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## “Royal Roads” and other Questions of the Neo-Assyrian Communication System

The ability of the Assyrian court to challenge a huge and permanent stream of information seems to have been one of the essential factors for the long maintenance of Assyrian domination, over the vast areas in the Near East. Starting with M. Liverani’s distinct statement about the Assyrian Empire as an “empire of communications,” S. Parpola offered in the introduction to SAA I a rather short, but until now the most comprehensive survey of the Assyrian administrative communication system.<sup>1</sup> Only a few basic questions were excluded, such as the possible use of waterways by the Assyrian administration, studied subsequently by F. M. Fales.<sup>2</sup> Though generally one has to agree with Parpola’s description of the Assyrian communication system, the picture presented in SAA I may have been a little bit too positive, especially for the non-specialist. One should also bear in mind the various Assyrian letters revealing serious deficiencies within this system, which then was surely not as perfect as described. In the following remarks special attention is drawn to some of the remaining questions regarding the Assyrian road system, but without being able to discuss all emerging questions at length.

### The “Royal Roads”

An organized road system formed the back-

bone of the Assyrian administration. It seems reasonable that the creation of exactly fixed and strictly controlled roads was somehow influenced, at least for certain stretches, by military considerations. Concerning for example the royal road to the West, the numerous campaigns of the Assyrian army, especially in the second half of the 9th century, may have shown the necessity of keeping abreast of the rising stream of military, political or economical information emerging in the course of every military action, which had to be registered as quickly as possible in the royal residence. The build-up of a regular line of communication may therefore have had its roots in military campaigns. But there is no reason to assume that, for example, the western-bound route used and described in detail by Ashurnasirpal II, was exactly the one which we detect in later texts as the Assyrian royal road. Though it is not implausible that some of the later road stations are identical with sites chosen earlier by the Assyrian army as military camps or smaller controlling posts, this – in my opinion – need not be the case for the majority of the road stations between the administrative centres and the royal residences.

It may well be that Parpola’s statement, “Added to the old network of commercial and local roads was a highway called the king’s road, traversing the Empire from East to West and from North to South,” was

<sup>1</sup> S. Parpola, SAA I, pp. XIII-XX.

<sup>2</sup> F. M. Fales, “River Transport in Neo-Assyrian Let-

ters.” In: *Šulmu IV*, Poznań 1993, pp. 79-92.

influenced partly by my former study of the North-Mesopotamian *hūl šarri* or, if we prefer, *harrān šarri* in the Babylonian dialect.<sup>3</sup> At least for Northern Mesopotamia the limited textual evidence seems to leave out whole regions and to favor the assumption of a very limited number of such main roads in that area. Whether this might be correct remains to be discussed. But surprisingly enough, thorough, up-to-date assemblages of the few and dispersed sources or preliminary answers to the more detailed questions surrounding the Neo-Assyrian road system do not exist. One letter, SAA I 97, demonstrates the quite different conditions which a high Assyrian official found using Assyrian roads. The traveller using the [*hūl*]u ša pāhat<sup>uru</sup> Arrapha, the road leading through the province of Arrapha (SAA I 97:9), seems to have been seriously hampered by wadis filled with reeds, apparently in contrast to a better road leading along the river Tigris (*ša šiddi nāri*, SAA I 97:13). In this connection the writer of the letter, the governor of Assur, unfortunately did not use the term *hūl šarri*, which leaves us with certain doubts as to whether those roads described were really royal highways. Possibly a *hūl šarri*, the stretch between Guzana and Našibina is referred to in the Tell Halaf letter AfO Beih. 6 11, indicating the known difficulties of crossing rivers. In contrast to the Assyrian sources, we possess for Babylonia of the 7th-6th century a few Neo-Babylonian documents which bring us some deeper insights into the exact measuring of such royal roads and their maintenance.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the royal roads one should stress that, as far as one can say at the moment, these roads generally follow tradi-

tional commercial roads and are then not a mere addition to the existing highway system. The creation of many of these royal roads seems to fall roughly in the period between Shalmaneser III and Tiglathpileser III. The earliest datable references come from the time of Adad-nerari III (SAA XII 1:9, 16; 2 r.5). More precise dates are difficult to assure. For example I wonder if the Northern Mesopotamian royal road running East-West was not, at least in its most western part, a creation of the time of Adad-nerari III, or of the years in which we can trace the powerful *turtānu*, Šamši-ilu, in this area. Years ago I suggested the foundation of Hadatu/Arslan Taş in this period could possibly be seen in the light of securing the Assyrian communication system.<sup>5</sup>

