

SAGGS, H.W.F. — *The Nimrud Letters*, 1952. (Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud V). Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2001. (28 cm, XII, 327, 62 pls. II pls.). ISBN 0-903472-20-1. \$ 70.00.

H.W.F. Saggs' *The Nimrud Letters*, 1952 (Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud 5; hereafter CTN 5) is an important volume that was published in 2001 by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI). The book contains editions and copies of 244 tablets and fragments that were excavated in 1952 by the BSAI (under the direction of M.E.L. Mallowan); note that there are no hand-drawn facsimiles for a handful of these texts. The majority of the tablets and fragments were discovered in Room Z[iggarat]T[errace] 4.¹⁾ Saggs began working on the so-called "Nimrud Letters" shortly after their discovery in the spring of 1952. In 1954, he prepared copies of the tablets in Baghdad. He originally intended to publish editions and copies of all of the texts in the journal *Iraq*. Between 1955 and 1974 (vols. 17–36), 99 Neo-Assyrian letters and 6 Neo-Babylonian letters, a total of 105 documents, were published in that journal.²⁾ A further 139

¹⁾ On the find spot, see M.E.L. Mallowan, *Iraq* 15 (1953) p. 31 (fig. 3) and pp. 33–34. According to an unpublished Nimrud Excavation Register now in the British Museum, some of the Nimrud Letters were not excavated in Room ZT 4. For details, see M. Luukko, *Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II from Calah/Nimrud* (State Archives of Assyria 19; hereafter SAA 19) p. XXVII.

²⁾ For the 105 previously published documents, see *Iraq* 17 (1955) pp. 21–50 and 126–154 and pls. IV–IX and XXX–XXXV; *Iraq* 18 (1956) pp. 40–56 and pls. IX–XII; *Iraq* 20 (1958) pp. 182–212 and pls. XXXVII–XLI; *Iraq* 21 (1959) pp. 158–179 and pls. XLIII–XLIX; *Iraq* 25 (1963) pp. 70–80 and pls. XI–XIV; *Iraq* 27 (1965) pp. 17–31 and pls. II and VII; *Iraq* 28 (1966) pp. 177–191 and pls. LIII–LVI; and *Iraq* 36 (1974) pp. 199–221 and pls. XXXIV–XXXVII.

"Nimrud Letters" remained unpublished until 2001. The long delay in publication was due to other obligations and commitments, as well as repeated disabling spells of illness. Nevertheless, nearly fifty years after the initial discovery of the "Nimrud Letters," Saggs achieved his goal. The result was CTN 5, which not only republished new editions and (improved) copies of the texts and fragments that were previously published in the journal *Iraq*, but also editions and copies of 139 hitherto unpublished texts. *The Nimrud Letters*, 1952 more than doubled the number of "Nimrud Letters" that had been previously published, thus making that book a valuable resource. Saggs openly noted that not all 244 texts treated in CTN 5 were letters.³⁾

CTN 5 comprises six chapters, some indices, copies of the letters, and photographs of a few clay tablets upon which "Nimrud Letters" were written. Chapter One (Introduction) provides details on the discovery of the corpus of texts, their publication history (including information on why it took so long to publish the volume), the physical differences between the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian tablets, the shape of Neo-Assyrian letters, the condition of the tablets, and the contents of the letters. In addition, the Introduction includes useful information on the conventions used for his editions and a handy list of the equivalences of logograms that are transcribed in his transliterations; Saggs uses a mixed-style transliteration system in which logograms are transcribed without indicating their logographic value. Two sections of particular interest in the Introduction are the paragraphs describing how some of the tablets were formed — some were made by rolling out the clay, folding the clay on itself, and then compressing the tablet — and how Assyrian scribes may have used small concave-sided cylindrical rollers to shape the tablets inscribed with royal correspondence (tablets which have curved sides and generally have curved ends).⁴⁾

The letters, the heart of the book, are edited in Chapters Two to Six (pp. 9–322). Unlike the *State Archives of Assyria* series (produced by the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, directed by Professor S. Parpola) — whose texts are arranged by geographical criteria and sender — the letters edited in CTN 5 are arranged according to their *mise en scène*. Saggs grouped the 244 documents into five chapters;⁵⁾ Chapter Two is further sub-divided into two sections, Chapter Four into three sections, and Chapter Five into four sections.

