settlements of their own, with the necessary agricultural infrastructure to sustain personnel, envoys, and transport animals. The Assyrian term for such institutions was *bēt mardēti* (literally “house of a route’s stage”). While the caravanserais of the medieval Muslim world may serve as a convenient comparison in that they, too, were purpose-built structures along long-distance routes providing short-term shelter and protection for travellers and their animals, the key difference is that the state-run Assyrian road stations served only the state and were not open to commercial travellers. No *bēt mardēti* has yet been identified archaeologically, no doubt in part because such structures must have been rather small, requiring neither stables for pack-animals nor storage facilities for merchandise.

The Assyrian imperial communication network utilized messengers mounted on mules (*kūdumu*). These animals, the offspring of a mare and a jack, mature five years later than the parents but have a longer working life, up to twenty years. Physically, they combine the body of a horse with the extremities

¹³ E.g., SAA 1 27, SAA 15 119, SAA 18 183, with especially drastic phrasing in SAA 1 22: “Assemble immediately your prefects plus the horses at your cavalry collection points! Whoever is late will be impaled in the middle of his house, and who(ever) changes the [*agreed array* of] the city will be impaled in the middle of his house, and his sons and daughters will be slaughtered by his (own) order.”

of a donkey and often grow taller than both. As hybrids, they are always infertile, which inspired the Assyrian curse: “Just as a mule has no offspring, may your name, your seed, and the seed of your sons and your daughters disappear from the land” (SAA 2 6:537–39). The mule’s infertility as well as its slower physical development and need for extensive training, made it a very expensive initial investment. In an Assyrian debt note from 670 BC, the return of a mule to the army commander who was responsible for it is guaranteed with the extraordinarily high penalty payment of 30 minas of silver (SAA 6 206).¹⁴ For the Assyrian state, the necessary initial expenses were easily offset by the mules’ combination of strength and resiliency, in which they are superior to horses, with the donkey’s sure-footedness and instinct for self-preservation. Moreover, mules are good swimmers – a significant factor in a country with two major rivers that have a half-dozen significant tributaries. The Assyrians were the first to realise the military potential of mules, and the military use of this animal has continued to the present, especially in difficult terrain.¹⁵ The Assyrian imperial mail system used pairs of mules, certainly in order to reduce the possibility that the rider would be left stranded with a lame animal.

The messages exchanged between the king and his governors and emissaries could either be delivered by letter or by envoy. The first method was considerably faster, because the letter was passed on in a relay system (*kalliu*) to a new courier with a fresh pair of mules at each postal station.¹⁶ This was an innovation of the Neo-Assyrian period – previously, messages had been entrusted to individual couriers who would deliver them personally – and was introduced because it was a faster method for getting messages across the vast distances of the Assyrian Empire. For example, the distance from Que in the region of modern Adana to the Assyrian heartland – one of the best known stretches of the King’s Road – is about 700 km as the crow flies¹⁷ and includes two major and several minor rivers that needed to be crossed, none of which had a bridge. Ferries were used to cross the Euphrates at Til-Barsip, the Balih south of Harran, several tributaries of the Habur between Guzana and Nasibina, and finally the Tigris at Nineveh, and this would have lengthened travel time considerably. Despite the absence of mountainous or hilly terrain along this route, it is hard to imagine how a message from Que to Central Assyria, even when passed on regularly to fresh riders and mules, could have been delivered in much less than five days. Nevertheless the Neo-Assyrian relay system set the standard for communication speed in the region for almost three millennia, until the advent of the telegraph in the Ottoman Empire in 1865.¹⁸

Whenever communication speed was not considered vital, Assyrian letters were carried the whole distance by a single envoy. Envoys were certainly the preferred means of communication whenever the message was very sensitive or when it was important that a decision be made on the spot. A letter by crown prince Sennacherib to his father Sargon shows how the Assyrian communication system routinely used the two methods simultaneously (SAA 1 29 = text B in the appendix).

