

“As for the Captives, don’t be Negligent or You Will Die”

**The Bureaucratic Organization of the Neo-Assyrian Empire’s Small-Scale Deportations,
Evidence from Bureaucratic Correspondences.**

I. Abstract

This paper examines the bureaucracy underlying deportations in the Neo-Assyrian Empire (approx. 900-600 BCE). While exact numbers are hard to come by, since many deportations, especially large-scale deportations, are only attested in inscriptions explicitly drafted as propaganda in which scribes provide only ballpark estimates, it seems that around 15,000 individuals were deported each year as a regular bureaucratic function, amounting to an estimated total of 3 million deportees over the course of the empire. Such a resettlement program would be difficult even in the modern world and surely was far more challenging for the Assyrians. While much has already been written about this deportation bureaucracy, primarily by Oded in his 1979 *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Assyrian Empire* and in Postgate’s 1992 *The Land of Assur and the Yoke of Assur*, the current literature is explicitly focused on high-profile, massive deportations, such as that of over 200,000 Hebrews (in part because this number is implausibly high). This paper, based primarily on bureaucratic correspondences from provincial officials, aims to prove that small-scale deportations were administered differently than large-scale deportations, and in particular that while large-scale deportations appear to have been handled largely by dedicated officials, small-scale deportations were handled ad hoc by local officials. A fortunate product of this, as historians, is

that there are a wealth of bureaucratic records about small-scale deportations and consequently I am able to reconstruct a fairly detailed account of what the bureaucratic process appears to have been.

II. Introduction

While the majority of this paper will build a positive claim about the bureaucracy of small-scale deportations, the goal of this paper is fundamentally comparative. Therefore, this section serves to briefly disaggregate “small-scale” and “large-scale” deportations and provide a brief positive claim about the administration of large-scale deportations based on previous research. While this deserves more nuance than I have dedicated to it, I am prioritizing brevity and generalized claims in order to stay under the word limit.¹

The difference between large-scale and small-scale deportations is fundamentally qualitative. The larger a given deportation is, the more unreliable the numbers become. These deportations, counting somewhere in the tens of thousands (or, occasionally, mere thousands), generally only took place directly after an Assyrian conquest, and while there is tentative evidence² that there were exact counts, the only surviving counts are in royal annals, which while generally not especially dishonest, employ ballparks liberally.³ While the following sections of this paper will try to show that there is a genuine bureaucratic difference between

¹ Or, rather, only marginally over the word limit.

² As discussed in de Odorico, many surviving depictions of conquest show the king with two scribes, recording details on a scroll. Such a “war journal” may have contained details such as exact counts (Postgate believes this to be the case), but it is impossible to know their function (or if they were simply an invention of artists) since none survive. Given that parchment surviving for three millennia would be an oddity and there would be no reason to copy a war journal, the lack of evidence is not a compelling argument such scrolls did not exist, either.

³ De Odorico provides valuable insight into how to tell when a number is “round” (which I call ballpark, since I think that is more intuitive) or exact which has been invaluable in interpreting bureaucratic letters.

small-scale and large-scale deportations, and therefore that the difference is *not just numbers*,⁴ a byproduct of this different bureaucratic process is that small-scale deportations almost always have surviving exact numbers,⁵ while large-scale deportations never do.

While this discussion is necessarily brief and flattens nuance since deportations were not uniform, I will set out several general claims about large-scale deportations from previous scholarship which I will show are distinct from small-scale deportations. First, large-scale deportations almost always took place immediately after a war, rather than arbitrarily for contingent political aims. Second, large-scale deportations were handled by dedicated officials. Third, large-scale deportations were a public spectacle.⁶ Fourth, the military was directly involved in large-scale deportations. Fifth, these deportations were directly provided for by the king.⁷

III. Method

My research primarily relies on a close reading of the bureaucratic correspondences held in the *State Archives of Assyria* (henceforth SAA), published and translated by the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus project. I researched the sections of the archives composed of letters to and from Sargon II (721-205 BCE) and, to a lesser extent, his predecessor Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BCE). Most correspondences in SAA are from the letter archives discovered in the capitols of Nineveh

⁴ For example, I will discuss a small-scale deportation ballparked to 6,000 individuals. The actual number is probably somewhere between 1,000 and 6,000, but no matter where it lies this deportation makes up the high end of small-scale deportations and overlaps with the low end of large-scale deportations.