But one cannot escape some old questions. Is it possible that all roads along which road stations were established by royal order were called royal roads? Are eventually all residences of Assyrian governors connected by royal roads to the palace? In this case we could speak of an extremely wide road network, like a spider's web with the Assyrian king in the center. If we were to take such a fundamental position – there are at the moment no real conclusive arguments for or against such an assumption – the *hūl* or *harrān šarri* would have been then a system constantly enlarged, as the numerous conquests under the Sargonids would have forced them permanently to integrate additional new road connections and to enlarge the dimensions of the road-net. Or were only the more important governmental residences involved, perhaps those where soldiers were stationed?

Answers to this group of problems demand at first regional studies, which for

<sup>3</sup> K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Topographie Nordmesopotamiens*, Wiesbaden 1980, pp. 183-233. See also F. M. Fales, "The Rural Landscape of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A Survey," SAAB 4, 1990, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> M. Jursa, "Von Vermessungen und Straßen," ArOr 63, 1995, pp. 153-58.

<sup>5</sup> K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen*, p. 195.



some areas do not exist and for others are not possible to write due to the lack of texts. One has to note the absence of new text sources, which would provide us with substantial fresh evidence. The intensive archaeological investigations have focused attention on many new iron-age sites, but have added few arguments for reconstructing these Assyrian main roads.

From the Assyrian sources we observe a complete absence of the term *hūl šarri* for the whole region west of the Euphrates. This may well be accidental due to the small number of texts touching these areas. Arguments for a wider concept may be gained by the biblical references for the royal road (Num. 20:17, 21:22; cf. Deut. 2:27), if the appearance of this term in the Bible is interpreted as a reflex of the Assyrian model.<sup>6</sup>

For Northern Mesopotamia we possess only a few long known and intensively discussed references, like the *hūl šarri ša issi* <sup>uru</sup>*Kubanaše ana* <sup>uru</sup>*Aridi* [ (SAA XII 1:16) and the *hūl šarri ša issi* <sup>uru</sup>*Urukka ana muḫḫi* <sup>i</sup>[<sup>d</sup>x (SAA XII 2 r.5), both between Guzana and Našibina.<sup>7</sup> In addition we now find the *hūl šarri* in a text from Girnavaz, ancient Nabula (SAAB II/1, 7 Gir. 84/84:11), thus tracing it almost exactly along the line where we would expect it to be. Indirect evidence for the same stretch of the *hūl šarri* is found also in a letter by Mannu-ki-Aššur, the Governor of Guzana (SAA I 233:10). A closer inspection at least suggests not a simple East-West road, from which only a North-South road along the Ḥabur passing Qatni to Dur Katlimmu, the *hūl šarri ša* <sup>uru</sup>*Dūr-aduku-lim* (SAA VI 335:

7'-8'), branched off. As there exists possibly a *hūl šarri ša* <sup>uru</sup>[*Harrānu*], a royal road leading to Harran (NALK 83:5'), this could well indicate also a deviation from a linear East-West scheme as this city lies further North from the supposed main road running East-West. But the passage itself is unfortunately broken and not very informative from a geographical perspective, so serious doubts remain whether we really have the royal road running from the area of the sources of the Baliḫ River to Harran or a completely different road. There would be no difficulty in inserting into the scheme the reference to Nemed-Issar (SAA VI 328:5' *hūl* [*šarri*]), if this town was situated along the highway running from Našibina to the royal residence<sup>8</sup> and the textual reconstruction proves to be correct. If one disputes this localization and assumes a location of Nemed-Issar at or around Tell Afar or near Tell Rimaḥ,<sup>9</sup> our present view of the system of royal roads in Northern Mesopotamia must of course be completely revised. Then another king's highway would run to the West, presumably in the direction of the Sinjar Region.