The format of state letters was standardised throughout the empire. The text of the message was inscribed on an oblong inner tablet of roughly the size of a mobile phone. This inner tablet was enclosed in a thin layer of clay and the resulting envelope was sealed and inscribed with the introduction of the letter, which identified the correspondents (fig. 1, plate 4). The language of the letters was also homogeneous throughout the empire, in part simply because the letters were created by professionals who had all received the same training: the “great ones” had scribes at their disposal who, like themselves, were dispatched from the centre of the empire to their respective postings. When an official found himself without a scribe he would immediately request a replacement be sent: it clearly would not have done to recruit a

¹⁴ The average price for a slave was just under 1 mina of silver (Radner 1997:248).

¹⁵ Cf. War Office 1937; United States Army Publication 1989; Orlean 2010.

¹⁶ A dispute between the Babylonian governor of Nippur (during the reign of Šamaš-šumu-ukin, Assurbanipal’s brother) and the Assyrian military official running the postal service in Nippur highlights that messages were normally expected to be sent on without delay: “I spoke to Aššur-belu-taqin, the prefect appointed in Nippur to pass on imperial correspondence (*unqāti*) and royal messengers, about the imperial correspondence and the royal servants who arrive and have to stay for three or four days in Nippur as he refuses to pass them on.” (SAA 18 192: r. 8’–12’).

¹⁷ Kessler 1980:235, map VIII (but delete “Kanbisizu”).

¹⁸ This did not occur without serious technical and diplomatic problems; see Shahvar 2007 and Winseck/Pike 2007:31–42.

local substitute. This is obvious from a short letter sent to Sargon by a governor in one of the Zagros provinces along the tributaries of the Diyala:

To the king, my lord: your servant Sin-na²di. Good health to the king, my lord! I have no scribe where the king sent me to. Let the king direct either the governor of Arrapha or Aššur-belu-taqin to send me a scribe. (SAA 15 17).

Though the governor was able to write this letter himself¹⁹ and successfully followed the formal and linguistic conventions governing state letter writing, his obvious assumption was that his position merited the attendance of a professional scribe.

How regularly did Assyrian officials correspond with their king? The main duty of the “great ones” was to act on behalf of the king wherever and whenever he himself could not be present. Officials were appointed to exercise power locally on behalf of the crown but generally to rely on their own judgment. They therefore wrote only when they needed to involve the central administration in their decision-making or to pass on vital information. Consequently, the bulk of their letters deals with the unexpected rather than with the routine: opportunities arising, catastrophes unfolding, events that would galvanise or, occasionally, stupefy the wardens of the Assyrian Empire. Owing to their nature, many of the letters focus on problems. To ignore this when dealing with these sources will invariably result in a negative assessment of the capabilities of the Assyrian administration, as is the case with the most recent study of the imperial postal system, which concludes with the statement that “my overall impression is that the Assyrian [postal] transport system was complex and not always so well organized.”²⁰ This cool appraisal is mostly due to the fact that, unlike Herodotus’ description of the Persian postal system (Hdt. 5, 52–54), the available Assyrian letters dealing with the imperial post do not offer a comprehensive survey of the system but instead are specific reports dealing with specific postal problems. Given that the workings of the Assyrian road stations are only mentioned in two letters from the reign of Sargon²¹ and one from the reign of Esarhaddon,²² my conclusion is that on the whole the system worked well and that responsibilities for its operation and maintenance were delegated in a straightforward way from the central administration to the provincial level.

The imperial postal system existed to streamline communication between the king and his officials. But the circle of people who were allowed to make use of it was severely restricted. Essentially it was at the disposal of those who had been formally appointed to a high state office. The “great ones” of Assyria all received a signet ring with the imperial seal (showing the king killing a lion) as a symbol of their office and imprimatur to act in the king’s stead,²³ and it seems likely that they used this universally recognisable seal as a ‘post mark.’ This enabled all those involved in the transmission of missives, such as the personnel of the road stations and the king’s secretaries, to instantly recognize letters of state importance and treat them with the required attention and urgency.

More temporary, less official arrangements might place an individual who normally would not have access to the imperial communication network in a position to use it. This was the case when the Babylonian scholar Mar-Išsar travelled on Esarhaddon’s behalf through Babylonia during the years 671–669 to reorganise the cults and civic institutions. He did not hold an official state appointment and certainly lacked the imperial seal that would have gone with it, but because he was expected to regularly send reports to the king, arrangements had been made for him to use the imperial post. This seems to have worked well as long as he operated in the cities where he and his connection to the king were known.