⁵ Specifically, many documents explicitly report “Reviews”, discussed below.

⁶ The vision of deportees in chains, being driven on by soldiers, makes up most Assyrian depictions of deportation. It is implausible most deportations were like this, and these depictions all purport to be of large-scale deportations. I speculate that a small number of important deportees were paraded through cities in this manner during larger deportation movements, thereby giving artists this general impression.

⁷ See Postgate and Oded for the justifications of these claims.

and Kalhu. While there are a small number of letters neither sent by nor received by the king, it is not clear what marked these documents as especially in need of archival to the Assyrians. I have focused my research on the contents of SAA 19, a section of the Nimrud letters that mostly deals with the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. I chose to focus on SAA 19 because in my initial research SAA 19 yielded the most consistently useful references to deportation. On face, this is unsurprising because these letters are situated during a period where Assyria quickly doubled its territory, and it is likely this resulted in a large number of deportations.⁸ Additionally, Oded has previously identified that Tiglath-pileser III had conducted far more large-scale deportations than his predecessors, so it seems plausible that small-scale deportations would follow a similar pattern. Finally, we do not know that deportations under Sargon II and Tiglath-Pileser III were identical, so the focus on an archive exclusive to Tiglath-Pileser III reduces the risk that I conflate differences between their deportation procedures. However, since the fundamental quantity of evidence is small, I have to use whatever resources are available, so while I have read the entirety of SAA 19, I have searched the rest of the letter archives (although, not non-letter sections of the archives) for deportation-related keywords.⁹ I will use correspondences from other SAA archives when I think they are especially lucid or valuable.

Relying on administrative correspondences has significant strengths and weaknesses. The particular strength which made these letters useful for my research is that each letter is meant to clearly communicate a piece of information and only the most important information would make its way to the king. This means that any elements of deportation that earned repeated

⁸ See Van De Mieroop for a general overview and Oded for a specific account of deportations by reign.

⁹ "Prisoner," "captive," "deport," etc.

references in the archives was likely the important—or perhaps cumbersome. Additionally, the Assyrian bureaucracy had an admirable attention to detail, and most numbers and facts presented are clear and exact. However, this is also the weakness of relying on letters: correspondences provide no context; they are *too* exact. This is worsened by the fact that there is no particular deportation which two correspondences unambiguously refer to. Thus, while determining the crucial steps of small-scale deportation is easy, it is not clear how these steps relate to one another, nor is it easy to assess the level of heterogeneity among deportations.

Finally, while the Assyrians recognize transporting captives and deporting civilians as different actions, the bureaucratic process underlying collecting and moving a population appears to be similar in both cases. However, captives often faced different destinations (forced labor, military impressment, etc.). A consequence of this is that fields were not prepared for captives and that there was greater need for military escorts since captives would often resist impressment. However, it is reasonable to believe that the task of transporting small numbers of captives to their destination would be carried out similarly to deportees, so I use evidence that, strictly, is about transporting captives rather than deportations, where appropriate. It should be noted that the same argument applies to research about large-scale deportations.

IV. The Deportation Process

As follows is my proposal for the bureaucratic process underlying a small-scale Assyrian deportation:

- 1) The king would identify a population to deport and where to deport them to.

- 2) Before the deportation, the governor would attempt to gain the consent of the deportees. In the event consent could not be produced, this would generally be reported to the king, and it is unclear what subsequent steps would be taken.
- 3) The local governor would be tasked with assembling the deportees and counting the deportees.
- 4) Simultaneously, fields would be designated and (if necessary, depending on the season) tilled in preparation to be given to the deportees.
- 5) Each governor would be in charge of moving the deportees through his territory and providing the deportees with food, water, oil, clothing, and sometimes even pack animals during the journey.
- 6) The governor would hand the deportees off to another governor, generally at a city in that governor's territory. This governor would inspect the deportees to make sure no foul play had occurred.
- 7) This governor would then transit the deportees through his territory, and this cycle would continue until the deportees reached their final destination.