³⁾ For details on the non-letters published in CTN 5, see, for example, Luukko, SAA 19 pp. LVI–LVII. Moreover, according to M. Luukko (SAA 19 p. LVII), there are only 229 "Nimrud Letters." The reduction is based on five new joins and the identification of eight documents or fragments as non-letters (list of towns, administrative documents, memoranda, legal transaction, or other [still undetermined]). These non-letters are ND 2415 (pp. 172–173), ND 2428 (pp. 260–261), ND 2479 (p. 320), ND 2605 (pp. 273–275), ND 2614 (p. 238), ND 2615 (pp. 275–276), ND 2752 (p. 308), and ND 2760 (p. 309). Two hundred and one of the letters are written in Neo-Assyrian dialect and twenty-eight are written in Neo-Babylonian dialect.

⁴⁾ For more detailed information on how scribes formed tablets, see, for example, J. Taylor, pp. 5–30 (esp. pp. 7–12), in K. Radner and E. Robson (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*; and J. Taylor and C. Cartwright, *Scienze dell'Antichità* 17 (2011) pp. 297–324.

⁵⁾ Compare Luukko, SAA 19, which divides the letters into thirteen chapters, with all identifiable letters grouped together in dossiers. Each dossier in that volume has been ordered principally according to geographical criteria (the provenance of the letters). When possible, the letters are assigned to the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III (151 letters) or Sargon II (52 letters). The names of sixty-eight senders are known.

Within each chapter, the primary criterion for the arrangement of the letters is generally by the excavation number; note that Saggs did not give the letters consecutive numbers (for example, text 1, text 2, etc.). Chapter 2 Part a is an exception; that sub-chapter attempts to present the letters in approximately chronological order. Chapter Two contains letters relating to Babylonia: (a) the Mukin-zēr rebellion (31 letters arranged chronologically; 9 letters ordered by excavation number); and (b) other letters relating to Babylonia (25 texts). Chapter Three includes 32 letters relating to the North. Chapter Four has letters relating to the West and Northwest: (a) Palestine and Transjordan (10 letters); (b) Syria (14 texts, including 1 non-letter); and (c) the north-west (4 letters). Chapter Five contains letters relating to the Assyrian homeland: (a) the wellbeing of the land (13 letters); (b) land administration (5 letters); (c) building operations (5 texts); and (d) other letters relating to the Assyrian homeland (8 letters). Lastly, Chapter Six has letters of uncertain provenance (88 documents, including 2–3 non-letters). Most of the 244 documents edited in the volume are written in Neo-Assyrian script and dialect; only a few are Neo-Babylonian.

Most of the individual text editions include: (1) relevant information on the tablet (Nimrud excavation number; the original “Nimrud Letter” publication number as it appeared in the journal *Iraq* [presented in uppercase Roman numerals]; Iraq Museum museum number [if known]; and the plate on which the copy appears in CTN 5); (2) a transliteration (with all logograms transcribed into their Akkadian equivalents); (3) an English translation; and (4) notes (information of the state of preservation, dialect and script [Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian], as well as some philological commentary). Saggs occasionally refers to editions of the letters that have appeared between his original publication in the journal *Iraq* and CTN 5.

The editions are disappointing, that is, they are not as good as one would expect from a scholar of Saggs’ caliber. This is surprising given the generally good quality of the author’s hand-drawn facsimiles (see below). There are numerous errors in the CTN 5 transliterations and room for many improvements.⁶⁾ Of course, this is not uncommon for an *editio princeps* (well, at least for the texts that are newly published in this volume). Some of the factors that may have contributed to the poor quality of the transliterations and translations, as inferred from pp. ix–x and 1–2, are: (1) Saggs’ long hiatus (1966–ca. 1990) from working on the “Nimrud Letters”; (2) his chronic illness during the 1980s; (3) the tablets having not been properly cleaned; (4) lack of access to the originals in the Iraq Museum (Baghdad); and (5) Saggs’ lack of access to relevant publications on Neo-Assyrian letters, especially those published by the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Given these (and other?) factors, it does not come as a surprise that the editions are not up to current Assyriological standards; Saggs’ editions were completed in July 1997 (several years prior to the book’s publication). On the other hand, the descriptions of the tablets, which he provides for each and every tablet in the notes section, are