¹⁹ As shown by the analysis of the language and cuneiform sign repertoire by Parpola 1997.

²⁰ Kessler 1997:136.

²¹ In SAA 1 177 the governor of the province of Šubutu (Beq’a plain in Lebanon) finds one of his road stations short-staffed and suggests ways to remedy this. SAA 5 227 is the reaction of the governor of Arzuhina (located south of the Lower Zab and west of the Qara Dagh range) to a royal envoy’s complaint to the king that a certain road station in Arzuhina was insufficiently provisioned with mules: the governor points out that the road station in question is situated at a crossroads between provincial borders and suggests that his counterpart in the other province (Mazamua = Shahrizor plain) should be asked to share the responsibility for providing mules.

²² SAA 10 361: three postal stations had rejected the correspondent’s letters for the imperial mail system. Discussed below.

²³ Radner 2008:486–90.

However, in the rural backwaters of Babylonia the personnel of three postal stations rejected his missives and Mar-Issar had to ask the king to have them instructed by royal order to accept his letters:

Along the roadside the (personnel) of the postal stations pass my letters along from one to another (and thus) bring them to the king, my lord. (Yet) for two or three times (already) my letter has been returned from (the postal stations) Kamanate, Ampihapi, and [...]garešu! Let an order sealed with the imperial seal (*unqu*) be sent to them (that) they should pass my letter along from one to another and bring it to the king, my lord! (SAA 10 361: r. 3–11)

3. *Client letters: the correspondence between the king and his scholars*

The link between the Assyrian king and the scholars in his entourage has been aptly described as patronage: a personal voluntary long-term relationship between a socially dominant patron, namely the king, and his socially inferior clients, namely the scholars, based on the mutual exchange of goods and services. Patronage is a flexible relationship shaped by privileges and obligations, favours and expectations, and is quite different from the rights and duties associated with an office.²⁴ Though the occasional scholar entertained a sense of entitlement quite at odds with the rather obsequious language used by the majority of scholars in their communications with the king,²⁵ they had no formal claims to their position and depended on their royal patron's goodwill (see also text C in the appendix). This is clear from a statement by Esarhaddon as quoted in a letter from the son of a scholar in his entourage to his own patron, the crown prince Assurbanipal:

So he (*sc.* king Esarhaddon) said: 'My servant has *looked* after me; let me do my servant a favour. The first token of my favour is: I will assign to him the leadership of scholars. My second favour is: As long as he is in Assyria, let him be near me.' Furthermore he said: 'If I did not do him a favour, would it be appropriate in the sight of the gods?' (SAA 10 182:22–29)

Here, the moral obligation of the patron to treat his client well is emphasised and Esarhaddon is praised as a good and benevolent master. The reason Assurbanipal's correspondent repeats the rules of the game to his own patron is clear from the remainder of the letter, which details how he himself has been badly neglected by the crown prince.

This letter shows that clients could expect to have direct access to their patron. This means that the clients of the king were entitled to meet the king in person and could assume that he would accept and read their letters, some 400 of which survive from the correspondence between Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal and the scholars in their entourage (edited in Parpola 1993, with additions in Machinist/Cole 1998 and Luukko/Van Buylaere 2002). In contrast to the state officials posted throughout the empire, these scholars normally resided and worked at court. There were of course exceptions, such as the already mentioned Mar-Issar, whose duties had taken him 'on the road'. Generally speaking, the scholars wrote whenever they could not see the king in person. Instead of dictating the message to a secretary, like the "great ones," the scholars wrote their letters themselves; and, rather than traversing vast distances across the empire, their letters were passed from sender to recipient within the confines of the royal palace. The difficulty and cost of sending such a letter was of course insignificant compared to a message sent by imperial mail via the mule express service and it is therefore not surprising that the scholars seem to have written very often to the king, even when there was nothing to report (see, e.g., text C in the appendix).

Theirs was a personal relationship with the king that needed to be cultivated and maintained by frequent communication, preferably in person, as the following extract from a letter of another one of crown prince Assurbanipal's disgruntled scholarly clients demonstrates:

Concerning what the crown prince, my lord, wrote to me, saying: 'Why are you here? Move on and go to the Inner City (*sc.* Assur)' – it is now the second time that the crown prince suddenly writes (like this). It is not time for the sacrifices, and there is no ritual and nothing that would make them send for me hastily. Why the same thing again? The crown prince should have come out so I could have seen his face and health; you should have spoken with me and given me orders. I would then have gone where I had to go, and I would not have raised the matter to the crown prince. (SAA 13 158:2'–12')

²⁴ Westbrook 2005:211; 222.