This ordering of events is loosely reconstructable from primary sources. Specifically, we know that there was an initial process of rounding up deportees, and another process of obtaining their consent, both prior to deportation. It would be odd to ask for consent *after* rounding up a population, since the point of consent was to make the rounding up easier. Additionally, land was prepared before the deportees were in transit, and each official seems to have reviewed the deportees when they came into his possession. Given these facts, it is difficult to imagine that these events occurred in any other sequence. It would not be possible

round deportees up *after* deporting them. However, it is unclear if each step happened in every deportation. It is plausible that consent was not always obtained or that farms were not always prepared in advance for deportees, for example.

In order to demonstrate that each one of the above steps did happen most likely as I describe, I discuss the most compelling textual evidence for each below.

1) Royal Identification and the Possibility of Bureaucrat-Initiated Deportations

Much like large-scale deportations, it appears that all small-scale deportations were initiated by the king, although these deportations were often more arbitrary and ad hoc, as the bureaucratic overhead and the risk of inciting a rebellion were both lower. While proving that bureaucrat-initiated deportations did not occur is impossible, there are surviving instances of bureaucrats asking the king for permission to deport a group. If royal permission was not required it seems odd that bureaucrats would ask permission and that multiple examples would survive, although it is possible that this was just a norm, rather than a requirement. I found one letter which may suggest a bureaucrat-initiated deportation:

I returned [X] men to their country according to their wish, and after that [X] men remained. I have sent them with the royal bodyguard to the king, my lord. (SAA 19 075)

However, this is unclear evidence. First, it is unclear whether this letter refers to deportees or mercenaries. Sending deportees to join royal forces was not unusual, and is well documented, however joining the royal bodyguard most plausibly refers to mercenaries. Additionally, the lines before the quotation reference a separate command from the king in

regarding the Kummaeans, and if this paragraph also refers to Kummaeans—which is unclear—the Kummaeans appear to have been both deportees and mercenaries, according to another letter which has no clear link to the previous:

The Kummean scouts who went from Kumme for hire have not yet returned but are still there! The king, my lord, should inquire and investigate: maybe they are getting deported with those other Kummeans. (SAA 5 105)

It makes sense that mercenaries would be returned to their country, as per their preferences, so there is no clear way to resolve this ambiguity. The bureaucrat goes on to recommend that:

The King, my lord, should return [the Kummean mercenaries] to Kumme. The king, my lord, knows that they are needed in Urartu, and that they are in Assyria for hire only. (SAA 5 105)

The deportation previously referenced appears to have been a deportation of Kummeans outside of Kumme back to Kumme, and as such, the bureaucrat is arguing that the king ought to include the Kummean mercenaries in the deportative action. However, whether this would mean that the mercenaries are also *deported* by the state, or simply told to go home, is unclear. Further, even if ASS 19 075 is in reference to Kummeans, there is no way to know whether it is in reference to the *same* deportation.

However, while this individual letter may be inscrutable, there is stronger evidence that there is a norm of expecting royal authorization of deportations. Consider the following:

We must deport the house of Ilumma-taklak, and we must also deport [...], so they will fear the king. After we have deported the house of Ilumma-taklak, let us thereafter deport the latter too there. (SAA 15 040)

In this letter, a local bureaucrat who clearly wants to initiate a deportation holds back, awaiting the king's approval. It is worth noting that this letter is unusually crass. Previous elements, while damaged, appear to be defensive and in response to the king chastising him, although no other context is clear. Additionally, with the notable exception of terse, war-time documents, saying "we must" to the king as if the king was an equal—not your lord—is unusual, as is the line "fear the king" rather than "fear the king, my lord". Despite this bureaucrat's odd lack of royal reverence, they still felt the need to seek royal approval, which does seem to suggest a norm of royal approval for deportations.

2) On Deportee Consent

By far my most unexpected discovery throughout my research is that the Assyrians made at least cursory efforts to obtain deportees' consent in the case of small-scale deportations.¹⁰ However, this should not be read as particularly humanitarian, considering that even highly

¹⁰ It would have been easy to write a paper entirely on this subject, but I chose not to since it would be difficult to discuss this without writing this paper first as a starting point. In particular, while it is outside the scope of this paper, the kings of Assyria seem to genuinely think being deported and "counted as an Assyrian" is an honor in many situations, and this is attested in the Hebrew Bible (see 2 Kings 18:31-18:32), royal inscriptions, and bureaucratic records. In several letters the king seems to even take a personal, humanitarian interest in the welfare of deportees. It is important to emphasize that this treatment did not extend to convicts or to deportations which were understood as punishments. However, it is shockingly humanitarian for the otherwise fearsome Assyrian royals. There is also evidence that the question of whether deportation was a punishment or an honor was contested among both officials and potential deportees (although there was an understandably strong majority on the side that deportation was undesirable).