East of the Tigris the textual situation seems much more complicated. This is not the case for the well documented branch of the royal road from Arzuḫina to the area of Zamua, attested as a royal highway by the passage *hūl šarri ša ana* <sup>uru</sup>*Azari illakūni* (Iraq 20, 187 NL 41:19-20) and documented as a frequently used travel connection by other texts. But the situation in Central Assyria looks rather complex and confusing. There is comparatively little information on

<sup>6</sup> For this question see B. Oded, "Observations on Methods of Assyrian Rule in Transjordan after the Palestinian Campaign of Tiglath-Pileser III," JNES 29, 1970, 182 note 41. Cf. also I. Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs*, Jerusalem 1984, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> See K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 207-209. Because of the recent archaeological finds at Tell Mozan and its possible identification with Urkiš, Urukka should be sep-

arated now from Tell Amuda.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. now the map of the roads in the northeast Jezirah given by T. J. Wilkinson and D. J. Tucker, *Settlement Development in the North Jezira, Iraq*, Warminster 1995, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. K. Nashef, *Répertoire Géographique des Textes Cunéiformes*, vol. 5, Wiesbaden 1982, p. 204.



the seats of the *bēl pāhite* in Assyria around Nimrūd and Ninua on one hand and almost no references for royal roads connecting their residences with the royal court on the other. With SAA VI 204:7 and SAA VI 93:11' we possess two references to the *hūl šarri* in or near Nineveh. A royal highway in the range of the royal residence is mentioned in SAA I 160:4. Though found together with some other place names in a purchase document, the geographical setting of the *hūl šarri ša ana* <sup>uru</sup>*Bīt-x* [ (SAA VI 27:3') remains unclear. Because of the persons involved, a position in the Assyrian heartland seems at least possible. The appearance of the royal road in a Balawat text, mentioned together with the settlement *Bišangû*, the *hūl šarri ina* <sup>uru</sup>*Bīt* <sup>lu</sup>*šangû* (Iraq 25, 93 BT 112:5), could mean that Imgur-Bel, where the course of a road was traced by archaeological investigation, was situated on the royal highway running from Ninua further to Arzuḫina. This gives us the impression that only one major highway led in a south-eastern direction. But I have difficulty localizing on this line the stretch of the royal road from Maliyati to Kannu, the *hūl šarri* [*ša issi* <sup>u</sup>]<sup>ru</sup>*Maliati* [*ana* <sup>ur</sup>]<sup>u</sup>*Kannu illakūni* (SAA VI 169:3-5), near the city of Adi-il (Adian), mentioned within the description of an estate. If one insists that the much-discussed Kannu<sup>10</sup> was situated on this road, then in my opinion only the area between the Upper and Lower Zab can be considered. But the geographical setting of this passage depends very much on the location of Adi-il/Adian, which has not so far been successful,<sup>11</sup> so the road problem could easily take a completely different turn.

The area of Assur adds other problems.

The enigmatic and unfortunately incomplete Assur text KAV 186, called by O. Schröder, a "Brunnentext", describing land lots in the range of a *hūl šarri ša šēri* (KAV 186:3), a "royal road of the desert plain," would testify to the existence of a royal road near Assur. In this case the lack of a precise date for the text is deplorable, as for the time of Adad-nerari III we find a royal highway near Ekallate, *hūl šarri ša issi* <sup>uru</sup>*Ekallāt[e* (SAA XII 1:9), also in the vicinity of Assur, but on the other side of the Tigris. This seems to point to two different roads leading to Assur. These early references stand in contrast to the absence of information about royal highways in the later Assur texts. In a recently published document from Assur with a post-canonical date the royal road is mentioned running through the New City, probably to the southern city gate.<sup>12</sup> As far as information from the unpublished Assur material is available to me, no further evidence seems to exist for such royal roads. The Assyrian kings visited Assur often and an intensive exchange of letters between the governor of Assur and the palace is documented, so the existence of such a communication line would be no surprise.