²⁵ Westbrook 2005:222–23.

The letter concludes with dramatic pathos:

But why do I speak so much? This is the gist of all this talking: I may weep before all the lands, but there is no one who would give heart to me. So it is to you alone that I look, you who are my lord. It is before you that I have wept. If your gods have moved you to have pity for me, then wipe away my tears. If not, tell me, 'Go and die!' Then I will go away and die. What (else) could I say? (SAA 13 158: r. 4'-12')

This letter illustrates the expectations that a client would have of his patron, and the crown prince was clearly felt to fall short of the standards set by his royal father.

The very different nature of the king's relationship with the high state officials and his relationship with his scholarly clients resulted in fundamental differences in how he was addressed by the two groups. The officials, it would appear, were able to approach the king on an almost equal footing, at least as far as this was possible while observing the necessary protocols of politeness. Their letters begin with brief greeting formulae, usually only, "To the king, my lord: your servant PN. Good health to the king, my lord." The scholars' letters, by contrast, would at the very least add a blessing like, "May Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord!" sometimes supplemented with such expressions as, "May Aššur, Bel and Nabû give happiness and joy to the king, my lord!" (SAA 10 61) or, in more elaborate versions, "May Nabû, Marduk, Ištar of Nineveh and Ištar of Arbail give long lasting days, everlasting years, happiness and joy to the king, my lord!" (SAA 10 83) or, "May Aššur, Šamaš, Bel and Nabû bless the king, my lord, and let the king, my lord, attain his desire!" (SAA 10 123). The blessings formula was omitted only on inauspicious days, probably in order not to curse the king inadvertently: "(Since) this is a gloomy day, I did not send the (introductory) blessing" (SAA 10 76). Thus the deep social division between king and scholars is evident even in the salutations of their letters.

The diction of the officials' letters, as we have seen, is straightforward, even when faced with royal accusations and suspicions. There is no place in their letters for the wheedling, coaxing, and pleading which is commonplace in those passages of the scholars' letters that do not concern their professional assessments. Compare the succinct "Whatever the king, my lord, commands" (SAA 1 227) from a typical magnate's letter to the "You are able, wise and circumspect: may the king do as he sees best" (SAA 10 112) of a typical scholar's letter. This difference in language reflects both the differing relationship with the king – patronage versus formal appointment – and the fact that, while the scholars wrote their letters themselves, the "great ones," although literate, had theirs written by centrally trained, professional scribes employed as their secretaries. Without the services of an intermediary, the scholars' letters offer unmitigated expressions of their authors' desires, hopes and anxieties.

4. *Unsolicited mail: letters to the king from perfect strangers*

Both officials and clients could expect the king to accept and read their letters, a special privilege that others in the empire could only hope for. From the reign of Esarhaddon survive a number of letters sent by individuals who could not assume that their messages would reach the king because they had no personal link to him. These correspondents needed to establish who they were before they could hope that the king would even notice their requests. Unlike the letters from officials and clients who only needed to identify themselves by name, these individuals give their name with their title and/or their father's name.²⁶

One such unsolicited letter, a petition to Esarhaddon by one Nabû-zer-ketti-lešir, production manager for white frit (possibly from Assur), survives in two versions (SAA 16 32 and 33 = text D in the appendix), identical save for an addendum to one of the manuscripts: it is a plea to the scribe who is presumed to receive the letter on the king's behalf and is urged to pass the message on to the king:

Whoever you are, O scribe who is reading (this), do not hide it from the king, your lord! Speak for me before the king, so that (the gods) Bel and Nabû may speak for you before the king! (SAA 16 32: r. 17–22)

²⁶ E.g., SAA 16 30–33, 42–44, 81 and 88.