cursory and coerced consent was seen as sufficient. Consider the following, from the Kummaeans, after being told the king wished them deported:

The king, our lord, is the lord of all; what can we say? The king, our lord, may take all the Kummaeans who hold houses in other countries to wherever it is appropriate. (SAA 5 105)

Additionally, I believe the cynical view—that obtaining consent was primarily out of convenience—holds significant water. If a population is not willing to go along with their own deportation, it is unlikely that a bureaucrat would have the resources to force the would-be deportees to cooperate since the military bureaucracy and administrative bureaucracy were mostly separated.¹¹ Therefore, a local official would presumably need reinforcements from the king. If the deportees agreed, everything was much easier.

There are several lines of evidence for this. Consider the following:

As to what I wrote to the king, my lord: "I shall be late as I am assembling the people wherever they are." I have now asked the sheikhs, and they told me: "Not a single one is left. These are all there are." (SAA 19 081)

The bureaucrat tells the king that he has delegated the assembly and reviewing of the deportees to local sheikhs (family leaders). If enough local family heads are at least nominally cooperating for assembly and review to be possible, some sort of consent must have been obtained already. Additional evidence comes from letters where deportees go to the king to

¹¹ See Postgate or Ponchia.

appeal their deportation, which suggests that there was a period between being informed of their deportation and the deportation itself where the king was willing to consider local views (or, perhaps, local bribes). One such letter:

He spoke [...] with us: "They must not deport us! [...] will go and say [...] to our brothers, and we shall bring all of them the king, my lord." Now then I am sending all four of them to the king, my lord in charge of my messenger. (SAA 15 221)

The fact that the bureaucrat took this request and brought what is presumably either letters or bribes to the king suggests that negotiating over deportation was an accepted process. An additional line of evidence comes from letters which refer to populations outright refusing deportation, a situation which could only arise if an official informed the locals of their deportation ahead of time. Consider the following:

The king gave us the following order: "Take your households to Huzirina." [...] they refuse to come. I told the son of Mubi: "Take your house to Huzirina," but he did not agree to take it. Whoever has a parental house there, refuses to take it. (SAA 19 179)

Some portion of those being sent to Huzirina directly refused, and there is no apparent consequence. However, a complication is that while this is an imperial order, the bureaucrat is included as a subject of the order, making it unclear whether this is a deportation or some other kind of population movement.

As a final line of evidence, the quotation above, in which the Kummaeans give their begrudging consent for deportation, is after an explicit order from the king to read the royal deportation order to the Kummaeans. While we do not know if this was unusual, the other secondary evidence above suggests that this was common practice.

3) The Review: Assembling Deportees

After the king has declared a small-scale deportation and consent was obtained, a local governor would be put in charge of assembling and counting the deportees. This differs from higher profile deportations, where Postgate has identified a dedicated official would handle this process. This makes sense since deporting thousands or tens of thousands requires much more bureaucratic overhead than deporting several hundred. The fact that this responsibility was given to local officials is best shown in that officials report to the king that they have done it, such as the quotation from SAA 19 081 in the previous section.

Notably, this practice seems to be tied to a more general responsibility of officials: conducting "reviews". References to "reviews", which seems to refer to assessing the number of men and their nationalities, abound throughout the royal archives in diverse contexts, including deportations, mercenary recruitment, and identification of individuals. One clear example:

Concerning the men whom the king, my lord, sent to me, saying: "Review them!"

– 150 men of Nadinu, 123 of Hazala, 60 of Aplaya, [X] of the Suhean, [X] of the

Hindanean. (SAA 19 084)

This notably differs from the duties of dedicated deportation officials, who would record more information about deportee men, such as how many dependents they had.¹²

4) The Land of Assur for New Assyrians

Simultaneously with the previous three steps, the king would arrange that land for the deportees to move into was prepared and cultivated. While this was beneficial for the deportees, this was sometimes at the expense of the local populations. In at least one account, the original population refused to accept the deportees and were subsequently removed:

Those who have previously built houses there refuse to bring them in and now they slander me and they have been destroyed. (SAA 19 179)

Most accounts, however, are more banal, and consist of the local bureaucrat confirming to the king that fields were, as ordered, under cultivation for the deportees:

Let the captives who are coming Immiha set out and come. Their seed is cultivated; they should come to their sickles. (SAA 19 023)

Interestingly, in both of the two letters I found referencing this practice (the other being SAA 19 003), the notice that the fields were prepared for deportees was included at the end of an otherwise unrelated letter, almost like an afterthought. I cannot avoid the impression that the bureaucrat thought something to the effect of “well, I am sending a letter anyways, might as well include that the deportees can come.” This does not appear to be a duty of great importance to the bureaucrats it was assigned to.