If one considers all roads along which road stations are documented to be called "royal roads," place-names mentioned as single road or post-stations could also be taken into consideration. But the few place-names available do not refer to the same areas as the *hūl šarri*. Which road could then be covered by the stations of Ampīḫabi, Kamanate and a settlement, whose name is broken, [<sup>uru</sup>x]-*ga-re-e-šú*, through which Mar-Issar sent his letters from Babylonia (SAA X 361 r.7-8)? Since SAA V 233, a

<sup>10</sup> For the position of this settlement see E. Lipiński, "Apladad," OrNS 45, 1976, pp. 53-74.

<sup>11</sup> E. Forrer, *Die Provinzeinteilung des Assyrischen Reiches*, 1920, p. 115, located Adian without any proof

at Dohuk!

<sup>12</sup> A. Y. Ahmed "The Archive of Aššur-mātu-taqqin Found in the New Town of Aššur and Dated Mainly by Post-Canonical Eponyms," *Al-Rāfidān* 17, 1996, 234 No. 10:11.

letter written by the governor of Arzuḫina, mentions a transport of grain to the land Ampihabi by boat, S. Parpola and G. B. Lanfranchi looked for a “town in the province Arzuḫina.”<sup>13</sup> For Kamanate, surprisingly listed (l. 20') also in the literary geographical text SAA XI 1, sometimes called also “provincial list,” therefore suggesting a settlement of some importance with a special status, a location on the Tigris was proposed.<sup>14</sup> I don't know the reason for that proposal. Did there exist similar official stations also along the rivers? How is this information to be combined topographically? How do they fit with the textual evidence, enlightened by some Assyrian and Babylonian letters and military campaigns which give at least some hints of a main communication line and *eo ipso* to a suspected special highway from Arrapha via Lubdu and Me-turan further to Der, and, using a southerly branch, from Me-turan in the direction of Babylon?

Concerning Babylonia one has to admit that up to now there is no clear proof from Assyrian sources that the special Assyrian communication system was prolonged further to the South. But at least with BR 8/7 1:15 we have a reference to a *harrān šarri* in a Neo-Babylonian adoption-treaty from Babylon, dated to Sargon II. We may therefore assume, as did M. Jursa,<sup>15</sup> that the Assyrians introduced their system also in Babylonia. But the majority of the Babylonian references occur in the time after the Assyrian domination. One example cited by Jursa in this connection shows a possible upgrade of a rural road of the middle of the 7th century to a royal road under Nebuchadnezzar, leaving us thus with the suspicion that, especially under the Chaldaean dynasty,

more Babylonian road connections were transformed to such royal roads. As their maintenance was often an obligation laid by the king upon the temple authorities, the internal structure of this system looks slightly different from the Assyrian one, where clearly the governors were responsible. There are so far no traces of a Babylonian counterpart to the special Assyrian road stations. So the assumption that also the whole of Babylonia was integrated in a network of Neo-Assyrian royal roads with corresponding stopping places and post-stations remains to be proven by texts or archaeological evidence.

All told, our evidence for the Assyrian *hūl* or *harrān šarri* seems ambiguous. There emerge more and more indications for a wider net of such royal roads, but the lack of this term west of the Euphrates or north of the Assyrian capital remains at the moment a serious obstacle for the assumption that all important Assyrian provincial capitals were integrated.

### The Road-stations

The assumption that the administrative designation for all the stations along special defined roads was *bēt mardēti*, is based almost solely on the two Neo-Assyrian letters SAA I 177 and SAA X 361. The first refers to an area in Middle Syria, approximately between Hamat and the Beqa'a-plain,<sup>16</sup> the latter to the eastern Tigris region. As we possess only these few references, most scholars combine this term with passages where the term *mardētu* appears alone. S. Parpola<sup>17</sup> describes the situation along the Assyrian main roads as fol-

<sup>13</sup> SAA X, p. 376 (Index of Place Names).

<sup>14</sup> SAA X, p. 377. It is tempting to see in Kamanate a variant writing for the well known Babylonian settlement Gananate, but this would be not more than a mere guess.