reported to be very good and these descriptions are quite useful.⁷⁾

The volume has four indices (pp. 323–327): (1) Index of ND numbers; (2) Index of the “Nimrud Letters” edited in *Iraq* vols. 17–36; (3) Index of editions in other publications; and (4) Index of Iraq Museum numbers. These indices are only useful if the reader is looking for a particular excavation or museum number. The biggest oversight in the volume — especially given the fact that the letters are not arranged in dossiers according to their senders and the texts are not given consecutive text numbers — is not including name or subject indices; such indices are found in the first three volumes of the series (CTN 1–3). These two major omissions greatly reduce the user-friendliness of CTN 5 and their absence in the volume forces the reader to skim the entire book for any given personal name, geographical name, divine name, or particular subject/word. For example, if one wants to read/study the letters written by the crown prince Ulūlayu (Shalmaneser V) to king Tiglath-pileser III or read/study the correspondence of the sender Aššur-mātka-tēra, the user must peruse the volume in its entirety. After much searching, the reader will eventually find the letters of Ulūlayu on pp. 182–184, 194–196, 200–201, and 204–205, and the correspondence of Aššur-mātka-tēra on pp. 92, 193, and 281.⁸⁾ However, the issue of searching the “Nimrud Letters” has been resolved by the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Luukko, SAA 19 has an index of names (pp. 256–262), a subject index (pp. 263–272), and a list of text headings (pp. 273–275), as well as a complete Akkadian glossary (pp. 227–255). Moreover, the “Nimrud Letters” can now be easily searched online on the State Archives of Assyria Online site (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saa/saa19/corpus> [2013]), which is part of the ever-growing Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (Oracc) site (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu>).

CTN 5 contains sixty-two plates of copies (pls. 1–62). Copies of only a handful of texts edited in the volume are not included. Saggs prepared most of the copies in Baghdad, in 1954, shortly after their discovery in 1952. Although the editions in CTN 5 are not excellent (that is, not up to this reviewer’s standards), the copies are for the most part accurate. Luukko, who collated about half of the “Nimrud Letters” (those now housed in the British Museum), has been able to confirm the accuracy of Saggs’ copies of the cuneiform originals. He notes the Saggs’ “skills as epigraphist are to be admired as he drew sign forms which follow closely the actual sign forms of the tablets.”⁹⁾ Based on that careful assessment, it should be noted that the copies in CTN 5 meet the high standards that one expects of twenty-first century Assyriological publications.

In sum, Saggs’ *The Nimrud Letters, 1952* is a little disappointing since the editions in the book fall short of this reviewer’s expectations. As mentioned above, there appear

⁶⁾ For this opinion, see, for example, Luukko, SAA 19 pp. LV and LVII–LVIII. In addition, see the numerous collations on pp. 283–286 of that book. Those collations are for only the “Nimrud Letters” housed in the British Museum (London).

⁷⁾ So Luukko, SAA 19 p. LV. That assessment is based on Luukko’s careful collation and examination of the “Nimrud Letters” now in London.

⁸⁾ For the Ulūlayu (Shalmaneser V) letters, see now K. Radner, *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50 (2003–2004) pp. 98–101; and Luukko, SAA 19 pp. 10–13 nos. 8–11. For the letters of Aššur-mātka-tēra, see Luukko, SAA 19 pp. 20–21 nos. 17–19. Note that Luukko (SAA 19 p. 160 no. 158) regards ND 2719 as being written by the crown prince Sennacherib (name restored) to his father Sargon II.

⁹⁾ Luukko, SAA 19 p. LIV. For a few minor points of critique, see *ibid.* p. LV.

to have been several circumstances that may have contributed to the sub-par transliterations and translations. Moreover, CTN 5 is not user-friendly since it does not contain either an index of names or a subject index. Because Luukko, SAA 19 has now appeared and that volume has an index of names, a subject index, and a list of text headings, as well as a fully searchable online version, it is likely that few people wanting to read the “Nimrud Letters” in transliteration or in translation will consult CTN 5. However, students and scholars serious about reading those texts in the original cuneiform will still need to consult that book. Saggs’ copies of the “Nimrud Letters” from Room ZT 4 at Nimrud, unlike his editions, are accurate and aesthetically beautiful. The legacy of CTN 5 will be its carefully prepared facsimiles of the cuneiform originals in Baghdad and London.

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