This addition identifies SAA 16 32 as the second version of the petition to the king, presumably sent after the first letter had not had the desired result, the appointment of a certain man to a position which would allow him to bring justice to the petitioner. The letter writer must have assumed that his lack of success was due to the interference of the king's secretary who had prevented the matter from coming to the king's attention. This case illustrates the difficulties an individual with no established relationship with the king faced when trying to reach the king, whether in writing or in person (see also fig. 1, plate 4).

5. Conclusions

This survey of the correspondence of the Assyrian kings first focused on letters exchanged between the king and his officials and which concerned the running of the Assyrian Empire. This correspondence necessitated the establishment of a well-working, but expensive, imperial communication system that enabled news to travel at unprecedented speed. This Assyrian innovation was a most important tool of control and cohesion that was passed on to the region's succeeding empires. We then turned our attention to the correspondence between the king and his clients. These letters served as an alternative to personal meetings with the king, the clients' preferred mode of interaction. Though there were occasional exceptions, these letters did not travel by state post but were passed from sender to recipient within the palace. The imperial mail system was of course inaccessible to those who sent unsolicited letters to the king, ranging from appeals and petitions to denunciations and anonymous slander. The onus of delivery of such letters rested entirely upon the writers: though the Assyrian king was theoretically under obligation to accept appeals from his subjects,²⁷ it is clear that not all correspondents succeeded in attracting the king's attention.

The fundamental differences in how these different types of letters were written, transported, and received, and how this informed their contents, are bases for further study of these key sources for the Assyrian Empire in the 8th and 7th centuries BC.

Appendix: four Neo-Assyrian letters

A. An official's letter to the king –

Ṭab-šil-Ešarra, the governor of Assur, to Sargon II: SAA 1 82 (from Nineveh, 41 lines)

The city of Assur was situated on the west bank of the Tigris and a key contact point between the Assyrian state and the independent Arab tribes that roamed with their herds across the Jezirah, the arid region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. When this land could not provide enough resources for their survival, these pastoralists would quickly turn into opportunistic raiders threatening nearby Assyrian settlements. Because this would strain the fragile but important relations between Assyria and the tribes, it was in the state's interest to find them good grazing grounds. In this letter the king orders Ṭab-šil-Ešarra, the governor of Assur, to lead the Arabs to Hinzanu (Hindanu), on the eastern bank of the Euphrates in the region of the modern border between Syria and Iraq, and allow them to graze there, stipulating Suhu (i.e. the region along the Euphrates between the modern Iraqi cities of Jabriyeh and Ramadi) as the southern border and the Wadi Tharthar as the eastern border.

Ṭab-šil-Ešarra is not at all happy with the idea: he considers it unlikely that the Arabs would stay in the assigned territory, presumably because he knows the grazing conditions there to be inadequate. He predicts that they would move further south into Babylonia and plunder there. We know from another of his letters (SAA 1 84) that the northern Babylonian city of Sippar was targeted by Arabs at the time.

He offers an alternative solution to the king: the Arabs should be moved northwards into the province of Kalhu, which means that they would be relocated to the other bank of the Tigris. There they would find enough grazing for their herds, but their movements would be kept in bounds by the various tributaries of the Tigris, most particularly the Upper Zab. Ṭab-šil-Ešarra's suggestion means that it was quite late in the

²⁷ Radner 2003:887.

year and the grain in this rich agricultural region had already been harvested: even today, pastoralists graze their herds around Kalhu after harvest.²⁸ Ṭab-šil-Ešarra suggests that they may be allowed to graze elsewhere also, but is adamant that their camps should be near Kalhu. In this way, the relatives of the pastoralists would effectively serve as hostages, guaranteeing the good behaviour of their wandering kinsfolk, who could not always be watched closely.

To the king, my lord: your servant Ṭab-šil-Ešarra. Good health to the king, my lord! May (the gods) Aššur and Mullissu bless the king, my lord!

As to the Arabs about whom the king, my lord wrote to me: ‘Why do they graze their sheep and camels in the desert where they must resort to plundering when hungry?’ Rains have been scarce this year; they had to settle in [the desert].

As to what the king, my lord, wrote to me: ‘Now, go to Hinzanu, and let them go and graze with you! There shall be no restrictions from the banks of the Wadi Tharthar up to the land of Suhu!’ I will now go to Hinzanu, but they (are sure to) leave the territory I am assigning to them, move further downstream and plunder; they pay absolutely no heed to the chief scout I have appointed.