<sup>15</sup> M. Jursa, ArOr 63, 1995, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> For the geographical background of this text see I. Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs*, pp. 95-98.

<sup>17</sup> S. Parpola, SAA I, p. XIV.



lows: “At regular intervals on this highway were garrisoned road stations serving as resting places for the royal army and as relay points for imperial messengers.” Similarly L. Levine in his discussion of the Zamua itinerary came to the conclusion: “Given the regular nature of the *mardītu* in most of the itinerary, we would expect the *bīt mardītus* were placed regularly along the routes at one day intervals, and the normal length of a *mardītu* was one day,”<sup>18</sup> though he argued also for exceptions to this rule.<sup>19</sup> As the term *mardētu* itself does not automatically mean a post-station, but only a stage in a journey, one has to check if the assumption of a day’s march is supported in every case by the context. Furthermore the problem arises whether we can simply combine our vision of regular daily road stations along the main roads with the function of the *kalliu*-express system and the assumption of changing the animals at every station. The letter SAA V 227, evaluated by the scholars mentioned, is one of the most important for reconstructing the Zamua road and gives in my opinion a hint that at least the picture of changing the animals at a road station every day is not very probable and possibly also not very practicable. *Šarru belī a-temu liškun ka[[ša ka]]liu ina uru Dūr Atanate<sup>mes</sup>-te lušazizu*, “the king, my lord, should give orders that a mule-express be stationed in Dur Atanate” (SAA V 227 r.10-14), demands the sender of the letter to improve the *kalliu*-service. As Dur Atanate is one of the known regular halting places along the Zamua road, this could well mean that normally no *kalliu* was stationed there, and that the mule express was used also for a distance of more than a day’s etappe. This letter, but also some other passages of this and other texts, like SAA V 74, give suffi-

cient evidence that animals were used over greater distances. This seems to confirm the suspicion that the system of the *kalliu* mule express and its function has, at least partly, to be separated from the alleged system of the road stations established at a day’s distance, though the latter should have certainly served always as night quarters for official travellers. The transmission of letters may have been organized similarly. We possess enough information that letters normally were transported by common messengers (*mār šipri*), eventually specified as *ša qurbūti* or *kallāpu*-messengers, using probably also the *kalliu*-system. Though it is mentioned in the letter SAA X 361 r.3-10 that with a royal seal the transport of letters to the king and vice-versa could be arranged via the chain of the *bēt mardēti*, this does not force us to assume that this letter was entrusted every day to another postman and animal. The text discussed shows us also the limited influence of the provincial authorities in the matter of transport and the direct royal involvement in the *kalliu*-system, which then seems not such an elaborate, longlasting and systematic construction as has been assumed, but apparently was in constant change. Interference by the Assyrian king occurred presumably more than once.

The only informative text on the internal structure of a *bēt mardēti* is the well known letter SAA I 177. Three Middle Syrian villages, Ḥesa, Argite and Šazana are mentioned as *bēt mardēti*, known also from other texts<sup>20</sup>. The most interesting point is that Ḥesa, lacking people and therefore in need of repopulation with 30 new families, was run by a *rab kallie*, a postmaster, together with a *rab raksi*-official, the latter a military rank not belonging to the mule ex-

<sup>18</sup> L. Levine, “K 4675+ – The Zamua Itinerary,” SAAB 3, 1989, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> See I. Eph’al, *The Ancient Arabs*, p. 97.