¹² See Postgate.

5) The Daisy Chain of Deportation Officials

The deportation journey happened under the supervision and management of several officials, generally the governors of cities or provinces, each of whom would supply, house, and transport deportees. Upon reaching a city governed by another official, the deportees would be passed off. It is not clear if this happened at each city, or only some subset. Upon receiving deportees from a previous official, the new official would conduct a review and inform the king. This prevented foul play, such as siphoning off deportees to work on fields other than their royally intended final destination. Consequently, since any given deportation required several letters to the king confirming the receipt and review of the deportees, this element of the deportation is especially well documented. One letter suffices to demonstrate the general form:

As to the deportees about whom the king my lord wrote to his servant, 160 healthy persons have come to me from the city of Si'imme. I have checked and received them. [...] The servants of Rahdi-aba about whom the king my lord wrote to me: Assur-balti-nise the palace superintendent has come, checked and received 277 persons from me. (SAA 01 257)

One thing about this correspondence worth noting is that the bureaucrat sent more deportees than he received. It is unclear whether the bureaucrat received one group, and then passed along another or whether the bureaucrat merged the deportee groups and passed them

along as one unit. In either reading, multiple, separate, small-scale deportations must have been passing through the region simultaneously.

6) Three Seahs of Barley Each

The official transporting the deportees was tasked with personally providing food, water, housing, oil, and pack animals, among other things. In theory, all property in Assyria was property of the king,¹³ but in practice most officials involved in deportations were uninterested in providing more resources than required and were eager to shirk this responsibility. Several angry letters—such as the letter quoted in the title of this paper (SAA 19 006)—survive, in which the king emphasizes that officials should make sure to properly feed deportees. These were not meant to be death marches: humans were valuable booty, and their loyalty was appreciated. Several complaints to the king survive. Considering the following, somewhat sarcastic letter:

Now, just as the king my lord orders, is one really to give [the deportees] oil as well. Just as the king my lord orders. (SAA 1 257)

Another letter, in a similar vein, reads:

As to what the king, my lord, wrote to me: "Feed the 6,000 captives in your presence." For how long? They are 6,000! Can I cut one-third with all the magnates? Did I not write to the king, my lord, last year: "There is no barley?" [...] Now does the king know that I have no barley? (SAA 19 081)

¹³ See Postgate.

It is notable that 6,000 is a ballpark estimate,¹⁴ meant to exaggerate and emphasize the burden placed on the official. However, it is undeniable that feeding 6,000 mouths for an extended time is a real burden. While many complaints, such as one (SAA 19 056) telling the king there were no donkeys to spare, appear to be frivolous, feeding deportees was a real concern. Consequently, the king would provide resources for the deportees in the event of a genuine lack (SAA 19 081, SAA 19 056).

V. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to reconstruct the bureaucratic process of small-scale deportations and, by doing so, show that large-scale deportations were a special process handled differently than routine population transfers. The primary weakness of my research is that it relies heavily on inference from primary evidence, and while my conclusions are reasonable, even single pieces of contradictory evidence, if discovered, would require significant reevaluations. Additionally, this is not an honors thesis: consequently, I have not read the entirety of SAA, nor do I know any Assyrian Akkadian other than numbers (since interpreting Arabic numbers does not reveal whether a number is reported in decimal or sexagesimal, which is important for determining if a number is exact or a ballpark estimate) and *Lugal* (Sumerian loanword for king) since it appears with such frequency it would be shocking if I did not learn it. My research could be significantly improved by a greater understanding of the original language and reading more of the primary sources.

VI. Citations

¹⁴ We know this since 6,000 is a nice, round number in sexagesimal systems, and, as de Odorico discusses, round numbers were almost always understood to be ballparks. I discuss this in more detail in footnote 4.

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