Let them order the governor of Kalhu to appoint one of his eunuchs and put the Arabs under his jurisdiction; they should then ask me for a territory where to graze. All the same, their tents should remain in the territory of the governor of Kalhu while they are grazing [elsewhere].

They plunder settlements. They never plunder sheep or camels but they do kidnap people.

B. An official’s letter to the king –

crown prince Sennacherib to Sargon II: SAA 1 29 (from Nineveh, 61 lines)

Sargon’s crown prince Sennacherib here writes from Kalhu, then the royal capital, to his father the king, who is away and has left the crown prince in charge of the country, as the greeting formula shows (§1. The paragraph divisions used here for convenience were not part of the original letter.) Note that he, just like all other correspondents of the king, addresses himself as the servant of his royal father: the convention that all must address the king as their master did not allow for any preference on the basis of family. Most of the letter concerns the activities of Sargon’s arch-enemy, king Rusa of Urartu, a kingdom situated in eastern Anatolia around the lakes of Van, Sevan, and Urmiye and embroiled in decades of conflict with Assyria, mostly wars by proxy in the minor states located between the two powers, including Kumme (pro-Assyrian), Ukku (pro-Urartian), and Arzabia (pro-Assyrian) on the southern slopes of the eastern Taurus, and Zikirtu (pro-Urartian) and Mannea (pro-Assyrian) on the east face of the northern stretches of the Zagros just south of lake Urmiye.

Sennacherib had just received news from Kumme from two sources: the ruler of Kumme sent word by messenger (§2), and the Assyrian emissary residing at that ruler’s court sent a letter (§3). The messenger and the letter clearly travelled separately. Sennacherib wrote his letter to the king immediately after receiving the emissary’s letter and stresses this fact (§7), presumably because there was a distinct possibility of an Urartian attack on Kumme, where the Assyrian governors and their troops were building a fort. The rest of Sennacherib’s letter sums up recent dealings with three other allied states: Arzabia had sent a letter in response to a diplomatic crisis with a neighbouring state, resulting in the dispatch of Sennacherib’s envoy to arbitrate between them (§4); a messenger had arrived from Mannea on a routine diplomatic mission (§5); and Ashdod’s routine tribute had arrived (§6 SAA 1, 29, r. 13. 11) Ike-. The fact that this Philistine city was annexed as a province in 711 BC provides the letter with a *terminus ante quem*.) None of these matters would have warranted the dispatch of a letter to the king, but were included simply because there was extra space on the tablet.

§1. To the king, my lord: your servant Sennacherib. Good health to the king, my lord! Assyria is well, the temples are well, all the king’s forts are well. The king, my lord, can be very pleased.

§2. They are working on [the fort in Kumme]. Their work is making [*good progress*]. A messenger of Ariye (*sc.* the vassal ruler of Kumme) has come into my presence (with the following message): “[The (ruler) of Ukku has written to] the Urartian king that the governors of the king of Assyria are building [a fort in Kumme], and the Urartian king has given his governors (the following) order: ‘Take your troops, go and capture the governors of the king of Assyria alive from the

²⁸ See also image 8 in the online collection of archaeological site photographs from Nimrud of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago: http://oi.uchicago.edu/gallery/asp_mes_nimrud/, accessed September 2011.

Kummean (= Ariye), and bring them to me.' I do not have the full details yet; as soon as I have heard more, I shall write post-haste to the crown prince that they should rush troops to me." This was the report of Ariye.