press system. The other establishments were headed by quite different authorities. Appointed to the *bēt mardēti* of Argite was a person in the rank of a *šaniu*-deputy, who now received the title of *rab alāni*, while in Šazana we find a person who was a *rab bēti* of the governor of Hamat. In my opinion this text clearly demonstrates that we can not expect a uniform structure of these road stations. The organization of the road posts may have been different from one station to the next, depending very much on the size of the settlements or the personnel chosen by the responsible governor. I have expressed my doubts above that in all these places a special *rab kallie* with his mules was stationed. Most of the stations seems to have been real villages, which normally are mentioned in the texts by name, surely one of the reasons why we detect the designation *bēt mardēti* only seldom in the texts. The military component in these villages and road stations seems logical and is easy to understand in a surrounding like Middle Syria, where other letters show us a certain hostility toward the Assyrian domination, as well as numerous problems with the inhabitants of the desert, raising of taxes, or fugitives, all of which made small fortresses and check-posts necessary. It is unlikely to expect outside of such areas quite so many road stations built as small fortresses along the controlled roads, though one might keep in mind the impressive Middle Assyrian installations, some of them apparently not attached to existing former villages like the fortress of Tell Sabi Abyad in the Baliḥ area, currently under archaeological investigation. In the central Assyrian area the character of these stations would have been completely different from those of the periphery. In settlements where other royal buildings yet existed, as in the residential cities and the seats of the governors, post and transport may have been organized by the local royal or provincial

administration or the *ekallu* directly; the use of the term *bēt mardēti* applied to these cities does not seem very probable.

The roads leading through semi-independent territories or the tracks through the mountains were a special case. In connection with the transport of logs, SAA V 117, we obtain information that the transport of such goods was also organized in *mardētu*-units (SAA V 117:11-14). Two units were taken over by different local leaders with an accompanying Assyrian official, while a third stage was under the guidance of an Assyrian official alone. From this passage we may extract that local city-lords, mayors of villages and local sheikhs acted in a similar manner as the Assyrian officials in the Assyrian provinces, certainly in this case bound by treaties. In case there was no road station under the oversight of another Assyrian official, locals were surely obliged to take care of the means of transport and the night quarters of royal messengers and other officials, although we possess no clear evidence. A similar regulation may be expected for secondary local roads, where the heads of the villages were responsible. I refrain from referring in detail to the situation in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century in comparable areas, described by many travellers.

The relationship between the road station and the *kalliu* post- or transport-system was mentioned above in connection with the discussion of the *bēt mardēti*. There exist only a few Assyrian letters through which we obtain some scanty information about the term *kalliu*. The different translations we read in the individual SAA volumes as “royal express service,” “mule express” or as “postman” are of course often more adequate than the simple “messenger” found in the CAD, based essentially on the meaning of this word in the sources of the second millennium. By contrast, in the Neo-Assyrian letters we register very rarely a personal

use, but a more abstract sense frequently fits well. We find *kalliu* only sporadically with the determinative LÚ in the sense of “messenger.” One of these passages, ABL 275:9, mentioning the <sup>16</sup>*kallû ša šarri*, was written in Babylonia by a Babylonian. From the context we assume that we have here special royal messengers and not members of the royal post, possibly also a Babylonian use of the term *kalliu* different from the Assyrian. But we completely lack the term <sup>16</sup>*kalliu* in official administrative texts of Assyria as a designation for a specific profession or office. We possess only a few references to the <sup>16</sup>*rab kallie*, the post-master, or better, the one responsible for the mule express. At least one should find an explanation why in the various administrative texts we fail to detect the slightest trace of a common <sup>16</sup>*kalliu*. The same seems valid for the numerous persons appearing as witnesses in the different deeds, where once (SAA VI 124 r.10) we find a *rab kallie*, but miss the ordinary *kalliu*. Where are these ordinary “postmen,” “post-holders,” “providers” and “transporters of animals”? Do they hide themselves under other designa-

tions? One may argue that the responsibility for transport was laid in the hands of the Assyrian governors or other provincial authorities, whose administration and own household are not well known, and the normal *kalliu* may have had a very low rank in the hierarchy, but on the other hand must have been a trustworthy person. Another possible explanation might be that the *rab kallie* alone was the person responsible for the single *kalliu* station who together with subordinate persons and servants managed the transport duties by himself. Whether these dependents, to which also the *mukīl appāti* (SAA V 74 r.13), the driver of the transport-chariots, would belong, may have had an administrative designation *kalliu* is questionable. If a postmaster was not established in every road station, then other provincial officials, placed at the head of the villages, could have organized the transport of persons, letters and goods ordered by the king. My overall impression is that the Assyrian transport system was complex and not always so well organized. But we must keep in mind that new texts may change our views very quickly.