- §3. On the eleventh day of the sixth month (August/September) I received a letter of Aššur-rešuwa (*sc.* the Assyrian emissary at Kumme): "The Urartian did not achieve anything on the venture on which the Zikirteans took him, but had to return empty-handed; he went with his troops to Waisi (*sc.* an Urartian city on the east face of the Zagros, near the southern tip of lake Urmiye), entered the city and left his forces there. Taking but a few troops with him, he set out and entered Mannean territory. I have not heard about the invasion yet, but I shall write you as soon as I have heard more. The (Urartian) governor (of the province situated) opposite me was in Waisi; I have heard that he left and went off after the king's departure, but nobody has seen him come out of Waisi. They are improving the roads leading to me and constructing bridges; as soon as I have heard what it is all about, whether he is coming with his troops or whether the matter has been resolved, I shall immediately write to the crown prince." This was the report of Aššur-rešuwa.
- §4. The (ruler) of Arzabia has written to me thus: "The (ruler) of Ukku must be kept away from me; why do you keep silent while he is trying to destroy me?" I have sent my personal delegate to the Ukkean (with this message): "Do not argue with the Arzabian! Until the king comes, I will arbitrate between you!"
- §5. A messenger of the Mannean (king) has come to me bringing a horse as the audience gift and giving me the regards of the Mannean. I dressed him (in purple) and put a silver bracelet on his arm.
- §6. The tribute from Ashdod was brought to Kalhu. I have received it, sealed it, and deposited it (with) the (accompanying) audience gift in the palace.
- §7. I am sending this letter to the king, my lord, on the eleventh day of the sixth month (August/September).

C. A client's letter to the king –

the astrologer Balasî to Esarhaddon: SAA 10 45 (from Nineveh, 34 lines).

This astrologer resided at court and was part of the scholarly entourage of Esarhaddon, who made him tutor of crown prince Assurbanipal. The solar eclipse mentioned in this letter dates it to 670, two years after Balasî had been entrusted with this important task. When Assurbanipal ascended to the throne in 669, he made Balasî his expert-in-chief (*ummānu*), the most prestigious position for a scholar in the Assyrian Empire.

Balasî was a frequent correspondent of both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. In this letter, he responds to Esarhaddon's repeated queries in writing and in person regarding a possible solar eclipse. Solar eclipses were regarded as portents of special danger to the king, which explains Esarhaddon's concern. However, by the 7th century, Assyrian astronomers were able to predict solar eclipses (cf. Steele 2000:426–27) and Balasî therefore knew that the king's fears that this eclipse may already have taken place were unfounded. Although he explains this, he takes great care not to point out that the king was simply wrong. Though he began his letter with an apology for not having written before and ends by stressing his supposed fear of having offended the king by his silence, he clearly felt secure in the king's respect for his expertise. His expressions of anxiety may be insincere, but it was the reality of the patron-client relationship that the king could arbitrarily withdraw his patronage at any moment.

To the king, my lord: your servant Balasî. Good health to the king, my lord! May (the gods) Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord!

Concerning what the king, my lord, wrote to me: "You must certainly have observed something in the sky": I keep a close eye on it, but I must say, I have seen nobody and nothing, therefore I have not written to the king. No (celestial body) has risen; I have seen nothing.

Concerning the watch of the sun about which the king, my lord, wrote to me, it is (indeed) the month for a watch of the sun (i.e., there is the possibility of a solar eclipse). We will keep the watch twice, on the 28th day of the eighth month (October/November) and the 28th day of the ninth month (November/December). Thus we will keep the watch of the sun for two months.

Concerning the solar eclipse about which the king spoke, the eclipse did not occur. I shall look again on the 29th day and write.

The king, my lord, must have given up on me! With deep anxiety, I have nothing to report.

D. Two petitions by an individual with no established relationship with the king – Nabû-zer-ketti-lešir to Esarhaddon, in two copies: SAA 16 32 and 33 (from Nineveh, both fragmentary).

Both texts are identical except for the final paragraph, which is only in SAA 16 32.

To the king, my lord: your servant Nabû-zer-ketti-lešir, the production manager for white frit. Good health to the king, my lord! May (the gods) Aššur, Šin, Šamaš, Bel, Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh and Ištar of Arbail bless the king, my lord. May they consolidate the foundations of your royal throne until far-off days! [...]

May the king, my lord, appoint Marduk-šarru-ušur [...] and may he do [justice] by me. Now, [PN] is not doing justice and does not obey the orders of the king. He is (only) seeking favour in the eyes of the governors.

Hear me, O king, my lord! They have now turned upside down the justice which your father imposed (and) the order that he gave. And I (alone) out of the entire house of my father am (reduced to) grovelling like a dog. Let me keep vigil and watch for the king, my lord, on my own. The king is the bulwark of the weak one. Let the king, my lord, do as he pleases.

(Only in SAA 16 32:) Whoever you are, O scribe who is reading (this), do not hide it from the king, your lord! Speak for me before the king, so that (the gods) Bel and Nabû may speak for you before the king.

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